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## Process Preferences and American Politics: What the People Want Government to Be

JOHN R. HIBBING and  
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*We present evidence of the kind of governmental processes Americans would like to see in Washington. People believe they have been excluded from current processes, but they do not want direct democracy. The extent to which individuals believe actual processes are inconsistent with their own process preferences is an important variable in understanding the current public mood. Moreover, individual-level differences in level of dissatisfaction with democratic processes help explain variations in public approval of government and in willingness to comply with the outputs of government. Of course, many political attitudes and behaviors are influenced by fondness for the policies that government produces, but it is also the case that sentiments and actions are affected by the way government produces those policies. Far from being merely a means to a policy end, governmental process is important in its own right.*

**H**ow should democratic government work? This question has been debated by political philosophers since the birth of democracy in Athens 2,500 years ago, but we do not know much about the ordinary American's answer. Understanding public desires concerning the processes and structures of government is crucial for several reasons. Negative attitudes may discourage prospective politicians from serving, sitting politicians (or whole institutions) from tackling controversial policy issues, and ordinary people from participating in politics. They also may embolden some people to view government as less legitimate and possibly even to take lightly their obligation to comply with the outputs of government (see, e.g., Hetherington 1998; Tyler 1990).

Standard investigations tend to be less interested in how the people want their government to run than in which candidates, parties, and policies are preferred. We know people are displeased with interest groups, the campaign finance system, and politicians who are accorded a large staff and salary; we know they dislike Congress more than the president and certainly more than the Supreme Court, and the government in Washington more than state governments; we know they generally view people in government as dishonest and untrustworthy; and we even know something about their attitudes toward selected reform proposals. As useful as all this information has been, it does not tell us the kind of government people want. We know the things that upset the American people, but we do not know much about the larger issue of how they want government to go about its business, to be structured, and to locate power.

This article focuses on public preferences for governmental procedures. Many aspects of modern American politics do not make sense unless consideration is

given to process. Are people satisfied with the procedures they perceive to be employed by government? If not, toward which processes do they want the government to move? What are the consequences when people believe they are not getting the type of government they want? To come to grips with public desires for (and perceptions of) the workings of government, we administered a specially designed national survey to 1,266 randomly selected adults, and we conducted eight lengthy focus groups at locations around the nation. We report primarily on the survey items that measured the processes people prefer and the processes they perceive they are getting.

### POLICY-BASED EXPLANATIONS FOR PEOPLE'S ORIENTATION TO GOVERNMENT

What influences people's relationship with their government? According to many scholars, broad societal conditions, which we call policy *outcomes*, are central to this relationship. For example, Nye (1997, 8) explains that feelings about government may go sour if people are "properly unhappy with poor social outcomes." Numerous scholars have followed Lane (1965, 877) in expecting that the public will be pleased with government if the economy is prosperous. Others focus on the match between the policy desires of citizens and the perceived policy decisions of the government, which we call policy *outputs*. In this view, ideological conservatives who are convinced the government is producing liberal policies will be dissatisfied, as will liberals with conservative policies.

The gap between policy preferences and the perceived policy offerings of various parties, institutions, and governments has been a workhorse variable in political research. Scholars argue that it influences the policy choices of institutions and parties (Downs 1957) as well as individuals' party identification (D. King 1997), vote choice (Enelow and Hinich 1984), modes of political participation (Muller 1972), desire for divided government (Fiorina 1996), and general support for the government (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974). In their famous exchange on the meaning of public mistrust, for

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example, Citrin and Miller disagree on many things, but Citrin (1974, 974) "accepts Miller's main conclusion that policy-related discontent is a source of political cynicism." Citrin (p. 973) describes policy-related reactions thusly: "Political elites produce policies; in exchange, they receive trust from citizens satisfied with these policies and cynicism from those who are disappointed."

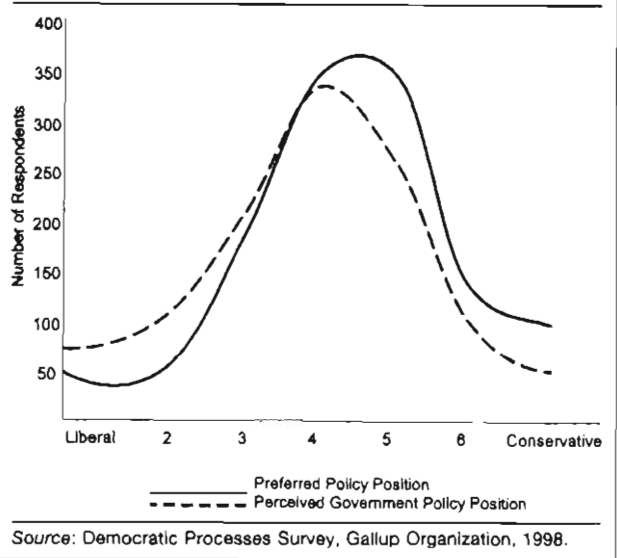
Whether the focus is on outputs or outcomes, these policy-based explanations directly challenge our contention that people are concerned not only with government policies but also with how they are produced. Policy-centered explanations have dominated the literature and assume that people will tolerate virtually any procedures as long as these help them obtain favorable policies and conditions. Popkin (1991, 99), drawing on Fiorina (1981) and others, expresses this view well: People "judge government by the results and are generally ignorant of or indifferent about the methods by which the results are achieved."

Empirical evidence is not particularly supportive of policy-based expectations. At the aggregate level, confidence in government dropped most dramatically in the late 1960s, when the economy was doing quite well, and shortly after Lane (1965, 877) declared that the new "age of affluence" would lead to "a rapprochement between men and their government and a decline of political alienation." More recently, Seelye (1998, A15) notes with surprise that "most Americans still deeply distrust the Federal Government despite the end of the cold war, the robust economy, and the highest level of satisfaction in their own lives in 30 years." There is even less support at the individual level. Cross-sectional analyses find no or only a modest relationship between policy satisfaction and institutional approval (Caldeira 1986; Mueller 1973; Patterson and Caldeira 1990). Tellingly, Tyler (1990) finds people's satisfaction with substantive decisions to be unrelated to their tendency to view them as legitimate and, most important, to comply with them. We are convinced that policy satisfaction is an important factor in the public's relationship with government, but previous research suggests that a great deal of variation in this relationship remains to be explained.

In spring 1998,<sup>1</sup> we asked a large random sample of voting-age U.S. residents to identify their general policy or ideological preferences as well as their perception of overall federal policies and those championed by the Democratic and Republican parties. As is the

<sup>1</sup> The telephone survey, conducted from mid-April to mid-May 1998, was administered by the Gallup Organization, which generated a random-digit-dial sample that provided equal access to all operating telephones. Respondents were chosen with a three-call design using the "youngest male/oldest female" respondent selection procedure. If a respondent was not reached in a household on the first call, Gallup called back two other times. If someone answered the phone, the interviewer asked to speak with the youngest male, 18 years of age or older, who was at home at the time. If no male was available, the interviewer asked to speak with the oldest female, 18 years of age or older, who was at home at the time. The survey had a 53% response rate. The average length of the interviews was 28 minutes, and the data are weighted to match the sample with the population (U.S. adults age 18 or older) based on the most recent Census.

FIGURE 1. Policy Space



case with parallel items used regularly by the National Election Studies (NES), respondents were presented with the following task:

Some people hold extremely liberal political views. Think of them as a 1 on a seven-point scale. Other people hold extremely conservative political views. Think of them as a 7. And, of course, there are people in between at 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Using the one-to-seven scale, how do you rate [yourself] [the recent policies of the national government in Washington] [the Republican Party] [the Democratic Party].<sup>2</sup>

We begin with a simple comparison of policy preferences and perceptions of recent government policies, as shown in Figure 1. The solid line, which represents public policy preferences, is a pattern familiar to students of modern politics. Americans tend to place themselves in the ideological middle, with a slight tilt toward the conservative side of the spectrum. Fully 72% of respondents located themselves at 3, 4, or 5 on the seven-point scale. Few claim to be policy extremists. The dotted line represents public perceptions of the policy output of the federal government, and these results are somewhat surprising. Most notable is the similarity in pattern between the policies Americans want and what they believe they are getting. In the aggregate the perceived output is a little more liberal than people prefer, but the difference is remarkably small. In terms of mean location, public preferences are at 4.4, and government policies are at dead center,

<sup>2</sup> It would, of course, be useful to have respondents' sentiments on individual policies important to them. But this would require them to locate not only their own position but also the perceived position of recent governmental policies on that specific issue and then repeat these tasks for several other specific policies. Given low public knowledge of government policies (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and the amazing diversity in the policy areas people cite as most important to them, we restrict the analysis to a sense of governmental policies in the aggregate. This is consistent with previous research, which often locates citizens on large issue dimensions because they tend to perform poorly in identifying positions on individual issues (see, e.g., Popkin 1991).

a difference that is statistically ( $p < .01$ ) but not substantively significant.

The similarity between preferences and perceptions is especially puzzling in view of people's proclivity to complain that the government is out of touch with their needs, concerns, and wants. The participants in our focus groups made such complaints regularly.<sup>3</sup> One person said: "The vast majority of Congress's members have no idea really what the people's wishes are." Another stated that government seemed "very removed from the people." A third commented: "I don't think [elected officials] have any idea about what anyone wants." Participants in the Kettering Foundation focus groups made similar remarks (Matthews 1994, 11–48). The belief that government is out of touch with ordinary Americans is extremely common, but Figure 1 gives no indication that, on the whole, the people see government policies as out of line with their own preferences. In what sense, then, does the public think the government is out of touch?

### INTRODUCING PROCESS SPACE

Explanations of public attitudes toward government that rely solely on policy satisfaction are likely to be incomplete. Our main theoretical premise is that attitudes toward the *processes* of government, as apart from the *policies*, constitute an important, free-standing variable that has serious implications for the health of democracy. This idea is not entirely new. The literature increasingly acknowledges that reactions to the way government works are important elements of public opinion. Weatherford (1992, 149) notes that citizen complaints about government could result from "problems with representational linkages (access and responsiveness) or with the elite policy making process (procedural regularity)." Kimball and Patterson (1997) find that disappointment with government is concentrated among those who expect elected officials to be honest, caring, and altruistic but perceive them to be otherwise. Gibson and Caldeira (1995) acknowledge the role of process in explaining public attitudes toward courts in the United States and elsewhere. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) and Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht (1997) see the always open and often bruising process in the U.S. Congress as a major reason for its consistent lack of popularity with the public (also see Rosenthal 1998, chap. 10, on state legislatures). Tyler (1990) has persuasively demonstrated that public perceptions of "procedural justice" have important consequences, especially for governmental institutions and compliance with those institutions.

<sup>3</sup> The eight focus groups were conducted in late fall 1997: two each in Nebraska, Maine, California, and Georgia. Each consisted of six to twelve participants, recruited either by professional recruiters (in California, the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at California State University, San Marcos; in Georgia, TDM Research of Birmingham, Alabama) or by advertisements, flyers, random telephone calls, and announcements at various civic and social meetings (Nebraska and Maine). Sessions lasted approximately two hours, and participants were paid from \$20 to \$50 for their time. The sessions were tape recorded.

Comments made in the focus groups reinforce our conviction that process space deserves to be analyzed alongside policy space. Participants rarely spoke in terms of the Left-Right political spectrum or about policies of any kind. Instead, the discussions were peppered with remarks about the way the government is working or, more frequently, not working. We heard about the people's voice being shut out by combative political parties, self-serving politicians, and demonic special interests. We heard about gridlock across political institutions and sloth and incompetence within them. Perhaps the many references to process should not have surprised us. After all, policy solutions to such perennial societal problems as education, crime, and pollution control are incredibly challenging. People tend to speak more directly and with more confidence about the flawed processes of government than they do about intractable policy dilemmas. The more we listened to them describe their perceptions of government, the more we were taken with the fact that people care deeply about the procedures by which policies are produced. If process perceptions and preferences are as central as they appear to be to the participants in the focus groups, then these attitudes deserve to be studied more thoroughly.

Previous research provides the theoretical justification for studying process, but scholars have paid less attention to measuring public opinion of current processes and, especially, to identifying people's preferred procedures. Indeed, survey instruments rarely include questions about what government processes respondents would like to see. For example, every two years NES asks: "How much attention do you feel the government pays to what people like you think?" It does not ask: "How much attention *should* government pay to what people like you think?" In short, we agree with Weatherford's (1992, 149) conclusion that process attitudes have not been ignored in earlier work, but "their measurement is scattered and unsystematic." We believe these measurement issues must be addressed before process theories and concepts can advance.

Accordingly, our national survey placed respondents on a seven-point scale for process space that is quite different from that delineating policy space. The question used to place respondents on process space is:

Some people say what we need in this country is for ordinary people like you and me to decide for ourselves what needs to be done and how. Others say ordinary people are too busy and should instead allow elected officials and bureaucrats to make all political decisions. Still others say a combination would be best. Imagine a seven-point scale with 1 being ordinary people making all decisions on their own and 7 being elected officials and bureaucrats making all the decisions on their own, while 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 indicate in-between opinions on the two extremes. Which number from 1 to 7 best represents . . . how you think government should work?

The item is a bit more involved than the traditional policy/ideology question simply because the terms liberal and conservative are familiar phrases, but it is still quite straightforward and boils down to that most basic of all political matters: Who should govern? We also

asked respondents their perceptions of the location in process space of the way the American government currently functions as well as of the process preferences of the Democratic and Republican parties.

One pole of the spectrum is labeled "direct democrat." That is, perhaps through town meetings or electronic coaxial cable connections, people make policy decisions themselves. The other pole represents the notion that policy decisions should be made by elected officials, and these may not (and do not need to) bear much resemblance to decisions that would have been made by the people themselves. The idea is that the people should have some say in the membership composition of political institutions, but once the membership is established, elected officials are left alone to do what they think is best. In this Burkean trustee style of government, public opinion is not directly influential in the determination of public policy (see also Schumpeter 1950). We label this position "institutional democrat." Between these extremes are various options. The influence on decisions by the people (not by political institutions, such as political parties, interest groups, courts, executives, and legislatures) becomes stronger the farther we move away from the institutional democrat pole and toward the direct democrat pole.

This spectrum is unavoidably crude. It ignores many of the important subtleties of ongoing democratic debate. A preferred location close to the direct democrat pole could indicate support for deliberative democracy (see Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1995), teledemocracy (Grossman 1995), deliberative opinion polls (Fishkin 1995), or ballot initiatives (Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998). Institutional democrats are equally diverse. Although people may care about process, they do not have sophisticated conceptions of these variations or of how minority rights should be protected, how interests should be articulated and aggregated, and what specific institutions are needed to approximate given process preferences. Because we are interested in the process ideas of ordinary people and not theorists, a basic process spectrum seems the appropriate place to start.

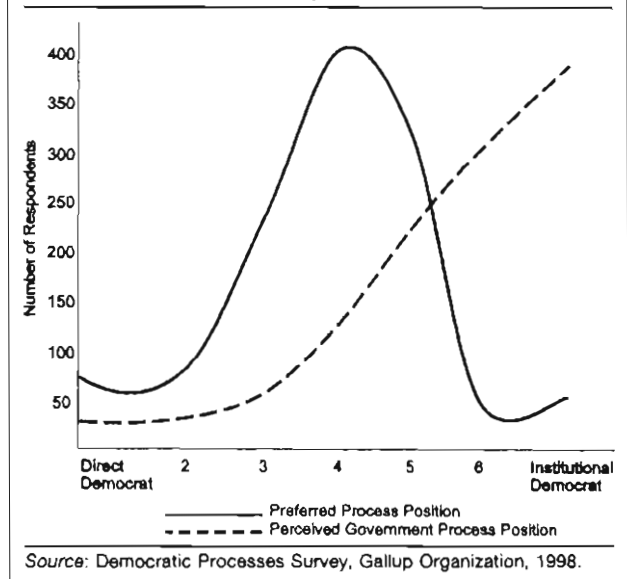
## PROCESS EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

Our sense is that Americans typically do not desire direct democracy. This interpretation is consistent with comments made by focus group participants, who often reacted warmly to the idea that the people would have more voice in a direct democracy but quickly raised concerns about its feasibility, the willingness of people to be involved in politics, and the civic abilities of the American public. One focus group exchange expands on this last point.

Sandy: It would be great if everybody got [to express] their, you know, whatever they felt about whatever the issue was. It would be great to know, "Hey, . . . I got my two-cents worth in." But the feasibility of it. . . .

Joan: Well, and I think the public, too, a lot of times is very shortsighted. Those are the problems they want an immediate solution to and they aren't looking 10–20 years down the road. And I mean you could end up with a whole bunch of

**FIGURE 2. Process Space**



stuff that, that looks great now, boy that's going to be good for four or five years. . . . But needs change. And problems change. And so elected officials are at least in a position where they can find out more about [it]. . . . They have to look long term and, and try and come up with something that's going to last, . . . hopefully going to be a good solution, . . . for a longer period than just for the immediate.

Our expectation that people do not yearn for direct democracy is certainly at odds with the impression frequently conveyed in media presentations and elsewhere. Americans are often made out to be wide-eyed democrats, willing to adopt any reform—from term limits to expanded initiative possibilities—that would give them more political power. Anthony King (1997, 52) calls Americans "hyperdemocrats" (on various populist sentiments of the public, see Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998; Citrin 1996; Cronin 1989). Much modern public discourse certainly encourages this conclusion, but we believe that when presented with the stark possibility of making many political decisions on their own, few people respond enthusiastically.

Our more important prediction, however, is that people's process preferences, even though not at the direct democrat pole, will be far to the left of what they perceive as the processes employed by the federal government. Most Americans, we expect, believe governmental processes are inappropriately dominated by elected officials (and the institutions they inhabit) and are insufficiently sensitive to the views of ordinary people. Therefore, they will place the actual workings of government closer to the institutional democrat pole than they place their own procedural preferences. If so, process space may help explain why people think the government is out of touch, even though government tends to provide policies closely approximating the people's desires, as indicated in Figure 1.

In Figure 2, the solid line represents the desires of respondents for processes dominated by the public or by elected officials and institutions. The dotted line

represents perceptions of the process they are getting. The contrast between figures 1 and 2 could hardly be more jarring. As anticipated, the preferred processes balance the input from ordinary people and elected officials. Of the 1,253 usable responses, 975 (78%) register a preference at 3, 4, or 5 on the seven-point scale. Only 119 want officials to have largely unfettered decision-making power once elected (a preference at 6 or 7). More surprisingly perhaps, only 170 want ordinary people to be in charge (a preference at 1 or 2). People definitely want elected officials to be involved in decision making and do not want governmental institutions to go away.

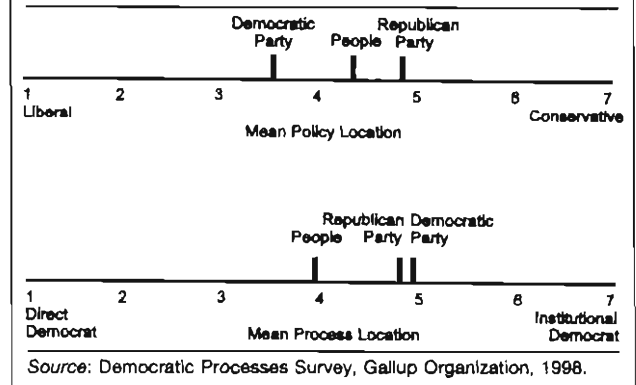
In Figure 1, we observed that people both desire and believe they are receiving centrist policies. The solid line in Figure 2 indicates they also want centrist processes, but the dotted line reveals they believe they are not getting them. More than 55% perceive current processes as dominated by elected officials and institutions (6 or 7 on the scale). Only 5% feel the public has a great deal of influence (1 or 2). The mean placement of respondents in process space is 4, compared to a 5.4 for perceived processes of government, a highly significant and substantive difference ( $p < .01$ ). The lines in Figure 2 support the conclusion that many people are not getting the governmental processes they want. When combined with Figure 1, these results invite the interpretation that public beliefs about an out-of-touch government have more to do with processes than with policies; that is, with the way decisions are made rather than their specific content.

### WHICH PROCEDURES DO THE PEOPLE BELIEVE THE TWO PARTIES ESPOUSE?

Another puzzle left unsolved by the policy space explanation involves public views of American political parties. No less common than the view that government is out of touch with ordinary people are such comments as "the parties are both the same," "there is not a dime's worth of difference between them," and the parties are as similar as "Tweedledee and Tweedledum." Grave implications attend such beliefs because modern democracy hinges on the competition between distinct parties. If they are not seen as distinct, any competition will be perceived as a farce (Ginsberg and Stone 1986).

A belief in the similarity of the parties is not merely the stuff of hackneyed phrases. It is consistent with the findings of previous survey research and with the comments we heard in the focus groups. For example, Wattenberg (1981, 943-4) reports that approximately half the public disagrees with the statement that there are important differences between the two parties (for more evidence, see Margolis 1977; Pomper 1972, 419). Although such sentiments may have diminished in recent years, they are still much in evidence among our focus group participants. One stated: "But what's bad is even the two parties are so dag-blasted confused anymore. . . . If you look up what was [once] a true Democrat or what was a true Republican, we don't have that." Another said: "I've heard the current parties referred to as the Republicrats. And to me that

**FIGURE 3. People's Perceptions of the Policies and Processes Preferred by the Two Major Parties**



really seems to describe what goes on. Whether we elect Democrats or Republicans, the only difference is chocolate cake with vanilla frosting or vanilla cake with chocolate frosting." Millions of people are convinced the parties are the same.

Contrast this attitude with the placement of the parties in policy space, as shown in Figure 3. For purposes of clarity, we represent only the mean location, not the full distribution of responses (see the top portion of Figure 3). The people place themselves at 4.4 on the policy scale, with 7 being conservative. They place the Democratic Party at 3.6, to the left of the public mean, and they place the Republican Party at 4.9, to the right of the public mean. This difference of 1.3 between the two parties in policy space is highly significant, both substantively and statistically ( $p < .01$ ). On the whole, people see the parties as distinct regarding the policies they advocate, which does not square with the popular belief that the parties are the same.

Again, process perceptions may explain the anomaly. Whereas people seem to believe the parties espouse different policies, they may view them as nearly identical in terms of processes. After all, both parties are heavily involved in financing candidates and in scoring debating points. Both run nasty campaigns and make promises they often cannot keep. Both are heavily intertwined with special interests and the cocktail-party circuit. These are the features that most upset people, and these are likely the features people have in mind when they bemoan the similarity of the political parties.

Empirical results support this logic (the bottom portion of Figure 3). In policy space, most people (64%) believe themselves bracketed by the two parties (usually with the Democrats to the left of them and the Republicans to the right), but in process space, most people (64%) see both parties as being to their right. In other words, both parties support a process in which elected officials and institutions are influential in decision making. Respondents placed the Democratic Party at 4.94 and the Republican Party at 4.85, a difference that is not significant either substantively or statistically ( $p = .17$ ). Thus, in contrast to policy space, both parties are to the right of the public's preferred process position, both are perceived nearly a

full point away from the public, and both are seen as espousing similar process ideas. In the eyes of ordinary people, the parties are separated by more than one point on their policy positions but by less than one-tenth of a point on their process positions. People believe that neither party is eager to loosen its grip and give ordinary people more say.

Compared to policy perceptions, people are less likely to view the process preferences of their own party much more favorably than those of the opposing party. That is, the partisan bias in assessments of process preferences is much less pronounced than in assessments of policy preferences. Excluding independents, the mean gap between respondents' own policy preferences and those of their own party is 1.15, compared to a mean gap of 2.64 with the opposing party, a substantial difference of 1.49. When it comes to process space, however, the mean gap between self and own party is 1.35, compared to 2.22 for the opposing party, a difference of only .87. Partisan bias does not seem to have as much influence in process space.

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF PROCESS DISSATISFACTION

Our use of the vague phrase "the relationship between people and their government" conveys our interest in a set of variables broader than voting behavior and party identification. Indeed, the results just presented indicate why it would be erroneous to expect process perceptions to help people decide whether they are Democrat or Republican or whether to support candidate A or candidate B. The public does not believe the Republicans and Democrats are very different in terms of process, so process factors are of little use in such tasks as voting decisions. (We would maintain, however, that support for the presidential candidacy of H. Ross Perot was driven primarily by process rather than policy preferences, just as dissatisfaction with "process as usual" may on occasion work against certain incumbents; see also Hetherington 1999.) Assessments of individual officeholders also are not likely to be affected by process concerns because people believe virtually all politicians are accomplices in promoting flawed democratic processes. We expect process concerns to play a much larger part in such broad variables as whether people approve of government and whether they view it as legitimate and therefore are willing to comply with the laws it produces.

We first test the hypothesis that the more people believe their process preferences are embodied in the actual workings of government, the more they will approve of government, even controlling policy outcome and policy output satisfaction. Those people who are generally pleased with policy outcomes (an improving financial situation) and with policy outputs (those believing their own overall policy preferences are reflected in recent governmental actions) should be more approving of government. But we maintain that people are often motivated not just by policies but also by their perceptions of how these policies were made.

To test this hypothesis, we developed a model consisting of the usual demographic and political variables

and perceptions of policy outcomes, policy outputs, and governmental processes. (See the Appendix for definitions and question wording for independent variables.) Each respondent's satisfaction with policy outcomes was measured by standard questions on whether their own financial situation and that of the nation had improved, stayed the same, or declined during the previous year (*Personal Financial Condition* and *Country's Financial Condition*). These questions do not cover every aspect of outcome satisfaction, but they measure a central element of overall conditions—perceptions of the economy. To measure each respondent's location in policy space, we computed the absolute value of the gap between policy preferences and perceived policy realities (*Perceived Policy Gap*). These gaps could range from 6 (a person who claims to be extremely liberal but who sees federal policies as extremely conservative, or vice versa) to 0 (a person who believes government policy outputs perfectly match his or her preferences). A parallel gap measure was constructed for process space, indicating the extent to which each person sees preferred and actual processes as being the same (0) or different (up to 6) (*Perceived Process Gap*). Approval of government was measured by the standard approval question: "Please tell me if you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of the way different entities have been handling their job lately. How about . . . the federal government?" Approval could range from strongly disapprove (1) to strongly approve (4).

We see from Table 1 that the demographic variables are not particularly useful in specifying the kind of person likely to be dissatisfied with government. Among the political variables, the politically knowledgeable are more likely to approve of the federal government as are those who identify with the Democratic rather than Republican Party. The real questions of interest pertain to the policy and process variables. With all the control variables entered, are those who are pleased with policy more likely to approve of government than those who are displeased? Yes. Both policy outcome variables—personal and sociotropic financial conditions—are related to approval of government, although the sociotropic formulation is clearly the more powerful, as previous research would lead us to expect (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979). The policy gap variable has the expected negative sign and is highly significant. The farther governmental policies are from a person's own preferences, the less that person is satisfied with government. But do people only care about policies or do they also want these policies to be produced in a fashion they find acceptable? Table 1 offers a clear verdict. Process matters. Even with all the other controls included, particularly those for policy outcomes and policy outputs, a process that matches a person's preferences for how the process should work increases approval of government. Apparently, people's approval of government is driven by more than just policy concerns. It is also driven by perceptions of the extent to which processes match what people desire processes to be.

We next concentrate on willingness to comply with

**TABLE 1. Explaining Variation in Government Approval and Compliance with the Law**

Variable	Approval		Compliance	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
Age	-.029	.034	.198**	.050
Income	-.030	.030	.091**	.035
Race	.037	.020	.097**	.022
Gender	-.005	.014	.023	.016
Education	.017	.026	-.021	.029
External Political Efficacy	.049	.028	-.014	.027
Political Knowledge	.083**	.019	-.025	.039
Party Identification	-.071**	.021	.009	.024
Personal Financial Condition	.045*	.022	.032	.025
Country's Financial Condition	.090**	.021	-.001	.023
Perceived Policy Gap	-.160**	.029	-.034	.034
Perceived Process Gap	-.095**	.030	-.117**	.034
Constant	.485**	.034	.546**	.039
F	15.12**		4.96**	
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.19		.06	
N	726		732	

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.  
 Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . All variables have been transformed to range from 0 to 1.

the law (*Compliance*), which in many respects is the most important aspect of people's relationship with their government. Tyler (1990) correctly notes that compliance is central to the viability of authority; if noncompliance is widespread, the system of government created to manage problems will not be able to do so. If a disjuncture between desired and perceived processes hampers compliance, then it is powerful evidence that process perceptions are anything but innocuous.

We measure the tendency to comply with the law with a straightforward survey question: "People should obey the law even if it goes against what they think is right." The response options for this item ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). When compliance tendencies are regressed on the independent variables described above, we anticipate that, even after controlling for dissatisfaction with policies, process concerns will still exert an independent influence on compliance. Turning again to the results displayed in Table 1, we find that only four of the twelve variables are related to compliance. Increasing age and increasing income bring a tendency to comply as does being a person of color. Notably, policy gap is not related to

compliance tendencies. Even with the other variables in the model controlled, however, the size of the difference between perceived and desired governmental processes (process gap) is strongly and negatively related to compliance. As hypothesized, regardless of their level of satisfaction with policies, people displeased with the process by which those policies are made are less likely to feel the need to comply with the law. People appear to be motivated less by the extent to which they get what they want than by the way in which decisions are made.

It is always possible that the causal direction is not the one theorized. In this case, perhaps process preferences result from a tendency to comply with the law rather than compliance being the result of process dissatisfaction. Such a reverse relationship can seldom be ruled out completely, but the theoretical and logical bases for expecting it here seem tenuous. The contention would have to be that willingness to comply with the law causes a person to prefer and to perceive certain governmental processes. This means that, because a person thinks it is not necessary to comply with laws, she will then conclude that people should be more influential in making laws than she believes them to be now. We think it much more compelling to argue that process preferences cause compliance. If a person does not think people are given enough influence in the formulation of laws, she will be less likely to comply. Not coincidentally, this is the formulation favored by previous work on compliance with the law (see especially Tyler 1990).<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Process matters. This does not mean people's policy concerns are unimportant, only that we cannot fully understand their orientation toward government without taking into account how the public thinks government ought to work and how it thinks government works in practice. Just what processes do they want, and what processes do they think they are getting? People are much less pleased with the government's

<sup>4</sup> These theoretical points are important because empirical refutations of reverse causation are almost never conclusive, particularly with one-shot survey data. Such tests require variables that are strongly related to the key hypothesized independent variable (in this case, process gap) but are completely unrelated to the dependent variable (in this case, compliance with the law). If these are available, the predicted values of process gap can serve as an instrumental variable, but in most cases such variables do not exist.

A few items in our survey are marginally suitable for the task at hand. Not surprisingly, items such as "if the American people were just given a chance, they could figure out how to solve this country's problems," "people should be allowed to vote directly on policies through ballot initiatives and the like much more often than they do now," and "members of Congress should do what they think is best regardless of what the people in their districts want" are all related to the process gap variable but are not related to compliance tendencies. The results obtained when using a "purged" variable created from these items generally support our contention that process preferences affect compliance and not the other way around (i.e., parameters are not markedly weakened when substituting predicted process gap for actual process gap), but we are reluctant to make much of this fact since the predicted variable only correlates with the actual at .32, which renders it a questionable instrument at best.



processes than its policies. The mean gap between desired and perceived process on the seven-point scale is 2.1, compared to 1.7 on the policy scale (the difference is significant;  $p < .01$ ). More important, in process space the discrepancy between preference and perception follows a definite pattern. Whereas in policy space approximately equal portions believe government policies are too liberal (55% of those perceiving any bias at all) or too conservative (45%), in process space a far larger portion believes elected officials have too much influence in decision making (80% of those seeing any imbalance) than believes ordinary people have too much influence (20%). People want policies to be a balance of liberal and conservative ideas, and in the aggregate that is what they think they are getting, more or less. People want decision making to be a balance between elected officials and ordinary people, but they think they are getting a process dominated by officeholders. From their vantage point, public enthusiasm for populist reforms is designed only to reestablish the balance, and until processes more closely approximate that balance, the ostensibly flawed governmental procedures will reduce the inclination of a surprising number of people to approve of government and to fulfill that most minimal of civic responsibilities: compliance with the law.

## APPENDIX

We measured the demographic and political variables as follows:

**Age:** Coded as reported age.

**Income:** Total household income in 1997 before taxes coded from 0 = under \$5,000 to 12 = \$100,000 and over.

**Race:** Coded 0 = white, 1 = nonwhite.

**Education:** Coded 0 = less than high school to 7 = post-graduate or professional degree.

**External Political Efficacy:** A scale created by summing agree or disagree responses to the two standard questions—"People like you have a say about what the government does" and "Public officials care a lot about what people like you think"—and coded so that higher scores signify more efficacious responses ( $\alpha = .42$ ).

**Political Knowledge Index:** The sum of correct responses to four factual questions on the job or political office held by Al Gore and by Tony Blair, on who has the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional, and on which party currently has the most members in the U.S. Senate.

**Party Identification:** Coded 0 = strong Democrat to 6 = strong Republican.

**Personal Financial Condition:** Coded 1 = worse off, 2 = same, and 3 = better off for the question: "We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you are better off financially, worse off, or just about the same as you were a year ago?"

**Country's Financial Condition:** Coded 1 = worse off, 2 = same, and 3 = better off for the question: "We would like to know your views about the nation's financial well-being. Is the nation better off, worse off, or about the same financially as it was a year ago?"

**Perceived Policy Gap:** Measured by taking the absolute value of respondents' self-placement on the ideology scale minus their perceptions of the recent policies of the national government—"We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Some people hold extremely liberal political views. Think of them as a 1 on a seven-point scale. Other people hold extremely conservative political views. Think of them as a 7 on a seven-point scale. And, of course, there are people in between at 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6. Using the 1–7 scale, with 1 defined as extremely liberal and 7 as extremely conservative, how do you rate . . . yourself? . . . the recent policies of the national government in Washington?"

**Perceived Process Gap:** Measured by taking the absolute value of respondents' self-placement on the process scale minus their perception of the national government—"Some people say what we need in this country is for ordinary people like you and me to decide for ourselves what needs to be done and how. Others say ordinary people are too busy and should instead allow elected officials and bureaucrats to make all political decisions. Still others say a combination would be best. Imagine a seven-point scale with 1 being ordinary people making all decisions on their own and 7 being elected officials and bureaucrats making all the decisions on their own, while 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 indicate in-between opinions on the two extremes. Which number from 1 to 7 best represents . . . how you think government should work? . . . how you think the national government in Washington actually works?"

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