Political Science: Political Ideologies

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Abstract

The past 50 years of research into political ideology has left scholars with a contested paradigm. One side, founded on the research of Philip Converse, argues that the mass public is distinctly nonideological in their thinking. The other side argues that ideological thinking is not, in fact, beyond the public and can be found in forms similar to that of political elites. The way forward for research in political ideology does not lie in rehashing this debate but in moving forward in two new areas of work. The first considers the role that values and principles play in determining the political and ideological thinking of individuals. The second questions the current measurement standards of political ideology. Rather than considering ideology as occurring along a single spectrum, ideology among the mass public is formed by positions along two separate spectrums. In this essay, we summarize the major arguments of Converse, his supporters, and his critics. Then, we discuss recent research on principles and values and the measurement of ideology.

Political ideology is the concept that political opinions and attitudes are linked together in a coherent interconnected system. Ideology has been theorized as particularly important for a well-functioning democracy. Politically knowledgeable and competent citizens are needed to provide coherent political inputs to set public policy. If citizens hold ever-changing attitudes that lack any overall structure to them, it becomes difficult for representatives to interpret the demands and wants of citizens. Democracy by and for the people quickly becomes undermined if representatives rely on their own opinions because they cannot interpret the public's opinions.

Despite its centrality to traditional versions of textbook democracy, the American public is distinctly nonideological, according to Converse (1964). He provided several pieces of empirical evidence that pointed unequivocally to this conclusion. Except for political elites and the most politically involved citizens, Converse claimed that the vast majority of the public had "ideological innocence" in the words of Donald Kinder (1998).

During the past several decades, this picture of a nonideological American public has been contested by others suggesting that ideology may not in fact be beyond the grasp of average Americans (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Jost, 2006; Layman & Carsey, 2002). However, even in the face of this new evidence, the level of ideological thinking among the public remains contested. Recent research suggests that the most fruitful way forward is not to continue rehashing the current arguments, but to reconsider the framing of the debate. This new work suggests two major ideas: (i) that attitudes in the public could be based on political values and principles rather than ideology and (ii) that ideology is being incorrectly conceptualized and measured because it is treated ass unidimensional rather than multidimensional.

In this short essay, we briefly discuss the foundations of research on political ideology, including Converse (1964) and the many responses his work spawned. Then, we discuss recent research considering political values and principles and new measures of ideology and its dimensionality. We conclude with our suggestions for key issues that researchers should consider moving forward.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

CONVERSE'S "THE NATURE OF MASS BELIEF SYSTEMS"

Building upon the findings of *The American voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), Converse (1964) studied the belief systems of both the mass public and political elites. He examined two characteristics of attitudes in belief systems, attitude centrality, and range. He argued that in political belief systems, some attitudes will be held more strongly and the number of political attitudes held will vary. Converse uses the concept of constraint to tie these characteristics together and identify ideological thinking. Constraint is the idea that attitudes are linked in a form of interdependence, such that holding one belief should be accompanied by holding another belief. For example, if an individual supported increased spending for education, he or she should also favor more spending for health care because both attitudes indicate a liberal belief in an enhanced role for government. Thus, ideological individuals hold some centrally important beliefs that are connected to other attitudes in a wide ranging system.

Using repeated measures comparing political elites to the mass public, Converse found that the vast majority of the population is nonideological in its political attitudes. First, he considers whether the mass public conceptualizes of politics in ideological terms. The public fails at this highest level of ideological thinking, as Converse finds that they do not mention ideology in their political opinions and evaluations, but rather use social groups or

political candidates as their bases of reference. Converse next considered the possibility that even though the mass public does not use ideological terms, they might recognize and understand the concepts. Here again the public failed, with most unable to recognize the ideological affiliation of various candidates or parties.

With evidence that the public failed to use, recognize, or understand ideological thinking, Converse next considered whether at the very least, individuals' opinions were correlated in such a way to indicate ideological constraint. Again, the public failed the test. Looking at the connection between related issues, the mass public had much smaller correlations compared to the elite sample. Even more troubling, opinions of the mass public possessed very low stability over time. While their partisan affiliations were stable, it appeared as if individuals were choosing opinions almost at random. No matter how the question was framed, the consistent and constant answer was that the mass public lacked any form of ideological belief system or thinking.

CRITIQUES OF "THE NATURE OF MASS BELIEF SYSTEMS"

Over the next few decades, three major critiques emerged challenging the idea of an unsophisticated and nonideological public. One critique centered on the political culture in the United States when Converse performed his study. The authors of *The Changing American Voter* (Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976) argued that ideological thinking in the public had significantly expanded from an all-time low during the 1950s, when Converse conducted his study. Using similar measures, they found increased levels of ideological constraint among voters. They explained this as a result of changing political culture. Politics in the 1950s, immediately following World War II was much more consensual, with a large agreement between the parties on the policies to implement. Going into the 1960s, more significant divisions began to emerge between the parties, bringing with it increased ideological thinking on the part of voters.

This critique has been extended more recently by Alan Abramowitz (2010) who has argued that ideological thinking has seen a rapid increase among the current US public. Owing to changes in both the geographic and demographic makeup of the country, Abramowitz sees evidence that the country is becoming more and more polarized in its voting and attitudes. The growing population of nonwhite voters has become more consistently liberal and as have younger voters. Abramowitz goes further in his search of mass ideology by measuring the connectedness of the public's policy opinions.

According to data from the 2008 election, a majority of voters were found at opposite sides on issues, rather than in the center. In addition, opinions

on these issues tended to be closely connected. Using climate change as an example, Abramowitz (2010) shows that those with extreme views outnumbered those with centrist views 41% to 28% (pp. 599–600). In addition, those who took a liberal position on climate change were very likely to take a liberal position on health care, with a similar pattern emerging for Conservatives. This evidence is a strong indication of the type of ideological constraint Converse sought to find in his original study.

Another critique against Converse came from Robert Lane (1962). Rather than using surveys, Lane used in-depth interviews with a small number of working-class men in one neighborhood. Lane argued, among other things, that Converse makes assumptions about what belief systems should look like and excludes personality and social structure from belief systems. Although ideology in the mass public does not look like ideology employed by political elites that does not mean that it is absent. In his interviews, Lane found that many individuals do have a form of ideological thinking but their ideology is not constrained by the standard liberal–conservative ideology of elites.

Rather, ideology in the public is constrained by how people think of themselves and society, such as who should rule, moral codes, and fundamental personal values. This includes attitudes toward equality, freedom, and democracy. For example, individuals who strongly believe in personal freedoms will believe both that same-sex marriage should be allowed and that citizens should be free to own firearms. While these attitudes would be seen as incompatible according to conventional ideological beliefs, they are a natural combination when considering a different ideological dimension. Despite the evidence Lane presents, his data collection methods were criticized as not generalizable to the wider population owing to his small, nonrandom, specialized sample. Dennis Chong's (1993) in-depth study of how a small number of individuals reason about issues involving civil liberties is another example of research in this tradition. His findings suggest that ordinary citizens can make sense of complex problems about civil liberties and constitutional rights but do not do so using conventional ideological reasoning.

The third critique came from Achen (1975) who approached Converse's findings from a statistical viewpoint. He argued that individuals hold unstable political opinions and attitudes that seem to vacillate not because they have no political opinions but because of the nature of survey questions. To test this possibility, Achen built a model designed to partition ideological constraint into two different sources: the instability of voter's attitudes and the low reliability of survey questions. Achen's purpose was to show that vague and changing survey questions themselves were mainly to blame for the instability of public attitudes. When this error was corrected for in the analysis, Achen found a strong relationship between individual attitudes. Recently, Stephen Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) have extended

Achen's work by applying well-known reliability estimation procedures to the observed correlations of respondents' issue preferences, demonstrating that once the observed measures are corrected for unreliability, their preferences are not only highly stable and tightly constrained but impact voting choices to the same degree as party identification.

John Zaller (1992) provides a more theoretical account of nonattitudes. Zaller suggests that the attitudes being measured by surveys not only possess measurement error but that the process itself introduces error. He provides a top of the head response model, where individuals often hold opposing and ambivalent political attitudes. Depending on the wording and order of survey questions, these responses can be altered, with ambivalent individuals easily being pushed one way or the other based on what considerations the survey has most immediately brought to mind. While Zaller provides an explanation of the finding of nonattitudes, he does not find evidence of ideological thinking, but rather the opposite.

A Public that Possesses or Lacks Ideological Thinking: The Current State of the Debate

These critiques have extended to current research suggesting that ideology may not in fact be beyond the grasp of average Americans (Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Jost, 2006; Layman & Carsey, 2002). However, in spite of this research, the debate on ideology is not settled. Others continue to present evidence that a nonideological public is the reality (Bishop, 2005; Feldman, 2003; Kinder, 2006). Some have attributed the recent polarization in the public to increasingly polarized elites (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010). As political candidates became more and more ideologically distinct voters sorted themselves into more extreme positions behind polarized candidates. Thus, voter sorting, not ideological polarization, has been occurring among the American electorate, according to these analysts (Levendusky, 2009).

While Converse himself has acknowledged that changes in American politics and the public may have ushered in a more substantial role for ideology in the American electorate, he argues that the larger picture remains unchanged (Converse, 2006). Many of the above critiques did not directly refute Converse's findings but simply tried to reinterpret them. The mass public as portrayed in *The Changing American Voter*, while showing some improvement from Converse's portrayal, still has limited ideological capabilities, particularly when compared with elites. Lane is unable to show that the public has a firmly structured ideology such as elites, but only that each individual might possess some idiosyncratic ideological thinking.

The end result of almost 50 years of research into mass ideology is a still contested paradigm. However, recent research into ideology has suggested

two interesting pathways out of this morass. Rather than continue the debate over the ideological character of the mass public, the new research suggests a shift in the terms of the debate. The first agenda suggests an important role not for political ideology but rather political values and principles, building on the work of Lane. The second agenda suggests a reconceptualization of what exactly ideology looks like and how it should be measured.

EMERGING TRENDS

The past decade of research into political ideology has brought two major advances that we will discuss here. The first is evidence that the voting public of today is constrained not by ideology but by adherence to certain political values or principles. The second is a criticism of the way ideology is conceived of and measured. While this criticism has its origins in previous research, only recently have scholars found evidence for a public that is ideological in many different ways from the simple liberal–conservative spectrum discussed previously.

POLITICAL ATTITUDES AS DETERMINED BY VALUES, NOT IDEOLOGY

Values are beliefs that indicate desirable behaviors, but which can be applied to many different situations in guiding specific actions or beliefs (Schwartz, 1992). These values are intuitively understood because of their use in an individual's daily interactions with others and in viewing the world. These values include ideas such as opinions toward equality of opportunity, economic individualism, and the free enterprise system (Feldman, 1988). Equality of opportunity is the extent to which an individual values policies or actions designed to ensure that all people, including racial minorities and women, are given an equal chance to hold certain positions. Economic individualism is the idea that people should get ahead through hard work. Support of the free enterprise system is a general distrust of governmental involvement and preference for free market solutions to problems.

Feldman's research showed that most people held a variety of political values and that they were empirically connected to many political opinions. For example, belief in equality of opportunity is strongly related to support for welfare or affirmative action policies. While Lane took a similar approach to understanding the basis of political opinions of the public, Feldman investigated the use of values among a large and representative sample with standardized survey questions, allowing for more generalized conclusions. Feldman's research has been extended by others looking at other value dimensions and their consequences for public opinion (Alvarez & Brehm, 1997; Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001).

While this research can explain how individuals reason and form opinions about politics, fewer scholars have investigated how political values might directly structure adherence to political ideology itself. Rokeach (1973) examined how two particular values, attitudes toward equality and freedom, structured beliefs in four major ideologies of the twentieth century: socialism (high equality/high freedom), communism (high equality/low freedom), fascism (low equality/low freedom), and capitalism (low equality/high freedom). Most recently, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt has examined how beliefs in certain dimensions of morality explain adherence to different political ideologies.

Haidt (2012) developed five different foundations of morality: (i) a care/harm foundation that involves sensitivity to signs of suffering, (ii) a fairness/cheating foundation that makes individuals sensitive to cooperation or exploitation, (iii) a loyalty/betrayal foundation involves trust for certain group members and dislike for those that betray the group, (iv) an authority/subversion foundation that makes individuals sensitive to signs of rank or status, and finally (v) a sanctity/degradation foundation that makes individuals wary of a diverse array of symbolic actions that do not necessarily directly affect them (pp. 153–154).

Haidt argues that liberal ideologues are notable for their reliance on two of these dimensions: fairness and care. Conservatives, on the other hand, are sensitive to all five of these moral dimensions. This diversity not only explains the emphasis both ideologies place on certain policies (e.g., feeling the care foundation is important would be related to strong support for social welfare policy) but also gives Conservatives a political advantage, says Haidt. Conservatives will be able to muster greater support for their ideology by supporting policies that are responsive to a wider range of moral dimensions than Liberals, who do not even try to compete on the other three foundations of morality.

Haidt's work and the general scholarship relating values to political beliefs shows promise in explaining how individuals that lack any kind of political understanding are able to form responses to political objects. The paradigm is not without detractors however. Some recent studies have shown that values have little additional power in explaining issue opinions when compared to the effect of ideology (Jacoby, 2006).

A related line of recent research focuses on principles rather than values. Paul Goren's (2013) work has developed this idea most fully. Goren argues that three key principles, limited government, traditional morality, and military strength, underlie and structure the specific issue preferences and choices of voters. Moreover, they play a major role in determining presidential voting decisions and most surprisingly are employed as heuristics by the unsophisticated as well as the sophisticated.

IDEOLOGY ALONG MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

Since 1972, the American National Elections Study (ANES) has explicitly asked respondents to place themselves on a seven-point ideological scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. As with Converse who tested whether individuals understood and used these ideological labels, this question is meant to measure the ideological orientation and strength of individuals. However, some scholars argue that this measure carries implicit problems. Ellis and Stimson (2009, 2012) argue that ideology has two different aspects: an operational and symbolic aspect. Symbolic ideology is measured by the ANES question and shows that the ideological label individuals prefer to use in describing themselves. Conover and Feldman (1981) had previously shown that symbolic ideology had little stability for individuals and was more an indication of how voters were evaluating candidates. Operational ideology, by contrast, is the actual array of political attitudes and issue positions that individuals hold. Ellis and Stimson present evidence that while the public tends to be symbolically conservative, they are simultaneously operationally liberal.

If individuals can hold simultaneously liberal and conservative beliefs, this indicates not only that a problem with the ANES measures but also that perhaps ideology cannot be simply measured along a single dimension. Classically, the left–right (liberal–conservative) distinction consisted of two factors: (i) supporting versus opposing social change and (ii) rejecting versus accepting inequality (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyaday, 2003). This single ideological dimension has been used consistently throughout history across the world and political elites and party activists strongly adhere to it. However, while this dimension has proven adequate to explain the ideology of our political representatives, it falls short for describing the ideological positions of the wider public.

One of the most prominent arguments is that the liberal–conservative dimension was actually two separate dimensions (Layman & Carsey, 2002; Saucier, 2000). One is an economic dimension that relates to governmental taxation, spending, and redistribution policies. The other is a social dimension that relates to social and cultural issues such as abortion and religious beliefs. Some researchers have gone further and argued that these dimensions are actually orthogonal to one another, making it possible to be both socially conservative but economically liberal as an example (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009). Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner (2012a, 2012b) take up this problem, presenting a more detailed ideological typology. They argue that the current measure of ideology is really only a measure of whether individuals are liberal or conservative on both dimensions. This spectrum fails to identify individuals that are conservative or liberal on one

dimension, with the opposite ideological position on the other. Empirically, these individuals end up clustered as Moderates according to the classic measure. However, individuals with mixed ideological viewpoints are quite distinct from true Moderates and deserve to be specifically pulled out for analysis.

Using this framework, Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner develop five different ideological groupings: Liberals, Conservatives, Moderates, Libertarians, and Populists. Individuals can be sorted into these labels according to whether they (i) support or oppose redistribution, social service spending, and governmental interference in the economy and (ii) defend or oppose traditionally moralist/religious positions on social and cultural issues. Liberals are those individuals that support redistribution and governmental spending on social services while opposing traditionally moralist positions on social and cultural issues. Conservatives are the mirror image of Liberals. They oppose redistribution policies and want to limit governmental size and spending. They tend to be more religious and supportive of policies that continue traditional social mores. As would be expected, Liberals tend to identify with and vote for the Democratic Party, whereas Conservatives identify and vote with the Republican Party. These two labels conform to the classic definition of liberal and conservative according to the standard-dimensional measure.

More interesting are the other ideological varieties. Libertarians are individuals who hold conservative views on the economic dimension but liberal views on the social dimension. They value limited governmental interference in the lives of individuals across all domains of policy. Libertarians would oppose an expansion of governmental spending and interference in the economy. They would also oppose limitations on same-sex marriage and access to abortion, opposing governmental interference in this policy dimension as well. On the whole, Libertarians tend to identify and vote for Republican candidates but not nearly to the extent of Conservatives. Populists have conservative social views but liberal economic views. While they are proponents of traditionally moral policy positions, they also value the increased services that result from a government active in the economy. They would support limitations on abortions and same-sex marriage while also approving of redistribution policies and governmental spending on social services such as Medicare. They tend to identify with and vote for Democratic candidates but much less so than Liberals.

Even though Libertarians and Populists look like Moderates according to the single-dimension measure, they differ in their actual policy positions. Moderates tend to identify as political independents and hold middling, rather than extreme positions along these two policy dimensions. Given these illustrations, it seems clear that the use of the classic

liberal–conservative ideology measure is limited in its use. While it applies readily to political elites and party activists who conform strongly to classic ideological boundaries, it falls far short when describing the mass public.

Miller and Schofield (2008) argue that not only are these labels relevant for the mass public but they are also important for political elites. They present evidence that the two major parties have long been built of coalitions with fractured interests. As these interests wax and wane in their power, the parties will have changing positions as they look to rebuild a stable voting coalition. Such a reality is perfectly illustrated by the challenges faced by the Republican Party following the 2012 presidential election. Republicans face a tension between libertarian leaning members, who are moderate on the social policy dimension and economically conservative, with populist leaning members who are moderate on economic policy but are conservative on social policy. These tensions were manifested in the many primary challenges to moderate Republican members of Congress, such as Sen. Richard Lugar, who were defeated by more socially conservative individuals. Shifts in ideology among the elite are likely to lead to further such alterations of exactly what liberal and conservative ideology means in the coming years.

LOOKING FORWARD WITH POLITICAL IDEOLOGY RESEARCH

We have seen that political ideology has regained the attention of political scientists and political psychologist in recent years. While it once seemed that ideologically oriented belief systems were beyond the grasp of ordinary citizens because they were too abstract, wide ranging, and interconnected, new lines of research have emerged and have led to a reconsideration of the role of ideology and related concepts in mass publics. On the one hand, the standard conceptualization and measurement of political ideology as self-identification along a single dimension has proven of limited use when describing average citizens (Carmines *et al*., 2012a, 2012b).

Yet this does not mean that ideological thinking is necessarily beyond the grasp of ordinary citizens. On the contrary, recent research on political values and principles as well as multidimensional conceptions of ideology suggests that there is an underlying structure to the political thinking of citizens, just not one that is as simple and elegant as that used by political elites. The political thinking of citizens, this new research suggests, is complex, multidimensional, and value-laden and involves deeply-held principles. It may not be ideological in the traditionally understood sense but it provides an underlying organization and structure to the political attitudes, evaluations, and preferences held by American citizens.

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