

Question: The main actors in the policy process are politicians, voters, bureaucrats and interest groups. Contrast the role, motivations and constraints of TWO of these actors. In democracies, which actor's preferences are most likely to be translated into public policies? Be sure to include examples in your answer.

Main Actors in Policy Making

In modern democratic systems, policymaking's main actors include politicians, voters, bureaucrats, and interest groups. In the U.S., while policies should ideally reflect the preferences of the voters, more often, powerful interest groups play a major role in policymaking, resulting in their preferences being reflected more often. Due to their common interests, organizational structure, and resources, interest groups can overcome the collective action problem voters face to influence policy at a greater capacity than voters. Using the framework of biased pluralism, we can see the disproportional impact of interest groups on the policy outcomes in the U.S. (Gilens, 2014). Historical trends reveal that policy generally does not reflect voters' preferences and more often reflects interest groups, with average voters having only a small influence (Gilens, 2014). This paper examines how voter constraints, particularly collective action problems, contribute to interest groups having disproportionate power, using gun control and abortion rights in the U.S. as examples.

Voters' Role and Motivations

Voters' role in the democratic policymaking process is to select representatives who will enact policies that reflect their preferences. Their motivation is influenced by policies that affect and are perceived to affect their daily life, causes they care about, and what may affect them in the future (Gilens, 2014). However, voters face significant constraints that affect their ability to influence policy outcomes successfully. Voter constraints can be categorized into three areas: state and institutions systemic structures, knowledge, and collective action.

Voters' Constraints

A substantial constraint for voters is the structures of the state and its institutions. If the voters are unable to have their voices heard, or if their representatives do not have effective power, voters' preferences will not be followed. The structure of the state will determine if voters are

fully represented. Without representation, voters' preferences can be disregarded in the policymaking process (Boix, 2019). Majoritarian state systems have higher accountability for representatives but often sacrifice proportional representation. While proportional systems gain representation at the cost of less accountability and a higher potential for chaos, due to the increased number of decision-makers (Manin, 1999). Additionally, not all democracies ensure equal access to the ballot. Before Brazil instituted electronic ballots, the less educated found it difficult to vote, effectively disenfranchising them. Instituting electronic ballots helped them less educated vote, leading higher representation for the less educated. This led to policies that better reflected their preferences, such as increased funding for education and healthcare (Schneider, 2020).

Additionally, voters are largely constrained by information asymmetry. Voters inherently have less information about policymaking, and the motivations of their representatives than the representatives themselves. This may lead to voters being unable to select representatives who will reflect their preferences (Gilens, 2014). When selecting representation, voters generally view voting through a mandate view or an accountability view (Manin, 1999). Understanding this, representatives who have more information about the policymaking process can strategically manipulate their message to match the narrative of a mandate referendum or an accountability referendum. Closer to elections, representatives often use a mandate view to propose short-term policies like tax cuts or subsidies to boost their approval ratings, even if these policies will be detrimental to voters in the long-term (Manin, 1999). During the 2024 U.S. election, a large percentage of voters wanted lower prices on everyday essentials and to bring back high-paying manufacturing jobs to the U.S. Donald Trump's promise to enact protectionist tariffs was viewed by many voters as a solution that would bring down prices and bring jobs back to the U.S., despite the consensus of economists saying otherwise (Kim, 2024).

Despite their potential power as a large voting bloc, voters are significantly constrained by a lack of collective action. Individually, a voter does not hold a lot of power (Olson, 1965). When voting as a block, however, voters hold a large amount of power to influence policy. While their

power is large, their organization is naturally extremely low leading to the collective action problem (Gilens, 2014).

Policies that regulate or benefit a specific group are collective goods that require collective action to influence. However, as group size increases, the incentive for group action declines, creating a free-rider problem within the collective action problem (Olson, 1965). Voters are the largest group among the main actors in the policy process, making them the most affected by the free-rider problem. In many democracies, there are few to no mechanisms for mandating voters to work towards their policy goals. The free-rider problem exists due to three factors. The benefits of policies are diffuse, the benefits are shared, and there is a coordination problem amongst a large group. The diffuse or shared nature of the benefits of a policy benefiting voters means many people benefit only minutely or in ways equal to everyone else, effectively eliminating any advantage. Voters often do not see the effort needed to influence policy as being worth the small benefit they receive from new policies, disincentivizing them from acting. While they hold a lot of power due to their size, large groups cannot easily coordinate with each other (Olson, 1965). Coercion or selective incentives can be used to mitigate the free-rider problem in a large group. However, voters would need coordination in the first place to enact these tools. Voters end up organizing into interest groups such as the AARP, unions, or non-profits to overcome the free-rider problem (Gilens, 2014).

Interest Groups' Role and Motivation

Interest groups' role in the policymaking process is to consolidate the power and organize the efforts of people with common interests. Because interest groups are made up of fewer people than voters, they inherently have an easier time organizing their efforts to overcome the free-rider problem (Olson, 1965). Interest groups use their organizational ability to lobby, finance specific campaigns, write policies, and influence voters. Their ability to organize gives them a large amount of influence (Gilens, 2014). Interest groups' motivation to influence policy is to align policy to reflect the interests of their members (Olson, 1965). Typically, these interests are either economic or ideological (Sunstein, 1985).

Interest Groups' Constraints

Interest groups can be constrained by a breakdown in their organization, if their power is challenged by other interest groups, public opinion becomes so strong voters overcome their collective action problem, or by the structure of the state the interest group is working in.

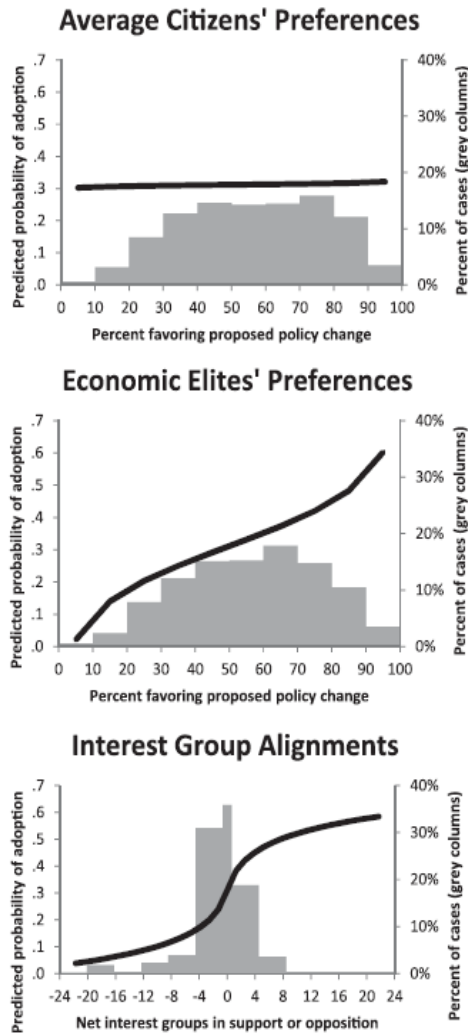
Interest groups are constrained by their size, resources, and organization strength, compared to other interest groups. Politicians supported by the interest group with a larger membership base, more resources, and more organization are more likely to win (Anzia, 2011).

Interest groups can also be constrained by public opinion in cases in which public opinion is extremely strong. For instance, in areas where homeownership is high, homeowners become a large group of voters with similar needs. They tend to vote for the same policies without the need of the organization of a formal interest group. Because of this, it is hard for interest groups to overcome the power of that block of voters (Anzia, 2011).

As interest groups become larger, however, their members are more likely to have differing interests causing internal conflict and a breakdown in their organizational effectiveness. For example, the members of a labor union all benefit from higher wages, but only some members benefit from a bonus based on time at the company, causing a rift among the members (Olson, 1965).

The structure of the state can have a lot of influence on the effectiveness of interest groups. More centralized states have fewer representatives to persuade, making it easier for an interest group to influence policy. A more decentralized state can put a constraint on interest groups by requiring them to persuade more representatives. Agricultural policy in the U.S. tends to remain unstable, reflecting the preferences of different interest groups, due to the diffuse power of policymakers over agricultural policy. Because many representatives oversee agricultural policy, many interest groups gain access to these representatives. It is very difficult for one interest group to persuade all policymakers overseeing agricultural policy. This creates a system with more representation but more chaos (Sheingate, 2000).

Figure 1
Predicted probability of policy adoption (dark lines, left axes) by policy disposition; the distribution of preferences (gray columns, right axes)



(Gilens, 2014)

Why Interest Groups Often Prevail over Voters

Evidence shows that policy outcomes often favor interest groups, particularly interest groups that are well-funded or have a large membership base such as business-oriented groups (Gilens, 2014). Using the U.S. as an example, Gilens and Page show when controlling for the impact of the average citizen, interest groups have an outsized influence on policy outcomes (Gilens, 2014). Their findings support the Biased Pluralism theory over the Majoritarian Pluralism theory (Gilens, 2014). In Figure 1, Gilens and Page show that, in the U.S., when support among interest groups is strongly in favor of a policy, the probability of it passing is 0.47, and if they strongly oppose a policy there is only a .16 probability of passage. Figure 1, also shows that the percentage of average citizens who support a policy has a minuscule impact on the probability of passage (Figure 1).

Overall, this data shows that when using empirical methods to directly compare Majoritarian Electoral Democracy theory and Biased Pluralism theory together, the median voter theory fails to hold up. The average American's preferences are rarely represented if they do not match up to those of the economic elite or interest groups (Gilens, 2014).

Examples of Policy Favoring Interest Groups over Voters

Gun Control in the U.S.

The effectiveness of interest groups can particularly be seen when looking at gun control in the U.S. Even though, 60% of Americans support stricter gun control, donations from gun rights groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), significantly increase a representative's likelihood of opposing gun control policies (Richards, 2017). The probability of a representative

sponsoring a gun rights bill rises above the average probability when a gun rights group donates the small amount of \$10,000 or more (Figure 3). Gun control legislation continues to be stalled throughout the U.S., even as voter support for it rises (Gilens, 2012).

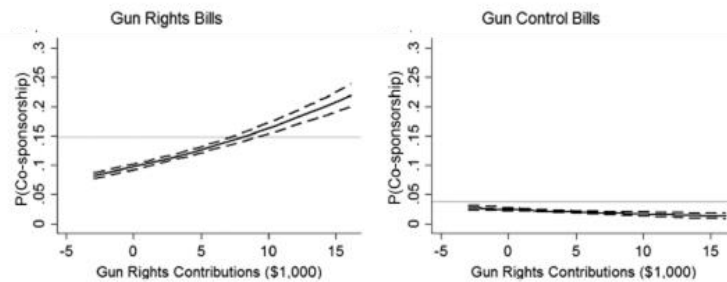
Figure 2

	Gun Control Bills				Gun Rights Bills			
	(1)	(2)	(MFX)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(MFX)	(6)
GOP legislator	-0.845** (0.087)	-0.820** (0.098)	-0.024** (0.003)	-0.829** (0.104)	1.087** (0.052)	0.942** (0.055)	0.102** (0.006)	1.418** (0.072)
District ideology	-0.287** (0.022)	-0.017 (0.033)	-0.004 (0.009)	-0.036 (0.035)	0.244** (0.018)	0.130** (0.020)	0.111** (0.017)	0.203** (0.027)
Percentage of hunters in district		-8.627** (0.811)	-0.080** (0.008)	-9.233** (0.862)		4.268** (0.346)	0.223** (0.020)	6.735** (0.462)
Gun control contribution (\$1,000)		0.178** (0.043)	0.096** (0.037)	0.278** (0.046)		-0.306* (0.134)	-0.136** (0.017)	-0.439** (0.158)
Gun rights contribution (\$1,000) ^a		-0.039** (0.012)	-0.021** (0.006)	-0.061** (0.013)		0.060** (0.004)	0.146** (0.011)	0.100** (0.006)
Midwest	0.151 (0.092)	-0.045 (0.094)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.036 (0.100)	-0.624** (0.050)	-0.697** (0.052)	-0.072** (0.005)	-1.141** (0.069)
Northeast	0.776** (0.073)	0.595** (0.075)	0.023** (0.003)	0.683** (0.080)	-0.834** (0.064)	-0.792** (0.065)	-0.077** (0.005)	-1.281** (0.082)
West	0.278** (0.080)	-0.069 (0.085)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.093 (0.090)	-0.463** (0.050)	-0.377** (0.053)	-0.041** (0.005)	-0.604** (0.069)
Constant	-3.976** (0.094)	-2.056** (0.191)		-3.076** (0.462)	-1.731** (0.064)	-2.711** (0.101)		-0.586** (0.178)
Bill fixed effects	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Observations	38,880	0.103		37627	25215	24655		24655
Pseudo R ²	0.086	38061		0.283	0.101	0.122		0.474

(Richards, 2017)

Figure 3

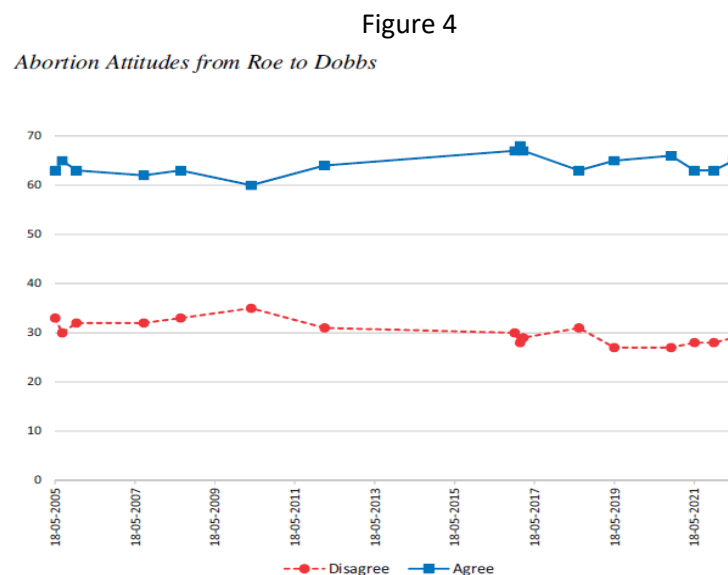
Predicted Probabilities of Co-Sponsorship



(Richards, 2017)

Abortion in the U.S.

Another prominent example of interest groups shaping American policy is the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Conservative groups such as American United for Life (AUL) and the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) worked for decades to roll back reproductive rights through slow incremental change that took about 50 years. Rather than fighting for an all-out ban, these groups created the path for the overturning of Roe v. Wade by lobbying for state-level abortion restrictions (Ackefors, 2023). This level of highly sophisticated coordination over decades is only possible through well-organized interest groups. Most Americans support access to abortion in certain circumstances (Norrander, 2023). Figure 4 shows the approval rating of Roe v. Wade in the U.S. remained steady between 60% and 70% from 2005 through 2021 (Figure 4). Only 34% of Americans supported the overturning of Roe v. Wade when it was overturned (Norrander, 2023). Throughout the U.S., anti-abortion policies are more common in states with republican representatives. The success of the anti-abortion movement has been attributed to long-term investments made by interest groups in the republican party (Ackefors, 2023).



(Norrander, 2023)

Conclusion

Policy outcomes in modern democracies around the world show a heavy imbalance in the power of interest groups over voters, particularly in the U.S. The empirical evidence shows that interest groups have an unequal impact on policy outcomes over the average voter. This advantage is mainly due to their ability to overcome the collective action issue faced by voters. Interest groups' organizational capacity weakens the ability of voters to be represented (Gilens, 2014). The concentrated power of groups such as the NRA (Richards, 2017) and the anti-abortion groups has shaped policy in America, straying far from the preferences of the average voter (Racsko, 2022). The overwhelming power of interest groups emphasizes the lack of representation of the average voter in the U.S. political system.

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Essay: PP478E Political Science and Public Policy November 2024

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