

Responsiveness gaps

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Abstract

Research on the opinion-policy link has consistently shown that there is a connection between public preferences and implemented policy, albeit biased towards the preferences of the affluent. The focus in the empirical analyses has been on how the probability of policy change varies with support for such change in different groups. When that correlation is high, the system is said to be responsive.

In this paper, we argue that we also need to look at the base level of policy implementation; not only the slope of the line, but also the intercept. It is conceivable that there are systematic biases against certain types of policy that cause such policy to be over- or undersupplied relative to preferences. Such bias can be present even when the system is responsive.

We combine survey data on a wide range of issues from over two million respondents with manually coded data on implemented policy in 43 countries over time on a range of issues, to investigate the question. In line with previous research, we too find that there is a positive relationship between opinion and policy. However, we also find evidence of a responsiveness gap: in almost all countries, the intercept is too low for some types of policy, and too high for others. Implemented policy is more economically conservative than what the public prefers, and too culturally liberal. The deficit cannot be explained by unequal responsiveness to high income groups, nor by fiscal responsibility on behalf of governments. The results imply that patterns of responsiveness can differ substantially between policy areas.

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1 Introduction

A central promise and justification of democracy is that it leads to the implementation of policies that citizens want. When that is the case, we say that the democracy is responsive (Powell 2004). Elections are the primary mechanism through which responsiveness is assured. According to canonical theory, rational parties seeking election will offer policy that appeals to the median voter (Downs 1957). Governments that fail to produce policy that is in line with the wishes of the electorate will be voted out, thereby securing correspondence between the preferences of the citizenry and implemented policy.

Political science research paints a mixed picture of the empirical reality. On one hand, there is on average a correspondence between public opinion and policy. More popular policies are more likely to be implemented, and policy also seems to react dynamically to changes in public opinion. On the other hand, governments also seem to be more responsive to the affluent, both in terms of reflecting their preferences, and in the implementation of policy (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Rosset and Stecker 2019; Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[a]). But as there (surprisingly) often is substantial overlap between the preferences of rich and poor, large parts of the citizenry often seemingly get what they want.

While this line of research has broken new ground, most existing approaches focus on differences in responsiveness between groups, primarily the affluent and less well off. The approach allows researchers to say whether one group is better represented than the other, but tells us little of situations in which all groups are poorly represented. To do so, we need to take characteristics of the policies themselves into account. In this paper, we therefore look not only at the correspondence of policy with opinion, but also the level of supply of each type of policy.

In order for the analysis to be substantially meaningful, we group policy proposals according to their content. We focus on the left/right and the GAL/TAN divisions, categorizing implementation of each policy as advancing a either a left-

ist or rightist agenda, respective a “Green, Alternative and Libertarian” agenda versus a “Traditional, Authoritarian and Nationalist” (Marks et al. 2006). Combining survey data on attitudes towards policy issues with hand-coded data on the implementation of the same issues in 43 countries, we find that while there indeed is a positive correlation between public opinion and implemented policy, there is also a consistent undersupply of certain types of policy.

In most countries, economically conservative and culturally liberal policies are implemented to a higher degree than preferred by the public - a responsiveness gap. Disentangling the GAL/TAN dimension further, it is clear that it is pro-immigration policy that accounts for most of the oversupply. Previous research has shown that while many are “left-authoritarian,” few mainstream parties offer that kind of platform (Brug and Van Spanje 2009; Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014). Our study highlights a similar mismatch, but between public opinion and policy.

Affluent voters support economically conservative and culturally liberal policies more than less well off voters, meaning that they are better represented, which is what previous research has found (Gilens 2012; Bartels 2008). However, implemented policy go beyond even what the most affluent quintile in our data desire. The responsiveness gap is thus not explained by unequal responsiveness to different voter groups. Instead, it is possible that the systematic bias to certain kinds of policy is driven not from below, from the citizenry, but from the political establishment itself, a proposal which has been theorized but not systematically tested (cf Bartels 2016; Mair 2009). Our findings thus point to a new avenue of research.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First we review the theoretical arguments for why we should or should not expect correspondence between public opinion and policy, and what could account for potential biases. In the data and methods we describe the surveys used, and the process of coding policy implementation. The following section presents the results, and the final section concludes.

2 Theory

Elections are the main mechanism for why we should expect correspondence between public opinion and government policy in democracies. They allow voters to select representatives whose programs most closely match their preferences, and remove governments that fail to provide good policy (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). Governments are continuously kept in check by recurring elections, and by simple replacement of representatives who do not act in the interest of voters the responsiveness of the legislative body is guaranteed.

But anticipation of elections also induces representatives to listen to public opinion - to be responsive - during their tenure. In countries with universal suffrage and political equality, the dual mechanisms of replacement and rational anticipation will lead policy to be aligned with the preferences of the median voter, at least in the long run (Downs 1957).

Empirical research gives support to this argument, showing that policy seems to be affected by changes in public opinion, especially on matters that are salient to the public (Burstein 2003; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). In a seminal article, Stimson, Mackuen and Erickson (1995, 560) concluded that “the government combines both short- and long-term considerations through both rational anticipation and compositional change to produce a strong and resilient link between public and policy.” The conclusion rested on a study in which public preference for more liberalism or conservatism was compared with the behavior of all branches of government. When the public’s mood shifted, the political system followed.

Subsequent studies have also looked at spending levels (Soroka and Wlezien 2010), and increasingly, implementation of concrete policy proposals. Martin Gilens combined american survey data on attitudes towards a host of policy proposals with data on their implementation four years later, and found a strong relationship. The more americans that favored policy change, the higher was the likelihood that change happened (Gilens 2012, 73). Studies in the same vein have since replicated this main result in many other contexts (Persson 2020; Rasmussen, Reher, and Toshkov 2019; Schakel and Hakhverdian 2018; Elsässer, Hense, and

Schäfer 2018).

Good representation can of course be argued to entail something more than simply following public opinion. Hannah Pitkin’s (1967) famous definition of responsiveness emphasized acting in the best interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them. What if there is public support for proposals that are not in the public’s best interest? Larry Bartels (2016) takes the example of the estate tax, which only affected a small sliver of the electorate, yet was deeply unpopular. Repeal of the tax is with the Gilens methodology coded as being consistent with public opinion, but might according to Bartels not be in the public’s interest. Even more problematic is the case of the Iraq war, where a key argument for the invasion was based on false information.

The counter-argument is that it is difficult to ascertain what each person’s best interests actually are, and that individuals might be against policies which they find unfair (such as the estate tax) even while they might benefit from them financially (Gilens 2012, 26). All else equal, it is preferable that representatives follow public opinion. A confused, shallow or inaccurate political discussion that makes it harder for citizens to know which policies best serve their interests is a true problem for democracy and violates Robert Dahl’s idea of “enlightened understanding” (Dahl 1989), but in this paper we treat it as separate problem. In this analysis, better correspondence between policy outputs and preferences entails better representation.

2.1 Unequal responsiveness

The main focus of the new literature on policy representation has however not been that policy follows opinion, but that governments seem to be more responsive to certain groups of voters than others. Gilens (2012, 1) stated that “the vast majority of Amcerians appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn’t adopt’ and have in other work argued that the American political system more resembles an oligarchy than a democracy (Gilens and Page 2014). Bartels (2016, 267) also find that “millions of americans have no

apparent influence on ... the fate of proposed policy changes”. This pattern of unequal responsiveness has also been replicated in many other countries (Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[a]; Schakel, Burgoon, and Hakhverdian 2020; Persson 2020; Rasmussen, Reher, and Toshkov 2019; Schakel and Hakhverdian 2018; Elsässer, Hense, and Schäfer 2018).

According to this research, the reason for why policy appears to correspond to the preferences of the median voter turns out to be largely non-causal. Less affluent voters get what they want only when their preferences align with the affluent. Even if that often is the case, the resulting “coincidental representation” is clearly problematic from a normative perspective, and there are many important issues on which the opinions of the different income groups diverge substantially (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2015).

While the pattern of unequal responsiveness to more affluent voters is robust and widespread, there is no consensus on the underlying mechanisms. As the field originated with studies on the United States, initial explanations for this bias tended to focus on the role of money in politics, given the importance of campaign financing and lobbying in the american context (Gilens 2012; Page and Gilens 2017). But as more and more studies from other contexts have shown a similar bias, it cannot be the entire explanation. Unequal responsiveness must stem from factors that are not unique to the United States.

Understanding of the causal mechanisms at play is important for the normative implications of unequal responsiveness, and for the analysis. Just as the correlation between the preferences of the median voter and policy has been argued to be accidental, it could be the case that affluent voters not are driving policy - they simply happen to agree with it more. If so, there might be a situation in which implemented policy deviates from what either group desires, but it will not be evident from comparisons of responsiveness between groups.

Economic affluence is the most obvious candidate that causes influence. Even if campaign finance laws are strict, the rich have more channels by which they can exert their will. It has been suggested that interest groups matter, (Gilens 2012),

but the issue is contested (Klüver and Pickup 2019; Bevan and Rasmussen 2020). Where corruption is rampant, economic resources can also be turned into political clout directly, through bribes (Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[b]). But even in the absence of corruption, affluent citizens tend to participate more in politics. (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2013). Representatives thus have greater incentive to cater to their interests.

Others have instead argued that the explanation is not so much that affluent citizens affect policy, but that elected politicians themselves are unrepresentative of the wider population. It is widely documented that representatives globally are richer and more educated than their constituents (Carnes and Lupu 2016). If they implement policy that they prefer personally, it will not be similar to the one preferred by the average citizen (Rosset and Stecker 2019). A lack of descriptive representation leads to a deficit of substantive representation.

Yet another line of thought suggests that there is little connection between public opinion and policy at all. Peter Mair (2009) argued that political parties have two main functions. To be *responsive*, that is, represent their voters, but also to be *responsible*, to coordinate the institutions of government and implement realistic policy. Parties have according to Mair turned away from the former function and focused on the latter, competing as governors rather than representatives. Partly this phenomenon is a result of a professionalization of politics. Individuals can now have an entire career within the party, in which a position in government is seen as the crowning achievement. As a result, representatives will be out of touch with the desires of the electorate as a whole (Mair 2009).

But Mair also raises the possibility that national political systems as a whole have less scope of action than what used to be the case. Governments are bound by international agreements and organizations, often entered by predecessors, such as the WTO or the EU (Mair 2009; Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[b]). Since the 1990s, central banks in many countries have gained greater independence, taking monetary policy, an important instrument, out of the hands of governments. Here we might also suspect that not only does this phenomenon lead to less responsive-

ness to public opinion, it also bias it in a specific way. Central bank independence generally means that control of inflation becomes the central objective of monetary policy, not fighting unemployment, which tends to be a more important goal for left-leaning governments.

Similarly, a trend towards increasing judicialization of politics has also been observed, where political decisions increasingly are subject to judicial review. It has been especially notable in the area of individual rights and freedoms, but also in relation to international organizations (Hirschl 2008). It could be the case that judicial decisions serve to make the law correspond better to current public opinion. But there are also undoubtedly instances in which judicial organs have used the law to expand on policy, further than intended by the original legislators. The most important example is the European Union, whose competencies have increasingly been expanded by the European Court of Justice's interpretation of the international agreements that underlie the cooperation (Tallberg 2000). There are signs that the court is affected by political signals and balances of power, but it clearly also exerts some independent influence, and can use conflicts among member states to expand its own competencies (Larsson and Naurin 2016). On the other hand, empirical studies have found little evidence that factors such as political institutions, globalization, or the political behavior of citizens moderate the degree of inequality in responsiveness (Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[b], forthcoming[a]).

2.2 Patterns of representation

There is thus one major reason for why representatives and parties can be expected to be responsive to voters - the electoral mechanism - and several arguments for why the electoral connection might be broken, or at least skewed to a subset of the electorate. But depending on which causal mechanisms that are at play, the weakened link might give rise to different patterns in the data.

As mentioned earlier, the standard approach in the literature, pioneered by Martin Gilens, is to primarily look at policy change or implementation, regard-

less of the content of policy. For instance, Gilens shows that the slope for the preferences of the 90th income percentile is steeper than that of the 10th, meaning that probability of policy change increases more when the affluent increase their support of change. But even when there is near unanimous support for change among the affluent, there is still just over 50 percent chance of change happening (Gilens 2012, 77). Gilens attributes the difference to a status quo bias.

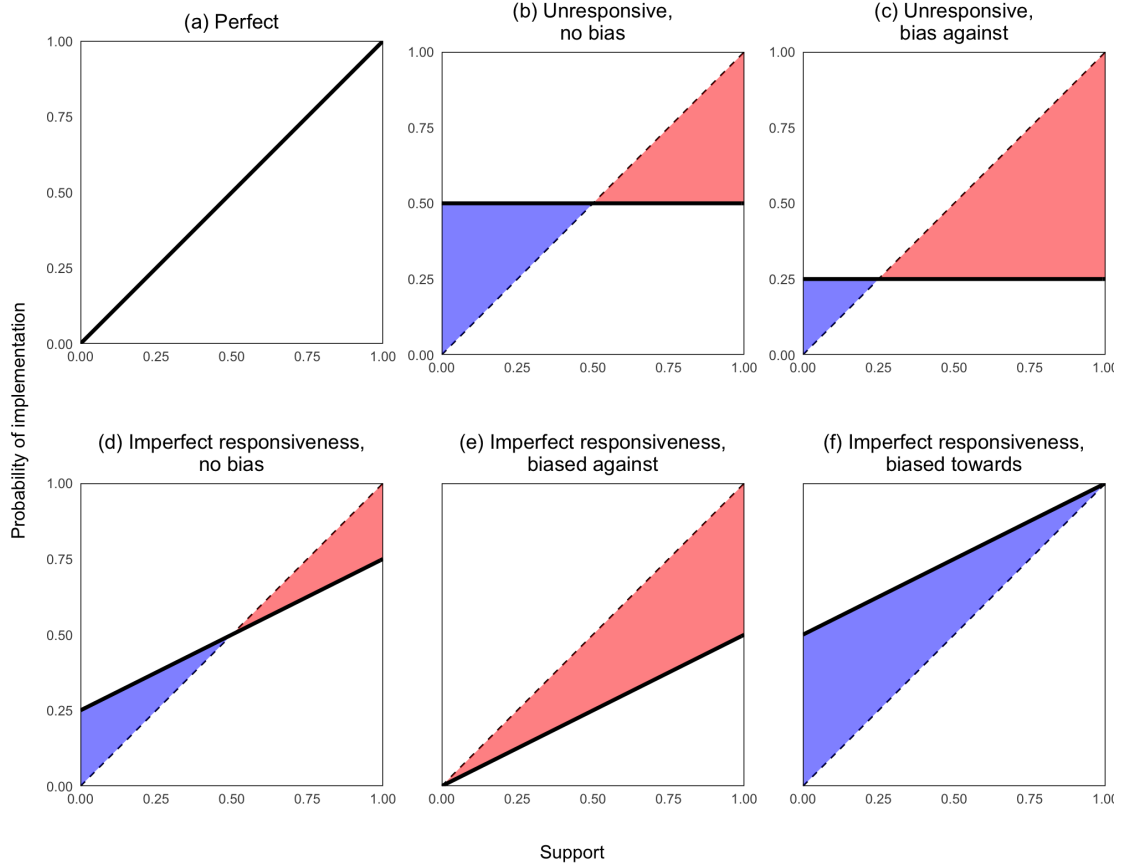
Such bias could be seen as inertia in the system - political change takes time. But it could also be a political outcome in itself. Non-change is often just as important as change, and upholding a status quo that goes against the preferences of a majority hurts representation. A notable example discussed by Larry Bartels (2016) is the minimum wage. Not raising the minimum wage equals, accounting for inflation, a choice to lower the purchasing power of it.

However, in Gilens' analysis, the focus is on change, not on what change or status quo represents. In our analysis, we will also assign a "direction" to each policy, meaning which type of policy agenda that is advanced by implementing the policy. For instance, if the proposal is to increase the progressivity of taxation, we code implementation of the proposal as "leftist policy". Not implementing the proposal is therefore coded as "rightist policy".

With this direction, it is not only the slope of responsiveness that matters, but also the intercept. Figure 1 shows six possible theoretical patterns of representation, where the x axis of each graph shows the level of public support for a proposal, and the y axis shows the level of implementation. Here we have only assumed a linear relationship between preferences and implementation, whereas it could also make sense to have a sigmodial or step-shaped function, where a policy never is implemented when support is below 50 percent, and always when support is above. Moreover, it could be argued that a proposal cannot be partly implemented.

We however argue that it is reasonable to think of implementation in a more gradual sense, as a sliding scale of probability of implementation. First, in the real world it is often difficult to ascertain what the true level of support for a

Figure 1: Six patterns of responsiveness



proposal actually is. Opinion polls have inherent uncertainty due to sampling issues, and might be biased because of low response rates. When interpreting polls, representatives can thus generally be more certain that a proposal has majority support the larger the majority is. Second, policy that deviates from majority opinion is a bigger break with good representation if the majority is large. If the opinion is equally split between support and non-support, the share of the electorate that will be satisfied with the outcome is the same regardless of policy. If a proposal instead has universal support, implementing or not implementing the policy leads to either 100 or 0 percent congruence.

We therefore conceive of perfect representation as resembling panel a in Figure 1, where the probability that a policy proposal will be implemented equals the share of support it has in the electorate. The other five panels show different deviations from this ideal. In panel b implementation probability is uncorrelated

with public support - the line is flat, indicating an unresponsive political system. But there is no bias towards any set of policies: all policies have a 50 percent chance of being implemented, which means that some proposals are undersupplied relative to demand, and others oversupplied. In panel c, there is also no responsiveness, but here there is also a bias against the entire set of policies: the line is below 50 percent, which means that there is more undersupply than oversupply.

In panel d there is no bias - proposals with 50 percent support have a 50 percent probability of implementation, and there is also responsiveness, but it is imperfect - the slope coefficient is less than 1. This pattern could be consistent with a scenario in which representatives listen to public opinion, but perceive it imperfectly, adding random variation.

In panels e and f the slope coefficient is the same, but there is bias against respective towards the entire set of policies. Looking at panel e, there is responsiveness, meaning that more popular proposals are more likely to be implemented, but there is always less of the policy than the public wants. This pattern is consistent with a scenario in which there are institutional features that make some types of policy more likely - for instance an independent central bank that prevents governments from pursuing an expansionary monetary policy, regardless of public opinion. But it could also be the result of unequal responsiveness, in which a more influential group - the affluent - call the shots. If we then produce separate plots for the affluent and others, we should expect to find that the line for the affluent falls on the diagonal, and the line for the rest far below.

These theoretical patterns thus help us distinguish between various forms of impediments to good representation. It is for instance entirely possible that there is responsiveness, and also that the slope coefficient for the preferences of one group of citizens is higher than that of another, but at the same time, there still is a bias against both.

One of the few existing studies that uses a similar approach is the one by Jeffrey Lax and Justin Phillips (2012) on the connection between public opinion and policy in American states. They find that there is a connection: more popular

policies are more likely to be implemented. However, by also classifying policies as liberal (for instance ban assault weapons) or conservative (for instance allow concealed weapons), they are able to show that state governments tend to be over-representative: policy is too conservative in states with conservative public opinion, and too liberal in states with a more liberal public opinion.

Studies that only look at the relationship between support for proposals and their implementation cannot distinguish between these scenarios. To conduct an analysis of this type, proposals must be possible to place along a dimension. As mentioned above, we will investigate proposals related to two dimensions: the standard economic “left/right” dimension, but also the “GAL/TAN” scale.

Our research questions are thus to what extent policy corresponds to public opinion, and if there is imperfect representation, whether there is any systematic bias towards any particular type of policy.

3 Data and methods

Studies of responsiveness have used a variety of methodological approaches. They usually involve looking at public opinion as measured through surveys, but there is considerable variation on the response side: attitudes of representatives (either ideological self-placement or on specific issues (Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[a])), expert judgements of government positions (Rosset and Stecker 2019), spending levels (Wlezien and Soroka 2012), and implementation of policy (Gilens 2012; Rasmussen, Reher, and Toshkov 2019).

We use the latter approach, and compare public opinion with corresponding data on implementation of specific policy proposals (which however include proposals to increase or decrease spending). We include 43 countries in the sample: the EU member and candidate countries, plus the remaining OECD member countries.

3.1 Independent variable: Support for policy proposals

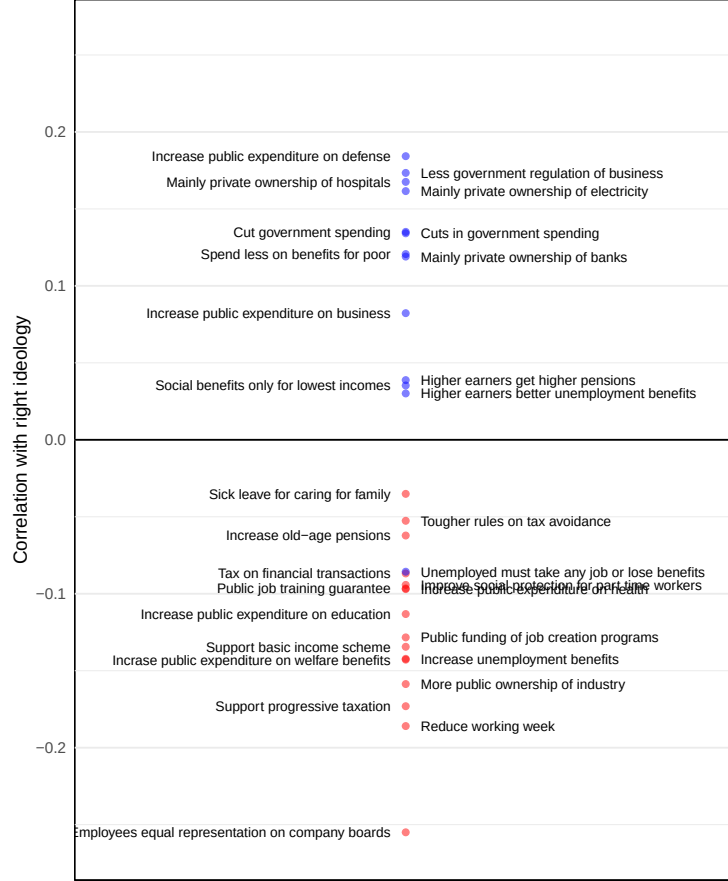
Our main independent variable is support for specific policies among the surveyed respondents, standardized across response scales to range from 0 (no support) to 1 (complete support). Data is collected from a number of cross-country surveys: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), Eurobarometer (EB), European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and the World Values Survey (WVS). Most questions have therefore been asked in several countries.

We have selected from the issues available in the surveys those related to two main political dimensions: the economic left-right dimension, and the cultural GAL/TAN dimension. Issues on the economic dimension are coded as indicating support for a “leftist” position, meaning pro-state, pro-redistribution, pro-equality. A “rightist” position instead implies less regulation, less redistribution, more inequality. For some but not all issues, we are able to investigate the correspondence between our coding of the issue and support for the issue among respondents that self-identify as “left” or “right”. In Figure 2 we can see that in general our coding matches with the patterns of support among respondents, with one notable exception: The proposal to take away unemployment benefits for those who refuse to take any job is more popular among respondents who self-identify as left, while we have coded the proposal as right.

On the GAL/TAN dimension, we code as pro-GAL those proposals that are pro-environment, for social justice and against discrimination, pro multiculturalism and immigration. TAN proposals are those that are for traditional morality, for the nation state, for law and order. Here we have no corresponding self-placement on the GAL/TAN spectrum, but issues coded by us as being TAN proposals are more popular with respondents that self-identify as right, while GAL policies are more popular on the left.

Some questions are concrete proposals, such as “Employers who hire illegal workers should be punished more severely”. Others ask about the respondent’s

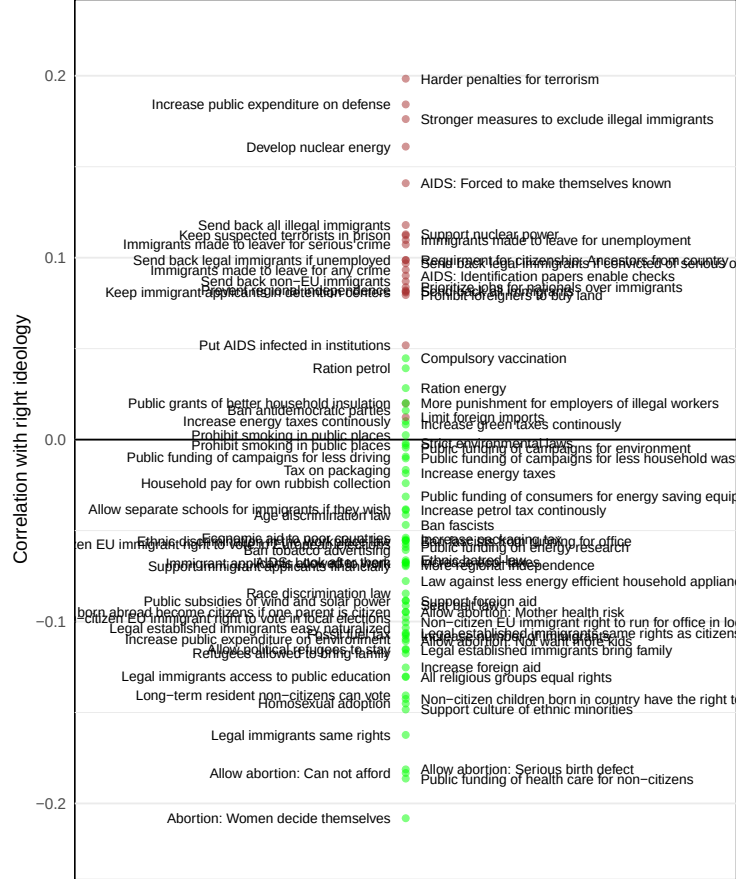
Figure 2: Correlation between respondents' ideological self-identification and support for policy proposals. Red proposals are coded as leftist policy, blue as rightist.



opinion on an issue; when the issue can be tied to a specific policy, we interpret a positive sentiment as support for the policy. Others ask about an adjustment of the level of something, most commonly spending. A full list of the included questions, and how they have been coded, can be found in the Appendix.

We include also those proposals which already have been implemented, such as support for progressive taxation or abortion. Some other studies have excluded them, motivated with a focus on policy change. However, we believe that this is mostly an issue of question wording, as questions also can be framed as removing a policy. For instance, asking a Swede about support for abortion (which is allowed in Sweden) should not be qualitatively different from asking about the proposal

Figure 3: Correlation between respondents’ ideological self-identifications and support for policy proposals on the GAL/TAN spectrum. Green proposals are coded as GAL policy, brown as TAN.



to ban abortion, even though the policy would be coded as already implemented in the first case and not in the second. Moreover, restricting responsiveness to a question of policy change skews the analysis theoretically, since some groups might benefit more from the status quo than others. Keeping the status quo is thus just as much an expression of a political agenda as is changing it.

3.2 The dependent variable: Policy implementation

The main dependent variable is policy implementation after five years, 0 or 1. 1 indicates that the policy was implemented (or kept in place), whereas 0 indicates

that the policy was not implemented at the end of the period. The mean value of this variable is 0.59, meaning that 59 percent of the policies asked about were implemented five years after the question was asked.

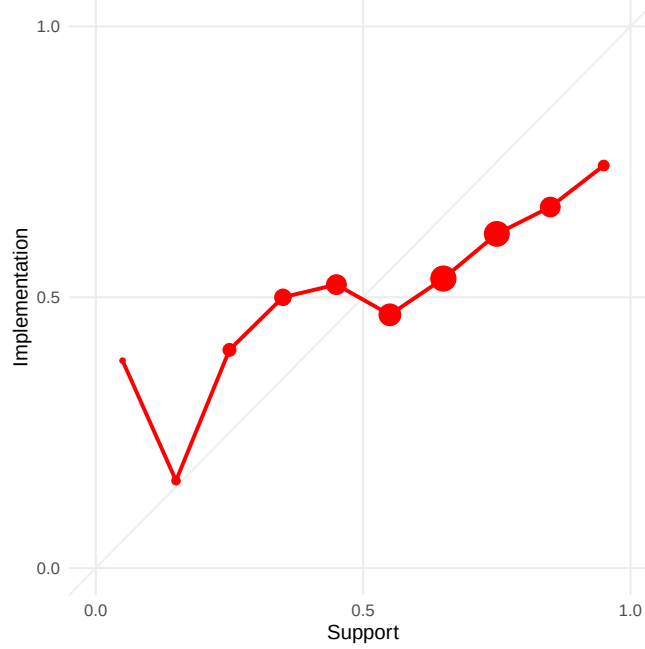
For questions that asked about changes in levels of something, such as spending, retirement age, number of immigrants, and so on, we did not use any thresholds for what constitutes a substantial change. Any change, even small ones, was registered as implementation of the policy, due to the difficulty in determining what constitutes an important or substantial change. The only exception is that spending was counted relative to GDP. Spending that increased in absolute terms, but decreased in relation to GDP were counted as decreases.

In our analyses, we will weight all issues equally, which is a less than ideal situation. Most voters would probably prefer having their preferred tax policy implemented over two marginal policies. But in order to take this factor into account, we would need detailed saliency measures for each survey that go beyond broad categorization such as “redistribution” or “the economy”, which we do not have.

4 Results

We begin by looking at the simple correlation between opinion support and policy implementation. Are policy changes that are supported by larger proportions of the electorate implemented to a higher degree? Figure 4 shows that the answer, on average, is yes. The figure shows the average level of implementation for proposals with different level of support, grouped in 10 categories (0-10 percent support, 10-20 support, and so on). Proposals with support from more than 60 percent of the respondents are on average implemented more than 50 percent of the time, whereas those with less support for the most part are implemented less than half the time. In 56 percent of the country-issue-year observations there is congruence between opinion and policy, meaning that the policy is implemented if at least 50 percent support the issue, or is not implemented when the issue has less support.

Figure 4: Policy change depending on opinion support (grouped in 10 categories). Size of circles indicate number of issues.



However, whether this indicates good or bad responsiveness is not clear. Proposals with near universal support - over 80 percent - are only implemented in about 68 percent of the cases. And universally reviled proposals (with less than 20 percent support) are still implemented 26 percent of the time. So while the correlation is positive, it is possibly weaker than what should be desired.

The relationship between opinion support and implementation holds also while controlling for basic confounders with regression. In Table 1 we first show the bivariate relationship, and then control for country and year fixed effects, then issue fixed effects, and then also add a control for whether the policy was already implemented when the survey question was asked. In all models, there is a positive and statistically significant association between support for the proposal and it being implemented after five years.

Model 3 allow us to rule the alternative explanations that some issues by nature are more popular, and also happen to be implemented more often. The inclusion of issue fixed effects mean that the remaining correlation is driven by variation within proposals, between countries and years. A given proposal has a higher

Table 1: Regression analysis: Opinion support and implementation

	Implementation			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Support	0.452*** (0.047)	0.471*** (0.049)	0.443*** (0.070)	0.208*** (0.057)
Status quo				0.691*** (0.018)
Constant	0.274*** (0.030)	0.073 (0.154)	0.292*** (0.075)	0.359*** (0.060)
Year FE	No	Yes	No	No
Country FE	No	Yes	No	No
Issue FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,933	2,933	2,933	2,933
Adjusted R ²	0.030	0.077	0.357	0.580

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

likelihood of being implemented in a country where support for the proposal is higher. Model 4 furthermore demonstrates that while one part of congruence is driven by the fact that already implemented proposals have a much higher likelihood of remaining in place as well as being more popular, it does not account for the entire relationship. Even when controlling for implementation status at the time when the survey question was asked, there remains a positive association between opinion support and policy implementation, corroborating a main finding from previous research (c.f. Rasmussen, Reher, and Toshkov 2019; Burstein 2003; Gilens 2012).

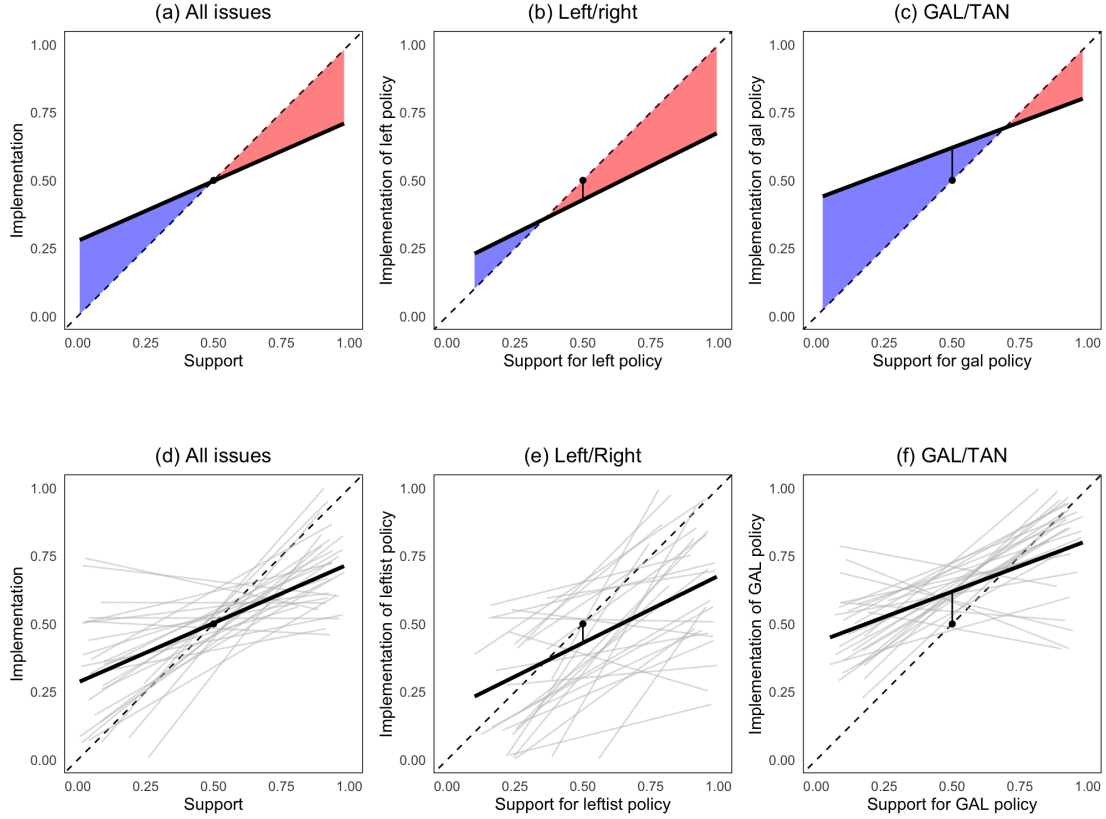
4.1 The slope and intercept of responsiveness

The average level of responsiveness could however mask important variation between issues. For instance, if policy follows opinion when the public wants more right-leaning policy, but never when it wants left-leaning policy, to say that there is responsiveness half the time gives a distorted view. We therefore now turn to the analysis of proposals coded according to whether they imply more or less left-leaning policy, and more or less GAL-leaning policy.

In Figure 5 we plot the predicted implementation of left-leaning proposals on the economic/redistribution dimension. The figures are based on regressions with implementation status of the issue as dependent variable, and public opinion support as the only independent variable. A shaded area below the diagonal line means that there is undersupply of the policy; shaded areas above indicate oversupply. The marker in the middle of each graph marks the theoretical pivot point for a pattern of responsiveness with no bias. Regression lines that pass above the point have bias towards the type of policy; lines that pass under have bias against the policy.

Panel a includes all issues and is included as a reference. Here we see a pattern of imperfect responsiveness, but with little bias - the slope is positive but smaller than 1, and the middle of the line is close to the theoretical pivot point. But when we in panel b instead look at implementation of leftist policy, the pattern is

Figure 5: Predicted implementation of policies with different levels of support. Top row shows main relationship: bottom row includes regression lines for individual countries with at least 50 issues.



different. While the slope is similar to the first graph, the regression line is more often below the diagonal, which indicates bias against the type of policy. While more popular leftist proposals have a higher chance of being implemented than less popular proposals, there is generally less implementation of leftist policy than what is desired by the electorate.

In panel c, we see the opposite pattern: The slope is the same, but the regression line passes over the theoretical pivot point, meaning that there is positive bias towards the policy. There is more GAL policy implemented than the electorate desires, and too little TAN policy.

In all three graphs, the slopes are positive, which leads to a conclusion that there is a degree of responsiveness in the system. However, they also reveal that

it is not the whole story: there also seems to be systematic “bias” against some types of policy, and positive bias towards other types of policies.

While the regression lines in panels a-c includes both within- and between-country variation, the relationships are not driven by between-country variation. Panels d-f of Figure 5 also display regression lines fitted within each country (only countries with at least 50 country-year-issues included), and in general, they resemble the main relationship. Scatterplots that show which specific issues that fall above and below the diagonal are included in the appendix, one for left-right issues and one for GAL/TAN issues.)

To more formally test the statistical significance of these deviations we run regressions where both dependent and independent variables have 0.5 subtracted from them. In the regression table, an intercept of 0 thus means that the regression line passes through the theoretical pivot point, and the p-value of the intercept constitutes a test of whether the bias is significantly different from zero. The results are presented in Table 3.

The numbers in the table correspond to panels a-c in Figure 5, but the point of interest here are the numbers for the intercepts. We see no bias for all issues in model 1, a statistically significant negative bias against leftist policy in model 2, and an even stronger positive bias towards GAL policy in model 3. Through integration we can calculate the area between the regression lines and the diagonal: a higher value means a worse match between preferences and policy. The number is highest for GAL-TAN issues

These results are in line with findings from previous research that has shown that representatives tend to be less in favor of redistribution and more economically conservative than their voters (Rosset and Stecker 2019; Lupu and Warner, forthcoming[a]). And regarding the GAL/TAN dimension, Figure 8 in the appendix shows that the public in general is more supportive of harsher penalties for terrorism and crime than what is reflected in policy. The opposite is true for immigration and the rights of political minorities: immigration policy seems to be too generous compared to the wishes of the electorate, on general.

Table 2: Regression analysis: Slope and intercept

	All issues	Leftist policy	GAL policy
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Support	0.440*** (0.045)		
Support (leftist)		0.497*** (0.083)	
Support (GAL)			0.375*** (0.050)
Constant	-0.002 (0.010)	-0.072*** (0.018)	0.120*** (0.011)
Area off diagonal:	0.140	0.136	0.179
Net over-under:	-0.002	-0.072	0.120
Observations	3,019	1,108	1,979
Adjusted R ²	0.029	0.031	0.026

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

It has previously been argued both by politicians and commentators that the political establishment has pushed an agenda of multi-culturalism and open borders on a less than enthusiastic public (c.f. Goodhart 2017; Dahlström and Esaiasson 2013). Our results give further support to that line of argument.

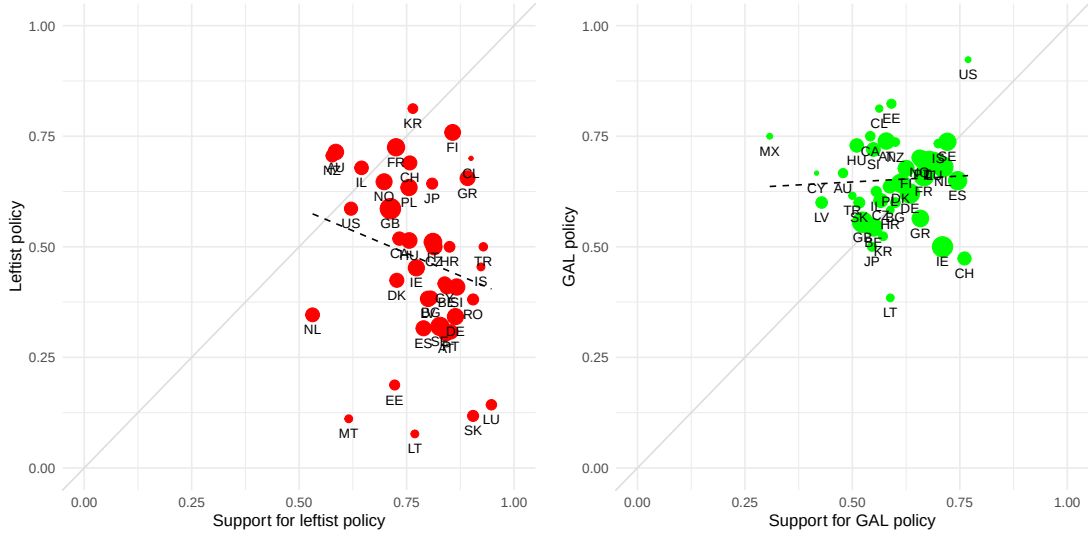
Taken together, the results also give a new perspective of the results from voter research, which has found large groups of “left-authoritarians,” who combine leftist economic views with conservative cultural attitudes (Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Brug and Van Spanje 2009). Scholars have noted that this combination is more common among voters than among parties, where progressivism/conservatism on economics and culture tend to be correlated. To that we can add that there is a similar gap between public opinion and policy. A possible explanation for our result could possibly be the lack of parties offering that particular combination of policies.

If we instead look at the relationship between support and implementation averaged within countries, we see that the positive relationship between opinion and policy holds here as well: Countries where the public desires more left-leaning policy also sees more left-leaning policy implemented. Nevertheless, there is also a clear pattern of undersupply of popular left-leaning policy. The x axis shows the proportion of issues for which there is majority support for left-leaning policy, and the y axis shows the proportion of left-leaning proposals implemented. France is the country that places closest to the diagonal, indicating that the supply of leftist policy matches the demand for it. In contrast, in Slovakia and Luxembourg, the public expressed support for the leftist position on almost all issues, but very few were actually implemented.

The US case is interesting, given the prominent role it has received in the field, and the focus on the influence of the affluent (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012). In the left/right issues included in our sample, US respondents are on average more to the right than most countries. The fact that american voters are less averse to inequality is discussed by Larry Bartels (2016), and it can be discussed whether these attitudes themselves are symptomatic of a tilted political discourse. But

as mentioned previously, our focus is on the correspondence between opinion and policy, and in this case, the correspondence for the US is good.

Figure 6: Average support and implementation of leftist proposals, respective GAL proposals, countries with at least 10 issues



For GAL/TAN issues, we find more countries above the diagonal than below, meaning that there is more GAL policy and less TAN policy than desired, but the imbalance is not as one-sided as on the left/right dimension. In some countries the opposite is true, for instance Ireland. While only a small minority of Irish respondents agreed with the statement that abortion should be allowed because a couple does not want more kids, significant percentages have been in favor of abortion when there is serious risk of birth defects or to the mother’s health. Already in 1979 49 percent agreed with the Eurobarometer statement that “women should be free to decide for themselves in matters concerning abortion.” The almost complete ban on abortion, until repealed in a referendum, might thus have been a relatively rare example of oversupply of TAN policy.

These findings both reinforce and nuance existing research. There are clear signs of both congruence and reponsiveness, but also indications of systematic bias in that certain types of policies are less likely to be implemented.

4.2 Can the oversupply of right-leaning and GAL policy be explained by the preferences of the affluent?

We have seen that implemented policy tends to be too economically conservative, and too culturally liberal. These attitudes are more common among the affluent and educated, and their preferences generally correlate better with political outcomes. In related research (Persson & Sundell 2021) we show that responsiveness is higher to more affluent voters, replicating a pattern from previous research. Can their influence account for the oversupply of certain kinds of policy?

If so, we should expect a smaller or no bias in policy relative to the preferences of the affluent. In Table 3 (models 1 and 2) we perform a similar analysis as above, but now regress implementation of leftist policy on support for leftist policy among the quintile with highest incomes, and separately, on support among the quintile with lowest incomes. The results show that the slope is steeper for the rich, and the intercept is also closer to the midpoint. For the affluent, the bias is negative, indicating undersupply, but it is not statistically significant. For the middle three quintiles, and the quintile with the lowest incomes, the undersupply is statistically significant.

The mismatch between preferences and policy is therefore partly, but not completely, explained by outsize influence of the affluent. If we, as is sometimes portrayed in the literature, conceive of politics as a tug-of-war between those well off and the rest, the regression line for the affluent should reasonably be a bit above the theoretical pivot point. For GAL policy, we can again observe decreasing responsiveness and more bias as we move down the income scale, but there is also here bias even relative to the most affluent's preferences.

We cannot rule out that the very very rich - the top 1 or top 0.1 percent - have even more economically conservative and culturally progressive preferences, which they then impose on policy. If the explanation for why the affluent generally are better represented is that they tend to participate more in conventional politics, through voting, contacting representatives and so on, it is reasonable to look at the broader group. But if the most likely mechanism is that they use their economic

Table 3: Regression analysis: Opinion support and implementation, income percentiles

	Left policy			GAL policy		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Support (top 20)	0.701*** (0.086)			0.491*** (0.051)		
Support (middle 60)		0.633*** (0.090)			0.374*** (0.051)	
Support (bottom 20)			0.544*** (0.090)			0.283*** (0.051)
Constant	-0.033 (0.018)	-0.049* (0.019)	-0.050* (0.020)	0.101*** (0.011)	0.120*** (0.011)	0.129*** (0.011)
Area off diagonal:	0.078	0.098	0.12	0.147	0.180	0.203
Net over-under:	-0.033	-0.049	-0.050	0.101	0.120	0.129
Observations	858	858	858	1,946	1,955	1,953
Adjusted R ²	0.071	0.053	0.040	0.045	0.027	0.015

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

resources to directly influence parties and representatives, the focus should be on the very elite. It is however impossible for us to study the truly super rich using conventional surveys. Even if they would answer surveys to the same extent as others, a survey with 1000 respondents would on average only have one respondent from the top 0.1 percent of the income distribution, which would make a too small sample to draw inference from. Nevertheless, the same limitation applies to all other previous studies on unequal responsiveness.

Remaining potential explanations for the bias could be that it is in line with the ideology of representatives. However, existing theories of how representatives' characteristics affect policymaking tend to focus on the fact that they are wealthier and more educated, but high incomes in itself is clearly not a sufficient factor. If specific characteristics of representatives explain why they pursue policy, it must be something above and beyond their status as belonging to the more affluent in society.

4.3 Are governments more responsible than responsive?

A possible systemic explanation for why certain kinds of policies are implemented to a higher degree than what is warranted is the idea of Peter Mair (2009) that parties are focusing on “responsibility” in government, rather than responsiveness. For instance, this could entail abstaining from popular policies, if they are fiscally irresponsible. In surveys of the kind used here, the questions are generally about the proposal in isolation, without reference to alternative costs or budgetary effects.¹ Survey respondents therefore don't have to make sure that the proposals they support add up in a balanced budget. Governments do, at least if they are responsible.

As a crude test of this proposition, we have coded issues according to whether they are likely to lead to increased or decreased expenses or incomes for the state,

1. In fact, we have excluded questions where there is conditionality, such as exchanging one tax for another “so that you don't have to pay more” since they are difficult to code as implemented or not.

resulting in an indicator for whether the proposal is likely to lead to more costs, neutral, or even a gain in terms of public finances. We have not taken dynamic effects into account, which for instance means that proposals related to immigration are in the neutral category. Lowering of tax rates and increased spending are thus seen as costly, whereas higher tax rates, decreased spending, and neutral policies without obvious budgetary effects (such as a ban on smoking in public places, or harsher penalties for crime) are seen as neutral.

This aspect is probably more important for the left/right dimension than the GAL/TAN dimension, and does not tell the whole story, but can be an indication of whether the apparent undersupply of leftist policy and oversupply of GAL policy simply is a symptom of governments holding back on popular but costly proposals. In Table 4 split the sample six ways, focusing on first left/right-proposals (model 1-3) and then GAL/TAN proposals (models 4-6), and then again divided according to the cost status of the proposal.

Table 4: Regression analysis: Opinion support and implementation, costly and not costly policies

	Left policy			GAL policy		
	Cost	Neutral	Gain	Cost	Neutral	Gain
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Support for left	0.341** (0.111)	0.936*** (0.175)	0.217 (0.227)			
Support for GAL				0.652* (0.266)	0.395*** (0.054)	-0.221 (0.243)
Constant	-0.037 (0.026)	-0.118*** (0.034)	-0.026 (0.041)	0.081 (0.050)	0.120*** (0.012)	0.162*** (0.041)
Area off diagonal:	0.167	0.118	0.197	0.106	0.175	0.327
Net over-under:	-0.037	-0.118	-0.026	0.081	0.120	0.162
Observations	632	171	305	215	1,595	169
Adjusted R ²	0.013	0.140	-0.0003	0.023	0.032	-0.001
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001						

Looking first at the first three models, we see that surprisingly, the largest representational gap is found for proposals that are cost-neutral. Examples of proposals in this category is the popular but seldom implemented proposal that employees should have equal representation on company boards, or the unpopular but often implemented proposal that there should be mainly private ownership of power supply and hospitals.

A potential but speculative explanation is that many of the spending questions relate to policies that can be adjusted incrementally, such as increasing expenditure on public health or education. Such adjustments can also be decided on by the government. Proposals that require new legislation are potentially more difficult or at least slower to implement, politically.

But for GAL/TAN policies, the pattern is reversed. Here non-costly GAL policies are oversupplied (many of them relating to immigration) and non-costly TAN policies undersupplied (several relating to harsher criminal punishments).

In both cases we find no support for the hypothesis that the opinion-policy link is weaker for costly policies. The fact that there is “too little” leftist policy is not just a reflection of the fact that voters want more of everything, regardless of the financial consequences.

Mair’s responsible party hypothesis however relates to more factors than just budgetary effects. For instance, upholding civil liberties as freedom of meeting even for extreme groups or upholding due process for terrorists in spite of popular opposition could be seen as acting responsibly, in relation to democratic norms. Not raising taxes despite popular demand could also be seen as responsible, even though it would result in increased revenue. The results could also signal that governments are constrained in their scope of action by international agreements. The proposal to “limit foreign imports” is for instance popular in most countries, but seldom implemented, as countries are bound by the WTO and the EU.

5 Conclusions

In this paper we have demonstrated that in a large sample of democracies, there is in general a relationship between public opinion and public policy. The more a policy is preferred by survey respondents, the higher likelihood it has of being in place, but also of being adopted, if it was not already in place. There is thus both congruence and responsiveness. Our results corroborate those of similar studies, both comparative and single case studies (Rasmussen, Reher, and Toshkov 2019; Schakel, Burgoon, and Hakhverdian 2020; Persson 2020; Gilens 2012).

However, we also highlight a representational deficit. While previous studies often has pointed out that there is unequal responsiveness, meaning that the affluent see their preferences realized more often than the poor, we show that certain policy tends to be undersupplied, and some oversupplied, relative to public opinion. There is responsiveness gap. Specifically, we see “too little” leftist policy, and “too much” GAL policy.

What would policy look like if it followed public opinion more closely? It would have more redistribution, and more worker protection. Looking at the five left/right proposals with the lowest level of congruence (meaning that implementation status and majority opinion differ in most countries) we can see that the public would want employees to have equal representation on company boards, that unemployed not should be forced to take any job or lose benefits, that people should be forced to retire when jobs are scarce, and that social protection for part time workers should be improved. However, paradoxically, majorities also tend to be in favor of less government regulation of business, which probably clashes with several of the other mentioned proposals. In contrast to governments, survey respondents need not have a coherent policy package. On the GAL/TAN dimension, the largest discrepancies are found concerning immigration.

While the affluent tend to be more economically conservative and culturally progressive than people in general, our analyses show that this discrepancy is unable to fully account for the gap between opinion and policy - at least when defining the affluent as the quintile with the highest incomes.

This leads us to question whether the story really is about unequal responsiveness, as most existing literature would have it, or about a general lack of responsiveness on behalf of the political system. The idea of unequal responsiveness implies that there is a causal effect of the attitudes of the affluent on policy. But our results show that alternative explanation is that some other factor cause policy to be more economically conservative and culturally liberal. While that in practice means that the affluent are better represented, it could be coincidental, if the true causal mechanism is related to factors internal to the political system. In his analysis of the United States, Bartels contends that there is little evidence that differences in political participation accounts for unequal responsiveness, but neither is there direct evidence for unequal influence through campaign financing. Instead, the picture that emerges is one where parties have considerable leeway to pursue policies preferred by leadership and core activists, and sometimes do, even in the face of a hostile public opinion (Bartels 2016, 253).

A political implication of the findings in this paper concerns the market for parties that can meet the undersupply of policy. Previous research has noted an undersupply of “left-authoritarian” parties relative to the preferences of the public (Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Brug and Van Spanje 2009). We find similar patterns in policy. Given that our empirical data stretches back in time, it provides a potential explanation for the rise of populist parties and politicians that has been evident in many western democracies the last decades. Future research should investigate whether there has been more fertile ground for populist parties where the discrepancy between opinion and policy has been especially grave.

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6 Appendix

Table 5: Left/right proposals in the data

<i>Proposal</i>	<i>Left (1) or Right (-1)</i>	<i>Cost (1) Neutral (0) Gain (-1)</i>
Increase retirement age	-1	-1
Spend less on benefits for poor	-1	-1
Higher earners get higher pensions	-1	0
Higher earners better unemployment benefits	-1	0
Social benefits only for lowest incomes	-1	-1
Public health care only in serious cases	-1	-1
Unemployed must take any job or lose benefits	-1	-1
Cut government spending	-1	-1
Cuts in government spending	-1	-1
Mainly private ownership of hospitals	-1	0
Mainly private ownership of banks	-1	0
Mainly private ownership of electricity	-1	0
Increase public expenditure on business	-1	1
Less government regulation of business	-1	0
Increase public expenditure on defense	-1	1
Public funding of job creation programs	1	1
Support progressive taxation	1	-1
Sick leave for caring for family	1	1
Reduce working week	1	1
Increase unemployment benefits	1	1
Support basic income scheme	1	1
Tax on financial transactions	1	-1
Increase public expenditure on welfare benefits	1	1
Increase old-age pensions	1	1
Increase public expenditure on education	1	1
Increase public expenditure on health	1	1
Public job training guarantee	1	1
Improve social protection for part time workers	1	1
More public ownership of industry	1	0
Employees equal representation on company boards	1	0
Tougher rules on tax avoidance	1	-1

Table 6: GAL/TAN proposals in the data

<i>Proposal</i>	<i>GAL (1) or TAN (-1)</i>	<i>Cost (1) Neutral (0) Gain (-1)</i>
Support foreign aid	1	1
Economic aid to poor countries	1	1
Increase foreign aid	1	1
Reduce military expenditures	1	-1
More regional independence	1	0
Childrens born abroad become citizens if one parent is citizen	1	0
Legal immigrants access to public education	1	0
Ethnic discrimination in the workplace law	1	0
Race discrimination law	1	0
Increase number of immigrants	1	0
Ethnic hatred law	1	0
Allow political refugees to stay	1	0
Allow separate schools for immigrants if they wish	1	0
Non-citizen EU immigrant right to vote in local elections	1	0
Legal established immigrants easy naturalized	1	0
Support immigrant applicants financially	1	1
Refugees allowed to bring family	1	0
Long-term resident non-citizens can vote	1	0
Non-citizen EU immigrant right to run for office in local elections	1	0
Legal immigrants same rights	1	0

<i>Proposal</i>	<i>GAL (1) or TAN (-1)</i>	<i>Cost (1) Neutral (0) Gain (-1)</i>
Legal established immigrants bring family	1	0
Immigrant applicants allowed to work	1	0
Legal established immigrants same rights as citizens	1	0
Support culture of ethnic minorities	1	0
Ban tobacco advertising	1	0
Non-citizen EU immigrant right to vote in European elections	1	0
Non-citizen children born in country have the right to become citizens	1	0
Allow abortion: Mother health risk	1	0
Allow abortion: Serious birth defect	1	0
Seat belt law	1	0
Homosexual adoption	1	0
All religious groups equal rights	1	0
Allow abortion: Not want more kids	1	0
Abortion: Women decide themselves	1	0
Liberalize abortion	1	0
Ban antidemocratic parties	1	0
Prohibit smoking in public places	1	0
Allow abortion: Can not afford	1	0
Ban fascists	1	0
Prohibit smoking in public places	1	0
Ban fascists from running for office	1	0
AIDS: Look after them	1	0
Compulsory vaccination	1	0
Ration petrol	1	0
Increase eco-taxes	1	-1
Public grants of better household insulation	1	1
Fossil fuel tax	1	-1
Ration energy	1	0
Strict environmental laws	1	0
Increase green taxes continuously	1	-1
Household pay for own rubbish collection	1	-1
Public funding of consumers for energy saving equipment	1	1
Public funding of campaigns for environment	1	1
Increase energy taxes	1	-1
Law against less energy efficient household appliances	1	0
Public funding of campaigns for less household waste	1	1
Public funding of campaigns for less driving	1	1
Increase petrol tax continuously	1	-1
Increase energy taxes continuously	1	-1
Increase public expenditure on environment	1	1
Increase packaging tax	1	-1
Tax on packaging	1	-1
Age discrimination law	1	0
Public funding of health care for non-citizens	1	1
Public subsidies of wind and solar power	1	1
Public funding on energy research	1	1
Increase public expenditure on defense	-1	1
Prevent regional independence	-1	0
Send back non-EU immigrants	-1	0
Send back all immigrants	-1	0
Send back legal immigrants if unemployed	-1	0
Prohibit foreigners to buy land	-1	0
Keep immigrant applicants in detention centers	-1	0
Immigrants made to leave for unemployment	-1	0
Send back all illegal immigrants	-1	0
Requirment for citizenship: Ancestors from country	-1	0
Prioritize jobs for nationals over immigrants	-1	0
Stronger measures to exclude illegal immigrants	-1	0
More punishment for employers of illegal workers	-1	0
AIDS: Forced to make themselves known	-1	0
Put AIDS infected in institutions	-1	0
AIDS: Identification papers enable checks	-1	0
Limit foreign imports	-1	0
Support nuclear power	-1	0

<i>Proposal</i>	<i>GAL (1) or TAN (-1)</i>	<i>Cost (1) Neutral (0) Gain (-1)</i>
Develop nuclear energy	-1	1
Send back legal immigrants if convicted of serious offence	-1	0
Immigrants made to leaver for serious crime	-1	0
Immigrants made to leave for any crime	-1	0
Keep suspected terrorists in prison	-1	0
Harder penalties for terrorism	-1	0

Figure 7: Mean implementation and support for left/right issues with at least 10 observations.

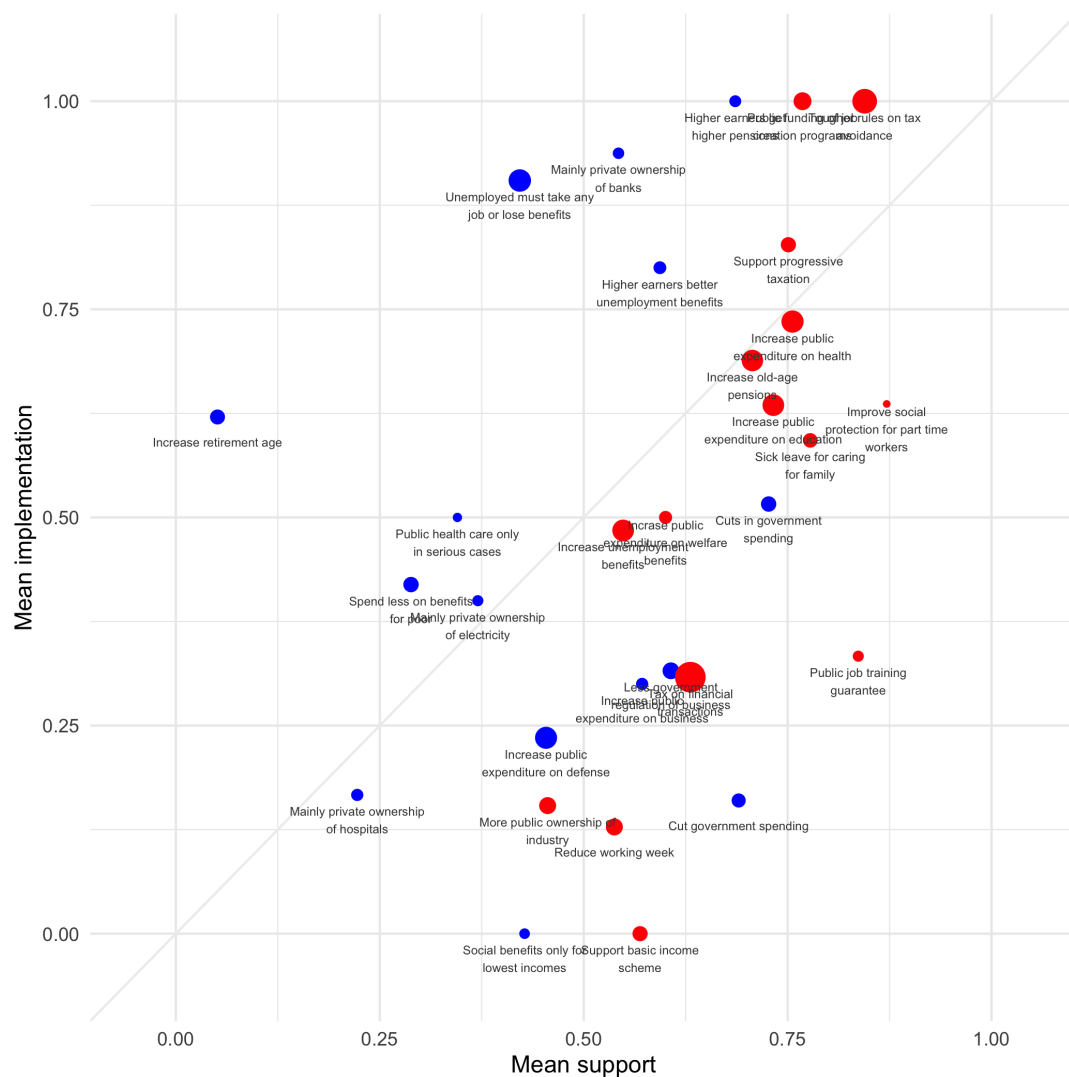


Figure 8: Mean implementation and support for GAL/TAN issues with at least 10 observations

