# Introduction

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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.

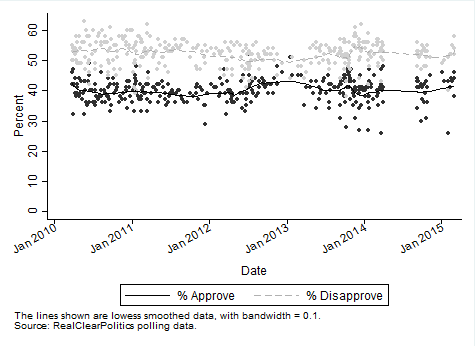


Figure 1: ACA Public Approval Since Passage

For example, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) was passed by a narrow, partisan majority of Congress and has proceeded through many phases of implementation, despite the reported opposition of a majority of Americans. This public disapproval was manifest in many public opinion polls at the time of passage (Blendon and Benson 2010). As shown in Figure 1, the public has remained sharply divided, though with small but persistent pluralities or majorities in opposition. On the other hand, there has often been broad-based public support for various national health reform proposals (Starr 1982, 2011), but none has ever become law, even temporarily, with the exception of Medicare in 1965 and the ACA. If America is supposedly a democratic society, why does public policy not reflect public opinion more closely?

In my dissertation, I propose to explore three factors that might affect the level of legislative responsiveness to public opinion in the United States: party competition, issue publics, and the characteristics of public opinion. These factors are all thought to have effects on responsiveness, based on various political science theories and models of the policy process, but further empirical testing is needed to validate some of these hypotheses. By conducting this analysis, we can not only validate theory but also explore the conditions under which the theories apply. This in turn will increase our understanding of the policy process and allow for refinement of theory where necessary. My analyses will generally focus on the US Congress, but will include some analyses at the state level and appropriate international comparisons where possible.

## Theories of the Policy Process

Classic political science models of representation are based on representation of the median voter, a conclusion drawn from formal modeling of governments formed by majoritarian/ plurality-rule electoral systems (Downs 1957). There is empirical support for the hypothesis that policy responds to public opinion (Burstein 2003; Miller and Stokes 1963; Soroka and Wlezien 2010), but there is also some debate as to what these findings mean (Burstein 2010). While influential models of the policy process deal with representation of the public's views to some extent, they tend to reach different conclusions on whether representation is expected to be strong or weak. Other factors are often presented as more important, sometimes even rendering empirical findings of responsiveness theoretically spurious rather than causal. However, the models disagree in important ways. Part of the issue seems to be the different evidentiary bases for the models. Different cases are used to validate different models, leading to different conclusions. By understanding each of the significant models in turn, however, we can start to see some patterns in terms of when public opinion has a large effect on policy and when it does not. In this section, therefore, I briefly explain four of these models.

### Kingdon's Modified Garbage Can Model

In Kingdon's (1995) modified garbage can model of the policy process, agenda and policy change occur as three separate streams, the policy, problem, and political streams, come into alignment. This alignment occurs as a result of the actions of policy entrepreneurs, who are seeking some sort of policy benefit. Policy entrepreneurs have incentives that may or may not line up with those of the public, leading to a potential conflict between public opinion and entrepreneur/ elite opinion.

Kingdon's model does allow public opinion to affect policy, to the extent that policy makers can detect and discern it. However, they do this imperfectly, getting a "feel" for the national mood, rather than always looking at exact percentages from the latest polls on all important issues. Some studies suggest that polls have helped democratic governments to get a more accurate sense of public opinion (Jacobs 1993), and political scientists feel that polls could provide an important link between the public and their representatives (Verba 1996), but even polling can only provide a limited amount of information. Kingdon views public opinion as a potential constraint on policy change, but not a driving force. Policy makers are often left open, within constraints set by their imperfect sense of public opinion, to the influence of policy entrepreneurs and their own inclinations.

### Incrementalism

Incrementalist theories of public policy (see Lindblom 1965) highlight the political conflict inherent in policy change and conclude that because of powerful interests and institutions, significant policy changes are generally kept off the agenda. This makes for a weakened public, unable to effectively promote its position. As a result, policy change happens incrementally, with vested interests successfully keeping major changes off the table.

The importance of institutions will be discussed later, but incrementalists also make important contributions to our understanding of policy elites as independent actors. First, they point out the tension between analysis as an alternative to politics and analysis as politics (Lindblom 1965 ch. 5). Many scientists would prefer that scientists themselves be left out of politics, leaving others to make policy-relevant conclusions based on the knowledge generated by scientific inquiry (Oliver 2006; Rothman and Poole 1985). Analysis, in this perspective, is a favored alternative to politics. On the other hand, the incrementalists point out that a great deal of analysis is itself political, both generated and presented with specific policy goals in mind. The strategic use of analysis is gaining greater attention in fields that traditionally tried to remain apolitical, such as public health (Bernier and Clavier 2011; Lezine and Reed 2007; Navarro 2008; Oliver 2006).

A second important point made by incrementalists is that analysis itself is often limited and subjective. Even the most scientifically rigorous and objective policy analysis must still define a problem and make the case for a particular policy or program as a solution to the problem. For example, some analysts could argue on the basis of their research that restricted access to health care can be solved by making insurance more widely available, while others could argue that cost is the driving factor. Given the conflict between different expert points of view, we would expect people to either mistrust all analysis (Lindblom 1965) or side with experts who share their worldviews (Zaller 1992). Incremental models thus posit an important role for policy elites, with the public at a disadvantage and at the mercy of sympathetic elites.

### Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET; see Jones and Baumgartner 2005; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 1999), as applied to policy change, also predicts long periods of relatively stable policy. However, this model of the policy process recognizes the potential for significant and sudden departures from the status quo, punctuations that result in a shift to a new equilibrium. Institutions again play an important role in this theory, but the theory also makes an important point about the capacities of both elites and masses to pay attention to an issue. PET assumes, quite reasonably based on past research (Downs 1972), that a nation has a limited amount of attention to devote to any policy issue at any given time. Because of this finite amount of attention, what the public pays attention to matters. When the public does not pay attention to a particular issue, policy elites will generally maintain the status quo. If the public focuses its attention on an issue (often very suddenly), the politics of the issue change dramatically, and policy may also move to a new equilibrium. Proponents of PET say their theory builds in crucial ways on incremental models of policy change, explaining not only the status quo bias of public policy but also the previously anomalous radical departures from the status quo. PET restores some power to the people, in contrast with the incrementalist view of public opinion as highly constrained and Kingdon's observation of public opinion as merely a constraining influence. The public may not be driving policy at all times, but PET posits conditions under which legislative responsiveness is more likely.

### Advocacy Coalition Framework

A fourth model of the policy process, the advocacy coalition framework promoted most prominently by Paul Sabatier (1988), is based on networks of policy elites and policy makers who work behind the scenes to enact policies. These subsystems, also called advocacy coalitions, have core values and beliefs about the proper course for public policy that develop over time. These developments occur slowly, over a decade or more in most cases, unless an exogenous shock to the system produces rapid change. Core beliefs in the advocacy coalitions change more slowly than peripheral beliefs, and are likely to endure while the peripheral ones are altered to align the core with external circumstances. Even exogenous shocks do not immediately change policy. One example of this dynamic is the changes in attitudes toward the role of public health departments after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the subsequent spate of anthrax-laced envelopes discovered in the postal system. Public health experts, law enforcement officials, and many American citizens were worried about the lack of preparedness to deal with bioterrorism. However, the long-standing core values of federalism, fear of government abuse of power, and personal and economic freedom impeded full adoption of expert recommendations (Gostin 2002). The advocacy coalition framework would predict this resistance to change as a result of the status quo bias within policy subsystems.

In this model, like the incremental model, policy elites impose a constraint on the system, while the public is often viewed as the group agitating for policy change. In this case, the public is constrained by the beliefs of actors in the relevant advocacy coalitions. These elites can essentially control the public dialog and framing of a policy issue, thereby manipulating public opinion at least to some extent, a claim which fits with the findings of other studies (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Zaller 1992).

### Implications

The models described in this section illuminate different characteristics of the policy process, including some conflicting views of the relationship between policy and public opinion. The garbage can model suggests that elites are the ones advocating changes, while the public imposes more of a constraining, negative influence. Conversely, both the incremental and advocacy coalition models posit an activist public, frustrated in its wishes by the conservative actions of policy networks. PET, with its emphasis on attention, leaves us agnostic on this issue. When the public pays attention to an issue, significant change can occur. Otherwise, the policy process is dominated by policy elites, which often leads to competition resulting in preservation of the status quo. It would seem from that description that the public is active and the policy community is restrictive. However, the public, realizing that the prevailing equilibrium is no longer acceptable, might suddenly pay attention to a problem that has been created by the previously unnoticed actions of policy elites. Another alternative scenario is that policy elites, hoping to enact some favorable change at the public's expense, inadvertently arouse public opinion in opposition to the proposed change (increased attention need not lead to change, but may also lead to preservation of the status quo). Its lack of micro-level causal explanations leaves PET unable to explain which dynamic is occurring, or whether different issues exhibit different dynamics.

Taking these theories together, we cannot say whether the public or elites lead on policy, but we can start to hypothesize about the conditions under which the public might lead. For one thing, the salience of an issue seems to matter a great deal. Indeed, numerous past studies have found that elected officials are more responsive to public opinion on salient issues (see Burstein (2003) and Burstein (2010) for reviews). It also seems that, in addition to salience, a public that is united in clearly favoring a certain policy is more likely to prevail than one that is divided or indifferent between the policy proposal and the status quo. These characteristics of public opinion itself may have important effects on the responsiveness of policy to public opinion.

The policy process models also indicate that institutions matter, particularly those institutions that link voters to elected officials. If the link is weak, for a specific policy decision or in general, then responsiveness will be less likely. The models further suggest that groups of voters might matter in policy making, whether organized or less formal. Responsiveness to specific groups could affect the level of responsiveness to public opinion overall, to the extent that representation can be viewed as a scarce good. In other words, if specific groups of voters compete successfully for a legislator's support, then the median voter will receive less representation than he/ she otherwise would.

For my dissertation, I plan to empirically test the factors mentioned above which might affect legislative responsiveness to public opinion. I will divide the analysis into three chapters, as follows:

1. Political parties provide organization for electoral and legislative politics. Aldrich and Griffin (2010) and others hypothesize, and preliminary evidence supports the hypothesis (Aldrich and Griffin Forthcoming), that increased party competition in a jurisdiction increases the responsiveness of elected officials individually and governments collectively to public opinion. Party competition may also increase political participation. In chapter 1, I will test these hypotheses.
2. Issue publics, or groups of citizens with more intensely-held opinions about an issue than the rest of the population, may send amplified signals to politicians, causing them to respond more to the issue public than to median public opinion. In previous work, Sunshine Hillygus and I have examined how the number of hunters in a congressional district affects House members' votes on gun bills. In this chapter of my dissertation, I plan to use a similar approach to examine the effects of various issue publics on congressional support for health bills. The issue publics analyzed may include doctors, hospitals, the elderly, and the uninsured.
3. In chapter 3, I want to analyze the way characteristics of public opinion itself affects legislative behavior. If we view public opinion itself as a signal received by legislators and translated into policy, then there may be characteristics of the signal itself that affect its reception. My specific hypotheses at this point are as follows (but may change as I do more literature review and consult with advisors). Public opinion is expected to exert more consistent influence on representatives' behavior when it clearly favors a change from the status quo, has a low variance, when there is more publicly available information about an issue, and when an issue is more salient to the public overall.

These hypotheses rest on theoretical frameworks specific to each topic. For example, there is a whole subfield of political science devoted to the study of political parties and their role in democracy. Therefore, my theoretical framework and specific hypotheses for analyzing parties are developed in chapter 1, separately from the other two chapters. This allows me to tap into the depth of research on this topic, while still maintaining a relevance to the policy process more generally in the context of this dissertation. I intend to write each chapter in such a way that it could stand stand on its own with minimal editing. Before moving into the individual chapters, I describe in general terms the concept of representation, which is the main dependent variable in all three chapters, and the measurement issues involved in studying representation.

## Measuring Representation

All three chapters will have the same set of dependent variables: representation. Measuring representation is of course important to studies like this, but there are many possible measures in the literature from which to choose, each with advantages and limitations. Representation can also be defined at the level of the individual legislator or the entire government (or legislature) in the context of either a single policy or some summary of policy issues. Different ways of conceptualizing representation can also be operationalized for analysis in different ways.

Perhaps the most common way of measuring representation is to use responsiveness, either of the legislator of of the entire legislative body. Responsiveness is essentially correlated movement on the margins. If the public expresses a conservative view on an issue, a responsive legislator or legislature will be relatively more supportive of the conservative option. This is most often measured by correlating estimated legislator ideal points with some measure of voter preferences, perhaps controlling for other factors. Testing representation defined as responsiveness in this manner is the most common approach used in political science to date.

Correspondence is a somewhat different concept, and perhaps a higher standard for representation. A correspondent legislator or legislature will not simply make marginal movements in line with public opinion, but will actually align itself with the median voter. Differences in position require measurement of legislator and constituenct preferences on the same ideological scale so a meaningful distance measure can be obtained, a measurement issue which is very difficult to solve. This difficulty is probably the main reason why researchers have not used correspondence measures as much in prior research, but the concept of correspondence as distinct from responsiveness is still important to note.

Measures of legislator and constituent preferences/ ideology are extremely important to measures of representation, whether responsiveness or correspondence is used. Legislator ideology is often based on roll call votes. Some studies use single roll call votes [CITE EXAMPLES], but many use estimates based on parametric scaling of roll call votes, such as the commonly used DW-NOMINATE scores (Carroll et al. 2015, Carroll2009). However, some have raised important issues with the use of roll call votes in this manner. Not all votes in congress are recorded, and the selection of votes that are recorded is neither random nor exogenous to the outcomes of the votes [CITES]. Also, there are many reasons a legislator may choose to vote a particular way on a particular bill, some of which are strategic and therefore defy easy classification of a vote as responsive to public opinion or not. A "non-representative" vote on one bill could be meant to secure support from others in the chamber for another bill the legislator or his/ her constituents feel is more important than the first. Is the legislator being responsive or representative in this case? The answer is not entirely clear. Thus, roll call votes are an imperfect measure of legislator preferences. Some have suggested cosponsorship activity as an alternative [CITE], and some researchers have applied parametric scaling techniques to cosponsorship data to obtain ideal point scores comparable to roll-call based estimates [CITE]. Cosponsorship is not a perfect measure either, and is not as closely tied to the passage of policy, but it does provide another perspective on representation and responsiveness.

Some measures that have been used to capture voter preferences include presidential vote share in a legislator's district or state [CITES], scaling techniques from large surveys or "big data" [CITES], and modeled constituency opinions based on multilevel regression with poststratification (MRP; CITES). As with the measures of legislator ideology, each of these measures is imperfect. Presidential vote share is generally easier to collect or access than the other two sources mentioned, but it is tied to electoral politics in addition to voter preferences, making it a tainted measure that may also be somewhat endogenous to legislative behavior. The other two methods require substantial resources and are generally not available to all researchers or for very long time spans. Survey data that is sufficiently representative of all legislators' constituents is ideal for studying representation on specific policies, even in a correspondence framework, but may not be as useful for overall measures of representation because it is impossible to ask about all or even a significant number of bills a legislature will consider. Survey data that is representative of state-level opinion is becoming somewhat more common, but representative surveys of multiple congressional districts are not conducted. "Big data" is a possible source of representative data in smaller geographic jurisidictions, but generally will not have actual opinion estimates. Demographic and community characteristics can still be used to generate preference estimates, even on the same scale as legislator ideal point estimates to yield correspondence measures (Xing, Hillygus, and Carin 2014). **[Learn more about MRP, describe it here]**

In summary, there are many different ways to conceptualize and measure representation. Where possible, I intend to use multiple measures to test my hypotheses. I plan to collect available data on cosponsorships and roll calls to use in measuring legislator ideology. I also plan to use not only presidential vote share, but also large-scale surveys like the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES, CITE), big data (Xing, Hillygus, and Carin 2014), and estimates from MRP methods where possible and appropriate.

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