

The Resilient Power of the Center:

Impacts of Moderate Public Opinion and Direct Democracy in States with Republican Governors

Henry Greenberg

Haverford College

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Professor Stephen McGovern

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Introduction

A recent *Bloomberg* article reported on one of two the case studies at the center of this thesis: minimum wage laws in Missouri. The article treated minimum wage law in Missouri as a complete economic anomaly. It opens; “with job openings near record highs, the tight U.S. labor market is creating some unusual proponents of higher pay for state workers: Republican politicians. Missouri Governor Mike Parson was the unlikely architect of a plan enacted last month that provides a \$15 minimum wage for thousands of state workers and boosts pay by 5.5% across the board... ‘It is very, very out of the ordinary’ for GOP governors to raise wages broadly like this, said [Cornell professor] Lee Adler” (Albright and Moran 2022). This economic frame ignores all of the political context surrounding Parson and the other Republican governors’ advocacy for an increased minimum wage. This thesis argues that Parson and Republican governors’ actions should be expected given the political circumstances and that this embrace of a popular and a tangibly beneficial policy is not an extraordinary event.

This is the puzzle: As a supposedly conservative Republican Party became ascendent in many states, many of these same states pursue policy agendas that are surprisingly moderate and are even sometimes progressive. How do we explain this? My thesis attempts to provide reasoning for the observable trend of Republican governors sometimes breaking away from the Republican party line on substantive spending issues. As the *Bloomberg* article demonstrates, the fact that Republican governors do break away from their party line is surprising at first glance. It directly conflicts with the conventional narrative that the Republican party has dominated at the state level since the rapid emergence of the Tea party movement in 2010. While it is true that Republicans have won a significant majority of state level elections, the story of the policy outcomes and the lasting impacts of these elections have been lost in the shuffle. At one point in

the 2010s, Republicans controlled thirty three state legislatures, but their agenda was consistently stalled at the state level. As the Tea party movement continued to gain ground electorally, state budgets grew at faster rates than ever before, earned income tax credits were implemented, state minimum wages continued to increase, Obamacare was adopted in the overwhelming majority of states, and penalties for drug laws were routinely reduced nationally. I wanted to find out why and how this happened and what the leaders of these state parties, governors, were doing during this time period and if this stalled conservative agenda was connected to what people truly wanted from their government.

Another major reason why deviation within the Republican party is surprising is because the current discourse on state politics and politics generally paints a picture of conservative states becoming more conservative and liberal states becoming more liberal. In American politics, there is a definite cultural focus on polarization and differences between the two major political parties. Our political instincts urge us to look at the party label attached to election winners and then extrapolate about what all future policy outcomes will be based on that alone. By its nature, a two party system encourages people to think of politics and government as a zero-sum game. In other words, typical conventions state that if the Democrats succeed, then the Republicans must fail and vice versa. A recent example of this emphasis on the commonly accepted theory of increasing polarization can be found in this week's *New York Times*. In the article "*Flurry of New Laws Move Blue and Red States Further Apart*," Shawn Hubler and Jill Cowan write about how abortion laws, gun laws, and gay rights laws are becoming more desperate depending on the state's dominant political party. They imply that America is heading down a path where state laws will become unrecognizable from another because of political ideology alone. Jon Michaels of UCLA provided an academic voice in supporting this way of thinking. He said, "we're further

and further polarizing and fragmenting, so that blue states and red states are becoming not only a little different but radically different” (Hubler and Cowan 2022).

Hubler and Cowan’s analysis is skewed in two main ways. First, they entirely focus on decision-makers who are exceptionally ideological. In fact, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas and Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida are the only two governors mentioned by name in the article. Both of these governors have been rumored to run for president in 2024 and therefore, they have incentives outside of trying to remain popular at home. Name-recognition and appealing to Republican primary voters may matter more to Abbott and DeSantis than most other Republican officials. In fact, most conservative states have governors who do a better job of reflecting where their voters truly stand. Most Republican governors are unafraid to cut back social services because they know their voters rely on the government in their daily lives. Similarly, most Republican governors do not use their own states as a testing ground for the most ideologically conservative laws. Rather, most leaders let fringe politicians, such as Abbott or DeSantis, try out a culturally conservative policy and then monitor how popular it is before potentially adopting it.

Second, the coverage of state politics is focused broadly on cultural issues. The Republican party believes that these issues will help keep their brand popular for elections, so they gear their legislative agenda towards these cultural debates. Taking a stance against abortion, rights for gay people, and access to voting excites the people who are most likely to vote for Republicans. By passing extremely ideological laws on these cultural issues, the Republican party is sending a reminder to extreme conservative constituents that their votes are desired.

However, the current popular discourse leaves out the fact that polarization does not apply to every element of our political system. This article makes no mention of the issues that

voters consistently list as their top priorities. This includes economic issues, such as taxes, the minimum wage, and financial stimulus. Other top priorities include healthcare, social security, education, transportation, and infrastructure. None of these issues were mentioned in the article because, for the most part, state-level Republicans are not working to advance their most conservative ideas on these issues. Opinions on these issues are still relatively moderate and unified. Because they do not actively contribute to the cultural divisions in America, they tend to be ignored and understudied.

I first noticed that the conservative agenda often struggles to get enacted at the state level when reading a different *New York Times* article over a year ago. The article, “*Asa Hutchinson, G.O.P. Governor of Arkansas, Vetoes Anti-Transgender Bill*,” details the governor of Arkansas’s decision to break away from his state’s Republican caucus in order to preserve the rights of an oppressed minority group (Astor 2021). The fact an official, who branded himself as a traditional conservative, made a choice that clashed with such a large percentage of the people who voted for him intrigued me. I began researching to see if this decision was exceptional or expected of Republican governors. The answer was that vetoing the anti-transgender bill was both exceptional and expected. It was exceptional because of the issue of trans rights itself. All Republican politicians have been more socially conservative for the last half-century of American politics.

However, this decision was also somewhat predictable because governors do break away from their party’s caucus under certain circumstances. Governors are responsible for so much that affects people’s lives, including unemployment benefits, healthcare, and education. These are the political issues that voters care most about because if the government is unable to provide proper employment conditions, healthcare, or education, it palpably lessens the quality of their

life. Furthermore, governors are broadly known by their constituents and they are seen as directly responsible for policy results. A governor cannot deflect or pass blame onto their colleagues in the same way a senator or a state legislator can. Therefore, the political pressure a governor faces is very different from any other members of their party. Looking at this case, it is possible that Governor Hutchinson felt that siding with the transgender community was the necessary and responsible decision. This project will be useful from an academic perspective because it challenges the conventional understanding of how divided Americans are politically. By showing tangible past examples where coalitions of ideologically diverse political groups came together to implement substantive policy, and even amend a state's constitution, my thesis project demonstrates that partisan differences are not insurmountable barriers.

Additionally, this project could help academics because I examine gubernatorial behavior through a novel lens. The influence of the ballot initiative elections on ensuing gubernatorial behavior is unstudied and from the results of my series of interviews, it appears that governors do plan around ballot initiative elections and can capitalize on the results if they are politically savvy. Because of ballot measures, governors quietly moderate on an issue, reap the benefits of popular policies, and never take a strong public stance against their party. This phenomenon is unreported in scholarship on gubernatorial behavior and is potentially very impactful towards policy outcomes. For those involved in politics or those who want to establish policies outside of the entrenched in-power ideology, this project showcases an underutilized alternative to government that more directly represents how the citizenry feels on a subject. The ballot initiative provides a way of avoiding partisan gridlock in the lawmaking process. Instead of dealing with committees and senate debate and veto powers, a single state-wide vote has the potential to circumvent the whole system. If these tools of government are available in a given

state, an activist or invested citizen could be able to accomplish what a legislative body can do without personally winning election.

My thesis is organized in eight parts. The first section, the literature review, briefly examines all of the established academic research on gubernatorial decision making. I placed a specific emphasis on articles that discussed gubernatorial moderation and disagreement within the governor's political party. From the published literature, I found three schools of thought theorizing what affects governors: public opinion, governmental institutions, and elections. In the second section, research design, I designed a way to test the influence of moderate public opinion upon Republican governors. Specifically, I designed a project where I used ballot initiative elections as a stand-in for the public sentiment on a policy and then I conducted a series of interviews to determine what were the effects of the public's choices.

In the third section, I established that there is underlying moderate public opinion in the state (Missouri) where my case studies took place. Showing moderate political feelings in Missouri might seem to buck conventions because the state has regularly elected Republicans to every major office for the last decade. Therefore, it was necessary to show that there was moderate public opinion in the state that could potentially influence the governor to moderate. The fourth and fifth sections are my first case study, which is on the 2018 minimum wage ballot initiative. The fourth section used newspaper research to inform readers about the history of the topic. The fifth section analyzed interviews in order to figure out if the campaign and the moderate sentiment it voiced had an effect on the governor. The sixth and seventh sections made up my second case study, which examined the 2020 Medicaid Expansion ballot initiative. The sixth section mirrors the fourth background as it provides background through newspaper research. The seventh section mirrors the fifth section in that it also analyzes interviews to see

how the governor was influenced by ballot initiative campaigns and moderate public opinion. Finally, in the conclusion, I assess how the results of my research tie back to, support, and challenge the previous scholarship on this topic.

By the end of this thesis, readers will have an understanding of why Republican governors are inclined to advance centrist policy issues in some critical areas. In fact, the thesis provides evidence that the institutions of government, specifically those aimed to actively represent the public, are still working as they were designed. The process of the ballot initiative gives people who are not substantively represented by their government a chance to better the quality of their lives within the current system of government. The findings of this project challenge ideas that governments in the United States are unresponsive to the needs of their people and challenge ideas that the will of the people is rapidly diverging on all major policy issues. This thesis gives a perspective on the functioning of government and the power of voters that is underrepresented in scholarship and is often dismissed cynically in the media.

Literature Review

For my thesis project, I wanted to examine what the role of governors is in the discrepancy between electoral status and moderate policy implementation and I found three main answers. First, governors are keenly aware of the public's opinion and will allow sweeping public opinion to push them towards moderation. Second, governmental institutions force governors to be responsive to the needs of the people, which influences leaders to be less ideological. These institutions include legislatures, the court system, federal rulemaking, and other state governments. Third, the influence of elections, which could be considered as governmental institutions or as methods of voicing public opinion, splits the differences between the two theories. Within the scope of elections and political parties, we find that electoral pressures including polarization, direct democracy, competitive election opponents, and opportunities to champion specific liberal causes all influence governors to moderate. Because research about elections and political parties does not cleanly fit into either two of the other schools of thought, they have to be categorized separately.

Matthew Grossman's *Red State Blues* (2019) is the most recent comprehensive study of the behavior of Republican governors and other state-level Republican officials. Grossman examines why Republican policies have not dominated the political landscape, when their party and politicians have been so successful. His answer is that conservative agendas get stalled at the state level. According to Grossman, state politics offer more opportunities for leaders to be attuned to public opinion, to over promise on campaigns, to react to ongoing crises, and to cooperate with opposing state legislators, among many other differences. Essentially, Grossman's scope is so wide that many of my research pathways stemmed from his research. In practice, this means his findings will be scattered across my literature review. When he finds evidence to

support a certain school (or subschool) of thought, I will cite it alongside the author I'm actively discussing. My hope is to narrow down Grossman's project. I aim to explore the actions of governors specifically and why they pass moderate laws when they do. As I do this, as stated earlier, I will be focusing on three main theories: the influence of public opinion, the influence of governmental institutions, and the influence of elections.

A. Public Opinion

In order to fully understand public opinion, we have to discuss why it matters, where it currently stands, and how it shifts from issue to issue. As the information about public opinion is presented, I will show why it influences conservative governors to moderate. Chris Tausanovitch (2019) argues that subnational governments are especially likely to be influenced by the public because they are most responsible for reacting to the concerns of citizens. This burden of responsibility is heightened in times when the federal government is divided and polarized. Because of this, responsiveness from state governments has remained relatively stable over the last forty years (see also; Grossman 2019). In Tausanovitch's research, all governmental actions at the state and local levels can be understood through the lens of trying to be as responsive as possible and trying to match the popular consensus among citizens. In his research, Tausanovitch finds estimates for public opinion on social and economic policy "based on hundreds of thousands of answers to policy questions" (pg. 335). Then, he directly measured the economic opinion estimates against the partisanship of policy proposals from the same time period. The measure of partisanship is taken from a study from Caughey and Warshaw (2018). Tausanovitch (2019) concludes that, "there is a proven strong association between policy measures and public opinion ($r = .88$), but this association appears to be roughly linear, suggesting that political

parties alone cannot account for the differences in the pattern” (pg. 335). Tausanovitch provided two hypotheses as to why this phenomenon occurred. First, he speculated that federal level officials were more polarized and ideological than state level officials and that state level politicians were more representative of how the population thinks. Second, Tausanovitch believed that state level officials, and especially governors, were more likely to be re-elected on the basis of tangibly improving people’s lives. He did not provide new quantitative data for either of these theories (Tausanovitch 2019).

Therefore, it becomes imperative to learn where public opinion falls in order to understand the actions of state government officials. Morris Fiorina (2017), who writes about public opinion in the context of the Trump administration, argues that, despite a seemingly more polarized political climate, most Americans are still politically moderate. Americans overwhelmingly prefer to see themselves as in the middle of the political spectrum, “when Americans are asked to classify themselves ideologically, we do not find them moving away from the middle and lumping up at the liberal and conservative poles” (pg. 24). Fiorina believes this is why Gallup polling data shows that more voters identify themselves as Independent (41%) than either one of the major political parties. In these studies, 29% of voters associate themselves with the Democratic party and another 29% categorize themselves as Republicans. The high level of moderate public opinion is driven by stances on policy issues; “The way that the public thinks about poverty, opportunity, business, unions, religion, civic duty, foreign affairs and many other subjects is, to a large extent, the same today as in 1987. The values that unified Americans twenty-five years ago remain areas of consensus” (pg. 29). I will expand on how Americans build consensus on issues of substantive spending later on.

The persisting tendency of Americans to avoid political extremism does not mean there hasn't been any changes in the landscape of public opinion. A major recent change is that more people are starting to get involved in politics; voter turnout is going up across all political parties and levels of government. Because of increased interest, American National Election Studies (ANES) has measured "a drop in 'don't know' and 'haven't thought much about this' responses" in their newest polls regarding political attitudes (Fiorina 2017). Fiorina also believes any detected drop in moderating public opinion can be attributed to this. Historically, people who are apathetic towards politics were recorded as moderate because they do not polarize the political climate in any way. People who are newly-invested in politics and elections are recorded as contributing to increased polarization, even if they newly identify as center-left or center-right and join popular consensus on most issues. Therefore, decreases in moderate public opinion are not caused by former independents taking on extreme political opinions. Instead, there has been an upswing in political involvement, which has changed historical records of public opinion, but potentially has only marginally changed public opinion.

In contrast, public opinion among politicians, activists, lobbyists, and donors has become much more polarized over the last ten years. Ben Merriman (2019) focuses on ways state level Republicans were innovative and successful in the 2010s. Overall, Merriman's theory of how state government works fits in better with the school of thought that asserts that established institutions greatly shape governmental actions, but his analysis of public opinion is still helpful for our understanding. Merriman still finds that today's politicians are more polarized than their voters, "partisan officials and especially Republicans have also moved away from the ideological median... even more rapidly than the public." He repeats this point, "the mobilization of the Tea Party in 2010 is also associated with an ideological shift within the Republican Party. Republican

elected officials moved sharply away from the ideological median after 2010 and moved further from the ideological median than the Democrats did” (pg. 18). However, the polarization among politicians and other politically active people is not evenly distributed (Fiorina 2017; Merriman 2019). Newer and younger candidates are more likely to be ideologically driven compared to older established counterparts. Politics no longer attracts talented moderates at the same rate that it once did. Governors tend to be more established and older. Because of their established status, governors often have a public history of which policies they’ve supported. Suddenly adopting new more extreme positions can be difficult to do without upsetting key constituencies and interest groups. Thus, there is reason to believe governors are more closely connected with moderate public opinion when they’re compared to other newer more ideological elected officials.

When shifting away from individual actors and looking towards issues of substantial spending, it has been found that public opinion on these types of issues also tends to be clustered together, usually towards the center of the political spectrum. William Franko and Christopher Witko (2018), specifically study populist economic policies. They study how and why populist policies have gotten implemented across all state governments regardless of partisan leanings. Franko and Witko repeatedly assert that although economic populist policies are typically associated with liberal politics, in reality, they are very popular across demographic and ideological groups. They found that the most significant reason why these policies came into fruition is because they are overwhelmingly supported by the public; “the policies that we look at in this book in detail -- the minimum wage (75% of Americans support), tax credits for the poor (71% of Americans of support), and tax increases for the wealthy -- are generally quite popular with the average citizen and are likely to reduce income inequality” (pg. 12). To put these

numbers in context, these percentages are both far higher than the percentages either major party gets in national elections and the percentages of seats either party gets at any level of government. Although it is outside the scope of Franko and Witko's research, it is worth noting that the support for other substantial spending issues like education and Medicaid also draw these high levels of favorability (Grossman 2019; Cohen 2018). This ensures that the support for these "bread and butter" policies is not exclusively coming from people of one political ideology. Later on, Franko and Witko conclude their study on populist economic policy by saying, "we find that increases in public concern about income inequality make it more likely that a state will have a wage minimum above the federal level, which provides evidence supporting our claim that citizen attitudes about growing inequality do influence state policy making, pushing it in an egalitarian direction" (Franko and Witko 2018). These findings reinforce the idea that public opinion about policy issues often leads to forming a broad populist political consensus.

Franko and Witko specifically honed in on minimum wage laws and earned income tax credits (EITCs) at the state level. From their study, it is evident that Republican governors are so attentive to public opinion that it favors the passage of these economic causes typically associated with liberalism. For minimum wage, Democratic state governments were only slightly more likely to enact that policy (Franko and Witko 2018; US Department of Labor 2014). This is illustrated by the fact that many different Republican governors (Jan Brewer, John Kasich, Sean Parnell, Rick Scott) from conservative states all across America (Arizona, Ohio, Alaska, Florida) kept their states' minimum wages above the federal minimum and even opted to raise it even more at points. This is a huge departure from how minimum wages were handled by Republicans at the federal level. As recently as March 2021, Congress split on partisan lines on whether to raise the federal minimum wage. Nearly all federal Democrats were in favor of raising the

minimum wage. All federal Republicans were against it. Thus, it is fair to say that the politics around state wage minimums are markedly different, Franko and Witko write, “state minimum wages have responded to a growing public awareness of income inequality” (pg. 16).

For earned income tax credits, state governments were even more responsive to public awareness and public opinion. Franko and Witko (2018) found that party control of the government made no significant difference on whether there was an earned income tax credit in a state’s tax code. They wrote, “both liberal and conservative governments adopted EITC laws at similar rates. In addition, states where individuals have become more aware of inequality... are more likely to adopt the EITC” and “our results do not show that more liberal governments are more likely to adopt a state EITC program” (pg. 160). This is unexpected considering federal Republicans unanimously refused to vote for it a generation ago during the Clinton administration. Like minimum wage increases, the implementation of EITCs is “relatively spread out across the country in terms of geography and politics.” Over the course of the 2010s, Republican governors in Ohio, South Carolina, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Iowa either added or expanded EITCs in their states’ tax codes. The conservative corporate apparatus of the Republican party is aware of the bipartisan success that advocates of the earned income tax credit have had. They have begun to push back through creating and disseminating general templates for bills that aim to repeal EITCs (Franko and Witko 2018). However, despite having an opportunity to spur widespread change, the only successful repeal fueled by elite conservative activists was in North Carolina. In the case of EITCs, external conservative pressures have been stalled when they reach the desks of state legislators.

The unenthusiastic EITC repeal attempts hint at another trend in issue-based public opinion: extreme policy proposals are relatively unpopular. Political writer Adam Serwer (2021)

details the positions of Governor Greg Abbott of Texas who has had to walk the line between appeasing his conservative base and straying away from the extreme policy proposals that he occasionally disagrees with. One example of Abbott's slight moderation includes his crude vow to "eliminate all rapists," which signals he believes women can choose to abort their baby only if they were raped. This may seem like a very conservative position, but it is a slightly more moderate stance than the most far-right Republicans in Texas. Another example includes strongly rejecting his Lieutenant Governor's suggestion to "let senior citizens sacrifice themselves to save the economy" at the very onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Serwer 2021). This hints that Abbott has standards he won't cross because of fears of alienating too many people. The overall argument of Serwer's piece is that Abbott would be more successful if he more definitively rejected the most conservative policy ideas and that his willingness to entertain these ideas opens up opportunities for once irrelevant Texas Democrats. Serwer cites his mishandling of the February 2021 blizzard in Texas as a time when his hardline libertarian ideology was costly to Abbott. Texans felt that their state government failed to adequately protect its citizens because their resources had been severely stripped and it led to Abbott's approval ratings dropping and his disapproval ratings going up five percent. In general, we can see that even people in the most conservative states still have misgivings about the full Republican small government agenda. However, more research is needed to determine how much conservative governors are aware of this hesitancy and how well they take advantage of comparing themselves to the most extreme actors in their party.

B. Institutions and the Design of the Government

The American government is responsible for creating the laws for over 320 million people. The scope of the government is so large that every official, level of government, and branch of government has to be deeply connected to many others if they want to achieve their goals. However, each set of governmental actors from state legislators to judges to bureaucrats have their own set of responsibilities and goals. In the cases when two types of officials disagree, the government's setup is designed for conflict to emerge between officials from different institutions. Therefore, institutions and the design of government inherently limit any individual's power in government by establishing rules and regulations that they legally have to follow. The research found in this school of thought centers around the idea that the American government is designed to force ideologues to make compromises and in today's political climate, that means the governmental institutions influence Republican governors to moderate. In short, this school of thought argues that effective governance calls for moderate actions from state governors.

One of the most important parts of the design of the American government is the structure of federalism or the division of power between the national, state, and local levels. State governments are legally required to adhere to federal laws, which are supreme. Occasionally, a federal law will be so large in its scope that it will become an institution of its own (Grossman 2019). These federal laws, such as the creation of Social Security or Medicaid, require state governments to hire administrators and to set guidelines around the implementation of the law. When the programs are first put into place, they are controversial and can even be divisive. However, they often remain intact and become entrenched in the American government because they are exceedingly difficult to repeal. While political controversy around the newly-forming

social institution stirs, governors of all political ties are forced to actually comply with the new federal law. Using the recent example of Obamacare, we can see that governors were pressured by the new federal policies to quietly break away from the strict anti-Obamacare stance from the Republican party. Phillip Singer and Michael Rozier (2020) write:

governors emphasized the positive economic and financial benefits for individuals, business, and health care organizations. Governor Matt Mead of Wyoming argued that failure to adopt the expansion would require the state to ‘cut more than \$33 million from literacy, tourism, local government, senior centers and early childhood development – just so we don't have to expand Medicaid’ ... Governor Gary Herbert of Utah told his legislature to approve the program by telling them that ‘The choice before us is stark: We can either watch our hard-earned tax dollars remain on the table in Washington, D.C., primarily benefiting other states, or we can bring back a significant amount of our own money to Utah to be spent on Utahns’ (pg. 501).

In turn, these new programs become even harder to contract because they are less politically salient as they remain in place. The purely political animus towards new federal policies goes away as citizens start to reap the benefits of the law. Through quantitatively analyzing newspaper data in large cities in conservative states, Singer and Rozier found that, “governors who served for the entirety of the study period reduced their use of oppositional framing after Donald Trump was elected. The overall use of positive framing increased after the 2016 presidential election amongst Republican governors who served for the entirety of the study period” (pg. 504). In other words, as federal-level Republicans repeatedly failed to repeal Obamacare and as the economic consequences of not accepting the federal funding hurt conservative states, Republican governors were more and more enticed to moderate their stance on Medicaid expansion.

Another critical aspect in the design of the American government is the funding of services through taxes and balanced budgets. All levels of government are legally mandated to justify how they spend their money by mapping out where the funds come from. However, there is a difference between how budgets are managed at the federal level and how they are managed

at the state level. In the federal government, Congress can spend beyond their revenue and incur debt in order to keep all their established programs and agencies afloat. However, in state governments, there is no deficit spending. All state-level expenditures have to be paid for by the actual taxes raised. This essential state government institution leads to more compromise between the parties than is seen at the federal level. Both parties have governmental interests that they care about, which creates a system where the size of the budget remains the same from year to year, but the allocation of funds changes depending on who is in power, “cutting back on the size and scope of government is popular in principle, but providing noticeably less resources to the people of a state is not a feasible policy in practice” (Grossman 2019).

By running a comprehensive statistical analysis of nearly all state government budgets between 1960 and 2012, Louis-Phillippe Beland and Sara Oloomi (2016) found that expenditures remained the same regardless of the political party in power. In their Regression Discontinuity Designed experiment (RDD), they matched gubernatorial election data with state government finance data from the Census Bureau from 1960 to 2012 in order to determine how partisanship affects a state’s policies and practices. They found “no significant impact of the political party of governors on total spending, only on the allocation of funds,” and “no impact of gubernatorial partisanship on health expenditures during the period from 1991 to 2009” (pg. 983). Spending on welfare is also unchanged between parties. Examples of change in the allotment of funds include Democrats spending more on education and public safety and Republicans spending more on infrastructure and natural resources. Beland and Oloomi’s analysis supports the idea that institutions within state governments push politicians towards moderation and makes enacting a small government libertarian ideology much less feasible.

Every state government has forty-nine counterparts that operate under the same governmental structure and the same national political climate. Because of this, state governments have the ability to act as a marketplace, where leaders can promote and compare their ideas freely in order to better all governments together. There is space for innovation and experimentation within state laws, “variation in political institutions found among the states means that new approaches to economic problems are more likely to be developed and implemented by the states than the federal government” (Franko and Witko 2018). If a law is proven to be successful or effective in one state, it may become implemented in many others, regardless of its political tilt. Medicaid expansion exemplifies this. Republican governors who chose to implement Medicaid expansion in fiscally responsible ways felt the need to share their success with governors in similar positions; “in his 2017 State of the State speech, Governor Rick Snyder of Michigan said, ‘Healthy Michigan is a model that can work for the rest of the country’ and that Republican representatives should ensure that Congress does not act too rashly in doing away with the program” (pg. 502).

Similarly, InsideCMS, a trade journal that reports on changes in American healthcare policy, reported that Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson’s pared down version of the Medicaid expansion had made its way around conservative circles. Some governors, like Pete Ricketts of Nebraska, originally rejected the proposal to adopt Arkansas’ version of Medicaid expansion claiming that it would be too expensive for Nebraska’s budget (InsideCMS 2017). However, within a few years, legislators and advocates within Nebraska’s government forced Governor Ricketts to get behind adopting a plan very near Arkansas’s, which is an example of stronger moderate policies rising to the top in a system where different policies are often shared and exchanged.

Along these lines, we see that extreme policies do not diffuse into other states as easily. In Kansas, Governor Sam Brownback used his state as a laboratory for trying very conservative policy ideas. Over his eight year tenure, it became increasingly clear that his agenda was not satisfying the needs of Kansans. In 2017, the Republican legislature of Kansas voted to repeal most of Sam Brownback's major tax cuts in a veto override. Then, a Democratic successor (Laura Kelly), who actively opposed Brownback's aggressive style of governance, was elected in 2018 (Merriman 2019). Conservatives from the rest of the country have taken an interest in the findings coming from Brownback's Kansas, but Kansas's policies have not been readily accepted into other states because governors are afraid of what will happen to their relationships with legislators and their political legacy (Merriman 2019). The case of Brownback's Kansas shows that state governments can react against new radical policies, if they are unsuccessful or ineffective.

The separation of powers is one of the most essential parts of the design of the American government. Between executive officials, legislators, and the courts, the government institutions meant to restrain the power of any individual or organization. The Court system provides the ultimate check on executives and legislators by determining if the law they passed is constitutional. Governors are aware of the threats that the courts pose and they do not want their legislative accomplishments to be struck down (Grossman 2019). A court ruling against a newly passed law permanently renders it useless. Historically, key legislation from the Republicans, such as pro-life abortion laws, anti-gay laws, refusal to adopt Obamacare, and partisan gerrymanders, has been continually struck down by the courts, even at the federal level, where courts are becoming increasingly conservative. Republicans and state legislators tailor their laws to make sure it fits under popular conceptions of constitutionality. Before the 2010s, Republican

governors often avoided using their attorneys general to challenge federal policy because they were afraid of investing so much political capital into a fight they'd have little control over. Even today, "only a small subset of Republican-controlled state governments have taken an active role in Court conflicts and the pattern of involvement is not a simple left-to-right continuum" (Merriman 2019). Instead, the governors who do not involve themselves in the politics of the judicial system have to rely on the conservative political apparatus to fight these legal battles for them. Singer and Rozier (2020), who mostly write about how federal policy interacts with state policy, mention that Republican governors tend to accept the decisions made by the Supreme Court. When responding to the verdict on the 2012 *NFIB v. Sebelius* case, which cost a lot of the Republican party's political capital and resources, "Governor Robert Bentley of Alabama said 'we lost in court. So what we have to do now is move past that, take the resources we have available...and that's exactly what I'm going to do'" (pg. 502). Thus, the institution of the federal court system is another moderating pressure on governors.

Ben Merriman's (2019) aforementioned study on the changes in political strategies of state level Republicans in the 2010s offers another perspective on the importance of institutions. Instead of highlighting the times when conservative governors moved towards the ideological center, Merriman chose to examine what led to the most far right and extreme policy actions from Republican officials. It is important to clarify that many of these extreme policies were heavily politicized and often related to cultural issues, which is outside the purview of my project. In essence, Merriman believes that the most conservative and effective laws from state Republican parties came into fruition because leaders were willing to ignore established norms and disregarded the value of governmental institutions. In the 2010s, Republicans could only enact major policies at the state-level if they refused to comply with federal rulemaking, denied

themselves federal funding, or challenged federal policy through the courts. Merriman gave another example of unconventional governance leading to the implementation of the Republican agenda; “passing conservative laws requires governors to circumvent the traditional governing process... [Governor Sam] Brownback [of Kansas] issued forty-nine executive orders in his first year in office, a number that greatly exceeded the annual average of ten” (Merriman 2019).

While Merriman would frame the Republican party’s disregard of institutions as a common occurrence, the research I found on how conservative governors treat issues of substantial spending shows that many Republican governors respect the government’s institutions under these conditions. In short, Merriman’s research supports that institutions greatly influence gubernatorial actions, but does not fully address the conditions surrounding moderation that I am focusing on.

C. Elections and Political Parties

The final school of thought I found takes elements from both of the previous schools of thought: public opinion and institutions. Elections and political parties are deeply entrenched parts of our system of governance. In fact, elections arguably are the most fundamental institution in government as they define what type of government is in place. Yet, these institutions, both elections and political parties, were designed to be fueled by public opinion. Elections can be viewed as a public opinion poll at a specific chosen moment in time. Political parties try to find commonalities among large swaths of the population and then advertise policies that they feel will resonate with them. Being popular with a large group of voters is the most basic goal of a successful political party. Electoral pressures cannot cleanly be grouped into either of the other schools of thought. Furthermore, within this school of thought, there are many

distinct moderating forces that have to do with elections exclusively. Primaries provide opportunities for people to show their preferences within a larger group and they help guide future political party decision-making. Direct democracy gives voters the chance to actively weigh in on policy proposals and can be hugely influential at subnational levels. Finally, divisions start to emerge within state political parties that are so electorally successful that their opposition party is not perceived as a legitimate threat.

Elections for governor are very different from any other elections at the state level. Steven Rogers (2017) studies the election of state legislators and how their ideology affects their electoral fate. He finds that because voters have such little information on their state legislators, they do not appear to actually hold their state representatives accountable for their voting records or ideology, “there is a weak relationship between a legislators’ roll-call positions and election outcomes with voters rewarding or punishing legislators for only four of thirty examined roll calls in this study” (pg. 555). Because legislators are well-insulated from public opinion and elections, they have more autonomy to act on extreme or ideological impulses. In contrast, voters are much more informed about their governors than they are about their state legislators or other state level executive officials. Governors are often identified as the leaders of their party and if a state legislator is from the same party as the governor, people will vote down the ticket based on their perception of the governor. Moreover, they are more likely to be held responsible for a policy-passage or failure as compared to a state legislator (Rogers 2017; Grossman 2019). Because governors are actually held accountable to their constituents, they cannot follow their legislators’ ideological impulses in all cases, if they want to be re-elected. Governors are responsible for the reputations of their legislative caucus and for their political party. Dropping personal philosophies and enacting effective legislation is more important for governors than for

any other official in state government because voters perceive governors as holding the most responsibility for what happens in their daily lives. When interviewed, Rogers said, “there is no accountability for individual roll call votes for state legislators [in general elections]... Instead, there is an electoral incentive to cater to their primary electorate... Is there a state where the legislature has an incentive to be more moderate than the governor? I do not think there is” (Rogers).

Under the right political conditions, governors are incentivized to break away from their legislative caucuses for another reason: to build their own personal constituency. Richard Burke, Justin Kirkland, and Jonathan Slapin (2020) did a study on why strategic disloyalty can be advantageous in the two-party political system of America. Even though party politics are made out to be a zero sum game, (meaning when one side wins, the other side loses), they found, “occasional disloyalty allows elected officials to foster an independent, ideological, personal brand rather than tying their electoral fate to a partisan brand which they have less control over” (pg. 1025). Part of the reason having a personal constituency is a moderating force is because while both the Republican and Democratic partisan brands remain relatively unpopular, bipartisanship is actually popular at the state level. This creates an avenue for Republican governors to selectively work with their state’s Democratic parties, when they feel it can demonstrate to voters that they are above the political fray. In conservative states where the Republican party dominates all branches of the state government, building personality constituencies is more common, “in states where one party dominates, resulting in the absence of inter-party competition, legislators have no need to distinguish themselves from opposing party members” (pg. 1025; see also Grossman 2019). Because the opposition to Republicans is so weak in these states, Republicans can claim popular liberal or moderate leaning causes as their

own personal goal without risking being labeled as a traitor to the party. Then, if their independent policy-making is effective or well-received, governors can earn the trust of voters that would not have had otherwise (Burke, et al. 2020).

Another electoral benefit for governors that governors get from moving towards the ideological middle is that they get noticed for breaking through severe governmental gridlock. When there is extreme gridlock in state government, governors get a boost in popularity because they have proved they can pass laws. Joshua Zingher and Jesse Richman (2019) ran “an OLS model” comparing partisan balance in state legislatures with national party polarization and state party positions. They found that when state-level political parties are polarized, moderation becomes “an effective way to improve a state party’s seat share.” They also write “more moderate state parties routinely outperform their more ideologically extreme counterparts under some circumstances” (pg. 1046). These circumstances are related to levels of polarization. If state level politics are very polarized, more attention is paid to state politics than usual and voters start to form opinions about the state parties. In these circumstances, when stronger opinions are formed about state parties, this is when moderate parties are statistically significantly more successful. In order to be seen as the moderating party, state parties need to distinguish themselves from their national party, “some state parties [and governors] try to break free from their political party’s brand by adopting more moderate positions than their national-level counterparts” (pg. 1036). By quietly reaching out across the aisle during polarized time, state political parties gain more control over control of their political destiny, avoid relitigating federal level issues, and get viewed more favorably by the electorate (Zingher and Richman 2019).

Outside of the previously mentioned electoral pressures on governors in general elections. Governors also have to consider the will of the voters in two other kinds of elections:

ballot initiatives and primaries. Ballot initiatives and direct democracy were researched by Franko and Witko (2018) as part of their examination on how populist economic policies got passed. They found that as more people become aware of populist economic policies, support would grow and the public support increased the chances of having a bill enacted. However, they also found that the presence of direct democracy in a state's government was tied to with the public's support of redistributive economic policies. By raising awareness and having dedicated advocates make targeted arguments to the public, they found that ballot initiatives "always move policy in the direction the proponents favor" (pg. 14; see also Gerber 1999). Even in the most politically conservative states, direct democracy can give voters a chance to support a liberal policy; "the public has supported higher minimum wages. For example, in 2014, voters in South Dakota approved a minimum wage increase via ballot initiative, and in 2016, 71% of voters in South Dakota rejected an initiative to reduce the minimum wage for younger workers" (pg. 13).

Franko and Witko (2018) speculated that the moderating effect of ballot initiatives could extend beyond economic policy. When grassroots movements start to gather signatures and support to add an initiative to the ballot, it makes governors and state executive officials aware of the specific concerns that voters have about an issue. In order to get ahead of the impending movement, governors will co-opt the issue in question. Governors do not want to be caught so glaringly out of step with their constituents. Additionally, once the voters' decision is shown via election, it becomes very unpopular to stray away from the result. Governors' desire to remain popular explains why Franko and Witko found that, "states with initiatives tend to have policies that more closely correspond to public preferences even when the initiative was not used to enact these policies" and say "state governments with the initiative will move their policies closer to the preferences of the public in order to maintain control over the policy processes" (Franko and

Witko 2018). It is also important to reiterate that, in conservative states, ballot initiatives focus on liberal or moderate causes and often lead to liberal or moderate results. Examples include Georgians voting against the state take-over of public schools and Ohioans supporting collective bargaining for unions. When conservative states including Arizona, Arkansas, Montana, South Dakota, and Utah put decisions regarding marijuana or medical marijuana up to the voters, these conservative voters consistently vote in favor of liberalizing drug laws. Moreover, when the issue of Medicaid expansion was left up for the voters, it passed in Oklahoma, Missouri, Utah, Nebraska, and Idaho.

Finally, Republican primaries, which might be perceived as a vehicle for extremely conservative voters to push their party rightwards, actually do have some moderating forces built into structure. Zach Cohen (2018) of the National Journal, an advisory service for politicians, details how Republican primaries have changed since Trump has taken office. In the Trump era, a new divide emerged within the GOP. To start, Trump wanted to build his own wing of the Republican party, filled with officials who would be indebted to him because he gave them his all-powerful endorsement. He broke away from many incumbent Republican governors of the early 2010s, even though they vehemently supported him (Cohen 2018). While this might seem like a rightward shift, Trump's endorsed candidates have not always been completely in line with his agenda. On one hand, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida has been in lockstep with Trump. On the other hand, Governor Mike DeWine of Ohio has blazed his own more moderate trail. The promised rightward shift coming out of Trump's wing has also been stalled at the gubernatorial level because Trump's preferred gubernatorial candidates, such as Bill Schuette of Michigan, Adam Laxalt of Nevada, and Ron DeSantis of Florida significantly underperformed in their general elections. This signals that general elections are decided by more moderate political

forces. These elections hint that Republican candidates who take the most conservative approach might fail them in general elections. New research will have to be done to determine if Biden-era Republicans are paying attention to these potential pitfalls of extreme conservative in general elections.

Research Design

I. Answer to Research Question and Hypothesis

At the height of the Republican Party power in the 2010s, it held thirty three governorships and had full control over thirty two state legislatures, which was a level of dominance never before seen in the party's history (Grossman 2019). However, even with an increasingly libertarian and fiscally conservative campaign rhetoric, once in office, most Republican governors of this era quietly maintained a politically moderate status quo on certain policy issues. Specifically, they held a moderate stance on issues identified by voters as their "top priority," such as the economy, healthcare, and education (YouGov 2020). At the state level, advances in conservatism were relegated to cultural and symbolic issues. Because of this, state budgets remained the same regardless of the partisanship of the governor. The most extreme libertarian policies consistently got stalled at the state-level (Grossman 2019). This behavioral pattern may be surprising because these actions break from how Republicans behave at the federal level where they less frequently vote in favor of moderate stances. Divisions among the Republican Party are increasingly hard to find, yet this is a clear difference between federal and subnational politicians. My thesis asks why Republican governors break from their party line on the aforementioned top priority issues.

Some scholars suggest that governors behave this way in order to be in line with a moderate political consensus on certain policy issues (Merriman 2019). Yet, there were some extremely ideological Republican governors who did not adhere to mainstream public opinion. When these governors chose to curtail an already popular social service, they risked losing broad-base popularity and they risked creating an impetus for political moderates to start mobilizing against them. The threat of mobilization could come from either moderate voters

within a state or progressive activists from outside a state who sense an opportunity to advance a cause. Former Kansas Governor Sam Brownback, who forced extremely conservative policies through his government, stood out to other Republican governors as a prominent example of what could happen if the public feels as if their quality of life is threatened by fiscal conservatism (Merriman 2019). In 2017, at the end of Brownback's term, his Republican state legislators turned against his political agenda. In addition, moderate voters organized against the Republican Party and elected Democrat Laura Kelly to replace him in 2018.

Franko and Witko (2018) hypothesized “another institutional factor we expect to play an important role in the state adoption of inequality-limiting policies is the ability of citizens to introduce and pass legislation. This is broadly referred to as direct democracy, but the ballot initiative can be particularly influential to the policy process. The initiative allows the electorate to control the policymaking process from writing the legislation to a popular vote on the proposal to determine the future of the policy. This allows residents of the 24 states that have the initiative process to use this political tool to circumvent their legislatures if they are unresponsive to public demands” (pg. 138). The power of the ballot initiative process could come from a variety of sources. Knowing that citizens had the power to advocate for and even enact their own policies provided governors with a credible threat to their power. Getting caught on the wrong side of a state-wide ballot initiative would signal to voters that the interests of the administration were not aligned with the interests of the people. Direct democracy provides a unique opportunity for people to mobilize around policy issues. State-wide campaigns start to form and bring extra political attention to issues like healthcare, education, minimum wage, or infrastructure when it would not have received that attention otherwise. Direct democracy also gives voters a chance to express their opinions on an issue without having to attach themselves to a political party or

candidate that they do not favor. Diverse ideological coalitions can form around ballot questions asking about top priority issues. These same coalitions would be unlikely to find a similar amount of common ground around a symbolic cultural issue. All of these possibilities make moderate mobilization surrounding ballot initiatives pressures into a unique and credible threat to gubernatorial power.

Therefore, I propose this hypothesis: In states where moderate public opinion is an established and known condition, direct democracy pressures cause Republican governors to adjust their behavior and that results in different policy outcomes on top priority issues.

If there is Moderate Public Opinion, then Direct Democracy Pressures → Behavior of GOP Governors → Policy Outcomes on Top Priority Issues

II. Definition of Concepts

Top priority issues are issues that the public has to put complete trust in their government to provide in order to maintain the quality of their daily lives. When polled, voters listed healthcare, education, infrastructure, tax credits, and wages as top priority issues. Such issues always make up a significant portion of yearly state budgets (Sigritz 2019). In every state, healthcare and education are the two greatest expenses for the government. Infrastructure and economic development almost always follow as the next most costly line items (Sigritz 2019). In terms of revenue, taxes provide the government with the majority of their funding. These issues command the attention of the elected officials as they try to run an operational state government and respond to the needs of their constituents. Furthermore, unlike the federal government, state governments cannot spend into a deficit. It is the most essential responsibility of state-level

elected officials to ensure the government is financially self-sustaining and that top priority issues are addressed. In sum, top priority issues represent what governors and state governments actually have control over and what they devote their energy to.

Moderate public opinion is a complicated subject because it can refer to people's views on policy issues, political parties, or politicians. Public opinion on politicians and political parties and does not necessarily match public opinion on policy issues. People's opinions on politicians, political parties, and symbolic political issues have become polarized (Abramowitz 2010). In contrast, views on specific policy issues that affect the quality of people's lives have remained grouped together in the middle of the political spectrum. Evidence for this includes, but is not limited to, 71 percent of Americans supporting a higher minimum wage, 75 percent of Americans supporting earned income tax credits, and 81 percent of Americans having favorable views of Medicaid (Franko and Witko 2017; Kaiser Family Foundation 2020). For the purposes of my project, I will use a definition of public opinion that exclusively focuses on public opinion on these Top Priority Issues. Incorporating views on politicians or political parties into my definition of public opinion could muddle the scope of my project. By narrowing in on a subset of policy opinions, it helps refine what governors could be responding to and keeps attention on issues that could be addressed through direct democracy.

Direct democracy is a method of having citizens directly vote on individual policy proposals, which bypasses the law-making roles of a state legislature and governor. In many states, if the proposal is approved by a high enough percentage of voters, it automatically becomes law. Direct democracy exists in some form in every state, but there are huge variations in how it is used. Initiatives come from the people of a state. Referendums work in a very similar manner to initiatives except they aim to approve or repeal an existing law, instead of adding a

new one. Both initiatives and referendums are included in this project's definition of direct democracy. The phrases "ballot measure," "initiative," "proposition," and "ballot question," are typically used interchangeably. For the purpose of this project, recall elections, which give citizens the potential to undo the results of general elections, will not be included in the definition of direct democracy. This is because recall elections reflect approval ratings of politicians, rather than opinions on policy issues. Views on an individual politician do not necessarily line up with their stated political agenda. Often, this disconnect is enhanced during a recall election because the official in question is embroiled in a personal scandal. Finally, direct democracy pressures refers to the political attention paid to ballot initiatives and activism surrounding them. For ballot measures that have serious political consequences, people, politicians, and donors get involved and publicly make their stances known. The campaigns on either side, the number of mobilized voters for a cause, and the magnitude of the ballot measure itself all contribute to direct democracy pressures.

III. Case Selection

To choose a case that will allow me to test my hypothesis, three criteria had to be met. First, there had to be Republican governors in power throughout the time of the study. Republican control of the governorship and state legislature is a necessary condition for this project. The presence of a Democratic governor or state legislature complicates the efforts of trying to determine how Republican elected officials react to moderate public opinion. Having multiple Republican governors over the course of the time studied would be an added benefit because it accounts for an exception. If two governors in the state demonstrate the same behavior, it makes it less likely that the found behavior is an aberration. Second, there has to be

documented moderate public opinion on top priority issues. In the most conservative states, there is less evidence that voters generally agree on top priority issues. In order to protect against this, there is a need for consistent reputable polling. Since pollsters tend to be based out of major cities and universities, the state in question should have a major city or a major university within it. Finally, there had to be a robust use of direct democracy within the state of interest. There must be multiple ballot measures to choose from and compare between. Direct democracy must have a regular presence so leaders could be aware of the impact it has on a government.

The state that best meets all three criteria is Missouri. First, Missouri has only had Republican governors since 2017. Eric Greitens was elected governor in 2016, took office in 2017, and resigned in 2018 because he was charged with two felonies. Current Governor Mike Parson took Greitens' place and then won his own election in 2020. He will be governor until 2025. Furthermore, Republicans in Missouri have held supermajorities in the state assembly and state senate since 2010, which solidified conservative power over the government. Second, Missouri has two major cities. St. Louis and Kansas City are two of the forty largest US metropolitan areas. Both cities have major newspapers: the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Kansas City Star*, respectively. This makes detailed coverage of Missouri's elections and coverage of the governors' behavior easier to come by and makes it more likely that the ballot measures received considerable media attention.

Finally, and most importantly, direct democracy is commonly used in Missouri. Since 2018, Missouri has held seven state-wide votes. The issues on the ballot included Medicaid expansion, term limits, Congressional gerrymandering, right to work laws, minimum wage, and marijuana legalization. Missouri's seven ballot initiatives in a quick three year succession is more than some states offer their voters in a decade. These consistent calls on voters to judge the

worthiness of new policy proposals makes it more likely that Missouri has a culture of citizen involvement in politics. Out of these seven ballot measures, I will focus on the 2018 minimum wage ballot initiative and the 2020 medicaid expansion ballot initiative because they most clearly fit into the category of a top priority issue. When Missourians were polled in 2020 and 2021, they listed healthcare as their most important or second most important issue every time. On average 36% of Missourians viewed healthcare as their top priority (Rogers et al. 2020; Rogers et al. 2021) By choosing two cases in the same state in the same time period, it is possible to control confounding factors such as a state's political culture and the era's federal government politics. Furthermore, ballot measures on minimum wage and medicaid expansion are not unusual issues to be left for voters to decide. In the last decade, seven states had ballot measures on medicaid expansion. In the same period, twelve states have held ballot measures on whether or not to raise the minimum wage. Therefore, results from Missouri's medicaid expansion and minimum wage initiatives could represent the impact of direct democracy and moderate public opinion nationally.

IV. Measurement of Variables

Four separate variables have to be measured to test my hypothesis. The first variable, moderate public opinion on Top Priority Issues, is an antecedent variable, meaning that it must be in place for the rest of the hypothesis to occur. Recent local polling on minimum wage and healthcare will be the basis for measurements on moderate public opinion. Polling on the ballot questions themselves will be included in a measurement of moderate public opinion, too. The independent variable, direct democracy pressures, is the hardest variable to measure. In order to create a consistent way to determine the pressures of direct democracy and public opinion,

activists and campaigns must be evaluated by quantitative metrics. Possible metrics for assessing Direct Democracy pressures include: the number of people who worked for organizations that endorsed a position on the ballot, the number of doors knocked, the number of dollars spent on advertising. Looking at how many politicians and organizations endorsed a side, how much engagement they got on social media, and how many people voted in the elections can also factor into a measurement of direct democracy pressures. If there is high engagement in all of these categories, it means that direct democracy pressures were strong and that moderate public opinion was widely expressed.

Measuring the intermediate variable, gubernatorial behavior, will be complicated by the fact that it is only examining the actions of a single person. By comparing the governors' decisions and stated positions to those of their counterparts across the country, it will highlight where Greitens and Parson stand on the ideological spectrum. If their positions start to align with or move closer to moderate governors or even Democratic governors, it would support the idea that direct democracy pressure does influence gubernatorial behavior. Additionally, looking at the number of state legislators who were swayed by direct democracy pressures could supplement the measurements of gubernatorial behavior.

Finally, the dependent variable, policy outcomes can also be quantitatively measured through placing the result within a spectrum of other state policies. Factors to judge the progressiveness of a minimum wage policy include the difference between the state minimum wage and the federal minimum wage, how high the highest state minimum wages are, and how this policy matches up in states with similar voting patterns. Factors to judge the progressiveness of medicaid expansion include how many people are newly covered, how much of the state's budget is devoted to these expenses, and what the qualifications for the program are.

V. Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data will drive my investigation into the impacts of ballot initiatives in Missouri. Regular reporting of local newspapers, such as the aforementioned *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Kansas City Star*, that originally covered these state laws, will provide insight into the actual decision-making process of the state governments and governors in particular. The most important figures and any major events would be revealed through thoroughly studying the media covering ballot measures. These newspapers are also likely to have polling data on the ballot initiatives from before the actual election. After developing a deep understanding of the political climate of Missouri in 2018 and 2020, some more research into governmental statistics and information may have to be done to find details on the quantitative metrics. However, the bulk of the project's research will be done through conducting a series of interviews with many different political actors across the state including local political journalists, activists, and staff members in state legislative offices and the governor's office.

Local political journalists will have an expertise on the political climate of their states. Interviewing journalists will shine light on how much media attention these issues got, how advocacy groups interacted with or used media, and how important ballot measures are in the state's political climate. Journalists may also suggest people of interest who were at the center of the public conversation about the ballot measure and who might have informed their own reporting. They can also share less obvious sources of data that may enhance my understanding of Missouri's politics, minimum wage laws, or Medicaid. Hearing from activists on both sides of the ballot question will be necessary for a comparison of political strategies. Knowing which groups of people were targeted as swing voters, how campaign funds were spent, and what mediums were used for advertisement will illuminate the ways moderates and progressives

mobilized in Missouri. It is also important to speak with national organizations, such as the Fight for \$15 and the AARP, that may have gotten involved in order to find out what drove them to Missouri and how much of their resources they invested in these elections.

Speaking with political insiders of both parties will deepen a comparative analysis. While elected officials themselves may be hard to reach, contact with staff members who are specifically designated to respond to media and other outside interests is much more likely. Publicly available politicians and staff members will be a useful tool for understanding how governors vote and what influences their decisions. Hearing how they respond to their constituents' views on top priority issues will be critical for judging the impact of public opinion and direct democracy. Furthermore, hearing from elected officials who have tried to change the structures around direct democracy will bring in more information about how politicians think about initiatives and referendums. Notably, some state-level Republicans have recently sponsored to restrict avenues of direct democracy. Learning about the motivations of those state officials and if they see a link between moderation and direct democracy would be valuable for this project. If executed correctly, this qualitative data will give me the information needed to make an assessment on the validity of my hypothesis.

Moderate Public Opinion in Missouri

1. Missouri is Perceived as Conservative

Missouri is commonly classified as a conservative state. Cook PVI lists Missouri as R+10, which means that according to their statistical model, a generic Republican candidate will finish ten points higher than their Democratic opponent. The governor, both senators, and six of their eight Congress members are Republicans. In both the state senate and the house, Republicans hold a super majority of the seats. Missouri's state Supreme Court has a four to three Republican advantage. The Republican party has become increasingly successful in Missouri in recent years. In 2008, Obama came within five thousand votes of winning the state. Since then, the Republican presidential candidate has won an increasingly larger share of the total voters in every successive presidential election. For the large majority of the 2010s, Missouri had a Democratic governor in Jay Nixon and a Democratic senator in Claire McCaskill. But since 2018, Republicans have assumed control of both positions. Aside from a very brief period in the mid 2000s, 2019 was the first year since the early 1990s that all three seats (governor, both senators) had been held by Republicans. On a surface level, the emergence of the Republican party domination over Missouri's politics points to an increasingly conservative political culture.

While election results heavily favor Republicans, this does not tell the full story of what Missourians think. The election of more Republicans does not necessarily correlate with an increasingly conservative political climate because politicians and the elite class are polarizing at a faster rate than most people are (Fiorina 2017). Most people are not engaged with current events and these less engaged citizens do not map as cleanly onto the political spectrum as politically active citizens do. Today, it is harder for people with moderate political views to get

elected because of the structure of party primaries. Talented moderate politicians are no longer attracted to politics at the same rate they once were (Fiorina 2017).

Polling and interview data back up the fact that Missourians' views on politicians, on policy issues, and on their own ideologies are complex. When interviewing John Hancock (2022), the former Chairman of the Missouri Republican Party, he summarized where he believed public opinion stood in Missouri: "I don't think the state ever was as liberal as people thought back in the 1970s and 1980s and I think Missouri is not as doctrinaire conservative as people assume because of the make-up of the general assembly today. Missouri's voters have a wide ranging set of viewpoints." In this section, I will use polls from YouGov/St. Louis University, from the insider group Missouri Scout, and from the national metadata compilers at the Congressional Election Study to examine public opinion in Missouri. Using this data, I will argue that there is evidence showing underlying moderate political opinion in Missouri and Hancock's assessment of popular sentiment in his state is verifiable.

2. How Missourians Classify Themselves

Most Missourians believe that they are in the middle of the political spectrum. In a set of three recent polls, Missourians were asked to place themselves on a five point political spectrum, where they are given five options to choose from: very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative, and very conservative. In all three polls, "moderate" was the most common response, which hovered around 25% of respondents. On average, the next most common response was "conservative" at around 23%, followed by "liberal" at 18%, then "very conservative" at 16%, and finally "very liberal" finished last at 14%. The results of the three polls are illustrated below in Table 1.

Table 1: How Missourians Classified their Political Ideology

| | Very Liberal | Liberal | Moderate | Consevative | Very Conservative |
|---------------------|--------------|---------|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| June 2020 | 14% | 18% | 24% | 24% | 16% |
| October 2020 | 15% | 19% | 26% | 23% | 16% |
| July 2021 | 14% | 17% | 26% | 22% | 17% |

Source: You Gov/St. Louis University

The July 2021 poll had a slightly more conservative skew, but the trend of most people seeing themselves belonging to a moderate or moderate-adjacent category stayed the same (Rogers et al. 2021). While “conservative” and “liberal” are defined political ideologies, in the context of this question, they imply that the respondent does not see themselves as extremely committed to one ideology. They either believe that there are flaws within their own ideology, that one can go too far with those positions, or that staying towards the middle is more optimal. Only 31% of respondents saw themselves as “very conservative” or “very liberal,” while the middle three categories had more than double the responses than that of the two extreme groups. This shows that the overwhelming majority of Missourians might be willing to compromise and debate policy issues or at least could not fully commit to one political ideology. Rogers said that this finding was “not especially surprising” (Rogers).

3. How Missourians Think of Politicians

In the same 2020 and 2021 polls, Missourians were asked if they strongly approved, approved, disapproved, or strongly disapproved of each politician listed. From this data, it can be safely said that Missourians prefer to have a moderate politician in executive positions. As seen

in Table 2 below, Mike Parson has consistently been the most popular politician in Missouri over the last three years. Parson is the most ideologically moderate politician of the five Republican elected officials listed above. As governor, he has supported moderate policy issues that all the other Republicans elected at the state-level do not support, including a gas tax, a higher minimum wage for state workers, infrastructure projects, and technical school funding. Parson has always polled between 42% and 47%, which is consistently higher than his counterparts in the senate. In every poll, he either received the highest approval rating or tied for the highest approval rating. In terms of elections, Parson received the highest share of the vote of any candidate in either party since 2016. In 2020, Parson earned 57% of the vote which significantly outpaced Senator Blunt, Senator Hawley, and former Governor Grietens. He barely edged out former President Trump's two performances of 56% of the vote.

Table 2: Approval Rating of Elected Officials in Missouri from 2020 to 2021

| | Senator Roy Blunt | Former Governor Eric Greitens | Senator Josh Hawley | Governor Mike Parson | Former President Donald Trump |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Percentage Elected With | 49% (2016) | 51% (2016) | 51% (2018) | 57% (2020) | 56% (2016) 56% (2020) |
| June 2020 | 33% | Not asked | 45% | 47% | 47% |
| October 2020 | 37% | Not asked | 40% | 42% | 42% |
| July 2021 | 40% | 32% | 44% | 46% | Not asked |

Source: YouGov/St. Louis University

Comparing Parson to Greitens is the best assessment of his relative popularity because those two men held the same position in government. They held the same powers and governed during similar political conditions. According to *Missouri Independent* journalist Rudi Keller. Greitens represented the most conservative wing of Missouri politics: “I think Eric Greitens

would be the outlier of all the governors [based on] my experience covering every politician who has held the Missouri governorship since 1985. All of them were within these [ideological] boundaries that you can clearly see: main road type politicians, doing bread and butter things. Eric Greitens would be the outlier” (Keller). He had no experience in government before his 2016 election to the governorship. Greitens was part of the younger TEA Party generation of the Republican party. In fact, he defeated Parson in the Republican primary, in part, because he was more conservative. In office, Greitens’ major issue was union busting and Right to Work laws. In contrast, Parson is from an older and less radical generation of Republican leaders. Parson spent twelve years in the state house, building connections with politicians from both parties. Rudi Keller supported the finding that Parson was significantly more moderate. He said, “[Former Governor Jay] Nixon and Parson were right in the realm where you’d expect Missouri governors to be operating.” (Keller).

As of 2021, the data shows that Parson is significantly more popular than Greitens. Parson has a 46% approval rating. Greitens has a 32% approval rating. For Parson, the most common response was “approve,” with 33% of respondents. This matches the result from June 2020 where “approve” was also the mode with 32%. The most popular response for Greitens was “very unfavorable” with 38% of total answers. However, it is important to note that Greitens’ reputation is not only affected by his politics and his decisions as governor. Greitens was embroiled in a major scandal in 2018 and he was charged with two felonies. The Missouri State Senate held a special session to impeach Greitens, but Greitens resigned in disgrace before they could do it. Yet, Greitens’ approval ratings are still an important metric for a complete understanding of Missouri politics because he currently is the leading Republican candidate for

US senate in a very divided primary. Because of his scandals and his very ideological governing history, Greitens' road back into Missouri has been especially challenging.

The numbers for Governor Parson and former President Trump look nearly identical at the surface level. However, Parson has a much wider range of people he can appeal to. Consistently, over 99% of Missouri voters had heard of Trump and had formed an opinion of him. 75% of voters either “strongly approved” or “strongly disapproved” of Trump in June 2020. He had little to no chance of surpassing or dropping from his 47% approval rating. Feelings about Parson are a lot less polarized. In every poll, more than 6% of voters had not formed an opinion of him, which meant he had the opportunity to improve upon his already high approval rating. Moreover, in the June 2020 and July 2021 polls, the majority of respondents (56% and 54% respectively) either “approved” or “disapproved” of Parson. Parson had the chance to win over voters who had less deeply entrenched feelings about him. His gubernatorial actions have a higher chance of changing minds because strong feelings about him are less common. All this leads to the conclusion that Parson has an opportunity to foster a broad based appeal that Trump was never afforded.

Executive positions, such as the governor and the presidency, are viewed differently than senators. Senatorial races are more nationalized than gubernatorial races because it is a federal office. Voters know that their senator's vote is more likely to affect partisan control of the chamber rather than any unilateral decision making. For example, Senator Hawley and Governor Parson both currently support an increased minimum wage. (A very rare moderate stance for Hawley.) In 2021, while Parson was safely able to publicly advocate for a \$15 state minimum wage, Hawley had to vote against an \$11 national minimum wage because voting for it would have handed the Democratic Party a major political victory. Because of the political risk and the

current split in the Senate, it is harder for senators to act upon any moderate leanings or breakaway from their party. In contrast, governors and presidential candidates have a higher potential to build personal constituencies, which can raise their profile and popularity across their state. This explains why a relatively moderate senator, like Blunt, consistently falls behind the extremely conservative senator, Hawley. The political conditions are significantly different for executive decision-makers.

4. Where Missourians Stand on Policies

Both the Missouri Democrats and Republicans know that key elements of the Democratic policy agenda are popular. Specifically, on issues such as economics, healthcare, and education, that Missourians identified as their “top priorities,” moderate or even progressive stances are the most common. For example, in 2021, 56% of Missourians believed the government should spend more to help the poor. 54% of Missourians believed public school teachers deserve a higher salary, which is a data point that has remained consistent over time. In 2021, 52% of Missourians believes that racism and slavery should be taught in schools. 51% of Missourians believed that not enough was being spent on public schools. (Rogers et al. 2021).

In terms of public opinion on minimum wage, there is a progressive consensus in Missouri. Nationally, in 2018, the Congressional Election Study, a metadata study from Harvard and Tufts that compiles every American political survey conducted in a given year, found that 69% of voters supported a raise to a minimum wage of \$12. In 2020, the Cooperative Congressional Election Study found that 67% percent of Americans supported raising the minimum wage to \$15. These percentages are quite high for an actively contested political issue. These national findings are very similar to the poll when only Missourians were polled. In

Missouri, 60% of likely voters supported raising the state's minimum wage and 12% more remained undecided (Missouri Scout 2018). This is slightly more conservative than the national average, but it far exceeds the percentage of voters that identify themselves with either political party. A sizable portion of Republicans, 41%, support the effort to raise the minimum wage (Missouri Scout 2018).

The Congressional Election Study also measured national stances on healthcare and Medicaid expansion. In 2018, 68% of respondents supported providing Medicare for all Americans and only 41% wanted to repeal Obamacare. In 2020, the national stance on healthcare was similarly liberal. 64% of people supported expanding Medicare to cover all Americans and again 41% of Americans were opposed to Obamacare. The public opinion in Missouri did not stray too far from the national averages. In June 2020, 54% of Missourians believed that their state government should expand Medicaid coverage. One year later, after the state legislature had furiously worked to undo the result of the August 2020 ballot measure, the public opinion on Medicaid expansion liberalized further. In 2021, 61% of Missourians believed that their state government should expand Medicaid coverage. 51% of Missourians believed this strongly. When a Democratic strategist was asked why the large majority of Missourians, including some Republicans, supported issues increasing the minimum wage and Medicaid expansion, despite their preference towards Republican politicians, he said, "getting it done makes it more likely that our kids will be able to raise their kids here. Rural or not, Republican or not, we're all just worried our kids will move away for opportunity" (Bogan 2022).

Missourians, as a whole, do not hold these moderate views on all issues. On issues that do not register as the aforementioned "top priority" issues, Missourians tend to hold stances that are more conservative than the national average. 47% of Missourians believed that abortion

should prohibited after only eight weeks. 45% of Missourians supported an unconstitutional state law which proposed that the Missouri state government would not enforce federal gun laws. Even though there are not outright majorities on these issues, the questions asked Missourians about some of the most extreme policy proposals. As of February 2022, the most extreme abortion laws prohibited abortion after six weeks nationally. The difference between six and eight weeks is negligible. The current laws in Missouri allow for abortions after much more generous 22 weeks. Understanding that when and why public opinion moderates in Missouri is critical for understanding potential changes in gubernatorial behavior. The focus of this project is on “top priority” issues which, as evidenced, have a moderate or a liberal consensus around them in Missouri.

Case Study 1: The 2018 Missouri Minimum Wage Ballot Measure

The Recent History of Minimum Wage in Missouri

The minimum wage is the absolute minimum a business or government can pay a worker without violating their rights. The minimum wage finds its origins back in the progressive era when workers, mainly women and children, were working countless hours without fair compensation. A massive workers' reform movement sprouted up. Alongside the minimum wage advocacy, reforms for a standardized work week, worker's compensation, vacation days, and sick leave started to gain popularity. From 1912 to 1923, minimum wage laws were passed in fifteen states. Following the 1908 Supreme Court decision of *Muller v. Oregon*, some of these original minimum wage laws only covered female or underaged workers because the lawmakers of the time believed women were genetically inferior and needed special protections. However, these laws did not stand the test of time because the court system continually struck them down in the interest of businesses. Even when the federal government first tried to implement a minimum wage under President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933, the Supreme Court invalidated it.

Only once Roosevelt had enough time to appoint his own nominees to the Supreme Court did the federal minimum wage pass the test of constitutionality. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was the law that officially enacted the federal minimum wage. Roosevelt believed that a minimum wage would provide a relief to the very poorest workers after there was a brief recession in 1937. The original federal minimum wage was twenty-five cents per hour, but that number continually increased over the next forty years. The peak purchasing power of the minimum wage was reached in 1968. The pattern of gradual increases stopped around 1980 with the election of President Ronald Reagan. Contrary to nearly all economic scholarship, Reagan believed that the economy would grow fastest if the government invested in the wealthiest

classes. Reaganomics soon became incredibly popular within the Republican party and this shift in philosophy ended the regular raises to the federal minimum wage. There have been four raises to the federal minimum wage since 1980.

The latest increase, which raised the minimum wage to \$7.25, was passed in 2009. This thirteen year gap between increases is the longest gap since the introduction of the law. Strictest adherents to the principles of Reaganomics, such as Speakers John Boehner and Paul Ryan, held outsized amounts of power within the Republican caucus of the Obama era, which limited any hopes of the federal government changing the minimum wage (Bouie 2014). These fiscal conservatives argued that a higher minimum wage would hurt more people than it would help. The Congressional Republicans believed a higher minimum wage would put people out of work, even though research from the Congressional Budgeting Office, or CBO, found otherwise. In 2014, the CBO found that if the federal minimum wage was lifted to \$10 per hour, 16.5 million people would receive a raise and about a half million would lose their jobs (Congressional Budgeting Office 2014). Their investigation in 2021 backed this up. The CBO found that a fifteen dollar minimum wage would boost the earning of 17 million Americans and about 1.3 million Americans would lose their employment. Even with the backing of the CBO, the Democrats could not break the gridlock. As inflation consistently increased through the 2010s and early 2020s, the value of the federal minimum wage decreased in terms of how much it can buy. As gridlock and polarization has dominated federal politics over this same era, minimum wage has become a critical issue for subnational governments in recent years.

1. Recent National Activism on the Minimum Wage

Inflation and wages for the highest income earners rose at an even faster rate in cities. Therefore, the relative value of minimum wage was even lower for urban workers. In 2012, the Fight for \$15 movement, which lobbies for a \$15 minimum wage, began in New York City. Hundreds of fast food workers went on strike in order to demand proper payment for their work. From 2012 to 2015, The Fight for \$15 held demonstrations across the country and built expansive social networks. The first protests in Missouri were held in December 2013 and used a lot of the same language as the strikes in New York did. Nationally, the Fight for \$15 aligned themselves with other burgeoning social movements like Black Lives Matter in order to target their appeal towards racial minorities and political progressives. In June 2014, the movement scored their first legislative success when Seattle decided to lift the city's minimum wage to fifteen dollars per hour. At this point, the movement caught the attention of Senator and Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders who promoted the efforts of the Fight for \$15 as part of his campaign (Stein 2017).

In addition to social activism, city governments started to feel the pressures of the wide-ranging popular support. Minimum wage has long been a very popular issue across all political ideologies. 72% of Americans support increasing the minimum wage. 87% of Democrats and 62% of Republicans are in favor of a rate hike (Ipsos 2020). Thus, as the minimum wage was getting more attention, instituting a raise became a very easy way for cities to win favor with their constituents. Between 2015 and 2018, New York City, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington DC, Denver, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and many more localities in liberal states boosted their minimum wages.

2. The First Attempts to Increase the Minimum Wage in Missouri

However, instituting a higher minimum wage was not as simple for local governments in states with conservative governments. Specifically, for Missouri, the state government opposed increasing its state minimum wage because it was led by a mostly rural and fiscally conservative Republican supermajority in both houses of the legislature. Due to the legislature's lack of action, two initial waves of minimum wage advocacy arose. The first wave was in 2015 and a second wave followed in 2017. In St. Louis, the first efforts to raise the minimum wage to \$15 quickly gained the support of the majority of the council and former Mayor Francis Slay (Pistor 2015). Slay, who had some conservative tendencies, immediately voiced his approval. One of his staff members told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "he believes, and he thinks most residents agree, that a higher minimum wage would be a good thing" (Pistor 2015). A Republican alderman, Joseph Vaccaro, halted the hearings on the Ways and Means committee without warning, until a compromise to moderate the timeline of the raises was reached. The final deal was going to create an instant increase from \$7.65 to \$8.25 per hour. Then, the minimum wage would increase one dollar per year until it hit \$11 (Pistor 2015).

In Kansas City, there was a simultaneous effort to increase the minimum wage. However, the local government was a lot less willing to get involved. In March 2015, former Kansas City Mayor Sly James announced to the public that he was hesitant to confront the powers of Missouri's state government on this issue, saying "we ain't Seattle" (Horsley 2015). After months of active protests and pressure from local civil rights leaders, James finally gave in. In May 2015, a councilman close to James, Jermaine Reed, submitted a bill that would establish a gradual increase towards a \$13 minimum wage. By July 2015, the bill was passed by Kansas City's government and was set to become implemented that fall (Horsley 2015). However,

activists were still dissatisfied because their goal was to achieve a fifteen dollar per hour rate. A diverse coalition of advocates gathered enough signatures to place a ballot question regarding a \$15 per hour on the 2015 ballot in Kansas City (Horsley 2015). However, before the voters could make a decision about the minimum wage, they were disrupted by Missouri's state government.

Once there were pathways to match the progressive policies of cities in liberal states¹, but Missouri's very conservative state legislature felt the need to undercut them (Bott 2015). In August 2015, the state legislature quickly passed laws that made these upcoming ordinances illegal before they could take effect. This governing style of pre-empting plans made by smaller communities finds its roots in the Jim Crow South (Graham 2017). When segregated black towns would pass laws that improved their quality of life, the state government would go out their way to invalidate the new local law. This underhanded system allowed white state-level officials to have nearly full control over majority black towns. Unfortunately, the racial dynamics between rural Missouri and these two major cities clearly mirrors this historical example (Graham 2017). Today, preemption of progressive laws by conservative state governments has become common throughout the United States (Bouie 2014). Even though the Missouri Republican party drew on these tactics, they publicly used the justification that an inconsistent minimum wage would drive away business interests. Missouri's governor at the time, Jay Nixon, was a Democrat, vetoed the Republican-led bill. Later, in a general assembly of the state legislature in September 2015, Nixon's veto was overridden by the Republican supermajority. Thus, these 2015 laws from St. Louis and Kansas City never came into fruition. Nearly 38,000 people who were set to get a raise were denied because of the state legislature.

¹ Seattle, New York City, and San Francisco stand out as examples of major cities in liberal states that were able to raise their minimum wage to \$15 in 2014 or 2015.

Organizers in St. Louis and Kansas City felt targeted by and restricted by the new state law and sued the state. It took from August 2015 to March 2017 for the Missouri State Supreme Court to hear the case. In the meantime, at the state level, efforts to start a ballot initiative for the upcoming 2016 election cycle had begun. Three petitions that offered different methods of raising the minimum wage were submitted to Missouri Secretary of State Jason Kander. Kander, who is a Democrat, approved all three petitions and said that they could be circulated to find signatures (Weinberg 2016). However, none of the petitions ended up getting enough signatures in time to make the state-wide ballot in Missouri for the 2016 election cycle. Essentially, the effort to raise the minimum wage was stalled on every front until the Missouri Supreme Court struck this law down in early 2017.

3. The Second Wave of Activism in Missouri

Two years later, The Missouri State Supreme Court unanimously struck down the state law from 2015. St. Louis's original law was quickly reinstated, which was celebrated by workers and small business owners alike. One restaurant owner justified his support of the higher wage: "If there's no economic opportunity, there's no opportunity for the young people here" (McDermott 2017). Over a hundred St. Louis businesses vowed to keep their wages above \$10, regardless of what new laws came into fruition. In Kansas City, activists petitioned the city government to have a ballot initiative on raising the minimum wage. Kansas City's 2015 could not be reinstated because it was never officially enacted (Horsley 2017). In many senses, Kansas City's ballot measure in 2017 was a precursor to the state-wide initiative that would eventually get the minimum wage to \$12 in 2018. The racially diverse and politically diverse coalition that successfully lobbied former Mayor Sly James in 2015 was able to reunite in order to get their

issue onto the ballot. The end result saw 68% of Kansas Citizens supporting an immediate increase to \$10 and a slow climb towards fifteen.

Seeing the momentum coming from the major cities again, the Republican state legislature began to look for new ways to prevent local minimum wages from going up. In the final hours of the legislative session, a bill was placed on former Governor Eric Greitens's desk, which closely mirrored the invalidated 2015 bill (Bott 2017). The state Democrats did not have a chance to debate it. Greitens signed the bill immediately and proudly announced that he stood behind his decision in a July 2017 speech. On August 28th, 2017, the law came into effect (Graham 2017). Minimum wage workers in St. Louis had their pay docked from ten dollars per hour back down to \$7.70. The ballot initiative in Kansas City did not have enough time to take effect (McDermott 2017). Thus, the salaries of Kansas Citizens were never officially reduced. Greitens believed that the state of Missouri had done more to care for the economy than any minimum wage increase could, "when you look at what we've done around reducing regulations ... All of this has helped to create a great environment for business owners so that we are creating new jobs and also raising people's take-home pay" (Lowry 2017).

4. The 2018 Ballot Measure

After going through the same process twice in three years, activists realized that they had to change their course of action. Relying on new legislation from their governments had repeatedly ended in disappointment for minimum wage activists. Because of the success of the city-wide ballot question in Kansas City, the groundwork was laid out for a state-wide ballot initiative in 2018. Furthermore, minimum wage workers and strategists knew that their issue was very popular. Voters in neighboring states Arkansas, Illinois, and Nebraska had approved higher

minimum wages in 2014. From Maine and Colorado to Alaska and Arizona, minimum wage ballot initiatives had success all across America, regardless of the state's political background. Nationally, a ballot initiative in favor of increasing the minimum wage has not failed since 1996.

Missouri Jobs with Justice, which had been involved in the battle to increase the minimum wage since 2015, originally filed twelve petitions with the Secretary of State's office. They polled all twelve proposals in order to determine which would be the most popular. The winning plan was to raise the wage by 85 cents per year until it eventually reached twelve dollars per hour. By this point, unions and union workers had joined the protests to raise the minimum wage. As Missouri's state government was disrupting the effort to boost local wages, they were simultaneously trying to restrict the power of unions by promoting Right-to-Work laws. Union workers from all over Missouri saw their interests aligning with the lower classes of St. Louis and Kansas City. Because of this expanding coalition, initial polling on the ballot initiative showed high support. Before any official campaign began, a higher minimum wage received support from 54% of those polled and 11% more were undecided (Shurr 2018).

Then, in the spring of 2018, the Missouri Republicans were set back when their leader, newly elected governor Eric Greitens, was charged with two felonies. The first was regarding invading the privacy of a hairdresser and the second was on computer tampering. That May, the state legislature commenced a special session to impeach Greitens. Greitens resigned before he could be impeached. The charges were subsequently dropped because of insufficient evidence. Greitens had been an outspoken critic of raising the minimum wage. In ensuing political discourse, the lieutenant governor, Mike Parson, received plaudits for the times when he challenged Greitens. Parson was seen as a break from Greitens because he was an established, traditionally conservative politician who had connections on both sides of the State House.

In the wake of Greitens's scandal, the Republican campaign against minimum wage was severely stifled. The momentarily fractured Republican party tried to cast doubt on the intentions of the minimum wage workers. Their minimal campaign centered on labeling donations to Raise Up Missouri and Stand Up Kansas City as dark money. They focused on the fact that most of the donations to these organizations came from outside Missouri and claimed that approving the ballot measure would give "special interests in Washington DC" power over Missourians (Kansas City Star Editorial Board 2017). However, this was the full extent of the campaign against the \$12 minimum wage. There were no advertisements or door-to-door campaigns advocating to keep the minimum wage as is. Governor Parson never took a public stance on the ballot measure. Josh Hawley, the attorney general, was the highest ranking Republican to come out against it (St. Louis American 2018). As the Republican candidate for senate, Hawley was forced to take a position. However, he did so without confidence, saying he was "not so sure" it would help Missourians.

In contrast, the campaign for approving the ballot measure was very well funded by unions and had thousands of enthusiastic supporters. Minimum wage advocate Richard von Glahn believes that maintaining strong connections with the citizens who financially support them and then mobilizing them to volunteer time to speak with other voters was fundamental to the campaign's success; "This is one thing that gives Missouri Jobs with Justice more confidence in our campaigns – we talk directly to people... Direct communication is always best because you can directly ask people if they will vote in support of your issue" (von Glahn). Additionally, the coalition of the most active supporters was diverse. Union leaders, teachers, pastors, fast food workers, and small business owners alike voiced their opinions in favor of the ballot measure in Missouri's major newspapers (Kite 2018). Raise Up Missouri and the Sixteen Thirty Fund raised

nearly seven million dollars in order to promote the cause. Richard von Glahn also noted that many of the activist organizations had pre-built connections between them. Enough activists had interchanged through multiple of these organizations that communication through the whole campaign became easier to manage than a typical state-wide campaign. A key distinction between a ballot measure campaign and a political election for an office is that Political Action Committees cannot legally interact with official campaigns. This lack of communication often leads to situations where multiple groups are reaching out to the same voters repeatedly without knowing if another group had already done the work. However, for the 2018 ballot measure, the minimum wage activists could legally coordinate a much more unified campaign because there was no official candidate or partisan stance.

In addition to voter outreach, von Glahn believed the coordination helped with the campaign's media presence. Stand Up KC, The Fairness Project, Raise Up Missouri, and Missouri Jobs with Justice all wanted to highlight the workers who needed the additional money to survive in their advertising. He said, "when the media focused on impacted people, not the politics or polarization around the issue, that was best [for our campaign]... We try to keep our issues talked about [in terms of] how they will impact people. Media loves to talk about controversy and conflict, but that is a distraction from the human impact" (von Glahn). This type of impact-focused campaigning is well-demonstrated by Raise Up Missouri's social media presence on Facebook and Twitter, which showed real stories of minimum wage workers struggling to make ends meet under the current laws. Furthermore, Raise Up Missouri's central campaign slogan was "Help 677,000 of your hard-working neighbors" (Raise Up Missouri 2018). Raise Up Missouri's campaign both illustrated the grand scale of the issue to voters and tried to make an emotional pitch to the average voter's sense of decency.

The campaign was also aided by the timing of the ballot measure aligned with Missouri's senatorial election, which was receiving national attention because Democrat Claire McCaskill's seat was in jeopardy. McCaskill was very reliant on donors from outside Missouri. The Democratic party's increased focus on Missouri drove home extra capital for the other liberal issues in the state. Over a hundred thousand pieces of literature were sent through the mail. Television and Facebook advertisements made their way onto the screens of Missourians. The years of effort from the minimum wage advocates, fast food workers, civil rights leaders, union workers, and some small business owners paid off as the initiative passed with 62% of the vote and with approximately six hundred thousand more total votes. The \$12 minimum wage ballot measure was approved in 78 out of Missouri's 114 counties. In addition to the big cities and college towns, the \$12 minimum wage found support in large parts of eastern Missouri and western Missouri, which almost exclusively elect Republicans today.

5. The Aftermath

Unlike many other ballot initiatives that conflicted with the ruling government's agenda, the \$12 minimum wage was not immediately challenged.² Yet, activists and Democratic politicians still felt the need to publicly emphasize the importance of following the will of the voters (Galloway 2019). The law did come into effect on January 1st, 2019 and 677,000 workers finally got an eighty-five cent per hour raise. Instead of trying to strike down the new minimum law, Republicans in the state house stated that they wanted to amend the process for submitting a petition to become a ballot measure. However, divisions within the Republican party prevented it

² Notably, in 2018, the voters approved the Clean Missouri Act in order to put strict limitations on lobbying and campaign donations. The state legislature has tried to gut the effects of this initiative many times. Similarly, the legislative response to voter-approved Medicaid expansion in 2020 saw much more push back than the 2018 minimum wage law did.

from fully coming into fruition. Still, as of February 2022, there are still active proposals to create higher standards for getting petitions onto the state-wide ballot.

Yet, the efforts of Raise Up Missouri, Stand Up KC, and the other minimum wage activists did not stop. Their initial goal of a \$15 minimum wage was still not met by the ballot measure. Weeks later, students and workers came together at Washington University to re-ignite their original effort. There was some pushback from politicians of both parties telling these progressives to be grateful for the upcoming rate increases (St. Louis Post-Dispatch Editorial Board 2018). However, the perception that minimum wage was a settled issue in Missouri was short-lived. In 2019, janitors, service workers, and fast food workers held demonstrations in St. Louis and Kansas City (Wise 2019). They continued to demand a \$15 minimum wage. Because Missouri's law forcing a consistent minimum wage across the state had been overturned by the people, former mayor Lyda Krewson was able to approve a \$15 minimum wage for city workers in early 2020. As a whole, workers were leaving St. Louis's jobs quickly after being hired to work for better paying private sector jobs. Krewson said that a new increase in the city's minimum wage would "boost morale, reduce turnover and help fill positions" (Schlinkmann 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the politics of minimum wage in Missouri. As the world shut down, many minimum wage workers had to continue doing their work, despite the dangerous conditions. The national economy lost millions of jobs, yet the federal government still opted not to raise the wages of the poorest workers. Instead, the federal government sent billions of dollars to Missouri as part of their relief effort in order to cover for potential gaps in state budgets. This allowed state governments to allocate large amounts in federal funding and created an inflationary effect. By the end of 2021, inflation was going up at a rate unseen in

decades and the state's minimum wage of \$10.30 was still far beneath what economists determined to be a livable wage.

Governor Parson noticed that the trend Mayor Krewson saw in St. Louis was now occurring state-wide. The government jobs could not compete with private jobs, especially in the healthcare sector. Workers were leaving the state government quicker than their replacements could be hired. At one point in 2021, Missouri's Department of Social Services was several months behind in terms of enrolling new healthcare applicants. Because of Parson's political focus on job creation and because well-staffed hospitals and government agencies are even more crucial right now, Parson included funding for a \$15 minimum wage in his budget for 2022 (Lieb 2021). This decision was lauded by the Missouri Democrats and some Republicans in state government. As of February 2022, Parson was still trying to push his new minimum wage proposal through the state house. However, members of the most conservative Republican caucus refuse to approve it because they believe that the fifteen dollar per hour minimum wage is a leftist political statement. When interviewing activist Crystal Brigman Mahaney, she commented on her experiences of dealing with Republican state legislators on this issue, "they gum up the process because they don't want anything that says '\$15 dollars' because it sounds very political[ly motivated] and scary to those who are afraid of direct democracy." Despite the pushback from members of his own party, Parson is holding onto his effort to boost the minimum wage for public employees. In the next section, I will examine why Parson believes a higher minimum wage is a good fit for Missouri and if public opinion and the 2018 ballot measure has influenced his reasoning.

Case Study 1: The 2018 Missouri Minimum Wage Ballot Measure

How Governor Parson Responded to the Successful Campaign for a \$12 Minimum Wage

The November 2018 ballot measure showed resounding popular support for a liberal cause in Missouri, a state whose voters almost always elect Republicans to hold office. Even though there was a clear mandate in support of increasing the minimum wage, the issue is still not settled in Missouri. On the left and from the middle, there have been continued efforts to raise the minimum wage further. The original demands from the Fight for \$15 Movement still have not been met and some activists cite rising inflation as reason to negotiate beyond a \$15 minimum wage. On the right, state legislators have submitted bills undoing the will of the voters. Laws slowing the speed of the rate hikes, not raising the wages of tipped workers, and excluding private sector workers entirely have all been debated in the Missouri legislature. It is worth noting that these hard-line ideological proposals have not gained much traction. The law has followed the wording of Amendment 2 exactly. The minimum wage has risen by the scheduled 85 cents per year since 2018. The minimum wage is now up to \$11.15, which is over three dollars per hour more than it was originally. Even though the debate goes on, the political conditions around the issue have significantly changed.

In particular, Governor Parson, who refused to issue an opinion on the subject in 2018, has now come out in favor of increasing the minimum wage to \$15 for state workers. This is a marked shift. In his 2022 State of the State speech, Parson highlighted this policy proposal as one of his central goals for the upcoming year: “The success of our state relies heavily on these public servants, and we must ensure we are able to recruit and retain quality team members to serve Missouri and that is why we are proposing an immediate 5.5% cost of living adjustment for

all state employees. This is long overdue.” In this quote, Parson is publicly explaining to all the state’s voters that his support of higher minimum wage is a rational economic decision. He wants the state government, which he is responsible for, to viably compete with private sector businesses. Many major employers and corporations in Missouri are already guaranteeing \$15 or more minimum wages, which forces talent to leave government jobs. Turnover within the Missouri government is at an all time high, which has exacerbated long-existing problems within the state’s bureaucracy. Parson wants to keep people in his government by offering them a better wage. Still, perspectives on why Governor Parson has changed his position since 2018 vary greatly depending on one’s role within Missouri’s political system. This section will outline the views of how activists, political insiders, and journalists all make sense of Parson’s changes and positions. Together, they provide many reasons why Parson has changed and how his behavior is connected to the ballot initiative.

A. Activists

I interviewed two activists, Richard von Glahn and Crystal Brigman Mahaney, in order to understand the perspective of the people who drove the campaign. Both work for Missouri Jobs with Justice, which was the group that officially filed the \$12 minimum wage petition. Brigman Mahaney works as the Communications Director and von Glahn works as the Policy Director for the organization. They stressed that they represented the workers of Missouri, rather than any party: “We are not coordinated with parties. I do not do any work for the Democratic Party. I do not work for the Republican Party, either... When knocking on doors, what I really want to know is ‘do you believe it would be a good thing if we raised our minimum wage?’” (Brigman Mahaney). They both also made a point of saying that the ballot initiative was chosen as the

political plan of action out of necessity, instead of convenience: “Ballot initiatives are not easy. They are incredibly expensive. They require hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours. Nobody does these because they’re easy. We do them because they are necessary and because the legislature is being unresponsive to meeting the needs of the state” (von Glahn). This is important to note because it emphasizes the motivations of the activists. They are truly focused on improving the lives of Missourians in any way they can from within the system of governance. Of all the groups interviewed, the activists felt the most confident that Parson’s position had been changed by the ballot initiative. When asked “is the governor’s current stance on minimum wage linked to the passage of the 2018 ballot initiative?” von Glahn answered, “Yes, undoubtedly, yes.” Brigman Mahaney echoed this feeling in her interview. They presented several reasons for why they believed Parson was affected by the approved initiative.

The first reason was purely economic, rather than political. In addition to actively raising the wages of the lowest earning citizens, creating inflationary pressure on wages had been one of the central goals of implementing the ballot question, “that’s the point of raising the [wage] floor. It puts pressure on everybody [including government] to have a better place to work” (von Glahn). He went on to talk about what has happened to Missouri’s economy since November 2018: “Predictions of cataclysmic business collapse have not come to fruition, as we [the activists] knew they would not. So, frankly, the floor has risen. The wage floor is much closer to \$15. Now, the governor is talking about the government not being able to compete with McDonald’s and Wendy’s” (von Glahn). He feels that Parson’s current efforts to give public sector workers a \$15 is motivated by his fiscal conservatism and his responsibility to run a functional government. However, von Glahn also strongly believes that the conditions that drove Parson to this moderate stance stem from the ballot initiative and minimum wage’s slow climb

up since 2018. Brigman Mahaney mentioned that the government will always be a little behind because the government has to publicize and justify its decisions. She said, “big corporations are also able to celebrate themselves, ‘Hooray, we did it! We got to \$15 dollars an hour!,’ but they don’t have to share how much it cost them out of their profits.” Therefore, as long as the minimum wage is going up (it will be tied to inflation in Missouri after 2023), it will create a positive feedback loop where governments and businesses are determined to outmaneuver each other and be economically competitive.

Brigman Mahaney also believed the ballot initiative was able to influence Governor Parson because cultural factors were at play. As mentioned in the background section, Missouri has a long history of preemptive laws. Laws or movements, like advocacy for a \$15 minimum wage, that originate from St. Louis and Kansas City are viewed unfavorably by the state’s elected officials, so often new and progressive local laws are struck down before they can be enacted. In a statewide election, it becomes much more difficult for opponents to blame the black communities in major cities: “There are a lot of dog whistles [used by Missouri Republicans]. I’m not saying that Governor Parson is intentionally behind it, but it’s been a very tried and true tactic to divide people based on race without talking about race. They will say ‘St. Louis wants to tell us here in Lawrence County what to do and we don’t like that.’ I ask them ‘what do you mean when you say that?’” (Brigman Mahaney). The overwhelming passage of the ballot initiative showed legislators that this was not only an urban issue. Without the extenuating cultural divide, it became harder for Parson and other conservative to rally their base against the issue.

Brigman Mahaney and von Glahn disagreed on where the current Republican party stood on the issue of the minimum wage. Brigman Mahaney acknowledged that Parson’s tone and

public stance on the issue had changed, but still finds that the conservative caucus has not changed: “We have to spend a lot of time defending [what we’ve passed] once it gets implemented through the court process, through the media, and through the court of public opinion. In this case, what Governor Parson will say when he’s campaigning is different from how they [Republicans] actually talk about minimum wage in the state legislature.” (Brigman Mahaney). In contrast, von Glahn feels that Republicans are happy to take credit for the benefits that an increased minimum wage provides to people. Nearly four years after the initiative was passed, they generally see minimum wage as a settled subject, “no one is apoplectic about the minimum wage passing. That’s not a thing where Republicans are consciously choosing to spend more political capital on, especially when there’s no money to support them there” (von Glahn).

B. Political Insiders

In order to understand how Republican officials thought about ballot initiatives, it became necessary to include perspectives of the Republican decision-makers themselves because they could mostly directly answer questions about how it affects dynamics within the party and their legislative agenda. It also allowed for Republican insiders to voice their true opinions of the issues in focus as well. John Hancock, the former chairman of the Missouri Republican Party, agreed to be interviewed. His career in politics started in a state assembly. He served in his early twenties from 1992 to 1996. Then, at the age of 28 he ran a failed campaign for Missouri Secretary of State. Even though he lost, Hancock was offered the position of the Executive Director of the Missouri Republican party. He served in that post for eight years. Following that, he moved into private political consulting for a decade. In 2015, he felt that the Missouri Republicans needed his help and expertise, so he agreed to be party chairman for two years.

After a full slate of Republican politicians in 2016, Hancock left the public sphere for the final time. When recapping the events of that cycle, Hancock said, “So, mission accomplished, and I retired.”

Hancock offered many answers as to why Parson has changed his stance on the minimum wage. However, before we discussed any policy issue, Hancock felt that it was important to note that he did not think of the ballot initiative process as a liberalizing force. Rather, Hancock saw it a moderating force, mostly used by the ideology without legislative power: “One of the key dynamics is that the party that is out of power in the legislature has used the initiative petition process to enact policies of their liking. Today, with the Republican supermajorities in the state house and state senate, I think you see a lot of center-left efforts at the ballot. The center-left has used the initiative process for their purposes, because they don’t control the legislative branch. The initiative process is truly the domain of power for the out of power ideology” (Hancock).

Hancock was personally opposed to the proposal to raise the minimum wage because of his conservative economic principles, “I opposed [the \$12 minimum wage proposal] because I don’t like the government setting wage rates for private businesses. From a policy perspective, every time you increase the minimum wage, you decrease the number of open entry level jobs.” However, the minimum wage floor was not a particularly pressing or meaningful issue to him, “I knew about it [the minimum wage ballot measure]. I was not particularly concerned about it. If it passed, it passed. I wasn’t going to expend any effort to try and defeat it” (Hancock). In contrast, 2018 was a year of extreme urgency and excitement from the Democrats and liberals nationally. Millions of dollars flowed in from across the nation with the hopes of gaining approval for a \$12 minimum wage in Missouri. In addition to knowing that increasing the minimum wage was generally popular, Governor Parson also knew where the enthusiasm on this issue stood.

Embracing the more moderate position on this issue brought him closer to the public's opinion and made his opponents less feverishly oppose him.

Hancock also speculated that part of the reason why Parson's stance had shifted is because the make-up of the Republican party is changing. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the two parties have increasingly been sorting on the basis of educational attainment and job type. The skilled workers without college degrees come from a different political legacy than most historical Republicans, so there is now a need to incorporate, or at least address, their feelings and beliefs into the Republican agenda. Hancock explains, "the labor unions, thinking about builders, construction workers, trades, pipe fitters, carpenters, car makers, — their members have been increasingly voting for Republicans. The public sector unions, SEIU, the folks who represent service employees, have still been in lockstep with the Democrats... Now, there's an acknowledgement by some Republican elected officials that there's some part of the labor agenda that we should embrace. And minimum wage is an example of something like that." In this assessment, Hancock is suggesting that Parson did not have to make that large of a political adjustment when he advocated for a \$15 minimum wage for state workers and in fact he might have strategically made new Republican voters feel more comfortable supporting him.

C. Journalists

Journalists provide a perspective on politics where they are forced to remain neutral and present the complicated interworking of government in a way that is easily understandable for wide audiences. Hearing from journalists was important because they could help decipher through the biases from the activists and political insiders, who might have had more motivated reasoning to frame the ballot initiatives in a way that made their organization look appealing.

The two journalists I interviewed were Rudi Keller of the *Missouri Independent* and Kurt Erickson of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. I also interviewed Jeanne Kuang, formerly of the *Kansas City Star*. However, because it was my first interview and because she only had a year's experience reporting in Missouri, very little of it ended up being relevant. Keller has been reporting on Missouri politics since he graduated college in 1985, giving him thirty-seven years of experience within the system. Erickson covered the Illinois state house from 1995 to 2016 and then moved to Jefferson City to work for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, where he has been the state politics beat writer for six years. Both men have vast knowledge about how state governments and governors operate, especially in Missouri. Keller and Erickson believe that Governor Parson's new stance in favor of a higher minimum wage stemmed from two main motivations: economic realities and political popularity. Both of these motivations can be connected back to the 2018 ballot question.

First, they felt that raising the minimum wage to \$12 per hour was the only economically viable policy for Missouri's economy. The journalists suggested that is why the minimum wage has remained on the track as the ballot measure planned. Republicans in Missouri's state legislature have a history of challenging the laws that voters establish through direct democracy at both the local and state levels. Recently, they've mounted successful obstacles to the implementation of healthcare and anti-corruption laws, but the new minimum wage schedule was never vigorously challenged by the Republican party after its approval. Erickson commented: "Raising the minimum wage is a serious problem here in Missouri. When I got here six years ago, I couldn't believe how low state workers were paid. I made it a feature of my beat to point this out and show what's happening...By the time we were voting on it, you could not walk by a convenience store, for example, without seeing a big sign out front that said 'we are ready to

have you start at \$10.25 an hour with benefits!’ It was obvious that the \$7.85 was inadequate. By the time the new minimum wage was taking effect, almost every employer in the state was paying well above that.” Because of this, Parson might be grateful that the \$12 dollar minimum wage got approved. Missouri’s workers are not far beyond the national average anymore and he did not have to embrace a policy that was spearheaded by activists in St. Louis and Kansas City, either.

Today, Parson’s idea to raise the public sector minimum to \$15 per hour is also partially motivated by economic realities: “We’ve seen how the drive for a \$15 minimum wage has gone. It’s not been successful in Congress, but it has been enacted in a number of states because it’s pretty realistic right now. The best evidence of that is, this past December, the governor asked the state legislator to set a \$15 minimum wage as the base rate for every state employee. That will be above the \$12 minimum wage which will above be the [current] standard for 2023” (Keller). Businesses are far outpacing the government in terms of new hires. As it stands, there is a worker shortage in the labor force. Parson can’t manage a well-functioning government when the turnover rates in his government are at all time highs. Once again, the lasting effects of the 2018 ballot measure can be seen. Not only has increasing the minimum wage to \$12 contributed to the current inflationary wage conditions, but Parson also no longer has to wonder what the issue of increasing the minimum wage will do to his support within his base. He’s seen the benefits it’s had for the workers and economy of his state. Parson can make the case that his proposal follows a precedent and that it does not come from Democratic or other unfavorable outside groups.

The second reason Parson has for approving a higher minimum wage is because it appeals to the widest block of voters. This reasoning is also connected to the ballot measure in 2018. The best evidence Parson has for holding this assessment of the public’s beliefs comes

from polling data within Missouri and the ballot initiative election in 2018. Parson is willing to risk the approval of some of his most fiscally conservative supporters in order to maintain a high popularity generally. Keller explains:

[Parson's \$15 per hour for state workers proposal] got a little bit of push-back in the legislature. There were some folks who wanted to keep the base at \$12. But, there was enough opposition [with the Republican caucus] to that restriction that the [most conservative] legislators did not get their way in the final legislation that was just approved. Fifteen dollars is now the minimum you can be hired for in the state of Missouri. That's evidence for things like moderate opinion and the minimum wage ballot measure pushing policies on state government. You may piss off a third of the conservative base by doing something like that, but there's going to be a whole lot more people who are going to say 'that's fair. That's the right thing to do.' I think that's what the governor is doing when he's making those decisions" (Keller).

Therefore, the journalists who know Missouri politics best agree that the 2018 ballot initiative has allowed Parson to take a position that makes him broadly more popular across the state.

Case Study 2: The 2020 Missouri Medicaid Expansion Ballot Measure

The Recent History of Healthcare in Missouri

Like the minimum wage, health insurance (or healthcare) also sees its origins in the United States come from the progressive era. Unlike most other developed nations, health insurance in the United States has always been associated with employment. In the 1920s and 1930s, healthcare became more and more common as part of an employment contract, but it was not guaranteed. Because of its increasing cultural and political relevance, the idea for a national healthcare system entered the larger political discourse. The greatest opportunity to enact a universal system came in 1935 when the Democratic Party had full control of the federal government and implemented many new robust governmental institutions in order to reinvigorate the economy. However, the Franklin Roosevelt administration made the decision not to include universal healthcare as part of its economic recovery effort because it was afraid it would not pass through Congress and that it would negatively impact his popularity. Even though President Roosevelt was overwhelmingly popular in 1935, his critics derided him as a tyrant and accused him of government overreach. Since then, healthcare has been a long-standing pressing political issue in the United States. In 1945, President Truman became the first president to propose a universal healthcare system, but it never gained much traction in Congress. The first major healthcare law was the establishment of Medicare, which guaranteed healthcare for citizens above age sixty-five. It was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965.

When President Lyndon Johnson was elected in 1964, he ran on a platform calling back to Roosevelt's goals from the 1930s. A super majority of Democrats were elected to Congress to help Johnson implement his big government ideals. Medicaid, which guaranteed health insurance

for citizens below the poverty line, was a hallmark of Johnson's domestic agenda. He believed that the poorest Americans should get access to government-run healthcare because the prices of private healthcare companies were out of reach. As a way to call back fondly on the New Deal, Medicaid was officially established as an addendum to Roosevelt's Social Security Act (van der Voort 2017). After its establishment and the ensuing political victory for the Democratic party, healthcare became a very partisan issue in the United States. For the most part, Democrats wanted to expand and promote government-run healthcare services and Republicans wanted to limit the government's participation in health insurance.

1. Obamacare and the NFIB v. Sebelius Supreme Court Case

The issue of healthcare came into greater political focus during Barack Obama's election in 2008. He ran on a promise that healthcare corporations would no longer be able to deny people with pre-existing medical conditions proper health insurance. In a series of partisan votes, the Democratic party pushed through The Affordable Care Act (ACA), also known as Obamacare, significantly expanded the eligibility of who qualified for Medicaid. Before the ACA, a citizen could only be eligible for Medicaid if they earned less than 64% of the poverty line (Garfield and Rudowitz 2020). Now, under the ACA, anyone whose income is less than 138% of the federal poverty line became eligible to receive Medicaid. However, a conservative group, the National Federal of Independent Businesses or NFIB, sued the federal government claiming that Obamacare reached beyond the constitutional role for Congress. The NFIB represented large health insurance corporations as well as smaller independent businesses. The United States government defended the legality of Obamacare.

The case reached the Supreme Court in 2012. On almost exact ideological lines, all of the Court's liberal justices upheld the ACA and the Court's conservative justices struck it down. However, in a surprising development, Republican justice John Roberts broke away from his conservative allies to form a majority with the Democrats and validated the constitutionality of Obamacare. However, Roberts' opinion did not simply keep the law as it was written. Instead, *NFIB v. Sebelius* set new standards. States can now make their own decisions about whether or not they adopted the new expanded standards for Medicaid; "The Commerce Clause allows Congress to regulate existing commercial activity, but not to compel individuals to participate in commerce" (Oyez 2011). This stipulation was critical for Republican decision-making because Republican lawmakers would no longer be accountable for the shrinking of any government programs. They only had to deny the help of the federal government.

However, Roberts also ruled that Congress could withhold some federal funding for states that did not adopt the new eligibility rules for Medicaid. Originally, the ACA set out to withhold all federal funding for Medicaid to states that denied the new federal government's rules, but Roberts's majority opinion ruled this as unconstitutional (Oyez 2011). Yet, the funds set aside to cover new applicants to Medicaid could be withheld to states that did not comply with the ACA. The lack of potential funds coming into a state's healthcare system put some political pressure on legislators to expand Medicaid. Proponents of Medicaid expansion could point out that the expansion would be no cost to the state government and to the taxpayers. Because of this very split and complex ruling, Justice Roberts's verdict in *NFIB v. Sebelius* set the stage for healthcare and Medicaid expansion debates across the nation for the next ten years.

2. Efforts of Former Governor Jay Nixon

In most state governments led by Democrats, the choice to expand Medicaid was an easy decision because it aligned with stated political promises and did not place an extra burden on constituents. Every completely Democratic-controlled state adopted the expansion within the first two years it was available. Providing healthcare to the poor and those with pre-existing conditions was a long-standing goal of the Democratic party and now they could achieve this without having an effect on state budgets. In retrospect, studies have shown the decision to expand Medicaid paid off for the states that adopted the new policy. The number of uninsured people has been effectively cut in half in states with Medicaid expansion. In states that expanded Medicaid, the uninsured rate is 7.3%. In states that did not expand Medicaid, the uninsured rate is nearly double at 14.1%. Today, the majority of America's uninsured population lives in those thirteen states that have chosen not to expand Medicaid. Studies have shown that people who live in states with Medicaid expansion are more likely to receive healthcare services and less likely to incur emergency room costs (Karpman et, al. 2016).

Missouri did have a Democratic governor in the years immediately following the *NFIB v. Sebelius* decision. Jay Nixon was not a progressive firebrand. Rather, Nixon governed as a southern conservative Democrat, which is a political archetype that has faded out of the mainstream in the last ten years. Nixon was very public about his Methodist beliefs and about spending his whole life in Missouri. When he took over in 2008, Nixon's fiscal conservatism came to the forefront. He started cutting social spending programs out of the state's budgets as a way to respond to the ongoing financial crisis. He was dubbed "the Cutter in Chief" (Kansas City Star Editorial 2011). At the same time, he was receiving federal funds and Missouri was accepting all the help it could get from the federal government. President Obama and Governor

Nixon were able to keep stable union jobs in Missouri. By holding onto this moderate political ground, Jay Nixon was easily elected governor of Missouri in 2012 with nearly 55% of the vote and with hundreds of thousands of more votes than his Republican opponent.

Despite some conservative tendencies, Nixon consistently voiced a liberal stance on healthcare and Medicaid expansion, which were derived from his religious beliefs. In early 2013, Nixon announced his first plans to adopt Medicaid expansion. He called the decision a “no brainer” and made the case for expansion by saying, “this is our moment. With your help, we will look back on this day as the beginning of a brighter, healthier opportunity for our state — not an opportunity that passed us by” (Kraske and Hancock 2013). However, the implementation of Nixon’s agenda on healthcare was obstructed by Republican caucuses in the state legislature. The decision to expand Medicaid was complicated for Republican leadership because of the potential political consequences. The Republican party put pressure on their elected officials not to embrace or adopt any of Obama’s policies at any level of government. Rudi Keller of the *Missouri Independent* described the political climate at the time: “The problem was the association with the national Affordable Care Act, which they called Obamacare. There was not any Republican while President Obama was in office who was willing to vote for something that President Obama wanted to do. And it was a national Republican strategy.” Republicans at the federal level put a lot of their political capital into making sure that ACA would never be passed. Therefore, Republicans, who compromised on Medicaid expansion at the state level, would be seen as undoing the work of their federal colleagues.

This was part of a coordinated effort to make Obama and the Democratic party seem ineffective. Moreover, if Republican lawmakers adopted Medicaid expansion, they would be accepting the assistance of federally elected Democrats. Right-wing media outlets led a

concerted campaign to label “Medicaid expansion” as “socialized medicine” (Hiltzik 2021). As part of their public explanation as to why they refused to cooperate with Governor Nixon on this issue, Republicans accused Nixon of being deceptive about his intentions. One state representative said, “it would have been more impressive, more honest, if he [Nixon] had come out for it [Medicaid expansion] before the [2012] election,” even though the specifics of how it worked had not been established before the 2012 election cycle (Kraske and Hancock 2013). Nixon was able to schedule meetings over Medicaid in 2013 and 2014, but as his tenure continued Republicans became less and less willing to come to the negotiating table (Hancock and Kraske 2013).

3. Trump Administration’s Attempts to Repeal Obamacare

The 2016 elections changed the political conditions in Missouri drastically. First, Governor Nixon was term-limited in the 2016 election. Without a popular incumbent Democrat as a candidate, the Republican party could finally capitalize on the gains it had made through the 2000s and 2010s. As mentioned earlier, the new Missouri governor, Eric Greitens, represented a clear ideological shift to the right. From 1993 to early 2017, Missouri had almost exclusively had Democratic governors. 2017 was the first time that the modern Tea party brand of Republican had complete control over Missouri’s government (Bott 2017). The shift towards more conservative Republicans extended beyond the governor’s office and included an increasingly ideological state legislature as well. The influx of extremely conservative laws, such as the Right to Work law, signaled to liberal and moderate activists that they had to use tools outside of the traditional legislative process to accomplish their agenda. However, activists in Missouri did not

immediately respond on the issue of Medicaid expansion because its very existence was being challenged by the federal government.

This segues into the second major change in Missouri politics. The 2016 elections gave the Republicans complete control over the federal government. In their first year, the federal Republicans made it their top legislative priority to repeal Obamacare. At the end of 2017, after numerous very close attempts, the Republicans finally agreed to keep the ACA in place for the foreseeable future (Roubein 2017). The attempts to repeal Obamacare were closely watched by healthcare advocates because without Obamacare, Medicaid expansion would have been impossible. Medicaid expansion activists in Missouri were deterred from making a ballot question available to voters because they thought the entire system might not exist by the time voters actually had an opportunity to voice their opinions on the issue; Rudi Keller of the *Missouri Independent* illustrated this, “It was until the end of 2017 that was clear that the Affordable Care Act was going to not be repealed by Congress. That was too late for an initiative for 2018 by Missouri’s state rules. That’s when, I assume strategically, they [activists] started targeting 2020, knowing that it would not even be part of the governor’s plan.”

For organizations like the Fairness Project and Missouri Jobs with Justice that do not exclusively work on healthcare, it made more sense to devote their resources to increasing the minimum wage, Right to Work repeal, and medical marijuana legalization. These activist organizations disproportionately put their resources into repealing Right to Work because it was a referendum initiated by the state legislature. In other words, activist networks in Missouri did not have time beforehand to prepare and poll on Right to Work. The state legislature’s decision to move the issue to a referendum was sudden and secretive. Furthermore, if voters had approved the Right to Work law, the court would have viewed it as a settled subject and there would have

been very little legal recourse for those in favor of unions. 2018 was the only opportunity activists had to deny a permanent Right to Work law in Missouri.

4. The 2020 Ballot Measure

After the busy 2018 election cycle, liberal and moderate activists in Missouri could re-focus their attention back onto healthcare. The stagnancy in federal healthcare policy paired with Governor Parson's reluctance to adopt Medicaid expansion made for the perfect political conditions for a state-wide ballot measure on the issue. Missouri organizers chose to sponsor a ballot initiative campaign because they observed many recent similar campaigns in conservative states. Between 2018 and early 2020, Utah, Nebraska, Idaho, and Oklahoma all had Medicaid Expansion approved by the voters of their states. The successful ballot measures boosted the confidence of activists in Missouri. Crystal Brigman Mahaney, the communications director for Missouri Jobs with Justice, said: "Around the issue of Medicaid expansion, I definitely thought it would win and it would be overwhelming, but other people around me were saying 'I don't think it's gonna pass. I don't think it's gonna pass.' And I said 'why not? It just passed in Oklahoma'" (Brigman Mahaney).

Additionally, activists had done research that found that the issue of Medicaid expansion itself was very popular. Missouri Jobs with Justice, an organization dedicated to protecting workers, reached out to their thousands of members in early 2020 and learned that Medicaid expansion was overwhelmingly people's highest political priority. Brigman Mahaney explained how her organization went about this: "We as an organization are made up of thousands of members. It's a grassroots network. I don't get to pick out 'oh this is the campaign I want us to work on.' We hear it from our members. We do year-round voter engagement. We are talking to

our neighbors [Missourians] and seeing what comes up with them. We do deep canvassing, meaning we have open ended conversations. It all feeds into what policies we decide we are working on. We hear about workers' rights and [about] people needing tangible benefits in their lives." National polling meta-data from the Cooperative Election Study backed up Missouri Jobs with Justice's finding that Medicaid expansion was both very popular and highly urgent. In 2020, 69% of Americans supported universal healthcare. 91% of Americans believed the government should be able to negotiate the prices of medications down. 61% of Americans supported lowering the minimum age of Medicare to fifty. And only 39% of Americans believe the ACA should be repealed (Schaffner et, al. 2020). Knowing that popular support was on their side made organizers in Missouri feel more confident they could win a public state-wide debate on Medicaid Expansion. They felt that by listening to the experiences of Missourians, they knew they could appeal to coalitions of people not accessible by either political party.

The "Yes on 2" campaign was extremely robust and had fervent support from the beginning. The signature collection process for Amendment 2 (Medicaid Expansion) far surpassed any ballot measure in Missouri before it. Amendment 2 amassed 350,000 signatures, which represented about 6% of Missouri's population and more than doubled what was legally required (St. Louis Post Dispatch Editorial 2020). Over ten million dollars poured in order to fund Yes on 2. Hospitals and medical groups led the effort to publicize and fund the campaign. The Missouri Hospital Association, the Health Care Issues Committee, the Health Forward Foundation, and the Fairness Project each contributed over half of a million dollars to help advertise and share information. As the Yes on 2 campaign was starting to take form, the Covid-19 pandemic began. Covid-19 raised the need for Medicaid expansion. More people felt the need for health insurance and more people became eligible because unemployment

skyrocketed. The combination of the Covid-19 pandemic and Yes on 2's strong financial backing became a formidable force for anti-expansion conservatives to oppose.

Reflecting back, Richard von Glahn of Missouri Jobs with Justice feels the strength of the Yes on 2 campaign was its voter-oriented strategy. In late 2019 and early 2020, von Glahn wondered if matching the success of the minimum wage campaign was possible because the coalition of activists supporting Medicaid expansion was much more ideologically diverse; "Minimum wage was essentially done by a group of organizations very familiar to us. In a certain way, it was a closely knit and trusting group of people. Conversely, the Medicaid campaign was composed of a network of people that historically opposed each other on issues, such as the minimum wage fight. In each case, trust and transparency were critically important, but they were built and acted upon differently" (von Glahn). Yet, von Glahn feels that each group's genuine desire to expand Medicaid in Missouri overrode any historical or political differences between the groups.

In all, the Yes on 2 campaign, which included every organization listed in the previous paragraph, facilitated over 100,000 direct conversations between volunteers and voters. According to the Healthcare for Missouri Facebook page, volunteers called over a million phone numbers and sent over 200,000 text messages. There was even a mobile campaign headquarters that traveled over 13,000 miles through Missouri in the first seven months of 2020 (Healthcare for Missouri 2020). Volunteers were told to center their conversation on job creation, increasing federal funding, and healthcare access for rural communities (Healthcare for Missouri 2020). Considering that the final difference between the two options on the ballot measure was 80,000 votes, it is fair to say that these active attempts to reach out to voters could have made the difference in the final result. Richard von Glahn believes that their voter outreach efforts were

the most important part of any ballot measure campaigns: “This is one thing that gives Missouri Jobs with Justice more confidence in our campaigns – we talk directly to people... Direct communication is always best because you can directly ask people if they will vote in support of your issue” (von Glahn).

Unlike in the minimum wage case study, the conservatives were not deterred from forming a “No on 2” campaign of their own. After losing all ballot measures in 2018, conservatives and the Republican Party mounted a much larger effort against the Medicaid expansion ballot question. Half of a million dollars were invested into public advertisements that argued to keep the restricted version of Medicaid. The “No on 2” campaign focused on the potential cuts to other government programs that Medicaid Expansion would cause. Elected Republican leaders tried to remind citizens about the cost of Medicaid, claiming that in 2020, Medicaid expansion would be more costly to the taxpayer because a larger group of people would need to be supported. Furthermore, because of the Trump administration’s changes to healthcare policy, state governments are now responsible for 10% of the financial cost of Medicaid expansion. State-level Republicans, including Governor Parson, warned that Medicaid expansion would take away from education and infrastructure projects (Gerber 2021). Republican officials never publicly advocated to pull back social programs. Instead, they warned the Democrats’ efforts to expand Medicaid would have unintended consequences upon other social programs. The “No on 2” campaign also relied on talking points of the past, namely labeling the funds coming from outside the state as “dark money” (Suntrup 2020).

However, the No on 2 campaign had interactions with actual voters. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and their relative lack of funding as compared to their opponents created legitimate limitations for the No on 2 campaign. Instead, the focus of the opponents of Medicaid

expansion moved towards influencing the elected officials who they thought supported their cause. In Spring 2020, the No on 2 campaign successfully lobbied Governor Parson and Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft to move the date of the ballot measure up from November 8th to August 4th. At the time, critics wrote that this was a thinly veiled attempt by Parson to mitigate voter turnout as non-presidential elections draw many fewer voters (St. Louis Post Dispatch Editorial 2020). Parson vehemently denied this criticism. Instead, he reasoned that a change to a summer election was necessary because, if the voters approved Medicaid expansion, there had to be more time for the government to implement the program before the 2021 state budget was due (Suntrup 2020). No matter the explanation for the change of date, both sides of the debate were actively planning strategies to make themselves look appealing and to win over voters. Politicians of both parties, the healthcare industry, and activists saw the ballot measure as very consequential. There was significant political investment on both sides.

5. Aftermath

On August 4th 2020, Medicaid expansion was approved with 54% of the vote in Missouri. Yes on 2 received eighty thousand more votes than No on 2. Even though turnout was suppressed because of the election's late move to August, the sentiment in favor of expanding Medicaid was strong enough to overcome these obstacles.³ Medicaid Expansion only won outright majorities in counties that Democratic candidates typically win: St. Louis and its metropolitan area, Kansas City and its metropolitan area, and Columbia, Missouri where the University of Missouri is located (Warren 2020). However, even though Medicaid expansion lost in all of Missouri's rural counties, the margins of victory for No on 2 were much slimmer.

³ The turnout in Missouri's August 2020 election was around 33.7% which was significantly lower than the 69.8% turnout that was seen during Missouri's November 2020 election.

Medicaid expansion outperformed Hillary Clinton's 2016 performance by 15% and outperformed Senator Claire McCaskill's 2018 performance by 10% (Warren 2020). Clearly, Medicaid expansion appealed to a coalition of voters beyond the reach of any liberal politician, even those with a personal constituency.

After his side lost the election, Parson did allocate the proper funding for Medicaid expansion in the fall of 2020. Parson had to devote more of the state's budget to Health and Human Services in order to financially cover for the thousands of new potential applicants. The state government has to ensure that they have enough capital to provide for every new person who signs up in that year. 230,000 people gained access to Medicaid through the ballot measure, but only about 25% of those people were able to actually enroll because the state health department was understaffed (Erickson 2020). These immense institutional problems came into play in enrollment windows in 2020 and 2021. As of March 2022, over 72,000 Missourians had their Medicaid status pending as the state's department of Health and Human Services tried to process their applicants. Of the Missourians newly-eligible for Medicaid, more people have their status currently pending than have been admitted into the system (Rivas and Weinberg 2022). Slow and inefficient bureaucracy has not been the only impediment towards the complete implementation of Medicaid expansion.

In 2021, the state legislature tried to undo the result of the 2020 ballot measure in many different ways. First, after a long legislative session, they successfully refused to approve Parson's budget for the fiscal year 2021 (Erickson 2021). Without a proper revenue stream, Parson refused to enact the new Medicaid eligibility rules because it would become an even larger financial burden on taxpayers and current Medicaid enrollees. Upon seeing the direct will of the voters ignored, activists stepped in to sue the government as the lack of funding for

Medicaid expansion now violated the Missouri state constitution. In July 2021, the Missouri State Supreme Court, which includes justices from both political parties, ruled unanimously that the state legislature had to include proper budgeting for new Medicaid enrollees (Kaiser Family Foundation 2021). The court noted that the 2020 ballot measure was a constitutional amendment, which could not be legally ignored or adjusted by the state legislature. However, the efforts to deny funding to Medicaid did successfully delay the expansion process for nearly a full year.

In the fall of 2021, Parson, once again, designated the proper funding for Medicaid expansion and thousands of Missourians attempted to register for the service. However, Republican legislators have not stopped fighting the new rules. Today, they are trying to include a work-requirement for new applicants for Medicaid (Erickson 2022). This requirement has been strategically proposed in many Republican-controlled states because it would severely restrict the growth of Medicaid because many jobs offer more comprehensive healthcare plans as part of their terms of employment. However, a change to a federal law of that scope necessitates approval from the President. President Joe Biden's steadfast stance against work-requirements for Medicaid has essentially sunk the chances of this plan succeeding in the immediate future. Even a decade after the *NFIB v. Sebelius* ruling, Medicaid expansion is debated within the Missouri state legislature, but the political battles are not what they once were. A political consensus, reluctantly supported by the governor, is coming to settle around a semi-functioning program with the new and more inclusive eligibility rules. In the next section, I will more fully explore Parson's exact role in the 2020 Medicaid expansion ballot measure and I will show how his behavior following the August 2020 vote can be explained.

Case Study 2: The 2020 Missouri Medicaid Expansion Ballot Measure

How Governor Parson Responded to Successful Campaign for Medicaid Expansion

In August 2020, 54% of Missouri voters approved the expansion of Medicaid in their traditionally conservative state. Even though Parson publicly opposed Medicaid expansion before the election, his stance was not extremely ideological or rigid. He was always willing to follow the will of the voters on this issue. He publicly said: “If the people of the state of Missouri vote [Medicaid expansion] in, we’re going to have to deal with it, implement it. We’ll prepare for that, we’ll implement it, and we’re just going to have to find the money to be able to pay for it” (Suntrup 2020). Once the election results came through, Parson legitimately made an effort to comply with the state constitution and provide the proper funds for the expansion of Medicaid, knowing the tension it would cause in his own caucus.

However, the fallout surrounding the Medicaid expansion ballot measure has been notably more contentious than the fallout surrounding the minimum wage ballot measure. The most ideologically conservative members of the state senate would not permit Parson to make good on his promise. They obstructed his proposed budget for months until Parson relented because he felt the rest of the state government would suffer. Unlike the minimum wage ballot measure, the effects of the Medicaid expansion ballot measure were delayed for a year. Still, major trends in Governor Parson’s decision-making have remained the same in both case studies. Through the intra-party conflict, Parson maintained that he would support the process of expanding Medicaid as long as the funds in his budget were approved. This represented a marked shift towards the center and towards the majority of Missouri voters. In February 2022, Parson signed a bill funding Medicaid for the year. As of March 2022, Republican state legislators have

put a lot of political focus on adding a work requirement to the new Medicaid eligibility rules, but Parson is yet to make a public statement for or against his party's wishes.

In this section, I will demonstrate that Parson has tangibly moderated on the issue of Medicaid expansion and that his decision to moderate was influenced by the 2020 ballot initiative. Once again, speaking with activists, political insiders, and journalists has provided potential evidence of Parson's behavior. Parson's more favorable attitude towards political issues after they were approved by voters shows that his responses are not total aberrations or isolated incidents. Rather, many of the theories as to why Parson shifted on the issue of the minimum wage re-emerged when discussing Medicaid expansion. This is partly because the same subjects were interviewed for both sections, but this is mostly because there are some inherent similarities between the two ballot initiatives. This section confirms the political influence that ballot initiatives can have in Republican-dominated governments. Again, when hearing all the perspectives together, it clearly shows evidence for the moderating effects of the ballot measures in Republican-led states.

A. Activists

Direct democracy activists Richard von Glahn and Crystal Brigman Mahaney were interviewed about their efforts on the 2020 Medicaid expansion ballot initiative. As with the minimum wage ballot initiative, they believed their work had led to changing Parson's public position on Medicaid expansion. However, unlike for minimum wage, there was some doubt about whether or not Parson's true position ever changed. Before the election, the activists believed that political dynamics, namely the decade-long Republican campaign against Obamacare, forced Parson to take a public stance against Medicaid expansion. Parson knew that

Medicaid expansion was more popular than unpopular and that the states bordering Missouri that had already expanded Medicaid did not experience harsh economic consequences as the Missouri Republicans warned. Instead of moving the Medicaid expansion ballot question to August to lower voter turnout as some Democratic critics suggested, von Glahn believes the election was moved earlier because Parson knew his stance on Medicaid at the time was a losing issue for him: “I believe he said he was going to uphold the will of the voters because he did not want the issue [of Medicaid expansion] to be used against him in his re-election campaign. [Parson] unilaterally acted to move the election... and then [he] said ‘I’m going to do whatever the voters decide,’ because he was trying to make it an issue that could not define him” (von Glahn). Therefore, from the perspective of the activists, it seems as if Parson was never strongly opposed to Medicaid expansion, but had no room to separate himself from the most ideologically conservative members of his caucus before the ballot question.

The activists believed that the biggest impact of the ballot measure is that statewide approval on the issue created a political justification for Parson to passively support Medicaid expansion: “There are a lot of Republican politicians that wanted us to do that [pass Medicaid expansion] because there is now tons of federal money coming into the state, which the state needed. I think there are a number of them who are perfectly happy with us doing that, including the governor. He was never going to be able to do it [pass Medicaid expansion] because if he had done it, he would have gotten primaried from the right and that would have been a problem for him... If the governor did not want Medicaid expansion to pass, he could have aggressively campaigned against it. If he truly did not want it, he could have made it a signature issue of his campaign... I think he looked at this and said ‘if we can get this done without me having to do it, that’s wonderful.’ That’s not exactly a profile in courage” (von Glahn). Through the ballot

measure citizens had given themselves the positive life-saving benefits of Medicaid expansion. Parson was given the luxury of being able to point to positive improvements that occurred under his tenure without conceding to his opponents in the Democratic party. The ballot initiative gave Parson a chance to champion the expanded access to healthcare as his own cause while being slightly removed from the dynamics of party politics.

The activists also made the point that the ballot initiative works in conjunction with many other factors that work to influence elected officials. Even though it is possible to draw a strong connection between the ballot initiative and relaxing the pressure on Parson to side with ideological conservatives, this is not the only factor at play. Brigman Mahaney says both quantitative evidence, such as elections and poll numbers, and qualitative experiences affect the behavior of officials: “I have definitely seen decision-makers change how they talk about an issue once they’ve seen someone who was struggling with [a lack of healthcare or access to food. The official will say,] ‘oh, I thought it was so easy to get Medicaid. I thought it was so easy to get food stamps’” (Brigman Mahaney). Brigman Mahaney said that sharing these anecdotal examples are a major part of her work as an activist. However, she also emphasized that the campaigning that activist organizations do after one of their issues has passed is essential for keeping their political victories in place, “we continue to work to agitate politicians out of their self-interest. It’s not name-calling. It’s telling them, ‘you said that your values are these things and you care about workers,’ so we are going to remind all of the people you represent that this is what you said” (Brigman Mahaney). This demonstrates that activist organizations view the ballot initiative process as an essential tool for their work, but it is still one of many. As illustrated, ballot initiative elections partially have permanent impacts because there’s a political network of activists and politically involved citizens that can fight to hold these results in place.

To paint the picture that the issue of Medicaid expansion has been simple following August 2020 would be misleading. It took more than a year for newly eligible citizens to receive the benefits of Medicaid. However, Brigman Mahaney and von Glahn do not blame the governor. Instead, they believe that the reason why the implementation of Medicaid expansion was delayed was because the governor's role is relatively small in terms of writing laws. The governor's powers allow him to allocate funding for the state departments and put him in charge of running the state's bureaucracy, but he has no legislative power. Similarly, as a figure with high name recognition in Missouri, Parson has the power to use the bully pulpit to garner popular support for an issue or put pressure on a legislator, but these abilities still don't bring him into the law-writing process. In recounting what has happened since Medicaid Expansion was approved, Brigman Mahaney placed most of the blame on the state legislature for the failure to expand Medicaid in 2021: "Prior to [the election], Parson said 'yes, when people vote on it, that will be the law of the land.' Then he said, 'we've got money there and I'm definitely not going to turn back on my word.' But on almost the last day of the session, Parson was forced to renege and we had to go back to court to defend the process. I don't know the motivation [from the state legislators] for that" (Brigman Mahaney). To illustrate this same point, von Glahn used the example of former governor Jay Nixon, "even when we had a governor who was in the right spot, he was not really with the people with the [power] to write the laws. Jay Nixon aggressively campaigned for Medicaid and yet still there was no action" (von Glahn). While these sentiments from activists may minimize how much power the governor has within the state, they do not change how ballot initiatives affect governors generally. However, it absolutely complicates the relationship between gubernatorial behavior and policy outcomes.

B. Political Insiders

As with the minimum wage case study, I interviewed former Missouri Republican party chairman John Hancock to shine light on how Republican officials thought about the policy of Medicaid expansion and how they reacted to the voters' approval of the new policy. To start, we talked about Hancock's personal stance on the issue. Hancock was against Medicaid Expansion at the time, but he thinks the Missouri Republican party was not as attached to the principles of conservative economics as he is. Hancock said, "I opposed [Medicaid expansion]. I opposed it on the account of the federal government dumping a ton of money into a plan to expand Medicaid. The state had to adopt all those policies in order to get all that [new] federal money. It was extremely enticing [for elected officials]. It required a small state investment. [However,] I do think over time, there's nothing stopping the government from turning off the taps and then the state is left holding the bag and they'll need to cut benefits... But, an awful lot of Republicans, and certainly the Hospital Association, which is part of the Chamber of Commerce supported it. In many counties, the Hospital is the largest employer in the county. They were very supportive and needful of those funds" (Hancock).

Because both Democrats and very influential segments of the Republican base strongly supported Medicaid Expansion, Hancock felt that Parson knew that being opposed to expanding healthcare would be an uphill battle. With the pressure of a re-election campaign in a wave year for the opposition party, Parson did not want to have the focus of his tenure as governor center around his healthcare policy. Hancock reiterated von Glahn's belief about why the election was moved up, "the Medicaid expansion could've been put on the November ballot or it could've been put on the August ballot. That was the governor's choice. The governor put it on the August ballot because the issue would be over and done with before he was on the ballot in November.

There are political maneuverings that take place around ballot initiatives... You look at polling and assess political implications and make choices based on that” (Hancock). All this shows that Parson was never confident or enthusiastic about his opposition to Medicaid Expansion.

Later, Hancock gave more credence to the idea that Parson’s true position on healthcare was not very strong and that seeing the voters approve Medicaid expansion gave him plausible deniability if he were to strongly flip positions. More importantly, the ballot initiative gave Parson the opportunity not to take a position on either side. This lack of position on a contentious issue like Medicaid expansion could make Parson more popular generally because both sides could see what they want to see from Parson’s public statements. Hancock believes this is one of the fundamental effects that having a strong and active ballot initiative system has on a state’s politics: “If you’re asking me, does having a robust initiative process ease a lot of pressures that would otherwise be on elected officials? The answer to that is yes. If you know the public is going to speak to something, you can sort of step aside, especially if you know it’s controversial. You can shrug and say ‘the people are going to decide. Let the will of people be supreme” (Hancock). Overall, Hancock and the activist Richard von Glahn had many overlapping opinions about how the Medicaid expansion ballot initiative affected governor Parson, even though they come from vastly different backgrounds within the political arena. This agreement hints that individuals with deep political experience in Missouri politics have seen patterns about how ballot questions play out. Political insiders feel ballot initiatives allow powerful figures to back away from a stance on an especially controversial issue and that leaders can benefit from letting the people decide because they will inherently have the majority behind them.

C. Journalists

As with the case study on the minimum wage ballot measure, I interviewed Kurt Erickson and Rudi Keller about how they viewed the politics of Medicaid expansion in Missouri, the aftermath of the 2020 ballot measure, and where Governor Parson currently stands on the issue. There was an acknowledgement by the journalists that they did not think any of these current conditions would have been possible without the tool of the ballot initiative, “Medicaid Expansion was not going to be part of the governor’s plan (Parson) or his predecessor (Greitens)... neither of them wanted to do Medicaid expansion and there was absolutely no way it was going to get voted out of the general assembly. If you look at states where ballot initiatives are allowed, you’ll see that ballot initiatives passed in many states before Missouri and they were very successful. This became seen as the successful strategy in the states where it’s part of the system” (Keller). There’s a baseline understanding that direct democracy is actively responsible for the passage of many policies that an unresponsive state legislature will not get behind.

Even though many members of his own party are still opposed to expanding Medicaid, Parson had quietly chosen to follow the more moderate-leaning result of the ballot initiative. Keller speculates that this could be because Medicaid expansion was approved as an amendment to the state constitution, rather than a statutory amendment: “Medicaid expansion being put into the constitution, rather than a statutory change made it very difficult for it to be repealed.” Challenging Medicaid expansion guaranteed a battle in the courts. Following the ballot measure result, Parson knew opposing Medicaid expansion was a legal battle that was very likely to lose and Parson wanted to focus on legislative battles he would win: “He [Parson] read the room. He knew that there would be a possible court challenge to that [ignoring the results of the Medicaid expansion ballot initiative] and acted within what the law prescribed based on the vote. Then, the

assembly led by rural Republicans tried to stop anyway, so then it went to the courts. At that point [after the court's ruling], they did not have a choice but to fund it. He always said, 'I will abide by what the constitution says'" (Erickson). In the assessment of the journalists, the delays to Medicaid expansion's implementation were not Parson's fault. Rather, the unresponsive state legislature was to blame. Because they had a supermajority, they could override Parson's decision to move on and concede the issue of Medicaid expansion to the people's will.

Before the ballot initiative, Parson publicly opposed Medicaid expansion. Today, Parson does not embrace either side of the debate over Medicaid expansion. The fears of the government slowing down and of losing support prevent him from embracing his former oppositional stance. Most notably, this has come up in the debate over adding a work requirement for Medicaid, but Parson won't get behind his fellow Republicans publicly. Erickson explained: "The senate Republicans have tried to do this every year since I've been here. The problem is the federal government would have to give a waiver to any state that wants to have a work requirement... The Missouri Republicans are going to try to do it again, but the Biden administration won't give them a waiver. They're just going to keep applying every year for the waiver until a president comes along who will grant the waiver... It's kind of more eye candy for Republican conservatives than it is for reality. If Parson does sign it, he would only do so knowing that it's meaningless." This signals that Parson knows the political tides have turned against the conservative approach to healthcare. He has the political power to rally his base against Medicaid expansion, yet since he was caught on the wrong side of the ballot initiative, he has refused to do that.

Instead, Parson now takes more of an observant role. Erickson said that: "He has taken the position of 'here's my budget. Here's my legislative agenda. You guys go fight about it in the

house and senate.” Keller describes this approach as pragmatic, “As for the governor himself, in terms of trying to match his policies to public opinion, he has shown that he’s pragmatic in many aspects. There’s lots of evidence of his pragmatism. He is willing to do some things a hardcore conservative wouldn’t.” Ultimately, for Governor Parson, following the written word of the Missouri constitution and not backtracking on the promises he made to his constituents is the path of least resistance. Today, staying popular and staying out of controversy matters more to him than any specific stance on Medicaid expansion.

Conclusion

Over the course of my thesis project, I attempted to find the answer to this question: why do Republican governors sometimes break away from the Republican Party line on substantive spending or top priority issues? The question itself is surprising because the focus of the media political scholarship does not highlight moderation within the today's Republican party. Instead, the focus of the political discourse tends to emphasize polarization, extremism, and difference. However, despite this emphasis, this tendency within gubernatorial behavior to moderate still remains true as it is directly evidenced by both of my case studies. After comprehensively researching academic scholarship on gubernatorial behavior, I found that the most compelling response claimed that governors moved away from their party or moderated because they wanted to better align themselves with the opinion of their constituents.

Many scholars illustrated how and why this occurred. In this final section, I will briefly outline some of the pre-existing research on the topic and show how my findings connect back to it. Morris Fiorina (2017) wrote on the subject of voters and citizens continually being much less polarized than the politicians who represent them. Chris Tausanovitch (2019) argues that subnational governments are inherently more responsive (and have acted more responsively) than the federal government because they represent less people and can be more closely attuned to their constituents' needs. William Franko and Christopher Witko (2018) claimed that moderation was fueled by the sheer popularity of the seemingly liberal stance on these top priority issues. They cited multiple polling sources showing overwhelming support for positions like increasing the minimum wage, adding earned income tax credits, better funding public schools, and implementing a universal healthcare program. Notably, all of these studies into the

actions of governors were quantitative, which left a gap in the scholar for a qualitative project examining my research question.

Franko and Witko (2018) also speculated that “another institutional factor we expect to play an important role in the state adoption of inequality-limiting policies is the ability of citizens to introduce and pass legislation. This is broadly referred to as direct democracy, but the ballot initiative can be particularly influential to the policy process. The initiative allows the electorate to control the policymaking process from writing the legislation to a popular vote on the proposal to determine the future of the policy. This allows residents of the 24 states that have the initiative process to use this political tool to circumvent their legislatures if they are unresponsive to public demands” (pg. 138). I wanted to determine if Franko and Witko’s expectations about direct democracy’s ability to voice a more moderate public opinion were true through an unexplored qualitative means. Franko and Witko’s statement helped me formulate this thesis statement; In states where moderate public opinion is an established and known condition, direct democracy pressures cause Republican governors to adjust their behavior and that results in different policy outcomes on Top Priority Issues. In order to test this, I looked at a state, Missouri, where direct democracy is a meaningful part of the political system and where patterns in the effects of ballot initiatives could be observed. I then chose two specific campaigns, the 2018 minimum wage ballot measure and the 2020 Medicaid Expansion ballot measure, because they were recent and relevant.

After completing a series of interviews of people directly involved in ballot initiative campaigns and who deeply understand the role of moderate public opinion in Republican states, I can now provide support for some of the previous research and highlight complications in others. To start, Fiorina’s claims that the general population are less ideologically divided than

political elites was both quantitatively supported through polling data and qualitatively supported when taking a close look at the coalitions that approved raising the minimum wage and Medicaid expansion. Specifically, when Richard von Glahn described the people who voted for these new policies, he said “some of them liked the governor, some of them did not like the governor. The thing about a ballot initiative allows you to re-focus on an issue and not the politicians, which is good for messaging in Missouri because it gets us out of the polarization that plagues Missouri. People can unify and agree on the issue” (von Glahn). Furthermore, when I asked Crystal Brigman Mahaney who was a part of Missouri Jobs with Justice, she said they had “thousands of members all across the state” (Brigman Mahaney). This implies that racial, gender, and geographic diversity are also present in these ballot initiative coalitions. By the same nature, the existence of these ideologically diverse, issue-based coalitions punctures Alan Abramowitz’s (2010) theory that voters of different parties and backgrounds are moving increasingly apart from one another. In future scholarship, Abramowitz and those who follow his line of thinking will have to explain how ideologically diverse coalitions find common ground on these critically important policy issues.

My findings also support Franko and Witko’s research that showed that a broad consensus could be found behind liberal stances on top priority issues. Within the constraints of my case studies, this was proved by the results of the ballot initiative elections. In a state that nearly exclusively elects Republican officials, lifting the minimum wage and expanding Medicaid were significantly more popular than unpopular. Moreover, Franko and Witko’s speculation, as well as my hypothesis, that ballot initiatives would loudly voice moderate public opinion and move gubernatorial behavior towards the center was **confirmed**. Keller noted, “these expressions of public opinion at the ballot box certainly help guide what the governor is

willing to do in terms of the policies he's willing to sign as a governor that are being brought forth by the general assembly." Former state Republican chairman John Hancock said, "does having a robust initiative process ease a lot of pressures that would otherwise be on elected officials? The answer to that is yes. If you know the public is going to speak to something, you can sort of step aside, especially if you know it's controversial. You can shrug and say 'the people are going to decide. Let the will of people be supreme.'" Finally, Brigman Mahaney said, "ballot initiatives have been the most powerful form of representing the people that I've seen in Missouri." These testimonials from separate and reliable political sources show that in practice, people have observed the moderating effects of the ballot initiative process. There is no reason to believe that Missouri or Governor Parson is an exceptional case, but future research could carry these results further by interviewing people involved in similar issue-based campaigns in other states and on issues, such as Right to Work laws and public school funding.

In terms of complications and challenges, Tausanovitch's work is only partially supported by my research. While it appears that subnational governments are more responsive than the federal government, in Missouri, it is not for the reasons that Tausanovitch believed. In the case of Missouri, state legislators were not more aware of the concerns of their voters. In fact, journalists and activists repeatedly told me that the state legislators' unresponsiveness drives the use of ballot measures in Missouri; von Glahn said, "Ballot initiatives are not easy. They are incredibly expensive. They require hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours. Nobody does these because they're easy. We do them because they are necessary and because the legislature is being unresponsive to meeting the needs of the state." Rudi Keller backed this up: "there was absolutely no way it was going to get voted out of the general assembly. If you look at states where ballot initiatives are allowed, you'll see that ballot initiatives on Medicaid passed in many

states before Missouri and they were very successful.” In future studies regarding the responsiveness and size of state governments, Tausanovitch will have to account for why state legislators and, specifically state legislators in supermajorities, can politically afford to ignore the will of their voters.

Thus, my findings more closely matched the research of Steven Rogers (2017) who wrote that state legislators can get away with acting on unpopular ideological positions because most of their voters do not recognize who they are. In my interview with him, he flatly said, “There is no accountability for individual roll call votes for state legislators... Because of the increased visibility, if a voter feels something is bad, they’re going to blame the governor, instead of the state legislature. They will say ‘I have no idea what the heck they [legislators] do.’” My interviews provide evidence that direct democracy, rather than elected officials themselves, is the reason why subnational governments are better able to respond to the needs of the people. People can actively shape state laws and state constitutions in a way that simply does not exist at the federal level. Additionally, my project could eventually help provide qualitative data for Rogers’s work, which currently does not exist. By his own admission, Rogers said, “I don’t speak with the voters. This is a deficiency in my research that people should call me out on more.” By interviewing the thousands of Missouri Jobs with Justice members, who genuinely feel that their state government does not represent their constituents, Rogers could analyze their opinions to determine how often they blame their individual state assemblyperson. In other words, there is a pre-existing network of voters who notice their state senate and state house act on ideological grounds, but it is still unknown if even they hold their representatives accountable for their swings away from the consensus.

In short, I believe my research contributes valuable and new information about how governors respond to public opinion, especially when it is explicitly and directly expressed. Researching the role of governors highlighted some key discrepancies between the behavior of legislative officials and the behavior of executive officials. My findings suggest executives have to be more attentive to the public, but new scholarship could try to test this idea further. The effects that the ballot initiative process has on the behavior of elected officials is still understudied. The data I collected is a starting point for this subject, but a more comprehensive study could incorporate more case studies, more states, and more policy issues. If the pattern of moderation holds true, it illuminates a pathway for representative and popular legislation to get enacted that might have underutilized before. This project also puts the focus of public opinion back on to critical policy issues, which led to a very different result than focusing on opinions of politicians or cultural policy issues. The consensus found on economic issues, healthcare, education, and infrastructure implies that there is room for broad coalitions of voters to form in potentially unexpected ways. I believe the case studies I chose and the findings that emerged from them critically engage with the available published research and that I've done this project to the best of my ability within the given time frame.

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