

# **The Impact of Public Opinion and Advocacy on Public Policy**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses a longstanding controversy about democratic politics—whether democratic governments are more responsive to the public, or to the activities of interest groups, social movement organizations, and other organizations (altogether, advocacy). But it amends the usual approach to consider three additional possibilities—that public opinion and advocacy affect policy equally, that they interact, and that neither has much impact. A review synthesis of all articles estimating the impact of both public opinion and advocacy on policy published in 68 political science and sociology journals between 2000 and 2020 shows that most often, neither influences policy. How much credence should we give such findings? It is hard to say, because almost none of the articles shows any interest in generalization; we do not know if the findings reflect the democratic policy process generally. How might the findings be explained theoretically? The articles themselves are of little help; almost half test no theories; almost half test theories about the impact of public opinion or advocacy but not both; very few test competing theories. The paper then considers two ways future work might be made more credible. The first—improving the conceptualization and measurement and public opinion, advocacy, and policy—might lead to findings showing public opinion and advocacy having more impact than has been shown so far. The second—making greater efforts at generalization—might lead to findings showing public opinion and advocacy having even less impact than has been shown so far.

## **The Impact of Public Opinion and Advocacy on Public Policy**

Researchers who study the impact of public opinion and advocacy organizations on public policy (including interest groups, social movement organizations (SMOs), NGOs, etc.) typically hypothesize that both matter (Burstein 2020, 101). But there are competing hypotheses. Organizations may have much more impact than public opinion, or public opinion much more impact than organizations (Gilens and Page 2014). Public opinion and organizations' efforts to influence policy may interact, each strengthening the impact of the other (Agnone 2007; Rasmussen and Willems 2022). Or neither public opinion nor organizations may have much impact (Burstein 2014).

The usual way to address these hypotheses is to conduct a study of how strongly public opinion, organizations, and other forces affect policy (e.g., Gilens and Page 2014; Lax and Phillips 2009; 2012). But that is not this paper's approach. Instead, it presents a research synthesis (Cooper 2019; Cooper, Hedges, and Valentine 2019)—a quantitative analysis of all articles estimating the impact of both opinion and advocacy organizations on policy published between 2000 and 2020 in 68 high-impact political science and sociology journals. This approach enables us to describe what we learn from relevant studies *collectively*—not what each says, but what they say overall.

The research synthesis will consider how strongly the articles support each hypothesis, considering (1) how often opinion and organizations, and interactions between them, influence policy, (2) how the findings might influence our confidence in each hypothesis, (3) how much theoretical support there is for the findings, and (4) the extent to which the findings may be generalized.

The research synthesis shows that more often than not, neither public opinion nor organizations influence policy; the findings enhance our confidence only in the hypothesis that neither has much impact; there is little theoretical support for the findings; researchers make no effort to generalize.

How to respond to such findings? This paper proposes two responses. The first is to argue that improvements in research design and methods would lead to our finding opinion and advocacy having more impact on policy. The second is to argue that opinion and advocacy really have little impact. Taking this possibility seriously leads to a reconsideration of some widely held views of the policy process.

## **The Impact of Opinion and Advocacy on Policy: Competing Views**

Do public opinion and organizations consistently influence policy? Of course. Burstein's (2003, 36) research synthesis finds that "Public opinion affects policy three-quarters of the times its

impact is gauged; its effect is of substantial policy importance at least a third of the time, and probably a fair amount more.” Shapiro’s (2011, 999) review of work on opinion and policy concludes that “public opinion matters in policymaking in the United States....the overall evidence—qualifications, contingencies, and all—provides a sanguine picture of democracy at work.” Similarly, for interest groups, Gilens and Page (2014, 574) conclude that “Our evidence clearly indicates that—controlling for the influence of both the average citizen and economic elites—organized interest groups have a very substantial independent impact on public policy.” As Leech (2010, 696) notes, “Almost everyone believes that interest groups are influential” (see also Burstein 2014, ch. 1; Rasmussen, Maher, and Reder 2018).

Or maybe opinion and organizations do not have much impact. Opinion, write Gilens and Page (2014, 575), has “only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.” According to Achen and Bartels (2016, 1), the notion that what the majority wants becomes government policy is just a “folk theory... seriously undercut by a growing body of scientific evidence.” Similarly, for interest groups, Baumgartner et al. (2009, 214) conclude that “In spite of millions of dollars often spent on all the latest lobbying techniques and the involvement of some of the nation’s most powerful campaigns, consultants, and political leaders, most lobbying campaigns end in a stand-off, the status quo remaining in place.” The “‘dirty little secret’ of the lobbying literature,” remarks Lowery (2013, 19), is that “lobbying is often not very effective” (see also Amenta et al. 2010; Leech 2010, 696; Rasmussen, Binderkrantz, and Kluver 2021, 377 ).

Or the impact of opinion and organizations may depend on how the two are related. Each may limit the impact of the other. Government responsiveness to public opinion may be thwarted by powerful organizations that get what they want even when the public wants something else (Flothe 2019; Gilens and Page 2014; Page and Gilens 2017). Alternatively, organizations may have little impact because politicians hoping to be re-elected cannot afford to ignore public opinion (Gilens and Page [2014] provide a good summary of competing theories). Yet it’s also possible that opinion and organizations each strengthen the impact of the other. The impact of public opinion may be especially strong when advocacy organizations raise the salience of particular policies and communicate to elected officials what the public wants; similarly, advocates may be more likely to get their way when public opinion is on their side (Agnone 2007; Amenta et al. 2010, 298; Dur and Mateo 2014; Flothe 2019; Lax and Phillips 2012, 159; Rasmussen 2019; Rasmussen, Binderkrantz, and Kluver 2021; Soule and Olzak 2004, 474; Steidley 2018).

What do researchers find? Before addressing this question, we must clarify how to describe the organizations and activities potentially influencing policy, and how to evaluate findings about impact.

## Advocacy

Many types of organizations (in addition to parties) are said to influence policy, including interest groups, SMOs, social movement groups, organized interests, advocacy organizations, advocacy groups, organizational advocates, NGOs, and lobbies (Burstein 2019). Some researchers, however, doubt the utility of conventional distinctions among types of organizations, and propose expanding the definition of key terms. Interest groups are said to include “advocacy organizations...that make[ ] policy related-appeals to the government” (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, xii), while SMOs include “most...political advocacy organizations” (Amenta et al. 2009, 639). Lobbying, Page and Gilens (2017, 131) write, includes “any type of communicating with public officials that is designed to influence public policy,” while protest, a major part of the social movement repertoire, includes, according to Walker, Martin, and McCarthy (2008, 48), lobbying. For Baumgartner et al. (2009, 9), citizen groups are a type of interest group “representing an issue or cause without any direct connection to a business or profession,” which seems to include SMOs; Rasmussen, Binderkrantz, and Kluver (2021, 990) use the terms “organised interests” and “interest groups” interchangeably, while including among organized interests “formal associations as part of broader social movements” (p. 982); for Fraussen and Halpin (2018, 27), “interest organizations” include “non-profits, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, SMOs, and interest organizations [sic];” Leech (2010, 535) proposes taking a broad view of what constitutes lobbying, using the term “advocacy.” Baumgartner et al. (2009, 9-10), Burstein (2014), Crosson, Furnas, and Lorenz (2020, 1120), Gamson (1975, 138) Koopmans and Statham (1999), and Tilly (2005; 2007) also contend that political organizations often seen as distinct should be treated as though they are the same for purposes of social-scientific analysis.

Burstein (2019, 2021) argues that this is not just wordplay; he shows that neither theories about the impact of non-party organizations and activities on policy, nor findings about their impact, claim that the distinctions matter. This is not to say that there is no difference between, say, the National Association of Manufacturers and Earth First!. It’s just that commonsense distinctions among types of organizations have not been shown to matter consistently, either theoretically or empirically, for their impact on policy. He proposes, therefore, that for many purposes the distinctions should be abandoned. Organizations (other than political parties) attempting to influence policy should be designated “advocacy organizations,” and activities aimed at influencing policy, “advocacy activities,” or just advocacy. That approach is adopted here.

## Analyzing Research on the Impact of Opinion and Advocacy on Policy

There is a vast literature assessing the impact of public opinion on public policy, and another assessing the impact of advocacy (Amenta et al. 2010; Hojnacki et al. 2012; Shapiro 2011). Yet most work on the impact of opinion fails to include advocacy, and most work on the impact of

advocacy fails to include opinion (see below). Because opinion and advocacy are often correlated, estimating the impact of one while ignoring the other is problematic; the impact of both must be analyzed together. The research synthesis presented here is therefore based on articles statistically estimating the direct impact of *both* public opinion and advocacy on policy at the national or subnational level. Books are not included because they are much more difficult to code; often their main findings appear in articles anyway (Bunea and Baumgartner 2014). Qualitative work is not included because estimates of impact cannot be coded reliably. The measure of policy focuses on the final stage, or something close to it, of the decision process—for example, enacting laws. (The process may be different in other stages, but too few articles analyze them for their findings to be included.) This is *not* a meta-analysis. Meta-analysis requires that studies included be very similar in research design, methods, and measurement (Cooper, Hedges, and Valentine 2019; Imbeau, Petry, and Lamari 2001); studies of the impact of opinion and advocacy on policy are extremely heterogeneous (Leech 2010, 538).

In previous quantitative reviews of work on the determinants of public policy, two approaches have been used to find relevant articles: going through a few top journals issue by issue (Amenta et al. 2010, 293; Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Burstein 2020; Burstein 2021; Burstein and Linton 2002; Hojnacki et al. 2012), and searching electronically for key words in the titles and abstracts of articles in a greater number of highly ranked journals (Bunea and Baumgartner 2014; Burstein 2019; Uba 2009). Neither approach is intended to find all articles on a topic—just articles especially likely to be of high quality.

The search here combines the two approaches. Articles were sought in the top 35 journals in political science and sociology ranked in terms of five-year impact as of 2019 through Incites Journal Citation Reports (<https://jcr.clarivate.com/JCRJournalHomeAction.action?>), listed by rank in table 1. Some are unlikely to publish articles on the determinants of policy, but the procedure here is standard—searching highly ranked journals.

Also searched were four specialty journals not already included—two focusing on social movements (*Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies*), one on interest groups (*Interest Groups & Advocacy*), and one on public opinion (*International Journal of Public Opinion Research*). Excluded were four journals that do not publish relevant original research: three *Annual Reviews* and *Qualitative Sociology*. Two journals—*Socio-Economic Review* and *International Political Sociology*—are included in both lists, reducing the total by two. Thus, the total number of journals searched is 68—a greater number of journals than included in other quantitative reviews of work on the determinants of policy.

The journals were published in, or focused on, multiple countries (e.g., *West European Politics*, the *European Sociological Review*, the *Journal of European Public Policy*, and the *British Journal of Sociology*), and approached politics from a variety of angles, focusing on policy domains (e.g., environmental politics, health), demographic categories (race and ethnicity, gender), theoretical perspectives (e.g., political economy), and types of organizations (SMOs, interest groups, international organizations, etc.).

**Table 1 Sociology and Political Science Journals Ranked by Five-Year Impact**

| <b>Sociology</b>                             | <b>Political science</b>                             |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Annual Review of Sociology                   | American Journal of Political Science                |
| American Sociological Review                 | International Organization                           |
| Annals of Tourism Research                   | Annual Review of Political Science                   |
| American Journal of Sociology                | American Political Science Review                    |
| Sociological Methods and Research            | Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory |
| Socio-Economic Review                        | Socio-Economic Review                                |
| Information Communication & Society          | Political Communication                              |
| Population and Development Review            | Political Analysis                                   |
| Sociology of Education                       | British Journal of Political Science                 |
| Gender & Society                             | World Politics                                       |
| Qualitative Research                         | Journal of European Public Policy                    |
| Cornell Hospitality Quarterly                | Policy Studies Journal                               |
| Journal of Health and Social Behavior        | Comparative Studies Journal                          |
| Journal of Marriage and Family               | Governance                                           |
| European Sociological Review                 | European Journal of Political Research               |
| Work Employment and Society                  | Political Psychology                                 |
| International Political Sociology            | Review of International Organizations                |
| Agriculture and Human Values                 | Review of International Political Economy            |
| Sociology (British Sociological Association) | Regulation & Governance                              |
| Social Problems                              | Journal of Peace Research                            |
| Work and Occupations                         | Environmental Politics                               |
| Social Networks                              | Public Administration                                |
| Social Forces                                | Journal of Conflict Resolution                       |
| Sociologica Ruralis                          | Global Environmental Politics                        |
| Chinese Sociological Review                  | Political Behavior                                   |
| Sociological Theory                          | Political Geography                                  |

|                                                 |                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Annual Review of Law and Social Science         | South European Society and Politics |
| Theory and Society                              | International Political Sociology   |
| Global Networks                                 | Journal of Democracy                |
| Journal of Consumer Culture                     | Perspectives on Politics            |
| British Journal of Sociology                    | West European Politics              |
| Sociology of Health and Illness                 | Public Opinion Quarterly            |
| Sociology of Race and Ethnicity                 | Journal of Politics                 |
| Economy and Society                             | New Political Economy               |
| Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism | International Studies Quarterly     |

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All journals were searched for relevant articles published from 2000 through 2020 (journals that started publishing after 2000 were included from their first issue). Many were searched using *Academic Search Complete* (EBSCO Publishing 2006-) and *Business Source Complete* (EBSCO Publishing 2005-), seeking in the abstracts key words that had been found previously to identify all relevant articles in a smaller set of journals (Burstein 2019)—that is, the electronic search found all the articles found previously by going through the journals, issue by issue, and no others. The search was (policy or policies or political opportunit\* or law or legislation or legislative) AND (interest or movement or advocacy or union or NGO or organization) AND (influence or contribution or initiative or polity or resolution or association). Journals not included in *Academic Search Complete* or *Business Source Complete* were searched through their own websites whenever possible. For journals not searchable either way, the table of contents of every issue was read, and then, if necessary, the abstract and entire text. The lists of references in all articles discovered were searched to see if they included any additional articles meeting the inclusion criteria; none were found.

The search produced 19 articles, six in political science and 13 in sociology, identified in table 2 (below) and the list of references.

That there are so few articles should not be surprising—numerous researchers have noted the paucity of articles considering both opinion and advocacy (e.g., Agnone 2007, 1596; Burstein and Linton 2002, 388; Kluver and Pickup 2019, 92; Olzak and Soule 2009, 202; Rasmussen, Mader, and Reher 2018, 140). Nevertheless, readers regularly argue (without providing additional citations) that the number must be greater. We must, therefore, ask why there are so few relevant articles. There are several possible reasons. Perhaps researchers no longer care about the impact of both opinion and advocacy on policy. But that seems unlikely (see, e.g., Bunea and Baumgartner 2014; Burstein 2019; Gilens and Page 2014; Hojnacki et al. 2012; Page and Gilens 2017; Rasmussen and Willems 2022; Shapiro 2011).

Might the search have been too narrow? Probably not. Seventeen of the articles were found in an earlier identical search of just 25 journals (Burstein 2019); searching 43 more found only two more articles (Butz and Kehrberg 2019; Dixon 2010). Searching many more journals would likely find very few more.

There are two other, likely better, reasons for the paucity of articles. First is the structure of academic disciplines. In political science, public opinion and interest groups are separate specialties; relatively few political scientists study both (Rasmussen and Willems 2022). Sociologists studying policy change long neglected public opinion (Manza and Brooks 2012). Research on public opinion, advocacy, and policy is divided among disciplines that often ignore each other (Burstein 2021; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 1996). An early research synthesis of articles on the impact of organizations found that very few also estimated the impact of public opinion (Burstein and Linton 2002).

Second, there is an important practical reason why researchers seldom study advocacy and public opinion together—collecting data on advocacy requires a huge amount of work. Gilens and Page (2014, 568) note that “prior to the availability of the data set we analyze here [including 1,779 issues], no one we are aware of has succeeded at assessing interest-group influence over a comprehensive set of issues, while taking into account the impact of ... the public at large...” The most widely used data set on advocacy associated with social movements runs only through 1995 and has never been replicated (Wang and Soule 2012). Finding just 19 articles probably means that there were just 19 articles to be found; even greatly expanding the search would find very few more.

The articles were coded to describe their findings about the impact of public opinion and advocacy, and other aspects of each study. The way to code certain variables—whether a variable gauges public opinion or advocacy, for example—is readily apparent, but the coding of others must be spelled out. A key guideline was that coding should reflect authors’ views (details provided below). The only exception was described above; organizations are described as advocacy organizations, regardless of what authors call them, and activities intended to influence policy as advocacy activities, or just advocacy.

Hypotheses that opinion or advocacy affect policy were seen as supported by the data if the relevant coefficient was significant at the .05 level. The coefficients included are those from the model described by the authors as final, most complete, or a similar term; variables excluded from the model because their impact was not statistically significant are included as well. Relying on significance tests and focusing on the .05 level are sometimes seen as problematic (McShane et al. 2019), but the articles all did so while providing no alternative.

## Assessing the Importance of Findings

How might we assess the importance of findings about the impact of opinion and advocacy on policy? Lieberman (1992, 1) proposes a hierarchy of three ways to relate evidence to theory. Easiest to demonstrate is that evidence is harmonious with a theory. Much more challenging and potentially more valuable is assessing how evidence affects our confidence in a theory; as findings consistent with a theory accumulate, our confidence in the theory should increase. Most challenging, and potentially most valuable, is assessing how evidence might help us choose between theories. The same may be said for hypotheses.

Articles frequently report whether their findings are harmonious (or consistent) with their hypotheses. But do they discuss whether the findings affect our confidence in their hypotheses or help us choose between theories? No one seems to have asked this question.

Another way to gauge the value of findings is generalizability. Many social scientists believe it important to generalize about the policy process. Do the articles attempt to do so?

## Findings

Seventeen articles focus on the U.S., six on federal policymaking and 12 on states (Giugni 2007 analyzes both). One analyzes 19 Western countries, and one, 29 countries around the world (table 2). Six analyze data beginning in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ten in the second half, and three in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Three articles focus on environmental policy and on gay rights, two on equal employment opportunity, defense, and the Equal Rights Amendment, and one each on social welfare, immigration, right-to-work laws, nuclear power, taxes, and gun control. One considers five issues, one 39, and one, 1,779 policy proposals.

**Table 2 Articles Analyzing the Impact of Opinion and Advocacy on Policy**

| <b>Article</b>         | <b>Politics</b>      | <b>Data beginning</b> | <b>Issues</b>                       |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Agnone 2007            | U.S.                 | 1960                  | environment                         |
| Amenta et al. 2005     | U.S. states          | 1936                  | social welfare                      |
| Butz and Kehrberg 2019 | U.S. states          | 2005                  | immigration                         |
| Chen 2007              | U.S. states          | 1941                  | equal employment opportunity        |
| Dixon 2010             | U.S. states          | 1944                  | right-to-work                       |
| Gilens and Page 2014   | U.S.                 | 1981                  | 1,779 policy proposals              |
| Giugni 2007            | U.S., U.S. states    | 1975                  | environment, defense, nuclear power |
| Grzymale-Busse 2016    | 29 countries         | 1945                  | five issues                         |
| Hildebrandt et al 2017 | 19 Western countries | 1989                  | gay rights                          |
| Johnson et al. 2010    | U.S.                 | 1961                  | environment                         |
| Kane 2003              | U.S. states          | 1973                  | gay rights                          |
| Lax and Phillips 2009  | U.S. states          | 2009                  | gay rights                          |
| Lax and Phillips 2012  | U.S. states          | 2008                  | 39 issues                           |
| Martin 2010            | U.S. states          | 1938                  | taxes                               |
| McAdam and Su 2002     | U.S.                 | 1965                  | defense                             |
| Santoro 2002           | U.S.                 | 1940                  | equal employment opportunity        |
| Soule and King 2006    | U.S. states          | 1972                  | Equal Rights Amendment              |
| Soule and Olzak 2004   | U.S. states          | 1972                  | Equal Rights Amendment              |
| Steidley 2018          | U.S. states          | 1981                  | gun control                         |

### Opinion, Advocacy, Both, or Neither?

What do the articles tell us about support for our five hypotheses, that (1) both opinion and advocacy organizations substantially affect policy; (2) neither has much impact; (3) advocacy organizations have much more impact on policy than opinion does; (4) public opinion has much more impact than advocacy; and (5) opinion and organizations interact to influence policy (this may be combined with 1, 3, or 4)?

The articles include 106 coefficients estimating the impact of opinion and advocacy on policy. Fifty-eight percent are not statistically significant—60 percent of those estimating the impact of opinion, 55 percent of those estimating the impact of advocacy, and 62 percent of those estimating the impact of interactions (table 3). These findings are consistent with a comparable study of 48 articles focusing only on advocacy published between 2005 and 2016: 61 percent of the coefficients gauging the impact of advocacy were not statistically significant.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 3 Impact of Opinion and Advocacy on Policy**

| Impact on policy | Coefficients not statistically significant at .05 | N   |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----|
| opinion          | 60%                                               | 40  |
| advocacy         | 55%                                               | 58  |
| interaction      | 62%                                               | 8   |
| total            | 58%                                               | 106 |

These numbers tell us, using conventional language, how *often* opinion and advocacy affect policy. As to how *strongly*—key to deciding whether one has much more impact than the other—the articles have little to say; they discuss the magnitudes of only a quarter of the statistically significant coefficients, in ways that vary from article to article.

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<sup>1</sup>Eight of the 48 articles are also included in this study: Agnone 2007; Dixon 2010; Gilens and Page 2014; Johnson Agnone, and McCarthy 2010; Lax and Phillips 2009; 2012; Soule and King 2006; Soule and Olzak 2004).

We can get a more fine-grained sense of the impact of opinion and advocacy by considering each article separately. There is no standard for deciding whether opinion or advocacy matter more, or whether they matter equally. Here public opinion is considered to matter more than advocacy if at least one coefficient for opinion is statistically significant, and no coefficient for advocacy, and advocacy more than opinion similarly. Opinion and advocacy are both seen as mattering if half or more of the coefficients for each are statistically significant. If less than half for each are statistically significant, neither is seen as affecting policy.

From this perspective, three articles find opinion mattering more than advocacy (Martin 2010; Santoro 2002 with regard to what he calls second-wave legislation; Soule and King 2006); five, advocacy mattering more than opinion (Gilens and Page 2014; Grzymala-Busse 2016; Santoro 2002, for first-wave legislation; Soule and Olzak 2004; Steidley 2018); six, both influencing policy (Hildebrandt Trudinger, and Jackle 2017; Kane 2003; Lax and Phillips 2009; 2012; McAdam and Su 2002, and Santoro 2002); and seven, neither (Agnone 2007; Amenta, et al. 2005; Butz and Kehrberg 2019; Chen 2007; Dixon 2010; Giugni 2007; and Johnson, Agnone, and McCarthy 2010). Thus, the most common finding—overall and by article—is that neither opinion nor advocacy organizations affect policy. The hypothesis in which we should have the most confidence? That neither matters.

### **Confidence, Theory, Generalization**

There is another way to assess how much confidence we should have in our hypotheses—seeing what the authors say. Here we consider what they state explicitly about how much confidence we should have in each hypothesis, the utility of competing theories, and their contribution to generalization.

Articles can influence our confidence in a hypothesis by describing how much evidence supports it—for example, that most studies show opinion having more impact than advocacy—and then spelling out what their evidence adds. No one does so. Authors describe what we learn from their own studies, but do not consider how their findings might influence our prior beliefs about the credibility of their hypotheses.

What did the 19 articles contribute to theory testing? Following Burstein (2021), an article is seen as testing a theory if the authors said, before the data analysis, that they were doing so; or they stated, after presenting their findings, that their analysis had been guided by a theory, which they then discuss; or they stated, after the data analysis, that a theory had been tested. Testing “a theory” meant that the theory had to have a name—“democratic theory,” “social movement theory,” and the like.

Eight articles tested no theory (table 4). The remaining eleven tested ten theories: democratic theory, political mediation theory, resource mobilization theory, biased pluralism, institutional politics, majoritarian electoral democracy, majoritarian pluralism, political

**Table 4 Testing Theories about the Impact of Opinion and Advocacy**

| <b>Article</b>         | <b>Theory about<br/>impact of opinion</b>                                                                   | <b>Theory about<br/>impact of advocacy</b>         |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Agnone 2007            | democratic theory                                                                                           | none                                               |
| Amenta et al. 2005     | none                                                                                                        | political mediation                                |
| Butz and Kehrberg 2019 |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Chen 2007              |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Dixon 2010             |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Gilens and Page 2014   | majoritarian electoral democracy;<br>economic-elite domination; majoritarian<br>pluralism; biased pluralism |                                                    |
| Giugni 2007            | theory of representative democracy                                                                          |                                                    |
| Grzymale-Busse 2016    |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Hildebrandt et al 2017 |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Johnson et al. 2010    | none                                                                                                        | political mediation                                |
| Kane 2003              | none                                                                                                        | resource<br>mobilization;<br>political opportunity |
| Lax and Phillips 2009  | democratic theory                                                                                           | none                                               |
| Lax and Phillips 2012  |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Martin 2010            | none                                                                                                        | institutional politics                             |
| McAdam and Su 2002     | democratic theory                                                                                           | none                                               |
| Santoro 2002           |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Soule and King 2006    |                                                                                                             | none                                               |
| Soule and Olzak 2004   | none                                                                                                        | social movement<br>theory                          |
| Steidley 2018          | none                                                                                                        | political mediation;<br>resource<br>mobilization   |

opportunity, representative democracy, and social movement theory. No theory was tested in more than three articles.<sup>2</sup> Of the articles that tested theories, nine tested theories about the impact of opinion *or* advocacy; just two tested theories about the impact of both (Gilens and Page 2014; Giugni 2007), one testing competing theories (Gilens and Page 2014). Articles that test so many theories can hardly be said to increase our confidence in any single theory, particularly since they so seldom test theories against each other.

Articles were said to generalize if the authors said they were generalizing. No one did, perhaps because most of the articles are case studies, valuable in themselves, but providing little basis for generalization (Amenta et al. 2010; Baumgartner et al. 2009, ch 1; Bunea and Baumgartner 2014; Hojnacki et al. 2012).

## Explaining Null Findings

Why might opinion and advocacy frequently have no impact? Opinion might have little impact because advocacy has so much, or vice versa. But neither seems especially powerful. Perhaps methodological problems prevent researchers from discovering the true importance of opinion and advocacy. Or perhaps we often find opinion and advocacy having no impact because they really have no impact.

## Methodological Issues

Researchers have proposed a variety of ways in which improvements in research design and methods might enable us to find opinion and advocacy having more impact (see, e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009; Burstein 2014; Leech 2010). This paper focuses on the potential importance of improving how policy, opinion, and advocacy are measured. This is because measurement is central to causal models of the policy process, and there is evidence that better measurement affects the estimated impact of opinion and advocacy on policy (Burstein 2020).

Typically, we expect that good causal models will link specific causes to specific effects in ways that make sense theoretically and empirically, using measures that are as objective and replicable as possible. If we want to measure policy, the measure should be an important component of the policy process, objectively measured—for example, the enactment of particular bills or provisions of bills, or expenditures (e.g., Gilens and Page 2014; Lax and Phillips 2009; Soule and King 2006; Soule and Olzak 2004; Steidley 2018; Wilkerson, Smith, and Stramp 2015). Measures of public opinion should measure opinion about real objects that are part of the

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<sup>2</sup>A comparable study of 24 articles focusing only on advocacy found 19 theories being tested (Burstein 2021).

policy process, making it possible to match opinions about specific policies to actions on those policies; likewise, measures of advocacy should emphasize actions targeting specific policies, .

As a practical matter, though, policy, opinion, and advocacy are frequently measured in other ways. Policy, for example, may be measured in terms of how many laws are passed rather than what they say (Johnson et al. 2010), “policy tone” (Butz and Kehrberg 2019), or historically contingent notions, such as whether congressional action is “pro-peace” or “pro-environment” (McAdam and Su 2002; Johnson, Agnone, and McCarthy 2010).

In the absence of widely accepted criteria for evaluating measures of policy, it may seem reasonable to use a variety of proxies. But more effort should be devoted to developing such criteria. Good measures of policy are more likely than poor measures to be strongly correlated with opinion and advocacy. Researchers know this—they regularly discuss their own measures—but there seem to be very few efforts to influence the measurement of policy generally.

A key problem with the measurement of public opinion is how the measures fit into a straightforward causal model of how opinion may influence policy. We might expect policy to be most strongly affected by opinion on the same policy (see, for example, Chen 2010, 1744; Gilens and Page 2014; Lax and Phillips 2009; Simonovits 2019; Soule and King 2006; Soule and Olzak 2004). What to do, then, when there are no data on opinion about a particular policy? Researchers could decide not to study the issue, but often issues seem so important that they adopt another approach—gauging opinion not on the policy itself, but on something arguably related to it. For example, Hildebrandt, Trudinger, and Jackle (2017, 1197) lacked data on what the public thought about laws recognizing same-sex unions, so they used data on whether the public thought homosexuality can be “justified;” McAdam and Su (2002, 699) lacked data on what the public wanted Congress to do about the Vietnam war, so they used data on whether the public thought “the U.S. made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam.” Gauging opinion on something other than the policy itself might be thought of as a form of measurement error—and measurement error typically reduces correlations between variables.

Advocacy presents an analogous concern. We might expect policy to be most strongly affected by advocacy directed at legislative action on that policy—for instance, gun rights policies by lobbying on gun rights proposals, environmental policy by protests calling for action on specific policies (Burstein 2020; Crosson, Furnas, and Lorenz 2020; Rasmussen, Mader and Reher 2018). But it can be laborious to collect data on targeted advocacy, so often proxies are used instead—on gun rights, NRA membership rather than lobbying or protest (Steidley 2018); on federal environmental policy, advocacy focusing on the environment, but not on any particular policy proposal or directed at any particular legislature (Johnson, Agnone, and McCarthy 2010, 2274); on the ERA, not activities trying to influence legislators, but numbers of NOW newsletters and anti-ERA organizations (Soule and King 2006). Perhaps if more often we estimated the impact of policy-specific advocacy, we would more often find advocacy influencing policy.

Thus, research regularly attempts to analyze the causes of policy change using measures

of “policy” that are not measures of policy, measures of public opinion that are not measures of opinion about policies, and measures of advocacy that measure neither advocacy directed at any particular policies, nor, often, advocacy at all. Perhaps we should be surprised at finding opinion and advocacy influencing policy as often as they do.

Some researchers take these problems especially seriously, and consider how best to address them: how to conceptualize and measure policy in ways that reflect the causal processes involved in policy change (e.g., Burstein 2014; Filindra and Goodman 2019; Gilens and Page 2014; Lapinski 2008; Lax and Phillips 2012; Reich 2019; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wilkerson, Smith, and Stramp 2015; Wlezien 2017); how best to measure public opinion, particularly by taking into account how much people are likely to know about policy (Berinsky 2017; Converse 2000; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Stimson 2015); how best to match measures of opinion and policy so that they are measured on the same scale (Caughey and Warshaw 2018; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Gilens and Page 2014; Lax and Phillips 2012; Simonovits, Guess, and Nagler 2019; Soroka and Wlezien 2010); and how to measure advocacy in ways that best represents what people do to influence policy (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Beyers et al. 2014; Burstein 2014; Crosson, Furnas, and Lorenz 2020; Kluver, Braun, and Beyers 2015; Koopmans and Statham 1999; Rasmussen, Binderkrantz, and Kluver 2021). Some researchers hypothesize that some measures of opinion and advocacy will be more strongly correlated with policy than others—for example, policy-specific opinion as opposed to more general measures (Gilens and Page 2014; Lax and Phillips 2009, 372), opinion measured at a “medium level of specificity” rather than at levels so broad that the questions do not connect to current political controversies (Berinsky 2017, 318), and measures of advocacy that focus on activities intended to influence policy, rather than the number of organizations involved or their budgets (Burstein 2014; Gilens and Page 2014, 574; Murdie and Peksen 2015; Rasmussen, Mader, and Reher 2018, 142). The utility of various measures will depend on the theoretical context, considering what we’re trying to explain, ideas about why some measures of opinion and advocacy may be especially powerful, and the types of connections among policy, opinion, and advocacy postulated by competing theories. But it would certainly be worthwhile to improve the measures we have.

### **Finding No Impact May Mean There Is No Impact**

The finding that opinion and advocacy so often fail to affect policy may have little impact on the strongly held belief that improvements in research will lead to finding more (see discussions in Amenta et al. 2010; Leech 2010; Lowery 2013). But might we find the opposite—that some improvements would lead to finding less impact?

Leech (2010, 540) stresses the possible impact of sampling bias in research on advocacy and policy. She argues that many studies focus on “prominent” issues “known to have a lot of interest group activity”—that is, issues on which interest groups are especially likely to get what they want. McAdam and Boudet (2012, 180-181) agree, arguing that research “has dramatically exaggerated the frequency and causal significance of true social movements,” partly because

movements studied are “wildly nonrepresentative” of all movements. A similar logic may apply to public opinion. Voters may have opinions about some prominent, controversial issues, but on most issues they will not (Achen and Bartels 2017, 36-41).<sup>3</sup> Governments cannot very well respond to public opinion when public opinion does not exist. If sampling bias were reduced—if less salient, less important issues were studied more often—we would likely find opinion and advocacy having little impact.

How much advocacy is there? There is some evidence that much advocacy is directed at a few issues, and very little at the rest (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Burstein 2014). Even on very important issues, levels of advocacy may not seem high. For example, between 1948 and 1997, the average number of non-violent protests by African-Americans on civil rights was 27.7 per year nationwide; even during the peak protest years of 1960, 1963, and 1965, the number of protests never reached one per day in the entire country (Jenkins, Jacobs, and Agnone 2003). Figures for the U.S. women’s movement are similar; between 1956 and 1979, the number of “outsider events” (collective action outside formal political institutions) associated with the movement was 101 (just over four per year) and the number of “insider” events (within formal political institutions), 318 (Rosenfeld and Ward 1996). A 1985 analysis of the most comprehensive effort ever undertaken to count U.S. protests on all issues (beginning in 1961) concluded that the number per month per million people averaged approximately 1.2 (Lichbach 1985; for comparable conclusions on other policies and types of advocacy, see Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder [2003], Burstein and Sausner [2005], and Mahoney and Baumgartner [2015]).

How much advocacy is found in the 19 articles? Just four provide information on how much advocacy activity was directed at policy change (the others fail to present their data, or measure numbers of organizations and the like rather than activities). Agnone (2007) finds an average of 7.85 environmental protests per year between 1959 and 1997 across the entire United States, with a maximum of 47, and 16.49 advocacy events other than protests, with a maximum of 72. Giugni (2007) finds the maximum number of ecology (environmental) protests to be around 20 in any given year, 1975-1995, the maximum number of anti-nuclear protests just over 70 in 1978 (at least triple the number during any other year), and the maximum number of peace protests peaking at 65 or 70 in both 1981 and 1982 (with no other year reaching half that). Johnson, Agnone, and McCarthy (2010, 2274) find a total of 554 “environmental movement collective action events” nationwide, including protests, press conferences, lawsuits, and other types of activity, between 1961 and 1990--18.5 per year. McAdam and Su (2002, 708) find far more protests than the others: between 1965 and 1973, there were up to 90 anti-Vietnam war protests in a single month; the average, however, was 11, and the average number of protests with over 10,000 participants, 0.38 (with a maximum of four). These levels of advocacy may be high relative to other issues, but they still seem extremely small relative to the size of the

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<sup>3</sup>This view of citizen competence is controversial (Bartels 2005; Berinsky 2017; Converse 2000; Gilens 2011; Lupia et al. 2007), but is consistent with a claim that sampling bias produces an exaggerated sense of how strongly opinion influences policy.

American population. Does advocacy influence policy? In Agnone, yes; in the other three articles, for the most part, no.

What about public opinion? In the 19 articles, public opinion influenced policy 40 percent of the time. Had a wider range of less contentious issues been studied—for example, issues on the “national policy agenda” (Barabas 2016) or those addressed in congressional bills (Burstein 2014)—that figure would very likely be lower. Every two-year congress during the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the introduction of over 10,000 bills in the House and Senate (Govtrack 2021). No one can possibly know what each bill says, much less have an opinion about it; few Americans could have opinions on very many. Thus, on many issues, there may be too little advocacy to matter, and too few people with opinions for their views to influence policy.

So how does policy change come about? Normally, at this point, we would say that other potential determinants of policy should be considered. But there is another way to look at this. Perhaps when there are few demands for policy change, policy does not change. And mostly it doesn't. Between 1973 (the 93<sup>rd</sup> congress) and 2021 (116<sup>th</sup>), less than six percent of bills introduced in Congress became law (Govtrack 2021). Whenever there is conflict over changing a law or adopting a new one, the best prediction is that supporters of the status quo will win (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Many reasons have been adduced for this “status quo bias,” but little attention has been paid to my suggestion here: that the status quo remains because there is little demand for change.

## Conclusions

This paper began with a set of competing hypotheses about the impact of public opinion and advocacy on policy. A research synthesis of articles gauging the direct impact of opinion and advocacy on policy showed that 58 percent of the relevant coefficients were not statistically significant, and that, within articles, the most common result was that neither opinion nor advocacy influenced policy. If the findings affect our confidence in any particular hypothesis, it must be that neither opinion nor advocacy affect policy.

Theories do not provide much help in understanding the findings. With eight articles testing no theories, the remaining eleven testing 10 theories, and only one testing competing theories, we cannot very well say that the findings increase our confidence in any particular theory.

None of the articles includes any attempt to generalize; they make no claims that they tell us anything about the political process in general.

This paper has proposed two responses to these findings. The first is to improve measurement of public opinion, advocacy, and policy; the second is to further investigate the

possibility that neither opinion nor advocacy has much impact on policy. The proposals are complementary and both may be pursued simultaneously (and surely there are other possibilities as well).

There has been a great deal of research on how to measure public opinion and advocacy, much less on how to measure policy. But what is really missing in past work is effort to treat public opinion, advocacy, and policy as part of a system in which the measurement of each is considered within the context of theories about how each is related to the others.

Consider the relationship between public opinion and policy, for example. Some researchers suggest that it is important to correlate public opinion on specific policies with government action on those policies; doing so connects opinion and policy in readily understandable ways, and puts the measures on the same scale (e.g., Gilens and Page 2014). Others contend, on the basis of ideas about citizens' cognitive capacities, that it is a mistake to measure opinion on specific policies, because too few people have such opinions; instead, opinion and advocacy should be measured on issues conceived of more broadly (Berinsky 2017; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Which approach is better, for what purposes? At this point, we do not know.

Similarly, some researchers argue that if we are to understand the relationship between advocacy and policy, we should measure advocacy in terms of what people do to influence specific policies, much like we are urged to focus on opinion about specific policies. Yet many researchers ignore people's activities, focusing instead on advocacy viewed other ways. Only very preliminary efforts have been made to see whether some types of measures of opinion and advocacy are more strongly related to policy than others (Burstein 2020).

At least as important as considering measurement in terms of pairs of variables is considering it with regard to opinion, advocacy, and policy together. This is done very seldom, partly because of how researchers specialize—experts in public opinion are not likely to be very interested in how to measure advocacy, and likewise for experts in advocacy—and partly because doing so is so difficult. For example, Baumgartner et al. (2009) very impressively relate lobbying to policy change. They would probably agree that public opinion might also affect policy; yet it is very difficult to see how public opinion might be incorporated into their very detailed analysis of lobbying on 98 randomly chosen issues. Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002, 316) find “nearly a one-to-one translation of preferences [public opinion] into policy,” suggesting that other forces, including advocacy, could not have much impact. Yet it is difficult to see how they could incorporate advocacy into their very global analysis of when federal policy moves in a liberal or conservative direction; advocates (as in Baumgartner et al. 2009) tend to focus their efforts on specific issues, not on the overall direction of federal policy. Researchers on the relationship between opinion and policy argue that it's useful to measure the two on the same scale; what might that mean when connecting advocacy and policy?

As to how to investigate more satisfactorily the possibility that neither opinion nor advocacy directly influence policy all that much, a key seems to be sampling from a population

of issues, policy proposals, bills, or other ways of categorizing aspects of the policy process. Expanding the range of issues studied would force researchers to take seriously the likelihood that on most issues, most of the time, there is very little advocacy, few people with opinions, and little policy change.

Especially valuable would be studying issues in ways that would make generalization possible, and we are steadily learning how to do so. For example, Baumgartner et al. (2009, 2) analyze interest group activity on “ninety-eight randomly selected policy issues in which interest groups were involved;” Beyers et al. (2014) and Dur, Bernhagen, and Marshall (2015), a stratified random sample of legislative proposals submitted by the European Commission 2008-2010; Burstein (2014), a stratified random sample of bills on the agenda of the 101<sup>st</sup> congress (1989-1990); Crosson, Furnas, and Lorenz (2020), a sample of organizations taking public positions on bills before Congress; Gamboa, Segovia, and Avaendano (2016), a random sample of bills addressed by the Chilean legislature; Gamson (1975), a random sample of SMOs active in the U.S. between 1800 and 1945; Junk and Rasmussen (2019, 494), a “quasi-random” sample of issues addressed in public opinion surveys in five European countries; and Lewis (2013), a random sample of bills considered by the Wisconsin state legislature. None of these articles addresses the impact of both opinion and advocacy on policy, but they provide both a justification for trying to generalize and guidance as to how to do so.

Following these suggestions would require a great deal of work, and even some rethinking of what the policy process is like, but many building blocks are already in place. There are discussions of how to measure opinion, advocacy, and policy together (Beyers et al. 2014; Burstein 2020; Dur 2019; Wlezien 2017), the state of theory with regard to testing the impact of advocacy on policy (Burstein 2021), and sampling and generalization (Barabas 2016; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Beyers et al 2014; Junk and Rasmussen 2019). If researchers paid more attention to the work of others, especially across disciplinary and subdisciplinary lines, it would be easier to identify and resolve disagreements about the impact of opinion and advocacy on policy. And if there were more opportunities to publish research syntheses, it would be easier to keep track of where research stands on each of these concerns.

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