

UCLA Undergraduate
RESEARCH WEEK

The Determinants of State-Level Policy Representation: Evaluating the Role of Policy Type in the U.S.

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Why Policy Representation?

INDICATOR OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

- Reflects democratic accountability
- Alignment with public opinion signals institutional responsiveness
- Misalignment can weaken trust and governance

strong policy representation ~ high-functioning democracy

Concept Specification

- **Morality Policies:** conflict over moral values, technically simple
 - Ex: abortion
 - **Technical Policies:** technically complex, jargon-heavy
 - Ex: Medicaid expansion
 - **Policy Representation:** two measures
 - **Responsiveness:** relationship between public opinion & policy *across* states
 - **Congruence:** relationship between public opinion & policy *within* states
 - **Political Salience:** importance and visibility of a policy to the public
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Literature Review

- State-level public policies are **responsive** to public opinion (Erickson, Wright, and McIver, 1993)
 - State-level public policies are **not congruent** with public opinion (Lax and Phillips, 2012)
 - Policy responsiveness is **enhanced** for policies with high **political salience** (Lax and Phillips, 2009)
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Research Gap & Contribution

GAP: role of **policy type** in state-level policy representation

- Existing focus on *political salience*

CONTRIBUTION: measure policy representation for two policy types:
morality policy & technical policy

- New focus on *policy type*

Research Question

To what extent does **policy type** influence the **degree of policy representation** for state-level public policies in the United States?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis: morality policies are **more representative** than technical policies, *regardless of political salience*

1. H_1 : high salient, moral policies are **most representative**
2. H_2 : low salient, moral policies are **2nd most representative**
3. H_3 : high salient, technical policies are **3rd most representative**
4. H_4 : low salient, technical policies are **least representative**

Why? Importance of morals in political participation & decision-making

Research Design

Calculate responsiveness & congruence for four policy categories

1. High salient, moral policies
2. Low salient, moral policies
3. High salient, technical policies
4. Low salient, technical policies

Public Opinion Data: American National Election Studies (ANES), Cooperative Election Study (CES) from 2018-2022

- Derived via Multilevel Regression and Post-Stratification (MRP)

Policy Data: state statutes, federal databases, think tanks/policy institutes

Analysis: logistic regression for responsiveness, % match for congruence

Data

Policy Topic	Policy Type	Salience Level
Abortion	Moral	High
Gun Control	Moral	High
Capital Punishment	Moral	Low
Drug Sentencing Reform	Moral	Low
Minimum Wage	Technical	High
Renewable Energy Requirements	Technical	High
Medicaid Expansion	Technical	Low
Paid Family Leave	Technical	Low

Results: Responsiveness

Policy Category	Average Responsiveness (θ_1)
High Salient, Moral	69.757
Low Salient, Moral	38.863
High Salient, Technical	42.194
Low Salient, Technical	37.269

- High-salience moral policies: strongest responsiveness
 - Low-salience technical policies: weakest responsiveness
 - Gaps between categories were smaller than expected, and outliers occurred
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Results: Congruence

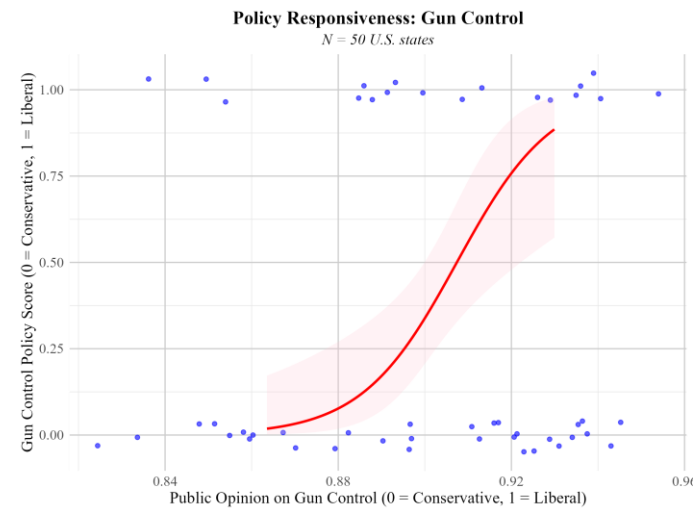
Policy Category	Average Congruence (%)
High Salient, Moral	59%
Low Salient, Moral	55%
High Salient, Technical	49%
Low Salient, Technical	48%

- High-salience moral policies: strongest congruence
 - Low-salience technical policies: weakest congruence
 - Gaps between categories were **significantly** smaller than expected
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Results: Variation at the Policy Level

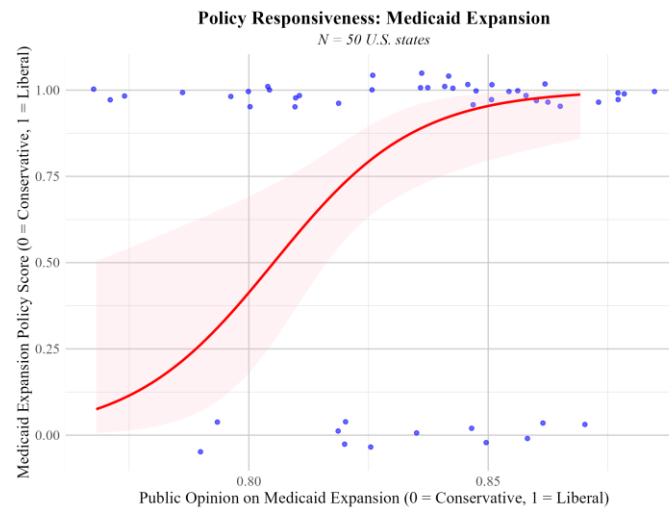
Policy-specific dynamics are important to representative outcome

High Salience, Moral



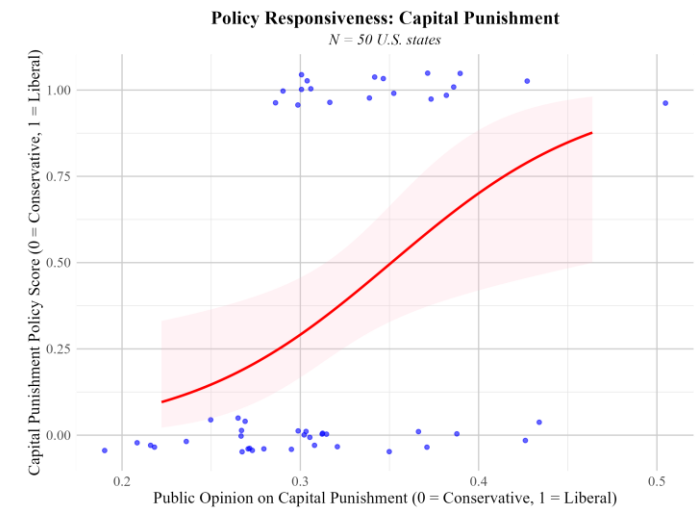
$\beta = 90.7$
Congruence = 36%

Low Salience, Technical



$\beta = 67.7$
Congruence = 76%

Low Salience, Moral



$\beta = 17.4$
Congruence = 62%

Implications & Significance

- Reinforces the value of distinguishing responsiveness and congruence as separate dimensions
 - Highlights uneven democratic responsiveness across different types of policies
 - Challenges the assumption that salience alone guarantees alignment with public opinion
 - Reinforces importance of policy framing (moral vs. technical) in mobilizing public opinion
 - Encourages attention to what kind of policies receive representation, not just how visible they are
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Thank you!