Is policy congruent with public opinion in Australia?: Evidence from the Australian Policy Agendas Project and Roy Morgan

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Abstract

Central to questions of representation is whether or not policy is responsive to public opinion. As V.O. Key Jr. argued: 'Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.' This paper tests the public opinion – policy link using legislative data from the Australian Policy Agendas Project and public opinion data from Roy Morgan. This paper asks: is policy congruent with public opinion in Australia? In doing so we examine to what extent policy fulfils the preferences of the public which in turn provides us with some answers in terms of how representative Australian democracy is. Our findings show that policy is congruent with public opinion much of the time which is consistent with the international literature which shows, in broad terms, that 'democracy works.'

1. Introduction

Central to questions of representation is whether or not policy is responsive to public opinion. As V.O. Key Jr. argued: 'Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense' (cited in Campbell, 2012, 272). To put it another way, if democracy 'is functioning as expected, there should be a robust correspondence between the public's professed preferences and public policy' (Campbell, 2012, 272). This paper tests the public opinion – policy link using legislative data from the Australian Policy Agendas Project and public opinion data from Roy Morgan. This paper asks: is policy congruent with public opinion in Australia? In doing so we examine to what extent policy fulfils the preferences of the public which in turn provides us with some answers in terms of how representative Australian democracy is.

2. Literature review

In addressing the opinion – policy link in Australia it is important to examine the findings from the overseas literature as it is here, in the US in particular, that the most systematic work has been done. Almost all of the literature reviewed below has established a link between public opinion and policy and therefore presents an optimistic picture of political representation.

While not concerned primarily with the link between policy and public opinion the work of Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1964) examined the nature of public opinion and painted a largely pessimistic picture. In *The American Voter* Campbell et al. (1960) found a poorly informed and inattentive public. Similarly, Converse (1964) argued that public opinion was largely irrational. This research did not examine the opinion – policy link directly. These researchers did however cast doubt on the extent to which public opinion corresponded with policy. If public opinion is poorly informed and irrational then this casts serious doubt in regards to the effect of public opinion on policy. Therefore, the early public opinion work set a pessimistic tone.

However, since this time much more systematic studies have been done examining the link between public opinion and policy. The US research in particular has developed very sophisticated ways of measuring the effect of public opinion on policy (and also the dynamic relationship between opinion and policy) though the use of detailed public opinion and budget data.

Monroe (1979) was the first to look at the opinion - policy link systematically. Monroe examined survey questions asking about particular policy areas and then examined policy change 12 months after the survey. If majority public opinion was congruent with policy change (i.e. the majority of the public preferred change and then government changed policy, or vice versa) then policy was labelled congruent with public opinion. Monroe found this to be true in 64% of the cases he examined. This was called the majoritarian approach.

Page and Shapiro in *The Rational Public* (1992) were concerned with whether a change in the direction of public opinion over time was followed by a change in policy. This analysis followed the covariational congruence approach as opposed to majoritarian opinion at one point in time as per Monroe. If public opinion changed in one direction (regardless of the level of support) Page and Shapiro wanted to know whether policy was responsive to this. They found that policy was responsive to shifts in public opinion 66% of the time.[1]

Building on this research was Erikson et al's *Statehouse Democracy* (1993) which examined the opinion – policy link in the US states. This was followed up with an even more sophisticated study, *The Macro Polity*. In this book Erikson et al. (2002) argue that while voters may know little and are generally inattentive to politics when the opinions of the public are aggregated they are able to make fairly sophisticated judgements and affect policy in a rational way (hence their call for macro-level over micro-level analysis). They argue that politicians are rational in anticipating and responding to public opinion, and policy mood more generally (see also Stimson, 1991).

Obviously the salience of particular issues is also important. In *The Politics of Attention* Jones and Baumgartner (2005) embed the opinion – policy link in their model of decision making. They find that a small number of salient issues are rated as most important by the public over time – national and economic security being the two most important, followed by civil rights and crime. However, Jones and Baumgartner (2005) find that sometimes space is created for other issues to become more important to the public because national and economic security issues are seen

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[1] Stimson in *Public Opinion in America* (1991) took a different approach to Monroe and Page and Shapiro. Stimson was more concerned with broader trends in public opinion over time. That is, he is less concerned with the opinion – policy link in regards to particular policy areas over time and more concerned with broader shifts in public opinion according to what he calls the 'mood' of the public (so, he uses surveys as the unit of analysis rather than individuals). At any given time, Stimson argues, public opinion is defined as having a broad 'mood' (defined as liberal or conservative). He argues that politicians react to this mood. Because politicians anticipate and respond to mood this circumvents the need for a fully rational and informed public. Mood is thought to be particularly important for less salient policy areas/policy areas the public have little knowledge of. He finds that politicians respond to mood and that policies that are too conservative create a more liberal mood. In a later co-authored work (*The Macro Polity*, see below) Stimson et al. also find that policy is responsive to mood.

as less important. They find government is most responsive to the most salient issues. They find a connection between public opinion and Congressional hearings and laws and conclude that when the public are concerned about an issue Congress pays attention to it. The results suggest that 'the public is seriously involved in the agenda-setting process, not an ignored bystander' (269).

The opinion – policy research has become increasingly sophisticated over time and culminates with Soroka and Wlezien's book *Degrees of Democracy* (2010) which looks at US, British and Canadian data. In this book they use detailed public opinion data (i.e. public opinion items which ask whether the government should spend more or less in particular policy areas) to show that policy (measured by budget outlays) is responsive to public opinion. They develop a thermostatic model (following on from Wlezien's (1995) earlier work) by which the public act as the thermostat and the politicians the heating/air conditioning. They also show that there is an opinion – policy feedback mechanism by which the public adjust their views in regards to changes in policy. They conclude, as do most works in this area, that 'democracy works' (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010, 182). This is particularly the case for highly salient issues and they also show, interestingly, that policy responds to all social groups, not the more privileged.

The broad consensus across almost all of these works is that 'democracy works.' This paper then aims to test whether representation works as well in Australia as has been found in the other democracies, the US in particular. This is important because this sort of research has rarely been done in Australia (Klingemann et al 1994; Goot 2005 for exceptions). However, in facing this question we are confronted with quite severe limitations in terms of data analysis. The early opinion – policy literature looked at the *congruence* of public opinion. The latter work, resting as it does on more sophisticated data analysis, examined the *responsiveness* of public opinion. Because of data limitations (as spelt out below) this paper will examine the *congruence* between policy and opinion rather than the *responsiveness* of public opinion.[2]

3. Data and Method

This paper relies on two types of data. The legislative data comes from the Australian Policy Agendas Project (see Dowding et al., 2010; Dowding et al. 2012 for earlier work). The Australian Policy Agendas Project has used codes developed in the US (and then adapted for the cross-national Comparative Agendas Project). There are 19 major codes (examples being Macroeconomics; Health; Agriculture) and each code has a series of minor codes. Legislative data between 1973 and 2011 has now been coded and reliability checks have been run on this data. It is important to note here that this coding measures policy attention, but nothing about policy content. It is therefore limited to which policy areas the government is concentrating on and not the actual substance of the legislation passed in these policy areas.

In terms of public opinion data we rely on the Roy Morgan 'most important problem(s)' questions. Roy Morgan asked respondents on a semi-regular basis

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[2] However, we are using the term congruent here in a more general sense that does Monroe (1979) as outlined above because we lack the data to show whether policy is congruent with policy in the way Monroe did.

between 1992 and 2004: 'Thinking about Australia as a whole. In your opinion, what are the THREE most important things the FEDERAL GOVERNMENT should be DOING SOMETHING ABOUT?' Then between 2005 and 2012 Roy Morgan asked: 'What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?'[3] The Roy Morgan data has several advantages over other datasets. Because Roy Morgan asks the item as an open-ended question this allows respondents to identify the most important issues to them without being presented with a set of policy areas as do respondents to the Australian Election Study and Newspoll for this type of question. The answers are then coded by Roy Morgan into a large range of categories (although the categories used do differ across the two time series). This style of question seems more democratic in the sense that respondents can identify which issues are most important to them rather than the survey prescribing which issues should be included and excluded. This style of question does not mean, however, that attitudes are not affected by what politicians and the media are talking about. However, the open-ended nature of the questions does allow respondents to identify issues that may not be asked about in other surveys with a set range of options.

Because of the data limitations outlined above we will be following the direction of the earlier research outlined above which measured the opinion – policy link in a less sophisticated way than does the more recent scholarship. We cannot examine the complex interaction between spending and opinion as per the thermostatic model. This is owing to data limitations. Unfortunately, we lack systematic budget data used by those like Soroka and Wlezein (2010). Budget data would give us a better (although still imperfect) indication of government priorities. However, because the government regularly change how appropriations are recorded such data is impossible to code in Australia. Furthermore, we would like consistent data that has asked if the government should spend more or less in particular policy areas (as Soroka and Wlezien (2010) have available to them). However, the only data we have on this is from the International Social Survey Program which has run just four surveys over a 20 year period (1985, 1990, 1996, 2006) which would greatly limit any inferences that we could make from this data.[4]

In terms of matching the Roy Morgan codes to the Policy Agenda Codes we deleted any Policy Agenda code that did not have a matching Roy Morgan response. For all the other codes we were able to match the Roy Morgan responses to the policy agenda codes in a satisfactory way. However, it should be noted that in several instances we collapsed multiple Roy Morgan responses into one major code (for example, for the 1992 to 2002 data for the macroeconomics policy agendas code we used the Roy Morgan responses unemployment; taxation; economy and finance; petrol prices and interest rates whereas sometimes we had to collapse more disparate responses into one category so the Roy Morgan 'work conditions' and 'immigration' responses were matched to the Labor, Employment and Immigration major code). At other times one single Roy Morgan response was fitted into one major code (for example, 'Aboriginal issues' were matched to the Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and

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[3] This was preceded by a question about what the most important issue facing *the world* is which likely conditioned responses to this question.

[4] There are a few other issues with the Roy Morgan data that should be pointed out. Roy Morgan did not conduct the survey every year (hence the missing years from the analysis below). Roy Morgan also regularly conducted the survey more than once a year (for example, in 2010 it was run 4 times a year) so the figures here have been aggregated by year.

Territorial Issues policy agendas code for the 2005-2012 data).

In the analysis below we are not positing a causal relationship between policy and public opinion. Rather, we are asking a broader question: are the issues that citizens say are important the actual issues that governments then pay attention to in terms of the policy agenda (one year following)? In other words, is policy and opinion congruent? Despite the limitations imposed on us by the data this paper will test the opinion – policy link in a more systematic way than has been done before.

It is also worth pointing out, as mentioned above, that neither legislative data nor opinion data gives us any indication of the actual content of legislation (different parties could pass different pieces of education legislation, for example, that are both coded the same way but may have very different intentions and outcomes). Nor does the public opinion data tell us about what the public want done on any one issue. For example, immigration could be listed as an important issue but that tells us nothing about what the public want done about immigration? These limitations point to the inherent problem of coding legislation and opinion in such a way as is done by the Policy Agendas Project and Roy Morgan. Qualitative case studies would be much more helpful in this regard. In particular, more detailed public opinion data on particular policy issues would be helpful. However, the problem is we have a lack of detailed public opinion data on specific issues. Opinion on specific issues is only tracked sporadically and once it falls off the agenda is not asked about any more.

4. Analysis

	1992	1993 PA	1994	1995 PA	1995	1996 PA	1998	1999 PA	1999	2000 PA	2001	2002 PA	2002	2003 PA	MATCHES
Macroeconomic	112	28.9	87	11	86.5	13.1	77	32.3	68	16.8	53.5	14.9	37	8.7	4/6
Health	14	5	26	2.9	26.2	7.1	43	2	49.5	5.2	50	5.4	41	5.3	4/6
Agriculture	0	4.1	0	5.2	0	9.5	0	4	2	8.1	2.5	10.8	0	9.3	2/3
Labour, Employment and Immigration	18	2.5	11	7.5	13.9	2.4	9	2	13	5.8	18.5	3.4	20	6.7	3/6
Education and Culture	18	4.1	22	2.3	19	1.2	29	2	37.5	0	45.5	2.7	38	3.3	3/6
Environment	13	0.8	12	2.3	12.3	0	9	1.5	9.5	1.7	10	5.4	14	2	2/6
Transportation	5	1.7	6	0	4.6	0	2	2	4.5	7.5	6.5	2.7	6	4.7	1/6
Law, Crime, and Family Issues	6	6.6	13	6.4	16.6	3.6	21	3.5	12	4.6	12	6.1	11	10	0/5
Social Welfare	17	0	24	1.7	22	1.2	18	0.5	19	0.6	25	0	19	0.7	4/6
Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues	6	12.4	2	15.6	2	23.8	3	17.4	3	11.6	1	11.5	1	16	1/2
Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce	16	9.1	13	13.3	10.6	13.1	6	7	4	9.8	6.5	4.7	8	6	3/6
Defence	1	9.9	2	6.9	2.3	4.8	1	4	4	5.8	10	7.4	28	6.7	3/6
Foreign Trade	12	3.3	10	4.6	11.6	1.2	4	7	5	6.9	6	2	6	4.7	0/5
Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues	2	0	6	4	4	6	6	2.5	5	2.3	2	4.1	2	2	2/5

Table 1: MIP and PAP data 1992-2002

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who identified, for example, a macroeconomic issue as one of the three most important issues that the Federal government should be doing something about and then the percentage of the government's legislative attention that was being taken up by that issue in the following year.[5] In this way we ask, did what the public identified as important in

year x then show up in terms of the policy agenda the following year (we expect that this would happen in a lagged fashion). If the public identified issue x as more important in, say, 1998 as compared to 1999 and then the issue increased in terms of the government's agenda between 1999 and 2000 we classified that as matching (or, to use the language above, we can think of these items as congruent). The last column in Table 1 shows the number of matching items. For macroeconomics we can see that as public opinion rose or fell so to did the policy agenda on 4 of 6 occasions. Put another way, the policy agenda was congruent with public opinion 66 percent of the time. The same level of congruence is found in regards to health and social welfare. In all these cases we can say that the policy agenda is congruent with public opinion. The same thing can be said of Labor, Unemployment and Immigration, Banking, Finance and Domestic Commerce and Defence and Community Development, planning and Housing.[6] Here policy was congruent with public opinion 50 percent of the time. Therefore, for 8 of the 14 issues policy was congruent with public opinion 50 percent or more of the time.

As noted above the salience of issues is also important. Therefore, it is prudent to not only look at the overall level of congruence but the level of congruence for the most important issues. In *The Politics of Attention* Jones and Baumgartner (2005) find government is most responsive to the most salient issues. Applied to our analysis the four most important issues (in terms of the average amount of respondents who said they were important issues) are, in order, macroeconomics, health, education and social welfare. Examining the level of congruence in these issues reveals that policy was congruent with public opinion 66 percent of the time for macroeconomics, health, education and welfare and 50 percent of time for education. In other words, for the most salient issues there is a high level of congruence between public opinion and policy.

	2005	2006 PA	2006	2007PA	2008	2009 PA	2009	2010 PA	2010	2011 PA	MATCHES
Macroeconomic	6	9.9	8	9.2	32.5	25.9	35	14.7	18.25	11.1	2/4
Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties	2	3.5	8	3.8	2	3	1	2.7	2	1.6	3/4
Health	8	4.1	11	5.4	6	4.4	3	4.7	7	9.5	3/4
Agriculture	0	9.9	0	10.3	0	5.9	0	13.3	0.25	5.8	0/1
Labour, Employment and Immigration	2	4.1	15	4.3	5	3.7	8.5	4	11.25	1.6	3/4
Education and Culture	2	1.2	2	1.6	2	5.2	2.5	4.7	2	4.2	1/2
Environment	15	3.5	8	0	27.5	5.2	20.5	2.7	20.5	1.6	3/3
Energy	0	4.1	0	2.2	1	5.2	0.5	4.7	1	3.7	2/3
Transportation	0	6.4	0	2.7	0	3.7	0	2.7	0.25	14.2	1/1
Law, Crime, and Family Issues	0	4.1	5	6.5	3.5	7.4	2	3.3	3.5	4.7	3/4
Social Welfare	4	2.3	4	2.2	2.5	0.7	3	0	2.5	0	1/2
Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues	1	11.6	0	12.5	1	7.4	2	4.7	2.5	10.5	1/4
Defence	21	7	9	11.4	1.5	8.9	2	7.3	2.5	7.4	2/4
Foreign Trade	1	7.6	2	5.4	0	1.5	1.5	6	1.75	3.2	2/4
International Affairs and Foreign Aid	0	1.7	3	3.3	0	0	0	6	0.5	0.5	1/1
Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues	0	4.1	0	4.9	0	4.4	0	6	0.75	8.9	1/1

Table 2: MIP and PAP data 2005-2011

Table 2 presents much the same analysis as Table 1 but this time covering 2005-2012 and with a change in the question wording in which respondents could only identify one issue as the most important facing the country. Here we can see that environment policy was congruent with public opinion on 100 percent (3) of the matchable time periods and on 3 of 4 occasions (75 percent of the time) in regards to Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties, Health, Labor, employment and Immigration and Law, Crime and family Issues. Policy and public opinion are congruent 66 percent of time in regards to Energy (2/3) and 50 percent of the time in regards to Macroeconomics, Education and Culture, Social Welfare, Defence and Foreign Trade. If we exclude the policy areas with only one usable time point we have 12 issues, all of which show a 50 percent or higher congruence between policy and public opinion. Thus, we can again conclude here that policy was congruent with public opinion over this time period.

We can again examine the level of congruence for the most salient issues for this time period. Between 2005 and 2011 the most important issues were, in order, macroeconomics, the environment, labor, employment and immigration and health.[7] As was for the case for the 1992-2002 time period policy is congruent with public opinion 50 percent or more of the time across these three issues so we can again conclude that there is a high level of congruence for the most salient issues. This is consistent with the findings of Baumgartner and Jones (2005) and, when compared to the 1992-2002 data does not suggest that policy is becoming less responsive to public opinion over time (as found by Jacobs and Shapiro in *Politicians Don't Pander* Jacobs and Shapiro (2000)).

6. Conclusion

Consistent with the international literature this paper (using data from the Australian Policy Agendas Project and Roy Morgan) has shown that policy is congruent public opinion in Australia. While we do not have the data available to establish strong causal links the data here supports the general finding in the literature that 'democracy works.' In terms of issues that were listed as most important to respondents macroeconomics and health were listed as important across the time period covered. Other issues such as education, immigration and social welfare are also issues listed as important issues to voters. In general this paper has shown that there are good (but not irrefutable) reasons to be optimistic about Australian democracy as the opinion – policy link appears to be a strong one.

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[7] Defence was actually the fourth most important issue using averages but because this is largely owing to one time point it was excluded from this analysis.

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