

# Uncertainty

## Session 6

PMAP 8551/4551: Data Visualization with R  
Andrew Young School of Policy Studies  
Spring 2026

# Plan for today

**Communicating uncertainty**

**Visualizing uncertainty**

# Communicating uncertainty

# The Bay of Pigs



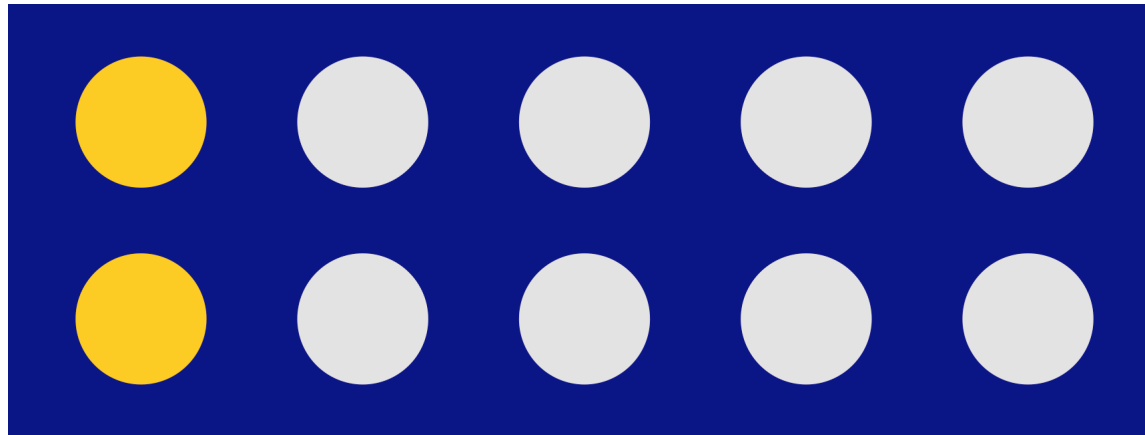
**Joint Chiefs said  
"fair chance of  
success"**

**In Pentagon-speak,  
that meant 3:1 odds  
of failure**

**25% chance of  
success!**

# Misperceptions of probability

1 in 5 vs. 20%



# Misperceptions of probability

Utah **SOLID R**

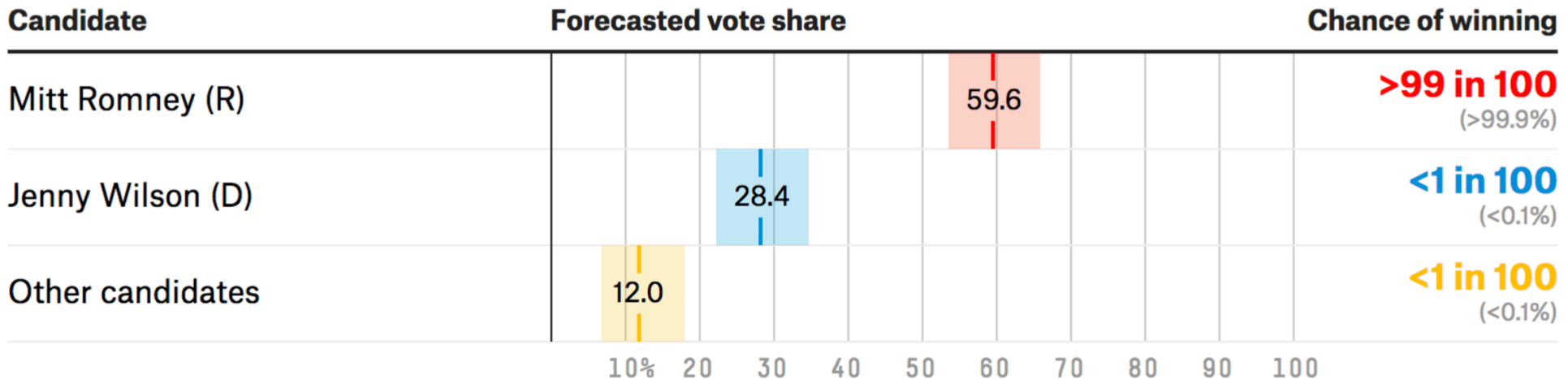


**<1 in 100**

Chance the Democrat wins (<0.1%)

**>99 in 100**

Chance the Republican wins (>99.9%)



# Misperceptions of probability

Texas LEAN R

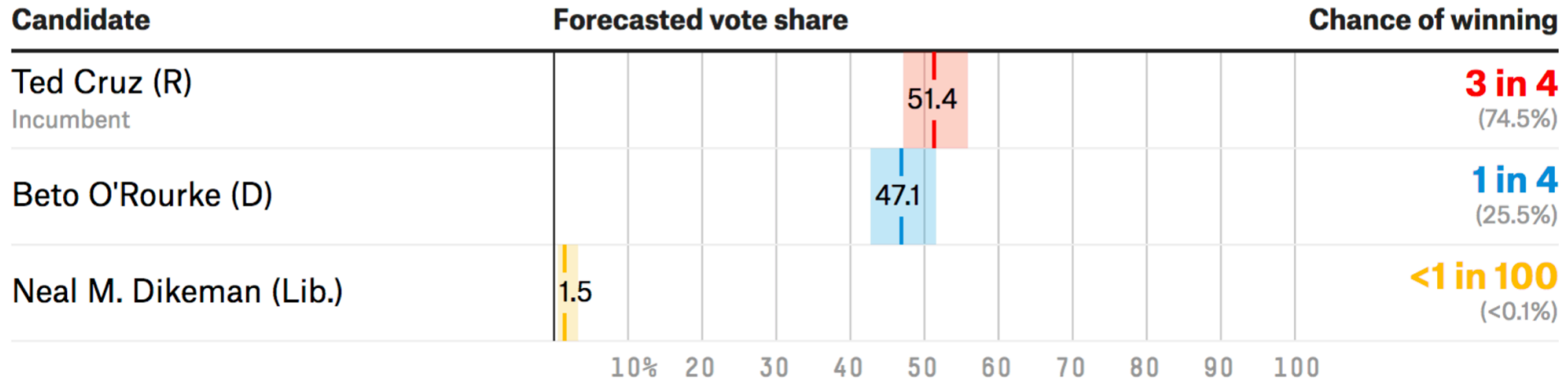


**1 in 4**

Chance the Democrat wins (25.5%)

**3 in 4**

Chance the Republican wins (74.5%)



# Misperceptions of probability

**Chance of rain = Probability × Area**



**100% chance in  
1/3 of the city**

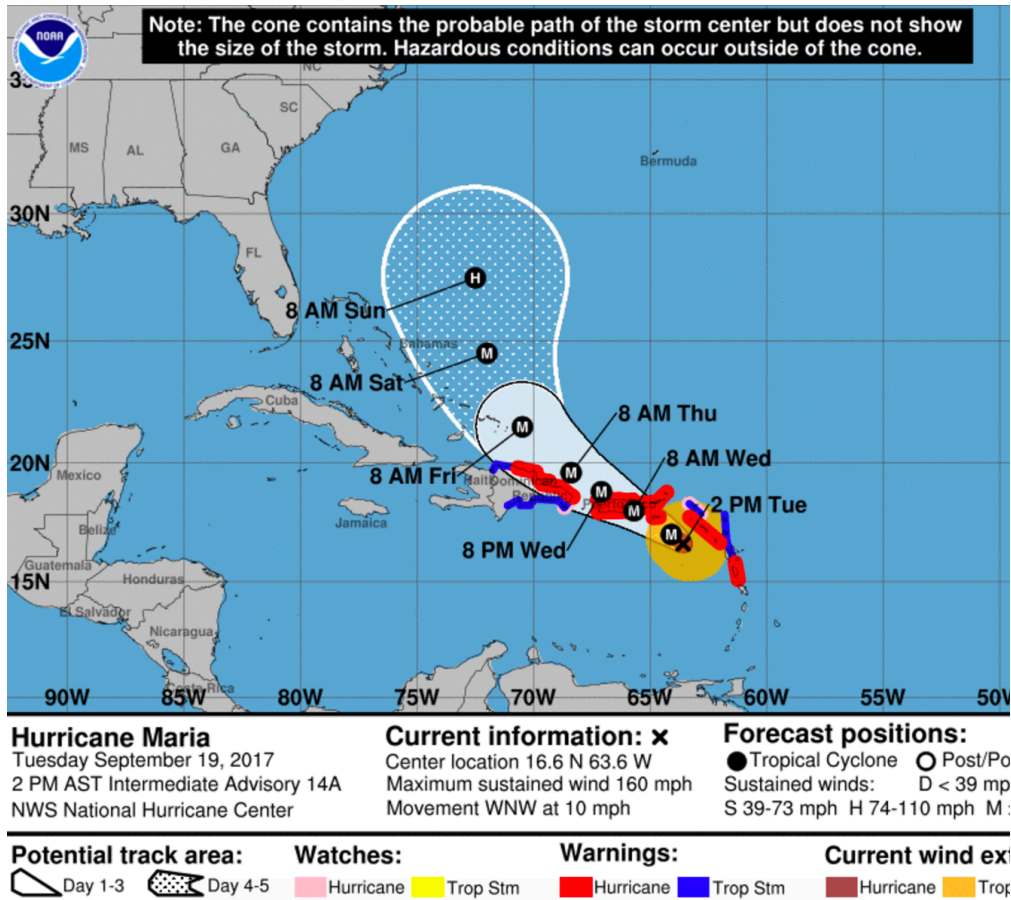
**0% chance in  
2/3 of the city**

**Chance of rain  
for city = 33%**

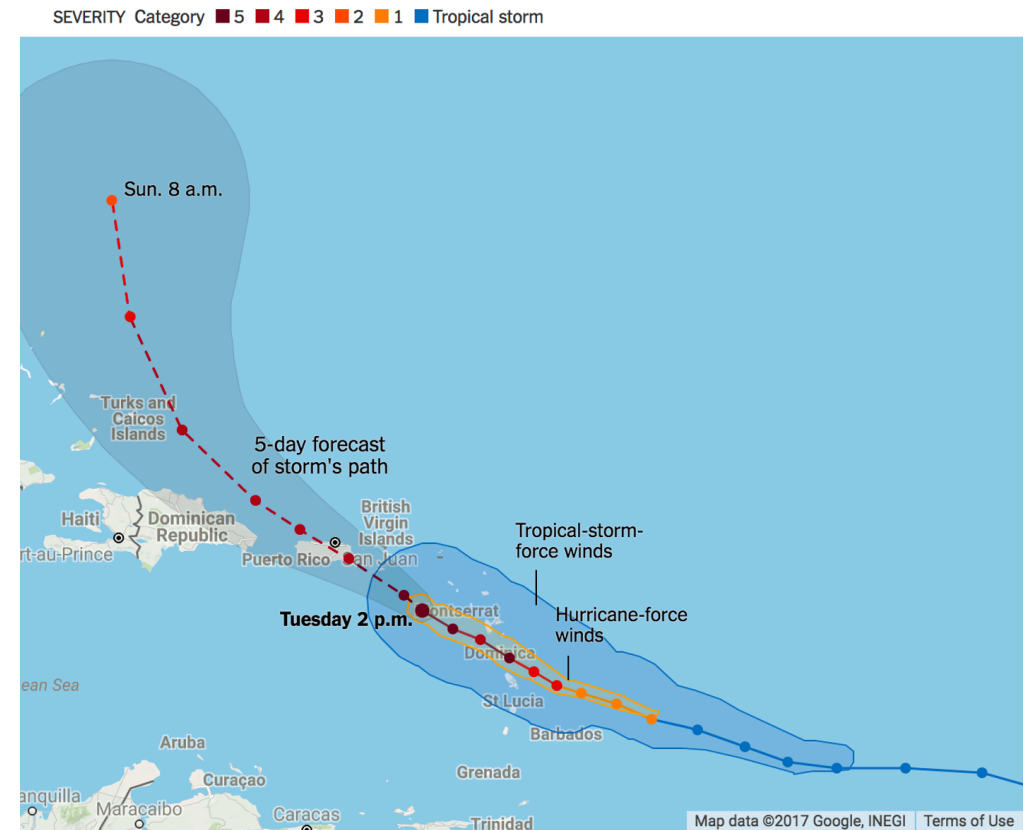
# Misperceptions of probability



# Misperceptions of probability

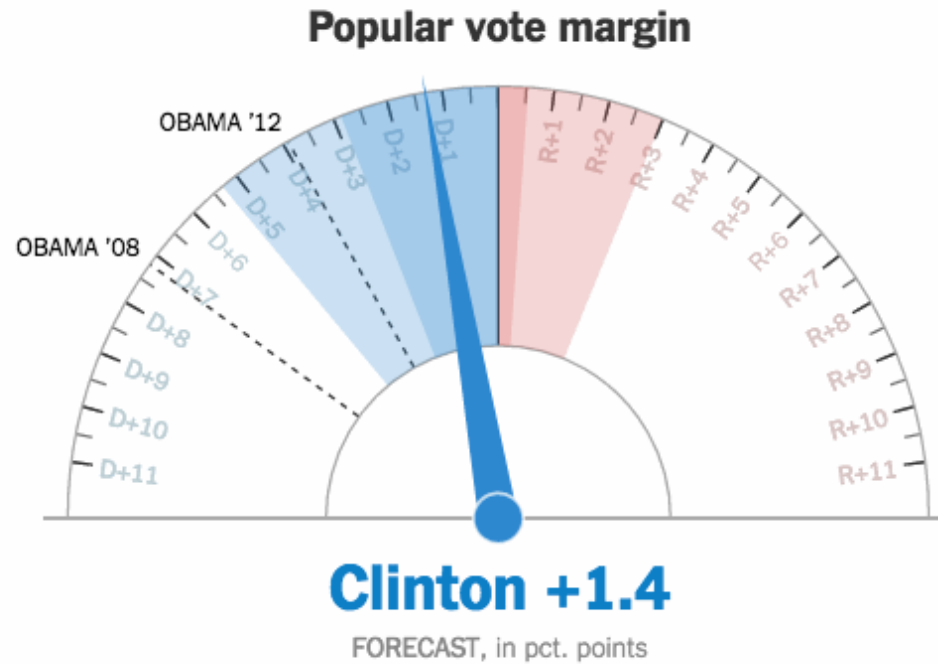


Hurricane Maria map, NOAA



Hurricane Maria map, New York Times

# The needle



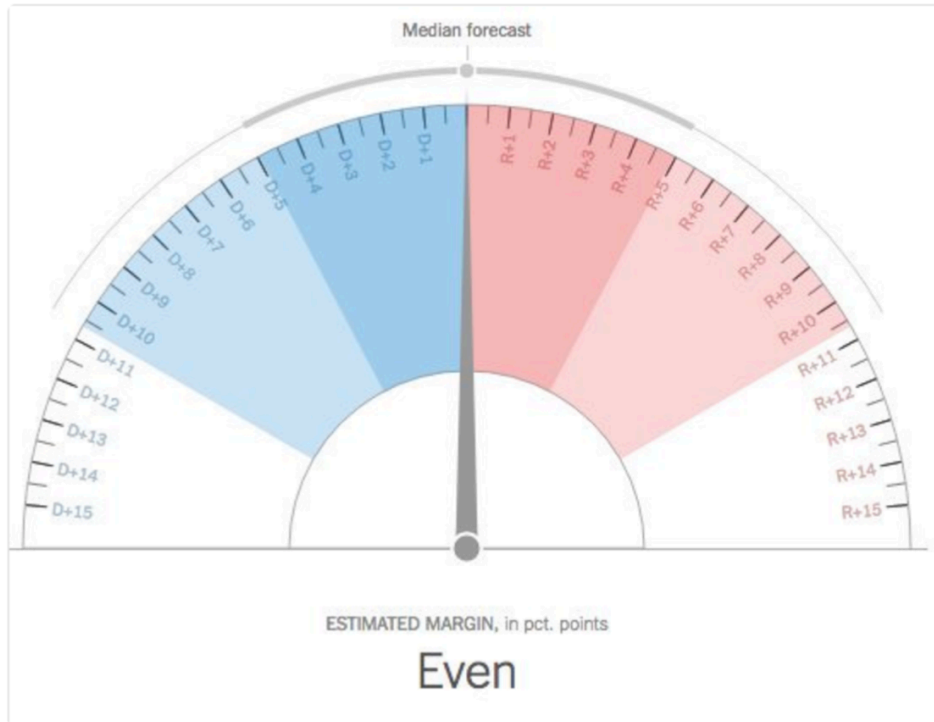
# The needle



**Nate Cohn** ✓  
@Nate\_Cohn

Following

The GA-6 live model is live.  
[nytimes.com/elections/resu](https://www.nytimes.com/elections/resu) ...



**Virgil Texas** ✓ @virgiltexas · Jun 20

Replying to @Nate\_Cohn

Nate



**Alp Ozelik** ✓ @alpicable · Jun 20

Replying to @Nate\_Cohn

DO NOT DO THIS TO ME AGAIN



**Sarcasmorator** @Sarcasmorator · Jun 20

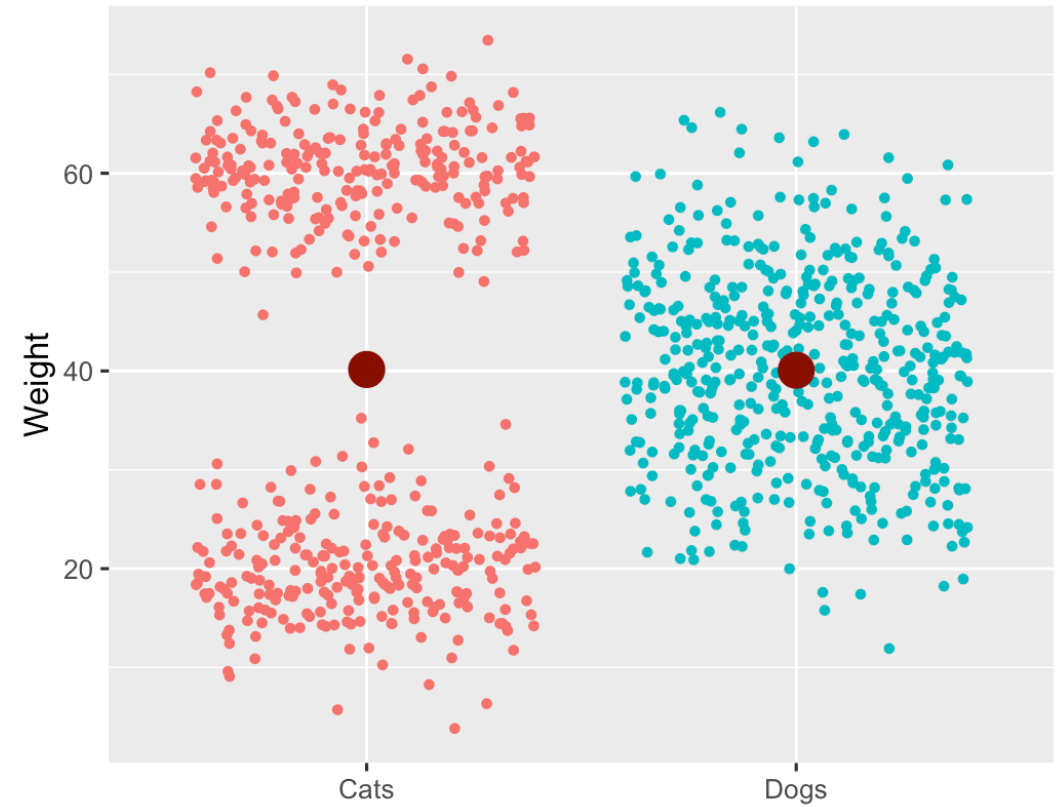
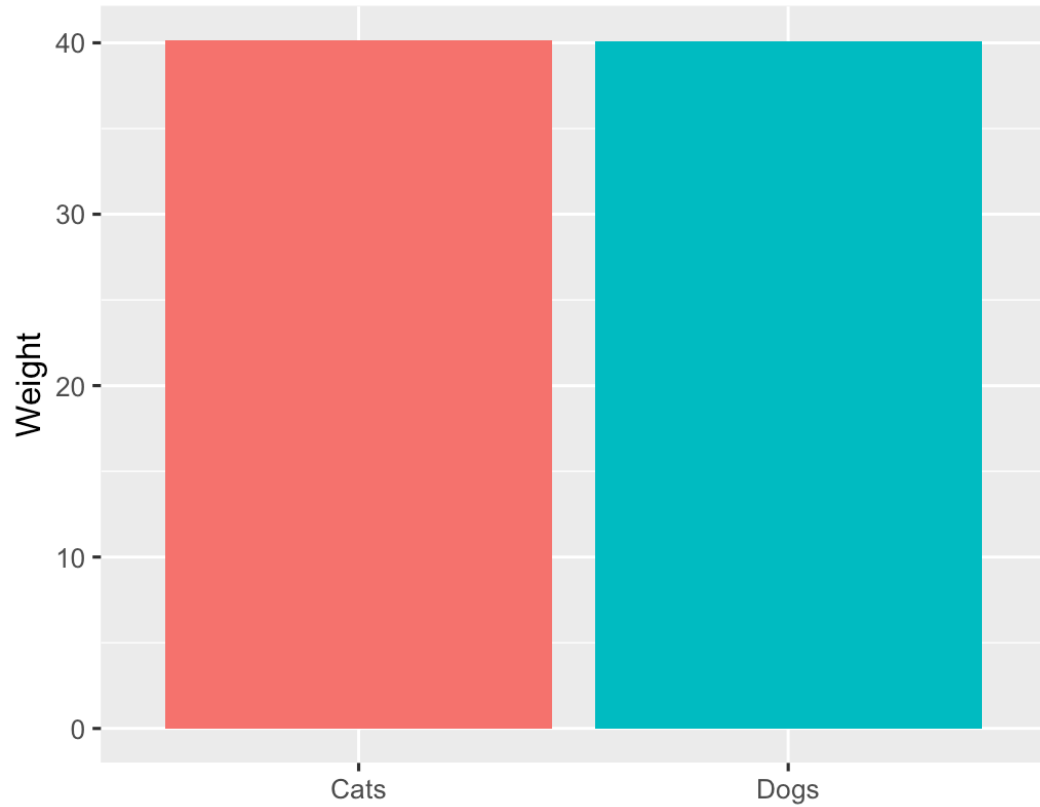
Replying to @Nate\_Cohn @jacquicollins\_

ah, yes, the election stress-o-meter



# Visualizing uncertainty

# Problems with single numbers



# More information is always better

**Avoid visualizing single numbers when you have a whole range or distribution of numbers**

**Uncertainty in single variables**

**Uncertainty across multiple variables**

**Uncertainty in models and simulations**

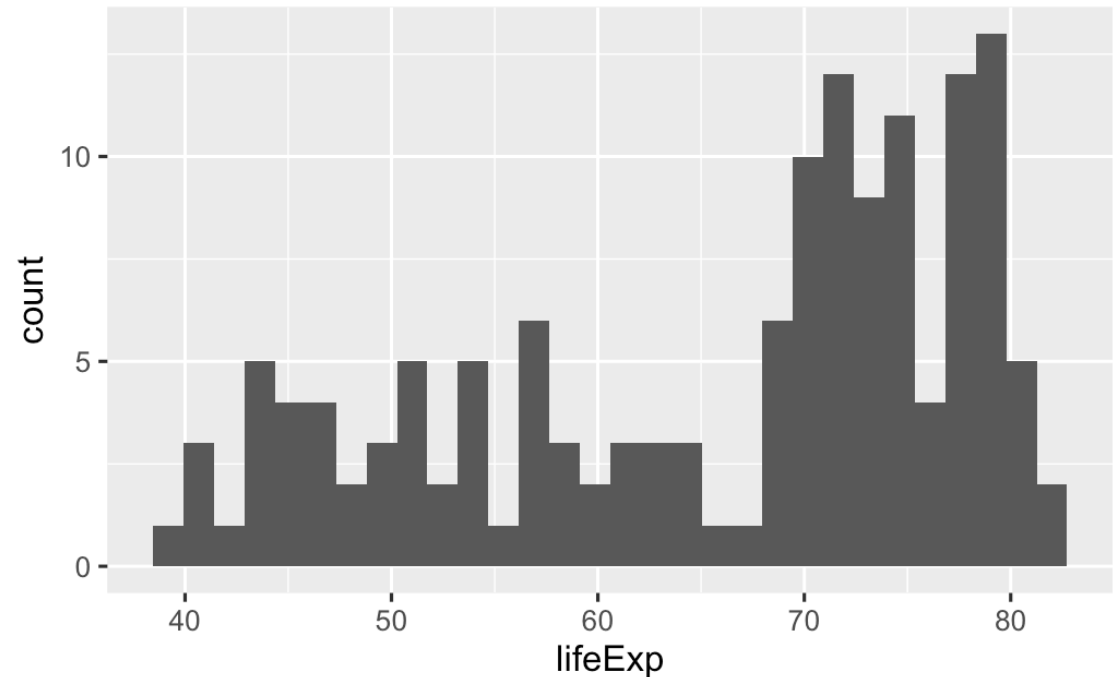
# Histograms

Put data into equally spaced buckets (or bins),  
plot how many rows are in each bucket

```
library(gapminder)

gapminder_2002 <- gapminder |>
  filter(year == 2002)

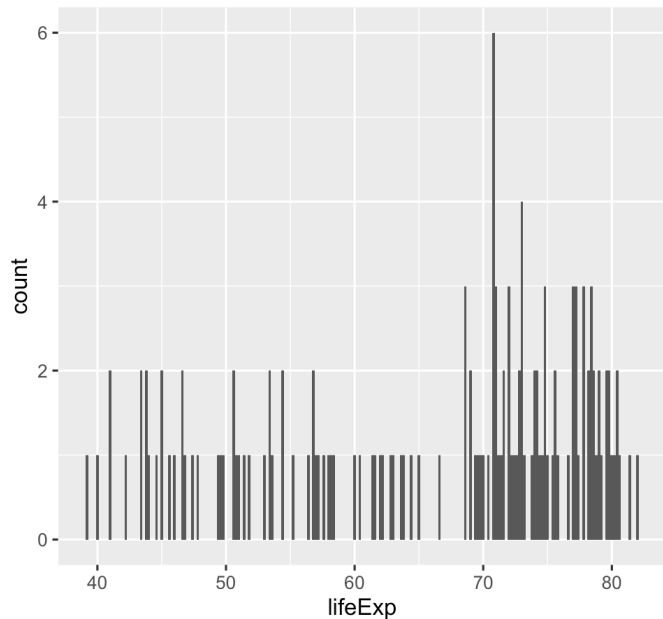
ggplot(gapminder_2002,
       aes(x = lifeExp)) +
  geom_histogram()
```



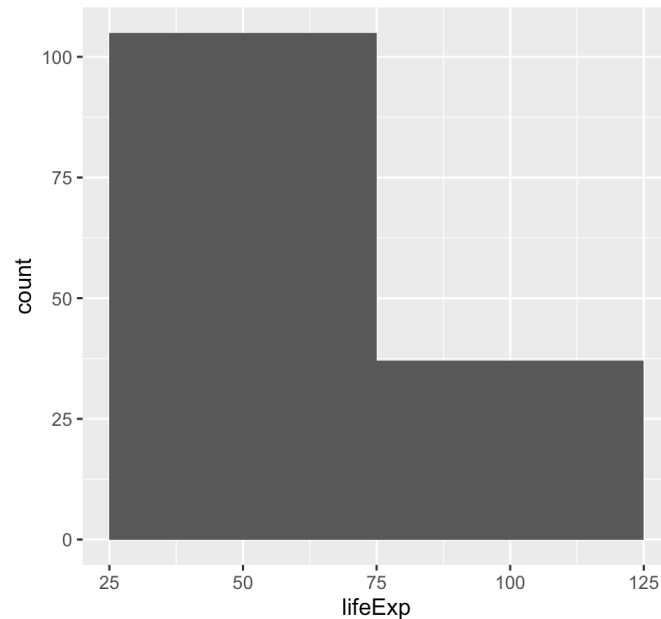
# Histograms: Bin width

No official rule for what makes a good bin width

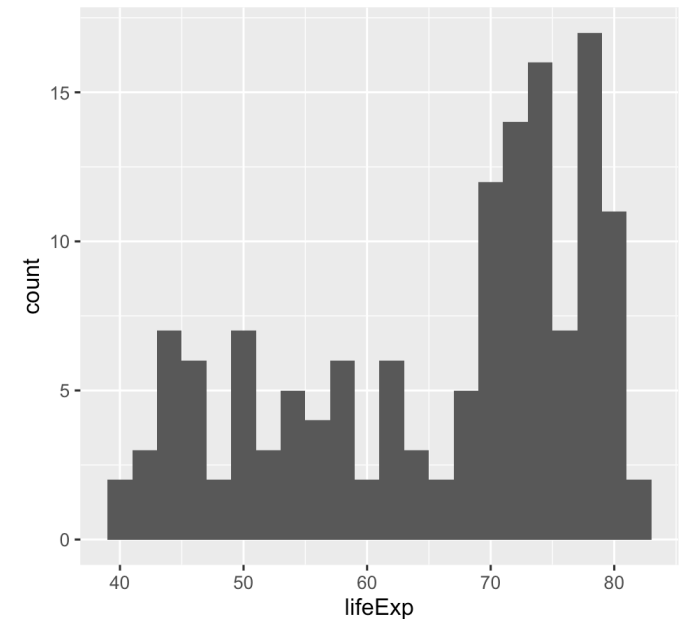
**Too narrow:**  
**binwidth = 0.2**



**Too wide:**  
**binwidth = 50**



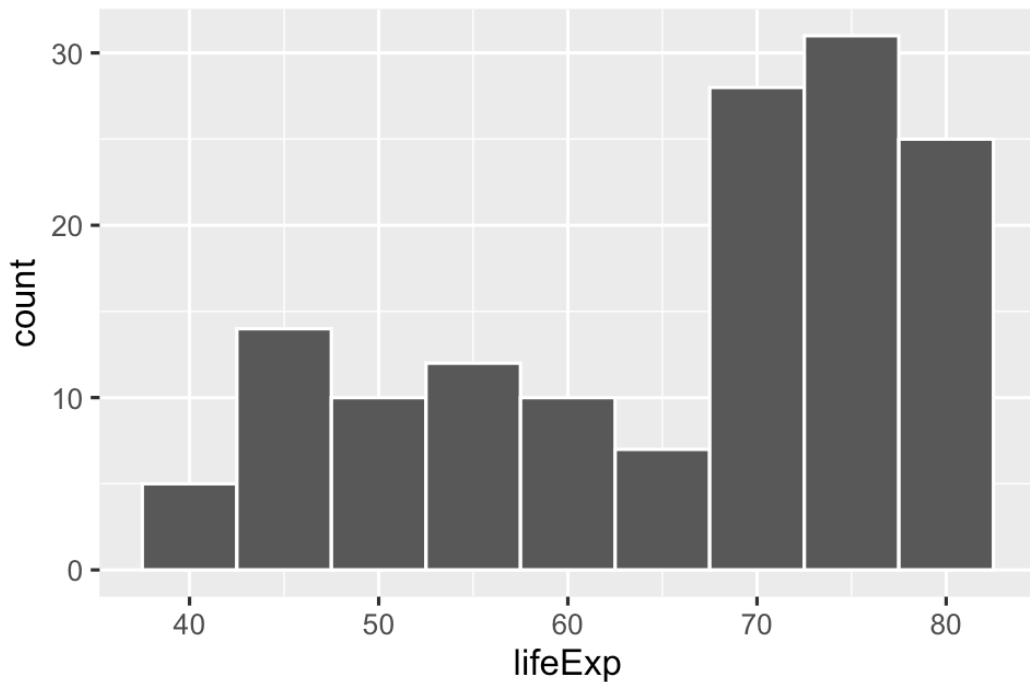
**(One type of) just right:**  
**binwidth = 2**



# Histogram tips

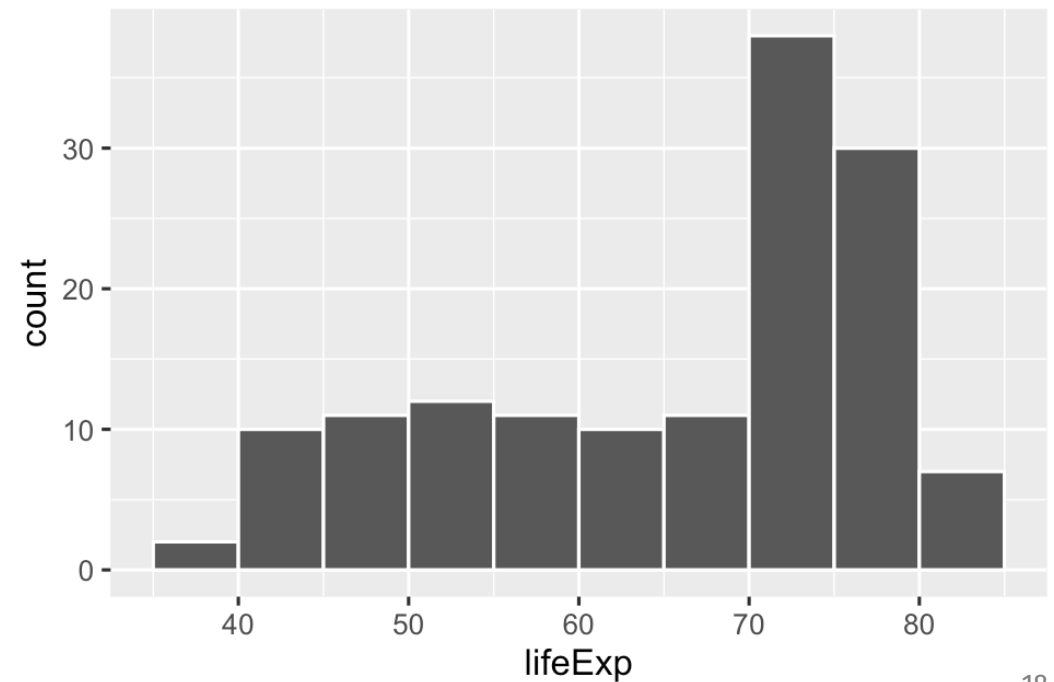
Add a border to the bars for readability

```
geom_histogram(..., color = "white")
```



Set the boundary; bucket now 50–55, not 47.5–52.5

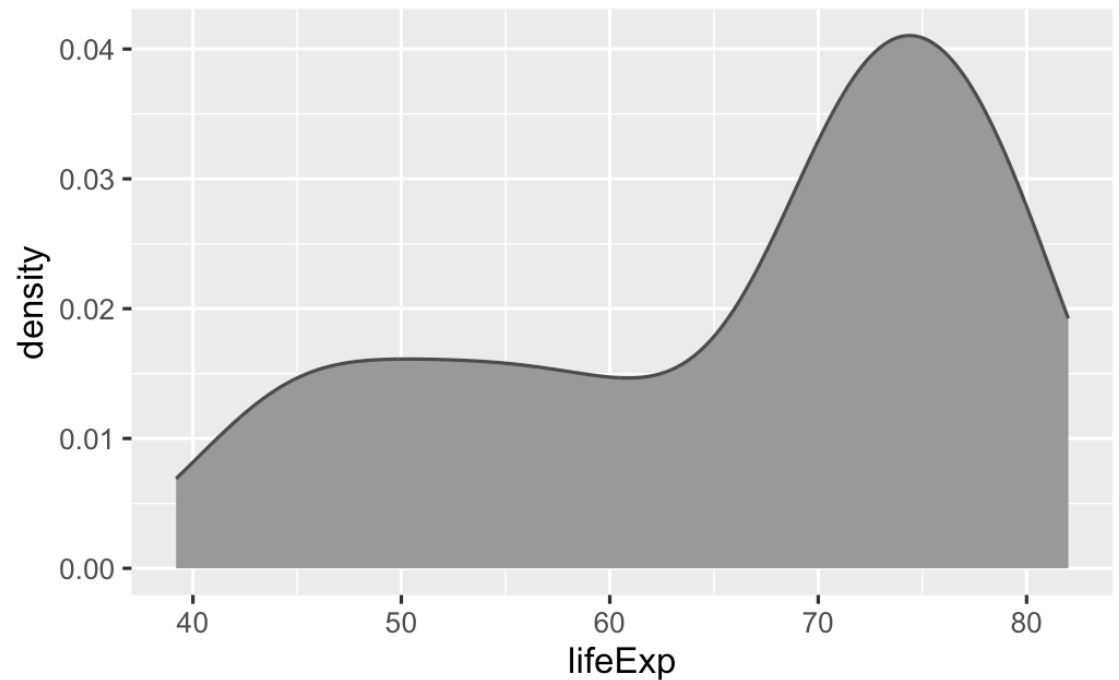
```
geom_histogram(..., boundary = 50)
```



# Density plots

Use calculus to find the probability of each x value

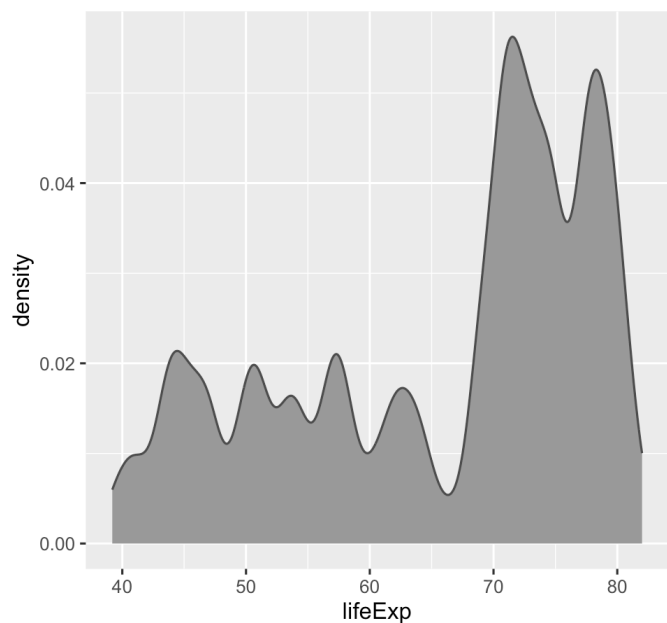
```
ggplot(gapminder_2002,  
       aes(x = lifeExp)) +  
  geom_density(fill = "grey60",  
              color = "grey30")
```



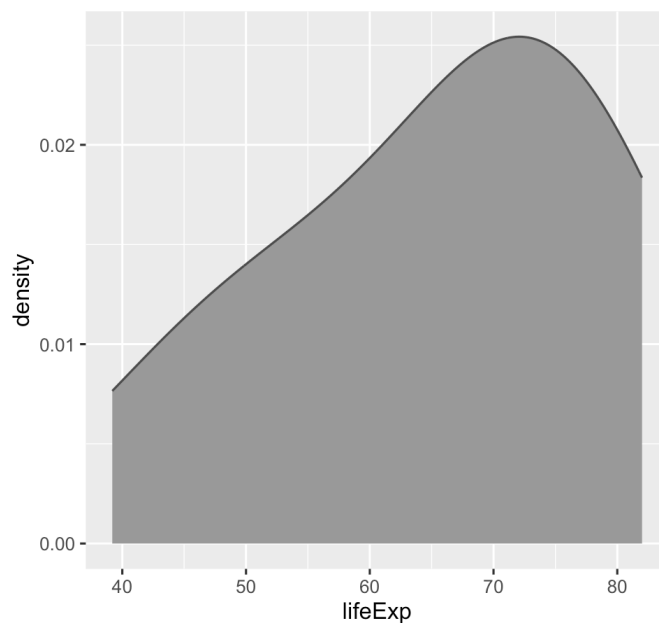
# Density plots: Kernels and bandwidths

Different options for calculus change the plot shape

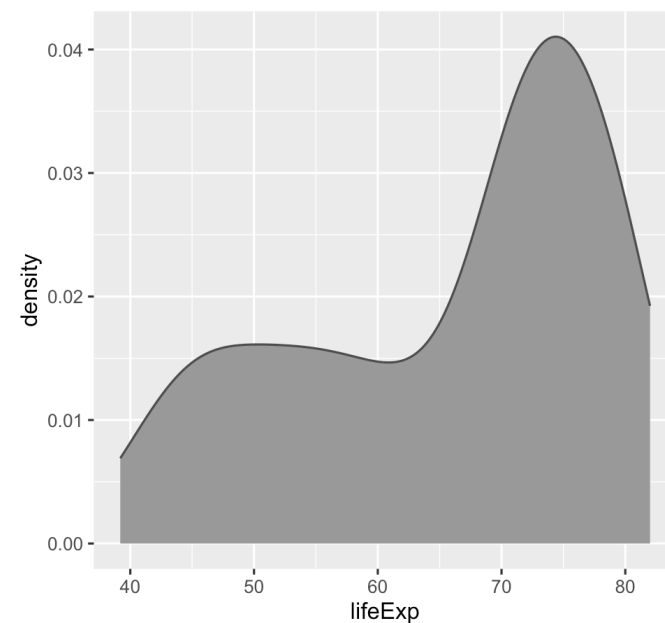
**bw = 1**



**bw = 10**



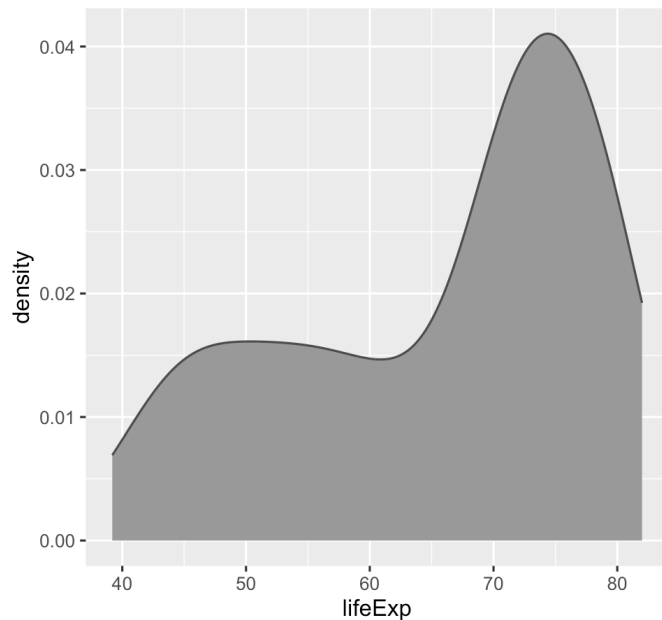
**bw = "nrd0"(default)**



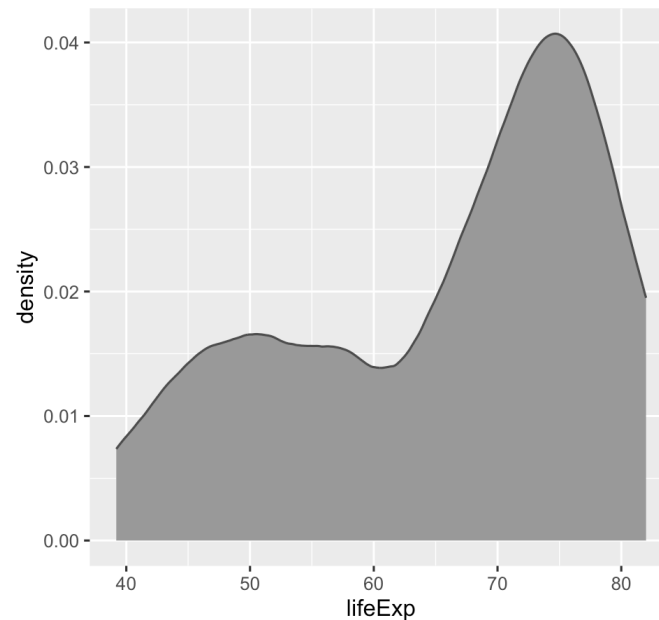
# Density plots: Kernels and bandwidths

Different options for calculus change the plot shape

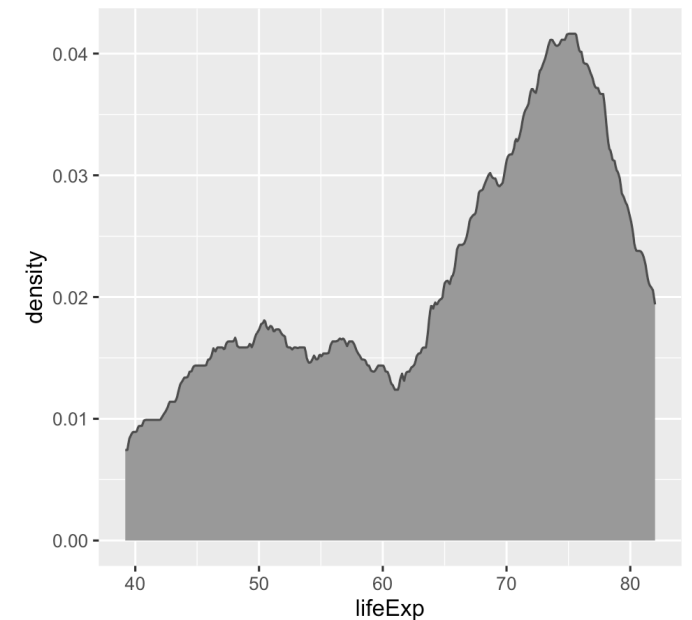
kernel = "gaussian"



"epanechnikov"



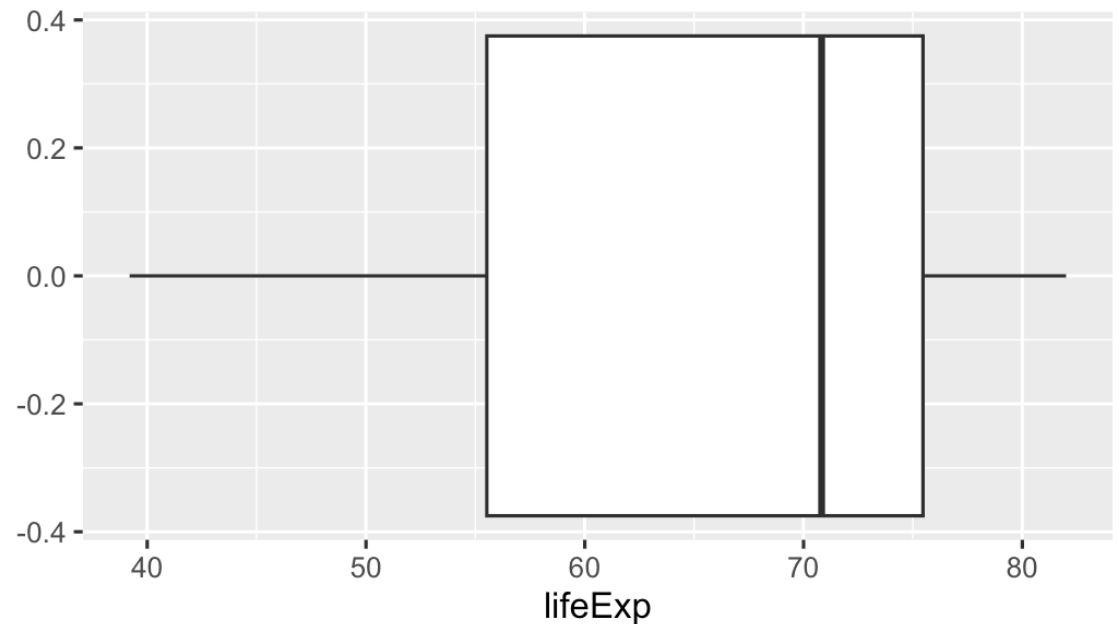
"rectangular"



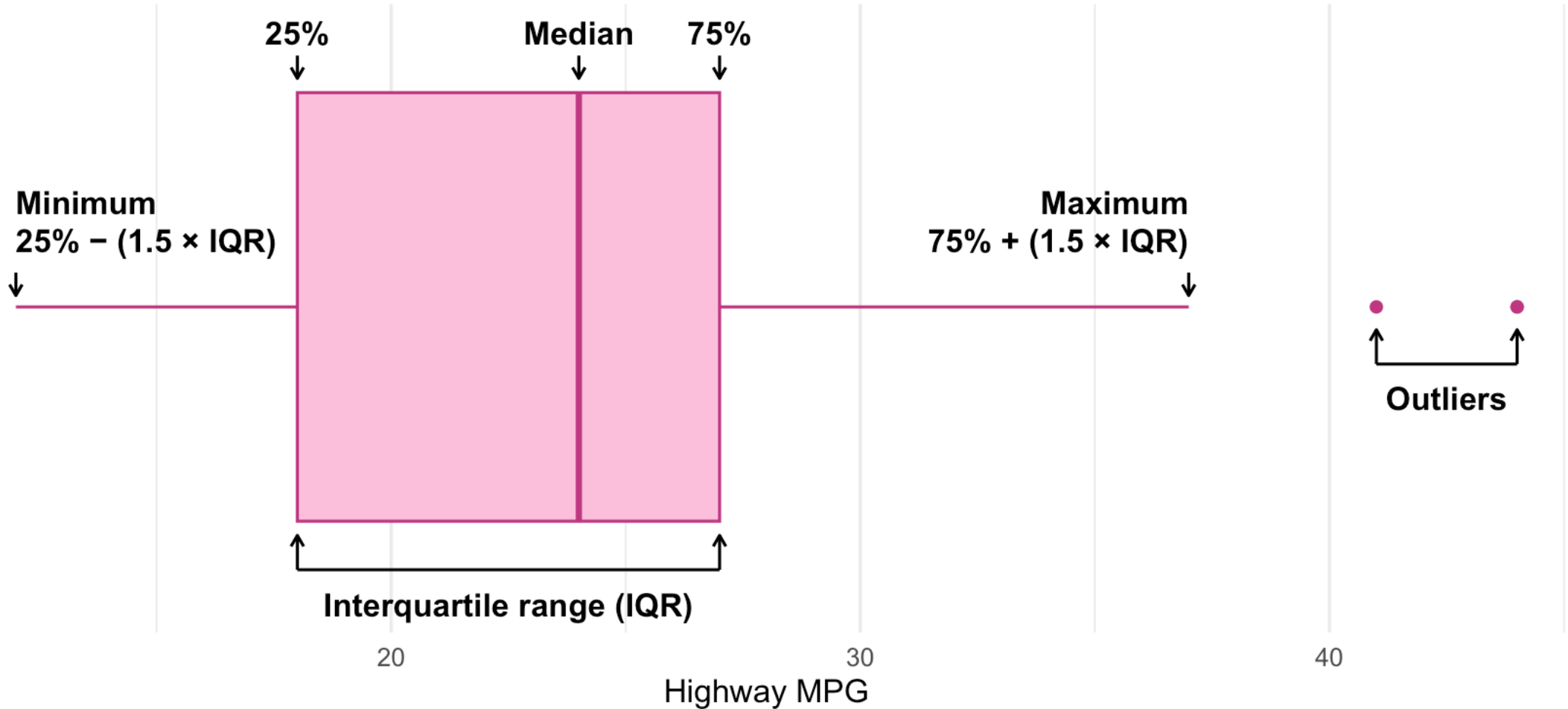
# Box plots

## Show specific distributional numbers

```
ggplot(gapminder_2002,  
       aes(x = lifeExp)) +  
  geom_boxplot()
```



# Box plots

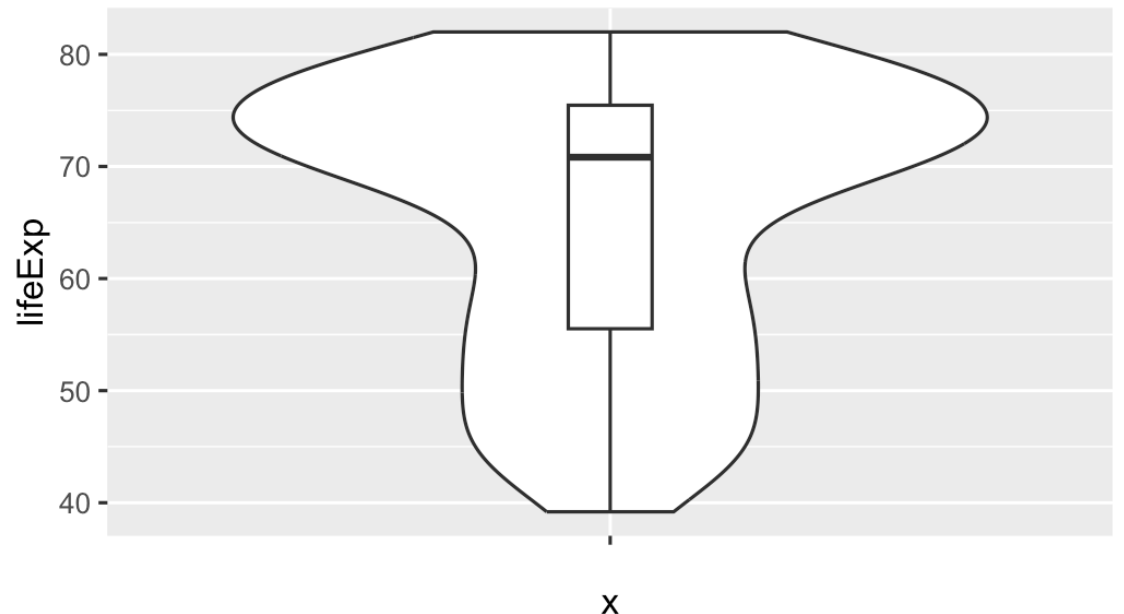


# Violin plots

Mirror density plot and flip

Often helpful to overlay other things on it

```
ggplot(gapminder_2002,  
       aes(x = "",  
           y = lifeExp)) +  
  geom_violin() +  
  geom_boxplot(width = 0.1)
```



# Uncertainty across multiple variables

Visualize the distribution of a single variable across groups

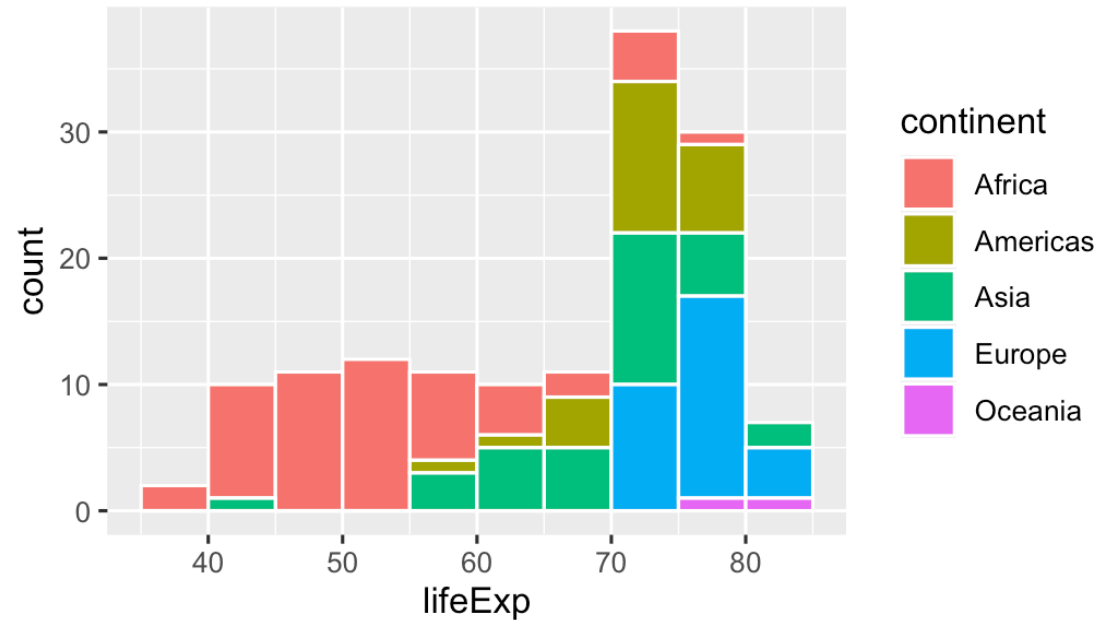
Add a `fill` aesthetic or use faceting!

# Multiple histograms

Fill with a different variable

This is bad and really hard to read though

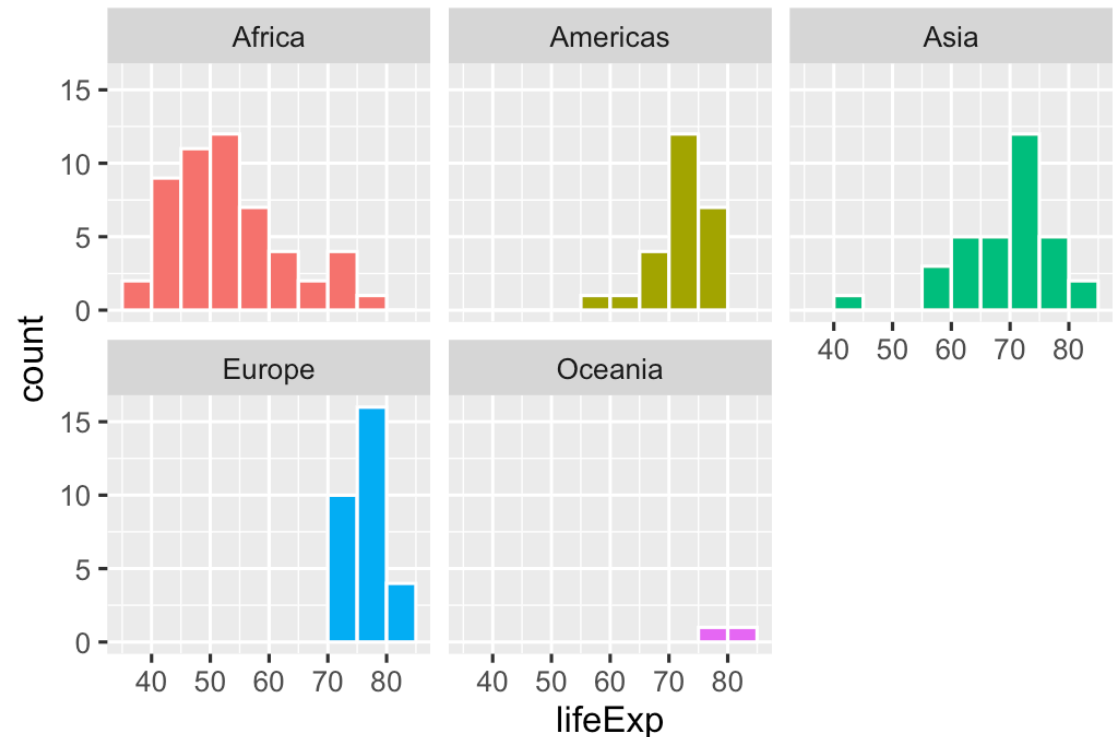
```
ggplot(gapminder_2002,  
       aes(x = lifeExp,  
           fill = continent)) +  
  geom_histogram(binwidth = 5,  
                color = "white",  
                boundary = 50)
```



# Multiple histograms

## Facet with a different variable

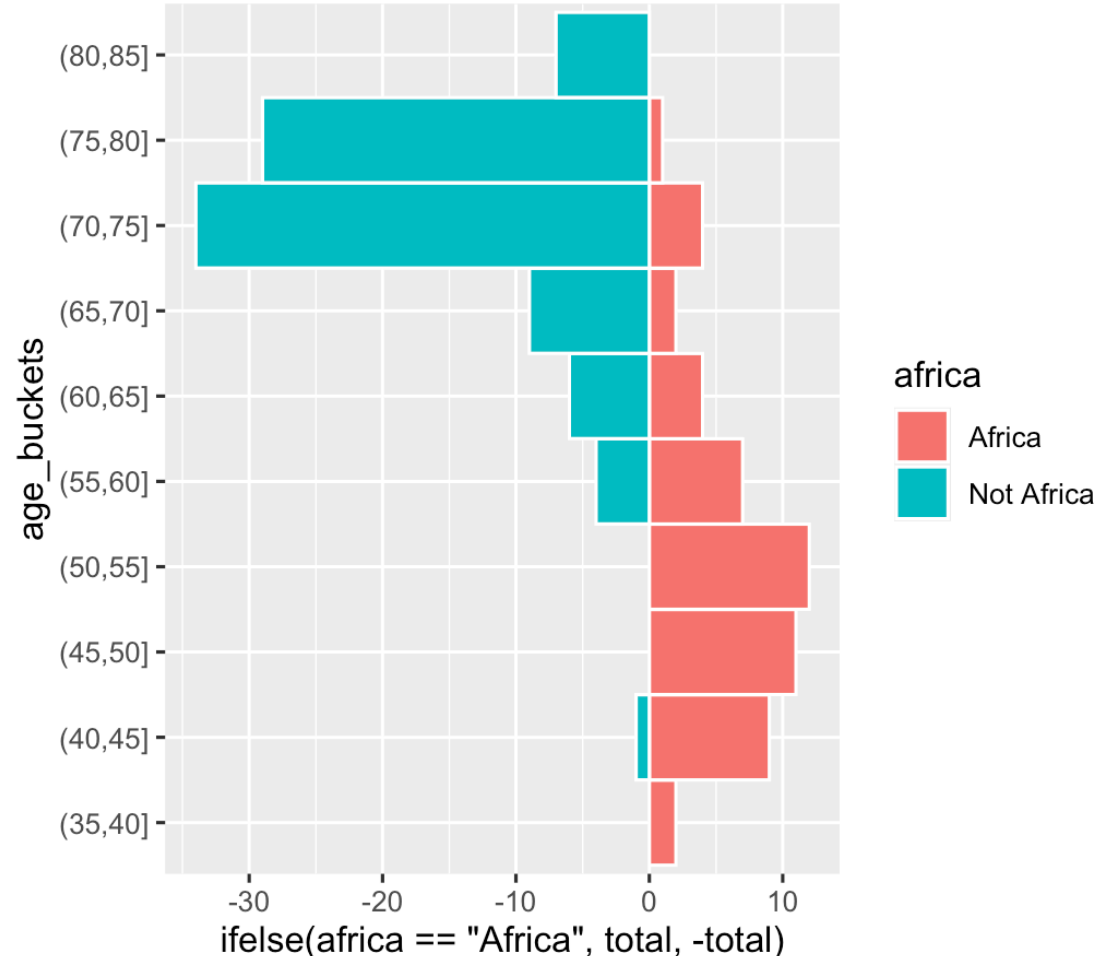
```
ggplot(gapminder_2002,  
       aes(x = lifeExp,  
           fill = continent)) +  
  geom_histogram(binwidth = 5,  
                color = "white",  
                boundary = 50) +  
  guides(fill = "none") +  
  facet_wrap(vars(continent))
```



# Pyramid histograms

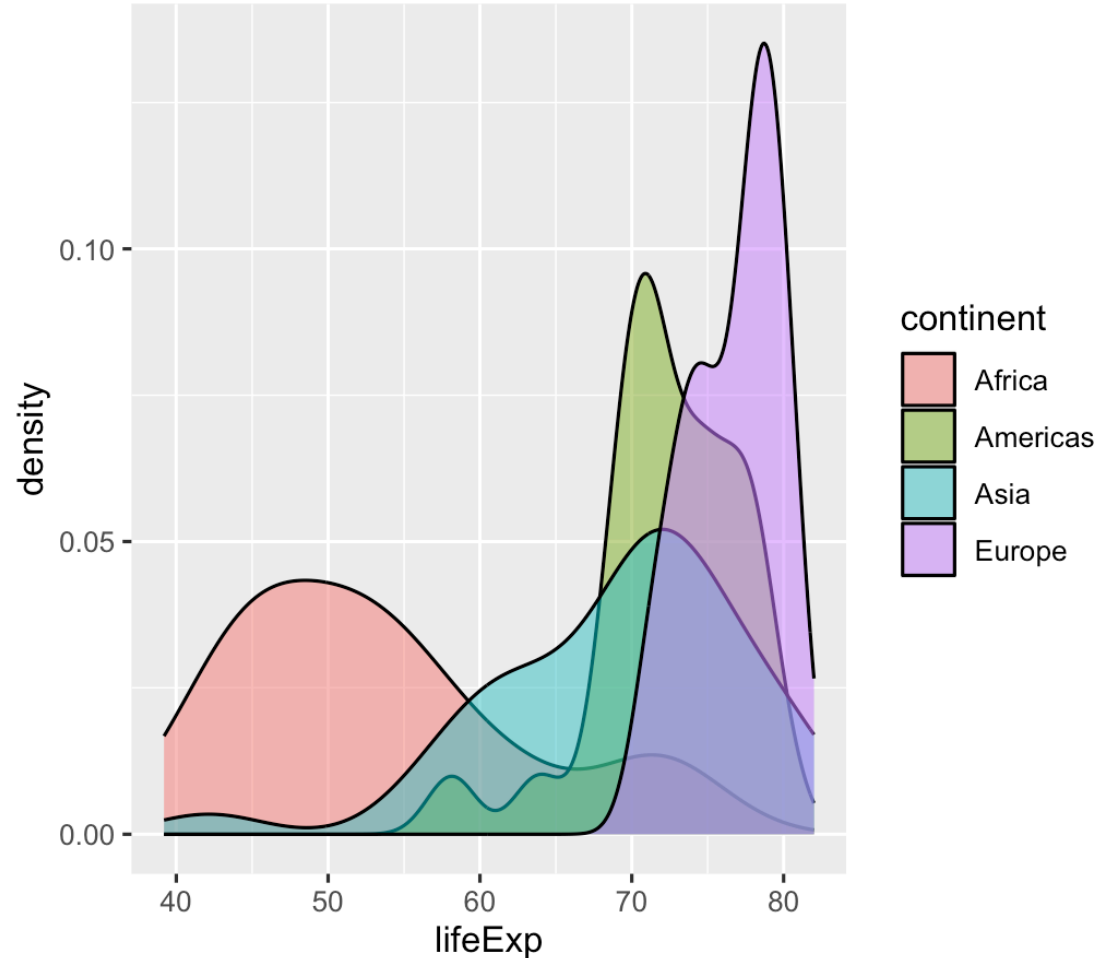
```
gapminder_intervals <- gapminder |>
  filter(year == 2002) |>
  mutate(africa =
    ifelse(continent == "Africa",
           "Africa",
           "Not Africa")) |>
  mutate(age_buckets =
    cut(lifeExp,
        breaks = seq(30, 90, by = 5)))
  group_by(africa, age_buckets) |>
  summarize(total = n())

ggplot(gapminder_intervals,
       aes(y = age_buckets,
           x = ifelse(africa == "Africa",
                     total, -total),
           fill = africa)) +
  geom_col(width = 1, color = "white")
```



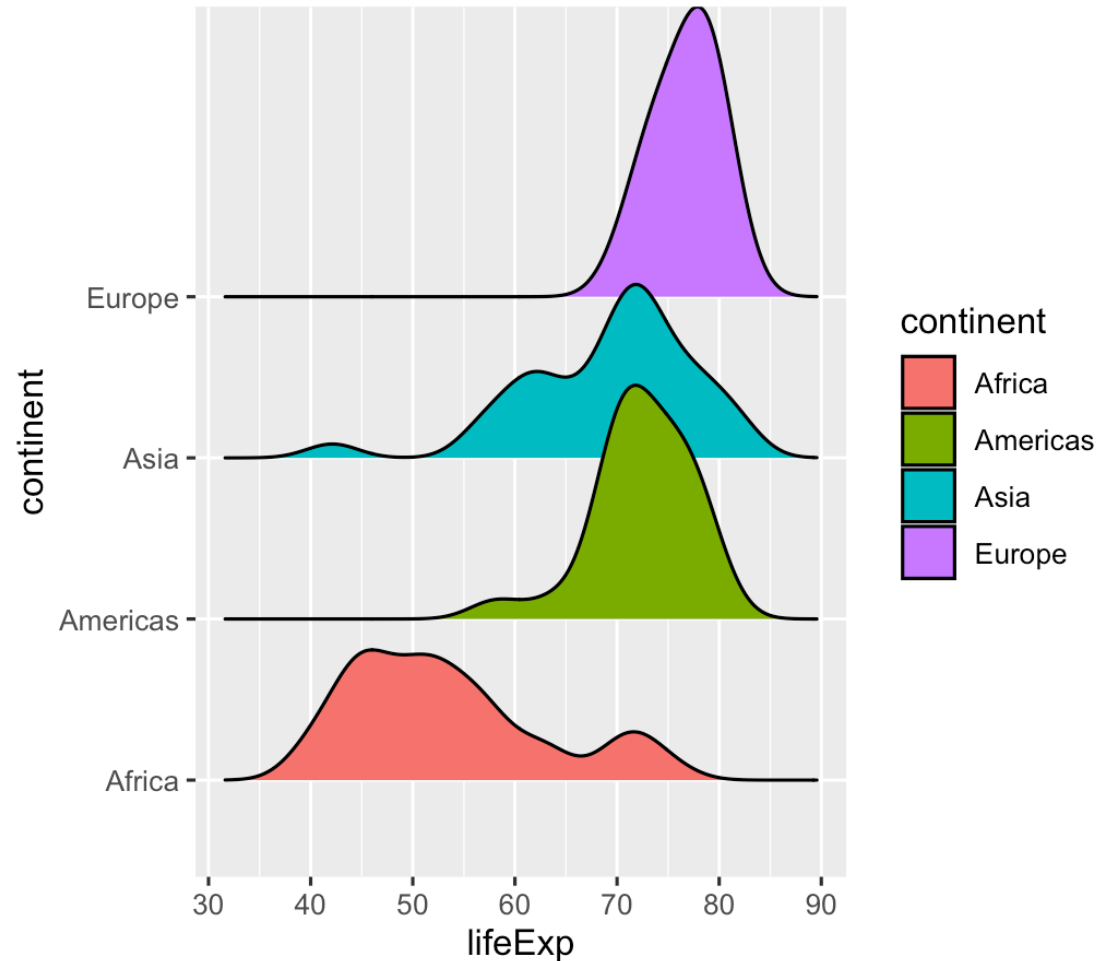
# Multiple densities: Transparency

```
ggplot(filter(gapminder_2002,  
            continent != "Oceania"),  
       aes(x = lifeExp,  
           fill = continent)) +  
  geom_density(alpha = 0.5)
```

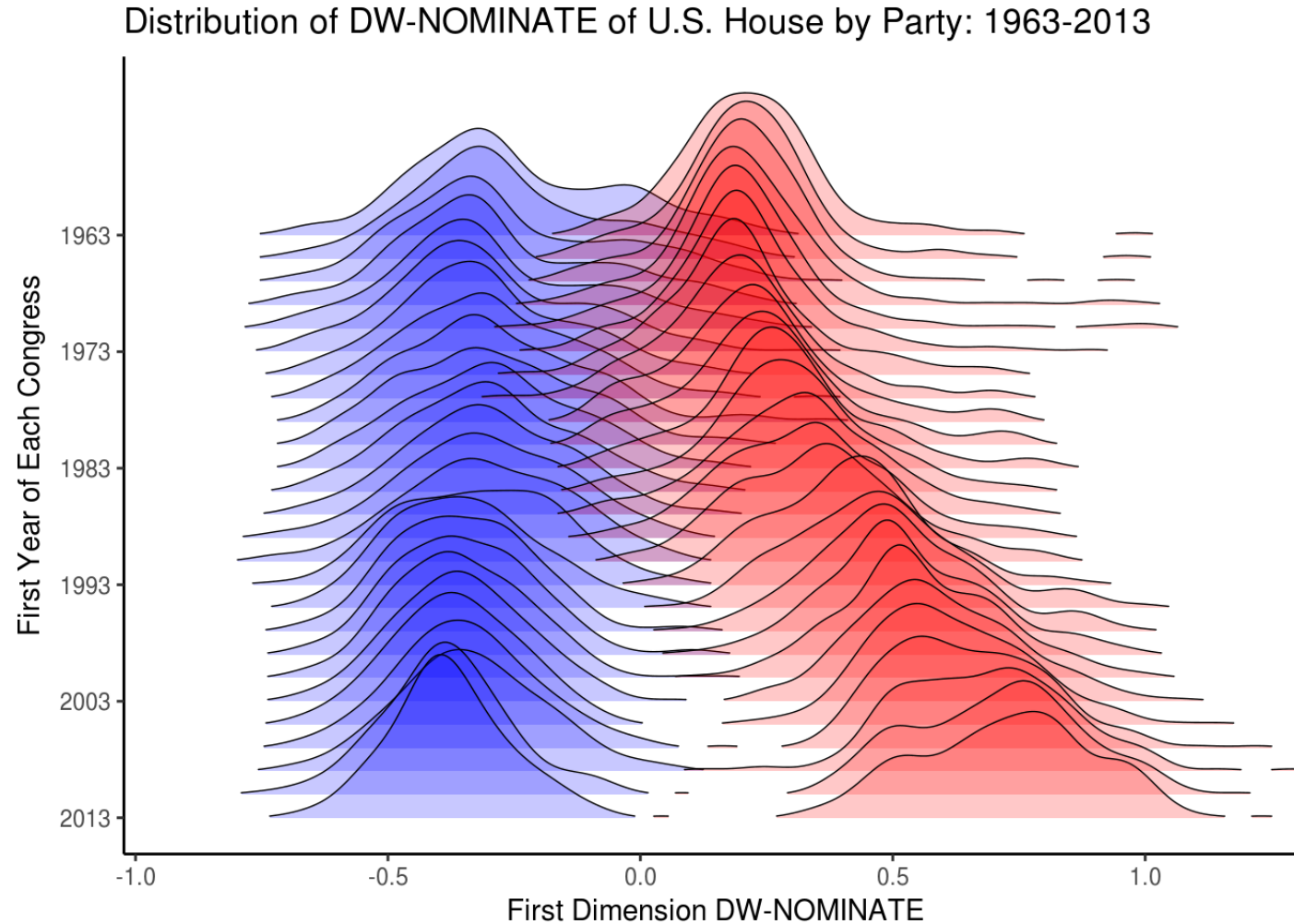


# Multiple densities: Ridge plots

```
library(ggribes)  
  
ggplot(filter(gapminder_2002,  
             continent != "Oceania"),  
       aes(x = lifeExp,  
           fill = continent,  
           y = continent)) +  
  geom_density_ridges()
```



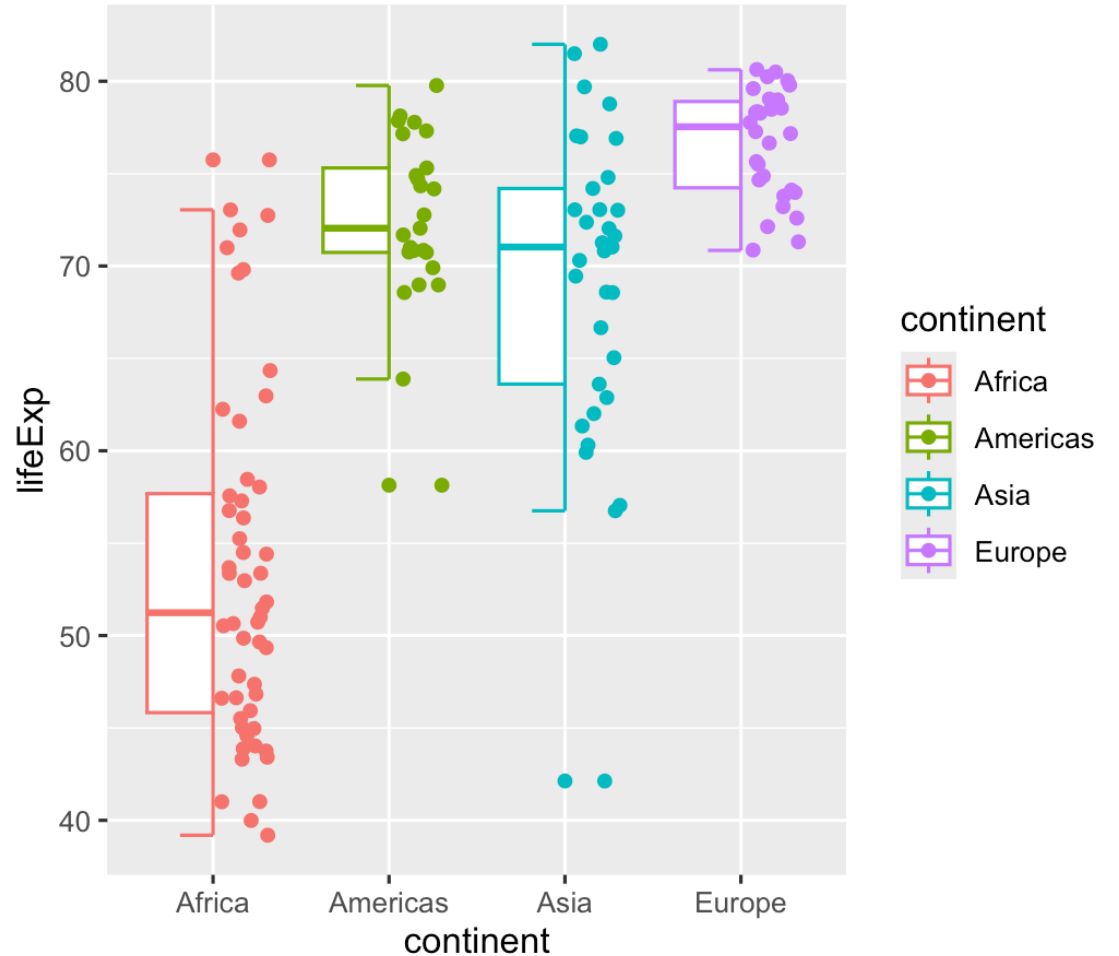
# Multiple densities: Ridge plots



# Multiple geoms: gghalves

```
library(gghalves)
```

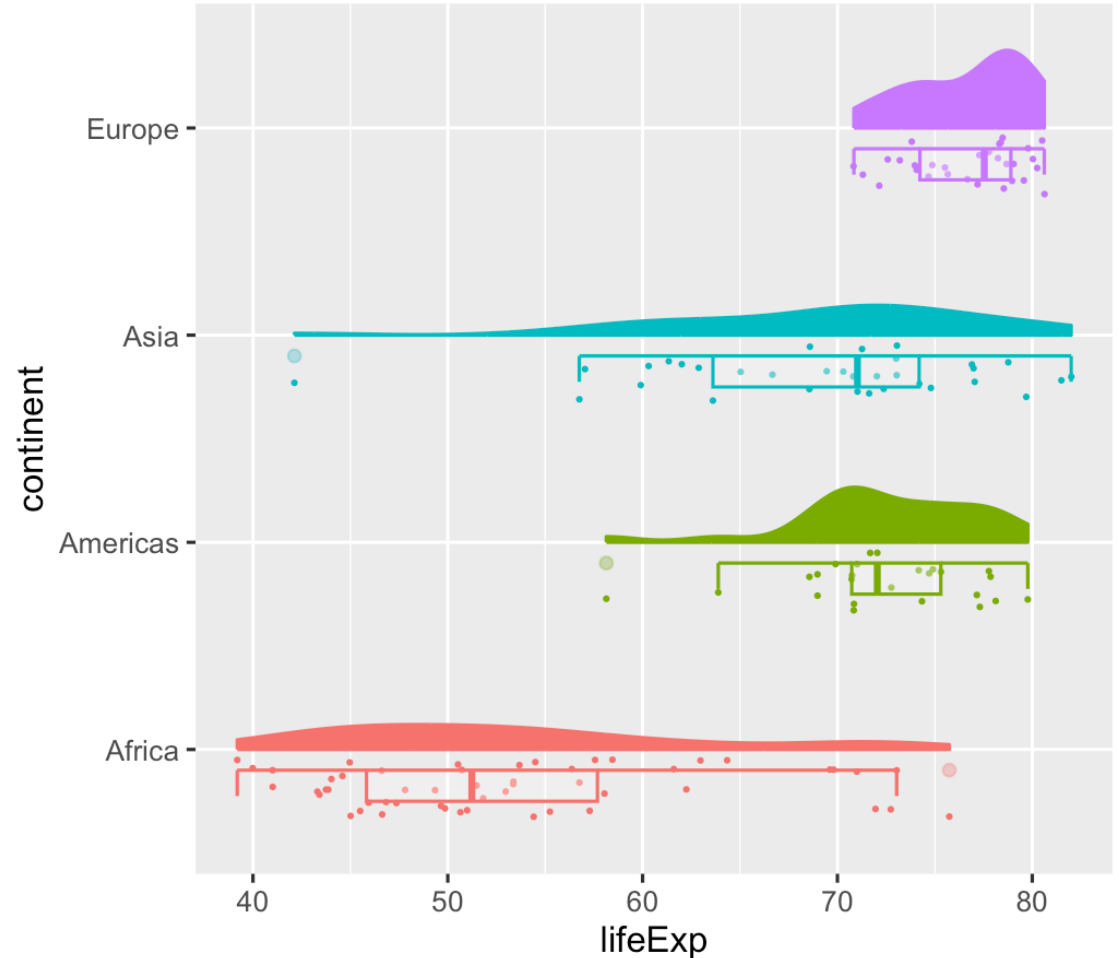
```
ggplot(filter(gapminder_2002,  
             continent != "Oceania"),  
       aes(y = lifeExp,  
           x = continent,  
           color = continent)) +  
  geom_half_boxplot(side = "l") +  
  geom_half_point(side = "r")
```



# Multiple geoms: Raincloud plots

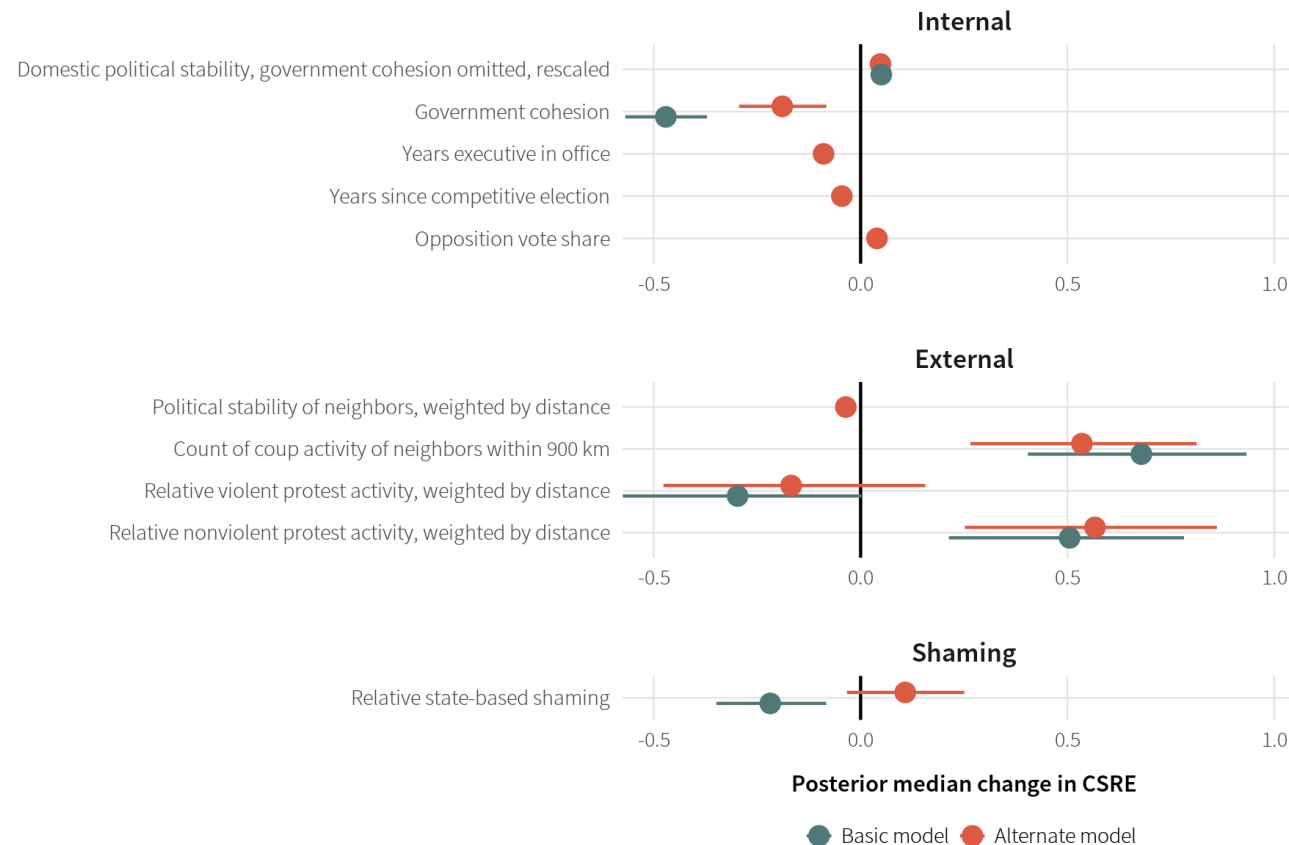
```
library(ggthemes)

ggplot(filter(gapminder_2002,
             continent != "Oceania"),
       aes(y = lifeExp,
           x = continent,
           color = continent)) +
  geom_half_point(side = "l", size = 0.3) +
  geom_half_boxplot(side = "l", width = 0.5,
                  alpha = 0.3, nudge = 0.1) +
  geom_half_violin(aes(fill = continent),
                  side = "r") +
  guides(fill = "none", color = "none") +
  coord_flip()
```

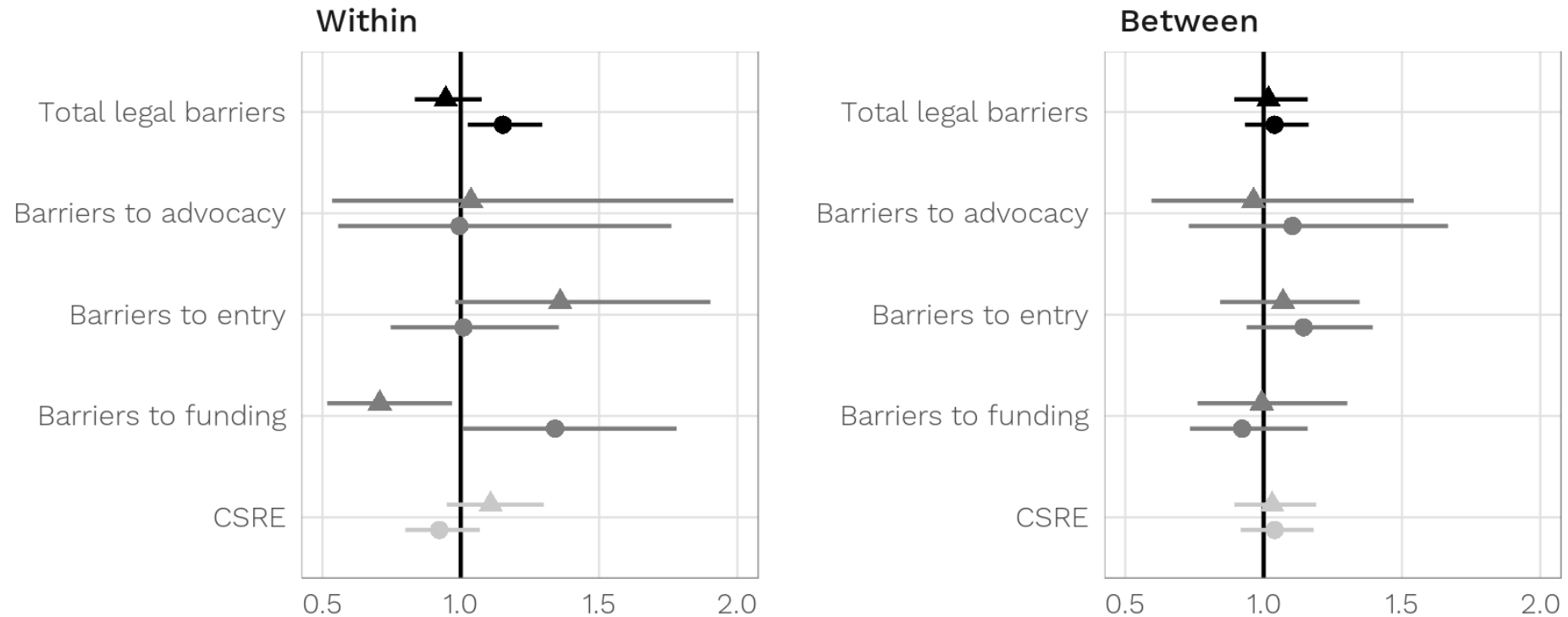


# Uncertainty in model estimates

(You'll learn how to make these in the next session)



# Uncertainty in model estimates



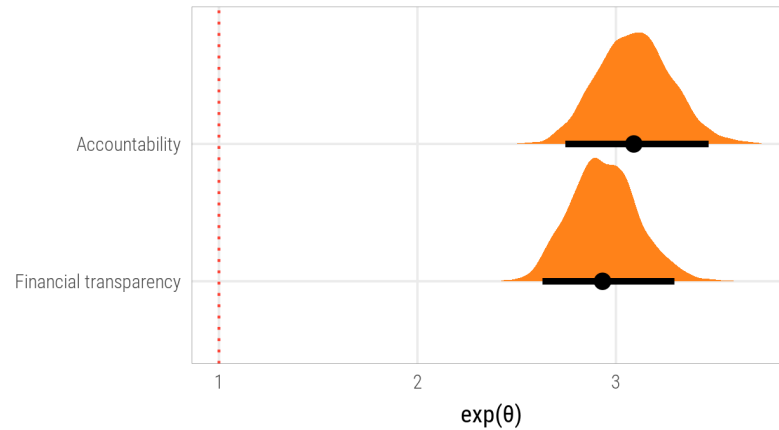
Percent change in ratio of aid channeled to NGO type (odds ratio)

- ▲ Foreign NGOs
- Domestic NGOs
- (1) Total barriers
- (2) Total barriers, by type
- (3) Civil society reg. env. (CSRE)

# Uncertainty in model estimates

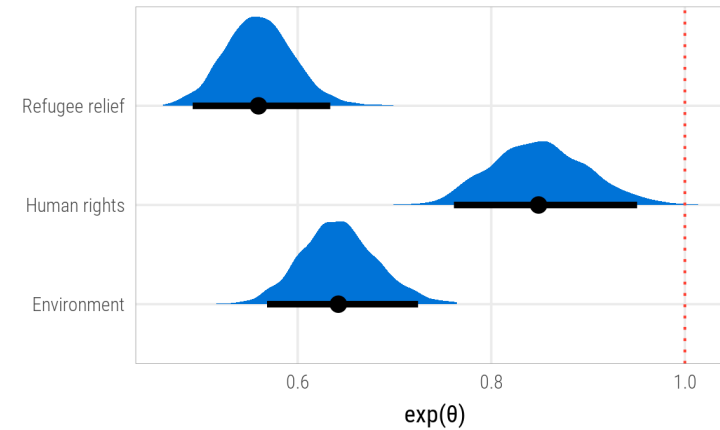
## Organizational practices

Reference groups = no accountability; no transparency



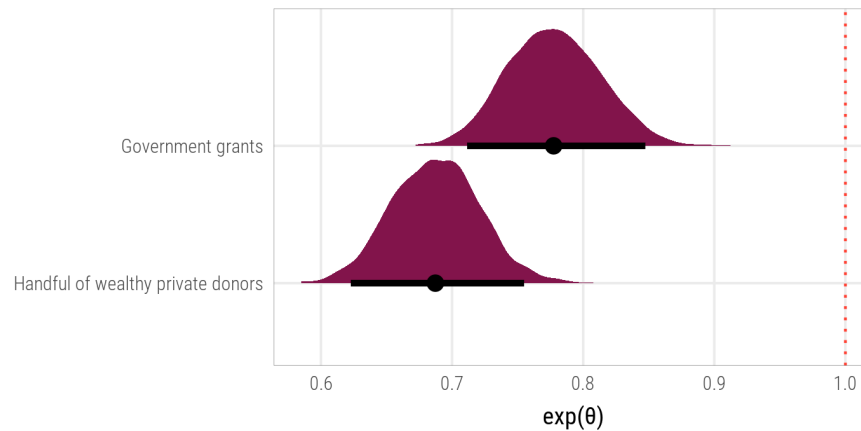
## Issue area

Reference group = emergency response



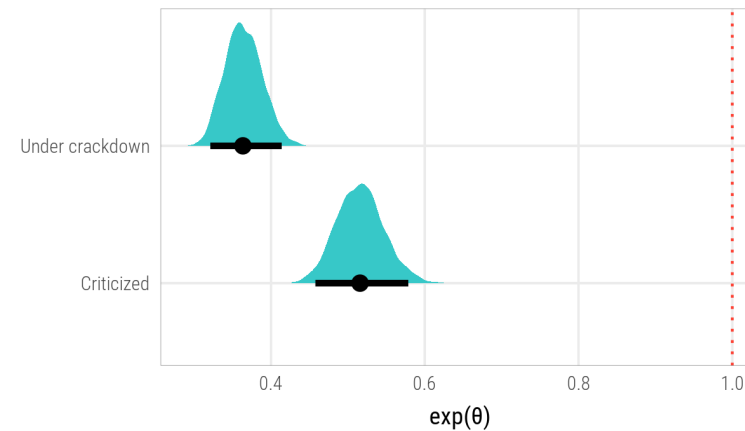
## Funding sources

Reference group = many small private donations



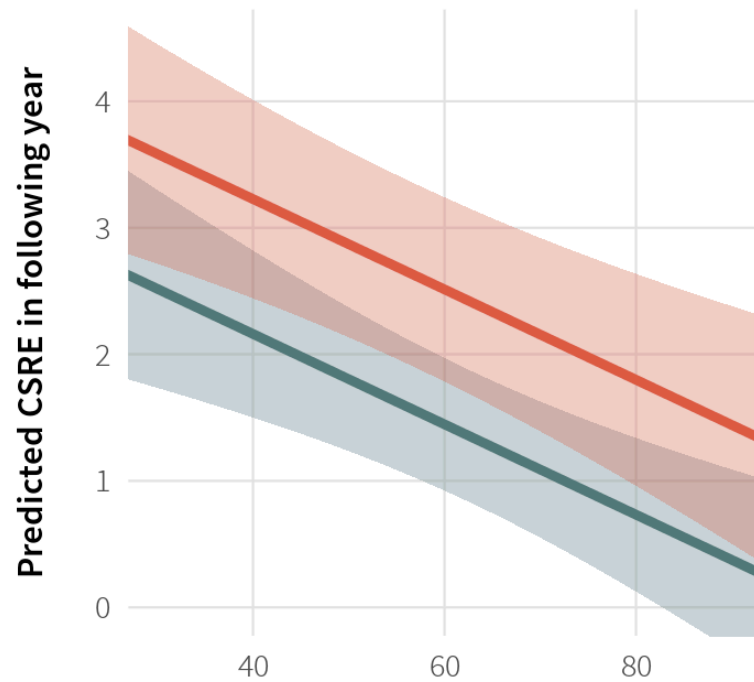
## Relationship with host government

Reference group = friendly relationship with government



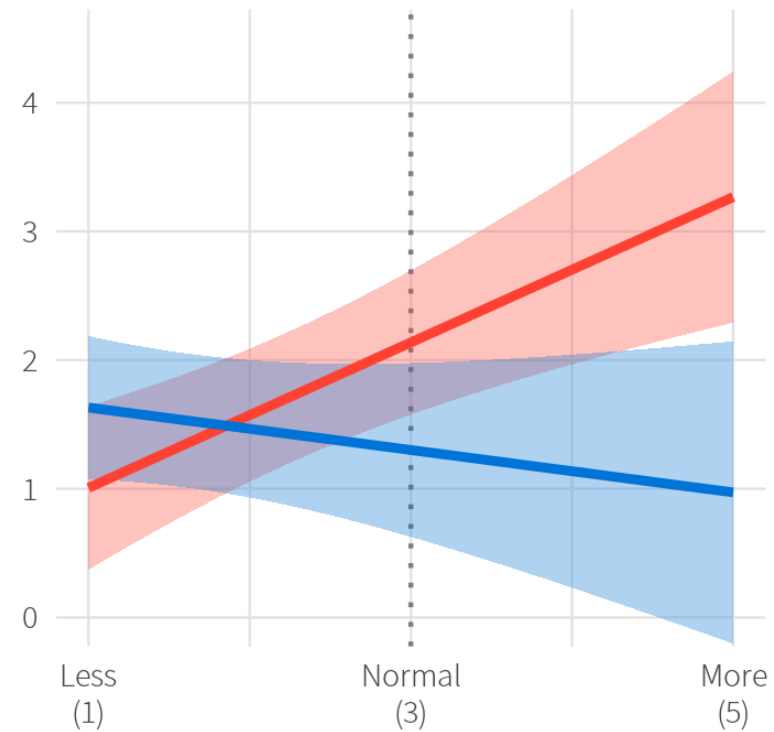
# Uncertainty in model effects

(You'll learn how to make these in the next session)



Political stability of neighbors

- No coups in neighboring countries
- Coup activity in neighboring countries



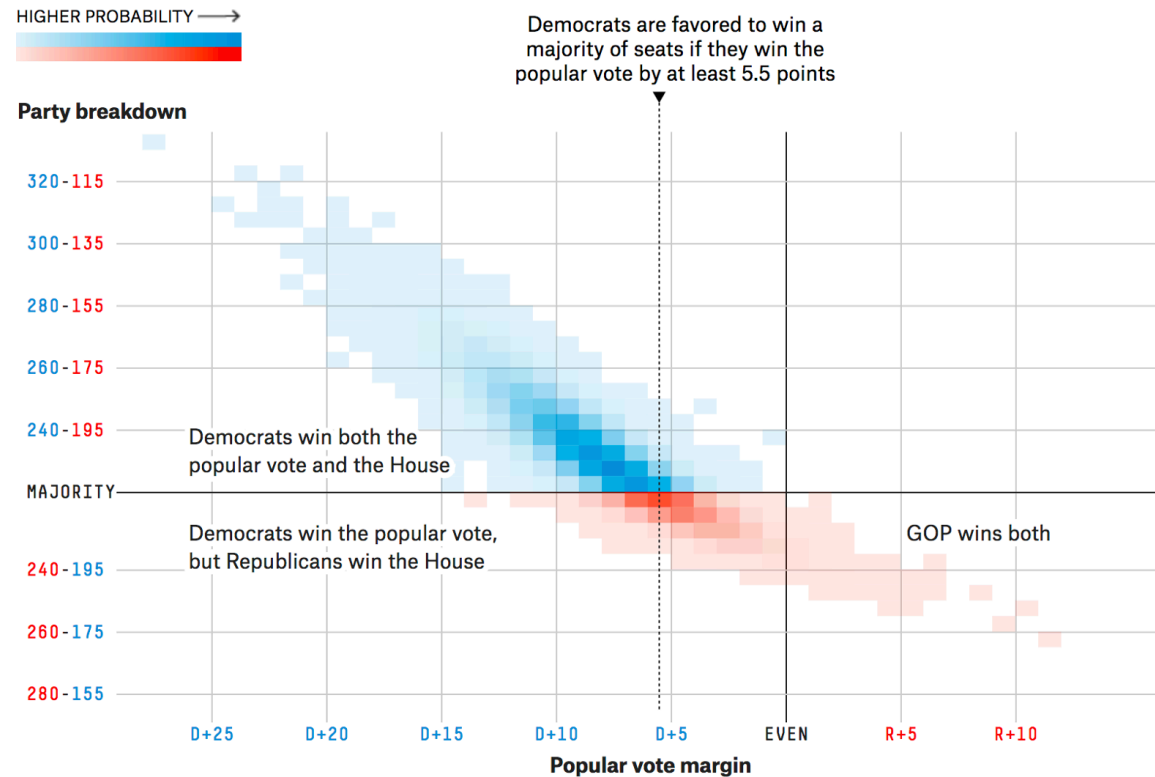
Relative protest activity

- Nonviolent
- Violent

# Uncertainty in model outcomes

## How the popular vote for the House translates into seats

How various breakdowns in the national popular vote correspond to the most likely distributions of House seats by party, according to our forecast



FiveThirtyEight's 2018 midterms model outcomes plot