

# Americans' Attitudes toward Federalism

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## Abstract

Contemporary and historical political debates often revolve around principles of federalism, in which governing authority is divided across levels of government. Despite the prominence of these debates, existing scholarship provides relatively limited evidence about the nature and structure of Americans' preferences for decentralization. We develop a new survey-based measure to characterize attitudes toward subnational power and evaluate it with a national sample of more than 2,000 American adults. We find that preferences for devolution vary considerably both across and within states, and reflect individuals' partisan and ideological orientations, political context, and evaluations of government performance. Overall, our battery produces a reliable survey instrument for evaluating preferences for federalism and provides new evidence that attitudes toward institutional arrangements are structured less by short-term political interests than by core preferences for the distribution of state authority.

**Key Words:** federalism; devolution; public opinion; state government

**Word count:** 7,671

Federalism is implicated in nearly every major policy debate in contemporary American politics. Policymaking activity on issues of immigration (Rodriguez 2017), gun control (Lund 2003), drug legalization (Chemerinsky et al. 2015), tax policy (Kincaid 2017), health care (Gruber and Sommers 2020), policing (Gerken 2017), environmental regulation (Fitzgerald, McCabe, and Folz 1988), and even foreign affairs (Goldsmith 1997) is routinely contested on the basis of whether authority rests with national or state and local governments. The coronavirus pandemic further sharpened debates about the division of power and responsibility across levels of government (Haffajee and Mello 2020). The salience and scope of the debate over federalism have led some observers to conclude that it is “without doubt, the most important political, legal, and constitutional debate taking place in America today, going to our very roots as a nation” (U.S. House: 1995).

Positive and normative theoretical perspectives emphasize connections between federalism and the quality of representative government. On the one hand, this literature finds that decentralized institutional arrangements promote incentives for elected officials to develop good reputations (Myerson 2006), create a more informed and involved public (Aidt and Dutta 2017; Frey and Stutzer 2000; Ordeshook and Shvetsova 1995; Inman and Rubinfeld 2009), and enhance accountability mechanisms (Chhibber and Kollman 2004). On the other hand, other research finds that federalism is associated with higher rates of corruption (Treisman 2000) and reduced government responsiveness to public opinion (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). While these studies reach mixed conclusions about the the implications of federalism for citizen welfare, they do not study whether decentralization itself is consistent with citizens’ preferences over governing arrangements.

How do Americans view the allocation of power between national and state government? Existing scholarship offers several competing perspectives. One line of argument posits that preferences for local control are associated with traditional political orientations (e.g., Green and Guth 1989), suggesting that individuals with more conservative ideologies are more supportive of decentralization. A second line of argument suggests that Americans

support policymaking by whichever level of government is most closely aligned with their own partisan affiliations and political interests (Dinan and Heckelman 2020; Riker 1964; Wolak 2016). A third alternative argues that views toward federalism reflect Americans' relative trust for national versus local governing institutions (Hetherington and Nugent 2001). Still other research suggests that evaluations of federal arrangements are shaped by the public's experience with the quality of government across them (Gehring Forthcoming).

Despite the prominence of federalism in debates over the American political system, existing scholarship provides relatively limited evidence about the nature and structure of preferences for decentralization. Empirical research on attitudes toward federalism has focused on the measurement of confidence assessments and approval ratings across levels of government or officials holding positions within them. These evaluations appropriately measure what Easton (1975: 437) termed "specific support," but this research has largely neglected the measurement of diffuse support, or "a reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effects of which they see as damaging to their wants" (Easton 1965: 273). While specific support is highly responsive to short-term changes in political circumstances, diffuse support characterizes more fundamental and longstanding attachments to institutional arrangements. We argue that the latter quantity provides a more appropriate assessment of the public's views about the distribution of power across levels of government apart from their evaluations of contemporary political actors.

In this paper, we develop a new survey-based measure to characterize Americans' preferences for subnational power and evaluate it with a national sample of more than 2,000 American adults. We validate the measure by demonstrating its strong and consistent relationship with respondents' preferences for devolution across a number of policy domains. Overall, we find that preferences for devolution vary considerably both across and within states, and we examine how attitudes toward subnational power reflect individuals' partisan and ideological orientations, political context, and evaluations of government performance.

We find that respondents do not evaluate questions of federalism merely as expressive partisans, and we find only limited evidence that attitudes toward federalism reflect the partisan context in which respondents live. Instead, views toward decentralization appear to reflect more deeply-rooted ideological commitments to federal institutions and comparative evaluations of the performance of state and national governments. Overall, our battery produces a reliable survey instrument for measuring preferences for federalism and provides new evidence about the nature and origins of public opinion about the allocation of power in a federal system.

## Public Attitudes toward Federalism

Federalism sits front and center in many of the most important debates in American political history. The Tenth Amendment attempted to assuage concerns among Anti-Federalists that the Constitution provided insufficient protections for the infringement of state sovereignty by the national government. The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, written in response to the Alien and Sedition Acts, asserted states' authority to evaluate the constitutionality of laws passed by the national government and refuse to enforce laws deemed unconstitutional. The Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* concerned the national government's right to regulate slavery in the territories and Southern states. Following the Civil War, Supreme Court jurisprudence routinely addressed the national government's power to compel states to enforce the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. And in the last century, conflict over states' rights and federal power have been waged over issues including civil rights, gender-based violence, inter-racial and same-sex marriage, gun control, and marijuana laws (for a selection of research on the role of states' rights in party platforms and policy debates, see, e.g., Beienburg 2018; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Melder 1939; Mettler 2000; Mooney 2000; Phillips 1969; Stevens 2002).

How does the American public view federalism? Survey data provides consistent evidence that Americans hold more positive views of state and local governance than they do of the national government. According to Pew Research Center (2018), for instance, two-thirds of Americans held favorable ratings of local government in 2018, and 58 percent viewed state government favorably, while only 35 percent provided favorable evaluations of the federal government. These data describe an American public with considerably greater esteem for local rather than national governing authorities.

We study how Americans view the balance of power between national and state government. Our focus on public preferences for federalism contributes to a growing body of research that studies public attitudes toward political institutions and procedures (Becher and Brouard Forthcoming; Doherty and Wolak 2012; Gibson 1989; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Reeves and Rogowski 2018; Schleiter and Tavits 2018). Attitudes about federalism may affect how Americans evaluate policy outcomes and political officials across levels of government. As Reeves and Glendening (1976: 135) explains, “The attitudes of the citizenry constitute one set of influences on a system’s movement along the centralization/decentralization continuum.” According to Kam and Mikos (2007: 623), moreover, “ordinary citizens play a role in policing the limits of federal power . . . because they value federalism.” In addition, attitudes about local control may be linked to behavioral outcomes, such as the use of violence against federal employees (Nemerever Forthcoming). Given the salience of federalism and its prominence in the U.S. political system, understanding the public’s views on federalism is a key component of understanding contemporary attitudes about American government.

## **How Americans Evaluate Federalism**

Traditional theories of public opinion leave little room for the American public to hold meaningful attitudes toward federal arrangements. Most Americans evince relatively low levels of political knowledge (Campbell et al. 1960; Carpini and Keeter 1996) and may have little interest in the details of federal arrangements. According to Dahl (2002: 115), attributing

responsibility for policy decisions in a federal system is difficult “even for those who spending their lives studying politics,” and citizens often misattribute policy decisions to officials at different levels of government (Sances 2017). These perspectives paint a rather dim portrait about the capacity of the American public to possess and express coherent preferences about the distribution of power in a federal system. Consistent with this conclusion, studies of federalism jurisprudence have argued that “no one besides the justices really cares about federalism” Tushnet (2005: 277).<sup>1</sup> Others argue, however, that Americans have “intuitive” beliefs about federalism (Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis 2011) and exhibit a “comprehensible structure” in allocating policy responsibility among national, state, and local government (Arceneaux 2005: 311).<sup>2</sup>

If Americans have genuine preferences over federalism, how are those preferences organized? A first perspective suggests that attitudes toward federalism could reflect more specific evaluations of officeholders and levels of government. For example, public preferences for federal arrangements could reflect their level of trust across levels of government. On this view, to the degree the public is more trusting of local government vis-à-vis national government, they are more supportive of vesting policymaking authority in local officials rather than national policymakers. Consistent with this perspective, Hetherington and Nugent (2001) argues that trends in devolution during the 1980s and 1990s were responsive to the public’s greater trust in state governments relative to the federal government.

Alternatively, attitudes toward federalism are based in core political beliefs about the distribution of authority across levels of government (e.g., Wolak 2016). This view is reflected in the “federalist theory” of representation outlined by Arceneaux (2005: 300) which posits that citizens attribute policymaking responsibility to different levels of government and evaluate those governments on the basis of how well they perform those responsibilities. According to this perspective, beliefs about federalism reflect long-standing views about political structures rather than by short-term or ephemeral political interests (on the dis-

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<sup>1</sup>For a contrasting view on this point, see Friedman (2010).

<sup>2</sup>See also Roeder (1994).

inction, see, e.g., Easton 1975). For example, attitudes toward states' rights may comprise a larger set of "traditional values" (Green and Guth 1989: 50).

Evaluations of federalism may also reflect short-term political conditions. Individuals' expressive affinities for copartisan officials and/or their beliefs that copartisan officials better serve their interests could result in evaluations of federalism that reflect the partisan composition of government. For example, when the public's preferred party controls national (but not local government), they may express greater support for centralizing power at the national level, and vice versa. Previous research indicates that Americans are more trusting of the national government when their preferred party is in power (Morisi, Jost, and Singh 2019), and previous research on beliefs about devolution among both political elites (Goelzhauser and Rose 2017; Stratford 2018) and the mass public (Dinan and Heckelman 2020; Wolak 2016) indicates that these attitudes are associated with individuals' partisan and political alignments with governing authorities.

Finally, preferences over federalism may be shaped by the public's evaluations of government performance. To the extent Americans believe one level of government perform more effectively relative to others, Americans may support greater authority for the high-performing level. Arceneaux (2005) terms this criterion the "causal-responsibility" attribution. This perspective suggests that, observing variation in policy performance across levels of government, the public endorses greater authority for the level of government they perceive as most effective. This perspective may further explain why preferences for federalism may vary across policy areas (Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis 2011; Thompson and Elling 1999), as Americans perceive that some levels of government are more effective in addressing issues of transportation and schools while others are more effective in addressing economic and social policies.

## Empirical Studies on Attitudes toward Federalism

While existing scholarship has provided a range of evidence in support of the perspectives outlined above, we argue and propose to rectify two persistent limitations of the empirical literature on public preferences for federalism. First, scholars have used inconsistent measurement approaches for studying attitudes toward federalism. Perhaps most commonly, attitudes about federalism have been studied using comparative measures of trust or confidence in various levels of government (e.g., Cole, Kincaid, and Rodriguez 2004; Kincaid 2017; Reeves and Glendening 1976; Wlezien and Soroka 2011). Other research studies preferences for federalism using measures of policy devolution (e.g., Dinan and Heckelman 2020; Wolak 2016). But because scholarship has tended not to jointly study trust (or confidence) and beliefs about devolution, it is unclear how to relate the findings from research that employs one approach but not the other.

Second, existing measurement approaches do not distinguish what Easton (1975) termed specific support from diffuse support. While measures of trust and confidence may be important indicators of affective evaluations, it is unclear whether they reflect short-term evaluations of institutional performance, approval of the officials serving in those levels of government, more durable views about the distribution of authority in a federal system, or something else altogether. Based on the distinction articulated by Easton (1975) in his conceptualization of regime support, these indicators are more akin to measures of specific support rather than diffuse support. While the former describes individuals' satisfaction with the performance and outputs of current political authorities, the latter quantity characterizes one's "commitment to an institution" (Easton 1975: 437, 451). Just as, for instance, approval ratings of the current president are not synonymous with individuals' beliefs about the institution of the presidency (e.g., Reeves and Rogowski 2016), evaluations of contemporary governments may not be synonymous with preferences toward federalism. Because federalism describes a system of governance, we argue that diffuse support provides a more



appropriate characterization of public beliefs about federalism than measures based on confidence assessments or approval ratings.

Given these limitations, existing literature provides an incomplete assessment of contemporary beliefs about federalism. This omission is surprising given that previous research finds some evidence to suggest that the public has well-structured beliefs about federalism. In their work evaluating attitudes toward devolution, for instance, Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis (2011: 16) conclude that there is “a meaningful unifying characteristic (presumably, a psychological trait such as an attitude) generating the systematic structure” observed in their survey data. In this paper, we contribute to this literature by focusing on the potential sources of this structure. We do so by developing a new battery to measure preferences for federalism and comparing it with attitudes about policy devolution and approval ratings across levels of government. These measures allow us to provide the most comprehensive evaluation to date of attitudes toward the American federal system.

## Measuring Preferences for Federalism

We measured public views about the distribution of power between national and state governments using a battery we developed and fielded with an online national survey of Americans ( $N = 2,135$ ) in May 2020. The survey was carried out by Lucid, which used quota sampling to produce a sample that approximates the U.S. adult population with respect to gender, age, race and ethnicity, and Census region. Full demographic information about the sample is shown in Table A.1.

Our data here consists of three parts: (1) a series of randomly-ordered questions canvassing performance evaluations of state and local government, (2) a series of questions on devolution across a range of policy areas, and (3) a battery of randomly-ordered questions on more general attitudes towards federalism. In the rest of this section we describe this

battery of questions, which we call the *federalism battery*. Additionally, we present summary statistics for the measure and evaluate its properties.

## Components of the Federalism Battery

Table 1 displays the test of the ten questions we used to develop the federalism battery. Following Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis (2011), who collapse attitudes toward local and state government and distinguish them from attitudes toward national government, our questions focus specifically on the relationship between national and state government.<sup>3</sup> The first item reflects question wording used by the Pew Research Center and analyzed in previous scholarship on federalism (e.g., Dinan and Heckelman 2020). The second, third, and fourth items reflect questions used by Schneider and Jacoby (2003). We devised the remaining items to measure other theoretically relevant aspects of federalism, including perceptions of the relative efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and innovative qualities of state government vis-à-vis the national government and support for state secession. Each question was answered on a four-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4).<sup>4</sup> Table 1 collapses “strongly” and “somewhat” responses for the purpose of presentation, but we retain the full set of response options when constructing the composite measure of federalism preferences.

Respondents agreed with the items in the battery at varying rates, suggesting that our items provide a more nuanced assessment of attitudes toward federalism than any single indicator. For example, nearly seventy percent of respondents agreed that “the federal government should run only those things that cannot be run at the state or local level,”

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, this is not the only intergovernmental relationship in federal systems. Future work could also incorporate preferences for local control in addition to national and state power, or to evaluate attitudes on the relationship between state and local government.

<sup>4</sup>The absence of a neutral and/or “don’t know” option contrasts with the response options used in Schneider and Jacoby (2003). By forcing respondents to provide an answer even if they are genuinely ambivalent or unsure, we may risk biasing or inducing measurement error in our assessments of preferences toward federalism. While we cannot entirely rule out this possibility, our validation exercise below provides evidence that responses to the federalism battery are correlated with other attitudes toward federalism in ways that suggest the validity of the measure.

similar to levels of support recorded in surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center and analyzed by Dinan and Heckelman (2020). Consistent with this view, the sample also reported high levels of agreement with statements that “the national government is involved with too many aspects of American society” and that “state governments should take on more responsibility.” However, a large majority (79.4 percent) also agreed that “national government should do more to try and solve pressing problems.”<sup>5</sup>

The new items we created further describe a public with relatively complex views about federalism. In asking respondents to comparatively evaluate the characteristics of state and local governments, we find that large majorities of respondents believed that state governments address problems faster (76.5 percent) and with better ideas (80.9 percent) than the national government. Responses to other items suggest, however, that the public does not hold uniformly limited views about the role of the national government. For example, a majority disagreed (54.3 percent) that states governments are more cost-effective at addressing problems than the federal government, endorsed the supremacy of national statutes relative to state law (60.9 percent), and disagreed that states should have the right to secede if they are dissatisfied with the national government (53.0 percent).<sup>6</sup> Overall, the patterns displayed in Table 1 provide new information about Americans’ views toward the federal system.

We used the responses to the items in Table 1 to calculate an additive index of public preferences for federalism. To calculate this index, we used the full four-point response options for each of the ten indicators, where larger values indicated increased support for state rather than national power. The items in Table 1 with the (RC) identifier were reverse-coded to be consistent with this interpretation. We then rescaled the values of this measure

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<sup>5</sup>The results for these three questions are generally similar (though not identical) to those reported in Schneider and Jacoby (2003), who use a sample from South Carolina and a five-point scale with a neutral middle option.

<sup>6</sup>The secession figure is generally consistent with some prior polls. For instance, 58 percent of respondents in a poll conducted by CBS in 2013 oppose allowing a state to secede if its citizens voted to do so (CBS News 2013). However, polling conducted in 2010 by the Pew Research Center for the People the Press showed that 67 percent of Americans opposed allowing states to secede. It is possible that our findings reflected the particular context during which our survey was conducted. Evaluating potential change over time is an important opportunity for future research.

**Table 1** – Federalism Battery and Levels of Agreement

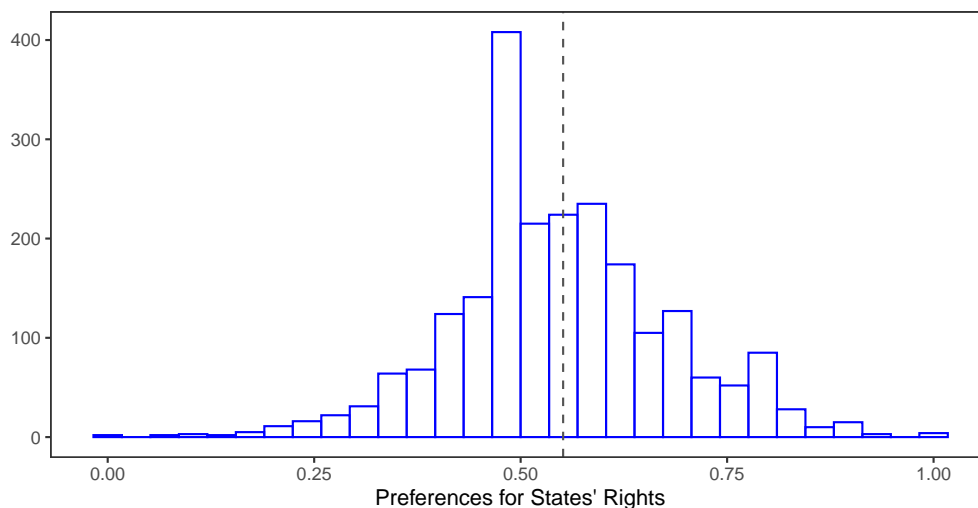
| Question text  | Percent Agree | Percent Disagree |
|--|---------------|------------------|
| <i>The federal government should run only those things that cannot be run at the state or local level.</i>                   | 69.3          | 30.7             |
| <i>The national government is currently involved in too many aspects of American society.</i>                                | 62.4          | 37.6             |
| <i>The state governments should take on more responsibility for the problems and issues that arise within their borders.</i> | 82.9          | 17.1             |
| <i>The national government should do more to try and solve pressing problems in American society. (RC)</i>                   | 79.4          | 20.6             |
| <i>Congress should withhold funding from states that do not comply with federal laws. (RC)</i>                               | 60.9          | 39.1             |
| <i>State governments can address problems faster than the national government.</i>   | 76.5          | 23.5             |
| <i>State governments are more cost-effective in addressing problems than the national government.</i>                        | 45.7          | 54.3             |
| <i>State governments have better ideas about how to address problems in their state than the national government.</i>        | 80.9          | 19.1             |
| <i>States should have the right to secede from the United States if they are dissatisfied with the national government.</i>  | 47.0          | 53.0             |
| <i>The federal government should only manage military affairs and the states should do everything else.</i>                  | 43.0          | 57.0             |

so that they ranged between zero and one. Overall, the scale appears to produce an internally consistent and reliable measure of federalism preferences, as the Cronbach’s alpha is 0.7.

Figure 1 displays the distribution of respondents’ federalism preferences. The mean score is nearly in the center of the range, reflecting the some mixed aggregate patterns shown in Table 1. Moreover, relatively few respondents have scores at the extreme ends of the range, suggesting that most Americans do not hold absolutist views about state versus national control of government.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Figure A.1 in the Appendix shows how preferences for federalism vary across states. We make these comparisons more tentatively since our sample is not designed to be representative at the state level and many states have relatively small samples. Interestingly, though, the figure suggests that state-level preferences toward federalism are not neatly distinguished on the basis of partisan control of state government.

**Figure 1 – Distribution of Federalism Battery Scores**



*Note:* Histogram of scores on federalism battery. The sample average is denoted with the dotted line.

## Measurement Validation

We validate our federalism measure by studying its relationship with attitudes toward policy devolution. To the extent Americans possess coherent preferences for federal arrangements, we would expect that their general views toward federalism would be associated with their attitudes about which level of government should exert control over specific policy areas.<sup>8</sup> We measured preferences for policy devolution by asking respondents whether local, state, or federal government ought to have primary control over nine different issue areas: education, roads and infrastructure, economic affairs, foreign affairs, environmental policy, health policy, social welfare, law enforcement, and criminal justice.<sup>9</sup> A respondent has a ‘preference for devolution’ if he or she believes that policy control ought to be at the state or local level.

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<sup>8</sup>As Thompson and Elling (1999) show, the public may prefer for multiple levels of government to be involved in a given policy area. For the purposes of validating our measure of preferences for national versus state power, however, we focus on evaluating whether our measure of preferences for national power map onto an individual’s preferences for primary control over specific policy domains.

<sup>9</sup>We show an image of the survey instrument in Appendix Figure A.2 and report descriptive statistics in Table A.2.

We estimate linear probability models to predict preferences for devolution across each issue area. Table A.5 presents the results, where the dependent variable is an indicator for whether a respondent prefers devolution in the relevant policy domain. Our main independent variable is respondents' federalism scores from Figure 1. Given how we coded responses to the federalism battery, we expect a positive relationship between our battery and each of the dependent variables, which would indicate that individuals who report abstract preferences for state power relative to national power are more likely to support policy devolution. To distinguish whether federalism preferences reflect individuals' general ideological orientations, we control for respondents' ideological self-placements on a five-point scale from "very conservative" (1) to "very liberal" (5). We also include several demographic controls for income (scaled to range between 0 and 1), race/ethnicity, college degree, and gender. Because political culture and context can vary across states and may affect how respondents evaluate national versus state power, we include state fixed effects in our models. Standard errors are clustered by state.

We find that respondents with greater preferences for states' rights as measured by our federalism battery are consistently more likely to prefer policy devolution to the state or local level. This relationship is positive and statistically distinguishable from zero across all nine issue areas. Interestingly, the magnitude of the relationship varies somewhat across policy areas. Just as preferences for devolution may vary across policy areas (Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis 2011), so too might the relationship between diffuse attitudes toward federalism and devolution in a particular policy domain. And, as the final column of Table A.5 shows, this relationship holds when calculating each respondents' average preferences for devolution across all issues. These results lend support for the validity of our measure of federalism preferences.

**Table 2** – Federalism Preferences and Support for Policy Devolution

|                         | Policy area       |                   |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                         | Education         | Roads             | Economic           | Foreign            | Environ            | Health             | Social             | Law                | Criminal           | Composite          |
|                         | (1)               | (2)               | (3)                | (4)                | (5)                | (6)                | (7)                | (8)                | (9)                | (10)               |
| Federalism preferences  | 0.196*<br>(0.075) | 0.206*<br>(0.073) | 0.639*<br>(0.086)  | 0.211*<br>(0.057)  | 0.581*<br>(0.087)  | 0.835*<br>(0.079)  | 0.708*<br>(0.087)  | 0.194*<br>(0.059)  | 0.572*<br>(0.103)  | 0.460*<br>(0.046)  |
| Ideology                | 0.001<br>(0.029)  | 0.009<br>(0.033)  | -0.020<br>(0.043)  | -0.026<br>(0.028)  | -0.075*<br>(0.027) | -0.071<br>(0.048)  | -0.067<br>(0.036)  | 0.011<br>(0.029)   | -0.061<br>(0.033)  | -0.033<br>(0.018)  |
| Republican              | -0.037<br>(0.037) | -0.043<br>(0.033) | -0.019<br>(0.035)  | -0.018<br>(0.031)  | -0.087*<br>(0.034) | -0.149*<br>(0.039) | -0.154*<br>(0.034) | -0.012<br>(0.029)  | -0.076*<br>(0.035) | -0.066*<br>(0.021) |
| Democrat                | 0.030<br>(0.045)  | -0.055<br>(0.046) | -0.011<br>(0.044)  | -0.103*<br>(0.040) | -0.147*<br>(0.053) | -0.165*<br>(0.042) | -0.088*<br>(0.037) | 0.061<br>(0.045)   | 0.007<br>(0.050)   | -0.052*<br>(0.023) |
| Income                  | -0.021<br>(0.036) | -0.001<br>(0.035) | -0.101*<br>(0.031) | -0.118*<br>(0.031) | -0.150*<br>(0.038) | -0.100*<br>(0.038) | -0.025<br>(0.046)  | -0.028<br>(0.027)  | -0.096*<br>(0.035) | -0.071*<br>(0.017) |
| Black                   | -0.047<br>(0.037) | 0.089*<br>(0.031) | 0.111*<br>(0.037)  | 0.262*<br>(0.039)  | 0.185*<br>(0.037)  | 0.089*<br>(0.030)  | 0.096*<br>(0.038)  | -0.069<br>(0.035)  | 0.022<br>(0.032)   | 0.082*<br>(0.016)  |
| Asian American          | -0.043<br>(0.042) | 0.034<br>(0.051)  | 0.064<br>(0.049)   | 0.144*<br>(0.038)  | 0.064<br>(0.042)   | 0.074<br>(0.046)   | 0.003<br>(0.061)   | -0.106<br>(0.065)  | 0.022<br>(0.056)   | 0.028<br>(0.028)   |
| Other race/ethnicity    | -0.060<br>(0.074) | 0.024<br>(0.052)  | -0.069<br>(0.089)  | 0.042<br>(0.056)   | -0.026<br>(0.066)  | 0.186*<br>(0.091)  | 0.033<br>(0.076)   | -0.064<br>(0.071)  | -0.013<br>(0.066)  | 0.006<br>(0.036)   |
| Hispanic                | -0.027<br>(0.044) | 0.049<br>(0.034)  | 0.096*<br>(0.027)  | 0.198*<br>(0.024)  | 0.132*<br>(0.044)  | 0.119*<br>(0.032)  | 0.026<br>(0.033)   | -0.108*<br>(0.037) | 0.023<br>(0.041)   | 0.056*<br>(0.021)  |
| College degree          | -0.017<br>(0.024) | -0.024<br>(0.021) | -0.012<br>(0.023)  | -0.006<br>(0.020)  | -0.022<br>(0.019)  | -0.030<br>(0.018)  | -0.042<br>(0.027)  | -0.017<br>(0.024)  | -0.006<br>(0.022)  | -0.020*<br>(0.009) |
| Woman                   | 0.053*<br>(0.023) | 0.105*<br>(0.021) | 0.027<br>(0.022)   | -0.026<br>(0.018)  | -0.016<br>(0.021)  | 0.002<br>(0.023)   | 0.045*<br>(0.022)  | 0.006<br>(0.015)   | 0.002<br>(0.023)   | 0.022*<br>(0.011)  |
| State Fixed Effects     | ✓                 | ✓                 | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| Observations            | 2,095             | 2,095             | 2,095              | 2,095              | 2,095              | 2,095              | 2,095              | 2,095              | 2,095              | 2,095              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.003             | 0.032             | 0.044              | 0.074              | 0.071              | 0.101              | 0.071              | 0.016              | 0.030              | 0.112              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. The dependent variable is whether respondents support devolution for the issues listed at the top of each column. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

## Predictors of Preferences for Federalism

Using our measure of preferences for federalism, we now investigate how these attitudes are shaped by individual characteristics and political context. We begin by evaluating how partisanship and ideology are associated with respondents’ preferences for federalism. To conduct our analysis, we created indicators for respondents who identified as Republicans or Democrats, treating leaners as partisans. Thus, independents are the omitted category. We also account for respondents’ ideological self-placements along a five-point scale (*Ideology*),

where larger values indicate individuals who reported more liberal orientations. As before, we include demographic controls and cluster standard errors on state.

Table A.6 presents our results. The results in column (1) provide little evidence that partisanship is systematically associated with preferences for federalism. The coefficients for the indicators for both partisan indicators are small in magnitude and neither is statistically distinguishable from zero. However, we do find evidence of a link between ideological self-placements and views toward federalism. The coefficient for *Ideology* is negative and statistically significant, indicating that individuals with more liberal orientations have lower scores on our federalism battery. Respondents with more traditional—that is, conservative—ideological values are more supportive of state power vis-à-vis national power compared with individuals with more liberal ideological beliefs. These results provide support for the claim that attitudes toward federalism are associated with individuals’ underlying ideological orientations.

Column (2) reports results when our model includes state fixed effects. In this specification, the coefficients for partisanship reflect difference within states rather than cross-sectionally within the entire sample. We find similar results as in column (1). The model provides strong evidence of a link between ideology and attitudes toward federalism but no evidence that party affiliation is associated with federalism preferences. The coefficients for the latter quantities are essentially zero and precisely estimated. Thus, despite the popular portrayal of the Republican Party as the party of states’ rights, we do not find that attitudes toward federalism vary systematically with partisanship.

## **State Political Context and Preferences for Federalism**

While an individual’s partisan affiliation may not be predictive of her attitude toward federalism, these beliefs may vary with state political context. For example, individuals who share the partisanship of state government officials might be more supportive of those officials’ policy agendas and express greater trust in state government more generally. In turn,



**Table 3** – Predictors of Federalism Preferences

|                         | (1)                | (2)                |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Republican              | −0.000<br>(0.013)  | 0.001<br>(0.013)   |
| Democrat                | 0.001<br>(0.009)   | 0.000<br>(0.009)   |
| Ideology                | −0.080*<br>(0.012) | −0.076*<br>(0.013) |
| Income                  | −0.004<br>(0.011)  | −0.003<br>(0.012)  |
| Black                   | 0.033*<br>(0.011)  | 0.031*<br>(0.011)  |
| Asian American          | 0.033*<br>(0.014)  | 0.032<br>(0.016)   |
| Other race/ethnicity    | −0.009<br>(0.020)  | −0.012<br>(0.021)  |
| Hispanic                | 0.015<br>(0.013)   | 0.011<br>(0.013)   |
| College degree          | 0.012<br>(0.006)   | 0.009<br>(0.006)   |
| Woman                   | −0.010*<br>(0.005) | −0.009<br>(0.005)  |
| State Fixed Effects     |                    | ✓                  |
| Observations            | 2,095              | 2,095              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.029              | 0.033              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. The dependent variable is respondents' federalism preferences. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

individuals whose state officials share their partisanship may support greater power for states relative to the national government. Likewise, individuals who have more favorable evaluations of their state government may also express greater support for state power relative to federal power.

We test these hypotheses with two sets of measures. In the first, we create indicators for *Copartisan governor* and *Counterpartisan governor*. The former measure takes a value

of 1 if the respondent and her state’s governor are from the same party, and zero otherwise. The latter measure takes a value of 1 if the respondent and her governor are from opposite parties, and zero otherwise. Thus, Independents have values of zero for both indicators.

For the second measure, we construct *Relative governor approval*. This variable indexes respondents’ approval ratings of their state’s governor relative to the president. Approval ratings were measured on five-point scales from “strongly disapprove” to “strongly approve”; we subtracted presidential approval ratings from gubernatorial ratings, and rescaled them to range between -1 and +1. Positive values indicate respondents who evaluated their governor more favorably than the president, while negative values indicate that the president had higher approval than the governor. Values of zero indicate that the respondent evaluated both officials equivalently. In all our models, we again include controls for self-identified ideology and demographic characteristics, as well as state fixed effects.<sup>10</sup>

The first column of Table A.7 shows the result of a model that includes indicators for respondents’ partisan alignments with their state’s governor. The coefficient for *Copartisan governor* is positive but small in magnitude and is not statistically significant. Likewise, the coefficient for *Counterpartisan governor* is negative, but it too is small in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Column (2) shows the results when accounting for *Relative governor approval*. The coefficient for this covariate is positive and statistically significant, indicating that increased approval of one’s governor relative to the president is associated with greater support for state power relative to national power. Column (3) shows results when jointly accounting for partisan alignment with the government and respondents’ approval of the governor relative to the president. We continue to find little evidence that partisan alignment with state government is associated with attitudes toward federalism. Moreover, while *Relative governor approval* is positive, the coefficient is no longer statistically distinguishable from zero.

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<sup>10</sup>We include controls for partisanship only in the models that do not include *Copartisan governor* and *Counterpartisan governor*, since these variables are perfectly collinear with respondent partisanship.

**Table 4** – Partisan Alignment, Gubernatorial Approval, and Preferences for Federalism

|                         | (1)                | (2)                | (3)                |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Copartisan gov          | 0.008<br>(0.011)   |                    | 0.006<br>(0.011)   |
| Counterpartisan gov     | -0.010<br>(0.011)  |                    | -0.009<br>(0.011)  |
| Relative gov approval   |                    | 0.017*<br>(0.008)  | 0.010<br>(0.007)   |
| Republican              |                    | 0.004<br>(0.013)   |                    |
| Democrat                |                    | -0.003<br>(0.009)  |                    |
| Ideology                | -0.079*<br>(0.014) | -0.083*<br>(0.014) | -0.086*<br>(0.014) |
| Income                  | -0.004<br>(0.012)  | -0.005<br>(0.012)  | -0.004<br>(0.012)  |
| Black                   | 0.032*<br>(0.010)  | 0.032*<br>(0.011)  | 0.031*<br>(0.010)  |
| Asian American          | 0.030<br>(0.016)   | 0.031<br>(0.016)   | 0.029<br>(0.016)   |
| Other race/ethnicity    | -0.015<br>(0.021)  | -0.012<br>(0.021)  | -0.015<br>(0.021)  |
| Hispanic                | 0.010<br>(0.013)   | 0.012<br>(0.013)   | 0.010<br>(0.013)   |
| College degree          | 0.010<br>(0.006)   | 0.009<br>(0.006)   | 0.009<br>(0.006)   |
| Woman                   | -0.008<br>(0.005)  | -0.009<br>(0.005)  | -0.009<br>(0.005)  |
| State Fixed Effects     | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| Observations            | 2,085              | 2,085              | 2,085              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.036              | 0.035              | 0.037              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. The dependent variable is respondents' federalism preferences. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

Overall, we find little evidence that partisan context is associated with attitudes toward federalism. This finding contrasts with results presented in Dinan and Heckelman (2020), who show that Democrats and Republicans differ systematically in their preferences for devolution. They further show that these preferences are sensitive to changes in political context, particularly among Democrats. While we find in Table A.5 that preferences for policy devolution do vary somewhat with partisanship, we find no evidence in Table A.6 that individuals’ partisanship is associated with more general preferences for the allocation of power across state and national government. Furthermore, Table A.7 provides no evidence that individuals’ partisan contexts is associated with their views toward federalism. Instead, we find relatively consistent evidence that respondents’ ideological orientations are connected with their views toward federalism, suggesting that these preferences are rooted in more deeply-seated political values. Finally, the results presented above provide some evidence that greater satisfaction with state relative to national government is associated with increased support for state power, though the findings are modest in magnitude.

## **Performance Evaluations and Attitudes toward Federalism**

In a final set of analyses, we consider how individuals’ performance evaluations of state and national government are associated with their attitudes toward federalism. In particular, we consider whether individuals who report greater satisfaction with their state government’s performance relative to national government express stronger preferences for state power. While Gehring (Forthcoming) presents evidence for this hypothesis in a cross-national setting, to our knowledge no studies investigate this possibility in the context of the United States.

We address this question in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Our survey was fielded several months into the pandemic’s spread in the United States. Therefore, every respondent was “treated” by the country’s national policy response to the pandemic, while responses varied significantly across state lines as governors and other policymakers adopted

divergent means of addressing the crisis.<sup>11</sup> State-level variation in pandemic response thus is likely to generate variation in respondents' approval of their governors. We asked respondents four questions to evaluate their state's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic along five-point scales, where larger values indicate greater approval or agreement. In addition to a question that asked about respondents' general approval of how state officials have handled the pandemic, they were asked each of the following:

- My state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was aggressive. (strongly disagree [1]/strongly agree [5])
- My state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was appropriate. (strongly disagree [1]/strongly agree [5])
- Compared to other states, how would you rate the performance of your state government's response to coronavirus and COVID-19? (much worse [1]/much better [5])

We created a measure of *State job performance* by averaging the five-point responses to each question. We then rescaled the measure to range from zero and one, where larger values indicate higher performance ratings of state government. We also asked parallel versions of each of the four questions above of the national government, created an analogous measure of national job performance, and then subtracted this measure from *State job performance*. This generates the variable *Relative state job performance*, which indexes respondents' evaluations of state performance relative to the national government and ranges from -1 to +1. We estimate regression models that include each of these measures as predictors of attitudes toward federalism. We again include demographic and political controls, estimate models with state fixed effects, and cluster standard errors on state.

Table A.8 shows these results. The models reported in column (1) includes the measure of *State job performance*. The coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that individuals who evaluated their state's pandemic response more approvingly expressed

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<sup>11</sup>Policy responses also varied by locality, though our analysis focuses on state-level variation.

stronger preferences for state power. The results in column (2) account for *Relative state job performance*. We again find that the coefficient is positive and statistically significant, indicating that individuals who were more approving of their state’s response to the pandemic relative to the national government’s response expressed greater support for state power.

The results in Table A.8 provide evidence that Americans’ attitudes toward federalism are at least partially responsive to their performance evaluations of state (and national) government. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals who perceived their state as responding more effectively also reported supporting more authority for state government relative to national government.

We acknowledge the challenges in interpreting our ordinary least squares estimates as causal estimates as they are likely to be biased. In particular, individuals’ evaluations of state governmental performance could be endogenous to their federalism preferences. To address this possibility, and to further explore the relationship between state outcomes and respondents’ evaluations, we instrument evaluations of state job performance with the percentage of individuals in a given respondent’s county confirmed with COVID-19 at the time of the survey. The intuition for this specification is that local experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to affect beliefs about federalism only through their impact on respondents’ evaluations of state government.

The results of the instrumental variables analysis and further discussion are included in Appendix Section A.3.1. Our two stage least squares estimates are consistent with those presented in Table A.8. Local experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic are positively associated with state government evaluations in the first stage model; moreover, the second stage model shows a statistically significant relationship with federalism preferences. While we do not wish to overinterpret the estimates because our instrument is relatively weak, the findings provide support for a causal link between state government performance and preferences for the allocation of state power.

**Table 5** – Evaluations of State Government Performance and Preferences for Federalism

|                                | DV: Federalism preferences |                    |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
|                                | (1)                        | (2)                |
| State job performance          | 0.070*<br>(0.019)          |                    |
| Relative state job performance |                            | 0.017*<br>(0.008)  |
| Republican                     | 0.001<br>(0.013)           | 0.004<br>(0.013)   |
| Democrat                       | -0.003<br>(0.009)          | -0.003<br>(0.009)  |
| Ideology                       | -0.076*<br>(0.012)         | -0.083*<br>(0.014) |
| Income                         | -0.008<br>(0.011)          | -0.005<br>(0.012)  |
| Black                          | 0.034*<br>(0.011)          | 0.032*<br>(0.011)  |
| Asian American                 | 0.033<br>(0.016)           | 0.031<br>(0.016)   |
| Other race/ethnicity           | -0.008<br>(0.020)          | -0.012<br>(0.021)  |
| Hispanic                       | 0.015<br>(0.014)           | 0.012<br>(0.013)   |
| College degree                 | 0.008<br>(0.006)           | 0.009<br>(0.006)   |
| Woman                          | -0.010<br>(0.005)          | -0.009<br>(0.005)  |
| State Fixed Effects            | ✓                          | ✓                  |
| Observations                   | 2,077                      | 2,085              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.047                      | 0.035              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. The dependent variable is respondents' federalism preferences. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

Overall, our results suggest that evaluations of federalism appear to reflect both ideological commitments and evaluations of government performance. Moreover, we find suggestive evidence that these evaluations of government performance are not completely uncoupled from real policy outcomes, implying that preferences for state power are in part shaped by sub-national government’s agendas and actions.

## Conclusion

Conflicts between state and national authority are omnipresent in policy debates in American politics. At the elite level, these debates often reflect partisan politics. For instance, though Democratic officials tend to advocate for more centralized, national authority, policy disagreements with Republican figures in national government are sometimes accompanied of the assertion of local prerogative by Democratic officials serving in local positions.<sup>12</sup> Yet, at least among elites, these debates often invoke more abstract principles related to the importance of local control. How are these factors reflected in Americans’ views about federalism? Addressing this question is important for characterizing how Americans view the distribution of power and understanding how elite debates resonate with the American public.

We present a new measure of public preferences for federalism. Our measurement approach follows Easton (1965, 1975), who distinguishes evaluations of political authorities from evaluations of political systems. The components of our federalism battery were designed to measure the latter quantity. Thus, while existing research focuses largely on performance evaluations and approval ratings of local, state, and national government, our measure focuses attention on respondents’ core beliefs about the distribution of authority in a federal system. This approach allows us to evaluate the presence and correlates of attitudes about national and state power that may structure evaluations of federalism in individual policy domains (see, e.g., Schneider, Jacoby, and Lewis 2011).

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<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., Dara Lind, March 8, 2018, “Sanctuary cities, explained,” *Vox*; available at <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/8/17091984/sanctuary-cities-city-state-illegal-immigration-sessions>.



Using our measure of diffuse attitudes about the distribution of power across national and state governments, we uncover several new findings about the predictors of attitudes toward federalism. First, we show that neither individuals' partisanship nor their partisan alignment with governing officials predict support for state power vis-à-vis national power. Instead, and second, these beliefs are more strongly and reliably associated with ideological orientations, where individuals with more conservative self-reported ideologies express greater support for state rather than national control. This evidence may suggest that federalism preferences are more deeply-rooted in core political values than they are in more ephemeral partisan debates. Third, we provided some evidence that preferences toward federalism may reflect respondents' evaluations of the (relative) performance of state and national government. As individuals believe that state authorities address policy issues more effectively than national government, they express greater support for state power.

Our findings provide a starting point for additional research about the political significance of Americans' attitudes about federalism. We invite further research to employ and revise our measure of preferences for federalism and to study the conditions under which they are relevant for understanding political debates. Indeed, our analysis did not probe all relevant factors that may structure beliefs about federalism and the distribution of political power. For example, prior research has highlighted the role of regional equity in evaluations of federalism (Kincaid and Cole 2016). To the degree that the federal government is perceived to treat states fairly in distributing resources, the public may be more accepting of national power than if the federal government is perceived to allocate resources in a more biased manner. We also did not account for the relationship between state and local government. Individuals may also have preferences for the relationship between local and state power, and these relationships may also vary with the relative performance of local governments. Exploring these possibilities can further enrich our knowledge about how the public evaluates the distribution of authority across multiple levels of government.

Of course, our analyses of the predictors of federalism have important limitations. Respondents' attributes and political contexts were not randomly assigned, and thus we can only report correlational findings. Additional research is needed to study how these factors are causally related to views about federalism. It would also be useful to evaluate temporal variation in the attitudes reported in our study. Our survey was conducted during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, when the relationship between state and national government may have been especially salient. Understanding whether attitudes toward federalism are stable at the aggregate and individual levels would shed additional light on the nature of these beliefs. Finally, our research leaves unanswered the question of whether and how these attitudes might structure how individuals evaluate specific politics and government actions. For example, do individuals view policies differently depending on which level of government implements them, in ways that vary with their more abstract beliefs about federalism? This is an important agenda for future scholarship.

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# Online Appendix

*Intended for online publication only.*

## A.1 Demographics



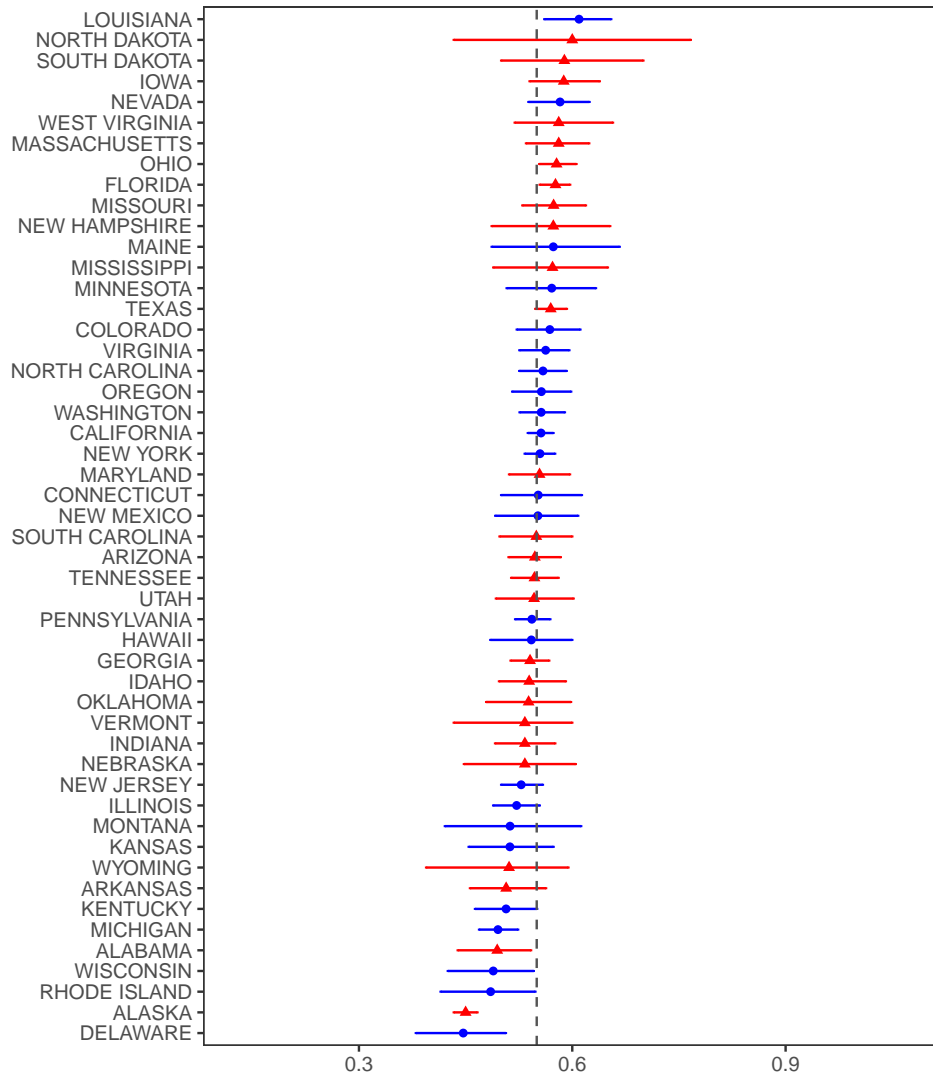
**Table A.1** – Sample Characteristics

| Category                        | <i>n</i> | Percentage |
|---------------------------------|----------|------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                   |          |            |
| Men                             | 1306     | 49.6       |
| Women                           | 1328     | 50.4       |
| <b>Age</b>                      |          |            |
| 18-29                           | 617      | 23.4       |
| 30-44                           | 749      | 28.4       |
| 45-64                           | 845      | 32.1       |
| 65+                             | 423      | 16.1       |
| <b>Education</b>                |          |            |
| Some high school                | 89       | 3.4        |
| High school diploma             | 661      | 25.3       |
| Some college                    | 682      | 26.1       |
| Bachelors degree or higher      | 1180     | 45.2       |
| <b>Income</b>                   |          |            |
| Below \$20,000                  | 609      | 24.3       |
| \$20,000 to \$34,999            | 405      | 16.1       |
| \$35,000 to \$49,999            | 335      | 13.4       |
| \$50,000 to \$74,999            | 454      | 18.1       |
| \$75,000 to \$99,999            | 281      | 11.2       |
| \$100,000 to \$150,000          | 229      | 9.1        |
| \$150,000 or more               | 196      | 7.8        |
| <b>Race/ethnicity</b>           |          |            |
| Asian American/Pacific Islander | 137      | 5.3        |
| Black                           | 283      | 11.0       |
| Hispanic                        | 332      | 12.9       |
| White                           | 1765     | 68.6       |
| Other/not specified             | 57       | 2.2        |
| <b>Partisanship</b>             |          |            |
| Democrat (inc leaners)          | 1169     | 44.4       |
| Republican (inc leaners)        | 1067     | 40.5       |
| Independent                     | 398      | 15.1       |
| <b>Region</b>                   |          |            |
| Northeast                       | 540      | 20.5       |
| Midwest                         | 494      | 18.8       |
| South                           | 995      | 37.8       |
| West                            | 605      | 23.0       |

**A.2 Federalism Preferences by State**

**A.3 Preferences for Devolution Instrument**

**Figure A.1 – Average Preferences for States’ Rights, By State**



The figure plots average responses by state with bootstrapped mean standard errors for each state. A higher value denotes greater feelings that the states should have more power over policy. The sample average preference score is denoted with the dotted line. Red triangles denote states with Republican governors and blue circles denote states with Democrat governors.

Which level of government ought to have primary control over each of the following issue areas?

|   | National government<br>(e.g. House Representative,<br>Senator, President) | State government<br>(e.g. State legislator,<br>Governor) | Local government<br>(e.g. Mayor, city or<br>town councilman,<br>county official) |
|---|---|--|--|
| Education                                 | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Roads and infrastructure                  | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Economic affairs (e.g. taxes)             | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Foreign affairs and defense               | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Environment (e.g. air quality policy)     | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Health care                               | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Social welfare (e.g. anti-poverty policy) | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Criminal justice (e.g. drug policy)       | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |
| Law enforcement (e.g. police operations)  | <input type="radio"/>   | <input type="radio"/>                                    | <input type="radio"/>  |

**Figure A.2 – Preferences for Devolution Instrument**

### A.3.1 Robustness check: 2SLS analysis of performance evaluations

In order address the issue of potential biases and interpret the results in Table A.8 causally, we instrument our *State job performance* measure with the percent of a given respondent’s county confirmed positive with COVID-19 at the time of the survey. We assume that COVID-19 cases do not affect a given respondent’s attitudes towards federalism other than through their evaluations of his or her state government’s performance handling the pandemic.

Appendix Table A.3 shows the first stage of our 2SLS analysis. While the instrument itself is weak, the coefficient on *Pct. of County Positive for COVID-19* is highly significant and remains strong and unchanged when we include individual-level characteristics in column (2). Overall, we find that individuals who live in counties where a greater proportion of the population tested positive for COVID-19 assessed their state governments more positively than those living in areas where a smaller proportion of the population tested positive. While this first stage may seem counter-intuitive, the positive sign on the point estimate might suggest that state governments expend more resources and are generally more visible in areas that are experiencing larger caseloads.

Appendix Table A.4 presents the second stage of our results. Mirroring the results in Table A.8, we observe that individuals who evaluated their state’s pandemic response

**Table A.2** – Percent of Respondents Preferring Devolution by Issue Area

|                      | Pct. Preferring<br>Devolution | Pct. Dems. Preferring<br>Devolution | Pct. Reps. Preferring<br>Devolution | p-value |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Education            | 71.2                          | 69.6                                | 72.8                                | 0.126   |
| Roads                | 72.7                          | 70.2                                | 75.2                                | 0.013   |
| Economic Affairs     | 48.1                          | 47.7                                | 47.5                                | 0.917   |
| Foreign Affairs      | 22.3                          | 22.6                                | 20.9                                | 0.386   |
| Environmental Policy | 40.6                          | 37.7                                | 41.4                                | 0.096   |
| Health Policy        | 47.9                          | 40.0                                | 52.7                                | >0.001  |
| Social Welfare       | 54.5                          | 47.9                                | 58.6                                | >0.001  |
| Law Enforcement      | 77.6                          | 76.2                                | 79.1                                | 0.123   |
| Criminal Justice     | 59.9                          | 58.2                                | 60.0                                | 0.449   |

Table shows sample and sub-sample average responses. The final column presents the p-values of a t-test comparing the responses of self-identified Democrats and Republicans.

**Table A.3** – IV Regression (First Stage)

|                                      | DV: State job performance |                   |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
|                                      | (1)                       | (2)               |
| Pct. of County Positive for COVID-19 | 0.555*<br>(0.224)         | 0.672*<br>(0.235) |
| State Fixed Effects                  | ✓                         | ✓                 |
| Individual Characteristics           |                           | ✓                 |
| Observations                         | 2,164                     | 2,028             |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. The dependent variable is respondents' evaluations of how their states have handled the COVID-19 pandemic. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

more approvingly expressed stronger preferences for state power. Overall, these results suggest that the patterns we observe in the main text are not only robust to an alternative specification, but that the positive relationship between perceptions of state job performance and preferences for devolution appear linked to actual policy outcomes.

**Table A.4** – IV Regression (Second Stage)

|                            | DV: Federalism preferences |                   |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
|                            | (1)                        | (2)               |
| State job performance      | 1.168*<br>(0.483)          | 1.147*<br>(0.415) |
| State Fixed Effects        | ✓                          | ✓                 |
| Individual Characteristics |                            | ✓                 |
| Observations               | 2,164                      | 2,028             |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered at the county level in parentheses. The dependent variable is respondents' evaluations of how their states have handled the COVID-19 pandemic. \* $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed test).

### A.3.2 Re-weighting

**Table A.5** – Federalism Preferences and Support for Policy Devolution

|                         | Policy area       |                    |                   |                    |                    |                    |                    |                   |                   |                    |
|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                         | Education         | Roads              | Economic          | Foreign            | Environ            | Health             | Social             | Law               | Criminal          | Composite          |
|                         | (1)               | (2)                | (3)               | (4)                | (5)                | (6)                | (7)                | (8)               | (9)               | (10)               |
| Federalism preferences  | 0.188<br>(0.117)  | 0.152<br>(0.096)   | 0.542*<br>(0.128) | 0.090<br>(0.104)   | 0.588*<br>(0.121)  | 0.686*<br>(0.106)  | 0.500*<br>(0.096)  | 0.162<br>(0.092)  | 0.567*<br>(0.119) | 0.386*<br>(0.053)  |
| Ideology                | -0.002<br>(0.042) | 0.010<br>(0.041)   | -0.036<br>(0.063) | -0.055<br>(0.044)  | -0.137*<br>(0.047) | -0.102<br>(0.058)  | -0.041<br>(0.053)  | -0.014<br>(0.035) | -0.073<br>(0.059) | -0.050<br>(0.028)  |
| Republican              | -0.058<br>(0.045) | -0.067<br>(0.043)  | -0.061<br>(0.050) | -0.074<br>(0.038)  | -0.110*<br>(0.051) | -0.190*<br>(0.038) | -0.160*<br>(0.056) | -0.020<br>(0.044) | -0.063<br>(0.051) | -0.089*<br>(0.028) |
| Democrat                | -0.001<br>(0.016) | -0.009<br>(0.013)  | 0.012<br>(0.017)  | 0.003<br>(0.017)   | -0.035*<br>(0.015) | -0.052*<br>(0.015) | -0.013<br>(0.012)  | 0.001<br>(0.015)  | 0.006<br>(0.018)  | -0.010<br>(0.009)  |
| Income                  | 0.0002<br>(0.003) | 0.002<br>(0.002)   | -0.002<br>(0.002) | -0.002<br>(0.002)  | -0.006*<br>(0.002) | -0.002<br>(0.003)  | -0.0001<br>(0.002) | 0.001<br>(0.002)  | -0.003<br>(0.003) | -0.001<br>(0.001)  |
| Black                   | -0.028<br>(0.052) | 0.117*<br>(0.040)  | 0.174*<br>(0.047) | 0.354*<br>(0.057)  | 0.176*<br>(0.048)  | 0.177*<br>(0.052)  | 0.077<br>(0.067)   | -0.058<br>(0.032) | 0.060<br>(0.045)  | 0.117*<br>(0.023)  |
| Asian American          | 0.012<br>(0.053)  | 0.054<br>(0.045)   | 0.011<br>(0.052)  | 0.103*<br>(0.040)  | -0.076<br>(0.076)  | 0.038<br>(0.089)   | 0.020<br>(0.057)   | -0.143<br>(0.083) | -0.022<br>(0.057) | -0.0003<br>(0.035) |
| Other race/ethnicity    | -0.046<br>(0.077) | 0.140*<br>(0.045)  | -0.059<br>(0.082) | -0.118*<br>(0.037) | -0.122<br>(0.063)  | 0.120<br>(0.073)   | -0.025<br>(0.086)  | -0.079<br>(0.070) | -0.055<br>(0.083) | -0.027<br>(0.029)  |
| Hispanic                | -0.032<br>(0.061) | -0.028<br>(0.033)  | 0.199*<br>(0.064) | 0.249*<br>(0.043)  | 0.179*<br>(0.079)  | 0.037<br>(0.076)   | 0.030<br>(0.064)   | -0.011<br>(0.052) | 0.116<br>(0.073)  | 0.082*<br>(0.030)  |
| College degree          | -0.011<br>(0.009) | -0.023*<br>(0.008) | -0.007<br>(0.011) | -0.011<br>(0.008)  | -0.012<br>(0.011)  | -0.025*<br>(0.010) | -0.012<br>(0.009)  | -0.013<br>(0.008) | -0.012<br>(0.012) | -0.014*<br>(0.005) |
| Woman                   | 0.047<br>(0.033)  | 0.104*<br>(0.024)  | -0.020<br>(0.038) | -0.038<br>(0.029)  | -0.027<br>(0.035)  | -0.005<br>(0.032)  | 0.052<br>(0.034)   | 0.022<br>(0.026)  | 0.009<br>(0.034)  | 0.016<br>(0.016)   |
| State Fixed Effects     | ✓                 | ✓                  | ✓                 | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                 | ✓                 | ✓                  |
| Observations            | 2,070             | 2,070              | 2,070             | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070             | 2,070             | 2,070              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.045             | 0.079              | 0.080             | 0.146              | 0.119              | 0.138              | 0.074              | 0.059             | 0.071             | 0.161              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. Specifications use survey weights sourced from the 2019 CPS. The dependent variable is whether respondents support devolution for the issues listed at the top of each column. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

### A.3.3 Re-weighting and dropping items on second component

**Table A.6** – Predictors of Federalism Preferences

|                         | DV: Federalism preferences |                    |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
|                         | (1)                        | (2)                |
| Republican              | 0.000<br>(0.014)           | -0.002<br>(0.013)  |
| Democrat                | 0.008<br>(0.015)           | 0.003<br>(0.015)   |
| Ideology                | -0.022*<br>(0.005)         | -0.018*<br>(0.005) |
| Income                  | -0.001<br>(0.001)          | -0.001<br>(0.001)  |
| Black                   | 0.044*<br>(0.012)          | 0.044*<br>(0.012)  |
| Asian American          | 0.023<br>(0.014)           | 0.027*<br>(0.013)  |
| Other race/ethnicity    | -0.007<br>(0.017)          | -0.012<br>(0.018)  |
| Hispanic                | -0.011<br>(0.013)          | -0.011<br>(0.011)  |
| College degree          | -0.002<br>(0.010)          | -0.007<br>(0.009)  |
| State Fixed Effects     |                            | ✓                  |
| Observations            | 2,080                      | 2,080              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.038                      | 0.076              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. Specifications use survey weights sourced from the 2019 CPS. The dependent variable is respondents' federalism preferences. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).



**Table A.7** – Partisan Alignment, Gubernatorial Approval, and Preferences for Federalism

|                         | DV: Federalism preferences |                    |                    |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                         | (1)                        | (2)                | (3)                |
| Copartisan gov          | 0.008<br>(0.013)           |                    | 0.006<br>(0.014)   |
| Counterpartisan gov     | -0.003<br>(0.015)          |                    | -0.006<br>(0.014)  |
| Relative gov approval   |                            | 0.005<br>(0.009)   | 0.003<br>(0.009)   |
| Republican              |                            | -0.001<br>(0.013)  |                    |
| Democrat                |                            | 0.002<br>(0.015)   |                    |
| Ideology                | -0.021*<br>(0.004)         | -0.018*<br>(0.005) | -0.017*<br>(0.005) |
| Income                  | -0.001<br>(0.001)          | -0.001<br>(0.001)  | -0.001<br>(0.001)  |
| Black                   | 0.046*<br>(0.012)          | 0.045*<br>(0.012)  | 0.046*<br>(0.012)  |
| Asian American          | 0.024<br>(0.014)           | 0.027<br>(0.013)   | 0.027*<br>(0.013)  |
| Other race/ethnicity    | -0.008<br>(0.017)          | -0.011<br>(0.018)  | -0.013<br>(0.018)  |
| Hispanic                | -0.012<br>(0.013)          | -0.010<br>(0.011)  | -0.011<br>(0.011)  |
| College degree          | -0.001<br>(0.011)          | -0.007<br>(0.010)  | -0.007<br>(0.010)  |
| State Fixed Effects     | ✓                          | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| Observations            | 2,070                      | 2,070              | 2,070              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> | 0.038                      | 0.075              | 0.077              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. Specifications use survey weights sourced from the 2019 CPS. The dependent variable is respondents' federalism preferences. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

**Table A.8** – Evaluations of State Government Performance and Preferences for Federalism

|                                | DV: Federalism preferences |                    |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
|                                | (1)                        | (2)                |
| State job performance          | 0.071*<br>(0.024)          |                    |
| Relative state job performance |                            | 0.005<br>(0.009)   |
| Republican                     | -0.004<br>(0.014)          | -0.001<br>(0.013)  |
| Democrat                       | -0.001<br>(0.014)          | 0.002<br>(0.015)   |
| Ideology                       | -0.018*<br>(0.005)         | -0.018*<br>(0.005) |
| Income                         | -0.001<br>(0.001)          | -0.001<br>(0.001)  |
| Black                          | 0.047*<br>(0.012)          | 0.045*<br>(0.012)  |
| Asian American                 | 0.031*<br>(0.013)          | 0.027<br>(0.013)   |
| Other race/ethnicity           | -0.009<br>(0.018)          | -0.011<br>(0.018)  |
| Hispanic                       | -0.008<br>(0.010)          | -0.010<br>(0.011)  |
| College degree                 | -0.008<br>(0.009)          | -0.007<br>(0.010)  |
| State Fixed Effects            | ✓                          | ✓                  |
| Observations                   | 2,062                      | 2,070              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>        | 0.090                      | 0.075              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. Specifications use survey weights sourced from the 2019 CPS. The dependent variable is respondents' federalism preferences. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

**Table A.9** – Federalism Preferences and Support for Policy Devolution, By Component

|                                       | Policy area        |                    |                   |                    |                    |                    |                    |                    |                   |                    |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                                       | Education          | Roads              | Economic          | Foreign            | Environ            | Health             | Social             | Law                | Criminal          | Composite          |
|                                       | (1)                | (2)                | (3)               | (4)                | (5)                | (6)                | (7)                | (8)                | (9)               | (10)               |
| Federalism preferences (First Comp.)  | 0.091<br>(0.088)   | 0.104<br>(0.081)   | 0.405*<br>(0.110) | 0.060<br>(0.086)   | 0.453*<br>(0.096)  | 0.519*<br>(0.091)  | 0.372*<br>(0.084)  | 0.085<br>(0.075)   | 0.440*<br>(0.091) | 0.281*<br>(0.042)  |
| Federalism preferences (Second Comp.) | 0.364*<br>(0.095)  | 0.126<br>(0.067)   | 0.262*<br>(0.077) | 0.083<br>(0.049)   | 0.214*<br>(0.063)  | 0.301*<br>(0.074)  | 0.254*<br>(0.104)  | 0.273*<br>(0.077)  | 0.189*<br>(0.076) | 0.230*<br>(0.038)  |
| Republican                            | 0.026<br>(0.043)   | 0.018<br>(0.042)   | -0.023<br>(0.063) | -0.050<br>(0.045)  | -0.129*<br>(0.047) | -0.088<br>(0.059)  | -0.027<br>(0.056)  | 0.007<br>(0.037)   | -0.067<br>(0.059) | -0.037<br>(0.029)  |
| Democrat                              | -0.025<br>(0.043)  | -0.058<br>(0.043)  | -0.046<br>(0.049) | -0.067<br>(0.038)  | -0.100<br>(0.051)  | -0.174*<br>(0.041) | -0.144*<br>(0.059) | 0.004<br>(0.043)   | -0.055<br>(0.052) | -0.074*<br>(0.028) |
| Ideology                              | -0.006<br>(0.015)  | -0.010<br>(0.013)  | 0.009<br>(0.017)  | 0.002<br>(0.017)   | -0.037*<br>(0.014) | -0.055*<br>(0.015) | -0.016<br>(0.012)  | -0.003<br>(0.014)  | 0.005<br>(0.018)  | -0.013<br>(0.008)  |
| Income                                | -0.0002<br>(0.002) | 0.002<br>(0.002)   | -0.002<br>(0.002) | -0.002<br>(0.002)  | -0.006*<br>(0.002) | -0.002<br>(0.002)  | -0.0003<br>(0.002) | 0.001<br>(0.002)   | -0.003<br>(0.003) | -0.002<br>(0.001)  |
| Black                                 | -0.038<br>(0.055)  | 0.114*<br>(0.040)  | 0.169*<br>(0.047) | 0.352*<br>(0.056)  | 0.173*<br>(0.046)  | 0.171*<br>(0.052)  | 0.072<br>(0.067)   | -0.066*<br>(0.030) | 0.058<br>(0.047)  | 0.112*<br>(0.023)  |
| Asian American                        | 0.012<br>(0.053)   | 0.054<br>(0.045)   | 0.011<br>(0.053)  | 0.103*<br>(0.040)  | -0.076<br>(0.077)  | 0.038<br>(0.091)   | 0.020<br>(0.058)   | -0.143<br>(0.085)  | -0.022<br>(0.058) | -0.0004<br>(0.037) |
| Other race/ethnicity                  | -0.041<br>(0.066)  | 0.141*<br>(0.046)  | -0.057<br>(0.086) | -0.118*<br>(0.036) | -0.121<br>(0.065)  | 0.122<br>(0.073)   | -0.023<br>(0.084)  | -0.076<br>(0.064)  | -0.054<br>(0.085) | -0.025<br>(0.029)  |
| Hispanic                              | -0.046<br>(0.057)  | -0.032<br>(0.035)  | 0.192*<br>(0.067) | 0.246*<br>(0.042)  | 0.174*<br>(0.080)  | 0.030<br>(0.072)   | 0.024<br>(0.064)   | -0.021<br>(0.049)  | 0.112<br>(0.075)  | 0.076*<br>(0.029)  |
| College degree                        | -0.008<br>(0.009)  | -0.022*<br>(0.008) | -0.005<br>(0.011) | -0.010<br>(0.008)  | -0.010<br>(0.011)  | -0.024*<br>(0.010) | -0.011<br>(0.009)  | -0.010<br>(0.008)  | -0.011<br>(0.012) | -0.012*<br>(0.006) |
| Woman                                 | 0.043<br>(0.029)   | 0.103*<br>(0.024)  | -0.021<br>(0.038) | -0.038<br>(0.029)  | -0.028<br>(0.035)  | -0.007<br>(0.033)  | 0.050<br>(0.034)   | 0.019<br>(0.026)   | 0.008<br>(0.034)  | 0.014<br>(0.016)   |
| State Fixed Effects                   | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                 | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                 | ✓                  |
| Observations                          | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070             | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070             | 2,070              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.069              | 0.081              | 0.084             | 0.146              | 0.121              | 0.142              | 0.078              | 0.075              | 0.072             | 0.178              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. Specifications use survey weights sourced from the 2019 CPS. The dependent variable is whether respondents support devolution for the issues listed at the top of each column. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).

**Table A.10** – Federalism Preferences and Support for Policy Devolution,  
By Component

|                                       | <i>Dependent variable:</i> |                    |                    |                    |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                                       | Composite                  |                    |                    |                    |
|                                       | (1)                        | (2)                | (3)                | (4)                |
| Federalism preferences                | 0.386*<br>(0.053)          |                    |                    |                    |
| Federalism preferences (First Comp.)  |                            | 0.226*<br>(0.045)  |                    | 0.281*<br>(0.042)  |
| Federalism preferences (Second Comp.) |                            |                    | 0.188*<br>(0.035)  | 0.230*<br>(0.038)  |
| Republican                            | -0.050<br>(0.028)          | -0.055<br>(0.028)  | -0.035<br>(0.029)  | -0.037<br>(0.029)  |
| Democrat                              | -0.089*<br>(0.028)         | -0.095*<br>(0.028) | -0.070*<br>(0.027) | -0.074*<br>(0.028) |
| Ideology                              | -0.010<br>(0.009)          | -0.011<br>(0.008)  | -0.019*<br>(0.008) | -0.013<br>(0.008)  |
| Income                                | -0.001<br>(0.001)          | -0.001<br>(0.001)  | -0.002<br>(0.001)  | -0.002<br>(0.001)  |
| Black                                 | 0.117*<br>(0.023)          | 0.123*<br>(0.023)  | 0.125*<br>(0.022)  | 0.112*<br>(0.023)  |
| Asian American                        | -0.0003<br>(0.035)         | 0.003<br>(0.035)   | 0.009<br>(0.037)   | -0.0004<br>(0.037) |
| Other race/ethnicity                  | -0.027<br>(0.029)          | -0.032<br>(0.029)  | -0.036<br>(0.027)  | -0.025<br>(0.029)  |
| Hispanic                              | 0.082*<br>(0.030)          | 0.089*<br>(0.030)  | 0.087*<br>(0.029)  | 0.076*<br>(0.029)  |
| College degree                        | -0.014*<br>(0.005)         | -0.014*<br>(0.005) | -0.011<br>(0.006)  | -0.012*<br>(0.006) |
| Woman                                 | 0.016<br>(0.016)           | 0.016<br>(0.015)   | 0.011<br>(0.015)   | 0.014<br>(0.016)   |
| State Fixed Effects                   | ✓                          | ✓                  | ✓                  | ✓                  |
| Observations                          | 2,070                      | 2,070              | 2,070              | 2,070              |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>               | 0.161                      | 0.142              | 0.146              | 0.178              |

*Note:* Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors clustered on states in parentheses. Specifications use survey weights sourced from the 2019 CPS. The dependent variable is whether respondents support devolution for the issues listed at the top of each column. \*p<0.05 (two-tailed test).