Rationality & Deliberation

Lecture 6

Citizen rule and citizens

- If democracy quality = citizen rule, then a lot depends on citizens

- What do citizens want?

- Do they want anything?

- Are their preferences stable?

- Are their preferences reasonable?

- Can they be manipulated?

- Can they be improved?

1. The Bad News
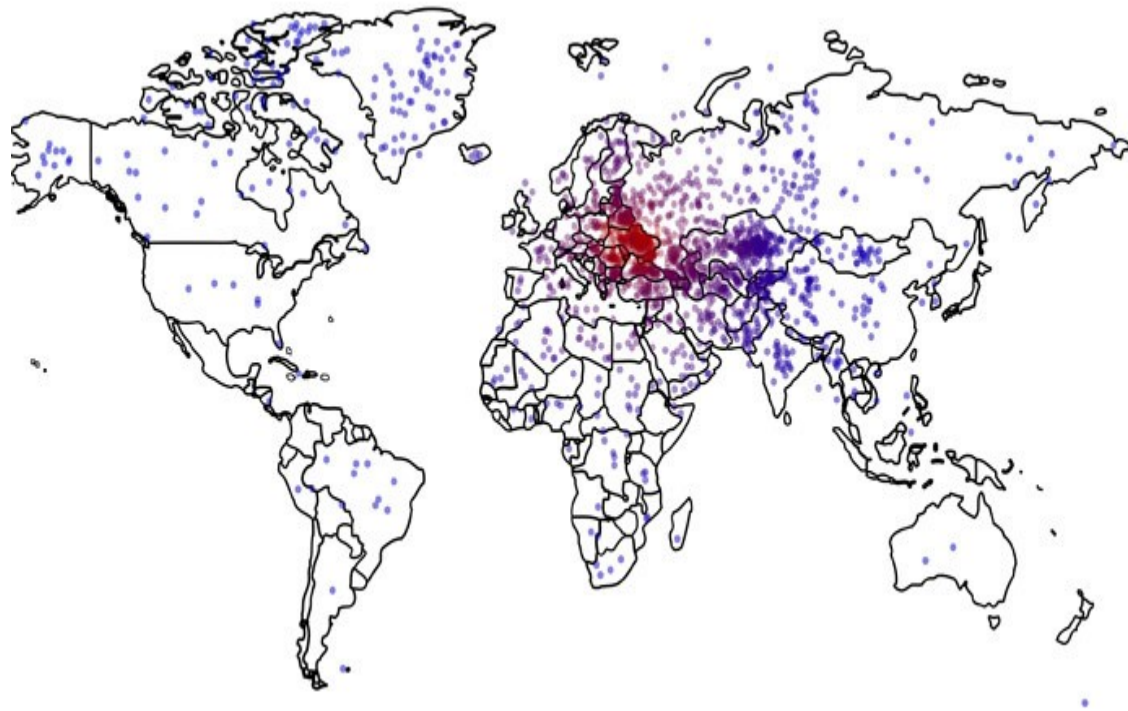
Rational ignorance

- Large costs to becoming informed about politics
  - Reading newspapers and magazines
  - Studying expert opinion
  - Attending meetings
- Few benefits to being well-informed
  - Respect of peers?
  - Ability to influence elections? Policy?

Public has very little knowledge of basic facts

- Institutions and processes
- People and players in politics
  - People know PM/President, but not much else
- Domestic and foreign politics
- General political knowledge

Where is Ukraine?

- Only 16% locate correctly
- Those who don't know where it is are more likely to support military intervention

A summary of research on knowledge in US

- Average American is poorly informed but not uninformed
  - About 50% correct on one test of 16 questions
- Levels of political knowledge relatively stable over last 50 years
- Americans slightly less informed about politics than citizens of other nations
- Average levels of knowledge mask important differences between groups
- Knowledge is tied to many aspects of good citizenship
  - More tolerance, more participation, more stable views

2. The will of the people

Does will of the people exist?

- Individual level beliefs not very stable
  - Little correlation over time
- Most people are not very ideological
  - Individual beliefs don't cohere very well
- Most people do not have strong political opinions
- Most people take cues from parties and political leaders
  - Adopt positions favored by preferred parties/politicians

Will of people depends on institutions

- Will of people looks different under majoritarian and proportional institutions
- Will of people looks different if presidential versus parliamentary, unicameral versus bicameral

Problems in assessing the will of the people

- Strong biases due to friends, colleagues, neighborhood, media
  - 1998: "I don't know anyone who approves of Clinton"
  - 2006: "I don't know anyone who approves of Bush"
- Very hard to make accurate estimates
  - Old method of public opinion: size and enthusiasm of crowds
- We tend to think we know more than we do

Monica Lewinsky's contribution to political science

- Clinton's approval ratings go up after scandal
- How is this possible?
  - People usually don't think about president
  - Scandal causes them to think more about his accomplishments
  - They distinguish his personal life from politics
  - They realize that he does a good job as president
- A revised view
  - Media and elites not so powerful
  - People influenced by fundamentals (eg, economy)

SPECIAL REPORT

TIME

Monica and Bill
THE SORDID TALE THAT IMPERILS THE PRESIDENT

Monica Lewinsky next to
President Clinton at a White
House lawn party the day after
the November 1996 election

3. Good news

Heuristics - shortcuts

- Are there easy ways to learn about politics?
- Authority: what do others you respect think
  - Endorsements of politicians, newspapers
- Party or ideology

- On-line processing
  - Keep a running tally in your head for each party
    - Positive information = +1 for party
    - Negative information = -1 for party
  - All you need to remember is total, not each piece of information

Condorcet's jury theorem

- If each voter has independent p>50% of choosing right policy (eg, 51%) and we use majority rule…
- Then, probability of picking right policy => 100% as number of voters increases
  - Actually increases very quickly: with 10,000 voters and p=51%, close to 100%
- But
  - Is p of being right >50%?
  - Are all voters independent of each other?

Wisdom of crowds

- Groups can produce better predictions than individuals
  - Eg, How much I weigh? How many jellybeans?
- But only certain kinds of groups
  - Opinions are independent
  - Group is diverse
  - Decentralization: People can specialize and draw on local knowledge
  - Some means of aggregating individual views
- Chcete být Milionářem?
  - Most of the time the audience is right
  - Much better than calling a friend

Miracle of aggregation

- From individual ignorance to collective wisdom
  - Voters not very well informed, but their errors are random
  - Therefore, in a large sample their errors cancel out
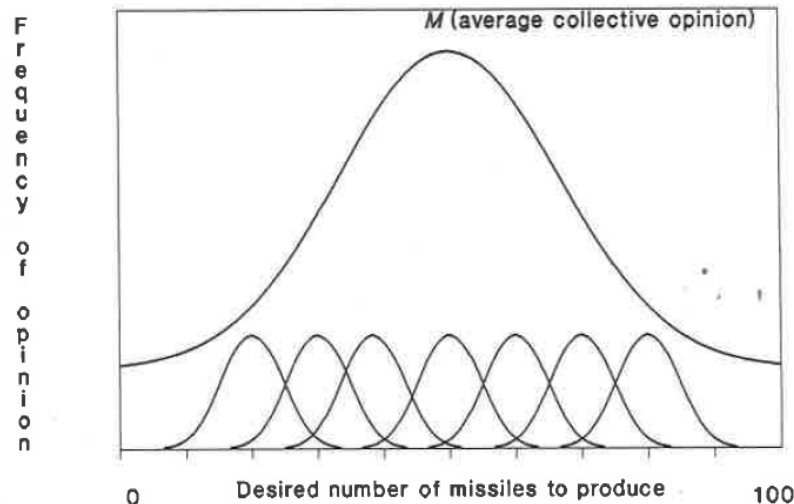- Aggregate opinion is thus (i) more stable and (ii) more rational

FIG. 1.3 Hypothetical distribution of collective public opinion on production of the MX nuclear missile.

The rational public

- Look at changes in aggregate opinion over time on identical questions
  - Eg, "Do you support or oppose same-sex marriage?"
  - Does opinion change?
  - How much does it change?
- Results
  - Most of the time opinion is stable
  - Changes are mostly <5%
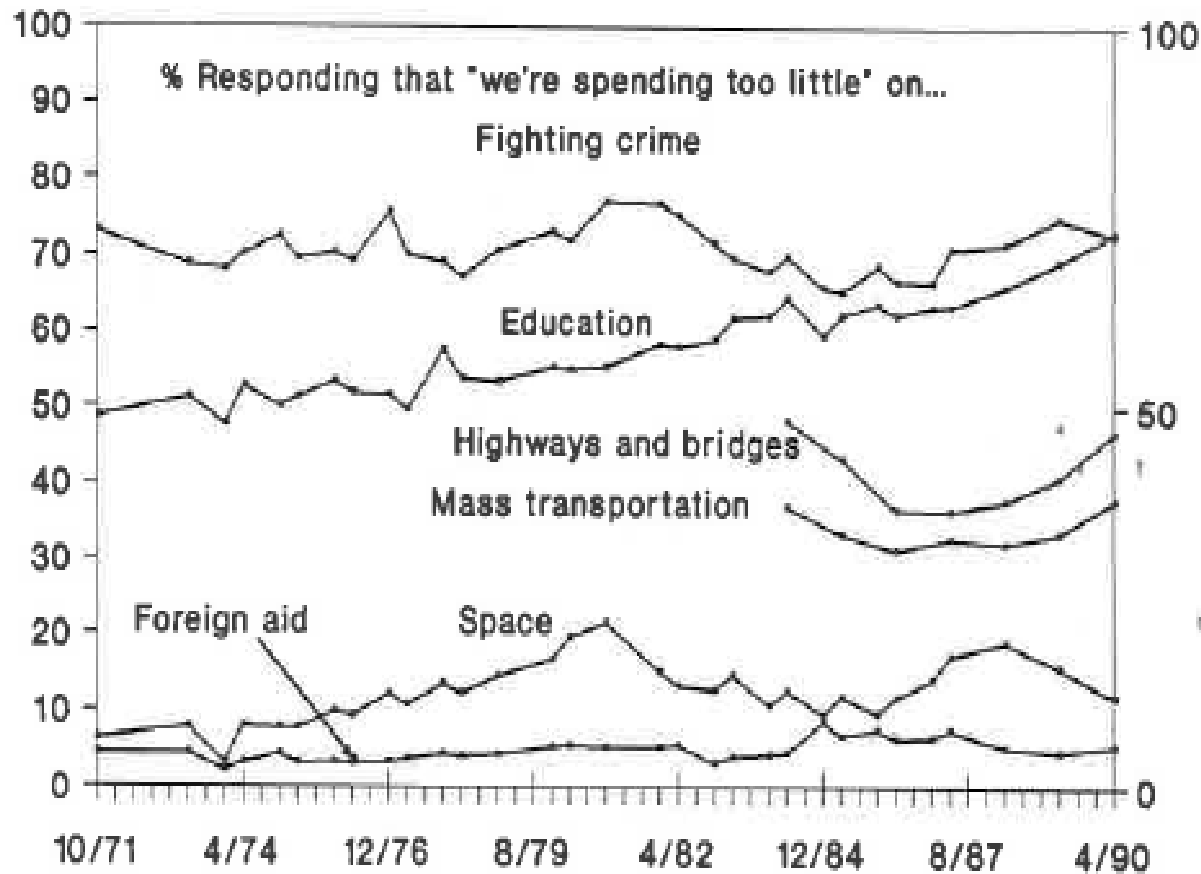 - Few fluctuations: up and down and up

Stability

% Responding that "we're spending too little" on...

Fighting crime

Education

Highways and bridges

Mass transportation

Foreign aid   Space

FIG. 2.2   Stable spending preferences, 1971–1990.
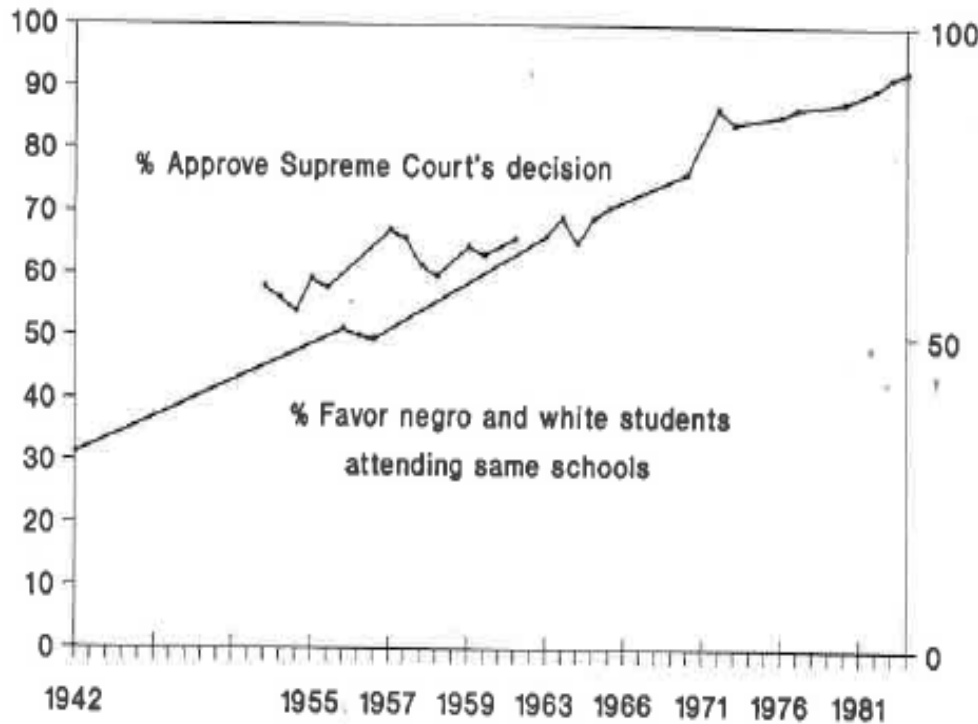
Change, but explicable

FIG. 2.5   Large, gradual opinion change: school desegregation, 1942–1985.
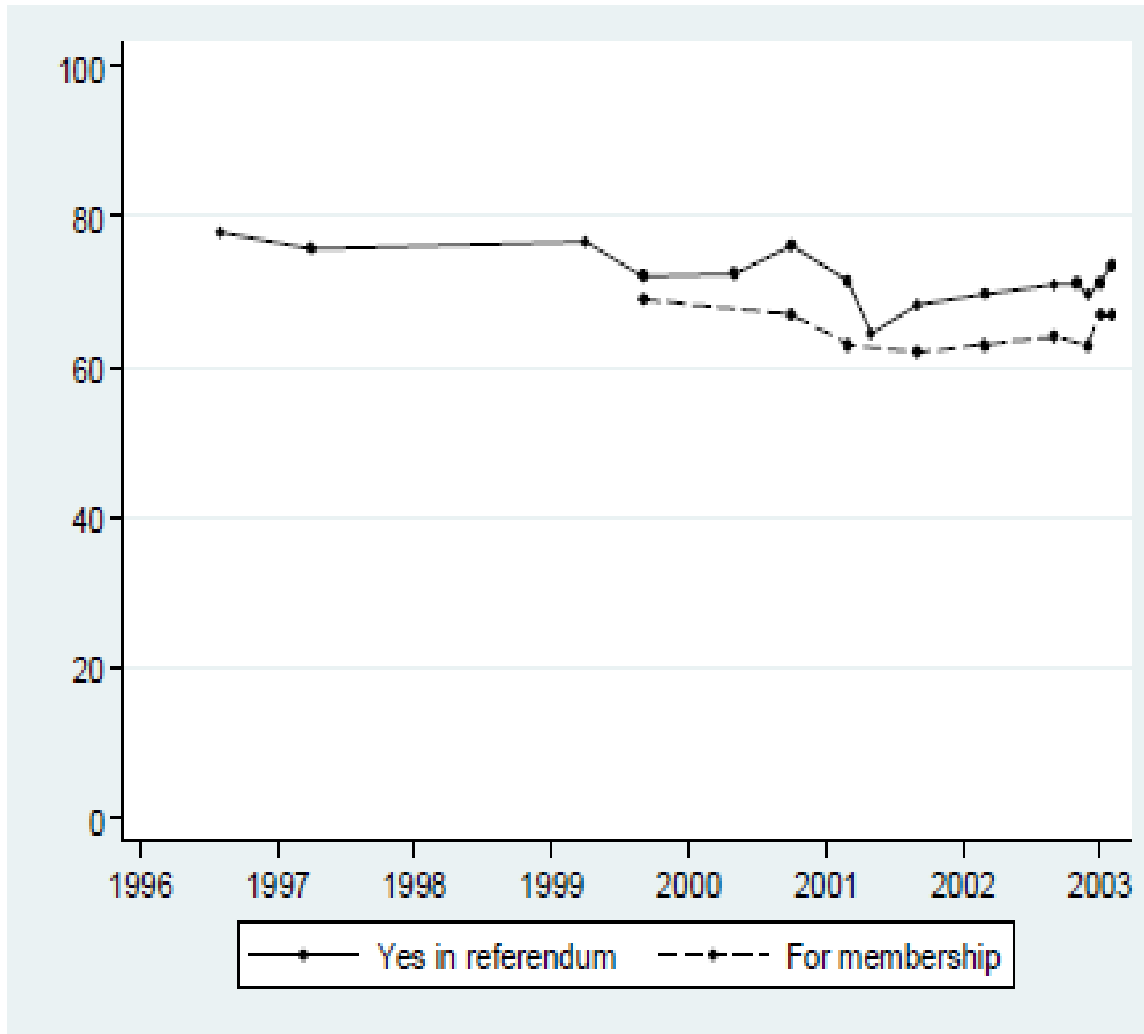

FIG. 2.6   Large, gradual opinion change: legal abortion, 1962–1990.

How about the Czech Republic?

- What would you expect?

- New democracy, new issues, changing politics, changing economy => instability?

- Or stability as in US?

- Answer
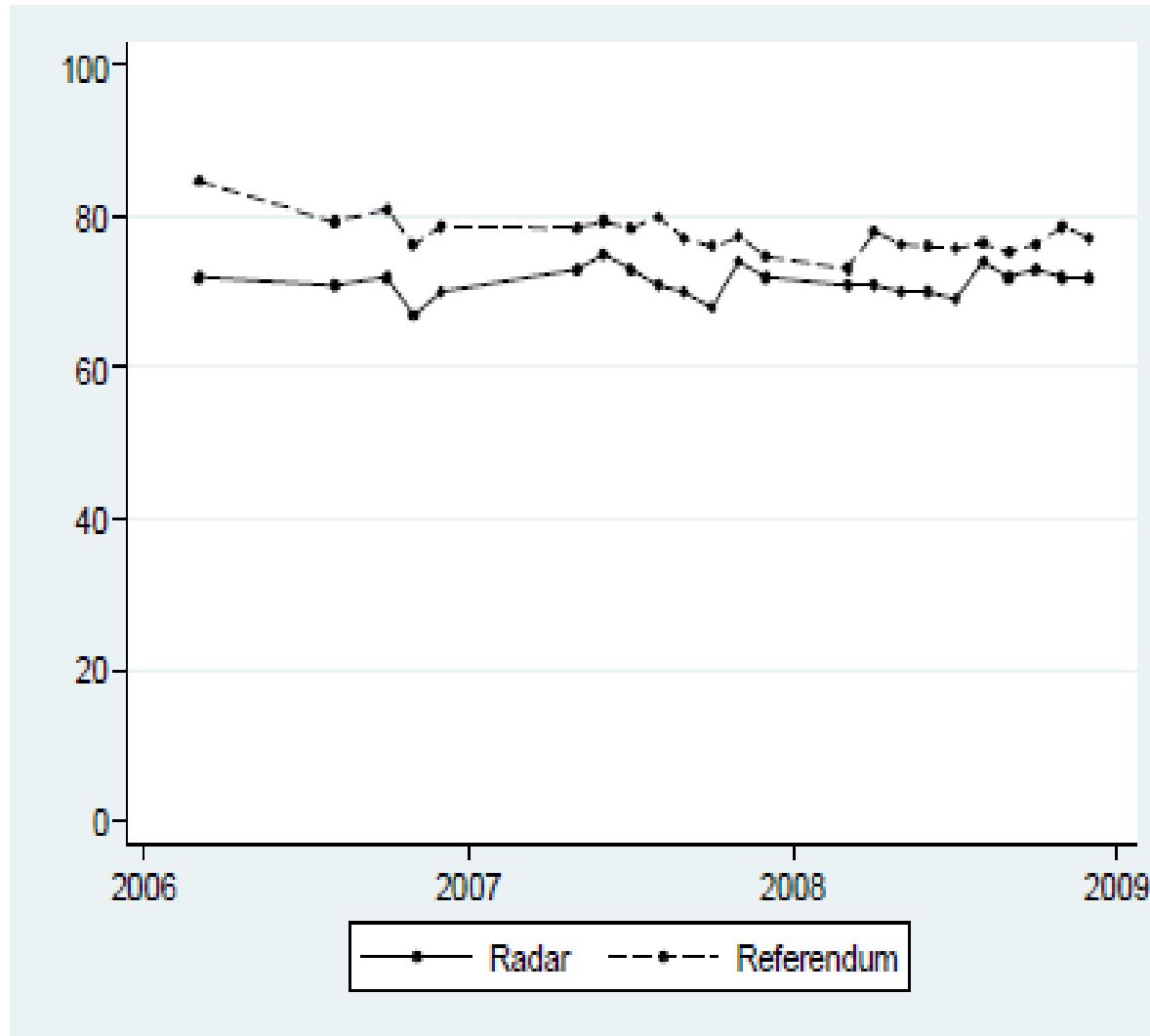 - Mostly stable
  - Exceptions: gay rights, joining the Euro

Support for EU membership

Figure 1: Support for EU membership

Opposition to anti-missile radar

Figure 3: Radar Installation

Deliberation

Ideal deliberative setting

- Everyone can speak

- Everyone can introduce or question any assertion

- No physical or psychological coercion

- Evaluate arguments based on reason and evidence

- Does this exist? Can we create it?

Cross-cutting discussions

- Level of disagreement in interpersonal networks
- Relatively rare, especially in US
  - Most people not engaged in cross-cutting talk
  - Norms against disagreement – talking about politics, religion
- Less common in certain situations
  - Family, close friends, voluntary associations
- More common in others
  - Workplace, lower income

Effects of cross-cutting talk

- Increases tolerance
  - Learn about other POVs
  - Doubts about own POV
- Decreases participation
  - More ambivalence
  - More likely to avoid conflict
- Thus need both homogeneous groups to promote participation and heterogeneous groups to promote tolerance

Fishkin's deliberative polling

- Random selection of citizens invited to gather at a single place for a weekend in order to discuss issue.

- Carefully balanced briefing materials are sent to the participants and are also made publicly available.

- The participants engage in dialogue with competing experts and political leaders based on questions they develop in small group discussions with trained moderators.

- Parts of the weekend events are broadcast on television, either live or in taped and edited form.

- After the deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions.

Europolis: A Deliberative Polity-Making Process European Union (June 2009)

	Before Deliberation %	After Deliberation %	Difference %
Agree that:			
"We should do everything possible to combat climate change even if that hurts the economy"	49	61	+12
"I am enthusiastic about energy efficiency"	75	84	+9
"Immigration is an important problem"	44	64	+20
"Illegal immigrants should be eligible for national health care"	63	71	+8

Problems

- Only a small number of public involved
  - But they are more representative
  - Can we use their opinions instead of elections?
  - Cf., ancient Athens – election by lottery
- How much time and effort will people commit?
- Are the new opinions better?