

INEQUALITY AND DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS

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Abstract By allowing voters to choose among candidates with competing policy orientations and by providing incentives for incumbents to shape policy in the direction the public desires, elections are thought to provide the foundation that links government policy to the preferences of the governed. In this article I examine the extent to which the preference/policy link is biased toward the preferences of high-income Americans. Using an original data set of almost two thousand survey questions on proposed policy changes between 1981 and 2002, I find a moderately strong relationship between what the public wants and what the government does, albeit with a strong bias toward the status quo. But I also find that when Americans with different income levels differ in their policy preferences, actual policy outcomes strongly reflect the preferences of the most affluent but bear virtually no relationship to the preferences of poor or middle-income Americans. The vast discrepancy I find in government responsiveness to citizens with different incomes stands in stark contrast to the ideal of political equality that Americans hold dear. Although perfect political equality is an unrealistic goal, representational biases of this magnitude call into question the very democratic character of our society.

A key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.

Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy*, p. 1

The ability of citizens to influence public policy is the “bottom line” of democratic government. While few would expect or even desire a perfect correspondence between majority preference and government policy, the nature of

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the connection between what citizens want and what government does is a central consideration in evaluating the quality of democratic governance.

Without elections, policy makers would have little incentive to consider the preferences of the governed. But do elections help ensure that the “voice of the people” is heard in the halls of government? Or do elections empower only a privileged subset of citizens who possess the financial and other resources to influence the political process?

Considerable prior research has examined the relationship between government policy and the preferences of the public taken as a whole. The project I report on here asks *whose* preferences are most influential in shaping policy decisions. While democracy requires that government policy reflect the preferences of the governed—at least in broad outlines over the long run—true democracy also requires that all citizens, not just the powerful or well-off, have an influence over government policies.

In the pages that follow I report the first findings from a project that seeks to understand inequalities in government responsiveness to the preferences of the governed. To assess citizen influence over government policy, I combine survey measures of an extensive array of public preferences collected over the past two decades with evaluations of actual government policy making. The broader project will examine changes over time in the relationship between public preferences and government policy, differences across population subgroups and policy domains, and variations associated with changing partisan control of national political institutions. In this article I focus on the strength of the preference/policy link for respondents with different levels of income in order to assess the differential responsiveness of government to the preferences of poor, middle-income, and well-off Americans.

Previous Research

Quantitative analyses of the link between public preferences and government decision making have taken three main forms (for reviews of this literature, see Glynn et al. 2004, chap. 9; Manza and Cook 2002; Monroe and Gardner 1987). The most prevalent approach, often labeled “dyadic representation,” examines the relationship between constituency opinion and the behavior of representatives or candidates across political units (typically U.S. House districts or Senate seats; e.g., Achen 1978; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Bartels 1991; Miller and Stokes 1963; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). This work typically finds strong correlations between constituents’ preferences and legislators’ voting behavior.

A second approach examines changes over time in public preferences and the corresponding changes (or lack of changes) in public policies. For example, if public support for spending on space exploration declines between time-one and time-two, does actual spending on the space program also decline between

time-one and time-two? Using this technique, Page and Shapiro (1983) have found fairly high levels of congruency between the direction of change in opinion and the direction of change in government policy, especially for salient issues or cases with large changes in public preferences.

Finally, using a third approach, Monroe (1979, 1998) has compared public preferences for policy change expressed at a given point in time with subsequent changes (or lack of changes) in government policy. For example, if the public expresses a preference for cutting spending on space exploration at time-one, does actual spending on the space program decline in the following years? Monroe finds only modest consistency between public preferences and subsequent policy change during the 1960s and 1970s and even less consistency during the 1980s and 1990s. Mirroring Page and Shapiro's results, however, Monroe (1998) has found a better match between public preferences and government policy for issues that the public deemed more important. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) also relate public preferences for policy change (or stability) to subsequent government policy. Rather than individual policy issues, however, they use a broad measure of "public mood" for more or less government spending or activity and a similarly broad measure of actual government policy. Taking into account the reciprocal relationship between public preferences and government policy, they report an extremely strong influence of public mood on policy outputs, concluding that there exists "nearly a one-to-one translation of preferences into policy" (2002, p. 316).

Previous research, then, suggests a fairly high level of correspondence between constituency preferences and legislators' behavior, a more modest match between Americans' specific policy preferences and specific government policies (with stronger correspondence on more salient issues), and a strong aggregate relationship between broadly defined "public mood" and broad measures of government activity. In contrast to the substantial body of research examining the preference/policy relationship for the public taken as a whole, only a few studies use quantitative data to assess the variation in this relationship across social groups. Jacobs and Page (2005) assess the impact on U.S. foreign policy of various elite groups as well as the public as a whole. Using parallel survey measures of policy preferences administered to the general public and a variety of "foreign policy leaders" over almost thirty years, they find that business leaders and experts have the greatest ability to sway foreign policy but that the public as a whole has little or no influence.

Taking a very different approach, a few studies have used samples of U.S. cities to assess the correspondence between public policy and the preferences of different citizen groups, with mixed results. For example, Schumaker and Getter (1977) report a bias toward the spending preferences of upper-SES and white residents within the cities they studied, while Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) find little evidence of economic or racial bias in representation in their sample of American cities.

Finally, in the study that most closely relates to my concerns with economically based representational biases at the national level, Bartels (2002) relates

U.S. senators' roll-call votes and Poole/Rosenthal NOMINATE scores to the preferences of their high-, middle-, and low-income constituents. Examining civil rights, the minimum wage, government spending, abortion, and ideological self-placement, Bartels has found senators to be consistently and substantially more responsive to the opinions of high-income constituents (this bias being somewhat greater for Republican than Democratic senators).

My project, then, aims to expand our understanding of the differential responsiveness of government policy to the preferences of different social groups. As in previous work, I use public opinion surveys to measure citizens' preferences on a range of policy issues. Surveys provide a useful, but far from perfect, indication of what the public wants from government. Survey questions themselves are sometimes vague, policy issues are often unfamiliar to respondents, and the preferences respondents express range from deeply considered opinions to meaningless "nonattitudes." A large literature explores the value and limitations of survey data for assessing the policy preferences of the American public (on limitations, see, e.g., Althaus 2003; Bartels 2003; Berinsky 2004; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Fishkin 1995; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 2003; and on the value of survey data as measures of public preferences, see, e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1992; Saris and Sniderman 2004). Even a brief assessment of these various perspectives would require more space than this article allows; my view, in brief, is that the biases and noise inherent in survey data are in the aggregate not sufficiently large or systematic enough to seriously compromise the analyses that follow (or those of the hundreds of other survey-based studies of public opinion).

Finally, the associations that I and others find between public preferences and government policy may reflect a variety of difficult-to-disentangle causal relationships. To some degree these associations likely reflect the responsiveness of government to the desires of the public, but these associations could also arise from the common response of both the public and policy makers to changing conditions or from the ability of policy makers to sway public preferences. I will return to the question of causal inference toward the end of this article and offer some suggestive evidence that the associations I observe between public preferences and government policy do reflect, to some substantial degree at least, the influence of the public on policy makers.

Data

My data set consists of 1,935 survey questions asked of national samples of the U.S. population between 1981 and 2002. Each survey question asks whether respondents support or oppose some proposed change in U.S. government policy: raising the minimum wage, sending U.S. troops to Haiti, requiring employers to provide health insurance, allowing gays to serve in the military, and so on. The survey question is the unit of analysis in the data set, with variables

indicating the proportion of respondents answering “favor,” “oppose,” or “don’t know” within each category of income, education, race, sex, age, partisan identification, ideological self-placement, and region, as well as a code indicating whether the proposed policy change occurred or not.

The data for this project were collected from the iPOLL database maintained by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut, from the Public Opinion Poll Question database maintained by the Odum Institute at the University of North Carolina, and for time periods where these databases lack sufficient numbers of appropriate questions with demographic breakdowns, from raw survey data supplied by a variety of sources.¹ In all cases, questions were identified using keyword searches for *oppose* in the question text or response categories and then hand-sifting through the results to find appropriate questions. The original survey data were collected by dozens of different survey organizations, with the largest number of questions coming from Harris, Gallup, CBS, and *Los Angeles Times* surveys. After identifying appropriate questions, research assistants used historical information sources to identify whether the proposed policy change occurred and, if so, whether fully or only partially and within what period of time from the date the survey question was asked.² Additional codes were developed indicating the policy area addressed by the question (e.g., tax policy, abortion, etc.) and the government body or bodies that could plausibly act to bring the proposed policy change about (president alone, president with Congress, Supreme Court, constitutional amendment, etc.). After eliminating proposed policy changes that would require a constitutional amendment or Supreme Court ruling, proposed changes that were partially but not fully adopted, and questions that lack income breakdowns, 1,781 questions remain for the analyses reported below.

IMPUTING PREFERENCES BY INCOME, EDUCATION, OR AGE LEVEL

Because the surveys employed were conducted by different organizations at different points in time the demographic categories are frequently inconsistent.

1. Survey data were obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of California, Los Angeles, the Kaiser Family Foundation, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, and the Roper Center.

2. Monroe (1998) looked for policy changes over a long time period and reports that 88 percent of the policy changes that occurred did so within two years of the date of the survey questions he examined. For my project, coders looked for policy change within a four-year window following each survey question. If no change consistent with the survey question occurred within that period, the outcome was coded as “no change.” If change did occur within that period, the year the change took place was recorded. In coding outcomes for survey questions with specific quantified proposals (e.g., raise the minimum wage to \$6.00 an hour), coders considered a change to have occurred if it represented at least 80 percent of the change proposed in the survey question. If the actual policy change represented less than 80 percent of that proposed in the survey question but more than 20 percent, the outcome was given a “partial change” code. Relatively few outcomes were coded as partial changes, and in the analysis here, only “full changes” occurring within the four-year window are coded as policy change. Inter-coder agreement for policy outcome (whether the proposed change occurred within four years of the survey question) was 91 percent; inter-coder agreement on the year the change occurred for those occasions where both coders agreed change had occurred was 93 percent.

In particular income, education, and age are divided into different numbers of categories and use different break points in different surveys (only income and education are examined in this article). To create consistent measures of preferences that can be compared across surveys and across years, I used the following procedure. For ease of exposition, I describe the procedure for imputing preferences by income; an identical procedure was applied to education.

For each survey, respondents in each income category were assigned an income score equal to the percentile midpoint for their income group based on the income distribution from their survey. For example, if on a given survey 10 percent of the respondents fell into the bottom income category and 30 percent fell into the second category, those in the bottom group would be assigned a score of .05, and the second group, a score of .25 (the midpoint between .10 and .40, the bottom and top percentiles for the second group).

After rescaling income for each survey, predicted preferences for specific income percentiles were estimated using a quadratic function. That is, for each survey question, income and income squared (measured in percentiles) were used as predictors of policy preference for that question (resulting in 1,781 separate regressions, each with two predictors and an n equal to the number of income categories for that question). The coefficients from these analyses were then used to impute policy preferences for respondents at the desired percentiles.

In the final stage of the analysis, the imputed preferences for respondents at a given income percentile were used as predictors of the policy outcomes across the available survey questions (that is, separate regressions for each desired income percentile, each with one predictor and an n of 1,781). This approach has the double advantage of allowing comparisons across survey questions with different raw income categories and smoothing out some of the noise inherent in estimating preferences for population subgroups with limited numbers of respondents.³

Findings

CONSISTENCY VERSUS INFLUENCE

Raw correspondence between majority preferences and policy outcomes is one way to assess the relationship between preferences and policies. But consistency

3. One consequence of using a regression-based imputation procedure to estimate the preferences of respondents at different income levels is that the uncertainty of the estimates will be smallest at the mean of the income distribution and largest at the tails. The imputed preferences correspond to the point estimate for the mean of Y (the percent favoring policy change) at a given value of X (income). The standard error of this prediction increases with the squared value of the difference between the mean of X and the value of X under consideration (Gujarati 1995, p. 137). This will result in slightly noisier measures of preferences for low- and high-income respondents than for those with middle incomes and therefore slightly attenuated coefficients for the relationship between preference and outcome for the extreme income categories. Consequently, my results slightly understate the degree to which preferences and policy outcomes are more closely aligned among high-income than middle-income Americans.

is a fairly crude measure that does not take into account the *degree* to which policy outcomes are influenced by the public's preferences. For example, a policy change opposed by 51 percent of the public and one opposed by 99 percent of the public would both be inconsistent with public preferences, but the latter clearly represents a greater failure of policy to reflect public preferences.

More important for my purposes, raw consistency is an inappropriate measure to use in comparing democratic responsiveness across population groups. Although 59 percent of the policy changes proposed in these survey questions received majority support (among respondents expressing a preference), only 32 percent of the proposed changes actually took place (within the four-year coding window, at least).⁴ Consequently, if the majority of population group X prefers policy change less often than population group Y, group X will *ceteris paribus* have higher consistency scores. But influence over policy outcomes is reflected in the degree to which policy change is more or less likely to occur depending on whether or not members of that group support it. A group that favors only 10 percent of proposed policy changes will inevitably have a high consistency score, but if the probability of a change being implemented bears no relationship to the group's preferences, the group cannot be said to have influence over policy outcomes. The weakness of raw consistency as a measure of policy influence is illustrated with a hypothetical example in the appendix.

To assess the strength of the relationship between policy preferences and policy outcomes across groups, I use measures of association (logistic regression coefficients) rather than raw consistency scores. Regression coefficients (and the associated probabilities of policy change that I report) overcome both of these shortcomings with consistency scores—they incorporate the degree of support (or opposition) to a specific policy proposal, and they reflect the extent to which different levels of policy support are associated with different probabilities of policy implementation within each group.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PREFERENCE AND POLICY

The relationships between policy preferences and policy outcomes are shown in table 1. These results are based on logistic regressions in which policy outcome (coded "1" for change and "0" for status quo) is regressed on the percentage of respondents favoring the proposed policy change (or on the imputed percentage of respondents at a specific income percentile favoring the proposed policy change). The first column of results in table 1 shows the preference/policy link for the survey respondents as a whole. Row 4 shows the predicted probability of a policy change occurring if 10 percent of respondents favor the proposed change, row 5 shows the predicted probability if 90 percent favor the proposed change, and row 6 shows the ratio of row 5 to

4. Level of support for policy change does not vary by income for my 1,781 policy questions. On average, 55 percent of those at the 10th income percentile favored policy change, compared with 56.2 percent of those at the 50th and 56.5 percent of those at the 90th percentile.

Table 1. Policy Preference as a Predictor of Policy Outcome, by Income Percentile

	All Respondents	By Income Percentile						
		10th	30th	50th	70th	90th		
Logit coefficient (Standard error)	1.77 (0.26)	1.22 (0.25)	1.43 (0.25)	1.63 (0.25)	1.91 (0.26)	2.25 (0.27)		
Intercept	-1.76	-1.44	-1.57	-1.69	-1.86	-2.06		
Predicted probability if 10% favor	.17	.21	.19	.18	.16	.14		
Predicted probability if 90% favor	.46	.42	.43	.44	.46	.49		
Relative change in predicted probability (row 5/row 4)	2.7	2.0	2.2	2.5	2.9	3.6		
N	1,781	1,781	1,781	1,781	1,781	1,781		
Log likelihood	2,186	2,209	2,200	2,189	2,175	2,158		
Likelihood ratio	$\chi^2(1) = 47,$ $p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 24,$ $p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 33,$ $p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 44,$ $p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 58,$ $p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 75,$ $p = .000$		

NOTE.—Cases consist of survey questions about proposed policy changes asked between 1981 and 2002. The dependent variable is policy outcome coded “1” if the proposed policy took place within four years of the survey date and “0” if it did not. The predictors are the percentage of respondents favoring the proposed policy change (first results column) or the imputed percentage of respondents at a given income percentile favoring the proposed policy change.

row 4—that is, the factor by which the predicted probability of policy change increases as opinion shifts from strong opposition to strong support.

The first results column of table 1 reveals the strong status quo bias across these 1,781 proposed policy changes. Overwhelmingly unpopular proposals are unlikely to be adopted: the predicted probability of policy change occurring among policies favored by 10 percent of Americans is only .17.⁵ But even policy proposals that receive overwhelming support among the public have a less than even chance of being enacted. Among proposed changes with 90 percent support, the predicted probability of adoption is only .46. This status quo bias should not be surprising; indeed, it is what we would expect from a government structure with separation of powers, multiple veto points within Congress, supermajority requirements in the Senate, and so on—a structure designed by its Framers as much to combat factionalism and inhibit the “tyranny of the majority” as to facilitate federal lawmaking.

Turning next to the differences in the preference/policy link for respondents at different income levels, we find, as expected, that higher-income respondents’ views are more strongly related to government policy. The logit coefficients relating preference and policy rise from 1.22 for those at the 10th income percentile, to 1.63 for median-income respondents, to 2.25 for those at the 90th percentile. These coefficients are translated into probabilities in rows 4 and 5 of table 1 and displayed more fully in figure 1. For respondents at the 10th income percentile, the probability of policy change rises from .21 with 10 percent favoring to .42 with 90 percent support. Thus a policy that is overwhelmingly favored by those at the 10th income percentile has twice the probability of being adopted as one that is overwhelmingly opposed.

For those at the top of the income distribution, the probability of policy change rises somewhat more dramatically, from .14 to .49 (a factor of 3.6). Looking across the columns in row 6 of table 1, we see that the strength of the relationship between preferences and policy outcomes not only increases with each step up the income ladder but, in fact, does so at an increasing rate: the difference in the 90/10 ratio in row 6 of table 1 is about half as great between the 10th and 50th income percentiles as it is between the 50th and 90th percentiles.⁶

5. These unpopular policies, which were nevertheless adopted, include various tax increases over the years, loan guarantees or other economic assistance to foreign countries, and sending U.S. troops to Haiti and Bosnia.

6. An alternative approach to assessing the independent influence of different income groups would be to include the preferences of multiple groups as predictors in the same model of policy outcomes. Using this approach I also found strong effects for the preferences of high-income Americans but not for those with middle or low income. However, measurement errors (which result from question wording effects, imperfect fit between the preference being tapped and the outcome coded, and simple errors in outcome coding) produce correlated prediction errors across income groups. If predictors with strong true correlations and also correlated errors are included in the same equation, the coefficients for the predictors with the weakest relationship to the outcome being measured (in this case, for those with the lowest income) may be unreliable and even incorrectly signed (Achen 1985). This problem, which has emerged in other analyses that compare the influence of policy preferences across multiple social groups (e.g., Bartels 2002; Jacobs and Page 2005), makes the separate analyses of the preference/policy link for the various income levels a more appealing alternative.

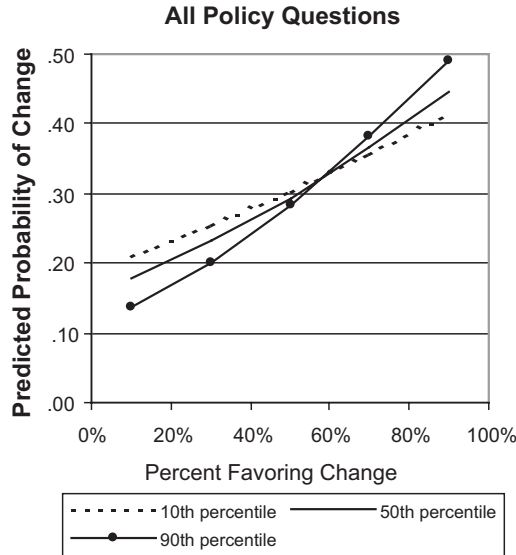


Figure 1. Preference/policy link for the 10th, 50th, and 90th income percentiles.

As explained above, the inconsistency in income categories from survey to survey requires the use of imputed rather than observed preferences for respondents at various income levels. To assess whether the results in table 1 are a function of the preference imputation process, I identified a subset of the survey questions that uses identical income categories. The largest such subset is from 1981 to 1987 and contains 451 questions, each using the same six income categories (under \$7,500, \$7,500–\$15,000, \$15,000–\$25,000, \$25,000–\$35,000, \$35,000–\$50,000, over \$50,000). For this subset of questions I compared the results obtained using the observed percentage of respondents in each category favoring each proposed policy change with those obtained using the imputed percentage based on the same quadratic imputation procedure described above.

The average size of the difference in the percent favoring policy change between the imputed and observed preferences is only .022 (standard deviation = .017), and the difference between imputed and observed preferences is nearly identical across the six income groups (all fall between .02 and .03). Given the similarity of the observed and imputed preferences, it is not surprising that the patterns of association between preference and policy outcome are similar when using the two sets of preference measures. The logit coefficients for the six income groups (from lowest to highest income) based on the

observed and imputed preferences, respectively, are -0.06 and 0.06 , 0.68 and 0.53 , 0.92 and 0.97 , 1.36 and 1.34 , 1.50 and 1.61 , 1.78 and 1.76 . Even the largest of these differences (0.68 versus 0.53 for the second-lowest income category) is less than one-third of the standard error of the estimates. In short, the preference imputation procedure does not appear to be driving the results of these analyses.

THE PREFERENCE/POLICY LINK WHEN PREFERENCES ACROSS INCOME GROUPS DIVERGE

It is hardly surprising that the preferences of the well-off are more clearly reflected in government policy than those of poor or middle-income citizens. But the results in table 1 understate the true differences in the ability of different economic groups to influence policy. On many of the policy issues in the data set, low- and high-income Americans did not differ substantially in their policy preferences. If the well-to-do are better able to exert influence over government policy, the association we do find between policy outcomes and the preferences of poor or middle-income respondents may simply reflect those proposed changes on which Americans of all income levels agree.

About one-third of the proposed policy changes in my data set generate levels of support within eight percentage points across all income groups. For these questions, preferences across different income groups are statistically indistinguishable. For the next set of analyses, I selected those questions for which the preferences of respondents at the 10th and 90th income percentiles differed by at least eight percentage points ($n = 887$ survey questions) and those for which the preferences of respondents at the 50th and 90th percentiles differed by at least eight percentage points ($n = 498$ survey questions). The logistic regression coefficients for the relationship between preferences and policy outcomes for these questions are shown in table 2, with predicted probabilities shown in figure 2. For the 887 policy questions on which well-off and poor Americans disagreed by eight percentage points or more (top panel of figure 2), outcomes are fairly strongly related to the preferences of the well-to-do ($b = 1.92$, $p = .000$) but wholly unrelated to the preferences of the poor ($b = 0.04$, $p = .92$).

The complete lack of government responsiveness to the preferences of the poor is disturbing, if not entirely surprising. But poor people might hold attitudes that consistently differ from those held by middle-income and wealthy Americans, and if so the lack of responsiveness to their preferences might actually reflect a well-functioning democracy. Middle-income respondents might better reflect the preferences of the median voter on most issues, and the responsiveness of government policy makers to the preferences of these Americans might therefore serve as a more appropriate test of biases in representation.

The bottom panel of figure 2 shows that median-income Americans fare little better than the poor when their policy preferences diverge from those of the

Table 2. Policy Preference as a Predictor of Policy Outcome, by Income Percentile, when Preferences across Income Groups Differ

	When Income Percentiles Disagree		When Income Percentiles Disagree	
	10th	90th	50th	90th
Logit coefficient	0.04	1.92***	0.33	1.80**
(Standard error)	(0.37)	(0.40)	(0.51)	(0.61)
Intercept	-0.75	-1.80	-1.06	-1.85
N	887	887	498	498
Log likelihood	1,120	1,095	602	594
Likelihood ratio	$\chi^2(1) = 0.01,$ $p = .92$	$\chi^2(1) = 24.6,$ $p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 0.43,$ $p = .51$	$\chi^2(1) = 8.8,$ $p = .003$

NOTE.—Cases consist of survey questions about proposed policy changes asked between 1981 and 2002. The dependent variable is policy outcome coded “1” if the proposed policy took place within four years of the survey date and “0” if it did not. The predictors are the imputed percentage of respondents at a given income percentile favoring the proposed policy change. The first two results columns are based on the 887 survey questions on which respondents at the 10th and 90th income percentiles differed by at least eight percentage points; the second two results columns are based on the 498 questions on which respondents at the 50th and 90th percentiles differed by at least eight percentage points.

** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

well-off. The probability of a proposed policy change being implemented rises almost thirty percentage points as support among high-income respondents increases ($b = 1.80, p = .003$) but rises only six percentage points as attitudes among median-income respondents shift from strong opposition to strong support ($b = 0.33, p = .51$).

The lack of responsiveness to the preferences of the 10th and 50th income percentiles illustrated in figure 2 does not mean that those groups never get what they want from government or that high-income Americans always see their preferences enacted in government policy. On the policy questions on which low- and middle-income respondents share the same preferences as those with high incomes, they are, of course, just as likely as high-income Americans to get what they want. But when their views differ from those of more affluent Americans, government policy appears to be fairly responsive to the well-off and virtually unrelated to the desires of the low- and middle-income citizens.

CAUSAL INFERENCE

With the data examined in this article we can observe the association between policy preferences and policy outcomes but not the *influence* of one or another

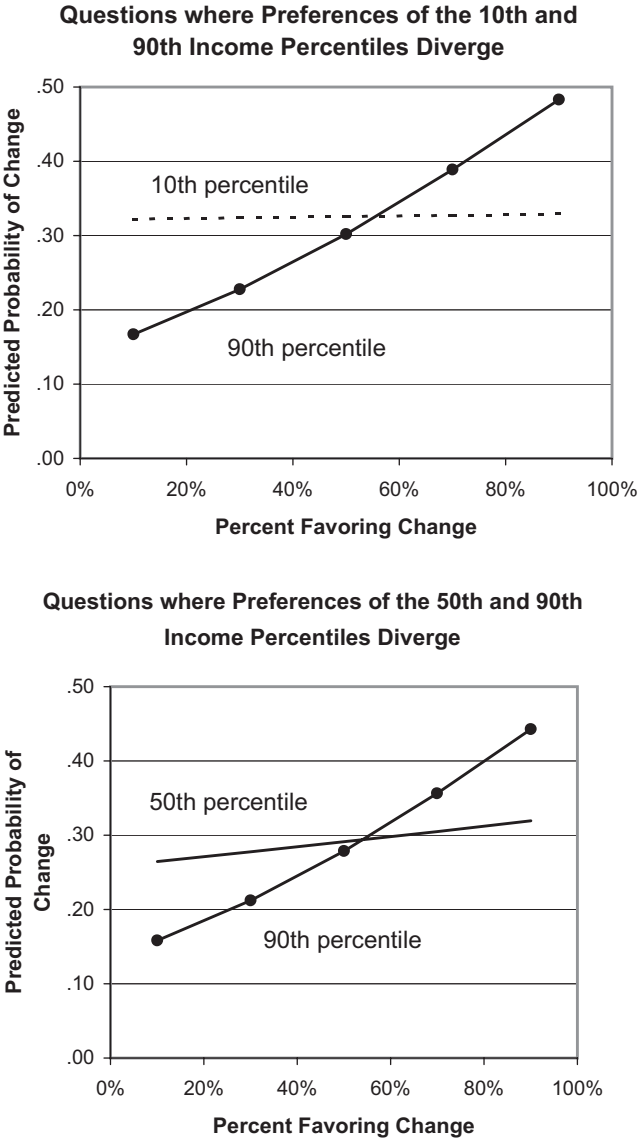


Figure 2. Preference/policy link when preferences across income groups diverge.

group of Americans on the policy process. The association between public preferences and government policy might arise through some combination of (1) the influence of the public’s preferences on political decision makers’

actions, (2) the influence of decision makers' statements or actions on the public's preferences, and (3) the response of both decision makers and the public to "real-world" events and conditions. Moreover, all of these paths of influence might differ in strength for different population subgroups. For example, high-income Americans might exert a stronger influence over government decisions than those with lower incomes. But the preferences of high-income Americans might also be more responsive to what policy makers are saying needs to be done, or high-income Americans might respond to real-world events in ways similar to government decision makers.

It would be surprising if any of these hypothesized causal influences were completely absent from the relationship between citizen preferences and government policy, and empirical evidence appears to reflect each of them at least to some degree (for an insightful review of some of this literature, see Kuklinski and Segura 1995). Moreover, we would expect the relative importance of alternative causal pathways to vary depending on the issue at hand. Past research, for example, indicates that the public is more likely to rely on policy makers in forming preferences on issues that are complex, unfamiliar, or lower in salience and where alternative sources of guidance (including other elites such as church or union leaders, advocacy groups, and so on) are unavailable (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Hill and Hurley 1999; Hurley and Hill 2003).

Recognizing the multifaceted relationship between public preferences and government policy, a variety of evidence nevertheless suggests that the relationship between what the public wants and what the government does reflects, at least in large measure, the influence of the former on the latter. First, if the preference/policy link is a consequence of the public adopting the views of policy makers, we would expect mass preferences to shift in accord with change in government policy. On the contrary, the public's policy preferences appear to have a "thermostatic" quality: when government policy shifts in a liberal direction, the public adjusts its preferences in a conservative direction, and vice versa, both in general preferences for more or less government activity (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) and in preferences for spending in specific policy domains (Wlezien 1995, 2004).

Second, the strong associations between constituency preferences and representatives' votes found in the "dyadic representation" literature are unlikely to arise from the influence of representatives on their constituents. Only 29 percent of Americans can name their U.S. representative, much less describe his or her position on any particular issue, and only 25 percent can name both their U.S. senators (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Far more plausible is that representatives' votes are shaped by their constituents' preferences (or at least by the preferences of their most affluent constituents [Bartels 2002]), operating through pressure on incumbents to keep

constituents happy and through the election of like-minded officeholders to begin with.

A third kind of evidence that the preference/policy link reflects the influence of the public on government decision makers derives from studies of presidential policy making and public preferences. If this association reflects primarily the ability of the president to sway the public, we would expect the relationship to be strongest when the president is most popular. But if it reflects the impact of the public on the president, we would expect the relationship to be strongest when the president is under the greatest pressure to please the public. Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2004) assess these alternative expectations and show that the correspondence between public preferences and presidential policy is strongest when a president faces reelection and enjoys average rather than high or low popularity. They argue that this is exactly the condition under which a president has the greatest incentive to cater to public preferences. If a president's popularity is very high, he can safely disregard the public's wishes on most issues and still be confident of reelection, and if his popularity is very low, he will be unlikely to win reelection regardless of the policies he adopts. But if reelection is uncertain, a president's incentive to respond to the public's preferences is greatest.

A final source of evidence that bears on the causal connection between public preferences and government policy concerns the relative importance of income and education as moderators of the preference/policy link. If the primary path of influence is from public preferences to government policy, we might expect the preference/policy link to be strongest among Americans with high incomes (since income is more closely linked to campaign contributions and influence in the community than is education [Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, p. 358]). On the other hand, if the primary causal path is either politicians shaping the public's preferences or attentive citizens responding to changing conditions and events, we might expect the link to be strongest among the highly educated (since education is more closely associated with interest in and attention to politics [Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996, p. 77; Zaller 1992]). While these are of course somewhat overlapping groups, fewer than one-third of Americans in the top income decile are also in the top education decile, and vice versa.⁷ By using the preferences of both high-income and high-education respondents as predictors of policy outcomes, I partial out from the estimated influence of the affluent that portion of their preferences that represents the views of those with the highest educations. Similarly, I partial out from the estimated influence of the highly

7. Based on the 1998–2002 General Social Surveys, 250 respondents were in both the top 11.4 percent of the income distribution and the top 11.7 percent of the educational distribution (these being the closest cut points to the top deciles). These 250 respondents constituted 30 percent of the top income decile and 29 percent of the top education decile.

Table 3. The Preference/Policy Link for High-Income and High-Education Respondents

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Income	2.25 (0.27)***	—	2.51 (0.84)**
Education	—	2.03 (0.26)***	−0.26 (0.82)
Intercept	−2.06 (0.17)***	−1.93 (0.16)***	−2.06 (0.17)***
N	1,781	1,811	1,781
Log likelihood	2,158	2,200	2,158
Likelihood ratio	$\chi^2(1) = 75.1, p = .000$	$\chi^2(1) = 64.5, p = .000$	$\chi^2(2) = 75.2, p = .000$

NOTE.—Logistic regression analyses, standard errors in parentheses. Cases consist of survey questions about proposed policy changes asked between 1981 and 2002. The dependent variable is policy outcome coded “1” if the proposed policy took place within four years of the survey date and “0” if it did not. The predictors are the imputed percentage of respondents at the 90th income or education percentile favoring the proposed policy change.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

educated that portion of their preferences that represents the views of those with the highest incomes.

Table 3 compares the association of policy outcomes with the preferences of high-income and high-education respondents (i.e., preferences for the 90th income and education percentiles). Including income and education in separate equations (models 1 and 2) suggests similar levels of association with policy outcomes. But when both are included simultaneously, the preferences of high-income respondents remain a strong predictor, while the preferences of the highly educated show no independent impact on policy outcomes. The greater attentiveness to politics that characterizes highly educated Americans does not seem to explain the stronger association between preferences and policy outcomes among the affluent than among less well-off Americans.

Conclusion

If government policy is uniquely responsive to the preferences of affluent Americans, as the evidence above suggests, by what mechanisms do the affluent exert their influence? My data are not well suited to answering this question, and space constraints preclude even an adequate account of the possible mechanisms at work. But the most obvious source of influence over policy that distinguishes high-income Americans is money and the willingness to donate to parties, candidates, and interest organizations. For example, a study of donations to congressional candidates in 1996 finds that four-fifths of donors who gave \$200 or more had incomes in the top 10 percent of all

Americans (Green et al. 1998).⁸ Since not only the propensity to donate but also the size of donations increase with income level, this figure understates—probably to a very large degree—the extent to which political donations come from the most affluent Americans. Of course, money is not the only valued commodity in politics. Groups that can mobilize large numbers of volunteers (like labor and religious organizations) may exert a policy influence that competes with that of the affluent, at least on particular issues at particular points in time. In future research I hope to identify the issues and political conditions that are most and least conducive to the influence of the wealthy over government policy.

There has never been a democratic society in which citizens' influence over government policy was unrelated to their financial resources. In this sense, the difference between democracy and plutocracy is one of degree. But by this same token, a government that is democratic in form but is in practice only responsive to its most affluent citizens is a democracy in name only.

Most middle-income Americans think that public officials do not care much about the preferences of “people like me.”⁹ Sadly, the results presented above suggest they may be right. Whether or not elected officials and other decision makers “care” about middle-class Americans, influence over actual policy outcomes appears to be reserved almost exclusively for those at the top of the income distribution.

Appendix

CONSISTENCY VERSUS INFLUENCE

Table A1 illustrates the problem with using raw consistency between policy preference and policy outcome as a measure of influence in the presence of a status quo bias. The preferences of groups A and B are each consistent with policy outcomes 10 out of 16 times (63 percent). But for group A, policies are three times as likely to be adopted if they are favored than if they are opposed ($3/8$ versus $1/8$), while for group B policies are equally likely to be adopted whether they are favored or opposed ($1/4$ versus $3/12$). The consistency scores are 0.63 for both groups, but the measure of association (in this case, correlation) reveals the stronger relationship between preference and policy for group A (0.29 versus 0.00).

8. Two hundred dollars was the level of donation requiring reporting to the Federal Election Commission.

9. Sixty-two percent of middle-income (\$35,000–\$65,000 in household income) respondents to the 2000 National Election Study agreed that “public officials don’t care much what people like me think,” compared with 36 percent of respondents in the top 10 percent income (over \$100,000 in household income).

Table A1. Hypothetical Preferences for Two Groups

Policy	Group A's Preference	Group B's Preference	Outcome
1	1	1	1
2	1	0	1
3	1	0	1
4	1	0	0
5	1	0	0
6	1	0	0
7	1	0	0
8	1	0	0
9	0	0	1
10	0	1	0
11	0	1	0
12	0	1	0
13	0	0	0
14	0	0	0
15	0	0	0
16	0	0	0
Consistency	0.63	0.63	
Correlation	0.29	0.00	

NOTE.—Group A favors eight policies, of which three are adopted, and opposes eight policies, of which one is adopted. Group B favors four policies, of which one is adopted, and opposes 12 policies, of which three are adopted.

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