How Democratic is the U.S.? Policy Responsiveness

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1. Polarization & Policy Making

2. Policy Responsiveness in the U.S.
Congressional Polarization

Partisan Polarization in Congress since WWII

Polarization measured as absolute difference between first dimension DW–NOMINATE party means.
How do you expect polarization to influence American policymaking under the Pivotal Politics & Partisan Model?

Under the Partisan Model, party polarization & internal unity facilitates delegation to party leaders.

Would this lead to a reduction of agency loss for members & congressional party caucuses?

What are the implications of polarization for the Madisonian vision of the district-centered Congress?

When conditions of polarization and elements of the Partisan theory of Congress are weakened, you get more of a district-centered Congress (ex: 1950’s - 1970’s)
Does Partisan Polarization Help Voters?

- Does Jones present a positive argument for political polarization?
- Jones argues that partisan polarization should help voters assess who to punish or reward for how Congress functions as an institution: “the subordination of individual officeholders to the party lessens their ability to separate themselves from party action.”
- Why would a lack of polarization foster the notion that “party disunity leads to diffused accountability?”
- What is Jones’ main finding?
- If congressional approval is high, majority party members see an increase in their vote percentages & minority party members see a decrease in their vote-shares
- How is this collective accountability? Implications for the partisan model?
Should we expect policy responsiveness from our political institutions, if so, which ones?

Representatives & even the Supreme Court have an incentive to be responsive to the mass public.

Stimson, MacKuen & Eriskon argue two mechanisms of policy responsiveness:

1. New elections can elect new politicians/representatives
2. Policy makers are *antelopes*, they calculate future (mainly electoral) implications of current public views & act accordingly

Stimson et al. assume that representation is *dynamic*, with policymakers being responsive to the ideological preferences of the mass public.

Assumption is that politicians are *well informed* by movements in public opinion.
Dynamic Theory of Policy Responsiveness

1. **Rationality**: Politicians are *rational* actors & make decisions in the *present* that have consequences in the future given the *uncertainty* in which they operate.

2. **Information**: Politicians receive *global information*, in that they look at aggregate public opinion to inform what they are going to do in the future.

3. **Consensus**: “Community of politics” talks about where public opinion is *going* and there is agreement about the direction in which public opinion moves. Example: *Iraq War, Economic collapse*, etc.
Evidence of System-Level Responsiveness

- Evidence of *responsiveness* among Congressional institutions, President, & Supreme Court
- Senate achieves greater responsiveness through *electoral turnover*, same as the Presidency...why?
- House achieves greater responsiveness through *rational anticipation*, why?
- Supreme Court achieves responsiveness, even more so than constitutionally obligated, but least responsive institution. Why? Why would the Court feel the need to be responsive?
- Supreme Court concerned about *legitimacy & legacy*
- Who is really getting represented by the “government” in American politics?
- Optimistic results that the *median voter* is being represented
Contrasting View & Responsiveness with a Caveat: Erikson

- What is Erikson’s argument with respect to how politicians respond to the preferences of the mass public?
- Main criticism is that low-income voters are less likely to be represented by politicians, why?
- Low-income voters less knowledgeable about politics & are less likely to vote/participate than high-income voters
- How does this contrast with the view of representation brought forth by Stimson et al.?
- One constricting view is that politicians are only responsive to constituents with formed political views (i.e. wealthy), why might this be a problem?
Recalling Resource Bias in Participation

Probability of Voter Turnout by Income Level in the 2014 Midterm Elections
Recalling Resource Bias in Participation

Probability of Being a Campaign Donor by Income Level in the 2014 Midterm Elections

- Probability of Contributing to a Campaign
- Voter Income

- Less than $10,000
- Greater than $500,000
Evidence of Divergence in Preferences by Resources

Presidential vote by social welfare opinion and income, 1980-2004

- Low knowledge
- High knowledge

Percent voting Democratic for President

Income percentile
Evidence of Variation in Responsiveness

Probability of Change by Percent Favoring Change by High/Low Income Issues

![Graph showing probability of change by percent favoring change by high/low income issues. The graph includes two lines: one for the 90th percentile favoring at least 10% more and another for the 10th percentile favoring at least 10% more.]
Erikson’s Findings

- Major policy change tends to move in the *liberal* direction (i.e. redistribution, government programs)
- However, upper-income voters & interest groups can slow the pace of liberal change
- Why would low & upper income voters have differing preferences?
- Public support of policies *not* a sufficient condition for policy change, why?
- Is the United States really democratic given the inherent status quo bias?
Key Points:

- Partisan polarization strengthens value of party brand & collective accountability
- Jones finds evidence that collective accountability is possible with greater partisan polarization, majority party representatives gain votes when Congress is popular while minority party representatives lose votes
- Stimson et al. present a dynamic model of representation where political actors anticipate a cost for not being responsive
- Find evidence of responsiveness, House more like antelopes while Senate & Presidency require more electoral turnover for responsiveness
- Supreme Court responsive (less than president & Congress), concerned with legitimacy
- Erikson posits that median voter is not well-represented, but wealthy citizens are better represented given that they participate