

# **CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTERGOVERNMENTAL POLICY RESPONSIBILITIES**

Saundra K. Schneider  
William G. Jacoby  
Michigan State University  
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sks@msu.edu  
jacobym@msu.edu

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## **ABSTRACT**

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 citizen's attitudes about the general responsibilities of each level of government, as well as their beliefs about which level of government should handle specific societal problems. We find that people make rational assessments of national, state, and local responsibilities. In fact, public opinion corresponds quite closely to actual policy efforts manifested at different governmental levels. Moreover, citizens' perceptions of specific programmatic activities are guided by a combination of general beliefs about governmental responsibilities and assessments of economic capacities. We believe that these findings have important implications for general theories of public opinion, democratic responsiveness and citizen input in policymaking.

Public input is an essential component of policymaking in a democratic political system (Dahl 1956; Schattschneider 1960). In order for this process to work successfully, citizens 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 process depends upon the effective translation of the public will into governmental decisions.

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. Are American citizens interested in, and informed about, governmental activity? Do they have clear preferences about what they want government to do? Do they know which governmental units are best able to represent their interests?

The American federal system was designed to facilitate citizen input into governmental policymaking (Downs 1999). By dividing responsibilities across different levels of government, this would give citizens more opportunity to influence the decisionmaking process. But, the complexities of the American federalism system may well prevent the general public from fulfilling the role that is assigned to it on the basis of normative considerations (Arceneaux 2006).

Stated simply, it is extremely difficult to sort out the various policy functions of the national, state, and local governments. During some situations, it seems that no one is really in charge of making or implementing policymaking (Reischauer 1977). While at other times, it appears that the “wrong” level of government is involved (Schneider 1995). 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 low

levels of political sophistication and relatively fragmentary understandings of the policy process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

Very little is known about public opinion regarding the policy responsibilities assigned to different levels of American government. And yet, 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 modern 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 perceptions and interpretations about intergovernmental responsibilities can have serious political consequences. If citizens mistakenly attribute responsibility to the one level of government and that level of government does not act in an effective manner, it can lead to criticisms of governmental responsiveness and effectiveness (Hetherington and Nugent 2001). This kind of process may well be occurring in contemporary American politics. On the one hand, the United States is currently undergoing a shift in some policy responsibilities (e.g., in the areas of 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 2000; Conlan and Dinan 2007). 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). 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).

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 because of their closer proximity to the underlying problems?

In order to address the preceding questions, we examine how the mass public views the role of the national government vis-a-vis state and local governments in American policymaking. More specifically, we use new data from a national survey to analyze citizen's attitudes about the general responsibilities of each level of government, as well as their beliefs about which level of government should handle specific societal problems. We find that people make rational assessments of national, state, and local responsibilities. In fact, public opinion corresponds quite closely to actual policy efforts manifested at different governmental levels. Moreover, citizens' perceptions of specific programmatic activities are guided by a combination of general beliefs about governmental responsibilities and assessments of economic capacities. We believe that these findings have important implications for general theories of public opinion, democratic responsiveness and citizen input in policymaking. And, they also have practical political consequences for the division of power across levels of government in the American federal system.

## **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, a number of 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 something of 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. Here, 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’ 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 (see also Reeves 1986 for a similar view).

Other scholars suggest that the public prefers typically 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.). But, during the mid-1990's 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 activities 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 American 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.

What accounts for the wide variability in findings and the apparent complexity of public opinion toward governmental policy responsibilities? For one thing, different researchers have examined different things. 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 specific public programs or substantive policy areas. Other analysts have examined opinions about specific policy responsibilities; in other words, should the national or state 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 governmental policy responsibilities at some level. But, it is not clear that they 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 non-attitudes. 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). 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 taking on specific problems and issues. But, survey respondents do not like to display ignorance, so the result might be responses to survey questions which consist of largely random “noise” rather than crystallized opinions.

In the analysis presented below, we try to address all of the preceding concerns. First, we distinguish between general orientations and specific beliefs. Second, we examine the degree to which opinions conform to political realities, as well as the degree of systematic structure that exists within policy-specific beliefs. And third, we consider the relationship between general orientations about governmental activity and specific beliefs about policy responsibilities. We believe the results from our analysis provide a clear and coherent picture of public opinion toward the policy activities of the national and subnational governments in the United States.

## **DATA**

Our analysis relies upon data drawn from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). 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 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 presented with 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.”

For each of these statements, responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from “agree strongly” to “disagree strongly.”

The survey also included a battery of items that tapped respondents’ beliefs about 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 are: assisting elderly Americans; protecting the environment; reducing crime; providing a good education; guaranteeing equal opportunity for all racial groups; reducing unemployment; regulating immigration; maintaining public roads, bridges, dams, and the like; providing financial assistance to the poor; protecting the rights of individuals with special needs, such as the blind and the disabled; guaranteeing equal opportunity for women; controlling the use of illegal drugs; developing public transportation systems; controlling illegal firearms; providing health care for all Americans; controlling hazardous toxic waste materials; promoting economic development; helping victims of natural disasters— e.g., floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, etc.; and promoting urban development and revitalization. So, for each of these policy areas, we have data on respondents’ perceptions 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 governmental 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 1 illustrates 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 in a negative direction. Given the coding of the items, this means that the public wants *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%) 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%) 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). But, Figure 1C shows that it would hardly be accurate to say that the public is hostile toward the national government. Instead, 63.9% agree that the federal government should do more. At least when thinking about the problem in broad terms, Americans clearly want more active government than they currently have.

Next, Figure 2 provides a graphical display which 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. In each panel, the height of the leftmost bar represents

the percentage of respondents who believe that the national government should take the lead in that policy area. The height of the middle bar shows the percentage who believe the states should take the lead. And, the height of the rightmost bar corresponds to is the percentage who believe that local governments should take the lead.

The figure shows that there is wide variability across policy areas. 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.

Figure 2 also shows that there are several policy areas where citizens believe that the states should 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.

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 it 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 BELIEFS CONSISTENT WITH POLICY REALITY?**

As we explained earlier, citizens' beliefs 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 perceptions about 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). Accordingly, we take the amount of spending in each policy by each level of government expressed as a proportion of the total spending in that area by the national, state, and local governments. Note that expenditure 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. This should be sufficient to discern any general patterns in the connection between public opinion and program spending.

Figure 3 shows a scatterplot of the percentage of respondents who said the national government should take the lead in each of the nine policy areas versus the percentage of total

government spending in each policy area that is contributed by the national government. There is a clear, positive—indeed, nearly linear—relationship between these two variables. The correlation is 0.81. Public perceptions about the national government’s role in specific areas is mirrored very closely by the national government’s actual commitment in each of those areas.

Figures 4 and 5 show similar scatterplots for public opinion about state and local policy activities versus state and local proportions of total spending. Once again, both of these scatterplots show positive relationships. However, the patterns are not as clear as it is at the national level. The correlations between opinion and spending are only 0.34 at the state level and 0.60 at the local level. So, it remains the case, that public support for state and local activity is generally mirrored in the sizes of relative expenditures exhibited at those governmental levels. However, there seems to be quite a bit of “slippage” between the two.

In summary, public opinion seems to differentiate fairly accurately between the policy activities of the national and subnational governments. But, within the latter, the distributions of public opinion do not really conform very closely to the relative contributions of state and local governments. 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 (REF?). 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 discerning 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 quite consistent with actual governmental activity at all three levels.

## STRUCTURE AND COHERENCE IN CITIZENS' BELIEFS

Up to this point, we have investigated the macro-level distribution of public opinion about policy responsibilities. Here, we will change direction slightly and examine micro-level patterns in the responses. Specifically, we are interested in determining 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 sub-national 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 sub-national levels and the national level are coherent and clear. Second, the long, contentious history of American federalism has always emphasized the competition between the state and national governments (Peterson 1995; Donahue 1999). Third, modern political rhetoric often focuses on the distinctions between the 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 state governments) than as choices among three interrelated alternatives. Thus, there are theoretical, political, and practical reasons for limiting our attention to the national and state governments.

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 are 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 attitudes, we will fit a nonparametric item response theory model to the data, using an approach called Mokken scaling. 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 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 implies that there is systematic variation across the policy areas, as well as across the respondents. In other words, there is a specific sequence of policies that is encountered as one moves from one end of the scale to the other. This enables very precise interpretations of individual scale scores in terms of specific policy areas. And, if the policy-specific items are mutually scalable, it also constitutes strong empirical evidence that there is a meaningful characteristic generating the systematic structure observed in the data.

Applying the Mokken scaling procedure to our data, the results indicate that thirteen of the policy-specific items are mutually scalable. Figure 6 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 reflect the degree of popular support for subnational action in each domain. For example, urban, 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 should 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 individual 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 6, we see that this hypothetical individual would support state/local action in education, economic development, reducing crime, and urban development. The same person would also say that the federal government would 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 6 shows that the distribution of policy specific beliefs is unimodal and nearly symmetric with a slightly heavier upper tail. 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. Relative few people say that state/local governments are responsible for most policy areas. And even fewer believe that the national government has pervasive responsibilities.

Once again, the scale only incorporates thirteen of the nineteen specific policy areas. It excludes immigration, toxic waste, gun control, public works, drugs, and public transportation. The nonscalable nature of the latter six items does not necessarily imply that public opinion in any less coherent or well-formed with respect to these policy areas. It simply means that responses 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. For the remainder of the analysis, we will focus on the scale created from the responses to the thirteen policy areas; the nonscaleable items will not be considered further.

## **THE LINKAGE BETWEEN GENERAL AND SPECIFIC POLICY RESPONSIBILITIES**

Earlier, we suggested that general feelings about governmental responsibilities and beliefs about 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 beliefs 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.

Specific beliefs about governmental responsibilities are operationalized using the Mokken scale developed in the previous section. Again, this variable gauges the extent to which individuals believe the state and local governments, rather than the national government, should 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. The important question is whether one of these affects the other. Psychological theories can be invoked to support either causal direction. For example, a scenario in which specific policy assessments influence general beliefs about governmental responsibility is consistent with the cognitive-driven reasoning chains described by Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991). Alternatively, the opposite causal path, from general beliefs to specific policy assessments, could represent affect-

driven reasoning (e.g., Brady and Sniderman 1985; Marcus, Neuman, MacKuen 2000). Thus, we need to allow for reciprocal influences across the general and specific policy orientations and we employ a nonrecursive system of structural equations in order to do so.

The general structure of our model is shown in Figure 7. Of course, the most interesting elements for present purposes are the paths connecting the two types of beliefs about governmental policy responsibilities. In addition to those, we hypothesize that general feelings about policy responsibilities will be affected by party identification and ideological 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). Both of these variables are measured in the usual manner, with seven-point scales in which larger values indicate stronger Republican affiliations and more extreme conservative positions, respectively (and vice versa for Democratic identifications and liberal self-placements).

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 standard understandings, we expect minority respondents to 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, Brady 1995; Schneider and Jacoby 2003).

Our measure of sociotropic evaluations represents individual feelings about the performance of the local versus the national economies. 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 the community economy to be better than the health of the national economy, and vice versa.

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 beliefs is 0.34. Both of these goodness of fit values are excellent, given the nature of public opinion data. 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 type of beliefs. People who believe 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 attitudes 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 common measurement scales. The 2SLS estimates are 1.10 and 0.23, respectively, showing that effect of general preferences for national versus subnational governmental activity on specific policy orientations is more than four times larger than the influence of specific attitudes on general beliefs about policy responsibilities.

Thus, people use their overall evaluations of national versus subnational effectiveness as a heuristic device to determine their feelings about which level of governments should handle particular policy problems. This lends support to the affect-driven reasoning chain described earlier. However, that conclusion must be tempered somewhat by the fact that policy-specific orientations still have a statistically significant impact on general attitudes. So, cognition-driven reasoning (i.e., moving from specific policy beliefs to more general assessments about national and state government effectiveness) does appear to play a role (although less pronounced than affect-driven reasoning or the likeability heuristic) in shaping 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 liberal/conservative self-placement affect people's general attitudes toward the two levels of government. The coefficient for partisanship is 0.11 and the coefficient for ideology is 0.14. Democrats and liberals are more inclined to support national government involvement in policymaking, while Republicans and conservatives prefer that subnational governments take the leader in guiding public policy developments (Roeder 1994; Cole and Kincaid 2006).

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 -0.85, indicating that non-white respondents favor the national government over state/local efforts when it comes to specific policy problems. Similarly, the negative value for the employment variable 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.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this analysis has been to examine citizen's beliefs toward the policy responsibilities of the national, state, and local governments. We believe that our research produces several important results. Our findings reveal that the American public is able to clearly identify its preferences for intergovernmental activity across a range of policy areas. And, citizen's beliefs about governmental policy responsibilities correspond quite closely to 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 its 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. A number of other prominent studies report that citizens are uninformed, confused, and misguided about governmental activities (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 beliefs about specific levels of government that should be involved in different program areas. Thus, our analysis shows that the American public has very rational, consistent, and accurate ideas about the respective policy responsibilities of the national, state, and local governments.

Our findings also have immediate political relevance. Over the past decade, the federal government has become more involved in a wide range of policy areas— from education to disaster relief (Conlan 2007). Some scholars contend that this shift in federal/state responsibilities reflects the every-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). 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.

Much of the debate over which level of government should be responsible for policymaking takes place among political elites— national, state, and local officials, interest

group representatives, and journalists (Rivlin 1992; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Peterson 1995). But, all important and sustained political issues also require a public response to elite initiatives (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Therefore, to understand the debate over federalism in the United States, as well as the consequences it has on society, we must also understand citizens' opinions about the policy activities of the local, state, and national governments.

Our research shows that the American public has well formulated, rational opinions about the policy responsibilities of various levels of government. These orientations reflect Americans' understanding of, and 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 clear idea what they want local, state, and national governments to do in public policymaking. But, they also feel that governmental institutions at all levels should be doing *more* to deal with important problems at issues. So, it is not clear if citizens believe that their policy preferences are getting translated clearly or effectively into governmental policy. If not, this could be contributing to more general feelings of public dissatisfaction about governmental performance. This, in turn, has important implications for the role of public opinion about intergovernmental policy responsibilities in the American political system



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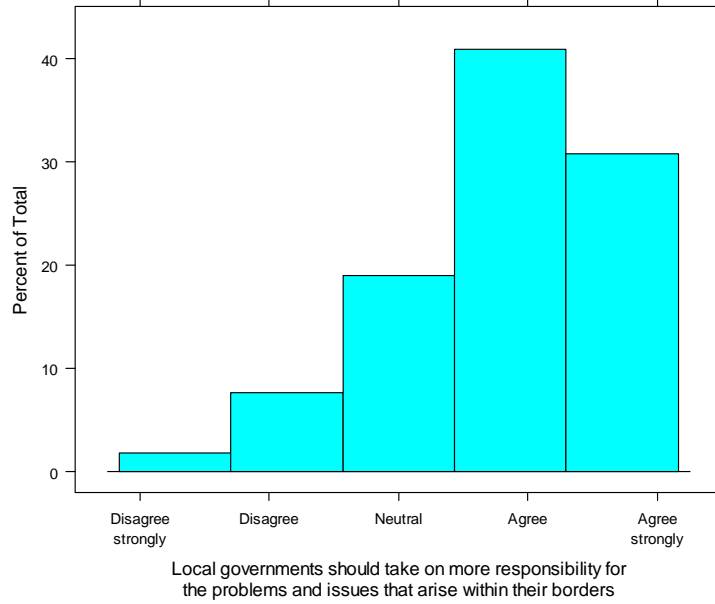
**Table 1:** Two-stage least squares coefficient estimates of parameters in model of reciprocal influences between general evaluations of governmental policy responsibilities and beliefs about which levels of government should take the lead in specific policy areas. Figures in parentheses are standard 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	—	1.100 (0.064)
Beliefs about specific policy areas	0.219 (0.018)	—
<i>Exogenous variables:</i>		
Party identification	0.108 (0.033)	—
Ideological self-placement	0.139 (0.068)	—
Non-white race	—	-0.852 (0.259)
Respondent is not working	—	-0.461 (0.228)
Sociotropic economic evaluations	—	0.272 (0.190)
Intercept	-2.124	7.178
R <sup>2</sup>	0.350	0.336

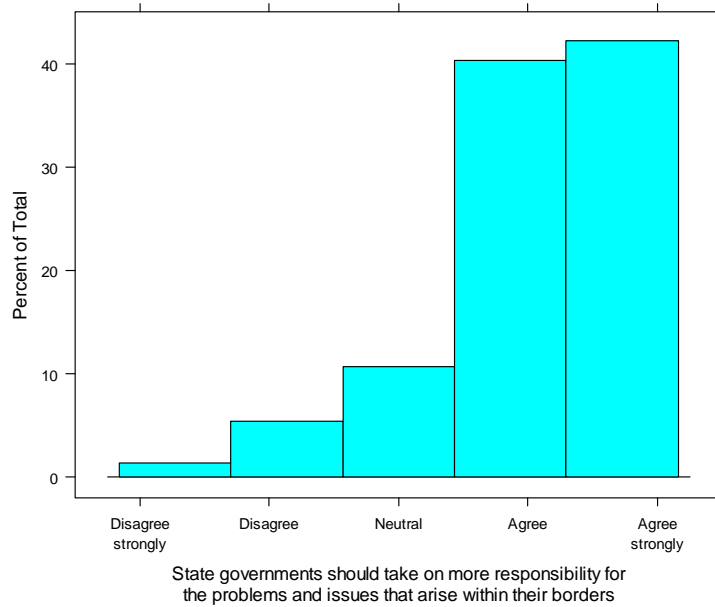


**Figure 1:** Distribution of opinion about general policy responsibilities at different levels of government.

A. Local governments.

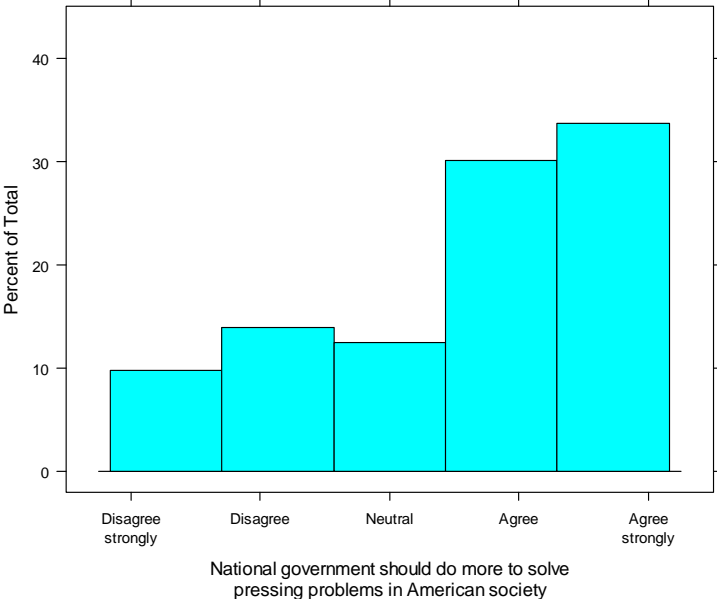


B. State governments.



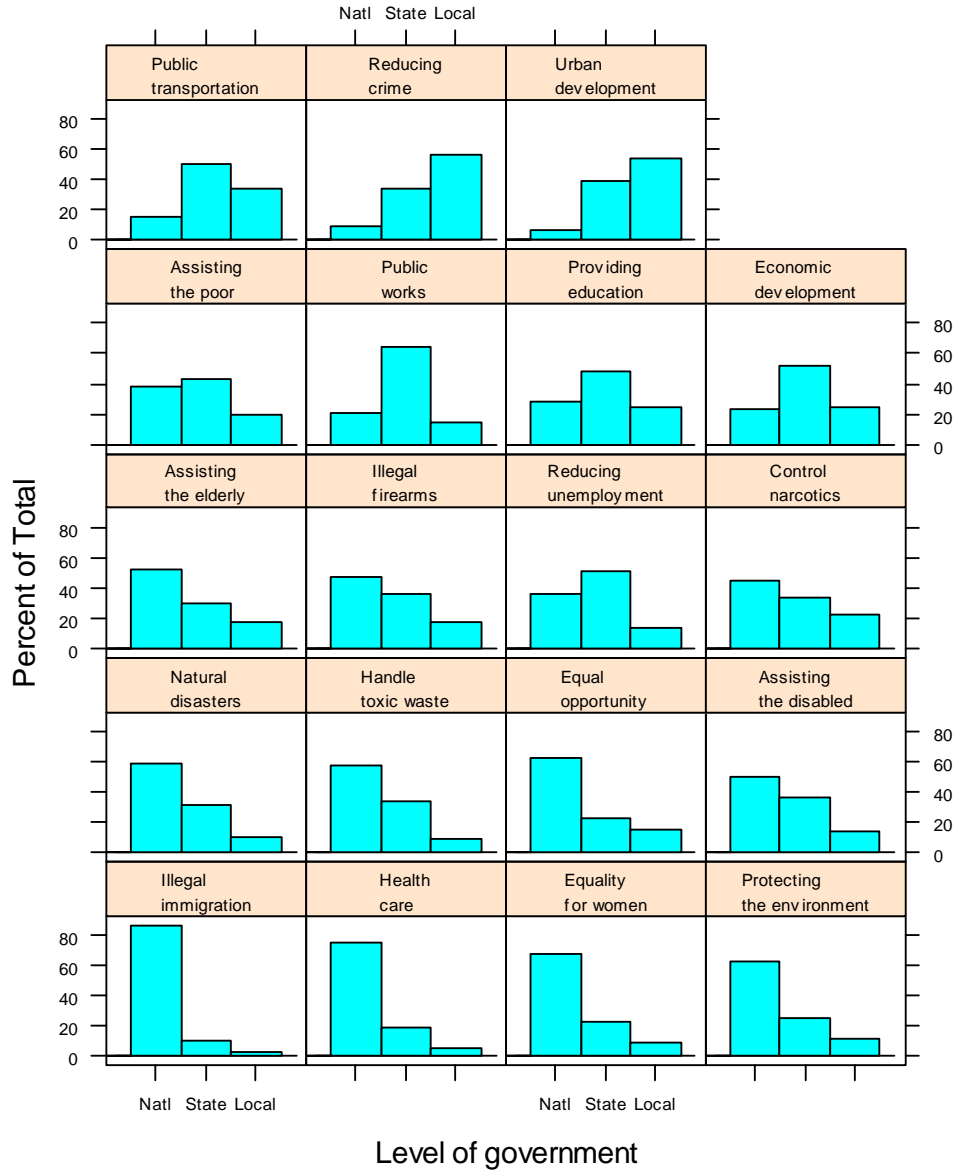
**Figure 1:** Distribution of opinion about general policy responsibilities at different levels of government (Continued).

C. National government.



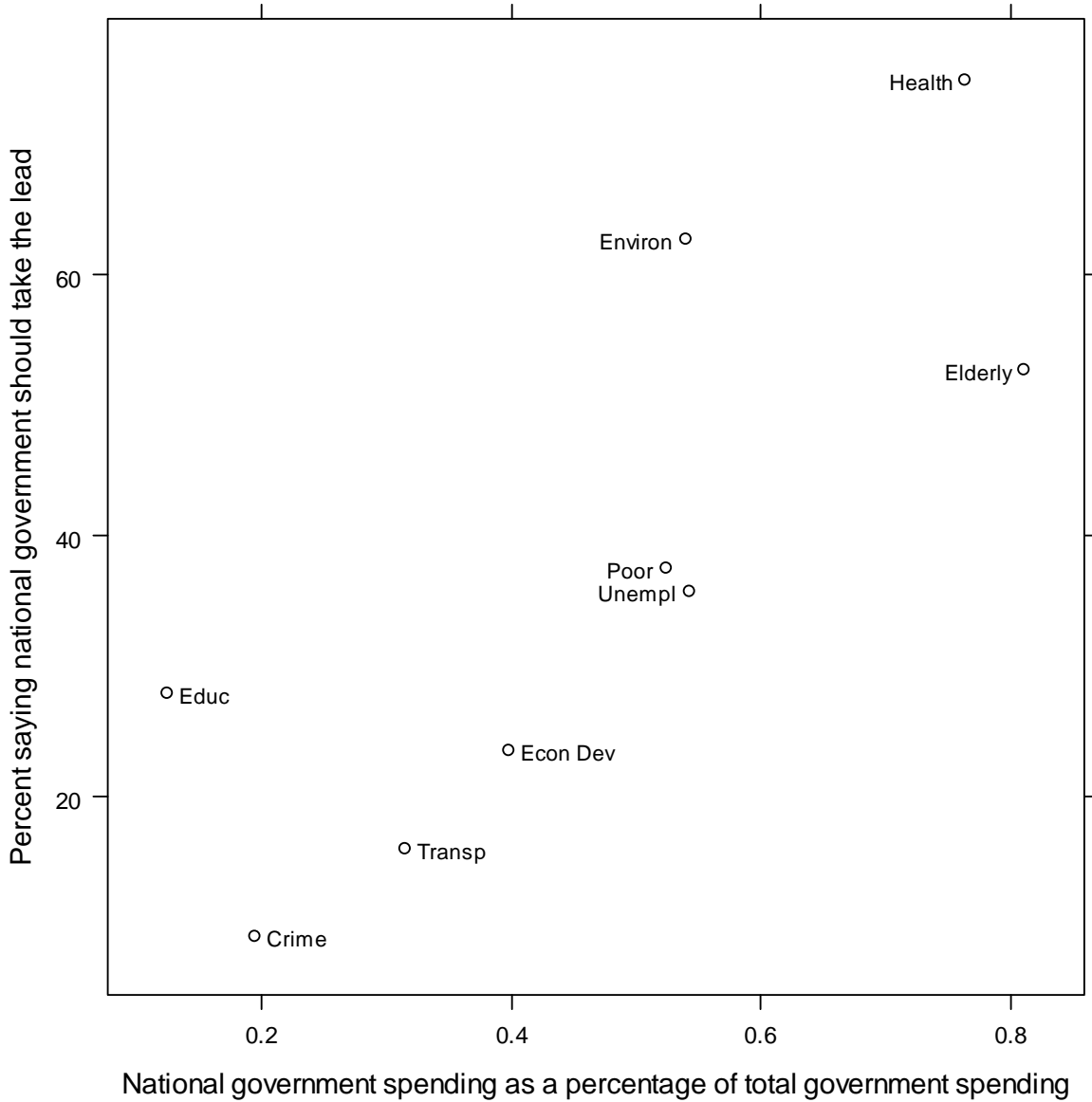
**Source:** 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Number of observations used to create each figure is 797.

**Figure 2:** Distribution of opinion about which level of government should take the lead in dealing with each of nineteen public policy areas.



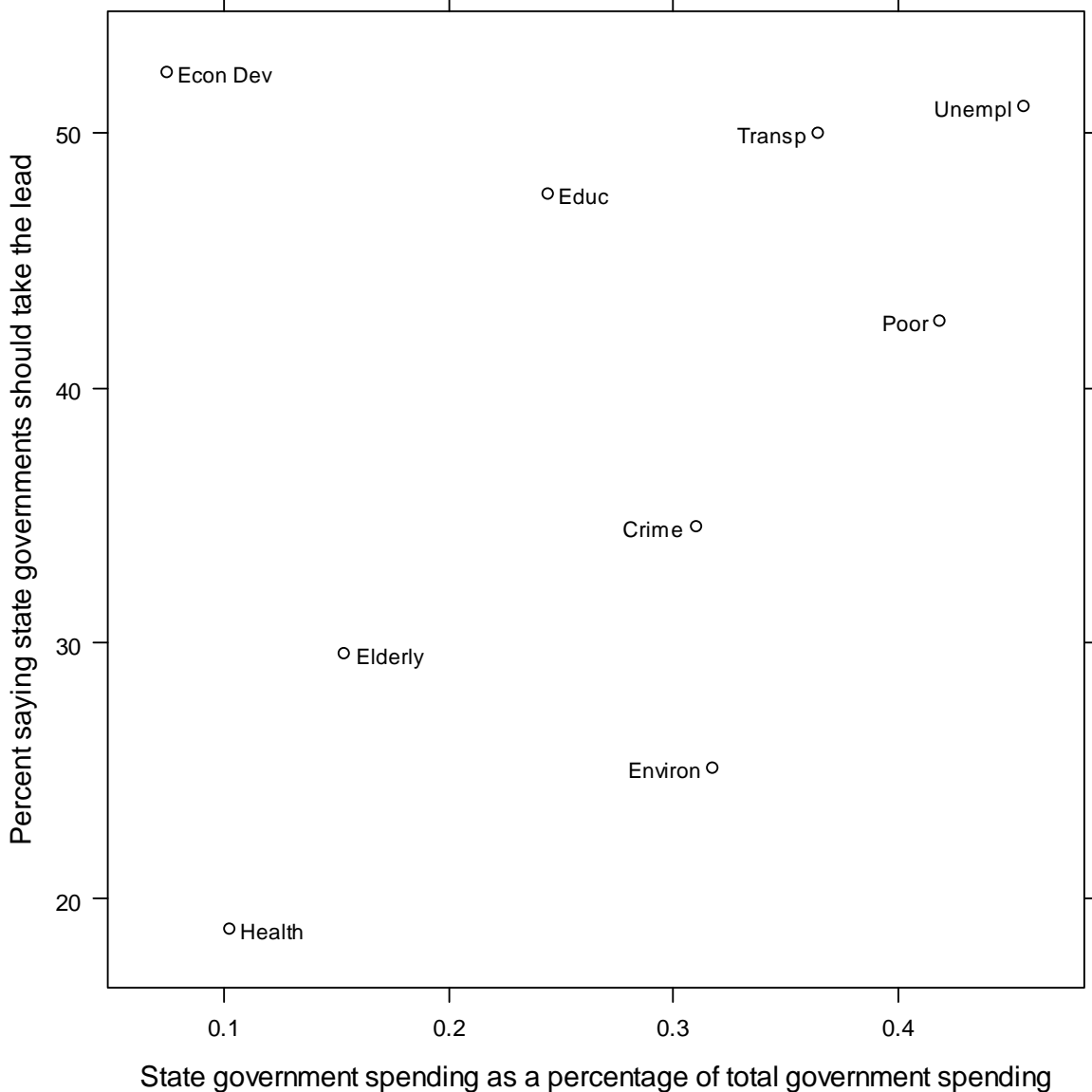
**Source:** 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Number of observations in each histogram ranges from 945 to 994.

**Figure 3:** Scatterplot showing the relationship between public opinion about national government responsibilities and total spending by the national government in each of nine policy areas.



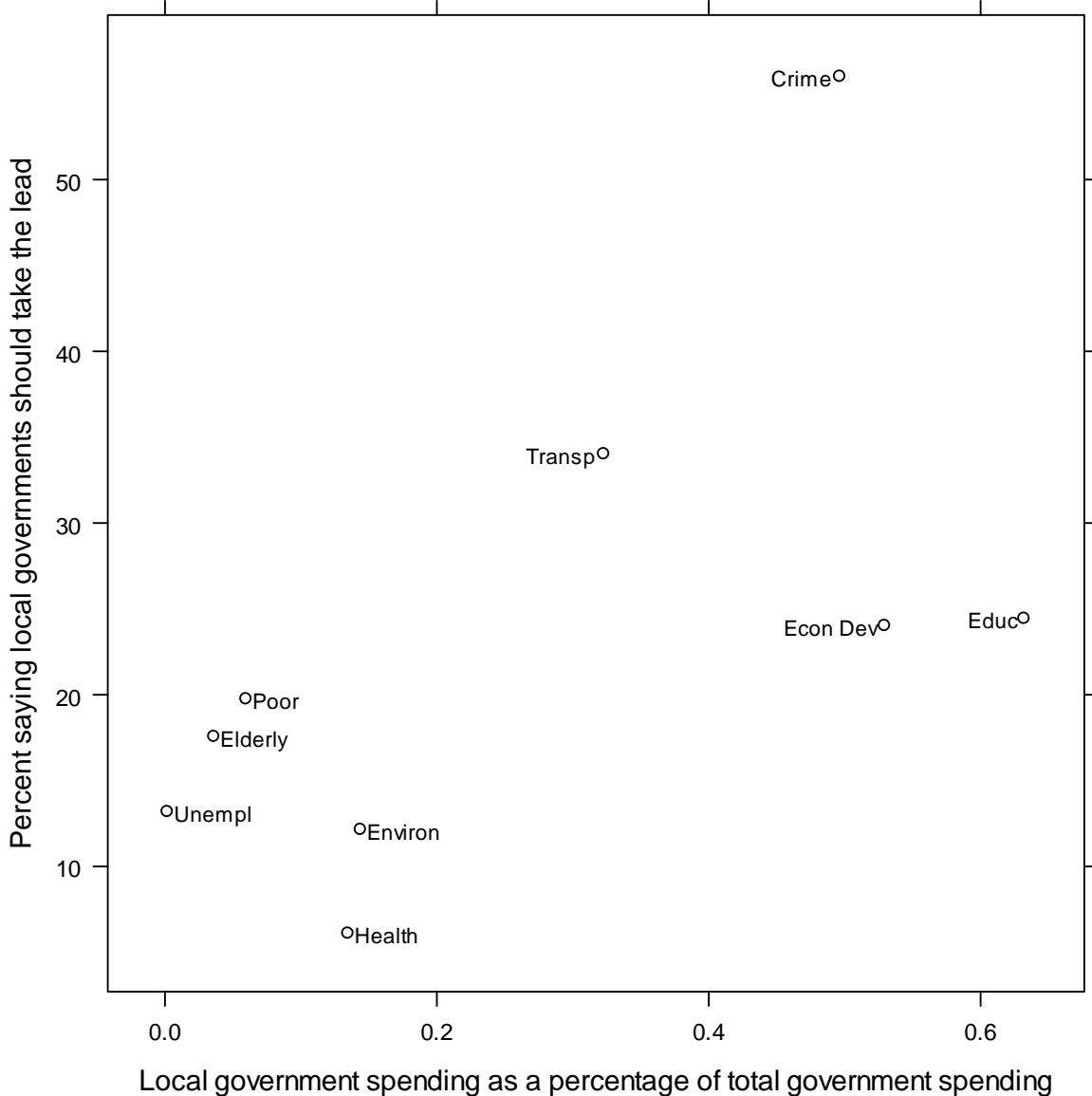
**Data Sources:** Public opinion data are from the 2006 CCES. Government spending data are from *The U.S. Statistical Abstract 2008*, “Federal Outlays by Detailed Function: 1990 to 2007 (reproduced from the *Budget of the United States Government, Historical Tables*, annual, U.S. Office of Management and Budget, [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/)) and The U.S. Census Bureau, “State and Local Government Finances by Level of Government and by State, 2004-05” ([www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0500ussl\\_1.html](http://www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0500ussl_1.html)).

**Figure 4:** Scatterplot showing the relationship between public opinion about state government responsibilities and total spending by the state governments in each of nine policy areas.



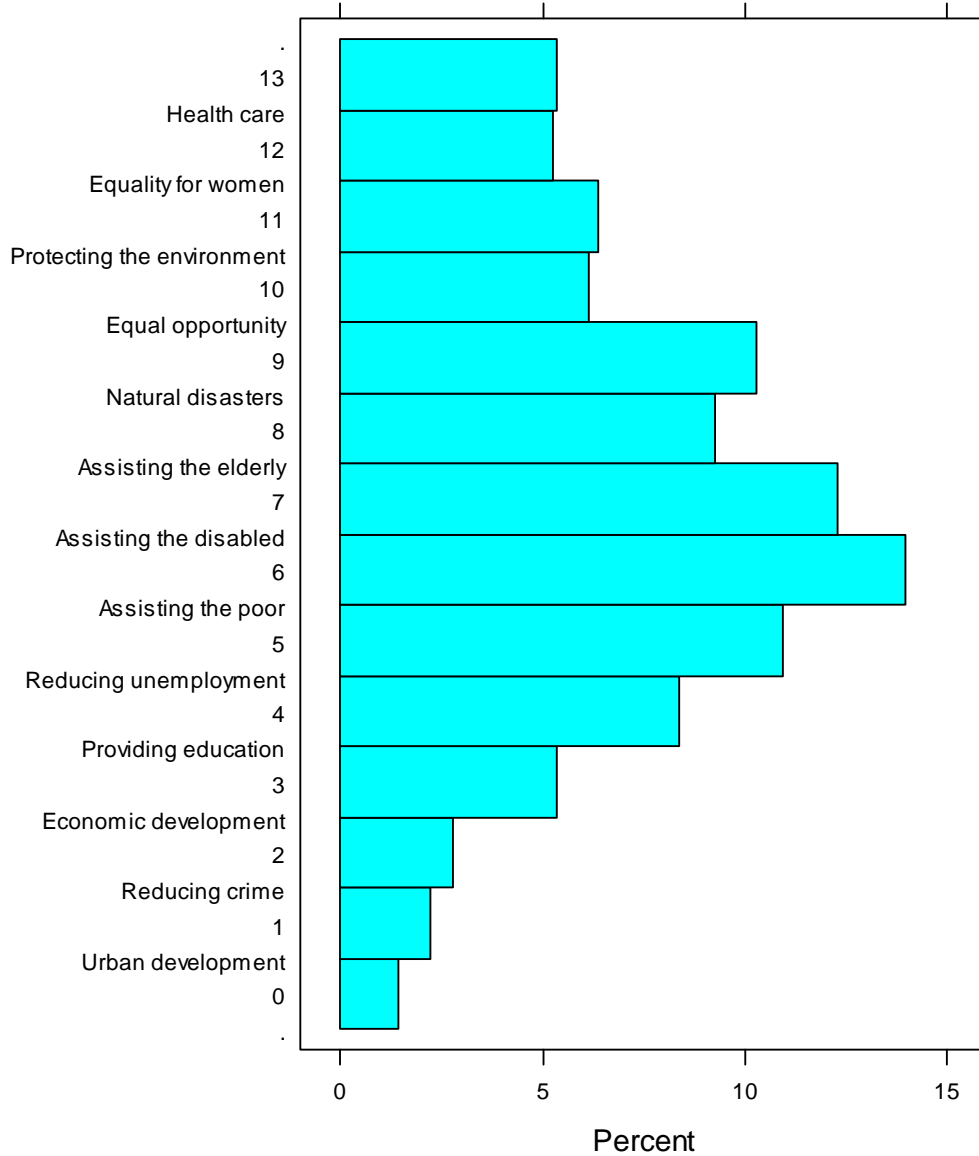
**Data Sources:** Public opinion data are from the 2006 CCES. Government spending data are from *The U.S. Statistical Abstract* 2008, “Federal Outlays by Detailed Function: 1990 to 2007 (reproduced from the *Budget of the United States Government, Historical Tables*, annual, U.S. Office of Management and Budget, [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/)) and The U.S. Census Bureau, “State and Local Government Finances by Level of Government and by State, 2004-05” ([www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0500ussl\\_1.html](http://www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0500ussl_1.html)).

**Figure 5:** Scatterplot showing the relationship between public opinion about local government responsibilities and total spending by the local governments in each of nine policy areas.



**Data Sources:** Public opinion data are from the 2006 CCES. Government spending data are from *The U.S. Statistical Abstract* 2008, “Federal Outlays by Detailed Function: 1990 to 2007 (reproduced from the *Budget of the United States Government, Historical Tables*, annual, U.S. Office of Management and Budget, [www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/fy2008/)) and The U.S. Census Bureau, “State and Local Government Finances by Level of Government and by State, 2004-05” ([www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0500ussl\\_1.html](http://www.census.gov/govs/estimate/0500ussl_1.html)).

**Figure 6:** 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.

**Figure 7:** 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.

