When Mass Opinion Goes to the Ballot Box: A National Assessment of State Level Issue Opinion and Ballot Initiative Results

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Important recent work on disconnect between elites and voters on public policy preferences (Broockman & Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger & Stokes 2018)

"Public opinion is those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" -- V.O. Key

Desire to explore the external validity of survey-based estimates of public opinion on issues
Data on all contested ballot initiatives from 1958 to 2020 gathered from:

- Ballotpedia
- Michigan State University’s IPPSR’s compilation of National Conference of State Legislatures’ (NCSL) “Ballot Measures Database”
Data from all national surveys with issue questions we could reasonably match wording for to ballot initiatives

Sources:
- Roper Center (e.g., Gallup, CBS/NY Times, Pew, etc.)
- American National Election Studies
- Cooperative Congressional Election Studies
- Nationscape
Downscaled opinion to state-level using dynamic MRP models:

- **Dynamic MRP model:**
  - Individual-level predictors: Urbanity, race, gender, education
  - State-level predictors: Economic and cultural ideology of state publics (Caughey & Warshaw 2018)
  - Dynamic linear model (DLM) to pool information overtime
- Estimated via dgmrp function in \texttt{dgo} package in R

National means in dynamic MRP model closely track trends in national surveys.
Ex: Public opinion on same-sex marriage
The resulting dataset contains information on ~200 issue polling and ballot initiatives pairs across 11 “topic areas” over the last 60 years, merged with other metadata.

Examples: abortion, marijuana, minimum wage, same-sex marriage, guns, etc.
When you ask Americans in a poll whether they support universal background checks for gun purchases, huge majorities say yes. Ask them for a specific vote for such a legal change, and that support drops off.

In recent years, there have been three true tests of this question. In Washington State and Nevada, voters said yes. In Maine, they said no. Ballot measures in all three earned a much smaller vote share than the initial polling suggested.

The results illustrate the political challenges facing the student-led activists who are marching in Washington and other cities this weekend to push for stronger gun laws.

While a wide range of gun control laws appear popular in polls, support may soften once details emerge and they’re subjected to a robust political debate. In survey after survey, background checks are the most popular gun control measure, with support frequently over 80 percent. A recent Quinnipiac poll, taken after the deadly shootings last month at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Fla., had support at 97 percent. Background checks are popular among Democrats and Republicans, gun owners and those without guns.
MRP estimate of support for background checks in Nevada in 2016: **86%**

"On the issue of gun regulation, do you support or oppose background checks for all sales, including at gun shows and over the Internet?" (CCES, 2016)

Vote share Question 1 received at the ballot box in Nevada in 2016: **50.4%**

"Shall Chapter 202 of the Nevada Revised Statutes be amended to prohibit, except in certain circumstances, a person from selling or transferring a firearm to another person unless a federally-licensed dealer first conducts a federal background check on the potential buyer or transferee?"
Correlation between public opinion and ballot initiative results
Mean Absolute Error (MAE)
Bias
Analysis of residual differences between public opinion and initiative outcomes
Descriptive Results
Polls are positively correlated with initiative results ($r = 0.6$).
MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs. Initiative Results

- **Abortion**
  - Corr. = 0.5
  - Bias = -0.16
  - MAE = 0.17

- **Assisted Suicide**
  - Corr. = 0.56
  - Bias = 0.14
  - MAE = 0.14

- **Civil Rights**
  - Corr. = 0.69
  - Bias = 0.23
  - MAE = 0.23

- **Death Penalty**
  - Corr. = 0.67
  - Bias = -0.06
  - MAE = 0.08

- **Education**
  - Corr. = 0.6
  - Bias = -0.22
  - MAE = 0.22

- **Guns**
  - Corr. = 0.6
  - Bias = 0.22
  - MAE = 0.22

- **Labor and Unions**
  - Corr. = -0.04
  - Bias = -0.17
  - MAE = 0.27

- **Marijuana**
  - Corr. = 0.56
  - Bias = 0.13
  - MAE = 0.16

- **Marriage and Family**
  - Corr. = 0.66
  - Bias = 0
  - MAE = 0.05

- **Minimum Wage**
  - Corr. = -0.18
  - Bias = 0.09
  - MAE = 0.1

- **Smoking**
  - Corr. = 0.28
  - Bias = -0.07
  - MAE = 0.11

Dir. of Change in Status Quo: Conservative, Liberal, Neither.
### Regression Results

**Dependent variable:** Ballot Initiative Result (% Liberal)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Opinion (% Lib)</td>
<td>0.488***</td>
<td>0.469***</td>
<td>0.473***</td>
<td>0.397***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
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<td>Initiative shifts SQ in Lib Direction</td>
<td>−0.025</td>
<td>−0.031</td>
<td>−0.039</td>
<td>−0.064**</td>
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<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>(0.026)</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
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<td>Opinion Question in Lib Direction</td>
<td>−0.095***</td>
<td>−0.054</td>
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<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.327***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
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- **Topic FE:** X X X X
- **State FE:** X X X
- **Year FE:** X

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<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
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<td>R²</td>
<td>0.420</td>
<td>0.585</td>
<td>0.715</td>
<td>0.824</td>
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<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.408</td>
<td>0.541</td>
<td>0.593</td>
<td>0.647</td>
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Catalist

More popular policies underperform; less popular overperform

MRP Issue Opinion Estimates vs. Initiative Results (Diffs)

Dir. of Change in Status Quo: Conservative (Red) Liberal (Blue) Neither (Green)

GW

Vanderbilt University
Errors are larger when opinion is **more** liberal or conservative.
There is a modest relationship between issue polling and ballot initiative results overall and within topic, although the strength of relationship varies across topics.

The bias seems to be similar for all ballot initiatives in a particular topic.
Due to the important and under-explored status quo bias in public opinion as well as initiative voting (Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz 2018), we see bigger discrepancies when:

(1) opinion is lopsided in one direction and

(2) the initiative attempts to change policy in that direction
Strong (though not perfect) correlation between public opinion in polls and ballot initiative results

No global bias in initiatives vis-a-vis polls

Suggestive evidence that error/bias in relationship between initiatives and polls driven by:

- Orientation of polling question
- Change in the direction of status quo in initiative
Next steps

- Expand universe of ballot initiatives matched to public opinion
- Explore features of electoral context that may drive errors
- Examine role of TV ads and initiative spending
  - Limited evidence from field experiments that ballot initiative persuasion effects are larger than in other contexts (Broockman & Kalla 2017)
Appendix
Ballot measures don’t tell us anything about what voters really want

With unlimited spending and little organized opposition, they’re nothing like other elections.
Suggestive evidence for bigger errors recently