Searching for Voters along the Liberal-Conservative Continuum: The Infrequent Ideologue and the Missing Middle

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Abstract

This article presents a new method of measuring the ideological orientation of the American electorate, using four variables found in the American National Elections Studies. The measure is tested for validity by examining its relation to a list of fundamental beliefs that we would expect a liberal and a conservative to hold. The proportions of liberals, conservatives and middle-of-the-roaders among the electorate over the past several decades are delineated. Both ideological orientation and party identification are then examined to determine the extent to which both of these predispositions coexist among the electorate. As of 2004, only 7.4 percent of potential voters were found to be both strong conservatives and strong Republicans, while 3.2 percent were strong liberals and strong Democrats. The majority of the electorate had neither strong predisposition. This majority should not be considered middle-of-the-roaders since they have little or no cognizance of the liberal-conservative continuum. The implications of these findings for party and candidate strategies, as well as for the assumption that voters need an ideological orientation in order to make sophisticated decisions, are discussed.

KEYWORDS: American voters, ideology, liberal, conservative, Downsian, sophistication

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Introduction

Most political analysts see elections as movements along a liberal-conservative continuum. If a conservative candidate (such as Ronald Reagan) wins, the assumption is that the American public has shifted to the right. If a liberal candidate (such as George McGovern) loses, the assumption is that there are relatively few liberal voters and a liberal candidate has little chance of winning. Behind these conclusions lies the fundamental assumption that most voters are either liberals, conservatives or middle-of-the-roaders, and that voters choose the candidate closest to them in ideology. If the distribution of voters along the continuum approximates a normal curve with most voters in the middle, then the assumption is that most voters will be looking for a centrist candidate.

Over 50 years ago, the economist Anthony Downs formalized these notions into a theory postulating that if voters were normally distributed, there would be a two party system and the “rational” strategy of both parties (A and B) would be to appeal across the middle (as depicted in Figure 1). Both parties, he hypothesized, would try to be ambiguous or equivocal about their stands on controversial issues. We saw this theory put into practice in the 1990’s when the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) deliberately chose to straddle the middle – to be centrist. This strategy apparently worked. Its standard-bearer, Bill Clinton, was twice elected.

In recent years, we have seen a severe polarization of politics in Washington. Congress is deadlocked. The Republican President and Democratic Congress are at loggerheads. An uncompromising, confrontational politics has ensued. Downs hypothesized that if the distribution of voters were bimodal (as depicted in Figure 2), the result would be a polarized political system. If the parties moved toward the center of this bimodal distribution, they would “lose far more voters at the extremes than they could possibly gain in the center” (Downs p. 118). Therefore, they would take polar opposite positions on the right and left.
Perhaps the distribution of the American electorate has shifted toward a bipolar situation.

Or perhaps the distribution of the American electorate is more like a combination of Figures 1 and 2 (as shown in Figure 3) with a substantial number of voters in the middle, but with a definite mode on the right. The venerable New York Times reporter, Robin Toner, recently observed that a “fundamental premise” has prevailed in Washington for more than a generation: “that any majority coalition must be carefully centrist, if not center-right.” (Toner, 2008)

Republican party strategists in 2000 and 2004 apparently had this type of voter distribution in mind when they took definitely rightist positions in hopes of building turnout among the large number of conservatives while cajoling just enough middle-of-the-roaders to vote Republican. This strategy apparently worked – up until 2006 at least.

Political analysts who use the liberal-conservative continuum to map party strategy and to explain voting behavior invariably see some sort of distribution of voters along the liberal-conservative continuum such as those depicted in the above figures. But this distribution has never been empirically measured in a reliable or verifiable way.\(^1\) Instead, the perceived distribution has been based

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\(^1\) A number of political scientists have attempted to empirically measure the ideological composition of the electorate. Two basic methods have been employed: 1) levels of conceptualization coding of verbatim responses to open-ended candidate and party questions; and 2) inter-correlations among various issue items looking for consistency or constraint among opinions. The levels of conceptualization method does not attempt to differentiate between liberal and conservative ideologues nor does it look for middle-of-the-roaders. (Campbell, et al. 1960, chap. 10; Pierce and Hagner 1982).

The inter-correlation method, such as that used by Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1976), is badly flawed. A matrix of pairwise correlations among issue questions does not provide information on the consistency of each individual’s responses across all items in the matrix. (RePass 1976; Judd and Krosnick 1989). Furthermore, the issue items used in this type of analysis
either on assumption or on a faulty self-placement measure commonly used in many polls. Yet despite this lack of evidence, a lot of political analysis is based on the notion that voters think in ideological terms and are able to place themselves on a liberal-conservative continuum.

This article presents a new, reliable measure which can accurately determine the ideological orientation of voters. Using this measure, we will see an electorate that does not look anything like the one analysts have imagined. This discovery has substantial implications for party strategy, for identifying the source of the polarization in Washington, for learning the true extent of the assumed shift to the right in American politics in recent years, and for finding out how many ideological “activists” participate in primaries and caucuses. These important implications will be examined after the extent of ideological thinking among the electorate has been delineated.

Self-placement Scales

Let us begin with the survey question that pollsters and political scientists have employed for several decades to measure ideology. Respondents are asked to place themselves on a scale running from very liberal through middle-of-the-road to very conservative. Gallup, for example, asks: “How would you describe your political views: very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?” The Edison-Milofsky Exit Poll asks: “On most political matters, do you consider yourself liberal, moderate or conservative?” The National Elections Studies (NES) asks: “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?” Other pollsters have similar variations of this basic question.

Self-placement scales are extremely unreliable. A great many respondents place themselves on these scales even though they have little or no idea what “liberal” or “conservative” mean, let alone hold beliefs that could qualify them to be true ideologues.

exhibit a high level of inconsistency in response over time. (Converse and Markus 1979; Zaller 1992 pp. 34-38). In short, this method uses issue items which elicit shifting responses and does not measure individual-level constraint.

Mikel Wyckoff (1987) performed an excellent study comparing these methods. He starts his analysis by giving each respondent an individual consistency score across several issue items. He then compares these scores with the traditional inter-item correlation method (as well as with the levels of conceptualization method). He concludes that “The findings reported here cast serious doubt on the reliability and validity of attitudinal consistency measures.” (p.164)
Let us start with a clear definition of “ideologue.” Ideologues are people who think of themselves as a liberal or a conservative and who hold a set of corresponding fundamental beliefs that guide their approaches to the political world. These beliefs are long-term predispositions that, once acquired, rarely change over a lifetime. For a thorough exposition of the beliefs held by liberals and conservatives, see Appendix A.

Now let us look at the frailties of self-placement questions. In 2004, using their version of the question, the Exit Poll found that 21 percent of respondents identified themselves as liberals, 34 percent as conservatives, and 45 percent as moderates. In the 2004 NES, 20 percent placed themselves on the liberal side of the scale and 32 percent on the conservative side – results very close to the Exit Poll. But only 24 percent chose the moderate or middle-of-the-road position on the scale (compared with 45 percent in the Exit Poll). How could that many moderates be lost? The answer is, the NES survey allowed respondents to opt out. Some 24 percent chose the “Haven’t thought much about it” option. Over half of the moderates in the Exit Poll were not really moderates at all. They were respondents who did not want to tell the interviewer that they really had no idea what these terms meant. Since they had not been given the opportunity to gracefully opt out, they chose the most innocuous category: “moderate.”

For this article, I use the NES version of the self-placement question. The NES contain a very full set of questions that allow a thorough examination of various aspects of the ideological dimension.

The 2004 NES included the self-placement question in both the pre and post election surveys. These interviews were one or two months apart, a time period during which a fundamental belief such as ideology would not be expected to change. Yet only 75 percent of those who placed themselves as liberals or conservatives in the pre-election interview chose the same placement again in the post-election interview. Furthermore, 24 percent of those who admitted that they hadn’t thought about being a liberal or a conservative in the pre-election interview now suddenly became a liberal or a conservative in the post-election interview. (Perhaps some of these had actually been “converted” during the course of the campaign, but that is not likely.) In addition, 21 percent of those who said that they “hadn’t thought about liberals and conservatives” in the post election interview had actually placed themselves as a liberal or a conservative in the pre-election interview. Clearly, this self-placement question does not result in reliable information about respondents’ ideological identity or understanding.

Furthermore, it is not clear what meaning respondents attached to the terms “liberal” and “conservative” in the 2004 survey since it included no questions that provided frame of reference. Some past NES studies (most recently, 1988) have included the question: “People have different things in mind when they say that someone’s political views are liberal or conservative. What
sorts of things do you have in mind when you say someone’s political views are liberal? ... when someone’s political views are conservative?” In 1988, of those who had placed themselves on the liberal side of the scale, almost 25 percent had no idea what “liberal” meant. Of those who had placed themselves on the conservative side, 20 percent had no idea. Seven percent of liberals and 7 percent of conservatives defined these ideological concepts only in terms of personality, not political beliefs. These respondents described “liberals” variously as people who were rash, impetuous, irresponsible, or as people who were open-minded, fair, compassionate, do-gooders. Conservatives were defined as cautious, careful and decisive, or alternatively, as closed-minded, self-centered and intolerant. Furthermore, 17 percent of liberals and 11 percent of conservatives gave only vague, overly generalized answers such as “conservatives resist change” and “liberals are innovative and have new ideas” or “liberals are generous and spend freely.” All told, 48 percent of self-placed liberals and 38 percent of self-placed conservatives had little or no idea of what it meant to be what they were calling themselves.

On the other hand, 52 percent of self-placed liberals and 62 percent of conservatives did provide at least some solid political or philosophical meaning to the terms. Conservatives often made references to free enterprise, less government intervention, individualism, public morality, opposition to government spending, and strong national defense along with many other substantive comments that are clearly associated with conservatism. Liberals mentioned government’s role in alleviation of social problems, freedom from strict social control, and support for civil rights, among other things, as policies that defined liberals.

And so we have a measure – the self-placement scale – that is responded to meaningfully by some real ideologues but which also attracts a great many non-ideologues who respond rather randomly and with little or no idea of what the terms “liberal” and “conservative” mean. How can we separate the real ideologues from the others?

**A New Measure of Ideology**

By using a series of questions, all of which probe for attitudes toward the objects “liberal” and “conservative,” we can arrive at a solid, reliable measure of ideological orientation. I have found four such questions in the NES surveys.² If

² Unlike many past attempts by political scientists to measure ideology, my measure employs questions each of which explicitly uses the words “liberal” and “conservative.” I do not try to infer ideology from responses to a number of issue questions which are assumed to have a “liberal” and “conservative” side.
respondents answer consistently and knowledgably across these four questions, then we can be very sure that they are not just guessing their way through. The questions are: the self-placement scale (discussed above), two thermometer questions that ask respondents’ feelings (warm or cold) toward “liberals” and “conservatives,” and a question which asks: “Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level? Which party is more conservative?” The importance of using the latter question was established by Phil Converse in his seminal work, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (Converse 1964). If a voter does not know that the Republican party is conservative then he/she most likely does not think of or understand politics in liberal-conservative terms. Several past NES surveys contain all four of these questions so this new measure can be built and applied to the study of a number of past elections.

Since my measure of ideology is based on Placement on the liberal-conservative scale, Thermometer questions and a Recognition of which party is conservative, I will refer to it as the PTR measure.3

Those respondents who consistently and definitively took the “liberal” position on the self-placement and thermometer measures will be called Full-scale Liberals. These respondents placed themselves at one of the two most liberal positions of the self-placement scale, were on the warm or hot side of the liberal feeling thermometer, on the cool or cold side of the conservative thermometer, and recognized that the Republicans were the conservative party. Full-scale Conservatives were identified in a like fashion: they were at one of the two most conservative positions on the placement scale, were warm or hot toward conservatives and cool or cold toward liberals, and knew that the Republican party was conservative. Somewhat Liberal or Somewhat Conservative respondents were never inconsistent throughout this battery of questions, but they showed far less definite attitudes. They were only slightly liberal or conservative on the seven point self-placement scale, or were at the midpoint on one or two of the thermometers. As we shall see throughout the rest of this study, these “somewhat” ideologues are not nearly as strong or as predictable as the Full-scale ideologues. Middle-of-the-Roaders were consistently in the middle of all scales, never answered “don’t know” and knew that the Republicans were the conservative party.

3 Details on how to construct the PTR measure are available in the Publication-Related Archive of the ICPSR at the University of Michigan.

Figure 4

Ideological Distribution of the American Electorate, 2004

(Percents are based on all eligible voters)
Figure 4 shows the ideological distribution of the American electorate in 2004. It is a far cry from any of the hypothetical distributions shown in Figures 1, 2 or 3. As can be seen, only about 11 percent of the American electorate are strong conservatives and only 6 percent are strong liberals. Very few (7 percent) are middle-of-the-roaders. An overwhelming majority (62 percent) of potential voters are non-ideological. For them, the terms “liberal” and “conservative” are rather meaningless. They are not middle-of-the-roaders. They cannot be in the middle of the road since, for them, there is no road. They do not use “liberal” or “conservative” road signs to navigate the political landscape.

Reliability and Validity of PTR the Measure

The 2004 NES study offers an excellent opportunity to do a test-retest reliability check. A separate, slightly different, self-placement question was included in the study along with the items used build the PTR measure: “In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?” Almost all (92 percent) of those who were identified as Full-scale Liberals or Conservatives using the PTR measure placed themselves correctly on this Left-Right scale. As would be expected, the Somewhat Ideologues were less consistent, but they did make a respectable showing. Seventy percent correctly placed themselves on the Left-Right scale. And middle-of-the-Roaders did, indeed, stay in the middle of the Left-Right scale with 51 percent placing themselves at the exact mid-point and an additional 25 percent landing very near the mid-point. Since Middle-of-the-Roaders are not very familiar with ideological terminology, it is not surprising that 10 percent did not know where to place themselves when asked about “right” and “left.”

If we go back to the 1988 NES study where respondents were asked the meaning of the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” 83 percent of Full-scale Ideologues were able to give at least one substantive political or philosophical response. Only 66 percent of the Somewhat Ideologues were able to give substantive definitions.

Appendix A presents a very complete and thorough validation of the PTR measure. There, I first drew up a list of basic liberal and conservative beliefs based on relevant political writings and speeches. I then searched the NES interviews for questions that could be used as criterion variables, questions that

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4 These percentages are based on the entire sample of potential voters. If we look at just those who voted in 2004, the proportion of ideologues increases – as would be expected since ideologues are more likely to turn out. However, the increase in percentages is rather small, rising to 14.1 percent for Full-scale Conservatives and 7.5 percent for Full-scale Liberals.
clearly expressed or reflected these ideological beliefs. To a remarkable extent, Full-scale Ideologues answered these criterion variables as predicted, with at least 80 percent, and often over 90 percent, falling into expected cells. The Somewhat Ideologues also responded as expected falling half way between Full-scale Ideologues and Middle-of-the-Roaders in their responses to criterion variables. And Middle-of-the-Roaders were indeed in the middle, giving liberal responses to half of the liberal criterion variables and conservative responses to half of the conservative criterion variables. (See Appendix A where this validation is presented in full.)

**Magnification of Ideologues**

Political analysts, media commentators and party strategists who are accustomed to conceptualizing elections in terms of movement along a left-right continuum may be skeptical of my finding that in 2004 only about 17 percent of the electorate were strongly liberal or conservative. After all, in their contacts with the public, commentators and party leaders regularly receive confirmation that there are a lot of ideologues “out there.” They receive hundreds of e-mails that discuss politics in liberal-conservative terms; they read blogs where participants converse in the liberal-conservative vernacular and they go to public meetings and rallies where the audience seems well attuned to the liberal-conservative terminology. But the “public” this political elite is listening to is not representative of the vast majority of the electorate. Like those mirrors in which objects appear much larger than they really are, e-mails, blogs and political meetings give a distorted view of the true level of ideological thinking among the electorate.

Table 1 shows that a disproportionate number of those who go to political meetings and rallies are ideologues. The proportion of ideologues at a political meeting or rally is twice that of a random sample of the electorate. Two-thirds of those who show up for campaign work are ideologues. We also see in Table 1 that those who listen to talk radio and get political information from the Web are disproportionately ideologues. Three-quarters of these ideologically oriented talk radio listeners and Web users report talking to people and trying to “show them

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5 Note that I chose criterion variables on the basis of whether or not they clearly measured or reflected an established belief, using predetermined lists of established beliefs. I did not simply pick issue questions just because they happened to be included in the NES survey and sort of seemed to measure an ideological position. Often the NES surveys had no question that tapped an established belief, so not all beliefs could be tested using the stock of “off the shelf” NES questions.
why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates.” Unfortunately the NES studies have never asked if respondents had ever called into a radio talk show or participated in political blogs. However, we might surmise from the above findings regarding disproportionate use of these media by ideologues and their strong propensity to try to influence others that much of the call-in traffic and the blogging probably is done by ideologues.

Thus, those who monitor the flow of comments that are submitted by e-mails, blogs and call-ins, who observe the participants at political meetings and rallies, or who converse with campaign workers are going to get a misleading view of the ideological orientation of the vast majority of the general public. Political analysts and activists are in a rarified atmosphere populated disproportionately by ideologues.

**The Primary Myth**

Most political commentators and analysts believe that primaries and caucuses are heavily populated by ideologues. There is this notion that large numbers of ideologues, especially conservatives in Republican primaries, are lying in wait to apply litmus tests for ideological purity. Candidates, it is assumed, face the dilemma of appealing to their party’s ideological base in the primaries yet not positioning themselves so far to the right or left that they will lose support from a more centrist public in the general election.

Now that we have a solid and reliable measure (PTR) of the ideological orientations of the electorate, let us test the notion of disproportionate influence of ideologues in primaries. In doing this, we will pay particular attention to the Full-scale Ideologues. As we see in Appendix A, these Full-scale Ideologues have internalized a full range of ideological beliefs and they take appropriate positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attend Political Meeting or Rally</th>
<th>Work for Campaign</th>
<th>Listen to Talk Radio</th>
<th>Political Info from Web</th>
<th>Total Electorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-scale Ideologue</strong></td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Somewhat Ideologue</strong></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle-of-the-Road</strong></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-ideological</strong></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 77 32 459 479 1061

Liberal and Conservative Ideologues are combined in this table.
on issues that reflect those beliefs. The Somewhat Ideologues are not nearly as ideologically pure and can be assumed to be less concerned with the ideological purity of the candidates.\textsuperscript{6}

The NES did not ask respondents about their voting behavior in primaries and caucuses in the past three presidential elections. Therefore, we will have to go back to the 1988 and 1992 surveys for information about the voting behavior of ideologues in primaries and caucuses. Table 2 shows, quite surprisingly, that ideologues are just a little bit more inclined to vote in primaries and caucuses than the entire electorate. The proportion of Full-scale Ideologues who made the effort to vote in primaries and caucuses is only 2 or 3 percentage points higher than their proportion in the total electorate. \textit{Usually over half of the Full-scale Ideologues do not bother to vote in primaries or caucuses.}

Since liberal ideologues almost always vote in Democratic primaries and conservative ideologues in Republican primaries, the proportions shown in Table 2 do not tell us the ideological composition of Republican and Democratic

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|l|c|c|}
\hline
 & \multicolumn{2}{c|}{1988} & \multicolumn{2}{c|}{1992} \\
 & Voted in & Total & Voted in & Total \\
 & Primary & Electorate & or Caucus & Electorate \\
\hline
Full-scale Liberal & 3.7\% & 2.3\% & 7.7\% & 5.4\% \\
Somewhat Liberal & 6.3 & 4.6 & 5.5 & 6.1 \\
Middle-of-Road & 6.4 & 6.3 & 7.1 & 6.1 \\
Somewhat Conservative & 10.9 & 9.9 & 9.8 & 8.3 \\
Full-scale Conservative & 11.2 & 8.2 & 11.0 & 8.4 \\
Non-Ideological & 61.5 & 68.7 & 58.9 & 65.7 \\
 & 100\% & 100\% & 100\% & 100\% \\
\hline
N & 654 & 1775 & 652 & 2105 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{6} Other evidence that Full-scale Ideologues are quite different than Somewhat Ideologues can be observed in their voting choices in primaries. Full-scale Liberals are much more likely to choose the most liberal candidate. Full-scale Conservatives tend to choose the most conservative candidate. For example, in 1988, 54 percent of Full-scale Liberals voted for Jesse Jackson and 13 percent for Paul Simon, a total of 67 percent voting for the most liberal candidates. Only 49 percent of the Somewhat Ideologues gave that pair of candidates their vote. In the 1988 Republican primaries, the two most conservative candidates – Jack Kemp and Pat Robertson – received 19 percent of the Full-scale Conservatives' vote while only 7 percent of the Somewhat Conservatives gave those two candidates their vote.
primaries when each is viewed separately. Since liberals and conservatives split off into different primaries, the relative numbers (proportions) of each in their respective primaries are naturally going to be greater than the proportions that we see in Table 2 (which are based on all primary voters taken together). In both 1988 and in 1992, Republican primaries contained about 25 percent Full-scale Conservatives. In 1988, Democratic primaries were populated with 6 percent Full-scale Liberals and, in 1992, with 12 percent Full-scale Liberals. Thus, Full-scale Ideologues were not a very large part of the electorate in those primaries. The bulk of the voters – 50 to 60 percent – were non-ideological.

Based on 1988 and 1992 data, I found that the percentage of Full-scale Liberals who voted in Democratic primaries or caucuses was about 2.5 times their percentage in the total electorate, and the percentage of Full-scale Conservatives who voted in Republican primaries was about 3 times their percentage in the total electorate. Extrapolating this finding to 2004 when about 6 percent of the electorate were Full-scale Liberals and 11 percent were Full-scale Conservatives, the primaries and caucuses in 2004 were probably composed of 15 percent Full-scale Liberals in the Democratic primaries and 33 percent Full-scale Conservatives in the Republican primaries. Thirty-three percent is a sizable group of voters for Republican candidates to cater to, but not sizable enough to direct the major part of their campaign toward. Furthermore, these Full-scale Conservatives are not interested in just certain “litmus test” issues such as abortion and gay marriage. As seen in Appendix A, there are at least a dozen issues that Full-scale Conservatives care deeply about. Also, conservatives are not unanimous in their views on the abortion issue. (See Appendix A for a complete discussion of conservative “litmus test” issues.) Furthermore, all voters in primaries, whether ideologues or not, are concerned with a number of major problems facing the country, not just social issues such as abortion. In addition, other factors such as electability are considered.

In summary, the majority of voters in primaries and caucuses are non-ideological. Full-scale Ideologues are not that numerous. Thus, the strategies employed by candidates in the primary season need not differ much from the strategies employed in the general election.

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7 Note in Table 2 that the proportion of Full-scale Liberals jumped from 2.3 percent in 1988 to 5.4 percent in 1992. Although a 3 percentage point change is not usually noteworthy in survey data, this change was quite unusual given that changes in proportions of ideologues from election to election is usually much more gradual. This change in proportion of liberals from 1988 to 1992 will be discussed later in the article.

8 In 1988 and 1992 the proportion of Full-scale Liberals who vote in Democratic primaries was 2.5 times their proportion in the total electorate, and the proportion of Full-scale Conservatives in Republican primaries was 3 times greater than their proportion of the total electorate. Extrapolating to 2004: 6% x 2.5 = 15% Full-scale liberals in Democratic primaries and 11% x 3 = 33% Full-scale conservatives in Republican primaries.
Change in Proportions of Ideologues Over Time

In the mid 1970s, conservative leaders initiated a concerted effort to mobilize support and to get their message out to potential voters. A conservative movement called the New Right was begun. The religious right, led at first by Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, also joined in. The most visible manifestation of this movement was the explosion in right-wing radio talk shows beginning in the late 1980s. Various conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, Family Research Council and the Free Congress Foundation provided support and talking points for these talk radio hosts (Viguerie and Franke 2004). Radio talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh were very successful. In addition Fox News, established in 1996, became the leading all-news TV channel.

Other evidence of the appeal of conservatism came with Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980 and his subsequent landslide win in 1984. In the 2004 election, polls indicated that “moral values” had been the leading issue.

The constant barrage of right-wing commentary on radio, on Fox news and other media sources put liberals on the defensive. Attempts to demean liberals were also made. For example, during the 1988 presidential debates, George H. W. Bush often disdainfully referred to Michael Dukakis as a “liberal.” Dukakis, compelled to defend himself from this attack, passively argued that labels should not be used. This constant attack on liberals and the word “liberal” eventually brought liberal leaders to the point where they shied away from even using the word. It was almost as if “liberal” had become a four letter word.

How much effect did these conservative propaganda efforts have on the electorate? One test would be to find out how much the public’s feelings toward “liberals” and “conservatives” changed during this period. Using the feelings thermometer question that has been asked in the NES surveys since 1964, Figure 5 shows that there has been no change in these feelings in four decades. (The fluctuations that can be seen in Figure 5 are not significant as they are within the margin of sampling error.) Conservatives have consistently been perceived a bit more favorably than liberals, with conservatives having a mean rating of just under 59 (on a 100 point scale) and liberals with a rating of just under 53. Of particular interest is the fact that favorable feelings toward liberals have not declined despite the efforts of the New Right.
Next, let us look at changes in the proportion of liberal and conservative ideologues since 1972, using data from the 1972, 1976, 1984, 1988, 1992 and 2004 NES surveys. (The NES studies prior to 1972 did not include the four questions that constitute my PTR measure. Also, one or more of the component questions for the PTR measure were not available in 1980, 1996 and 2000.)

We might expect that the proportion of conservatives would spike upward in the Reagan years (1980-1988) and would accelerate in the 1990s when the era of right wing talk radio and the Fox News channel began. This did not happen. The proportion of Full-scale Conservatives increased ever so slowly and steadily from 1972 onward with no spikes or change in slope. The proportions of Full-scale Conservatives fall precisely along an absolutely straight line that goes from 4.6 percent in 1972 to 11.3 percent in 2004. The slope of this line is exactly .2 percent (two tenths of one percent) per year.\(^9\) (At this rate it would take almost 200 years for even half of the public to become Full-scale Conservatives.) Note that this slope started around 1972 (or before), a number of years prior to the efforts of the New Right.

What brought about this very slow, steady increase in the proportion of conservatives will have to await further research. However, we can explain why the right-wing media does not appear to have had much, if any, effect on the electorate. First, the audience for these media is very small relative to the entire electorate. Fox News has an audience of only about 1.5 million on any given evening.\(^10\) The total eligible electorate is around 200 million and about 60 percent vote in presidential elections.\(^11\) Obviously, if Fox News is reaching only a tiny portion of the electorate, its potential influence is limited. And the audience that tunes in is predominately conservative to begin with.

The NES study in 1996 asked respondents if they ever listened to Rush Limbaugh, who at that point was well established with high ratings. Only 3 percent of the sample said that they listened to him every day or most days. Seventy-three percent of these listeners were conservatives. Not a single liberal listened to him that often. He was essentially preaching to the choir, and a relatively small choir at that.

Thus, these media efforts on the part of conservatives had very limited reach and almost no potential to influence or convert non-believers. However, even though these New Right efforts had little or no impact on the general public, they did have a major impact on political elites. Political leaders of both parties, members of Congress, media commentators, and campaign strategists paid a great

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\(^9\) A regression analysis of the proportions of Full-scale Conservatives plotted over time produced an unusually high \(r^2\) of .99, showing that the data fell almost exactly along a straight line.

\(^10\) Data on the Fox News audience is from a 2007 Project for Excellence in Journalism report and can be found at www.stateofthemedia.org/2007.

\(^11\) Stanley and Niemi, 2006. Table 1-1. This is the average turnout since 1952.
deal of attention to these broadcasts. These political elites bought into the notion that America was turning to the right, that liberal policies were unpopular and liberals were an endangered species.

How many liberals were there during this period? When I examined the proportions of Full-scale Liberals in the NES data from 1972 onward, I found that back in the 1970s and 1980s, liberals were very scarce. On average, Full-scale liberals comprised only 2.7 percent of the electorate in those decades. In 1992, the proportion of Full-scale Liberals increased to 5.4 percent and by 2004, 6.2 percent were Full-scale Liberals. Although the New Right had created a very hostile environment for liberals, they survived and even increased a bit.

There is no ready explanation for this increase in liberals. Indeed, the fairly large increase in 1992 makes little sense if becoming an ideologue has anything to do with presidential leaders and party positioning. In 1992, we had a non-ideological independent candidate (Perot) who was quite popular until he dropped out of the race (and then came back in). The Democratic candidate was a leader in the Democratic Leadership Council, a wing of the party that advocated taking a centrist stance on issues rather than a liberal one. No pro-liberal stimuli seemed to be present.

It should also be noted that the Reagan wins in 1980 and 1984 were not due to his conservatism, and the poll finding regarding “moral values” in 2004 was badly flawed. As Appendix B explains, these elections were not indicators of widespread voter support for conservatism. Again, political elites have misinterpreted election results and have read ideological meaning into voting choices when most voters are not ideologically oriented.

**Party Identification: The Other Political Predisposition**

Now that we have explored the ideological orientations or predispositions of the American electorate, we need to examine the other major long-term predisposition that can strongly influence voting behavior: party identification. Anthony Downs was not aware of the concept of party identification when he wrote in 1957 and therefore his theories left out this extremely important component of voter calculus.

It is important to make clear at the outset that party identification is conceptually, psychologically and empirically different from an ideological belief system. Ideologues are not necessarily strong party identifiers and many strong party identifiers are not ideologues. Yet political analysts and commentators often use these terms as if they were the same thing, interchangeably referencing Democrats and liberals; Republicans and conservatives; Independents and middle-of-the-roaders. This practice can lead to confusion and misinterpretation of voting behavior.
Party identification is based on the psychological concept of social identity. Social identity can be simply defined as understanding who we are and who other people are (Jenkins 1996). Thus, a party identifier is someone who thinks of himself/herself as a Republican or a Democrat and is aware that other people are also Republicans or Democrats. Identification involves a sense of belonging to a group. In the case of political parties, the group has two manifestations. One is all those who identify with the group. The second is an actual organized group. The organized group consists of party chairs and committees, elected leaders, campaign workers and other activists, and financial supporters.

Party identifiers, on the other hand, are not actual members of this organization. They likely have never been to a party meeting. Being a party identifier is like being a sports fan. Fans ( identifiers) may never go to a game or be active participants in any way, but they are emotionally attached to a team. They are very interested in its fortunes, they watch it on TV, they are known to their friends as a Team X fan, and they feel elated if their team wins and dejected when it loses. The actual team organization consists of the players, coaches, managers and owners. This organization gains or loses fans depending on its ability to win games (or at least perform well), recruit or develop stars, and avoid scandal.

Sports fans become fans through socialization. Perhaps they were raised in a family where a close member of the family was a fan, or perhaps they grew up when a certain team was doing very well so they wanted to “join” that team. Perhaps they were attracted because of a certain outstanding player. In the same way, party identification is acquired as one grows up. It is usually established by the time one is thirty. It usually comes about through absorbing the party identity of one or both parents, through admiration for particular political leaders (usually presidents), through the influence of peers, or perhaps through acquiring a liberal or conservative set of beliefs and joining the party that best exemplifies those beliefs. Some party identifiers have little or no idea why they are a “member” of a certain party. They just know that they are a Republican or a Democrat. Many party identifiers have no idea what a liberal or a conservative is, but they do know which party tends to advance programs and policies that are beneficial to groups of people like themselves, be they workers, the poor, the wealthy, business people, African-Americans, women, or some other group.

Contrast party identification with being an ideologue. Ideologues do not identify with an external group but rather base their being a “liberal” or a “conservative” on a set of internalized beliefs. A person can be a party identifier without having a set of political beliefs. On the other hand, the very basis for being an ideologue is a set of core internalized political beliefs.
The leaders and activist party members (including major contributors) in a party organization set the policy positions of the party, and these policy positions are naturally heavily influenced by the self-interests of these activists. Democratic party activists come disproportionately from union members, the less well off, women, minorities, and the intelligentsia (professors, writers, artists, etc.). Republican activists come disproportionately from business (both large and small business), the wealthy, the military and, more recently, from the Christian Right. Looking at the list of liberal beliefs in Appendix A, these beliefs dovetail nicely with the Democratic party policies promoted by that organization’s activists. The belief in advancing civil rights and equal treatment, for example, dovetails with policies that stem from the interests of minorities and women. On the Republican side, the interests of business activists who, for example, do not like regulation, coincide nicely with the conservative beliefs in limited government and a free enterprise economy. There is a natural symbiotic relationship between liberals and the Democratic party; conservatives and the Republican party.

Sometimes, however, party policies promoted by organization activists do not mesh with the beliefs of ideologues who would be expected to identify with the party. Conservatives, for example, strongly believe in individual freedom and want to limit government intrusion into people’s lives. Yet Republican party policies, as promoted by the Christian Right activists in the party, call for the federal government to intervene in individual decisions regarding reproduction and choice of a lifetime partner. Another example: conservatives are basically “America firsters” and do not like entangling this country in the affairs of other nations. Yet many activists in the Republican party strongly support the U.S. intervention in Iraq. This kind of mismatch between conservative beliefs and Republican party policies is why many conservatives are more comfortable with the Libertarian party.

Party identification has been measured by the NES surveys since 1952 using a carefully worded question that has stood the test of time: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?” Those who respond “Republican” or “Democrat” are then asked: “Would you call yourself a strong [Republican][Democrat] or a not very strong [Republican][Democrat]?” (Those who respond “not very strong” are
Figure 6. Distribution of Party Identifiers, 2004

- Strong Democrat: 15.9%
- Weak Democrat: 14.6%
- Independent: 37.9%
- Weak Republican: 12.9%
- Strong Republican: 17.0%
called Weak Republicans or Weak Democrats). Note that this measure is an excellent operationalization of the concept of social identity as defined above. It uses the words “usually think of yourself” and assumes that identity is a long-term psychological attachment rather than a short-term inclination.12

Figure 6 shows the distribution of party identification in 2004. Just because the Independents are shown (for convenience sake) in the middle of the figure should not be interpreted as equating Independents with middle-of-the-roaders. Independents are simply non-identifiers. They feel no attachment to a party, and the liberal-conservative continuum means little or nothing to them. They are off to the side and not on any continuum.

**Combining Ideologues with Party Identifiers**

Figure 7 depicts the combined distributions of ideologues and party identifiers. Ideological leanings have been brought together with party identification. The first thing to notice is that strong party identification and strong ideology often do not coexist. Not all ideologues are strong party identifiers and not all strong party identifiers are Full-scale Ideologues. Indeed, 40 percent of the Full-scale Ideologues are weak party identifiers or independents. Less than half (43 percent) of strong Republicans are Full-scale Conservatives. Hardly any strong Democrats (20 percent) are Full-scale Liberals.

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12 Measures of party affiliation that are employed by some major polling organizations capture a muddy mixture of party identity along with current voting inclinations. Results from these polls cannot be compared with the NES findings. The Pew Research Center asks: “In politics TODAY, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat or Independent?” The Gallup poll asks: “In politics, as of today, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent?” These questions place emphasis on the current political scene, not long-term predispositions. When answering, respondents are going to bring to bear their feelings toward the current occupant of the White House and the performance of the party in control of Congress. Their current voting choices will also come into play. In essence, these questions are measuring both the independent and dependent variables within the same question. Long-term party identification is an independent variable that influences vote choice – the dependent variable.
Figure 7. Party Identifiers and Ideologues Combined, 2004

(Percents are based on all eligible voters)

Floaters
Weak Party Identifiers and Independents with no Ideological leanings

54.5%

Non-Ideological

11.4%

1.3%

3.2%

Strong Democrat

Weak Democrat

1.3%

1.0%

Full-scale Liberal

Somewhat Liberal

Independent

2.0%

1.8%

Full-scale Conservative

Somewhat Conservative

Weak Republican

2.0%

2.2%

Strong Republican

7.0%

2.6%

7.4%
Figure 7 shows the relative size of these various combinations of ideology and party identification. Each bloc has a different potential for voting along party lines. Some blocs consist of respondents who have both strong party identification and strong ideological beliefs. Other blocs contain only those with one predisposition: either strong party identification or strong (Full-scale) ideology. Shown above these blocs in Figure 7 is a large body of voters whom I call “floaters.” These are people who are not anchored in either a partisan or an ideological direction. They are floating free, available to be wooed by the most attractive candidate and the most sensible policy proposals.

We would expect those with a strongly held ideology and a strong party identification to be highly motivated not only to turnout to vote, but to stay loyal to their party. An examination of the voting behavior of these double-predisposed people in past elections shows behavior exactly as predicted. Their turnout rate is almost always close to 100 percent and they vote almost unanimously for their party’s candidate. (The only exception was in 1992 when some strong Republican conservatives defected and voted for Ross Perot. None have ever gone over to the Democrats.)

When only one strong predisposition is present, we cannot expect such a complete degree of motivation to both turn out and to stay loyal, but these single-predisposed voters are still a source of highly predictable party support. Matrix 1 shows the actual probabilities of partisan voting support as a function of degree of ideological belief and degree of party identification.

Weak party identifiers and independents who have no ideological leanings are not shown in Matrix 1. Their turnout rates are relatively low and they,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strong Party Identifier</th>
<th>Weak Party Identifier</th>
<th>Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full-scale Ideologue</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Ideologue</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-ideological</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each cell shows the average proportion of voters in the cell who turned out and voted for the candidate of their party/ideology. Based on 1988 and 2004 data.
especially the independents, have little or no predisposition to vote in a predictable partisan direction. These are the voters who I have called “floaters.”

The Republicans in 2004 had a hard core of 7.4 percent of the electorate who reliably voted Republican. (Lower right bloc.) In addition, there were 2.6 percent who identified as strong Republicans and were Somewhat Conservative along with 2.2 percent weak Republicans who were Full-scale Conservatives. These latter two blocs were highly likely to turnout and vote Republican – a probability of .90 as seen in Matrix 1. Thus the Republicans had a total of 12.2 percent “sure things” or almost “sure things” (7.4 + 2.6 + 2.2). Democrats had only 5.5 percent of these types of voters to count on in 2004.13

It is these types of voters – the hardcore Republicans and Democrats – who are very rigid and uncompromising. They look for ideological purity in their candidates. Their view of the opposite party is pejorative and disdainful. If a large number of voters were this highly ideological and partisan, we would have a polarized electorate. Having just 17.7 (12.2 + 5.5) percent of the electorate in these hardcore categories means that polarization is not emanating from, nor is it supported by, the vast majority of the electorate. The polarization that we see in Washington (and in some state capitals) is not a reflection of unbending partisan and ideological attitudes of the electorate. Rather, it is a development that has been bred within the world of the political elites. If these elites think that there is a large audience of ideologues out there that they must play to, they are mistaken.

**Implications for Party and Candidate Strategy**

With a clear picture of the distribution of potential voters along partisan and ideological dimensions (Figure 7), we can now postulate the party strategies that would maximize voter support. The hypothetical models used by Downs (as depicted in Figures 1 and 2) bear no resemblance to the real world. Downs failed to consider party identification and never empirically determined the distribution of ideological leanings. We now have the empirical picture (Figure 7) needed to do a Downsian type of analysis.

Figure 7 suggests a number of rational party strategies:

1. Do not waste a lot of time and resources appealing to or energizing the base, i.e. those hardcore blocs located in the lower left and lower right in Figure 7. These voters, who have both strong party identifications and

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13 The 5.5 percent figure is arrived at by adding 3.2 percent strong Democrats who were Full-scale Liberals, 1.3 percent strong Democrats who were Somewhat Liberal and 1.0 percent weak Democrats who were Full-scale Liberals.
strong ideologues, are already highly motivated to turn out and vote for their party. They can be counted on come hell or high water without any extra attention.

2. Go after the very large body of “floaters.” They are highly receptive to being recruited. How do you woo these voters? Not with ambiguous, equivocal and “centrist” policy positions. Remember, they are not middle-of-the-roaders. These voters are looking first and foremost for a strong, capable leader. They also have serious concerns about the problems facing the country and they want clear, straightforward, uncomplicated and sensible proposals to deal with them. Candidates who are “wissy-washy” on the issues will not be seen as strong leaders.

3. Do not be afraid of offering definite proposals even though they may arouse strong opposition, including TV ads. Attack ads are going to occur no matter what. (Even war veterans are not off limits.) You might as well show voters that you are a strong leader willing to fight for a definite solution to a major problem. As Ronald Reagan proved, strength of conviction is like a coat of Teflon that can protect you when attacked.

4. “Floaters” need reasons to vote for you. You must attract them. Negative campaigning does not attract. You must build up reasons in their minds to vote for you.

5. Do not worry about proposing policies that may be called “too liberal” or “too conservative.” As we have seen, these labels mean little or nothing to non-ideological “floaters” and non-ideological party identifiers – the vast majority of the electorate. And candidates need not be concerned about being labeled as “too liberal” or “too conservative.” Note, for example, that the very liberal Paul Wellstone was elected to the Senate from a state that often votes Republican. The liberal label had little effect. It was Paul Wellstone, the person, who the people of Minnesota elected.

6. If you are the incumbent, you must have dealt with and resolved as many problems as possible by election time. You are going to be judged on your performance. If the economy has gone sour, if you are engaged in a protracted war with no end in sight (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq), if you fail to develop missiles and your enemy puts up a Sputnik, if you have corrupt cronies, if you run up huge deficits, etc. you are in trouble. You must be forward looking and farsighted from the day you take office. Seek the best, most informed, objective advice about potential problems and how to
deal with them. Extreme ideologies or abstract theories do not solve real world problems. Indeed, they can create huge problems. The domino theory (Vietnam) and neo-conservatism (Iraq) are examples.

7. Stay on message. If major contributors or factions within your party push you to modify or soft-pedal certain policy proposals, resist. Yes, it takes money to run campaigns, but if that money causes you to muffle messages and thus lose votes because you seem weak, ambiguous or inconsistent, what, on net, have you gained from the money? Fortunately, there is now the Internet which provides a means for candidates to raise large sums of money from many small donors thus bypassing the special interest money.

8. Direct your campaign toward all potential voters, not just a subset. For example, many Democratic party leaders have proposed that their party direct its efforts toward the middle class. In 2004, only one-third of the “floaters” said that they belonged to the middle class. An equal number said they belonged to the working class and yet another third did not think they belonged to any class. Thus, two-thirds of the “floaters” would be neglected by this “middle class” strategy. It is also interesting to note that only 16 percent of the “floaters” are evangelical Christians. An equal number of “floaters” are non-religious.

The vast majority of American voters are pragmatists. They judge by results. They ask: is it working? Is the proposed policy sensible? If you are the party that controls the White House and/or Congress, build a record of achievement. The public welcomes bold initiatives that solve problems. The New Deal era is evidence of that. FDR pushed through a number of innovative programs to address the economic crisis. He was continually reelected. President Ronald Reagan was also a bold leader, and many new voters became Republican identifiers during the 1980s.

Politicians who muck around in the middle, who pass watered-down, cosmetic legislation that does not actually solve problems will lose in the end. Reality will always catch up to and overtake half measures, lip service and spin.

**Polarization**

Some analysts might argue that the party strategies that I have just proposed will lead to (or exacerbate) polarization. These analysts assume that if both parties take clear positions and neither one tries to move to the middle, polarization and deadlock will naturally ensue. But if we look back in history we find that strong differences between parties need not lead to deadlock. America has gone through
a number of periods when serious divisions have occurred within society. The Great Depression, the union movement, the battle for civil rights are examples of highly divisive periods in history. Yet Congress and the President were able to bring forth legislation to deal with these issues despite wide differences between the parties: the New Deal programs, the Taft-Hartley law, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Strong party and ideological differences in Washington did not lead to paralysis.

We should also note that a political leader can have strong ideological beliefs without being rigid or obstructionist. President Ronald Reagan was certainly an ideologically pure conservative, yet he managed to accomplish an ambitious legislative agenda even though he had to work with a Democratic Congress. It was largely a matter of style and willingness to bend when necessary.

Why do we have paralyzing polarization today when it did not happen as seriously in the past? As we have observed, paralysis in Washington does not result from an ideologically divided public. The vast majority of the electorate are not ideologically oriented. Furthermore, as the data in Appendix A demonstrate, those voters who are conservative ideologues are not diametrically opposed to their liberal counterparts on most issues. On only one issue, gay marriage, do large proportions of liberals take the direct opposite position from conservatives.

Let me quote from Appendix A.: “Liberal and conservative ideologues are not as polar opposites as we might expect. Liberals have one set of beliefs that they adhere to and conservatives have another set of beliefs. These beliefs are not necessarily in confrontation with each other. For example, conservatives want to limit the role of government, but many have become reconciled to spending on education. Conservatives want a strong military, but many liberals are not opposed to a strong national defense. Conservatives are very patriotic, but many liberals love their country as well. What we do see is that liberals are very distinct from conservatives in where they place their emphasis.”

The polarization in Washington, therefore, is a result of politics within Washington. A full explanation of the current phenomena is beyond the scope of this article. However, I might point out two major factors that contribute to the problem.

First, politicians in Washington may believe that they have a large audience that applauds when they take strong, unyielding ideological positions. In this age of e-mails and blogs, many more citizens can give instant responses to political issues. This may give political leaders the impression of widespread sentiment when in fact, as we have seen, such communications come very disproportionately from a relatively small set of ideologues, a subset that is very unrepresentative of the vast majority of voters.
Second, for all intents and purposes, the U.S. Senate is now controlled by the minority. Forty-one Senators can block any piece of legislation. This has come about because Rule 22 (cloture) has been turned on its head. Cloture was designed to close debate once debate had started, in order to end an extended filibuster. Today, debate need not even start before Rule 22 is applied. All the minority party has to do is say they are going to filibuster and 60 votes are necessary to begin debate. (One might call this a “phantom filibuster.”) If political parties had found a way to require a 60 percent majority of Electors to elect a President, there would be a vast public uproar. Yet the 60 percent majority requirement in the Senate has happened with barely a murmur. It has paralyzed the Senate, bringing passage of key legislation to a halt. Grave tensions arise when the people elect a majority to Congress but that majority cannot act.14

Conclusion

Relatively few voters are ideologues. The vast majority of the electorate does not see politics in liberal-conservative terms. Yet media commentators and political analysts believe that political movement takes place along a left-right dimension. They give much attention to locating candidates and issues along this one-dimensional continuum. All candidates are given a “left”, “right” or “centrist” label and most issues are thought to have a left and a right position.

The majority of voters engage in a much more complex and sophisticated process of evaluating candidates and issues. They evaluate multiple characteristics of the candidates, both positive and negative.15 For example, a voter may find a candidate to be honest and sincere, to have a solid background of experience, to be a strong leader, and to take agreeable positions on issues the voter cares about. That same voter may also have some negative attitudes toward the candidate. For example, the voter may feel that the candidate is too arrogant, or is not very intelligent. Most voters also have concerns about issues such as lack of health insurance, loss of jobs or a prolonged war. The voter will make a determination about which party/candidate will be most likely to deal effectively with the issues

14 Minority rule will continue in the Senate as long as the Majority Leader allows for “phantom filibusters” – filibusters that are mere threats of filibusters. The minority party should be required to mount an actual filibuster, to organize enough Senators to hold the floor for an extended period of time. Such a major effort would take place only on the issues of greatest concern to the minority party. To require an actual filibuster would be to the political advantage of the Majority Leader. The spectacle of the minority party holding the floor for days on end would make clear to the public just who was blocking Senate action and just what the minority’s position on the issue really was.

15 This conclusion about how voters make up their minds is thoroughly documented in my forthcoming book: Listening to the American Voter: How Presidential Elections are Decided.
or problems he/she is concerned about. After weighing these pros and cons the voter makes a decision. This is the kind of decision-making we all engage in almost every day whether hiring a new employee, buying a car, or even choosing a movie to watch. These are multidimensional decisions with many variables. People are perfectly capable of making these decisions without having an overall belief system or ideology to structure their thoughts.

The more information a voter can obtain about the candidates and their positions, the better able the voter will be in making this decision. Knowing only that a candidate is a “liberal” or a “conservative” is not very helpful. For example, a label does not tell voters anything about leadership abilities, personal characteristics, past record, or experience. Labeling assumes that a whole variety of issue positions can be subsumed under one simple label. Voters are able to juggle many aspects of candidates and several issues at the same time, and come to a reasonably solid net conclusion. What the vast majority of the public really needs and wants is more specific information. A recent Pew poll found that 77 percent of the public wants the media to give more coverage to candidates’ positions on issues.

Furthermore, many issues often defy liberal or conservative labels. For example, during the Vietnam war, political analysts and commentators decided to measure public attitudes along a dimension that assumed two opposite positions: more military action (Hawk) and “pull out” (Dove). In reality, a great many voters saw the Vietnam issue on a different, more basic dimension: “mistake” or “not a mistake.” Another example: what would be the bipolar linear dimension for

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16 Most voters acquire enough information to make informed, rational decisions about candidates and the issues. This conclusion is based on an extensive analysis I once performed on all the open-ended materials from a NES survey. Respondents were interviewed in their homes by highly skilled interviewers who recorded verbatim just what respondents said about the candidates and issues. Reading the handwritten materials from the pages of the original interviews, I evaluated the degree to which respondents possessed substantive information about candidates and issues, and were able to make appropriate choices of party given their issue preferences. I found that well over half of those who voted achieved at least a satisfactory level of “rationality,” with many having quite high levels of knowledge and understanding. I concluded that most voters had a fairly sound (and often quite solid) basis for making a voting decision and that these qualified voters outnumber the uninformed, floundering or capricious voters by two to one. (RePass 1974).


18 The use of the terms “hawk” and “dove” are an example of political commentators inventing a short-hand jargon to describe political positions. In the middle of the Vietnam era, in 1967, the Minnesota poll asked respondents: “The terms ‘hawk’ and ‘dove’ are often used to describe the way people feel about the Vietnam war. Do you know what these two terms mean?” Only 25 percent could give the correct definition (Minnesota Poll 1967). As with terms like “liberal” and “conservative,” “hawk” and “dove” were never explained to the audience by the political elites using them.
the corruption issue: “more corruption” on one side and “no corruption” on the other? Corruption is a non-dimensional valence issue. Or take the immigration issue. What would be the simple, single dimension along which to array attitudes on illegal immigration? That issue has at least four dimensions: degree of border control, whether or not to grant amnesty for those already in the United States, whether or not to enforce existing laws against employers of illegal immigrants, and whether or not to allow illegal immigrants to obtain driver’s licenses. A single dimension (liberal-conservative) cannot begin to describe all the complex aspects of the immigration issue. In general, candidates and issues cannot be located on a simple, single liberal-conservative dimension. Such oversimplification does not inform.

Ideologues have a relatively easy time making decisions. Often they are also strong party identifiers so they have two major attitudinal predispositions that largely determine how they are going to vote even before the campaign begins. They do not have to worry about weighing the pros and cons because they will perceive few, if any, cons about their party’s candidate and few, if any, pros about the opposition candidate. Their party will almost always be seen as best able to handle a problem, no matter what the problem. We know from social psychology that dissonant information simply will not register with people who have such strong predispositions. No calculus is needed. For ideologues, most attitudes line up neatly in a predetermined partisan row.

Thus, ideologues are far from being ideal citizens in a democracy. The ideal citizen evaluates the candidates and weighs the issues to try to find the candidate best able to run the country. The ideal voter certainly does not make up his or her mind before the campaign begins as do most ideologues. The fact that most voters do not view politics in liberal-conservative terms makes for a

19 For a discussion of valence issues see Stokes (1966).
20 An examination of the number of pro and con comments respondents made when asked what they thought about the candidates in the 2004 NES interviews shows that strong party identifiers and/or Full-scale Ideologues were clearly one-sided. These respondents almost never made a negative remark about their candidate, nor made a positive comment about the opposition candidate. “Floaters,” on the other hand, had a balanced view, mentioning both positive and negative qualities of each candidate.
21 The conventional wisdom among most political scientists is that structuring political attitudes around a core ideological concept is the best way for voters to understand and evaluate the political world. The ability for voters to think ideologically is equated with sophistication. It is assumed that voters who do not possess an ideological belief system cannot make much sense of politics and cannot “effectively engage the political system.” (Federico and Schneider 2007, p. 222) Perhaps it is time for this assumption to be reexamined. Those political scientists who would like to see more ideologues among the electorate should ponder the description of an ideologue that I have just presented.
healthier democracy where a majority of voters are open-minded. They seek practical solutions, not unbending prescriptions.

**Appendix A**

I have defined ideologues as people who think of themselves as a liberal or a conservative and who hold a set of corresponding fundamental beliefs that guide their approaches to the political world. These are core beliefs that have a relatively high degree of centrality. In order to investigate the ideologies of the American electorate, we need to know the particular beliefs that comprise liberal and conservative belief systems. A search of the literature on ideology reveals no summary of such beliefs. I have, therefore, come up with my own lists. The lists consist of broad, lasting, fundamental beliefs, not specific positions on narrow, time-bound issues of the day.

American ideological beliefs have evolved over time. Some beliefs have been added or modified to adapt to major changes in society (such as the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution). Other beliefs have withered or become irrelevant. A great many, such as attitudes toward the role of government or attitudes toward equality and views about individualism, have lasted for centuries.

The lists of liberal and conservative beliefs below were compiled primarily from three sources: Clinton Rossiter's *Conservatism in America* (1956), Barry Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960) and Paul Starr's *Freedom's Power* (2007). As a long-time student of American politics, I have also drawn upon my own knowledge of the beliefs expressed by liberal and conservative political leaders, activists and commentators. Some readers of this article may disagree with me on the inclusion or exclusion of some beliefs, or will take exception to some of the wording I use. I view these lists as an initial attempt to codify these beliefs in a succinct and usable form, and I hope others will help hone the lists so that they will develop into a set of beliefs most scholars can agree upon. It is high time that such lists were available so that students and observers of the political scene will at last know what we are talking about when we use the terms “liberal” and “conservative.”

\[1\] Note that I have used the phrase “set of fundamental beliefs” when defining an ideologue. I have deliberately not used Converse's more “constrained” definition of a belief system which was “a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence.” (Converse 1964, p. 207). I make no assumptions about how structured or constrained ideologues’ beliefs are. Perhaps it is enough to know that people have “stores” of political attitudes and beliefs that they draw upon, and not be so concerned about interconnectedness.
Conservative Beliefs

C1) **Limited government.** As much as possible, the scope of government should be limited to public safety, national defense, administering justice and facilitating commerce. Put concisely by Henry Thoreau: “That government is best which governs least.”

C2) **An unfettered free enterprise economy.** Government should not interfere with the free market. Conservatives trust in Adam Smith's “invisible hand” to guide the economy.

C3) **The fundamental right to property.** People should be free to use their earnings and their property as they see fit. The more government taxes earnings or limits the use of personal property, the less freedom people have. Assistance for the needy should come from private charity, not government.

C4) **Individualism.** Each individual should be as free as possible to achieve his or her destiny. Individuals should be self-reliant and government should stay out of their lives.

C5) **Protection of traditional values.** Conservatives are reluctant to accept new social mores and tend to be less tolerant of unconventional ideas and practices.

C6) **Law and order.** Conservatives believe that justice and domestic security are best served by being tough on crime. They support severe punishment for wrongdoers on the premise that punishment or threat of punishment will change criminal behavior.

C7) **Primacy of religion in human affairs.** Conservatives cherish individual religious feeling and consider religion to be the foundation of moral society. (Rossiter 1956, pp. 43-45).

C8) **A strong military.** Conservatives believe in maintaining a superior military force to provide for national defense and to protect American interests abroad. They are fervently patriotic.

C9) **American national interest comes first in international affairs.** Foreign policy should be shaped by American interests. Joining with other nations to ameliorate world problems should not be a major obligation.
Liberal Beliefs

L1) **Equality.** Liberals believe that all people are equally worthy. Liberals strive to reduce inequalities. Everyone deserves the basic necessities of life, such as a living wage, housing, medical care and a healthy environment. Universal government-run social insurance programs are needed to provide a safety net for everyone.

L2) **Role of Government.** Government has a positive role in providing equal opportunity and promoting the general welfare. Government should provide the basic services, such as good education, that are necessary for getting ahead in life. Government should also extend a helping hand to individuals and families through such means as food stamps, assistance for child care, mandating family leave, and providing for unemployment insurance.

L3) **Moderating the free enterprise system.** Government intervention in the economy is necessary to limit the excesses of unrestrained free enterprise. Liberals believe that government should act as a referee to maintain open and fair competition between private enterprises. Government should also provide consumer and worker protections.

L4) **Civil Rights.** Liberals promote civil rights and equal treatment. They embrace the claims of historically excluded groups.

L5) **Humanitarianism.** Liberals emphasize the common good and are willing to put the greater good ahead of their own individual interests.

L6) **Tolerance.** Liberals are tolerant of diverse religious and cultural practices. They are quite willing to accept change in social mores.

L7) **Approach to criminal behavior.** Liberals emphasize rehabilitation over punishment in their approach to criminal justice.

L8) **Attitude toward change and reform.** Liberals tend to choose “change over stability, experiment over continuity, the future over the past.” (Rossiter 1956, p. 12). They are optimistic about the possibilities of reform.

L9) **International cooperation.** Liberals believe that international cooperation can ameliorate world problems and is in the long-term interest of the United States. They would use military power only as a last resort. They believe in protecting the human rights of all peoples.
Beliefs Shared by Both Liberals and Conservatives

Civil liberties and diffusion of power.

Both liberals and conservatives are strongly committed to civil liberties (individual rights), and they both believe that political and economic power should be dispersed so that no single governmental body or private group acquires too much power. Writing in 1960, Barry Goldwater stated, “The enemy of freedom is unrestrained power, and the champions of freedom will fight against the concentration of power wherever they find it.” He then cites both union and corporate “monopolies” as antithetical to freedom. Both conservative and liberal writers alike cite the Constitutional separation of powers as vital for maintaining freedom.

Equality and freedom.

Both liberals and conservatives believe in equality and freedom. However, Clinton Rossiter has said of conservatives: “When he is forced to choose between liberty and equality, he throws his support unhesitatingly to liberty. Indeed, the preference for liberty over equality lies at the root of the conservative tradition.” (Rossiter 1956, p. 24). A content analysis of any conservative's speeches or writings will turn up innumerable mentions of the words “liberty” or “freedom.” (Rokeach 1968). On the other hand, liberals are often concerned with “equality.” When we look at the list of liberal beliefs above, “equality” is a major feature in three of the eight beliefs.

Beliefs That are Often Mistaken to be Ideological Markers

Spending.

It is often thought that “spending” is a core belief that separates liberals from conservatives. On closer examination, it all depends on what the spending is for. Conservatives are certainly for military spending. And they sometimes favor other kinds of spending as well. For example, the 2004 NES survey shows that conservatives were more favorable to spending on crime prevention and building highways than were liberals. It is spending on education, welfare, childcare, etc. – things that expand the role of government – that conservatives do not like.

As for fiscal conservatism (balancing the budget), conservatives still pay lip service to it but, in practice, it went by the wayside starting with President Reagan.
States' rights

I have not included “state’s rights” or decentralized government on the list of conservative beliefs. This is because these beliefs have not been applied consistently by conservatives over time. In reality, these beliefs are instrumental rationalizations used by political interests to justify certain policies. True conservatives want to limit government whether it is at the local, state or national level.

The invoking of “states’ rights” comes when a political party, interest group or region wants to maintain practices and policies that are legally enforced or are customs at the state level. Maintaining Jim Crow laws and other segregation practices in southern states prior to federal intervention in the 1960s is a prime example of the use of the “state’s rights” argument. Recently, many state laws provided for strict environmental controls, allowed for the medical use of marijuana and prevented usury by lenders. These laws have now been superseded by federal laws and regulations imposed by a Republican administration which wanted to weaken environmental regulations, outlaw medical use of marijuana, and benefit banks that issue credit cards. If it is to the political advantage of conservatives to use the federal government, they will – just as liberals have used federal power to advance their programs, the New Deal for example.

Historically, members of the Federalist party, which is the antecedent to the Republican party, took the greatest single step toward centralization that has ever been taken when they wrote the Constitution and got it ratified. A strong national government served the interests of Federalist political leaders at the time. Today, conservative interest groups seek amendments to the Constitution to advance their policies – to prohibit abortions and prevent gay marriage, for example. Conservatives are certainly not adverse to centralized power when it can serve their purposes.

“States' rights” and decentralized government are often the battle cries of the party that is out of power in Washington. We became used to hearing these principles invoked by the Republican party during the long reign of Democrats in Washington from the 1930s to the 1980s. Now that Republicans have been successful in presidential and congressional elections, we hear less about “states’ rights.” Interestingly, conservative ideologues among the public are very fickle when it comes to their feelings toward the federal government. In 2004, when a Republican had been in the White House for four years, 67 percent of conservatives were warm toward the federal government. Eight years before that, when a Democrat had been in the White House for four years, 60 percent of
conservatives were cool toward the federal government.\(^2\) If “states’ rights” were a true core belief, it would not blow with the political wind.

**Testing the Validity of the PTR Measure**

Focusing especially on the 2004 study, I searched through the NES studies for variables that expressed or reflected the beliefs of liberals and conservatives as defined in the lists above. I found thirty variables that measured these beliefs clearly and unambiguously enough to be used as criterion variables to validate the PTR measure. Full-scale Liberals and Full-scale Conservatives answered most of these criterion variables very much as would be expected. Indeed, the cross tabulation tables used to check validity showed remarkably “pure” patterns of data. Cases fell into expected cells with unusual regularity – 80, 90, even 100 percent in expected cells.

Tables 1A and 2A report the findings for twenty-three of these criterion variables. On all the variables in Tables 1A and 2A, at least 80 percent or more of the ideologues' responses fell into the expected cells. The basic belief that the criterion variable expresses or reflects is shown in parentheses after each variable. (L6), for example, refers to belief L6 in the list of liberal beliefs.

In addition to assessing whether or not ideologues answered as expected, I also looked to see how far apart liberals and conservatives were on these questions. Not all liberals or conservatives can be expected to be “pure.” That is, liberals may harbor a few conservative beliefs and vice versa. The data bore out this assumption. When examining the liberal criterion variables, I found a few conservatives who gave the liberal response, and vice versa – a few liberals gave the conservative response to the conservative criterion variables. Usually, less than 25 percent responded in this “misplaced” manner. To measure this phenomena, I developed a simple measure called “degree of differentiation.” It is the percentage point spread between the percent of those who took the expected position and the percent of those with the opposite ideology who took that same position. For example, 83 percent of conservatives agreed with the statement “The less government the better”, but 21 percent of liberals also took that position. The percentage point difference, or “degree of differentiation,” is 62.

All criterion variables shown in Tables 1A and 2A have at least a 50 point (or nearly 50 point) degree of differentiation. The variables in these tables are listed in order of their degree of differentiation so the reader can see which variables most clearly distinguish liberals from conservatives.

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\(^2\) Based on the NES feelings thermometer question that measured attitude toward “Federal Government in Washington.”
Table 1A. Validity Tests using Conservative Criterion Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conservative Stated Position</th>
<th>Conservatives(^1) Who Took Stated Position</th>
<th>Degree of Differentiation(^2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the American flag flying makes me feel extremely good or very good. (C8)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newer lifestyles are causing society to breakdown. (C5)</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex couples should not be allowed to marry. (C5)</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rather than the government in Washington seeing to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living, each person should get ahead on their own. (C1, C4)</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense spending should be greatly increased. (C8)</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is extremely important for the U.S. to have a strong military force in order to be effective in dealing with our enemies. (C8)</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be more emphasis on traditional family ties. (C5)</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The less government the better.” (C1)</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an American is extremely important. (C8, C9)</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How strong is your love for your country? Extremely strong. (C8)</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you consider religion to be an important part of your life? Yes (C7)</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagrees with the statement: “The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes.” (C5)</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)This table contains data on Full-scale Ideologues only.

\(^2\)Degree of Differentiation is the difference between the percent of Conservatives who took the stated position and the percent of Liberals who also took that (conservative) position.
Table 2A.  Validity Tests using Liberal Criterion Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated Position</th>
<th>Liberals$^1$ Who Took Stated Position</th>
<th>Degree of Differentiation$^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The United States should solve international problems by using diplomacy and other forms of international pressure and use military force only if absolutely necessary. (L9)</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. (L4, L6)</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. (L1)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree that we would be better off if we worried less about equality. (L1, L4)</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living. (L1)</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt. (L4, L6)</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree that we have gone too far in pushing equal rights. (L1, L4)</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of the big problems in this country is that we don't give everyone an equal chance. (L2, L4)</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal spending on child care should be increased. (L2)</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should be more tolerant of different moral standards. (L6)</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems. (Rejects idea that the free market can handle these problems.) (L3)</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal spending on public schools should be increased. (L2)</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$This table contains data on Full-scale Ideologues only.

$^2$Degree of Differentiation is the difference between the percent of Liberals who took the stated position and the percent of Conservatives who also took that (liberal) position.
Polarization

It should be pointed out that degree of differentiation is not the same thing as polarization. Polarization occurs when a vast majority (over 80 percent) of those with one ideology answer a question in one way and a vast majority of those with the opposite ideology answer the question the opposite way. Such questions would show up in both Table 1A and 2A. Only one question showed polarization: the question having to do with same-sex marriage.

Liberal and conservative ideologues are not as polar opposites as we might expect. Liberals have one set of beliefs that they adhere to and conservatives have another set of beliefs. These beliefs are not necessarily in confrontation with each other. For example, conservatives want to limit the role of government, but many have become reconciled to spending on education. Conservatives want a strong military, but many liberals are not opposed to a strong national defense. Conservatives are very patriotic, but many liberals love their country as well. What we do see is that liberals are very distinct from conservatives in where they place their emphasis, with liberals showing strong consensus on the items in Table 2A and conservatives showing strong consensus on items in Table 1A.

Table 3A presents findings about three very interesting variables. These variables show that liberals are unanimously (100 percent) in favor of protecting gays from job discrimination, allowing gays to serve in the military, and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3A.  Criterion Variables with Low Differentiation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberals</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who Took Stated Position</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Favors laws to protect homosexuals from job discrimination. (L4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the Armed Forces. (L6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government. (L4, L6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. Others feel that a woman's place in the home. (C5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1This table contains data on Full-scale Ideologues only.
2Degree of Differentiation is the difference between the percents presented in this table.
supporting an equal role for women. But a majority of conservatives also hold these views as well. Conservatives are around 40 percentage points behind liberals, but many conservatives have grown to accept the change in the role of women and have become fairly tolerant of gays in certain roles. It is only on the issues of gay-marriage and gay couples adopting children that most conservatives take an anti-gay stand.

It usually takes some time for conservatives – and the public in general, for that matter – to accept change in society. On the matter of an equal role for women, for example, if we go back to 1972 when the NES first asked the question shown in Table 3A, only 29 percent of conservatives took the “equal role” position and 37 percent believed that a woman's place was in the home. At that time, even liberals were not unanimous, but a hefty 84 percent did support equal roles for women. The degree of differentiation in 1972 was 55. Views on this matter changed rather rapidly and by 1984, 100 percent of liberals and 58 percent of conservatives favored an equal role for women – very much the same as the results we see for 2004 (in Table 3A). Presumably conservatives will continue to lag about 40 percentage points behind liberals on this issue into the foreseeable future.

Similar shifts in attitudes can be seen on the question of protecting homosexuals from job discrimination. This question was first asked in the 1988 NES study. At that time, only 24 percent of conservatives favored laws to protect gays from job discrimination. Eighty-three percent of liberals favored such laws in 1988. The difference between liberals and conservatives then was quite large – a degree of differentiation of 59. As we can see in Table 3A, liberals and conservatives, especially conservatives, have come a long way since 1988 in support of protection of gays against job discrimination. But conservatives remain over 40 percentage points lower than liberals on this question.

The reader may wonder why I did not include any questions about discrimination against African-Americans in this presentation. The answer is that the question used in all NES studies since 1964 to measure attitudes toward job discrimination against Blacks is so poorly worded that it lacks validity.

**Criterion Variables that Did Not Work**

Only four of the thirty criterion variables that I selected for testing failed to show expected differences between liberals and conservatives. These variables had to do with the importance of “promoting and defending human rights in other countries,” “strengthening the United Nations,” “combating world hunger” and “promoting market economies abroad.” These items seem to be clear operationalizations of several fundamental beliefs such as L1, L5, L9, C2 and C9. Yet three of them produced degrees of differentiation of just around 20 while the
question about the United Nations had a below standard degree of differentiation of 45. Only 68 percent of liberals thought that strengthening the U.N. was very important. Conservatives did not universally dismiss the U.N. – less than half (43 percent) of them felt that strengthening the U.N. was not important.

Interestingly, all these variables had to do with international issues. Apparently Americans, whether liberal or conservative, do not think much about international affairs and therefore do not apply their basic beliefs to matters that go beyond the water's edge. Perhaps parochialism is a universal American trait.

**Litmus Test Issues as Criterion Variables**

The abortion issue, taxes, gay rights, gun control and the death penalty have become central in the vetting process for Republican party standard bearers. Republican candidates are given a “litmus test” to see if they hold “pure” conservative positions on these issues. Let us examine these issues to determine the extent to which conservatives among the electorate are themselves “pure” on these issues. Is there consensus among conservative voters on these issues? Do these issues pass the test of being criterion variables – the test that would place them in Table 1A?

**Abortion**

Conservatives believe that the role of government should be limited and that government should stay out of people's lives. (C1, C4) We might expect, therefore, that conservatives would take the position that government should not intervene in personal decisions such as those regarding abortion. On the other hand, conservatives also believe in the primacy of religion in human affairs, they cherish individual religious feeling and consider religion to be the foundation of moral society. (C7) However, this general belief in religiosity is not likely to predict attitude toward abortion since attitude toward abortion is so closely connected to one's particular religious denomination. Different religious denominations have different views on when life begins – at conception, at quickening, or at birth. We can assume, therefore, that conservatives of one religious denomination will have different views on abortion than conservatives of another denomination. Thus, the abortion issue probably reflects the beliefs of one’s religious denomination much more than one’s conservative beliefs.

Liberals, on the other hand, might be expected to take a clear pro-choice stand on

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3 We saw in Table 1A that 90 percent of conservatives consider religion to be an important part of their lives. This religiosity is universal among conservatives regardless of religious affiliation. Evangelical, mainline protestant and Catholic conservatives all share this spirituality.
abortion since liberals believe in promoting the rights of minorities and women. (L4)

These assumptions are borne out by the data. Seventy-one percent of Full-scale Conservatives in 2004 did oppose abortion (would never permit it or would permit it only in case of rape, incest or danger to life of mother). However, this percentage (71 percent) does not demonstrate the degree of consensus (80 percent threshold) necessary for the anti-abortion issue to be a criterion variable.

This percentage (71 percent) would not have been nearly that high if it were not for the disproportionate number of evangelicals among the Full-scale Conservatives. Thirty percent of Full-scale Conservatives were evangelicals, as compared with 17 percent in the general population. A majority (51 percent) of these evangelical conservatives believe abortion should never be permitted. An additional 41 percent would permit it but only in the case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger. Mainline protestant conservatives are not as adamantly opposed to abortion: only 32 percent would never permit it. Only 15 percent of Catholic conservatives would never permit it. If we combine those who would never permit it with those who would permit it in the case of rape, incest or when the life of the mother is in danger, 92 percent of evangelical conservatives, 70 percent of mainline protestant conservatives and 67 percent of Catholic conservatives did not think abortion should be a matter of personal choice. Clearly, the religious denomination of conservatives has a strong influence on their position on this issue. This issue has a lot more to do with religious affiliation and beliefs than conservative beliefs.⁴

As predicted, almost all liberals took the pro-choice position on the abortion issue. Eighty-six percent of liberals respond that abortion should be a matter of personal choice and an additional 11 percent would permit it if the “need has been clearly established.” Among liberals, attitude toward abortion is not related to religious preference – liberals from all religious denominations (including Catholics) are pro-choice. Thus, for liberals the abortion issue does reflect a fundamental liberal belief (L4) and the pro-choice position on the abortion question can be used as a criterion variable – but only for liberals.

⁴ When it comes to government funding of abortion, however, conservatives become monolithic. Ninety-three percent oppose “a law in your state that would allow the use of government funds to help pay for the costs of abortion for women who cannot afford them”. Eighty-five percent of liberals favor such laws. This is definitely a polarized issue. Conservatives believe that government activity should be kept to a minimum: the funding of anything that is not essential is anathema to them. Couple that belief in limited government with the prospect of facilitating abortions and you can expect the nearly unanimous opposition that we observe among conservatives on this question.
Death Penalty

The death penalty issue can be tested as a conservative criterion variable since a pro-death penalty stand is an expression of conservative belief – i.e., being tough on crime and severely punishing wrongdoers. (C6) However, there is no liberal belief that would be clearly reflected in an anti-death penalty position. Possibly humanitarian and civil rights concerns (most of those executed are African-American) might come into play, but the connection between those beliefs and attitude toward the death penalty is rather tenuous.

The data support these expectations. Conservative nearly universally favor the death penalty, with 88 percent supporting it. Liberals are divided on the issue with 55 percent opposed to it and 42 percent favoring it. With so many liberals favoring the death penalty, the degree of differentiation on this variable is only 46, not quite enough to place it with the criterion variables in Tables 1A and 2A.

Gun Control

There is nothing in the belief systems of either liberals or conservatives that would predict how they would feel about gun control. Interestingly, only 11 percent of Full-scale Conservatives would make it easier for people to buy guns. A majority (58 percent) would keep the rules the same. Liberals, on the other hand, strongly favored gun control: 85 percent wanted to make it more difficult to buy guns. One might hypothesize that since liberals are disproportionately female, this attitude might be gender-based. Quite the opposite is true. Controlling for gender produced surprising results: 92 percent of liberal males wanted to make it more difficult to buy a gun while 81 percent of liberal women wanted this gun control. There is something about being a liberal that makes a person favor gun control. But a search of the list of liberal beliefs presented at the beginning of this appendix shows none that would anticipate this attitude on gun control.

Taxes

Being anti-tax is a direct expression of the general conservative belief that people should be free to use their earnings as they see fit. (C3) Conservative candidates constantly reiterate their strong antipathy to taxes. Yet in response to the question: “Do you feel you are asked to pay MORE than you should in federal income taxes, about the RIGHT AMOUNT, or LESS than you should?,” only half of the Full-scale Conservatives took the “more” position. Nearly 30 percent of Full-Scale Liberals also responded that they paid more than they should. Thus, the degree of differentiation was only 20 points. Attitudes toward level of taxation is not an issue that clearly differentiates conservatives from liberals and it cannot be used as a criterion variable.
If we look at the large pool of non-ideological voters, we find that unhappiness about taxes is not widespread. Only 35 percent feel that they are asked to pay more than they should, 54 percent say the level of federal tax is “about right,” and 4 percent even think that they are paying less than they should.

Gay Rights

The gay rights issue has already been examined. We found earlier that gay marriage was the one issue that most clearly separated liberals from conservatives. Also, we saw in Table 2A that liberals agreed that homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt.

In conclusion, we see that, of the conservative “litmus test” issues, only one (gay marriage) can be used as a criterion variable. This is not to say that these “litmus test” issues do not separate conservatives from liberals to some extent. But there is not enough consensus and differentiation in the attitudes of ideologues on these issues to warrant their inclusion in a list of criterion variables. We even found that one issue – being pro-life on abortion – does not stem primarily from conservative ideology but rather is a function of religious belief. Conservative ideologues among the public are not nearly as single minded on these “litmus test” issues as we have been led to believe. We can infer that the insistence on testing Republican candidates on these issues comes primarily from certain activist elements within the Republican party and not from the beliefs of rank-and-file conservative voters.

Summary

As a final test of the validity of the PTR measure, let us find out the total number of criterion variables people of each ideological type responded to appropriately. We cannot expect every ideologue to be totally “pure” – that is, to give the “correct” response to all of the criterion variables shown in Tables 1A and 2A. But we can expect each ideologue to embrace most of the beliefs that define their ideology. Also, we cannot expect them to be so “pure” that they do not occasionally stray and take positions expected of someone of the opposite ideology. Liberals may harbor a few stray conservative beliefs and vice versa.

Each respondent was given a Liberal score based on the number of liberal responses he/she made on the liberal criterion variables and a Conservative score base on the number of conservative responses on the conservative criterion variables. Table 4A presents the means of these individual scores for each ideological group. Not all 12 conservative criterion variables could be used. Two (love of country, and importance of being American) were not asked of the entire sample and therefore the N’s were too small for accurate measurement.
Throughout this Appendix, only Full-scale Conservative and Full-scale Liberals have been examined. There was not much point in testing criterion variables on those who the PTR measure identified as being only “somewhat” ideological. We would not expect very clear results from these “weak” ideologues. But now that we have established a set of clear-cut criterion variables (presented in Tables 1A and 2A) which Full-scale Ideologues responded to in the expected fashion, we can now look at the Somewhat Conservatives and the Somewhat Liberals to see if they fall appropriately along the liberal-conservative continuum.

Table 4A presents a beautiful array of data with steady gradations from one ideological grouping to the next. It demonstrates quite conclusively the validity of the PTR measure. Full-scale Liberals, on average, gave appropriate responses to 10 of the 12 liberal criterion variables and Full-scale Conservatives gave, on average, 8 out of 10 “correct” responses to the conservative criterion variables. Middle-of-the-Roaders split their answers down the middle, giving 6 of 12 liberal responses and 5 of 10 conservative responses. The Somewhat ideological were exactly half way between the Middle-of-the-Roaders and the Full-scale Ideologues. As expected, Full-scale Liberals occasionally took conservative positions and Full-scale Conservatives occasionally strayed into the liberal column. On the whole, the PTR measure locates voters quite precisely along the liberal-conservative continuum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean of Liberal Scores</th>
<th>Mean of Conservative Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on Liberal Criterion Variables</td>
<td>on Conservative Criterion Variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-scale Liberal</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Liberal</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-of-Road</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Conservative</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-scale Conservative</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on 12 Liberal criterion variables and 10 Conservative criterion variables. Each respondent was given a Liberal score: the number of liberal responses to liberal criterion variables and a Conservative score: the number of conservative responses to conservative criterion variables.

Figures in the table are the mean of these scores for each ideological group.
Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980 had essentially nothing to do with the fact that he was a conservative. Almost any Republican candidate could have won that year. President Carter had not been able to deal effectively with rampant double digit inflation, nor the ongoing Iran hostage crisis. The NES survey in 1980 showed that these problems were definitely the focus of concern for a great many voters. In addition, Carter was seen as a poor president and an ineffective leader. Attitudes toward Reagan in 1980 were quite diffuse. More voters had negative views toward him than positive. The 1980 election was strongly anti Carter, not pro Reagan.

Only 7 percent of the voters in 1980 mentioned Reagan favorably because he was a conservative or because he believed in conservative principles such as less government activity. Four percent thought he was too conservative or too far right. This left Reagan with a net of 3 percent favorable toward him on the conservatism factor. Eight percent of the voters did praise Reagan for his strong military stand but these supporters were cancelled out by an equal number of voters who were concerned that Reagan would get the United States into war.¹

The 1984 election also had almost nothing to do with Reagan’s conservatism. Only 8 percent of voters mentioned Reagan favorably because he was a conservative or held conservative beliefs. Six percent were unfavorable because he was too conservative or was too much against government activity. This left Reagan with a net of 2 percent because he was conservative. “Taxes” was a big issue in 1984, at least so it was thought. Mondale had proposed a tax increase and that was assumed to have hurt him badly. Eleven percent of the voters did express a negative attitude toward Mondale because of taxes, but 5 percent praised him for trying to raise revenues to balance the budget. (The budget deficit was the problem most mentioned by voters that year.) The two most damaging things working against Mondale were the fact that he had been Vice President in the failed Carter administration and that he was perceived as weak, wishy-washy and uninspiring. By far the most important factor in Reagan’s landslide win in 1984 was that he brought hope.²

¹ The comments summarized here came in response to open-ended questions that asked for likes and dislikes of the candidates.
² These conclusions are thoroughly documented in my forthcoming book: Listening to the American Voter: How Presidential Elections are Decided.

Appendix B

Only 7 percent of the voters in 1980 mentioned Reagan favorably because he was a conservative or because he believed in conservative principles such as less government activity. Four percent thought he was too conservative or too far right. This left Reagan with a net of 3 percent favorable toward him on the conservatism factor. Eight percent of the voters did praise Reagan for his strong military stand but these supporters were cancelled out by an equal number of voters who were concerned that Reagan would get the United States into war.¹

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Moral Values in 2004

The National Election Pool exit poll in 2004 listed seven issues and asked respondents to check the one issue that “mattered most in deciding how you voted for president.” On the list was an item: “Moral values.” It received 22 percent of the responses, more than any other issue. Respondents were not asked for their frame of reference when they checked this item. “Moral values” is an ambiguous term, especially when compared with other, more explicit, issues on the list such as “Iraq”, “Terrorism”, “Health care” etc. Without knowing what respondents had in mind when they checked that item, it is difficult to know what lay behind the answer. Many analysts and commentators assumed that it meant such moral issues as abortion and gay marriage, issues that are particularly salient among conservatives and were often being discussed and debated that year.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted a survey a few days after the 2004 election in which they asked half their sample the same question that the NEP exit poll had used. The other half of the Pew sample was asked an open-ended question: “What one issue mattered most to you in deciding how you voted for president” (without listing any issues). Open-ended questions are the best way to find out what all voters are thinking because there is virtually no contaminating influence from the survey instrument itself. Open-ended questions tap what is on people's minds. Giving respondents a list of items can prompt them in ways that were not present before they saw the question. If prompting occurs, we learn only the reaction of a small sample of respondents to the particular words in that questionnaire. That response does not represent the opinions held by of the vast number of voters who were not presented with the questionnaire.

In the Pew survey, about 4 percent of those who were asked the open-ended question mentioned abortion and gay rights explicitly and another 7 percent gave a generalized response such as “moral issues” or “values.” Thus, when using the open-ended measure we find that a total of 11 percent were voting on the basis of “moral values.” This amount of comment about moral values paled in comparison to Iraq which was mentioned by 25 percent of respondents. The economy and jobs were mentioned by 12 percent. Thus, “moral values” was the third most important issue on people's minds, not the first.

It is interesting to look at those in the Pew survey who were administered the closed-ended NEP exit poll question. The Pew poll result was similar to the

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4 About 3 percent mentioned that they admired President Bush (as a person) because he was a Christian, believed in God or had strong religious values and beliefs.
findings of the exit poll: “moral values” had more responses than any other item on the list with 27 percent giving that answer from the list of seven items. Iraq and economy/jobs came in second and third with 22 percent and 21 percent respectively. But the Pew survey went a step further; it asked for the frame of reference of those respondents who chose the “Moral values” item. They were asked the open-ended question: “What comes to mind when you think about “moral values?” Only 44 percent mentioned specific moral issues such as gay marriage, abortion, stem cell research and family values. A few (5 percent) mentioned Christianity or conservative beliefs. Thus, only half of those who answered “moral values” had conservative issues or beliefs in mind. An additional 10 percent mentioned general concerns about the direction in which the country was headed; that Americans needed to know right from wrong, etc.

Nineteen percent talked about President Bush as a person – that he was a good Christian with moral values. Many comments had to do with non-conservative, non-religious characteristics such as Bush being trustworthy, someone with convictions, someone who was clean and honest.5 Thus, for many, “moral values” referred to the current occupant of the White House, not any concern with conservative issues.

Some of those who answered “moral values” (6 percent) were liberals who favored civil rights for gays or were concerned that fundamentalist or extreme Christians were trying to impose their values on others. Others (10 percent) had a hard time answering the open-ended frame of reference question at all. They gave vague or incoherent answers. Apparently they had found the phrase “moral values” appealing when they saw it on the list and had chosen that answer without any real thought behind it.6

Thus, the National Election Pool exit poll in 2004 gave a very faulty impression of the true extent of conservative attitudes and values among the voters.

5 The question asked by the NEP exit poll, i.e. what issue “mattered most in deciding how you voted for president,” elicits a muddy mix of issue concern and attitude toward the person who ran for president.
6 Coding of open-ended responses was done by the author from original survey materials.
References


