CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Studying Public Opinion in the American States

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SCHOLARLY INTEREST in state-level public opinion has grown in recent years. New data collections, methodologies, and theoretical approaches have all stimulated interest. One indication of this growing interest was the short course, "The Uses of Public Opinion Data in State Politics and Policy Research," held at the 2003 American Political Science Association. Many of the participants at that short course are represented in these pages (e.g., Paul Brace, Robert Erikson, John McIver, Barbara Norrander, and Gerald Wright). Some may even like to think of state public opinion as an emergent subfield in political science.

Yet since the publication of Erikson, Wright, and McIver's seminal Statehouse Democracy (1993) over a decade ago, no major book-length study of public opinion in the American states has been published. Public Opinion in State Politics provides the first book on the topic in a decade in hopes of stimulating research on state public opinion by collecting in one convenient place some of the best recent research on the topic. Another aim of Public Opinion in State Politics is to increase the accessibility of work in the subfield to scholars beyond those doing research on state public opinion. The issues and questions that state public opinion scholars deal with are relevant to those with interests in public opinion, public policy making, democratic theory and representation, and political development, among other subfields.

The authors of the chapters in Public Opinion in State Politics present a

mix of senior scholars who have already made major contributions to the topic, as well as younger scholars who bring new insights and issues for study. The contributors offer a variety of data, analytic methodologies, and substantive concerns. Despite the diversity across the chapters collected for this volume, several themes unify them.

The first theme that underlies the studies in this book is a concern for the role of public opinion in democratic politics, a fundamental question for democratic theory. Almost all theories of democracy require some minimal level of governmental responsiveness to public opinion in order to say that a polity is democratic. Do policy makers incorporate public opinion when making policy decisions? Can policy makers and other political leaders shape public opinion? These are some of the questions that the chapters in this volume address, but they do so by looking at the American states as the units of analysis.

The focus on states as units of analysis represents a departure from the mode of much research on public opinion. Most public opinion research focuses on the individual, asking questions such as what opinions do people hold, how do they arrive at those opinions, or how stable and sophisticated are people's opinions about politics? To study these questions, public opinion research relies heavily on surveys and more recently on experiments.

However important the survey research brand of public opinion research is to our understanding of mass political opinion, it does not directly address many of the important questions of democratic theory. Democratic responsiveness and representation are fundamentally aggregate level processes. Policy makers respond and anticipate the preferences and reactions of groups of people, not individuals. Although an understanding of individual level properties of public opinion may provide a foundation for understanding public opinion in the aggregate (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, Stimson, 2002), understanding the quality of democracy requires an aggregate perspective, one that links the public opinion of groups of individuals, such as district constituents or blocks of voters, to the processes of government and policy making. States as analytic units serve this purpose well. All of the chapters in this volume treat public opinion as an aggregate phenomenon, although several chapters must look at individual-level opinion because of the particular question posed or because of data limitations (cf., Chapters 4 and 5).

A second theme that ties the studies in this book concerns the increased importance of states as policy-making units. During the middle third of the twentieth century, the national government increasingly assumed responsibility for public policy, a function of the expansion of

government into new policy realms, as well as national assumption of policy that was once the responsibility of the states and localities. During this era of national government policy expansion, the federal government often directed and mandated the shape of many state and locality policies. But for the past quarter century, responsibility for some policies has devolved from the national to the state governments, such as welfare, and states have increased their policy-making efforts for other policy areas, such as economic development. The increased autonomy and scope of states as policy makers suggests the importance of studying the states.

Third, the chapters in this volume exploit the states to study the linkages between public opinion, policy making, and democratic politics. Comparative state politics has long recognized the utility of making comparisons across the 50 states for building theory and testing hypotheses. All of the states possess a Madisonian political structure composed of checks and balances and separation of powers and they share in the same basic political culture.1 With these two characteristics of political systems held constant, one may be better able to isolate the effects of other factors on policy making and democratic processes, such as public opinion.

State Politics and State Public Opinion Research

The comparative study of state politics and policy making dates to V. O. Key's magisterial study, Southern Politics, published in 1949, if not earlier. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the comparative study of state politics hit its high-water mark, with a stream of influential studies by scholars such as Richard E. Dawson and James A. Robinson (1963), Thomas Dye (1965, 1969a, 1969b), Richard Hofferbert (1966), and Ira Sharkansky (1967, and with Hofferbert, 1969), among others. But by the late 1970s, the excitement in pursuing comparative state studies began to fade, although many important studies were still to be published. Comparative state politics and policy was no longer the cutting edge topic it was a decade earlier (for a review of the state politics and policy literature see Brace and Jewett, 1995).

One factor that depressed enthusiasm for comparative state studies was the lack of public opinion data across the states. Scholars in the 1960s and early 1970s developed many useful indicators of many aspects of state politics and policy processes, including aspects of policy outputs, political arrangements and structures, and state demographic and economic profiles. But without comparable data on public opinion, the comparative study of state politics and policies stalled. An important element of politics and policy-making processes, public opinion, was missing, and developing public opinion measures for the states seemed unobtainable. Conducting surveys of public opinion at the time seemed prohibitively expensive, especially to academically based polling organizations, and organizations with the resources to conduct such studies seemed uninterested in tapping the opinions and attitudes of citizens in the states. Facing such a barrier to research progress, scholars interested in democratic theory and politics shifted to other research arenas where they felt they could make more progress.

Studying Public Opinion in the States

The major complaint of the earlier generation of scholars about the absence of good comparative data on state public opinion can no longer be voiced so loudly, although as the studies in this volume demonstrate, gaping holes in our data on state public opinion still exist. Good data on some aspects of state-level public opinion, often for all 50 states, now exist; the major techniques and methodologies for deriving public opinion estimates are discussed below. They include pooling national surveys, conducting national surveys with states as important subunits of analysis, combining independent state-based surveys, simulating state opinion, and using individual-level national surveys to learn about individual opinions on state-level politics, policies, and issues. Each has its strengths as a way to gauge state-level opinion, as well as limitations.

POOLING NATIONAL SURVEYS

Erikson, McIver, and Wright (1987, 1989, 1993) and Wright, Erikson, and McIver (1985, 1987) pioneered the methodology of pooling national surveys to construct state-level opinion measures. Using CBS News/New York Times polls, they estimate the partisan and ideological make up of the states, two important global political orientations. The simplicity and elegance of this method led others to employ it to elicit other state-level opinion measures, most notably Brace and colleagues (2002, 2004), who employ the General Social Survey (GSS) to generate measures of state opinion on a range of specific issues, as well as trust toward federal government, as Brace and Johnson do in this volume (Chapter 2). Uslaner (Chapter 8) follows this path to construct a state-level measure of citizen trust.

Several complaints have been leveled against this approach. In using national surveys, the number of cases per state reflects the relative population of each state. It can be difficult to generate enough cases for reliable estimates from smaller states. To allow for reliable estimates for smaller states thus often requires gathering polls across relatively long periods of time, unless many national surveys exist over a short time period. When collapsing polls across relatively long time periods, one must assume stability in attitude under study at least for the length of the time frame used to generate the state estimates. In Erikson, Wright, and McIver's initial 1985 report, this was a 7-year period (1976-1982), in their latter report (1993), the time frame is 13 years, and for Brace and colleagues the period lengthens at times to over 20 years (1974-1998). Second, national surveys do not use states as units from which to draw their national sample (Jones and Norrander, 1996). The resulting variability of state estimates may not resemble the true variability in the states.

NATIONAL SURVEYS WITH STATES SUBUNITS OF ANALYSIS

In response to the second critique noted above, Norrander and colleagues (2000, 2001; with Jones, 1996 and with Wilcox, 1999, and Chapter 3 in this volume) turned to the 1988-1990-1992 National Election Studies (NES), which used states as the primary sampling units to allow analysis of U.S. Senate elections. Two fundamental problems plague this approach. One, as NES has not replicated this design of using the states as primary sampling units, nor has any other national survey organization, the estimates of state opinion are becoming quite dated. Two, respondents were generally asked about national issues, not policies or issues specific to state policy making or politics, although national and state-level concerns often overlap. Those issues that fail to register on the national agenda or do not rise high on the national agenda, but appear on many state agendas, are absent but may be of vital importance in understanding the politics and policy making of state governments.

COMBINING INDEPENDENT STATE-BASED SURVEYS

A recent project by Thad Beyle, Richard Niemi, and Lee Sigelman (2002a, 2002b) has collected state-level popularity for the president, governor, and U.S. senators and provides us with another perspective on state public opinion-how state citizens view major political figures.2 These measures of state opinion come from state-level surveys, but across a variety of polling firms. Measures of state approval date to 1945 for presidents, 1958 for governors, and 1978 for senators, but most of the public approval readings are more recent-since the 1990s-when an explosion in opinion polls occurred. At this writing these data have been updated through early 2005.

As a compilation from many survey organizations, including academic,

commercial, and newspaper polls, one must be careful when making comparisons across the surveys. The sources of noncomparability that may exist include different question wordings, different response categories, different placement within the survey protocol, house effects, different sampling frames, different survey designs, different interviewing techniques, and so on. Furthermore, not all of the polls went into the field at the same time. Thus, we have opinion readings for some states at some time points but not for others. Cohen and King in this volume use these data to effect in their study of the factors that affect gubernatorial approval and offer an extended discussion and example for comparing these popularity measures across the states (also see Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman, 2002a, 2002b).

These data have proved quite popular in recent years. The Fall 2002 issue of State Politics & Policy Quarterly was devoted entirely to studies using these data (Anderson and Newmark, 2002; Barth and Ferguson, 2002; Beyle, Niemi, Sigelman, 2002a, 2002b; Crew, Branham, Weiher, and Bernick, 2002; and Dometrius, 2002). Other recent studies utilizing these data include Bardwell (2003, 2005), Cohen (2003), Cohen and Powell (2005), Ferguson (2003), and Kang, Niemi, and Powell (2003). The presence and use of these data reveal another gap in our knowledge of state public opinion—we lack good data on state opinion about other political leaders and institutions, such as the state legislature and state courts. Hamman in this volume grapples with studying public opinion toward state legislatures in the face of highly limited data.

SIMULATING STATE PUBLIC OPINION

Simulating opinion is the most venerable tradition in the study of state public opinion. The inability of collecting public opinion data across enough states to allow comparative state studies led first to the use of demographic and socioeconomic data as surrogates for public opinion. Using demographics and socioeconomics as surrogate measures of opinion assumed that opinion holding within a group was reasonably uniform about the issue in question and that these social characteristics largely determined political preferences.

Some scholars felt that the surrogate demographic approach to tapping state opinion was too blunt. In a series of refinements, Pool, Abelson, and Popkin (1965) and Weber and associates (Weber, Hopkins, Mezey, and Munger 1972–1973; Weber and Shafer, 1972), still relied on demographic and socioeconomic variables, but tied them to opinion questions. With the combination of demographic categories and opinions of members of those categories, one could simulate state opinion if one knew the size of

the group within a state. Still, such measures were at best indirect indicators of state-level public opinion.

The assumptions that underlie simulation from demographics are open to challenge. First, these simulations assumed that the distribution of preferences of a group would not vary much across states, that, for instance, blacks or Latinos in New York would think similarly to blacks or Latinos in Mississippi. Leal, in Chapter 4 in this volume, tests for cross-state variation in the political attitudes of Latinos, finding significant differences in the attitudes of Latinos from Cuba, from those in Texas, from those in California. The finding of Norrander and Wilcox in this volume that state residence may affect public attitudes severely tests that assumption of similarity in attitude across states of people of the same demographic category.

Seidman's 1973 critique of simulations of state opinion led to the death of that approach shortly thereafter. First, the simulation technique then in use assumed independence across the different demographic categories used to simulate opinion, but interaction effects might at times affect opinion. For instance, the interaction of race and region may lead southern and northern blacks (and whites) to hold different political opinions (see Valentino and Sears, 2005, on differences between northern and southern whites). Second, the simulation depended on assuming that demographics not employed in the simulations are not relevant to the state estimates. However, typically only a handful of demographics are available, such as region, occupation, race, and education. Similarly, the model assumed that any two states are alike except for the differences in their demographic profiles. Other factors that may affect opinion independent of demography (e.g., political leadership, media reporting, and variation in the economic cycle, for instance) are assumed to lack impact, a dubious assumption at best.

A revival (or resurrection) of simulating state opinion has occurred in recent years. In this volume, Park, Gelman, and Bafumi (Chapter 11) present a new simulation approach using Bayesian statistics and hierarchical linear modeling. By controlling for place (state) they are able in their simulations, which also rely on demographics, to reduce the error variance and thus produce somewhat more precise estimates. Berkman and Plutzer (2004, forthcoming) adapt the Park-Gelman-Bafumi method to estimate the opinion in school districts units. Ardoin and Garand (2003) use a method similar to Berkman and Plutzer, what they call "top-down" simulation, to generate estimates of congressional district ideology. To the mix of demographics used to create these estimates, Ardoin and Garand add presidential election results at the congressional district level, which have been shown to be highly related in some elections to ideology. Still, these

new simulation approaches are open to some of the charges made against the older variety, especially that the opinions of demographic groups do not vary across the states.

AN OLD STANDBY:

NATIONAL SURVEYS ON STATE-LEVEL TOPICS

Although we now possess state-level opinion data for a much larger range of attitudes than was the case two decades ago, several gaps still exist. As noted above, we know little about issues that states grapple with but do not percolate to the national agenda. Also, we know little about public attitudes toward state leaders—even the impressive JAR (Job Approval Ratings) data compendium is more about state-level attitudes to those who hold federal office (president, U.S. senator) than state office (governor). We know precious little about attitudes, for instance, about state legislators, state judiciaries, and other state executives. Occasionally, however, national surveys ask respondents about these state leaders. For instance, in 1990 and 1991 the ABC / Washington Post polls asked respondents whether they approved or disapproved of the job that their state legislature was doing. Presumably, other national surveys have asked about other aspects of state politics.

Hamman, in Chapter 5, analyzes these state legislative data, which require extraordinary care. With such surveys we get a portrait of how the people in the nation feel about state leaders, but we can say little about state publics. Moreover, characteristics of state legislatures vary by state size—large state legislatures tend to be more professional and often have larger district sizes than small state legislatures. The level of state legislative professionalism and district size may affect public attitudes toward state legislatures, but unless we control for this covariance between state size, state legislative characteristics, and state opinion, the attitudes of those in large states may swamp that of those living in smaller states.

Admittedly, then, the data on state public opinion that now exist have their limitations. Many of the chapters in this volume speak to the limitations of existing state public opinion data. Yet compared to the situation that scholars of the 1960s through 1980s faced, even the limited data currently available represent a quantum improvement and allow scholars to address questions only dreamed about a generation ago. The chapters in this volume represent among the best and most exciting work on the topic of the role of public opinion in state politics and policy making, and by implication, in democratic processes. And as all good research, the chapters in this volume raise many new questions.

A Preview of the Chapters

I have organized the chapters in this book into three sections, although many of the chapters can easily fall into more than one of these categories. The first deals with factors that affect state-level opinion, while the second section looks at the impact of state opinion on state politics and policy making. The final section offers directions for future research, although one could say that about the other chapters as well. In section three, Park, Gelman, and Bafumi present their new simulation methodology and Erikson, Wright, and McIver update their state ideology and partisanship data to account for change in state-level opinion, a research direction that one previously could only dream of. In the final chapter of this book, I assess where the studies in this volume have taken us and where we need to go.

In the first part of this book, several authors deal with factors that shape state-level opinion. Paul Brace and Martin Johnson, in Chapter 2, "Does Familiarity Breed Contempt? Examining the Correlates of State-Level Confidence in the Federal Government," ask whether the federal context affects attitudes to national government across state publics. Using the methodology developed in Brace, Sims-Butler, Arceneaux, and Johnson (2002), Brace and Johnson pool General Social Surveys from 1975 to 1998 to develop measures of confidence in the federal government. They find that the presence of the federal government in a state affects the way a state's citizens view the national government: when the federal government owns more land within the state, citizens view the federal government with less confidence, but as federal employment increases, so does confidence in the national government. Their results echo Cohen and King, finding that the national context seeps into and helps shape state public opinion.

In Chapter 3, "State Residency, State Laws, and Public Opinion," Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox ask whether state residence affects public opinion, a question that contrasts but also complements the question of federal impacts that Brace and Johnson pose. From a political culture argument, states can be seen as relatively autonomous political units, with distinctive sets of public policies and political traditions. Does the environment of the state affect a person's attitude toward public policies? Using the pooled Senate National Election Surveys (SNES), which provide Norrander and Wilcox with a representative sample for all 50 states, they ask whether variation in abortion laws across the states affect attitudes toward abortion. Based on their estimates, Norrander and Wilcox

calculate that state residence accounts for from 10 to 25 percent of the variance in abortion opinion. People who live in more conservative abortion policy states will tend to hold more conservative opinion than those who live in more liberal abortion policy states.

David L. Leal also addresses the question of whether state residence affects the attitudes of its citizens in Chapter 4, "Mexican-American and Cuban-American Public Opinion: Differences at the State Level?" Leal focuses on the fastest growing and now largest minority group in the United States, Hispanics. Much research treats Hispanics as a homogenous group when it comes to politics, but Leal notes that in California, Hispanic political activity and opinion tends to be more liberal than that of Hispanics who reside in Texas. Besides the obvious differences in national origin of Hispanics in the United States, does state of residence help account for any differences in Hispanic political opinion? Leal finds that Mexican-Americans in Texas and California, in a multivariate analysis, actually appear more similar than different, which calls into question the impact of state residence on citizen opinion. Taking Leal and Norrander and Wilcox together suggests that we need to better understand the conditions on which state residence affects citizen behavior and opinion. Leal also shows the utility of using a small number of states for comparative analysis.

John A. Hamman turns to an often forgotten state policy-making institution, the state legislature, in his contribution, Chapter 5, "Public Opinion in the States: Determinants of Legislative Job Performance." Hamman's study is hampered by the dearth of cross-state data on public evaluations of the state legislature. Scouring the National Network of State Polls, Hamman found 124 surveys across 13 states that asked respondents about their attitudes toward the state legislature. The limited number of states and the spottiness of the data preclude much analysis. Then Hamman turns to two national polls in 1990 and 1991 that ask about state legislative performance. Thus, unlike most of the other studies in this volume, this part of Hamman's analysis looks at individual-level attitudes. Hamman finds, consistent with other studies, that the more professional the state legislature, the lower its job performance ratings. This is indeed an ironic result, which calls for more research and the need for more cross-state data on public evaluations of the state legislature.

Touching on federalism themes (also see Brace and Johnson above), Jeffrey E. Cohen and James D. King, in Chapter 6, "The State Economy, the National Economy, and Gubernatorial Popularity," compare the impact of the national and state economies on public attitudes toward the governor. Governors often tout their efforts to bring jobs into their states. Thus, it makes sense to ask whether a state's citizens hold their governor

accountable for the state's job climate. But national economic factors also impinge on state economies. Given the large impact of the national economy, will the public still hold the governor accountable for the performance of the state economy? Cohen and King use the recently released Official Job Approval Rating database (Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelman, 2002a and 2002b), which provides them with approximately 2,000 monthly gubernatorial popularity observations across a 20-year period. The JAR data set allows them to employ a modified pooled cross-sectional time series design: They find that both national and state economic factors affect state public opinion toward the governor.

Chapters in the second section of this book look at the consequences of state public opinion on state government and policy. Most studies of state-level opinion look at opinion in the aggregate. In so doing, they tend to rely on measures of central tendency, like means or the proportions of the public that hold a particular opinion. Charles J. Barrilleaux takes a different tack in Chapter 7, "Ideological Cleavage, Political Competition, and Policy Making in the American States," by focusing on the spread or diversity of opinion. Barrilleaux makes the case that states with homogeneous opinion present different information and constraints to policy makers compared to states with heterogeneous or dispersed opinion, that is, when opinion is spread widely around its central tendency, even if the compared states have the same mean opinion. Using the Erikson, Wright, and McIver data on state ideology, he finds that more dispersed or diverse opinion weakens the impact of ideology on state policy outputs. Barrilleaux's chapter reminds us that single measures cannot fully describe the complexity of aggregate state opinion.

Eric M. Uslaner, in Chapter 8, continues the theme of the linkage between a state's citizens and the outer environment in his contribution, "The Civil State: Trust, Polarization, and the Quality of State Government." He asks whether trust toward others in the mass public affects the quality of governmental performance. Besides creating a state-level measure of public trust toward others, Uslaner's other major innovations include treating trust as an independent variable, something that may affect governmental performance, as opposed to treating trust and social capital as something to be explained. Uslaner finds that the quality of government performance improves for most of his measures when mass trust is higher, suggesting an important linkage between the way that the public thinks about others and the ability of government to deliver services and policies.

Like Norrander and Wilcox, Donald Haider-Markel and Matthew S. Kaufman deal with social policies in Chapter 9, "Public Opinion and Policy Making in the Culture Wars: Is There a Connection Between Opinion and State Policy on Gay and Lesbian Issues?" Haider-Markel and Kaufman collect a number of measures of state attitudes toward gay and lesbian issues and ask whether such opinions affect state policies toward gays and lesbians. They find that in some instances public opinion affects state policies, but in other instances, it does not. Haider-Markel and Kaufman hypothesize that when opinion is divided and contentious, policy makers will be more sensitive to public opinion in building policy. But when opinion is consensual or lopsided, to use their term, other factors, such as policy entrepreneurs, will have a larger impact on policy. The Haider-Markel and Kaufman chapter is a big step forward in identifying the conditions when public opinion will affect policy.

Similar to Haider-Markel and Kaufman, Saundra K. Schneider and William G. Jacoby also look at the impact of state public opinion on policy making in Chapter 10, "Citizen Influences on State Policy Priorities: The Interplay of Public Opinion and Interest Groups." But Schneider and Jacoby ask about the relative importance of public opinion and interest groups, an enduring question of democratic responsiveness. Beyond comparing the impact of interest groups and public opinion on public policy. Schneider and Jacoby offer a new measure of state public policy. They create a measure of state policy priorities, which makes comparisons of policy spending levels across all 10 major budget categories, using spatial proximity modeling, a form of unfolding. Based on their new policy indicator, Schneider and Jacoby suggest that policies may be either collective goods oriented or more particularistic. The impact of public opinion varies across the two types of policies, with stronger direct effects found for collective goods. But in an important refinement in our understanding of the comparative impact of interest groups and public opinion, Schneider and Jacoby argue that public opinion indirectly affects both collective goods and particularistic policy through the impact of public opinion on interest group formation. Thus, the relationship between public opinion, interest groups, and policy is quite complex and conditional; the conventional view that public opinion and interest groups compete in the policy-making process is too simplistic.

In Chapter 11, "State-Level Opinions from National Surveys: Poststratification Using Multilevel Logistic Regression," David K. Park, Andrew Gelman, and Joseph Bafumi critique the Erikson-Wright-McIver methodology and return to the older simulation methodology, but with significant refinements. To Park, Gelman, and Bafumi, a major limitation of the Erikson-Wright-McIver methodology is its insensitivity to shortterm change in opinion. Park, Gelman, and Bafumi return to simulation, but increase the number of categories compared to earlier research (Weber et al., 1972-1973; Weber and Schaffer, 1972) and employ multilevel logistic regression to estimate state opinion. As a result, Park, Gelman, and Bafumi (2003) are able to estimate state-level opinion in more refined time units than Erikson, Wright, and McIver (1993) or Brace et al. (2002). Their method produces quite precise estimates of different examples of public opinion, opening up a new avenue for capturing dynamic properties in estimating state-level public opinion.

Robert Erikson, Gerald Wright, and John McIver, in Chapter 12, "Public Opinion in the States: A Quarter Century of Change and Stability," update their seminal work on state mass partisanship and ideology, asking whether the patterns observed through the 1980s, the end point of their original study, still hold as we enter the twenty-first century. They find strong stability over time in mass ideology, and while mass partisanship is also highly stable, patterns of change are evident in the partisanship data, notably the conversion of the once rock-solid Democratic south into a Republican-advantaged region, Erikson, Wright, and McIver also find that ideology and partisanship are strongly correlated in the 1990s, unlike their lack of association in 1970s and 1980s data. According to their analysis, over-time partisanship realigned to converge with the ideological predispositions of states' mass publics.

Notes

- 1. However, some scholars have noted variation in political culture across the states, notably Daniel Elazar (1966), who distinguished among individualistic. moralistic, and traditionalistic political cultures. Elazar's venerable typology still finds it way into current research; for instance, see the chapter by Schneider and Iacoby in this volume.
- 2. These data can be accessed from the website, http://www.unc.edu/~beyle/jars .html

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