CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE SUBSTANTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE UNFOLDED SCALE

A report to accompany "A New Measure of Policy Spending Priorities in the American States"

William G. Jacoby and Saundra K. Schneider
Michigan State University
September 2008

jacoby@msu.edu
sks@msu.edu

http://polisci.msu.edu/jacoby
http://polisci.msu.edu/schneider

The distinction between particularized benefits and collective goods provides a substantively meaningful interpretation of the dimension underlying variability in state spending priorities. But, it is also important to consider some alternative interpretations of our scaling results. For example, there is an apparent regional pattern in the state point locations. Densely-populated northeastern states, like New York and Massachusetts, are located at the left end of the dimension. Large, sparsely-populated western states, such as Wyoming, Nevada, and Alaska, are located near the right side. This separation of points in the geometric model is consistent with previous research that emphasizes region-based contrasts in American state politics (e.g., Elazar 1984; Garreau 1981; Gray 2004).

But, region does not account for *all* of the differences in state locations. For example, the mean point coordinates for California, Michigan, and Illinois fall among the northeastern states near the left side of the continuum, while the mean coordinates for Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina, are located on the right side, close to the western states. And, there are quite a few other anomalous placements like these. This suggests that a regional interpretation of the unfolded dimension has limited substantive utility. In fact, the relative locations of the state points correspond more closely to the differences in policy orientations that we discussed above. Therefore, we believe that the continuum should be interpreted from this latter, more explicitly political, perspective.

We also would be very hesitant to suggest that the unfolded continuum is a direct measure of broad state ideologies. Part of our reticence is conceptual: State spending profiles are more accurately viewed as possible *consequences* of state ideologies, rather than defining characteristics of those ideologies. Furthermore, it seems problematic to divide the policy areas along ideological lines. Even though popular stereotypes associate welfare with "liberal" and law enforcement with "conservative," the same kinds of connections do not really exist for most of the other policies. For example, it is difficult to specify an ideological valence for hospitals, highways, and the like. And, liberals as well as conservatives have used education in their symbolic appeals.

At the same time, the state point locations do not always correspond to traditional characterizations of state ideologies and political cultures (e.g., Erikson et al. 1993). For example, New Hampshire and South Carolina are usually regarded as a conservative states. However, the points representing these states fall near the left side of the continuum, close to many states that are usually considered to be very liberal (e.g., Massachusetts, New York, and California). On the other hand, Oregon and Hawaii are often described as liberal states, but their points tend to fall close to the middle of the unfolded scale. The movements in the state points raise further questions about an ideological interpretation, since the very term, "ideology," implies a broad world view which should be quite stable over time. Finally, the state point locations are only weakly related to several explicit measures of the states' liberal-conservative orientations (Jacoby and Schneider 2008). For all of these reasons, it is more appropriate to interpret the unfolded dimension as a contrast between the specific policy groupings, rather than as a broad ideological divide.

Of course, we expect that differences in the state point locations will correspond to a variety of interesting phenomena, such as socioeconomic class disparities, entitlement versus discretionary funding, and partisan polarization. However, all of these phenomena are conceptually distinct from the spending patterns, themselves. We anticipate and hope that future research will be devoted to explicating the connections between them. But, we strongly prefer to interpret the dimension in terms of the substantive content within the two policy subsets revealed by the unfolding analysis.

REFERENCES

Elazar, Daniel. 1984. *American Federalism: A View from the States (Third Edition)*. New York: Harper and Row.

Erikson, Robert S.; Gerald C. Wright; John P. McIver. 1993. *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States*. Cambridge University Press.

Garreau, Joel 1981. *The Nine Nations of North America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Gray, Virginia. 2004. "The Socioeconomic and Political Context of States." In *Politics in the American States: A Comparative Analysis (Eighth Edition)*, ed. Virginia Gray and Herbert Jacob. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

Jacoby, William G. and Saundra K. Schneider. 2008. "Empirical Relationships between State Spending Priorities and Other Political Characteristics." Unpublished report available from the authors.