

**Referenda Scepticism among Highly-Informed Citizens:
Assessing Three Explanations**

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Introduction

The role of the citizen in political decision making is a perennial focus of political science. From classic democratic theory to current academic and popular writing on ‘democratic deficits’, ‘democratic malaise’, and the like, the role of the citizen in the policy process has been analyzed, debated, and evaluated extensively. ‘Democracy’ comes from the Greek word *dēmokratia*, which means ‘rule by the people’. The questions that continue to fascinate and provoke are these: by what means, and how intimately, are ‘the people’ meant to rule? In the theoretical literature, there are various models of citizen involvement in democratic political decision making from indirect involvement in pure representative democracy to direct and total citizen control over law and policy in pure direct democracy, such as the town meeting model. Naturally, few, if any, polities in the world correspond to pure models of any type, so political analysts typically study hybrid models that combine features of both - generally representative democracies that provide opportunities for periodic occurrences of direct citizen decision making via referenda, recalls, or initiatives.

Discussion of the public’s role in political decision making appears to have intensified in recent years. Calls for access to the political process are linked to decreasing confidence in politicians, as well as cognitive mobilization coupled with an attendant decline of deference to authority, among other factors. Based on findings that the use of instruments of direct democracy has increased globally over nearly the last four decades (e.g., Scarrow 2001), it appears that political institutions have responded for public demands for access to decision making. Yet, public support for the use of referenda and other ‘citizen-centred’ models of politics is not uniform, or uniformly high. Interestingly, the segment of the electorate best equipped for political decision making – highly informed and sophisticated voters – appears to be relatively

sceptical about the use of referenda and other direct democratic mechanisms (Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005). In other words, where one might expect greatest support for direct citizen policy making, one finds the opposite.

This objective of this paper is to analyze *why* there are information effects in attitudes toward the use of direct democratic modes of decision making – in this endeavour we focus specifically on attitudes toward referenda.¹ Using data from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies, we assess the evidence for three explanations for referenda scepticism among highly informed citizens: 1) the confidence in government explanation 2) the incompetent public explanation, and 3) the concern for minority rights explanation. We discuss these results within the context of comparative work on citizen attitudes toward referenda.

Increased Pressure for Citizen Involvement in Political Decision Making

A variety of developments have prompted calls for more extensive citizen involvement in political decision making in recent decades. One of these is increased attention to what has been called the ‘democratic deficit’, a term that originated in Europe to describe shortcomings in the operation of the EU, particularly the seeming inaccessibility of EU institutions to member states’ citizens. While the term democratic deficit has many dimensions, one of its most consistent applications is to denote seeming deficiencies of citizen involvement in law and policy making. From academic and popular writing today one gets the sense that citizens do in fact see their

¹ The term referendum has a variety of interpretations, but it is basically the act of presenting a question or set of questions on some issue of law or policy to the public for a direct vote on the issue. Sometimes, the term ‘plebiscite’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘referendum’. In the political science literature, a distinction is typically made between the two based on the finality of the result. Referenda are usually considered to produce binding decisions with which lawmakers must comply; plebiscites are typically seen as providing advisory opinions from the public, by which governments are not bound (e.g., Boyer 1992). Yet, even this distinction is not ironclad, as referenda have not always been treated as binding.

roles in politics as inadequate and political institutions as insufficiently responsive to their needs and desires.

As a result, reform of political decision-making processes has been high on public agendas around the globe, and in many cases the push has been toward greater citizen involvement in law and policy making. In Canada, the last decade has witnessed citizen-centred exercises in electoral engineering in BC, Ontario, Quebec, and beyond, as well as referenda on electoral reform in BC, Ontario, and PEI. Canada has also seen government-initiated efforts to reform the roles of elected legislators to make them more independent and responsive to citizens' needs and desires (e.g., Aucoin and Turnbull 2003). Globally, there has been much attention to a possible EU democratic deficit (e.g., Blondel et al. 1998), as well as deficits in international organizations such as the WTO and the UN (e.g., Keohane 2002). In Europe, the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon in late 2007 was a direct response to criticisms of the EU's purportedly closed and inaccessible structures. One of the key features of the Treaty – which the EU touts as a modernizing force that will bring the EU into the 21st century² – is its European Citizens' Initiative, which seems to open space for citizen-initiated policy making. Beyond specific government reforms, a stunning variety of countries boast groups of scholars and other partners that have organized themselves into 'democratic audit' teams for the purpose of examining and assessing democracy within (and in some cases outside) their countries' borders. Australia, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Malawi, New Zealand, Peru, and others have assembled such teams under the *State of Democracy* project, and other countries, such as Sweden, the UK, and Canada, have undertaken their own audits. While democratic audits have been sweeping in focus, the *State of Democracy* project identifies "popular control over public

² http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/index_en.htm

decision-making and decision makers”³ as the first criterion of the democratic assessment. Similarly, the Canadian democratic audit chose public participation as the first of its three benchmarks for the assessment of democracy (Cross 2001). Clearly, the role of the citizen in political decision making is a fundamental priority within the audit exercise.

Referenda and Referenda Scepticism

There is a seeming discontent with traditional institutions and practices of governance, and at the forefront of this is the notion that publics do not possess sufficient means to affect the direction of law and policy. Consequently, interest in alternative modes of political decision making has increased, including interest in mechanisms of direct democracy, which typically mean referenda, initiative, and recall. Our analyses focus on referenda. The allure of the referendum is not new, nor is the citizen-participation rationale commonly used in its defence. The endorsement and use of referenda have been closely associated with populism (e.g., Betz 1998; Riker 1982), an ideology built on the premise that ordinary citizens can come together to act politically in order to transcend artificial divisions created by greed, corruption, and elite dominance. Direct democratic modes of decision making enhance the role of the citizen in policy making, which fits with populists’ “faith in the capacity of ‘ordinary people’” and wish to prevent “concentrations of political and economic power” (Bowler and Donovan 2006: 653). In the US, Bowler and Donovan (Ibid.) find that through the course of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the most directly democratic forms of initiative were adopted in states with the strongest populist forces, driven principally by the People’s Party. Likewise, across the globe, populist parties of various stripes have commonly endorsed the use of referenda (and other instruments of direct democracy). The Progressive Movement of the 1920s and, later, the

³ See: http://www2.essex.ac.uk/human_rights_centre/research/projects/democracy.shtm

former Reform and Canadian Alliance parties in Canada (e.g., Laycock 1990); the Front national in France (e.g., Mayer 1998); the now-defunct New Democracy in Sweden (e.g., Svdsand 1998); and New Zealand First (e.g., Miller 1998) are illustrative examples...

Within the current climate that frequently turns to talk of democratic deficit and citizen empowerment, the referendum is often touted as an antidote to inaccessible policy-making processes and closed circles of political elites. Publics around the world appear to be in general agreement with this sentiment, as public opinion toward the use of referenda is generally favourable (e.g., Cronin 1989; Dalton et al. 2001; Donovan and Karp 2006; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 129; Karp and Aimer 2002). In Canada, pro-referendum attitudes tend to prevail in the aggregate among 50 to 60 percent of survey respondents (e.g., Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005; Clarke et al. 2000; Johnston et al. 2006; Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001a, 2001b). Yet, attitudes toward the use of referenda certainly vary. Despite the normative appeal of referenda – indeed, what means of decision making could be more democratic than referenda? – many citizens are relatively sceptical. In one survey, most respondents said that referendums should be held only “sometimes”, suggesting that “support for direct democracy does not appear to be very deep” (Mendelsohn and Parkin 2001a: 4). Interestingly, citizens best suited to referendum voting, political sophisticates, are among the sceptics (e.g., Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005; Dalton et al. 2001). It is this group of citizens’ attitudes that we attempt to explain.

Why are there information effects in attitudes toward the use of referenda? Why are the highly informed, most sophisticated voters who might naturally embrace citizen-centred, elite-directing forms of political decision making less enthusiastic than the public at large about the use of referenda? We focus on three explanations: 1) the confidence in government explanation 2) the incompetent public explanation, and 3) the concern for minority rights explanation.

Confidence in Government

Referenda scepticism among highly-informed citizens may be a function of their greater confidence in government institutions and political actors. We know that highly-informed voters tend to have more confidence in government (e.g., Gidengil et al. 2001; Holmberg 1999; Karp et al. 2003), and we also know that there is an inverse relationship between trust in government and support for the use of referenda (e.g., Dalton et al. 2001).

One of the reasons for greater confidence in government among the highly knowledgeable is their more realistic views about what government can do and how well it performs its functions given the wide range of factors that can challenge successful policy making. As Galston points out, “More knowledgeable citizens tend to judge the behavior of public officials as they judge their own—in the context of circumstances and incentives, with due regard for innocent oversights and errors as well as sheer chance” (2001: 224). In short, more knowledgeable citizens may judge governments more favourably because of a more generous and realistic assessment of the difficulties of policy making. In this sense, greater confidence in government is an expression of relative satisfaction with the policy-making status quo – in other words, a sense that government is performing well given the challenges it encounters on various fronts, rendering experimentation with alternative instruments of political decision making, like referenda, unnecessary.

Citizen Competence

One of the focal points in work on citizen involvement in political decision making is competence. With respect to the use of referenda, the question scholars have typically tackled – particularly in normative work on direct democracy – is whether citizens are sufficiently

competent to perform direct roles in law and policy making? This debate is at the forefront of work on direct democracy (e.g. Cronin 1989: chap. 4; Johnston et al. 1996; Lupia and Johnston 2001; Qvortrup 2005), and raises questions about whether voters have enough political information or are sufficiently resilient to manipulation by parties and other elites during referendum campaigns to cast sensible votes. We remain neutral on the question. In fact, if anything, the possibilities presented by work on campaign learning (e.g., Gelman and King 1993), low-information shortcuts (e.g., Sniderman et al. 1991; Popkin 1991), and collective rationality (e.g., Page and Shaprio 1992) may suggest that relatively uninformed citizens *are* able to make sensible choices when presented with relatively clear options on policy issues (more on clarity shortly). Rather than ask whether citizens are competent enough for referendum voting, the question we address is whether the ‘model’ citizens with high information *think* or *believe* that the majority of their peers are insufficiently competent for referendum voting. We propose that political sophisticates take a particularly pessimistic view on the question; that is, their estimations of the political competence of the voting public are more critical, on the whole, than those of poorly- and moderately-informed citizens. Thus, referenda scepticism among highly-informed citizens may be a function of more pervasive beliefs among this segment of the electorate that the general public is ill-equipped to weigh in directly on law and policy, because of perceptions that the public is either *unable* to make sense of the political world or *unwilling* to incur the information costs of doing so. Additionally, because highly-knowledgeable citizens tend to have more accurate estimations of the difficulties involved in policy making, and likely also better understand the challenges presented by complex referendum questions, their estimations of the competence of the general public may represent a more salient consideration in their attitudes toward the use of referenda more generally.

One factor to keep in mind when analyzing citizen competence for referendum voting is that some referenda present citizens with more challenging or complex issues than others. As such, we need a way of categorizing referenda as more or less complicated, and to do this, we propose that there is some purchase in using Carmines and Stimson's (1980) typology for the classification of political issues as either 'easy' or 'hard'. Sometimes voters are presented with decisions on abstract or complex matters, such as the 1992 Canadian referendum on the Charlottetown Accord on constitutional change.⁴ There is ample evidence that many people did not understand the content and implications of the Charlottetown Accord (Clarke et al., 2000; Johnston et al., 1996), in large measure because "the package which was ultimately negotiated at Charlottetown ... was too large, too complex and too incomplete to be easily 'sold' to the population at large. It was a patchwork of pragmatic compromises which seemed to lack coherence or a larger vision" (Stein 1997: 326). Similar concerns are commonly raised about other referenda that "involve multiple issues, complex international treaties, or large packages of constitutional provisions" (LeDuc 2002: 717) such as the 1988 Australian constitutional referenda (Ibid.), the 1999 Australian republican referendum (e.g., Higley and McAllister 2002), and the 1992 referenda on the Maastricht Treaty (e.g., Johnston et al. 1996; LeDuc 2002).

In contrast, some referenda present voters with relatively straightforward questions that provoke instant, often 'gut' reactions and where the link between voters' core values and their issues positions is straightforward. Good examples would be the 2004 ballot measures that saw 11 US states vote for constitutional bans on same-sex marriage, or the 1998 and 2007 Portuguese abortion referenda that simply asked voters whether they wanted to decriminalize voluntary

⁴ The Accord had four central features: recognition of Quebec as a distinct society, recognition of Aboriginal self-government, a guarantee to Quebec of 25 percent of seats in the House of Commons, and Senate reform. In addition, there were other, less central features of the Accord, all of which were combined in a single, comprehensive constitutional package and submitted to a direct yes/no vote by the Canadian public.

abortions obtained in the first 10 weeks of pregnancy. In both examples, the referenda were on relatively 'easy' issues that had long been on public agendas and that dealt clearly with policy ends rather than technical policy means, key criteria of Carmines and Stimson's (1980) classificatory scheme. Additionally, voters' issue positions were likely structured by 'gut responses', as Carmines and Stimson (Ibid.) predict is typically the case with easy issues. Following on this, it is reasonable to assume that the level of citizen competence required to make a sensible referendum vote depends, in part, on the nature of each referendum. As always, context matters. Subsequently, in systems where referenda have been used solely or primarily for decision making on hard issues, the highly knowledgeable voters may judge the public less suitable for referendum voting than in systems where there has been ample experience with voting on easy referendum issues.

Concern for Minority Rights

Another central feature of the direct democracy literature is its focus on how referenda affect the status and rights of minorities (e.g., Cronin 1989: chap. 5; Bowler and Donovan 2001; Sartori 1987). Concern about tyrannies of majority opinion have a long history and are linked typically with the framers of the US Constitution who feared that "in a society under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign as in a state of nature where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger" (Alexander Hamilton, as quoted in Cronin 1989: 91). Referenda are majoritarian instruments of decision making, and thus have the potential to create majority tyrannies that trump minority opinions, particularly in cases where referenda thresholds are set at simple majorities (50% plus 1). Empirical analyses suggest that this fear has become concrete in a

variety of contexts. Analyzing three decades of citizen initiatives and referenda on topics categorized among five civil rights domains⁵ in the US, Gamble (1997) reports that majorities “tyrannized” minorities by voting in favour of restricting their civil rights in over three-quarters of these initiatives/referenda. By comparison, the success or ‘pass’ rate of all initiatives/referenda over the period was 33 percent (Ibid). More recently, initiatives proposing constitutional bans on same-sex marriage that were passed by 11 states during the 2004 Presidential election could be seen as further evidence of majority will restricting minorities’ rights (e.g., Riggle et al. 2005). Taking a global view, there is mixed evidence on the issue, particularly in the Swiss case where various authors have concluded that referenda have not tyrannized minorities (e.g., Frey and Goette 1998; Lijphart 2004), likely due to double-majority provisions and other safeguards (e.g., LeDuc 2003). Nonetheless, the general wisdom in the literature is that referenda and other instruments of majoritarianism pose distinct dangers for minorities’ rights. In his recommendations for constitutional design, Lijphart goes so far as to recommend strict limitations on the use of referenda in societies characterized by deep ethnic and other cleavages (2004).

Our focus with the concern for minority rights explanation is not values, per se, but citizens’ abilities to realize that the use of referenda has the potential to violate their values (concern for minority rights, among those who hold such values). In other words, we predict that concern for minority rights plays a significant role in diminishing support for the use of referenda among the highly-knowledgeable *because* this group of citizens is more likely than less knowledgeable citizens to know (or deduce) that referenda pose dangers to the needs and rights of minorities, broadly defined. Following this, many uninformed or moderately-informed

⁵ “Housing and public accommodations for racial minorities, school desegregation, gay rights, English language laws, and AIDS policies” (Gamble 1997: 245).

citizens who do prioritize the rights of minorities may not realize that referenda pose dangers to minorities' rights, and will thus fail to make the connection between their own values and the use of referenda. Consequently, for relatively poorly-informed citizens there may be no relationship between their concern for minority rights and their attitudes toward the use of referenda, because many in this group will not make the connection between their values and the consequences of majoritarian decision-making procedures. Given evidence that relatively uninformed citizens can experience difficulty correctly linking their own interests and values to political parties' positions or policy options (e.g., Althaus 1998; Anderson et al. 2005; Gidengil et al. 2004), this hypothesis is certainly on solid footing.

Data and Methods

The data for these analyses come from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies (CES).⁶ Canada provides a strong case within which to consider the central questions of the analysis. In the first instance, Canada has relatively recent experience with a national referendum on amending the Canadian constitution. While the 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown Accord ultimately failed, the substance of the document as well as the process of a country-wide campaign and widespread public deliberation on the merits of the proposed constitutional change provided all Canadians with the opportunity to experience the exercise of direct collective decision-making through the use of referenda. Outside of this referendum (and the two sovereignty referenda in Quebec), the use of this instrument of direct democracy is quite rare in

⁶ The 1997 CES is a three wave survey and was conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University. This survey consists of 3,949 respondents in total, of whom 3,170 completed the post-election telephone survey and 1,857 completed a mail-back survey. Finally, the 2000 CES is also a three wave survey and was conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University and Jolicoeur & Associates in Montréal. The 2000 CES consists of 3,651 respondents in total, of which 2,852 completed the post-election survey, and 1,535 completed the mail-back questionnaire.

Canada. As a result, for the vast majority of Canadians in 1997 and 2000 (the years in which our data were collected), there was limited and infrequent experience with the use of referenda. A third beneficial feature of the Canadian case is that the central issues dealt with in the Charlottetown Accord pertained to constitutional principle and design more than explicitly moral issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage, both of which have been the subject of referenda in other countries (abortion in Italy, Ireland, and Portugal, for example, and same-sex marriage in various US states). As a result, citizens' experiences with and views on referenda are less likely to be biased for or against referenda, because of the kinds of questions asked.

Analyses are performed on responses to comparable questions about referenda in each survey. From the 1997 and 2000 election studies, views on referenda were measured with a question asking whether referenda on important/controversial issues should be held regularly, occasionally, rarely, or never.⁷ Responses were rescaled into a binary dependent variable combining the categories of regularly and occasionally (=1) and rarely or never (=0).⁸ In other words, the dependent variable we use in our analyses contains two categories: those with positive attitudes toward the use of referenda and those with negative or sceptical attitudes toward the use of referenda.

While the central focus of the paper is explaining information effects in attitudes toward the use of referenda, models include a range of control variables, in which we have only a passing interest.⁹ Models control for age, education, region, and election year. Additionally, we have included a party identification control which indicates whether the respondent is a partisan

⁷ In the 2000 CES, half of the sample was asked this question using "important issues" and half was asked using "controversial issues". While there may be some substantive difference in the connotations of each version of the question, we have combined them into a single variable. A comparison of the distribution of responses between these two questions showed very similar patterns (results not shown).

⁸ 'Don't know' and 'refused' responses were coded as missing.

⁹ See the Appendix for coding details of all variables included in the analyses.

of any of the federal parties most closely aligned with support for direct democracy, including the use of referenda: the Reform (1997) and Canadian Alliance (2000) parties outside Quebec (e.g., Laycock 1990) and the Bloc Quebecois within Quebec (for obvious reasons). Finally, we include an attitudinal variable for internal efficacy, which measures the extent to which citizens view politics as too complicated for themselves to understand.

For our variables of greatest theoretical interest, some discussion is required. Our political knowledge variable is a five-point index which scores respondents' answers to five factual questions about Canadian politics and the two campaigns. From the 1997 CES, the knowledge index is composed of answers to questions including: naming the provincial premier, the first female Prime Minister of Canada, the federal Minister of Finance, which party was proposing to cut employment in half, and which party was promising to lower personal income taxes by 10%. For the 2000 CES, the knowledge scale is constructed from correct answers to questions on the provincial premier, the federal minister of finance, the Prime Minister when Canada signed the Free Trade Agreement, which party was proposing a single tax rate, and which party was proposing a national prescription drug plan.

This paper's central task is to evaluate three explanations for more knowledgeable voters' referenda scepticism. As discussed previously, referenda scepticism among the more knowledgeable citizens may be a function in part of generally greater levels of trust and confidence in politicians and/or the political system, heightened cynicism about the average person's (i.e. less knowledgeable) ability to contribute to collective democratic decision making, as well as a keen fear of 'tyranny of the majority'-type outcomes that may pervade in referendum law making.

To operationalize the confidence in government explanation, we use responses to a question that asked respondents directly about their confidence in the federal government.

To operationalize the incompetent public explanation, we use an index that combines responses to two survey questions. The first taps degrees of agreement with the statement: “the problem with democracy is that most people don’t really know what’s best for them”. The second component of the index is composed of degrees of disagreement with the statement: “most people have enough sense to tell whether the government is doing a good job.” Responses are coded so that higher scores on this index reflect a generally more pessimistic view of the average person’s ability to correctly identify their own political interests and to ascertain whether government is performing well, two necessary abilities for democratic decision making. Combined, these two questions provide a good proxy for general views on whether the general public is sufficiently competent for referenda.

Finally, we assess the notion that the most knowledgeable respondents are less likely to support referenda because they are more aware of and more concerned about the possible drawbacks referendum decision making holds for the protection of minority groups’ rights. To operationalize this variable, we use a question that asked respondents: “which is more important in a democratic society: letting the majority decide or protecting the needs and rights or minorities”. Reflecting the tensions inherent in the use of referenda, this question directly measures the potential concern for minority rights that more knowledgeable respondents may be more sensitive to or, alternatively, may account for the strong possibility that the more knowledgeable are better able to connect their concern for minorities to the potential risks in the use of referenda, producing relative scepticism about referenda.

Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, we estimate these models using binary logistic regression. With respect to our estimation strategy, we first estimate a model with the control variables and the knowledge scale. This allows us to demonstrate the central claim that more knowledgeable respondents are less likely to endorse the use of referenda. From this, we consider why this might be the case by assessing our three possible explanations for information effects in referenda support. To do this, we estimate a model containing variables that interact political knowledge with each of our explanatory variables (confidence, incompetence, and minority rights). If these explanatory expectations are correct, we should observe coefficients for these interaction terms which are negatively signed and statistically significant.

Results

Before turning to results of our regression models, a look at the distribution of the dependent variable provides a general sense of attitudes toward the use of the referendum in Canada. As Table 1 indicates, just below 60% of Canadians surveyed in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies expressed favourable support for the use of referenda on important or controversial issues. By contrast, a clear minority of around 40% expressed more hesitation with the regular use of referenda as a means of collective decision making on important issues of public policy. While these data provide a picture of the overall distribution of opinion on the use of referenda, they say nothing about why respondents hold the positions that they do. It is to this question that we now turn.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 2 contains the results for the two central logistic regressions. While of little relevance for the central objective of our analyses, the control variables in Model 1 have some

interesting and statistically significant effects. Younger generations are more likely than older generations, on average, to support the use of referenda. Those with higher levels of education are 22 points less likely, based on the odds ratio, to advocate the use of referenda, and this education effect is independent of political knowledge (which is also negatively related to referenda support). There is important regional variation in that respondents from the West are about 36 points more likely to support the use of referenda as compared to the reference category of Ontario. By contrast, those in Quebec are about 34 points less likely relative to Ontarians to support the use of referenda.

(Table 2 about here)

Two further and important control variables are internal efficacy and identification with a political party that advocates or is associated with the use of referenda. In a somewhat counter-intuitive result, those with lower internal political efficacy – who believe that politics is too complicated for them to understand – are more likely to support the use of referenda. Based on the odds ratio, a one-unit increase in agreement that politics is too complicated results in a 13-point increase in the odds of supporting the use of referenda. Much more in line with expectations is the finding that those who identify with either the Reform (in 1997) or Canadian Alliance (in 2000) parties and the Bloc Québécois (within Quebec) are more likely to support the use of referenda. Based on results contained in Model 1, respondents who identify with either of these political parties are about 140 points more likely to support the use of referenda than non-identifiers and other party identifiers.

The variable of greatest theoretical interest in Model 1 is political knowledge. Based on these results, the effect of being able to answer one more question correctly *decreases* the odds of supporting the use of referenda by about 20 points. This finding is in keeping with

expectations developed earlier in the paper and with previous findings (e.g., Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005; Dalton et al. 2001; Goodyear-Grant and Anderson 2004). As a result, one of the central expectations of the paper is confirmed: more knowledgeable voters are less likely to support the use of referenda as a form of democratic decision making.

(Graph 1 about here)

To further examine the effects of knowledge on referenda scepticism, we conducted a series of post-estimation simulations. These simulations generate the predicted probabilities of supporting the use of referenda at different values of the knowledge index.¹⁰ Following this method, if all respondents exhibited the lowest level of knowledge (i.e. zero correct answers), the predicted probability of favouring the use of referenda would be about 0.806.¹¹ By contrast, if all respondents correctly answered every knowledge question and their index score was five out of five, then the probability of supporting the use of referenda drops to 0.595. The gap between the two knowledge groups is greater than 20 points (significant at $p < .001$), which is a major decrease in predicted support for referenda when we move from no knowledge to full knowledge.

The final step in the analysis is to attempt to account for *why* political knowledge has the observed effect on support for the use of referenda, so we turn now to our three potential explanations for referenda scepticism among political sophisticates: greater confidence in government, cynicism regarding of the competence of the average voter, and a concern for the rights and needs of minorities in a democratic system. Model 2 in Table 1 includes interaction

¹⁰ All predicted probabilities presented in this paper are generated using the ‘predict’ command in Stata. The values generated indicate the predicted probability of referenda support at different values of the independent variable in question holding the values of all non-manipulated variables in the model at their original values.

¹¹ This value comes from a 0 to 1 scale where a predicted probability of ‘1’ would indicate that all respondents are predicted to support the use of referenda and a score of ‘0’ suggests that none of the respondents are predicted to support the use of referenda.

terms which test these three explanations.¹² In short, all three of the interaction terms are in the expected negative direction (i.e. decreasing support for referenda). Additionally, two of the interaction terms – confidence in the federal government and concern for minority rights -- are statistically significant. As a result, the interaction terms suggest that politically knowledgeable citizens are less supportive of referenda than their poorly- and moderately-informed peers in part because they have greater confidence in government, as well as greater concern for minority groups' rights or greater knowledge that minority groups' rights can be jeopardized by the use of referenda.

(Graph 2 about here)

As an easier means of interpreting the results of Model 2, another series of predicted probabilities were generated and are presented in Graphs 2 and 3. Graph 2 presents a visual display of the predicted probabilities of supporting the use of referenda at different values of both political knowledge and confidence in government. Based on our hypotheses, we would expect to find very little effect of confidence in government at the low knowledge levels and large effects of confidence in government at the high knowledge levels.

Graph 2 presents the predicted probabilities of supporting referenda at the four different levels of confidence in government (one for each of the levels) when knowledge is set to each of the scores on the knowledge scale. At each level of the knowledge scale, as one moves from the left to right across these four vertical bars, confidence in government increases. When the knowledge scale is set to 0 (i.e. all respondents were unable to answer any of the knowledge questions correctly), increasing confidence in the federal government has virtually no effect on changing the predicted probability of supporting referenda. For the uninformed with the lowest

¹² Based on post-estimation diagnostics using variance inflation factors, multicollinearity is not a concern in any of these models.

level of confidence in government, the predicted probability of supporting the use of referenda is 0.821. By contrast, at the highest level of confidence in the federal government, the predicted probability of supporting the use of referenda is 0.809. In short, when knowledge is low, confidence has little effect on referenda support.

At the other end of the spectrum, when knowledge is set to the highest level, the influence of confidence in government on referenda support is substantial. When knowledge is at its highest level and confidence is at its lowest level, the predicted probability of supporting the use of referenda is 0.79. It can be noted that this value is only marginally lower than the predicted level of referenda support when knowledge is lowest (=0) and confidence in the federal government is also set to the lowest level (0.821). By contrast, when knowledge is high and confidence in the federal government is set to the highest value, the predicted probability of supporting the use of referenda drops to 0.457. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Based on these predicted probabilities, when knowledge is high, the effect of increasing confidence in the federal government is relatively large and significant, resulting in a significant drop in support for the use of referenda.

The general pattern observed in Graph 2 suggests that views on referenda are not affected by knowledge per se or knowledge solely, but also by varying levels of confidence in government, particularly among the most knowledgeable. It is when the effects of confidence in government are accounted for among knowledge levels that the effect of knowledge becomes clearer. When this is done, the predicted probabilities reveal that that the combination of high knowledge and high confidence in government decreases support for referenda relative to either high confidence or high knowledge considered independently.

(Graph 3 about here)

Graph 3 presents the results of predicted probabilities generated for the interaction of knowledge and concern for minority rights in Model 2. Our theoretical expectations as well as the interpretation of the graph are the same as for that in Graph 2. If prioritizing the needs and rights of minorities in a democracy is an important component of explaining the knowledge effect, as the negative and significant interaction term suggests, then we should observe stronger effects of these kinds of ‘minoritarian’ views on decreasing referendum support at higher levels of knowledge.

At the lowest level of knowledge (i.e. zero correct answers), the predicted probability of support for referenda *increases* as respondents’ priorities shift from majoritarian decision-making (=0) to concern for minority rights (=2). At the lowest level of knowledge, the predicted probability of referendum support when respondents prioritize letting the majority decide (over concern for minority rights in a democracy) is 0.789. By contrast, when uninformed respondents think that protecting the needs and rights of minorities is more important than letting the majority decide, the predicted probability of support for referenda increases to 0.869. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$). While this finding is counter-intuitive, it is not confined to the most uninformed respondents; a similar pattern is found for each of the lowest three categories on the knowledge scale. One reason for this surprising finding may be that citizens exhibiting low levels of knowledge may be less able to accurately connect their concerns about protecting the needs and rights of minorities to the potentially harmful effects that the use of referenda may have on minority interests. In other words, they may not be aware of the fact that referenda are thought to pose potential dangers to minority rights. The crucial link between their values and their attitudes toward referenda may be missing.

This counter-intuitive result -- whereby privileging the rights of minorities over letting the majority decide leads to *greater* support for the use of referenda -- is 'corrected' at the point in the knowledge scale where respondents provide three correct answers out of five. At this stage, among these well-informed citizens, concern for minority interests over majoritarian decision making decreases support for referenda. Among the most knowledgeable respondents (five out of five correct answers), the predicted probability of referenda support among majoritarians is 0.686. Within the same knowledge category, the predicted probability of referenda support drops to 0.56 among those who prioritize the needs and rights of minorities. This difference is statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Discussion and Conclusions

We started these analyses with a base model estimating support for the use of referenda (Table 1, Model 1). Our results indicate a clear negative relationship between political knowledge and support for the use of referenda to decide policy issues, a finding in line with previous work on the topic (e.g., Anderson and Goodyear-Grant 2005; Dalton et al. 2001). More knowledgeable citizens are relative referenda sceptics, controlling for the effects of age, university education, region, identification with a party associated with support for or use of referenda, and internal political efficacy. The central objective of the paper has been to assess three explanations for this information effect in support for the use of referenda, and to do so we identified three possible explanations with firm grounding in the literature: 1) the confidence in government explanation, 2) the incompetent public explanation, and 3) the support for minority rights explanation. Our analyses provide support for the first and last explanations, but not the second (Table 1, Model 2; see also Graphs 2 and 3). It appears that both their greater confidence in

government and their concern for minority rights -- or, their ability to identify the dangers that referenda pose for minorities, in our opinion – make political sophisticates more sceptical than the public at large about the use of referenda.

Of particular interest in our assessment of these findings is the fact that evaluations of the competence of the general public played no significant role in support for the use of referenda in our analyses. Competence occupies a central role in the theoretical and normative literatures on direct democracy, as discussed previously, but does not seem to be as salient a consideration for the voting public – a surprising and curious result. It is particularly interesting considering that the data we use to test our hypotheses come from the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies, surveys conducted less than a decade after the 1992 Charlottetown referendum and the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum. Both referenda could be characterized as complex, although for different reasons. As discussed in earlier section of the paper, the Charlottetown referendum presented voters with a large package of constitutional reforms and was by many accounts considered complicated (e.g., Johnston et al. 1996; LeDuc 2002; Stein 1997). Additionally, the 1995 Quebec sovereignty referendum – which asked citizens to vote on ‘sovereignty association’ rather than outright succession – provoked serious debate about the wording of referendum questions, as well as speculation about whether the voting public understood what ‘sovereignty association’ would mean. In short, given the debate about complex decisions and ambiguous referendum question wording in recent decades, it is surprising that public competence played no significant role in Canadians’ attitudes toward the use of referenda.

We offer several initial thoughts on this surprising, but interesting finding. First, it is possible that highly knowledgeable voters’ attitudes toward the use of referenda are driven largely by other considerations, namely their confidence in government and their knowledge that

referenda have the potential to jeopardize minority rights. These may simply be more salient to referenda attitudes among this group. Second, it is also possible that highly knowledgeable voters are not particularly sceptical about the general public's abilities to make sense of politics and therefore cast sensible referendum votes. Even if the highly knowledgeable view the general public as relatively uninformed, perhaps they realize that those with information deficits can compensate through the use of heuristics, for example (Sniderman et al. 1991). The highly knowledgeable may not speak the language of 'information shortcuts', 'low-information rationality', and 'heuristics', but it is not unreasonable to suppose that they are aware, even intuitively, of the general thrust of these arguments. For example, political sophisticates might sense that uninformed voters take cues from opinion leaders, such as journalists, political elites, and union leaders. In the case of the 1992 Charlottetown referendum, it was clear that important political figures actively campaigned for both the 'yes' and 'no' sides (for example former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau campaigned against the 1992 agreement).

Taking a step back, it is important to assess the generalizeability of our findings in this specific time (1997-2000) and space (Canada). Again, we go back to the particular experiences with referenda that Canadians had around this period: two referenda on critical constitutional change. The stakes were high, the referenda were complex, the campaigns could not help but remind citizens of the society's deepest divisions, and in both cases, the 'no' side won. This is a distinct context. In similar contexts, where referenda are seldom held and when they are, on high-stakes issues, similar attitudes may prevail. In jurisdictions with similar referenda experiences, highly-knowledgeable voters with high confidence in government may see little need for political experimentation with alternative instruments of policy making, particularly if the political decisions to be made deal with constitutional matters of great importance. In such

scenarios, risk aversion is likely an important factor promoting preference for the status quo. Likewise, in jurisdictions characterized by deep societal cleavages, the highly knowledgeable voters that are both more concerned with minority rights *and*, more critically, likely to be aware that majoritarian modes of decision making have the potential to jeopardize minorities are also likely to be less enthusiastic about the use of referenda.

In contrast, our findings may have relatively less applicability to jurisdictions that have regular experience with referenda; where referenda tend to deal with less critical, more ‘mundane’ or run-of-the-mill policy issues; and where referenda do not necessarily engage deep societal cleavages. In these types of jurisdictions, information effects in support for referenda may be absent or may take on a different complexion. In contexts where referenda are commonplace, such as Switzerland and various US states, the referendum may be viewed similar to any election.

In general, then, we are making the argument that empirical experiences with specific referenda affect public attitudes toward the referendum as a decision tool in general. What this suggests, however, is that public attitudes toward the use of referenda are not immutable; they are subject to change as a consequence of additional empirical experiences with referenda. Thus, if Canada were to hold more regular, less high-stakes referenda (such as those in BC, Ontario, and PEI on electoral reform over the past few years), information effects in attitudes toward referenda may change. Highly-knowledgeable voters may become more convinced that while they have high confidence in government, there is some value in altering decision-making habits to provide for additional public input, for instance. With more regular use of the referendum, low-knowledge voters may have greater exposure to debates about minority rights and the potential for referenda to tyrannize minorities, which may in turn alter their opinions about the

referendum as a decision tool, especially among low-information citizens who have pre-existing attitudinal commitments to minority rights.

Building on this last point, the direct democracy literature suggests that experience with initiatives, referenda, and other such tools do, in fact, influence electorates' attitudes and behaviours. While we have considered attitudes toward referenda as a dependent variable, other studies have treated the holding of initiatives and referenda as independent variables that are positively correlated with political knowledge, voter turnout, political efficacy, and confidence in government (e.g., Mendelsohn and Cutler 2000; Smith and Tolbert 2004; Smith 2002). This is an important reminder that "the attitudes and abilities of citizens, although often treated as exogenous for analytical purposes, are nurtured and molded by democratic institutions" (Smith 2002: 892). Indeed, we need to be careful to embed our analyses of citizens' attitudes toward the use of referenda within their particular experiences, as discussed above. This literature on the educative function of referenda and other direct democratic instruments suggests that increased use may very well change attitudes and behaviours and perhaps in positive ways.

As a final point of discussion, we refer back to the opening sections of the paper. There is ample scholarly and popular discussion these days about 'democratic deficit', 'democratic malaise', 'critical citizens', declining trust in government, political apathy, and the like. These various phenomena are said to be highly intertwined, and one of the key themes in this sort of discussion is the sense that the public feels inadequately represented by policy makers and the political system as a whole, which is thought to offer too few routes to genuine citizen influence. In short, the public wants in. The increased use of referenda to decide law and policy is one among many options that permits citizens greater access to the policy process, and it is a popular option that has become more pervasive globally in the last few decades (e.g., Scarrow 2001).

Yet, clearly our analyses caution against wholesale statements about both public discontent with politics, as well as the popularity of the referendum as a decision tool. Attitudes toward the use of referenda are not uniform, or uniformly high. Across the political knowledge spectrum, the citizens who are arguably best equipped to deal with the informational and cognitive demands of referenda are the most sceptical about its use to decide law and policy. Indeed, there are important information effects in attitudes toward referenda, and these are based, in part, on differential levels of confidence in government and on attitudes toward the rights of minorities in the political system (or, more likely, the ability to connect concern for minorities with the possible dangers of referenda).

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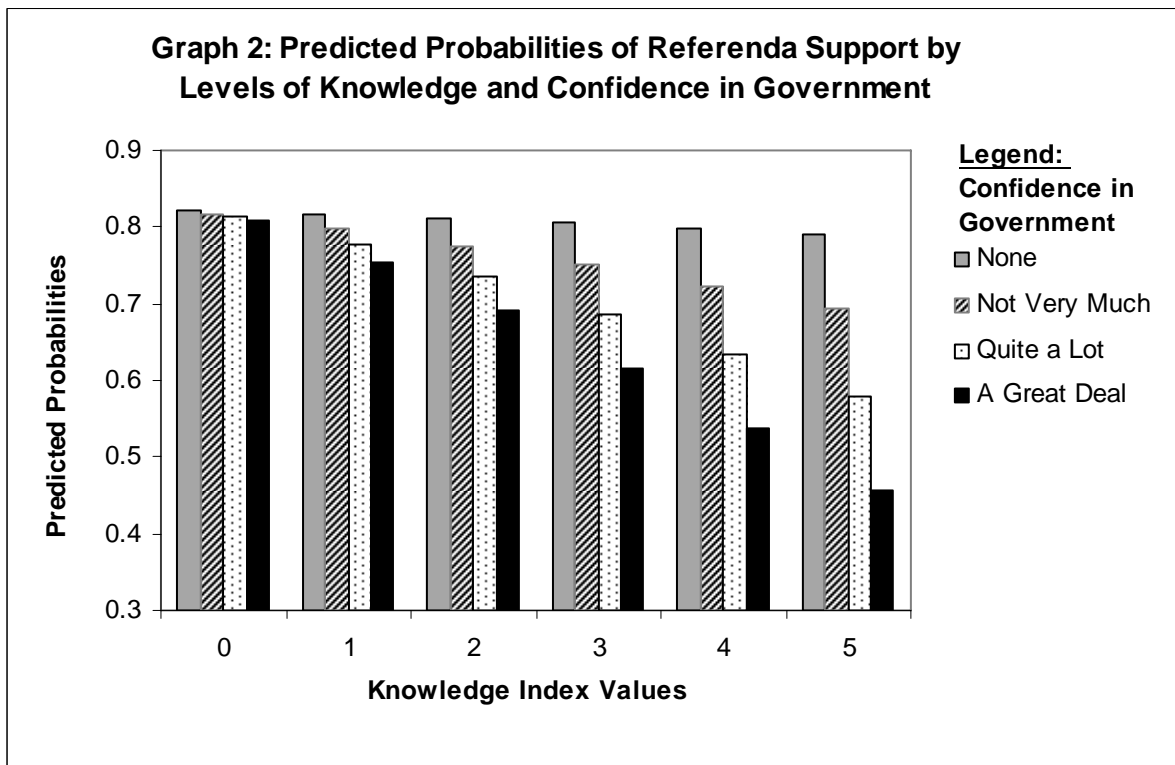
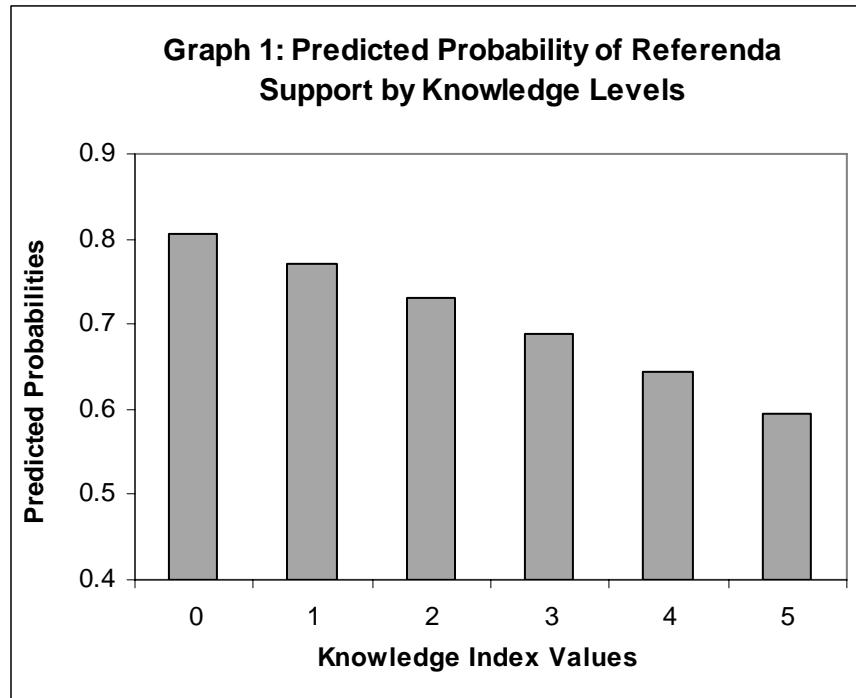
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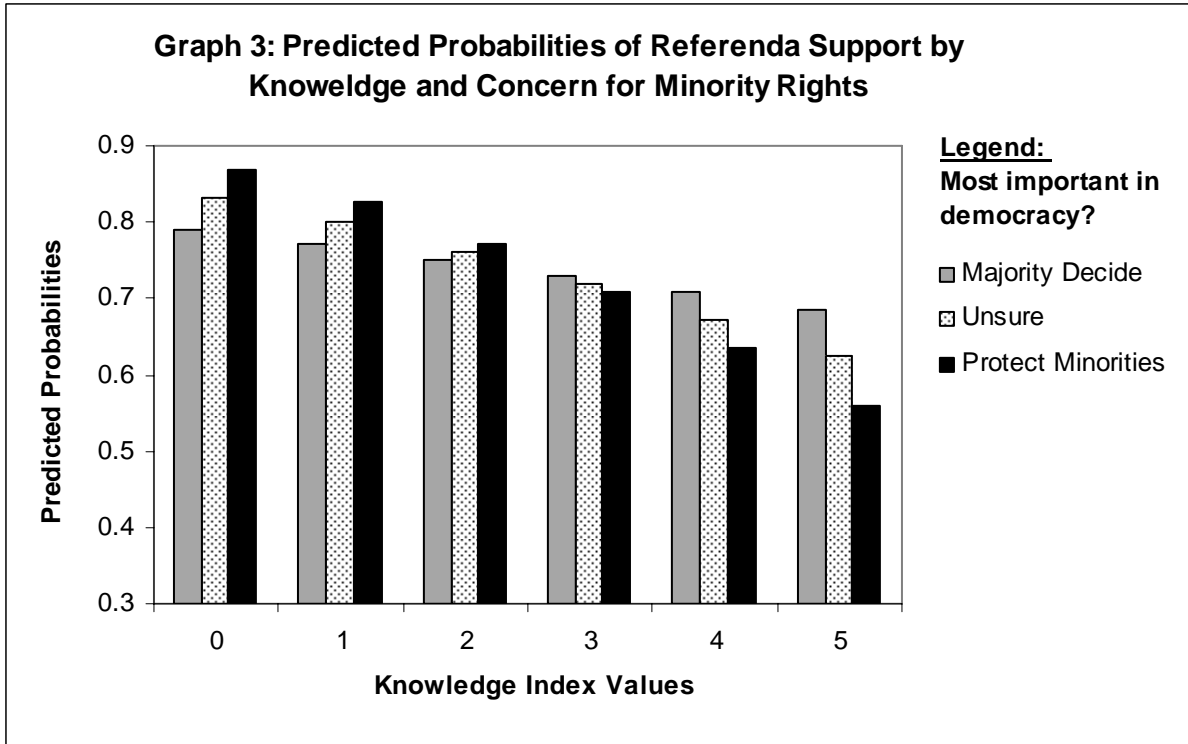
**Table 1: Aggregate Support for
Referenda, 1997 & 2000**

Never	20.7%
Rarely	21.2
Occasionally	37.4
Regularly	20.9

Source: 1997, 2000 CES

Table 2: Support for the Use of Referenda		
	Model 1	Model 2
Age	1.11 (.05)**	1.07 (.06)
Education	.78 (.09)**	.83 (.10)
West	1.36 (.16)**	1.20 (.15)
Quebec	.66 (.08)***	.63 (.08)***
Atlantic	1.00 (.15)	.88 (.14)
CES 2000	.59 (.06)***	.59 (.06)***
Efficacy	1.13 (.06)**	1.14 (.06)**
Party ID	2.41 (.06)***	1.95 (.31)***
Knowledge	.80 (.03)***	1.03 (.12)
Confidence in Gov't	-	.98 (.16)
Incompetent Public	-	1.11 (.23)
Minority Rights	-	1.34 (.20)*
Confidence*Knowledge	-	.90 (.05)*
Incompetent*Knowledge	-	.95 (.06)
Minority*Knowledge	-	.89 (.04)***
Pseudo R ²	0.06	0.08
N	3082	2802
Note: figures in columns are odds ratios with standard errors in parentheses		
*** p<.01 ** p<.05 * p<.10		
Source: 1997, 2000 CES		





Appendix: Coding of Variables¹³

University Graduate:

Highest level of education completed
graduated from university=1, no university degree=0

Age Cohorts:

Pre-boomers = 0 if born 1944 and before

Boomers = 1 if born 1945-1959

Gen X = 2 if born 1960-1969

Post-gen X = 3 if born 1970-1982

Region:

Dummy variables for Atlantic, Quebec and West with Ontario as the reference category.

Party Identification:

Moderate and Strong Identification with Reform/Canadian Alliance or Bloc Quebecois = 1
no party identification and other party identification = 0

Internal Efficacy:

“Sometimes politics is so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”

strongly disagree=3, strongly agree=0

Political Knowledge:

Index comprised of questions on knowledge of politics. Indexes arrange from 0 to 5 where a score of 5 means that a respondent answered all five questions correctly and a score of 0 means that no questions were answered correctly.

1997 CES (Cronbach’s Alpha= 0.61)

1. “Do you recall the name of the Government Leader/Premier of this province/territory?” (varies with province)
2. “Do you recall the name of the first woman Prime Minister of Canada?” (Kim Campbell)
3. “Do you recall the name of the Federal Minister of Finance?” (Paul Martin)
4. “Do you recall which party promised to lower personal income tax by 10%? (PC)
5. “Do you recall which party promised to cut unemployment in half” (NDP)

2000 CES (Cronbach’s Alpha= 0.68)

1. “Do you recall the name of the Government Leader/Premier of this province?” (varies with province)
2. “Do you recall the name of the Minister of Finance of Canada?” (Paul Martin)

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, all variable coding and construction are consistent across the 1997 and 2000 Canadian Election Studies.

3. “Do you happen to know the name of the Prime Minister at the time of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States?” (Brian Mulroney)
4. “Do you happen to remember which party is promising a single tax rate?” (Canadian Alliance)
5. “Do you happen to remember which party is proposing a national prescription drug plan? (NDP)

Confidence in Government:

“Please indicate how much confidence you have in the ‘the federal government.’”
none at all=0, not very much=1, quite a lot=2, a great deal=3

Incompetent Public - assessments of other people’s abilities to reason politically:

“The problem with democracy is that most people don’t really know what’s best for them.”
strongly agree=3, strongly disagree=0

“Most people have enough sense to tell whether the government is doing a good job.”
strongly disagree=3, strongly agree=0

Concern for Minority Rights:

“Which is more important in a democratic society: letting the majority decide or protecting the needs and rights of minorities?”

letting majority decide=0, unsure=1, protecting the needs and interests of minorities=2