

# Political Science 146 – Public Opinion and Mass Media: Attitude Stability and Non-Attitudes

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- ▶ **Instability emerges when issues are more remote**

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- ▶ If overall aggregation of responses is the same -- > collective attitude stability.

## *Attitude Instability*

**Table:** Source: Converse: "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics."  
1964. 1956-58-60 panel data.

Attitude	Correlation	Pct. Same Attitude
<b>Party identification</b>	.73	85.7
School desegregation	.43	57.5
Employment discrimination	.41	60.0
Guaranteed employment	.41	56.5
Isolationism	.39	59.6
Federal aid to education	.38	57.2
Foreign economic aid	.34	48
Foreign military aid	.32	56.7
Federal housing	.29	40.7

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- ▶ By well organized, attitudes on similar topics do not necessarily hang together

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- ▶ Partially explained by social-desirability effect: People do not want to look stupid in front of someone else, when we know our role as citizens is supposedly to pay attention to news and have opinions on things our vote may influence.

## *Non-attitudes*

**Table:** “Some people say that the 1975 Public Affairs Act should be repealed. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?”

Opinion	Percent
Opinion	33
No Opinion	66



## *Non-attitudes*

**Table:** “[President Clinton/The Republicans in Congress] said that the 1975 Public Affairs Act should be repealed. Do you agree or disagree?”

<b>Clinton Version</b>	
Party ID	Percent
Democrats	36
Republicans	18
<b>Republican Version</b>	
Democrats	19
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- ▶ With fragmented media environment – highly interested people self-select into news 24-7, and those less interested watch *American Idol* or sports

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- ▶ **Collective attitude change often modest; large attitude swings over short periods of time are uncommon**

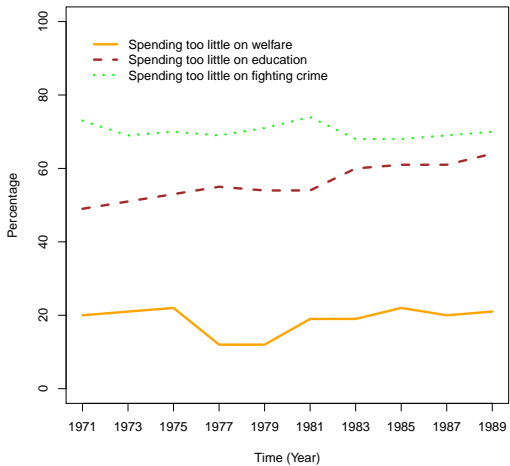
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- ▶ Random fluctuation around “true opinion”

### Opinion toward Gov't Spending (1971-1989)



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  - ▶ **Political capital, helps president pursue goals**

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  - ▶ Subjective measures (perceptions of state of economy)
- ▶ Changes in pres. approval not random but reactions to political events and economic conditions

### Obama Approval, Jan 2009 – Current (Gallup)

