

Public Opinion Toward Intergovernmental Policy Responsibilities

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This study examines public opinion toward the policy responsibilities of the national, state, and local governments. We use new data from a national survey to analyze citizens' attitudes toward the general and policy-specific activities of the respective governmental levels. We find that people want all levels of government to do more. But, they also differentiate among national, state, and local responsibilities for particular policy areas. In fact, public opinion corresponds quite closely to actual policy efforts manifested at different governmental levels. Moreover, citizens' preferences for specific programmatic activities are guided by a combination of general beliefs about governmental responsibilities and assessments of economic capacities. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications for understanding the American intergovernmental system.

Public input is an essential component of policymaking in a democratic political system (Dahl 1956; Schattschneider 1960). Citizen preferences should be a major influence on governmental allocations of resources and benefits within society. In order for this process to work successfully, people must know what they want the government to do and be able to communicate their preferences to the appropriate public officials (Putnam 1993). Indeed, the viability of a democratic system depends upon the effective translation of the public will into governmental decisions (Dahl 1989).

Yet, the connection between public opinion and public policy has always been somewhat tenuous in the American political context. A host of questions have been raised about every aspect of this process (e.g., Erikson, McKuen, and Stimson 2002). Are American citizens interested in, and informed about, governmental activity (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996)? Do they have clear preferences about what they want government to do (Alvarez and Brehm 2002)? Do they know which governmental units are best able to represent their interests (Shaw and Reinhart 2001)?

The American federal system was designed to facilitate citizen input into governmental policymaking (Downs 1999). Dividing responsibilities across different

levels of government gives citizens more opportunity to influence the decision-making process. But, the complexities of American federalism may well prevent the general public from fulfilling the role that is assigned to it on the basis of normative considerations (Arceneaux 2005, 2006).

In many circumstances, it can be extremely difficult to sort out the various policy functions of the national, state, and local governments. In some cases, it seems that no one is really in charge of making or implementing policy (Reischauer 1977). At other times, it appears that the “wrong” level of government is involved (Schneider 1995, 2008). These ambiguities exist for elites and knowledgeable observers of the political system (Wright 1988; Anton 1989; Conlan 1998). It is likely that the difficulties are even greater for the mass public, given the low levels of political sophistication and relatively fragmentary understandings of the policy process that are believed to exist therein (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Very little is known about public opinion regarding the policy responsibilities assigned to different levels of American government. But, this is an important topic for several reasons. First, and perhaps most generally, citizens’ beliefs and attitudes about governmental activity comprise a central element in their overall orientations toward the political system. Theories of public opinion have focused closely on feelings about the kinds of policy steps that need to be taken in order to ameliorate problems and inequities in American society (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). But, in most contemporary political issues, a large part of the disagreement centers on which level of government is responsible for addressing particular problems in the first place (O’Toole 2000). Thus, it is important to get a sense of the mass public’s preferences on this point in order to clarify their role in the ongoing interplay of citizens and government that characterizes a democratic political system.

Second, public interpretations about intergovernmental responsibilities can have serious political consequences. If citizens mistakenly attribute responsibility to a particular level of government which subsequently does not act in an effective manner, then criticisms of governmental responsiveness and effectiveness are likely to arise (Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Malhotra 2008). This situation may well be occurring in modern American politics. On the one hand, the United States is currently undergoing a shift in some policy responsibilities (e.g., in the areas of economic stimulation, health care, education, and disaster relief) away from state and local governmental units toward more centralization of power at the national level (Jansson and Smith 1996; Krane and Koenig 2005; Conlan and Dinan 2007; Ehrenhalt 2008; Dinan and Gamkhar 2009). On the other hand, many scholars still contend that public opinion favors subnational governments—especially the states—over the national government (e.g., Roeder 1994; Conlan 1998; Kincaid and Cole 2008). Such a “disconnect” between citizen beliefs and the development of public policy may contribute to more general feelings of citizen mistrust in, and

a decay of popular support for, the entire political system (Hetherington 1998; Malhotra and Kuo 2008).

So, how does the American public feel about governmental policy responsibilities? Do citizens believe that the national government should play a greater role in dealing with social problems? Or, do they think that most public policies are best handled by state and local governments? How well do national and subnational government activities reflect public preferences toward intergovernmental policy responsibilities? Do citizens possess coherent attitudes toward the various levels of government? How are general orientations about governmental activity and specific preferences about policy responsibilities related to each other? In order to address these questions, we examine how the mass public views the role of the national government vis-a-vis state and local governments in American policymaking.

Background

Previous research does not lead to any clear scholarly consensus about the nature and quality of public opinion toward governmental responsibilities. At a very broad level, several studies report that Americans maintain relatively negative orientations toward the national government and believe that the state governments are more capable of dealing with social problems and political issues (e.g., Blendon et al. 1997; Donahue 1997; Conlan 2000; Hetherington and Nugent 2001). But, other work suggests that citizens are reconciled to the necessity of a large and active national government (Bennett and Bennett 1990). Cantril and Cantril take a “middle ground” position when they state that “[i]t can be difficult...to conclude...that the public has strong views one way or the other regarding which level of government is appropriate for a broad area of public policy” (1999, p. 38).

The situation is even more confused when it comes to mass beliefs about specific policy activities. For example, Cantril and Cantril argue that “people make quite nuanced distinctions in assigning responsibilities among levels of government even *within* one area of public policy” (1999, p. 38). In the same vein, Thompson and Elling (1999) argue that Americans’ opinions are consistent with Grodzins’ (1983) conceptualization of “Marblecake Federalism.” In other words, there is a blurring of policy responsibilities wherein the public wants all three levels of government simultaneously involved in providing public services (Reeves 1987).

Other scholars suggest that the public typically prefers one level of government over the other for specific policy activities. For example, Roeder (1994) states “that the public believes state government...should have more responsibility for several domestic policy areas, and the national government should have less” (p. 104). However, public opinion also seems to shift over time, presumably in response to the broader political environment. Thus, Conlan reported in 1993 that Americans did not have much confidence in the ability of the federal government to handle

problems effectively, but that they still wanted “aggressive federal action on a broad range of issues” (1993, p. 5.). During the mid-1990s, however, Conlan reported that sizable majorities of Americans favored giving state governments (versus the federal government) “more control over virtually every area of domestic activity. . .” (1998, p. 229).

Still other research presents a quite positive view of the public’s ability to assign policy responsibilities across various levels of government in a reasoned manner. Reviewing survey data across the 1990s on the public’s confidence in government to carry out specific policies (such as welfare, job training, and health care), Shaw and Reinhart (2001) find that Americans are able to “distinguish among various types of policies and the most appropriate level of government in which to invest primary responsibility for these policies” (p. 377). Schneider and Jacoby (2003) arrive at a similar conclusion. Using data from a public opinion survey in South Carolina, they report that people have meaningful opinions about what they want the national government to do relative to the state governments. In the same vein, Arceneaux’s (2005) analysis of public opinion in three American cities demonstrates that citizens can attribute functional responsibilities to different levels of government in a coherent manner.

What accounts for the wide variability in findings and the apparent complexity of public opinion toward governmental policy responsibilities? There are several possible answers to this question. For one thing, different researchers have approached the topic in different ways. A number of scholars have focused on citizens’ responses to very broad questions asking whether the national (or state, or local) governments should be doing more or less than they currently are, without mentioning particular public programs or substantive policy areas. Other analysts have examined opinions about specific policy activities; should the national, state, or local governments take the largest share of the responsibility for such programs as welfare, education, reducing crime, and so on? Of course, both of these kinds of questions involve intergovernmental policy responsibilities at some level. However, research shows that public opinion can vary widely when an issue is framed in general or specific terms (Jacoby 2000; Stimson 2004; Lax and Phillips 2009). Therefore, it is not clear that these different lines of inquiry on governmental policy activity are really tapping the same kinds of psychological orientations on the part of the survey respondents.

It is also possible that some of the apparent complexity in public opinion about governmental activities may actually be manifestations of confusion and nonattitudes. There is a broad scholarly consensus that most citizens possess abysmally low levels of knowledge about the internal workings of the American political system, with little understanding of governmental structure and the policy process (e.g., Ferejohn 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). For example, a sizable segment of the public is unable to identify the names of key political leaders, and

people are often unclear about their respective roles and responsibilities (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). If this is the case with visible and seemingly well-known stimuli like public figures, then there easily could be similar difficulties with respect to more technical questions about the governmental institutions most capable of dealing with specific problems and issues. But, survey respondents do not like to display ignorance, so the result might be answers to survey questions which consist largely of random “noise” rather than crystallized opinions (Converse 1970; Zaller 1992).

In the analysis presented below, we try to address all of the preceding concerns. We begin at the macrolevel, by distinguishing between general orientations toward governmental activities and specific beliefs about which levels of government should be responsible for particular policy areas. We then examine the degree to which the distribution of public opinion about intergovernmental policy responsibilities conforms to political reality. Next, we move to the microlevel in order to assess the degree to which citizens’ specific policy beliefs are held together by a common psychological structure. Finally, we consider the relationship between general orientations about governmental activity and specific opinions about policy responsibilities. The results from our analysis provide a clear and coherent picture of citizen preferences regarding the policy activities of the national and subnational governments in the United States.

Data

Our analysis relies upon data drawn from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), an Internet survey carried out by Polimetrix, Inc. The component used here involves a national sample of 1,000 American adults.¹ For present purposes, the most important feature of the CCES is that it included questions on both general and policy-specific governmental responsibilities.

Three items from the CCES survey instrument measure general feelings about governmental activity at the national, state, and local levels, respectively. In other words, they ask respondents whether each level of government should do more or less, without mentioning specific policies. During the course of the survey, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

Local governments should take on more responsibility for the problems and issues that arise within their borders.

State governments should take on more responsibility for the problems and issues that arise within their borders.

The national government should do more to try to solve pressing problems in American society.

Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly.”

The CCES survey also included a battery of items that tapped respondents’ preferences regarding specific policy areas. For each of nineteen policies, respondents were asked the following question:

Do you think the national government, the state governments, or the local governments should take the lead in trying to ____?

The nineteen policy areas cover a wide range of substantive activities which are listed in figure 2. So, for each of these policy areas, we have data on respondents’ opinions about which level of government is most appropriate to deal with problems that arise in that area.

The Distribution of Public Opinion on Policy Responsibilities

Let us begin by considering a simple, but important, question: How does the public feel about intergovernmental policy responsibilities? Our survey questions should give us unprecedented detail regarding the distribution of citizens’ beliefs about policy activity at different levels of government.

Figure 1A–C illustrate the distributions of responses for the items measuring citizens’ general feelings about the policy responsibilities of the local, state, and national, governments. There is a clear, common, feature across all three panels of the figure: Each histogram shows a distribution that is fairly heavily skewed toward the left. Given the coding of the items, this means that citizens want *all* levels of government to take on more responsibility. Public opinion seems to be particularly clear-cut with respect to the local and state governments: In figure 1A, just under three-fourths of the respondents (71.6 percent) fall into the two right-most categories, indicating some level of agreement that the local governments should take on more responsibility. In figure 1B, more than four-fifths of the respondents (82.5 percent) maintain a similar orientation toward the state governments. These results are consistent with the literature which indicates that the public is relatively positive about the activities of the subnational governments (Shaw and Reinhart 2001; Kincaid and Cole 2001, 2005; Cole and Kincaid 2006). But, figure 1C shows that it would hardly be accurate to say that the public is hostile toward the national government. Instead, 63.9 percent agree that the federal government should do more. At least when thinking about the problem in broad terms, Americans clearly want more active government—at all levels—than they currently have.

Figure 2 provides a graphical display that summarizes responses on the nineteen questions about governmental responsibilities in specific policy areas. Each panel in the figure shows a bar chart for a single policy area. The height of the left-most bar represents the percentage of respondents who want that the national government

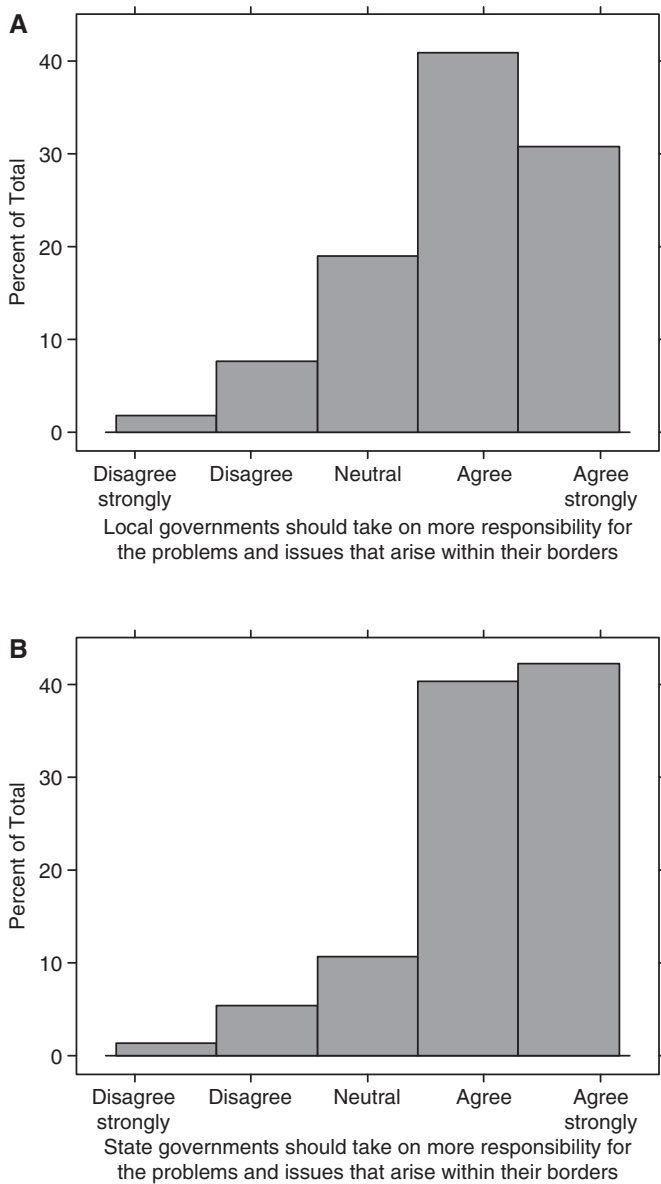


Figure 1 Distribution of opinion about general policy responsibilities at different levels of government. (A) Local governments; (B) State governments; (C) National governments. *Source:* 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Number of observations used to create each figure is 797.

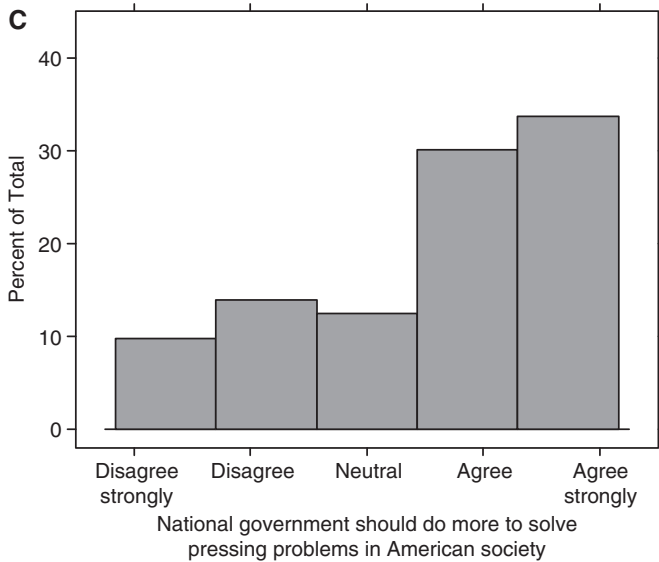


Figure 1 continued.

should take the lead in that policy area. The height of the middle bar shows the percentage who prefer that the states take a leading role. And, the height of the rightmost bar corresponds to the percentage who believe that local governments should take the lead.

The figure shows that there is wide variability in public preferences across the different policies. The national government is the modal category for eleven of the nineteen policy areas. For certain issues, such as regulating immigration, providing health care to all Americans, and guaranteeing equal opportunity for women, there is clear majority sentiment that the federal government should take the lead. In other areas, such as controlling illegal drugs and regulating firearms, there is almost as much popular support for the state governments as there is for the national government. Nevertheless, there are still pluralities favoring the latter over the former.

Figure 2 also shows that there are several policy areas where citizens want the states to take the lead. This is particularly clear-cut with maintaining public works (i.e., roads, bridges, and dams), providing education, and promoting economic development. In two other areas, helping the poor and reducing unemployment, support for the states barely exceeds support for the national government. And, for public transportation, a majority of the respondents favor state action, but they are counterbalanced by a sizable minority which supports the local governments.

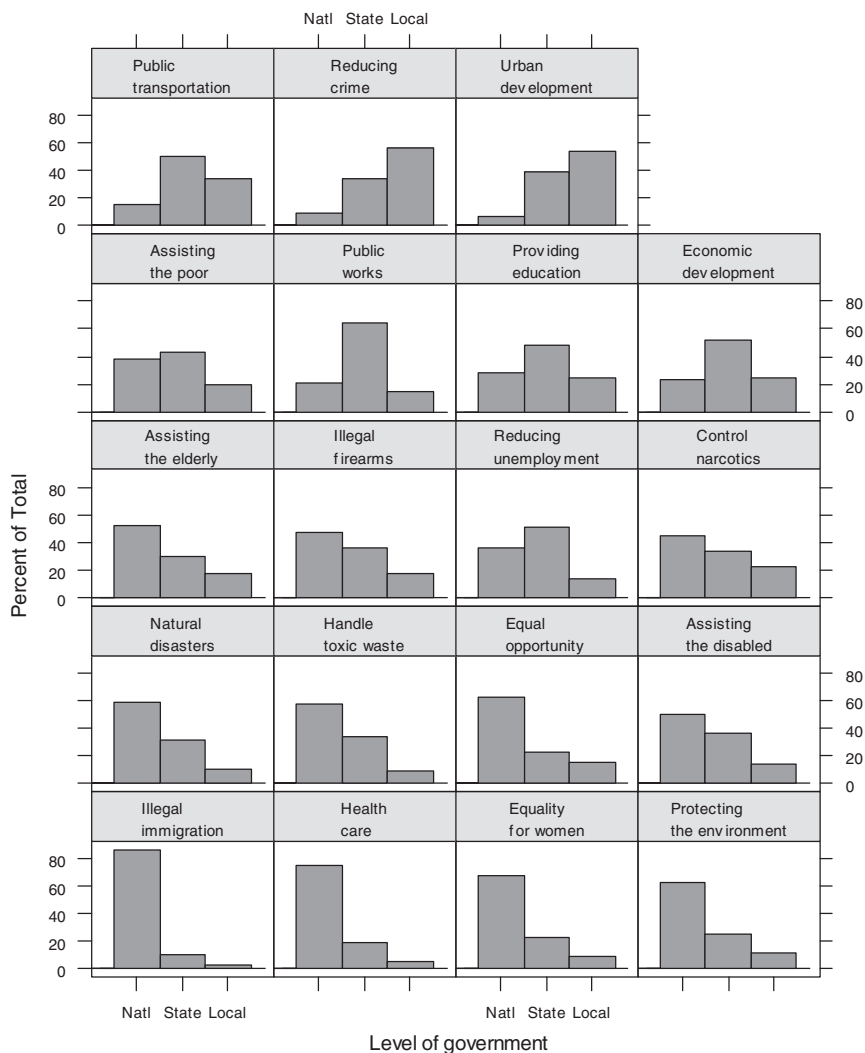


Figure 2 Distribution of opinion about which level of government should take the lead in dealing with each of nineteen public policy areas. *Source:* 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Number of observations in each histogram ranges from 945 to 994.

Finally, there are only two areas (reducing crime and promoting urban development), for which the modal position is that local governments should take the lead. Overall, the results in figure 2 provide no support for the idea that Americans prefer the “closer” local and state governments over the more distant national government. Instead, these findings demonstrate that the public differentiates among substantively distinct policy areas. This is consistent with

the findings reported by others (Roeder 1994; Schneider and Jacoby 2003). And, this heterogeneity in citizen preferences matches the variegated responsibilities of the three levels of government in the contemporary American political system (Nathan 1993; Nice 1998; Weber and Brace 1999; Van Horn 2006).

Are Citizen Preferences Consistent with Policy Reality?

As we explained earlier, citizens' preferences about policy responsibilities have political consequences. The degree of correspondence between public opinion and governmental activity is a central indicator of the quality of representation in a democratic political system. At the same time, the correspondence between opinion and policy affects the way the public feels about government in general. Therefore, it is important to determine how closely public attitudes toward policy responsibilities coincide with governmental efforts.

Our data provide us with measures of public opinion. But, indicators of policy activity are more problematic. No single variable provides a completely satisfactory measure of governmental efforts. But, as a rough gauge of governmental activity we will rely upon program expenditures. These are widely recognized as tangible outputs of governmental decisions even if they do not provide a complete account of all activity within a given policy area (Garand and Hendrick 1991; Ringquist and Garand 1999; Jacoby and Schneider 2001, 2009).

Accordingly, we take the amount of spending for fiscal year 2006 in each policy area by each level of government. These expenditures are expressed as percentages of the total 2006 spending in the respective areas by the national, state, and local governments, combined. In other words, the spending figures for the national, state, and local governments sum to 100 within each policy area.² Note that spending figures are only available for nine of the policy areas—crime, economic development, education, the elderly, the environment, health care, the poor, transportation, and unemployment.³ But, this should still provide sufficient information to discern any general patterns in the connection between public opinion and program spending.

There is a clear, positive—indeed, nearly linear—relationship between the percentage of respondents who said the national government should take the lead in each of the nine policy areas and the percentage of total government spending in each policy area that is contributed by the national government. The correlation between these two variables is 0.83. Public preferences about the national government's role in specific areas are mirrored very closely by the national government's actual commitment in each of those areas.

There are also positive relationships between public opinion about state and local policy responsibilities and state and local percentages of total spending on the other. However, the patterns are not as clearly linear as it is at the national level.

The correlations between opinion and spending are only 0.42 for the states and 0.51 for the local governments.

There appears to be some “slippage” between public support for state and local activity and the sizes of the relative policy expenditures exhibited at those governmental levels. However, closer inspection of the data reveals that the attenuated correlations are due to unusually wide divergence between opinion and policy in just two policy areas. At the state level, the public wants much more spending on economic development than currently exists. When this policy area is dropped, the correlation between opinions about state policy spending and relative expenditures by the states jumps up to 0.74. Similarly, the public prefers far lower local spending on economic development and education than actually exists. When these two policy areas are dropped, the correlation between opinion about local responsibilities and relative spending by local governments in the remaining seven policy areas increases sharply to 0.88.

Scatter plots showing the percentages of respondents saying federal, state, and local governments should take the lead versus state and local percentages of total spending are available in the [Supplementary Data](#) at *Publius* online.

In summary, citizen preferences for national policy responsibilities are mirrored quite closely in the federal government’s spending levels on the respective policy areas. Of course, it is interesting to consider why this relationship exists. On the one hand, popular preferences may be helping to determine levels of policy spending by the national government. On the other hand, citizens’ expressed opinions about policy responsibilities may be rationalizations of what the national government is already doing. Unfortunately, the available data do not provide sufficient information to disentangle the causal relationship between public opinion and national spending. But, the latter depiction seems unrealistic, given the low levels of information that exist within the mass public (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Instead, we believe the correlation between public opinion and national expenditure patterns exists because the government really does respond to expressions of citizen preferences (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Stimson 2004).

In contrast, when we look at the spending patterns of state and local governments, the distributions of public preferences do not conform as closely to the relative contributions provided by these two subnational levels. This may be due to the fact that subnational governments are less salient to the public than the federal government because they do not receive the same degree of media attention or publicity (Iyengar 1991). Furthermore, the division of responsibilities between states and local units is extremely complex (Nice 1998; Weber and Brace 1999). So, the public may just have difficulty thinking about the dividing line between the two. Regardless, even though the relationships for state and local governments are somewhat attenuated, they are still quite clear and positive in form. Therefore, our

general conclusion is that public opinion about specific policy responsibilities is consistent with actual governmental activity at all three levels.

Structure and Coherence in Citizens' Beliefs

In the aggregate, public opinion about policy responsibilities shows clear differentiations that closely reflect the actual policy activities within the U.S. federal system. However, it is unclear whether these same distinctions hold at the microlevel. Therefore, we need to determine whether individual citizens display coherent structure in their beliefs about governmental responsibilities *across* different policy areas.

For the remainder of the analysis, we will focus on the dichotomous distinction between the national government on the one hand, and the subnational governments on the other hand. That is, we will combine the responses indicating that the state or local governments should take the lead on a given policy area into a single category. We do this for four reasons. First, as we have already seen, people seem to have some difficulty differentiating between state and local responsibilities. In contrast, the distinctions between the two subnational levels and the national level are coherent and clear. Second, the long, contentious history of American federalism has often emphasized the competition between the state and national governments (Whittington 1996; Robertson 2005; Purcell 2007; also see Beer 1993, and Feeley and Rubin 2008 for overviews). Third, modern political rhetoric often focuses on the distinctions between these two levels of governments (Gingrich 1995; Campbell 1997; Harris 1997). Fourth, it is simply easier to characterize public attitudes along a bipolar continuum (i.e., between national and subnational governments) than as choices among three interrelated alternatives. Thus, there are theoretical, political, and practical reasons for limiting our attention to the dichotomous distinction between national governments on the one hand and state/local governments on the other.

The question of structure across the policy-specific responses is a particularly important component of our analysis. Figure 2 revealed that there is wide variability in public beliefs about which levels of government should be responsible for particular policy areas. But, are the differences across the policy areas substantively meaningful? Do they actually reflect a real psychological orientation that citizens maintain for themselves about specific types of governmental activity? Or, are we merely tapping nonattitudes, in which case the differences across policy areas would be largely “noise” reflecting measurement error?

To test for the presence of underlying structure in these survey responses, we will fit a nonparametric item response theory (IRT) model to the data on program-specific beliefs, using an approach called Mokken scaling (Mokken and Lewis 1982). This strategy hypothesizes the existence of an underlying dimension

which presumably ranges from maximal support for national policy activity at one extreme to maximal support for policy action by the subnational governments at the other extreme. Individuals are located at higher positions along this dimension according to the degree to which they believe that specific policies should be handled by subnational governments, rather than the national government.

The IRT approach is particularly well-suited for the current analysis because it explicitly allows for systematic variation across the policy areas, as well as across the respondents (Sijtsma and Molenaar 2002). In other words, there is a specific sequence of policies that is encountered while moving from one end of the scale to the other. The underlying scaling model hypothesizes that certain policy areas are more likely to be associated with the national government, while others are more likely to be assigned to the subnational units, regardless of individual preferences for policy activity at one governmental level rather than the other.

While there are alternative scaling models that could be applied to the data on policy-specific preferences, we believe that they are less suitable from the perspective of substantive theory. For example, summated-rating scales differentiate between respondents, but not items (e.g., McIver and Carmines 1981; Jacoby 1991). Therefore, such an approach could not incorporate systematic variability in the degree to which policy areas are associated with the national or subnational governments. At the same time, factor analysis and similar techniques, such as principal component analysis or structural equation modeling, are based upon mutual covariation among a set of items. But, we hypothesize that systematic differences exist across policies. And if that is the case, correlation coefficients (i.e., standardized measures of covariance) are inappropriate for representing common structure across the items (Weisberg 1974; Jacoby and Schneider 2009). Thus, the nonparametric IRT approach is used here because it conforms to substantive theoretical expectations.

The Mokken scaling procedure is “nonparametric” in the sense that it does not require a precise specification of the function relating the underlying dimension to the observed item responses (Sijtsma and Molenaar 2002). Therefore, it is particularly appropriate for constructing attitudinal measures from public opinion survey data (Van Schuur 2003). The scaling technique tests for the existence of cumulative or “Guttman” patterns within each individual’s responses to the full set of policy-specific items. If a set of items is mutually scalable, it enables very precise interpretations of individual scale scores in terms of specific policy areas. A more complete discussion of the IRT model and Mokken scaling is provided in an [Supplementary Appendix](#).

Applying the Mokken scaling procedure to our data, the results indicate that thirteen of the policy-specific items are mutually scalable.⁴ Figure 3 shows the ordering of the items on the dimension along with a histogram of the scale scores assigned to the CCES respondents. The relative positions of the scaled policy areas

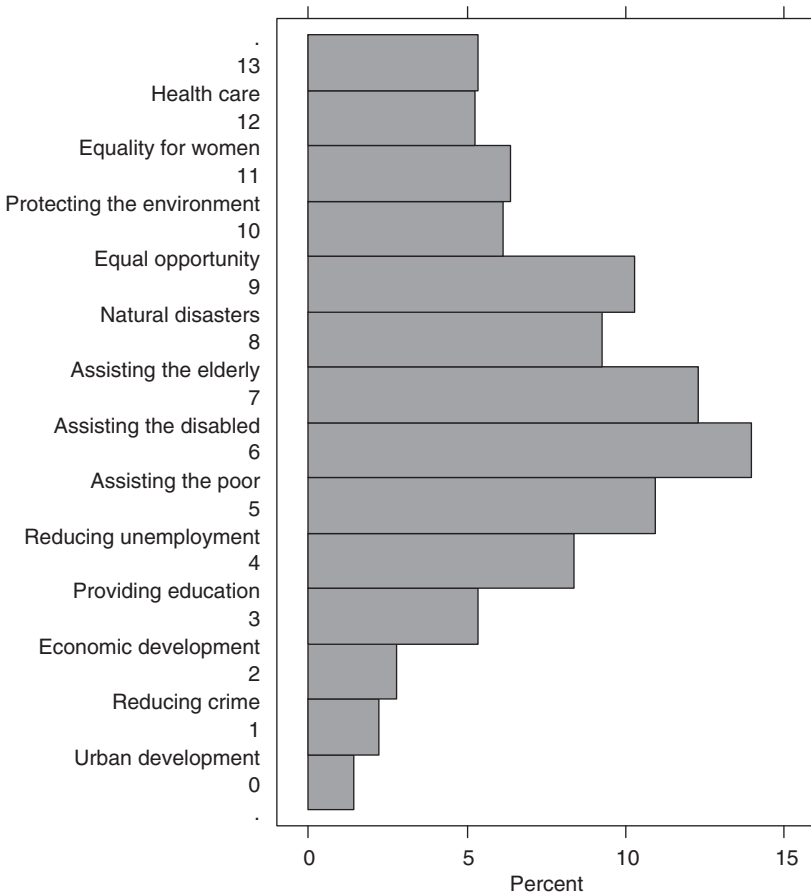


Figure 3 Mokken scale of public opinion about national versus state/local government responsibilities for specific policy areas. *Note:* For each survey respondent the Mokken scale scores indicate the number of policy areas in which that individual believes the state or local governments should “take the lead” rather than the national government. A person at any given scale score believes the state or local governments should take the lead in all policy areas that fall below that scale score along the vertical axis and the national government should take the lead in all policy areas that fall above that scale score. Data source is the 2006 Comparative Congressional Election Survey, and the number of observations used to construct the scale is 896.

reflect the degree of popular support for subnational action in each domain. The lower the position of the policy area, the greater extent to which the public believes it should be handled by the state and local governments.

For example, urban development, reducing crime, and economic development fall at the lower end of the scale. This means that an individual would not have to

be a strong supporter of subnational responsibility in order to want state or local governments to take action in each of these three areas. At the other extreme, health care and women's issues fall at the two highest positions on the scale. This implies that only those individuals who are extremely supportive of subnational action would believe that the state or local governments should take the lead in these areas.

The ordering of the policy areas along the scale is very reasonable in substantive terms. The items near the lower end of the scale consist of issue areas that have traditionally been associated with subnational governments, such as education and crime prevention. In contrast, the policies at the upper end of the scale represent rights of national citizenship (women's issues, equal opportunity), problems that are too large for subnational governments (environmental protection), or matters of salient national debate (health care). The policies that appear within the middle region of the scale represent either areas of controversy about which level of government should be responsible (special needs populations and the poor) or areas in which local, state, and national governments have worked together to distribute services to certain populations (disaster relief and helping the elderly). Thus, the content suggests that the underlying dimension is meaningful in terms of the substantive differences across the respective policy areas.

The scale scores are also directly interpretable in terms of each individual's responses to the separate items. If a person has a particular scale score, then he/she believes that subnational governments should take the lead in all policy areas which fall below that score and that the national government should take the lead in all policy areas above the scale score. For example, say an individual has a scale score of 4. Referring to the positions of the items relative to this score in figure 3, we see that this hypothetical individual would support state/local action in education, economic development, reducing crime, and urban development (i.e., in all policy areas that fall below the scale score of 4 on the vertical axis in the figure). The same person would also say that the federal government should take the lead for the remaining nine policy areas (helping the poor, people with special needs, and so on, up to women's issues and health care).

The histogram in figure 3 shows that the distribution of policy-specific beliefs is unimodal and nearly symmetric with a slightly heavier upper tail. Relatively, few people say that state/local governments should be responsible for most policy areas. And even fewer believe that the national government should have pervasive responsibilities. The concentration of respondents in the central region of the scale shows that most people prefer a mixture of federal responsibility in some areas and subnational action in others.

Other analysts have reached similar conclusions, suggesting that citizens support "marblecake federalism" (Reeves 1987; Thompson and Elling 1999). But, the Mokken scale reveals new detail about the composition of the public's mixed

preferences. From figure 3, we can see that the modal score is 6. According to the rule for interpreting Mokken scale scores, this means that individuals in this category prefer the state or local governments to handle assisting the poor, reducing unemployment, providing education, economic development, reducing crime, and urban development. In contrast, an individual with the modal score of 6 should prefer national action to assist the disabled and the elderly, deal with natural disasters, provide equal opportunity, protect the environment, guarantee equality for women, and provide health care. Thus, people differentiate systematically among the policies that they believe should be addressed at different levels of government.

The fact that the policy-specific items are mutually scalable constitutes strong empirical evidence that there is a meaningful unifying characteristic (presumably, a psychological trait such as an attitude) generating the systematic structure observed in the data. But, as mentioned earlier, the scale only incorporates thirteen of the nineteen specific policy areas. It excludes immigration, toxic waste, gun control, public works, drugs, and public transportation.⁵

The Linkage between General and Specific Policy Responsibilities

Earlier, we suggested that general feelings about governmental responsibilities and preferences for specific policy actions could be conceptually distinct phenomena. But, even if they are, we would certainly expect the two to be related to each other. Therefore, it is important to determine whether this is the case. And, if general and specific preferences are related, it is also important to evaluate the likely nature of any *causal* linkage between them.

General beliefs about government responsibilities are measured by combining the three survey items discussed earlier. First we take the mean of each respondent's scores on the questions about state and local government responsibilities. Then, we take the difference between that mean score and the respondent's score on the question about the national government taking on more responsibility. The result is a single variable which summarizes each person's *net* feelings about subnational versus national governmental responsibilities. The variable ranges from -4 to $+4$. Negative values indicate greater support for state and local responsibility, while positive values indicate more support for the national government. A value of zero indicates that the individual feels equally strongly about the subnational and national governments taking on more (or less) responsibility.⁶

Specific preferences about governmental responsibilities are operationalized using the Mokken scale developed in the previous section. Again, this variable gauges the extent to which individuals want the state and local governments, rather than the national government, to take the lead in a variety of policy areas. In order to facilitate interpretation of the statistical results, this variable is recoded so that

the values span the same range as the summary variable for general beliefs about governmental responsibilities.

The correlation between general and specific beliefs is 0.557. While fairly robust, this value is still not extremely large. And, we believe that this provides some basic confirmation of our argument that the two variables tap separate psychological orientations. Therefore, the important question is whether one of these affects the other.

Psychological theories can be invoked to support either causal direction. On the one hand, specific policy preferences could influence general beliefs about governmental responsibility. This is consistent with the online processing model (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989) and also with Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action, both of which suggest that overall orientations toward a stimulus object are constructed from separate evaluations of the components that go into the stimulus. Basically, an individual's feelings about specific policy activities would determine his/her broader feelings about the respective levels of government.

Alternatively, the opposite causal path leads from general beliefs to specific policy assessments. This could represent affect-driven reasoning (e.g., Brady and Sniderman 1985; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Here, broad positive or negative reactions toward a stimulus influence specific assessments. In this case, a person's overall feelings about government would have an impact on what that individual believes the various levels of government should be doing.

Thus, we need to allow for reciprocal influences across the general and specific policy orientations. In order to do so, we employ a nonrecursive system of structural equations. The general structure of our model is shown in figure 4.

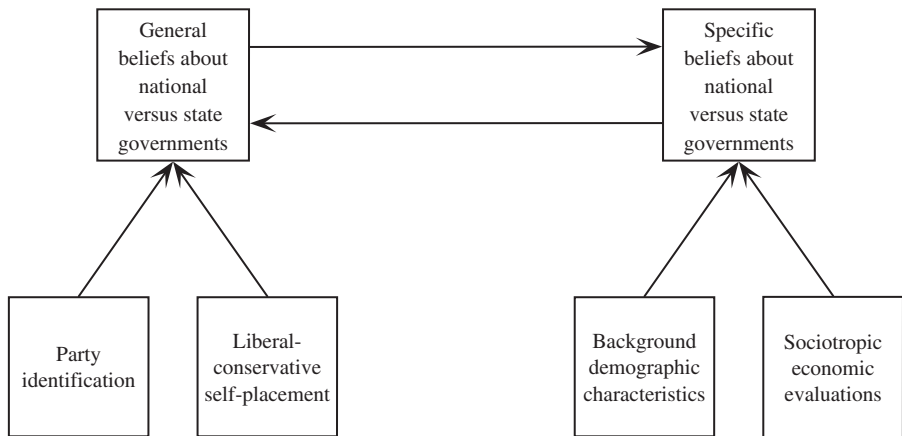


Figure 4 Model of reciprocal influences between general evaluations of governmental policy responsibilities and beliefs about which levels of government should take the lead in specific policy areas.

For present purposes, the most interesting elements of the model are the paths connecting the two types of beliefs about governmental policy responsibilities. In addition to those, we hypothesize that the general feelings about policy responsibilities will be affected by party identification and ideological self-placements. Both of these variables are measured in the usual manner, with seven-point scales on which larger values indicate stronger Republican affiliations and more extreme conservative positions, respectively (and vice versa for Democratic identifications and liberal self-placements). Democrats and liberals are predicted to support national responsibilities, while Republicans and conservatives are expected to emphasize state and local responsibilities. This specification is consistent with the symbolic politics theory of public opinion (e.g., Sears 1993), as well as the symbolic appeals of American political parties (Elder and Cobb 1983), and the general thrust of liberal-conservative positions in American political culture (McClosky and Zaller 1984). For all of these reasons, we contend that broad orientations like partisanship and ideology should exert their influence primarily upon similarly broad, general, feelings about governmental policy responsibilities.

On the other side of the model, demographic characteristics and sociotropic economic evaluations are hypothesized to influence policy-specific beliefs. To measure the former, we include two dummy variables for nonwhite respondents and for those who are out of work. Consistent with the usual understandings, we expect that demographic characteristics will affect relatively specific opinions about the kinds of services people want from government, and where they will look for these services. Thus, minority respondents should favor the national government since it has historically taken the lead in promoting civil rights (Hetherington and Nugent 2001). Similarly, people who are unemployed should look more positively toward the federal government because it has a wider arsenal of policy tools to alleviate economic distress (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schneider and Jacoby 2003).

Our measure of sociotropic evaluations represents individual feelings about the performance of the local versus the national economies. Prior research has shown that economic evaluations are potent predictors of political attitudes and behavior (Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000); we believe that their effects will be manifested most clearly in opinions about particular activities rather than broad, general, feelings. The CCES survey respondents were asked to evaluate the health of the national economy and their own community's economy on separate five-point scales (with successive integer scores assigned to categories ranging from "poor" to "excellent"). We use the difference in the scores across the two items. This variable taps each person's judgment about the *relative* economic conditions in his or her local area and the nation as a whole; positive values indicate that the person perceives the health of

Table 1 Two-stage least squares coefficient estimates of parameters in model of reciprocal influences between general evaluations of governmental policy responsibilities and beliefs about which levels of government should take the lead in specific policy areas. Figures in parentheses are standard errors.

	Endogenous variable:	
	General evaluation of state/local versus national government responsibilities	Beliefs about specific policy responsibilities of state/local and national governments
<i>Endogenous variables:</i>		
General evaluation of government responsibilities	–	0.677 (0.039)
Beliefs about specific policy areas	0.356 (0.030)	–
<i>Exogenous variables:</i>		
Party identification	0.108 (0.033)	–
Ideological self-placement	0.139 (0.068)	–
Non-white race	–	–0.524 (0.160)
Respondent is not working	–	–0.284 (0.140)
Sociotropic economic evaluations	–	0.167 (0.067)
Intercept	–0.698	0.417
R ²	0.350	0.336

the community economy to be better than the health of the national economy, and vice versa for negative values.

Table 1 shows the two-stage least-squares (2SLS) coefficient estimates for the model parameters. The model fits the data very well: The R^2 for general evaluations of governmental responsibilities is 0.35, while that for the scale of policy-specific preferences is 0.34. Both of these goodness-of-fit values are excellent, especially for public opinion data (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). Moreover, they are noticeably better than those values which have been reported in previous studies focused directly on citizens' attitudes toward governmental responsibilities (Roeder 1994; Thompson and Elling 1999; Schneider and Jacoby 2003). Thus, we believe that this model provides a very good account of the fundamental determinants of public opinion toward general and specific intergovernmental policy responsibilities.

The most important results in the table involve each endogenous variable's impact on the other endogenous variable. The relevant coefficients are both positive

and statistically significant (0.05 level, directional tests). Thus, there is a mutually reinforcing, reciprocal relationship between the two types of preferences. People who think that the state and local governments should take the lead across a range of specific policy problems also believe that the subnational governments should assume more responsibility, in general, for public policymaking.

The results also show that the impact of general attitudes on policy-specific preferences is much stronger than the opposite path of influence. The coefficients for the variables in the two equations can be compared to each other, because the endogenous variables have been transformed to a common measurement scale. The 2SLS estimates are 0.677 and 0.356, respectively, showing that the effect of general preferences for national versus subnational governmental activity on specific policy orientations is almost two times larger than the influence of specific attitudes on general beliefs about policy responsibilities.

Thus, people use their overall evaluations of national versus subnational responsibilities as a heuristic device to determine their feelings about which level of government should handle particular policy problems. This lends support to the affect-driven reasoning chain described earlier. However, that conclusion must be tempered by the fact that policy-specific orientations still have a statistically significant impact on general attitudes. So, the psychological theories that move from specific preferences to more general assessments regarding national and subnational governmental activities are relevant to the development of public opinion about intergovernmental policy responsibilities.

Moving on to the other explanatory variables in the model, the two exogenous influences on general policy preferences are statistically significant and signed as hypothesized. Both partisanship and ideological self-placement affect people's general attitudes toward the respective levels of government. The coefficient on the former variable is 0.108 and the coefficient for the latter is 0.139. These results show that partisan and ideological disagreements are not based on a simple contrast between more or less governmental activity. Instead, partisan and ideological lines are drawn over *which* level of government should take action. Democrats and liberals are more inclined to support national government involvement in policymaking, while Republicans and conservatives prefer that subnational governments take the lead in guiding public policy developments (Roeder 1994; Cole and Kincaid 2006; Kincaid and Cole 2008). Thus, the empirical results from our model help to clarify partisan and ideological perspectives on American federalism.

All three of the exogenous influences on policy-specific governmental responsibilities have statistically significant effects and they coincide with our initial expectations. The coefficient for race is -0.524 , indicating that nonwhite respondents favor the national government over state/local efforts when it comes to specific policy problems. Similarly, the negative value for unemployment shows

that people who are not working do look to the national government versus state/local governments to take the lead in taking concrete policy actions. And, the coefficient for economic performance shows that perceptions about the economy also make a difference in this process: Respondents who think the local economy is stronger than the national economy are more supportive of subnational policy activity. On the other hand, those who believe that national economic conditions are better want the federal government to take the lead in addressing specific policy problems.⁷

Conclusions

The purpose of this analysis has been to examine citizens' beliefs toward the policy responsibilities of the national, state, and local governments. Our research produces several important results. The findings reveal that the American public is able to clearly identify its preferences for intergovernmental activity across a range of policy areas. And, citizens' opinions about governmental policy responsibilities correspond quite closely to the actual program efforts of the national, state, and local governments. We also show that there is a mutually reinforcing connection between citizens' general feelings about intergovernmental policy responsibilities and their specific beliefs about which level of government should handle particular types of policy problems. But, general orientations have a stronger impact on policy-specific orientations in this process.

The American public has a reasonably clear picture of what it wants the national, state, and local governments to do. In this respect, our conclusions differ markedly from what appears to be the "conventional wisdom" in the field among scholars of mass political behavior. A number of prominent studies report that citizens are uninformed, confused, and misguided about governmental responsibilities (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). Furthermore, it is widely believed that Americans are generally hostile toward governmental activity (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

The results from this study present a very different picture. Citizens not only want government to take on more responsibilities; they also appear to maintain quite coherent views about which levels of government should be involved in different kinds of policy activities. And, there appears to be a high level of constraint between general principles and preferences about the specific levels of government that should be involved in different program areas. Thus, our analysis shows that the American public has very reasonable and consistent ideas about the policy responsibilities of the national, state, and local governments. Furthermore, the distribution of citizen preferences conforms closely to the relative efforts of the various governmental levels within the respective policy areas.

It is interesting to juxtapose our findings against theories of federalism and intergovernmental relations. While there are many different frameworks (Wright 1988, 2000; Feeley and Rubin 2008), a major divide in the literature exists between shared governance models with intertwined, overlapping activities (e.g., Grodzins 1983) and differentiated models which emphasize a division of labor and/or functional responsibilities across governmental levels (e.g., Peterson 1995; McKinnon and Nechyba 1997; Ferejohn and Weingast 1997; Volden 2005; Weissert and Scheller 2008; Broadway and Shah 2009). The evidence presented in this study shows that aggregated public preferences are more consistent with the latter perspective. There is a broad array of substantive areas where the weight of public opinion clearly favors action by the national government. These include health care, environmental protection, assisting the elderly, and so on. On the other hand, there is popular support for state action in such areas as public works, education, and economic development. Finally, citizens want local governments to focus their attention on crime and urban development. Of course, these preferences are not unanimous. But, the trends in these directions are clear. The American public wants the national, state, and local governments to be active in separate policy areas.

Our findings also have immediate political relevance. Over the past decade, the federal government has become more involved in a wide range of policies—from education to disaster relief and economic stimulation (Conlan 2007; Ehrenhalt 2008; Dinan and Gamkhar 2009). Some scholars contend that this shift in federal/state responsibilities reflects the ever-changing, cyclical nature of American Federalism (Conlan 1998; Jansson and Smith 2000), while others attribute this national-level drift as a major departure in federal versus state/local relationships (Donahue 1999; Walker 2000; Nagel 2002; Zimmerman 2008). Regardless, our research indicates that the American public understands these trends and wants the national government to take the lead in a wide variety of important substantive policy fields. Hence, public attitudes seem to be aligned with actual developments in American intergovernmental policymaking. Of course, we cannot say whether this is a general phenomenon that will persist over time or a unique feature of American politics during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Our research shows that the general public has well-formulated opinions about the policy responsibilities of various governmental levels. These orientations reflect Americans' general appreciation for the complexities of contemporary policymaking in a federal system. And, they also have significant consequences for citizens' evaluations of the overall responsiveness and general effectiveness of the political system. The American public has a fairly crystallized idea about what it wants local, state, and national governments to do in public policymaking.

Notes

1. The 2006 CCES is a large collaborative project involving 36 research teams comprised of scholars from thirty-nine universities. Prior to the data collection, a complex procedure was used to draw a representative sample of respondents from a huge panel of potential survey interviewees (Vavreck and Rivers 2008). Matching procedures were then employed to insure that the CCES sample conforms to the demographic profile of the American adult population. The full CCES sample has 38,443 respondents. The data used in the current analysis comprise a randomly-selected subset of size 1,000 from the overall sample. The demographic characteristics of this subset mirror those of the adult sample from the 2006 Current Population Survey (CPS) quite well. Gender, marital status, and employment status match almost perfectly across the two datasets. On education, CCES respondents have slightly more schooling than those from the CPS, but the percentages of college graduates are almost identical across the two samples; differences in educational attainment are slightly larger at lower levels. Similarly, the CCES respondents show slightly higher incomes than the CPS respondents. But, once again, the largest differences appear at the lower end of the income distribution. Racial comparisons are somewhat difficult because the categories differ across the two data sources. But, the percentages of whites are virtually identical in the CCES and CPS samples. It does appear that the CCES undersamples African Americans and Hispanics relative to the CPS. Overall, the characteristics of the CCES sample are very similar to those manifested in the datasets produced by other Internet surveys (Chang and Krosnick 2008). Tables comparing the demographic characteristics of the 2006 CCES and 2006 CPS are available from the authors.
2. All of the federal program expenditure data come from *The 2009 U.S. Statistical Abstract*: Expenditures for economic development, education, the elderly, the environment, crime, transportation, and unemployment are taken from “Federal Outlays by Detailed Function: 1990 to 2008” (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0455.pdf>, last accessed October 22, 2009); federal expenditures for the poor are taken from “Government Transfer Payments to Individuals by Type: 1990 to 2006” (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0521.pdf>, last accessed October 22, 2009). State and local program expenditure data are from The U.S. Census Bureau, “State and Local Government Finances by Level of Government and by State, 2005-06” (http://www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0609dcsl_1.html, accessed October 22, 2009). All spending figures cover the federal fiscal year 2006 time period.
3. The *U.S. Statistical Abstract* divides governmental spending into a more detailed set of categories than is necessary for present purposes. Therefore, several of our categories are created by combining separate categories in the *Statistical Abstract*. Our “Environment” category is created from “Natural Resources/Environment” and “Parks/Recreation.” Our “Health” combines “Health,” “Hospitals,” and “Medicare.” Our “Elderly” category combines “Social Security,” “Retirement,” and “Public Retirement.” Our “Transportation” combines “Transportation (Ground/Highways),” “Transportation (Air),” “Transportation (Water),” and “Transportation (Parking).” Our “Crime” category brings together four *Statistical Abstract* categories, “Law Enforcement for Police Protection,” “Law Enforcement for Litigative Assistance,” “Corrections (Prisons),” and

“Corrections (Inspections/Regulation).” Our “Poor” category is a bit more complicated. For state and local governments, we simply take the figures reported in the “Public Welfare” category found in the “State and Local Government Finances by Level of Government” report in the *U.S. Statistical Abstract*. For the federal government, four *Statistical Abstract* categories—“Medical Assistance (Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program),” “Temporary Assistance for Needy Families,” “Supplemental Security Income,” and “Food/Nutrition Assistance”—are combined in order to create a comparable “Poor” spending category. Finally, the remaining three categories, “Education,” “Community/Economic Development,” and “Unemployment,” are taken exactly as they are reported in the *U.S. Statistical Abstract*.

4. The goodness of fit statistic for a Mokken scale is Loevinger’s H. This is a proportional-reduction-in-error measure that compares the number of responses that are inconsistent with the hypothesized cumulative scaling pattern to the number of inconsistent responses that would be expected if the items in the scale were statistically independent of each other. The value of the H statistic for this scale is 0.39, indicating a moderate degree of fit between the cumulative structure and the empirical data (Mokken and Lewis 1982). The reliability of the scale scores assigned to individual survey respondents is 0.81.
5. The nonscalable nature of the six items does not necessarily imply that public opinion is any less coherent or well-formed with respect to these policy areas. It simply means that responses on these items do not conform to the same common cumulative pattern that underlies the other responses. It may well be that people are just evaluating governmental responsibilities on their own merits, separately for each of the six nonscalable areas. This interpretation is supported by the fact that these items are not mutually scalable among themselves.
6. The distribution of scores for the summary variable measuring general beliefs about government responsibilities has a mean of 0.40 and a standard deviation of 1.60.
7. It is interesting to note one potential independent variable that does *not* have any impact on attitudes toward intergovernmental responsibilities: education. This result is somewhat surprising. Intuitively, one might expect that more sophisticated citizens would have more coherent feelings about which governments should be involved in different policy areas. But, that is just not the case. In earlier versions of our model, we included dummy variables for individuals who had not graduated from high school and for those who had at least some college. The coefficients on these variables were not significantly different from zero in either equation. Thus, education does not affect either general attitudes or specific preferences about the distribution of governmental policy responsibilities.

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