Policy Responsiveness

Lecture 2

Today

- Theory of policy responsiveness
- Techniques for studying policy responsiveness
- More nuanced results
- Ideas for research

1. Theory of policy responsiveness

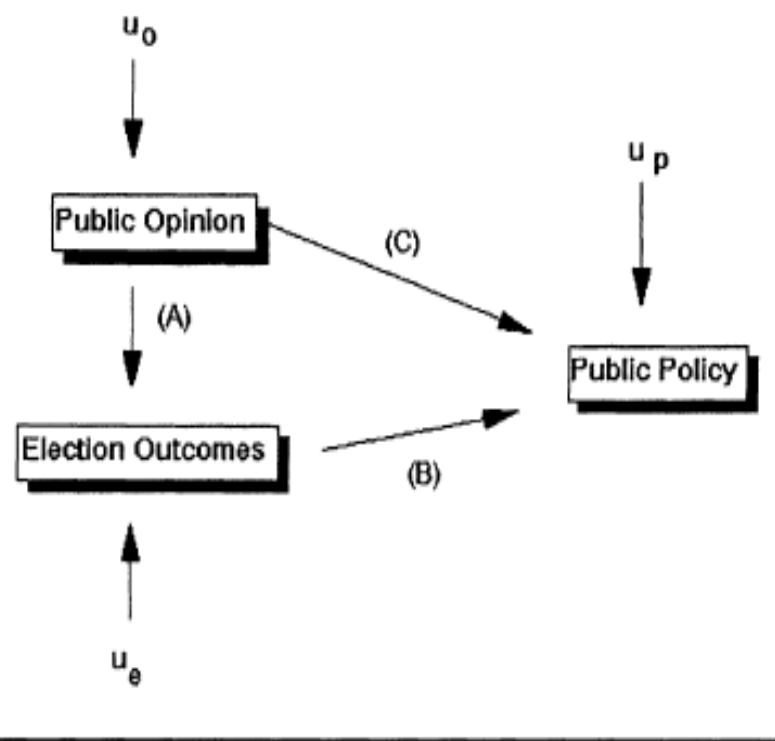# What is policy responsiveness?

- Politicians follow will of public
  - Congruence: exact match between public preferences and policy
  - Responsiveness: policy changes with changes in preferences
- But
  - Should public and policy converge exactly?
  - With no time delay?
  - On all issues?

Potential mechanisms

- Incentives – rational anticipation
  - Politicians afraid of consequences of not listening: lose elections, protest, revolution
  - Requires that voters (i) know what politicians do and (ii) punish them for doing different things
- Selection of types
  - Voters choose politicians that have similar beliefs and values
  - Politicians then carry out those values
  - Policy changes with elections
- Altruism
  - Politicians want to please people, want to be loved

FIGURE 1

The Pathways to Dynamic Representation

u_o

Public Opinion

(C)

u_p

(A)

Public Policy

Election Outcomes

(B)

u_e

Case for responsiveness

- Fundamental idea of democracy: people rule

- Citizens know what is best for them

- Wisdom of crowds

- Politicians are corrupt and self-interested, need to be controlled and disciplined

Case against responsiveness

- Citizens have no real opinions about most issues, especially complicated ones – can't provide guidance
- Citizens have uninformed or bad opinions
  - Pandering: politicians try to please voters with policies that they know will have negative effects
- Citizens can be manipulated by politicians or groups
- Leadership is a good thing
  - Who are the great democratic politicians?
  - Brecht: unhappy is the land that needs a hero

When will responsiveness yield the best policies?

- Best = policies in the real interests of citizens
  - Substantive representation
- Citizens need to actually know and prefer the policies with the best consequences for society
  - Or the aggregate average of opinions somehow = the best policies
- How often does public desire what is right?
- Where would you trust the Czech public?
- Where would you not trust it?

2. Techniques for studying responsiveness

The major problems

- Measures of what the public wants
  - Can they identify exact policies?
  - Or just more/less/about the same?
- Measures of policy/actions of politicians
- Controls for other causes of policy and opinion
- Reverse causality: policy => preferences

Dyadic representation

- Miller and Stokes (1963)
  - Public opinion on issue positions in US Congressional districts
  - Link to preferences and behavior (roll-call votes) of representatives in those districts
- Results: good correspondence for more salient issues
  - Sometimes through election, sometimes anticipation
- Problems
  - Need a common scale of measurement
  - Roll call votes ≠ policy (position-taking)
  - Who is influencing whom?

What about proportional systems like CZ

- Can't link citizens with individual MPs
  - Multiple MPs represent each district
  - Maybe for Senate?
- Try to link parties with their voters
  - Opinions of party voters
  - Opinions of MPs or placement of party on left-right spectrum

Party representation

- Measure preferences/ideology of supporters of each party as well as parties

- Do supporters have same positions as party?

- But is it true that parties only represent their own voters?

- Results from postcommunist countries
  - Good correspondence
  - But parties tend to exaggerate differences between citizens

- Problems
  - Are we measuring policy?
  - Are we showing causality?

How to measure positions/ideologies of parties?

- Survey of legislators – opinions on policies
  - Sincerity? Is it policy?
- Roll-call votes in parliament
  - Party discipline, strategic voting
- Interest group evaluations of MPs
- Expert survey of positions of parties
- Lists of major legislation (label as left or right)

Collective representation

- Gather all national-level surveys asking about concrete policy changes
  - Eg, Do you support capital punishment?
- Is the change made or not within 4 years?
- Results
  - 50-70% of time government does what citizens want in established democracies
- Problems
  - Depends on issues that surveys cover
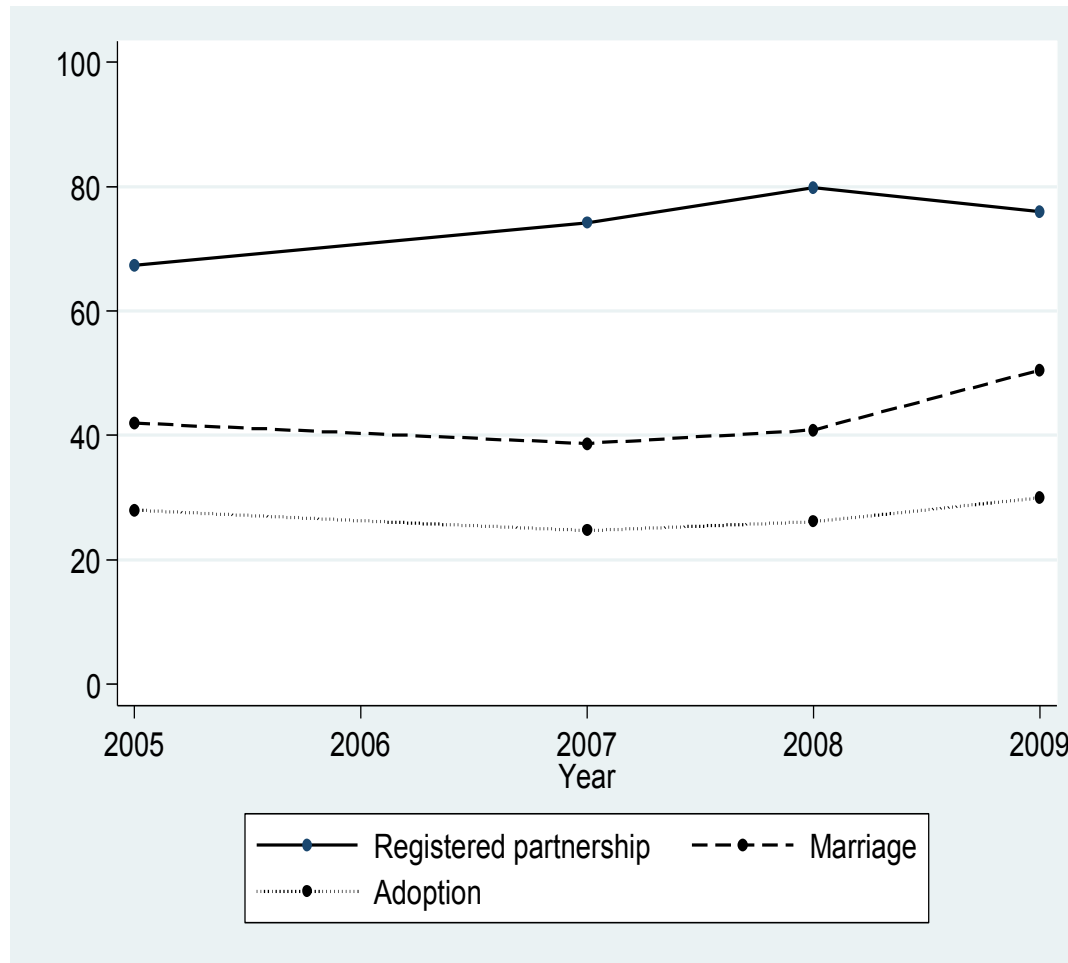 - Is it causality or just correspondence?

How do we isolate causality?

- Control for other factors
  - Media, interest groups, parties, civil society
  - Very few studies do this
- Time-series
  - Responsiveness is a temporal idea: changes in public opinion lead to change in policy
  - Do changes in public opinion precede changes in policy?

One clever way

- Look at all significant changes in public opinion (Page & Shapiro 1983)

- What percentage of changes are followed by a change in policy?

- In US, 2/3 of changes in public opinion => change in policy in same direction
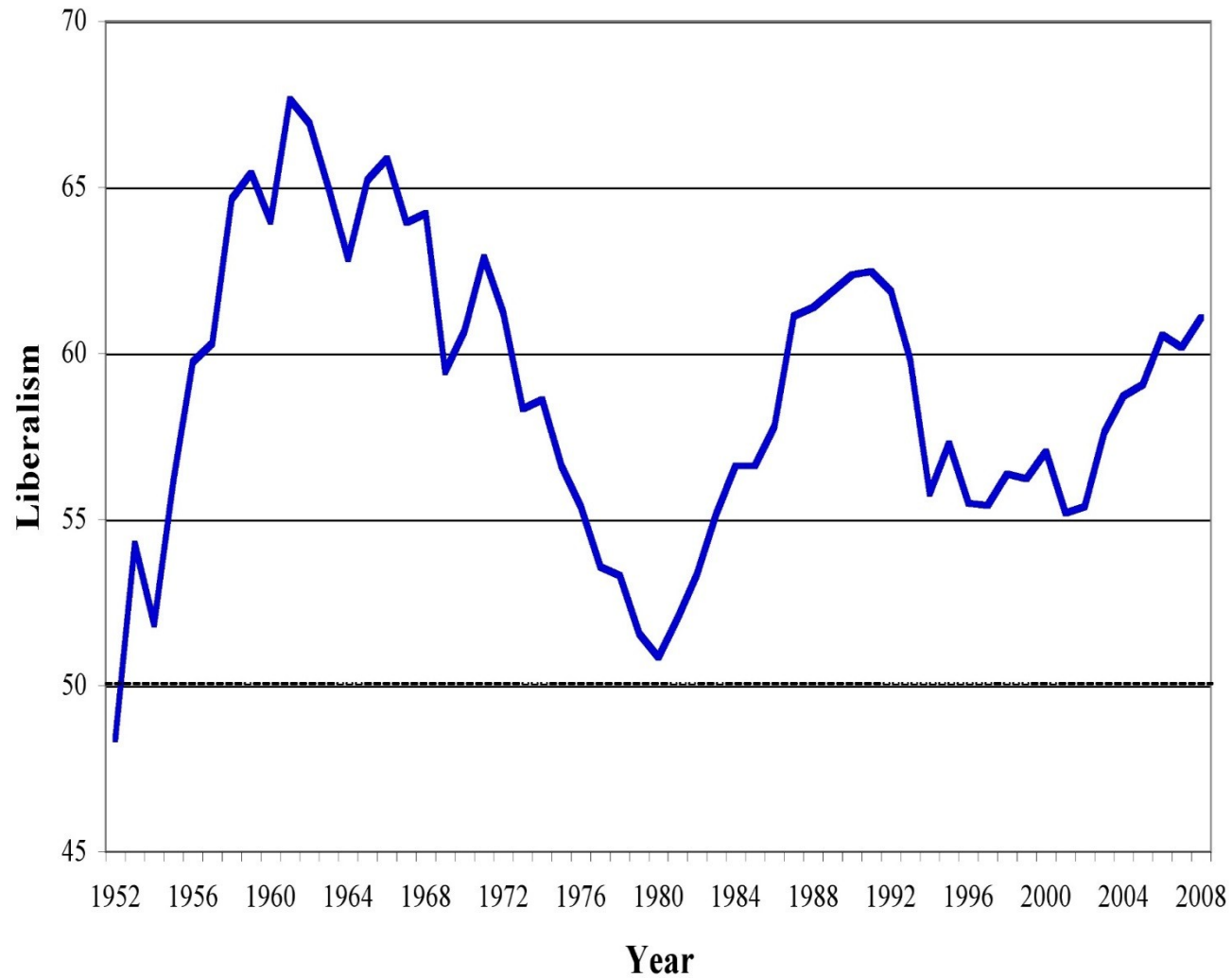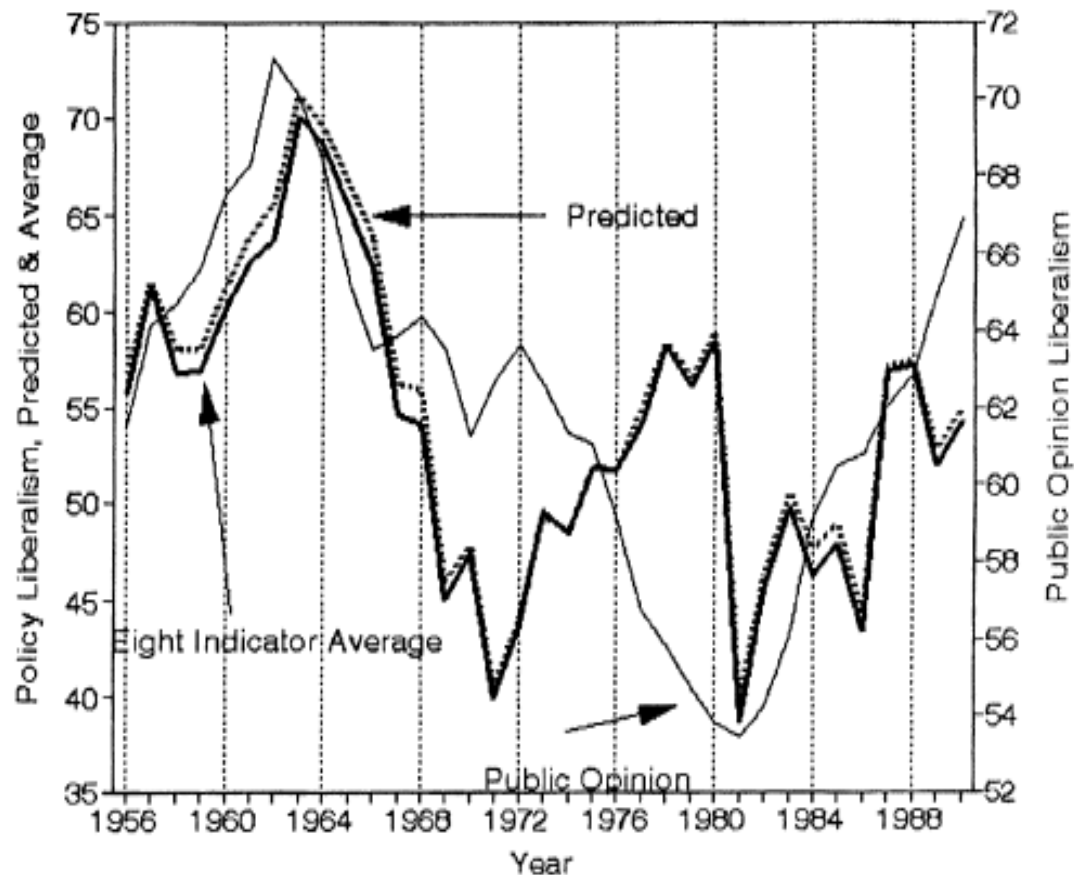
Rights of same-sex couples in CZ

Can we be more systematic?

- Dynamic representation
- Policy mood: do citizens want large, more active government or smaller, less active government
  - Advantage: long time-series, other policy issues come and go
  - Disadvantage: very abstract
- Measures of policy
  - Interest group ratings of MPs
  - Roll-call votes
  - Number of liberal/conservative laws

Policy mood in US

Putting policy and public opinion together

Results

- Strong responsiveness for all four branches
  - 1 point change in mood => 1 point change in policy
- Change is fast
  - For legislature, public opinion => policy within 1 year
  - For Supreme Court: 2 years
- Differences across branches
  - House of Representatives: direct effect of public opinion strongest
  - Senate: indirect effect through elections stronger
  - President: change in party of president has largest effects

Why are courts responsive to public opinion?

- Judges have political motivations
- Court depends on other actors for enforcement
  - No control over police, bureaucracy
  - If they take unpopular actions, then other actors (executive, legislative) won't enforce
- Court needs to maintain legitimacy
  - Countermajoritarian dilemma

3. Some more nuanced results

Lumpers and splitters

- What are politicians responsive to:
  - General public mood (lumpers)
  - Opinion on specific issues (splitters)
- Does politician say: "The public's mood is becoming more hostile to government, let's think of ways to cut government"
- Or: "The public dislikes Church restitution, let's limit or stop Church restitution"

Druckman and Jacobs (2006)

- Private polls conducted by Richard Nixon
- When Nixon has specific policy data, he uses it
  - Tries to win over general public
- When an issue is not so important, he doesn't collect data about specific policy and focuses on general ideology trends
  - Appeals to his core supporters

When are politicians most responsive?

- When elections are near
  - Public has short time horizon – only remembers most recent policy when voting
  - Honeymoon effect – politicians have more freedom at start of term, mandate to rule
- When popularity is moderate
  - High popularity (eg, 70% approval) – I can do what I want and ignore the public
  - Low popularity (eg, 30% approval) – Small policy changes won't help me, so just do what I want

Public as thermostat

- Public can influence policy, but policy can also influence public
  - Public may adjust preferences depending on what policymakers do
- If policy becomes too liberal, public becomes more conservative
  - Thermostat adjusts heat to keep temperature constant
- Spending preferences of public ("Should we increase or decrease spending on defense?") and actual spending
  - Policy has negative affect on public opinion
  - More spending => preferences for less spending

Gaps in our knowledge

- To what extent do politicians manipulate public opinion?
  - How do they do it? Can you see it in CZ?
- Can we control for other causes of policy?
  - Media, interest groups, civil society
- What about inequalities in responsiveness?
  - Do politicians listen to some groups more than others?
  - Most studies focus on average person

Collective representation in CZ

- All questions on policy issues asked in national surveys of public opinion in the Czech Republic from 1990 to 2009
  - Do you support or oppose tuition fees for university?
- To date 586 questions from CVVM
- Determine whether policy adopted within 4 years

Preliminary results

- 59% of policies supported by majority adopted
- 32% opposed by majority adopted
- Altogether 62% of policies fit majority preferences
- Comparable to studies of US, France, & Germany

What are policy areas where CZ politicians don't listen to public?

- Public opposed but adopted
  - Social policy cuts (copays, retirement age)
  - Church restitution (but opposite in past)
  - Missile defense?
- Public supports but not adopted
  - Restrict MP immunity
  - Referenda
  - Death penalty
  - Direct presidential election (in past)