Expectations for policy change and participation

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Abstract

What policy changes do people expect from elections, and how do those expectations influence the decision to vote? This paper examines voters’ beliefs about what candidates would actually do if given political power. I first find that public respondents likely underestimate the impediments that the separation of power poses to policy change. Just before the 2020 election, these general population respondents expected much more legislation than political scientists completing an identical survey. Second, among the general public, there was a 16 percentage point difference between voters and non-voters in expectations for policy change resulting from the election. Most importantly, these high expectations predicted validated voter turnout better than education, identifying as a Democrat or as a Republican (as well as partisan strength and ideology), having voted in 2016, and political interest. These results support explanations for the decision to turnout which center on the benefits, whether individual or social, 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? If partisans want more change than politicians can reasonably deliver, then those unmet expectations may lead to disillusionment with political institutions (Levi, 2019, 368). Moreover, extreme forecasts for the policy consequences of winning or losing elections may motivate more extreme political action. Many Americans are willing to sacrifice democratic principles for policy gains (Graham & Svolik, 2020). If those policy gains or losses are overestimated, then people may act to undermine democratic institutions out of unjustified hopes or fears.

Much attention has been paid to people’s retrospective consideration of past government performance (Healy & Malhotra, 2013). Other work considers people’s beliefs about future economic growth (Kuklinski & West, 1981; Lacy & Christenson, 2017). Less attention, however, has been paid to what 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 in law together constitute what Downs calls the expected party differential (EPD) (Downs, 1957). To engage in prospective issue voting, citizens must form expectations about how likely candidates are to enact the policies they support. This paper attempts to measure those beliefs and link them to the decision to turnout.

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 & Paolino, 1998, p. 1,181). 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, public respondents draw less of a distinction between policies that presidents can quickly implement through executive action and those more persistent changes that require
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 roadblocks to policy change. If expected party differentials are important for the decision to turnout 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 survey of 1,000 Americans conducted shortly before the 2020 election as part of the Congressional Elections Study (CES). To test whether those expectations are especially high, I compare the general population results to an identical expert survey of 305 political scientists from ten doctoral-granting institutions, also run just before the 2020 election. Of course, there is no way to determine with certainty that the general population is overestimating the consequences of elections, but their opinions can be benchmarked to those of these expert researchers.

The surveys asked respondents to estimate the percentage chance that eight policy changes (such as the federal minimum wage rising to $15) happen given Democrats or Republicans win the presidency in the upcoming 2020 election. For each of the eight issues

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1In 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 the Appendix (3).

2REDACTED University’s Institutional Review Board approved the expert survey on October 14, 2020 and approved the CES survey on September 9, 2020. Neither study used any deception and respondents completed an informed consent form before participation. These surveys did not provide respondents with any information and thus were unlikely to influence voting behavior. See the Appendix (2.1) for full survey instruments and for more information about sample composition (1.1).
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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 the four issues favored by each candidate two require legislation while a president can accomplish the others through executive action.

Table 1: “What is the percentage chance that each of the following will happen if [Donald Trump / Joe Biden] wins the 2020 Presidential Election?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue respondents saw</th>
<th>Law?</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A federal ban on 3rd trimester abortions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A federal law that allows for organized prayer in public schools</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 50 additional miles of the border wall with Mexico are completed</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United States completes its withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord</td>
<td></td>
<td>Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal minimum wage rises to at least $15 per hour</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Biden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal government implements Medicare for All</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Biden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United States offers protected status to increasing numbers of refugees</td>
<td></td>
<td>Biden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ban on the transfer of military equipment to police</td>
<td></td>
<td>Biden</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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% chance that the minimum wage would rise to $15 under a hypothetical second term of the Trump administration, but a 30% chance that this would happen under Biden, then their expected differential for what these candidates will actually do if elected on this issue is 25%. The average difference between a respondent’s expectations for the issues represents that persons belief about the differential effect of electing Biden or Trump across all eight policies. I treat that average expected differential as an individual’s expected policy gap between the candidates.

It is very unlikely that winning candidates would ever implement their opponents policies. But given that these questions are about percentages, people are free to put 0% for any of the 16 questions. Respondents may have reasonably believed that it was near impossible,
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for example, that more refugees would be granted protected status if Trump were to be elected. If so, then the measured policy differential would simply reflect their beliefs about the likelihood Biden would implement that policy if elected.

This approach was motivated by three goals. First, because this paper attempts to speak to the Downsian expected party differential, I focus on beliefs about the differential effect of electing a Republican or Democratic president on policy outcomes. The measure that I use, which asks people to consider the chance that presidents implement binary 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 people are especially concerned with high impact but very low-probability outcomes, then these data may underestimate the importance of people’s beliefs about policy change for explaining participation.

The second goal was to develop an understanding of people’s marginal expectations. That is, the survey instruments intended to capture people’s beliefs about the changes that the election of one president brings relative to his or her opponent, accounting for all other political contingencies. 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 election is. That uncertainty, and especially the possibility of a Democrat president facing a Republican Congress (or vice-versa), should reduce people’s expectations for what presidential candidates can achieve if elected. This survey intends to capture beliefs integrating (or not) all uncertainties surrounding elections.

One way to learn about whether people do adjust their expectations for those unknown political 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.
To that end, the final goal of this design is to explore one avenue that past work suggests may contribute to overestimated expectations – failure to differentiate between policies that are more and less difficult to change. The included policy issues are divided into those that require legislation and those that can be implemented through executive orders. Less than 10% of proposed bills have received a vote in the U.S. Congress since 1974 (GovTrack). In parallel the use of the presidential executive order has expanded (American Presidency Project). Legislative changes are likely more meaningful and more likely to be permanent; if people do not differentiate between these two types of political change, then people are likely to overestimate the policy consequences of presidential elections.

What people expect politicians to do

Table 2 compares the average expert and general population policy gaps for each issue, as well as the overall expected policy gap. 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 5 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 the general population responses for each issue and overall.

Public respondents have high expectations for winning candidates. For example, the average respondent thought that there was a 59% chance that Biden would pass federal legislation implementing Medicare for All (compared to just 31% in the expert sample). Because people thought Biden would be so effective at passing this law, CES respondents reported a 45% differential between Biden and Trump on that issue (American politics researchers believed there was just a 22% 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 may contribute to high expectations for policy change.
Table 2: Shows expected policy gaps for each issue and overall. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential policy change</th>
<th>CES differential (Standard error)</th>
<th>Expert differential (Standard error)</th>
<th>Difference [T-test p-value]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law vs. executive action</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal abortion ban</td>
<td>45% (1.03)</td>
<td>32% (2.75)</td>
<td>-13% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal prayer in schools</td>
<td>43% (0.99)</td>
<td>23% (2.36)</td>
<td>-20% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal $15 minimum wage</td>
<td>43% (0.93)</td>
<td>48% (2.35)</td>
<td>5% [p = 0.049]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Medicare for All</td>
<td>45% (1.00)</td>
<td>22% (2.06)</td>
<td>-23% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal law change average:</td>
<td>44% (0.01)</td>
<td>31% (1.53)</td>
<td>-13% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Paris deal withdrawal</td>
<td>59% (1.13)</td>
<td>78% (2.32)</td>
<td>19% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=50 additional miles of border wall</td>
<td>55% (1.07)</td>
<td>52% (2.75)</td>
<td>-3% [p = 0.260]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing numbers refugees</td>
<td>51% (0.95)</td>
<td>64% (2.53)</td>
<td>13% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban military to police transfers</td>
<td>41% (1.01)</td>
<td>39% (2.38)</td>
<td>-2% [p = 0.469]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive action average:</td>
<td>52% (0.01)</td>
<td>58% (1.54)</td>
<td>6% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall average:</td>
<td>48% (0.01)</td>
<td>45% (1.25)</td>
<td>-3% [p = 0.00]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**High expectations and turnout**

High expectations matter for people deciding whether to vote or stay home. If someone participates entirely because they feel 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. 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, 39).

In turn, I examine the relationship between people’s beliefs about what presidential candidates will deliver and real-world behavior. In a simple comparison, those confirmed to have voted reported a median expected policy gap of 53%. That number is 16 percentage points higher than the 36% reported by those who abstained; the difference is statistically

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3These beliefs about high stakes motivate turnout (Stokes & Aytaç, 2019).
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significant. Figure 1 shows this graphically. The larger the perceived difference in expected policy outcomes people report, the more likely people were to have voted.\textsuperscript{4}

Figure 1: Shows the average expected policy gap for voters and non-voters. The figure also includes 95% confidence intervals around each mean. The difference is statistically significant with \( p = 0.00 \).

\footnote{Fully 95\% of the sample claimed to have voted, with only 65\% confirmed to have done so.}
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 may 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, home ownership, and union membership.

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 (Prior, 2018; Persson, 2015; 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” (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022, 90).\(^6\) Additionally, knowledge of politics strongly predicts turnout (Keeter & Carpini, 1996, 226).\(^7\) Marital status (Plutzer & McBurnett, 1991) and homeownership (Hall & Yoder, 2022) are also potentially important political cleavages that may motivate participation. Finally, social groups, including unions, are linked to the decision to participate (Powell, 1986).\(^8\)

I also include whether someone claimed to have voted in 2016 because lagged turnout powerfully predicts current turnout (Green & Schachar, 2000; Aldrich et al., 2010).\(^9\) 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.\(^10\) That the coefficient for the expected policy gap is larger than that of identifying as a partisan or going from the lowest to the highest level of education implies an especially large role for

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\(^5\)See the Appendix for details on measurement of each variable (2.2) and regression tables (4.1 - 4.3).

\(^6\)The typically observed effect of education may be a result of other, prior factors (Kam & Palmer, 2015).

\(^7\)Differences in the distribution of knowledge across national and local politics may have implications for who researchers treat as knowledgeable (Shaker, 2012).

\(^8\)However, focusing on a single category of organization that represents interests may limit the scope of this control variable (Schlozman & Jones, 2013, p. 102).

\(^9\)Even those who are randomly induced to vote in one election are more likely to vote in the next election (Gerber et al., 2003).

\(^10\)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.
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expectations about policy change.\textsuperscript{11} In the Appendix (4.4) I also include regression results using state-level fixed effects to control for any contextual-level factors that may intervene in the decision to turnout. Results are consistent whether including these fixed effects, using weights, replacing validated voter turnout with self-reported voting, and when breaking out partisanship into Democrats and Republicans.

\textsuperscript{11}All tests are two-tailed, and the full results with exact p-values are available in Appendix 4.1. The adjusted r-squared of the model is 0.28.
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 (and as a liberal or conservative) are indicator variables, and the omitted category represents independents (moderates). The expected policy gap is the average of the absolute value of the difference in reported likelihood of policy achievement across all 8 issues. Control variables included in the model but not in this figure are: race, income, age, gender, marital status, home ownership, and union membership. See the Appendix (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.
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) (Chamberlain, 2012; Ulbig, 2008).\footnote{12} 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 & 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 undermine the link 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). Furthermore, increasing age and efficacy have been measured to have similar effects on the decision to turnout (Karp & Banducci, 2008, 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 (Appendix 4.5).

**Conclusion**

This article studies people’s expectations for policy change resulting from elections. I find that members of the public expected more policy change to result from the 2020 election than American politics researchers. Public respondents also drew less of a distinction between those changes 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 most voters think that each successive election is among the most important they have ever experienced, 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 expectations while incorporating policy expectations as a key motivating factor in the decision to vote.

Examining policy expectations also produces implications for the study of partisan politics in America. The Appendix includes additional data on the observable characteristics that predict high expectations. One striking finding is that strong / leaning Republicans in the general population expected about 8% more change from either candidate winning than independents or weak Democrats. In other words, Republicans 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 turnout at higher rates than they currently do, a potentially pivotal change in competitive elections. Furthermore, debate continues over whether partisan animosity results from identity- or policy-based motivations (Orr & Huber, 2019). 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.

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\[^{13}\text{See: Bram (2023) for work on the causes of overestimates of differences between the candidates and consequences for turnout and polarization.}\]
References


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