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# DEMOCRATIC FRUSTRATION IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN POLITIES: A QUANTIFICATION OF INCONSISTENCY BETWEEN MASS PUBLIC OPINION AND PUBLIC POLICY

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**F**EW ISSUES in the comparative analysis of democracy and elitism have been more debated and less tested empirically than the relationship between mass public opinion and public policy. While normative democratic theory has concerned itself with whether a positive connection between opinion and policy would be desirable (Bachrach 1967; Pateman 1970; Sullivan 1979 and 1981), almost all empirical research on the actual nexus between mass opinion and governmental policy has concentrated solely on the United States (Monroe 1979; Page and Shapiro 1983) — especially the sub-national level (Weber, 1972; Sutton 1973; Seidman 1975). As a consequence, quantification of the relative degree of democracy or elitism (defined in terms of the opinion-policy relationship) on a cross-national basis has been lacking.<sup>1</sup>

This article represents an initial step to compensate for the lack of comparative research in this area. It compares the major Anglo-American polities (Great Britain, Canada, and the United States) according to the extent of *inconsistency* between mass public opinion and public policy. In addition, potential variations in the opinion-policy relationship are examined in regard to the following independent variables: (1) the degree of centralization of governmental authority (federal versus unitary, parliamentary versus separation-of-powers); (2) the extent of majority opinion (landslide versus bare majority); (3) the type of issue (redistributive versus non-redistributive); (4) the partisan nature of the government (social democratic versus liberal/conservative); and (5) the impact of electoral proximity (election versus non-election years).

## COMPETING SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Based upon the relevant literature, there are (at least) three competing schools of thought regarding the nature and role of mass public opinion vis-à-vis public policy. For the purposes of this article, they will be referred to as: (1) counterfeit consensus; (2) democratic linkage; and (3) democratic frustration. Each of these schools is examined below in terms of its predictions regarding the relationship between opinion and policy.

The *counterfeit consensus* school of thought perceives mass public opinion as non-autonomous in nature. Opinion in Anglo-American

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<sup>1</sup>In fact, the only non-American oriented research (beyond individual case studies) to be published is by Hewitt (1974). He compares mass opinion and public policy in Britain on 20 national issues (all prior to 1965).

polities is depicted as being largely a creation of the ruling (business oriented) elites by means of their control of the modes of opinion formation and the socialization process (Mills 1956; Bottomore 1964; Miliband 1969; Domhoff 1978). As a consequence, there is a preordained consistency between opinion and policy — regardless of varying “democratic traditions” (e.g., Madisonian versus Burkean) between the United States and Britain. Such a consensus is deemed “counterfeit” in that it does not derive from genuinely independent mass opinion but is the result of a manipulative process (Hewitt 1974).

The *democratic linkage* school of thought rejects the elite-dominated view of opinion formation represented by the previous school — adopting instead a pluralist vision of the distribution of political power in the Anglo-American polities (Dahl 1958, 1967, 1971; Manley 1983). Public opinion is perceived as both substantially autonomous and capable of significant policy influence through various “linkages” between mass opinion and receptive policy-makers (Key 1961; Erikson and Luttbeg 1973; Sullivan 1974; Weissberg 1976; Luttbeg 1981). As a consequence, consistency between opinion and policy may occur frequently and is interpreted as evidence of significant democratic input (“linkage”) in the policy-making process. This perspective is adopted (implicitly, if not explicitly) by the bulk of empirical research on the opinion-policy nexus in the United States.

The *democratic frustration* school of thought takes an intermediate position between the two extremes presented above. While acknowledging the important role of business elites as the key political veto group in Anglo-American policy-making (Marsh 1983; Dahl 1982; Lindblom 1977), this school perceives mass public opinion as a complex mélange reflecting a variety of political and economic forces and institutions (Parlin 1971). As a consequence, mass preferences can (and often do) differ from elite desires on a number of issues. However, given the effect of an elite-dominated political system, public policy may still run counter to the wishes of the general public in a majority of instances. Mass opinion, when it differs from that of the elite, generally will be unsuccessful in achieving its policy options (Rose 1967; Manley 1983).

To summarize, both the counterfeit consensus and democratic linkage schools would predict significant consistency between mass public opinion and public policy — though for clearly different reasons. Only the democratic frustration school of thought (among the three competing perspectives presented) hypothesizes substantial inconsistency between opinion and policy. This article now turns to an empirical test of these competing viewpoints.

#### METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Given the lack of previous comparative research of a quantitative nature, it was first necessary to create a moderately large body of aggregate data that would allow systematic analysis on a cross-national level. The process by which the data were collected is described in detail below.

In order to provide reasonable parameters for this initial study, it was decided to focus on a small group of countries — Britain, Canada, and the United States — with a long-term historical commitment to democratic government but with differing institutional structures (e.g., parliamentary versus presidential, federal versus unitary) and political traditions (e.g., Madisonian versus Burkean). This would allow testing of the importance of such institutional and cultural differences (Alford 1963) in comparison to the significance of alleged similarities among the Anglo-American polities regarding the power of elites (especially business) in the policy-making process (Miliband 1969; Marsh 1983). In addition, availability of comparable English language polling data was an important consideration in limiting the analysis to these three countries.

In this article, the basic terms are operationally defined as follows: (1) “public opinion” — the distribution of national mass sentiment on selected issues as determined by published, scientifically designed surveys; (2) “public policy” — governmental actions or positions regarding selected issues as indicated by legislative, executive, and/or judicial decisions; (3) “democratic frustration score” — the frequency of cases indicating inconsistency between public opinion and public policy.

Cases were selected by the author in the following manner. All published American, Canadian, and British Gallup polls on policy-oriented questions from 1965-74 (the latest ten-year period for which complete data were available) constituted the initial survey base (Gallup 1972 and 1976; Gallup Opinion Index 1972-74; Gallup Poll of Canada, 1965-74).<sup>2</sup> Retrospective opinion questions regarding *ex post facto* approval or disapproval of previously made governmental decisions were then excluded, since they may not be an accurate reflection of opinion on the issue concerned prior to the announcement of the government's policy.

Surveys on the same specific issue (e.g., support for or opposition to the death penalty) within the same calendar year were averaged and treated as one survey result. This prevented more than one case of opinion-policy inconsistency (or consistency) for any one issue per calendar year. At the same time, highly salient issues which persisted over the period analyzed (e.g., liberalization of abortion laws) were considered as separate cases for each year they were polled. Thus, a built-in weighting system — dependent upon the frequency and duration over the years with which the Gallup organization surveyed respondents on particular issues — was established. This weighting was independent of any subjective judgments by the author as to the importance of one issue versus another.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the use of Gallup polls (admittedly imperfect instruments), the situation in respect to adequate data for comparative research in the opinion-policy area is generally (to paraphrase Hobbes) poor, nasty, brutish, and fragmentary. Thus, one is forced into a second best strategy in which the best available evidence is assembled — rather than pursuing a futile search for the optimum data (Castles 1978). As a consequence, previous researchers focusing on the United States or Britain have had to rely upon Gallup polls as a major source of mass opinion data (Hewitt 1974; Page and Shapiro 1983).

An additional consideration was sampling error. Since samples of the size used by Gallup have a 3 percent margin of error 95 percent of the time, all polls indicating 3 percent or less difference between majority and minority opinion were excluded from the cases analyzed.

As a result of the winnowing process outlined above, 342 issues (cases) remained: 141 American, 106 British, and 95 Canadian. For each case, the reported majority opinion on an issue was recorded as either favoring or opposing the policy suggested in the survey question. Having determined majority sentiment on the 342 separate cases, it was felt to be inappropriate for the author also to be directly involved in the interpretation of public policy on these same issues. To avoid the possibility of bias, it was decided that those who interpreted public policy on the issues considered should have no prior access to the public opinion data. Thus, these policy judgments were to be made independent of knowledge regarding how such characterizations would affect the ultimate results of this study.

To provide for an expert assessment of public policy, a panel of six judges specializing in the Anglo-American polities was assembled (composed of one political science and one history professor for each of the three countries considered). With the aid of graduate research assistants, data were gathered on each of the issues in order to facilitate the policy appraisals of the judges (*Facts on File* 1965-75; *Canadian News Facts* 1967-75; *Keesing's Contemporary Archives* 1965-75). The two country experts (for each of the three nations) were assigned the task of reaching a consensus assessment of public policy on the specific issues raised in the cases selected for their particular country. For example, the two Canadian expert judges were responsible for determining the nature of public policy on the 95 issues involving Canada. In most instances this was a straightforward and relatively simple procedure. As an illustration, when required to determine Canadian policy toward formal recognition of China in 1970, the historical record clearly indicated that the Trudeau Administration established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic late in that year. However, other issues were not as clear-cut (e.g., policy regarding foreign investment in Canada from the United States). When policy was deemed to be nebulous or even contradictory, the assignment of the judges was to reach agreement (based on additional evidence and their expertise) on the predominant thrust of the policy for the particular year under consideration.

In order to test for the potential relevance of the *type of issue* on the level of democratic frustration (see later section in this article), the judges were given an additional task. They were asked to designate each issue according to a dichotomous distinction — “redistributive” versus “non-redistributive” — based upon a variation of Lowi's (1964, 1972) typology of public policies. For this purpose, all issues involving a potential progressive (i.e., more equitable) reallocation of economic or political advantage or power in society were to be categorized as “redistributive” in nature (e.g., nationalization or guaranteed annual income proposals).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> At an early stage of research for this article, a distinction was also made between foreign policy and domestic issues. Contrary to the expectation expressed in the pertinent literature (Rosenau 1961), there was greater consistency between opinion and policy for

In the handful of cases when there was disagreement among the two country judges as to the characterization of policy or the type of issue, the remaining four judges of the six-member panel broke the deadlock. Upon completion of the policy assessment task, the results were transmitted to the author. For each case, the reported majority opinion on an issue was then compared with the expert determination of public policy on that same issue. Instances of inconsistency between majority opinion and policy were designated as "democratic frustration" cases. An additional element considered in this process was the time-lag factor. How long a period after the expression of public opinion indicated in a poll should one allow before making a determination as to policy consistency or incongruence? While there is no obviously right or wrong answer to this question, a 12-month time-lag factor (as adopted by Page and Shapiro 1983) was utilized.

#### DEGREE OF INCONSISTENCY

Table 1 quantifies the degree of inconsistency between mass public opinion and public policy (democratic frustration) in each of the Anglo-American polities. On average, 58.5 percent of all cases examined indicated incongruence between government action and public opinion.

TABLE 1  
DEGREE OF INCONSISTENCY (DEMOCRATIC FRUSTRATION) AND CENTRALIZATION OF  
GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY

<i>Centralization</i>	INCONSISTENCY		
	%	<i>N</i> *	<i>T</i> †
High (parliamentary/unitary): BRITAIN	56	59	106
Medium (parliamentary/federal): CANADA	61	58	95
Low (separation-of-powers/federal): UNITED STATES	59	83	141
All Anglo-American Polities	58.5	200	342

Note: Differences between findings for Britain, Canada, and the United States are *not* statistically significant using chi-square test at .05 level.

\*N: number of democratic frustration cases.

†T: total number of opinion-policy cases examined.

Regarding the minority of instances (41.5 percent) manifesting congruence between opinion and policy, the following caveat is appropriate. It must be emphasized that in light of the counterfeit consensus argument, a finding of consistency in these cases does not necessarily establish a causal relationship between mass opinion and governmental policy (and

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foreign as opposed to domestic cases. Upon closer examination, however, this was found to be largely a function of the high correlation between domestic and redistributive issues. No other independent variables in this study are similarly correlated.

therefore presumed democratic linkage). On the other hand, the ability of the ruling elites to manipulate mass opinion easily (as contended by the counterfeit consensus school) is open to doubt given the lack of high correspondence between policy and mass preferences in a majority of cases. As a consequence, these results are most consistent with the reasoning of the democratic frustration school of thought.

#### CENTRALIZATION OF GOVERNMENTAL AUTHORITY

Comparative studies of the policy performance of contemporary democracies often assert the importance of institutional differences regarding the distribution of governmental power — federal as opposed to unitary, parliamentary as opposed to presidential structures (Heidenheimer 1983; Powell 1982). However, substantial variations in the degree of centralization of formal governmental authority — ranging from the comparatively high centralization of a unitary/parliamentary system (Britain) to the relatively low centralization of a federal/separation-of-powers system (the United States) — do not appear to have an impact on the level of democratic frustration. The small differences between the findings for Britain, Canada, and the United States in Table 1 are not statistically significant.<sup>4</sup> This contradicts the assertion that “American political institutions (and political culture) are clearly much more sensitive to public opinion than their Canadian or British counterparts . . .” (Truman 1973: 46). Obvious differences in governmental institutions and political traditions (e.g., Madisonian versus Burkean) between the Anglo-American polities are apparently less important than the similarities among them affecting the opinion-policy nexus (discussed in the following sections of this article).

#### EXTENT OF MAJORITY OPINION

Despite the results reported above, it is conceivable (based on the democratic linkage school of thought) that an overwhelming degree of majority opinion (i.e., a landslide majority) regarding an issue might carry greater weight than a bare majority. In this regard, one can hypothesize: inconsistency between mass public opinion and public policy is higher for bare majority than for landslide majority cases. For the purposes of this study, all cases involving over 60 percent majority opinion on an issue were designated as landslide majority.

Table 2 presents the results. With the exception of Canada, there are no statistically significant differences between landslide majority and bare majority cases. In the Canadian instance, democratic frustration is actually higher in landslide majority cases (i.e., the opposite of what was hypothesized). It appears that the degree of majority opinion expressed in opposition to or in support of a particular issue is not an important factor in the decision-making process. Thus, these results provide further negative evidence against the democratic linkage perspective.

<sup>4</sup>This was determined using chi-square test at .05 level.

TABLE 2  
DEMOCRATIC FRUSTRATION AND DEGREE OF MAJORITY OPINION

<i>Country</i>	Landslide Majority		Bare Majority	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
Britain	53	19	57	40
Canada	64	27	52	31
U.S.A.	58	38	52	45
All Anglo-American Politics	58	84	54	116

Note: Only for Canada are differences between landslide and bare majority cases statistically significant.

### TYPE OF ISSUE

As suggested earlier, another way to approach the opinion-policy relationship is to differentiate between types of issues. Adapting Lowi's (1964, 1972) typology of policies, one can distinguish between redistributive and non-redistributive (i.e., "regulatory" plus "distributive") cases. As used in the relevant literature, redistributive issues concern deliberate proposals to reallocate wealth, property, political rights or some other related value among broad groups of classes — with the goal being a more equitable society. This necessarily means that there will be losers and winners — with the process marked by class conflict and cast in ideological terms (Ripley and Franklin 1976). On redistributive types of issues (i.e., those which threaten the economic elite's continued predominance), the degree of democratic frustration ought to be higher. Since these issues challenge those forces which benefit from existing inequalities in economic and political power, it can be expected that in these cases, more than any others, attempts will be made to frustrate the popular will. Thus, it can be hypothesized: inconsistency between mass public opinion and public policy is higher for redistributive than for non-redistributive issues.

As anticipated (see Table 3), democratic frustration is generally higher for redistributive (63 percent) than for non-redistributive (50 percent) issues. The greatest variation is for Canada (73 percent versus 43 percent) — with a statistically insignificant difference for Britain (though see results in the following section). If the failure of democratic linkage or

TABLE 3  
DEMOCRATIC FRUSTRATION AND TYPE OF ISSUE

<i>Country</i>	Redistributive Issues		Non-redistributive Issues	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
Britain	54	27	57	32
Canada	73	34	43	24
U.S.A.	62	34	51	49
All Anglo-American Politics	63	95	50	105

Note: All results are statistically significant except for Britain.



counterfeit consensus were simply a random event, one would not expect such results for redistributive cases.

#### PARTISAN NATURE OF THE GOVERNMENT

Unlike the other countries in this study, Britain has had an alternation between social democratic (Labour) and "bourgeois" (Conservative) governments at the national level.<sup>5</sup> This raises the question of whether action regarding redistributive issues is different under conditions of social democratic rule — where the supposed representatives of the working class (and the alleged opponents of the economic elite) have attained control of the mechanisms of government. Though the impact of the partisan nature of the government vis-à-vis economic inequality has been questioned (Brooks 1983), many researchers contend that social democratic administrations make some inroads against inequality of a political or economic nature (Cf. Parkin 1971; Castles 1978; Jackman 1980). Thus, within the British context, one could compare results for redistributive issues under Labour versus Conservative rule to test the importance of the ideological composition of the government. Accordingly, one could hypothesize: inconsistency between mass public opinion and public policy for redistributive issues is lower under periods of Labour as opposed to Conservative party rule.

The results for this hypothesis are presented in Table 4. As anticipated, democratic frustration for redistributive cases in Britain is significantly lower under periods of Labour (44 percent) than Conservative (75 percent) party rule. In fact, 19 out of 23 (83 percent of all) cases involving redistributive issues in which there was *consistency* between opinion and policy occurred under Labour governments. Thus, the attainment of political power by a social democratic party appears to have a substantial impact upon issues affecting its supposed ideological *raison d'être*.

TABLE 4  
DEMOCRATIC FRUSTRATION AND REDISTRIBUTIVE ISSUES BY  
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC RULE IN BRITAIN

Party	Redistributive Issues		Non-redistributive Issues	
	%	N	%	N
Labour Party Rule	44	15	55	18
Conservative Party Rule	75	12	61	14

Note: All results are statistically significant.

<sup>5</sup> The Canadian New Democratic party (which advocates a moderate social democratic platform) has held political power in three of the ten provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan) but has been limited to approximately 20 percent of the popular vote and a smaller percentage of parliamentary seats at the national level (Engelmann and Schwartz 1975).

## ELECTORAL PROXIMITY

As proposed in the "electoral connection" thesis (Mayhew 1974), representatives may attempt to be responsive to their constituents because they can ultimately be held accountable (admittedly *ex post facto*) for their actions at election time. Kuklinski's study of the California legislature found that the temporal proximity of elections results in increased consistency of opinion and policy. As he observed (1978: 166): "The notion that the necessity of facing reelection will sensitize representatives to the preferences of their constituencies has an honorable tradition in political science." Thus, it can be hypothesized (based upon this variant of the democratic linkage school of thought): inconsistency between mass public opinion and public policy is less in election than non-election years.

Table 5 presents the results for this hypothesis. Contrary to the predicted relationship, democratic frustration is higher in election years (with no difference for the Canadian cases).<sup>6</sup> The failure of electoral proximity to increase the congruence between opinion and policy is consistent with the other results in this article which indicate the inability of alleged democratic linkage mechanisms to achieve their goal.

TABLE 5  
DEMOCRATIC FRUSTRATION AND ELECTORAL PROXIMITY

<i>Country</i>	Election Years		Non-election Years	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
Britain	66	21	51	38
Canada	57	23	57	35
U.S.A.	67	45	43	38
All Anglo-American Polities	63	89	50	111

Note: All differences are statistically significant.

## CONCLUSION

In an important (though neglected) area where basic cross-national information has been lacking, this study represents a first step. Though the results should be viewed as tentative — with further work on a greater number and variety of countries and variables remaining, the findings presented above are consistent and clear. In the Anglo-American polities, mass public opinion is thwarted in a majority of instances — regardless of differences in centralization of governmental authority or political traditions. The greatest degree of inconsistency between opinion and policy

<sup>6</sup>In considering the subsequent electoral success of the incumbent political party, the Liberals retained power in Canada at the national level for the entire period examined. For the United States, both houses of Congress remained in Democratic hands and there was only one loss for the incumbent party controlling the White House. For Britain, there was also only one change in administrations during the period considered. Therefore, the political cost of higher democratic frustration in election years appears to be negligible for the party in office.

occurs for redistributive cases. Contrary to what has been hypothesized in the relevant literature, the degree of majority opinion (landslide as opposed to bare majority) is not a factor affecting democratic frustration.<sup>7</sup> In addition, electoral proximity does not reduce opinion-policy inconsistency. Only the presence of social democratic rule in Britain appears to decrease democratic frustration — and in this instance solely for redistributive cases. Thus, the democratic linkage school of thought is not compatible with the bulk of empirical evidence.

As previously noted, if there were a high degree of consistency between mass opinion and governmental action, this could be caused by an extremely successful effort on the part of governmental and non-governmental elites to structure mass opinion to agree with their preferences — a false consistency between opinion and policy being the result. By the same token, the very fact that mass opinion differs from ultimate policy in a majority of cases analyzed in this article is evidence of the failure in a significant number of instances to mold public opinion to share the elites' values. Thus, the counterfeit consensus school also fails to obtain major support from the quantitative analysis. Among those schools of thought presented in this article, only the democratic frustration perspective is consistent with the findings.

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<sup>7</sup>In relation to the question: Are there particular kinds of issues that might affect this finding?, the author examined redistributive issues as they relate to landslide versus bare majority cases. Forty-five percent of the landslide majority cases of democratic frustration as compared to 38 percent of the bare majority cases of inconsistency involved redistributive issues. This minor difference would not account for the results provided in Table 2 that indicated landslide majorities were as likely to be frustrated as narrow ones.

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