



The Latest Research

As discussed extensively in this chapter, the comparative method is an important tool used by scholars to understand how state-level differences translate into meaningful political and policy differences. A lot of these differences that make a difference are not static—indeed, some may be changing even as you read this textbook. Recently, some of the most foundational state differences have been the subject of a series of studies that may change our understanding of those differences and their implications.

The “granddaddy” of all differences is political culture, a concept originated by Daniel Elazar that continues to be widely respected for its explanatory power. Yet, however powerful its explanatory capacities, Elazar’s classification of state political cultures is not based on intensive statistical analysis; it is much more impressionistic. It is also static—in other words, the basic state classifications of moralistic, traditionalistic, and individualistic have not changed since Elazar defined them nearly half a century ago. In the time that has elapsed since then, large shifts in demographics have taken place as the result of new waves of immigration, population, and other relevant data have become more widely available, and sophisticated statistical analysis techniques have been developed and broadly employed. All this gives state scholars the opportunity to undertake much more fine-grained analyses of regional value systems, how they translate into culture, how that culture might change, and what those changes might mean for state politics and policy.

Related to the renewed interest in studying and tracking cultural changes is a spate of new scholarship that focuses on measuring state-level political orientations and ideology, in effect capturing the political nuances of what makes a “red” state or a “blue” state or even a “happy” state. Several teams of scholars have been developing new measures of state-level policy attitudes and orientations, and these improved measures

of political differences are proving useful for predicting important policy differences.

Below we summarize some of the cutting-edge research on the differences that make a difference.

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- **Lieske, Joel.** “The Changing Regional Subcultures of the American States and the Utility of a New Cultural Measure.” *Political Research Quarterly* 63 (2010): 538–552.
- **Lieske, Joel.** “American State Cultures: Testing a New Measure and Theory.” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 42 (2012): 108–133.

Lieske, a political scientist at Cleveland State University, is the scholar most associated with the contemporary study of state political culture. He focuses on what is perhaps the toughest question of culture studies: How can we measure culture? Elazar’s classifications are useful but impressionistic, and efforts to quantify those classifications into “yardsticks” to measure degrees of cultural difference often amount to nothing more than putting numbers on Elazar’s classifications. Lieske has long argued that regional subcultures may be more expansive than Elazar’s threefold classification. In the first study listed above, he uses county-level data on racial origin, ethnic ancestry, religious affiliation, and various indicators of social structure to create a composite statistical measure of political culture. This is a much more sophisticated analysis than that employed by Elazar, and it results in not three primary subcultures but eleven. In Lieske’s analysis, for example, moralistic cultures are actually made up of three related but distinct political subcultures—Nordic, Mormon, and Anglo-French, with the labels representing the cultural elements of particular ethnic groups (especially Germans and Scandinavians) and different sects of dissenting Protestantism. In the second study, Lieske puts his new measure to the test, pitting it against Elazar’s typology to see which best predicts various indicators of