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December 2012

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I certify that all the material in this dissertation that is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted to or approved by this or any other university for the award of a degree.
This thesis explores “The Conditions of Effective Policy Representation in a Cross-National Perspective: Veto Players, Public Opinion and Government Responsiveness”. When one indicator of a democracy’s quality is whether and how well governments respond to citizens’ demands, continuing policy responsiveness is a key concern. Various models of responsiveness claim to explore the responsiveness of government towards citizens’ preferences but these come to inconsistent conclusions about how context affects the opinion-policy relationship.

My research contributes to the field (1) by systematically examining the commonly used models of the opinion-policy relationship (2) by providing a new theory of contextual effects based upon the veto player theory (Tsebelis, 2002) and clarity of responsibility argument (Hobolt et al., 2012, Whitten and Palmer, 1999, Powell and Whitten, 1993), (3) by cross-validating measures of issue preferences, and (4) by testing my theory using models of issue responsiveness and positional policy congruence.

After careful analysis of the many models and approaches to the opinion-policy linkage, I argue that political representation is best explored by applying a model of effective responsiveness, that is, governments responding to preferences by implementing policy that the public wants. Other models examine whether government agendas correspond with public agendas. This is achieved by using issue responsiveness techniques and also, to a limited extent, positional policy congruence.

Context is an important factor yet scholarship comes to inconsistent conclusions about how it affects political representation. I therefore develop a universally applicable theory of contextual effects, which borrows from the Tsebelis’ veto player theory (2002) and the clarity of responsibility hypothesis from economic voting literature (Hobolt et al., 2012, Whitten and Palmer, 1999, Powell and Whitten, 1993). Succinctly, the fewer veto players enter the decision-making process, the clearer it is who is responsible to act and the more likely it is that governments respond to public demands.

The first empirical chapter focuses on the validity of public opinion measures in issue responsiveness research and asks whether thinking something is an important problem is the same as wanting to increase public spending in the same domain. I find that both measures are related but that this relationship depends on the policy domain in question. The second and third empirical chapter test my theory of contextual effects, employing the salience model of responsiveness and the citizens’ perceptions model of positional policy congruence in a comparative framework. The results support my theory: In contexts where fewer veto players are created and the responsibilities are clearly allocated, political representation is increased.

This research finds its limitations in the quality and availability of the data, as well as in the non-dynamic nature of the model of ideological positions.
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