



Symbolic ideology in the American electorate

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A B S T R A C T

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Ideological self-identification in the United States is well measured for the period 1970 to the present. Many survey measures are available and they are posed with considerable frequency and regularity. It is thus a relatively straightforward methodological exercise to combine them into a single measure of the American public's latent disposition to identify as liberal or conservative. What is problematic about this state of affairs is that the availability of these good measures occurs after a number of important changes in the American political context, changes that, we argue, have affected how Americans conceive of ideological terms and how scholars think about self-identification in the modern electorate. This paper seeks to measure and explain ideological self-identification in the time before modern survey research. We undertake an historical analysis of scattered pieces of public opinion data before 1970, assembling the pieces to build a time series of self-identification from 1937 to 2006. We then begin attempts at explaining the now observable, and often dramatic, changes in this series.

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1. Introduction

One of the central concepts of American political behavior, ideological self-identification is nearly indispensable to our understanding of the beliefs and choices of American citizens. Although most commonly used as an independent variable—where it is often called simply “ideology”—a great deal of work has been done explaining the micro-foundations of ideological self-identification and the ways in which it does and does not affect the political decisions that citizens make (see, e.g., Jennings, 1992; Knight, 1985; Jacoby, 1995). We know a good deal about the ways in which ideology can help to structure political belief systems and guide political choices (Stimson, 1975; Knight, 1985; Luttbeg and Gant, 1985), and about the considerable heterogeneity within the electorate with respect to the ability to understand and use ideological terms (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1987; Jacoby, 1995).

Although not as frequently studied as other important macro-level concepts such as partisanship or policy preferences, there also is a growing line of research examining ideological self-identification as an aggregate political phenomenon, exploring the causes and consequences of changes in macroideology and the relationship between macroideology and other important political variables (Robinson et al., 1988; Box-Steffensmeier et al., 1998; Box-Steffensmeier and DeBoef, 2001). But most research on ideological self-identification—especially aggregate self-identification—is limited to the period after the early 1970s, when rich, reliable survey data on ideological identifications became available. Claims about the nature of macroideology as a time series, about long-term trends in the ideological self-identification of the electorate (e.g., the often-noted phenomenon that Americans are becoming “more conservative” ideologically), and about the causes and consequences of changes in macroideology are thus restricted to this time period.

In this paper, we seek to examine the dynamics of ideological identification before regular academic surveys, looking to shed light on both the history of self-identification in

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the United States and how the landscape of ideological identification in the contemporary electorate has evolved. Our larger task, of which this paper is part, is coming to terms with the contradiction in American ideologies, a contradiction often seen in joint preferences for both conservative symbols and liberal policy action (Free and Cantril, 1967; Cantril and Cantril, 1999; Jacoby, 2000). We wish to understand why the American public, in the aggregate, supports “liberal” public policies of redistribution, intervention in the economy, and aggressive governmental action to solve social problems, while at the same time identifies with the symbols—and ideological label—that rejects these policies. At the individual level, we want to explain why so many individual citizens—as much a third of the electorate, depending on the measures employed—hold such “conflicted” operational and symbolic views. But before we can do that, we first must understand each of the pieces. The piece that concerns us in this paper is ideological self-identification—in particular, how the adoption of conservative self-images came to dominate American politics.

The principal problem that prevents such an understanding is that we have previously had access to good data on self-identification only since around 1970. We have observed a large “conservative” plurality—a majority of those who chose one of the two labels—despite the fact that citizens, by and large, hold left-of-center views on a variety of policy issues. We have speculated that things may once have been different, a “before” and “after” scenario when only the “after” is observed. Here we work to come to terms with the “before:” ideological self-identification in the decades before measures of it became routine. At the very least, we suspect that what happened before the 1970s has helped to shape the attitudes that Americans have both toward the “liberal” and “conservative” labels and to the ways in which citizens use these labels to pass judgment on candidates, parties, and policies.

This paper thus serves two purposes. The first is to delve into the “pre-history” of American public opinion research, before national academic surveys became commonplace, making sense of the diverse data that are available to develop a time-serial measure of ideological self-identification that extends well before the advent of modern survey research. The second is to use this series to point out critical shifts—and enduring themes—in American political ideology, and to suggest avenues of future research that will help to improve our understanding of self-identification in the American electorate.

2. Building a historical portrait of American ideology

Our central goals in this paper are to develop a measure of macroideology, the aggregate ideological identification of the American public, that extends well before the advent of modern survey research, and to use this measure to help inform our understanding of how Americans view and update their symbolic self-identifications. Given the limited time span of data with which most analysts of macroideology have had to work, it is important in its own right to build a richer picture of American ideological attitudes, tracing movements of self-identification over a broader time span. But, given a central feature of

American public opinion during the time span for which we do have reliable data—that Americans, in the aggregate, think of themselves as ideologically conservative while at the same time holding operationally liberal preferences on most issues of public policy—it is especially interesting to look further into the history of American ideological identification. This disconnect between operational and ideological attitudes is often noted at the aggregate level, and recent research has begun to develop more sophisticated individual-level explanations of it, attempting to isolate and explain the political attitudes of those who hold liberal policy preferences but preferences for conservative political symbols.

But for the 40 years for which we have data, this aggregate preference for ideological conservatism has always been the case. We ask whether this preference for the label “conservative” over “liberal” is an enduring feature of American political life, or whether it is a more recent phenomenon, created or exacerbated by political events or changes in the usage of ideological terms that occurred before we have access to good survey data. We wish to create a series that will shed light on this question, as well as help to answer questions regarding the causes and consequences of movements in macroideology more generally speaking.

Our first task is to build an annual time series of self-identification. Such a series provides the answer to the basic question, “how do Americans think of themselves?” For the last 40 years, that task is quite easy. Survey organizations, both academic and commercial, have been asking national samples of Americans how they see themselves in ideological terms with reliability, frequency, and regularity.

We have over 1700 such surveys for that 40 year span. Their question formats are reasonably similar, so that we can be relatively sure that—minor differences aside—these questions are tapping the same general concept of “liberal–conservative” self-identification. And they richly overlap in time so that any possible effects due to modest differences in question wording can be readily observed and taken into account in measurement. Next to perhaps presidential approval and partisanship, ideological self-identification is the best measured longitudinal construct in all of American politics.

Before 1968 is a different story entirely. Surveys that asked about ideological self-identification were rarer, and question formats were far less comparable among the surveys that did exist. For the period 1936–1967 we have found exactly 78 instances of organizations posing self-identification questions. They are of various formats, some not very similar to more modern queries. The different question formats have little overlap in time, so that whether or not they are measuring the same thing often becomes a matter of assumption rather than direct evidence. The earliest of these queries, Gallup work in the late 1930s, are posed to quota samples, so that it is something of a matter of faith that they accurately represent the U.S. population at the time.

We believe that there is good data in these series, and that we can use that data to provide reasonably reliable insight into self-identification in this period (and how it

compares to the more modern context). But the style of our analysis will accordingly be quite different. The good data of later years naturally yield a dimensional solution so that getting to a valid annual time series is a mechanical process. The survey data go into a dimensional algorithm and an annual time series emerges from it. For the years before 1968, our task will begin more in the style of anthropology. We pull any and all available data from a number of survey houses, using questions that get at the basic concept of how individuals orient themselves, using ideological language, to the political world. These data, too, need to be validated, tested, and run thorough an algorithm to produce a coherent, longitudinal measure. But because of the often substantial differences between the wording of these questions and the wording of more modern queries, developing a substantive understanding of these questions and their underlying properties is more difficult.

We, of course, much prefer the simple measurement technology and consistent question wording of the later years. But then a full story of the emergence of left–right ideology in American politics could not be told, because much of that story unfolded before the good measures became available. Thus we will do our best with both kinds of evidence, putting together a 70 year time series, part of which is rock solid and part of which will require readers to believe some assumptions we make to patch together the scattered data that exist. We begin with the analysis of shards.

3. Liberalism and conservatism during the new deal era: some basic evidence

While the American public was ratifying the “New Deal” by giving Franklin D. Roosevelt the then biggest landslide victory in modern American electoral history in 1936, the Gallup organization fielded the first—at least the first that we know of—query about self-identification. A national sample was asked in May of 1936, “If there were only two political parties in this country—Conservative and Liberal—which would you join?”

The question is a strange one, at least from the perspective of the 21st Century. And ultimately we are unable to include it in our series to come, because it is asked in this form only one time, making it impossible to sort out how comparable its dynamics are to other, differently worded, questions. We present it here because it is the first question asked about ideological self-identification, and (see Table 1), because it tells us something important about ideology in the time of the New Deal. It tells us that “liberal,” FDR’s preferred term for those whose supported his programs, was unable to gain majority

support in the months just before FDR produced his crushing victory over Alf Landon and conservatism.

Thus begins a pattern, continued to the present day, in which the name for an ideology which supports highly popular programs is itself unpopular. Knowing of FDR’s landslide, and knowing that the election was contested largely over the New Deal programs of spending and social welfare that party elites then and now associate with the label of political “liberalism,” we would have expected a support for “the liberal party” something like the actual support for FDR. It was certainly more popular than in the modern context, where, ‘conservative’ is preferred to ‘liberal’ by nearly a 2-to-1 margin. But it was still a loser.

4. Ideological self-identification: 1936–1967

4.1. *The raw materials*

Our search for queries about ideological self-identification, broadly construed, produced 78 usable items in the span 1936–1970, almost two per year on average.² They come from a variety of survey houses, all of which attempted to get at the ideological thinking of American citizens in diverse ways. It is from these questions that we begin our task of developing a longitudinal measure of ideological self-identification. The questions are of five general types, each of which, from different approaches, attempt to understand how Americans orient themselves to the political world using ideological language.

4.1.1. *Administration*

These questions use the language of “liberalism” and “conservatism” to ask about the direction that particular administrations should follow. Example: “Should President Roosevelt’s second Administration be more liberal, more conservative, or about the same as his first?” This taps ideological preference, but of course relative to where the administration is now. Since most of this series is about FDR, it makes sense to use only FDR questions and not introduce the bias of having different responses to different presidents.

This series of questions, asked by Gallup in 1936–1938 and by ORC once each for Eisenhower (1957) and Johnson (1964) paint a picture of preference for more liberal government as exactly even with conservative preferences in 1936 and then declining substantially thereafter. (See Fig. 1).³ The last two points in the series are asked about different presidents in a quite different context, with an almost 20 year gap in the middle. We present them for descriptive interest, but assuming comparability here is not reasonable and we shall not do so for purposes of developing the longitudinal measure.

Table 1

“Which Party Would You Join?,” Gallup, May, 1934. “If there were only two political parties in this country—Conservative and Liberal—which would you join?”

Liberal	47%
Conservative	53%

Source: Gallup Organization, May 11–May 16, 1936. *N* = 1500 (approx.).

² Some are split half samples from the same survey, so the actual number of observed occurrences is smaller than 78.

³ Figure notes: In this and figures to come we graph the percent giving the liberal response divided by the number choosing either liberal or conservative. Thus 50 is the natural neutral point where sentiment is equal in both directions. Also note that these are line graphs with considerable gaps in between survey years, so that the spacing of years on the horizontal axis is very uneven.

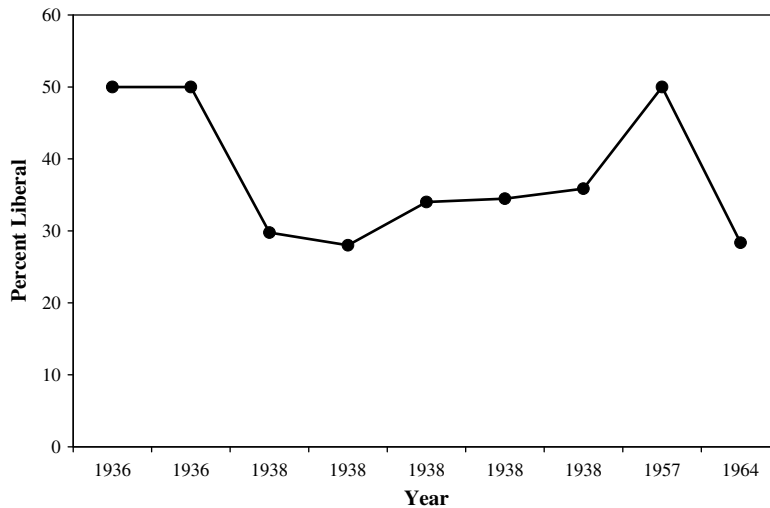


Fig. 1. The Administration Series: 1936–1964.

4.1.2. “Go left”

These (Gallup) questions ask respondents what “government”—or sometimes newly elected presidents—should do. Example: “Which of these three policies would you like to have President (Harry) Truman follow: 1. Go more to the left, by following more of the views of labor and other liberal groups? 2. Go more to the right, by following more of the views of business and conservative groups? 3. Follow a policy half-way between the two?” These differ from the Administration series in that they are not relative to current ideology and policy. This series spans 1945–1979, Truman to Carter, but with big gaps in that span Fig. 2.

The “Go left” series is the only question form which uses the more abstract, and somewhat European, “left” and “right” to define the ideological terms. The evidence is thin, but the definitions appear to aid the liberal cause a bit. The phrase “labor and other liberal groups” gives this term a labor- and economic-issues related context that we know it often lacks (Conover and Feldman, 1981). In the modern

context, we know the term “liberal” from its more pejorative connotations in both political- and non-political situations (recklessness, elitist, lacking standards), not from its political connotations that explicitly link it to policies that favor labor, taxation, and redistribution (Sears and Citrin, 1985). Apparently, orienting “liberal” to “labor” and “conservative” to “business” connects the ideological symbols to the more familiar material of party images. Even here, though, the term “liberal” fails to gain consistent majority support.

4.1.3. Identification

These are minor variations on the more familiar self-identification questions asked in the more modern context. Example: “In politics, do you regard yourself as a radical, a liberal, or a conservative?”

The identification questions are by far the most similar to modern self-identification probes asked in major academic and commercial surveys. We will exploit that

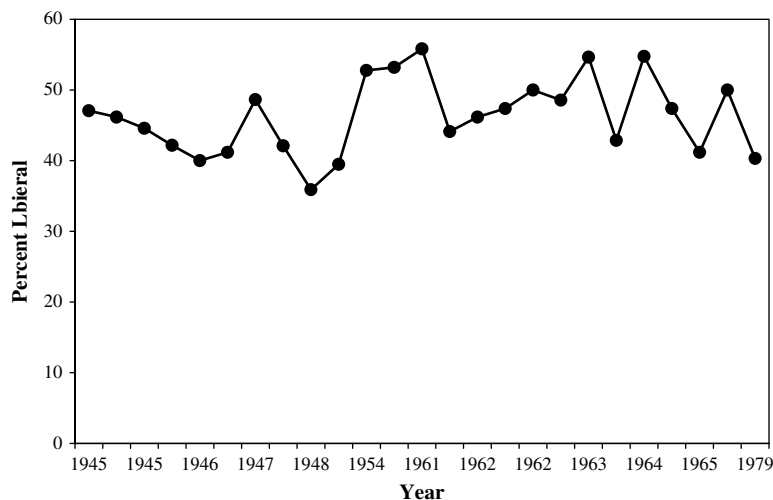


Fig. 2. The “Go left” Series: 1945–1979.

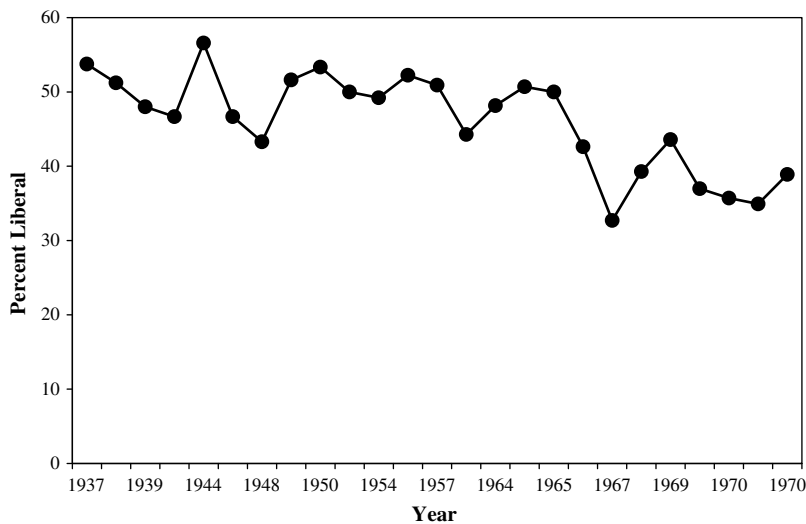


Fig. 3. The "Ident" Series: 1937–1970.

similarity when the time comes to link old to new estimates. As with some of the other series, we can see a break after 1964–65 (see Fig. 3) in which the level of self-identified liberalism appears to undergo a permanent decline. We will return to that issue when we have a clean final series in hand.

4.1.4. Party to join

These are hypothetical questions about what a respondent would do if the party system had one pure liberal party and one conservative one. They are asked for the period 1936–1978. Example: "Suppose there were only two major parties in the United States, one for liberals and one for conservatives, which one would you be most likely to prefer?"

The hypothetical "Which party would you join" series is seen in Fig. 4. It traces a relatively smooth path from 1936 through 1964 and then, like many of the others, drops off to a new lower level.

4.1.5. Preference

These are preferences for future outcomes. Example: "Which type of man would you prefer to have elected President in November (1944)—one who is known as liberal, or one who is known as conservative?" The modern versions of this question concern the Supreme Court and come after the 1968 Nixon campaign politicized the Court's ideological balance. We are uncomfortable about them, but will explore their properties.

The Preference series seems more gap than data with one reading in the 1940s, one in the 1950s, and then three closely spaced in the late 1960s. (See Fig. 5.) This series also shows a drop-off to a new lower level at some time in the middle 1960s.

These scraps of data are our fossils and shards. The task we now face is putting them together to see if we can extract common movement over time from these disparate items. The parallelism that we see in their behavior is encouraging evidence that we can.

4.2. Putting them all together

Before constructing our full series, we wish to see if we can estimate a single, coherent measure of self-identification for 1936–1970 from these five pieces. A first task is to decide what to use and what not to use. That decision is to use four of the five scraps, but not the Administration series. It is non-comparable because it asks about different presidents in the first place and then even the Roosevelt data for 1936 and 1938 cannot be used because the questions include a middle category, "stay about the same," for 1936 but not 1938.

In a quite exploratory fashion we ask if the four scraps move in parallel to one another and are therefore believable indicators of the underlying concept, self-identification. To answer that question we perform an exploratory dimensional analysis of the four for the period 1936–1970.⁴ The result is reported in Table 2.

There we see that the "Go to Left" measure is somewhat different than the other three, but has enough common variance to merit inclusion. It is much less variable than the other three, not showing the large movements displayed by the others in the 1940s and 1960s. Perhaps the connection to labor and business keeps it steady while the unanchored connotations of "liberal" and "conservative" fluctuate with the issues and groups of the times. But despite the divergent wording and framing of the four series, they all share considerable variance over time, suggesting that they are, at least in general terms, tapping the same concept of liberal–conservative identification.

The estimated series is pictured in Fig. 6, which displays the estimated latent series (as a solid line) superimposed upon the data points which produced the estimate. What

⁴ This analysis, and the resulting time series, is created using Stimson's (1999) dimensional analysis algorithm, designed to extract latent dimensions from time series of survey marginals in situations where not all survey questions are administered at all points in time.

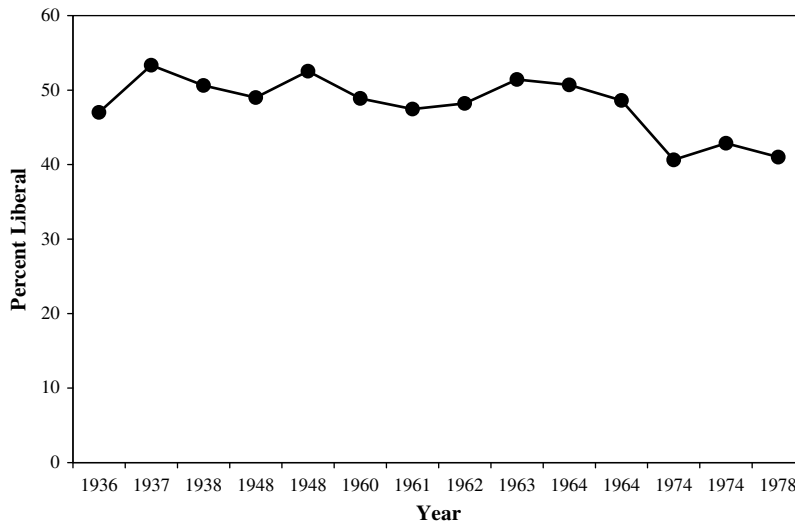


Fig. 4. The "Join" Series: 1936–1978.

one wishes to see in such a display is that the estimation of the latent variable has not been too creative, that the summary measure looks reasonably like the data which produced it.

There is one movement in Fig. 6 which is very suspicious, the sharp increase in liberal identification between 1936 and 1937. This is a data comparability problem, which we alluded to earlier. The estimate is driven by a single data point with non-comparable coding. In further work we will drop that case and start the series in 1937. Other movements in the graph correspond both to the raw data and to what we know about the historical context. One can see a very large drop in liberal identification in the mid to late 1960s, which we have seen before in the individual series. And there is a large temporary drop in about 1946. We know from the history of congressional elections that 1946

and 1966 marked the largest congressional election losses to that time of the then dominant New Deal coalition. So we are not surprised to see a turn away from liberal identification at the same times.

In all, the performance of the dimensional solution is reassuring. We can estimate self-identification with some confidence for this period before the time when measures became abundant. The remaining measurement task is to solve for a series that covers the entire 70 year span.

5. A complete series

We now have two series, 1937–1970 and 1968–2006. The former is the series that we have developed above. The latter is the more commonly used series of macroideology, comprised of more-or-less regular questions about



Fig. 5. The Preference Series: 1944–1970.

Table 2
Dimensional factor loadings for 1936–1970 ideology items.

Variable	Years Available	Loading
"Go to left"	11	0.36
"Identification"	17	0.96
"Party to join"	9	0.68
"Preference"	5	0.96
Total estimated explained variance: 61.4%		

ideological self-identification since the late 1960s, developed in Box-Steffensmeier et al. (1998), (see also Erikson et al., 2002).⁵ What we want is one continuous series covering the entire span. To get there we require one more assumption.

None of the five "pre-history" series is continued in identical form after measurement of self-identification became abundant at the end of the 1960s. But we can bridge the gap by relaxing a little bit the idea of identical. Given the strong longitudinal covariation of quite different measures that we have seen with the older data and will see again with the newer and better materials, we are comfortable not demanding that the questions be identical to be comparable. An opportunity to bridge the gap presents itself in assuming continuity between what we have called the Identification series:

In politics, do you regard yourself as a liberal or conservative?

and a newer Gallup question:

Taking everything into account would you say that you, yourself, are more of a liberal or more of a conservative in politics?

posed to national samples from 1969 to 1987. That amounts essentially to assuming that the lead-in phrase, "Taking everything into account" does not materially affect the response. We see no reason to think that it should.

With this assumption, we have overlap between old and new and it becomes possible to estimate a dimensional solution for the entire time span. For data we have the universe of survey research questions on self-identified ideology from 1937 to 2006. These are 1741 individual reports of national percentage marginal results forming 18 separate question series: 3 "older" series, 14 newer ones, and one combined series.

Overall, the data are exceptionally rich. Using the same dynamic dimensional extraction technique that we use to create the series from the older data, we combine all of our self-identification questions into a single analysis. We present information on the structure of a solution for ideological self-identification in Table 3, with variables

(question series) arranged by the number of years coverage they provide.⁶

The relatively modest estimate of explained variance of 52% and some smallish loadings both have to do with the same phenomenon, that many self-identification questions were first posed in the last decades of the time span when the series is close to a flat line. If true variance is minute, expected longitudinal correlations will be the same. When self-identification was actually substantially changing, all the question forms picked up the change, producing strong loadings.

The goal of all this effort is seen in Fig. 7, where we present the estimated series of self-identification from the 1930s into the 21st Century. The growth of conservatism and the decline of liberalism are both widely assumed in popular commentary. We find some support for that story, especially when considering the broad sweep of 20th century history. But while there is a decline in liberal identification, there is no support for the extreme version of this story, that liberals were once a ruling majority. The decline of liberal self-identification is an obvious impression of Fig. 7, but it is important to note that it is a decline from minority status, averaging around 44% of those who declared themselves either liberal or conservative, to a smaller minority status, about 35% in recent years.

5.1. The liberal majority?

We know that Americans hold operationally liberal preferences on a wide variety of political issues, especially on issues of spending and social welfare that alone defined the party system for much of the 20th century. But were Americans ever *symbolically* liberal? There are no more than a scattering of polls that seem to suggest it. One can find polls in which there are more self-declared liberals than conservatives, 18 of them to be exact, the highest of which, a NORC poll of 1944, has liberals at 57%.⁷ But that is by no means the dominant story: one can also find 52 surveys in the period before 1970 where liberals are the minority, with numbers that range down to the upper twenties. A simple average of all surveys before the abrupt break of 1966 has self-declared liberals at 46.8%—a large minority to be sure, but still a minority.

Nor is it the case that there is a particular brief era when liberalism reigned. The 18 surveys with liberal majorities are scattered over four decades, surrounded in each by more numerous samplings in which there are conservative majorities. The "liberal" identification has never been truly dominant in American politics, even when Democratic policymakers, making sweeping changes in the size and scope of the welfare state, were regularly winning elections. In the current era, with relatively evenly split political parties and closely contested elections, the "liberal" identification never comes close to majority status—even during

⁵ These questions, though their wording varies slightly, generally ask respondents directly about their own general ideological orientation—e.g., "How would you describe yourself on most political matters? Generally, do you consider yourself as liberal, moderate, or conservative?"; "Now, thinking politically and socially, how would you describe your own general outlook—as being very conservative, moderately conservative, middle-of-the-road, moderately liberal, or very liberal?";

⁶ The question series are named for the organization that first used a particular question or used it most often. But the data include the probes of other organizations when they have used the same questions.

⁷ There are also 8 polls in which the numbers of liberals and conservatives are equal.

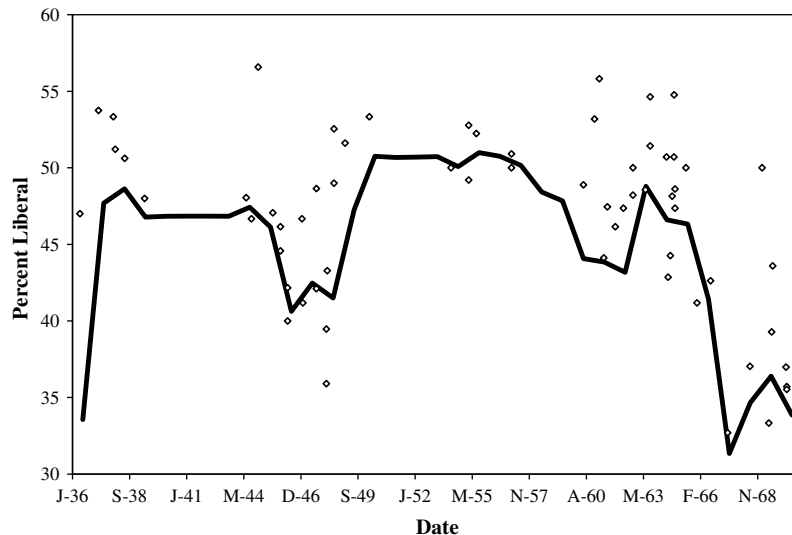


Fig. 6. Self-identification, 1936–1970: Actual Data Points and Estimated Series.

times when opinions for public policy tilt fairly far to the left. Further, the preference for the “liberal” label over the “conservative” one has been steadily declining since at least the 1970s, even while preferences for specific ‘liberal’ policies—not to mention “liberal” political candidates—have vacillated, but have not trended downward, during this time period.⁸

6. Explanations for growing conservative identification

Everything to this point has been measurement. We turn now to the task of explaining movements in self-identification. We first pause to consider the properties of our time series. It is, to begin, notably data rich. Something on the order of two million people have contributed their assessments of where they stand on ideology over the 70 year span. That data richness shows in the crisp patterns of Fig. 7. Not only is the decline dramatic in the mid-1960s—we’ll set it at 1966—but even the year to year

movements after that are highly patterned. What one does not see, even in the earlier series, is the year to year zig-zag pattern which is the signature of sampling error. When the series moves left or right in one year, that is, it is very likely to continue in that direction the next year and the year after that. To be sure, these data originate in survey samples and sampling error must be present. It is just very small relative to true variation. Thus, if we do not succeed in explaining this systematic variation, it will be because we lack theoretical imagination, not because it is not, in principle, explainable.

We have two sorts of explanatory problems to deal with in this series. The obvious one is why liberalism was once a near majority and has since declined precipitously, to a level closer to half the numbers of self-described conservatives. Given the demonstrated role that elite framing of ideological terms has on ideological self-identification for at least large subsets of the American electorate (Jacoby, 2000), the reasons for the initial unpopularity—and, just as importantly, the steadily decreasing popularity—of the liberal label (and vice-versa for the conservative label) have their roots in the political context.

The second problem is to explain the back and forth movements in shorter time spans. These are movements of three or four or five points, but much too systematic to ascribe to chance. We have good theory that works to explain year-over-year vacillations in public opinion on specific policy issues (Erikson et al., 2002; Wlezien, 1995), and we will bring that theory to bear here.

7. Ideological symbols in the modern electorate

In this section, we attempt to explain movements in ideological self-identification over time, in particular trying to explain the decline in “liberal” ideological self-identification throughout the latter half of the 20th century. The explanation is not as simple as saying that a decline in

⁸ Our explanatory problem has been constructed using the standard definition of macroideology: the proportion of self-declared liberals in America, relative to the numbers of self-declared conservatives. But we also ask whether we have really two phenomena, why people choose to identify as liberals and why others choose to identify as conservatives. Is one the complement of the other, or do we need separate theories for liberal and conservative identifications? To answer that question we have also estimate separate series for proportions of citizens who identify as “liberal” and “conservative” over time. These series (available upon request) show a strange parallelism in the early decades, with the numbers of liberals and conservatives rising and falling in parallel, probably reflecting the early tradition in commercial surveys of attempting to force respondents into categories even when they indicated unwillingness to choose. When respondents are given more freedom to choose a “moderate” option or to not answer, then the series diverge in ways that make intuitive sense, with the percent choosing “liberal” rising as the percent choosing “conservative” falls, and vice-versa. This is the principal reason for using relative percents as our explanatory variable. They are not similarly subject to manipulation by such devices.

Table 3
Dimensional factor loadings for 1936–2006 ideology series.

Variable	Years Available	Loading
CBS/New York Times	26	0.81
Michigan/NES/GSS	25	0.75
NBC/Wall Street Journal	21	0.08
ABC/Washington Post	20	0.12
Gallup (format 4)	19	0.77
Roper	19	0.79
Gallup (format 1)	18	0.96
Harris (format 2)	16	0.65
Go to left	12	0.57
Gallup (format 3)	11	0.91
Gallup (format 2)	10	0.78
Party to Join	10	0.84
Yakelovitch (format 2)	10	0.92
Preference	7	0.48
Harris (format 1)	6	0.89
Gorden Black/USA Today	5	0.46
Yakelovitch (format 1)	5	0.78
NORC	3	0.98
Estimated Explained Variance: 52.0%		

“liberalism” more broadly defined has driven this shift: the decline in liberal identification has occurred even as support for “liberal” policies (and, in many cases, support for liberal candidates for office) remained relatively stable over the time period in which we are interested (see e.g., [Stimson, 1999](#)). Instead, our argument is that a series of events changed the ways in which citizens approach the terms “liberal” and “conservative” themselves, irrespective of their implications for the substance of public policy. As a result of these changes, many citizens moved away from the “liberal” label for reasons other than its implications for the whole of policy conflict.

It is clearly not novel to suggest that the mass public's ability to understand political conflict in abstract ideological terms and to relate those terms to their own political belief system is not high ([Jacoby, 1986](#); [Luskin, 1987](#)). Citizens often cannot discern the “liberal” or “conservative” positions on issues, and often misunderstand how these

labels apply to political parties and candidates ([Luttbeg and Gant, 1985](#)). Even among those who understand the meaning of ideological terms, the tendency to use ideological labels to structure issue preferences is weak ([Jacoby, 1995](#)). It is clear that in the mass public, the link between ideology and issue preferences is tenuous at best.

We might expect, then, that many citizens form and report ideological self-identifications that are more-or-less random, essentially unconnected with other political beliefs (and surely, many citizens do). But in the aggregate, we know these responses are not random: the ideological label “conservative” dominates despite demonstrated preferences for operational liberalism. This suggests that many citizens, at least, are forming ideological self-identifications for reasons that are *systematically* different from what would be expected given their preferences on the underlying dimensions of political conflict. We argue that these reasons are grounded in the ways in the terms “liberal” and “conservative” themselves are used in modern political discourse, and by extension, the types of things that citizens are thinking about when reacting to these ideological terms.

We shall provide a bit of historical commentary intended to highlight basic facts of the self-identification series and then finish with a statistical exercise that more directly models the changes that we observe. The analysis here is, to be sure, very basic. We offer them not because they provide the last word in understanding the dynamics of self-identification, but because they illustrate a first attempt to use changes in the political context to explain why American symbolic attitudes have changed as they have.

8. Explaining the dynamics of ideological identification

8.1. FDR and the politics of the 1930s

We know the term “liberal” has a very long history, but with a quite different—almost opposite—connotation,



Fig. 7. Ideological Self-identification: 1937–2006.

support for freedom from government intervention in all matters. So how did a program of activist government intervention in the economy become “liberalism?” Franklin D. Roosevelt is at the center of an answer. We know that his pre-presidential views were strongly shaped by the “progressivism” of his illustrious ancestor Theodore. He took “progressive” to mean a propensity to action, that when problems arose, it was government’s obligation to identify them and then act decisively to resolve them.

Thus when FDR assumed the presidency, he did what came naturally in fashioning an intensive effort by the national government to deeply involve itself in a broken American economy. The doctrine, from his campaign slogan, was “The New Deal.” And people who were part of that program, or supported it, became “New Dealers.” Roosevelt apparently was in search of a term for this program, one which would embed it in American traditions—even though it was a departure from tradition in almost every regard—and also one that stayed well clear of the “isms” that were already ominously gaining force on the European stage at the time.

FDR hit upon “liberal” for its positive association with freedom and for its absence of any link with the socialism and communism that were threatening and unpopular in American opinions. And thus a novel term for a belief in activist government involvement in the economy, and activist in particular in support of those most in need, the poor, became part of the American lexicon. Roosevelt called himself, his ideas, and his programs “liberal,” which he contrasted to the views of their opponents, “conservative.”

We have FDR’s words from a 1938 “fireside chat” where he discusses the words themselves:

In the coming primaries in all parties, there will be many clashes between two schools of thought, generally classified as liberal and conservative. Roughly speaking, the liberal school of thought recognizes that the new conditions throughout the world call for new remedies. Those of us in America who hold to this school of thought, insist that these new remedies can be adopted and successfully maintained in this country under our present form of government if we use government as an instrument of cooperation to provide these remedies. We believe that we can solve our problems through continuing effort, through democratic processes instead of Fascism or Communism. ...

Be it clearly understood, however, that when I use the word “liberal,” I mean the believer in progressive principles of democratic, representative government and not the wild man who, in effect, leans in the direction of Communism, for that is just as dangerous as Fascism.

The opposing or conservative school of thought, as a general proposition, does not recognize the need for Government itself to step in and take action to meet these new problems. It believes that individual initiative and private philanthropy will solve them—that we ought to repeal many of the things we have done and go back, for instance, to the old gold standard, or stop all this business of old age pensions and unemployment insurance, or repeal the Securities and Exchange Act, or let monopolies thrive unchecked—return, in effect, to

the kind of Government we had in the twenties. ... [Fireside Chat, June 24th, 1938]⁹

We know that some large proportion of those who tuned into the fireside chats bought into the idea of liberalism, but somewhat fewer than those who supported Roosevelt. The liberal label failed to gain majority support under Roosevelt, but the percentage of citizens that called themselves “liberal” was much higher than it is now—in the 1930s nearly half of all citizens who chose an ideological label identified as liberals. That number would survive almost unchanged through World War II, the tense early years of the Cold War, and through the quiescent 1950s. And then it, along with the meaning of the ideological term in the eyes of the mass public, started changing again.

8.2. LBJ and the “Less Than Great Society”

We know with some precision *that* something happened in the 1960s to dramatically affect the percentages of citizens who identified with the “liberal” label, and we know with some precision *when*. The *why* will require more speculation. Between 1963, when the Kennedy assassination made Lyndon Johnson president and 1967, the third year of LBJ’s Great Society, the ranks of self-identified liberals fell by 10.5 points—about one fourth—and never recovered. That movement would have been huge had it been temporary. As a permanent shift it is a dominant story of American politics in the Twentieth Century. It goes directly to the heart of the modern phenomenon we now work to explain—the disdain for the “liberal” label despite the popularity of many “liberal” social programs.

In the transition year from Kennedy to Johnson, 1963–1964, the ranks of self-identified liberals declined by 1.5 points. That is larger than typical year to year movements, but not so large as to be remarkable. From 1964, while LBJ was winning landslide reelection, to 1965, there was another drop of 1.4. After 1965, when the 89th Congress set about passing everything in Johnson’s “Great Society” package, the drop was more remarkable, another 2.4 points—on top of the previous 2.9. And then in 1967 came a really big drop, 5.2 points, the largest one year movement in the history of the series. That marked the end of “liberalism” as a competitive ideological force, and the beginning of the modern pattern where those who are in fact liberals try assiduously to avoid the label. John Kennedy would not be the last liberal president. But he would be the last who would call himself a liberal.

That leaves us wondering what precisely happened. We know what was going on in American politics at the time. It was a busy decade. The Kennedy assassination rocked the nation and produced an accidental president in Lyndon Johnson. But of course Johnson was no longer accidental after reelection by a landslide vote one year later.

That landslide itself might figure in the explanation. It produced a Democratic Congress with, for the first time, a solid liberal majority. That majority, spurred on by an

⁹ From The American Presidency Project, americanpresidency.org.

ambitious White House, was ready to manufacture legislation in mass quantity. The Democratic Congress had a solid liberal majority in each committee and on the floors of both houses. After years of compromises with the Republicans and the southern wing of the Democratic Party, there would be no compromise—and essentially no conservative participation—in the 89th Congress. Legislation written in the White House would whisk through Congress, often unchanged.

That legislation would include a Medicare program that was popular from the start and a lasting legacy to Johnson. And too it included an historic voting rights bill that put an end to a hundred years of deliberate political exclusion of African Americans. But that was just the beginning. Lyndon Johnson had produced a program called the “Great Society” which was a radical extension of the “liberalism” popularized by FDR in the New Deal. The Great Society would reach beyond the “common man” who had been the focus of the New Deal to bring benefits and political voice to an underclass of Americans who lived below the common standard.

The Poverty Program, as it would come to be called, focused particularly on the urban poor. Not merely a package of benefits, it was intended to allow the poor to organize for their own benefit. Community Action Programs directed immense amounts of Federal money to urban areas and set up governance over that spending by boards that largely excluded local public officials and called for “maximum feasible participation” of the poor. It would be empowerment by conflict, and the conflict was not long in coming. In city after city there would be a struggle for control of the CAP’s by poor people and their representatives which featured, not surprisingly, an absence of political skill and a great deal of anger. It was a largely unappealing show, all financed by Federal dollars.¹⁰

The 1960s produced a revolution of rising expectations of the urban poor, and particularly the Black urban poor. With the Federal government enlisted in the cause of black civil rights and then seeking to eliminate poverty in America, there was reason to think that the future would be brighter than a bleak past. It was debatable whether community action programs would ever significantly improve the lives of the urban poor. But certainly they had not done so by the summer of 1965, while they were still the subject of congressional action, or by 1966, when they were too new and too small to matter much. The rising expectations and the absence of real change in the urban ghettos aided sometimes by brutal local police behavior, produced race riots in a great many American cities in the summers of 1965 and 1966.

The riots were a body shock to American politics, events which were not unprecedented in American history but certainly were without precedent in the television age. The televised images were ugly, showing human behavior at its worst. The collapse of civil order in the face of angry mobs was a picture of America coming apart at the seams. Quite

probably they are a big part of the story of declining support for the idea of liberalism as well.

8.3. *The new clientele of liberalism*

The end result of the Great Society era was a change in the type of citizen that the public associated with the “liberal” label. The liberalism of the New Deal had for clients the working people of America: “the common man.” Thus liberalism was conjoined with pictures of workers, often unionized and almost always white, hard-working people, playing by the rules, and trying to get ahead. It is hard to imagine an image better suited to politics than being with and for the common man. With the coming of the Great Society there was a new clientele of liberalism, the poor—and the non-white. The focus of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty was the underclass of people whose usual defining characteristic was that they did not work. And although there were—and are—more poor white people than black people, the image of poverty from the very beginning was black.¹¹

Kellstedt (2000, 2003) documents the rapid changes in media framing of government spending and “the poor” in the mid-1960s, showing that after around 1965, the framing of major media coverage of poverty changed markedly, with dramatically increasing numbers of references to “black poverty,” “ghettos,” and other images that changed how Americans viewed both poverty and government spending to alleviate it. This change in framing served to fuse in the American mind government spending, the welfare state, and a largely unsympathetic portrait of a largely non-white underclass.¹² If one asks whose face was seen in stories about poverty of that time, it was the Black single mother who lived on public assistance. The “welfare mom” affected attitudes of entitlement (See (Gilens, 2000) for documentation of the Black face of poverty and welfare.) If liberalism was about improving the lives of welfare moms, large numbers of Americans were willing to reject the label. “Welfare” itself, meaning public assistance to families with children, stands out among public programs for its unpopularity. If “liberal” came to mean someone who wanted more welfare, then it was doomed to be unpopular.

The symbolism that came to surround the Great Society thus helped to produce the dramatic operational-symbolic disconnect in American political attitudes that we take as a constant today. New Deal-type spending, redistribution, and social welfare policies enjoyed—and largely, still enjoy—majority support among American citizens.

¹¹ Blacks were disproportionately likely to be poor, but at only about ten percent of the population, that disproportion was not large enough to overcome the small numbers.

¹² Importantly, Kellstedt also shows that despite the fact that media mentions of black poverty declined sharply after this particularly contentious time in American politics, attitudes toward racial attitudes and the welfare state, separate domains during the pre 1960’s era, continued to be viewed as one and the same by the electorate through the rest of the 20th century. This suggests that whatever happened in the late 1960s to change how Americans thought about the relationships between race, poverty, and ideological “liberalism” persisted even after the 1960s.

¹⁰ This is chronicled in a highly critical appraisal by scholar and later U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1969).

Preferences for particular issues of public policy generally come from individuals' reactions to the specific program social goal in question (Jacoby, 2000), and most of the specific social goals that were either a part of or grew out of the Great Society—better education, Medicare and public health, public works, social security, and even economic security for citizens willing to work—remain popular. But ideological self-identification is formed largely as a reaction to symbols associated with the ideological labels themselves (Conover and Feldman, 1981). The symbols and images of the “Fireside Chat” “liberalism” were changed irreconcilably in the 1960s.

8.4. *The Vietnam war*

The war in Vietnam was a dramatic and painful experience in American life. It has all the hallmarks of an explanation for substantial ideological change save one, timing. The story is plausible in many respects. The war, for example, produced widespread liberal opposition to the foreign policy of the United States for the first time. Liberals could not be accused of lack of patriotism when, for example, they ardently supported the foreign policies of presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy. “Liberal” is associated with protests in the streets before Vietnam, but not the ragtag disorder of what Vietnam protests later became.

The problem with a Vietnam hypothesis to explain declining liberalism is that the events that plausibly could have produced large-scale change largely occurred after about 1968, when the shift away from liberal identification had already occurred. To be sure there were events in say 1965–66. The acceleration of the war and the first use of regular Army (which is to say, draftees) occurred in 1965. But one needs to remember that the war was initially popular, the nascent antiwar movement largely an intellectual debate on the sidelines of American politics. And it was Lyndon Johnson, the liberal president, who was the number one symbol of hard line support for the war.

The beginning of a visible antiwar movement among liberals came with Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign in 1968. It becomes substantial when Robert Kennedy, a more central image of American liberalism, entered the fray. And it dominated the airwaves with first protests during the Democratic convention of 1968 and later a string of Washington protests against the Nixon version of the war. As antiwar blended with long hair and counterculture, the formerly button-down image of liberalism would undergo considerable change.

8.5. *After the 1960s*

What happened in the 1960s, whatever explanation one chooses, produced a new reality that “liberal” became, on balance, an unpopular term. Before that the numbers of self-declared liberals were almost as large as those of conservatives and the image of liberalism came from political figures like four Democratic presidents, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. Liberalism in the minds of citizens was about taking care of the common man, Social Security, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and so forth.

What changed after the decline of liberal identification was that astute politicians on the left stopped using the term to describe themselves. Before the change the public saw “liberal” aligned with popular Democratic programs. In one speech one would hear “I am a liberal” conjoined with “I believe in enhancing the Social Security System, ... , raising the minimum wage, ... , protecting working people, ... , expanding support for public education” and on and on. After the change all those same policy proposals would still be heard, but without the word “liberal” as a summary (see Schiffer, 2000).

This is a curious case where what is individually rational, for individual politicians to avoid the liberal label, may be collectively non rational, as they become subject, as a class, to being associated with an ever more unpopular label as it goes undefended. And as popular politicians avoid the liberal label, it provides an opportunity for their conservative opponents to fill the vacuum with unpopular personalities and causes. Indeed, berating the stereotypical images associated with the word “liberal”—but not, at least to nowhere near the same extent, the specific social programs that underlie the label—is virtually the *raison d'être* of conservative talk radio (see Barker, 2002 for a detailed analysis of the imagery of conservative talk radio and its effects on political attitudes). Politicians began to recognize the disconnect between the operational and ideological preferences of American citizens, and begin to tailor their messages accordingly. The asymmetrical linguistic war sets up a spiral in which “liberal” not only is unpopular, but *becomes* ever more so. Thus we expect to see a downward trend in liberal identification as progressive generations of citizens experience the term only in its negative usage.

8.6. *Thermostatic response*

Finally, we wish to explain the shorter-term, but still systematic, fluctuations in ideology. In the matter of policy views there is a well-established view—originating with Wlezien (1995)—that public opinion generally runs counter to the views of current policy (and the current party control of the White House). One can make an argument that a public which, in the main, positions itself between the ideological positions of most “liberal” and “conservative” political elites, should reject the policies of both left and right, wanting to be left of (i.e., more moderate than) right policies and right of left policies. We see this in particular with respect to preferences for government spending, where a government policy that increases spending on a certain program usually reduces the percentage of people who support spending “more” on that program (and vice-versa for spending less). The status quo moves, in other words, and a generally moderate public responds accordingly. It is not so clear that this movement should carry through to ideological identification. The logic isn't quite as clean. But the evidence of thermostatic response with respect to other specific government policies is quite strong. We expect that this thermostatic model can help to explain movements in ideological identification as well.

We can imagine citizens not strongly committed to left or right identification who move with the times. As one

ideology plays out too long and becomes associated with failure and scandal—or simply with government giving us more of the kinds of policies that that ideology produces, they move toward the other. Weakly liberal when Democrats take power, over time they become weakly conservative as the images associated with liberalism become unfavorable or time-worn. And, of course, the reverse would also be true. What we expect to see is movements counter to the party of the White House, associated with that party's time in office.

9. A statistical model

We have developed three explanations of movements in self-identification. Each will find a simple operationalization in the model to come. Most importantly we model the transition from liberalism as robust minority view—an almost majority—to the decidedly weaker force of today. For that we will entertain a simple intervention model, a step downward in liberal identification beginning in 1966.¹³ For the downward trend after the intervention, we create a counter variable which is zero until the 1960s intervention and then incremented uniformly after that year.

For the thermostatic effect we have a counter for number of years in office that begins at 1 for the inaugural year of a party takeover (i.e., implicitly treating follow-ons of the same party as a continuation, not a new regime) and is then incremented until the party is defeated. This is multiplied for Republican regimes by -1 so that continuation in office hurts whichever ideology is associated with the incumbent president. Again, we expect a negative coefficient, with movement *away from* the party in power.

We put it all together in the first column of Table 4, where we present a linear regression of the three effects combined. We find support for each of the three ideas. Most important is the nearly six point permanent drop (-5.92) in the mid-1960s. Both in substance and in variance explained, this is the key component of the model.

The coefficient for party control, the thermostatic effect, is cleanly estimated. The effect, -0.18 points per year in office, produces about a point and a half shift after an eight year span or a little over two points for 12. Recall that the measure is extremely precise for the years in which this effect is estimated. Two points is not huge, but it is noteworthy when the total variation, high to low, is on the order of ten. There is at least general evidence that the thermostatic logic of aggregate public opinion, applied by Wlezien and others to the dynamics of mass issue preferences, holds also for ideological preferences.

The coefficient on the post-1960s trend is smaller still. But for a trend that runs for forty years in the current data, the ultimate effect, -3.6 points, is not at all small. Ignoring the cycles of party control, the decline of liberal identification is the addition of the negative intervention and the

Table 4

Explaining movements in self-identification, 1937–2006.

Variable	Regression	Regression with AR(1) Correction
Great Society Intervention	-5.97^* (0.64)	-4.74^* (0.80)
Party Control Duration	-0.12^* (0.06)	-0.06 (0.05)
Post-Intervention Trend	-0.10^* (0.02)	-0.13^* (0.04)
Intercept	44.12 (0.34)	43.90* (0.58)
ϕ_1		0.63* (0.11)
R^2 (adjusted)	0.84	
N	70	70

Notes: $*p < 0.05$ Table entries are regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

trend, which jointly predict an almost ten point drop by the end of the series.¹⁴ The regression model of column 1 presumes no autocorrelation, which of course is usually problematic with time series regressions. To deal with the issue we estimate a similar model with an AR(1) error component. The results, in the second column, are similar but not identical to the linear specification. The initial intervention effect is about a point smaller. But this is compensated in a trend estimate which is larger. Thus the ultimate effect is about the same.

The biggest change is that the thermostatic effect (duration in office) is reduced by about two-thirds to a level which is not significant (but still correctly signed). In effect duration in office is competing with autocorrelation to explain within regime similarity of effects and autocorrelation is winning the competition. On balance we think that the thermostatic effect is real and that its failure to be estimated reliably in the specification which controls for autocorrelation is more a specification failure than a refutation of the idea.¹⁵ But the discipline of significance testing is a useful curb on author enthusiasm.

10. Conclusions: building the conservative symbolic majority

Using a rich, non-traditional, collection of survey data, we have developed a time series of ideological self-identification in the American electorate from the New Deal Period to the present day. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the history of ideological self-identification in the American electorate, attempting to explain at least broad shifts in how the American public thinks of itself ideologically.

¹³ We have considered dynamic specifications of the Box and Tiao (1975) variety. These produce estimates of dynamics—the δ in $\hat{\omega}/(1 - \delta)$ —that are quite small, about 0.40, and therefore indicate approximately linear effects. We choose the linear specification to gain the more flexible multivariate modeling associated with regression.

¹⁴ Estimating linear trends from sample time series is always dicey, for in the *long run* they go off to infinity—or in this case to a number of self-identified liberals that tries to go below zero! So trend estimates need to be qualified a bit as appropriate perhaps only for a period of time.

¹⁵ Part of the problem is that the effect always occurs, but is irregular in duration. Thus, for example, the drop-off during the four years of the Carter Administration is of comparable magnitude to the gain during 12 years of Reagan and Bush. Our regression specification fails to deal with this irregularity and thus evidence of irregular effect becomes evidence of non effect.

We have seen that while symbolic liberalism has nearly always been a minority in American politics, there has also been a steep decline in this liberalism that corresponds with observed changes in American political discourse, in particular changing the dominant symbols of ideological liberalism from the white working-class American of FDR to the largely non-white underclass—as well as the counterculture movement—of the 1960s and beyond. The ability to see and measure this decline has implications for our understanding of how the current electorate orients itself to ideological terms. Even if the implications of ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ for specific policies has changed little since the New Deal era, our understandings of the terms “liberal” and “conservative” are not static, but rather affected powerfully by the political context and the associations that citizens make between ideological labels and the images that they represent.

This 1960s time period began, we believe, the move toward the current state of ideological self-identification in the United States, where liberalism as a symbolic term is out of favor even with many citizens who express support for liberal candidates and policies. None of these changes dampened support for the largely popular—and operationally liberal—policies of the New Deal. But the symbols associated with liberalism have dramatically changed.

Our empirical model, to be sure, is quite basic. We need to do more to add empirical rigor to this logic, explicitly linking the changes that we observe in American political discourse—the ones that seem to happen contemporaneously with the decline in popularity of the liberal label—to changes in how Americans perceive and use ideological terms. But the logic that links changes in the political context to changes in the ideological self-identifications in the American electorate is consistent with what we know of Americans’ feelings toward politically relevant groups and symbols, with how citizens form ideological self-identifications, and with the factors that elites consider when framing their own political arguments.

Substantively, these results shed light on the reasons for and consequences of the broader paradox—why many individual voters hold the seemingly conflicted position of supporting, on balance, liberal policy positions while identifying with label that rejects those positions. Political elites have strong incentives to frame issues in a way that is likely to garner support. A citizenry likely to support a particular economic or social program if it is framed in terms of its specific aims, but likely to oppose if it is framed as a component of a broader “liberal” agenda, has obvious implications for how “liberal” and “conservative” elites will frame those proposals to the mass public. Conservatives talk a great deal about the principles of a “conservative” approach to politics and the way in which this general value will affect one’s approach to solving political problems, doing little to explain the concrete implications of this conservatism for policy.

When it comes to operational messages, the story is reversed. Liberals attack conservative politicians, but usually not their conservatism. People prefer government action to meet specific social needs because they like the benefits that government action confers. Liberal politicians thus usually frame their political appeals in terms of

specifics, since government action at the operational level, generally leads to popular support. These policies may, in fact, be “liberal,” but the use of the label liberal, with its connotations of intrusiveness, recklessness, and more recently, elitism, is avoided.

If one asks the simple question, “what do citizens hear?” the answer is that they hear dominant messages of operational liberalism and symbolic conservatism. It is, of course, the case that the policy implications of these “conservative” and “liberal” messages conflict with one another. And political sophisticates can recognize this conflict (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 1998). But since these messages deal with different things—liberal specifics, conservative symbols—and since neither is given much opposition in mainstream political discourse, the context necessary for citizens who are only vaguely involved in politics to reconcile their competing implications and choose between them is not apparent. As a result, people may internalize *both* types of messages. The result is that at least some segments of the citizenry holds sincere, systematically conflicted views, identifying with the symbols of conservatism but supporting specific liberal policies. Elites, working to portray their positions in the best light, have no incentive to correct this “systematic error” (see Caplan, 2008, also Althaus, 1998, 2003) in public opinion.

This discussion reinforces the important role of issue framing in affecting public support for policy proposals. When specific social goals—public education, health care, a clean environment—dominate political discourse, liberals will generally expect to earn popular support. When symbols and ideological rhetoric dominate, conservatives can expect to win (see Jacoby, 2000). The multiple meanings—and implications—of the term “conservative” is not lost on politicians and campaigns, even the most liberal of whom attempt to exploit the positive connotations of the word in an attempt to appeal to certain types of constituents.

Finally, we also wish to understand why “liberal,” while certainly a more popular term during the New Deal era than today, was never able to gain a clear majority of the American electorate, even when Roosevelt was handily winning elections and when the social programs he explicitly tried to link to symbolic “liberalism” were quite popular. We hypothesize elsewhere that the reason the term “conservative” is more popular than “liberal” is not only because of liberalism’s negative connotations for the symbols of American politics, but also because of the appeal of term “conservative” in non-political contexts (lifestyle choices and religious morality, for example). It is possible that it was these connotations that drove the term conservative to still be relatively popular, even when conservatism as a political philosophy was a loser.

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