

Public Opinion, Rational Choice and the New Institutionalism: Rational Choice as a Critical Theory of the Link Between Public Opinion and Public Policy

Derry O'Connor
Université Laval

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Abstract

Studies on the nature of public opinion and its impact on public policy, while borrowing from Rational Choice's methodological individualism and rational actor assumptions, often fail to take into account the wider implications of rational choice theorizing for the Opinion-Policy Nexus. In this paper we use Rational Choice Theory to criticize the mass society approach to Public Opinion and Policy. Particularly important, but often overlooked by Public Opinion scholars, are Public Choice findings on rational ignorance, the spatial theory of preferences, Intransitivity, Heresthetics, and Collective Action Problems. These theories suggest the vulnerability of mass-opinion, a positivist construct, to elite rhetorical manipulation. Riker's conclusion in favour of Liberalism over Populism, paralleled in the debate over the need for elite leadership of the public versus democratic responsiveness to polls, suggests that Public Opinion scholars might also reconsider the validity of mass opinion polls as the dominant construct of public opinion. Also within the Rational Choice framework, the findings of Neo-Institutionalism may suggest the applicability of some alternative forms of public input into the policy process.

Résumé

Bien qu'elles empruntent à la perspective du choix rationnel l'individualisme méthodologique et les prémisses de rationalité de l'acteur, les études sur la nature de l'opinion publique et son impact sur les politiques publiques ne tiennent pas toujours compte des implications plus larges reliées à l'utilisation de la perspective du choix rationnel eu égard aux liens entre les politiques et l'opinion de masse. Dans ce texte, nous utilisons la théorie du choix rationnel afin de critiquer l'approche de la société de masse à l'opinion publique et aux politiques publiques. L'ignorance rationnelle, la théorie spatiale des préférences, l'intransitivité, l'«heresthétique» et les problèmes d'action collective - autant de questions sur laquelle l'approche «Public Choice» a permis de jeter d'importants éclaircissements théoriques - représentent des questions souvent ignorées par les chercheurs se penchant l'opinion publique. Les théories «Public Choice» posent la vulnérabilité l'opinion de masse, construit positiviste, à la manipulation rhétorique de la part des élites politiques. Le biais de Riker en faveur du libéralisme par rapport au populisme, biais repris dans le débat confrontant le besoin d'un leadership de l'élite sur le public à la perception du sondage comme représentation de la volonté de la majorité, indique que la communauté de chercheurs sur l'opinion publique devrait réexaminer la validité des sondages d'opinion de masse comme construit dominant de l'opinion publique. Qui plus est, les trouvailles du néo-institutionnalisme - qui se situent à l'intérieur du cadre du choix rationnel - suggèrent des voies alternatives pour imprégner l'élaboration des politiques publiques de participation.

1. Introduction

Academic literature on the nature of public opinion and its relation to public policy¹ appears as a frightening landscape wrought with theoretical confusion, ideological division, and a myriad of unanswered questions. Intellectual battles rage over operational definitions of public opinion (Herbst, 1997), its nature and origins (Zaller, 1992), the possibility that it has any observable impact on policy (Pétry, 1999), as well as the normative question of whether or not it should (Page & Shapiro, 1992; Converse, 1964). The term “public opinion” has been used to refer to the aggregate of individual preferences, to the opinion of political elites, to the demands of organized special interest groups, even to mass media content (Entman & Herbst, 2001; Price, 1992).² At any stage in the public policy process, from problem definition to agenda setting, to decision-making to policy evaluation, references to “public opinion” might be used by various political actors to garner support or silence opposition. In this sense, public opinion functions as part of a process of social preference formation and serves as a form of social control, creating

¹ Hereafter referred to as the Opinion-Policy Nexus.

² Entman and Herbst see public opinion as made up of four referents: Mass opinion, activated opinion, latent opinion, and perceived majorities (2001 see pp.206-210). Mass opinion refers to the aggregate of individual opinion found in polls and is not necessarily informed. Activated opinion includes the opinion of engaged, organised, and informed groups and individuals, including lobbies and experts. Latent public opinion is shaped by underlying beliefs behind opinions and is where the collective stance ends up after debate. Perceived majorities are the perceptions of the mass audience, journalists, political actors, and journalists of where majority opinion stands on an issue. This is cognitively mediated and open to rhetorical sway. For Entman and Herbst, the media acts as a communicative glue or network linking the various referents of public opinion (Entman and Herbst, 2001, pp. 206-210).

political consensus and silencing radical opposition (Noelle-Neumann, 1995). For more critical theorists, the term “public opinion” simply refers to an artificial political construct or a rhetorical device used by those in power to legitimize the domination of organized special interests over those of the masses by claiming to have the support of “the people” (Durham Peters, 1995).³

Even if “public opinion” is an ambiguous hypothetical construct used to refer to the “people’s will” (in whatever guise it may manifest itself), public opinion may still have a “real” impact on politics. This has left many scholars determined to measure it in quantifiable terms. As a result, the dominant academic conception of “public opinion” remains simply as mass opinion, “*the aggregate of responses to nationally representative polls*”(Zaller, 1994, p.276). This is the dominant conception of public opinion for two reasons. One is “the ease with which it lends itself to systematic and quantitative research,” and the other is “its close fit with the widely accepted ideal of individualist democracy, in which every citizen has an opinion on every issue, and in which these opinions are, at least in a normative sense, equally important”(Zaller, 1994, p.276).

This individualistic conception of public opinion fits in well with a mass society model. The model assumes that the public has real preferences on issues, that these can be revealed through polls, and that governments will be motivated to pay attention to these opinions in order to win elections (Schiff, 1994). This enables the link between public opinion and public policy to be untangled with the aid of economy-like models of consumer demand and government supply (Downs, 1957). Nevertheless, whether this mass public opinion influences policy, or whether policy-makers influence the mass, and under what conditions, is a puzzle that remains unsolved (Burstein, 1998). This debate is complicated by concerns as to the reliability of surveys to measure mass opinions, as well as the capacity of the public to even hold “real” and meaningful attitudes in the first place (Sinnott, 2000). And so we see that not only is there division between various research fields on the definition of public opinion, within research programs there exists by no measure a consensus on the nature of public opinion and its role in policy formation.

In order to understand the public opinion-public policy nexus, more attention should be paid to rational choice theory. “Too often, the study of public opinion has been conducted without adequate reference to the dynamics of social choice” (Gabautz, 1995, p.554). Even within research programs dominated by the mass society model, where presumably rational individuals communicate their preferences to policy-makers, there has been little attention paid to the implications of Rational Choice Theorizing on the nature of individual rationality and the problems associated with aggregating individual preferences. “Despite forty years of rigorous work on these problems, they remain surprisingly unacknowledged in the literature on public opinion”(Gabautz, 1995, p.554). How can Rational Choice Theory explain how public opinion informs policy-makers and how policy-makers try to “inform” the public and in doing so help put some conceptual unity into a highly divided academic field? In this paper we investigate how the work of rational choice theorists in general, and public choice scholars in particular, can help us understand the nature of public opinion, how public opinion may shape political discourse, and whether or not mass public opinion can provide reliable information on public preferences to inform a democratic public policy. Our conclusions do not bode well for the normative aspects of mass society model and its implications in favour of populist democratic responsiveness.

Taking the cue from a new generation of writers calling for a more “outrageous” public choice (Cullis & Jones, 1998), we intend to use rational choice findings as a critical theory of public opinion (Dryzek, 1992).⁴ We first give an overview of research into the opinion-policy

³ In this vein, this conception of public opinion as referred to by the rhetoric of the popular will, quite often invoked in the media, might enable powerful actors in the policy-making process to gain credibility for their proposals. By representing a particular image of itself to the public that is favourable to their own policy preferences, policy-makers might gain support for their decisions (Durham Peters, 1995).

⁴ Public Choice findings will be used as critical theory as far as “critical theory proclaims an ‘emancipatory’ interest in liberating individuals from the tyranny of controls revealed in what look like causal relationships, which can in truth be overturned by the individuals subject to them, once they become aware of the essentially

nexus using the mass society model. Here we highlight three important debates, two within the mass society model: over democratic responsiveness to public opinion versus elite leadership of public opinion; and around the ability of the public to form coherent and stable preferences, and a larger debate in political science over the need for public input into political decisions to avoid elite domination of politics. Then we give a brief overview of the major contributions of rational choice approaches to political science, applied specifically to the theoretical problems posed by phenomena observed in opinion-policy research.

Using rational choice reasoning, we highlight the often constructed nature of discourse appealing to public opinion and point out the problems associated with the normative assumption of the mass society model of public opinion, that individual opinions can and should be converted into social choices. Particularly relevant for the comprehension of the public opinion-public policy nexus is the paradoxical rational actor assumption; rational politicians seek re-election vis-à-vis appeals to rationally ignorant citizens (Downs, 1957). To explain when and why policy makers will lead the public and when they will follow, the spatial theory of preference distribution comes in handy (Downs, 1957; Geer, 1991). Further, Arrow's impossibility theorem and the possibility for intransitivity in multidimensional mass preferences (hence majority rule disequilibrium) suggest that it is not possible to follow the collective will since it may not exist (Riker, 1980; 1982; McLean, 2002). Further, the possibility of rhetorical manipulation of mass opinion by self interested politicians through strategic agenda setting (Heresthetics) (Riker, 1986), coupled with collective action problems such as monitoring problems and information asymmetries (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998), put public goods at risk to the short term profits of narrow distributional coalitions (Olson, 1982).

To point out how Rational Choice Theory can help better understand the ins and outs of public opinion is not to say that rational choice has all the answers to the problems posed by the opinion policy nexus. There is considerable division within the approach, particularly over whether or not democratic majorities should have more or less input into policy, epitomized in the debate over *Liberalism Against Populism* (Riker, 1982). Depending on whether or not majority rule can be stabilized, the conclusions differ as to the possibilities for mass public input into policy. However reading a problem from a public choice perspective does not predispose particular solutions simply due to ideological reasons as there is nothing in public choice that makes it a tool of either the left or right (Grofman, 1993). We conclude with a discussion of how research from the new-institutionalism can help shed light on how to overcome the pathologies of public opinion as identified by public choice. The work of the new institutionalism provides insight into ways to maximize majority rule stability and protect the latent interests of the disorganized masses. As well as underlining the importance of some favoured democratic institutions such as the free and independent press, legislative accountability, and party competition, new institutionalism might suggest how more novel means can better encourage citizen participation in existing liberal political institutions. These might include neo-town-hall meetings in the form of deliberative polling or electronic citizens' forums.

2. The Opinion-Policy Nexus in the Mass Society Model

Democratic theory suggests that the majority of the body politic should have some input into the elaboration of the political decisions by which they must abide. This is an important concept as it protects the silent majority from the tyranny of a small but powerful elite (Dahl, 1989, p.277). At the same time, there must be institutionalized mechanisms such as a strong judiciary to protect minority groups when majority decisions endanger their rights (Dahl, 1989; Riker, 1982). Paradoxically, due to the enormous size of the polity in the mass society and the need to guard against the tyranny of the majority, political decision-making is restricted to all but

ideological and repressive nature of these influences. This basic practical intent means that critical theories are tested not by applying empirical data to hypotheses through statistical or experimental means, but rather through successful action on the part of their intended audience, deciding that, on reflection, the theory gave a good account of the causes of their suffering and effectively charted the course of their relief." (Dryzek, 1992, p.402).

a small minority. As a result, a form of representative democratic government has emerged in modern states, that which Dahl refers to as Polyarchy, in which a political elite governs in the name of the majority (1989, p.215). How can the spirit of democracy still reign in this elitist system? One way for the masses to have their say in decision-making would be to ensure that governments take representative samples of mass public opinion into account when making policy (Fishkin, 1997). Consistent with one of the most basic normative assumptions to emerge from the liberal enlightenment, that one citizen equals one vote (Downs, 1957), it seems logical that the opinions of each individual should be weighed equally and added up to produce a majority choice. Governments in effect, should show responsiveness to the aggregate of individual opinions (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002). This individualist ideal of democracy is at the heart of what is often referred to as the Mass Society Model.

The mass society model of modern society is based on the central importance of individuals, who are supposed to be socially isolated; legally equal in the expression of political opinions; and contractually free to make independent economic decisions. Public opinions, audience effects, consumer preferences and voting behaviours constitute the relevant units of analysis. Based on this mass society model, survey research into the public's opinions has tried to determine if some enduring structure underlies the attitudes of individuals and groups (Schiff, 1994 p.288).

The mass society model assumes that the individual is the appropriate unit of analyses for public opinion research, that "real" attitudes and opinions in the form of public preferences on issues exist and can be measured, and that governments will be motivated to pay attention to these opinions in order to win elections. Presumably the link between public opinion and public policy can be described in terms of economy-like models of consumer demand and government supply (such as that of Downs, 1957) (Schiff, 1994). As we shall see, this is much more problematic than it first appears. The mass society model and operational definitions of public opinion as the aggregate of individual opinions is the dominant theoretical and methodological framework for empirical studies of the effects of public opinion on public policy. In fact, this conception of public opinion so dominates research that many scholars of "public opinion" refer exclusively to "mass opinion." (Zaller, 1994) and neglect the effects of interest groups, media, and culturally mediated latent opinions on public policy (Herbst, 1998).

Studies motivated by the Populist ideal of democratic responsiveness of governments to mass public opinion, as measured by representative polling, continue to constitute an important research program in studies of foreign and domestic policy (Powlick & Katz, 1998; Burstein, 1998; Monroe, 1998; Shapiro & Jacobs, 2002). At the heart of this approach are methods to measure the percentage of public policies along specific issue lines that match the direction of contemporaneous majority poll results on the same issues (Pétry, 1999). The empirical evidence on the subject suggests that while public opinion polls may impact policy in some cases, especially when issues are highly salient to the public (Monroe, 1998), policy makers do not generally make policy directly by the polls (Burstein, 1998; Page & Shapiro, 1983). Manza and Cook (2001) for example, claim that policy makers are generally responsive only when the public holds clear majority opinions on highly salient issues. On issues of high complexity, when salience to the public is low and little information exists, no clear majority preference will emerge (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002). In such cases, policy-makers tend to take the lead and make policy according to their own preferences, bringing the public on side afterwards (Manza and Cook, 2001), in some cases even deliberately trying to manipulate public opinion in their favour (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002). Some research only looks at public opinion as a dependent variable of policy (Mauser & Margolis, 1992). So it seems that politicians don't "pander" to every whim of the public mood (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002) but instead try to sell their policies to the public through public relations efforts mostly in the mass media. This might result in the creation of a opinion manipulation machine composed of communications experts and press attachés (Jacobs, 1992). In order to determine when public opinion should be followed and when it should be led, policy makers nevertheless need to read polls. In doing so, their policies may begin to reflect the

majority preference, thus producing a “recoil effect” where public opinion actually does seem to impact policy in academic studies. There may also be a “reverse recoil effect” as found in Isernia where the policy makers first listen to the public opinion and then create means to reinforce a desired response to a policy direction (Everts et Isernia, 2002, p.268).

The most accurate way to describe how public opinion polls are used in government (by both politicians and bureaucrats), may be simply as a form of self-censorship, to ensure themselves and the population that they are not too far from the majority standpoint on most issues (Jacobs, 1992). For those who decry the loss of democratic responsiveness on the part of policy-makers, these results are the cause of much frustration. It seems to contradict democratic common sense that the will of the majority should be so often ignored and in some cases manipulated by the policy elite. Nevertheless, other scholars argue that sometimes the government has to try to educate the public about the benefits of policies that the public knows little about (Powlick, 1991), or even contradict majority preferences in order to make morally upright policy, as in some cases it is the public that should change (McLean, 1987). Thus the debate over the role of public opinion in public policy poses both descriptive and normative problems for scholars. Descriptively, under what conditions does majority public opinion lead to matching policy outcomes? Normatively, is it justified that governments ignore public opinion, but on the other hand, despite democratic ideals, is it even desirable that mass public opinion should guide policy-makers? Perhaps it is only desirable that it restrains them. This is all the more relevant for it may be doubtful that the mass public is knowledgeable enough about political issues to make informed choices in the first place. According to Vincent Price, there are five fundamental problems facing the modern public. “Two relate to its potential superficiality – lack of competence and lack of resources – and three concern its potential susceptibility – to the tyranny of the majority, to propaganda or mass persuasion, and to subtle domination by elite minorities” (Price, 1992, p.17). If mass opinion suggests a superficial, ignorant, and susceptible public, how can it act as a reliable force to constrain policy makers, or even as a source of information to guide the elaboration of citizen oriented public policy?

For many authors, the response to these questions depends largely on the capacity of the public to hold meaningful opinions, based on “real” rather than “random” attitudes (Sinnott, 2000). This lies at the heart of the debate between adherents to the Almond-Lippmann consensus and the Revisionists on the nature of mass opinion. From empirical findings, mass opinion, the ‘conventional wisdom’ of the Almond-Lippmann consensus holds, is simply a capricious and unstable entity. The mass is composed largely of individuals lacking cognitive organization, “or constraints,” of political ideas along even simple left-right ideological lines (Converse, 1964). The aggregate of the opinions of politically uninformed individuals should be interpreted as little more than a collection of cumulative random error (Riker, 1980). This fallible public, the Democratic Elitists conclude, should be led by the more informed political elite and should be given only a minor role in policy, particularly in foreign policy (Almond, 1950; Lippmann, 1922; Converse, 1964).

Revisionists of this view, on the other hand, claim that mass opinion, while not constrained or structured by political ideology, is far from random (Sinnott, 2000). At the individual level, survey responses may be structured according to moral, cultural, or rational constraints (Holsti, 1992; Bardes & Oldendick, 1990; Wagner, 1990; Burk, 1999). Just because people do not interpret the political world according to typical left-right, liberal-conservative, ideological terms, does not discount the possibility of finding other types of constraints. Some of these Democratic Rationalist researchers, taking a methodological collectivist approach, claim that mass opinion may in fact transcend individual random error as a collective entity and show remarkable coherence over time. In the aggregate, individual random errors in poll responses cancel one another out, and so polls could still reveal a majority that reacts to perceived changes in the political world in line with its preferences as new information emerges (Page & Shapiro, 1992). If the public, at a methodologically collective level, can be considered as rational, it is not clear to what extent the public looks to maximize preferences based on economic goals in opinion

formation (Sanders, 1988) and to what extent these opinions reflect favoured moral or political values (Boudon, 2001). This debate assumes that the mass public forms preferences exogenous to politics. It is of course possible that preferences are endogenous to political contexts, that political institutions and media discourse shape preferences.

To this point we have discussed the debate over the nature of the opinion policy nexus in the mass society model. For a moment we will move beyond this model to the work of more methodological situationist scholars of political communication. They suggest that perhaps we should take into account the role of social contexts and political rhetoric in the construction of mass opinion (Saferstein, 1994). Rapid swings in the public's priorities could be explained by the manipulation of the public by political and media elites on issues the public knows little about (Bennet & Manheim, 1993; Jordan & Page, 1992). Further, organisational biases in polling practices may result in polls that represent elite concerns and not public concerns (Bourdieu, 1972). If this is the case, rhetorical appeals using polls as representative of the popular will, as are quite often invoked in the media, might enable powerful actors in the policy-making process to gain credibility for their proposals. By representing a particular image of the public that is favourable to certain policy options to the public itself, policy-makers might gain support for their decisions (Durham Peters, 1995). This is all the more serious if most people believe that polls themselves represent the mass and not elite preoccupations, and if previous polls themselves influence how citizens respond to surveys (Marsh, 1985; Mutz, 1992). If human beings, as social animals, desire to keep in step with the crowd, perhaps previously published polls shape citizens' perceptions about political issues and thus latently influence preferences for policy options in subsequent poll responses (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). If this is the case, then mass opinion might simply be a political construction of a mass communication system dominated by an ideological elite that wants to legitimize its own power, at a cost to the public interest (Bourdieu, 1973; Habermas, 1989; Edelman, 1993; Bennet, 1993; Durham Peters, 1995). In effect, public opinion polls, whatever they do measure, don't measure any meaningful or democratic public opinion. In order for there to be any effective and democratic public participation in politics, according to these Critical Social Constructivists, an open public sphere must provide a forum for reasoned communicative action and debate free of the exercise of coercive power (Gingras, 1999; Habermas, 1989).

The above discussion has illuminated the lines of three debates in the opinion-policy nexus; two within the mass society model and one that goes beyond but includes the mass society model. The first debate plays out around the level of democratic responsiveness to majority preferences policy-makers might have versus the degree to which elites lead public opinion. Considering that democratic theory supports the sovereignty of the people, why would policy-makers sometimes ignore public opinion? In other instances, why would they be motivated to make policy by the polls? The second debate, within the mass society model, focuses on the nature of mass opinion; whether it represents "real" or "random" attitudes. If the public is ignorant and uninformed about policy, in many cases lacking real attitudes, policy-makers might be justified in trying to lead the public, but if the public does form coherent opinion, politicians interested in re-election might be obliged to account for it. The third debate rages over ways to enhance citizen input into public policy and reduce the danger of political manipulation of the masses by elites. The reliability of survey methods to measure opinion is not just in question, but rather the construct validity of opinion polls as measures of public opinion is itself at stake.

Does there exist a flexible yet logical analytical framework within which we can critically study these debates? Rational Choice Theory provides us with a comprehensive tool kit into which we may "dip" in order to come up with a number of useful insights for scholars of the opinion-policy nexus from a number of different angles and epistemological approaches, explaining individual motivations behind behaviour as well as the effects of political institutional contexts on these motivations (Kato, 1996, p.556). In this section we begin with an explanation of the theoretical foundations and the working terminology used by Rational Choice theorists. We then apply the findings of Rational Choice to the opinion policy nexus, particularly relying on

Public Choice. This is followed up by a discussion of the broader implications of Rational Choice theory for Public Opinion Research. Particularly useful is the New Institutionalism.

3. Assumptions of Rationality in Public Choice and Rational Choice Theory

According to Elinor Ostrom, “a rational choice theory can be viewed as a “theory of advice” that informs individuals or, potentially, collectivities of individuals, about how best to achieve objectives – whatever these may be” (Ostrom, 1991, p.238). Rational Choice provides students wishing to understand political phenomenon with both explanations of individual motivations in addition to accounting for how social forces, beyond the individual, shape behaviour. Actors behave in a rational way by forming preferences for outcomes based on their perceived individual interests and use strategic action in the pursuit of these goals. We define interests, preferences, and strategies; Interests refer to the general well-being of an actor, usually defined in terms of economic utility. Preferences refer to dispositional traits of actors in specific situations; they “are the way an actor values alternative outcomes of the decision process being modeled” (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.252). Faced with a given situation, an actor forms preferences for policy outcomes based on his or her perceived interests. “Actors *prefer* a particular outcome because they *believe* it will best satisfy some deeper goal” (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.254). In order to ensure that an actor’s preferred outcome occurs, and hence her interests protected, she must have a strategy. “Strategies (and the actions they involve), in contrast, define what an actor can do; they are the actions, that, when taken together, produce outcomes. Strategies are means, preferences are ends. Actors prefer ends but they choose means”(Roberts Clark, 1998, p.252). This type of instrumental rationality is usually assumed to be directed toward maximizing economic gain. In the words of Roberts Clark:

While rational choice theorists all share the assumption of goal-oriented behaviour, exactly what goal oriented behaviour is varies according to the empirical situation under study. Actors need not be driven by pecuniary interests – the value they maximize is not necessarily economic. In other words, while all rational choice theorists agree that actors seek to maximize their interests, what that interest is remains the object of theorizing. Establishing the preferences of actors is therefore a key and problematic task for rational choice theorists (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.249).

Most critics of Rational Choice find it undesirable to think that humans are simply interested in their own economic interest. Expanding upon Weber’s axiological rationality (moral value based rationality), French Sociologist Raymond Boudon proposes a theory to explain why not all actions are purely based on economically instrumental rationale. Boudon’s cognitive rationality predicts that people do not just do things because they are instrumentally valuable, they may also do things because they are motivated to behave according to principles they believe are important (Boudon, 2001, p.62). Some actions are taken to support principles that one believes are right or morally worthwhile. Principles might come to be valued because they appear to be inter-subjectively valid, that is, other people would likely also consider the principle to be valuable, and so it would be more desirable to conform to such a principle.⁵ Habermas’ communicative action is a form of rational natural selection of ideas through debate between actors in an equal setting (1989).

But one does not have to stray to far from traditional Rational Choice to understand how individuals might form preferences based on other motivations. “Since politics is the process by which individual preferences are combined into a collective choice, any explanation of that process will involve essential reference to the political values that figure in those preferences” (Weale, 1984,p.380). Further, while it is the case that many Public Choice scholars generally assume individual social actors to be motivated by a desire to gain money and prestige, this does

⁵ Boudon illustrates his position with the following example. A paradox in Public Choice is why people vote. It simply does not pay the rational actor to bother to waste his or her time to go and do it. Instrumental rationality cannot explain why people vote, but axiological rationality can: “I vote because I think I should vote. I think I should vote because I have strong reasons to believe in democracy, because in other words I endorse a theory concluding that democracy is a good organization of political life.” (Boudon, 2001, p.66).

not have to be the case. “Riker eschews this particular restriction and allows the motivations of persons to include ethical as well as self-interested motivations” (Weale, 1984,p.379). In some cases, it is rational for individuals to participate in some political activities because of the social benefits it brings them in their network of relationships, thus the currency of exchange becomes social rewards (in Miller, 1997, p.1178). Thus actors maximize utility, whether their preferences are based on economic interests, ethical concerns, or moral values.

Classical economic models assume that preferences are exogenous to situations, in that faced with a political choice, actors weigh the costs against the benefits of all possible pathways of action and form a preference for one action accordingly.⁶ After Kato, “utility maximization according to economic rationality assumes that actors have consistent orderings of preferences, constituting their utility functions. Utility functions may be flexibly defined, but once defined, the actors are assumed to maximize their utility based on it” (Kato, 1996, p.575). Modern Rational Choice Theory takes a more realistic view. Instead of assuming substantive rationality, where actors have stable general preferences and pursue them across all situations, actors behave with bounded rationality (Simon, 1985). Bounded rationality is more subjective, implying that an individual is rational to the extent that he or she perceives what is in her best interest considering her capacity to evaluate a given situation (Kato, 1996, p.576). That is to say, preferences themselves are endogenous to the social structures that surround an actor.

Due to bounded rationality, individuals do not make cost-benefit calculations for every strategic choice they are faced with. Instead they rely on a number of factors to help make choices more efficiently. “Individuals tend to use heuristics – rules of thumb – that they have learned over time regarding responses that tend to give them good outcomes in particular kinds of situations” (Ostrom, 1998, p.9). Along with heuristics, individuals may adapt their behaviour in line with norms. After Ostrom, “by *norms* I mean that the individual attaches an internal valuation – positive or negative – to taking particular types of action” (Ostrom, 1998, p.9). Norms are no doubt valued as worthy of compliance based on evaluations of their intersubjective validity, after Boudon, that is, if they are valued by most people (2002). In some cases, individuals’ behaviour is rational if they abide by rules. “By rules I mean that a group of individuals has developed shared understandings that certain actions in particular situations must, must not, or may be undertaken and that sanctions will be taken against those who do not conform” (Ostrom, 1998, p.10). In the failure of social norms to encourage individuals to constrain their own (in some cases) opportunistic self-interest, rules enforced with coercion may be an effective resort, but only if they can be enforced. If not, unchecked self interest may lead to free-rider problems.

If the preferences of rational actors, in pursuit of their interests, are nevertheless shaped to an extent by the rules of the political games they play, social forces that surround them, and cognitive tricks learned through experience, in order to understand rational behaviour, we must consider how aspects of the organization or institutional setting within which they find themselves shape choices (Kato, 1996; Ostrom, 1998). Further, in order to understand how public policy emerges from the actions of rational individuals, we must focus our attention to the mechanisms that add up and modify individual preferences, such as constitutions (Riker, 1980). This is important as many studies of public opinion blindly and simplistically assume that we can and should add up individual opinions and let them shape policy in a direct cause and effect relationship. Ironically, ignoring much of rational choice’s suggestions, the mass society model in its most individualist incarnation, overlooks how institutional structures themselves shape

⁶ “A rational man is one who behaves as follows: (1) he can always make a decision when confronted with a range of alternatives; (2) he ranks all the alternatives facing him in order of his preference in such a way that each is either preferred to, indifferent to, or inferior to each other; (3) his preference making is transitive; (4) he always chooses from among the possible alternatives that which ranks highest in his preference ordering; and (5) he always makes the same decision each time he is confronted with the same alternatives. All rational decision-makers in our model - including political parties, interest groups, and governments - exhibit the same qualities. Rationality thus defined refers to processes of action, not to their ends or even to their success at reaching desired ends.” (Downs, 1957, p.6).

preferences. Theoretically exaggerating the extent of citizen/consumer sovereignty, places more emphasis on individual agency in public opinion formation than may be empirically justified.

To review then, while individuals have general goals which reflect their interests, they form preferences for actions within specific situations to reflect these goals. “People behave rationally in the sense that they aim in any particular situation to attain that outcome which ranks highest on their list of preferences” (Weale, 1984, p.379). Rational Choice modelers try “to understand (changes in) choices as a function of the nature of institutional rules and incentive structures and of constraints on resources, and on the other hand, they seek to explain how preferences for outcomes condition preferences for candidates and preferences for institutions” (Grofman, 1993, p.241). The Science looking into the way choices are made from a combination of individual interests and social forces is known as Social Choice Theory. “The theory of social choice is concerned with the methods utilized by people for selecting among alternative possibilities. Because choices and the rules which connect people’s preferences into a collective outcome are central for any attempt to understand the way policy decisions are made, social choice theory became an important part of the study of policy-making”(Doron, 1992, p.360).

From the findings of Social Choice theory, scholars such as Downs, Riker, and Olson applied Rational Choice modeling to the study of politics. The result has been Public Choice, a scientific study of politics. “A science of politics seeks to understand the processes by which diverse individuals each pursuing his or her own ends co-ordinates their activities” (Weale, 1984, p.379). Public Choice is thus a theoretical and methodological approach in political science that “applies economists' methods” to the study of political phenomenon (McLean, 1987, p.10). William Riker, one of the primary figures in Public Choice lore, considers politics as the “process of selecting, producing and enforcing the policies to realize individual preferences. Central to Riker’s approach is the assumption that individuals have preferences over alternatives and that they need to cooperate together in order to realize those preferences” (Weale, 1984, p.379). Public Choice, sheltered under the expansive theoretical umbrella of Rational Choice is a field full of exciting insights from which we can draw to examine the rocky terrain of the public opinion and public policy nexus. No discussion of mass opinion, in which the sum of individual opinions are supposed to be added up to create a “public” preference, a majority decision, which is supposed to guide policy, can do without the insights from Public Choice into the pitfalls inherent in aggregating individual wills.

3. Rational Choice Applied as a Critique of the Opinion-Policy Nexus in the Mass Society

In this section we explore the following questions related to our three debates in the opinion policy nexus as they have been approximately reproduced in Rational Choice terms already. First of all, to what extent are politicians and political parties motivated to follow mass public opinion and form policy based on majority preferences in order to please voters and eventually win elections? To what extent might politicians take the lead to shape public preferences or even manipulate the public? This debate parallels arguments in public choice over to what extent democratic systems should be characterized by Liberalism, and to what extent might Populism be desirable. The rational actor assumption is useful because it explains how rational politicians will be motivated to follow the majority choice on prominent issues (or convince the public that they followed the majority choice) in order to design strategic communications and create platforms that will win elections. But this does not mean that politicians will simply read polls and do whatever they suggest. The rationally ignorant public often does not bother to form opinions on non-salient issues, giving self interested politicians a chance to pursue their own preferences in policy elaboration. Here we have a debate within a debate, both in the mass society model of public opinion and within public choice. Like mass opinion researchers, who ask whether public opinion is constrained or structured, Public Choice scholars ask to what extent public preferences show central tendencies to some median point in multi-dimensional issue space. Populist democracy might be salvaged if the public could overcome information deficits using heuristics, party cues, and information aggregation to form

opinions that reflect what their interests would be if fully informed. The spatial theory of voters' preferences and the search for a stable central distribution of preference on multiple issues parallels the search for constraints in mass opinion, despite Riker's warnings about the possibility for cycles in majority preferences (1980; 1982). Spatial theories of preference distribution help us understand why politicians will not or cannot follow the public on non-salient issues for which no majority policy preference exists, either due to intransitivity or lack of information.

Beyond the mass society model and the debate over public rationality, Public Choice scholars can help us understand the Social Constructivists warnings that "public opinion" is a rhetorical sleight of hand used to justify these policies. In fact, they share the constructivists' "opinion" that "the people's will" does not even exist for most issues. Pointing to the intransitivity of collective preferences, the warnings of Public Choice authors suggest that there is no way to fairly aggregate individual opinions into one satisfactory public policy outcome (Riker, 1980; Mclean, 1986; Gabautz, 1995). Further, Riker explains in a very elegant way just how political agendas are manipulated by shrewd Herestheticians who create packages of policies for which stability might exist and avoid mentioning policy-issues that might tip preferences into cyclical disequilibrium.

Public Choice offers also tries to respond to the question of how mass public preferences might constrain self-interested elites, but at the same time asks how elites might brace political decision-making against the effects of majority disequilibrium? This possibility of rhetorical manipulation by politicians with superior information to that of the public, coupled with Social Dilemmas remind us of the desirability of some input on the part of the greater mass of the population into public policy. Something must provide constraints against unhindered pursuit of self interest by rational actors so as to create a counterbalance against the capture of the government apparatus by narrow distributional coalitions which hijack public goods and saddle the latent majority with public bads (Olson, 1982). In the debate between Liberalism and Populism, we are confronted with some of the same issues inherent in debates over the normative role that opinion should play in policy-making. "In the liberal (Madisonian) view, voting is a method of controlling officials by subjecting their tenure to periodic electoral tests" (Riker, 1982, p.xi) while on the other hand, "in the populist (Rousseauistic) view, voting is a method for citizens to participate directly in making law, which is then the will of the people" (Riker, 1982, p.xi). In the Democratic Responsivist view, public opinion, as Rousseau might have suggested, should shape policy (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002). Those who favour elite guidance in helping the public shape opinion (Zaller, 1994) might take a more Madisonian view, limiting the direct influence of the public into policy.

New Institutionalism may provide some ideas about how to achieve a balance between restricting unstable majority rule while still allowing citizen input into policy in order to protect the interests of the disadvantaged principal. This is achieved through the establishment of norms and even institutionalized rules to ensure cooperation between citizens and politicians to protect the principal from the capture of government and the abuse of public goods by self-interested political agents or some short-sighted organized economic groups. We warned the reader that we would use Public Choice in a critical manner.

First we will discuss the implications for public opinion and policy found specifically within Public Choice, beginning with the rational actor assumption, the spatial theory of voting and preference formation, the paradox associated with the aggregation of information versus the aggregation of preferences, Arrow's impossibility theorem, the implications of heresthetics, and the collective action problem. Moving into other dimensions of Rational Choice theory, we discuss the debate over stabilizing majority rule, hence the debate between Liberalism and Populism. Finally we will get to both the existing mechanisms and some possible innovations provided by Neo-institutionalism that offer insights into solving collective action problems and social dilemmas.

3. a) The Rational Actor Assumption Applied to Politicians and the Public

From our discussion of rationality above, while there are many definitions of what constitutes a rational actor, it might suffice to say that “a rational actor is one who is a maximizer of some value and acts to obtain it in a purposeful and non-randomized manner” (Doron, 1992, p.339). This idea applied to politics means “that citizens are rational in the sense that they seek to maximise utility from governmental actions and (2) that parties are rational in the sense that they seek to maximise votes” (Riker, 1962, p.98). Individual politicians are rational in the sense that they seek re-election and might fulfil their goal of changing their society according to their ideals or even in pursuit of their own economic interests. According to Downs,

“Our model is based on the assumption that every government seeks to maximize political support. We further assume that the government exists in a democratic society where periodic elections are held, that its primary goal is re-election, and that election is the goal of those parties now out of power. At each election, the party which receives the most votes (though not necessarily a majority) controls the entire government until the next election, with no intermediate votes either by the people as a whole or by a parliament.” (Downs, 1957, p.11).

The implications of these ideas for public opinion and policy are essentially that politicians will be motivated to understand what the public preferences are on any particular policy issue in order to appeal to the majority of voters by creating platforms that reflect those preferences, and thus win the next election. The mass society model might predict that for politicians, public opinion polls would be the means by which they inform themselves about public preferences on policy issues to create election winning platforms. Furthermore, a rational citizens would hope that their preferences, their opinions, would penetrate the ears of decision-makers in order to protect their interests.

3. b) Populism, Politicians, Preferences and the Spatial Theory of Issue Dimensions

It is important here to mention another important line of development in Public Choice studies the spatial theory of voting (McLean, 1986). On any given issue we can think of the distribution of voter’s preferences (or of public opinion) as a range of possibilities along a one dimensional line. If the distribution of preference lies along the normal bell curve, it is likely that rational policy-makers will make policy that appeals to the median preference. This would be the way to maximize their appeal to a larger number of voters, on both sides of the median, and thus win re-election (Downs, 1957). Downs’ model of spatial competition posits that political parties will take policy stances closest to the median position on any single issue in order to maximize the number of voters they will appeal to (1957). By understanding what the majority stance is on policy issues, politicians can stay close to the median preference and appeal to a higher number of voters when creating platforms. “When parties know the distribution of opinion, they can position themselves to maximize their support” (Geer, 1991, p.440). This is in essence the importance of public opinion polls, as considered as manifest representations of public preferences on issues. “In short, politicians clearly rely on (and will continue to rely on) public opinion polls to make political decisions, which should result in minimizing the differences between the parties on matters of high salience to the public.” (Geer, 1991, p.444). Where little is known about public preference on an issue, parties would remain ambiguous and might tend to diverge in their platforms. Where much is known about the public preference, parties would tend to converge.

Thus it would appear that political parties use polls to understand what the majority of voters prefer and then construct platforms to appeal to these voters to win elections. As the incumbent, the government that made policy to appeal to the median voter should please the largest amount of citizens, and thus continually win elections. If the public had clear and stable preferences, and politicians were capable of understanding these, we might expect to see politicians governing precisely by the polls. The findings of Page & Shapiro (1992) seem promising in this regard as they point to a reasonable if not rational public. While they do not negate the findings of Philip Converse (1964) that individual members of the mass public show

inconsistency and lack structure in their political opinions, they do point to individual opinion stability in the aggregate. The key to understanding this rational public lies in the difference between the stability of the individual opinion of members of the mass public (which is what Converse studied) and the stability of the collective opinion of the mass of individuals that make up the public. As Page & Shapiro point out, using mass aggregate data from a large number of people across time on responses to questions of identical wording, cancels out individual random error in responses. So while individuals might be prone to error, the collective is rather stable (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p.30; see also Inglehart, 1985, p.115). It is important to note then, that “in studying public opinion at the aggregate level, the process of aggregation itself must be included in the analysis” (Gabautz, 1995, p.551).

Such a hypothesis and its normative implications favouring a two-party system where parties compete to offer voters the policy platforms that will appeal to their preferences is at the heart of what William Riker calls Populism (1982). As the reader can see, applying public choice to public opinion research sometimes requires simply that we replace the word preferences with opinions, as does Riker, who equates preferences, tastes and opinions (1980). From a populist democratic perspective, it is desirable that there be only two parties, parties which provide factional differences to give electorates choices over policy packages. After all, “it is the parties’ role to define issues, set the political agenda, and, most important of all, present the electorate with alternative courses of action in the form of policy platforms” (Weale, 1984, p.372). Two party political systems still allow for stable majority rule as choice between two parties avoids intransitivity. All in all “voting in a single dimension seems to result in basically well behaved and centrist outcomes, with some degree of slippage when candidates have their own preferences, are unsure of the relationship between their own policy positions and the probability of an election, and perceive an advantage to cloaking their own policy pronouncements in ambiguity”(Miller, 1997, p.1185). Donald Wittman (1973) argues that candidates own policy preferences might weaken convergence toward the centre of preferences (if it exists). This depends on the level of voter awareness and thus ability to monitor or sanction candidates, as unaware citizens would not notice if parties diverged significantly in their policies

4. Challenges to Populist Notions of Democratic Responsiveness

There are however, a number of strong reasons, all pointed out by rational choice scholars, why politicians do not directly follow public preferences, *voir* public opinion, on many issues and why in fact Populism, or pandering to polls for that matter, may not be a normatively desirable way of making social choices. For one, politicians do not always try to maximize votes indefinitely and hence may not always be motivated to appeal to all voters’ preferences. Second, opinion polls are not mini-referenda with consequences for politicians’ tenures in office. Third, rational ignorance may suggest an inattentive and superficial public, although it is possible that this is mitigated by aggregation of information and institutional cues such as party labels. Fourth, and most importantly, the implications of Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem suggest that there is no fair way to aggregate individual preferences into one public policy. Further, public preferences as measured by public opinion polls might show cyclical patterns where no clear preference emerges as a most favoured option on a given policy issue.

4. a) Minimum Winning Coalitions

First, it is not clear the extent of the importance of the vote-maximising assumption. Riker criticises Downs’ notion that political parties seek to maximise votes. Recall that “all politics involves coalitions. If only a simple majority is required to win an election, a minimum winning coalition is sufficient to govern thus it is not necessary to maximize votes or to try to appease public opinion on every dimension. Working from this assumption, Riker lays out his critique.

Downs assumed that political parties (a kind of coalition) seek to maximize votes (membership). As against this, I shall attempt to show that they seek to maximize only up to the point of subjective certainty of winning. After that point they seek to minimize,

that is, to maintain themselves at the size (as subjectively estimated) of a minimum winning coalition (Riker, 1962, p.33).

This is to limit the number of individuals who can profit from the spoils of power by cutting down the number of shareholders in the governing clique. But Downs may not be completely incorrect, as uncertainty about whether a party will win may be enough motivation to seek to maximize votes after all. “Since the members of a winning coalition may be uncertain about whether or not it is winning, they may in their uncertainty create a coalition larger than the actually minimum winning size” (Riker, 1962, p.48). It is better to have something than nothing therefore first it is essential to ensure victory. Then, once victory is subjectively believed to be assured, the winning coalition can be minimised. The key is to have as much information about preferences as possible in order to ensure a minimum winning coalition. “The significance of incomplete and imperfect information in natural decision-making bodies is that coalition-makers tend to aim at forming coalitions larger than the minimum winning size” (Riker, 1962, p.81). The Minimum Winning Coalition finding suggests that politicians will not be motivated to make policy according to public preferences on every single issue, but only on enough issues to win power. They will, however, be motivated to learn what these preferences are in order to create their platform and tailor their political rhetoric.

4. b) Inconsequentiality of Public Opinion Polls

A second reason why politicians would not pander to opinion is simply that public opinion polls on specific issues are not mini-referenda and so, unlike elections, don't have drastic consequences for politicians if they don't follow them. While politicians have to appeal to voters' majority preference around election time, that is, majority public opinion on important issues, elections are not necessarily won or lost by public judgements over whether or not the government has followed the majority will on every issue in the polls. Not all issues are of equal importance or visibility to the public, that is some are more salient than others, and the public is not always attentive.

4. c) The Debate Within the Debate: Rational Publics Are Also Rationally Ignorant

The third reason to doubt populist democracy and public opinion pandering (assuming populist theorists equate public opinion over time with voter's preferences), is due to questions about the extent to which poll responses are informed and thus represent the “real” attitudes of a rational public. In fact, the rational actor assumption predicts that the public will not be informed (Downs, 1957). Thus, it is possible that the public is unaware of their interests, that is, what they would want if fully informed.

Rational Ignorance

The rational actor hypothesis, applied to the public, often results in “rational ignorance.” There are a number of reasons the public may ignore information, or may form inconsistent attitudes, from a rational perspective (See Schiff, 1994, p.291). It may be too costly to be politically informed (Downs, 1957) as it takes time and cognitive resources to pay attention to politics. As Downs noted, only citizens who will gain more than the costs of voting if their chosen candidate wins will be motivated to actually vote, thus most people will not. Further, there will be little incentive to remain informed about politics as “the cost of acquiring information about candidates and policies may be great, and the value of that information must be discounted by the fact that the individual has little impact on the final outcome”(Downs, 1957, p.258: Miller, 1997, p.1176). In addition, many issues may not be salient to individuals as they lack information on issues that have little relation with their daily life as is particularly the case with foreign policy (Holsti, 1992). The importance of information for the formation of stable public opinion is recognized by Page and Shapiro (1992). Public opinion is more coherent and stable when information exists about policy, especially on salient issues in the media. Finally, the public may be disgruntled with elitist battles between ‘liberals and conservatives’ etc. and feel alienated from the political system (Schiff, 1994, p.291) as it appears to be the case in Canada where public deference to the government is in decline (Nevitte, 1996). And so in opinion formation, only those

who are motivated to form an opinion on a particular issue will bother to seek out the needed information to do so as they feel they have something to gain if the government heeds their opinion.

While it is always desirable that information should be freely accessible to the public, and the ignorance of the mass appears at first to be troublesome,⁷ rational choice theory nonetheless suggests that public ignorance does not always hinder public opinion from representing the rational and informed majority preference. It might be enough to know “*what the public would want, if fully informed and rational*” (Zaller, 1994, p.276 & 282; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Luskin et al., 2002). This can be achieved by the phenomenon of information aggregation.

Information Aggregation

Despite rational ignorance, according to the Condorcet Jury Theorem, an uninformed majority can still make choices that maximize their self interest on binary choices if at least a small minority among them are fully informed and act according to their own interest. If each individual has a fifty-percent chance of making the correct choice (that is the one that favours their own interest) without any information at all, the probability that the majority preference of n individuals would be rational approaches 1 as the size of the electorate approaches infinity. So, as long as portions of the mass are informed, the probability that the majority opinion reflects a rational choice, that is the aggregation of individuals acting according to their self-interest (as if fully informed), increases as the size of the electorate grows (Miller, 1997, p. 1192). Again, here the “correct” choice “is defined as the one which would receive a majority vote if each voter correctly perceived her self-interest” (Miller, 1997, p.1193). This type of reasoning does not assume that the electorate has homogenous preferences, it simply means that the majority preference in a binary choice will reflect the direction of the majority’s choice as it would look if the entire electorate had voted with full information.⁸

Thus while preference aggregation might lead to instability in majority rule, information aggregation might lead to an informed and daresay rational electorate in the collective since “analysis suggests that large electorates have the capacity for judgemental synergies; that large uninformed electorates coerce political parties to find centrist outcomes in the same way that large informed electorates would, that accountability may transcend the limited ability of democratic institutions to monitor their expert agents” (Miller, 1997, p. 1193). Thus, when choices on political issues can be limited to two alternatives, the conditions are favourable for majority rule since three or more alternatives may result in cycles (Weale, 1984,p.373) as we will see soon. So, Page & Shapiro give examples of how opinions from a large number of people across time on responses to questions of identical wording can aggregate information and create a more rational public opinion in the collective. Again, this is because aggregation cancels out individual random error in responses. So while individuals might be prone to error, the collective is rather stable (Page & Shapiro, 1992, p.30; see also Inglehart, 1985, p.115). It is important to note then, that “in studying public opinion at the aggregate level, the process of aggregation itself must be included in the analysis” (Gabautz, 1995, p.551). Again, we might underline that despite the possible ignorance of the public, if the goal of re-election is a strong enough motivator for an agent to look after the interests of the principal, for the legislator to look after the electorate, they will be motivated to learn their preferences (But whether legislators can ensure bureaucrats look after their and the electorate’s preferences is of course another matter (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998)). Delegation to legislators form an ignorant or uninformed public may still tend toward the median of voters’ preferences if the candidates know the shape of policy space, that is they understand

⁷ Much research has focused on the ignorance of the public These authors give a concise survey of the research explaining the extent of the mass public’s ignorance of political affairs (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

⁸ This is countered by Riker who argues against the idea that individual random error in aggregated decisions cancel each other out so that aggregated results are representative of some sort of mass preference. “It may be ... that all deviations are in one direction so that a summation magnifies the deviations rather than eliminating them.” (Riker, 1962, p.20). This would seem to suggest that some mass aggregates could be deceptively inaccurate.

which issues are on the agenda and how the distribution of the majority on each issue, they will offer policies close to what the ideal point of voters preferences would be voters were fully informed (Miller, 1997, p.1192). Public opinion polls are important for Parties in platform making as they highlight the distribution of preferences along issue lines, they show what the majority favours.

And now we have come to a much more serious technical problem associated with aggregations of public opinion. Public choice shows us that rarely does politics involve uni-dimensional issues, thus the uni-dimensional model of issue space where parties' platforms might converge is unrealistic. Voters are forced to choose parties in elections where many issues are at stake at once. Thus a multi-dimensional model of issue space is required. While it is likely that there is a stable centre of preference on single issues,⁹ the debate lingers over whether there is a centre of preferences for voters in n dimensional issue space. In other words, do the preferences of voters (public preferences) converge around a stable centre of preferences on more than one issue? The other problem concerns the prudence of trying to even add up individual preferences and call it a "fair" and "democratic" public policy. This is primarily due to the problem of cyclical preferences, or in technical terms, "intransitivity".

4. d) The Impossibility Theorem

And so we have come to the third reason to doubt populism and to understand why politicians would not pander to public opinion. Another highly important branch of public choice deals with Arrow's general impossibility theorem (McLean, 1986). It seems that "Logically there is no reasonable voting mechanism for aggregating diverse opinions into coherent societal choices" (Gabautz, 1995, p.538). Arrow's Impossibility theorem proposes that if there are at least 3 social options and an infinite number of voters, no Social Welfare Function (SWF) can satisfy a number of criterion of fairness. They are:

"(1)The choice function should be able to deal with every possible ordering of preferences; (2) If everyone in the society prefers option x to option y, then society should prefer x to y; (3) The preference ranking of any two options should be independent of the inclusion of any third option; (4) No one should be a dictator; that is, no one individual's preferences should become society's preference irrespective of the preferences of everyone else"(Gabautz, 1995, p.538)¹⁰

Furthermore, these criterion assume that preferences are complete and transitive. As discussed, it is not even clear that clear preferences always are formed by political actors,

⁹ For example Hansen writes that: "mass preferences over public finance are remarkably well structured, all in all. Most people have no trouble determining their position on budget policy proposals. Most people have no difficulty avoiding blatant inconsistencies in their choices. Many people have preferences that are complete, consistent, and transitive – this is the modal category- and most of the rest fall prey to only the mildest form of preference intransitivity. The view that ordinary Americans are irrational in a fundamental sense is difficult to sustain." (Hansen, 1998, p. 517).

¹⁰ Gabautz uses Kenneth Arrow. 1951 (1963). For more detail into the nature of these criterion it is useful to consult McLean, 1987. Here he states, in a comprehensive review of Arrow, that "Both individual and social orderings are assumed to be *complete* and *transitive*. An ordering is complete if it can say of every possible pair of options either that one is better than the other or that they are equally good. An ordering is transitive if, assuming that it chooses x over y and y over z, it chooses x over z." (McLean, 1987, p.166). In other words, it is not cyclical. Universal domain condition "requires the SWF to cope with every possible individual ordering."(McLean, 1987, p.166). If each individual preference is compared with each others, it is possible that there will be no Condorcet winner and the procedure would break down without making a social choice. The weak Pareto condition "requires that if every individual prefers x to y, the social ordering should prefer x to y." (McLean, 1987, p.166). The Independence from irrelevant alternatives condition "requires that the social ranking of any two options depends only on the individual rankings of these two and is unaffected by individual rankings of either of the two against other 'irrelevant' options."(McLean, 1987, p.166). The non dictatorship condition "simply requires that there is no dictator - that is, no individual whose preferences automatically become society's irrespective of anybody else's".(McLean, 1987, p.167). "Since all voting systems must break at least one of Arrow's conditions, it is to some extent a matter of taste which system anybody regards as 'best'." (McLean, 1987, p.167).

especially the mass public in specific situations where they lack information. Further, it is not clear that preferences are transitive. Intransitivity occurs “if society prefers A to B, B to C, and C to A, as must always be possible when there are three or more alternatives” (McLean, 2002, p.540). In such a case we have a situation of intransitivity and thus we can say that preferences are cyclic; there is no clear winner that could beat all other winners. Cyclical preferences, due to the lack of a Condorcet winner (an option that can beat any other option in a head to head competition), can result in disequilibrium. “The concept of an equilibrium requires an assumption that everyone adopts their best strategy as predicted by the theory and that once at equilibrium no actor is unilaterally motivated to adopt another strategy” (Ostrom, 1991, p.238). Since equilibrium requires that every actor is not motivated to seek another outcome, “the conditions for equilibrium are highly restrictive, and that with no equilibrium, ‘every possible alternative is in the cycle of best outcomes’” (Riker, 1982,p.xvi in McLean, 2002, p.540). If we represent a distribution of majority preferences in multiple issue space, it is not clear that there will be an identifiable core of preferences, a median point in the centre close to the median of all the majority preferences on all of the issues. “In typical game-theory terms, the core of the typical voting game is empty” (In McLean, 1986, p.380). Or, as Yeats puts it in literary terms, if one is so inclined: “the centre cannot hold.”

Instability in public opinion may be due to non attitudes or public ignorance leading to instability and incoherence in mass opinion, it may be due to technical differences in the way poll questions are asked, due to wording changes, or it may be due to intransitivity (Gabautz, 1995, p.537). If public opinion is represented as the aggregate of individual preferences for policy issues, it seems unlikely that any one public policy, given more than 3 options, could represent a clear winning majority preference, and so any number of policy proposals could beat a suggested policy, such that equilibrium could not be reached. According to Gabautz, “few public opinion polls have been conducted in a way that allows the transitivity issue to be addressed. Without some indicator of when it is a problem and when it is not, any claims to understand or express an aggregate sense of public opinion will be suspect” (Gabautz, 1995, p.539). It is surprising that the findings of social choice theory and “their strong implications for the study of public opinion have been remarkably underappreciated,” considering that scholars of public opinion would surely have a knowledge of Social Choice Theory (Gabautz, 1995, p.537).¹¹

The impossibility theorem not only poses the problem that preferences for specific policy solutions to problems, such as whether to send peacekeeping troops, to send aid-money, or to do nothing might be intransitive, but also preferences over which real world problems the government should address might also be in cycle. Perhaps war, famine, or disease might be in cycle as to a definition of the most important foreign policy concern for a government at any given moment, not to mention what the priority should be given as to which part of the world aide should be concentrated to, etc. etc. So, intransitivity can exist in preferences within policy issues, but also between policy issues.

This has strong implications for pollsters, of which they may already have been aware of. The way questions are worded and the policy alternatives presented to the public within questions

¹¹ Gabautz contends for example that “the indeterminacy of public opinion in recent policy debates about military intervention may owe as much to intransitivities in the underlying distribution of public preferences as to the technical difficulties of polling or the inherent complexity and seriousness of the issues in question” (Gabautz, 1995, p.535) In the USA analysts have identified a number of attitudinal dimensions along which public attitudes toward foreign affairs can be classified. These include not only the Hawk-Dove, preference for aggressive versus passive in international intervention, but also the internationalist-isolationist and unilateral-multilateral dimensions (Gabautz, 1995,p.541). As a result, preferences for specific military interventions may be highly open to intransitivity due to the multidimensionality of attitudes. “Coalitions may change not just from issue to issue; but even on a single issue simultaneous coalitions may form around different positions with no clearly superior aggregate social choice. These dynamics can be concretely illustrated with an examination of public opinion in the recent Persian Gulf War” (Gabautz, 1995, p.542). Before this conflict, Gabautz shows us how public opinion was intransitive on US policy toward Iraq: “A starting position of doing nothing can be beaten by either sanctions or multilateral intervention. Sanctions themselves can also be beaten by multilateral military action. Multilateral military action can be beaten by unilateral military action. Unilateral military action can be beaten by either sanctions or withdrawal, which returns us to the beginning of the cycle” (Gabautz, 1995,p.546).

are important. “A poll assessing attitudes about limited air strikes when the implicit alternative is set by vocal US threats to send troops abroad may look very different from one taken when the implicit alternative is allowing some petty dictator to get away with pillage and murder” (Gabautz, 1995, p.551). Simply knowing majority preferences on single issues is not enough. “If we wish to gain insights into public reactions to specific policies, we will need to adjust our polling practices to elicit clear comparisons of policies or to determine the implicit comparisons respondents are making” (Gabautz, 1995, p.551). Such practices may help to reveal intransitivities in preferences that single questions on general issues could not.

To summarize, Arrow’s theorem proves that “one cannot design a social choice function (or a voting system, market or any other way of aggregating people’s preferences or tastes) such that the social choice will accurately reflect individual values or preferences” (Doron, 1992, p.360).¹² Arrow’s theorem suggests that social choice, majority rule, or for our purposes, majority public opinion will be inconsistent and unstable. In this case, “following the ‘will of the people’ becomes impossible because the will of the people is undefined” (McLean, 2002, p.540). Any one social choice will not reflect the optimal outcome for the aggregate of all of the individuals. Riker warns political scientists against putting too much emphasis on the study of tastes and preferences, or opinions as “given an appropriate distribution of tastes, even a perfected system of voting might produce imperfect results” due to problems of cyclic preferences (Riker, 1980, p.434). Taking it further, “every social choice function can be manipulated so as to produce outcomes compatible with the interest of the designers of the system.” (Doron, 1992, p.362).

Public Choice helps us understand under what conditions rational politicians, desiring re-election will heed public opinion and under what conditions they will ignore it, or manipulate it. Public Choice then seems to suggest the inherent utility of public opinion polls for restraining self interested politicians. This does not, however, clarify for which issues policy-makers will govern by the polls and on which issues they will ignore public opinion. Likely on salient issues about which the public is informed and public opinion shows stability over time in its preference, politicians will not go against it. However, on non salient issues, the lack of consequences for policy-makers who do not follow majority opinion, the possible ignorance of the public, and the lack of clear majority preferences due to transitivity leave a lot of room for politicians to structure political agendas according to their own preferences and those of the groups who support them. The use of public opinion information, information about preferences, provides ammunition for strategic manipulation of the agenda. This is all in line with a rational actor approach for “with some incentive to clarify by ideology and without an absolute incentive to becloud, one can expect parties in this model to present voters with an artistically devised mixture of ambiguity and clarity which are varied in amounts according to the degree of information available” (Riker, 1962, p.100). To win elections, policy-makers might try to convince the public that they have their best interests at heart, that their own interests are the same as those of the public, or by persuading the public to accept their policy preferences. How do rational politicians construct rhetoric to convince the public to vote for them? For this we need to employ the Spatial Model of the Distribution of Preferences in multiple policy space. As well we must keep in mind that skilled politicians must be aware and capable of exploiting for their own ends the possibility for intransitivity in preferences whenever a clear majority opinion in favour of one option or another does not present itself. This is not to say that politicians think of these things in the terms we describe them, in a scientific way, but rather they practice an art we attempt to explain in scientific terms.

5. Heresthetics

¹² Arrow is summarized in Downs: “Arrow has shown that if most choice situations involve more than two alternatives, and if the preferences of individuals are sufficiently diverse, no unique and transitive general welfare function can be constructed unless some part of society dictates to the rest. This argument... dissolved the relationship between individual and social ends which it had tried to establish.” (Downs, 1957, p.18).

The art of devising ambiguity and clarity into rhetoric that wins elections is elaborated upon by Riker. The fact that there may be intransitivities in public preferences makes it possible for shrewd politicians to manipulate agendas. They may impose their own preference ordering upon issues that show intransitivity in mass preferences. Further, they may introduce new issues into politics for which their own preferences are in line with the majority (or they can be made so through rhetoric) that allow them to balance the distribution of preference in multiple issue space in their favour. In *The Art of Political Manipulation*, Riker showed how wily Politicians are capable of arranging the dimensions of issue space in their favour by introducing issues onto the public agenda which could create a stable package of majority preferences that matches their policy proposals, or dis-equilibrate their competition (1986). In doing so they can control the dimensionality of issue space by introducing onto the agenda issues for which their proposals match the majority preferences or ignoring those that don't (McLean, 2002, p.540).

Riker labels the ability to strategically manipulate issue space or the political agenda, as 'heresthetic' the art of political manipulation. While rhetoric is the use of words for persuasive ends, heresthetic is the use of words for strategic ends, to manipulate the agenda, the public, or political opponents toward one's own position (Riker, 1986 in McLean, 2002, p.541). An example of a heresthetician was Abraham Lincoln. By introducing the slavery issue onto the political agenda, Lincoln, himself willing to talk the abolitionist talk, and walk it to, was able to tip the majority distribution of preferences in the particular issue space at that time into his favour, creating a stable subset of policies for which majority was equilibrated in his favour. Thus he beat Douglas in the Republican Leadership debates of 1860 (Riker, 1986).

Although he doesn't mention it specifically, Gabautz also alludes to the importance of heresthetics in analyses of public opinion dynamics:

To the degree that effective leaders can set the agenda to order the alternatives, they will be able to point to the existence of public support. The difficulty is that there are other political elites who have other priorities and will also be working to shape the debate. Presidential leadership is particularly critical. A president will need to take the initiative to set the terms of the public debate. Failing this, the president must be aware that what looks like a majority today may prove vulnerable to other actors who can effectively change the agenda tomorrow (Gabautz, 1995, p.553).

According to long-time Public Choicer Iain McLean, "Heresthetics ('structuring the world so you can win') may not happen as often as Riker claims, but when it does, it matters" (McLean, 2002, p.556). Nevertheless, for every politician who tries to structure the agenda strategically, there is likely to be opposition. According to Riker, politicians' communication is dominated by two principles "the Dominance Principle and the Dispersion Principle. The former states that 'when one side dominates in the volume of rhetorical appeals on a particular theme, the other side abandons appeals on that theme,' and the latter that 'when neither side dominates in volume, both sides abandon it'" (McLean, 2002, p.544 citing Riker, 1996). One could expect the two opposing sides in political competition to talk past one another on issues they could dominate in the volume of electoral appeals and ignore issues where they were equal to the other party, such that "after that, every possible issue would be raised either by precisely one side or by precisely zero sides" (McLean, 2002, p.544). For a politician to raise an issue, it must be something that she is willing to enact and is sure her opponents will not, thus such an issue usually reflects his or her own preferences. Therefore, "herestheticians have an incentive to increase or diminish the dimensionality of issue space, according to their perceived advantage" (McLean, 2002, p.556) through strategically pursuing their own interests. The dark-side of all of this is that we can see how many issues that concern disadvantaged minority groups, which do not hold much electoral sway but whose interests are no doubt of moral importance, such as the plight of Aboriginal Poverty, might often be overlooked in main stream political rhetoric aimed at voters.

The concept of heresthetic, emerging from a rational choice approach, could fit nicely into any comprehensive social constructivist theory on the nature of political rhetoric, suggesting again

the value of Rational Choice for the opinion policy nexus, even for critical theorists. “It is not difficult to prove that some pathologies of social choice do occur, and that some of them are rather important. ... All that a Rikerian needs to show is that multidimensional issue space offers the potential to construct a new winning majority” (McLean, 2002, p.556). Other pathologies of public opinion research revealed by Rational Choice are equally pertinent.

6. Social Dilemmas, Collective Action, and Moral Hazards

The preceding discussion of the implications of rational choice for public opinion do not bode well for democratic idealists who hoped that policy might reflect public opinion. The “rational ignorance” of the masses and the possible disequilibrium of majority preferences, coupled with the knowledge that self-interested political elites might look to manipulate the public, are somewhat dreary findings. Things do not begin to look up immediately upon examination of another important but problematic finding from Public Choice: The collective action problem. “In its most general sense the collective action problem is that which arises when the pursuit of individual interests may lead to suboptimal results for the group” (McLean, 1986, p.281). Collective action problems, public goods problems, free rider problems, moral hazards, all go by another name: Social Dilemmas (Ostrom, 1998, p.1). “Social dilemmas occur whenever individuals in interdependent situations face choices in which the maximization of short-term self-interest yields outcomes leaving all participants worse off than feasible alternatives” (Ostrom, 1998, p.1). These types of problems “pervade ... citizen control of governments in a democracy” (Ostrom, 1998, p. 1). For example, majority rule instability can be aggravated by voters who take the “exit” option, and do not vote, even if there may be a core of stable preferences (Miller, 1997, p.1189). Thus, even on issues where majority public opinion suggests stable preferences, public opinion will not provide perfect information for policy makers on voters’ preferences when forming platforms since a significant percentage of poll respondents could be expected not to even bother to vote as it is not in their economic interest to do so.

It appears that the possibility of rhetorical manipulation of the agenda by scheming politicians, albeit restrained by electoral incentives, might pose a continuous moral hazard for democratic public policy that reflects the public good, or at least, protects public goods from free riders if the term “the public good” is too abstract. Unrestrained pursuit of rational self-interest by powerful actors in political situations may be dangerous for the interests of the greater society. “Olson made clear the distinction between individual rationality and social efficiency; deplorable conditions such as citizen apathy and systematic policy bias may be perfectly consistent with individual rationality”(Miller, 1997, p.1199). Since bureaucrats have superior information, it is difficult for the principal, the population, to adequately monitor their activities. “Because the effort of monitoring managers is costly and supplies a public good for shareholders, large numbers of shareholders face a collective action problem not unlike that described by Olson” (Miller, 1997, p.1189).

Cooperation between self-interested actors, avoidance of defection from multiple player games, and commitment to rules are difficult to implement. How can common pool resources such as the environment be protected from the threats of manipulative and organized special interest groups out for short term gains? The actions of Lobby groups in liberal democracies poses some moral hazards. The work of Olson suggested that only those actors whose preferences are sufficiently different from the majority will form groups to protect their special interests. In some cases these distributional coalitions will pay for a relatively small fee to a policy entrepreneur for the provision of a public good that is worth much more, putting the costs onto the latent and unorganized majority (summarized in Miller, 1997, p.1177; Olson, 1971). This can lead to social rigidities and stagnation in advanced industrial societies (Olson, 1982). Thus the work of Mancur Olson implies a strong critique of organic conceptions of public opinion as the activated and attentive opinion of interest groups from a Rational Perspective. He is not alone in his critique: Other Public Choice scholars “target iron triangles of self-interested politicians, bureaucrats and lobbyists in conspiracy against the public interest, diverting and wasting public resources.”

(Dryzek, 1992, p.404). Thus there is a normative concern in the functioning of liberal democracies if self interested party activists and interest groups¹³ are to free ride on the public purse by using the political system to further their own narrow and divergent interests.

As Olson suggests, there exist latent groups that have common interests but are too large or disorganised to look after them. Just the absence of a group does not mean the absence of an interest. The mass public can be viewed as such a latent group, having in some cases common interests but lacking the will or the motivation to join together to protect them (Olson, 1971). If this is the case, how then can the public protect its long term interests. Who will look after the silent majority, especially if we have just outlined cause for suspicion of any individual or group who claims to speak for the interests of the many. The need to protect the latent interests of the majority while protecting decision-making from majority disequilibrium poses a normative problem for both rational choice theorists and public opinion scholars.

7. Liberalism Against Populism as Responsiveness to versus Leadership of Opinion

Up until now we have been discussing the way public choice can point out the pathologies associated with public opinion research in the mass society model and the possibility for rhetorical manipulation of the masses by the few. The debate reproduces the tensions between proponents of Democratic Responsiveness and those wary of protecting policy from the incoherent opinions of an uninformed public, or Liberalism Madisonian view versus the Rousseauistic Populism (Riker, 1982, p.xi). Whether voters should input policy or simply kick out politicians *ipso facto* who did not please them parallels the debate over the need for democratic Responsiveness to public opinion (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2002), and those who favour elite guidance in helping the public shape opinion (Zaller, 1994).

7. a) In Favour of Liberalism and Institutions and Riker's Conclusions

Arrow's impossibility theorem and the difficulties with finding a centre or median mass preference on multiple issues have inspired in many observers a "widespread despair over dignifying the uninformed, unprocessed opinions of the majority, adding them up, and calling it public opinion" (Katz, 1995, p.xxv). The implications for the public opinion policy nexus are that democratic responsiveness to public opinion, or pandering to the polls, is undesirable as it only leads to fragmented decision-making and political chaos. These observations led William Riker to reject a system of government in which two parties competed for votes in attempts to appeal to the centre of voter preferences on a variety of issues. That which he called Populism, he feared, would be extremely unstable and lead to poor policy outcomes. The pallbearers of the implications of the instability of majority rule, led by William Riker, followed the precedent set by James Madison and Joseph Schumpeter, proclaiming the news that the role of the majority in a democracy should simply be to throw out the rascals they don't like every few years, but not to make rules (McLean, 2002, p.546; Weale, 1984, p.298).¹⁴ Surely in Public Opinion lore, Philip Converse (1964), and his finding of mass opinion instability, belongs in the group of those who distrust populist democratic principles and the notions of the sovereignty of the people (Zaller, 1994, p.298). It is important to note that there are probably good intentions behind the conclusions of these authors. Because they were wary that Rousseau's idea of the "will of the people" is an empty and meaningless concept, recognized that no social choice function will provide a desirable outcome for everybody, and they feared the tyranny of an ill-informed majority over minority groups, or at least the rule of tyrants claiming legitimacy from the majority of the "people," they thought it best to constrain majority rule.

¹³ "An interest group is any organisation which tries to influence public policy. Unlike a political party or an official bureaucracy it is not directly involved in governing; but members and potential members of interest groups face similar public-goods problems to those faced by politicians and bureaucrats. They are more acute than the problems faced by potential voters because giving time or money to a lobby is a much larger action than voting." (McLean, 1987, p.62).

¹⁴ *Liberalism Against Populism* (1982) was the stage that Riker used to expound the notion that rigid institutional structures must restrain majority rule as proposed by classical liberal thinkers since large societies were so prone to majority preference cycling and thus disequilibrium in majority rule.

Thus Public Choice scholars, like many critical communications scholars wary of the validity of opinion polls to measure “the people’s will” might feel the need to point out to mass society scholars of public opinion that, even if politicians wanted to follow the majority preference, they couldn’t in many cases due to a lack preference formation, a lack of information, and intransitivity, and thus instability in mass opinion. Public Choice scholars, as are critical theorists, are wary of claims of politicians to understand “the people’s will” or *la volonté générale*, as this does likely not exist for many issues. “Government cannot obey the will of the people because there is no such thing. There is almost certainly no state of the world that is socially preferred to all other possible states of the world.” (McLean, 1986, p.378).¹⁵ The people’s will must be created. Opinion polls, rather than democratising public policy, may actually pervert the process by enabling politicians to claim they have the support of the “people” (Durham Peters, 1995) when in fact Public Choice scholars warn us that any number of other policy proposals might also have the support of “the people” since no one package of preferences could be seen to beat all others. While the mass society model and its’ normative individualistic assumptions of citizen rationality and thus democratic responsiveness, emerges from a similar normative epistemology as public choice, the theoretical advancement in public choice, partly due to empirical findings, actually discounts the mass society model’s populist ideal of democratic responsiveness to public opinion.

Instead of favouring majority rule and trying to see how public opinion shapes policy, Riker encouraged political scientists to pay attention to how political institutions could stabilize majority disequilibrium and aggregate individual preferences into public choices.¹⁶ Instead of populism, an insitutionalized system of checks and balances could create some stability in social choice formation. Institutions, understood to be rules, create regularities that can help predict outcomes of political decision-making processes. Riker was not alone in his conclusions. Arrow’s impossibility theorem led Downs and others to turn to the analysis of the system of rules and relationships that govern the incentives of governments to translate mass preferences, activated opinion, and other forms of public opinion into policy.¹⁷ Particularly important, as Riker suggests, are institutions that play a role in political communication and persuasion. In order to see how the artistically devised mixture of ambiguity and clarity shapes both opinion formation and social choice it is important to understand how information is diffused in society, to understand the pathways of communication between the public, policy-makers, and other influential actors over the policy process. This expanded view of Public Choice accounts for how values, language, and norms

¹⁵ This is reminiscent of the constructivists’ claim that the will of the people may be a rhetorical construct used by policy makers to mobilize support for their positions: “Historically, public opinion was invoked by politicians in name only as the symbolic force of the people. It was in essence a “rhetorical invention” or an ideological construct that owed as much to its strength as a persuasive symbol than as an actual social force.” (Durham Peters, 1995, p.13).

¹⁶ “Although there are not likely to be equilibria based entirely on tastes, still there are outcomes of social decision processes, those outcomes do embody some people’s values, and the outcomes themselves are not wholly random and unexpected. What prevents purely random embodiments of tastes is the fact that decisions are customarily made within the framework of institutions. Since institutions certainly affect the content of decisions, we can see something of the future by specifying just what these effects are and how they are produced. Thus, despite the recent enthusiasm for studying tastes (e.g. public opinion, political culture, and the like), what we learn from recent political theory is that the particular structure of an institution is at least as likely to be predictive of socially enforced values as are the preferences of the citizen body” (Riker, 1980, p.443)

¹⁷ “Because every government is run by men, and because all men must be privately motivated to carry out their social functions, the structural relation between the function of government and the motives of those who run it is a crucial determinant of its behaviour. This relation is, in essence, the political constitution of society. It determines the effective relationship between the government and the governed (i.e. the rest of society) whether the latter have a direct voice in choosing the former or not. In other words, the constitution specifies the contents of the social welfare function because it provides a rule for transforming individual preferences into social action” (Downs, 1957, p.290).

shape public policy, beyond simple economic self interest (Riker, 1980, p. 432), suggesting some complimentary links between rational choice and media studies' that observe how beliefs about issues are constructed by media narratives packaging generic ideological slants to issues (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gingras & Carrier, 1996).

7. b) The Inadequate Defence of Populism and Its Dismissal

Within the mass society model. The mourners of the loss of democratic responsiveness on the part of public officials are wary of elite domination of government apparatuses by self interested actors. They have no doubt heeded the notions of Mancur Olson and fear capture of the public good by distributional coalitions. Mass public opinion provides a way for the otherwise silent majority to communicate its preferences to government, if only in a passive way. They abandon not Rousseau's ideal, and still hold out that while the will of the people might not exist on every political issue, the public good must be identified and governments made to protect it. If government cannot read the collective will, there must at least be some way of restraining the actions of powerful self interested groups and political actors. How are collective action problems to be overcome, the latent interests of the mass public to be protected, and moral hazards avoided? If some way to aggregate individual preferences could be found, despite Arrow's theorem, policy makers might be able to use polls to gauge public perceptions about issues in order to check the action of iron triangles and to give the "silent majority" some sort of a voice on important policy issues to balance that of activated interests. Olson made clear that the most powerful determinants of political outcomes "are not the atomistic maximizing choices of individuals, but the groups and institutions that guide and constrain self-interested individual choice" (Miller, 1997, p.1199), but perhaps mass interests, that is the aggregated interests of the majority, should still play some role in elaborating policy whenever possible.

While there have been consistently robust findings of instability in multiple dimensions (Miller, 1997, p.1185), this has not prevented some Rational Choice scholars from hunting for conditions under which majority stability can prevail. While the observation of the potential for majority rule instability due to intransitivity is important, other authors downplay its implications. Gordon Tullock (1981) asked, if intransitivity is such a problem, why is there so much stability in real democratic decision-making? The predictions of Downs, the principal defender of the idea that equilibrium in one dimensional issue space where two competing parties both migrate toward the median position, still support Populism. Downs himself, fully aware of the possibility for instability in multiple issue space, suggested that along single issue lines stability is possible. Even with multiple issues stability was conceivable. After Miller, "he claimed that most people agree not only on which issues are most important, but also on what to do about those issues; Downs argued (1957, pp.667-68) that this makes majority rule-instability less likely, and limits the scope of the cycles" (Miller, 1997, p.1183-1184). Downs claims that there may be core preferences for high profile issues that remain stable over time. Meanwhile other authors have looked for centres of preference in subsets of related issues. When the median point on single issue dimensions are combined, a line can be drawn that intersects each median. The size or radius of this yolk could provide a measure of the instability of the potential majority rule on this batch of preferences (Miller, 1997, p.1186). If instability was over-estimated and there does exist a yolk, a core, or a centre of preference in multidimensional issue space (McLean, 2002, p.548), then the presence of cycles in voting are much more rare than Riker feared and it may have been an exaggeration to shun populism with so much fervour

Related to the search for a yolk, a core, or a centre of preferences in multiple issue dimensions, authors studying public opinion and foreign policy have found that attitudes toward foreign policy show some underlying structure or constraints according general goals such as upholding moral principles or reflecting economic concerns, across related issue areas (Bardes & Oldendick, 1990). If similar thought structures inform opinions on related issues, perhaps researchers will find a centre of preferences on related issues, such as international trade and international development, in the future. The debate over the potential stability of majority rule as

well as the possibility that parties would converge toward some centre of majority preferences rages on in Public Choice. Likewise, in Public Opinion research, the nature of mass constraint or opinion structure continues. The two fields would both benefit from paying closer attention to one another.

Thus, the possibility that reports of majority instability and aggregation of information suggest that in some cases, majority rule may be equilibrated. For public opinion, this suggests that mass input may be valuable, especially when political issues can be polarized into choices along a single dimension, for or against. The problem with this is that it restricts policy options, digitises choices, and reduces politics to a series of yes-no answers, over-simplifying the complexity of political conflict. "In polarizing the choice between just two alternatives, political parties must necessarily be imposing an arbitrary structure on the pattern of citizen preferences. On this account, political parties *manufacture* popular will rather than *reflect* or *represent* it" (Weale, 1984, p.382). This leads many once again to reject possible as only institutional arrangements that allow the public to reject leaders who are particularly bad should be favoured over populist systems characterized by competition between parties competing for a majority of the vote (Riker, 1986 in Weale, 1984, p.383). Furthermore, stability in mass preferences for many issues does not eliminate the possibility for disequilibrium in mass preferences over which issues should be dealt with on the government agenda.

The debate between liberalism and populism, between responsiveness and leadership of opinion has revealed the tension between constraining majority rule due to the possibility of disequilibrium and restraining political elites from trampling over public interests. Which promotes stability more: a Madisonian regime of checks and balances, or a majoritarian regime with a strong executive? Usually, the first. But is stability a good thing or not? It is no answer to say, 'A stable majority for the people or policies I favour is good; a stable majority for the other lot is bad.' There is obviously a trade-off between stability and democratic responsiveness" (McLean, 2002, p.555). Due to the problems associated with transitive preferences and limited line supply of public preferences (i.e. difficulties in supplying public goods to satisfy all interests (McLean, 1987)), it is clear why political parties cannot, and do not, always produce platforms that are close to the centre of majority opinion. As Lincoln once said (and probably Jean Chrétien as well), you can't please all the people all the time.

Rational Choice implications for Public Opinion Research are many. For the results of mass opinion polls to reflect the "people's choice" or the majority stance on an issue, there are a few assumptions to be made. First of all there must be unimodal preferences for specific policy issues, that public opinion polling must be able to accurately measure these preferences, and that it is even possible for these preferences to be reflected in policy outcomes, i.e. that there are clear choices of policy that can be made. Plus, the accessibility of information about preferences must be perfect for policy makers and the voter must have a reasonable amount of knowledge about the policy options. In addition, there must be some way to decide which issues are the most important to the voter, or which are the most salient. Unfortunately, these criteria are so difficult to meet, that much Public Choice scholarship has been devoted to discussing them. It is unlikely that the results of public opinion polls could often meet these criterion either. We discount mass opinion as a meaningful source of public opinion under many conditions. Perhaps now it is time that Public Opinion researchers pay more attention to what these conditions are and put less stock in the importance of polls, following the lead of many politicians who are wary of polls (Herbst, 1998). Along with our critique of the mass society model with polls as the dominant referent of mass opinion, we also discount populism and question the "democratic" aspect of the notion of "democratic responsiveness" of policy to public opinion polls.

Coherent democratic policy choices require more than coherent individual preferences. Because political institutions intervene between individual and "social" preferences, public choices may be logically inconsistent, even when every individual's private preferences are the model of rationality. As is well known, a majority vote on one among an array of options

on a single policy dimension produces a settled outcome only when individuals' preferences are single peaked (Hansen, 1998, p.519).

Now that we have said our piece, we will conclude this paper with a brief discussion of how research from the New-Institutionalism can lead the way to a more democratic public opinion that may be able to usefully inform policy. First we discuss how institutions shape choice, how political contexts - rules, norms, and values - restrain self-interested politicians and help alleviate the effects of the intransitivity in the preferences of the public. The above debate outlines the differing interpretations as to what to do about majority rule from public choice scholarship, "but this implies nothing about the optimal design of institutions" (McLean, 2002, p.546). How can institutional design provide democratic restraints on elites but avoid majority rule instability? To answer these questions we move a little beyond the traditional public choice perspective, in which politics is explained by the actions of individual rational actors motivated by money or prestige, but still remain very much within a Rational Choice epistemology where behaviour is goal oriented. Here we find some hints about how to alternatively encourage active citizen input in existing political decision-making.

8. New-Institutionalism

The new institutionalism, largely rooted in a Rational Choice Epistemology, provides a more complete picture of how individuals pursue their interests in real political contexts. According to Junko Kato there are three different types of neo-institutionalists. First are scholars who study institutions from a socio-historical perspective, next those who use an agency centred rational choice approach, and finally those who employ a structural approach (Roberts Clark, 1998).

Some scholars of institutions employ "primarily traditional methods of political science research, especially historical investigation and qualitative analysis with a renewed focus on institutional changes and dynamics"(Kato, 1996, pp.553-554). This Socio-historical approach is novel due to the way it includes culture, norms and routines in the analysis of institutions, these being "sets of rules that shape the behaviour of actors" (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.248). This can be combined with rational choice analytics. From a rational choice perspective, scholars in this group aim to understand how these rules governing social choice emerged. For one, it is not clear whether institutions evolved as a result of a rational process of adaptation and deliberation between interdependent actors that which is called Spontaneous Convergence based on adopting Axelrod's Tit-for-Tat cooperation strategy (1984). For another, it is unclear whether institutions were imposed upon the majority by powerful actors through coercion. Of course, powerful actors may coerce others into particular institutional arrangements, but as Miller notes, no one warlord is capable of defeating all the other warlords combined (1997, p.1198). Then again, it may be that institutions are in some cases established through deliberate bargaining processes that achieve immediate institutional equilibrium (Knight,1992).

Secondly, New Institutional scholar look to see how institutions constrain rational actors in pursuit of their goals. "The second group is composed of rational choice theorists who attempt to incorporate institutional constraints upon individual behaviour into their original approach, which is based on an assumption of economic rationality"(Kato, 1996, p.554). They are "neo" in the way they add institutional frameworks around public choice's individual rational actors but do not abandon methodological individualism. In fact, in this agency centred approach, the institutions that constrain individual choices are themselves the products of individual choices. "Ostrom contends that rational individuals choose institutions for self-governance using the information about prospective rules as well as costs and benefits accompanied by these rules" (Kato, 1996, p.561). These 'agency centred' insitutionalists have typically treated preference formation as outside their domain and focused on the ways in which actors' pursuit of their goals aggregate into social outcomes" (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.266). In the United States, for example, public choice scholars use neo-institutional approaches to understand "which" interests are represented in public policies (the social choice) and with "how politicians who desire re-election

represent the interests of constituencies under the constraints of the institutionalized decision-making procedures and committee system of Congress” (Kato, 1996, p.557).

A third variety of Neo-Institutionalism looks to understand to what extent these institutional structures determine actors preferences. “The third group is least well known and often confused with the second group. They use the concept of bounded rationality, as presented by Simon, and consider institutions to be organizational contexts in which individual rational behaviour is cultivated and promoted” (Kato, 1996, p.554). These structural neo-institutionalists contend that actors’ preferences are embedded in the institutional environment, thus we can say that preferences are endogenous to the institution (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.247). Even if institutions are not exactly the result of rational design, but the result of evolution, trial, error, or historical accident, actors will still form preferences for policy outcomes within the institutional rules and attempt to achieve these goals.¹⁸ Kato finds extremely useful this third structural approach to Neo-Institutionalism, which acts as a synthesis of the other two in regards to the nature of individual rationality: “It is possible to use the factors such as rules, routines and norms embedded in institutions with the postulate of individual rational calculation in the explanation of policy outcomes” (Kato, 1996, p.561).

The work of Neo-Institutionalists shows us which institutions are valuable for restraining elite interests from dominating politics. These are contractual incentives to increase accountability, rules to clarify interests through transparency and availability of information, and political competition. Further, new institutionalism points out which institutions are important to stabilize the effects of majority rule disequilibrium, particularly; bicameralism, two party political systems, decentralized decision-making, and issue linkages by policy area, and in some cases, supermajorities. Neo-Institutionalism shows us how in some cases, despite our general dismissal of public opinion polls as the sole basis for forming policy, they can provide useful input on establishing platforms that reflect voters’ preferences, tastes, and yes, opinions in some cases.

8. a) Constraining Powerful Actors

A moral hazard occurs due to the fact that political agents have superior knowledge about political issues than the largely uninformed agent. Principal-agent theory discusses how rational actors behave when there are asymmetries between the actor charged with looking after the interests of the others (Miller, 1997, p.1191). A focus on the study of political institutions shows how short-term self-interested behaviour on the part of powerful actors might be restrained. North and Weingast are representative of the view that institutions evolved to restrict powerful actors from pursuing their short-term self interest by encouraging commitment to institutional structures.

The control of coercive power by the state for social ends has been a central dilemma throughout history. A critical role of the constitution and other political institutions is to place restrictions on the state or sovereign. These institutions in part determine whether the state produces rules and regulations that benefit a small elite and so provide little prospect for long-run growth, or whether it provides rules that foster long-term growth (North & Weingast, 1989, p.805-806).

Douglass North argues that since rulers might often violate the property rights of the ruled in order to gain in the short term, they must be forced to commit to rules that constrain them. In order to encourage commitment to rules and to create compliance, a constitution must be created whose provisions match the potential enforcement problems among the constituent parties. “The

¹⁸ “If large portions of the electorate are confronted with the choice of voting for, say, the candidates of two parties they find less palatable than their “ideal” candidate because they believe the electoral prospects of their ideal candidate are extremely poor due to the first past the post electoral system, their behaviour is being shaped by (and in fact reproduces) institutional structures that have been, to paraphrase Marx, “inherited from the past””(in Roberts Clark, 1998, p.265 citing Riker, 1986, *The Art of Political Manipulation*). Thus we see that “the institutions of today are shaped by the (contextually bound) actions of individuals of the past. These institutions shape the actions of individuals today, which to a greater or lesser extent, shape the institutions of tomorrow” (Roberts Clark, 1998, p.265).

constitution must be *self-enforcing* in the sense that the major parties to the bargain must have an incentive to abide by the bargain after it is made” (North & Weingast, 1989, p.806). Thus institutions will only be successful if they can encourage compliance to their rules, by incentive, or threat of punishment, and that the rules still allow some degree of individual agency to pursue goals.

Party Competition and Information Aggregation

In democratic systems, legislators are subject to regular elections where the voter can “kick out the rascals”, The importance of Down’s “only normative rule”, one person one vote, and the rational politicians’ desire to appeal to these interests point to the importance of electoral institutions. Those whose policies are in line with the majority preferences should win re-election, that is, if the public is paying attention. Despite the possible ignorance of the public, if the goal of re-election is a strong enough motivator for an agent to look after the interests of the principal, they will be motivated to learn their preferences. Delegation to legislators from an ignorant or uninformed public may still tend toward the median of voters’ preferences if the candidates know the shape of policy space, that is they understand which issues are on the agenda and how the distribution of the majority on each issue, they will offer policies close to the ideal point of voters preferences if they were fully informed (Miller, 1997, p.1192). Public opinion polls are important for Parties in platform making as they highlight the distribution of preferences along issue lines, they show what the majority favours. Further, the role of the party as an institution in clarifying the political agenda and offering up a set of alternatives to the public, based on one package of policies, or one formation of issue space, helps put the political debate into understandable terms, and organises issues along ideological lines. And so, parties, according to Weale, play their role in the aggregation of information for the public by polarizing debates around issues (1984, p.381). Thus while preference aggregation might lead to instability in majority rule, information aggregation might lead to an informed and daresay rational electorate in the collective since “analysis suggests that large electorates have the capacity for judgemental synergies; that large uninformed electorates coerce political parties to find centrist outcomes in the same way that large informed electorates would, that accountability may transcend the limited ability of democratic institutions to monitor their expert agents” (Miller, 1997, p. 1193). Thus, when choices on political issues can be limited to two alternatives, the conditions are favourable for majority rule since three or more alternatives may result in cycles (Weale, 1984,p.373) hence disequilibrium.

Principal-Agent Theory and Contractual Incentives

Electoral incentives must be strong enough to deter politicians from wasting public goods. “Politicians become political entrepreneurs who institute reform only when the benefits outweigh the costs of implementing them. This means that a substantial number of politicians must be continuously encouraged with incentives to boost their latent interests to provide a public good” (Kato, 1996, p.572). This is one reason why Kato recounts, some Latin American countries do not have efficient bureaucracies since there is no incentive for political actors to undergo reform. This might be for a number of reasons, probably because citizens are not paying attention, are not monitoring their legislators, or the benefits of corruption outweigh the costs of cleaning it up. And so, one way to hold agents accountable to the interests of the democratic principal is to develop contractual incentive systems where risks are traded off against incentives to perform for the better informed agents, thus monitoring can occur at a difference with less cost to the principal (Miller, 1997, p.1190). Democracies, from this perspective, are considered to work on the principle that an electoral platform functions as the terms of the contract between the electorate and the legislative agent with electoral success or failure as an enforcement mechanism. Nevertheless, the threat of elections as contractual incentives, will not always be effective in giving the electorate too much control over the agent if they are nevertheless ignorant of the record of policy-makers ability to fulfil electoral promises, if they don’t know what they promised and they don’t know what they achieved while in office. Herein lies the importance of reliable sources of monitoring and surveillance of government actions. Thus we are reminded of the

institutional frameworks that are important to provide incentives for governments to economise on public goods and in doing so protect the latent interests of the majority; a free and openly communicating press, clearly alternative platforms from competitive oppositional parties, and a transparent and rule abiding bureaucracy. Journalists and opposition parties have to continue alert the public to signs of capture of the government by special interests, corruption, wasted resources, and provide feasible policy alternatives to current government agendas to encourage reform.

Rules to Clarify Interests, Provide Information, and Verify Speakers' claims

Once again, voter ignorance does not have to be a problem. From a rational choice background, Lupia & McCubbins (1998, p.4) suggest that reasoned choice can guide the actions of citizens (principals) in delegating authority to agents (legislators, judges, executives etc.) In the absence of knowledge, uninformed people use external cues such as institutional factors that promote trust in speakers, clarify interests, and thus enhance their ability to learn from others about how to maximise economic utility when voting or choosing policy options. Lupia & McCubbins conclude that political institutions which allow citizens to make more reasonable choices are those that clarify the interests and incentives of political agents, provide information to verify statements, and punish those who lie by imposing penalties.¹⁹ Despite the evidence that seems to suggest that publics can form rational choices in environments lacking information, it is normatively more desirable that the public should be provided with adequate official information from government sources, subject to verification by opposition parties, diffused in the mass media.

8. b) Avoiding Disequilibrium

Nevertheless, we have seen due to problems of aggregating individual preferences, majority rule may be instable as no clear preference is likely to emerge. Neo-Institutionalism explains how rules developed to create mechanisms by which preferences could be aggregated and majority disequilibrium restrained. In the New Institutionalism “legislators were seen to create institutional modifications from simple majority rule in order to protect favoured policies from the risks associated with majority rule instability. The subtle manipulation of regulatory agencies was accomplished by embedding regulatory actors in a rich institutional setting which determined whose preferences were heard inside and outside of the agency”(Miller, 1997, p.1194). The rules of importance to this end are bicameralism, two party political systems, decentralized decision-making, and issue linkages by policy area, and in some cases, super-majorities. “Bicameralism, especially in combination with the executive veto, prevents most simple majority coalitions from enacting their preferences, and thus has a stabilizing impact on outcomes”(Miller, 1997, p.1187). Further, if disequilibrium of preferences is particularly a problem when there are multiple issues in question, then decisions are made in single issue domains at a time. If full line supply is a problem, that is only one policy can emerge despite a large number of interests, where there are n voters, and n interests, then decentralisation of decision making may help democratise governments (Riker, 1980, p.444). According to McLean:

Most voting procedures do not ask for full revealed preference schedules, therefore we cannot usually know whether a cycle exists at all (both a problem and a spur for Riker). Binary procedures usually do not compare all pairs in the set. A legislature such as the US Congress operates through committees. Opinion over the options available in the domain of any one committee is usually single peaked. The procedures of Congress, such as closed rules for reporting proposals out of committees, forbid any heresthetical exploitation of between-committee multidimensionality (McLean, 2002, p.547).

When decisions that concern a large majority of the body politic are made in centralized settings, it might be desirable to have more than the simple majority rule. Requiring supermajorities in favour of a given action may increase stability and eliminate cycles (Gabautz,

¹⁹ For a concise summary of the Lupia & McCubbins' argument which underlines the most important aspects of the book *The Democratic Dilemma*, see Arthur Lupia & Mathew D. McCubbins. 2000, pp. 304-306.

1995, p.549). The rebuttal to this issue is that simple majority rule in institutional analysis leads Buchanan and Tullock to conclude that a minimal majority minimizes the costs of forming a winning majority and decreases the cost of being on the losing side (1962).

Such arrangements might lead to situations of equilibrium, where a decision is made that cannot be beat by any other alternative option. Thus a degree of stability of preferences is imposed upon the system. Were these institutions imposed violently, or did they evolve over time from the mutual choices of rational actors adapting to one another's strategy (Miller, 1997, p.1196). Unfortunately, rules themselves are not necessarily in equilibrium, as they are made through social decision making processes Riker (1980) and others (Miller, 1997). There is no preferred set of rules that could not be beaten by any other alternative, much like the original problem of disequilibrium of preferences or tastes, which Riker claims to be the only certainty in political life (besides of course death and taxes). "If institutions are congealed tastes and if tastes lack equilibria, then also do institutions, except for short-run events."(Riker, 1980, p.445). Since those who have the gold make the rules, "procedural rules for setting the agenda are evidently not neutral tools for expediting decision making, but potentially powerful weapons for biasing outcomes one way or the other" (Miller, 1997, p.1188). It seems inevitable that those who have political knowledge and power will ensure that their interests dominate the political agenda. Their key may just be to contain overzealous self-interested politicians if they cannot be stopped.

It thus highly important to re-evaluate institutionalized rules, that is, in some cases constitutions, governing democratic choice in order to re-evaluate the extent to which self interested actors might sacrifice the public good for long term gain, and the extent to which a stable majority rule might provide a counterbalance to this point on some policy issues. Accordingly, we see how the tension between constraining rulers and constraining majority rule produces institutional arrangements that evolve over time to balance competing interests. Do there exist other alternatives between Liberalism and Populism? Weale offers the anarchist alternative by suggesting that individuals can organize in small self-governing communities that share their political values, and vote with their feet and leave when it becomes intolerable (Weale, 1984, p.383). If stability is not possible, why would it be more desirable to impose upon the public a policy that nobody wants anyway (Weale, 1984,p.384). If mass public opinion cannot lead policy due to majority rule instability, but nevertheless, self-interested politicians threaten to compromise the latent public interest without some public input, what can be done? What is the equivalent to Weale's suggestion in the debate over the role of public opinion in public policy. The answer is partly suggested by a Habermassian public sphere where communicative action reigns, and partly suggested by the work of neo-institutionalists who provide insights into how to encourage cooperation among rational individuals and solve social dilemmas through decentralized decision-making forums.

9. In Favour of Decentralized Forms of Citizen Input: An Institutionalized Democratic Public Sphere.

New Institutionalism unearths some interesting findings about the ways individuals cooperate to overcome collective action problems using communication. This suggests that some practical applications of the communicative action principles at the base of Habermas' liberal public sphere could suggest some ways to enhance citizen input in existing liberal institutions. According to Ostrom, it is futile to argue over whether or not individual actions or structural variables are the most important elements to concentrate on when trying to solve social dilemmas. Rather a behavioural understanding of how individuals act within institutional structures is required (Ostrom, 1998, p.2). She argues that "evolutionary psychologists have produced substantial evidence that human beings have evolved the capacity – similar to that of learning a language – to learn reciprocity norms and general social rules that enhance returns from collective

action” (Ostrom, 1998, p.2).²⁰ While gains for the individual may be one driving motivation behind behaviour, in many cases, individual gains are best achieved through cooperating with others. From the results of behavioural experiments, Ostrom claims that “individuals temporarily caught in a social-dilemma structure are likely to invest resources to innovate and change the structure itself in order to improve joint outcomes” (Ostrom, 1998, p.8). Thus, cooperation between individuals is possible, especially if they feel that they can work together to achieve outcomes approaching pareto-optimality, and can assure that the other players in collective games will not defect, in other words, that they can trust other players.

Cooperation among self-interested actors increases when they are capable of communicating with one another, even more so with face-to-face communication. “Consequently, exchanging mutual commitment, increasing trust, creating and reinforcing norms, and developing a group identity appear to be the most important processes that make communication efficacious” (Ostrom, 1998, p.7). However, in high stakes games, where it is difficult to monitor individual commitments to the rules established by the group, communication among members becomes less effective in enhancing cooperation (Ostrom, 1998, p.7). Reciprocity norms are important not only when communication occurs, but also when trust exists between actors. “When many individuals use reciprocity, there is an incentive to acquire a *reputation* for keeping promises and performing actions with short term costs but long term benefits” (Ostrom, 1998, p.12). Here we see how trust, reputation, and credibility of politicians are important signals for voters and party members when choosing leaders. “We can expect many groups to fail to achieve mutually productive benefits due to their lack of trust in one another or to the lack of arenas for low cost communication, institutional innovation, and the creation of monitoring and sanctioning rules (V. Ostrom, 1997). New-institutionalism suggests the importance of communication forums, providing face to face interaction, where participants in decision making develop trust through following reciprocity norms. Ostrom maintains that “policies based on the assumptions that individuals can learn how to devise well-tailored rules and cooperate conditionally when they participate in the design of the institutions affecting them are more successful” (Ostrom, 1998, p.3). Cooperation is possible in non-coercive, non hierarchical settings absent of a leviathan where individuals impose restraints or penalties upon one another to encourage trust and enhance cooperation, in some cases institutionalizing these rules. Thus, self-generated, rationally evolved institutions are possible (in Miller, 1997, p.1180). While new institutions often facilitate collective action, the key problems are to design new rules, motivate participants to conform to rules once they are devised, and find and appropriately punish those who cheat” (Ostrom, 1998, p.16). Institutionalized norms or rules might be developed to restrain self-interest on the part of politicians and bring their interests in line with following the rules.

Jurgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere encompasses some of the elements suggested by the work of Ostrom into a normative theory of political communication. He suggests that the expression of preferences, the clarification of values, in short, social choice formation, should and could emerge from a rational process of communication on the part of the public. The theory proposes that public opinion is a form of communicative rationality. “Action oriented to mutual understanding” in politics is “public opinion” by another name” (Durham Peters, 1995, p.12). If public consensus is reached through a process of free and open deliberation by equal participants outside of the state’s sphere of power, public choices can be made without powerful groups dictating to the majority. This process of communication, known as communicative rationality, is important for the evolution of values, preferences, and ideas. If ideas are debated through a process of communication between cognitively rational actors, then opinions that stand up in the face of criticism in an open discussion have a better chance of surviving and becoming

²⁰ “Humans do not inherit particular reciprocity norms via a biological process. The argument is more subtle. Individuals inherit an acute sensitivity for learning norms that increase their own long-term benefits when confronting social dilemmas with others who have learned and value similar norms” (Ostrom, 1998, p.10).

inter-subjectively accepted (Boudon, 2002). Putting a structure to this ideal public sphere is of course a problem.

If we allow that there is such a thing as communicative rationality ... then the political challenge becomes one of constructing institutions for its promotion and, where appropriate, a concomitant attenuation of instrumental rationality and the pursuit of private advantage. Institutional design starts to look very different from constructing devices with rules for the aggregation of preferences of social isolates (Dryzek, 1992, p.411).

The structure the ideal of communicative action has taken has been through the conceptualisation of the mass media as a public sphere (Gingras, 1999). Thus, for citizen participation in politics and the nurturance of a rational public opinion, we underline the importance of a free and open press. In the mass society, if there is to be a public sphere where public opinion would refer to a process of communicative or deliberative action, it would no doubt be the media. There is nothing new here under the sun, but nevertheless still the best way we have to monitor politicians and overcome information asymmetry, despite concerns that the media itself is not a sphere free from the exercise of the power elite (Kellner, 1990; Gingras, 1999). Since the study of public opinion is essentially the study of communication (Katz, 1995; Durham Peters, 1995; Entman & Herbst, 2001), we emphasize that political scientists cannot pay enough attention to the integrity of the media as part of a free and democratic public sphere in which a wide variety of positions are presented on issues. The media must hold governments accountable for their actions, and oblige politicians to disclose of all of the available information about complex issues in order to help the public understand complex issues.

Where are existing public opinion polling practices in all of this discussion about institutions? More attention must be given to how organizational norms and individual motives of pollsters, journalists, and communications agents within governments shape the type of questions they ask the public (Saferstein, 1994). Work to these ends has been undertaken by Loïc Blondiaux, who asks if there can be a democratically viable public opinion poll (1998). Understanding citizen ignorance due to misinformation might motivated policy-makers to reveal more political information to citizens in the media, provide background information before poll questions are asked, and encourage polls to ask questions in ways that would reveal possible intransitive preferences. If public opinion is constructed in that it represents the concerns of a dominant minority (Bourdieu, 1972), neo-institutionalism shows how contractual incentives and electoral accountability might keep those concerns in line with those of the public through electoral incentives. Thus, existing polling could encourage policy elites to better understand the electorate, an electorate who they could better inform rather than manipulate. According to John Zaller:

It is the discourse of this larger elite, always conducted with one ear cocked to hear how the public is responding, that creates the specific 'issues' on which 'public opinion' is collected and published. There is, I would add, nothing sinister about pollsters' role in constructing public opinion. Given a public with no fixed attitudes, but simply a range of only partially consistent considerations, someone must play the role of crystallizing issues in a way that leads to action. This is the job of political elites, including pollsters (Zaller, 1994, p.281).

The public can inform itself about the complexity of political issues and monitor politicians to keep them in line when they try to manipulate the government agenda for short term personal gains at the cost of long term collective gains. But this is only made possible through the free and open exchange of information from reliable sources representing a variety of viewpoints in and out of government. This can occur from a combination of regulations of the media, such as limiting concentration of ownership of newspapers or television and radio, as well as adding new forms of public input into stages of the policy-making process and government agenda setting.

10. Innovations on Forms of Public Input from the New-Institutionalism

Besides renewed attention to existing institutions of political communication, New-Institutionalism suggests some more innovative ways that public opinion research might shape politics. These are namely, face to face contact of government officials with citizens, decentralized forums for informed discussion and debate, in essence, simulated town-hall meetings, and electronic discussion forums. Symbolic public spheres can be recreated by tapping public opinion in creative ways. One such example is Robert Dahl's Minipolus, where a randomly selected sample of citizens meet over a long time period to discuss political concerns (Dahl, 1989). A similar such example is the Deliberative Poll. "An ordinary poll is designed to show what the public actually thinks about some set of issues, however little, irreflective, changeable that may be, and generally is. A Deliberative Poll is designed to show what the public *would* think about the issues, if it thought more earnestly and had more information about them. It is an attempt to provide some glimpse of a hypothetical public, one much more engaged with and better informed about politics than citizens in their natural surroundings actually are" (Luskin et al. 2002, p.458). The results were quite impressive showing most importantly that those whose attitudes changed the most were often those who had learned the most, and that changes were not necessarily related to the region of origin, or any demographic, racial, or class characteristics (Luskin et al. 2002, p.485). Another way to encourage citizen input into government institutions is through internet forums (Savigny, 2002). Digital governance and citizen input through government internet portals might offer ways to decentralize agenda setting. There are however a number of problems such as lack of internet access or computer literacy of many marginalized social groups, as well as methodological problems with qualitatively analysing email data sent in to government agencies (Schulman, 2000).

This is not to say that the results of such experiments should always be used to make policy directly, as this would just cause a repetition of the above pathologies of majority rule that Rational Choice has revealed.

To make public policy responsive to whatever preferences people have creates a highly unstable situation. Perhaps then, the lesson we should draw is that we cannot have a stable political community without a substantive conception of the good to guide policy. This stable conception may take a conservative form in say, the protection of historic, private property rights or it may take a radical form in, say, the pursuit of redistribution by social democratic governments (Weale, 1984, p.385).

Not only should there be open discussion about what course of action a government should take, but also the "substantive conception of the good," whatever it may be, should also be questioned. It is to say that, not only should rules be developed to increase policy-makers commitments to the protection of public goods, but perhaps the way in which these rules are made should be subject to an analysis of whose interests it promotes, that of an elite minority or that of the public. "Any serious institutional analysis should include an effort to understand how institutions – including ways of organizing legislative procedures, formulas used to calculate electoral weights and minimal winning coalitions, and international agreements on global environmental problems – are vulnerable to manipulation by calculating, amoral participants" (Ostrom, 1998, p.16). "Democracy does not and cannot prevent corruption. But it makes it less likely than other types of regimes. An independent press and an independent judiciary system are indispensable elements of a democracy, since, by their critical function, they can detect and break political corruption or mismanagement, etc." (Boudon, 2001, p.79). How can the media discourage corruption and reduce the personal gains to be made from seeking public office, instead encouraging politicians to protect public goods rather than to sell them out to narrow distributional coalitions. Enforcement of norms by electoral punishment for violations of legislative responsibility by a more attentive public, enforcement of penalties for violations of rules by the judiciary, both coupled with closer monitoring by the media of the links between policy-makers and economically powerful actors from the private sphere, should increase encourage politicians to serve the interests of the electorate and not just powerful but narrow special interests.

11. Conclusion

Perhaps the lessons of rational choice should be that we need to encourage more public vigilance in the control of our legislators and bureaucrats in order to hold them accountable; both to the democratic principal - the public - and to democratic principles, that is, norms, values, and rules. We do not mean democratic principles that favour policies based on passive poll responses, but rather the development of norms that encourage active political participation through communication and trust building among the citizens whose political choices are mutually interdependent. Because the “the social and political world is fraught with interdependence and contingency... reason embedded in democratic institutions and practices is perhaps the best resource we have as we try to navigate that world.” (Knight & Johnson, 1999, p.587). How can institutions stabilize some of the problems posed by cyclical preferences or intransitivity, public ignorance, as well as the problems posed by the elite capture of the public apparatus? While there is nothing new here under the sun, the findings of rational choice simply underline the importance of some existing bastions of democratic societies and suggest some improvements upon these institutions.

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