

Baumgartner, POLI 195 Spring 2013

Shifting Frames of the Death Penalty

Reading: Decline, ch 7, the impact of
framing on the number of death
sentences

March 4, 2013

Conclusions from *NYT* analysis

- Innocence frame is the single most powerful media frame in history
- It equals the constitutionality focus of the 1960s and 1970s
- It surpasses that frame in amount of coverage
- It brings together previously existing arguments, such as the racial disparity argument, but puts it in a new context
- It is not just in the NYTimes
- Most important: How people respond to it...

Reminders about public opinion

- In the long run, opinion responds to:
 - A. The Net Tone of media coverage
 - B. The number of homicides

- And in the short run it responds to
 - A. Change in the Net Tone of media coverage
 - B. Change in homicides
 - C. Major events, beyond their effect on news coverage

Public Opinion Summary

- Frustrating to study because the questions are extremely general: “Do you support or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” But jurors face not an abstract question but a very particular one.
- Disjuncture between wide support for the abstract notion and the rarity of the penalty
- Still, it varies in sensible ways over time
- It is affected by real-world events AND by media coverage

Policy Impact

Annual Death Sentences as the most appropriate dependent variable

Juries not faced with a hypothetical question as posed in surveys

Juries presented with strong stimulus, not like aggregate public opinion

May be different, should definitely be less inertial

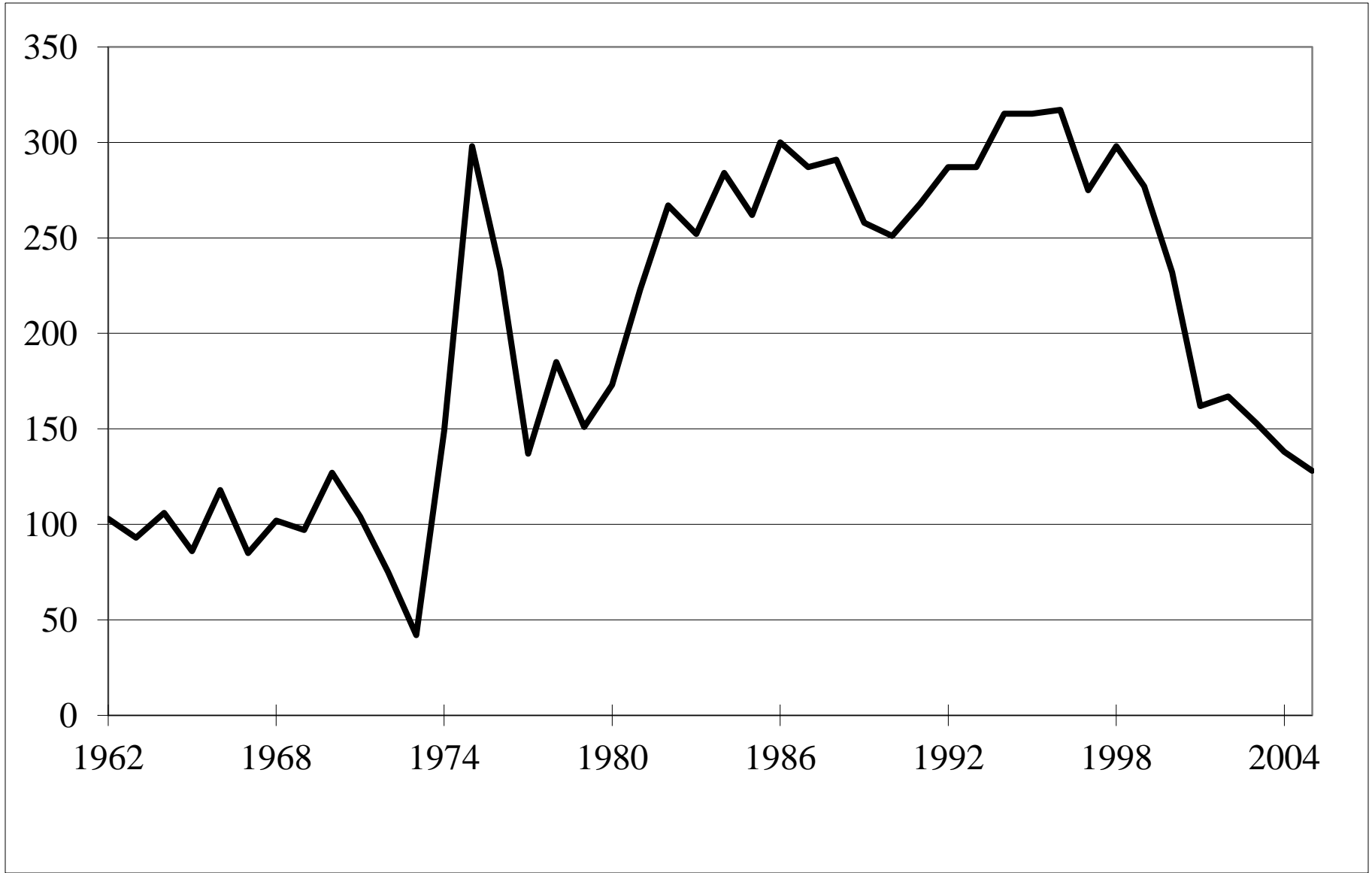
How to study the state of a public policy?

- This is one of the most distinctive features of our book: we actually study the state of public policy, over time, to see if we can ‘explain’ it statistically.
- If we can explain it, then we can understand the component parts of what is causing it.
- We conclude that it is homicides, public opinion, and media coverage, but not in that order.

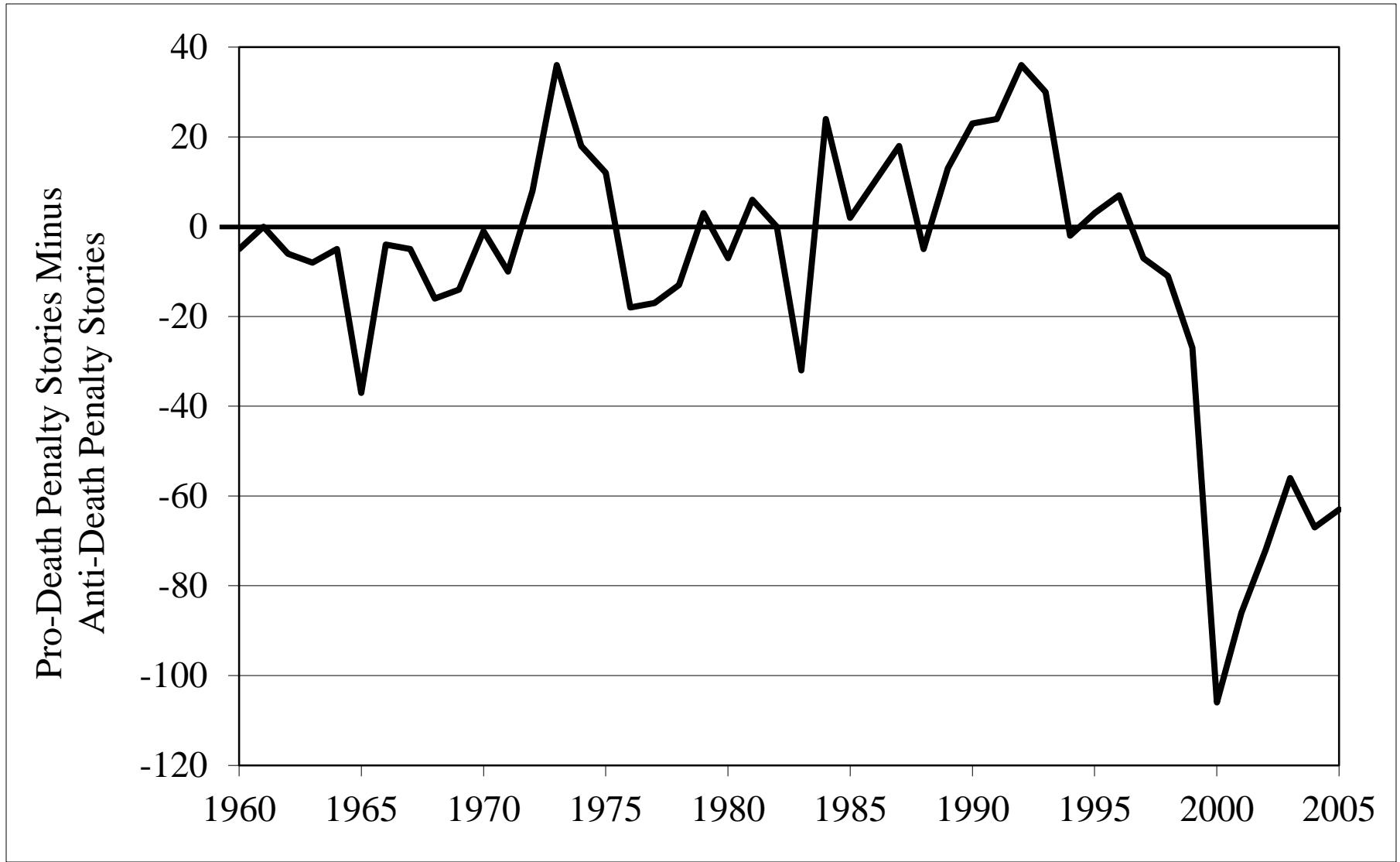
Measuring public policy

- Number of laws pro- and anti-DP?
 - Number of executions?
 - Number of capital prosecutions?
 - Percent of eligible murders where death is sought?
 - Death sentences?
-
- Theory, logistics combine to lead to death sentences as our indicator.
 - Policy can change w/o changes in the law.
 - Executions affected by appeals processes that are very difficult to predict.

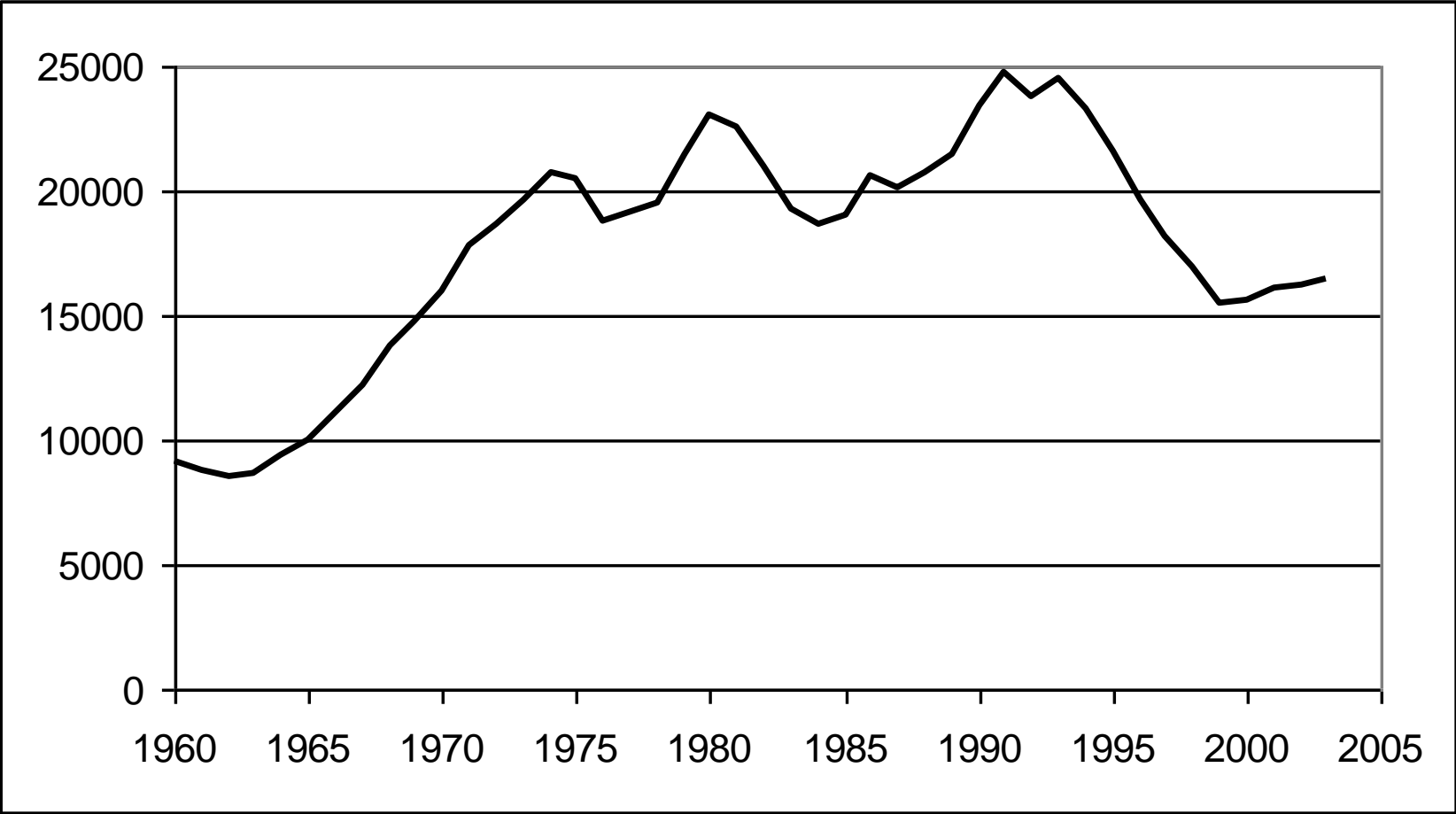
Reminder: Number of Death Sentences



Reminder: "Net Tone" of NYT Coverage

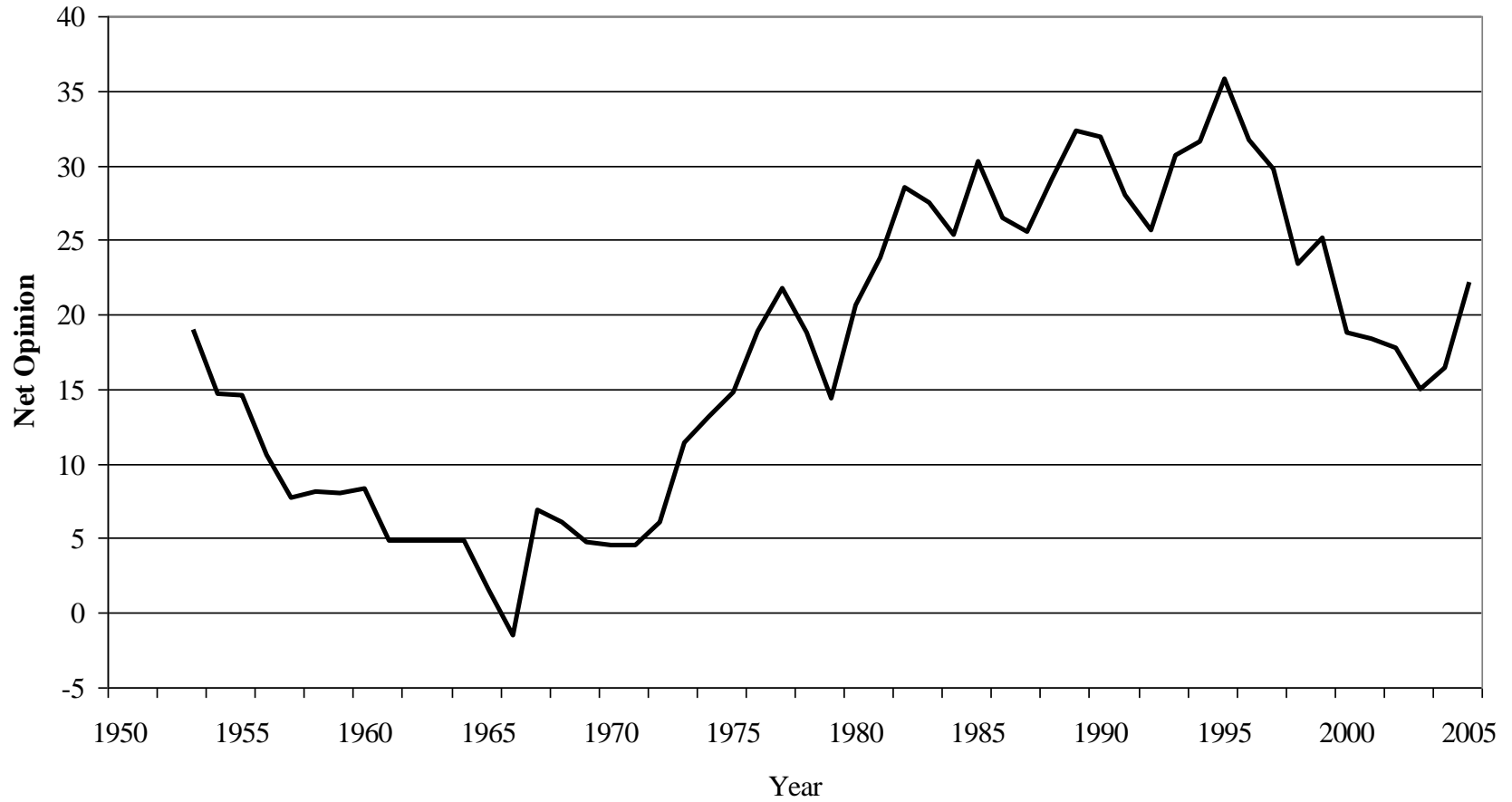


Homicides: decline from 24,500 in 1993 to 15,500 in 2000



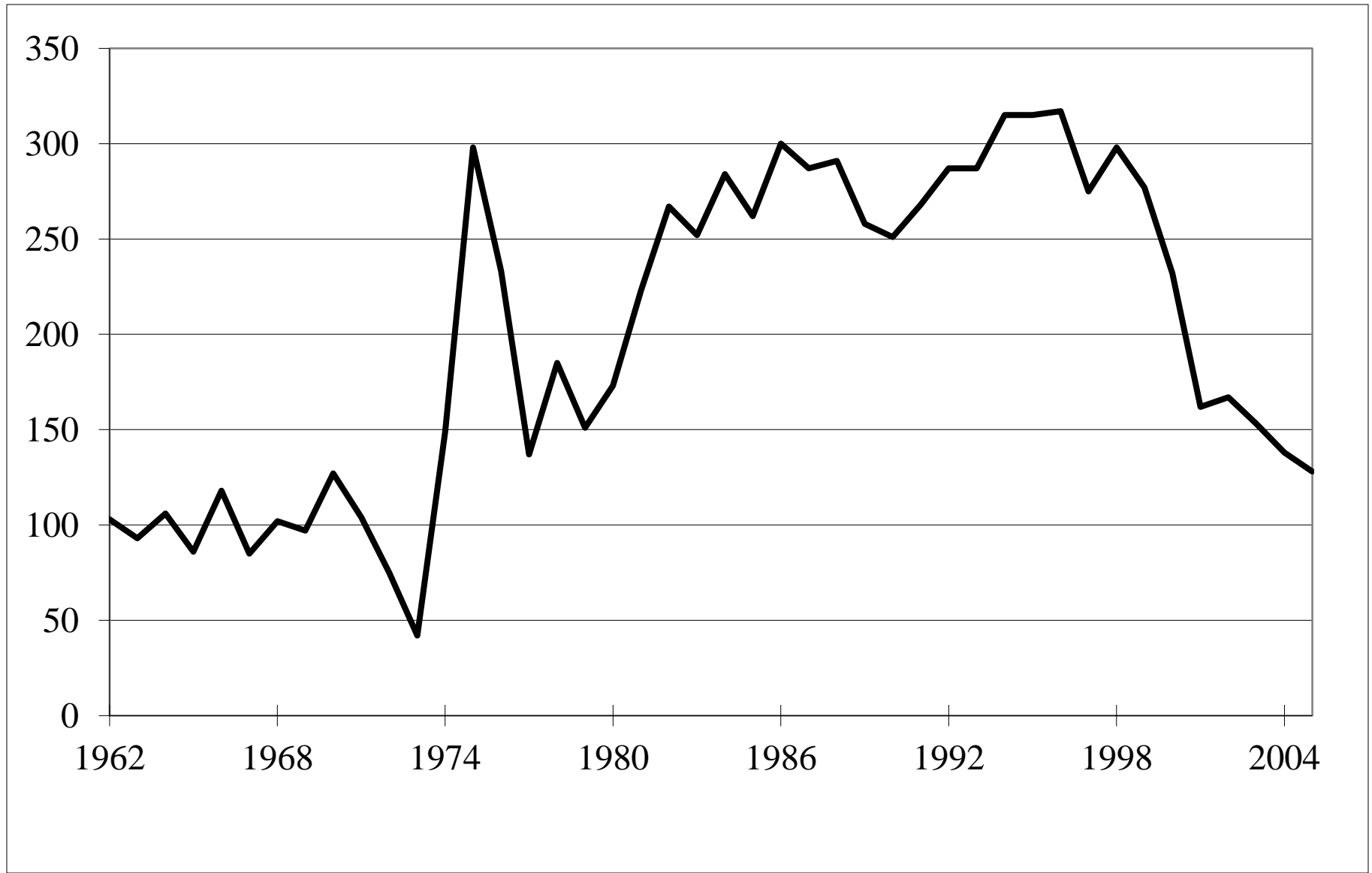
NB: France, UK, approx 400 per year

Net Public Opinion, 1953-2004



Number of Death Sentences

Can We Predict this Series?



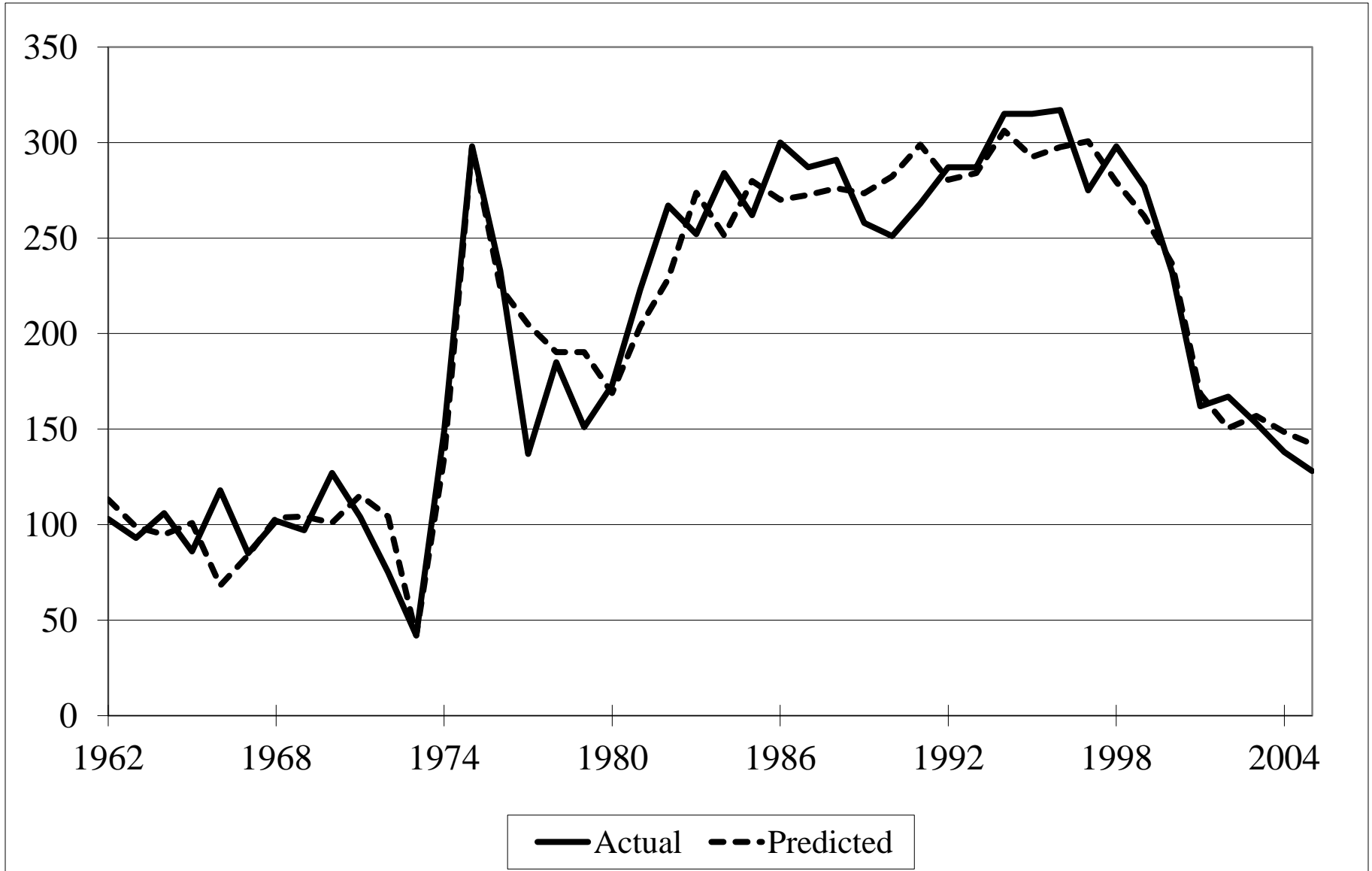
Predicting Annual Death Sentences (p. 207)

Annual Number of Death Sentences =
22.92 (19.20)+
0.316 x Sentences_{t-1} (0.097) +
0.453 x Net Tone of *New York Times*_{t-1} (0.137) +
0.817 x Homicides (thousands)_{t-1} (1.437) +
5.059 x Opinion_{t-1} (1.069) +
-67.80 x 1973 dummy (25.80) +
129.49 x 1975 dummy (25.34)

$R^2 = .930$ (N=42)

Note: Analysis is annual from 1963 to 2005.

Predicted and Actual Death Sentences



Interpretation

0.316 x Sentences_{t-1} (0.097)

The series has some inertia to it; 32% of each value carries forward.

This is significantly less than what we saw for public opinion; that series was much more inertial, or slowly moving. Juries respond more quickly than aggregate public opinion to new events.

Each additional independent variable also has some inertial impact into the future as well. $(1 / (1 - .316)) = 1.46$ x immediate effect)

Interpretation

$0.453 \times \text{Net Tone of } New\ York\ Times_{t-1} (0.137)$

A 10-point shift in news coverage: 4.5 fewer death sentences in the following time period, with a longer term impact of 6.7 fewer.

1992: Net tone = +36

2000: Net tone = -106

Shift of 142 points

Expected impact: 98 death sentences

Interpretation

$.817 \times \text{Homicides (thousands)}_{t-1} (1.437)$

Move homicides by 8,000:

Decline in death sentences: 10 per year

(Effect is small, and statistically insignificant)

Interpretation

5.059 x Opinion_{t-1} (1.069)

This is a big impact:

In the long term, after inertia plays out:

15 point shift in opinion: 111 fewer death sentences

Public Opinion

(Results from Chapter 6, quarterly model)

<u>Manipulation</u>	<u>Effect</u>
Reduce Net Tone of NYT by 50	-7.46
Reduce homicides by 2,000	-6.80

So homicides do affect sentences, indirectly through public opinion.

Media framing, however, shows both a significant effect on public opinion, and a direct effect on sentencing, in addition to the indirect effect.

Interpretation

The tone of media coverage affects both aggregate public opinion and, separately, jury and prosecutor behavior.

Public opinion changes slowly but has a strong impact on jury behavior.

Substantive effect of shift in media tone is greater than the slowly shifting nature of public opinion.

This media effect is not a journalistic bias, but reflects how communities of professionals discuss the policy issue.

Framing can change public policy.