

Stealth Democracy

AMERICANS' BELIEFS ABOUT HOW
GOVERNMENT SHOULD WORK

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Policy Space and American Politics

What do people want the government to do? What governmental policies would make the people happy? Questions such as these are apropos in a democracy because public satisfaction, as opposed to the satisfaction of, say, a haughty, distant, and self-serving monarch, is the key goal of democratic governance. The answer to the questions seems obvious, if difficult to achieve – satisfaction increases when governmental policies approximate the policies preferred by the people – and a substantial literature has developed investigating the connection between popular satisfaction with government and the policies government produces. In this chapter, we review much of this literature, but the purpose of this review is to show that, despite the idea’s intuitive appeal, people’s satisfaction with government is not driven mainly by whether or not they are getting the policies they want – partially yes, but mainly no. Policies and issues are frequently and surprisingly unable to explain variation in people’s satisfaction with government. Others have questioned the importance in American politics of the people’s issue positions, and we borrow much from them while adding some new evidence of our own.

Theoretically, it is possible to ascertain people’s preferences in each and every policy area on the governmental agenda. To measure policy preferences, analysts often present policy options on spectra (rather than as forced-choice dichotomies). For example, a spectrum could run, as it does in the top half of Figure 1.1, from massive cuts in defense spending through a middle ground of no change in current spending levels all the way to massive increases. Such spectra allow individuals to be represented in policy space. Due to logical progressions from, say, more to less spending or fewer to greater

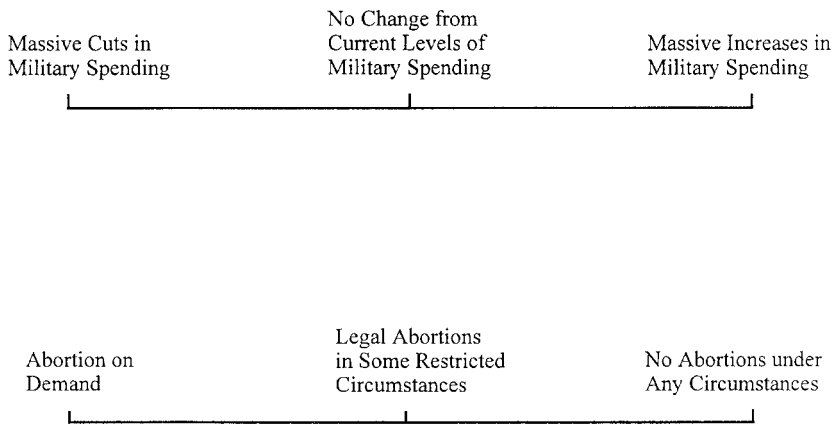


Figure 1.1. Policy space for military spending and for legal abortions.

restrictions on the circumstances in which an abortion can legally take place, analysts can derive meaning and predictions from the relative positions of individuals in this space.

Since there are so many issues being addressed in the political arena, creating a policy space for each of them quickly leads to overload for both the respondents and the analysts. Accordingly, a common practice is to utilize a single, overarching policy space (sometimes called ideological space). Instead of innumerable separate spectra, a composite spectrum running from extremely liberal to moderate to extremely conservative can be used. This practice of treating policy space as unidimensional unavoidably introduces some potentially serious distortions (e.g., liberals on one issue are not necessarily liberals on all issues) and these distortions are discussed in detail below. But the simplification to a single encompassing dimension renders policy space tractable and researchers commonly employ it when studying policy preferences.¹

USING POLICY SPACE TO DERIVE EXPECTATIONS

Whether dealing with an individual issue or the more overarching concept of political ideology, the relevant idea is that people want the distance between their own policy preferences and the policies

¹Hinich and Munger (1994: 160) even argue that employing a single ideological spectrum is not only simpler, it is analytically preferable. For more on the advantages of a single dimension, see Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

passed by government to be small. Perhaps the most obvious application of policy space is the expectation that people will vote for the candidate closest to them on the issues, assuming they deem the issues important. This basic concept of voters attending to the distance between their issue positions and candidates' issue positions was delineated by Hotelling (1929) and elaborated by Downs (1957).² Hotelling's original analogy involved lazy shoppers who were trying to minimize the distance they walked to a store. Just as customers would patronize the nearest store, voters were expected to support the political candidate whose policy position was closest to their own. To stick with one of the examples from Figure 1.1, an ardent "abortion on demand" voter would be expected to vote for whichever candidate favored the fewest restrictions on a woman's right to an abortion. Candidates and parties, being Machiavellian vote maximizers in the spatial world, would adopt the policy position that would attract the most votes just as stores would locate wherever they would attract the most customers.

Just what is the optimal position or location for a party or a candidate? In the United States, it is in the middle, since Americans tend to adopt centrist positions on most policy issues. Usually, a relatively small number of people prefer massive increases or massive decreases in military spending, with most favoring either no or minor alterations in current spending levels. Even on abortion, which many take to be the quintessential divisive issue, most Americans actually support the middling position of permitting abortions but under a number of restrictive conditions. Fiorina (1996) believes this is why divided government is so common. Most American voters view themselves as residing in the middle of policy space *and* see the parties as being on each side of the middle, Republicans to the right and Democrats to the left. Fiorina claims that the separation of powers system we have in the United States allows people to obtain the centrist policies that neither party would provide if left entirely to its own devices. People do so, of course, by electing one party to one institution (the Congress) and the other party to the other major elective institution (the presidency), thereby ingeniously minimizing the distance between their policy preferences and actual policies.

A widely invoked corollary of the notion that voters select candidates whose policy stands are most consistent with their own

²For good summaries, see Enelow and Hinich (1984); Merrill and Grofman (1999).

preferences is that people will vote for incumbents when the government is producing the “right” kind of policies. Often, analysts test this expectation not by determining the precise policy-space location of an incumbent politician relative to voters but by assuming voters desire peace, a prosperous economy, low crime rates, and so on, and then determining whether incumbents are more likely to win votes when these favorable conditions apply (see, esp., Tufte 1975; Fiorina 1981). This shift from policy positions to policy outcomes is an important one, although analysts are still assuming policy-goal-directed behavior on the part of voters.

However policy satisfaction is measured, analysts believe it influences far more than whether they vote for candidate A or candidate B, the incumbent or the challenger. Barely half of those eligible take the opportunity to vote in even the most publicized and salient of American elections, and many more people are not eligible, so a focus on voting behavior ignores the sentiments of half of the adult population. All people, on the other hand, make decisions about whether or not to support the government and its various parts, whether or not to participate in politics (conventionally or otherwise), and whether or not to comply with governmental edicts, and these are the topics that are of most concern to us.

In many respects, we should expect policy space to be strongly related to public attitudes toward government. After all, it makes sense that those dissatisfied with the outputs of government would also be dissatisfied with the government itself. This was certainly the thinking of Gamson (1968: 178), who contended that political distrust could be traced to undesirable policy decisions and outcomes. As Alesina and Wacziarg (2000: 166) put it, “greater voter dissatisfaction could also originate from increased discrepancies between the preferences of the median voter and the policies actually implemented.” Citrin (1974), Miller (1974), and virtually all others who have written on the topic have assumed the same. Citrin (1974: 973) summarizes the core hypothesis nicely: “Political elites ‘produce’ policies; in exchange, they receive trust from citizens satisfied with these policies and cynicism from those who are disappointed.” Citrin even refers to the notion that “we tend to trust and like those who agree with us” as “one of social science’s most familiar generalizations” (973).

So the expectation is that disliked policies and conditions will lead to negative attitudes toward government: a lack of confidence, an absence of trust, a dearth of support. Similar logic leads to expecta-

tions that when government produces policies the people dislike or that lead to unfavorable societal conditions, the nature and level of people's political participation (including their tendency to engage in violent political behavior) and perhaps even their willingness to obey the government's laws and rules will be affected (see Tyler 1990). When people are displeased with current policies, the argument goes, they are more likely to grumble about the government, to take steps to signal their displeasure to the powers that be, and to view the actions of such a flawed government as something less than fully legitimate.

THE LIMITATIONS OF POLICY EXPLANATIONS

It certainly makes sense to expect disfavored policies to lead to a disfavored government, and empirical analyses have often revealed support for these expectations. But a fair reading of the research in this area leads to the clear conclusion that policies – substantive issues, if you prefer – are far less consequential to most Americans than scholars typically expect. In this section we detail the limited explanatory powers of policy when it comes to many of the dependent variables mentioned above.

The concept of policy space has been tremendously influential. Citations in the political science literature to the policy-space concepts of Downs now easily outstrip citations to the psychological concepts found in Campbell et al. and Downs is assigned in more American Politics graduate seminars than Campbell et al. (see Dow and Munger 1990). But the widespread usage of policy-space concepts should not be taken to imply universal acceptance. Serious reservations abound regarding both the theory behind policy space and the evidence of its influence. Some skeptics have difficulty visualizing voters as possessing the requisite ability and inclination to estimate the relative distance in policy space between their own positions and those of the candidates seeking various offices. Instead, vote choice may be the result of psychological attachments to groups and parties. These attachments may exist for less-than-rational reasons and may even predate the ability of most voters to think rationally about complex issues. As is well known, children adopt a party identification long before they understand the policy implications of that identification. People later adopt policies to fit into their existing party identification (see Campbell et al. 1960: ch. 7). And even when these psychological attachments are not determinative, it may be that

candidate image, style, slogans, and presentation are more important than issue positions. As Popkin (1991: 78–9) points out repeatedly, personal information drives out policy information. People are enamored with the candidates' personalities far more than with their policies. Thus, while people can turn against their long-term attachments, their reasons for doing so are often not based on policy concerns (see Campbell et al. 1960: ch. 19).

Stokes (1963) has taken these arguments even further and stresses the importance of “valence issues,” those that do not distinguish the parties all that much. Both parties, presumably, want lower crime rates, improved economic conditions, and fewer births to teenage mothers. According to Stokes, voters are left to make their best guesses about which candidates are most likely to accomplish these goals. The issue, therefore, is not so much which party is closer to a voter's ideal position on policy space but, rather, which candidate inspires confidence. Stokes believes that Downs has pointed analysts in a particularly unpromising direction and that the explanation for vote choice is generally not the voter's policy utility and (often inaccurate) perceptions of the candidates' policy locations.

Whether the alleged deciding factor is party identification, candidate image, or a valence issue, the basic notion uniting most of the critiques of policy spatial theory is simply that voters tend to decide on the basis of things other than the perceived location of candidates on policy space. The underlying conceit is that issue voting demands too much of voters by requiring that they have issue positions of their own *and* an understanding of the issue positions of the competing candidates. This last point is particularly difficult. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 76) playfully note after examining fifty years of survey items, only two issue stands of public officials have ever been correctly identified by at least three out of four respondents: Clinton's “don't ask, don't tell” approach to gays in the military and George H. W. Bush's 1989 revelation that he hates broccoli. As a result of their policy uncertainties, voters are more likely to fall back on the shortcuts provided by party identification or countless other heuristic devices (see Popkin 1991).

Perhaps for these reasons, empirical tests of the hypothesis that voters are attracted to candidates with whom they share policy predilections have been disappointing. Scholars have been hard pressed to demonstrate empirically that the perceived distance in policy space between a voter and competing candidates is a key predictor of which candidate the voter will support. The demands of

policy voting are great. Voters must feel strongly about an issue, know their own established position on the issue, and know the respective candidates' positions on the issue. Often the candidates go out of their way to obfuscate their positions,³ thereby making it difficult for even well-meaning voters. Faced with these challenges, voters may simply project their own policy preferences onto their preferred candidate, thus reversing the expected causal sequence (see Niemi and Weisberg 1976: 161–75; Page and Jones 1979). This tendency of voters to attribute desired policy positions to candidates they like rather than to like candidates who have desirable policy positions is incredibly damning to those who stress the causal importance of policies. It suggests that voters merely make up policy positions for candidates, and often the attributed policy positions bear little resemblance to candidates' actual positions.

Are policy positions merely created out of thin air in an effort by voters to justify choices they made on the basis of nonpolicy reasons? No. While sorting out the direction of the causal arrow is methodologically challenging, Page and Jones (1979) engaged in a careful effort to do so. In the two presidential elections they studied (1972 and 1976), they found that policy positions did influence candidate preference. Policy matters. But in both elections they found that the link from candidate preference to policy positions was stronger than the link from policy positions to candidate preference. In these two elections, at least, projection was more prevalent than issue voting. And if this is the case in presidential elections, imagine the amount of projection in lower-level races where candidates' policy positions are harder to determine. Defenders of the importance of policy are fond of noting that voters generally share more policy preferences with the candidates for whom they voted than with those for whom they did not. But work like that of Page and Jones shows that such protestations badly miss the mark. Just as is the case with children and party identification, policy substance often comes well after a vote choice has been made and is less substance than rationalization.

If people *are* issue-involved, chances are their concerns are limited to a very small number of issues. Evidence for this conclusion is found in the scholarly work on issue publics. First articulated by Converse (1964) and elaborated perhaps most successfully by Krosnick (1990; see also Key 1966; RePass 1971), the idea is attractive – so

³See Page and Brody (1972); Alvarez and Franklin (1994); Hinich and Munger (1994: 235).

attractive that we draw heavily on it later in the book. Voters are not interested in most policies addressed by the government, but some voters are interested in one, perhaps two, policy areas. Though they do not care about much, they may care about government actions in a particular area and they may even be willing to vote on the basis of the candidates' policy stances concerning this issue area. Farmers may follow farm policies, Jews may be particularly interested in U.S. policy toward Israel, and the economically downtrodden may be attuned to welfare and related policies. In this fashion, if policy positions play a role at all, the relevant issue varies from person to person, and most issues are irrelevant to these issue specialists.⁴

In light of the extremely limited concern most people have for most policies, it is not surprising that even those who are the most eager for policy space to predict voting behavior do not often try to test the relationship. Enelow and Hinich (1984), for example, use feeling thermometers for various political figures to predict voting behavior. The idea is that the more warmly a respondent feels toward a political figure, the more likely that respondent is to vote for the political figure. The problem with this procedure, of course, is that there is absolutely no reason to assume the thermometer ratings have anything to do with policy positions. Instead, voters may like certain political figures because of where they were born, what foods they like, or how they part their hair.⁵ Concerning the task of predicting vote choice, the verdict must be that policy space is something less than successful. Perceived policy distance may influence vote choice under certain highly restrictive conditions but it is not usually the central concern for most voters.⁶

⁴Of course, a slice of the population is deeply involved in policies of all kinds, but this slice is surprisingly small. As far as political information is concerned, people tend not to be information specialists. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) found that knowledge in one issue area correlates strongly and positively with knowledge in other areas (see also Zaller 1986; Bennett 1990). People either know a lot about a variety of policies or they know little.

⁵Fiorina (1996) does provide some tests of his institution-balancing model, but his results have been subjected to vigorous challenge (see Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Born 1994; Frymer 1994).

⁶Even those who see policy space as a key element of vote choice do not agree on exactly how it works. Reacting to the occasionally inaccurate predictions yielded by Downsian notions, Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) suggest that the absolute distance from voter to target is not as important as being on the same side of the political debate. They refer to this as the directional theory: Voters will vote for a candidate more distant from their own preferences if that is the only way they can vote for a

A similar, fairly dismal assessment can be rendered concerning the ability of policy space to predict whether and how people participate in politics. To be fair, the theoretical basis for hypotheses concerning participation is less clear. What, exactly, is the expected result of a person believing the government's policies depart from his or her own policy preferences? Would such a belief inspire involvement in an effort to change the situation or would it encourage despair and alienation from the system?⁷ The absence of a clear answer to these questions is no doubt part of the reason standard investigations of political participation pay virtually no attention to the possibility that the divergence between a person's own policy positions and current perceived governmental policy will be a key determinant of who participates and who does not.⁸

Downs is in a similar boat. His famous treatment of voting abstention (1957: ch. 14) is almost entirely devoted to the costs of voting. He *does* raise the possibility that abstention could be caused not by the perceived location of governmental policies but by the perceived differences between the options being presented by the parties. Specifically, he hypothesizes that the benefits of voting will increase if voters perceive substantial policy differences between the two parties, but he provides no empirical tests. Other than this, even most proponents of policy space as an important independent variable do not claim it has much clout when it comes to standard political participation such as voting, working for campaigns, or contributing money to political movements.⁹

It may be, however, that policy factors are more useful when it comes to less traditional modes of participation. A distaste for current governmental policies (and for the policies being promoted by the two established parties making up the government) could lead not so much to alterations in the tendency to be involved in voting or campaigning for the established parties and their candidates but, rather, to an embrace of less traditional, even illegal, political

candidate who shares their view of the direction needed to move on that issue (see Merrill and Grofman 1999 for an attempt to synthesize the directional and proximity views).

⁷Perhaps this relationship is curvilinear with modest policy discrepancies encouraging participation but gigantic discrepancies resulting in an abandonment of hope.

⁸Rosenstone and Hansen (1993); Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995).

⁹For treatments of the relevance of policy spatial theory for political participation, see Hinich and Ordeshook (1970); Ordeshook (1970); McKelvey (1975); Aldrich (1995: 178–80).

participation – or at least of an alternative party. Was support for H. Ross Perot in the presidential races of 1992 and 1996 driven by the fact that his policy positions were more attractive to voters? Do people who are grossly displeased with current government policies protest with greater frequency than their less displeased colleagues? It seems possible that those willing to take to the streets or to turn their backs on the traditional parties would be those most discontented with current policies. However, tests of these ideas have been neither plentiful nor conclusive.¹⁰ Though such hypotheses may eventually prove true (it would seem supporters of Ralph Nader in 2000 were probably more displeased with governmental policies than supporters of Al Gore and George W. Bush), empirical evidence connecting policy space to participation of any kind is mostly lacking.

Our primary interest in this book, however, is to find out what people want out of government. As we have just seen, a widespread expectation is that people are primarily concerned with obtaining their preferred policies and pleasant societal conditions. Popkin (1991: 99) is up-front about this, saying that people “generally care about ends not means; they judge government by results and are . . . indifferent about the methods by which the results were obtained.” As has been the case with the other policy-based hypotheses, though, the notion that policy perceptions or outcomes explain attitudes toward government has not fared well on those few occasions when it has been empirically tested. Miller (1974: 952), for example, investigated “the impact that reactions to political issues and public policy have on the formation of political cynicism.” His empirical work (done with survey data from the 1960s) produced a string of disappointments. On Vietnam, the most salient issue of the day, “the most immediate observation . . . is that the original prediction that the most cynical would be those favoring withdrawal is partly false” (953). On race, over the very years that governmental policy began actively promoting integration, “individuals in favor of forced integration [became discontented] at a faster rate” (957). Admittedly, Miller is unable to test the hypothesis properly since he does not employ measures of what people perceive government policies to be and only makes assumptions about those perceptions. But the point remains that there is little evidence for the commonsensical notion that citizens who agree with governmental policies will trust

¹⁰But see Muller (1972) and Sears and Maconahay (1973) for some interesting speculation concerning the related concept of violent political behavior.

government and citizens who are “disappointed” with these policies will be cynical toward government.

More typically, scholars have tested whether favorable societal conditions, such as a booming economy, cause people to be satisfied with government. Though surges in support for government sometimes seem to occur during strong economic times, systematic analyses invariably question the role of economic conditions. Lawrence (1997) finds no consistent effect. Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton (2000: 24) conclude that “a growing body of work generally discounts [macro-economic conditions] as the primary explanation for the decline in public confidence in political institutions.” Overall, evidence for a connection between satisfaction with outcomes or conditions and satisfaction with government can be classified as only weak. Like so many others, Pharr (2000: 199) is forced to conclude that “policy performance . . . explains little when it comes to public trust.” It is easy to understand why della Porta (2000: 202) asked, “[W]hy do policy outputs in general, and economic performance and expectations in particular, play such a minor role in shaping confidence in democratic institutions?”

MORE LIMITATIONS OF POLICY EXPLANATIONS

To this point, we have demonstrated the limitations of policy explanations by relying upon previous research, but the same message is also apparent in data originally collected for this project. To illustrate, we draw readers’ attention to two assertions frequently made by ordinary Americans. The first is that the two major political parties are virtual carbon copies of each other, and the second is that the government is out of touch with the people. If people are concerned only with policy ends, neither of these assertions makes any sense.

Americans frequently complain that the two political parties are identical.¹¹ Interestingly, when people are asked to place the parties on policy space they actually see the parties as being quite distinct.

¹¹See Pomper (1972: 419); Margolis (1977); and Wattenberg (1981: 943–4). While the percentage of people who claim there is no difference between the two major parties has diminished since the 1970s, the extent of the decline is not large. The American National Election Study (NES) survey has periodically asked respondents whether they “think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for.” In the 1970s, an average of 48 percent responded that there was no difference, compared with an average of 38 percent in the 1980s and 41 percent in the 1990s.

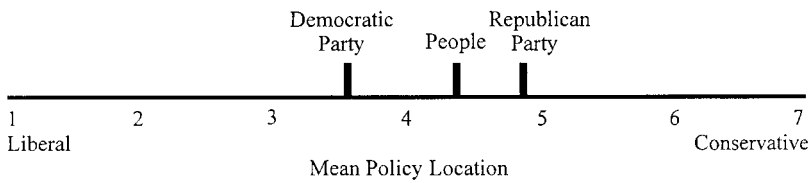


Figure 1.2. Policy space location of the people and their perceptions of the two major parties.

We administered a lengthy survey on policy and process attitudes to a national sample of 1,266 voting-age Americans in the late spring of 1998.¹² In that survey we asked people to locate themselves and the two parties on the ideological (or policy) spectrum. The mean placement provided by respondents is depicted in Figure 1.2. In spite of the prevalence of the belief that “there is not a dime’s worth of difference between the parties” or that “they are no more different than Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,” people typically attribute much more than a dime’s worth of difference to the policy positions of the two parties. While the mean self-placement of respondents was just a little to the conservative side of the center (4.4 on a scale running from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating more conservative policy positions, lower numbers indicating more liberal positions, and 4.0 representing the midpoint), the common perception of the policies advocated by the Democratic party is that they are to the left of the people (3.6), while Republican policy positions are located to the right of the people (4.9).¹³ The obvious question becomes, how can people see one party as being to their left on policy space and the other party as being to their right and still insist that there is no appreciable difference between the two parties? A total reliance on policy space renders it difficult to understand the situation.

Similar to the claim that the parties are identical, the notion that the government is out of touch has become a touchstone phrase for many Americans. Just a few months before conducting the national

¹²See Appendix A for information on the national survey.

¹³For a report of similar results produced by another survey, see Carman and Wlezien (1999). We found, using NES data, that the average placement of the two major parties on a seven-point ideology scale was 3.10 for the Democrats and 4.84 for the Republicans in the 1970s, 3.33 for the Democrats and 4.99 for the Republicans in the 1980s, and 3.28 for the Democrats and 5.02 for the Republicans in the 1990s.

survey, we convened eight focus group sessions at locations across the United States.¹⁴ Several participants in these groups complained about an out-of-touch government. Consider the following comments from two different focus group participants: “[T]he vast majority of Congress’s members have no idea really what the people’s wishes are” and “I don’t think [elected officials] have any idea about what anyone wants.” Virtually identical sentiments were recorded in the focus groups done by the Kettering Foundation (see Mathews 1994: 11–48) and can also be heard frequently on most street corners and in most bars. If more systematic evidence is desired, nearly 70 percent of the respondents in our survey disagreed (some strongly) with the statement that the current political system does “a good job of representing the interests of all Americans.” The feeling that the political system is unresponsive to the desires of the people is rampant.¹⁵

The curious thing is that people claim to be moderate in their policy affinities *and* they perceive governmental policies as being essentially moderate, too. To provide the complete picture, in Figure 1.3 we present not just the mean location (as was done in Fig. 1.2) but the entire distribution of people’s policy self-placement (the solid line) and their perceived placement of federal government policies (the dotted line). The similarity of the two distributions is striking. Americans are clearly moderates, with 71 percent preferring policies of the middle (e.g., 3, 4, or 5). This is no surprise. More noteworthy is the fact that Americans are almost as likely to see governmental policies as centrist, with 70 percent placing government policies at 3, 4, or 5. The people’s desired policies are only slightly more conservative (a mean of 4.4) than the policies they believe they are getting from the federal government (a mean of 4.0). A difference of only 0.4 on a seven-point scale separates preferences from perceived realities (for more on this point, see Monroe 1979).

Of course, these aggregate data may well mask important individual-level differences. As we argued earlier, some people care deeply about policies and pay attention to what the government does in a variety of policy areas. Similarly, some people are not policy moderates, and these ideologues may be inclined to view government policies as far removed from their own policy preferences. Liberals could

¹⁴See Appendix A for information on the focus groups.

¹⁵See also Wright (1976); Kettering Foundation (1991); Craig (1993); and Phillips (1995).

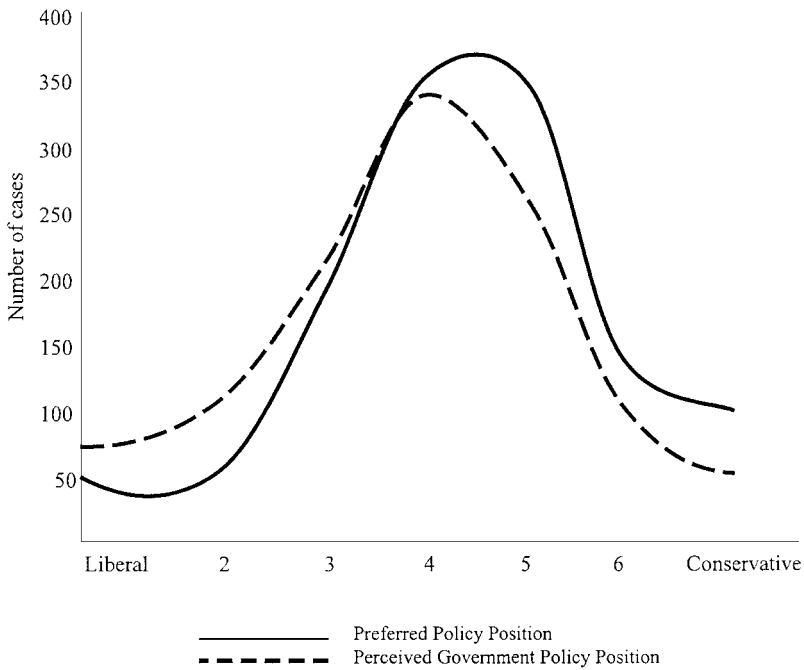


Figure 1.3. Policy space distribution of the people and their perception of actual governmental policies.

think government policies much too conservative, whereas conservatives could think government policies much too liberal. Moderates might also exhibit individual-level differences that are lost in our aggregate analysis. To test whether we have missed something, we divided people into three groups according to their self-placement on policy space: liberals (who placed themselves at 1 or 2), moderates (3, 4, or 5), and conservatives (6 or 7).

Table 1.1 shows the mean self-placement of liberals, moderates, and conservatives as well as their perceptions of government policies. Ideologues clearly see a much larger gap between their own preferred policies and the policies government produces (a gap of 2.75 for liberals and 2.97 for conservatives) than do moderates (a gap of only 0.01). While these results demonstrate that there are individual-level differences between some people's own self-placement and perceived government policy positions, there are two aspects of these results that deserve mention. First, and somewhat surprisingly, liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike perceive

Table 1.1. *Policy preferences and perceived government policies among liberals, moderates, and conservatives*

	Preferred policy position	Perceived government policy position	Difference	<i>N</i>
Liberals	1.46	4.21	2.75	98
Moderates	4.18	4.17	0.01	797
Conservatives	6.49	3.52	2.97	237

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

government policies as moderate. Liberals and conservatives, who perceive a fairly large differences between their own policy positions and the government's, still place government policy positions well within the moderate range (4.21 for liberals and 3.52 for conservatives). Second, as mentioned above, the vast majority of Americans (over 70 percent) consider themselves moderate, and these moderates view government policies as right in sync with their own preferences (a minuscule difference of only 0.01). So, while liberals and conservatives believe government policies are too moderate given their own proclivities, they make up less than 30 percent of the population.¹⁶ For the vast majority of Americans, government policies match their own preferences.

How, then, can the people be so convinced that the government is wildly out of touch with their interests, desires, and concerns? If the public's perception is that federal policies do not diverge much from the policies they desire, what are people thinking when they insist that the government is "out of touch"? Once again, policy positions on their own are unable satisfactorily to account for an important feature of the American political scene.

¹⁶Liberals and conservatives are not more likely, even given their perception that government policies are far removed from their own preferences, to believe government does not represent all Americans or to feel dissatisfied with government policies. Survey respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (on a four-point scale) with the following statements: "The current political system does a good job of representing the interests of all Americans, rich or poor, white or black, male or female" and "You are generally satisfied with the public policies the government has produced lately." Liberals, moderates, and conservatives gave similar responses to these two questions: means of 2.1, 2.2, and 2.2, respectively, for the representation question, and means of 2.6, 2.6, and 2.3, respectively, for the policy satisfaction question.

WHY IS POLICY SPACE ALONE INADEQUATE?

Perhaps those familiar with American politics will not be too surprised by the inadequacies of policy positions in explaining various political phenomena. After all, using policies to make judgments takes a substantial amount of work, and an impressive and growing corpus of literature points to the conclusion that individual Americans may not be up to the demands of the classical policy-driven democratic citizen. Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) investigation into what Americans know about politics concludes that "political knowledge levels are, in many instances, depressingly low" (269). These poorly informed citizens, in turn, "hold fewer, less stable, and less consistent opinions. They are more susceptible to political propaganda and less receptive to relevant new information" (265). Most pertinent to the current discussion, "they are less likely to connect . . . their policy views to evaluations of public officials and political parties in instrumentally rational ways . . . and . . . they are less likely to tie their actions effectively to the issue stands and political orientations they profess to hold" (265). Consequently, Delli Carpini and Keeter found that "for the substantial portion of citizens who are poorly informed . . . voting was poorly connected to their views on issues" (258).

The inability of people's issue stances to explain more of their attitudes and behavior is probably due to the fact that people's issue stances are often not so much stances as dances. Converse (1964) demonstrated long ago that issue positions change alarmingly over time. Zaller (1992) has elaborated on this theme more recently, presenting evidence that, rather than holding preformed attitudes on issues, people construct "opinion statements" on the fly as they confront each new issue, making use of whatever idea is at the top of their heads.

And, of course, there is always the danger that standard research techniques overstate the role of issues. Most of what we know about how issues affect people's political attitudes and behaviors comes from survey research. As John Brehm (1993) has carefully pointed out, survey nonresponse rates have been growing rapidly and are approaching 50 percent. Not surprisingly, those who answer political surveys are not identical to the 50 percent who do not. One major difference is that "refusals are less informed about politics than respondents" (62). Brehm also shows that nonrespondents are less interested in politics, so it does not take a particularly large inferen-

tial leap to conclude that survey respondents are probably more likely than typical Americans to care about policies. Brehm additionally recognizes that even his estimates of the discrepancies caused by nonresponse are probably conservative because his baseline (Current Population Studies) has some survey characteristics and therefore some nonresponse problems of its own. In short, traditional survey methodology overrepresents issue concern and still concludes that concern is anemic.

Further support for the malleability of people's policy positions comes from Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2000). Continuing an interesting line of work that attempts to determine how easy it is to talk respondents out of their original answers, they conclude that "the portion of the public that can be induced to change their mind on major issues remains impressive" (6; see also Sniderman and Piazza 1993 and Gibson 1998). Even more disconcerting are their findings that "content free" counterarguments (such as "Considering the complications that can develop, do you want to change your mind?") are just as effective at inducing changes as real arguments and that opinion switching is more common if the interviewer paid the respondent an empty compliment before asking the respondent if he or she wanted to change answers. Sniderman et al. conclude quite sensibly that "a substantial fraction of the public is only weakly attached to the positions they take, or possibly not attached at all" (33).

More evidence of the sensitivity of stated opinions to contextual factors is found in a fascinating experiment conducted by Amy Gangl (2000). Details are provided below, but for now the relevant point is that her experimental subjects read about a policy dispute in Congress. Some subjects read an account that stressed divisiveness, while other subjects read an account of a more agreeable congressional exchange. In their posttest evaluations of Congress, the initial policy positions of the subjects were irrelevant to the reactions of those reading the agreeable account, but for those who read about a serious congressional fight, their initial policy preferences had a significant effect on how they evaluated Congress. Pointed conflict, in other words, made it more likely that people cared about the outcome. Gangl's research demonstrates the remarkable degree to which people's policy preferences can be ignited or doused merely by the manner in which issues are handled. If no conflict is present, people's initial policy preferences will lie dormant and may even atrophy. The presence of conflict, however, can heighten the role of

initial policy preferences – if the issue is one for which people care enough to have a preference in the first place.

Though open to question, one interpretation of the modern American polity is that, compared with times past, there are now fewer issue disputes on matters about which the people really care. Remember, it is necessary only to go back to the 1950s to find a time in which the stated policy of one of the major parties (the Republicans) was to abolish the Social Security program. Today, neither party makes serious proposals to abolish Social Security, and the only arguments offered concern how the cost of living adjustment (COLA) should be calculated and whether participants should have the option of investing a small portion of their individual holdings in the stock market. These are not unimportant matters and some people have become exercised, at least about the latter, but in the larger scheme of things these disputes pale in comparison to whether or not a mandatory pension plan for the elderly should exist. When the political debate is reduced to the mechanics of COLA calculation, we should not be surprised that many citizens do not have an initial policy preference on many issues addressed in the halls of power.

This narrowing of debate and differences is found in many other issue areas and may, perversely, encourage politicians to be inappropriately strident and petty. Ex-Representative Fred Grandy, reflecting on the political implications of the 1997 bipartisan balanced budget agreement, stated that “coupled with the end of the Cold War . . . party defining issues are getting harder to find . . . it means going into local and personal issues” (quoted in “A Balanced-Budget Deal Won . . .” 1997: 1831). Russell Hardin (2000: 43–44) contends:

The former left-right antagonism has been reduced to a very short spread from those who prefer more generous welfare programs to those who prefer somewhat less generous programs, and the difference between the two positions represents a very small fraction of national income. Radical reorganization of the economy to achieve some degree of equality or fairness is now virtually off the agenda. . . . The odd result is that politics may be noisier and seemingly more intense and even bitter, but it is less important.

Of course, policy differences still exist. But the point is that many of these differences are sufficiently nuanced that a large share of the American public does not regard them as important. Maybe they should, but they do not. The constituency for major policy changes in the United States does not exist. Ask Ralph Nader and Patrick

Buchanan. When people claim to want political change, they are not typically speaking of policy change (as we demonstrate in Chapter 2). The result is that the policy positions of the two major parties frequently seem quite similar. Democratic President Bill Clinton passed a largely Republican version of welfare reform and Republican President George W. Bush's first policy package was a largely Democratic education plan (with a tepid and half-heartedly supported voucher component added for cover). Policy differences obviously remain on the scene, but our point is that the people believe that most of them concern only details and that, therefore, much political conflict is actually contrived.¹⁷ As a result, they have difficulty seeing the point, let alone care about the outcome. People despise pointless political conflict and they believe pointless political conflict is rampant in American politics today.

But perhaps even as people dismiss the relevance, importance, and meaning of most governmental policies, they retain a general predisposition toward the liberal or the conservative side of the political spectrum. After all, such an inclination does not demand an awareness of details. Maybe so, but, attributing great meaning to overarching ideological positions is not without danger. People are not particularly comfortable with an ideological spectrum even though it tends to fascinate elite observers. The terms liberal and conservative, or even the terms left and right, are not deeply understood by most people.¹⁸ These are phrases the public uses only with great prodding, and most do not understand them well even after prodding. Further, people are not good at placing politicians on a liberal-conservative scale and frequently do not tie together issue positions that elites expect to be tied together under the rubric of liberal or of conservative. People do not like to be labeled, and their lack of constraint across issues suggests their dislike is understandable and even well founded. People often think in neither policy nor ideological terms.

So, attempts to salvage issue voting (or even issue thinking) by moving from stances on individual issues to stances on collections of issue positions generally come to naught. Rather than wrestle with the intricacies of individual issues in a technologically complex society or rely on incomplete and inaccurate labels developed long

¹⁷For a critique of the view that the parties are becoming more similar in policy positions, see Gerring (1998).

¹⁸See Converse (1964); Levitin and Miller (1979); Conover and Feldman (1981).

ago to encapsulate collections of particular policy positions, most people look to something other than the issues in their effort to get a grip on the political scene. And it is nearly time for us to describe what that “something other” is.

CONCLUSION

Most Americans are not political elites, and, thus, policies and policy positions are not politically determinative. This can be seen in their voting behavior, as E. J. Dionne, Jr. (2000: 27), notes in his summation of the presidential elections of 2000: “The exit polls made abundantly clear that a large and critical portion of Bush’s support came from voters who are closer to Gore on the issues.” A startling number of Bush voters also viewed Gore as more competent to deal with the issues. And the lack of influence of policy matters certainly applies to approval of government itself. Many people who have no particular problem with the policies produced by the government are tremendously dissatisfied with that government.

Interpretations of American politics that rely exclusively on policy space are doomed to failure. A focus group participant named Linda complained that people who run for office “have to believe so strongly in one thing . . . they have to have something that drives them to run for office . . . so sometimes you get the wrong kind of people in government.” This sentiment nicely illustrates the attitude toward policy positions of an important segment of the people. They believe, with Linda, that candidates and parties have their “own agenda” and thus must not be “doing it for service to the people.” People like Linda neither conceive of politics in policy terms nor think politicians should. They believe candidates with strong issue positions are unlikely to be “the right kind of person.” The notion of searching and voting for a candidate with the most desirable policy positions is quite foreign to this way of thinking about politics. People are often confused (and therefore frustrated) by the proposals emanating from the candidates running for office. At the extreme, they even conclude that people with strong policy convictions should not be in government. Policies certainly are not irrelevant to American politics, but people are less concerned with the substance of public policy than analysts seem to realize. When policy preferences do come into play, they are just as likely to be endogenous as exogenous.

If not policy, then what? We believe people are more affected by the *processes* of government than by the policies government enacts.

This is especially true of their attitudes toward government. Dissatisfaction usually stems from perceptions of how government goes about its business, not what the government does. Processes, we argue, are not merely means to policy ends but, instead, are often ends in themselves. Indeed, with most policies being of such casual importance to them, the people's sensitivity to process makes sense. In Part II we address the kinds of processes Americans want, but first we turn in Chapters 2 and 3 to evidence supporting our contention that process preferences in general are important shapers of American political attitudes and therefore of the American polity.