Distinguishing between Most Important Problems and Issues?

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Abstract

To measure the importance of political issues, scholars traditionally have relied on a survey question that asks about the "most important problem" (MIP) facing the nation. Increasingly scholars are relying on a variant that asks about the "most important issue" (MII). While we have learned quite a lot about what MIP captures, especially over time, we know little about MII. Using newly compiled data from the UK, this paper examines differences in the two items and their dynamics. The results of our analyses reveal that MII responses are strikingly similar to MIP responses. While they may be slightly closer to a valid indicator of issue importance, MII responses mostly reflect variation in individuals' assessments of problem status. An effective measure of issue *importance* remains elusive.

The importance of political issues to citizens is central to much social science research. Scholars of voting behavior have had a long-standing interest in identifying the importance individuals attach to issues when making electoral judgments, what has commonly been referred to as issue "salience" (see the overview in Behr and Iyengar 1985). There is an interest among scholars of the public and political agenda (e.g., Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jennings and John 2009), political representation (e.g.,Soroka and Wlezien 2010), mass media (e.g., McCombs and Shaw 1972) and political communication (e.g. Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

To measure importance, scholars traditionally have relied on responses to a survey question asking about the "most important problem" (MIP) facing the nation. Responses were first used in studies of voting in the US to indicate the importance of issues to individual voters (RePass 1971; Miller et al. 1976). Scholars also have used aggregate MIP responses to characterize the broader public salience of issues at particular points in time and over time (e.g. McCombs and Shaw 1972; MacKuen and Coombs 1981; Jones 1994; Soroka 2002; Jones and Baumgartner 2004). There are problems with using MIP responses to indicate importance, however (Wlezien 2005). Of particular significance is that the question asks about the most important "problem." Increasingly, researchers are turning to a different question, which asks about the "most important issue" (MII) facing the country (e.g., Belanger and MeGuid 2008; Opperman 2008). The trend partly reflects the problem with MIP responses. Because the question asks about the most important "issue" and not "problem," MII seems to solve the problem of tapping importance. But is this really true? Do voters answer the questions differently, reflecting on problems in response to one and issues in response to the other?

This paper begins to answer these questions, focusing on MII and MIP responses in the United Kingdom (UK). The longest historical data series on issue importance are to be found in the UK, where Gallup asked a variant of the MIP question between 1966 and 2001. The "most important issue" question was first asked by Market & Opinion Research International (MORI, now Ipsos-MORI) in 1974. Since MIP and MII are never asked by the same survey organization in the same survey, it is not possible to compare individual-level responses to the two questions or to conduct basic split-half sample comparisons. The Gallup and Ipsos-MORI data do offer an uninterrupted overlapping period of annual measures of MIP and MII between 1977 and 2001 and this forms the basis of our analysis.[1]

To begin, we briefly consider why and how MIP and MII responses might (and might not) differ. After this, we introduce our measures of aggregate MII and MIP responses. We then provide a basic comparison of the measures, focusing on visual display and a comparison of means and correlations, reporting results from additional analyses along the way. These indicate a high degree of similarity between MII and MIP responses—when asked about "issues," people evidently tend to think of "problems." An effective measure of issue importance remains elusive.

Important Issues and Problems in Theory and Practice

Survey organizations routinely ask people about the most important issue or problem facing the nation. Scholars using the responses typically assume that respondents are thinking of things that are "important" to the nation as a whole or some broad subset. This presumably is what the designers of the question had in

[1] Comparing across survey organization introduces possible "house" effects, which serves to inflate differences in responses to the two items.

mind. To the extent this is true, important issues and problems reflect things of political relevance. They may not reflect the same things, however.

In theory, an important issue refers to a something that people care about, taxes or the economy, for instance. If a lot of people care about an issue, then it is considered an important political issue. An important problem is conceptually different. It captures the importance of an issue *and* the degree to which it is a problem. Something can be a problem but of little importance. Something can be important but not a problem. Both are necessary for something to be an important problem.[2] See Wlezien (2005) for more on the conceptual difference between important issues and problems.

While theory suggests that issues and problems are related but different, it may be that in practice people do not reflect the distinction in response to survey items. That is, it may be that when asked about "issues" people think about "problems." If so, their important issue and problem responses would be indistinguishable. This would not be because issues and problems are the same things or because problem status determines importance. It would be that simply asking about issues and problems simply does not make a difference to people. Their survey responses ultimately reflect what is uppermost in their minds, and not what is most salient in the minds of researchers and scholars (see Zaller and Feldman 1992).

Measuring Most Important Problems and Issues

[2] Not surprisingly, MIP responses tap variation in problem status in particular domains, e.g., when the economy worsens, "economic" mentions increase. These responses also tap variation in the problem status of other domains matters, e.g, when the economy worsen and economic mentions increase, MIP responses in other categories drops.

Survey organizations have been asking about the most important problem (MIP) facing the nation for many years. Gallup first asked the question in the US in 1935 and in the UK in 1947. More recently, organizations have asked about the most important issue (MII). The question was first asked in the UK beginning in 1974. The UK provides the longest running time series, and thus allows us the best basis for comparing MII and MIP responses over time.

Gallup's question about the "most important problem" was introduced in its most recognizable form in the UK in August 1959, asking "What is the most important problem facing the *country* at the present time?" The wording was later changed to "Which would you say is the most urgent problem facing the country at the present time?"[3] Instead of asking about the most important problem, in its monthly political monitor MORI asks "What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?" Further discussion of question wording and details of the monthly poll data for MIP and MII are reported in the Online Appendix, Sections 1, 2 and 3.

Our analysis compares time series of most important problem (MIP) and most important issue (MII) responses. As the MIP and MII responses categories differ, it was necessary to collapse them into a set of 18 common super-topics. (The full list of Gallup "problems" is reported in Online Appendix Table A2 and the full list of Ipsos-

[3] Note that the wording changed in two ways: (1) the use of *urgent* instead of *important* and (2) the use of *at the present time* instead of *today*. King and Wybrow (2001, p. 261) report that "[t]he reasons for substituting the word 'urgent' for the word 'important' are unclear; but, as usual, it is doubtful whether the change made much practical difference." Because of a lack of data, we cannot directly compare responses. We do know that most urgent problems may not be the same, and differences between most urgent problems and most important issues are a "worst case" of sorts. That is, the difference between most important problems and issues seemingly *can be no greater* than what we detect using the data we do have.

MORI "issues" is reported in Table A3.) For each survey, we calculate the percentage of responses in each super-topic—specifically, we use the number of responses as a percentage of the total number of respondents.[4] We then aggregate by year, taking the mean response across surveys. The result is a set of 18 annual MII and MIP s time series for the 1977-2001 period.[5]

- Figure 1 about here -

Comparing the Measures

Figure 1 plots annual mean MIP and MII responses for each of the categories. The left-hand axis indicates the percentage of respondents identifying the particular category as the most important problem or the most important issue. The black line indicates MIP responses and the dashed line the MII responses. Visual inspection of the figures indicates a great degree of similarity in most categories, i.e., that the MII and MIP series capture many of the same things, both at particular points in time and over time. The series follow each other very closely for health, education, law and order, immigration, welfare, strikes and labour issues, local government and council tax, and to a lesser degree for housing and defense and foreign affairs. The unemployment and inflation MII series track just below the MIP series, while the

[4] While it may be tempting to take percentages of total *responses*, doing so has an unfortunate consequence because the total number of responses varies over time. That is, it artificially increases the evident interdependence among different categories. Also see Wlezien (2005).

[5] Our aggregation of responses introduces potential measurement error in two ways: (1) in the assignment of MII and MIP responses to corresponding categories and (2) in the averaging of responses to surveys conducted at different points during the year (for further details see Online Appendix, Section 4). It is not possible to determine how much error is introduced, however. Since measurement error expands the differences between the measures, our analyses exaggerate the true differences in MII and MIP.

economy MII series tracks just above the MIP series. Other categories exhibit more pronounced differences. For Europe, the MII series is considerably higher than the MIP. For the environment, the MII series does not exhibit a pronounced increase in 2000 that is observed in the MIP. Some issues, such as transport and the pound, have such low means (each lower than 1%) that the degree of variation is exaggerated by the scale of the graph.

Table 1 permits a more rigorous assessment. It contains summary statistics for MIP and MII responses between 1977 and 2001. Means are reported in the first and second columns of the table, with standard deviations in parentheses, and differences of means are shown in the third column. These results are consistent with our observations of Figure 1, that on some issues the mean is higher for the MIP – inflation, unemployment, health, and housing – and on others it is higher for the MII – the economy, law and order, Europe, immigration, education, strikes.

We conducted more rigorous tests as well. Specifically, we tested the differences between MIP and MII ('between-groups') across the 18 issue categories and within each category ('within-category'). The MANOVA reported in Table 2 shows there is a significant difference between MIP and MII responses across the 18 issue categories taken together (according to the Wilks' lambda, Lawley-Hotelling trace and Pillai's trace test statistics). Notice from the associated multivariate regression model that the differences are concentrated within a handful of categories – crime, defence, housing, Northern Ireland, Europe and the pound. These mostly are issues where the mean level of MIP/MII response is relatively low. This is consistent with what we saw in Figure 1 and in the comparison of means in Table 1. Response categories account for only a small part of the difference in MII and MIP responses over the period, that is, the average R^2 indicates they explain just 6% of the variance.

It is important to note that the difference is small to begin with. The mean absolute difference is equal to 2.14 points.

There thus is no escaping a dominant pattern of similarity. Although MII and MIP responses do differ, the differences are small and concentrated in a certain areas. This is particularly noteworthy given the possible differences in classification of economic problems and issues by Gallup and Ipsos-MORI and the potential measurement error introduced by our own aggregation procedure —see note 6. Focusing on the mean MII and MIP responses in each category over the full time period, the correlation is a near-perfect 0.98.

- Table 2 about here -

Let us now examine commonality over time. We already saw a good degree of parallelism from the graphs in Figure 1. The pairwise correlation between the MIP and MII time series in each domain summarizes the correspondence. These are reported in the fourth column of Table 1 (see above). Here we can see that there is a significant correlation between MIP and MII measures for nearly all the categories with the sole exception of Northern Ireland.[6] In 10 out of the 18 categories the correlation coefficient is greater than 0.9. These include nearly all the most prominent issue/problem areas in the UK: inflation, unemployment, law and order, immigration, health, education, strikes, Europe, the environment, and the Council Tax. Somewhat lower correlation coefficients are observed for transport, welfare and housing. There is even a reasonable degree of correspondence in the other/don't know category

[6] Aside from the pound, the Northern Ireland topic has the lowest mean of any MIP/MII category, so the result is not surprising when combined with inspection of the series in Figure 1. This non-finding might be attributed to high sampling error on such low means or alternatively to house differences in creation of new categories for issues that previously had been coded as "other."

(Pearson's $r = 0.68$), despite the growth of non-major categories for the MIP toward the end of the time period – see Figure 1.[7]

Some of the correlations are fairly low, however. Of particular note is the modest 0.44 for the "economy." This might reflect simple sampling error or differences in classification of economic problems and issues by Gallup and Ipsos-MORI at different points in time. Of course, it also could reflect genuine differences in issue importance and problem status of the economy. The correlation for defense and foreign affairs also is weak, barely above .5. As for the economy, we cannot determine why this is the case. MII and MIP measures are not always equivalent.

While there are certain differences between the measures, there is no escaping the conclusion of pervasive similarity in responses at particular points in time and over time. The strength of the correspondence is illustrated in Figure 2, which plots MII and MIP responses for each year and category (N=450). The slope of the regression line (0.84) is just less than identity and the fit is near-perfect (adjusted R^2=0.90). Although the measures are not exactly the same, they just are not very different.

- Figure 2 about here -

Conclusion

Does the public really answer questions about the most important problem and the most important issue in distinct ways? Or is there a great deal of commonality in responses to these questions? Our comparison of public responses to the two

[7] Note that while there is autocorrelation within each MII and MIP series–and categories are shown to be interdependent in the additional analyses in the Online Appendix, Section 4.2–the correlation coefficients indicate the degree to which the series track each other over time, as also shown in Figure 1.

questions indicates that they mostly tap the same things. The findings are all the more striking given the difference in question wording—"most urgent problem" and "most important issue"—used by the survey organizations, other possible house effects such as the coding of responses, our own classification and aggregation of responses, and sampling error itself.[8] Issues and problems evidently are much the same things to people, at least given how survey organizations typically ask about them.

There still are some differences in responses. We cannot tell whether these tap real differences in MII and MIP responses or the sources of measurement error noted above, however. What we can say is that, while MII and MIP responses exhibit a great deal of similarity, they are not perfect substitutes. One thus cannot draw tidy conclusions based on differences, say, across countries at a particular point in time or within countries at different points in time. One also cannot simply splice the two series together to construct a continuous measure.

Separate analyses of the responsiveness of MIP and MII to exogenous variables reveal further that both measures tap variations in problem status (see Online Appendix, Section 4.1). The size and significance of the coefficients for MIP and MII are similar, which implies that responsiveness to changing problem status in particular categories is the same. Other analyses indicate that variation in the problem status of other domains matters a lot as well (see Online Appendix, Section 4.2). Thus, for example, when the economy worsens, "economic" MIP and MII responses increase *and* other MIP and MII responses decrease. The patterns are basically equal

[8] Recall that the MIP and MII questions were never asked by the same survey organization, which precludes us from undertaking individual-level analysis or even a split-sample comparison.

for the two measures. When people are asked about "issues," it appears, they tend to think about "problems."

We cannot completely rule out some connection between problem status and importance. To explain the correspondence between the measures, problem status and importance would need to be almost perfectly correlated, however. Although this is possible, it is highly unlikely. What is absolutely clear is that one cannot simply take responses to the MIP and MII questions at face value. These questions provide an indication of the topics that are on people's minds, not researchers'—respondents evidently do not draw a fine conceptual distinction between issues and problems. Thus, while neither measure neatly taps importance, both may indicate public "attention," though even this remains to be seen. In the meantime, users of the measures need beware.

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FIGURES & TABLES

Figure 1. Most Important Issue and Most Important Problem, percentage of respondents

Figure 2. Most Important Issue (*y*) and Most Important Problem (*x*)

$y = 0.84x + 0.99$
$R^2 = 0.90$

Table 1. Difference in Means of the MIP and MII Categories

Category	MIP Mean (S.D.)	MII Mean (S.D.)	Pairwise Correlation
Economy & Taxation	4.825 (2.861)	6.403 (6.573)	0.445*
Inflation, Prices & Cost of Living	11.217 (11.300)	7.491 (10.102)	0.985***
Unemployment	39.972 (24.133)	35.002 (21.277)	0.902***
Crime, Law & Order	4.242 (2.247)	5.840 (2.602)	0.932***
Immigration & Asylum	1.443 (1.251)	2.110 (2.048)	0.936***
Defense & International Affairs	2.347 (2.626)	4.498 (4.309)	0.534**
Roads & Transport	0.233 (0.808)	0.176 (0.415)	0.807***
Health/NHS	9.872 (9.841)	7.894 (6.977)	0.981***
Education	3.093 (2.781)	3.705 (3.215)	0.978***
Strikes & Trade Unions	2.828 (5.319)	3.562 (7.336)	0.946***
Pensions & Welfare	1.681 (1.024)	1.949 (1.436)	0.654***
Housing	2.190 (2.020)	1.377 (0.647)	0.566**
Northern Ireland	0.187 (0.367)	0.781 (0.682)	0.181
Europe, Common Market, Single Currency	1.863 (2.614)	5.417 (5.704)	0.978***
Environment & Pollution	1.750 (4.476)	1.813 (2.727)	0.810***
Council Tax, Poll Tax & Local Government	1.096 (3.548)	1.013 (2.863)	0.949***
The Pound & Exchange Rates	0.025 (0.091)	0.208 (0.183)	0.345†
Other, None & Don't Know	10.574 (7.161)	11.950 (4.200)	0.441*

† $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$ N = 24 Start = 1977, End = 2001

Table 2. Multivariate Analysis of Variance of MIP and MII Responses

Source		Degrees of Freedom	Test Statistic	F	Sig.
Group (MIP/MII)		1			
	Wilk's lambda	(18, 31)	0.157	9.28	0.000
	Lawley-Hotelling trace	(18, 31)	0.844	9.28	0.000
	Pillai's trace	(18, 31)	5.390	9.28	0.000
Residual		48			
Total		49			

Category	B	Std. Err.	RMSE	R^2	t	p
Economy & Taxation	-1.578	1.434	5.069	0.025	-1.10	0.277
Inflation, Prices & Cost of Living	3.726	3.031	10.718	0.031	1.23	0.225
Unemployment	4.970	6.435	22.750	0.012	0.77	0.444
Crime, Law & Order	-1.598	0.688	2.431	0.101	-2.32*	0.024
Immigration & Asylum	-0.667	0.480	1.697	0.039	-1.39	0.171
Defense & International Affairs	-2.151	1.009	3.568	0.087	-2.13*	0.038
Roads & Transport	0.058	0.182	0.642	0.002	0.32	0.752
Health/NHS	1.979	2.413	8.530	0.014	0.82	0.416
Education	-0.612	0.850	3.006	0.011	-0.72	0.475
Strikes & Trade Unions	-0.733	1.812	6.407	0.003	-0.40	0.688
Pensions & Welfare	-0.268	0.353	1.247	0.012	-0.76	0.451
Housing	0.813	0.424	1.500	0.071	1.92	0.061
Northern Ireland	-0.595	0.155	0.548	0.235	-3.84***	0.000
Europe, Common Market, Single Currency	-3.554	1.255	4.437	0.143	-2.83**	0.007
Environment & Agriculture	-0.063	1.048	3.707	0.000	-0.06	0.952
Council Tax, Poll Tax & Local Government	0.084	0.912	3.224	0.000	0.09	0.927
The Pound & Exchange Rates	-0.183	0.041	0.144	0.295	-4.49***	0.000
Other, None & Don't Know	-1.377	1.660	5.871	0.014	-0.83	0.411

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

ONLINE APPENDIX

In this Online Appendix, we outline our analyses in further depth and provide additional details of the datasets compiled on Gallup's "most important problem" and Ipsos-MORI's "most important issue".

1. Polling on the Most Important Problem and the Most Important Issue

1.1. The Gallup Organization's "Most Urgent Problem" Question

Survey organizations have been asking about the most important problem (MIP) facing the nation for many years. Gallup first asked the question in the US in 1935. It has since been asked, and continues to be asked, by polling organisations in a large number of countries, e.g. Australia, Canada, France, Spain, Denmark, and Germany. In the UK, in September 1944 Gallup first asked "What do you think is the most urgent problem the Government must solve during the next few months?" This followed earlier wartime versions of the question.[9] Between 1944 and 1959 it was asked in a number of forms as the "most important problem," the "chief problem," the "must urgent problem" again, and in August 1959 the question most recognisable to current versions was introduced: "What is the most important problem facing the *country* at the present time?"[10] Between December 1959 and December 1964, Gallup

[9] The initial wartime UK versions of the question (1940) asked "What do you think is the most important war problem the government must solve this spring?" and during the later years of the war "What will be the most urgent problem on the home front after the war?" and after that "What do you think is the most urgent home-front problem that the government must solve during the next few months?"

[10] For pre-1960 MIP data, see the original reports published in *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain 1937-1975* (Gallup 1976). After this period, MIP data was published in

provided respondents a list of items and then asked "Which of these is the most important problem facing the country today?" identical to its counterpart in the US. The question was not asked at all in 1965. From March 1966 Gallup began to ask a slightly different question "Which would you say is the most urgent problem facing the country at the present time?" (Respondents were not prompted with a list of items). Note that the wording changed in two ways: (1) the use of *urgent* instead of *important* and (2) the use of *at the present time* instead of *today*. King and Wybrow (2001, p. 261) report that "[t]he reasons for substituting the word 'urgent' for the word 'important' are unclear; but, as usual, it is doubtful whether the change made much practical difference." Because of a lack of data, we cannot directly compare responses. We do know that most urgent problems may not be the same, and differences between most urgent problems and most important issues are a "worst case" of sorts. That is, the difference between most important problems and issues seemingly *can be no greater* than what we detect using the data we do have. Gallup stopped asking the MIP question in May 2001.

During most of the period Gallup asked the most urgent problem question, they also asked "And what would you say is the <u>next</u> most urgent problem?," with multiple responses permitted. (We refer to this as OIP for "other important problem.") King and Wybrow (2001) indicate that this started with the post-1968 version of the Gallup question but the official monthly *Gallup Political and Economic Index* reports responses only from September 1973.[11] This question was reported up

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the *Gallup Political and Economic Index* (December 1959 – May 2001) and summarized in *British Political Opinion, 1937-2000* (King and Wybrow 2001).

[11] There is no evidence that data was collected prior to that date but not published. They suggest that omission of this question from their data is justified since the inclusion of follow-up questions "…seldom have much effect on the initial rank ordering" (King and Wybrow 2001, p. 261).

until November 1997, when it appears to have been dropped. The OIP data is compiled from volumes of the *Gallup Political and Economic Index* published between 1966 and 1997.

1.2 Ipsos-MORI's "Most Important Issue" Question

Since October 1977, Ipsos-MORI have asked respondents "What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?"[12] As a follow-up, Ipsos-MORI have regularly asked "What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?" Like Gallup's "most urgent problem" questions, the Ipsos-MORI questions are not prompted.[13] The headline trend that is reported on the Ipsos-MORI website (www.ipsos-mori.com) is the combined total of MII and "other important issue" (OII) responses.

2. The Data[14]

2.1 The Updated Gallup MIP Dataset

Data on aggregate responses to Gallup's MIP question are reported in *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain 1937-1975* (Gallup 1976), the official monthly *Gallup Political and Economic Index* (Gallup Organization 1960-2001), and in King and Wybrow's (2001) *British Political Opinion, 1937-2000*. The

[12] The earliest reported data refers to two polls in September and October 1974, but there is no record of most important issue results for these dates.

[13] One technical difference in reporting of the official Ipsos-MORI data compared with the Gallup data is that response rates of >0 and <0.5% are indicated with a '*'. These are replaced in our MII/OII dataset with the mid-point value, 0.25%. This means, however, that the Ipsos-MORI data tends to capture variation around 0, whereas the Gallup data does not. This does not affect comparison of major issues, but is relevant for comparison of minor issues.

[14] Datasets used in these analyses are available from the authors upon request.

collected *Gallup International Public Opinion* volume contains data on the early versions of the MIP question up to 1975. It does not report fieldwork dates or sample sizes, however. Between March 1974 and January 1991, the official *Gallup Political and Economic Index* did not report categories where the response was below 4% or 5%, instead aggregating these in its "other" category. This is evident from the "comparison" data, since categories that exceeded that threshold were reported in subsequent months. The MIP data reported in *British Political Opinion, 1937-2000* (King and Wybrow 2001) was compiled from the original Gallup fieldwork and includes details of these missing observations. This is more complete than the data reported in the official index for the period between February 1974 and January 1991. However, the King and Wybrow version of the MIP data contains a number of typographical errors and misattributions of fieldwork dates (listing only the month, which is also problematic when fieldwork overlapped between months), whilst some response categories were aggregated for no obvious reason (e.g. "roads and transport" and "Commonwealth" were added to the "other" category between 1966 and 1974). As a result, no one version of the dataset could be considered a perfect or exhaustive record of British public opinion for the period.

This prompted an integration of these datasets into a new comprehensive MIP dataset for the period between 1946 and 2001, to maximise the detail and reliability of existing data. The new MIP dataset was reconstructed through a painstaking process of data inputting and cross-checking. To begin with, the King and Wybrow (2001) data was entered into a master database. These data then were checked against the data published in the monthly Gallup index and the "comparison data" published in subsequent months of the Gallup index. In this, some categories from the original data were reconstituted and transcription errors from King and Wybrow were corrected,

adding fieldwork dates and sample size where available. Where the month of publication of the Gallup index was reported in King and Wybrow instead of the relevant fieldwork month, this was corrected (specific fieldwork dates are available for 400 of the 426 polls). This process of triangulation and data enhancement was designed to minimise transcription errors and maximise the robustness of the data series.

The dataset includes an additional 21 observations from the published *Gallup Political and Economic Index* (which includes 5 missing observations for 2001 and a poll for January 1976 which is a typographical error in King and Wybrow).[15] This retains 3 observations from King and Wybrow that are *not* reported in the official index and so cannot be verified.[16] In total, the dataset either corrects or adds data for 316 category*responses from King and Wybrow out of an overall matrix of 5,072 poll*category*response observations: the matrix consists of 426 polls with responses across *i* categories, where *i* ranges between 7 and 37 – with a mean of 17.6. Corrections are required where there are differences between King and Wybrow and the official index, while additions are made when a poll is not reported in King and Wybrow (not including those instances where the month of the Gallup index is misreported as the month of fieldwork dates). Of these amendments, some are the

[15] The polls that are additional in this dataset to those reported in King and Wybrow (2001) are January 1961, February 1962, June 1962, February 1963, June 1963, April 1964, June 1964, March 1966 (i), September 1968, January 1976 (entry in King and Wybrow is a typographical error/reprint), April 1979, October 1979, September 1992 (ii), November 1992 (ii), December 1992, November 1998, January 2001, February 2001, March 2001, April 2001, May 2001.

[16] The MIP polls reported in King and Wybrow, but missing from the official Gallup Index are December 1960, February 1974, September 1989 (ii).

result of typographical or transcription errors in King and Wybrow, whilst the remainder are the result of differences in rounding.

The dataset also includes MIP questions for the period between December 1946 and November 1959, adding a further 34 polls from *Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain 1937-1975* (Gallup 1976) that were not reported in King and Wybrow.

2.2 The Ipsos-MORI MII Dataset

As was noted, the 'headline' trend data that is reported in table format on the Ipsos-MORI website is in fact the combined total of "other important issue" (OII) responses and MII responses. MII data is available in monthly publications of the Ipsos-MORI *Political Monitor*. These were compiled for the period between 1998 and 2008. Roger Mortimore of Ipsos-MORI kindly arranged for MII data to be compiled from hard copies of MORI monthly reports for the period between 1977 and 1998. A small number (56) of category*responses were amended/corrected for the OII data (almost all of which are from 2002). Our analyses drop an Ipsos-MORI OII poll for September 1997 listed on the official Ipsos-MORI website which appears to be identical to another poll for September 1997, with the exception of differences in the AIDS, animal welfare, don't know and other categories. It also drops a duplicate poll for April 1998 which again is near identical to another for the same month.

3. The Polls

Our analysis compares annual time series data for the most important problem (MIP) and most important issue (MII) questions. This generates annual means from

the available monthly data for the period between 1977 and 2001.[17] If there are two monthly polls in a given year, these are used. If there are twelve polls, then the mean is calculated from these. A few monthly observations were removed from our dataset to ensure balanced annual means, i.e., as much as possible the aim was to avoid over-weighting responses in one month compared to others. Of course, it is impossible to avoid under-weighting due to missing monthly data because polls were not conducted in certain months, so some of the annual means are not perfectly balanced.[18]

3.1 Summary Statistics

The summary statistics in Table A1 indicate that the mean number of polls per year is similar for both Gallup (10.14) and Ipsos-MORI (11.12), and the mean number of responses is too – 101.02% for Gallup's MIP question and 99.43% for Ipsos-

[17] Note that not all the categories listed in the Appendix in Tables A1 and A2 are observed in Gallup and MORI data reported for *every* month, i.e., some of these categories are left blank in published Ipsos-MORI trend data while others are not reported in all of the Gallup monthly reports. Such missing data are, as a rule, treated as a response of 0%. As exceptions to this, missing data are imputed using linear interpolation for one observation in the inflation category and six observations in the Other/None/Don't Know category for the MII data. (In five of the six cases response totals well below 100 indicate that these are not true zeros, while in the other case the adjacent response totals were well above 100, suggesting the data was also missing.)

[18] The monthly Gallup MIP/OIP data is an average of multiple monthly polls for March 1966, January 1990, February 1991, and February, March and October 1992. This data is retained for estimation of the annual averages. To further balance data, the Ipsos-MORI dataset drops OII poll data for 4 - 10 November 1982, 6 - 12 January 1983, 3 - 9 February 1983, 3 - 9 March 1983, 7 - 12 April 1983, 5 - 11 May 1983 because there is no matching MII data. Both MII & OII data are dropped for 7 - 12 October 1982 (the OII data is undated for this month and is assumed to be later in the month like other 1983 months, to ensure a balanced annual sample).

MORI's MII question. The mean number of MIP responses is inflated slightly by polls from the period between 1966 and 1973 where Gallup permitted multiple answers to the *most* important problem question. The mean MIP response total is 99.62% for the 1974 to 2001 period, much closer to the mean for MII. Ipsos-MORI tend to have reported, on average, a greater number of response categories (26.78) compared to Gallup (18.48), but our aggregation of categories (see below) means this does not affect comparative analysis.

– Table A1 about here –

3.2 The Categories

The full list of Gallup "problems" is reported in Table A2 and the full list of Ipsos-MORI "issues" is reported in Table A3. The total number of MIP categories proliferated in the last five years of Gallup's polling in the UK. Further, during this period, Gallup's other and don't know categories totalled 21.9% on average, above industry standard, and cannot be disaggregated further. Our aggregation generates 17 super-topics for issues or problems in familiar areas, such as the economy, inflation, health, education, and one other/none/don't know category for the leftovers – see Table A4.[19] One notable aggregation is the defense and international affairs category, required because this measure is combined in the Ipsos-MORI data.

– Table A2 about here –

– Table A3 about here –

– Table A4 about here –

4. Additional Analyses

4.1 The Responsiveness of MIP and MII to Exogenous Variables

[19] The topics included in this none/don't know/other category include: government, public services, devolution, privatisation, fuel shortage, drugs, national unity, and morality.

To what extent is variation in MIP and MII responses due to changes in either importance on the one hand or problem status on the other? The influence of importance obviously is less easily resolved, as we do not have an independent measure of it. We can assess the influence of problem status, however. That is, we can measure variation in problem status over time and its covariation with MIP and MII responses. As discussed, it is possible that problem status and importance are positively correlated, i.e., as an issue becomes a problem it may become more important as a result. Assessing the effects of problem status still is an important first step in establishing what MIP and MII questions measure.

Our analysis focuses on a number of economic categories where reasonable measures of problem status can be found. Some categories, such as unemployment or labor disputes, have indicators that correspond directly to problem status. Other categories, such as health have multiple indicators of problem status, e.g., life expectancy, hospital waiting lists, patient satisfaction. And others, such as foreign policy, lack clear objective indicators. For this exercise, we test the effect of general economic conditions on the percentage of respondents referring to economic categories (including the economy, inflation, unemployment, and the pound). We use leading economic indicators (LEI) from the Conference Board.[20] LEI has been shown to be the dominant predictor of economic MIP in the US (Wlezien 2005). The measure used in the analysis represents the mean annual value of LEI. For expository

[20] The Conference Board leading economic indicators (LEI) index consists of: Order Book Volume (source: Confederation of British Industry); Volume of Expected Output (source: Confederation of British Industry); Consumer Confidence Indicator (source: European Commission); FTSE All-Share Index (source: FTSE Group); Yield Spread (source: Bank of England); Productivity, Whole Economy (Office for National Statistics); Total Gross Operating Surplus of Corporations (Office for National Statistics).

purposes, the variable is inverted, so high values indicate a bad economy and low values a good one. Thus, the measure should be positively related to economic MIP and MII mentions over time.

We estimate the effect of economic problems on MIP and MII responses in the form of an error correction model, measuring short-run and long-run effects of LEI. For expository purposes, let us focus specifically on modeling MIP. The model can be represented in the form $\Delta MIP_t = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 MIP_{t-1} + \alpha_2 \Delta LEI_t + \alpha_3 LEI_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$. The first difference in MIP (ΔMIP_t) is regressed on the lagged level of MIP (MIP_{t-1}) and the first difference (ΔLEI_t) and lagged level (LEI_{t-1}) of LEI. The two LEI variables capture the short-run and long-run effects, respectively, and should be positive if changing economic conditions influence MIP responses. The lagged level of MIP or MII is the "error correction" parameter and should be negative by construction—it indicates the rate at which MIP or MII returns to its long-run equilibrium level in response to a shock. If MIP or MII is too high given the equilibrium, it shifts downward; if too low, it shifts upward.

The results for general economic problems are reported in the first two columns of Table A5. Here we can see that the responsiveness of MIP and MII to changes in problem status for general economic concerns is quite similar. The coefficients for LEI are positive and significant at the 95% confidence level. Comparing across equations, the coefficients also are of similar value, and not significantly different. The rate of error correction does differ, however, though the difference is slight. Change in MIP and MII and mostly driven by changes in problem status and these effects are strikingly similar.

- Table A5 about here -

Table A5 also includes results for more specific indicators of economic problems – inflation and unemployment – where there are good measures of problem status, namely, the inflation rate and national unemployment rate themselves.[21] These are presented in the second and third pairs of columns in the table. The last pair of columns contains results for mentions of strikes and trade unions using the number of working days lost to labor disputes per year (per capita) and trade union membership (per capita).

These more specific results indicate again that variations in problem status are reflected in changes in both MIP and MII responses. The short-run effects of the rate of inflation and the rate of unemployment are positive and significant and there is little difference between the coefficients for MIP and MII measures. The long-run effects of unemployment are also significant for the number of MIP and MII responses and the coefficients are indistinguishable. Lastly, the numbers of labor disputes and trade union members have a positive and significant short-run effect on the number of MIP and MII responses about strikes and trade unions. These results are all much as might be expected given what we have already seen; they nevertheless make clear that variation in problem status typically has significant effects on variation in both MIP and MII responses and the effects are essentially the same.

4.2 The Structure of Responses

We next consider whether variation in issue or problem status in one category affects MIP or MII responses in other categories. As discussed above, there are few indicators of problems with foreign policy, either objective or subjective, in the UK.

[21] Data on the inflation rate, the Retail Price Index (RPI), and the national unemployment rate are both from the Office for National Statistics (www.statistics.gov.uk).

The same is true in most other domains. We thus concentrate on the effect of variation in economic problem status on variation in MIP and MII responses on the economy and in three other general categories: foreign affairs and defense, social issues (consisting of health, education and welfare) and all other issues. The analysis again relies on leading economic indicators (LEI). To test for basic interdependence between categories, we regress MIP and MII responses in each category on LEI. If there is interdependence, the coefficient for LEI in the non-economic categories will be negative—when the economy gets better (worse), and economic MIP (and MII) decrease (increase), non-economic MII (and MIP) would increase (decrease).

The regressions are estimated as a bivariate autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) model, which includes a lagged dependent variable, represented in the form $MIP_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 MIP_{it-1} + \alpha_2 LEI_t + \alpha_3 LEI_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$.. The analyses refer to the period of overlapping data for MIP and MII, between 1978 and 2001. (We lose 1977 because lagged dependent variables are included in the models.) The percentage of respondents on economic (economy, inflation, unemployment, pound), foreign, social (health, education and welfare), and other (all others) is estimated as a function of the lagged MIP or MII mentions and the contemporaneous effect of leading economic indicators (LEI_t). We are interested to see if mentions in the non-economic categories are negatively related to LEI.

To begin with, as was shown in Table A5, the effect of LEI on importance of economic issues/problems is positive and significant and very similar, indicating that as economic conditions worsen the MIP and MII series both increase in corresponding degrees. In contrast, the effect of LEI on MIP and MII responses for social issues and "other" areas is negative and highly reliable. As economic conditions deteriorate (improve), there is a decline (rise) in the issue/problem importance of these other

categories. These results are consistent with findings on the MIP from the US (see Wlezien 2005).

The same is not true for the foreign affairs and defense category. Here LEI has no effect on either MIP or MII, suggesting that these responses are largely the result of things directly relevant to national security, e.g., the outbreak of war or other international incidents. It nevertheless differs with what has been observed in the US, where economic problem status powerfully structures foreign policy MIP (Wlezien 2005). Foreign policy MIP and MII in the UK clearly are independent of the ebbs and flows of the economy.

The results in Table A6 also indicate highly similar dynamics. That is, with one exception, the MIP and MII series are autoregressive—the lagged dependent variable is positive and significant but also less than 1. (This is precisely what we would expect given the pervasive error correction shown in Table A5.) The one exception is foreign/defense MIP. For the other areas, the MIP and MII autoregressive parameters are essentially the same. This implies that the series have very similar time series characteristics.

The most important finding from this analysis is that the structure of MIP and MII is largely indistinguishable in each of the general categories. Responses in social and other domestic domains are dependent on the degree to which *other* domains are problems, particularly the economy. When the economy worsens (improve), economic MIP and MII increase (decrease) and social and other domestic MIP and MII decrease (increase).

- Table A6 about here -

5. Additional Bibliography

Gallup, George H. (ed.). 1976. *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain: 1937-1975*. New York: Random House.

Gallup. (1960-2001). *Gallup Political and Economic Index*. London: Gallup Organization.

King, Anthony, and Robert Wybrow. 2001. British Political Opinion 1937-2000. London: Politicos.

Table A1. Gallup and MORI Polls on Important Issues and Problems

	MIP	**OIP**	**MII**	**OII**
	Most Urgent Problem	Next Most Urgent Problem	Most Important Issue	Other Important Issues
Pollster	Gallup (UK)	Gallup (UK)	MORI (now Ipsos-MORI)	MORI (now Ipsos-MORI)
Start	March 1966	September 1973	September 1977[22]	September 1974
End	May 2001	December 1997	December 2008	December 2008
Polls	355	278	302	304
Polls: Annual Average	10.14	11.12	9.44	8.69
Start of regular monthly polling	March 1971	September 1973	May 1981	March 1983
End of regular monthly polling	May 2001	November 1997	December 2008	December 2008
Responses	Unprompted	Unprompted, Combined	Unprompted	Unprompted, Combined
Categories: Min	7	7	7	7
Categories: Max	33	19	37	36
Categories: Mean	18.48	12.87	26.78	23.80
Total %: Min	94	149	95	158
Total %: Max	140	205	112	316
Total %: Mean	101.02	174.21	99.43	241.60
Source	King and Wybrow (2001) and monthly volumes of the Gallup *Political and Economic Index*.	Monthly volumes of the Gallup *Political and Economic Index*.	Monthly releases of the Ipsos-MORI *Political Monitor* and data provided by Roger Mortimore of Ipsos-MORI.	Ipsos-MORI website (www.ipsos-mori.com) and monthly releases of the Ipsos-MORI *Political Monitor*.

[22] Data for the first MII question is not available, hence the later date than for the OII question.

Table A2. Categories for Ipsos-MORI's MII & OII

AID	AIDS
AW	Animal Welfare
BF	Bird Flu/Flu Pandemic
BSE	BSE/Beef
Coa	Coal Review/Pit Closures
Com	Common Market/EU/Europe/Single European Currency
Cou	Countryside/Rural Life
Cri	Crime/Law & Order/Violence/Vandalism
Def	Defence/Foreign Affairs/International Terrorism
Dev	Devolution
Dru	Drug Abuse
Eco	Economy/Economic Situation
Edu	Education/Schools
Foo	Foot And Mouth Outbreak/Farming Crisis
Ger	German Reunification/Eastern Europe
GM	GM/GM (Genetically Modified) Foods
Hea	Heathrow/third runway at Heathrow
Hou	Housing
Inf	Inflation/Prices
Inn	Inner Cities
Int	Interest rates
LG	Local Government/Council Tax/Poll Tax
Low	Low Pay/Minimum Wage/Fair Wages
Mor	Morality/Individual Behaviour
Nat	Nationalisation
NHS	NHS / Hospitals / Health Care
NI	Northern Ireland
NP	Nuclear Power/Fuels
Nuc	Nuclear Weapons/Nuclear War/Disarmament
Pen	Pensions/Social Security
Pet	Petrol Prices/Fuel
Pol	Pollution/Environment
Pou	Pound/Exchange Rate/Value Of Pound
Pov	Poverty/Inequality
Pri	Privatisation
Pub	Public Services In General
Rac	Race Relations/Immigration/Immigrants
Rho	Rhodesia
SA	Scottish Assembly
SWA	Scottish/Welsh Assembly/Devolution Constitutional Reform
Tax	Taxation
TU	Trade Unions/Strikes
Tsu	Tsunami/South East Asia
Tra	Transport/Public Transport
Une	Unemployment/Factory Closure/Lack Of Industry
Vio	Violence/bombings/terrorists
Oth	Other
DK	Don't Know

Table A3. Categories for Gallup's MIP & OIP

A	Economic Affairs, including production, finance, trade and employment
B	Cost of living, prices, inflation
C	Unemployment, employment, three day week
D	Other economic affairs, other economic problems, other economic issues, income tax
E	Education, services for young people
F	Health, hospitals and medical services
G	Housing, rents, mortgages, rates, mortgage rates
H	Immigration, immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees
I	Strikes, labor relations, trade unions, unions
J	Pensions, services for old people, services for the elderly
K	Roads and transport
L	Poll tax, council tax
M	Vice ring, law and order, corruption
N	Fuel shortage
O	Social security benefits, social security, welfare
P	Increase productivity
Q	Colonial affairs, Commonwealth, including Rhodesia
R	Defence, armaments, nuclear weapons
S	International affairs, relations with other countries, peace
T	Common Market, Europe, Euro
U	Ireland, Northern Ireland, Irish Problem
V	Environment, Ozone Layer
W	Middle East, Middle East Crisis
X	Other
Y	None, no problems particularly important, don't know, refused
Z	Nothing
AA	Mad cow, mad cow disease, BSE
AB	Petrol prices, fuel prices, fuel/petrol tax, problem, crisis
AC	Crime
AD	Crime, law and order, corruption
AE	Drugs
AF	Police
AG	Floods, weather, water, environment, ozone layer, greenhouse effect
AH	Weather, greenhouse effect, floods, water
AI	Environment, ozone layer, greenhouse effect
AJ	Floods, the weather, water
AK	Farming, agriculture, countryside
AL	Drought
AM	Food shortage
AN	Genetically modified food
AO	Foot and mouth
AP	Flu/Epidemic
AQ	Bosnia
AR	Kosovo
AS	Railway Crisis
AT	Transport, roads, traffic, railways
AU	Transport, roads, traffic (excl. railways)
AV	National unity
AW	Strength of the pound, exchange rates
AX	Taxation, high taxation, taxing systems, taxes
AY	Economy, recession
AZ	Industry, business, trade
BA	Poverty, deprivation
BB	Homelessness, homeless, homeless people
BC	The Dome, money going to/wasted on the Dome
BD	Government problems/dishonest/should leave
BE	Government out of touch
BF	Government spending/monetary problems
BG	The Government, leadership, ministers
BH	Public services

Table A4. Correspondence of the Gallup and Ipsos-MORI Categories

Category	**Ipsos-MORI**	**Gallup**
Economy & Tax (includes productivity, trade, recession, business, interest rates)	Eco, Tax, Int	A, D, AY, AX, AZ, P, BF
Inflation & Prices	Inf, Pet	B, AB
Unemployment	Une	C
Law, Order & crime	Cri, Vio	M, AC, AD, AF
Immigration & Asylum	Rac	H
Defence & International Affairs (includes Commonwealth, Middle East, Kosovo, Bosnia, Nuclear Weapons & Disarmament, German reunification, Eastern Europe)	Def, Ger, Nuc, Rho, Tsu	R, S, Q, W, AQ, AR
Roads & Transport	Tra, Hea	K, AS, AT, AU
Health & NHS	NHS, AID, BF	F, AP
Education	Edu	E
Strikes, Trade Unions & Labour Issues	TU, Low, Coa	I
Pensions & Welfare	Pen, Pov	J, O, BA, BB
Housing	Hou	G
Northern Ireland	NI	U
Europe, Common Market & Single Currency	Com	T
Environment & Pollution (includes drought, floods, weather, greenhouse effect)	Pol, GM, AW, BSE, Cou, Foo	V, AI, AJ, AG, AH, AL, AK, AA, AK, AM, AN, AO
Council Tax, Poll Tax.,Local Government & Cities	LG, Inn	L
Pound, Strength of the Pound & Exchange Rates	Pou	AW
Other, None & DK	*All other categories*	*All other categories*
E.g. government, public services, devolution, privatisation, fuel shortage, drugs, national unity, morality,	Dev, Dru, Mor, Nat, NP, Pri, Pub SA, SWA, Oth, DK, N	N, X, Y, Z, AA, AE, AV, BC, BD, BE, BG, BH

Table A5. Response of Ipsos-MORI/Gallup MIP/MII Categories to Exogenous Variables

	ΔMIP_t (Economy – All)	ΔMII_t (Economy – All)		ΔMIP_t (Inflation)	ΔMII_t (Inflation)		ΔMIP_t (Unem)	ΔMII_t (Unem)		ΔMIP_t (Strikes & TUs)	ΔMII_t (Strikes & TUs)
MIP_{t-1} / MII_{t-1}	-0.249†	-0.252†	MIP_{t-1} / MII_{t-1}	-0.267*	-0.266†	MIP_{t-1} / MII_{t-1}	-0.350*	-0.387*	MIP_{t-1} / MII_{t-1}	-0.298*	-0.633**
	(0.126)	(0.140)		(0.101)	(0.148)		(0.158)	(0.146)		(0.110)	(0.211)
ΔLeading Economic Indicators$_t$ (inverted)	1.119*	1.391*	ΔRPI_t	1.292***	1.485***	$\Delta UNEM_t$	11.585***	10.803***	$\Delta STRIKES_t$	34.356***	41.171***
	(0.529)	(0.493)		(0.254)	(0.203)		(1.414)	(1.469)		(1.410)	(7.375)
Leading Economic Indicators$_{t-1}$ (inverted)	1.228***	1.096***	RPI_{t-10}	0.070	0.208	$UNEM_{t-1}$	3.288†	2.759†	$STRIKES_{t-1}$	11.063*	30.545*
	(0.308)	(0.293)		(0.276)	(0.360)		(1.715)	(1.418)		(4.563)	(14.021)
Constant	118.392***	106.268**	Constant	1.623	0.202	Constant	-13.718	-9.932	$\Delta UNIONS_t$	91.822*	329.759†
	(31.855)	(30.643)		(1.227)	(1.297)		(9.016)	(7.918)		(33.622)	(179.039)
									$UNIONS_{t-1}$	-2.975	2.533
										(6.529)	(34.044)
									Constant	0.621	0.220
										(1.004)	(5.217)
Adjusted R^2	0.469	0.527		0.722	0.824		0.751	0.711		0.987	0.835
Durbin-Watson d-statistic	2.124	2.008		1.370	2.317		2.075	2.321		2.081	2.185
Breusch-Godfrey (1)	0.300	0.105		2.620	1.132		1.004	2.534		0.123	3.167
ARCH χ^2 (1)	0.502	0.171		0.034	0.006		0.671	1.390		2.501	0.136

† $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$ N=24, Start=1978, End=2001

Note: Strikes=Days lost to labor disputes per year per capita; Unions=Membership of Trade Unions per capita

Table A6. An Analysis of Interdependence among MIP and MII Responses, 1978-2001

	$ECONOMY_t$		**$FOREIGN_t$**		**$SOCIAL_t$**		**$OTHER_t$**	
	MIP	MII	MIP	MII	MIP	MII	MIP	MII
Intercept[a]	114.939*** (23.911)	116.194*** (21.834)	10.932† (6.217)	-0.184 (8.907)	-52.801*** (14.121)	-44.287*** (11.567)	-54.984** (18.317)	-41.554* (17.215)
$ECONOMY_{t-1}$	0.766*** (0.086)	0.698*** (0.090)	-	-	-	-	-	-
$FOREIGN_{t-1}$	-	-	0.203 (0.205)	0.578** (0.196)	-	-	-	-
$SOCIAL_{t-1}$	-	-	-	-	0.649*** (0.109)	0.630*** (0.105)	-	-
$OTHER_{t-1}$	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.699*** (0.137)	0.677*** (0.132)
Leading Economic $Indicators_t$ (inverted)	1.198*** (0.244)	1.184*** (0.222)	0.103 (0.070)	-0.028 (0.102)	-0.680*** (0.172)	-0.577*** (0.143)	-0.735** (0.215)	-0.609** (0.199)
Adjusted R^2	0.884	0.874	0.073	0.231	0.844	0.865	0.662	0.632
Durbin-Watson d-statistic	2.140	1.921	2.006	1.811	2.401	2.295	2.081	1.971
Breusch-Godfrey (1)	0.334	0.024	0.122	0.662	1.767	1.163	0.609	0.000

† $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$ N=24, Start=1978, End=2001