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978-0-521-68789-8 - Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy

Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien

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## Degrees of Democracy

### *Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy*

This book develops and tests a “thermostatic” model of public opinion and policy. The representation of opinion in policy is central to democratic theory and everyday politics; so too is the extent to which public preferences are informed and responsive to changes in policy. The ongoing coexistence of both “public responsiveness” and “policy representation” is thus a defining characteristic of successful democratic governance, and the subject of this book.

The authors examine both public responsiveness and policy representation across a range of policy domains in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The story that emerges is one in which representative democratic government functions surprisingly well, although there are important differences in the details. Responsiveness and representation are found to reflect both the public salience of different domains and the design of governing institutions – specifically, federalism (versus unitary government) and presidentialism (versus parliamentarism). The findings alter our understanding of both opinion-policy relationships and the functioning of representative democratic institutions.

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*Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy*

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## Preface

This is a book about representative democracy. We are interested in seeing how well it works – specifically, how consistently governments make policy that reflects public preferences. There is a good deal of academic work demonstrating quite a strong connection between opinion and policy. Even as there seems to be representation, however, there seems to be little basis for it in the public itself. That is, even while showing that governments tend to follow preferences, the body of evidence suggests that the public is largely inattentive to politics, and uninterested and uninformed about the goings-on of governments.

The problem is that the representation of opinion presupposes that the public actually notices and responds to what policymakers do. Without such responsiveness, policymakers have little incentive to represent what the public wants in policy – there is no real benefit for doing so and no real cost for not doing so. Moreover, without public responsiveness to policy, expressed public preferences contain little meaningful information – they are unanchored to the policy status quo. As a result, there is not only a limited basis for holding politicians accountable, but expressed preferences also are of little use even to those politicians motivated to represent the public for other reasons. We need a responsive public; effective democracy depends on it.

A responsive public behaves much like a thermostat. It adjusts its preferences for “more” or “less” policy in response to what policymakers do. Imagine a situation in which the public prefers more defense policy. If policymakers respond, and provide more (but not

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too much) for defense, then the new policy position will more closely correspond to the public's preferred level of policy. And, if the public is indeed responsive to what policymakers do, then they will not favor as much more activity on defense. They might still favor more, on balance, but not as substantially as in the prior period. (And if policymakers actually overshoot the public's preferred level of spending, they will favor less.) In effect, following the thermostatic metaphor, a departure from the favored policy temperature produces a signal to adjust policy accordingly; once policy has been sufficiently adjusted, the signal stops.

Whether this is the case in reality is the subject of the work that follows. We are interested in capturing the reciprocal, "thermostatic" relationship between public opinion and policy – (a) the degree to which public preferences adjust thermostatically to policy change, and (b) the degree to which government policies reflect these public preferences. We are interested in this relationship not just in one country, or one domain, but across policy domains and countries. Indeed, we are interested not just in whether "public responsiveness" and "policy representation" exist in multiple circumstances, but also in the ways in which they vary across policy and institutional environments. That is, we would like to learn where the opinion-policy relationship is strong (or weak) and the conditions that help make it so.

Before starting in, we have a lot of appreciation to share. This book has been long in progress; it began in 2001 when we both were at Nuffield College, Oxford. We owe a great deal to the institution itself for providing the infrastructure – administrative, intellectual, and social – that was so valuable in the early phases of this work. We are particularly thankful to three Nuffield colleagues, Iain McLean, Tony Atkinson, and Byron Shafer, each of whom provided support and comments as we started the project.

Financial support has come from various sources. We received support from the Nuffield Foundation for a conference on the subject of budgetary policy in the United Kingdom, which was essential to our research there. Subsequent data-gathering and research assistance were funded in part by Nuffield College, by an Internal Research Development Fund Grant from McGill University, and by a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We benefited from the expertise of Russell Hubbard, Stuart Mitchell, Allan

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