

**Public Opinion 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? Similarly, are Republicans or Democrats in the population more likely to get the policies they prefer when their party is in control of national political institutions? Because my database contains policy preferences broken down by income, education, partisanship, sex, race, region, religion, and union/non-union status, I will be able to address a multitude of questions concerning government responsiveness to public preferences.

In the following pages I use data on public preferences and policy outcomes based on 754 national survey questions from 1992 through 1998 and restrict my attention to divergent policy preferences of low- and high-income Americans. I am currently preparing an additional 686 survey questions from 1980 through 1991. When these data are ready for analysis I will be able to examine changes in policy responsiveness over time.

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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 strengths and weakness of democratic governance.

### **Previous research**

Quantitative analyses of the link between public preferences and government decision making have taken four 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, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). This work typically finds strong correlations between public preferences and legislators' voting behavior.

A second approach examines changes over time in public preferences and public policies. Using this technique, Page and Shapiro (1983) found fairly high levels of congruency between the direction of change in opinion and change in policy, especially for salient issues or cases with large changes in public preferences. Using a third approach, Monroe (1979, 1998) compared public preferences for policy change at a given point in time with subsequent government policy across a 30 year period, 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).

Finally, using a fourth approach to the link between public opinion and government policy, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002) relate a broad measure of "public mood" for more or less government activity to broad indicators of actual government activity. 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. Yet in contrast to the substantial body of research looking at the public's preferences in the aggregate, few studies have examined *whose* preferences are influential in shaping legislators votes or policy outcomes.

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. 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. My data will consist of about 1,400 survey questions asked of national samples of the U.S. population between 1980 and 1998. Currently, only the 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, region, and for a limited subset of questions, religion and union membership 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**

The data for this project come from two sources. Survey questions asked between 1980 and 1991 were collected from Harris surveys available from the Odum Institute at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, while those for 1992-1998 were collected from the iPOLL data base maintained by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut and available through NEXIS. In both cases, 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 data of the survey questions he examined. For my project, coders looked for policy change within a four-year window 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 data 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.

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.).

The most significant characteristic of the data set is that it contains only aggregate preferences broken down by demographic categories, not individual level data (the data available through NEXIS consist only of survey marginals and n's, not that original individual-level data sets). Consequently, I will need to employ an unusual procedure to conduct multivariate analyses (which is conceptually straightforward but difficult to program).

The data from the Odum Institute (for 1980-1991) are still being cleaned and reformatted. All the analyses reported below are based on the 754 cases with income breakdowns collected from NEXIS and covering the years 1992-1998.

### **Imputing preferences by income level**

Because the surveys employed were conducted by different organizations at different points in time the demographic categories are not always consistent. In particular, age and income are divided into different numbers of categories and use different break points in different surveys. To create standardized measures of preferences by income level that can be compared across surveys, I used the following procedure.

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 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. The coefficients from these analyses were then used to impute policy preferences for respondents at the desired percentiles (based on 754 separate regressions each with two predictors and an n equal to the number of income categories for that question.)

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.

### **An alternative preference imputation**

Using the above method of preference imputation, the imputed preferences of respondents at different income levels are strongly but not overwhelmingly correlated with each other. (For example, the correlation between the imputed preference of those at the 10th and 90th income percentiles is .84.) This is expected, since it reflects the fact that policy proposal which are popular among the well-off tend, as a whole, also to be popular among the poor, while those unpopular among the well-off are also more likely to be unpopular among those with low incomes. Also as expected, the preferences of both high and low income groups are positively

associated with policy outcomes. (That is, proposed policy changes that receive greater support are more likely to be implemented.)

However, when the imputed preferences for both the 10th and the 90th income percentiles are used simultaneously as predictors of policy outcomes, the sign for the policy preferences of the 10th income percentile becomes negative. This implausibly suggests that *for a given level of support among the well-off*, a policy change which is endorsed by the poor is *less* likely to be implemented than a policy change opposed by the poor.

One possible cause for "wrong signs" in multivariate analyses is strongly correlated errors among predictors whose true scores are also strongly correlated (Achen 1985). The imputation method described above uses all of the available information about preference by income level to impute preferences for each income level (by including all income categories as predictors in the imputation equations). Consequently, this might be expected to lead to correlated errors above those that arise from the idiosyncrasies of individual survey items, their context within the survey, the events occurring when the survey was conducted, etc.

In an effort to develop imputed preferences that are less susceptible to correlated errors across income levels, I tried an alternative approach. Rather than using all income categories as predictors of preference in the imputation equations, I imputed preferences for the 10th income percentile using only the bottom two income categories in each question (income was most commonly coded into six categories, sometimes five, and on a very few questions, four). Similarly, preferences for the 90th income percentile were imputed using only the top two income categories.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These imputations were calculated using linear interpolation (when the bottom or top two income categories spanned the 10th and 90th percentiles of income) or extrapolation (when the bottom or top income categories contained 10% or more of the respondents).

Unfortunately, this approach did not produce a different result--the imputed preferences for the 10th and 90th income percentiles were similarly related to each other (correlation of .83 versus .84), and more importantly the same reversal of sign for the preferences of those at the 10th percentile occurred when both 10th and 90th percentile preferences were used simultaneously as predictors of policy outcome.

Any suggestions for how to conceptualize this problem or for alternative analytic strategies would be welcome.

### **Causal inference**

Before presenting my findings, I want to acknowledge the difficulty in drawing clear causal inferences from these data. Any relationship between public opinion and government policy might reflect a 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. Similarly, high income Americans might respond to real world events in ways that would lead them to adopt the same policy preferences as government decision makers.

I have a few ideas for ways to distinguish these alternative causal paths, though none that are completely satisfactory. For example, with some additional programming, I will be able to include income and education simultaneously as moderators of the association between public

preferences and policy outcomes. 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, we might expect education to be the stronger moderator (since education would more closely reflect interest and attention to politics). Suggestions for other ways of disentangling the direction(s) of causal influence are welcome.

In the meantime, Bartels (2002) study of senators' voting patterns suggests that the association between public preferences and government policy is likely to reflect, at least to a substantial degree, the influence of the public on it's leaders. It is unlikely that specific U.S. Senators have much influence over the policy preferences of their particular constituents, if only because so few constituents receive and attend to any persuasive communication from their Senators (in 1985, only 35% of the public could name both their U.S. senators; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In contrast, many politically attentive citizens can identify the dominant position on major issues of the two parties, the president, and a handful of other high-profile political figures. Many constituents could probably guess where their Senators stand on the major issues you examine (minimum wage, abortion, etc.), but if their views coincide with their Senators' votes, it is not likely to be because members of the public have been persuaded by their particular Senators.

If the cross-state association between 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 the public on elite decision makers.

## FINDINGS

### **Change over time in government responsiveness**

To provide some historical comparison, I first contrast my aggregate data for 1992-1998 to Monroe's findings for earlier periods. Monroe (1998) reports the consistency between public preferences for or against each proposed policy change with actual policy outcomes separately for 1960-1979 and 1981-1993 (based on 327 and 566 survey questions respectively). His raw consistency scores are 63% for the earlier period and 55% for the later. In comparison, I find a raw consistency of 49% for my 754 questions from 1992-1998.

At first blush, these figures appear to indicate a fairly substantial and continuing decline in the extent to which the national government responds to the preferences of the population in making policy decisions. However, comparisons across time periods might be misleading to the extent that the issues that dominate each period are changing. For example, if the government is always more responsive to public preferences on social than on economic policy, and if the proportion of issues concerning economic policy grows over time, it might appear that government is (in some fundamental way) becoming less responsive to the public will.

To address this possibility, I recalculated overall consistency scores for each of these three time periods adjusting for the mix of policy areas (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> These adjusted scores vary only slightly from the raw scores: consistency has declined, in a roughly linear fashion across these three time periods.

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<sup>3</sup> To make these adjustments, I first eliminated two policy areas that were not represented in all three time periods (Vietnam and Energy/Environment) as well as "miscellaneous" questions which reflect different issues in each time period. I then calculated a weighted overall consistency score where the contribution of questions from each policy area to the overall score for that time period was weighted by the total percentage of questions in that policy area across all three periods combined.

**figure 1 about here**

Even these adjusted policy consistency score should be interpreted with caution, however. First, the categorization of survey questions into different policy areas is fairly crude. The adjusted cross-time comparisons reported above are based on only 7 substantive categories (Social welfare; economic and labor; defense; foreign policy; civil rights/liberties; and political reform) and there might exist substantial variation within each category from period to period.

A second, and probably more serious, concern is that the apparent decline in consistency may simply reflect a larger number low-salience policy questions in more recent years. Studies consistently find a stronger relationship between public preferences and policy outcomes among high-salience than among low-salience issues (Monroe 1998; Page and Shapiro 1985; results for my own data are presented below). Monroe's data for 1960-1979 contain only about 16 survey questions per year, his data for 1981-1993 contain about 44 questions per year and my data for 1992-1998 contain about 108 questions per year. If these larger numbers of available questions reflect a general growth in public opinion polling then we might expect the data bases to contain a wider array of issues and a larger number of low-salience issues in the more recent periods.

Conceivably, this problem could be addressed by measures of issue salience but I have not yet attempted to do so.

**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.

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 convey both the degree of association between preferences and policy outcomes, and they reflect the extent 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 2. 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 2, 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 in the unrealistic case where *all* Americans endorse a proposed policy change, the predicted probability of that change occurring is only about 44%.<sup>4</sup> The overall 49% consistency for this period reflects the strong tendency for unpopular policy changes to fail which overcomes the much weaker tendency for popular policy changes to be enacted.

**table 1 and figure 2 about here**

### **Salient and non-salient issues**

Past research has found the association between public preferences and government policy to be stronger for more salient issues. I use the proportion of respondents answering "don't know" to each proposed policy change as my measure of issue salience. 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,

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<sup>4</sup> There are, in fact, about two dozen questions in the data set in which at least 90% of respondents expressed support for the proposed policy change. Of these, change occurred in 63% of the cases.

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 3, 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 3), 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 3 about here**

Alternative (although not mutually exclusive) causal process may contribute to these differing associations. In part, these differences surely reflect government decision makers' greater inclination to follow the public's desires on policy issues about which the public holds strong opinions. But the weaker association between preferences and policy on some issues may

also reflect the public's failure to attend to and adopt elites' preferred policy views on issues about which the public has little interest.

### **INCOME AND THE PREFERENCE-POLICY LINK**

Consistent with expectations, the relationship between policy preference and policy outcomes is substantially stronger for Americans at the 90th income percentile than for those at the 10th percentile (table 2 and figure 4). 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 4 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 upper line in figure 4 shows the factor change in predicted probability associated with the difference between complete opposition to a proposed policy and complete support for that policy. (That is, the ratio between the predicted probability of policy change if all Americans at a given income percentile support the policy to the probability of change if no Americans at that income percentile support the policy.)

Like the raw coefficients, the factor 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 income percentile, a policy is about twice as likely to be implemented if it receives unanimous endorsement than if it receives unanimous opposition, but for the 90th income percentile, there is almost a six-fold increase in the probability of a proposed policy being enacted if it is fully supported than if it is fully opposed.

### **Policy agreement and disagreement across income levels**

To the extent that the associations between policy preference and policy outcome shown in figure 4 reflect the causal impact of the public's preferences on policy, it would appear that Americans at the 90th income percentile have two to three times as much influence over policy outcomes as those at the 10th percentile. But even the comparatively modest impact of poor 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. For about one-third of the 754 policy items, the difference between the predicted preferences of the 10th and 90th income percentiles is less than five percentage points, while a difference of less than ten percentage points separates the 10th and 90th percentiles 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 between 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 5 which shows the dramatic increase in the probability of policy change as support among the well-off rises. 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 magnified for the rich and wholly absent for the poor.

**figure 5 about here**

**DIVERGENT POLICY PREFERENCES OF RICH AND POOR**

The analyses above show that high-income Americans are much more likely to get what they want from government. But what do they want? 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 and 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> 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).

### **Future plans**

The next step in this project is to assess the differences in responsiveness bias across different policy domains. My aim here is both to locate the types of government policies for which income matters most in shaping the preference-policy link and to account for the overall economic difference in this link by showing how much different policy domains contribute to it.

A second step in clarifying the relationships documented in this paper will be to conduct multivariate analyses using demographic characteristics (especially education) as controls in equations with income as the moderator of interest. One motivation here (as discussed above) is to assess the degree to which income differences in the preference-policy relationship stem from differences in the public's influence over policy and the degree to which they stem from differential attentiveness to or trust in political elites.

Once my data from the 1980s are ready for analysis I will be able to examine the changes in differential responsiveness to public preferences over time and across different conditions of party control. My full 1980-1998 data set will cover periods of mixed party control (with the presidency and either one or both houses of congress controlled by different parties) under both Democratic and Republican presidents, as well as two years of unified control under Clinton. If I can add more recent data I will be able to compare policy responsiveness under unified Republican control as well.

Finally, I am still refining my modeling of policy responsiveness. Although measures of association have distinct advantages over raw consistency scores (especially in comparing population subgroups, as discussed above), they do not fully capture the nuances of the link between preference and outcome. For example, logistic coefficients and other measures of association do not reflect the discontinuous nature of aggregate preferences over binary outcomes. For example, a twenty percentage point difference between 60% support and 80% support is not "politically equivalent" to the difference between 40% support and 60% support. Indeed, for an extremely responsive government, the probability of policy change would differ greatly between 40% and 60% public support, but hardly at all between 60% and 80%.

I am hoping to develop a modeling strategy that can account for such discontinuities, while also (1) reflecting the degree of support or opposition to a given policy change within a given group, and (2) taking account of the "status quo bias" which results in higher consistency between preference and outcome for groups which are less supportive of policy change and which suggests an asymmetry in "responsiveness" which needs to be recognized (that is, given the status quo bias, the failure of government to implement unpopular policies constitutes less evidence of responsiveness than the implementation of popular policies).

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

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

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

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

	Income Percentiles				
	<u>10th</u>	<u>30th</u>	<u>50th</u>	<u>70th</u>	<u>90th</u>
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)

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).

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

**Table 3**  
**Policy Preference and Policy Outcomes by Income Percentile**

	Income Percentiles				
	<u>10th</u>	<u>30th</u>	<u>50th</u>	<u>70th</u>	<u>90th</u>
<b>High Agreement Questions (n=454)</b>					
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)
<b>Low Agreement Questions (n=300)</b>					
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**

	<b>Rich</b> <b>(90th p-tile)</b>	<b>Poor</b> <b>(10th p-tile)</b>	<b>Diff</b>
<b>Taxes -- rich more conservative</b> <b>(except on energy tax, which they support)</b>			
Cut capital gains tax	+ 4	0	+ 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
<b>Other Economic Issues -- rich more conservative</b>			
Raise minimum wage	+ 3	+ 5	- 2
Balance federal budget	+ 4	+ 3	+ 1
<b>Foreign Econ. Policy -- rich are more liberal</b>			
GATT, NAFTA, free trade	+ 3	- 1	+ 4
Aid to FSU, developing countries	+ 3	- 3	+ 6
Mexico loan guarantees	- 3	- 4	+ 1
<b>Health Care -- rich are more conservative</b>			
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
<b>Social Security Reform -- rich favor markets</b>			
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
<b>Welfare Reform -- rich sometimes conservative</b> <b>(but equal support for most features)</b>			
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

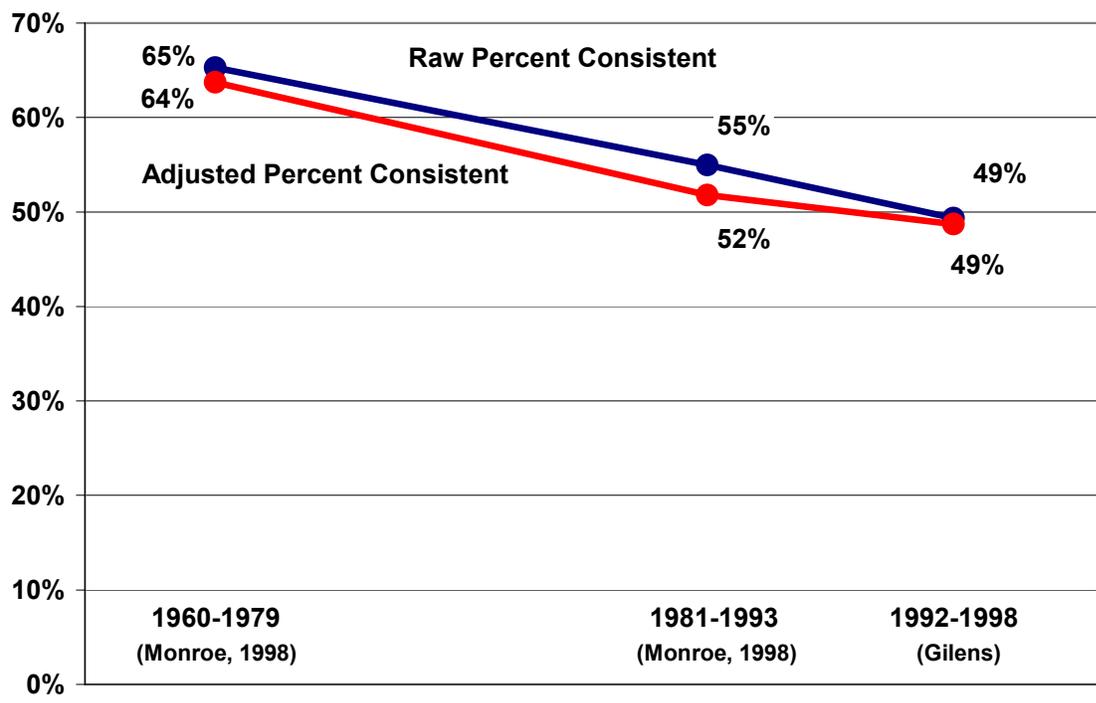
Support or opposition codes: 0 - evenly split  
1 - 55% / 45%  
2 - 60% / 40%  
3 - 65% / 35%  
4 - 75% / 25%  
5 - 85% / 15%

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

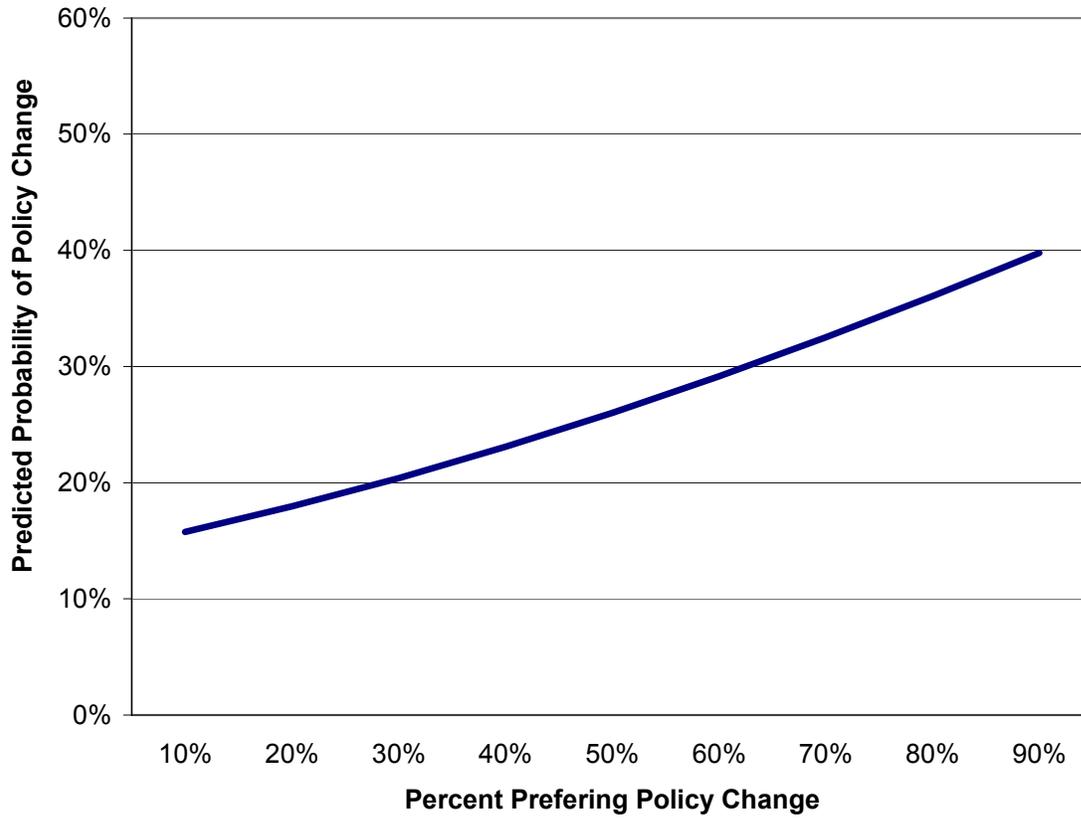
	<b>Rich (90th p-tile)</b>	<b>Poor (10th p-tile)</b>	<b>Diff</b>
<b>Civil Rights -- rich conservative on affirmative action rich liberal on gays</b>			
Aff act: individual hiring/admissions (w & m)	- 4	+ 2	- 6
Aff act: government contracts (w & m)	- 2	+ 1	- 3
Gays in the military (allow to serve)	+ 1	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
<b>Abortion -- rich are more liberal</b>			
RU-486	+ 3	0	+ 3
Constitutional ban on abortion	- 4	- 1	- 3
<b>School Prayer -- rich are more liberal</b>			
Constitutional amendment	+ 1	+ 4	- 3
<b>Campaign Finance Reform -- rich more liberal</b>			
Contribution limits (amount; source; etc.)	+ 4	+ 3	+ 1
Public financing	0	- 3	+ 3
<b>Miscellaneous</b>			
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

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

Figure 1. Percent of Policy Outcomes Consistent with Public Preferences

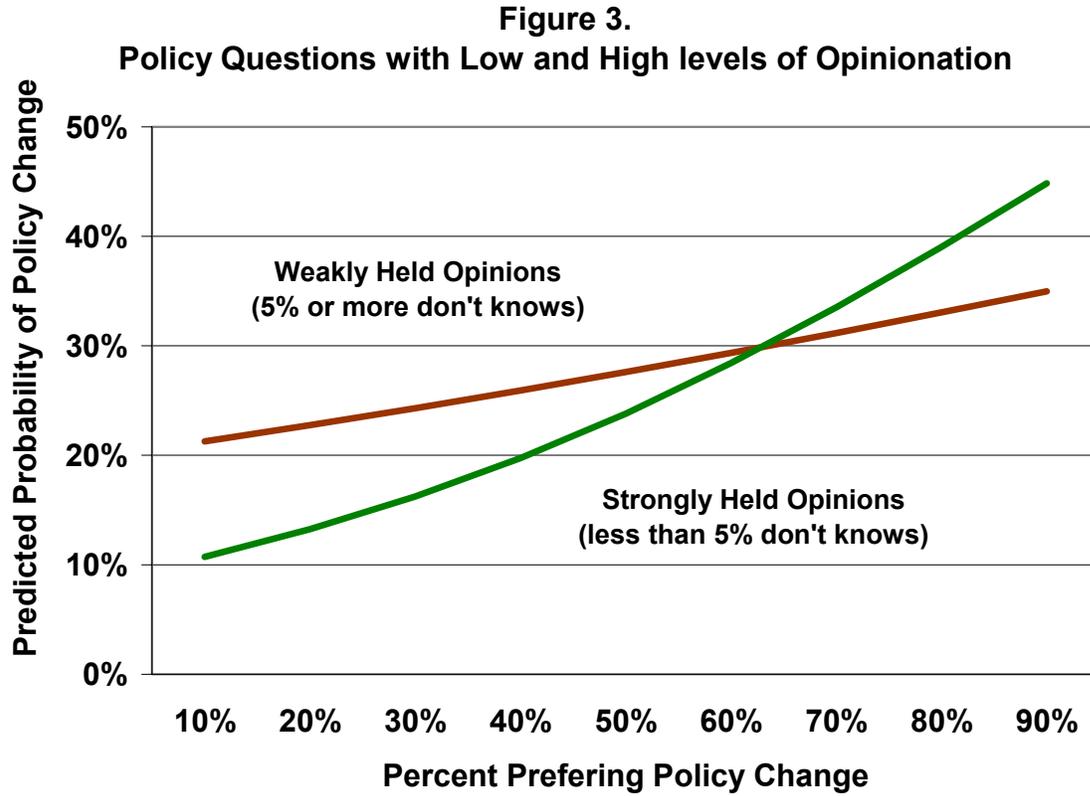


Adjusted percent excludes two policy categories not common to all three time periods (Vietnam and Energy/Environment) as well as "miscellaneous" questions and weights policy categories at each time period according to the distribution of questions across policy categories for all three periods combined.

**Figure 2. Public Preferences and Policy Outcomes, 1992-1998**

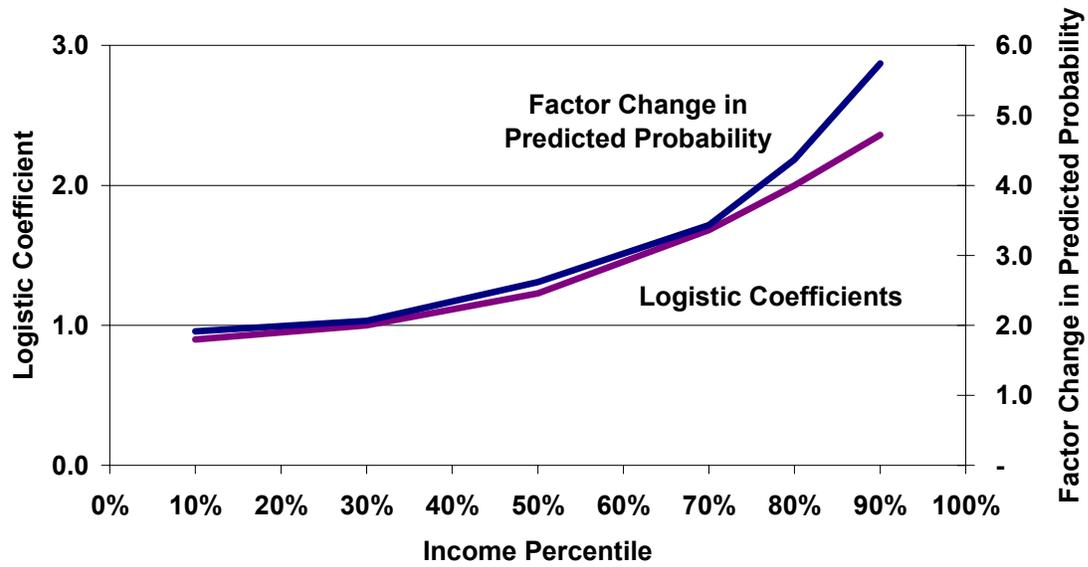
N=754 policy questions

Predicted probabilities of policy change based on logistic regression, table 1 column 1



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 4.**  
**Strength of the Relationship Between Preference and Policy by Income Percentile**



Factor change in predicted probability is the ratio of the probability that a proposed policy change will occur if it is endorsed by 100% of the respondents at a given income level to the probability that it will occur if endorsed by 0% of the respondents at that income level.

**Figure 5. Policy Questions on which 10th and 90th Percentiles Disagree by 10 Percentage Points or More (n=300)**

