

The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications

Author(s): Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman

Source: *American Journal of Political Science*, Nov., 1981, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Nov., 1981), pp. 617-645

Published by: Midwest Political Science Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2110756>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Midwest Political Science Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Political Science*

JSTOR

*The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications**

Pamela Johnston Conover, Stanley Feldman, *University of Kentucky*

Although over the past few decades liberal/conservative self-identifications have often played a part in studies of belief systems, they have seldom been the focus of research. Recently, however, several studies have suggested that such identifications play a significant role in voting behavior and political perception. Implicit in this research, however, are two tenuous assumptions: that liberal/conservative identifications are bipolar in meaning and that underlying this bipolarity is cognitive meaning based on political issues. In this paper, we develop a model of ideological identifications that emphasizes their symbolic and nondimensional origins and nature. Based on the 1976 and 1978 National Election Studies, our empirical analysis reveals strong support for the model. Specifically, ideological identifications are found to have largely symbolic meanings, a fact that helps to explain some of the findings concerning the relationship of the liberal/conservative continuum to political perception and behavior.

Over the last 20 years, one of the enduring questions characterizing the study of mass electorates has been whether or not there is ideological thinking in terms of the liberal/conservative continuum. Curiously, though research on this question has been both abundant and controversial, it has tended to ignore—or perhaps take for granted—the meaning of liberal/conservative self-identifications and their impact on political behavior. Typically, it has been assumed that the logical links between ideological self-identifications, on the one hand, and general political orientations and specific issue positions, on the other hand, do in fact exist. Only in the past few years have researchers begun to probe the wisdom of such traditional reasoning. Notably, Levitin and Miller (1979, p. 751) recently explored “the use of the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ as they are applied by citizens to describe themselves, the political parties, presidential candidates, and positions on issues of public policy.” Along similar lines, Holm and

*The order of the authors' names is alphabetical. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1980 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 24–26, 1980. The data analyzed in this paper were collected by the Center for Political Studies and made available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, neither of which bears any responsibility for the interpretations presented here. We would like to thank Robert Weissberg, Herbert Asher, Herbert Weisberg and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on this paper.

American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 25, No. 4, November 1981
©1981 by the University of Texas Press 0092-5853/81/040617-28\$02.15

Robinson (1978) have compared the impact of partisan and ideological identifications on voting behavior. Finally, from a cross-national perspective, Klingemann (1979a, 1979b) has studied both the use and meaning of the terms “left” and “right.”

Generally, these researchers have concluded that, although many members of the public may lack a complete understanding of such ideological terms as traditionally conceptualized, these labels and related self-identifications nonetheless have considerable impact on political perceptions and behavior. Thus, these studies have succeeded in establishing the political significance of ideological labels and identifications. At the same time, however, they have left in doubt the dynamics of the process underlying the influence of such identifications. In particular, in order to understand why liberal/conservative identifications are as influential as recent researchers have claimed, it is necessary to explore the meaning they hold for members of the public, a task which is undertaken in this paper. In so doing, we attempt to bridge the gap between the more traditional research on mass belief systems and the recent work on the political impact of ideological labels.

The Meaning of Ideological Labels

It is our contention that in order to understand fully the nature of ideological self-identifications, it is first necessary to uncover the meaning of the “liberal” and “conservative” labels. In this regard, implicit in much of the mass belief system’s literature are two questionable assumptions: (1) that the meaning of ideological labels is structured in dimensional terms; and (2) that the content of such meaning is largely issue oriented. Clearly, these assumptions are not unreasonable given the predominant direction of research on mass belief systems. Nonetheless, there is substantial reason to doubt their validity.

The Structure of Meaning

Traditionally, it was assumed that the meaning of ideological labels and self-identifications could be easily summarized in terms of a single dimension: the liberal/conservative continuum. In recent years, however, this viewpoint has undergone some modification. The decade of the 1970s ushered in a variety of “social” issues—abortion, marijuana use, the Equal Rights Amendment—which did not fit easily into the traditional liberal/conservative spectrum. Because of this, many researchers now posit that the meaning of ideological labels and self-identifications must be interpreted within the context of two liberal/conservative dimensions: one economic and one social (Asher, 1980; Miller and Miller, 1977; Weisberg and Rusk, 1970).

Whether one assumes the presence of a single or several liberal/conservative dimensions does not fundamentally alter our argument. From our perspective, what is critical is the assumption of bipolarity which is common to *both* dimensional interpretations. That is, both the single- and two-dimensional conceptualizations assume that with regard to a particular dimension of meaning the liberal perspective is simply the opposite of the conservative one. In effect, liberals and conservatives are depicted as sharing the same perceptual framework(s); all that differs is that their view is from opposite sides of the field. Because of such shared meaning, voters ought to be able to compare candidates, issues, and parties, and subsequently evaluate such objects using their own identification as an anchoring point.¹ But, recent works reveal that many voters are unable to make accurate comparisons of candidates and issues in liberal/conservative terms (Erikson et al., 1980; Levitin and Miller, 1979). Furthermore, this tendency is especially pronounced in the case of issues, where, based on traditional conceptualizations, one might logically expect to find the clearest liberal/conservative distinctions. For example, Erikson et al. (1980, p. 57) note a Harris poll which revealed that only 50 percent of the electorate was able to “correctly identify the liberal and conservative sides of major political issues.” Similarly, Levitin and Miller (1979) found that on some issues even so-called ideologues had difficulty in distinguishing the liberal position from the conservative one. One interpretation of such findings is that most members of the electorate attribute relatively little meaning to the terms “liberal” and “conservative.” An alternate interpretation, however, is that researchers have erred in their basic assumption that the meaning of ideological terms is necessarily structured in dimensional terms. Both empirical findings and theoretical arguments suggest that the latter interpretation is the more valid one.

To begin with, those studies (Asher, 1980; Weisberg and Rusk, 1970) which posit the existence of two liberal/conservative dimensions raise a possibility which paradoxically conflicts with a dimensional interpretation of the meaning of ideological terms. Namely, for some voters, one dimension might be significantly more salient than the other in determining the meaning associated with such terms. Some people, for example, might define ideological labels almost exclusively in terms of social issues while, at the same time, others may base their interpretation entirely on economic issues.

¹Even where two bipolar liberal/conservative dimensions are assumed, voters should still be able to compare candidates and parties on those issues relevant to defining that dimension. At the same time, however, assuming the presence of two dimensions does inject some uncertainty into the voter's comparisons, since they may become confused about which dimension they are dealing with.

Were this to occur, different groups of people would have fundamentally different, rather than opposing or bipolar, ideological perspectives. More generally, several studies have found that people organize their beliefs in a multidimensional fashion, with the nature and number of dimensions often varying from individual to individual (Brown, 1970; Conover and Feldman, 1980; Coveyou and Piereson, 1977; Herzon, 1980; Jackson and Marcus, 1975; Lane, 1962, 1973; and Marcus et al., 1974). As a critical by-product of such multidimensionality, the salience of specific beliefs is likely to vary among people, thus creating different frames of reference from which they interpret the meaning of ideological labels (Brown and Taylor, 1973). As a consequence, the ways in which self-defined liberals and conservatives understand those labels may differ in important respects.

Several studies support this hypothesis. Warr et al. (1969), for example, discovered that the political judgements of left-wing, center, and right-wing British respondents were based on different sets of cognitive dimensions. Along somewhat similar lines, Brown and Taylor (1973) found that a group of students differed considerably in how they conceptualized the term "conservatism." Some focused on the "lack of change" which they felt was inherent in the philosophy, while others concentrated on what they perceived to be the "elitist" aspect of conservatism. But, perhaps most relevant to our argument is Kerlinger's (1967, 1972) theory of "criterial referents." Kerlinger posits that attitudes differ in terms of their "referents," or focus; referents that are "criterial" or central to one attitude may be irrelevant to another. With respect to the social attitudes composing political belief systems, Kerlinger (1967, p. 112) suggests that "liberal is not just the opposite of conservative"; rather than representing endpoints on the same continuum, liberalism and conservatism constitute relatively distinct attitude systems based on different criterial referents. Kerlinger's thesis received strong support from his factor analysis which revealed that predesignated "liberal" and "conservative" referents did load on different dimensions, and that there were few negative loadings. Taken together, such findings indicate a distinct lack of bipolarity in the beliefs defining liberalism and conservatism. Thus, based on such evidence it seems quite plausible that the meaning of ideological labels is not structured in bipolar terms. Instead, different referents or concepts may be critical to defining the terms "liberal" and "conservative."²

²Our examination of the structure of the meaning of ideological labels focuses primarily on their aggregate or shared meaning. In effect, we are suggesting that the public as a whole, does not have a dimensional conception of the two terms. We do not mean to suggest as a general rule that individuals fail to see these terms as opposites, though in some instances there may be a lack of bipolarity at the individual level as well.

The Content of Meaning

The assumption that the meaning of ideological labels is bipolar typically has been accompanied by a second assumption about the content of that meaning. Specifically, as Levitin and Miller (1979) note, it is traditionally assumed that ideology is based on issue preferences, and consequently that ideological labels are largely issue oriented in meaning. Yet, the findings of several recent studies suggest that the mass public must associate considerable nonissue-based meanings with labels like “liberal/conservative” and “left/right,” and that ideological self-identifications may not be determined entirely, or even primarily, by issue stances (Klingemann, 1979a, 1979b; Levitin and Miller, 1979).

If not issue oriented, then what is the meaning associated with ideological labels? Clearly, to some degree such meaning may be partisan in nature, if not origin. Both Levitin and Miller (1979) and Holm and Robinson (1978) note a substantial relationship between partisan and ideological self-identifications; as the former explains, “when people describe themselves as having an ideological position, they also seem to be saying something about their positions on the parties, quite apart from their issue or policy stands” (Levitin and Miller, 1979, p. 768). But, it is unlikely that party identification accounts for all the meaning lent ideological terms, especially given Levitin and Miller’s (1979) normal-vote analysis which indicates that liberal/conservative self-placements have an impact on vote choice independent of that of party identification. In any case, to say simply that partisan and ideological labels share some common meaning begs the question in that the nature of that shared meaning remains unspecified. Consequently, we will return to this question once we have explored the meaning of ideological labels.

Our approach to unraveling the meaning associated with ideological labels begins with the assumption that such terms are powerful, political symbols to many members of the public.³ As symbols, the meaning which people attach to ideological labels, such as “liberal” and “conservative,” may be of two types: (1) cognitive—the “objective information or substantive content associated with the symbol,” and (2) evaluative—the affect elicited by the symbol (Cobb and Elder, 1973, p. 313). From this perspective, then, much of the previous research has focused on the cognitive content of ideological labels. But, if for many people ideological labels have sparse cognitive meaning, as research seems to suggest, then the symbolic power of such terms most likely stems from their evaluative content: their ability to generate strong positive or negative feelings.

³For a discussion of the various types of symbols, see Edelman (1977).

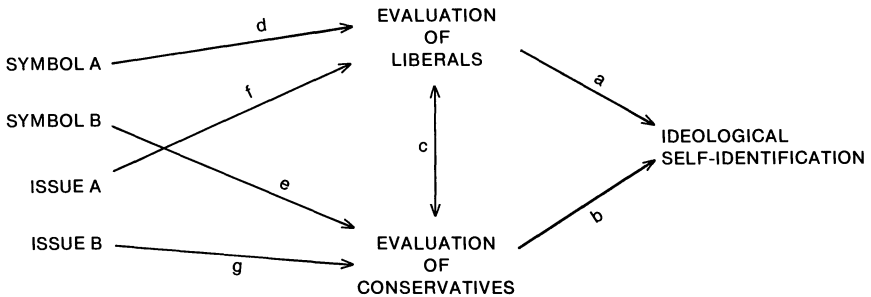
Logically, then, the next step is to focus on the origins of the evaluative meaning of ideological labels. One source may actually be the cognitive content, however little, that is associated with the label. In effect, not only may issue-oriented factors directly define the cognitive content of ideological terms, but they also indirectly influence the evaluation of such terms. For example, an individual may react positively to the term “liberal” because he or she associates favorably evaluated issue positions with it. Alternatively, when cognitive sources of meaning are lacking, ideological labels may derive their affect from other, related symbols whose own evaluations may be influenced by long-standing predispositions. To illustrate, deeply ingrained racial prejudices may prompt a strong negative reaction to the *symbol* of busing (Sears et al., 1979); subsequently, linking that symbol with the “liberal” label should trigger a negative reaction to the latter.

Political symbols differ, however, in their basic nature, and consequently some are more likely than others to be related to ideological symbols such as the terms “liberal” and “conservative.” Cobb and Elder (1972, 1973) have argued that political symbols may pertain to four different sorts of political objects: the political community, regime norms, formal political positions, and situational settings involving nongovernmental actors or specific political issues. These various types of symbols play different roles in society; some serve as a foundation for social solidarity while others act as a basis for social differentiation and conflict. For example, symbols of the community (i.e., democracy, freedom) and the regime (majority rule, due process) tend to be sources of consensus and unity in society. In contrast, certain groups (i.e., the Black Panthers, women’s liberation) and political issues (i.e., busing, end the war) are symbolic of the lines of conflict in society. Within this context, the traditional nature of ideological concerns suggests that ideological labels should act as a basis for social differentiation. Thus, in the absence of substantial cognitive content, ideological symbols or labels are expected to derive their affect from their association with other symbols of social conflict such as various groups and issues.

A Model of Ideological Self-Identification

Having discarded the assumptions that the meaning of ideological labels is largely bipolar and issue oriented, a different model of the nature and origins of ideological self-identifications may be outlined (see Figure 1). A critical element in this model is the specification of the relationship between ideological labels and self-identifications. Based on our earlier

FIGURE 1
Model 1 of Ideological Self-Identification



discussion, we argue that it is the *evaluative* meaning of ideological labels that is most closely related to self-placement. In effect, it is assumed that identification with an ideological label is associated with a positive evaluation of it. Having made this assumption, we are left with the difficult task of untangling the direction of causality in the relationship. In addressing this problem, two factors govern our thinking: the presumed lack of bipolarity in the meaning of ideological labels and our conceptualization of self-identification. A presumption of bipolarity is implicit in any causal model in which a single factor, such as ideological identification, is depicted as determining evaluations of both liberals and conservatives. In contrast, a causal ordering in which evaluations of ideological labels influence self-identification requires no assumption about bipolarity or its absence, and is thus consistent with our theoretical argument.

Our conceptualization of self-identification leads us to the same conclusion. If ideological self-placements are thought of merely as acts of social categorization, then considerable research suggests that the more reasonable causal ordering is one in which self-placement stimulates a positive evaluation of the ideological label identified with (for a review, see Hamilton, 1976). If, on the other hand, the act of self-identification is treated as a statement of group consciousness—a declaration of group loyalty—then the reverse causal ordering is more appropriate; that is, a positive evaluation of an ideological group should enhance identification with it (Miller et al., 1978). For our part, we follow the latter line of reasoning by adopting a conceptualization of ideological identification that closely parallels that

commonly associated with party identification. Specifically, like Levitin and Miller (1979), we assume that ideological self-placement reflects a “psychological attachment” to a particular group.

In summary, the basic premise underlying our model is that ideological self-placement is determined directly by the individual’s evaluation of the two major ideological labels or groups—liberals and conservatives. This relative comparison of evaluations is indicated in the model by parameters *a* and *b*. Furthermore, in the absence of a bipolar structure of meaning, liberals will not necessarily evaluate conservatives negatively and vice versa. Thus, parameter *c* should approach zero, rather than being strongly negative. The direct relationship between ideological self-placement and the evaluation of ideological labels suggests that the meaning of such identifications derives from the meaning of the labels themselves. With respect to the structure of meaning, it was argued earlier that, in the aggregate, liberal and conservative labels have meanings which are not structured in a bipolar or dimensional fashion. Instead, those concepts associated with a positive evaluation of one term are likely to differ considerably from those central to determining a positive evaluation of the other. This lack of bipolar meaning assumes a special significance when considered in conjunction with individual self-identifications. Specifically, it implies that individuals who label themselves as liberals do so for very different reasons than those who call themselves conservatives, in the sense that different concepts or referents are critical in determining their positive evaluations of their respective ideological labels. In essence, then, it is posited that liberals and conservatives view the political world not from different sides of the same coin, but rather, if you will, from the perspective of entirely different currencies. In the model this is indicated by the fact that each of the symbols and issues are linked with evaluations of either liberals *or* conservatives, but not both.⁴

Turning to the content of meaning, both cognitive factors and political symbols can influence attitudes towards liberals and conservatives, and thus ideological self-identifications. In the model this linkage is represented by paths *d* through *g*. Individuals may vary, however, in the degree to which they derive their evaluations of ideological labels from cognitive sources such as issue preferences or emotional sources such as political symbols. For some members of the electorate, ideological labels may hold substantial cognitive meaning which complements that derived from various symbols, so that the two sources interact in a consistent fashion to produce the affect

⁴As Kerlinger (1967, 1972) points out, a bipolar structure of aggregate meaning occurs only in one instance: when “conservative referents are critical to liberals and liberal referents are critical to conservatives—in both cases negatively” (Kerlinger, 1972, p. 625). This pattern is expected to occur relatively infrequently and primarily among groups of political ideologues.

associated with the label. Alternatively, lacking issue-oriented information about ideological labels, other individuals are expected to base their evaluations largely on the affective relationship of the label with other political symbols. In both cases, people may attach significant symbolic meaning to ideological labels, and although the sources of the meaning differ, its impact on self-identification, and subsequently behavior, may not.

To summarize, our model specifies a set of causal processes underlying liberal/conservative self-identifications that goes against much of the common wisdom on the subject. As with any model, it is not possible to *prove* that it has been specified correctly. Instead, final judgments about it depend on the theoretical justification of the processes specified, the fit of the model to the data, and the explanatory power of the model. Since we believe that we have established a sound theoretical basis for the model, let us turn now to an empirical assessment of it.

Data and Methods

In testing this model, we had the option of two different research strategies. By focusing on a relatively small group of people, the meaning of ideological self-identifications could be examined on an individual by individual basis. Alternatively, we could take a larger, representative sample and assess the common, or shared meaning of ideological labels. Although individual variations in meaning are important, we have chosen the second route for several reasons. First, this follows the general approach of those studies noted earlier which have raised many of the problems we wish to address. Second, since ideological labels like “liberal” and “conservative” are in large part societally defined, there should be an important component to such identifications that is shared by many people. And finally, looking at the common meaning of such labels provides a basis for assessing their ability to aggregate individual patterns of belief and symbolism. Thus, this approach provides a good first test for the model and ultimately a base line against which group differences may be assessed.

Given this, the data employed in the test of our model are taken from the 1976 National Election Study conducted by the Center for Political Studies. In order to test the model properly, it is necessary to operationalize three categories of variables: (1) ideological self-identification, (2) evaluations of ideological labels, and (3) the cognitive and symbolic sources of the meaning of ideological labels. Let us consider each of these.

Ideological Self-Identification

Ideological self-identification was measured in terms of a standard CPS question which focuses on *political* liberal/conservative identification.

Specifically, respondents were asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale whose values ranged from “people whose political views” are “extremely liberal” on one end, to “moderate” in the middle, to “extremely conservative” on the other end. The higher the score, the more conservative the self-identification.

Evaluation of Ideological Labels

Evaluations of the two major ideological labels—liberal and conservative—were measured in terms of “feeling thermometer” ratings. In particular, respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 degrees how warm or cold they felt toward “liberals” and “conservatives”; high scores on each item indicate a positive evaluation of the ideological label.

Cognitive and Symbolic Sources of Meaning

In assessing the cognitive and symbolic sources of the meaning of ideological labels, we were faced with a critical measurement dilemma: whether to employ closed-ended or open-ended questions as the basis for our measures. On the one hand, responses to closed-ended questions dealing with peoples’ issue orientations and their attitudes towards various political symbols could be correlated with evaluations of ideological labels in order to identify the meaning of the labels. While this constitutes something of an indirect approach, such closed-ended questions are a relatively clear-cut way of getting at the shared, or aggregate, meaning of ideological labels. In contrast, open-ended questions—such as those asking respondents what the terms “liberal” and “conservative” mean—are a much more direct method of establishing the meaning of ideological labels. However, verbal abilities play a large role in determining whether responses to such questions accurately reflect the meaning associated with ideological labels. Those respondents with lower levels of education may be hampered by the question format so that their responses are not good indicators of the real meaning which ideological labels hold for them. Similarly, because open-ended questions allow for greater individual expression, they make it more difficult to identify patterns of aggregate meaning than is the case with close-ended measures. All this, taken together with our interest in the shared patterns of meaning, led us to employ closed-ended questions as the primary means of establishing the cognitive and symbolic sources of meaning of ideological labels.

Cognitive Sources. Our assessment of the cognitive sources of meaning is based on the respondents’ specific issue positions. In adopting this ap-

proach, we acknowledge that measuring the meaning of ideological labels in terms of specific issue positions becomes problematic once we abandon the assumption that belief systems are structured unidimensionally (Coveyou and Piereson, 1977; Jackson and Marcus, 1975; Marcus et al., 1974). In particular, a measure of issue orientation based on a series of issue positions aggregated according to their relationship to a liberal/conservative continuum runs the risk of penalizing those respondents who, in fact, do not structure their attitudes along that dimension. Nonetheless, given that previous research has strongly emphasized the role of issues in determining the meaning of ideological labels and the nature of self-identifications, we considered it necessary to employ specific issue positions in our measure of cognitive meaning, even though in doing so some bias may have been introduced into our analysis.

With that caveat in mind, the respondents' specific issue positions were used to construct three summated rating scales which represent the major domains of domestic policy: economic concerns, social issues, and racial questions (Knoke, 1979). Listed below are the three scales, the issues used in their construction, and their reliabilities (coefficient alpha).⁵

*I*₁: Economic Issues—health insurance, guaranteed jobs and standard of living, and taxation policy (.54).

*I*₂: Racial Issues—busing, school desegregation, and aid to minorities (.68).

*I*₃: Social Issues—marijuana use, abortion, ERA, and sex roles (.62).

In constructing the scales, all the issues were first put in standardized form (mean = 0; standard deviation = 1) and then summed to produce an overall score for the respondent on that scale. In each case, high scores indicate more conservative issue positions.

Symbolic Sources. As noted earlier, to the degree that evaluations of ideological labels are based upon their association with other political symbols, these are likely to be symbols of social differentiation and conflict rather than consensus. Consequently, in measuring the symbolic sources of ideological meaning we focused upon nongovernmental actors or groups that might constitute symbolic representations of various cleavages in American society. Specifically, the respondents' feeling-thermometer

⁵The exact question wording of the items employed in constructing the issue scales is available in the CPS 1976 National Elections Study Codebook. The question numbers are as follows: RACIAL ISSUES, 3257, 3211, 3264; SOCIAL ISSUES, 3772, 3787, 3799, 3796; and ECONOMIC ISSUES, 3273, 3241, and 3779.

ratings of 27 different groups in society were factor analyzed.⁶ This analysis produced six factors with eigenvalues greater than one. The interpretation of these factors was based on the assumption that factor loadings of .5 or greater were substantively significant. Based on this criteria, six additive scales were formed from the feeling-thermometer ratings; positive scores on each scale indicate positive feelings towards the groups composing it.⁷

As indicated in Table 1, each of the six scales is composed of a distinct cluster of groups which symbolically represent major cleavages in society. The first scale represents the "status quo" and is composed of mainstream groups traditionally associated with the "protestant ethic" and "middle America." The second scale deals with the "radical left": groups symbolic of revolutionary or rapid change such as "black militants" and "radical students." The third scale is symbolic of "capitalism." The "reformist left" is represented by the fourth scale which concerns groups or minorities related to moderate social change. The symbolic meaning associated with the "disadvantaged" segments of society is captured by the fifth scale which pertains to relatively powerless groups such as the "poor" and "older people." Finally, the last scale deals with symbols of "social control" such as the police and military. It is important to recognize that, taken together, these scales symbolically tap the various dimensions of meaning traditionally associated with the liberal/conservative continuum (Converse, 1964; and Klingemann, 1979a). Yet, at the same time, these scales also act as a symbolic representation of some of the new social issues, which emerged in the late 1960s, centered around the agents of social control and the evolution of a counterculture (Miller and Levitin, 1976).

Findings

Self-Identification and the Evaluation of Ideological Labels

First, our model suggests that ideological self-placement should reflect evaluations of the two major ideological groups—liberals and conservatives. Our findings confirm this relationship as indicated by the form of the regression equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Self-Identification} &= .309 \text{ evaluations of conservatives} \\ &\quad - .422 \text{ evaluations of liberals} \\ &(\text{coefficients are beta weights}) \end{aligned}$$

⁶Specifically, a principal components analysis with oblique rotation was conducted. Consequently, the factors which emerged are correlated to some extent.

⁷For each of the six factors, the feeling-thermometer ratings of the specific groups composing it were summed to form a single scale tapping that dimension of symbolic meaning.

TABLE 1
Six Symbolic Meaning Scales and Their Components

S₁: STATUS QUO	S₂: RADICAL LEFT
Protestants	Radical Students
Working Men	Women's Liberation
Whites	Marijuana Users
Men	Black Militants
Middle-Class People	(reliability = .73)
(reliability = .89)	
S₃: CAPITALISM	S₄: REFORMIST LEFT
Big Business	Blacks
Republicans	Chicanos
Businessmen	People on Welfare
(reliability = .77)	Jews
	Civil Rights Leaders
	(reliability = .77)
S₅: DISADVANTAGED	S₆: SOCIAL CONTROL
Poor People	Police
Older People	Military
Women	(reliability = .69)
Young People	
(reliability = .74)	

All reliabilities are coefficient alpha.

Taken together, evaluations of liberals and conservatives explain 36 percent of the variance in ideological self-placement (multiple Pearson's $R = .60$). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that evaluations of liberals have a somewhat stronger impact on self-identification than do evaluations of conservatives. This pattern may reflect the nature of the political environment over the past 20 years. Until quite recently, the "New Left" and the social issues which it championed tended to dominate political discourse in the United States. As a consequence, the "liberal" label may have become more salient and reactions to it more emotionally charged than in the case of the "conservative" label, thus accounting for the relatively stronger impact of the "liberal" label on self-identification. However, with the current emergence of the "New Right" and the concomitant ascendancy of the "conservative" label, evaluations of conservatives may come to have a stronger impact on self-identifications in future years.

The finding that ideological self-identification is strongly influenced by evaluations of liberals and conservatives takes on added significance when considered in conjunction with the following finding: though evaluations of

liberals and conservatives are both strongly related to self-identification, they have only a weak negative relationship with one another; Pearson's r equals $-.17$ for those respondents having an ideological self-identification.⁸ This finding runs counter to the argument that the aggregate meaning of ideological labels is bipolar in its structure. Instead, it suggests that evaluations of ideological symbols are relatively independent. In essence, a positive evaluation of liberals does not guarantee a negative attitude towards conservatives, though it does not preclude it either. In more general terms, this finding parallels a pattern uncovered in the study of attitudes towards political parties. Several researchers (Maggiotto and Piereson, 1977; Weisberg, 1980) have found that evaluations of Democrats and Republicans are relatively independent of one another. Taken together, these two sets of findings suggest that the dimensional models so typical in the study of political attitudes be approached with some caution.

Next, our model posits not only that evaluations of ideological labels influence self-identification, but also that they mediate the impact of all other sources of meaning. To test this argument, two regressions were run. In the first, ideological self-placement was regressed on the three issue-position scales (economic, racial, and social) and the six symbolic-meaning scales. In the second regression, ideological self-placement was regressed on the three issue-position scales, the six symbolic-meaning scales, *and* the evaluations of the two ideological labels (see Table 2). A comparison of the two regressions reveals that, with only one exception, all those variables having a significant impact in the first regression had no influence once liberal and conservative evaluations were entered into the regression; only evaluations of liberals and conservatives, and economic issues remained significant in the second regression. Furthermore, although economic issues continued to have some direct effect on self-identification, it is important to note that evaluations of liberals and conservatives had a much stronger impact. Thus, although there remains a weak vestige of what once might have been a strong direct link between New Deal economic issues and ideological identification, by and large our prediction is borne out; both cognitive and symbolic sources of meaning influence ideological self-placement primarily through their contribution to the evaluative meaning associated with ideological labels.

⁸Some might question whether this finding is an artifact of the "positivity bias" often associated with the thermometer ratings of social groups (Miller et al., 1978). This is not likely. The primary impact of any positivity bias should be to simply shift the mean of the distribution of the evaluations up the feeling thermometer and to reduce the range, but *not* to fundamentally alter the shape of the distribution. Consequently, the transformation produced by a positivity bias should not effect the covariance of the evaluations with other variables. In our particular case, this interpretation is strengthened by the fact that, though there is some positivity bias in the ratings of liberals and conservatives, there is also substantial variance in both sets of evaluations.

TABLE 2

Regressions of Liberal/Conservative Self-Placements on the Issue-Position Scales, the Symbolic-Meaning Variables, and Evaluations of Liberals and Conservatives^a

Independent Variables	Regression 1	Regression 2
<i>I. Symbolic-Meaning Variables</i>		
<i>S</i> ₁ : Status Quo	-.019 (-.0004)	-.018 (-.0008)
<i>S</i> ₂ : Radical Left	-.113 (-.0027)*	-.037 (-.0009)
<i>S</i> ₃ : Capitalism	.252 (.0079)*	.067 (.0027)
<i>S</i> ₄ : Reformist Left	-.232 (.0052)*	-.071 (-.0018)
<i>S</i> ₅ : Disadvantaged	.009 (.0003)	.009 (.0003)
<i>S</i> ₆ : Social Control	.095 (.0042)	.076 (.0034)
<i>II. Issue-Position Scales</i>		
<i>I</i> ₁ : Economic	.189 (.131)*	.099 (.069)*
<i>I</i> ₂ : Racial	.019 (.011)	-.006 (-.003)
<i>I</i> ₃ : Social	.152 (.070)*	.085 (.031)
<i>III. Evaluations</i>		
Of Conservatives	—	.259 (.019)*
Of Liberals	—	-.385 (-.027)*
	(<i>R</i> = .56)	(<i>R</i> = .65)

^aUnparenthesized entries are beta weights; parenthesized entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.

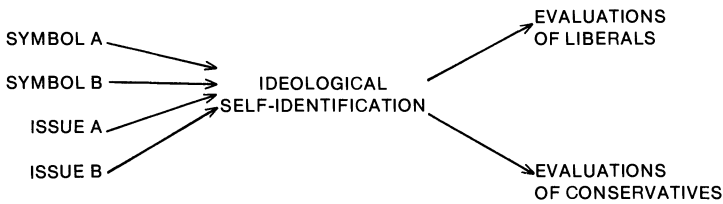
**p* < .05 level.

Thus, to this point several key findings have supported our argument that evaluations of liberals and conservatives are the most immediate determinants of ideological self-identification. Despite this, in order for our interpretation to be fully convincing we must consider two major alternatives to our model, both of which seriously question the validity of our causal ordering of the evaluation of ideological labels and self-identification. As illustrated in Figure 2, the first alternative, model 2, reverses our causal ordering so that self-identification is depicted as influencing evaluations rather than vice versa. Another alternative conceptualization is represented by model 3 which is based on the assumption that evaluations of both the "liberal" and "conservative" labels, as well as ideological self-placement, are simply multiple indicators of the same underlying construct, rather than measures of different constructs, as we have assumed. Such a model would be most consistent with the measurement strategy adopted by Levitin and Miller (1979) in their recent examination of ideological identifications.

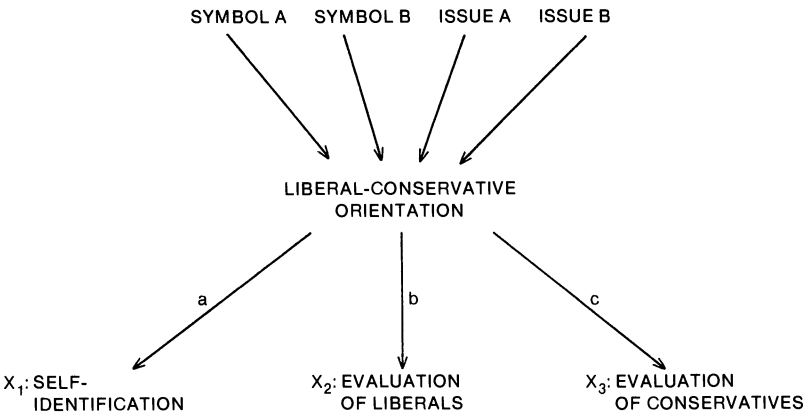
Both of these alternative conceptualizations lead to certain predictions

FIGURE 2
Alternative Models of Ideological Self-Identification

MODEL 2



MODEL 3



which can be tested. In particular, model 2 predicts that once ideological self-placement—the intervening variable—is held constant then the symbolic variables and the issue scales should have little or no direct impact on evaluations of liberals and conservatives. This prediction was tested in the following two regressions (coefficients are beta weights and starred coefficients are significant):

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Evaluations of Liberals} = & .07S_1 + .21*S_2 - .09S_3 + .17*S_4 - .01S_5 \\ & + .09S_6 - .15*I_1 + .04I_2 - .06I_3 - .33*\text{Self-} \\ & \text{placement } (R = .69)\end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Evaluations of Conservatives} = & .11*S_1 + .06S_2 + .42*S_3 - .02S_4 + .02S_5 \\ & + .14*S_6 + .00I_1 + .17*I_2 - .03I_3 \\ & + .22*\text{Self-placement } (R = .71)\end{aligned}$$

As the estimates show, although self-placement did have an impact on evaluations, the model is clearly misspecified in this form; both the symbolic variables and the issue scales had a substantial direct impact on the evaluations even with self-placement included in the regression. Thus, based on this test, model 2 is not as strongly supported as the original model.⁹

Our test of the third model focuses on the relationship between the theoretical construct of a general liberal/conservative orientation and its three hypothesized indicators—self-placement, and evaluations of liberals and conservatives. In this model, there are three unknowns: the epistemic correlations (a , b , and c) which represent the relationships between the theoretical construct and its indicators. There are also three known quantities: the observed correlations (r_{12} , r_{13} , and r_{23}) among the indicators. Since there are three unknown and three known quantities, the model is just identified. Consequently, although we can solve for the three epistemic correlations, there is no excess information to test for goodness of fit. Instead, the only weak condition that must be met in order for the model to hold is that the estimates of a , b and c not exceed ± 1 , since they are effectively correlations (Duncan, 1972).¹⁰ But, as the following estimates demonstrate, the model

⁹Based on such findings, some might posit a fourth model in which self-identification influences evaluations which in turn determine issue positions and the evaluation of political symbols. Theoretically, this model seems to us to be quite weak since it removes from contention the logical determinants of self-identification, and since it does little to specify the manner in which such identifications originate.

¹⁰In order to estimate the parameters, each correlation is first expressed in terms of the three parameters: $r_{12} = ab$, $r_{13} = ac$, and $r_{23} = bc$. These three equations can then be solved for each unknown, with the following results:

$$a = \sqrt{\frac{r_{12} \times r_{13}}{r_{23}}} \quad b = \sqrt{\frac{r_{12} \times r_{23}}{r_{13}}} \quad c = \sqrt{\frac{r_{13} \times r_{23}}{r_{12}}}$$

For the calculations noted in the text: $r_{12} = -.53$, $r_{13} = .47$ and $r_{23} = -.17$.

fails even this relatively simple test: $a = 1.21$, $b = -.44$, and $c = .39$. Since the estimate for parameter a exceeds one, model 3 cannot be accepted in its present form. In essence, self-identification and evaluations of liberals and conservatives cannot be considered to be indicators of the same theoretical construct.

Thus, in their present forms neither model 2 nor model 3 fits the data very well. Such a relatively poor showing by both of these alternative models bolsters our confidence in our own conceptualization of the nature of the relationship between evaluations of ideological labels and self-identification. Nonetheless, the choice between these various models ultimately must be made on theoretical grounds; no amount of empirical testing can establish the appropriate causal ordering in the absence of a sound theoretical basis (Duncan, 1975). From such a theoretical perspective, any specification of the causal relationship between ideological self-placement and evaluations must be consistent with one's understanding of the nature of those evaluations and their determinants. In this regard, our conceptualization differs critically from the alternative models in our treatment of the question of bipolarity. Because we posit a lack of bipolarity in the meaning of ideological labels, we necessarily must hypothesize structurally *distinct* determinants of the evaluations of such labels. In contrast, the other two models assume bipolarity and therefore are theoretically compatible with the idea of structurally *identical* determinants. This suggests that our judgment as to the appropriate causal ordering between ideological self-identification and evaluations should not be divorced from our assessment of the validity of our broader theoretical framework, particularly our argument concerning bipolarity. Therefore, the next step is to examine the sources of the evaluations of ideological terms.

Sources of the Evaluation of Ideological Labels

As noted earlier, two general types of factors are considered as possible sources of an individual's attitudes towards liberals and conservatives: specific issue positions and other political symbols. To test the relative contribution of each of these types of factors, evaluations of liberals and conservatives were separately regressed on the three issue-position scales and the six symbolic-meaning scales. The results are presented in Table 3.

Considering first the content of meaning, symbolic factors clearly played a more important role than issue positions in determining the evaluation of ideological labels. Attitudes towards liberals and conservatives were each significantly influenced by four variables; yet, in both cases only one of these was an issue-position scale. Furthermore, for both liberals and conservatives the most important determinants were symbolic in nature. Specifically, positive attitudes towards liberals were primarily a function of positive feelings towards the symbols of the radical and reformist left.

TABLE 3

Regression of Evaluations of Liberals and Conservatives on
Issue Positions and the Symbolic-Meaning Variables^a

Independent Variables	Evaluation of Liberals	Evaluation of Conservatives
<i>I. Symbolic-Meaning Variables</i>		
<i>S</i> ₁ : Status Quo	.078 (.019)	.125 (.032)*
<i>S</i> ₂ : Radical Left	.305 (.073)*	-.022 (-.008)
<i>S</i> ₃ : Capitalism	-.154 (-.063)*	.473 (.169)*
<i>S</i> ₄ : Reformist Left	.246 (.080)*	.015 (.004)
<i>S</i> ₅ : Disadvantaged	-.037 (-.013)	.051 (.016)
<i>S</i> ₆ : Social Control	.052 (.028)	.192 (.088)*
<i>II. Issue Positions</i>		
<i>I</i> ₁ : Economic	-.132 (-1.28)*	.042 (.326)
<i>I</i> ₂ : Racial	.029 (.207)	.167 (1.00)*
<i>I</i> ₃ : Social	-.075 (-.337)	.016 (.083)
	(<i>R</i> = .61)	(<i>R</i> = .69)

^aUnparenthesized entries are beta weights; parenthesized entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.

**p* < .05 level.

Negative sentiments towards the symbol of capitalism and a traditional liberal perspective on economic issues were also significant, though less important, determinants of attitudes towards liberals. In contrast, positive evaluations of conservatives were most heavily influenced by a positive affect towards the symbol of capitalism. In addition, a positive affect towards the status quo and social control symbols, and a conservative stance on racial issues also contributed to a positive evaluation of conservatives.

Even though issue positions had relatively little direct impact on evaluations of liberals and conservatives, it could still be argued that issues have some indirect influence vis-à-vis political symbols. From our perspective, such a causal ordering is theoretically suspect. Nonetheless, we tested this possibility by regressing each of the six symbolic meaning scales on the three issue-position scales. The results of these regressions indicated that issue positions had relatively little influence on the affect attached to the various symbols. On average, the issue scales accounted for only about 11 percent of the variance in attitudes towards the symbols. This suggests that an individual's attachment to political symbols is derived primarily from other, nonissue-oriented sources. Thus, as predicted, ideological self-identifications are largely a product of symbolic affect and only slightly reflect

specific issue positions, a finding which strongly confirms Levitin and Miller's (1979) suspicion that issue positions are of limited importance in determining liberal/conservative self-placements.

Turning now to a consideration of the structure of the meaning of underlying the evaluation of ideological symbols, we find ample support for our hypothesis that the structure is not bipolar. Specifically, with only one exception, different referents were central to defining the meaning of the terms liberal and conservative. The one shared referent, the symbol of capitalism, was associated positively with evaluations of conservatives and negatively with those of liberals (see Table 3). But, while the capitalism symbol was the most critical determinant of attitudes towards conservatives, it was one of the least important determinants of evaluations of liberals. Thus, for the most part, the aggregate pattern of meaning associated with ideological terms was not bipolar. Rather, the two labels derived their meaning largely from different sources, primarily of a symbolic nature.

The implications of such findings for our understanding of ideological self-identifications are diagrammatically outlined in the path model shown in Figure 3.¹¹ While our findings by no means render the liberal/conservative classification meaningless, they do fundamentally challenge the traditional understanding of this distinction. In particular, our findings indicate that the meaning of ideological labels is largely symbolic in content and nondimensional in structure. Furthermore, our finding of a predominant lack of bipolarity also allows us to discount further the viability of the alternative models considered in the last section, since neither of those models is theoretically consistent with such a pattern. Thus, instead of all people viewing the political world from the same perspective, our model suggests that individuals vary in the affect and salience which they attach to political symbols, and this is reflected in how they label themselves ideologically. For the most part, it is likely that conservatives identify themselves as conservatives for quite different reasons than liberals label themselves liberals.

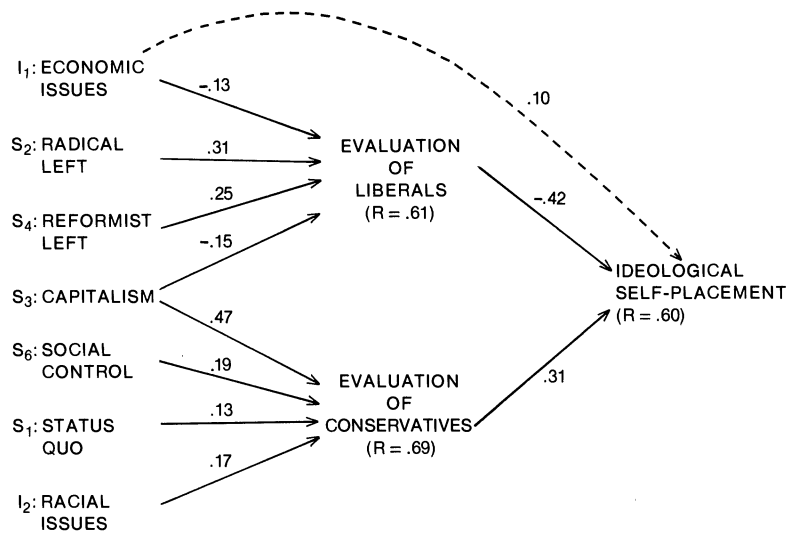
Meaning of Ideological Labels

Even though direct open-ended questions were rejected as a way of initially identifying the meaning of ideological labels, they are nonetheless useful in further testing the viability of our model. If conservatives and liberals really do view politics from different perspectives there should be some evidence of this in their self-definitions of ideological labels. To test this possibility, we examined the responses given to the following two questions in the 1978 CPS National Election Study:

¹¹The full nonrecursive path model was tested; only significant paths are reported.

FIGURE 3

Path Model Relating Symbolic Meaning Variables and Issue Positions to Evaluations of Liberals and Conservatives, and Ideological Self-Placement



NOTE: Coefficients are standardized regression weights; all are significant at the .05 level. Only significant paths are shown.

The correlations among the seven exogenous variables are:

	<i>S</i> ₂	<i>S</i> ₃	<i>S</i> ₄	<i>S</i> ₆	<i>I</i> ₁	<i>I</i> ₂
<i>S</i> ₁	.14	.43	.42	.46	.00	.07
<i>S</i> ₂		.03	.47	-.08	-.21	-.31
<i>S</i> ₃			.22	.44	.23	.13
<i>S</i> ₄				.25	-.30	-.48
<i>S</i> ₆					.09	.18
<i>I</i> ₁						.39

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 that someone's political views are liberal? And, what do you have in mind when you say that someone's political views are conservative?

For each question, up to three answers were coded for every respondent. The original coding scheme for these answers was reduced to 13 categories.¹² Then, for each of the two questions, 13 dummy variables were created which corresponded to the 13 coding categories; these 26 variables were coded "1" if the respondent used the category in *any* of his or her three responses, and "0" otherwise. The percentage of all respondents, of self-identified liberals, and of self-identified conservatives using each category is presented in Table 4; since some respondents gave more than one answer to each question, the column totals exceed 100 percent.

To begin, the percentage of respondents using various categories provides one way of assessing whether or not the aggregate meaning of ideological terms has a bipolar structure. As shown in Table 4, the ideological labels had some shared meaning for liberals and conservatives. Both groups tended to define both labels with reference to "change," "fiscal policies," and "New Deal policies." *At the same time, however, liberals and conservatives clearly emphasized different categories in their definitions*; there were significant differences between the two groups in their use of all but

¹²We found that 91.2 percent of all the responses on the "liberal" question and 93.9 percent of all the responses on the "conservative" question were codeable within these 13 categories. The rest of the responses were either uninterpretable or were very infrequently cited reasons. The following constitutes a representative sample of the CPS codes for each category:

- (1) CHANGE—acceptance/resistance to change, new ideas; slow/rash responses to problems; cautious, irresponsible;
- (2) RECENT SOCIAL ISSUES—abortion; birth control; women's rights; ERA;
- (3) EQUALITY—equal rights; elitist; special privileges;
- (4) CONCERN WITH PROBLEMS—sensitive to social problems, reform; interested/not interested in improving conditions;
- (5) GROUP REFERENCES—all people, working people, common people, middle class;
- (6) FISCAL POLICIES—government spending; too much spending; tight economic policies; sound money;
- (7) SOCIALISM/CAPITALISM—socialistic, welfare state; free enterprise, capitalism; big business; rich people;
- (8) NEW DEAL ISSUES—minimum wage; social security; health insurance; control of utilities; social welfare; poverty programs;
- (9) FOREIGN POLICY/NATIONAL SECURITY—peace/war; internationalist/isolationist; national defense;
- (10) BIG GOVERNMENT—centralized government; local government; local initiative;
- (11) LAW AND ORDER—hard line/soft line on law and order;
- (12) IDEOLOGICAL TERMS—radical; extreme; reactionary; far right; and
- (13) MINORITY GROUPS—minorities, black, racist, civil rights.

TABLE 4
Frequency Distribution of the Self-Defined Meaning of Ideological Labels^a

Category	Meaning of "Liberal"			Meaning of "Conservative"		
	All	Liberals	Conservatives	All	Liberals	Conservatives
Change	34.9%	52.3%**	23.5%	43.2%	56.8%**	35.5%
Recent Social Issues	7.6	12.7**	6.3	3.0	6.1**	2.4
Equality	4.1	7.5**	2.1	1.6	2.7**	.5
Concern with Problems	4.4	7.5**	3.4	3.1	4.8*	2.1
Group References	4.8	6.6*	3.7	3.9	3.2	3.7
Fiscal Policies	22.7	9.3	33.5**	28.2	12.2	41.8**
Socialism/Capitalism	9.4	7.5	14.7**	11.9	11.3	15.5*
New Deal Issues	14.4	10.9	22.1**	5.5	3.4	9.0**
Foreign Policy	4.0	2.3	7.1**	6.3	4.5	8.7**
Big Government	5.6	5.4	7.6	4.6	4.3	8.1*
Law & Order	3.3	2.3	5.3*	2.2	2.0	3.5
Ideolo. Terms	2.9	1.1	3.1*	2.7	1.8	2.4
Minority Groups	7.3	7.9	8.5	1.7	2.7	1.6
N =	1673	442	620	1673	442	620

^aEntries are the percentage of respondents mentioning that category; percentages total to greater than 100 percent because some respondents gave more than one answer to the question.

** = The difference between liberals and conservatives is significant at the .01 level, for that category and label.

* = The difference between liberals and conservatives is significant at the .05 level, for that category and label.

one category of meaning—minority groups. Thus, as expected, liberals and conservatives did have distinct perspectives on politics which were reflected in the structure of the meaning they lent ideological labels.

Furthermore, the content of the meaning of ideological labels revealed by this analysis accords nicely with our earlier analysis. First, in their definition of ideological labels, liberals made relatively greater use of four categories: “change,” “recent social issues,” “equality,” and “concern with problems.” Especially noteworthy is the finding that the liberal viewpoint was dominated by a concern with change; proportionately twice as many liberals as conservatives made reference to “change” and “recent social issues” such as abortion and ERA. This is quite consistent with our earlier finding that a positive reaction to liberals was a function of an attachment to the groups associated with rapid and moderate change in society—the symbols of the radical and reformist left. At the same time, liberals made some use of the various economic categories—“fiscal policies,” “socialism/capitalism,” and “New Deal issues”—thus, supporting our claim that the symbol of capitalism also influences the evaluations of liberals. But, it is critical to note that liberals made relatively much less use of such categories than conservatives: a finding that confirms our earlier conclusion that capitalism is considerably more important in defining the conservative, as opposed to liberal, perspective.

Turning to the conservatives, we find that they made relatively more references to four categories of meaning: “fiscal policies,” “socialism/capitalism,” “New Deal issues,” and “foreign policy.” In particular, the conservative viewpoint was heavily influenced by a strong focus on economic matters; proportionately three times as many conservatives as liberals made reference to “fiscal policies,” and twice as many conservatives mentioned “New Deal issues” such as minimum wages and social security. This is consistent with our finding that an attachment to the symbol of capitalism is the most critical factor in producing positive evaluations of conservatives. Similarly, the conservatives’ relatively greater use of the “foreign policy” and “law and order” categories supports our contention that the symbols of social control—the military and the police—are relatively more important in defining the conservative, as compared to the liberal, perspective. In summary, our examination of liberals’ and conservatives’ self-definition of the two major ideological labels strongly supports the conclusion of our earlier analysis. For the most part, liberals and conservatives do have distinct political perspectives which are not simply mirror images of one another.

Conclusions

In summary, in three important respects, our data analysis has provided support for our specification of the processes underlying the development of ideological self-identifications. First, although there may be some

reciprocal effects between the two, the data is consistent with our assumption that causality runs primarily from evaluations of ideological labels to self-identification. Not only do such evaluations have a strong impact on self-identification, but they also mediate almost all of the impact which issues and symbols have on such identifications. Furthermore, neither of the two major alternative models of the relationship between self-identifications and evaluations fits the data very well, nor are either of them theoretically consistent with a lack of bipolarity. Second, and related to our first point, three key findings run contrary to the traditional bipolar conception of ideological identifications: the absence of any strong negative correlation between evaluations of liberals and conservatives; the relationships of different symbols and issue stances to those evaluations; and the different emphasis which liberals and conservatives placed on various categories in their definitions of ideological terms. Finally, our analysis indicates that ideological labels, and consequently self-identifications, have largely symbolic, nonissue-oriented meaning to the mass public.

In addition to confirming our model, such findings have other implications as well. Methodologically, our findings suggest that Levitin and Miller's (1979) approach to measuring ideological identifications is simultaneously a step in the right and wrong directions. Recall, rather than relying solely on self-placement on the liberal/conservative continuum, they combine both evaluations of liberals and conservatives, and feelings of closeness towards these groups with self-placements in order to arrive at a measure of ideological identification. Such a measurement strategy is an improvement over previous ones in that it draws attention to and takes into account the strong evaluative meaning which our findings suggest is so important to understanding ideological self-identification. At the same time, however, we would argue that their combination of evaluations and self-placement into a single measure is based on an erroneous assumption: namely, that these variables are indicators of the same underlying construct. From our perspective, a more appropriate measurement technique would be one which maintains separate measures of evaluations and self-placement, and then examines, rather than assumes, the relationship between various combinations of the two. Thus, with respect to measurement strategies our work implies both that evaluations of ideological labels are important to understanding self-identifications, and that it is critical to maintain a conceptual distinction between the two.

Several other methodological implications stem from our finding that the meaning of ideological labels is largely based on symbols rather than issues. Specifically, this finding suggests that the common method of using the liberal and conservative labels as stimuli to measure ideological or issue-oriented thinking may be misleading. For the same reason, we should also be cautious of interpretations of political change which rely on shifts in

ideological identifications as an empirical indicator of changes in basic issue positions. Our findings imply that major shifts in the distribution of the public's ideological identifications are indicative of fundamental alterations in the symbolic meaning of politics, rather than major changes in issue orientations.

Our model and findings also have several theoretical implications. In particular, one of the major puzzles suggested by both the Levitin and Miller (1979) and Holm and Robinson (1978) studies is why ideological identifications have such an impact on vote choice, even though most voters encounter a great deal of difficulty in labeling which side of an issue is conservative and which is liberal. This is, perhaps, even more curious in a "nonideological" election like 1976 in which voters perceived more of a difference between Ford and Carter in their ideological identifications than on any specific issue position (Page, 1978, p. 98). From our perspective, the symbolic meaning underlying liberal/conservative identifications is the key to understanding these phenomenon. Specifically, even when information about candidates' issue positions is absent or very costly (Page, 1978), the symbolic cues associated with various groups and "easy issues" (Carmines and Stimson, 1980) should still be available. To the degree such symbols are linked to ideological identifications, voters may readily make inferences about the candidates which subsequently influence their evaluations and ultimately their vote choice. Thus, as traditionally argued and empirically confirmed, ideological identifications should act as cues or reference points in the evaluation of candidates. But, contrary to traditional expectations, the basis for these comparisons is largely symbolic, rather than issue oriented, and therefore, may occur in the absence of any true ideological conflict or debate between the candidates.

Similarly, our findings help to unravel the nature of the shared meaning binding together ideological and party identifications. Recall that Levitin and Miller (1979) suggested that such identifications share considerable meaning which, to a large extent, may not be issue based. Given our understanding of the nature of ideological identifications, we can now posit that such shared meaning is primarily symbolic in content. In effect, both party and ideological identifications may represent symbolic ties to the political world which overlap in their meaning. Some insight into the specific nature of this overlap is gained by reviewing the symbolic determinants of evaluations of liberals and conservatives. Specifically, evaluations of Republicans were a component of the capitalism scale—the symbol having the greatest impact on evaluations of conservatives. This suggests that positive evaluations of the conservative label are related to positive evaluations of Republicans, and thus there may be some tendency for self-identified Republicans to also identify themselves as conservatives. At the same

time, evaluations of Democrats did not fit into any of our symbolic-meaning scales. Consequently, with no direct symbolic link between evaluations of Democrats and evaluations of either liberals or conservatives, one might expect greater variation in the ideological identifications of Democrats. In fact, this is precisely what Levitin and Miller (1979) found: "Republicans were more homogeneous than Democrats in their ideological self-placement, and they were also much more often unqualified in their ideological commitments" (p. 757). Thus, based on our preliminary findings, we would argue that party and ideological identifications share a common meaning which centers around the symbol of capitalism.

Finally, one criticism of our empirical analysis is likely to be that the results are time bound: the symbolic meaning associated with the "liberal" and "conservative" terms is a consequence only of the recent conflicts and events of the 1960s. But, a closer look at our empirical analysis reveals a basis for drawing more general conclusions concerning the meaning of these terms. The nature of the major symbolic referents that defined each label—the reformist and radical left for liberals, and capitalism, social control, and the status quo for conservatives—indicates that the core symbolic meaning of these labels revolves around elements of "change vs. the preservation of traditional values." In general, liberals seem to favor change and progress even at the expense of government involvement; conservatives, on the other hand, wish to preserve traditional arrangements particularly those threatened by government involvement. This interpretation is somewhat broader than Converse's (1963) "spend-save" characterization of the differences between liberals and conservatives, although there are certainly elements of such a distinction in our analysis. Similarly, Robinson and Holm's (1980) recent description of liberals as being "pro-change" and conservatives as "antigovernment" is compatible with the broad lines of our own characterization.

Given this interpretation of the fundamental differences between liberals and conservatives, it can be argued that at any one point in time the major symbols of change and progress become associated with evaluations of liberals, while the symbols associated with the preservation of traditional values determine evaluations of conservatives. If this is in fact the case, then liberal/conservative identifications should always reflect in symbolic terms the dominant cleavages in society. This would account for the observed changes in the meaning of these terms over time (Erikson et al., 1980); as the cleavages evolve and change so do the symbolic referents associated with each term. Ideological self-identifications, therefore, may serve an important function for the public by providing a symbolic framework which simplifies societal conflicts. Furthermore, these core meanings of change and the preservation of traditional values do capture symbolically the gen-

eral, more ideological definitions typically associated with these terms. Thus, our analysis suggests that the public's usage of ideological labels is more a simplification than a distortion of reality, and that ideological identifications constitute more a symbolic than issue-oriented link to the political world.

Manuscript submitted 14 August 1980

Final manuscript received 22 December 1980

REFERENCES

- Asher, Herbert B. 1980. *Presidential elections and American politics*, 2nd ed. Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press.
- Brown, Steven R. 1970. Consistency and the persistence of ideology: some experimental results. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34 (Spring 1970): 60–68.
- Brown, Steven R., and Richard W. Taylor. 1973. Frames of reference and the observation of behavior. *Social Science Quarterly*, 54 (June 1973): 29–40.
- . 1972. Perspectives in concept formation. *Social Science Quarterly*, 52 (March 1972): 852–860.
- Carmines, Edward G., and James A. Stimson. 1980. The two faces of issue voting. *American Political Science Review*, 74 (March 1980): 78–91.
- Cobb, Roger W., and Charles D. Elder. 1973. The political uses of symbolism. *American Politics Quarterly*, 1 (July 1973): 305–339.
- . 1972. Individual orientations in the study of political symbolism. *Social Science Quarterly*, 53 (1972): 79–90.
- Conover, Pamela Johnston, and Stanley Feldman. 1980. Belief system organization in the American electorate. In John Pierce and John L. Sullivan, eds., *The electorate reconsidered*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Converse, Philip E. 1964. The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In David Apter, ed., *Ideology and discontent*. New York: Free Press.
- Coveyou, Michael R., and James Piereson. 1977. Ideological perceptions and political judgment: Some problems of concept and measurement. *Political Methodology*, 4 (Winter 1977): 77–102.
- Duncan, Otis D. 1975. *Introduction to structural equation models*. New York: Academic Press.
- . 1972. Unmeasured variables in linear models for panel analysis. In Herbert L. Costner, ed., *Sociological methodology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Edelman, Murray. 1964. *The symbolic uses of politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Erikson, Robert S., Norman R. Luttbeg, and Kent L. Tedin. 1980. *American public opinion: Its origins, content and impact*. New York: Wiley.
- Hamilton, David L. 1976. Cognitive biases in the perception of social groups. In John S. Carroll and John W. Payne, eds., *Cognition and social behavior*. Potomac, Md.: Erlbaum.
- Herzon, Frederick D. 1980. Ideology, constraint, and public opinion: The case of lawyers. *American Journal of Political Science*, 24 (May 1980): 232–258.
- Hicks, Jack M., and John H. Wright. 1970. Convergent-discriminant validation and factor analysis of five scales of liberalism-conservatism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 14 (February 1970): 114–120.

- Holm, John D., and John P. Robinson. 1978. Ideological identification and the American voter. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 42 (Summer 1978): 235–246.
- Jackson, Thomas H., and George Marcus. 1975. Political competence and ideological constraint. *Social Science Research*, 4 (June 1975): 93–111.
- Kerlinger, Fred N. 1972. The structure and content of social attitude referents: A preliminary study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 32 (1972): 613–630.
- . 1967. Social attitudes and their criterial referents: A structural theory. *Psychological Review*, 74 (March 1967): 110–122.
- Klingemann, Hans D. 1979a. Measuring ideological conceptualizations. In Samuel H. Barnes et al., eds., *Political action: Mass participation in five western democracies*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- . 1979b. Ideological conceptualization and political action. In Samuel Barnes et al., eds., *Political action: Mass participation in five western democracies*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.
- Knoke, David. 1979. Stratification and the dimensions of American political orientations. *American Journal of Political Science*, 23 (November 1979): 772–791.
- Lane, Robert E. 1973. Patterns of political belief. In Jeanne Knutson, ed., *Handbook of political psychology*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.
- . 1962. *Political ideology*. New York: Free Press.
- Levitin, Teresa E., and Warren E. Miller. 1979. Ideological interpretations of presidential elections. *American Political Science Review*, 73 (September 1979): 751–771.
- Luttbeg, Norman. 1968. The structure of beliefs among leaders and the public. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 32 (Fall 1968): 398–409.
- Maggiotto, Michael A., and James E. Piereson. 1977. Partisan identification and electoral choice: The hostility hypothesis. *American Journal of Political Science*, 21 (November 1977): 745–768.
- Marcus, George, David Tabb, and John L. Sullivan. 1974. The application of individual differences scaling to the measurement of political ideology. *American Journal of Political Science*, 18 (May 1974): 405–420.
- Miller, Arthur, Patricia Gurin, and Gerald Gurin. 1978. Electoral implications of group identification and consciousness: The reintroduction of a concept. Paper delivered at the 1978 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York, August 31–September 3, 1978.
- Miller, Arthur H., and Warren E. Miller. 1977. Partisanship and performance: “Rational” choice in the 1976 presidential election. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1977, Washington, D.C.
- Miller, Warren E., and Teresa E. Levitin. 1976. *Leadership and change: Presidential Elections from 1952–1976*. Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop.
- Page, Benjamin I. 1978. *Choices and echoes in presidential elections: Rational man and electoral democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robinson, John, and John Holm. 1980. Ideological voting is alive and well. *Public Opinion*, 3 (April/May 1980): 52–58.
- Sears, David O., Carl P. Hensler, and Leslie K. Speer. 1979. Whites’ opposition to “busing”: Self-interest or symbolic politics? *American Political Science Review*, 73 (June 1979): 369–384.
- Warr, Peter B., H. M. Schroder, and S. Blackman. 1969. The structure of political judgment. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 8 (February 1969): 32–43.
- Weisberg, Herbert F. 1980. A multidimensional conceptualization of party identification. *Political Behavior*, 2 (No. 1, 1980): 33–60.
- , and Jerrold G. Rusk. 1970. Dimensions of candidate evaluation. *American Political Science Review*, 64 (December 1970): 1167–1185.