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Kim Hill

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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## Kistner '15 Studying Polarization in State Government

July 29, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— It's one thing both the red and blue camps agree on: a sharpening partisan divide currently defines modern politics in our nation.

Political scientists have studied partisanship's impact on federal governance, but researchers have largely ignored the effects of such polarization at the state level.

That's curious, according to Illinois Wesleyan University **political science** major Michael Kistner '15 (Bloomington, Ill.), who said state laws often have the most immediate impact on the everyday lives of citizens. Kistner is spending his summer examining polarization's effects on the productivity of state legislatures as an **Eckley Summer Scholar and Artist**.



Michael Kistner '15

In theory, a more partisan state legislature would have less compromise, leading to a decreased ability to respond to the state's needs with legislation to address those needs. To test this empirically, Kistner is using a point scale developed by researchers at the University of Chicago and Princeton University to measure polarization in each state legislature.

The most polarized? California. The least is Rhode Island. Illinois ranks as the 11<sup>th</sup> least polarized, according to the scale Kistner is using.

Guided by Professor of Political Science Tari Renner, Kistner is conducting a content analysis of unsigned newspaper editorials mentioning a political topic or pending legislation. Kistner is cataloguing the issues to measure the correlation between the level of polarization in the legislature and the number of laws passed and signed by the state's governor addressing those issues.

Although his project is still underway, Kistner is discovering that the relationship between polarization and productivity is not a simple bivariate one. "It's not simply that as polarization increases, legislative productivity decreases," Kistner explained. "Sometimes that was the case, as in California which is very polarized and not a lot gets done. In other cases, such as Illinois, the state is not very polarized and still nothing's getting done."

Indeed, Kistner found that less than one-third of the issues identified in his analysis of *Chicago Tribune* editorials resulted in the passage of new laws in Illinois addressing those issues.

His experience as an Eckley Scholar has shown Kistner that research is an independent, personally driven process.

"This project has confirmed that this is the career path I want to follow," said Kistner, who plans to pursue a doctorate in political science with continued research on political institutions at the state and even local level.

The Eckley Summer Scholars and Artists endowment supports summer research and creative activity for several students each year, enabling them to stay on campus over the summer to work under the direction of faculty mentors. The program was established as one aspect of a major gift to the University by President Emeritus Robert S. Eckley, his wife Nell and the Eckley Family Foundation, shortly before he passed away in 2012.

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*Contact: Kim Hill, (309) 556-3960, [khill1@iwu.edu](mailto:khill1@iwu.edu)*