*Robbie Richards*

# Assignment 2: Introduction and Significance (Reduction)

In an ideal representative democracy, the wishes of the people are translated directly into public policy, with each citizen receiving equal consideration in the representational function. This occurs through the actions of representatives, who are elected ostensibly to do what voters would do if asked to make the decision directly. When judging the representativeness of a government, scholars, pundits, and citizens alike often think in these terms, though with varying degrees of sophistication. However, this idealized picture often does not comport with reality. Public opinion and public policy regularly diverge, often significantly, even in societies that are zealously committed to democratic ideals.

The existence of another simple normative model of the policy process highlights an important tension in American politics. This second model, adhered to by many policy experts and scientists, often implicitly, suggests that policy should reflect current scientific understanding of a problem. Policy should change in response to advances in human knowledge to deliver the “best” possible outcomes for society, based on good scientific analysis. The fact that public opinion and elite opinion does not always agree makes this distinction meaningful, and sets the stage for competition between the two over policy representation.

The tension between these two ideals prevents both from being fully met. Policy does not reflect public opinion well, but neither does it reflect state-of-the-art scientific knowledge. This normative tension leads to an important positive question: how is resulting policy affected by these two competing ideals? In my research, I seek to form the beginnings of an answer to this question by studying legislative behavior in the US at the federal and state levels. Based on my reading of relevant literature on representation, public opinion, and the policy process, I hypothesize that institutional factors will mediate the effects of public opinion and of policy elites. The balance of power between those two primary actors is predicted to vary across time, issues, and institutional contexts, even within policy making bodies and individual policy makers.

While the literatures mentioned above provide a good foundation for my research, the model I propose will advance our understanding of representational politics. Theories of the policy process tend to account for public opinion and/ or policy elites as merely one institution among many that affect policy, but the models diverge in important ways. In some, public opinion is active but constrained by policy elites, while others hypothesize the opposite. Different cases are brought to bear as evidence for each theory, but this leads to narrow perspectives of particular situations and contexts. In my research, I intend to offer a more unified, generalizable view of the policy process. This will afford greater understanding of not only what factors are important in policy making, but also when and why we might expect the impact of certain factors to vary and the implications for policy.