A Note on the Endogeneity of Ideological Placements of Government Institutions*

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By

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For a long time, the NES has asked respondents to place themselves, the political parties, and selected politicians on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale. With the exception of the president, however, survey respondents have not been asked to provide placements of government institutions, that is, until the 1997 Pilot Study. There, the NES asked respondents to place the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court (and government policy itself) on a seven-point ideological scale. In a Pilot Study Report on these items, Carman and Wlezien (1998) found these placements to be quite meaningful: Respondents were likely to place the three government institutions and policy on the ideological scale, the distribution of means is sensible, and the placements are related in understandable ways. They also showed that measures of self-institution ideological distance nicely predict judgments of each government institution.

However, Carman and Wlezien did not explicitly consider the possibility that ideological placements of government institutions are themselves endogenous to political judgments, i.e., that approval of an institution actually structures individuals' placements of the institution. This is of obvious importance and has been recognized for some time (Markus and Converse, 1979), even though it has been ignored in much academic research. In this report, I attempt to address the endogeneity of the placements of the government institutions, at least to some extent. I do not do so in the usual way—by specifying structural equations models of ideological placements and political judgments—and rely instead on a straightforward and very basic technique. Specifically, I estimate the effects of two different components of self-institution distance—a clearly exogenous component that captures distance from the mean institutional placement and the potentially endogenous, residual component—on judgments of the institutions. Although the

1

pattern of results cannot tell us whether institutional placements are exogenous, they can tell us whether they are endogenous, at least under certain circumstances.

A Simple Model of Ideological Placements and Political Judgments

There is a long-standing tradition in political science that conceives of and models political judgments in terms of issue distance. Beginning with Downs (1957), a stream of scholars have relied on the classic spatial model, which posits that an individual's utility is greatest for candidates or parties closest to their own issue positions (see, e.g., Alvarez 1997; Enelow and Hinich 1984; 1989; Enelow, Hinich, and Mendell 1986; Erikson and Romero 1990; Jackson 1975; Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby 1982; Rivers 1988). For any one particular political actor and a single issue dimension, the model is straightforward.[1] Each individual's utility (U_i) for the political actor, say the president, is a simple function of the absolute distance between each individual's position (S_i) and the president's position (I):

$$(1) \qquad U_i = a_o + \hat{a} \, |S_i - I| + u_i,$$

where a_o represents the intercept and u_i is a normally distributed disturbance term that captures other non-issue sources of utility for the president. As is clear in the equation, the effect ($\hat{a}$) of distance is expected to be negative, so that the greater (smaller) the distance between the individual's position and the president's position, the lower (higher) the utility for the president.[2]

We might conceive of the effects of broad ideological distance in much the same way. That is, the evaluation of a political actor is a function of the distance between one's liberal-

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[1] The term "political actor" is used to refer to any of a broad range of individual and institutional actors, e.g., candidates, parties, and government institutions.

conservative self-placement and the liberal-conservative placement of the actor. There is good

reason to suppose that this unidimensional model oversimplifies reality, however. We already

know that the meaning of ideological labels varies across individuals (Converse, 1964; Knight

1999): For some individuals, ideology reflects issue-based concerns; for other individuals, it

reflects group-related ones; for yet others still, ideology reflects more transitory factors.[3] Of

course, the weights (or salience) that individuals place on different issues or groups also can

vary. The main point is that individuals may rely on a variety of different dimensions when

placing themselves or political actors on a broad liberal-conservative continuum. For example,

we can conceive of an individual's own position on this continuum as $Ób_{ij} S_{ij}$, which is the sum

of placements on dimensions j weighted by the salience (b_{ij}) of the different dimensions. Note

that the sum of the weights for each individual equals 1.0. Likewise, we can conceive of the

position of the political actor as $Ób_{ij} I_j$. Thus, from this perspective, the institutional placement

varies meaningfully across individuals due to the different weights they attach to different

dimensions. This is of obvious importance. Substituting into equation 1 produces the following

equation:

$$(2) \qquad U_i = a_o + â\,|S_i - I_i| + u_i,$$

where I_i represents each individual's ideological placement of the institutional actor. The only

difference from equation 1 is that the institutional placement varies across individuals. Of

course, the model only captures distance broadly defined, the equivalent of the *net effect* of

distance across different underlying dimensions. In effect, political judgments are a function of

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[2] Scholars typically assume that the effects are not linear and instead take the form of quadratic loss, which simply involves squaring the distance term in equation 1.

the distance between the weighted sums of placements on the dimensions, not the weighted sum

of distance between these placements. The ideological distance model thus is very general. This

is by definition.[4]

Now, the model presumes that the measures of ideological distance are exogenous, i.e.,

that distance is not caused by judgments of the institutions themselves. There is good reason to

think that perceived ideological distance is not exogenous, and that individuals' placements of an

institution—given their own self-placements—reflect approval of the institution (see Markus and

Converse 1979). Specifically, we might expect that the more (less) an individual approves of an

institution, the closer (further) the individual places the institution to (from) oneself. From this

perspective, the placement of an institution is as follows:

(3) $\quad I_i = a_o + \hat{a} \, (S_i - \bar{I}) \, U_i + e_i,$

where $\bar{I}$ represents the mean location of the institution and $-1 \leq U_i \leq 1$ and $\hat{a}$ is greater than 0.[5]

This may be true despite Carman and Wlezien's (1998) diagnostic analyses, which show that

respondents' institutional placements add up quite nicely, though imperfectly, in placements of

policy and thus seem to capture meaningful information about institutional behavior. Indeed,

Carman and Wlezien actually provide strong evidence of "contrast" effects (King 1977;

Granberg 1985), where institutional placements are negatively-related to self-placement, as

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[3] Also see Brady and Sniderman (1985) and Miller, Wlezien, and Hildreth (1991).

[4] In practice, the model only offers a baseline estimate of the effects of distance across issues and other non-issue dimensions. It conceals effects when the direction of distance varies across dimensions, that is, when individuals place an institution to the left of self-placements on some dimensions and to the right on others. In effect, distances on the different dimensions cancel out.

[5] If institutional placements are perfectly endogenous, $\hat{a}$ would be equal to 1 and the intercept would be equal to $\bar{I}$.

endogeneity would imply.[6] Whether placements directly reflect political judgments themselves still is not clear based on these analyses. The possibility that they do seriously complicates the analysis of political judgments. It ultimately may be that ideological distance does not cause but is instead caused by respondents' judgments of the institutions.

Disentangling (Some of) The Endogeneity

How can we tell whether one or the other model in equations 2 and 3 (or both) is at work? Given the potential endogeneity, estimating either equation tells us absolutely nothing. One way to proceed is to estimate a simultaneous equations model of ideological distance and political judgments. This is a logical course to take, but not entirely straightforward (see, e.g., Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997; Evans and Andersen, 2001). The problem centers on model identification, both structural and empirical. What is the underlying structural model? Does it allow us to proceed to estimation? Can we identify appropriate exogenous instruments? It is difficult to answer these questions in a satisfactory way, which is important. After all, the assumptions one makes tutor the results one gets.

It is tempting to avoid the issue altogether by using the mean institutional placement in measures of distance. Since the mean placement is exogenous, measures of self-institution distance also are exogenous. Political judgments of an institution then can be modeled as a function of the absolute distance between one's self-placement and the mean placement of the institution. The approach is fairly standard in analyses of issue distance and presidential judgments (see, e.g., Alvarez 1997) and surely would offer insight into the effect of ideological distance, as Wlezien and Carman (2001) have already shown. The approach still is limited: It

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[6] Put directly, the more conservative (liberal) one's self-placement, the more liberal (conservative) one's placements

assumes that all differences in individuals' institutional placements are endogenous. The

approach nevertheless does provide useful information, that is, when compared with analyses

using the original measures of perceived distance.

Consider that perceived distance is the sum of: (1) the clearly exogenous component that

measures the distance between self-placements and the mean institutional placement ($|S_i - \bar{I}|$);

and (2) the potentially endogenous component that measures the residual distance owing to

differences in individuals' placements of the institution ($|S_i - I_i| - |S_i - \bar{I}|$).[7] The residual

component strictly reflects differences in individuals' institutional placements only when

S_i is not between I_i and $\bar{I}$. If $I_i \leq S_i \leq \bar{I}$ or $\bar{I} \leq S_i \leq I_i$, the residual tells us little about

the respondents' placements of an *institution* relative to the mean placement (and their own self-

placements). For expository purposes, let me put aside these cases.[8]

Now, we are interested in whether the second, residual component is exogenous or

endogenous. How can we tell? It is possible to glean some information by including both

components into models of institutional judgments and comparing the two coefficients.

Specifically, we can estimate the following equation:

$$(4) \qquad U_i = a_o + \hat{a}_1 |S_i - \bar{I}| + \hat{a}_2 [|S_i - I_i| - |S_i - \bar{I}|] + u_i,$$

where $\hat{a}_1$ and $\hat{a}_2$ are assumed to be less than or equal to 0. We are interested in the relative size of

these two coefficients. Specifically, we want to know whether $\hat{a}_1$ is smaller than $\hat{a}_2$ in absolute

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of the institutions.

[7] The residual component thus can take both positive and negative values.

[8] If we are interested in the endogeneity of ideological *distance* per se, then it would make sense to include the cases.

terms. Such a pattern would be strong evidence of endogeneity: There is no other reason to expect residual distance to matter more than the clearly exogenous component.[9]

We obviously are interested in those cases where $\hat{a}_2$ is significantly different from 0—where perceived distance predicts political evaluations. Now, if the coefficient ($\hat{a}_1$) for the exogenous component is not statistically significant, we can safely conclude that ideological distance does not matter for political judgments. Indeed, we can conclude that political judgments actually cause individuals' placements of the institution, i.e., that the placements are endogenous. Recall that there is no other reason to expect such a pattern. If $\hat{a}_1$ is significant, conversely, we can conclude that ideological distance does structure political judgments. Then what matters is the relative size of the two coefficients. In the extreme, $\hat{a}_1$ and $\hat{a}_2$ are equal. Here we might suppose that perceived distance causes political judgments. Such a pattern would only be suggestive, however: It could be that the evident effect of the residual component ultimately reflects endogeneity in institutional placements that happens to exactly match the real effect of exogenous distance. We still could conclude that directly estimating the effect of perceived ideological distance would make little difference—the estimated effect would not be an artifact of endogenous institutional placements.[10] The strategy thus is limited, for it cannot tell us whether respondents' placements are exogenous. It nevertheless can tell us whether they are endogenous. Let us see how it works in practice.

Following Carman and Wlezien (1998), the dependent variables are the respondents'

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[9] The approach is equivalent to estimating the separate effects of perceived ideological distance and exogenous distance in the same model.

[10] In the middling case, $\hat{a}_1$ is less than 0 but significantly different from $\hat{a}_2$. Here we can conclude that institutional placements are *at least* partly endogenous, that is, proportionate to the difference between the two coefficients.

thermometer evaluations of the government institutions.[11] For each institution, the institutional

thermometer rating is regressed on the two components of perceived distance. To be absolutely

clear, the "exogenous" component represents the absolute value of the distance between

individuals' self-placements and the mean placement of the corresponding institution.[12] The

"residual" component is the difference between perceived distance and the exogenous

component itself. Recall that the coefficients are expected to be negative, so that the larger

(smaller) the distance the lower (higher) the evaluation of an institution. Also recall that, in

order to isolate the differences in individuals' institutional placements, we must exclude those

cases where I_i S_i $\overline{I}$ and $\overline{I}$ S_i I_i. The frequency of these orderings varies across

institutions, which itself is suggestive: For the president, it occurs in 50 of 363 cases; for the

Congress, 36 of 363 cases; for the Supreme Court, 23 of 357 cases. The results of analyses

excluding these cases for the three institutions are shown in Table 1. (Results including the cases

are shown in Table A1.)

– Table 1 about here –

It is clear in the table that the effects of the two components differ quite dramatically

across institutions. We can see in the second row that the coefficient for residual distance is

appropriately negatively-signed and statistically significant for each of the institutions. This is as

expected, though notice that its size (in absolute terms) and significance do decline as we turn

from the president to the Congress and then the Supreme Court. The effect of exogenous

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[11] Also following Carman and Wlezien, the thermometers were adjusted using each respondent's average thermometer evaluation of seven groups: blacks, whites, labor unions, big business, people on welfare, gays and lesbians, and Christian fundamentalists. Specifically, the respondent's average rating of these seven groups was subtracted from the respondent's thermometer rating of each of the institutional thermometers. This adjustment helps account for any positivity bias, though it makes little difference in the analyses.

[12] Using the median institutional placements makes little difference.

distance exhibits a different pattern. The coefficient is largest and most significant for the

president, smaller and less significant for Congress, and very small and insignificant for the

Supreme Court. The relative effect of exogenous distance also declines across the institutions:

That is, the ratio between the coefficients for the exogenous and residual components shrinks.

What do these results tell us about ideological placements of the government institutions?

To begin with, they indicate that individuals' placements of the Supreme Court are endogenous,

i.e., that they do not cause political judgments but are caused by those judgments instead. Since

the coefficient for exogenous distance is not significantly different from 0, this would seem fairly

obvious.[13] For Congress, things are less clear, as the coefficient for the exogenous component is

statistically significant. We nevertheless can see that the estimated effect of residual distance on

Congressional judgments is almost twice the effect of exogenous distance. This pattern might be

taken to imply that individuals' placements of Congress are at least partly endogenous,

proportionate to the difference between the two coefficients. (As noted above, there is no other

reason to expect such a pattern.) However, the difference is not statistically significant ($F_{1,326} =$

2.23, $p = .14$), so we cannot strictly draw the conclusion based on this analysis.

For the President, things are even less clear. The coefficients for the two components of

ideological distance are virtually identical ($F_{1,313} = 0.39$, $p = .53$). There thus is no evidence that

individuals' presidential placements are endogenous. We cannot conclude that they are

exogenous, however. It may be that the effect of residual distance captures endogeneity in the

placements of the president that exactly equals the real effect of exogenous distance. All we can

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[13] Directly estimating the effects of perceived distance thus is quite deceiving (b = −2.90, s.e.=.67).

say for sure, therefore, is that directly estimating the effects of perceived ideological distance in models of political judgments will not exaggerate the real effect.[14]

– Table 2 about here –

Table 2 presents the results of more fully articulated models, containing both ideological self-placement and party identification.[15] Notice that self-placement matters only for evaluations of Congress while party identification matters only for evaluations of Clinton. Understandably, including the variables does tend to dampen the effects of both components of ideological distance, mostly for the president, but leaves the structure essentially unchanged. If anything, the patterns evident in Table 1 are more pronounced. For the Supreme Court, the effect of exogenous distance is smaller and less distinguishable from 0. For Congress, the difference between the two distance coefficients now is larger and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This result implies that Congressional placements are endogenous, *at least* in proportion to the difference between the coefficients. The two coefficients in the presidential model now also differ quite considerably, though the difference is not significant ($F_{1,308} = 3.57$, $p = .07$). We thus cannot tell whether individuals' presidential placements are endogenous (or exogenous).

It is tempting to conclude that the endogeneity of ideological placements varies across institutions, that it is most pronounced for the Supreme Court, lower for Congress, and not present at all for the president. Such a pattern would be understandable given the evident differences in the structure, function, and salience of the institutions. After all, independently attributing an ideological position would seem to depend on the ease of assigning political

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[14] The coefficient is –9.84 (s.e.=.67). For purposes of comparison, when residual distance is excluded from the model, the coefficient for exogenous distance is –10.35 (s.e.=1.13). Note that the explained variances are quite different—the adjusted R^2 is .40 and .21, respectively.

responsibility, the content of institutional behavior, and the degree to which the behavior is known. Where it is relatively easy to assign political responsibility and decisions have explicit ideological content and are relatively well-known, as for the president, we might expect ideological placements to be exogenous. For the Congress, where it is more difficult to assign political responsibility and decisions, perhaps, are less well known, we might expect placements to be less exogenous. For the Supreme Court, where decisions are even less well known and tend to have less explicit ideological content, we might expect placements to be thoroughly endogenous. These expectations nicely mirror the effect of strictly exogenous distance on political judgments of the institutions themselves; as we have seen, the effect is most pronounced for Clinton, sharply lower for Congress, and not evident at all for the Supreme Court (also see Wlezien and Carman, 2001). While tempting, we still cannot conclude based on our analyses that the endogeneity of institutional placements actually varies across institutions. All we can conclude is that placements of the Supreme Court and, to a lesser extent, Congress are structured by evaluations of the institutions. The nature of presidential placements remains unclear.

Discussion

Endogeneity in responses to survey items is of obvious importance in most political science research relying on survey data. Indeed, there is reason to think that such "contamination" is pervasive (for a recent, very general statement, see van der Eijk, 2002). Unfortunately, it is difficult to actually detect and correct for endogeneity in survey responses, at least when using cross-sectional data. The problem centers on the proper identification of

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[15] Including the usual demographic suspects has little effect. Results are available upon request. Results including cases where self placement is between the individual's institutional placement and the mean institutional placement are shown in Table A2.

11

simultaneous equations models, which is not straightforward. The assumptions one makes about the underlying structural model and choice of instruments can powerfully tutor the results one gets. However, there are other strategies available—indeed, very basic ones—that can provide us with at least some information. That is the main point of this essay.

As the foregoing analysis of political judgments reveals, simple diagnostics can offer quite useful information about possible endogeneity, at least in respondents' ideological placements of government institutions. By estimating the separate effects of the clearly exogenous component of self-institution distance and the potentially endogenous residual component, we learn quite a lot about the nature of institutional placements. We don't learn everything we want to know, as the approach is limited in a number of ways: it only can tell us whether individuals' responses are endogenous, not whether they are exogenous; it only does so under certain conditions; and, even to the extent we can determine that responses are endogeneous, it does not allow us to explicitly correct for the evident contamination. The approach nevertheless can tell us whether estimating the effect of a variable, in our case, perceived ideological distance, would be deceiving. For judgments of the Supreme Court and, to a lesser extent, the Congress, it would be quite deceiving indeed: It would suggest that ideological distance structures political judgments when it actually is true that these judgments structure individuals' placements of the institutions. This also may be the case for ideological placements of other actors, including political parties, social groups, and politicians themselves. It may be the case for issue placements of political actors as well.

Table A1: Regressions of Institutional Feeling Thermometers on Components Of Perceived Absolute Distance—All Cases				
Components of Absolute Distance		Clinton	Congress	Supreme Court
Exogenous Distance	b	-9.90*	-2.94**	-0.72
	(s.e.)	(0.93)	(0.98)	(1.07)
	[â]	[-0.44]	[-0.15]	[-0.03]
Residual Distance	b	-9.85*	-5.45*	-4.81*
	(s.e.)	(0.98)	(0.83)	(0.86)
	[â]	[-0.42]	[-0.32]	[-0.28]
Constant	b	21.44*	4.80*	10.35
	(s.e.)	(1.78)	(1.41)	(1.56)
Adjusted R²		.38	.12	.08
N		366	365	359

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

Table A2:	Regressions of Institutional Feeling Thermometers on Measures of Perceived Absolute Distance, Self-Placement, and Party Identification— All Cases			
Components of Absolute Distance		Clinton	Congress	Supreme Court
Exogenous Distance	b	-5.35*	-2.24**	0.14
	(s.e.)	(1.53)	(1.02)	(1.12)
	[â]	[-0.24]	[-0.11]	[-0.01]
Residual Distance	b	-7.59*	-5.32*	-4.93*
	(s.e.)	(0.97)	(0.83)	(0.86)
	[â]	[-0.32]	[-0.32]	[-0.29]
Self-Placement	b	-0.15	1.46**	0.84
	(s.e.)	(1.26)	(0.68)	(0.75)
	[â]	[-0.01]	[0.14]	[0.07]
Party Identification	b	-4.04*	-0.04	0.60
	(s.e.)	(0.57)	(0.42)	(0.47)
	[â]	[-0.37]	[-0.01]	[0.08]
Constant	b	30.02*	-2.15	3.44
	(s.e.)	(3.50)	(3.04)	(3.34)
Adjusted R^2		.46	.14	.09
N		363	363	357

 * $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

14

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Components of Absolute Distance		Clinton	Congress	Supreme Court
Exogenous Distance[b]	b	-9.38*	-3.31*	-1.05
	(s.e.)	(0.99)	(1.04)	(1.08)
	[â]	[-0.41]	[-0.15]	[-0.05]
Residual Distance[c]	b	-10.31*	-5.34*	-4.12*
	(s.e.)	(1.01)	(0.84)	(0.87)
	[â]	[-0.45]	[-0.32]	[-0.25]
Constant	b	20.14*	5.42*	10.60
	(s.e.)	(1.96)	(1.54)	(1.59)
Adjusted R[2]		.40	.13	.06
N		316	329	336

Table 1:   Regressions of Institutional Feeling Thermometers[a] on Components Of Perceived Absolute Distance

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

[a] To adjust for positivity bias, the Feeling Thermometers (FT) were centered using the formula:

Centered Institution FT = FT Institution - [(FT Blacks + FT Whites + FT Christian Fundamentalists + FT Gays and Lesbians + FT Labor Unions + FT Big Business + FT People on Welfare)/7].

[b] Exogenous Distance = the absolute value of the difference between self-placement and the mean institutional placement on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale.

[c] Residual Distance = Perceived Absolute Distance minus Exogenous Distance, where Perceived Absolute Distance equals the absolute value of the difference between self-placement and the individuals= perceived institutional placement on the 7-point liberal-conservative scale.

Components of Absolute Distance		Clinton	Congress	Supreme Court
Exogenous Distance	b	-4.57*	-2.45**	-0.24
	(s.e.)	(1.61)	(1.08)	(1.14)
	[â]	[-0.20]	[-0.12]	[-0.01]
Residual Distance	b	-8.11*	-5.22*	-4.25*
	(s.e.)	(1.00)	(0.83)	(0.87)
	[â]	[-0.35]	[-0.32]	[-0.26]
Self-Placement	b	-0.59	1.66**	0.91
	(s.e.)	(1.30)	(0.70)	(0.75)
	[â]	[-0.04]	[0.16]	[0.05]
Party Identification	b	-3.88*	-0.01	0.36
	(s.e.)	(0.61)	(0.45)	(0.48)
	[â]	[-0.35]	[-0.01]	[0.05]
Constant	b	29.63*	-2.45	4.39
	(s.e.)	(3.55)	(3.17)	(3.33)
Adjusted R^2		.48	.15	.07
N		313	327	334

Table 2: Regressions of Institutional Feeling Thermometers on Measures of Perceived Absolute Distance, Self-Placement, and Party Identification

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$ (two-tailed)