Policy Representation and Evaluations of State Government

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Abstract

Using data on citizens’ ideological preferences and state policy outputs, this paper examines the linkage between how well citizens’ preferences are reflected in state government policy decisions and their level of confidence in state elected officials. The analysis reveals that citizens report less confidence in state government as the ideological distance between themselves and state policy outputs increases, and that the substantive effect rivals other common predictors of confidence in government. Notably, this relationship is stronger among respondents with higher levels of political interest and holds only for evaluations of state government and not of local or the federal government.

Keywords: political representation, U.S. state politics, evaluations of government, public opinion
A large literature in political science examines the causes and consequences of citizens’ feelings of trust and confidence in government (e.g., Citrin 1974; Miller 1974; Bianco 1994; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Cook and Gronke 2005; Hetherington 2005; Rahn and Rudolph 2005). However, little scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how citizens’ evaluations of government might be affected by how well or poorly their political opinions are reflected in government policy decisions. In other words, we have limited knowledge about whether evaluations of government are rooted in “political reality” (Weissberg 1975).1 This lack of attention is unfortunate because democratic accountability requires that citizens accrue some degree of knowledge about how well their opinions are being represented to allow them to make informed decisions at the ballot box in subsequent elections (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hutchings 2003; Arnold 2004).2

Previous studies question the degree to which Americans can discern the content of public policies (Converse 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Bartels 2005), but there is growing evidence that citizens can and do pay attention to how well their opinions are generally represented in government policy decisions at the national level (Wlezien 1995, 2004; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). It is questionable, however, to assume that this finding extends to citizens’ attention to and knowledge about the content of state public policies, where researchers have reported that citizens possess alarmingly low levels of political information about the behavior

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1 Hetherington (1998) finds that as the distance between one’s own preferences and the perceived preferences of the two political parties increases, trust in government declines. Similarly, Jones and McDermott (2002, 259) find that “the smaller the ideological distance that citizens perceive between themselves and the majority party, the more likely they are to approve of the job Congress is doing.” However, neither study examines whether these perceptions are grounded in fact – that is, whether citizens’ perceptions of how well their own opinions match national party positions are accurate when party positions are measured “objectively” instead of using citizens’ subjective placements.

2 As Soroka and Wlezien (2005, 666) explain, “The representation of public opinion presupposes that the public actually notices and responds to what policymakers do. Without such responsiveness, policymakers would have little incentive to represent what the public wants.”
(or even identity) of elected officials and the content of state policies (Songer 1984; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992; Farnsworth 1999; Hogan 2008). Therefore, the American states arguably present a more stringent test of any possible relationship between an objective measure of opinion-policy representation and feelings of trust and confidence in government.  

This paper examines whether there is a relationship between how well citizens’ political preferences are reflected in state government policy decisions and their evaluations of state government. Using multiple measures of the congruence between public opinion and policy, it finds that citizens report less confidence in state elected officials as the ideological distance between themselves and state policy outputs increases and that the substantive effect of ideological distance rivals other common predictors of confidence in government. Importantly, this relationship is stronger among more politically interested citizens and exists only for evaluations of state government, and not for similar evaluations of local or the federal government. These findings suggest that citizens do have the capacity to identify and understand the extent to which their opinions are reflected in state public policies, and that political representation can have an important effect on citizens’ political attitudes and evaluations of government.

**Theoretical Expectations**

In order for policy representation to have any impact on citizens’ evaluations of government, citizens must have some knowledge of how well, or poorly, their political preferences are represented by the policy decisions made by elected officials. Are there theoretical reasons to expect that citizens are paying attention and possess this knowledge? Most

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3 Moreover, as Kelleher and Wolak (2007, 707) assert, “Subnational governments are in many ways closer to the public, dealing with policies from education to public utilities to welfare, that relate to people’s everyday lives most tangibly.”
studies of public opinion and policymaking in the states are prefaced by pointing out the low levels of knowledge about elected officials and public policies among citizens. For example, in a recent study on legislative extremism and incumbent reelection in state legislatures, Hogan (2008, 858) begins by asking: “In a setting where voter knowledge is relatively low, are incumbents helped or harmed by their policy votes?” He goes on to reference a survey that found while 49% of respondents could correctly recall the name of their member of Congress, “barely one-fourth (25.2%) of the registered voters surveyed were able to name their state representative” (Sonter 1984, 390). Moreover, Farnsworth (1999) found no relationship between citizens’ evaluations of state government and whether they shared the same partisanship as the state legislative majority or shared the same tax preferences as actual state tax policy. These studies do not paint a flattering picture of citizens’ knowledge about state politics and cast doubt on any possible linkage between policy representation and evaluations of government.

However, a separate series of studies suggests that many citizens do possess at least a baseline level of information about their state elected officials. Citizens seem able to hold different levels of government responsible for the policies over which they have primary responsibility (Niemi, Stanley, and Vogel 1995; Cohen and King 2004; Cutler 2004) by, for example, holding governors responsible for the performance of the state economy but not for the performance of the national economy (Atkeson and Partin 1995). Moreover, Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo (2012) find that citizens evaluate their state legislature as a whole more favorably when they share the partisanship of the majority party. There is also some evidence that citizens react to state policies in a “thermostatic” way, adjusting their opinions in a rational and predictable fashion in response to the ideological tone of state policies (Johnson, Brace, and Arceneaux 2005; Pacheco forthcoming). These studies suggest that, contrary to pessimistic
assumptions about citizens’ knowledge of state politics, citizens do possess at least a minimal level of information about elected officials in their state and the content of the public policies they pass into law. If so, then it is reasonable to expect that citizens will have more negative evaluations of government if the policies passed into law tend to conflict with their own policy preferences.

Using levels of confidence in state elected officials to measure evaluations of government, the exact nature of this expectation can be stated as the following hypothesis:

\[ H_1: \text{Citizens’ level of confidence in state elected officials will get lower as the ideological distance between their preferences and state policies grows (i.e. when their state government implements policies they do not agree with).} \]

Moreover, for a relationship between policy representation (ideological distance) and confidence in state elected officials to meaningfully exist, citizens must have at least some knowledge that their political opinions are well or poorly represented by the general ideological tone of public policies. Therefore, we would expect the effect of ideological distance on confidence in government to be stronger among more politically informed and interested citizens because they are the most likely to correctly discern how well or poorly they are represented. This expectation leads to a second hypothesis:

\[ H_2: \text{The magnitude of the negative relationship between ideological distance and confidence in state elected officials will grow as citizens’ levels of political interest increase.} \]

The examination of these two hypotheses is important not only for furthering our understanding about the factors that influence citizens’ evaluations of their government, but also for better understanding the possible mechanisms by which democratic accountability occurs in the states.
Data and Method

To measure evaluations of state government and not government at any level or “in general,” this paper requires survey data that specifically asks respondents about their confidence in state government. The 2000 and 2004 National Annenberg Election Surveys, two random-digit-dialing rolling cross sectional surveys conducted in the months leading up to that year’s presidential election, both include an identical item that asks respondents: “Please tell me how much confidence you have in elected officials in your state. Do you have a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or none at all?” It is important to note that this item asks specifically about elected officials (who are primarily responsible for making public policy in a state) and not state government or public employees in general. Among the respondents who answered the question across the two survey waves, 12.3% had a great deal of confidence, 56.8% had a fair amount, 24.5% had not too much, and 6.4% had none at all. This item is coded on a 1-4 scale such that a more confident response is coded higher.

Policy representation is measured using a proximity technique that places a citizen’s preferences and government policy on the same linear scale and compares the distance between the two.\(^4\) Using this method, as the ideological distance between a citizen’s preferences and policy grows (i.e. policy is ideologically “further” from a citizen’s preferences), that citizen is not well represented. The identical measurement technique has been used in several recent studies to evaluate the ideological distance between citizens and Member of Congress (Griffin and Flavin 2007; Griffin and Newman 2008; Ellis 2012), Senators (Gershtenson and Plane

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\(^4\) Policy representation, the focus of this paper, is not the only way in which elected officials can “represent” citizens (Griffin and Flavin 2011). For example, Eulau and Karps (1977) identify three other types of representation: allocation, service, and symbolic representation. Allocation representation is reflected in legislator success in distributive politics, service representation is reflected in legislator effectiveness aiding constituents in their personal interactions with government, and symbolic representation is reflected in publicized gestures intended to strengthen constituency support and trust.
2007), and presidential candidates (Burden 2004) in the United States as well as the ideological
distance between citizens and political parties in Europe (Blais and Bodet 2006; Powell 2009;
Golder and Stramski 2010). In practical terms, this proximity technique allows a researcher to
evaluate whether a conservative (liberal) citizen lives in a state that, compared to other states,
implements conservative (liberal) policies and is “well” represented, implements liberal
(conservative) policies and is “poorly” represented, or gradations in between.

Measuring ideological distance requires two pieces of data: (1) a measure of citizens’
political ideology and (2) a measure of the general ideological content of state policy. To
measure citizens’ ideology, this paper uses the following item from the NAES: “Generally
speaking, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate,
liberal, or very liberal?” The measure is coded such that it runs from -2 (very conservative) to
+2 (very liberal). Data on citizens’ self-reported political ideology have been commonly used to
measure public opinion in previous studies of political representation (e.g., Erikson, Wright, and
McIver 1993; Griffin and Flavin 2007; Bartels 2008; Flavin 2012) and there is reason to be
confident that self-reported ideology is an accurate measure of citizens’ aggregated policy-
specific opinions. For example, in the 2000 and 2004 NAES only 38% of respondents who
place themselves in the “very conservative” category believe that “Government should reduce
income differences between rich and poor.” In contrast, fully 77% of respondents who place
themselves in the “very liberal” category support that policy proposal. Similarly, only 28% of
very conservative respondents opposed stricter laws regulating abortion while 81% of very

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5 However, some previous studies have questioned whether a person who identifies him/herself as a liberal
(conservative) actually holds liberal (conservative) policy opinions; that is, whether citizens’ self-reported or
“symbolic” ideology accurately reflects their operational ideology when queried about specific issues (Knight 1985;
liberal respondents opposed stricter laws. These differences across ideological classifications suggest that self-reported ideology is an accurate measure of citizens’ actual policy opinions.

Next, measuring public policy requires an indicator of the general “liberalism” (Klingman and Lammers 1984) of state policy outputs that comports with the survey item that asks citizens about their general political ideology. In their seminal book on state opinion and policy, Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) developed a composite index of state policy liberalism using eight policy areas for which liberals and conservatives typically disagree. Gray, Lowery, Fellowes, and McAtee (2004) updated this policy liberalism measure for 2000 using the following five policy items: (1) state regulation of firearms as measured by state gun laws; (2) scorecard of state abortion laws in 2000; (3) an index of welfare stringency that accounts for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) rules of eligibility and work requirements for 1997-99; (4) a dummy measure of state right-to-work laws in 2001; and (5) a measure of tax progressivity calculated as a ratio of the average tax burden of the highest five percent of a state's earners to the average tax burden of the lowest forty percent of a state's earners. These five components are then standardized and summed in an additive index such that more liberal state policies are coded higher. This index is used as the first measure of the general ideological tone of state policy.

Second, a recent article by Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008) provides a rich source of data on state policies in twenty different areas ranging from public assistance spending to gun control to health insurance regulations. In addition to specific statutes and spending data, the authors provide a summary index of policy liberalism for each state that they derive by factor

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6 Gray et al. (2004) argue that using these policy items, as opposed to a measure of per capita expenditures for different policy areas, precludes the possibility that policy liberalism is simply a proxy for a state’s wealth. The five measures produce a Cronbach's alpha of .63.

7 The state policy data can be accessed online at www.statepolicyindex.com.
analyzing their entire range of policies. This composite score is used as the second measure of general policy liberalism. Together, the two policy liberalism measures represent the uni-dimensional liberal/conservative ideology of state policy decisions that corresponds well to the measure of citizens’ general political ideology described above.

Measuring ideological proximity requires a method of placing citizens’ opinions and state policy on a common scale for comparison. Drawing on previous studies that have also used a proximity technique to measure political representation (Burden 2004; Blais and Bodet 2006; Gershtenson and Plane 2007; Griffin and Flavin 2007; Griffin and Newman 2008; Powell 2009; Golder and Stramski 2010; Ellis 2012), this paper approaches this task by standardizing all ideological opinions to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one and standardizing the two recent measures of general state policy liberalism described above (Gray et al. 2004; Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger 2008) as well. After standardizing both opinion and policy, they are now on a common (standardized) metric, similar to the strategy used by Wright (1978). Proximity is measured as the absolute value of the difference between a respondent’s ideology score and the policy liberalism score for his/her state using both of the measures of policy. If policy representation is linked to confidence in state elected officials, a negative and statistically

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8 Across the states, the Gray et al. (2004) and Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008) policy liberalism measures correlate at .79.

9 To ensure that the results reported in this paper are not sensitive to any one particular method of measuring ideological proximity, two alternative measures were also created. First, the two measures of state policy were rescaled to the same scale (-2 to +2) as citizens’ self-reported ideology and the absolute value of the difference between them was computed. This technique is similar to that used in early studies of congressional representation (Miller 1964; Achen 1978) and one that is still advocated by representation scholars today (Burden 2004; Griffin and Newman 2008). Second, policy is rescaled to a tighter range (-1 to +1) than citizens’ ideologies. This procedure is used because we can expect citizens’ ideological opinions to have a wider range and take on more extreme values compared to actual state policy outputs. This transformation to a tighter scale is suggested and implemented by Powell (1982, 1989) in her studies of congressional representation. Again, the absolute value of the distance between a respondent’s ideology score and the state policy liberalism score for his/her state is computed. The results of the analyses reported in Tables 1 and 3 are substantively identical when using these two alternative measures of ideological proximity and are available on the author’s website (http://blogs.baylor.edu/patrick_j_flavin/).
significant coefficient for this ideological distance variable is expected that indicates the following dynamic: as the distance between a citizen’s ideology and the general policy liberalism in his/her state increases, confidence in state government decreases.

Besides how well or poorly a citizen’s opinions are represented by government policy decisions, what other factors might influence confidence in state government? One possible alternative explanation is that instead of basing their evaluations of state government on ideological proximity, citizens base their evaluations on whether the party they support controls government. Indeed, Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo (2012) find that citizens evaluate their state legislature more favorably when they identify with the party that has majority control of the state legislature. To account for this possibility, an additive Partisan Match Score variable is created that tallies whether the state house, state senate, and governor’s office are controlled by the party the respondent identifies with.\(^{10}\) This additive variable runs from zero (none controlled by the respondent’s preferred party) to three (all three controlled by the respondent’s preferred party). By controlling for this variable, this paper is able to examine whether citizens’ confidence in state government is linked specifically to the ideological content of state policies and not simply whether the party a respondent prefers controls government at the time of the survey.\(^{11}\)

The analysis also includes a set of individual demographic control variables that build on Kelleher and Wolak’s (2007) study that broadly examines what conditions and institutional

\(^{10}\) For the state house and senate, respondents are coded as a “1” if the party they identify with is the majority party in that chamber and “0” if it is not. For the governor’s office, respondents are coded as a “1” if their state’s governor is the same party they identify with and “0” if he/she is not.

\(^{11}\) For respondents in the 2000 wave of the NAES, the analysis uses partisan composition of state government data from 2000. For respondents in the 2004 wave of the NAES, the analysis uses partisan composition of state government data from 2004. Data on the partisan composition of state legislatures and governors’ offices are from Carl Klarner’s “State Partisan Balance Data” website at http://www.indstate.edu/polisci/klarnerpolitics.htm (also see Klarner 2003).
arrangements lead to more or less confidence in the state legislature, state governor, and the state court system. At the individual level, they include measures of respondents’ level of education, age, gender, race (African American or Hispanic), and news consumption. In the models predicting confidence in state elected officials, the same set of variables is included but reported interest in politics is substituted in for the news consumption variable.12

Institutional and contextual factors that vary across the states are also likely to have some influence on citizens’ confidence in state elected officials. Building on the state level factors Kelleher and Wolak (2007) found that most influenced confidence in the three branches of state government, the analysis controls for a state’s economic health using the unemployment rate in the state for the year of the survey, whether a respondent’s state has the ballot initiative process or not (Matsusaka 2004), the degree of professionalization of the state legislature (Squire 2007), whether a state has term limits for state legislators or not, a measure of the level of government corruption in a state (Boylan and Long 2003; Glaeser and Saks 2004, 2006), and the level of income inequality in the state (Rahn and Rudolph 2005).13 Consistent with Kelleher and Wolak’s (2007) conclusions, levels of confidence in state elected officials are expected to be higher in states with legislative term limits and lower in states with high unemployment rates, the initiative process, highly professionalized legislatures, and high levels of government corruption

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12 The political interest item asks respondents: “Some people seem to follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there is an election or not. Others are not that interested. Would you say you follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” The variable is coded 1-4 with higher values indicating greater interest in politics.

13 Data on state unemployment rate are from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Data on the presence of the initiative process are from the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California. Data on legislative professionalization are from Squire (2007) and are an updated measure (for 2003) of his widely used legislative professionalism index. The index includes measures of salary and benefits, time demands of service, and staff and resources, and compares them as a proportion to the resources of the United States Congress. Data on term limits are from the National Conference of State Legislatures. Data on government corruption are from Glaeser and Saks (2004, 2006) and uses conviction rates for corruption-related charges for public officials in a state per 100,000 state residents from 1990 to 2002. Income inequality is measured as the Gini coefficient for each state in 2000 provided by the U.S. Census.
and income inequality. While not exhaustive, this list of institutional and contextual variables accounts for the most likely state level factors that influence evaluations of state government (also see Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo 2012).

Confidence in state elected officials is modeled as a function of the distance between a citizen’s ideology score and his/her state’s policy liberalism score (with the expectation that larger ideological distance will lead to less confidence) and the individual and state level control variables described above. Because the dependent variable only has four categories, an ordered probit estimator is used. Because survey respondents are nested within states and all residents of the same state share the same value for state level variables (and thus errors are not independent), standard errors that are clustered by state are reported (Primo, Jacobsmeier, and Milyo 2007; Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009). However, the results reported in the following section are substantively identical when a multi-level modeling technique is used instead of the clustered standard errors approach.14

Results

Do citizens evaluate state government more negatively when it passes and implements policies they do not agree with? To date, state politics scholars have cautioned that citizens possess low levels of information about the behavior or even identity of state elected officials and the content of state public policies (Songer 1984; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992; Farnsworth 1999; Hogan 2008). To examine the relationship between evaluations of state government and policy representation, confidence in state elected officials is regressed on the ideological distance between a citizen and state policy and the individual and state level control variables described above. For each model, the measure of state policy liberalism used in the

14 The results for the multi-level models are available on the author’s website.
calculation of ideological distance is listed at the top of the column. The results of these two estimations are reported in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Looking across the columns, both of the bolded coefficients for ideological distance are negative and bounded below zero at traditional levels of statistical significance (p<.05). In practical terms, these results confirm Hypothesis #1: as the distance between citizens’ self-reported ideology and the general liberalism of state public policy grows, they report less confidence in state elected officials. As expected, respondents evaluate state government more positively as the number of chambers/offices that are controlled by the party they identify with (i.e. the Partisan Match Score) increases, and respondents rate state government more negatively as the state’s unemployment rate increases.15

Substantively, the effect of ideological distance between preferences and policy on confidence in state elected officials rivals other common predictors of confidence. Table 2 reports the percentage point change in the predicted probability of responses falling into each of the four categories of the dependent variable when holding all other variables in the model at their mean value and varying only the independent variable of interest.16 The top row of Table 2 reveals that the effect of ideological distance on confidence in state government is substantively

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15 To examine if the results uncovered in Table 1 are an artifact of using self-reported ideology to measure citizens’ general political ideology, a factor score is created using four policy items (reduce income differences, spending on health care, spending on schools, and gun control) for which respondents were also asked the confidence in state elected officials question (not all NAES respondents were asked all questions). The four items have a Cronbach’s alpha of .57. This alternative measure of citizen ideology and the two measures of policy liberalism described above are then used to create two ideological proximity scores for each citizen using the same standardization method. Confidence in state elected officials is then (separately) modeled as a function of the two measures of ideological proximity and the same set of control variables described above. The results (available on the author’s website) are substantively similar to those reported in Table 1. This robustness check confirms that the results are the same regardless of whether self-reported ideology or an item-based composite is used to measure citizens’ general political ideology.

16 Predicted probabilities are generated from the coefficients reported in Column 1 of Table 1 using the CLARIFY program (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003).
large. Moving from a citizen at the 10\textsuperscript{th} percentile of ideological distance (i.e. someone who is “well” represented) to the 90\textsuperscript{th} percentile (i.e. someone who is “poorly” represented) leads to a 2.5 percentage point \textit{increase} in the probability of a respondent falling into the “none at all” confidence category and a 4.9 percentage point \textit{decrease} in the probability of a respondent falling into the “great deal” confidence category. Looking at the other two rows below in Table 2 reveals that this substantive effect is about the same as the effect of going from a state where all three chambers/offices are controlled by the respondent’s preferred party to a state where none are and larger than the effect of moving from the 10\textsuperscript{th} to the 90\textsuperscript{th} percentile for state unemployment rate. In sum, the effect of ideological distance on confidence in state elected officials is substantively large and rivals other common predictors of confidence in government.

[Table 2 about here]

Next, for a relationship between policy representation (ideological distance) and confidence in state elected officials to exist, an essential ingredient is that citizens have at least some knowledge that their political ideology is well or poorly represented by the general ideological tone of state public policies. By extension, we would expect that more politically informed and interested citizens would be more influenced by how well or poorly they are represented. To further test the plausibility of the relationship between policy representation and confidence in state elected officials, this paper next examines whether the link between ideological distance and confidence is greater among citizens who pay the most attention to politics and are most likely to be able to correctly discern whether they are well or poorly represented. To do so, an interaction term of citizens’ self-reported interest in politics (measured on a 1-4 scale) and each of the two measures of ideological distance is created. If the negative relationship between ideological distance and confidence in state elected officials gets stronger
as political interest increases, the interaction term will be negative and statistically different from zero. Confidence in state elected officials is then regressed on the interaction term, the two main effects (ideological distance and political interest by themselves) and the same set of individual and state level control variables as before. The results of these estimations are reported in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

The top row of bolded coefficients in Table 3 reports that the interaction term between ideological distance and political interest is negative and statistically different from zero (p<.05) for both models. Substantively, this means that the negative effect of ideological distance on confidence in state elected officials is larger among respondents with high levels of political interest compared to those with low levels of political interest. This is important, because knowing how well or poorly one is represented is the essential mechanism linking policy representation and confidence in state government. The results from Table 3 confirm Hypothesis #2 and reveal a stronger relationship between ideological distance and confidence among more politically interested citizens. This finding suggests that the relationship between policy representation and confidence in state elected officials is not spurious.17

Finally, as a second way to check for robustness and probe whether the relationship documented in Table 1 is spurious, this paper next examines whether the distance between citizens’ ideology and the general ideological tone of state public policies is similarly linked to evaluations of one’s local and the federal government. If ideological distance between opinion

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17 When (instead of using an interaction term) the sample is split up and separate models are run for respondents with each level of political interest, the coefficient for ideological distance is negative and statistically different from zero only for respondents who report they follow what is going on in government and public affairs “most of the time” or “some of the time.” For respondents in the “only now and then” or “hardly at all” categories, the coefficient for ideological distance is not statistically different from zero. The results for these models are available on the author’s website.
and policy at the state level is linked to evaluations of local and the federal government, this suggests a spurious relationship. However, if the relationship is contained only to evaluations of state government and not for local or the federal government, this further suggests that citizens are paying some degree of attention to state policy outputs, comparing the policies to their own opinions, and coming to an intelligent evaluation about the elected officials in state government. In other words, it suggests that citizens are able to differentiate among levels of government when making evaluations (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Niemi, Stanley, and Vogel 1995; Cohen and King 2004; Cutler 2004).

To measure evaluations of local government, the following item from the 2000 and 2004 NAES is used: “Please tell me how much confidence you have in the government of the city or town where you live. Do you have a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or none at all?” The item is coded 1-4 with more confidence coded higher. Finding a comparable question for the federal government is a bit trickier because the NAES did not ask respondents their confidence in the federal government or federal elected officials “in general.” To address this challenge, two different (but similar) questions are used. The first asks respondents: “Please tell me how much confidence you have in the Executive Branch of the federal government – this includes the office of the president. Do you have a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or none at all?” The second asks respondents: “Please tell me how much confidence you have in the Legislative Branch of the federal government – this includes the U.S. Congress. Do you have a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, or none at all?” Both items are coded 1-4 with higher values indicating greater confidence in government.

These three different evaluations of government are then (separately) modeled as a function of the two measures of distance between citizens’ ideology and the general ideological
tone of state public policies and the same set of individual and state level control variables used for the models reported in Table 1. When inspecting the coefficients, a clear pattern emerges: ideological distance between citizen opinion and state policy bears no statistical relationship with either the measure of confidence in local government or the two measures of confidence in the federal government. Out of six coefficients for ideological distance (two for each of the three measures of confidence), none are statistically different from zero. These results provide further evidence of a meaningful link between policy representation and confidence in state elected officials that does not “spill over” to evaluations of other levels of government.

Conclusion

The representation of citizens’ opinions in state policy outputs is an important yardstick for measuring the quality of democracy in the American states. One mechanism that promotes political representation is democratic accountability whereby citizens observe state policy outputs, compare those outputs to their own opinions and values, and evaluate their elected officials accordingly. For this process to occur, however, citizens must have some knowledge of the content of policies passed into law in their state. Previous studies of state politics have cast doubt on this premise by showing that citizens tend to possess alarmingly low levels of political information about the behavior or even identity of elected officials and the content of state policies (Songer 1984; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992; Farnsworth 1999; Hogan 2008). If that is the case, citizens’ evaluations of state government may bear little relationship with how well or poorly their opinions are actually represented by state government.

Using measures of citizens’ political ideology and the general ideological tone of state policy outputs, this paper finds a substantively large relationship between opinion-policy

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18 The results of these estimations are available on the author’s website.
representation and confidence in state elected officials such that confidence declines as the ideological distance between opinion and policy grows. Notably, this relationship is stronger among respondents with higher levels of political interest and also holds only for evaluations of state government and not evaluations of local or the federal government. These findings extend previous work that established a link between evaluations of government and whether one’s preferred party controls government (Citrin 1974; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Kimball and Patterson 1997; Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo 2012) by showing that, even in what is commonly thought to be a low information environment, the ideological content of state policy outputs can have an important influence on citizens’ evaluations of government. From a normative perspective, this finding is encouraging for democratic competence because it suggests that citizens are paying attention to the general ideological tone of state government policy outputs and then using that information in their evaluations of state elected officials.

One important extension of this paper would be to examine whether citizens’ evaluations of their own specific state legislator are linked to how well or poorly that legislator represents their political opinions when voting on bills in the state legislature. While there is ample evidence at the congressional level that citizens evaluate their congressperson based on ideological proximity (Griffin and Flavin 2007) as well as evidence at the state level that more ideologically extreme state legislators are punished at election time with lower vote totals (Hogan 2008), little is known about whether constituents possess enough information about their individual state legislator’s voting record to make intelligent evaluations based on ideological proximity at election time. Future studies should attempt to establish this chain of legislative accountability at the state level in more detail.
More generally, this paper adds to the growing literature that illuminates how government policy decisions can affect citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors (Mettler 2002; Campbell 2003; Mettler and Soss 2004; Flavin and Griffin 2009). Whenever elected officials make an important policy decision, some citizens will agree with their course of action while others will not. However, this presumes some degree of citizen awareness about the content of public policies. This paper finds that citizens are aware, at least at a basic level, of the content of state government policy decisions and adjust their subsequent evaluations of elected officials and government accordingly. When compounded over time, government policy decisions may have an increasingly important influence on how citizens ultimately view the legitimacy and effectiveness of their government and on subsequent levels of political interest and engagement.
References


Table 1: Confidence in State Elected Officials Declines as Ideological Distance Grows

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<th>Policy Measure</th>
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<td>GLFM</td>
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<td><strong>Ideological Distance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Partisan Match</td>
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<td>0.089*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Score (0-3)</td>
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<td>-0.267*</td>
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<tr>
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<td>[0.047]</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.205*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>[0.085]</td>
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<td>-0.053*</td>
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<td>[0.025]</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.062</td>
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<td>[0.069]</td>
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<td>0.039</td>
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<td>-0.059</td>
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<td>[0.069]</td>
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<td>-0.006</td>
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<td>Corruption</td>
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<td>[0.013]</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-0.506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[1.127]</td>
<td>[1.135]</td>
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<td>-1.877*</td>
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<td>[0.456]</td>
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<td>[0.455]</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
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<td>3,605</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Dependent variable: Confidence in state elected officials (1-4, more confidence coded higher).
Table 2: Substantive Effects on Confidence in State Elected Officials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory Variable</th>
<th>Predicted percentage point change in probability of respondent falling into response category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideological Distance</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th percentile → 90th percentile</td>
<td>+2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partisan Match Score</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (All) → 0 (None)</td>
<td>+2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Unemployment Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th percentile → 90th percentile</td>
<td>+1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Predicted percentage point change in probability of a respondent falling into each response category when varying the independent variable as specified and holding all other variables at their mean values are generated using CLARIFY from the model specification in Table 1, Column 1.
Table 3: Link Between Ideological Distance and Confidence in State Elected Officials
Stronger Among Politically Interested Citizens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Measure</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>GLFM</td>
<td>SMR</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ideological Distance x</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Political Interest</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Distance</td>
<td>0.070</td>
<td>0.253*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>0.142*</td>
<td>0.209*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partisan Match Score (0-3)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>0.011</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>-0.271</td>
<td>-0.273</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.206*</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>-0.054*</td>
<td>-0.050*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>[0.025]</td>
<td>[0.025]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative Process</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
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<td>Legislative</td>
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<td>[0.141]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term Limits</td>
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<td>-0.052</td>
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<td>Corruption</td>
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<td>[0.013]</td>
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<td>Income Inequality</td>
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<td>-0.769</td>
</tr>
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<td>Cut Point #1</td>
<td>-1.777*</td>
<td>-1.571*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cut Point #2</td>
<td>-0.669</td>
<td>-0.459</td>
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<td>Cut Point #3</td>
<td>1.018*</td>
<td>1.235*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3,605</td>
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</table>