

21. Monroe (1998) found that majority opinion on policy questions declined from 63% in the 1960-79 period to 55% in the 1980-93 period. Jacobs and Shapiro (1997a), in a preliminary investigation, found that policy responsiveness to public opinion in welfare, crime, Social Security, and health care fell from 67% in 1984-87 to just 36% during the first half of Bill Clinton's first term in office.

22. Ansolabehere et al. (2001) analyzed racial issues separately from other issues, to avoid confounding the peculiarities of racial politics among the Southern congressional delegations before the 1970s. The details of the story are more complicated than the simple summary here suggests. Beginning with the New Deal, Republicans began responding to constituency opinion, as those running in districts with higher levels of Democratic strength in their districts adopted more "liberal" policy stances. It was not until the mid-1960s that Democratic candidates became responsive to the level of Republican strength in their districts. Responsiveness began to decline in the mid-1970s, but among Republicans more than Democrats. We thank Stephen Ansolabehere for making a pre-publication draft available to us.

23. For our own work on the development of a contingent model, see Cook and Barrett (1992) and Manza and Cook (2002). Sharp's (1999, chap. 1) thoughtful overview of the logic of contingency approaches has informed our discussion of these issues.

24. Domhoff's (1998) observation that power elite organizations have varying degrees of concern about different issues (ranging from intense concern on something like labor law to nonexistent concern on something like gay and lesbian rights) provides another reason to expect a variable impact of public opinion across policy domains.

25. Concrete comparisons across policy domains unsurprisingly indicate differences in levels of responsiveness. For example, Sharp's (1999) analysis of the dynamics of public opinion and policy change on six issues (criminal justice, affirmative action, pornography, abortion, welfare, and Social Security) suggests wide variation, with some policy domains such as Social Security and welfare significantly more responsive than on issues such as affirmative action or abortion.

2

Public Opinion and Policy *Causal Flow in a Macro System Model*

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In a democracy such as the United States, policy is supposed to flow from the preferences of the public. Of the many studies of a possible causal connection from public opinion to policy, almost all are cross-sectional, that is, involving a search for covariance between public opinion and policy across units measured for a constant time period. Although often reporting positive opinion-policy relationships, these studies invite the critique that reported cross-sectional correlations are subject to rival causal interpretations beyond the claim of representative democracy at work.

In this chapter, we again ask whether public opinion and public policy are connected. We do so, however, not with another cross-sectional analysis, but from a time-series perspective. We inquire whether current public opinion predicts subsequent policy activity and actual policy at the national level, and, if so, why.

Much of what we present here briefly restates major results from our fifteen-year investigation of public opinion and policymaking in *The Macro Polity* (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002), based on statistical modeling of a conventional sort. It serves to set the stage and define our interest. Then, we turn to thinking about systems of relationships and ask what we can learn by building models of systems in which each part influences the others.

POLICY REPRESENTATION: CROSS-SECTIONAL VERSUS TIME-SERIES EVIDENCE

Does public opinion influence public policy? Start with the evidence one can adduce in cross-sectional analyses. The views of constituents are statistically related to the positions their legislators take. The two are positively correlated. For example, in the U.S. Senate, roll call liberalism correlates with liberal ideological identification in the state (e.g., Wright and Berkman 1986). In the House of Representatives, roll call liberalism correlates with constituency Democratic presidential voting, a good proxy for the liberalism of House districts (Erikson and Wright 2001a, 2001b). In the American states, policy liberalism and the views of governing elites correlate with the state electorates' degree of liberal ideological identification (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993). And at the cross-national level, the left-right placement of the governing parties and coalitions correlate with the left-right preferences of national electorates (Powell 2000).

What are we to infer from patterns such as these, evident across numerous political arenas? The obvious answer would be strong evidence of democracy at work, with public opinion influencing public policy. But, if so, how? And can we be sure that some mechanism other than opinion causing policy is not responsible for the correlation?

A best-case interpretation is that the evidence shows democratic representation but fails to discriminate among alternative pathways. When we start thinking about those alternative pathways, the problem gets thornier. Do legislators consciously solicit the views of constituents? Do they take them into account, but only indirectly, making inference from indirect cues such as constituency demographics and constituency voting behavior? Or we might imagine a process where no legislator ever consciously considers the wishes of constituents but nonetheless reflects them because the elections process has molded agreement between constituents and representatives. These different scenarios are all democratic in the fundamental sense that the will of the people is somehow reflected in governance.

But we have not exhausted the possible explanations for the positive correlation between opinion and policy. Suppose the truth was that the voters decide based on reasons that have nothing to do with public policy. Even under this hypothetical circumstance, opinion and policy could correlate in the cross-section, leading to the spurious conclusion that opinion caused the policy. Before making causal claims about democratic representation, we should not rule out alternative mechanisms for generating opinion-policy correlations. We consider three.

First, and most obviously, the representatives and the represented can agree not only because the represented cause their representatives' behavior but also for the opposite reason—because representatives lead or “educate” their constituents. It is possible to think of voters as docile followers, readily susceptible to

leaders can tell their constituents what to believe, the illusion of representation is enhanced.

Of course, voters are not totally passive in such a manner. Still, politicians try to influence voters' opinions because they can gain electorally whenever they convince issue-oriented voters to agree with their views. Elected officials often face the dilemma of acting on their personal convictions or, for electoral survival, the convictions of their constituents. For the elected official, an attractive solution—if it can be accomplished—is to convert skeptical constituents to their own position, thus eliminating the dilemma by converting the two choices into one. (For elaboration of this argument, see Jacobs and Shapiro [2000].)

A second reason why an opinion-policy correlation might not be causal is that people create the correlation with their feet rather than their votes. Such a notion is popular in the literature on taxation and spending in suburban municipalities. Suppose we observe a correlation between communities' taste for taxes and their tax rates—the more they dislike taxes, the lower their tax rates. But why? We might like to believe that municipalities calibrate their tax rates to fit public tastes. But the most plausible explanation may be that tax rates are set exogenously and then attract residents whose preferences match the policy. Similarly, communities with good schools attract residents who care about good schools. School quality could be an accident of exogeneity that generates a correlation between education quality and concern with education, even in the absence of democratic representation.¹

Of course, this sort of theorizing assumes that citizens are both geographically mobile and sensitive to policy considerations. If people were sensitive to policy considerations when they decide where to reside, would they not also show policy sensitivity when they vote? Still, even at a higher level of government than the local municipality, people can choose their place of residence based on policy considerations, thus somewhat affecting the opinion-policy correlation. In part, liberals live in liberal states and conservatives live in conservative states because liberals and conservatives prefer to live where they find agreeable policies (and agreeable neighbors). Even when we turn to the cross-national context, we recall that emigration and immigration are often political in origin; to some degree this process of national selection must enhance the degree of correlation between national opinion and national policy.

Finally, geography, apart from geographic mobility, affects the opinion-policy correlation. Imagine a nation where there is opinion diversity across geographic constituencies and relative homogeneity within them. Urban residents, dependent on mass transit in their daily lives, like the idea of government subsidy for transit. Those in rural areas have lives tied the quality of highways; they like them wide, straight, level, and smooth, and they will urge government to produce what they want and need. Western ranchers and farmers use guns to kill rattlesnakes and coyotes—and not very often one another. They do not like the idea of government regulating gun ownership and usage. Urbanites perceive guns as weapons for homicide, thinking that they and their families are in danger.

would like to diminish the possibility by greater regulation and restriction. In many areas of policy discourse and conflict, views come to be associated with the areas in which people live.

Given such a scenario, we can elucidate another explanation for observed opinion-policy correlations. Even if the geographic constituencies choose their leaders at random, the fact that the leaders are drawn from the constituencies they represent will ensure some sharing of opinion by the public and its representatives. All that matters is that candidates have relatively uniform views within a constituency. Evidence of representation will emerge even when no voter considers policy views and no representative consciously acts to honor constituent preferences.²

When we observe correlation between opinion and policy, our inclination is to see it as evidence of democratic representation at work. However, given the possibilities of alternative causal mechanisms, it is no surprise that cross-sectional opinion-policy correlations are often viewed with skepticism (e.g., Sharp 1999). The skeptic's argument would have particularly strong force if cross-sectional correlations between constituency preferences and representative behavior were the sole evidence for ascertaining the degree of policy representation. By itself, the sharing of preferences by the representative and the represented demonstrates congruence but nothing more. In democratic theory, the aim is a causal dynamic by which the preferences of constituencies cause the behavior of the representatives—beyond what would occur by elite persuasion, voter mobility, or geographic accident.

Fortunately, the case for democratic representation is enhanced by a full consideration of the extensive evidence beyond raw correlations—such as the findings of the considerable literature on policy issues and election outcomes and elite anticipation of the electoral response. Still, if we are to convince the avowed skeptic, the strongest evidence comes from time series. The idea is not that time-series data patterns automatically trump cross-sectional ones, but rather that with time series one can exploit temporal order to infer causal ordering.

Imagine a body of evidence in which current public opinion is significantly related to future policy in a systematic pattern over time, in which opinion change precedes policy change in temporal sequence. Given such evidence, could one easily refute the idea that opinion is the cause of policy? If opinion leads policy—and particular if policy does not lead opinion—one could not comfortably argue that the causal arrow goes from policy to opinion. Given such time-series evidence, could the opinion-policy congruence be due to people voting with their feet? This possibility becomes implausible because it implies vast migrations in and out of the governmental entity (city, state, or nation) in advance of new turns in policy direction. And the mere sharing of opinions by elites and masses is an awkward explanation if public opinion predicts future policy independent of current policy, which presumably reflects current elite preferences. Of course, spurious relationships are always possible in the absence of a true controlled experiment. Thus, our skeptic could argue, for example, that elites change public policy

in their desired direction while propagandizing so that the public will accept it as good. But before taking such propositions too seriously, we must ask, why would such powerful elites need to influence public opinion if public opinion was irrelevant to policymaking?

The table is set to examine the dynamic case. Time-ordered relationships are vastly easier to study for evidence of cause and effect. If we are to understand process, it is helpful to observe change in progress. That idea is the starting point for the classic Page and Shapiro (1983) quasi-experimental study of *changes* in opinions and policies. Page and Shapiro observe changes in particular opinions over a span of time and then ask whether policy changes lying between them move also in the same direction. They conclude that the answer is yes. Here we have evidence for representatives responding to changed preferences. Accident or coincidence can be ruled out.

Thinking about the very same question, "If opinion changes, does government respond?" we have moved toward representing the process in the covariation of two time series, rather than the before-after test scenario of the quasi-experiment. The quasi-experimental evidence establishes the fact of representation but offers little guidance for how it might be modeled. That further step motivates our work, both what has gone before and what will appear in this chapter.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION: LIBERAL-CONSERVATIVE "MOOD"

If the issues that government processes were discrete—that is, they arise; get discussed, resolved, or ignored; and then *disappear*—then the idea of representation as a continuous process would be intractable. If, alternatively, individual issues are merely specific cases of a general and continuing issue debate, then we may think of measuring the net liberalism or conservatism of both public opinion and policy, connecting the two. Another way to pose the question is to ask whether opinion has some common element that persists over time and across apparently dissimilar issues. Our traditions on this matter sharply conflict. Policy studies begin with the presumption that all policies are unique. There is education policy, environmental policy, transit policy, gun policy, and on and on, all different. In common parlance and punditry, however, we contradict this view by referring to most (not all) issues is the same reference frame: liberalism and conservatism. If it is meaningful to refer to, say, a liberal position on environment, on education, on guns, and transit, then this "liberalism" must be something common to all; schools must somehow be related to trees, trains, and guns.

The matter may be easier in operational terms than as an abstraction. Imagine that we have a technology for solving for the common element(s) of a large array of public attitudes toward distinct issues—a principal components analysis in which issues are variables and time is the unit of analysis. Then the number of dimensions required to adequately account for the variation in the issue array

is an empirical question. One dimension might run through all, perhaps one in each policy domain (e.g., education, environment, guns, transit, and all the rest) that ties together more specific controversies, or perhaps each specific issue debate requires its own dimension. We approached the data willing to believe any outcome, without a strong prior belief. We learned (Stimson 1991, 1999; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) that most of the systematic variation in measured policy opinion questions could be accounted for by a single left-right organizing dimension.³ That dimension we call *public policy mood* and interpret as a generic response to government itself. Mood liberalism taps willingness to expand the size and scope of federal activity in all policy domains. Mood conservatism taps a preference for a lesser federal role.

In retrospect, we should have expected this outcome. We know from scholarship on government policymaking (most prominently Poole and Rosenthal 1997) that it is characterized by low dimensionality, most issues fit nicely within a left-right divide. And we know, of course, that all conflicts have their electoral resolution in a two-party political system, which tends to force issue controversy into a bipolar mode, both for governors and the governed. And when issues arise unaligned with the common dimension, there is great pressure to bend them to fit the ongoing debate (for the racial case, see Carmines and Stimson 1989; for the abortion controversy, see Adams 1997).

Thus, we have the first half of our question "If opinion changes" captured in a single time series, public policy mood. The measurement of mood is too complex to describe in much detail here (see instead Stimson 1991, 1999). Suffice it to say, mood is a composite incorporating virtually all available public opinion surveys that tap the common dimension of government activity. The annual or biennial measures of mood represent a weighted average of the trend, holding constant the specific survey question and weighting items according to their commonality with the dominant dimension. Using the ideological terms in common parlance, periods of high mood indicate a public at its most "liberal," while low scores indicate a public at its most "conservative." By the mood index, the public was most liberal in the early 1960s—just before the liberal Great Society legislation—and most conservative around 1952 (at the start of the series) and around 1980 at the advent of Reagan's conservative revolution. From "high" to "low" points or back again, the amount of change in mood can be considered large—upward from a standard deviation of cross-sectional liberalism-conservatism by our estimates—and encompassing all segments of the electorate (see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson [2002, chap. 6] for details).

To answer the representation question then requires also a continuous measure of the second piece, the policy response. The policy response, it turns out, includes two parts: year-to-year adjustments, which are sometimes wholly symbolic and sometimes modify existing policies at the margin (*policy activity* in our usage to come), and the making of law, a matter of more gravity and permanence (*policy*).⁴ The former is captured by aggregate measures of position-taking available from congressional roll call votes, presidential positions, and the like.

The latter is based on actual legislation passed by Congress (and overriding presidential vetoes).

We now have the two concepts necessary for analysis of government response to opinion. Public policy mood we treat as the current public view of the status quo, the answer to the question "Does government do too little, about the right amount, or too much?" Because the actual reach of government expands and contracts with alternating regimes, we expect public opinion to respond in a thermostatic mode, to say "too much" when government is expansive, creating new programs, taxing more, spending more, and "too little" when conservative regimes cut back and scale down. This would be true even if absolute preferences for the "best" size of government were wholly constant.

DYNAMIC REPRESENTATION: MOOD AND POLICY ACTIVITY

We postulate that rational politicians who wish to succeed in future elections and reelections use current public opinion as leverage in the calculation of which positions are dangerous or advantageous. We model policy activity as a function of previous policy activity and of public opinion (mood), as represented by an equation of the form:

$$y_t = \delta y_{t-1} + \beta x_{t-1} \quad (1)$$

with y_t and y_{t-1} our policy activity construct and x_{t-1} the previous year's public opinion. For the theoretical model, x could equally well be current public opinion. We use the lagged value to ensure correct causal ordering. The parameters δ and β can then be estimated by some form of dynamic regression.

But equation 1 doesn't fully close the loop on opinion influence. A nonzero β tells us that public opinion influences policy activity, but not quite how. Because public opinion influences election outcomes, it alters the composition of government, influencing policy activity by changing the preferences of those who become entitled to be policymakers. Democrats, for example, are more liberal than Republicans, so a public opinion that tilts an election result toward the Democratic Party would tend to produce more liberal policy activity *even if no elected politician took account of public opinion in his or her behavior*.

To sort out the two prevailing pathways to opinion influence, we need to allow the "electoral connection" scheme to work its influence in order to observe whether there is also direct influence of opinion on policy activity. To do so, we add the party composition, z_t , to the difference equation specification:

$$y_t = \delta y_{t-1} + \beta x_{t-1} + \gamma z_t \quad (2)$$

where z_t represents the current party composition, for example, percent Democratic, which is a function of public opinion in the most recent previous election. Simple though it is, equation 2 requires only an occasional control variable to be

a complete specification for assessing the impact of public opinion on policy activity. We have estimated the parameters of 2 for various governing bodies and under varying conditions. Table 2.1 is a summary statement, where the policy activity measure is a joint function across House, Senate, presidency, and Supreme Court.⁵

To clarify inference, we estimate the model in two stages, entertaining first a “reduced form” specification that predicts policy activity only from mood, an empirical estimate of the parameters of equation 1. This is a test of whether public opinion influences policy activity, ignoring issues of process and pathway. The answer of table 2.1 is that it does; the modest coefficient (0.18) is statistically significant. The picture is shown in figure 2.1. Here we see a temporal relationship stronger at some times than at others. To understand more fully, we must move beyond the bivariate case.

When we turn to the full model, the evidence is stronger and clearer. It tells us that composition matters (0.88) a lot, a surprise to no one, and that public opinion also matters in addition (0.36). The evidence produces undeniable support for the key assertion: changes in public opinion produce changes in government policy activity. To our question, “If public opinion changes, does government respond?” the answer is an unqualified “Yes.”

Table 2.1 Estimations of Global Representation: Predicting Policy Activity, 1956–1996

Variables	Model	
	Reduced Form	Full Model (with Vietnam)
Dynamics (Y_{t-1})	0.77* (8.64)	0.20 (1.90)
Mood _{t-1}	0.18* (2.15)	0.36* (4.16)
Composition (average of percent Democratic, House and Senate, Democratic dummy for presidency, percent liberal for Supreme Court)		0.88* (5.91)
Cumulative Vietnam deaths		-0.23* (-7.05)
Constant	1.13 (0.17)	-29.67* (-3.37)
Number of cases	41	41

Note: Policy Activity, the dependent variable of this analysis, is a weighted function of (1) Senate Percent Liberal Wins, (2) Senate Median Liberal Coalition Size, (3) House Percent Liberal Wins, (4) House Median Liberal Coalition Size, (5) Presidential Key Vote Liberalism, (6) Presidential Support Coalition Liberalism, (7) Supreme Court, Civil Liberties Domain, and (8) Supreme Court, Economics Domain. Measurement details are available in Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002. *T* values are in parentheses.

**p* < .05

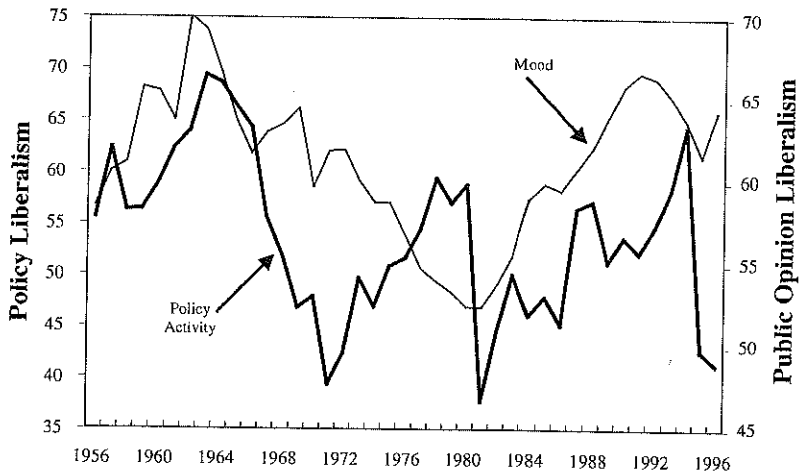


Figure 2.1 Public Policy Mood and Policy Activity

Note that mood affects policy activity two ways. The composition effect is simply that the party composition of government affects policy activity—with Democrats behaving more liberally than Republicans.⁶ A key part of the story—discussed shortly—is that the electorate chooses the party composition based on its current mood. The direct effect of mood on policy activity represents only the politicians’ response in anticipation of the electorate’s potential sanctions. For instance, consider the electorate momentarily in a liberal mood. Democratic politicians become free to engage in their liberal proclivities because the electorate’s liberalism lowers the cost of policy liberalism. Republican politicians become compelled to act more liberal than usual because of the political costs of bucking opinion.

DYNAMIC REPRESENTATION: MOOD AND POLICY

On the surface, the daily actions of Congress, the president, and courts appear to translate directly into public policy. Or they might not. One can imagine acts of government that amount to nothing more than posturing. Debates can be held and votes taken on matters of momentary import that amount to nothing. Thus, we ask whether the slow accretions of policy encapsulated in law also move in response to public demands.

“Policy,” in this conception, is the body of law that remains in place forever—or until reversed by other permanent changes. Given its cumulative character, policy cannot be a simple response to *current* public demands. Thus, we focus on change, asking what happens in each biennium that leaves a lasting residue. Our measurement strategy is an adaptation of David Mervin’s concept

lation of important laws—which we have coded for direction (liberal or conservative) and extended in time.

We measure policy as the accumulation of “laws.” The laws index is constructed in simple fashion from Mayhew’s (1991) compilation as the number of liberal (important) laws minus the number of conservative (important) laws for the Congress (biennium), from 1953–54 through 1995–96. Policy is measured by adding up the laws scores, cumulatively, from 1953–54 through 1995–96. As liberal important laws outnumber conservative important laws by about 9 to 1, we detrend the measure. On average, the net change (laws) is between five and six major laws in the liberal direction, each Congress.⁷

Asking again, “Does government respond to public demands?” we have a model of the pathways to representation similar to the policy activity discussion before. Again looking at all of government output, we are concerned with responses to government composition—now measured as a scale of party control of the three elected branches, House, Senate, and presidency, 0–3 for number in Democratic hands—and with response to public opinion directly. Equation 2 again captures the structure. Table 2.2 presents the equations; figure 2.2 shows the pattern of mood leading laws over time. The story with laws is much the same as we saw earlier with policy activity. The liberalism of laws produced by the U.S. government is very much a function of which party is in control and also of public opinion as measured by mood. Liberal policy comes from Democratic governments. But holding composition constant, what government does is also responsive directly to public opinion, captured in the public policy mood of the previous biennium. With regard to changes in important public policies,

Table 2.2 Policy Change (Laws) as a Function of Mood and Party Control

	Dependent Variable = Δ Policy (Laws)		
Policy Mood _{t-1}	0.62* (2.99)	0.47* (2.10)	
Mean policy mood _{t-1,t-2}			0.62* (2.92)
Democratic Party control _t		2.72* (2.32)	2.28* (2.10)
Laws _{t-1}	0.30 (1.69)		
Number of cases	22	22	22
Adjusted R ²	.46	.52	.59
RMSE	3.83	3.62	3.40

Note: Biennial data, 1953–1996. Change (Δ) in Policy = Laws. Democratic Party control = the number of the three institutions (presidency, House of Representatives, Senate) controlled by Democrats. *T* values are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$

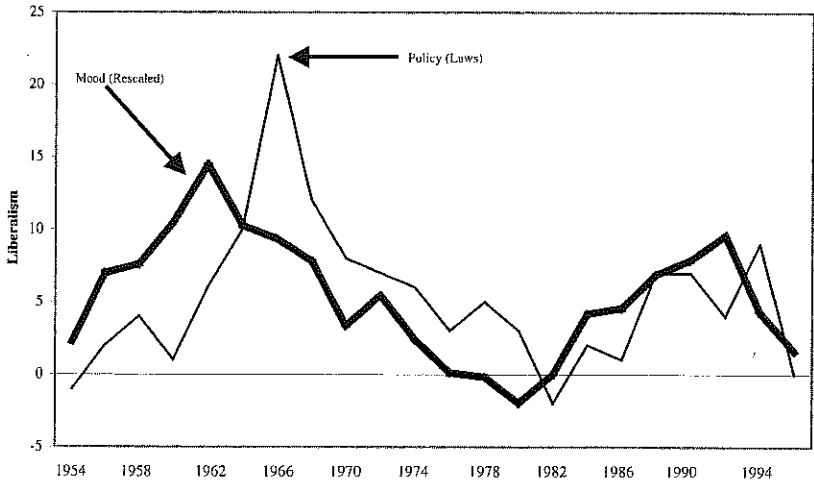


Figure 2.2 Public Policy Mood and Policy Change (Laws)

government is responsive to public opinion, now demonstrated for a second policy construct.⁸

THE FLOW BACK TO OPINION

Our interest in opinion and policy goes beyond how government responds to public opinion, representation. It is also important to understand how people react respond to the government response. We expect citizens to want more government when government in fact does little, to want less when it does much. That implies a negative association between what government does (policy) and how citizens respond (mood). We model such a relationship in table 2.3. We ask in that analysis whether public opinion (mood) responds to changes in policy. We answer the question first in a specification that lets mood be a function only of its previous value and of policy in the previous biennium. The key coefficient of -0.22 tells us that the response is as expected; liberalism in policy in one biennium produces a conservative reaction in opinion in the next and vice versa.⁹

We know from other analyses that mood is a function of economic outcomes also. Thus, that first specification, ignoring that information, is not quite complete. We supplement the analysis by adding inflation and unemployment effects in the second column. The result is a slight reduction of the key policy coefficient (to -0.17), which nonetheless leaves the effect in the predicted direction and quite highly significant. We have asked, “If government policy changes, do citizens respond?” The answer clearly is that they do.

Thus, we complete the loop. Government action and its cumulative residue responds to public opinion and public opinion responds to government action

Table 2.3 Mood as a Function of Policy

	Only Policy	Policy and Economics
Policy _{t-1}	-0.22* (-4.54)	-0.17* (-2.85)
Policy mood _{t-1}	0.39* (3.18)	0.41* (3.68)
Inflation _t		-0.25 (-1.16)
ΔUnemployment _t		1.38* (2.50)
Constant	38.26* (5.09)	37.57* (5.34)
Number of cases	22	22
Adjusted R ²	.77	.81
RMSE	2.02	1.82

Note: Biennial data, 1953–96. Policy is cumulative laws, detrended. T values are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$

These two dynamics are related in a system of equations. We start the system with a shock to mood—say, an exogenous “conservative” shock. Politicians immediately become more conservative in their posturing or policy activity; eventually, actual policy becomes more conservative. In appreciation, the public lowers its demand for more conservatism and, barring further disruptions, the system returns to equilibrium.

So far we have said little about the process that makes this work—the voters’ behavior at election time. We turn next to the electoral connection. For politicians to respond to mood requires that by doing so they gain—or at least think they gain—an electoral advantage.

THE ELECTORAL CONNECTION

The pivotal link in the chain of requirements for policy representation is that the electorate votes in a policy-oriented fashion. We have seen that for the direction of national policy, party composition matters and so does mood, when party composition is controlled. This mood effect represents the anticipation of elected officials—the belief that heeding public opinion enhances electoral security. This anticipatory response is contingent on the electorate paying a certain degree of attention, or at minimum that elected officials think that they are paying attention. Is the electorate’s responsiveness to policy considerations real or does the anticipatory response of politicians rest on an illusion?

Decades of electoral research provide a bleak picture of the political qualifications of the typical American voter. The typical voter is not particularly interested in policy issues and often is shockingly ill-informed. At election time, our typical voter starts with a standing preference based on a long-term party identification but also shows a tendency to defect based on evidence that the in party is governing well or poorly. Is there room for policy voting to emerge, given the state of the typical voter? Perhaps we should be reminded that not too long ago, the central debate of electoral politics was whether the American voter was even “rational.”

Two points must be raised to this concern. First, one must distinguish between occasional ignorance and irrationality. Contemporary research claims that although the American electorate may often be uninformed, voters do make intelligent use of the information that they possess (see, for instance, Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Second, and perhaps more important in the context here, the macro-level entity (the American electorate) must be distinguished from the micro-level construct (the typical American voter). To put it simply, if the typical American voter is (by definition) at the fiftieth percentile of attentiveness to policy issues, the macro-level behavior of the American electorate is heavily weighted by the behavior of the people above the fiftieth percentile of attentiveness. The behavior of the electorate shows more intelligence than our knowledge of the typical voter would suggest.

Is there a degree of policy responsiveness to voting in the United States that is observable with time-series evidence? The statistical question is whether election year mood predicts election results. We show that it does, for three dependent variables: the Democratic vote for president, the Democratic percentage of House seats, and the Democratic percentage of Senate seats among those up for election in the particular year. Our primary control variable is *macropartisanship* (party identification in Gallup surveys) in October of the election year. For the two congressional equations, we add a midterm dummy for the midterm effect. For the House seats equation, we add lagged seats. The statistical efficiency of the two congressional equations is enhanced by using “seemingly unrelated regressions.” The results appear in table 2.4.

The results of table 2.4 imply that mood is a considerable influence on national elections. The mood coefficients are all highly significant, at the .01 level or better.¹⁰ To appreciate the size of the coefficients, consider that each percentage point of mood represents an average across-the-board change of 1% on liberal-conservative policy items in opinion polls. The parameter estimates suggest that each percentage point opinion shift carries with it almost 1% of the two-party presidential vote, about two 3 House seats and about two-thirds of a Senate seat.¹¹

Clearly, elections are at the center of the representation process. The more liberal the electorate, the more Democratic its voting. The more Democrats elected, the more liberal become the policies. At the same time, politicians anticipate this process and the effects of their actions on public opinion.

Table 2.4 Predicting Election Results from Policy Mood and Macropartisanship

	Dependent Variable		
	Democratic Presidential Vote ^a	Democrat Percent of House Seats ^b	Democrat Percent of Senate Seats ^{b,c}
Mood, election year	0.92* (3.23)	0.47* (3.07)	1.81* (5.32)
Macropartisanship, October, election year	1.15* (3.98)	0.56* (3.45)	1.43* (3.94)
Midterm (1 = Dem. Pres, -1 = Rep. Pres, 0 = Pres. year)		-5.57* (-5.58)	-9.17* (-4.23)
Lagged Dem. percentage of House seats		0.71 (6.12)	
Constant	-75.05* (-2.59)	-49.04* (-2.45)	-141.01* (-3.53)
Number of cases	(12)	(23)	(23)
Adjusted R ²	.60	.63	.60

^a OLS equation. Democratic presidential vote is as a percent of the two-party vote.
^b SUR (Seemingly unrelated regressions). SUR - R² are unadjusted. Seats are measured as the percent of two-party seats.
^c The Senate seat equation is based on all Senate seats up in the specific election cycle. Seats decided in earlier election years are ignored.
T values (z values for SUR) are in parentheses. Based on all national elections, 1952-96.
* p < .05

THE REPRESENTATIVE SYSTEM

The representation system consists not of a single equation but instead a system of interrelated equations. The parameters of these equations are themselves contingent on other variables we have ignored. The size of the mood effect on elections, for instance, is ultimately a function of the ideological attentiveness of individual voters and the diversity of ideological choices presented by the two major parties. Widen the ideological gulf between the parties, for example—or enlighten the electorate—and the parameters capturing the electorate’s responsiveness will change.

The anticipatory policy response of elites to mood in turn depends on the degree to which the electorate responds to policy issues. It also depends on their balancing of electoral versus policy considerations in the politicians’ optimizing equations. At one extreme, professional politicians striving only to stay elected follow their constituencies at the expense of personal preferences. At the other extreme, elected officials (perhaps when term-limited) follow their preferences and shirk their responsibilities to their constituents.

An important element of the system is the feedback from policy to mood. Liberal policy causes conservative mood and vice versa. We should pause a mo-

ment to figure out why this should be. It is not that legislation generates a boomerang of disillusionment. And it is not that politicians spend their capital passing unpopular legislation. (Available poll data show that, although major laws are often controversial, they are usually favored by the median voter.) Rather, liberal policy breeds conservative mood and vice versa because popular liberal legislation lessens the perceived need for more liberal legislation and popular conservative legislation lessens the perceived need for more conservative legislation. To take an example, Johnson’s Great Society was popular but lessened the perceived need for further liberalism of the kind that the Democratic Party could deliver. Similarly, Reagan’s conservative revolution was popular but lessened the perceived need for further conservatism of the kind the Republicans could deliver.

The mood measure represents the *relative* judgment of the American electorate. When the electorate is in a liberal mood, the people see their policies as more conservative than they want. When the electorate is in a conservative mood, the people see their policies as more conservative than they want. Mood then responds “negatively” to policy because liberal (conservative) legislation lowers the demand for liberalism (conservatism).

This theorizing suggests still another aspect to the system. If mood measures the difference between policy and preferences, we should introduce *preferences* as a further latent (or unmeasured) variable. Mood can change when policy changes, but when it changes in a way not readily attributed to policy, the source might be exogenous changes in the electorate’s preferences.

At this point, we push the modeling to the limit. A potentially useful way to model the representation process has mood as a thermostat, with the public opinion registering its view that policy should be “more liberal” or “more conservative” (see Wlezien 1995). The unmeasured preference then is the electorate’s set point, but one that can vary over time. Restating the model in the language of time-series statistics, policy equals preferences plus error in an error correction model, where mood represents the error. By this formulation, one can visualize a graph of policy and preferences over time, where mood represents the difference between the two, or the error.¹²

If one pursues this idea to the next step, mood represents a parameter *k* times the quantity “latent preferences minus policy” where preferences are measured in policy units. The value of *k* calibrates how many units of major legislation (the policy measure) constitute one unit of mood. That is, one unit of mood is a demand for *k* major laws. But what is *k*?

We can offer a speculative answer, based on assumptions of rationality. When modeling representation, we can impute rational expectations to the actors. Rational expectation does not mean the absence of error, but rather the absence of *systematic* errors. Actors do not persist in making the same mistake; they are able to learn. For instance, if voters have rational expectations, they would cast partisan votes based on their personal issue positions (liberals vote Democratic, conservatives vote Republican) only if the political parties actually pursue different policies in office. Similarly, if politicians have rational expectations, they would not

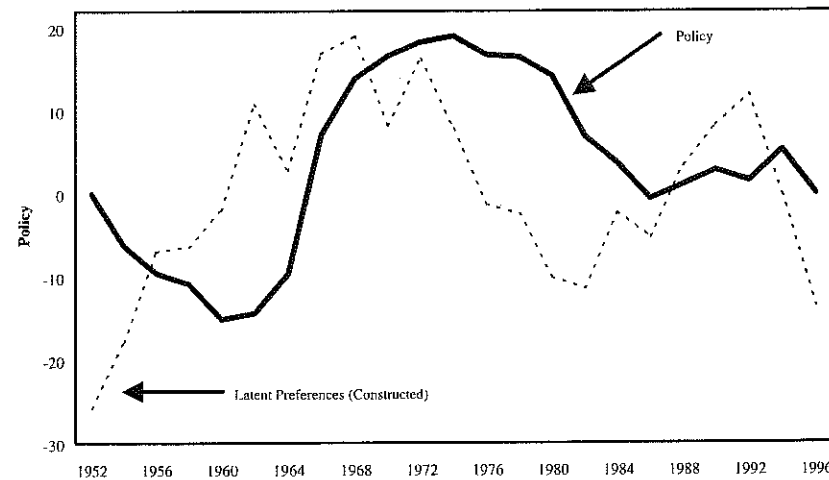


Figure 2.3 Constructed Public Preferences and Cumulative Policy

act *as if* the electorate were paying attention to their policies unless the electorate was paying attention.¹³ Finally, if politicians have rational expectations, they learn the magnitudes of the signals sent by the electorate when the electorate changes its mood. This is the key for calibrating mood and policy on a common scale.

Using this rational expectations framework, we see a k value of about 3, meaning that one unit (percentage point) of mood is equivalent to a demand for three major laws. If, say, Congress enacts three extra major liberal laws, mood moves conservative one percentage point. If k is less than 3, according to the pattern of the mood and policy time-series data, the policy response to mood would be too strong—Congress would move policy farther than the public's target, requiring a spiral of overcorrections each direction that would imply that politicians are unable to learn.¹⁴ If k is greater than 3, then the data suggest the policy response to mood would be too weak—Congress would always underestimate the public demand and never reach the public's target. In this sense, a k value of about 3 is just about right.

The potential payoff of this theorizing is the speculative depiction of the time series of public *preferences* overlaid with actual *policy*. Figure 2.3 presents the picture. Here, *mood* equals the *preferences* minus *policy* gap. The greater the gap, the more liberal the *mood*. By this depiction of figure 2.3, *preferences* move quite a bit. The contemporaneous correlation between hypothetical *preferences* and measured *policy* is not great (a mere .30), but *preferences* do correlate at an impressive .83 with *policy* eight years later.¹⁵ Preferences by this model take up to eight years to translate into law. If this is the correct depiction, the response of *policy* (unlike *policy activity*) is slow. This is exactly what we expect, given a Madisonian system of checks and balances. *Policy* responds surely but slowly so that *preferences* sometimes change faster than the system can respond.

THE LARGER SYSTEM: MACRO POLITY

The representation process that we have described is only one part of a larger set of dynamics that compose the macro political system. We have examined the public opinion-policy system of equations as if it were in a vacuum from which other political variables were sealed out so as not to interfere and complicate the analysis. Although this isolation is appropriate as a first step, a complete understanding requires that we place the representation subsystem within the context of the larger system of equations.

In modal social science, we abstract a piece of a larger system of relationships for study. We declare our explanatory focus a "dependent variable" and set about building theoretical and then statistical models to account for it. With this familiar approach, our larger study has modeled presidential approval, macropartisanship, and the economic perceptions that affect them. We have also modeled public policy mood; election outcomes for the presidency and both congressional chambers; policy activity in the House, Senate, presidency, and the Supreme Court; and the production of important laws.

Over time, almost all the "dependent" variables of one analysis become inputs of another. We could start a causal chain at an arbitrary point and consider the consequences. Economic performance, for example (measured as familiar employment and inflation outcomes), moves presidential approval, macropartisanship, and mood in different ways. Each of these three affected variables influences election outcomes and policy activity. Elections sometimes cause shifts in party control, which alter future levels of unemployment and inflation, thereby bringing us back to where we (thought we) started—the economy's performance. This is, in short, a system.

The Cascade of Causality—An Example

To illustrate the properties of the system, we trace in greater detail the impact of a hypothetical increase in unemployment at a particular time. We ask, what are the short-term and long-term ramifications for other variables, including those involving the representation process?

The story begins with a public response in terms of economic perceptions, even be the expectation of the unemployment shock in advance of the realization. The first political response is an immediate decline in presidential approval. Then, both directly and via approval, the public's economic pessimism finds its way into macropartisanship, harming the standing of the party occupying the White House. Already the process is complicated, as the effect on approval decays with a half-life in months, whereas the (smaller) influence on macropartisanship leaves a permanent imprint.

Although these first impacts are contingent on which party holds the presidency, another effect is not. Increasing unemployment causes a surge of support for government programs that address the needs of the unemployed. This surge

cratic presidents experience offsetting effects from unemployment—losses of presidential and party standing offset somewhat by gains in support for the party's liberal positions. In contrast, unemployment under Republican administrations produces only negative effects for the ruling Republicans.¹⁶

Elections for president and Congress are next to feel the effects of our unemployment shock. They are a function of approval, of macropartisanship, and of public policy mood, all of them carrying some of the signal of our unemployment shock. Thus, we leverage the number of seats in Congress and the probable presidential outcome down the temporal road from the initial unemployment shock. The next responses to consider are the changes in policy activity. These stem in part from the personnel changes brought about by the election. But even before the next election, they are generated by elite anticipation of the electoral forces including mood, which, of course, is affected by the unemployment shock that starts the process. Policy activity—the actions of Congress and the president—leads to actual policy, which has a permanent and cumulative character. Laws passed remain in force permanently or until some explicit counter action.

Change in laws (the accumulation of policy) sets off a later effect in mood, now contrary to the original impetus. When the unemployment shock leads to liberal laws, the electorate's mood shifts in the conservative direction. Meanwhile, if the unemployment shock helps to put a Democrat in the White House, the president would be one inclined toward economic initiatives that target unemployment. Thus, one net effect of the hypothetical unemployment shock that started our chain of events is an eventual (and possibly mistimed) reduction of unemployment.

At this point, we might ask the simple question, familiar from the old path-modeling tradition: what is the total effect of the increase in unemployment? Although our cascade of consequences is all based on regression analyses, obtaining an answer is not as simple as just multiplying through the known coefficients to get total effects. Some of the effects are contingent and some are not. Some influence future events only as probabilities (for example, the party of the president) that have an uncertain and nonlinear translation into outcomes. And all of the cascading effects move through the system over time at differing rates. Some decay quickly. Some are permanent. Some, for example, election effects, do not even begin until several months after the cascade begins. Moreover, much of the variance in our variables appears to the observer to be due to stochastic error, deterring us from making deterministic predictions.

Computer simulation is one approach we are pursuing to understand the long-term effects of changes in political variables. To simulate from a series of causal equations, one manipulates various aspects of the system by changing some or holding others constant and running the system (in some instances many times) to study the consequences.

Our simulations of the macro polity are a work in progress, with much to

tuals and observe what "happened." The short-term effects of the counterfactual changes in these exercises are usually and understandably predictable: that is, in terms of policy, mood and party control matter. The long-run effects are often another matter. For instance, in one version of our model when we reelect Carter over Reagan in 1980, the Republicans win control of the House of Representatives in the 1980s rather than in 1994, a triumph that would not be deducible from the equations alone. Similarly, when we induce an artificial liberal boost to mood in 1976, in time for the Ford-Carter election, policy changes in the expected liberal direction, but in the long-run mood shifts in the conservative direction, contrary to the initial inducement of a liberal shock.

Where the simulation yields counterintuitive outcomes, the question becomes, is the problem with the intuition or with the simulations? The answer can be debated, and the model can be tweaked to seek better fits with expectations. Unfortunately, we cannot know whether the changes induced are normal, typical, or representative; we have no sampling theory for systems. But there are unconventional lessons that can be learned. More surmise than inference, they nonetheless are lessons derived from looking at systems as systems.

CONCLUSIONS: THE OPINION-POLICY DYNAMIC

This chapter has focused on the time-series dynamics of policy representation in the United States. Much of our analysis is on short-dynamics within the representation subsystem. The presented evidence to show that not only the liberalism-conservatism of public opinion influences national policy but also that policy alterations in the direction of public opinion shift the public's demand in the reverse direction: liberal electorates cause liberal policies that lower the demand for further liberalism.

The representation process is embedded in a larger series of equations, from which we have explored simulation models with the goal of an improved understanding of long-term processes. Our preliminary simulations suggest an emphasis on the unpredictability of long-run consequences. For instance, what are the policy consequences of the Bush presidential victory in 2000? The short-run consequence is surely a more conservative swing of public policy. But what of the long run? Does policy eventually "correct" to a less conservative course? In the long run, is Bush-beats-Gore "good news" politically for the Republican or the Democratic Party? Our answer must be that we do not know. We still have much to learn.

NOTES

1. The theory of a market of mobile consumers shopping for communities traces to Tiebout (1956). For recent reviews of the evidence, see Dowding, John, and Biggs (1994) and Rickers and Stein (1998).

2. Luttbeg (1968) first identified this process as the "sharing" model (see also Erikson and Tedin 2001).

3. We were, and remain, agnostic about the possibility of a second dimension. The statistical evidence supports it. The interpretative evidence is, however, so confusing and contradictory that we can bring little substantive meaning to it and cannot rule out the possibility that the evidence of a common dimension is an artifact of some real shared covariation that is not substantively meaningful. We can be more confident of what it is not; this is not the "social issue" that is almost uniformly the second dimension of American politics in the views of pundits.

4. And we need to apologize for sowing some confusion on the terms. The measures we called "policy" in our 1995 article directly on this subject (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995) have become "policy activity" in our newest work. The new labels for old content was necessitated by our realization that we had to treat the two components separately, even though they share a single name in our literature.

5. In equation (2.2), public opinion is lagged, but composition is not. In reality, the impact of public opinion can be immediate, requiring no delay. Empirically, we model the direct impact of public opinion with a lag to avoid ambiguity about causal direction. See also Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, chap. 8).

6. Table 2.1 includes Vietnam casualties (Johnson years only) as a control. This variable acts as a suppressor variable, with the war thwarting liberal activity at a time of liberal public opinion. Note that the coefficient for mood goes *up* in the full model compared to the reduced form model. The major reason is that the dynamic term—the effect of lagged policy activity—dissipates in the full model and the substantive variables compensate. The correlation between independent variables mood and composition is positive, as one would expect, with more Democrats elected when the electorate is in a liberal mood. For further elaboration, see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, chap. 8), and Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995).

7. See Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002), particularly chapter 9, for discussion of the policy concept and measure. We use an extension of Mayhew's major laws through 1996 that was compiled by Jay Greene.

8. This is yet a third, which we have not reported here or elsewhere: the content of the budgetary process also responds to both composition and public opinion. Spending on liberal domestic programs goes up when Democrats are numerous and when public opinion demands more spending, going down with Republican composition and with conservative opinion. This supports similar budgetary claims by Wlezien (1995).

9. The significance of the relationship also holds up from a simpler test, regressing current mood change on lagged laws. The more liberal the legislation of one Congress, the more conservative the mood change from that biennium to the next.

10. The midterm effects in table 2.3 are significant and negative, meaning that each party's share of seats decreases at midterms when it holds the presidency. This fact is often treated by itself as evidence of an ideological reaction by the public, with the electorate adding seats to the out-party to ideologically balance the president (see, for instance, Alesina and Rosenthal 1995).

11. The equations of table 2.4 are bare-boned versions of our modeling of election results in *The Macro Polity*. Party platforms also matter for presidential races, although not for congressional elections. Presidential approval and economic prosperity show little direct impact on election results with macropartisanship controlled. See Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, chap. 7).

12. Technically, mood would represent the error with a minus sign. A liberal mood

13. The early representation studies by Miller and Stokes (1966; see also Stokes and Miller 1966) were often interpreted to mean that politicians paid far more attention to their constituents than was justified by the public's limited awareness of their actions. Rather than dismiss representatives' preoccupations with constituency as irrational, perhaps stemming from politicians' deluded sense of self-importance, we think it more profitable to ask whether it might be a clue that constituency attention is indeed electorally warranted (see Mayhew 1974).

14. Imagine, for instance, a liberal mood that the government interprets as a more liberal mandate than the electorate intends. Policy then becomes too liberal for the public, whose new mood signals trigger an overly conservative spate of policies, which makes the public ask for more liberalism, etc. The problem with this scenario is that it implies that politicians (and perhaps the public) are not able to learn from past errors.

15. In a related correlation involving observable variables, biennial mood correlates at .89 with policy change over the subsequent eight years.

16. Similarly, the political consequences of inflation are a mixed package for Republican presidents but only bad news for Democratic presidents.

3

Politics and Policymaking in the Real World

Crafted Talk and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness

LAWRENCE R. JACOBS AND ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

The public opinion polls that fill newspapers and the offices of government officials and election campaigns have fueled the nearly unquestioned assumption among observers of American politics that elected officials “pander” to public opinion. Politicians, they charge, tailor government policy to polls and other indicators of public opinion.

The presumption that politicians slavishly follow public opinion when they design policy is wrong or, more precisely, less true today than it was two or three decades ago. As a thought experiment, consider some of the most significant government decisions and policy proposals over the past decade or so: committing American troops to driving Iraqi troops from Kuwait; the House decisions to impeach President Clinton; failed campaign finance reform; aborted tobacco legislation; Clinton’s proposals in his first budget for an energy levy and an increased tax on Social Security benefits (despite his campaign promises to cut middle-class taxes); the North American Free Trade Agreement (at its outset); U.S. intervention in Bosnia; House Republican proposals after the 1994 elections for a “revolution” in policies toward the environment, education, Medicare, and other issues; President George W. Bush’s tax cut, the Bush administration’s rejection of the Kyoto agreement on global warming; and President Bush’s support for partial privatization of Social Security. On all of these issues (and others), government officials made decisions and offered proposals that defied what most Americans preferred.

This initial inkling that politicians may not be quite as responsive to public opinion when making policy decisions as commonly assumed is corroborated here with more systematic evidence.

The term “pandering” is most commonly associated with the notion that polls and public opinion drive substantive policy choices; this *substantive responsiveness*, we suggest, is on the decline (though it has by no means disappeared). A second form of responsiveness involves the use of polls and focus groups to attempt to manipulate public opinion; this *instrumental responsiveness* is amply present today. Politicians and other political activists spend a fortune on focus groups and public opinion polls to pinpoint the most alluring words, symbols, and arguments for their desired policies; the purpose is to move Americans to “hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis” (Zaller 1992, p. 313). Politicians and political activists respond to public opinion in order to craft their presentations of already decided policy. This strategy of “crafted talk” is used to *simulate responsiveness*—political activists’ words and presentations are crafted to change the public’s perceptions, understandings, and evaluations of specific policy proposals and create the appearance of responsiveness as they pursue their desired policy goals. Although the public’s values and fundamental preferences (such as strong and sustained support for Social Security and environmental protection) are unlikely to change, politicians do work to alter the public’s perceptions, of specific proposals, such as President George W. Bush’s initiative to privatize Social Security or his proposal for greater exploration for oil and gas.¹ Politicians, then, use polls and focus groups not to move their positions closer to the public’s (as commonly assumed) but just the opposite—to find the most effective means to move public opinion closer to their own desired policies. Elected officials follow a simple motivation in opting for crafted talk: lower the potential electoral costs to themselves and their supporters of not following the preferences of average voters while increasing the electoral costs to rival politicians. They want the best of both worlds: to enact their preferred policies and to maximize the probability that they and their allies will be reelected and their opponents defeated.

In short, the widespread image of politicians as “pandering” to public opinion when making policy decisions is mistaken. We suggest in this chapter and in our recent book, *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*, that the influence of public opinion on policy decisions has declined since the 1970s. Instead, politicians’ own policy goals (and those of their supporters) are increasingly driving their major policy decisions and their public opinion research, which is used to identify the language, symbols, and arguments to “win” public support for their policy objectives. Responsiveness to public opinion and attempted manipulation of public opinion are not mutually exclusive; politicians attempt to manipulate public opinion by tracking public thinking to select the actions and words that resonate with the

public. The next section provides evidence of declining responsiveness and situates this trend within larger institutional and political changes in American politics since the 1980s. We, then, compare our conclusions with the systems analysis offered in the previous chapter by Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson.

STUDYING PUBLIC OPINION AND
GOVERNMENT POLICY ISSUES

Research on the connection between public opinion and *specific* government policies reveals two key findings: first, political responsiveness has risen and fallen over time; second, and more specifically, it has declined since the 1970s.²

Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1983; Shapiro 1982) tracked the variation over time in the congruence of changes in public preferences toward specific policy issues and changes in subsequent government policy. Table 3.1 shows that the degree of congruence between government policy change and opinion change varied noticeably between the 1930s and 1980. The incidence of changes in policy paralleling changes in public opinion declined from 67% in the 1935 to 1945 period (heavily dominated by wartime issues) to 54% during the 1960s, and then increased to 75% during the 1970s. The clear implication of this analysis is that government responsiveness to public opinion has changed over time, with the 1970s as a high point of responsiveness.

In another study using a different methodology, Stephen Ansolabehere, James Snyder, and Charles Stewart (2001) examined the responsiveness of members of the House of Representatives in their policymaking activity between 1874 and 1996. They used the Republican share of the presidential two-party vote within each congressional district as an indicator of constituency opinions and compared it to the ideological direction of the policymaking of each party's candidates for the House of Representatives. Figure 3.1 also shows substantial variation over time

Table 3.1 Variations in Congruence over Time

Time Period	Percentage Congruent	(N)
1935–45	67	(18)
1946–52	63	(59)
1953–60	59	(37)
1961–68	54	(26)
1969–79	75	(91)

Percentages are based on Ns in parentheses, which are the total number of congruent plus noncongruent cases.

Source: Shapiro (1982).

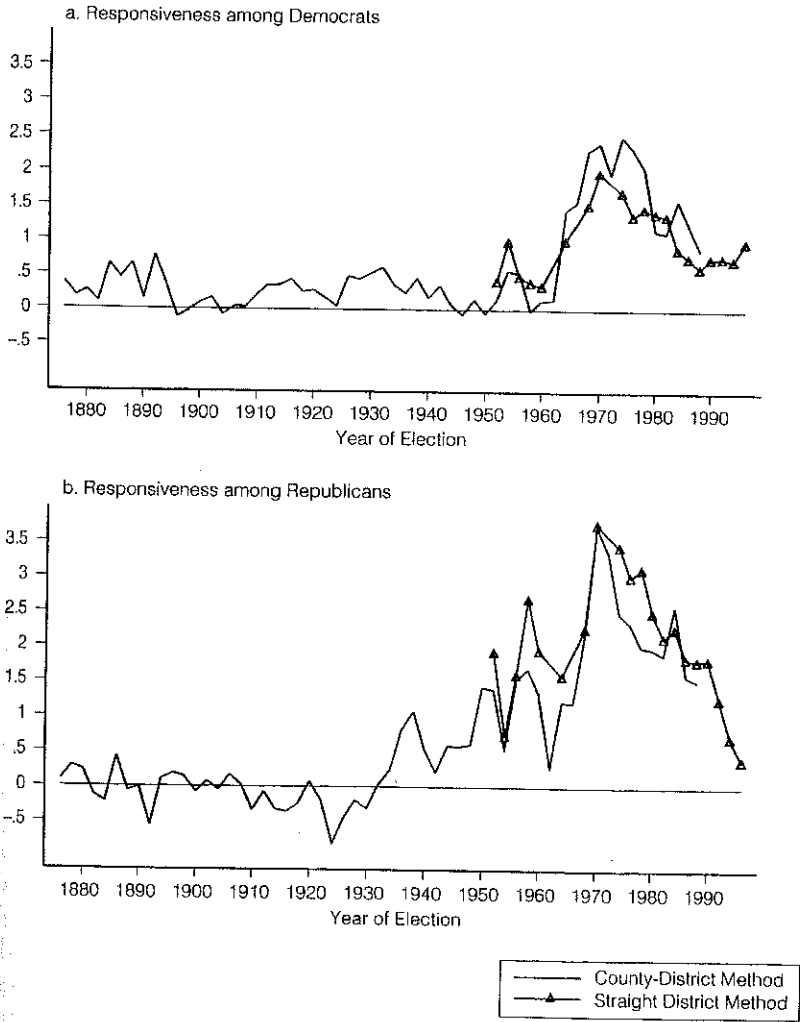


Figure 3.1 Responsiveness by Party, 1874–1996. From Stephen Ansolabehere et al., “Candidate Positioning in U.S. House Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 45 (2001): 136–59. Reprinted by permission.

in political responsiveness. In particular, they found that the candidates’ ideological responsiveness to opinion within their district was weak prior to the 1930s, rose in 1934 and peaked in the early 1970s, then declined into the 1990s (precipitously among Republican candidates). The finding that responsiveness peaked in the 1970s corroborates the results Page and Shapiro’s different approach produced. One of the most striking findings in figure 3.1 is the precipitous decline since the high point in responsiveness during the 1970s.

Table 3.2 Opinion/Policy Consistency by Policy Area

	1960–79		1981–93	
	Consistent (%)	n	Consistent (%)	n
All cases	63	327	55	566
By policy area				
Social welfare	63	51	51	45
Economic and labor	67	46	51	156
Defense	52	21	61	49
Foreign policy	84	38	67	150
Civil rights/liberties	59	39	56	61
Energy and environment	72	36	67	27
Political reform	41	34	17	23
Vietnam	71	35
Miscellaneous	74	27	40	55

Source: Monroe (1998).

A third methodology for studying substantive responsiveness has also found a decline since the 1970s. Alan Monroe (1979, 1998) investigated whether 500 separate government policies were consistent with the preferences of a majority of Americans. Table 3.2 shows that government policies in the 1980–93 period were less consistent with the preferences of a majority of Americans than during 1960–79. This pattern holds both overall and within eight of nine separate policy areas: the overall consistency of government policies with majority public preferences declined from 63% in the 1960–79 period to 55% in the 1980–93 period, with the steepest declines in the policy areas of social welfare, economic and labor issues, and, especially, political reform.

Monroe’s study is partly confirmed by our own preliminary study, which used the approach adopted by Page and Shapiro (1983). We examined the congruence of changes in public preferences and subsequent changes in government policy toward a subset of issues. We found a noticeable decline in the correspondence between opinion and policy changes during the 1980s and especially the 1990s (Jacobs and Shapiro 1997a). Focusing on four areas of social policy (welfare, crime, Social Security, and health care), we found that congruent changes in opinion and policy fell from 67% during Reagan’s second term (1984–87) to 40% during the Bush administration (1988–92) and 36% during half of Clinton’s first term (1993–94).

In short, the evidence suggests that government responsiveness to public opinion varies over time and has declined over the past several decades. The findings indicate that politicians’ policy decisions *do* respond to public opinion but that responsiveness has *fallen off* since the 1970s. The change in responsiveness underscores the most significant feature of government responsiveness: it is not static but rather has changed over time.

A CONDITIONAL POLITICAL EXPLANATION
FOR RESPONSIVENESS

Research on government institutions and political dynamics has shown systemic changes that account for the variation in substantive responsiveness and, in particular, the decline since the 1970s. As a general rule, politicians who enjoy long careers in elected office are skilled at weighing the political costs and benefits of their statements and actions. Their perceptions of the costs and benefits of their behavior affect their motivation and willingness to pursue two distinct goals. The first goal is electoral and suggests pleasing as many voters within their constituencies as possible. The second goal is to enact the policies they and their supporters most desire. Obviously, the skilled politician prefers to take actions that advance both electoral goals and policy goals. But political reality often presents politicians with unpleasant choices. Electoral goals are a constant concern of elected officials, though the intensity of concern increases as election day approaches. But the pressure on politicians to pursue policy goals favored by supporters has varied over time as political and institutional conditions have changed.

A series of significant and widely researched developments in American politics has elevated the expected benefits to politicians of pursuing policy goals that they and their supporters favor. We discuss two here; others are examined more fully in *Politicians Don’t Pander* (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, chap. 1 and 2).

Changes since the 1970s in the organization and balance of power within political parties dramatically increased the power of party activists, as well as core partisan voters who routinely support each party. As a result, control over the selection of congressional and presidential candidates and the platforms of presidential campaigns, shifted from party organizations and a small cadre of party leaders to party caucuses and direct primaries after the 1960s. Instead of winning the party nomination by battling for support among the small cadre of party leaders, candidates since the 1970s have depended on securing the support of party activists, who provide the bulk of the contributions, volunteers, and votes necessary to win the party’s nomination and then the general election (Aldrich 1995, chap. 6; Rohde 1991; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Davidson and Oleszek 1998, pp. 67–68).³

The knighting of political activists as the selectors of each party’s nomination has had enormous political consequences since the 1970s. Political activists voice policy positions that are more ideologically extreme than those of the general public or even their fellow (but less active) partisans. The consequence is that each party’s nomination requires cementing the support of party activists, which in turn pressures the candidates and officeholders to support ideologically extreme positions that diverge both from those of the opposing party and from centrist opinion (Fiorina 1974; Aldrich 1995; Polsby 1980; Jacobson 1987, p. 20; Wright 1994). (“Centrist opinion” refers to the median voter or citizen in the distribution of public opinion and not to an ideologically fixed “left” or “right.”) Indeed, the anticipated reaction of party activists has shaped the political agenda

didates are recruited to run: each party tends to recruit candidates whose own personal attitudes and ideological views about "good public policy" closely mirror those of activists.

The pressure of party activists has produced national Democratic and Republican parties that have become increasingly polarized since the 1970s, as evident in two trends. First, there is greater unity *within* each political party as the proportion of moderates in both parties (but especially the Republican Party) has declined dramatically from the 1970s to the 1990s. Legislators who harbored policy views outside their party's mainstream and regularly voted with the opposing party—like liberal New York Republican Jacob Javits and conservative Arkansas Democrat Wilbur Mills—have been replaced in each party by more ideologically extreme politicians (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997; Bond and Fleisher 1990; Fleisher and Bond 1996). The diminishing number of moderates and the decline of intra-party differences are evident in roll call votes on the floor of the House and Senate, which no longer divide each party as they did from 1945 to 1976. Since the mid-1970s, the proportion of close floor votes in Congress on which more than 10% of each party disagreed with a majority of their party has declined. Moreover, the ideological position of each party's members has moved closer together. Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) measures of the distance between the votes of members of the same party in the House and Senate show less division within each party during the 1990s than at any time since 1947. The second trend producing partisan polarization has been the growing ideological distance *between* each party. Poole and Rosenthal's analysis suggests that the distance separating the average House and Senate Democrat from the average Republican increased over time. In addition, roll call votes in Congress were more frequently divided between liberals and conservatives in the 1990s than at any time since 1947, when President Harry Truman faced a contentious Republican-dominated Congress.

Democrats and Republicans became more ideologically homogeneous and polarized by the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century (as illustrated by gridlock on economic and fiscal policy). The implications are significant: the combination of fewer legislators outside a party's ideological mainstream and growing policy differences between the parties on social and economic issues has increased the costs of compromising the policy goals of partisans. Responsiveness to centrist opinion becomes less likely if it means an erosion of support from party activists.

The political incentives of the new political order were well illustrated in the impeachment of Bill Clinton. The congressional Republicans' relentless pursuit of impeachment was largely driven by the priority that Republican activists attached to the policy goal (removing Clinton) instead of the electoral goal (appealing to a majority of Americans). Moderate Republicans could not ignore the risk of opposing impeachment—it could lead to a challenge in the next primary election. Put another way, Republican members of Congress disregarded the two-thirds of Americans who opposed impeachment because their electoral goal of responding to a majority of voters was offset by the substantial costs of compro-

misg their policy goals of enacting legislation that Republican activists and other supporters favored.

The second factor that heightened politicians' expectations about the benefits of pursuing policy goals that they and their supporters favored was the rapid growth in the number and diversity of national interest groups that could mobilize particularistic groups within a legislator's constituency and use national political action committees to provide campaign contributions to supporters (Cigler and Loomis 1983; Salisbury 1990; Walker 1991; Hecl 1978). Until the 1960s, interest groups were relatively few in number and those from similar sectors of society came together under relatively strong peak associations such as the American Medical Association, which dominated health policy. The dominance of a few peak organizations aggregated the demands of interest groups and provided a tangible bargaining partner for politicians as they balanced electoral pressure to follow centrist opinion.

After the 1960s, however, indicators—from the number of registered lobbyists to the number of corporations operating offices in Washington—revealed a dramatic growth in the number and variety of organizations engaged in pursuing their interests in Washington. New groups and new coalitions on social, economic, and political issues formed continually. Moreover, once-dominant peak organizations were replaced by associations that specialized in small policy niches or that formed complicated coalitions that cut across formal associations (Cigler and Loomis 1983; Salisbury 1990; Walker 1991; Hecl 1979). The groups increasingly used campaign contributions, grass-roots organizing, and media campaigns to pressure politicians to advance their particularistic policy concerns.

Organized labor—a decisive influence into the 1960s—saw its membership slip from over 30% to 14% of the workforce in just three decades, recording one of the lowest rates of union membership among industrial countries. The AFL-CIO, once the lead voice for organized labor, no longer served as a dominating peak association. Labor's decline combined with intensified business opposition to government social welfare programs has been credited with shifting the political balance to the right and moving the average officeholder's position away from centrist opinion (Rogers and Ferguson; Weir, 1998).

The result was that a relatively small number of powerful interest groups no longer dominated government decision making, in particular policy areas such as health care. The proliferation of narrowly based interest groups increased the pressure on politicians to pursue specific policy goals; politicians could no longer negotiate with a peak organization to gain flexibility on some issues in exchange for supporting an organization's priorities. Greater numbers of interest groups with focused agendas also stimulated volunteers and, especially, contributions (Stein and Bickers 1995).

Incentives to pursue policy goals grew (though perhaps not as extensively as some reformers assume) with the increasing importance of money in politics—in the form of campaign contributions by political action committees (PACs) and well-funded lobbying campaigns during policy debates, epitomized by the 1995

million spent by opponents of the Clinton health plan in 1993–94 and by the infamous “Harry and Louise” commercials (West, Heith, Goodwin 1996, pp. 42–43; but cf. Jacobs 2001). Although researchers disagree on the nature and extent of the influence extracted by contributors to campaigns and policy initiatives,⁴ there is some agreement that the pressure on politicians to fund media advertising and political consultants has advantaged private interests by disproportionately increasing their access to politicians and the mass public and enabling them to prevent threatened actions by lawmakers (McChesney 1997; Sorauf 1988; West and Loomis 1999; Ferguson 1995).

Since the 1970s, the rise of ideological polarization, the proliferation of interest groups, the increasing importance of campaign expenditures, and other factors have elevated the perceived benefit to politicians of pursuing policy goals that they and their supporters favor rather than responding to centrist public opinion. Responding to centrist public opinion at the expense of policy goals entails compromising their own philosophical convictions and possibly alienating ideologically extreme party activists and other supporters who volunteer and contribute money to their primary and general election campaigns. In contemporary America, designing policy to reflect what most Americans prefer has increasingly become costly to politicians and therefore something that the ambitious politician will avoid. To get the best of both worlds, politicians pursue the policy goals they and their supporters prefer yet try to lower the electoral risks by attempting to manipulate public opinion.

The approach of imminent elections, however, temporarily interrupt the drive of politicians to reach their policy objectives. As the elections approached in the summer of 1996, congressional Republicans and Clinton briefly replaced partisan gridlock with compromise and cooperation to pass legislation that had strong public support, such as the minimum wage law, the Kassabaum-Kennedy reform of private health insurance operations, and, arguably, welfare reform. The clearest evidence for the impact of electoral proximity comes from studies of senators who moderate their earlier positions and increase their responsiveness to their state’s median voters as election day neared (Levitt 1996; Kuklinski 1978; Amacher and Boyes 1978; Elling 1982; Wright 1989; Wood and Andersson 1998). Our own analysis found a similar pattern for presidents; comparing the publicly enunciated positions of Lyndon Johnson with his private polling revealed a pattern of rising responsiveness as the 1964 presidential election approached (Jacobs and Shapiro 1993). The heat of an upcoming presidential election and elevated attention from average voters appear to motivate politicians for a short period to respond to public opinion and run the risk of absorbing the costs of compromising their policy goals.

Although the drift of institutional changes over the past several decades have both increased the costs to politicians of compromising policy goals and responding to centrist opinion and raised their benefits of pursuing the policy goals of supporters, standard models of competitive elections predict long-term respon-

toral margins, competitive elections are expected either to produce an alteration in power that clusters around the median voter (even if it zig-zags from left to right of the median) or to induce compromise that hews to centrist opinion in an effort to avoid electoral punishment (Sundquist 1968). However, the last two decades, as well as the historical record, suggest that responsiveness has remained comparatively low across elections and that elections may not be a self-correcting cure. Three reasons stand out. First, motivated politicians exercise substantial discretion to pursue unpopular policies. Voters lack complete knowledge of their representatives’ positions; they cannot always monitor and punish officeholders due to the plethora of considerations that enter into their choices (including non-policy evaluations of personal image), and policymakers’ strategic packaging of decisions obscures the costs and responsibility of policy changes (Arnold 1990). Second, muting responsiveness to centrist opinion is electorally expedient for most members of Congress from ideologically homogeneous districts. Third, politicians of both major parties use crafted talk to obscure their *true* policy goals and to appear responsive to centrist opinion through their language and symbolic actions such as candidate Bush’s frequent photographs with blacks during the 2000 presidential election even as the African American community thoroughly rejected his policies. The 2000 election also showed both candidates closely hewing to language that embraced tax cuts, smaller bureaucracy, more consumer choice, and expanded social welfare provisions (e.g., establishment of Medicare drug benefit). The policy goals of politicians have diverged even as their rhetoric has converged toward words and presentations that signal an affinity for what the median voter favors.

POLICYMAKING IN ACTION

Our book, *Politicians Don’t Pander*, builds a theory and explanation for variations in responsiveness and, in particular, the decline since the 1970s. We intensively analyzed President Clinton’s drive for health care reform in 1993–94 and the first Gingrich Congress (1995–96) to explain *why* policymakers were discounting public opinion in fashioning policy decisions. We combined quantitative research with a review of White House memoranda, content analysis of the statements and decisions of leading policymakers, and semi-structured interviews with senior officials. In this section, we briefly outline the political motivations and strategic considerations that led authoritative officials from diametrically opposed ideological perspectives to converge on a similar approach to public opinion.

Clinton Revisionism: Where Is the Great Panderer?

Perhaps the second most common rap on President Clinton—beyond the questions about his private conduct—was that he was poll-addicted. Here was the poster child for the pandering politician. Yet interviews, White House documents

content analysis, and other evidence suggest that during the formulation of Clinton's health reform proposal—the centerpiece of his domestic policy agenda—public opinion was repeatedly discounted in favor of policy goals that arose from the president's own philosophy and policy preferences, interest group pressure, and other factors not directly related to public opinion. Only after the president's plan began to take shape were his pollsters called in to “poll the presentation.”

Clinton advisers, both defensive and critical, agreed that the president's New Democratic philosophy and economic considerations regarding universal coverage and other issues were “uppermost in Clinton's mind.” Health reform rose to the top of Clinton's agenda during his campaign and his first two years in office because he and his advisers identified it as the means to achieve his overriding goals of economic rejuvenation and deficit reduction.⁵ Public opinion toward health care reform did not elevate it on his agenda. One senior aide during the campaign and the administration explained that Clinton promoted health care reform from the start of the 1992 presidential race because “he viewed health care primarily as an economic issue first, and as a social issue second.”⁶ According to a wide spectrum of Clinton's aides, Clinton's commitment to economic growth and deficit reduction led to his support of universal health insurance.⁷ Universal coverage was expected to control government and business costs by ending the rampant practice of shifting the expenses for treating the uninsured to the insured and by focusing Americans on remaining healthy and efficiently using the health system. According to advisers, Clinton's “goal was not a social goal of coverage expansion per se”; he “went in as a way to save and reduce the deficit” and, perhaps, to “finance high priority new initiatives in such areas as education or the environment.”⁸

The novel approach to health care reform that Clinton embraced was the offspring of his New Democratic philosophy; it seemed to promise an approach to health care reform that would expand insurance coverage yet avoid a visible government role and massive tax increase. Clinton backed a liberal variant of managed competition that proposed to establish universal access to health insurance by requiring employers to contribute to their employees' insurance and by creating new regional bodies that negotiated with private health plans and monitored competition between them. Clinton viewed his novel approach, according to an aide, as allowing him to “say ‘I have a competitive bill, not a regulatory bill’ ”⁹ that would finance health care reform by squeezing waste out of the system rather than imposing enormous direct tax hikes. White House officials, especially Ira Magaziner, who coordinated health care reform, repeatedly assured the president and Mrs. Clinton that by eliminating “waste in the current system, . . . system savings will exceed system costs significantly” and would “cover universal access and possibly contribute to deficit reduction.”¹⁰ Managed competition seemed to promise “something for nothing.”¹¹ (The Congressional Budget Office [1994] would later report that Clinton's managed competition approach did not produce greater savings than costs.) By contrast, health policy experts or advo-

regulation of health care spending were labeled “Old Democrats” and were derided as “Washington people” dependent on the outdated ideas of “direct . . . tax increases . . . [and] regulatory approaches that the president was not fond of.”¹² Put simply, the president and his senior aides like Ira Magaziner preferred the liberal variant of managed competition to alternative approaches because of their strong views of what constituted “good public policy.”

Appeasing interest groups and Democratic constituents also drove White House decisions, especially in designing the framework of the president's managed competition approach. Long-term care and drug benefits were added, according to White House documents, to “make the Medicare and Medicaid savings possible for the American Association of Retired Persons [and other senior and disability groups] to support”; the early retiree discounts were created to “solidify large business, labor, senior and state and local government support”; and numerous other policies were designed to curry favor with small businesses, urban areas, provider groups, and single-payer advocates.¹³ Even on the issue of comprehensive benefits, for which White House pollster Stanley Greenberg reported strong national support, several administration officials suggested that aggregate public opinion was not as influential as “a lot of pressure from a lot of seniors.” “We knew,” one political adviser recalled, “that if we didn't have long-term care we wouldn't get the AARP.”

In short, within the White House, Clinton officials repeatedly insisted that their “plan [was] constructed by the policy people” and that “polling didn't drive the policy decision.”¹⁴ They fully accepted, as aides reported, that “the most compelling features of our package in policy terms may *not yield the highest public support*” (emphasis added).¹⁵ Public opinion was discounted (often explicitly) in favor of the policy preferences of interest groups, party activists, and the president himself.

Our intensive case study provides an opportunity to penetrate the black box of policymaking portrayed in systems analysis and analysis of aggregated data; the purpose is to investigate how politicians understand, evaluate, and use public opinion (Jacobs 1992a, b, c, 1993). Studying the strategic calculations of policymakers unravels a perplexing puzzle of the Clinton era: why would Clinton gorge himself at a sumptuously provided banquet of polls and focus groups yet discount public opinion in favor of policy goals when designing policy? Why spend a fortune on researching public opinion when it does not drive your policy decisions?

Our analysis of the Clinton White House's health care operations suggests that it used polls and focus groups as part of a strategy of crafted talk or, as White House aides put it, to “craft the communication strategy and the message” in order to appeal most effectively to the public.¹⁶ White House aides candidly acknowledged that the purpose of public opinion research was to move Americans toward supporting what “you care about . . . and believe.” Polls and focus groups were aimed at determining, as one official said, “where people [are] in relation-

poll the policy," well-placed aides explained, to discover what "people really wanted policy wise"; rather, "we polled the *presentation* of the policy."¹⁸

In particular, White House aides most consistently used polls and focus groups to identify the language, symbols, and "arguments that will resonate with people."¹⁹ Pinpointing the "words that people use" in everyday life told the White House staff how to "talk, describe, and sell" the reform package in a manner that effectively appealed to public opinion.²⁰ The White House staff used public opinion research, then, to identify existing public attitudes and information that supported aspects of the Clinton plan (e.g., universal coverage) as well as unfavorable views (e.g., proposals to control costs and expand government bureaucracy); then, they crafted presentations to prompt Americans to bring attitudes and information favorable toward the Clinton plan into the top of their minds. White House research on Americans' attitudes directed decisions on three aspects of "message" development: its choice of "security for all" as an overriding theme, its emphasis on the personal benefits of reform, and its selection of specific words to describe its plan—such as the word "alliance" to publicly describe the new entities that were to purchase health insurance for consumers (health policy designers referred to them as "health insurance purchasing cooperatives," or HIPCes).

Bill Clinton's policy preferences, philosophy toward government, and political judgments about the policy goals of his supporters drove the formulation of his health care reform plan. Only *after* he and his advisers reached their decisions did they focus on public opinion, and then the strategic objective was to win over the public to their policy positions and thereby induce cooperation from policy-makers.

*Political Learning: What Gingrich Republicans Shared
with Clinton Democrats*

The stark policy differences between congressional Republicans (especially in the House after Speaker Newt Gingrich took the gavel) and the Clinton White House produced the Washington version of the "war between the Tates." Even as Washington's political titans squared off during the 1990s, they were driven by common motivations and strategy: they pursued the policy goals that they and their supporters wanted to achieve into the fall of 1996, and they discounted the fact that most citizens did not support some of these desired policies. The Republicans echoed both the public's broad objectives (evident in the supermajorities of more than 70% that favored balancing the budget, cutting taxes, establishing a presidential line-item veto, eliminating "welfare," and passing term limits) as well as the public's philosophical leanings toward individualism and limited government (about two-thirds of Americans consistently tell pollsters that the government does too many things that are better left to business and individuals).²¹

The Republicans' specific proposals to achieve these broad objectives, however, contradicted the public's specific policy preferences. They ran counter to the

and safety regulation, school lunches, student loans, Americorps volunteers, education and training, increased defense spending, and other policy areas (Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992).²² Although Americans favored ending "welfare," they did not support either the sharp cuts in government spending for poor people or the punitive approach to children and the poor that the House proposed. During the 104th Congress, majorities of nearly 60% of Americans continued to support government assistance for "poor" people and over 80% believed that the government was spending too little or about the right amount on "assistance to the poor" and "poor children." Moreover, the 104th Congress failed to act on the popular political reforms of term limits and lobbying regulations, despite Republican promises in the Contract with America to enact them.

An intensive analysis of the Republicans' motivations for discounting public opinion points to the importance legislators attached to their own policy goals (what they considered "good public policy"), as well as the demands of party activists and interest groups. The policy decisions of many House Republicans were driven by the fact that—in the words of House Republican Whip Tom DeLay—they were "ideologues [with] . . . an agenda [and] . . . philosophy" (quoted in Drew 1996, p. 116). House Republican Sam Brownback, a leader of legislators who first entered Congress in 1994, agreed that "most of my colleagues are very ideologically driven" and came to Washington committed to making good on a "very aggressive, very ideological campaign . . . [to] reduce the size of the federal government" (quoted in Drew 1996, pp. 124–25).

The views of DeLay and Brownback were repeated in our interviews with staffers; legislators were determined to "do what's best" according to their personal values. One Republican respondent explained: "On policy, beliefs are more important than public opinion." Another explained that the member of Congress "just does what he feels he needs to do. Public opinion is not at all useful in day-to-day policy making." Eighty-eight percent of the legislative staff we interviewed (46 out of 52) acknowledged that public opinion information was used to lobby their offices but argued that it had no influence on the member; their member "stuck" to his or her beliefs and distrusted the results because the "numbers are so easy to manipulate" to serve the interests of the lobbyist, whether an interest group, another legislator, or the White House. The persistent and unequivocal downplaying of public opinion by the staff we interviewed is consistent with the gap between public opinion and Republican positions as well as with the previous research on a member of Congress and his constituents, which suggests that the preferences of a member's constituents has a modest and highly contingent effect on the legislator's voting decisions and electoral prospects.

The policy goals of Republicans were the product of not only legislators' own beliefs but also the preferences of the Republican Party activists and interest groups who supported them, especially the Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association, and the National Association of Small Businesses (Drew 1996). The standing of the Republicans' allies was reflected in the dramatic rise during the

advocacy groups, business groups, and others sympathetic to the party's goals (Gormley 1998).

As Republican leaders would discover, legislative proposals that compromised the party's policy goals and responded to centrist opinion faced a potential revolt by rank and file legislators as well as party supporters. Conservative Republicans (especially in the House) were vigilant in protesting what they saw as backsliding on key elements of their agenda, equating "compromise" and "split[ting] the difference" with the abdication of principle (Drew 1996, p. 310). The Christian Coalition and other supporters pressured Republicans to enact their preferred legislation and ominously warned (in one mailing) of retribution for failing to follow its policy goals: "We'll throw you out. We mean it" (quoted in Schneider 1995).

In short, the intensive cases studies of the Clinton and Republican policy initiatives in the 1990s, as well as more systematic research on political responsiveness, point to three findings. First, the responsiveness of government policy to the public is not static but varies over time. Second, it has declined since the 1970s. Third, changes in American political dynamics and institutional developments have increased the perceived political benefits of pursuing policy goals over electoral goals, increasing the incentives for discounting the preferences of centrist opinion when it has diverged from those of party activists and other supporters of ambitious officeholders.

STUDYING VARIATION AND POLITICAL CONFLICT IN SUBSTANTIVE RESPONSIVENESS

The previous chapter by Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, as well as their previous work (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1994, 1995), offers an alternative interpretation of government policy and public opinion in which politicians incessantly follow public opinion.

Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson base their conclusions on highly aggregated measures of domestic public opinion (or, in their terms, "mood") and government policy. They use global measures of liberalism and conservatism for each year to track the decisions of American government on domestic affairs since the 1950s (such as legislation enacted by Congress). They have similarly condensed available public opinion toward domestic policies into comparably global measures of liberal and conservative public "mood." The researchers then asked: Did changes in government policy in a liberal or conservative direction correspond to changes in public mood for more or less government? In short, their method treats policy decisions and national public opinion as a single dimension of ideological conservatism and liberalism and then compares the public's liberal-conservative "mood" to overarching policy measures.

Based on these highly aggregated measures of public opinion and policy,

Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) have reported that government policy has followed public opinion as it moved in a liberal direction in the 1960s, in a conservative direction around 1980, and then back toward a liberal course in the late 1980s. These results have heartily supported the assumption that politicians unrelentingly "pander" to public opinion when making policy: for politicians, public opinion is the only signal that matters. Politicians behave "[l]ike antelopes in an open field" (p. 559): "When politicians perceive public opinion change, they adapt their behavior to please their constituency" (p. 545).

The authors' chapter in this volume augments their previous reports of "antelope"-like responsiveness of politicians by conducting "systems" analysis and focusing on the "larger set of dynamics that comprise the macro political system" (chap. 2). Their admirable motivation is to demonstrate the endogeneity of previously disconnected aspects of American politics: economic conditions, public opinion, policymaking, elections, and other factors. The authors' embrace of systems analysis both modifies their treatment of political representation in important respects (partisan composition is now incorporated with public opinion in an analysis of government policy) and raises new questions.

Systems analysis reached its heyday in the social sciences during the decades after World War II and then became the subject of probing questions during the 1970s.²³ In 1970, Giovanni Sartori classified research—in one of the classics of social science methodology—as running along a "ladder of abstraction" between two extremes. At one extreme were descriptive studies that suffered from the "microscopic errors" of exclusively focusing on particular detail and failing to identify common patterns across cases; at the other extreme were global approaches such as systems analysis that attempted to explain everything but committed the "macroscopic errors" of failing to measure accurately the most basic aspects of political reality. Sartori's recommendation was for "middle-level" theorizing that produced empirically grounded but theoretically informed analysis.

Indeed, the critical reaction to systems analysis was an important catalyst for the return to the workings of institutions that is now a prominent part of contemporary political science. Three or so decades ago journals and books chronicled the ways in which government institutions and political conflict produced government activities that defied the predictions of systems analysis. The fashionable catchwords of the day referred to breaking open the "black box" of systems analysis into which inputs flowed and outputs popped out; the aim was to accurately understand policymaking while producing generalizable "middle-level" theorizing (e.g., Skocpol 1979; Verba 1971; Tilly 1975).

Although the empirically grounded research by Stimson, Erikson, and MacKuen and, specifically, their *Macro Polity* project avoids the most extreme form of systems analysis, their work does raise two questions posed three decades earlier about systems analysis: the authors rely on a form of overaggregation that creates "macroscopic errors"; they do not study changes in relationships over time that produce temporal variations in responsiveness. The result is that their

empirical portrayal of public opinion and policy and their inferences about democratic governance are incomplete: not allowing for strategic attempts to manipulate public opinion leads them to conflate responsiveness to genuine public preferences with possible simulated responsiveness. Their conceptualization of public opinion, the nature of their data, and their research design do not allow them to disentangle variations in responsiveness over time that stem from changing political and institutional dynamics.

Overaggregation

Stimson, Erikson, and MacKuen claim that highly aggregated measures of liberal-conservative trends in public mood and national policy are more accurate and realistic than studying public opinion and policy toward actual policy issues. Their case principally rests on two claims. First, typical citizens, in their view, form only highly generalizeable policy attitudes and "usually fail" to develop specific preferences (Stimson, Erikson, and MacKuen 1994); on the other hand, they are confident that their mood measure identifies the "common element that persists over time and across apparently dissimilar issues" (chap. 2). Second, politicians are preoccupied with the public's general "mood" instead of attitudes toward government policies: "it is the general public disposition, the mood, which policy makers must monitor" (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1994, pp. 30–31).

The macro, or systems, approach to public opinion and government policy is susceptible to the macroscopic errors Sartori identified in an earlier generation's systems analysis. Most notably, important distinctions that the public makes among different policies do not fit along a single ideological continuum. Americans' thinking about social welfare policies is quite different from their evaluation of social policies (abortion, capital punishment, law and order issues, and different racial issues): Americans may be liberal on social welfare issues even as they express conservative views on social policies.²⁴ Research on public support for specific policies and on changes in these preferences over time demonstrates that the public consistently draws reasonable distinctions—based on available information—between different government programs (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, chap. 7; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992; Best 1999; Cook 1979; Cook and Barrett 1992; Mayer 1992).

Overaggregation has significant statistical consequences that obscure critical empirical patterns. First, the efforts of Stimson, Erikson, and MacKuen to average a number of diverse issues that move in opposite directions greatly reduces the variance that they have to explain. Second, they limit the variance they do model to a particular trend that fits the model nicely. Their approach is akin to analyzing group means rather than individual behavior: it is much neater and easier but obscures critical patterns in the data.²⁵ Our point, then, is not for greater particularism and "thick description"; accurate tracking of empirical patterns is necessary to build worthwhile theory, yet the authors' approach masks critical aspects of the data.

Problems with Model Specification

Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson mis-specify their model because they fail to adequately control for endogeneity and spuriousness, despite their initial acknowledgment of the problem (chap. 2). Research on politicians' calculations, behavior, and strategy reveals that they are not content to rely on global indicators of public opinion. Instead, presidents and other officeholders and political activists devote enormous time, money, and organizational resources to tracking and analyzing public preferences and reactions toward specific policy issues (Jacobs 1992 a, b and c; Jacobs 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995b; Heith 1995). Even a cursory review of presidential archives unearths a veritable warehouse of polling data on specific policy issues. During the 1996 presidential campaign, for instance, Bill Clinton and his advisers tracked the public's preferences toward an array of policy issues from welfare reform to health care and income policy, with many surveys probing voters' reactions to specific options for policy change (Morris 1999, appendix). Clinton decided in 1996 to move simultaneously in a conservative direction by signing welfare reform and in a liberal direction by expanding the government's role in health care and income policy. A global approach to public opinion and policy would have conflated these two quite different sets of public attitudes and mistakenly characterized Clinton's behavior as moving in strictly a conservative direction. Put another way, the systems approach to political representations lacks the micro-foundations to bolster its assumption that politicians follow global mood.

The overaggregation of public opinion and government policy produces a substantial risk: the systems approach may lose sight of politicians' efforts to manipulate public opinion in order to simulate responsiveness. A long (and perhaps dominant) line of research on American politics has documented the substantial efforts of politicians to changing public opinion through "explanations" and orchestrated presentations (Fenno 1973, 1978; Ginsberg 1986; Kernell 1986) or to prevent voters from clearly monitoring their representatives by tracking the costs of particular legislation to a single vote (Arnold 1990). The commitment of politicians to changing public opinion is consistent with much of the research on contemporary government institutions and elections, which point to party activists and other factors as the primary influences on politicians (Aldrich 1995; Rohde 1991; Page 1978; Wittman 1983, 1990; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Kingdon 1989; Fiorina 1974; Shapiro, Brady, Brody, and Ferejohn 1990).

Focusing on global outcomes runs the risk of obscuring causal connections. Does public opinion drive policy decisions or do politicians make strategic and targeted efforts to alter public opinion? What the systems approach treats as substantive responsiveness may in fact be the product of "simulated responsiveness"—cases in which politicians (with the inadvertent aid of the media) influence public opinion in order to create the *appearance* of responsiveness to public opinion.²⁶ In short, the study of global ideological trends may both underestimate the strategic behavior of politicians and overestimate the responsiveness of the public.

centrist opinion and overstate the actual level of government responsiveness to the public's relatively autonomous preferences.

Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson do suggest in the previous chapter that public opinion is affected by government policy but the impact is highly abstract and not animated by political conflict and strategic calculations. Public opinion is scripted by the authors to move mechanically in the opposite ideological direction of policy: "We expect citizens to want more government when government in fact does little, to want less when it does much" (chap. 2). Although the authors investigate the impact of partisan composition on responsiveness, their framework and analysis do not consider directly the impact of partisan policy goals on political strategy and on attempts to manipulate public opinion: their initial acknowledgment of endogeneity remains outside their actual systems model. As we suggested earlier, intense political conflict and dueling ideological commitments during the 1990s motivated rival sets of political elites to adopt crafted talk as a strategy to win public opinion. The product of these dueling campaigns to win public opinion was vividly illustrated in September 1994: Republicans gloated that most Americans got what they wanted when Congress defeated Clinton's proposal; Democrats (who controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress) decided to accept quietly the defeat of the unpopular Clinton health plan. Although the policy decisions of Democrats and Republicans in September 1994 appear to "respond" to the public's evaluation of the Clinton plan (which had declined by twenty percentage points over the past year), that reaction was itself the product of a sustained and well-orchestrated strategy by opponents of health reform and the media's coverage of the political battle.

In short, the macro, or systems, approach to political representation may be confusing substantive responsiveness and simulated responsiveness. The result is that the global approach misses the decline in government responsiveness since the 1970s because it failed to accurately measure public opinion toward policy, government policy itself, and the relationship between the two. The global view obscures the institutional and political dynamics that condition real politicians to discount substantive responsiveness in favor of attempted manipulation. Studying political representation requires analyses that connect public opinion with real institutional and political dynamics.

The Static Treatment of Substantive Responsiveness

Although Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson have previously characterized their findings as demonstrating "antelope"-like hyper responsiveness by politicians, the results they present in the previous chapter may create the false impression of muted responsiveness. For instance, they note that about a "third of each year's public opinion change is found in next year's policy activity" (chap. 2). Few (if any) students of government responsiveness would be surprised by this result or expect public opinion to have no impact on policy. Their comment, however, focuses narrowly on the *direct* impact of public opinion. Their tables and figures

make it clear that public opinion also exerts substantial *indirect* influences as well—namely, a determinative impact on partisan composition (see table 2.1) and Democratic Party control (see table 2.2). The combined direct and indirect impact of public opinion is substantial and consistent with an interpretation of the political system as highly responsive.

The systems approach to political representation outlined in the previous chapter treats substantive responsiveness as stable over time: what is heralded as a dynamic model is, in fact, quite static in important respects. Global aggregation and the omission of direct attention to political conflict and institutional dynamics lead the authors to miss the ways in which changing political and institutional patterns alter the motivations and strategic calculations of politicians as they weigh policy goals and electoral goals. The underlying—and theoretically undeveloped—presumption is that politicians' goals do not vary over time.

But there is a larger point here: the impact of partisan composition varies over time and alters political calculations and thereby the levels of responsiveness. Politicians have been caught in a tug-of-war between wanting the benefits of pleasing voters (as the "median voter" theory predicts) and fearing the costs of displeasing party and interest group supporters. The costs and benefits that politicians attach to pleasing voters by responding to their policy preferences and pursuing cherished policy goals vary over the course of both short-term election cycles as well as longer-term historical cycles of several decades or more. Although the authors acknowledge that "policy will always err in the direction of the ideological position of the party" (chap. 2), they treat this as a fixed rather than changing condition. Indeed, it is precisely the intensification of partisan polarization that has increased the incentives for ambitious politicians to discount public opinion over the past two decades or so. *We need a dynamic theory of political representation that explains rises and falls in substantive responsiveness as a function of real and changing political and institutional factors.*

Let us be clear, then, about our criticism of the approach Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson use. Their models examine changes in variables over time. Our point, however, is that the structure and parameters of the statistical models Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson employ are static.

POLITICS AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Political representation is one of the most significant indicators of the health of a working democracy. Popular sovereignty and the notion that government largely follows the wishes of its citizenry is a normative rationale for representative government. Many of the most heavily studied areas of American politics and political science more generally—from elections and interest groups to legislative and executive politics—are the tools for achieving political representation, and their study is intellectually motivated by just this concern with popular sovereignty. Yet the amount and depth of the actual research on political representation lag

far behind the importance attached to it. More and better research on the connection between government policy and the wishes of the citizens is a high priority for political scientists.

Perhaps the most significant challenges for future research on political representation are to include real institutions and political dynamics and to identify variation over time. Failing to examine the political costs and benefits that real politicians associate with responsiveness threatens to construct a mere abstraction. The substantive responsiveness of politicians to centrist opinion varies over time. Identifying this variation and developing grounded explanations for it is a daunting but significant challenge for future research.

NOTES

We greatly appreciate the written comments and gentle persuasion of Jeff Manza; Ben Page posed his usual dose of challenging questions that led us to rethink several key points.

1. Rather than attempting to alter fundamental preferences, most politicians pursue a "priming" strategy that focuses on activating already existing advantageous attitudes and considerations. For instance, opponents of President Clinton's health care reform plan highlighted "big" government to activate already established public uneasiness, just as President Bush has accentuated "choice" in promoting Social Security privatization (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

2. For a review of research on public opinion and policymaking, see Jacobs and Shapiro 1994b; Burstein (1998a), and Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe, and Shapiro (1999, chap. 9). Our previous research pointed to the influence of public opinion on policymaking, but it also emphasized that policymakers' responsiveness to public opinion was conditioned by political and institutional dynamics, as evident in the variations across policy issues, time periods, and political environment (Jacobs 1992a, b, and c; 1993; Shapiro 1982; Page and Shapiro 1983, esp. p. 188, n. 17).

3. Party activists influence the selection of candidates not only by dominating the nomination process but also by recruiting candidates. Many candidates are drawn to politics by their initial experience as activists and by their attraction to the policy positions of the party and their fellow activists (Aldrich 1995, chap. 6).

4. Disagreements among scholars stem from difficulties in measuring the preferences and contributions of different groups (Domhoff 1996; Sorauf 1988) and disputes over whether money is dispersed to reflect the distribution of influence in American politics (Sorauf 1988) or concentrated in the hands of blocs of business investors to advance (at least since the 1970s) conservative interests (Ferguson 1995). One challenge (requiring additional research) is linking variations in campaign finance to the rises and falls of responsiveness before 1980.

5. For an explanation of Clinton's placement of health care high on his agenda and his adoption of a managed competition approach, see Jacob Hacker's (1997) careful book.

6. Interview with #16 by LRJ, 12/6/94, in person, White House, Washington, DC.

7. Interviews with members of Congress and advisers to the president were conducted on an anonymous basis by Lawrence Jacobs; each interviewee was assigned a random number. Interview with #16 by LRJ, 12/6/94, in person, White House, Washington, DC; interview with #23 by LRJ, 8/2/94, in person, White House, Washington, DC; interview

with #17 by LRJ, 8/1/94, in person, White House, Washington, DC; interview with #17 by

LRJ, 8/1/94, in person, in Washington, DC; interview with #22 by LRJ, 6/28/94, in person, Washington, DC.

8. Interview with administration official #7 by LRJ; interview with #24 by LRJ, telephone, 10/8/97.

9. Interview with #21 by LRJ, 8/2/94, in person, Washington, DC.

10. Memo to Mrs. Clinton from Ira Magaziner, 5/3/93, re: "The Policy"; "Preliminary Work Plan for the Interagency Health Care Task Force," by Magaziner, 1/26/93, notes; memo to Mrs. Clinton from Lynn Magherio regarding waste in current system, 9/18/93; memo to the president and Mrs. Clinton from Magaziner, 3/8/93, regarding health care reform and the budget process; interview with #22 by LRJ. The memos cited here and in nn. 13 and 15 were examined on site at the Clinton White House.

11. Interview with administration official #7 by LRJ.

12. Interview with administration official #7 by LRJ; telephone interview with #25 by LRJ, 6/22/94; interview with #17 by LRJ, 8/1/94, in person, in Washington, DC; interview with #10 by LRJ, Washington, DC, 6/19/95; interview with #22 by LRJ, 6/28/94, in person, Washington, DC; interview with #21 by LRJ, 8/2/94, in person, Washington, DC; interview with #16 by LRJ, 12/6/94, in person, White House, Washington, DC; interview with administration official #7; interview with #20 by LRJ, 8/31/94, telephone; Johnson and Broder (1996).

13. Memo to the president and Mrs. Clinton from Ira Magaziner regarding where we are positioned, 10/1/93; "Long-Term Care: Political Context," 6/2/93, by Ira Magaziner.

14. Interview with #2 by LRJ; interview with #26 by LRJ, 6/28/94, in person, Washington, DC; interview with #1 by LRJ, 12/6/94; interview with #16, notes; interview with #10 by LRJ, Washington, DC, 6/19/95; interview with #13 by LRJ, 8/2/94, in person, Washington, DC; interview with #15 by LRJ, 6/28/94, in person, Washington, DC.

15. Memo to Mrs. Clinton from Bob Boorstin and David Dreyer (copies to McLarty, Rasco, and Magaziner), 1/25/93.

16. Interview with #2 by LRJ.

17. Interview with #2 by LRJ.

18. Interview with #2 by LRJ; interview with #1 by LRJ, 12/6/94.

19. Interview with #2 by LRJ; interview with #8 by LRJ; interview with #16 by LRJ; interview with #15 by LRJ, 6/28/94, in person, Washington, DC.

20. Interview with #24 by LRJ; interview with #10 by LRJ.

21. *New York Times*/CBS News poll, February 22–24, 1996; Weaver, Shapiro, and Jacobs (1995a and b); McClosky and Zaller (1984); *Public Perspective* (1995, p. 28).

22. Princeton Survey Research Associates poll, October 25–30, 1995, for the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press.

23. Jervis (1997) offers a more complex approach to systems analysis—one that addresses its limitations while harvesting its contributions.

24. Stimson (1991) has tried to account for some of these differences by allowing for an additional dimension or two, but important differences remain both across policy issues at one point in time and over time. The Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson chapter returns to this issue in footnote 3; our point is that even looking for two or perhaps three dimensions does not sufficiently disaggregate the public's policy attitudes.

25. We thank Ben Page for crystallizing our thinking on this point.

26. Politicians may influence public opinion by priming Americans to alter the standards they use in evaluating government policies rather than by literally altering the public's fundamental preferences (Jacobs 2001; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

Panderers or Shirkers?

Politicians and Public Opinion

ROBERT S. ERIKSON, MICHAEL B. MACKUEN,
AND JAMES A. STIMSON

In chapter 3 and in an earlier award-winning book (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), Jacobs and Shapiro argue that “politicians don’t pander.” What does this mean? Jacobs and Shapiro make a compelling case that politicians are more complicated than mere machines seeking reelection. Politicians, they say, are also motivated by policy considerations. Politicians try to create public policies that, from their diverse ideological perspectives, they perceive to be in the public interest. Jacobs and Shapiro assert, moreover, that when facing the dilemma of satisfying public opinion to stay elected or making good policy, politicians often try to educate the public. For politicians, the policy decision comes first, then the crafting of a message to sell it to the public. When politicians successfully nudge the public’s *policy preferences closer to their own*, they improve their chances both for reelection and achieving desirable public policies.

So far, so good. Political scientists are all too timid in acknowledging that elected politicians actually care about the policies they produce. Of course, members of Congress, for example, are not indifferent to the policy implications of their work. And Jacobs and Shapiro’s idea that politicians try to “educate” is a refreshing insight. If they were to stop there, what they say would generate little controversy. The trouble is the next step. What they sometimes seem to *really* mean by “politicians don’t pander” is that politicians care, that they try to educate, *and* that they don’t give a damn about public opinion. “Pandering,” in other

words, means being slaves to public opinion and the polls. To do the opposite—not to pander—means ignoring public opinion.

In short, Jacobs and Shapiro write as if compelled not only to defend their favorite explanation but also to challenge the relevance of other contenders. The analogy would be if our work that contends that public opinion does matter (chapter 2 of this volume; Erikson, Stimson, and MacKuen 2002) went on to argue that politicians follow only public opinion at the expense of all else. Then we could title our contribution “Politicians Don’t Shirk.” Like “not pandering,” “not shirking” is an awkward phrase that implies a mono-variable explanation. As applied to politicians, to “shirk” means to ignore the interests of their clients, the public.¹ When a politician’s actions stray from the preference of the constituency median voter, the politician “shirks.”

Do politicians “not shirk” or do they “not pander”? This would be an unconstructive debate that neither side would (or should!) win. Although we have no quarrel with their *Politicians Don’t Pander*, they evidently challenge *The Macro Polity*. The last part of their contribution in chapter 3 launches a critique of our research, summarized in chapter 2, which claims to show policy as responsive to public opinion. Does a fundamental incompatibility prevent politicians from responding both to their own policy preferences and the preferences of their constituents?

Jacobs and Shapiro exaggerate our position. They say we say that “politicians *incessantly* follow public opinion” (p. 24, our italics) as if “public opinion is the only signal that matters” (p. 25). Not so. Perhaps more disturbingly, and in a surprise to us, we are guilty of an alleged “enthusiasm for resuscitating systems analysis” (p. 25), by which they mean a defunct theoretical approach that Sartori proclaimed dead over two decades ago.² Finally, we are all wrong in our evidence anyway. We “mis-specify” our model because we “fail to control for endogeneity and spuriousness” (p. 28). As no statistical critique follows this remark, some may interpret it to mean that any statistical evidence that public opinion matters is inherently suspect.

Jacobs and Shapiro do not actually claim that public opinion has no impact on public policy. After all, they purport to take seriously the research showing that public policies or policy changes usually agree with majority opinion or change in opinion. Similarly, we grant that they cannot really believe that our modeling assumes that politicians either have no policy beliefs or set aside their personal beliefs when they make policy. For the rest of this chapter, we focus on areas of agreement and disagreement between us and discuss how the differences and misunderstandings might be resolved. Jacobs and Shapiro raise some interesting points that deserve discussion.

ARE POLITICIANS DON’T PANDER AND THE MACRO POLITY IN LOGICAL CONFLICT?

Suppose, in the abstract, that X causes Y. What does this fact imply about the possible effect of a rival independent variable—call it Z—on Y? Or again assum-

ing *X* causes *Y*, what does this imply about the possible reverse effect of *Y* on *X*? Unless there is a rule of nature that each variable can have but one cause or that there can be no simultaneous effects, the answer, of course, is “nothing.” For instance, whether the size of the police force affects the crime rate has no logical bearing on the possible effect of poverty on crime. And if the number of officers affects the crime rate, it does not logically follow that the crime rate cannot affect the number of officers. In fact, the truth of one causal statement will often strengthen the case for the plausibility of the other. When cops on the street actually prevent crime, there is more reason to expect that police will be sent to areas with high crime rates.³

The application to the current discussion should be obvious. We see a clear compatibility rather than a logical conflict between Jacobs and Shapiro’s work (politicians care about policy and try to educate their constituents) and ours (public opinion matters). First, politicians can be strongly motivated to satisfy both public opinion and their own beliefs. Second, if politicians do influence public opinion, it does not logically follow that public opinion therefore cannot influence politicians and their policy making. Indeed, if politicians try to influence public opinion as Jacobs and Shapiro say they do, the only plausible motivation is because public opinion matters at election time. We develop these points in the following section.

The Public’s Preferences versus Personal Preferences?

We begin with the assumption that elected politicians want to construct useful policies and to stay elected, if for no other reason than to be able to make more good policies. What politicians must do to stay elected depends on such matters as the attentiveness of the voters to policy issues and the politicians’ ability to discern what the voters want. Suppose voters are totally inattentive to policy. Politicians could manufacture policies without regard to public opinion. Or suppose voters are totally attentive and clearly transmit their preferences to politicians. Politicians would need to pander to the median voter as if their political careers depend on it.⁴

The reality of course is somewhere in between. Jacobs and Shapiro are largely silent on electoral sanctions, offering more discussion of politicians’ obligations to extremists in their party constituencies than of obligations to the median voter. Our view is that the overall responsiveness of the electorate is strong enough to compel politicians to respect the electoral consequences of ignoring public opinion—but certainly not strong enough to make them abandon their ideological principles. This is no grudging conception that yes, maybe politicians lead as well as follow. Both individually and collectively, the three of us have always incorporated both conceptions of representation. For example, Stimson said it explicitly in a 1991 precursor to this work: “The postulate is this: Politicians engage in representative behavior because they wish to lead, to have influence on the di-

rection of public opinion” (p. 3). The dichotomy of leading versus following

however, is a troublesome simplification. Politicians must stay in touch with public opinion in order to exert the leverage to move it.⁵

Policy-driven politicians do not necessarily thwart policy representation. When politicians make policy based on their personal policy preferences, they can actually enhance representation by providing a valuable policy cue that voters. Instead of relying on the cheap talk of campaign rhetoric, voters can use the information that Democratic and Republican politicians have different policy tastes and choose accordingly. Democratic and Republican politicians may both try to follow public opinion somewhat, but the voters know also that when elected, Democratic politicians “cheat” to the left and Republicans “cheat” to the right. Aggregated to the national level, the party composition of Congress reveals most that is needed to know about the net liberalism-conservatism of the membership.

*Politicians Responding to Public Opinion versus
Politicians Educating the Public?*

The inner workings of policy representation are commonly depicted as politicians responding to exogenous policy preferences emanating from public opinion. Jacobs and Shapiro turn this around to show that politicians often decide on a policy program and then try to convince the public of their position. At first glance, it might seem that if politicians try to educate public opinion, public opinion must actually have little influence on policymaking. But the truth is that one depends on the other. Politicians would likely try to educate the public if the public’s policy preferences affect the politicians’ electoral fates. Voters’ policy positions affect their electoral choices and ultimately public policy. If policy issues were essentially irrelevant to voters, politicians would not need to gain the voters’ agreement for the policies they are about to institute.⁶

Does it matter whether voters get their ideas from politicians and other political elites? It is possible to misperceive the contention that public opinion matters as an assertion that public opinion implausibly emanates from the exogenous preferences of uninformed voters—the opinions of the lowly “masses,” as opposed to worldly “elites.” Although we remain neutral on the matter, it does seem unlikely that the shifting currents of public opinion regularly bubble up exogenously from the bottom strata of society. The alternative is that opinion change originates disproportionately from “elites,” including Jacobs and Shapiro’s politicians.

That opinion change originates with the opinions of informed “elites” is no reason to diminish the causal connection from opinion to policy. Elite ideas may trickle down to the mass public; mass opinion change then might generate policy change. But this is not to argue that elite consensus is then propagandized to a compliant public for its deferential ratification. Political arguments emanate from competing elite points of view, and the public chooses which to endorse.⁷

HEALTH CARE AND THE FIRST REPUBLICAN CONGRESS: AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

Jacobs and Shapiro present two detailed examples of policymaking—Clinton's failed health care plan and Gingrich's aborted "Contract with America." Jacobs and Shapiro inform us of the zeal and idealism with which elected leaders and their staffs promoted these policies not necessarily because of electoral payoff but because they saw them as "good." According to Jacobs and Shapiro, in each instance the leadership initially held a vision of correct policy; when the policy specifics were burnished, they worked to sell it to the public.

We have no reason to dispute the main points of Jacobs and Shapiro's accounts of these policy events. Of course, one can quibble with the details. For instance, was the "Canadian" health care model scrapped because it was supposedly inferior to "Hillary care," or was it abandoned as too "leftist" and therefore less viable with the public? And did the early post-1994 Republican Congress really pursue a mission too important to be constrained by public opinion? The Republican leadership tried to sell its contract as mandated by the Republican succession to power. One can amass evidence that the congressional Republicans had convinced themselves that they had the ear of the people, only to express befuddlement at extensive public opposition to many of the details.

All this is somewhat beside the point, however. In each instance, two important things happened that receive little notice in the Jacobs and Shapiro narrative. First, both the health care initiative and the contract received a rebuke at the polls—when the public turned Congress over to the Republicans in 1994 and when they gave Clinton his easy victory in 1996.⁸ After 1994, a major health care initiative was a dead issue. After 1996, there was no hope of passing the content of the contract. And in each instance, even before the electoral rebuke, the politicians realized that the policy initiative had overreached. Already, by summer 1994, "Hillary care" proved so unpopular that it was pronounced "dead on arrival" when placed at the doorstep of a Democratic Congress. In summer 1996, the Republican Congress, realizing its disadvantage with the more moderate president in the eye of public opinion, desperately tried to backtrack from its rightward course, even passing the first increase in the minimum wage in nearly a decade.

In the end, the essentially moderate public was the decisive determinant of the policy agenda of the 1990s. The Clinton administration steered too far left and then the Republican Congress steered too far right, each convinced that the public supported them. The electorate made the call to produce the ideological balance of divided government.

HAS THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPINION DECLINED?

Has the importance of public opinion declined over the years? Jacobs and Shapiro

our work—to test for (in the lingo of time-series analysis) the presence of time-varying parameters. We chose not to do so, partially because of a belief that our slim data were not up to the task and partially because we saw no compelling theoretical argument for the role of public opinion to vary visibly over the post-World War II span of our analysis.

Jacobs and Shapiro are convinced that the impact of public opinion on policy has been in decline at least since the 1970s. Largely, they argue that the parties have become increasingly polarized ideologically, driven by changes in the nomination system that increase the role of party activists. Obviously, the parties have become increasingly polarized, for reasons scholars continue to investigate. But does it really follow that, just because parties are more polarized, public opinion thus plays a lesser role in policymaking? The matter may be too complicated for confident assertions.

Polarized parties do sharpen the choices available to voters. Indeed, a previous generation of political scientists claimed that policy representation was handicapped by an absence of "responsible" political parties; they meant that parties should provide clear policy choices to guide the electorate toward better collective decisions. Polarized parties now provide that choice.

Polarization enforces the bundling of all issues into coherent sets over which disagreement occurs along party lines. In an early, unpolarized era it was normal for politicians to pick and choose positions without enforced consistency. They could be liberal on social issues yet conservative on economics, conservative on race, yet liberal on other aspects of domestic policy, and so forth. That is now rare. To be conservative in the polarized period is to be conservative, period. And the same for liberals. Where policy is polarized, there is little nuance, and the signal of a bundled public opinion, such as mood, should be all the stronger.

MACRO-ISSUES, MACRO-ANALYSIS VERSUS SINGLE-ISSUE ANALYSIS

As summarized in chapter 2, our analysis of the opinion-policy connection tests for the impact of global opinion, measured as a single dimension of liberalism-conservatism (mood) on policy activity and policy, measured again as one-dimensional liberalism-conservatism. Jacobs and Shapiro say that by aggregating so much we miss the nuances and subtleties of policymaking. Moreover, they note that the political world contains ideological inconsistencies—opinion does not always move the same way in one policy domain as in another, and Congress sometimes makes "liberal" decisions in one domain but "conservative" ones in another. Evidently, they think that each issue and policy decision should be examined separately, as if no common ideological context exists.

If one wishes to explain passage or failure of a specific congressional bill, one might consult opinion polls on that issue (if any) rather than global mood and be prepared to make causal judgments under conditions of few statistical

degrees of freedom.⁹ We prefer a macroscopic approach precisely because, by aggregating and averaging, “errors” cancel out. The electorate’s global taste for liberalism or conservatism will predict the liberal or conservative tone of policy decisions, averaged over many issues. Indeed, this is what we find, and it is difficult to explain away as a statistical illusion.

General versus specific is a familiar argument. How is it to be resolved? If we asserted that the general was also universal, that every specific opinion manifested underlying mood, then finding a single exception would defeat the generalization. But we make no such assertion. We find a common domestic policy domain that does not include issues related to crime or to the abortion controversy. We claim only a high degree of commonality across issues. Then an occasional exception is nothing more than an error term. We can do better than simply argue the matter. We estimate how much variance in public opinion series is common; it is about half.¹⁰

How do Democrats and liberals manage to overcome the odds and line up on the “liberal” side of health care and the “contract?” How do conservatives managed to sort themselves into the “conservative” position on both? The odds of doing so by chance, taking exception and nuance at face value, are appallingly small. But no reasonable person, Jacobs and Shapiro included, actually believes that everything is independent. Exceptionalism is a useful argument as criticism, impossible to defend as theory.

Actually, when important proposals are both on the legislative agenda and in the public eye, the circumstantial evidence shows that public opinion plays a major role. We have examined available public opinion polls regarding major laws on the eve of their passage. Because the legislative path is fraught with obstacles, one should not expect all popular ideas to become law. But if public opinion is an important part of the policy mix, one should expect Congress to be wary of passing major legislation that polls show to be unpopular. That is the case. Policies that were controversial in our collective memory were popular at the time of passage,¹¹ including the major civil rights bills of the Johnson years and the major legislation of the early Reagan presidency. In more recent times, the polls showed that the George W. Bush tax cut of 2001 enjoyed a plurality in support. Moreover, we are struck by how roll call support for major legislation tends to be one-sided on final passage, with close votes the interesting exceptions. It is as if much major legislation obtains not only the support of the nation’s median voter but also the support of the median voter in the vast majority of states and congressional districts.¹² Could it be that when the preponderant weight of public opinion is unambiguous, members of Congress run like antelopes to the popular position?

Jacobs and Shapiro critique our bundling of disparate issues into a composite measure of liberalism-conservatism for mood. They worry that preferences on different issues—for example, social policy issues and social welfare issues—can move differently over time. By forcing all issues into one aggregation, we compress the variance and “obscure critical patterns of the data” (p. 28). Of course,

public opinion does not move in precise lockstep across all issues at the same time. The methodology of mood measurement takes into account that opinion on disparate issues tends to change *in part* due to common currents of shifting ideological change. The mood measurement extracts this commonality, discarding the differences. Specific opinion items are reflected in mood only if they show opinion following the common trend on the dominant dimension.

Assume that the public evaluates politicians in a piecemeal fashion (Fiske 1986), from the sum of their separate behaviors on separate issues rather than merely identifying their global ideological position. Assume also that this is how politicians perceive their reputations, as the sum of the evaluations of their behaviors rather than an evaluation of their global position. The complication (for us) is when a conservative policy might be popular in a liberal era or vice versa.¹³ Even so, measuring opinion as the weighted average across many issues distills a common component of policy preference, just as aggregating policy activities or policies distills the common component. Even if voters are inclined to judge by summing microscopic evaluations, the evidence should be visible in an opinion-policy correspondence at the macroscopic level.

Jacobs and Shapiro misunderstand the consequences that would result if public opinion were more multidimensional than our portrayal. A worst case would be if responses to poll items on salient issues move independently of the common trends mood identified. Opinion on these items would be heavily discounted, ignored, or (if countercyclical) even given the wrong sign in the measurement of mood. Such a hypothetical distortion of the evidence would work against the representation hypothesis, not provide false support. If mood misses opinions on key issues salient to the public, these omissions make all the more remarkable the fact that a flawed measure still predicts policymaking and policy.

CONCLUSIONS

The title of this chapter sets up a false dichotomy. Politicians in the representation process do not choose pandering or shirking. These choices imply excessive reliance on opinion polls or constituency abandonment. Elected politicians deal with the complex trade of satisfying constituents (to stay elected) versus achieving “good” policy. Jacobs and Shapiro show one solution to this problem: convince the constituents of the “goodness” of one’s preferred policies. But even through politicians try to persuade (and are sometimes successful) the public controls its policy destiny.

NOTES

1. This usage of “shirking” traces to certain economists who have ventured into the study of politics. Interestingly, economists view the representation process differently from political scientists. Whereas political scientists are conditioned to be skeptical of claims that democracy works the way it is supposed to, economists are conditioned to believe in

their theories, not the facts. For economists, the starting point for understanding democratic politics is that politicians must behave as the agent for the median voter (e.g., Downs 1957). The interesting questions to economists are why theory sometimes fails and why elected officials often shirk their duty by, among other things, following their own conception of the public interest.

2. We plead guilty as charged for the offense of portraying a causal "system." "System" is one of a handful of great unifying ideas in science. A political science that rejected it would itself need resuscitation.

3. In this example of cops and crime, the two simultaneous effects have opposite signs. The same logic can apply for two simultaneous effects with the same sign. A political science example is the relationship between a nation's electoral system and its number of political parties. A system of proportional representation encourages multiple parties. This only encourages the complementary effect—that nations with multiple parties tend to adopt proportional representation.

4. The logic of Downs's model of party competition would apply. Both candidates in a two-candidate race must represent the median voter because the opponent would successfully exploit any deviation.

5. We lay no claim to the originality of this idea. For an excellent explication, see Geer (1996).

6. Jacobs and Shapiro hint at a nonelectoral motivation for politicians influencing voter opinion. At several places, they write of politicians engaging in "simulated responsiveness," whereby politicians "influence public opinion in order to create the *appearance* of responsiveness to public opinion" (p. 30, their italics). They do not fully develop the reasons why politicians would wish to engage in this baroque maneuver.

7. A good example of elite manipulation of public opinion is provided by the Public Accommodations Bill of 1964. Before passage, polls show that opinion shifted from about an even split to about 2:1 in favor of the bill. This growth is generally attributed to the appeals of President Johnson and to the acquiescence of Republican congressional leaders, awakened to the need for legislative change (countering a rival Southern elite message). If we grant that elite propaganda molded this change in mass opinion, public opinion's degree of responsibility for the bill's enactment does not correspondingly diminish. It is doubtful that the Public Accommodations Act would have passed without a decisive majority of public opinion. Moreover, continuing the role of public opinion in shaping policy, Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater's opposition to the Public Accommodations Act contributed to the 1964 Democratic landslide for both president and Congress.

8. Or at least that is the commonly believed causal story. The attribution of reasons for election outcomes is not easily subject to validation.

9. Health care is an intriguing exception. In the 1990 to 1993 period leading to the health care debate of 1994, movement specific to the health care domain was notably more liberal—the trends stronger—than was the case for the full domestic agenda. (Notably also in this period of great public support for change, nonpanderers from both sides of the aisle were jumping on board the reform bandwagon.) One would have done better predicting the eventual defeat from global mood than from measures specific to health care. Eventually the specific converged on the global; the support for radical change did not exist.

10. More specifically, we estimate explained variance by an Eigenvalue analogue. Using the full set of all known repeated question series, a set that includes large numbers of series on crime and abortion controversies that we know do not belong to the mood domain, we estimate an overall first dimension explained variance of 42. Excluding the

nonloading items produces numbers in the 50–60 range. These numbers imply correlations between series and scale that average .80 or more.

11. We define major laws as those in Mayhew's (1991) "sweep one"—seen as important at the time. Our inspection is item-driven, limited to bills that were unambiguously in the public eye as they became law. In admirable studies, Monroe (1979, 1998) performs poll-driven searches for congruence between majority opinion in polls and subsequent policy decisions. His data also show that policy changes in the face of public opposition are rare events.

12. Although not actual legislation and therefore technically outside the bounds of this discussion, the majority votes for Clinton's impeachment and conviction could be cited as a prominent contrary example when a majority of Congress members willingly took high-profile positions contrary to majority opinion. We offer a simple explanation for this salient counterexample: like almost all Washington insiders, congressional Republicans believed that support for Clinton would plummet as the revelations grew, making momentary polls irrelevant. By the time the error of this assessment became obvious, it was too late for the majority Republicans to change. They could retreat at considerable political embarrassment or they could continue in their impeachment quest, hoping that public opinion would eventually catch up to their interpretation. This act of nonpandering carried a political cost, arguably being the major reason Republicans were denied gains in the 1998 congressional elections.

13. Both liberal and conservative policy ideas vary in their popularity quite independent of mood. For instance, expansion of the minimum wage (liberal) and reducing welfare (conservative) are generally popular but vary with the national mood.

Those who, like Ms. Huffington, attack the polls are, whether they realize it or not, arguing against the influence of public opinion. Perhaps they believe we should go back to a restricted franchise when only those citizens who were “qualified” to vote were allowed to do so.

Without public opinion polls, the deep pockets that finance, influence, and (Ms. Huffington, and many others, believe) corrupt our politicians and our government would have more, not less, power. The polls are often a strong counterbalance to the loud voices of the special interests whose political goals are different from those of the general public. Public opinion would sometimes not be heard if there were no polls.

As former British Prime Minister James Callaghan once wrote, “If you cannot trust the public with polls, you should not trust them with the vote.” Knowledge of public opinion, whether well used or misused, is far better than ignorance, and those who attack, censor, corrupt, or intimidate the polls are the enemies of democracy.

The Semi-Sovereign Public

BENJAMIN I. PAGE

More than forty years ago, E. E. Schattschneider—the great advocate of responsible parties and governmental responsiveness to ordinary citizens—wrote about the “semi-sovereign people” of the United States. He maintained that the public can exert substantial control over government policymaking, particularly when issues are made highly visible through conflict and when citizens are mobilized by competitive, unified, programmatic political parties. Still, Schattschneider insisted that “public opinion about specific issues does not necessarily govern the course of public policy.” Instead, he argued, a “pressure system” dominated by well-organized business groups often gets its way, particularly when the people are not looking (1960, p. 133 and chaps. 2 and 8.)

I believe that the research reported in this volume largely confirms, or is consistent with, Schattschneider’s view of American politics. There is substantial evidence of government responsiveness to public opinion, especially on high-salience issues. But the evidence also indicates that there is considerable room for interest groups, party activists, policymakers, and others to prevail against the public on many issues. Often anti-popular policy decisions can be kept out of the public spotlight or cleverly packaged to avoid offense. Sometimes public opinion can be manipulated. Moreover, the extent of responsiveness to public opinion varies by type of issue and over time. Schattschneider’s picture of a quite imperfect democracy appears to be correct.

give definitive answers to all questions about how often and under what circumstances U.S. government policies respond to public opinion. To a rather surprising extent, however, the different sorts of evidence presented in this volume—which at times seem to be in sharp conflict—can actually be reconciled to form a single, reasonably coherent view of public opinion and policy. Let me outline such a view, bearing in mind that I will choose among findings and reinterpret some in ways the authors may not approve.

HOW MUCH RESPONSIVENESS?

Statistical studies that explore connections between policies and poll-measured public opinion have invariably found substantial covariation between opinion and policy. This has been true for quite a variety of research designs. Assessments of “consistency” between majority opinion and existing policies on various issues, correlation or regression coefficients between policies and central tendencies of opinion across the American states, measures of association between changes over time in opinion and changes in policy have all indicated strong relationships.

It is important to recognize, however, that all such studies (including those in which I have participated) have very likely overestimated the extent of responsiveness. All have been prey to varying combinations of sampling and aggregation biases and specification errors, especially specification errors involving the omission of relevant variables and relationships that might have revealed the opinion-policy relationship to be partly spurious or reciprocal. The very design of these studies has ruled out, a priori, certain processes that are likely to occur in the real world. Nearly all studies have excluded from the analysis a number of factors, such as world events, mass media stories, and interest group lobbying and propaganda, that may directly affect both opinion and policy and create a spurious relationship between the two. A number of studies have also excluded (or inadequately modeled) processes by which policymakers or policy itself may reciprocally affect opinion—“preparing” the public for new policies or selling those policies after they are enacted—so that one-way estimates of the effects of opinion on policy are exaggerated. Some have overaggregated the independent and dependent variables, producing excessively strong relationships.

The problems are most obvious in the earliest studies, which looked only at bivariate relationships between opinion and policy (omitting all other variables) and posited a purely one-way causal relationship, with opinion influencing policy but not vice versa. Both Monroe (1979) and Page and Shapiro (1983), for example, offer evidence that seems to support a “two-thirds rule”: that government policy tends to correspond with majority opinion, or to move in the same direction as opinion changes, on about two-thirds (63% or 66%) of sampled issues. (Of course, the finding that policy moves in the *opposite* direction from public opinion about one third of the time might be taken as a sobering limit on public influ-

opinion in the analysis, so neither could test for possible spuriousness; and neither empirically ruled out a reciprocal relationship in which policy affected opinion. (Page and Shapiro’s [1983, pp. 185–86] somewhat strained effort in that direction cast doubt on reciprocal influence in only about half the subset of cases considered.)¹

Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993), with their clever use of an across-state design, produced even heftier estimates of the effects of opinion upon policy. They found an estimated “true” correlation between state “opinion liberalism” and “composite policy liberalism” of fully 0.91 (p. 80), which remained nearly as high when controlling for demographic factors (wealth, urbanism, and education level; p. 85.) Beyond those demographics, however, they did not include independent variables that might produce spurious relationships between opinion and policy. State political parties, for example, were treated as part of the processes by which opinion affects policy, but not as possible shapers of opinion itself. The authors tried to rule out possible reciprocal influences of policy upon opinion through an instrumental-variables approach that yielded a big opinion/policy coefficient of 0.86 (p. 89), but the specification of exogenous variables was questionable. (The crucial “exogenous” factor of religious fundamentalism, for example, probably influences policy directly through organized lobbying, not just indirectly through public opinion—as posited—thus inflating the estimate of public opinion’s impact; see pp. 67, 88.) Moreover, any gains in accuracy due to improved measurement and model specification may have been offset by losses due to excessive aggregation in both the independent and the dependent variables. All issues were compressed into liberal-conservative scales that muffled variations in responsiveness—and may have concealed substantial nonresponsiveness—across specific issues. Aggregation over time also permitted such processes as selective political migration to inflate the apparent effect of opinion on policy. That is, people may tend to move to states whose policies they like, rather than the states responding to their residents’ policy preferences.

The tremendously influential time-series analysis of liberal-conservative trends in national domestic opinion and policy by Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) made important methodological advances, but still very likely overstated the impact of public opinion on policy. It gained some leverage on the causal direction of the opinion/policy relationship by using a time-lagged independent variable (“domestic policy mood”), thus ruling out any reciprocal impact by policy itself (but not earlier action by policymakers or others) upon the opinion postulated to affect it. And partisan-composition-of-government independent variables were included in the analysis, which indicated that the party balance in Congress and the presidency—independently of public opinion, and itself only moderately affected by the public’s policy preferences—has strong effects upon policy (a coefficient of .704 in the “global” regression, p. 556.) This constituted a substantial concession to critics of a “public opinion drives everything” view, because party-in-government effects do not merely reflect the policy preferences

(often distinctly contrary to public opinion) of party activists and money givers. Within the time-series model itself (though unexamined by the authors), therefore, exists the possibility of substantial elite influence upon policy of the sort discussed by William Domhoff in chapter 6, insofar as it operates through differences between the political parties (see Ferguson and Rogers, 1986; Ferguson, 1995).

There is room within the framework for a number of factors and processes unrelated to public opinion that may influence policymaking. But such factors were not explicitly modeled. They were not, in most cases, even mentioned. As a result, the authors ran the risk of being unfairly criticized for proposing precisely what they reject (in chapter 4 of this volume): a univariate or mono-causal model of politics.

The chief impression given by Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995)—and carried through in their later work reported here—is one of enormous, virtually unopposed influence of public opinion upon public policy. In their full global analysis, the coefficient for indirect (through parties-in-government) plus direct impact of “domestic policy mood” upon policy was estimated as a remarkable 1.094. That is, they found “about a one-to-one translation” of preferences into policy. The authors offered a striking image of politicians stampeding like antelopes at the slightest noise from public opinion (pp. 556–57, 559.) This, I believe, is seriously misleading.

A major problem, the same problem that has plagued nearly all quantitative research in this area, is the omission of independent variables that may affect both opinion and policy and create a spurious relationship between the two. Stimson et al. did not allow, for example, for the possibility of influence by corporations, interest groups, and elites upon both opinion and policy, working outside of (or through) *both* political parties. Yet William Domhoff, in chapter 7, offers several compelling historical examples of precisely that kind of influence, and he outlines plausible mechanisms (including an “opinion-shaping process” in which foundations, think tanks, and policy discussion groups propagate elite views through a large dissemination network) that could bring it about. Other scholars (e.g., Ferguson 1995, chaps. 1 and 2) have uncovered strong historical evidence of similar phenomena.²

For example, the apparent congruence of conservative Reagan-era policy changes with a rightward shift in public opinion helped drive Stimson et al.’s time-series statistical findings. But the causal connection is questionable. Most of American business (including firms that had formerly backed the Democrats) made a sharp right turn in the middle and late 1970s, coming to oppose government taxes, regulation, and social spending (Ferguson and Rogers 1986). This was followed by—and may have influenced—a shift in public opinion that is discernable but very faint: considerably weaker than is implied by the big change in measured “domestic policy mood.” There was very little decline in Americans’ overwhelming support for economic regulation and for government spending on

chap. 4). It seems at least possible that the subsequent sharp Reagan-era policy changes were caused chiefly by business lobbying, with public opinion acting only as a supplementary transmission belt or as an irrelevant sideshow. That is, the opinion-policy relationship may have been partly or wholly spurious.

Readers can miss the potential importance of omitted variables because Stimson et al.’s time-series model seems to account so well for everything it tries to explain. But that explanatory power, and the big part played in it by public opinion, depends heavily upon extreme statistical aggregation that greatly restricts the domain and range of variation in the independent and dependent variables. In effect, an extremely selected, refined, and crunched opinion variable does an excellent job of accounting for an extremely selected, refined, and crunched policy variable. This reveals an interesting and important tendency but does not necessarily tell us much about the whole big, messy realm of public opinion and policymaking in the United States.

The analysis begins by entirely ignoring many policy issues that do not fit onto a single, liberal-conservative dimension. All foreign policy is thrown overboard, and certain inconvenient domestic issues (e.g., crime and abortion) are excluded as well. Then public opinion is measured in a highly aggregated way. The recursive algorithm for computing over-time “domestic policy mood” from the selected public opinion items (as described in Stimson 1999, chap. 3 and appendices 1 and 3) in effect standardizes each item and extracts a weighted-average central tendency of over-time movement from them, weighting each item by its contribution to the “mood” construct. The result is then subjected to “exponential smoothing.” The selection, weighting, averaging, and smoothing of opinion items guarantees that only a rarified summary of broad liberal-conservative tendencies will be preserved in the measure. All public opinion that moves differently from the general tendency—that moves faster, slower, cross-wise, or idiosyncratically—will be ignored. Such disparate movements of public preferences on different issues are quite common and are often meaningful, reflecting issue-specific social and demographic changes, new information, political events, and the like (Page and Shapiro 1992). But we will not learn anything from this analysis about whether or not policy responds to them.

One sign of just how thoroughly compressed and averaged the public opinion “mood” measure is: less than a quarter (24% or 21%) of the “real variance” over time in standardized liberal-conservative indices from each selected domestic opinion item can be accounted for by some forty time-period dummy variables, which one might expect to pick up almost every bit of the variation due to overall shifts in mood (Stimson 1999, pp. 57, 59.) In other words, more than 75% of the over-time variance of public opinion, even in the liberal-conservative essence of the selected domestic items, can apparently not be accounted for by a general mood.³

On the policy side, too, the many policies that may move in contrary ways, or idiosyncratically, or just *more sharply* in a liberal or conservative direction than

or "policy activity" trend line. Little wonder that public opinion and policy, so measured, move in close harmony with each other.

There is yet another important, though subtle and often-ignored, way in which the Stimson et al. time-series analysis (and, indeed, nearly all quantitative work on this subject) restricts the phenomena to be accounted for. By focusing on *covariation* (over time or cross-sectionally) between opinion and policy, it neglects the question of whether or not the *level* of policy corresponds to what the public wants on the average issue or at a given moment in time.⁴ For example, if corporations' lobbying led to a steady conservative tilt in policy by a uniform amount every year, this effect would not generally show up at all in regressions or other studies based on covariation. A perfect correlation of 1.00 between opinion and policy could conceal the fact that policy was always (by a constant amount) more conservative than the average American wanted. (That such a situation is not totally implausible is suggested by the frequent General Social Survey findings that many more Americans favor spending "more" than favor spending "less" than the current amount on education, medical care, and other domestic programs.)⁵ This, along with overaggregation and omitted variables, means that considerable room is left outside, as well as inside, the model for anti-popular influences upon policy of the sorts that power elite theorists like Domhoff, "biased pluralism" theorists like Schattschneider, and others propose.

The new statistical and computer simulation work that Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson report in chapter 2 and in their recent (2001) book does not alter the model or the core statistical findings of their 1995 paper in any major way. It does extend and modify them in certain important respects: exploring negative feedback effects of policy on public opinion; bringing in trends in unemployment and inflation; distinguishing the old policy measures—rechristened "Policy Activity"—from "Policies" or fundamental laws; and taking explicit account of how Constitutional provisions (especially the separation of powers) complicate the policy-making process. But its main contribution is to work out the complex ways in which the pieces of their model interact and to show how disturbances to one variable can cascade through the whole system.

Certain modifications in their model take better account of real-world limits to the responsiveness of policy to public opinion. "Policy," as opposed to "Policy Activity," is found to react only slowly, incrementally, cumulatively to the public's preferences. Policy changes are slowed by the separation of powers and multiple veto points (modeled by multiplicative interactions among branches of government and a partial adjustment, "error correction" process), so that there can be about an eight-year delay in fully translating public preferences into policy. The importance of party control of government (and implicitly, therefore, the importance of party activists, investors, and money givers) is shown to be profound, and parties are shown to oversteer, regularly pushing their agendas further than the public wants. Small electoral changes that tip the balance of party control in Congress or the presidency can have sharp, knife-edged impacts upon policy

activity, some of them quite contrary to the public's preferences, that followed the narrow Republican victories in election year 2000.) There is no talk here of a 1.094, "one-to-one" translation of public preferences into policy, nor of easily spooked politician-antelopes.⁶

Yet the overall impression is once again of public opinion as an extremely powerful force on policy. The modest-appearing finding that just over a third (0.36) of each year's "Policy Mood" change shows up in a global measure of next year's "Policy Activity" understates the estimated immediate impact of public opinion on some of the separate institutions of government. And we can see that the estimated total, direct plus indirect (through elections and party-in-government) effects of public opinion are larger still. Perhaps most striking of all is the estimate, within the error-correction model, that unmeasured public "Preferences" correlate at a solid .83 level with "Policy" (accumulated laws) eight years later. Similarly, the measured biennial "Policy Mood" correlates fully .89 with Policy changes over the subsequent eight years. The picture here is of a ship of state that oversteers a bit to the left and then oversteers a bit to the right, but in the long run holds true to exactly the course that the public wants.⁷

Once again, however, the model almost certainly overestimates the impact upon policy of public opinion, for the same old reasons. It still omits major factors—such as many sorts of external events, the mass media, politicians' talk, and corporate and interest group activity—that may affect both opinion and policy (opinion first) and produce a partly spurious relationship between the two. The analysis still rests on the highly aggregated, liberal-conservative measures of opinion and policy, ignoring—and excluding from the variance to be explained or do the explaining—movements in policy or opinion that cut across, contradict, shrink, or magnify a general liberal-conservative trend. The results are important and intriguing; they indicate a general tendency for summary liberal-conservative opinion "moods" and certain summary features of domestic policy to move together. But this does not tell us to what extent the whole set of different public policies is actually influenced by the public's preferences on each of those policies.

Let me comment briefly on Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson's chapter 4 response to Jacobs and Shapiro. In that response, they seem largely to disregard the possibility that opinion-policy relationships are *spurious*: that public opinion has no real causal impact on policy, but only appears to do so because some third factor—perhaps interest groups, or politicians with their own agendas—independently affects both opinion and policy. (Indeed, they do not mention interest groups at all.)

Instead, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson focus on the possibility that politicians or other elites may influence public opinion, which itself then affects policy: that is, the possibility that public opinion acts as an *intervening variable* between some third factor and policy. They correctly point out that in such a case, public opinion would still have an important causal status as the proximate cause of policy change. (They suggest that politicians or others would bother

confuses actual with potential public influence. It neglects the possibility of spuriousness, in which policy shapers might defuse public opposition to their plans before it had any actual effect, or in which they might affect opinion only incidentally or even accidentally.) Their use of the appealing term "educate" to characterize such cases, however, seems to rule out the possibility of systematic misinformation or deception, which would not alter the causal picture (public opinion as an intervening variable) but might drastically change our normative reaction. Presumably, we would not want to celebrate as democratic a process in which elites grossly deceived the public and then bowed to the god of public opinion. Terms like "crafted talk" and the "deception" or "manipulation" of opinion not only address causal structure but also have normative connotations (particularly concerning the truth or falsehood of persuasive information) that Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson do not address in chapter 4.

How Big Are the Biases in Quantitative Studies?

It is easy enough to point out that the quantitative estimates of public opinion's effect on policy are almost certainly biased upward. But it is much harder to figure out precisely how big the biases are.

In order to be more sure about how responsive policy is to public opinion, we will need more studies that take account of all the key variables, including the activities of interest groups and opinion shapers, and that allow for public opinion to be endogenous, in a variety of ways, to the policymaking process. It would be unrealistic to hope for a single, definitive coefficient summarizing opinion's impact, both because that impact is likely (in the real world) to vary markedly across issues, time, and other circumstances, and because each feasible type of research design suffers from inherent weaknesses that are bound to render all results less than definitive. Cross-sectional, multiple-issue studies face the daunting challenge of finding truly exogenous variables, in order to identify reciprocal effects among many potentially endogenous variables. Time-series studies must either be fragmented by issue or must overaggregate issues and lose the ability to analyze the effects of issue-specific variables and processes. Yet issue-specific case studies (unless and until many such studies cumulate) inevitably raise questions about generalizability. Quantitative studies of all sorts risk neglecting subtleties and factors that are hard to measure, including actors' private intentions, secret communications and agreements, under-the-table money, and the like, which may (or may not) play significant parts in policymaking.

Moreover, one fundamental type of sampling bias subtly, and almost inescapably, affects nearly all studies of opinion-policy links. We can study the impact of public opinion only to the extent that public opinion is measured. But opinion is measured—at least polls and surveys are conducted—only with respect to a relatively small and rather vaguely formulated subset of policy alternatives that pollsters and their clients are interested in investigating. This usually excludes any

16), and it excludes anything very detailed or obscure. To restrict in this way the range of policy that is studied, to consider only general tendencies of opinion on relatively high-salience issues, almost certainly leads to overestimates of the impact of public opinion on the whole range of actually existing policy choices.⁸ Detailed examinations of policymaking can alert us to this problem by revealing the wide range of policy alternatives about which measured public opinion has nothing to say. But this invites the opposite error, of assuming that public opinion has no impact (by anticipated reactions, for example) when convenient measures of opinion do not exist.

Thus, we should continue to embrace methodological pluralism of the sort represented in this volume. We will need to pursue a variety of methods (definitely including observational and historical/archival as well as quantitative methods), each with significant strengths and significant weaknesses.

Still, even the presently existing, incomplete, quite imperfect research can begin to give us some idea of the extent of biases in the quantitative estimates of public opinion's impact. The trick is to pay serious attention to case studies, limited to one or a few policy issues, that include additional variables and/or that closely examine the details of the policymaking process.

Certain quantitative studies that limit their attention to a single policy issue over time have included independent variables in addition to public opinion. They generally find that adding the new variables lowers estimates of public opinion's impact. Hartley and Russett (1992), for example, found that from 1965 to 1990 the public's judgment that "too much" or "too little" was being spent on defense had a statistically significant but modest effect (a standardized coefficient of .261) upon subsequent annual changes in U.S. military spending. Soviet spending, lagged two and three years, had considerably more impact (coefficients of .357 and .503, p. 910).⁹ If the study had included such additional factors as corporate lobbying, opinion shaping and Reagan policy influencing by the Committee on the Present Danger, and media hype over the Iranian "hostage crisis," it might have found a still more limited effect of public opinion upon the main policy variation in the data (the Reagan-era spike in spending).

The inclusion of analogous opinion-related variables that may affect other kinds of policymaking (unemployment rates, inflation rates, crime statistics, poverty levels, etc.) generally lowers estimates of opinion's impact by comparable amounts, even when indirect policy effects of those factors, through their impact on public opinion, are (as is proper) attributed to opinion.

Also helpful are detailed, "inside the black box" case studies of the policymaking process that consider public opinion along with other influences upon particular realms of policy. Such studies generally demonstrate that there is no instantaneous, knee-jerk responsiveness of policy to opinion. Far from it. Even though these studies, too, may suffer from sampling bias (they usually concern issues big and visible enough to interest researchers and readers, where public opinion is presumably at its strongest), they generally reveal messy, start-and-

portant evidence of spurious opinion-policy relationships due to outside factors, including manipulation of public opinion (and independent influence on policy) by presidents and other policymakers.

Paul Burstein, for example, looking at some sixty years of policymaking on equal employment opportunities for minorities and women (see chap. 5), found that congressional action and inaction on major legislation has generally been quite consistent with public opinion, even when salience has been relatively low. On only one of ten major decisions (i.e., not ending affirmative action) did Congress clearly go against the public's preferences. Yet plainly many years passed in which opinion changes were not responded to, and countless small policy changes doubtless occurred without regard to public opinion.

More closely examining a single important piece of legislation, R. Kent Weaver (chap. 6) found that high-salience public disgust with the old AFDC program propelled action on some sort of welfare "reform," and that certain provisions of the 1996 legislation (e.g., work and training requirements; increased funding for child care) did indeed reflect the public's preferences. But other provisions (e.g., "hard" time limits without work guarantees) did not. Those who controlled the legislative agenda, namely, congressional Republicans, had considerable leeway under the rubric of "reform" to enact provisions without public support.

Again scrutinizing a single important legislative issue, chapter 8, written by Fay Cook, Jason Barabas, and me, indicates that accurately measured public opinion was certainly not a consciously articulated preoccupation among legislators, presidents, and experts as they discussed Social Security reform. To be sure, silence about public opinion could conceal quiet acquiescence to it, but the frequent misleading or downright erroneous references to poll results tend to cast doubt on this possibility.

More broadly, Steven Kull and Clay Ramsay, in chapter 10, summarize substantial evidence that many members of the foreign policy elite systematically misperceive public opinion about foreign policy. Many of the surveyed elites (including members of Congress) were quite convinced that "the American people"—or at least their own constituents—held isolationist opinions on foreign policy that they simply did not hold, including alleged opposition to the United Nations and aversion to peacekeeping operations. National survey evidence to the contrary seemed to cut little ice; even data from surveys of their own districts were sometimes dismissed out of hand. We need to know more about exactly why officials (especially elected officials) could be so out of touch with the citizens they are supposed to serve. One factor, no doubt (pointed out by Kull and Ramsay), is mythology about the supposed representativeness of Congress, the media, and interest groups as surrogates for public opinion. Further factors may include elites' reliance on "vocal publics" with quite unrepresentative views; their insulation from electoral punishment due to the relatively low salience of foreign policy issues; their location in safe, one-party seats; their need to please activists and voters in their party primaries; and the highly restricted turnout in congres-

Particularly useful is the work by Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (chap. 3), which reports on a detailed inside look at how the Clinton administration both reacted to and used or manipulated public opinion on health care reform. As in the welfare case, public discontent with the existing system pushed for *some* sort of change. But the administration did not simply respond to specific policy preferences of the public; instead, it created its own managed-competition scheme and used "crafted talk" to try (with limited success) to sell it to the public. Jacobs and Shapiro's detailed interview and archival evidence on administration efforts to manipulate public opinion raises a serious challenge to other scholars—many of whom have not allowed for such a possibility—to investigate whether and to what extent it occurs in other policy areas.

The review by Shapiro and Jacobs (chap. 10) of many foreign policy decisions and of the growing White House "public opinion apparatus" suggests that policy makers' efforts to manipulate public opinion—and to evade responsiveness to opinion—may be particularly frequent in foreign policy. And such efforts may have increased in recent years (see also Nacos, Shapiro, and Isernia, 2000.)

Qualitative case studies cannot, of course, assign precise numbers to the extent of upward bias in the multiple-issue, quantitative studies' estimates of opinion's impact on policy. But multi-issue quantitative studies themselves can begin to tell us something about the magnitude of bias from one particular source: the inevitable focus on the rather high-salience issues for which survey data are available. Within certain multi-issue studies, it is possible (while holding research methods and measurement techniques constant) to compare the strength of opinion-policy congruence on higher-salience issues with that on lower-salience issues.

Page and Shapiro (1983), for example, found congruent movement of policy and opinion on 73% of fifty-five issues about which opinion was highly salient ("don't know" responses were very infrequent), but only 56% of twenty-five issues of much lower salience. (Medium-low- and medium-high-salience issues were 61% and 70% congruent, respectively; p. 181.) That is, on the lowest-salience issues studied, policy actually moved in the *opposite* direction to public opinion close to half (44%) of the time. This suggests that the level of opinion-policy congruence in a hypothetical universe of "all" policy issues, including the even-lower-salience matters not subject to opinion surveys, would be quite low, well below Page and Shapiro's 66% "two-thirds rule."¹⁰

All in all, the research to date seems to me quite consistent with the view that the U.S. public is, at best, "semi-sovereign."

UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES?

When, and under what circumstances, does policy tend to respond more closely or less closely to public opinion? How and why does this come about? Research reported in this volume and elsewhere offers some insights into these questions.

Is there, for example, more responsiveness to public opinion on domestic issues than on foreign policy issues, which may be dominated by the president and executive branch? The evidence to date seems inconclusive. Page and Shapiro (1983, p. 182) found that policy moved in harmony with opinion slightly more often on the domestic issues than on the foreign policy issues they studied; 70% versus 62% congruence. But the difference was not statistically significant. And Monroe (1979, 1998) suggests just the opposite. Monroe found nondefense foreign policy to be consistent with public opinion on 84% and 67% of the issues in his two data sets, a substantially higher level of consistency than the averages for all issues of 63% and 55%, respectively (1998).

As we continue to explore foreign/domestic differences, we need to be alert to the possibility (highlighted by the work on presidential uses of public opinion that Shapiro and Jacobs report in chapter 10) that policymakers may have more success in the foreign than the domestic realm at influencing—educating or manipulating—public opinion to harmonize with intended or existing policies. Presidents and other officials have substantial information control and have been known to lie to the public during crises. If this is often the case, multi-issue studies like those I have mentioned may overstate their estimates of foreign policy responsiveness more than they overestimate domestic responsiveness, thereby distorting comparisons between the two.

Certain studies suggest, on the basis of rather large sets of issues, that responsiveness may also vary systematically across other policy domains. Particularly striking is Monroe's (1998) finding of extremely low levels of consistency—only 17% in the 1981–93 period—between public opinion and policy on issues of political reform.¹¹ The U.S. political system has proven highly resistant to such proposals as moving to popular (rather than electoral college) selection of presidents, easing registration and voting procedures, reducing the role of private money in elections, and the like that would increase the power of ordinary citizens in politics.

Also suggestive is Monroe's (1998) finding of slightly below-average consistency in recent years between opinion and policy on social welfare and economic/labor issues. This hints at support for William Domhoff's argument in chapter 7 that economic and political elites take the trouble to mold or defy public opinion mainly on issues of the greatest importance to themselves, presumably including major matters of taxation, spending, and economic regulation. But these data offer no more than a hint. Future research should test this proposition by systematic analysis of separate samples of issues that do and do not meet clearly specified criteria signifying high importance to elites. Such studies could proceed by quantitative or case-study methods (ideally both) but would have to encompass explicitly the possibilities of spuriousness and reciprocal influence often ignored by researchers yet central to the elite-influence argument.

The best-established finding about differences in responsiveness across types of issues probably concerns issue salience. As noted, Page and Shapiro's (1983)

opinion on issues of high salience than low. (Paul Burstein's interesting finding in chapter 5 of high consistency between opinion and policy even on relatively lower-salience equal opportunity cases does not really refute this tendency, since his lower-salience cases are still rather salient in absolute terms: all involve central provisions of major legislation.) This is very much in accord with E. E. Schattschneider's views concerning the "scope of conflict." When conflict is intense and widespread, when an issue is highly visible, when ordinary citizens are paying attention, citizens are more likely to prevail in policymaking. When politics is quiet, obscure, and out of sight, on the other hand, organized interests (especially corporate interests) are more likely to get their way (Schattschneider 1960, chaps. 1 and 2).

One methodological caveat: it is conceivable that the high-salience/low-salience contrasts in opinion-policy congruence may be an artifact of a tendency for opinion manipulation—rather than genuine policy responsiveness to public opinion—to be greater when the public is more fully engaged. Perhaps elites work harder to bring public opinion into line with what they want when the issues are crucial and the public's inclinations seem threatening. This possibility is less worrisome than the analogous problem with foreign/domestic policy contrasts, however, because foreign policy—in contrast to many high-salience domestic issues—regularly involves conditions especially conducive to manipulating public opinion. Foreign policy issues are often obscure, distant from everyday life, and the executive often enjoys a high degree of information control as well as substantial bipartisan deference from other elites. Still, we need to pin down high-versus low-salience distinctions using research techniques that better take account of possibly spurious or reciprocal relationships between opinion and policy.

What about differences in responsiveness to public opinion by different political institutions? Page and Shapiro (1983, p. 183) expressed surprise at finding higher levels of congruence with public opinion on state than on national policies. But their study may have magnified the extent of state responsiveness, as the state issues on which they had data were mostly important, nationally polled social issues (capital punishment, divorce, abortion) involving large, stable, high-salience opinion changes to which high responsiveness would be expected. Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995) found intriguing differences in connections between domestic liberal-conservative mood and policy activity by different institutions. Their estimated reduced-form coefficients (not controlling for party composition) ranged from 1.183 for the Senate and .850 for the House of Representatives down to .490 for the presidency and just .302 for the Supreme Court. Moreover, the mechanisms seemed to differ: House members apparently moved quickly to anticipate and avoid the voters' biennial wrath, whereas the Senate responded to public opinion mainly through electoral replacement (1995, 552–56).

Has policy responsiveness to public opinion varied over time? Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro in chapter 3 argue that the answer is "yes," based on research by themselves and others. Shapiro (1982) and Page and Shapiro (1983, p. 182) found varying levels of congruence between opinion change and policy

change in different historical periods, with peak (75%) congruence in 1969–79; the New Deal period came in second at 67%, but after 1945 there was a slow, steady decline in congruence to the 54% level of 1961–68, before the jump to 75% in 1969–79. In a preliminary study of social welfare issues, Jacobs and Shapiro found a drop in congruence in the post-1980 period. Monroe (1998), whose estimate of 63% consistency between policy and majority opinion in 1960–79 is quite consistent with Shapiro's congruence estimates for that same period, found a subsequent drop to 55% consistency in 1980–93.

As Jacobs and Shapiro acknowledge, the evidence for a recent drop in responsiveness is still preliminary and tentative; more research will be needed to firmly establish or refute it. In case the finding holds up, however, Jacobs and Shapiro (here and in their 2000 book) have offered some rather convincing explanations for the drop, including the sharply increased party polarization in Washington and presidents' increased capability (through the institutionalized "public opinion apparatus") to learn about public opinion and attempt to craft talk that will evade or manipulate it. I would also emphasize, perhaps more strongly than Jacobs and Shapiro do, three other factors that may have contributed to a decline in responsiveness to public opinion. First is the long-term erosion in the already limited membership and political power of organized labor in the United States (see Goldfield 1987). Though often ignored, this is arguably one of the most important facts about politics in the United States as opposed to the rest of the industrialized world. Labor's decline has largely removed as key political actors organizations representing the views of millions of ordinary citizens and countervailing the power of business corporations. Second, economic globalization (increased trade flows, immigration, and, especially, capital mobility) has greatly enhanced the political power of business, by increasing the credibility of firms' threats to cut jobs or to flee abroad in reaction to popular but costly taxing, spending, and regulatory policies (see Winters 1996). Third, the increasing circumvention of post-Watergate campaign finance reforms and the ensuing flood of "soft money" into the electoral process have probably increased the political power of moneyed minorities and decreased the influence of ordinary citizens on policy (Drew 1999).

If the recent decline in responsiveness is real and if these factors have contributed to it—on top of the abysmally low voter turnout and the class-biased political participation that have been with us for a long time (Burnham 1970; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995)—then to reassert popular control of government will be no simple matter.

HOW TO MEASURE PUBLIC OPINION

I have so far ignored the rather important question of how public opinion—especially citizens' policy preferences—should be measured. Implicitly, I have accepted the mainstream view that polls and surveys do it best; that aggregations

(medians, means, majorities) of responses to issue questions asked of representative national samples of citizens can rather accurately tell us what "the people" want their government to do. Surveys may not exactly be the *only* wheel in town. But no feasible, regularly available alternative method of measuring citizens' opinions and policy preferences seems to me to be superior.

Susan Herbst, in a series of books and articles (e.g., Herbst 1993) and in chapter 9, has vigorously challenged this view. Herbst has pointed out a number of deficiencies in polls: the danger, for example, that forced-choice, closed-ended questions will create the appearance of opinions where no opinions actually exist; the problem that responses can vary widely with different question wordings; the general failure of surveys to measure intensity of opinion; the risk that analysts of survey data on isolated individuals will ignore social contexts and social dynamics; and the empirical fact (supported by our work in chapter 8 and Kull and Ramsay's chap. 11, as well as by Herbst's chap. 9) that, in any case, many or most politicians disdain polls as inaccurate or irrelevant. Herbst has championed alternative or supplemental measures of public opinion, based on real-life conversations, which get at the texture of genuine attitudes; public meetings, actions, and demonstrations, which clearly signal intensity; and stands taken by interest groups and the media, which express real opinions by real people when polls may not be available (e.g., in a state legislative setting) or issues may be too complex or obscure for ordinary citizens to form attitudes about.

Similarly, Taeku Lee in chapter 16 thoughtfully reviews a wide range of normative, conceptual, and empirical critiques of polls, scoring some important points. For example, survey data certainly should not be conceptually confused with the construct of "public opinion" itself, which can take many forms and can be measured in many ways. The production of polls is indeed a political, largely elite-driven process, and polls may indeed often ignore or lag behind what is on ordinary citizens' minds, as they did in Lee's well-documented case of the civil rights movement. When survey data are not available, letters to public officials—interesting in any case for the insights they offer into the views of a set of highly attentive and active citizens—may give us useful glimpses of the views of the public as a whole, or at least help illuminate the dynamics of change in mass opinion (see Lee 2002).

Again, James Witte and Philip Howard in chapter 15 note that telephone- and personal-interview-based survey research has encountered increasing problems over time. Interview refusal rates, for example, have risen alarmingly, and the proliferation of multiple telephones within households has greatly complicated probabilistic sampling.

Herbst, Lee, and Witte and Howard raise a tangle of important issues that I will not attempt to analyze at any length here; Peter Miller deals with many of them in chapter 12 (see also Page and Shapiro 1992, esp. pp. 27–31). I will simply defend the pro-survey consensus on its two points of greatest strength: feasibility and representativeness.

As to feasibility, if we want to ascertain—in comparable fashion—the views

of many different people on a particular issue, the most feasible way to do so is usually to ask them identical, specific questions about that issue. It can be enlightening to observe natural-setting conversations, letters, demonstrations, and the like, but such observations cannot generally provide the comparable information we need about everyone's views on a specific matter. Moreover, if we want to know the views of *millions* of citizens, it is not generally feasible to ask questions of everyone; much better to ask questions of a small but statistically representative sample.

Representativeness constitutes the prime advantage of surveys, both for the empirical purposes that Miller notes and for normative purposes. The sort of public opinion most relevant to democratic theory as I conceive it (granted, this is a liberal, individual-based democratic theory) consists of the aggregated policy preferences of *all* citizens, with each individual citizen *weighted equally*. I see universality and political equality as absolutely central to democracy. Properly designed and analyzed surveys can deliver a good, highly representative picture of what citizens as a collectivity think, free of the participatory biases inherent in other measures of public opinion (see Verba 1996). Yes, we have to be careful about selective (and untimely) question asking, the vagaries of question wording, effects of interview context, sampling complexities due to new telephone technology and altered ownership patterns, refusal problems, possible biases in "don't know" responses,¹² and so forth. These are serious problems, but they are not beyond our power to solve.

Indeed, as Humphrey Taylor points out in chapter 17—with a refreshing dose of comparative, outside-the-U.S. perspective—the existence of free, independent public opinion polls may be quite crucial to the establishment of political accountability and democracy. Polls make decision makers aware of what the public wants so that they can take public opinion into account. And accurate polls can expose (hence sometimes prevent) the stealing of elections.

Alternative measures of public opinion, in contrast to survey-based measures, are all subject to biases that tend to make them highly unrepresentative. Interest groups, for example, are notoriously unrepresentative of ordinary citizens. As practically every scholar since Mancur Olson (1965) has recognized, David Truman's broadly based "potential groups" have trouble forming because of free-rider problems. Actual groups tend to represent businesses, producers, and upper-income professionals much better than they represent workers, consumers, or middle-class people (Schlozman and Tierney 1986). Newspaper editorials and other media voices often express very unrepresentative political opinions. Demonstrators, letter writers, party activists, and the like tend to be quite unlike ordinary citizens in their views and demography, with higher incomes, more formal education, and more extreme opinions (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Herbst, like Kull and Ramsay, provides some important findings about how politicians and their staffers often rely for readings of "public opinion," upon these biased sources rather than on polls or surveys. (Again, we need to know

more about exactly why they do so; besides nonavailability of pertinent surveys, one factor may be the electoral importance of unrepresentative activists, money givers, and organized groups.) But I have no doubt that, in terms of democratic theory, they *should* rely, whenever possible, on more representative survey measures. The normative features of survey-based measures of public opinion make poll data—and their relations to policymaking—well worth studying. Democratic theory has provided a major motivation for researchers who, in this volume and elsewhere, have investigated connections between public opinion and policymaking. Poll data necessarily play a central part in such investigations.

That said, it does not follow that existing poll data are perfect or cannot be improved. Several of our authors, in fact, have suggested highly promising improvements.

Charles Manski, for example (in chap. 14), proposes survey techniques to ascertain citizens' voting intentions in a fine-grained probabilistic fashion, rather than the usual dichotomous "Would you be more likely to vote for Bush or Gore?" or the crude verbal "How likely are you to vote? Very likely? Not too likely?" The preliminary evidence indicates that most citizens are able to ascribe a meaningful numerical probability figure to their likelihood of voting for a particular candidate or to their likelihood of voting at all. Probabilistic data promise to be particularly useful for predicting outcomes in elections with multiple candidates (e.g., third-party candidates like Ralph Nader) and for studying the determinants—both over time and across individuals—of higher and lower uncertainty about voting.

Similarly, James Witte and Philip Howard in chapter 15 describe some exciting actual and potential uses for on-line survey research. Internet-based surveys would seem to be especially promising for the study of small, specialized, dispersed population subgroups (e.g., members of the John Birch Society, fans of *National Geographic*), where conventional surveys—even telephone surveys with screener questions—would be far more expensive. And they are best suited for topics for which the vexing problems of nonrepresentativeness (due to differential access to computers, self-selection of respondents, multiple hits by individuals, and even organized campaigns to "flood" surveys) are minimal. I would not, however, expect on-line surveys to replace conventional sample surveys any time soon in ascertaining Americans' collective policy preferences.

In chapter 13, Martin Gilens crisply describes the great power of survey experiments (relying on differential treatment of random subsets of respondents, especially through CATI technology) to illuminate a wide range of substantive and methodological issues. Experiments on question wording, question context, the interview relationship, and survey modes can help us improve survey data and analysis by pinning down the precise impact of using such treacherous words as "welfare," and of priming respondents with cues about crime rates or foreign aid spending; relying on male versus female (or black vs. white) interviewers; using "secret ballots," mail surveys, or list techniques rather than straightforward

techniques can also illuminate substantive matters: interactions between methods and respondent characteristics (a tendency of liberals to conceal qualms about affirmative action in response to traditional questions; easier incorporation of new information into preferences by the already knowledgeable), and the crucial role of correct or incorrect information in forming policy preferences.

Information is also central to Kull and Ramsay's discussion in chapter 11 of public opinion concerning foreign policy. Not only do foreign policy elites often misperceive the state of public opinion but on some issues measured public attitudes that seem to fit an image of American isolationism are based on seriously erroneous information. Opposition to foreign aid spending, for example, appears to depend on gross overestimates of the amount of current spending (see also Kull and Destler 1999.) To the extent that poll-measured opinion is based on misinformation, of course, the normative status of those poll results comes into question, and we need to think about alternative measurement techniques such as those Kull has used and the experiments cited by Martin Gilens. We also need to think about how to improve our information system so that the collective public is exposed to the correct information it needs.

CONCLUSION

In an early book about public opinion and American democracy, V. O. Key Jr. (1961) wrote that popular governments "give . . . weight" to public opinion, but there is no "mechanistic articulation" between opinion and action, no "precise mirroring" of public opinion by government policy (pp. 411–12). To an extent that we can never be certain of, parallelism between opinion and policy results from influence on opinion by "government and other centers of political influence" that attempt to form opinion, rather than adjusting of policy to bring it into accord with public opinion (pp. 412, 423). In the end, public opinion is like a "system of dikes" that channel public action or fix a "range of discretion" within which government may act. These dikes rule out some policy alternatives as not worthy of serious attention and define other areas of "permissive consensus" within which action may be taken (p. 552; see also Sobel 2001).

I believe that the research reported in this volume is largely consistent with Key's formulations, just as it is largely consistent with E. E. Schattschneider's insistence that the American public is only "semi-sovereign." Ordinary citizens can have substantial influence upon policy, especially on high-salience issues for which the scope of conflict is broad, but on many issues (especially those of low visibility) autonomous public officials or a business-oriented pressure group system may prevail over the general public.

We have seen substantial evidence that policy often moves in harmony with public opinion. But we have also seen evidence that the extent of opinion-policy congruence varies with the degree of salience, the type of issue, and over time.

we have seen evidence that organized interests and policymakers themselves may sometimes shape public opinion rather than being moved by it.

The leading quantitative studies of opinion-policy links offer a number of important findings, but close scrutiny of those studies reveals a consistent tendency to *overstate* the impact of opinion on policy. Sampling and aggregation biases, as well as specification errors—especially the omission of variables that may influence both opinion and policy and generate spurious opinion-policy relationships, and failures to identify reciprocal effects of policy on opinion—afflict all these studies to varying degrees and seriously inflate their estimates of opinion's impact on policy. As a number of case studies confirm, the true relationship between opinion and policy is far from perfect.

If the empirical evidence does, in fact, support the views of Key and Schattschneider, and if we accept a populist democratic theory that calls for close adherence of policy to the preferences of ordinary citizens, then the U.S. political system has a long way to go before it becomes fully democratic. And if our authors are right about the factors that impede responsiveness—such as increased party polarization in Washington, clever "crafted talk" by policymakers, economic globalization, and increasingly powerful political money, along with the separation of powers, the weakness of labor unions, the lobbying power of business and other organized interests, and restricted, class-biased political participation—then movement toward more democracy will require considerable political struggle.

NOTES

1. In self-defense, I should point out that Page and Shapiro (1983) carefully qualified their findings and disclaimed any notion that democracy worked perfectly in the United States. Still, it is also true that Shapiro and I have subsequently come to put a greater emphasis on the undemocratic, nonpopular influences on American politics, as we have perceived those influences to grow in importance.

2. Mark Smith's (2000) data indicating that business (as represented by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce) loses on a good many highly visible issues on which it takes a stand does not necessarily contradict this point. Such public stands may be taken more often on the (perhaps relatively infrequent) occasions on which business is already losing. Business victories may be more frequent and more important, even if less visible, than the defeats. In any case, Smith is more interested in variations in business success over time than in the level of success, which he considered hard to measure objectively (pp. 85–86).

3. True, the different time periods over which different poll items were fielded mean that standardizing each of them independently does not guarantee to calibrate them exactly to the postulated public "mood" over that period. Hence, one should not actually expect either the measured mood or the time-period dummy variables to account for 100% of the variation in individual items, even if the actual relationship were perfect.

The authors' estimate—using an eigenvalue analog—that "about half" of the variance in selected time series is common variance (see chap. 4, especially footnote 11) may come closer to the truth than the 24% or 21% figure that I suggest. But to neglect even half the variance in *selected*, standardized public opinion items is to neglect a lot. And again: the

time series and isolated items that may be particularly unlikely to track a simple liberal-conservative mood.

4. An exception is Monroe (1979, 1998), whose “consistency” measure tries to assess discrepancies between the level of policies at a given moment and majority public preferences at that moment. But such judgments are necessarily difficult and subjective when (as is usually the case) opinion and policy are not measured on identical metrics.

5. If opinion and policy are measured on identical metrics, as is arguably true in Achen (1978), a constant deviation of policy from opinion should appear in the intercept term of a regression or in a simple arithmetic difference between the average values of the two variables. (See the intercept terms in Achen’s [1978, pp. 490–94] estimates of “responsiveness,” which do, in fact, suggest a degree of bias.)

6. The antelopes do, however, creep back—by way of an ambiguous reference—in chapter 4.

7. A simulation result not included in the final version of chapter 2 actually produced an example of “hyper-representation” in policy activity. When the authors moderately disturbed public opinion by every year (starting in 1977) adding 1.0 extra units of liberalism to the “Domestic Policy Mood,” this disturbance worked its way through the political system, tipping control of Congress to the Democrats in 1984 and 1986, and having a rather prolonged impact on policy activity that was *larger* than the change in public opinion itself. The authors did not claim that such an effect would be typical, but it did follow from their model.

8. Burstein, Bauldry, and Froese (2001) make this point concrete by tabulating the vast number of issues on the legislative agenda, few of which are the subject of opinion polls, and by noting that most legislative activity is “virtually invisible” to the public. Studying a stratified random sample of policy proposals, they find responsiveness to public opinion to be very low, by conventional measures, though Congress seldom acts in direct opposition to the measured preferences of the public.

9. To be sure, measurement error in the opinion variable may have led the estimates of direct effects of Soviet spending to erroneously include some impact that actually occurred indirectly through public opinion and should be attributed, in the sense of proximate cause, to opinion.

10. See Burstein, Bauldry, and Froese (2001). Note that even the modest levels of opinion-policy congruence that Page and Shapiro (1983) estimated for lower-salience issues were presumably biased upward by that study’s omission of nonopinion independent variables, by its partial failure to rule out reciprocal causation, and by the fact that it considered only cases in which *both* public opinion and policy moved significantly and measurably. (Not counted as instances of nonresponsiveness were cases in which public opinion did not move but policy did, or in which public preferences changed but policy did not.)

11. Within Monroe’s (1979, 1998) research design, however, issues of political reform face a high hurdle for achieving consistency because they inherently involve substantial departures from the status quo. Measured policy consistency is much higher on opinion items that do not call for such departures.

12. Nonresponse and “don’t know” biases are particularly threatening to the normative status of surveys, if the views of citizens with less political information (and often lower incomes) tend to be underrepresented (see Althaus 1998). But these biases may not be enormous. Althaus’s simulation of “full information” preferences found an average of seven percentage points of change in marginal frequencies. By my calculation, however, a measured majority actually switched sides on only two of his forty-five issues (pp. 552, 555–57).

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