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# Political Ideology in American Politics: One, Two, or None?

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# Political Ideology in American Politics: One, Two, or None?

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**Abstract**

Are Americans ideological, and if so, what are the foundations of their ideology? According to Converse's seminal view, whatever the case in other western democracies and despite its centrality to traditional versions of textbook democracy, the American public is distinctly non-ideological. Our objective is to compare the standard and by far most widely used measure of political ideology—a measure that presumes ideology is one-dimensional—to a more recent measure that allows for a multi-dimensional conception and measurement. This measure demonstrates that while American political elites compete across a single dimension of conflict, the American people organize their policy attitudes around two distinct dimensions, one economic and one social. After explaining how we derived the measure and how it can be used to develop five separate ideological groups, we show how these groups differ politically and why it is not possible to map their preferences onto a one-dimensional measure of ideology.

KEYWORDS: ideology, public opinion, political parties, polarization, measurement

Are Americans ideological, and if so, what are the foundations of their ideology? Until recently, this might have seemed like an odd question, since Converse's seminal essay fifty years ago seemed to settle the issue once and for all. Whatever the case in other western democracies and despite its centrality to traditional versions of textbook democracy, the American public is distinctly non-ideological, according to Converse (1964). He provided several pieces of empirical evidence that pointed unequivocally to this conclusion. Most Americans did not employ ideological terms such as liberalism or conservatism to describe candidates or parties nor did they seem to grasp the meaning of these terms when asked about them.

Moreover, their opinions on policy issues were only weakly connected to one another, undermining the idea that they flowed from a single overarching ideological framework. Finally, he found that many Americans did not even have meaningful opinions on the major issues of the day, which was consistent with their lack of involvement in politics and meager levels of political information. Except for political elites and a tiny sliver of the public—a sliver identified mostly by their advanced education and unusual attention to politics—Converse claimed that the vast majority of the public possessed "ideological innocence" in Donald Kinder's memorable phrase (Kinder 1983, 1998). Americans are practical, pragmatic, and realistic, but ideological—no way.

Yet during the last several decades, this picture of the non-ideological American public has begun to crack, and some would say crumble. Alan Abramowitz (2010), most forcefully, argues that during the last few decades ordinary Americans have shown a substantial uptick in political interest, knowledge, and activity. Most relevant to our concerns, he contends that twenty-first century Americans display increased levels of ideological thinking, which is most visible in the public's impressive growth in ideological constraint. Whereas Converse found that voters' positions on the leading issues of the day were only very modestly related to one another, Abramowitz finds that the public's issue preferences are notable for their high degree of coherence and consistency.

Other recent research reaches essentially the same conclusion, which suggests that ideology may not in fact be beyond the grasp of average Americans (Abramowitz & Saunders 2008, Jost 2006, Layman & Carsey 2002, Nie, Verba, & Petrocik 1976). Even Converse has acknowledged recently that changes in American politics and the public may have ushered in a more substantial role for ideology in the American electorate. But other analysts maintain that the traditional Conversian portrait remains largely accurate, that his non-ideological account of the American electorate "still holds up pretty well" (Fiorina 2011:19; also see Bishop 2005, Feldman 2003, Kinder 2006).

It is not our purpose to enter into this contentious debate concerning the ideological nature of the American public. Instead, our purpose is a more limited

one, focusing on the conceptualization and measurement of ideology. Our objective is to compare the standard and by far most widely used measure of political ideology—a measure that presumes ideology is one-dimensional—to a more recent measure that allows for a multi-dimensional conception and measurement of ideology. While American political elites may compete across a single dimension of conflict (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006), this measure demonstrates that the American people organize their attitudes around two distinct dimensions, one economic and one social (Duckitt et al. 2002; Saucier 2000). After explaining the measure, we show why it is not possible to map voters' multidimensional issue preferences onto a one-dimensional measure of ideology.

### Ideological Self-Identification

While various survey organizations posed questions about ideology as far back as the 1930s, surveys conducted by the American National Election Study did not begin asking its ideological self-identification item until 1972. Since then, it has been asked regularly in its national surveys. Here is the wording of the question: "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-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?" The respondents are then shown a seven-point scale, with all options fully labeled. The points are (1) "Extremely liberal," (2) Liberal," (3) "Slightly liberal," (4) "Moderate, middle of the road," (5) "Slightly conservative," (6) "Conservative," (7) "Extremely conservative."

Virtually every model of voting choice includes this measure of ideology in their equations. Yet there are problems with this measure. First and most obviously, a substantial number of respondents do not answer the question—they refuse to place themselves on such a scale. Figure 1 gives the proportion of the ANES sample failing to place themselves since 1972. This number never dips below twenty percent and reaches as high as thirty-five percent in some years. It is true that the secular trend is downward, but a substantial fraction of the public still refuses to place themselves even in the most recent surveys. Another criticism of this measure is that liberalism and conservatism are actually two separate dimensions that should be decoupled, rather than considered on a single bipolar dimension (Conover & Feldman 1981; Kerlinger 1984; Kinder 1998).

Ellis and Stimson (2009), among others (Free and Cantril 1967; Stimson 2004), have pointed to a much more serious problem with this measure of ideology. They argue that there are really two faces of ideology in America. The first is symbolic and is measured by ANES-type self-identification questions. The second is operational and is reflected in the public's actual policy preferences that

they call public policy mood. Policy mood is composed of the traditional "role of government" issues that have dominated American politics since the New Deal era. Often referred to as the "economic" dimension, the issues that define the dimension concern "government spending, taxes, government reach, benefits for the needy, and income equality and inequality," according to the authors. In other words, these issues all involve controversies about the proper role and scope of the federal government.

Ellis and Stimson demonstrate convincingly that while the American public is on the whole symbolically conservative it is operationally liberal. In particular, they discover two large groups of symbolic conservatives who do not hold consistently conservative policy views. One group consists of "conflicted conservatives" who hold liberal policy preferences across the board. The other group is made up conservative identifiers who have only conservative views on culture and traditional morality but liberal views on other issues. Thus their research reveals a major disconnect between symbolic and operational ideology and underscores the limitations and faulty conclusions that can arise when research relies solely on self-identification as a measure of ideology.
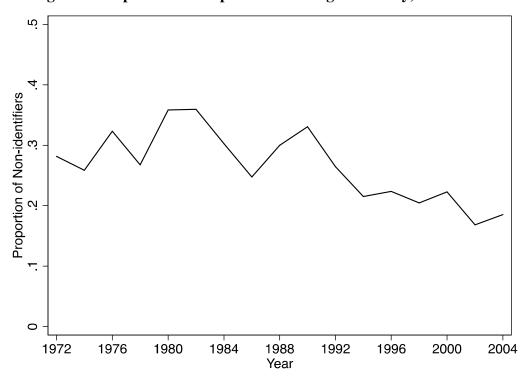
**Figure 1. Proportion of Respondents Failing to Identify, 1972-2004**

**Two Dimensions of Political Ideology**

We have seen from Ellis and Stimson's research the pitfalls that can occur when relying too heavily on the standard measure of ideological self-identification. Simply stated, many Americans who self identify as conservative have liberal or predominately liberal policy preferences. We focus on a related problem associated with this self-identification measure of ideology. The measure, as we have seen, allows respondents to locate themselves along a seven-point liberal-conservative continuum and thus is based on the assumption that ideology is one-dimensional. Recently, however, we have shown that there are two major substantive dimensions that underlie mass issue preferences (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2011, forthcoming).

One dimension is the long-standing economic dimension, which concerns government spending, taxes, and redistribution policies. A second dimension, which has become salient only in more recent decades, focuses on social and cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights. Although both of these issue dimensions have collapsed into a single broad ideological dimension for political elites and activists, they remain distinct and separate for the public. Thus, it is meaningful in the mass public to speak of citizens who have liberal or conservative preferences on both issue dimensions but also those who have liberal preferences on one dimension but conservative preferences on the other issue dimension (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2011). Adding into this mix those voters who hold moderate, centrist views on both economic and social issues gives us five distinct ideological groups.

We first describe how we measure these two underlying dimensions of mass policy opinions that give rise to our five ideological groups and then illustrate some of the difficulties that occur when trying to map respondents with two-dimensional policy preferences onto a single dimensional measure of ideology. As we will see, while the standard measure of ideological self-identification can help us locate and identify respondents who hold moderate, liberal, or conservative views on both issue dimensions, it does not accurately reflect the views of those voters who have liberal preferences on the economic dimension but conservative preferences on the social dimension or vice versa.

Both of these latter ideological groups place themselves between liberals and conservatives on the self-identification measure of ideology and closer to those who identify themselves in the "moderate, middle of the road" category but in a number of politically significant ways they are distinct from moderates as well as liberals and conservatives and also differ from each other.

Let us first describe how we construct our two-dimensional model of ideology and how it can be used to identify the five major ideological groups who we label as Liberals, Conservatives, Moderates, Libertarians, and

Communitarians. Then we demonstrate how these ideological groups differ from each other in politically significant ways, making it impossible to accurately locate them relying on a one-dimensional measure of ideological self-identification.

## A Two-Dimensional Model of Ideology

To develop our two-dimensional measure of mass political ideology, we use ANES (American National Election Studies) data on citizens issue positions from 1972 to 2008. We identified every issue within each ANES survey that pertained to either the economic or social issue-dimensions, while trying to maintain as much consistency as possible across the surveys. To create the issue scores for each respondent on both issue dimensions, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for each ANES presidential-year survey to get scores.[1]

Since the number of complete cases is significantly reduced when all the issue questions are used simultaneously, we chose to impute missing values before performing the CFA.[2] We created five data sets through multiple imputation and then performed the CFA to estimate each individual's scores for each dimension.[3] Scores were standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. A high (i.e., positive) score indicates a conservative orientation and a low (i.e., negative) score indicates a liberal orientation on the respective dimension.[4] All of the estimates obtained using these measures are the average effect based on the five imputed data sets (see King et al. 2001 for a description of this approach).

Here we have defined ideological groups by dividing the two-dimensional policy space into five discrete areas. Given, that each dimension is set to have a mean 0 and the standard deviation is 1, the origin (0,0) is roughly the center of the space. Moderates are defined as those respondents who are within a one-half of a standard deviation of the origin in any direction. In other words, Moderates are

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[1] The CFA model allowed the correlation between the dimensions to vary.

[2] We have taken advantage of this approach in our analyses examining how individuals' location in a two-dimensional measure of ideology helps explain variation in party identification and civic engagement (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner forthcoming; 2011).

[3] The multiple imputation procedure was performed in SAS version 9.1 using the PROC MI procedure. Specifically, we used the MCMC algorithm and an uninformative Jeffery's prior with the default 200 burn-in iterations and the Expected Maximization algorithm for creating starting values.

[4] The correlation between the two issue dimensions never exceeds 0.5 in any survey which is important for our contention that there is a large proportion of the American public that does not fit into the traditional left-right continuum on both of these issue dimensions simultaneously. Though, this is not surprising given evidence that has shown a lack of connection between issues and ideological identification (e.g, Sniderman, 1993).

those who are located in the circle with a diameter of 1 where the center of the circle is located at the point (0,0). The other groups are defined in terms of which quadrant they are located in, excluding those that fall in the Moderate category.

- Those that have a positive value on both dimensions are considered Conservative.

- Those that have a negative value on both dimensions are considered Liberal.

- Those that have a positive value on the economic dimension and a negative value on the social dimension are considered Libertarian.

- Those that have a negative value on the economic dimension and a positive value on the social dimension are considered Communitarian.

We use these five group indicators in the findings reported below.

### Two Dimensions of Ideology and Ideological Self-Identification: Preliminaries

What is the relationship between our five ideological groups defined by their social and economic policy preferences and ideological self-identification? In particular, do the issue preferences of Libertarians and Communitarians map onto the standard self-identification measure in a consistent and predictable manner? Before turning to these fundamental questions, let us first examine the relationship between voters' economic and social policy preferences and ideological self-identification and party identification to see if these measures are behaving as we believe they should.
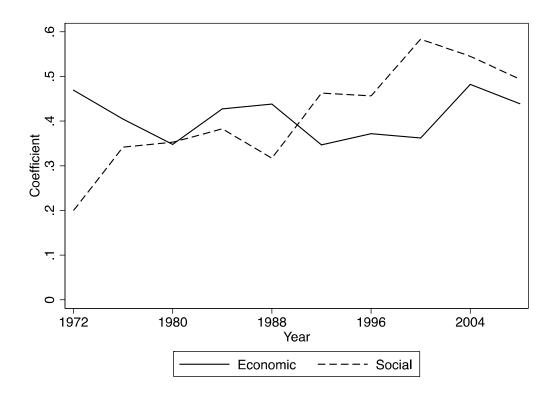
      Figure 2 presents the relationship between these two sets of policy preferences and ideological identification from 1972 to 2008. The figure shows the HLM coefficients from the regression of ideological identification on the economic and social preferences of citizens, where each coefficient captures the direction and the strength of the relationship of one dimension with ideological identification while controlling for the other dimension.[5] We see that there has

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[5] Specifically, we estimated a hierarchical linear model (HLM) with random effects for years. Further, we allowed the effect of the economic and social issues (i.e., the slope of coefficients) to vary by year. The coefficients from this regression are represented in Figure 2. Also, the same procedure was used to create Figure 3, the regression of partisan identification on economic and social issues.

been a fairly strong positive relationship between economic issue preferences and self-defined ideology throughout this period; those voters with more conservative economic attitudes tend to identify as being more conservative and vise versa. Moreover, there is no secular decline in this relationship over time, which suggests that one's ideological identification continues to be closely aligned with his or her actual economic policy views, just as it was during the New Deal era.
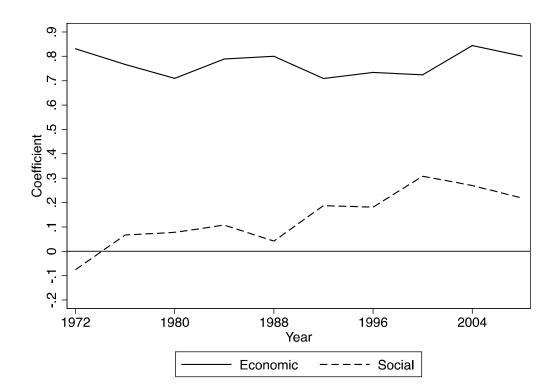
**Figure 2. Relationship between Ideological Identification and Policy Dimensions**



In contrast, the coefficients for the social dimension show that voters' positions on these issues have become more closely connected to ideological identities beginning in the 1990s. Except for 1972, there has been a significant relationship between preferences on social issues and ideological identification throughout the period. But from the 1990s onward—as social and cultural issues became more salient—this relationship has shifted upward so that in the last two decades or so, ideological self-identification has come to reflect both social and economic preferences, and more so the former.

Figure 3 indicates that this is decidedly not the case when it comes to partisan orientations. We obtained the coefficients in Figure 3 in the same way as we did in Figure 2 but used partisan identification as the dependent variable. Throughout this period, the economic issue dimension far outpaces the social issue dimension as a definer of partisanship. Thus while social issues have clearly become a more salient dimension of American politics in recent decades—as seen in their growing effect on voters' ideological identifications — when it comes to partisanship, traditional concerns about the role of government and economic issues loom supreme.

**Figure 3. Relationship between Partisan Identification and Policy Dimensions**



**Two Dimensions of Ideology and Ideological self-Identification: Findings**

We now return to our central concern: how do our five ideological groups, defined by their preferences on economic and social issues, relate to the standard measure of ideological self-identification, especially in regard to our two heterodox ideological groups, the Libertarians and Communitarians? We begin to

answer this question by observing from Figure 4 that the proportion of respondents in the ANES surveys from 1972 to 2008 who choose the middle category (4), labeled "moderate, middle of the road," varies between the lower to upper thirty percent. It is by far the most popular choice for ANES respondents.
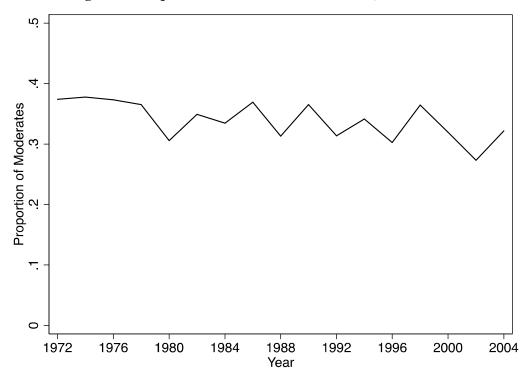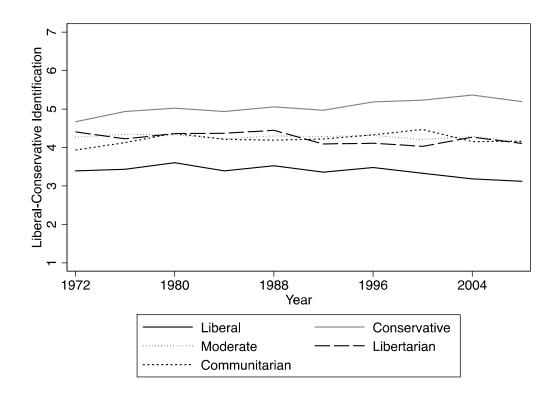
**Figure 4. Proportion of Moderate Identifiers, 1972-2004**



This raises the question as to whether this category attracts not only those respondents with moderate policy preferences but also those holding libertarian and communitarian views. Since both of these ideological groups have heterodox sets of issue preferences, perhaps they gravitate to the less well-defined middle category of the self-identification scale instead of opting for the liberal or conservative poles? This conjecture is given some support in Figure 5, which shows the average position of the five ideological groups on the seven-point ideological self-identification scale.

Not surprisingly and overall, Liberals consistently cluster toward the lower—that is, liberal—identified region of the scale and Conservatives toward the higher, conservative region. But not only do Moderates consistently place themselves between Liberals and Conservatives on the scale, Libertarians and Communitarians do as well. Both of these ideological heterodox groups are consistently much closer to Moderates than Liberals or Conservatives. Looking at

how closely they track the movement of Moderates, it is tempting to believe that perhaps Libertarians and Communitarians think and act politically like them as well. It is to this question that we now turn.

**Figure 5. Liberal-Conservative Identification by Ideological Type, 1972-2008**
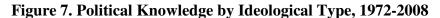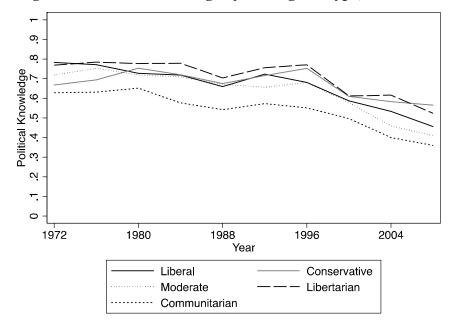


We turn first to turnout in presidential elections. Figure 6 shows the turnout rates for our five ideological groups. One immediately sees that neither Libertarians nor Communitarians look similar to Moderates in this regard. Moderates tend to vote less than Liberals and Conservatives. But Libertarians report high turnout, generally surpassing Liberals and rivaling Conservatives. In contrast, Communitarians are by far the least participatory of any of the five ideological groups. A similar picture emerges when it comes to political knowledge.[6] As Figure 7 indicates, Libertarians along with Conservatives tend to be the most knowledgeable ideological group, while Communitarians are consistently the least knowledgeable.

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[6] Political knowledge is defined as the percentage of correct responses to a series of factual questions about politics.

**Figure 6. Turnout by Ideological Type**



**Figure 7. Political Knowledge by Ideological Type, 1972-2008**

Turning to partisan orientations and behavior, we see a somewhat similar pattern. Figure 8 displays the partisan identifications of the five ideological groups on the seven-point scale running from a strong Democrat to a strong Republican (1-7). Liberals are mostly Democratic Party identifiers and Conservatives mostly Republican identifiers, with Moderates consistently identifying themselves predominately as Independents. Nothing surprising here. In most years, Libertarians are more Republican than Moderates, while Communitarians are always more Democratic than Moderates, and not much less so than Liberals. Thus both Libertarians and Communitarians differ from Moderates in terms of partisan identification and also differ significantly from each other.
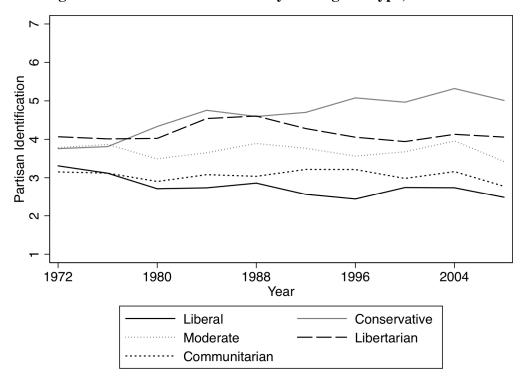
**Figure 8. Partisan Identification by Ideological Type, 1972-2008**



What about partisan voting? Figure 9 shows the proportion of each of the five ideological groups who voted for the Democratic presidential candidates in each election from 1972 through 2008. Communitarians tend to vote in higher proportions for Democratic presidential candidates than either Moderates or Libertarians who have similar presidential partisan voting patterns. The same is true of partisan voting in Congressional elections. As Figure 10 indicates,

Communitarians consistently vote more for Democratic Congressional candidates than either Moderates or Libertarians, while the latter have similar levels of Congressional partisan voting.
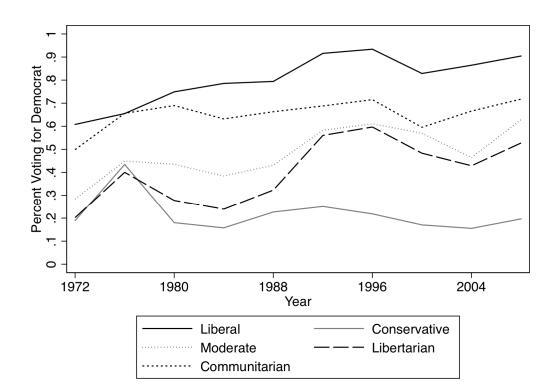
**Figure 9. Presidential Vote Choice by Ideological Type, 1972-2008**



Finally, what about split-ticket voting (i.e., voting for a presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of the other party)? Figure 11 shows the percentage of split-ticket votes for the five ideological groups. Notably there has been a rapid decline in split-ticket voting among Conservatives. In 1972, Conservatives were the most likely to cast a split ballot, yet by the end of the time-series, the level of split-ticket voting for Conservatives has dropped to the level of Liberals and Communitarians. On the other hand, split-ticket voting has remained highest among Libertarians and Moderates, whereas Communitarians exhibit considerably lower levels of split-ticket voting.

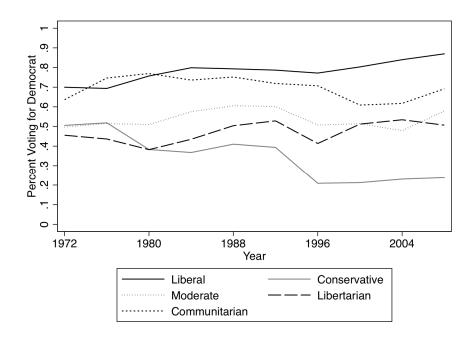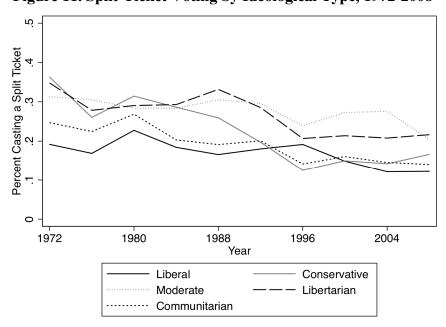**Figure 10. Congressional Vote Choice by Ideological Type, 1972-2008**



**Figure 11. Split-Ticket Voting by Ideological Type, 1972-2008**

# Conclusion

The role that political ideology plays in the American public has gained renewed interest in recent years. Whereas this issue seemed mostly settled fifty years ago, with the consensus verdict being that the mass electorate was largely unmoved by ideological motivations, this conclusion is now hotly disputed. As we have noted, some recent research finds a new American electorate, one that is far more ideological than its predecessor. Whereas in earlier decades, political ideology was evident only among a tiny sliver of the electorate, mostly confined to the highly educated and politically sophisticated, it is now widespread and increasingly consequential, according to this new line of research. But other research dissents sharply from this new conventional wisdom, concluding that the public remains mostly non-ideological in its political views, largely reaffirming the portrait that Converse drew of the American electorate a half century ago.

In this paper, we have focused on the conceptualization and measurement of political ideology. It has become quite popular to include an ANES-type question on ideological self-identification in models of voting behavior. This item allows respondents to place themselves along a seven-point scale that runs from "strongly Liberal" at one pole to "strongly Conservative" at the other, with "Moderate, middle of the road" located at the middle position. But our research joins other studies in questioning this common practice.

The self-identification measure of ideology suffers from a number of limitations and weaknesses. Most obviously, it has a high rate of non-response, which suggests that a substantial portion of the public either does not understand the question or cannot be located along the liberal-conservative continuum. Response to the item is correlated with education and political knowledge and interest (Jacoby 1991). Moreover, by far the largest fraction of respondents place themselves in the middle of the scale, which may indicate that they see themselves as ideological moderates or, alternatively, may be an indication of guessing (Treier and Hillygus 2009). These are signs that the measure is subject to substantial random error.

Recent research by Ellis and Stimson (2012) indicates that this measure of ideological identification may be subject to systematic measurement error as well. They argue that ideology has two faces, one symbolic and the other operational. The former is measured by ANES-type questions focusing on identification as Liberals, Moderates, or Conservatives, while the latter is measured by role-of-government economic-oriented policy preferences originating in the New Deal era. The problem is that the two measures lead to contradictory assessments concerning the nature of the public's ideology. Symbolically, the public is conservative; operationally, it is liberal. The root cause of the discrepancy, they argue, is that the term "conservative' is popular among Americans for mainly

non-political reasons, so that relying on this self-identification measure systematically overestimates the degree of policy conservatism endorsed by the public.

This problem is greatly exacerbated when voters have multidimensional policy preferences. Ideological conflict in contemporary American politics, we argue, revolves around two principal dimensions, one economic, the other social. Though mass preferences on these two ideological dimensions are correlated, they remain separate and distinct, which produces five ideological groups: Liberals, Moderates, Conservatives, Libertarians, and Communitarians. As we have seen, while Libertarians and Communitarians along with those voters with moderate preferences on both economic and social issues locate themselves closest to the "moderate, middle of road" response category on the self-identification scale, these three groups think and act politically in very different ways from each other. Indeed, all five ideological groups have different political profiles, which flow partially from their varying ideological orientations.

In the end, it is simply not possible to map the preferences of these ideological groups, especially Libertarians and Communitarians, onto the standard ideological self-identification scale. Because the scale is subject to substantial missing data, overestimates conservative policy opinions, and fails to identify libertarian and communitarian preferences, it ought to be used sparingly and even then with a great deal of caution.

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