From Opinions to Policies: Examining the Links Between Citizens, Representatives and Political Decisions.*

J. Alexander Branham† Mikael Persson‡

Abstract

According to a democratic ideal elected representatives should translate public opinion into policy outputs. While the link between public opinion and elite opinion as well as the link between opinion and policy output is fairly well studied, few studies have looked at the entire relationship between public opinion, elite opinion and policy output. We use data from Swedish election studies and surveys with representatives in the national parliament combined with data on policy implementation. Generally, we only find a moderately strong relationship between elite opinion and public opinion. This is, however, considerably stronger when assessing the relationship within party. Moreover, we find that MPs opinions are related to policy outputs, and that MPs of the governing party opinions matter substantially for policy output. Finally, we look at how public opinion constrains the effect of elites' opinions on policy outputs. The effect of elite opinion on policy outputs is stronger when a larger proportion of the public indicates that they "don't know" what they think on a given issue, indicating that elites may have more opportunity to pursue policies they themselves want when the public is paying less attention or is more apathetic about the policies in question.

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†Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin

‡Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg

1 Introduction

According to a populist conception of democracy elected representatives should translate public opinion into policy outputs (Mackie 2003; Manin 1997). Because of the critical role of representatives, scholars have extensively studied the relationship between opinions of elected representatives and their constituencies. For example, some scholars have focused on matching elected representatives' votes or positions to constituency preferences (for example, Miller and Stokes 1963; Peress 2013). There is also evidence that elites can and do represent their constituents opinions on policy votes (Butler and Nickerson 2011).

Equally interesting but less studied is the degree to which policy outputs reflect representatives' opinions. Survey data on representatives issue positions is not available in most countries, limiting what we can learn about their opinions and how they are related to policy outcomes. Scholars therefore usually rely on broader measures of representatives' opinions, such as ideology (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014; Bafumi and Herron 2010).[1]

In this paper, we examine the relationship between public opinion, representatives' positions, and policy outputs. Using data from Sweden, we are able to match opinions of parliamentarians and the public on specific policy proposals. Crucially, we can also observe whether these policies were actually implemented or not. We show that parliamentarians preferences do in fact shape policy, but that the impact is limited to only those parliamentarians who are members of the governing party or parties. Additionally, we are able to include public preferences on these same issues. This allows us to see how close (or not) representatives' opinions are to public opinion.

We find that the general relationship between elite opinion and public opinion is fairly weak. However, this is much stronger when we look at how strongly elite opinion relates to public opinion by party. Additionally, we assess how public opinion can affect the relationship between elite preferences and policy outputs. We find that higher levels of people saying that they "don't know" maximizes the impact of elite opinion on policy. Low levels of

[1] See (Broockman 2016) for a critique.

"don't know" responses reduces the effect of MP opinion on policy. Somewhat surprisingly, we do not see this same relationship if we look at the proportion of the public in favor of the policy. We finish by discussing some of the implications of these findings and potential future research.

2 How Opinion Affect policy

The classic approach to study responsiveness examines the congruence between citizens' opinions and their elected representatives' opinions. The classic study by Miller and Stokes (1963) showed that congressmen are largely responsive to citizens' opinions in their constituency. Indeed, the conventional wisdom is that, at least in the US, there is a relatively strong relationship between the voters and their representatives' opinions and behavior (Mayhew 1974; Clausen 1973; Kingdon 1989).[2] This is sometimes refereed to as dyadic representation (Weissberg 1978), as opposed to collective representation which focuses on the connection between the public as a whole and representatives as a collective. This strand of research has looked beyond representatives attitudes and votes as dependent variables and instead studied implementation of policies. In an influential study Monroe (1998) showed that implemented policies in the US were in accordance with the majority's opinion only in slightly more than the majority of the cases. This is echoed in a more recent study by Lax and Phillips (2012) also shows that policy is "congruent with majority will only half the time". However, responsiveness was found to be higher for issues that citizens regarded as salient in both the studies by Monroe (1998) and Lax and Phillips (2012).

It should, however, be noted that Monroe's results are correlational and he is not able to establish causality between opinion policy. Hence, the key question whether opinion affect policy or if politicians drive policy change remain unsettled in correlational studies (Kuklinski and Segura 1998).

In a study which tries to look into the timing of opinion and policy change, Benjamin I

[2]See (Achen 1977) for a critique.

Page and Shapiro (1983, p. 543) conclude that "public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy" and that "when Americans' policy preferences shift, it is likely that congruent changes in policy will follow" (Benjamin I Page and Shapiro 1983, p. 185). A more sophisticated approach to try to what extent and through which mechanisms opinion affects policy is developed by Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995). They find support for "dynamic representation", which means that policy respond to policy change via mechanisms such as government change and rational anticipation.

More recently Soroka and Wlezien have developed what they refer label "thermostatic representation" (Stuart N Soroka and Wlezien 2010). They argue that not only does policy respond to opinion change; citizens also adjust their preferences as a reaction to implemented policies (Stuart N Soroka and Wlezien 2010). In a number of empirical studies they find support for the thermostatic model of representation in the US and in comparative data (Stuart N Soroka and Wlezien 2004; Wlezien 1995).

Most studies mentioned so far look at the effects of public opinion as a whole or opinions among different constituencies. However, some studies go further in order to try to estimate which groups of citizens has the most influence on policy. In a classic study Verba and Nie (1972) found that leaders' preferences concurred with more strongly with policially engaged citizens' preferences. Moreover, in a number of recent studies researchers have argued that policy appear to be more responsive towards citizens with high socioeconomic status (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2005; Gilens 2012a; Gilens and Benjamin I. Page 2014). However, the magnitude of this bias is contested (Stuart N. Soroka and Wlezien 2008; Enns 2015; Branham, Stuart N Soroka, and Wlezien 2016; Bashir 2015).

Previous Swedish studies in this area have looked primarily at the relationship between public opinion and political representatives opinions (Holmberg 1997). While the relationship is found to be relatively strong opinion polarization is larger among political representatives than among voters (Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996). Sören Holmberg has shown that voters' and citizens' opinions co-vary over time and that trends in opinion change are very similar

among voters and representatives. However, when opinions change Holmberg suggests the shifts tend to be elite driven rather than driven by public demands. It is the elite that changes, and the public the follows, rather than the other way around. However, whether these elite opinions translate into policies is an open question in Holmberg and Esaiasson's studies.

Most importantly, as far as we are aware there are no studies — neither in Sweden nor elsewhere — looking at the relationship between public opinion, representatives' opinions and implementation of policies concerning issues in a wide set of different policy areas.

3 Data and Analysis

In order to asses the impact of elite opinion on policy, we turn to the surveys conducted with all of the members of the Swedish Riksdag.[3] The survey is fielded after each election starting in 1985.[4] This gives us eight waves of the survey. The response rate varies between 89 percent (2010) and 97 percent (1985 and 1994).

For public opinion, we use data from two sources. First, data from the Swedish "Society, Opinion and Media" (SOM) surveys which started in 1986 and has been conducted annually since then. It draws on a representative net sample of usually about 6000 Swedish adults (15–85 years old residing in Sweden) and is carried out mainly as a mail survey.[5] And second, data from the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES). The SNES were carried out after all national elections since 1956 and draw on net samples of usually about 3000 to 4000 Swedish adults.[6] The interviews are mainly conducted as face-to-face interviews. Both the surveys of the members of the Swedish Riksdag, the SOM surveys and the SNES

[3] "Riksdagsundersökningarna" in Swedish.

[4] Although the survey was fielded in 2014, we only include years 1985–2010 because our measure of whether policy changed or not depends on the next election. The next election in Sweden will not occur until 2018. Additionally, the survey was fielded in 1996 even though there was not an election. Substantive results reported here do not change if we rerun the analysis excluding the observations from 1996.

[5] The response rate in the SOM surveys have declined somewhat over time, from the peak of 71 percent in 1992 to 58 percent in 2008.

[6] The response rate has declined from 95 percent in 1956 to 69 percent in 2010.

surveys are carried at by researches at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden (the latter one in collaboration with the Swedish official statistics bureau "Statistics Sweden"). Since the bulk of studies with both representatives and the public were designed by the same of researchers there is substantial overlap between the questions asked in the different surveys, which allows us to match opinions of the public and parliamentarians.

To asses how opinions are related to policy change, we also need information on implementation of policies. Following the work of Gilens (2012b), we use survey questions that ask about policy support on specif policy proposals. We collected all such questions asked in any of the specific surveys in the three series of surveys. For each such survey item we calculated the proportion supporting the policies among the public as a whole as well as in subgroups such as the supports or representatives of different parties. Examples include introducing a six-hour workday, eliminating nuclear power, joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and prohibiting pornography.[7] We counted a policy as having changed if it changed in the direction of the question wording anytime before the next election.[8] We have coded the data so that if the implementation variable is coded 1 it represents policy change (and opinion variables indicate amount of support for policy change.) To accomplish this some variables asking about support for status quo policies have been switched in the opposite direction.

In order to assess whether a specific policy proposal we have turned to different sources depending on the nature of the policy. Some survey questions are specifically about political decisions and for those we have looked at transcripts from the national parliament. Other questions are focusing on implementation of proposals and then we have turned to appropriate source for that specific evaluation that specific issues, which for example could

[7]Unlike Gilens, we also include relative preference questions such as whether taxes should be lowered of the size of the public sector should be reduced.

[8]So even if the policy subsequently changes back to the status quo, it still counts as having passed. Reported results do not substantively change if we rerun the analysis coding policy passage in several different ways. For example, we try coding change as having occurred within one, two, and four years with no difference. We also look at change between governments or party coalitions instead of between elections, with little difference.

be budgets, official documents of different sorts, or documentation of the actual closing of nuclear plants or the construction of a controversial infrastructure project. Moreover, for many proposals that were never implemented there is simply no source or documentation (since these proposals were non-events).

Thus, the unit of observation is a possible policy (i.e. a survey question) asked a specific year to either the public, the representatives or both. In total, we have 91 complete observations where we were able to match one of the public opinion surveys to the parliamentarian data and also find information about policy implementation. As far as we are aware, no other dataset exists for any country which successfully matches public opinion, legislator opinion, and policy outputs on specific policies at the national level. Before turning to assessing how elite opinion affects policy outputs, let us first see how public opinion is related to elite opinion.

3.1 Elite opinion and public opinion

How related are opinions of Members of Parliament and the public? We expect to see a relatively strong positive relationship here. After all, members of parliament should generally reflect public opinion if democracy functions as we think it should, normatively speaking. We plot this relationship in Figure 1. The diagonal line represents what we would expect to see if public opinion and elite opinion were perfectly related. This has the additional advantage of distinguishing between observations with more support from the elites than from the public (above the line) from those with more support from the public than from elites (below the line).

As expected, the relationship between public and elite opinion by issue is positive, indicating that as more of the public support something, more of the representatives tend to support it as well. That said, there are clearly policies where support among elites is higher than support among the public, and vice-versa. They appear to be linearly related with a Pearson's r of 0.47. This is perhaps lower than what we would expect, given that represen-

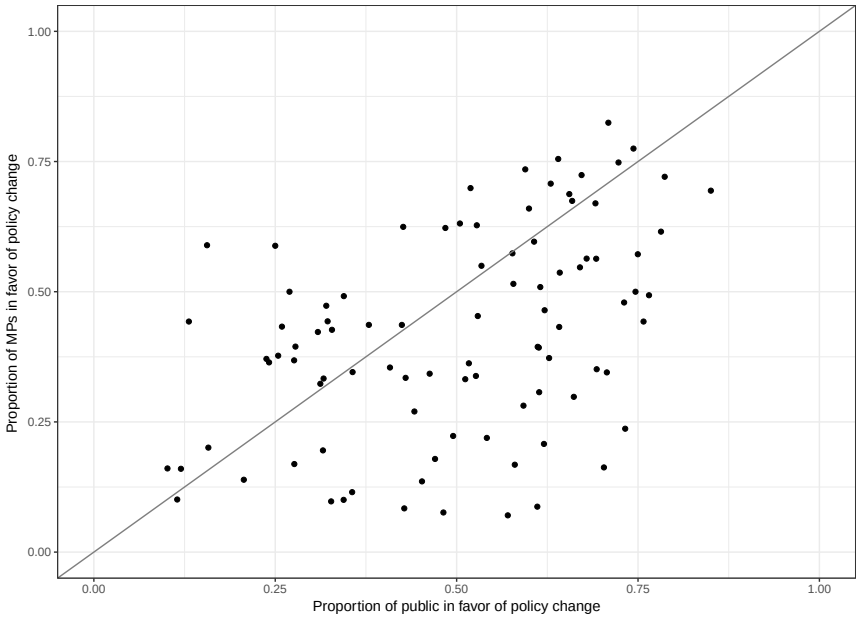

Figure 1: Relationship between opinions of the public and their representatives

tatives are supposed to represent the will of the people, according to democratic theory. Of course, we know that partisanship is oftentimes the structure that politics builds on, and so we turn to analyzing support by partisanship rather than by the whole of the public or Riksdag.

Of course, we know that there are many sub-publics, and that opinion can vary dramatically among different subpopulations (Lax and Phillips 2012). A particularly important dimension of conflict, especially in the Riksdag, is partisanship. The party system in Sweden is constructed along roughly a left-right ideological spectrum, at least for most of the years under study (König, Marbach, and Osnabrügge 2017). The Social Democratic party is the largest center-left party and has been the dominant party for most of postwar politics, though usually as a minority government. The Social Democrats were the governing party in postwar Sweden until 1976 and have since periodically alternated power with a coalition of center-right parties. This coalition (referred to today as "The Alliance") consists of the Moderate Party, the Center Party, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats.[9] All four are center-right parties with ideological influences from liberalism and conservatism to dif-

[9]The Liberals were known as the Liberal People's Party until 2015.

ferent degrees, and with slightly different policy positions. They vary drastically in their support in the public, however. The largest party in the alliance (depending on the year, this is either the Moderates or the Center Party) usually draws between 20 and 30 percent of the vote. The smallest on the other hand, draws around five percent of the vote. OR EVEN LESS, THE CHRISTIANS DEMOCRATS WERE EVEN TO SMALL TO ENTER PARLIAMENT FOR A LONG TIME...

There are also several parties who have not been in government but have won seats in the Riksdag and are thus included in our analysis. WELL ONLY 2... The Left Party is a left-wing party with historical ties to the Communists. The Green Party is a center-left party concerned with environmental politics.[10] The Swedish Democrats are a populist party on the right with an anti-immigration message.[11] They are a relative newcomer to the party system. Although they were officially founded in 1988, they won seats in the Riksdag for the first time in 2010. Although they are an important force in current-day Swedish politics (they are currently the third-largest party in the Riksdag, although the other parties maintain a staunch no-cooperation policy), they play a relatively minor role in our analysis since they only appear in the 2010 election data.

Given the wide range of party choice in Sweden, we might expect the relationship between public opinion and MPs' opinions to look quite different when we examine it by party. After all, members of parliament are some of the most dedicated partisans. For this reason, we plot the relationship between supporters of a party in the public and their elected representatives in Figure 2.[12]

The relationship between public opinion and their representatives' opinions here is much stronger than the relationship shown in Figure 1. Opinions between partisans and members of their party in parliament are more strongly associated with each other than opinion

[10]Following the 2014 elections, the Greens are a part of the government of Sweden.

[11]TODO: we can add cites here with the far-right parties literature if we want, though not sure that's necessary. NOT SURE EITHER, WE DON'T WANT TO GO INTO THE MESSY DEBATE OVER WHETHER TO LABEL THEM POPULITS, NATIONALISTS,ETC

[12]Partisanship for the public is a self-reported measure of which party they voted for (in election years) or would vote for (in non-election years)

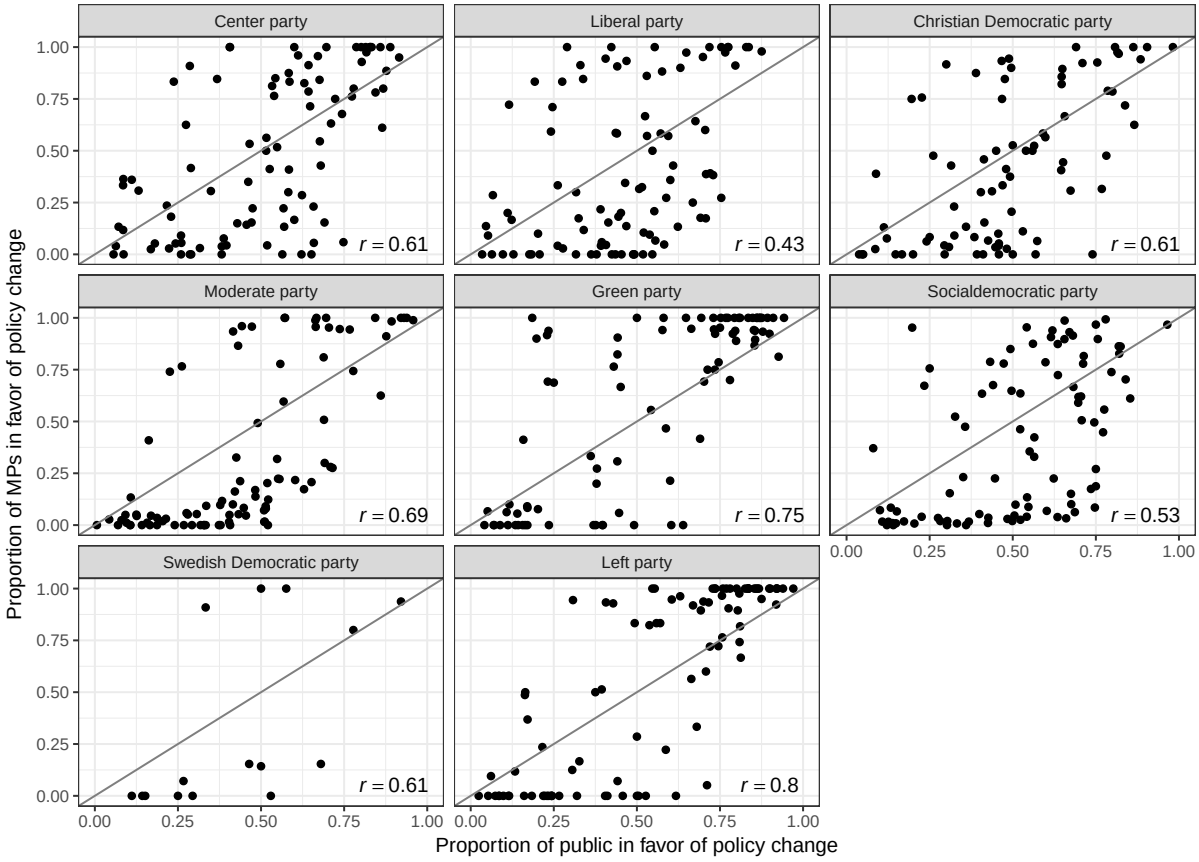

Figure 2: Relationship between opinions of the public and their representatives

between the public at large and the legislature at large. With the exception of the Liberals, the Pearson's r for every party is higher than the equivalent measure for the public at large.

One notable finding here is that MP opinion by party tends to be clustered at the extremes of the scale (that is to say, near the top and bottom of each plot), echoing the results of (Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996). Either all the MPs from a party are in favor of the policy or none are. This is in contrast to taking MPs as a whole, as was shown in Figure 1, where we do not observe this clustering. Additionally, we do not find that the public is as extreme as their representatives are. Across all parties, there is a distribution of dots at many different levels of public support along the horizontal axis. This suggests that MPs are more polarized than their supporters are, which is in line with other work on this subject (see, for examples, Levendusky 2009; Bafumi and Herron 2010).[13]

[13]TODO: add European cites

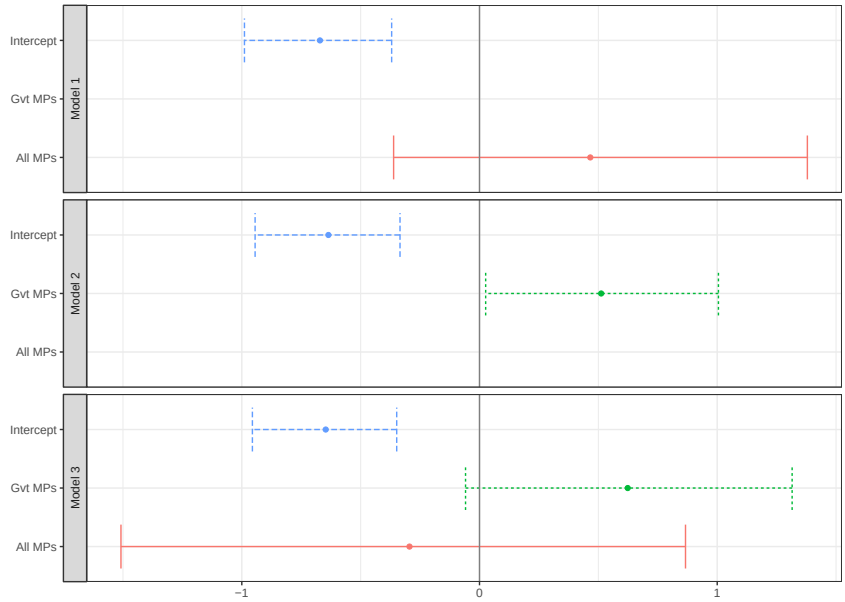

Figure 3: Probit coefficients predicting policy change by MP opinion, governing MP opinion, and both. TODO: Maybe Model 3 does not make sense — All MP includes governing; change to out-MP opinion?

3.2 Elite opinion and policy change

Since we now know that public opinion is well represented in parliament (especially by party), let us now consider the role of MPs opinions on policy outputs.

As stated above, there are several reasons to expect that not all MPs opinions are represented equally in policy outputs. Sometimes, as in the case of the Swedish Democrats, political elites explicitly state that they are not willing to work with them on policy issues. Other times, the mechanics of parliamentary government suggest that the governing party or parties should exert more control over policy outputs.

For this reason, we examine both the impact of the opinion of all members of parliament and the impact of only those in the governing party or coalition. Figure 3 shows the results of three separate probit models estimated in a Bayesian framework.[14]

Figure 3 shows that there is oftentimes an absence of clear evidence of the impact of MPs' opinions on policy outputs. Restricting MP opinion to only those MPs of the party or parties

[14]TODO: Info about choice of priors & convergence checks, etc

in power leaves the mean of the posterior distribution nearly unchanged, but increases our confidence in the prediction. There is at least weak evidence that their opinion may affect policy outputs.[15] Evidence also suggests that opinions of MPs in the governing party or parties matters more. The coefficient associated with governing MPs opinions is consistently larger than the coefficient associated with all MPs opinions. It is also estimated with more precision to be different from zero, in contrast to the coefficient associated with all MPs opinions. Including both variables together also suggests that governing MPs's opinions may matter more than MPs as a whole.

Representatives' opinions seem to matter for policy change. However, the fit of the model is perhaps lower than one would suspect. There are clearly many determinants of public policy other than simply the whim of elected representatives. We suggest that one of those determinants is the degree to which the public cares about a particular policy.

3.3 Elite opinion, policy, and public opinion

Of course, elites may be constrained by public opinion. Politicians interested in reelection may be in favor of a particular policy, yet averse to implementing that policy if it is controversial.

To estimate this relationship, we interact the net support for policy change of governing MPs with the proportion of the general public who indicate that they "don't know" whether they support or oppose a policy. We estimate this again in a Bayesian context.[16] Because the magnitude of the interaction effect in nonlinear models is not equal to the marginal effect of the interaction term and can even be of opposite sign (Ai and Norton 2003), we focus here on presenting predicted probabilities from the model. Full results are reported in Appendix A.

[15] Although the interval presented in Figure 3 does not overlap zero, if we estimate this relationship using the proportion of MPs in favor rather than net support, the interval does overlap zero. Further analyses suggest that using measures of net support are a better fit for the data, so we focus on presenting those here, but it bears keeping in mind that the results can and do change slightly when using other ways of measuring MP opinion.

[16] TODO: Info about sampler

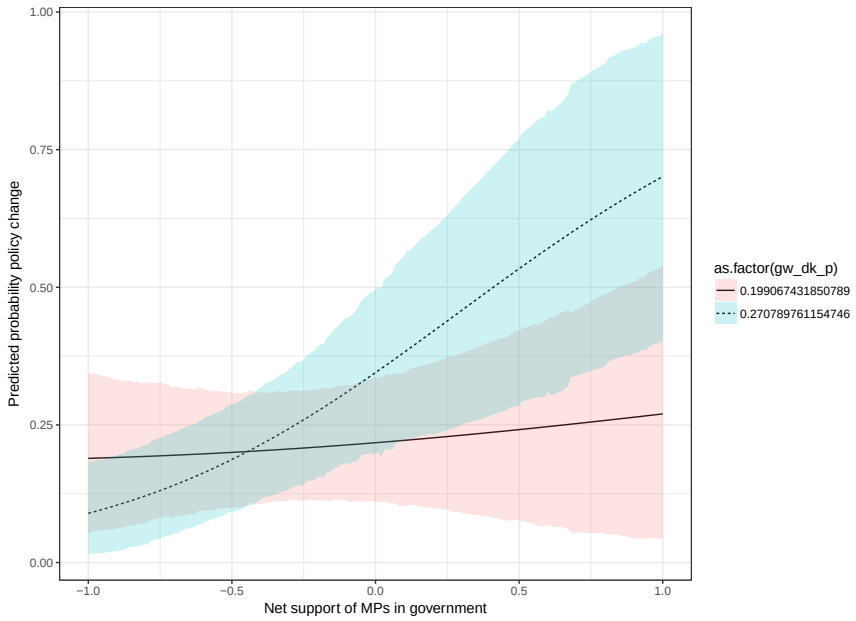

Figure 4: Predicted probability of policy passage by governing MP support and public don't know. The blue dashed line represents setting "don't know" at the **WHAT** percentile (**PERCENT** DK) and the red solid line represents the **WHAT** percentile (**PERCENT** DK).

Figure 4 plots the effect of MPs opinions on the predicted probability of policy change across different levels of public "don't know" levels. At lower "don't know" levels — that is, when more people have an opinion one way or another — the effect of MPs' opinions on policy outputs is smaller. In fact, depending on the exact level, the effect of MPs' opinions on policy outputs is estimated to be very close to zero. In other words, when more people have an opinion on a given issue, the harder it is for MPs to pass policies that they themselves prefer.

On the other hand, when more people say that they "don't know" whether they favor or oppose a particular policy, then MPs' opinions has a larger effect on policy outputs. When the proportion of people saying that they do not have a clear opinion is high, then we find that MPs' opinion has a large substantive effect on policy outputs.

4 Conclusion

5 References

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A Results from interaction models

TODO