Ideology in Major Legislation and Public Opinion:
Which is the Chicken, and Which is the Egg?

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Abstract

What are the public opinion consequences when public policy moves in a more liberal or conservative direction? The accepted wisdom on ideology in public opinion is that it is largely ephemeral for most people. While this is undoubtedly true, it is also possible that the relative salience of ideology could vary over time. As ideological distinctions become more important in political debate, ideology itself may come to mean more to the mass public. In addition, while ideology may be a nebulous concept for individuals to grasp, perhaps on average it is sensitive to shifts in public policy.

This paper represents an initial investigation of these questions, with an emphasis on the first question. It finds—tentatively—that as Congress and the President produce more major legislation that is polarized along ideological lines, people increasingly have ideologies, and those who have ideologies are increasingly polarized towards the ends of the scale.

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Representation requires that public policy be made in accordance with the public's wishes. In a representative democracy, this is achieved in some combination of two archetypes. The first of these is the 'trustee' model. In this way of thinking, we choose representatives whose judgment of what is best we believe will most closely match our own. The criteria for evaluation are prospective. The 'delegate' model takes the opposite approach. Here, the correct role of the representative is to do what they believe their constituents would like, regardless of their own personal leanings. The electorate then judges their behavior and returns them to office or chooses a new representative they believe will better follow their wishes. In practice, people consider their representatives with somewhat of a mixture of both models.[1]

In a sense, we can think of a circle of causation between public policy and public opinion. Public opinion should affect public policy. It does so both through electing legislators that represent public desires and by the anticipated consequences of current policymaking on future elections. This second method is a reason why public policy should affect public opinion. If public opinion does not react to the making of public policy, then there are either no consequences for those who govern or they predict future consequences so well that the production of public policy is perfectly attuned to public desires.[2]

We have plenty of reasons to believe that the first direction of causation (from the public to policy) is strong. For instance, it is well established that the Supreme Court has

[1] Only logic restricts a person from subscribing fully to both conceptions simultaneously. In practice, it is likely that people want both a trustee and a delegate out of the same person (a trustee when they disagree with their neighbors, and a delegate when they agree). It is also likely that many people distrust 'politicians' so much as to want neither type of representative, while still claiming to support representative democracy.

[2] For example, the stock market routinely does not react to changes in monetary policy, for many experts spend a great deal of time predicting such changes, and the market has already adjusted. However, the market is sensitive to new information about future moves, even subtle hints.

tended to make decisions generally in line with public opinion, although that may have changed in recent years (Mishler and Sheehan 1993, 1996). Mayhew contends that one of the main reasons why divided government is just as productive as unified government is the public policy is produced largely in response to demand from the public (Mayhew 1991). Furthermore, Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) provide evidence that public policy is changed in response to public desires.

We also have good evidence that Members of Congress (MCs) are held accountable at the voting booth for their individual voting records (Brady, Cogan, Gaines and Rivers, 1996; Erikson, 1971). There has been little work done on similar effects in Presidential elections, largely because of the few number of the elections which involve an incumbent (only 8 elections since World War II have featured a full-term incumbent president) and because the infrequency of the elections make sufficient control variables difficult. After all, a change in partisanship since the last election could have been the product of a number of phenomena, including public policy. Indeed, such a claim is close to that Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002). They argue that public policy liberalism is partly caused by the public policy that has come before it. As policy grows increasingly liberal, it becomes too liberal for the public, who then become more conservative. There is also evidence that the raw production of public policy has consequences for presidential approval (Jarvis 2004a), but little consequences for congressional approval (Jarvis 2004b) or congressional elections (Jarvis 2004c).

Measuring Policy Ideology

Measuring the ideology of the legislation produced by a given Congress is no mean feat. The problem is compounded by the very fact that Congress is not obliged to produce a constant amount of legislation every two years. Essentially, we face the simple problem that the ideological output of government will have both *direction* and *magnitude*. For any individual piece of legislation, it might be possible to measure the ideological direction that that piece of legislation moves public policy in. This could be done by a detailed reading of the legislation, of the debate surrounding its passage, or, if one is willing to make certain assumptions, by looking at the coalition of support. If known liberal legislators support the legislation and conservatives oppose it, it is likely a liberal piece of legislation. This last approach has been the dominant approach taken recently by scholars. (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997) Some sort of scale of how liberal or conservative legislation is could be devised.

However, once we have a measure of the liberalness of a given piece of legislation, it is from clear how to aggregate this over a variable number of laws. First, we must have some way of knowing that the laws we look at are somehow comparable in scope. A Congress that differs from another only in its greater volume of unimportant, liberal legislation should not be counted as significantly more liberal. One approach that suggests itself is to select laws of comparable importance.

David Mayhew gives us a method for finding comparably important laws (Mayhew 1991). Using both contemporary sources, such as the annual roundups of a session of Congress in the *New York Times*, and historical sources like histories of social

policy, Mayhew constructs a measure of important laws passed. Mayhew's set of laws has become one of the more commonly used measures of major legislation, informing many other scholars' work on important legislation. (Howell, Adler, Cameron and Riemann 2000; Shipan 2002; Jarvis 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002) In fact, Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) code most of Mayhew's laws as being either liberal or conservative. They then total up the net liberalism of a Congress as being the sum of the liberal laws minus the conservative laws, counting some particularly important laws—such as Reagan's first budget and the War Powers Act—doubly.

An examination of Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson's scores for a pair of Congresses highlights the tensions of direction and magnitude.[3] The 97th Congress (Reagan's first, 1981-82) produced 9 major pieces of legislation, according to Mayhew. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson code 4 of these for their measure. Two of these, the Transportation Assistance Act of 1982 and an extension of the Voting Rights Act were coded as liberal; the other two, Reagan's tax cut and budget, were coded as being historically important conservative laws. Therefore, the net ideology of this Congress was –2 (2 for the liberal laws – 2*2 for the conservative laws). Compare this to the immediately following 98th Congress, for which they found only two liberal laws, for a net score of 2. The problems of direction and magnitude can be seen even more clearly when we add in the 104th Congress, for which they found 3 liberal laws and 2 conservative laws, one of historic importance (for a net score of 0). The 98th Congress was the least productive in volume of the 3, and the 104th the most, yet they are adjacent

[3] This should not be taken as an indictment of their measure, but rather, as simple illustration of the large difficulties of measurement here.

on the scale. The point of this exercise is not to point out that the measure is fundamentally flawed; rather, that measuring both direction and magnitude (in particular, summing legislation that goes in seemingly different directions) is problematic and must be handled carefully.

This paper attempts to come to grips with these problems of direction and magnitude. I believe them to be only attempts, and tentative ones at that. The first approach taken is similar to that taken by Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, in that it subtracts liberal laws from conservative laws. However, rather than determining the ideological content of the laws from a direct reading, it uses voting alignments to come up with a measure of degree to which a law is liberal or conservative. For each of Mayhew's laws, the vote on final passage in both the House and the Senate was gathered (for the cases where there was a recorded vote on final passage; some of these laws passed by voice vote). The ideological direction of a given law was computed by taking the proportion of Republicans voting for the law and subtracting the proportion of Democrats voting for the law from that. This could range from a maximum of 1 (a conservative law passed with only the votes of Republicans) to a minimum of –1 (a liberal laws passed with only the votes of Democrats). These major pieces of legislation are usually not quite that partisan in their voting alignment; in practice it ranges from –.89 (the vote in the Senate in 1993 on the Deficit Reduction bill) to 0.77 (the House vote in 1981 on Reagan's budget reconciliation). For each Congress, these differences are summed (combining the votes in both the House and Senate, but weighting each chamber equally, not by number of members). In summing, the most conservative Congresses are the 83rd (1953-54) and 80th(1947-48) with scores of 3.08 and 3.05, respectively. The

most liberal Congress is the 103rd (1993-94) at –11.54, followed by the trio of Congresses 87-89 (1961-1966). The values of this variable (termed *Sum Index*) overtime are presented in Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

By and large, this variable conforms to expectations of the more or less liberal periods in government policy. The Great Society period stands out, as we believe it should. Also, the period of productivity that Mayhew finds from 1964 to 1976 ranges in its ideological effect; despite the aggregating nature of this variable, the scores in the early 1970s hover close to 0. Congress was productive in those years, but largely produced major laws that had broader appeal. The Reagan years start conservative but become progressively more liberal. However, the large spike in 'liberalism' in the 103rd Congress is troubling. The 103rd Congress did produce more liberal legislation than some previous Congresses. However, by the EMS measure it rates near the lower points of the Great Society period, rather than being twice as liberal as the most liberal Congress of the Great Society! In truth, this is because our measure is particularly sensitive to partisan polarization in Congress, and because the decrease in voice votes on difficult votes heightens partisan differences in voting records.

Other measures also suggest themselves. The problem of productive, yet largely neutral, Congresses still haunts this first measure. A slight difference in voting could be aggregated over many votes. An alternate measure is to count up the number of 'rolls' on major legislation for both the Democrats and Republicans. A 'roll' is when a majority of

the party opposes legislation that still passes.[4] Naturally, we would expect this to happen more often to the minority party, but it can also happen to the majority party. We could then subtract the number of times the Republicans got rolled (a liberal outcome) from the number of times Democrats got rolled, giving us the net rolls in a conservative direction. In practice, this measure is so similar to the first measure, as to not prove particularly useful (Pearson's r = .977).

Another problem that was earlier glossed over was the use of voice votes instead of floor votes. Those laws passed by voice vote are simply not counted by the voting alignment method. Naturally, this technique has been more common in the Senate, where it has happened more than twice as often on these pieces of major legislation than in the House. This difference is not as troubling, though, as the possibilities are real that voice votes are somehow associated with legislation that is somehow different (as we have every reason to believe it to be) or over time (which they are; of the 64 voice votes in on Mayhew's laws, only 7 of them happened over the last third of the period being studied). An attempt to bypass this is to take the average voting alignment on the other pieces of major legislation considered in that Congress and multiply it by the volume of major legislation that 'should' have had votes. This, of course, makes the worst kind of inference: that the voting alignment on a voice vote would have been identical to those on other pieces of legislation, a very questionable assumption. With a suspicious mind, therefore, consider Figure 2, which presents this variable, termed *Average Index*.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

[4] Rolls are traditionally defined as any time a majority of a given party is on the losing side of any vote, including when the majority party is defeated in an attempt to pass a bill. However, as Mayhew's major laws constitute a sample of bills that *all* passed, we are only looking at parties that were on the losing side in opposing a bill.

Problems with the method that created this variable aside, the outlier of the 103rd Congress now appears to be at a much more reasonable level. According to this measure, the most liberal Congress was the 89th, followed by a large number of reasonably similar Congresses. Eisenhower's first Congress (the first unified Republican government in 22 years) now scores as the most conservative Congress, followed closely by the famous 80th Congress and Reagan's first Congress. The theoretical justification for this measure may be weak, but, empirically, it fits quite nicely with the conventional wisdom on Congress.

In practice, these different yield fairly similar results. Table 1 presents the correlation coefficients between these measures and EMS' measure, *Laws*. The two indices produce quite similar measures. EMS' measure differs slightly from both of these measures (and is measured in the opposite direction). However, on the whole, it seems as if these three measures are tapping into the same concept.

Table 1: Correlations Between Measures of Legislative Ideology

	Sum Index	*Average Index*
Laws	-.624	-.607
Sum Index		.911

Note: All correlations significant at p <.01. N = 21 for *Laws*, 24 for the indices.

Consequences of Producing Ideological Legislation

What are the opinion consequences of the production of major legislation that takes public policy decidedly in one direction or another?[5] First, we would have to ask ourselves about the meaning of 'ideology' to individuals. The dominant picture is that

[5] It should be noted that the hypotheses put forward in this section are not fully fleshed out yet. Any suggestions on enriching these notions into theories would be appreciated.

most individual people either lack the cognitive abilities, tools, or simple desire to understand politics and public policy with anything approaching an internally consistent belief structure. The median member of the body politic doesn't really understand what it means to be "liberal" or "conservative." This is what most prior studies have concluded (cf. Campbell et al. 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954).

This paper will not challenge the basic precepts of this prior work. However, one of the arguments here is that, as public policy moves to one or the other direction in a greater degree, "liberal versus conservative" begins to take on meaning. Put another way, in a political environment barren of ideological content, an individual person has little contact with ideology and doesn't develop much of a sense as to what ideology means. However, in a political environment where public policy has moved greatly, we might expect the average person to become informed about what it means to be liberal or conservative. There is something to react to.[6]

Hypothesis 1: The more public policy changes in an ideological direction, the more people will take on less moderate (liberal or conservative) identities.

Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) make the argument that public opinion responds dynamically to public policy. In a similar vein to Wlezien's thermostatic model (Wlezien 1995, 1996), as public policy becomes more liberal, people's desire for more liberal legislation has been sated. The opposite holds for more conservative legislation.

[6] It could also be going too far to claim that nobody who claims to be liberal or conservative doesn't, in fact, hold those opinions and a reasonably consistent belief structure. In fact, the claims have not been that nobody is capable of making ideological distinctions and decisions, but that lamentably few are capable (or, at a minimum, do so). If this were the case, we might expect that greater ideological activity in the realm of public policy would activate the sleeping ideology in people. It's not that people are incapable of making ideological distinctions, but people do not make such distinctions in an environment otherwise free of them. As the importance of ideology in making public policy goes up, so should the effect of ideology on other opinions. This is a reasonable hypothesis, but one which will not be tested here.

Thus, the ideological direction of legislation should, in the aggregate, push people in the opposite direction.

Hypothesis 2: The more public policy changes in an ideological direction, the more individuals' ideologies should move in the opposite direction.

Aggregate Data

The first tests of these nascent theories come in looking at the aggregate data. Does public opinion move in any systematic fashion with respect to the ideological direction of public policy? We will investigate this question first with some simple descriptive statistics and correlations. As a weak test of *Hypothesis 2*, we can examine how the means of certain opinion measures change with public policy changes. Table 2 presents correlations between our 3 measures of ideological direction of policy and a handful of measures of ideology and partisanship.

Table 2: Correlations Between Ideological Legislation and Average Opinions

	Laws	*Sum Index*	*Average Index*
Ideology	.189 (13)	-.076 (12)	-.294 (12)
Party ID	-.148 (22)	-.262 (22)	-.196 (22)
Difference in Party Thermometers	.055 (10)	.341 (9)	-.035 (9)
Party that would best handle 'most important problem'	-.253 (11)	.339 (10)	.489 (10)

Question wording can be found in the appendix. Number of valid cases in parentheses.

Table 2 presents fairly weak evidence in favor of any average opinion shifts. The two most promising effects seem partisan. Party ID (coded from –3 for Strong

Democrats to +3 for Strong Republicans, with Don't Know/Apolitical coded as 0s) seems to react against the tide of public policy: as more conservative laws are made, the public grows increasingly Democratic. However, the effect is exactly the opposite using the EMS measure, where increasingly liberal laws are associated with Democratic identification.[7] The second area of promise with mean opinions comes from the party that people think would best handle their 'most important problem.' Here, however, the opinion moves in tandem with the direction of the legislation. More liberal legislation is passed when people think the Democrats could best handle the most important problems.

What about our hypothesis that the increase in the salience of ideology to public policy increases the relevance of the concept for individuals? Mean shifts fail to capture this phenomenon; rather, if people increasingly take on ideological identities, the variance (and standard deviation) of ideology should increase (more scores located nearer to the ends of the scales versus the center of the scale). Table 3 presents the correlations between our measures of ideological direction and the yearly variance in opinions. Table 4 presents the same correlations with the standard deviations.

Table 3: Correlations Between Ideological Legislation and Opinion Variance

	Laws	*Sum Index*	*Average Index*
Ideology	.165	-.725	-.559
Party ID	-.161	.077	.244
Difference in Party Thermometers	.090	.318	-.071
Party that would best handle 'most important problem'	-.253	.339	.489

Question wording and number of cases identical to Table 2.

[7] Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002) present a much more nuanced approach than this on these questions. Interested readers should consult their work.

At first blush, it might seem fallacious to use the indices (which attempt to capture both magnitude *and* direction of legislative ideology) to predict increased variance in ideology. After all, our hypothesis was that increased consideration of ideological legislation would increase the salience of ideology to people. Our measure (theoretically) runs from the production of a great deal of conservative legislation, to a small amount, to neutral, to a small amount of liberal legislation. However, in practice, we have not seen any highly productive conservative Congresses in the period under study (1953-1994, for the indices). Thus, for all intents and purposes, Congress has produced varying amounts of liberal legislation. Figures 1 and 2 tell us as much. Furthermore, the correlations in Table 3 are relatively similar if we use only the absolute value of the indices above.[8]

There seems to be some support for *Hypothesis 1* here. As Congress produced more ideological laws (recall that the index is scaled with conservative laws being positive and the liberal laws, which constitute the vast majority of them, being negative), there is an increase in the variance of ideology in the public. Naturally, there is problem of causal direction here (perhaps a polarized public quickly produces a polarization in Congress). However, further evidence can be garnered by looking at the number of people who are willing to answer these questions. Table 4 presents correlation coefficients between the various indices and the number of people who respond that they "don't know" the answers to questions.

[8] In fact, the correlations are largely the same whether we use the absolute value of the *Sum Index* or if we create a new variable that uses that absolute value of the partisan difference on every one of the votes in question and sums those. These two alternate constructions (one being the sum of the net ideological alignments on legislation and the other the net of the sums of the alignments) are *very* highly correlated (r = .981), because legislation over this period has largely been Democratic legislation.

Table 4: Correlations Between Ideological Legislation and % Responding "Don't Know"

	Laws	*Sum Index*	*Average Index*	*Magnitude Index*
Ideology	-.267	.526	.324	-.432
Party ID	-.360	.357	.305	-.261
Party that would best handle 'most important problem'	.006	.522	.349	-.545
Congressional Approval	-.408 (9)	.511 (8)	.342 (8)	-.441 (8)

Question wording can be found in the appendix. Number of valid cases (where not similar to previous tables) in parentheses.

As ideology and partisanship played a larger role in crafting public policy, they also became more salient in public opinion. Table 3 shows that more people express more polarized opinions, and Table 4 shows that more people express opinions at all. In fact, the findings for people being able to pick any ideology (or party ID, etc.) further bolster the findings of polarization. The natural 'entry point' for people who are now willing to answer these questions is in the center—where the mean is. As these people 'enter' the population of responses, they should, in fact, act to *lower* the variance in ideology, as their differences in scores from the mean are quite small. However, the reverse happens: the variance increases. We shouldn't make too much of this finding based on simple correlations, but it indicates that *Hypotheses 1* and *2* are worth further investigation.

Individual-Level Data

The aggregate summaries are instructive, but we are more interested in the micro-level effects. Unfortunately, such an analysis is quite difficult to carry out. The biggest problem is that our theories predict change in opinions (or their import), while most of the available data consist only of snapshots. This project only utilizes these snapshots; future work will attempt to make use of available panel data. Panel data would further help us sort out problems of causal direction. Given that our measures are susceptible to an increase in polarization in voting in Congress, this is a real concern. Unfortunately, it is a concern that we will simply live with in this preliminary work.

Another problem bedeviling this work is that we are interested in the micro-level effects of a macro-level phenomenon. Unfortunately, standard statistical techniques were not designed with this problem in mind. Therefore, hierarchical statistical techniques, alternatively known as 'multilevel modeling', have been developed with this 'nested' (in the sense that some of our units exist within other units) data structure in mind. Why are normal techniques not appropriate? The simple answer is that the estimators of conventional statistical approaches are inefficient; the standard errors estimated for them will be biased. In this case, standard techniques are *much* more prone to this problem. Using NES data gives us a very large number of valid individual cases (34,714). However, for our aggregate level-variables, we have only 22 cases at most. The problem has two facets. First of all, our estimates of the standard errors will be off, as the denominator will contain an artificially high number (making our standard errors too small). Secondly, the distribution of the T-statistic with 15 degrees of freedom is far

different than the T-distribution with thirty thousand degrees of freedom. Through no fault of its own, a conventional statistics package will report a *p* value associated with a curve that is essentially normal, when we cannot assume such a curve. The models presented in this paper are two-level regressions computed with the HLM5 software package.

As a demonstration of these problems, consider the fixed-effects least squares model presented in the first columns Table 5. The Bayesian approach utilized here starts with this as the first set of priors. The model presented here predicts the intensity of a person's ideology (measured as the distance from 'moderate', with "don't knows" assigned 0) as a function of a number of demographic characteristics, as well as a function of the *Average Index*, which has also been interacted with both education and the strength of a person's partisanship (again measured as distance from the center score of 'independent'). Note that, with our 24578 degrees of freedom, many variables are significant. In particular, the aggregate effect of the ideological direction of the laws as well as its interaction with the strength of partisanship, are both significant. However, the results from the multilevel estimates presented in the second set of columns shows that the interactive effect was not real, whereas the aggregate effect is.

If we had only the GLS estimates, we would have concluded that the effect of strength of partisanship on strength of ideology varied with the production of ideological legislation. In the more ideologically productive Congresses, an increase of 20% in the effect of partisanship would have been estimated (recall that most major legislation has been liberal, or negative on this scale). However, a more appropriate estimation technique indicates that this is likely not the case. From here on, the analyses will only

Table 5: GLS and HLM Estimates of Strength of Ideology

	GLS Estimates		*HLM Estimates*	
	Coefficient	T	Coefficient	T
Constant	0.708543	127.658	0.706196	54.588
Average Index	-0.00799	-4.084	-0.01281	-3.372
Age	-0.00043	-1.309	-0.00042	-0.925
Gender	0.162876	14.752	0.164933	10.983
Urbanity	-0.04121	-5.634	-0.03968	-4.379
Income	0.010473	1.767	0.012305	1.811
Education	0.107332	29.562	0.108169	20.004
Education * *Average Index*	-0.00134	-1.215	-0.00014	-0.095
Married	0.001518	0.124	-0.00231	-0.135
Union Membership	-0.06029	-4.45	-0.06054	-2.8
Jewish	0.074265	1.733	0.052699	0.839
Black	-0.08645	-4.806	-0.07391	-1.835
Asian	-0.15013	-2.547	-0.13651	-2.059
Native American	0.006086	0.171	0.003356	0.084
Hispanic	-0.10139	-3.589	-0.07373	-1.802
Unemployed	-0.00812	-0.402	-0.0049	-0.214
Strength of PID	0.125059	22.539	0.124465	9.857
Strength of PID * *Average Index*	-0.00492	-2.535	-0.00149	-0.604

Note: for purposes of showing how GLS estimates are inefficient, but unbiased, coefficients have been shown as reported, to up to 7 places.

rely on these hierarchical models. Rather than report the individual level coefficients from what are, essentially, very similar models, we shall focus on the coefficients of interest in the following discussion.

Ideology Salience

The first set of models examines the consequences for the strength of ideology of passing more ideological legislation. The relevant coefficients are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Ideological Legislation and Strength of Ideology

	Measure			
	Laws	*Sum Index*	*Average Index*	*Sum of Absolute Values*
Main effect	.008 (.044)	-.011 (.005)	-.012 (.008)	.008 (.059)
Education Interaction	.001 (.633)	-.001 (.464)	-.002 (.927)	.001 (.317)
Strength of PID Interaction	.002 (.368)	-.004 (.121)	-.001 (.559)	.004 (.080)

p values in parentheses

These results lend credence to *Hypothesis 1*. As Congress passed more liberal legislation, people became more polarized in their ideologies. The effect is fairly small, though: the most ideological Congresses are associated with people being, on average, 10% more ideological than for the least ideological Congresses. Put another way, only 4-6% of the possible range of ideological intensity scores is covered by the range of these variables. This accounts for roughly 20% of the standard deviation in ideological intensity scores, though. Ideological intensity doesn't vary a great deal, so these effects, though small, should be seen as potentially significant.

Ideological Leanings

If the thermostat model of Wlezien (1995, 1996)—adapted by Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson (2002)—is correct, the more liberal legislation is passed, the more conservative public opinion on a number of public policy issues should be. It should be noted here that Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson specifically restrict their model to aggregate level effects instead of individual effects. However, for there to be aggregate

level effects, individuals must change their opinions. At this stage, this research doesn't have opinion change data, but we can examine the different samples of people in the NES to see if such effects seem likely.

As a first cut at such an effect, it seems reasonable to ask whether average responses to the basic question of ideology react to ideological legislation being passed. Whereas previously we had asked if people gained ideology or became more polarized ideologically, here we are simply asking if there is any net shift in ideology. We are only going to consider the relevant coefficients from a multilevel model that includes a number of individual level controls,[9] and has added a control for the state of the economy, coded to reflect good economies for Republican presidents positively, and good economies for Democratic presidents negatively. Table 7 presents these results for the various measures.

Table 7: Ideological Legislation and Ideological Leanings

	Measure		
	Laws	*Sum Index*	*Average Index*
Main effect	0 (1.000)	-.005 (.401)	-.003 (.635)
Education Interaction	-.003 (.192)	.001 (.800)	-.003 (.140)
Party ID Interaction	.001 (.839)	-.006 (.021)	-.002 (.440)
Trust in Gov't Interaction	-.0002 (.086)	0 (.872)	0 (.424)

By and large, these results cast doubt on the supposed effect of ideological legislation on the average ideology of individuals. The only statistically significant effect is not robust across measures and, even if it were real, would simply say that as Congress

[9] The notable changes are that partisanship is now in the model as a normal scale, opposed to being folded at moderate, and that trust in government has been added as a predictor.

produces more ideological legislation, partisanship better predicts ideology. This is a troubling finding, given how our measures are constructed on partisan (not the same as ideological) voting alignments, and the one measure that picks this up is likely the most subject to pick up some kind of partisan baggage. In sum, there is no evidence in these data to support the notion that increasingly ideological laws produce an ideological counteraction in the public. Rather, the null effects seem to further support the notion that ideological legislation simply makes ideology a more important factor for individuals, not that it changes beliefs.

Discussion and Future Research[10]

The simple statistics and more complicated models in here point in similar directions. Despite evidence that public desires for more liberal or conservative legislation respond to the recent provision of ideological legislation, it is difficult to discern an effect on individuals. This is not to say that the phenomenon is not real; many macro-level phenomena are difficult to observe in micro-level data. However, it does call into question causal mechanisms.

If one takes the perspective of the so-called Michigan school of thought on voter behavior, the findings here are actually not all that strange. Few people organize the political world using the same concepts as political scientists.[11] However, few scholars have considered how the political environment itself may vary in how important it signals

[10] I omit a 'Conclusion' section for the simple reason that I am unwilling to make conclusions at this stage in the research project. What I have presented here is a starting point for further investigations.

[11] This is not surprising; after all, very few people decide to get PhDs in political science. The ones that do likely approach politics differently.

various ways of thinking about the world. For instance, as more people claimed to be independents in the 1970s, perhaps we should have been thinking about how party, viewed nationally, was ebbing in its predictive power for understanding elite politics. As partisanship has regained prominence in Congressional politics, so too has the number of people 'picking a side.' The question remains, however, what the true causal order is here. The conventional wisdom has assumed that individual beliefs have affected elites, but the opposite is also quite possible. Both the individual and the environment could be both cause and effect.

The investigation here is far from complete. Future work will utilize panel data to better get at who changes their opinions and why. Better modeling techniques than simple correlations and even the more complex hierarchical models will be employed, for there is likely a time-series component that has been left uninvestigated. Perhaps most important for this work, however, is both a better theoretical justification for the hypotheses offered and more thorough investigation of the correct measures of the phenomenon of ideological direction of public policy. This has been a first cut at this issue, and we can do much better than what has been done here.

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Figure 1 Sum Index by Year

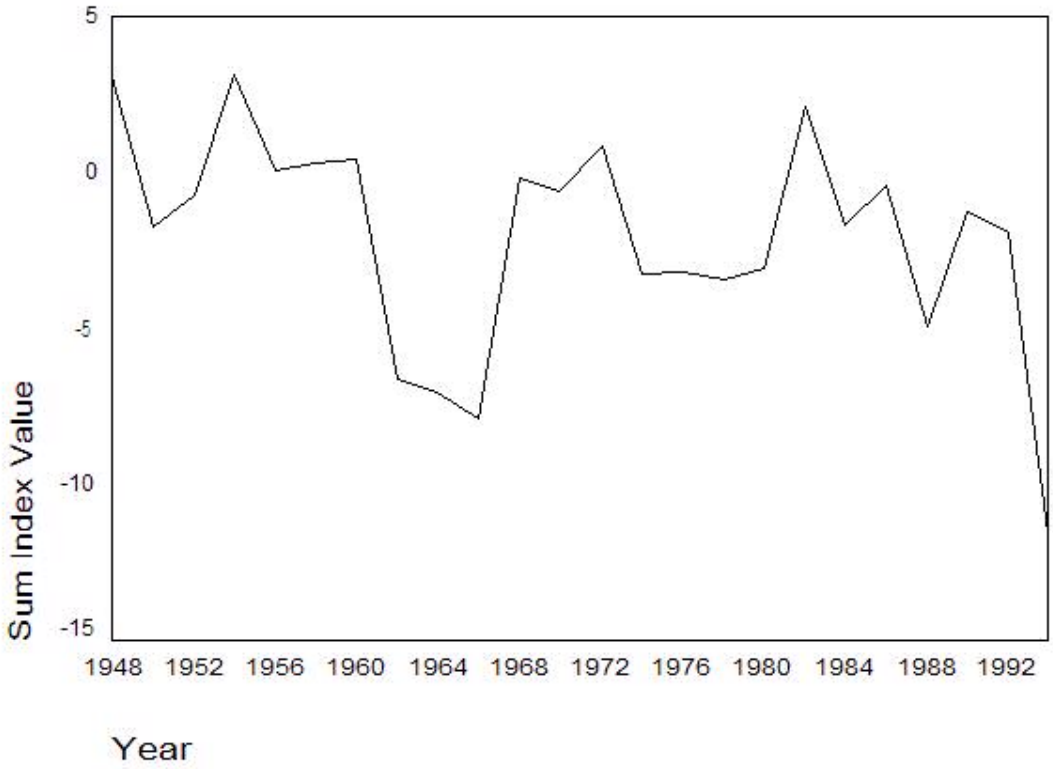

Figure 2 Average Index by Year