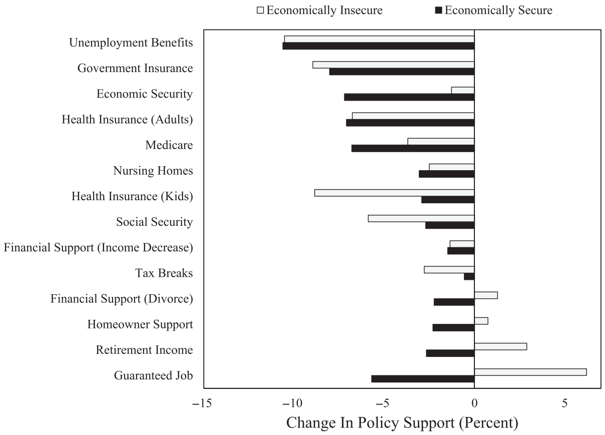

FIGURE 7.9. Change in the percent supporting each policy proposal from Mar. 11–Apr. 9, 2009, to Sept. 8–Oct. 22, 2009, among the economically secure (black bar) and insecure (grey bar)

increased among the economically insecure by 6 and 3 percent, respectively, while support decreased among the economically secure by about the same margins.

Although exceptions exist, the overall conclusions are clear. The definition of responsiveness matters for the conclusions we draw about those who experience and do not experience negative economic shocks.

PROGRAM RECIPIENTS AND NONRECIPIENTS

Differences in policy preferences among those who receive and do not receive support from programs like Medicaid or public housing offer another potential source of unequal representation. Not only is program experience likely to influence policy attitudes toward those programs, but experience with these types of social policies corresponds with socioeconomic status, which in turn can influence political participation. Because the most economically and politically disadvantaged are most likely to benefit from many government programs, those most likely to support these policies may be the least likely to influence policy (Mettler and Stonecash 2008; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012, 128–133).[16]

To consider these representational implications, I build on Mettler and Stonecash's (2008) important work on attitudes toward six programs among those who experience and do not experience the programs. Figure 7.10 reproduces Table 3 from Mettler and Stonecash (2008), which examines data from

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[16] Faricy (2015) demonstrates an important exception to who benefits from government programs in *Welfare for the Wealthy*.

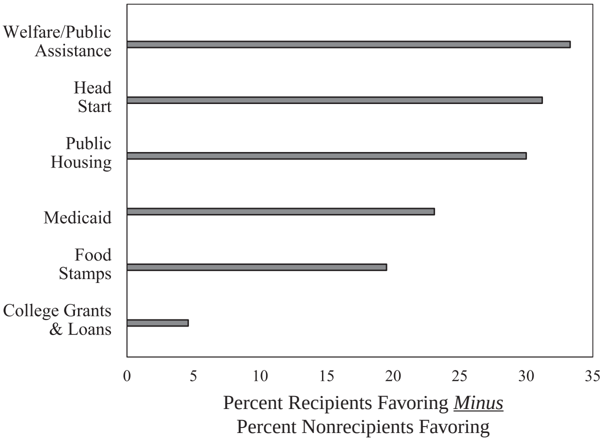

FIGURE 7.10. The preference gap between program recipients and nonrecipients (Mettler and Stonecash 2008, Table 3)

the 2005 Maxwell Poll on Civic Engagement and Inequality. The horizontal bars indicate substantial preference gaps, as program recipients consistently support the program they experienced more than non-recipients (five of the preference gaps exceed 19 percent). Highlighting the implications for representation, Mettler and Stonecash (2008, 283) write, "This disparity between beneficiaries and nonbeneficiaries underscores the need to examine whether beneficiaries are as likely as nonbeneficiaries to make their preferences known through political action."

If we consider majority opinion, the potential for unequal responsiveness drops in half. For three policies (welfare/public assistance, public housing, and food stamps) a majority of program recipients support the policy and a majority of nonrecipients oppose the policy. Although relative policy support is not perfectly equivalent, Figure 7.11a shows that programs like Head Start and college grants/loans are relatively popular among both program recipients and nonrecipients and welfare/public assistance is the least popular among both groups (Spearman's rho = 0.77).

An important consideration with Figures 7.10 and 7.11a is that given the size of the survey (n = 609) and the small fraction of respondents who report experiencing these programs (just 6.3 percent and 6.5 percent for Head Start and public housing), considerable uncertainty exists around the estimated percent of policy support among program recipients. To help address this concern, Figure 7.11b considers the data from the other three waves of the Maxwell Poll on Civic Engagement and Inequality, conducted in 2004, 2006, and 2007. Two patterns stand out. First, with the larger sample, the similar pattern of relative policy support among program recipients and nonrecipients is even more evident (Spearman's rho = 0.94). Second, majority opinion only

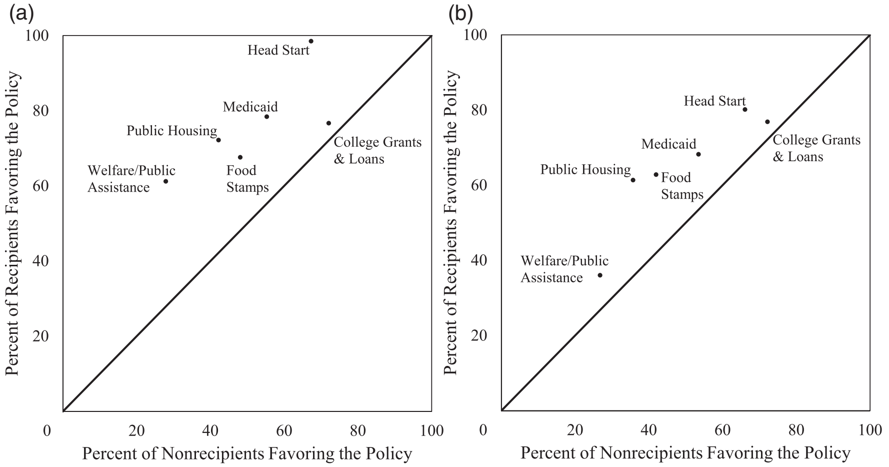

FIGURE 7.11. Relative policy support among program recipients and nonrecipients (a) (Mettler and Stonecash 2008, Table 3 and (b) Maxwell Poll on Civic Engagement and Inequality, conducted in 2004, 2006, and 2007)

differs on two policies with the combined data (food stamps and public housing).

Unfortunately, given the small proportion of program recipients, it is not possible to evaluate opinion change and the potential for differential dynamic representation.[17] The small subgroup samples mean it would be impossible to distinguish between true opinion change and over-time variation due to sampling error. We can conclude, however, that group opinion, majority rule, and relative policy support hold distinct implications for the representation of those who receive and do not receive government programs. If politicians focus on preference gaps, the potential for unequal representation is substantial. If politicians consider relative policy support, the opportunity for differential representation is minimal. Despite the existence of preference gaps, Figure 7.11b shows that politicians can please both groups by supporting Head Start and college grants and loans.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analyses in this chapter highlight how past conclusions about who gets represented are not as robust as often thought. If politicians consider preference gaps and strive to represent one group at the expense of another, opportunity for unequal responsiveness exists for almost every policy and group considered.

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[17] Across the six policies analyzed above, the average number of recipients per survey was just fifty-one.

If politicians focus on majority opinion, there is much less potential for unequal responsiveness. And if politicians consider relative policy support or opinion change, the opportunity for unequal responsiveness is minimal. Conclusions about the level of responsiveness are sensitive to the theoretical model guiding the analysis. In addition to reconsidering conclusions from past research, the findings also suggest several questions and recommendations.

Which Model(s) of Responsiveness Do Politicians Follow?

These results show that in order to determine whether existing scholarship over-emphasizes or under-emphasizes the extent of unequal representation in the United States, we must have a better understanding of *how* politicians consider group preferences. Do policy makers focus on preference gaps, majority opinion, relative policy support, or opinion change? While ultimately this is a question for future research, existing theory and findings offer some strong suggestions about the importance of relative policy support and dynamic representation.

We have seen that the group conflict frame implied by preference gaps is not attractive for politicians (Stimson 2011) and that majority rule ignores the strength of support or opposition. It is much more informative to know how popular a policy is relative to other policies than to know the percent supporting a single policy. Consistent with relative policy support, politicians often gauge public support for multiple policies within a single survey (Druckman and Jacobs 2011). And if a policy maker does focus on public support for a particular policy, opinion change can provide important information to the politician. Sixty percent support for a policy means something very different depending on whether this reflects a 10 percentage point increase or decrease in support since the last time the issue was polled. In addition to these theoretical considerations, empirically, politicians appear most attentive to relative policy support (e.g., Gilens 2012, see Figure 3.2) and to the direction of opinion change (e.g., Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995), suggesting that the preferences of various groups correspond with policy much more evenly than typically thought.

Why Does It Feel Like Politicians Don't Listen?

If, as I suggest, politicians are most likely to consider relative policy support and opinion change, which are the models of responsiveness that have the *least* opportunity for unequal representation, why do average citizens so often *feel* like their voice is not represented?[18] One answer to this question is the immense status quo bias in the U.S. political system (e.g., Gilens 2012), which has increased with rising political polarization (Enns, Kelly, Morgan, Volscho, and Witko 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010). This status quo bias means anyone who prefers policy change will often be frustrated. Furthermore, those with the least economic security are most disadvantaged by policy stagnation (Hacker and Pierson 2010). But this result does not necessarily imply that policy makers fail to legislate because they ignore the economically insecure. As we saw in this chapter, this group expresses the most support for the same policies as the economically secure.

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[18] A 2019 Pew Survey found that just 27 percent of adults agreed that most elected officials "care what people like me think" while 71 percent disagreed (Pew Global Attitudes Project Poll, Question 7 [31116681.00017]. Abt Associates. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research).

Rising partisan polarization also influences perceptions of political responsiveness in another way. Given the sorting of partisan political preferences (Levendusky 2009), Democrats and Republicans are the two groups where the potential for unequal representation is large regardless of the type of responsiveness we consider. Whether politicians consider preference gaps, majority rule, relatively policy support, or opinion change, partisan preferences often differ substantially. In recent decades, all models of responsiveness yield roughly the same conclusions about the potential for unequal *partisan* representation. Because Democrats in office are more likely to support policies preferred by Democrats and Republicans are more likely to support policies preferred by Republicans, when their preferred party does not hold power, out partisans will *not* feel represented (Enns 2015c; Enns 2015b; Enns and Wlezien 2011). Even if policy makers often represent voters and nonvoters or middle and upper-income groups in similar ways, all of these groups will feel ignored when their party is not in power and they will be frustrated when they prefer policy change but political polarization leads to policy inaction.

Implications for Understanding Social and Economic Inequality

Nobody argues that responsiveness is equal in the United States. However, it appears that the opportunity for unequal representation is less than scholars often conclude. If so, what explains the massive social and economic inequalities in this country? One possibility is that voters versus nonvoters or those in the upper income decile versus those in the middle or bottom decile are not the key distinctions in U.S. politics. In the United States, the top 1 percent owns approximately 40 percent of the wealth (Woff 2017) and this elite group is much more likely to share common backgrounds with politicians (Carnes 2013), have direct access to politicians (socially and professionally), be able to provide large campaign donations, and to be able to fund policy indirectly by funding research and advocacy. It may be that the truly rich influence the political system at the expense of the bottom 99 percent (or even 99.9 percent) (Enns 2015b; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).[19] In other words, money

[19] See Page, Bartels, and Seawright (2013) for an important survey of eighty-three Chicago-area respondents in the top 1 percent.

surely matters, but the income groups most existing research analyzes may not capture this influence.

Another possibility is that key differences in responsiveness occur earlier in the policy process at the agenda-setting stage (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Dahl 1961; Schattschneider 1960; Witko, Morgan, Kelly, and Enns 2021). In most cases, the fact that a survey asks respondents their views on a particular policy means that the policy is at least being considered in some way. It may be that the issues where relative policy support differs across groups are kept completely off the political agenda by the politically powerful and are thus never asked about in surveys. If so, we would need a different way to measure group preferences to understand unequal agenda setting.

The failure to enact policies that mitigate rising inequality may also reflect other factors tangential to unequal responsiveness, such as partisan polarization (Bartels 2008; Enns et al. 2014; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). The key point is that the above findings should not be viewed as an indication that all is well with U.S. politics. Instead, they should be viewed as a call to action to look in other places for the causes and solutions to social and economic inequality. Differential responsiveness to groups such as voters and nonvoters, program recipients and nonrecipients, or income deciles may matter, but at most, this is a small part of the story.

Comparative Implications

The previous analyses have focused on the United States. As noted in the introduction, an impressive literature on differential policy responsiveness in other countries exists (e.g., Elässer, Hence, and Schäfer 2017; Flöthe and Rasmussen 2019; Schakel 2019). It would be valuable to see if these analyses are similarly sensitive to the model of responsiveness employed. Larry Bartels (2014) has argued that “rich and poor Americans disagree about government spending to an extent virtually unmatched elsewhere in the world.” If Bartels is correct, we would expect even less opportunity for unequal responsiveness in other countries. Brooks, Nieuwbeerta, and Manza’s (2006) cross-national analysis, however, focuses on class and party support and concludes that the United States has the lowest levels of class voting across the countries they analyze. Indeed, given the unique parties and different political institutions, there may be reasons to suspect larger group differences in other countries. Extending the above analyses to countries with different institutional settings and potentially different patterns of group policy preferences could yield important new insights about the potential and mechanisms for differential policy responsiveness.

Final Thoughts and Recommendations

If policy aligns with the preferences of various groups to roughly the same extent, responsiveness is much more equal than much of the literature acknowledges. However, from a normative perspective, we should not necessarily be satisfied. Even when policy reflects the preferences of all groups, this does not mean policy makers are listening or responding to all groups (Enns 2015c; Gilens 2015). As other chapters in this book highlight, we should also keep other models of representation in mind. In Chapter 2, Landwehr highlights how inclusive deliberation can address policy decisions as well as the procedural "rules of the game." Lafont focuses on "participatory uses of minipublics" as a model to empower the citizenry (Chapter 3). Crowder-Meyer emphasizes the importance of descriptive representation (Chapter 6). While it is important to understand the extent to which policy outcomes correspond with the preferences of different groups, the perspectives offered throughout this book help illustrate that this is not the only model of representation to consider.

Nevertheless, an accurate understanding of policy responsiveness is necessary to inform the public about the state of democracy. If politicians do not consider the preferences of average Americans, supporting populist candidates who challenge the establishment might be considered a rational response. The analyses in this chapter, however, challenge this simplistic notion. Consistent with a growing literature (Ellis 2017; Lax, Phillips, and Zelizer 2019; Wlezien and Soroka 2011), the answer to who gets represented appears highly nuanced. If policy makers consider relative policy support and opinion change, average citizens will see their preferences adopted into policy about as much as everyone else. Failing to recognize this point risks increasing support for populist candidates and directs attention away from the study of more fundamental causes of social and economic inequality.

Several recommendations follow from these observations. *First*, researchers should remember that the existence of preference gaps does *not* imply unequal responsiveness. If a researcher documents preference gaps, the implications for relative policy support and dynamic representation should be tested. If this is not possible, researchers should note explicitly that preference gaps typically do not imply unequal responsiveness for two prominent models of representation. *Second*, researchers should be explicit about the model(s) of responsiveness they choose, they should justify the model choice, and they should plot the data in a way that aligns with the model's assumptions. Although statistical analyses are an important research tool, as we have seen, plotting the data can help reveal the potential (or lack thereof) for unequal responsiveness. *Finally*, researchers should consider more complicated models of responsiveness than I have presented. In order to make distinct comparisons and to speak directly to existing research, I have kept the model types separate. It is possible, however, that policy makers employ aspects of the various models of responsiveness in tandem. For example, maybe relative policy support matters differently above and below the majority support threshold. Or perhaps dynamic representation is relative, meaning that larger changes matter more than smaller changes. Researchers can use legislator survey experiments, interviews with legislators, and archival sources to further inform our understanding of how legislators consider various groups' policy preferences. Our ability to inform citizens about the level of policy responsiveness and our understanding of the sources of social and economic inequality require careful attention to these theoretical and empirical details.