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**Public Opinion and Public Policy in Temporal Perspective:
A View from the States**

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INTRODUCTION

Among the elemental questions that drive political science research is the connection between democratic theory and democratic practice: What is the link between the governed and the government? How close do real polities come to a theoretical model in which the public, or representatives acting on the public's behalf, dictate the policy directions of the polity? While nations aspiring to the democratic model hope the link is a strong one, there is often much skepticism, and accompanying debate, about the nature of representation.

This lively debate is repeated in many of the subfields of our discipline. We addressed the issue of state-level representation in *Statehouse Democracy* (Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993) and several early papers (especially, Wright, Erikson, and McIver, 1987; Erikson, Wright and McIver 1989). Chapter 4 of *Statehouse Democracy* demonstrated a strong empirical link between public opinion and state policymaking. We measured state ideology from state ideological preferences in CBS News/New York Times polls, 1976-1982. We measured policy with an eight-item indicator with the eight policies centered in time around the early 1980s. By our observations, state-level ideological preferences correlate at .82 with the left-right policy tendencies of the states and swamped all demographic predictors (e.g., state income) as predictors of policy. Moreover, by adjusting for the known sampling error in the measure of ideology, the true opinion-policy correlation can be imputed to be well above .90. In short, states with liberal publics enact laws that on average are far more liberal than the policies in states with conservative publics.

Our interpretation is causal: We claim that the state publics' ideological majority largely drives the policy tendency of the states, with elections providing the intermediary link. Over time, state electorates choose a mix of Democratic and Republican policy-makers that reflects the degree to which the parties represent the electorate's ideological interests. Moreover, in anticipation of this process and the potential consequences for their political careers, state party elites adjust their public ideologies to reflect state opinion. The result is that each party is at its most liberal in the most liberal states and the most conservative in the most conservative states. Policy-makers enact policies in accord with public opinion and, to the extent they depart from public opinion, elections account for the remainder of the representation. For details of our theory and empirical analysis, see Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993, especially Chapters 5 and 6.

Our work has been subject to some criticism. For example, we have heard it questioned whether we get the causal arrow right when we posit opinion causing policy rather than the other way around. Perhaps we got it backwards. Could it be that state elites set policy independent of public opinion and then convince the public of the merits of their actions? This strikes us as implausible. If state officials were immune from the consequences for going against public opinion, why would they bother to sway the public to the merits of their actions? In any event, the contrarian causal argument fails the test of empirical analysis. In our previous work, we divided state ideology into two components, one determined by state demographics and the other a residual that we dubbed as state political culture (Erikson, McIver, and Wright, 1987; Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993: Chapter 3). Because it is highly unlikely that state policy determines the demographic composition of the state's population, the demographic component serves as an

instrumental variable for state ideology. The resultant two-stage least squares analysis only reinforces the notion that opinion is doing the causing to policy.¹

The most prominent criticism of our work is that our research design is primarily cross-sectional (albeit with some historical consideration found in Chapter 9 of *Statehouse Democracy*). For instance, Lowery, Gray and Hager (1989) question the ability of such a research design to capture change in both opinion and policy over time and hence to address the issue of causal priority adequately. Recently, Berry, Ringquist, Fording and Hanson (1998) argue that our measure is overly time-bound. They offer a new “dynamic” measure of state ideology that, though indirect, evolves every two years. Their measure is derived from congressional roll calls and congressional voting. By their measure, a state electorate’s degree of liberalism at the moment is a function of the aggregate vote for the congressional delegation, adjusted by the roll call liberalism of the elected state delegation.

In this paper we take a fresh look at the arguments presented in *Statehouse Democracy*, with new perspective gained from both the passage of time and the availability of new data. For new data, we have updated our measure of state opinion through 1999, thus providing a virtual quarter-century of state-level ideological readings.² We have also taken preliminary steps toward the measurement of state policy liberalism on an annual basis.

THE TIME FACTOR

Our work in *Statehouse Democracy* is limited in at least two important respects. First, because the time period for most of our opinion measures is the 1970s and 1980s, the measures we developed are likely to be of decreasing value to investigations of contemporary state politics. If opinion fails to have an impact on some significant new measures of state policy at the turn of the century, we would be unable to differentiate between the explanations of “opinion just does not matter on this” and “the measures are out-of-date.”

A second limitation is that our analysis was almost entirely cross-sectional. We provided a snapshot of the static relationships between opinion, elite and legislative ideologies, legislative partisanship and state policy. While there is nothing wrong with the cross-sectional approach, it is appropriate to examine the policy process in dynamic terms (Berry, Ringquist, Fording and Hanson, 1998; Lowery, Gray and Hager, 1989). At the national level, recent works suggest that basic public attitudes move in understandable ways, and that these movements have an impact in national elections and on national policy (Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson, 1995; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2001 forthcoming).³ Therefore, a next logical step in our research

¹ See Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993 for the details. Of course some might insist that state policy does determine state demographics; with, for instance, rich people moving to conservative states. But it is difficult to argue that people are so politically sensitive as to vote with their feet by migrating to politically congenial states and at the same time be so politically incompetent when they arrive as to pay no attention to state policy when they vote in state elections.

² These data were first presented at the 2000 Midwest Political Science Association meetings (Wright et al, 2000).

agenda is to assess the changes in public opinion that have occurred in the states since our earlier efforts and to estimate the degree to which these changes influence state policies.

MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION

Our original measure of the policy preferences of state electorates was based on aggregation of responses to media polls conducted by CBS News and *The New York Times*, first from 1976 through 1982 (Wright, Erikson and McIver, 1985) later updated through 1988 (Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1993). Fortunately for us, CBS News and *The New York Times* have continued their polling partnership, even stepping up considerably the frequency of their national polls during the 1990s. Here we report on a collection of polls conducted from 1976 through 1999. The total data collection we will be working with in this paper covers 336 national polls and 429,063 respondents. The distribution of surveys and respondents over time is shown in Table 1.⁴

[Table 1 about here]

In describing the average tendency of state electorates, we compute the citizen ideology as percent liberal minus percent conservative. Thus higher scores identify a more liberal state.⁵

In our previous work we assert that the state's relative positions on this ideology scale were quite stable over the late 1970's and 1980's. But we went further:

Except for extreme in- or out-migration, we have no reason to suspect much volatility in the *relative* positions of state electorates over time. Our measure of state ideology in the late 1970's and early 1980's is conceivably a reasonable reflection of state ideology throughout, say, most of the post World War II era (Wright, Erikson and McIver, 1987, 998, emphasis in original)

That was clearly an ambitious statement and one we qualified to some extent in Chapter 9 of *Statehouse Democracy* in our discussion of surveys conducted from 1930's through 1960's.⁶

³ Also see Reiter and Stam (2001) for the effects of public opinion on foreign policy, particularly war-making. For contrary empirical evidence, see Durr (1993a).

⁴ The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research and the Roper Center provided the data used in this paper. We are grateful to both organizations for their assistance but, of course, neither bears any responsibility for our analysis or conclusions.

⁵ Notice that our summary measures are strictly directional. They track the relative strengths of conservatives vs. liberals. If moderates, a sizable fraction in the electorate, change they only affect these scores if they draw more from one ideological group than the other. We do not, however, ignore changes in the proportion of moderates. See notes 7 and 8 below.

⁶ We caution the reader to recognize our emphasis on relative change. We did not assert that states would not change the level of their ideological support for either the liberal or conservative position. Rather we did not foresee massive changes in the relative position of the states, e.g., that Mississippi would become more liberal than Massachusetts.

Here we will address the question of changes in citizen ideology over the last quarter century. Have public preferences changed over the last 25 years? If so, have these changes been uniform across the states?

National Changes

We begin our examination of changing orientations by looking at overall patterns of change at the national level from the Carter administration on. For these comparisons we aggregate the data at the national level by year and look at changes ideology over time.

Figure 1 shows the relative strengths of ideological identifications. Several features worthy of note stand out in Figure 1. First, throughout the period many more Americans continued to call themselves conservatives than liberals; the ideology line remains safely below zero indicating conservatives outnumber liberals. This is not a surprise. More surprising, however, is the lack of any long term trend in relative ideological strength. The plotted line is actually a quadratic trend fitted to the yearly series, but it might as well be a straight line. Throughout the apparent surge of conservative Republicanism, including the supposed repudiation of liberalism in 1994, Americans' ideological identifications remained steady. Among the individual components of our measure, there is hardly any change at all.⁷

[Figure 1 about here]

State Changes

State ideological orientations are equally steady. By aggregating the data at the state level by year, we consider patterns of change over time. To identify change in the state ideological predispositions, we ran a series of basic tests to see if we could detect any systematic departures from that of ideological stability.⁸ There are a few, but those that made it to statistically significant departures from no change show really quite modest differences. Among the handful of states that showed any evidence of change, the most common pattern was an upward drift in the proportion claiming to be moderates accompanied by off-setting downward movement in both liberals and conservatives. This occurred in California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York. The substantive significance of these shifts is not much, however.

The only other pattern evident was in Alabama, Tennessee and West Virginia where the loss of liberal identifiers was not matched by a corresponding loss of conservatives--thus yielding modest declines in percent saying they are liberal. In addition, six states showed some sign of linear trend for our overall measure of ideology. One of these is Nevada which had such high

⁷At most we find a hint of rising moderation being offset by slight declines in liberal and conservative identification. However, the range of change over the 23 year period is only about two percent and is not statistically significant.

⁸We ran almost two hundred regressions (4*48) of ideology on time. We looked at our overall scores, as well as just the proportions liberal, moderate and conservative for ideology. We looked at of the few instances in which either the linear or quadratic trend was statistically different from zero. Those departures from consistency are quite modest as described in the text.

liberalism scores in the early years of CBS/*NYT* polling that we concluded in our earlier work that the Nevada ideology estimates were just not credible (Erikson, Wright and McIver, 1993: 19-20). The others have estimated changes in a conservative direction. Each of these changes is relatively modest: Arkansas (8.4), Montana (16.9), Ohio (5.2), Tennessee (9.5) and West Virginia (11.8). In each case, the visual patterns, with the exception of Ohio, do not inspire confidence of genuine change. The yearly samples tend to be small for these states, again with the exception of Ohio.

With only minor exceptions, then, we conclude that ideological identifications of the state electorates has been remarkably stable. In spite of all the political rhetoric, liberal identification is not much different than it has been – nationally, liberals continue to be badly outnumbered by self-identified conservatives.⁹ In all states liberals remain outnumbered by conservatives although the degree of conservative dominance varies from state to state.

In concluding that ideology has not changed significantly over the past quarter century, we find ourselves to some degree in disagreement with work by Berry et al. (1998) and Brace et al. (1999). Some of our differences no doubt are a function the various types of data used to operationalize citizen preferences. Berry et al. use interest group ratings of members of each states' delegation of representatives to the US Congress, their electoral challengers, and election results. We find this approach a little too indirect for our taste and one that confounds ideology, partisanship, election results and representation, precisely the pieces of the puzzle we try to separate. Brace et al. adopt an approach not unlike our own – using survey data to estimate citizen opinions. We suspect some of our differences with Brace and his colleagues involve the much smaller sample sizes that they use in relying on NES/GSS surveys. Where they argue for significant change in state ideology overtime we see a great deal of stability.

But we can do more than simply assert that the policy preferences of state electorates are essentially unchanging and that our measure, built from more respondents and more years, is better. In the following section, we marshal evidence demonstrating the degree to which state ideology is stable.

⁹ Based on the data from the second Clinton administration, 1997-1999, 34.2 percent of the electorate claims to be conservative compared to the 20.7 percent who identify themselves as liberals.

TRUE CHANGE, SAMPLING ERROR, AND THE MEASUREMENT OF STATE IDEOLOGY

To know the ideology of a given state in a given year is largely a function of the specific state and the specific year. States tend to be stable in their liberalism or conservatism relative to other states. When they change, they often change in tandem in response to national forces. But in addition, the possibility remains that state positions on the ideological scale vary due to state-specific trends.

This section poses our question: how much do state-level scores on ideology vary over time *independent of national trends*? In attempting to supply an answer, it applies statistical theory. With twenty-four years of observations on 48 states, we are in a good position to provide a detailed assessment of the stability of state-level ideological preferences. An obvious starting point—but potentially a misleading one—is to select a few states and observe their ideological scores over the 24 years. As an illustrative example, Figure 2 displays the observed ideology scores for three states: California, Missouri, and Utah. The higher the score, the more liberal the state.

[Figure 2 about here]

Although this graph shows no clear time trends for these states, it does show clear differences among them. Clearly California is the most liberal on average, followed by Missouri, and then Utah. Still another difference is in the variance. California has the most ideologically stable set of state samples, followed by Missouri and then Utah. For the occasional year, Missouri and even Utah appears to catch up or even exceed California in their degree of liberalism. Thus one might surmise that for some states opinion bounces around a lot while for others the net opinion is quite stable. We might speculate, for instance, why Utah residence underwent a surge of liberalism in 1978 that immediately evaporated by 1979 or why both Missouri and Utah virtually caught up to California's level of liberalism in the mid-1980s only to return toward their more conservative patterns. With 48 states to examine, the door is seemingly open for the testing of numerous hypotheses about what makes states move ideologically and what might be the political consequences of these changes.

Unfortunately, the temptation to read meaning into observed ideological movements leads in the states should be strongly resisted. Virtually all the movement one observes in Figure 2 is within the realm one would expect from sampling error alone! States maintain levels of relative ideological liberalism that are roughly constant over time. With modest N 's for most states for most years, sometimes a state will appear more liberal than its average by sampling error alone, while sometimes it will appear more conservative. In either case, the next observation with a new independent dose of sampling error will revert toward the mean.

The amount of sampling error for any given state for any given year is a function of the sample size. Large states are sampled more than small states. Bolstered by an average annual N of 1,486, California's annual readings appear relatively stable. With an average annual N of only 332, Missouri's readings must show considerably greater bounce—about four times the error

variance of California. And with only an average annual N of 104 respondents, Utah's annual scores are all over the place—with about 16 times the error variance of California and almost 4 times that of Missouri. Thus, we are not in a position to consider the variation in volatility of observed readings across states to be anything more than the natural variation due to sample size.

Still, when we say that the observe variation is little more than what would be expected from sampling error, we are not saying *all* the variance is sampling error. Even if individual citizens never change their ideologies, we would expect some ideological movement by the states relative to each other if for no other set of reasons than the flow of migration and the idiosyncrasies of cohort replacement. We should estimate how much real change there is, and whether the amount of change allows a serious examination of the causal dynamics of ideological representation.

As in *Statehouse Democracy*, we do accept the observed state ideology "scores" as free of error. Instead, we adjust our statistical estimates for the amount of sampling error. With a strong degree of approximation, we know the amount of sampling error from simply applying sampling theory and the assumption that the surveys are approximate random samples. For any state for any time period under observation, we know the state's observed mean, its observed variance, and its N or sample size. Given this information, we can estimate the sampling error of the observed state ideological readings:

$$\text{Var.}(e_{jt}) = \frac{\text{Var.}(\text{Observed Ideology}_{ijt})}{N_{jt}} \quad \text{where} \quad \text{(Equation 1)}$$

e_{jt} = the sampling error in
state j during time interval t ,

$\text{Observed Ideology}_{ijt}$ = the observed ideology of individual i in state
 j in time interval t , and

N_{jt} = the number of useable cases in state j in time interval t .

We use this information to compute the mean (estimated) error variance averaged across states for period t : $\text{Var.}(e_t)$. Armed with this information, we can estimate the reliability of the ideology scores for any sampling period:¹⁰

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Reliability}_t &= \frac{\text{Var.}(\text{True Ideology}_j)}{\text{Var.}(\text{Observed Ideology}_j)} \\ &= \frac{\text{Var.}(\text{Observed Ideology}_j) - \text{Var.}(e_t)}{\text{Var.}(\text{Observed Ideology}_j)} \end{aligned} \quad \text{(Equation 2)}$$

With the reliabilities in hand for each period, for each period we can estimate the autoregressive parameter in the equation

¹⁰ This is the identical procedure used to estimate state-level reliabilities in *Statehouse Democracy*.

$$Ideology_{jt} = \mathbf{b}_t Ideology_{j,t-1} + \mathbf{d}_{jt}$$

where

$Ideology_{jt}$ = state ideology as a deviation from the national mean and from the state's long-term mean, plus

\mathbf{d}_{jt} = a random shock.¹¹

One way of estimating \mathbf{b}_t is to regress $Ideology_{jt}$ on $Ideology_{j,t-1}$ and dividing the observed parameter estimate by the estimated reliability at time $t-1$. With more than two periods, we can do even better than this. We can combine information from all T waves to estimate the $T-1$ \mathbf{b}_t autoregressive terms from the $T \times T$ matrix of covariances. In other words, all cross-time covariances are used to estimate all autoregressive parameters simultaneously.

For the period of time, we chose eight 3-year intervals as eight "waves" from wave 1 (1976, 1977, 1978) to wave 8 (1997, 1998, 1999). This yields average state sample sizes per period of 965 rather than one-third that number per year. For waves 2 through 8 we estimate the autoregressive parameter predicting *true* ideology from *true* lagged ideology, using observed ideology and statistical theory. We assume the standard AR1 model where ideology is a function of ideology at its most recent lag, with history prior to the most recent lag not mattering. In addition to the autoregressive parameter we estimate the variance of \mathbf{d}_{jt} , the shock to current opinion. With eight waves and seven equations, we estimate seven separate \mathbf{b}_t parameters and seven separate variances of \mathbf{d}_{jt} .

The full model is shown in Figure 3. Because the model is over-identified, we estimate it using full information maximum likelihood. The degree of fit is very good. The best display of the fit is from the deviations of the observed correlations from those predicted by the model. For the 28 (7 factorial) off-diagonal residual correlations, the average absolute value is only |.03| and the maximum is only |.09|. The parameter estimates are shown in Table 2.

[Figure 3, Table 2 about here]

Note several things about the results. First, the estimates of the \mathbf{b}_t terms are in the range of 1.00. Indeed, their average over seven estimates is exactly 1.00! An autoregressive parameter of 1.00 means that the best guess regarding a state's relative ideology at the next period is its score this period. In terms of true (as opposed to observed) scores there is no regression to the mean. Statistically, this means that state-level ideology is not "stationary" but rather an integrated variable that moves as a random walk. If it were stationary, then in the long run state differences would blur as each regressed toward a common mean (but with constant variance). Integrated

¹¹ This equation also includes a small intercept due to the difference between mean adjusted Ideology in the state (zero) and the mean of lagged Ideology from this zero mean. The mean of lagged Ideology will not in general be zero because of the deletion of the first Ideology case. The deletion of the intercept in the equation presented in the text represents lagged Ideology as a deviation from the mean for lagged ideology.

(“of order 1”), over time the states move farther away from each other. Incorporating the added variance from each new shock, the cross-sectional variance of state ideology (as well as within-state variance) increases with the passage of time.

Second, note that the variance of the d_t shocks is small indeed. Thus the evolution of the states toward greater variance is held to a slow pace due to the limited variance of new shocks. Each state changes its ideology but only slowly. As a result, the over-time correlation between ideology at successive time periods is very high, approaching (but not reaching) 1.00.

From a practical standpoint, we find evidence of change but not much. For perspective, we observe the ratios of the variance of new shocks (the d_t s) to the error variances (the e_{jt} s) to be about 1:3. Error dominates true change. Moreover, error in change scores is compounded by error variance at both ends—the total error variance for a change score Dy_t is the error variance at time t plus the error variance at $t-1$. Thus, for observed change scores in state ideology, the ratio of true variance to error variance is a notable 1:6. All but 14 percent of observed change is noise. And that estimate is when time is aggregated into three-year intervals. For annual movement of ideology, the ratio of true to error variance is 1:18. On the other hand, aggregating further to, say, 12 year intervals yields a true to error variance ratio of 4:6. Thus, even if we were to aggregate at the maximum by dividing our 24 years of data into two 12 year periods, one an early period and one a late period, roughly sixty percent of the variance in observed ideological change from the early to late periods would still be error variance.

Let us summarize what we have learned from our statistical exercise. We learn that state-level ideology is highly stable, changing only slowly over time as a slowly evolving random walk. Although the amount of true change is swamped by sampling error when we divide time into small intervals of a few years at a time, we should emphasize both the stability and the fact that some change exists.

With so much stability, it is clearly folly to hold in one’s head a model of ideological change in the states where states are constantly reordering their ideological positions on the liberal-conservative scale. This stability means that in cross-sectional research, the exact years of measurement for state ideological placement is of minor importance. One could even relate ideology measured in the 1990s, say, to policies enacted in the 1980s and still be permitted to infer that ideology is the cause of the policy.

This stability, however, is not as kind to time-series approaches to state-level ideological representation. We see two tasks. One is to conceptualize the nature of the time-series process when the causal variable is a virtual constant. The second is to see whether it is possible, given the unfavorable signal to noise ratio for the measurement of short-term variation in state opinion, to tease out any time-series evidence of a representation dynamic at work.

Temporal reliability and stability

Over time, state-level ideology is stable. Table 3 provides further illustration comparing the observed correlations with the correlations imputed by the reliability estimates of Table 2. Recall that the reliability estimates come solely from sampling theory; thus they are independent of the causal assumptions and parameters shown in Table 2.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 presents two correlograms. The upper-right triangle shows the *observed* correlations between state policy at various lags using eight periods of three-year intervals. These observed correlations are mildly positive (mean = 0.71); they vary only mildly with the time gap between readings; the correlations involving the later periods are the largest, reflecting the larger sample sizes for the later periods.

In contrast, the lower-left correlogram shows the imputed true correlations, corrected for sampling error using the reliabilities reported in Table 2. These correlations are quite high, averaging 0.89. Moreover, we can observe some degree of regularity of the correlations over different time spans. As a general rule, the correlation over t periods will represent the product of all one-period correlations contained in the time interval. (For instance, the correlation between periods one and three approximates the product of the correlations between periods 1 and 2 and between periods 2 and 3.) This evidence is consistent with the autoregressive assumption for the estimates in Table 2.

Clearly states change ideologically but glacially. Near the end of the twentieth century, roughly half the variance in state-level ideology can be statistically explained by state-level ideology a quarter-century earlier. For another—quite remarkable—demonstration, see Table 4. This table compares our measures of state ideology with network exit polls in 1988 (CBS) and 2000 (VNS). These exit polls tend toward accuracy at the state level because they tend to have large samples for their electoral camera shots. For 1988 Exit Polls our comparison reading is our CBS/New York Times sample for the three years 1986-1987-1988. For 2000 Exit Polls our comparison reading is our CBS/*NYT* sample for the two years 1998 and 1999. (We do not currently possess the 2000 readings.) Keep in mind that the Exit Poll measures actual voters, while our surveys represent the general public.

[Table 4 about here]

As Table 4 shows, the correlation between exit polls conducted twelve years apart was a hefty .86, in contrast to an observed .69 for our CBS/*NYT* measure over the 12 year time gap. Note that the two sets of CBS/*NYT* general population readings correlate about equally with the two Exit Poll readings. If there were much ideological change in the states from 1988 to 2000, the earlier CBS/*NYT* poll would have correlated most strongly with the 1988 exit poll and the later CBS/*NYT* poll would have correlated most strongly with the 2000 surveys. In fact each CBS/*NYT* general population reading correlates slightly higher with the opposite-year Exit Poll readings; the 1986-87-88 readings correlate slightly stronger with the 2000 Exit Poll readings than with the 1988 Exit Poll readings, while the 1989-1999 readings correlate slightly higher with the 1988 exit poll readings than the 2000 exit poll readings. Similarly (not shown in the

table), the 2000 state Democratic vote correlates more strongly with 1986-87-88 public ideology readings than with 1998-99 readings, while the 1988 state Democratic vote correlates more strongly with 1998-99 readings than with 1986-87-88 readings. These perverse tendencies suggest little or no ideological movement of the states over this period. As we will see, there is some ideological change in the states over time, but it is a challenge to measure it.

State-Level Reliability

So far we have examined the reliabilities of state-level ideology for specific cross-sections of time. We can also estimate the reliabilities of the ideology time-series for specific units or states. We start with each state's mean error variance, following sampling theory. (See equation 1, above.) We then estimate the reliabilities as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} Reliability_j &= \frac{\text{Var.}(True\ Ideology_t)}{\text{Var.}(Observed\ Ideology_t)} \\ &= \frac{\text{Var.}(Observed\ Ideology_t) - \text{Var.}(e_j)}{\text{Var.}(Observed\ Ideology_t)} \end{aligned} \quad \text{(Equation 3)}$$

Equation 3 is identical to equation 2 above, except for transposing the j (unit) and t (time) subscripts.

We can compute the reliability several ways. We can start with the reliability of state j 's scores relative to the annual means, $\overline{Ideology_{jt} - Ideology_t}$. The mean reliability by this test is .18, meaning that less than one-fifth of the typical state's observed variance over the years represents true variance as opposed to sampling error. We can achieve some improvement by measuring not the positions of the states relative to annual trends but rather the observed state scores including national trends. In other words, we can observe the unadjusted state time series. Measured this more generous way, simply as $Ideology_{jt}$, the estimated mean variance rises slightly to .23—an improvement, but still the case that vast majority of the observed variance is error. We can boost this value by aggregating—for example, to .38 for three-year periods. However this improvement is slight and is at the cost of sacrificing temporal variation.

The estimated reliabilities of the observed annual scores (not relative) for individual states are shown in Table 5. Generally, the larger a state's annual sample size, the greater is the reliability. But the reliability is also a function of the true amount of observed variation within the state, which reflects both sampling error and true variance. The exact values of the state estimated reliabilities probably are themselves unreliable. The seemingly largest reliability is for Pennsylvania. Seven states have reliabilities that are computed to be negative. In those states, the estimated error variance actually exceeded the observed variance. In those seven states, observed ideology varied more over time than would be expected by chance if ideology were constant.

[Table 5 about here]

Implications for State Policy Research

Ideally, we would measure the impact of state opinion using 48 period time series analysis, or a pooled cross-sectional time series of 48 states times 24 years in one grand equation. Data limitations make this a difficult challenge. The simple problem is that states change so little relative to their sampling error. The result is an independent variable (ideology) that is measured in a way that it is close to 4/5 error variance. With this much error in the independent variable, parameter estimates become too attenuated to allow routine forms of statistical analysis.

But analysts might take heart from the challenge of finding statistical relationships among the noise. One intriguing bit of side evidence is that the estimated true variance of within-state ideology over time is bigger than one might expect given our discussion—about four-tenth the magnitude of the cross-sectional variance pooled over several years.¹² The rub is that the measured version of within-state ideology is four-fifths error variance.

STATE POLICY LIBERALISM

In previous work (Wright et al., 1987 and Erikson et al., 1993), we developed a simple cross-sectional measure of state policy liberalism. In aggregating policies from 8 different arenas, we chose policy measures that we believed reflected broad tendencies of state governments to enact policies that would be endorsed or criticized by the Left or Right. Our final scale included state policies in legislation and practice in the areas of social welfare (unemployment and family with children), employment, gaming, criminal justice, equal rights for women, education spending, consumerism, and tax progressivity. The policies represented by the final scale of state policy liberalism proved to be related to the preferences of state electorates of the late 70's and early

Here we look back at our original conception of state policies and ask two questions.

- Are there observable changes and/or trends in states policies for the last quarter of the 20th century?
- Are these changes/trends state specific, or do changes in state policies reflect some common pattern across all states?¹³

¹² Adjusting for its reliability of .96, the variance of the 48 state 24-year means is .0060. The estimated true variance of state deviations from their means is .0024.

¹³ A related question is - Have state policies become more or less constrained over time? That is, is there evidence of a single dimension of state policy liberalism or do patterns of policymaking suggest that state governments do not enact policies as part of a broad ideologically coherent program?

Once we answer these questions we proceed to the next step, to address the issue of the causes of these changes. Specifically, we will ask whether changes in state preferences are predictive of changes in state policy.

Unfortunately, we cannot simply update our original policy measure. Some of the measures used in our original scale reflect policy decisions unique to the earlier time period (e.g., state passage of the Equal Rights Amendment). Some of the original measures were simply data collected at one point in time by other researchers. Developing a measure of state policy at multiple time points is a difficult task, a function largely of data limitations.¹⁴

Here we rely on 3 policy items that have been collected annually since the mid 1970's. These items don't reflect the full diversity of state policies but nonetheless offer a preliminary view of policy change over time. These policy measures are state aid toward family and child welfare, state unemployment insurance programs, and state spending on primary and secondary education. For the reader unfamiliar with these policies, we provide a brief introduction.

Three State Policies

Aid to Families With Dependent Children

The Title IV of the Social Security Act of 1935 included funds for states to assist children in financial need. Participation by any state in this program, originally titled "Aid to Dependent Children" (ADC), was voluntary. Title IV specified minimal conditions for state governments to receive federal matching funds (up to a specified maximum payment per child) without any ceiling on total state expenditures for child welfare. The program was quite flexible. It allowed states to choose both the total amount and the size of payment to any individual recipient. States were permitted to set their own residency and citizenship requirements.

Despite these initial conditions, participation by the states during the first few years of the program was not universal: some state and local governments, with budgets stretched thin by the continuing Depression economy, could not find ways to meet the financial requirements for these federal funds.¹⁵ Eventually all states chose to participate in ADC. This welfare program expanded in 1950 to allow states to recover maintenance costs of a caretaker relative. By 1961, children of an unemployed parent and that parent were included in the program. One year later, the second parent in a family with an incapacitated or unemployed parent was incorporated into the program and the name of this family welfare program was officially changed to Aid to

¹⁴ While one might plausibly develop a general policy scale based upon different policies found at different points in time, such a scale leaves results open to the alternative hypothesis that results reflect changes in the items used to construct the scale rather than true underlying change. To avoid this situation we choose the more conservative route by basing our policy scale on identical items from all time periods.

¹⁵ As of 1939, Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, South Dakota, and Texas as well as the territory of Alaska had no ADC program. (Coll, 1995, 104)]

Family with Dependent Children (AFDC).¹⁶ IN this paper, we take average monthly benefits per family as a measure of the state's commitment to family welfare.

On August 22, 1996, the AFDC was replaced by TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Public Law 104-193). While not mandating an immediate end to "welfare", TANF requires workers to actively seek employment and sets limits on the length of time individuals may receive payments from government. Under TANF, state payments are mandated to remain at least at 80% of AFDC levels. As welfare budgets decline, it is unclear whether we will see lower payments to recipients, a smaller number of recipients, or both.

Systematic data on state and federal monies spent under the AFDC program are available from the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. These data are summarized annually in the *Green Book* and in *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

State Unemployment Insurance

State unemployment insurance programs were enacted rapidly during the late 1930's. Following Wisconsin's lead (July 1936), state unemployment insurance programs were established in 29 states and territories in 1938 with 20 more to follow in 1939. Regular state unemployment insurance programs provide up to 26 weeks of benefits to qualified unemployed workers. Historically, state programs vary in many ways, including:

- tax rate on employers
- definition of eligibility (earnings history/justification for unemployment)
- amount of benefits
- duration of benefits

Unemployment benefits for workers may be supplemented by Federal-State extended benefits and federal emergency benefit programs. This program remains active today. Here we choose to focus on the average weekly benefit as a measure of state "effort" toward minimizing the impact of short term unemployment on its workers.

Current data on state unemployment insurance programs is available through the Office of Workforce Security, Employment and Training Administration, Department of Labor. Extended discussions of annual state changes can be found in the January editions of the *Monthly Labor Review* (Runner, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996 1997, 1998, 1999; Kenyon, 2000).

¹⁶ In many instances federal rules left it to state governments to decide whether to adopt optional programs such as support for unemployed and 2nd parents. But in 1984, state support for the 2nd parent in a household with an incapacitated or unemployed worker was mandated by federal law. Further federal restrictions on state operation of their AFDC programs were enacted in 1990.

Education Spending

More money is spent by state and local governments for education than for any other public service. To standardize comparisons in educational expenditures across states, we examine annual dollars per student in average daily attendance in public elementary and secondary schools.

While the Coleman Report left many to wonder about the impact of money on education (and politicians question whether educational dollars are spent on schools that do not work), common expectations are that money matters. Although the US Supreme Court has ruled that education is not a fundamental right protected by the federal constitution (*San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (411 US 1 (1973))), litigation in state courts regularly raises the question of the equal opportunity for education under state constitutions (Wise and Gendler, 1989). State courts have responded by asserting the existence of a right to education and required state legislatures to respond by equalizing spending.

But equalized spending within states does not equalize spending across states. State boundaries do distinguish substantial differences in state and local spending for elementary, secondary and higher education. By implication state spending commitments provide more or less access to educational services than neighboring states. Clearly more spending does not guarantee better education. But spending, we believe, does indicate state commitment to improve education.

Data on state educational spending comes from the National Center of Education Statistics, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, US Department of Education. These data are reported in a variety of formats including *State Comparisons of Educational Statistics: 1969-70 to 1996-97* and the annual *Digest of Education Statistics* (Snyder and Hoffman, 2001).

Trends in State Policies

In examining state policies over time, we have converted the values of all policy measures to constant dollars. The AFDC and State Unemployment Insurance measures are standardized to Year 2000 constant dollars by applying a CPI correction to each data series (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). The per pupil school expenditure data are subject to a school year CPI deflator while the state unemployment and AFDC data are deflated using the calendar year CPI series. (Snyder and Hoffman, 2001)

National Patterns

Broad national changes in state policies are chronicled in Figure 4. Data for the 50 states are plotted by year. Simple quadratic trend lines representing the average tendencies within each policy are included.

[Figure 4 about here]

AFDC. Support for welfare declined throughout the last quarter of the 20th century. So did monies spent for AFDC. In constant dollars, average monthly benefits to families with

dependent children declined from 1976 to 1980, were stable during the Reagan years, and then continued to decline through the Bush and first Clinton administration years. TANF replaced AFDC in 1997.

State unemployment benefits. State unemployment insurance programs expanded steadily to the point that by 1980 they provided temporary wage replacement to most unemployed workers. (Less than 60% of the national workforce was covered by unemployment insurance in 1950. By 1980, about 90% of the workforce was eligible for state and federal benefits.) However, state benefit levels dropped significantly during the late 1970's and early 1980's and remained low until the mid-1990's (McMurrer and Chasenov, 1995). During the last 4 years, state unemployment benefits have risen back to mid-1970's levels.

School Expenditures. Nationally, school expenditures per pupil expanded through the Carter and Reagan years but then flattened in the late 1980's. State educational spending picked up again after the 1995-96 school year.

State Specific Patterns

Hidden within these general national trends are a variety of state patterns that are summarized in Figures 5 through 7. The subplots found within these figures identify different trends in state policymaking. To simplify our characterization of trends, these charts identify states (1) with no significant positive or negative trend, (2) those with statistically significant positive or negative trends and (3) those with significant positive or negative quadratic trends. For visual simplification, only the trend lines are plotted.

AFDC (Figure 5). While the national trend in aid to families with dependent children is a steady decline in real dollar support, states vary a great deal from this tendency. The average state reduced benefits by 39% in real dollars over the 20 year period from 1976 to 1996. Idaho reduced its monthly benefits by 59% while aid in New Mexico dropped only 5%.

[Figure 5 about here]

Unemployment Benefits (Figure 6). Most states mirror the national pattern of decline and latter increase in state benefits for unemployed workers. (In some of these states there is real recovery of benefit levels while other states simply slow the rate of decline or recover partially.) Some states show no systematic trends over the last 25 years. Several states decline without any evidence of recovery and others buck the national tendency and increase support during this period. Overall, the average state changes less than 1% with approximately equal numbers of states having increased benefits (by up to 35%) and decreasing benefits (by up to 25%) over this period.

[Figure 6 about here]

School Expenditures (Figure 7). Two distinct patterns stand out in state school spending per pupil. More than half the states (27) show steady (constant dollar) increases in support for primary and secondary education. The trend line for most of the rest is increasing expenditures

but at a decreasing rate over time. All states increased constant dollar spending for elementary and secondary education since the middle 1970's. While the average increase was 60%, some states raised expenditures by as much as 120% (Maine). Over this period, Alaska expanded funds for education the least (3%).

[Figure 7 about here]

The message should be clear. State aid to families, support for unemployed workers, and commitment to educational spending have changed over the last 25 years. Not only do we see significant mean changes in policy commitments but we find substantial differences in how individual states alter their policies over time.

CONSTANT CONJUNCTION? THE LINK BETWEEN OPINION AND POLICY

Ideology and Policy Over Time

The question before us is quite simple. Are the preferences of state electorates correlated with and causally related to state public policies? The preliminary answer seems obvious and disheartening. In the first section of this paper we conclude that state public opinion is essentially constant over the past 25 years. We have just shown how variable state policies have been during this same period. How can changing public policies be responsive to the ideological preferences of state electorates if those preferences do not change? But perhaps the story is not quite that simple. Let's consider the evidence.

Our data exist as pooled cross-sectional time series. For both our public opinion data as well as our policy measures we have constructed annual estimates beginning with the year 1976 and continuing through 2000 where possible. Standard practice might be to estimate one of several pooled cross-section regression models. We do so here as a preliminary step.

In Table 6 we report the regression coefficients for ideology on each of our state policies. The effect is muted as we might expect.¹⁷ The decomposition of R^2 into between and within units (states) gives us substantial insight into the situation. There is very little systematic within-unit variance being explained by ideology. The variation in these data is found between units (states). Estimating a "fixed effects" model eliminates any evidence that ideology is a cause of policy.

[Table 6 about here]

¹⁷ A slightly stronger link between preference variables and state policy can be found by lagging state ideology one or two years. One year is a reasonable period linking citizen attitudes and any spending decision for the following fiscal year. Two year lags allow politics to influence the distribution of legislators and for new policies to be enacted and implemented. But the basic story remains. The statistical evidence does not stand up to standard significance level expectations.

Visually it is easy to see the relationship between ideology and policy across units and temporally. The top row of Figure 8 shows the mean cross-sectional relationship between ideology and 3 state policies. The bottom row illustrates the temporal data.

[Figure 8 about here]

The failure of ideology to produce “effects” in a time series analysis is not surprising – at least within the context of the historical period under study. Our clear findings indicate a great deal of stability in the mean ideology of state citizens over time. The national numbers change very little. The states change position only slightly. Variables that don’t change cannot produce change.

An Answer - Relative Policy Stability

The challenge facing us is to explain why policy changes when ideology, the driver of the political system does not. One answer lies in distinguishing policy change in level terms from relative policy position change.

That state policies have changed in level is undisputed. The various time series of individual policies shift, sometimes incrementally sometimes dramatically, over the last quarter century. Aid to Families with Dependent Children finds itself subject to increasing restrictions as states commit fewer and fewer matching funds per family until finally, the program is scrapped altogether by the federal government in 1996. Over the same period, state support for unemployed workers falls quite quickly, stabilizes and then increases just as the AFDC program is being eliminated. Throughout this period state educational funds increase in real dollars.

These three policies are strongly related. These three items can be combined in a scale to reflect general liberal or conservative state policy commitment. An easy characterization is that liberals are more willing than conservatives to endorse spending for welfare families and the unemployed. Support for public education in the form of spending per student in public elementary and secondary schools also reflected a liberal bias. We combine these three policies into a common scale of policy liberalism.¹⁸ First, each policy is transformed into a standardized score for each year in our data set. Each standardized policy has a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. For each state, these policies are then summed within each year to create a measure of state Policy liberalism. The Policy Liberalism scale has a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of approximately 2.5.¹⁹

¹⁸ Correlations among these 3 items are positive and significant within all states. A simple principal components analysis of these items highlights a first component that reflects on average 69% of the variance in these policies.

¹⁹ While we can examine individual policies for more recent years (Educational spending through the 1997-98 school year and state unemployment payments through 2000), measures of all three policies are only available through 1996.

Despite significant changes in some individual policies over time, one characteristic of the state policy liberalism has not changed. That is the relative position of the states compared to one another. States that manifest the most liberal policies in the mid 1970's continued to produce the most liberal policies in the late 1990's. The Middle Atlantic and New England states (New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts) remain quite liberal relative to other states. At the same time, the states that had enacted the most conservative policies at the beginning of our study period remained among the states with the most conservative welfare, unemployment, and educational policies at the end of the study period (Mississippi).

The zero order correlation between state policies in 1976 and state policies in 1996 is a surprising 0.865. (Visually, this relationship is depicted in Figure 9.) Correcting this correlation for measurement error only increases our sense that states remain amazingly stable in relative terms despite significant shifts in the levels of policy commitments. Individually, the state policies measures are also quite stable. Correlations between state policies in 1976 and 1996 are .844, .652 and .802 for AFDC, unemployment insurance and educational spending, respectively.

[Figure 9 about here]

In one respect we are left with a quandary. Neither our independent variable nor our dependent variable varies over time. But this is the “glass half empty” perspective. While it may appear there is little hope of sorting out the question of causal priority even with these time series data we believe there is at least a plausible inference to be drawn. Why haven't states shift their policy priorities relative to one another over the past 25 years? Our “glass half full” answer is because the preferences of their electorates have not changed. State policies remain constrained by the preferences of local voters. More liberal states continue to have the most liberal policies. Legislatures in more conservative states likewise cater to their electorates. None of this is to say that state policies haven't changed. But there is a great deal of stability in state policy regimes.

This “non-finding” need not preclude ideology as motivation for policy. Policies can all move in a consistent direction as funds become available with relative positions unchanging. Or ideology may serve as an anchor: as policies move too far from an expected value or move outside a reasonable range, policies may moderate, returning to closer conformity with expectations. (Stimson, 1991)

The empirical story can be told in different ways but the bottom line is that ideology and policy are related cross-sectionally. Table 6 and Figure 8 support this interpretation. The picture of citizen preferences and public policies in lock-step is quite consistent with the evidence. Temporal evidence is hard to come by. But what is available suggests a great deal of stability in the relationship and perhaps equilibrium.

SPECULATIONS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our answer to the question “Why doesn’t ideology drive policy?”... “But it does.” may not satisfy everyone. Indeed it is not fully satisfactory. Policy while *relatively* stable is not *absolutely* stable. While ideology serves as an anchor for the political system, it is not the only factor driving state policy outcomes.

The paper we presented at the Midwest Political Science Association meetings last year (Wright et al. 2000) hints at an answer and at the direction we will go next. While state ideology is relatively stable, state partisanship during this period is not. Furthermore, state partisanship change is a key driver in state legislative change. In every election year since the mid-1970’s state partisanship is strongly correlated with party control of state legislative seats. Just as we lay out a more detailed process of the linkages between ideology and policy in *Statehouse Democracy* (see especially Chapter 6), we hope to be able to flesh out some of the dynamics in state politics over the past quarter century in further analysis of partisan change. We plan to present such analyses at the Midwest meetings.

We also believe that the simple bivariate pooled cross-sectional time-series model presented above may not be the way to attack this question. Error correction models may help us understand the state political dynamics in a more appropriate setting where we can examine both the long run and the short run relationships between ideology, partisanship, policy and other key political variables.

Now we should offer the usual caveats to our analysis in this paper. Clearly the results are preliminary. The “model” presented is really only a bivariate correlation describing the relationship between opinion and policy. We do not control for the variety of demographic variables included in our earliest (1987) analysis of this relationship. Yet is it hard to imagine dramatic transformations in the relative positions of the states on these variables as well. While wealth, urbanism (population density), and education have all increased over time, they have done so incrementally and fairly equally across state boundaries. It’s hard to see them as major contributors to a shift in the relative policy positions of the states and we believe ignoring them here does not produce major distortions to our general conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTIONS IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

Where does our debate with Lowery et al (1989), Berry et al. (1998) and Brace et al. (1999) stand?

- Have state electorates changed over time in their basic ideological predispositions?
- Have our observations about ideological change altered our sense of the responsiveness of state governments?

- And can we set aside questions about the degree to which state government leads or follows the preferences of state electorates?

We certainly don't have final answers here. But we have some comments on the state of the evidence and will have more to say in the future. And we certainly expect a response from all our colleagues whose work we regard with great respect and who continue to push us to continue our own inquiries. But let us summarize our findings:

1. Public policy preferences have not changed much over the course of the past two and a half decades. This statement is true in the absolute sense that the ratio of individuals willing to call themselves conservative to those identifying as liberal has not shifted. It is also true relatively. The most conservative states at the start of the Carter presidency were the same states at the close of the Clinton presidency.
2. Critical to the dynamic analyses of public opinion is our conclusion that most of the variation in state ideology over time is error variance.
3. State policies toward families with dependent children, unemployed workers, and funding for primary and secondary schools changed dramatically -- but only absolutely, in their level. Despite all the observed changes in state policies, states changed very little in relative terms. States with the most conservative policies in the 1970's were the same as the states with the most conservative policies in the
4. The relative stability of state policies in the face of so much change is attributable to the stability of state electorates relative preferences.

These findings leave us in some respects in opposition to Berry et al.'s and Brace et al.'s results that indicate greater amounts of fluctuation in state public opinion. While we see some minor shifts in a few states, the overall picture in our data leaves us to conclude that state ideological preferences haven't changed a great deal. Furthermore, we do believe our empirical results linking ideology and policy mesh well with a story that supports our assessments of state ideology. The joint stability of ideology and policy support both empirical regularities.

The causal status of ideology as exogenous remains open for debate.²⁰ Perhaps "Which comes first?" is the wrong question to ask. The constant conjunction of opinion and policy reflects the interdependence of these variables in the operation of state politics. The statistical "answer" may depend on the time frame of a particular research study. Over some periods, the influence of the electorate may dominate as elected officials cater to actual and perceived preferences. During other times, government officials and other opinion leaders may be able to turn public opinion to

²⁰ We find that lagged ideology does predict policy slightly better than contemporary ideology. But all of our measures are so incremental (autoregressive) that is difficult to demonstrate conclusively a short term impact of ideology on state policy broadly conceived.

support policies they advocate to solve public problems. The system involves give and take on both sides. What is important is that public judgment comes into play either in advance of government action or in response to it. In each case, the public is a key actor in the policy process.

The picture over the last quarter of the 20th century appears to us compelling evidence that electorates constrain state governments to provide baskets of goods and services consistent with their preferences. Certainly state governments have some leeway in doing so. But the big picture has not changed. It matters where you live and who your neighbors are for the types of policies your government provides. Conservative electorates elect conservative state legislators who enact conservative state policies. More liberal electorates choose less conservative representatives who pass policies acceptable to their supporters. Democracy works in the American states.²¹

Alternatively, the moral of the story is -- It's not when you live that determines the policies you

²¹ OK, so there's still the intercept term to deal with. Lacking a common metric for ideology and policy, we are constrained to speak of the relationship between citizen preferences and public policy without being able to discern whether or not there is a systematic bias in policymaking. Or, as Schattschneider might argue "The flaw....is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent."

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