

the thermostatic model of representation reviewed

kathrin thomas

Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ, United Kingdom
E-mail: kt270@exeter.ac.uk

doi:10.1057/eps.2010.73

Book reviewed:

Degrees of Democracy. Politics, Public Opinion, and Policy.

Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien (eds.) (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 241pp., ISBN: 978 0 5216 8789 8

The reciprocal relationship between public opinion and public policy is one major concern in the study of democratic representation. One key characteristic of a representative democracy is policy responsiveness (Dahl, 1971: 1), which aims for a relatively close correspondence between government policies and public preferences (Lijphart, 1984: 2). In order to evaluate the democratic performance of a representative government, scholars focus on the government's ability to fulfill this responsiveness function. Typically, researchers ask whether or not government policies reflect public preferences and how consistently they do this.

Giving an answer to this question and more is also the main concern of Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien in *Degrees of Democracy*. The authors set their responsiveness study in a comparative framework and investigate thermostatic linkages in the opinion-

policy nexus in Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Thereby, they do not focus purely on government responsiveness, but emphasise the importance of public responsiveness to policy change alike. Before reviewing the book itself, the concept of democratic responsiveness needs to be introduced and embedded in the existing literature.

DIMENSIONS OF DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS

Democratic responsiveness is one measure of the quality of a representative democracy. Other concepts such as accountability, equality and freedom can also serve as indications of a functioning democracy. Certainly, all of these qualities also facilitate responsiveness if we talk about it in a broader sense.

(Powell, 2004: 99) However, responsiveness research rather focuses on a more precise conception of democratic quality.

Until today scholars have failed to confidently define democratic responsiveness (Kuklinski and Segura, 1995: 18), as political representation is eminently a complex phenomenon of which responsiveness is one fragment. The closest definition we can give is that responsiveness is what occurs when the democratic process induces the government to form and implement policies that the public requires. (Powell, 2004: 91) Yet, this is not a very straightforward definition of democratic responsiveness. What we do know is that democratic responsiveness possesses different dimensions: (1) the direction of responsiveness, (2) the nature of responsiveness and (3) the approach to investigate responsiveness. A glance at these could help in understanding the concept behind.

Responsiveness studies usually focus on the government's ability to respond to public preferences. However, this only describes one direction of responsiveness. Democratic responsiveness is dynamic and, therefore, characterised by government responsiveness to public preferences and also by public responsiveness to policy change. Although one major concern of responsiveness studies is to evaluate the quality of a representative democracy by looking at the democratic performance on part of the government, public correspondence is a core pre-condition to do this. Without a public that articulates its preferences for policies we cannot analyse whether the respective government acts accordingly. Hence, we need to be clear about the actor who is supposed to be responsive and also about the recipient of responsiveness. Scholars usually talk about 'policy responsiveness' or 'policy representation' when policy makers respond to public preferences and of 'public responsiveness' when the public reacts to policy

'The concept of government responsiveness does not apply when public responsiveness is absent'

or policy change. Responsiveness works both ways. Nonetheless, government responsiveness is the main focus of responsiveness research that assesses the quality of representative democracies. But the concept of government responsiveness does not apply when public responsiveness is absent.

The recipient of responsiveness can be either the public or the government. Governments need to react to public preferences and are, consequently, a receiver of public responsiveness. This is straightforward as there is only one federal government in a representative democracy to perceive responses or signals from its citizens. It is less straightforward though when responsiveness works in the other direction, viz, government responsiveness to citizen preferences. The premise is that the electoral system determines who governments will be responsive to. The relationship is simple in majoritarian systems. The majority of the people appoint the government which, in reverse, means that the government has to be responsive to the majority of the people. In proportional systems, however, we do not have such a majority. This is why Lijphart suggested that governments established under proportional rules have to be responsive to as many people as possible (Lijphart, 1984: 4). These views assume that there is equality in public responsiveness and policy representation. Whereas, recent literature suggests that inequality in preference formation and, subsequently, democratic responsiveness exists. For

instance, better educated and wealthier citizens are more likely to form and articulate an opinion and also to vote (Gilens, 2005; Soroka and Wlezien, 2008; Bartels, 2009). Thus, responsiveness is believed to be higher in social groups that are well educated and live of a high income.

Another dimension of democratic responsiveness is the nature of policy responsiveness. When policy makers respond to public preferences, they can do this on different levels. Sara Binzer Hobolt and Robert Klemmensen (2008) have distinguished two forms of policy responsiveness: *rhetorical* and *effective* responsiveness. The former means that policy outputs is captured in terms of rhetorics such as speeches, manifestos and spending appropriations. Rhetoric responsiveness, therefore, describes policy intentions that appear in terms of policy agendas which do not necessarily have to be translated into effective policies in the end. Measures of effective responsiveness, in contrast, no longer look at policy agendas, but at actual policy outputs. Something that has already been implemented and is typically indicated by analysing spending outlays or implemented (regulative) acts.

The last dimension addresses the approach to investigate responsiveness. In general, responsiveness is approached empirically in terms of policy congruence which allows exploring particularly the dynamics of the public opinion–public policy relationship. The two main streams to examine policy congruence are as follows: (1) ideological congruence and (2) issue congruence. Whereas the former emphasises the ideological coherence of the public and policy makers on the left–right continuum over time, the latter focuses on the coherence of public preferences and public policy on a particular policy issue over time.

Previous research has predominantly focused party democracy and the ideolo-

gical coherence of the median citizen and the party government. Democratic responsiveness has been approached in terms of an ideological super-issue (Pierce, 1999: 30). Recent ideological congruence studies have been set in a comparative or cross-national framework. Whereas the latest vote or a self-placement of citizens on the left–right scale have served as an indication for public opinion, three different methods have been employed to calculate the government's ideological stance and, therefore, policy responsiveness: (1) an expert placement or (2) a citizen placement of the respective parties on the left–right continuum, and (3) a content analysis of party manifestos in terms of 'left' and 'right'.

The expert approach deduces the stance of the respective parties on the left–right scale from expert assessments who are asked to position the party on the continuum.¹ A similar procedure is applied with citizen surveys. Respondents are asked to place the respective parties on the same scale that they have placed themselves on earlier. This measurement captures citizens' perception of the position of the political parties on the continuum.² The third technique estimates party positions in left–right terms from party manifestos, where key words are assigned to be 'leftist' or 'rightist'. The main support for leftist/rightist policies defines the party's position on the scale.³ The government's stance on the continuum can easily be determined in majoritarian systems which usually lead to single party governments. Here the ideology of the governing party is our estimate for policy outputs. For coalition governments the weighted mean-ideology of the governing parties defines policy outputs. The major criticism of ideological congruence approaches to responsiveness is that they focus purely on policy agendas and employ no measures of effective responsiveness.

However, *Degrees of Democracy* follows an issue congruence approach. A vast literature on issue salience and issue voting hints that the importance of the policy issue is rising. Thus, issues are of increased significance⁴ even for responsiveness research. Besides, issue congruence approaches are not new to the field and typically they examine a single nation or compare a smaller sample of two or three countries. There are no cross-national studies that follow this approach and typically early Anglo-American responsiveness research has primarily focused on responsiveness to particular policy issues.⁵ Anglo-American survey research asks respondents about their preferences for more, less or about the same amount of policy regulation in a particular policy domain. The net support for a policy – calculated by subtracting preferences for more regulation from preferences for less regulation – represents public opinion on the particular issue. As with ideological congruence, the calculated public opinion for change is compared with policy outputs in the respective policy domain.

However, European survey research does not ask these questions and employs different measures of public preferences. One of them involves asking about the most important problem. Most large surveys ask citizens what they consider to be the most important problem that faces their country. The most salient answer indicates which issue or policy domain matters most to the public. Responsiveness is then tested by comparing public preferences (the most salient issue) with policy outputs in the respective domain.⁶ Another method to identify public preferences is to take the most mentioned and, thus, most salient issues, in party manifestos and to compare them with policy outputs.⁷

The main argument of *Degrees of Democracy* is that the public responds to policy change by expressing their

preferences for more or less regulation in the respective policy domain and, hence, effectively influences policy representation. Thus, the authors follow the Anglo-American survey tradition. Policy, Soroka and Wlezien claim, will follow the direction of net public preferences for policy change. Which means that the public acts as a thermostat for policy-making. The prevalent goal of the authors is to capture this thermostatic model of dynamic representation empirically and to test it in the setting of a comparative framework.

Soroka and Wlezien also incorporate recent suggestions that responsiveness may differ between social groups. In *Degrees of Democracy* they include an analysis about responsiveness by and to different social groups (income and education). In most cases, the authors find no significant differences in public responsiveness to policy between social groups, yet, the image changes for policy responsiveness. Policy representation, they note, is greater for middle and high education and income groups. Yet, the differences in responsiveness between social groups matter most when they can detect some variation in public responsiveness too. In addition, they observe, that unequal policy representation depends on the policy issue as well, for example the authors find stronger inequality in policy responsiveness on welfare issues.

Degrees of Democracy does not purely focus on government responsiveness, but emphasises especially the importance of public responsiveness to policy. It, therefore, accepts the dynamics of the opinion-policy relationship. In addition, the book provides us with an investigation of both natures of responsiveness: an analysis of rhetorical responsiveness to public preferences in the form of spending appropriations and a test of effective responsiveness in terms of spending outlays. Finally, with particular reference

to the increasing significance of policy issues, the authors choose an approach that accounts for this phenomenon and is appropriate for considering both directions of responsiveness to policy issues.

Degrees of Democracy is clearly structured and addresses different problems of the opinion–policy link in each chapter. Soroka and Wlezien begin by going back to the origins of dynamic representation and develop their thermostatic model on the basis of previous research.⁸ The central insight is that the public reacts to policy change by adjusting their preferences to it. In theory, the public's net support for more or less regulation within a particular policy field is crucial for policy-making and leads to change in policies in direction of preferences. For instance, if the public demands more regulation in domain *X*, policy follows by increasing the budget for the respective domain, and vice versa.

In doing this, the authors attach themselves to a long-standing Anglo-American survey tradition. Nonetheless, their thermostatic model of representation gives a new and innovative insight to the dynamics of the opinion–policy connection that has not been achieved so far. They capture public behaviour in terms of a 'temperature' that increases or decreases according to more or less regulation in the policy domain on the part of the government.

Before testing the model empirically as a whole, Soroka and Wlezien explore public responsiveness and policy representation separately. They develop measurement instruments for both components and test responsiveness and representation for three major policy domains over time employing opinion polls and spending data⁹: (1) foreign policy, (2) social policy and (3) other domestic policies. When investigating public expenditure as an indication for public policies, they distinguish between

spending intentions (appropriations) and outlays. In their comprehensive preliminary analyses the authors even explore public responsiveness to appropriations and outlays separately. By doing this they account for twofold nature of policy representation, the rhetorical and the effective dimension.

VARIATION IN DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS

The degree of democratic responsiveness evidently varies with the influence of different contextual factors. To explain this variation scholars classically control for a number of independent variables. Whereas researchers generally agree on the fact that responsiveness varies depending on (1) the different institutional design, (2) the government's ideology and (3) the policy issue, it is still obscure how these variables affect responsiveness.

Previous research has mainly accentuated the effect of political institutions on responsiveness and consequently the type of the electoral system (majoritarian versus proportional), the type of the system of government (presidential versus parliamentary) and the disproportionality of the party system (proportional versus disproportional) have especially been taken into account. Early responsiveness research considered majoritarian, presidential systems with few parties to be superior to their proportional, parliamentary and multiparty counterparts. Elections based on majoritarian rules were believed to bring out decisive single party governments and reduce the number of institutional veto players to a minimum, whereas proportional rules frequently led to coalition governments that had to deal with a large number of veto players and, thus, were not able to decide and respond as effectively.¹⁰

Later research has disproved this and shown that, in fact, proportional, parliamentary and multiparty systems are more responsive and sometimes even outperform their counterpart.¹¹ It is believed that proportional, multiparty systems that bring out coalition governments consider each opinion from the beginning of the representation process onwards. The coalition bargaining process is conceived to merge the many opinions into one median view that the government represents. However, recent research indicates that variation in responsiveness is only insignificantly caused by a country's institutional design.¹² Although scholars still find variations between the different institutions, the differences are too small to make inferences. Thus, there are inconsistencies that may be traced back to the data that has been utilised to conduct the studies. Also it is remarkable that these findings are based on research that solely followed an ideological congruence approach.

In contrast, research based on issue congruence has not come so far. Although scholars have tested for some contextual variables causing variation in responsiveness, the number of factors taken into account has been limited. For instance, the focus has largely concentrated on the different types of government (presidential versus parliamentary governments). Research has consistently shown that presidential systems are more responsive than parliamentary ones.¹³ Nevertheless, researchers of issue congruence have not neglected the impact of party democracy on representation and particularly responsiveness. Although party ideology is the major indicator for responsiveness under the ideological congruence approach, associates of issue congruence typically account for the ideology of the respective government. However, the image drawn about party ideology of the government is an ambiguous one. In some analyses government

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ideology has no significant effect, whereas in other studies it has a strong or even a statistically significant effect on responsiveness depending on the country and issue examined.¹⁴ These inconsistencies leave much leeway for further research.

In *Degrees of Democracy*, Soroka and Wlezien follow up on issue congruence research and control for a small set of independent variables. The authors have chosen three majoritarian systems as the unit of their analysis, which primarily differ in the government formation process. The US government is characterised by presidentialism, whereas Canada and the UK possess parliamentary governments. The authors also control for the ideology of the party government. A key novelty in *Degrees of Democracy*, however, is the addition of a completely new variable: the vertical division of powers through federalism. This is an utterly new idea. Whereas Canada and the US are strong federal countries, the UK is organised as a unitary state. Federalism splits the responsibilities in a country vertically and creates another level of governance. Depending on the level of integration the federal government and the sub-governments own or share different issues. The responsibilities in federal countries are blurred. Thus, there are good reasons to believe that federalism affects representation and particularly responsiveness.

Indeed, the authors find evidence that responsiveness is higher in the US presidential system than in the parlia-

mentary systems of Canada and the UK which supports the results of previous research. In addition, they find that government ideology does affect responsiveness depending on the issue and the country. For instance, responsiveness in the US is high on defence issues and increases when a Republican government is in charge. A finding that matches the results of prior studies. Concerning federalism the authors observe that it is negatively associated with responsiveness. The public's ability to respond to policy is constrained by the existence of a strong federalism. This, the authors conclude, has at least an indirect effect on policy responsiveness as well. If preferences cannot be articulated clearly, the possibility of responding to them is also restricted.

DISCUSSION

Degrees of Democracy integrates to the vast literature on the evaluation of the quality of dynamic democratic governance in a comparative framework. The book contributes a new, visible model of dynamic representation it supplies an in-depths comparative analysis of the opinion-policy link in the three exemplary countries and finally in federalism it adds a new institutional variable to the set of contextual factors that are believed to cause variation in dynamic representation.

Stuart N. Soroka and Christopher Wlezien claim to empirically capture the relationship between public preferences and policy representation in Canada, the US and the UK which they believe is a thermostatic one. Previous research by the same authors has already shown that thermostatic representation works in the single countries. (Wlezien, 1995, 1996, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien, 2004, 2005; Wlezien and Soroka, 2007) *Degrees of Democracy* integrates their earlier studies

into an extensive comparative project and adds vital aspects such as more detailed assessments of opinion formation, the representation of different social groups, and the effect of vertical division of powers. The precision and clarity with which they build up their argument is highly convincing. When developing the model theoretically and empirically, the authors give sufficient attention to details which allows the reader to follow the research steps without difficulty. However, it seems that their method – calculating the net support for a policy – is limited to an Anglo-American survey culture. For instance, many European surveys do not ask for preferences for change in a particular domain, but focus on issues salience approaches such as the 'most important problem' question. In addition, the measures of effective policy outputs leave room for improvement. Certainly, the authors have employed the best existing measures to capture policy outputs, spending appropriations and outlays. However, expenditure is not all to policies as it neglects all regulative legislation. Hence, it is up to further research to develop measurements of effective policy outputs that include an analysis of implemented acts.

With its focus on policy domains *Degrees of Democracy* gives a different, yet, important insight to the dynamics of issue representation. The issue congruence approach chosen for their analysis draws a more precise image of the consistency between preferences and policy outputs. Besides, the authors are not satisfied with the analysis of policy agendas, but go beyond agenda-setting and look at actual policy outputs. This is especially striking as current research in the field still seems to emphasise ideological congruence with its focus on party democracy and agenda-setting, but largely neglects the importance of policy issues and actual policies. *Degrees of Democracy*, therefore, allows us a

more precise insight to the opinion–policy connection and encourages the reader to do further research.

However, *Degrees of Democracy* leaves some room for improvement. The authors themselves have already noted that the political systems they have chosen for their analysis share similar characteristics. For instance, all countries studied follow a majoritarian tradition. Current responsiveness research also looks at the differences between proportional and majoritarian representation which, according to the authors, lies beyond the scope of their research. The distinctions of countries in *Degrees of Democracy* range between just two dimensions: the formation of government (presidentialism versus parliamentarianism) and the vertical division of powers (federalism–unitarianism). To enhance the approach’s explanatory power with respect to previous research it would be valuable to extend the analysis at least to one other dimension: the electoral system (proportional versus majoritarian). Also the disproportionality of the party system, as shown many times in ideological congruence studies, plays an important role and could be incorporated in further issue congruence research. This might even help clarifying what effect those institutions have on responsiveness.

Certainly, federalism deserves some more attention as well. The two federal systems chosen for Soroka and Wlezien’s analysis are almost identical. They are characterised by so-called dual federalism where the responsibilities are very strictly allocated between the different levels of government. Yet, there is at least one other form of federalism to be taken into account: a cooperative federalism where the different levels of government share responsibilities and powers to a large extent, for example the German federalism. Variation in the density and interdependence of federalism may affect responsiveness differently.

Another aspect concerns the analysis of federalism as a contextual factor on dynamic representation. When testing the direct impact of federalism on public responsiveness, the authors come up with logical and comprehensive explanations. Federalism, they argue, leads to blurred responsibilities and confuses the public. Consequently, the existence of a federal structure decreases public responsiveness. Regrettably, the authors do not carry out a similar in-depth analysis for policy representation, but argue that as public responsiveness decreases, policy representation does too. Hence, the impact of federalism on representation is an indirect one. A public that cannot articulate preferences, because responsibilities are not clear, cannot be as well represented. A more detailed description of the effect of federalism on the policy responsiveness side would be welcome.

Furthermore, some analyses in *Degrees of Democracy* deviate from the authors’ general in-depths investigation. For instance, Soroka and Wlezien test responsiveness of different social groups by policy domain, but because of a lack of sufficient data they had to leave out the UK from the analysis. It would be desirable, however, to have all assessments carried out under same conditions.

On the whole, *Degrees of Democracy* delivers an excellent analysis of the quality of representation in three main policy domains in Canada, the US and the UK. The book contributes valuable, but also debatable results for the study of responsiveness and opens a new perspective on the topic. The focus on public responsiveness also shows that there still remains a research gap to be filled on the public opinion side. *Degrees of Democracy* is absolutely worth studying for all those interested in representative democracy.

Notes

- 1 Expert surveys have predominantly been used by G. Bingham Powell and his co-authors, see: Huber and Powell (1994), Powell (2000, 2006, 2009), Powell and Vanberg (2000).
- 2 See Blais and Bodet (2006), Powell (2009), and Golder and Stramski (2010) as examples for ideological congruence studies that employ citizen perception to place political parties and, thus, respective governments on the left–right continuum.
- 3 The methodology to place parties on the left–right scale employing content analysis to party manifestos has been developed by Kim and Fording (1998, 2001). See McDonald *et al* (2004), McDonald and Budge (2005), and Budge and McDonald (2007) for the application of this method.
- 4 For empirical evidence of the increased significance of policy issues see: Hellwig and Samuels (2007) and Hellwig (2008).
- 5 Three classical studies employing an approach to test responsiveness to particular policy issues are for example: Monroe (1979, 1998) and Page and Shapiro (1983).
- 6 Recent research employing this method has been conducted by Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005, 2008).
- 7 Obviously, the premise of this method is that party manifestos mirror public opinion. Research employing this technique has been done by Klingemann *et al* (1994).
- 8 Soroka and Wlezien have accomplished some pioneer research on the theoretical and practical development of the thermostatic model they test in *Degrees of Democracy*. For details see: Soroka (2003), Soroka and Wlezien (2004, 2005, Wlezien and Soroka (2007), and Wlezien (1995, 1996, 2004).
- 9 The data for each country vary in the time period regarded: the US, 1973–2004, the UK, 1978–1999, and Canada, 1984–2004. The survey item employed to capture public opinion for change is: Do you think your government regulates issue x too much, too less or about right? The main data sources to capture public opinion are the Canadian Opinion Research Archive (CORA), Gallup UK, the US General Social Survey (GSS), and the US National Opinion Research Archive (NORC). The indicators of public policy are spending data appropriations as well as outlays. These data are taken from Statistics Canada, the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis, UK HM Treasury (PESA) and the US Office of Management and Budget.
- 10 See amongst others especially Duverger (1954) and Downs (1957). For details on veto players see Tsebelis (2002).
- 11 This has been pioneered by Arend Lijphart (1984, 1994, 1999) and empirically been demonstrated amongst others by Huber and Powell (1994), Powell (2000), Powell and Vanberg (2000), Powell (2006).
- 12 These findings are based on research conducted by Blais and Bodet (2006) who have found differences between majoritarian and proportional systems that have not been statistically significant. Their results are supported by further research by Powell (2009) and Golder and Stramski (2010).
- 13 See particularly Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005, 2008), but also Soroka (2003), Soroka and Wlezien (2004, 2005), Wlezien and Soroka (2007), Wlezien (1995, 1996, 2004).
- 14 Brooks (1990) has found no significant effect of government’s party ideology in Germany, whereas a similar study on France has shown that ideology affects responsiveness significantly (Brooks, 1987). More recent research on Denmark and the UK by Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005) has found no significant influence of government ideology on responsiveness. Yet, in a later study Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008) have observed weak effects in Britain and the US according to issues. These results find support in studies by Soroka and Wlezien (2004), who have also detected little effects of government ideology on responsiveness depending on the policy issue.

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About the Author

Kathrin Thomas is an ELECDem early stage researcher and a PhD candidate in Politics at the University of Exeter and the European University Institute. She has obtained a Master of Arts degree in Political Science, Public Law and Art History from the University of Münster.