The Evolution of Political Knowledge

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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COMMENTARY

A Comparative Approach to Democratic Representation

GARY W. COX

Bing Powell has provided a thoughtful and theoretically coherent overview of much of the empirical literature on representation. Given the protean and sometimes cussed nature of that concept, this is no mean accomplishment.

In my comments, I wish to make two additions to Powell’s discussion. The first addition is “completing the representational loop.” The second is “adding a 900-pound gorilla (and inducing it to jump through the loop).”

Completing the Representational Loop

By completing the representational loop I mean simply adding a few more boxes and arrows to the implicit diagram that lies behind Powell’s discussion. By way of clarification, I refer the reader to figure 5.1.

The first four arrows in this figure run: (1) from “citizens’ preferences” to “votes”; (2) from “votes” to “seats”; (3) from “seats” to “portfolios”; and (4) from “portfolios” to “governmental actions.” These arrows cover the terrain surveyed in Powell’s paper. The literature on electoral systems and the translation of votes into seats, Powell’s first major subset of the literature, corresponds to arrow (2). The extensions on either side of this arrow, to cover the translation of preferences into votes, and of seats into governmental policies, correspond to Powell’s second major subset of the literature.

I would simply add two more arrows—labeled (5) and (6)—to complete the loop. Arrow (5) is one about which we know embarrassingly little: how governmental policies interact with private decisions and acts of Nature to produce an “outcome.” By an “outcome” I mean a “state of the world” that specifies everything that affects human welfare in a given polity. There are of course many specialized literatures in public policy that seek to address this general question—how do government policies affect outcomes?—for special cases. How do abortion policies affect the incidence of abortion? How do educational policies affect the high-school drop-out rate? And so forth. In comparative political economy, the largest such literature is probably that which asks how governmental policies affect economic performance. Moreover, we have a corresponding literature at arrow (6): how shifts in economic performance affect citizens’ preferences, hence the government’s votes at the next election.

The point of adding arrows (5) and (6) is that governments’ decisions about
which policies to implement will depend on what each thinks its citizenry’s response will be. That is, the extent to which governments have an incentive to respond to citizens’ preferences depends not just on how preferences percolate through the electoral system and the government formation process (arrows (1), (2) and (3)), but also on how actions affect preferences (arrows (5) and (6)).

Adding a 900-Pound Gorilla

This brings us to the 900-pound gorilla. As Powell notes, few students of representation explicitly consider the strategic decisions of politicians and how these affect actually achieved representation. Here, I focus on one collective actor of considerable importance: the government.

I have one broad point to make about the government’s role vis-à-vis the representational loop: governments can monkey with the electoral system and the government formation process in such a way as to greatly dampen any preference shocks that might arise from their (abysmal) performance. They can also monkey with the translation of governmental performance into preferences, again in such a way as to set themselves free from representational pressures. Metaphorically, they can make the loop they must jump through rather larger and lower to the ground than a democratic theorist might. Let’s first consider several ways of enlarging the loop (i.e., making representational demands less
demanding). Then we can return to the issue of jumping through the loop (i.e., meeting representational demands well enough to secure reelection).

**Monkeying with the Translation of Performance into Preferences**

The general strategy here is to ensure that citizens hear only good things about the government and about any “outcomes” that might be linked with the government. The primary technique is to ensure that the mass media just ape the government line, so to speak. Although blatant governmental control of the mass media disqualifies a polity as democratic, there are many fine gradations between blatant control and a totally free media sector admirably performing civics-text functions. A corollary technique is to ensure that “government statistics” appear in an amended version of Mark Twain’s gibe: “lies, damned lies and government statistics.”

**Monkeying with the Translation of Preferences into Votes**

A ruling group can monkey with the translation of preferences into votes in two main ways: first, by preventing certain preferences from being expressed at all as votes; second, by preventing certain preferences from being expressed sincerely as votes. Examples of the first strategy include preventing the naturalization of the opposition’s supporters; disfranchising the opposition’s supporters; making it harder for the opposition’s voters to register to vote; and posting thugs at the polling stations to scare away the opposition’s voters on polling day. Examples of the second strategy include fostering surplus opposition candidates and financing opposition splinter groups.

Rather than worsening the opposition’s preference-to-vote translation, a government can also seek to improve its own preference-to-vote translation. The strategies are basically the same, though in reverse: hasten the naturalization of supporters; enfranchise more supporters; agree on an optimal number of candidates (with the aid of governmental resources); and so on.

One might argue that true democracies do not allow throwing a monkey wrench into voting rights, registration, and electoral administration. But again all of these strategies can be employed in varying degrees and they are well known in the electoral history of all countries that are considered stable democracies today.

**Monkeying with the Translation of Votes into Seats**

There are two main techniques under this heading. One is to make some seats not a function of votes at all. For example, the KMT in Taiwan had for a long time a large share of the Legislative Yuan’s seats that were not at risk in elections. A less permanent way of insulating seats from votes is creative vote-counting (i.e.,
fraud). If seats must depend on votes, the next best thing is to make sure your votes regularly count more than your opponents’ votes. The main techniques here are gerrymandering and malapportionment. The first is largely limited to small-magnitude systems, but the second can appear in PR systems too.3

**Monkeying with the Translation of Seats into Portfolios**

Once each party’s seat shares are determined, there may still be structural impediments to, or structural advantages in, the formation of certain governments. As an example of a structural impediment, consider the existence of a pariah party with a significant seat share, such as the Italian Communists in the latter half of the twentieth century. As an example of a structural advantage, one might mention the substantial monetary resources of which the Tanaka/Takeshita faction of the Japanese Liberal Democrats disposed, which reputedly contributed to their so frequently being in the “mainstream” of the LDP.

**Getting the 900-Pound Gorilla to Jump through the Representational Loop**

Ideally, we want our 900-pound gorilla to jump through the representational loop: taking decisions in light of how those decisions will affect popular preferences—hence votes, seats, and a return to office. However, the gorilla has notoriously and persistently, throughout its long and variously democratic life, been engaged in several monkey businesses the point of which is to reengineer the loop so that any baboon could jump through it.

In less simian terms: If the current government can arrange that its performance in office will have less impact on its chances of retaining office, then its electoral incentive to take actions that conform to popular preferences is lessened. This lessening of the representational connection can be “arranged” anywhere along the loop. To take the extreme cases at each arrow in the loop, if any of the following conditions holds, then the government has no purely electoral incentive to perform well: the government’s performance has no impact on popular preferences, popular preferences have no impact on votes, votes have no impact on seats, or seats have no impact on portfolios.

Put another way, just as a chain holding a gorilla is only as strong as its weakest link, so the representational incentive constraining the government is only as strong as the weakest link in the chain of connections diagrammed in figure 5.1. This suggests that, if we are going to study how well the government’s actions reflect the electorate’s preferences, then we need to look carefully along the whole representational loop for structural biases that favor one group or another; and also consider to what extent such biases reduce to a common metric.

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Notes

1. Indeed, the first four arrows go somewhat beyond what Powell considers, in that the fourth arrow ends at "governmental actions," rather than the "governmental preferences" which are the focus of much of the literature surveyed.

2. More specific versions of this question include: Are democracies better than autocracies at fostering growth? Are independent central banks better than dependent central banks at controlling inflation? For recent surveys of these questions, see Przeworski et al. (2000) and Berger, de Haan, and Eijffinger (2001).

3. Much of the literature skips right past preferences to votes, fusing arrows (6) and (1). See Lewis-Beck (1988).

4. Although I don’t show it in the diagram, one might well argue that there should be another arrow, directly from governmental actions to citizens’ preferences, but I won’t get into the proliferation of arrows, other than to note that several more might plausibly be added.

5. For a recent perspective on gerrymandering, see Cox and Katz (2002). For a comparative analysis of malapportionment, see Snyder and Samuels (2001).
COMMENTARY

New Challenges in the Study of Political Representation.
Comment on G. Bingham Powell Jr., “Citizens, Elected Policymakers, and Democratic Representation: Two Contributions from Comparative Politics”

HERBERT KITSCHELT

G. Bingham Powell’s essay offers an excellent survey of the current state of the art in the field of representation studies. My comments expand on Powell’s musings about future avenues of research and only in one instance directly object to his rendering of current theory and knowledge. I will first address a general question relevant for studies of both procedural and substantive political representation. I then briefly turn to the area that is less relevant for my own research, procedural representation, and finally focus on issues of substantive representation. Readers may view my comments on this last subject also as an implicit self-critique of my own work on representation in postcommunist democracies that Powell’s essay summarizes so well.

As a red thread through my comments, consider the plea to theorize the “content” of the representative relationship in the sense of how politicians empirically act on their constituencies’ preferences in the authoritative allocation of scarce resources. I invite scholars to probe further into the interplay between inputs of the political processes (interest articulation and aggregation) and outputs (policies) in the study of political representation.

The Object of Representation

The relevant research question of representational studies is in most instances whether political parties express preferences that are close—in the sense of a Euclidean spatial rendering—to the preference ideal points of their own voters. Powell’s essay highlights that the two critical assumptions motivating this research agenda may not always be met, namely that (1) parties are unitary actors and (2) pursue policies as a way to compensate voters for their support. Policies constitute an indirect and noncontingent compensation of voting constituencies for their inclination to support the governing party or coalition. Governing parties aim to reward broad categories of citizens with “club
goods” whose members they suspect to have supported them more than other voter groups or groups whose partial support is pivotal in maintaining executive power. Alternatively or supplementary, governing parties benefit the median voter with collective goods dissipating benefits throughout society. Governments do not make the access to such club or collective policy benefits contingent upon the voting behavior of individuals and small groups in the overall population or the targeted categories.

As Powell points out (Powell, p. 232 in this volume), sometimes politicians and parties may reward individual voters and small groups directly and contingent upon their voting conduct with selective, private goods for their voting preference and broader support of parties and candidates with scarce resources (money, labor). Such “clientelistic” rewards may take the form of government procurement contracts, favorable regulatory decisions, public sector jobs, public housing, or even direct gifts paid for by the party or the public purse at the behest of governing partisan politicians. It should be recognized that clientelism does establish a relationship of representation that entails responsiveness of the patron (agent) to the client (principal) in the anticipation that the latter will hold the former accountable at subsequent elections for her capacity to deliver scarce goods. Clientelism may also be competitive in the sense that alternative parties offer selective goods and voters support whom they expect to be the most credible and generous supplier of selective benefits. Indeed, in contemporary democracies the empirical presence of clientelism often involves a political market process in which potential patrons bid for the support of a variety of client groups.

Little cross-national and cross-regional research has probed into the systematic conditions under which “clientelistic” or “programmatic” policy-based representational relations emerge, persist, or decline and give way to other forms of representation. The conditions that affect politicians’ choice between clientelistic and programmatic representational linkages to voter constituencies also may influence the empirical accuracy of the parties-as-unitary-actors premise and the cohesiveness of parties in policy terms, an assumption underlying conventional representation studies. Where politicians rely on contingent direct exchanges with voters, they may have much less incentive and sense of urgency to work out a cohesive party policy program than in instances where clientelistic linkage strategies are not an option and voters examine the policy record and programmatic commitments of party elites. For procedural studies of representation this implies that the formal correspondence of votes and seats cast for a party may say little about representative relations. In the presence of clientelistic representation, the party label may not reveal the nature of the groups that seek representation in the political process.
Procedural and Substantive Representation

Even if we restrict our focus to policy representation, the substantive nature of the goods sought after by electoral constituencies and offered by politicians (i.e., the “content” of the representative relationship) is relevant and deserves more theorizing. This comes to the fore in the evaluation of Duverger’s Law. Powell refers to a large number of studies that show an empirical tendency for single-member district systems (SMD) with a plurality-winning formula to produce a more compact party-system format (less party fragmentation and ideally a two-party system), but he also indicates several exceptions to that tendency. These exceptions are in fact consistent with the basic premise of the law, namely the prevalence of strategically instrumental, myopic voters with consistent preference orderings who opt for those candidates and parties whose advertised policy preferences are closest to their own ideal points in the policy space and have a capacity of winning the seat. Under these conditions multiparty formats may emerge if (1) voters have no clear priors about which two within a field of candidates have the greater probability of being winner or close runner-up (Gary Cox’s “non-Duvergerian” equilibrium), or (2) one candidate is virtually certain to win, rendering it irrelevant for voters in the opposed camp to coordinate strategically around the closest runner-up at prelection time. Further opportunities for multi-system formats under conditions of SMD plurality rules present themselves as we move from the individual district to the national level, even in parliamentary democracies where voters have incentives to consider the national rather than the district level performance of parties. SMD systems may have only two viable parties in each district, but heterogeneity of constituencies across districts may enable different parties to belong to the pair of likely winners from district to district, thus generating a multiparty system format at the national level.

What may be also consistent with Duverger’s Law and its rationalist underpinnings is that newly founded democratic polities, as well as polities that recently experienced an exogenous “shock,” triggering novel and hitherto unrepresented but now salient voter preferences, may generate multiparty formats even in the presence of SMD-plurality elections. In such instances, instrumental strategic voters and office-seeking politicians have yet to learn from trial-and-error and feedback loops around which parties and candidates it is best to coordinate and thus to reduce the party-system format to two alternative camps.

But not all empirical violations of Duverger’s Law are consistent with its basic logic. Empirical studies show that the presence of SMD plurality systems may explain only a relatively small share of the variance in party-system formats or in the disproportionality in the vote-seat correspondence, the correlated measure of Duverger’s Law in representational studies. To probe further into the causal efficacy of Duverger’s Law, it would be necessary to explore the extent to which
anomalies can be accounted for in terms of auxiliary hypotheses that are implications of the premises that yield Duverger's Law and of hypotheses that are independent of or directly contrary to such premises. To a considerable extent, what appear to be anomalies of party-system format or vote-seat disproportionality from a Duvergerian perspective may be due to microlevel processes of voting and party strategizing that are clearly inconsistent with the broader logic. And here it is where the actual policy “content” of the representative relationship, the empirical capacity of politicians to actually deliver policies consistent with their voters’ preferences, may matter as a critical explanatory variable that is exogenous or contrary to Duvergerian logic.

Where legislative parties—through actual policy when in government and legislative bills when in opposition—fail to act on the preferences of important societal groups in salient policy areas, such as distributive political economy, then voters belonging to the latter may not vote instrumentally for a second-best party, but support new and blackmail parties with little chance of winning seats in the expectation of nurturing them to major party status in the long run. These groups may constitute a new cleavage line, or an existing cleavage line with radicalized demands. What is critical is that voters may no longer behave in an instrumentally strategic fashion once we relax the assumption of a myopic time horizon of interest maximization. Short-term strategizing becomes unappealing, when voters become too passionate and polarized around policy alternatives. The more alienated voters may abstain from electoral participation or opt for radical new parties, thus moving the party-system format away from the Duvergerian equilibrium.

Future research on procedural representation has to do better to identify the diverge conditions that affect empirical vote-seat disproportionality across SMD-plurality systems over time and space. Some studies, such as Cox (1997, chap. 11), have made first steps toward this agenda by employing the presence of cleavages, for example, of a sociocultural variety, as additive and interactive terms in multivariate regressions predicting party-system format. But such analyses implicitly adopt a “primordealist” and essentialist reading of cleavages that does not theoretically model or measure the rise and decline of politically salient societal preference/issue dimensions and the interaction between such processes and strategic party conduct. The pursuit of this research agenda would be situated at the interstices between procedural and substantive representation, understood not primarily as voter-politician preference alignments, but as relations of representation made tangible through public policies of authoritatively assigning costs and benefits across mobilized groups in society. The inability of politicians to deliver policies that satisfy voters is an important trigger of political polarization that increases the likelihood of party-system fragmentation.
The Dynamics of Substantive Representation and Representational Content

Not only studies of procedural representation, but also those of substantive representation fall short because hitherto they have not examined the content of representational relations in terms of the interplay between citizens’ preferences and parties’ activities in legislative debates and executive implementation of public policy. The current research, including my own, deals entirely with comparative-static constellations of preferences. But voters or politicians themselves may not conceptualize representative relations in terms of preference alignments, but enacted policy. Voters may ask: Did the party I preferred in the last election make me better off by acting in the spirit of the preferences that motivated me to support it? Since policy implementation requires time, the consideration of policy content in the study of representation requires an inherently dynamic, intertemporal analysis of the interaction between the moves of parties and the conduct of voters. Research beyond preference constellations thus also requires a shift in research from comparative-static to dynamic analysis.

Research on comparative-static preference configurations may tell us whether voters actually can and do bring knowledge to bear on their choice of party. It thus illuminates the empirical validity of one key cognitive premise of rationalist theories of voting and party competition. But, taken by itself, it may be of very limited relevance for assessing the bigger questions that have inspired research on substantive representation, such as gauging the performance of democratic polities in the eyes of their citizens or more fundamentally the trust of citizens in the superiority of basic democratic principles of governance, when compared to authoritarian alternatives. To address these broader questions, a content-oriented dynamic analysis is necessary. Before I elaborate on this point, however, let me first discuss one problem in the analysis and interpretation of comparative-static preference alignments.

Representation as Correspondence between Voters’ and Parties’ Preferences

The strength of voter-politician preference alignments varies across issues, social categories and countries, net of electoral-system choice. Powell argues quite correctly that there is no single encompassing theory to account for the varying configurations of citizens’ and politicians’ policy preferences. Highly educated and politically involved citizens tend to understand party positions better and exhibit a closer preference alignment with their preferred party. Consistent with simple models of information processing, salient issues receiving plenty of media exposure and public debate generate closer voter-politician preference
alignments than less salient issues. The salience hypothesis is useful for the explanation of cross-national and intertemporal diversity of representational configurations. Of course, to establish why issues gain salience would lead us into the study of the substantive content of enacted policies and their impact on satisfying voters’ preferences.

As Powell recognizes, it is much more contentious to derive institutional, systemic hypotheses about the variance of comparative-static principal-agent preference alignments than individual level voter and issue-based hypotheses. Here I would like to object to the hypothesis he derives from spatial theories of party competition, namely that two-party competition generates weaker relative issue-partisan connections than multiparty competition (Powell, p. 229 in this volume). I submit that spatial theory of competition would lead to exactly the reverse prediction. What is weaker in two-party systems is “absolute” representation, measured as the distance between a party’s elite preference and its voters’ mean preference on the same scale, but not “relative” representation, measured as the predictability of a party’s elite preference from its constituency’s mass preferences.

If in a two-party system each contender adopts a Downsian median voter strategy to maximize votes and hence both advertise elite programs close to the median voter preferences, they will leave quite a few of their more extreme fringe voters unrepresented in absolute terms, because the latter support much more radical “leftist” or “rightist” positions than the respective partisan elites. Unless the voters’ ideological distribution is very densely clustered around the median voter’s position, each party’s mean and median voter will be located quite far apart from the party’s strategic policy appeal situated close to the population median voter (weak absolute representation). Nevertheless, each party’s voter median predicts the party’s elite median well (strong relative representation). Conversely, in multipartism, where parties have an incentive to spread out their programmatic appeal over the space of voters’ salient-issue positions, voters’ preferences may be pretty close to their preferred party’s elite appeals (strong absolute representation). But a field with five, six, or more competitors may be so crowded that other parties’ elite preferences may also be as close or closer in the preference space of many voters opting for the first party. This configuration would yield weak relative representation. Knowing a voter’s preference profile does not permit us to predict his partisan choice with high confidence.

Two or more parties may be as representative of a party’s voter means as that party’s own elite. Also the non-Downsian two-party case, with one or both parties adopting out-of-equilibrium radical positions diverging from the median voter, would not disturb the difference in voter-party preference alignments between multiparty and two-party systems. In the latter, as parties move away from the electorate’s median voter, they first approach their own partisan median
voter, increasing absolute representation *in addition to* maintaining strong relative representation. If they go further out to extremes beyond their partisan median voter, they once again face diminishing absolute representation, but preserve relative representation.

The extent to which party elites are willing to “overstate” preference differences between their electorates and thus articulate a representative configuration of “polarized trusteeship” or “issue leadership” with high relative, but low absolute representation, requires both a theory of intraparty political decision making as well as an analysis of political-economic and sociocultural policy outputs and outcomes in society. As studies of preference alignments, substantive theories of representation cannot be self-sufficient in the sense of avoiding recourse to political-economic and sociocultural theories of policymaking and cleavage mobilization. This leads me to my final topic, the interplay between preference and policy representation in a dynamic framework.

**Policy Content: From Comparative-Static to Dynamic Voter-Party Alignments**

Can we infer that voters are well served in terms of policy and satisfaction with democratic governance if we establish that voter-party preference alignments are pretty close? Conversely, can we draw any inferences about the performance and legitimacy of democracy from voter-party preference discrepancies on salient issues? To see why I answer this question negatively, consider three scenarios. A negative answer shows that the study of voter-party preference alignments, by itself, is not a terribly interesting subject. We need to embed it into a political-economic and cleavage theory of democratic representation.

First, in scenario S1, at election t1 voters and parties are strongly aligned, with the winning parties A promising redistributive and expansionary (“populist”) fiscal policies and parties B austerity policies. At midterm time t2, the governing party A has gone through a “policy reversal” and delivered fiscal austerity policies, triggering higher unemployment and declining wages. Its voters are now unhappy because their preferences are now far removed from party A’s enacted policy. But at the time of the subsequent election, t3, economic performance has bounced back and employment and income are rising again. A’s voters have changed their mind and now support austerity policy as a means to reaching the ends that made them support party A all along. Voters of A and B are in rather close alignment with their respective parties’ elite positions, though stronger in relative than in absolute terms.

In an alternative scenario S2 with the same initial conditions at election t1, consider that at time t1’, the “policy-switching” governing party A has been abandoned by most of its past supporters at time t1, but many of B’s former voters
have joined A’s fold. That new voter combination backing A now generates a rather close voter-party preference alignment at \( t_2' \) around economic austerity policies. At election time \( t_3' \), the economy has not bounced back. Both A and B attract smaller voter constituencies with market-liberal austerity policy preferences, while most of A’s former “populist” voters either stay home or vote for some new party C that challenges the basic rules of democratic politics and promises an economic future in which public investments together with new taxes and social-policy schemes will mend all the ills of the present state of affairs. Again, all parties exhibit rather strong relative representativeness. With more parties in the game, their absolute representativeness may now be higher than at any point in the past.

Finally, consider scenario S₃ in which the governing party A from similar initial conditions as before does remain faithful to its constituencies’ populist economic policy preference (“mandate representation”), but where its expansionary fiscal policy yields a declining economy with high inflation that ultimately motivates most of its voters to opt for a new populist party C with a strong antisystem appeal at the subsequent election. Populist voters distribute themselves among A and C and the remaining austerity-minded market liberals support B. The party-voter alignment remains close across all time points in terms of relative representation and actually improves in terms of absolute representation, as a new third party crowds the field of competition.

Overall, from the criterion of voter-party preference alignments, stripped of considerations of policy content and dynamic interaction, scenarios S₂ and S₃ are clearly superior to scenario S₁, because in the former two representation remains robust throughout the electoral cycle, whereas in scenario S₁ it is volatile and precarious. Hence, are the second and third scenarios superior, if we apply the criterion that representative relations should instill confidence in the accountability and responsiveness of politicians, mediated through the mechanism of periodic electoral competition? Based on an analysis of voter-party preference alignments, scenario S₃ should actually be best, because it enacts perfect “mandate representation.” Once examining enacted policy content and the consequences of policy for citizens’ welfare, however, reasonable minds may disagree. Instead, the least “mandate representative” alignment S₁ may be preferred because it generates greater popular satisfaction with public policy and rules of democratic governance. Our imaginary scenarios, of course, involve the difference between what Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes call “mandate representation” and “accountability representation,” with the latter tapping the phenomenon an older literature would have called “trustee representation.”

The pure analysis of voter-party preference alignments, however, has a built-in evaluative bias toward “mandate representation.” To overcome this bias and to interpret findings based on simply comparative-static analysis of preference
alignments adequately, we must contextualize them in three regards. First, we must employ a dynamic perspective referring to previous alignments at an earlier point in time and subsequent enacted policy. Next, we must examine the turnover of parties’ electorates over time. And finally we must relate preference alignments to the electoral cycle. To observe big discrepancies between voters and their parties is one thing near election time and quite another in the middle of the electoral cycle.

Future research will need to come up with imaginative ways to detect temporally extended circuits of dynamic accountability representation. The comparative-static measurement of principal-agent alignments in conventional representation studies is clearly insufficient to address the big questions of comparative democratic analysis, the nature of the representative feedback circuit between politicians and voters and the quality of accountability and responsiveness involved. In part this weakness derives from the absence of time series or panel studies of voter-politician alignments; in part, it is grounded in the limits of a paradigm that exclusively focuses on explicitly stated preferences of actors, but ignores the circuit of representation that runs through policy outputs and outcomes.

Notes

1. As a result, the coefficients for district size (whether measured dichotomously as single-versus multiple member or continuously based on some measure of the “effective” district size) and plurality ballot in regressions that employ party-system format as a dependent variable often tend to be rather modest.

2. This difference, of course, goes back to the older Burkean tradition of distinguishing between mandate and trustee relations. See Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999b).
COMMENTARY

Democracy and Representation. Comments on Powell’s “Citizens, Elected Policymakers, and Democratic Representation: Two Contributions from Comparative Politics”

SUSAN C. STOKES

Bing Powell ends his stimulating discussion of comparative politics and representation with the suggestion that not much is to be gained from “additional articulation of the normative models that create the interest in democratic representation in the first place” (Powell, p. 233 in this volume). The parallel lines of research he explores—the correspondence between votes and legislative seats allotted to parties, and the correspondence between voters’ issue positions and those of the politicians or parties that are supposed to represent them—have done pretty well, he contends, without going too deeply into the normative theory of representation. And occasional efforts in this direction “have been more of a distraction than help” (Powell 2001, 44).

This assessment strikes me as odd, coming from the man who has done so much to enrich our comparative understanding by elucidating two distinctive normative models (or “visions”) of representation (majoritarian and proportional influence) and connecting these distinctive models to alternative institutional systems (see Powell 2000b; Huber and Powell 1994). My general argument in what follows is that we should not do what Bing Powell says we should do (or not what he says we should do in the essay under discussion) but instead try to emulate what he has done so well. It is time to reconsider comparative empirical research on representation from the vantage point of normative theory. Doing so will help us to see the limitations of the research programs in question and may even suggest methodological solutions to problems in the comparative study of political representation.

“Democratic representation,” Powell writes, “means that votes for parties should correspond to the seats those parties win in the legislature” and “that citizens’ issue preferences should correspond to the positions or behavior of their representatives” (Powell 2001, 2–3). I take him to mean here that the theory of democratic representation posits that votes for parties should cause or induce a corresponding distribution of seats in the legislature and that voters’ issue preferences should cause or induce corresponding positions or behaviors among their putative representatives. (The mechanisms linking cause and effect in-
clude, in the first case, electoral rules that translate aggregate vote choices into distributions of parties in legislatures; in the second case, either a conscious strategy of parties to select candidates whose own preferences mirror those of the constituents, or candidates’ and parties’ expectation that, whatever their private preferences, they may lose office if they don’t pursue the policies their constituents prefer.) Democratic theory is about causation; the observational expectation is of correspondence.

The question is, how far can these simple notions of causation (and observational expectations of correspondence) take us in understanding how democratic representation is achieved and why some systems do a better job than others? My own feeling is that simple correspondence analysis has taken us some considerable way. The research programs that Powell reviews have been far from sterile. And one would be hard-pressed to come up with a good argument for why votes for parties and the distribution of seats, or constituents’ preferences and those of their agents in the assembly, should be negatively correlated if representation is to be served (although see below).

But does correspondence analysis really get at democratic representation? Powell wisely turns to John Stuart Mill and Hannah Pitkin for insights into representation; yet both theorists view representation as something more than the correspondence of votes with seats or of constituents’ and legislators’ issue preferences.

When deciding whom to choose as their parliamentary representative, Mill encouraged voters to look for someone who seemed honest and competent. And voters could fairly be expected to support someone similar to them in religious beliefs and social class. But after electing their MPs, voters should defer to the policy preferences of their member. This deference was appropriate because the member should be highly educated and therefore would know more about most issues than voters, even before being elected. And he would learn more about the issues of the day in the course of parliamentary debate. The legislator should defer to constituent opinion only on issues where the voter’s “convictions on national affairs which are like his life-blood,” or involve his “primary notions of right” (Mill 1958 [1861], 243). The genius of Mill’s theory of representation is that he retained both a sense of the superior policy competence of the legislator, and the sense that constituents had some fundamental interests that legislators ought to pursue (an expectation that, Mill made clear, voters could reasonably worry might not be fulfilled). Indeed, one can tease out of Mill’s theory a distinction between preferences for one legislative proposal or another, and interests, which are connected to class, religion, region, and deep convictions.

The preferences and actions of a good representative should be in line with those of constituents more consistently in Pitkin’s approach to democratic representation than in Mill’s. (The difference probably reflects the lesser faith of
twentieth-century liberals in education as a source of political wisdom, and the declining relevance in the twentieth century of the assumption that legislators would be more educated than many of their constituents.) But Pitkin’s approach to representation also goes beyond mere correspondence. She contends that when we reflectively use the term “representation” in a political context, we generally mean something more than a legislator, say, acting as a passive conduit for the views of her constituents. The “substantive activity of representation” means not that politicians always respond to the expressed preferences of citizens, which may in any case not exist on every issue of import. Still, it is “incompatible with the idea of representation for the government to frustrate or resist the people’s will without good reason, to frustrate or resist it systematically or over a long period of time” (1967, 233). Sometimes a good representative’s legislative behavior will be at odds with the preferences of constituents. But the two will not habitually be at odds. Furthermore, when a legislator does something her constituents don’t like, eventually the preferences of the two should converge. A failure of representation, then, would show up in a legislator whose positions are habitually at odds with those of her constituents, and one who takes actions that are out of line both with constituents’ current preferences and with her longer-term preferences (the latter reflective of her interests). Although Pitkin doesn’t want us to equate representation with the promotion by the legislator of the constituent’s welfare, still we can make sense of her dynamic story of representation by, again, drawing a distinction between voters’ current preferences and more enduring interests. Representatives must pursue and defend the latter, but will not always defer to the former.

Pitkin’s approach counsels us to study representation as a dynamic process, and cautions against an exclusive focus on static correspondences between the issue preferences of constituents and of politicians. Some recent contributions to positive democratic theory, as well as recent empirical research on representation, point in this direction as well. Suppose that voters’ policy preferences are supported by beliefs about how policies will affect their welfare. It seems highly plausible that these beliefs are probabilistic. I may think that privatizing social security will reduce my postretirement income; but I’m not sure. Harrington (1993a, b) uses the idea of preferences founded on uncertain beliefs to develop several models of party competition where voters update their beliefs (and hence their policy preferences) as uncertainty about the mapping of policies onto outcomes is resolved (see also Canes-Wrone et al. 1999). An incumbent who wants nothing more than to do well by his constituents in order to win reelection will implement currently unpopular policies if he thinks that voters’ beliefs are far enough off the mark; once the unpopular policies have had a chance to work, voters will realize that they were appropriate. The model is consistent with Pitkin’s normative idea that representatives will sometimes appropriately act
against the wishes of constituents, but constituents’ preferences and representatives’ actions should eventually converge.

The sense that representation might sometimes violate static correspondence led me and my collaborators to draw a conceptual distinction between responsiveness (politicians following the dictates of constituents’ current preferences) and representation (politicians pursuing the interests of constituents; Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999a). This conceptual distinction helped make sense of some political realities. Presidential candidates in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s sometimes baited voters with promises of job creation and economic stimulation, then switched to austerity programs associated, through the medium term at least, with rising rates of unemployment (Stokes 2001). Although in some sense these presidents were acting under pressure from global markets, what they cared most about was political success at home and they thought that the policy switch was their best strategy. If they didn’t switch to economic efficiency policies, they believed, the economy would perform much worse than if they did. The Latin American president’s expectation (or hope) was that voters’ policy preferences would eventually converge with the policies that the governments carried out, once uncertainty about the mapping of policies onto outcomes disappeared and the outcomes were good. And sometimes they actually did converge. Here, then, is a case where looking just at static convergences would lead us to draw the wrong inferences about representation.

Other models and empirical work are even more deeply subversive of the correspondence approach to representation. Some theorists tell us that if we find correspondences between votes and seats, or between constituent preferences and legislator preferences, all we are learning is that politicians are doing a good job selling themselves to hapless voters or telling them what to believe. Empirical evidence that might be seen as sustaining a critique of the issue correspondence approach comes from John Zaller’s landmark study, *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion* (1992). Powell mentions Zaller’s study in the context of the problem of whether people have real policy preferences at all. But the latent critique that Zaller’s work poses of the correspondence approach goes deeper. It isn’t just that people may not have stable, deeply meaningful preferences among policies; it’s that their preferences, to the extent that they have them, may be endogenous to politics and party competition. Zaller offers evidence that people in the United States take their cues about which policies to favor from the positions adopted by political parties: from the party which the voter is predisposed to vote for when the parties disagree, and from political elites in general when the parties agree. If we prefer some policies over others because at time 1 the leaders of the party we sympathize with tell us to prefer them, are these same parties “representing” us when at time 2 they do what we want them to do? This is not representation in any simple sense.
Some of the comparative research that Powell reviews underscores the problems of theoretical inference that arise if we can’t be sure whether the causal arrow goes from citizens’ preferences to the preferences and behavior of political leaders or in the opposite direction. Holmberg (cited in Powell 2001, 29) expects that the more publicly salient the issue, the stronger the correspondence between voters and party representatives, and in Scandinavia he finds significant (though not uniform) correspondence on salient issues. But how are we to interpret his findings? Are Nordic politicians especially careful to follow their supporters’ preferences on issues that are especially salient, because they’re afraid of being voted out if they go against these preferences (a finding consistent with representation)? Or is the conveyance of preferences from elites to voters especially efficient when elites succeed in making issues salient (a finding that has little to do with representation)?

Turning from policy preferences to vote-to-seat correspondence, Joseph Stigler (1975) and his fellow members of the Chicago School of Regulation develop a theory of democracy and party competition that implicitly questions the correspondence approach to representation. In Stigler’s model there are three actors: voters (who are also consumers), politicians, and private firms. Private firms want regulations (protection), regulations that impose dead-weight losses on consumers (there is no other kind of regulation, in the view of the Chicago School). Firms buy these regulations with contributions to political parties, which need the money to run campaigns. Presumably the parties that raise the most money get the most votes, so a close correspondence between seats and votes would be an indication not of representation but just the opposite: that the party or parties that impose the biggest losses on voter-consumers are the most richly rewarded.¹

Although Stigler’s model probably strikes most readers as a caricature (a caricature with some grain of truth), his approach does suggest another potential problem plaguing the comparative studies of representation that Powell reviews: their narrow focus on governments’ responsiveness to voters, as though politicians and constituents were the only actors in the system. The research strategy pioneered by Miller and Stokes (1963), as Powell explains, was to measure the correlation of policy preferences of voters in congressional districts with the preferences and behavior of the members of Congress from these same districts. The existence of influence and its magnitude were supposed to be captured by the correlation coefficient relating constituency median voter preferences to the preferences and behavior of representatives. Achen (1977, 1978) suggested methodological refinements. He pointed out, among other things, that one might find a positive correlation between the preferences of the median voter in a district and the district’s representative even when the representative’s opponent held positions even closer to the median voter’s. Achen’s critique in effect calls
on us to introduce a third actor into models of representation: the opposition. Still, the strategy of many later studies that Powell reviews continued to be to study voters’ influence without controls for other kinds of influence.

The problem with this strategy is not just that it offers us an incomplete picture of the kinds of influences that parties and governments are subject to. More profoundly, it may give us a biased view of the influence of citizens on parties and governments. Let’s assume that, on a set of issues, the preferences of the median voter and of market actors are negatively correlated (as they would be in Stigler’s model if voters were aware of the effect of regulation). Let’s assume that, on this same set of issues, both voters and market actors independently wield some influence over the government. If we only estimate the regression coefficient relating voters’ preferences to government actions and neglect to control for market actors’ preferences, we will underestimate the independent influence of voters. Powell’s essay suggests that most comparative studies do find a significant correspondence between constituents’ preferences and the positions of parties on many issues. Perhaps with the proper controls the effect would turn out to be larger and more robust.

If so, there is an irony here. By employing too rosy a picture of democracy as a system in which only voters influence governments, we may have produced an insufficiently rosy picture of the influence of voters on governments.

Thus far these comments have been long on theoretical problems and short on practical solutions for the study of representation. I end with a few suggestions. The thrust of my comments has been that we need to move from static correspondence to the dynamics of representation; and we need to introduce more actors (private firms, international financial institutions, party activists) into our analyses. With more actors and complex interactions, it may be more difficult to study representation comparatively with large-N statistical analyses alone. I believe much comparative light can be thrown on representation by studies that cleverly deploy within-country and cross-national statistical analyses, along with qualitative research. A fuller picture of representation and the factors that encourage or discourage it will probably not be brought into focus with statistical data alone.

Introducing a dynamic element into the study of representation will simultaneously help us deal with the possible endogeneity of voter preferences to politicians’ preferences, and with normative theorists’ insistence that representation cannot be reduced to static correspondence. As Powell notes, one line of research on vote-to-seat correspondences looks at this correspondence in a dynamic context (Gelman and King 1994). A corresponding tradition exists for the study, in the United States, of issue correspondence. Page and Shapiro (1983) and Stimson and his associates (1995) explore the impact of shifts in public opinion on subsequent shifts in the policy outputs of representative institutions.
These studies conceptualize shifts in public opinion as exogenous; but it seems to me a small next step to look at the effect of prior changes in policy outputs (or elite political discourse) on public opinion. Stimson (1991) finds a lagged effect of policy outputs on subsequent public opinion (not inconsistent with Zaller), an effect that is positive but smaller than the effect of prior opinion changes on subsequent policy shifts.

An opportunity for dynamic analysis of representation also arises in the instances, which comparative research has turned up, where politicians and their constituents disagree over policy. These instances occur not just in new democracies such as the Latin American ones mentioned earlier. We learn from Bing Powell’s review that Scandinavian voters are considerably more anti-immigrant than are the parties these voters vote for. How such tensions resolve themselves over time can tell us much about the nature and status of political representation in democracies around the world.

Notes

1. Dennis Thompson (1976) perceived these two moments in Mill’s thought, drawing from his elitism on the one hand and his utilitarianism on the other, less as a sign of genius and more as an unresolved contradiction.

2. Voters go along with the scam, according to Stigler, because the cost of learning about the effect of each piece of regulation would be larger than the cost that regulation imposes on each individual voter. But if, as Stigler claims, the pattern of regulation as a whole is enormously costly to voters, why would they not learn about, and reject, the practice of regulation?

3. Of course if voters and market actors were both pushing politicians in the same direction, by omitting the influence of market actors we would be overstating the influence of citizens.