

# PUBLIC OPINION & PUBLIC POLICY

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# OUTLINE

1. Aggregate Rationality
2. The Thermostatic Model
3. Dynamic versus Partisan Representation
4. Institutional Variance in Representation and Responsiveness
5. The Decline of Evidence-Based Policymaking?

# AGGREGATE RATIONALITY

Our starting point is this: public opinion, in the aggregate at least, is stable, and reacts to changes in external conditions.

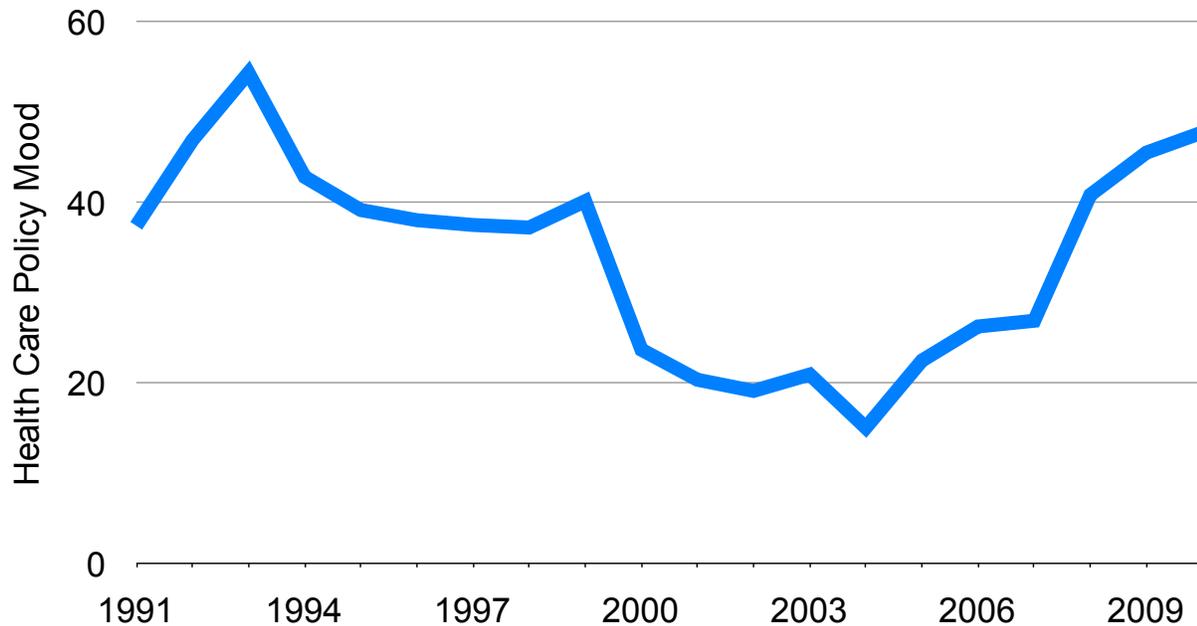


Figure from: Stuart Soroka and Adam Mahon, 2012. *Better Value* CNA/CHSRF series of reports to inform the CNA National Expert Commission, *The Health of our Nation* -- *The Future of Our Health System*. Paper 3.

# AGGREGATE RATIONALITY

Public opinion can thus be a useful resource in policy-making and policy evaluation (, and in judging the nature of democracy and/or democratic institutions).

Indeed, we should view the relationship between public opinion and policy as “thermostatic”...

# THE THERMOSTATIC MODEL

## A PRECURSOR: FUNCTIONALIST MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

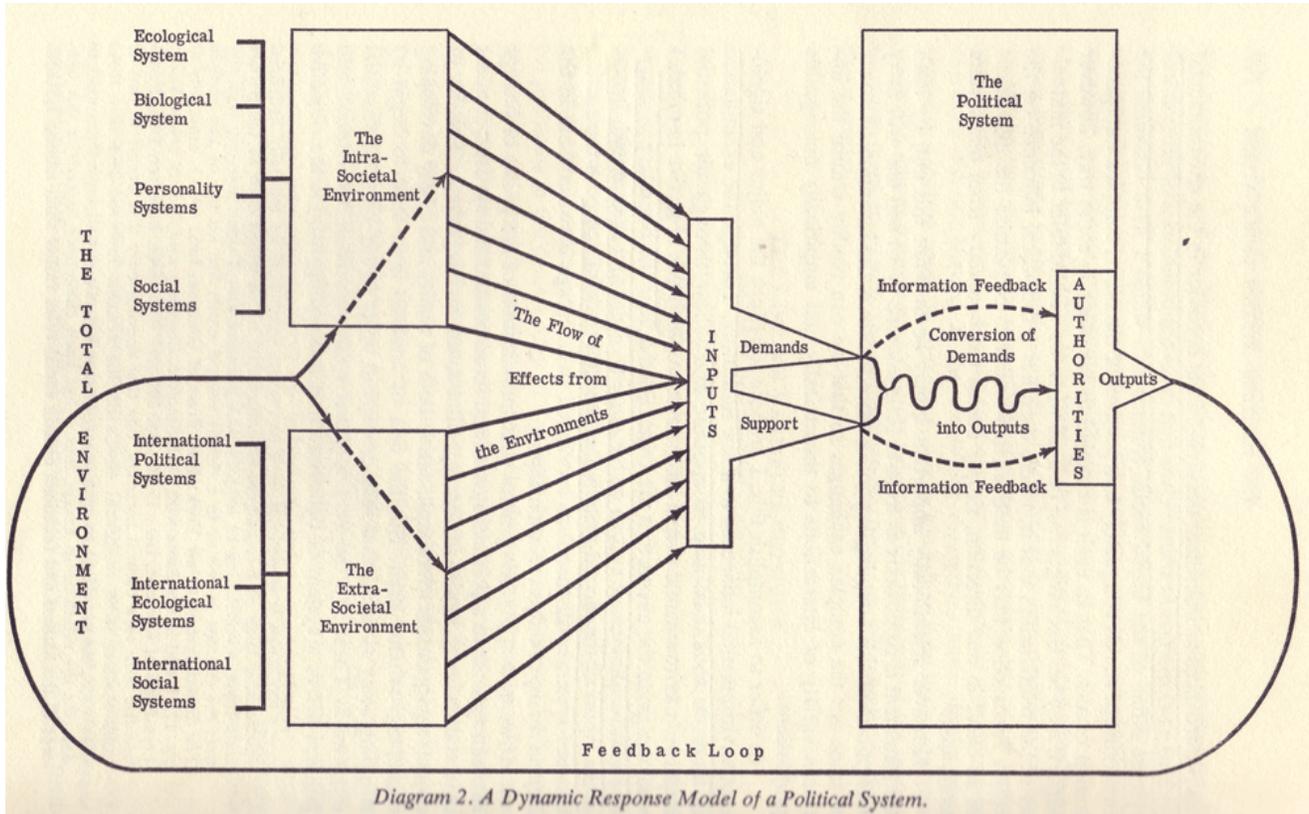


Figure from: Easton, David. 1965. *A Framework for Political Analysis* Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall.

# THE THERMOSTATIC MODEL PUBLIC RESPONSIVENESS (FEEDBACK)

If policy (P) moves closer to the public's preferred level of policy (P\*), then the public's relative preference for policy change (R) will be reduced (that is, it will respond thermostatically).

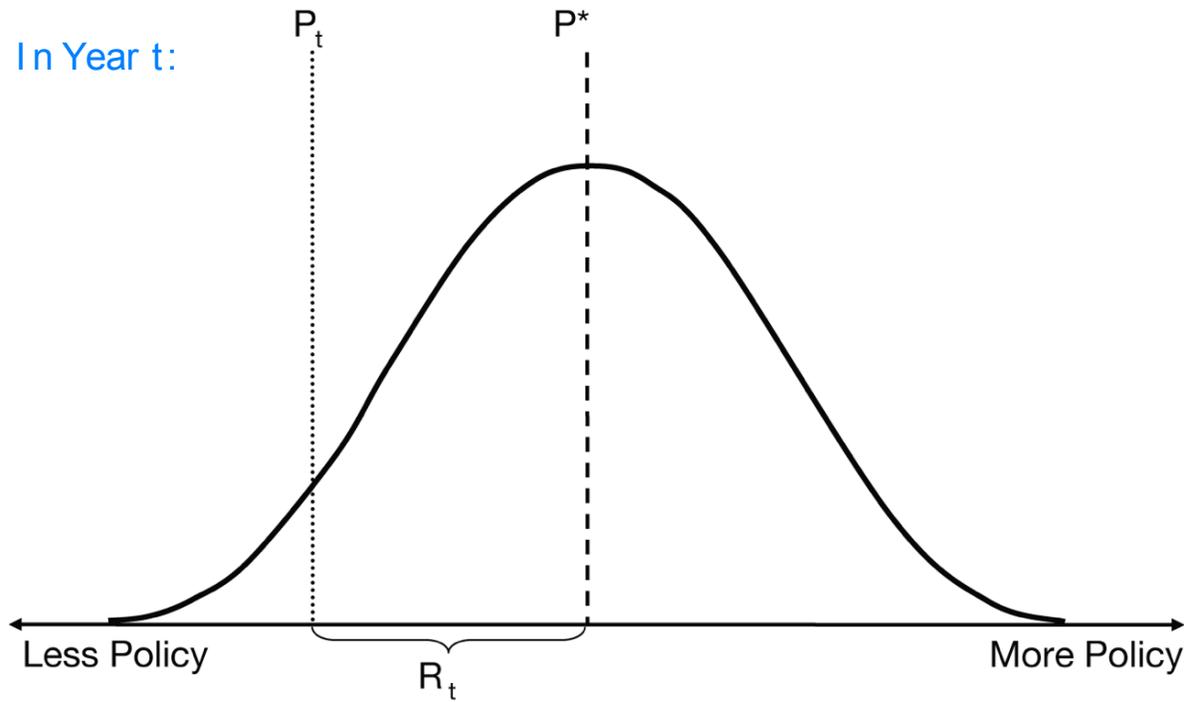


Figure from: Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. 2010. *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion and Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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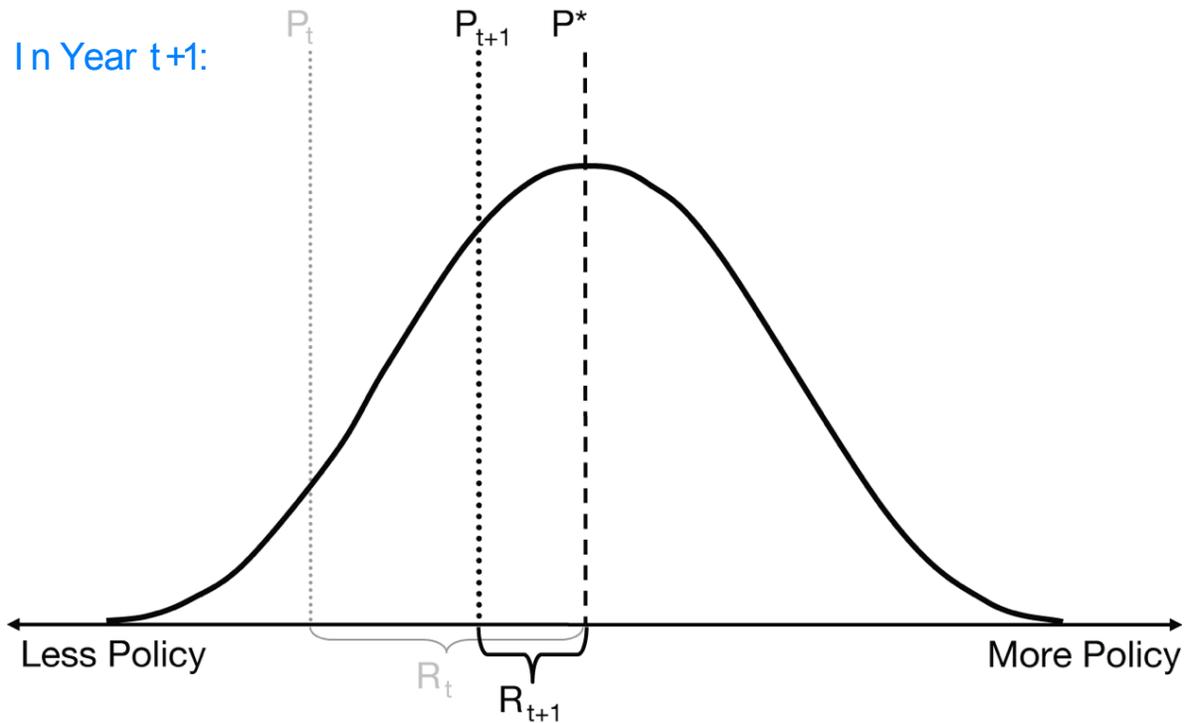


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# THE THERMOSTATIC MODEL

## REPRESENTATION AND FEEDBACK OVER TIME

The impact of policy on preferences, and of preferences on policy, spills out over time, where:

- (a) relative preferences for policy (R) in year  $t$  matter for policy (P) in year  $t+1$ , and
- (b) policy (P) in year  $t$  affects relative preferences (R) in year  $t$ .

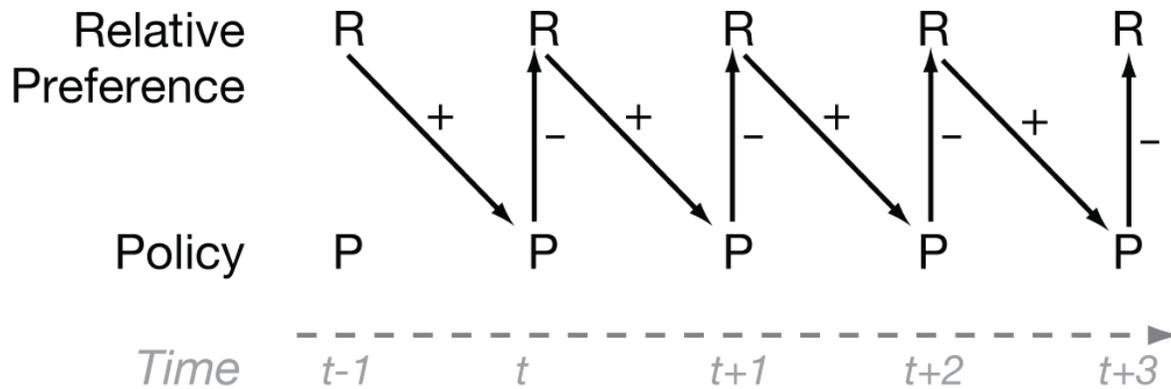


Figure from: Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. 2010. *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion and Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# THE THERMOSTATIC MODEL

## IT'S NOT THAT HARD

The thermostatic model does not require a lot of public opinion:

- people need to have relative, not absolute, preferences for policy
- they do not need to have clearly-defined positions on all issues, just broad preferences for 'more' or 'less'
- not everyone has to pay attention to all policies all the time

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### Public Responsiveness (Feedback):

$$R_t = a + \beta_1 P_t + \beta_2 W_t + \epsilon$$

### Policy Representation:

$$\Delta P_t = \rho + \gamma_1 R_{t-1} + \gamma_2 G_{t-1} + \mu_t$$

Figure from: Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. 2010. *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion and Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# THE THERMOSTATIC MODEL

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN DIRECT (PARTISAN) AND INDIRECT (DYNAMIC) REPRESENTATION

The thermostatic model focuses on indirect/dynamic representation. And dynamic representation (between elections) is critical.

But we probably don't want exclusively dynamic representation -- we want the partisanship of governments to matter as well. So there should be some balance between direct/partisan representation, and indirect/dynamic representation.

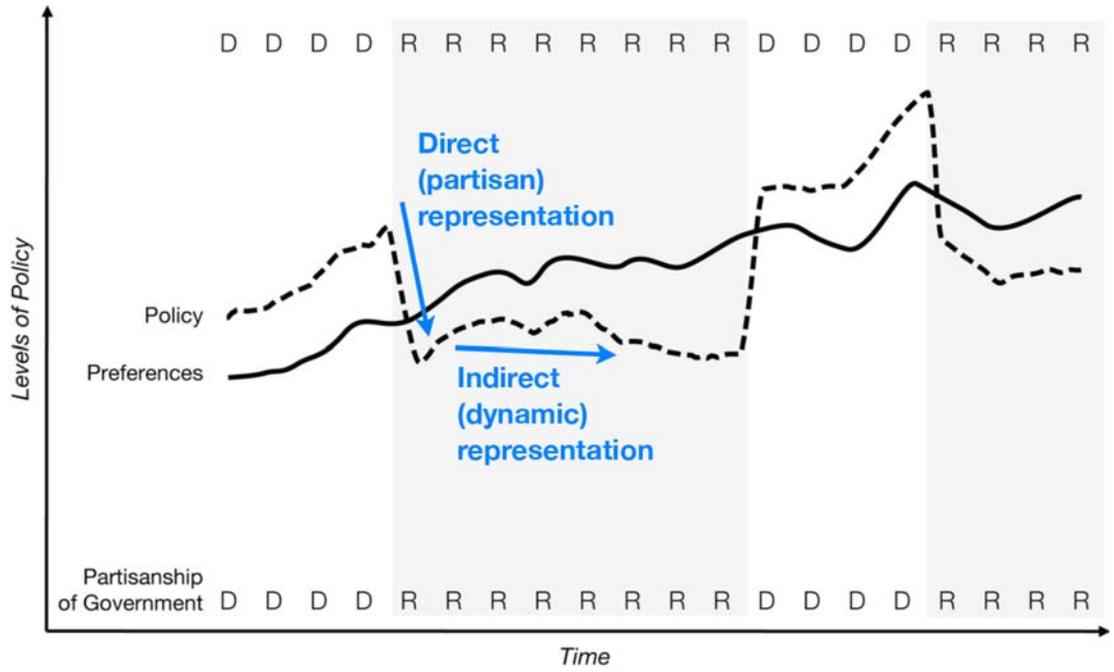


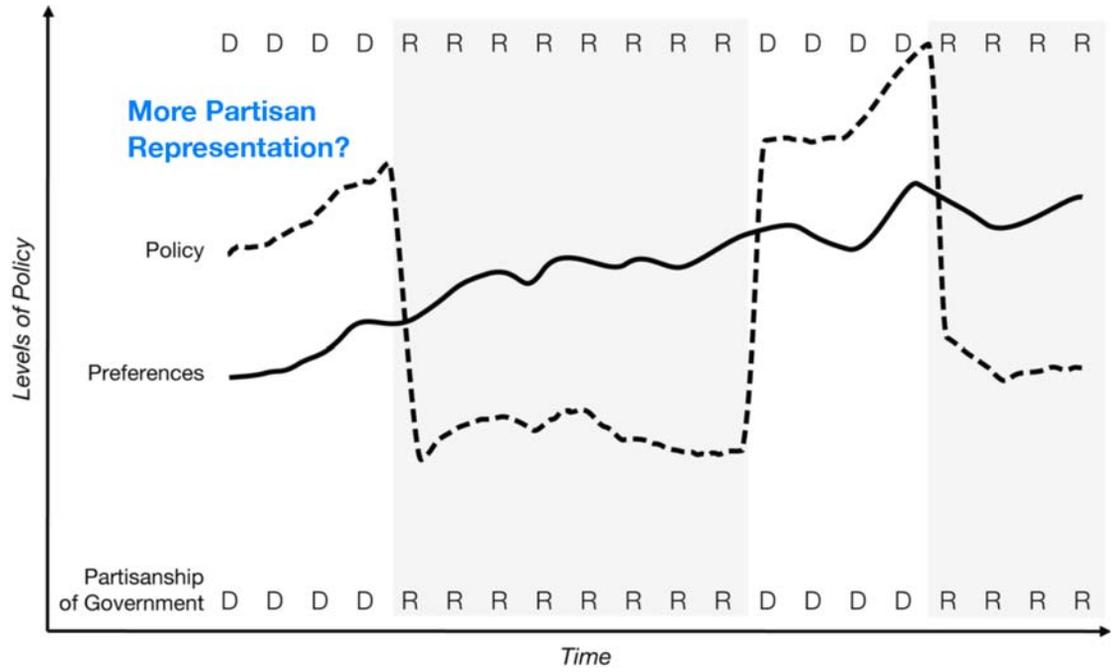
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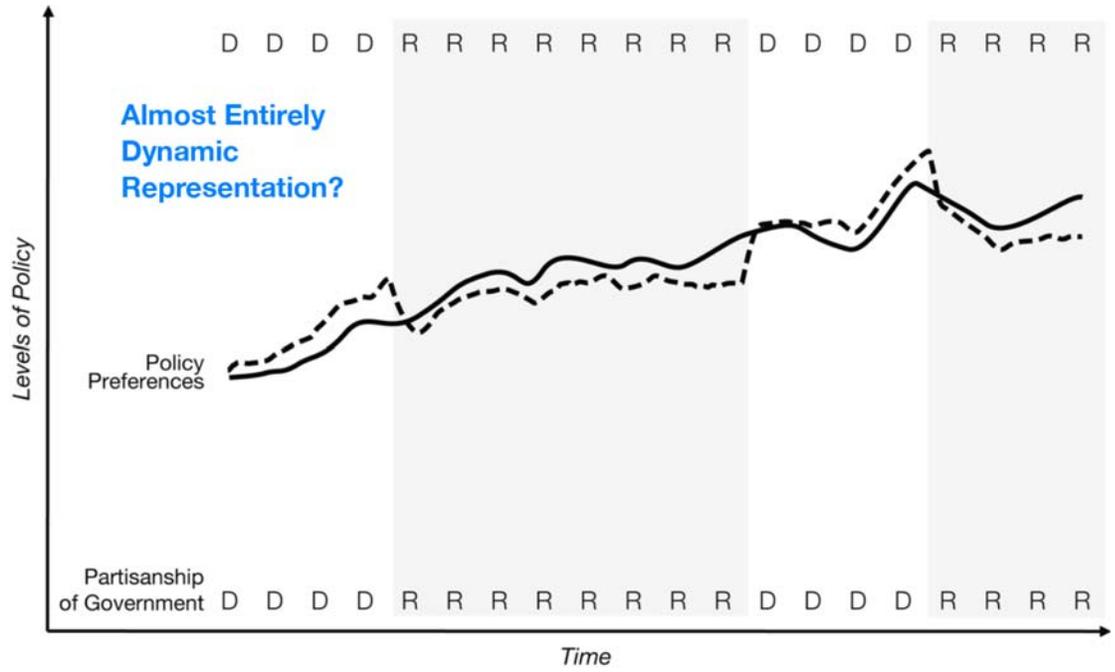


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# VARIANCE IN RESPONSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATION

Opinion-policy connections will not be the same across all policy domains, or all political-institutional environments. We have at least three expectations.

A. Opinion-policy connections will be greatest in salient domains (where people are paying attention).

B. Public responsiveness decreases with federalism (where the “policy signal” is less clear).

C. Policy representation decreases in parliamentarism (where the executive is more isolated from public opinion).

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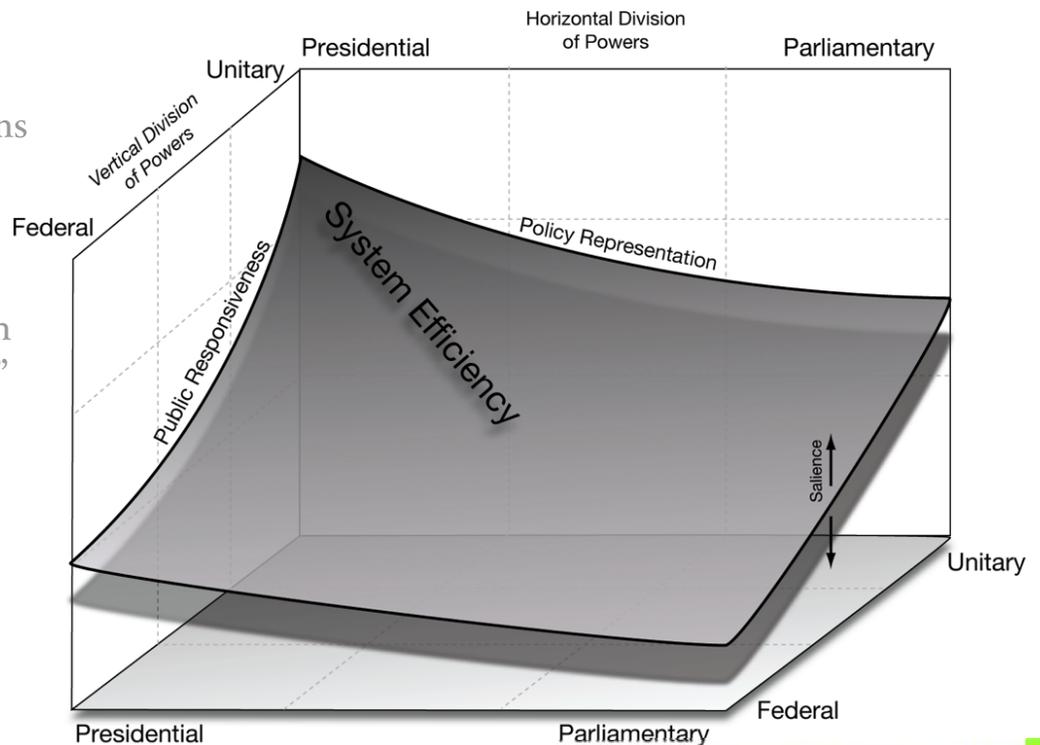


Figure from: Stuart Soroka and Christopher Wlezien. 2010. *Degrees of Democracy: Politics, Public Opinion and Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# VARIANCE IN RESPONSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATION

Results across Canada, the UK and US suggest that feedback and representation are positively related, and vary as we would predict based on issue salience, federalism, and parliamentarism.

The relationship between issue salience and the magnitude of public responsiveness:

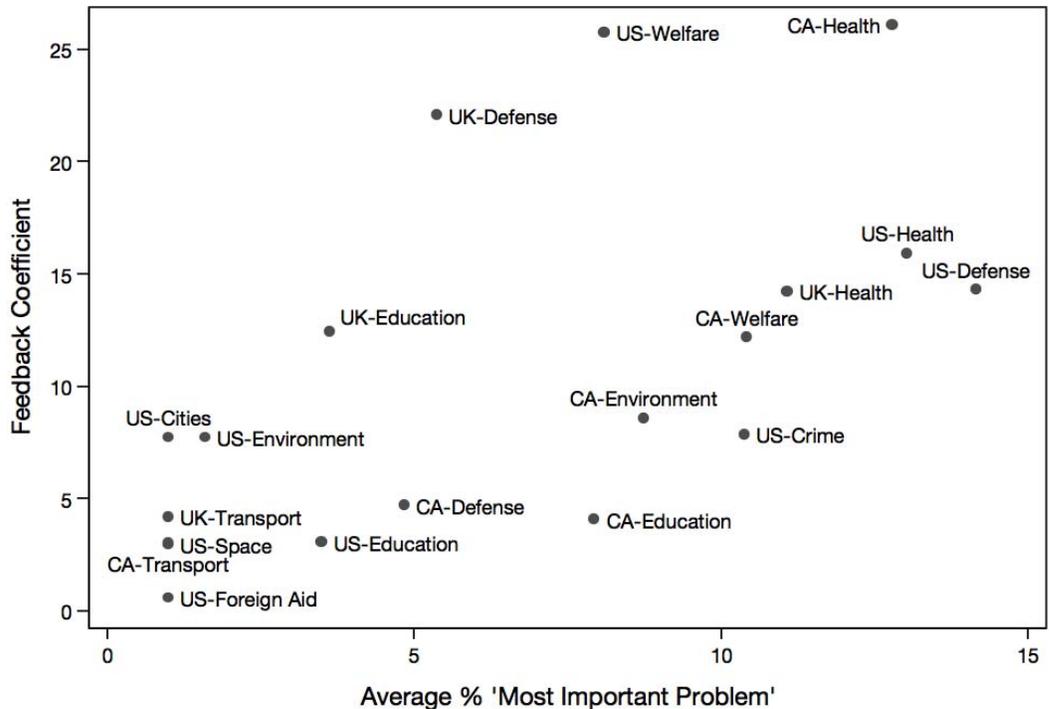


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The relationship between representation and feedback (across institutions):

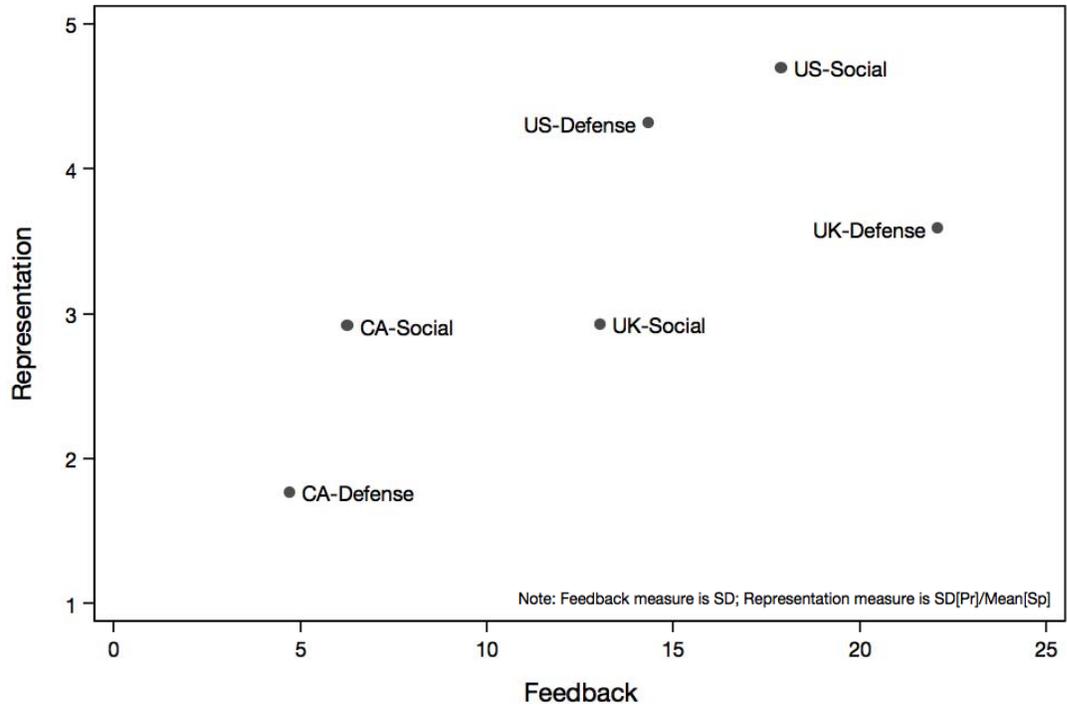


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System efficiency across institutions):

System efficiency ( $\zeta$ ) for domain  $d$  in political system  $C$  is:

$$\zeta_{cd} = \beta_{cd} * \gamma_{cd},$$

where  $\beta$  is public responsiveness, and  $\gamma$  is policy representation. The product of these two coefficients,  $\zeta$ , tells us how much of a given shock is corrected in each year.

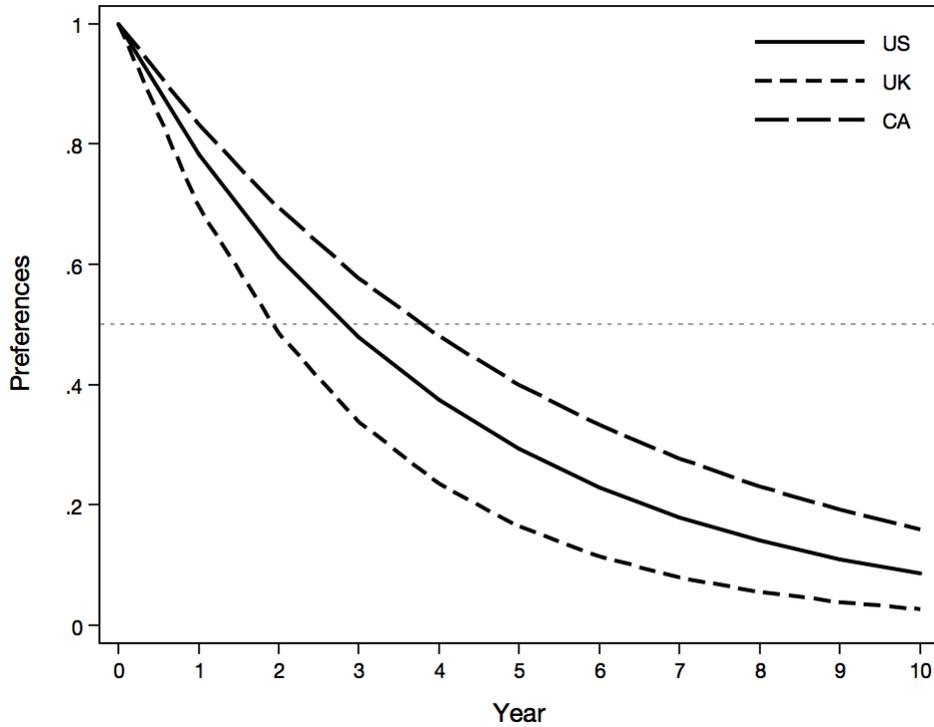


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# VARIANCE IN RESPONSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATION

These results are confirmed in more broadly comparative findings as well.

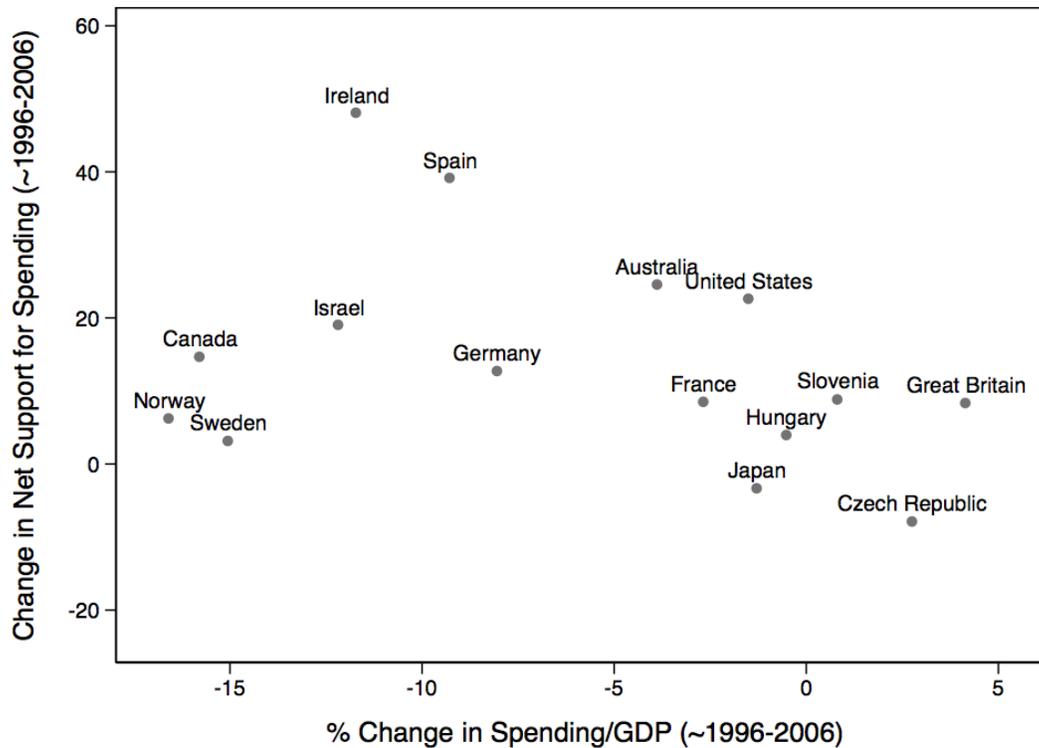


Figure from: Christopher Wlezien and Stuart Soroka. 2012. "Political Institutions and the Opinion-Policy Link," *West European Politics* 35(6): 1407-1432.

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TABLE 3  
PUBLIC RESPONSIVENESS, MODERATED BY FEDERALISM

		DV: Net preferences <sub>kt</sub>	
% government spending/GDP <sub>kt</sub>		-3.169** (1.152)	-2.298** (0.979)
Federalism <sub>kt</sub>		4.920** (1.840)	-2.357 (1.155)
IMPLIED FEEDBACK COEFFICIENTS, BY LEVEL OF FEDERALISM		0.000 (0.040)	0.000 (0.033)
<i>P* Instruments</i>		Implied feedback coefficient	
Federalism	Support for government action <sub>kt</sub>	0.635* (0.385)	0.617** (0.308)
Low	Unemployment <sub>kt</sub>	-2.991** (0.894)	-0.506 (1.751)
Medium	Net preferences <sub>kt-1</sub>	-	0.644** (0.141)
High	Constant	88.622 (61.346)	62.541 (46.210)
** <i>p</i> < 0.05. Levels of federalism correspond to the 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles in the data, i.e. 9, 13 and 32. Based on results in column 1 of Table 4.		11.517** (1.698)	
N		31	23
N (panels)		13	13
LR Chi2		22.875	29.812
rho		0.534	0.000

\**p* < 0.10; \*\**p* < 0.05. Cells contain MLE coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Federalism is a revenue-based measure (rescaled from 0 to 100) from Rodden (2004).

Results from: Christopher Wlezien and Stuart Soroka. 2012. "Political Institutions and the Opinion-Policy Link," *West European Politics* 35(6): 1407-1432.

# VARIANCE IN RESPONSIVENESS AND REPRESENTATION

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TABLE 6  
POLICY REPRESENTATION, MODERATED BY PROPORTIONALITY AND  
PRESIDENTIALISM

DV: %  $\Delta$  Total government spending<sub>it</sub>

		Executive dominance		
		Low	Medium	High
Net preferences <sub>it-1</sub>			0.136*	0.504**
			(0.072)	(0.166)
Prefs <sub>it</sub> * Executive dominance <sub>it</sub>			-	-0.043**
				(0.015)
ENPP <sub>it</sub>				2.248**
				(2.023)
Prefs <sub>it</sub> * ENPP <sub>it</sub>				-0.099**
				(0.043)
ENPP	% $\Delta$ GDP(deflated NCU) <sub>it-1</sub>	0.565**	0.515**	0.555**
		(0.251)	(0.234)	(0.210)
Low	% $\Delta$ Debt(deflated NCU) <sub>it</sub>	<b>0.142**</b>	<b>-0.110**</b>	<b>0.045**</b>
		(0.078)	(0.044)	(0.052)
Medium	Constant	<b>0.083**</b>	<b>0.050</b>	<b>-0.014</b>
		(0.058)	(0.052)	(0.052)
High		<b>0.025</b>	<b>-0.008</b>	<b>-0.072</b>
		(4.524)	(8.560)	(8.560)
	sigma u	0.000	0.000	0.000
	sigma c	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N (panels)	33	28	28
	LR Chi2	12.728	17.265	24.332
	rho	0.000	0.000	0.000

\**p* < 0.10; \*\**p* < 0.05. Levels of institutional variables correspond to the 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles in the data; for ENPP, 2.74, 3.34, 3.93; for Executive dominance, 2.09, 2.86, 4.36. Based on results in column 3 of Table 6.

\**p* < 0.10; \*\**p* < 0.05. Cells contain MLE coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. ENPP is the effective number of parliamentary parties from Golder (2010), and Executive dominance is from Lijphart (1999).

Results from: Christopher Wlezien and Stuart Soroka. 2012. "Political Institutions and the Opinion-Policy Link," *West European Politics* 35(6): 1407-1432.

# WHAT WE KNOW...

Work on the thermostatic model makes clear the areas in which opinion and policy are (more or less) connected.

It also makes clear that, in some domains at least, public opinion can be a useful signal for policymakers, both for policy development, and policy evaluation.

This is true for broad, salient issues of public policy, at least.

Public opinion will be less informative in non-salient domains.

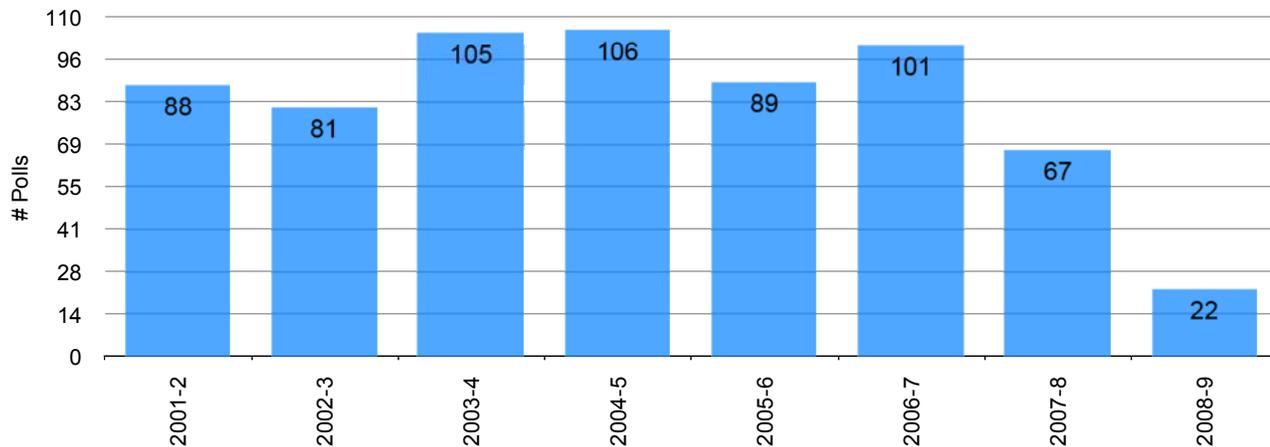
Specific questions (should doctors work in groups, or independently?) are probably still left to policymakers.

And representation of preferences does not really require that governments poll all the time - there are many ways in which public preferences can find their way to policymakers.

# THE DECLINE OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING?

That said, testing the thermostatic model requires data; and policymakers require data in order to accurately gauge public reactions to policy change. The recent (and marked) decline in public opinion polling by the federal government is problematic -- much of that polling data had value for policy development and policy evaluation.

## Health Canada Polling Projects, by Fiscal Year



Stuart Soroka 2011. Public Perceptions and Media Coverage of the Canadian healthcare System: A Synthesis. CHSRF.

# CONCLUSIONS

It nevertheless remains the case that available opinion data can be of real value for those interested in policy development, in policy outcomes, and in the comparative functioning of democratic institutions as well.

That said, the story in Canada is that our political-institutional environment (federal & parliamentary) likely reduces effectiveness of public responsiveness, and political representation.

Amongst Anglo-American democracies, *ceteris paribus*, opinion-policy connections in Canada are likely the weakest.

That does not mean that we should pay no attention to opinion, indeed in probably means we should pay more attention to it -- in order to better consider both the weaknesses and advantages of the Canadian system generally; the strength (or weakness) of opinion-policy links across policy domains; and to work towards better representation, and more effective use, of public policy preferences in Canada.