

## IDEOLOGUES WITHOUT ISSUES THE POLARIZING CONSEQUENCES OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTITIES

LILLIANA MASON\*

**Abstract** The distinction between a person's ideological identity and their issue positions has come more clearly into focus in recent research. Scholars have pointed out a significant difference between identity-based and issue-based ideology in the American electorate. However, the affective and social effects of these separate elements of ideology have not been sufficiently explored. Drawing on a national sample collected by SSI and data from the 2016 ANES, this article finds that the identity-based elements of ideology are capable of driving heightened levels of affective polarization against outgroup ideologues, even at low levels of policy attitude extremity or constraint. These findings demonstrate how Americans can use ideological terms to disparage political opponents without necessarily holding constrained sets of policy attitudes.

The “loathing” felt between Democrats and Republicans in modern American politics is widely understood and increasingly discussed within political science (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015). Less discussed is the conflict between those who identify as liberals and conservatives. The 2016 election cycle brought ideology into the forefront of political conflict in two ways. First, battles within the Democratic and

LILLIANA MASON is an assistant professor in the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA. The author would like to thank the organizers and attendees of the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics Conference on Political Polarization at Princeton University, the Georgetown American Government Seminar, and the University of Maryland American Politics Workshop for very helpful commentary on early versions of this article. Many thanks go to three anonymous reviewers, and to the editors, for providing feedback and suggestions that improved the article significantly. Finally, thanks to Jared McDonald for assistance in collecting and coding the SSI data. This work was supported by a University of Maryland Dean's Initiative Research Grant [to L.M.]. The American National Election Studies data were collected with support from the National Science Foundation by grants to the University of Michigan and Stanford University [SES-1444721 and SES-1444910, respectively]. \*Address correspondence to Lilliana Mason, University of Maryland, College Park, 3140 Tydings Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA; email: [lmason@umd.edu](mailto:lmason@umd.edu).

Republican parties suggested that party and ideology are not perfectly intertwined, despite a great deal of partisan-ideological sorting that has occurred in recent decades (Levendusky 2009). Second, Donald Trump's successful campaign was relatively devoid of coherent policy prescriptions, and was described by Trump's own pollster as being "post-ideological" (Hohmann 2016), suggesting that policy debates were not the central points of conflict.

At the same time, plenty of public rhetoric can be found that vilifies both liberals and conservatives. This is not reducible to partisan conflicts, as ideological and partisan affiliations are not equivalent. In fact, their lack of equivalence has been the topic of much recent scholarship (i.e., Mason 2015; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). What, then, do liberals and conservatives hate so much about their ideological opponents? It is unlikely that feelings toward liberals and conservatives are based entirely in policy disagreements, as most Americans continue to hold relatively unconstrained issue positions, and have done so for decades (Converse 1964; Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). A lack of consistent policy attitudes in the public helps make sense of the success of Trump's policy-light 2016 campaign. Despite very little policy content, the campaign generated antagonistic and angry reactions that divided family members and friends on a social level (Tavernise and Seelye 2016).

Identity does not require values and policy attitudes; it simply requires, as Brewer (2001) puts it, a sense of inclusion and a sense of exclusion. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) explain that, for some, the terms "liberal" and "conservative" designate who is "us" and who is "them." The present article separates the issue-based and identity-based elements of ideology and examines how they differentially generate social distance between those who call themselves liberals and conservatives. "Ideology" can be understood separately as a set of issue positions and as an identity, and this article finds that it is the "otherness" of ideological opponents, more than issue-based disagreement, that drives liberal-versus-conservative rancor.

## Elements of Ideology

The measurement of "ideology" is a matter of debate. Any attempt to take hold of a solid and static measure has been met with numerous rebuttals and revisions. However, as Lee (2009, p. 50) states, "the difficulty in devising operational definitions of ideology has not prevented the concept from becoming central to political science." This difficulty emerges at least partially because what researchers are trying to define is both a system of beliefs, as Converse (1964) so clearly elaborated, but also a sense of connection to like-minded others (even when this is not true in terms of actual opinions). These things are theoretically and empirically distinguishable, but are often grouped under the single term "ideology." However, literature from both political science and

psychology would suggest that the outcomes of identities and opinions are significantly different from one another.

Traditionally, ideology has been considered to be a broad worldview represented by a set of issue positions that can be consistent with each other to varying degrees, and this consistency generally has been understood to form along one dimension—liberal to conservative, left to right, or pro-government to anti-government (Converse 1964; Free and Cantril 1967; Zaller 1992; Stimson 1999). A large body of literature has also examined the multidimensionality of ideology, generally considering the concept to consist of separate social and economic dimensions of issue beliefs (Weisberg 1980; Conover and Feldman 1981; Treier and Hillygus 2009; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Feldman and Johnston 2014; Klar 2014).

Another recent approach to the study of ideology argues that looking at issue positions alone is inadequate to understanding ideology (Noel 2014), with Ellis and Stimson (2012) making a clear distinction between issue-based (operational) ideology and identity-based (symbolic) ideology. In this study, the *issue* and *identity* aspects of ideology are understood as separate elements of ideology, and the downstream effects of the two elements are compared.

The first element accounts for the traditional view of ideology as a set of coherent issue positions, or a “system of beliefs” (Converse 1964). A system of beliefs can be defined by a set of opinions and the degree to which they form measurable patterns. These patterns often take the form of a left-right constraint between issues (Converse 1964, Free and Cantril 1967). There are many ways to construct a measure of issue-based constraint, but the key is that these measures are based on stances toward actual policies. I refer to any measure that is based in policy attitudes as a version of *issue-based ideology*—a term similar to the “operational ideology” coined by Free and Cantril (1967), but akin to what most scholars have historically simply called ideology.

The second element of ideology proposed here is one based in social identity. Prior research has found that the names “liberal” and “conservative” confer a sense of group identity that is not neatly connected to any set of issue positions, but nonetheless motivates political judgment (Malka and Lelkes 2010; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Devine 2014). These effects of identity-based ideology on political evaluations are psychological and emotional, and help explain how “liberals” and “conservatives” may dislike each other for reasons unconnected to their opinions.

The identity-based approach to ideology was introduced by Levitin and Miller (1979), as a measure focused on ideological “labels.” It has since been referred to by Conover and Feldman (1981) as liberal/conservative self-identification; by Devine (2014) as “ideological social identity”; by Malka and Lelkes (2012) as “ideological identity”; and by Ellis and Stimson (2012) as “symbolic ideology.” I refer to this as *identity-based ideology*. It is characterized by a uniquely social connection to the groups that hold the labels

“liberal” and “conservative.” It is often measured using the simple seven-point self-identification scale included in most political studies,<sup>1</sup> but can be more powerfully measured using established measures of social identity that gauge the intensity of a person’s psychological attachment to a group (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Many of the effects of identity-based ideology have not to date been studied with social identity-based measures (with the exception of Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe [2015], as it relates to activism).

## The Power of Identity

A social identity, according to Brewer (2001), fills two basic psychological needs—one of inclusion (being part of the group) and one of exclusion (distinguishing oneself from others). The groups called “liberal” and “conservative” have been observed to function as social identities (Malka and Lelkes 2010; Devine 2014). Conover and Feldman (1981) found that ideological labels have “largely symbolic meanings,” rooted in other social identities arranged around “dominant cleavages in society” (pp. 617, 643). This prior research is consistent with a social identity-based view of ideology. According to social identity theory, ingroups are implicitly judged to be superior to outgroups, and this judgment is seated in the connection between the group status and the self-concept rather than any objective facts (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

As Achen and Bartels (2016, p. 228) argue, “identities are not primarily about adherence to a group ideology or creed. They are emotional attachments that transcend thinking.” These analyses will help determine how much of the contemporary animosity between liberals and conservatives can be explained by these social and emotional attachments to ideological groups.<sup>2</sup>

## Identity-Based Ideology and Affective Ideological Polarization

Anecdotaly, battles between “liberals” and “conservatives” are prominent features in contemporary American politics. A quick search on Twitter will

1. Although the traditional scale anchors both ends of the spectrum with the term “extremely,” which may suggest a more issue-based type of ideology, Conover and Feldman (1981) did not find it to be a problem, and Knight (1990) found little difference between the use of “extremely” and “very.”

2. A great deal of research has examined the precise nature of the difference between the “operational” and “symbolic” aspects of ideology (Free and Cantril 1967; Berry et al. 2007; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009; Carsey and Harden 2010; Popp and Rudolf 2011; Ellis and Stimson 2012). This project examines the outcomes of such divisions.

return a wealth of insulting language directed at members of both groups. This undercurrent of conflict between liberals and conservatives is palpable in social and mass media, but has yet to be quantified in studies of American affective polarization.

The established definition of polarization is an increasing distance between partisans in terms of their issue-based ideology, sometimes referred to as “ideological polarization” (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Whether advocates of this view believe that ideological polarization is increasing (Abramowitz 2010) or not (Fiorina 2009), it is a distinctly issue-based view of polarization. Increasing disagreement over issues is certainly an important phenomenon to measure and study. In fact, for many, this is the only interpretation of polarization. However, this type of polarization is not the focus of the present study.

Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) and Mason (2015) advance an alternate view of polarization, which they call “affective” and “social” polarization, respectively. In this view of polarization, partisans increasingly dislike each other without any direct or conditional connection to issue-based ideological disagreements. To date, this version of polarization has only been applied to partisan, not ideological, identities.

Affective polarization is particularly driven by social identities (more powerfully than by issue positions) because social identities have repeatedly been found to generate ingroup privilege and outgroup derogation (Tajfel 1981; Mackie, Devos, and Smith 2000; Mason 2015; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Even among imaginary groups that exist only in a laboratory, group members will privilege their own group at the expense of the greater good (Billig and Tajfel 1973).

When it comes to American politics, however, partisan and ideological identities are far from imaginary. Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) explain how the distinctly social element of partisan identity can generate anger, enthusiasm, and action. This project examines how the social attachments to the terms “liberal” and “conservative” generate affective polarization against liberals and conservatives in the American electorate, even when issue-based ideology is not extreme. In particular, I expect social attachments to ideological labels to push Americans into bias against their ideological outgroups.

Identity-based ideology may be capable of explaining a portion of the affective polarization that we observe toward political opponents, even beyond the effects of partisan identity alone (a known predictor of affective polarization), and even when individual respondents are not particularly aware of issue-based ideology. In other words, we already know that Democrats and Republicans hate each other, but liberals and conservatives likely hate each other too, for reasons that go beyond partisanship or even issue-based disagreement.

## Polarizing Effects of Issue-Based Ideology

Real policy attitudes are also likely to affect how individuals feel about their political opponents. However, issue-based ideology should motivate political preference that is more in line with democratic values. After all, a normative goal of representative democracy is that citizens engage in politics in order to make their true preferences known. [Converse \(1964\)](#) presented the lack of issue-based ideological constraint as a negative characteristic of large portions of the American electorate. Issue-based ideology can cause issue-based ideologues to prefer one label over the other for normatively positive (logical) reasons. Thus, identity-based ideology should motivate political preference for primal, group-based reasons, while issue-based ideology will generate political preferences for potentially less visceral reasons. Thus, even when issue-based ideology is weak or conflicting with identity-based ideology, I expect identity-based ideology to be capable of driving affective polarization against other ideologues.

These arguments lead to the following hypotheses:

1. *Identity-based ideology is associated with increasing affective polarization of ideological groups.*
2. *This relationship will occur even when issue-based ideology is weak or conflicting with identity-based ideology.*

## Data and Methods

In data collected in August 2016 using a national sample from Survey Sampling International (SSI),<sup>3</sup> I use social-identity-based measures ([Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015](#)) to assess identity-based ideology. The items include: (1) How important is being a [identity] to you? (2) How well does the term

3. A total of 2,500 respondents answered a web-based survey conducted by SSI during August 2016. SSI maintains a panel of respondents, which it recruits through their website in return for incentives. Since recruitment into the panel is voluntary, the sample may be unrepresentative of the national population. However, sample matching on census region, age, gender, and ethnicity was employed to draw a close to nationally representative sample from the larger, non-representative sample. The one exception is that this sample was intended to be balanced between Democrats and Republicans (the study was contracted to collect data for multiple projects, so balancing on party was chosen over balancing on ideology). This balance was conducted using preliminary data collected by SSI prior to the administration of this study, and counted Independent leaners as Independents. In the analyses conducted here, leaning Independents were counted as partisans and nearly all of them leaned toward the Democratic Party, leading to more counted Democrats than Republicans. In order to account for this developed imbalance, party weighting was added to the sample by raking the data and weighting the Democratic and Republican observations to accord with national statistics gathered by HuffPost Pollster as of August 17, 2016, the closest time point available to match the collection of data.

[identity] describe you? (3) When talking about [identity]s, how often do you use “we” instead of “they”? (4) To what extent do you think of yourself as being a [identity]? The four-item scale was administered using liberal ( $\alpha = 0.80$ ), conservative ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), as well as partisan identities ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ). This measure is coded to range from 0 to 1. For the measure of *identity-based ideology*, the liberal and conservative social identity measures are occasionally combined, such that high values represent strong identification with either liberal or conservative labels.<sup>4</sup> In the online appendix (table A1), this measure is replaced with a folded seven-point scale of ideology, in order to compare the effects of the traditional and social identity-based measures. Although the social identity-based measures generate slightly stronger results, the folded seven-point scale is an adequate measure of identity-based ideology.

I use a measure of *issue-based ideology* that assesses left-right constraint. It accounts for the consistency of policy attitudes across six issues: immigration, the Affordable Care Act, abortion, same-sex marriage, gun control, and the relative importance of reducing the deficit or unemployment (see exact wording in the online appendix). I build the measure by combining the percentage of issue items that were answered on the left-leaning end of the spectrum with the percentage that were answered on the right-leaning end (only left-of-center or right-of-center opinions are counted toward each percentage). The final measure of constraint is the absolute difference between these two values.<sup>5</sup> The difference, rather than the simple percentage of each, is used in order to account for cross-cutting issue positions (for example, a person who answers on the left-leaning end of the spectrum in 66 percent of the items, and never answers on the right-leaning end of the spectrum, would be different from a person who is 66 percent left-leaning and 34 percent right-leaning). The online appendix presents alternate approaches, including measures of extremism (table A2) and the interaction between extremism and constraint (table A3).

The distribution of constraint for liberals and conservatives appears in the online appendix (figure A1). There is a notable asymmetry between liberals and conservatives, with conservatives demonstrating significantly less issue-based constraint. This is consistent with Ellis and Stimson (2012), who find that American conservatives tend to be relatively left-leaning in their issue-based

4. Respondents are routed into the “liberal” or “conservative” identity items based on their answers to the traditional seven-point ideological identification scale. Anyone on the liberal end of the scale (not including “moderate”) is given the liberal identity items. Those on the conservative end of the scale (not including “moderate”) are given the conservative identity items.

5. Significant credit is due to Hans Noel for the suggestion of measuring constraint by percentage. Any errors in the measure’s operationalization or use belong only to the author.



preferences, while liberals also hold left-leaning attitudes. As discussed below, this asymmetry does not change the effects of identity-based ideology among conservatives, further emphasizing the independence of the effects of identity-based and issue-based ideology.<sup>6</sup>

#### AFFECTIVE IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

In line with [Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes \(2012\)](#), I use a social distance model of affective polarization, but applied to ideological identities. Respondents were asked how willing they would be to marry a member of their own ideological group and the opposing ideological group (in randomized order). The responses included “I absolutely would not,” “I probably would not,” “I probably would,” and “I absolutely would.” The variable was coded to range from 0 (I absolutely would) to 1 (I absolutely would not) in order to generate a measure of “unwillingness.” The affective ideological polarization measure was generated by subtracting the unwillingness to marry a member of the respondent’s own ideological group from the unwillingness to marry a member of the opposing ideological group. Beyond the marriage item, subjects were also asked about their willingness to be friends with, to live next door to, and to spend occasional social time with liberals and conservatives. A description of average levels of this social distance across liberals and conservatives can be found in the online appendix ([figure A2](#)).

#### CONTROL VARIABLES

Controls are also included for partisan social identity, race, sex, income, age, political sophistication (exact wording is included in the online appendix), frequency of church attendance, and interest in politics. All variables in the model are coded to range from 0 to 1.

#### 2016 ANES

In order to validate the results found in the SSI sample, key models were replicated using the 2016 American National Election Studies

6. Other models, not shown, were run including each folded importance-weighted issue individually. This measure was examined in order to account for a suggestion made recently by [Broockman \(2016\)](#) that the common approach to issue indices, combining the issues into a directional (left to right) scale before folding the scale, could obscure significant heterogeneity in opinions across the spectrum of ideology, and extreme issue positions in different directions could be mistakenly represented as “moderate.” Using the aggregated extremity measure alone could therefore obscure significant non-monotonicity around the center of the scale. These models did not change any of the conclusions found here. None of the single issues alone was as powerful as identity-based ideology in any model. Contact the author for these models.



data (May 2017 version).<sup>7</sup> This dataset does not include ideal measures for identity-based ideology or affective ideological polarization. Instead, identity-based ideology strength is measured using the seven-point ideological self-placement scale, folded to range from 0 (moderate) to 1 (extremely liberal or conservative). Affective ideological polarization is measured using the difference between liberal and conservative feeling thermometers. Average levels of this measure of affective ideological polarization are also depicted in the online appendix (figure A2). All other measures were generally replicable, and generated in the same manner as in the SSI study, except for the measure of partisan identity, which is operationalized as the folded seven-point party identity scale. See the online appendix for particular question wording.

All models shown are weighted OLS models with robust standard errors in parentheses.

#### SSI SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The basic descriptive statistics of the SSI sample are included in table 1. They are reported as percentages, and compared against the 2016 American National Election Studies data. The SSI data is more heavily Democratic than the ANES sample, and weights are therefore applied for party in the analyses that follow.<sup>8</sup> The gender makeup of the SSI sample is generally similar to the makeup of the ANES sample. The racial makeup is mostly reflective of the ANES sample, with the exception of a larger number of Asian/Pacific Islander respondents in the SSI data. The SSI sample is more highly educated than the ANES sample, and the age distribution is somewhat younger.

The SSI data were collected in the late summer of 2016. Mean values of liberal and conservative social identity were relatively even. Mean liberal identity

7. A total of 1,181 face-to-face interviews and 3,090 Internet interviews were conducted during the pre-election period, for 4,271 interviews in all. The AAPOR (2016) Response Rate 1 was 50 percent for the face-to-face component and 44 percent for the Internet component. The re-interview rate on the postelection survey was 90 percent for the face-to-face component and 84 percent for the Internet component. The sample was a multi-stage stratified cluster sample, with respondents contacted via mail and paid to participate. Respondents were interviewed in a pre-election survey between September 7 and November 7, 2016, and as many as possible of the same respondents re-interviewed in a post-election survey between November 9 and January 8, 2017. Interviews in both modes were conducted in English or Spanish. The data release in May 2017 is the initial public release of the data. Quality control review, summary variables, and documentation are abbreviated. ANES and the National Science Foundation bear no responsibility for this use of the data or for interpretations or inferences made here.

8. Due to the partisan imbalance of the sample, key models were replicated only among Democrats, and results were virtually identical. Contact the author for these models.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

	SSI 2016	ANES 2016
Partisanship		
Democratic (inc. leaners)	61.3	44.8
Republican (inc. leaners)	36.9	40.0
Non-leaning Independent	1.7	15.2
Gender		
Female	51.6	52.5
Male	48.4	47.5
Race/Ethnicity		
White	68.4	68.7
Black	11.6	10.8
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	6.3	3.1
Native American	1.3	0.7
Latino/Hispanic	10.7	11.8
Education		
Less than high school	1.5	9.4
High school diploma (or equivalent)	16.6	28.6
Some college	32.1	30.7
4-year degree	29.5	18.2
Advanced degree	20.2	12.6
Age		
18–39	47.1	38.8
40–64	37.4	43.1
65+	14.6	10.7

NOTE.—Percentages shown.

(on a scale from zero to one) was 0.68, while mean conservative identity was 0.67.<sup>9</sup> Mean Democratic Party identity was 0.67, while Republican Party identity was significantly lower, at 0.61. In comparison, mean issue constraint across the sample was 0.39 (0.40 in the ANES). Both samples hold issue positions that are generally on the left-leaning end of the spectrum. Generating a left-to-right scale out of the six issues (coded from 0 to 1, with scores below 0.5

9. These identities are only measured among those who claim an ideology (those who respond to the ideology item and do not place themselves at “moderate” on the seven-point ideology scale). This represents 75 percent of the SSI sample. In comparison, 98 percent of the SSI sample identified as partisan. In the ANES, 52 percent of the sample claimed an ideology, while 86 percent of the sample claimed a partisan identity. The results presented here should therefore be understood as what occurs among ideological identifiers, who make up 52 percent of the national population in 2016. It is also worth noting that in the cumulative ANES through 2012, the percent of Americans who are ideological identifiers has been steadily increasing since 1972, when the item was introduced. It ranges from 36 percent of the sample in 1972 to 53 percent of the sample in 2012 (with the exception of a single drop in 2000).

representing mainly left-leaning positions and above 0.5 representing mainly right-leaning positions) produces a mean issue position score of 0.41 across the sample (0.30 in the ANES). Among self-identified liberals, this score is 0.31 (0.20 in the ANES), and among self-identified conservatives this score is 0.53 (0.37 in the ANES).

To put this in electoral perspective, those respondents who were planning on voting (or voted in the ANES data) for Donald Trump in 2016 scored slightly lower on issue constraint (0.37 in the SSI sample, 0.40 in the ANES) than Hillary Clinton supporters, who received mean issue constraint scores of 0.41 (0.46 in the ANES). This is consistent with a notable lack of issue constraint emanating directly from the Trump campaign. However, mean identity-based ideology for both Trump and Clinton voters was the same, at 0.63. Average scores on the directional (left-to-right) issue scale were 0.55 for Trump supporters (0.41 in the ANES) and 0.33 for Clinton supporters (0.21 in the ANES). Trump supporters were therefore less issue constrained and less consistently right-leaning than Clinton supporters, who were constrained and consistently left-leaning. However, both groups of voters were equally attached to their ideological identity.

## Results

It is important to begin by establishing that the key concepts examined here (*identity-based ideology* and *issue-based ideology*), though related, are empirically distinguishable from each other. Pairwise correlations between identity-based and issue-based ideology are 0.34 in the SSI data and 0.33 in the ANES data. These are moderate to weak correlations, leaving plenty of room for differential effects. In the online appendix, identity-based ideology is regressed on issue extremity, constraint, and importance, and only importance is a significant predictor. Partisan identity predicts identity-based ideology far more effectively than does issue-based ideology (see [table A4](#)).

### AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION OF IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS

The first hypothesis concerns the effect of identity-based ideology on the affective polarization of ideological groups. In column 1 of [table 2](#), identity-based ideology has a significant effect on relative willingness to marry someone in the same ideological group over someone in the opposing ideological group, controlling for issue-based ideology. In marriage preferences, identity-based ideology is a potent predictor of affective ideological polarization.<sup>10</sup> Moving from the least identified to the most identified with an ideological

10. These results hold among married and unmarried respondents (though are stronger among the unmarried), and equally among those younger than 30 years old and older than 30 years old.

label increases preference for marrying inside the ideological group by 30 percentage points. This is nearly one-third of the scale of relative willingness to marry outsiders versus insiders. Even more notable, the reason for this preference goes beyond issue beliefs. It could be argued that people would like to marry those they agree with politically, but the effect of issue-based ideology on ideological marriage preferences is less than half the size of the effect of identity-based ideology.

In fact, the effect of issue-based ideology is less than half the size of identity-based ideology in each element of social distance. Moving from weakest to

**Table 2. Identity-based ideology and issue-based ideology predicting affective polarization of ideological groups**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Marry	Friends	Social time	Next door	Thermometer difference (ANES 2016)
Identity-based ideology	0.30 (0.04)*	0.16 (0.03)*	0.11 (0.03)*	0.13 (0.03)*	0.28 (0.02)*
Issue constraint	0.12 (0.02)*	0.06 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.02)*	0.02 (0.01)	0.05 (0.02)*
Partisan identity	−0.04 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.07 (0.01)*
Sophistication	0.13 (0.02)*	0.06 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.01)*	0.04 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*
White	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)
Male	−0.05 (0.01)*	−0.02 (0.01)*	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Income	−0.08 (0.03)*	−0.08 (0.02)*	−0.10 (0.02)*	−0.09 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)
Age (decades)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)*	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.00)*	0.00 (0.00)
Political interest	0.06 (0.02)*	0.06 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)*
Constant	0.39 (0.03)*	0.45 (0.02)*	0.48 (0.02)*	0.50 (0.02)*	0.39 (0.02)*
Observations	1875	1875	1883	1869	2033
R-squared	.18	.09	.07	.06	.28

NOTE.—Affective ideological polarization is defined as the comparative willingness to engage socially with someone within your ideology versus someone from the opposing ideology. All variables are coded to range from 0 to 1. Standard errors in parentheses. Models are OLS regressions with robust standard errors (represented in parentheses) and sample weights applied.

\*  $p < .05$

strongest identity-based ideology increases preferences to be friends within the ideological group by 16 percentage points, preference to spend social time within the ideological group by 11 percentage points, and preference to live next door to a co-ideologue by 13 percentage points. These are sizable and significant effects, robust to controls for issue-based ideology, and they demonstrate that Americans are dividing themselves socially on the basis of whether they call themselves liberal or conservative, independent of their actual policy differences.

In the fifth column of [table 2](#), ANES data is used to replicate these results in a more nationally representative sample. In predicting the difference between liberal and conservative feeling thermometers, identity-based ideology is associated with a 28-degree increase in the difference between the feeling thermometers for the ideological ingroup versus outgroup. This effect is more than five times as large as the effect of issue-based ideology as measured by issue constraint. Even when using this weaker measure of identity-based ideology, significant results are observed in predicting affective ideological polarization.

In order to test hypothesis 2, the models from [table 2](#) are modified in three ways. First, for the sake of space, the four social distance items are combined into an index.<sup>11</sup> Second, in order to be able to examine the effect of identity-based ideology across levels of “correctness” of issue positions, a control for a directional scale of the six issue items is included in the regressions (left-to-right, coded 0 for most left-leaning and 1 for most right-leaning). Third, the model includes an interaction between identity-based ideology and left-to-right direction of issue positions.<sup>12</sup> These models are run separately for self-identified liberals and conservatives. A non-significant interaction term would indicate that the effect of identity-based ideology on affective polarization does not depend on the “correctness” of issue positions. The results presented in [table 3](#) suggest that the interactive effect of issue- and identity-based ideology is significant in one case out of four.

Predicted values of affective polarization facilitate interpretation of these effects. Drawn from the models in [table 3](#), [figures 1](#) and [2](#) examine the effect of identity-based ideology among the people who hold the most left-leaning and right-leaning issue positions.<sup>13</sup> This is operationalized by choosing left-right issue scores that represent the 90th percentile most left-leaning and 90th percentile most right-leaning values among liberals and conservatives, separately.

11. The results also hold when each element of social distance is examined separately.

12. Results from not including the interaction appear in the online appendix, [table A5](#).

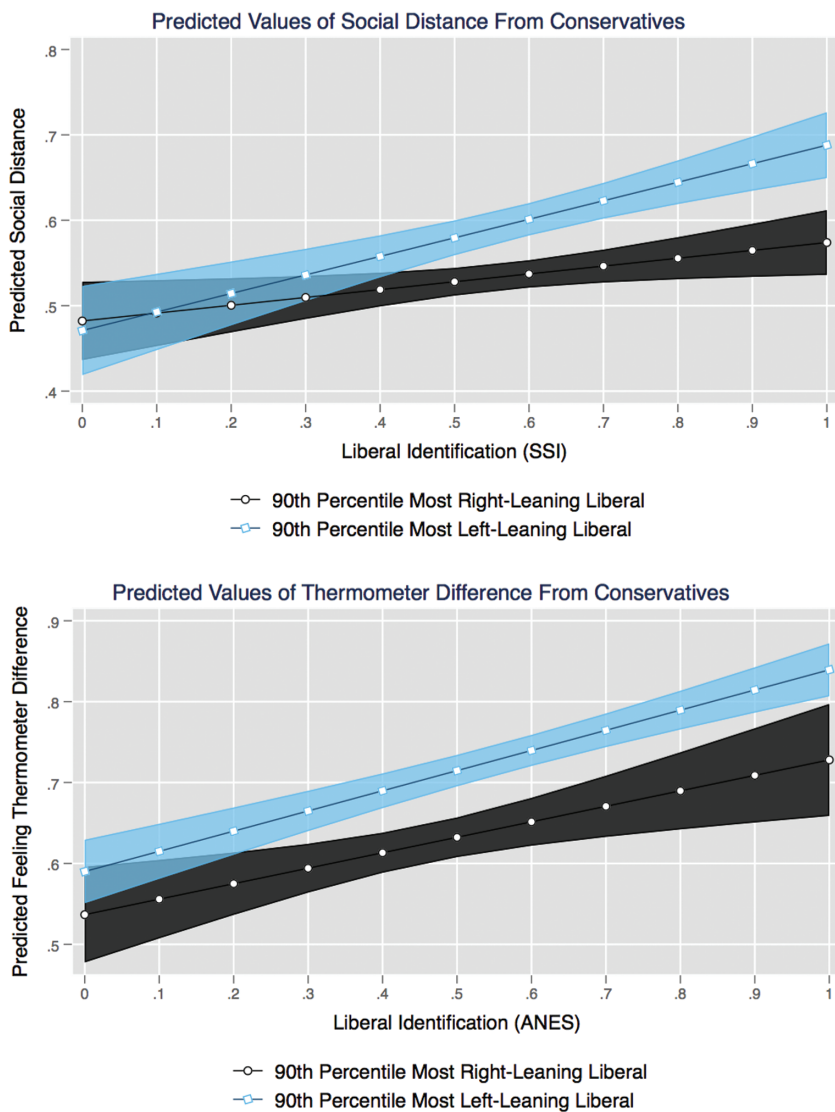
13. In the ANES, socially identified liberals do not score above 0.55 on the issue-based ideology scale, whereas socially identified conservatives are distributed across attitudes ranging from 0 to 1. In the SSI sample, attitudes are more broadly distributed among socially identified liberals. Both liberals and conservatives have attitudes distributed across the entire scale from 0 to 1, though the median score for liberals is 0.29 and for conservatives is 0.53, suggesting that socially identified liberals are more attitudinally left-leaning than socially identified conservatives are attitudinally right-leaning. This is true of both samples and echoes the [Ellis and Stimson \(2012\)](#) finding that American identified conservatives are generally “operationally” left-leaning, and that this effect is not mirrored among identified liberals.

Table 3. Interacting issue-based and identity-based ideology

	Ingroup social preference among liberals (SSI)	Ideological thermometer difference among liberals (ANES)	Ingroup social preference among conservatives (SSI)	Ideological thermometer difference among conservatives (ANES)
Identity-based ideology				
Liberal-Conservative issues	0.25 (0.05)*	0.26 (0.05)*	0.13 (0.09)	0.27 (0.13)*
Identity-based ideology X Liberal-Conservative issues	0.02 (0.08)	-0.21 (0.15)	0.23 (0.12)*	0.57 (0.19)*
Party identity strength	-0.28 (0.13)*	-0.23 (0.29)	0.01 (0.17)	-0.11 (0.31)
Sophistication	-0.02 (0.02)	0.09 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.03)	0.07 (0.02)*
White	0.06 (0.02)*	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.01)
Male	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)
Income	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Age (decades)	-0.10 (0.02)*	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.06 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)
Political interest	-0.01 (0.00)*	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Constant	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.06 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.02)
N	0.51 (0.03)*	0.52 (0.04)*	0.39 (0.06)*	0.27 (0.08)*
R-squared	1041	947	851	1114
	0.16	0.33	0.18	0.37

NOTE.—The Liberal-Conservative issues scale is an index of six issues ranging from most liberal on all issues (0) to most conservative on all issues (1). All variables are coded to range from 0 to 1. All models are OLS regressions with robust standard errors (represented in parentheses) and sample weights applied.

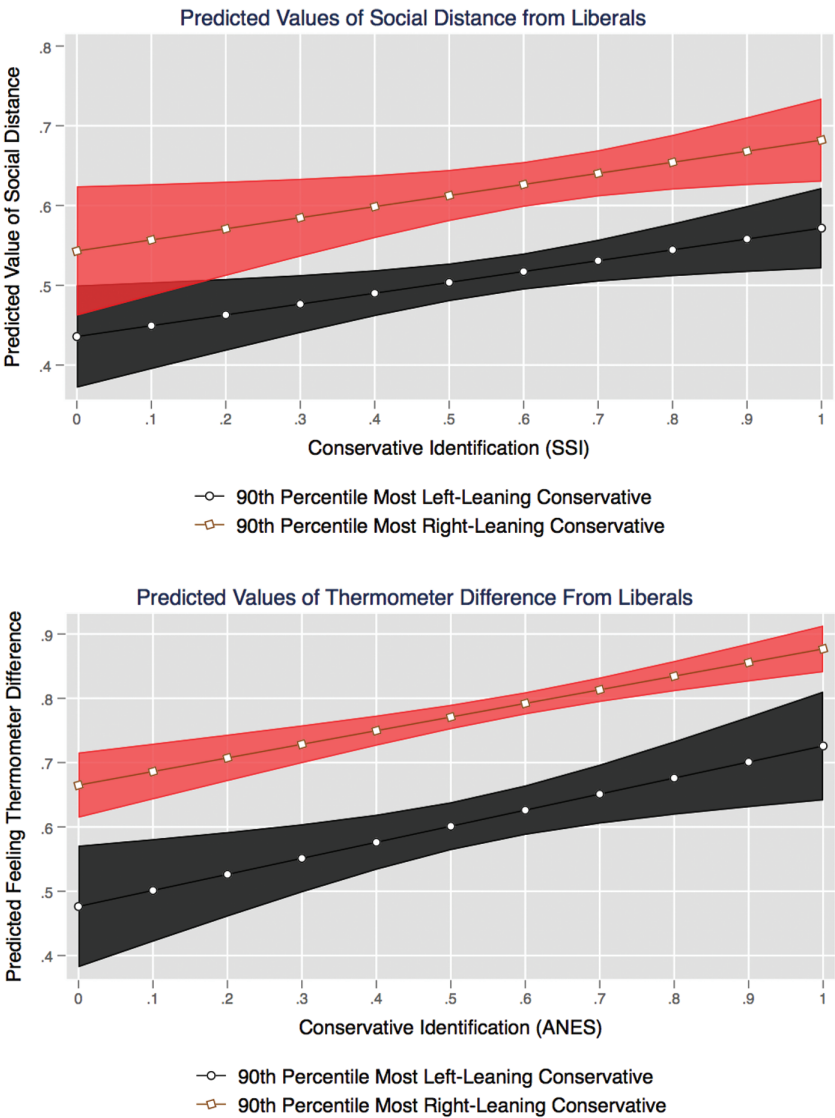
\*  $p < .05$



**Figure 1. Interacting identity-based and issue-based ideology, predicting affective polarization against conservatives among liberals.** Ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown. Originating regressions in [table 3](#).

For example, among self-identified liberals, this will include individuals who, across the range of six issues, are the most right-leaning 10 percent of the liberals in the sample, as well as individuals who are the most left-leaning





**Figure 2.** Interacting identity-based and issue-based ideology, predicting affective polarization against liberals among conservatives. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals shown. Originating regressions in [table 3](#).

10 percent of liberals in the sample. All other variables from [table 3](#) are held constant at their means or modes.<sup>14</sup>

In the first panel of [figure 1](#) (using SSI data), the effect of liberal identification on social distance from conservatives is plotted for those scores at the most left-leaning and right-leaning. At the 90th percentile value of left-leaning issue positions among self-identified liberals (0.10 out of 1.0), identity-based ideology has a strong and significant effect on feelings of social distance from conservatives. Among those who have some of the most consistently left-leaning attitudes, moving from weakest to strongest liberal identity increases social distance by about 20 percentage points. Thus, even when issue positions are consistent with the ideological group, the identification with that group can still have significant effects on feelings toward ideological opponents.

[Figure 1a](#) also examines the effect of liberal identification at the 90th percentile value of right-leaning issue positions among self-identified liberals (0.54 out of 1.0). Among this 10 percent of most right-leaning liberals, the effect of identity on social distance is somewhat muted. Moving from weakest to strongest liberal identity increases social distance by about 10 percentage points. Among self-identified liberals with cross-cutting issue-based ideology, the effect of identity on social distance is about half the size of the effect among those liberals with consistent issue-based ideology. This figure, therefore, provides some evidence that cross-cutting issue-based ideology can reduce the effects of identity-based ideology. However, this particular model is the only place this effect appears. Furthermore, even among these cross-pressured liberals, an increase from weakest to strongest identification does still significantly increase social distance from conservatives.

In [figure 1b](#), similar results are found using ANES data and measures, though the dampening effect of issue-based ideology is not replicated. At the 90th percentile value of left-leaning issue positions among identified liberals (0.08), the effect of moving from weakest to strongest liberal identification is to increase feeling thermometer differences by about 25 degrees. Here too, even when left-leaning attitudes are consistent with identity, the degree of identification with liberals is capable of significantly increasing affective polarization against conservatives. Also in [figure 1b](#), self-identified liberals at the 90th percentile of right-leaning issue positions (0.33) respond nearly as powerfully to increasing liberal identity. These liberals with cross-cutting issue-based ideology respond to an increase from weak to strong liberal identity with a nearly 20-degree increase in the difference between liberal and conservative feeling thermometers. Not only are both effects of identity significant, but the slopes of the two lines are not statistically distinguishable. While a set of cross-cutting issue positions may generally decrease social distance

14. The plot of marginal effects from [figures 1](#) and [2](#) is included in the online appendix, [figures A3](#) through [A6](#).

from conservatives, in this model it does not change the effect of liberal social identity on feelings toward conservatives.

Figure 2 examines the same models among self-identified conservatives. In figure 2a (SSI data), among self-identified conservatives at the 90th percentile value of most right-leaning issue positions (0.75), the effect of moving from weakest to strongest conservative identity is to increase social distance from liberals by nearly 15 percentage points. That is, among the conservatives with the most consistently right-leaning attitudes, the strength of conservative identity can significantly increase animosity toward liberals. Among conservatives with cross-cutting issue-based ideology, those at the 90th percentile value of most left-leaning attitudes (0.29), identification with the conservative group can still increase social distance from liberals. Moving from weakest to strongest conservative identity, even in the presence of cross-cutting opinions, increases social distance by about 15 percentage points. This is identical to the effect of identity among conservatives with consistently right-leaning positions. The cross-cutting issue positions decrease the general level of social distance from liberals, but the effect of identity is the same regardless of actual positions.

In figure 2b, the same model is run using ANES data and measures. Among conservatives at the 90th percentile score of most right-leaning issue positions (0.5), moving from weakest to strongest conservative identity increases feeling thermometer differences between liberals and conservatives by about 20 degrees. Once again, in the presence of right-leaning issue positions, conservative identity is still capable of significantly increasing affective polarization against liberals. Remarkably, the combination of a consistent set of right-leaning attitudes and a strong conservative identity predicts a difference between liberal and conservative feeling thermometers of almost 90 degrees. The only way for this score to occur is if conservatives are rating liberals consistently below 10 degrees, while rating conservatives near 100. Even among those conservatives whose attitudes are not consistent with their identity, the identity has a polarizing effect. Among conservatives at the 90th percentile score of the most left-leaning attitudes (0.17), moving from weakest to strongest conservative identity increases feeling thermometer differences by about 25 degrees. This slope is, again, not distinguishable from that of the issue-consistent conservatives.

The main difference between liberals and conservatives in figures 1 and 2 is that liberals with the most right-leaning opinions still hold, on balance, generally left-leaning issue positions. Conservatives with the most left-leaning opinions, however, also hold generally left-leaning issue positions. This means that the self-identified liberals in these figures are less cross-pressured by attitudes than are self-identified conservatives. The fact that the results are largely similar across the two groups, and that the interaction between identity and issues is only significant in one model out of four, supports the premise that issue-based ideology is not the only factor driving the affective polarization of ideological groups. There is an independent effect of identity-based ideology pushing Americans apart from one another, based in social identity.

## DISCUSSION

Among the growing number of Americans who are identifying as either liberal or conservative, there is significant heterogeneity. Self-identified liberals and conservatives exhibit varying levels of issue-based consistency, with conservatives holding attitudes that are the least consistent with their chosen ideological label (Ellis and Stimson 2012). However, regardless of a person's level of issue constraint, social identification with liberals or conservatives reliably predicts substantial social distancing from ideological outgroups. That is, a set of inconsistent issue positions does not prevent someone from disliking their ideological opponents. According to the SSI data, nearly every person who identifies as either liberal or conservative reports *some* degree of social preference for the ideological ingroup over the outgroup in every aspect of social distance measured. According to the 2016 ANES, this includes 52 percent of Americans, or more than half of the nation.

These findings reflect a continuing problem of political segregation that has been observed in the American electorate. DiPrete et al. (2011) have found that in American politics, "social divisions based on religiosity, political ideology, family behaviors, and socioeconomic standing are high and in some cases rival racial segregation in their intensity" (p. 1236). Klostad, McDermott, and Hatemi (2012) find that liberals and conservatives prefer to date inside the ideological group. The results presented here underscore this social distancing on ideological terms. Furthermore, this process is occurring without much regard to actual issue-based disagreement. Liberals and conservatives are distancing themselves from one another on behalf of their identity-related feelings about who is "in" and who is "out."

Some of this is likely due to partisan-ideological sorting and media consolidation that has allowed even uninformed Americans to know the name of their ideological team. But team names without issue knowledge can generate political conflict that is unmoored from distinct policy goals. This is likely to lead to a less compromise-oriented electorate. After all, if policy outcomes are less important than team victory, a policy compromise is a useless concession to the enemy.

Although politics is generally thought to be outside everyday experience for most Americans, social identity is a deeply embedded psychological orientation toward all social interactions. While policy attitudes may not be structuring these interactions to a huge degree, the sense of ideological identification does affect the relationships between Americans. And more likely than not, the effects of ideological identity reported here are not the only outcomes. As Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe (2015) found, partisan social identity is capable of driving both affective evaluations and political activism, even when issue-based ideology is not extreme. Ideological social identity should be expected to do the same. As aversion toward the ideological outgroup grows, motivation

to participate in politics is likely to grow as well. Future research should assess the ability of identity-based ideology to move voters to the polls.

Finally, when political scientists discuss ideological polarization, what is usually meant is an increasing distance between the issue-based ideological positions of partisans. These results imply that it may be clearer going forward to refer to this as issue-based polarization. The potential inclusion of identity-based ideology in the term “ideological polarization” ends up placing identity-based and ideological polarization into increasingly overlapping categories. American identities are better than American opinions at explaining conflict.

## Conclusion

In the context of the 2016 election, many pundits have expressed confusion over the appeal of a candidate whose policy plans seemed, at best, ideologically conflicted. How could self-identified “conservatives” find appeal in a candidate who did not hold consistently right-leaning policy positions? The data presented here show that, in fact, this should be easy to explain. The power behind the labels “liberal” and “conservative” to predict strong preferences for the ideological ingroup is based largely in the social identification with those groups, not in the organization of attitudes associated with the labels.

That is, even when we are discussing ideology—a presumably issue-based concept—we are not entirely discussing issues. And when we wish to know how “ideological” our increasing affective polarization truly is, the answer is that the ideological roots of that polarization are largely based in our social attachments to ideological labels, not only to thoughtful collections of opinions.

There is a difference between ideological labels and ideological issue positions. Identity-based ideology encompasses more than just a list of policy attitudes. As a result of this, there is a distinct difference in the *effects* of the two elements of ideology. Identity-based ideology can drive affective ideological polarization even when individuals are naïve about policy. The passion and prejudice with which we approach politics is driven not only by what we think, but also powerfully by who we think we are.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are freely available at *Public Opinion Quarterly* online.

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