

Institutional Design and Policy Responsiveness in US States

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Abstract

There is significant disagreement on the moderating role of institutions on policy responsiveness, yet overwhelmingly research in state politics has focused on single institutions. This project leverages a new aggregate scale of state institutions to evaluate if the collective institutional context moderates the influence of public opinion on policy. I use a recently released latent scale of institutional context and find that high levels of accountability pressure strongly strengthen public opinion's influence on policy for both economic and social policy, while the strength of a state's checks and balance system is largely unrelated to policy responsiveness. These results demonstrate the importance of incorporating aggregate institutional design into our understanding of the role of institutions in state politics, and that collectively institutions play a large role in determining how public opinion is translated into policy.

How do state institutions collectively influence the relationship between public opinion and policy? Questions of policy responsiveness are central to how political scientists evaluate democratic governance, as few would call a system democratic if policy was completely unrelated to public preferences. In the American context, there is a significant body of research documenting a correlation between public opinion and policy (Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993; Caughey and Warshaw 2018; Soroka, Wlezien et al. 2010; Pacheco 2013), but a robust debate on whether responsiveness is largely constrained to responding to the preferences of the wealthy (Gilens 2012), or that any responsiveness is largely an artifact of the voting based on partisan identity, not policy preferences (Achen et al. 2017). This debate has led to increased research on the conditions when state policy is more (or less) responsive to public preferences.

There has been extensive research on whether institutions can affect the ways in which governments respond to public opinion (Gerber 1996; Matsusaka 2010; Lax and Phillips 2012; Maestas 2000; Pacheco 2013), but the evidence is decidedly mixed with some finding that certain institutions can moderate this relationship, and others finding no effect. Yet very little scholarly attention has been given to understanding how a state's broader institutional context influences state policy. The focus on specific institutional reforms, while important, is cannot evaluate institutions fit together and influence state politics. Individual institutions may have small effects that are difficult to consistently capture empirically, and institutions may have multiple effects that are hard to capture with an indicator. A collective measure of institutional design may provide a clearer picture of how institutions modify policy responsiveness among other phenomena.

I propose scholars also use aggregate institutional measures to understand the role of *institutional context* in state politics. This approach mirrors comparative research that argues single institutions are necessary but insufficient alone in measuring latent concepts such as democracy (Treier and Jackman 2008). This approach also allows researchers to measure multiple dimensions by which institutions are organized (Lijphart 1999; Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado 2008), meaning researchers can better incorporate multiple effects that institutions may have. A latent scale of institutions along shared dimensions can incorporate overlapping effects that institutions

may share, and a dynamic measure of institutional context reflects the time-varying nature of state institutional design. I argue this approach can help scholars understand the largely unknown collective effect of state institutions. Rather than evaluating a single institution, this project explores the extent to which institutions can collectively moderate public opinion's influence on policy.

I use a recently published measure of state institutional context along two primary dimensions (LaCombe 2021). The first dimension, accountability pressure, represents measures the extent to which states have institutions that either incentivize responding to the median voter or provide resources for state actors to learn about public opinion, including an easy to use initiative process, high levels of legislative professionalism, and relatively strict campaign finance rules. The second dimension, checks and balances, measures the extent to which a state has power separated into different branches of government versus concentrated in a single, powerful branch.

I extend the models from Caughey and Warshaw (2018), and unlike the original analysis I find evidence that institutional context has a large moderating effect on public opinion's association with policy on both social and economic policy. This effect is particularly large for social policy, but institutional context is vital for economic policy responsiveness. Regardless of institutional context, states are at least somewhat responsive to social liberalism, whereas only states with relatively high levels of accountability pressure respond to public preferences on economic policy. When states have chosen a series of institutions designed to increase accountability, public opinion has more than twice the influence on policy compared to states that lack this institutional context.

While previous research has produced mixed findings on the role of individual institutions, these findings highlight the promise of incorporating institutional context into research in state politics. By organizing institutions along their anticipated effects, scholars can more clearly identify cases by which institutions do and do not influence state policy. A more comprehensive measure of state institutional groups organizes institutions by their anticipated effects, while also allowing for those with multiple, differing effects, to be organized along multiple institutions.

1 Policy Responsiveness

There is a long tradition of measuring how public opinion is translated into policy at the state, national, and cross-national level (Miller and Stokes 1963; Burstein 2003; Lupia et al. 2010; Bartels 1991; Wlezien 1996; Soroka, Wlezien et al. 2010; Warshaw 2019). Research on policy responsiveness in US states has found that there is an association between public opinion and policy, although there are significant disagreements over who the government is responding to and the direction of the relationship. Some argue that political elites are merely responding to wealthy and organized interests (Gilens 2012; Page and Gilens 2017; Bartels 2018), and that any relationship between public opinion and policy is coincidental. Others contend that the public largely lacks defined opinions, and the direction between public opinion and policy should be reversed. Rather than the public pushing for preferred policies, policy drives attitudes (Hill and Hurley 1999; Manza and Cook 2002). Despite these disagreements, research has generally found that states with more liberal populations have more liberal policies on average (Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993; Lax and Phillips 2012; Caughey and Warshaw 2018).

Scholars have identified two primary mechanisms in which public opinion is translated into policy- selection and adaptation (Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson 1995; Caughey and Warshaw 2018). Selection occurs when voters decide who they want to represent them in a governing body. Parties compete on a platform, and voters select their preferred candidate. Those candidates then implement the policies that they ran on, thus translating voter preferences into policies. Unresponsive politicians are voted out of office and replaced with ones that are more in line with public opinion. Elections help keep legislators in line with public opinion, because they will lose election if they deviate too far from pivotal voter's preferences. Elections play an important keeping politicians in line with public preferences.

Yet state-level elections occur every two to four years depending on the office. If elections were the only way in which public opinion can be translated into policy then public opinion's influence on policy would be inconsistent at best. Particularly in a two party system it can be difficult for politicians to misinterpret electoral results as a broad endorsement of their platform

(Kogan 2016). The recent nationalization of American politics (Hopkins 2018; Caughey, Dunham and Warshaw 2018) has made it even more difficult for state and local politicians to interpret their election as a sign of ideological support versus a function of economic or national political forces (Lowry, Alt and Ferree 1998). Elections alone provide very little information to politicians about public preferences (Grossback, Peterson and Stimson 2007; Peterson et al. 2003), even more so in a polarized and nationalized political environment (Kogan 2016).

The second mechanism, adaptation, focuses on how public opinion influences policies between elections. Politicians are strategic actors, and may change their views to become in line with public opinion in order to maximize their chances of re-election. A politician may change their official stance on a policy when it becomes clear their constituents oppose that policy. While elections drive the selection mechanism, adaptation occurs through changes in public opinion. This mechanism can only function if elites are aware of public opinion (Geer 1996). There is considerable debate on the extent to which mechanism most strongly influences policy responsiveness, with some arguing that selection dominates (Fowler and Hall 2017; Bafumi and Herron 2010) and others adaptation (Soroka, Wlezien et al. 2010; Caughey and Warshaw 2018). Responsiveness occurs through some combination of selection and adaptation.

2 Mediating Role of Institutions

Institutions structure the resources and incentives available to political actors when governing. US states make ideal cases to study the role of institutions in policy responsiveness because they have considerable institutional variation, are nested in the same national context, and there are reliable cross-sectional and over time measures for both policy outputs and public opinion.

One of the primary reasons institutions are expected to influence responsiveness is that they structure the amount and quality of information available to policymakers about public preferences. Before the 1960s, policymakers had little polling data which forced them to rely on election results to determine if they were in line with public opinion (Geer 1996). Winning reelection provided some evidence of public support, but given that the US has largely been a two-party system for most of its history, voters could not electorally indicate support for some components of a can-

didate's platform, but opposition others pieces (Kingdon 1967). Politicians frequently relied on their own intuition of what their district/constituency wanted (Fenno 1978). Their perceptions of their constituencies were a product of interpersonal connections with the district. However, these interactions are not typically representative of the general population. Not only are activists typically more polarized on issues than the general population, but Broockman and Skovron (2018) find that constituents who contact policymakers tend to skew more conservative than the general population. This poor information environment has been found to result in local party elites from both parties overestimating the conservatism of their constituents, which can lead them to be more supporting of ideologically extreme candidates (Broockman et al. 2021). Numerous institutions have been created over the last century to help overcome informational deficiencies to give policymakers more accurate information about public opinion. For example, the ballot initiative provide information to officeholders if they are out of step (Matsusaka 2018; Kogan 2016; Bowler and Donovan 2004), and highly professionalized legislatures have more resources to learn about public opinion (Squire 1992; Pacheco 2013). The higher quality the information, the better governing actors are able to respond to public opinion.

Institutions also can affect the types of candidates that run for office, and in the case of direct democracy, change the policies that a state adopt. Rules governing campaign finance laws affect the selection mechanism by structuring incentives for candidates to moderate or cater to ideological extremes. Individual campaign donations tend to be driven more by ideology, whereas when parties play a stronger role in the nomination process candidates tend to be less polarized as they converge near the center of the ideological spectrum to maximize election prospects (Barber 2016; La Raja and Schaffner 2015). The adoption of term limits also shifted the incentive structure for state legislators (Lewis 2012), leading to different legislative behavior including some evidence of higher levels of policy-opinion congruence (Lax and Phillips 2012). Additionally, both the direct and indirect effect of the ballot initiative can force legislators to adopt policies they otherwise would not because the public can use the "gun behind the door" to force policy moves (Gerber 1996; Matsusaka 2001).

Institutions also structure the ease of moving the status quo. If a system is so rigid that the status quo cannot change, then it will be unable to change policy in response to changing public opinion. Scholars have evaluated the extent to which institutional configurations give different governing actors negative agenda control (Tsebelis 2002). In the US context some have argued that negative agenda control is so powerful that the system is defined by stasis, with occasional shocks to the system forcing movement in the status quo (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). Systems with more institutional veto points respond more slowly to changes in public opinion because they need a higher critical mass of actors to move the status quo (Henisz 2004).

Despite a rich literature in the politics of American states evaluating specific institutions, far less attention has been paid to collective effect of institutions on policy responsiveness. Some institutions may have an additive effect on policy responsiveness, while others may counter balance each other. While there are clear reasons to evaluate individual institutions, I argue researchers should also take a collective approach to understand the total effect of institutions on policy responsiveness. If institutional design was measured by including separate measures of ten or twenty institutions, not only would the model lose degrees of freedom, but scholars would be assuming that institutions have independent effects on responsiveness to public opinion. A latent variable approach acknowledges that many of these institutions have overlapping contributions to their moderating effect of public opinion.

Furthermore, this approach can allow for measuring multiple dimensions of institutional design (Lijphart 1999; Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado 2008), meaning that researchers can model multiple, distinct effects that institutions may have. For example, the ballot initiative is expected to push policy closer to the median voter (Matsusaka 2018), but also changes the gridlock interval for policy change (Boehmke, Osborn and Schilling 2015) leading to changes in the rate at which states adopt policies (LaCombe and Boehmke 2021). Similarly, professionalized legislatures can learn more about constituent opinion and become more responsive (Maestas 2003), but also have more resources to check gubernatorial action (Boushey and McGrath 2017). These two theorized effects may play different roles in moderating public opinion's effect on policy. By measuring institutional

context along multiple dimensions, scholars are able to parse out the multiple theorized effects of institutions.

There is a comparative literature that evaluates differences in institutional context, such as the extent to which a democracy is designed to be a majoritarian versus consensus oriented system (Lijphart 1999). Responsiveness scholars recognize that the institutional context structures incentives for politicians to learn about and respond to public opinion (Kang and Powell Jr 2010; Amenta, Caren and Olasky 2005), and have identified important differences in how consensus vs majoritarian systems respond to the public (Wlezien and Soroka 2012). Despite smaller levels of variation, there are important differences in how states organize their policy making institutions. An aggregate measure can better mirror the dynamic nature of institutional design as states change their institutional configurations over time.

The American states make an ideal candidate for studying institutional design because they are nested in the same national context, but have substantial institutional variation. Roughly half of the states have ballot initiatives (and term limits), and legislatures vary considerably in professionalism, ranging from full-time, well staffed legislatures that meet year round, to other legislatures that only have legislative sessions lasting a few weeks every other year (Squire 1992). I use recently published measures from LaCombe (2021) that includes two primary dimensions of state institutions. The first, accountability pressure, is a measure of how institutions structure the ability of politicians to receive information about public preferences. The second dimension, checks and balances, measures the extent to which power is divided across multiple branches of government. Both measures were generated from a Mixed Bayesian Factor Analysis (Quinn 2004) and measure all 50 states from 1975-2015.¹ The measures are normally distributed with a mean of zero and are publicly available. I next overview how each dimension is expected to fit into a model of policy responsiveness.

¹See LaCombe (2021) for a more detailed write up of each dimension.

2.1 Accountability Pressure

The first dimension, accountability pressure, incorporates both the selection and adaptation mechanisms. This dimension measures how institutions structure the types of candidates that run for office and the quantity and quality of information about public preferences that can be seen to governing actors. The institutions that load the most on this dimension regulate elections, include campaign finance limits, voter registration laws, and direct democracy.

For example, laws that restrict the ability of organized interests such as parties and political action committees may increase polarization as they reduce the ability for pragmatic oriented interests to support moderate candidates, which in turn increases the relative influence of more ideologically driven activists (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Barber 2016; Hassell 2018). Although Broockman et al. (2021) find that local party leaders prefer extreme candidates over moderates, they attribute this to the lack of “organizational and informational resources” of state and national leaders. The lack of information about constituent preferences leads to local elites to misperceive constituent ideology and thus misjudge the ideology/electability trade off. A richer information environment about public preferences, which higher levels of accountability pressure are theorized to generate (LaCombe 2021), could lead to local leaders operating more strategically with respect to candidate ideology. This dynamic highlights the importance of studying institutions collectively rather than independently. Absent institutions that facilitate learning about constituent preferences, such as the ballot initiative (Kogan 2016) or legislative professionalism (Pacheco 2013), parties may be less likely to act as a moderating force. However, when accountability pressure is high elites have better informational resources to judge public opinion.

Limitations on individual campaign limits may decrease polarization as individuals tend to be more ideologically or issue oriented than access-seeking interests. Donations send important signals to candidates about their bases of support and the incentives for candidates to polarize or moderate on the campaign trail. While there is evidence that campaign finance limits may strengthen the incumbency advantage, states high in accountability pressure also tend to have term limits, which increase legislative turnover and prevent incumbents from remaining in the same

office for more than a few terms (Moncrief, Niemi and Powell 2004).

States high in accountability pressure have an easy to use initiative process and highly professionalized legislatures. While citizen legislators must rely largely on their intuition to understand district preferences legislators with staffers can accommodate more constituent interactions, and staff can aid legislators with determining what the public prefers (Squire 1992; Maestas 2000; Pacheco 2013). Not only do initiatives allow voters to directly pass preferred legislation, but they also provide important information to politicians about public preferences (Gerber 1996; Matsusaka 2001; Kogan 2016). With more accurate information about preferences, elites are predicted to strategically alter their positioning to maximize their chances of reelection. If they fail to match public preferences, voter also have opportunities to override state policy through direct democracy.

In sum, states that have institutional configurations rated high in accountability pressure tend to be states that incentivize the election of ideologically moderate candidates through their campaign finance system, and also provide ways for officeholders to receive accurate information about public preferences. Importantly, states high in this dimension tend to have all of these institutions, and states low in this dimension generally lack them. So, just evaluating a single institution may attribute the collective effect of an institutional configuration to a single institution. LaCombe (2021) finds that accountability pressure predicts policy congruence across nearly 40 policies in a replication of Lax and Phillips (2012), but these models are only from a single year in time. Extending this analysis to a model of responsiveness can leverage the extensive cross-sectional time-series variation in institutional configuration. Incorporating time varying dynamics will allow for a more thorough investigation of the role of institutional design across states and time, and across different types of policies.

Public opinion should have a greater influence on policy in states high in accountability pressure for a number of reasons. Institutions that loads strongly onto this dimension decreases the influence of narrow interests and refocuses incentives to learning about and responding to the average voter. Additionally, states high in accountability pressure have rules that facilitate the election of ideologically moderate candidates, and institutions such as the initiative that can correct the sta-

tus quo if it deviates from the median voter's preferences. For states low in accountability pressure, low professionalized legislatures are expected to have less information about public preferences, and rules governing elections incentivize ideologically extreme candidates to run for office, and there is no institution such as the initiative to move the status quo back to the median voter.

Hypothesis 1: High levels of accountability pressure will increase the influence of public opinion on policy.

A potential barrier to accountability and responsiveness at the sub-national level is the typical voter pays so little attention to state politics that they are unable to hold representatives accountable because they are unaware of what their legislator supports/opposes (Rogers 2017). Despite this barrier, there is significant evidence of a strong correlation between public opinion and policy at the state level Tausanovitch (2019) for a review. This may suggest that selection is the dominant mechanism for generating responsive policy (Caughey and Warshaw 2018), or the importance of nomination procedures producing candidates that reflect the public's preferences. Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993) suggest that even if voters are unaware of their specific representative's behavior, they do have the heuristics of partisanship and perceptions of state party extremity. If responsiveness is collective rather than dyadic, then the state voting population in the aggregate may be able to hold elites accountable by the group of engaged voters changing their behavior and opinion in response to events (Page and Shapiro 2010). Taking an aggregate approach to both opinion and policy outputs requires less assumptions about voter sophistication and engagement. Although this project is unable to resolve tausanovitch2019subnational puzzle of responsiveness, identifying institution contexts that are related to more responsive policy is a step closer to understanding how institutional resources change elite policymaking behavior.

2.2 Checks and Balances

The second dimension, checks and balances, measures the extent to which power is divided among separate branches of government. The largest contributors to this dimension include ballot initiatives (which empower voters), legislative professionalism and (which empowers the legisla-

ture), as well as gubernatorial power and high veto override requirements (which empower the executive branch). States high in checks and balances have stronger veto actors that can develop their own policy solutions and veto those of other branches. When there are more actors with the ability to stop policy change, the probability of policy change decreases (Tsebelis 2002). When checks and balances is high, it should be harder to move the status quo because more actors have the power to stop policy change. Changes to the status quo will also likely require a larger critical mass of policymakers to override veto points, meaning that it may be difficult to move policy dramatically without risking a veto actor preventing any movement (Krehbiel 2010). This measure is negatively correlated with Boehmke and Skinner's (2012) policy innovativeness measure indicating that states with a strong checks and balance system adopt new policies more slowly and are somewhat less likely to innovate.

I therefore expect high levels of checks and balances to somewhat weaken the relationship between public opinion and policy. While LaCombe (2021) finds no relationship between levels of the checks and balance system and policy congruence, the expectations for policy responsiveness are somewhat different because responsiveness is a dynamic process. Systems with strong checks and balances by design are more resistant to shocks to the system, including in the form of changes to public opinion. So, systems high in checks and balances will respond more slowly to changes in public opinion because larger coalitions must be assembled to move policy. Policy may move closer to public preferences eventually, but changes may be blocked by veto actors.² Public opinion may still influence policy, but changes will be smaller and slower.

Hypothesis 2: High levels of checks and balances will weaken the influence of public opinion on policy.

²The expectations are much less clear for checks and balances when the question is policy congruence rather than responsiveness. If the status quo is aligned with majority preferences, high levels of checks and balances makes continued congruence more likely, whereas when preferences and policy deviate, low checks and balances would increase the probability of congruence.

3 Data and Methods

To test my hypotheses I replicate the models from Caughey and Warshaw (2018) which estimate both social and economic policy responsiveness in US states. The first set of model measures policy responsiveness, and the second set estimate dynamic policy responsiveness by including lagged policy liberalism.³ The authors find that public opinion does influence policy in models of responsiveness and dynamic responsiveness, but that individual institutions have little to no moderating effect on public opinion's influence on policy. I use the same model specifications as Caughey and Warshaw (2018), a linear regression with fixed effects for state and year to control for state or year specific shocks that cannot be modeled.⁴ Standard errors are also clustered by state. As part of the replication the only control included is a lagged measure of unified Democratic control, and the institutional measures described above will replace the institutional interactions in the models. Additional specifications are included to include controls for state income per capita, state population, and the percent of the population that is black (Grossmann and McCrain 2021). I estimate four parallel sets of models, one for responsiveness without controls, dynamic responsiveness without controls, responsiveness without controls, and responsiveness without controls for both social and economic liberalism.

The dependent variables are measures of policy liberalism on economic and social scales.⁵ The measures of policy liberalism are developed by Caughey and Warshaw (2018). This measure includes dynamics estimates for economic and social policy liberalism in the states from the 1930s to 2014. Both measures are estimates from an IRT model that uses data on 150 state policies to identify the relative levels of policy liberalism for each state year. High values indicate state-year observations that have relatively liberal policies, and negative values signify states with relatively conservative policies. This over time measure encapsulates the overall ideological trajectory of a

³I include just a single lag for public opinion to match the specification from Caughey and Warshaw.

⁴As a robustness check models were also estimated with a linear time measure. The conclusion were the same across models. It also should be noted that as the institutional measures are continuous and time variant. Neither measure has repeated values across the time series for each state.

⁵In both cases liberalism reflects the left side of the political spectrum of American politics. More liberal social and economic policy would indicate policy is further to the left ideologically.

state's policies over both the social and economic dimensions.⁶

The key independent variables are the measures of institutional design, accountability pressure and checks and balances that are publicly available for use.⁷ These continuous measures give the relative level of a state's institutional configuration on both dimensions from 1975 to 2015. The base term of both measures does not have a clear theoretical expectation for policy liberalism. Rather, these dimensions are expected to mediate the role between public opinion and policy, so I interact each institutional measure with public opinion.⁸ A positive and significant interaction term would indicate that institutional measures are strengthening the influence of public opinion on policy.

To measure public opinion I use Caughey and Warshaw's (2018) measure of public liberalism on economic and social scales. This measure aggregates hundreds of thousands of survey responses across hundreds of surveys on policy preferences from the last 80 years and aggregates them into large dataset that is then used to generate state-year level estimates for mass liberalism. The scale is relative so very liberal constituencies have high values, and conservative populations negative values. I use the lagged values of mass liberalism to recognize the public opinion is expected to have a delayed effect on policy output because policymakers must learn about public opinion before they are able to respond to it, also also to ensure that the model specification of policy driving opinion (Erikson, Wright and McIver 1993). While policy likely has feedback effects on opinion, public opinion in 1990 is not influenced by policy outputs in 1991. These scales will allow me to evaluate the extent to which state policies respond to public preferences on both economic and social policies.

⁶State-level aggregate measures of public opinion offer several advantages. Errors and randomness in individual voter opinion can cancel out to produce reliable aggregate measures of public preferences (Page and Shapiro 2010). Furthermore, while the average voter is not likely to have a defined opinion on every policy, an general measure such as policy liberalism can average across preferences to estimate an ideological location of a population, and a Bayesian approach can incorporate uncertainty directly into the posterior estimates. See Caughey and Warshaw 2018 for more details on the measurement of both scales.

⁷Because the estimates are a posterior distribution I include parallel analyses for the 2.5% and 97.5% posterior estimates for accountability pressure and checks and balances in the supplemental material

⁸Each dimension was estimated to be orthogonal to the others. As recommended by LaCombe (2021) I combine the first two sub-dimensions into a single accountability pressure dimension. The correlation between accountability pressure and checks and balances is very weak (.008). Models were estimated with accountability pressure and checks and balances included separately an the conclusions were unchanged in both direction and significance

4 Results

Table 1 shows the results for social policy liberalism. Columns 1 and 3 of table 1 model policy liberalism, and columns 2 and 4 changes in policy liberalism (dynamic responsiveness). Holding the institutional measures at their mean of 0, as the public becomes more liberal a state's policy also on average becomes more liberal across all specifications. More liberal public opinion is associated with more liberal policy and more liberal changes in policy. Lagged policy liberalism strongly predicts policy liberalism as expected. In three of the four specifications, the base terms for institutional design have no relationship with policy liberalism. In model three (the model of responsiveness with additional controls) both dimensions are associated with somewhat more conservative policy outputs, but the relationship is substantively small. However, to fully understand the influence of institutional design the interaction terms must be evaluated.

Figure 1 plots the marginal effect of a one unit change in public liberalism on policy liberalism at different levels of both institutional dimensions using the results from model 1.⁹ The two institutional measures have dramatically different moderating effects on public opinion's influence on policy. As accountability pressure increases, public opinion's influence becomes much stronger. At high levels of accountability pressure a one unit increase in public liberalism (roughly a one standard deviation move) results in a half a standard deviation change in policy liberalism. This is substantively a very large effect. Holding public opinion constant a state's social policies can go from being moderate to being half a standard deviation more liberal than the average state just by changing institutional structure. In 2010, this is the equivalent of a state moving from having policy liberalism similar to Pennsylvania (.14) to having a similar profile to Illinois (.81). While a one unit shock in public liberalism would be large, the interaction demonstrates that public opinion has a very different relationship with policy depending on the institutional configuration. The interaction between public liberalism and checks and balances shows a completely different relationship. While public opinion consistently has a positive effect on policy liberalism, the effect remains constant regardless of levels of checks and balances. Accountability pressure has a strong moderating

⁹The histograms show the distribution of observations by their score along each institutional measure.

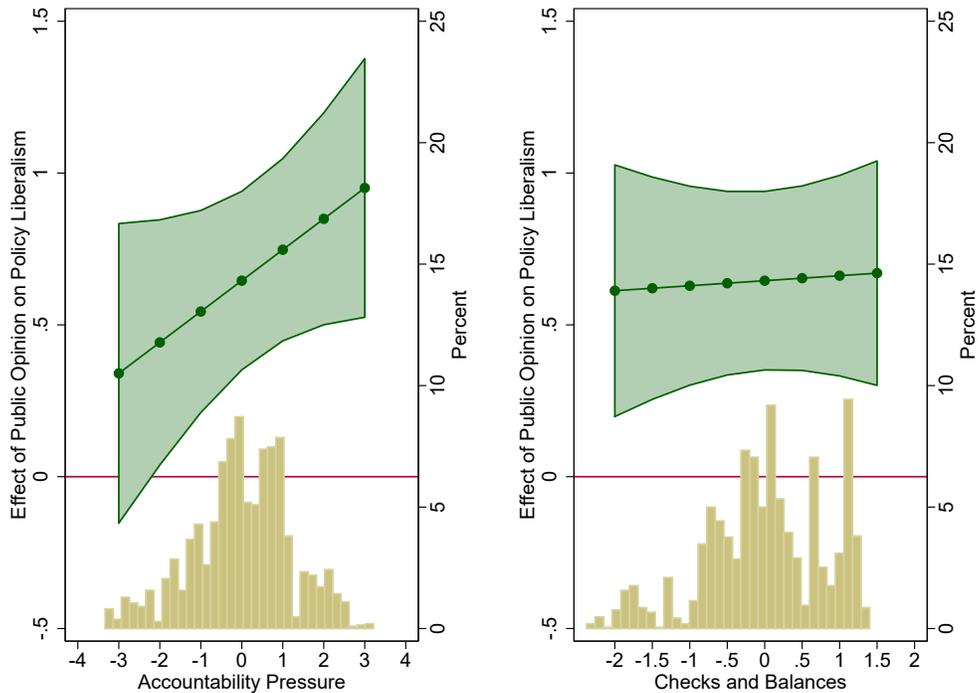
Table (1) Modeling Social Policy Liberalism in the States

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lagged Policy Liberalism		0.9144*		0.9111*
		(0.0130)		(0.0131)
Public Liberalism	0.6455*	0.0680*	0.5718*	0.0531*
	(0.1462)	(0.0200)	(0.1368)	(0.0183)
Public Liberalism × Accountability Pressure	0.1018*	0.0125*	0.0778	0.0134*
	(0.0588)	(0.0064)	(0.0527)	(0.0062)
Accountability Pressure	-0.0363	-0.0135	-0.0534	-0.0103
	(0.0836)	(0.0117)	(0.0833)	(0.0127)
Checks and Balances	-0.0388	-0.0145	-0.0595	-0.0123
	(0.0807)	(0.0116)	(0.0852)	(0.0134)
Public Liberalism × Checks and Balances	0.0165	0.0027	0.0038	0.0044
	(0.0733)	(0.0110)	(0.0704)	(0.0101)
L.Unified Democratic Control	0.0871*	0.0199*	0.1115*	0.0226*
	(0.0400)	(0.0078)	(0.0389)	(0.0080)
Income			-0.0103	0.0033
			(0.1230)	(0.0142)
Population			0.3154*	0.0130
			(0.1808)	(0.0214)
Percent Black			0.0389	0.0094*
			(0.0305)	(0.0045)
Constant	-0.8372*	-0.1294*	-1.8459*	-0.3646*
	(0.2690)	(0.0492)	(0.7894)	(0.1293)
Observations	1911	1911	1911	1911
R^2	0.914	0.985	0.918	0.985
<i>AIC</i>	696.400	-2642.421	617.869	-2644.365
<i>BIC</i>	940.837	-2392.428	878.972	-2377.707

Model includes Fixed Effects for State and Year and standard errors clustered by state. * indicates $p < .1$

influence on public opinion’s influence on policy (lending support for the first hypothesis), but checks and balances do not.

Figure (1) Marginal Effect of Public Liberalism on Social Policy Liberalism ¹⁰



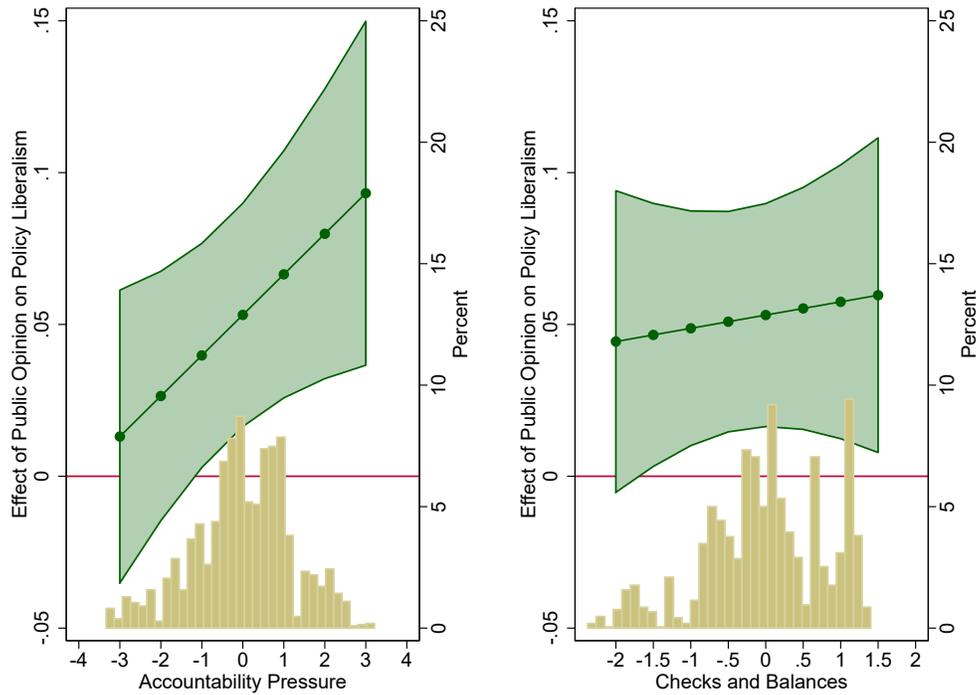
The coefficients for both policy liberalism and the interaction between public liberalism and accountability pressure are much smaller in the models of dynamic responsiveness. This reflects that changes in policy are gradual and that public opinion leads to incremental shifts in policy, not a dramatic change in all policies after a single election. Even after lagged policy absorbs much of the variation in the dependent variable, there is still a significant moderating effect of institutions on public opinion for accountability pressure, but not for the checks and balance system.

Figure 2 plots the marginal effects of the same interactions for dynamic responsiveness using the results from model 4. When accountability pressure is low public opinion is not associated with changes in policy liberalism. This highlights that despite having smaller effect sizes in a model

¹⁰Standard errors for the marginal effects plots have been calculated following the guidance from Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) on modeling interaction terms.

¹¹Standard errors for the marginal effects plots have been calculated following the guidance from Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) on modeling interaction terms.

Figure (2) Marginal Effect of Public Liberalism on Dynamics Social Policy Responsiveness ¹¹



of dynamic responsiveness, institutional design is even more important because states with low levels of accountability pressure see no relationship between public opinion and changes in policy. If institutional designs do not prioritize accountability, then state policy outputs do not move in accordance with public preferences. However, as accountability pressure increases public opinion is associated with policy moving in the same direction, while levels of checks and balances are not associated with the strength of public opinion’s influence on policy. Taken together the two figures support the first hypothesis that accountability pressure increases the effect of public opinion on policy in models of responsiveness and dynamic responsiveness. I do not find support for the the second hypothesis because checks and balances is unrelated to the strength of public opinion’s influence on policy across all models. Across all specifications democratic control is associated with more liberal policy as expected. In both models with controls states with larger black populations have more liberal policies and more liberal changes in policy, while larger population is associated with more liberal policy but not with changes in policy.

4.1 Economic Policy

Table 2 shows the results for the models on economic policy liberalism. In models 1 and 3, holding the institutional dimensions at zero, public liberalism does not predict economic policy liberalism. However, as can be seen in figure 3 there are significant interactive effects for both institutional measures. When accountability pressure is low public opinion is negatively associated with economic policy liberalism, and when accountability pressure is high a one unit change in public opinion results in .5 increase in economic policy liberalism. When one considers that economic liberalism runs from -2 to 3, a .5 increase in economic liberalism is substantively large. This means that holding public opinion constant, high levels of accountability pressure is associated with states being 10% more liberal than states with average levels of accountability pressure and identical public preferences, and more than a full standard deviation more liberal than a state with low levels of accountability pressure. The marginal effects plot highlights the importance of institutional design because under some institutional configurations public opinion and policy are actually moving in opposite direction, which suggests that elites are less responsive to public influence on economic policies unless institutions can incentivize responsive behavior.

The interaction between public liberalism and checks and balances is negative and significant for the models of responsiveness but not for the models of dynamic responsiveness, lending some support to the second hypothesis. A stronger checks and balance system reduces the extent to which changes in opinion are associated with changes in policy output. The results from table 2 indicate that without the proper institutional configuration public opinion has little influence on economic policy.¹² These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that policy responsiveness is stronger for social than economic policy (Caughey and Warshaw 2018). Whether this dynamic driven by the public having less defined economic policy views, or by a greater divergence between the affluent and general public on economic policy (Gilens 2012; Elkjær 2020), or some other trend remains to be tested. Nevertheless, higher levels of accountability pressure are associated with state governments responding more public preferences on economic policy.

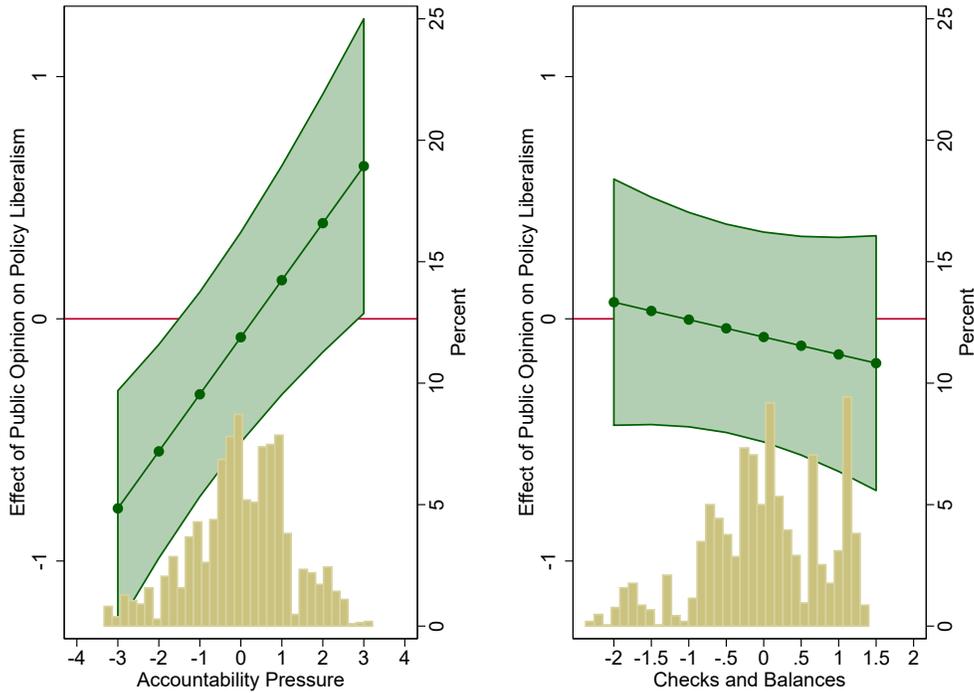
¹²The models were also estimated without the interaction terms, and public opinion still did not predict policy.

Table (2) Modeling Economic Policy Liberalism in the States

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Lagged Policy Liberalism		0.8502*		0.8373*
		(0.0179)		(0.0219)
Public Liberalism	-0.1022	-0.0241	-0.0752	-0.0211
	(0.2324)	(0.0478)	(0.2154)	(0.0449)
Public Liberalism × Accountability Pressure	0.2332*	0.0293*	0.2355*	0.0339*
	(0.0601)	(0.0168)	(0.0562)	(0.0177)
Accountability Pressure	0.0749	0.0105	0.1238*	0.0240*
	(0.0753)	(0.0142)	(0.0657)	(0.0127)
Checks and Balances	0.0239	-0.0044	0.0773	0.0088
	(0.0799)	(0.0180)	(0.0754)	(0.0168)
Public Liberalism × Checks and Balances	-0.1343	-0.0121	-0.0719	-0.0024
	(0.0864)	(0.0229)	(0.0818)	(0.0242)
L.Unified Democratic Control	0.0272	0.0107	0.0386	0.0117
	(0.0371)	(0.0099)	(0.0337)	(0.0095)
Income			0.2412*	0.0641*
			(0.1253)	(0.0278)
Population			0.1179	0.0029
			(0.1076)	(0.0253)
Percent Black			0.0524*	0.0064
			(0.0226)	(0.0047)
Constant	-1.2921*	-0.2181*	-2.1352*	-0.2805*
	(0.2932)	(0.0645)	(0.6019)	(0.1282)
Observations	1911	1911	1911	1911
R^2	0.929	0.981	0.934	0.981
<i>AIC</i>	653.006	-1876.080	514.687	-1891.360
<i>BIC</i>	897.443	-1626.088	775.790	-1624.702

Model includes Fixed Effects for State and Year and standard errors clustered by state. * indicates $p < .1$

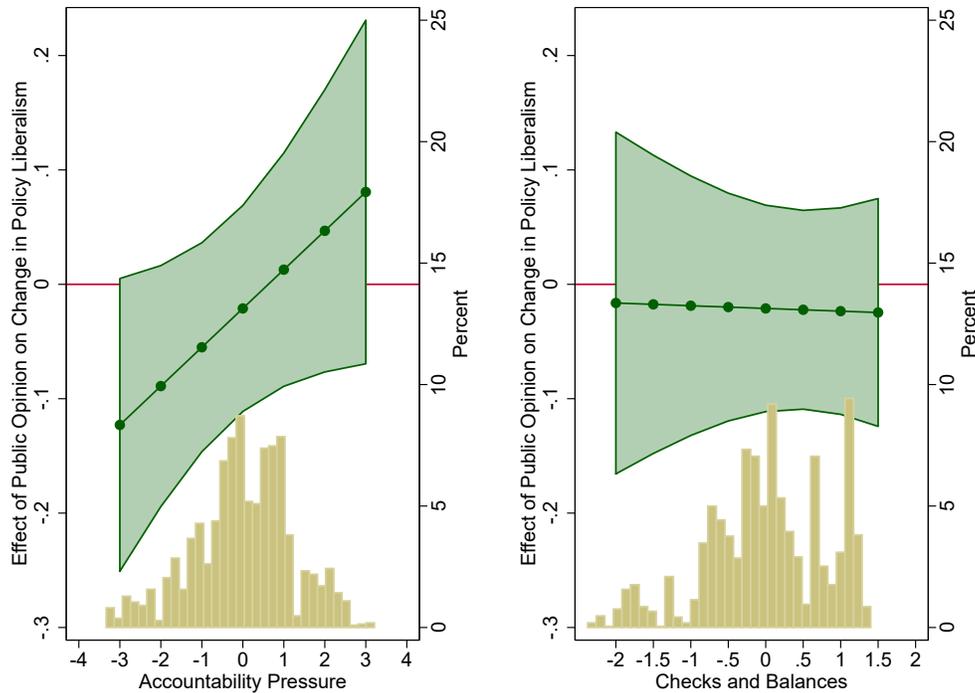
Figure (3) Marginal Effect of Public Liberalism on Economic Policy Liberalism ¹³



Models 2 and 4 of table 2 shows the results for dynamic responsiveness. Lagged policy liberalism again strongly predicts policy liberalism. This relationship is so strong that very few other variables are significant. Holding the institutional dimensions at zero public liberalism again does not predict policy liberalism. The interaction between accountability pressure and public liberalism is again significant, but substantially smaller than in the model that does not include lagged policy liberalism as can be seen in the marginal effects plot in figure 3. High levels of accountability pressure increase the influence of public opinion on changes in policy. The interaction between checks and balances and public liberalism is again insignificant. The only controls that significantly predict policy are income and percent black. Wealthier states and states with larger black populations tend to see policy move in a more liberal direction. After accounting for lagged policy liberalism, partisan control is not significantly related to a change in economic policy liberalism. Only in model 3 does being controlled by Democrats in the previous year result in more

¹³Standard errors for the marginal effects plots have been calculated following the guidance from Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) on modeling interaction terms.

Figure (4) Marginal Effect of Public Liberalism on Dynamic Economic Policy Responsiveness
 14



liberal economic policy.

The results from both the social and economic models provide strong support that accountability pressure increases the influence of public opinion on policy. In every specification there is a positive and significant interaction between accountability pressure and public opinion, and the effects are substantively large. These results hold regardless of model specification, including alternative ways to account for temporal and state trends such as random effects or splines, and hold with the addition of other potential control variables. Combined with earlier research showing that accountability pressure is also associated with significantly higher levels of policy congruence across dozens of policies (LaCombe 2021), there is ample evidence to show that accountability pressure strengthens the relationship between public opinion and policy. The results for the checks and balance system are less robust. While there is some support that a stronger checks and balance system does weaken the relationship between opinion and policy on economic policy, the results do

¹⁴Standard errors for the marginal effects plots have been calculated following the guidance from Brambor, Clark and Golder (2006) on modeling interaction terms.

not hold across every specification. This reflects the less clear expectations of this dimension because it measures the ease of moving policy, not the direction that policy should move with respect to public opinion. These results also highlight that the two dimensions are distinct, despite having some overlapping institutions that load strongly onto each. By using both measures researchers can parse out the multiple effects that institutions such as the ballot initiative are expected to have on state politics.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that state institutions *collectively* play a strong role in policy responsiveness. When state institutions are designed to maximize the amount of information sent to policymakers about public preferences and incentivize the nomination of moderate political candidates, public opinion has a much stronger relationship with policy change. At the same time the strength of the checks and balance system appears mostly unrelated to policy responsiveness. This is consistent with other research (LaCombe 2021) finding that states with high levels of accountability pressure are more likely to have policies congruent with public opinion across a variety of policies, but the checks and balance system is unrelated to policy congruence. I argue that these results show the utility of incorporating institutional context into our understanding of state politics.

States with high levels of accountability pressure are not more liberal or conservative on average, but have a stronger association between public preferences and state policies. These relationships hold even when lagging the dependent variable. The moderating effect of accountability pressure is also stronger for social than economic policies. State economic policy may be less salient for the average voter, and voters may have better defined opinions about topics like abortion than preferred tax rates. Institutions that convey information to policymakers may be more effective when the signal from the public is salient and better defined. If the public has no defined opinion (or more weakly defined opinions) than the importance of having institutions to send that information is less clear. These institutions do not define or strengthen public opinion, but merely are tools for policymakers to learn about the public.

This project proposes a new approach to evaluate the role of state institutions in policy respon-

siveness. Despite decades of advances in measuring public opinion and policy, there is still considerable disagreements on whether institutions such as the initiative play a role in how public opinion is translated into policy. The results highlight the theoretical and methodological advantages to using aggregate institutional measures to understand the role of institutions in policy responsiveness. First, they demonstrate the utility of organizing institutions along multiple dimensions because institutions often have multiple theorized effects. For example, this measurement strategy allows for the initiative to operate as the 'gun behind the door' to push elites to be more responsive to public opinion (Gerber 1996), but also can act as a veto point to block or overturn legislation (Boehmke, Osborn and Schilling 2015; LaCombe and Boehmke 2021). The multi-dimensional approach to measuring institutions can help to parse out these effects and identify the institutional features that influence policy responsiveness, and those that do not.

Secondly, an aggregate approach allows researchers to evaluate the net effect of state institutional context. If the "true" effect of an institution is small, then we may expect that an institutional-specific approach may produce mixed results due to natural variation in sampling procedures. With a small effect size it would be expected that some models would produce significant results, and others insignificant ones. Furthermore, including a single institutional indicator in a model omits the many other institutions that may cancel out a single institution's effects, and decisions on what institutions to omit or include can affect conclusions when taking an institutional-specific approach (LaCombe 2021). When these institutions are combined, the moderating effects are substantially larger and the effect clearer. This paper directly tests this proposition and finds that aggregate measures of a state's accountability structure produce robust, substantively large results showing the moderating effect of institutions on public opinion's influence on policy.

Aggregate institutional research should operate parallel to institutional-specific work. There are trade offs to including a coarsened measure of institutional context over specific measures. First, this research design is unable to attribute increases in responsiveness to a specific institution, meaning that activists cannot attribute blame or credit when proposing new state level reforms. Furthermore, a coarsened measure of state context is unable to distinguish between two states

that have very different institutions that aggregate to similar levels of accountability pressure or checks and balances. Therefore, this project is not suggesting that this analysis replaces individual institutional research, but rather complements existing research on a parallel track so that we can identify both the effects of specific institutions and understand the role of the larger institutional context. Research should also explore how institutional effects vary by policy.

These findings provide clear evidence that institutional design plays an important role in state policy responsiveness. Scholars should continue to apply these measures to a variety of research designs that test the role of institutions in the American states. An aggregate approach can clarify the role of institutions in a field of study with significant disagreement.

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6 Supplemental Models

Table (3) Modeling Dynamic Social Policy Responsiveness at Different Points of Distribution of Posterior Estimates for Institutional Measures

	(1) Median Estimate	(2) 2.5 % Estimate	(3) 97.5 % Estimate
Public Liberalism	0.6455* (0.0412)	0.7946* (0.0507)	0.2279* (0.0738)
Public LiberalismXAccountability Pressure	0.1018* (0.0149)	0.0609* (0.0119)	0.1482* (0.0173)
Accountability Pressure	-0.0363 (0.0263)	-0.0273 (0.0162)	-0.0318 (0.0179)
Checks and Balances	-0.0388 (0.0310)	-0.0387 (0.0216)	-0.0375* (0.0188)
Public LiberalismXChecks and Balances	0.0165 (0.0220)	-0.0156 (0.0168)	0.0667* (0.0217)
L.Unified Democratic Control	0.0871* (0.0181)	0.0897* (0.0181)	0.0857* (0.0179)
Constant	-0.8372* (0.1281)	-0.8830* (0.1515)	-0.6191* (0.0746)
Observations	1911	1911	1911

Model includes Fixed Effects for State and Year and standard errors clustered by state. * indicates $p < .1$

Table (4) Modeling Dynamic Social Policy Responsiveness at Different Points of Distribution of Posterior Estimates for Institutional Measures

	(1) Median Estimate	(2) 2.5 % Estimate	(3) 97.5 % Estimate
Lagged Policy Liberalism	0.9144* (0.0098)	0.9147* (0.0098)	0.9161* (0.0100)
Public Liberalism	0.0680* (0.0183)	0.0991* (0.0224)	0.0606 (0.0312)
Accountability Pressure	-0.0135 (0.0110)	-0.0035 (0.0067)	-0.0092 (0.0075)
Public LiberalismXAccountability Pressure	0.0125* (0.0063)	0.0106* (0.0050)	0.0067 (0.0074)
Checks and Balances	-0.0145 (0.0129)	-0.0055 (0.0090)	-0.0100 (0.0079)
Public LiberalismXChecks and Balances	0.0027 (0.0092)	0.0029 (0.0070)	-0.0031 (0.0092)
L.Unified Democratic Control	0.0199* (0.0076)	0.0203* (0.0076)	0.0199* (0.0076)
Constant	-0.1294* (0.0540)	-0.1069 (0.0635)	-0.0487 (0.0321)
Observations	1911	1911	1911

Model includes Fixed Effects for State and Year and standard errors clustered by state. * indicates $p < .1$

Table (5) Modeling Economic Policy Responsiveness at Different Points of Distribution of Posterior Estimates for Institutional Measures

	(1) Median Estimate	(2) 2.5 % Estimate	(3) 97.5 % Estimate
Public Liberalism	-0.1022 (0.0859)	0.1264 (0.1229)	-0.9011* (0.1583)
Public LiberalismX Accountability Pressure	0.2332* (0.0327)	0.1718* (0.0260)	0.3075* (0.0461)
Accountability Pressure	0.0749* (0.0252)	0.0069 (0.0157)	0.0663* (0.0165)
Checks and Balances	0.0239 (0.0306)	-0.0394 (0.0204)	0.0362 (0.0187)
Public LiberalismX Checks and Balances	-0.1343* (0.0442)	-0.1405* (0.0354)	0.0282 (0.0507)
L.Unified Democratic Control	0.0272 (0.0179)	0.0271 (0.0179)	0.0277 (0.0179)
Constant	-1.2921* (0.1112)	-1.5544* (0.1368)	-1.6009* (0.0698)
Observations	1911	1911	1911

Model includes Fixed Effects for State and Year and standard errors clustered by state. * indicates $p < .1$

Table (6) Modeling Dynamic Economic Policy Responsiveness at Different Points of Distribution of Posterior Estimates for Institutional Measures

	(1) Median Estimate	(2) 2.5 % Estimate	(3) 97.5 % Estimate
Lagged Policy Liberalism	0.8502* (0.0120)	0.8503* (0.0120)	0.8513* (0.0120)
Public Liberalism	-0.0241 (0.0443)	-0.0075 (0.0634)	-0.1399 (0.0822)
Accountability Pressure	0.0105 (0.0131)	0.0058 (0.0081)	0.0103 (0.0086)
Public LiberalismX Accountability Pressure	0.0293 (0.0171)	0.0189 (0.0136)	0.0387 (0.0240)
Checks and Balances	-0.0044 (0.0158)	-0.0051 (0.0105)	-0.0009 (0.0097)
Public LiberalismX Checks and Balances	-0.0121 (0.0229)	-0.0230 (0.0184)	0.0169 (0.0261)
L.Unified Democratic Control	0.0107 (0.0092)	0.0106 (0.0092)	0.0106 (0.0092)
Constant	-0.2181* (0.0593)	-0.2194* (0.0731)	-0.2524* (0.0406)
Observations	1911	1911	1911

Model includes Fixed Effects for State and Year and standard errors clustered by state. * indicates $p < .1$