The Effects of Institutional Design on State Supreme Court Ideologies

NAME

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Introduction

Institutional arrangements for the 52 state supreme courts vary from direct elections to gubernatorial appointments to so called "merit" plans that lie somewhere in between. A novel measurement of judicial ideology, the State Court Ideals Point (SCIP) score was compared with the Berry et al. state citizen ideology score to obtain a new metric: the ideological deviation between a state court and its respective citizen ideology.

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Measures of Ideology

Citizen Ideology:

Berry et al. score

- Based on interest group rankings of members of Congress, election results for congressional races, and party affiliations

Judicial Ideology:

PAJID (Party Adjusted Surrogate Judge Ideology)

- Based on party affiliation of judge, then adjusted by method of selection with either citizen or elite ideology
- Makes the assumption that elected judges are aligned to citizen ideology while appointed courts are less so
- Methodologically limited in terms of analyzing preference change over time

New Measure of Judicial Ideology

State Court Ideal Point (SCIP) Score

- Based on Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers (2004) methodology
- Created by Hudak and Lukasik (2007)
- Has the advantage of using how judges actually voted in cases to estimate their ideological position
- Results based on 1995-1998

Selection Method Overview

State Supreme Court Justices in the United States are selected in one of three ways:

Elections:

These can be either partisan or non-partisan and are very similar to elections for any other office, with eligible citizens voting for a justice.

Appointment:

In states with appointed justices, an already elected official like a governor or state House of Representatives chooses the Justices.

Merit Plan/Missouri Plan

In a "merit plan" system, justices are selected by a hybrid system that usually contains nomination by a panel, initial appointment by a governor, and a retention election after a few years.

Conclusions:

(1) A confirmation that elected state courts have the lowest rate of deviation from citizen ideology.
(2) States with elected judiciaries had a statistically significant lower amount of deviation than did those states with merit plans
(3) Elected courts and appointed courts were indistinguishable from each other in terms of citizen/court ideological deviation.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Washington University Office of Undergraduate Research, the Center for New Institutional Social Sciences, Professors Itai Sened and Murray Weidenbaum, John Hudak, Jenna Lukasik, and the participants in the CNISS seminar series. Their support and advice made this project possible.

State Court Deviations

Elected Courts

Merit Plan Courts

Appointed Courts

Each bar indicates the ideological difference between state citizen ideology and state court ideology in absolute terms: Abs(Berry et al. – SCIP)