Democracy's Denominator:
Reassessing Responsiveness with Public Opinion on the National Policy Agenda

Supplemental Appendix
April 2016

This appendix provides background details on the methodology underlying the analyses in "Democracy's Denominator," which were unable to be included in the manuscript due to the journal's word limit. In particular, this appendix contains details on the national policy agenda measure (from Binder 2003) as well as the procedures used to search for public opinion data corresponding to policy agenda topics. For details on the data in Study 2, see Gilens 2012. A separate online appendix contains the survey question details for the 2,449 questions in Study 1.

Binder's Policy Agenda Measure and Data

In her studies of legislative gridlock, Sarah Binder (1999; 2003) pioneered a method of determining what issues were being considered before Congresses in the U.S.[1] In particular, she constructs a measure of the agenda for each Congress based upon the unsigned editorials in the *New York Times* newspaper (hereafter, "NYT"). As Binder (2003, 37), writes, "The choice [of the NYT] rests on the assumption that the nation's paper of record responds to issues under consideration in Washington and highlights public problems that deserve attention." In a defense of her methodology, Binder cites the favorable view of this paper among political elites the choice of this paper as a good one (see page 37). Importantly, the NYT editorializes on issues they favor and oppose, which mitigates concerns about ideological biases; these are not only the issues the NYT supports (see Binder 2003, 171, footnote 9 for more). It is also cited in other research as the agenda setter for most other media outlets (Page 1996).

Binder instructed her team of coders to "extract the issues that plausibly constitute the systemic agenda" by coding, "the legislative content of each editorial that mentions Congress, the House, or the Senate…" (2003, 37). She considered any policy issue discussed in the NYT as a "potential enactment." Each day from the start of the legislative session for the 80th Congress (a two year period spanning 1947-48) through the 106th Congress (1999-2000), she tallied the number of times that the NYT wrote about the issue in each Congress. Routine appropriations bills were also not included (Binder 2003, 136). In all, nearly 15,000 editorials were collected and coded. Binder reports intercoder reliability averaging 87 percent and discrepancies were carefully reviewed and resolved by the research assistants or author (Binder 2003, 136).

Binder reports that unlike past works (e.g., Mayhew 1991) or news summaries that consider only major pieces of legislation, "my method tends to capture these smaller legislative moments quite well" (2003, p. 39). As examples, she cites the issue of childhood vaccinations (enacted in the 103rd Congress) and the repeal of the oleomargarine tax of the 81st (after stalemating in the 80th

[1] As Binder (2003, 35) writes, "…measuring [legislative] output without respect to the underlying policy agenda risks misstating the true frequency of gridlock. A Congress might produce little legislation because it is truly gridlocked. Or it might generate few laws because it faces a limited agenda. With little on its legislative plate, surely a Congress should not be blamed for meager results. We can evaluate Congress's performance only if we have some idea of the size of the underlying policy agenda."

Congress) as seemingly small, yet important issues that are left out of end of the year legislative review summaries. Also, Binder's method does not favor some policy areas over others, which had been a limitation in the past. Moreover, it is very detailed, going into nuanced aspects of policies, such as weapons programs like the A-12 Avenger, the B-1 bomber, the B-2 bomber, the MX, and Midgetman missiles; many of these would be lost in measures that deal with the more generic spending on defense (e.g., Bartels 1991; Wlezien 1995). Further, despite the rise of omnibus bills since the 1980s—e.g., three different issues are combined into a single legislative package—in Binder's measure, "each of the three issues still counts as a component of the agenda" (p. 40). Her policy metric also avoid subjective impressions of what is significant legislation or not. Binder writes, "Because I rely instead on the judgment of the nation's paper of record to identify salient policy issues, the problem of subjectivity is reduced…," though not eliminated as she acknowledges (p. 40).

Overall there were 3,152 agenda items from 1947 to 2000, and just under half of those were enacted (Binder 2003, 38). However, in her calculation of gridlock scores—and in the data Binder generously made available—the final number of issue items was 2,818 over the 1947-2000 time period. The reduction in cases was because Binder opted to drop issues concerning, "nominations, matters of internal legislative procedure, and foreign aid matters." As she writes, "Nominations and procedural issues are dropped because they are not strictly legislative in nature, and foreign aid issues are dropped because it is difficult to assess 'success' or 'failure' when the issue is primarily framed in terms of the amount of funds provided" (footnote 28, page 172). Doing so is consistent with what others working in the area have done (e.g., Mayhew 1991). However, treaties are included as are many topics that would be considered international affairs and trade (e.g., statehood for Puerto Rico, arms sales to Ireland, sanctions against South Africa, textile import quotas). While it is not possible to list the thousands of issues here, the text of the manuscript provides additional examples of issues from the national policy agenda.

As Binder (2003, 37) writes, "The number of editorials per issue provides a proxy for the public or political salience of the issue, a proxy that can be used to divided the agenda into progressive levels of significance." Accordingly, the number of editorials was used in the manuscript as a measure of salience. Most issues had only one editorial (n=1,372, or nearly 49%), but the average was a little more than 3 per issue (ave=3.3, s.d=5.1), but the most editorials recorded was 87 editorials on campaign finance reform in the 105th Congress. In general, there was only a modest correlation (Pearson's r=.21, $p < .01$) between the number of editorials on an issue and the number of poll questions on that topic.

After delineating the policy agenda, Binder then coded the final disposition on each issue. Specifically, she calculated whether the issue was eventually enacted into law. The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* was used to determine legislative fate in most cases. However, "if the *Almanac* provided no or ambiguous coverage, numerous sources were consulted, including the Library of Congress's Thomas website, Legi-Slate's online bill retrieval service, the U.S. Congressional Hearings Data Set…" (Binder 2003, 136). Importantly, though, Binder writes that, "in most cases, it was relatively easy to match the *New York Times's* discussion of an issue with its legislative fate" (p. 136). For more on this process as well as the specific search steps used when finding editorials, see Appendix A in Binder 2003 on pages 135 to 139.

Procedures for Finding Survey Questions on the National Policy Agenda

The paper makes extensive use of the iPOLL database at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. The Roper Center claims on its webpage that, "The iPOLL Databank is the most comprehensive, up-to-date resource for US public opinion poll data." As of early 2015, there were over 600,000 public opinion survey questions dating back to 1935. The text of the paper mentions using 2,449 poll questions devoted to the 2,818 agenda issues. However, more than 20,000 poll questions were reviewed before determining that 2,449 were suitable for the purposes of this analysis (i.e., they had to use national samples, they had to provide the public's preference on the issue). Non-opinion questions were excluded (e.g., knowledge of an issue, how political leaders were handling an issue, the salience of an issue).

The iPOLL Search document accompanying this appendix (below) contains explicit instructions for conducting the searches along with screenshots of the iPOLL interface. Coders were instructed to go from the day of the election prior to the start of a congressional session (on the notion that opinions between the election and the official start of a session would be relevant) until the last official day of the two-year congressional session. They were also instructed to use Boolean search terms whenever possible to enlarge the set of potential poll questions returned (e.g., wiretap% for Wiretapping Regulations, truck% for legislation banning wider trucks, abortion% and Medicaid for restrictions on Medicaid paying for abortions).

The agenda issue items were sorted randomly before the polling acquisition phase so that coders did not work on specific issues, congressional sessions, or eras. Reliability statistics were high, with Krippendorf alpha intercoder statistics of .67 to .82 for a random sample of 35 cases. Also, coders reported a high level of self-confidence. For more than three quarters of the issues (n=2,117, or 76.2%), coders rated their confidence as high (i.e., they were very confident in the search terms and poll questions produced). When they were not very confident, they were somewhat confident (n=616, 22%). Rarely were coders not confident (n=45, 1.6%). An inspection of these cases revealed that vague issue descriptions were often the problem (e.g., "land use reform" in 1972 or "Balanced National Growth and Development" in 1976). Whenever the issue description category in Binder's file was vague, coders attempted to A) find the original editorial(s), B) search for other stories and events around the same time to provide a more specific topic search, and/or C) attempt to learn more about the issue based upon the content of the poll questions that turned up for the particular legislative session. Auxiliary analyses were undertaken to ensure that the results were robust to the inclusion/exclusion of these the not-confident cases. Specifically, dummy terms for the unsure categories are insignificant and the findings look similar if unsure cases are dropped.

The polls were diverse in terms of origin. The following organizations contributed five or more questions that were deemed relevant for the issue agenda: ABC News/Louis Harris and Associates (including ABC News/Washington Post and ABC News), Associated Press (including Associated Press/Media General), CBS News (including CBS News/New York Times and New York Times), Cambridge Report/Research International (including Cambridge Reports), Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan (also Survey Research Center, University of Michigan), Gallup Organization, Gordon S. Black Corporation, Hart and Breglio Research Companies, Hart and Teeter Research Companies, ICR Survey Research Group

(including ICR--International Communications Research), Los Angeles Times, Louis Harris & Associates (Louis Harris and Associates), Luntz Research Companies, Market Facts, Market Strategies (including Market Strategies and Greenberg Research), NBC News (as well as NBC News/Associated Press or NBC News/Wall Street Journal), National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago (also National Opinion Research Center and the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy Research or National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago and The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research), Penn & Schoen Associates (including Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates and Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates), Princeton Survey Research Associates, Program on International Policy Attitudes, University of Maryland, Roper Starch Worldwide (also Roper Organization), Washington Post, Wirthlin Group (including Wirthlin Worldwide), Yankelovich Clancy Shulman (as well as Yankelovich Partners or Yankelovich, Skelly & White), and "Opinion Research Corporation."

Details on the survey organization, Binder's short issue description, sample size, interview method, beginning/ending dates of the survey, Roper iPoll question identification number, and question text for the 2,449 questions are available in a separate online appendix devoted to question details (titled "Online Supplementary Appendix of Survey Questions and Details"). This other survey question appendix provides detailed question-level information in a standard format to comply with AAPOR recommendations and reporting standards. However, some methodological details like survey sponsorship, sampling frame, and sampling error are not available in the Roper archives, especially for surveys conducted in the early years of the study (e.g., 1940s-1960s). For this reason, the question wording appendix provides the iPoll question ID number for all 2,449 items in the analysis so that interested readers can look up any additional details that may be available the iPoll archive beyond the complete and common set of items.

References

Binder, Sarah A. 2003. *Stalemate: Causes and Consequences of Legislative Gridlock.* Washington, DC: Brookings.

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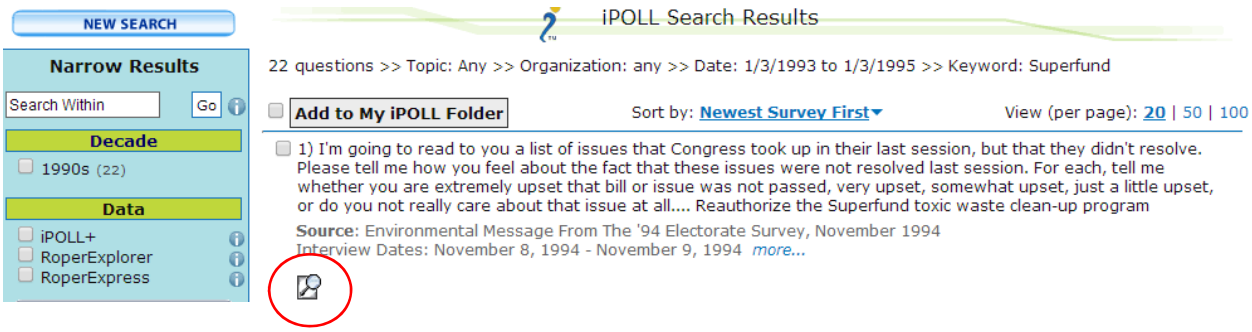
Wlezien, Christopher. 1995. "The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending." *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (Nov.): 981-1000.

Researching Public Opinion on Policy Issues using iPOLL Roper
June 10, 2014

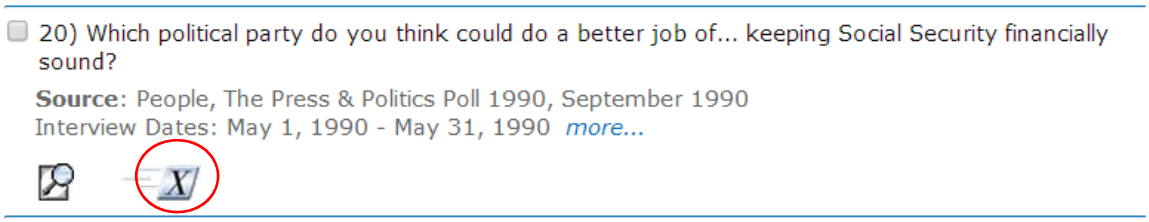
Background:

The goal of the coding is to determine what the public prefers, assuming public opinion data exists, on the issues listed in a spreadsheet of topics that were deemed to be on the national policy agenda based upon a review of *New York Times* editorials (for more about that process, see Binder 2003). The issue descriptions are sometimes general but other times they are very specific. For each issue, it is necessary to develop a sense of what the issue entails as well as an orientation relative to the status quo (i.e., Congress should change something or Congress should keep things the way they are).

The interface at Roper iPOLL has changed over the years. It is better in many ways and keeps getting more sophisticated, which means these coding rules may need to be updated. However, as of June 2014, there are two major distinctions that are important. First, iPOLL can be used to look up opinion preferences from their collection of more than 600,000 poll questions from around the world. These opinion distributions (sometimes "toplines," "marginals," "cross-tabs," or "frequencies") show the percentage in each of the response categories for the question as well as basic information about the organization conducting the survey, the survey dates, number of respondents, etc. The questions available for inspection come up with a symbol of a magnifying glass on top of a piece of paper, as noted in the example below which is from a search of iPOLL for the term "Superfund" between 1/3/1993 to 1/3/1995.



The other way iPOLL can be used is to download data. In that case, the entry would have an "X" as well as the magnifying glass.



Step 1. Roper iPOLL Search

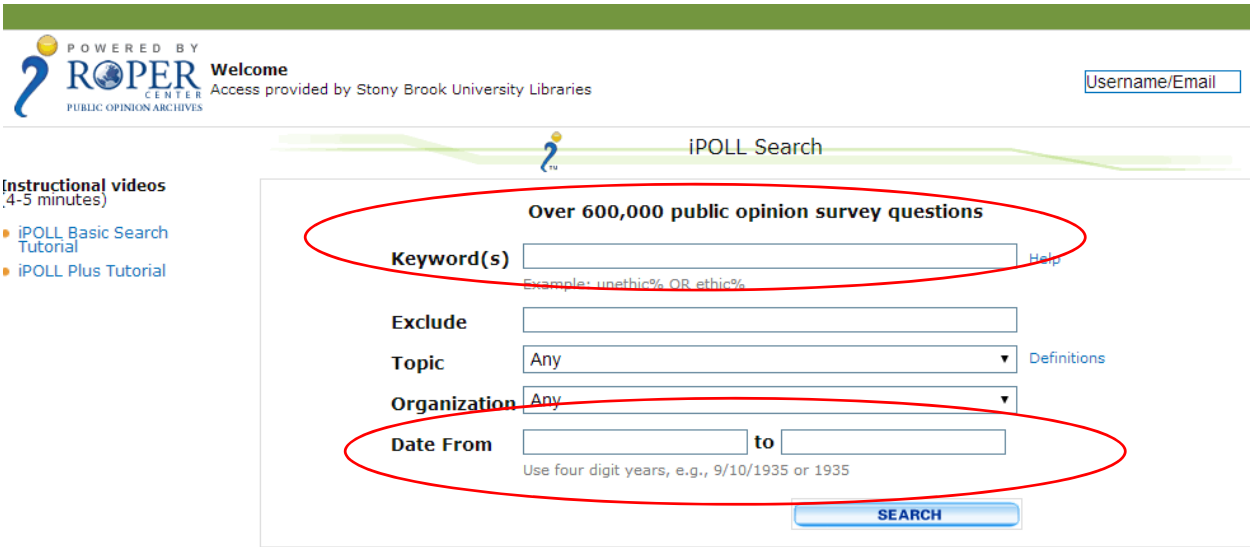
Go to the iPOLL interface. Search iPOLL rather than datasets only.

http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/CFIDE/cf/action/ipoll/index.cfm

You might find it helpful to create an iPOLL account too, so you can log in beyond just through the university.

For search dates, use November 1 of the year before the congress starts to the final day that Congress was in session. So, for the 93rd congress which was in session from 1/3/1973 to 12/20/1974, you would use 11/1/1972 to 12/20/1974 for the search dates because members of Congress in the 93rd might have been responding to issues raised when they were elected around the time they were elected.

Enter the search terms (using Booleans if necessary) and search dates, which correspond to the congressional term being searched. For survey organization, leave it on the default as "all."



Step 2. Save best search results

Searches will yield different results depending upon how closely the search terms match what is in the archive. Once you have found what appears to be the best set of search terms (i.e., those that identify questions on the issue), save the overall results (without looking at the individual questions at this point).

In particular, save the page(s) with all possible questions that come up with your search. Put the Bid number in the file tile. Be sure to ask for as many questions as you can (i.e. 100 per page).

<u>Step 3. Identify questions with public opinion preferences from within the search results.</u>

From within the set of questions identified with your search terms, find those that contain public policy preferences. Different styles of questions are applicable, but the common element is that they would let you characterize whether the public prefers some aspect of the policy proposal or not. Favor vs. oppose questions are the most obvious example of this, but other questions are potentially applicable (i.e., is it a good idea to do X, do you support X, etc.).

So, for example, a search of "medicare and catastrophic" could try to also recover questions that were policy preferences by adding terms like agree, support, and favor, as in the following:

(medicare AND catastrophic) AND (favor OR support OR agree)

Add the questions with policy preferences to the My iPOLL Folder by clicking the check box.

<u>Step 4. Download and save the questions as both .txt files and .csv files.</u>

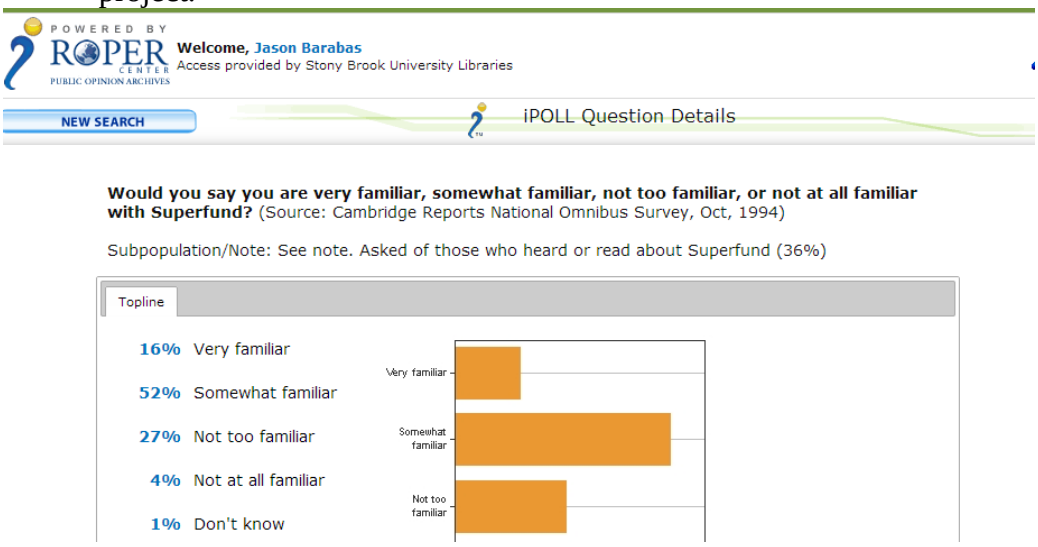
There are two options for downloading the questions, text files (.txt) and as spreadsheet files (.csv). Download both forms and rename the files with the Bid number in the file name.

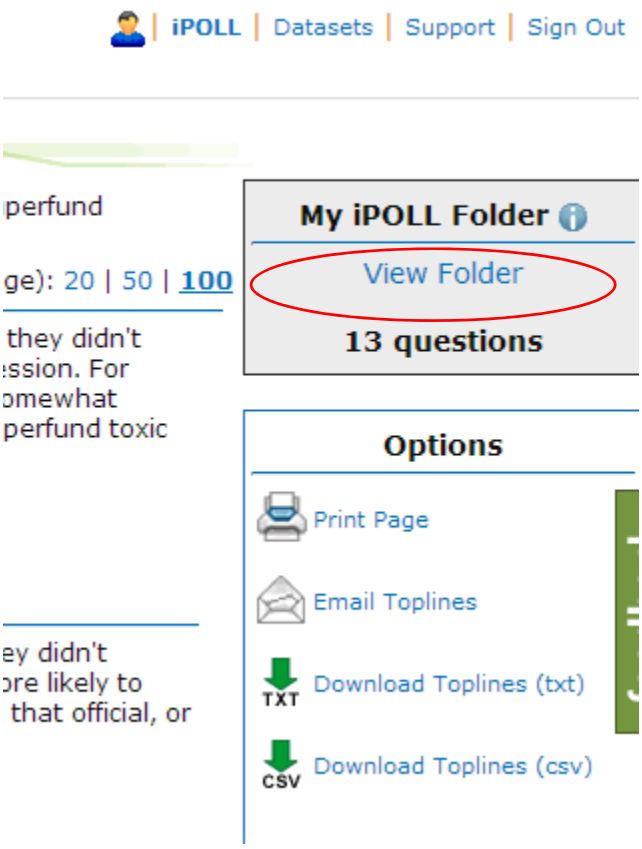
Other tips:

Try to explore variations on search terms. If you don't get many/any, try alternatives. If you get too many hits, then try ways to refine the search. Think about using Boolean search terms such as AND or OR.

The goal is to characterize national (i.e., U.S.) public opinion without respect to whether they are voters or subgroups in any other sense. So, do not take poll questions that have the following criteria:

1. Polls or poll questions asked only of registered voters. So, we want the description at the bottom to say: Sample: National adult
2. Poll questions that are only given to a subset of the sample who passed a filter question (e.g., only asked of those on Medicare or those who are employed).
3. Questions that are on something other than a preference. For example, some questions ask whether people are familiar with the issue (below). These are not relevant for this project.



However, sometimes poll questions are asked of a subset of the survey, randomly, to explore differences in question wording or for other reasons. Since these are still technically nationally representative, include these questions.

You have to add the questions you want to the My iPoll Folder. Then you must click on My iPOLL Folder to view only those questions. Otherwise, if you click download toplines it will do so for the entire search, not just the questions on policy preferences.