

# **SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND THE ILLINOIS PENSION PROBLEM: ROLES OF POLITICS, GEOGRAPHY AND MEDIA**

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*This article explores attitudes toward the Illinois pension system and analyzes the impact of demographic and geographic characteristics on information intake and beliefs regarding pension management and funding. Using data from a statewide telephone poll of 1,000 registered voters, as well as other sources, it evaluates some of the complex social factors that influence views on this issue. The results show that Chicagoans regard the severity of the problems facing the Chicago and Illinois pension systems as more substantial than other Illinois residents do, while gender, political and labor identities also correlate with particular views.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last several years, Illinois and hundreds of its municipalities, including the City of Chicago, have struggled under the heavy burden of paying the costs for long-underfunded public employee pension programs. That some of the programs are underfunded is not in dispute; however, the magnitude and nature of the pension crisis is a matter of considerable debate among political officeholders and activists on both sides of the issue.

Whether the pension system is in crisis, whether it is bankrupting the state and whether it could be fully funded under a new policy regime are hypothetical questions that lack conclusive answers. There is little consensus regarding the pension problem, with activist media on both sides using the word “stealing” to describe the actions of, alternately, public employees (Andrzejewski, 2011) or the state (Rosenfeld, 2013). Illinois residents’ beliefs about the situation and

potential ways of resolving it, however, may shed light on the role of social identity and identity-related media use in how these residents have come to understand the pension issue and its public policy implications.

Recent research has identified effects among social identity, media and information use, and beliefs about contested issues that extend beyond what would typically be attributed to motivated reasoning (Braman, Kahan, & Grimmelmann, 2005; Hindman, 2009; Veenstra, Hossain, & Lyons, 2014). This model of social identity influence suggests that group affiliation and norm adherence further motivate the expression of particular beliefs about contested, identity-salient topics. The pension issue in Illinois is one such topic, with significant implications for vote choice, and ultimately, for public policy decisions. Given the extent to which this issue pits various classes of stakeholders against one another, it also suggests that the activation of a number of salient social identities—political, labor-related and geographic—might influence the mode of processing and ultimately incorporating relevant information into a belief structure. This study examines how those social identities might simultaneously affect an individual’s intake of information and formation of beliefs related to the pension topic.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is already an extensive body of literature on the politics of public pension programs, as well as the impacts of social identity, union membership and geographic location on these programs. Some of the most notable research on these themes is unpacked below, in separate sections.

### **PUBLIC EMPLOYEE PENSION PROGRAMS**

Although political and legal battles have, in recent years, brought the pension problem in Illinois to the fore, state and local budgetary concerns associated with financing employees’ retirement benefits date back decades. The number and size of these programs grew dramatically during the 1970s (Weber & Perlman, 1984), coinciding with a period of stagnant real growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and tax receipts (Zarnowitz & Moore, 1977). Indeed, more than four decades ago, Bahl and Jump (1974) were already arguing that “fiscal economists and other scholars of state and local finance have devoted too little attention to the budgetary implications of public employee retirement programs” (p. 490).

The largely uncontrolled growth of these plans may be accounted for by the fact that the political incentives driving them functioned as a one-way ratchet. Democrats in state and local governments have ideological reasons for supporting generous employee compensation, but are also practically and politically motivated to ensure contentment of union members, who are more likely to vote than non-members (Thom & Randazzo, 2015). However, their Republican colleagues have also been historically incentivized to support these programs, given their ability to minimize a potential Democratic advantage with spending that does not compromise the current budget (Anzia & Moe, 2017). For all lawmakers, public employee pensions permit the immediate creation of benefits that will not be paid until relatively distant future years. For their part, unions have engaged with the issue of pension promotion, not only through collective bargaining, but also by supporting pension-friendly candidates (Thom & Randazzo, 2015).

Political interest in these programs underwent a sharp renewal subsequent to the economic crash of 2008. While many state and local governments had failed to fully fund their programs, they were not forced to address the significant associated fiscal problems until their underlying assets abruptly and considerably decreased in value. Some state plans, writ large, were fully funded in 2001, but that level had dropped to 86% by 2007, and then to 65% in 2010, although state-by-state funding levels were not predicated on party control of government or density of union membership (Coggburn & Kearney, 2010). While it may be the case that “the normal politics of public pension benefits is bipartisan” (Anzia & Moe, 2017, p. 45), such politics have been upended throughout the 2010s, especially given the profound polarization concerning labor issues (Jochim & Jones, 2013).

Due to its historically extensive underfunding, Illinois has seen public employee pensions at the heart of an ongoing budget battle (Zorn, 2017) as it has worked its way into the worst funding position of any state (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015). As of 2013, Illinois was funding only 39% of its required actuarial contribution, thereby earning it a grade of “F” from the Urban Institute (n.d.) on its funding ratio. By some measures, the City of Chicago’s municipal pension situation is as bad as that of the state as a whole, due to considerable underfunding of its pension obligations even before the 2008 stock market crash; Chicago ranks among the nation’s least diligent large cities (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013).

As the pension issue and its complex nature became an increasingly important part of the news and political agendas in Illinois, citizens might be expected

to seek guidance from trusted leaders that they see as connected to the issue, which would likely include political and labor elites. As such, pension-related social identities may direct people to develop pension-related beliefs that conform to those prescribed by group norms.

## SOCIAL IDENTITY INFLUENCE

Recently, several distinct lines of research have begun to examine the influence of social group membership on the beliefs and knowledge held by group members. Specifically, studies examining the belief gap hypothesis (Hindman, 2009; Veenstra, Hossain et al., 2014) and the cultural cognition model (Braman et al., 2005; Kahan, Braman, Slovic, Gastil, & Cohen, 2009) have considered the effects of political ideology and partisanship on beliefs and knowledge about a variety of contested, but factual, topics.

Each of these approaches builds on the concepts of biased processing (Cohen, 2003) and identity bolstering (Kahan, 2013) to evaluate the influence of a particular social attribute on beliefs or knowledge about a particular topic. However, individuals' connections to social groups may frequently be in conflict within the context of any given contested issue (Barkan, 2014; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). This can be explicit, as in the case of a Catholic Democrat seeking guidance related to reproductive rights. It can also assume a more latent form, if a given identity characteristic lacks the strong group structure that characterizes political parties or religions.

Models of social identity influence posit that individuals who acknowledge and value group belonging are influenced toward beliefs supported by group norms via the transfer of attitudes from elites, within general membership, and through communication channels (Huddy, 2013). This notion of elite influence on group members squares with well-established patterns in the development of public opinion (Zaller, 1992). However, the process whereby identity influences beliefs appears to be highly idiosyncratic. Hindman (2009) found different influences on the seemingly related beliefs that global warming is occurring and that it is primarily caused by human activity. A subsequent study found considerably distinctive patterns of effects on a handful of "culture war" science topics (Veenstra, Hossain, et al., 2014). Narrowly defined beliefs about the benefits and risks of vaccines (Veenstra, Jurkowski et al., 2014), and the risks fracking presents to the environment and individuals (Veenstra, Lyons, & Fowler-Dawson, 2016) have also shown disparate patterns of influence on apparently similar belief outcomes.

In the case of the fervently contested pension issue, and specifically, the belief that public employee pensions are “bankrupting” Illinois and the City of Chicago, political and labor identities have special relevance. Political party membership and ideological affiliation are particularly powerful social identities that exert a profound influence on individuals’ attitudes and beliefs (Conover & Feldman, 1981). Union membership engenders a similarly powerful identity (Cregan, Bartram, & Stanton, 2009; C. Kelly & Kelly, 1994; J. Kelly, 1998), with elite preferences that are likely to mirror those attributed to leaders in the Democratic Party (Anzia & Moe, 2017). Given the localized nature of the municipal pension problem, place-based identity should also be expected to be highly relevant (Stedman, 2002).

### UNION MEMBERSHIP AS SOCIAL IDENTITY

Studies of union members’ behavior suggest that, like political partisanship, union-identity influence is driven by leadership (e.g., Fullagar, McCoy, & Shull, 1992), via attitudes of solidarity (Cregan et al., 2009; Twigg, Fuller, & Hester, 2008). Indeed, union organizations employ leadership strategies and group-based mobilization to promote collective, value-oriented socialization instead of individual orientations (Cregan et al., 2009; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). So, through mutual struggles in the workplace and “inspirational leadership,” union workers cultivate social identification with the union, which, in turn, solidifies collective attitudes and behavior (Cregan et al., 2009, pp. 701-702; see also J. Kelly, 1998).

Social identity theory proposes that, to boost their self-esteem, individuals associate with groups they perceive as distinct from others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Kelly (1998), and Cregan et al. (2009) suggest that workers’ involvement with workplace struggles, against perceived injustices and in the context of management disputes, strengthens this identity, pursuant to the process of group distinction, where “‘we’ is defined in opposition to ‘them’” (Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005, p. 527; Cregan et al., 2009, p. 704). Logically, others make sense of union identity as deriving from the organizational space in which members work and associate. Such communal interaction builds collective identity (e.g., Yu, 2014).

Because “social identity plays a major role in determining the strength of collectivism” (Cregan et al., 2009, p. 704; C. Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Metochi, 2002), union-identifiers would be more likely to subscribe to beliefs that are more common to the group and serve the group’s interests (e.g., unions are not

bankrupting the state). We suppose that, in addition to collectivist attitudes and behaviors, union membership also results in adherence to shared beliefs about issues that may affect unions.

## PLACE-BASED IDENTITY

Identities are derived from and shaped by the contexts in which individuals find themselves, including geography (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Mass communication scholarship has demonstrated the existence of relationships among place-based orientations, media exposure and democratic outcomes, such as knowledge and participation. Media are particularly important to this matrix, because place-based identity development is open-ended and fraught with ambivalence (Paasi, 1986). Local news, in particular, helps to shape public opinion within a socially circumscribed place, and local media channels can indirectly influence who will be regarded as a leader, relative to one's place-based identity (Paasi, 2002). McLeod and his colleagues (1996) explored this role of the media in relation to dimensions of community integration, and determined that psychological attachment, discussion networks, city vs. group orientation, localism vs. cosmopolitanism and city vs. neighborhood orientation all contribute to the strength of media influence. Research along this line has shown strong links among identification with one's community, consumption of local media and civic engagement (McLeod et al., 1996; Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005).

In the present case, the split between Chicago, the third-largest city in the United States, and the mostly rural remainder of Illinois may promote the development of place-based identification that biases residents' beliefs in favor of local contexts and norms. Such geographic areas may act similarly in aligning norms and making salient different kinds of media and information sources, resulting in disparate beliefs about objective realities like the pension plans in the City of Chicago and at the state level.

Irrespective of the role and effects of national media, the links between local media and place-based identity are strong (Grindle, 2007). Local media, including local newspapers, radio and television, function as storytellers in neighborhoods (Gürses, 2015), providing a shared field of experience that helps to reinforce local identity, partly because of their ability to cover stories related to that identity more thoroughly than national media outlets can (Mahrt, 2008).

## **HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Though we have good reason to expect results indicating that political and labor identities are related to beliefs expressed about the Illinois and the City of Chicago pension systems, we currently lack a clear understanding of the mode by which demographic and geographic identities might influence those beliefs. Thus, this analysis begins with two exploratory research questions and two hypotheses, related to a range of potentially relevant social identities.

*Research Question 1.* What demographic characteristics predict the belief that public employee pensions are bankrupting Illinois and Chicago?

*Research Question 2.* Do such beliefs differ among residents of Chicago, the Chicago suburbs and the rest of Illinois?

*Hypothesis 1.* Union members are less likely than non-members to believe that public employee pensions are bankrupting Illinois and Chicago.

*Hypothesis 2.* The belief that pensions are bankrupting Illinois and Chicago is related to (a) Republican partisanship and (b) conservative political ideology.

Following on recent social identity research, we expect identity-relevant media to track with the influence of the identities themselves, by providing a channel for the transmission of group norms from leaders to members.

*Research Question 3.* How does the use of (a) local newspapers, (b) local television news and (c) social media for news relate to beliefs that pensions are bankrupting Illinois and Chicago?

*Hypothesis 3.* (a) The use of conservative media is related to greater belief that pensions are bankrupting Illinois and Chicago than the use of liberal media.

Regarding place-based identity, we propose research questions about the relevance of local media and highly egocentric social media to pension beliefs. Each of these research questions and hypotheses focuses on a different dimension of the deepening pension issues facing the City of Chicago and the state.

## **METHODS**

The hypotheses are evaluated using data collected by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute in its annual Illinois-wide poll. Data were collected via live telephone interviews with 1,000 registered voters, from February 28 to March 10, 2015. A Spanish-language version of the questionnaire and a Spanish-speaking interviewer were made available, as needed. Respondents using cellphones comprised 30.7% of the sample. Participants were drawn: 20% from the City of Chicago, 50% from the remainder of Cook County and the five “collar” counties (DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry and Will), and 30% from the remainder of the state. The sample was 51.3% female and 74.2% white, with a median education level of an associate’s degree, and a mean age of 58.1 ( $SD = 17.4$ ; Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, 2015).

## **VARIABLE CONSTRUCTION**

The predictive model uses variables grouped into the following three categories:

### **1. POLITICAL AND UNION AFFILIATIONS**

Two political orientations were measured with single items. Partisanship was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a scale running from strong Democrat (1) to strong Republican (7). Those who indicated they belonged to another party were placed at the midpoint (4) of this two-party partisanship scale ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ). Political ideology was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a scale from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5;  $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Another item asked respondents whether they were members of a labor union (15.9% union members). Social identity is often measured by binary group membership or by degree of identification with a group (such as our partisan identity scale; Greene, 1999), but is also sometimes gauged using more fine-grained multi-item measures (Huddy, Mason, & Aarøe, 2015). This study’s reliance on secondary analysis limited these variables to single-item measures.

### **2. MEDIA USE**

Five types of media use were measured, using items asking respondents how many days in a typical week they used the following media: social network sites to get news or news headlines ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 3.10$ ); local newspapers, including online ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ); local television news, including online

( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 2.67$ ); conservative online political commentary ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 2.21$ ); and liberal online political commentary ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ).

### 3. BELIEFS ABOUT PENSIONS

Two beliefs about the effects of pension underfunding were measured with single items asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements, “Pensions for public employees are bankrupting the state” (54.5% agreed), and “Pensions for public employees are bankrupting the city of Chicago” (55.8% agreed). These two variables were strongly correlated ( $r = .81$ ); however, as this study aimed to identify minor differences between measures that seemed to be tapping similar cognitive concepts, each was modeled as a dependent variable in an individual analysis.

## RESULTS

Two identical analyses of covariance models were used to test influences on the two outcome beliefs. Geographic area (i.e., City of Chicago, Chicago suburbs, downstate Illinois) and union membership were included as factors, with nine variables included as covariates: age, race (coded as white), gender (coded as female), education, political partisanship (coded as Republican), political ideology (coded as conservative), social media use for news, conservative online media use and liberal online media use.<sup>1</sup> Because of missing values on some variables, total usable  $N$  was 649 for the Illinois model and 588 for the Chicago model.

To establish some context for the pension dispute, which has received little attention in public opinion scholarship, our first research question asks what demographic characteristics predict beliefs about Illinois and Chicago pensions. Gender, coded as female, negatively predicted both beliefs—that is, women were less likely to believe that pensions were bankrupting the state and city (Illinois,  $p < .001$ ; Chicago,  $p = .001$ ).<sup>2</sup> Race, coded as white, positively predicted both beliefs (Illinois,  $p < .001$ ; Chicago,  $p < .001$ ).<sup>3</sup> Age positively predicted the belief that pensions were bankrupting Chicago ( $p = .010$ ), but was not a significant predictor of beliefs about Illinois pensions.<sup>4</sup>

The second research question asked how pension beliefs were distributed across three differentiable regions of the state: the City of Chicago, the Chicago suburbs and “downstate.” The main effect of region was not significant in either model (Illinois,  $p = .064$ ; Chicago,  $p = .076$ ).<sup>5</sup> However, similar patterns of differences

in *estimated marginal means* (the expected mean, if all other variables except the variable under consideration are held at their overall means, in the sample) emerged in both models, with Chicago residents expressing greater belief that pensions were bankrupting the state and city than did suburbanites or downstate residents (Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

ESTIMATED MARGINAL MEANS FOR BELIEF THAT PENSIONS ARE “BANKRUPTING” THE STATE OR CITY: PERCENT RESPONDING “YES”

	PLACE OF RESIDENCE				UNION AFFILIATION		
	City	Suburbs	Downstate	Statistically Significant	Union	Non-Union	Statistically Significant
<b>Are pensions bankrupting Illinois?</b>	57%	49%	44%	Yes	38%	61%	Yes
<b>Are pensions bankrupting Chicago?</b>	59%	49%	47%	No	40%	63%	Yes

*Note: Marginal means, shown above, measure the expected result if all other variables except the variable under consideration are held at their means. For example, the percentage response of city dwellers to the question, “Are pensions bankrupting the city” is the expected level, if the degree of partisanship, union membership and other variables are at the statewide mean. This allows for a comparison of the differences across populations, while controlling for confounding factors.*

Our first two hypotheses proposed that, while union membership would be related to relatively lower belief that pensions were bankrupting the state and city, Republican partisanship and conservative ideology would be related to greater expression of such beliefs. Union members were less likely to hold that belief for both Illinois ( $p < .001$ ) and Chicago ( $p < .001$ ).<sup>6</sup> Republican partisanship was related to greater belief (Illinois,  $p = .043$ ; Chicago,  $p = .007$ ).<sup>7</sup> However, conservative ideology was not significantly related to greater or lesser belief (Illinois,  $p = .084$ ; Chicago,  $p = .239$ ). Our third hypothesis proposed that partisan media relationships would track with the partisanship findings. Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b were both supported, as conservative online media use was related to greater bankruptcy belief (Illinois,  $p = .010$ ; Chicago,  $p = .013$ ), while liberal online media use was related to lesser expression of such

beliefs (Illinois:  $p = .022$ ; Chicago:  $p = .022$ ).<sup>8</sup> These results are summarized in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**

PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION BELIEVING THAT PENSIONS ARE BANKRUPTING ILLINOIS OR THE CITY OF CHICAGO

	IDEOLOGY					PARTY AFFILIATION						
	Liberal-Conservative					Democrat-Republican						
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Estimated marginal means for each group*</i>												
<b>Bankrupting Illinois</b>	51%	46%	50%	56%	55%	40%	60%	38%	51%	60%	50%	61%
<b>Bankrupting Chicago</b>	57%	44%	52%	59%	56%	40%	58%	46%	55%	62%	51%	64%
<i>Raw percentages for each group**</i>												
<b>Bankrupting Illinois</b>	43%	47%	53%	65%	67%	38%	63%	38%	59%	73%	59%	73%
<b>Bankrupting Chicago</b>	50%	45%	54%	70%	65%	36%	61%	42%	64%	77%	64%	77%

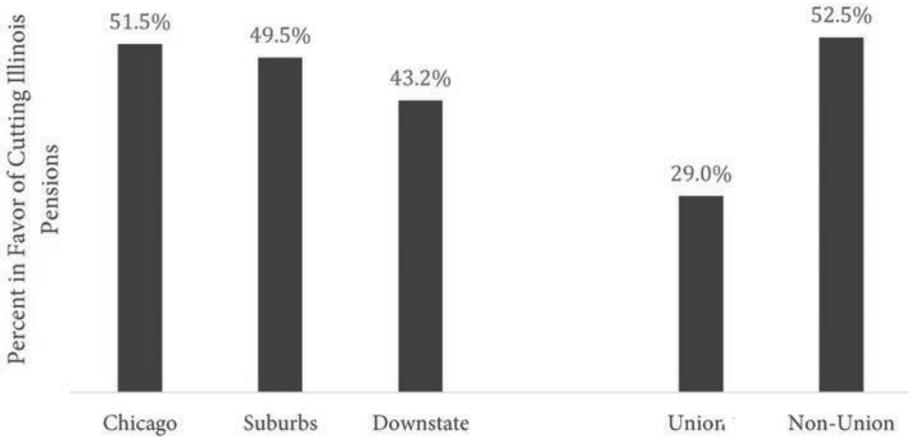
Notes: \*Cell entries are estimated marginal means for each group. These estimates hold demographic variables constant to identify the unique influence of group variables. \*\*Cell entries are raw percentages for each group.

Finally, our third research question explored the role of local television, local newspapers and social media news-seeking. Two of these were significantly and negatively associated with the belief that pensions are bankrupting Illinois (local TV,  $p = .015$ ; social media,  $p = .038$ ).<sup>9</sup> However, none of the three were significantly associated with the belief that pensions are bankrupting the City of Chicago. Interpreted broadly, the results support Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2a, but not Hypothesis 2b.

It is also instructive to review the different responses categorized by place of residence and union affiliation, without holding constant the variables mentioned above. Table 1 shows the percentage of Illinoisans who support cutting pensions according to place of residence and union affiliation in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The lower part of this table shows the margin of difference between support and opposition to cutting pensions from 2015 to 2017, with

negative numbers indicating that opposition exceeds support. Figure 1 shows results from 2017 in graphical form. The data in these illustrations support the earlier conclusion that downstate and union members tend to be far more skeptical of the idea that cutting pensions will resolve financial problems facing pension systems than do others in the state. In Chicago, 51.5% support cutting pensions, compared with 49.5% in the suburbs and 43.2% downstate.

**FIGURE 1**  
SUPPORT FOR CUTTING PENSIONS IN ILLINOIS  
BY REGION AND UNION MEMBERSHIP (2017)



*Residents of metropolitan Chicago—both in the city and suburbs—consistently rate the state’s pension problems as being more severe than those in downstate areas. An even wider gap exists between union and non-union workers.*

**TABLE 3**

PERCENT IN FAVOR OF AND IN OPPOSITION TO CUTS IN STATE SPENDING ON PENSION BENEFITS FOR STATE WORKERS' RETIREMENT

	2015		2016		2017	
	<b>Attitude Toward Cuts in State Spending on Pension Benefits for State Workers' Retirement</b>					
	Favor	Oppose	Favor	Oppose	Favor	Oppose
<b>Chicago</b>	48.0%	47.5%	53.0%	37.5%	49.0%	46.0%
<b>Suburbs</b>	46.6%	45.2%	50.4%	43.8%	45.8%	46.8%
<b>Downstate</b>	38.0%	56.7%	44.7%	47.0%	40.3%	54.0%
<b>Union</b>	28.4%	66.7%	37.1%	56.3%	26.0%	68.0%
<b>Non-Union</b>	49.0%	44.8%	53.1%	39.6%	49.4%	44.4%
	<b>Margin of Difference between Support for and Opposition to Cutting Pensions</b>					
<b>Chicago</b>	0.5%		15.5%		3.0%	
<b>Suburbs</b>	1.4%		6.6%		-1.0%	
<b>Downstate</b>	-18.3%		-2.3%		-13.7%	
<b>Union</b>	-38.3%		-19.2%		-42.0%	
<b>Non-Union</b>	4.2%		13.5%		5.0%	

*Note: Across the three periods considered, individuals living downstate and those affiliated with a union consistently expressed less support for the idea that pensions should be cut. A negative margin of difference indicates that opposition exceeds support for the proposition that pensions should be reduced. In 2016, the union membership question was for the household rather than the individual.*

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand social identity and media influences on beliefs that public employee pensions are “bankrupting” Illinois and the City of Chicago, and to examine differences between the two. Although these two beliefs are likely to be close to each other in a given individual’s cognitive network, and therefore likely to share many of the same cognitive connections (e.g., thoughts about public employees, the history of public corruption in Illinois and Chicago, one’s opinions of the governor and mayor), demographic and media-use differences emerge, providing a way to distinguish between the two concepts. Most notably, local television and social media news use only

play a significant role in predicting beliefs about the Illinois pension system, failing to significantly predict beliefs about the City of Chicago pension system; age operates the same way, but in the opposite direction. This suggests key differences in the information environment around these two related stories, perhaps owing to the varying relevance of the Chicago pension story relative to other media markets around the state.

That Chicago residents diverge from the rest of the state on these beliefs, but more so on the Chicago-specific belief, suggests that there may be a cognitive interactive effect at play. Both pension systems have direct relevance for this group of people, and their thinking about these two problems may compound itself to make them see each as worse than other Illinoisans do. Another possible explanation is that they are more acutely aware of the dangers of underfunded pensions and the potential implications for the state of Illinois, based on current issues that the City of Chicago is experiencing. Moody's downgraded the city's debt rating in February 2015, for example.

Not surprisingly, union identity is highly relevant to pension beliefs. Individuals who belong to labor unions are significantly more likely than other Illinoisans to believe that pensions are not bankrupting the state.<sup>10</sup> This belief reflects the collective, value-oriented socialization that unions attempt to foster, via mobilization, at the expense of individual orientation. Our findings suggest that unions are already highly mobilized in this way around the pension issue.

As expected, Republican partisanship, though not conservative ideology, predicted beliefs that pensions were bankrupting the state. Moreover, partisan media were found to reinforce this position. This fits with findings of previous literature (Veenstra et al., 2014) examining partisanship and ideology as social identities, and their influence over beliefs about objective realities that have nonetheless become contested along deeply political lines. Similarly, we find that party plays a stronger role than ideology, perhaps because the issue is more topical and policy-oriented than representative of a deeply ingrained worldview. The findings also support the model of belief formation that flows from elites, through largely internal communication channels, to rank and file members. One limitation of this study is a lack of available data describing local policy coverage, especially in state and local partisan media.

As with any single study, there are a number of additional limitations to consider. First, social identity is sometimes difficult to operationalize and measure. Specifically, our study more accurately measures union membership

than social identity, per se. The context for local media sources is also somewhat murky. Our geographic categories are not mutually exclusive, when it comes to individuals' complex senses of self—people can express multiple place-based identities. Many people live in the suburbs, but work in the city or vice-versa. Relocation is another factor complicating place-based identity. Over a lifetime, an individual might live in all three places, and feel different levels of attachment to each of them.

The broad media exposure measures typical to public opinion surveys are also rather blunt. For instance, in terms of actual content, there is no clear distinction between local and national media. Additionally, social media further blur the lines between local and national media by spreading content through social networks unconstrained by geographical boundaries. Little research attention has been paid to issue agendas in local media, or local politics in social media, but the reach of these stories and the impact of actual events may play a role in geographically circumscribing attitudes. For example, the Illinois Supreme Court ruling that overturned a law that unconstitutionally cut existing pensions was noted in the *Chicago Tribune* as threatening “a similar law [Chicago] Mayor Rahm Emanuel pushed through to shore up two of the four city worker retirement funds” (Pearson & Geiger, 2015). However, the downstate *Belleville News-Democrat* (“Illinois Supreme Court,” 2015) did not mention municipal pensions at all in its report on the ruling.

The manner in which the survey questions are worded might also affect the results. For example, the term “bankrupting” may be problematic due to its semantic connotations and unclear meaning in the minds of some respondents (the state government cannot declare bankruptcy in a way similar to private corporations). Respondents might believe that pensions are a serious problem, but not bankrupting the state. Other respondents might believe that pensions are merely one variable out of many responsible for city and state financial problems. Future studies could build upon our findings by addressing the identity, media and belief measurement shortcomings mentioned previously, by comparing beliefs about pension struggles in states and municipalities around the nation, and by conducting an analysis of the actual content in local news. This would necessarily involve expanding from our narrow focus on “bankrupting” to a broader range of pension-related concerns.

Future studies of pension attitudes in the state should also proceed under the assumption that these attitudes have crystallized (Bishop, 1990). From 2015 to 2017, the Simon Institute fielded another question in its statewide survey,

asking in general about support for pension cuts. The basic pattern of our findings—more hostility to pensions in Chicago than in the rest of the state, and less hostility from union members—holds for this measure across this time period. Post-2015 surveys do not measure attitudes about the City of Chicago’s municipal pensions. In each year, Chicagoans offered net support to cutting pensions, and the suburbs did so in 2015 and 2016. At the same time, Illinoisans outside of metropolitan Chicago were, on the whole, opposed to cutting pensions in all three years (see Table 3). While the additional data cannot speak to attitudes about Chicago municipal pensions, seeing the same geographic pattern of state pension hostility is suggestive of a broader trend. As such, additional media exposure and coverage of developments (such as subsequent years’ budget battles) may not result in significant changes in public opinion. It is likely that, with attitudes falling consistently along these lines, a major policy shift or exogenous shock to the system would be required to produce change (Collingwood, Lajevardi, & Oskooii, forthcoming).

Although these attitudes appear fairly robust, our findings illustrate the potentially crosscutting challenges for politicians and policymakers, as the more Democratic and union-friendly City of Chicago nonetheless shows greater hostility to pensions. The issue may remain combustible in Chicago while continuing to fly under the radar in the many other municipalities facing their own shortfalls.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The original analyses included income, which was not a significant predictor in either model. Because the variable had nearly 20% missing cases, considerably reducing the statistical power of the models, it was omitted from the final analyses.

<sup>2</sup> Illinois,  $F(1, 634) = 13.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Chicago,  $F(1, 573) = 11.14$ ,  $p = .001$

<sup>3</sup> Illinois,  $F(1, 634) = 14.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Chicago,  $F(1, 573) = 21.53$ ,  $p < .001$

<sup>4</sup>  $F(1, 573) = 6.72$ ,  $p = .010$

<sup>5</sup> Illinois,  $F(2, 634) = 2.76$ ,  $p = .064$ ; Chicago,  $F(2, 573) = 2.59$ ,  $p = .076$

<sup>6</sup> Illinois, ( $F(1, 634) = 21.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ); Chicago, ( $F(1, 573) = 20.39$ ,  $p < .001$ )

<sup>7</sup> Illinois,  $F(1, 634) = 4.10$ ,  $p = .043$ ; Chicago,  $F(1, 573) = 7.39$ ,  $p = .007$

<sup>8</sup> Conservative beliefs: Illinois,  $F(1, 634) = 6.63$ ,  $p = .010$ ; Chicago,  $F(1, 573) = 6.23$ ,  $p = .013$ ; Liberal beliefs: Illinois,  $F(1, 634) = 5.25$ ,  $p = .022$ ; Chicago,  $F(1, 573) = 5.31$ ,  $p = .022$

<sup>9</sup> Local TV:  $p = .015$ ; Social media:  $p = .038$

<sup>10</sup> In terms of understanding the cognitive networks from which we formulate beliefs, the geographic, union and partisan associations that we have found to overlap shed more light on the complex nature of social identity influences and how they might be derived through analysis. In terms of public policy, they help those hoping to mobilize opinion on the pension situations to understand the origins of beliefs among different classes of stakeholders.

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