Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness: Who Gets What They Want from Government?*

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This paper reports the first findings from a project that examines the extent to which different social groups find their policy preferences reflected in actual government policy and the variation in these patterns across time and policy domains. For example, when Americans with low and high incomes disagree, are policy outcomes more likely to reflect the preferences of affluent Americans? If so, does the advantage of more affluent Americans differ over time (e.g., depending on which party controls the congress and presidency) or across policy domains? The larger project includes approximately 1,800 survey questions about possible changes in U.S. government policy administered between 1981 and 2002.

In this paper I use data on public preferences and policy outcomes based on the subset of 754 national survey questions from 1992 through 1998. I find that when Americans with different income levels differ in their policy preferences, actual policy outcomes strongly reflect the preferences of the most affluent but bear virtually no relationship to the preferences of poor or middle income Americans. The vast discrepancy I find in government responsiveness to citizens with different incomes stands in stark contrast to the ideal of political equality that Americans hold dear. Although perfect political equality is an unrealistic goal, representational biases of this magnitude call into question the very democratic character of our society.

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"…a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals."

Robert Dahl, Polyarchy, p.1

The ability of citizens to influence public policy is the "bottom line" of democratic government. While few would expect or even desire a perfect correspondence between majority preference and government policy, the nature of the connection between what citizens want and what government does is a central consideration in evaluating the quality of democratic governance.

Previous research

Quantitative analyses of the link between public preferences and government decision making have taken three main forms (see Manza and Cook 2002, Monroe and Gardner 1987 for reviews of this literature). The most prevalent approach, often labeled "dyadic representation," examines the relationship between constituency opinion and the behavior of representatives or candidates across political units (typically US House districts or Senate seats; e.g., Achen 1978; Bartels 1991; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Ansolabehere, Synder, and Stewart 2001). This work typically finds strong correlations between constituents' preferences and legislators' voting behavior.

A second approach examines changes over time in public preferences and the corresponding changes (or lack of changes) in public policies. Using this technique, Page and Shapiro (1983) found fairly high levels of congruency between the direction of change in opinion and the direction of change in government policy, especially for salient issues or cases with large changes in public preferences.

Finally, using a third approach, Monroe (1979, 1998) compared public preferences for policy change expressed at a given point in time with subsequent changes (or lack of changes) in government policy, finding only modest and declining consistency from the 1960s and 1970s to the 1980s and early 1990s. Mirroring Page and Shapiro's results, however, Monroe found substantially higher levels of consistency between public preferences and government policy for issues that the public deemed more important (Monroe 1998). Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) also related public preferences for policy change (or stability) to subsequent government policy. Rather than individual policy issues, however, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson used a broad measure of "public mood" for more or less government spending or activity and a similarly broad measure of actual government policy. Taking into account the reciprocal relationship between public preferences and government policy, they report an extremely strong influence of public mood on policy outputs, concluding that there exists "nearly a one-to-one translation of preferences into policy" (p.316).

Previous research, then, suggests a fairly high level of correspondence between constituency preferences and legislators' behavior, a more modest match between Americans' specific policy preferences and specific government policies (with stronger correspondence on more salient issues), and a strong aggregate relationship between broadly defined "public mood" and broad measures of government activity.

Limitations of research on democratic responsiveness

Each of the three main approaches to assessing the link between public preferences and government policy has advantages and disadvantages. Because the dyadic approach examines legislators' voting behavior rather than policy outputs, it cannot truly address policy responsiveness. Even if individual legislators' votes strongly reflect the preferences of their

constituents, actual policies may not coincide with aggregate preferences. Federal government policies do not relate in any simple way to the "average position" of the congress. Instead, policies are shaped by the complex interactions among multiple units of government, by the congressional committee system, by the degree of autonomy granted to the various federal agencies, and by many other characteristics of our governmental structure. Moreover, votes cast in the U.S. House or Senate reflect a mixture of sincere efforts to shape policy outcomes and posturing for public consumption. Legislators might be expected to vote in accord with their constituents' preferences on the many votes which can be safely assumed to have little chance of impacting policy. Thus the fit between constituency preferences and legislative votes is an uncertain indication of the link between the public's preferences and government policy.

The second approach discussed above--assessing the preferences/policy link by examining change over time in expressed preferences and actual policies--overcomes some of the limitations of the dyadic approach. However, one weakness of this method is that the *direction of change in aggregate opinion* need not correspond with the *aggregate preferred direction of policy change*. For example, if public support for increasing environmental regulation declined from 90% to 75% over some time period, we might conclude that support for environmental regulation weakened. But if actual regulation was reduced during this period, it would clearly be contrary to, not consistent with, the preferences of the public. Across a range of policy issues, the direction of change in aggregate opinion might coincide with changes in actual policies even if the direction of policy change was opposed by majorities of Americans.

The third approach--relating public preferences for policy change in a given direction with subsequent policy change (or lack of change)--overcomes the problems outlined above. Yet all of these approaches are limited by the possibility of spuriousness. The associations with public preferences revealed by any of these approaches could arise from the responsiveness of

government to the desires of the public, but these associations could also arise from the common response of both the public and policy makers to changing conditions or from the ability of policy makers to sway public preferences. Increases in defense spending following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan may have coincided with increased public support for defense spending. But lawmakers were likely responding to some combination of public preferences and real-world events, and it is extraordinarily difficult to assess the relative importance of each in cases like this. I'll return to the question of causal inference toward the end of this paper, and offer some suggestive evidence that the associations I observe between public preferences and government policy do reflect, to some substantial degree at least, the influence of the public on policy makers. But this ambiguity remains a central difficulty in the study of democratic responsiveness.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that surveys of public preferences are at best imperfect measures of what the public wants from government. One important limitation is the willingness of respondents to express opinions even about issues on which they have no clear or consistent views. (Indeed, studies show that 20 to 40 percent of respondents will offer opinions on fictitious legislation if asked in a survey interview. Bishop, Tuchfarber and Oldendick 1986) Even those who advocate a high level of government responsiveness to public preferences would not want government to respond to the "non-attitudes" expressed by some respondents on some policy questions.

While it is difficult to distinguish *individuals* whose expressed preferences on a given survey question amount to "non-attitudes" it is possible to distinguish survey questions to which smaller or larger proportions of the public appear to have formed opinions. As we'll see below, government responsiveness to public preferences is much lower for questions which elicit large numbers of "Don't Know" responses.

Another limitation of survey questions as a basis for assessing the public's policy preferences stems from the notion of "latent opinion." As V.O. Key conceived it, latent opinion refers to the opinion that the public might hold at some future date in response to government action of one kind or another (see also Zaller 2003). Two aspects of latent opinion can be distinguished. First, public opinion may be "uncrystalized" about a new or unfamiliar issue. As the public becomes more familiar with the issue and with the arguments put forth in favor of various actions, latent opinions may become activated and expressed preferences may change. In this case, latent opinion represents something like "what the public would prefer after having considered the issue more fully."

A second kind of latent opinion represents what the public would prefer after having seen the consequences of some government action. For example, the public might express support for humanitarian intervention abroad. But if that intervention were to lead to a substantial (or unusually grisly) loss of American lives, opinion might turn against U.S. involvement. A policy maker attempting to respond to public opinion would need to take both current expressed support, and latent potential opposition into account. In this case, if the policy maker believes the risk of lost lives is high, the policy most consistent with long run public preferences may in fact be not to intervene.

The concept of latent opinion raises a host of issues about what kinds of public opinion government does and should respond to, issues which have always been a central concern of democratic theory. For our purposes, it is important to recognize that democratic responsiveness is a subtle phenomenon and that survey measures of public opinion provide only a partial and imperfect account of the full range of preferences that we might want government policy to reflect. (For further discussion of the limitations of survey data in this regard see Althaus 2003.)

Assessing inequalities in democratic responsiveness

Recognizing the limitations inherent in any effort to link public preferences and government policy, this paper addresses an aspect of democratic responsiveness largely ignored in previous work: *whose* preferences are influential in shaping government policy.

While the notion of "equal representation" is a central element of normative democratic theory, there are good reasons to expect that different sub-groups of the population will be more or less successful at shaping government policy to their preference. Past research on this question is quite limited. A small number of studies have used samples of U.S. cities to assess the correspondence between public policy and the preferences of different citizen groups, with mixed results. For example, Schumaker and Getter (1977) report a bias toward the spending preferences of upper-SES and white residents within 51 cities. In contrast, Berry, Portney, and Thomson (1993) find little evidence of economic or racial bias in representation within the five cities they studied.

The only study I'm aware of that has used public opinion data to assess representational bias at the national level is Bartels' (2002) examination of U.S. senators' specific roll call votes and NOMINATE scores. Comparing constituency views on civil rights, minimum wage, government spending, abortion, and ideological self-placement with senators' voting, Bartels found senators to be consistently and dramatically more responsive to the opinions of high-income constituents (this bias being somewhat greater for Republican than Democratic senators).

The current project

In the current project, my aim is to further explore biases in government responsiveness to public preferences asking how successful different population sub-groups are in shaping government policy and how such differences have changed over time, across issue-area, or in

response to changing party control of national political institutions. This paper reports the first set of findings, which are limited to data from the 1990s and which focus on biases in government responsiveness to the preferences of high and low income Americans.

When complete, my data set will consist of about 1,800 survey questions asked of national samples of the U.S. population between 1981 and 2002. Currently, only 754 questions asked between 1992 and 1998 are available for analysis. Each survey question asks whether respondents support or oppose some proposed policy change.

The data set consists of respondents' attitudes toward these proposed policy changes broken down by income, education, race, sex, age, partisan identification, ideological self-placement, and region, as well as a code indicating whether the proposed policy change occurred or not. All questions refer to policies that could plausibly be adopted at the federal level either by legislation, executive action, or (occasionally) constitutional amendment.

Data

My data for 1992-1998 were collected from the iPOLL data base maintained by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut and available through NEXIS. Questions were identified using keyword searches for "oppose" in the question text or response categories and then hand-sifting through the results to find appropriate questions. The vast majority of questions chosen for the study clearly refer to a proposed change in existing U.S. national policy. A smaller number of questions ask about a specific policy without indicating whether that policy represents a continuation or change from existing policy (for example, "Do you support the sale of U.S. weapons to Turkey?"). In these cases, if the policy being asked about was consistent with current policy, respondents indicating support were coded as preferring existing policy while those indicating opposition were coded as preferring a policy change.

After identifying appropriate questions, research assistants used historical information sources to identify whether the proposed policy change occurred, and if so whether fully or only partially, and within what period of time from the date the survey question was asked.[1]

The data set, then, consists of one case for each survey question, with variables indicating the percentage of respondents expressing support, opposition, "don't know" or "no answer" for each demographic category, the number of respondents in each demographic category, the outcome code indicating whether the proposed policy change occurred, and a code indicating the policy area addressed by the question (e.g. tax policy, abortion, etc.).

Imputing preferences by income, education, or age level

Because the surveys employed were conducted by different organizations at different points in time the demographic categories are not always consistent. In particular income, education, and age are divided into different numbers of categories and use different break points in different surveys (only income and education are examined in this paper). To create standardized measures of preferences that can be compared across surveys, I used the following procedure. For ease of exposition, I describe the procedure for imputing preferences by income; the identical procedure was applied to education.

For each survey, respondents in each income category were assigned an income score equal to the percentile midpoint for their income group based on the income distribution from

[1] Monroe (1998) looked for policy changes over a long time period and reports that 88% of the policy changes that occurred did so within two years of the date of the survey questions he examined. For my project, coders looked for policy change within a four-year widow following each survey question. If no change consistent with the survey question occurred within that period, the outcome was coded as "no change." If change did occur within that period, it was coded as having taken place within 2, 3, or 4 years from the date of the survey question. In coding outcomes for survey questions with specific quantified proposals (e.g., raise the minimum wage to six dollars an hour), coders considered a change to have occurred if it represented at least 80% of the change proposed in the survey question. If the actual policy change represented less than 80% of that proposed in the survey question, but more than 20%, the outcome was given a "partial change" code. Relatively few outcomes were coded as partial changes, and in the analysis below, only "full changes" occurring within the four-year window are coded as policy change.

their survey. For example, if on a given survey 10% of the respondents fell into the bottom income category and 30% into the second category, those in the bottom group would be assigned a score of .05 and the second group a score of .25 (the midpoint between .10 and .40, the bottom and top percentiles for the second group).

After re-scoring income for each survey, predicted preferences for specific income percentiles were estimated using a quadratic function. That is, for each survey question, income and income-squared (measured in percentiles) were used as predictors of policy preference for that question (resulting in 754 separate regressions each with two predictors and an n equal to the number of income categories for that question). The coefficients from these analyses were then used to impute policy preferences for respondents at the desired percentiles.

In the final stage of the analysis, the imputed preferences for respondents at a given income percentile were used as predictors of the policy outcomes across the available survey questions. (That is, separate regressions for each desired income percentile each with one predictor and an n of 754.)

This approach has the double advantage of allowing comparisons across survey questions with different raw income categories and smoothing out some of the noise inherent in estimating preferences for population subgroups with limited numbers of respondents.

FINDINGS

Consistency versus influence

Raw correspondence between majority preferences and policy outcomes is one way to assess the relationship between preferences and policies. But consistency is a fairly crude measure which does not take into account the *degree* to which policy outcomes are influenced by the public's preferences. For example, a policy change opposed by 51% of the public and one

opposed by 99% of the public would both be inconsistent with public preferences, but the latter clearly represents a greater failure of policy to reflect public preferences.

More importantly for my purposes, raw consistency is an inappropriate measure to use in comparing democratic responsiveness across population groups. Most proposed policy changes asked about in these survey questions did not occur: in my 1992-1998 data, only 29% of the proposed policy changes took place (within the four-year coding window, at least). Consequently, if the majority of population group X prefers policy change less often than population group Y, X will *ceteris paribus* have higher consistency scores. But influence over policy outcomes is reflected in the degree to which policy change is more or less likely to occur depending on whether or not members of that group support it. A group that opposes 90% of proposed policy changes will inevitably have a high consistency score, but if the probability of a change being implemented bears no relationship to the group's preferences, the group cannot be said to have influence over policy outcomes. The weakness of raw consistency as a measure of policy influence is illustrated with a hypothetical example in the appendix.

To assess the strength of the relationship between policy preferences and policy outcomes across groups, I use measures of association (typically, logistic regression coefficients) rather than raw consistency scores. Regression coefficients (and the associated probabilities of policy change which I report) overcome both of these shortcomings with consistency scores--they incorporate the degree of support (or opposition) to the a specific policy proposal, and they reflect the extend to which different levels of policy support are associated with different probabilities of policy implementation within each group.

Overall relationship between preference and policy

The overall relationship between the public's policy preferences and actual policy outcomes is shown in the first column of table 1 with predicted probabilities shown in figure 1. These results are based on a logistic regression in which policy outcome (coded 1 for change and 0 for status quo) is regressed on the percentage of respondents favoring the proposed policy change. As is reflected in figure 1, the predicted probability of policy change rises from about 16% if 10% of the public favors the change to about 40% if the change is endorsed by 90% of the public. A strong status-quo bias is evident among these 754 proposed policy changes: even policy changes favored by 90% of Americans occurred only 4 times in 10 (at least within the four-year coding window). This status quo bias should not be surprising; indeed, it is what we should expect from a government structure with separation of powers, multiple veto points within congress, supermajority requirements in the Senate, and so on--a structure designed by its framers as much to combat factionalism and inhibit the "tyranny of the majority" as to facilitate federal lawmaking.

table 1 and figure 1 about here

Salient and non-salient issues

The hundreds of policy issues facing the federal government at any one time range from obscure questions of little interest to most Americans to momentous matters of great consequence and widespread interest. From a practical point of view we would expect lawmakers to be more responsive to public preferences on issues about which Americans hold clear and strong opinions, and from a normative point of view most democratic theorists would want government to be more responsive to the public on such issues.

Consistent with these expectations, past research has found the association between public preferences and government policy to be stronger for more salient issues. To assess

salience, I use the proportion of respondents giving a substantive answer (rather than "don't know") to each proposed policy change. The 754 questions in this data set include both policy issues about which most Americans hold clear and strong preferences and others about which large numbers of Americans have no clear view. For example, in a December 1993 survey, only 5% failed to offer an opinion on banning the manufacture, sale and possession of rapid-fire assault rifles. On that same survey, however, 17% of the respondents said they didn't know whether or not they supported using U.S. troops to help restore the democratically elected government of Haiti. These differences in the proportion of respondents offering opinions are also likely to reflect the strength of opinion of those who do provide an answer (cite). Questions which elicit high levels of "Don't Know" responses are also likely to reflect weakly held preferences (or "non-attitudes") among those who do provide a substantive response.

In the analyses reported in the second and third columns of table 1 and in figure 2, I use the proportion of "Don't Knows" to each survey question as a proxy for the aggregate strength of opinion on that question among the American public. I divide the 754 policy questions into those which generated less than 5% "don't know" responses (58% of all questions), and those which generated 5% or more. As table 1 shows, the coefficient for public preferences is over six times as large among questions that generated high levels of opinionation (2.68 versus .43). In terms of probabilities (figure 2), on questions with weakly held opinions, a policy change supported by 90% of those offering opinions is about one and a half times as likely to be adopted as one supported by only 10% of those with opinions. But on questions with strongly held opinions, the support of 90% of opinion holders is associated with about four and one half times the likelihood of adoption compared with a policy supported by only 10% of those with opinions.

figure 2 about here

INCOME AND THE PREFERENCE-POLICY LINK

As one would expect, the relationship between policy preference and policy outcomes is substantially stronger for affluent Americans than for those at the bottom of the income distribution (table 2 and figure 3). Moreover, the strength of this relationship does not increase in a linear fashion; Americans at the 50th income percentile are barely more likely to see their policy preferences reflected in actual policy than are those at the 10th percentile. In contrast, the preference-policy link for those at the 90th percentile is almost twice as strong as those at the 50th percentile.

table 2 and figure 3 about here

The magnitude of these differences in the preference-policy relationship can be judged by substituting predicted probabilities of policy change in place of the raw logistic coefficients. The bottom row of table 2 shows the extent to which a proposed policy change is more likely to be adopted if it has 90% support among respondents at a given income level compared to 10% support. Like the raw coefficients, the change in probabilities shows a gradual increase in the relationship between preference and policy between the 10th and 50th income percentiles, and then a steeper climb with each additional decile. For the 10th through 50th income percentiles, a policy is about twice as likely to be implemented if it is overwhelmingly favored (i.e. 90% support) than if it is overwhelmingly opposed (i.e., 10% support). For respondents at the 90th income percentile, there is a four-fold increase in the probability of a proposed policy being enacted if it is overwhelmingly favored than if it is overwhelmingly opposed.

Policy agreement and disagreement across income levels

To the extent that the associations between policy preference and policy outcome shown in figure 3 reflect the causal impact of the public's preferences on policy, it would appear that

Americans at the 90th income percentile have about twice as much influence over policy outcomes as those at the 10th or 50th percentiles. But even the comparatively modest impact of less affluent Americans over government policy might be overstated in these analyses. On many of the policy issues in the data set, low- and high-income Americans do not differ substantially in their policy preferences. Less than five percentage points separate the preferences of the 10th and 90th income percentiles for about one-third of the 754 policy items, and preferences among these income groups differ by less than 10 percentage points on fully 60% of the policy items examined. Consequently, the association between government policy and the preferences of poorer Americans may arise not due to these citizens' influence on government outcomes but to the fact that poor and wealthy Americans share policy preferences most of the time.

To assess the role of shared preferences in accounting for the association between policy outcomes and the preferences of the poor, I divided the set of survey questions into the 454 questions where predicted preferences for the 10th and 90th percentiles differ by less than ten percentage points and the 300 questions where preferences differ by ten percentage points or more. Among the 454 questions where poor and rich Americans are in closer agreement, the association between preferences and policy differs little across income percentiles (table 3).

table 3 about here

On the other hand, among the 300 questions where preferences differ more strongly by income level, policy outcomes are unrelated to preferences among the poor, and highly related among the rich (with coefficients of -.06 and 3.67, for those at the 10th and 90th income percentiles respectively). The implications of this difference is illustrated in figure 4 which shows the dramatic increase in the probability of policy change as support among the well-off rises and the complete lack of responsiveness to the preferences of the poor. For the subset of policy questions about which rich and poor hold different views--which are, of course, the only

questions about which differential responsiveness matters--the link between preference and policy is strong for the rich and wholly absent for the poor.

figure 4 about here

The lack of government responsiveness to the preferences of the poor is disturbing, if not entirely surprising. But poor people might hold attitudes that consistently differ from those held by middle-income or wealthy Americans, and if so the lack of responsiveness to their preferences might actually reflect a well-functioning democracy. Middle-income respondents might better reflect the preferences of the median voter on most issues and the responsiveness of government policymakers to the preferences of these Americans might therefore serve as a more appropriate test of biases in representation.

Figure 5 shows the same relationships between preferences and policy outcomes as in figure 4, but in this case for policy questions on which the 50th and 90th percentile respondents disagree. It appears that median income respondents fare little better than the poor when their policy preferences diverge from those of the well-off. The probability of a proposed policy change being implemented rises from 8% to 51% as support among high-income respondents increases, but rises only from 24% to 31% as attitudes among median income respondents shift from strong opposition to strong support. In other words, a policy is over six times as likely to be adopted if its is strongly supported by affluent Americans than if it is strongly opposed, but among median income Americans this difference is only 1.3 times.

figure 5 about here

The lack of responsiveness to the preferences of the 10th and 50th income percentiles illustrated in figures 4 and 5 do not mean that these groups never get what they want from government nor that high income Americans always see their preferences enacted in government policy. On the fifty to sixty percent of questions on which low and middle income respondents

share the same preferences as those with high incomes they are, of course, just as likely as high income Americans to get what they want. But when their views differ from those of more affluent Americans, government policy appears to be fairly responsive to the well off and wholly independent of the desires of the low and middle income citizens.

DIVERGENT POLICY PREFERENCES OF RICH AND POOR

The analyses above show that high-income Americans are uniquely influential in shaping government policy to their liking. But what do they want from government? And in particular, how do the policy preferences of the well-off differ from those of the poor?

In this section, I offer an overview of the ways in which rich and poor differ in their policy preferences. For these analyses, I compare the (imputed) policy preferences of respondents at the 10th and 90th percentiles of the income distribution. During the mid-1990s (when these surveys were conducted), the 10th income percentile was about $10,000 (about $11,000 in 2002 dollars) and the 90th percentile was about $100,000 ($110,000 in 2002 dollars; U.S. Census Bureau 1998). For convenience, I will call respondents at these household income levels "poor" and "rich" while recognizing that "poor" is a better fit for those at the 10th percentile than is "rich" for those at the 90th.

Economic policies

"Pure" economic policies. Economic policies are where most observers would expect to find substantial differences in the preferences of the rich and poor, and the data largely bear out this expectation (table 4). On questions about taxes paid by individuals (perhaps the most clear-cut in terms of the economic implications for different income groups) Americans at the 90th income percentile were strongly favorable toward cutting the capital gains and inheritance taxes

while those at the 10th percentile were about evenly split. Similarly, rich Americans were somewhat supportive of the flat tax proposals being debated during the 1990s while poor Americans were somewhat opposed.

table 4 about here

On the other hand, rich are poor were both enthusiastic about raising corporate tax rates and raising taxes on households making over $180,000 (or $200,000) dollars per year. Surprisingly, even among those at the 99th income percentile a strong majority (about 64%) supported raising taxes on these high-income Americans (although this may reflect the difficulty of predicting preferences for extreme values on income from the available data).

Both rich and poor strongly supported raising the minimum wage (although the poor were near unanimous in their support) while both groups were quite favorable toward balancing the federal budget. Finally, the rich leaned slightly toward increasing (the usually regressive) taxes on energy and/or gasoline while the poor were solidly against such increases.

In sum, on "pure" economic policy issues, rich and poor preferences diverge in rational and predictable ways. Even on policies whose implications are often obscure (or purposefully obscured) such as the flat tax, rich and poor in the aggregate appear to express preferences that reflect their groups' differing economic self interest.

Foreign economic policies. Economic aspects of foreign policy have less clear implications for the economic well-being of rich and poor Americans. On free trade (including the G.A.T.T. and the N.A.F.T.A. treaties), rich Americans express solid support while the poor are mildly opposed. While economists differ on the implications of freed trade for different groups of Americans, it would be reasonable for poor (or low-skilled) workers to be more concerned about the downside of lowering trade barriers.

Among the strongest policy disagreements between rich and poor, however, has no clear-cut differential economic implications: U.S. aid to developing countries and to Russia and the former Soviet Union. On these questions, the rich expressed solid support while the poor were equally strong in their opposition. Differences between the rich and poor were larger when the aid recipient was Russia/F.S.U. than when it was "developing countries," suggesting the observed differences may reflect attitudes toward Russia or communism more than (or in addition to) attitudes toward assistance to needy countries.

Health care. Health care was an important policy issue during the 1990s with significant redistributive implications. Differences in the preferences of the rich and poor were not overwhelming, but they were substantial and consistent with the presumed interests of higher and lower income Americans. The poor, for example, were strongly supportive of tax funded national health care (in the abstract at least), employer mandates, and government guarantees of universal health care. The rich were only mildly supportive these first two proposals, but shared the poor's enthusiasm for the last. When asked about the Clinton health plan per se, the rich were solidly opposed while the poor were evenly split.

Social Security. Social Security reform was another topic on which rich and poor interests might be thought to diverge (since the poor are much more dependent on Social Security for their retirement income). But the two reform proposals with the clearest redistributive implications (increasing the tax on Social Security benefits of higher income retirees and raising the retirement age) produced no differences in support between rich and poor. On the other hand, directing the government to invest part of the Social Security surplus in the stock market was strongly opposed by poor Americans while the rich were evenly split. Similarly, allowing individuals to control their own Social Security retirement accounts won solid support from the rich but mild opposition from the poor. These differences may reflect the

greater trust of more affluent Americans in the stock market or in the business world more generally.

Welfare reform. Despite what might be seen as clearly differing impact on the lives of the rich and poor, welfare reform elicited far less divergence of opinion than most other policies with redistributive implications. On four of the six dimensions represented in the data set, rich and poor expressed equal (and enthusiastic) support: work requirements, job training, child care, and time limits for welfare recipients. The rich were supportive of cutting overall spending in contrast to the poor (who were evenly split), while the rich similarly expressed solid support for eliminating increases in benefits to women who have additional children while on welfare (the poor were again split on this proposal). Note that the rich--along with the poor--are strongly supportive of both welfare "carrots" (like job training and child care) as well as "sticks" (like work requirements and time limits). Overall, these similarities in attitudes seem to suggest a similar (and non-interest based) approach to welfare among the rich and poor, and a similar balancing of a desire to help the needy and a skepticism about the true motivation of welfare recipients. The support among the rich for cutting overall welfare spending might reflect a self-interested calculation, although I argue elsewhere that this difference largely reflects not self-interest but the different experiences with welfare among rich and poor Americans (Gilens 1999).

Social issues

Civil rights. Among the issues I have classified as "social" as opposed to "redistributive," the issue with the clearest redistributive implications is affirmative action and it is here that the largest rich/poor differences are found. The rich and poor differ most dramatically when asked about affirmative action for individual hiring, promotion, or college admissions. On these

questions, poor Americans express support while the rich are strongly opposed. Affirmative action in the awarding of government contracts elicits smaller differences, provoking less opposition among the rich and slightly less support among the poor than programs for individuals.

table 5 about here

Most of the affirmative action questions in my data set ask about "women and minorities" but the few questions that ask only about one group or the other generate similar levels of rich/poor disagreement. In part, the greater support for affirmative action among the poor is explained by the larger proportion of African Americans among this group. Among Americans in the bottom ten percent of the income distribution in the 1990s, almost 25% were black, but only 4% of those in the top income decile were African American. Separate analysis of an affirmative action question on the 1996 National Election Study suggests that about half of the rich/poor difference in support for race-based affirmative action for individuals remains when looking at white respondents only. The tendency for poor whites to express greater support for affirmative for minorities and women appears to rest on perceptions of discrimination or values toward equality rather than considerations of self-interest.

Homosexuality. The other major civil rights issue appearing in surveys from the 1990s concerned policies toward homosexuals. Across this range of issues, rich Americans expressed somewhat higher levels of support for gays and lesbians including a slight tendency toward allowing gays to serve in the military, somewhat stronger support for extending legal protections (for example, against job discrimination), and somewhat lower levels of opposition to gay marriage than poor Americans.

Abortion and school prayer. Rich Americans expressed substantially greater support for abortion and less support for school prayer than did the poor. While poor Americans were

evenly divided over the "abortion pill" RU-486, the rich were solidly in favor. Similarly, the poor expressed only slight opposition to a constitutional amendment banning all abortions while the rich were strongly opposed. A constitutional amendment to permit prayer in school received support from both rich and poor Americans, but support was much stronger among the poor.

Campaign finance reform. In the realm of campaign finance reform, the rich expressed slightly greater support for tightened restrictions on the sources and amount of campaign donations (for example, from non-citizens, from business and labor groups, etc.). Rich Americans differed more substantially from the poor over public financing of elections, expressing mixed views in contrast to the solid opposition of the poor.

Summary of divergent policy preferences

Differences in policy preferences between rich and poor during the 1990s emerge most strongly and consistently on issues with clearly differing economic impacts on these two groups. Strong differences were common (although not universal) on issues of taxation, Social Security reform, and foreign trade and aid policies. National health policy also produced fairly consistent differences in support, while welfare was a partial exception to this pattern, with rich and poor expressing equal (and high) levels of support for most aspects of welfare reform debated (and passed) during the 1990s. Without exception, when differences between the rich and poor did emerge, the rich favored more conservative policies.[2] However, it is important to point out that rich Americans did support many policies that would be expected to disproportionately benefit the poor, even if their support was lower than support for these policies among the poor. For example, both rich and poor favored raising the minimum wage, providing some form of tax-financed universal health care, and providing job training and child care for welfare recipients.

[2] Differences between the rich and poor also emerged on issues that cannot be clearly classified along the liberal/conservative dimension, such as foreign aid and trade policy, or balancing the federal budget.

On social issues, rich Americans tended to favor more liberal policies, with the strong exception of affirmative action (which has stronger implications of divergent consequences for different income groups, despite the equal prominence women and minorities as beneficiaries in the survey questions).

My discussion above (and the data in tables 4 and 5) focus on those policy questions on which rich and poor preferences diverge. Many other policy areas in my data set produced few systematic differences between the preferences of the rich and the poor, including defense policy, drug policy, education, gun control, terrorism, and crime. Although some aspects of each of these policy areas do include clearly redistributive issues (e.g., education), for the most part the proposed policy changes in these issue domains do not have obviously different consequences for the rich and poor. Similarly, although some of these issues have strong "moral" components (e.g., drug policy, crime), they lack the strong connection to religion and "traditional morality" that abortion and school prayer possess.

In sum, it appears that divergent policy preferences between the rich and poor most often reflect the difference in tangible benefits that the two groups might expect from these policies, with a second factor being the greater appeal of "traditional morals" among the poor (at least as reflected in attitudes toward abortion and school prayer).

Causal inference

In the preceding sections we saw that the link between preferences and policy is substantially stronger for high income than for middle or low income Americans. Moreover, when the policy preferences of these latter groups diverge from the preferences of those with high incomes, the association between preference and policy for middle and low income Americans virtually disappears.

With the data examined in this paper we can observe the association between policy preferences and policy outcomes (where such an association exists), but we cannot observe the *influence* of one or another group of Americans on the policy process. As with most survey data, we must infer causal influence--when warranted--based on the associations we observe. In assessing whether such causal inferences are warranted, we must consider the alternative processes which might produce the observed associations.

The link between public preferences and government policy might arise through some combination of (1) the influence of the public's preferences on political decision makers' actions, (2) the influence of decision makers' statements on the public's preferences, and (3) the response of both decision makers and the public to “real world” events and conditions. Moreover, all of these paths of influence might differ in strength for different population subgroups. For example, high income Americans might exert a stronger influence over government decisions than those with lower incomes. But the preferences of high income Americans might also be more responsive to what policy makers are saying needs to be done or high income Americans might respond to real world events in ways similar to government decision makers.

I can offer two kinds of evidence that the links identified between public preferences and government policy reflect, at least in large measure, the influence of the former on the latter. First, Bartels (2002) study described above found U. S. senators' votes to be more consistent with the preferences of their high income constituents. Because this study compared voting and preferences across geographical units, it is unlikely that the associations observed reflect the influence of policymakers on the public or of both to social conditions or events. Senators are unlikely to influence their constituents if only because so few constituents receive and attend to communication from their senators. And state-level variation in social conditions are unlikely to explain the association between constituency preferences and legislative votes because

preferences for national policy on the issues Bartels examined (civil rights, minimum wage, government spending, and abortion) are far more likely to reflect national than local conditions. If senators' votes and their affluent constituents' preferences coincide it is almost surely because incumbent senators respond to the desires of this subset of constituents or because this subset of constituents was influential in determining who represents them in the Senate to being with.

If the cross-state association between high income constituents' views and senators' votes is due primarily to the influence of the public on elected officials rather than the other way round, then the broader association between the public's preferences and government policy outputs is also likely to reflect the influence of high income Americans on elite decision makers.

The second kind of evidence that bears on the causal connection between public preferences and government policy concerns the relative importance of income and education as moderators of the preference-policy link. If the primary path of influence is from public preferences to government policy, we might expect income to be the stronger moderator (since income is more closely linked to campaign contributions and influence in the community than is education; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, p. 358). On the other hand, if the primary causal path is politicians shaping the public's preferences or attentive citizens responding to changing conditions and events, we might expect education to be the stronger moderator (since education more closely reflects interest in and attention to politics).

Table 6 compares the association of policy outcomes with the preferences of high income and high education respondents (i.e. preferences for the 90th income and education percentiles). Because preferences for these two groups are (not surprisingly) highly correlated, these regressions are limited to the 360 survey questions for which preferences among high income and high education respondents differed by at least 7 percentage points. Including income and education in separate equations (columns 1 and 2) suggests relative similar levels of association

with policy outcomes. When both are included simultaneously as predictors of policy outcomes (columns 3 and 4) it appears that income is the stronger predictor. Because the number of survey items is limited and the correlation between the preferences of these two groups is high even in this subset of survey questions, neither the income nor the education coefficient is statistically significant in this third model. The most important point for our purposes, however, is that the association between policy outcomes and the preferences of high income Americans declines only modestly when we control for the preferences of those with high levels of education (from 1.94 to 1.35). It thus appears that biases in government responsiveness across income groups primarily reflect something other than interest in or attention to politics.

The most obvious source of influence over policy that distinguishes high income Americans is money and the willingness to donate to parties, candidates, and interest organizations. For example, a study of donations to congressional candidates in 1996 found that four-fifths of donors who gave $200 or more[3] had incomes in the top 10% of all Americans (Green et al. 1998). Since not only the propensity to donate but the size of donations increases with income level, this figure understates--probably to a very large degree--the extent to which political donations come from the most affluent Americans.

There has never been a democratic society in which citizens' influence over government policy was unrelated to their financial resources. In this sense, the difference between democracy and plutocracy is one of degree. But by this same token, a government that is democratic in form but is in practice only responsive to its most affluent citizens is a democracy in name only.

[3] Two hundred dollars is the level of donation requiring reporting to the Federal Election Commission.

Most Americans think that public officials don't care much about the preferences of "people like me."[4] Sadly, the results presented above suggest they may be right. Whether or not elected officials and other decision makers "care" about middle-class Americans, influence over actual policy outcomes appears to be reserved almost exclusively for those at the top of the income distribution.

[4] Sixty-two percent of middle income ($35,000 to $65,000 in household income) respondents to the 2000 National Election Study agreed that "Public officials don't care much what people like me think" compared with 36% of respondents in the top 10% income (over $100,000 in household income).

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Table 1
Policy change as a function of public preferences overall and by level of opinionation

	All questions	Weakly Held Opinions (5% or more don't knows)	Strongly Held Opinions (less than 5% don't knows)
B	1.58 ***	.43	2.68 ***
(standard error)	(.42)	(.76)	(.58)
Intercept	-1.83 ***	-1.05 *	-2.75 ***
(standard error)	(.26)	(.42)	(.41)
N	754	307	437

* p < .05; *** p < .001

Table 2. Policy Preference as a Predictor of Policy Outcomes by Income Percentile

	Income Percentiles				
	10th	30th	50th	70th	90th
B (s.e.)	.90 (.39) *	1.00 (.39) **	1.23 (.39) **	1.68 (.41) ***	2.36 (.44) ***
Intercept (s.e.)	-.42 (.24)	-1.50 (.24)	-1.63 (.25)	-1.91 (.27)	-2.34 (.29)
Change in probability of policy adoption given high support versus low support among respondents at each income percentile	1.7	1.8	2.1	2.7	4.1

Notes: n for all analyses is 754. In these logistic regression analyses, the dependent variable is policy outcome scored 1 if policy changed in the proposed manner and 0 if it did not. Predictors are the imputed policy preferences of respondents at each income percentile which range from 0 (indicating that none of the respondents at that income percentile favored the proposed policy change) to 1 (indicating that all the respondents at that income percentile favored the proposed change).

Change in probability of policy adoption indicates the probability of a proposed policy change being adopted if it is favored by 90% of respondents at a given income percentile divided by the probability of being adopted if it is favored by 10% of respondents at that income percentile.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3
Policy Preference and Policy Outcomes by Income Percentile

	Income Percentiles				
High Agreement Questions (n=454)					
	10th	30th	50th	70th	90th
B (s.e.)	1.49 (.51) **	1.23 (.49) *	1.19 (.47) *	1.40 (.49) **	1.87 (.52) ***
Intercept (s.e.)	-1.80 (.33)	-1.65 (.32)	-1.63 (.31)	-1.76 (.32)	-2.05 (.34)
Low Agreement Questions (n=300)					
	10th	30th	50th	70th	90th
B (s.e.)	-.06 (.67)	.61 (.70)	1.41 (.73)	2.46 (.79) **	3.67 (.86) ***
Intercept (s.e.)	-.88 (.37)	-1.24 (.40)	-1.70 (.43)	-2.33 (.48)	-3.08 (.54)

Notes: n for all analyses is 754. In these logistic regression analyses, the dependent variable is policy outcome scored 1 if policy changed in the proposed manner and 0 if it did not. Predictors are the imputed policy preferences of respondents at each income percentile which range from 0 (indicating that none of the respondents at that income percentile favored the proposed policy change) to 1 (indicating that all the respondents at that income percentile favored the proposed change).

High Agreement Questions are those in which the predicted preference of those at the 10th income percentile differ by less than ten percentage points from the predicted preferences of those at the 90th income percentile. Low Agreement Questions are those in which predicted preferences differ by ten percentage points or more.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 4.
Divergent Policy Preferences of the Rich and Poor: Economic / Distributive Issues

	Rich (90th p-tile)	Poor (10th p-tile)	Diff
Taxes -- rich more conservative			
(except on energy tax, which they support)			
Cut capital gains tax	+ 4 [a]	0 [a]	+ 4
Cut inheritance tax (only 1 question)	+ 4	0	+ 4
Flat tax	+ 2	- 2	+ 4
Raise corporate tax rates	+ 3	+ 3	0
Raise taxes on rich ($180,000 or $200,000)	+ 3	+ 4	- 1
Raise taxes on energy, gasoline	+ 1	- 3	+ 4
Other Economic Issues -- rich more conservative			
Raise minimum wage	+ 3	+ 5	- 2
Balance federal budget	+ 4	+ 3	+ 1
Foreign Econ. Policy -- rich are more liberal			
GATT, NAFTA, free trade	+ 3	- 1	+ 4
Aid to FSU, developing countries	+ 3	- 3	+ 6
Mexico loan guarantees	- 3	- 4	+ 1
Health Care -- rich are more conservative			
Tax funded national health care	+ 1	+ 4	- 3
Employer mandates	+ 2	+ 4	- 2
Gov't guarantee of universal coverage	+ 4	+ 5	- 1
Clinton Plan	- 3	0	- 3
Social Security Reform -- rich favor markets			
Increase tax on Soc. Sec. benefits of better-off	- 1	- 1	0
Raise retirement age	- 4	- 4	0
Gov't invest Soc. Sec. money in stocks	0	- 4	+ 4
Individuals control own stock accounts	+ 3	- 1	+ 4
Welfare Reform -- rich sometimes conservative			
(but equal support for most features)			
Work requirements	+ 4	+ 4	0
Job training	+ 4	+ 4	0
Child care	+ 4	+ 4	0
Time limits	+ 3	+ 3	0
Cut total spending on welfare	+ 3	0	+ 3
No extra money for extra kids	+ 3	0	+ 3

[a] Support or opposition codes: 0 - evenly split
1 - 55% / 45%
2 - 60% / 40%
3 - 65% / 35%
4 - 75% / 25%
5 - 85% / 15%

Table 5. Divergent Policy Preferences of the Rich and Poor: Social Issues

	Rich (90th p-tile)	Poor (10th p-tile)	Diff
Civil Rights -- rich conservative on affirmative action rich liberal on gays			
Aff act: individual hiring/admissions (w & m)	**- 4** [a]	**+ 2** [a]	**- 6**
Aff act: government contracts (w & m)	**- 2**	**+ 1**	**- 3**
Gays in the military (allow to serve)	**+ 1**	**0**	**+ 1**
Gays in the military (don't ask don't tell)	**0**	**- 2**	**+ 2**
Gays, extend legal protections	**+ 2**	**+ 1**	**+ 1**
Gays, permit gay marriage	**- 2**	**- 4**	**+ 2**
Abortion -- rich are more liberal			
RU-486	**+ 3**	**0**	**+ 3**
Constitutional ban on abortion	**- 4**	**- 1**	**- 3**
School Prayer -- rich are more liberal			
Constitutional amendment	**+ 1**	**+ 4**	**- 3**
Campaign Finance Reform -- rich more liberal			
Contribution limits (amount; source; etc.)	**+ 4**	**+ 3**	**+ 1**
Public financing	**0**	**- 3**	**+ 3**
Miscellaneous			
Mandatory high school drug testing	**- 2**	**+ 3**	**- 5**
National ID card (to stem illegal immigration)	**- 1**	**+ 3**	**- 4**
Reduce size of armed forces	**+ 4**	**- 1**	**+ 5**

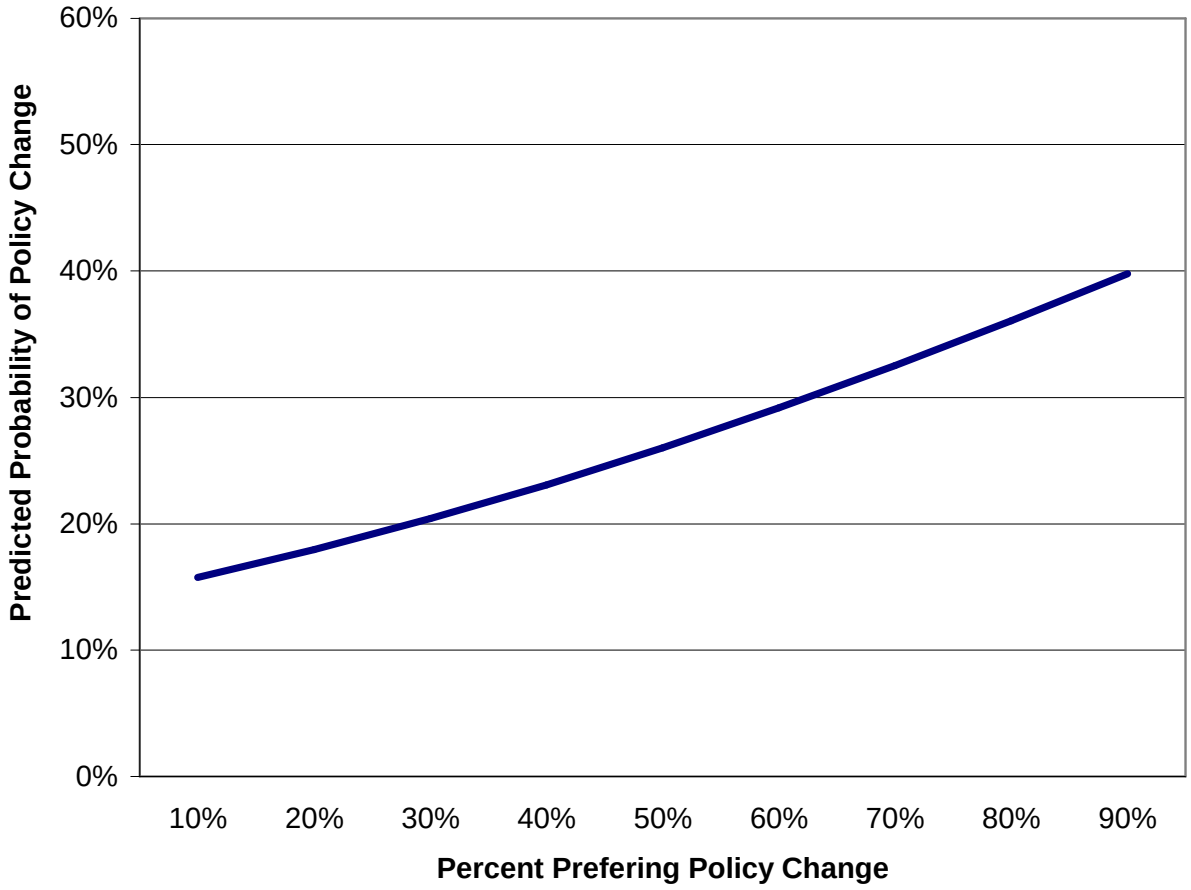
[a] Support or opposition codes: 0 - evenly split
1 - 55% / 45%
2 - 60% / 40%
3 - 65% / 35%
4 - 75% / 25%
5 - 85% / 15%

Table 6. The Preference-Policy Link for High-Income and High-Education Respondents

	Income	Education	Income	Education
B (s.e.)	1.94 (.70) **	1.50 (.58)**	1.35 (1.08)	.64 (.90)
Intercept (s.e.)	-2.10 (.43) ***	-1.85 (.37)***	-2.13 (.44)***	
n	360	360	360	

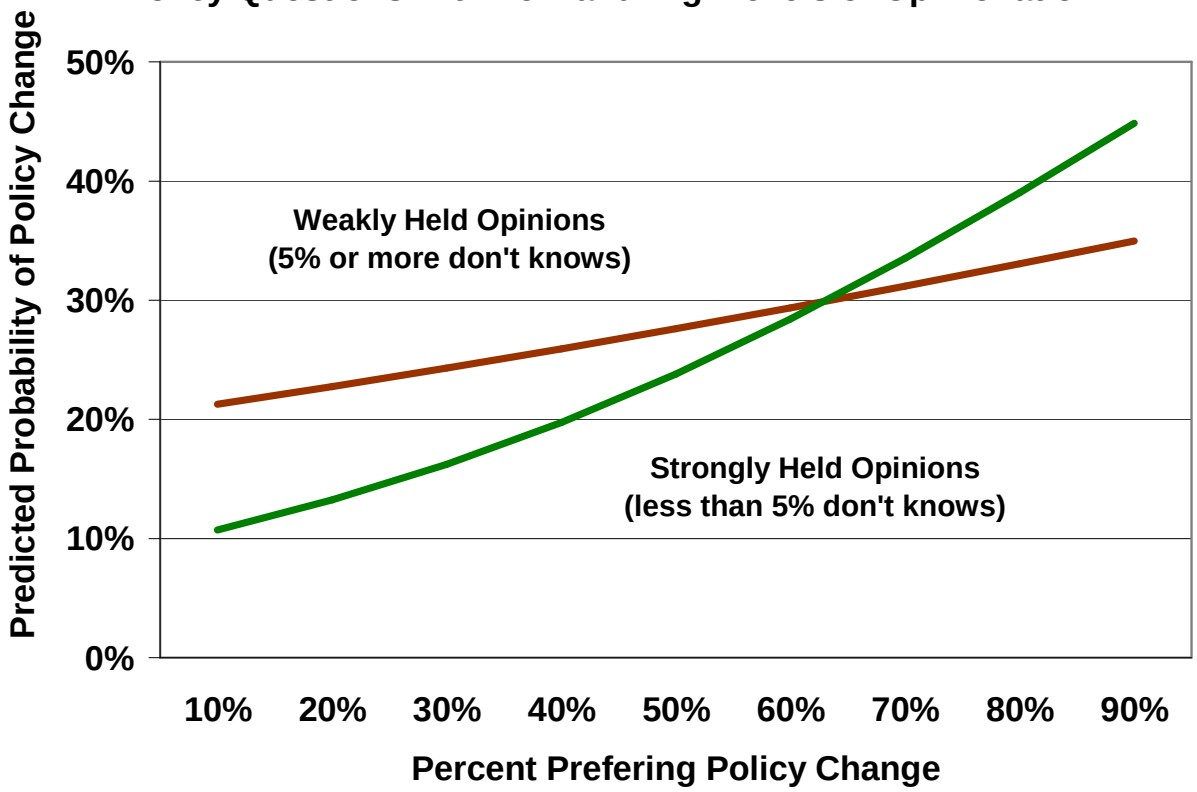
Logistic regression coefficients. Dependent variable is policy outcome; independent variables are the imputed preferences of respondents at the 90th percentile of income or education. Includes the 360 survey questions in which preferences of high income and high education respondents differ by at least 7 percentage points.

Figure 1. Public Preferences and Policy Outcomes, 1992-1998



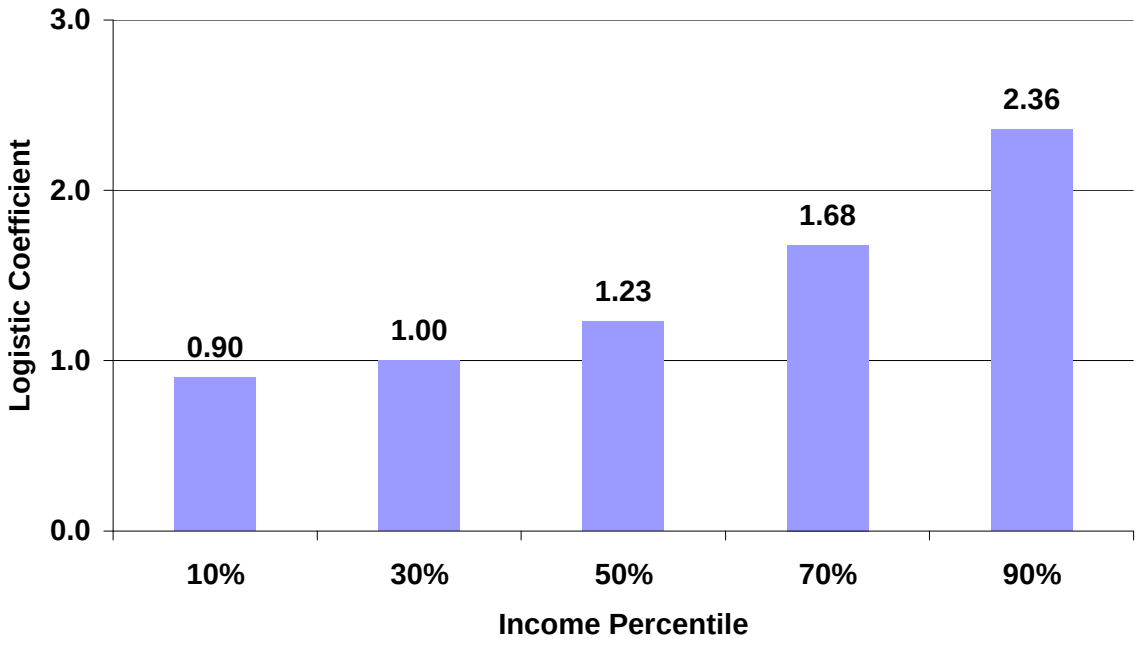
N=754 policy questions
Predicted probabilities of policy change based on logistic regression, table 1 column 1

Figure 2.
Policy Questions with Low and High levels of Opinionation



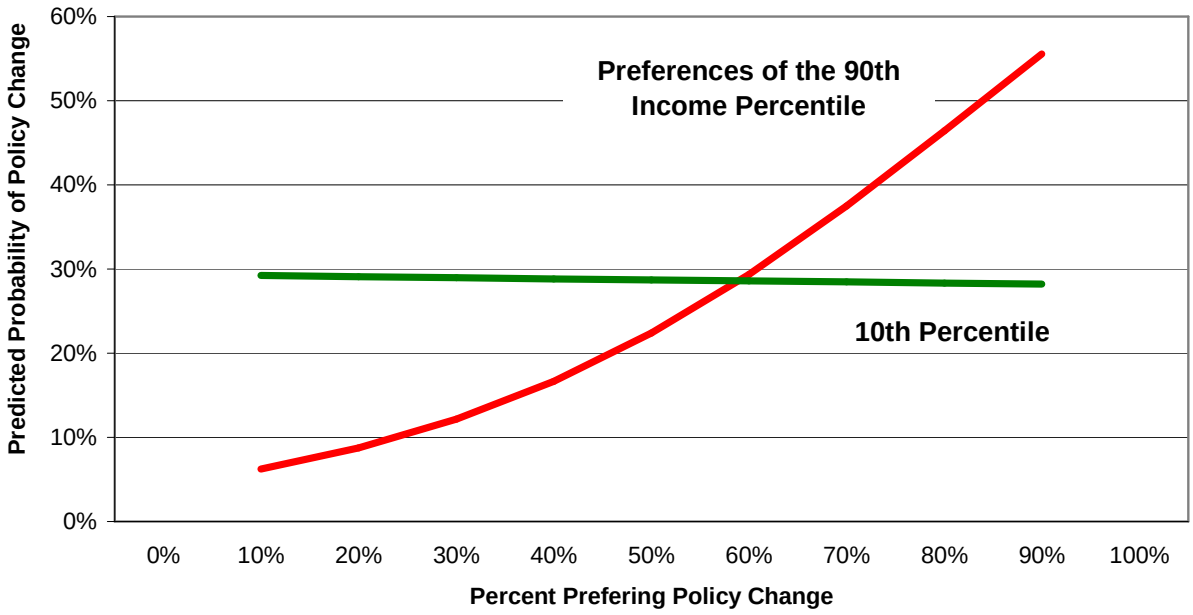
N=307 questions with weakly held opinions, 437 questions with strongly held opinions
Predicted probabilities of policy change based on logistic regression, table 1 columns 2 and 3

Figure 3.
Strength of the Relationship Between Preference and Policy by Income Percentile



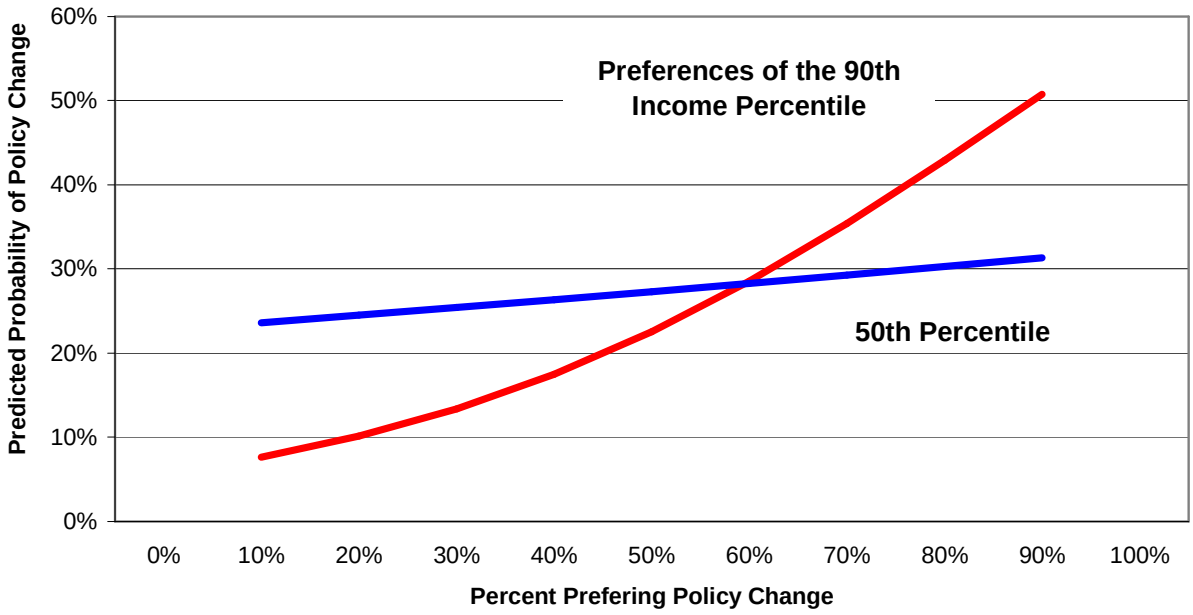
DV=policy outcome; IV=imputed percent favoring policy change; n=754 for all income percentiles

Figure 4. Policy Questions on which respondents at the 10th and 90th Income Percentiles Disagree



Includes the 300 questions for which preferences among respondents at the 10th and 90th income percentiles differ by at least 10 percentage points.

Figure 5. Policy Questions on which respondents at the 50th and 90th Income Percentiles Disagree



Includes the 369 questions for which preferences among respondents at the 50th and 90th income percentiles differ by at least 5 percentage points.

Appendix: Consistency versus Influence

The table below illustrates the problem with using raw consistency between policy preference and policy outcome as a measure of influence in the presence of a status quo bias. The preferences of groups A and B are each consistent with policy outcomes 10 out of 16 times (63%). But for group A, policies are three times as likely to be adopted if they are favored as if they are opposed (3/8 versus 1/8) while for group B policies are equally likely to be adopted whether they are favored or opposed (1/4 versus 3/12). The consistency scores are .63 for both groups, but the measure of association (in this case, correlation) reveals the stronger relationship between preference and policy for group A (.29 versus .00).

Policy	Group A's Preference	Group B's Preference	Outcome
1	1	1	1
2	1	0	1
3	1	0	1
4	1	0	0
5	1	0	0
6	1	0	0
7	1	0	0
8	1	0	0
9	0	0	1
10	0	1	0
11	0	1	0
12	0	1	0
13	0	0	0
14	0	0	0
15	0	0	0
16	0	0	0

consistency:	**0.63**	**0.63**
correlation:	**0.29**	**0.00**

Group A: Favors 8 policies of which 3 are adopted
Opposes 8 policies of which 1 is adopted

Group B: Favors 4 policies of which 1 is adopted
Opposes 12 policies of which 3 are adopted