What Drives Change in National Policy Outcomes?

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Abstract

How have national policy outcomes evolved over time and what drives changes in national policy outcomes? I develop an approach for measuring policy outcomes on the same scale as mass and elite ideology. My results suggest that over a 90 year period, policy outcomes have drifted to the left by an amount that is small relative to the difference between the modern Republican and Democratic parties. Social policies have seen more left-wing movement than economic policies, and international policies have not drifted over time. Changes in policy happen slowly with legislation being the most common mechanism and executive action being the second most common mechanism. Opposition by institutional elites to the status quo policy moderates the degree of change, and left-wing movement in policy has followed left-wing movement in mass ideology, but the observed left-wing movement in policy is better explained by mean reversion rather than an effect of mass ideology or elite ideology on policy outcomes.

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1 Introduction

How effectively does the federal government translate the preferences of its citizens into policy outcomes? Understanding this process involves understanding the many ways policy outcomes can change. Congress can enact laws. The executive branch can maneuver strategically within the bounds of discretion allowed by those laws. The judicial branch can interpret the constitution and laws passed by Congress. The constitution can be changed.

Each of these processes is controlled by political actors that the public has some degree of influence over, though in many cases, the influence is very indirect. Voters can influence legislative and executive action by voting in congressional and presidential races. Voters can influence the makeup of the federal judiciary (indirectly, and in the *long run*) by voting in those same elections. Subject to extreme supermajority requirements, voters can indirectly influence the U.S. constitution by voting in federal and state elections.

In this article, I seek to answer the following questions—how have national policy outcomes changed over time? Have they drifted to the left or right? Have there been different patterns in economic, social, and international issues? To what degree are such changes attributable to the legislative process, executive action, judicial decisions, and constitutional amendments? To what degree are these changes driven by changes in the preferences of elite political actors and the mass public? Answering these questions requires measuring changes in national policy outcomes, changes in the makeup of elite political actors, and changes in the preferences of the mass public.

I develop an approach for measuring national policy across three issue areas by coding binary policy items. My measure identifies binary policy items using survey questions posed to elites and the mass public as well as the platforms of the national parties. The policy items are coded for the period of time ranging from 1930 to 2020. For each change in national policy, the mechanism of change is coded (legislative, executive, judicial, or constitutional). The policies are then aggregated into a left-right measure on economic issues, social issues, and international issues.

For comparison, I also collected elite survey responses from the Project Vote Smart's National Political Awareness Test (NPAT) and coded the policy positions of the Democratic and Republican parties from their national party platforms. I collected mass public survey responses from Gallup

polls. Each was used to measure the left-right policy orientation of elite political actors and the mass public on economic issues, social issues, and international issues.

I next built a model to explain when and through what mechanism policy change occurs. A conditional logit model is used to handle the multinomial nature of the dependent variable. Change due to each of the institutional mechanisms can then be explained using the opposition of institutional actors to the status quo and the opposition of the mass public to the status quo.

My results indicate that economic and social policies have moved to the left over time, while international policies did not exhibit a consistent direction of change. The degree of change was somewhat larger for social than economic policies, and in both cases, the change was concentrated in the 1960s and 1970s. Legislative change was the most prevalent, followed by executive change, with judicial change much less prevalent. Legislative change was most prominent in the 1970s, though it experienced other periods of increased change. Executive change has remained relatively stable over time. Judicial change was overwhelmingly concentrated in the late 1970s.

I found strong evidence that political actors influenced policy outcomes and weak evidence of a direct effect of public opinion. The preferences of legislative actors influenced legislative change and the preferences of presidents influenced executive change. No such relationship was found between the preferences of Supreme Court justices and judicial change. This pattern could be due to an anomalous Supreme Court decision, where a court regarded as conservative by many measures of the preferences of Supreme Court Justices made a far reaching decision that is widely regarded as left-wing.

Policy and mass ideology have moved in the same direction over time. This may initially seem to point to one of three mechanisms. Left-wing movement in mass ideology may have led to increasing Democratic success in controlling institutions, which led to increasingly liberal policy outcomes. Left-wing movement in mass ideology may have led directly to increasingly liberal outcomes. Left-wing movement in mass and elite ideology may have co-occurred, and left-wing movement in elite ideology may have led to left-wing movement in policy. My results don't provide strong evidence for any of these mechanisms. Instead, the observed left-wing movement in national policy outcomes appears due to mean reversion and anomalous left-wing movement during the Nixon administration.

2 Background

Efforts to understand why policy change occurs are long standing. Early work by Miller and Stokes (1963) examined whether more conservative congressional constituencies were associated with more conservative members of Congress. It is this cause of policy change that has seen the most intensive study (Powell, 1982; Clinton, 2006) due to the relative ease in obtaining data. Stimson, MacKuen and Erikson (1995) recognized the importance of going beyond the legislative process in their study representation, directly tackling the executive branch and the judicial branch. Their measures, however, did not allow for a clean separation between policy outcomes and the preferences of elite political actors. Take, for example, their measures of judicial outcomes. While they used the percentage of liberal wins in Supreme Court cases as a measure of policy outcomes, other scholars have used the percentage of liberal votes directly (Baum, 1988; Epstein et al., 2001) or indirectly (Martin and Quinn, 2002) as a measure of the preferences of the justices. As elite preferences are a key explanatory variable for policy change, to study policy change, we need a measure of policy which is entirely distinct from elite preferences.

2.1 Estimates of Policy Outcomes

Research on policy outcomes and policy representation has been conducted at both the state level and the national level, with greater attention paid to the state level. Policies considered can be binary (e.g. is the death penalty available as a punishment?) or continuous in nature (e.g. what is the level of education spending?). Alternatively, a piece of legislation can be considered a policy. The goals of this literature have been to measure policy representation—as the correlation between public opinion and policy, or as the congruence between public opinion and policy—and to detail the political process through which public opinion is (imperfectly) translated into policy outcomes.

Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993) developed a measure of policy outcomes in the U.S. States. Their measure was composed of both binary and continuous items which were aggregated into an index of state policy liberalism. They uncovered both a direct effect of public opinion on policy outcomes and an indirect effect where more liberal public opinion led to democratic legislative strength which then led to liberal policy outcomes. Erikson, Wright and McIver's study measured

policy and public opinion at a moment in time. Caughey and Warshaw (2018) measured public opinion and policy over an 80 year time period. They aggregated policy outcomes into indices and similarly found a strong relationship between public opinion and policy (at least, over the long term), though their results were less supportive of an indirect mechanism whereby public opinion influenced state policy through democratic control of state government.

Lax and Phillips (2009) took a different approach to measuring policy representation—they used exclusively binary policy items. Rather than aggregating these items into an index, they matched the items with public opinion on those same issues. This, in turn, facilitated measuring the congruence between public opinion and policy outcomes. Lax and Phillips (2011) expanded on this approach to include a larger number of issues. While they found evidence of responsiveness to public opinion, policy outcomes were often incongruent with public opinion majorities—in fact, policy outcomes matched opinion majorities only 48 percent of the time. Battista, Peress and Richman (2019, 2022) were similarly interested in measuring policy congruence. To facilitate the investigation of the political process, they employed continuous measures of policy outcomes. Battista, Peress and Richman (2022) developed a methodology for measuring voter preferences, the preferences of political actors, and policy outcomes on a common scale. Like Lax and Phillips, Battista, Peress and Richman (2019) found evidence of incongruence between policy outcomes and voter preferences.

Caughey and Warshaw (2022) expanded on this analysis of Caughey and Warshaw (2018). The work emphasised the slow dynamic nature of responsiveness in the states. They document little overall movement in the ideology of the mass electorate (with the exception of a strong leftward drift on racial issues), coupled with a leftward shift in state policies. The leftward drift in state policies was present in both economic and cultural policies, but more pronounced with economic policies. The pace of the leftward drift has been constant since 1935 for economic policies, but picked up in pace for cultural policies around 1965. Caughey and Warshaw argue for a causal effect of party control of state government on policy outcomes. Over the long term, policy outcomes were responsive to the ideology of the mass public, with the mechanism being primarily adaptation by the parties rather than turnover due to elections. Caughey and Warshaw examined the match between individual policies and public opinion and found a stronger match than Lax and Phillips (2011)

did—while Lax and Phillips found that policy outcomes matched opinion majorities 48 percent of the time, Caughey and Warshaw found that policy outcomes matched opinion majorities about 60 percent of the time, a difference that Caughey and Warshaw attributed to a larger sample of issues in their study.

National policy outcomes have seen less work and the work that does exist has had a less comprehensive coverage of policies. An exception to this is Gillens (2012). Gillens identified binary policy outcomes using survey questions posed to the mass public between 1981 and 2002. This allowed him to tie policy outcomes to issue-specific measures of public opinion, like the work of Lax and Phillips (2009, 2011). Gillens's goals were different than much of the literature—he was primarily focused on the relative responsiveness of policy to the preferences of different income groups. Consistent with the work on state policies, he found that national policies were responsive to public opinion, although they exhibited a strong status quo bias.

A number of other studies considered national policies, but were less comprehensive than Gillens (2012). Richman (2011) generated continuous estimates of tax and spending policies at the federal level. Richman did not directly consider policy representation and was instead focused on part of the mechanism in more detail—how the makeup of the legislative branch is translated into policy outcomes.

2.2 Measures of Legislative Productivity

A second approach has conceptualized policy outcomes as pieces of legislation. Common to this literature is the focus on *legislative* productivity—the literature does not consider changes in policy outcomes that come about as the result of executive actions or judicial decisions. Mayhew's (1991) work modeled the number of significant legislative enactments at the federal level. His central claim was that the U.S. Congress was no less productive during periods of divided government. Binder (1999) updated Mayhew's work to consider the size of the policy agenda. She conceptualized her dependent variable as a ratio of the number of significant legislative enactments to the size of the policy agenda, a measure she built by analysing the content of newspaper editorials. She also considered a more expansive set of measures of the makeup of the federal government—she

accounted for the percentage of moderates in Congress, the ideological diversity within Congress, and bicameral differences between the chambers of Congress. She found that these additional factors were related to legislative productivity and that Congress was less productive under divided government when those variables were accounted for and using the new measure of legislative productivity.

The work of Krehbiel (1998) and Chiou and Rothenberg (2003) sought to tie the study of legislative productivity more closely to formal theories of legislative outcomes. Krehbiel (1998) argued that rather than divided government being the cause of poor legislative productivity, the gridlock interval was the key. The gridlock interval can be thought of as a comprehensive way of accounting for many of the factors that Binder (1999) accounted for individually, motivated by formal theories of legislatures. Chiou and Rothenberg (2003) demonstrated that different formal theories of legislatures produced different gridlock intervals. In some specifications, they found that the gridlock interval was related to legislative productivity while in others, they found that divided government was related to legislative productivity.

Peress's (2013) is somewhat distinct in the part of the literature which conceptualized policies as bills, in that the focus is not of legislative productivity, but on the direction of policy change. Like Richman (2011), Peress tests theories of how the makeup of the legislative branch is translated into policy outcomes. Richman (2011) and Peress (2013) thus share one aspect of Krehbiel (1998) and Chiou and Rothenberg (2003), but work with the ideological location of legislation rather than the quantity of legislation.

2.3 Contribution of Paper

My contribution to the literature is as follows. First, this is one of the first papers to measure policy representation at the national level (existing papers that have estimated policy outcomes were concerned about other things). Departing from the literatures on legislative productivity (Mayhew, 1991; Binder, 1999; Krehbiel, 1998; Chiou and Rothenberg, 2003) and theories of law making (Richman, 2011; Peress, 2013), I consider a broad enough set of polices such that I can observe four types of policy change: legislative, executive, judicial, and constitutional.

Relative to the research on policy representation, the contribution of this paper is geared towards studying national policy outcomes. Previous studies of state policy outcomes are clearly important, but the national context remains understudied. Relative to the research on legislative productivity, this article contributes in a number of ways. First, my research studies *policy* productivity—I consider not just changes in policy that result from legislation. I also consider changes that arise as a result of executive action or judicial decisions. My analysis also explicitly considers the ideological direction of the changes. This is something that existing work could have done—for example, Mayhew (1991) could have coded the ideological orientation of the important pieces of legislation he identified, but didn't because it was not necessary for his research question. The closest the literature comes to this is the work of Krehbiel (1998) and Chiou and Rothenberg (2003). Like Binder's (1999) analysis, my work is able to conceive of productivity as a fraction, though the denominator is structured differently, based on the universe of all policies (that were ever polled on or ever discussed in presidential platforms) rather than a set of particular policies that met some threshold of discussion in newspaper editorials in the current legislative session. Of particular importance is that the denominator in my study is (relatively) constant, where as the denominator in Binder's work varies from legislative session to legislative session.

3 Data

To measure national policy outcomes, I identified a set of policies that could be coded consistently over time and which could be compared to elite and public opinion as a reference. I focused on binary policies because they offered better prospects for both consistency and comparison. To identify a universe of policies, I used survey items from Project Vote Smart's National Political Awareness Test (NPAT), survey items from Gallup, and items mentioned in the national party platforms. A secondary goal of the analysis was to measure elite and public opinion on a comparable scale, and this analysis relies on these same three data sources. I thus first discuss the data on mass and elite opinion and I then discuss the coding of policy outcomes.

3.1 Elite Positions

To construct measures of elite positions, I relied on two data sources. First, I considered the NPAT, a survey of candidates for office that has existed since 1992. Candidates are asked to provide a series of binary and ordered responses for a number of policy items. The policy items vary from year to year, but there is a great deal of overlap across years. Early in its existence, response rates to the NPAT were relatively high, but have been declining since 2000. Starting in 2010, the NPAT began filling in responses for legislative candidates who did not respond from their public statements. My data includes both the responses and the inferred responses of candidates for the U.S. House and U.S. Senate. I merged the NPATs from 1992 through 2022 into a single dataset.

A drawback of using the NPAT is that it only allows for measuring elite ideology starting in 1992. This is sufficient for providing some context for the change in policy outcomes over time—we can, for example compare the magnitude of change in policy outcomes to the difference between the modern Democratic and Republican parties—but it is still a limitation. To counteract this limitation, I also coded policy positions from the platforms of the national parties. The national party platforms are presented in narrative form, but it is possible to read the platforms and identify binary policy items, which is what my coding does. I identified issues that were mentioned in multiple years and coded binary policy items from the national party platforms between 1936 and 2020.

In using these two measures, my approach differs from the common approach in the literature, which is to rely on the DW-Nominate Common Space scores. These scores rely on roll call voting in the U.S. Congress and would thus be available for the entire period under study. A limitation of using these scores is that they would not be on a comparable scale to policy, and comparing the degree of policy change to the degree of change in elite opinion is a key goal of this study. A second limitation of using these measures is in how they are able to capture dynamics. Using either the NPAT or the national party platforms, I am able to measure change over time using bridge items. Bridge items are items that are available in multiple years. The DW-Nominate Common Space relies instead on bridge voters, and assumes that members of the House and Senate do not change their positions during the time in which they serve. One thing I hope to learn from this

study is where policy, elite opinion, and public opinion has drifted over time. Measures that assume that members of Congress do not change their positions are poorly suited to capturing one type of change—drift where all members of the chamber move in one direction.

3.2 Public Opinion

Gallup has fielded surveys of the mass public going back to the mid 1930s. Among other questions, respondents were asked about their views on policy. I relied on Gallup polls stored in the Roper Center's Public Opinion Archive. This included about 2,500 polls fielded between 1936 and 2015. The polls included about 4,500 unique policy items, of which about 800 were asked in multiple years. These questions were merged into a single dataset. In addition, to facilitate comparisons between the two elite measures and the public measure, I identified bridge items between the Gallup surveys, the NPATs, and the national party platforms. Bridge items were items that appeared in multiple sources in identical or near identical form. For example, both Gallup and the NPAT asked respondents whether they supported a ban on partial-birth abortion. Similarly, Gallup asked respondents if they supported legalizing an abortion pill, which the national party platforms took a position on in some years.

3.3 Policy Outcomes

Using the NPAT, the national policy platforms, and the Gallup surveys, I identified binary policies which could be coded consistently over time. I attempted to code policy for all binary NPAT items, all items identified from the national party platforms, and Gallup survey items which were asked in at least two different years. Not all binary items could be consistently coded however. Consider the following examples:

- Support for coverage of abortion under medicaid
- Support for increasing the minimum wage
- Support for using nuclear weapons against Chinese cities
- Support for allowing China to join the UN if a majority of countries vote to allow it

The first item could be consistently coded—it is framed in absolute rather than relative terms. It is relevant over a broad period of time. It refers to an action the U.S. government could conceivably take. Support for increasing the minimum wage could not be coded in a consistent way over time—an individual could conceivably support increasing the minimum wage in 2018 and not support it in 1995, not because their underlying position changed, but because the minimum wage changed. There are ways for handling such data (Richman, 2011), but this involves a different methodology which cannot easily be merged with the methods I apply here. The third item alludes to a set of circumstances that are not operable right now—the U.S. is not currently involved in a military conflict in China. The fourth item is at best, tied to a particular moment in time. The U.S. Government could express a policy of supporting China in the U.N. at the moment the other countries voted for it, but there is no way we could actually observe the U.S. government policy as changing after this point.

A problem that consistently comes up in the coding is the interplay between state and national policy. Consider, for example, national policy on abortion and consider the following two items:

- Abortions should be legal in all circumstances as long as the procedure is completed within the first trimester of pregnancy
- Abortions should always be illegal

Prior to the Roe v. Wade decision, there was no national policy on abortion. After the Roe v. Wade decision (and before the 2022 reversal of the decision), abortion was legal nationally in the first trimester. I thus coded the first item as 'No' between 1930 and 1972 and 'Yes' between 1973 and 2020. I coded the second item as 'No' between 1930 and 2020. One could imagine a different approach to coding this items, choosing to code both items as missing prior to 1973. The former approach, I would argue, does a better job of capturing that a lack of national policy falls midway between an anti-abortion national policy and a pro-abortion national policy.

A third issue arises for conditional policies or the regulation of technologies that did not exist for the entire period of study. Consider the following three items:

- Support for on-line voter registration

- Support for permitting tax-free withdrawals from IRAs in limited circumstances
- Support for eliminating federal financial aid for individuals convicted of drug offenses

The internet started to become widely used around 1995. IRAs came into existence due to the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974. Pell Grants were first available due to the Higher Education Act of 1965. In such cases, I used missing values to account for a policy which could not be expressed due to such a circumstance. The policy of on-line voter registration was coded as missing before 1995 and as 'No' between 1995 and the 2020. The policy of permitting tax-free withdrawals from IRAs was coded as 'Yes' from 1975 to the present and 'Missing' between 1935 and 1974. The policy of eliminating federal financial aid for individuals convicted of drug offenses was coded as 'No' between 1966 and 2020 and is coded as missing from 1935 and 1965.

The final data set included 756 national policies. 403 of these policies came from the NPATs, 331 of the items came from Gallup items that did not also appear on the NPATs, and 22 came from party platform items that did not also appear on the NPATs or in Gallup surveys.

The use of the NPAT data, Gallup data, and national party platforms to identify policies to code serves as a way of employing contemporary judgements (Mayhew, 1991; Binder, 1999) to identify important policies. Important policies tended to lead to a greater variety of questions in the NPAT and Gallup surveys. This naturally leads to important policies receiving more weight in my analysis.

A few limitations should be noted. The NPAT was only available starting in 1992. It is possible that if I had used the NPAT alone, I would miss many important issues that were particularly relevant in earlier years, but less relevant in the last three decades. By using the Gallup surveys and the national party platforms, my coding should pick up these older issues as well. In practice, the biggest change I observed over time was social issues becoming increasingly prevalent.

4 Methodology

My goal was to construct an index of national policy, along with comparable measures of elite opinion and public opinion. I approached this in a number of different ways. The simplest approach

I used to build the policy index was to form a simple additive one. For all items I used to assess policy, elite opinion, and public opinion, I coded each item as either the left-wing option or the right-wing option. I then measured policy as the percent of issues for with the national policy was the conservative one. I also coded the items as being either economic, social, or international. International issues dealt with defense, U.S. involvement in foreign conflicts, international trade, and U.S. involvement with international organizations. Economic issues where those that involved general taxation or domestic spending (e.g. social security, medicare, education). Social issues include abortion, gun control, school prayer, reform of the government, etc. In addition to my main index, I developed indices for economic, social, and international policy, similarly computing the percentage of right-wing policies in each year. I also used additive indices to form measures of the positions of the Democratic and Republic parties from their national platforms, the positions of Democratic and Republican candidates from the NPAT responses of those candidates, and positions of the mass public, Democratic identifiers, and Republican identifiers, from their responses to Gallup polls.

A limitation of a simple additive index is that it can be affected by patterns of inclusion of items. Consider the following situation—early Gallup polling asked about support for the Supreme Court decision banning segregation. Gallup is incentivized to ask questions that respondents do not overwhelming support or oppose. Gallup has not asked this question in a very long time because segregation now has very little support. Consider instead support for gay marriage. This item was not asked until the early 1990s because prior to that, there would been little support for such a policy. If, in reality, public or elite opinion was moving to consistently to the left, we might underestimate it using a simple additive index because as the public moved to the left, the items on which the public would exhibit extremely high support for the liberal side would drop from the average. This is not much of an issue for the policy index because there is very little missing data. My coding of policy does not rely on a survey question being asked in a particular year. The problem can be though of as the "difficulty" of giving a right-wing response to an item varying over items. Opposing segregation would be a more difficult item than opposing gay marriage. To handle this potential critique, the second approach I take reports estimates based on a linear regression

where the difficulty of giving a right-wing response is controlled for by including an item fixed effect. The linear regression includes a parameter for the ideology of the national policy, the Democratic and Republican platforms, every NPAT respondent, and the average Democratic, Republican, and independent identifier who responded to the Gallup survey in each year. In this approach, one item fixed effect must be excluded for identification purposes and an individual's fixed effect represents the expected support for the conservative position of that individual on the excluded item. This requires that different individuals (Gallup respondents, NPAT respondents, platforms, and policies) responded to at least some common bridge items, but the nature of the data and my coding ensures that these bridge items are present. In estimating this model, I ignored the platform-only items because I lack survey respondents that I can use to reliably recover the difficulty of these items.[1]

Even the difficulty-adjusted measure relies on coding for what the conservative side of an issue is. Moreover, it pools items in a way that assumes that items are equally discriminating. It is possible that some items carry more information than others about an individual's location in left-right space. I address this via an ideal point estimation model. Here, $Y_{nt} = 2$ denotes a conservative response and $Y_{nt} = 1$ denotes a liberal response. Each item, indexed by t, is governed by an intercept (or difficulty parameter), a_t, and a slope (or 'discrimination' parameter), b_t. Each Gallup respondent, NPAT respondent, policy platform, and policy, indexed by n, is characterized by an ideal point α_n. I model the probability of a conservative response using $Pr(Y_{nt} = 2) = \Phi(a_t + b_t\alpha_n)$. Note, however, that the left-right coding is irrelevant for this analysis—since the discrimination parameter b_t is estimated from the data and a negative sign for b_t will allow for more conservative individuals to give a more left-wing response.

One approach would be to estimate this using a conventional ideal point estimation model similar to Poole and Rosenthal (1991, 1997) and Jackman (2001). While this approach is feasible for policies, platforms, and NPAT respondents, it will not work well for Gallup respondents. Gallup respondents typically respond to very few items while Poole and Rosenthal and Jackman treat the ideal point as a fixed effect, which requires a large number of observations per individual. This problem is present in Caughey and Warshaw (2015) and they solve this problem by treating α_n

[1] Had I left these items in the model, the difficulty of the platform-only items would be determined by how national policies and the platforms for these items co-move over time.

as a random effect.[2] I similarly treat α_n as a random effect for the Gallup respondents. I model, $\alpha_n = \beta' z_n + \eta_n$, where z_n are covariates used to predict ideology of a Gallup respondent and $\eta_n \sim N(0, \sigma_\eta^2)$. I include in z_n the year of the survey interacted with the party identification of the individual. My model will thus estimate a parameter for each party-year (roughly 250 parameters) rather than a parameter for each of the approximately 3 million Gallup respondents. As my goal is to compare mass ideology with elite ideology and policy, I estimate a hybrid model which treats α_n as a random effect for the Gallup respondents and as a fixed effect for the NPAT respondents, policy platforms, and national policies.[3]

The ideal point estimation approach has a drawback compared to the other two approaches. The first two approaches weight all items equally. I argued that surveys will ask about important issues in more ways if that issue is more important. The ideal point estimation approach does not leave that weighting in tact—the ideal point estimation approach attempts to summarize the data with a single dimension and chooses the weighting—governed partially by the discrimination parameter—to improve model fit. The ideal point estimation approach will thus effectively place more weight on items that are more closely tied to a primary dimension. It will potentially undo that importance weighting I argued for. Fortunately, it is not the case that we have to trade off these various advantages and disadvantages for the policy index—I ultimately find that the three policy indices are extremely highly correlated. In addition, I find that most of the patterns I examine in the paper are robust to the choice of measure. The few patterns that are not robust to the measure will be highlighted in Section 5.2.

For the simple additive measure, the scale naturally varies between 0% conservative and 100% conservative. For the difficulty-adjusted additive measure, the scale is determined by the omitted item. I re-adjusted this scale so that the mean and the variance of national policy match with the simple additive measure. For the ideal point estimation measure, the scale is only identified up to a linear transformation. I similarly adjusted the scale so that the mean and variance of national policy match with the simple additive measure. In both cases, this aids graphical comparisons, but the reader should not be tempted to interpret the *absolute* level of support in the difficulty-adjusted

[2] See also Bailey (2001) and Zhou (2019).

[3] Similar to the difficulty-adjusted index, I exclude the platform-only items from this analysis.

and ideal point estimations measures in as strong a way. My presentation below focuses first on the simple additive index and then comments the robustness of the findings when the difficulty-adjusted and ideal point estimation measures are used.

5 Measuring National Policy Outcomes

5.1 Simple Additive Index

Figure 1 reports the trajectory of policy using a simple additive index. Policies change from 57% conservative in 1930 to 44% conservative in 2020. The largest amount of change in observed between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s. The patterns vary considerably across policy area though. For social policies, the change is even more concentrated between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s. For economic policy, the most change is observed in the 1930s and the 2010s, with policy moving left in both cases. Interestingly, social policies are more conservative than economic and international policies throughout the entire period of study.

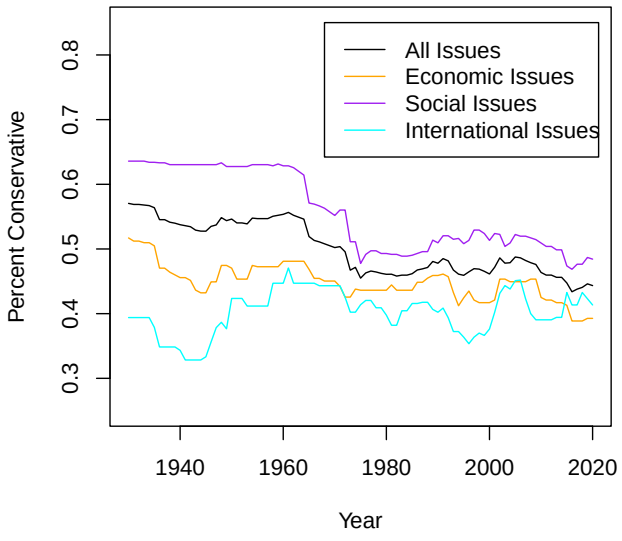

Figure 1: *Policy Change by Issue, Simple Additive Index*

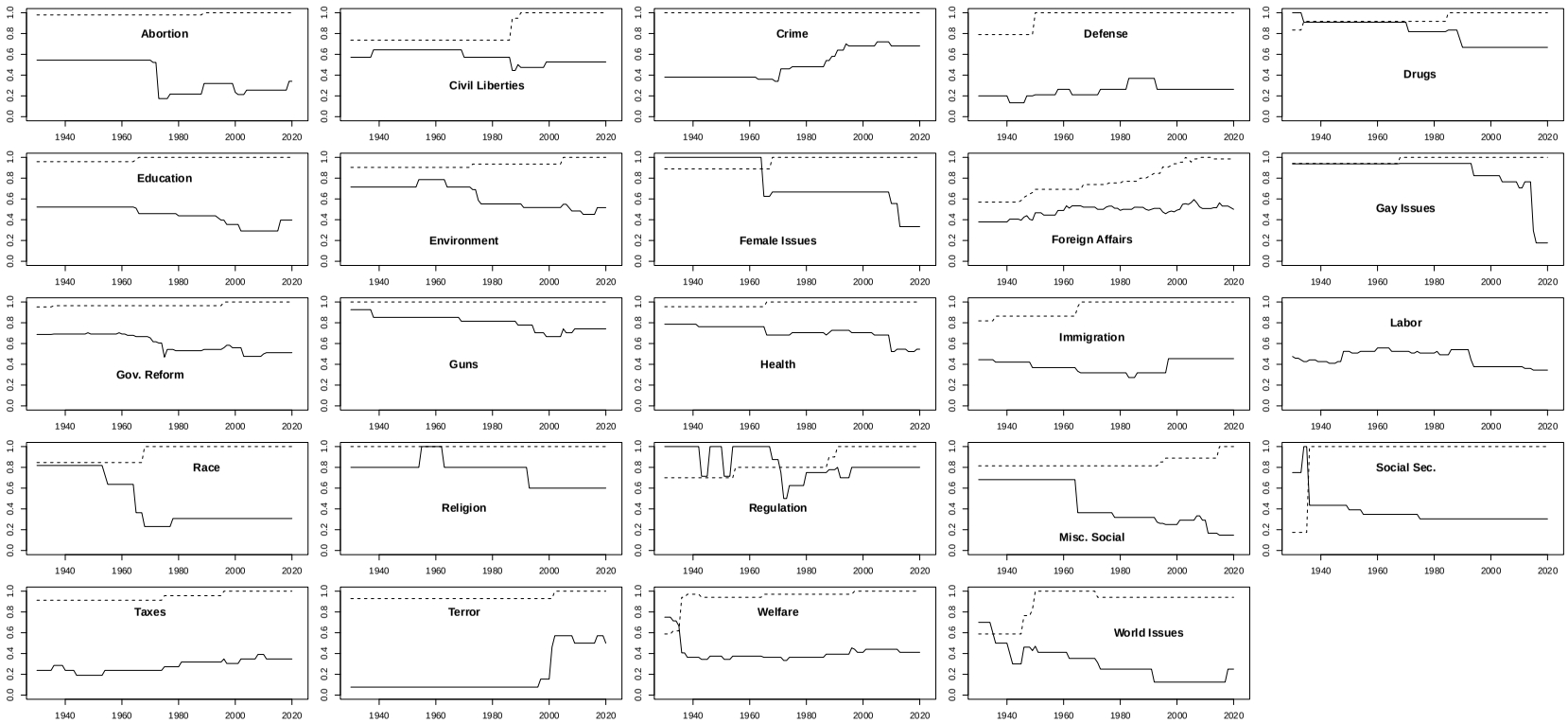

Figure 2: *Policy Change by Sub-issue, Additive Index – The solid line indicates the percent of conservative policy outcomes on a sub-issue. The dashed line indicates the percentage of non-missing items in a particular year.*

Figure 2 considers policy change in additional detail—for 24 issue areas, the solid line indicates the percentage of conservative policies and the dashed line indicates the percentage of non-missing policy items. The later is included to allow the reader to detect when a seeming change in the percent of conservative policies is potentially driven by changes in the items included in the average. There is quite a bit of heterogeneity in the degree of movement. Drugs, female issues, gay issues, race issues, miscellaneous social issues, and world issues move substantially to the left. Social security and welfare initially appear to exhibit a large degree of left-wing movement, but the movement coincides with dramatic changes in which items are included in the index. Abortion, education, the environment, government reform, guns, health, religion, and regulation see a moderate amount of left-wing movement. Crime and terror issues see right-wing movement. Civil liberties, defense, foreign affairs, immigration, labor, and taxes see little movement.

Large changes in these indices were often easy to tie to particular court cases or legislation. For example, the rapid leftward movement in abortion was tied to the Roe v. Wade decision, the rightward movement in crime in the early 90s was due to crime bills passed in 1990 and 1994, the movement in female issues was due to executive orders relating to affirmative action and women in combat, and the movement on gay issues in the early 2010s was due to a change in interpretation of the Civil Right Act of 1964 by the Equal Opportunity Commission and two court decisions.

Having established the general trajectory of policy change, I next compare its' movement to elite and mass ideology. Figure 3 compares the movement in policy to the ideology of the national parties.[4] The parties converged starting in 1932 and began to diverge between the 1972 and 1976 elections. Between 1944 and 1968, the parties were very similar in their platforms and co-moved– either both parties moved left or both parties moved right. Most of the divergence between the 1972 and 1976 election was attributable to the Republican party, and before this period, the Republican party was not consistently conservative, while the Democratic party tended to be consistently liberal. The movement in policy was 13% from 1930 to 2020. In comparison, the divergence between the parties was 43% in 1936, 6% in 1964, and 81% in 2020. In this context, the amount of leftward movement in policy between 1930 and 2020 could be considered small relative to the

[4]To aid in interpretation, Figure A.1 labels the party platforms by presidential administration.

differences between the two parties in either 1930 or 2020.

In Figure 4, I report similar results, separately for economic, social, and international issues. Economic policy moved 13%, from 52% conservative to 39% conservative, over my period of study. The national parties moved apart over time, starting with a difference of 40% in 1936 to 75% in 2020. Social issues and international issues exhibited interesting patterns, with the parties not polarizing until 1972 and 1976, respectively. Social issues saw the most left-wing movement, with policy moving from 64% conservative in 1930 to 48% conservative in 2020. International policy saw almost no movement over this 90 year period. Overall, we see that the amount of movement was small relative to the disagreement between the parties for all three issue categories.

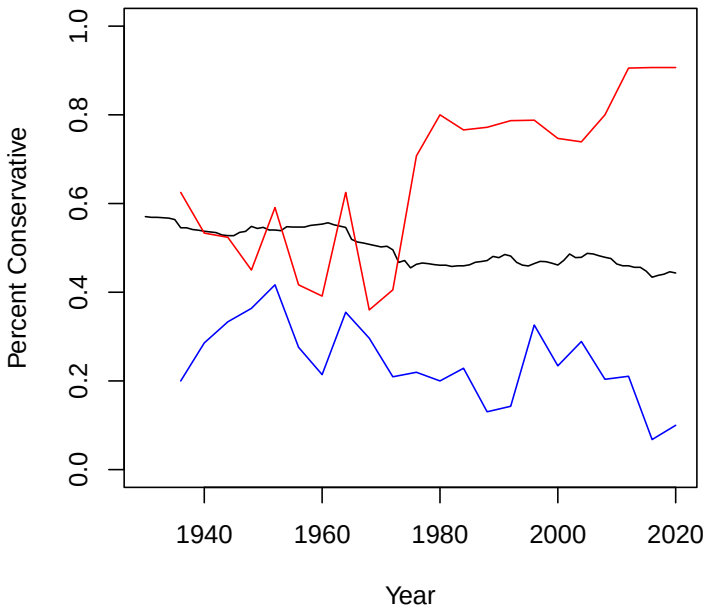

Figure 3: *Policy Outcomes and National Party Platforms, Simple Additive Index.*

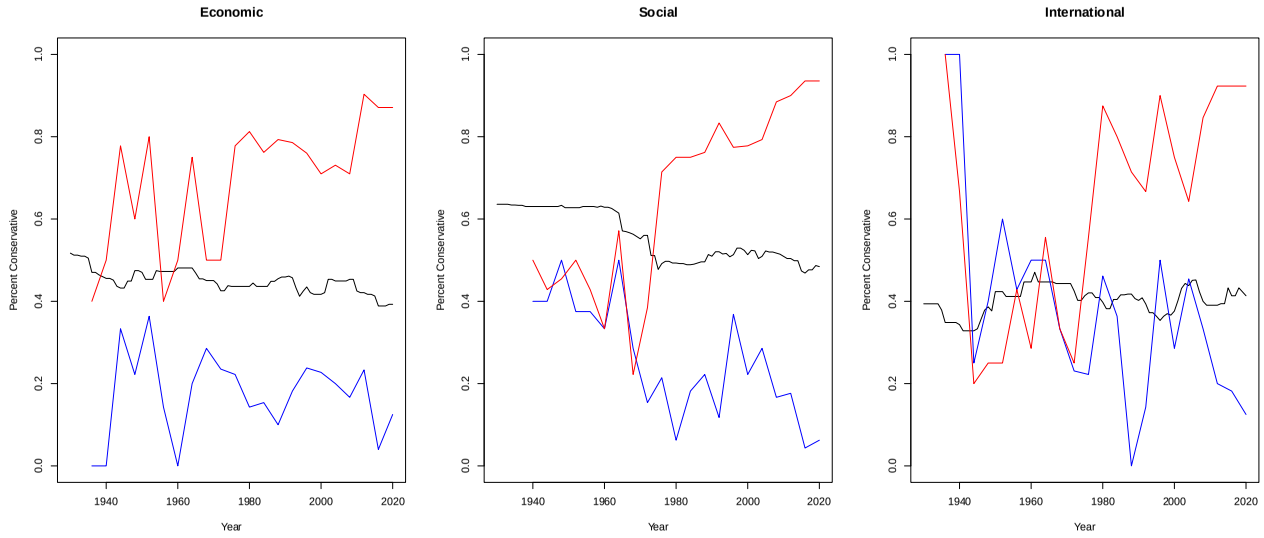

Figure 4: *Policy Outcomes and National Party Platforms, Simple Additive Index—Economic, Social, and International Issues*

Figure A.2 compares the trajectory of policy to an alternative measure of elite ideology based on the NPAT. A drawback of this approach is that the NPAT only becomes available in 1992, so this approach cannot be used to measure the trajectory of the national parties over the entire time series. The difference between the parties was 17.9% in 1992 and 76.0% in 2022. The NPAT suggests the parties polarized later than the national platforms suggested. Nonetheless, we continue to find that the left-right movement in policy was small relative to the modern divergence between the Republican and Democratic parties. Figure A.3 presents similar results separately by issue area. We continue to find that the parties diverged on economic and social issues and that the movement in economic and social policy was small relative to the modern difference between the parties on those issues. The parties' positions on international issues exhibit less consistency according to the NPAT. Part of this inconsistency could be due to very few international items being available in the NPAT starting in 2012, though international ideology was inconsistent even in the time periods where there was more robust issue coverage. The more wild pattern appears to at least partially be due to change in the positions that legislative candidates took on international issues.

Figure A.4 compares the movement in policy to movement in the ideology of the mass public, using a simple additive index and averaging the results for Democratic and Republican identifiers. Identifiers to the major parties started to diverge around 1960 and reached modern levels of divergence around 2000. Consistent with the literature, I find that identifiers of the major parties as less polarized than elites from the major parties (Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Shor, 2011; Jessee, 2016; Shor and Rogowski, 2018; Battista, Peress and Richman, 2022; Marshall and Peress, 2022; Peress, 2022)—the distance between identifiers was never more than 40%, while elite polarization reached 82% according to the national platforms and 76% according to the NPAT. However, even this small difference is much larger than the degree of left-right movement in policy. Figure A.5 presents similar results by issue area. In all three cases, identifiers of the two major parties diverged, with most of the divergence occurring by 2000. There is somewhat less divergence on social issues, but in all three cases, the left-right movement in policy is small relative to the modern distances between identifiers of the major parties.

5.2 Difficulty-Adjusted and Ideal Point Estimation Indices

I next present an alternative set of results that are designed to address potential criticisms of the results I reported in Section 5.1, using a difficulty-adjusted measure and an ideal point estimation measure. I compare the three sets of results for national policy in Figure 5. Using the three different measures, the policy trajectory for all issues, economic issues, and social issues follow each other very closely. For all issues, the correlations between the three series are greater than 98%. For economic and social issues, the correlations are greater than 96%. The ideal point estimation series for international issues is the odd one out, with a correlation of 35% with the simple additive index and 30% with the difficulty-adjusted index. The simple additive index and the difficulty-adjusted indices for international issues are correlated at 96%.

I compare the platform estimates using the three different measures in Figure A.6. The results using the simple additive and difficulty-adjusted measures are nearly identical. The ideal point estimation measure exhibits a clear difference—while national policy has the same trajectory and the party platforms have the same trend in divergence, the movement in policy is larger relative to the differences between the modern parties. While the first two measures suggest that the movement in policy was 18% and 16% of the distance between the modern parties, the ideal point estimation measure suggests that the movement in policy was 29% of the distance between the major parties. Figure A.7 reports similar results using the NPAT to measure elite preferences. Here we see a more dramatic difference—the movement in policy is 52% of the difference between the modern parties. Figure A.8 compares the three measures of party identifiers in the mass public. While the simple additive and difficulty-adjusted index suggest that policy moved about 50% of the difference between the major party identifiers, the ideal point estimation index suggest that policy moved about 100% of the difference between the major party identifiers.

Upon closer examination, the differences between the ideal point measure and the other two measures is due to the fact that the ideal point measure places more weight on highly discriminating issues and highly discriminating issues have tended to see more movement than less discriminating issues. Figure 2 illustrated some of these differences. One the one hand, this suggests a limitation of trying to measure overall movement in policy when policy is moving to a different extent on different

dimensions. However, on balance, over-weighting items with high discrimination is probably a drawback rather than a positive aspect of the ideal point measure. If the goal is to measure how the mass public experiences policy, the measure should try to capture the weights that the mass public would put on the issues. There is little reason to think that voters will inherently care more about issues that are more closely correlated with each other. Hence, if one wants to get an overall sense of how policy has moved, the simple additive and difficulty-adjusted indices are probably more appropriate, and my results continue to suggest that the left-right movement in policy is small relative to the difference between the modern parties.

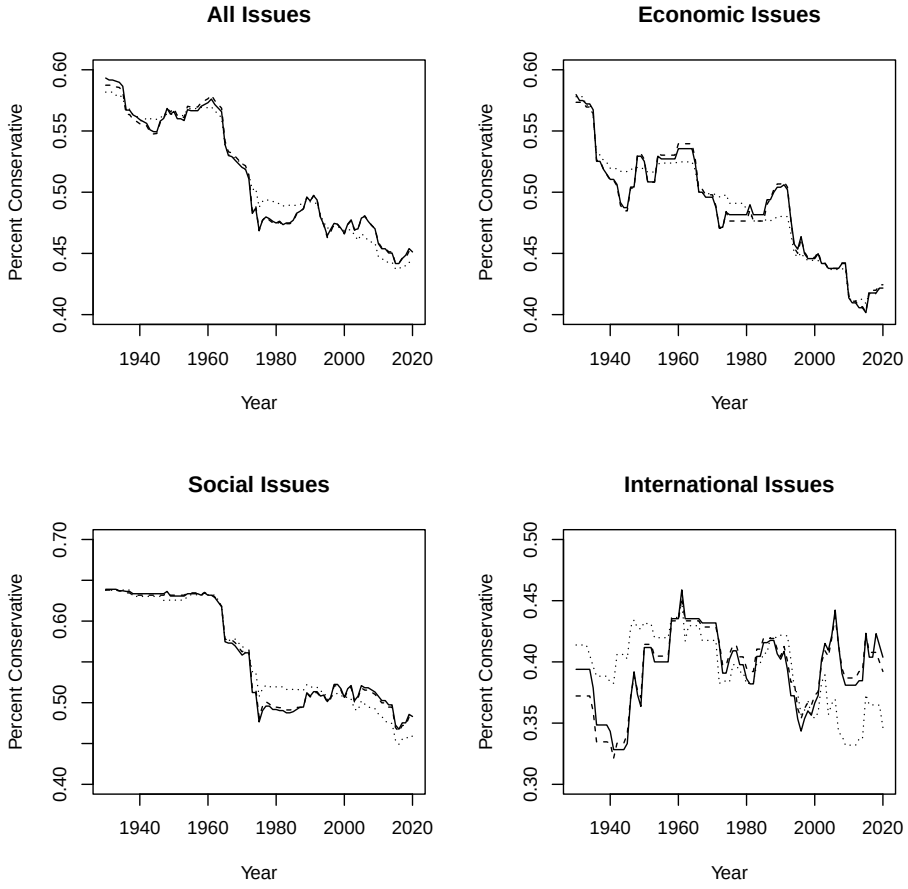

Figure 5: *Comparing Three Measures of National Policy, by Issue Area — The solid line denotes the simple additive index, the dashed line denotes the difficulty-adjusted index, and the dotted line denotes the ideal point estimation index.*

Using all three methods, the midpoint between the party platforms has moved to the right.

Using all three methods, the NPAT suggests that the midpoint between the parties has not changed much in the 1992-2022 time period. Using all three methods, the mass public has moved to the left between 1940 and 2020. This begins to frame our ability to explain the movement in policy based on mass and elite ideology, something I expand on in Section 6. Using the simple additive index and the difficulty adjusted index, the modern party platforms are about 2.5 times further apart than the average Republican and Democratic identifier. Using the ideal point estimation index, the modern party platforms are about 4 times farther apart than the average Republican and Democratic identifier. Using all three indices, the average Republican and Democratic NPAT respondent are about 2.5 times father apart than the average Republican and Democratic identifier in the mass public. These findings, similar to others in the literature, demonstrates the extremity of elites relative to the mass public.

5.3 Representation

Consider the trajectory of national policy outcomes and the trajectory of mass ideology. I plot both series in Figure 6. The figure uses the difficulty-adjusted measure for each series. The two series exhibit somewhat similar patterns—both move to the left over time and appear to converge near the end of the series. The series are correlated at 0.45, suggesting a moderate relationship.

The co-movement of policy outcomes and mass ideology are suggestive of three different mechanisms. One mechanism is that the liberal movement in mass ideology has led to more Democratic institutional control, which then led to left-wing movement in policy. A second mechanism is that the liberal movement in mass ideology directly pushed institutional actors to enact more liberal policies. A third mechanism is that mass ideology and elite ideology co-moved to the left, and the left-wing movement in elite ideology led to increasingly liberal policy outcomes. In the next section, I address these mechanisms by considering the relationship between elite political actors and policy outcomes, and later, the relationship between mass opinion and elite political actors.

Figure 6: *National Policy Outcomes vs. Mass Ideology*

6 Changes in Policy Outcomes

I next examine the degree of policy change over time. A policy change for policy i in time period t occurred if policy i was left-wing in period $t-1$ and right-wing in period t, or if policy i was right-wing in period $t-1$ and left-wing in period t. Figure 7 plots the total number of policy changes over time. The largest number of policy changes occurred during the 1970s. The number of policy changes is characterized by spikes in different years. Beyond the spikes, there is a trend in the degree of policy change over time. Before 1960, we saw an average of 2.9 policies changing each year. Between 1960 and 1980, we saw an average of 6.7 policies changing each year. Since 1980, we saw an average of 5.9 policies changing each year.

This brings up the following questions—are the spikes we observe in Figure 7 due to legislative, executive, or judicial change? Do the changes reflect left-wing or right wing movement? Does the direction of change line up with the orientation of the political branch responsible for the change? The figures and analyses below address these questions. Four types of changes are possible—changes with legislative origin involve a law passed by the U.S. Congress (and signed by the president, or alternatively, along with a veto over-ride). Changes with executive origin involve a policy change made by the president or an executive branch agency. Changes of judicial origin involve a court decision. Finally, a small number of changes had as their origin a constitutional amendment.

Figure 8 illustrates that legislative change and executive change has been higher since the 1960s while judicial change was concentrated in a short period of time and was due to two very important court cases—Roe v. Wade and Buckley v. Valeo. The later decision reversed provisions of the 1971 Campaign Finance Reform Act, which led to the spike in legislative change in the prior year.

It is important to highlight how my measure differs from Mayhew's (1991) and Binder's (1999) measures. Both Mayhew's and Binder's measures capture only legislative productivity while my measure captures change due to executive and judicial action. The unit of analysis is different as well—in Mayhew's and Binder's work, a piece of legislation can by definition only change one policy. In my measure, the unit is the survey item. Particularly important issues will receive more coverage in the Gallup and NPAT surveys. My measure can thus be viewed as an importance-weighted measure of policy change. It is possible for a single piece of legislation to be responsible

for many individual policy changes. For a similar reason, it is possible for a piece of legislation that shows up in Mayhew's or Binder's data to not show up in my data if none of the provisions of the legislation were deemed important enough policies to show up as mass or elite survey questions or to be mentioned in the parties platforms at any point during my period of study. Figure A.9 compares my measure of legislative productivity to the Mayhew and Binder measures. Like Mayhew's, my measure finds an "activist era" in the 60s and 70s, though the coverage of Mayhew's measure means he does not pick up the fact that recently, the amount of legislative productivity is only slight lower than it was during the activist era. Binder's measure exhibits a different pattern, with the amount of gridlock generally increasing over time.

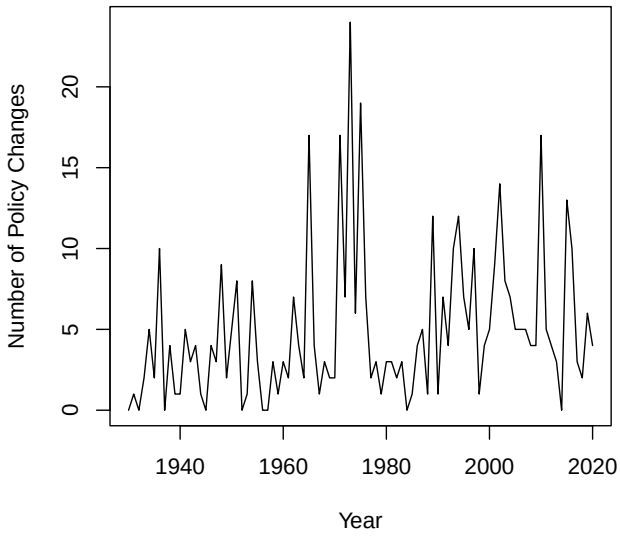

Figure 7: *Number of Policy Changes Each Year*

Figure 9 reports these results in more detail—I separate the number of left-wing changes (colored blue) and right-wing changes (colored red). I also labeled any peak were at least 5 policies were changed in a particular direction. For comparison, I coded the party of the president (blue and red shading) with darker shading when there was united government. I never observe a spike in left-wing policy during unified Republican government nor a spike in right-wing policy during a unified Democratic government. The one seaming exception to this occurred in 2002 and is not

really an exception. The spike is due to the McCain-Feingold bill which passed under Democratic control of the Senate—the seeming exception is therefore just driven by the fact that the data were quantized into years.

Peaks of policy movement almost always line up with the party of the president. Exceptions include the Taft-Hartley act, Nixon's War on Drugs legislation, the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision, the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974, the Contract with America, and McCain-Feingold. The Taft-Hartley Acts was passed by the Republican congress over the veto of a Democratic president. Nixon's War on Drugs (passed during a period of divided government) is the only instance when there was substantial left-wing and right-wing movement in policy in the same year—the legislation itself increased penalties for drug use (a policy coded as right-wing) and increased funding for drug treatment (a policy coded as left-wing).

A good part of the left-wing movement observed in the policy series during the 1960s through 1980s is driven by Johnson era civil rights legislation, the Roe v. Wade decision, and the Federal Election Campaign Acts of 1971 and 1974. Abortion and campaign finance policy receive a great deal of weight in the index because they are implicitly viewed as important by the NPAT and Gallup surveys.

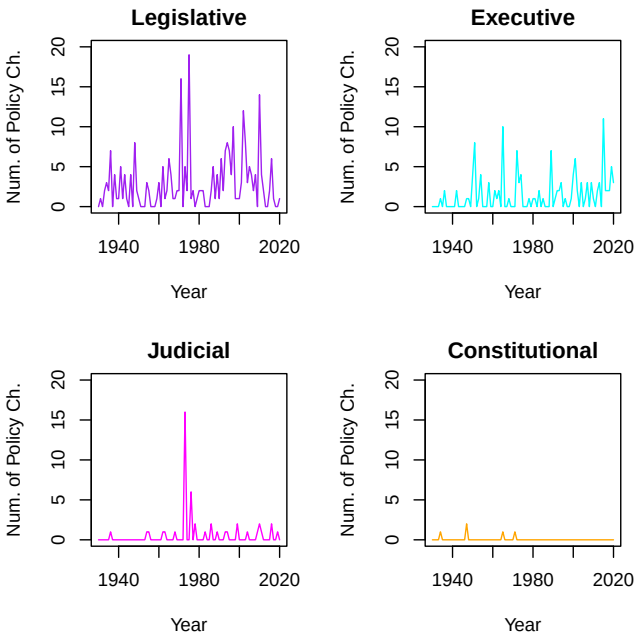

Figure 8: *Number of Policy Changes by Mechanism of Change*

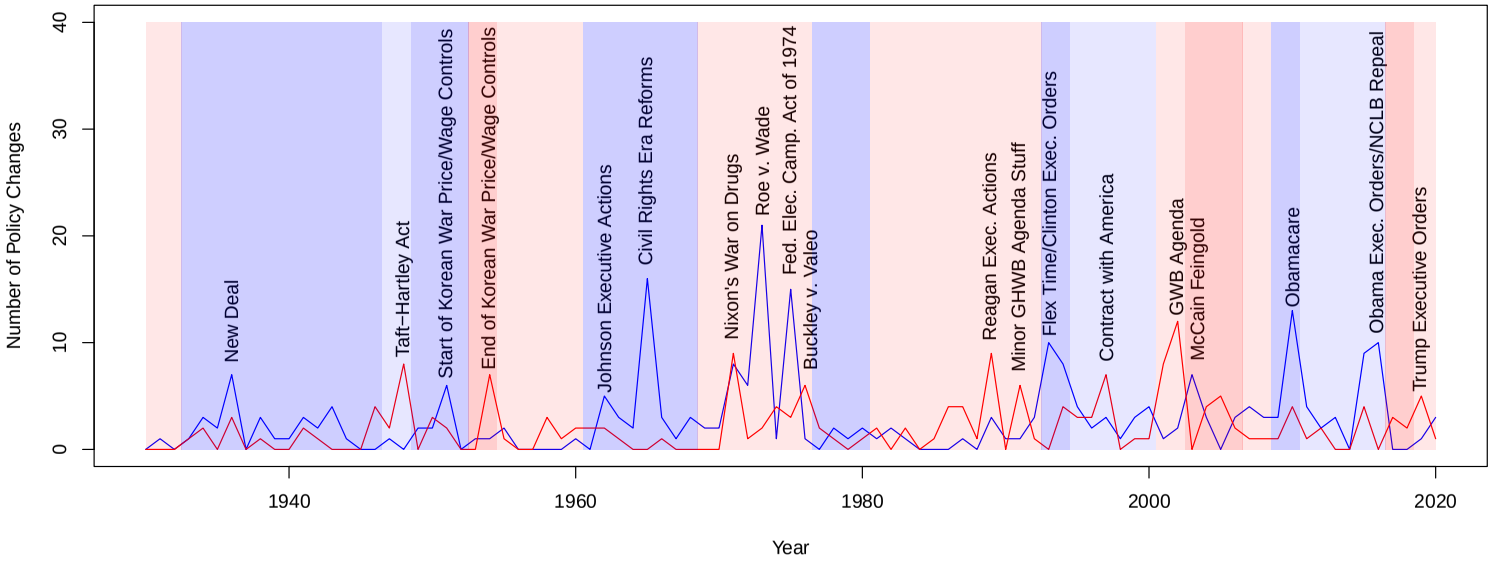

Figure 9: *Number of Policy Changes by Direction of Change*

Policy change does seem to exhibits a small start of term effect, as the gridlock literature finds—we see about 0.5 more policy changes in the first two years of a presidential term. However, this does not seem to be driven by legislative activity. There are about 0.25 more executive policy changes in the first two years of a presidential term and about 0.25 more judicial policy changes during the first two wears of a presidential term, though the later probably shouldn't be generalized as the overall pattern is largely driven by just two judicial decisions. There is a moderately sized odd-year effect (with odd years representing the first year of a congress)—odd years see about 1 more policy change than even years. Both legislative change and executive change are about 0.4 higher during odd years.

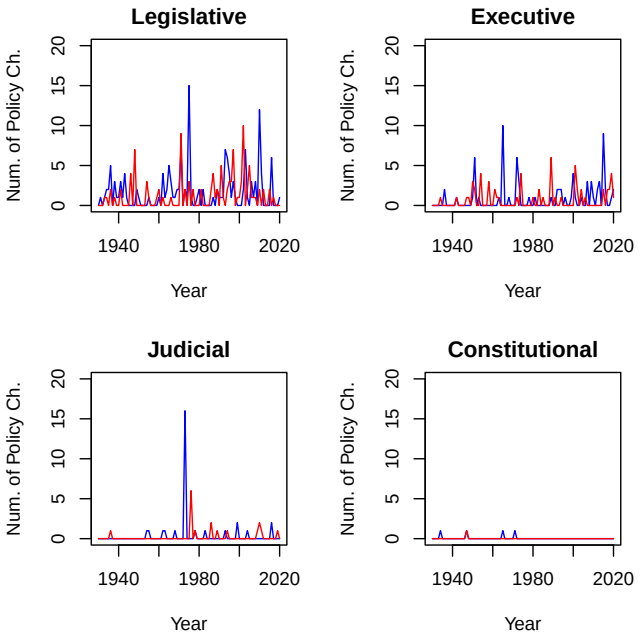

Figure 10: *Number of Policy Changes by Direction of Change and Mechanism of Change*

6.1 Explaining Change in Policy Outcomes

I next seek to explain when policy changes. For each policy in each year, one of five things can happen. First, no policy change occurs (this occurs 99.6% of the time). When policy does change, it can change through four different mechanisms—through legislation, through executive action, through a judicial decision, and through a constitutional amendment. Legislation is most common

for of policy change (accounting for 59% of the changes), executive action is the second most common (accounting for 30% of the changes), judicial decisions account for 10% of the changes, and amendments account for 1% of the changes.

I model these five outcomes as a dependent variable in a conditional logit model. With a conditional logit model, a latent variable is used to model the relative likelihood of each outcome, with one of the outcomes normalized to zero. In this case, I normalize latent variable of observing no change in policy to be zero. Each other latent variable can be modeled as a function of covariates. The covariates included in a conditional logit model must vary over choice. This can be met in two ways—a covariate can be choice specific or a covariate that is not choice specific can be interacted with a choice dummy. A covariate such as opposition by a branch of government to the status quo is inherently choice specific, as the opposition of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches to the current status quo need not be equal. A covariate such as a start of term dummy does not vary over choice, but can be interacted with a choice dummy. If the start of term dummy is interacted with a dummy for the no change choice, it will capture the degree to which no change in the status quo is more or less likely in the beginning of a presidential term.

In the first specification, I included a constant term for each of the four types of policy change. I also considered the orientation of the relevant branch of government relative to the status quo policy (i.e. the policy direction of policy i in period $t-1$). If the status quo is a left-wing policy, we should expect a higher probability of legislative change when the legislature is right-wing. Similarly, if the status quo is a left-wing policy, we should expect a higher probability of executive change when the president in right-wing. To capture this, I multiplied a measure of the how right-wing a branch of government is with a variable that is -1 when the policy is right-wing and 1 when the policy is left-wing. I next discuss how I measure how right-wing each branch of government is.

Legislative change involves assembling a large enough coalition. The legislation must receive a majority in both houses of Congress, and must either survive a presidential veto, or overcome a veto through an override. I coded the orientation of the legislature as left-wing if there was unified Democratic government, or if there was a Republican president and a veto-proof Democratic majority in both chambers of Congress. The orientation of the legislature was coded as right-wing if

there was unified Republican government, or if there was a Democratic president and a veto-proof Republican majority in both chambers of Congress. I coded legislative opposition to the status quo as 1 if the status quo and the legislature had a different orientation, and I coded opposition as 0 if the status quo and the legislature have the same orientation or the legislature was split. The potential of a filibuster in the Senate suggests an alternate coding. As a second form of this variable, I coded the orientation of the legislature as right-wing if there was unified Republican government and if the Republican party held at least 60 Senate seats, or if there was a Democratic president and a veto-proof Democratic majority in both chambers of Congress. I similarly coded the orientation of the legislature as left-wing if there was unified Democratic government and if the Democratic party held at least 60 Senate seats, or if there was a Republican president and a veto-proof Democratic majority in both chambers of Congress.

Executive opposition to the status quo was more straightforward to code. I coded this as 1 if there is a left-wing status quo and a Republican president or if there is a right-wing status quo and a Democratic president, and 0 otherwise.

For judicial opposition, I considered a number of different measures. The first measure was based on the party of the president that appointed each justice. If a majority of justices were appointed by a Republican president, the court was considered to be right-wing, and if a majority of justices were appointed by a Democratic president, the court was considered left-wing. Judicial opposition to the status quo was equal to 1 if the was a right-wing status quo and a left-wing court, or a left-wing status quo and a right-wing court, and was coded as zero otherwise. The second measure was built off of the Martin-Quinn scores (Martin and Quinn, 2002). Specifically, I used the median Martin-Quinn score in each year. To generate the measure of judicial opposition, the court median was multiplied by 1 is the status quo was left-wing and -1 if the status quo was right-wing. The third measure was built off of the Supreme Court Database (Spaeth et al., 2020), where each vote cast by each justice was coded as being a left-wing vote or a right-wing vote. My measure multiplied the percent of right-wing votes cast by the justices over the period of a year by 1 if the status quo was left-wing and -1 if the status quo was right-wing. The three measures of court orientation are summarized in Figure 11.

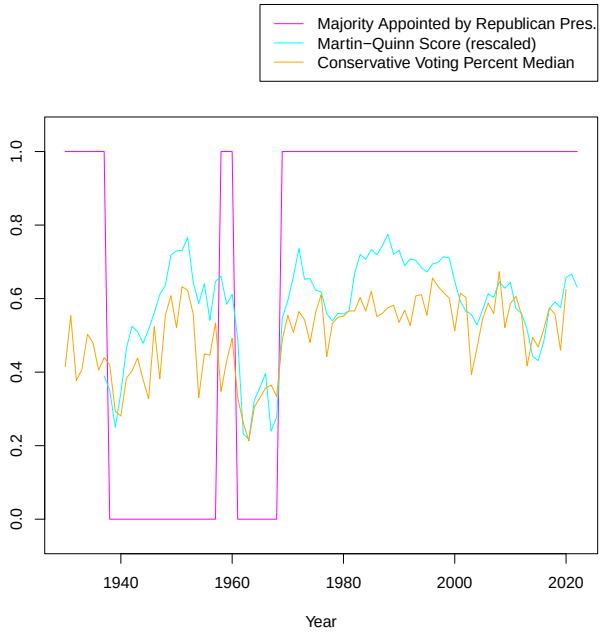

Figure 11: *Measures of Court Preferences.*

I did not consider a measure of opposition for change due to amendments. Amending the constitution requires either two-thirds of Congress and three-quarter of the states, or (theoretically) in the case of a constitutional convention, control of two-thirds of the states. Neither party has come close to meeting either threshold—in fact, in the period of time I study, neither party has a achieved unified control of state government in even a majority of the states. Beyond this, there are so few observations of policy changes due to amendments (5 in total) that I cannot expect to model these statistically.

The four forms of institutional opposition to the status quo generate a choice-specific covariate in the following way—the covariate is zero for the choice of no change, equal to the legislative measure for the choice of legislative change, equal to the executive measure for the choice of executive change, equal to the judicial measure for the choice of judicial change, and equal to 0 for the choice of amendment change.

The results are given in Table 1. The first column incorporates the filibuster into the measure of legislative opposition and uses the party of the nominating president to generate the measure of judicial opposition. The coefficient on opposition is assumed to be the same for legislative change,

executive change, and judicial change. Standard errors are clustered by year. Government opposition to the status quo has the expected sign (positive) and is statistically significant at the 10% level. I investigate this further by relaxing the assumption that the coefficient on government opposition to change is the same across the three branches of government. In column (2), I find a statistically significant effect for executive opposition. The coefficient on executive opposition is statistically distinguishable from legislative opposition. The coefficient on judicial opposition is imprecisely estimated and is statistically indistinguishable from the other two opposition coefficients.

I next considered an alternative measure of legislative opposition that does not incorporate the filibuster. It is arguable that there was a norm that until relatively recently, Senators would not routinely filibuster all legislation. In addition, there are methods for overcoming a filibuster with a majority vote for certain types of legislation. The results are given in columns (3) and (4). In column (3), I find that institutional opposition to the status quo is statistically significant. In column (4), I find that legislative and executive opposition to the status quo are statistically significant. I also find that none of the executive opposition coefficients are statistically distinguishable from any other and we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the three institutional opposition coefficients are equal.

I considered the two alternate measures of judicial opposition to change in columns (5) through (8). In columns (5) and (7), I continue to find that the coefficient on (overall) institutional opposition to change is statistically significant. In columns (6) and (8), I continue to find that the coefficients on legislative and executive opposition to change are statistically significant (though the coefficient on legislative change is only statistically significant at the 10% level when judicial opposition is measured using Martin-Quinn scores). In columns (6) and (8), the null hypothesis that the three institutional opposition coefficients are equal cannot be rejected. In column (6) the judicial and executive opposition coefficients are statistically distinguishable at the 10% level. No other combination is statistical distinguishable in columns (6) and (8).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Leg. Measure Incorporates Filibuster:	Yes		No		No		No	
Jud. Measure:	Party of Nom. Pres.		Party of Nom. Pres.		Martin-Quinn		Percent Right Wing Votes	
Independent Variables:								
Govt. Opposition to SQ	0.390+		0.526*		0.465*		0.624***	
	(0.224)		(0.214)		(0.226)		(0.188)	
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Leg. Change)		0.167		0.500*		0.464+		0.500*
		(0.251)		(0.234)		(0.250)		(0.234)
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Exec. Change)		0.876**		0.877**		0.887**		0.877**
		(0.283)		(0.283)		(0.290)		(0.283)
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Jud. Change)		-0.222		-0.222		-0.230		1.114
		(0.735)		(0.735)		(0.579)		(2.479)
Constant (Leg. Change)	-5.535***	-5.502***	-5.645***	-5.635***	-5.616***	-5.616***	-5.682***	-5.635***
	(0.140)	(0.143)	(0.162)	(0.172)	(0.165)	(0.177)	(0.162)	(0.172)
Constant (Exec. Change)	-6.361***	-6.682***	-6.446***	-6.683***	-6.367***	-6.650***	-6.509***	-6.683***
	(0.179)	(0.236)	(0.186)	(0.236)	(0.191)	(0.242)	(0.171)	(0.236)
Constant (Jud. Change)	-7.406***	-7.073***	-7.493***	-7.073***	-7.189***	-7.150***	-7.189***	-7.196***
	(0.463)	(0.648)	(0.449)	(0.648)	(0.403)	(0.354)	(0.371)	(0.395)
Constant (Amend. Change)	-9.424***	-9.424***	-9.424***	-9.424***	-9.585***	-9.585***	-9.424***	-9.424***
	(0.542)	(0.542)	(0.542)	(0.542)	(0.628)	(0.628)	(0.542)	(0.542)
Observations	62353	62353	62353	62353	58616	58616	62353	62353
Clusters	90	90	90	90	84	84	90	90

Table 1: Explaining Change in Policy Outcomes. Each column reports the results of a conditional logit model. Standard errors clustered by year are in parentheses. One star indicates statistical significance at the 5% level. Two stars indicates statistical significance at the 1% level. Three stars indicates statistical significance at the 0.1% level. A plus sign indicates statistical significance at the 10% level.

Public Opinion Measure:	(1)	(2)	(3) Conservative Opinion	(4) Stimson Mood	(5) Conservative Opinion	(6) Stimson Mood	(7)	(8)
Independent Variables:								
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Leg. Change)	0.415+	0.604*	0.527*	0.621*	0.511+	0.622*	0.518*	0.500*
	(0.246)	(0.246)	(0.259)	(0.287)	(0.264)	(0.290)	(0.213)	(0.234)
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Exec. Change)	0.863**	0.888**	0.900**	1.062**	0.928**	1.069**	0.876**	0.877**
	(0.284)	(0.284)	(0.298)	(0.340)	(0.295)	(0.346)	(0.283)	(0.283)
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Jud. Change)	-0.122	-0.231	0.053	-0.258	-0.059	-0.291	-0.224	-0.222
	(0.716)	(0.735)	(0.809)	(0.768)	(0.906)	(0.844)	(0.737)	(0.735)
Right SQ (No Change)	-0.254							
	(0.163)							
Time (No Change)		-0.804**						
		(0.297)						
Public Opposition to SQ			7.941***	2.195				
			(1.818)	(3.438)				
Public Opp. to SQ (Leg. Change)					5.735*	2.346		
					(2.831)	(4.162)		
Public Opp. to SQ (Exec. Change)					12.801***	2.737		
					(2.975)	(6.515)		
Public Opp. to SQ (Jud. Change)					5.063	-0.800		
					(6.088)	(9.711)		
Start of Term (Leg. Change)							-0.090	
							(0.240)	
Start of Term (Exec. Change)							0.143	
							(0.315)	
Start of Term (Jud. Change)							0.432	
							(0.675)	
Odd Year (Leg. Change)								0.126
								(0.254)
Odd Year (Exec. Change)								0.259
								(0.300)
Odd Year (Jud. Change)								0.303
								(0.685)
Constant (Leg. Change)	-5.751***	-6.094***	-5.650***	-5.588***	-5.626***	-5.589***	-5.597***	-5.700***
	(0.169)	(0.272)	(0.193)	(0.191)	(0.192)	(0.192)	(0.232)	(0.160)
Constant (Exec. Change)	-6.814***	-7.121***	-6.710***	-6.709***	-6.792***	-6.712***	-6.755***	-6.820***
	(0.237)	(0.303)	(0.252)	(0.279)	(0.255)	(0.278)	(0.328)	(0.301)
Constant (Jud. Change)	-7.263***	-7.501***	-7.183***	-6.832***	-7.106***	-6.814***	-7.307***	-7.236***
	(0.619)	(0.696)	(0.709)	(0.666)	(0.739)	(0.695)	(0.416)	(0.395)
Constant (Amend. Change)	-9.562***	-9.857***	-9.534***	-10.094***	-9.496***	-10.093***	-9.424***	-9.424***
	(0.545)	(0.598)	(0.624)	(0.719)	(0.626)	(0.719)	(0.542)	(0.542)
Clusters	90	90	77	69	77	69	90	90

Table 2: Explaining Change in Policy Outcomes, Alternative Models. Each column reports the results of a conditional logit model. Standard errors clustered by year are in parentheses. One star indicates statistical significance at the 5% level. Two stars indicates statistical significance at the 1% level. Three stars indicates statistical significance at the 0.1% level. A plus sign indicates statistical significance at the 10% level.

My results lead to two possible interpretations. As we can never reject the null that the three coefficients are equal in columns (4), (6), and (8), we can interpret the results as suggesting that institutional opposition to change moderates change in all three institutions. However, we lack any direct evidence that judicial opposition to change moderates change. The coefficients on judicial opposition to change are imprecisely estimated because judicial change is rarer than executive and legislative change. Figure 8 shows that unlike legislative and executive changes, judicial changes have been rare and concentrated on two supreme court cases—Roe v. Wade and Buckley v. Valeo. Roe v. Wade led to a number of left-wing policy changes while all three measures of judicial ideology suggest that Roe v. Wade occurred at a time at which the court was very conservative. The rarity of judicial changes and the anomalous nature of the Roe v. Wade decision make it unlikely that the model could recover evidence that judicial opposition to change leads to less judicial change.

Table 2 considers additional moderators of policy change. In column (1), I interact whether there is a right-wing status quo with whether the choice was no policy change. The coefficient captures whether there is an asymmetry in the degree of change between left-wing and right-wing status quos. The coefficient on right-wing status quo is not statistically significant. Column (2) investigates whether there is a time trend in policy change not explained by the institutional variables.[5] The results suggest that there is a time-trend in policy change which is not explained by institutional opposition to change.

Column (3) investigates what one thing the time trend could be capturing—public opposition to the status quo. Mass ideology is measured using the difficulty-adjusted index (illustrated in Figure 12). To generate the measure of public opposition, I multiplied the mass ideology by -1 if the status quo was left-wing and 1 if the status quo was right-wing. The results indicate that policy change is more likely when the public is opposed to the status quo. Column (4) employs Stimson's (1991) public mood index (reverse coded) as an alternative measure of mass ideology. In this case, the coefficient on public opposition to the status quo is not statistically significant. Figure 12 demonstrates that both indices find that the public has trended liberal over time, but the liberal trend is stronger in my measure than in Stimson's measure. It is possible that the

[5]Time is scaled to be within 0 and 1 for the time period between 1930 and 2020.

statistically significant coefficient in column (3) is due to the fact that such a relationship exists and my measure is a better measure of public opinion. It is also possible the statistically significant coefficient in column (3) is due to a time trend being present for some other reason and my measure more closely resembling a time trend than the Stimson's measure.

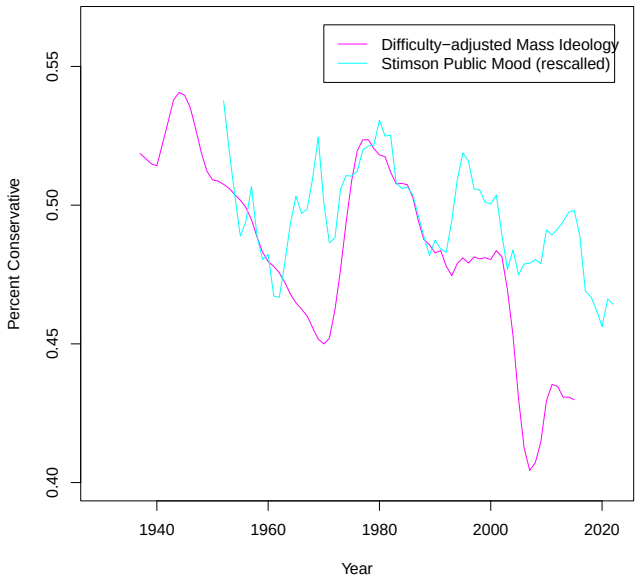

Figure 12: *Measures of Public Opinion.*

Columns (5) and (6) investigate whether the start of presidential term is associated with more change and columns (7) and (8) investigate whether odd years are associated with more change. In both cases, the coefficients are not statistically significant. The results suggest that the findings I highlighted in Figure 9 are either accounted for by institutional opposition to change, or do not rise to the level of statistical significance. The former finding is different than the pattern described in Mayhew (1991), though Krehbiel (1998) argues that the start of term effect should be accounted for by institutional variables.

In Table 3, I examined differences across issue areas. My specification relies on a measure of legislative opposition that does not incorporate the filibuster, a measure of judicial opposition based on the party of the appointing president, and a measure of public opposition based on Gallup policy questions. I only considered judicial opposition for social issues as there were too few economic and

international issues that were changed via judicial decision to model them. An amendment intercept term was only included for social policies as only social policies where changed via constitutional amendment.

For economic issues, I find that government opposition to change is statistically significant. Legislative opposition to change is individually significant while executive opposition is not, though the two coefficients are not statistically distinguishable. For social issues, government opposition is not statistically significant. Only executive opposition is individually significant and the coefficient on executive opposition is statistically distinguishable from the coefficients on legislative opposition and judicial opposition. For international issues, government opposition is not statistically significant. Legislative opposition is individually statistically significant and executive opposition is not, and the coefficients are statistically distinguishable at the 10% level.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Sample:	Economic Issues		Social Issues		International Issues	
Independent Variables:						
Govt. Opposition to SQ	0.991***		0.441		0.246	
	(0.300)		(0.348)		(0.314)	
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Leg. Change)		0.908**		0.038		1.027*
		(0.340)		(0.368)		(0.493)
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Exec. Change)		1.299		2.971***		-0.046
		(0.921)		(0.716)		(0.313)
Govt. Opp. to SQ (Jud. Change)				-0.062		
				(0.838)		
Public Opposition to SQ	2.901***	2.899***	8.198*	7.518*	4.432***	4.432***
	(0.356)	(0.356)	(3.271)	(3.142)	(0.852)	(0.852)
Constant (Leg. Change)	-4.974***	-4.937***	-5.675***	-5.549***	-5.082***	-5.333***
	(0.211)	(0.211)	(0.299)	(0.282)	(0.276)	(0.264)
Constant (Exec. Change)	-6.612***	-6.844***	-6.793***	-8.877***	-4.313***	-4.165***
	(0.397)	(0.815)	(0.304)	(0.666)	(0.275)	(0.247)
Constant (Jud. Change)	-9.069***	-8.445***	-6.791***	-6.534***	-21.930***	-22.424***
	(1.001)	(0.988)	(0.544)	(0.722)	(0.215)	(0.114)
Constant (Amend. Change)			-8.897***	-8.889***		
			(0.620)	(0.619)		
Observations	18765	18765	28009	28009	6838	6838
Clusters	77	77	77	77	77	77

Table 3: Explaining Change in Policy Outcomes and Issue Areas. Each column reports the results of a conditional logit model. Standard errors clustered by year are in parentheses. One star indicates statistical significance at the 5% level. Two stars indicates statistical significance at the 1% level. Three stars indicates statistical significance at the 0.1% level. A plus sign indicates statistical significance at the 10% level.

6.2 Effect Sizes

Section 5 found that policy has trended left while Subsection 6.1 highlighted that institutional opposition moderated the degree to change, but can institutional opposition explain the degree of left-wing movement we observed? To answer this question, I consider the effect sizes predicted by the model. I based these results on the model from column (4) of Table 1. Setting judicial opposition to the status quo at 0.5, I varied legislative opposition to the status quo and executive opposition to the status quo. When both were zero, the model suggested a 0.56% probability that policy would change. When legislative opposition was at 0 and executive opposition was at 1, there was a 0.74% probability that policy would change. When both executive opposition and legislative opposition were at 1, there was a 0.96% probability that policy would change.[6] Unified opposition to the status quo thus increased that probability of change by about 70% relative to no opposition to the status quo.

Consider a simple time-series model with a lagged-dependent variable, $y_t = \theta + \rho y_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$. The model captures a mean-reverting stochastic process with a stationary mean of $\frac{\theta}{1-\rho}$—such a series can be out of equilibrium, but over time, it will equilibrate to a distribution centered at the stationary mean. The status quo policy in the conditional logit model I considered acts similarly to a lagged dependent variable and has a similar mean-reverting tendency. During the period of my study, the Democratic party had legislative and executive control 38.7% of the time, the Democratic party had executive control with a split legislature 15.1% of the time, the Republican party had control of both 11.8% of the time, and the Republican party had executive control with a split legislature 34.4% of the time. Based on this, we would have expected a left-wing drift in policy. Based on these probabilities, we would expect right to left movement 0.74% of the time and left to right movement 0.67% of the time, leading to a long-run state where 47.4% of policies would be conservative, if the distribution of intuitional control observed was uniformly distributed over the 90-year period.

Figure 13 investigates this in more detail by simulating the likely trajectories of policy starting

[6] A fourth possible case—with executive opposition at 0 and legislative opposition at 1—was not considered since during my period of study, I never observed the party that did not have control of the presidency having a large enough legislative coalition to override a presidential veto.

from 1930 using the model parameters and the institutional configuration observed in the data. The simulated policy trajectory moves to the left over time, but not to the same degree as the observed policy trajectory. The simulated trajectory moves to the left during periods with a Democratic president and moves to the right during periods with a Republican president. The observed trajectory follows this with some anomalies. In particular, during the Nixon administration, policy move massively to the left, and during Truman's first term, policy moved to the right.

I considered two other simulated trajectories in Figure 14. Rather than use the observed institutional configurations, I sampled intuitional configurations according the to probabilities 38.7% (unified Democratic control), 15.1% (Democratic president with a split legislature), 34.4% (Republican president with a split legislature), and 11.8% (unified Republican control). This matches the fraction of control each party has had, but distributes it more evenly over time. For comparison, I also considered the probabilities 35.0%, 15.0%, 15.0%, and 35.0%, to consider the trajectory that would be observed under a symmetric control scenario. The trajectory that used the observed probabilities of institutional control closely matched the trajectory that used observed institutional control. This indicates that the fact that the Democratic advantage was concentrated early in the time series did not appreciably alter outcomes. The trajectory for the symmetric scenario led to policies that were about 2% more conservative by 2020. Under the symmetric scenario, the trajectory would eventually approach 50.0% conservative policies and would require about 150 years to reach within a point of that. Using the observed probabilities, the series would eventually approach 47.3% conservative policies and would require almost 200 years to reach within a point of that.

The model predicts that policy would have moved 6 percentage points in the liberal direction due to mean reversion alone, with the Democratic advantage in legislative and executive control over this period leading to additional movement of about 2 percentage points. This leaves almost 40% of the 13 percentage point movement unaccounted for by the model. This is roughly equal to the anomalous left-wing movement observed during the Nixon administration, much of which corresponds to the anomalous Roe v. Wade decision and liberal provisions in the War on Drugs legislation. If the Democratic party did continue to hold on to institutions as it did over the last 90 years, policy has approximately equilibrated, and achieved this earlier due to the anomalous

change during the Nixon administration. The Republican party, however, has done better in terms of institutional control over the last 40 years and if that pattern continued, mean reversion would lead to right-wing movement in policy outcomes slowly approaching an equilibrium of 50.9% conservative policies.

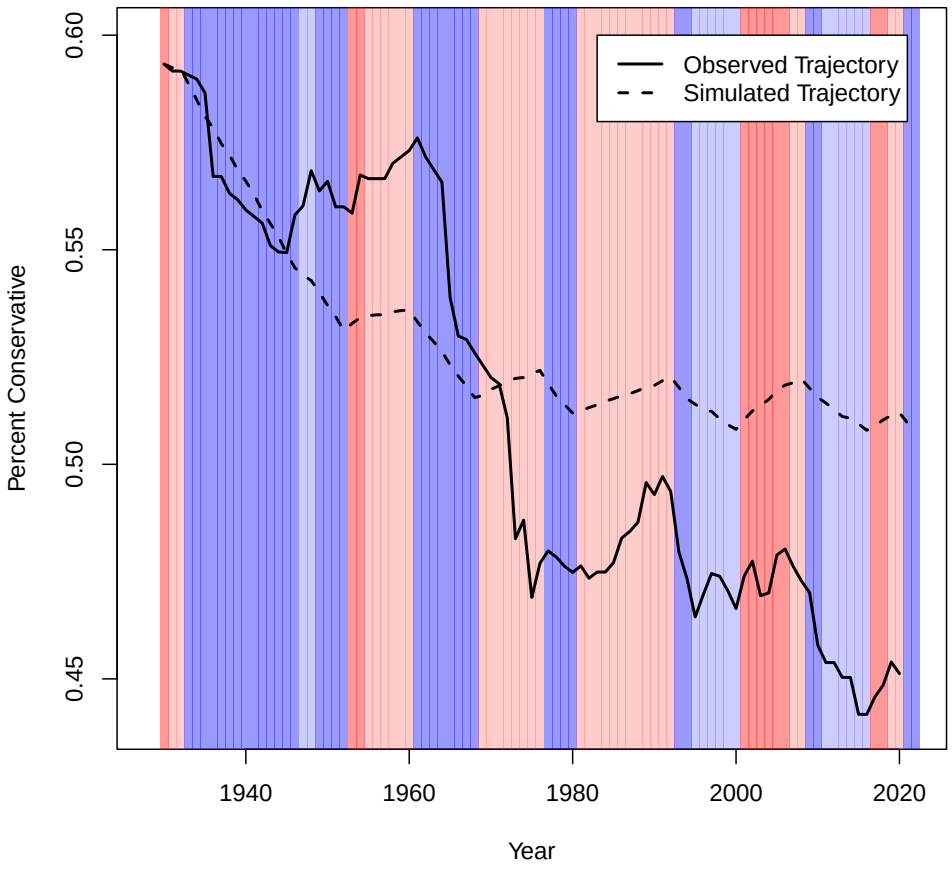

Figure 13: *Observed and Simulated Polices — The solid line represents the observed trajectory of policy and the dotted line represents the trajectory as simulated by the model. For comparison, the figure highlights periods of unified Democratic control (in dark blue), a Democratic executive with a split legislature (in light blue), unified Republican control (in dark red), and a Republican executive with a split legislature (in light red).*

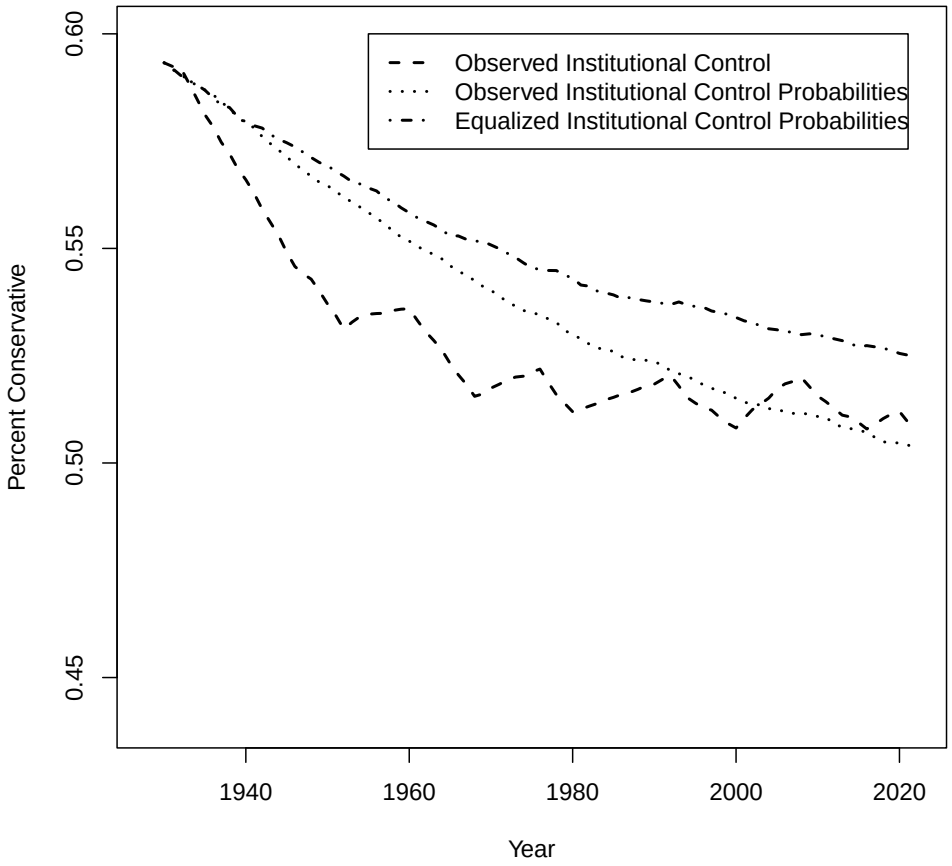

Figure 14: *Simulated Policies*

7 Conclusion

My article suggests that policy has drifted left over time, with social policies seeing the most movement. The change was concentrated in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly for social policies. Legislation was the most common source of change, followed by executive action and then judicial decisions. Both legislative and judicial change were most prevalent in the 1970s, while the degree of executive change has remained stable over time.

I found evidence that the preferences of legislative and executive actors moderated policy change. There was some evidence of a moderating effect of public opinion, but this evidence was substantially weaker. I did not find any evidence of a moderating effect of judicial preferences. The later was precluded by an anomalous Supreme Court decision were a conservative court produced a far ranging liberal outcome.

Both policy and mass ideology have drifted left over time and mass opinion and national policies are close in aggregate. This initially was suggestive of three plausible mechanisms. One mechanism had mass ideology drifting left over time leading to increasing Democratic success in controlling institutions, leading to increasing left-wing policy outcomes. A second mechanism had mass ideology driving left over time leading directly to increasingly left-wing policy outcomes. A third mechanism had both mass ideology and elite ideology coincidentally drifting left over time, with increasingly left-wing elite ideology leading to increasingly left-wing policy outcomes. My results point against all three mechanisms. As the mass public drifted left, we have not seen increasing Democratic success—instead, we have seen increasing Republican success. I found some weak evidence in support of a direct effect of mass ideology, but this result was not robust to alternative plausible measures of mass ideology. Instead, my results suggested that the left-wing drift we have seen in policy was due to mean reversion, Democratic electoral over-performance before 1980, and anomalous left-wing policy movement during the Nixon adminstration.

My results suggest important differences from what Erikson, Wright and McIver (1993) and Caughey and Warshaw (2018) found for state policies. Both found a very strong cross-state correlation between mass ideology and state policy outcomes. Contrarily, I found a weak over-time correlation between mass ideology and national policy outcomes, which was not robust to alter-

native measures of mass ideology. Both Erikson, Wright and McIver and Caughey and Warshaw describe a mechanism whereby more conservative mass ideology leads to increasing Republican control of institutions which then leads to more conservative policy outcomes. While they provide strong evidence that this mechanism accounts for cross-state differences, it does not appear to work in the same way at the national level across time. At the national level, an increasingly liberal public was associated with increasing Republican control of government and policy liberalized nonetheless. Moreover, this was not because of a direct effect of public opinion or a lack of an effect of the preferences of elite political actors. Instead, the movement reflected mean reversion from a starting point which was out of equilibrium—left-wing policy movement during Democratic administrations outpaced right-wing movement during Republican administrations because there were more policies that could be changed in the liberal direction.

A reader might desire an explanation for why policies were out of equilibrium early in the time series. Fully understanding this is beyond the scope of this article, but I offer some thoughts and suggestive pieces of evidence. The equilibrium is determined by the probabilities that each party controls the branches of government, which should in theory be linked to mass ideology. But this link would not have been operable infinitely backwards in time. Certainly, it would not have been present when the U.S. constitution was written, with the constitution heavily constraining policy outcomes and that constraint only slowly being peeled away by constitutional amendments. This was coupled with a lack of universal suffrage, the indirect election of Senators, etc. While a robust link between the public and institutional actors could be plausible a few years prior to 1930, the model of policy change indicated slow movement with hundreds of years being required for policy to equilibrate. There is thus no reason to think that policy outcomes would being anywhere near equilibrium in 1930.

Some of my results point to additional potential differences between national and state policies that can't be conclusively demonstrated due to different methodologies being used in prior work. My results suggest that economic and social policies have drifted left over time, with social issues experiencing a greater degree of change. Moreover, this change was not uniformly distributed, with the change concentrated in the 60s and 70s. The degree of change in small relative to the modern

degree of separation between the party elite and party identifiers. Caughey and Warshaw (2022) found that at the state level, both economic and social policies have drifted left over time with steady movement in both cases. Moreover, they observed a greater degree of change in economic policy. The results are not entire comparable—my results can measure the absolute amount of change in different policy categories due to using a simple additive index. Caughey and Warshaw's comparison instead normalizes the degree of change based on across-state variance in economic and social policy. Moreover, my measures can be compared to movement in mass and elite opinion while Caughey and Warshaw's do not allow such a comparison. Nonetheless, the magnitude of the changes they observe are suggestive that while national policies have exhibited a relatively small amount of left-wing movement, state policies have exhibited a large amount of left-wing movement.

Overall, my results demonstrate than national policies are now, in aggregate, close to were voters would want then, but even aggregate alignment between the public and policies takes a very long time to arrive and congruence at the individual policy level is far more difficult to achieve.

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A Additional Results

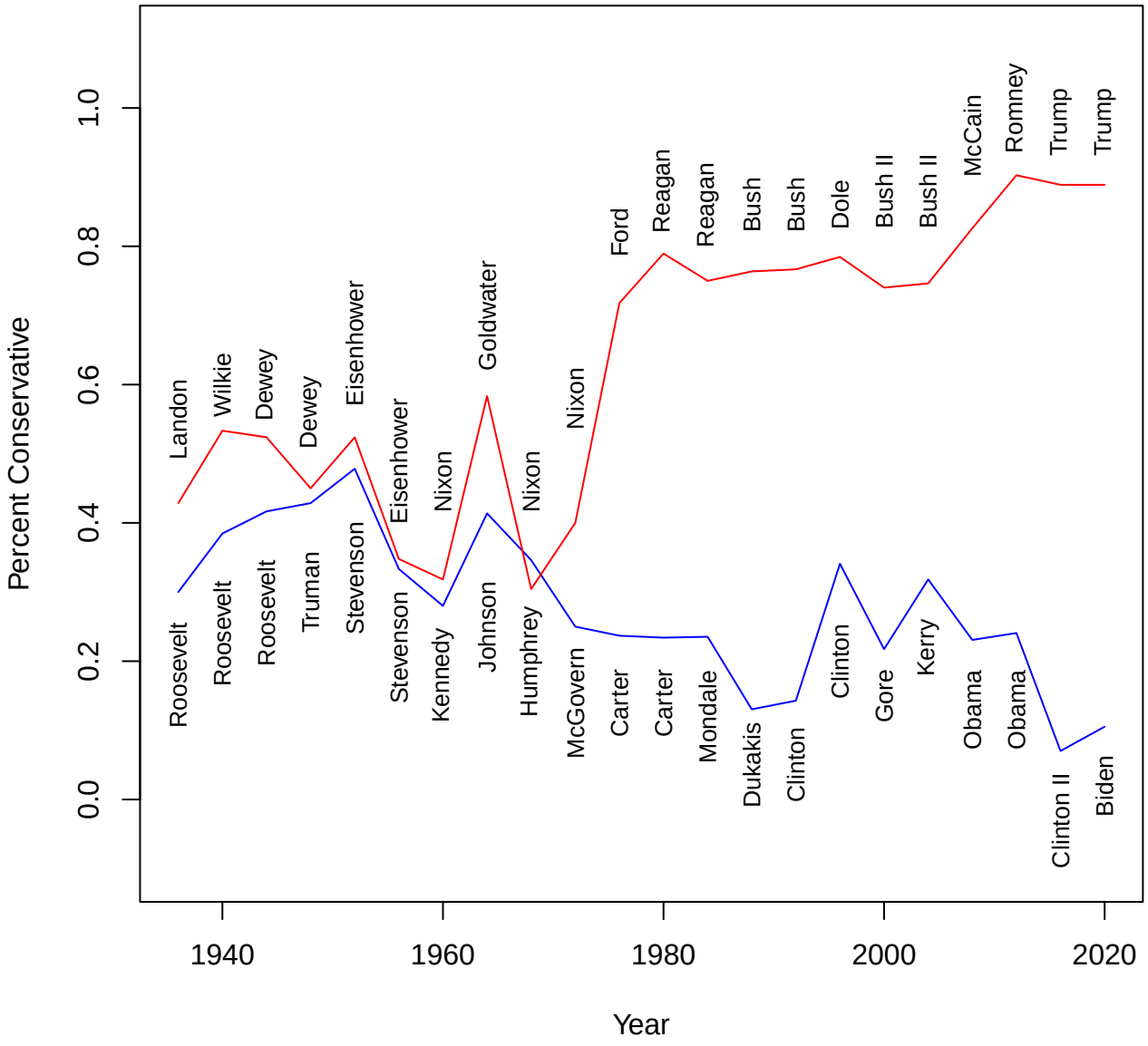

Figure A.1: *National Party Platforms, Simple Additive Index.*

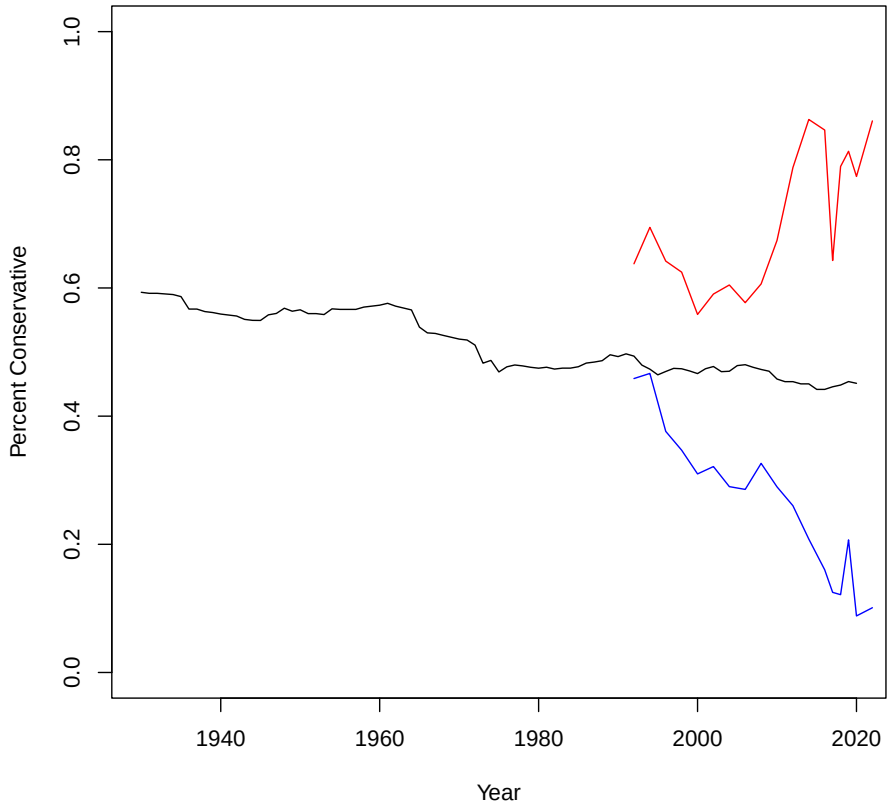

Figure A.2: *Policy Outcomes and Average NPAT Position for Democratic and Republican Candidates, Simple Additive Index.*

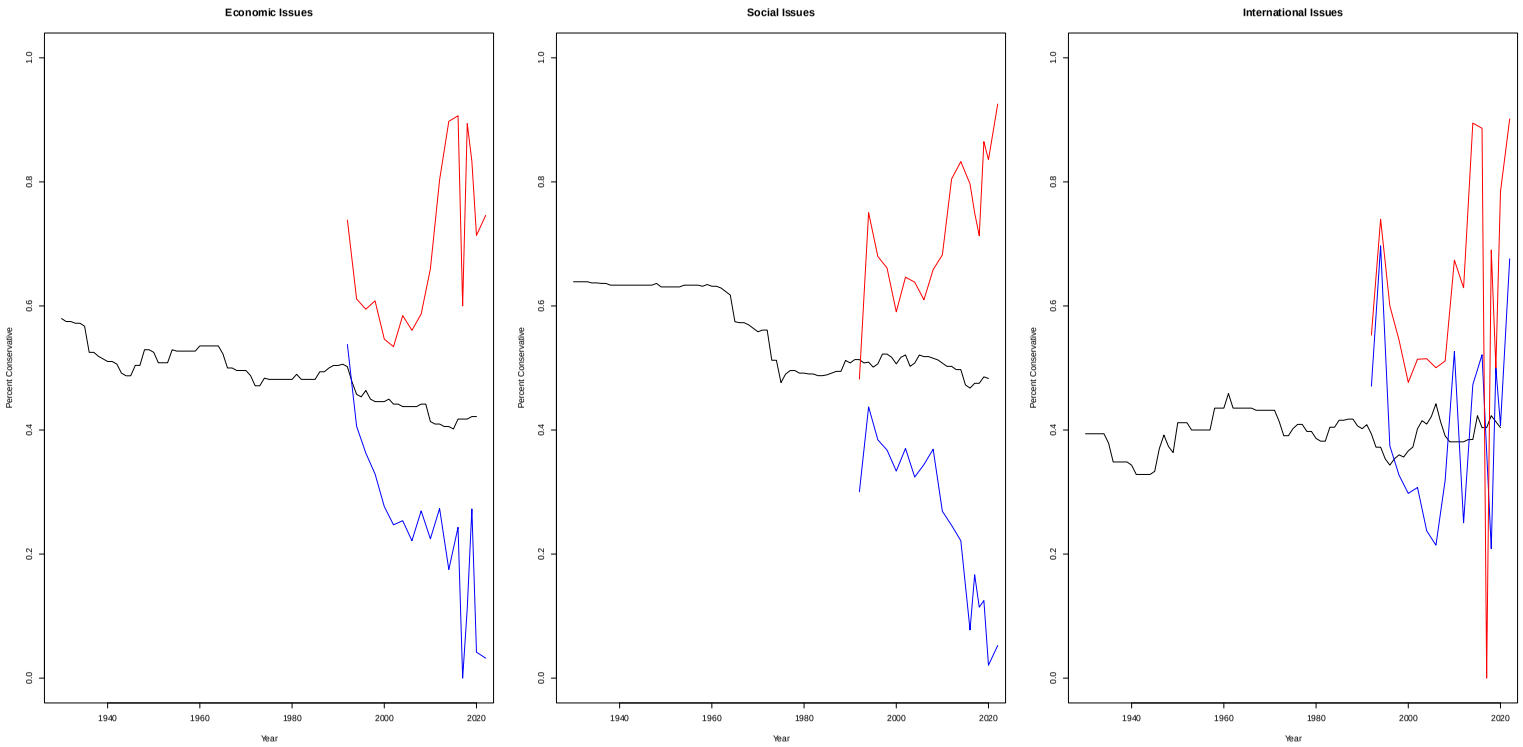

Figure A.3: *Policy Outcomes and Average NPAT Position for Democratic and Republican Candidates by Issue, Simple Additive Index.*

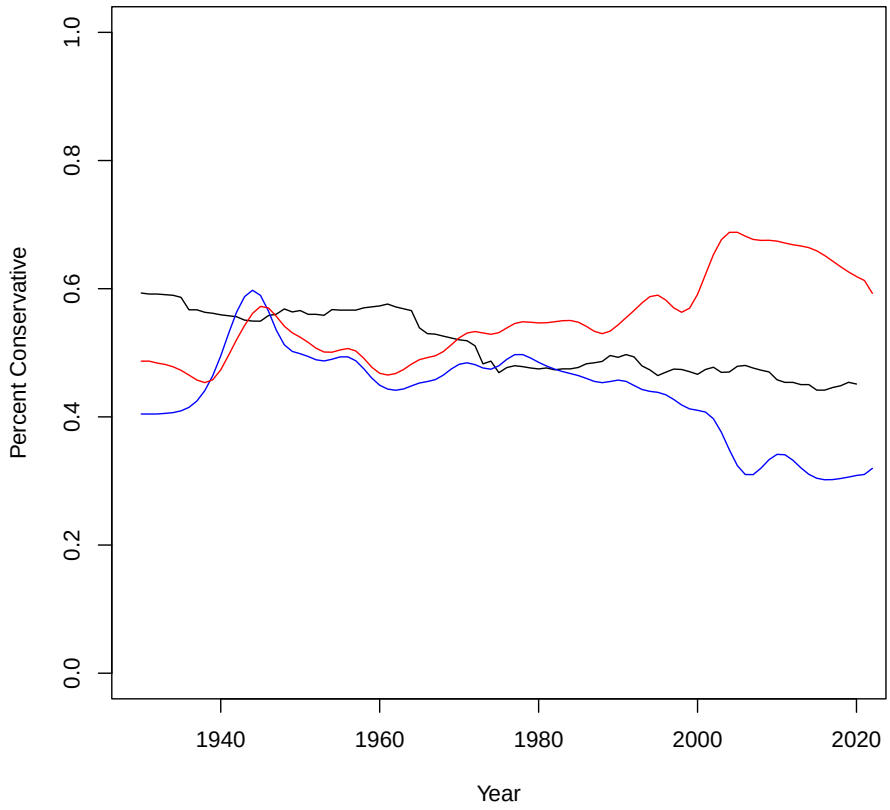

Figure A.4: *Policy Outcomes and Average Gallup Position for Democratic and Republican Identifiers, Simple Additive Index.*

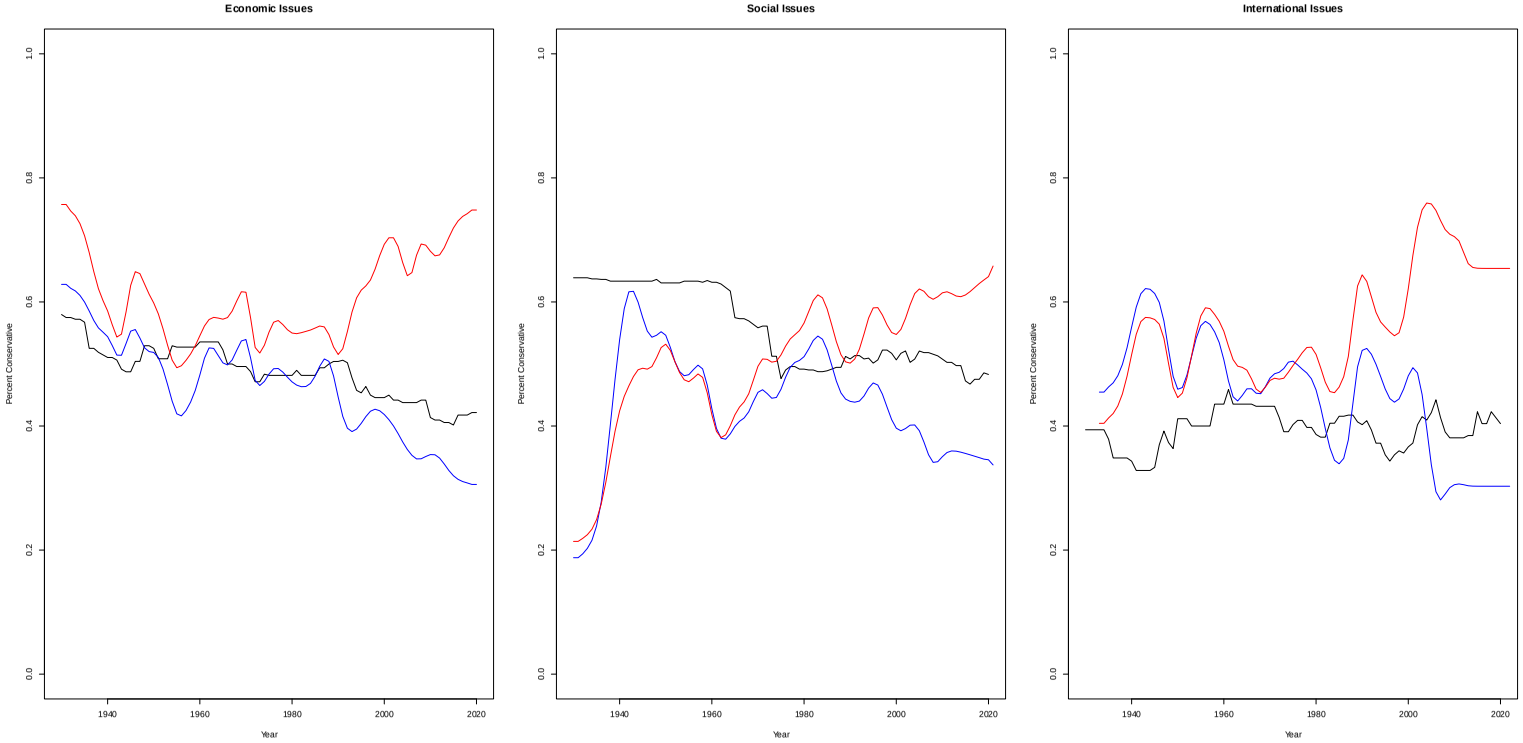

Figure A.5: *Policy Outcomes and Average Gallup Position for Democratic and Republican Identifiers by Issue, Simple Additive Index.*

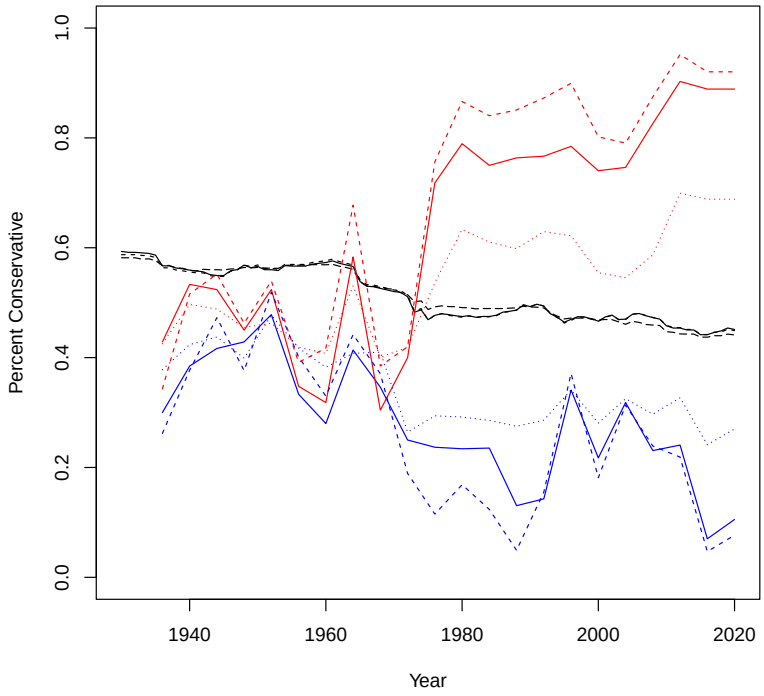

Figure A.6: *Comparing Three Measures of National Policy and Party Platforms.*

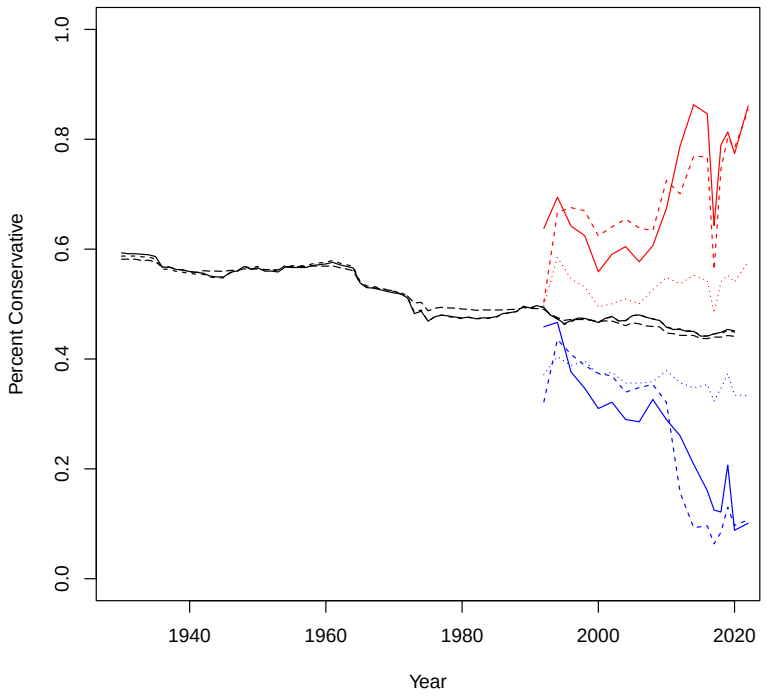

Figure A.7: *Comparing Three Measures of National Policy and NPAT Positions.*

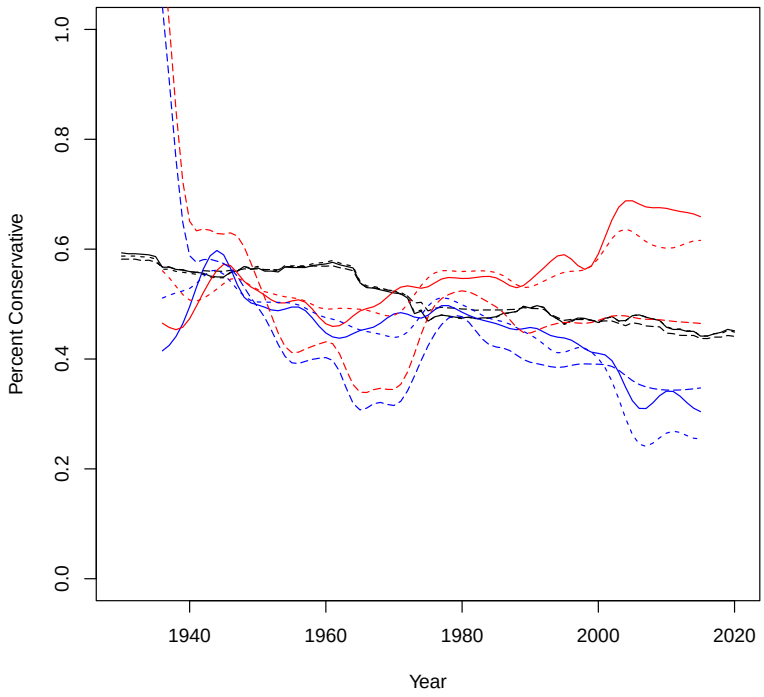

Figure A.8: *Comparing Three Measures of National Policy and Gallup Positions.*

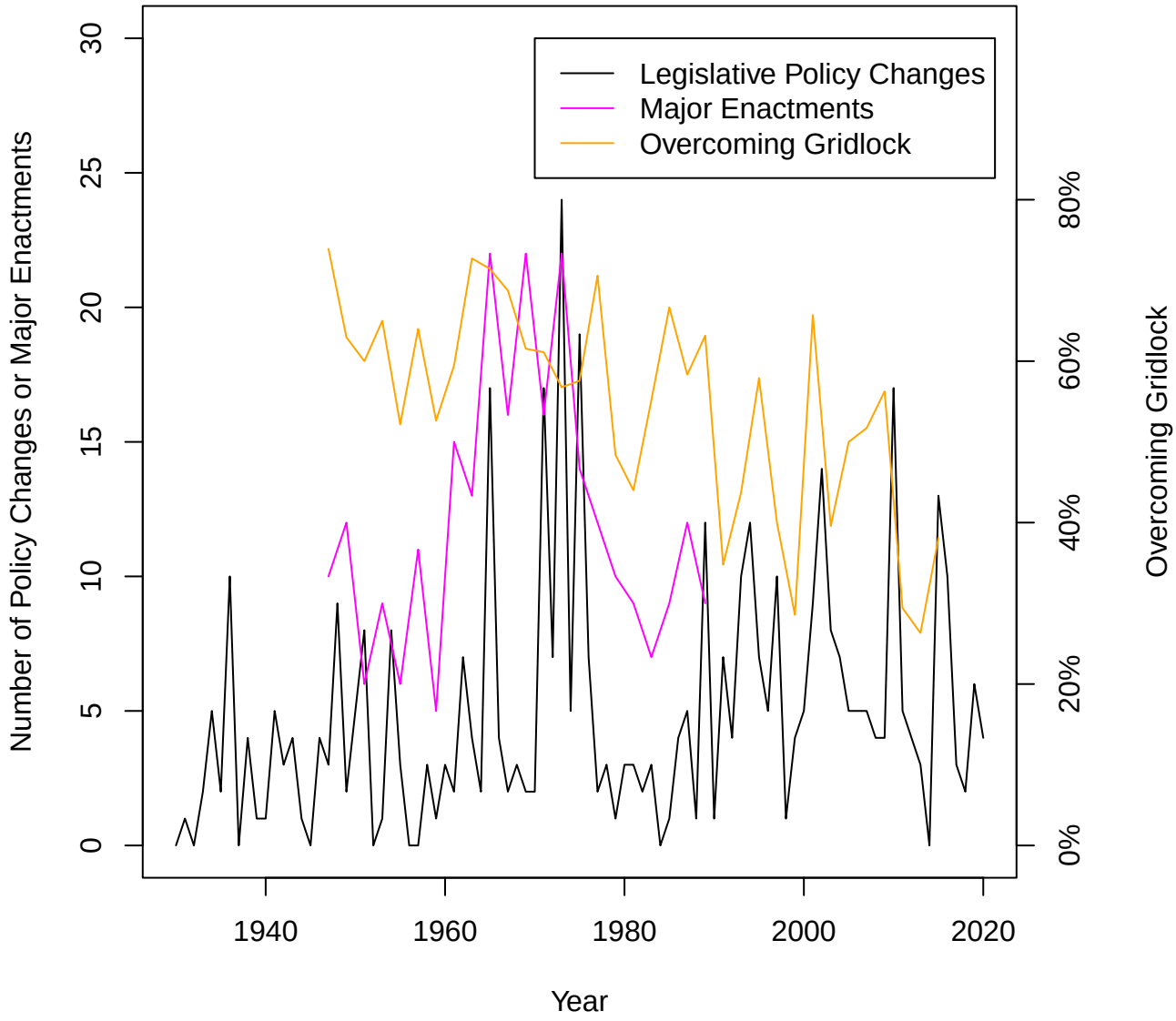

Figure A.9: *Comparing Measures of Legislative Productivity.*