

# What drives government policy?

Lane Kenworthy

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## *There are various ways to ask the question*

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What drives government policy?

Why does the U.S. have less-interventionist government than most other rich nations?

Why has America's public safety net become more (or less) generous over time?

Why did health care reform fail in 1994 and succeed in 2010?

# *Outline*

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Hypothesized causes

Public opinion

Policy makers

Organized interest groups

The context: America's unique political institutions

# Public opinion

# *Public opinion*

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The hypothesis: In a democracy, it is citizens' wants that drive policy

Mechanisms

Elections

Public opinion surveys (polls)

Referendums

## *Public opinion*

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Government "of the people, by the people, and for the people"



# *Public opinion*

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Within the United States over time, public opinion and policy have tended to be correlated

## **Effects of Public Opinion on Policy**

**BENJAMIN I. PAGE**  
*University of Chicago*

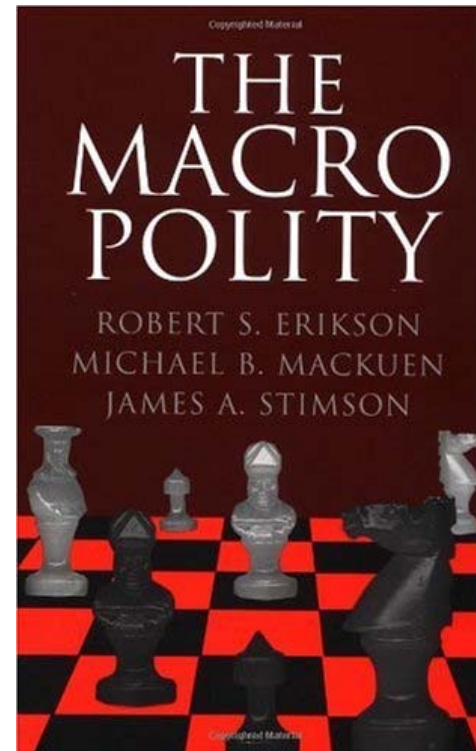
**ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO**  
*Columbia University*  
*and*

*The National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago*

## *Public opinion*

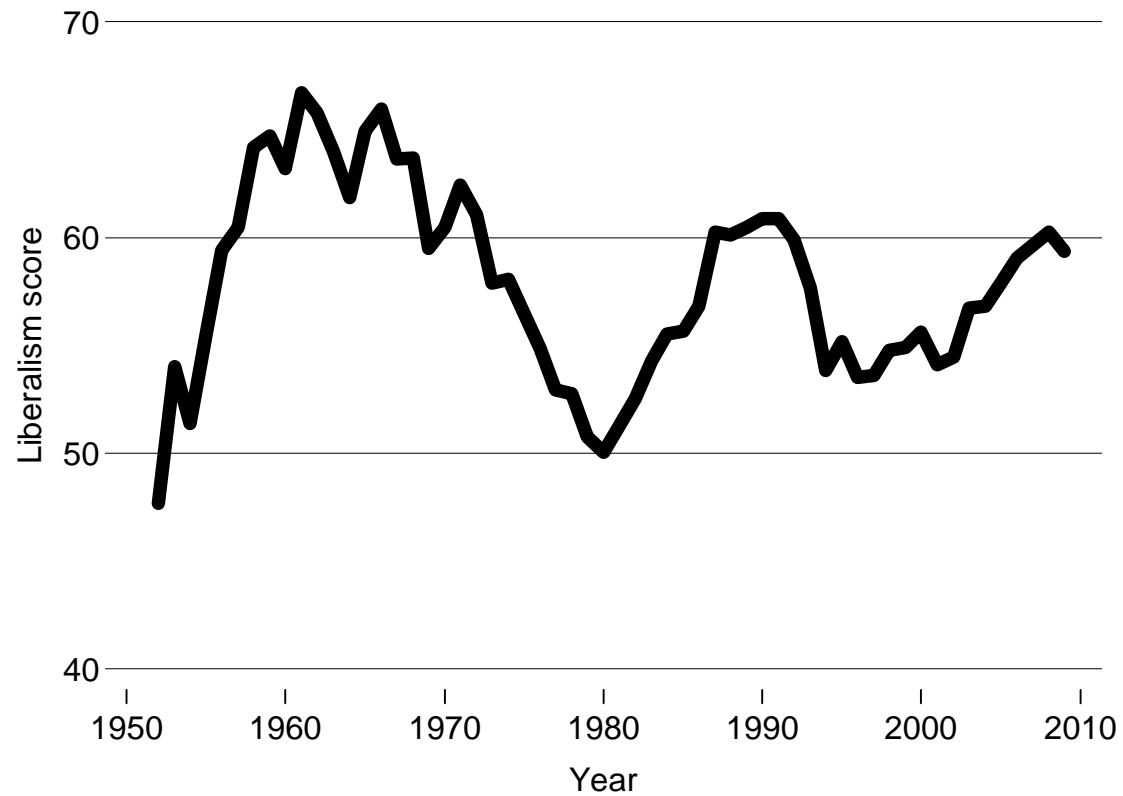
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Within the United States over time, public opinion and policy have tended to be correlated



## *Public opinion: liberalism*

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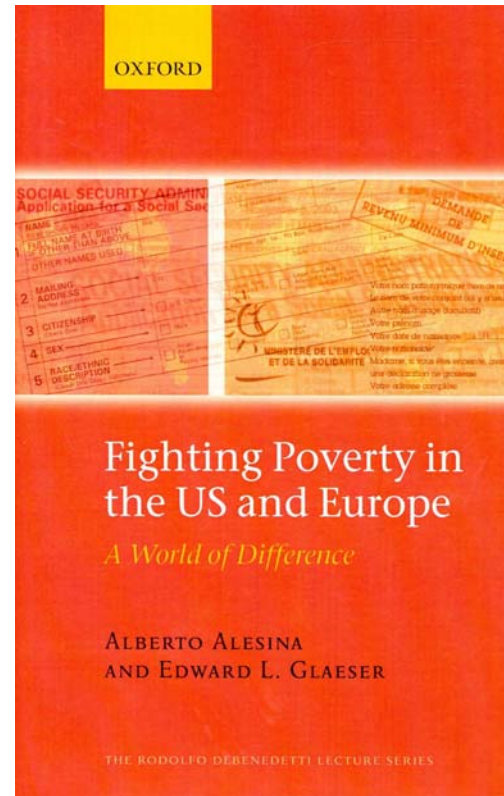


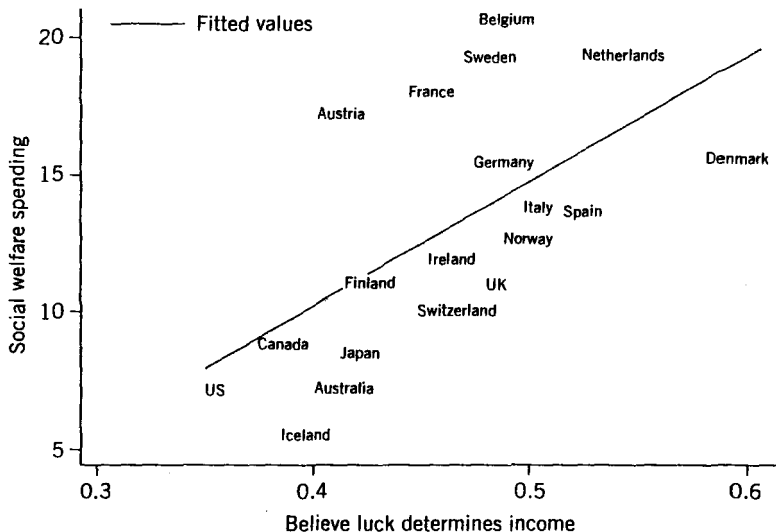
Degree of liberalism among the American public. Derived from public opinion survey data. Data source: James Stimson, [http://www.unc.edu/~cogginse/Policy\\_Mood.html](http://www.unc.edu/~cogginse/Policy_Mood.html).

# Public opinion

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Across rich democratic nations, public opinion and policy tend to be positively correlated



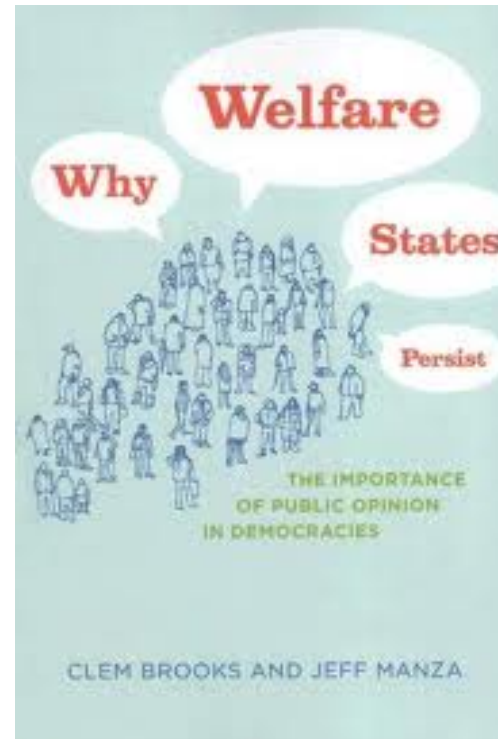


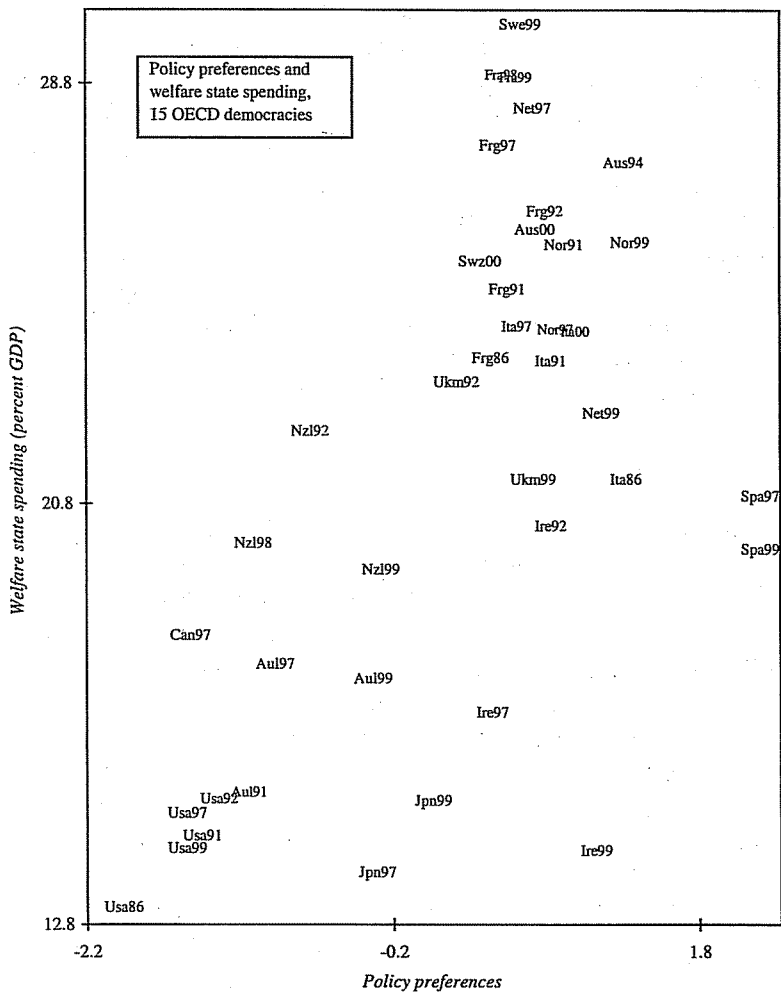
**Fig. 7.1. Belief that Luck Determines Income and Welfare Spending**  
 (Source: Calculations from GSS Data.)

# *Public opinion*

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Across rich democratic nations, public opinion and policy tend to be positively correlated





## *Public opinion*

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But there are a number of holes in the case for public opinion as a major determinant of policy

Relatively few Americans vote

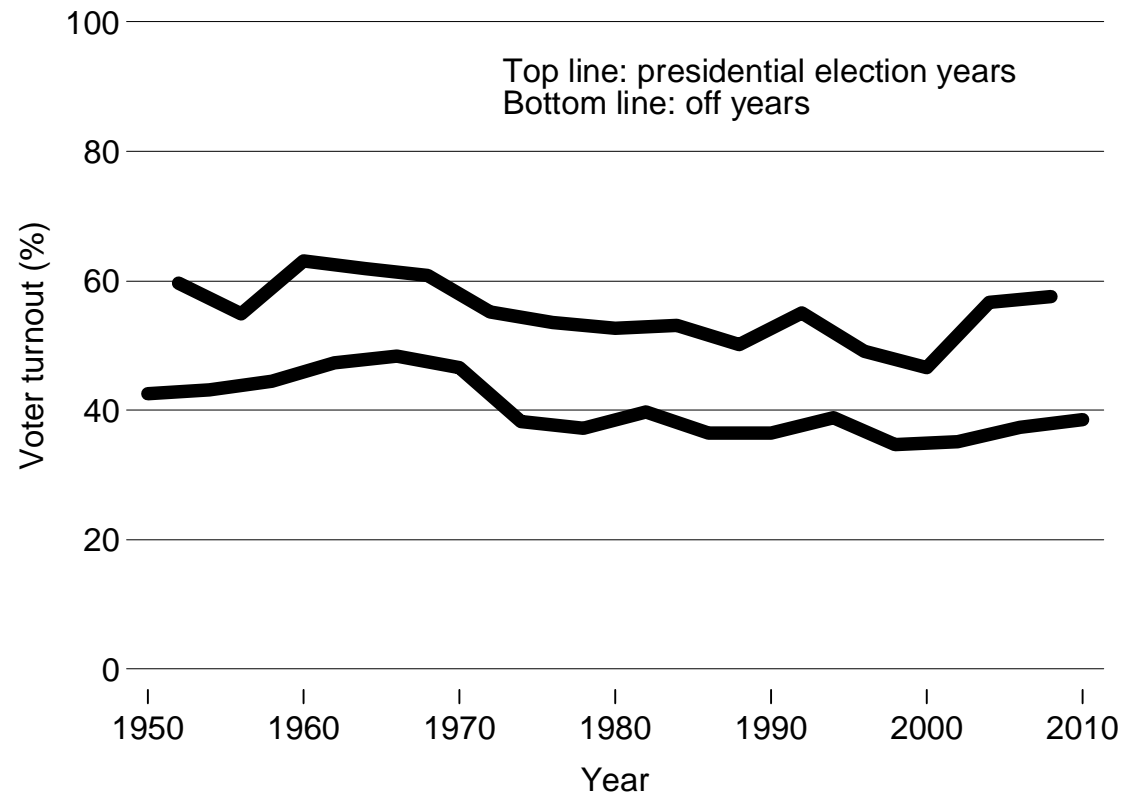
Some parts of the public seem to have more influence than others

There have been lots of instances in which policy makers don't follow the public's preferences

Across rich democratic nations, *changes* in public opinion aren't correlated with changes in social policy

# Voter turnout

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Voters as a share of the eligible population. Data source: International IDEA Voter Turnout database, [www.idea.int/vt](http://www.idea.int/vt).

# *Public opinion*

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In the U.S., some parts of the public have more influence than others

## **Affluence & Influence**

**Economic Inequality and Political Power in America**

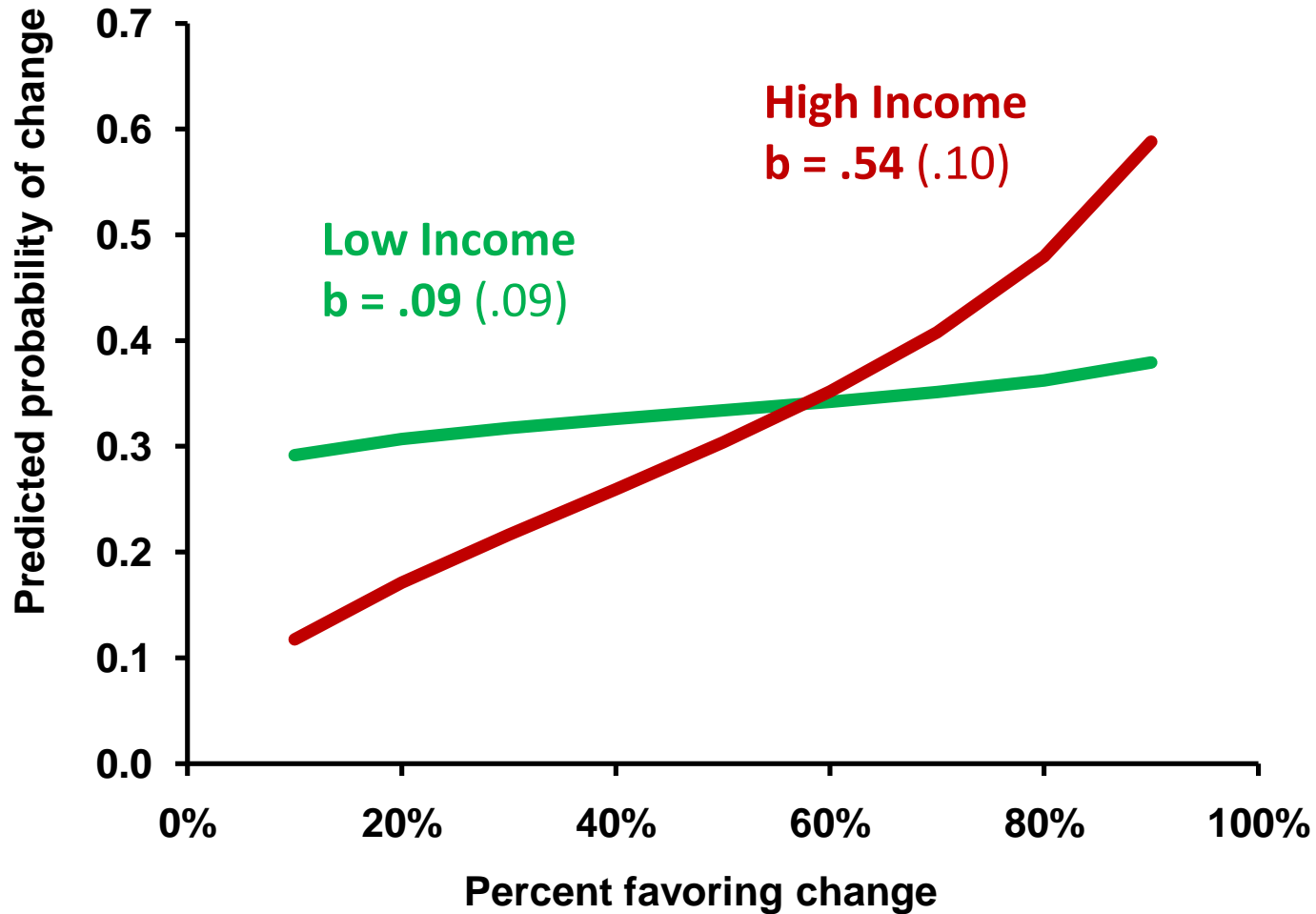
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**Martin Gilens**

**Department of Politics**

**Princeton University**

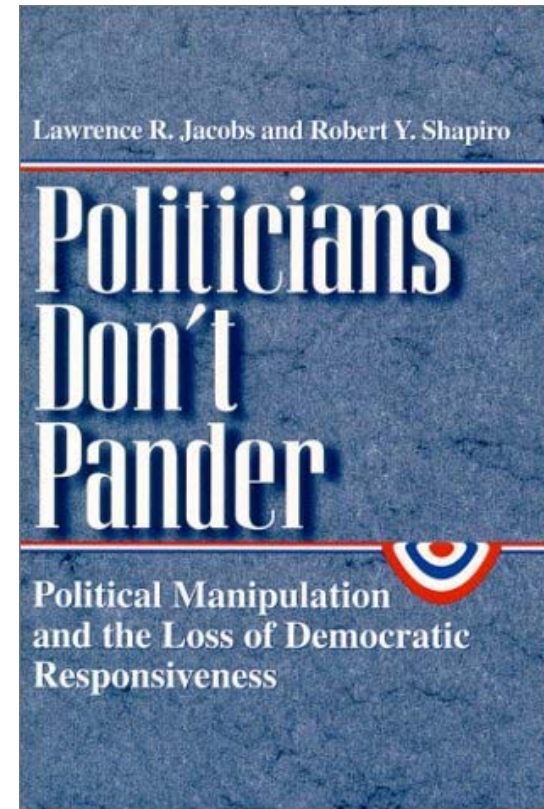
## When Low vs. High Income Preferences Diverge



## *Public opinion*

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In the U.S., there have been lots of instances in which policy makers don't follow the public's preferences



# *Public opinion*

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Across rich democratic nations, *changes* in public opinion aren't correlated with changes in social policy

Socio-Economic Review (2009) 7, 727–740  
Advance Access publication June 28, 2009

doi:10.1093/sor/mwp014

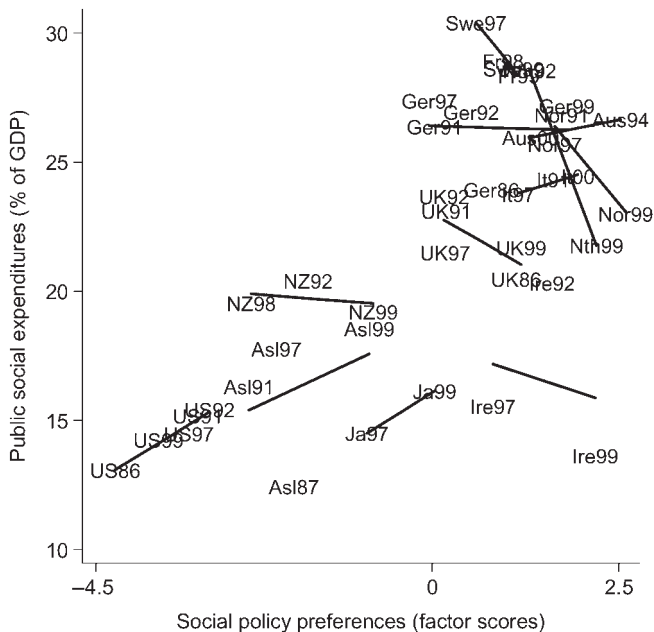
## **RESEARCH NOTE**

The effect of public opinion on social policy  
generosity

**Lane Kenworthy\***

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Note: For data definitions and sources, see the appendix.

**Figure 5** Social policy generosity by public opinion: pooled data with within-country regression lines.

## *Public opinion*

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My view is that the causality runs mainly in the opposite direction:  
policy → public opinion

## *Public opinion*

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Public opinion does seem to affect the likelihood of policy reversals

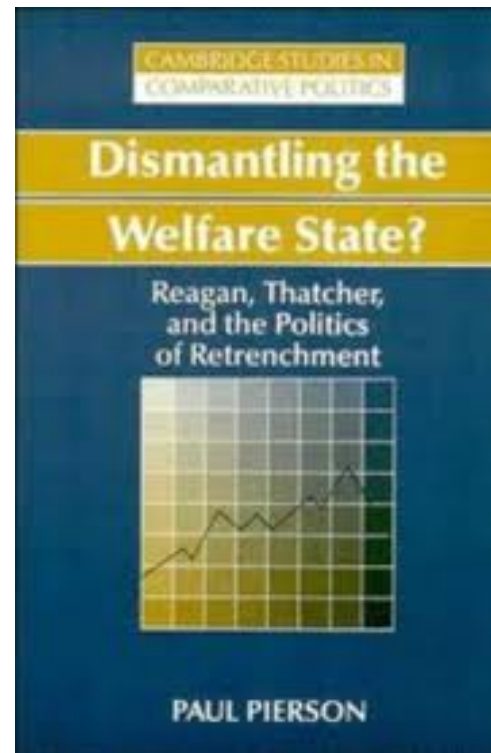
Programs that broadly conform to what the public wants and that seem to work well become popular

This popularity makes it less likely that policy makers will radically alter the program

# *Public opinion*

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Public opinion does seem to affect the likelihood of policy reversals



## *Public opinion*

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Public opinion does seem to affect the likelihood of policy reversals

In the United States, this restraining effect is aided by the large number of veto points in our policy-making process

# *Public opinion*

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Things may be changing

With instant polling, the impact of public opinion on government policy may increase

**Policy makers**

## *Policy makers*

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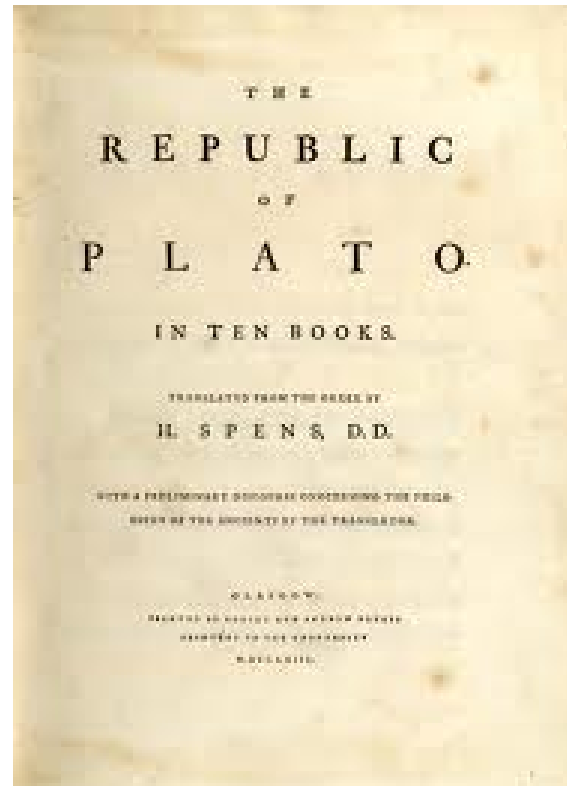
The logic of a representative (as opposed to direct) democracy is that the people themselves don't always know what they want or how best to achieve that

Elected representatives must figure out how to solve problems and pursue the common good

# *Policy makers*

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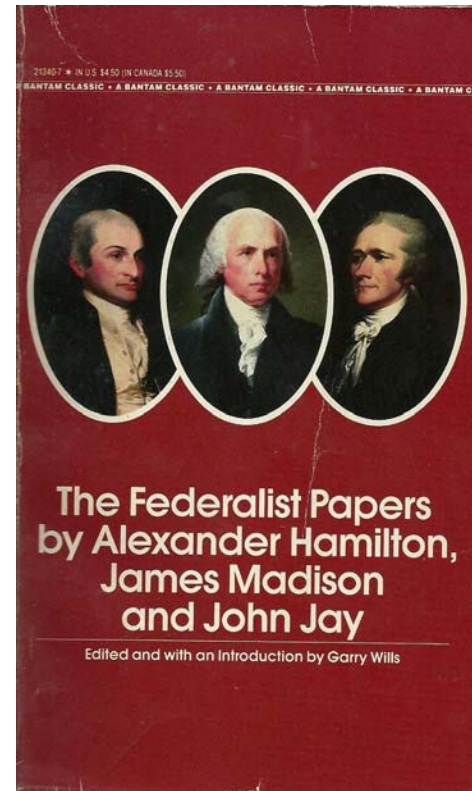
The people don't always know what they want or how best to achieve that



# *Policy makers*

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Elected representatives must figure out how to solve problems and pursue the common good



# *Policy makers*

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How do policy makers reach wise decisions?

Evidence and opinion from experts

Policy learning

Deliberation

# *Policy makers*

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Evidence and opinion from experts

Government research and analysis agencies (Census Bureau, Congressional Budget Office)

Party research and analysis bodies

Think tanks

Congressional hearings

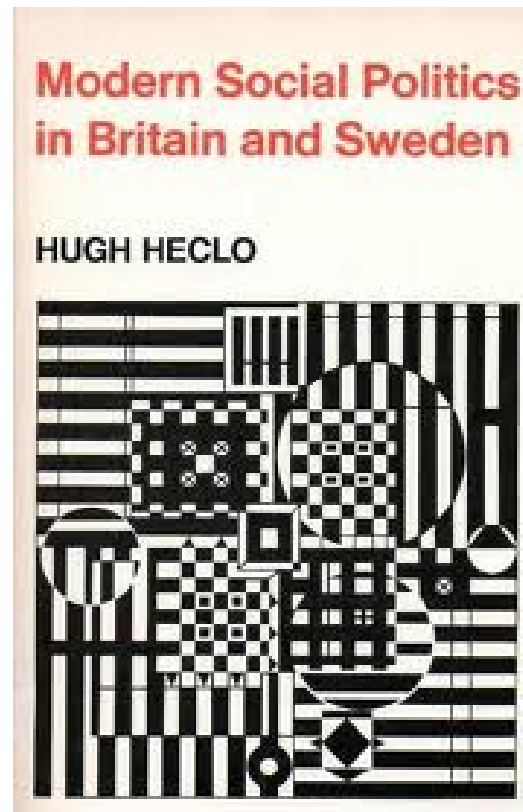
Formal discussion with representatives of organized interest groups ("corporatist concertation")

Lobbying

# *Policy makers*

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Policy learning



# *Policy makers*

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## Policy learning

Hugh Heclo: "Governments not only 'power' ... they also 'puzzle'."

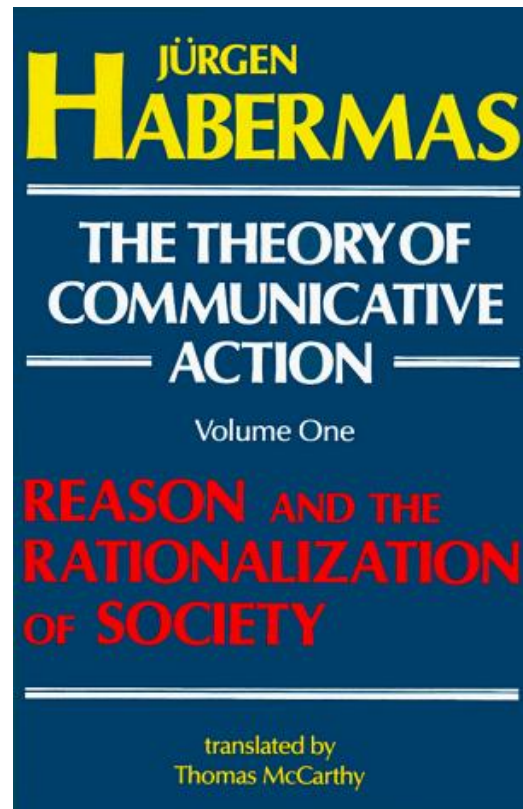
They try to figure out the best course of action, given the aims, resources, and available knowledge

Especially civil servants and policy staff

# *Policy makers*

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Deliberation



## *Policy makers*

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But policy officials — elected politicians, advisers, civil servants — might pursue their own interests rather than those of the people

- To ensure reelection or reappointment

- To accumulate authority and power



# Organized interest groups

## *Organized interest groups*

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Business

Labor

The women's movement

The civil rights movement

The elderly

Single-issue groups: the antiwar movement, the NRA, Greenpeace

Lots of others

# *Organized interest groups*

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The hypothesis: In a democracy, a concentrated voice tends to have more influence than individual voters or the amorphous "public"

## Mechanisms

Campaign contributions

Lobbying

Economic threats: capital flight, strikes

Marches, demonstrations, sit-ins

# *Organized interest groups*

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Benign version #1

"Pluralism"

Organized interest groups distill and clarify public opinion

They have roughly equal strength and political influence, so they enhance democratic representation

# *Organized interest groups*

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Benign version #1

"Pluralism"



# *Organized interest groups*

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Benign version #2

Labor strength

Employers have economic and political power without organizing

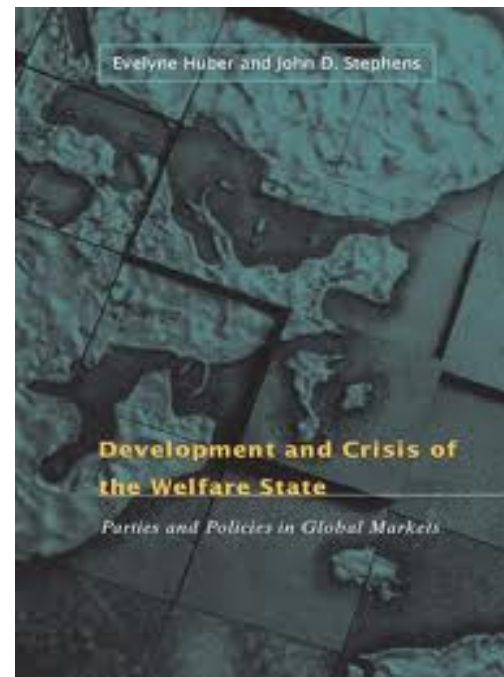
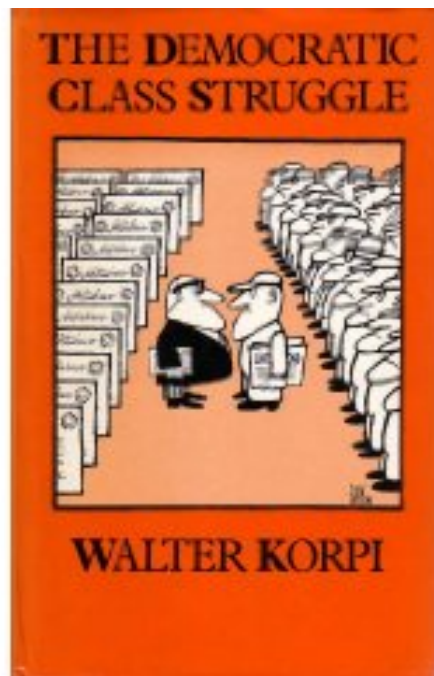
Organization puts less powerful actors, especially workers, on an equal footing

# *Organized interest groups*

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Benign version #2

Labor strength



# *Organized interest groups*

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Not-so-benign version #1

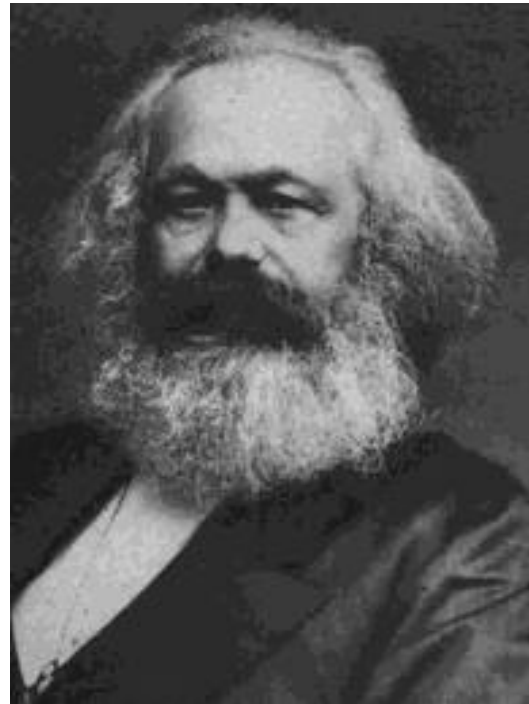
Business power

Organization furthers the structural advantages of those with money and/or economic leverage

## *Organized interest groups*

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Government as "the executive committee of the bourgeoisie"

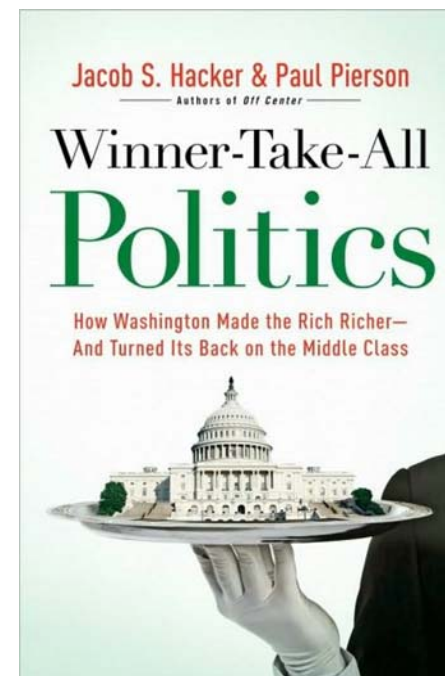
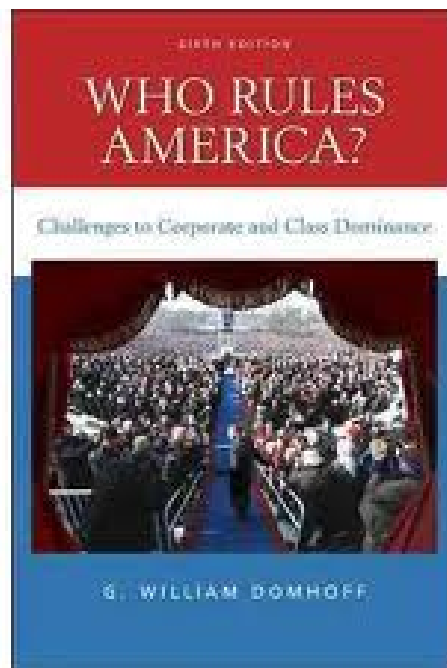


# *Organized interest groups*

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Not-so-benign version #1

Business power



# *Organized interest groups*

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Not-so-benign version #2

Extremist groups

Organization can enable disproportionate influence by small but dedicated groups with extreme views

**The context: America's  
unique political institutions**

## *The context*

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Key features of America's political institutions

Privatized system of campaign financing

Majoritarian, single-member district electoral system

Federal government structure (lots of authority at state and local levels)

Extensive separation of power across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches

Bicameral legislature

Filibuster practice in the Senate

## *The context*

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These features

Heighten the influence of private money in politics

Make policy change difficult

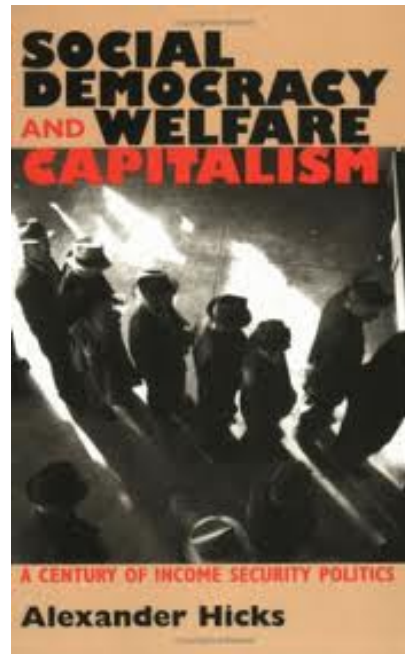
**What drives government  
policy?**

## *What drives government policy?*

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I lean toward organized interests as the most important cause

But public opinion, policy makers, and political institutions clearly matter too



# *What drives government policy?*

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In any given instance, the causality is likely to be complex

## Examples

The failed attempt to reform Social Security in 2004

The failed attempt to pass a carbon tax or cap-and-trade in 2009-10

The 2010 health care reform

The absence of heavy federal government support for high-quality affordable early education