Public Opinion and Policy in Representative Democracy

Edmund Burke was a much better political philosopher than he was a politician. Burke was a Member of Parliament for Bristol for six years, from 1774 to 1780. He visited the constituency infrequently during that time, and managed to alienate his electorate through a combination of his rather unpatriotic support for America during the war and a general lack of attention to the principal concerns of Bristol’s merchants. It was clear by 1780 – when he withdrew – that Burke stood no chance at reelection.¹

Burke’s political writings remain fundamental to this day, however, including his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol*. In his mind, an elected representative should seek and consider the advice of his constituents, but that advice should not be authoritative instruction. It should not serve as a mandate, dictating what a representative does; it should be but one input into his decision making. Burke’s philosophizing did not free him from the burden of representing the interests of his electors, however, and his ideas evidently had only limited appeal for Bristolians at the time. That is, Burke paid the electoral price.

The situation is little changed more than two hundred years later. Active representation of the public’s policy preferences remains a – if not *the* – central concern in electoral and inter-electoral politics. Indeed, some argue that the tendency to represent public preferences

has increased as politics has become a career path during the twentieth century, and that politicians have become (out of desire for reelection) more reliably interested in keeping voters happy (e.g., Maestas 2000, 2003). Moreover, Geer argues that the onset and development of public opinion polling has made it easier for politicians to know what public preferences are. Politicians have both a keen interest in representing the public and the seeming means to do so.

Representation is also at the heart of everyday political debate. Citizens care about what they get from government, whether it’s tax cuts or prescription drug benefits or education subsidies. They also care about the degree to which what government does matches their preferences for various other things, whether it’s the amount of healthcare, the availability of abortion, environmental protection, or going to war.

Not all politics is explicitly about policy, of course. Citizens also care about outcomes, and many argue that this is true now more than ever before (see, e.g., Clarke et al. 2004). People want a growing economy, safe streets, and high-quality healthcare. Not surprisingly, U.S. presidential candidates routinely ask: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?” This is not a question about policy per se – it is a question about outcomes. Policy nevertheless is implicated, of course. Politicians do not have magic wands – they influence outcomes using policy. Politicians offer plans to solve important problems, such as a struggling economy. There are policies to reduce crime, improve education, fix healthcare, and so on, and when conditions improve, politicians don’t claim to have been lucky. They explicitly credit policy, for instance, when they declare that “Our tax cut policy got the economy moving again,” or that “We put more police on the streets and crime came down.” Policy clearly matters for both outcomes and politics. We want things, and, through policy, politicians try to deliver.

This opinion-policy relationship is central not just in everyday politics, but in the theoretical literature on democracy and representation as well, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to John Stuart Mill, to Robert A.

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2 There is some disagreement on this point, however. See, e.g., Fiorina 1997, Weber 1999.
3 There is also disagreement on this point. Karol (2007), for instance, argues that polls have not improved representation.
4 Actually delivering outcomes can be quite complex – see Kelly’s (2009) interesting analysis of economic inequality in the United States.
Dahl. Indeed, for each of these theorists the connection between public preferences and public policy is one of the most critical components of representative democracy. Importantly, for each the opinion-policy link is necessarily reciprocal: on the one hand, policymakers need to react to the public’s policy preferences; on the other hand, the public needs to have informed preferences, based in part on what policymakers are doing. To put it differently: If we want politicians to make the policy we want, our preferences must be informed by policy itself. This is the theme that guides our investigation, where “degrees of democracy” are conceived as deriving from the extent to which both “policy representation” and “public responsiveness” are evident.

We develop and empirically test a model of democracy in which opinion-policy relationships are paramount. Following Wlezien (1995, 1996a), we posit a very simple but powerful framework that connects opinion and policy, what we call the “thermostatic” model. The model has as its referent the temperature control systems in our homes, where the public is the thermostat and policymakers the furnace or air conditioning unit. If the model works, we will observe three things. First, the difference between the actual policy temperature and the preferred temperature will cause the public to send a signal to change the policy temperature, for example, to turn up the heat. Second, in response to such a signal, policymakers will increase policy. Third, as the policy temperature approaches the preferred temperature, the signal for change will be reduced. This, we argue, is how a functioning democracy should work. Is it what we actually observe out in the world? That is, do policymakers respond to public preference signals? Does the public adjust its signals in response to what policymakers do?

That these are important questions should be clear. They speak to the capacity of citizens, the quality of governance, and, as we shall see, relationships between the two. They speak not just to the quality but also to the principles and potential merits of representative democracy. They are academic questions, to be sure, but they are academic questions with rather sweeping real-world implications.

The chapters that follow begin to provide some answers. We first set out expectations for public responsiveness and policy representation, varying as a function of issue salience and political institutions, and applying, we believe, across the democratic world. Our theoretical scope thus is rather broad. Our empirical focus is necessarily more
narrow. “Policy” is captured using budgetary data; public preferences are measured using opinion polls. The empirical analysis is limited to the three countries for which extended, reliable time series of both opinion and spending are available: the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. We shall argue that these three countries provide a quite strong “most similar systems” research design. Additional leverage is gained by looking at multiple policy domains within the three countries, for a total of nineteen individual domains, across which institutional characteristics differ. The comparative reach nevertheless is limited, as we cannot explore the full range of political institutions with the data at hand. We can take an important step forward, however. We also can consider – as we do in the final chapter – what the broader implications of our findings may be for policy domains and regimes not directly assessed here.

The story that emerges is one in which representative democratic government in some cases works surprisingly well. There is strong evidence that the public actually adjusts its preference for “more” or “less” policy in a thermostatic way, as policy itself changes. There also is evidence that policymakers respond to changes in public preferences over time. The thermostatic model works. The magnitude and nature of both public responsiveness and policy representation do vary across policy domains and countries, and this variation is systematic. As we will show, varying degrees of responsiveness and representation can be explained at least in part by factors such as the salience of various policy domains, as well as by the design of government institutions, that is, by the vertical and horizontal division of powers. That this is true means that we can begin to make some generalizable predictions across different policy domains and political contexts. It means that we can begin to capture, empirically speaking, “degrees” of democracy.

POLICY REPRESENTATION

The relationship between public preferences and policy has been the central concern of the literature on representative democracy at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* (1762).

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5 Rousseau’s “general will” is clearly quite different than the “public preference” we are interested in here. His discussion of the reliability with which representatives
Policy Representation

This was among the first considerations of the connection between representatives and their constituents, and many others have examined the opinion-policy connection since. The first explicit consideration of public opinion per se appears roughly fifty years later in the work of Jeremy Bentham. His writings reveal a view of representative democracy very similar to the one we are concerned with below: Bentham conceives of a reactive public that monitors government activities, and to which governments are held accountable (see Cutler 1999). Bentham was an elitist, to be sure, just like Edmund Burke one generation earlier, and John Stuart Mill one generation later. Each believed that certain people’s opinions were more worthy than others. But each also focused on essentially the same question: What conditions or institutions are required to produce a representative democracy in which policies reliably reflect the interests of citizens – citizens, that is, whose interests are sufficiently informed to justify representation?

Political scientists are now much closer to answering that question. Or, at least, we are accumulating a body of evidence on when representation seems more or less likely, and under what conditions citizens are more or less informed on political and policy matters. But what exactly do we mean by “policy representation”? There are several different kinds of representation we might look for in a democracy. Drawing in large part on the theoretical literature above, as well as Pitkin’s (1967) classic work on representation, our paramount concern is policy representation: policymakers’ active representation of citizens’ (aggregated) preferences. Indeed, while other versions of representation have garnered considerable attention, we suggest that most are valued in large part because they are likely to enhance the connection between what people want regarding policy and what governments provide.

Descriptive Representation

Take, for instance, discussions of “descriptive” representation. These typically focus on representatives’ characteristics, specifically, on the extent to which representatives resemble the represented, particularly...
with respect to demographic characteristics. Race, ethnicity, gender, language, sexual orientation – any number of characteristics can be salient. “Shared experience” (Mansbridge 1999) can also be critical – experience as a farmer, for instance, or of having grown up in a particular region. According to this view, a representative legislature should be a microcosm of the larger society. Indeed, a number of theorists refer to this type of representation as “microcosmic representation” (e.g., Birch 1971, 2001).

Support for descriptive representation comes in both symbolic and substantive forms. A symbolic argument for descriptive representation focuses on the representation of historically under-represented groups (e.g., women, or racial or ethnic minorities), and stresses the significance of seeing oneself represented in government, and of consequently seeing politics as something that you are or can be involved in. Results include the possibility of increased participation in politics by previously under-represented groups, and – often viewed as more fundamental – the enhanced symbolic legitimacy of a government seen to encompass diverse individuals or groups (e.g., Sapiro 1981, Phillips 1995; Kymlicka 1993). Descriptive representation may also facilitate communication between constituents and representatives, particularly in historically conflictual contexts (Mansbridge 1999). Indeed, there is evidence that some individuals are more likely to contact their representative if they share certain demographic characteristics (Gay 2002).

Proponents of descriptive representation have also argued that it can be a useful proxy for policy attitudes: “When interests are uncrystallized, the best way to have one’s most important substantive interests represented is often to choose a representative whose descriptive characteristics match one’s own on the issues one expects to emerge” (Mansbridge 1999:644). That demographically similar groups will tend to have similar policy attitudes is thus the heart of the substantive argument for descriptive representation. Bentham’s support for microcosmic representation in Britain was based on the concern that a legislature dominated by the upper class would advance only upper-class interests, for instance. Bianco (1994) emphasizes race as a kind of cue for representatives’ values and interests (see also Phillips 1995), a fact that is confirmed by representatives’ own views on how and who they represent (e.g., Fenno 1978; Kingdon 1981; Mansbridge 1986). And the link between demographic characteristics is evidenced in the empirical literature on legislative
behavior: day-care coverage is greater in Norwegian municipalities where there are more female representatives, for instance (Bratton and Ray 2002); black and female representatives in the United States are consistently more likely to introduce or sponsor black or women’s interest bills respectively (Bratton and Haynie 1999); the voting records of Hispanic members of the House of Representatives are distinct in ways that may be culturally attributable (Welch and Hibbing 1984; Hero and Tolbert 1995; Kerr and Miller 1997).

That said, the extent to which demographic similarities are a substitute for policy attitudes is unclear, and using a proxy of dubious reliability is less than ideal. Note first that preferences and interests are not the same thing. Many people have a preference for a level of redistributive policy that clearly is not in their best interest, for instance – they are wealthy themselves but support politics that favor the less advantaged. Similarly, many white (majority) respondents support policies that benefit visible minorities. In neither case are their preferences in line with what would seem to be their interests.

This gap between preferences and interests is confirmed in work on the actual behaviour of demographically “representative” elected officials. Some work on female legislators argues that women who successfully gain office are not necessarily representative of women’s interests – that is, they may provide some kind of symbolic and descriptive representative function, but the extent to which their policy preferences are similar to women’s (aggregated) policy preferences can be relatively limited (e.g., Gotell and Brodie 1996). A number of authors have expressed further concerns about the way in which descriptive representation encourages the belief that certain groups can be represented only by certain people (in those groups), and alternatively that certain people can only represent certain groups (e.g., Kymlicka

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6 Indeed, the difference between preferences and interests is perhaps clearest in the literature on support for redistributive policy, where there are two conflicting expectations about the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and support for welfare policy: one, that worsening conditions lead to a general increase in support for government policies that help those in need, or two, that worsening conditions make self-interest more salient, and support for redistribution thus decreases for those concerned about the economy but unlikely to require government assistance. See esp. Blekesaune 2007.

7 Survey research offers some supporting evidence. See, e.g., Kelly et al. 1991; Erikson 1997.
Descriptive representation may actually be destructive to political community; some also charge that “Socially descriptive representation is pernicious because it makes recourse to constituencies unnecessary” (Morone and Marmor 1981:437). We view these problematic features of descriptive representation as in some sense supplementary – supplementary, that is, to the fact that demographic or experiential characteristics will only intermittently and unpredictably be relevant to the representation of policy preferences. Descriptive representation may thus be important in terms of providing role models, connecting to politics, or engendering a feeling of belonging in the political community. Where policy is concerned, descriptive representation falls short.

Electoral Representation

More common in the empirical literature is a version of representation which we will refer to as “electoral representation.” Electoral representation is not always distinguished from descriptive representation, since theories of representation focusing on electoral systems are often motivated primarily by an interest in descriptive representation – the work arguing for proportional representation tends to focus on those systems’ capacity to better represent subsets of the population that are demographically different, for instance. (See, e.g., Lijphart 1977; Katz 1997; see also the work on proportional representation and women’s representation, e.g., Norris 1985; Matland and Studlar 1996.) Electoral systems themselves have played a particularly prominent role in the comparative literature on representation, however (see esp. Powell 2000). Indeed, the comparative study of representation is mostly based on a concept of representation that prioritizes the vote-seat function over everything else. That is, the electoral representation literature is often agnostic about the representation of groups defined by anything other than their vote. It equates the quality of representation with the efficiency and exactness of the vote-seat function. Lijphart’s Electoral Systems and Party Systems (1994) begins with what we regard as a paradigmatic statement of electoral representation theory:

Except in very small communities, democracy necessarily means representative democracy in which elected officials make decisions on behalf of the
people. How are these representatives elected? This indispensable task in representative democracies is performed by the electoral system – the set of methods for translating the citizens' votes into representatives' seats. Thus the electoral system is the most fundamental element of representative democracy. (1994:1)

Lijphart’s working hypothesis is echoed in much of the comparative institutional literature. For a particularly succinct statement, see Sartori (1997:3): “In the beginning is how a people is made to vote.” But also see much of the literature on vote-seat functions, in which the electoral system is paramount (e.g., Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Cox 1997). Indeed, this work largely reduces democracy to the method by which representatives are selected, not unlike Schumpeter’s oft-cited and decidedly narrow view of democracy: “the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (1942:269). 8

The particular significance of electoral systems for democracy and representation is relatively clear, of course, and in fact has quite deep theoretical roots. One of the central debates in democratic theory regards the tension between individual equality – leading to majority rule – and the protection of minorities. 9 The tension is central in the Federalist Papers, where the American system of checks and balances is laid out with the primary objective of avoiding a tyranny of the majority in the face of individual political equality, a difficult and pretty much unattainable task. It is also prominent in J. S. Mill’s argument for proportional representation, for instance, and Toqueville’s concerns about democracy in America. The preoccupation with electoral systems follows almost directly from the fundamental concern with the equality of individuals in liberal democratic systems (see, e.g., McGann 2006).

Like descriptive representation, however, electoral representation only captures a part of what we might like in representative government. If descriptive representation is about the representation of (mainly)

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8 Notice that from this simple assumption about competition one can derive powerful implications for democratic representation (Downs 1956).

9 For more complete discussions of equality in democracy, see, e.g Mill 1991; Dahl 1956, 2000; for theoretical work on equality as it pertains to electoral systems, see especially Rogowski 1981; Still 1981; Rae 1981.
demographic characteristics, electoral representation is principally about the representation of votes. In both cases, representation is – in Pitkin’s terminology – “standing for.” Electoral representational theory is interested in the extent to which a legislature mirrors the electorate, where the most salient characteristic of voters is for whom they voted. It thus focuses on how the distribution of seats reflects the distribution of votes. This is not to say that representation as “acting for” is entirely ignored; as with descriptive representation, electoral representational theory is premised on a connection between the representation of votes and the resulting representatives’ legislative activity. Some of the preceding work has demonstrated such a link, and our own models will provide further evidence of the connection between electoral representation and policy representation.

Policy Representation

In spite of the role that both descriptive and electoral representation have played in the empirical literature on democracy, they capture just a small part – and neither a sufficient nor a necessary part – of what we require of representation in a democracy. What we ultimately are interested in is policy representation, whereby the policy decisions of elected representatives are broadly reflective of some aggregation of public preferences, or – to draw on Rousseau – something like a “general will.” The quality of representation should be indicated not by shared belief, demographic proximity, or the accuracy of a vote-seat function, but by the extent to which representatives’ actions are related to the preferences of those being represented.

\[\text{10} \text{ Hence, the related literature on whether the partisanship of government has an effect on policy outcomes. See, e.g., Schmidt 1996.}\]

\[\text{11} \text{ Although Rousseau’s “general will” is in many ways quite different from the “public preference” that we focus on here – see note 5 – there are also some striking similarities. Consider the following passage from Book 2, Section 3 of The Social Contract, which suggests a calculation of the “general will” that is very similar to our own measure of net preferences: “There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular wills: but take away from these same wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.”}\]
There have been several bodies of literature that address policy representation – or at least aspects of policy representation – more directly. (For a thorough review, see Wlezien and Soroka 2007.) One body of work compares the attitudes of representatives and constituents as a means of testing the potential link between public opinion and policy. The typical research design is to take surveys of both the public and of policymakers and compare the two (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Uslaner and Weber 1979; Erikson et al. 1987; Herrera et al. 1992; Hill and Hinton-Anderson 1995). This design has been particularly popular in the foreign policy literature (e.g., Oldendick and Bardes 1982; for a review, see Holsti 1996). Policy positions are the focus for some scholars; others concentrate on the ways in which the public and policymakers understand issues; both are illustrated in a recent volume drawing together work in this field (Miller et al. 1999). In neither case is policy itself evident in the analysis, however. The work is premised on the notion that representatives’ attitudes will influence policy. But it is perhaps more accurately labeled “attitude” or “opinion” representation, examining as it does the extent to which representatives’ attitudes are similar to voters’ attitudes.

There are also related bodies of work exploring the relationship between public and government agendas (e.g., Soroka 2002), and opinion and presidential or government rhetoric (e.g., Cohen 1999; Rottinghaus 2006; Jennings and John n.d.), as well as a burgeoning literature on party manifestos (e.g., Budget et al. 1987; Klingemann et al. 2006). The latter sometimes directly addresses the link between public preferences and parties’ policy commitments. This literature tells us much about party positions over time and across countries. Like policymakers’ attitudes, however, party manifestos can be far removed from policy. Indeed, recent work suggests only a modest relationship between the two (McDonald and Budge 2005). Although each of these literatures has contributed to our understanding of representation, none directly addresses policy itself.

A literature focused more clearly on policymaking was sparked, if not fueled, by Miller and Stokes’s (1963) “Constituency Influence in Congress.” These authors brought together data on public opinion by constituency and both opinion surveys and the roll-call voting behavior of members of the U.S. Congress for an analysis of the extent to which prevailing attitudes within a constituency guided
representatives’ behavior. This research played a seminal role in the study of roll-call voting, primarily in the United States where roll-call data are readily available, but also elsewhere.\(^{12}\) The resulting literature seeks to establish links between the voting behavior of members of the House of Representatives and some combination of constituency opinion (measured by various means), constituency aggregate demographics, and each representative’s own demographic traits and party affiliations.

Roll-call voting is actual representative activity, and thus offers a better indication of Pitkin’s (1967) representation as “acting for” than does the work on opinion representation. Roll-call votes are also more proximate to policy formation than are representatives’ attitudes. The study of these votes does not address the kind of system-level policy representation that Pitkin describes, however.\(^{13}\) Referred to as studies of “dyadic” representation (Weissberg 1978), the literature on roll-call voting asserts that representation is to be found in the relationship between individual representatives and individual constituencies. From this perspective, we have representation when representatives and the preferences of geographic constituencies line up. Dyadic representation does not constitute policy representation.\(^{14}\) Although a strong relationship between constituency opinion and individual legislators’ behavior can be viewed as increasing the potential for policy representation, it is not a necessary condition. A great many individual representatives could vote against the majority opinion in their district; so long as the various district preferences were spoken for by other districts’ representatives, policy outputs could still be representative of the (national) majority preference (e.g., Hurley 1982).

We simply cannot address the existence of representation, or a lack thereof, without concerning ourselves with policy development and

\(^{12}\) This literature is both vast and varied; it includes the classic roll call voting literature (e.g., Mayhew 1966; Clausen 1973; Fiorina 1974; Kingdon 1981; Stone 1979; Wright 1989) as well as the literatures examining roll call votes along various measures of constituency opinion (e.g., Erikson 1978 1990; Achen 1978; Kuklinski 1977, 1978; McCrone and Kulinski 1979; Shapiro et al. 1990; Bartels 1991). Outside the U.S., see, e.g., Barnes 1977; Converse and Pierce 1986; Matthews and Valen 1999.

\(^{13}\) This has also been noted by Eulau and Karps 1977.

\(^{14}\) As we will see below, actually determining whether constituency preferences and roll-call votes actually line up is not straightforward.

There is a small but growing body of literature – in large part building on opinion representation and roll-call voting research – focused on the systemic representation of citizens’ preferences in actual public policy. (For reviews of the literature, see Burstein 2003; Brooks 2006; Manza and Cook 2002; Weakliem 2003; Wlezien and Soroka 2007). Some research demonstrates a correspondence between opinion and policy at particular points in time. In the United States the classic work is Erikson, Wright and McIver’s examination of states (1993). Brooks and Manza (2007) provide the most important comparative work, and show a strong correspondence between attitudes and welfare policy across countries. Other scholars go a step further and show “consistency” between public preferences for policy change, as captured in a single polling question, and the direction of policy change in a following period. Yet other studies capture opinion at two (or more) points in time, and compare changes in polling results with preceding, concurrent, and subsequent changes in policy. Page and Shapiro’s (1983) study of what they (and Monroe, 1998) refer to as “congruence” provides the classic case. By examining policy before and after shifts in opinion, this type of analysis more directly tests whether opinion change does indeed cause (or at least precede) policy change.

The dynamic relationship between opinion and policy is, however, best captured through an analysis of the relationships between extended time-series of both opinion and policy. Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson’s (1995) model of dynamic representation in the United States is one archetypal case, as is Wlezien’s (1995, 1996a) initial explanation of the thermostatic model, upon which this book is based. This


16 See also Belanger and Petry 2005; Isernia, Juhasz, and Rattinger 2002. Note also that this approach can be applied very effectively across space as well as time. A number of studies look at variation across U.S. states, for instance. See, e.g., Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993, Goggin and Wlezien 1993; Norrander and Wilcox 1999. For cross-national work, see Brooks and Manza 2006.

17 For earlier work along these lines, see Devine 1970; Weissberg 1976; Burstein 1979; Hartley and Russett 1992.
kind of dynamic approach to the opinion-policy relationship has seen increasing attention in recent years. Eichenberg and Stoll (2003) have examined the dynamic relationship between preferences and defense spending in the United States and Western Europe; Johnson, Brace, and Arceneaux (2005) have done the same for environmental policy in U.S. states; Jennings (n.d), on border control and asylum policy in the United Kingdom; and Hobolt and Klemmenson (2005, 2008), across several policies in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Denmark. All of this work examines the relationship between public preferences and public policy, the final and most significant outcome of representative activity. In so doing, it provides empirical evidence of the strength and nature of policy representation, the kind of representation that we believe is crucial in modern representative democracies.

PUBLIC RESPONSIVENESS

The representative function of democratic governance – the production of policy consistent with our preferences – comes with a crucial stipulation: we need to know what we want representatives to do. That is, representation requires that we have policy preferences. Preferably, those preferences will be consistently, rationally based on a number of real-world phenomena. Of critical importance is policy itself. That is, preferences need to be informed by what policymakers actually do.

The case for public responsiveness as a critical component in the functioning of democratic systems is perhaps made most clearly in work on “systems analysis,” by authors such as David Easton and Karl Deutsch. Both authors draw on a body of work on “cybernetics,” developed during and following the Second World War by Norbert Wiener and colleagues, and first focusing on the difficulties in shooting missiles from moving airplanes (Wiener 1961[1948]:5–7).

There are representative activities that are not adequately implicated in public policies, admittedly, such as informal international treaties, or symbolic but nevertheless important public statements abroad or at home. But the vast majority of important representative functions should be implicated in public policy in one form or another.

Indeed, the model of representation and responsiveness that we describe in Chapter 2 owes much to Easton’s “Dynamic Response Model of a Political System” (1965:110).
Wiener writes, “... when we desire a motion to follow a given pattern the difference between this pattern and the actually performed motion is used as a new input to cause the part regulated to move in such a way as to bring its motion closer to that given by the pattern” (1961:6).

Wiener, among others, suggested that cybernetic processes could be usefully applied to both machines and humans. They could also be applied to societies and governments, and work by Easton and Deutsch in the early 1960s took up the task. In his argument for systems analysis, Easton (1965) provides a theoretical model of political systems in which the system stands between inputs (demands and support) and outputs (decisions and actions). In our model, these are preferences and policy, respectively, and, as for Easton, the relationship between inputs and outputs is a reciprocal one. This “feedback loop” is critical to the ongoing functioning of a political system. It is through this feedback, or public responsiveness – we will use both terms in the chapters that follow – that a system is able to manage demands and maximize support; it is through monitoring public preferences that a system is able to develop a capacity for responsive outputs, or policy. The ongoing interaction between public preferences and policy is in this way fundamental to the functioning of a democratic political system. Indeed, the more the public responds to policy, and policymakers represent public preferences, the more “efficient” the system, that is, the more effectively – quickly and fully – changes in preferences translate into changes in policy.

The same dynamic is described in Deutsch’s work, best represented by The Nerves of Government (1966). For Deutsch, the flow of information is paramount, and, again, feedback is critical to the ongoing successful functioning of the system. Deutsch’s feedback is “a communications network that produces action in response to an input of information, and includes the results of its own action in the new information by which it modifies its subsequent behaviour” (88). Deutsch goes somewhat further than Easton in describing both a representative government and a reactive public. The first is evident in his description of “lag” – the time it takes for a system to react to information – and “gain” – the extent of that reaction. Lag has to do with whether governments react in a timely manner to preferences for change, and gain determines whether the extent of the change is
less, more, or exactly what the public wants. The latter is evident in Deutsch’s discussion of “goal-changing feedback,” that is, feedback allowing for the goal to change over time based on new information. Whether this feedback can exist is of course another matter. There is of course a considerable body of literature questioning whether citizens are sufficiently informed or reactive enough to play a role in democratic decision making. The literature has a long and distinguished lineage, beginning with Plato and Aristotle. J.S. Mill was concerned about the relative ignorance of the average citizen (see Birch 1971:89–93). So too were the American founding fathers. For example, that just one third of U.S. senators is elected only every six years is partly a defense against what the founders saw as an ill-informed and sometimes irrational public. In The Federalist No.10, Madison writes that the effect of representation is

... to refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.

In fact, Madison among others viewed representative government as something quite different from and better than democracy, where the latter was direct and thus more prone to the vulgarities of public opinion (see Manin 1997).

The issue of public ignorance is also implicated in the literature on what Pitkin (1967) calls the “mandate-independence” controversy: the degree to which representatives must (a) do what they know their constituents would do or (b) make educated decisions based on their constituents’ interests (see also, e.g., Fairlie 1940; Birch 1971:37–40). Moreover, it is evident in the literature on whether representation should be of individuals or “interests,” most often associated with Burke. Burke’s argument for representation of interests was founded in large part on his belief that a representative was capable of clearer, more informed thought than his constituents. That representatives were more capable of making beneficial decisions was partly because debate and deliberation in Parliament was helpful; partly because the purpose of Parliament was to develop and protect the national

20 See, for instance, Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” in The Republic.
Public Responsiveness

interest, rather than those local interests that the average citizen would be most interested and aware; and partly because Burke viewed the average citizen as ill-informed and largely incapable of rational decision making.

Schumpeter and Lippmann present perhaps the best-known treatises on the problems of an inevitably ignorant electorate. Schumpeter’s (1950) argument against “the classical doctrine of democracy” rests on the belief that there is no “common good,” nor is there a reasonable “will of the people” established by aggregating varying preferences. One objection has to do with the biases and difficulties inherent in aggregation (on this, see Arrow 1951; Riker 1982). But, even if this problem is overcome, “… we still remain under the practical necessity of attributing to the will of the individual an independence and a rational quality that are altogether unrealistic” (1950:253). Lippmann (1925) presents his case in more eloquent and stronger terms. Even if citizens were able to understand politics, they could not possibly have the time to inform themselves properly:

The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs. (1925:39)

Lippmann’s concerns about the ignorance and irrationality of the average citizen were largely supported by early public opinion research, finding that citizens were for the most part uninterested in politics and uninformed about current affairs. Columbia School researchers suggested that demographic characteristics were the primary drivers of voting behavior (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al. 1968); Michigan School scholars suggested that party loyalties drove voting (e.g., Campbell et al. 1964). In both cases, citizens seemed to have only very limited capacities to understand current issues and independently form opinions (see esp. Almond 1950; Converse 1964; Miller 1967). Wahlke (1971:273) nicely summarizes the view at the time: elections are the primary means by which governments are held democratically responsible, but, “However logical and obvious such a conception of democratic representative government processes may seem, the observed behaviour
of citizens is in almost all critical respects inconsistent with it.” More recent work on individual citizens’ attitudes is only marginally less pessimistic. We know from much previous research that people are not highly interested in politics, for instance, at least not in a very consistent way. Interest does appear to increase approaching an election, and this makes a good deal of sense. In between elections, however, people care much less and pay much less attention (Zaller 1998). Most people are not passionate about politics and would rather spend their time doing other things. Not surprisingly, they also appear highly uninformed (Berelson et al. 1954; Campbell et al. 1964; Converse 1964; Ferejohn 1990). The failure of Americans to know the names of the members of Congress is often cited. In one study, only 30 % could name either of the senators from their state (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Knowledge of party control of Congress is no better (Neuman 1986). Even familiarity with basic government institutions and how they work is low (Althaus 2003). Many people just don’t know the basic facts of political life, at least based on surveys.

Of course, it may be that all of these results substantially overstate the case. A number of growing literatures – relying on increasingly sophisticated survey instruments – show that the average citizen may be at least slightly more consistent, attentive, and educable than we initially thought. Consider for example the burgeoning literature on election campaigns, which shows a considerable amount of voter learning about the positions of candidates and parties (e.g., Andersen, Tilley and Heath 2005; Arceneaux 2005; Brady and Johnston 1987; Gelman and King 1993; Johnston et al. 1992, 1996; for a review of the broader literature, see Erikson and Tedin 2004). This is not to say that the average citizen knows very much about politics, even on Election Day. Rather, it is to say that she (or he) may know enough to make “good” decisions (Lupia and McCubbins 1998). But does this mean that people can effectively manage representative democracy by our standard? Or is the thermostatic model just too much to ask?

21 Consider, for instance, basic responses to questions about interest in politics. In the 2000 National Election Study, only 20% of those surveyed said they were interested in politics “most of the time,” although it should be noted that another 36% said they were interested “some of the time.”
There are at least three possible ways by which the public can fulfill the role that we set out here. First, it may be that citizens actually do not need much information to have sufficiently informed preferences, and the information may be fairly easy to get. The demands of the thermostatic model require that the public responds to changes in policy, to be sure, but only in a very simple way; they need only to know, for instance, whether government has increased spending in an area and whether by a little or a lot. This seemingly does not require a high level of information or cognition. Politicians also have strong incentives to offer cues that help citizens make decisions (see Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007).

Second, it may be that not all individuals are informed about policy, but that a sufficient number are. It is not necessary that all individuals respond to what governments do. What matters is that some nontrivial number respond, enough to produce the aggregate level signal necessary to guide politicians. This is not a perfect way to representation, of course. That is, differential public responsiveness raises the possibility of differential representation, for example, that policymakers pay closer attention to the preferences of informed responders than to the preferences of others. It is of consequence when the preferences of the “informed” and “uninformed” differ, as we will discuss later in the book.

Finally, the responsiveness of individuals can differ across issues. Not everyone will pay attention to policy in different areas, and some people may follow what happens in one area while other people follow what happens in other areas. Their responsiveness to policy should differ accordingly. Just as it is not necessary that all individuals respond to policy, it is not necessary that the same individuals respond in all domains. What matters is that the number of people who pay attention is large enough to signal policymakers. Again, this way to representation is not perfect, at least to the extent the preferences of the “issue publics” and the rest of the population differ.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} Note also that, regardless of how many people are responding, there can be errors in individuals’ responses. As has been noted by numerous scholars, and most famously by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1983, 1992), such errors will be canceled out through aggregation if they are approximately random. If errors do largely cancel each other out, the mean preference will be an accurate indication of the mean individual. Even if errors in preferences do not cancel each other out,
Of course, it may be that not even significant issue publics notice what government does in many areas. We actually expect this, and theorize that public responsiveness varies substantially in understandable ways, being imperceptible in some domains and quite pronounced in others. We consider the underlying structure of public responsiveness in more detail in forthcoming chapters. For the meantime, suffice it to say that we – along with many others, most notably Bentham (1989; see Cutler 1999), Page and Shapiro (1983), and Converse (1990) – are some of Lippmann’s (1925:39) “mystical democrats.” We believe that an informed public interest is possible, at least in some areas. This belief is buttressed by a growing body of evidence that publics respond in the ways that justify policy representation as we described it earlier (like Page and Shapiro, but see also Durr 1993; Erikson et al. 2002 Wlezien 1995, 1996a, 2004). Examining the degree, extent, and nature of this public responsiveness is a central goal of forthcoming chapters.

SYNOPSIS AND PROGNOSIS

These are the ideas that guide our investigation, and it proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 provides an outline of the theoretical model on which our investigation is based – the thermostatic model of opinion and policy. Chapter 3 extends this model, suggesting ways in which the characteristics of issues and political institutions may mediate the links between public preferences and public policy. Chapter 4 describes our data on preferences and policy in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. These data require some discussion, since we are trying to build models of preferences and policy that are as directly comparable as possible, across both policy domains and countries. Testing of the thermostatic model then begins in Chapter 5. This chapter includes the basic models, comparing the magnitude of public responsiveness across countries and policy domains. In so doing, it assesses the thermostatic model and how it varies with differences in issue salience and the level of federalism. Chapter 6 explores those errors may be consistent over time in a way that makes the bias markedly less important to the examination of dynamic representation and public responsiveness. We discuss this further in Chapter 8.
responsiveness further – it considers whether publics respond to policy decisions (appropriations) or policy outputs (outlays), the timing of this responsiveness, and the degree to which it is really driven by the results of spending on the broader environment. Chapter 7 then examines policy representation, particularly the degree to which representation varies systematically in magnitude alongside issue salience and political institutions. Chapter 8 offers final analyses of both public responsiveness and policy representation, this time with an eye on the possibility that certain segments of the public are more responsive, or better represented, than others. Chapter 9 reviews our findings and interprets them in light of the preceding theoretical discussion, and introduces a measure of system efficiency to characterize the representational effectiveness of democratic institutions.