Dealing with public and published opinions

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Outline

1. Why public and published opinion?
2. What are the public opinions?
3. Conclusions for the political debate

Death

- Death does not only constitute a challenge for every individual person, but also a threat to society
- Public practices: death announcements, funerals, cemeteries, obituaries, art & culture about death...
- Modern taboo around death creates anxiety and impedes our coping with death
- Death as the "great equalizer" calls for considering each person's voice on the same level

Death calls for public discourse!

Ethics

- The essence of ethics is about the right way to live together as a community and society
- Core ethical concepts of respect, dignity and fairness require giving a voice to every person
- The historical origins of ethics in the European Antiquity were on the "agora" (Socrates), in the synagogues and churches
- Today, ethics is both a scientific discipline (academia) and an everyday activity (agora)

Ethics calls for public discourse!

Biopolitics

- Bioethical issues are increasingly becoming political
- Political history is full of warning examples of moral authoritarianism
- Open, plural societies are based on the competition of value systems using debate and argument
- Discourse is no supreme epistemological way to truth, but the best political way to compensate for the lack of a supreme way to truth

Biopolitics calls for public discourse!

Forms of discourse

Involving every citizen, esp. those affected
Promoting a well-informed, balanced, rich discourse
Biases in the discourse

- Opinion leaders often motivated by moral ideology (strong motivation, interest in a recognizable profile)
- Many media formats favor pure, provocative theses (disfavor argumentation & scientific evidence)
- Some tend to confound ethical argumentation with personal storytelling
- Opinions of ordinary people and those affected only taken into account as selective case examples
- Patient advocacy groups do not represent all patients
- Sound opinion polls and empirical research needed

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Opinion polls

- Critique: undefined, vague terms, emotionally charged language, sponsoring, selective reporting
- Yet: The lying polls are indeed a caricature and an easy way to disregard unwanted results
- Professional activity with decades of experience, staffed with social scientists, employing rigorous procedures
- Results are often highly consistent with each other and concordant with scientific attitude research

Example Germany

- Higher support rates among:
  - Eastern Germans
  - Less religious ones
  - Citizens with a higher education
  - Younger/Middle-aged citizens
- 75% of bereaved relatives of cancer patients in favor of AS
- Polls played a marginal role in the debate 2014-2015 (often just used as an introduction to talk shows etc.)
- Moral lobbyists usually mocked or ignored public opinion
Attitude research

- **Wording effects:**
  - context-rich, personal description → more permissive attitudes
  - theoretical, impersonal description → more restrictive attitudes

- **Order effects** (e.g. contrast effect):
  - Uncontroversial question: withholding treatment? → Rather YES
  - Highly controversial question: euthanasia for health elderly? → Rather NO

- **Impact** moderate (intensifying, not inverting opinions)

International research

- **Acceptance of euthanasia 1981-2008 (range 0-10)**

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- End-of-life ethical issues should be publicly debated
- Public discourse should satisfy quality criteria, but should also involve as many citizens as possible
- Opinion polls and attitude research are indispensable, but should be carefully done
- Majority of Western Europeans are increasingly in favor of assisted dying (↔ Eastern Europe)
- How should parliaments, churches and professions take into account this changing moral landscapes?

Thank you for your attention!

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