

**A DEMOCRATIC POLITY?
Three Views of Policy Responsiveness
to Public Opinion in the United States**

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The capacity of a political system to respond to the preferences of its citizens is central to democratic theory and practice. Research and theory about the impact of public opinion on policy making in the United States, however, have produced decidedly mixed views. A number of analysts find a strong and persisting impact of public opinion on public policy. Others reject the idea that the public has consistent views at all or, even if it does, that those views exercise much influence over policy making. In this article, we evaluate the state of the art in the debates over the opinion-policy link in the rapidly growing body of research on public opinion and policy making. After an extensive review and critique of the theoretical and empirical research developing “strong” and “weak” effect views of the impact of opinion on policy, we conclude that a third “contingent” view, highlighting the historical, institutional, and political contingencies, provides the best understanding of the impact of opinion on policy.

Democratic governance assumes that the preferences of citizens are reflected in policy outputs. This objective has, however, proved extraordinarily difficult to attain in practice. One possible vehicle would be a strong impact of representative public opinion on the decisions of politicians and political leaders. This was certainly the optimistic hope of some of the pioneers of survey research, and it has been endorsed many times over the years.¹ However, a considerable body of research and theorizing about the impact of public opinion on policy making in the United States has produced decidedly mixed assessments about the extent of responsiveness. Whereas some analysts find

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a strong and persisting impact of public opinion on public policy, others reject the idea that the public has consistent views at all or, even if it does, that those views are capable of exercising much independent influence over policy making.

The confusing state of this debate reflects both the diverse ways in which researchers have investigated the question and a number of underlying, and often contradictory, social and political changes of the past few decades. Among the most important of the latter are the ever-growing number of public and private polls being conducted, extensive growth of media outlets and changes in the form and content of political reporting of public opinion, and the increasing availability of money and other resources available to political actors to strategically craft policy messages. Such institutional and organizational changes have simultaneously increased the measurement and reporting of public attitudes and provided political elites with new avenues to shape or direct those attitudes.

This article provides an overview and analysis of the state of the art in the debates over the impact of public opinion found in the large and interdisciplinary body of research on polls, public opinion, and policy making, and it outlines a synthetic “contingent” approach that we believe best captures the dynamics of the relationship between opinion and policy in American democracy. The article is in three parts. The first two parts dissect in some detail the evidence and theoretical arguments about the impact of public opinion on policy making represented in the two predominant poles in recent debates, the “large” and “small” effect images of the impact of opinion, respectively. Part 3 of the article develops the case for what we characterize as the contingency approach (cf. Cook & Barrett, 1992, pp. 223-226; Sharp, 1999, pp. 25-35), focusing on the historical, institutional, and political sources of variation in how public opinion influences policy makers.

One clarification is important to note at the outset of the article. In this article, as in most of the literature on opinion-policy linkages and indeed in everyday parlance, *public opinion* is assumed to refer to the aggregated responses of individuals as reflected in opinion polls. This assumption clearly reflects the “sovereign status” of opinion polls as measures of public opinion since World War II (Lee, 2002, chap. 3), and it implicitly solves the sticky problem of defining public opinion in the first place (cf. Allport, 1937; P. Miller, 1995). We do, however,

recognize that other types of public opinion exist and can influence policy as much or more than the types of mass opinion expressed through polls and surveys. Throughout history, citizens have expressed opinions through a variety of modes: in crowds, salons, and coffeehouses; through riots, petitions, strikes, letters to newspaper editors and political elites, and social movements; and through in-depth interviews, deliberative polls, or other expressions of individual sentiment (Eliasoph, 1998; Fishkin, 1995; Herbst, 1993; Lee, 2002, chap. 1; Lewis, 2001, chap. 2; Tilly, 1983). Entman and Herbst (2001, pp. 207-210) argue that today at least three sources of public opinion other than poll-based mass opinion provide policy makers with images of citizens' preferences: (a) activated public opinion, the views expressed by those citizens, organizations, and, occasionally, social movements actively participating in political life; (b) latent public opinion, the underlying values and fundamental preferences of citizens, distinct from more ephemeral and possibly poorly informed responses to detailed policy questions; and (c) perceived majority opinions, that is, the assumed preferences of citizens, which may be reinforced through the media and which may or may not accurately reflect actual preferences.

“LARGE EFFECTS” IMAGES OF THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION

The view that there is a high degree of policy responsiveness to public opinion in American politics rests on three types of evidence. The first comes from quantitative studies of the effects of either national or district majority public opinion, or changes in opinion, on policy outputs. Most of these investigations are based on time-series analyses using elaborately constructed measures of public opinion and legislative, executive, or judicial policy making. The second set of arguments comes from more intensive examinations of policy making in a single or small number of policy domains. Finally, there is a set of arguments, more commonly asserted in journalistic treatments of American politics, that highlights the importance of polls and other sources of information in influencing the behavior of politicians and the output of the political system.

The view that politicians, state managers, or the political system as a whole is responsive to public opinion ultimately rests on some version of the argument that political elites derive benefit from pursuing policies that are (or appear to be) in accord with the wishes of citizens (Downs, 1957; Geer, 1996; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000, chap. 1). For example, politicians and state managers may perceive it to be in their interests to minimize the distance between their own positions and that of the public because they periodically have to be elected or reelected. Both prospective and retrospective causal mechanisms have been advanced to account for the dynamic of politicians' responsiveness to their constituents' views (cf. Arnold, 1990; Fiorina, 1973; Mayhew, 1974).

MULTI-ISSUE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Quantitative research on the opinion-policy link across multiple issues has had two distinct foci: studies that draw on differences in public opinion across states or legislative districts and studies that consider the impact of public opinion at the national level.

Dyadic and state-level investigations. Research examining multiple issues, or attempts to estimate the overall responsiveness of policy to citizens' opinions, has taken advantage of legislative district or state-level variation in attitudes to assess impacts on policy outputs. The earliest systematic empirical work on policy responsiveness investigated the characteristics of voters in particular states or districts and the behavior (such as that reflected in roll call votes) of politicians and policy makers in those regions. The classic work of Miller and Stokes (1963), later characterized as the "dyadic representation" model, examined the relationship between opinions of voters in congressional districts and the behavior of House members while in office, reporting some modest (though variable) links. Other studies of constituency opinion—employing a variety of methodological assumptions and different measures of opinion and behavior—have extended the foundation established by Miller and Stokes, often reporting even stronger evidence of a persisting link (see, e.g., Bartels, 1991; Erikson, 1978; McDonough, 1992; Page, Shapiro, Gronke, & Rosenberg, 1984).

The dyadic analyses offer one plausible way of thinking about how public opinion influences policy: by shaping the behavior of elected officials once in office. The most sophisticated of these analyses have attempted to address issues of measurement error and simultaneity bias, although the possibility that the same (unmeasured) developments are influencing both public opinion (or voters) and legislators is always problematic. More seriously, dyadic studies face three particular limitations. First, they rarely include relevant controls for factors that may mediate the opinion-behavior link, for example, local or national media coverage of political issues or the actions of key interest groups in legislative districts. Second, these studies also do not consider systematically the possibility that elected officials may influence the attitudes of their constituents, rather than a one-way flow from opinion to behavior (Hill & Hurley, 1999; Hill & Hinton-Andersson, 1995). As we will see below, this is a problem that plagues other quantitative investigations as well (cf. Page, 2002). Third, these studies may be biased by focusing on highly salient issues where there is clear variation across districts, rather than less salient issues or ones where there is less variation in district opinion, as is often the case (Monroe, 1998, p. 7; cf. Burstein, Bauldry, & Froese, 2001).

Variation across the states has provided another early source of testing for an opinion-policy linkage. Early theory suggested that private interests would be more likely to dominate public opinion at the state and local level (McConnell, 1966; Schattschneider, 1960; cf. Shapiro & Jacobs, 1989, pp. 154-155). The major challenge to the Schattschneider-type view is developed in the research of Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993). They conducted a broad cross-sectional analysis of public opinion and public policy across the 50 states, disaggregating several years of *New York Times*/CBS poll data to create state-level ideology scores. They also developed measures of state policy outputs on eight key policy issues to compute a composite "policy liberalism" score for each state. The general conclusion is that states with more liberal polities tend to get more liberal public policies (and states with more conservative citizens get more conservative policies). Although not in itself especially surprising, the enormous correlation of .91 between opinion and policy (p. 80) surely is. The authors characterize it as "remarkable" and "awesome" (p. 80).

More detailed case studies of the impact of opinion on particular policies across the states afford the possibility of examining a broader range of political, institutional, economic, and other factors than Erikson et al. (1993) were able to consider in their global investigations of state-level differences. In multivariate analyses, there has been considerable variation in the size of the effects of opinion found, depending on the policy examined (cf. Berry, Ringquist, Fording, & Hanson, 1998, pp. 344-345). Significant effects of public opinion have been found by Clingermayer and Wood (1995) on per capita state debt, by Grogan (1994) on state variation in Medicaid eligibility rules, and by Taggert and Winn (1993) on state incarceration rates. Wetstein's (1996) study of variation in state abortion laws reports small and varying effects of public opinion (see also Groggin & Wlezien, 1993; Meier and McFarlane (1992) find more consistent effects for Medicaid funding of abortion. Fording (1997) reports a modest but significant effect of public opinion in explaining state-level differences in Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program expansion between 1962 and 1980 in multivariate models containing measures of political disruption through protest and African American political influence; other studies of variation in welfare expenditures across the states have found weak or insignificant effects of public opinion on welfare expenditures (cf. Hill & Leighley, 1992; Hill, Leighley, & Hinton-Andersson, 1995).

State-level analyses of the policy responsiveness to public opinion link go beyond dyadic studies by focusing on policy outcomes, rather than legislators' votes (which may or may not translate into policy outcomes). Furthermore, although measures of public opinion available in the states are more modest than at the national level, they are much more extensive than legislative district opinion. But the state-level studies have been plagued by some of the same questions about the nature of the causality in the opinion-policy (or opinion-behavior) connection as the dyadic analyses (Hill & Hinton-Andersson, 1995; Page, 1994, 2002). These studies typically have not addressed the possibility that political elites and state political parties can shape or influence opinion within the state. For example, in Erikson et al. (1993, p. 126), governors are excluded from the model, even though governors clearly attempt to shape public opinion within their states. Erikson et al. do include a measure of Democratic Party influence in the legis-

latures but make no effort to distinguish among the different types of Democratic parties found across the states.² Furthermore, most studies do not attempt to measure important policy feedback or diffusion processes (e.g., the diffusion of ideas or innovations from neighboring or other states). Finally, it is important to note that it is the federal government, not the states, that usually makes policy decisions about which citizens care the most and are most informed (Converse, 1990, p. 371).

Multi-issue, national-level quantitative studies. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about overall responsiveness in the American political system from dyadic analyses or state-level comparisons alone, however valuable they may be in other respects (such as in developing over-time or regional comparisons).³ Not surprisingly, it has been through national-level investigations, which can draw on detailed information about citizens' opinions across a range of issues, that the most systematic evidence in favor of the large effects view has been adduced. The detailed public opinion information available at the national level permits the development of time-series analyses in which opinion measured at time t is examined in relationship to policy output at $t + 1$. Monroe (1979) examined the links between majority opinion toward a proposed policy change and legislative outcomes in more than 500 cases where new policies were adopted between 1960 and 1979. He found that in 63% of the cases, policy moved in the direction preferred by majority opinion. A later replication (Monroe, 1998) found similar, though slightly lower (55%), levels of responsiveness in the period between 1980 and 1993.

Other approaches have sought to develop more dynamic assessments of the opinion-policy link by examining the relationship between changes in public opinion during two points in time and changes in policy. The most influential and wide-ranging investigation is that of Page and Shapiro (1983). They identified 357 instances of change in public opinion on a particular issue between 1935 and 1979 and measured policy developments regarding each issue a year after the opinion shift, as well as over longer periods. They found overall that policy changed in ways congruent with public opinion 43% of the time, there was no change in policy in 33% of the cases, and there was noncongruent policy change in 22% of the cases in the first year

after the shift in public opinion on the issue. Adjusting for policy areas where change was not possible in the direction desired by the public and allowing for a longer time horizon, they concluded that in about two thirds of the cases where policy change occurred, it was congruent with the change in public opinion.

The most comprehensive attempt to develop a global model of the impact of opinion and policy across a wide range of issues has been developed in the work of Erikson, Stimson, and MacKuen (see especially Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002, chaps. 6-9; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995). Their investigations have examined the association of historical evidence of changes in "public mood" (Erikson et al., 2002, chap. 7; Stimson, 1999) with "policy activity" (measured by House and Senate roll call votes, presidential "liberalism" as reflected in policy stances and solicitor general briefs, and Supreme Court rulings on civil rights and civil liberties, criminal procedure, and the economy) and "policy" (measured by the passage of "important" laws, drawn from Mayhew, 1991). Key to their logic is that there is a broad public mood that changes over time and that those changes in mood are visible to professional policy makers who have incentives to stay on top of public preferences (see Erikson et al., 2002, p. 291). The focus on mood, rather than specific policy attitudes, avoids the problem of low policy information on the part of the public. Although citizens may not have sufficiently informed views on many of the details of policy controversies, there is nonetheless a broad ideological mood that provides important signals to politicians (see also Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1994). The measure of public mood employed in these studies reflects changes in the ratio of responses to a very wide range of repeated survey items asked by several polling organizations and standard academic surveys. Changes in the ratio of responses to repeated items are combined to produce a single liberal-conservative measure of mood that shifts over time (Erikson et al., 2002, chap. 6; see Stimson, 1999, chap. 3, for a more detailed description).

Erikson et al. (2002, chaps. 8-9) develop a series of specific tests of the effect of public mood through a time-series analysis of the impact of lagged mood on policy activity and the passage of important laws since the 1950s, controlling in the full models for Democratic control of Congress and cumulative Vietnam casualties (the latter having

proved significant in preliminary analyses). They posit two distinct interpretations of the ways in which the elected branches of government can respond to mood changes: electoral turnover (mood changes produce swings in the party balance in Congress or control of the presidency) and rational anticipation (incumbents change their behaviors in response to perceived changes in mood before elections take place). Their models have produced results consistent with the broad theory: Although there is significant variation in responsiveness across the three institutional arenas (with the Supreme Court being the least responsive), there are both direct and indirect (principally via elections) avenues through which public opinion influences policy.⁴ The overall conclusion is that as the public mood shifts to a more liberal position, more liberal policy activity and, ultimately, lawmaking occur (and vice versa with conservative trends) (see especially pp. 304-321).

What is perhaps most startling in the Erikson et al. (2002) analysis is their estimate of the size of the impact of public opinion. Taken together, the indirect and direct effects of public opinion produce large coefficients for the impact of policy mood on policy such that "there exists about a one-to-one translation of preferences into policy" (p. 316). The most readily interpretable effect can be seen in the passage of important laws (since 1953, they identify an average of 5.5 such laws per Congress). They find that a mere 1-point liberal shift in the policy mood will eventually produce three major new liberal laws (pp. 368-369). From such findings, they draw the vivid conclusion that "politicians are keen to pick up the faintest signals in their political environment. Like antelope in an open field, they cock their ears and focus their full attention on the slightest sign of danger" (pp. 319-320).

The leading quantitative studies of multi-issue or global responsiveness such as those mentioned above attempt to develop systematic assessments that produce an overall picture that the case study approaches cannot provide. Yet there are a number of common limitations to these studies that limit their ability to provide a single definitive account. First, they overstate responsiveness by ignoring non-salient issues that are the subject of legislative action but not measured by polls (Burstein et al., 2001). Quantitative studies may include measures of public opinion and policy outcomes across a wide range of

issues but are still limited to examining those issues where poll data on public preferences are available.⁵ These are in most cases the most salient and visible issues, where responsiveness is likely to be greatest. Second, these investigations rarely include controls for other relevant variables, nor do they test models incorporating antecedent or mediating factors in the policy-making process, such as the activities of business and other interest groups (e.g., Domhoff, 1998; Ferguson, 1995; Page, 2002), social movements (e.g., Lee, 2002), or the mass media (e.g., Entman & Herbst, 2001; Lewis, 2001). Finally, these studies generally assess the one-way flow of influence from public opinion to policy, implicitly ignoring the possibility that politicians themselves may influence the policy preferences of citizens (e.g., Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000).⁶

The global model of Erikson et al. (2002) raises one other issue that is worth mentioning here (cf. Page, 2002). Their ambitious effort to measure long-term trends in the public mood and policy activity and laws rests on the association between highly aggregate measures of each. The mood measure collapses change in attitudes across a large number of domestic policy issues but pays no attention to faster or slower change in attitudes or salience on particular issues (and excludes some key issues such as abortion, affirmative action, and crime). This global construct of necessity masks large changes on a single issue that may influence policy on that issue but not others. Similarly, policy output information is collapsed to produce a single yearly average of policy activity or laws passed, thereby making it impossible to know which liberal or conservative policy responses are related to which types of public attitudes (a point developed further by Page, 2002). We also do not know much about whether policy outputs are appropriate matches for public desires.⁷

The importance of the demonstration by Erikson et al. (2002) that global policy shifts are associated with highly aggregated shifts in the public's policy mood is no small achievement. Indeed, the fact that their aggregated measures perform as well as they do clearly suggests that there is a connection of some sort. But the unexplored details of large-scale quantitative investigations leave us skeptical that a single number, however carefully derived, can provide an adequate measure of the overall level of policy responsiveness to public opinion.

CASE STUDIES

Quantitative studies of the impact of public opinion on policy making across a wide range of policy domains, such as the research discussed in the previous section, cannot hope to capture all of the messy details that shape actual policy making within specific domains. Case studies of particular issues, however, are especially well suited for the latter task; researchers can more easily take account of other politically significant factors and develop more detailed analyses of the timing and sequencing of policy change. In this section, we consider very briefly some examples of research that endorse a large effects interpretation of policy responsiveness to public opinion through case studies.⁸

In the case of domestic social policy, most of the studies that include public opinion (or over-time change in public attitudes) report substantial evidence of responsiveness. Burstein's (1985/1998b) study of the evolution of equal employment opportunity legislation from the 1940s to the 1970s found that the crucial change making possible liberal policy breakthroughs was the shifting racial attitudes of Whites and growing acceptance of the principles of racial equality. Weaver's (2000) detailed examination of the origins and passage of the 1996 welfare reform legislation finds evidence that growing public opposition to AFDC was crucial for creating political opportunities for reform advocates, although it was not sufficient in itself or adequately detailed to produce any particular outcome. Jacobs (1993) found strong archival evidence that perceptions of public opinion paved the way for the adoption of Medicare in the mid-1960s. Quirk and Hinchliffe (1998) assert that public opinion influenced the direction of public policy in six key policy domains in the 1970s and 1980s (including social security, business regulation, tax cuts, and petroleum policy), although the precise routes through which public opinion influenced the direction of policy debates in Congress and in the White House varied across those domains.

In foreign policy, a large number of studies have attempted to assess the impact of public opinion on policy (see Foyle, 1999; Holsti, 1996; Kull & Destler, 1999; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2000; Sobel, 2001). Perhaps the most widely studied question has been whether public opinion shapes defense spending. The general finding has been that the actual

level of military effort is associated with majority public opinion (see, e.g., Hartley & Russett, 1992; Jencks, 1985; Shapiro & Page, 1994; Wlezien, 1995, 1996). Hartley and Russett (1992), for example, find significant and persisting impacts of public opinion on changes in U.S. defense spending (controlling for Soviet military spending and the size of national budget deficit) in the cold war era between 1965 and 1990 (see also the replication of these findings, adding information about issue salience, in Jones, 1994, pp. 124-128; but cf. Entman & Herbst, 2001, pp. 210-219). Bartels (1991) examined the sources of congressional support for the Reagan military buildup, finding that district opinion exercised significant influence on congressional voting patterns. Other analysts have investigated the impact of public opinion on the use of U.S. military power abroad; the public has frequently been more wary about the use of such force than political elites, and in a number of cases, this has provided a powerful constraint on military action (see, e.g., Sobel, 2001).

One aspect of the relationship between public opinion and foreign and military policy differs from domestic issues and is worth considering. Foreign and military policy is frequently made in response to event- or crisis-driven developments. When a foreign crisis changes the context within which the public views a question—such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Iran's seizure of the U.S. Embassy that same year, or more recently the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—rapid changes in public attitudes are possible. Such changes may well be associated with later changes in policy, such as the Carter/Reagan military buildup following on the heels of the twin crises of 1979, the reduction in defense spending following the collapse of the Soviet Union, or more recently proposals to increase the defense budget and enhance intelligence-gathering capacity in response to the threat of international terrorism. But at the same time, it is likely that dramatic forces such as these move both public opinion and elites. In such cases, any apparent correlation would thus be spurious.

In general, case studies allow for consideration of a wider range of events and institutional or political factors that may mediate the opinion-policy relationship. They can often get beyond relatively crude measures of public opinion and policy outputs in quantitative studies to provide more refined information about the details of public

opinion and policy and political moves of elites. But they face some of the same limitations as the multi-issue quantitative studies and introduce new ones. As with the multi-issue studies, the cases selected will tend to be those in which there is measured public opinion (and, hence, issues that have high salience and thus more likely to produce a positive association) (Burstein et al., 2001). Furthermore, it is difficult to draw general conclusions about overall responsiveness from case studies, and cumulative reviews or meta-analyses cannot be conclusive for the same reason.

RESEARCH ON POLL-DRIVEN RESPONSIVENESS

A third set of arguments for high levels of policy responsiveness to public opinion focuses on the impact of the vast increase in the amount and quality of information available to political actors about public opinion, largely through the rapid growth of public and private opinion polling (for general overviews of the growth of polling, see Brehm, 1993; J. Converse, 1986; Herbst, 1993). Key (1961, p. 536) and Geer (1996, chap. 1) make a simple but powerful point about this historical shift: Political actors are more likely to respond to public opinion when they are confident what it is. Recent presidents in particular have quite detailed information about citizens' preferences, including extensive private polling operations directed by the White House (Eisinger, 1996; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1995). The growing use of polls by other political actors and organizations—members of Congress, interest groups, national and state Democratic and Republican parties, and the mass media—provides further sources of information about public attitudes. As Brehm (1993) has put it, "there is hardly an aspect of American political life untouched by polling and survey research" (p. 3).

The existence of such vast information, however it is gathered and for whatever purpose, may of its own accord produce higher levels of policy responsiveness (cf. Warren, 2001, chap. 7). Geer (1996) asserts that "well-informed politicians behave differently than their less well-informed counterparts—even when their motivations are the same" (p. 2) (see also Lavrakas & Traugott, 2000). The claim is that greater amounts of trusted information facilitate responsiveness by giving political leaders the capacity to make reasoned judgments about

where the public stands. Jacobs (1992, 1993) argues that although private polling by presidents and other policy makers is typically used to strategically craft policy and political rhetoric, the information from polls can nonetheless produce a “recoil effect” in which actors alter their behaviors in response to evidence about the state of public opinion.

Advocates of public influence on policy making have often endorsed increased reliance on polls as providing a solution to some of the weaknesses of American political institutions; as Verba (1996) puts it, polling “fits the U.S. polity, where institutions are weak, and therefore the views and attitudes of citizens—as autonomous individuals—make more difference in their political behavior than is the case where a person’s party, religion, or ethnicity is more predictive” (p. 3). But poll respondents may not accurately answer survey questions when the issue is a highly contested one in which respondents may be reluctant to reveal their true feelings (Berinsky, 1999); the literature on racial attitudes has emphasized this point (see, e.g., Krysan, 1998; Sears et al., 2000). Even if the aggregate responses are valid, concerns about excessive reliance on polling have led some political commentators to express the concern that contemporary politicians are increasingly prone to simply “pander” to the public.⁹ In fact, in recent years, candidates for political office have frequently felt it necessary to assert their independence from polls as evidence of their capacity for leadership. Wide variation in the degree to which individual politicians rely on or listen to poll data (see, e.g., Foyle, 1999, on public opinion and foreign policy) and more generally the institutional factors producing differences across policy domains (see below) suggests caution toward blanket assertions about the impact of the rising numbers of opinion polls being conducted. Nonetheless, the startling increase in polling suggests at least the possibility of changes in how public opinion influences policy makers.

“SMALL EFFECTS” VIEWS OF THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION

If the different versions of the large effects view identified above represent distinctive empirical and theoretical arguments for why and

how public opinion matters, there are no shortage of analysts who express skepticism about such conclusions. The range of such appraisals stretches from those who dismiss the very possibility of coherent public views, or that public opinion is so easily led or manipulated by elites that it cannot constitute an independent causal factor, and/or that there is little direct connection between what the public thinks and what policy makers do. Among the skeptics, a broad distinction exists between what we might call "critical" approaches and more conventional, or "mainstream," accounts. These positions have important affinities, but there are also important differences in theory and emphasis. We thus discuss them separately in this section.

THEORIES OF LOW RESPONSIVENESS: STARTING ASSUMPTIONS

Two distinct assumptions underlie arguments that policy making is not generally responsive to public opinion. The first assumption is that the policy preferences of most citizens are either nonattitudes (in the famous strong formulation of Converse, 1964) and, hence, incapable of coherently informing policy, or they are so weakly held or sufficiently contradictory as to permit manipulation by elites. The second emphasizes broadly the autonomy of both elected officials and bureaucrats from the mass public (e.g., Skocpol, 1995). If theories of responsiveness often invoke some version of a median-voter model, models of nonresponsiveness often assume that politicians can deviate from mass preferences and get away with it. These deviations may reflect the greater influence of activists and articulate actors, interest groups, party and organizational interests, the structure of legislative institutions, or the policy and political dispositions of politicians themselves, any or all of which can lead toward nonresponsiveness.

The most basic way in which policy is likely to be nonresponsive to public opinion is if there are relatively few policies about which the public has clear and consistent views that political leaders might meaningfully follow. Converse's (1964) widely debated thesis about nonattitudes was based on a National Election Studies panel study in the late 1950s that suggested that most respondents did not maintain ideologically consistent responses to repeated survey questions, and he interpreted such seemingly random responses as reflecting "nonattitudes." An army of assessments of Converse's controversial

thesis has appeared over the years, but the debate it launched has remained largely unresolved (cf. Brooks, 1994). A prominent attempt to show that the changing political environment of the 1960s had improved the ideological and informational capacities of citizens was advanced by Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1979), but a wealth of later scholarship, including that of E. Smith (1989) and Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), found little substantive support for the claim that American voters are becoming more sophisticated over time. Indeed, the balance of the evidence suggests continued low levels of information overall.

If information is low, can citizens meaningfully express opinions to policy makers? Recent work in political psychology has supplied two micro-level responses to the original Converse (1964) thesis, and a third can be found in the macro-level approach of Page and Shapiro (1992) (cf. Erikson et al., 2002, chap. 1). One individual-level response is that it is the ambiguities of the questions, or the complexities of the issues, rather than nonattitudes, that produce respondent instability (e.g., Zaller & Feldman, 1992). In Zaller's (1992) powerful theoretical model of the survey response, the claim is that in responding to surveys, citizens sample among the different possible answers they have in their heads. The likelihood of any particular response is based on the relative strength of the different possible responses the respondent is aware of. This explains response inconsistency but also implies that polls convey meaningful information by averaging the complexity of attitudes held by each individual across the entire population.¹⁰ The second individual-level response, increasingly influential, has sought to show how citizens are capable of reasoning through cues and heuristics of various sorts, even in the absence of detailed information or policy understandings (e.g., Chong, 1999; Ferejohn & Kuklinski, 1990; Lupia, McCubbins, & Popkin, 2000). Although the cognitive models provide an elegant and hopeful view of poorly informed citizenry, they do not necessarily exhaust the problem suggested by the Converse thesis. Low information, even when heuristic shortcuts are available, can distort citizens' expressed policy preferences in significant ways (Althaus, 1998; Alvarez & Brehm, 2002). Better informed citizens are also equipped with the tools to resist elite influences (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, pp. 137-138; Lewis, 2001, pp. 103-117). Providing survey respondents with more information

about policy details significantly alters their responses (cf. Kuklinski et al.'s [1998] experiments on welfare attitudes).

At the aggregate level, the work of Page and Shapiro (1992) and Erikson et al. (2002) suggests—in spite of important differences in these works—that public opinion moves over time in ways that can be characterized as “rational” and associated in a meaningful way with events, crises, or economic fluctuations. In other words, even if most individual survey respondents are poorly informed or ideologically inconsistent, the collective shifts in public opinion may still hold meaning. These movements may be driven by a relatively small segment of the attentive public, but the signals produced by these moves can be read by political elites as reflecting the collective will, and they may respond as a consequence. Whether this is true responsiveness, however, hinges on whether the kinds of movements in public opinion believed by political elites are real. For example, the well-known contradictions in responses to differently worded or framed survey questions (e.g., Schuman & Presser, 1981; Sniderman & Grob, 1996) leave open the question of which changes in public views policy makers are responding to, considering the profusion of diverse poll results (employing different sampling procedures and survey questions) being reported in the media.

The issues surrounding the rationality of the public are hotly debated at present, at both the individual and aggregate level, and no closure is thus possible. Because much of the low-responsiveness literature hinges on this issue, however, definitive assessment of the entire thesis is constrained by lack of resolution about the challenge first posed so sharply by Converse nearly 40 years ago.

THE MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC OPINION BY ELITES

Even if we grant the nonobvious claim that the public effectively expresses coherent and meaningful views in response to survey questions, either individually or collectively, it may nonetheless be the case that the causal link between opinion and policy is rendered spurious. In the strong version of this argument, some analysts (such as Ginsberg, 1986) contend that the rapid growth of polling explicitly reflects an attempt on the part of state managers and political elites to channel citizen opinion and prevent the emergence of contentious pol-

itics. Others express skepticism about such functionalist arguments but nonetheless highlight the extensive efforts and frequent successes of political elites in shaping or even manipulating public opinion in positing elite influence on public opinion. There is no shortage of efforts to influence public opinion by party, government, business, and other political and economic organizations. Although presidential polls may be used to gauge public opinion on a particular issue, in practice they are often undertaken to test the popularity of particular political rhetoric and policy framings in advance of public presentation in an attempt to improve the reception of particular proposals already decided on (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000, chap. 2). Institutional advantages enjoyed by presidents make them well positioned to focus public attention on particular social problems or policy proposals through prominent speeches and/or careful use of the mass media (J. E. Cohen, 1997; Skowronek, 1993; cf. Hill, 1998). Some research suggests that presidents may, under certain circumstances, have special powers to shape or direct public opinion. For example, the power to increase the salience of an issue through priming can alter the impact of opinion on policy making, even if policy preferences per se do not change (cf. Beckett, 1997, on crime and drug issues in the Reagan-Bush-Clinton era). More rarely, presidents may sometimes succeed in changing public opinion itself (Page & Shapiro, 1992, pp. 348-350). Such shifts are often temporary, however, as the president's opponents will inevitably challenge such opinion-shaping projects and may be able to return attitudes to the status quo.

Other governmental and organizational bodies engage in opinion-gathering and opinion-shaping activities. Each major governmental agency has its own sophisticated public relations operation to promote its activities, and many undertake efforts to understand public views in their domains. Public actors besides presidents attempt to shape public opinion, although their more limited access to the mass media reduces the effectiveness of such efforts (with governors, senators, and large-city mayors having the greatest opportunities, followed by lower level elected officials and bureaucrats). Business elites and interest groups also seek to manipulate public opinion, through the funding of peak business associations, public relations, think tanks, and policy formation (e.g., Akard, 1992; Domhoff, 1990, 1998; cf. M. A. Smith, 2000, chap. 8), and corporate control over and influence on

the mass media are two examples (see Underwood, 2001, for a recent summary).

Whether such efforts to influence public opinion succeed is controversial. Measurement difficulties abound. Visible campaigns, whether by presidents, business associations, or other organizations, produce countercampaigns that may unravel whatever changes in opinion were achieved in the first place (e.g., Akard, 1992; Domhoff, 1990, 1998; cf. M. A. Smith, 2000, chap. 5). Elites are frequently divided among themselves, creating some competition for influence over public opinion. The framing and agenda-setting capacities of elites are undoubtedly significant but (as we discuss in more detail in the next section) variable across contexts and difficult to generalize about. In short, research on the flow of influence between elites and the media is probably best characterized as bidirectional (e.g., McCombs, Danielian, & Wanta, 1995, pp. 290-291), even if disagreements remain about the respective strengths of each.

Returning to the general question about the impact of public opinion on policy, it is worth noting that the extensive efforts undertaken by political elites to shape public opinion provide an interesting confirmation of the strong effects view: Why bother trying to influence public opinion if it has little impact on policy outcomes? Evidence that elites on both sides of an issue such as social security will often invoke particular readings of public opinion to support desired policy positions (Cook, Barabas, & Page, 2002), or that business interests will seek to shape or influence public opinion in addition to direct lobbying activities (see, e.g., Domhoff, 1998), provides, ironically, evidence of the extent to which political and economic elites take seriously the political impact of public opinion.

HOW DO ELITES KNOW WHAT THE PUBLIC THINKS?

A final source of low responsiveness may stem from the sources of public opinion drawn on by politicians and policy makers. Politicians frequently are not able to draw on survey-based information about public attitudes because poll data do not exist on most of the questions that come before Congress (Burstein et al., 2001). Public information about the details of even hotly contested policy controversies is usually so limited as to provide policy makers massive room for maneu-

ver, even if there is consensus in support of policy change (see, e.g., Weaver's [2000] detailed study of public opinion and national-level welfare reform). Herbst's (1998) investigation of how state-level political leaders "read" public opinion in the absence of detailed poll data in state politics is instructive. The dominant approach of the policy managers Herbst studied in Illinois was to examine (a) constituent letters, (b) letters to the editors of newspapers, and (c) the positions taken by organized interest groups as ways to gauge public opinion. We know relatively less about how national-level political elites discern public opinion on policy issues in which poll results are not available, but Powlick (1995) and Kull and Destler (1999, pp. 219-221) report evidence from separate studies of public opinion and foreign policy making that the primary sources drawn on by government officials (Powlick, 1995) and members of Congress (Kull & Destler, 1999) are media attention and the current state of congressional opinion on particular issues (see also Schoenbach & Becker, 1995). To the extent that such sources of public opinion are biased, they may push political elites to policies not desired by the mass public, even when politicians want to follow public opinion.

CRITICAL THEORIES OF NONRESPONSIVENESS

Critical theorists of public opinion extend some of the arguments made by mainstream accounts into a broader critique of the very notion of public opinion itself. Critics challenge the view that aggregated responses to poll questions can adequately represent public opinion.¹¹ Instead, polls are themselves viewed as sources of ideology about public opinion, constructing quantitative indicators of public opinion where none could exist in the absence of polling. In this view,

public opinion surveys present only a rough idea of what people generally think because the results are highly sensitive to a number of factors. . . . Polls may even create the impression of public opinion on questions in which none actually exists. (Domhoff, 1998, p. 172; see also Bourdieu, 1979; Herbst, 1993)

Respondents may not understand the questions in the same way as pollsters intend, rendering responses problematic (e.g., Bourdieu,

1979, pp. 126-127). More important, the questions and response categories are those created by elites, rather than by "the public" (Ginsberg, 1986; Lee, 2002, chap. 1; Lewis, 2001, pp. 32-33), and the kinds of questions that tend to be asked are those that are of concern to elites (Bennett & Entman, 2001, p. 8). This makes it unlikely that alternative conceptions of public opinion are even possible because questions that might tap such alternative views are not even asked (Ginsberg, 1986). Corollaries of this can be found in the "spiral of silence" thesis (Noelle-Neumann, 1984): Perceptions of what the range of acceptable views are (which may in turn be based on previously reported poll results) at one point in time may shape and constrain individual beliefs at later points in time (cf. Schuessler, 2000, for a more formal demonstration of the power of expressive identity with majority views).

Following the classical commentary of Blumer (1948/1969), critical theorists have also argued that in relying on aggregating poorly informed individual opinions to constitute "public opinion," we systematically ignore collective expressions of opinion and/or the dynamic character of public attitudes such as that reflected in social movement or "activated" opinion in contexts where those opinions have real content (Blumer, 1948/1969; Gunn, 1995; Herbst, 1993, pp. 2, 166; Lee, 2002, chap. 4). In other words, the public part of public opinion is missing. In this way, the intensity of sentiment, the capacity for revision in the face of deliberation, or the social position of respondents is ignored (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 305; Habermas, 1962/1989, pp. 211 ff.; cf. Sanders, 1999, p. 252).¹² The rapid growth of poll and survey data about individual attitudes has frequently replaced other types of indicators of public attitudes, such as that expressed through the collective action or thoughts of ordinary citizens (Tilly, 1983). For some critics, the rise of polling has contributed to the decline of public life, shifting political expression from collective to individual forms (Herbst, 1993; Lee, 2002, chap. 3).

Critical theorists have raised significant objections to the entire survey enterprise, some of which have been addressed by sophisticated survey researchers and analysts (cf. P. Miller, 1995; Sanders, 1999; Sniderman & Grob, 1996). Irrespective of the broader issues their work raises, however, critical theories have at best ambiguous implications for understanding the relationship between public opinion (as

measured in polls) and policy making. Even assuming, *arguendo*, that polls create rather than measure public opinion, it is nonetheless possible that the policy and political outcomes are still shaped by policy makers' perceptions of public opinion based on those very polls.¹³ If the media report extensively on poll data showing that the public supports or opposes a particular policy initiative, for example, it will hardly matter how poorly the poll captures the dynamics of citizens' attitudes if the results are taken seriously by political elites. The incentives for responsiveness outlined by advocates of the strong view will persist.

A "CONTINGENT" VIEW OF THE IMPACT OF OPINION ON POLICY

The large and small effects views of the opinion-policy link represent two radically different scholarly understandings. We have argued above that neither adequately solves the responsiveness question, although important insights can be derived from each. The basic shortcomings can be summarized as follows: Large effects models tend to overstate responsiveness through sample selection bias or over-aggregation; small effects models tend to understate responsiveness by ignoring or understating the impact of public opinion on high-salience issues, making problematic cross-level inferences from individual-level attitudes to macro-level processing of public opinion, and/or prematurely displacing the empirical question altogether. We think a third view of the relationship between opinion and policy that emphasizes contingency provides the most useful way of thinking about the dynamics of responsiveness. Under some conditions and with some kinds of issues, the relationship between public opinion and policy is strong; under other conditions or with other issues, it is weak. Although we cannot outline a full theory of the institutional and political factors that explain the variations in the public opinion-policy linkages in American politics today, we can highlight some of these factors in this concluding section of the article.¹⁴

The primary evidence for a contingency approach comes from comparative analyses of how and when opinion moves policy in different policy domains or over time (see, e.g., Hill & Hurley, 1999;

Sharp, 1999). Scholarship in both the large and small impact schools has noted contingency (cf. Erikson et al., 2002; Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Monroe, 1998; Page & Shapiro, 1983). What is different about starting from a contingency perspective is that variation is treated as an outcome to be explained, rather than as a simple deviation from a more important master trend (toward or away from greater responsiveness).

There are some well-established institutional reasons responsiveness may vary. The first reason is because policy making occurs through legislation, administrative action, or judicial decisions, and at the national, state, and local level where the policy that gets made matters (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Erikson et al., 2002). Legislative bodies are subject to periodic elections, which potentially raise the stakes of nonresponsiveness. On the other hand, judges often have permanent appointments and thus need not fear loss of office. Bureaucratic officials may have more or less exposure to public opinion, depending on the type of policy they are responsible for or the structure of their agencies. The literature reporting case study research on state-level responsiveness finds considerable differences across different policy arenas (see above), only some of which are attributable to methodological differences.

Second, differences in the level of responsiveness related to the salience, coherence, structure, and intensity of citizens' attitudes toward particular policy issues are likely to matter greatly. The salience of a particular issue for the public may matter both for the possibility of over-time shifts in public opinion (Page & Shapiro, 1992, chap. 2) and for the likelihood that politicians will take the public seriously (e.g., Burstein, 1998a, 2001; Jacobs, 1993; Jones, 1994). Some types of issues are simply more opaque to the public than others, with important consequences. For example, Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 373) argue that the lower salience of foreign policy issues often gives politicians more room for maneuver than in domestic policy domains.¹⁵ One reason an issue's salience matters is that the higher visibility of salient issues increases the costs to politicians of deviating from median preferences (Geer, 1996, p. 171). The distribution of attitudes on an issue can also be important; on an issue where attitudes are bimodal and there is little room for compromise, such as abortion or

gun control, responsive outcomes are much more problematic than on issues where public opinion is unimodal (e.g., Strickland & Whicker, 1992).

A third factor relates to the potential fiscal costs of responsiveness. Issues where the responsiveness requires significant budgetary expenditures may reduce the impact of public opinion in comparison to issues that do not involve high costs (Sharp, 1999, pp. 26-27). Budgetary politics may also lock in spending commitments that cannot easily change even if public opinion shifts (cf. Entman & Herbst, 2001, p. 214, on long-term defense spending commitments). Pork barrel spending projects, and legislative logrolling more generally, may also cut against responsiveness to public priorities.

Fourth, the overall structure of the policy domain within which policy contests occur is important for both the content of policy making (cf. Laumann & Knoke, 1987, and Burstein, 1991, on policy domains) and the potential impact of public opinion. Some policy domains are thick with powerful interest groups that have vested interests in maintaining the status quo (cf. Heinz et al., 1993). Other domains may be newer and/or less dominated by entrenched interests or may be more open to policy innovation or in general responsive to the public. Domains where social movements from below generate pressure on state managers for policy reform may also increase the likelihood of responsiveness (Burstein, 1999).¹⁶

A fifth factor, related to the last, is variation in the extent of previous policy making on an issue, or even the length of time previous policies have been in place. Path-dependent policy-making processes (Piereson, 2000) restrict policy responsiveness in that policy outcomes at one point in time constrain what is possible—or even likely to be considered—at later points in time (cf. Skocpol, 1995). Long-established public policies are more difficult (or costly) to alter. In such cases, responsiveness is likely to be low (for an exception, however, see the discussion of AFDC by Weaver, 2000). Wlezien (1995, 1996) has produced evidence that in the case of highly visible government spending programs (such as defense spending), public opinion changes in response to policy direction; demand for more liberal or conservative policies at time_{t+1} is influenced by spending priorities of policy developments at time_t (cf. Erikson et al., 2002, pp. 342-360).

AGENDA-SETTING PROCESSES

Research on agenda setting contributes to an understanding of the contingent nature of the relationship between opinion and policy. By agenda setting, we mean the processes whereby issues gain access to the policy agenda and the ways groups and institutions play a role in that process (Cook & Skogan, 1990). In his classic book on agenda setting, Kingdon (1995) suggests a version of what we refer to here as a contingency approach. He posits that issues rise on policy agendas only under some conditions: specifically, when three separate “streams” of processes—problems, policy solutions, and politics—join together at a time when a “window of opportunity” develops. Because Kingdon notes that policy windows open infrequently and do not stay open long, the question for those who want to understand policy responsiveness for agenda setting is, What makes a window of opportunity open, and what role does public opinion play? Among a range of possibilities, one of the key elements comes from the political stream and is what Kingdon calls “national mood” (p. 153), that is, changes in public opinion, the climate of opinion in the country, or broad social movements. His interviews with a range of policy elites and 23 case studies led him to conclude that an issue’s rise on the policy agenda is, in part, contingent on governmental policy makers’ sense of the national mood, which can serve to promote some issues and to restrain others.¹⁷

The media are often described as powerful agenda setters. In a classic conceptualization, B. C. Cohen (1963) said that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think* [italics added], but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about* [italics added]” (p. 13). In line with this, a variety of scholars has shown that the general public’s attention to policy issues closely tracks media coverage of those issues (Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; Funkhouser, 1973; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; A. H. Miller, Goldenberg, & Erbring, 1979). Pushing the agenda-setting role of the press further, some scholars who have examined the consequences of agenda setting and media framing go beyond B. C. Cohen’s formulation and argue that the media do not simply tell us “what to think about” but also tell us “how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think” (McCombs & Shaw, 1993, p. 65).

The role of the media in framing public opinion is a particularly important aspect of the agenda-setting process. One key effect of the media is the type of poll results that are reported and how they are characterized. Only a fraction of the poll results available to the media are reported. Indeed, poll results often only have significance to the extent that they are noticed by the media (Lewis, 2001, pp. 36-42). The media may also systematically mischaracterize public opinion. Page (1996), among others, has produced evidence that the mainstream news media is out of touch with the opinions of the public (see also Lewis, 2001).

Scholars who discuss policy agenda processes often take the media-public link one step further, extending it to the policy agenda. A commonly accepted model shows (a) the media agenda influencing (b) the public agenda (measured by public opinion surveys), which in turn may influence (c) the policy agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 22). But whether this simple model of media, citizens, and policy is simply a useful heuristic framework or a description of how agenda setting works in the real world is open to debate. Nelson (1984) and Rivers (1982) both make strong cases for the powerful role of the media in shaping the policy agenda. Protess et al. (1991) reach a different conclusion in their study of the impact of investigative reporting on public opinion and government policy making. They found that policy makers' responses to investigative stories often occurred independently of any change in the public's priorities. In fact, changes in policy priorities were sometimes orchestrated by journalists and policy makers acting in tandem, with the public playing a spectator role.

Dearing and Rogers (1996) suggest in their comprehensive review of agenda setting that no one overarching explanation of the linkages between the media, public opinion, and policy is possible. This is because under some conditions, the media play a traditional democratic role of neutrally supplying information to the public, which in turn influences policy priorities, whereas under other conditions, the media shape the agendas of both citizens and policy makers. Under still other conditions, the media themselves react to the agendas of the public and policy makers. Understanding the conditions under which the media influence policy is very much in need of additional research (cf. Bennett & Entman, 2001; Schoenbach & Becker, 1995).

OPINION-POLICY LINKAGES VARIABLE OVER TIME?

Historical context provides yet another source of contingency. A number of scholars have found evidence that overall responsiveness has declined over time. For example, Monroe (1998) and Jacobs and Shapiro (1997) report replications of their earlier studies of the impact on opinion (Monroe, 1979; Page & Shapiro, 1983) that find declining overall responsiveness in recent years (see also Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000).¹⁸ More sweepingly, Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000) find long-term historical evidence of a variable impact of constituency opinion and candidate's issue and ideological positioning. They report that ideological responsiveness was low from the 19th century through to the 1930s, rose steadily from the mid-1930s through the early 1970s, but then declined into the 1990s.¹⁹ Evidence of historical variation is consistent with a contingency approach. As political institutions and parties evolve, overall pressures to respond to the public can be expected to wax and wane.

Accounts of recent changes in the patterns of responsiveness have emphasized a variety of factors. Variation in the extent of polarization in Congress (cf. Poole & Rosenthal, 1997) has increased in recent decades, with the simultaneous erosion of the southern wing of the Democratic Party and the northern liberal wing of the Republican Party. This shift alters opportunities for bipartisan bargaining, moving the United States somewhat closer to a "majoritarian" system of governance (cf. Powell, 2000). The increasing importance of money in the financing of elections is another factor that analysts often identify (e.g., Ferguson, 1995; Page, 2002). One largely hidden consequence of the money system in contemporary American politics may be to undermine responsiveness by encouraging the addition of loopholes to legislation that appears symbolically responsive but, on closer inspection, is substantively at odds with public opinion (e.g., Clawson, Neustadt, & Weller, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The vexing question of how much influence citizens have over democratic governments continues to elude simplistic conclusions,

but we gain some purchase on an adequate response by answering, “sometimes.” At this point in the evolution of the scholarly debates about the policy impact of public opinion, we think several conclusions can reasonably be drawn. Where measured public opinion expresses a coherent mood or view on a particular policy question (or bundle of policy or political questions) in a way that is recognizable by political elites, it is more likely than not that the movement of policy will tend to be in the direction of public opinion. *Prima facie*, this is a powerful finding with important implications for the practice of democracy, and one that we believe is sustainable on the basis of the existing evidence. But three crucial caveats must also be entered. First, within the broad parameters established by public opinion, politicians and policy entrepreneurs often have substantial room to maneuver policy in detailed ways that are not visible to the public. For example, there are many different ways to reform welfare, combat the spread of communism in less developed countries, fight crime, reduce unemployment, or address energy shortages. As in other arenas of social life, when it comes to making policy, “the devil is in the details.”

Second, although public opinion clearly sets important parameters on policy making, the combination of contradictory public views on many key policy issues and the capacity of political elites to shape or direct citizens’ views significantly reduces the independent causal impact of public opinion. There are two distinct components at work here. Policy questions are inherently multisided, and it is frequently the case that policy and political entrepreneurs can draw on particular issue framings and broad ideological underpinnings that appear to have popular support to promote a particular policy agenda. In this sense, the flow of causality is reversed: Elites can “use” public opinion as a weapon of political struggle, instead of merely responding to it. The changing institutional vortex—including the rise of the mass media, the development of sophisticated polling technologies and campaigning strategies, and the growing importance of money in the political system—has simultaneously increased our capacity to understand public opinion and made it easier for elites to manipulate or work around it.

Finally, although policy will tend to follow public opinion more often than not, there is sufficiently wide variation in the extent of responsiveness across different issues and at different points in time to

warrant increased scholarly attention to examining the institutional and political sources of variation. Quantitative or well-designed comparative case studies, for example, might examine why policy responds more to a more favorable opinion climate in some contexts than in others. In short, rather than debating whether policy is responsive to public opinion overall, we suggest that scholars work toward the development of theories of the sources of contingency to better understand the factors that explain variation in the opinion-policy link. We hope that this article provides a start in that direction.

NOTES

1. Writing at the beginning of the era of modern scientific polling, for example, George Gallup and Saul Rae (1940) suggested that soon politicians "will be better able to represent . . . the general public" by avoiding "the kind of distorted picture sent to them by telegram enthusiasts and overzealous pressure groups who claim to speak for all the people, but actually only speak for themselves" through opinion polls (p. 266). For other examples of such claims in the early years of survey research, see Cherington (1940), Meyer (1940), and Truman (1945); for more recent examples, see Crespi (1989) and Warren (2001). In his 1995 presidential address to the American Political Science Association, Verba (1996) explicitly advocates the importance of polling for encouraging representative public input into policy, suggesting that "polls are . . . a way to give everyone a voice, but they do not reflect the strongest of voices" (p. 6).

2. To be sure, these are immensely difficult problems of data collection and measurement, and we do not wish to imply that Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) have not made a major contribution in their study. We point out these problems precisely because even the best work to date contains significant limitations in relation to the larger question of representation.

3. In other words, we do not want to imply that dyadic or comparative state analyses cannot provide useful information about historical or comparative patterns. But we do not believe that such information permits analysts to assess the overall level of responsiveness, and it is this "big" question that provides the central motivation for investigations of the opinion-policy link.

4. Key to their interpretation is a demonstration that public opinion influences elections (Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002, chap. 7). Their conclusions are strikingly similar to Powell's (2000) comparative analysis of electoral systems and public preferences. Powell finds that the "mixed" constitutional design in the United States (containing features of both majoritarian and proportional systems) tends to elect politicians who are closer to the median voter than the electoral systems of most European countries.

5. It is striking to note in this regard that the measure of public mood employed by Erikson et al. (2002, chap. 6) excludes both foreign policy and some important domestic policy issues such as abortion, crime, and affirmative action. These attitudes move in a different direction than the overall mood measure and, hence, represent a possible separate mood dimension but one that is not analyzed in later investigations. This is potentially significant for a period such as the late 1980s, when attitudes on crime and affirmative action were becoming more conservative, whereas the rest of the public mood was becoming more liberal.

6. Erikson et al. (2002, pp. 306-307) discuss the possibility of including a measure of presidential agenda setting but reject it on grounds that presidents rarely win their full agendas (and hence give a misleading picture of policy responsiveness) and that measures of the content of the presidential agenda would go too far beyond the scope of their analysis.

7. One of the strengths of their model is an attempt to estimate how the cumulation of liberal or conservative laws produces feedback dynamics that influence policy making at later points in time (see, e.g., Erikson et al., 2002, pp. 342-368). The idea is that as liberal laws cumulate, such as in the 1960s, a public backlash inevitably pushes policy back toward the center, and vice versa. Again, however, to the extent that policy contests occur in particular domains rather than across all domains simultaneously, this key insight concedes leverage.

8. Most studies of policy change within a single domain that have considered the role of public opinion have generally found an impact. Reviewing the literature on case studies of the impact of public opinion, Burstein (1998a, pp. 36-41) identifies 20 case studies published in the past two decades, all but 1 reporting a strong relationship between opinion in the policy domain and policy output. Our discussion in this section is indebted to Burstein's valuable analysis.

9. See, for example, Ornstein (1996), Drew (1998), and Huffington (2000); Jacobs and Shapiro (2000, pp. 3-4) cite a number of other examples of journalistic writing about the tendency of modern American politicians to simply cave in to public opinion in response to poll data. Such concerns have a long history. Edward Bernays (1945) argued that "there is . . . the danger in the new kind of leadership which polls have produced in the United States—leadership of obedience to polls. . . . We are no longer led by men. We are led around by the polls" (p. 266a).

10. Zaller's (1992) "receive-accept-sample" model of individual respondents' processing of political information and responding to survey questions assumes a dominant role for elites in framing the issues and providing the range of choices in the heads of citizens/survey respondents. This aspect of his argument cuts against a strong interpretation of the independent causal role of opinion in the sense that it is elites who do the framing of issues (see Lee, 2002; Shapiro, 1998).

11. Representative collections of critical theories of public opinion can be found in Glasser & Salmon (1995); the historical case is developed in Herbst (1993); a mainstream response can be found in P. Miller (1995).

12. One of the most striking criticisms of the new Internet surveys—beyond the standard concerns about representativeness—is that unlike telephone or in-person surveys, the context of an Internet survey potentially enables respondents to discuss their answers with other people. In this way, they potentially render a collective rather than individual response. See Witte and Howard (2002) for a discussion of the debates around Internet polling.

13. It is further striking that in spite of their analytical criticisms of polls as measures of public opinion, some critical theorists have nonetheless acknowledged that poll-based influences on policy making are more democratic than some other representations of public views (see, e.g., Lewis, 2001, pp. 28-29). The most prominent of these alternative representations of public opinion is that found in the mass media, which is usually far less representative and closed to the public than opinion polls (as critical theorists readily argue) (e.g., Bennett & Entman, 2001).

14. Versions of the contingency argument were championed in the classical works on American democracy of Schattschneider (1960) and Key (1961). Sharp's (1999, chap. 1) thoughtful overview of the logic of contingency approaches has informed our discussion here, as has Page's (2002) recent review of methodological and intellectual controversies. An earlier version of the contingency approach is developed in Cook and Barrett (1992).

15. In a study of policy making toward Nicaragua in the mid-1980s, Leogrande (1993) suggests that despite consistent public opposition to the Reagan administration's policy of aiding the Nicaraguan contras, Congress supported contra aid for most of this period because of a wide-

spread perception of public opposition and because "Democrats never quite believed the polls" (p. 186).

16. This raises a larger point about the sources of visible public opinion to elites. Where movements or other expressions of collective sentiment become visible, these may come to take priority over poll-based indicators of public opinion. See Lee's (2002) discussion of the dynamics of the civil rights movement and changing racial attitudes from the late 1940s through the mid-1960s.

17. According to Kingdon (1995, pp. 182-183), a window of opportunity can also be opened by the emergence of a pressing problem, a change of administration, or the elections of new members of Congress.

18. Monroe (1998) found that majority opinion on policy questions declined from 63% in the 1960 to 1979 period to 55% in the 1980 to 1993 period. Jacobs and Shapiro (1997), in an as yet preliminary investigation, found that policy responsiveness to public opinion in the areas of welfare, crime, social security, and health care fell from 67% in 1984 to 1987 to just 36% during the first half of Bill Clinton's first term in office.

19. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000) 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 more among Republicans than Democrats.

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