Summary
Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens
by Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page in Cambridge Journals

Definitions of four families of theoretical traditions in the study of American politics:

Majoritarian Electoral Democracy where the set of actors is the Average Citizen or “median voter”. This theory attributes U.S. government policies chiefly to the collective will of average citizens, who are seen as empowered by democratic elections.

Economic-Elite Domination where the set of actors is the Economic Elites. This theory attributes U.S. government policies chiefly to individuals who have substantial economic resources, i.e., high levels of income or wealth – including, but not limited to, ownership of business firms.

Majoritarian Pluralism is a type of special interest-group pluralism in which the interests of all citizens (set of actors is Mass-Based) are more or less equally represented. Madison argued in Federalist Paper 10 that struggles among the diverse factions that would be found in an extensive republic would lead to policies more or less representative of the needs and interests of the citizenry as a whole.

Biased Pluralism is a type of special interest-group pluralism in which corporations, business associations, and professional groups predominate (set of actors is Business-oriented Interest Groups that includes the finance industry). Theories of biased pluralism generally argue that both the thrust of interest-group conflict and the public policies that result tend to tilt toward the wishes of corporations and business and professional associations.

In their discussion of special interest-group pluralism (majoritarian and biased pluralism), they write:

As to empirical evidence concerning interest groups, it is well established that organized groups regularly lobby and fraternize with public officials, move through revolving doors between public and private employment, provide self-serving information to officials, draft legislation, and spend a great deal of money on election campaigns. Moreover, in harmony with theories of biased pluralism, the evidence clearly indicates that most interest groups and lobbyists represent business firms or professionals. Relatively few represent the poor or even the economic interests of ordinary workers, particularly now that the U.S. labor movement has become so weak.

Introduction:
Who governs? Who really rules? To what extent is the broad body of U.S. citizens sovereign, semi-sovereign, or largely powerless? What is the influence of each of these groups on U.S. policy making? These are the questions that Gilens (at Princeton University) and Page (at Northwestern University).

Testing Theoretical Predictions
The authors used a unique data set compiled over many years (by Gilens) for a different but related purpose: for estimating the influence upon public policy of “affluent” citizens, poor citizens, and those in the middle of the income distribution. Gilens gathered data on a large, diverse set of policy cases: 1,779 instances between 1981 and 2002 in which a national survey of the general public asked a favor/oppose question about a proposed policy change. The income categories of the respondents were defined as the 10th income percentile (quite poor), the 5th income percentile (median income and proxy for Majoritarian Electoral Democracy), and the 19th percentile (fairly affluent and proxy for the Economic-Elite). In order to measure
interest-group preferences, the authors used a modified list reported in Fortune magazines “Power 25” lists of “powerful” interest groups that favored a given policy change, minus the number that opposed it.

**Influence upon Policy of Average Citizens, Economic Elites, and Interest Groups.**

It is important to note that even if one of the predictor variables is found (when controlling for the others) to have no independent impact on policy at all, it does not follow that the actors whose preferences are reflected by that variable—average citizens, economic elites, or organized interest groups of one sort or another—always “lose” in policy decisions. Policy-making is not necessarily a zero-sum game among these actors. When one set of factors wins, others may win as well, if their preferences are positively correlated with each other.

It turns out, in fact, that the preferences of average citizens are positively and fairly highly correlated, across issues, with the preferences of economic elites. But net interest-group stands are not substantially correlated with the preferences of average citizens. Whatever the reasons, all mass-based groups taken together simply do not add up, in aggregate, to good representatives of the citizenry as a whole. Business-oriented groups do even worse, with a modest negative over-all correlation. Additionally, they did not find an association between the preferences of economic elites and the alignments of either mass-based or business-oriented groups.

**Summary of findings**

Each of these theories makes different predictions about the independent influence upon U.S. policy making by these four sets of actors. The central point that emerges from their research is that economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence. Our results provide substantial support for theories of Economic-Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism.

**What do these findings say about democracy in America?** They certainly constitute troubling news for advocates of “populistic” democracy, who want governments to respond primarily or exclusively to the policy preferences of their citizens. In the United States, these findings indicate, the majority does not rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the U.S. political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it.

**The authors powerful conclusion:**

Despite the seemingly strong empirical support in previous studies for theories of majoritarian democracy, our analyses suggest that majorities of the American public actually have little influence over the policies our government adopts. Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance, such as regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and a widespread (if still contested) franchise. But we believe that, if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America’s claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened.
Predicted probability of policy adoption (dark lines, left axes) by policy disposition; the distribution of preferences (gray columns, right axes)*

Clearly, when one holds constant net interest-group alignments and the preferences of affluent Americans, it makes very little difference what the general public thinks. The probability of policy change is nearly the same (around 0.3) whether a tiny minority or a large majority of average citizens favor a proposed policy change.

By contrast—again with other actors held constant—a proposed policy change with low support among economically-elite Americans (one out of five in favor) is adopted only about 18 percent of the time, while a proposed change with high support (four out of five in favor) is adopted about 45 percent of the time.

When support for policy change is low among interest groups (with five groups strongly opposed and none in favor) the probability of that policy change occurring is only 0.16, but the probability rises to 0.47 when interest groups are strongly favorable.

When both interest groups and affluent Americans oppose a policy it has an even lower likelihood of being adopted; whereas, high levels of support among both increases the probability of policy adoption.

*A helpful way to assess the relative influence of each set of actors is to compare how the predicted probability of policy change alters when moving from one point to another on their distributions of policy dispositions, while holding other actors’ preferences constant at their neutral points.
Separating **mass-based** from **business** interest groups influence leads to the following:

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<th>Table 4</th>
<th>The separate policy impact of business-oriented and mass-based interest groups</th>
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<td>Average citizens’ preferences</td>
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<td>Economic elites’ preferences</td>
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Note: All predictors are scaled to range from 0 to 1. The dependent variable is the policy outcome, coded 1 if the proposed policy change took place within four years of the survey date and 0 if it did not. Predictors are the logits of the imputed percent of respondents at the fiftieth (“average citizens”) or ninetieth (“economic elites”) income percentile that favor the proposed policy change, and the Net Interest-Group Alignment Indices described in the text. Standard errors are asymptotically distribution-free, and all analyses reflect estimated measurement error in the predictors, as described in Appendix 2. N=1,779.

Clearly the predictions of **Biased Pluralism** theories (business-oriented interest groups) fare substantially better than those of **Majoritarian Pluralism** theories (interests of all citizens – mass-based – taken together). The influence coefficients for both mass-based and business-oriented interest groups are positive and highly significant statistically, but the coefficient for business groups is nearly twice as large as that for the mass groups.

It is not the case that a host of diverse, broadly based interest groups take policy stand – and bring about actual policies – that reflect what the general public wants. Interest groups as a whole do not seek the same policies as average citizens do.

Table 4 also confirms their earlier findings about economic elites and median voters. When the alignments of business-oriented and mass-based interest groups are included separately in a **multivariate** model, average citizens’ preferences continue to have essentially zero estimated impact upon policy change, while economic elites are still estimated to have a very large, positive, independent impact.