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Title: A Note on the Endogeneity of Ideological Placements of Government Institutions

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Abstract

In a recent NES Report, Carman and Wlezien (1998) examined the seven-point ideological placements of government institutions—the president, Congress, and the Supreme Court—and policy that were included in the 1997 Pilot Study. They found that the placements are 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 the institutional placements are themselves endogenous to political judgments, i.e., that approval of an institution actually structures individuals' ideological placements of the institution. Although they provide strong evidence of “contrast” effects, which is what endogeneity would imply, it is not clear whether placements directly reflect political judgments themselves.

Here, Wlezien considers this possible endogeneity. He outlines a simple model of ideological placements and political judgments of government institutions and then provides a basic diagnostic analysis, one that is not complicated by issues of identification and specification. Specifically, Wlezien estimates the effects of two different components of self-institution distance—a clearly exogenous component that reflects differences in self-placement and the potentially endogenous component that reflects differences in institutional placements—on judgments of the institutions. Although the pattern of results cannot tell us whether institutional placements are exogenous, they can tell us whether they are endogenous, at least under certain circumstances. The results of his analysis indicate that ideological placements of certain institutions are structured by political judgments, particularly for the Supreme Court and, to a lesser extent, the Congress. This also may be true of other liberal-conservative placements, including those of political parties, social groups, and politicians themselves. It may be the case for issue placements of political actors as well.