

The Importance and Variability of Public Responsiveness to Policy

Plenary given at the 2017 WAPOR Annual Conference in Lisbon, Portugal by **Stuart Soroka** (University of Michigan), based on collaborative work with **Christopher Wlezien** (UT Austin), **Dan Haeshutter-Rice** (Michigan), and **Fabian Neuner** (Michigan).

Background

A regular, responsive link between what governments provide and what publics demand is central to representative democracy.

It follows that effective representative democracy depends on a public that is at least minimally informed, and at least partly responsive to what governments do.

Background

It is of real significance that a growing body of work suggests that publics can respond to change in public policy, and other real-world conditions.

This makes the study of public preferences for policy meaningful.

It also justifies a government that represents public preferences.

Background

That said, there is a great deal of variability: in some instances, there is strong evidence of a reactive public; in others, public opinion is ill-informed, and incapable of holding governments accountable for their actions.

How well does representative democracy work?

Answering this question requires not just that we explore representation of public preferences, but the coherence, responsiveness and sources of public preferences themselves.

Outline

I intend to:

(A) examine the importance of but also the difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy,

(B) identify some of the institutional arrangements that enhance public responsiveness, and

(C) explore the role that media play in facilitating public responsiveness to government action.

(A) The importance of & difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy

Analyses of public preferences for policy regularly ignore the framing of questions, and the context in which they are asked.

Asking about ‘welfare’ spending is not the same as asking about ‘social assistance’ spending.

Asking about spending ‘keeping in mind that it may require additional taxes’ matters as well.

Even if there is an underlying ‘true’ distribution of preferences, our questions will capture it in different ways.

Stuart Soroka & Christopher Wlezien. 2004. “Opinion Representation and Policy Feedback: Canada in Comparative Perspective.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 37(3):531-559. [\[link\]](#)

Stuart Soroka & Christopher Wlezien. 2010. *Degrees of Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. [\[link\]](#)

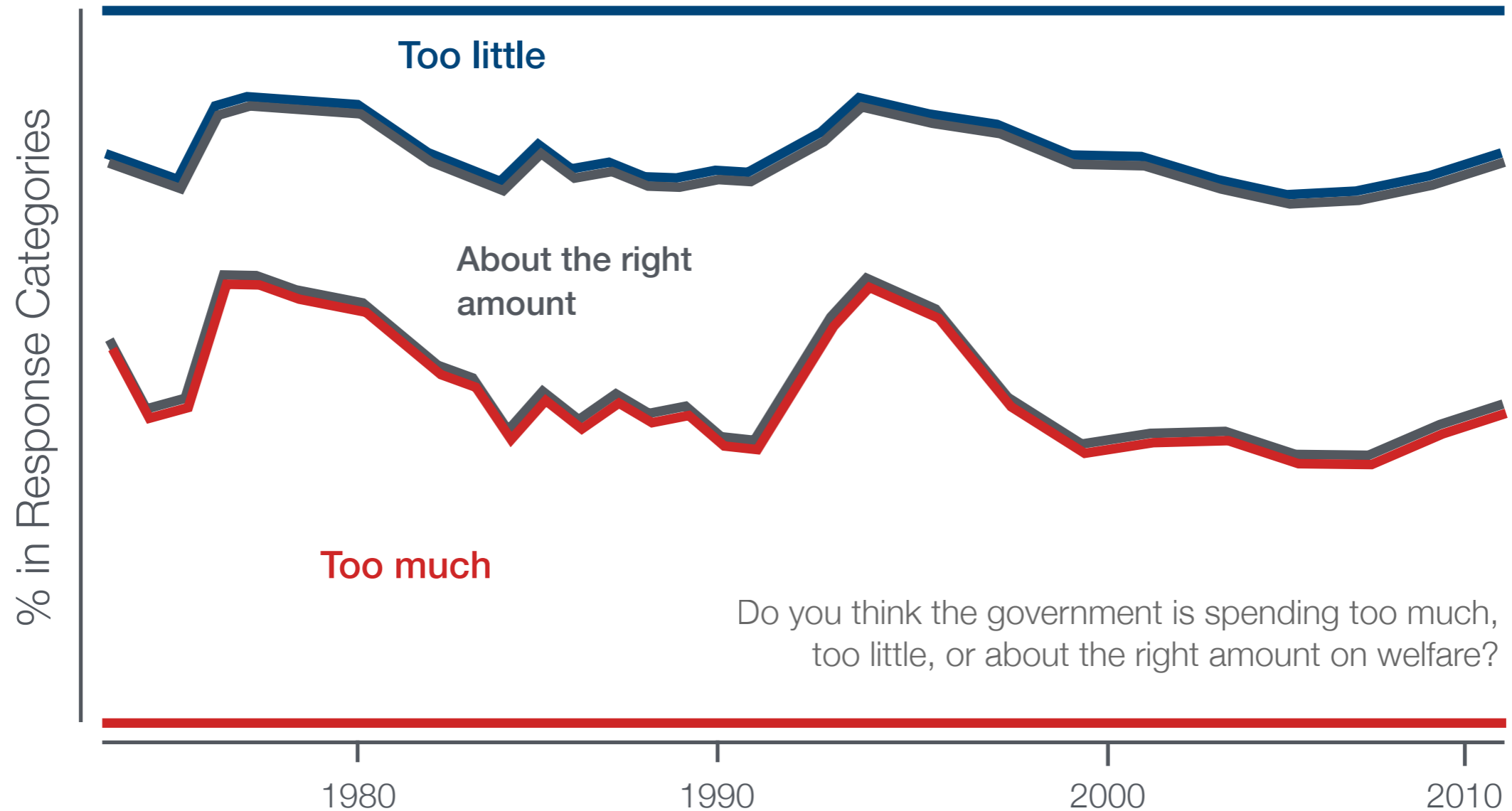
(A) The importance of & difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy

Survey organizations also often ask about *relative* preferences, not *absolute* preferences.

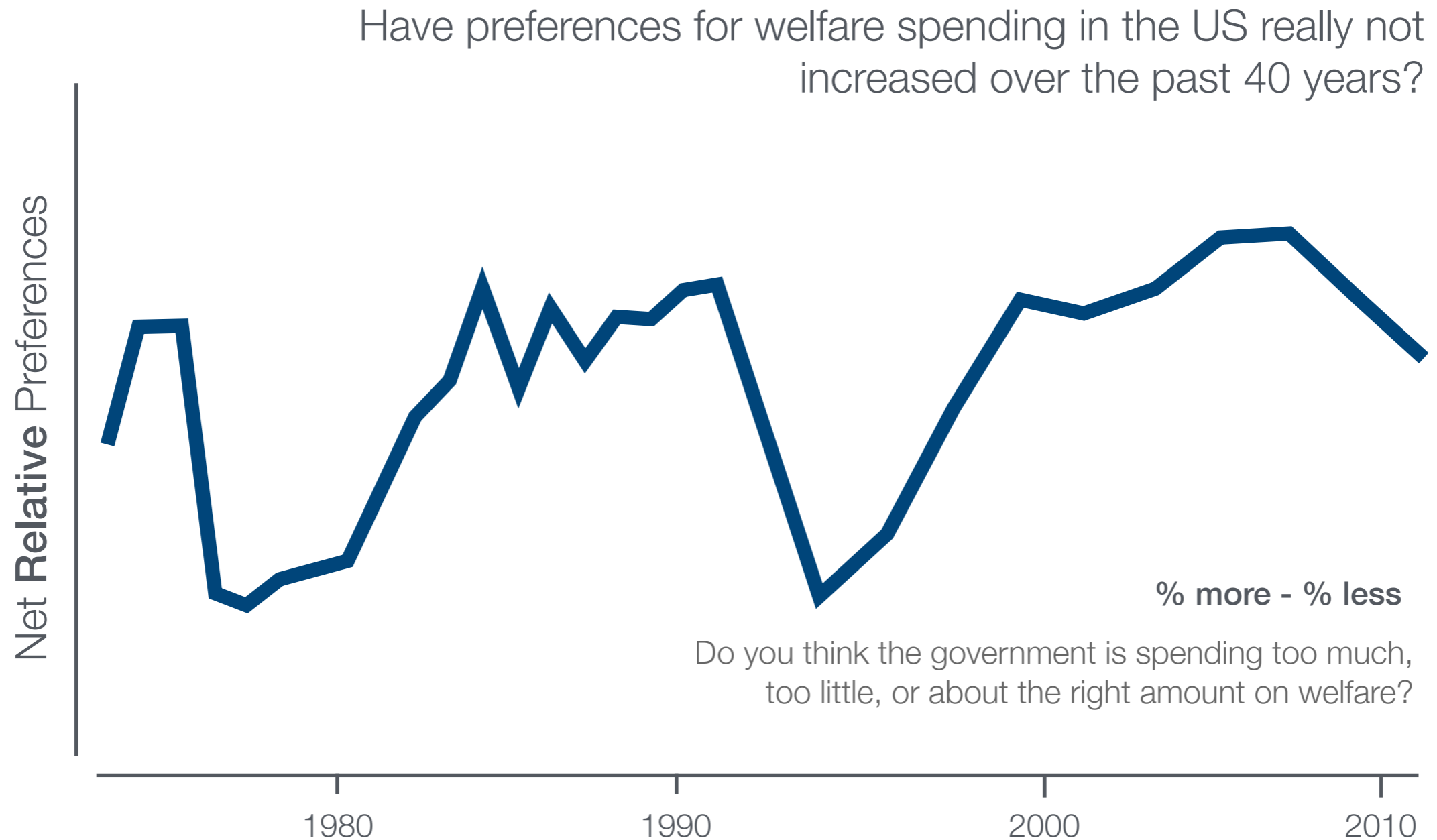
This makes sense — even as people may have absolute preferences, they cannot easily express them in most policy domains.

As a consequence, we have to be cautious in interpreting policy questions.

(A) The importance of & difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy

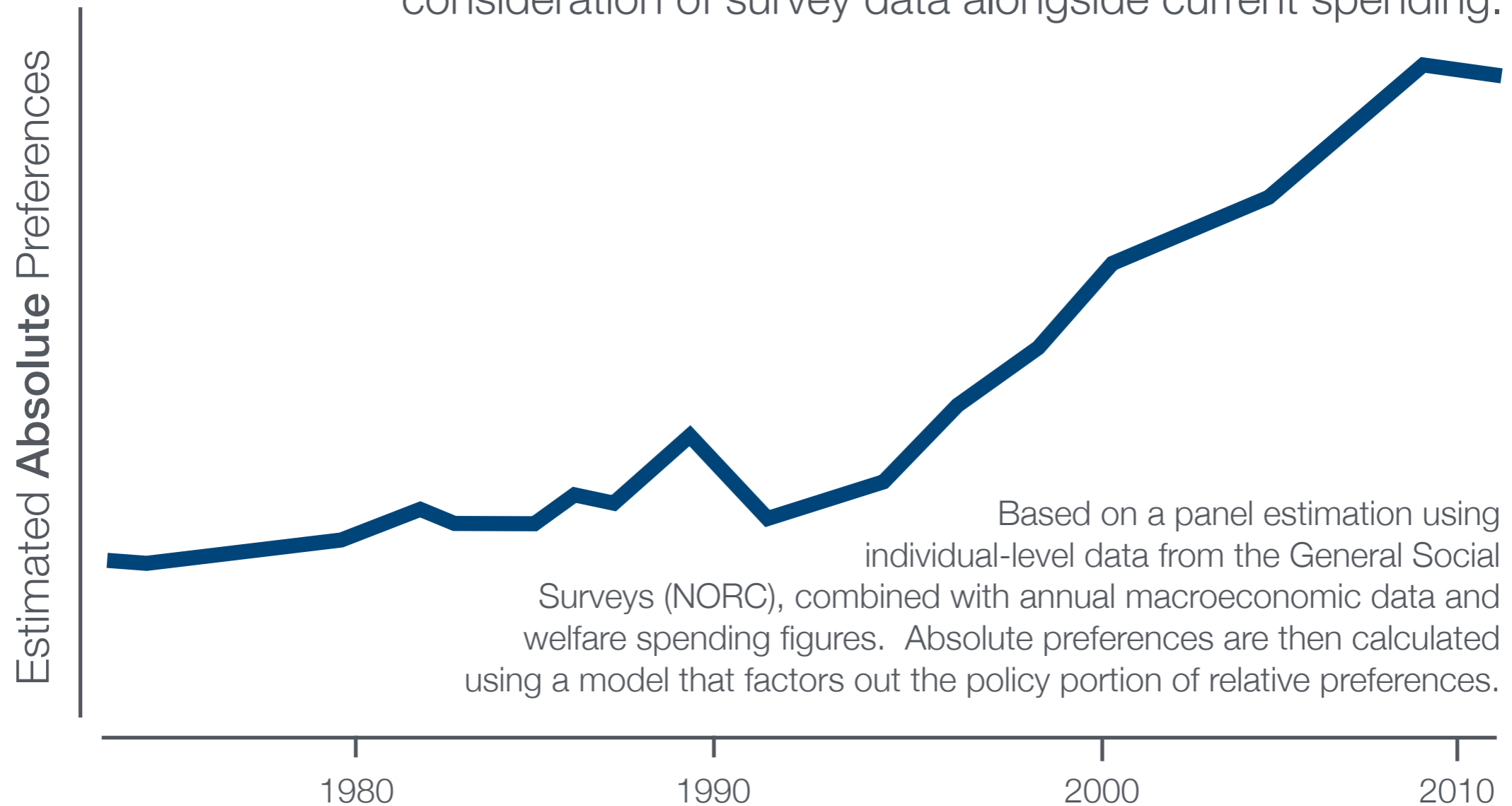


(A) The importance of & difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy



(A) The importance of & difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy

They have!, driven largely by macroeconomic factors. But revealing the absolute preferences that underly relative preferences requires a careful consideration of survey data alongside current spending.



(A) The importance of & difficulty with measuring public preferences for policy

That said, the public is not responsive to macroeconomics, or government spending, in all countries, across all policy domains. And exploring variation in public responsiveness offers an opportunity not just to look at the structure of public preferences, but to explore the potential for representative democracy...

(B) The political-institutional arrangements that enhance public responsiveness

Thermostatic responsiveness to public policy is contingent on there being a sufficient amount of clear and accurate information about policy change available to citizens.

Institutions are critical to the 'clarity' of policy signals, and our work suggests that vertical divisions of power (federalism) are especially important.

(B) The political-institutional arrangements that enhance public responsiveness

For instance, we estimate a model in which (for country c at time t)...

$$\text{Relative Prefs}_{ct} = f \left(\begin{array}{l} \text{spending}_{ct} \times \text{federalism}_c, \\ \text{support for redistribution}_{ct}, \\ \text{unemployment}_{ct} \end{array} \right)$$

Data are from the International Social Survey Program 'Role of Government I-IV cumulative file', combining results from the four years in which the survey has included a battery of questions on government policies, namely, 1985, 1990, 1996 and 2006, across 13 countries. Question wording is as follows: Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Please show which actions you are in favor of and which you are against: Cuts in government spending (strongly in favor, in favor, neither in favor nor against, against, strong against).

(B) The political-institutional arrangements that enhance public responsiveness

Results suggest that public responsiveness is dampened in highly federalized countries. Estimated feedback coefficients are as follows:

low federalism (25th percentile, e.g., Ireland)	-2.33*
moderate federalism (50th percentile, e.g., France)	-1.95*
high federalism (75th percentile, e.g., Norway)	-0.17

* $p < .05$, where coefficients capture change in net support for spending, with a maximum range of -100 to +100, as a result of a 1% change in spending (as proportion of GDP).

(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

Thermostatic responsiveness is contingent on there being a sufficient amount of clear and accurate information about policy change available to citizens.

Mass media (like non-federalism) are critical to the 'clarity' of policy signals.

(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

One concern is that media coverage must include a sufficient amount of accurate information about policy. Another is that media must be sufficiently free, so that reporting is accurate.

Controls on press freedoms can lead to less accurate signals about policy change. This can make it more difficult for citizens to hold accurate opinions and, consequently, more difficult for citizens to hold their governments accountable.

(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

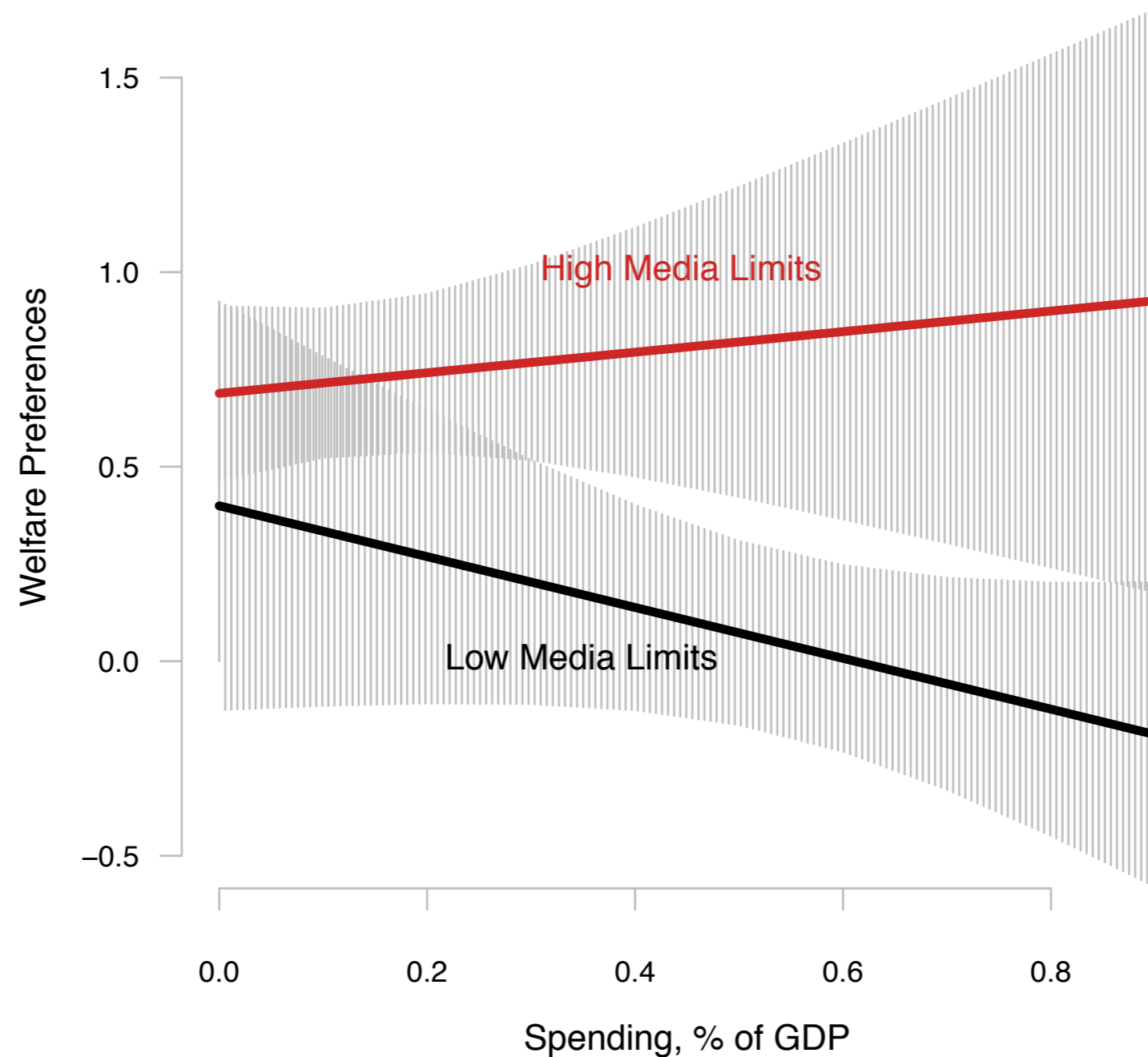
We estimate a model in which (for respondent i in country c)...

$$\text{Relative Prefs}_{ic} = f \left(\begin{array}{l} \text{spending}_c \times \text{press limits}_c, \\ \text{support for redistribution}_i, \\ \text{political ideology}_i, \\ \text{demographics}_i \end{array} \right)$$

Data from Wave 4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), a cross-national survey that thus far includes over 30,000 individuals in 27 countries. Merged with OECD SOCX and Freedom House data. Relative Prefs are based on “For the next questions, please say whether you would like to see more or less government expenditure in each of the following areas. Remember if you say ‘more’ it could require a tax increase, or ‘less’, it could require a reduction in those government services. (Response categories: Much more than now, Somewhat more than now, The same as now, Somewhat less than now, Much less than now) ...Welfare Benefits

Dan Hiaeshutter-Rice, Stuart Soroka & Christopher Wlezien. 2017. “Freedom of the Press and Thermostatic Responsiveness,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the MPSA. [\[link\]](#)

(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action



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(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

It thus appears as though responsiveness to welfare spending is contingent on a free media.

How can we be confident that our results - relying on cross-sectional data across just 27 countries - are not just luck?

First, the same results obtain for data on health and pensions spending. Using measures of political freedom does not produce the same results as using press freedom specifically. In addition, there is evidence that people *can* learn about policy from media...

(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

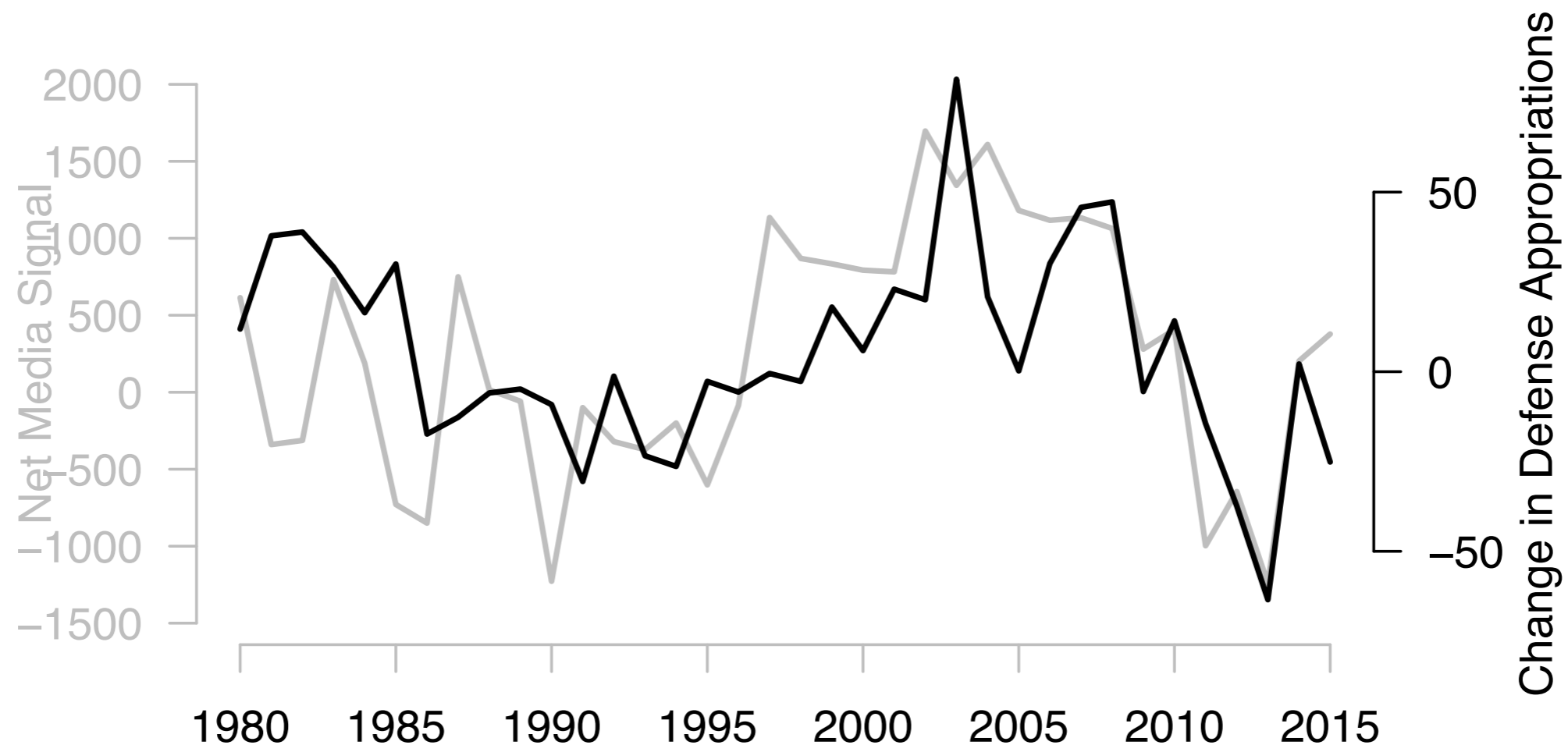
We rely here on a database of over 600,000 stories related to defense, drawn from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, from 1980 to 2015.

Of the 602,168 articles dealing with defense, there are 233,645 articles (40%) that include at least one mention of spending.

Put differently, our search finds an average of 17.7 articles referencing defense spending every week for the 35 years from 1980 to 2015.

(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

Moreover, these spending cues are roughly in line with actual government spending



(C) The role of media in public responsiveness to government action

Coding exercises with MTurkers suggest that people can readily identify spending cues.

Work with the American National Election study suggests that individuals' perceptions of spending are driven by both actual spending, and the 'media policy signal.'

Discussion

For US defense policy, there is evidence that media coverage can facilitate public responsiveness to policy. There also is evidence in past work that public responsiveness is high for defense policy in the US, and that governments tend to react to public preferences in this domain.

In short: in a salient, centralized (non-federal) policy domain, in a country with high levels of press freedom, there is a strong reciprocal relationship between public preferences and public policy.

Discussion

But not all policy domains are salient and centralized; and not all countries have high levels of media freedom.

Each of these factors can reduce the clarity of the signal the public receives. Public opinion may lack coherence; media may offer inaccurate information; and the strength of opinion-policy links can decrease as a result.

Discussion

As students of public opinion and policy-making, our task is to be careful and systematic in the measurement of policy preferences, both to produce information that is valuable for policymakers, and also to better understand (and gauge) the institutional and domain-specific conditions under which to expect high or low levels of public responsiveness, and representative democratic governance.