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PUBLIC OPINION AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract *Public Opinion Quarterly* at its outset focused heavily on the *influences on* public opinion, predicated on the assumption of its strong impact on politics and policymaking. Has this assumption been borne out? This essay reviews the research on the influence of American public opinion on policymaking that began to use survey data first to examine the legislative representation and then national-level and state-level policies. *POQ*'s assumption has been confirmed by a substantial connection, overall, between public opinion and policymaking in the United States. Although this general finding is striking, there are limits to what we can conclude from it about American *democracy.* This raises important questions for future research and in ongoing debates about major issues before the nation, for which the public holds its leaders accountable.

Introduction

At the start of *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, V. O. Key, Jr., asserted that "Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense. As [Harold] Lasswell has said, the 'open interplay of opinion and policy is the distinguishing mark of popular rule'" (Key 1961, p. 7; citing Lasswell 1941, p. 15). This goes beyond the minimum of electing policymakers (Schumpeter 1950). Early readers of *Public Opinion Quarterly* were no doubt familiar with George Gallup's view that the public opinion polling which he began in 1935 would enable the nation's leaders to find out these mass views and respond to them (Gallup 1938; Gallup

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and Rae 1940). This assumed importance if not decisive power of public opinion, not only to the United States but *worldwide,* was central to the journal's founding in 1937, spurred on by public and private "polling" in the new "scientific" approach to research on mass opinion. It is noteworthy, however, that in accepting a *strong effect* of public opinion, the "Foreword" to the first issue of the journal made no explicit reference to "opinion polls" or "democracy": "A new situation has arisen throughout the world, created by the spread of literacy among the people and the miraculous improvement of the means of communication. Always the opinions of relatively small publics have been a prime force in political life, but now, for the first time in history, we are confronted nearly everywhere by *mass* opinion as the final determinant of political, and economic, action. Today public opinion operates in quite new dimensions and with new intensities; its surging impact upon events becomes the characteristic of the current age—and its ruin or salvation? . . . Under these conditions the clearest possible understanding of what public opinion is, how it generates, and how it acts becomes a vital need touching both public and private interest. . . . Of course the most active and intense interest in public opinion is usually displayed by political leaders, group leaders, advertisers, and others who wish to promote some cause—who have objectives the carrying out of which necessitates the cooperation of many minds" (Editors 1937, pp. 3–4).

At its outset, *POQ* focused heavily on the *influences on* public opinion, predicated on the assumption of its strong impact on politics and policymaking. Indeed, the journal began at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs, and the founding editorial team included the editor, DeWitt Clinton Pool, a U.S. foreign services officer who worked in Russia during the revolution; managing editor, Harwood L. Childs, a public opinion scholar at Princeton who did research on propaganda; and four associate editors. Childs edited the Professional Services section of the journal that focused broadly on public relations/opinion leadership and management; Harold Lasswell's Government section covered research on government informational and public relations activities; E. Pendleton Herring's Organized Groups section focused on the relevant work of groups to secure cohesive followings and rally public support; and O. W. Riegel's Communications section addressed the mass media's behavior and influence on public opinion. Hadley Cantril's Technical Research division stood apart in covering the formation, analysis, and measurement of public opinion—for which *POQ* became best known. The journal, then, was poised to focus on the study of efforts to influence and manipulate public opinion, expecting that such opinion had important political and policy consequences. Whereas Gallup's (1938) and Lehman's (1938) essays in the journal's *Special Supplement: Public Opinion in a Democracy* issue discussed public opinion and policymaking, the remainder of the volume focused on the influences of the mass media and on safeguarding rights and democratic unity.

Has this expectation of public opinion's strong effects on policy been borne out? What can we conclude about American democracy? This essay reviews the

research on the influence of public opinion on policymaking. A fuller discussion of "democracy" would need to cover long-standing normative debates (including requisite procedures and the protection of fundamental rights and liberties) and the important empirical one about the nature and quality of public opinion—its possible shortcomings; its overall "irrationality"/"rationality" or *democratic competence*; the extent it is *autonomous* versus *led, educated*, or *manipulated or deceived* by leaders, the mass media, or other elements of the political system (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992; Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 8; Ginsberg 1986; Herbst 1992; Althaus 2003, 2006; Weissberg 2002; Caplan 2007; Bartels 2008a; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Shapiro and Jacobs 2010, 2011; Gilens Forthcoming). Writing on "British Public Opinion and Foreign Policy" in the first issue of *POQ*, with no references to polls or other concrete opinion measures, a former diplomat and member of Parliament lamented that "the present generation" was too emotional and, in contrast to domestic issues, had "no experience in popular sovereignty in foreign affairs" (Nicolson 1937, p. 63). The voluminous research and writing on such important concerns about public opinion are beyond the bounds of this essay. The public opinion–policy literature alone is now enormous. Whether political leaders became more responsive with greater exposure to public opinion polling is difficult to determine, and there is the question about how to define "the public" in a past when women, 18–21-year-olds, and African Americans did not have full voting rights. What polling did provide was a way—as the 19th century's Lord Bryce (1897) had wanted and Harry Field intended in founding the National Opinion Research Center in 1941 (National Opinion Research Center 1992)—of regularly measuring people's privately held opinions that leaders might act on, not just the opinions of those who choose to influence leaders through political activity (see Key 1961, p. 14; Dahl 1956; Verba 1996). *And* political scientists and others could use these *data* to examine more analytically than before the impact of the mass public on government policies.

The main section that follows recaps how these data were used to examine first legislative representation and then nation-level and state-level policies. It shows, overall, a substantial connection between public opinion and policymaking in the United States. Though this general finding is striking, the remainder of the essay emphasizes the limits to what we can conclude from it about American *democracy* and raises important questions for future research.

Public Opinion and Policymaking

Research that used survey data to study the relationship between public opinion and policymaking began slowly. This is surprising since this relationship is central to normative and empirical theories about the workings of democracy. While different causal processes or "linkages" might be at work—including interdependent ones—the most persuasive driving force is *electoral*

accountability, which anticipates that elected leaders in a democratic nation will not deviate far from voters' opinions—at least by the time of the next election (see Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974; on other linkages, see Monroe and Gardner 1987; Erikson and Tedin 2011 and its earlier editions; Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 9). After 1935, national opinion data could be used to study this. Whether due to what were thought to be important research questions (including how to conceptualize and measure "public opinion"; see Rogers 1949; Herbst 1992; Lee 2002) or the lack of easy access to the data needed for appropriate research designs, it took until the 1970s for this work to take off. The research now encompasses hundreds of articles, as well as major books on the effects of public opinion on policy (see the more extensive bibliography that is available online at http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/). The largest number of research articles have examined legislative representation and public opinion and policy-making in the states. There have been numerous useful reviews, beginning in 1979 (Kuklinski 1979; Jewell and Loewenberg 1979; Uslaner 1986; Monroe and Gardner 1987; Shapiro and Jacobs 1989, 2010, 2011; Kuklinski and Segura 1995; Page 2002; Brooks 2006; Burstein 1998a, 2003, 2006, 2010; Manza and Cook 2002a, 2002b; Wlezien 2011; Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 9; Druckman and Jacobs 2009; Quirk 2009, 2011; Quirk and Hinchcliffe 1998; Stimson 2007; Wlezien and Soroka 2007).

Has the evidence to date met V. O. Key's expectation that public opinion has "a place in the shaping of policy"? Is it a "strong effect"? In short, the answers from past reviews range from a strong "yes" to "it is conditional" to "let's reserve judgment" (e.g., Stimson 2007; Manza and Cook 2002a, 2002b; Page 2002; Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 9). Burstein (2010, p. 72) offers a balanced summary: "Overall the finding that opinion influences policy is amazingly robust—most studies show opinion affecting policy regardless of how opinion, policy, and the relationship between them is measured. It's not possible to say how strong the relationship is, or how the strength depends on circumstances." In fact, the range of studies has been enormous; different methodologies and an enormous amount of data have provided evidence for such recurring relationships under conditions consistent with opinion affecting government policies; and, as Burstein also notes, errors in measuring both opinion and policy very likely underestimate the relationship. There is still much debate about whether the "effects" found are genuinely *causal*—whether other factors and explanations have been controlled statistically to the extent possible or otherwise taken into account (Page 2002; Burstein 2010; and other reviews cited above)—but it is a discussion that continues as new studies point to the same conclusion about the opinion–policy relationship. Substantively, public opinion can both *constrain* (which Key 1961 emphasized; Powlick and Katz 1998; Sobel 2001; Foyle 2004) and influence policymakers (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 9; Stimson 2007; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

Even when particular conditions and bounds are accepted, the evidence is so impressive that it might raise the question of a "file drawer" effect, in which null

findings are neither submitted nor accepted for publication. This is unlikely, given the indeterminacy of the full strength of the relationships, a number of reports and cases of null results, and negative interpretations regarding how the opinion–policy effects bear on "democracy." As to the bounds of the research, the most compelling evidence has been limited to the issues covered in opinion surveys conducted by public pollsters (for their subscribers and public releases), media pollsters, academic surveyors, and private pollsters and consultants doing proprietary work for political parties, candidates, organized groups, and others. These data cover topics and issues that are salient and important to pollsters' subscribers and clients and to academic researchers. Thus, the evidence for the effects of public opinion covers largely salient matters (see Burstein 2006). Further, the relative visibility and importance of these issues makes a difference as well. The repeated finding of greater or more frequent effects of opinion on more salient policies fits directly with the expectation that political leaders and candidates would be most concerned with matters that are of greatest visibility to (potential) voters (and as "issue publics" expand; see Shapiro 1998). If, however, the dominant finding had been one of little or no opinion–policy relationship, this would have shown that the political system was not responsive to public opinion.

One cynical view concerning responsiveness is that the most important influences on policy have been those that determine what issues make it to the political agenda and what pollsters ask about (Lewis 2001). Although this may have been true in part historically (see Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Schattschneider 1960), it is difficult to uncover the suppression of issues among the large number of major policies that have been examined (see Burstein 2010). On the other hand, this research has only recently attempted to look at identifiable major issues for which there are no available opinion data and how this might alter conclusions about democratic responsiveness (Barabas 2007; Jacobs and Shapiro 2008). A more compelling concern is how policymaking elites promote issues and influence public opinion through rhetoric and persuasion. Policies ultimately enacted may consequently be related to opinions that policymakers have helped shape through their rhetoric and behavior (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, on "crafted talk"; Cohen 1973), so that this would be responsiveness in which public opinion was not an independent driving force. Such cases require closer examination in making judgments about whether the outcomes are "democratic," and as noted above, the evaluation of the quality of these influences on public opinion goes beyond the limits of this essay.

In addition to issue salience, other conditions affecting the attentiveness of policymakers to the public include the size of opinion majorities, the magnitudes of opinion changes, the time in an election cycle (with policy changes responding to the public before an election versus after the election with changes in the governing elites; Kuklinski 1978; Shapiro 1982), the degree of electoral competition (e.g., Kuklinski 1977b) , and the politics associated with different types of issues that lead to predictions, in particular, that

responsiveness will be greater for domestic than foreign policy, which are more complex, often less salient, and where the president dominates (see Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1983; Shapiro 1982; Shapiro and Jacobs 2002; Murray 2006; Foyle 2011; and Lowi 1988 on different *types* of issues). It also matters, then, which institutional actors are taking action: the president, each house of Congress, the Supreme Court or other courts, and state and local governments and their separate institutions. Moreover, political parties and or organized groups active on an issue can help channel—or thwart—the wishes of the public in the policymaking process (e.g., Burstein 2003, 2010; Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 9; Bartels 2008a; Gilens Forthcoming; Monroe 1983; Winter and Page 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Hussey and Zaller 2011; Shapiro and Jacobs 2010, 2011).

The Beginning: Constituency Representation

The first research on the opinion–policy relationship in the United States that examined legislative activity provided a framework for later work. The path-breaking Miller and Stokes's study of "Constituency Influence in Congress" (1963) examined 1950s data for congressional districts, more than 20 years after the first "scientific" national polls were conducted. It compared district-level public opinion, based on very small and far from representative cross-sectional samples from the early National Election Studies (NES), with the corresponding congressmen's roll votes and responses to a separate survey of their political attitudes and perceptions of their constituents' opinions. Until this time and continuing afterward, it was common to correlate characteristics of geographic units—district-, state-, and city- or community-level demographics and other variables—with policy output or outcome measures as a way of imputing significant effects of public needs, interests, or wants (e.g., Shapiro and Jacobs's review 1989; MacRae 1952; Froman 1963; Fiorina 1974; Jackson 1974; Peltzman 1984; Krehbiel 1993; Uslaner 1998). As the first to examine direct measures of public opinion in this way, Miller and Stokes (1963) found a modest relationship between constituency opinions and congressmen's roll call voting overall and differing noticeably across policy areas. The weakest relationship occurred for much less visible foreign policy issues; there was a solid correlation for the more salient civil rights legislation votes, along with statistical evidence of representatives acting in accord with their perceptions of their constituents; and the relationship was noteworthy for economic welfare issues.

This work was gradually followed by studies that similarly compared constituency–legislator "dyads" of measures of public opinion and policy action in both houses of Congress, in state legislatures, and in similar European bodies (e.g., Converse and Pierce 1986). Researchers sought better aggregate measures of public opinion to study the responsiveness of the policies of state governments and across countries. Reanalyses of the Miller and Stokes data found stronger relationships after dealing with measurement error or applying

newly developed methods for estimating or "simulating" aggregate opinion from census data and individual-level surveys. This simulation methodology was initially used to study the effect of opinion on state government policymaking and could also be applied to opinion influences on U.S. senators' voting and that of state legislators (this use of demographics, in effect, as "instruments," controlled for any reverse causation; see Weber et al. 1972; Weber and Shaffer 1972; Uslaner and Weber 1979; Shapiro and Jacobs 1989; Page 2002; Erikson 1978; the latest advancement in Lax and Phillips 2009a; Krimmel, Lax, and Phillips 2011; Warshaw and Rodden Forthcoming). A more representative sampling design more than 20 years later in the 1978 NES survey revealed stronger results for Miller and Stokes's domestic issues (racial integration, aid to minorities, health care, providing jobs), as well as new ones such as women's rights (and to a much lesser extent law-and-order issues and abortion; see Erikson 1981; Powell 1982; Page et al. 1984). Using the 1980 NES to measure district-level opinions toward defense spending (and district demographics as instrumental variables to deal with measurement error), Bartels (1991) showed that these opinions were strongly related to House member voting on the major Ronald Reagan–era defense buildup.

Looking at the NES data over time, still based on small district samples, Stone (1982) found some increase in the relationship from 1956 to 1972 between district opinion and roll call voting. Overall, the congressional and state-level constituency representation literature provided evidence for district-level responsiveness to public opinion, controlling for other variables and in which issue salience remained important. There remains some uncertainty, however, regarding whether legislators were responsive to all their constituents or mainly their fellow partisans or particular core constituents (see Mayhew 1974; Bishin 2009; Clinton 2006; Jewell and Loewenberg 1979). The latest development in the search for better measures of opinion and policy action has been the availability of large samples from the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES; see Clinton 2006, which combined this with data from Knowledge Networks) and the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) that can be used for district-level as well as state-level research (see Bafumi and Herron 2010).

Representation in the U.S. Senate and in the states could be studied by pooling multiple NES and NORC General Social Surveys (NORC-GSS) to obtain large samples, and there was a major Senate National Election Study (1988–1992, SNES) that provided more representative state samples as well (Norrander 2001; Brace et al. 2002; Matsusaka 2010). Measures of the state-level-opinion liberalism–conservatism that were developed to study state policymaking by pooling the 1976–1988 CBS News/*New York Times* surveys could also be used to study voting by senators (see below and Erikson et al. 1993). The NAES and CCES data can also be used for this purpose, as well as exit poll data in election years that have large samples (see Frankovic, Panagopoulos, and Shapiro 2010; Medoff, Dennis, and Bishin 1995b). The use of these state-level opinion

measures has found that the effects of public opinion on Senate roll call voting have varied by issue, with some evidence for greater responsiveness in homogeneous than heterogeneous states (e.g., greater on gun control, trade, and general ideological policy direction than on abortion issues; Medoff et al. 1995a, 1995b; Bailey and Brady 1998). Among the most recent research, using a new and more refined method of estimating state opinion (see below), Kastellec, Lax, and Phillips (2010) found that state-level public opinion was strongly related to senators' votes to ratify the nominations of justices to the Supreme Court.

To examine district and Senate representation prior, and continuing subsequent, to the emergence of opinion polling, a number of studies used less direct measures of opinion to study representation. The existence of opinion surveys did not mean that legislators or any policymakers had access to measures of opinions on all issues on the policy agenda. They continued to use whatever information or impressions they might get from the media, contacts by lobbying groups and constituents, and any informants they had relied on. Some studies, especially those concerned with representation over time, used district-level partisan presidential votes as proxies for voter ideology (see Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Under the assumption that House delegations represent their constituencies very well, their (liberal–conservative) ideological voting records (i.e., as measured by Americans for Democratic Action [ADA], Americans for Constitutional Action [ACA], or "DW-nominate" scores; see Wood and Hinter-Andersson 1998; Poole and Rosenthal 1997) could arguably be averaged as proxies for state-level opinions, especially for tracking them in a standardized way over time (Berry et al. 1998). More aptly, to examine directly opinions on specific policy issues, ballot initiatives and referenda votes were used as estimates of policy preferences (see the review by McDonagh 1992, 1993; e.g., Overby 1991 on the nuclear freeze issue). Using the available referenda results by county (covering the years 1913–1921) to measure district-level opinion toward women's suffrage, Prohibition, and the pro-labor Clayton Act, McDonagh (1992, 1993), found district opinion to have a substantial impact on House roll call votes. For the years 1917–1937, just leading into the expansion of Gallup's polling, Karol (2007) showed that the Literary Digest Polls, which had known biases in their population coverage and responses, could be used to uncover a significant impact of state-level public opinion on Senate voting on Prohibition, the Soldier's Bonus, and the Mellon Plan (tax cuts).

The issues cited above, again, were salient ones examined in studies that also took pains to control for other variables, including partisanship and other characteristics of the elected representatives themselves. Although the findings of constituency effects have proven reliable, this research fell short in that Senate and House members' votes are not enacted government *policies*. In addition, the statistical evidence for *responsiveness* does not directly indicate whether the public is getting the policy action it wants. What it does show is that opinions

in districts or states that are more supportive of a policy in a particular direction are reflected through more supportive roll call voting in that direction. This is a compelling effect. But because opinions and policy votes themselves are not measured on the same scale, any estimate of correlation does not provide any information on the *closeness* or *proximity* or public opinion and policy behavior or action (Achen 1978). This sets a higher bar for any judgments concerning democracy, which is considered further below.

The National Level: Aggregate Policy, Presidents, and the Courts

Congressional and state-level studies of legislators and those whom they represent have profound normative and empirical importance to political scientists and philosophers who have contemplated whether elected legislators should behave as "delegates," who directly channel the expressed wishes of their constituents, or as "trustees" who fit the Edmund Burke model of leaders chosen to exercise their own best judgment in serving the interests of their constituents (Wahlke et al. 1962). But as Weissberg (1978) noted, this examination of legislator–district "dyads" is different from analyzing the extent to which representatives collectively assert the preferences of the nation's citizenry as a whole. His own analysis of the 1958 Miller and Stokes data showed that members of Congress taken altogether represented the opinions of congressional districts better than found in the dyadic comparisons for all three policy areas (see also Hurley 1982, 1989). Backstrom (1977) compared surveyed national public opinion on six issues with the surveyed responses on these issues from House and Senate members in 1970—the Vietnam war, the antiballistic missile program, control of inflation, a family income maintenance program, social and economic assistance to blacks, and the Supreme Court on the rights of the accused. He found that the majorities of House members and the public agreed on four of the six issues, with a three-three split for senators. The logical extension of this was the comparison of public opinion *majorities* and the actual *enactment of policies*, not legislative votes or position-taking along the way, which is presumably what Gallup, Key, and others had in mind (which raises the question, what took so long to examine this?). To this end, research designs were needed to compare measures of national public opinion with government policies at particular points in time and over long time periods, so that short-term and long-term effects of opinion on policy could be ascertained.

National opinion surveys have provided data to compare over time the degree of consistency or *congruence* between national public opinion and government policies. Policies have been measured in different ways depending on the issues described in the survey questions: the enactment (or not) of legislation—corresponding precisely with, or sufficiently close to, the action proposed in the questions; the corresponding or approximate presidential, bureaucratic, or judicial (especially Supreme Court) decisions; inflation-adjusted government expenditures for spending issues; and any relevant quantitative

indicators called for by particular question wordings, such as troop levels, immigration levels, and the like (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1982; Shapiro 1982, Appendix A). Interpretive analyses of individual issues can be found in histories and case studies (e.g., works cited in Shapiro and Jacobs 1989, pp. 152–53; Weaver 2002; Burstein 1998b; Burstein and Freudenberg 1978; Hinckley 1992; Sobel 2001; Jacobs 1993). The first important analytic works were Weissberg's *Public Opinion and Popular Government* (1976) and Devine's *The Attentive Public: Polyarchical Democracy* (1970). In studying the opinion–policy relationship, Weissberg made the important distinction between "majoritarian congruence," or agreement between opinion majorities and government policies, and "covariational congruence" between *opinion changes* and *policy changes*. This led to the two major strands of research that subsequently provided the most widely cited evidence for strong effects of public opinion on policy. Looking at a relatively small number of issues, however, Weissberg found limited evidence for both forms of congruence. Devine had found greater opinion–policy congruence for the preferences of the more politically "attentive" segment of the public, though his data showed congruence for public opinion writ large as well. Often overlooked, Hughes (1978) offered similar findings for foreign policy issues, while looking at a fuller range of domestic influences on them.

To reach any conclusion regarding persistent or predictable effects of opinion on policy, however, required examining a large number of issues over time. Monroe (1979) and Page and Shapiro (1983) offered this kind of evidence. In comparing public policy changes (or lack thereof) for more than 200 issues for which he could compare majority opinion supporting or opposing such *proposed changes* (as framed in the available survey questions and albeit sensitive to question wording), Monroe (1979) found majoritarian congruence in 64 percent of these cases. Page and Shapiro's (1983; Shapiro 1982) findings were about the same (66 percent) in comparing changes in policy one year after changes in public opinion occurred also for well over 200 cases ("instances") of opinion change. The relationship was greater for larger opinion changes and more highly salient issues. Both Monroe and Page and Shapiro noted that finding over 50 percent congruent—more than the random coin toss result—indicated that something systematic was at work. But the possibility of a 50 percent or even lower result would not preclude the possibility that public opinion mattered in policymaking in many important cases (see Brooks 1985, 1987, 1990), though not in the preponderance of them. By the same token, 60 percent or greater congruence may not include many important cause-and-effect connections. Based on closer analysis, however, the time sequences in the relationships that Page and Shapiro (1983) found suggested that any effect of opinion on policy was more prevalent than the reverse effect. In addition, the congruence that Monroe (1979) and Page and Shapiro (1983) found occurred more frequently for larger opinion majorities, larger opinion

changes, and more salient issues, as expected if policymakers were attuned and responsive to public opinion (see also Graham 1994; Murray 2006).

Monroe (1983) connected his cases of congruence to processes of party representation, which are also consistent with presidents fulfilling a large number of their campaign promises and party platforms driven by concerns for public opinion (Pomper with Lederman 1980; Fishel 1985; Patterson 1996). There have not been a great many other similar studies of country-level responsiveness across a wide range of issues. Monroe's (1998, 2001) updated research found a drop to 55 percent in the early 1990s and 53 percent by the end of the decade. Outside the United States, Brooks (1985, 1987, 1990) stood out in finding low levels of opinion–policy congruence in his comparisons for the Anglo American countries, France, and West Germany. In contrast, Brettschneider's (1996) study of German public opinion and Petry's study in Canada (1999; see also Petry and Mendelsohn 2004) found congruence at 60 percent. There has been, however, far less research done in Europe and elsewhere compared to the United States (see Dalton 2006).

More targeted study has been devoted to presidential responsiveness to public opinion. This has included research on the congruence of presidential policymaking with public opinion, along with archival work uncovering presidents' private polling and analyses in order to examine the causal processes at work (Jacobs 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2000; Druckman and Jacobs 2006, 2011; Eisinger 2003; Foyle 1999; Murray 2006; Murray and Howard 2002; Heith 2004; Rottinghaus 2007, 2010; Knecht 2010; Stevens 2002; Towle 2004; Tenpas and McCann 2007). These studies of the "public presidency" have reported noticeable congruence between public opinion and presidential position-taking and actions, but presidential representation is complicated and fluid. As Druckman and Jacobs (2009) observed in their review of this work, presidents have substantial influence on what issues rise to the fore on the policy agenda so that they can target their responsiveness to them and to the preferences of certain segments of the country. Presidents can also shift the standards by which the public evaluates their performance in office—away from policy concerns and toward symbolic activities, image, and personality (see Cohen 1997; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Druckman and Jacobs 2006, 2009, 2011).

The frequency and patterns of congruence are striking in particular studies. Looking at presidential rhetoric, Rottinghaus (2010) found that presidents' positions were congruent with prior majority opinion in 70 percent of the issues he examined. Canes-Wrone (2006) found less congruence overall (just over 50 percent) for public opinion and presidents' proposed budgetary changes, but over 70 percent in the cases of more ideologically charged social welfare issues. Congruence also increased as an election neared; it was contingent also on the president's popularity and declined for second-term presidents. Whereas Murray (2006) found congruence at 54 percent among the policies she examined during the Reagan administration, it occurred more frequently for domestic

issues and issues with greater salience and opinion majorities much greater than 50 percent; it reached nearly 75 percent for highly salient and supported domestic policies. Druckman and Jacobs's (2011) analysis of the Reagan administration also revealed significant effects of public opinion on administration's domestic policy positions, but this masked greater responsiveness to religious conservatives and Independents in order to strengthen the administration's party's coalition. Despite claims that George W. Bush was unresponsive to public opinion during the polarizing conflict surrounding his administration, Jacobs and Shapiro (2008) found that more than half of the key votes in Congress that Bush supported were congruent with majority opinion during the first six years of his presidency. At the same time, however, his administration was able to pursue policies that were not widely visible and clear, allowing it to pursue conservative policy goals, responding to Republican partisans (see Wood 2009), with diminished risk of electoral punishment.

The above summary presents an overall picture in need of examples to fill out the picture (see Burstein's 2010 critique). In Page and Shapiro (1983; Shapiro 1982), the frequency of congruence was 100 percent and 71 percent for high-profile World War II and Vietnam war issues, respectively, and the 78 percent for social rights and civil liberties involved large long-term opinion changes. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed after support increased from mid-1963 to early 1964, and the legalization of abortion in the 1970s came with opinion changes afoot after 1965. Campaign spending laws in 1971 and 1974 and seat belt requirements for all cars came about after significant opinion changes, as did the final push for admission of Hawaii as a state in 1959, tariff changes from the mid-1950s into 1961, the winding down of military aid to Nationalist Chinese (1948–49), 1948–50 cuts in aid to Europe, increased aid to "backward" countries in the early to mid-1950s, and the admission of Communist China into the UN after a major opinion shift from 1964 to 1971.

More compelling evidence for the persistent causal interplay in which policy responds to public opinion has come from time-series studies that were finally possible as more trend data (i.e., responses to identically worded survey questions) became available, encompassing an increasing number of major issues. Three major studies have examined the influence of public opinion regarding expansive government: Erikson et al.'s (2002) *The Macro Polity*; Brooks and Manza's (2007) *Why Welfare States Persist;* and Soroka and Wlezien's (2010) *Degrees of Democracy*. They stand out because they are book-length works based on time-series data and multivariate analysis that are important frames of reference for future work.

The Macro Polity starts from the premise that, aside from the most salient issues, political leaders do not respond issue-by-issue but rather react to changes in the overall liberal-to-conservative "public mood," which they measured as a composite of opinion trends across a range of big government/domestic economic welfare issues. The public in the aggregate may express preferences

on individual issues moving over time in an overall liberal–conservative direction, or they might use ideology as a shortcut in making judgments about the direction of government policy. The authors compared trends in liberal–conservative mood from the early 1950s forward and found that it tracked closely with multiple measures of policymaking activities for the House of Representatives (average ADA-ACA ratings for the entire House, the median size of the liberal coalition on all actual identifiable liberal–conservative roll call votes, and the percentage of liberal wins on all these identifiable votes); the Senate (same measures as for the House); the president (the percentage of presidential stands each year that were liberal for what were classified as "key votes" in Congress, the liberalism of the president's overall supporting coalition in the House and Senate, and the percentage of liberal *amicus curiae* briefs filed by the solicitor general in Supreme Court cases); and the Supreme Court (the percentage of liberal votes cast by Supreme Court justices in criminal procedure, civil liberties, and economics cases); an overall combined measure of policy activity for all four institutions; and the number and cumulative total of all "important" liberal laws enacted (Erikson et al. 2002, pp. 294–303, 325–36). The time lags found for the relationships were consistent with effects of opinion on policy corresponding to the timing of elections for the different institutions, with the trends tracking least closely, as expected, for the non-elected members of the Supreme Court (more on the courts below).

Why Welfare States Persist examines government responsiveness to public preferences for social welfare benefits and related policies by comparing how these policies differ across 16 Western European and other developed democratic countries and over time. The authors used public opinion data (a scale indicating support for government responsibility to provide jobs and to reduce income differences) for years between 1985 and 2000 from the International Social Survey Program; their policy measure was total government spending on nine types of "cash and in-kind benefits and services" as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (Brooks and Manza 2007, pp. 39–40). The expected responsiveness to public opinion was suggested in Coughlin's (1980; also Shapiro and Young 1989) analysis of fragmentary opinion data for a few countries, and Brooks and Manza examined this further in a pooled time-series analysis to show that the strength of the persistence over time of welfare state policies has varied consistently with the level of public support for such policies, with the United States historically at the low end compared to other countries—defined further as liberal democracies, Christian democracies, and social democracies. How the effects of opinion on policies play out in the shorter term, however, for which there is less data, calls for further analysis (see Myles 2006). Taking a similar but more qualitative approach in examining foreign policy, Risse-Kappen (1991) showed how responsiveness to trends in public opinion within several nations during the Cold War depended on the degree of strong-state, centralized policymaking within countries: There was more limited responsiveness to public opinion in more centralized and state-

dominated France and Japan, compared to the United States and Germany, in the easing of tensions and of the military buildup against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, as the public saw the Soviets as less of a threat and supported less national defense spending.

Degrees of Democracy synthesized and expanded its authors' earlier work, which focused on opinion time-series analyses for a range of policy areas in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (e.g., Wlezien 1995, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2005; Soroka and Wlezien 2011, extending the research to additional countries). It examined government spending (measures of both appropriations and expenditures) on national defense, welfare, health care, education, the environment, the problems of cities, the space program, crime, and foreign aid for the United States; national defense, health care, education, and transportation for the United Kingdom; and national defense, health care, welfare, and transportation in Canada. Overall, the evidence revealed substantial but varying degrees of responsiveness to the countries' publics wanting more or less spending (taking into account appropriations decisions versus outlays), greater responsiveness in the cases of more salient issues, and the most glaring cases of nonresponsiveness occurring for spending on foreign aid and dealing with crime in the United States. The U.S. system, however, tended to be the most responsive overall in the other policy areas.

Other time-series research reported similar and even more striking cases of policy following the lead of public opinion. Hobolt and Klemmensen's (2005, 2008) longitudinal studies of policy priorities showed how public opinion drives policymakers' attention and government expenditures in major policy areas in the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the United States. Soroka and Wlezien's (2010) findings for defense spending comport with other analyses of defense spending in the United States over the past 40 years and of changes in support for the Vietnam war from the 1960s to the early 1970s (including responses to questions about troop levels, not just general support; see Shapiro and Page 1994; Hartley and Russett 1992; also Bartels 1991; Page and Shapiro 1992). In a recent and highly compelling study, Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun, in *The Decline of the Death Penalty and the Discovery of Innocence* (2008), show how the decline in national public support for the death penalty for murder that occurred after DNA and other new evidence revealed numerous cases of innocent people on death row, led to an overall decline in death sentences and executions in the United States (on past sentencing in the federal judiciary, see Cook 1977; Kritzer 1979; Kuklinski and Stanga 1979). Brace and Boyea (2008) found that elected state supreme courts were not beyond influence by state-level public opinion in their decisions on whether to reverse death penalty decisions.

That the judiciary might be influenced by public opinion runs against the argument that, with the exception of states that elect judges, this branch of government is insulated from politics. There has been a surprisingly large literature on the effect of public opinion on Supreme Court decision-making.

This Court has been described as the "least dangerous" or weakest branch of government since it requires the executive branch and other levels of government to enforce its decisions, and the judiciary depends on legislation for its budget and infrastructure. The members of the Court and the rest of the federal judiciary are the political appointees of presidents who would prefer judges similar to themselves in their ideological and political views. And the opinions of judges might change in parallel with the public as they share the same values and may be influenced by the same forces, societal developments, and changes in real-world conditions, which reach their further attention through litigation. Research has progressed substantially from the early use of congressional majorities that upheld or bypassed Court decisions as proxies for public opinion to determine the responsiveness of the Court (see Dahl 1957; Casper 1976). Based on comparisons of public opinion data with Court rulings and on other observations, there is a consensus "that public preferences and court policies continue to be largely in agreement with one another" (Gibson 2008, pp. 828–29; Marshall 1989, 2008). The debate, however, is whether this reflects responsiveness to public opinion or political leadership by the Court (see Shapiro and Jacobs 1989, pp. 156–58). There is evidence that at least some decisions clearly followed significant changes in national public opinion, such as those toward civil rights and abortion (Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992; Shapiro 1982).

To further untangle the direction of influence, a series of studies has examined the effect of changes in liberal–conservative public mood on judicial decisions. The latest debate on this has focused on the proportions of liberal Supreme Court decisions each term that reversed rulings in a lower court, which researchers argued provided a theoretically and empirically compelling assessment of the effect of the public's ideological mood. These effects have been found to be pronounced, similar to what earlier studies found for other measures of court decision-making, but not more so for more salient cases (see Casillas, Enns, and Wohlforth 2011; McGuire and Stimson 2004; Mishler and Sheehan 1993, 1994, 1996; but see Norpoth and Segal 1994). That so much attention has been devoted to policymaking by the branch of government least expected to yield to pressures from public opinion says much about the importance of public opinion in the policymaking process.

State Policymaking

The effects of public opinion are relevant not just to national-level policymakers, but to government actions at all levels and in all decision-making institutions. On the political agenda writ large, however, state and local issues and the actions and politics of these governments are less visible in the national media. In contrast, it might be expected that responsiveness is greater at levels "closer to the people," including administrators and bureaucrats at all levels

charged with implementing policies and solving problems that arise in doing so. There is a long train of research in public administration that looks at the role of citizens' input and participation, including survey studies of citizen satisfaction and inquiries about problems that need to be addressed (see the brief reviews in Shapiro and Jacobs 1989; Frankovic et al. 2010). The U.S. government has a long history of survey research, not the least of which is the decennial census, related to fact-finding for purposes of identifying problems and collecting data useful in policymaking and implementation (see Converse 1987; Frankovic et al. 2010). These are not political in the sense of this essay but can facilitate responsiveness to the public's wants and needs.

As noted above, state and local policymaking could be studied using aggregate demographic characteristics as proxies for the public's interests and preferences (on the local level, e.g., Schumaker and Getter 1977; see Clark and Ferguson 1983). From the outset, this research faced challenges and criticisms. For one, there was disagreement regarding whether demographic variables, especially economic ones, were indicators of public pressures having the same status as political variables such as partisanship or party competition (e.g., Dawson and Robinson 1963; Erikson 2011). Second, in states and localities in particular, it was argued that individuals voted with their feet, selecting where to live based on existing policies; or they were predisposed to like these policies or to go along with the dominant elites (Peterson 1981; Erikson 2011). Although the state and local studies suggested varying degrees of government responsiveness, to show this more convincingly required at minimum more direct estimates or measures of public opinion. The first efforts in this direction, though fraught with limitations, were "simulations" of state-level opinion using census data in tandem with information from individual-level surveys to estimate how demographic attributes translated into opinions and policy preferences (see under "The Beginning: Constituency Representation" above; Seidman 1975; Kuklinski 1977a). More compelling evidence for substantial state-level government responsiveness to public opinion came from studies that measured directly the opinions of state residents, their degree of liberalism–conservatism, or that have drawn on further advances in estimating state public opinion based on demographic data and national surveys.

State-level opinion data have not been easy to come by due to small (or nonexistent) state samples within national surveys, and state-by-state polling has been done on an ad hoc basis without designs or coordination for comparisons across states. With the NAES and CCES data and the national and state election-year exit polls, some large samples can be compared for recent years, and referenda and ballot initiative results can be used in the states in which they are available, which is preferable to using presidential vote or ideologically scaled congressional votes in targeting specific issues. Erikson (1976) broke new ground by ferreting out and using large Gallup Poll samples in 1936 and 1937 to find a substantial relationship of state-level public opinion with whether state governments had the death penalty for murder, allowed women to serve on

juries, and ratified the proposed Child Labor Amendment (which Congress had passed). Gibson (1988) also made clever use of the large survey that Stouffer (1955) conducted to study political tolerance to show that there was some correlation between public opinion and the repressiveness of the anticommunist legislation that states adopted. In this case, however, the crucial influence at work came from elites (based on Stouffer's parallel surveying of community leaders) in the states, very likely influencing public opinion but largely spurring the severity of the states' responses (Gibson 1988).

The now large research literature on state public opinion and policymaking has used different survey-based measures of public opinion. The use of state ballot initiatives and referenda still has appeal, but more importantly, the existence of these in any state has been routinely used in studies as a measure of democratic norms and values or as an institutional context that emphasizes responsiveness to public opinion. There has been disagreement on how much this and other political institutional variables interact with public opinion to facilitate policy responsiveness (see Gerber 1999; Gerber and Lewis 2004; Lascher, Hagen, and Rochlin 1996; Camobreco 1998; Matsusaka 2004; Arceneaux 2002; Hagen, Lascher, and Camobreco 2001; Burden 2005; Lupia et al. 2010; Lax and Phillips 2009b and Forthcoming; Lewis 2011), but there is little disagreement that public opinion matters in state policymaking: A number of studies have disaggregated state samples from individual or pooled NORC-GSS or NES surveys; used the 1988–1992 Senate National Election Studies; or have pieced together opinion measures from state or national polls by different organizations. These studies have found significant effects of public opinion on policies, including capital punishment, restriction of abortions, gay rights issues, school prayer, and certain taxes and spending policies (Norrander and Wilcox 1999; Norrander 2000; Arceneaux 2002; Burden 2005; Lupia et al. 2010; Brace et al. 2002; Matsusaka 2010; Lewis 2011).

Pre-dating Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson's (2002) work and premised on a similar causal process in which leaders sense changes in the ideological direction of the public's policy preferences, Erikson, Wright, and McGiver's (EWM) *Statehouse Democracy* (1993) showed how variations in different state policies (and a combined policy measure) can be explained by the different ideological leanings state publics measured by pooling a large number of CBS News/*NYT* polls that asked respondents to self-identify as liberal, conservative, or moderate. Like the aggregate public mood measure used in national studies, the EWM ideology measure has become widely used in studies of state politics and policymaking, showing the effect of states' opinion ideologies on a wide range of policies, including education spending, the scope of Medicaid and Aid for Family with Dependent Children, the legalization of gambling, passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, capital punishment, and those related to state spending and tax effort and progressivity (e.g., Lascher et al. 1996; Camobreco 1998; Mooney and Lee 2000).

The latest advanced technique that has been used to estimate state-level public opinion as well as public opinion at other levels of aggregation (especially legislative districts but also others) builds on the simulation methods that used national-level survey data in conjunction with state-level census data. This multilevel regression and poststratification method (MRP) developed by Park, Gelman, and Bafumi (2006) has been used on a large scale by Lax and Phillips (2009a), who first examined and showed how state policies toward gay rights were responsive to public opinions toward these rights—more so than any effect of liberal–conservative ideology. Extending this to 39 policies covering eight issue areas—abortion, education, electoral reform, gambling, gay rights, health care, immigration, and law enforcement —they found that state policies are highly responsive to state publics' issue specific preferences, statistically controlling for other variables; they confirm that issue salience affects this relationship, as does legislative professionalism and term limits that apparently sensitize state legislatures to public opinion, consistent with electoral motivations (Lax and Phillips Forthcoming). This method of opinion measurement was also used at the local level in Berkman and Plutzer's (2005) study of how political and institutional factors bear on how public opinion affects spending on education by school districts.

Limited Democracy?

The above review of a sweeping range of research shows that public opinion matters in policymaking in the United States. Though a fully and indisputably *causal* effect of public opinion is still subject to debate (Page 2002), the overall evidence—qualifications, contingencies, and all—provides a sanguine picture of democracy at work. The findings are consistent with the incentives that elections provide for office-seeking leaders and for political parties that recruit candidates attuned to public opinion. Geer (1996) has argued that the proliferation of polling both outside and inside government available to leaders should strengthen this by providing better information about public opinion than has been available in the past. There is no direct evidence, however, that polling has had precisely this effect. Opinion surveys have provided data to study the opinion–policy connection, and to the extent that they provide the best measures of public opinion, they should sharpen findings for this relationship and the relationships should be stronger if the results of polls actually enter the policymaking process. There is, however, no clear evidence for a stronger relationship than in the past. Rather, one current debate is that policy responsiveness to the public at large has decreased: Partisan conflict has become more polarized, and presidents and other political leaders have used polling to determine how best to lead, persuade, and manipulate public opinion, not respond to it. The opinions to which they may be most likely to respond are those of their partisan bases whose support they must keep to avoid intraparty challenges

(see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Layman et al. 2010; Abramowitz 2010; Jacobson 2008; Fiorina with Abrams 2009; Wood 2009; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008; Shapiro and Jacobs 2010, 2011; Quirk 2009, 2011; see also McClosky, Hoffman, and O'Hara 1960).

There was evidence, noted earlier, for responsiveness in the era prior to scientific polling, and policymakers rely on different sources of information on public opinion—the media, organized groups, social movements, constituency contacts, staff members, and various informants—in what Zukin (1992) has emphasized as a top-down process in which leaders choose which indicators of public opinion to attend to (see Powlick 1995; Herbst 1998; Shaw 2000; Lee 2002; Rottinghaus 2007). Moreover, political elites do not always, believe, trust, understand, and know how to interpret polling. Thus, the findings of responsiveness more likely reflect political leaders' sense of public opinion in the overall environmental "ether," so to speak, and not just what opinion polls report (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Kull and Destler 1999; Hawver 1954; on the use of polling in other countries, see La Balme 2000; Rothmayr and Hardmeier 2001; Goot 2005; Rounce 2004; Page 2006).

The evidence for responsiveness, however, only goes so far. First, although it may be easy to accept substantively that the effect of public opinion should apply to issues above a certain level of visibility in political debates and on the public's collective radar screen, there have been at least some important issues for which there are no public opinion data, leaving no direct basis for judging responsiveness (see Burstein 2006; Barabas 2007). Second, there have been many cases of nonresponsiveness on salient issues. With opinion–policy congruence at the 60-percent level or better, cases of noncongruence still abound, so that while responsiveness is the modal effect, the occurrence of nonresponsiveness is far from trivial. Page and Shapiro (1983; Shapiro 1982) report this for issues such as economic assistance in the 1950s for Eastern Europe; the relative balance during the same period of economic versus military aid to U.S. allies; increased aid to Mideast countries in the mid- to late 1960s in the face of increased public opposition; the end of the initial policy responsiveness for more strict wage and price controls during the Nixon administration; the unheeded increase in public support for lowering the voting age in the 1950s and the same for increases in support for instituting a national presidential primary, abolishing the electoral college, and limiting senators to two terms; no corresponding policy response in the early 1950s to rising support for Hawaii statehood; and no visible response during 1947–48 to increased support universal military training as the Cold War heated up. Two of the most well-documented cases of nonresponsiveness concerned prayer in public schools, in which large majority support for prayer in school was ignored; and gun control, for which there were large and steady majorities of the public in the past (60–80 percent) who supported, to no avail, requiring permits and stricter laws covering the sales of guns (see Schuman and Presser 1977).

Nonresponsiveness is often associated with the public will being thwarted by organized "special" interests or elites who have decisive influence on major policy issues and on important but less visible ones (McConnell 1966; Schattschneider 1960; Olson 1965; Winter and Page 2009; Shapiro and Jacobs 2010, 2011). This has been part of a perennial debate, now heightened by the increasingly important role of money in political campaigns and politics at large (Winter and Page 2009; Hacker and Pierson 2010). At best, this debate is inconclusive since, as Burstein (2010) has noted, there is some evidence for the ways in which organized groups and social movements reflect or magnify public opinion, or affect policymaking through their influence on public opinion. There is evidence for this in the areas of environmental protection, civil rights and employment opportunities, women's rights, and business and regulatory policies (Burstein 2010, p. 73; Kollman 1998; Smith 2000; Burstein 1998b; Agnone 2007; Soule and Olzak 2004). If so, there may still be legs to the theory of "democratic pluralism" that saw public opinion well enough represented over time by existing or new groups that formed to address new issues or belatedly to deal with old ones (see Truman 1951; Dahl 1961).

The strongest critique of the opinion–policy studies is that the responsiveness that does occur is limited and incomplete: It falls short of giving the public the policies it wants, going only so far in the direction the public desires. Leaders may not be fully predisposed to provide this, or their responses are imperfect. Government and policymakers may *satisfice* so that in the end there is a democratic *deficit* (see Lax and Phillips Forthcoming; Weissberg 1976, 1978, 1979). Page (2002) and Burstein (2010) raise the strong possibility of this discrepancy that Achen (1978) had emphasized. Policymakers may be responding in a democratic fashion, but they may keep falling short or overshooting the mark. This is one theme in the time-series studies that found responsiveness over time but also tracked what Wlezien (1995) first called a "thermostat" effect, which is an important part of the analysis in *The Macro Polity* and *Degrees of Democracy*. In short, policies respond to public opinion by overresponding. Sharp's *The Sometime Connection* (1999) takes this view in its analyses of what at the outset are different combinations of federal and state government responses to public opinion on the issues of crime and imprisonment, affirmative action, abortion, welfare reforms, and Social Security. These are then followed by either entrenched policies that do not respond further to opinion changes, or continued changes that do not acknowledge policy changes that have occurred; or a discrepancy emerges that produces the thermostat pattern in which policy overresponds to opinion, leading public opinion to reverse itself in the hopes of pulling policy back to what the public prefers (see Wlezien 1995; Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Bartels (2008b) reports a related kind of ongoing opinion–policy disconnect on national spending issues in an analysis of public opinion in 23 countries. In the study of comparative party systems, the debate regarding opinion–policy congruence has focused (for lack of alternative measures of public opinion) on the ideological

proximity of parties and citizens, for which it is not usually possible to judge how such distances translate into differences in positions on specific policy issues. Some evidence suggests that these distances are less in proportional representation systems than in majority/single-member-district systems, but that responsiveness to public opinion is similar for the two systems—for example, to the median voter on the ideological spectrum in the case of redistributive welfare spending (see Huber and Powell 1994; Kang and Powell 2010; see also Blais and Bodet 2006).

The most likely explanation for this, especially as party politics in the United States has become increasingly ideologically polarized, has to do with how parties represent their supporters and how elections change the partisan composition of the executive and legislative branches. Party leaders and activists take more extreme positions than party voters, and as a result policies move too much in the responsive direction—or are perceived to move too much in that direction—much in the way politics plays out in strong party systems in Europe where parties do not converge (see Glynn et al. 2004, Chapter 9 on linkage mechanisms; Dalton 2006; Adams, Haupt, and Stoll 2009). The major contribution of Bafumi and Herron's (2010) study of constituency representation in Congress is that since the authors measure constituency opinion and House members' policy positions on the same scale, enabling them to calculate proximity, they can show how representation occurs through a "leapfrog" process in which representatives take positions that are more extreme than those of their supporters. In the case of public opinion and state policymaking, Lax and Phillips (2009b and Forthcoming; see Matsusaka 2010) show how a high degree of responsiveness for the 39 policies they examined can fall short in providing the policies that the majority opinion wants, which they attribute to the overresponsiveness of polarized policies due to heightened partisan and ideological politics. This provides a strong qualification regarding democracy in interpreting the findings of responsiveness. It should also be noted that the congruence judgments that have been made may be sensitive to measurement error due to survey question wordings and to the public being less sure of what it wants than can be measured accurately in surveys (see Weissberg 1976; Monroe 1979; Erikson and Tedin 2011; Page and Shapiro 1983; Hagen et al. 2001).

There is another possible reason for the shortfall in responsiveness: Governments may respond unequally to public opinion—to the opinions of the rich versus the poor or those differing in political participation, engagement, or other sources of influence—including the opinions of business and economic or other elites versus those of the public at large. Studies examining changes over time in public opinion and policy have generally found no difference in responsiveness to either stable opinions or parallel changes in opinion among all subgroups (Wlezien and Soroka 2011; but see Jacobs and Page 2005 on largely foreign policy issues). In contrast, cross-sectionally, Bartels's (2008a, Chapter 9) analysis of Senate voting using the 1988–1992 National Senate Election Study revealed greater responsiveness among senators to those in the top-third income

group versus the poor and those with middle income—both for overall liberal–conservative voting and for specific roll call votes (minimum wage, civil rights, important budget-related votes, and four abortion restriction votes; see also Griffin and Newman 2008). Gilens (Forthcoming) found that policies were more likely to be enacted when supported by larger percentages of the rich as opposed to those in the middle- and lower-income groups. Assuming these disparate subgroup effects continue to be found in cross-sectional studies, which need to be replicated with other data and other policy issues (see Bhatti and Erikson 2011), the different results for studies of responsiveness over time are not necessarily at odds: As Stimson (2011) observed, government policies can move in the same direction over time as public opinion, but the substance of the policies themselves may remain closer, maybe increasingly so, to some groups than to others—most notably, those more well off and active in politics, with resources and opportunities that enhance their influence—producing and maintaining an overall democratic deficit.

Public Opinion and Democracy: What to Believe?

What can we conclude at this point about public opinion and American democracy? What further research is most needed? For one, there are a great many studies of representation and responsiveness that provide evidence for strong effects of public opinion on government policies at different levels. That said, the causal processes that appear to operate in these and other studies also reveal limits to democracy: Other influences and obstructions are at work, and government actions and policies fall short of what the public wants, even as they move in desired directions. Thus, as Page (2002) has claimed, the public is "semi-sovereign" (Schattschneider 1960). Moreover, this essay has tabled any normative expectations of upholding fundamental rights, liberties, and the rule of law, and any debate about the extent to which public opinion is influenced and well served by its political leaders and the information environment that they and the mass media provide, so that public opinion meets some minimum standard of *quality* or *rationality* as an important input into the policymaking process. Although these issues have been studied and debated, more thought and work, for example, is still needed regarding the conditions and bounds under which governments can temporarily encroach on rights and liberties in the national interest. Moreover, with regard to the capabilities required of citizens in a democracy, political theorists and philosophers have not fully wrestled with this question, drawing on extant and ongoing empirical research (see Althaus 2006).

Research on public opinion and policymaking has come a long way since the first study constituency representation (Miller and Stokes 1963) and the data limitations that led to its slow start. At issue now is having sufficient data over time for a wide range of issues—measures of public opinion, government

policies, and the other variables that needed to be accounted for—to allow the kind of broad coverage, temporal sequences, and multivariate analysis needed to make causal inferences about responsiveness at least for the most important and salient policy issues for which the interplay of public opinion should occur (see Burstein 2003, 2010; Barabas 2007). Moreover, these studies also need to look increasingly at how close the enacted policies are to the specific type or level of government action the public wants.

The end of the review above raised the question of unequal responsiveness. The need for more research on this has been spurred on by the increase in economic inequality in the United States (Bartels 2008a; Hacker and Pierson 2010). Whereas there may be room for debate about whether this has been at odds with mass public opinion (see Campbell 2010; Hochschild 2011), this outcome itself strongly suggests that those who have benefited from this trend have had the greatest political influence (see Winter and Page 2009). The title of Enns and Wlezien's *Who Gets Represented?* (2011) and Druckman and Jacobs's (2011) depiction of "segmented representation" encapsulate a research agenda for determining to what extent the opinions of the rich or other particular segments of the public have a greater influence on policymakers. In addition to the limited research to date, another challenge related to data availability is the difficulty identifying and measuring the policy preferences of those who might have more political clout; for example, one important study underway is examining the very rich—oversampling those in the top 1 percent or less of the national income distribution, in contrast to the top third or quartile that can be studied in conventional surveys (see Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2011). At the same time, as noted earlier, Burstein (2010) has resurrected Dahl's (1961) "*Who Governs?*" question, of the pluralist theorists decades ago and their critics, concerning the democratic versus anti-democratic political role of organized groups: Do they thwart the wishes of the public or do they help channel them into the policymaking process (e.g., Truman 1951; Olson 1965)? Or do they affect policymaking through their influence—in a constructive fashion or not—on public opinion (Smith 2000; Kollman 1998; Page and Shapiro 1992, Chapters 8–9)?

This essay has focused on the United States, but it has also cited studies of public opinion and policymaking in other liberal democratic nations. In contrast to the enormous research literature on the United States, studies of other countries have been much more limited, with the exception, as noted, of the attention devoted to the study of political parties and ideological congruence or proximity. The justification for this latter focus is that the ideological location of parties helps define where the important policy action lies in parliamentary systems (see Warwick 2011; Ezrow 2010; Hakhverdian 2010; Adams and Ezrow 2009; Adams et al. 2009; Powell 2006, 2011; Powell and Vanberg 2000; Golder and Stramski 2010). Still, more comparative research is needed on specific areas of domestic and foreign policymaking (where there is currently noteworthy interest in the issue of European integration and globalization; Down and Wilson

2010; Mattila and Raunio 2006; Steenbergen, Edwards, and de Vries 2007; Hellstrom 2008; Nacos, Shapiro, and Isernia 2000; Ward, Ezrow, and Dorussen 2011), as issue-based politics is relevant to all democracies, not just the United States.

Finally, this essay reflects a limitation of social science analysis: Although it can persuasively assess broad patterns and trends as they relate to theories and specific hypotheses, it often lacks direct relevance to real-world conditions and important issues at hand. Whereas this can be covered retrospectively in studies of specific issues, or brief examples of cases can be cited in statistical studies, individual issues are important in their own right, and they point to the need to examine others in greater depth, including ones playing out in ongoing politics and debates. Especially today, in the new media age that is seeing the spread of democracy worldwide, important issues of the day should be confronted directly—in real time—in a way that publicly raises questions about public opinion and democracy. The relationship between public opinion and policy is more than just an academic matter. Whether public opinion polling fosters greater democracy is an open question, since it depends on how information about public opinion is used. Polling has spread worldwide in tandem with democracy; with elections have come pollsters and American-style political consultants. Poll results are now widely and increasingly published and posted online, so perhaps it is high time that there be more transparency and honesty among political leaders, the press, and others, and the public itself, in assessing the relationship between government decision-making and public opinion—and debating how this aspect of democracy is playing out. One dilemma of democracy is whether leaders should follow the wishes of voters or exercise their own judgment—as *leaders*. When they do the latter and act at odds with public opinion, they should *explain* why the course they choose is better than what the public wants.

There is no reason to hesitate in focusing on policies as they are actively debated and decided, rather than waiting to reflect on them historically. For example, when the enactment of health care reform (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010) is debated further, the fact that public support since its passage has not increased (at this writing in July 2011) raises questions about democracy and policymaking that are worthy of national discussion—beyond leaders on both sides superficially citing polls that support their positions (Deane et al. 2011). Another case in point: Should it be concluded that since the public turned against the Clinton administration's 1993–1994 health care reform effort, the failure to enact reform represented a "democratic" outcome? Maybe so (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Blendon, Brodie, and Benson 1995). Was the ending of the U.S. military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy a democratic outcome because, during the final debate over it, opinion polls widely showed that the public increasingly supported allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the armed forces? And because the Defense Department shrewdly conducted an unprecedented massive survey of military personnel and their families that revealed that the proposed change in policy would have

few, if any, negative consequences? To understand the role of public opinion in American democracy, the nation should debate such questions about many, if not all, of the major issues that it faces and for which the public holds its leaders accountable.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available online at http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/.

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(A more extensive Bibliography is available as supplementary data online)

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