

A Rational Postcommunist Public?

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Abstract: There has been considerable skepticism about whether postcommunist publics are prepared to rule their countries. The legacies of communism and the rigors of the transition are said to produce citizens whose opinions are unstable and ill-informed. This paper tests this proposition by considering the nature of public opinion in the Czech Republic from 1990 to 2008. Methodologically, the paper replicates the work of Page and Shapiro on the rational public. It asks whether Czech public opinion is rational in the sense of being “real, coherent, stable, and understandable.” Its main conclusion is that postcommunist public opinion is more rational than the conventional wisdom suggests. Opinions on most policies change slowly if at all and when they do change the changes are prompted more by gradual shifts in mores than political manipulation.

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The quality of governance in a democracy can be compromised in two ways. On the one hand, political leaders may free themselves from democratic control. They may engage in corruption and rent-seeking and preserve their positions through clientelism or charisma. This is the standard complaint in new democracies. Rulers have purportedly come to power through populist or nationalist campaigns and then used their positions to enrich their cronies and entrench themselves in power.

But there is another way that democracy can come to grief. Citizens may hold irrational beliefs about the right policies or may change their opinions so frequently that they are a poor guide to action. In this case, politicians may actually follow public opinion as we would expect in a democracy, but policy would not serve citizens' interests precisely because citizens were demanding incoherent or contradictory policies.

Which of these diagnoses is correct matters because each has very different policy implications. If governance is poor because elites are pursuing their own interests, the solution is more democracy. Citizens should be empowered and given the means to hold their rulers accountable. If the problem is with citizens, however, the solution is to insulate politicians from their influence through anti-majoritarian institutions or limits on the state's power.

Whether there is elite failure or citizen failure is a particularly important question in new democracies where there are fewer stabilizing forces and democratic traditions to cushion the effects of poor policy choices. To date most work has attributed policy failures in these countries to political elites; they have managed to avoid democratic accountability and thus pursue policies that benefit them and their supporters rather than society as a whole. But there are also reasons to worry about the ability of citizens to govern.

The worry has been particularly acute in the postcommunist region where the repression of the communist era is said to have created citizens who are "civilizationally incompetent", "infantilized", and possess a sense of "learned helplessness" (Marody 1990, Schopflin 1991, Sztompka 1991). Yet except for a handful of studies of economic reform, there have been few attempts to determine whether public opinion in the region is a reliable guide to policy making (Przeworski 1991).

This paper follows the lead of Page and Shapiro (1992) to ask whether postcommunist public opinion is rational in the sense of being "real, coherent, stable, and understandable". Using an original dataset – still being assembled – of all nationwide public opinion polls fielded in the Czech Republic from 1990 to the present, it considers whether policy preferences change rapidly or slowly and whether they respond to new circumstances in reasonable ways.

The preliminary results presented here suggest that public opinion is relatively rational in this sense. Opinion on most issues is stable even over substantial lengths of time. The changes that do occur further appear to be a function of changes in social conditions rather than a product of whim or elite manipulation. At least in the case of the Czech

Republic, politicians could reasonably rely on public opinion in making policy without endangering the public weal.

1. Theory

For many theorists, the main threat to democracy comes from self-interested politicians or interest groups who subvert the principle of citizen rule. In this view, if the people were really ruling – if policy followed the preferences of the median voter – then democracy would produce better results.

But is this assumption true? An older literature expresses doubts as much about elites as citizens. For centuries, political philosophers were suspicious of democratic rule because they assumed that most citizens did not possess the information or reasoning skills to fruitfully participate in politics. The worry was that democracy would become mob rule because citizens were incapable of both understanding policy and acting effectively on their understandings.

Some of these worries have been confirmed in modern empirical work. In a comprehensive study of political knowledge in the United States, Delli Carpini and Keeter found disturbingly low levels of knowledge among American citizens (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Few citizens knew the basic rules, actors, and substance of American politics. Given their lack of knowledge, it is not surprising that the policy preferences of citizens have been found to be incoherent and unstable. In a classic study, Converse (1964) found that citizens hold contradictory opinions and change their opinions over time with little rhyme or reason.

Other scholars have come to the defense of the mass public. Thus, some argue that it is possible for citizens to act rationally and effectively even in a low-information environment. They can use heuristics and cues such as partisanship or trusted opinion leaders (Popkin 1991, Lupia and McCubbins 1998). They may also use on-line processing, incorporating new information into their evaluations of politics and politicians but then forgetting this information (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989).

Moreover, as Page and Shapiro (1992) point out, it is possible that the citizenry in the aggregate behaves in a rational and well-informed manner even if most of its individual components do not. The reason is the miracle of aggregation. If the mass of uninformed citizens act randomly, then their actions cancel each other out, leaving the opinions of the better informed to show through. In these ways, citizen competence can be salvaged from its seeming inconstancy and ignorance.

Again, there are counters to these points. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) point out that heuristics do not provide effective guides in many situations. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that public opinion would look very different if citizens possessed more political knowledge (Althaus 2003, Lau and Redlawsk 2006). Even the miracle of aggregation may not work as billed (Althaus 2003). For example, Caplan (2006) has

argued that opinions on economic policy are systematically biased, so that canceling out does not occur.

One important shortcoming in this research is its nearly exclusive focus on the US and to a lesser extent other established democracies. In a variety of ways, American politics presents an anomaly in the developed world (Lipset 1996) and it is likely to be so here as well. More important, there has been little study of these issues in a new democracy where worries about citizen competence might seem to be most severe and most consequential. It is to just this situation that I now turn.

2. Citizens in Postcommunist Europe

If citizens in the world's oldest democracy have difficulty recalling basic factual information about politics, what can be expected of citizens in postcommunist Europe? Indeed, most scholars have been skeptical of their ability to reason in effective ways about politics.

Much of this work blames the communist inheritance (Sztompka 1991, Schopflin 1991). In the first place, most citizens spent their formative years in a regime that never called on them to have real opinions. They were instead expected to parrot the party line. Similarly, they received almost no genuine information about public affairs and learned to discount whatever information the government and media did provide as biased propaganda. As a result, they were far behind democratic citizens in developing the basic storehouse of political information and reasoning skills that citizens usually build up over their life course.

The repression and forced mobilization of the communist era also purportedly generated second-order effects that might harm democratic capacities. Because there was little room for influence in the public arena, citizens became apathetic. Excessive state paternalism created a syndrome known as learned helplessness: citizens ceased to take an active part in managing their own affairs and came to rely on a benevolent state (Marody 1990).

These problems were exacerbated by the transition to democracy and capitalism. Citizens now had to readjust themselves to a brand-new and unfamiliar political system. New parties and personalities emerged and disappeared with startling frequency (Rose and Munro 2003, Birch 2003). Even political institutions were not always stable. The Czechs saw their state break apart (Innes 2001). The transition to capitalism had similar dislocating effects as citizens had to scramble to make ends meet and find new careers. These hardships likely limited the energy they had to devote to politics. Finally, a free media had to be built up from scratch and could not always be counted on to fully inform citizens (Milton 2000).

While this litany of problems suggests that public opinion would be uninformed and incoherent, postcommunist citizens did have some resources. They were in general well-educated. Almost all were literate and had attended high quality secondary schools. The more prosperous countries of Eastern Europe did not feature a large underclass that was

excluded from politics or cut off from the mass media. One might even expect citizens to have a heightened interest in politics. The euphoria at the fall of communism suggested as much (Tismaneanu 1992). More practically, new governments had to make so many fundamental decisions which would affect the livelihoods of citizens that they had good reasons to pay close attention to politics.

These expectations constitute a set of alternative theories about the capabilities of citizens in Eastern Europe. Were communist legacies determinative or could resourceful citizens extract themselves from the past once given access to information and the freedom to act on it. In short, could political knowledge be built up quickly or does it require the work of generations?

3. Methods

The question I address in this paper is the extent to which public opinion on policy issues during the postcommunist transition is “real, coherent, stable, and understandable” (Page and Shapiro 1992). Do citizens change their opinions frequently, by large margins, and for little reason, or are their opinions relatively constant and reasonable responses to changed conditions?

Methodologically, I follow the work of Page and Shapiro (1992). The data is responses to all survey questions on policy preferences that have been repeated over time in the Czech Republic in identical forms. The focus on policy preferences is because these questions ask about a relatively unchanging subject. While opinions on a politician or party should change as his/her actions and the environment change, opinions on a policy (e.g., abortion or taxes) should be relatively constant. Because I am interested in the stability of opinion and its determinants, the survey questions need to be repeated in identical form so that one can gauge levels of change. This helps to avoid potentially large question wording effects.

The data themselves are the marginal frequencies (“marginals”) of responses, in other words, the percentage of respondents giving various answers. “Don’t know” or “No opinion” answers were excluded from the calculation of marginals in order to produce more readily comparable data.

All of the analyses focus on the Czech Republic over the entire course of the transition. The Czech Republic was chosen for several reasons. Most important, it has a relatively long democratic lifespan among new democracies. This is necessary to capture changes over time. It also offers a high-quality opinion polling sector whose research is deemed reliable even at the start of the transition. The vicissitudes of Czech politics also make this a useful case study. Once considered the darling of the post-communist transition, the Czech Republic later fell into political and economic turmoil which provide more grist for analysis (Pehe 2002).

The data are from the major Czech survey organizations: CVVM, STEM, and Factum Invenio as well as international surveys like the Eurobarometer, the World Values

Survey, the New Democracies Barometer, and the International Social Survey Project. Since I am still in the process of gathering data, the results presented here should be viewed as preliminary. To date, all of the data have been gathered from online press releases. Ultimately, I plan to gather data on all repeated policy-related survey questions asked from 1990 to the present. The present data is a small fraction of the planned dataset, but still presents an interesting first look at the rationality of postcommunist public opinion.

4. Aggregate Results

How stable and reasonable is public opinion in the Czech Republic? My first concern is whether there are large swings in policy preferences. Page and Shapiro (1992) define a significant change in opinion with a 6% rule. A 6% change up or down represents a noticeable change which is almost always statistically significant at the .05 level. They measure these changes from local peaks to troughs or troughs to peaks in order to maximize the size of the changes.

Using this definition, Table 1 presents the number of significant and non-significant changes in public opinion. The initial results show that public opinion is relatively stable. Of the 77 repeated policy questions (repeated here refers to changes from peak to trough, not all questions), only 32% showed a significant change and a clear majority – 68% showed no significant change.¹ This compares to 42% showing a change in Page and Shapiro's data and 58% showing no change. Czech public opinion is at least as stable as American public opinion.

Table 1: Changes in Public Opinion

	No change	Change	Abrupt	Fluctuation
All issues	68% (52)	32% (25)	5% (4)	12% (9)
Foreign policy	81% (21)	19% (5)	8% (2)	8% (2)
Domestic policy	61% (31)	39% (20)	4% (2)	14% (7)

Note: Abrupt changes and fluctuations are subsets of changes.

These results hold if one breaks down issues into foreign policy and domestic policy. In both cases a majority of repeated questions yielded no change, though foreign policy views were more stable than domestic policy ones. Interestingly, Page and Shapiro find the reverse finding which may be due to the difference between a superpower who can dictate to the world and a small, vulnerable country who is dictated to.

Probing further, the size of the significant changes was not typically large. Of the 25 significant changes, more than half (56%) were less than 10 percentage points, another 28% were between 10 and 15 percentage points, while only 16% were greater than 15 percentage points. Page and Shapiro go further and define an abrupt change as a change of greater than 10% per year. As Table 1 shows, such abrupt changes were rare in the

¹ In fact, I have data on 17⁷ repeated questions, but the “peak to trough” rule eliminates many of them. For example, if support for higher taxes moves from 5% to 10% to 15% to 12% over four successive polls, then the 10% value would be dropped because it is neither a peak nor a trough.

Czech Republic with only 5% of all repeated questions yielding abrupt changes and only 1 in 6 of all significant changes were abrupt.

They similarly define a fluctuation as two or more significant changes in opposite directions within two years or three or more significant changes within four years. As with abrupt changes, fluctuations were relatively rare though they were somewhat more common than abrupt changes. The majority of movements could then be described as gradual, a category that categorizes all movements that were not abrupt or fluctuating.

These aggregate results suggest a reasonable degree of stability to Czech public opinion. But to show that public opinion moves in reasonable ways, it is necessary to look more closely at the substance of these preferences. Are changes understandable responses to real political, economic, and social circumstances? Or do they appear to be mere “whims” or manufactured by politicians themselves? To determine whether public opinion is responding to general social changes or to political manipulation, one needs to situate public opinion in context. To do this, I look more closely at opinions on foreign policy, social issues, and economic policy.

5. Foreign Policy

As noted above, foreign policy preferences are extremely stable in the Czech Republic and this despite significant controversies over issues like EU membership, the Beneš decrees, and the installation of an anti-missile radar system. Given the lack of change, the likelihood of manipulation is low. These appear to be the public’s “true” preferences.

EU Membership

One of the slogans of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia was the return to Europe. Though the European Union was initially hesitant about welcoming the new postcommunist democracies, in 1993 the EU established the Copenhagen criteria for accession. The Czech Republic submitted its application in 1995 and proceeded to enter negotiations with the EU.

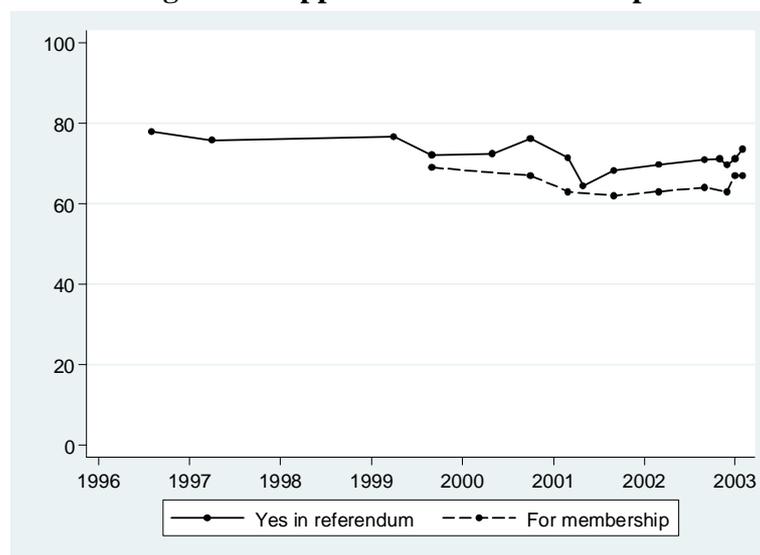
Political controversy dogged the accession process. While the Civic Democrats (ODS) who ruled from 1992 to 1997 did not openly oppose accession, their leader, Václav Klaus, frequently expressed serious doubts, criticizing the overly-bureaucratic nature of the EU and its threat to Czech sovereignty. ODS thus frequently sparred with the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, and Freedom Union who were strongly in favor of entering the EU. The Communists along with the extremist Republicans meanwhile opposed accession altogether.

Despite this controversy, the Czech Republic did complete all of the accession requirements and scheduled a referendum on accession for June 2003. In preparation for the referendum, the government began a purportedly neutral public information campaign in February 2003 which in reality encouraged citizens to vote “yes” in the referendum. The official campaign was allocated 200 million CZK which nearly equaled the

combined spending of the five major political parties in the previous year's parliamentary election. In the referendum, 77% of those voting favored accession (turnout was 55%) and the Czech Republic proceeded to enter the EU on 1 May 2004.

How did public opinion evolve in relation to the EU? Figure 1 presents data from CVVM on the percentages of Czechs who said that they would vote 'yes' in the referendum and the percentage of those who were in favor of accession. What is readily apparent is that despite a high level of controversy, public opinion remained relatively stable. A fairly consistent 70-80% of Czechs said that they would vote 'yes' in the referendum – which was quite close to the actual result – and a similarly consistent but somewhat lower percentage was in favor of accession.² Though this percentage is relatively high, it still ranked the Czechs as one of the more Euroskeptics of the new members.

Figure 1: Support for EU membership



Noteworthy as well is that the public campaign for accession seems to have had little effect in altering preferences; there is only a slight uptick in support in the period leading up to the referendum. In fact, Hanley (2005) finds that “Czech voters were minimally influenced by the campaign. Rather, they took their cue from longstanding positive linkages of ‘Europe’ with democracy, market reform, and Czech identity.”

Beneš Decrees

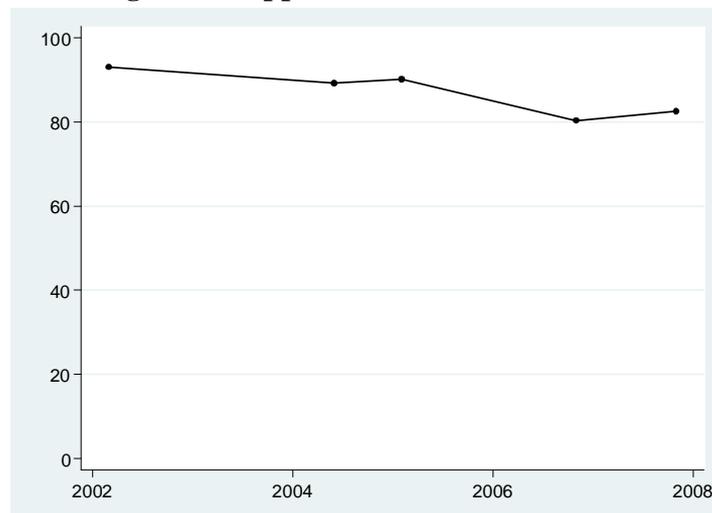
A perennial controversy in Czech foreign relation is the Beneš Decrees. These decrees were issued in the closing stages of World War II by then President Beneš and among other things sanctioned the expropriation of German and Hungarian property owners in Czechoslovakia, including the large Sudeten German population. These decrees became

² It is not clear why some individuals who were voting ‘yes’ would oppose accession, though this might capture Klaus’s thought that while accession was not a good thing, there was little alternative open to the Czechs.

the object of controversy after the fall of communism when descendants of those expropriated, many organized in the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft, began to protest the decrees and demand their revocation as a condition for normalizing Czech-German relations and even for EU accession.

The Czech political class was nearly united in their defense of the decrees and often played on worries that revocation of the decrees would lead to massive restitution claims. Only a few politicians, notably Václav Havel, expressed regret over the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, while the majority argued that the Germans were themselves to blame because they sided with Nazi occupiers. Not surprisingly, Czech public opinion has remained staunchly in favor of maintaining the decrees in force. As Figure 2 shows, from 2002 to 2008, 80 to 90% of those queried supported the decrees, though there has been some moderation of this support towards the present. Surprisingly, this moderation came after EU accession when Germany held far less leverage over the country.

Figure 2: Support for the Beneš Decrees



Radar

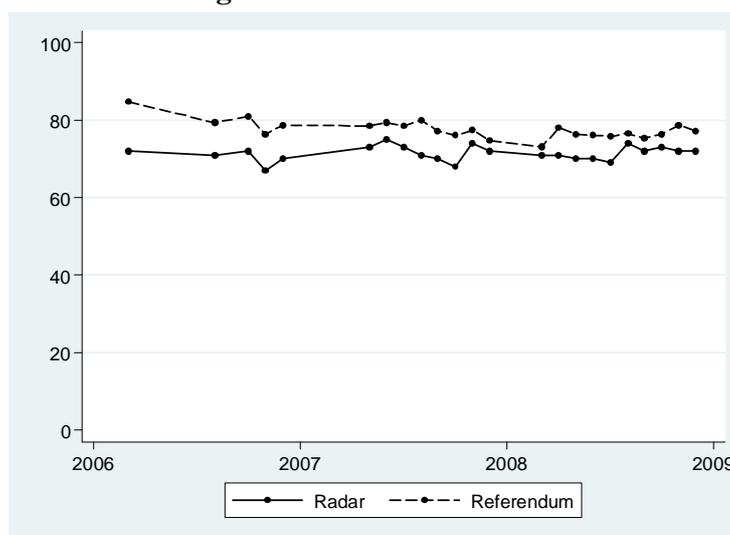
The preeminent Czech foreign policy issue of the last several years has been the proposed installation of a radar base in the Czech Republic as part of a missile defense system that would purportedly defend Europe against attack from Iran and North Korea. (The actual missiles would be located in Poland.) The Czech Republic began formal negotiations with the US over construction of the radar in February 2007 and the center-right government of Mirek Topolánek signed a treaty with the US in July 2008, but could not get the treaty through parliament. Since the fall of that government and its replacement by a caretaker administration, the issue has been put on hold with the US now expressing skepticism about the system.

The debate over the radar has been fierce. The center-right government elected in 2006 (with the exception of the Greens) has been strongly in support of the radar. The Minister of Defense, the Christian Democrat Vlasta Parkanová, even composed a song praising the

radar. The arguments of its supporters drew on traditional fears of Russia as much as rogue nations and a desire to establish closer relations with the US. The leader of the opposition Social Democrats Jiří Paroubek claimed indifference about the issue but pledged to follow his party whose members were vehemently opposed to the radar. The Communist Party was even more strongly opposed. Opponents cited environmental issues, the cost and feasibility of the system, and the danger of having Russia as an enemy.

Given the vociferous debate over the issue and the determination of the government to push it through come hell or high water, public opinion has been surprisingly constant. Over the past three and half years, there has been almost no change in the public's preferences. Figure 3 presents levels of support for the construction of a radar base in the Czech Republic as well as opinions on whether citizens should decide on the issue in a referendum. Two-thirds of the public has consistently opposed constructing the radar, a percentage that has remained constant through changing US presidents and Czech governments.³ An even higher and similarly consistent proportion of citizens believes that a referendum should be held on the issue. Despite significant attempts by both sides to sway public opinion, there has been little change over time.

Figure 3: Radar Installation



6. Social Issues

Compared to foreign policy, there has been more change in preferences on social issues like abortion, homosexuality, and the death penalty. But these changes look more like secular trends in the direction of more tolerance of abortion and homosexuals and less

³ There have been some claims from the Czech secret service, the BIS, that Russian agents have been trying to influence Czech public opinion, however, the outward signs of this influence are not immediately obvious. See, “Ruští agenti chtějí v Česku vyvolat odpor k radaru, varovala BIS”, *zpravy.idnes.cz*, 25 September 2008.

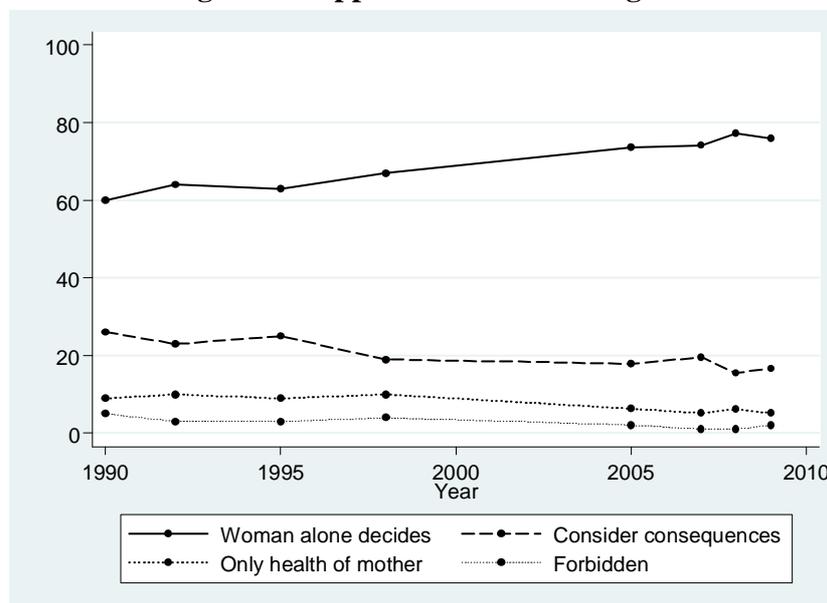
support for the death penalty. Such secular changes are common on social issues in American data and appear to be evidence of changing mores rather than other nefarious forces.

Abortion

The Czech lands are among Europe's most liberal when it comes to abortion. The procedure was legalized in 1957 and most restrictions were lifted in 1986. The abortion rate rose dramatically during the late eighties, but then fell just as dramatically in the nineties likely due to the increased availability of birth control (Možný 2002). Currently, abortion is legal unconditionally in the first trimester and through the second trimester with medical indications, though it is only covered by insurance if there is a medical justification. Politically, only the relatively small Christian Democratic Union has opposed legalized abortion, but it has not found allies with any of the larger parties.

As Figure 4 shows, the public has supported the liberal abortion regime with over 60% of the population believing that the woman alone should decide. This percentage has increased over the first two decades of the transition reaching nearly 80% in 2009. It is not clear what is causing this increase, though the low salience of the issue helps to exclude political manipulation. Meanwhile less than 10% of the population favors a complete ban on abortion or a ban with exceptions for the life of the mother. A recent poll of 10 European countries meanwhile found that the Czechs were the most in favor of a woman's right to choose.

Figure 4: Support for Abortion Rights

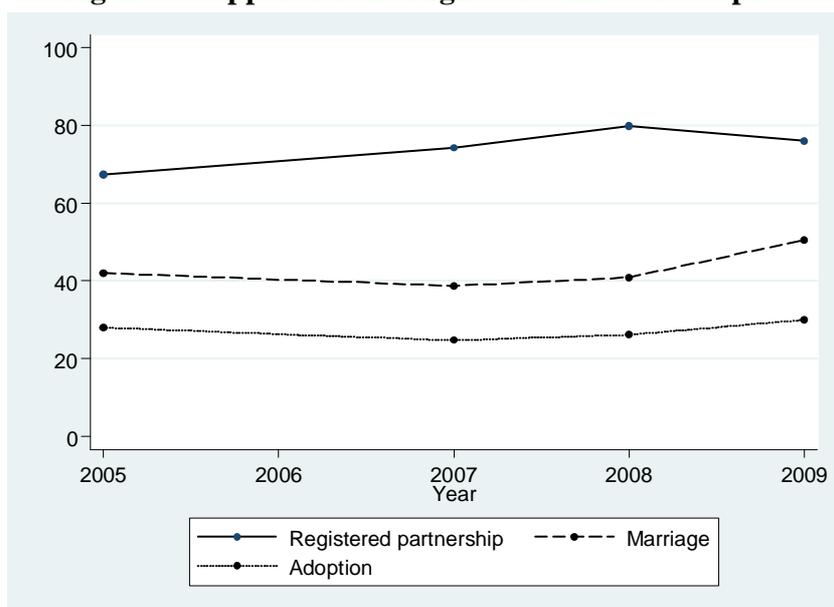


Homosexuality

Czechs have long been viewed as tolerant in matters of sexual morality, particularly by Eastern European standards. Homosexual sex was legalized in 1962, though persecution of homosexuals was common under the communist regime. Since the revolution, there has been greater acceptance of homosexuality, and laws to create civil partnerships were rejected narrowly by parliament in 1998, 2001, 2003, and 2005, before being finally accepted in 2006. The partnership bill was supported by the Social Democrats, the Communists, and Freedom Union and opposed by the Civic Democrats and Christian Democrats.

Public opinion backs up the impression of tolerance. Figure 5 shows that from 2005 to 2008, a substantial majority of Czechs supported civil unions, with the numbers rising somewhat over the period. Considerably smaller, but again mostly unchanging percentages, however, supported genuine marriage rights or giving same-sex couples the right to adopt children. Neither of these rights is currently granted to same-sex couples. The main impression is of gradually increasing tolerance of homosexuality which accords with trends elsewhere in the world.

Figure 5: Support for the Rights of Same-Sex Couples



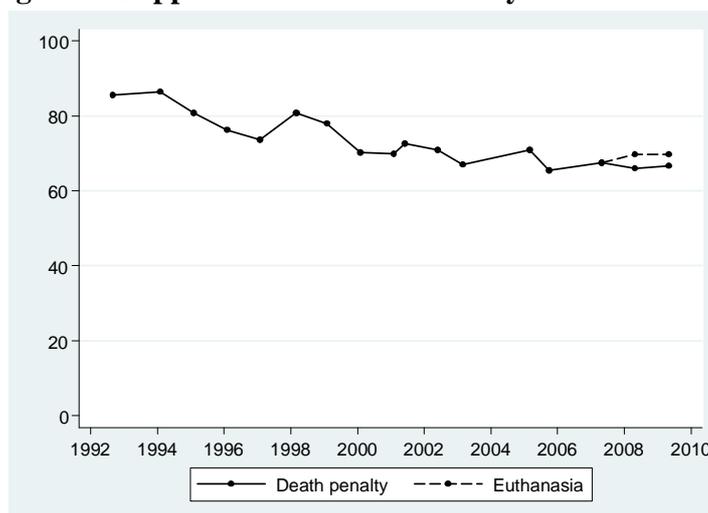
Death Penalty and Euthanasia

The death penalty was legal under the prewar and the communist regime and 1,217 executions were carried out from 1918 to 1990. Surprisingly, the majority of them (730 or 60%) took place in the relatively democratic years of 1945 to 1948 (Frommer 2005). The communist regime meanwhile carried out 456 judicial executions, though it was responsible for many more deaths in labor camps and prisons. The democratic government elected in 1990 quickly moved to ban the death penalty as part of its criminal

law reform and this ban was further entrenched by its inclusion in Article 6 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms which became part of the country's constitutional order in 1991.

While the communist regime's abuse of the death penalty and other harsh criminal penalties might have been expected to reduce the public's tolerance for the punishment, support remained high in the early nineties. Somewhat surprisingly there has been a gradual decline in support – by about 15% from the low 80s to the high 60s – over the course of the transition. The decline is surprising because it coincided with a dramatic rise in crime which might be expected to lead the public to favor harsher penalties (Možný 2002). The decline in support was not likely a product of political manipulation as few parties devoted attention to the theme. More likely is a gradual diffusion of European norms along with generational replacement, though the exact mechanisms of this diffusion are uncertain.

Figure 6: Support for the Death Penalty and Euthanasia



Euthanasia has been an even less politicized issue than the death penalty in the Czech Republic. A bill to legalize and regulate euthanasia was proposed in the lower house of the Czech parliament in February 2008 and in the upper house in June 2008, but it was rejected in both cases. Still, no major party has come out in favor of legalized euthanasia.

The public, however, disagrees with the political elite. Public opinion has been tracked far less extensively on this issue with three identical polls conducted from 2007 to 2009. The results show little change with a consistent two-thirds of the public supporting euthanasia.

7. Domestic Policy

The category of domestic policy here is a dustbin for domestic issues that do not fall into the social issues category. It is here – on issues like nuclear power and presidential elections – that one sees fairly large moves in public opinion, though not moves from

majority to minority support or vice versa. It is these issues which constitute the substance of most day-to-day politics – which may account for the changes in preferences – and so it will be interesting if these results extend to a wider selection of preferences.

Structure of the Economy

The transformation of the planned economy was the central issue of the Czech transition. Policymakers had to decide what sorts of reforms and what speed of reform would best ensure economic prosperity. Alternative answers to these questions constituted the main cleavage in the Czech political system (Kitschelt et al. 1999). Parties and their voters could be neatly lined up on a single axis ranging from maintenance of state control to a rapid transition to a market without adjectives. The extent and speed of economic reforms were thus the fundamental issues on the table during elections with one bloc of parties typically supporting speedy and thorough reforms and the other continued state intervention.

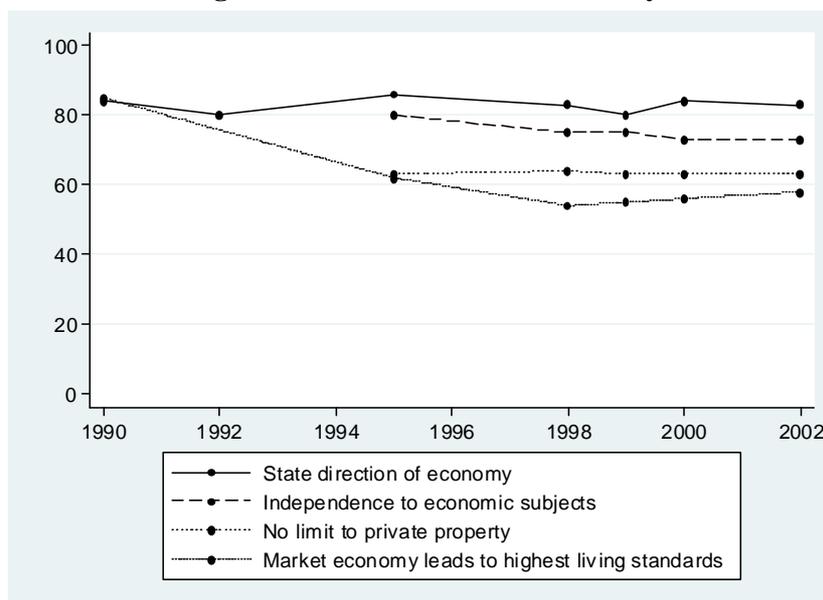
Early in the transition, the market bloc led by Klaus's ODS was more successful and it managed to carry out a series of rapid reforms including liberalization of most prices and privatization of a large portion of the economy. Though doubts about the effectiveness of these reforms (particularly privatization) emerged later (Orenstein 2001), for a time the country was regarded as the region's leading reformer. However as the country hit economic difficulties in part caused by corruption, public sentiment shifted to the left and by 1998 the Social Democrats had won a plurality of the vote with the argument that a change in course was necessary. What Havel at the time called the country's *blbá nálada* (bad mood) was mainly a consequence of disaffection with the state of the economy.

One might thus expect large changes in policy preferences of the public over time. Indeed, evaluations of the reform process (whether it was a net benefit or loss) closely tracked the state of the economy. Figure 7, however, presents trends on more general preferences over the nature of the economy which capture core, underlying beliefs rather than a changing sense of how things are going. These questions asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that "The state should direct the development of the economy", "The state should grant economic subjects the greatest possible independence", "The size of private property should not be at all limited", and "A market economy is the path to the highest living standards."

What stands out from the trends is their relative stability. The support for state direction and private property began and ended the tumultuous twelve years in virtually the exact same position. Support for independence for economic subjects dropped slightly and only belief in the efficaciousness of the market economy plummeted and that mostly over the first five years of the transition. Of the 12 peak to trough changes in these series, 8 were small and only 4 large. Despite a roller-coaster ride in economic performance and massive changes in the nature of the economy, the public continued to support a similar kind of economy that combined state direction and private enterprise which Orenstein (2001) has called the social-liberal path. (Indeed, the criticism of rationality that one

could make here is that these beliefs were incoherent, that one could not support both state direction and independence for economic subjects.

Figure 7: Structure of the Economy



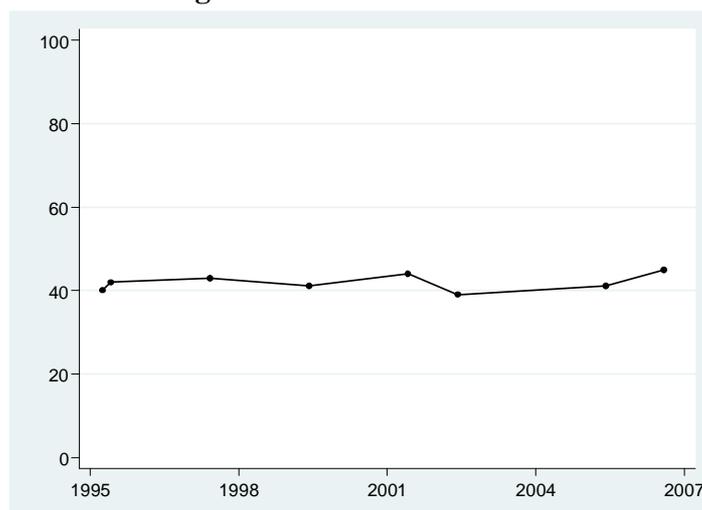
Church Restitution

Czechs are distinguished from most of their neighbors by relatively lukewarm feelings towards established religion. Surveys consistently find high levels of atheism and low levels of church attendance. This is commonly attributed to past history, especially the Austrian-led counter-reformation which, in one influential interpretation of Czech history, wiped out a more authentically Czech version of Christianity associated with Jan Hus.

The Communists not only persecuted Catholic priests, they also seized most of the Church's vast property holdings. After the fall of communism, the Church began to reassert its rights and demand the restitution of Church property seized under the communist regime. The Church, however, found few allies among the political elite. The Christian Democrats were the only party to endorse wholesale restitution while other parties played on fears that restitution would empty government coffers. As a result, the process of restitution has been glacially slow in the Czech Republic with only properties of "little monetary value" being returned (Enyedi and O'Mahony 2005). A commission named in 1999 to resolve the issue has still not yielded concrete results. This contrasts with Hungary where comprehensive restitution laws were passed in 1996 and 1997 and the Church has been gradually compensated for its losses. Failure to address restitution is matched in a similar failure to reach an agreement with the Vatican over the status of the Catholic Church.

Turning to public opinion, shown in Figure 8, one sees an ocean of stability despite controversy among elites. Over the 12 years for which identical questions were asked, support for Church restitution has never risen higher than 45% or dropped lower than 39%. Czechs remain opposed to church restitution – likely the reason why no comprehensive solution has emerged – and have not changed their opinions very much if at all.

Figure 8: Church Restitution



Nuclear Energy

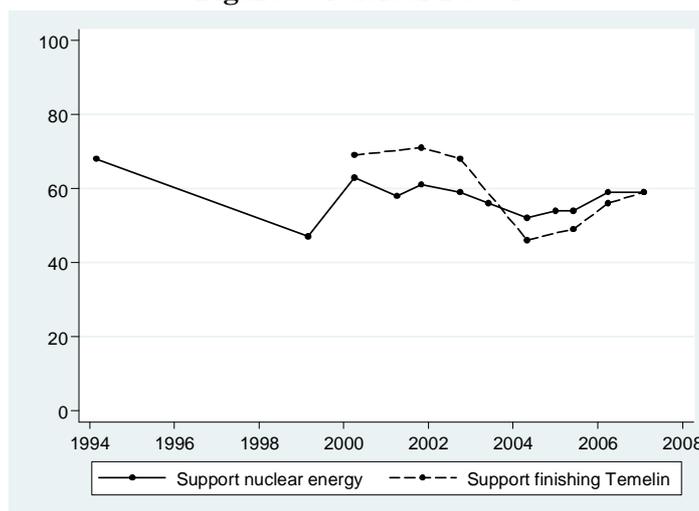
Czechs have lived with nuclear power for a long time. The uranium mines near Jachymov helped supply the Soviet nuclear program and the country's first nuclear power plant was opened in Slovakia in 1972. The first plant on the Czech lands began operating at Dukovany in 1985. The accident at Chernobyl was traumatic for Czechs and helped encourage its dissident environmental movement, but did not stop communist plans to expand nuclear energy. Construction started on a plant at Temelin in 1987 and it was this plant which dominated Czech debate in the nineties.

The Temelin plant was planned with four reactors, but this number was reduced to two after the revolution. The opening of the plant suffered numerous delays and cost overruns as the design was changed to meet European standards. Despite these changes, Temelin became the object of considerable controversy. Environmentalists, particularly from Austria, have criticized the safety of the plant (an untried combination of Russian and Western technology) and nuclear power in general, while supporters (including most of the main Czech political parties) have noted that the plant would help the country replace its heavily polluting coal-fired power plants. Temelin opened in 2000 despite official protests from the Austrian government and even border blockades by Austrian environmental groups.

Again, these controversies have had little effect on aggregate public opinion. As Figure 9 shows, a consistent majority of Czechs – hovering around 60% - has favored the

development of nuclear power. A similarly high percentage has favored the completion of Temelin with its full complement of four reactors. This consistency may have less to do with considered views of nuclear power than with reactions to perceived Austrian bullying. Debate over Temelin focused as much on Czech sovereign rights as the actual safety and benefits of the plant.

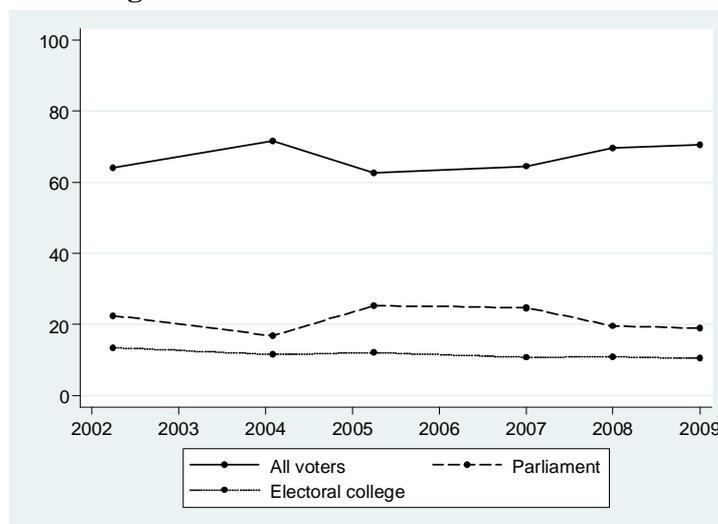
Figure 9: Nuclear Power



Direct Presidential Elections

After the fall of communism, the Czechs opted for a pure parliamentary system with a figurehead president elected by parliament. This choice has aroused some controversy. With each successive presidential election, there have been calls to institute direct elections. These calls increased as Václav Havel planned to step down in February 2003. The fiasco surrounding Václav Klaus's election – with multiple ballots and considerable horse-trading – increased these calls. The Civic Democrats, however, consistently opposed this change even as most other parties, particularly smaller ones, advocated direct elections.

As Figure 10 shows, the mass public has consistently supported direct elections with between 60 and 70% of these queried favoring this option. By contrast, around 20% of the electorate favored the continuation of parliamentary elections and another 10% supported an electoral college system with a wider gathering of electors. Noteworthy again is the consistency of these responses despite the controversy surrounding the presidential elections of 2003 and 2008.

Figure 10: Form of Presidential Election

8. Democratic Responsiveness

Though the subject of this paper is the nature of public opinion, one might ask whether it matters whether opinion is rational. If politicians ignore the public, then it hardly makes a difference if public opinion is volatile. A quick glance at policy choices in the issues considered here suggests that public opinion does matter. Czech politicians are frequently responsive to the desires of the majority.

In foreign policy, public support for the EU and the Beneš decrees was mirrored in political support for them. Radar is a tougher case: though an agreement on construction has not been reached (which is what the public desires), even as there were vigorous attempts by the center-right government to buck public opinion.

In social policy, the public's strong support for a woman's right to choose is reflected in policy as is the majority's belief that homosexuals should have the right to registered partnerships but not marriage or adoption. Conversely, rulers have not acted on the public's support for the death penalty and euthanasia, though in the former case they may be constrained by the European Union and by the constitutional entrenchment of the ban (which requires supermajorities to be changed).

On other domestic policy issues, the fit is reasonable as well. The public's support for a social liberal economic transformation produced exactly that (Orenstein 2001). Opposition to church restitution is reflected in the slow process of restitution and support for nuclear power is reflected in its continual use and expansion. Politicians, however, have not yielded to public desires for a direct presidential election both because it threatens the interests of powerful actors and it is entrenched in the constitution.

In sum, there is a reasonable though not perfect correspondence between policy choices and public preferences. This does not eliminate the possibility that the choices have

determined the preferences rather than vice versa, though it does suggest that democracy may be working better than many assume.

9. Conclusion

How capable are citizens in new democracies of governing their countries? Are their opinions real, coherent, and stable? Do they understand and make rational deductions from the information they receive? Or does opinion move willy-nilly or in line with the desires of political elites.

The preliminary conclusion here is that public opinion, at least in one new democracy, is rational in the sense of being “real, coherent, stable, and understandable”. Most of the time Czech public opinion on major policy matters has not changed greatly over the course of the transition. Stability persists even where there were considerable attempts by politicians and governments to sway citizens to their positions (e.g., on EU accession). Whether an issue was controversial or commanded a consensus among elites did not seem to matter. Where changes have occurred, they appear to be more a result of changes in general mores than manipulation.

What explains this rationality? While answers here are more the product of speculation, I would argue that Czech citizens were well-educated and media-savvy. It was not hard for them to orient themselves in political debates and determine the issue stances that corresponded with their core beliefs (Kitschelt et al. 1999, Tworzecki 2004). Moreover, the communist experience may have had a positive effect on public opinion by showing citizens the nature of propaganda and leading them to distrust the pronouncements of politicians. This distrust may have led them to rely more on their own core beliefs than the advocacy of political actors.

Though it is not clear how well these findings generalize to other new democracies, they do have important implications. There has been considerable debate about whether democracy should be promoted across the world. One of the worries is that citizens may not be capable of ruling because public opinion is volatile or manipulable. The findings here suggest that these worries may be misplaced. Public opinion may be a better guide to policy than many have assumed even in countries with pernicious authoritarian legacies.

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