Global Public Opinion Project:
Changes in Public Opinion in the UK, France and Belgium

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The Global Public Opinions Project aims to create the world's largest database of public opinion, investigating whether publics across the world have become more or less conservative over time.

As an intern on this project, I contributed to the creation of this database by collecting and coding data from the UK, France, and Belgium. I also undertook statistical analysis for these countries to try and explain the shifts and changes that have occurred in public opinion since the 1980s.

Objectives

The overall objective of the project is to collect an unprecedented amount of regional, national, and global survey data from which to investigate shifts and changes in global public opinion since the 1980s. Access to a database of this scale provides a breadth of empirical data from which to base in depth analysis on changes in public opinion, thus allowing for greater understanding of this phenomenon.

Therefore the central aim of my work on the project was to collect and code data from the UK, France, and Belgium accurately and efficiently into survey marginals. This format allowed variant format data to be utilised and compared more easily, making the data accessible for analysis regarding change in liberal - conservative attitudes. This was done on a huge scale with approximately 4,000 variables across the three countries in total.

A secondary aim was to then run some initial statistical analysis on the data I had collected to investigate the trends and changes in public opinion during the time period 1980-2016.

Method

In order to create the public opinion database I used stata to recode survey responses into marginals. This compiled information across numerous different issues - from immigration to privatisation - which taken together provided a larger picture of public opinion as a whole.

As survey questions repeated across multiple years, this recoded data meant I was able to create an overall graph of longitudinal public opinion change for each country. I did this using the statistical software Wcalc which threads together fragmented public opinion data on particular issues to create a single line showing public opinion change. These graphs created a visual depiction of how public opinion has changed across the UK and France.

To investigate and understand these changes in public opinion I ran further analysis, graphing the separated components of public opinion- for example economic and social- to see if they behaved in the same way. I also employed regression analysis on the data using stata to discover if there was a statistically significant relationship between changes in public opinion and public spending levels or ideological position of the current government.
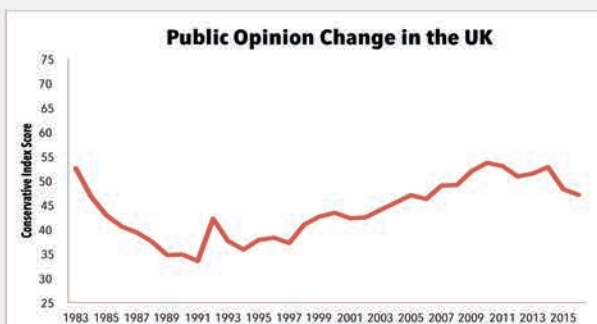
A graph to show public opinion change in the UK 1983-2016
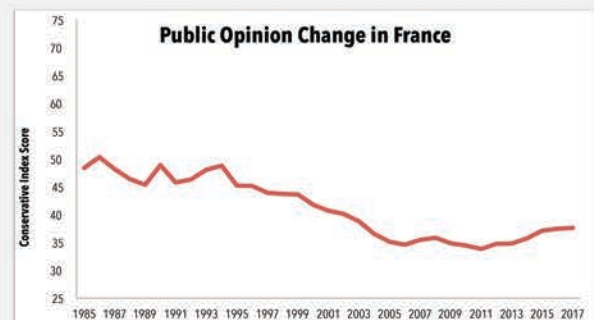
A graph to show public opinion change in France 1985-2017

Results and Conclusions

In the UK public opinion shifted towards more liberal attitudes during the 1980s, then in the early 1990s this trend reversed leading to rising conservatism until 2010. This same trend occurs across both the economic and social elements of public opinion when it is separated into sub-categories. It can also be observed through regression analysis that changes in public opinion have a statistically significant relationship with levels of public spending. This occurs in a thermostatic fashion- as spending rises public opinion becomes more conservative and vice versa. Such a relationship perhaps indicates that the public observes changing levels in spending and reactively shifts in opinion to counter this, centered around the median voter preference.

While the UK's public opinion shows periods of rising and falling conservatism, France's public opinion change denotes a trend of generally falling conservatism since the 1980s. Due to the federal nature of Belgium, survey data is incredibly fragmented between regions and without additional data a graph of public opinion change is not reliable for the country as a whole.

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