

PUBLIC APPROVAL OF STATE LEGISLATURES

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ABSTRACT

Americans express strong support for representative democracy, but even though state legislatures are among the longest-standing of American democratic institutions, they are often viewed negatively. Low levels of public approval for legislatures could have important implications for the institution and the individual members, but little is known about contributing factors. Among the more important findings has been that legislatures with higher levels of professionalism experience lower levels of public support. We argue that this result depends on limited data and insufficient methods, and using a large national sample across all fifty states we demonstrate that the negative relationship is not a function of legislative professionalism but rather a function of an interaction between a citizen's ideology and state professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Citizens expect much of democratic governance, but they are also often frustrated with the results of the political process. In particular, the compromise, delay, and often byzantine procedures of legislatures can be bewildering and often alienating for the average citizen. Bismarck's comment on the unappealing prospect of watching the sausage-making process of legislation certainly rings true for many, and it is neither a recent phenomenon nor a uniquely American concern. Studies have shown high levels of citizen cynicism about democracies around the globe (Norris 1999), in the context of American national politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), and at the state level (Rosenthal 2009).

Americans generally express high levels of support for democracy and core Constitutional principles (Lipset and Schneider 1987), but even though state legislatures have roots in America's earliest experiences with self-governance in colonial assemblies, they have not been well regarded for some time (Jewell 1982; Squire 1993; Rosenthal 2009). State legislative power may have reached its peak in the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, which granted broad power to a unicameral state legislature with few checks, but most states by 1790 had adopted more of a Whig model that relied on bicameralism and incorporated some checks on legislative power (Williams 1989). The state constitutions of the 1820s to 1850s reflected growing anti-legislative sentiment (Still 1936), and major reforms of the Progressive Era such as the citizen initiative and popular referendum were responses to the view that legislatures were dominated by special interests (Donovan and Bowler 1998). More recently, citizen frustration led to the initial passage of term limits in twenty-one states in the early 1990s (Benjamin and Malbin 1992; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000).

Although low levels of satisfaction with state legislatures could lead to partisan turnover, policy instability, diminution of institutional effectiveness, heightened concerns over policy legitimacy, and institutional reforms (Powell 1982, 1986), citizen approval of state legislatures has received limited scholarly attention. The few studies in the existing literature have examined surveys from a single state or just a few states (Patterson, Ripley and Quinlan 1992; Patterson, Hedlund, and Boynton 1975; Jewell 1982; Squire 1992; Kelleher and Wolak 2007 is an exception). In general, these studies have found various individual-level socioeconomic and political attributes to be correlated with legislative approval and also suggest the importance of state politics and institutions. In particular, studies have found legislative approval to be positively associated with gubernatorial approval and term limits and negatively related to a legislature's level of professionalization, divided control of government, and the presence of the initiative or referendum (Squire 1992; Kelleher and Wolak 2007).

Studying data from the 2007 and 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), we analyze attitudes from a nationally representative sample of over 36,000 respondents over two years to examine the factors associated with public approval of state legislatures. Our analysis improves on the existing literature in three ways. First, we address possible endogeneity problems of including gubernatorial approval in models of legislative approval. Second, we control for the possible effects of all state institutions on legislative approval simultaneously, which is not done in existing studies. Third, we demonstrate that political ideology conditions the relationship between legislative professionalism and approval. Specifically, we show that the negative relationship between legislative professionalism found by Squire (1992) and Kelleher and Wolak (2007) disappears when interacting a state legislature's professionalism levels with a

respondent's ideology, and that conservatives in states with more professional legislatures are more negative toward the state legislature.

The balance of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we review the small literature studying the determinants of public approval of state legislatures, and argue that there are three potential shortcomings in existing approaches. We then discuss the survey data we study, and our improvements to the literature. Subsequently, we report our findings, and conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of the results.

PUBLIC APPROVAL OF STATE LEGISLATURES

Surveys of the American public have long revealed citizens' disdain for Congress. As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 60) note, "Congress embodies practically everything Americans dislike about politics." Public opinion of state legislatures is no different. Although typically more popular than Congress, a recent comparison of public approval of state government institutions found that state legislatures fare worse than both state executives and state judiciaries (Kelleher and Wolak 2007). Rosenthal (2009) recently suggested that state legislatures are unpopular because Americans do not care for disagreement, negotiation, compromise, the role of political parties, or the influence of interest groups.

These arguments may help explain the overall low levels of public support for legislatures. Figure 1 displays approval rates for state legislatures using data from the 2008 CCES survey.¹ We graph the approval rates over state legislative professionalism levels (using the measures constructed by Squire and Hamm, 2005) for presentation purposes, but also because past work has found approval to be related to professionalism. There are two features of the approval rates worthy of note. First, state legislatures are held in low regard across the

country. A majority of respondents in only five states – Alaska, Idaho, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming – approved of their state legislature. Across all respondents, the level of approval was approximately 35%, with a mean statewide approval rate of 37%. Second, there appears to be a negative association between legislative professionalism and public approval rates. Legislative approval is particularly low in states with highly-professionalized legislatures, such as California, Michigan, and New York, and higher in states with citizen legislatures, such as Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. As we discuss below, this pattern is consistent with previous research that has demonstrated a negative correlation between legislative professionalism and public approval.

Although scholars have given state legislatures considerable attention, there is not a large literature studying the determinants of public approval. In part, the lack of past research is due to data limitations. Major surveys of American political attitudes, such as the American National Election Studies, are focused on the national level and generally do not include questions measuring attitudes and opinions about state government. Most of the studies that have been conducted rely on opinion data from a single state or just a few states (Patterson, Hedlund, Boynton 1975; Jewell 1982; Cotter 1986; Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992; Squire 1993).

The early studies of state legislative approval tended to focus on individual-level correlates. Patterson, Hedlund and Boynton (1975), for example, polled a sample of Iowans and found that education, occupation, income, ideological orientation, political knowledge and political participation were associated with legislative support. A subsequent study of Ohioans' compared attitudes toward Congress and the Ohio state legislature (Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992), and found that the best predictors of approval for the state legislature were

evaluation of the governor and political efficacy. These studies generally did not consider contextual variables, with the exception of economic conditions.

More recent analyses have considered both the individual-level determinants of public approval, as well as other contextual factors such as state political institutions. Squire (1993) conducted perhaps the most comprehensive analysis using data from a six-state survey. His main findings regarding approval were that political attitudes – namely, people of the same party as that controlling the legislature and contemporaneous gubernatorial approval - were positively associated with evaluations of the legislature, while the level of legislative professionalism was negatively related to an individual’s level of approval. Counter to his expectations that legislators in states with professionalized legislatures should be able to use their available resources for beneficial public relations, he found a negative relationship. Squire posited that the reason for the negative association might be that states with highly professional legislatures tend to be populous and economically and socially diverse, and citizens in such states may demand more from their state legislature. “Because professionalized legislatures are likely to have more expected of them,” Squire (1993, 488) notes, “they are apt to disappoint people.”

Most recently, Kelleher and Wolak (2007) studied data from a nationally-representative survey conducted by the National Center for the State Courts in 1999. These survey data enabled them to perform a comparative analysis of public confidence in state legislatures, state executives, and state judiciaries. Similar to Squire’s (1993) model of legislative approval, Kelleher and Wolak estimated models including both individual- and institutional-level determinants of confidence, although their models omitted the individual-level political attitudes previous work had found to be associated with legislative appraisals. Consistent with Squire (1993), they found that professionalism levels were negatively associated with public

confidence, and argued that legislatures with longer sessions, greater complexity, and larger staffs are more distant from “people’s ideal of citizen legislatures” (708). In a separate model, they found higher levels of confidence in states with term limits but lower rates of approval in states with either an initiative or referendum. In addition, they found public confidence in state legislatures to be lower on average in states with divided government but higher in states scoring well in government management practices.

We believe that the extant literature suffers from three shortcomings. First, gubernatorial approval is likely endogenous to legislative approval, yet studies in the literature typically include it as a right-hand side variable without treating it as such (Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan, 1992; Squire 1993).² The source of endogeneity could be of a couple forms. First, to the extent to which citizens given credit or attribute blame to one institution or the other, evaluations of a state government’s elected officials are likely to be jointly-determined. Second, endogeneity may result from an omitted variables problem. If there is an unobserved factor that is correlated with evaluations of the governor and the error term, estimates from a model including gubernatorial approval as an explanatory variable will be inconsistent. Omitted variables of this type might include a scandal, a bad fiscal situation, or an unfavorable policy outcome in a state that affects approval ratings of each institution. These variables are unobserved, and, as a result, gubernatorial approval may be correlated with the error term. Regardless of the source of endogeneity, including a contemporaneous measure of gubernatorial approval in a model explaining variance in legislative approval may be problematic statistically.³

Second, existing studies do not fully consider how state institutions may shape citizen approval of state legislatures. The legislative approval model estimated by Squire, for example, included legislative professionalism, but it did not consider the possibility that other state

institutions could also influence approval levels. Kelleher and Wolak considered other state institutions, but not all together in the same model. We argue that three state institutions may influence citizens' level of approval of state legislatures – legislative professionalism, term limits, and citizen initiatives – and that each should be included in models of legislative approval to avoid omitted variable bias. We discuss each in turn.

State legislatures vary considerably in the allocation of resources they provide to legislators. Scholars generally measure professionalism in terms of legislative salary, number of staff, and session length (Mooney 1995; Squire 2007). Legislative professionalism has a number of institutional and behavioral effects that one might expect to enhance public approval of legislatures. For example, professionalized legislatures have been associated with increased legislative efficiency (Squire 1998), more time for legislators to focus on their job including activities such as developing legislation, deliberating on policy, and interacting with other branches on more equal footing (Thompson 1986; Squire 1988; Rosenthal 1998), greater policy innovation (Kousser 2005), more casework for constituents (Freeman and Richardson 1996), and greater congruence between public opinion and policy (Maestas 2000).

Although scholars have generally viewed these effects positively, past studies have found a negative association between legislative professionalism and public approval of and confidence in state legislatures (Jewell 1982, Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992; Squire 1993; Kelleher and Wolak 2007). In addition to the arguments made by Squire (1993) and Kelleher and Wolak (2007) noted above, the negative relationship may also be due to other outcomes often associated with legislative professionalism, including that it provides incumbents with greater electoral safety (Berry, Berkman, and Schneiderman 2000), attracts more ambitious legislators (Maestas 2003), and advantages Democrats (Fiorina 1989, 1994, 1997).

Term limits may also shape public approval of state legislatures. Frustration with entrenched incumbents and low citizen approval of Congress and state legislators led to calls for term limits in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Term limit proponents believed that careerism was a major contributor to pork barrel spending, excessive regulation, and inefficient bureaucratic practices (Fiorina 1989). Because state legislatures increased in professionalism from the 1960s to 1980s, they became more attractive for politicians seeking a career in a single chamber (Moncrief and Thompson 1992), and states witnessed increasing levels of tenure and higher reelection margins for incumbents (Breux and Jewell 1992). State legislative term limit proponents sought to put an end to such careerism.

Scholars have offered a variety of hypotheses about the impact of term limits. Petracca (1991) predicted the end of “politics as usual,” but others argued that term limits would result in more seats for the “old, rich and the bought” (Polsby 1991, 1521) and political ideologues (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995). Others suggested term limits would produce more “citizen legislators” and that term-limited legislators would spend more time on lawmaking rather than reelection activities (Glazer and Wattenburg 1996). Although post-implementation assessments have not found evidence of significant differences in legislative composition or in time devoted to policymaking (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000), careerism has been reduced. If proponents were right about term-limited legislators staying closer to the people, then we would expect citizens in states with legislative term limits to exhibit higher levels of legislative approval, as found by Kelleher and Wolak (2007).

A third state institution we believe might be an important correlate of legislative approval is the citizen initiative. The initiative was originally adopted in response to cynicism about state legislatures and the belief that state legislatures were controlled by a few special interests.

Studies suggest procedures allowing citizen input via direct democracy enhance internal and external efficacy (Bowler and Donovan 2002), provide educative effects for citizens (Pateman 1970; Smith and Tolbert 2004), and create opportunities for participation that positively influence citizen support (Barber 1984). Further, studies have found that the initiative improves legislator information about citizen preferences (Matsusaka 1992), and even the threat of the initiative may push legislative outcomes closer to citizen preferences (Gerber 1996). Such effects are likely to make citizens more favorable toward state legislatures.

On the other hand, concerns about the initiative process could negatively affect approval of the legislature. Expensive campaigns run by professionals in the “initiative industry” have been used to support or oppose ballot measures, and some are concerned that the initiative process has been captured by special interests (Schrag 1998; Broder 2000). In addition, some state legislatures have largely ignored, substantially amended, or subverted ballot measures (Waters 2001) and some legislatures are largely insulated from ballot measures (Bowler and Donovan 2004). In addition, legal challenges over implementation have been frequent (Bowler and Donovan 1998), and some worry about minority rights being trampled by the majority on ballot measures (Gamble 1997; Tolbert and Hero 1996). Such concerns could cause citizen frustration with the policy process and reduce approval of the state legislature. The negative relationship found by Kelleher and Wolak (2007) would support this view.

A final potential problem with the existing literature regards the treatment of party control of legislatures and individual-level political attitudes. Scholars have entered partisanship into models of legislative approval in a variety of ways: as individual-level partisan self-identification (Patterson et al. 1992), as partisan division at the state level such as divided control of the legislature or state government and party competition (Kelleher and Wolak 2007), and as a

dichotomous variable for whether the respondent's preferred party is in control of the state legislature (Squire 1993). We argue that partisans are likely to care about which party controls the legislature, something which cannot be captured simply by including dummy variables measuring an individual's party identification. Likewise, divided government or party competition at the state level may affect voter preferences, but it is likely to be an evaluation that is seen through a party filter (Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992). We expect that partisans are more likely to approve of an institution controlled by their "team" than one that has divided or full control by another party. Moreover, political independents may be satisfied with divided control so a simple dummy variable for divided government may not capture any effects.

In addition, we believe that political ideology may condition the effects of state institutions. For example, there is little reason to believe that legislative professionalism will have a common effect for all citizens. Rather, we argue that ideology provides a filter through which citizens view its effects. If Fiorina is correct that professionalism advantages Democrats, and if conservatives in states with a professional legislature see incumbency effects as primarily helping the opposition hold power, ideology should interact with professionalism in shaping approval of the legislature. Similarly, if professionalism is associated with larger government that spends more per capita (Owings and Borck 2000), ideology should condition the effects of professionalism on legislative support. In particular, conservatives in states with professional legislatures may have more negative reactions. The studies finding a negative relationship between professionalism and legislative approval (Squire 1993; Kelleher and Wolak 2007) neither controlled for political ideology nor considered how it might condition the effect of professionalism on approval.

A similar argument can be made about the relationship between political ideology and term limits. Ideological conservatives were particularly vocal proponents of term limits (Petracca 1991; Will 1992), seeing them as a way to curtail careerism and other ills perceived as plaguing state legislatures. The evidence on public views of term limits has been mixed with studies showing partisan and ideological factors (Donovan and Snipp; Karp 1995), but it is also possible that the outcomes associated with term limits make conservatives more approving of the legislature than moderates or liberals. For example, Meinke and Hasecke (2003) demonstrate that term limits have affected incentives for Democrats to serve in state legislatures, and the partisan composition of term limited legislatures has been affected. Our expectation is that because conservatives were more likely to support the passage of term limits, prefer limited government, and like the outcomes from legislatures with fewer ambitious Democrats, ideology will interact with the presence of term limits in shaping public approval of state legislatures. In this view, term limits would not have a consistent effect across all citizens; rather, conservatives in term limited states would express more positive views of the legislature.

To sufficiently address these three issues – the endogeneity of gubernatorial approval, the potential effects of state institutions, and the role of party control of legislatures and individual-level political attitudes – requires having a survey with a large sample where it is possible to exploit variance in institutions to use as instruments in the case of gubernatorial approval and to estimate the effects of institutions on public approval of legislatures. As we describe in the next section, pooling common questions from the 2007 and 2008 CCES surveys provides us with such a sample.

DATA AND METHODS

We examine the determinants of public approval of state legislatures using data from the 2007 and 2008 CCES surveys.⁴ The CCES is a nationally-representative survey that has been conducted by YouGov/Polimetrix annually since 2006. YouGov/Polimetrix utilizes a matched random sample methodology to generate a nationally-representative sample from its panel of possible respondents. The survey is composed of two parts: a common section asked of all respondents, and several team modules administered to subsamples of 1,000 persons.

In the analysis here, we pool respondents from the 2007 and 2008 common content portion of the two surveys, which had sample sizes of 10,000 and 32,500, respectively. Once missing values are dropped, the final usable sample is just over 36,000. The matched random sample methodology utilized by YouGov/Polimetrix produces a nationally-representative sample, but not necessarily a state-representative sample. An important advantage of the large survey, however, is that there is good coverage of each state's population. On average, there are 735 respondents from each state in the pooled sample. By comparison, Squire's (1993) survey had 300 respondents from each of the six states covered, while the survey analyzed by Kelleher and Wolak (2007) had only 36 respondents from each state, on average. As we note below, we supplement the survey data with information about state political institutions collected from a variety of sources.

As we discussed in the last section, scholars have modeled the determinants of legislative approvals in a variety of ways. As a starting point for our analysis we estimate the following model:

$$\text{Legislative Approval}_i = \alpha_i + \beta_1 \text{Legislative Professionalism}_s + \beta_2 \text{Gubernatorial Approval}_i + \beta_3 \text{State Economic Conditions}_s + \beta_4 \text{Political Attributes}_i + \beta_5 \text{Demographics}_i + \beta_6 \text{CCES 2007} + \varepsilon_i$$

where i indexes individuals and s indexes states. *Legislative Approval* is the respondent's approval of the state legislature coded on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disapprove (1) to strongly approve (5).⁵ *Gubernatorial Approval* is coded on the same five-point scale. *Legislative Professionalism* is measured in the standard way using legislator salary, number of professional staff, and session length with a theoretical range from zero to one with Congress as the standard at a score of one (Squire and Hamm 2005).⁶ *State Economic Conditions* is measured as the state unemployment rate to control for the effects of economic circumstances on approval rates (Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan 1992; Kelleher and Wolak 2007). *Political Attributes* is a vector of individual-level political attributes, including ideology (measured on a five-point scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative), party self-identification represented by Republican and Democrat dummy variables (other party and no party are the excluded category), and a variable we term "home team" legislature coded one if a citizen identifies as of the same the party controlling both chambers of the state legislature, and coded zero otherwise (including divided control or for independents).⁷ Last, *Demographics* is a vector of individual-level attributes that includes age, indicator measures for gender and minority groups (whites are the excluded category), education (measured on a five-point scale), income (measured on a 15-point scale),⁸ and a dummy variable for whether the respondent was registered to vote. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all of the variables in the model.

The estimates we present below are not sensitive to the pooling of the surveys across the two years. We estimated each of the regression models separately for 2007 and 2008 with substantively identical results. However, to account for any differences in the surveys (including any slight differences in question wording), we also include a 2007 dummy variable. Also,

because respondents are grouped by state, we correct all standard errors for clustering by state (Primo, Jacobsmeier and Milyo 2007).

After estimating the base model, we serially address the shortcomings in previous work we highlighted in the last section. First, we address the possible endogeneity of gubernatorial approval with an instrumental variables approach. Two variables were used as instruments in the first stage estimating gubernatorial approval. The first variable, home team governor, indicates whether the current state governor is of the same party as the respondent with the same coding as the home team legislative variable. The second variable is a five-point scale adapted from the measure of gubernatorial power developed by Thad Beyle (1968, 2010). The original measure has six categories (appointment power, budget power, organizational power, party control in the legislature tenure potential, and veto power), but one category (party control in the legislature) is closely related to other variables in the model so we dropped it from the index. The justification for these instruments is that they are analogous to legislative professionalism and the home team legislative variable so we have roughly parallel construction in the models. Various diagnostics, such as the Hansen J-test, F-tests, and a test of joint significance of endogenous regressors (reported in the appendix), suggest inclusion of the instruments in the model.

We then estimate the model including other potentially relevant state institutions, namely term limits and citizen initiatives. These institutions are measured as dummy variables coded as one if a state has the institution in place and zero otherwise. The data on term limits come from Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000), and the information on initiatives comes from Bowler and Donovan (2004). We did not include state referendum with measures sent by the legislature.

Last, we test our argument that political ideology conditions the effects of legislative professionalism and term limits. To do so, we add to the model interaction terms between

ideology and legislative professionalism and ideology and term limits. Our expectation with professionalism is that it will have a neutral impact on evaluations of state legislatures, but that conservatives in states with professional legislatures will have lower levels of support for the legislature. Similarly, term limits will not have a consistent effect across all citizens, but we anticipate that conservatives in states with term limits will show more support for the legislature.

RESULTS

We report the estimates from each model of legislative approval in Table 2. The estimates in column 1 are from an OLS regression of the base model, which is meant to reflect the standard approach taken in the literature.⁹ Analyzing the CCES survey data, we find very similar relationships to those found in past studies suggesting that there is nothing specific to the CCES survey or the time-period studied that distinguishes this survey from previous work. Further, the use of standard errors clustered by state does not appear to change observed patterns. Of particular note, there is a significant, negative association between the professionalism level of a state's legislature and public approval for that institution. This is similar to the relationship found by Squire (1993) and Kelleher and Wolak (2007).

Also of note are the coefficients on the political and gubernatorial approval variables. The positive coefficient on the home team legislature measure suggests that individuals, not surprisingly, express more support for the legislature when they are of the same party controlling the legislature. Compared to political independents, both Democrats and Republicans also were on average more favorable toward the state legislature. Regarding gubernatorial approval, consistent with Patterson, Ripley, and Quinlan (1992) and Squire (1993), there is a positive association between evaluations of the executive and legislative branches of state government.

Many of the control variables suggest systematic relationships with public approval of state legislatures. Women and African-Americans were, on average, more likely to approve of their state legislature, while older Americans and those with higher levels of education and income were more likely to disapprove. These patterns hold across the subsequent model specifications.

The estimates reported in Column 2 are from a 2SLS-IV model, where we have instrumented for gubernatorial approval, as discussed above.¹⁰ This model accounts for possible endogeneity between evaluations of the executive and legislative branch, keeping the rest of the variables the same as in the base model. The magnitude of the coefficient on gubernatorial approval is slightly smaller than the base model but remains positive and statistically significant. The negative relationship between legislative professionalism and public approval also remains, as do the relationships between each of the other institutional and individual determinants found to be systematically related to legislative approval in the base model. Although the relationships with these variables do not change when addressing endogeneity of legislative and gubernatorial approval, the 2SLS-IV estimates provide more consistent estimates and better evidence that citizens' assessments of state elected institutions are related.

The next set of results considers the effects of institutions, first in isolation, and then interacted with political ideology. We estimate this and each subsequent model with 2SLS-IV to continue to address the endogeneity concern with gubernatorial approval, although using OLS regression models without instrumenting for gubernatorial approval produces substantively identical results. The regression reported in column 3 replicates the model just discussed, with the addition of dummy variables indicating whether the respondent's state had in place term limits or the citizen initiative.¹¹

Recall that past work on legislative professionalism and public approval of the legislature had not included these state institutions in their models of public approval, raising concerns about omitted variable bias. The estimates reported in column 3 suggest that any such problem with omitted variables was not biasing relationships. The coefficients on the term limits and citizen initiative themselves are not statistically different from zero, suggesting that citizens in states with and without these institutions do not systematically vary in their approval of state legislatures. This result stands in stark contrast to Kelleher and Wolak's (2007) findings that citizens in initiative states were significantly more negative and citizens in states with term limits were significantly more positive in their assessments of the state legislature. Finally, the coefficients on the other variables of principal interest are largely unchanged, with the exception of state economic conditions. In this model, an individual is more likely to disapprove of the state legislature when his or her state's unemployment is high.

The next set of results tells a different story. In column 4 of Table 2, we report a 2SLS-IV model, including an interaction term between political ideology and a state's legislative professionalism score. Our expectation is that political ideology conditions the relationship between legislative professionalism and public approval for legislature. The model estimates support this conclusion. When including this interaction term, the negative association between legislative professionalism and public approval found by Squire (1993) and Kelleher and Wolak (2007) and in our base model, disappears. The coefficient on a state's legislative professionalism level is now positive but not statistically different from zero. The coefficient on the interaction term, however, is negative and significant. Political ideology conditions the effect of legislative professionalism and in a particular way: conservatives in states with professional legislatures are less approving of their state legislature.

Political ideology, however, does not seem to condition the relationship between term limits and public approval for state legislatures. The coefficient on the term limit variable is not statistically significant, nor is the coefficient on the interaction term (in the final column of Table 2). Contrary to expectations of both proponents and opponents of term limits, public approval neither systematically differs among residents of states with or without this institution, nor is the relationship conditional on an individual's political ideology as anticipated.

To further illustrate how political ideology conditions the relationship between legislative professionalism and public approval, consider the graphic presented in Figure 2. Using the coefficients from the last model in Table 2, we calculated the mean predicted values of legislative approval for each survey respondent based on the legislative professionalism of the respondent's state of residence. Further, separate estimates of mean predicted values were calculated for each category of self-identified ideology. One can see that the mean predicted values for liberals and strong liberals do not vary much by state professionalism level. Meanwhile, moderates experience a slightly lower level of predicted support as professionalism increases, but conservatives and strong conservatives have much lower levels of predicted supported in the states with the most professional legislatures (i.e. – California, Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin).

DISCUSSION

The public's view on state legislatures has ebbed and flowed over time, and our survey results suggest that state legislatures are not well regarded at this time. In the past, major institutional reforms, such as the citizen initiative and term limits, have been adopted during times of public scorn for legislatures so low levels of approval could have long-term impacts.

Combined with the fiscal strains that have been affecting (and will likely continue to affect) the states in the period after the surveys were conducted in 2007 and 2008, one can expect difficult times for incumbent legislators in upcoming elections and perhaps tumultuous times for the legislatures as organizations.

Of further concern is that past institutional remedies, such as the citizen initiative, the various organizational facets comprising legislative professionalism, and term limits, do not appear to have much impact in enhancing public approval of legislatures. Relying on a survey with a very large sample of over 36,000 respondents from across the nation, our results suggest that citizens in states with term limits and the citizen initiative are not substantially different from citizens in states without these institutions. Further, higher levels of legislative professionalism have no appreciable effect on self-identified moderates, liberals and strong liberals in their assessments of the state legislature, but legislative professionalism is associated with stronger disapproval of the state legislature for conservatives and strong conservatives. Such results make one less than sanguine about the efficacy of the next round of institutional reforms in shaping public approval of state legislatures.

NOTES

¹ The CCES survey represents a nationally-representative sample of the U.S. public. Although there are respondents from all states included in the survey, the samples are not representative of each state. For this reason, the data presented in Table 1 should be interpreted cautiously.

² Kelleher and Wolak (2007) separately modeled legislative approval and gubernatorial approval. To the extent to which one is correlated with the other, this creates an omitted variables problem.

³ Most studies of gubernatorial approval do not include legislative approval either (Alt, Lassen and Skilling 2002; Cohen and King 2004) so omitted variable bias is a problem there as well.

⁴ More information about the CCES project can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>.

⁵ The variable for legislative approval was coded differently in 2007 and 2008. In both years, categories included strongly approve, approve, disapprove, and strongly disapprove. In 2007, the question also included a “neither approve nor disapprove” option, but in 2008 the only neutral option was “not sure.” We treated each of these as the same middle category in our dependent scale for the results listed here, but we also tested all models separately for the two years as well as with different coding scales for the variables in unreported tables, and the main results were largely consistent with the models reported. For example, the positive coefficient on professionalism and a negative, significant coefficient on the interaction of ideology and professionalism were very similar in the 2007 and 2008 results with the full instrumental variable regression model. Skipped and not answered responses were dropped from the analysis.

⁶ Although scores for each state vary over time, Squire (2007) has shown stability in the rankings of states, especially those in the extremes of the measure. In addition, Mooney (1994) argues

that the choice of scale seems to matter little as the various indices correlate highly and thus appear to be measuring the same concept.

⁷ In the reported models we rely on a measure with partisans and strong partisans, but the results are not sensitive to the inclusion of citizens leaning toward a party.

⁸ Approximately nine percent of the sample did not respond to the income question. Rather than exclude these respondents from the analysis, we coded these responses as zero, and then included a dummy variable to indicate whether the respondent answered this question.

⁹ One could be concerned with the use of OLS on a dependent variable that is measured with a five-point scale. While we chose to report the results of the OLS for ease of interpretation and consistency with the instrumental variables regression results, the base models were also tested with ordinal logistic regression. For the main variables of interest, there were no major differences in the significance of the model estimates.

¹⁰ The first stage regression explaining gubernatorial approval includes the same set of demographic variables as the main legislative approval model, including ideology, Republican, Democrat, female, age, African-American, Hispanic, other minority, education, income, income answered, registered voter, and 2007 survey. The coefficients for the main variables of interest as well as diagnostics for the IV regression are in the appendix.

¹¹ We also tested for a variable adapted from the insulation index developed by Bowler and Donovan (2004). They suggest not all initiatives are the same and that some legislatures have greater discretion once a ballot measure is passed. This insulation could reduce public control over policy (or at least the perception of efficacy) and lead to some public disillusion with the legislature. While the effect is possible, the unreported results suggest no significant impact.

Appendix

Table A1. Results from the first stage of the IV Regressions (Gubernatorial Approval)

	<i>Institutions</i>	<i>Ideology Interaction</i>	<i>Full Model</i>
Home Team Governor	0.724**	0.732**	0.732**
Gubernatorial Power Index	-0.024	-0.012	-0.013
Legislative Professionalism	0.792	1.465*	1.483*
Ideology X Legislative Prof.	-	-0.730**	-0.736**
Legislative Term Limits	0.603	0.602	0.586
Ideology X Term Limit	-	-	0.005
Citizen Initiative	-0.311	-0.304	-0.304
Home Team Legislature	0.066	0.043	0.043
State Unemployment Rate	-0.123*	-0.119*	-0.119*
F-test (21, 48 df)	116.35**	124.29**	176.04**
Hansen J statistic, Chi-square (1), P-value	0.813	0.905	0.841
Joint significance of endogenous regressors, F-test (2, 48 df)	11.42**	34.57**	23.06**

Note: Ideology, Republican, Democrat, Female, Age, African-American, Hispanic, Other Minority, Education, Income, Income Answered, Registered Voter, and 2007 survey included but not reported in tables

Note: * indicates $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

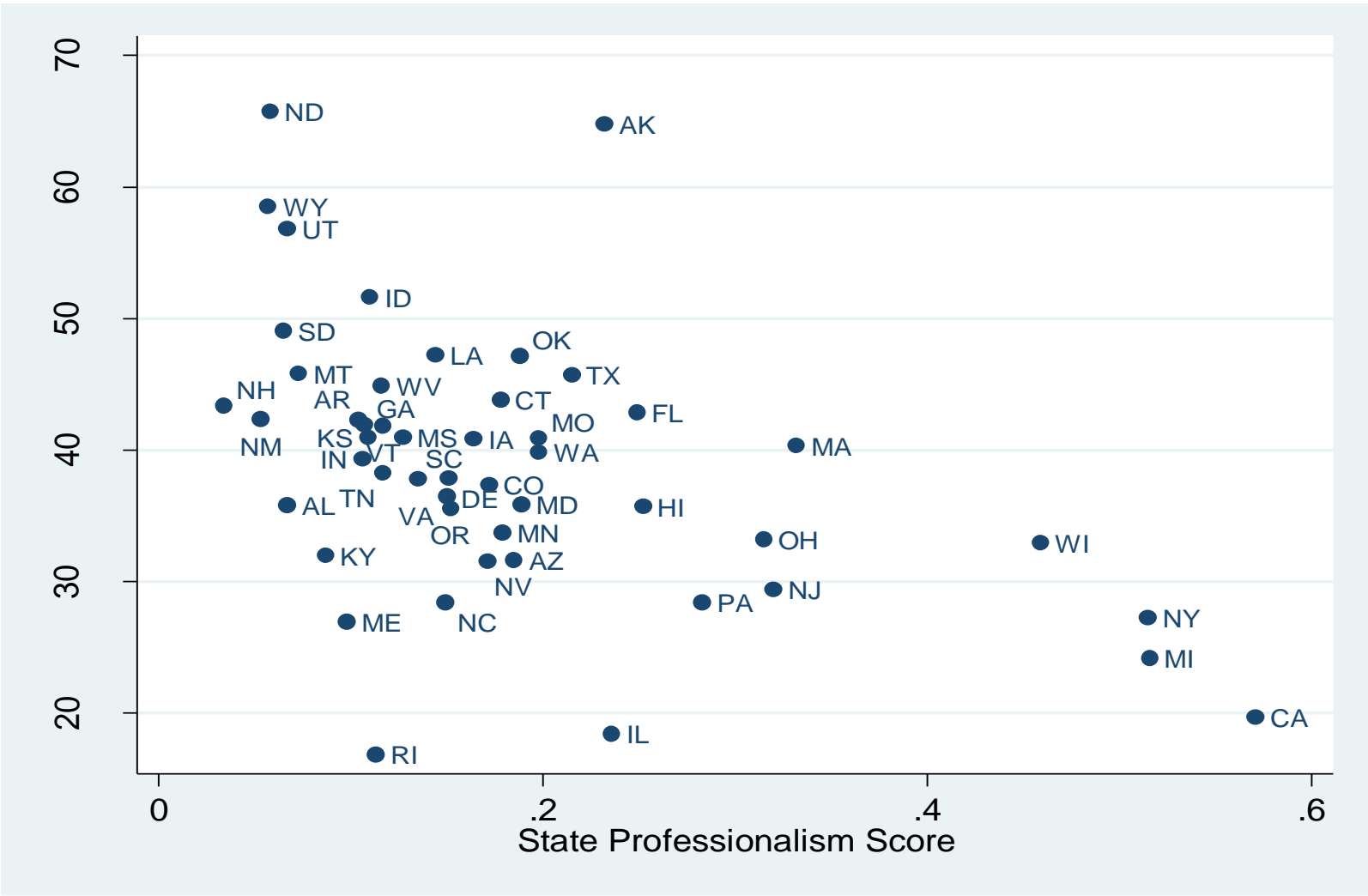
Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Legislative Approval	2.68	1.20	1	5
Legislative Professionalism	.262	.151	.034	.561
Professionalism/Ideology Interaction	.821	.566	.034	2.80
Term Limits Legislative	.358	.480	0	1
Term Limits/ Ideology Interaction	1.15	1.68	0	5
Citizen Initiative	.490	.499	0	1
Home Team Legislature	.040	.704	-1	1
Ideology (conservative=5)	3.20	1.17	1	5
State Unemployment Rate	5.48	1.11	2.6	8.4
Republican	.335	.472	0	1
Democrat	.358	.479	0	1
Female	.483	.500	0	1
Age	49.7	15.1	18	97
African American	.055	.228	0	1
Hispanic	.051	.219	0	1
Other Minority	.055	.228	0	1
Education	3.65	1.50	1	6
Income	7.88	4.04	0	14
Income Answered	.913	.281	0	1
Registered Voter	.966	.182	0	1
Year 2007	.231	.421	0	1
Governor Approval	3.03	1.47	1	5
Home Team Governor	.035	.832	-1	1
Gubernatorial Powers	3.56	.430	2.6	4.3

TABLE 2. STATE LEGISLATIVE INSTITUTIONS AND APPROVAL OF THE STATE LEGISLATURE

	<i>Base Model (OLS)</i>	<i>Governor Approval (IV REG)</i>	<i>Institutions (IV REG)</i>	<i>Ideology Interaction (IV REG)</i>	<i>Full Model (IV REG)</i>
Legislative	-.879**	-.933**	-.982**	.345	.654
Professionalism	(.200)	(.179)	(.194)	(.319)	(.401)
Ideology X Legis- lative Prof.	-	-	-	-.424**	-.526**
Term Limits	-	-	.065	.059	-.191
			(.079)	(.079)	(.175)
Ideology X Term Limit	-	-	-	-	.079
Citizen Initiative	-	-	.010	.016	.014
			(.071)	(.069)	(.070)
Home Team	.377**	.405**	.405**	.392**	.385**
Legislature	(.036)	(.032)	(.032)	(.026)	(.028)
Governor	.336**	.225**	.226**	.232**	.224**
Approval	(.025)	(.037)	(.036)	(.027)	(.030)
State Unemploy- ment Rate	-.031	-.044	-.054*	-.052*	-.051*
Ideology	(.025)	(.027)	(.023)	(.022)	(.023)
	-.030	-.045	.045	.067	.065
	(.039)	(.041)	(.041)	(.045)	(.047)
Republican	.126**	.134**	.133**	.130**	.129**
	(.037)	(.037)	(.037)	(.035)	(.034)
Democrat	.137**	.155**	.155**	.153**	.155**
	(.030)	(.029)	(.029)	(.028)	(.028)
Female	.188**	.199**	.198**	.198**	.198**
	(.018)	(.017)	(.017)	(.017)	(.017)
Age	-.005**	-.004**	-.005**	-.005**	-.005**
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
African-American	.100**	.107**	.111**	.117**	.115**
	(.032)	(.032)	(.031)	(.030)	(.030)
Hispanic	.073	.076	.069	.070	.070
	(.046)	(.043)	(.047)	(.049)	(.048)
Other Minority	.053	.042	.039	.038	.036
	(.033)	(.034)	(.034)	(.034)	(.035)
Education	-.031**	-.030**	-.030**	-.030**	-.031**
	(.006)	(.006)	(.006)	(.006)	(.006)
Income	-.012**	-.012**	-.012**	-.012**	-.012**
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Income Answered	.141**	.154**	.150**	.151**	.153**
	(.027)	(.025)	(.025)	(.024)	(.024)
Registered Voter	-.061	-.065	-.067	-.063	-.065
	(.037)	(.038)	(.037)	(.034)	(.034)
CCES 2007	-.042	-.059	-.069	-.068	-.067
	(.050)	(.051)	(.047)	(.049)	(.049)
Constant	2.334**	2.765**	2.810**	2.420**	2.446**
	(.057)	(.352)	(.348)	(.233)	(.228)
N	36,036	36,036	36,036	36,036	36,036
F-test	264.3**	206.5**	176.6**	209.3**	176.0**

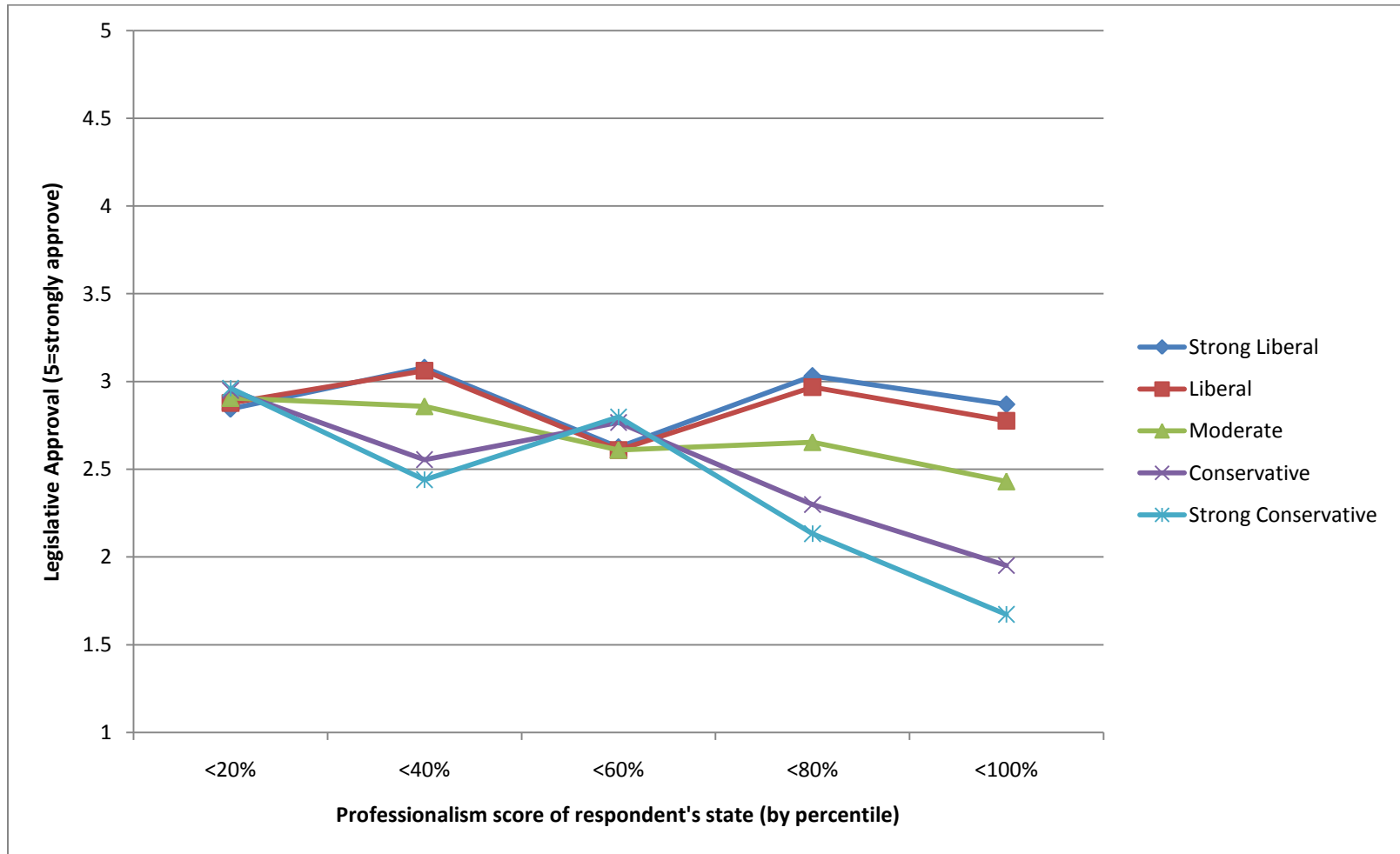
Note: standard errors clustered by state in parentheses, and * indicates p<.05, ** p<.01

FIGURE 1. LEGISLATIVE APPROVAL ACROSS THE STATES, 2008



Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, 2008.

**FIGURE 2. MEAN PREDICTED VALUES OF LEGISLATIVE APPROVAL
BY PROFESSIONALISM SCORE OF THE RESPONDENT'S STATE BY IDEOLOGICAL GROUP**



Notes: Calculated from estimates from the Full Model presented in column 5 of Table 2.