

Chapter 3

Two-Thirds Full?

Citizen Competence and Democratic Governance

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The eminent political theorist Robert Dahl asserted that “a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.”¹ This formulation implies first that citizens must have meaningful preferences for democratic government to be possible, and second that in order to gauge the democratic quality of any given government we must be able both to discern what its citizens’ preferences are, and to assess how strongly and how equally government policy responds to those preferences.

The ideal democratic citizen “is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed ... [and] what the likely consequences are.”² Observers of American democracy have long questioned not only citizens’ ability to meet this lofty goal, but citizens’ ability to play any truly meaningful role in shaping government policy. Political issues in contemporary societies are numerous, complex, and often remote from citizens’ everyday lives. The American public, it is often claimed, simply lacks the interest, motivation, or ability to form meaningful preferences on most of these issues.

In this chapter I ask first whether American citizens hold meaningful policy preferences and whether such preferences, if they exist, are accurately reflected in surveys of political attitudes. I argue that despite the limited political knowledge and engagement typically displayed by the American public, public preferences—at least in the aggregate—are “enlightened enough” to serve as a reasonable basis for guiding government decision makers on a wide range of issues. Given this positive evaluation, I then ask how the preferences of the public are related to the policy decisions of the national government, and how equally influence over government policy extends to more and less well off Americans.

To evaluate the link between public preferences and government policy, I rely on a dataset consisting of over 2,000 survey questions in which random samples of Americans were asked whether they favored or opposed specific changes in government policy. Some of these proposed changes were extremely popular (like confiscating money from bank accounts linked to terrorism),

others were quite unpopular (like reducing Social Security benefits), and some were favored by the poor but opposed by the affluent or vice versa. In each case, I determined whether the change in government policy posed in the survey question took place. Using these data, I assess how much the probability of a proposed policy change being adopted depends on the extent to which that change is favored or opposed, and how this association between preferences and policies differs for poor, middle class, and affluent Americans.

Conflicting Views of Citizen Competence

Scholars of public opinion can be roughly divided into two schools of thought. One concludes that Americans’ low level of political knowledge and apparent lack of clear and consistent policy preferences shows that the public is incapable of providing meaningful guidance to government decision makers on policy matters. The other school of thought acknowledges the gap between the traditional expectations of democratic citizens and the public’s performance, but believes that compensatory mechanisms allow citizens to form meaningful preferences, at least in the aggregate, even in the face of low information levels and considerable inconsistency in survey responses.

In his seminal paper “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” Philip Converse³ painted a bleak picture of the American public as largely lacking coherent political preferences. Converse observed that survey respondents were apt to express different preferences when presented with the identical question on different occasions, that preferences on one policy issue were at best weakly associated with questions on seemingly related issues, and that broad organizing principles like liberalism or conservatism were poorly understood by most Americans. Confronted with this evidence, Converse concluded that the preferences respondents report on surveys consist largely of “non-attitudes” and that “large portions of [the] electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time.”⁴

Many subsequent assessments of Americans’ political preferences have been only slightly more hopeful. After examining hundreds of survey measures of political information, for example, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter conclude that

More than a small fraction of the public is reasonably well informed about politics—informed enough to meet high standards of good citizenship. Many of the basic institutions and procedures of government are known to half or more of the public, as are the relative positions of the parties on many major issues of the day.⁵

But the flip side of this coin is that a large proportion of the public does not rise to this level. “[L]arge numbers of Americans citizens are woefully

underinformed," Delli Carpini and Keeter write, and "overall levels of knowledge are modest at best."⁶

These two analyses address the two most troubling aspects of public opinion casting doubt on the feasibility of meaningful democratic government: the public's lack of knowledge about political affairs and the seeming randomness of policy preferences expressed on surveys as reflected in their lack of stability over time, and the weakness of associations between related issues or across similar formulations of the same policy issue.

Scholars who take a more sanguine view of the quality of citizens' policy preferences point to three aspects of mass political attitudes to explain how a public with minimal political information can nevertheless form meaningful issue preferences. First, citizens with modest levels of information might turn to more knowledgeable others for "cues" about the desirability of alternative policies or politicians. Second, individual citizens are not equally interested in the full range of political issues in play at any given time but tend to "specialize" in a subset of issues about which they are more knowledgeable and have more stable and well thought out preferences. The division of citizens into these "issue publics" means that the ability of any individual citizen to meaningfully participate in shaping government policy should be judged relative to the set of issues that that individual cares about; all citizens need not hold equally well developed preferences on all issues for the public to fulfill its role in democratic governance. Finally, the fickle element of individual citizens' policy preferences will, to some degree at least, tend to cancel out when preferences are aggregated across the public as a whole (or across distinctive subgroups of the public). Aggregate opinion, by this reckoning, will typically be more stable, with a higher "signal to noise ratio" than the individual opinions that make it up.

Cue Taking as a Basis for Political Preferences

Given the stringent standards for "the ideal democratic citizen" noted above, it is not surprising that these authors view the American public as falling short. Political opinions, they write, are more frequently "matters of sentiment and disposition rather than 'reasoned preferences' ... characterized more by faith than by conviction and by wishful expectation rather than careful prediction of consequences."⁷ Yet Berelson and his coauthors believed that despite the public's general lack of politically relevant information and poor quality of reasoning about policy matters, the ignorant many are able to leverage the expertise of the well-informed few who are politically knowledgeable and engaged. If most citizens are indifferent to and uninformed about public affairs, it is nevertheless true that some are absorbed in the world of politics and policy. Moreover, social networks, they maintain, allow for a division of labor in which more informed "opinion leaders" provide policy insights and endorsements to their less informed friends and acquaintances.

"The political genius of the citizenry," they conclude, "may reside less in how well they can judge public policy than in how well they can judge the people who advise them how to judge public policy."⁸

Taking cues from more knowledgeable elites or acquaintances is a sensible strategy for citizens who lack the ability or inclination to gather the information needed to formulate a preference on a given policy issue. Anthony Downs, writing shortly after Berelson et al., notes that the average citizen "cannot be expert in all the fields of policy that are relevant to his decision. Therefore, he will seek assistance from men who are experts in those fields, have the same political goals he does, and have good judgment."⁹

A substantial literature has developed over the past decades which identifies the wide range of cue givers that citizens can rely on in forming political judgments.¹⁰ Most cue taking models posit that citizens adopt the policy positions expressed by "like minded" elites (judged on the basis of partisan or ideological compatibility, or the more specific affinities associated, for example, with a citizen's religious, union, or professional organization) and either ignore those of the "non-like minded" or adopt the opposite position from the one that they espouse.¹¹ Cue givers of this sort can be either social leaders whose views are transmitted through the media, or individual acquaintances who are perceived as comparatively well informed on the issue at hand.

The strategy of turning to those with greater knowledge when faced with a challenging decision is hardly limited to political novices. Even citizens who follow politics closely will inevitably lack sufficient information (or technical expertise) to form opinions "from scratch" on many issues. In a modern nation, there are simply too many detailed and technical issues for even the most motivated members of the public to possibly keep abreast of. Indeed, even elected representatives who have abundant informational resources and who "follow politics" for a living turn to experts in specific issue areas for advice and take cues from other representatives in their own party who "specialize" in particular issue domains.¹²

Issue Publics

Cue taking is one mechanism by which citizens may be able to form meaningful preferences on issues despite a lack of knowledge and expertise, and the relationship between cue taker and cue giver highlights the large differences in political knowledge held by different members of the public. At the same time, however, any given individual's knowledge may differ greatly from one policy issue to another. Among the many enduring contributions of Converse's seminal paper was the concept of issue publics—the obvious but often overlooked fact that different people care about different political issues. In order to participate in democratic governance, citizens must be able to form meaningful preferences on the policy issues that government addresses.

But that does not mean that every citizen must have a preference on every issue. Given the broad range of backgrounds, interests, and situations that citizens in a large and diverse society face, it would be surprising if there were not substantial variations in the specific political issues that different citizens care about and attend to.

Converse based his negative assessment of the mass public's political preferences in part on the substantially stronger inter-correlations of preferences on related issues among the political elites he surveyed. (Converse's sample of political elites consisted of candidates for the U.S. Congress, arguably an unrealistically sophisticated comparison group.) Nevertheless, when Converse restricted his analysis of the public's policy positions in a given issue domain like foreign aid or racial policy to those respondents who he judged to be members of a given issue public,¹³ he found that the inter-correlations among ordinary Americans resembled those among his political elites. "[R]emoval from analysis of individuals who, through indifference or ignorance, lie outside the issue publics in question serves to close much of the gap in constraint levels between mass and elite publics."¹⁴

Subsequent analyses confirm Converse's insight regarding issue publics.¹⁵ Jon Krosnick, for example, sorted survey respondents into issue publics on the basis of the level of importance they attached to a dozen different political issues.¹⁶ Krosnick reported that the greater the importance a respondent attached to a given policy issue, the more likely they were to mention that issue as a reason for liking or disliking the presidential candidates, the less likely they were to change their issue preference in response to persuasive communications, and the more stable their reported issue preference was over time.

Another technique for identifying issue publics is to rely on demographic group membership on the assumption that members of particular groups are, at least on average, more interested in some issues than others. Vincent Hutchings, for example, identifies union members and people living in union households as more likely to have an interest in labor issues while abortion policy is likely to be of greater interest to women and religious conservatives.¹⁷ Consistent with these expectations, he finds that members of these groups are more attentive to Senate and gubernatorial campaigns when "their" issues were raised and more likely to base their Senate votes on their senator's record on the particular issues associated with their group.

Research on issue publics suggests that assessments of the quality of public preferences that look only at the average level of knowledge, preference stability, or other measures across the public as a whole may strongly understate the degree to which a typical citizen holds meaningful policy preferences. True, the typical citizen may attend to only a few of the many issues facing the country at any point in time. But if citizens have sensible, stable, and reasonably informed preferences on the subset of issues that they care most about, and if they use those issues disproportionately as a basis for choosing among

parties and candidates, then the public can fulfill its assigned role in democratic governance, even if most citizens lack meaningful opinions on most issues.

The "Magic of Aggregation" and the Quality of Public Preferences

Cue taking suggests that even citizens with minimal information may be able to form meaningful preferences by relying on others who share their general outlooks or political orientations, and the division of the citizenry into issue publics suggests that meaningful participation in democratic governance does not require all citizens to hold meaningful preferences on all issues. A third factor relevant to the assessment of the public's role in democracy is that the aggregate preferences of the public as a whole have different characteristics than the individual preferences that make them up.

The eighteenth century French philosopher and mathematician Condorcet explained in his famous "jury theorem" that if each individual in a group has even a modest tendency to be correct, the group as an aggregate can have a very high probability of reaching the correct decision (and the larger the aggregate, the higher the probability that the collective judgment will be correct). This insight has been applied to the political attitudes expressed on surveys to suggest that the "errors" in respondents' reports of their own preferences will, at least under some circumstances, tend to cancel out, resulting in a measure of aggregate opinion that is more stable and more reliable than the individual opinions that make it up.¹⁸

But how can respondents be "wrong" about their own preferences? Two different kinds of "errors" in survey-based measures of policy preferences can be distinguished. First, even if respondents had perfectly fixed and certain views on a particular policy option, the reports of those views as captured on surveys would contain some degree of error. The ambiguities of question wording, the difficulty in matching a specific sentiment to the available response options, and mistakes in reading or hearing the survey question or recording the respondent's answer will all introduce some degree of "measurement error" (see Chapter 2 of this volume).

Second, most respondents are not likely to have perfectly fixed and certain views on most political issues. Current understandings of political attitudes suggest that citizens typically hold a variety of considerations relevant to a given policy issue and use those considerations to construct a position on a policy question when asked by a survey interviewer.¹⁹ For example, if asked whether they favor cutting government spending on foreign aid, a survey respondent might consider his or her views about taxes and government spending, about humanitarian needs in developing countries, about waste and corruption in those countries, about competing domestic needs, and so on. This process of canvassing considerations and constructing positions is an

imperfect one, however. Given the time and motivational constraints typical of a survey interview, only a subset of all possible considerations bearing on a particular question are likely to be brought to mind. Moreover, this subset of considerations may be biased toward those that are at the “top of the head” as a result of earlier questions in the survey, stories that have been in the news, recent experiences the respondent may have had, specific aspects of the question wording, or any number of other reasons.

From this perspective, most citizens cannot be said to “have attitudes” corresponding to a particular survey question on a political issue, in the sense that those attitudes existed in a crystallized form before the question was asked.²⁰ But individual citizens can be said to have “response tendencies” or “long term preferences” which represents their (hypothetical) average opinion if it were to be ascertained repeatedly over time.²¹ This Platonic “true attitude” is nothing more than the imperfectly revealed average of these hypothetical repeated preference constructions (in the same way that a “true circle” is a hypothetical shape that can only be approximated by any actual circle in the real world).

It is impractical, of course, to measure citizens’ “long term preferences” by repeatedly surveying the same individuals. But aggregating survey responses across many individuals will produce much the same result (without the problem of dealing with new information or changed circumstances which might alter the set of relevant considerations). To the extent that the biases in formulating a preference from a given set of considerations are randomly distributed across individuals they will balance out, just as the errors in individuals’ judgments in a jury context cancel each other out. If randomly distributed idiosyncratic factors lead individual citizens to report preferences that differ from their “true” or “long term” preferences, those errors will lead some citizens to under-report support for a policy while leading others to over-report support. With a large enough sample of citizens, these errors will cancel out resulting in aggregate preferences that closely match the average of the individuals’ long-term preferences. Of course, not all factors that lead citizens to wrongly report their issue preferences will be random and therefore offsetting, a concern I’ll return to below.

The most thorough examination of aggregate opinion toward public policy is Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro’s influential book *The Rational Public*.²² Page and Shapiro do not view aggregation as a cure for all of the shortcomings of public opinion. But they argue that collective preferences display a degree of stability and cogency that far exceeds the typical individual level preferences that make them up.

While we grant the rational ignorance of most individuals, and the possibility that their policy preferences are shallow and unstable, we maintain that public opinion as a *collective* phenomenon is nonetheless stable (though not immovable), meaningful, and indeed rational ... it is able to make distinctions; it is organized in coherent patterns; it is reasonable,

based on the best available information; and it is adaptive to new information or changed circumstances.²³

Moreover, they maintain, “surveys accurately measure this stable, meaningful, and reasonable collective public opinion.”²⁴ The collective rationality of public opinion stems, Page and Shapiro argue, from the aggregation of individual opinions which cancel out both random measurement errors in surveys and temporary fluctuations in individuals’ opinions. The aggregate preferences that result from this process tend to be quite stable, but also exhibit sensible responsiveness to changing conditions. For example, public support for unemployment assistance increases as unemployment rates rise, public support for defense spending increases when the threat of war goes up, public support for tax cuts declines when tax rates are lowered, and so on.

Two principal objections have been raised about the “miracle of aggregation.” The first, which Page and Shapiro discuss at some length, is that “errors” in individuals’ policy preferences will not always be randomly distributed. One source of non-random “error” in preference formation is misinformation that leads most or all members of the public to shift their policy preferences in the same direction. For example, John F. Kennedy and others claimed during the late 1950s that the United States was facing a nuclear “missile gap” with the Soviet Union. In retrospect it is clear that not only was there no missile gap (the United States had and maintained a considerable advantage in nuclear missiles) but that good evidence was available at the time demonstrating the absence of such a gap. This sort of misinformation will inevitably “pervert” the preferences that the public would otherwise hold on related policy issues (in this case, defense spending and foreign policy).

Shared misinformation need not result from purposeful attempts to mislead the public. Sizeable misperceptions of changes in the crime rate, spending levels on foreign aid, the racial composition of the poor, and the typical length of time beneficiaries receive welfare have all been widespread among the American public at various points in time.²⁵ The extent of collectively held misinformation among the public is difficult to assess, in part because the truth about many politically relevant facts may not become known until later (if ever). After canvassing some of the sources and content of misinformation held by Americans, Page and Shapiro conclude

we cannot hope to offer a precise or definitive account of the extent (or, for that matter, the nature) of information biases in the United States. But if we are on track concerning important instances of opinion manipulation and general patterns of biased and misleading information, these pose troubling implications for the workings of democracy.²⁶

Just how troubled we should be about biased or misleading information is difficult to judge. To the extent that misinformation is universal (or nearly

universal) among elites and the public at large, it is hard to see how any form of government could make optimal decisions. The consequences of misinformation that are unique to democracy, on the other hand, are those in which large numbers of citizens fall prey to *avoidable* misperceptions or biases. For example, if the preferences of the majority of citizens were influenced by misinformation that the best informed citizens knew to be untrue, then a democratic government that reflected the public's collective preference might do a poor job of serving the public's true interests. Misinformation always has the potential to bias preferences under any form of government, but the special challenge to democracy arises from situations in which the collective preferences of the public would look different if the public had the same level of relevant information that the most politically knowledgeable and engaged members of society hold.

In the following section, I will discuss the degree to which this sort of misinformation appears to bias public preferences and undermine democratic governance. But there is a second principled objection to the optimistic account of aggregate opinion that we must consider as well. As Scott Althaus explains, the notion that "errors" in the individual preferences reported on surveys will cancel out when those individual reports are aggregated rests on the assumption that preferences are measured in such a manner that errors in one direction and errors in the other direction are equally likely.²⁷ But this is not always the case. For example, consider a question with only two response options (in addition to "don't know"), such as those gauging support or opposition to some proposed policy change. Among citizens who "really" favor the proposed change, some proportion will mistakenly be recorded as opposing the change, because they misunderstood the question, because they were misinformed about the policy, or simply because the interviewer entered the wrong code. But if these sources of error are randomly distributed across the survey respondents, then (approximately) the same proportion of citizens who "really" oppose the policy will be recorded as favoring the policy.

It might appear that this balancing out of opposite errors will leave the aggregate preference on this policy as measured by this hypothetical survey question unchanged. But that is only the case if equal numbers of citizens support and oppose the policy. If "true" supporters outnumber opponents by say, three to one, then the number of survey respondents erroneously counted as opponents will be three times as great as the number erroneously counted as supporters. In this example, if 20 percent of all respondents are misclassified then 15 percent of the respondents will be "erroneously" shifted from supporters to opponents (20 percent of 75) while 5 percent will be erroneously shifted from opponents to supporters (20 percent of 25). As a result, it will appear that 65 percent rather than 75 percent of respondents favor the proposed policy and 35 rather than 25 percent oppose it.²⁸

More generally, random errors will shift the apparent distribution of preferences on questions with only two valid responses toward 50 percent. (If the

true distribution of preferences on such an item is 50 percent, then random errors will in fact be equal and offsetting.) The same logic applies to survey questions with more than two valid response categories to the extent that the preferences of respondents who belong in the highest category can only be moved downward while those in the lowest category can only be moved upward. If the true distribution of long term preferences is asymmetrical then random errors will not cancel out but will tend to move the recorded mean toward the center of the scale.

These sorts of non-offsetting errors on policy issues with asymmetric distributions of preferences will dampen the apparent extremity of preferences for the public as a whole. But the distortion of public opinion that results will be only one of degree, not of kind. The distribution of policy preferences will appear to be somewhat more "centrist" and less "extremist" than is really the case. Consequently the amount of opinion difference associated with a given change in the probability of a proposed policy change being adopted will appear somewhat smaller than it should (and the strength of the preference/policy link somewhat stronger than is really the case). In sum, the "magic of aggregation" cannot be assumed to cancel out all of the random error inherent in measures of political preferences. Highly popular policies will appear somewhat less popular and highly unpopular policies somewhat less unpopular than is really the case. But this "moderating bias" will have only a modest impact in strengthening the apparent association of government policy and public preferences.

How Well Does Cue Taking and Aggregation Work?

To what extent do cue taking, preference aggregation, and issue publics ameliorate concerns about low levels of political information and the low quality of public preferences on political issues? No actual public in a large society is likely to meet the classical expectations of the well-informed citizen. But does the existing public display enough "wisdom" in its political preferences to recommend a system of governance that strongly reflects the preferences of the public?

We know that cue taking *can* be an effective strategy for forming policy preferences on complex issues. In one study, for example, respondents who were poorly informed about the details of five competing insurance-reform initiatives on a California ballot, but who knew where the insurance industry stood on each initiative, were able to closely emulate the voting behavior of their better-informed peers.²⁹ But just because cues *can* serve as effective shortcuts doesn't mean the necessary cues are always available or that citizens will make use of them when they are. One way to assess the quality of public preferences that emerge from the processes described above is to compare the actual preferences expressed on surveys to some hypothetical standard of

“well-informed preferences” that citizens would hold if they had the ability, time, and inclination to gather the relevant information on a given set of policy issues.

The most straightforward way to assess how far actual preferences diverge from hypothetical well-informed preferences is to inform a representative group of citizens about some set of policy issues and see how their preferences shift as a result. James Fishkin and Robert Luskin have done just this in a series of “deliberative polls.”³⁰ For example, the 1996 National Issues Convention brought 466 participants, selected at random from the U.S. population, to Austin, Texas, for four days, during which time they read briefing materials on various economic, foreign policy, and family issues, discussed those issues in small groups, and participated in question-and-answer sessions with experts. When initially contacted, and once again at the end of their stay in Austin, participants answered identical questions concerning their policy preferences in these three issue areas. To provide a comparison group, members of the initial sample who elected not to come to Austin completed the same surveys.

The participants in the National Issues Convention did shift their preferences somewhat on many of the 48 political attitude questions they were asked. But the average change in aggregate preferences was not large and barely exceeded the aggregate change of preferences expressed by the control group which was not provided with the information or opportunity to deliberate. On a 100-point scale, the average net (i.e., aggregate) difference in pre-post preferences across these 48 issue questions was about five points for the deliberation group and about three points for the control group.³¹ The four days of focused study and deliberation, it appears, resulted in a two percentage point greater aggregate change in policy preferences than would otherwise be expected by simply resurveying the same respondents with no intervening activity.

The results of the National Issues Convention study suggest that on the topics addressed, participants’ pre-existing aggregate preferences closely resembled the “well-informed preferences” they expressed after four days of education and deliberation. But these conclusions hinge on the specific information provided to the deliberating respondents. If the information provided was not new to the participants, or was not different enough from what they already knew, or was not relevant enough to the policy judgments they were asked to make, then the possibility remains that different information might have shifted aggregate preferences to a greater degree. Nevertheless, since the organizers’ goal was to provide just the sort of educational experience that critics of the quality of public opinion view as lacking, these results do lend some credibility to the notion that cue taking and aggregation result in collective judgments that differ little from what a well-informed and engaged citizenry would express.

A very different way to compare actual to hypothetical “well-informed” preferences is to use statistical tools to simulate a well-informed citizenry.

This approach takes advantage of the fact that, as Philip Converse observed, the mean level of political knowledge among the electorate is very low, but the variation in knowledge is very high.³² By modeling the vote choices or policy preferences of the most well-informed segment of the electorate, one can impute preferences for citizens who share a given set of characteristics but have lower levels of political information.

Larry Bartels, for example, compared the presidential votes of the most well-informed respondents with those of less-informed respondents of the same age, education, income, race, sex, occupational status, region, religion, union membership, urban residence, homeowner status, and labor force participation.³³ Bartels found an average individual deviation of about ten percentage points between actual and “well-informed” votes for the six presidential elections between 1972 and 1992. Many of these deviations were off-setting, however—some poorly informed citizens reported casting a Republican vote when they would have been predicted to vote Democratic if well informed, but other poorly informed citizens “mistakenly” voted Democratic when they would have been predicted to vote Republican. The more relevant *aggregate* deviation between actual and well-informed presidential votes was only three percentage points.³⁴

In an even more directly relevant study that used a similar methodology, Scott Althaus compared respondents’ expressed preferences on 235 political opinion questions with imputed preferences calculated by assigning to each respondent the predicted preference of someone with the maximum level of political knowledge but otherwise identical in terms of education, income, age, partisan identification, race, sex, marital status, religion, region, labor force participation, occupational category, union membership, and homeownership.³⁵ Althaus found that in the aggregate, imputed “fully informed preferences” differed from expressed preferences by an average of about 6.5 percentage points. Not a trivial amount, but hardly enough to dismiss existing preferences as an unsuitable guide to government decision making.

Two lessons can be drawn from the research on “enlightened preferences.” First, while heuristics or informational shortcuts might, in theory, be extremely effective at allowing citizens to reach the same preferences they would if they were more fully informed, in practice a gap remains between actual and hypothetical “well-informed” preferences, whether those preferences are statistically imputed or arrived at after exposure to new information and deliberation. Second, the size of the aggregate gap is rather modest. The two most directly relevant analyses that focus on policy preferences find gaps of two and 6.5 percentage points, with a three percentage point gap in presidential voting. Differences of this size might be enough to swing a close election or to shift aggregate preferences from slightly favorable toward some policy option to slightly opposed. But the policy proposals I examine below range widely from strong opposition to strong support (about two-thirds of the proposed policy changes in my dataset were favored by under

40 or over 60 percent of the respondents). Thus, the relatively small differences in favorability that might be expected from a better informed, more "enlightened" citizenry, would be unlikely to lead to substantially different conclusions.

Question Wording and Framing Effects

Even casual consumers of survey data are aware that subtle differences in how a question is worded can sometimes produce large differences in responses. Advocacy groups sometimes take advantage of this phenomenon by asking "loaded" or "biased" questions which are designed to portray public sentiment as highly favorable toward the group's preferred policies. But many observers are skeptical that even careful and well-crafted surveys can avoid this problem. One popular book aimed at explaining surveys and their use in American politics claims:

Even when the sponsor has no obvious ax to grind, question wording choices greatly influence the results obtained. In many instances, highly reputable polling organizations have arrived at divergent conclusions simply because they employed different (although well-constructed) questions on a particular topic.³⁶

But just how ubiquitous and how consequential are such question wording effects? This is a difficult question to answer because there is no clear way to define the range of plausible question wordings on a given topic or the set of topics that should be considered. Some of the most frequently cited examples of question wording effects do raise doubts about the ability of survey measures to accurately capture the public's policy preferences. For example, Tom Smith reports that 64 percent of Americans thought the government was spending too little on "assistance to the poor" but only 22 percent thought too little was being spent on "welfare."³⁷ Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser found that in the 1970s two in five Americans felt that the United States should "not allow" public speeches against democracy, but only half that number felt that the United States should "forbid" public speeches against democracy.³⁸ Finally, George Quattrone and Amos Tversky found that 64 percent of their respondents preferred a program that would increase inflation somewhat while *reducing unemployment* from 10 percent to 5 percent, but only 46 percent made the same choice when the program was described as *increasing employment* from 90 percent to 95 percent.³⁹

Each of these examples reveals substantial effects from apparently minor changes in the words used to describe a policy choice and each has been replicated numerous times, so we cannot dismiss them as statistical flukes. Yet their implications for how we understand citizens' policy preferences (or their lack of preferences) and our ability to gauge those preferences is far from

clear. For example, the greater appeal of "assisting the poor" over "welfare" has often been interpreted as indicating the sensitivity of the public to particular positively or negatively loaded terms. If the preferences expressed toward the same policy can be shifted so dramatically by calling it one thing rather than another, can we even say the public has a "real" and discernable preference toward that policy? Yet this example can be viewed another way entirely. There are many different government programs that assist the poor by providing medical care, housing subsidies, legal aid, child care, job training, and so on. For some respondents, all of these programs might be included under the rubric "welfare" but for many Americans, welfare is understood as cash assistance to the able-bodied working-age unemployed poor. The public tends to be strongly supportive of these other anti-poverty programs, so the lesser appeal of "welfare" in comparison to "assisting the poor" can be understood not as a superficial response to an emotionally laden term, but a sophisticated differentiation between different sorts of government anti-poverty programs.⁴⁰

The broader lesson from this alternative perspective on the "welfare" question wording experiment is that much of what passes for question wording effects are in actuality differences in responses resulting from differences in the policy that respondents are asked to respond to. The same survey that showed more support for "assisting the poor" than for "welfare" also found greater support for "halting the rising crime rate" than for "law enforcement" and greater support for "dealing with drug addiction" than for "drug rehabilitation" (General Social Survey). But these alternative question wordings are not simply different formulations of the identical policies; they are references to different aspects of their respective issues.

In the second example above, which contrasts "forbid" and "not allow," the alternative wordings do appear to have identical meanings. The substantial differences in responses to these two formulations are a bit of a mystery, especially since the alternate question wordings sometimes produce dramatically different responses (like the case of "speeches against democracy" described above), sometimes modest differences (e.g., in a parallel experiment focused on "speeches in favor of communism"), and sometimes no differences at all (e.g., in questions about "showing x-rated movies" or "cigarette advertisements on television").⁴¹ Sometimes respondents seem to react differently to "forbid" and "not allow" but at other times these alternative wordings seem to make no difference.

The third example above revealed different evaluations if a policy choice was presented in terms of its effect on the percent of the workforce that would be *employed* or on the percent of the workforce that would be *unemployed*. These sorts of mathematically equivalent alternative descriptions have been labeled "equivalency frames."⁴² This example is explained by recognizing that people tend to evaluate differences in magnitude (like the employment or unemployment rates) at least partly in terms of ratios. The difference between

10 percent and 5 percent unemployment appears large because the former is twice as big as the latter. In contrast, the difference between 90 percent employment and 95 percent employment appears small because their ratio is close to one.⁴³

These sorts of framing effects have led many scholars to doubt whether the public can plausibly be said to have preferences on the underlying policies. But other scholars point out that such framing effects in survey experiments take place under highly artificial conditions. In the real world alternative ways of characterizing a policy choice are typically encountered not in isolation (as in survey experiments) but simultaneously as part of the political debate. The availability of competing frames, and the give and take of political debate have been shown to undermine framing effects, reducing or eliminating differences in responses.⁴⁴

Question wording and framing effects potentially challenge the notion that the public holds meaningful preferences and that we can use survey interviews to discern what those preferences are. Yet the real world impact of these problems may be small, as two recent examples suggest. In the first example, opponents of the inheritance tax were said to have boosted their cause by relabeling it the "death tax."⁴⁵ But the best evidence suggests that the label made little difference. In a survey experiment using two alternative wordings administered to randomly selected halves of the sample, 69 percent of respondents favored doing away with the "estate tax" while 73 percent favored doing away with the "death tax."⁴⁶

In a parallel example, observers have claimed that the label "climate change" generates greater concern among the public than "global warming."⁴⁷ But the only randomized survey experiment to pit these two formulations against each other found little difference: 57 percent of Americans believed that "global warming" would become a "very serious" or "extremely serious" problem if nothing was done, compared with 60 percent who felt that way about "climate change" and 58 percent about "global climate change."⁴⁸

In sum, we cannot dismiss concerns about question wording and framing effects entirely. The evidence is strong that how a policy is described can have an impact on the level of support or opposition expressed toward that policy. These effects, however, do not imply that the public has no "real" attitudes toward these policies, or that we cannot know (at least approximately) what those attitudes are. As one expert who has himself conducted numerous studies of framing effects concludes "framing effects appear to be neither robust nor particularly pervasive. Elite competition and heterogeneous discussion limit and often eliminate framing effects."⁴⁹

Feigned Attitudes and Feigned Non-Attitudes

Two additional problems are sometimes viewed as affecting survey measures of political attitudes. First, respondents who lack opinions may be reluctant to

say "don't know" either out of embarrassment or in an effort to be "helpful" to the interviewer. In such cases, claims to support or oppose some policy represent "non-attitudes" which distort the observed measure of public preferences. In other cases, respondents who in fact do have relevant opinions nevertheless may answer "don't know" perhaps because they think their true preference is embarrassing or out of step with perceived social norms. In either situation, respondents who engage in these behaviors may be distinctive in ways that result in a misleading assessment of what the true distribution of preferences in the population looks like.

Scholars have examined both of these kinds of "mis-reported" attitudes. Respondents' tendency to feign preferences on issues on which they lack opinions has been assessed by asking respondents about wholly fictitious issues. For example, 24 percent of respondents in one survey expressed a preference on whether the "1975 Public Affairs Act" should be repealed and 39 percent offered an opinion on the "Agricultural Trade Act of 1984" despite the fact that neither of these supposed pieces of legislation existed.⁵⁰ This suggests that some of the opinion preferences collected by survey interviewers about policies (or potential policy changes) that really do exist are in fact "non-attitudes" reported by respondents who are reluctant to say "don't know." These sorts of findings are often seen as embarrassments undermining the notion the surveys reveal meaningful preferences. Yet the 76 percent and 61 percent of respondents who did say "don't know" in response to these two questions about fictitious legislation is far higher than the percentage of respondents saying "don't know" to any of the real issues represented in the data I analyze below.

Since most respondents do seem able to resist the pressure to express a preference on an issue they have never heard of, most of the preferences that are expressed in response to the questions I examine in this study are likely real preferences, even if the respondents offering those preferences are only vaguely familiar with some of the issues they were asked about. Taking the "worst case scenario" above as a guide, if only 61 percent of those who really don't have an opinion on an issue say "don't know" and the rest offer a substantive preference anyway, the observed proportion of "don't knows" will be an underestimate of the true proportion. Thus if we observed that 5 percent of respondents said "don't know" (about the average for my data) we could infer that the real percentage of respondents who lack an opinion is about 8.2 percent (since 61 percent of 8.2 is 5.0).

The "hidden" non-attitudes in the example above consist of the 3.2 percent of respondents who gave a substantive answer despite having no real opinion. Of course, if the question concerned a more obscure policy on which a larger percentage of the respondents in fact had no opinion, the size of the hidden non-attitudes group would be proportionately larger. Since few of the policy questions in my data set produce observed "don't know" rates of greater than 10 percent, the extent of such hidden non-attitudes is simply too small to

seriously distort the real information contained in the substantive survey responses that form the basis of my analyses.⁵¹

The second threat to the validity of survey data mentioned above is the opposite of hidden non-attitudes. In this second scenario, respondents who in fact hold opinions nevertheless give “don’t know” responses. Adam Berinsky offers the most extensive analysis of this phenomenon. Berinsky hypothesizes that survey questions on political attitudes are most likely to elicit “don’t know” responses from people who in fact do have opinions if the issue being discussed is either complex or if the respondent’s views run counter to perceived social norms.⁵² In the former case, for example, a question about tax policy might require considerable effort from respondents to connect the proposed policy to their own interests and preferences on taxes. Rather than engage in this effortful processing, respondents may simply say “don’t know.” In the latter case, a respondent who opposes laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination may prefer to avoid the risk of embarrassment or social sanction by saying “don’t know” instead.

Berinsky tests this theory with a series of questions about race, social welfare policy, and the Vietnam war. Of concern here is the extent to which observed measures of policy preferences are distorted by respondents with real attitudes saying “don’t know.” Using a sophisticated statistical model to impute preferences to respondents who said “don’t know,” Berinsky finds virtually no such distortion for questions that lack complexity and have no clear socially normative answer. In contrast, he does find distortions on questions with one or the other of these qualities. But like the impact of hidden non-attitudes, the size of the distortions uncovered in Berinsky’s analysis is quite small. The largest distortions occur on racial policy questions asked during the 1990s for which he estimates that opposition to school integration would appear 3 to 5 percent higher if the hidden attitudes of respondents saying “don’t know” were statistically taken into account. The distortions on the other questions hypothesized to produce hidden attitudes are even smaller: observed preferences on social welfare policy in the 1990s and on the Vietnam war in the 1960s never differ from the estimated true preferences by more than two percentage points.

Survey questions are imperfect measures of public preferences in many ways. The question for scholars and others interested in what the public thinks is whether the distortions inherent in survey data are small enough that such data can be relied on to gauge public sentiments. With regard to both of the potential threats to validity examined above, it appears that these distortions are minor. Neither hidden attitudes nor hidden non-attitudes appear to be substantial enough to significantly impact the value of survey-based preference measures for analyzing Americans’ preferences on matters of public policy.

Public Preferences and Government Responsiveness

If the policy preferences expressed by the mass public are meaningful (at least in the aggregate) and reflective of Americans’ genuine attitudes toward alternative government actions, then one criterion for assessing the degree of democratic legitimacy is the strength of the association between public preferences and policy outcomes. Of course we would not expect or desire a perfect match between majority preferences and government policy. First, there are issues of minority rights to be considered. Second, the public is not capable of guiding policy on all questions that come before the government. Issues like alternative high-definition TV standards, or which government regulatory agency should be responsible for agricultural futures trading, are simply too obscure for most citizens to have meaningful preferences on. Finally, one subset of the public might care intensely about a particular issue another is fairly indifferent. If I care deeply about foreign policy and am indifferent to education, and you care strongly about education and not foreign policy, a government that responds to my preferences on foreign policy and yours on education would make us both happier than one that took each of our views equally into consideration in both issue domains.

These considerations notwithstanding, it remains true that a government that responds only weakly or not at all to the preferences of the governed, or that systematically responds to some citizens but ignores others, has but a weak claim to being considered a democracy. The association of government policy with public preferences measured by surveys is only one basis for judging government responsiveness, but it is a useful starting point for assessing the nature and degree of representation.

To estimate the association between public preferences and government policy I make use of the dataset mentioned briefly above. These data consist of 2,245 survey questions asked between 1964 and 2006.⁵³ Each question asked whether respondents favored or opposed some specific change in federal government policy. In my dataset, I collected the responses to these questions separately for respondents at different income levels in order to compare the strength of the preference/policy link for more and less well-off Americans.

As we would expect, the more support a given policy has among the public, the more likely it is that that policy will be adopted, and this pattern holds true for respondents at all income levels. Figure 3.1 shows this relationship separately for respondents at the 10th, 50th, and 90th income percentiles.⁵⁴ The far left side of the figure shows that policies with strong public opposition (with fewer than 20 percent favoring the proposed change), have a low probability of being adopted, with the probability of adoption increasing as support increases. However, the far right side of the figure shows that even policies with strong public support (at least 80 percent of the public favoring the proposed change) have a less than even chance of being adopted. This

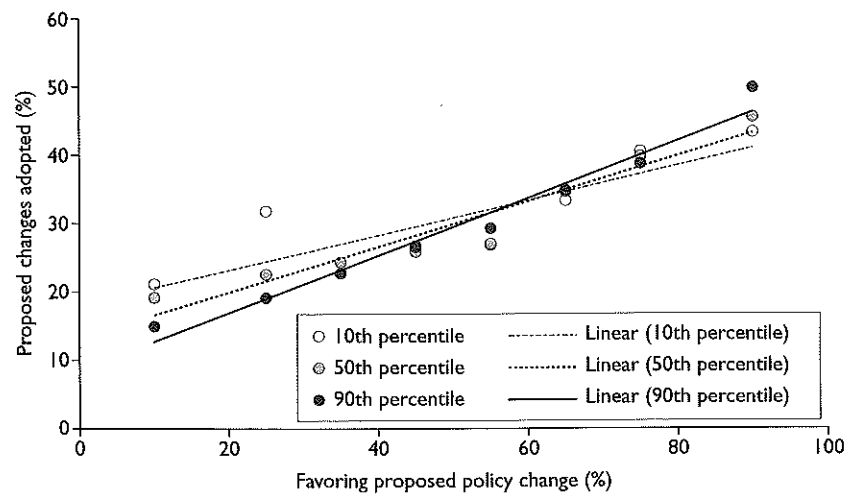


Figure 3.1 The Preference/Policy Link for Respondents at the 10th, 50th, and 90th Income Percentiles.

Note
Based on 2,245 survey questions concerning proposed policy changes asked between 1964 and 2006.

pattern suggests that the political system is responsive to public preferences, but with a strong status quo bias. Given that our federal government was designed by its framers to inhibit as much as facilitate lawmaking (with its separation of powers, multiple veto points within congress, supermajority requirements in the Senate, and so on), this status quo bias should not be surprising.

Figure 3.1 also shows that the probability of a policy being adopted is somewhat more strongly related to the preferences of the affluent than those of the middle class or the poor: the solid line, representing respondents at the 90th income percentile, is somewhat steeper than the lines for the 50th and 10th income percentiles. But the differences among income groups are modest, and at every level of income, favored policies are substantially more likely to be adopted than unfavored policies.

To better gauge the true influence over policy making of Americans at different income levels, we need to take into account the fact that poor and well-off Americans agree on many policy questions. If affluent Americans are better able to influence policy outcomes than the less well-off, the association of policy outcomes with the preferences of the poor or the middle class shown in Figure 3.1 may simply reflect those proposed changes on which Americans at all income levels agree.

Figure 3.2 shows the same relationships shown in Figure 3.1, but restricted to proposed policy changes for which low and high income

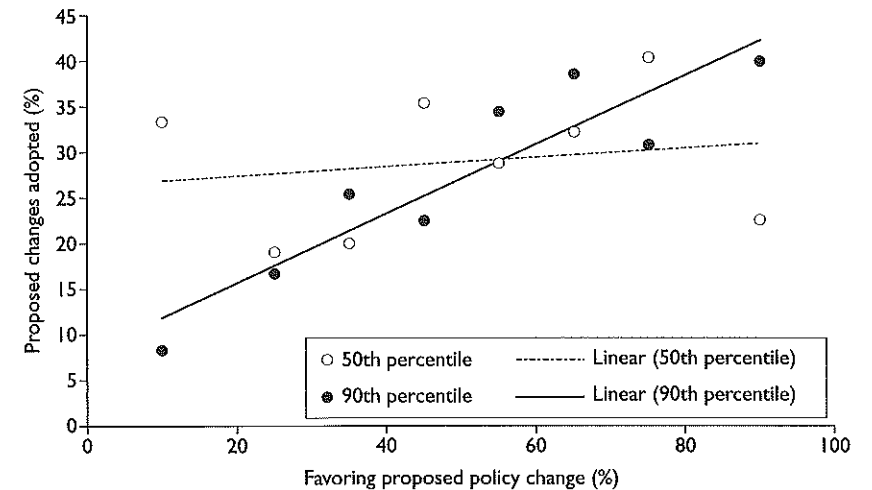
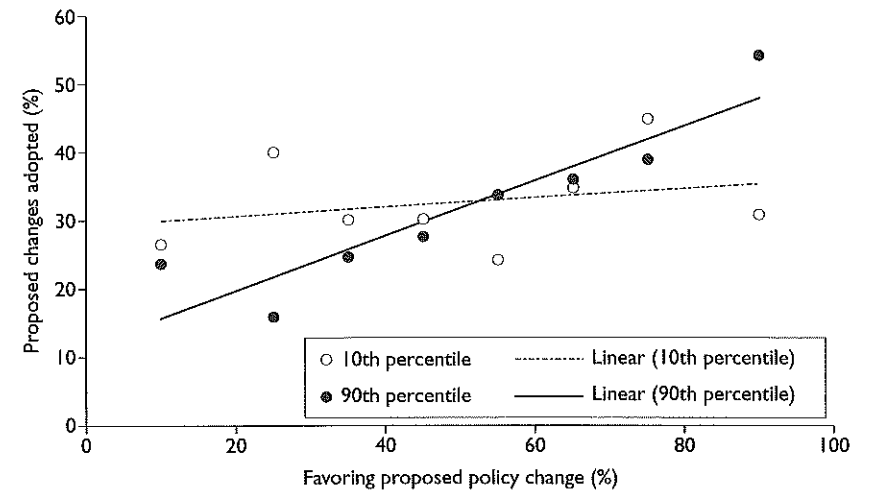


Figure 3.2 The Preference/Policy Link when Preferences at the 10th or 50th Income Percentiles Diverge from the 90th Income Percentile.

Note
Based on the 932 and 414 survey questions on which the preferences of people at the 10th and 90th and 50th and 90th income percentiles diverged by at least ten percentage points.

Americans' preferences, or middle and high income Americans' preferences, diverge by at least ten percentage points. Here we see a very different picture: the preference/policy link for the affluent remains strong, but when the preferences of less well-off Americans diverge from those at the top of the income distribution, the preferences of the less well-off appear to have

virtually no relationship with policy outcomes. In other publications I explore these relationships in greater detail. I find that the basic pattern shown in Figure 3.2 is similar with regard to foreign policy, economic policy, social welfare, and moral or religious issues and cannot be explained by the higher levels of voting among the affluent, or a lack of strong preferences among the middle class or the poor.⁵⁵

A number of different factors may contribute to the influence over policy exerted by affluent Americans and the lack of influence among the less well-off, but they all relate directly or indirectly to the importance of money in the political system. The well-off contribute to parties, candidates, and interest organizations at far higher rates than the middle class or the poor. In addition, they tend to share the policy preferences of an even smaller and more powerful group of truly rich Americans who help determine who runs for and wins public office (and therefore what sorts of policies they subsequently pursue). Finally, government policy makers are themselves far better off economically than the average American, and their own policy preferences are more likely to reflect those of their economic peers than of less well-off citizens.

Conclusions

The American public's knowledge of political issues and understanding of the policy choices government faces is clearly limited. And studies of framing and question wording show the potential difficulties of measuring public preferences. Yet, on balance, the evidence indicates that framing and question wording effects in the real world are infrequent, and that aggregate preferences as measured by surveys reflect much the same set of attitudes that a more fully informed and engaged public would express. This evidence, I suggest, is sufficient to conclude that survey measures of public opinion are sensible bases on which to judge the extent to which government policy reflects the preferences of the governed.

Based on the findings described briefly above, American democracy is found wanting. The problem lies not in the failure of the public to form meaningful policy preferences, but in the failure of policy makers to respond to the public. Affluent Americans appear to have substantial influence over policy outcomes, but when less well-off Americans' preferences diverge from those of the affluent, government policy makers appear to take into account only the desires of the most economically advantaged.

In every society the well-off have more influence over government than the less economically advantaged. But the degree of inequality in how government responds to its citizens is a fundamental gauge of how truly democratic a society is. In this regard, we have a long way to go before we can claim to be a democracy characterized by "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals."⁵⁶

Notes

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3. Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
5. Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 269.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
7. Berelson et al., *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign*, p. 311.
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9. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1957), p. 233.
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11. Arthur Lupia, 1995. "Who Can Persuade? A Formal Theory, a Survey and Implications for Democracy." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL, April 6–8.
12. E.g., John W. Kingdon, *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*, 3rd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989).
13. Converse assessed issue public membership by dint of the consistency of responses to the same questions over time.
14. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," p. 246.
15. Shanto Iyengar, Kyu S. Hahn, Jon A. Krosnick, and John Walker, "Selective Exposure to Campaign Communication: The Role of Anticipated Agreement and Issue Public Membership," *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008); Amy R. Gershkoff, "How Issue Interest Can Rescue the American Public" (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Politics, Princeton University, 2006); Jon A. Krosnick, "Government Policy and Citizen Passion: A Study of Issue Publics in Contemporary America," *Political Behavior* 12, no. 1 (1990).

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20. Larry M. Bartels, "Democracy with Attitudes" (New York, May 9, 1998).
21. Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 14.
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25. Martin Gilens, "Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (2001); J.H. Kuklinski, P.J. Quirk, J. Jerit, D. Schwieder, and R.F. Rich, "Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship," *Journal of Politics* 62, no. 3 (2000); Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
26. Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*, p. 381.
27. Scott L. Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
28. With 20 percent of respondents reporting the "wrong" preference, the true 75 percent favoring is reduced by 15 percentage points (75×0.20) who are recorded instead as opposing. The true 25 percent who oppose is reduced by five percentage points (25×0.20) who are recorded instead as favoring. Thus the total percentage recorded as favoring is $75 - 15 + 5 = 65$ and the total percentage recorded as opposing is $25 - 5 + 15 = 35$.
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34. Ibid., Table 3.
35. Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People*.
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42. James N. Druckman, "The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence," *Political Behavior* 23, no. 3 (2001).
43. Quattrone and Tversky, "Contrasting Rational and Psychological Analyses of Political Choice," p. 728.
44. James N. Druckman, "Political Preference Formation: Competition, Deliberation, and the (Ir)Relevance of Framing Effects," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (2004); Paul M. Sniderman and Sean M. Theriault (1999) "The Dynamics of Political Argument and the Logic of Issue Framing." Presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
45. Michael J. Graetz and Ian Shapiro, *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth*, 1st ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
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53. For reasons explained in Martin Gilens, "Paying the Piper: Economic Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness in the United States" (unpublished book manuscript, Princeton University, n.d.), only survey questions asked during 1964–1968, 1981–2002, and 2005–2006 were included.
54. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 show the mean proportion adopted for policies favored by less than 20 percent, 20–30, 30–40, 40–50, 50–60, 60–70, 70–80, and 80 percent of respondents or more (for respondents at the 10th, 50th, and 90th income percentiles). See Martin Gilens, "Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness," *Public*

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56. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, p. 1.