

US State Policies, Politics, and Life Expectancy



Jennifer Karas Montez

Professor of Sociology

Gerald B. Cramer Faculty Scholar in Aging Studies

Director of the Center for Aging and Policy Studies

Syracuse University

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Collaborators:

Jason Beckfield, Julene Kemp Cooney, Jacob Grumbach, Mark Hayward, H. Zeyd Koytak,
Steven Woolf, Anna Zajacova

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Forbes

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Dying Young: Decline In U.S. Life Expectancy For Third Straight Year Signals Alarming Trend



Joshua Cohen Contributor ©

Healthcare

I write about prescription drug value, market access, healthcare systems, and ethics of distribution of healthcare resources

The New York Times

Life Expectancy in U.S. Declines Slightly, and Researchers Are Puzzled



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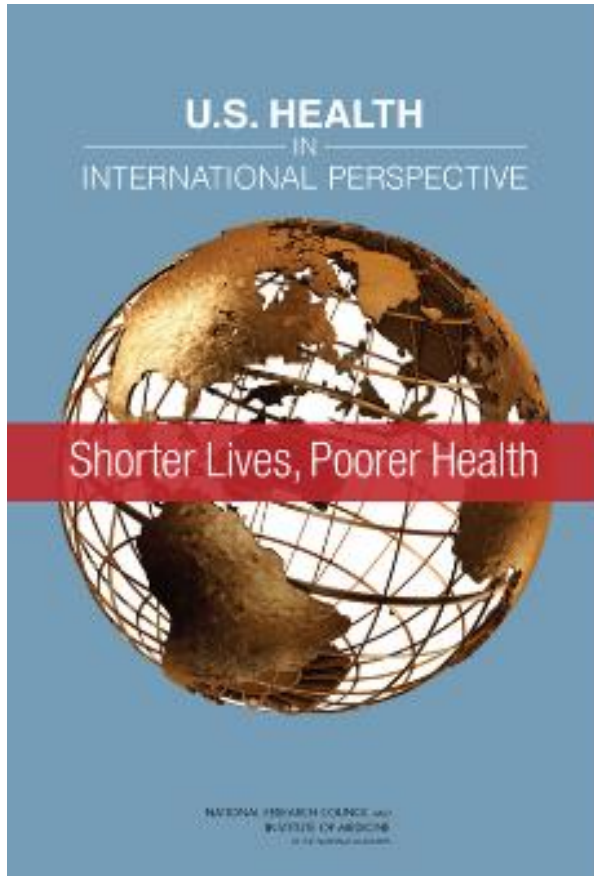
US life expectancy has been declining. Here's why

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Policy environment

?

Physical and social environments

? Income inequality

Public health, medical care

✗ Health insurance and care

? Health insurance system

Social and economic conditions

✗ Racial and ethnic diversity

✓ Socioeconomic resources

Individual behaviors

✓ Smoking

? Physical activity

? Obesity

✓ External causes (overdose, suicide, homicide, accidents)

Federal

Devolution

1980+ Reagan's devolution revolution

1994 midterms



State

“the policy regime under which an individual lives is increasingly determined by her state of residence.”

(quote from Grumbach 2018; Hertel-Fernandez 2019; MacLean 2017)

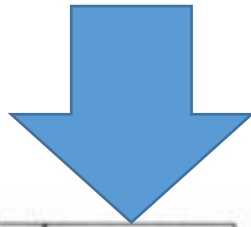
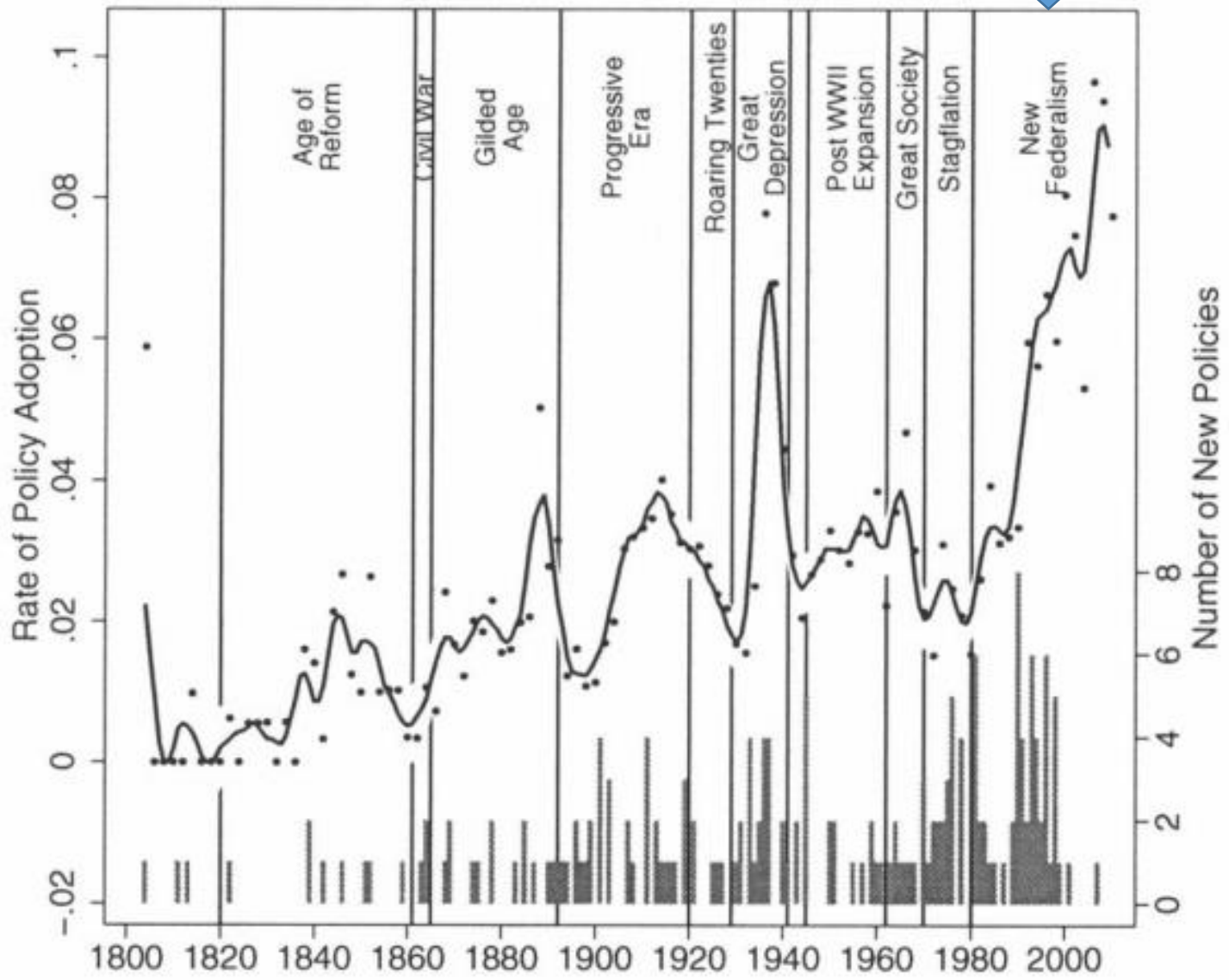


Local

Many states removed local authority to legislate on a host of issues such as raising the minimum wage

Ramped up around 2010

Preemption



Polarization in State Policy Contexts

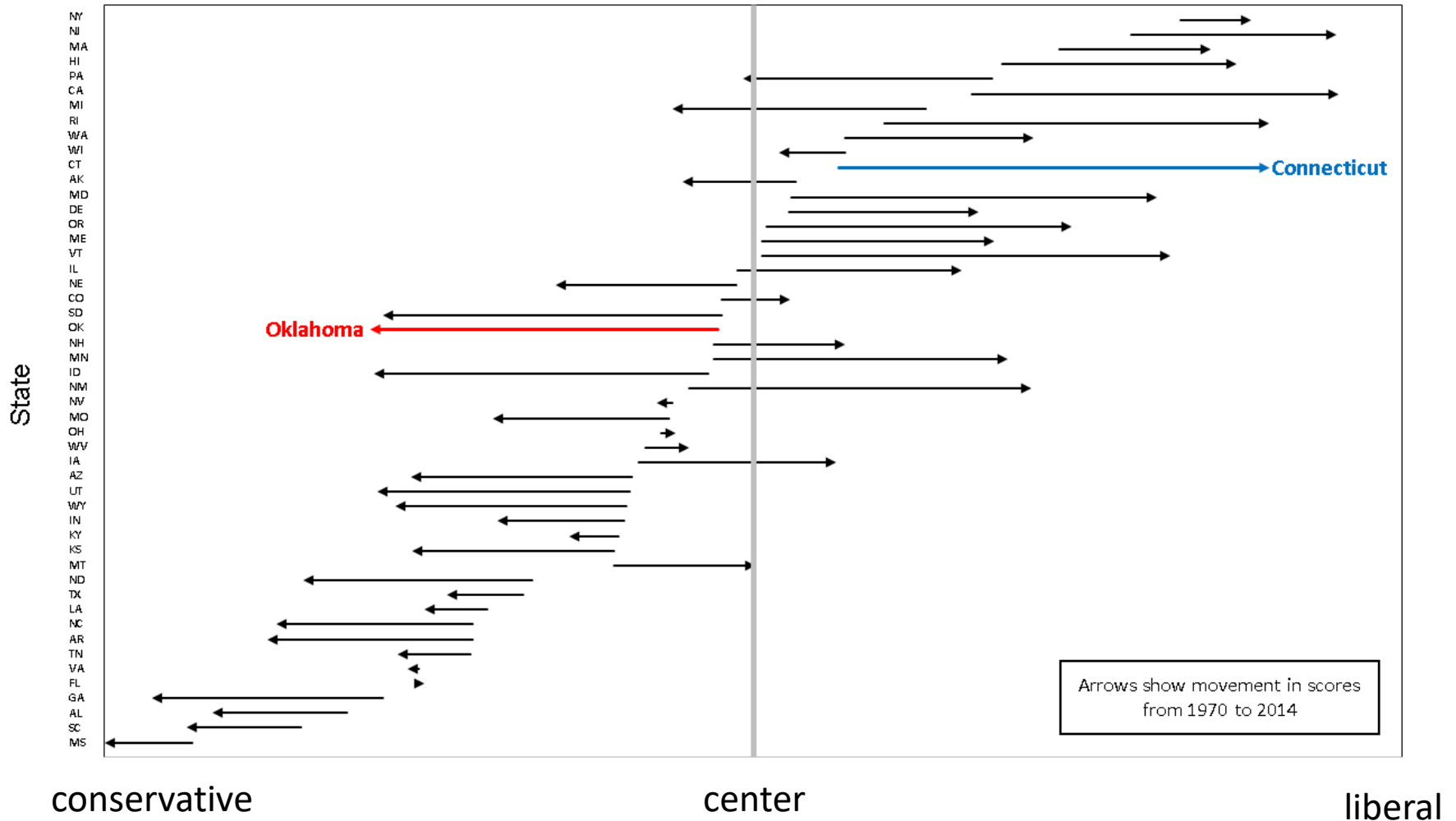
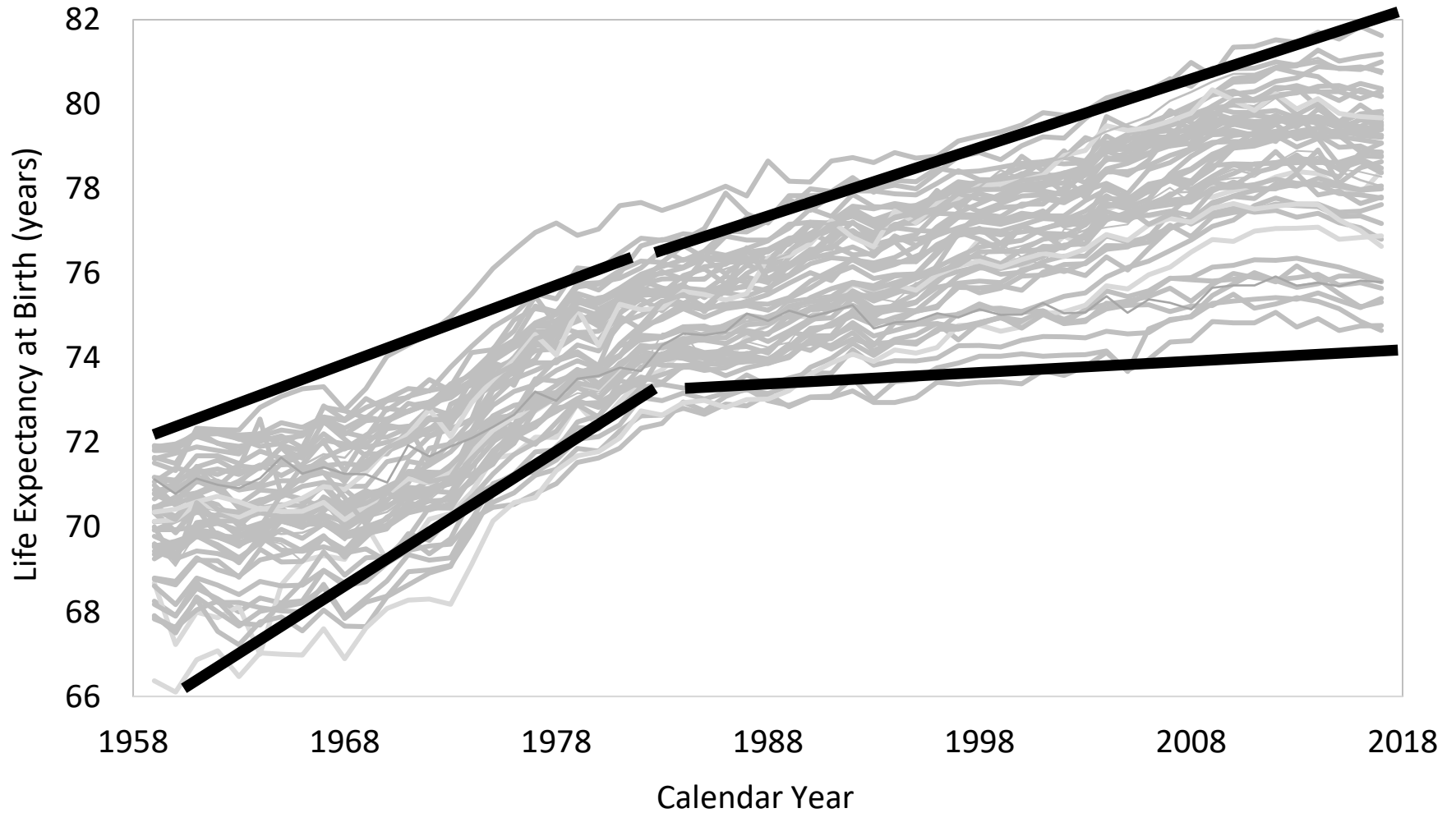


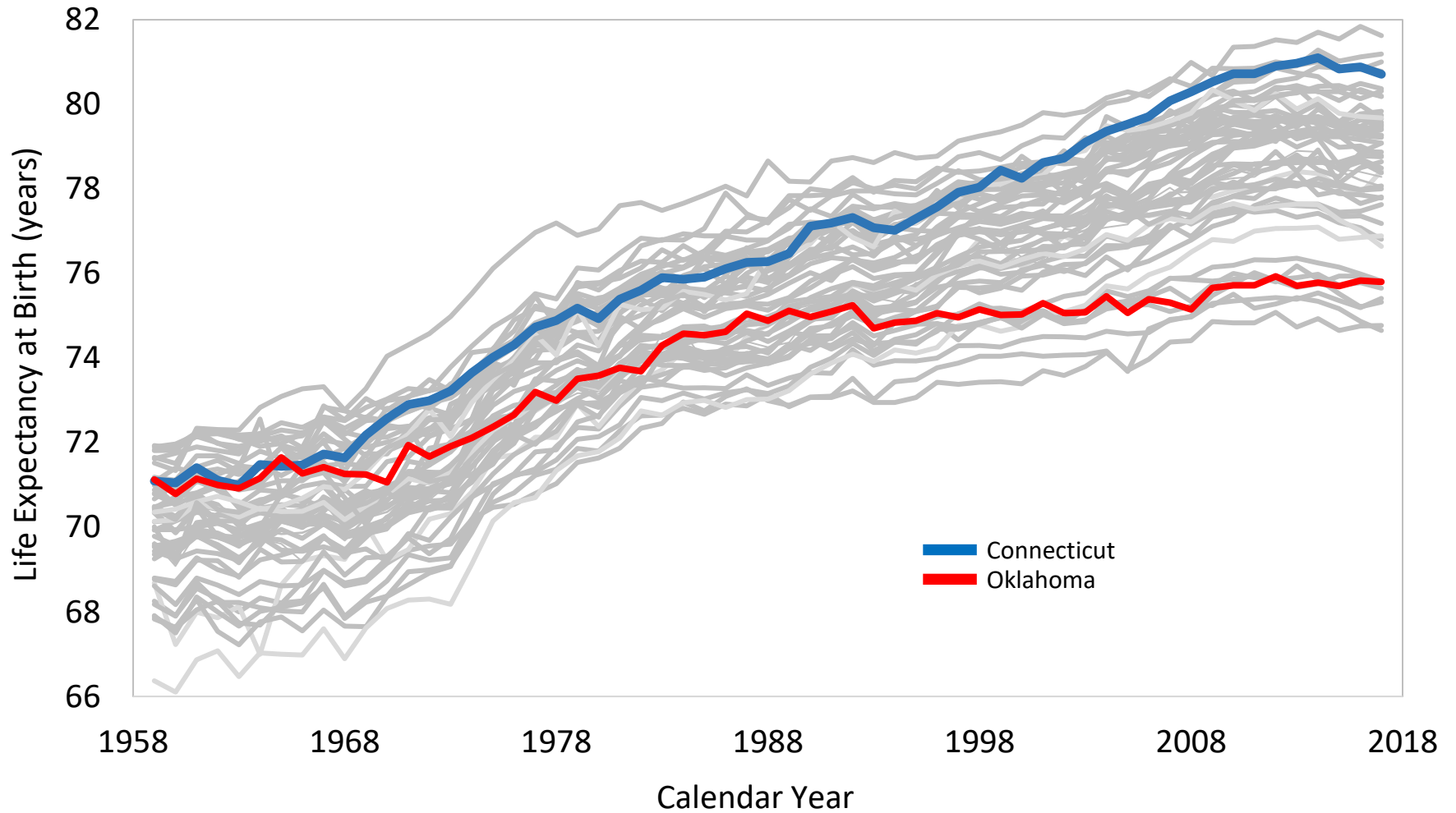
Figure from Montez et al. 2020. "Policies, Politics, and US Life Expectancy." *Milbank Quarterly*

Data from: Grumbach. 2018. "From Backwaters to Major Policymakers: Policy Polarization in the States, 1970-2014." *Perspectives on Politics* 16(2):416-435.

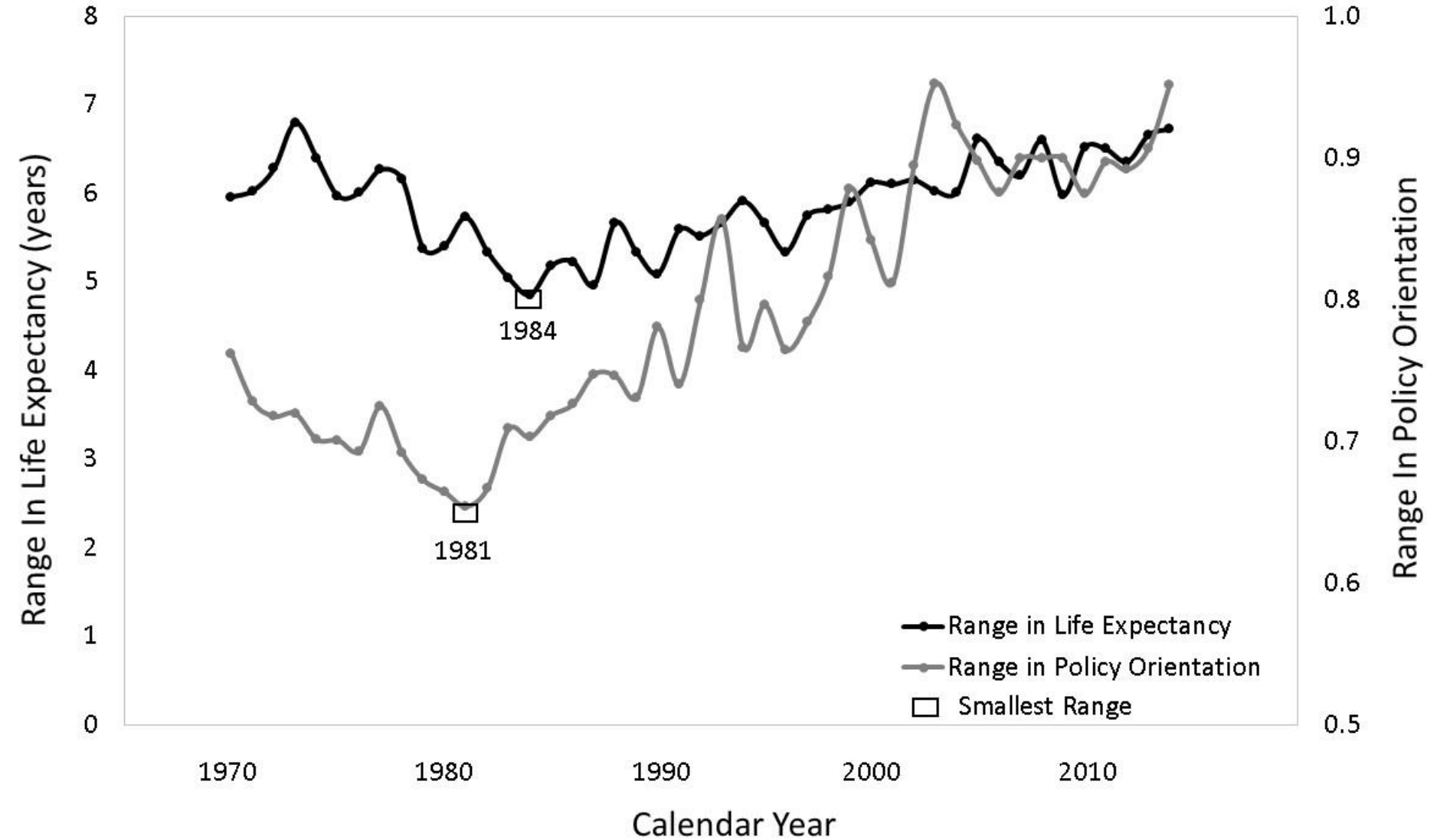
Life Expectancy by U.S. State



Life Expectancy by U.S. State



Policy Polarization and the Growing Gap in Life Expectancy



Have trends in state policies contributed to trends in US life expectancy?

Approach

Merge annual data on states' life expectancy & 18 policy measures

State Policy Measures

abortion	housing and transportation
campaign finance	immigration
civil rights and liberties	private sector labor
criminal justice	public sector labor
Marijuana	LGBT rights
Education	taxes
Environment	voting
gun control	tobacco excise taxes
health and welfare	overall state policy activity score

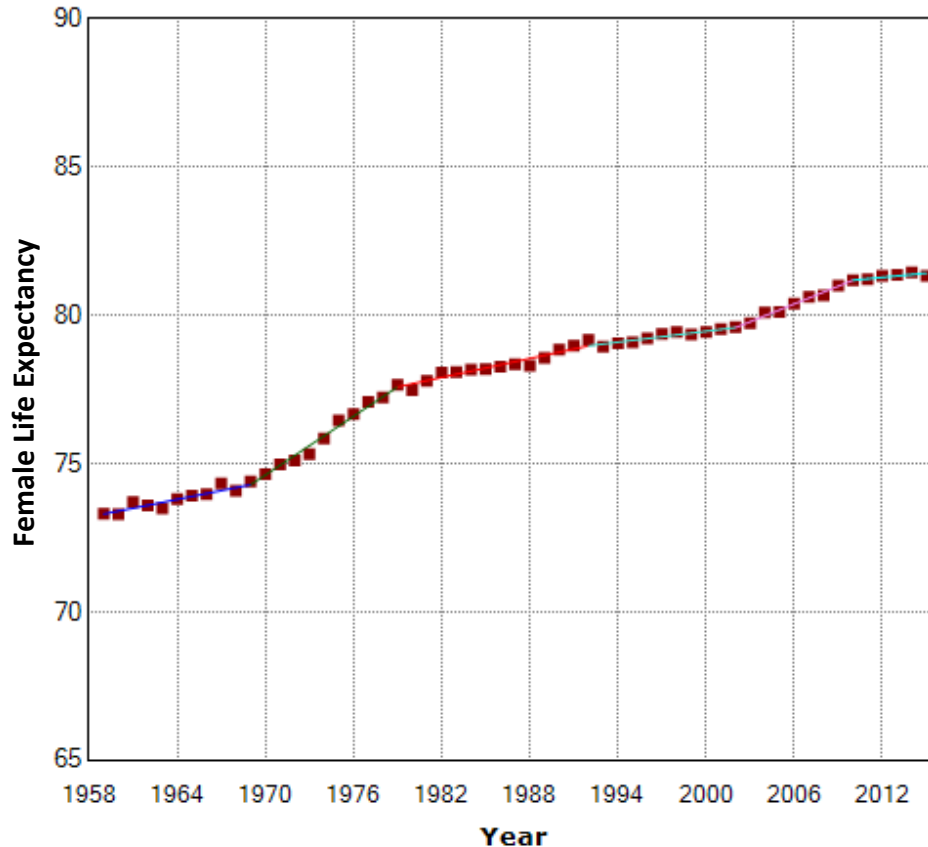
All measures scored 0-1 on conservative-liberal continuum

Boehmke & Skinner. 2012. "State policy innovativeness revisited." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 12(3):303-329.

Grumbach. 2018. "From backwaters to major policymakers: policy polarization in the states, 1970-2014." *Perspectives on Politics* 16(2):416-435.

Approach

Operationalize time using joinpoint regression models



- Women: 1970-78, 1979-91, 1992-2001, 2002-09, 2010-14
- Men: 1970-81, 1982-88, 1989-2010, 2011-14

Approach

Regress LE on “T” time segments and “Z” state policy domains, including fixed effects for states

$$LE_{it} = \beta_t T_t + \beta_z Z_{it} + \alpha_i + \mu_{it}$$

- Weight state-year observations by population size
- Adjust for auto- and spatial- correlation
- Adjust for %immigrants

Supplementary analyses:

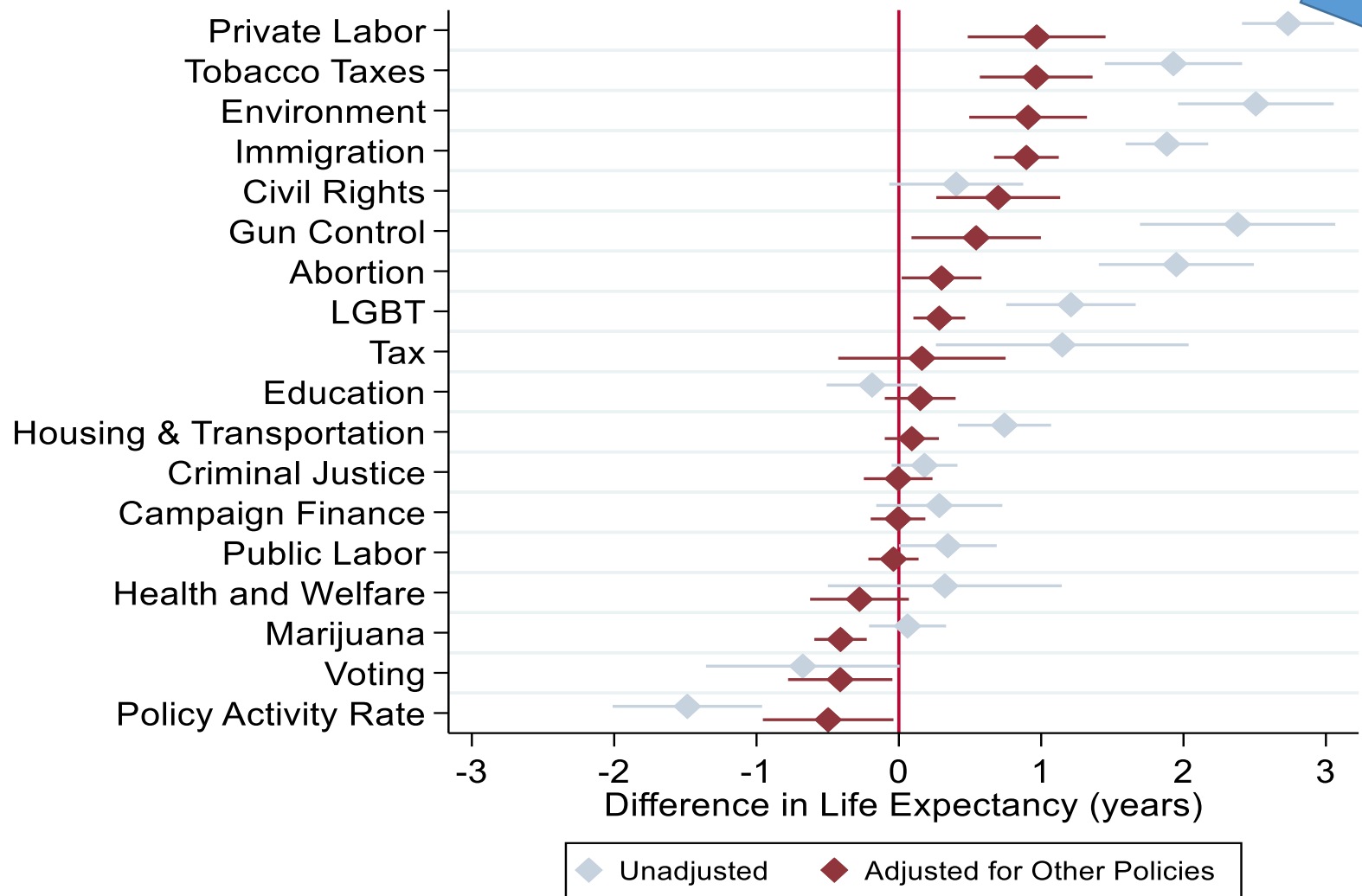
- Fixed effects for years, quadratics for policies, added unemployment for 1976+, placebo tests

Do state policies predict state LE?

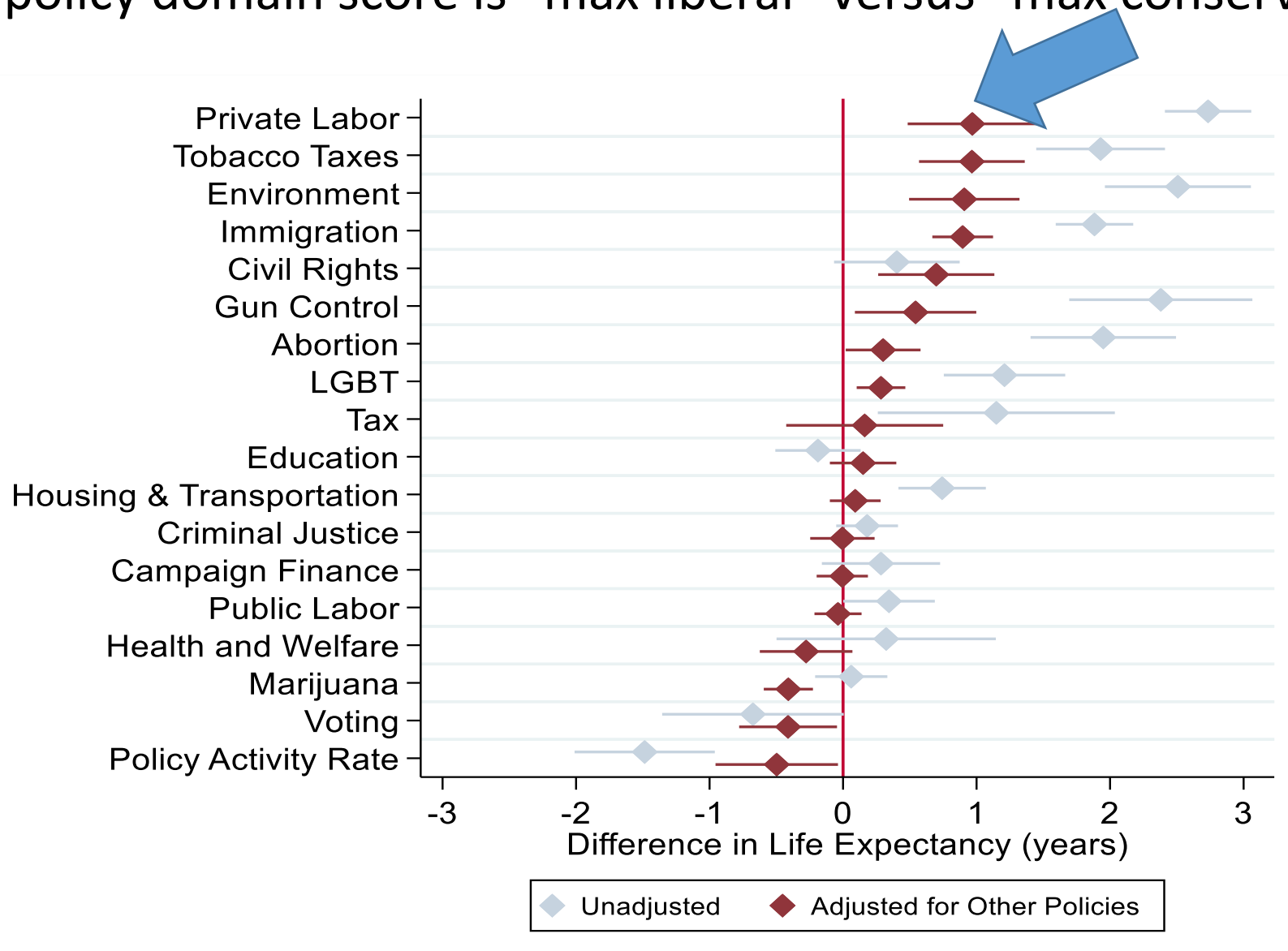
Would changing state policies affect US LE?

Have trends in state policies contributed to trends in US LE?

Estimated difference in female LE within a state when a policy domain score is “max liberal” versus “max conservative”



Estimated difference in female LE within a state when a policy domain score is “max liberal” versus “max conservative”



Do state policies predict state LE?

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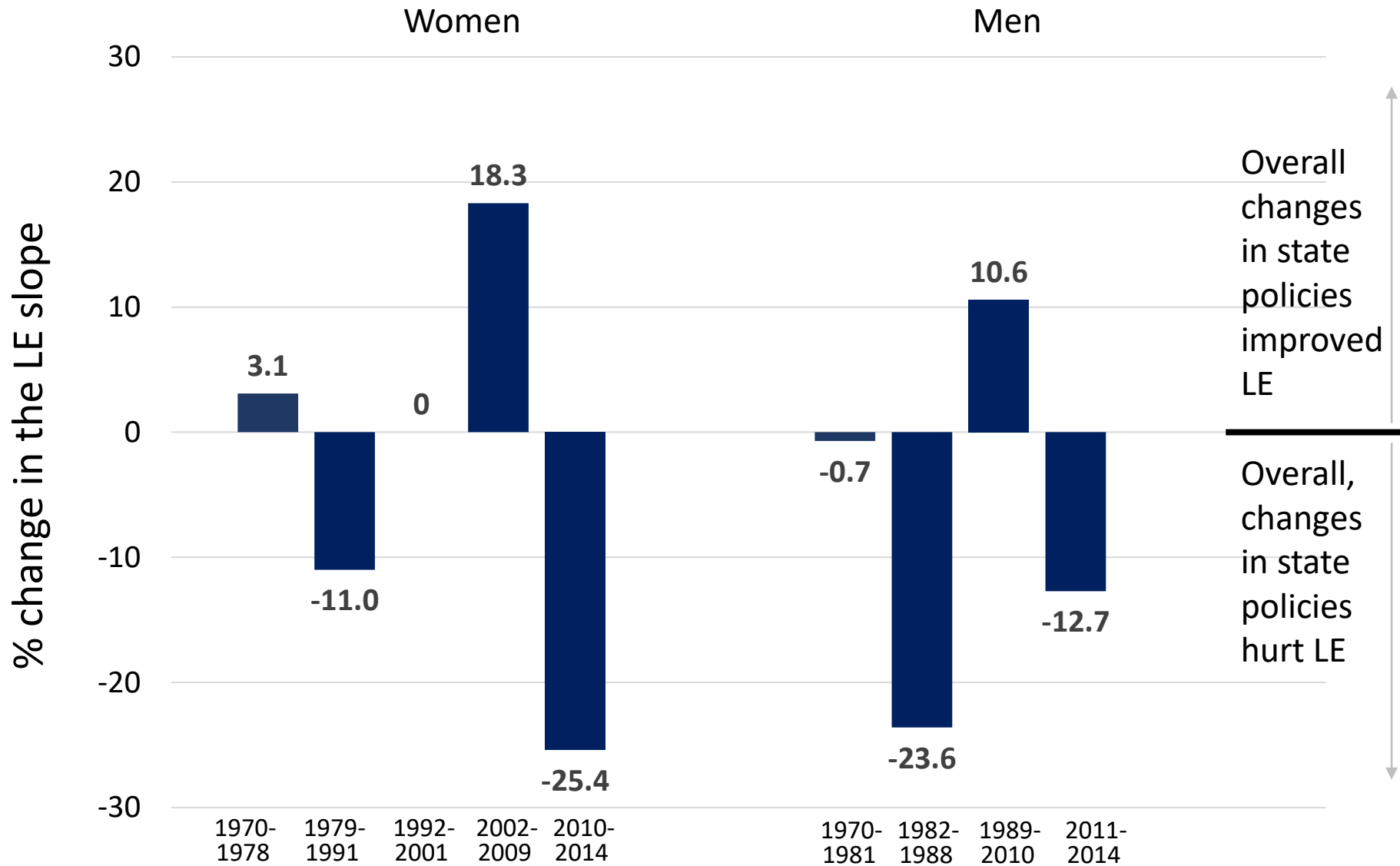
Policy Context	Estimated change in life expectancy	
	Women	Men
Status quo	0.4	0.3
All policies scores = 1 (i.e., max liberal)	2.8	2.1
All policy scores = 0 (i.e., max conservative)	-2.0	-1.9
Policies of Connecticut in 2014	2.0	1.3
Policies of Oklahoma in 2014	-1.0	-0.5

Do state policies predict state LE?

Would changing state policies affect US LE?

Have trends in state policies contributed to trends in US LE?

$$LE_{it} = \beta_t T_t + \beta_z Z_{it} + \alpha_i + \mu_{it}$$



Source: Montez et al. 2020. "US State Policies, Politics, and Life Expectancy." *Milbank Quarterly*.

Conclusions

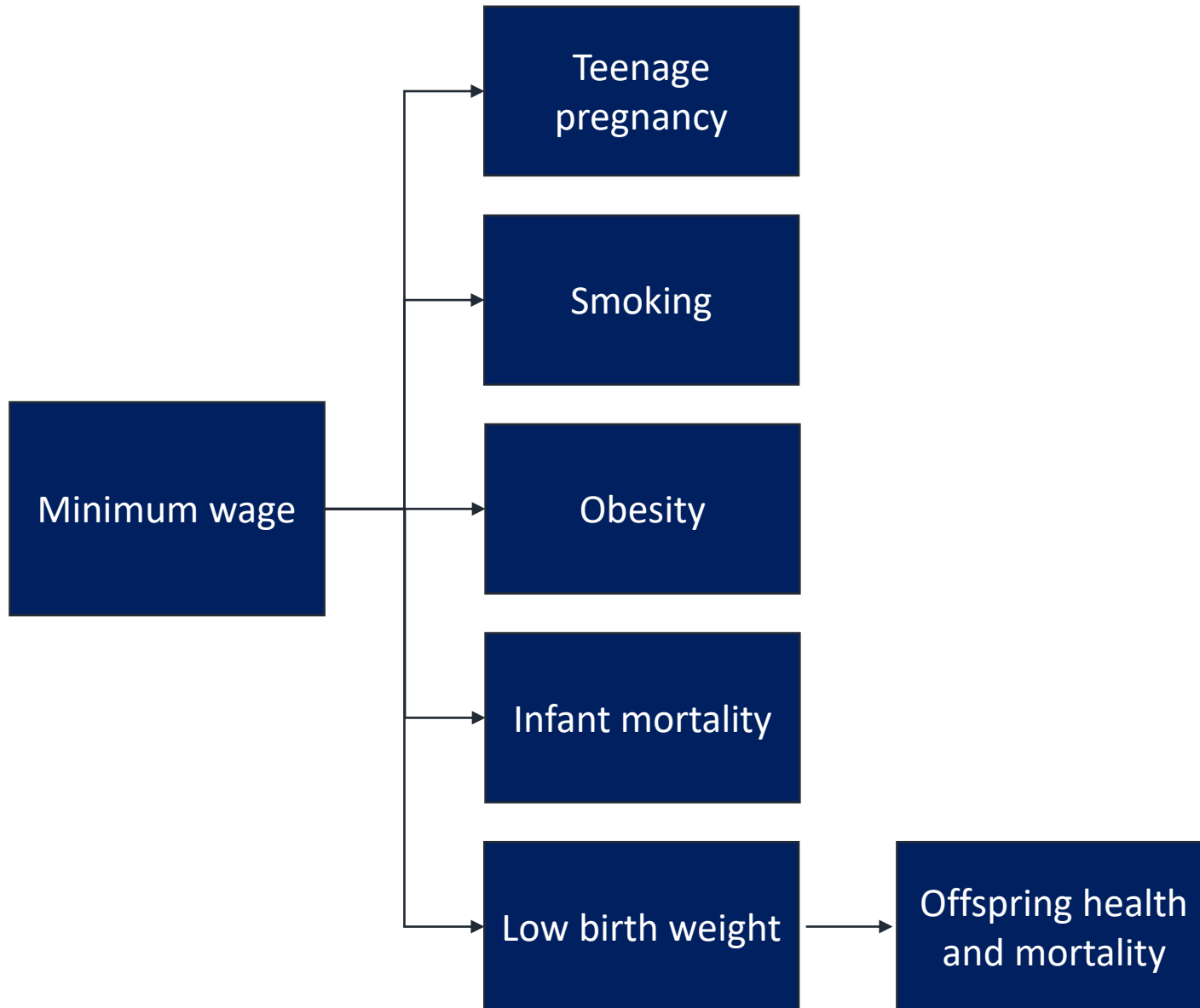
Relatively stagnant national trends in LE obscure a **highly dynamic and diverging environment at the state level**

States making greatest LE gains implemented **more liberal policies**

- **Labor, tobacco taxes, environment, immigration, civil rights**
- **For women, guns and abortion**

Changing **policy contexts of states** may have played an important role

How might state policies affect life expectancy?



Threats to causality

Economic conditions fluctuate differently across states

- Our analyses adjusted for annual unemployment rates by state

Populations of some states are less-educated, poorer than others

- Our models adjust for stable differences between states
- Education, income, and other “personal characteristics” are better thought of as pathways via which states shape population health

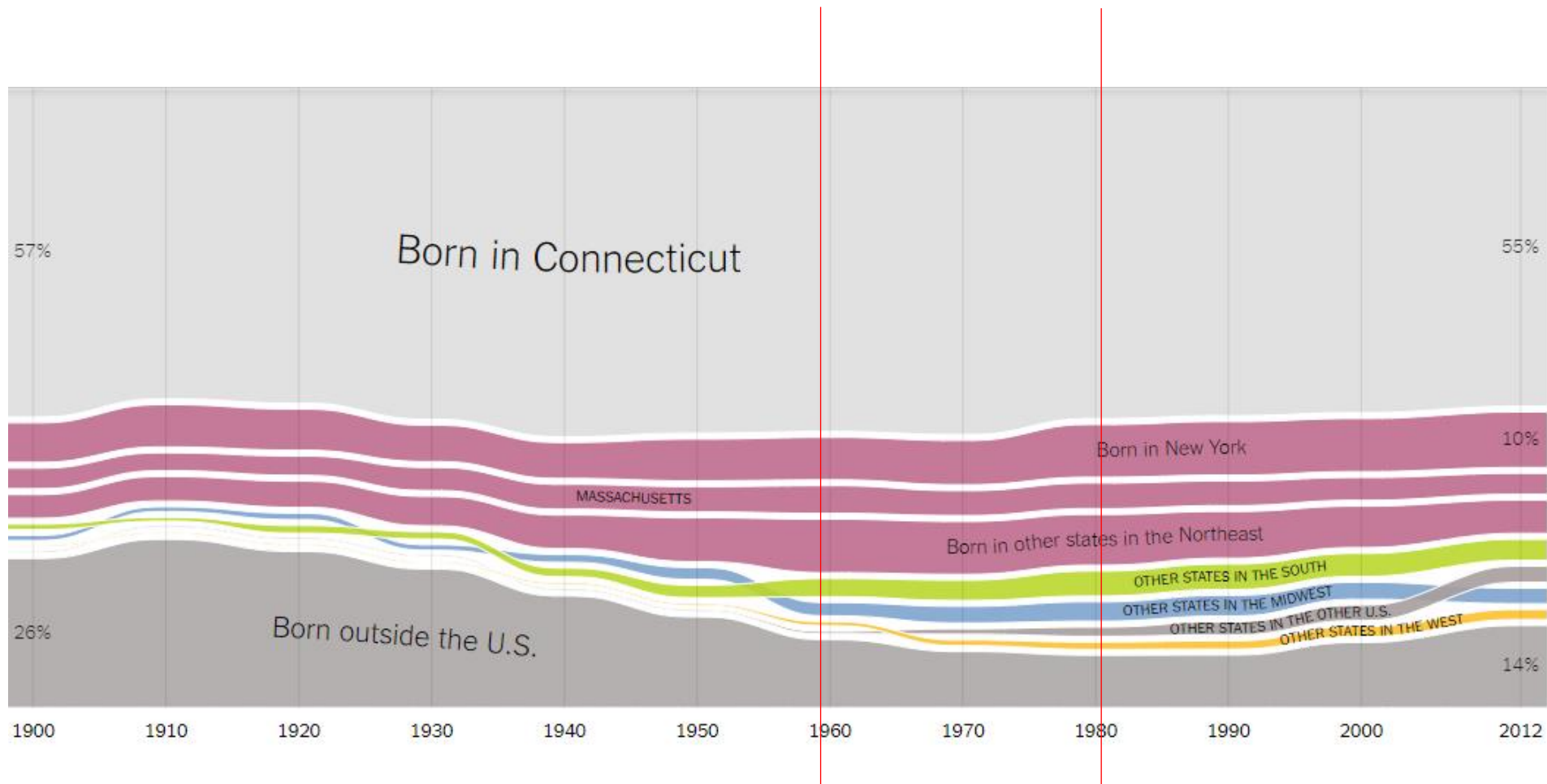
Other factors may also matter

- True. More studies are needed.

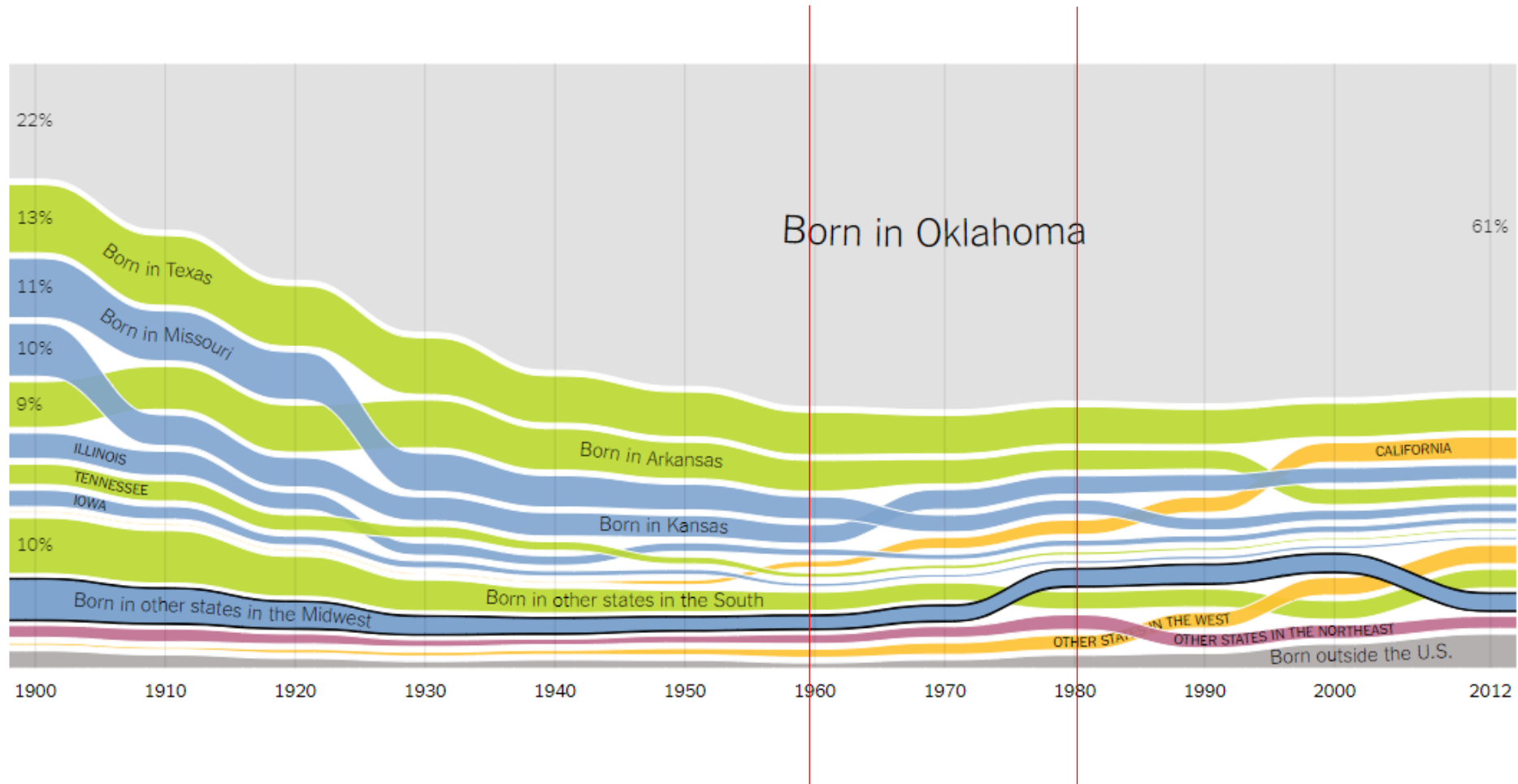
Interstate migration may matter

- It likely contributes but it does not explain the trends
- It has steadily declined since mid-20th century, with the rate cut further in half since 1980 (Frost 2020)
- Disparities in disability & mortality across states remain when limiting data to non-movers (Montez et al 2017; 2019)

Where people living in Connecticut were born



Where people living in Oklahoma were born



Implications & Next Steps

Need greater attention on the political, legal, and commercial determinants

“to properly understand the US mortality disadvantage, geographical research needs to ‘scale up’ and refocus on upstream political, economic, and policy drivers.”

policies and political choices are “the *causes of the causes of the causes*”focus on them or risk “missing the big picture.”

Bambra et al 2019

Examine specific causes of death

Examine heterogeneity across population subgroups

Thank you

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