

Are Citizens to Develop Coherent Ideological Preferences?

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Teaching Agenda

- 1 What Are Belief Systems?
- 2 Is there Variation in Citizen Capacity for Ideological Thinking?
- 3 What Goes with What? Ideology across Domains
- 4 Overcoming the Democratic Dilemma: Promise of Heuristics?

Are Citizens “Ideological?”



Motivating Question

Do you think citizens “hold” coherent preferences about government policy? How does “ideology” help explain how citizens form coherent preferences about government policy?

Setting the Stage

Defining Ideology: Elite *Influence*

“In his seminal 1964 article, Converse argued that elites combine policy issues into liberal and conservative bundles, not because their positions on these disparate issues logically flow from an overarching “crowning [ideological] posture” but for more mundane reasons—such as to gain or hold the allegiance of key groups” - Lenz et al.

- ▶ What does this mean and what are the implications of this for “ideological thinking?”
- ▶ Many voters remain ignorant about these bundles—about which issue position goes with which ideological or partisan camp—leading to lack of *ideological issue beliefs*

Defining Belief Systems: The Original Story

Field Consensus!?

“To a commendable extent, political scientists have met the expectation. Most, if asked, would tell a story much like the following: A sizeable segment of the adult population knows little about politics. Failing to understand the left-right context that structures debates among their elected representatives, they cannot adequately assess those debates or the policy proposals that generate them.” -Kuklinski & Peyton (2009)

- ▶ Seminal Study: *Converse (1964): The Nature of Mass Belief Systems*
- ▶ In the 1950's & 1960's, $\approx 12\%$ could be labeled as “ideologues” or near “ideologues” ... only about 15% citizens can tell parties apart
- ▶ People who took a liberal position on one issue, did not *necessarily* take a similarly liberal position on another issue
- ▶ By stark contrast, a sample of incumbents & challengers showed *greater ideological consistency* across issues

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What about “Non-Opinions”?

- ▶ However, could be possible that citizens may fail to grasp liberal-conservative ideology and still hold meaningful preferences on policy
- ▶ Why should we be skeptical that citizens who fail to grasp ideological thinking still holding meaningful preferences on policy? What does it mean to hold “meaningful” preferences?
- ▶ Converse uses 1956-1960 panel data measuring citizen preferences on “*The government should leave things like electrical power and housing for private businessmen to handle.*” to assess whether citizens that fail to hold ideological preferences have stable opinions
- ▶ Only a small proportion recorded stable attitudes $\approx 20\%$ citizens held stable attitudes—what does this mean with respect to ideological thinking?

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Variation in Citizen Capacity for Ideological Thinking

Inherit Variation: *Knowledge*

“Which isn’t to say that voters didn’t have opinions, much less party and group loyalties. They did, and they do. But the internally coherent (or at least semi-coherent) ideological frameworks that drive the activities of politicians, pundits, and other political actors are foreign to most voters.”

-Ezra Klein

- ▶ Scholars tend to think main driver of this variation is political knowledge
- ▶ Why would the mass public (voters) not possess the same level of political knowledge as political elites?
- ▶ **Again**, the *rational incentive* to abstain from politics and forgo paying *information costs* form issue beliefs

Stability of Ideological & Partisan Identification over Time

- Klein highlights recent work comparing the stability of partisanship and ideological identification over time using various panel datasets

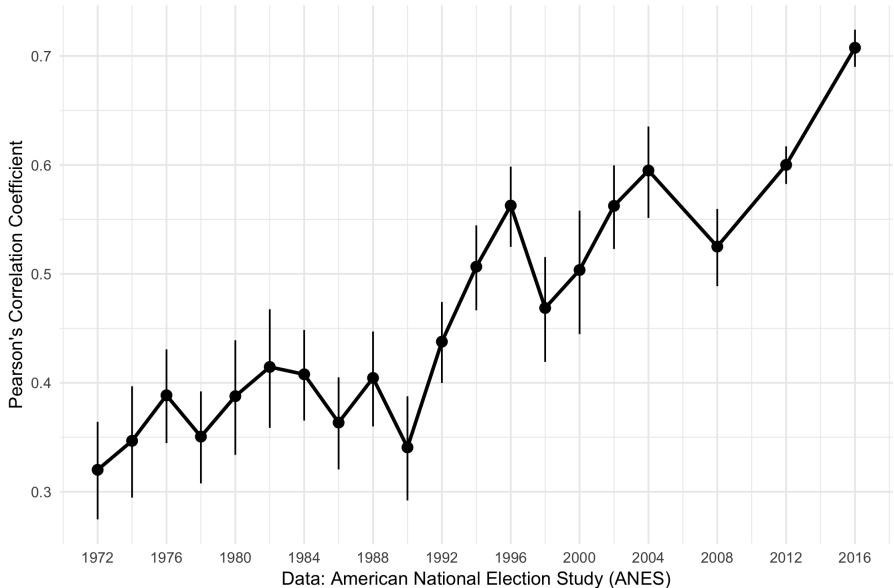
Table 4.6. Stability of ideological identification (I) and party identification (P) by information (Pearson r)

	1973–97		1972–74		1974–76		1980 campaign		2000– 2002	
Information	I	P	I	P	I	P	I	P	I	P
5th percentile	.20	.68	.15	.68	.27	.76	.34	.77	.28	.70
50th percentile	.38	.57	.47	.78	.49	.80	.54	.86	.63	.84
95th percentile	.55	.50	.73	.87	.72	.84	.74	.96	.91	.95

Source: 1965–97 Youth-Parent Socialization Panel Study; 1980, 1972–1974–1976, and 2000–2002 ANES Panel Studies.

Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public

Stability of Ideology & Partisanship Over Time



What Goes with What? Ideology across Domains?

- ▶ What do you think underpins the definition of “ideological thinking?”
- ▶ Fundamentally about *which issues positions go together to form a coherent set of issues beliefs, also known as a political ideology*
- ▶ How do we test whether citizens have “issue beliefs?”
- ▶ Freeder, Lenz, & Turney assess to what extent citizens form “coherent” ideological beliefs
- ▶ **Theoretical Expectations:** Those with *high knowledge* and with *agreement with party elites* are more likely to engage in coherent issues beliefs

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Research Design

- ▶ How would you study the theory posited by Freder, Lenz & Turney?
- ▶ Critical need for survey data measuring attitudes with the following criteria
 - ① Ask about issue positions of candidates & parties
 - ② Did so in same survey waves asking respondents
 - ③ Ask about more than one item in a policy domain
 - ④ Spans periods when party and candidate stances remained distinct, salient, & relatively constant
- ▶ Researchers settle on American National Election Study (ANES) 1972-1976/1992-1996 Panels, British National Election Studies (BES) 1992-1997/1997/2001 Panels & SSI 2015/2016 Panels

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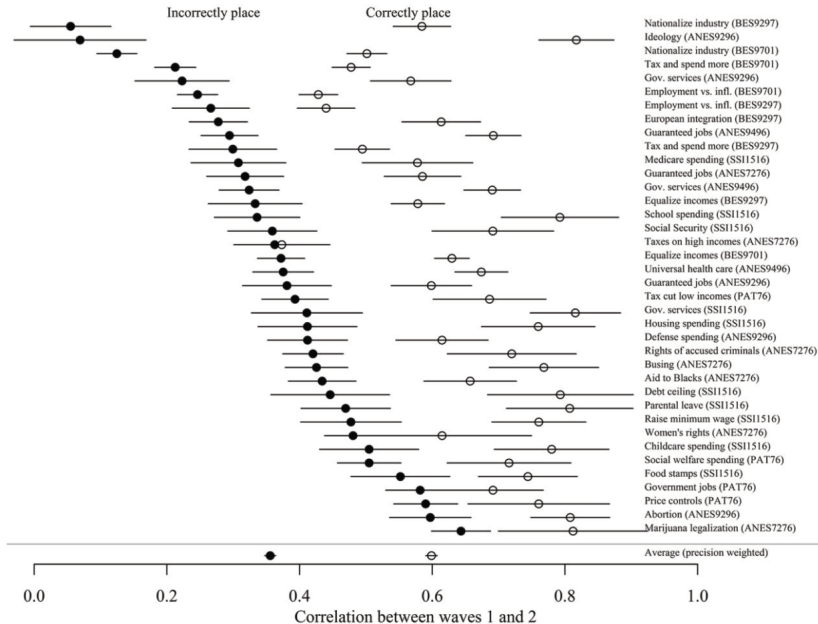
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How Stable Are Issue Positions?



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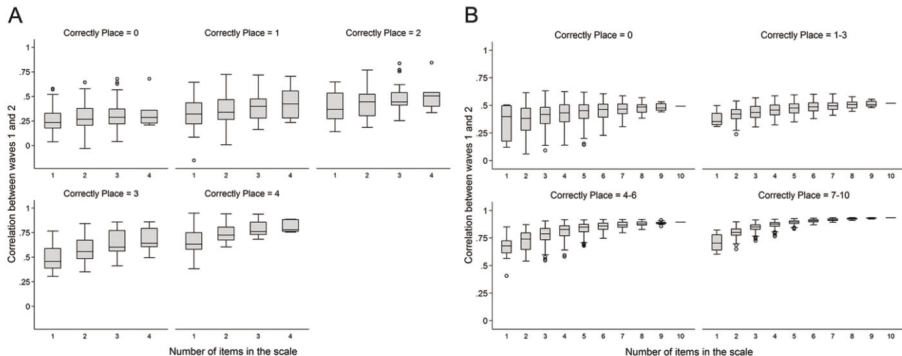


Figure 4. Stability by placement knowledge and number of scale items. *A*, All four-item economic scales pooled; *B*, SSI 2015–16 10-item panel. Subplots show the results by the number of correct placements. In *A*, we include six two-wave panels with a total $N = 5,975$ (see table 2 for the list). We show the plot for each of the six panel waves separately in app. sec. 5.2. In *B*, $n = 336$, $n = 136$, $n = 92$, and $n = 139$, from lowest to highest correct placement categories, respectively.

Bringing this Together: *Democratic Dilemma*

- ▶ What do the findings of Lenz et al. suggest about the nature of ideological beliefs in the mass public? What are the implications of this finding for the nature of electoral accountability?
- ▶ *Democratic Dilemma*: expectation that citizens must be fully informed to engage in politics even though they have a rational incentive not to be
- ▶ *Resource bias*: notion that only “resource-rich” citizens are more likely to overcome the costs of participation and participate in political activities
- ▶ How might citizens “cut-down” the costs of political participation to fundamentally fulfill their constitutional prerogative of holding elites accountable for their conduct in office?

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Cutting Information Costs with Political Heuristics

Models of Electoral Control

<i>Heuristic</i>	Vote-Choice Model	Implications for Representatives	Analytical Purposes
Ideology	Spatial/Proximity Voting	Responsive to Median Voter	Representation & Candidate Positioning
Partisanship	Michigan Model	Responsive to Partisan Base	Explaining vote choice/partisan bias
Valence	Retrospective Model/Valence Rule	Develop reputation, (honesty/integrity), monitor economy	Explaining electoral outcomes, pres. forecasting

Note: Partisanship & ideology are generally prospective models.

Key Points

- 1 Ideological preferences need not logically flow, but are the result of elites “bundling” issues together to “hold the allegiance” of key groups.
- 2 Political science consensus is that citizens are incapable of thinking about political debate in *ideological terms*
- 3 Lenz & colleagues show citizens are incapable of knowing “what goes with what” with respect to issue positions in an ideological framework
 - ▶ Key exception: citizens with high levels of political knowledge
- 4 However, there's greater consistency in partisanship and ideological preference as elite political discourse (i.e., the two congressional parties) begin to polarize
- 5 Lack of ideological thinking and ability to use coherent ideological beliefs to inform representative vote choice leads to *democratic dilemma*. Again, potential distortion in representative outcomes given which citizens are fully informed enough to engage in politics