



The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda

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This article considers the impact of public opinion on public policy, asking: (1) how much impact it has; (2) how much the impact increases as the salience of issues increases; (3) to what extent the impact of public opinion may be negated by interest groups, social movement organizations, political parties, and elites; (4) whether responsiveness of governments to public opinion has changed over time; and (5) the extent to which our conclusions can be generalized. The source of data is publications published in major journals and included in major literature reviews, systematically coded to record the impact of public opinion on policy. The major findings include: the impact of public opinion is substantial; salience enhances the impact of public opinion; the impact of opinion remains strong even when the activities of political organizations and elites are taken into account; responsiveness appears not to have changed significantly over time; and the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized is limited. Gaps in our knowledge made apparent by the review are addressed in proposals for an agenda for future research.

Most social scientists who study public opinion and public policy in democratic countries agree that (1) public opinion influences public policy; (2) the more salient an issue to the public, the stronger the relationship is likely to be; and (3) the relationship is threatened by the power of interest organizations,¹ political parties, and economic elites (see, e.g., Aldrich 1995; Dahl 1989; Mueller 1999; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Page and Shapiro 1983; Smith 2000).

There would be much less consensus, however, on the answers to five follow-up questions widely seen as important but seldom addressed directly:

1. *How much* impact does public opinion have on public policy?
2. *How much* does the impact of opinion on policy increase as the importance of an issue to the public increases?
3. To what extent do interest groups, social movement organizations, political parties, and elites influence policy even when opposed by public opinion?
4. Has government responsiveness to public opinion changed over time?
5. How generalizable are our findings about the impact of opinion on policy?

This article distills considerable research directed at these questions. It is not, however, a literature review in the

¹ The term "interest organization" encompasses both interest groups and social movement organizations; for the rationale for treating them together, see Burstein 1998a.

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usual sense. Rather than summarizing publications in a conventional narrative, I use each publication as a source of data, tabulating the issues and countries studied, and the authors' predictions, variables, and findings. The analysis will provide the publications' collective answer to each question, and, at times, show how little evidence is available. Highlighting how little we know on some issues will point to an agenda for future research.

It turns out that public opinion influences policy most of the time, often strongly. Responsiveness appears to increase with salience, and public opinion matters even in the face of activities by interest organizations, political parties, and political and economic elites. Claims that responsiveness is changing over time or varies across issues rest on very little evidence.

The next section describes issues that arise in attempts to answer the questions. This is followed by a description of the data, presentation of findings, and conclusion.

ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES

The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy

No one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does. Even dedicated proponents of democratic theory acknowledge that democratic governments sometimes ignore the public (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983: 189); those whose theories attribute little power to the public concede that governments sometimes follow public opinion (e.g., Block 1987: 66; Domhoff 1998: 301; Korpi 1989: 313). What distinguishes those who believe democracy gives citizens genuine control over their government from those who believe it does not, is thus disagreement over matters of degree: *how much* impact does public opinion have on public policy?

This disagreement is an old one, and one might think it had been resolved, or at least narrowed substantially.

But this is not the case. Indeed, it may be argued that the range of predictions about impact based on democratic theory has widened in the past 20 years, not narrowed, and that researchers are no closer to consensus now than they were then.

A good place to begin is Page and Shapiro's (1983) classic article, "Effects of Opinion on Policy." They begin conventionally, delineating theoretical controversies about the impact of opinion on policy: some theories (particularly economists' on electoral competition) predict "a high degree of responsiveness" (175), while others (notably those attributing great power to interest groups) predict much less. Their empirical conclusions are presented in a conventional way as well: on the one hand, the evidence supports one side ("opinion changes are important causes of policy change" [189]), but, on the other hand, problems in the research require make them hesitate to accept their own conclusion—it would be "unwise to draw normative conclusions about the extent of democratic responsiveness in policymaking" (*ibid.*).

What has happened in the 20 years since the publication of "Effects of Opinion on Policy"? Theoretically, those expecting responsiveness to be low have generally held fast to their ideas, but the paths of those initially identified with the high responsiveness view have diverged. Some (e.g., Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995) still argue that democracy works much as it is supposed to, with public officials consistently responding to shifts in public opinion. Others have come to claim, however, that the complexity of modern politics makes responsiveness problematic. Democratic institutions may link opinion and policy on issues that are especially important, relatively simple, and addressed by legislatures straightforwardly, but such issues are few. Jones (1994) argues that inherent limitations in both the cognitive capacities of individuals and the organizational capabilities of Congress mean that responsiveness is likely on only the few issues that the public cares about a great deal at any given time. Zaller (1992) and others (see Glynn et al. 1999: ch. 8) contend that on many issues the public cannot be said to have meaningful political opinions, so policy must be the product of other forces. And Arnold (1990: 271-72) suggests that many issues are so complex, and the legislative process so arcane, that most citizens are unable to ascertain whether their interests are being served.

Thus, predictions about the impact of opinion on policy range from its having a very substantial influence (Stimson MacKuen, and Erikson 1995) to its keeping policy, rather vaguely, "in bounds" in its distance from public opinion (Jones 1994: 238). Increasing theoretical sophistication about opinion and policy has not narrowed the predictions; instead, they have become more diffuse.

One might hope that 20 years of research would enhance the credibility of some theories and reduce that of others. But this does not seem to have happened, partly for a reason rarely discussed: researchers regularly describe their conclusions in terms too vague to be very useful. For example, Wlezien (1996: 81) writes that research "generally

corroborates a linkage between public preferences and policy;" Page (1994: 25) that evidence shows "substantial empirical relationships" between opinion and policy; S. Hays, Esler, and C. Hays (1996: 58) that state environmental regulation is "quite responsive" to public opinion, and Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993: 80) that the relationship between opinion and policy in American states is "awesome." Are they agreeing with each other about the impact of opinion on policy? Or disagreeing?

Faced with this conundrum, a recent review (Glynn et al. 1999: 301) decides to "let the cases and data speak for themselves, so that the reader may judge." This does not seem very satisfactory. Thus, our first task is to develop a way to report findings consistently, so that we can address the first question: what does the evidence show about how much impact public opinion has on policy?

Issue Salience and Government Responsiveness

Issue salience has long been seen as a key element of democratic responsiveness. Citizens who care about an issue are especially likely to take elected officials' actions on that issue into account on election day (Arnold 1990: ch. 6; Jones 1994; see also Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). This leads elected officials to be particularly responsive on highly salient issues.

The impact of salience on responsiveness has implications not only for particular issues, but for overall government responsiveness as well. If only a few issues at a time can be salient to the public and the legislature, and if responsiveness is high primarily when salience is high, then responsiveness will be high on only those few issues (Jones 1994: ch. 10). Policy would be kept from drifting too far from public opinion on low-salience issues mainly by elected officials' realization that their salience might increase at some future date.

These arguments about overall responsiveness presume that salience has a powerful impact on responsiveness. But does it? Our second question: How much does the impact of opinion on policy increase as an issue's salience to the public increases?

Interest Organizations, Political Parties, and Elites vs. the Public

The most common objection to the claim that public opinion influences public policy is that policy is really determined by interest organizations, political parties, and elites, particularly economic elites. The resources available to interest organizations and elites may enable them to get what they want, even in opposition to public opinion (Domhoff 1998; Wilson 1990; Wright 1996), and political parties may, when in office, enact policies favored by their most ardent supporters rather than the general public (Aldrich 1995). Even when opinion and policy are highly correlated, the public's power may be more apparent than real; citizens may have been persuaded that they are getting

what they want, while effective power lies elsewhere (Margolis and Mauser 1989; Page and Shapiro 1992: ch. 9).

These points seem obvious to most people, but social scientists have developed important alternative points of view. Many think interest organizations *cannot* get what they want against the wishes of constituents, who can defeat elected officials who ignore them. As Lohmann (1993: 319) writes, “it is puzzling that rational political leaders with majoritarian incentives would ever respond to political action” by interest organizations. Even if interest organizations may be influential, their political activities may be most effective when consistent with public opinion (Denzau and Munger 1986; Kollman 1998).

Indeed, some political scientists argue that interest organizations don't impede responsiveness, they enhance it. Hansen (1991: 227-30), for example, suggests that interest organizations may be influential, in part, because they provide information useful to legislators, including information about what the public wants, serving as useful intermediaries between the public and the government. They represent some groups better than others (see also Baumgartner and Leech 1998: ch. 6), but overall may enhance the impact of public opinion on public policy. Denzau and Munger (1986: 103) argue that it makes sense for interest groups to focus their efforts on legislators whose constituents are divided, ignorant, or indifferent, because it is too costly to influence legislators whose constituents are informed and clearly on one side or the other. The latter group of constituents winds up being effectively represented by their legislators, even if they are unorganized.

Similar arguments have been made about political parties. They may want to serve the interests of their most ardent supporters rather than the public, but electoral competition often mandates responsiveness to the public. They may have some flexibility in how they do this, but inter-party competition may actually increase the impact of opinion on policy (see, e.g., Blais, Blake, and Dion 1993; Burstein 1998b: ch. 5; Kitschelt 1994: ch. 7).

Thus, discovering a relationship between opinion and policy is only a first step toward ascertaining how much power the public has. We also need to know the answer to the third question: To what extent do interest organizations, political parties, and political and economic elites influence policy even when opposed by public opinion?

Trends in Responsiveness

The struggle for democratic responsiveness never ends. There is a long history of institutional reforms intended to increase responsiveness, including extending the suffrage, regulating campaign contributions, nominating candidates through primary elections, and instituting referenda and initiatives. To the extent that such institutional changes have the effects their proponents intend, government responsiveness to the public should increase (see, e.g., Garrow 1978; Rueschemeyer, E. Stephens, and J. Stephens 1992; Haskell 2001; Lijphart and Grofman 1984).

Responsiveness might increase for other reasons as well. Improvements in communications, transportation, and information processing may enhance citizens' connections to their elected officials (Clemens 1997; Hansen 1991; Walker 1991: ch. 1). Public opinion polls may increase politicians' knowledge of citizens' preferences (Geer 1991). And the rise of interest groups may have enhanced responsiveness as well (Clemens 1997).

Increasing responsiveness is hardly inevitable, however. Attempts to reduce the public's influence on policy have occurred often (Markoff 1996)—some blatant (such as denying effective suffrage to blacks after Reconstruction) and others subtle. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000: xvi) recently claimed that in the U.S. “the influence of public opinion on government policy is *less* than it has been in the past” (emphasis in original; also see pp. 326-27), largely because politicians have discovered how to avoid accountability to voters. A “growing body of evidence,” they write (4), “suggests that since the 1970s the policy decisions of presidents and members of Congress have become less responsive to the substantive policy preferences of the average American.” Both television and new strategies developed by interest organizations have been described as reducing responsiveness (Iyengar 1991: 42-43; Haskell 2001), and it has been suggested that it is reduced responsiveness that has led to the drastic decline in Americans' trust in government over the last 30 years (Bok 1997).

Thus, there is real disagreement about whether changes in politics and society have increased responsiveness or decreased it. Hence, our fourth question: are democratic governments getting more responsive to public opinion, or less?

Generalizing across Issues and Politics

Theories about the impact of opinion on policy are typically stated in general terms, and hypotheses about particular aspects of the opinion-policy relationship are supposed to be derived from general theoretical propositions. For example, the hypothesis that responsiveness will be lower on foreign policy issues than on domestic issues is based on the general propositions that responsiveness increases with salience and with how well informed people are, together with the fact that foreign policy issues are usually of low salience to a poorly informed public (Jones 1994; Kollman 1998; Page and Shapiro 1983).

The way research is usually designed and implemented presents at least a couple of impediments to hypothesis testing and generalization. First, researchers have limited resources and typically devote them to studying one issue they are particularly interested in, making generalization very problematic. Potentially, researchers could accomplish collectively what they could not as individuals, studying enough issues and circumstances to make hypothesis testing and generalization possible. Even collectively, however—here is the second possible impediment—the entire set of issues studied may be so small that it is unrepresentative of the set of all issues and an inadequate basis for generalization (Wittman 1995: ch. 13; cf. Page and Shapiro 1983).

Thus, the fifth and final question: what does the evidence show about our ability to generalize across issues and polities?

DATA

Data Sources

This article presents no new data, instead drawing on the work of others. But it is not a conventional literature review, because it is oriented to hypothesis testing, which most such reviews are not. The approach here is a hybrid; others' research is used as data, with their "output" serving as our "input." Creating the new data set based on others' work required decisions about which studies to include, how to code the variables, and which data to include (cf. Baumgartner and Leech 1998, and Burstein 1998c).

Any review of past work is necessarily selective; for this article relevant studies were drawn from the bibliographies of two recent, fairly extensive literature reviews (Burstein 1998c; Glynn et al. 1999: ch. 9), the three most prestigious journals in sociology (*American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*) and political science (*American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*) from 1990 through 2000, and the book in which Jacobs and Shapiro (2000: 4) contend that responsiveness has declined. To be included, a study had to gauge quantitatively (though not necessarily statistically) the relationship between opinion and policy at the aggregate level, utilizing at least one measure of opinion based on a large random (or stratified, random) sample and a clear measure of public policy. Not included were discursive narratives and studies of decisions by individual legislators.

There were 30 such studies, listed in the appendix. Because the focus was on major reviews, top journals, and relatively recent works, their quality should be high.

The unit of analysis is the *effect* of a predictor on a dependent variable, a measure of the relationship between opinion and a policy. Thus, if a particular author analyzes the impact of two distinct measures of public opinion on a policy outcome, that would be two effects.²

Studies considering many issues presented a problem. Some (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995) combine many issues into a single index (of "policy liberalism," for example). Arguably, such studies should be weighted more heavily, but it is not obvious how much more. Other studies (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983; Monroe 1998; Brooks 1985) considered hun-

dreds of issues separately before reaching an overall conclusion about responsiveness. If each issue were counted separately, those studies would dominate the results of any review like this one. The decision here was to take each study into account along the lines emphasized by their authors, focusing on coefficients for those relying on indexes and overall estimates of responsiveness (e.g., the percentage of issues on which opinion and policy agree) for the multi-issue studies. On this basis, the 30 studies include estimates of 52 effects. These will be called coefficients, even though not all take that form.

Gauging Impact

Researchers most often describe the impact of independent variables in two ways: in terms of statistical significance, and of substantive significance. The first is by far the more common in studies of policy change. Its virtues are apparent precision and objectivity. It is difficult to argue with, except on highly technical grounds, and provides an answer to what is often the key question in a piece of research: did a variable have an impact?

Statistical significance is not, however, a very satisfactory measure of impact (Gill 1999; Lieberman 1992; McCloskey 1998: ch. 9). It tells us whether there is a relationship (with some uncertainty), but not how strong it is or how important in policy terms. It is thus of little help in answering the first question: how much impact does public opinion have on policy?

Unfortunately, the studies use many measures of impact, and there is no precise way to compare them. That does not mean that nothing meaningful can be said about substantive significance, however. Each relationship between opinion and policy was coded as: 1 not significantly different from zero; 2 statistically significant, substantive significance not discussed; 3 statistically significant, substantive significance discussed and described as of little policy importance; 4 statistically significant, substantive significance discussed and of considerable policy importance; and 5 ambiguous, sometimes statistically significant and sometimes not, in ways unpredicted by the authors.

Many relationships fell into category 2: statistical significance was assessed, but not substantive importance. Authors sometimes used adjectives such as "strong" to describe statistical relationships when their only criterion was the significance level; these descriptions are meaningless in substantive terms, and were ignored.³

Discussions of substantive significance used language relevant to the particular policy setting. For example, Fording (1997: 21) found that the "increase in [opinion] liberalism accounted for an increase of about 2,100 recipients (per million population) in state AFDC growth," and concluded

² For example, Mooney and Lee (2000) include two measures of attitudes—pertaining to the death penalty and to general ideology—and thus estimate two effects. Ostrom and Marra (1986) consider the impact of opinion on three aspects of defense policy: president's budget request for defense, congressional appropriations, and Department of Defense expenditures. Ostrom and Marra argue convincingly that the three are different in policy terms, and not alternative measures of the same thing, so the effect of opinion on each one is counted separately.

³ Jacobs' (1993) study of British and American health policy did not include statistical analysis; his findings were tabulated in ways that seemed most consistent with his own interpretation.

≡ TABLE 1
ISSUES AND TIME PERIODS IN STUDIES OF PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICY

Issue	Coefficients	Time Periods	Coefficients
Social welfare	5	Before 1960 only	4
Taxes	1	1960-69	1
Other economic, business	5	1970-79	1
Rights, discrimination	4	1980-89	1
Capital punishment	5	1990-	1
Other domestic*	5	Multiple decades, through 1970s or earlier	13
Defense	10	Multiple decades, through 1980s	16
Policy indexes, multiple issues	17	Multiple decades, through 1990s	15

*Includes one environmental issue, one labor, one abortion, and one "social investment" (Devine 1985) and one "social consumption" (ibid.).

(1997: 20) that opinion had the "strongest effect" among political variables. Similarly, Bartels (1991: 466) concluded that public opinion "produce[d] an estimated aggregate impact of almost \$16 billion" on fiscal 1982 defense appropriations.

How was it decided whether policy impacts were small (category 3) or considerable (category 4)? Here, the authors were seen as the best judges of their own findings. There is inevitably some subjectivity in such judgments, but a very careful reading of the articles showed them all to be reasonable (even if not absolutely unassailable); accepting their judgments seemed preferable to any obvious alternative.

As already noted, the unit of analysis is a measure of the effect of public opinion on policy. But which relationships should be included? Many statistical analyses present several models; the magnitude of particular relationships depends, to some extent, on which other variables are in the model and sometimes on other factors.

Here, as elsewhere, the choice was to generally reflect the authors' view, coding relationships from what they often call their "final" model. But there is one major exception to this practice. Often authors find during preliminary analyses that the impact of some independent variables is not statistically significant; these variables are often dropped from the analysis, not appearing in the final equation (and sometimes referred to only in footnotes). These findings, while negative, are findings nevertheless and are included. If they were not—if only the statistically significant findings in the final equations were included—it would be easy to overestimate how often public opinion and other variables affect policy.

It is necessary to point out that inconsistencies among authors affect the coding. For example, if two authors each have two variables gauging public opinion on an issue, one may include both measures in the final equation, while the other may combine them into an index. The approach taken here is, again, to accept the authors' approach.

RESULTS

The 52 coefficients gauge government responsiveness over a number of issues, and, often, fairly long periods of time (Table 1). Their geographical focus is very narrow, however; 28 pertained American policies at the federal level,

and 19 more to the state level; only 4 pertained to western Europe, 1 to another developed country and 0 to any developing country or to multiple countries as units of analysis. Thus, it is still true, as Brooks remarked in 1985 (250) that "almost all empirical research on the actual nexus between mass opinion and governmental policy has concentrated solely on the United States."

The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy

Three-quarters of the relationships between opinion and policy are statistically significant (or a plausible equivalent in qualitative studies; Table 2). Almost half of these were not discussed in substantive terms. When the magnitude of impact was considered, however, it was nearly always substantial.⁴ Had the magnitude been assessed in every case, the percentage in which it was substantial surely would have been considerably higher than the 35 percent found in the table.

How should these results be characterized? Is the relationship between opinion and policy "awesome," to use the term Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993: 80) apply to their own results? Or should we conclude that public opinion "does not have the routine importance" that many attribute to it (Domhoff 1998: 195)?

Social scientists are not very good at addressing this kind of question; that is why, after so many studies, some are willing to say only that there is "a linkage between public preferences and policy" (Wlezien 1996: 81) or that "the reader may judge" (Glynn et al. 1999: 301; on the general issue, see Burstein 1999). At this point, though, I think it would be reasonable to make a claim that, while not very precise, communicates far more than saying merely that a

⁴ The term "impact" suggests that the relationship between opinion and policy is a causal one. The authors themselves describe the relationship in a variety of ways. Some (e.g., Monroe 1998: 12) state that they are not trying to reach conclusions about causality, while others (e.g., Hill and Hinton-Andersson 1995: 924) state that they are, to the extent feasible. "Impact" is used here for the sake of brevity and because that is what all the authors are ultimately interested in, however cautious they might be in particular publications.

≡ TABLE 2
IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POLICY

	%
None	25
Ambiguous	2
Statistically significant, policy importance not discussed	35
Statistically significant, little policy importance	4
Statistically significant, substantial policy importance	35
Total number	52

Note: Total may be greater than 100 percent due to rounding.

linkage exists: so far as we can tell from published research, policy is affected by opinion most of the time; often—over half the time when public opinion has any effect—the impact really matters substantively.

There are at least two ways to refine this conclusion and assess its credibility. The first is to see how robust the relationship between opinion and policy is under a variety of circumstances; the second is to examine it in light of theoretical and methodological concerns not necessarily addressed in the studies already taken into account. We consider robustness first. Theories about the relationship consider how it might be affected by salience, interest organizations, political parties, and elites. It is to these influences that we now turn.⁵

Issue Salience and Government Responsiveness

Salience has come to play a central role in theories of responsiveness. It therefore seems vital to know whether it actually has the impact attributed to it theoretically. How much does the impact of public opinion on policy increase as salience increases?

Unfortunately, the theoretical importance of salience has not led to a comparable level of importance in research. Few studies of the impact of opinion on policy include salience (Table 3). But the available data do suggest that the theoretical focus on it is justified. When opinion is related to policy without taking salience into account, opinion has no impact a third of the time. When salience is taken into account, however—when the measure of public opinion incorporates salience as well as substantive preferences—the combination of salience and substantive public opinion always has an effect and is of substantial policy importance over three-fifths of the time. This is consistent with the impact of public opinion increasing as salience increases.

⁵ Might study results have been affected by study design? Comparisons were made between cross-sectional and time-series analyses, specific and general measures of policy (e.g., capital punishment vs. policy liberalism), and specific and general measures of public opinion (e.g., opinion on defense expenditures vs. ideological liberalism). None affected the results.

≡ TABLE 3
IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION ON POLICY WHEN ISSUE SALIENCE IS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

Impact	Salience Ignored	Salience Taken into Account
	%	%
None	32	0
Ambiguous	2	0
Statistically significant, policy importance not discussed	37	27
Statistically significant, little policy importance	2	9
Statistically significant, substantial policy importance	27	64
Total number	41	11

These results should be interpreted extremely cautiously; salience is taken into account in the estimation of only eleven coefficients. Nevertheless, the results do bring together more data on the impact of salience than others have, and increase our confidence that it matters.⁶

Interest Organizations, Political Parties, and Elites vs. the Public

Often the central question in research on public opinion and policy is not whether the two are related, but whether the relationship is spurious. Might interest organizations, political parties, and economic elites be so powerful that when their activities are taken into account, the apparent relationship between opinion and policy decreases, or even disappears? Might interest organizations, political parties, and economic elites, that is, dominate the political process when they choose to?

It would not be surprising to find the apparent impact of opinion on policy going down when the activities of interest organizations, parties, and elites are taken into account. Bivariate relationships usually decrease when other plausible variables are added to the equation. Our question, therefore, is how much the relationship decreases when the new variables are added.

A caveat is in order. Like salience, organizations and elites play a critical role in theories of democratic responsiveness, yet theoretical importance has not been matched by importance in empirical work. Of the 52 coefficients, only 15 are in studies in which the impact of interest organizations is assessed, and of these, 9 are in studies considering only 1. The impact of the party balance is considered much more often—25 coefficients are from studies which

⁶ It should be noted that all issues considered in the studies must be of relatively high salience, since all were important to warrant attention from survey organizations or authors. Were all issues, or a random sample of issues, included in the reported analyses, estimates of overall responsiveness might very well decline.

estimate the impact of both the party balance and public opinion—but the impact of elites hardly at all (only 7 of the coefficients are from studies considering elite influence).

First, interest organizations: We re interests organizations to get what they wanted, even when opposed by the public, the apparent impact of opinion on policy would decrease as organizations' involvement increased. In fact, though, data show the opposite. The impact of opinion on policy is most likely to be statistically significant when more than one organization is taken into account (83 percent of the time), a bit less likely when one organization is included (78 percent), and least likely when no organizations are included in the analysis (69 percent of the time, 26 of 37 coefficients). What's more, the relationship between opinion and policy is most likely to be of substantial importance when more than one organization is included in the analysis—83 percent of the time with more than one, 11 percent with one, and 32 percent when no organizations are included.

For political parties, the findings are again contrary to expectations. In studies including parties, the impact of opinion is statistically significant 72 percent of the time; in studies not including parties, 74 percent. And, public opinion is more likely to be of substantial importance when the party balance is included than when it is not—48 percent of the time versus 22 percent.

The results for elite influence are the same as for interest organizations and political parties. Taking possible elite influence into account never shows a relationship between opinion and policy to be spurious; all coefficients in studies that consider elite influence are statistically significant.⁷

The data must be interpreted cautiously, of course, but, as they stand, they do not suggest that the relationship between public opinion and policy is often spurious. Indeed—to be as cautious as possible here—the results are consistent with the possibility that interest organizations and parties enhance responsiveness rather than reducing it (for an example, see Burstein 1998b: ch. 5).

Trends in Responsiveness

What is the evidence that government responsiveness to public opinion has declined, at least in the U.S., as Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) claim? They do not provide much. Their conclusion rests on three studies that they cite repeatedly (4 and 297). The first, Monroe's, does support their claim, finding (1998: 13, included in this review) that consistency between preferences and policy change declined from 63 percent in the 1960s and 1970s to 55 percent in the

1980s and early 1990s. A second study (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001), however, contains no data on public opinion or policy,⁸ while the third is Jacobs and Shapiro's (1997: 4) own earlier work, where they refer to their "preliminary results" but present only their conclusions and not their evidence.⁹ Thus, their claim rests on one study alone. Do the data analyzed here support them?

Jacobs and Shapiro really make two related claims. The more general one is that responsiveness has simply declined, that it is "less than it has been in the past" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000:xvi); the more specific claim is that responsiveness declined just since the 1970s.

Several studies, involving twelve coefficients, attempt to gauge changes in responsiveness. Two show it decreasing: Monroe's (1998) on multiple policies and Mooney and Lee's (2000) on specific policy preferences for abolishing the death penalty. Five show no change: Burstein and Freudenburg's (1978) on the Vietnam War, Hartley and Russett's (1992) on defense spending, and Mooney and Lee's (2000) on general policy preferences for abolishing the death penalty and two measures of public opinion on reinstating it. And five show it increasing: Erikson, Wright, and McIver's (1993: ch. 9) on responsiveness in the U.S. South, Fording (1997) on welfare recipients, Ringquist et al.'s (1997) on two measures of state AFDC policy, and Page and Shapiro's (1983) comparison between the 1950s-60s and the 1970s. Nine coefficients compare the periods before and after the 1970s or 1979-80 specifically; the same two show decreasing responsiveness; four, no difference (Hartley and Russett 1992; Mooney and Lee 2000); and three, increasing responsiveness (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Ringquist et al. 1997).

It is also possible to compare studies of responsiveness before the mid-1970s or so to studies of responsiveness afterward, even though the studies themselves do not compare periods. This procedure is problematic because studies vary in many ways in addition to period studied, but if we nevertheless compare coefficients gauging responsiveness earlier to responsiveness later, across studies (not including those considered above), we find 13 coefficients gauging responsiveness in the earlier period,¹⁰ and 9 in the later.¹¹ Comparing these coefficients, responsiveness does appear to have declined; before the mid-1970s, only 8 percent of the coefficients showed public opinion having no impact, but after the mid-1970s, a third did.

⁷ We cannot address here how strongly public opinion is influenced by elites, interest organizations, and the political parties. Elites and organizations often influence opinion, but they are constrained by it as well. As it is, almost no one tries to gauge the separate impacts of opinion versus elite and organizational activities when each is affecting the other. Thus, at this point we include the usual note of caution, emphasizing that opinion is not simply the product of elite manipulation. See Hansen 1998; Newman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Jacoby 2000; Zaller 1994.

⁸ The authors use congressional district votes for president as an indirect measure of the public's ideology, and their dependent variables are congressional roll call votes, not policies.

⁹ They also cite Page and Shapiro (1983), whose data end in 1979 and cannot be used to describe change since then; in a footnote (note 3, p. 5) they refer the reader to a study described as documenting nonresponsiveness on a single issue, and to an unpublished paper.

¹⁰ From Brooks 1985; Burstein 1998b; Burstein and Freudenburg 1978; Devine 1985; Erikson 1976; Fording 1997; Jacobs 1993; Page and Shapiro 1983.

¹¹ Bartels 1991; Grattet, Jenness, and Curry 1998; S. Hays, Esler, and C. Hays 1996; Hill and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Ringquist et al. 1997; Monroe 1998; and Wetstein 1996.

Thus, data that directly gauge whether responsiveness has declined find more evidence of increase than decline, while a comparison of studies of different periods finds more evidence of decline. From a methodological standpoint, explicit comparisons within studies are the more credible. At this point there is little evidence that responsiveness has declined.¹²

Generalizing across Issues and Politics

Our ability to generalize about the impact of opinion on policy is very much limited by the geographic narrowness of the studies and the range of issues studied. As noted, almost all the studies focus on the United States. The studies that compare governments generally find them equally responsive (British and American health care policy (Jacobs 1993) or unresponsive (Britain, Canada, France and the U.S. on a range of issues, Brooks 1987: 470); the sole exception is the finding that southern states in the U.S. were considerably less responsive than northern states (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993: ch. 9). But all the comparisons put together totaled only seven coefficients.

Theories about responsiveness have been seen as implying that it is likely to be stronger on some issues than others, and the range of issues covered by the studies permits very modest tests of a couple of hypotheses. Responsiveness is hypothesized to be higher on domestic issues than on foreign policy, because the former will usually be more salient to the public than the latter (Page and Shapiro 1983: 182). It is also hypothesized to be higher on issues of little concern to economic elites than on issues that challenge their interests, because elites are seen as having so much power they can get what they want regardless of public opinion, when it matters to them (Erikson 1976; Smith 2000).

The data on foreign and domestic policy provide no support for the hypothesis. Of the ten coefficients gauging the relationship between opinion and defense policy (nine on expenditures, one on the Vietnam war), all are statistically significant; on defense, government is more responsive to the public than on other policies, not less.

With regard to business interests, the studies are divided. Seven coefficients in studies of specific issues may be seen as referring to economic issues of interest to business: one each to child labor (Erikson 1976) and taxes (Jackson and King 1989), three to federal revenue and expenditures (Hicks 1984), and two to policies affecting business more generally (Smith 1999). All but one of the coefficients is statistically significant; the public has some influence even on such issues.

Brooks' work (1985, 1987) differs from the others by explicitly comparing responsiveness on issues of interest to economic elites with responsiveness on other issues, and his findings differ from the others as well. He made a special

effort to identify issues especially likely to provoke strong reactions among economic elites, contrasting redistributive issues (involving reallocation of wealth, property, political rights, or some other related value among broad groups) with others. The British government is just as responsive on redistributive issues as on others (1985: 256), but the Canadian, American, and French governments are quite a bit less so, with an eleven percent difference in the U.S. (38 percent vs. 49 percent), 10 percent in France (34 percent vs. 44 percent; 1987: 473), and the greatest difference, 30 percent, in Canada (27 percent vs. 57 percent). There is thus somewhat more support in the studies analyzed here for the hypothesis that business interests affect responsiveness than for the hypothesis about foreign and domestic policy.

Overall, though, what should be emphasized is how our capacity to generalize is limited by the narrowness of the range of issues studied. The studies of foreign affairs all really focused on defense, and many important issues were touched on little or not at all (Table 1). Only one study each addressed environmental policy, taxes, and health, and none at all considered, for example, education, transportation, agriculture, non-defense aspects of foreign affairs, trade, Social Security, energy, immigration, housing, or technology (some such issues may have been included in the multi-issue studies, but they were not analyzed separately).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This review has shown that: (1) Public opinion affects policy three-quarters of the times its impact is gauged; its effect is of substantial policy importance at least a third of the time, and probably a fair amount more. (2) Saliency does affect the impact of public opinion on policy. (3) The impact of opinion on policy remains substantial when the activities of interest organizations, political parties, and elites are taken into account; but the paucity of data on interest organizations and elites mandates great caution when interpreting the results. (4) The hypothesis that government responsiveness to the public has changed over time cannot be definitively rejected, because so little evidence is available; but that evidence does not support the hypothesis. (5) Our ability to generalize about the impact of opinion on policy is severely compromised by the narrow focus of available work, both geographically and in terms of issues.

Overall, the findings about responsiveness seem quite robust, not strongly affected by the activities of political organizations or elites, type of issue, or time. Yet it is also surprising how little has been published in major journals, or referred to in major reviews, about critical topics concerning public opinion and public policy. The publications reviewed suggest two agendas for future research, one substantive and one methodological.

A Substantive Agenda

More work is needed on every topic addressed here, but the findings highlight some avenues of research likely to prove especially fruitful.

¹² It would be desirable to ascertain whether democratization increases responsiveness. Only two studies looked at this, but both found it did (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993: ch. 9; Fording 1997).

It has long been hypothesized that responsiveness varies with salience, and recent theoretical work has emphasized how important salience is to political conflict and overall responsiveness—if the connection between salience and responsiveness is in fact strong. Thus, the magnitude of the impact of salience on responsiveness matters greatly.

Simple tests of the hypothesis that salience matters go back decades (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1983), and a great deal of data on salience is available. It therefore seems astonishing that only one study (Jones 1994) assesses statistically whether salience affects responsiveness, and only one more comes close to doing so (Burstein 1998b). More research on the relationship between salience and responsiveness is both feasible and urgently needed.

Another issue of great theoretical importance is how the relationship between opinion and policy is affected by the activities of interest organizations, political parties, and elites. Again it seems surprising how little relevant research has been done. Studies of the impact of opinion neglect organizations and elites, while studies of the impact of interest organizations and parties neglect public opinion (Burstein and Linton 2002).

Why this is the case is difficult to surmise. Contributors to each body of work ought to be able to get together with contributors to the other. Progress, though, would not simply be a matter of each set of researchers incorporating the other's variables into their studies. Some political scientists (Hansen 1991; Lohmann 1993, 1994; Wright 1996) who study interest organizations, for example, have argued that organizations are most likely to influence elected officials when they provide them with information and resources relevant to their re-election prospects. Yet few studies of organizational influence consider the impact of information, and those that consider resources seldom assess their relevance to re-election (Burstein and Linton 2002). Similarly, with regard to public opinion, if salience is theoretically important but seldom investigated, progress will be slight if those studying political organizations simply borrow conventional measures from specialists in public opinion.

A third concern is generalizability. Most studies of opinion and policy focus on issues that the researchers find especially important and of interest to them personally. Almost never considered is how the choice of issues affects our ability to generalize about the impact of opinion on policy. Even important issues are neglected; perhaps even more critically, issues that don't make the headlines are virtually ignored (except in the studies that address hundreds of issues) even though, in the aggregate, the relevant policies affect the public tremendously. The sample of issues studied is very much biased toward those of relatively high salience; if salience influences responsiveness, current estimates of the strength of the relationship between opinion and policy may be too high. But we won't know if this is the case until we study a much wider range of issues—perhaps even something like a random sample of issues.

Another concern about generalizability stems from the exceptionally strong bias in extant work toward studying the

United States. Not only does this limit our ability to say much about other long-established democracies, it also may cause us to miss opportunities to study the consequences of democratization. In recent years many countries have democratized their political institutions, including Korea, Taiwan, and some new regimes in eastern and central Europe. Some have moved far along the democratic path; others have not. The time is ripe for studying how transitions to democracy (and failed transitions) affect governmental responsiveness. It is true that before the advent of democratic institutions, public opinion polls on policy questions cannot be conducted or are of doubtful credibility. Nevertheless, polling often begins early in the process of democratization, and the potential for gathering data important for understanding democracy is vast. Doing so in developing democracies (some of which may fail) should be a high priority.

A Methodological Agenda

I would argue that progress in the study of public opinion and public policy depends to a considerable degree on advances in measuring the relevant variables and estimating the relationships among them. Such advances are important not only for the quality of individual studies, but for our ability to synthesize many studies as well.

As a first step, we must ask how decisions about measurement and estimation affect results. Some of this is already being done, but not nearly enough. For example, Brooks (1985; 1987) finds much lower rates of responsiveness than others who study multiple issues, around 40 percent as opposed to 55 (Monroe 1998) or 66 percent (Page and Shapiro 1983). He says nothing about why his results differ from others', and they have responded in kind, referring to his work only in passing (Glynn, et al. 1999: 308) or not at all (Monroe 1998).

One likely reason for the difference is how long-term inconsistency between opinion and policy is counted. Page and Shapiro focus on whether policy moves in the same direction as opinion, counting each issue once. Brooks (1985: 252), in contrast, counts separately each year in which policy and opinion are inconsistent. This probably means that controversial issues (disproportionately the subject of polls year after year) will be counted many times, while issues more easily resolved with agreement between opinion and policy will drop off the political agenda and out of his data set. Monroe's (1998: 10-11) approach is a hybrid, sometimes including an issue more than once, sometimes not, and his results are intermediate between Page and Shapiro's, and Brooks'. It is not necessarily obvious which approach is best, or even whether the differences among them are responsible for the differences in results, but so far as I can tell, the issue has not even been raised.

A second important step would be to improve the measurement of policy. Some such measures are fairly intuitive, particularly expenditures. Others are the product of long effort, often collaborative (see, e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; S. Hays, Esler, and C Hayes' 1996). Often,

though, measures of policy are developed on an ad hoc basis in single studies, with little effort being devoted to validating or standardizing them (Burstein 1991). Research on the determinants of policy change is therefore much less cumulative than it might be.

Third, greater effort could usefully be aimed at standardization more generally. One reason it proves so difficult to reach conclusions about the impact of opinion on policy is the great variation among studies in measurement, causal models, estimation of impact, and so on. This makes comparison among studies problematic, and, indeed, makes it difficult to imagine successfully carrying out formal meta-analyses that would provide a more comprehensive and precise summary of what we know (Stanley 2001). It is perhaps no surprise that some writers on opinion and policy figuratively throw up their hands and decline to reach any conclusions, but the field need not remain that way.

Of course, much variation among studies is necessitated by the particularities of issues, available data, political institutions, and historical circumstances. Nevertheless, there has recently been some very real progress toward standardization in measurement. Erikson, Stimson, Wright, and their colleagues (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995) have developed measures of opinion and policy useful to many researchers (e.g., Barrilleaux 1997; Fording 1997; Grattet, Jenness, and Curry 1998; S. Hays, Esler, and C. Hays 1996; Hill and Hinton-Andersson 1995; Mooney and Lee 2000; Radcliff and Saiz 1998); careful work by all these researchers, in turn, may help to validate the measures. This is most certainly not a claim that progress requires that scholars all use the same measures; rather, our understanding of opinion and policy will advance more rapidly when researchers see themselves as part of a common enterprise, with regard not only to theory, but to research design as well.

Arguably less progress has been made with regard to causal models and estimates of impact, but we can imagine what such progress might look like. Although there are major theoretical controversies about the determinants of policy change, there is considerable consensus as to what factors might be important and should be included in research whenever possible; when they cannot be included, researchers should discuss the implications of their absence. Similar arguments can be made about statistical analysis. Were researchers in different policy areas to incorporate each other's advances in their own work, our understanding of public opinion and public policy would increase more rapidly.

Finally, there is another issue pertaining to generalizability. Studies of the impact of opinion on policy always begin with public opinion—that is, with issues for which public opinion data are available. But such data are available for only a small fraction of all issues, those controversial enough to warrant attention from survey organizations. Thus, even random samples of all issues for which opinion data are available will be biased samples of all issues, weighted toward issues of relatively high salience, and studies based on such samples may exaggerate the impact of opinion on

policy. It may be possible to get around this problem to some extent by developing indexes of general public opinion across a very wide range of issues (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995), but serious work on this problem has barely begun.

This somewhat unconventional review has led to two types of conclusions. The first pertains to what we know about the impact of public opinion on public policy. The second follows from highlighting what we don't know and how this leads to an agenda for future research. Much progress has been made; what needs to be done is clear.

APPENDIX
STUDIES OF THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION ON
PUBLIC POLICY

Authors, Date	Policy	Political Units
Barrilleaux 1997	policy liberalism	U.S. states
Bartels 1991	defense	U.S.
Brooks 1985	many	U.S., U.K., Canada
Brooks 1987	many	France
Burstein 1998b	equal employment opportunity	U.S.
Burstein & Freudenburg 1978	Vietnam war	U.S.
Devine 1985	social investment; health, education, others	U.S.
Erikson 1976	capital punishment, child labor, women's rights	U.S. states
Erikson, Wright, McIver 1993	policy liberalism	U.S. states
Fording 1997	AFDC recipient rates	U.S. state
Grattet, Jenness, & Curry 1998	hate crimes	U.S. states
Hartley & Russett 1992	defense	U.S.
Hays, Esler, & Hays 1996	environmental	U.S. states
Hicks 1984	budgets, revenues, expenditures	U.S.
Hill & Hinton- Andersson 1995	policy liberalism	U.S. states
Hill, et al. 1995; Ringquist et al. 1997	welfare benefits	U.S. states
Ignagni & Meernik 1994	many (Supreme Court decisions)	U.S.
Jackson & King 1989	taxes	U.S.
Jacobs 1993	health care	U.S., U.K.
Jencks 1985	defense	U.S.
Jones 1994	defense	U.S.
Monroe 1998	many	U.S.
Mooney 2000	capital punishment	U.S. states
Ostrom and Marra 1986	defense	U.S.
Page and Shapiro 1983	many	U.S.

Authors, Date	Policy	Political Units
Radcliffe and Saiz 1998	policy liberalism	U.S. state
Smith 1999	policies favoring business	U.S.
Stimson, et al. 1995	policy liberalism	U.S.
Wetstein 1996	abortion	U.S. states
Wlezien 1996	defense	U.S.

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