

The Role of Salience on the Relationship between Public Policy and Public Opinion

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Introduction

The literature field of public opinion research is dominated by two separate strands: the relationship between public opinion and electoral politics; and public opinion and mass communications. The literature on public opinion and public policy is more sparse. This paper reviews some of the more relevant literature on the interaction between public opinion and public policy beyond elections.

The relationship between public opinion and policy-making is not clearly defined. Most research shows that, in general, policy-makers follow public opinion (Monroe, 1979; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Stimson, 2004), some research that policy-makers ignore public opinion (Korpi, 1989; Schwartz, 1995) and others find that policy elites drive public opinion toward their viewpoint rather than the other way around (Kingdon, 2003; Zaller, 1992). In addition, some argue that “public opinion” is an artifact of measurement and does not really exist (Bishop, 2005).

One of the early studies of the linkage by Harwood Childs found that “the relationship between public opinion and public policy varies greatly from issue to issue. The influence of public opinion varies from virtually no influence to enormous influence. Influence may be exerted quickly or slowly, it may change over time or remain constant, and its impact may be direct or indirect” (Childs, 1965). While this initial conclusion appears to be a non-finding, Childs also notes that extent of the influence depends on a number of factors including: the degree of agreement within the public; the intensity with which opinions are held; and the extent of organized support for and against the public position. He also notes the clarity and simplicity of the issue is important.

Childs notes that public opinion influences policy in two major ways. In the first way, public opinion tends to influence policy-makers through dissatisfaction rather than a public

groundswell for positive action. Public opinion for progressive policies is, in essence, a dissatisfaction with existing policies. Another aspect of the negative influence of public opinion is that policy-makers use the knowledge of the public's tolerances to constrain the policy options because the public would not accept some solutions. This leads to Childs' second point which is that officials are reluctant to take a stand in the face of probable widespread, popular disapproval.

Childs also reports that the relationship between public opinion and public policy is two-way, cyclical and dynamic. Public opinion not only influences policy, but policy influences opinion. Once a policy decision is made, there is a tendency for public opinion to accept it. As general policies become more specific and the implications of the policies become clearer, public opinion often changes.

It is the specifics of policy in which Childs makes his most insightful conclusion:

“the general public is especially competent, probably more competent than any other group—elitist, expert, or otherwise—to determine the basic ends of public policy, to choose top policy-makers, to appraise the results of public policy, and to say what, in the final analysis is fair, just, and moral. On the other hand, the general public is not competent to determine the best means for attaining specific goals, to answer technical questions, to prescribe remedies for political, social, and economic ills, and to deal with specialized issues far removed from the everyday experience and understanding of the people in general. (Childs, 1965)

Theoretical Models

There is not a dominant theory about the role of public opinion on policy-making that has emerged in the literature. This section will present several theoretical models that have tried to address this issue from the 1700s to the twenty-first century.

The first model goes back to the 18th century when Edmund Burke, a parliament minister, described his position of representation using two models: delegate and trustee. To Burke, the

delegate would represent his constituent's desires in parliament and, in essence, vote according to public opinion. Burke's preferred alternative was to act as trustee, which he meant that he would vote, not according to the whims of public opinion, but in the best interest of his constituent's and to the country as he saw fit (Burke & Stanlis, 2000).

In the United States, the distinction between delegate and trustee was implanted into the Constitution. The House of Representatives with its constant elections would remain close to people and often act as delegates to their districts, while senators were more removed from the electorate with longer terms and could act as trustees (Madison, 1992 [1788])

Luttbeg

Norman Luttbeg outlines the theoretical models of the political linkages between the public and policy-makers in two broad groups: coercive models and noncoercive models (Luttbeg, 1981). In coercive models, the public applies pressure, either real or potential electoral pressure, to force lawmakers to enact the desired policies. Luttbeg defines these models as:

- **Rational-Activist Model:** Public exerts pressure electorally. Representatives must enact policy demands of the public or the public will elect some else who will enact those policies.
- **Political Parties Model:** The political parties act as an intermediary between the public and the representative. The public holds the party responsible for the policies to be enacted. The parties therefore exert pressure on the lawmakers to follow the party line or to enact policies for the good of the party.
- **Pressure Group Model:** In this model, the public expresses itself to lawmakers by gathering in groups: business groups, labor unions and interest groups. These groups influence lawmakers through money or electorally to support the policy of the group. These pressure groups have more influence than individuals.

It is not necessary for the public to coerce public officials to do their will. Noncoercive models explain how public policy can reflect public opinion without a direct threat to the policy-maker. The two noncoercive models offered by Luttbeg are:

- **Believe-Sharing Model:** In this model, policy-makers are not acting to heed the desires of the electorate but are acting on their own beliefs. However, the lawmaker was elected because the lawmaker shares the same beliefs as his or her constituency. This model reflects the theory of some political scientists who maintain that elections are about the candidates' values and not about issues (which would be the rational actor model).
- **Role-playing model:** In this model, representatives act as their constituency's delegate. Lawmakers respond to policy decisions by anticipating the desire of the district. This is differentiated from the rational actor model because the lawmaker is not responding from pressure by the public, but is proactively producing policy that the representative believes his or her constituency desires.

Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe and Shapiro

Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe and Shapiro's book *Public Opinion* includes a chapter on "Public Opinion and Policymaking" which was co-authored with Lawrence R. Jacobs (Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 1999). In the chapter Glynn et al. present theories of the linkage between public opinion and policy that echo Luttbeg's models:

- **Political processes** – in which leaders are held accountable by elections to do the will of the people. Leaders have to anticipate public opinion in their decision-making in order to survive the next election.
- **Shared opinions** – the voters elect leaders who are similar to themselves in enough ways that the leaders share the opinions of those who elect them.
- **Social pressure** – leaders feel they have to vote the preferences of the constituents even if it is not what the leader would do on his or her own (delegate).
- **Interest groups** – Glynn et al. expand on Luttbeg's discussion of interest groups by discussing the theory of "democratic pluralism."

The theory of democratic pluralism is that over time and across all issues that arise, groups will exist so that public opinion will be fully represented. This would occur through existing groups and by new groups that would form as new issues or as segments of the

population who felt underrepresented began organizing them. The theory is that public opinion will be presented by these groups.

Critics of the pluralism theory note that some groups are more difficult to organize. Also, on issues of low salience to the general public, a motivated interest group can dominate political discussion. In addition, those with substantial wealth and other resources and have much to gain are motivated to organize and act. If there are no established groups to counteract, it is unlikely that a new group of unrepresented will have the same influence. If those who are well-off financially are more likely to organize their interests, then the public opinion from pluralism will have an upper-class bias.

Glynn further emphasizes that the role of class in limiting the influence of public opinion is by observing that policymaking is dominated by powerful elites. The connections that elites have in the policymaking arena, in addition to the money they can provide for electoral purposes, can thwart public opinion. The authors note that one of the surest ways that elites prevent public opinion from affecting policymaking is by keeping the issue off the public's agenda and changing policy with as low a profile as possible.

Public Opinion Constrains Policy

Glynn et al. posit three causal impacts of public opinion on policy: public opinion exerts strong pressure to direct government policy; public opinion is ignored in government policymaking; or public opinion constrains public policy.

The concept that public opinion constrains policy is based on the idea that some policy options will be unpalatable to the public despite other advantages. Most policies have a range of options available. The public may not be knowledgeable enough to separate the options in the most cases, but some options the public will not accept.

Sharp

Elaine Sharp adds to theories by examining sequential aspect of the linkage by looking at the continuing relationship after a policy is enacted (Sharp, 1999).

- **Thermostatic Sequence** – Public policy responds to public opinion, and then public opinion provides feedback in which public opinion adjusts to the policy change. Like a thermostat that's been adjusted when its too cold, the change may make it too hot. The public might respond to a progressive change by becoming more conservative on an issue.
- **Policy Learning Sequence** – As knowledge increases, both policy and public opinion respond to new information. A prime example of this sequence would be policies on global warming. Initially, scientists and environmentalists lobbied about global warming, but the public was unresponsive, uninterested and, perhaps, skeptical. However, as new information emerged, the public has become more aware and less skeptical, which encourages policy responses.
- **Path Dependence** – Once some policies have been enacted, the policy choices in that area are reduced. The policy choices are dependent on the first policy. In the current debate, it doesn't matter whether the U.S. should have invaded Iraq or not. The policy debate is on how what should be done now.
- **Solution Becomes the Problem** – This is related to the path dependence in that a once popular solution becomes institutionalized into the bureaucracy, so that when thermostatic effect changes against the policy, the bureaucratic institution becomes difficult to change.
- **Broken Thermostat** – In this case, the public does not appear to acknowledge the changes in policy and does not modify its request for more spending or tougher sanctions based on the change in policy.

Empirical Studies

There have been several attempts to measure the influence of public opinion on public policy. One of the first studies that examined the effect of public opinion on policy was by Miller and Stokes who examined Congress members votes versus their constituencies' opinions (Miller & Stokes, 1963).

After Miller and Stokes, there have been three major empirical studies on the influence of public opinion on public policy most often cited by authors in this field. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro examined public opinion and policy data for the United States from 1935 to 1979 (Page & Shapiro, 1983). Alan Monroe examined the relationship by using national surveys to compare public opinion and policy outcomes for 500 issues from 1980 to 1993 (Monroe, 1998). The third study used a different methodology. Stimson, MacKuen and Erickson examined the policy activity for the House, Senate, presidency and Supreme Court separately from 1956 to 1993. Their study adds election outcomes as an intermediary effect between public opinion and policy change (Stimson, Mackuen, & Erikson, 1995).

Miller & Stokes

The study by Miller and Stokes included interviews with incumbent Congress members, their nonincumbent opponent (if any) and a sample of constituents in 116 congressional districts. The survey included the Congress members' perception of their district's opinions as well as their own viewpoints on a series of topics. In essence, testing the difference between the coercive Rational Actor Model and the noncoercive Role Playing model in which members act as delegates and try to anticipate the desires of their constituency.

Miller and Stokes' findings were that Rational Actor model was an insufficient explanation as Congress members did not vote in accordance with the opinions of their constituency. While the representatives tended to vote based on their own policy preferences (fulfilling the Shared-Belief model), the members often believed they were acting on the desires of their constituency and therefore acting in the Role-Playing model. The authors point out that this indicates a communications breakdown between the Congress member and the district, but

the communications problems occur both ways as the district is mostly unaware of their Congress members' voting record.

The relationship between the public and Congress was different based on the policy being discussed. In the area of civil rights, the congress member often voted based on their perceptions of the districts' opinion. However, in the social welfare domain, the dominant model was the Political Parties model. Miller and Stokes posit that social welfare was the main differentiating factor between the two parties at that time. Parties recruited candidates who shared their viewpoint on social welfare and the public took their cues on candidates viewpoints based on party identification. If public views of social welfare changed, it was more likely to result in a change of Congress members than a change in the Congress members vote.

Robert Erikson reexamined Miller and Stokes data to look at other factors that might account for the discrepancy between public opinion and members voting (Erikson, 1978). What he found was that there was sampling and weighting problems with the data in which small number of constituents in some districts were give an inordinate amount of weight which causes variance problems in the statistical calculations. He also discovered that the party representativeness variable was suppressed by the influence of the electoral loser. The correlations between Democratic or Republican candidates increase when only winners are examined. As a corollary, the correlations go down when only Democratic or Republican losers are examined. In other words, winning party members are more similar than their party brethren running in opposing party strongholds. With this recalculation, Erikson found that political parties play an intermediating role in the relationship between public preferences and policy outputs. And when controlling for the party relationship, the direct effects of constituency opinions became significant in determining members voting behavior.

Page and Shapiro

The starting point of Page and Shapiro's book, *The Rational Public*, concerns the methodological implications raised by Converse in his work on "non-attitudes." Converse found that respondents on panel surveys often answered the same policy questions differently during different waves of the panel. Converse found that opinions varied randomly in direction and that respondents answer questions "as though flipping a coin" (Converse, 1970). Converse attributed the random responses to people have no real attitudes on the matter but felt obliged to give an answer during the survey. Converse questioned the validity of opinion surveys to address non-salient policies.

Page and Shapiro argue that while individual responses will vary, the variation that Converse found was statistically random such that by aggregation the variation will still fall around the mean of all respondents. They show that attitudes across surveys and time are stable except when there is true change in the population over a policy.

Page and Shapiro's methodology was to examine national survey questions that were asked more than once so that they could measure opinion change. After identifying opinion change, they checked for policy changes on the same issues (Page & Shapiro, 1992).

They found substantial congruence between opinion and policy especially when opinion changes were large and sustained and the issues were salient. An extraordinary event can cause a short term change in opinion but will not have the policy effect of a sustained change in opinion. For example, the arrest of Saddam Hussein had a short term impact on the approval of the War in Iraq but it was not sustained. Large and sustained changes in opinion will be noticed by lawmakers and will be hard to dismiss. Lawmakers will have to react to large and sustained changes in public opinion.

Their results showed that there was congruence between opinion change and policy change 66 percent of the time – and 90 percent of the time when opinion change was large and sustained. For directionality, their results showed that opinion changed before the policy which suggests that opinion changes are important causes of policy change.

In terms of Luttbeg's models, Page and Shapiro's results show policy-makers follow public opinion. However, the manner in which policy is affected by public opinion is not part of their study. Therefore while it seems implicit that Page and Shapiro's hypothesis might refer to the rational-actor model, there is nothing explicit in their research that would rule out the noncoercive models such as the share-beliefs leading to policy change.

Monroe

Monroe is cautious about Page and Shapiro's congruent methodology. First, he points out that there was statistically significant opinion change on only half of the issues they studied. Also, the congruency methodology can produce some erroneous results. He offers the following example: "Suppose that public support for increasing some government program drops from 90 percent to 80 percent. A reduction in that activity would be the congruent response, even though that would be at odds with the preferences of a large popular majority."¹

Monroe's methodology uses a consistency methodology in which the response from a survey at one point in time and compares the distribution of public opinion with the policy outcome. Monroe had used the same methodology in an earlier study of policies from 1960 to 1979 (Monroe, 1979).

He found that policy outcomes were consistent with the preferences of public majorities 55 percent of the time. Consistency was highest with foreign policy decisions with 67 percent

¹ Monroe, p. 9.

agreement between public opinion and policy. This marks a decline from an overall 63 percent consistency for the 1960-79 period.

The results showed that a key reason for policy not being consistent with public opinion is that there is a bias toward the status quo in the political process – that is, policy change is difficult due to the nature of United States political system. Monroe suggests that this difficulty in producing policy change increased over time and is the root cause of the decline in consistency over time. He hypothesizes that the divided government of the Reagan-Bush presidency and the increased ideological conflict are factors in the difficulty to produce policy changes.

Monroe confirms Page and Shapiro's finding that public salience is a key factor in producing policy change and opinion and policy congruence. Issues of high salience to the public will be addressed by lawmakers.

In terms of Luttbeg's model, Monroe finds recent evidence that the political party model might be contributing to the lessening congruence between opinion and policy. Ideological differences between the parties are mitigating the public's influence on policy-makers.

Stimson, MacKuen and Erickson

Stimson, MacKuen and Erickson used a different methodology for identifying public opinion. Instead of examining individual survey questions, the authors created a composite measure Domestic Policy Mood. The authors claim that the Mood is "the major policy dimension underlying expressed preferences over policy alternatives in the survey research record. It is properly interpreted as left vs. right – more specifically, as global preferences for a larger, more active federal government as opposed to a smaller, more passive one across the sphere of all domestic policy controversies."² To measure election outcomes, Stimson et al

² Stimson, MacKuen, Erikson (1995) p. 548.

measure seat turnover in each house. In measuring policy changes, the authors used congressional votes and categorized them broadly as whether the policy moved in a more expansive (liberal) direction or in a more conservative one. Therefore the policy variable is analogous to the national mood variable.

Their first-cut analysis for the House of Representatives shows that there is a statistically significant relationship between changes in public mood and public policy with a coefficient of 0.85 – meaning that a ten percentage point change in public mood produces a 8.5 percentage point change in public policy. This indicates that the House of Representatives is receptive to public opinion. However, there is not a statistical connection between public mood and election results in the House. This indicates that changes in public opinion do not affect election results. High incumbency reelection rates reduces the variability of the measure and other factors, like the midterm election factor, play a significant part which reduces the possibility that opinion changes effect election results. Putting election results in the same model as public opinion produces independent effects. Each percentage increase in the number of Democrats in the House increases the liberal agenda by 0.48. And there is a one-to-one ratio of opinion on policy when controlling for election changes.

The results for the Senate reflect the political reality. Conceptually, Senators should react less directly to public opinion than the House with its continuous elections. However, Senators do not enjoy the same incumbency reelection advantage the House members have. House members' districts tend to be politically homogenous, often set up through districting to be politically safe, while Senators have to be elected by their entire state. Senators will also face opponents with greater name recognition than house opponents. Therefore, they might be more likely to be concerned about the public mood.

Indeed, the first-cut analysis shows a 1.18 coefficient in the Senate for public opinion's effect on policy. And public opinion does influence election outcomes with a coefficient of 1.02 which means that every change in public mood is worth one senate seat. When election results and public opinion are both in the model, the election results hold a significant change in policy and public opinion becomes insignificant. In other words, public opinion produces change in the election which produces a change in policy.

The hypothesis of Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson is that there is a dynamic relationship between public opinion, elections and public policy. One of their findings is that House members anticipate public mood changes and can incorporate policy changes outside of election pressure. In the Luttbeg models, this would fit the Role-playing Model where the relationship is noncoercive but the lawmakers follow public opinion.

On the Senate side, the coercive force is more persuasive as policy changes are more from the result of election results than in the direct influence of public opinion. In the Senate, the rational actor model is the dominant model, but the political parties model is also present in how a change in party composition of the Senate changes the policy outcomes and public opinion affects electoral outcomes.

Comprehensive Overviews

Two recent studies have attempted to consolidate the various studies on the responsiveness of lawmakers to public opinion. Jeff Manza and Fay Lomax Cook examined the literature by the three different results of studies: the high impact of public opinion on policy; the low impact; and a contingent view of the impact of opinion on policy (Manza & Cook, 2002). Paul Burstein started with the assumption that public opinion affects policy but tried to find

answers in previous studies to the amount of impact and under what conditions did the impact occur (Burstein, 2003).

Manza and Cook

After reviewing the various studies, Manza and Cook cautiously concluded that public opinion affected policy “sometimes.” But they did feel that three conclusions could be drawn from the literature:

- Where measured public opinion expresses a coherent mood or view on a particular policy question in a way that is recognizable by political elites, it is more likely than not that policy will move in the direction of public opinion.
- The combination of contradictory public views on many key policy issues and the capacity of political elites to shape or direct citizen’s views significantly reduce the independent causal effect of public opinion.
- Although policy will tend to follow public opinion more often than not, there is sufficiently wide variation in the extent of responsiveness across different issues and different points in time to warrant increased scholarly attention to examining the institutional and political sources of variation.

The authors point out that although policy will tend to follow public opinion, there is still substantial room for politicians and policy entrepreneurs to maneuver policy in ways that are not visible to the public. For example, a prescription drug policy may sate the public’s desire for change while still benefiting the pharmaceutical industry.

Manza and Cook are comprehensive in their review and point out how various studies reflect each of Luttbeg’s coercive models by either the direct influence of public opinion on lawmakers or through the intercession of political parties or interest groups.

Burstein

Burstein starts from the premise that these three concepts are generally accepted: public opinion influences public policy; the more salient an issue to the public, the stronger the

relationship; and that the relationship is threatened by the power of interest groups, political parties and economic elites. He reviews the literature to determine five follow-up questions:

1. How much impact does public opinion have on public policy?
2. How much does the impact of opinion on policy increase as the importance of an issue to the public increases?
3. To what extent do interest groups, social movement organizations, political parties and elites influence policy even when opposed by public opinion?
4. Has government responsiveness to public opinion changed over time?
5. How generalizable are our findings about the impact of opinion on policy?

He attempts to answer these questions by reviewing a number of studies – most which do not address these questions directly. Only one question can he put numbers to, “how much impact,” where he finds that public opinion affects policy three-quarters of the time that its impact is gauged and opinion has a substantial impact at least a third of the time. However, a few years later, he questions this result by stating that impact of public opinion is estimated too high because non-salient issues don’t even get addressed in surveys, so there is no influence of public opinion on most issues (Burstein, 2006). His follow-up article does reinforce his conclusions on the second question. Salience has a large impact of the influence of public opinion on public policy. Highly salient issues will be addressed by lawmakers or there may be electoral consequences.

Interestingly, Burstein finds that the impact of public opinion remains substantial even when in opposition to powerful interest groups. However, he cautions that the paucity of data on this subject may not make this finding reliable. More research is needed on this subject. In fact, lack of studies lead to the answers to his fourth and fifth questions to be inconclusive.

Countering Arguments about Public Opinion

When considering the impact of public opinion on public policy, it is important to recognize the counterarguments. For this paper, three dissenting opinions are presented. The first two arguments are related. For George Bishop, much of public opinion is an artifact of the opinion polls that force people to answer questions that they don't think about in ways that force responses to a predetermined outcome (Bishop, 2005). John Zaller provides an explanation on how poll respondents make up their opinions by using the cognitive information available to them. Zaller argues that elites and the media have direct influence on providing these cognitive markers that lead to public opinion (Zaller, 1992). The last counterargument is from John Kingdon who posits that public opinion has only a minor influence on policymaking and that other political actors are much more influential (Kingdon, 2003).

Bishop

In his book, *The Illusion of Public Opinion*, George Bishop finds that unfortunately public opinion is defined as “what the polls says.” He argues that the polls are not producing an accurate reflection of public opinion because of methodological issues, such as forcing people to state their opinion when they are ignorant of the issue.

Bishop's model begins with the public ignorance of public affairs. The two inputs to the model are “question ambiguity” and the “question form, wording, and context.” These three elements add up to an illusion. Ask ignorant survey respondents an ambiguous question and Bishop argues you will get an answer that means nothing. In the same manner, ignorant respondents will use whatever information is provided in the question (form and wording) or previous questions (context) to provide an answer. This phenomenon will be discussed further in the survey methodology section of this paper.

Zaller

John Zaller in his book, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, also questions the validity of surveys in measuring public opinion (Zaller, 1992). Like Bishop, he believes that the average person does not have fixed opinions on most topics but will create opinions on the fly when asked. Opinion is based on the interactive effects of four types of variables: intensity of political communication, the person's attention to politics, their political predispositions (such as values), and the "accidental factors that make considerations momentarily salient to people, such as news reports or questionnaire construction."

Zaller's theory is based on four premises:

1. Individuals differ in the attention to politics and exposure to elite sources of political information;
2. People react critically to political communication only to the extent that they have knowledge;
3. People rarely have fixed attitudes on specific issues, but will construct preference statements as they confront each issue raised;
4. In constructing these preference statements, people make use of ideas that are most immediately salient to them.

The four axiom model reduces down to two main ideas. First, individuals do not process true attitudes in the usual sense of the term on most political issues, but a series of "considerations" that are rather poorly integrated. The second main idea is that an interaction between political awareness and political predispositions is fundamental to the process by which people use information from the political environment to form opinions. Those who are most politically aware tend to have a strong political predisposition and are more resilient to new information. Those who have a weak political predisposition and would be more easily swayed are also the hardest to reach with information about politics.

Kingdon

John Kingdon finds that policy-makers acknowledge that public opinion sometimes affects policy-making but often times do not. When an issue is being raised in public opinion polls as being important to be addressed, it will move up on the agenda of the lawmakers. However, Kingdon points out that often the reason an issue is raised in public awareness is because there are some politicians who have been campaigning for its cause and it has captured the public attention. In other words, public opinion did not put the item on the policy-maker's agenda, but the policy-maker had put in on the public's agenda.

Kingdon acknowledges the constraining aspect of public opinion. Some policy options will not be viable because the general public will be against it. On the positive side, potential public interest can help spur governmental action. Transportation deregulation occurred first in the airline industry because airline ticket prices and schedules would be more salient to the general public than trucking deregulation.

POWER OF SALIENCE

Three hundred years after Burke, the basic question about the relationship between public policy and public opinion remains the same. Do policy-makers act as delegates, making policies that reflect public opinion or act as trustees to use their best judgment to enact policy for the greater good? Certainly politicians have expressed both sides of the equation, sometimes condemning others for pandering to the polls and sometimes justifying their votes by claiming that their constituents want them to vote that way.

Since elections are the most direct form of public opinion expression, politicians will try to form policies that are most likely to lead them to be reelected. In which case, the criterion that public policy will be changed to reflect public opinion is that policy-makers must believe that

this issue is of importance to the electorate. If the policy-makers believe that issue is not important to the public, the policy-maker will not feel an obligation to base policy on public opinion.

In low salience policy areas, policy-makers often rely on interest groups to reflect public opinion in the democratic plurality model of expressing public opinion. While the general public may be unaware of the particular details of an environmental policy option, environmentalist groups may represent the interests of the environmentally friendly public versus a pro-business public reflected in the industry-group who may be affected by the environmental policy. A policy-maker may know that the particular policy has low salience, but when considered with other votes, the issue could be part of process that defines that policy-maker as pro-environment or pro-business.

Burstein summarized three concepts about the relationship between public opinion and public policy: public opinion influences public policy; the more salient an issue to the public, the stronger the relationship; and that the relationship is threatened by the power of interest groups, political parties and economic elites. All the studies emphasize the importance of salience to whether public policy follows public opinion.

ISSUES OF SALIENCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Capturing salience in a public opinion poll is difficult. Asking how important a particular issue is often generates an overstatement of salience as respondents generally will say that most items are important. However, if asked about the most important issue, many items will never make the list. The Gallup Poll³ asks almost every month “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” Table 1 below shows all answers that reached the

³ The survey results reported here were obtained from searches of the iPOLL Databank and other resources provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

12 percent threshold in the twenty-first century. The table shows the highest percent the issue received and the most recent month it reached that height.

Table 1: Most Important Problem Facing the Country Today

Issue	Highest Percentage	Date of Highest Percentage
Economy	58%	November 2008
Terrorism	46%	October 2001
War	38%	February 2007
Fuel/Energy	32%	June 2008
Unemployment	20%	February 2004
Illegal immigrants	19%	April 2006
Health Care	14%	July 2007
Disaster Relief	13%	September 2005
Social Security	13%	February 2005
Dissatisfaction with government	12%	December 2005
Education	12%	June 2001
Lack of energy resources	12%	May 2001

Prior to September 11, 2001, there was no predominant issue capturing 20 percent of the population. Since the terrorist attacks, there has seldom been a month in which one issue has captured one-third of all responses to this open-ended question. As shown in the figures below, terrorism remained one of the highest-priority problems until the Iraq War was begun. The economy was an important issue in early 2003 and became the dominant issue of the day starting in February 2008. Fuel prices and energy policy also had two spikes, the first in spring/summer of 2006 and again in the spring/summer of 2008 as in both years energy prices soared.

The issue of illegal immigrants is an interesting case study of interpreting this question. In the spring 2006, there were demonstrations throughout the country in support of illegal immigrants. The House of Representatives had passed a very anti-immigrant bill and the Senate was constructing its own bill which was less restrictive. The demonstrations raised the issue in importance to public, but did not change public opinion about the issue: the same number of

people said it was important problem, the same number felt that U.S. should do more to keep illegal immigrants out of the country, but the number of people who felt that immigration was good for the country increased slightly. (Kay, 2007)

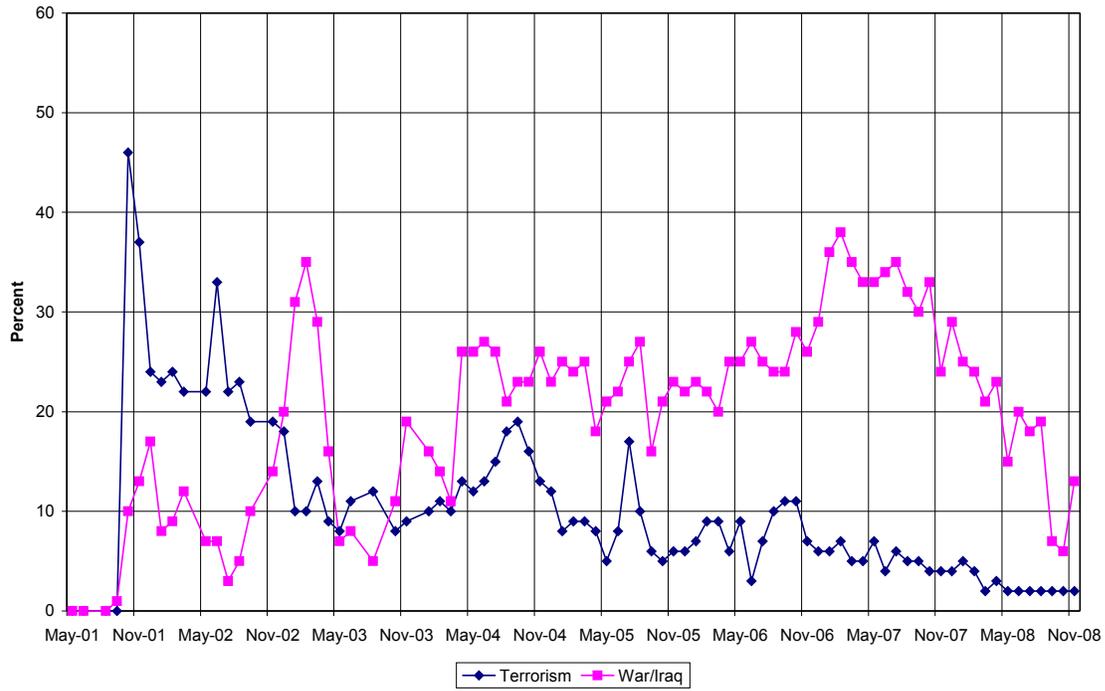
Health care issues arise periodically, usually when the other pressing issues such as war and economy are waning. The discussions raised during the prescription drug debate raised the issue in the public's consciousness.

Social Security was only above the 12-percent threshold for two months immediately following President Bush's State of the Union address where he made privatizing social security a priority. This minor bump shows the power and limits of the presidential bully pulpit to put an item on the national agenda.

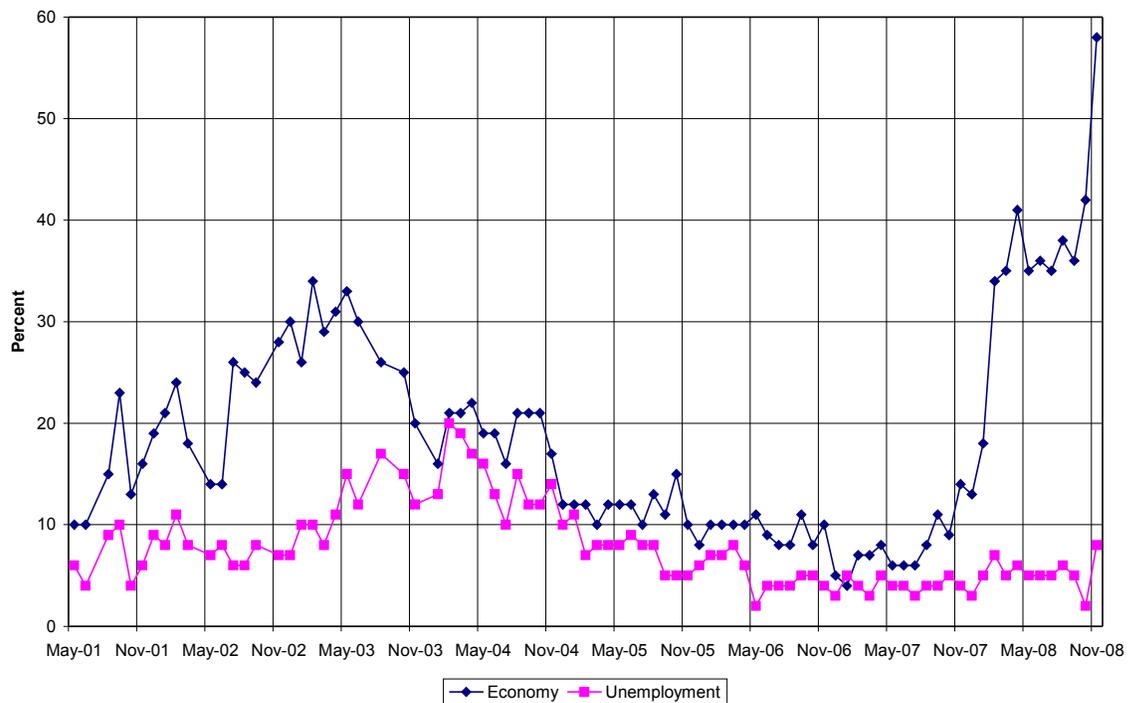
CONCLUSION

These findings show that the issues of great salience to the general public in the twenty-first century have all been thrust into the public's agenda by extraordinary events: terrorism, war, the economy, and fuel prices. The other issues that have risen into the public's consciousness, such as immigration, social security and health care, have done so after the issue was already on the political agenda. This supports Kingdon's assertion that public opinion does not drive agenda-setting but that policy-makers start the process. On the other hand, even though the public's acknowledgement of the problem as one of the most important problems occurs after the issue is already on the agenda, it is the dissatisfaction with the status quo by the public that also drives the issue and raises the stakes.

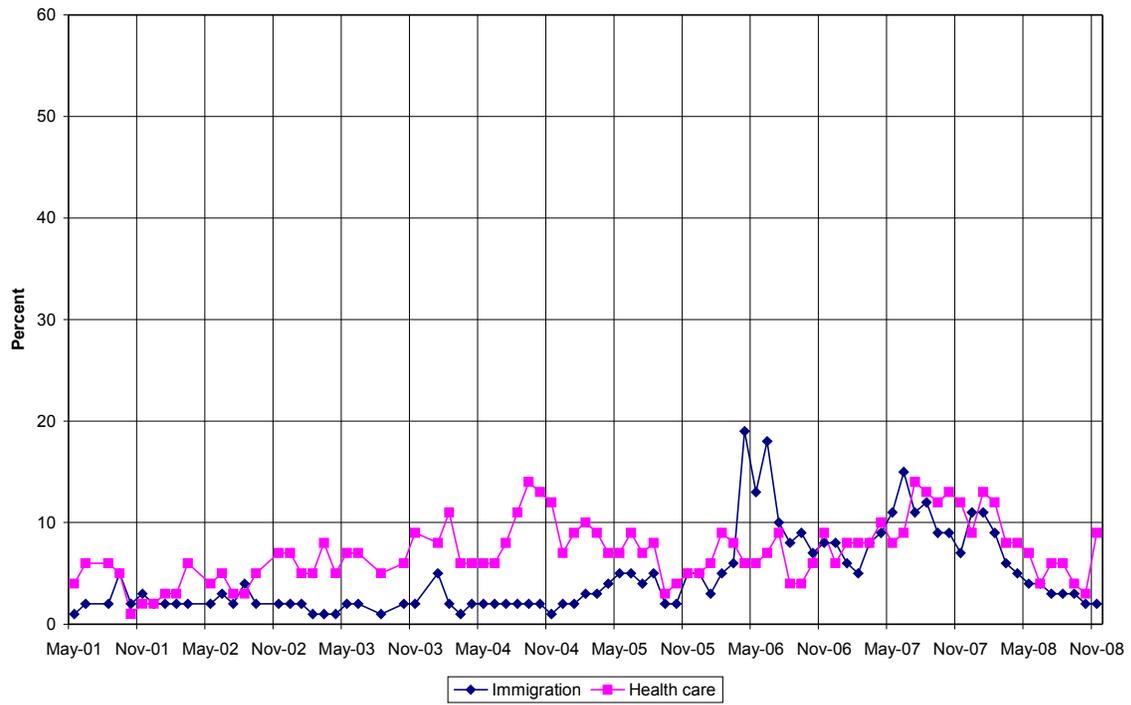
Terrorism and War



Economy and Unemployment



Immigration and Health Care



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