

PUBLIC PREFERENCES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY RESPONSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

Analyzing survey data from the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, this paper examines citizens' preferences for assigning policy responsibility for environmental problems to different levels of government. I find that the public generally prefers the federal government to take the lead in addressing most issues, particularly those that relate to pollution and those that have a national or global scale. The public, however, prefers to give more responsibility to state and local governments to handle local-level issues. These results suggest a desire among many in the public to match governmental policy assignment with the geographic scale of the problem. The best predictor of individual's choice of government level is political orientation, and to a lesser extent one's general confidence in each level of government.

Should the responsibility to address environmental problems rest with the national or subnational levels of government? This question has been at the center of a long-standing debate about the institutional design of environmental policy in the United States (Anderson and Hill 1997; Esty 1996; Kraft and Scheberle 1998), and in other federal systems of government, such as Canada (Harrison 1996) and Germany (Rose-Ackerman 1995). For much of the past half century, U.S. environmental policy can, in part, be characterized, as a tug-of-war between federal, state, and sometimes local authorities. Environmental protection and, particularly, pollution control, was decidedly a state and local issue through the 1960s, with the federal government reluctant to assume more than an advisory role. By 1970, however, there was a growing consensus that state governments were failing to make much progress (Stewart 1977; Davies 1970). State spending and administrative capacity varied immensely across the country, and were generally viewed to be inadequate by the federal government (Lowry 1992). The federal government responded by enacting major pieces of legislation such as the Clean Air Act (1970) and Clean Water Act (1972) that shifted the balance of power from the states to the federal government.¹ This legislation followed a major administrative reorganization of environmental protection responsibilities within the federal government, resulting in the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1970. In more recent years, states have re-asserted authority in several areas of environmental policy, most notably to address climate change due to what most believe to be foot-dragging by the federal government (Rabe 2008).

Many arguments have been made regarding the appropriate level of government to address environmental problems, based on normative, technical, and other criteria. Despite sometimes contentious debate among policy researchers and elected officials on this issue, we know little about what the public desires. Which level of government do citizens think should take a lead role in

addressing environmental challenges? Do these preferences depend on the nature of the environmental problem, such as its geographical scale and whether it is one of pollution or resource exploitation? Do people match their choice of government level to the scale of the problem? Last, to what extent are these preferences determined by general assessments of government performance and other individual-level factors such as one's political orientation?

To address these questions, I analyze survey data from the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), including a battery of questions specifically designed to measure and explain public attitudes toward environmental policy responsibility. The principal findings of the analysis are that people's preferred level of government to handle environmental problems is issue-dependent. In general, the public prefers that the federal government have primary responsibility to address most pollution issues, and issues (pollution or resources) that are national or global in geographic scale. The public does, however favor state and local governments to handle local-level issues, particularly those related to resource management. The best predictors of an individual's choice of government level is one's political ideology, partisan identification, and level of education, and, to a lesser extent, one's general confidence in each level of government.

This paper makes several important contributions. First, the design of the survey departs from most in the existing literature in that I study a single issue in detail, rather than multiple issues in general. This approach enables consideration of possible within-policy area differences in public preferences. Second, attitudinal studies on the environment tend to focus on measuring and identifying the correlates of environmental concern, in an effort to gauge individuals' overall orientations toward the environment (see Dunlap and Jones 2002 for a review). This study focuses specifically on understanding the dynamics of citizens' public policy preferences regarding a host of environmental issues. Third, I consider policy preferences beyond the simple question of whether

government should do more to address issues, treating government as either a single entity or focusing on only a single level of government. Many of the commonly-used public opinion surveys contain questions that conflate attitudes about government, federal spending, and environmental protection.² The 2007 CCES survey differs in that it first asked respondents to specify how much government effort they thought was necessary, without specifying spending or a particular level of government.³ Second, the survey directly inquired about their preferred level of government intervention, which allows for more careful measurement of attitudes about government policy responsibility.

The paper proceeds as follows. Next, I review the existing literature examining citizens' preferences about policy responsibility and discuss a set of theoretical factors that may explain these preferences. I then describe the battery of environmental questions asked as part of the 2007 CCES. In the subsequent section, I analyze aggregate public opinion about assigning policy responsibility to different levels of government, and the individual determinants of public preferences. Last, I discuss the implications of the findings in the concluding section.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT POLICY ASSIGNMENT

There is a large literature examining public attitudes toward government, but only a handful of studies have explicitly measured and analyzed citizens' preferences about policy assignment.⁴ Arceneaux (2005) considered policy assignment in a general way in his study on public attitudes and federalism. To measure what he referred to as "solution-responsibility attribution," Arceneaux asked survey respondents to indicate the level of government they thought "would do the best job when it comes to solving many of the problems and issues we face." More than a third of the respondents

indicated a preference for the federal government (37 percent), followed by a preference for state government (24 percent) and local government (12 percent).

Several studies have descriptively considered citizens' opinions about which level of government they prefer to have authority over various policy areas. For example, Conlan (1993), commenting on results from a 1989 survey conducted by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, showed that the public expressed the most trust and confidence in the federal government to "clean up air pollution" and "fight drugs," but had the most trust in state government to "improve schools" and in local government to "recycle trash." Other scholars have reached similar conclusions that opinions on the preferred level of government vary across issues (Roeder 1994; Blendon et al. 1997; Shaw and Reinhart 2001).

Cantril and Cantril (1999) asked survey respondents to indicate whether several issues related to public education should be handled "mostly at the local or county level, state level, or federal level," and found that preferences varied somewhat by issue. The respondents favored local or county government for "running the schools day-to-day," but state government for "certifying that teachers are qualified" and "providing financial assistance to schools in low-income areas." This work demonstrated the utility of considering specific issues within a general policy area. Cantril and Cantril note "[i]f respondents are asked only about broad areas of public policy, there appear to be limits to what can be learned about public opinion regarding the levels of government appropriate to address problems" (p.39).

Several studies have examined public preferences for the devolution of policy authority from the federal government to state and local governments. Roeder (1994) found that strong majorities of the U.S. public in 1987 supported decentralization of authority for a wide-range of issues, including welfare, mass transportation, health care, and providing public service jobs. Thompson

and Elling (1999) examined preferences among Michigan citizens regarding devolution of policy authority from the federal government to states and localities for eleven government services. One noteworthy feature of their survey is that they allowed for individuals to express a preference for intergovernmental responsibility, and most of their respondents preferred a mix of federal, state, and local involvement in most issues. The best predictors of preferences for devolution in the Thompson and Elling study were party identification, race, and political ideology, with self-reporting Republicans, whites, and political conservatives expressing more support for devolution.

The most systematic treatment of public preferences on policy assignment is the work of Schneider and Jacoby (2003, 2008). Schneider and Jacoby (2003) conducted a survey of South Carolina residents in 1999 to assess their views of the governmental responsibilities of the national and state governments for public policy problems, and to test if framing effects shape these views (they did not). The survey asked respondents to indicate whether the national or state governments should take the lead in addressing seventeen policy areas, and to respond to a set of more general questions about the national and state governments. Schneider and Jacoby concluded from their analysis that individuals do reach meaningful judgments about which policies should be addressed by different levels of government. Moreover, they argued that there is a common underlying structure to public attitudes across fifteen of the seventeen policy areas, and that the public exhibited a slight tendency to favor the national government over state governments. In terms of the individual-level determinants of policy assignment preferences, they found that political orientation (party identification and ideology), race, and income were correlated with these preferences. In addition, they found a strong relationship between general evaluations of the national and state government with preferences for assigning policy responsibilities to these levels of government.

Schneider and Jacoby (2008) reached similar conclusions in their subsequent study of a nationally-representative sample of the U.S. public. Analyzing data from the 2006 CCES, they again found that public preferences regarding policy responsibility were issue-dependent. They further showed that these judgments generally reflect actual policy efforts of federal, state, and local government as measured by spending in these areas by each level of government. Schneider and Jacoby also argue that individuals' attitudes on governmental policy responsibility had a coherent structure. Using Mokken scaling, they found that individuals have reasonably coherent preferences regarding policy assignment across a wide range of policy issues. Finally, Schneider and Jacoby found that partisan identification and political ideology were the most important correlates of these preferences.

The studies by Schneider and Jacoby (2003, 2008) consider a diverse set of policy areas which enables them to both make cross-policy comparisons, as well as to measure and explain the public's general preferences for policy responsibility between the national and subnational governments. However, there are several drawbacks to studying broad policy areas. One potential concern is that we cannot be sure that responses are commensurate across individuals since people may be considering different dimensions of a problem when identifying their preferred level of government. For example, when asked about "providing aid to the poor," we do not know whether individuals are thinking about financial assistance programs such as welfare or food stamps, or health insurance or job training. As a consequence, when an individual provides a response to the question of assigning governmental policy responsibility for an issue, we only observe the outcome of what could have been different ways of approaching the question. An individual might be averaging over a number of specific within-policy issues, or simply responding by thinking of the first specific issue that the broad policy problem area cues.

A second related drawback is that by asking about broad policy areas, we do not allow people's preferences to vary *within* a policy issue. As Cantril and Cantril (1999) showed with public education, the public's opinion on which level of government it prefers depends on the specific education issue in question. In the present context of environmental problems, it is possible that opinions vary across specific environmental problems. For example, an individual's opinion about policy responsibility may depend on whether the problem regards pollution control or natural resource management and/or whether the geographical scope of the problem is local, national, or global. The 2007 CCES included questions specifically designed to study these possible nuances within a single policy domain.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ASSIGNING POLICY RESPONSIBILITY

What explains an individual's choice about which level of government is best to address a particular problem? The existing literature suggests several possible explanations. First, preferences regarding policy responsibility may be based on an individual's general assessment of different levels of government. For example, individuals with favorable impressions of state government may be inclined to prefer that state government take on environmental challenges. This preference may cut across environmental issues or be sensitive to particular dimensions of issues, such as their geographic expanse. Several studies in the literature suggest such a relationship exists. Mikos (2007) argues that people may prefer state to federal action in a policy domain for several reasons, including that they tend to have more trust in state government relative to the federal government. Kam and Mikos (2007) provide empirical support for this argument in the context of public attitudes toward a federal ban of physician-assisted suicide. Schneider and Jacoby (2003) similarly found that preferences about the assignment of policy authority to the national and state governments were

largely a function of their comparative assessments of these levels of government, and Arceneaux (2005) demonstrated a positive correlation between performance ratings of government and the general assignment of policy responsibility.

Past work has shown that individuals do vary in their general attitudes about the performance of federal, state, and local government institutions, measured in terms of approval, trust, confidence, and other metrics. Cantril and Cantril (1999), for example, found that the public expressed more approval for the job of state and local government compared to the federal government, and that the public had more confidence in the state executive and legislative branches, than these branches of the federal government. Several studies have shown that the public generally is more trusting of state government, compared to the federal government (Blendon et al. 1997; Cole and Kincaid 2000; Uslaner 2001; Shaw and Reinhart 2001), although these judgments do vary over time and in response to important events such as Hurricane Katrina and party control of the presidency (Cole and Kincaid 2006). Hetherington and Nugent (2001) analyzed data from the 1996 American National Election Studies about the faith and confidence people have in the federal government, relative to state and local governments. One of the strongest predictors of their faith and confidence in the federal government was their degree of trust in the federal government (along with political orientation and news consumption). Kelleher and Wolak (2007) found similar results in their more recent study that compared levels of confidence in different state and federal level institutions.

A second possible explanatory factor is an individual's political orientation. Ideological conservatives are more likely to express confidence in more proximate levels of government (i.e., state and local compared to federal), and, thus, should be more likely to select these levels when forced to make a choice (Uslaner 2001). Party identification may also be correlated with attitudes about policy responsibility. An important feature of the modern Republican Party's platform is not

just smaller government, but decentralization of policy authority from the federal government to state and local governments. Devolution was an important component of Reagan's New Federalism initiative as well as the 1994 Republican "Contract with America." Democrats, on the other hand, tend to be more supportive of expansive government, which often translates to more policy authority for the federal government. Several previous studies have shown that an individual's political orientation is an important determinant of attitudes about which level of government should have authority to handle a policy area (Schneider and Jacoby 2003, 2008; Cole and Kincaid 2006; Roeder 1994). Moreover, recent work found political ideology and partisanship to be strongly correlated with blame attribution across levels of government (Maestas et al. 2008), a concept closely related to assigning policy responsibility.

In addition to an individual's political orientation, the political context of the area in which s/he lives may also influence preferences for assignment of policy responsibility to different levels of government. Individuals should be more inclined to assign environmental policy responsibilities to a level of government when it is controlled by the party to which they identify, regardless of whether the individual favors more or less protection or management of the issue in question. Although party control of the federal government obviously does not vary across individuals, differences in party control across states and localities could very well affect which level of government people prefer have the lead role in addressing various environmental issues.

A fourth factor that may be associated with preferences toward policy responsibility is somewhat specific to the environmental policy domain. Environmental problems are characterized by various geographic scales, ranging from distinctly local problems such as urban air pollution to global problems such as climate change. Individuals may consider this geographical scale when indicating their preference for a given level of government to assume primary responsibility.

Specifically, some people may prefer to match their choice of government to the scale of the problem, reflecting an effort to pick the level of government that is best positioned in their view to deal with the boundaries of the problem. This logic would suggest that some people would prefer local government to address purely localized problems, but recognize the need for the capacity of the federal government to handle issues that are explicitly interstate in nature such as some air and water pollution problems or issues that reflect national interests such as protecting national parks. In this way, people may be expressing a preference in line with the principle of subsidiarity, the idea in governance that a centralized, higher level of government should only perform functions that cannot be effectively carried out at a lower level of government.

SURVEY DATA

The survey data I analyze in this paper come from the 2007 CCES, which was administered in November 2007 by YouGov/Polimetrix through a web-based format. YouGov/Polimetrix uses a national matched-random sampling method in which participants are selected to reflect the national adult population (Rivers n.d.). The 2007 CCES asked 1,000 respondents a battery of questions on environmental policy topics. Most relevant for this analysis, survey respondents were asked a two-part question about twelve environmental issues. Respondents were first asked:

“Thinking about *Environmental Issue X*, how much effort do you think the government should put into addressing this issue?”

The response categories were: “A lot less,” “A little bit less,” “About the same,” “A little bit more,” or “A lot more.” The twelve issues included: protecting community drinking water, reducing urban air pollution issues like smog, preserving natural areas near where I live, managing urban sprawl, reducing pollution of the nation’s rivers, lakes, and ecosystems, reducing national air pollution

problems like acid rain, maintaining national parks, preserving national forests and other federally-protected areas, reducing emissions that contribute to global warming, preventing damage to the earth's ozone layer, preventing loss of the world's tropical rain forests, and protecting the world's plant and animal species from extinction.⁵ These issues were selected to vary along two dimensions. First, the issues were evenly split between pollution control and natural and biological resource conservation issues. The issues were also evenly divided between three geographical scales: four questions concerned local issues, four national issues, and four global issues. Moreover, within each of the three geographical scales, two of the four issues asked about were pollution questions and two were resource questions. The wording of the questions was chosen such that each environmental issue contained a geographic referent to clearly indicate the geographical scope of the issue at interest.

Table 1 presents the distribution of attitudes, aggregating the responses into whether the public seeks more, less, or about the same level of government effort to address each issue. These data show that the public as a whole generally favors more government action to address each of the issues. Strong majorities of the public (ranging from about 54 percent to 71 percent) indicate a preference for either "a little bit more" or "a lot more" government effort for each of the twelve issues. Moreover, only small percentages of the public indicate that less government effort is desirable. There are, however, some notable differences along the dimensions just noted. First, the public expresses a clear preference for more government effort toward pollution problems, relative to resource issues. Protecting community drinking water, reducing urban air pollution, reducing pollution of the nation's rivers, lakes, and ecosystems, and reducing emissions from that contribute to global warming are thought to require the most government effort. Moreover, there is some indication of a stronger preference for government to address local- and national-scale problems,

rather than global problems; at least 15 percent of the public expressed that less government effort was required to address the four global problems asked about on the survey. Konisky et al. (2008) explores these attitudes in more detail.

[Table 1 about here]

Following this question, the survey asked respondents to identify the level of government that in their judgment should have primary policy responsibility for each issue. Specifically, respondents were asked:

“Which level of government in the United States do you think should be most involved in addressing this issue, or is this not an issue government should address?”

The response options included: “Local government,” “State government,” “Federal government,” or “No government action.” Different from some past studies of policy responsibility (Schneider and Jacoby 2003, 2008; Roeder 1994),⁶ the response options for this question deliberately included an option for respondents to indicate no government action. This design enabled respondents to sincerely specify a preference for no additional government action on an issue, and avoided forcing respondents with this preference into another response. Without giving respondents this option, they may have chosen a level of government (rather than skip the question altogether) for reasons unrelated to assigning environmental policy responsibility.

CHOICE OF LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Which level of government does the public believe should have primary responsibility to address environmental problems? Figure 1 presents the results for the four local-level issues. The public clearly expresses the most support for assigning policy authority to local and state government. State government was the preferred level for protecting community drinking water (46

percent) and preserving local natural areas (48 percent), while the public was evenly split in their preference for state and local government to take the lead in managing urban sprawl. In the case of reducing urban air pollution, however, the public indicated substantial support (41 percent) for the federal government to take the lead role.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 2 displays the distributions of responses for the national-level problems for which the public expressed overwhelming support for the federal government to have primary responsibility. In all but the case of reducing pollution of the nation's rivers, lakes, and ecosystems, more than 70 percent of the public indicated a preference for the federal government. Local government was only preferred by small percentages of the public, and state government only exceeded 20 percent in the cases of reducing pollution of the nation's rivers, lakes, and ecosystems and preserving national forests and other federally-protected lands.

[Figure 2 about here] Last, as shown in Figure 3, respondents clearly indicated a preference for federal government responsibility for global-level environmental problems. With respect to each of the four issues asked about, the degree of support for the federal government exceeded 65 percent. Only small percentages of the public expressed a preference for local or state government to handle these issues. Also noteworthy is the substantial percentage of the public that indicated that they did not want any additional government action to deal with global problems, which ranged from 17 to 24 percent.

[Figure 3 about here]

Do public preferences on policy assignment depend on the nature of the environmental problem? For five of the six pollution issues asked about on the 2007 CCES survey, at least a plurality of the public expressed a preference for the federal government to take primary policy

responsibility. Only in the case of protecting community drinking water did more respondents prefer another level of government (although the difference between state government and the federal government in the case of reducing urban air pollution was negligible). A clear pattern also exists for the six resource management issues. Strong majorities expressed a preference for the federal government to take the lead, except for the local-level issues of managing urban sprawl and preserving local green spaces.

The distributions of responses also are suggestive of some matching of the choice of government level to the geographic bounds of the problem. The data presented in Figure 1 indicate that many in the public prefer local government to have primary policy responsibility for local problems – 29 percent for protecting community drinking water, 14 percent for reducing urban air pollution, 34 percent for preserving local natural areas, and 40 percent for managing urban sprawl. There is even stronger evidence of matching in the selection of the federal government to address national-level problems. The responses shown in Figure 2 show that the federal government is the preferred for reducing pollution of the nation’s rivers, lakes, and ecosystems (56 percent), reducing national air pollution (73 percent), for preserving national forests and other federally-protected lands (70 percent), and for maintaining national parks (76 percent).

This evidence of matching, however, should be interpreted cautiously. The inclusion of a specific geographic referent for each problem may have affected individuals’ responses to the policy assignment questions, by priming them to respond with the same level of government as the geographical scale of the problem. For this reason, the extent of matching suggested by the responses may inflate actual preferences for aligning the level of government with the geographic scope of the problem. That said, in the case of the selection of local government to address local-

level problems, the degree of matching is not as large as one would have expected if a priming effect was at work.

Individual-Level Determinants

To test the hypothesized theoretical explanations for why the public chooses a level of government, I estimate several regression models. I first consider the following baseline model:

$$Y_{ij} [\textit{Choice of Government Level}] = \alpha_{ij} + \beta_1 C_i [\textit{Confidence in Government Level}] + \beta_2 P_i [\textit{Political Orientation}] + \beta_3 T_i [\textit{Political Context}] + \beta_4 D_i [\textit{Demographics}] + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where i indexes individuals, j indexes the twelve environmental issues, Y is the measure of choice of government level, C is a variable measuring a respondent's confidence in federal, state, and local government, P is a vector of variables measuring political orientation, T is a vector measuring political context, D is a vector of personal characteristics, and ε is an error term. In this model, Y is measured dichotomously, coded 1 if an individual responded that the federal government should be mostly involved in addressing this issue and 0 if they indicated state or local government.

Individuals that responded that the issue was not one that government should address are excluded in this part of the analysis. The dependent variable is coded in this way to simplify interpretation and to reflect the common framing of the choice in assigning policy responsibility as one between the federal and state/local governments.⁷

To measure an individual's evaluation of each level of government, I develop an additive index comprised of three items from the 2007 CCES survey. The questions asked respondents to indicate their level of trust in, their perception of the responsiveness of, and their approval of federal, state, and local government.⁸ Collectively, I interpret these three items as a measure of an individual's general confidence in a given level of government. The trust question was coded on a 4-point scale (from 1 to 4), and the responsiveness and approval questions on a 5-point scale (1 to 5),

so the scale ranges from 3 to 14, with higher values representing more confidence in a particular level of government.⁹ Overall, the public expressed the most confidence in local government, followed in order by state government and the federal government. This rank ordering also holds for the individual components of the confidence scale, which is consistent with other studies (Cole and Kincaid 2000, 2006; Shaw and Reinhart 2001). Descriptive statistics for these and the other explanatory variables included in the analyses are presented in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Two variables are included in the analysis to capture an individual's political orientation: political ideology and party identification. Political ideology is based on the respondent's self-placement on a 5-point scale, ranging from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5). I measure party identification with a Republican indicator variable and an Other party (including Independents) indicator variable, with Democrat as the excluded category. The analysis also includes two political context variables measured at the state-level.¹⁰ The first is an indicator variable that designates whether the respondent is of the same party as their governor, and the second is an indicator variable that measures whether the respondent is of the same party as that controlling either the lower or upper chamber of their state legislature. The expectations are that ideologically conservative and Republican respondents will be less inclined to assign policy responsibility to the federal government while individuals living in states where their party is in control of state government will be more likely to assign primary policy responsibility to state government.

Last the model includes a standard set of demographics: age (in years), gender (female coded 1, male coded 0), race (minorities coded 1, whites coded 0), education (6 point scale ranging from no high school to a post-graduate degree), and urban residence (individuals living in an urban county coded 1, those living in a rural county coded 0). Although demographic attributes have been found

to be correlated with environmental attitudes, I do not have specific expectations about their relationship with attitudes about environmental policy responsibility.

I estimate the baseline model separately for each of the twelve environmental issues using logistic regression. These models, thus, examine the correlates of a preference for federal government involvement with each environmental problem relative to state or local government, conditional on the belief that some government action is warranted to address the problem. The results from the twelve regressions are reported in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

The model estimates suggest that, controlling for political and demographic attributes, individuals' general confidence in government is only weakly associated with their preferences on environmental policy assignment. The best evidence is with respect to confidence in local government. In a third of the models, including two in which the environmental problem relates to local-level pollution, the coefficient on confidence in local government is negative which is consistent with expectations. The coefficients on the federal confidence variable do not attain statistical significance, except for the case of preventing tropical rainforest deforestation when the sign is in an unexpected direction. Citizens' confidence in state government is positively associated with preferences for federal responsibility for addressing national-level air pollution, which is also an unanticipated result.

Political orientation performs as hypothesized. In ten of the twelve regressions, political ideology is negatively associated with the choice of the federal government, indicating that conservatives were on average considerably less likely than liberals to indicate a preference for the federal government to have primary policy responsibility. Moreover, in several models, self-identifying Republicans are less likely to state a preference for the federal government, even after

controlling for ideology. The results for the political context variables do not provide much evidence that state political conditions have an additional, independent effect on preferences for assigning policy responsibility to different levels of government. The coefficients on the measures of whether the respondent is of the same political party holding control of state government institutions rarely reach statistical significance in the models, and, for only two issues – preserving local natural areas and protecting global biological diversity – is the coefficient statistically significant in the expected direction. Collectively, the political variables seem to suggest that core political attitudes are better predictors of environmental policy assignment than are political context factors.

The demographic control variables also suggest some systematic relationships. The more educated the respondent, the more likely the individual was to prefer the federal government relative to state or local government. Older individuals were more likely to favor the federal government taking on responsibility for several issues, including three of the four national-level issues. Women were, in contrast, less likely to select the federal government to deal with both national-level and global-level issues.

The most consistent predictors of assigning environmental policy responsibility across the twelve issues are political orientation, especially political ideology, and education. One way to assess the relative magnitude of the effects is to consider the predicted probabilities of respondents selecting the federal government for different values of these variables, holding the other variables at their means. The coefficients for political ideology range from about $-.25$ to $-.76$, which translates, on average, to a difference in the predicted probability of a very conservative individual choosing the federal government to take the lead on these issues compared to a very liberal individual of about $.22$. The effects for education level are a little smaller. The parameter estimates on the education

variable range from about .15 to .40, which translates, on average, to a difference in the predicted probability of an individual without a high school degree choosing the federal government relative to someone with a post-graduate degree of about .17. Confidence in different levels of government were less consistent predictors of environmental policy responsibility attitudes, but when these coefficients were statistically significant, the magnitude of the effects were of comparable size to political ideology and education when moving from the least to the most confident values on the scale.

To examine the robustness of these findings, I also consider a model with a dependent variable measured as the count of the number of responses for each level of government. That is, for a given individual, the dependent variable reflects the number of times they responded that they wanted the local, state, or federal government to have primary policy responsibility. The scale of the variable, thus, ranges from 0 to 12. The mean score for the different levels of government were 1.5, 3.1, and 6.1 for local, state, and federal government, respectively.

I estimate these models with OLS regression, and the results are presented in Table 4.¹¹ The coefficients on the confidence measures suggest some systematic relationships between an individual's general assessment of each level of government and their preference for giving that level primary responsibility to handle environmental problems. As was the case above, the public's confidence in the federal government has no effect on these preferences; there is neither a positive association with an individual selecting the federal government nor a negative association with an individual choosing state or local government. More consistent with expectations, there is a positive relationship between an individual's confidence in local and state government and the number of times (s)he expressed a preference for assigning policy responsibility to those levels of government. There is also a negative relationship between one's confidence in state government and the number

of times choosing local government to handle environmental problems. This relationship suggests that as confidence in state government increases, the less individuals want local government to assume responsibility for environmental problems. This is an interesting result, indicating that people's preference for policy responsibility are not just a function of attitudes about the particular level of government at issue, but also related to assessments of other levels of government. In this particular case, a positive assessment of state government is associated with less of a preference for local government responsibility, all else equal.

[Table 4 about here]

Political orientation is again strongly associated with environmental policy responsibility preferences. As anticipated, ideological conservatives are more likely to express a preference for local and state government, and less likely to indicate a desire for federal government. The negative relationship between conservatives and the federal government is particularly pronounced; moving one point on the ideology scale toward conservative is associated with one less time the federal government was preferred to handle the environmental problems. In addition to ideology, there remain party effects. Self-identifying Republicans were more likely to express a preference for local government, and less likely to indicate a desire for federal government. The size of the negative coefficient on the Republican variable is particularly large in the federal government model.¹² Again, the political context measures are not statistically significant predictors of policy assignment preferences.

An additional point regarding political orientation is important to note. The political orientation variables also account for the large difference in the amount of variation explained in the federal government model, compared to that of the local and state government models. Political ideology and party identification explain about 23% of the variation in the federal government

responses, compared to just 3% in the other models. A likely reason for the additional explanatory power in the federal choice model is that political ideology and party identification have stronger meanings for individuals when thinking about the federal government.

The demographic control variables suggest similar relationships as before. As an individual's education level increases, so too did the number of times (s)he expressed a preference for the federal government. Education was also negatively associated with preferences for assigning responsibility to local and state governments. Men and older individuals were more likely to favor the federal government, while women on average preferred local government. Last, people living in urban areas selected local government more frequently.

CONCLUSION

The literature examining public attitudes on governmental policy assignment is small, and has tended to focus on understanding individuals preferences' toward broad policy areas. The principal take-away lesson from this analysis of environmental policy responsibility is that people's attitudes are issue-dependent. Similar to the conclusion reached by Cantril and Cantril (1989) in the context of education policy, studying citizen attitudes on responsibility for broadly characterized policy areas may disguise important nuances. The public prefers that the federal government have primary responsibility for most environmental issues, particularly those that relate to pollution and those that have a national or global reach. Given the relatively low regard in which much of the public holds the federal government, this is a noteworthy finding in itself. The public does, however, prefer to give more responsibility to state and local governments when it comes to local-level issues. Collectively, these results suggest a desire among at least some in the public to match governmental policy assignment with the geographic scale of the problem.

Regression analysis indicates that the best individual-level predictors of preferences about policy responsibility are an individual's political orientation and education level. Ideological conservatives and Republicans are on average more likely to desire a more active role for state and local governments. By contrast, individuals with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to prefer that the federal government has the lead role. These relationships were consistent across the twelve environmental issues asked on the survey, indicating that they are not specific to issue type or the geographical scale of the issue. The strong relationship between political orientation and assignment of policy responsibility found here is consistent with previous work studying broad policy areas (Schneider and Jacoby 2003, 2008; Cole and Kincaid 2006; Maestas et al. 2008; Roeder 1994). Moreover, these core political attitudes outweigh political context – that is, there is not an additional effect of being represented politically by your party, at least at the state level. There is also some evidence that an individual's general confidence in each level of government is related to their specific preferences for assigning environmental policy responsibility, a finding in line with past research (Arceneaux 2005; Kam and Mikos 2007; Schneider and Jacoby 2003, 2008). The effects of confidence in government, however, vary across issues, and generally are less consistent than is the case for political orientation and education.

The research design of the survey attests to the utility of studying a specific issue in detail. However, the design of the survey did not enable an examination of two potentially important dimensions of attitudes on environmental policy responsibility. First, the survey questions did not allow individuals to specify a preference for intergovernmental responsibility, which some work has shown to be important (Thompson and Elling 1999). The low percentage of the respondents skipping the policy responsibility questions (1 to 2 percent across the twelve questions) may somewhat mitigate concerns that people were forced to give an insincere response, but we cannot

rule out the possibility that individuals prefer an intergovernmental approach to addressing environmental problems. Second, the survey did not specifically ask about public attitudes toward devolution of authority from the federal government to state and/or local governments (Roeder 1994; Thompson and Elling 1999), and there is not a direct way to infer from the survey responses preferences for decentralizing authority. Some evidence suggesting only weak preferences for devolution is that large majorities of the respondents expressed a desire for the federal government to take the lead in dealing with many national- and global-level problems, which are currently under its purview. Regardless, future research should more directly measure and explain public attitudes toward intergovernmental responsibility and devolution due to their importance in discussions about policy within the U.S. federalist system of government.

Debates about the appropriate allocation of power among the U.S. federal, state, and local governments remain central to many policy areas, not just environmental protection and natural resource management. While elected officials do at times frame policy solutions in terms of assigning authority to specific levels of government, often ignored in these debates are the preferences of the citizens affected by government decisions. Yet, in a well-functioning representative system, the translation of the public will into public decision-making is critical for establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of government policy. And, establishing legitimacy may go beyond simply establishing (or, working to improve) general feelings of trust and/or confidence in government institutions or gaining general approval for government performance. Citizens may have specific preferences about which level of government they want in charge of various public tasks, as shown to be the case for environmental policy responsibilities here. As governments across the U.S. federal system take on new policy problems and revisit long-time challenges, public

decision-makers are well-advised to bear in mind the preferences of the public so as to avoid undermining the legitimacy of their policy solutions.

More generally, studying citizens' views about the allocation of policy responsibility across the federalist system informs our understanding of how people relate to different levels of government. Although in the aggregate, individuals tend to express more confidence in lower levels of government, this does not necessarily mean that they think these levels of government should have policy responsibility. A clear implication of the findings presented in this paper is that the public makes more nuanced determinations depending on the dimensions of the policy problem, suggesting that they will find one-size-fits-all government arrangements unsatisfactory. As a consequence, approval of particular policy responses may reflect, at least in part, views about which level of government should be addressing the problem.

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Table 1. Public Attitudes about Government Effort to Address Environmental Issues (Percentage)

	Thinking about <i>Environmental Issue X</i> , how much effort do you think the government should put into addressing this issue?		
	<i>More</i>	<i>About the same</i>	<i>Less</i>
<i>Local-level issues</i>			
Protecting community drinking water	71.4	25.7	2.9
Reducing urban air pollution issues like smog	64.5	27.4	8.1
Preserving natural areas near where I live	52.9	39.3	7.8
Managing urban sprawl	53.7	33.8	12.5
<i>National-level issues</i>			
Reducing pollution of the nation's rivers, lakes, and ecosystems	68.3	25.6	6.1
Reducing national air pollution problems like acid rain	59.7	28.2	12.0
Preserving national forests and other federally-protected areas	59.0	31.0	10.0
Maintaining national parks	54.3	40.6	5.2
<i>Global-level issues</i>			
Reducing emissions that contribute to global warming	61.7	20.5	17.8
Preventing damage to the earth's ozone layer	58.3	25.1	16.6
Preventing loss of the world's tropical rain forests	59.5	25.9	14.6
Protecting the world's plant and animal species from extinction	53.7	29.3	17.1

Note: Totals may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Confidence in:				
Federal government	5.89	2.37	3	14
State government	7.57	2.36	3	13
Local government	8.56	2.45	3	14
Political ideology	3.18	1.04	1	5
Republican	0.30	0.46	0	1
Other party	0.43	0.50	0	1
Same party as governor	0.29	0.45	0	1
Same party as one legislative chamber	0.39	0.49	0	1
Education	3.70	1.49	1	6
Age	49.4	13.7	19	81
Female	0.53	0.50	0	1
Minority	0.18	0.38	0	1
Urban	0.83	0.37	0	1

Table 3. Logistic Regression of Federal v. State/Local Government Choice in Assigning Environmental Policy Responsibility

	<i>Local-level issues</i>				<i>National-level issues</i>				<i>Global-level issues</i>			
	Protecting community drinking water	Reducing urban air pollution	Preserving natural areas near where I live	Managing urban sprawl	Reducing pollution of nation's rivers, lakes, ecosystems	Reducing national air pollution	Preserving national forests and other federally-protected areas	Maintaining national parks	Reducing emissions that contribute to global warming	Preventing damage to the earth's ozone layer	Preventing loss of world's tropical rain forests	Protecting the world's plant and animal species from extinction
Confidence in:												
Federal government	0.06 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.18** (0.08)	-0.08 (0.05)
State government	-0.06 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.06 (0.07)	0.06 (0.04)	0.13** (0.06)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	0.03 (0.06)	0.04 (0.07)	0.06 (0.10)	0.06 (0.06)
Local government	-0.09** (0.04)	-0.08** (0.04)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.10** (0.05)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.12* (0.07)	-0.07 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.05)
Political ideology												
Republican	-0.25** (0.10)	-0.28*** (0.09)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.38*** (0.14)	-0.34*** (0.09)	-0.74*** (0.13)	-0.54*** (0.11)	-0.30*** (0.11)	-0.76*** (0.14)	-0.63*** (0.17)	-0.32 (0.20)	-0.66*** (0.13)
Other party	-0.82*** (0.28)	-0.53** (0.25)	-0.72* (0.38)	-0.43 (0.40)	-0.48* (0.24)	0.00 (0.34)	-0.35 (0.28)	-0.17 (0.30)	-0.91*** (0.35)	-0.39 (0.43)	-0.35 (0.49)	-0.25 (0.33)
Same party as governor	-0.17 (0.29)	-0.24 (0.26)	-0.30 (0.34)	-0.35 (0.38)	-0.07 (0.26)	-0.15 (0.38)	-0.66** (0.32)	-0.19 (0.34)	-0.44 (0.39)	-0.39 (0.51)	0.31 (0.55)	-0.37 (0.39)
Same party as one legislative chamber	0.13 (0.23)	-0.14 (0.20)	-0.54* (0.32)	-0.21 (0.33)	0.33 (0.20)	0.15 (0.27)	-0.22 (0.23)	-0.35 (0.24)	-0.43 (0.28)	-0.11 (0.34)	0.15 (0.39)	-0.12 (0.27)
Education	0.43* (0.26)	-0.05 (0.22)	-0.31 (0.32)	-0.33 (0.34)	0.02 (0.21)	-0.41 (0.28)	-0.14 (0.24)	-0.06 (0.25)	0.28 (0.28)	-0.17 (0.36)	0.01 (0.41)	-0.52* (0.29)
Age	0.10* (0.06)	0.16*** (0.05)	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.09)	0.21*** (0.05)	0.22*** (0.07)	0.23*** (0.06)	0.40*** (0.07)	0.17** (0.08)	0.29*** (0.10)	0.29** (0.12)	0.26*** (0.08)
Female	0.02** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Minority	0.00 (0.17)	0.07 (0.15)	0.05 (0.22)	0.01 (0.24)	-0.07 (0.15)	-0.38* (0.20)	-0.22 (0.17)	-0.70*** (0.19)	-0.39* (0.21)	0.02 (0.26)	-0.68** (0.34)	-0.19 (0.21)
Urban	0.33 (0.22)	-0.17 (0.20)	0.49* (0.27)	0.28 (0.31)	0.06 (0.20)	0.02 (0.30)	-0.51** (0.23)	-0.51** (0.24)	-0.07 (0.30)	-0.13 (0.38)	-1.25*** (0.41)	-0.35 (0.29)
Intercept	-0.41* (0.24)	0.26 (0.22)	-0.21 (0.30)	-0.61** (0.31)	0.24 (0.21)	0.15 (0.26)	-0.26 (0.23)	-0.42 (0.27)	-0.46 (0.29)	-0.09 (0.35)	0.42 (0.42)	-0.23 (0.28)
Observations	-0.39 (0.69)	0.57 (0.61)	-0.93 (0.86)	-0.28 (0.95)	-0.24 (0.61)	3.12*** (0.86)	2.58*** (0.70)	0.30 (0.76)	3.91*** (0.90)	4.14*** (1.14)	4.06*** (1.38)	3.73*** (0.89)
LL	872	842	840	797	860	795	853	863	734	739	680	723
χ^2	-441.6	-543.3	-313.1	-261.7	-542.5	-329.5	-449.1	-382.0	-312.3	-217.7	-149.3	-307.5
% Correctly predicted	58.3***	59.8***	22.2*	22.0	84.3***	90.2***	77.8***	95.3***	105.0***	50.0***	43.2***	81.2***

Note: Coefficients are from logistic regressions with standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 4. OLS Regression on Number of Times Choosing Local, State, or Federal Government

	Local Government	State Government	Federal Government
Confidence in:			
Federal government	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)
State government	-0.10*** (0.03)	0.09** (0.04)	0.11** (0.05)
Local government	0.11*** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)
Political ideology			
Republican	0.16** (0.06)	0.25*** (0.09)	-1.06*** (0.11)
Other party	0.35** (0.15)	0.26 (0.24)	-1.25*** (0.29)
Same party as governor	0.28 (0.17)	0.03 (0.23)	-0.60** (0.31)
Same party as one legislative chamber	-0.08 (0.14)	0.11 (0.19)	-0.21 (0.24)
Same party as one legislative chamber	0.05 (0.16)	0.03 (0.20)	-0.11 (0.25)
Education	-0.09** (0.04)	-0.16*** (0.05)	0.31*** (0.06)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
Female	0.18* (0.10)	0.01 (0.14)	-0.37** (0.18)
Minority	0.21 (0.13)	-0.17 (0.20)	-0.34 (0.25)
Urban	0.26* (0.14)	-0.12 (0.22)	-0.14 (0.27)
Intercept	0.35 (0.42)	2.89*** (0.58)	8.56*** (0.76)
Observations	894	894	894
R ²	0.07	0.07	0.26

Coefficients are from OLS regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

NOTES

¹ Most of the environmental statutes passed in this period were partially preemptive. States were invited to implement the federal laws as long as they put in place programs with at least equally as stringent pollution control requirements. Most states have chosen to seek “primacy” from the federal government, and functionally carry out the federal programs under the supervision of the EPA.

² The General Social Survey, for example, often includes a question asking the public whether the federal government is spending too little, about the right amount, or too much money on improving and protecting the environment.

³ One downside to using such a general question phrasing is that individuals may have different ideas about what is meant by “more effort.” For some respondents this might mean more spending, for others more regulation, and, still for others, a different kind of policy response.

⁴ There is distinct but related literature that examines how the public attributes responsibility for policy outcomes in areas such as economic performance (Rudolph 2003; Cutler 2004; Gomez and Wilson 2001), fiscal outcomes (Rudolph 2008), and disaster response (Arceneaux and Stein 2006; Gomez and Wilson 2008; Maestas et al. 2008).

⁵ The twelve issues were asked in a random order to minimize bias from question ordering effects.

⁶ The ACIR data studied by Conlan (1993) and Thompson and Elling (1999) did include a no government response option, as well as an option to respond all levels of government.

⁷ Schneider and Jacoby (2003, 2008) make the same distinction in their work on policy responsibility. I also estimated multinomial logistic models with substantively similar results. These and all other results discussed but not reported are available from the author upon request.

⁸ The trust question was worded as follows: “Next, I am going to ask you about how much you trust different levels of government. How much of the time do you think you can trust each level

government?” The responsiveness question read: “Next, we’d like to ask you about the responsiveness of different levels of government. Please respond whether you agree or disagree, strongly agree or strongly disagree, or neither agree nor disagree about whether each level of government is responsive to public opinion.” Last, the approval question was worded: “Next, I’d like to ask you about whether you approve or disapprove of the job that different levels of government are doing. Would you say you strongly approve, approve, neither approve nor disapprove, somewhat disapprove, or strongly disapprove in the job that your local government, state government, and the federal government is doing?”

⁹ A Cronbach alpha of .75 suggests that the items fit together reasonably well on a single scale.

¹⁰ Although there are lower-level geo-identifiers in the CCES data (i.e., county, zip code), the political context variables are not easily identifiable at levels lower than the state.

¹¹ As a check on the robustness of these models, I also estimated Poisson regression models since the data are counts. The results were substantively the same.

¹² It is possible that these results are time-specific, reflecting a relationship between political orientation and assessments of the Bush Administration specifically, rather than the federal government in general. When re-estimating the model including an individual’s response to a presidential approval question, the magnitude of the coefficient on ideology decreases and the coefficient on the Republican indicator variable is no longer statistically significant. In addition, an individual’s general level of confidence in the federal government is positively associated with the number of times that the respondent chose the federal government.