



Research Article

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The relationship between public opinion, decision-makers, and public policy in American democracy

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the relationship between public opinion and the decision-making process in American democracy. People's attitudes on different issues should be considered in the policy-making process as an indicator of the health of representative democracy. To evaluate these interactions, I reviewed approximately forty academic articles that address the opinion-policy relationship and elite polarization. In conducting this analysis, I identify a reciprocal dynamic in which public opinion influences political leaders and policy outcomes. The evidence also supports my expectation that elite polarization plays a role in shaping public opinion. I found that polarization of the political elite influences public opinion and policy outcomes of Congress. Summing up, it can be concluded that decision makers in some issues don't react to public opinion but to the public resonance of their attitudes. In the future, efforts should focus on gathering more information about the strength of elite polarization's impact on public opinion across different issues, causal inferences about responsiveness, and how this phenomenon influences the quality of American democracy.

Keywords: public opinion, decision-makers, public policy, democracy.

1. Introduction

Public opinion is a crucial element in democracy. Some scholars view the intensity of public opinion in decision-making as a key democratic standard. There are ongoing questions about how public opinion relates to public policy and how political elites influence opinion. This review addresses these questions by examining research on the reciprocal relationship between public opinion and policy, the shaping of policy outcomes by public sentiment, and the role political elites play in influencing public beliefs. The study aims to assess whether American democracy demonstrates strong responsiveness to the public or is shifting from Lincoln's ideal of government "by the

people" toward one led by a political elite. Focusing on American politics, the analysis draws on extensive research regarding legislators' reactions to public opinion and the impact of influential groups in shaping it.

2. The Impact of Public Opinion on Decision Makers and Public Policy

The influence of public opinion on decision-making and policy outcomes is an important foundation of contemporary democracy. The democratic system requires institutions elected by the people in free and fair elections that represent the will of the majority. Based on these theoretical premises, I expected to find evidence of public opinion's influence on policy. To address my expectations, I investigated this relationship by reviewing publications on the impact of public opinion on policy in American politics. According to Page (1994), government actions, or policy outputs, typically align rather well with what surveys indicate the public wants them to do. Public opinion affects decision-makers, however, not in the same way for all issues and at all times. Pacheco (2013) found that policy representation and public responsiveness in the states depend on issue saliency. Salient issues prevail, and other specific public preoccupations are overlooked. As Page and Shapiro (1983) observe, although there is evidence of the impact of opinion and policy, most of the time we should be "cautious about democratic responsiveness in American politics". Next, I will present my findings succinctly, starting with the favorable arguments.

In the first decades of the last century, public opinion was important to decision-makers. American politics was different from the rest of the world. Erikson (1976) found a strong correlation between public opinion and state policy in the 1930s. His evidence shows that "state legislators are rather responsive to public opinion," especially when "the public demand for the policy is the strongest." The role of public opinion stayed important during World War II and afterward. Page and Shapiro (1983) examined data on opinion and policy from 1935 to 1979. They found that "public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion". Opinion's influence on policy and elected institutions was widespread. Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson (1995) developed several indicators of policy activity for the House, the Senate, the presidency, and the Supreme Court. In both institutional and broader analyses of "government as a whole," they found that policy responds dynamically to changes in public opinion (Figure 1). Each electoral institution quickly translates public opinion into policy "without delay or hesitation." Politicians constantly respond to changes in public opinion to stay ahead of the political curve.

Data show that public opinion influences decision-makers at both the federal and state levels. Wright, Erikson, and McIver (1987) examined the effect of public opinion on state policy. They reported with confidence that "public opinion counts, and not just a little". Using regression and LISREL analysis, they found that state opinion is a major determinant of state policy. The correlation between public opinion and state policy is a strong +0.80. The coefficient for public opinion's impact on the composite measure is +0.66, down only slightly from +0.80 without socioeconomic controls.

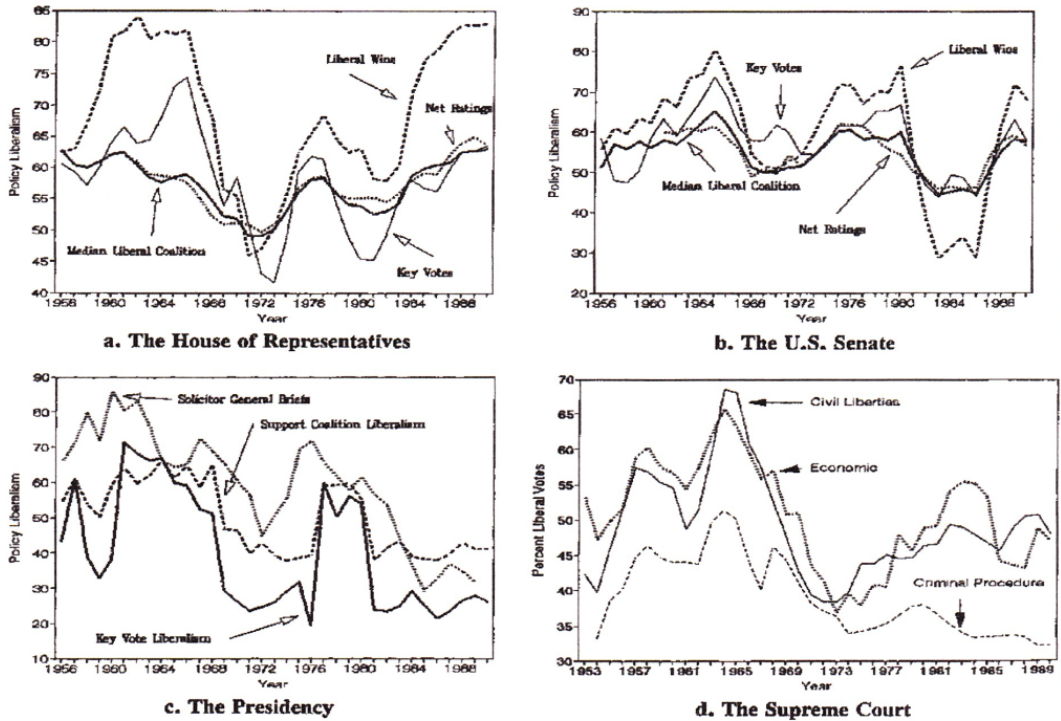


Figure 1. Indicators of Public Policy Change in Four Parts of the American Government (Stimson, Mackuen & Erikson, 1995)

In my research, I found that public opinion influences political parties as well. Monroe (1983) studied promises in Republican and Democratic platforms from 1960 through 1980. He observed that both parties adopted positions favored by a majority of the public but went against popular majorities on issues of greatest concern to their established constituencies. He also found that party platforms related to policy decisions both when public majorities favored those proposals and when majorities opposed them. Hartley and Russett (1992) examined military spending policies and how these policies reflected public opinion. They found that when the percentage of the public believing the government spent too little on the military increased, military spending increased as well ($b = .261$, $p < .05$). The authors provided strong evidence that public opinion influenced government policy, though the arms race and budget deficit were equally or more influential. They noted that the influence of public opinion remained systematic over the years.

The trend is clear: generally speaking, public opinion has an important effect on decision makers and policy outcomes, but there are significant cases in which it has no importance, domains where it is ignored, or issues left in the shadows due to a lack of visibility. Some evidence in this direction is provided by different scholars. Matsusaka (2010) used 10 high-profile issues across the 50 states in his study and found that "states chose the policy preferred by a majority of citizens 59 percent of the time

(...) meaning that states chose policies opposed by a majority of citizens 41 percent of the time.” Similar conclusions were reached by Monroe (1998) as well. According to him, policy outcomes are consistent with the preferences of public majorities in 55% of cases. Observing these data naturally raises the question: why do some issues supported by public opinion have an impact on decision makers, while others do not? Many studies conclude that salience issues and the level of importance accorded to them by public opinion are key factors in successful decision-making. Burstein (2003), reviewing numerous articles on the impact of public opinion on public policy, observed that “the impact of public opinion is substantial” and considered salience an important factor that enhances that impact. “Democratic governments often do what their citizens want, and they are especially likely to do so when an issue is important to the public and its wishes are clear” (Burstein 1998). According to Shapiro and Page (1983), there are still specific cases that are less visible and with less voice; there are cases in which policy does not change at all after opinion changes, and cases when “policy unequivocally moves in the opposite direction from opinion”. These conclusions are also supported by Alan Monroe (1998). In his study, he compared public opinion with policy outcomes on over 500 issues from 1980 through 1993. According to him, when issues were categorized by their public salience, opinion/policy consistency was greater for the highest-salience issues.

The trend continues to this day as well. In a recent study, Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2025) studied public opinion on 103 important issues on the congressional agenda from 2006 to 2022. They found alignment between decision-making and public preferences in 55% of issues, and argue that this process depends on public support, on how divided the public is on a given issue, and on whether party control of the two chambers of Congress is divided. The number of chambers is a fundamental institutional aspect of legislatures, as reported by Ezrow, Fenzl, and Hellwig (2024), regarding the responsiveness to public opinion. They observed that “when responsiveness under bicameralism and unicameralism is magnified, policy responsiveness to public opinion is observed to be stronger with one chamber rather than two. Moreover, within bicameral systems, the more symmetrical the balance of power between chambers, the weaker the opinion–policy responsiveness”. Factors such as state government ideology, legislators’ partisan affiliations, and unemployment rates predict state-level policy responsiveness to media attention on fracking issues (Chen, 2023), leading to a gradual dynamic responsiveness that, according to Caughey and Warshaw (2018), results in large policy shifts from the cumulation of incremental responsiveness over many years.

On the other hand, Manza and Cook (2002) concluded that “it is more likely than not that the movement of policy will tend to be in the direction of public opinion,” but politicians often have ways to maneuver policy in a way that is invisible to the public. In addition, there are times when public opinion is overlooked or simply ignored. This category may include foreign policy issues. Jacobs and Page (2005), trying to discover who influences U.S. foreign policy, conclude that “U.S. foreign policy is most heavily and consistently influenced by internationally oriented business

leaders, followed by experts,” while referring to public opinion, it “seems to have considerably less effect, except under particular conditions”. These findings raise questions about the role of public opinion in a democratic system. Perhaps for this reason, Page and Shapiro (1983) found substantial congruence between opinion and policy, a signal to be cautious about democratic responsiveness in American politics. The trend of influence is evident, but approximately 40% of decision-makers still don’t respond to public opinion. Future studies should elucidate, case by case and institution by institution, when public opinion is a major factor in policy outcomes, and when opinion influences fade due to other factors. Next, I will focus on the relationship between public opinion and decision-makers to examine the political elite’s role toward ordinary citizens in the era of polarization.

3. Elite Polarization Effect on Public Opinion

During the last four decades, American politics have changed and become more polarized. This phenomenon has had a profound resonance throughout society. Initially, I expected polarization to affect public opinion, and after reviewing several articles on polarization, I notice the political elite’s influence on public opinion.

In the first part of the paper, I presented evidence about the influence of public opinion on political leaders and policy. Next, I will provide evidence in the opposite direction—from the political elite to public opinion. “Who leads whom?” asks Canes-Wrone in her book about the president, policy, and the public. It is meaningful to know the trend of polarization, in what direction it is developing, the echo of elite polarization in the mass public, and how this phenomenon influences opinions, the legislative process, and democracy in general.

According to Theriault (2006), since 1973, “the Senate has become 29% more polarized, and House polarization has increased to 47%.” This evidence of Congress polarization has also been accepted by Fiorina and Levendusky (2006). However, they do not agree with the idea of mass polarization, concluding that “there is almost a total separation between Democratic and Republican members of Congress, but the pattern among ordinary voters is somewhat weaker.” This conclusion has been challenged by other authors. Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) emphasize their ideas about the role of mass public polarization. Their evidence indicates that “since the 1970s, ideological polarization has increased dramatically among the mass public in the United States as well as among political elites.” In contrast to Fiorina’s claim, Abramowitz and Saunders demonstrate, based on results, that “there has been an increase in ideological polarization since the 1980s: the percentage of respondents at the low end of the polarization scale fell from 39% during the 1980s to 32% in 2002-2004, while the percentage at the high end rose from 24% to 33%.” Although there is debate over the extent of the elite’s polarization’s influence on citizens’ attitudes, the trend is clear — ideological thinking is more prevalent among the American public today than in the past. Elite polarization pushes average citizens to take sides. James Campbell (2006) reinforces these findings. Based on evidence, he indicates that

moderates were a majority in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and a minority in 2002 and 2004.

Scholars provide data about the effect of polarization on public opinion judgment regarding different issues. The evidence demonstrates what Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz have named a conflict extension. Abramowitz presents evidence that elite polarization has affected ordinary voters on a variety of specific issues. For him, the difference between Democratic and Republican voters increased from 11 percentage points in 1972 to 38 percentage points in 2004 on the issue of Black AIDS, from 6 percentage points in 1992 to 45 percentage points in 2004 on the issue of defense spending, and from 3 percentage points in 1980 to 25 percentage points in 2004 on the issue of abortion (Figure 2). "Changes in the behavior and attitudes of the non-ideological have generally mirrored those of ideologues", sustains Hetherington (2008).

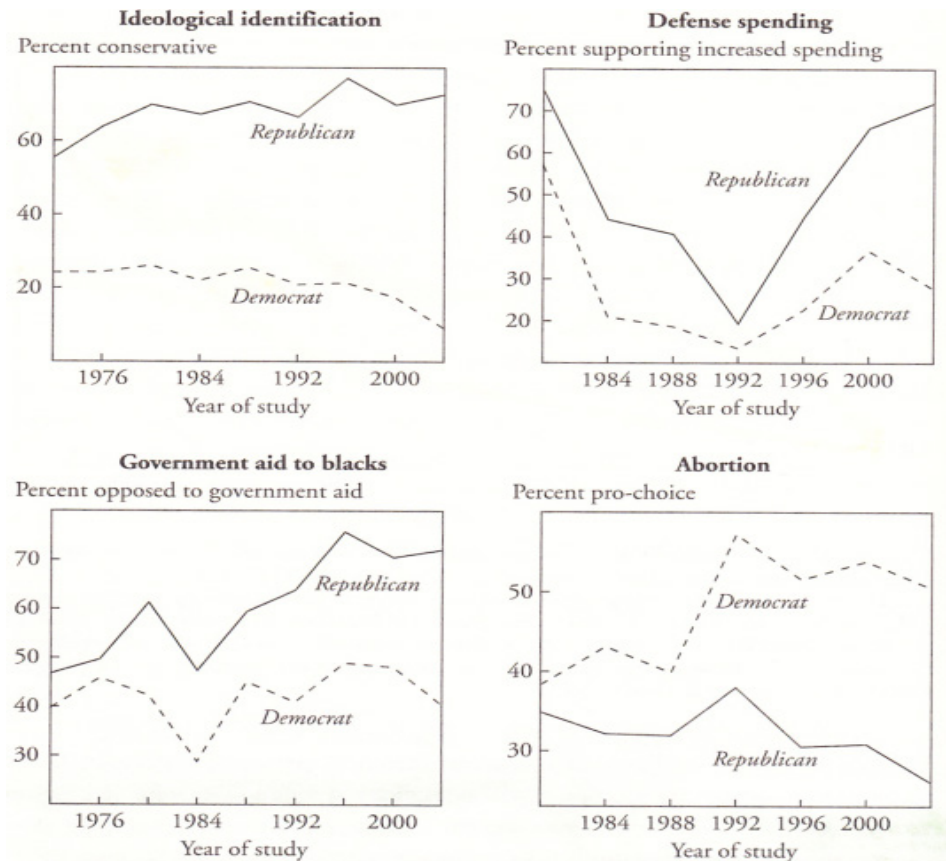


Figure 2. Trends in partisan polarization on various issues (Abramowitz, 2006)

Polarization also affects Congress's policy outcomes. Brady, Ferejohn, and Harbridge (2008), looking for a correlation between policy spending in Congress and polarization

in some policy areas, found a strong relationship in some direction. Thus, increased polarization is associated with a decrease in spending changes. "For environmental policy, the correlation is -0.44, and for energy policy, the correlation is -0.33", supporting the hypothesis that increased polarization has made it more difficult for Congress to make changes to policy.

The evidence provided in this part of the paper leads to the conclusion that decision-maker polarization influences public opinion, making it changeable and affecting attitudes. Under this new evidence, how do we relate these findings to the ones in the first part of the paper? Wright, Erikson, and McIver (1987) reported that the liberalism or conservatism of state policy results largely from the relative liberalism or conservatism of the state's electorate. According to them, state political structures deliver more liberal policies to more liberal states and more conservative policies to more conservative states. This paper provides evidence that public opinion influences decision makers and policy outcomes and that the polarization of the political elite influences public opinion and policy outcomes of Congress. Summing up, I can conclude that decision makers don't react to public opinion but to the public resonance of their attitudes. Although "there is also the question of whether elites represent the public's dispositions" (Shapiro 1998), or whether we are in the case of elite domination, defined by Zaller (1992) as a situation in which "elites induce citizens to hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis." Is this healthy for democracy? According to Page and Shapiro (1983), "if leaders influence public opinion through a more benign process of education or persuasion, using reasoned arguments and good evidence, we might still want to call the outcome something different from pure democracy". This issue requires further studies.

4. Public Opinion, Sampling and Democracy

Beyond the question of how leaders influence or react to public opinion, another structural problem that can undermine democratic legitimacy may be the exclusion of significant segments of the population from political engagement and opinion measurement. In this context, migrants' views on several issues of political government are often neglected or entirely unconsidered. According to the UN, the estimated number of international migrants reached 304 million in 2024, with North America hosting 61.2 million at mid-year 2024. The total number of immigrants in the US in 2023 was 51.8 million, according to the Pew Research Center, with 14.0 million (27%) unauthorized immigrants and 37.8 million (73%) lawful immigrants. Only half of them are naturalized citizens and eligible to vote. Can there be a real democracy when more than 10% of the population, who live and work in one country, don't have a political voice and cannot express an opinion on different issues in society? "Most surveys focus only on part of that population, however, who are at least 18 years old and who are citizens of that country" (Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1996). As long as immigrants are *de facto* part of society, indifference is a social injustice and

an academic inaccuracy. "Representative government does not function well if the needs of one group, namely the migrants, are not well articulated, not heard by the decision-makers, and not represented in political parties, councils, and parliaments" (Hammar, 1985). In 2006, 57% of people in red counties believed that immigrants living in the U.S. illegally should be required to go home, compared to 44% of people living in blue counties (Doherty, 2006). In 2024, the partisan division on immigrants has increased, with 66% of Republican voters saying illegal immigrants should not be allowed to stay legally, compared to 16% of democratic voters saying the same. These percentages are based on the opinions of American citizens of these states. But what is the opinion of legal and illegal immigrants? This element is missing. Politicians, researchers, and the general public are uninformed about their opinions and are often misinformed about the general public's opinion. What they know is the citizens' opinion. If the researchers modify the sample's structure, the results will change as well.

Calling for immigrant integration is a requirement for equal opportunities, human solidarity, and building a society without discrimination. "The right to have rights" sustains Shachar (2000) and is not negotiable by third parties. Magleby et al (2008) note that "In a democracy, there are many interests and many organized interest groups. The democratic process exists to decide among those competing interests (...) diverse groups help preserve democratic values and limit the concentration of power in any single group". It doesn't make sense that the rights of immigrants remain an issue in electoral debate or are influenced by citizens' opinions. Everyone should enjoy full rights, and rights shouldn't be an optional subject in the hands of the majority. Indigenous populations sometimes treat the issue from their own interest, judge with stereotypes, and don't care about human rights. From this perspective, scholars who modify their samples and include legal/illegal immigrants in their surveys can improve society, decision-making, and the democratic system. This is not only an issue of human rights and democracy but also an issue of methodology. Researchers should accurately inform decision-makers and society about public opinion in a given country. The opinion of the public should not be discriminated against and should not be stopped at the borders of citizenship.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the role of public opinion in decision-making and public policy, as well as the reciprocal influence of the political elite on public opinion. The results indicate that public opinion exerts a clear influence on decision-makers, political parties, and policy outcomes at the federal and local levels. Although there is a clear trend of influence, there are still many cases in which public opinion is unimportant, domains where it is ignored, or issues left in the shadows due to a lack of visibility. When, in about 40% of the time, public opinion does not influence public policy (Matsusaka, 2010; Monroe, 1998), questions arise. Is it healthy for democracy when politicians don't respond to public preferences, or is this a problem with the

democratic process? Further studies should elucidate the importance of other factors that influence decision-makers.

My review also analyzed the relationship between the political elite and public opinion in the last decades of American political polarization. The results demonstrated the effect of polarization on public opinion judgment about different issues. "Changes in the behavior and attitudes of the non-ideological have generally mirrored those of ideologues" (Hetherington 2008). These findings raise questions about the authenticity of public opinion and about democracy as a system based on public preferences. "The quality of the public's attitudes is, however, a point of serious contention" (Shapiro, 1998). In conclusion, I can say that decision-makers do not react to public opinion but rather to public resonance of their attitudes. At this point, further studies should elucidate the exact influence of political and other factors on public opinion. I found that elite polarization affects public opinion attitude, making it more polarized, but the direction in specific issues, the strength of the relationship, the correlation with other factors, and how they return to influence political decisions remain unclear.

At the end of this paper, I appeal for a methodological reformulation as a process that can improve knowledge and the democratic system in general. The public opinion survey should include the opinions of immigrants. The democratic system in America "does not function well if the needs of one group, namely the migrants, are not well articulated, not heard by the decision-makers" (Hammar 1985), and not taken into account by society in general. If the researchers modify the sample's structure, the results change as well, and the changes are in the right direction. As long as immigrants are *de facto* part of society, indifference is a social injustice and an academic inaccuracy.

6. Limitations and Future Research

My work has some weaknesses that offer directions for future research. An unconventional research study based on other studies has some limitations, manifested in its methodology, spatial and temporal coverage, and insufficient case discussion, which limit its ability to draw general conclusions.

I used each publication as a data source. This approach creates some restrictions. Different studies use different methodologies and vary in measurement, which affects public policy and makes it difficult to assess data compatibility and comparability. Deficiencies of each study are overlooked. In this case, the probability of bias in judgment is high.

My paper is based on articles selected randomly. This choice has been selective, potentially excluding other sources that could modify the study's results. At the same time, the number of articles is relatively small. The domain remains uncovered, and my paper based on these data may be insufficient for generalizations. Also, this study is based on the influence of public opinion on parties and policies in the United States and cannot be generalized to other countries. There are countries where the reactions of government parties do not necessarily reflect public opinion. Romeijn (2020),

in his study of German politics, notes that “While there is a link between general public preferences and the positions of political parties, this connection weakens considerably once political parties are in government.”

In addition, the correlation between elite polarization and public opinion was only briefly addressed. I found evidence of opinion polarization in the same direction as elite polarization, but couldn’t determine how much this relationship shapes opinions. This paper provides an opportunity to understand the trend of influences, but other methodologies should clarify these limitations and avoid bias. In the future, efforts should focus on gathering more information about the strength of elite polarization’s impact on public opinion across different issues, causal inferences about responsiveness, and how this phenomenon influences the quality of American democracy.

There is a need to study the impact of these factors over long periods of time on different issues, with standardized measurements. Correlations and regressions are necessary to estimate the effect sizes of these variables, enabling comparisons and generalizable conclusions.

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