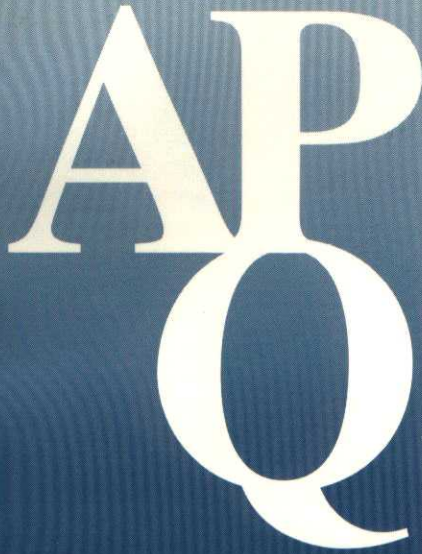


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A large, stylized graphic of the letters 'APQ' in white, set against a dark blue background with a subtle, wavy texture. The letters are bold and serifed, with the 'A' and 'P' stacked above the 'Q'.

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USING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RETURNS TO MEASURE CONSTITUENCY IDEOLOGY

A Research Note

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Scholars studying the determinants of congressional voting behavior have always faced the problem of how to measure the effects of constituency influence. In place of random surveys in congressional districts, which are too costly to conduct nationwide, scholars have employed a variety of proxy variables to measure constituency attitudes. In this research note we review these proxies and test the reliability and validity of the most popular, that is, presidential election returns at the state and district level. The use of this proxy rests upon two assumptions: (a) short-term factors affecting the vote have a more or less uniform effect across subnational constituencies and (b) constituency ideology is the sole long-term factor affecting the vote. Both of these assumptions prove to be empirically questionable, leading us to conclude that presidential election returns should be used as a proxy for constituency ideology only with great caution.

Scholars studying the determinants of congressional voting behavior have always faced the problem of how to measure the effects of constituency influence on representatives' decisions. Because random surveys covering every congressional district are prohibitively expensive, scholars have employed a variety of proxy variables to measure constituency opinion and ideology. Our aim is to assess the reliability and validity of the one most widely used in recent years—presidential election returns at the state and congressional district level.

One way to avoid the pitfalls of using proxy variables is simply to rely on available survey data, despite their shortcomings. Miller and Stokes (1963) relied on the 1958 National Election Survey, which had an average district sample size of only 13 respondents. They made a spirited case for the representativeness of their data, but Erikson (1978)

found that the 1958 survey proved to be a poor predictor of district demographic variables that could be externally verified from the census, thus casting doubt on the reliability of the Miller and Stokes findings. Page et al. (1984) found similar problems with the 1978 National Election Study.

One of the earliest proxies for a constituency's preferences was its demographic profile (e.g., MacRae 1958; Froman 1963; Jackson 1971). Among economists and public choice theorists studying congressional decision-making, it remains the favored approach (Kalt and Zupan 1990; Kau and Rubin 1982; Peltzman 1984). Demographic variables are easily obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau, and we know from national surveys that they are related to the distribution of attitudes. Among political scientists, however, demographic proxies have fallen out of favor because of their tenuous theoretical link to attitudes (Seidman 1975; Stone 1979; Weisberg 1979). First, the use of demographics to measure a particular constituency attitude requires an assumption that the attitude actually exists, despite the absence of any manifest behavior. Nothing but prudence prevents us from "measuring" any attitude we might devise. Second, the use of demographic proxies implausibly assumes that nondemographic contextual factors (such as local political culture and media coverage) have no effect on constituency attitudes. Third, demographic groups located in different constituencies are assumed to have the same attitudes; African Americans in Alabama, for example, are attributed with the same views as those in California or New York.

The absence of a clear link between demographic proxies and constituent attitudes has led some scholars to try opinion simulation as an alternative. The basic strategy of opinion simulation is to use national surveys to map the relationship between demographic characteristics and attitudes at the national level, and then estimate the attitudes of subnational constituencies. National opinions are regressed on demographic variables, and the resulting coefficients are used to estimate opinion in states or districts by inserting the values of the subnational demographic variables into the nationally derived regression equation (Erikson 1978; Jackson and King 1989; Page et al. 1984). Seidman (1975) argued against the use of all simulations on the grounds that they are essentially demographic proxies in disguise. Moreover, there is no reason to assume that the relationship between

opinion and demographics found nationally obtains uniformly across subnational constituencies.

In a creative effort to solve the problem of the small sample size of national polls, Erikson, McIver, and Wright (Erikson, McIver, and Wright 1987; Wright and Berkman 1986; Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1985; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993) pooled responses from a series of national surveys. From the pooled surveys, Erikson, Wright, and McIver produced a measure of "state ideology," which they sought to validate by correlating it with state ideology as directly measured in several state polls (i.e., the 13-state Comparative State Elections Project [CSEP] 1968 postelection survey, as well as the Network of State Polls reported in Jewell 1980). They found correlations of .72 with the CSEP results and .82 with the polls in Jewell.¹ However, there are practical limitations on using polled national surveys. National polls by the news media tend to ask questions that tap opinion on current policy issues rather than long-term attitudes or ideology. They rarely repeat questions over a long series of polls (except for the perennial presidential support questions), thus limiting the sorts of attitudes that can be measured by pooling. Finally, even pooling does not produce sample sizes large enough to disaggregate responses to the congressional district level.

Finally, some scholars have devised indices of state ideology based on policy innovation. Rosenstone (1983) developed a New Deal Social Welfare Liberalism measure, and Klingman and Lammers (1984) developed a General Policy Liberalism (GPL) scale, to measure state ideology based on state policy outputs. Savage (1978) developed a policy innovation scale to rate the speed at which states adopted new policy initiatives.² A drawback to using policy indices to measure constituency attitudes is the time and effort required to create them and keep them up to date. Moreover, policy scales are of no use in measuring constituency attitudes at the congressional district level, since districts do not neatly coincide with the jurisdictional boundaries of local government.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RETURNS

The use of presidential election returns as a proxy for constituency attitudes or ideology dates back to the 1960s (Cummings 1966; Flinn

and Wolman 1966; Press 1963). By the 1980s, presidential returns were by far the most popular proxy, appearing in some two dozen studies.³ Election returns have several advantages as an indicator of constituency ideology, and these advantages have no doubt contributed to their popularity: (a) the data are readily available at both the state and congressional district level; (b) new data are generated every 4 years, facilitating time series analysis (with the obvious caveat that many districts change with each new census); (c) the data represent actual constituency behavior, not imputed or simulated opinion; and (d) presidential voting is at least partially related to ideological orientation.

However, the relationship between presidential election returns and constituency ideology is by no means straightforward. The presidential vote clearly depends on a plethora of other factors. Indeed, scholars who specialize in explaining or forecasting presidential elections typically rely on a number of variables that represent both long-term constituency predispositions (such as ideology and partisanship) and short-term factors unique to particular elections (such as candidate traits, issue positions, and the health of the economy).

Two key assumptions underlie the use of presidential returns as a proxy for constituency ideology: (a) that short-term factors determining the vote have a fairly uniform effect across subnational constituencies and (b) that constituency ideology is the only significant long-term factor affecting the vote. If the first assumption is true, then the relative position of one constituency to another as measured by the returns will accurately reflect their relative position on the underlying dimension of ideological predisposition. If this assumption is wrong, that is, if short-term factors have a substantially different impact in different constituencies, one cannot reasonably use the vote as an indicator of long-term predisposition.

The assumption that short-term factors have a uniform effect across constituencies is close kin to the concept of the "normal vote" introduced by Converse (1967). In the normal vote model, however, the only long-term factor taken into account was constituency partisanship; all other factors were treated as producing short-term deviations from the normal (i.e., strictly partisan) vote. This raises the second major assumption: that ideology (rather than partisanship or something else) is the only significant long-term factor determining presidential voting.

THE UNIFORMITY OF SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

The assumption that short-term factors have a uniform effect across subnational constituencies is relatively easy to test.⁴ If it is true, the ordering of constituencies based on the division of the vote (e.g., percentage voting Democratic) should remain constant from one election to the next, even as the actual division of the vote between parties changes. Thus we would expect high correlations in the division of the vote in constituencies (both state and district) across a number of elections. Tables 1 and 2 present Pearson product-moment correlations for presidential election returns (Democratic percentage of the two-party vote) in state and district constituencies from 1960 to 1992.

The state-level returns are not very strongly correlated. Of the 36 coefficients, 7 are not even significant at the .05 level, and only 3 are over .80 (a frequently used benchmark for measures of reliability). The average correlation coefficient is .54. Part of the reason for these weak correlations is that state constituencies are changing over time as a result of population movement. Indeed, the highest correlations are between proximate elections: 1976 and 1980 ($r = .84$), 1984 and 1988 ($r = .87$), and 1984 and 1992 ($r = .84$).

But time is not the only factor at work. Some of the weakest correlations are also between proximate elections: 1960 and 1964 ($r = .06$) and 1972 and 1976 ($r = .06$). Residuals from ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions indicate that sectional factors are responsible. When 1964 returns are regressed on the 1960 vote, all the largest residuals are for southern states, which gave Lyndon Johnson a much lower percentage of the vote than predicted based on 1960 returns—presumably as a consequence of the Democratic Party's civil rights stand.

In predicting the 1976 and 1980 returns from 1972, both southern and midwestern states show large residuals, indicating that Jimmy Carter received a higher percentage of the southern vote and a lower percentage of the midwestern vote than predicted, based on George McGovern's performance in 1972. Although this comes as no great surprise, the extent to which the regional origin of the candidate affects the relative regional returns is strong enough to render state-level presidential returns a dubious measure of constituency ideology.

TABLE 2
Correlations for District
Presidential Election Returns, 1972-1988

	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988
1972	—	.531	.525	a	a
1976		—	.902	a	a
1980			—	a	a
1984				—	.971
1988					—

a. Because of redistricting, districts are not equivalent before and after 1980, so correlations cannot be computed.

The correlations for district-level returns tend to be somewhat stronger. Whereas the coefficients for the 1972-1976 and 1976-1980 pairs are not significant at the state level, they are significant ($p < .001$) at the district level. In both the 1976-1980 and the 1984-1988 pairs, the correlations are also higher at the district level. Still, coefficients in the .50 range are not strong evidence of reliability.

THE HOMOGENEITY OF LONG-TERM EFFECTS

If ideology is the only significant long-term effect underlying the presidential vote, principal components analysis should identify a single factor on which all elections load heavily.⁵ Tables 3a and 3b present the results of a principal components analysis of state-level presidential returns from 1960 to 1992. Two significant factors are identified, accounting for 60.3% and 21.8% of the variance, respectively (81.1% total). The third factor extracted accounts for just 6.6%.

These results accord well with Rabinowitz, Gurian, and Macdonald (1984), Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1986), and Macdonald and Rabinowitz (1987), who factor analyzed state-level presidential returns from 1944 to 1980. They also found two underlying factors that accounted for 48.1% and 31.1% of the variance, respectively. Based on additional analysis, they identified these dimensions as partisanship and ideology. Of the two, partisanship was the stronger, although Rabinowitz, Gurian, and Macdonald show that, since 1960,

TABLE 3a
Results of Principal Components Analysis of
Presidential Election Returns, 1960-1992

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>Percentage of Variance</i>	<i>Cumulative Percentage</i>
1	5.431	60.3	60.3
2	1.959	21.8	82.1
3	0.591	6.6	88.7
4	0.374	4.2	92.8
5	0.212	2.4	95.2
6	0.174	1.9	97.1
7	0.130	1.4	98.6
8	0.092	1.0	99.6
9	0.037	0.4	100.0

TABLE 3b
Results of Principal Components Analysis of
Presidential Election Returns, 1960-1992:
Varimax Rotated Coefficients and Communalities

	<i>Factor 1</i> <i>(Ideology)</i>	<i>Factor 2</i> <i>(Partisanship)</i>	<i>Communalities</i> <i>(% Variance Explained)</i>
1960	.120	.799	.653
1964	.870	-.098	.766
1968	.809	.384	.801
1972	.948	.019	.899
1976	.026	.918	.843
1980	.247	.917	.903
1984	.678	.646	.878
1988	.851	.319	.825
1992	.753	.505	.822

the ideological factor has been gaining in strength relative to partisanship. This has prompted Rabinowitz and his colleagues to conclude that "ideology has replaced party as the major structural element in the more recent presidential elections."

Our analysis, which begins in 1960 and extends through the 1992 election, confirms Rabinowitz's conclusion. The stronger of the two factors we identify corresponds to the ideological dimension found by Rabinowitz. But partisanship remains a significant factor—too sig-

nificant for us to conclude that the second assumption underlying the use of presidential returns as a proxy for constituency ideology is fully justified.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

We began this study expecting to demonstrate the validity and reliability of presidential returns as a proxy for constituency ideology. Indeed, one of us has relied upon this proxy in previous work (LeoGrande and Brenner 1993), so discovering the seriousness of its flaws has been disconcerting. After all, we are not prepared to abandon the study of constituency influence on legislative behavior, so we have to use *some* measure of constituency ideology.

IDEOLOGICAL ELECTIONS

One strategy is to minimize the confounding effects of partisanship by only using elections that are highly ideological (Erikson and Wright 1980; Holbrook 1991; Segal, Cameron, and Cover 1992). Based on the results from Tables 3a and 3b, it is clear that the elections that load most heavily on the ideological rather than partisan factor are those of 1964, 1972, and 1988. We can demonstrate some external validity for this approach. Returns from these elections tend to be more highly correlated than are other returns, with two policy output indices (Klingman and Lammers 1984; Rosenstone 1983) and two pooled opinion poll indices (Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1985; Erikson, McIver, and Wright 1987) designed to measure state ideology (Table 4).

Moreover, a principal components analysis of the two policy and the two pooled opinion indices produced one underlying factor that accounted for 73% of the variance. We then repeated the analysis, including presidential election returns for the three highly ideological elections. One underlying factor still emerges, accounting for 69.6% of the variance, and all three of the elections load heavily on it, with coefficients above .82.⁶ Thus we can conclude that election returns in highly ideological elections tap (however imperfectly) the same underlying factor as these other four proxies of state ideology.

TABLE 4
Correlations of Proxy Indices and State
Presidential Election Returns, 1960-1992

	<i>Klingman</i>	<i>Rosenstone</i>	<i>Wright</i> ^a	<i>Erikson</i> ^a	<i>Ideology Factor</i>
1960	.044 (n.s.)	-.001 (n.s.)	.323 (.03)	.196 (n.s.)	.583 (.01)
1964	.656 (.01)	.567 (.01)	.621 (.01)	.551 (.01)	.630 (.01)
1968	.586 (.01)	.473 (.01)	.661 (.01)	.571 (.01)	.875 (.01)
1972	.715 (.01)	.675 (.01)	.649 (.01)	.570 (.01)	.763 (.01)
1976	-.184 (n.s.)	-.234 (n.s.)	.229 (n.s.)	.232 (n.s.)	.581 (.01)
1980	.087 (n.s.)	-.102 (n.s.)	.501 (.01)	.481 (.01)	.756 (.01)
1984	.434 (.01)	.305 (.03)	.705 (.01)	.620 (.01)	.931 (.01)
1988	.577 (.01)	.565 (.01)	.703 (.01)	.644 (.01)	.868 (.01)
1992	.444 (.01)	.425 (.01)	.785 (.01)	.750 (.01)	.905 (.01)
Ideology factor	.508 (.01)	.406 (.01)	.761 (.01)	.681 (.01)	1.000

NOTE: Significance levels noted in parentheses.

a. The signs were reversed on these indices so that a positive correlation would indicate a positive relationship between these and the other indices.

IDEOLOGY FACTOR SCORES

Using returns from ideological elections minimizes the error due to partisanship, but it does not ameliorate the error introduced by the nonuniformity of short-term effects. We believe a better proxy for state ideology is the ideology factor score identified by analyzing returns over a number of elections. This controls for the effect of partisanship *and* minimizes the error from nonuniform short-term effects, thus giving this proxy more construct validity than returns from a single election.

We derive state ideology factor scores from the presidential returns for 1960-1992 (Table 5) and correlate them with the four policy and pooled opinion indices described above. The factor scores correlate significantly ($p < .01$) with all four indices, most strongly with the

TABLE 5
State Ideology and Partisanship
Factor Scores (1960-1992 Elections)

<i>State</i>	<i>Ideology</i>	<i>Partisanship</i>
Alabama	-0.427	2.069
Arizona	-1.236	-0.462
Arkansas	0.389	1.551
California	0.492	-0.551
Colorado	-0.348	-0.923
Connecticut	0.608	-0.440
Delaware	0.418	0.253
Florida	-0.736	0.817
Georgia	0.193	3.335
Idaho	-1.883	-0.650
Illinois	0.663	-0.270
Indiana	-0.669	-0.179
Iowa	0.545	-0.821
Kansas	-1.082	-0.506
Kentucky	0.141	0.209
Louisiana	-0.165	1.207
Maine	0.508	-0.812
Maryland	1.045	0.391
Massachusetts	2.370	-0.531
Michigan	0.599	-0.568
Minnesota	1.568	-0.183
Mississippi	-1.026	2.795
Missouri	0.548	-0.083
Montana	-0.093	-0.641
Nebraska	-1.893	-1.021
Nevada	-0.601	-0.496
New Hampshire	-0.722	-0.741
New Jersey	0.113	-0.271
New Mexico	0.115	-0.204
New York	1.240	-0.256
North Carolina	-0.205	1.252
North Dakota	-0.935	-0.801
Ohio	0.147	-0.337
Oklahoma	-1.238	0.015
Oregon	0.680	-0.778
Pennsylvania	0.837	-0.183
Rhode Island	2.495	-0.065
South Carolina	-0.666	1.863
South Dakota	-0.263	-1.076
Tennessee	-0.102	0.995
Texas	-0.097	0.128

(continued)

TABLE 5 Continued

State	Ideology	Partisanship
Utah	-2.267	-1.018
Vermont	0.327	-1.008
Virginia	-0.657	0.413
Washington	0.625	-0.658
West Virginia	1.273	0.461
Wisconsin	0.745	-0.488
Wyoming	-1.375	-0.732

indices based on pooled opinion (Table 4). On the whole, these correlations are stronger than the correlations between the proxy indices and returns from most individual elections, confirming that the use of factor scores compensates for the nonuniformity of short-term effects in individual elections.⁷

This strategy does not help much when one needs a proxy for district-level ideology, since district boundaries remain constant over, at most, three elections. We have tried averaging state returns across elections held between reapportionments to reduce the error produced by the nonuniformity of short-term effects. However, this requires averaging returns from elections that are highly ideological with ones that are not, thus increasing the confounding effect of partisanship. The resulting average-return indices are inferior to returns from individual ideological elections, which remain the best proxy for district ideology.

CONCLUSION

All the available proxies for constituency ideology have their drawbacks. Presidential election returns remain attractive on practical grounds of availability and simplicity, but the assumptions underlying their use are empirically suspect. Ideology is not the only long-term predisposition influencing how constituencies vote. Partisanship is still significant, although its importance has been declining relative to ideology since the 1950s. Nor do short-term factors influencing the

vote have a uniform effect across constituencies. Different candidates command very different levels of regional support, depending primarily on the candidates' region of origin rather than on any stable ideological predisposition of the population. Thus returns are only moderately correlated across elections.

Nevertheless, these problems can be ameliorated sufficiently to justify using election returns as a proxy. Some elections are clearly more ideological than others, and using these elections reduces the confounding effect of partisanship. Second, returns at both the state and district level appear to be more highly correlated in recent elections, suggesting that the effects of short-term factors have been more uniform across constituencies in recent years than they were previously.

The best alternative, however, is to analyze returns from many elections to derive factor scores for the ideological component of the vote, scores which can then be used as a proxy for constituency ideology. A factor score index corrects for both problems, eliminating the partisanship component of the vote *and* minimizing error caused by the nonuniformity of short-term effects. But because of redistricting, this approach can be used effectively only at the state level. At the district level, the use of highly ideological elections remains the best, albeit imperfect, alternative.

NOTES

1. Holbrook-Provov and Poe (1987), however, find that pooled survey data have serious reliability and validity problems. Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993, 21-8) address these issues, arguing that the reliability of their state ideology measure is above .92, although they acknowledge that this is an upper bound. They estimate the reliability in two ways: by estimating its error variance and by split-halves correlation among the survey items constituting the state ideology variable.

2. In fairness, Savage does not claim that he is measuring state ideology. A related approach is Morgan and Watson's (1991) development of three indices, measured by religious affiliation, to represent dimensions of political culture (moralism, individualism, and traditionalism). Although the authors show that the last two of these exhibit moderately strong correlations with an index of policy liberalism, the content of their indices is too far removed from state ideology to be treated as a proxy for it (see note 7).

3. Occasionally, presidential returns are used in conjunction with demographic variables (e.g., Erikson 1978; Fleisher 1993; Flinn and Wolman 1966; Kalt and Zupan 1984, 1990; Langbein and Lotwis 1990). Other noteworthy studies using presidential returns include Carson

and Oppenheimer (1984), Glazer and Robbins (1985), Johannes and McAdams (1981), Kau, Keenan, and Rubin (1982), LeoGrande and Brenner (1993), Schwarz and Fenmore (1977), and Segal, Cameron, and Cover (1992).

4. The authors would like to thank Professors George Rabinowitz, Robert Erikson, and Jeffrey Segal for sharing with us their data sets on presidential election returns.

5. We can only test this hypothesis with state-level returns because districts are not comparable across decades. Recent redistricting has been so extensive that too few districts remain unchanged to warrant analysis.

6. At first, we included Savage's (1978) policy innovation index in the principal components analysis, but its correlations with the other indices are so low (with Klingman, $r = .57$; Rosenstone, $r = .51$; Erikson, $r = .27$; Wright, $r = .35$) that the percentage of variance explained by the single factor fell to 64.8. We conclude from this that Savage's innovation index is not primarily tapping state ideology, and exclude it from the second principal components analysis.

7. The correlation between the factor scores and Savage's (1978) state policy innovation index is .24, which is not significant at $p < .05$. The correlations with Morgan's (1991) three political culture indices are as follows: moralism index, $r = -.33$ ($p = .02$); individualism index, $r = .57$ ($p < .01$); traditionalism index, $r = -.30$ ($p = .04$).

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