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## Representative Government: An Evaluation of Single-Party Dominance in the State of Arkansas

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Representative Government:  
An Evaluation of Single-Party Dominance in the State of Arkansas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Political Science

by

Kennedy Hill  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, 2020

May 2022  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation of the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

Studying the opinion-policy link in the state of Arkansas can determine if the state has had a representative governing body. The state, like many others, has a history of single-party dominance politics, and this study seeks to understand the conditions for policy congruence under one-party rule. Specifically, this research focuses on the past two decades of Arkansas politics, wherein the state's legislature experienced a partisan shift from the Democratic Party to the eventual single-party dominance of the Republicans. Using data from the Arkansas Poll and the Arkansas State Legislature to analyze multivariate OLS regression models, this study investigates factors that account for policies passed by the state legislature that are congruent with the state's public opinion. Overall, this study finds that policies were most congruent with public opinion under Democratic single-party dominance, yet where party competition remained high, influencing the party to be more accountable to its right-leaning constituents. Public policy is incongruent with public opinion under Republican years of single-party dominance, which occurs during a low competitive political environment. This indicates that single-party dominance flourishes when it has an electoral advantage, giving parties less incentive to adhere to public interests and greater political room to pass more extreme policies that do not necessarily align with what the public may want. These findings have important implications for the current state of Arkansas politics. Though Republicans may have control of both the executive and legislative branches, 2022 has the potential to be an election year that shakes up Arkansas politics as more Democratic candidates are running for office, possibly increasing the policy congruence between the state legislature and public opinion.

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## **Dedication**

To my Mema, the woman who taught me the value of education at a young age. You may be gone, but the values you instilled in me are everlasting. And to my mama, the woman who does not set the standard but *is* the standard. Your legacy continues through me.

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## Introduction

A representative governing body at the state level is crucial to democracy. Certainly, national policies are an important aspect of citizens' lives, but state policies affect the everyday lives of the mass public as state governments play a large part in America's domestic government policies (Donovan et al. 2013, 1). Scholars have contended that competitive political environments in which parties ultimately compete to maximize votes encourage a more representative government (Key 1949; Schattschneider 1942). This healthy competition is threatened when one party dominates the political landscape, diminishing competition and adversely affecting government representation, otherwise known as the phenomenon of single-party dominance. Yet, at the state level, researchers have demonstrated that one-party rule is the norm at the state level and has been for decades (Parry et al. 2022).

Single-party dominance has important implications for policy congruence in the American states. A public opinion-policy link has been established by Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1987, 1993), suggesting that government policy is responsive to public partisanship and ideology. Other scholars have found that policy is not always congruent with public opinion, especially on policy issues that do not have high public salience (Monroe 1998; Lax and Phillips 2012). Further, policy congruence varies from issue to issue, as public opinion is not consistent throughout policy areas (Norrander 2001; Brace et al. 2002). I build on this literature by exploring how well the policies produced by the Arkansas General Assembly reflect the state's public opinion from 2001 to 2021. Specifically, this research seeks to discern if single-party dominance and party competition affect policy congruence in the state of Arkansas.

This thesis begins with a brief discussion of Arkansas' political history, followed by a literature review of single-party dominance and policy congruence. Drawing from the literature,



this research develops models that explain how public opinion, single-party dominance, and policy competition affect policy congruence in Arkansas.

### **Literature Review**

#### *The Case for Arkansas*

The American states are a valuable unit of analysis in studies of state politics as their commonalities and differences allow researchers to analyze political theories by pitting states next to one another for comparison. By placing states and their phenomenon into a broader comparative context, scholars of state studies can easily identify emerging themes that are not bound by state lines. Comparative studies are essential as states' diversities and their shared similarities help explain the political process and how policies work (Jewell 1982; Donovan et al. 2013; Mooney 2001).

Nonetheless, taking a closer look at Arkansas politics by itself will yield its own fruit. Arkansas, established as a territory in 1819 and admitted to the union as a state in 1836, has been riddled with political corruption since its inception. The notorious 'Family' of Arkansas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were powerful white, elitist Democrats of the Johnson, Conway, Sevier, and Crittendon families that dominated Arkansas politics, injecting their corruption into the system while leaving citizens little hope for a responsible and representative state government (Blair and Barth 2005, 1). These political figures left a legacy in Arkansas politics that centered on their wealth wrongly gained through manipulating the state government, ultimately producing adverse effects on the political system and the electorate. Political corruption carried on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which party bosses, electoral fraud, and issueless campaigns further dissuaded voters from believing that the state government represented their interests (Blair and Barth 2005, 1).

Ironically, the state motto of Arkansas is “*Regnant Populus*,” or “the people rule” in Latin. Yet, Arkansas politics was rife with political corruption prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, producing a government concerned with lining its own pockets rather than improving its citizens’ lives. The state finally saw sweeping reform following the 1940s movements of the post-World War II era. Critical changes following WWII that ushered in an age of more honest politics in Arkansas include eliminating the poll tax, introducing voter registration, and adopting voting booths (Blair and Barth 2005, 3; Hoffman, Parry, and Reese 2019, 3). Furthermore, low voter participation, a legacy lasting to the present, results from previous issue-less campaigns and political corruption. However, the reform era brought about changes that improved voter turnout. The end of the dual primary in Arkansas, the expansion of the electorate through women’s suffrage, the Civil Rights Movement, and the end of all-white primaries, along with general socioeconomic improvements, helped to encourage greater Arkansan voter participation (Blair and Barth 2005, 3; Hoffman, Parry, and Reese 2019, 3).

Arkansas’ rich political history provides the perfect backdrop for analyzing policy congruence within her state lines. Though the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about significant change that has helped revamp Arkansas politics, state legislators still have potential to be unresponsive or unrepresentative of their constituents. Scholars have noted how competitive two-party systems are a necessity for American politics. Competitive systems make parties more accountable to the public, easily identifiable from one another, and are a critical component in maintaining a democracy (Key 1949; Schattschneider 1942; White 1992). Following this line of reasoning, political parties impact legislative government by producing policies that reflect the interests of their constituencies so that they continue to maximize votes in elections. This policy congruence is essentially the agreement between government policy and public opinion in which legislators

substantially represent the interests of their constituencies. This study considers the effect political parties can have on policy congruence at the state level. The time has come to empirically analyze Arkansas' policy congruence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Have previous political reforms in Arkansas produced a government responsive to and representative of citizens' public opinion?

### *Single-Party Dominance in Arkansas*

Though Arkansas politics has undergone significant reforms in the previous century that were meant to create a more responsible state government, Arkansas suffers from a relatively low competitive political environment. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arkansas politics were subjected to the control of the state's Democratic Party. Until recently, partisan control in the state shifted to the Republican Party, the majority party since 2015.

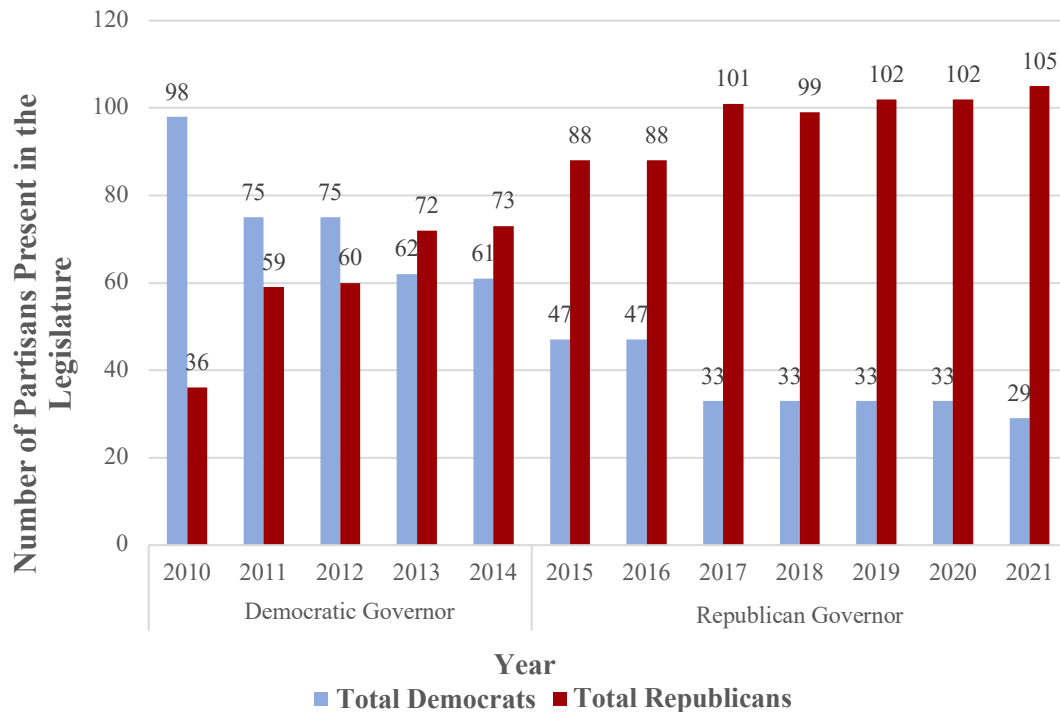
Southern Democrats dominated politics in Arkansas from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the late 1900s. Following the Reconstruction Era that witnessed an increased number of Blacks in the Arkansas General Assembly, Arkansas Democrats disenfranchised both Black and Republican voters by passing the 1891 Election Law and a poll tax amendment in 1892. Both measures complicated the voting process, kept the poor from voting, and rendered the coalition of Republican and farmer-labor parties virtually powerless (Blair and Barth 2005, 2).

It is worth bearing in mind that before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Arkansas Democrats were highly conservative (Blair and Barth 2005, 3). However, Republicans in the post-WWII era began to attract progressive Democrats and newly enfranchised Blacks into their party. Arkansas voters elected Republican Winthrop Rockefeller into the governorship of Arkansas in 1966, making him the first Republican governor of the state since Reconstruction. That same year, John Paul Hammerschmidt was elected to the U.S. House, becoming the first Republican elected

to the U.S. Congress from the state following Reconstruction. Tim Hutchinson became the first Republican U.S. Senator elected to Congress from Arkansas in 1996, a mere twenty-six years ago. Despite the handful of Republicans who were able to win elections in Arkansas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white conservatives of the Democratic Party began to shift to the Republican Party only during the latter part of the century.

Yet, Democratic Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton won the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996, receiving majority support from his home state. The start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, marked a notable change in the state's voting in presidential elections as it increasingly votes Republican. Democrats still dominated the Arkansas General Assembly and elected Democratic Governor Mike Beebe in 2006 following the end of the Republican governorship of Mike Huckabee (1996-2007). Arkansas government, from 2007 to 2012, experienced a period of unified, Democratic control. However, the 2010 mid-term elections saw a significant decline of Democrats in both chambers and an increase in Republican legislators. By the 2012 elections, Republicans took control of both the Arkansas House and Senate. The current Arkansas governor, Republican Asa Hutchinson, succeeded Mike Beebe in 2015. In sum, for the period beginning in 2001 and ending in 2021, Arkansas was singularly under the control of the Democratic Party from 2007 until 2011. Since 2015, however, the state has been under the power of the Republican Party, with a Republican governor, Asa Hutchinson, and sizable majorities in both houses of the legislature (see figure 1). This begs the question, to what extent might the current dominance of the Republican party have on the degree to which Arkansas' state elected officials listen to Arkansas' voters?

**Figure 1: Party of the Governor and Partisan Seat Composition in the Arkansas State Legislature, 2010-2021**



*Sources:* Arkansas State Legislature website, National Governors Association website

### *Single-Party Dominance and Policy-Congruence*

Single-party dominance is not unique to just Arkansas as research has shown that this type of one-party rule is typical of all American states (Parry et al. 2022). Schreckhise (2018, 9) notes that party polarization at the national level appears as two ideologically distinct parties. However, at the state level, while party polarization is occurring (Schreckhise 2018, 9), such polarization takes on a different form. Instead of two polarized yet competitive political parties at the state level, it looks like single-party dominance, in which “one party controls all (or almost all) of the major state governmental institutions” (2018, 189). Because of this, some state studies have investigated the effect single-party dominance can have on state governments and their policy responsiveness.

Furthermore, Schreckhise (2018, 9) contends that single-party dominance has the potential to render state governments less responsive to public opinion. A state government under single-party dominance is subject to a legislature that does not have to appeal to the moderates in the electorate to gain control in the legislative and executive branches. It only needs to satisfy the interests of those who share in their similar policy preferences. Thus, states under single-party dominance are less responsive to moderates and those of the opposing party. In the case of Arkansas, periods of either Republican or Democratic single-party dominance should have less policy congruence than periods of shared partisan control.

In *Statehouse Democracy*, Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) figure differently. These researchers highlight an opinion-policy link by disaggregating *New York Times* and CBS opinion polls from 1976 to 1988 to measure the average ideology of residents of each U.S. state. They determine each type of law of a state to find its ideology and compare that with the average ideology and partisanship of state residents. The researchers conclude that policy is responsive to public opinion at the state level when comparing the states to one another based on their ideologies and partisanship. Even further, Hill and Hinton-Andersson (1995) find causal evidence that at the state level, the policy process is a reciprocal relationship between elite preferences and those of the public. Specifically, greater policy congruence results from a sharing of preferences between the people and the political elite *of the same party*. Following this logic, if Arkansas were to be a conservative state as its history suggests, it could be assumed that policy responsiveness of the state government would be high. In other words, I expect that policy congruence would be greater during years of Republican party dominance than Democratic party dominance due to the tendency of Arkansans to lean more to the right of the political aisle:

H<sub>1</sub>: Public policy will be more congruent with public opinion under the single-party dominance of the Republican Party than that of the Democratic Party.

Scholars building on the work of Erickson, Wright, and McIver (1993) have also found the national government to be just as responsive to its electoral bases (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Other scholars have also investigated the link between general attitudes toward specific policies (Brace et al. 2002). These studies also disaggregate national survey data to the state level to analyze policy responsiveness to state citizens. Yet, Lax and Phillips (2012) find that state policies are less responsive than the national government. Taking a different methodological approach than Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993), Lax and Phillips analyze specific policy preferences of each state rather than relying on a state's average ideology of its residents. The researchers find that at the state level, public opinion and public policy are congruent only about half the time, mainly when certain policies are essential to the public. Monroe (1998) provides further evidence of this, arguing that although policy congruence declined in 1960 to 1970, there was still greater congruence on policy issues with high public salience. States under the control of a single party had less policy congruence when mass opinion was met with powerful interests. Lax and Phillips provide further evidence for Bawn et al.'s (2012) argument that parties are led by activists who are usually on the more extreme ideological sides of their respective political parties. They find that state legislators are more likely to vote for extreme policies while the public wants moderate legislation.

Lax and Phillips are not the only scholars who argue that public policy in the U.S. states is not representative of opinion on specific policy issues and that for a more detailed analysis of the public opinion-policy linkage at the state level, scholars should investigate the effects of particular policy opinions on policy outcomes (Norrande 2001; Brace et al. 2002). However, the

goal of this particular study is not to delve into the detailed specifics of the link, if any, between public opinion and state policy. As other research has shown, there is a significant relationship between general attitudes and public policy outcomes that should not be overlooked, and it is this research that has sparked others to seek out the complexities of this relationship (Wright, Erikson, McIver 1985; Erickson, Wright, McIver 1993; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). This study provides a starting point for the conversation of the opinion-policy link in Arkansas, to identify if there even is a relationship between the two concepts, and to detail what the relationship looks like.

As the phenomenon of single-party dominance entails one party controlling the majority or all of a government, it also reflects party competition, or the lack thereof. Studies of single-party dominance have also suggested that higher competition between political parties may lead to more liberal policymaking (Davies and Worden 2009; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993). The conventional argument is that as parties experience greater competition for votes with one another, they tend to target the marginal voters that vote in close elections and whose interests are underrepresented in the political system (Key 1949; Baumann, Nelson, and Neumann 2021). Based on this rationale, I expect that the longer the Republican Party dominates Arkansas politics, the political environment will become less competitive. During years under Democratic dominance, the state residents were (and still are) relatively conservative. Because of this, Democratic legislators still had to produce policies that were not too 'far left' to continue to be competitive for votes. However, under Republican rule, because voters already tend to lean to the right, Republicans have no viable competition from the opposing party. Thus, my final hypotheses are:



H<sub>2</sub>: As the Republican Party continues to be the only dominant party in Arkansas politics, party competition will decrease.

H<sub>2b</sub>: As party competition decreases, the state legislature will be less likely to produce policies congruent with public opinion.

I have already detailed how a low, competitive political environment is detrimental to the health of democracy, and this includes at the state level. As Downs (1957) argues that parties are pulled toward the middle of the liberal-conservative ideological continuum because they seek to maximize votes, it is reasonable to contend that parties will fall further away from the center when there is no incentive to seek out the moderate voter (Schreckhise 2018, 9).

### **Data and Methods**

This study is concerned with the degree of representative government in Arkansas in the last twenty years. I employ an initial correlation analysis of public opinion, additional government and economic variables, and public policy from 2001 to 2021 to determine the general relationship between the variables. A series of regression models then evaluate independent variables that can potentially influence the congruence between public policy produced by the state legislature and Arkansas public opinion. These analyses determine the relationship Arkansas public policy congruence has, if any, with public opinion (composed of public ideology and partisanship), party competition, governor partisanship, president partisanship, and the state's annual GDP from 2001 to 2021. A summary of all variables and their coding can be found in Appendix A.

#### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable of policy congruence is operationalized as the policy liberalism of major laws passed in the 83<sup>rd</sup> through 93<sup>rd</sup> legislative sessions of the Arkansas General

Assembly. The *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, a major news and opinions source for the state, is used to search for and code major legislation. Specific bills of those legislative sessions mentioned in the state newspaper's articles featuring session wrap-ups were deemed major, following in similar fashion to the methodology provided by Mayhew (1991). After identifying 342 major laws, those measures were then scored for their policy liberalism to determine each's ideology by analyzing the roll-call votes of each measure.

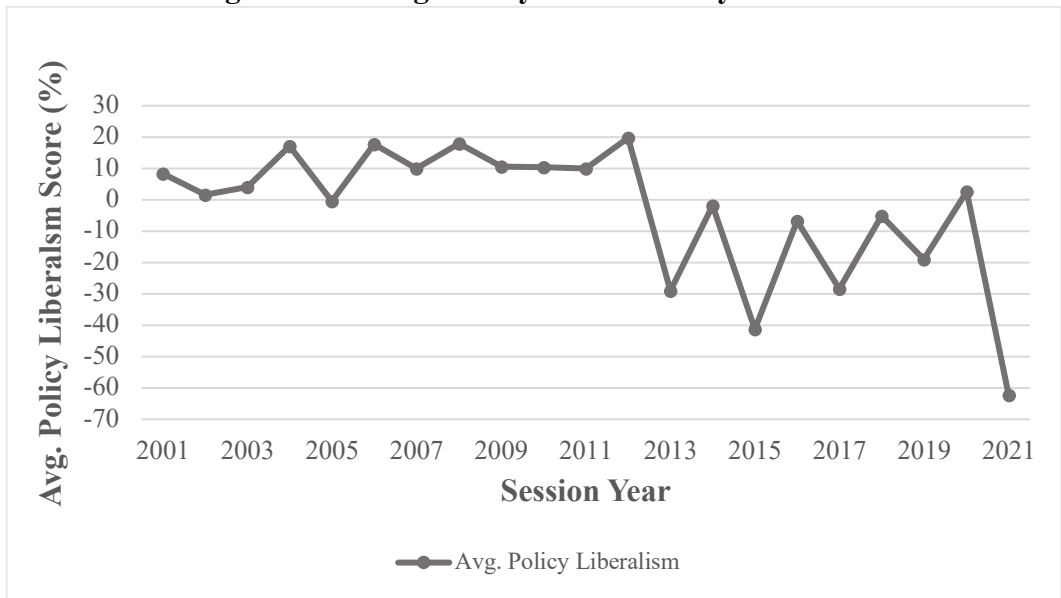
To calculate a score for the measures, I created a dataset of the partisan composition of both the House and Senate for each legislative session. The number of votes for and against each measure were recorded, categorized as the combined number of Democrats and Republicans of both legislative chambers that voted 'yea' or 'nay' for that bill. Previous studies have documented the increasing party polarization of the political elite in which top Democrats and Republicans are growing further apart from one another. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that the two major parties are becoming more ideologically distinct from one another in which Democrats have grown more liberal and Republicans more conservative (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2008; Levendusky 2009; Bawn et al. 2012; Schreckhise 2018, 3,8). The operationalization of policy congruence as the policy liberalism of major laws passed assumes that the partisans serving in the Arkansas state legislature in the years ranging from 2001 to 2021 are conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats.

The total number of Democrats who vote 'yea' on a measure is added and then divided by the total number of Democrats serving in the state legislature for a specific session, resulting in the proportion of the total amount of Democrats supporting a bill (%Dem) out of all Democrats in the legislature's chambers. The same calculations are made for Republicans, providing the total number of Republicans supporting a bill (%Rep) out of all Republicans in the

legislature. Subsequently, the Republican proportion is subtracted from the Democratic proportion (%Dem - %Rep). This final number represents the policy liberalism of a given measure with values ranging from -100 to 100. Namely, a measure receiving a score of '100' is highly liberal and indicates absolute Democratic support and no support from Republicans. Conversely, a bill with total Republican support but does not receive 'yea' votes from Democrats gets a score of -100, indicating a highly conservative measure. However, a measure receiving support from half of the proportion of Democrats and half of the proportion of Republicans would be considered moderate and receive a score of 0.

Figure 2 illustrates the average policy liberalism scores from 2001 to 2021. Again, scores greater than 0 indicate more liberal policies, less than 0 indicate conservative policies, and scores at 0 indicate moderate policies. There is a negative trend of policy liberalism of legislation passed that is gradually becoming more conservative over the years. The session years 2007 through 2012 have the highest policy liberalism scores and fall within President Obama's first few years in office and the single-party dominance of the Democrats.

**Figure 2: Average Policy Liberalism by Session Year**



Sources: Acts obtained from the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

Following 2012, policy liberalism immediately dropped into the negatives by 2013. This occurred right after the 2012 election in which Republicans took control of both the Arkansas House and Senate. It should be noted that policies passed in Arkansas during this period have not been overly liberal, as the legislature's most liberal year, 2012, had a mere percentage score of 19.76. In short, public policy during the last twenty years began as slightly liberal and has evolved to reflect more conservative tendencies.

### *Independent Variables*

Many public opinion studies measure state opinion by disaggregating national surveys to the state level, a method developed by Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993), or by simulating opinion using multilevel regression and post-stratification (Park, Gelman, and Bafumi 2006). State politics scholarship must sometimes overcome the "lack of comparable state-level survey data" (Parry, Kisida, and Langley 2008, 200). However, because this study focuses explicitly on Arkansas public opinion and is not a comparative analysis, it benefits from access to the Arkansas Poll (AP), directed by Dr. Janine Parry at the University of Arkansas. Conducted annually from 1999 to 2021, the poll offers roughly 800 phone interviews of citizens from across the state. Unlike many other polling groups, the AP team provides viewers a comparison of respondents' demographic characteristics to that of the state, offering a unique chance to determine how representative a survey's sample is to the population being studied. Arkansas Poll interview questions and subsequent responses from 2001 to 2021 are pooled into an individual dataset and concern respondents' ideology and partisanship.

Public opinion is operationalized as state citizens' self-identified ideology and partisanship. Recently, scholarship regarding state public opinion measures has debated over its most effective conceptualization and methodology. The debate between Berry et al. (1998, 2007)

and Erickson, Wright, and McIver (1993, 2007) centers on these two teams' disagreement over state ideology measures and if state ideology changes over time. Berry et al. (2007) argue that the state-citizen ideology measures of Erikson, Wright, and McIver, hereafter called EWM (1993), do not account for changes in policy at the national level that can impact state public opinion, concluding that these measures are static, disregard longitudinal variation in state-citizen ideology, and only capture symbolic ideology. EWM (1993) disaggregate national public opinion polls from the *New York Times* and CBS to the state level to create their measure of citizen ideology and argue that state ideology does not change over time.

Some scholars have argued that because Berry et al. (1998) use interest group ratings of congressional members and congressional election race outcomes to derive state ideology, this measure captures more policy mood than ideology (EWM 2007; Brace et al. 2007). Researchers have since tested both measures and have come up with slightly mixed results. Brace et al. (2004) provide confirmatory evidence of EWM's (1993) measure, finding that state ideology is more stable than changing. Yet, other researchers have found that though policy mood and symbolic ideology differ conceptually, the two do not differ much empirically (Carsey and Harden 2010).

Berry et al.'s (1998) measure is too complex and assumptive for this current study. To assume that legislators represent the preferences of their constituents is slightly naïve and is the premise of this research- does the state legislature represent its people? Electorate ideology cannot be measured under the assumption that the government produces policies representative of its people within a study that is questioning that very thing. Thus, public opinion in this study is operationalized as the percentage of respondents' self-identified ideology and partisanship. Ideology variables consist of respondents who self-identify as "Conservative" and those who

self-identify as “Moderate.” Partisanship variables account for respondents who identify as just independents (“Independent”), along with independent respondents that lean closer to the Republican Party and those who identify as Republican (“Rep/Leaner”).

Political party competition is necessary for a working democracy as it encourages both major parties to fight for the electorate’s votes. Competition among political parties mitigates the problem of single-issue politics and encourages these groups to represent a broader range of interests (Schattschneider 1942; Key 1949; Baumann, Nelson, and Neumann 2021). The dominant hypothesis throughout this literature suggests that highly competitive political systems are more likely than non-competitive systems to produce liberal policies (Key 1949; Ulsaner 1978; Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993). Two dominant measures have come about throughout the literature on party control measurements. The Ranney Index (Ranney 1976) measures the degree of two-party competition within the American states, and the Holbrook and Van Dunk (HDV) measure (Holbrook and Van Dunk 1993) is based on district-level outcomes of state legislative elections. These two measures differ conceptually as the HDV has been proven to measure electoral competition while the Ranney Index captures a party’s control of state government (Barrilleaux 1997; Shufeldt and Flavin 2012).

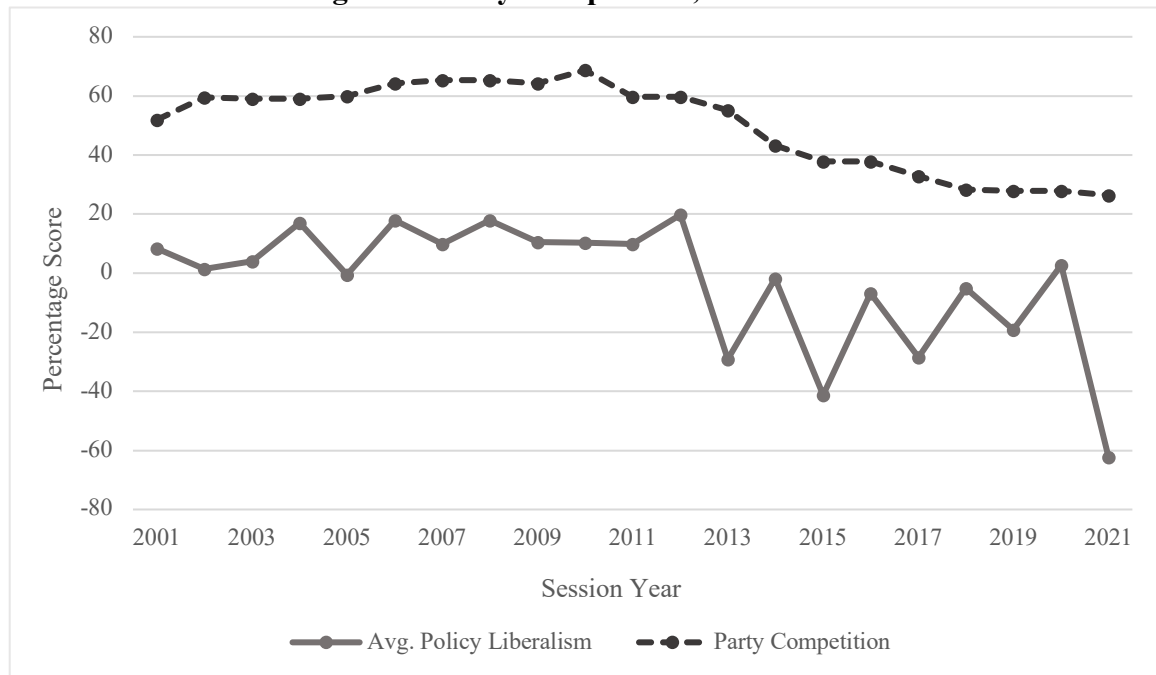
The original Ranney Index measures party competition by incorporating the proportion of state legislative seats won by the Democratic Party, the percent of the vote received by the Democratic candidate for governor, and the time percentage of Democratic control of both legislative houses (Ranney 1976). An individual score is produced by averaging these three components that consider legislative and gubernatorial elections over several years. However, many scholars have folded the Ranney Index over its midpoint to create scores for the level of competition between the parties for party control of state government (HJ Tucker 1982; King

1989; Barrilleaux 1986). Higher values produced by the folded Ranney index indicate increased party competition, while lower values signify one-party dominance (Baumann, Nelson, and Neumann 2021).

This study employs a modified version of the folded Ranney Index in which the percentage of seats won by the Democratic Party and the portion of the vote share received by the Democratic gubernatorial candidate are averaged. The portion of time Democrats control both the executive and legislative branches is dropped in this modified version because this study looks at annual data. In contrast, the original index measures party competition for periods, such as decades. Data on the percentage of seats won by the Democratic Party come from the Arkansas General Assembly's website, which lists each legislator and their political party affiliation for every session, except for 2001 to 2005. Legislators' party affiliation of those years was derived from the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, through mentions of legislators and their respective parties. Gubernatorial election results come from the Arkansas Secretary of State website.

Scores of the modified version of the folded Ranney Index are evaluated the same as those of the original folded index. Values closer to "0" indicate low party competition, while values closer to "1" indicate high party competition. Figure 3 illustrates the competitiveness of Arkansas politics. Party competition hit its peak during the 2010 midterm elections, signifying the definitive switch from Democratic leadership to Republican control in the following years. Though this line graph displays only the correlation of party competition and policy liberalism averages from 2001 to 2021, it is evident that as the political environment became less competitive, policy liberalism averages noticeably declined. Even further, this simple figure shows that parties were more competitive with one another before Republican control.

**Figure 3: Party Competition, 2001 - 2021**



*Sources: Acts obtained from the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.*

Conventional wisdom regarding the relationship between the strength of the political parties at the state level and the public policies produced argues that greater Democratic strength in the state legislature leads to more liberal policies, while increased Republican strength leads to more conservative policies (Garand 1985; Alt and Lowry 1994). The partisan composition of the state legislature (“Ledge Comp”) is derived from the Arkansas State Legislature website. This variable is operationalized as the percentage of Democrats within each legislative session and indicates the strength of Democrats present. Values closer to 0 percent indicate minimal to no Democratic presence, while greater Democratic presence is evidenced by values closer to 100 percent.

The governor is considered part of the policymaking process and has the power to approve or veto legislation passed by the state legislature. Literature notes the governor’s ability to directly influence policymaking in the states (McCally 1966; Barrilleaux 1999). Studies have



also demonstrated that Democratic governors have positively affected state policy liberalism (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Caughey, Xu, and Warshaw 2017). Thus, the political party affiliation of each Arkansas governor (“Gov. Party”) heading the state from 2001 to 2021 is considered in this study. There have only been three governors, two Republicans, and only one Democrat, within this period. Partisanship data is derived from the National Governors Association website, listing former and current state governors and their time in office and party affiliation. This dummy variable is coded as “0” for years under a Democratic governor and “1” for years under a Republican governor.

Studies have demonstrated the increasingly vital link between partisan voting patterns at the state and federal levels and how national partisan trends affect partisan voting in the states (Jewell and Morehouse 2001). Thus, this study includes the president’s partisanship from 2001 to 2021 to discern if the party in the executive office at the national level influences policy liberalism at the state level in Arkansas. An additional dummy variable accounts for the president’s party in office during a given session year (“Pres. Party”). This dummy variable is coded as “0” for Democratic presidents and “1” for Republican presidents.

The state’s gross domestic product (GDP) and personal income (“Real GDP”) for the years 2001 to 2021, along with the GDP percent change of the preceding year (“GDP % Change”), is provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Economic Analysis. GDP statistics are recorded in real GDP (millions of chained 2012 dollars).

## **Results**

### *Correlation Analyses*

To discern the correlation between policy liberalism and public opinion, I first employ a correlation matrix to derive simple correlations between the average respondents’ self-identified

political ideology and partisanship in relation to the average policy liberalism score for a given year. This highlights the independent variables that have high correlations with the dependent variable and signal these variables' strength and direction of their correlation with policy liberalism<sup>1</sup>. Table 1 summarizes the correlations between the independent variables and policy liberalism. The variables "Rep/Leaner," "Conservative," "Moderate," "Party Cmpt," "Ledge Comp," and "Real GDP" have moderate to high correlation, with values that are greater than +/- 0.4. Out of these, "Rep/Leaner," "Conservative," and "Real GDP" are the only variables negatively correlated with average policy liberalism, with values of -0.459, -0.467, and -0.559, respectively. The remaining three significant variables, "Moderate," "Party Cmpt," and "Ledge Comp," have a positive correlation with policy liberalism with strong values greater than 0.5.

Pairwise correlation is used to identify groups of highly correlated variables. This function is valuable as it can also indicate statistically significant variables that have *p*-values at or less than 0.05. The same independent variables identified as having the highest correlation are also the variables identified through pairwise correlation as being statistically significant. Because pairwise correlation measures the correlation between groups of variables and not their linear relationship, it is worth bearing in mind that these correlations are interchangeable. For example, the correlation between Variable A and Variable B is the same as the correlation between Variable B and Variable A. Thus, a correlation matrix tells us if two variables are related to one another, not if one independent variable causes a change in the dependent variable.

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<sup>1</sup> Because these correlation coefficients represent the relationship between any one independent variable and the dependent variable, all explanatory variables were used in the correlation matrix.

**Table 1**  
**(Pairwise) Correlation Values with Average Policy Liberalism**

	Avg. Policy Liberalism
Avg. Policy Liberalism	1
Independent	-0.069
Rep/Leaner	-0.459*
Conservative	-0.467*
Moderate	0.569*
Party Cmpt.	0.688*
Ledge Comp.	0.714*
Gov. Party	-0.336
Pres. Party	0.288
Real GDP	-0.559*
GDP % Change	-0.236
<i>N</i>	21

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

### *Regression Analyses*

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, on the other hand, estimates an entire equation to discern how a single or multiple independent variables can cause a change in the dependent variable. This study estimates OLS regression models to investigate if the variables operationalized to make up public opinion and government-level and economic variables account for changes in Arkansas' policy liberalism score for a given year.

Table 2 features all four regression models. The public opinion variables, "Rep/Leaner," "Independent," "Conservative," and "Moderate," are grouped together by partisanship and ideology and placed into two different models. The first model represents the regression estimates of partisanship on average policy liberalism and indicates that only the variable "Rep/Leaner" is statistically significant with a  $p$ -value less than 0.05. This negative relationship can be interpreted as for every one unit increase in AP respondents identifying with the Republican Party, an estimated 2.024-unit decrease can be expected in policy liberalism. In other words, the more Republicans in the AP sample, the less likely policy will be liberal. Model 2 estimates respondents' self-identified political ideology and the relationship this has with policy

liberalism, but neither “Conservative” nor “Moderate” have any statistical significance. Thus, it can be assumed that these two variables do not have a linear relationship with policy liberalism.

**Table 2: OLS Regression Models of Policy Liberalism**

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Independent	-2.622	(2.435)			0.834	(2.297)	0.666	(2.257)
Rep/Leaner	-2.024*	(0.816)			1.744	(1.834)	1.025	(1.673)
Conservative			0.248	(2.390)	0.247	(3.560)	2.619	(3.432)
Moderate			3.257	(1.933)	-0.873	(2.201)	-1.243	(2.229)
Party Cmpt.					1.638*	(0.766)		
Gov. Party					3.267	(15.63)	-0.309	(13.91)
Pres. Party					17.70	(9.728)	14.56	(9.682)
Real GDP/Mil					-444.1	(788.8)	-31.75	(853.0)
GDP % Change					-3.081	(2.044)	-2.509	(1.888)
Ledge Comp							1.410*	(0.621)
Constant	105.4*	(47.07)	-123.6	(162.3)	-105.3	(173.5)	-198.9	(182.4)
$R^2$	0.258		0.325		0.713		0.724	
Adj. $R^2$	0.176		0.250		0.479		0.498	
F	3.135		4.324		3.042		3.200	
Observations	21		21		21		21	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Models 3 and 4 estimate regression effects of party competition and the composition of the legislature separately as these two variables are highly correlated with one another, causing a problem of multicollinearity. I suspect that this problem is a result of both variables capturing two similar concepts, party competition, measured for degrees of competition while also indicating single-party dominance, and the partisan composition of the legislature, measured as the strength of the Democratic presence in the Arkansas General Assembly for a given year. However, “Party Cmpt” is derived in part by accounting for the partisan composition of the state legislature in terms of the proportion of Democrats present. Thus, it is understandable that a multicollinearity problem has come about.

To eradicate this problem, I separated the variables into two regression models so that I can estimate their effects on policy liberalism while mitigating the potential of the two working together to predict the dependent variable. I find that party competition and the partisan

composition of the state legislature are significant explanatory variables of policy liberalism. Model 3 includes all variables except for the composition of the legislature. Here, the “Party Cmpt” variable shows statistical significance with a  $p$ -value less than 0.05. This relationship with policy liberalism is positive with a correlation coefficient of 1.638. This signifies that as competition between the parties increases by one unit, average policy liberalism is predicted to increase by 1.638 units. The composition of the legislature is also statistically significant with a  $p$ -value less than 0.05 in Model 4. Regarding both Models 3 and 4, the regression results indicate that “Party Cmpt” and “Ledge Comp” all have positive relationships in predicting average policy liberalism. Thus, it can be assumed that as competition between the parties increases, and as the composition of the legislature increases in Democratic presence, policy can be expected to become more liberal.

Evaluating adjusted R-squared values of all four models reveals that Model 4 is the best regression model of good fit. Partisanship and ideology variables, the composition of the legislature, the party of the governor, the party of the president, real GDP, and GDP percent change make up a better predictive model than the variables of Models 1 through 3. It should be noted, however, that Model 4 has an adjusted R-squared value of 0.498, meaning that the model’s independent variables can predict a little under fifty percent of the variance in the dependent variable, average policy liberalism.

Adjusted R-squared penalizes researchers for adding too many independent variables, thus, this statistic is valuable because it displays the percentage of variation explained only by independent variables included in a model that affect the dependent variable. A supplemental regression model of the independent variables “Rep/Leaner,” “Conservative,” “Moderate,” “Party Cmpt,” Ledge Comp,” and “Real GDP/Mil,” can be found in Appendix B. Because these

were the only statistically significant variables in the best model of fit for policy liberalism and pairwise correlation in this analysis, I ran a regression analysis to determine how well the six variables explain the amount of variance in policy liberalism. This regression model has an adjusted R-squared value of 0.4190, which is a few points lower than that of Model 4. This indicates that though these independent variables hold statistical significance in their own models, they are not important variables in this particular model and explain slightly over forty percent of the variance found in policy liberalism. Thus, additional explanatory predictors are needed to produce a model that can explain even more variation in the dependent variable.

### **Discussion**

The regression analyses provide support for my first hypothesis of Republican single-party dominance producing policy congruent with Arkansas public opinion to be incorrect. This analysis has revealed that the public opinion variables of ideology, at least in this study, do not play a significant role in affecting policy liberalism, yet partisanship does. Only evaluating the relationship Republican partisanship and nonpartisan independents have with policy liberalism demonstrates that part of the electorate identifying with the Republican Party is significant and has a negative relationship with policy liberalism. In other words, it can be expected that the more Arkansans identify as Republican, the less liberal policies will be. However, adding both partisanship and ideology variables to models that account for either party competition or the legislature's composition, along with both the governor's and president's partisanship, Arkansas' real GDP, and its GDP percent change transforms the negative relationship "Republican" has with policy liberalism into a positive but statistically insignificant one. This finding is rather unexpected and is contrary to the traditional opinion-policy link theories found in the literature. As the research team of Robert Erikson, Gerald Wright, and John McIver have indicated, there is

a relationship between public opinion and legislative opinion, suggesting that legislators' opinions represent that of citizens (Wright et al. 1987; Erikson et al. 1989). Even further, conservative electorates tend to produce conservative state legislatures, and the same can be argued for liberal electorates and liberal states (Erikson et al. 1993). Yet, I find that in more complex regression models, Republican partisanship can lead to more liberal policies. I suspect that this unexpected finding is rooted in a methodological error on my part. Each independent variable only has twenty-one observations, reflecting the variables' averages I took for each year, from 2001 to 2021. Though my results are statistically sound, from a practical point of view, a more robust set of statistically significant findings would come about from a larger set of observations while decreasing random sampling error.

However, the relationship between party competition, the composition of the legislature, and policy liberalism has important implications for the purpose of this study. I expected that because Arkansas is a right-leaning state, public policy will be more congruent under the single-party dominance of the Republican Party than that of the Democratic Party. The regression analysis reveals that this has not been the case for Arkansas in the past twenty years. Scholars have emphasized the importance of party competition in a democracy in that increased competition leads to the production of more liberal policies (Barrilleaux 1997, 2000). Because of this, though party competition during the era of the Republican Party's dominance declines, there is still some party competition occurring. Party competition continues its overall decline starting in 2010, though, during the Republican single-party dominance era, this is only a slight decline. During this period, policy liberalism is conservative, but the trend fluctuates, alternating between notable rises and falls in policy liberalism scores.

Fluctuations like these are not as pronounced during the Democratic single-party dominance period (2006 – 2010). Here, party competition is high, Republican partisanship is relatively low<sup>2</sup>, and policy liberalism is moderately liberal. It is during this highly competitive political environment that policy liberalism is more congruent with public opinion (in terms of Republican partisanship) than in any other period, proving my first hypothesis to be incorrect. Public policy is more congruent with policy under the single-party dominance of the Democratic Party than that of the Republican Party, as evidenced in Figure 4. Republican partisanship and policy liberalism slightly varied from one another from 2006 to 2010. Yet, literature suggests that political parties behave both sincerely and strategically, passing policies in the context of electoral circumstances (Barrilleaux, Holbrook, and Langer 2002). During this period, Democrats may have a large presence in the legislature, but they also are in a highly competitive political environment, causing them to produce policies that will satisfy their constituencies enough to maintain their dominance in the state legislature, even if those policies do not reflect an overly liberal stance.

However, from 2015 to 2021, the distance between the increasing Republican partisanship and fluctuating, yet conservative, policy liberalism scores are more pronounced while party competition continues its gradual decline, thus providing support for my final two hypotheses. As the Republican Party continues to dominate Arkansas politics, party competition has steadily dropped. This decline has led to very conservative policy scores that are not congruent with public opinion, supporting the argument that single-party dominance gives a political party minimal incentive to target the moderate voter and more room to pass more extreme policies without fear of being voted out of office (Schreckhise 2018, 9).

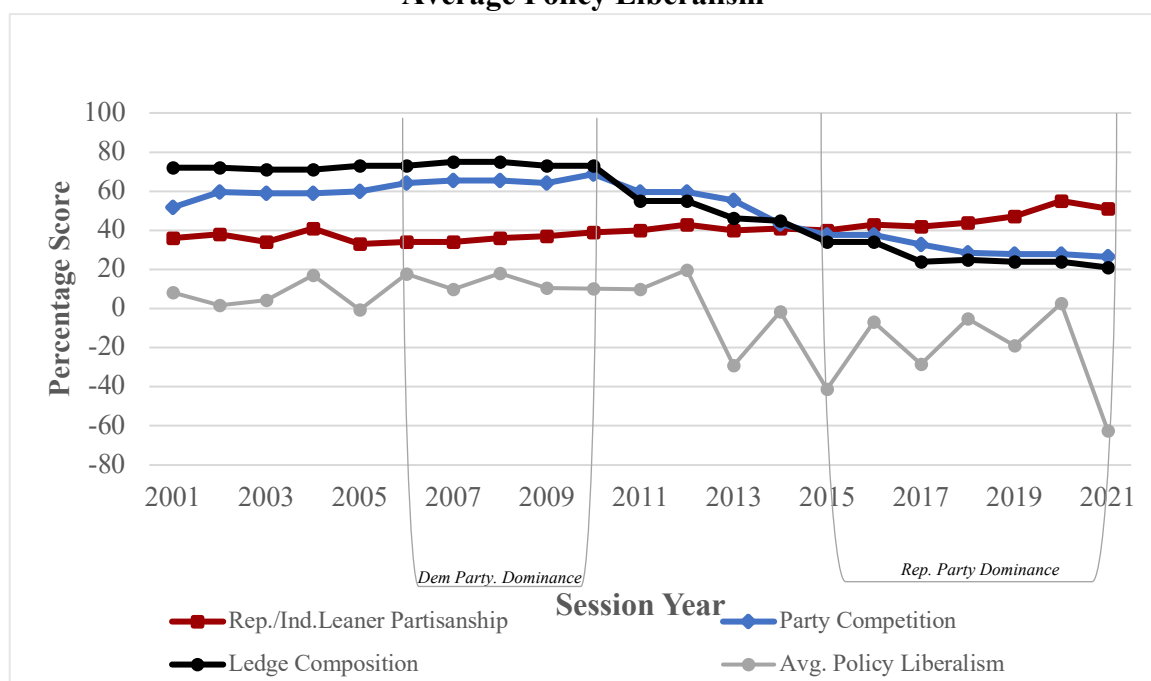
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<sup>2</sup> Low in comparison to the almost doubled increase of Republican partisanship by 2021.



Adding the strength of the Democratic presence in the state legislature transforms this relationship to another level. When both competition and Democratic numbers in the Arkansas legislature are high, policy is more closely aligned with public opinion than when competition is low and Republican strength in the legislature is strong, supporting the argument that increased competition and Democratic party strength lead to more liberal policies. The decline of both Democratic membership in the legislature and party competition has certainly led to less liberal policies, but the fluctuating policy liberalism scores indicate the small, yet existent, presence of both Democratic legislators and party competition.

**Figure 4: Republican Partisanship, Party Competition, Legislature Composition, and Average Policy Liberalism**



Source: 2001-2021 Arkansas Poll, University of Arkansas, Arkansas State Legislature website

However, the relationship between Democratic strength in the legislature and policy liberalism found in this study is contrary to that found in others. Scholars have found that the Democratic Party's legislative strength is negatively associated with policy liberalism in that the more Democrats present in a state legislature, the less likely policy will be liberal (Wright et al.

1987; Erikson et al. 1989). Even further, research has also found that Democratic control of a state legislature does not guarantee liberal policies as high party competition influences the Democratic Party to be more accountable to its constituents (Barrilleaux 2000). This current study's finding of Democratic presence in the state legislator being an important, positive factor of policy liberalism warrants further investigation.

### *Limitations*

Though this study demonstrates the significance of the public opinion-policy link at the state level in Arkansas from 2001 to 2021, it suffers from limitations that must be discussed. Foremost, this research provides a general analysis of the opinion-policy link, avoiding any specifics. For example, the major laws identified in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* were not grouped into issue categories that would allow for analysis of public opinion and individual policies. Additionally, though the 342 laws used in this study are impressive in number, a larger sample of measures should be employed for a more accurate model.

Furthermore, this research does not account for both electoral competition and party control. Though this study considers a party's control of state government through a modified version of the Ranney Index, literature has demonstrated the value of also including electoral competition in models. Scholars have argued that partisan legislators of the dominant party who have narrowly won their seats behave differently in the policymaking process than those who have won within comfortable margins (Barrilleaux, Holbrook, and Langer 2002). This insinuates that partisan legislators rely on their ideologies and political strategies when producing policies and that both party control and electoral competition should be considered when studying the opinion-policy link. Moreover, Parry et al.'s (2022) folded Ranney Index should be used to measure party competition as it accounts for Democratic strength in both houses of the state

legislature along with the vote share of the Democratic candidate for governor *in addition to* the Democratic strength of a state's federal congressional delegation and the popular vote share of a state's choice for the Democratic presidential candidate. This measure of party competition captures the nationalization of party politics and its effect on state-level partisanship (Parry et al. 2022). Including this measure in future Arkansas opinion-policy analyses could better account for the dynamics of the state's politics and how they, along with party strength and the ideologies of both the electorate and political elite, influence policies produced by the state legislature. Along with an improved measure of party competition, future research should also account for voter mobilization as the literature suggests that higher voter turnout is linked to policy liberalism (Hill and Leighley 1992; Hill, Leighley, and Hinton-Andersson 1995). Further, research has found that greater voter turnout leads to increased levels of competition between the parties (Flavin and Shufeldt 2015).

This research is also limited by the length of the time period I was able to use. The Arkansas Poll began in 1999, allowing for an analysis of twenty-three years, but for a more in-depth investigation into the opinion-policy link in Arkansas, future research should seek to include years prior to the late 1990s. Furthermore, though the Arkansas Poll has twenty-three years' worth of data, I only used poll results from 2001 and on because data collection on state legislator partisanship and roll-call votes proved to be time-consuming. The Arkansas General Assembly's website is a useful resource to obtain roll-call votes and other legislative information, but it has only been updated with easily accessible material starting with the year 2001. Investigating earlier decades of Arkansas politics can provide even more comprehensive results of policy liberalism influential factors. Lastly, though I focus solely on Arkansas, the importance of the comparative aspect in state politics studies is not lost on me. Future research

should compare the opinion-policy link in Arkansas to other states, such as those of the Southern region, and then to all states within the nation.

### **Conclusion**

As Arkansas politics, like many other states, continues to undergo periods of single-party dominance, whether under Democratic or Republican rule, it is essential to understand how these eras affect public policy. Under single-party dominance, does the Arkansas state legislature produce policy that is congruent with public opinion? Are there conditions that affect how well state legislators represent their constituency bases? Though single-party dominance is not unique to just Arkansas, it is worth understanding how the phenomenon manifests in the state and influences its policies.

This study has found that Republican partisanship, party competition, and the legislature's composition have influenced policy congruence in Arkansas from 2001 to 2021. During the period of Democratic single-party dominance, public policy was more congruent with public opinion than during the era of Republican single-party dominance due to varying degrees of both party competition and the statehouse's composition. Though Democrats may have been the dominant party from 2006 to 2010, the party still had to compete for the votes of those who leaned slightly to the right, increasing party competition that ultimately produced policies more reflective of public partisanship. Republican dominance occurs during low political competition and a weak Democratic presence in the state legislature. Because of the legislative freedom granted by a relatively unchallenged political party, Republicans under single-party dominance have had more room to pass policies that are not as congruent with public opinion as they benefit from low political competition and dominate Democrats in the legislature.

These findings have important implications for what low party competition and unequal partisan proportions in the legislature mean for single-party dominance in Arkansas. Without the accountability incentive competition instills in political parties, these groups, or at least, in this case, the Republican Party, will veer further away from producing policies that are congruent with public opinion. However, Arkansas has undergone recent redistricting, resulting in all 135 seats in the state legislature being up for reelection, which could potentially result in heightened party competition as hundreds of candidates seek office (Herzog 2022). Arkansas' political landscape is thus ripe for a significant change from the Republican single-party dominance era. This study suggests that a more competitive political environment could result in a more representative governing body.

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## Appendix

### *Appendix A*

**Table 3: Variable Coding**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Avg. Policy Liberalism</b>	% Scores Range: -1 = Conservative; 0 = Moderate; 1 = Liberal
<b>Independent</b>	% Range: 0 = No Independents; 1 = Total Independents
<b>Republican/Leaner</b>	% Range: 0 = No Rep/Leaners; 1 = Total Rep/Leaners
<b>Conservative</b>	% Range: 0 = No Conservatives; 1 = Total Conservatives
<b>Moderate</b>	% Range: 0 = No Moderates; 1 = Total Moderates
<b>Party Competition</b>	% Score Range: 0 = Low Competition; 1 = High Competition
<b>Legislature Composition</b>	% Score Range: 0 = No Democrats; 1 = Total Democrats
<b>Governor's Party</b>	Coded 1 for Republic governor; 0 for Democratic governor
<b>President's Party</b>	Coded 1 for Republican president; 0 for Democratic president
<b>Real GDP/Mil</b>	Annual Real GDP for AR divided by millions of dollars
<b>GDP % Change</b>	Percent change from preceding period

*Appendix B***Table 4: Statistically Significant Variables Regression**

Rep/Leaner	0.511	(1.742)
Conservative	3.343	(3.958)
Moderate	-0.343	(2.199)
Party Cmpt	-0.543	(1.169)
Ledge Comp	1.663	(1.136)
Real GDP/Mil	-30.54	(896.2)
Constant	-214.9	(189.2)
$R^2$	0.593	
Adj. $R^2$	0.4190	
F	3.404	
Observations	21	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$