Expectations for Policy Change and Participation

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Abstract   What policy changes do people expect from elections, and how do these expectations influence the decision to vote? This paper seeks to understand the relationship between people's expectations and their subsequent voting behavior by examining beliefs about what candidates would actually do if given political power. I start with a survey of political scientists and compare their forecasts about what presidential candidates will accomplish to those of the general population. Public respondents expected much more legislation to result from the 2020 election. This comparison suggests an underestimation by the public of the impediments that the separation of powers poses to passing legislation. The study further reveals that voters expected much more policy change than nonvoters did, with high expectations serving as a strong predictor of validated voter turnout. These results support explanations for the decision to vote that center on the policy benefits that people believe their preferred candidate will deliver.

Introduction

What policy changes do people expect to result from elections, and how do those forecasts affect political behavior? Much attention has been paid to people's retrospective consideration of past government performance (Healy and Malhotra 2013). Other work considers people's beliefs about future economic growth (Kuklinski and West 1981; Lacy and Christenson 2017). Less attention, however, has been paid to the policy changes people expect from elections. But this is a critical issue because beliefs about how candidates' policy preferences differ and how likely they are to enact these preferences

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in law together constitute what Downs calls the expected party differential (EPD) (Downs 1957). Recent work focuses on beliefs about candidates' policy positions while leaving aside the probability of policy implementation (Bram 2023). But to engage in prospective issue voting, citizens must form expectations about how likely candidates are to enact the policies they support (Grofman 1985). This paper attempts to measure those beliefs and link them to the decision to vote.

One reason why people might have especially high expectations is the difficulty of thinking through the effects of checks and balances inherent to American political institutions. For example, past work takes the separation of powers as a key "element of the difference between what candidates announce and what they are likely to do" (Lacy and Paolino 1998, p. 1181). I start by comparing the expectations of general population respondents to an identical survey of expert researchers. I find that public respondents are relatively inattentive to the separation of powers—they expect much more legislation to pass than political scientists. On average, members of the public draw less of a distinction between policies that presidents can quickly implement through executive action and those more persistent changes that require legislation.

If people do not fully consider the roadblocks to changing policies in a democracy, then their expectations for candidates, and thus their expected party differentials, will be higher than they might be if they understood these systemic checks on policy change. And if expected party differentials are important for the decision to vote, then inflated expectations should increase participation. Using validated voter records, I find that high expectations for policy change predict voter turnout better than well-established correlates, including education, political knowledge, partisan strength, and political interest. These results remind us that a potential voter "cannot merely compare platforms; instead he must estimate in his own mind what the parties would actually do were they in power" (Downs 1957, p. 39).

Research Design

To figure out what policy changes people expect, I report results from an original web survey conducted by YouGov of a quota sample of 1,000 Americans drawn from a large national opt-in panel conducted between September 29 and November 2, 2020, as part of the Congressional Elections Study (CES). To test whether those expectations are especially high, I compare the general population results to a substantively identical expert survey of 305 political scientists from ten doctoral-granting institutions conducted

between October 29 and November 3, 2020.[1] This sample was generated by web scraping the ten selected US-based departments.

The surveys asked respondents to estimate the probability of eight policy changes occurring—such as the federal minimum wage rising to $15—if either Democrats or Republicans were to win the presidency in the upcoming 2020 election. For each of the eight issues, respondents were asked, "What is the percentage chance that each of the following will happen if [Donald Trump/Joe Biden] wins the 2020 presidential election?" I chose these issues for their political importance at the time and to vary which candidate favored the policy and whether the enactment would unambiguously require executive action or legislation. Each candidate favored four of the eight issues; among those four, two require legislation, while a president can accomplish the other two through executive action (Table 1).[2]

Respondents reported their beliefs for the eight issues for both Trump and Biden separately. I focus on the difference between candidates for each issue. So, if a respondent believed that there was a 5 percent chance that the minimum wage would rise to $15 under a hypothetical second term of the Trump administration, but a 30 percent chance that this would happen under Biden, then his or her expected differential for what these candidates will do if elected on this issue is 25 percent. When averaged, these questions intend to capture people's beliefs about the policy changes that the election of one president brings relative to his or her opponent. I take that average difference as a respondent's *expected policy gap* for the election.

The measure that I use, which asks people to consider the chance that presidents implement specific policy goals, necessarily leaves out people's beliefs about issues beyond the eight studied, in addition to beliefs about the extent of possible policy change within each of those eight issues. For example, a voter may passionately believe that a living wage in America is no less than $30 an hour, and think that a $15 per hour minimum wage, supported by Biden, may be better than nothing, but not much better. To the extent that

1. See Supplementary Material section 2.1 for full survey instruments and for more information about sample composition (Supplementary Material section 1.1). In the main text of the paper, I report results from only the 98 participants who claimed to specialize in American politics. The full sample results are consistent and are available in Supplementary Material section 3. Institutions were selected based on departmental rankings. Neither study used any deception, and respondents completed an informed consent form before participation. Duke University's Institutional Review Board approved the expert survey on October 14, 2020, and approved the CES survey on September 9, 2020. These surveys did not provide respondents with any information and thus were unlikely to influence voting behavior. Funding for the CES module was provided by Duke University.

2. Biden was more favorable toward increasing the minimum wage, Medicare for All coverage, increasing admittance of refugees, and a ban on the transfer of military equipment to police. Trump was more favorable toward banning third-trimester abortions, allowing organized prayer in schools, building a border wall with Mexico, and withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord.

Table 1. "What is the percentage chance that each of the following will happen if [Donald Trump/Joe Biden] wins the 2020 presidential election?"

Issue	Federal law?
A federal ban on 3rd-trimester abortions	X
A federal law that allows for organized prayer in public schools	X
More than 50 additional miles of the border wall with Mexico are completed	
The United States completes its withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord	
The federal minimum wage rises to at least $15 per hour	X
The federal government implements Medicare for All	X
The United States offers protected status to increasing numbers of refugees	
A ban on the transfer of military equipment to police	

people are especially concerned with high-impact but very low-probability outcomes (or issues beyond the eight studied), these data may underestimate the importance of people's beliefs about policy change to political involvement.

In addition to leaving aside beliefs about the extent of policy change, these questions ask people if they think there is any chance that winning candidates will implement their opponents' preferred policies. Of course this is extremely unlikely; polarization incentivizes political elites to appeal to their most ideological constituents (Merrill et al. 2022). But given that the response options were percentages, people were free to report 0 percent for any of the 16 questions. Respondents may have believed that it was impossible, for example, that more refugees would be granted protected status if Trump were to be elected. If so, then the measured policy gap for that issue would simply reflect their beliefs about the likelihood Biden would implement that policy if elected.

This approach serves two objectives. First, I explore an avenue that prior research suggests will contribute to overestimated expectations—failure to differentiate between policies that are easier or harder to implement. The included policy issues are divided into those that require legislation and those that can be implemented through executive orders. Notably, less than 10 percent of proposed bills have reached a vote in the U.S. Congress since 1974 (GovTrack). In parallel, the use of the presidential executive order has expanded (American Presidency Project). Changes made through legislation are likely more impactful and more enduring. While there is no way to prove that the general population is overestimating the consequences of elections, their opinions can be benchmarked against those of expert researchers. Because researchers who focus on American politics are most likely to consider the distinction between these two types of policy change, I compare

their opinions to those of the public. If people do not differentiate between policy changes enacted into law and those proclaimed through executive orders, then they are likely to overestimate the policy consequences of presidential elections.

The second objective was to speak to the Downsian expected party differential. To that end, I focus on beliefs about the differential effect of electing a Republican or Democratic president on policy outcomes—in other words, on people's marginal expectations. In addition to not knowing which party would win the presidency, there was considerable uncertainty about control of Congress. Uncertainty about the outcome of other elections is itself relevant for what people think the effect of the presidential election is. That uncertainty, and especially the possibility of a Democratic president facing a Republican Congress (or vice versa), should reduce people's expectations for what presidential candidates can achieve if elected. These surveys intend to capture beliefs integrating (or not) all uncertainties surrounding elections. One way to assess if people adjust their expectations based on these unknown contingencies is to compare the opinions of those experts most likely to integrate uncertainty about control of Congress into their forecasts with those of the general population.

What People Expect Politicians to Do

Table 2 compares the average expert and general population expected policy gap for each issue, and includes overall averages. I find that American politics researchers reported about a 13 percentage point lower legislation-specific differential than public respondents. On the other hand, experts reported about a 6 percentage point higher executive order-specific differential than CES respondents. The right column reports *p*-values for t-tests of the difference between American politics researchers and responses from the general population, both for each issue and for overall averages.

Public respondents have high expectations for winning candidates. For example, the average respondent thought there was a 59 percent chance that Biden would pass federal legislation implementing Medicare for All (compared to 31 percent in the expert sample). Because people thought Biden would be so effective at passing this law, CES respondents reported a 45 percent differential between Biden and Trump on that issue (American politics researchers believed there was a 22 percent differential). These comparisons suggest that people are failing to consider the checks and balances that prevent presidents from implementing all of their agenda, and that failure contributes to high expectations for policy change.

Table 2. Expected policy gaps for each issue and the overall averages. This table compares American politics researchers' and CES respondents' reported marginal expectations for each issue. This table also compares policies that require federal legislation with those that a winning candidate could accomplish through executive action.

Potential policy change	CES differential (Standard error)	Expert differential (Standard error)	Difference [T-test *p*-value]
Federal abortion ban	45% (1.03)	32% (2.75)	−13% [$p < .01$]
Federal prayer in schools	43% (0.99)	23% (2.36)	−20% [$p < .01$]
Federal $15 minimum wage	43% (0.93)	48% (2.35)	5% [$p < .01$]
Federal Medicare for All	45% (1.00)	22% (2.06)	−23% [$p < .01$]
Federal law change average:	44% (0.01)	31% (1.53)	−13% [$p < .01$]
Complete Paris deal withdrawal	59% (1.13)	78% (2.32)	19% [$p < .01$]
More than 50 additional miles of the border wall	55% (1.07)	52% (2.75)	−3% [$p < .01$]
Increasing numbers refugees	51% (0.95)	64% (2.53)	13% [$p < .01$]
Ban military to police transfers	41% (1.01)	39% (2.38)	−2% [$p < .47$]
Executive action average:	52% (0.01)	58% (1.54)	6% [$p < .01$]
Overall average:	48% (0.01)	45% (1.25)	−3% [$p < .01$]

High Expectations and Turnout

Expectations matter for people deciding whether to vote or to stay home. If someone participates entirely because they feel that it is their duty, or because of their identity as a partisan, then that person will vote even if they do not expect any policy change to result from the election. But if people would stay home if they believed that different politicians would produce nearly identical policies, then high expectations should increase participation (Butler 2009). These beliefs about the expected policy gap can motivate voters even if people understand that one vote will not change the outcome. As Brian Barry writes, perceiving high stakes can mitigate free riding: "Even an infinitesimal chance of preventing a nuclear holocaust makes it worth incurring some cost to vote" (Barry 1978, p. 39).

In turn, I examine the relationship between people's beliefs about what presidential candidates will deliver and real-world behavior. This analysis follows a long line of research on the motivations for turnout, and especially the consequences of indifference or alienation (Merrill et al. 2023).[3] In a

3. See Adams et al. (2006), Yoo (2010), and Weisberg and Grofman (1981).
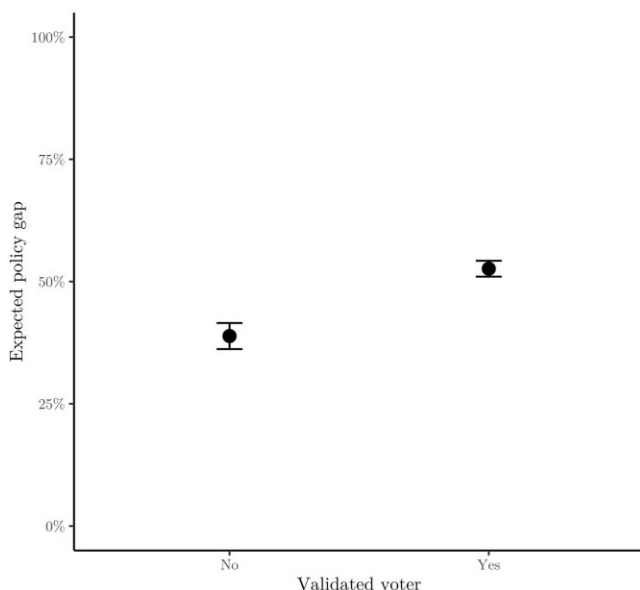
Figure 1. Average expected policy gap for voters and non-voters with 95 percent confidence intervals around each mean. The difference is statistically significant with $p < .01$.

simple comparison, those confirmed to have voted (using voter files) reported an average expected policy gap of 53 percentage points. That is 14 percentage points higher than the 39 percentage points reported by those who abstained; the difference is statistically significant. Figure 1 shows this graphically. The larger the perceived difference in the expected policy gap people report, the more likely they are to have voted.[4]

But both participation and expectations may be endogenous to other variables, raising the possibility that expectations have little independent causal role. To account for that, I include a wide range of control variables, which can mitigate (but not completely address) this issue (Figure 2). The model on which the figure is based includes, in addition to the key construct of the expected policy gap: partisan strength, ideology, political interest, political knowledge, education, past voting behavior, self-identified race, self-reported income, age, gender, marital status, employment status, homeownership, and union membership.

4. Fully 95 percent of the sample claimed to have voted, with only 65 percent confirmed to have done so.
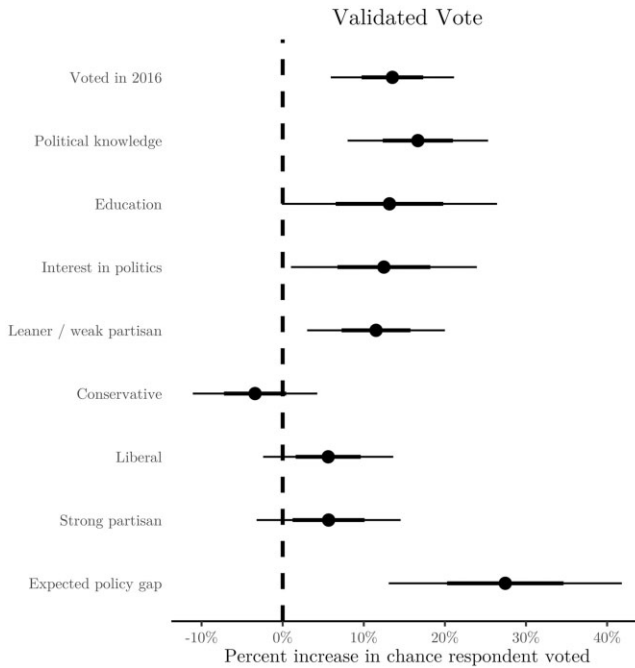
Figure 2. Independent variables for education, political knowledge, and political interest are scaled from 0 to 1. Whether someone identifies as a strong or weak partisan, or as a liberal or conservative, is represented by indicator variables. The expected policy gap is the average of the absolute value of the difference in reported likelihood of policy achievement across all eight issues. Variables included in the model but not in this figure are: race, income, age, gender, marital status, homeownership, and union membership. See Supplementary Material section 4.1 for regression tables corresponding to this figure. Because all independent variables are scaled from 0 to 1, coefficients can be interpreted as percentage point increases in the chance the respondent voted, and these estimates are for the difference between the minimum and maximum value of each independent variable.

Decades of research on the decision to participate in politics motivate the inclusion of these controls.[5] Two of the most powerful studied predictors of participation are political interest and education (Persson 2015; Prior 2018; Lindgren et al. 2019). Some go further, arguing that "if scholars could use only one variable to predict voting … it would be the level of education"

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5. See the Supplementary Material for details on measurement of each variable (Supplementary Material section 2.2) and regression tables (Supplementary Material sections 4.1–4.3).

(Willeck and Mendelberg 2022, p. 90).[6] Additionally, knowledge of politics strongly predicts turnout (Keeter and Carpini 1996, p. 226). Marital status (Plutzer and McBurnett 1991) and homeownership (Hall and Yoder 2022) are also potentially important political cleavages that may motivate participation. Finally, membership in social groups like unions is linked to the decision to vote (Powell 1986).

I also include whether someone claimed to have voted in 2016 because past participation powerfully predicts current turnout (Green and Shachar 2000; Aldrich et al. 2010). When all controls are scaled from 0 to 1 to allow for comparisons across variables, the coefficient for the expected policy gap is larger than all of these tested variables except for age.[7] This implies an especially large role for expectations about policy change. In Supplementary Material section 4.4, I also include regression results using state-level fixed effects to control for contextual-level factors that may intervene in the decision to turn out. Results are consistent whether including these fixed effects, omitting the CES-provided weights used in the main analysis, replacing validated voter turnout with self-reported voting, and when breaking out partisan identification into Democrats and Republicans.

One important caveat is that these data do not include a measure of political efficacy—the belief that government officials are responsive to citizen demands (Ulbig 2008; Chamberlain 2012).[8] External efficacy could cause a spurious correlation between higher differential expectations and higher turnout. I conducted a sensitivity analysis to test the strength of confounding needed to overturn the statistically significant relationship between the expected policy gap and turnout (Cinelli and Hazlett 2020). That analysis compares effects of a hypothetical confounder to the measured effect of age (moving from the youngest person in the sample to the oldest), which I chose because out of all control variables used in the analysis, only age had a stronger association with turnout than the core construct of the expected policy gap. The result is that the effect of efficacy or another unmeasured confounder on turnout would have to be more than twice as large as that of age (while still including all other measured controls in the model) to account for all of the observed association between expectations and voting.

While there is no way to rule out such large effects, efficacy correlates with many of the control variables included in this model (Craig et al. 1990).

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6. Education is also linked to understanding of, and respect for, the separation of powers (Cheruvu 2022).

7. Estimates are for the difference between the minimum and maximum value of each independent variable. The coefficient for age is 0.41, which I omit from Figure 2 to focus on more substantive variables. All tests are two-tailed, and the full results are available in Supplementary Material section 4.1. The adjusted r-squared of the model is .28.

8. These survey items also do not allow for weighting of issues based on subjective importance to the individual survey respondents.

Furthermore, increasing age and efficacy have been measured to have similar effects on the decision to turn out (Karp and Banducci 2008, p. 328). Even if a hypothetical confounder predicts 2020 turnout three times better than 2016 turnout does, that unmeasured variable would still not overturn the significant relationship between the expected policy gap and voting (Supplementary Material section 4.5).

Conclusion

This article studies people's expectations for policy change and links those beliefs to political participation. I find that members of the public expected more change to result from the 2020 election than researchers in American politics. Public respondents also drew less of a distinction between those policies that a president can enact unilaterally and those that require legislation. Most importantly, high expectations predicted validated voter turnout better than well-studied correlates of participation.

Two limitations of this study motivate further work. First, these findings result from a single election. While many voters think that each successive election is among the most important they have ever experienced (Bram 2023), it is possible that people believed that 2020 was uniquely important and that belief may have contributed to unusually high expectations for the candidates. Second, despite the inclusion of a wide range of control variables, there is no way to rule out the possibility that high expectations for policy outcomes result from unmeasured confounders. Future work will benefit from untangling the causal foundations of these beliefs while incorporating policy expectations as a motivating factor in the decision to vote.

Examining policy expectations also produces implications for the study of partisan politics in America. The Supplementary Material includes additional analysis of the observable characteristics that predict high expectations. One striking finding is that Republicans in the general population may have expected Biden to enact more policy change upon winning than Democrats or independents did. These results suggest that if Democrats had the same expectations as Republicans, then Democratic-leaning voters would turn out at higher rates than they currently do, a potentially pivotal change in competitive elections.

More generally, if voters want more change than politicians can reasonably deliver, then those unmet expectations may lead to disillusionment with political institutions (Levi 2019, p. 368). Extreme forecasts for the policy consequences of winning or losing elections may even motivate more extreme political action. Many Americans are willing to sacrifice democratic principles for policy gains (Graham and Svolik 2020). If those policy gains or losses are overestimated, then people may act to undermine democratic

institutions out of unjustified hopes or fears. Finally, debate continues over whether partisan animosity results from identity- or policy-based motivations (Orr and Huber 2019; Dias and Lelkes 2022; Algara and Zur 2023). The data in this paper cannot untangle the link between identity and policy, but are consistent with the importance of policy-based motivations for political involvement. Future work should incorporate differential policy expectations alongside classic measures of political engagement.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary Material may be found in the online version of this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfad047.

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Data Availability

Replication data and documentation are available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WCYLKU.

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