

# Public Opinion in the States: A Quarter Century of Change and Stability

Robert S. Erikson  
Columbia University  
RSE14@columbia.edu

Gerald C. Wright  
Indiana University  
Wright1@indiana.edu

John P. McIver  
University of Colorado  
John.mciver@colorado.edu

Prepared for the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual State Politics and Policy Conference, April  
30-May1, 2004. Cuyohoga Falls, OH

***Abstract:*** This paper updates data from Statehouse Democracy (1993) to incorporate 15 additional years-worth of state-level data on ideological identification and party identification. The analysis examines stability and polarization of opinion over seven presidencies.

# Public Opinion in the States: A Quarter Century of Change and Stability

## *Introduction*

This paper examines state-level ideology and partisanship over time, using over a quarter-century of data from CBS News/*New York Times* polls. This presents an important update of our earlier analysis (Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1994) of state opinion and partisanship, 1976-1988. Here we extend that analysis an additional 15 years. This almost doubles the temporal horizon of our knowledge of state-level preferences using the CBS/NYT data.

This report stresses the following observations.

- In our earlier analysis, state variation in ideological identification was found to be highly stable over time. This pattern has persisted, post-1988.
- Unlike in our earlier analysis, state variation in party identification has shifted, post-1983. Much of this movement is among southern states abandoning their one-time Democratic allegiance for the GOP.
- In the 1976-1988 period, state-level partisanship and ideology were not strongly correlated, and in fact the correlation for data averaged over the 14-year period is slightly negative. Over time, this correlation has become decidedly positive. It is now true that the most liberal states are the most Democratic and the most conservative states are the most Republican.
- We have evidence regarding what caused what. Did partisanship begin to affect ideology or the other way around or both? We see clear evidence that ideology is

the agent for partisan change. The more conservative states moved Republican to align their partisanship more with their ideology.

### ***The Data***

Our data consists of the responses to CBS News/New York Times polls, 1976-2003. At our disposal are over 400,000 sets of responses, more than the current population of Pittsburgh PA. To divide this data into meaningful time segments, we begin with 28 annual time segments. However, the *N*'s per state are too small and uneven to make an annual analysis very fruitful. We discovered that a useful way is to divide the data into seven periods. While the natural way to divide 28 years by seven is to simply do seven four year segments, we instead divided them by presidency. For this paper, we discard 1976 data (Ford presidency) and divide by Carter (1977-1980) through GW Bush (2001-2003), our one presidency with only three years of data. In between we have Reagan I (1981-1984), Reagan II (1985-1988), GHW Bush (1989-1992), Clinton I (1993-1996) and Clinton II (1996-2000).<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 illustrates the individual-level trends over the seven presidencies. Mean ideological identification tilts in the conservative direction and is remarkably stable. Party identification tilts Democratic, but has been moving more Republican over the seven presidencies. Figure 1 graphs these tendencies. For this figure, each observation is the mean of state means over the seven presidencies.

(Table1, Figure 1 about here)

---

<sup>1</sup> The data include all states but Alaska and Hawaii. These two states are dropped because they were not sampled during the early part of our time period. The data analysis here does include the District of Columbia. In future versions, we plan to drop DC, although whether DC is included does not greatly affect the results.

Table 1 also shows the total N's of the individual-level data per presidency. Divided by 49 (48 states plus DC) yields the average *N*s per state, which have a wide variation due to varying population size. In analyzing the state means, we need to adjust for the reliability of the data. Assuming the equivalent of simple random samples, this is straightforward. (See Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1994, Chapter 2, for details.) For ideology, the estimated reliability per presidency varies from .80 to .89. For partisanship, the estimated reliability varies from .91 to .96.

## **Stability**

We have seen that the national mean of ideological identification is stable over time. Here we investigate the stability of the states' relative positions around the state means for the seven presidencies. Party identification has been moving Republican in terms of the overall state mean. Here we examine whether this change is uniform, with stability in state positions relative to the moving mean, or whether relative positioning among the states is also changing.

Table 2 shows the pattern of reliability-corrected over-time correlations for ideology. For ideology, correlations are high—ranging from .82 to an impossible 1.01 (where the estimated reliabilities exceed the observed correlation). State-level ideological difference persist over the half century. States do change their ideological position but the evolution is slow-moving.

(Table 2 about here)

Table 3 shows the pattern of reliability-corrected over-time correlations for party. The correlations range further for partisanship than ideology, from a low of .66

(between Carter and GW Bush) to a hefty .99 between Clinton I and Clinton II. Clearly there has been more movement of relative state partisanship than of relative state ideology.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 4 summarizes the two sets of over-time correlations as mean correlations for the various time gaps between presidencies—from one term to six. Clearly, the correlations decline with the time gap, as it should be. We can try to fit an AR1 model to these correlations (meaning that earlier history is of no predictive value once the previous period's score is known), with the assumption of a steady rate of correlation decay per the number of periods  $t$  as  $r^t$ . The ideology data roughly fits a pattern where the correlation declines at a rate of  $.97^t$  where  $t$  is the gap between readings. For party, the fit is roughly with a rate of  $.95^t$ .

(Table 4 about here)

In summary, this analysis clearly shows a remarkable stability to ideological preferences in the states. States do not make sudden liberal or conservative turns. Even partisan change, which is remarkable because it happens at all, is a gradual process.

Some may think that this message of stability defies what we know about elections in the states, where Democrats and Republicans often oscillate in power. These temporary electoral shifts in party preference do not represent shifts in ideology and (in the short term) not even in partisanship. Rather, state shifts in state-level voting may represent shifting policy demands due to one party being in power long enough to shift policy in its favor and away from the state's median voter. For example, if the Republicans hold power in a conservative state long enough, they will push policy

sufficiently in a conservative direction that the state's voters elect the Democrats to power to provide an ideological correction.

### ***Polarization***

It is approaching common knowledge that the United States is becoming increasingly polarized in terms of the party-ideology connection. Whereas once, liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats were once commonplace, that is no longer true today. Here we can document this process at the state level.

Table 5 displays the cross-sectional correlations between ideology and partisanship in terms of state-level mean identification. With the outlier DC included, even during the Carter presidency, state liberalism and state Democratic partisanship were weakly correlated, at .22. Since the Carter years, this correlation has increased in non-monotonic fits and starts, to where it surged to .79 during the GW Bush presidency.

(Table 5 about here)

Over time data of our sort allows some testing of which caused which. We simply regress current values of the selected dependent variable on lagged values of this variable plus lagged values of the presumed causal variable. With seven presidencies, we can set the “current values” to be those for each of six presidencies. Table 6 shows the results predicting current values of ideological identification. Table 7 does the same for party identification. In each case we conduct the exercise while adjusting for reliability—using the ‘eivreg’ program within STATA.

Table 6 shows the results for ideology as the dependent variable. These results are decisive. In five of the six regressions, the estimated impact of party on ideology is

actually negative and in one case (mysteriously) statistically significantly so. Thus there is no statistical argument that state-level partisanship influences state-level ideology.

(Table 6 about here)

Table 7 shows the results for party identification as the dependent variable. These results suggest that ideology moved partisanship. The equations suggest not a steady impact but rather two periods where the impact of ideology was particularly strong. These were the first Clinton presidency and again the GW Bush presidency. In each case a change of party in the White House signaled a partisan shift in response to ideology.

(Table 7 about here)

The influence of ideology on party can most clearly be seen by regressing GW Bush partisanship on ideology and partisanship from the Carter presidency. The results of this exercise are shown in Table 8. Whether comparing the unstandardized coefficients, the standardized coefficients (betas), or t-values, the greater of the two “effects” is ideology! Thus, to understand whether a state is Democratic or Republican in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is slightly more informative to know its ideological preferences during the Carter years than knowing the state’s earlier partisanship. Meanwhile, if we regress GW Bush ideology on ideology and partisanship from the Carter presidency (not shown in a table), the partisanship coefficient is small, insignificant, and negative. (The lagged ideology coefficient is a sturdy 0.94).

(Table 8 about here)

The growing correlation between partisanship and ideology is clearly driven by partisanship coming into alignment with ideology. This is as if the electorate has been

re-sorting as Democrats and Republicans on the basis of their ideological leanings *relative to the national parties*. In *Statehouse Democracy* (Erikson, Wright, and McIver, 1994), we observed a pattern whereby state partisanship was governed by the ideological preferences of state electorates *relative to those of the state parties*. We do not have data to offer here on state party elites, so we cannot say whether these shifts have a state party basis or people are responding to the ideological polarization of the national parties and shifting/adopting partisanship that reflects the differences they see.

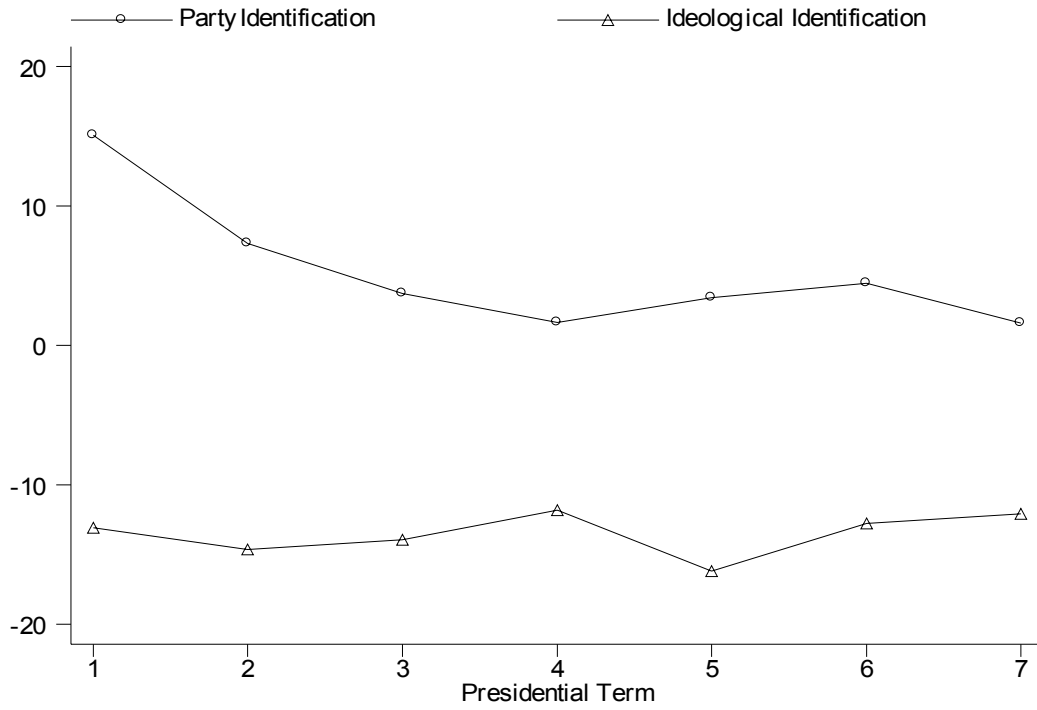
Much of the evolution has occurred in the south. If we analyze the nonsouth alone, the movement has been more modest than for the nation as a whole. Table 9, our final table, shows this. In the nonsouth, ideology and partisanship were modestly correlated even during the Carter years. For these nonsouthern states, the increase in the correlation has been gradual and slight, given its already modest level in the 1970s. The increased state polarization is largely—but not entirely—a phenomenon due to the changing South.

(Table 9 about here)

### ***Reference***

Erikson, Robert S., Gerald C. Wright, and John P. McIver. 1994. *Statehouse Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.





**Figure 1.** Mean State Party Identification (Dem. minus Rep.) and Mean State Ideological Identification (Lib. Minus Cons.) by Presidential Administration, Carter to GW Bush.

**Table 1. Mean Ideological and Partisan Identification over Seven Presidencies, CBS News/New York Times Individual-Level Data.**

		<i>Ideology</i> (-100= Cons., 0=Mod., +100=Lib.)		<i>Party</i> (-100= Rep. 0=Ind., +100=Dem.)	
		Mean	N	Mean	N
1	Carter	-11.74	36,694	14.50	40,450
2	Reagan I	-12.88	43,668	9.08	45,810
3	Reagan II	-13.10	55,420	4.42	64,877
4	GHW Bush	-11.18	70,062	2.43	72,138
5	Clinton I	-15.05	89,880	4.34	93,860
6	Clinton II	-11.64	88,446	5.76	93,041
7	GW Bush	-11.27	40,258	2.26	42,871
<hr/>					
All Cases ('77-'03)		-12.58	424,428	5.54	453,047

**Table 2. Reliability-Corrected Over-time Correlations of State Ideological Identification, 1977-2003, by Presidential Administration**

	<i>Carter</i>	<i>Reagan1</i>	<i>Reagan2</i>	<i>GHWBush</i>	<i>Clinton1</i>	<i>Clinton2</i>	<i>GWBush</i>
<i>Carter</i>							
<i>Reagan1</i>	.92						
<i>Reagan2</i>	.99	.93					
<i>GHWBush</i>	.93	.91	.97				
<i>Clinton1</i>	.89	.86	1.01	.95			
<i>Clinton2</i>	.84	.82	.94	.97	1.00		
<i>GWBush</i>	.83	.76	.85	.92	.92	1.00	

N=49; Alaska and Hawaii excluded; DC included.

**Table 3. Reliability-Corrected Over-time Correlations of State Party Identification, 1977-2003, by Presidential Administration**

	<i>Carter</i>	<i>Reagan1</i>	<i>Reagan2</i>	<i>GHWBush</i>	<i>Clinton1</i>	<i>Clinton2</i>	<i>GWBush</i>
<i>Carter</i>							
<i>Reagan1</i>	.94						
<i>Reagan2</i>	.92	.98					
<i>GHWBush</i>	.82	.95	.98				
<i>Clinton1</i>	.77	.85	.93	.94			
<i>Clinton2</i>	.77	.88	.95	.92	.99		
<i>GWBush</i>	.66	.68	.86	.82	.96	.96	

N=49; Alaska and Hawaii excluded; DC included.

**Table 4. Mean Reliability-Corrected Over-Time Correlation by Time Gap in Number of Presidential Administrations.**

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Ideology</i>	.96	.95	.91	.85	.80	.83
<i>Party</i>	.96	.94	.86	.84	.73	.66

**Table 5. Reliability-Corrected Cross-Sectional Correlations between State Ideological Identification and State Party Identification**

<i>Carter</i>	<i>Reagan1</i>	<i>Reagan2</i>	<i>GHWBush</i>	<i>Clinton1</i>	<i>Clinton2</i>	<i>GWBush</i>
.21	.44	.27	.37	.46	.54	.79

**Table 6. Reliability-Corrected Regressions of State Ideology on Lagged State Ideology and Lagged State Partisanship**

	<i>Constant</i>	<i>Ideology<sub>t-1</sub></i>	<i>Party<sub>t-1</sub></i>	<i>R Squared</i>
<i>Reagan1</i>	-0.04*	0.78***	-0.02	.75
<i>Reagan2</i>	0.03*	1.05***	-0.23***	.90
<i>GHWBush</i>	0.05**	1.23***	0.08	.89
<i>Clinton1</i>	-0.05***	0.91***	-0.05	.89
<i>Clinton2</i>	0.05***	1.11***	-0.01	.97
<i>GWBush</i>	0.02*	1.13***	-0.02	1.00
<i>Mean</i>	<i>0.01</i>	<i>1.04</i>	<i>-0.04</i>	<i>.90</i>

\*=significant at .05; \*\*=significant at .01; \*\*\*=significant at .001, using two-tailed tests.

**Table 7. Reliability-Corrected Regressions of State Partisanship on Lagged State Ideology and Lagged State Partisanship**

	<i>Constant</i>	<i>Ideology<sub>t-1</sub></i>	<i>Party<sub>t-1</sub></i>	<i>R Squared</i>
<i>Reagan1</i>	-0.05*	0.09	0.91***	.85
<i>Reagan2</i>	-0.01	0.10	0.84***	.92
<i>GHWBush</i>	-0.05**	-0.15	1.14***	.94
<i>Clinton1</i>	0.05***	0.29***	0.88***	.90
<i>Clinton2</i>	0.02*	0.06	0.99***	.97
<i>GWBush</i>	0.02	0.38***	0.90***	.96
<i>Mean</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>0.13</i>	<i>0.94</i>	<i>.92</i>

\*=significant at .05; \*\*=significant at .01; \*\*\*=significant at .001, using two-tailed tests.

**Table 8. Reliability-Corrected Regressions of State Partisanship 2001-03 (GW Bush) on State Partisanship and Ideology 1977-1980 (Carter)**

	<i>Constant</i>	<i>Ideology<sub>t-1</sub></i>	<i>Party<sub>t-1</sub></i>	<i>R Squared</i>
<i>Coefficient</i>	0.05	0.90	0.57	.76
<i>St. Error</i>	0.03	0.15***	0.10***	
<i>Standardized Coefficient</i>	--	0.62	0.54	

**Table 9. (Non-reliability corrected) Correlations between Ideological and Party Identification by Region, for six Presidencies.**

	<i>Carter</i>	<i>Reagan1</i>	<i>Reagan2</i>	<i>GHWBush</i>	<i>Clinton1</i>	<i>Clinton2</i>	<i>GWBush</i>
North (N=35)	.63	.82	.70	.78	.75	.80	.85
South & Border (N=14)	.16	-.09	.20	.15	.00	-.05	.31

South and Border states include the 11 former Confederate states plus Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia.