

Introduction: The State of Polarization in the States

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In American politics, the two major political parties are more separated ideologically than at any point in the last fifty years. This separation, commonly referred to as polarization, implies an intense disagreement in the preferred policy solutions and preferences of political actors. It is well known that American political elites, especially those in the national political context, have been polarized for some time (Theriault 2008, Fleisher and Bond 2004, Wood and Jordan *Forthcoming*). Evidence at the mass level is more mixed; it is unclear whether American individuals hold relatively moderate (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011) or more extreme (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) policy positions. At the very least citizens' evaluations of the other party have grown more extremely negative (so-called affective polarization: Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

While polarization in the national political arena is evident with every media story as well as at the forefront of American politics research, we have had less exploration of this phenomenon at *any* sub-national level. State government scholars have measured ideology of citizens and elites (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993, Berry et al. 1998), party competition (Ranney 1976), and divided government (Bowling and Ferguson 2001). More recently, Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2011) made across-state comparisons of political polarization. Broadly, over the last several years, scholars have begun discussing “fragmented federalism,” or how party polarization might impact and complicate policy making in states (Ghamkar and Pickerill 2012, Bowling and Pickerill 2013). States make policy on most issues directly impacting their citizens as well as implement federal law and rules: in these “laboratories of democracy,” policy can be innovative, mainstream, or ideologically extreme. Thus, it becomes extremely important to investigate the extent of polarization among state elites and among individuals within states to understand the effect of either form of polarization on the politics within the states.

The special issue of *State and Local Government Review* begins this exploration. It features five articles illustrating important potential consequence of polarization within the states. The articles address changing an individual's perception of state governments, citizen evaluations of the policy outputs of the states, and, perhaps more importantly, the effects of polarization on the policy outputs themselves. We introduce these papers individually after briefly outlining the broader improvements in data availability that have made such state-level research a possibility.

New Data for State-Level Polarization

Scholars have long recognized the importance of states as independent units in policy creation and variation; states are the laboratories of democracy. From the earliest studies of policy innovation (Walker 1969), scholars of state politics and federalism have noted the leading role of states in making and implementing policies that then spread across the other states. States also make choices in creating innovative or individualized programs as they implement federal policy, such as the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid, or Race to the Top education initiatives. With party polarization comes the potential for policy choices to become ideologically more divergent and/or extreme.

However, there has been little work investigating the extent of polarization in the states or the effects of that polarization. For the most part, the problem has been one of data availability, not scholarly interest. The data problem is two-fold. First, quality data with reliable samples for *individuals* (for instance, for measuring mass ideology or polarization) within states was, until recent developments, considered prohibitively expensive. Even the original American Representation Study (Miller and Stokes 1963) which attempted to measure Congressional representation by comparing ideology in House districts to member voting patterns had notoriously small-*n* problems, especially in more remote districts. Direct measurement using survey measures, like Erikson, Wright, and McIver's (1993) classic study, still relied on national-level samples disaggregated by states, facing a small-*n* problem within units.

Recent advances in survey research have remedied some of the availability problem, leveraging both internet survey technology and new statistical methods. Using the internet, scholars have pooled together resources to create the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), an online survey of between 30,000-50,000 individuals, allowing for research in subnational units, especially states (see Vavreck and Rivers 2008 for a thorough explanation). Additionally, new statistical advances have allowed scholars to pool national estimates of individual opinion to inform estimates of local opinion (Warshaw and Rodden 2012). Both new data and new methods have allowed us to measure only recently the quantities of interest—individual-level opinion—at the subnational level.

Second, quality data for *elites*, like state legislatures, is also notoriously problematic, especially when attempting to build time-series cross-sections of all fifty states over an extended amount of time. Here, the discipline owes a debt to Shor and McCarty (2011). They collected data on individual state legislators in all fifty states from 1993 to present and then used Bayesian item response models to scale legislator responses to ideal points. They use the National Political Awareness Test (NPAT) from Project Vote Smart to project the legislatures into a common space across the states. These data allow scholars potentially to make comparisons across individual legislators, across chambers within states, and, ultimately, across legislators or chambers across states.

Below, we give context to the five papers in this collection by discussing the level of polarization in the states over time using the Shor and McCarty data. In a broad sense, the patterns mirror the national trend of growing polarization among elites.

Descriptive Polarization in State Legislatures

We start by discussing party control of government, which at its most basic level can indicate broadly which the ideology of policy that is likely to pass (Republican or Democrat-leaning preferences), with unified governments theoretically more likely to pass ideological policy than divided (see Bowling and Ferguson 2001 for a more thorough and complex explanation, however). Figure 1 illustrates the number of unified (governor, upper, and lower chamber of legislature controlled by the same party) state governments since 1993. The most apparent pattern is that the absolute number of

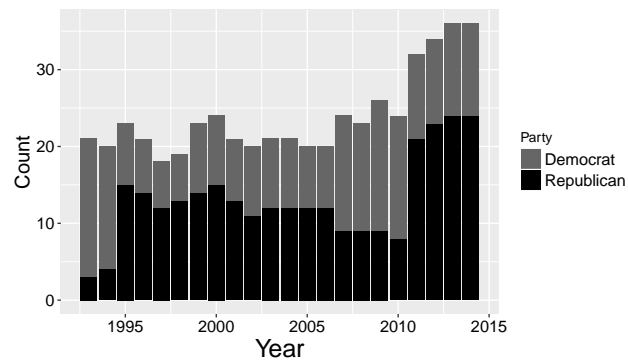


Figure 1: Unified State Governments by Party Control.

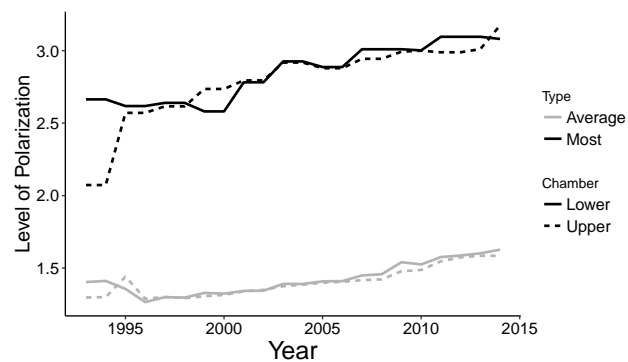


Figure 2: Polarization in State Legislatures by Chamber.

unified state governments in any given year has increased dramatically in the last twenty years. In the early 1990s, an average of twenty states had unified party control of the governor and both houses of the legislatures. That number has risen to thirty-six in the last two years. The number of Democratic versus Republican unified governments has waxed and waned with the national political climate. Figure 1 shows a jump in the number of Republican unified governments in the “Contract with America” year of 1995 and after the Tea Party elections of 2010. Democrats experienced a similar increase in the late George W. Bush terms.

While party control of state offices is informative of the *potential* for policymaking, it is not necessarily informative of the *types* of policies that might be sought beyond a simple categorization by partisan preference. How moderate or extreme policy outputs might be is unclear. In other words, unified government under a moderate party might not be nearly as outside the mainstream as unified government under a more polarized party. Alternatively, divided government might not be nearly as gridlocking when parties are more moderate. To get a sense of *polarization* in state legislatures, we present a few relevant trends of the Shor and McCarty data.

Figure 2 shows four trend lines. The measure plotted is ideological difference measured as the absolute value of the distance between the median Republican and median Democrat in each chamber of each state legislature. We take two quantities of interest: the “average” level of polarization in all fifty states as well as the “most” polarized legislature for each given year. We disaggregate the quantities by upper and lower chamber, as an argument could be made that lower chambers in states polarized before upper chambers (similar to the House of Representatives and the Senate: see Theriault 2013).¹

First, polarization, both across chambers and across states, seems to broadly mirror the increasing trend at the national level. Unlike the national level, though, the average level of polarization has been almost identical in the upper chamber as in the lower chamber, suggesting that both are polarizing at the same rate. Second, the most polarized chamber in any given year is much more polarized, in absolute terms, than the average chamber. This suggests a substantial amount of variation across the states. In other words, polarization has been broadly increasing in the average, but there are states that are more polarized than others. The differential effects these levels of polarization could have on polarization are exactly the kind of interesting and suggestive research questions explored by the authors in this special edition.

Last, we illustrate the average levels of polarization in the chambers disaggregated by the party control of government (unified or divided)

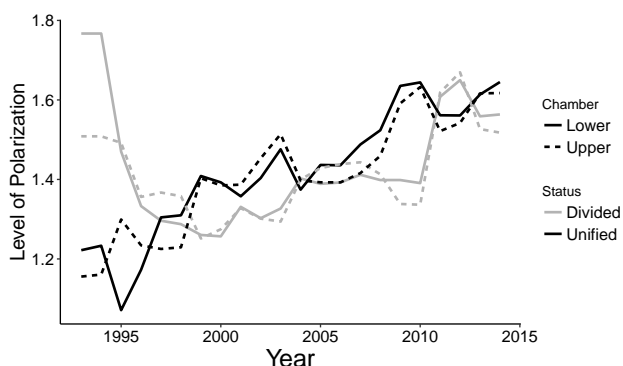


Figure 3: Polarization in State Legislatures by Government Status (Divided or Unified).

as shown in Figure 1. Figure 3 shows the average trends over time. Average polarization in lower chambers is shown by a solid line while average polarization in upper chambers is shown by a dashed line. Polarization in states with a divided government is shown by gray lines; unified government is shown by black lines.

Principally, we are interested in the average political climate. If unified governments enable certain policymaking abilities, it would be normatively concerning if states with unified governments were also the most polarized (because of exactly the kind of policies they could promulgate). Interestingly, though, Figure 3 gives little cause for concern along these lines. Unified governments and divided governments spend roughly an equal number of years having the more polarized average chambers. Legislative chamber makes little to no difference, as the upper and lower chambers of unified and divided governments tend to track together.

Overall, evidence suggests that polarization at the state level has broadly increased along with national elite polarization. What remains to be seen, though, is the potential effects this polarization could have on political behavior, decision-making, and policy outputs in the fifty states. To illuminate these effects, we turn to the five papers that follow in this special edition.

The Special Edition

The collection of papers here do an excellent job of marshaling unique and interesting evidence regarding the effects of polarization in state legislatures, and, in some instances, the *non*-effects that run counter to conventional wisdom. Two papers (Singer, Noh) situate the effects of polarization within state legislatures on the interactions of states with the federal government. One paper (Birkhead) encourages us to remember the state legislature context when considering the potential effects of polarization. The final two papers (both by VanderMolen and Milyo) investigate the effect of state polarization on the perceptions of state governments by individuals within those states.

Singer, in “States of Reform: Polarization, Long-term Services and Supports, and Medicaid Waivers,” investigates how state government context affected whether or not governors applied for a Section 1915 (c) waiver from the federal government regarding the provision of certain long-term health services within their states. The author identifies a unique and under-utilized way that governors potentially have discretion over state-federal relations. The role of polarization is obvious: as politics, particularly partisan politics, become more severe within the state, governors might apply for more waivers as a way to signal national-level political aspirations or to shield themselves from conflict and blame within the state. Waiver applications are negatively associated with polarization in the upper chamber of the state and positively associated with polarization in the lower chamber.

Noh, in “Federal Strategies to Induce Resistant States to Participate in the ACA Health Exchanges,” questions which national and state-level political factors made states more or less likely to participate in healthcare exchanges after the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010. The author moves our understanding of policy implementation forward by recognizing that, in 2012, implementation transitioned from a dichotomous implement/not implement choice (of which only 14 states participated) to a separate choice to implement any or all of four key functions (230). Refining the dependent variable of interest, the author finds evidence for the relatively well understood role of partisanship, but also notes additional roles for financial incentives from the federal government in

pushing states toward implementing some part of an exchange, especially among the remaining 36 initially resistant states. With changes to health care administration likely coming as a result of the 2016 presidential election, we encourage future scholars to build off this work.

Birkhead, in “State Budgetary Delays in an Era of Party Polarization,” looks at the effect of polarization within state legislatures on the budgeting process within the states. Polarization within states has the clear potential to affect the likelihood of a state passing a budget on time (or, as Birkhead notes, how long it takes a state to resolve a budgetary delay). The less investigated side of this story, though, is whether institutional safeguards (like sequestrations in spending or shutdown provisions) can help to ensure the passage of a budget *in spite of* polarization. The author finds evidence for these precise roles: polarization and divided government both increase the probability of a budgetary delay and the length of a delay, but shutdown provisions decrease the likelihood of a budgetary delay and the length of a delay. The analysis reminds us to think not just of the potential effects of polarization but also of effective institutional constraints on those effects.

VanderMolen and Milyo, in “Public Confidence in the Redistricting Process: The Role of Independent Commissions, State Legislative Polarization and Partisan Preferences,” test the conventional and often-expressed wisdom that individuals want their politics to be less partisan. Specifically, they examine whether individual confidence in the redistricting process, often viewed as partisan due to gerrymandering, improves when redistricting is controlled by an independent commission as opposed to state legislators. The authors make use of minimal variation: less than ten states have purely independent commissions. They find that independent commissions alone are not enough to improve an individual’s confidence in the redistricting process. Instead confidence is largely driven by an individual’s shared partisanship with the legislature and the governor.

Richardson and Milyo, in “Giving the People What They Want? Legislative Polarization and Public Approval of State Legislatures,” expand the previous question to whether or not individual approval of state legislatures as a whole (rather than just the redistricting process) is also driven by polarization within the state legislature. Again, the conventional wisdom here is that people dislike polarization and partisanship, and more people would be attuned to politics if it were less contentious. The authors note that their test is the first to consider polarization in the states. The authors find that polarization does little to depress approval in the state legislature once accounting for an individual’s partisan preference. Polarized legislatures are not punished as long as an individual shares the partisanship of the legislature. These findings echo the emerging wisdom in the literature: partisanship, not normative views of politics as a process of compromise, drives approval. Harbridge, Malhotra, and Harrison (2014) find similar effects in the national legislature, while Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz (2016) demonstrate that, just like an individual’s supposed preference for independent redistricting commissions, voters do not support moderate candidates in open-primary systems when compared to more extreme candidates. In the words of VanderMolen and Milyo, “like-minded partisans of both parties are happy when their representatives push a partisan agenda rather than a more bipartisan centrist one” (277). Perhaps these findings lend evidence to why polarization is growing at the both the national and state level and why the potential for more extreme policy outputs continues.

Conclusion

These articles yield new insights into the extent and effects of polarization in subnational legislatures. Importantly, these papers and the data they use suggest potentially fruitful ways to move the field forward even more. One effort could focus on the improved subnational data on elites and allow us to examine potential causes for polarization. For instance, recent research provides conflicting evidence on institutional mechanisms like open primaries. Traditionally, the use of open primaries was hypothesized to increase polarization, as select ideological individuals ran for office and campaigned to an extreme

audience. Although some evidence (Hirano et al. 2010) suggests this is unlikely, it is difficult to conclude more assertively until we have data on a range of state and local elites.

A second research effort could expand the search for potential causes of polarization beyond institutional mechanisms. By taking advantage of variation across states in levels of elite polarization, specific state-level variables such as political culture, party competition, and state policy liberalism could be examined to determine how they impact levels of elite polarization. Additionally, the interplay of unified or divided party control of government and ideological polarization could be examined more closely to determine the impact on policy outcomes in states. Finally, the interactions of party polarization at the national level with the varied degrees of polarization in the fifty state legislatures could yield improved understanding of the intergovernmental relationships that form during the implementation of federal policy in areas such as education, health, welfare, and immigration.

All of these papers push our knowledge of the effects of polarization at the state-level forward. Importantly, several of these findings run counter to our conventional wisdom or findings from the national level. Additionally, they suggest ways to mitigate the effects of polarization through institutional constraints, should we find that polarization slows legislative productivity to an unacceptable degree or creates policy outputs that are too ideologically extreme. Moreover, the importance of state variation and federalism is emphasized in these findings. We encourage scholars to note these contributions, the novel use of data, and the new evidence produced by moving tests of polarization to the subnational level. There is much more to explore at both the national and state levels as we continue in this era of heightened ideology and polarized politics.

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Notes

¹Because of the scaling procedures and projections involved in the data, the “levels” of polarization are comparable across chambers and states, but have no intuitive scale. In other words, it is useful to compare the lines to themselves and to each other over time, but less useful to describe what a “one-unit” increase in polarization means on this scale.

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