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Benjamin I. Page, Robert Y. Shapiro

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Effects of Public Opinion on Policy

BENJAMIN I. PAGE
University of Chicago

ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO
Columbia University
and

The National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago

The responsiveness of government policies to citizens' preferences is a central concern of various normative and empirical theories of democracy. Examining public opinion and policy data for the United States from 1935 to 1979, we find considerable congruence between changes in preferences and in policies, especially for large, stable opinion changes on salient issues. We present evidence that public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion. One should be cautious, however, about concluding that democratic responsiveness pervades American politics.

The responsiveness of government policy to citizens' preferences is a central concern in normative democratic theory (Dahl 1956; Arrow 1963; Sen 1970), and there is no shortage of empirical theorizing about the extent to which policy does or does not respond to public opinion. Economists' perfect information theories of electoral competition (the first section of Downs 1957; Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook 1970) predict a high degree of responsiveness, under various assumptions about the nature of preferences and the behavior of politicians and voters.

Certain interest group theorists, on the other

hand (e.g., Schattschneider 1960; McConnell 1966), suggest that the will of the general public may be obstructed because the system of pressure group politics is biased in favor of well-organized business and professional groups. Similar results are predicted by political economists who build information costs and transaction costs into their models (thus accounting for political inequality), and who stress that the free-rider problem impedes the organization of diffuse interests (the second part of Downs 1957; Olson 1965; Hardin 1982).

Those who see government as a problem solver, administered by statesmen who reason about the public interest and employ objective techniques (e.g., cost-benefit analysis) to reach policy decisions, likewise do not necessarily expect any close correspondence between specific policies and the public's preferences of the moment as expressed in opinion polls.

Although certain other scholars do anticipate agreement between opinion and policy, they see the causal relationship as partly or wholly reversed: politicians and policies themselves affect public opinion. Under conditions of limited information this could occur if statesmen lead and educate ordinary citizens by helping them to understand which policies will further their interests (Mill 1962; Key 1961); or if politicians manipulate the public with lies and deceptive symbols (Edelman 1964; Wise 1973; Miliband 1976). Finally, of course, an observed relationship between opinion and policy could be spurious, the product of a concurrent influence upon both by some outside factor.

By no means are all of these processes mutually exclusive; they could occur in various combinations. Furthermore, there is reason to expect that they might vary across issue areas. Foreign policy

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decisions might be relatively autonomous from the public, or they might involve more leadership and manipulation of opinion than do domestic policies. Political responsiveness might be greatest concerning highly salient issues for which the scope of conflict is broad. There might also be significant variations across political systems and historical periods, or among different political institutions. In contemporary American politics, for example, one might expect the president and Congress to be more responsive to public opinion than are state governments or the courts. One might also predict that government will respond more frequently to cases of large sustained opinion change than to changes that are slight or temporary.

Empirical evidence on these matters tends to be inconclusive. Some of the best research concerns representation in the U.S. Congress. These studies indicate that there are moderate relationships between congressmen's roll call votes and their constituents' survey-measured policy preferences (Miller and Stokes 1963, 1966). But the principal data (from the 1958 study by the SRC, University of Michigan) are based on small and unrepresentative district samples and are susceptible to varying interpretations (Achen 1978; Erikson 1978). (The recent use of congressional districts as primary sampling units promises improved samples; see Erikson 1981; Page et al. 1981.) The causal direction of the underlying processes is left ambiguous, since we cannot be sure whether constituents' opinions affect congressmen's votes, or whether—perhaps less plausibly—congressmen influence opinion in their districts.

The use of demographic census data to simulate district opinions, which may suggest stronger representational links (Erikson 1978, but see Page et al. 1981; see also Weber et al. 1972-73; Weber and Shaffer 1972) eases the sampling problem and increases our ability to draw causal inferences. But simulation also introduces new problems of its own (see Seidman 1975; Kuklinski 1977). Some but not all of these difficulties are reduced when referendum results rather than demographic characteristics are used as indicators of preferences (e.g., Kuklinski 1978).

The most important limitation of representation studies is that they concern the microlevel behavior of individual congressmen and do not necessarily reveal much about the responsiveness of the political system as a whole. They deal with legislators' votes, not policy results (Weissberg 1978).

Some empirical studies have pursued a different, more macrolevel strategy of comparing government policies with aggregate (surveyed) public opinion. Erikson (1976) found substantial covariation of opinion and policy in three areas of

state policymaking. Weissberg's thorough case studies of eleven policy topics provided several examples of "majoritarian" congruence, in which policy corresponded to what the majority of Americans said they favored, but also several cases of noncongruence (Weissberg 1976; see also Devine 1970). The small number of cases limited generalizability, however, and there were prodigious difficulties in policy measurement. In such studies alternative policy measures often suggest different results, and some opinion items are so ambiguous that they are not easily matched with specific policies. Causal inference is quite uncertain, with little hope of distinguishing policy responsiveness from leadership or manipulation of public opinion.

Based on a much larger number of cases (248), Monroe's (1978) work has suggested that there is considerable—though far from complete—consistency between opinion and policy, especially for foreign policy and highly salient issues. Again, however, policy measurement is difficult, and causal inference is problematic; it is hard to tell whether correspondence between opinion and policy arises from democratic responsiveness, from leadership or manipulation of opinion, or from some combination of these.

Data and Methods

Our own approach also employs a macrolevel, aggregate design but uses what Weissberg (1976) calls the "covariation" model, examining relationships between changes in preferences and changes in policy in the United States. The instances of opinion change are our units of analysis.

Our change-oriented design (discussed more fully in Page and Shapiro (1980) and Shapiro (1982)) permits simple, ordinal measurement of policy. We need only ascertain whether policy moves in the same direction as opinion—that is, *congruently*—or in the opposite direction, or not at all. We can gather multiple measures of policy to make sure that they all point in the same direction or, if they do not, to show how the findings vary with different kinds of measures.

Most important, we aim to illuminate the causal structure of the processes by which policy and public opinion are related. We can use temporal asymmetries to get at causal priority, noting when opinion changes before policy and when the opposite occurs.

We began by sorting through marginal frequencies from several hundred surveys of national samples of Americans, which were conducted between 1935 and 1979 by three survey organizations: Gallup, the National Opinion Research Center, and the Survey Center/Center for Politi-

cal Studies (Michigan). We archived several thousand (3,319) questions about policy preferences, of which some 609 items were repeated in identical form at two or more points in time. We then identified every instance in which there was a significant change (6 percentage points or more, assuming samples of 1500 and fairly even divisions of opinion) in opinion from one survey to another. We chose the end points of instances of change so as to maximize the extent of movement in a given direction without significant internal reversal.

In all we found 357 instances of significant change in Americans' policy preferences between 1935 and 1979. These instances of change are described elsewhere (Page and Shapiro 1982; Shapiro 1982); a list is available from the authors. These changes in policy preferences encompass many different kinds of policies at the federal, state, and local levels: foreign and domestic (about one-half each); spending, taxation, regulation, military action, trade, diplomacy. They cover the period from 1935 to 1979 (but with relatively few cases before 1940). They vary in magnitude (from as large as 38 percentage points to as small as a barely significant 6 percentage points); in duration (some span many years, others as little as one month); and in gradualness or abruptness of change. Some represent long-term trends; a few are parts of fluctuating time series. Each of these characteristics is explicitly described by variables in our data set, so that we can investigate whether the frequency of policy congruence varies with characteristics of opinion changes.

For each of these instances of opinion change we measured policy outputs during the period beginning two years before the date of the initial opinion survey and ending four years after the final survey. We used multiple indicators of policy and examined various lags between the end of the opinion change and the measurement of policy. Our techniques of policy measurement are described in an Appendix found in Page and Shapiro (1981a, b) and also available from the authors.

The analysis in this article is based on the full 357 instances of opinion change, for all of which we have been able to code covariational congruence (or noncongruence) using at least one suitable measure of government policy. In many cases (57 percent), the best available measure is identical to the theoretically ideal measure agreed upon by both senior investigators on the basis of the precise wording of each survey item. For purposes of comparison with other research, we also attempted to code the extent of majoritarian congruence between policy and opinion at the beginning of each instance of change, at the end of the change, and one year and four years after the end.

These data allow us to determine how much agreement there is between changes in opinions and policies; how the results of our change design compare with those for majoritarian congruence; whether the extent of congruence varies between foreign and domestic issues, for large versus small opinion changes, or in other ways; and, in cases of congruence, whether opinion or policy usually moves first.

Findings

How Much Congruence

There has been a great deal of congruence between changes in policy and changes in opinion during the last half century; more, in fact, than initially meets the eye. Table 1 displays our findings for all 357 cases of opinion change, using the best available policy measure.¹ These figures refer to congruence after a one-year lag; that is, policy change is measured from the moment (T1) of the first opinion survey to a point one year after the final (T2) opinion measurement for the instance of change. As one would expect, congruence appears more frequent when the policymaking process is allowed time to react to change in opinion, and a one-year lag is a reasonable time interval.²

Congruent changes in policy were clearly much more frequent than noncongruent changes. Table 1 also shows, however, that in 33 percent of the cases policy did not change at all. What are we to make of these cases of no change in policy?

In one sense, cases of no change would seem to signify a lack of congruence: the public's preferences changed significantly, but policy did not. If all the no-change cases were treated as noncongruent with opinion, the extent of congruence would be a rather unimpressive 43 percent.

But a closer look demonstrates that many, in fact most, of the no-change cases are inappropriate for handling by our change-oriented research design, and they conceal congruence of a different kind. In the first place, 65 (54 percent) of these

¹Results for the cases with theoretically "ideal" policy measures are generally similar but sharper; some will be mentioned later. Results for second- and third-ranked measures are slightly weaker than those discussed here. Dichotomous judgments of congruence/noncongruence using the second and third measures correlated .82 and .50 (Yule's Qs), respectively, with those for the best policy measure.

²The 66 percent congruence with a one-year lag is slightly higher than the 61 percent with no lag. It is approximately the same as with a two-year lag (66 percent), a bit more than with three years (63 percent), and— for unknown reasons—slightly less than the 67.5 percent with a four-year lag.

Table 1. Congruence Between Opinion and Policy, 1935-1979

	Total cases		Cases with policy change	
	%	N	%	N
Congruent change in opinion and policy	43	(153)	66	(153)
Noncongruent change in policy	22	(78)	34	(78)
No change in policy	33	(120)		
Uncertain	2	(6)		
	100	(357)	100	(231)

Note: Each case is an instance in which public policy preferences changed significantly, according to repeated administration of identical survey items.

cases concern policies that have reached floors or ceilings, making it impossible for them to respond any further to opinion. For example, when more Americans came to oppose "requiring all young men to give one year of service to the nation—either in the military forces or in nonmilitary work," and there was no compulsory military (or nonmilitary) service before this opinion change, the political system could not respond to the change by drafting fewer than zero people. Similarly, when there was an increase in the size of the majority opposing fines for people who fail to wear seatbelts in automobiles, it was impossible to respond by lowering fines, which were already zero. These policies had reached a point where they could not move in the same direction as public opinion. We consider such cases inappropriate for covariational analysis and set them aside.

We also observe that 9 (16 percent) of the other 55 no-change cases eventually show policy change in a congruent direction (and then stay congruent), but only after time lags greater than the one year we are presently discussing. We do not attempt to take them into account, because of offsetting changes in the opposite direction.

But it is more important that many of the remaining no-change cases involve a dichotomous policy or a relatively discontinuous one, such as specific legislation or executive action, so that small opinion movements would not necessarily be expected to yield policy changes unless opinion happened to surpass some threshold—perhaps a sizable majority.³ When, for example, approval of

³In perhaps more than half these cases policy could be considered maximally noncongruent, and as a reviewer has pointed out, this floor or ceiling effect prevents movement in a noncongruent direction. The cases of no policy change which are the most likely examples of nonresponsiveness often involve political reform issues (e.g., the electoral college, voting age, terms for federal officials, a national primary). All these cases show con-

gruent pre-policy activity (discussed below). See Shapiro (1982) and Monroe (1978).

Communist China's admission to the United Nations rose from 7 percent to 20 percent in the 1950s, we would not expect the United States to begin voting for admission. When support for one of Gallup's pet projects like national prohibition or six-year terms for presidents rose from approximately 20 to 30 percent, we would not expect those plans to be enacted. Policy responsiveness would more plausibly take the form of increased *pre-policy* activity: more and stronger proposals being made, more bills introduced, and further advancement of proposals through the policy-making process.

For a small subset (28) of these no-change cases, we have data on such pre-policy measures as the number and content of proposals and their progress toward enactment.⁴ In 57 percent of those cases, the pre-policy measures moved in the same direction as public opinion. In only 14 percent of the cases did it move in the opposite direction; in the rest there was still no change. Since these cases with pre-policy measures represent a more or less representative sample of cases without policy change,⁵ it is reasonable to estimate that approximately the same 57 percent of all no-change cases without floor or ceiling effects involved congruent pre-policy activity.

⁴We are especially grateful to John Dister and Joseph Altonji for their skillful and diligent assistance in collecting much of this historical information on legislative and executive activity.

⁵The cases were not chosen by any systematic procedure. They are, however, quite diverse, covering issues such as civil liberties, political reform (the voting age, terms for federal officials, and others), atomic energy, arms control, relations with particular foreign countries or regions, education, Hawaiian statehood, welfare, inflation, gun control, the draft, wars, labor, Puerto Rico, taxes, and a few others. They do not manifest any obvious bias.

In a large majority (approximately 80 percent) of no-change cases, then, the lack of change resulted from a discontinuity in policy, which concealed either a floor or ceiling effect or a pre-policy movement in the same direction as opinion (see Table 2). We are reluctant, therefore, to count no-change cases as noncongruent. But we are also hesitant to consider any of these cases fully congruent. Rejected bills are not laws; proposals are not official policies; and no-change cases which may have already responded fully to public opinion still should not be called congruent changes. For most purposes, therefore, we will set aside all cases of nonchange in policy, pointing out when treatment of some of them (those without floor or ceiling effects) as noncongruent would alter our findings.

Examining the 231 cases from Table 1 in which we are certain that policy changed in one direction or the other, we find that policy change was congruent with opinion change in 66 percent of the cases. If our collection of cases is treated as a sample, we can reject the null hypothesis of random (probability .5) congruence at better than the .01 level, based on a cumulative binomial test. Moreover, the 66 percent figure may be depressed somewhat by measurement error. When we restrict our attention to the 203 cases for which we have theoretically "ideal" policy measures, the extent of congruence is an even more striking 76 percent.

Our 66 percent result is quite similar to the 64 percent that Monroe (1979) found for majoritarian congruence, that is, for agreement between majority opinion and policy. In our data, majoritarian congruence appears to be less frequent: only 54 percent at T2 (based on the cases that could be coded with confidence), and only 49 percent with opinion measured at T1. Neither is significantly different from the amount of congruence that would be found in a sample by chance if there were no real relationship at all between opinion and policy. But this is probably an artifact of the research design based on cases of

opinion *change*, since majoritarian congruence during the process of change might be expected to be temporarily out of kilter. And in fact, when we examine policy a year after T2, giving opinion and policy time to reach a new equilibrium, the proportion of congruent cases goes up to 61 percent. With a more generous four-year lag, it rises to 65 percent; and for *any time* within a four-year span (the criterion Monroe used), it is 68 percent. These latter results are very similar to Monroe's findings and to our 66 percent for covariational congruence.

As expected, majoritarian congruence sometimes proved difficult to assess. In 22 percent of the 357 cases (for majoritarian congruence with a one-year lag), we had to resort to codes of "probable" congruence or noncongruence, or complete uncertainty. In contrast, we had very little difficulty coding covariational congruence, as long as there was discernible change in policy; only 2 percent (6) of the cases were coded probable or uncertain using the one-year lag.

Thus we begin with a finding of rather substantial congruence between changes in opinion and policy. This result is reinforced when we look more closely at the cases of noncongruence.

Relatively Few Cases of Noncongruence

When we examine the cases of noncongruence, it becomes apparent that the 34 percent in Table 1 overstates their frequency and importance. Some are artifacts of imperfect policy measures. (As we noted, there is less noncongruence—only 24 percent—among the cases for which we have ideal policy measures.) Approximately a quarter of the cases of noncongruence vanish when lags longer than one year are allowed for. Some involve very small changes in opinion, to which it is hardly startling that policy does not respond. Finally, a few instances of noncongruence involve fluctuating or temporary opinion changes in which the changes in opinion are closely preceded or followed by movements in the opposite direction.

Table 2. Kinds of Nonchange in Policy

	Proportion of cases with no policy change	
	%	N
Policy already maximally congruent with opinion change	54	(65)
Pre-policy congruent with opinion change	26	(31, estimated*)
Nonresponsive to opinion change	20	(24, estimated*)
	100	(120)

*Estimates are based on the subsample of cases with pre-policy measures.

Table 3. Frequency of Congruence for Opinion Changes of Different Sizes

Size of opinion change	Direction of policy change					
	Congruent		Noncongruent		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
6-7 percentage points	53	(25)	47	(22)	21	(47)
8-9	64	(32)	36	(18)	22	(50)
10-14	62	(32)	38	(25)	29	(65)
15-19	69	(22)	31	(10)	14	(32)
20-29	86	(18)	14	(3)	9	(21)
30+	100	(10)	0	(0)	4	(10)
	65	(147)	35	(78)	100	(225)

Gamma = $-.29$.

It would be asking a great deal to expect policy to follow each small twist and turn of opinion.

If all the weak cases are disregarded, there remain relatively few solid, convincing examples of noncongruence between opinion and policy. But there are some which must be taken seriously.

The extent of congruence for opinion changes of different sizes is shown in Table 3. Noncongruence is much more frequent when opinion change is small; it reaches 47 percent for cases with a barely significant (6 or 7 percentage point) change in public preferences. That is, for very small opinion changes, policy moves in a congruent direction no more than would be expected by chance (assuming a .5 probability). Among cases of very large change in public opinion, by contrast, policy almost always goes in the same direction as opinion. When there is opinion change of 20 percentage points or more, policy change is congruent an overwhelming 90 percent of the time.

Similarly, noncongruence is relatively common when there is evidence that opinion may be reversing direction or fluctuating.⁶ Based on the 136 cases for which we have adjacent opinion measurements to detect fluctuations, noncongruence again nears the 50 percent level (it is 44 percent) among cases of fluctuation or reversal. It is only 21 percent among cases of steady or one-time change. When an opinion change is sustained, policy usually moves in a congruent direction.

When we put all these factors together and disregard all cases where there is small (less than 10

percent) opinion change, or our data show opinion fluctuation,⁷ or the policy measures are imperfect, we find that noncongruence is quite uncommon indeed. Fully 87 percent of the remaining cases are congruent (see Table 4). We take this figure to be a better estimate of the extent of congruence than the 66 percent reported earlier. When Americans' policy preferences change by a substantial amount, without reversal, public policy (if it changes at all) overwhelmingly tends to move in the same direction.

Still, some cases of noncongruence remain and are worth illustrating. Although public disapproval of economic assistance to Eastern Europe rose 10 percentage points (from 42 to 52 percent) between November 1956 and April 1957, for example, U.S. aid (in current and constant dollars) actually increased. Similarly, from August 1952 to June 1956 public support for sending our allies economic rather than military aid rose by 26 percentage points (from 55 to 81 percent!), but economic assistance as a proportion of total aid (military and economic) declined.

From November 1971 to April 1973 support for "more strict" wage and price controls increased from 42 to 56 percent, but responsiveness to this was transient; after President Nixon's 60-day price freeze of June 1973, the strictness of controls decreased through "Phase IV" and the termination of the Economic Stabilization Program in May 1974. During the mid-to-late 1970s, the federal government moved toward the adoption of the metric system (with the Metric Conversion Act of 1975), while public opposition to such ac-

⁶As we have argued elsewhere (Page and Shapiro 1982), public opinion has seldom fluctuated in the sense of suddenly moving significantly in opposite directions. In the analysis reported here, we more loosely call an opinion change part of a fluctuation when there exists either an opinion point within two years before T1 which is not significantly (6 percentage points) different from T2; or one within two years after T2 which is not significantly different from T1.

⁷Our data permit us to identify the presence or absence of fluctuations in only 59 percent ($N=136$) of our cases. A number of cases where opinion fluctuated—but there were no surveys to reveal the fact—no doubt remain in our data set and depress the proportion of congruence among the "stable" instances of opinion change in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency of Congruence for Large, Stable Opinion Changes Using Ideal Policy Measures

Opinion change	Direction of policy change					
	Congruent		Noncongruent		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Large (10%+) and stable	87	(53)	13	(8)	54	(61)
Small and/or fluctuating	63	(33)	37	(19)	46	(52)
	76	(86)	24	(27)	100	(113)

Yule's Q = .58.

tion rose 15 percentage points (from 50 to 65 percent among people who said they "know what the metric system is"). These few cases are sufficient to indicate that responsiveness to public opinion is not perfect.

Variations in Congruence

The Nature of Opinion. The extent of congruence appears to vary according to the political institutions and the types of issues involved. Most of these differences, however, reflect more basic differences in the nature of public opinion or in the way it changed.

The most basic variations in congruence, in fact, are probably those we have already discussed. Policy tends to move in the same direction as public opinion most often when the opinion change is large and when it is stable—that is, not reversed by fluctuations.

Similarly, policy congruence is higher on salient than on nonsalient issues. There has been much more frequent congruence, for example, in cases where an opinion question was repeated often, an indicator, presumably, of substantial public interest as well as relatively large opinion changes. (Pollsters have incentives to ask questions that will attract readers' attention.) Policy moved in a direction congruent with opinion change in 76

percent of the 74 cases involving items that were repeated six or more times, but in only 60 percent of the 65 cases with just two repetitions.

Salience can be measured more directly, although still not perfectly, by the proportion of respondents answering "don't know" or "no opinion" to survey questions. When the proportion of don't knows is relatively low—that is, when more people are willing to offer a preference—it is a sign of more public interest and attention and perhaps also stronger, more intensely held opinions. As Table 5 indicates, congruence was substantially more common when "don't know" responses were relatively few (73 percent congruence for 1-5 percent don't knows) than when they were many (56 percent congruence for 15 percent or more don't knows).⁸

⁸Since the literature (e.g., Smith, 1978) indicates that proportions of "don't knows" vary markedly, depending on the question formats and interviewing techniques used in different surveys, we conducted the same analysis separately for different survey organizations and types of surveys. While the average frequencies of "don't knows" did vary, the same moderate tendency toward more congruence with fewer "don't knows" appeared, although it was weaker in Gallup poll items. There were particularly large salience effects in the NORC (State Department) foreign policy surveys.

Table 5. Frequency of Congruence by Issue Salience

Proportion responding "don't know" at T2 (%)	Direction of Policy Change					
	Congruent		Noncongruent		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
15+	56	(14)	44	(11)	13	(25)
10-14	61	(25)	39	(16)	22	(41)
6-9	70	(48)	30	(21)	36	(69)
1-5	73	(40)	27	(15)	29	(55)
	67	(127)	33	(63)	100	(190)

Gamma = -.20.

These findings suggest that Schattschneider's (1960) argument concerning the scope of conflict has some validity. On issues about which the public has more well-defined opinions and shows more concern, where the scope of conflict is broad, policy tends to move in harmony with public opinion.

The greater congruence when opinion change is large and stable and issues are salient is consistent with the interpretation of congruence as showing an effect of opinion upon policy. The theoretical grounds for expecting greater congruence in these cases have to do with democratic responsiveness. It is natural to expect that when the public has definite opinions, when those opinions change by large amounts, and when the changes endure over time, the political system will more often respond to the public's preferences. Moreover, as we will see below, multivariate analysis shows that some other variations in congruence—variations according to issue type and political institution—result from characteristics of public opinion.

Type of Policy Issue. One expected kind of variation in congruence, a difference between domestic and foreign issues, does not occur even at the simple bivariate level. One might think congruence should be more frequent on domestic than foreign policy issues, since the public presumably tends to care more about matters close to home and is more insistent that politicians follow its wishes on domestic policy. On the other hand, we might expect congruence of a different sort on foreign policy issues. Precisely because the public tends to be less involved and have less information, it might be easier for officials to change policy and get citizens to go along.

We found, however, that there is little difference between foreign and domestic issues. The apparently slightly greater congruence for domestic issues (70 percent) than foreign (62 percent) actually reverses a finding from our small preliminary data set (see Page and Shapiro 1981a, p. 16). But the difference is not statistically significant, and it disappears when no-change cases are counted as noncongruent: then there is 53 percent congruence for domestic policy and 54 percent for foreign.

The reason foreign policy does not show substantially less (or more) congruence than domestic is probably that opinion changes were not ap-

preciably smaller or less stable on foreign than domestic issues, although foreign affairs were somewhat less salient, having significantly more don't knows (see Shapiro 1982; Page and Shapiro 1982). It is also possible that the gross similarity hides a difference in the processes by which congruence comes about, but we have not yet found any compelling evidence for this.

We did find more congruence (78 percent) for the salient and large-change social issues, than on economic or welfare policies (66 percent) or most of foreign policy. There are too few cases to be sure about more refined categories of issues, but it is worth noting that congruence was particularly high on cases concerning abortion (100 percent, $n = 10$), civil liberties (89 percent, 9), civil rights (74 percent, 19), and World War II (100 percent, 7), for which our instances of change were mostly large and sustained. In contrast, congruence was less frequent on matters of collective security (50 percent, 14), national defense (53 percent, 19), relations with Russia (64 percent, 14), foreign aid (65 percent, 26), political reform (63 percent, 19, including big government and labor issues), or the economy (68 percent, 22) where opinion changes tended to be smaller and sometimes fluctuating.

The frequency of congruence has varied in different historical periods: there was more in the 1970s (75 percent of 92 cases) than in the Eisenhower years (59 percent of 37) or the Kennedy-Johnson years (54 percent of 26), and the level was about average from 1935 through 1952. But before concluding that government was intrinsically more responsive during the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, we should note that there has been a trend toward a better-educated citizenry and greater issue salience, concurrent with the rise of important new social issues (see Scammon and Wattenberg 1970; Davis 1975; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Taylor 1978; Shapiro 1982). Moreover, opinion data have been better in recent years, with identical questions repeated more regularly. More time has passed, so that there has been more opportunity to discover cases of large, sustained opinion change.

Political Institutions. McConnell (1966) and others have argued that state governments, with their narrow constituencies and low visibility, are less responsive to the public than the federal government is. Similarly, Schattschneider (1960) claimed that the scope of conflict is broader and responsiveness greater when the president rather than Congress makes policy. By the same token, the judiciary might have the lowest visibility and be the most insulated from the public.

To test these hypotheses we noted which political institutions—state governments, Congress, the president, or the courts—were specified (or im-

We also used Tom Smith's (1980) time series for the Gallup poll's "most important problem" question to classify issues by salience. Differences in congruence were small and erratic, however, probably because the gross response categories failed to differentiate sharply among our specific issues, especially foreign policies.

plied) in each opinion question as the relevant policymaking bodies. We then compared the frequency of congruence across political institutions.

Overall we found little difference among the executive, Congress, or even the federal courts; for each, congruence was at the 63 to 65 percent level. New congressional legislation, however, is hard to get. About two-thirds of the cases requiring it showed no change at all, often (presumably) because the changes in opinion had not yet reached a threshold of magnitude and duration sufficient to push bills through the legislative process. But when legislation did change, it went overwhelmingly (in 92 percent of 25 cases) in the same direction as public opinion. Other congressional action that was joint with the executive (which usually involved continuous measures such as expenditures) was congruent with about average frequency, in 59 percent of 125 cases.

This lack of variation among national government institutions need not contradict the reasoning that led us to expect differences. All our cases involve significant opinion changes on issues of relatively high public salience, quite possibly higher salience than is usual with court decisions or legislative actions.

To our distinct surprise, state policies turned out to be congruent most often of all, in 81 percent of 26 cases.⁹ Again, however, the nature of the opinion changes, rather than institutional characteristics, probably underlie this finding. Most of the state issues we examined were moral or social concerns like capital punishment, divorce laws, and abortion; issues of high salience for which there were often large changes in public opinion (cf. Erikson 1976). As we will see, in a multivariate analysis controlling for the characteristics of opinion change, the apparent effect of state policymaking vanishes.

We take this as supporting the core of McConnell's (1966) and Schattschneider's (1960) argument: policy is more responsive to the public on issues of high salience and visibility. Most state policy may be less salient than our cases, more subject to special economic interests and small constituencies, and less in harmony with the preferences of the general public.

Ideological Direction. One rather startling variation in congruence, however, persists even when

⁹Our opinion data come from national samples, so that the corresponding measures of state policy are "nationalized": They are aggregate tendencies across all states, with each state's policy weighted by its population (see Weissberg 1976). Thus one or two states can dominate the results with responsive changes, if all other states keep policy constant. C.f., Weber and Shaffer (1972) and Erikson (1976).

other factors are taken into account. That is the strong tendency for policy to move congruently with public opinion more often when opinion changed in a liberal direction. Policy moved congruently with liberal opinion changes a substantial 86 percent of the time, but with conservative changes only 53 percent of the time (see Table 6).¹⁰

In part, this simply reflects the fact that some of the most salient issues and biggest opinion changes of the last two decades involved sweeping liberal trends in such areas as civil rights, civil liberties, and abortion (see Page and Shapiro 1982). Not surprisingly, policy moved mostly in harmony with those trends. On the average our instances of liberal change are larger than the conservative shifts (means of 14.5 versus 10.5 percentage points); and all but one of the 14 changes of 30 percentage points or more were in a liberal direction. But in the multivariate analysis controlling for such opinion characteristics, the liberal effect is still substantial.

We hesitate to conclude, however, that there is a liberal bias in the polity. Some of the conservative changes are very recent and relatively small, and the period of our data collection may have ended just before opinion shifted further in a conservative direction and government policies, with a time lag, began to respond to them. The liberal-conservative difference is small for large and gradual opinion changes, particularly when the cases of no policy change are counted as non-congruent (Shapiro 1982). Moreover, different frequencies of congruence say little or nothing about the *degree* of congruence for changes in different ideological directions, nor about whether the average *level* of policy differs systematically from citizens' desires. Our finding does not exclude the possibility that policy could tend to be less liberal than the public wants. In fact, according to our data, policy a year after T2 was (majoritarian) congruent with a liberal *majority* only a bit more often, and not significantly so (61 versus 55 percent), than with a conservative majority.

Still, the finding of more congruence for liberal

¹⁰The coding of policy changes as liberal or conservative was necessarily subjective, but the two authors ignored conceptual complexities and simply tried to apply the labels as used in journalistic and popular discourse in the 1960s and 1970s, resaching near perfect agreement (99.5 percent) on the 215 of 357 cases that each was willing to assign to one of the dichotomous categories. The remaining 142 cases were set aside as not easily locatable on the liberal-conservative dimension, although they were included as nonliberal changes in our multivariate analysis to maximize the number of cases. Table 6 also excludes the cases of no policy change; the difference in congruence is approximately the same when these cases are included.

Table 6. Congruence for Liberal vs. Conservative Opinion Changes

Direction of opinion change	Direction of policy change					
	Congruent		Noncongruent		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Liberal	86	(62)	14	(10)	58	(72)
Conservative	53	(28)	47	(25)	42	(53)
	72	(90)	28	(35)	100	(125)

Yule's Q = .69.

changes must be reckoned with. One possibility is that policy had a liberal dynamic in the 1960s and 1970s regardless of public opinion; that when public opinion happened to move in the same direction, policy appeared congruent with it. Thus part of the relationship between opinion and policy might be spurious. This seems more plausible with regard to spending issues, however (where incrementalism and bureaucratic expansionism might hold sway), than with respect to the sweeping social liberalization in civil rights, civil liberties, and lifestyle issues.

In any case, the multivariate results presented in Table 7 confirm that in several cases the magnitudes and even the directions of relationships

change when we move from bivariate correlations to multiple regression and logistic analyses of the variables affecting congruence.¹¹

Taken as a group, the highly intercorrelated characteristics of opinion—the size of opinion

¹¹The presence of a dichotomous dependent variable reduces the size of coefficients estimated by correlation and regression techniques and reduces the efficiency of estimates. Logit (or probit) analysis is more appropriate. We have included OLS and logit results in Table 7, because standardized regression coefficients are more readily interpretable and because here, as is often the case, the main findings are very similar. See Hanushek and Jackson (1977).

Table 7. Multivariate Analysis of Congruence

Variables	Bivariate Correlation*	Regression Stand. Beta	Logistic	
			Estimate	t***
Size of opinion change (%)	.23	.06	.04	1.31
No fluctuation**	.19	.11	.57	1.15
How long change took (months)	.18	.01	.00	.45
Low salience (% DKs)	-.10	-.09	-.05	1.63
Social issues	.14	.00	-.09	.16
Economy	.01	.03	.17	.26
Defense	-.09	-.03	-.29	.55
World War II	.13	.15	9.75	.00
Other foreign policy	-.14	-.11	-.58	1.36
Liberal opinion change	.28	.25	1.38	2.65
States' policy	.11	-.05	-.08	.10
1969-1979 period	.14	.06	.11	.26
Multiple R		.40		
R ²		.16		

Note: The dependent variable is direction of policy change from T1 to one year after T2, scored 0 (noncongruent) or 1 (congruent). Some independent variables with insignificant bivariate correlations are omitted. The excluded category of issue types consists of remaining domestic policies. See Shapiro (1982).

*Correlations with magnitudes of .11 or better are significant at the .05 level; those .07 or greater, at the .1 level.

**Three categories; cases with insufficient time points to detect fluctuation were coded in a middle category.

***Ratio of logistic estimate to its asymptotic standard error. We consider *t* values of 1.96 or greater statistically reliable.

change, whether it fluctuated, how long it took, and the degree of policy salience—are nearly significant at the .05 level ($F(4,177 \text{ df}) = 2.181, p = .072$), but their individual effects diminish (unlike other variables in the table, however, most of their logistic estimates are greater than their standard errors). The recency of opinion change (the 1969-1979 period) makes little or no difference; social issues lose their distinctiveness; and state policymaking switches to an insignificant negative effect.

The liberal direction of change retains a substantial impact and is significantly different from zero ($p < .05$) according to a *t*-test. Again, though, we do not want to overstate the importance of this effect. Nor would we conclude that other variables are irrelevant, especially since multicollinearity and measurement error make the estimates unstable, and the causal status of the liberal-conservative variable is unclear. We suspect that, even after “controlling” for all other factors in Table 7, some of the apparent effect of liberal opinion change upon the degree of congruence results from the fact that liberal changes tended to be large, salient, and stable.

The Effect of Public Opinion on Policy

The mere observation of congruence between opinion and policy tells us little, of course, about which causes which. Congruence could indicate that there is democratic responsiveness: that changes in public preferences cause changes in policy. But it might instead result from policy affecting opinion. Policy changes might lead citizens to change their opinions as they saw good results from the new policies, or as they rationalized that whatever the government does must be acceptable. Or persuasive rhetoric by politicians and others accompanying new policies might convince citizens of their merits. Such processes of learning, persuasion, and rationalization are indistinguishable from responsiveness, if all we know is that opinion and policy move in the same direction.

The use of temporal asymmetries, however, permits us to draw some inferences about causal priority. In particular, when public opinion changes before policy does, it is generally reasonable to infer that policy has not affected opinion.

A high proportion of the changes in public opinion since 1935 did in fact occur before congruent changes in policy. To begin with, of 148 cases of congruence after a one-year lag, 26 percent showed no congruence *during* the time interval of the opinion change. That is, at the end of the instance of opinion change (T2), policy had not yet moved in a congruent direction. Opinion clearly moved first.

Furthermore, for a small subset of congruent cases, additional information is available: there exists an opinion survey at a point (T1a) between T1 and T2 which shows that opinion had already changed significantly from what it was at T1. For these cases we measured policy change from T1 to T1a. In a high (48 percent) proportion of them, policy had not yet moved in a congruent direction by T1a; in fact it had usually moved in the opposite direction (see Table 8).¹² Again, opinion had clearly begun to change before policy changed.

If we are willing to consider these cases with T1a's as a random sample of all cases of congruence (which, strictly speaking, they are not),¹³ we

¹²One caveat is in order: in a few cases the brevity of the time interval from T1 to T1a may have prevented us from detecting changes in aggregate policy measures (e.g., annual budget figures), even though policy did in fact change.

¹³However, these cases are quite diverse, covering such issues as relations with Russia, foreign aid, policy toward China, general activeness in international affairs, arms control, tariffs, taxes, inflation, abortion, civil liberties, national defense, crime, civil rights, and Watergate. They appear to have no glaring substantive bias, but they were selected by the availability of data rather than through any sampling procedure. One possible problem is that the focus on the cases of significant opinion change from T1 to the intervening measurement

Table 8. Movement of Opinion Before Policy

	Proportion of Cases	
	%	N
Opinion movement before policy	48	(22)
Earlier policy movement cannot be ruled out	52	(24)

Note. Entries are based on cases with intervening (T1a) opinion measurements before T2, in which opinion had already changed significantly. Opinion moved before policy if policy between T1 and T1a did not change or moved contrary to the opinion change.

can infer that in at least the same proportion of all cases (about half), opinion changed before policy did. The actual proportion may be much higher, because in cases where policy had moved congruently by T1a, opinion (unmeasured) may still have moved first.

In half or more of our cases of congruence, then, we rule out the possibility that policy affected opinion. We think that it is reasonable in most of these cases to infer that opinion change was a *cause* of policy change, or at least a proximate or intervening factor leading to government action, if not the ultimate cause.

The main alternative possibility is that opinion and policy were only spuriously related, both independently affected by world events, elite leadership, interest group campaigns, technological change, or some other exogenous factor. We cannot definitely rule out spuriousness (or gauge its extent) without multivariate analysis incorporating exogenous variables for which we do not presently have measures, and/or intensive case studies of congruent changes in opinion and policy. (We are conducting a number of case studies, which we shall report upon at length elsewhere.) But spuriousness becomes less likely when the first movement comes unequivocally from the normally sluggish public (e.g., Key 1961; Page and Shapiro 1982) rather than policy-makers; the time asymmetry suggests a genuine effect of opinion. Based on our careful study of individual cases to date, our judgment is that opinion changes did often affect policy.

To cast doubt on the likelihood of spuriousness is by no means to deny that third factors affect both opinion and policy, which they surely do. We only argue that public opinion is a real influence—often an intervening one—upon policy, in many (probably more than half) of our cases of congruent change. When some third factor affects both opinion and policy, it tends to affect policy *through* opinion; policy changes only *because* opinion changes. A few brief illustrations lend support to this interpretation.

In a number of our cases policy moved in a congruent direction only well after opinion changed: up until the time period one year after the opinion change, policy had changed contrary to public opinion or remained the same. The cases showing this apparent responsiveness occur among a fairly wide range of policy issues, and most of these relationships do not appear to be spurious, at least not a consequence of major external events.

In domestic affairs, examples include a major civil-rights issue and abortion policies. Public opinion on these issues had probably changed as the result of generational replacement and national liberalizing trends since the 1950s (see Davis 1975; Taylor 1978), and perhaps through events and media influences. Although it has been difficult to determine with confidence the causal impact of opinion concerning school desegregation and some other civil rights issues (McNichol 1980; Schmalzer 1981), we found that the law giving blacks “the right to be served in public places” (i.e., the Civil Rights Act of July 1964) was passed only after public support for it had increased from 54 to 66 percent during the period from June 1963 to mid-August 1963 and then January 1964. (Opinion had begun to change before Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963.) Similarly, permitting abortions for pregnant women who did not want to have a child (because they were “single” or “poor” or simply did not want to) came about (with *Roe v. Wade*, February 1973) only after public opinion had changed substantially, by 32 percentage points from December 1965 to April 1972.¹⁴

Other instances in which opinion change probably contributed to policy change were the passage of the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 (public opinion since late 1968 had shown increased support for campaign spending laws; see Dempsey 1982) and the October 1979 legislation giving the president authority to ration gasoline (public approval increased from May to August 1979).

In foreign affairs there is comparable evidence for government responsiveness. From April 1948 to June 1949, public opposition to military aid for the Nationalist Chinese rose 16 percentage points; during the period from March to September 1949, disapproval of the Marshall Plan rose 14 percentage points; and from March of that year to April 1950, more people thought that we were spending too much on European recovery (a change of 19 percentage points). From November 1950 to August 1952 (continuing through March 1955), more of the public thought that aid to “backward” countries was a good idea (a 15 percentage-point shift in opinion). In all of these cases government-assistance expenditures, in constant

¹⁴Our analysis (and Karplus’s 1979) of states’ policies permitting abortions under a variety of more stringent conditions (e.g., rape, the possibility of a birth defect, danger to the health of the mother) provided less evidence for a causal interpretation, since there were no opinion data between 1965 and 1972 to indicate whether opinion had changed before some states revised their laws.

eliminating cases in which opinion did not change during the intervening time, and where it is somewhat more likely that policy changed first.

dollars, moved contrary to opinion until the year after a significant opinion shift had occurred, and then moved congruently.

A more striking case of policy following the lead of opinion was the United States' support for the admission of Communist China to the United Nations. Support among Americans for admission rose 33 percentage points from January 1964 to May 1971, with a 13 percentage-point shift by 1966. Had public preferences not shifted, the Nixon administration very well might not have altered U.S. policy toward the People's Republic of China (but cf. Kusnitz 1980).

Does Policy Affect Opinion?

The finding that in many cases public opinion affects policy does not rule out the possibility that there is a reciprocal influence as well. It is quite possible that policy also affects opinion, in some or all of the ways we have mentioned: by citizens learning about a policy's impact, rationalizing its existence, or heeding the persuasive efforts of politicians, interest groups, or others.

Time asymmetries are not as helpful for discovering the extent to which policy affects opinion as they are for making the opposite inference. First of all, with intermittent poll data it is sometimes possible to be sure that opinion changed before policy, but it is seldom certain that policy changed before opinion. Public opinion may have changed at some early point when there were no surveys. Secondly, policymakers can (and have incentives to) anticipate the reactions of the public, so that public opinion may affect policy even when policy changes first. A mere showing that policy changed before opinion in a number of cases could not be conclusive about causation.

Nonetheless, investigation of temporal asymmetries can at least give some idea about the extent to which policy affects opinion, perhaps identifying an upper bound for it. Our data are not inconsistent with some effect of policy on opinion, though it is likely much less than the influence of preferences on policy.

A first point to be made is that during the year before our instances of opinion change (from one year before T1 to T1), policy moved in the same direction as the subsequent opinion change only 25 percent of the time. Usually (46 percent of the time) policy did not change at all over that period, and when it did change it was as often (27 percent) in a *noncongruent* direction as congruent. In a preliminary report we therefore inferred—perhaps too quickly—that policy could not be affect-

ing opinion to any considerable degree (Page and Shapiro 1981a).¹⁵

The interpretation changes somewhat when only the cases of congruence between opinion and policy (using a one-year lag) are considered. Of these cases, a higher 39 percent show congruent movement by policy in the year before the beginning of the opinion change. (The figure is a bit lower for the cases with ideal policy measures.)

But examining policy movements before the beginning of opinion changes does not allow for the impact of new policy that comes into being *between* the first and last opinion measurements in our instances of change. For the most pertinent information on how policy may affect opinion, we must turn to another subset of cases: those 81 cases for which there are opinion data at an intervening time point (T1c) between T1 and T2, where opinion had not yet changed to a statistically significant extent.¹⁶ A finding of congruent change from T1 to T1c—that is, policy change from the moment of our baseline opinion measurement up to a point at which opinion had not yet changed significantly—would seem to support the likelihood of policy affecting opinion.

By this criterion, possible effects of policy on opinion appear more frequent. In 46 percent of the 41 congruent cases for which data are available, policy between T1 and T1c changed in the same direction as the subsequent opinion change (see Table 9).

Thus our data suggest that policy may affect opinion in close to half the cases of congruence between opinion and policy. But we would emphasize that this is only an upper limit; the extent of influence is likely much less. Policy change is only barely (and not significantly) more often in the direction of opinion change than it is in the opposite direction. The congruence could represent nothing more than chance. Furthermore, as we have noted, opinion can still be affecting policy (through anticipated reactions) rather than the opposite, even when policy moves first.

Most important, the inference of policy effects

¹⁵We are still confident that this policy-first congruence occurs through processes (presumably of education, leadership, manipulation, rationalization, or ratification) different from those through which opinion affects policy. This congruence is *not related* to the variables examined earlier (under "Variations in Congruence"), which distinguish conditions under which in theory policies will be more or less *responsive* to public preferences. See Shapiro (1982).

¹⁶If several such points existed we picked the last one, in order to maximize the chance of detecting policy movement before significant opinion change. For a given case there can be both points T1c and T1a; in that event T1c always occurs first in time.

Table 9. Movement of Policy Before Significant Opinion Change

	Proportion of Cases			
	%	N		
Influence of policy upon opinion possible				
Change in same direction as subsequent policy change	46	(19)		
Influence of policy upon opinion ruled out				
No change in policy	20	(8)	}	54 (22)
Change in opposite direction	34	(14)		
	100	(41)		

Note. Table 9 is based on cases with intervening (T1c) opinion measurement showing no significant change in opinion from T1 to T1c. Policy movement is measured from T1 to T1c.

upon opinion depends on viewing the cases with T1c's as a sample of all our cases of congruence, but there are strong reasons to doubt the validity of the sample. The T1c's were selected as points at which opinion had not yet "significantly" changed from T1: any change that had occurred was less than 6 percentage points. Yet the definition of our instances of opinion change itself ensures that at point T1c opinion had already moved slightly in the direction of T2. Therefore all the cases of policy congruence displayed in Table 9 actually occurred after a small shift in opinion had already begun. Consequently the 46 percent figure almost certainly overstates the frequency with which policy moved before opinion.¹⁷

To be sure, there are some cases in which our best judgment indicates that policy change or accompanying rhetoric or both probably affected public opinion. For example, as the Atlantic Charter and early wartime cooperation with the

Allies formed the basis for the United States' greater institutionalized participation in international affairs, the public quite likely reacted to this; support for joining an international organization after the war rose sharply (22 percentage points from May 1941 to June 1942).

Similarly, the Watergate investigation, congressional hearings, and court actions may have swayed the public (perhaps in part by merely uncovering the facts) against President Nixon through a process of political leadership or education. From June 1973 to May 1974, opposition to impeaching Nixon and compelling him to leave office dropped 34 percentage points. Of course in both these cases public opinion may have subsequently affected government action as well.

Deception and political manipulation are the less appealing counterparts of education or leadership. The escalation of the Vietnam War may be the best example of this in our data set. From August to November 1965 public support for sending more troops to Vietnam rose by 13 percentage points (more respondents said they would vote for a congressman who advocated sending more men to Vietnam), while by July the number of troops there had risen to approximately 75,000, although the public was not informed (and may still not be) about the uncertainty surrounding the Tonkin Gulf incident (see Wise 1973).

But we cannot be sure how often policy change causes congruence between opinion and policy. Very likely the frequency of this process is less than the upper limit suggested by Table 9, and less than is implied by some fashionable images of active policy makers and a pliant public. Almost certainly the opposite process of opinion affecting policy is the more prevalent one.

Conclusion

The finding of substantial congruence between opinion and policy (especially when opinion

¹⁷The data do not, however, indicate a higher level of (T1 to T1c) congruence among the cases with larger opinion shifts from T1 to T1c, except for the largest (and nearly significant) changes of 5 percentage points.

A thoroughgoing study of the effects of policy upon opinion would not work backwards from the dependent variable as we have done here, but would begin with a set of policy measurements and ascertain in what direction, if any, opinion subsequently moved. We are now starting such a study. A focus solely on instances of opinion change biases the data toward showing an effect of policy on opinion; this particular bias does not occur for our assessment of opinion's effects upon policy.

A further bias in this use of T1c's results from the fact that in some cases public opinion at T1 may itself already have changed from a prior (unmeasured) point. Pollsters may sometimes have asked a question at T1, precisely because circumstances had changed in a way that led them to suspect a change in public opinion. Here, again, policy that moved only after the beginning of a shift in opinion would appear to change before it.

changes are large and sustained, and issues are salient), together with the evidence that opinion tends to move before policy more than vice versa, indicates that opinion changes are important causes of policy change. When Americans' policy preferences shift, it is likely that congruent changes in policy will follow.

It is tempting to conclude, then, that democratic responsiveness pervades American politics; that the people get what they want from government. But there are several reasons to be cautious about such a conclusion:

1. Our findings concern policies on which public opinion has been judged by survey researchers to exist and to be worth measuring at two or more points in time. Although these are concrete issues, not merely setting the outer bounds for government action (cf., Key 1961; Weissberg 1976), they are still cases of relatively broad generality and high public salience. On many less visible matters of more specific, detailed policy, the public may have less opinion and less voice.

2. There are some cases among those in which policy does not change at all after opinion changes, which must be considered nonresponsive to the public (see Shapiro 1982).

3. There are a few clear cases of noncongruence in which policy unequivocally moves in the opposite direction from opinion. Although these are not nearly as frequent as cases of congruence and are particularly rare in the face of large, stable opinion changes, some of them concern serious matters of policy and should not be dismissed out of hand. They do demonstrate that responsiveness is not perfect.

4. Our findings are consistent with policy affecting opinion in a substantial number of cases of congruence.

5. The covariational research design poses a rather easy test for political responsiveness: only that there be *some* movement of policy, however big or little, in the same direction as an opinion shift. Even if responsiveness of this sort occurred every time, there could still be major biases in the system. Policy might, for example, always move only half as far as opinion dictated; a strong tilt of policy toward the positions of special interest groups could coexist with such widespread (but partial) responsiveness to the public.

The above points must be considered in appraising the extent to which public opinion determines policy outcomes. Moreover, even to the degree that policy does react to public opinion, one should be cautious about bestowing the normative imprimatur of "democracy" without taking account of the quality of that opinion: what kind of information it is based on, what has influenced it, and perhaps how closely it corresponds with objective standards of citizens'

interests.

Even if public opinion is truly a proximate cause of policy, it may itself be affected by factors not wholly compatible with normative concepts of democracy. If, for example, interest groups or politicians manage to manipulate opinion through lies or deception, and policy subsequently responds to the manipulated opinion, we would hesitate to celebrate the result as a democratic one. And if leaders influence public opinion through a more benign process of education or persuasion, using reasoned arguments and good evidence, we might still want to call the outcome something different from pure democracy.

To study processes of leadership or manipulation of opinion requires examining media content, politicians' rhetoric, and other matters beyond the opinion and policy variables considered here. Before such research is done it would be unwise to draw normative conclusions about the extent of democratic responsiveness in policymaking. We can be confident only that public opinion, whatever its sources and quality, is a factor that genuinely affects government policies in the United States.

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