

Latent Opinion, Issue Attention, and Policymaking

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Abstract

A rich literature in political science examined the responsiveness of government policy to public opinion. However, a notable limitation has been the inability to grapple with latent directional opinion and issue-attention cycles. Prior research may underestimate policy responsiveness by failing to account for policymaker efforts to anticipate the public's opinion on issues at election time – both its direction and its salience. This paper uses a survey on a snowball sample of former and current policy advisors for Canadian federal and provincial ministers to shed light on this issue. Survey experiments were conducted using policy vignettes that manipulated latent directional opinion and salience to establish the mechanism of policy responsiveness to latency at the micro-level. Findings show that our respondents adjusted their policy support to account for latent issue salience, but that responsiveness to latent directional opinion is conditional on issue attention. This suggests policymakers in Canada are only responsive to public opinion for the purposes of re-election – they will follow their policy preferences at odds with public opinion if they think they can get away with it. Descriptive survey results also provide new insights that could help future researchers study latent opinion and policymaking.

DRAFT: Please contact authors before citing

That public policy is at least somewhat responsive to the ebbs and flows of public opinion has been widely supported by research in political science over the past few decades. However, few scholars have seriously grappled with V.O. Key's astute observation that politicians are likely most interested in anticipating public opinion in the future to bolster their chances at re-election, and that opinion polling is often not up to facilitating this task. Policymakers may be willing to ignore current opinion if they expect the direction or saliency of that opinion to change in the future. Studying the "slippery" concept of latent opinion has been no easy feat, but it is crucial for greater awareness of how public opinion influences the policy process.

This paper contributes to this nascent literature through two means. First, it presents results from survey experiments conducted on a unique sample of current and former policy advisors to Canadian federal and provincial cabinet ministers. In doing so it provides micro-level evidence of policy responsiveness to latent directional opinion and salience. Second, it leverages this unique sample of elite respondents for new and compelling insights into how policymakers incorporate public opinion into their decision making, the relative importance of current and latent opinion, latent issue attention and directional opinion, and the information sources used by policymakers to estimate latency. The hope is that this information may be of value in guiding future research on latent opinion and policymaking. This paper will start by providing a brief overview of the literature on latent opinion and issue attention, and establish some hypotheses and research questions that flow from this work. It will then describe the sample and the experimental design. Lastly, it will present the results from the survey and vignette experiments before providing a brief discussion of the findings and directions for future research.

Latent Opinion, Issue Attention Cycles, and Policymaking

The concept of latent opinion can be traced to V.O. Key's *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (1961). Along with memorably noting that "to speak with precision about public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost", the book's introductory chapter offers a compelling and enduring definition of public opinion with elite politics placed at its center. Public opinion was, for him, "the opinion of private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" (262). The characteristics and content of public opinion that explain government responsiveness to public opinion thus depend on the incentives they face. For a politician motivated by re-election, current public opinion does not warrant as much attention as opinion the next time voters head to the polls. For, as Key writes, "if a legislator is to worry about the attitude of his district, what he needs really to worry about is, not whether his performance pleases the constituency at the moment, but what the response of his constituency will be in the next campaign when persons aggrieved by his position attack his record" (p.499). To date, the extensive literature on public opinion has focused on estimating and understanding contemporaneous public opinion and has overlooked the possibility that we are not focusing on the actual inputs into the policy process.

In an important exception to the dearth of research on latent opinion, Zaller (2003) attempted a research revival by drawing attention to evidence of responsiveness to latent opinion in presidential decisions. He showed convincingly that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson perceived themselves to be in a bind of latent opinion: withdraw from Vietnam and face backlash from the public for losing, or stay in Vietnam and face the wrath of the public for mounting casualties. Zaller (2003) also argues

President Clinton was more responsive to latent opinion than current opinion on a host of issues, including the economic bailout of Mexico in 1995 and U.S. intervention in Bosnia. The crux of Zaller's argument rests on presidential knowledge of some well-known regularities in public opinion: electoral punishment for a poor economy (Fiorina 1981); the rally around the flag effect (Mueller 1994; Oneal et al. 1996); and public resistance to mounting casualties in armed conflict (Mueller 1973; Zaller 1995). More generally, Zaller (2003) argues that "for cases in which a President can, by the levers of power he controls, alter the real world situation that will shape public opinion at the time of the next election, he should ignore public opinion as expressed in current polls and cater to future opinion. When, however, a President is powerless to affect the real world basis of future opinion, he should be wary of ignoring current opinion."

Zaller's reading of the cases he presents are compelling, but they leave many unanswered questions for scholars wishing to broaden the scope of inquiry. First, what group of voters are most important for policymakers in estimating latent opinion: likely voters, swing voters, or the base? And what information do they use to formulate this estimate? We know little about whose latent opinion policymakers are interested in, and how they go about forming these estimates. Second, evidence of responsiveness to latent opinion is typically found with the presidency, but does this concern extend to legislators and those that advise them? Representatives and Senators have little individual capacity to shape public opinion through the exercise policy instruments, so does it follow that latent opinion is less of a concern for these actors? The same can be said of policymakers in smaller countries, like Canada, that have less ability to shape global events compared to an American president. Lastly, the cases he selected were highly salient at the time of presidential decisions. Scholars who are interested in the responsiveness of policy to public opinion are typically interested in a much broader selection of issues of different salencies and policy areas (Burstein 2003; Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1983; Soroka and Wlezein 2010; Stimson, Mackuen and Erikson 1995), as there is reason to suspect, at least in the American case, that public policy may be more responsive to the opinion of economic elites (Gilens 1995; Gilens and Page 2014), which is more likely to be the case on low salience issues where policy monopolies tend to prevail (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Selecting issues on salience would make it impossible to study potential inequities in responsiveness to public opinion.

When it comes to electoral significance, the two characteristics of public opinion stand out: direction and salience. That is, politicians are concerned with both the share of voters who support their position on the issue (direction) and the importance of the issue among the public (salience). Zaller's empirical work addresses salience but only obliquely. While most cases he selects were highly charged, the Mexican currency crisis example hints that Clinton may have been as, or more, concerned with anticipated issue salience. That is, Clinton's decision may have reflected his belief that regardless of opposition to the bailout, attention to the issue would fade over time only if he avoided substantial negative domestic economic consequences. Downs (1972) was the first to draw scholarly notice of what he called "issue-attention cycles" where public attention to policy issues waxes and wanes over times on environmental issues. He theorized that these cycles consisted of five stages. First, there is a pre-problem stage where an unrealized problem exists. Second, there is some focusing event, such as the proposal or passage of legislation or a crisis that draws media and

public attention to the problem. Third, the public begins to realize the costs of the dealing with the problem (Downs 1972; Daw et al. 2013). In the context of the Mexico bailout, Clinton made his decision in the third stage of the process, and likely anticipated that the fourth and fifth stages would be reached well before the next election – those characterized by a gradual decline of interest, and permanent lesser attention of the issue.

Issue-attention cycles have been of tremendous interest to scholars in the field of public policy. Application of this theory has extended well beyond environmental policies (Anderson et al. 2012; Daw et al. 2013; Holt and Barkemeyer 2012; Petersen 2009). In public opinion research, however, variation in public attention, often takes a backseat to directional opinion.¹ Understanding the role of public opinion as an input into the policy process almost certainly requires us to come to grips, not just with policymakers' anticipation of directional opinion, but their anticipation of the public's agenda as well. For example, we can imagine that anticipating a negative turn in public opinion will matter far less in a decision calculus if there is little expectation an issue will capture the public attention in proximity to the next election. In general, we should expect the responsiveness of policymakers to latent directional opinion to be conditional on anticipated issue salience, or even more concretely, the anticipated salience of an issue at the time of the next election.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

The sparse theoretic and empirical literature on latent opinion is in part a product of the methodological challenges associated with studying it. In addition to the difficulty of measuring politicians' perceptions of latent opinion, it is also exceptionally hard to tease out the independent effects of latent versus current opinion, salience versus direction, as well as separating those factors from policymaker preferences when using observational data. Thus, this paper will follow a growing trend in exposing elites to survey experiments (Loewen et al 2017; Sevenas et al. 2017; Walgrave et al. 2017). For our purposes, *latent public opinion* is the aggregate public's attitude toward a policy issue at the time of an election that may or may not have been activated when the policy decision was being made. We distinguish between two features of latent public opinion: *latent directional opinion* is the aggregate public's opinion towards a policy (supportive or non-supportive) at the time of an election that may or may not have manifested itself at the time the policy decision was being made; and *latent issue attention* or salience is the importance the aggregate public attaches to a policy issue at the time of the next election that may or may not have manifested itself at the time a decision was being made.

We will manipulate latent opinion independent of current opinion – both its direction and its salience. There are a few general hypotheses that come out of what literature exists. First, research has shown that public opinion is generally stable across most issues, and moves marginally in response to events in predictable ways (Page and Shapiro 1992). As much as politicians often try to shape public opinion on certain issues (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), many policymakers are likely aware of the general persistence of public opinion on many issues. Given the difficulty in acquiring

¹ With some notable exceptions. See Page and Shapiro (1983) and Lax and Phillips (2009), who show responsiveness to current opinion increases with salience.

reliable information that public opinion will change on any given issue, policymakers would stand to benefit by assuming persistence unless given information to the contrary, which leads to our first hypothesis:

Inference (H1): Policymakers will use information about current public opinion to estimate latent public opinion.

However, in some instances policymakers may have reason to believe that the shape of public opinion may change in the future. They will make use of other information in their environment that signals what public opinion will look like in the future, particularly at the next election. The most obvious concern is the direction of that opinion and its intensity (Key 1961; Zaller 2003). If polling at the time of a policy decision does not reflect what the public may believe after the policy is implemented and interest groups and the opposition react, this could leave a government vulnerable at election time. The converse is also important. Even unpopular policy can begin to secure more public support as it creates constituencies that benefit from the policy, which leads to our second hypothesis:

Latent Directional Opinion (H2): Policymakers will be responsive in their policy decisions to anticipated directional opinion.

Policymakers may not just be interested in the direction of future opinion. They may also want to anticipate the public's future agenda. When deciding to propose a policy that the public supports, they may only choose to spend time and political capital in proposing this policy under the expectation that the issue will continue to be, or become, an important one for the public in the future. Even more importantly, if flying in the face of negative public opinion, they may choose to push forward if there is an expectation the public will move on to other issues. In short, policymakers are actively trying to anticipate Downs' (1972) issue-attention cycle. This leads to our third hypothesis:

Latent Issue Attention (H3): Policymakers will be responsive in their policy decisions to anticipated issue attention, holding directional opinion constant.

Although we expect policymakers to be responsive to latent opinion and salience, it is very possible that the relationship is conditional. The importance of latent directional opinion may depend on their expectations of the public's future agenda. This conforms to an instrumentalist notion of policymaker responsiveness to public opinion where they seek to maximize the tradeoff between their own policy preferences and public opinion. If salience is anticipated to be low in the future, there is little incentive to be responsive to current or latent directional opinion. This is reflected in our next hypothesis below:

Instrumentalist (H4A): Policymaker responsiveness to anticipated directional public opinion is conditional on anticipated issue attention.

A more robust form of responsiveness to public opinion, however, is desired by not just democratic theorists, but the public as well. Democratic responsiveness is limited if it is confined to

a narrow range of issues that the media and public deem important at election time. It is also possible that policymakers adopt a delegate model of representation and are responsive to latent opinion regardless of issue salience. This possibility is reflected in our delegate hypothesis below.

Delegate (H4B): Policymakers are responsive to anticipated directional public opinion regardless of anticipated issue attention.

In addition to the empirical hypotheses our experiment confronts, we use our survey of elites to shed light on other important questions that have been unexplored in literature on latent public opinion. First, how important is latent opinion as a policy input compared to other inputs in the policy process? Second, what groups in the public are policymakers interested in insofar as they have an interest in aggregate opinion? Third, what sources of information do they use in formulating estimates of latent public opinion? Lastly, are there any important differences on these dimensions across levels of political experience or ideology? The descriptive survey will also help us shed some more light on the tradeoff between current and latent opinion, and the distinction policymakers have been anticipated salience, and direction of opinion.

Data and Methods

We conducted web-based experiments on a sample of 153 individuals who reported in the survey that they currently or previously worked for Canadian federal or provincial Ministers of the Crown in a partisan policy advisory capacity. This is notably different than most other elite surveys, which often sample parliamentarians, in part due to ease of access (for instance, Loewen et al 2017; Sevenas et al. 2017; Walgrave et al. 2017). We are interested examining the role of latent public opinion as an input into the policy process. In Westminster systems like Canada's, parliamentarians often find themselves on the outside looking in to the policy process even if they are on the government benches (Franks 1987). Most surveys of parliamentarians are only able to get a handful of responses from individuals with ministerial experience. Our approach attempts to address this sample size issue by surveying those who work for ministers in a policy advisory capacity. These chiefs of staff and policy advisors, among others, often provide policy-based advice to their respective ministers on important files. Because they are partisan appointments, they have more election-related incentive to provide advice based on public opinion compared to the career civil servants who also work in these ministries. Partisan appointees in ministries, after all, only have a job if their party wins government.

Access to this ideal population of policy advisors is a problem. Surveying parliamentarians is comparatively easy because their roles are public, and some of them feel compelled to help researchers to provide a public service. Much less is known about their advisors, and they have little reason to cooperate in filling out a survey that probes into details of their current or previous work they would rather not share. To address these concerns, we conducted a snowball sample. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where respondents are asked to recruit new respondents from among their acquaintances (Goodman 1961). This technique is most commonly used for qualitative research on hard to reach populations, like criminals and those that are generally isolated (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). More generally, though, this technique allows researchers to

tap into social networks of typically hard to recruit respondents to gather a reasonably large sample that would otherwise be infeasible (Thompson 1997). In this case, we simply do not have a population frame of current and former policy advisors at the federal and provincial level. We also wish to acquire rather frank insight on how public opinion is used in the policy process, which may be a sensitive topic for those not wishing to embarrass their current or former partisan employers.

There are, of course, important limitations to snowball sampling. As a form of non-probability sampling it is prone to bias, particularly of selection. It will over-represent people well connected in social circles and underrepresent those that are not (Griffiths et al. 1993). The representativeness of the sample is also dependent on the initial respondents who take the survey. We do not believe these biases would seriously compromise inferences drawn from our survey and experiments. That being said, replication in future samples is the best way to gain further external validity for our experimental manipulations, and our descriptive survey data is primarily exploratory – meant to gather data to help future researchers study latent opinion. For our purposes, a snowball sample was ideal.

We passed this survey along to a small handful of acquaintances who had held very senior roles in ministries and first ministers' offices². They then passed this survey along to those that they believed were qualified to fill out the survey (i.e. having advised ministers in a policy capacity). Survey respondents were incentivized to complete the survey with their choice of an Amazon gift card or a cheque each worth 100 dollars and were instructed at the end of the survey to pass it along to those they believed would qualify, or to write the names and emails of people to which we could send the survey. Respondents were also under strict instructions not to divulge the specific purpose of the study. The end of this process gave us a sample of 166 individuals. At the beginning of the survey we asked respondents to provide details about their work experience. Only those who indicated that they served in a policy advisory role for ministers were allowed to proceed on to the remainder of the survey. This left us with a sample of 153 individuals.

Approximately 33 percent of our sample is female. The bulk of our sample is comprised of former ministry staffers for provincial and federal Conservative parties (65%), while the remainder worked for provincial and federal Liberal parties. As a result, our sample tilts to the right, averaging 6.5 on a 0-10 ideology scale (SD=1.98). Our sample has a fair degree of variance on political experience. Only 14 percent of the sample has between 1 and 2 years of experience. 55 percent have over 5 years of experience, with 9 percent having over 10 years. The bulk of our sample has extensive experience working in government.

Design and Protocol

Respondents were given three vignettes of hypothetical policy issues for the experimental component of our survey. The outline of these vignettes is provided in Table 1 below, and the detailed text is provided in the Appendix. Vignettes 1 and 2 (hereafter described as V1 and V2) described two fictitious policy scenarios after which respondents were asked to make a policy recommendation to their minister. They were asked to choose between two options. The first option was supported by the civil service. These “good policy” options were named *Aspire* (for V1)

² That is, the central offices of provincial premiers or federal prime ministers.

and Fast Finish (for V2), respectively, and both were also described as aligning with their party's principles and ideological allies. In the absence of any other information, policy recommendations should be strongly in favour of both options at the expense of Secure (for V1) and Jump Start (for V2), which are the second policy options presented for each vignette, respectively. By creating fake policy proposals, we hoped to clearly establish the mechanism of policymaker responsiveness to latent opinion. There is an obvious tradeoff with realism, as respondents have no policy preferences to factor in to their recommendation. To explore the impact of greater realism, we added an additional vignette (V3) as a stronger test of possible responsiveness in a real-world setting. Respondents were asked to give advice to their minister on whether to increase the number of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) allowed in Canada. After each vignette, respondents were asked to make their recommendation, and rate the strength of that recommendation (very strong, strong, somewhat strong, or not strong at all). Our dependent variables will be the resulting scales with higher values moving towards the "good policy" option and away from current public opinion.

Table 1. Vignette Design

Vignette	Issue	Control	2	3	4
		Current Opinion	Latent Opinion		
1	Aspire v. Secure	Negative-Salient	Non-Salient	Salient	N/A
2	Fast Finish v. Jump Start	Negative-Salient	Positive	Negative-Non-Salient	Negative-Salient
3	Temporary Foreign Workers (same vs more)	Ambivalent	Negative-Salient	Negative-Non-Salient	N/A

Respondents were randomly assigned into one of three or four categories depending on the vignette. In V1, they were assigned into three groups. Group 1 received the control condition which contained the policy vignette (Aspire v. Secure), information indicating that the general public was strongly against the "good policy" option, Aspire, and information noting that the issue was currently very salient. Group 2 received the same vignette and information about current opinion, but they were also given some information indicating that the issue will fade as a public priority in the future, stating that:

Both a trusted pollster and retired cabinet ministers agree that public attention to this issue will fade and the issue is only a temporary priority for the public.

Group 3, in contrast, was given the following additional information that suggested Aspire would remain high on the public agenda:

Both a trusted pollster and retired cabinet ministers agree that public attention to this issue will remain high and the issue will persist as a priority for the public.

This study does not manipulate the direction of future opinion. In both treatment groups, there is no mention of the direction of future opinion. We have two major expectations in this study that are consistent with our hypotheses presented in the previous section. If respondents use current opinion to infer the nature of latent public opinion (H1), we expect no difference between the control condition and group 3. We also expect a significant negative difference (i.e. more supportive of *Aspire* compared to *Secure*) between group 2 and the other conditions if respondents are responsive to latent salience (H3).

Respondents are assigned into four conditions in V2. Group 1 received the control condition which contained the policy vignette and information that current public opinion was strongly opposed to *Fast Finish* (v. *Jump Start*), and that the issue was currently very salient. Group 2 received the same information as group 1 along with the following information that suggested the public would directional opinion would shift in favour of *Fast Finish* over time:

A report on policy adoption in other jurisdictions finds that, despite often significant public resistance to *Fast finish*, support for the decision turns increasingly positive after implementation reveals the policy's success. A trusted pollster makes a similar argument noting that this is the sort of issue people are ultimately flexible on and the government might even get credit for making a tough choice.

Group 3 instead received information that public opinion would remain negative, but that the issue fades in importance over time:

A report on policy adoption in other jurisdictions finds that, despite often significant public resistance to *Fast finish*, the issue usually falls off the media agenda and drops off voters' radar. A trusted pollster makes a similar argument noting this is the sort of issue that soon won't be a priority for many people, most will forget all about it.

Finally, group 4 gets told that public opinion would not only remain negative, but that it will remain a salient issue for the next election:

A report on policy adoption in other jurisdictions finds that initial public resistance to *Fast finish* tends to have legs. Even when the policy successfully deals with the original problem, voters' opposition remains unchanged. A trusted pollster makes a similar argument noting that this is the sort of issue where moving voters is hard and is certain to be on the agenda in the coming election.

V2 manipulates both the direction and saliency of latent opinion. There are several expectations with this design that flow from our hypotheses. First, if respondents use current opinion to infer about future opinion, we would expect no difference in the policy recommendations of people in groups 1 (control) and 4 (negative-salient). Second, if they are responsive to the direction of latent opinion (H2), we may expect a significant negative difference between group 2 (positive), and the other groups (which are negative). Third, if they are responsive to latent issue attention (H3), there

should be a negative difference between group 3 (latent-non-salient), and groups 1 (control) and 4 (negative-salient). Lastly, we can tease out the implications for H4. If our instrumentalist model holds (H4A), we should expect no difference between groups 2 (positive) and 3 (negative-non-salient), but significant differences between each of those groups and the others. If directional opinion dominates, group 2 (positive) should stand alone in moving towards the good policy option.

The final vignette randomizes respondents into three groups. Group 1 is the control condition that is given the vignette along with information that current public opinion is ambivalent between both options for the Temporary Foreign Worker program. Group 2 gets additional information indicating that latent public opinion is likely to turn against the Temporary Foreign Worker program while the issue becomes salient for voters:

One of the opposition parties believes this to be an important issue for their electoral chances. They will try to frame TFW as outsiders who are taking jobs away from qualified Canadians. They have set up a website where citizens can share stories about jobs they've lost to TFWs. Your chief pollster and other advisors expect this may be effective in gaining media attention and making the issue a priority for the public. They expect the public to turn against the policy change as more attention is brought to the topic.

Group three receives information that public opinion will turn against the program, but that it ultimately would not be a major issue moving forward:

One of the opposition parties believes this to be an important issue for their electoral chances. They will try to frame TFW as outsiders who are taking jobs away from qualified Canadians. Your chief pollster and other advisors expect that the public will turn against the policy change as a result. However, they expect the issue won't have much traction in the media and is very unlikely to be on the public agenda next election.

In this study both the latent issue attention and directional opinion are manipulated. There should be a significant positive difference between group 1 (control) and the others if respondents are responsive to directional opinion (H2). We should also see a positive difference between group 2 (negative-salient), and both the control and group 3 (negative-non-salient) if our instrumentalist model prevails (H4A), while there should be no difference between the control and group 3 (negative-non-salient). If our normative model dominates (H4B), we would expect no difference between groups 2 (negative-salient) and 3 (negative non-salient), and a positive difference between each of them and the control.

The full experimental protocol was as follows. Survey respondents were first given questions on their political experience and background. This allowed us to remove those without policy advisory experience. They were then exposed to each vignette in turn (1 and 2 were randomized), and asked for their policy recommendation after each in vignette. After the experimental component of the survey, they were asked a number of questions on the role of public opinion in policymaking, the relative importance of current and latent opinion, and the information sources they use to learn about latent opinion, the results of which are presented below. Finally, respondents recommended

other potential survey participants and gave their personal information for survey incentive disbursement.³

Survey Results

Before describing the results of the vignette-based survey experiments, we highlight some interesting descriptive results from our unique survey of policy advisors. Survey respondents provided frank analysis on the role of public opinion in the policy process and the relative importance of current and latent opinion. They also provided new insights on how policymakers make estimates of this opinion. These will each be handled in turn.

Public Opinion and Policymaking

Policymakers are forced to make decisions based on a large number of factors, only some of which are related to public opinion. How did our respondents view the importance of current and latent opinion as an input into the policy process? Respondents were asked to rank a number of inputs into the policy process in their importance in public policy decision making. Table 2 presents the factors in order from most [1] to least important [12] along with their means and standard deviations. Respondents generally judged the compatibility of the policy with party principles and platform to be the most important factor [M=3.22], along with the position of key stakeholder groups [M=5.10]. Less important were the position of the opposition party [M=10.12], current opinion among swing voters [M=7.95], and the media [M=7.77]. Public opinion generally clustered around the middle along with the advice of experts and civil servants. Public opinion is important, but not a dominant concern.

Table 2 also presents pairwise correlations between political experience or ideology, and the ranking of each factor in its influence on policy. Experienced policy advisors are modestly more likely to rate latent public opinion as more important [$p < 0.1$], along with the support of swing voters [$p < 0.1$], while also rating experts and stakeholders as comparatively less important [$p < 0.05$]. Respondents to the ideological right are more likely to privilege the opinion of party supporters [$p < 0.05$], and latent opinion of swing voters [$p < 0.05$], at the expense of recommendations from experts [$p < 0.1$], civil servants [$p < 0.05$], responsiveness to the media [$p < 0.1$]. There appears to be broad placement of current and latent public opinion as an important, if modest influence on public policy.

The relative importance of public opinion in the policy process is also reflected in the answers provided by our respondents in the open-ended questions. For most of our respondents, public opinion was an important consideration in influencing policy, although there were a few that were adamant public opinion was secondary to concerns about good policy. As one respondent put it: “We always wanted to do what was right (based on expert and civil service opinion) and then we weighed in political consideration and public and stakeholder reaction next.” Moreover, the impact of public opinion, even for those who signaled it is important, is highly conditional on two factors.

³ Respondents were also asked three attention check questions related to the vignettes. Respondents were excluded from the experimental analysis if they failed all three.

Table 2. Ranking Factors in Policy Decisions

Rank	Input	Mean	SD	Experience	Ideology
1	Compatibility with party principles and platform	3.22	2.83		
2	Current positions of key stakeholder groups	5.10	2.65	-0.17**	
3	Recommendations for economists and experts	6.05	3.63	-0.20**	-0.14*
4	Your reading of how the general public will feel about the policy after it is in place	6.05	3.24	0.16*	
5	Current support/opposition among the general public	6.08	3.29		
6	Your reading of how your party's supporters will feel about the policy after it is in place	6.08	3.13		
7	Current support/opposition among your party's supporters	6.18	2.95		0.24**
8	Recommendations from civil servants	6.64	3.34		-0.31**
9	Your reading of how swing voters will feel about the policy after it is in place	6.76	3.22		0.18**
10	Trends in media coverage	7.77	2.99		-0.14*
11	Current support/opposition among swing voters	7.95	2.86	0.14*	
12	Position of main opposition party	10.12	2.54		

Note: Displayed correlations are significant at the 0.1 level or lower

First, the electoral context mattered to our sample of policymakers. One respondent remarked that “political policy making is vastly different [depending] upon where the government is at relative to the electoral cycle,” for example “decisions made in the first budget following an election are much more informed by ‘unpopular’ ideological concerns [than] those made in the last budget before an election.” Additionally, “a majority gov’t has much more flexibility than a minority and the factors at play in that situation are much more dependent upon opposition party opinions than those of other stakeholder groups.” A few also argued that battling on a losing issue early in a mandate, even one “that people will forget, or even agree with you in the future” does a fair amount of damage by “hurt[ing] the overall reputation of a government.” For this respondent, specific policy was less important because of the tendency of voters to “change their votes based on a general feeling of the government as opposed to specific policy actions.” Most, however, viewed government as less tethered to public opinion early in a mandate when political capital is high.

Second, respondents viewed public opinion as dynamic and open to being changed by both themselves and their opponents, albeit not always successfully. This, again, was seen to be conditional on a government being early in its mandate (i.e. having enough time to change peoples’ minds). It was also dependent on having the resources to be able to shape public opinion, which, as one respondent put it, is not very common: “The reality is an active government will face hundreds of these types of decisions a year. Given that leading/shaping public opinion is costlier and time

consuming (and riskier), usually governments have limited capacity for how many of these types of decisions can be taken on at one point in time.” Respondents indicated governments were more willing to commit these resources on high priority issues that speak to the brand of the party and its leader. It was also seen as more likely for governments to attempt to shape opinion if its benefits were easy to communicate, and if allied stakeholder groups were willing to assist the party in its own communications campaign. Ultimately, early in a mandate policymakers make a choice on any given major issue: do they lead or do they follow?

The data presented in Table 2 suggest that there is little distinction made between current and latent opinion. This is likely due to the question wording (i.e. not tapping into future public opinion at election time). As one respondent pointed out: “How people will feel about a policy in the future is less important than how they will feel during the next election.” Our other survey data therefore tells a sharply different story. Respondents were also asked the following on a 0-10 scale:

All policy decisions are complicated and involve many factors. Public opinion is only one and is often relatively minor. When it comes to public opinion, how important is opinion when you make a policy choice vs your predictions of how the public will feel about the choice when the next election occurs? [0=Public opinion when decision is made; 10=Expected public opinion during the next election]

Respondents reported that they considered expected opinion during the next election as substantially more important [M=6.92, SD=1.62]. Only 12% of the sample viewed current opinion as more important with 76% choosing a number from 6 to 8. Respondents were more or less unanimous on this point in their open-ended responses. Latent opinion was a dominant concern. As noted above, current public opinion was perceived to only matter close to an election. Latent opinion, for its part, only matters if it is activated in time for the election. This activation is not inevitable, nor does latent opinion have a static nature. Rather, it is a product of political contestation (or lack thereof) – as one respondent put it “Future polling numbers are an active choice, not passive.” Although at least one respondent hinted at a potential asymmetry where negative opinion at the outset is not liable to change, most suggested the critical task for most of a government’s mandate is anticipating the voters’ wants at the time of the election after both sides have implemented their communications strategies on respective issues.

Our respondents clearly had more interest in latent opinion than public opinion at the moment of a policy decision. But are they more concerned about the direction of public opinion or whether an issue is on the agenda of the voters? And, furthermore, does the direction of current public opinion moderate the relative importance of expected opinion direction and salience? Respondents were asked to imagine that their ministry was considering a change in policy, and to weigh the importance of these two features of public opinion. That is, they rated the importance of future direction and salience, on a 0-10 scale, given three different types of current opinion. When current opinion was either supportive of, or ambivalent to, the policy change, only 10 percent of the sample rated directional opinion as more important than the salience of an issue for voters. Policymakers appear modestly more attuned to the agenda of the public rather than in their opinion of policy.

Respondents also strongly suggested that anticipating the direction of public opinion was even less important in the context of low salience. One respondent pointed out that public opinion was only important in “policy decisions involving major, substantial issues,” and that in “the vast majority of policy development (80%) [that] involve[d] small, minor, targeted issues, broader public opinion ha[d] little bearing on how decisions [were] made.” Anticipating what issues would capture the public’s imagination is no easy task. As one respondent argued: “Predicting public interest in an issue is always the greatest challenge. Things like ending the long-form census seemed to not be that important, but became six month national issues. Similarly, policy matters like Temporary Foreign Workers, affected relatively few people but became national debates that shifted votes.” Anticipating issue attention is often times as challenging as anticipating the latent direction of public opinion come election time. Failing to anticipate either can be potentially damaging to the re-election prospects of a government.

Table 3. Importance of Segments of the Public in Policy Decisions

Rank	Input	Mean	SD	Experience	Ideology
1	People who consistently vote for the party [the base]	2.02	1.07		
2	People who occasionally vote for the party [swing voters]	2.70	1.25		
3	People who frequently vote in elections [the electorate]	2.73	1.27		
4	People who are active in the party [party activists]	3.30	1.14		0.16**
5	All people eligible to vote [the public]	4.24	1.29		-0.14*

Note: Displayed correlations are significant at the 0.1 level or lower

But, whose opinion and agenda, exactly, are policymakers interested in anticipating? We asked these policy advisors to rank which groups they believed to be most important in policy decisions: party activists, party supporters, swing voters, likely voters, or the broader public. The results are below in Table 3. Respondents ranked the party base as the most important factor [M=2.02], and the public [M=4.24], and (surprisingly) party activists [M=3.30] as the least important, while not distinguishing between likely and swing voters on average. This placement does not vary by experience, and only marginally does so by ideology. Conservatives are modestly more likely to rate activists higher and the public lower. Together with the findings above, they suggest a party’s base or voter coalition is perhaps the most important component of the public to which policymakers are responsive, but their influence is by no means dominant.

Respondents echoed this in the open-ended questions. One respondent remarked that “you had to have a strong idea of where your voter coalition was on a topic,” because “[e]ven if the national media was going to lose their mind and call you all sorts of names, if you knew that 40% of the Canadian population was solidly behind you....then you were bullet proof.” So, flying against public opinion only was worrying if “it flies counter to the general expectations of a party.” After all, “majorities are elected by only ~37% of the electorate, so general public opinion isn't a great

measure.” The emphasis on one’s voter coalition is a big reason why upholding platform commitments was seen as the most important policy input in Table 2. The major caveat was that most respondents found polling to be rarely segmented enough to draw conclusions about how their voter coalition responds to particular policies. Rather than rely mainly on polling, policy makers focused on the expected tangible effects of a policy to estimate reaction among their party’s coalition.

Estimating Latent Opinion

The most obvious shortcut policymakers can take to construct estimates of future opinion is by basing it on current opinion. In the face of uncertainty, current opinion can provide an important signal of what opinion will look like in the future, provided there is often some stability in public opinion. Respondents, for their part, believe that public opinion is often stable on issues. We asked how often current opinion reflects future opinion and only 29% of the sample reported that they believed public opinion changes on issues ‘more often than not’, and not a single respondent reported believing it changed ‘almost always’.⁴ This supports the assumption that policymakers perceive aggregate public opinion is relatively stable, which undergirds our inference hypothesis (H1). However, as noted above, most respondents believed it was possible for themselves and their opponents to shape public opinion, particularly when it is ill-formed. How do they estimate the public’s reaction to certain policies?

Respondents were asked to rank ten possible sources of information about future opinion, and were given the option to provide their own factor in the ranking.⁵ The results are shown in Table 4. The most important factor by far was perceived to be the fit between the policy and the party’s brand [M=3.38], followed by advice from stakeholder groups [M=4.42], party strategists [M=4.73], and comparisons with other jurisdictions [M=4.75]. Of less importance is the strength of opposition to the proposal in the legislature [M=7.22], and op-eds in the press [M=7.72]. Unsurprisingly, respondents did not view constituent correspondence as particularly important [M=6.33], but unexpectedly viewed the advice of pollsters as equally unimportant [M=6.66]. Pairwise correlations suggest that those with more political experience find brand a more important consideration [p<0.05], but are more skeptical on advice from stakeholder groups and strategists [p<0.1]. These correlations, however, are modest. Conservatives, for their part, are more skeptical of getting information on latent opinion from the media [p<0.1] or op-eds [p<0.05].

⁴ The three other response options were: ‘about half the time’, ‘less often than not’, and ‘almost never’.

⁵ The exact question wording is: “When making policy choices, current opinions polls may not detect how people will feel about a policy decision in the future. We are interested the types of information you might use to **anticipate future public opinion**. Please rank this factors from most to least important by clicking and dragging each label below.”

Table 4. Sources of Information on Latent Public Opinion

Rank	Information Source	Mean	SD	Experience	Ideology
1	The fit between the policy and your party leader's brand	3.38	2.55	0.23**	
2	Stakeholder group leaders' suggestions about future support	4.42	2.38	-0.14*	
3	Recommendations from people with substantial political experience	4.73	2.45	-0.13*	
4	Reports on public reactions in other jurisdictions that made similar policy choices	4.75	2.80		
5	The public's general mood when it comes to whether the government should generally be doing more or less	5.44	2.70		
6	Tone of media coverage while developing policy	5.55	2.66		-0.13*
7	Correspondence from constituents	6.33	2.73	-0.15*	0.18*
8	Polling experts claims about opinion in the future	6.66	2.94		
9	Strength of opposition to the proposal in the legislature	7.22	2.68		
10	Opinion editorials while developing policy	7.72	2.27		-0.17**

Note: Displayed correlations are significant at the 0.1 level or lower

Open-ended responses highlighted the critical importance of policy details in informing their estimates of latent opinion. Respondents expected the public to turn against policy that flew against the brand of the leader and his or her party, and to be able to build support for policies consistent with that brand – particularly among their voter coalition. Others made inferences from the costs and benefits of the policy, and its impact on their voter coalition, to latent opinion, which is missing from Table 4. This can occur in the policy design phase, as one respondent noted “policy people in political offices consider impact/benefits/costs of policies alongside public opinion research.” It is evident that our respondents felt that the particulars of a policy, especially the identity of winners and loser, provide considerable leverage in anticipating future public opinion.

Perhaps the next most important factor respondents noted was the importance of stakeholder groups. This naturally follows with our respondents' beliefs that public opinion can sometimes be shaped in the course of a political debate. For them, the ability of stakeholder groups to command media attention plays a critical role. This could work to the advantage of the government or against it depending on the impact of the policy on relevant stakeholders. Even still, a few respondents cautioned that the “quality of stakeholder groups vary immensely” with some pointing out that their tendency towards “stridency” was sometimes unhelpful in anticipating public reaction to policy.

Surprisingly, respondents were much more skeptical of the media and polling as information sources to estimate latent public opinion. Perceptions of the media varied substantially. Some saw

the media as critical in anticipating public reaction. As one respondent put it “The media is the message; bias in media, their interests, and their readership numbers impact policy more than people give credit,” because “[i]t's rare that the electorate is genuinely informed on the various aspects of public policy A majority of people get their information from online media found on Facebook and Twitter.” However, others saw the media as existing in a bubble disconnected with the voters policymakers care about. One respondent remarked that “that national media are a terrible barometer for public opinion,” because “[t]he limited number of parliamentary analysts are too 'inside the bubble' and come from a very narrow segment of educated, 'Liberal' and urban people.” Another noted that “The main challenge/focus was always to get a realistic read of what average, everyday Canadians felt about issues”, but that this was complicated by the fact that “[i]n most public policy debates that are front and centre, [those] dominating political debate and media coverage [or] the groups that are most prevalent are often off-side of the ‘silent majority.’”

Respondents were also deeply skeptical of the utility of polling for a number of reasons. Many pointed out polling was rarely available for most policy issues, particularly polling segmented enough to tap into the voters they were most concerned about, such as their supporting coalition. As one respondent noted “I can count on one hand the number of times I saw sensitive and insightful public opinion data. It is very closely-held, if it exists at all. Most (nearly all) decisions happen in a vacuum of public opinion data - the decisions rely on the political instincts of the decider.” Others were deeply skeptical of the entire enterprise, stating increased perceptions of polling unreliability. For example, one astute participant noted that “public opinion polling tends to promote an outcome of what people think they should say, rather than what they actually believe. For example, many people would say that we need to do more for climate change and even that people should pay for it. But when push comes to shove, no one actually wants to pay for it.” Others preferred different approaches to gauging latent opinion. For instance, one respondent argued that “focus groups were more revealing and helpful than polls in exploring an issue in depth, including exploring how people would feel in the future about different policies explained or presented in different ways.”

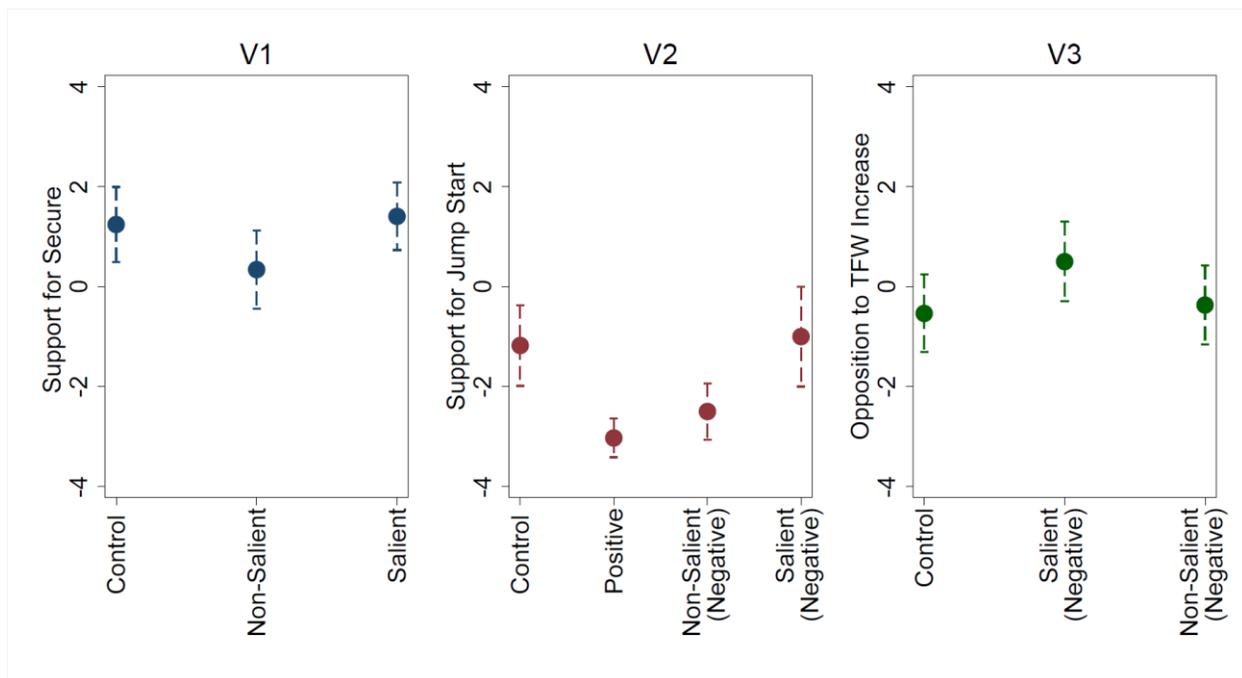
Experimental Results

The survey findings provide some suggestive evidence that policymakers are attuned to latent opinion (H2 and H3), and that perhaps concerns about public issue attention, or salience, dominate concerns about the direction of public opinion issues (H4A). Our experiments were designed to confirm the mechanism of responsiveness to latent issue attention and directional opinion at the micro-level in both mock and real policy areas with hypothetical vignettes.

The means of our policy recommendation variables in across treatment groups and experiments are presented in Figure 1. In each case the dependent variable is a nine-point scale ranging from ‘very strong’ support for the policy recommended by the public service to ‘very strong’ support for the second of two policy options. Table 5 summarizes our findings by listing our different hypotheses and the evidence obtained via the experiments. The results paint a clear picture in support of our hypotheses above.

Our first hypothesis suggests that policymakers, absent other information, use current opinion as means for estimating latent opinion. To test this claim we have two comparisons. In the first vignette, the control group the public opposes the public service's preferred response and a treatment group learns that experts predict the issue will remain high on the public agenda. The difference between these groups is fairly small, 1.24 vs 1.40, and not statistically significant [$p=0.39$, one-tailed]. Thus, learning that salience will remain high had very little impact on policy choices. For the second vignette, the control group again learned of opposition to bureaucrats' recommendation, and a treatment group had experts suggesting public opinion would remain the same. Again, policy choices are similar across these groups [$M1= -1.18$ vs $M4= -1.00$, $p=0.40$, one-tailed]. Specifying that latent opinion would be similar to current opinion had minimal to no impact compared to those simply informed of current opinion. We interpret these findings as evidence that, at least in some cases, policymakers will use current features of public opinion to infer the nature of future opinion.

Figure 1. Means Policy Recommendation across Vignettes and Conditions



Note: Confidence intervals at the 90 percent level

We also find support for the claim that expectations about how the public will feel about an issue in the future, latent directional opinion, affect policymakers' choices (H2). In V2, the mean policy recommendation was substantially closer to the public service's recommendation, and further away from current directional opinion, when respondents were told that the public is expected to come to support the policy in the future [$M2=-3.04$] compared to the others' conditions [$M=-1.63$]. This difference is statistically significant [$p=0.001$, one-tailed]. Similarly, in V3, comparing the control condition, where the public is ambivalent and salience is low, to the treatment groups who learned the public would come to oppose increasing Temporary Foreign Workers, is associated with

a shift toward latent directional opinion [$M1=-0.53$ vs $M2\&3=0.06$], though this is not quite significant [$p\sim 0.14$, one-tailed].

Table 5. Experimental Evidence for Conceptual Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Expectation	Reject Null?
Inference (H1)	No difference: Control and Negative-Salient (V1)	Yes
	No difference: Control and Negative-Salient (V2)	Yes
Latent Directional Opinion (H2)	Negative difference: Positive and others (V2)	Yes
	Positive difference: Control and others (V3)	No
Latent Issue Attention (H3)	Negative difference: Non-salient and others (V1)	Yes
	Negative difference: Negative-Non-Salient and Control/Negative-Salient (V2)	Yes
Instrumentalist (H4A)	No difference: Positive and Negative-Non-Salient (V2)	Yes
	Negative difference: Positive and Control/Negative-Salient (V2)	Yes
	Negative difference: Negative-Non-Salient and Control/Negative-Salient (V2)	Yes
	No difference: Control and Negative-Non-Salient (V3)	Yes
	Positive difference: Negative-Salient and Control (V3)	Yes
	Positive difference: Negative-Salient and Negative-Non-Salient (V3)	Yes
Delegate (H4B)	Negative difference: Positive and Negative-Non-Salient (V2)	No
	Negative difference: Positive and Control/Negative-Salient (V2)	Yes
	No difference: Negative-Non-Salient and Control/Negative-Salient (V2)	No
	Positive difference: Negative-Non-Salient and Control (V3)	Yes
	Positive difference: Negative-Salient and Control (V3)	Yes
	No difference: Negative-Salient and Negative-Non-Salient (V3)	Yes

There is even stronger evidence for responsiveness to latent salience. In V1, respondents were closer to the recommended policy position [$M2=0.34$] and farther from current public opinion when told the issue would fade on the public's agenda [$M1\&3=1.33$], a difference which is statistically significant [$p\sim 0.03$, one-tailed]. The same is true in V2. Respondents were more likely to deviate from current public opinion [$M3=-2.50$] when told the issue would fade from the voters' agenda compared to the other negative public opinion conditions [$M1\&4=-1.10$], a difference which is strongly significant [$p\sim 0.005$, one-tailed]. Latent public opinion matters for our respondents. They were responsive to both anticipated direction and salience.

Finally, our results support the notion that latent saliency is a more important consideration for policymakers than latent directional opinion in some cases. Table 6 below presents estimates from

ordinary least squares (OLS). The first column displays the results for V2. It shows that both the positive and negative non-salient conditions are significantly different from the other conditions where current/latent opinion was negative and salient. [$p < 0.01$]. However, there is no significant difference between the effect of positive latent directional opinion, and negative opinion that is low in salience [$p \sim 0.28$, two-tailed]. The effect of reduced salience was nearly as effective in influencing our respondents as information that the public would come to support the policy in the future. The conditioning role of salience is also evident in V3. There is little difference in Temporary Foreign Worker policy choices between the control condition, where opinion is ambivalent and salience is low, and the negative-non-salient condition. That is, learning that the public would come to oppose an increase in TFW will low issue attention had little impact on policy choices. When told the public would come to oppose a TFW increase and the issue would be salient, however, we see a 1.04 point shift toward latent opinion. [$p \sim 0.06$, one-tailed]. The difference between the negative-non-salient and negative-salient condition is similar in size at -0.87 [$p \sim 0.10$, one-tailed]. The TFW study results thus suggest the impact of a directional change between current and latent opinion is conditional on latent salience being high. Taken together, these two studies demonstrate that anticipated negative public opinion only matters when it is salient, and anticipated positive opinion is just as effective as believing the public will lose interest in an issue despite remaining opposed to government policy.

Table 6. OLS Estimates, H4

	V2	V3
Positive	-1.85*** (0.50)	
Negative-Non-Salient	-1.32*** (0.50)	0.17 0.66
Negative-Salient		1.04* (0.66)
Control/Negative-Salience	-1.18***	
Control		-0.54
R2	0.14	0.02
N	117	117

Standard errors in parentheses, * < 0.10 , ** < 0.05 , *** < 0.01 , one-tailed

Discussion

Accounting for latent opinion is crucial for scholars who are interested in public opinion as an input into the policy process. Studying this is no easy task. The effects of current and latent opinion need to be disentangled, along with the direction and salience of that opinion. There are only observable implications of responsiveness to latency when it departs from both policymaker preferences and current public opinion. For this reason, we followed a growing trend of surveying elites and exposing them to embedded experimental manipulation.

Our unique sample of former federal and provincial policy advisors in Canada provided revealing insights on the role of current and latent public opinion in the policy process. Respondents clearly found public opinion to be of considerable importance in the formation of their policy decisions. However, current public attitudes towards policy was not seen as significant unless it was on a highly-charged issue at election time. For the rest of a government's mandate, respondents felt that policymakers had to make a choice to lead the public or follow it – both of which require an estimate about how the public will feel about the policy or the government after the cut and thrust of political debate. This concern, however, was seen as conditional on issue attention. Respondents did not feel that public opinion was an important factor in areas of low issue attention, which comprise the majority of policy issues. Anticipating the public's agenda around the next election, however, was seen to be fraught with difficulty. Our respondents appeared to derive their estimates about latent opinion and issue attention primarily from expected policy impacts, stakeholder positions, and the fit between the policy and the leader's brand. In short, our elite sample of policy advisors revealed nuanced and complex judgments on the role of public opinion in policymaking and political strategy.

That theory policymakers might be responsive to latent directional opinion on policy or issue attention was further bolstered with novel experimental manipulations. Our results show compelling evidence that responsiveness to latency extends beyond legislators to their partisan advisors across both simulated and real policy issues. Our respondents adjusted their policy recommendations in response to the latent direction and salience of public opinion (H2 and H3). It also appeared that responsiveness to directional opinion was conditional on policy preferences and issue attention. Providing information to our respondents that latent opinion towards a policy was positive moved respondents in the direction of that opinion, and towards the clear "good policy" option. However, this effect was almost the same as informing them that the public would come to oppose this option but that issue salience would be low. These results were consistent in our third vignette using a real policy issue. Respondents were unmoved by latent negative opinion from the control condition (ambivalent current opinion) if issue attention was low, but it was a different matter entirely when issue attention was high. These results are consistent with an instrumentalist model of policymaking where decision makers simultaneously maximize their own policy preferences and the need for re-election. They seem to not depart from their policy preferences in response to latent opinion if they think they can get away with it (i.e. when salience is low).

There are important limitations to this experimental design. For one, two of the three vignettes were fictional. We cannot make confident assertions about how strong these effects would be in real world situations. However, the similarity of the effect sizes across both fake and real policy issues gives us comfort that we are indeed tapping into the mechanism of responsiveness to latent opinion. For another, we could not hope to put all our respondents through every possible combination of current opinion, latent directional opinion, and latent salience with our sample size to test all the implications of an instrumentalist model of responsiveness. We also designed these experiments without fully knowing what sort of information staffers and politicians use to estimate latent opinion. This could have dampened the power of our treatments. For example, featured in our manipulation was information from a "trusted pollster", but it seems from our descriptive survey

responses that our respondents do not typically make use of this information. It would also seem to be essential to address the policy decision's location in the electoral cycle in the vignettes and the ability of the government to move public opinion in its direction. Insights from our respondents can be used to design more compelling experimental vignettes in the future.

The issue of latent opinion is an important one that deserves far more scholarly attention that it currently receives. Future work could make use of elite-based survey experiments to further establish the mechanism of responsiveness to latent directional opinion and salience. Scholars need not be confined to the study of presidents, or indeed even politicians. This approach can extend the study of latent opinion beyond the United States and into other contexts as we have done here. It can also help answer related questions that deserve exploration. For example, how accurate, exactly, are policymaker estimates of latent directional opinion and issue attention?

The policy advisors who participated in this study emphasized the importance of context in understanding how public opinion influences policy. We couldn't agree more. Rather than measuring simple correlations between polling data and policy outcomes, future research needs to do a better job studying public opinion in the context of how policy is actually made. Surveying elites can provide the means by which this is accomplished. Only then can we fully develop the research program V.O. Key and John Zaller laid out.

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Appendix

Vignette 1 (V1) – Aspire v. Secure

A ministry in your government is faced with choosing a policy to address a highly charged political issue. Here is the information you have at hand:

- There are two main policy approaches. Public servants have given each a clever acronym: ‘SECURE’ is a slight policy change that’s close to the status quo, but is expected to make some minor improvements on policy. ‘ASPIRE’ represents a more fundamental change to policy. The current status quo is not viable.
- The opposition party's main message has been criticizing the government for inaction. They have yet to take a clear position on both *Aspire* and *Secure*.
- Despite their general inclination toward incremental policy change, public servants in this case believe *Aspire* is superior to *Secure*. They agree the changes in *Secure* are a step in the right direction, but not enough to make policy sustainable. The issue would have to be revisited in the future.
- Major allied interest groups and think tanks are not strongly invested in the policy area and but generally prefer *Aspire*. Groups representing citizens most directly affected by the policy strongly support *Aspire*. But these groups represent a tiny segment of the population.
- Polls find strong opposition to *Aspire*. Currently around 72% oppose *Aspire*, while only 16% support it (12% undecided). Opposition to *Secure* is more muted with 29% against and 35% supportive.
- The issue has gotten a lot of attention recently in the press both in news coverage, op-eds, talk radio, and social media. In a recent poll, 73% of the public say they have heard about the issue, versus only 14% who have not.

Vignette 2 (V2) – Fast Finish v. Jump Start

A ministry in your government is faced with creating policies to address an emerging issue. The legislative session will end soon and the ministry must introduce and pass a bill in a short time period. Here is the information you have at hand:

- There are two main policy approaches: They've been nicknamed "*Jump start*" and "*Fast finish*". Maintaining current policy is much worse than either option since failing to act will cause a number of significant problems in the very near future.
- Think tanks and opinion leaders associated with your party say *Fast finish* represents the best course of action. They note the policy is most consistent with your party's governing philosophy and leader's brand.
- The opposition party has criticized the government for inaction and argues that no matter what the government decides, they've acted too late. The opposition has agreed that both policy options are viable but seem to be following the public by pushing for *Jump start*.
- Public servants in the ministry agree that both options are viable but that *Fast finish* is ultimately superior as it is more cost efficient and will save around \$90 million. They note that both approaches have been tried and succeeded in other jurisdictions.
- Since there are unexpected and significant challenges in this policy area the issue is well covered by the media at the moment. Current coverage emphasizes government inaction.
- Polls indicate a clear public preference for *Jump start*. Head to head, 68% prefer *Jump* with 15% choosing *Fast* (17% undecided). When asked about the policies in isolation, 60% oppose *Fast* and 12% oppose *Jump*.

Vignette 3 (V3) – Temporary Foreign Workers

Imagine you are providing policy advice to the Minister of Immigration. You are faced with making a choice on a policy regarding temporary foreign workers. Here is the information you have at your disposal:

- There are two main policy approaches that are on the table: 1) increase the number of temporary foreign workers 2) maintain the status quo.
- Public servants in the ministry are strongly in favour of increasing the number of temporary foreign workers to deal with increasing labour shortages in some sectors.
- Opposition parties are split on the question. One party favours the increase in temporary foreign workers, and the other party opposes it.
- Interest groups are mixed in their support of the increase in temporary foreign workers. Businesses are strongly in favour, but organized labour is opposed.
- To date, the issue has not attracted any meaningful media attention.
- Polling data finds the public is ambivalent towards the foreign worker increase with 36% opposed, 25% support, and 39% undecided. The issue is not top of mind at present only 18% regard this issue as important or very important to their vote choice, while 74% say it is not very important. Only 10% say that they have read a lot about the issue, versus 90% who say they have not.