

The Dimensionality of Issues in Two Party Politics

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Prepared for the Conference on Elections at Columbia University, Oct. 18-19, 2002

Why do new issues arise in the conflict between parties? What happens to them when they do? And how many dimensions structure public opinion in American politics? These are the questions for this paper. It will weave together the three questions and argue that they are highly related facets of a set of other questions about the nature of issue spaces in two-party politics. Then I turn to partially related questions about the mismatch of ideology as organized preferences and ideology as self identification. I begin with theory.¹

The Issue Evolution Theory of Issue Alignment²

A large and complex society has immense possibilities for producing conflicts over public policy. Every time a diverse and dynamic economy rubs against the public domain it generates issues for the public order. In principal the number of public issues is almost boundless. While one might imagine an *administrative* structure that could deal with almost boundless controversies, for example, the whole rule-making and rule-enforcing structure of all the administrative agencies of the federal government, it is hard to imagine a political structure that deals with numerous unrelated issues.

Politics has limits. If we conceive it in democratic terms as a dialogue between voters and government, then the channel capacity of that dialogue has stark constraints. A citizenry that is mainly not interested in public life -- which pretty much has to be the case if that same citizenry is productively employed doing something else -- can not ponder a long list of controversies. Legislatures can deal in hundreds of issues at most. There are not enough days in the calendar for thousands or tens of thousands or more.

But more than all these, the central mechanism for deciding public controversies, the election, is an extraordinary issue bottleneck. The number of things that can be talked about in a campaign is small (if that talk has any chance of reaching the voters, who by and large are not listening very carefully.) The number that voters can take into mind in making their voting decision is small. And the tightest constraint of all of these forces is the number of issues that can be decided by the outcome. Although election winners can and do claim that everything they stood for was endorsed by the fact of their win, objective observers, who serve as referees in this process, rarely concede that anything has been decided. It is quite impossible that this channel could carry numerous messages.

¹. This paper, the opposite of the customary scenario in which ideas are tried out in papers and eventually become articles or chapters, is a mildly revised version of what is in the first instance Chapter 3 of my book, *Tides of Consent: How Opinion Movements Shape American Politics*, currently under review. The book is written for general readers and thus the paper will not have the familiar flavor of an academic exercise.

². This argument builds upon a joint effort with Ted Carmines in our 1989 book, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*. The theory has been extended to cover the abortion controversy by Greg Adams (1997) and to women' rights by Christina Wolbrecht (2000). Some elements are new in this treatment.

This abstraction about candidates, voters, and messages comes to ground in the party system. If the voter's decision is between exactly two parties and their nominees -- as it normally is in the United States -- then it becomes very hard to imagine how we would settle multiple unrelated controversies with one vote. We could *claim* to have settled them, but for that claim to have reality, it would have to be the case that voters weighed each matter separately, came to a conclusion, and factored all of these influences into the single vote. The problem is that the mechanism of choice -- a single vote cast for one of two candidates and parties -- does not permit the expression of multiple and conflicting views.

A single vote is binary, a "bit" in information theory. A bit is the smallest possible unit of information. It can carry the summary result of a mix of considerations, but it cannot convey the considerations themselves. Think of voting as a censoring process. You can have independent views on multiple controversies. And if the issues are truly independent, the candidates also will have multiple views on multiple controversies. Consequently, as the number of issues goes beyond say two or three, it becomes exceedingly unlikely that either of two candidates will have the same mix that you have. The voting process doesn't allow you to divide your vote in proportion to the number of issues on which you agree, voting say 2/3 vote for candidate A with whom you agree on two issues and 1/3 for B, who lines up with your views on the third. That is the nature of censoring, forcing an expression into a form that may not carry all of the original information.

A multi-party vote also is a censoring process, even a pretty extreme one, but it allows more than a single bit of information. Imagine a standard European party system that divides along two axes, one left-right as in the United States and the other along religious lines, clerical versus secular. Then you can have at least four parties who represent the possible combinations of the two dimensions, left-clerical, left-secular, right-clerical, and right-secular. Choosing one of the four now carries two bits of information about your preferences, how you feel about left versus right *and* how you feel about clerical versus secular.

A lot of ink has been spilled arguing about the superiority of various party systems for allowing the rational expression of voter preferences. That is not my interest. The two party system appears to be a pretty permanent fact of American politics. I wish to assume that this is the case and then exploit that assumption.

Ask how parties and candidates are affected by the knowledge that a vote in a two party system can carry preferences along a single dimension of choice, say left versus right, but not more than one. Candidates and parties want to win elections, not to solve problems in information theory. But as they consider strategies for winning, this issue of information censoring looms in the background. How should they structure a set of positions on issues to present to the voters?

Here it is useful to distinguish between what they say in platforms and what they choose to be the central messages, conveyed over and over again to the voters through the campaign. The platform will mention many issues. Many of these will be what Donald Stokes (1963) referred to as "valence" issues, declarations that the party is in favor of peace, prosperity, good education, stable families, a strong national defense, and on and on. "Valence" issues have the character of appearing to be issues, but actually are assertions of support for values which are

nearly universally held. Real issues, what Stokes called “position” issues, are genuine controversies on which numerous reasonable people are found on both sides. Some of those involve benefits for a specialized constituency, whether it be farmers, the textile industry, or whatever. These have the character of being of considerable interest only to those directly affected, not to ordinary voters.

The things candidates talk about on the campaign trail and in candidate debates are the platform that voters see and react to. Candidates talk about many “issues” in the campaign. This, among other things, demonstrates competence, showing that the candidate has thought about public debates and has a thoughtful position on each. But the many “issues” pretty commonly are many cases of the same issue dimension. Democrats promise to do more on education, support for farms and cities, making sure that Americans who want to work can find employment, and so forth. These are all elements of the New Deal package (or have become part of it) and really form one issue dimension. What all have in common is the assertion that government will be used to intervene in the economy to promote the welfare of those who might be harmed by the excesses of *laissez faire*. Republicans address the same issue domain when they talk about cutting back the excesses of government involvement, cutting taxes, and taking a more hands-off approach. This is one issue with many individual facets.

Why is it often so simple? Why not think of novel things to talk about? I have argued that the number of possible issues is almost boundless, so it is not for lack of possibilities. One good reason is that new positions on novel controversies are as likely to subtract votes as they are to add them. Politicians are always on the lookout for attractive stances. If there were winners out there not yet exploited, then the class of politicians would have to be a pretty unskilled lot. Notwithstanding the low esteem of politicians in America culture, claiming that professionals whose careers depend upon getting it right will be routinely incompetent is not a promising tack. Second, candidates face a pressure for coherence of positions. When, because of chronic inattention, most of what they say fails to get to their target audience, then the need to hone the message to stark simplicity is great.

Looking at both parties and their candidates as if they had exactly parallel needs and strategies gets us into a bit of trouble here. In normal politics it will often be the case that one of the two parties is advantaged in the tug-of-war over their central issue divide. As public opinion shifts and the parties’ performance (for example on managing the economy) is favorable or unfavorable, one will usually approach a particular campaign season with the sense that it has the dominant appeal. That party is strongly motivated to keep politics simple and predictable. Its position is dominant. So the winning strategy is to spell out its now popular message clearly, avoid introducing anything novel, and wait for the voters’ reward at the polls.

The likely losing party is the opposite. Contesting the election from its disadvantaged position on the main issue divide would also produce a predictable outcome for it, but an unhappy one. What if you are the likely loser on the main dimension of issue controversy? Then what strategy is sensible? Appealing on new issues is dangerous; they could shake loose voters who would otherwise be supportive. But this risk becomes sensible when you are the likely loser. The loss might be even worse. (But as Al Gore can testify, a close loss isn’t worth much in politics.) It is better in this situation to shake things up and hope for the best than to go for a sure thing probable loss.

Thus there is constant tension, with likely winners trying to shape the debate to an issue dimension on which they are favored and likely losers trying to introduce some new consideration into the mix to shake up the outcome. Because the need to shake up the system occurs with predictable frequency, new issue conflicts do get introduced every few years.

It is useful to say what I mean by “new.” The important claim about novelty is that the new conflict is not just another facet of the familiar left-right debate over the size of government. That wouldn’t introduce the new uncertainty that the strategy requires. Introduce one more controversy over whether government should do more or spend more in some domestic arena and we can predict which side each party would take. The central issue -- the scope of government -- isn’t new.

The genuine new issue will be cross-cutting, will appeal across the existing alignment of voters, parties, and positions. Racial issues had this character in the early 1960s. Then the South was Democratic and, a simpler era, the politics of race was very largely regional. Young voters in the 21st century might find it astonishing that the Republicans were once the more liberal party on race, but that was the case. The abortion controversy at the time of *Roe v. Wade* also found large numbers of pro-choice and pro-life voters in both parties.

Issue Evolution Dynamics

Imagine that a process begins with a “critical moment,” (Carmines and Stimson 1989) a notable event which signals that a new issue position has been taken. One of the parties opts to take a stand. On two-sided controversies (and *genuine* controversies are two-sided), the other by default is assigned the opposite side. Barry Goldwater voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and then made that position a centerpiece in his campaign for the presidency. That was a critical moment. Republicans, in the 1980 platform for Ronald Reagan’s run, abandoned a position of support for women’s rights that had been a hallmark of Republican politics for forty previous years. That was a critical moment. America had witnessed a small scale controversy over the exclusion of homosexuals from military service. It ceased to be an issue on the sidelines after Bill Clinton adopted support for “gays in the military” in his 1992 campaign. That was a critical moment.

What happens then? After a critical moment the two-sided politics in America become four-sided. In each party, already aligned along the old dimension, there are two groups, those supporting and those opposing the new party position. Huge numbers of racial liberals in 1964 called themselves Republicans as, in parallel, huge numbers of racial conservatives were Democrats. The abortion controversy saw the two parties divide into pro-choice and pro-life factions of comparable sizes.

Such a configuration is unstable. It leaves both candidates and voters misaligned with their parties. Misalignment exerts stresses that produce a dynamic resulting, ultimately, in elimination of the stresses by folding the two-fold alignment into one. The story can be told about either candidates or voters. I take up candidates first.

Story 1: Candidates. Each of the parties has tens of thousands of candidates and potential candidates for public office and thousands of other political professionals associated with party

activities. They run the gamut from the most visible candidates for U.S. House and Senate down to the proverbial local dog-catcher. (I wonder if there is a remaining jurisdiction in the United States in which dog-catchers are actually elected and what we writers about politics will do if the answer is “no.”) A new issue, one hot enough to have strategic advantage, will polarize all these people into three camps, supporters of the new position, opponents, and an in-between group that lacks strong views and previous public commitments to one side or the other.

When a controversial new position is staked out, the “supporters” -- those who have already advocated the position -- will of course join with enthusiasm. And most of those in between will find it easier and more comfortable to support their party’s new stance than to oppose it. The cost of opposition is estrangement from their party, while going along is costless. The opponents, who, in contrast, will have taken public positions, sometimes intense ones, sometimes even winning political support for them, will not go along. For them it is not costless to join their party’s position. They might appear inconsistent and unprincipled and might alienate voters they count on for support. (This was the situation on race of New York Republicans -- the party of the liberal Nelson Rockefeller -- in the 1960s and 1970s. They could not go along with their party’s conservative wing in opposing federal intervention to secure civil rights of black Americans without being at war with their own traditions.)

Assuming for convenience that the pro, con, and neutral groups are of about the same size, within months then the party goes from a fifty-fifty split on the new issue to the beginning of a consolidated position as the neutrals join the “pro’s” to form the new party core. Those who oppose the new line are now an uncomfortable minority in the party.

A period of awkwardness for the out-of-line faction follows. Not just that they are sitting on their hands when the applause line for the new position comes, they are sometimes working against their party colleagues, force to ally with the opposition to remain true to their convictions. Chances are that they represent constituencies that support their views, for example, pro-life Democrats representing ethnic Catholic constituencies in the northeast. Out of line, they cannot aspire to leadership roles in their national party. Although their colleagues understand the awkwardness of the situation, they would still have to oppose those who oppose the party’s stand.

The out-of-line opponents nonetheless might hold out, even for a long career in politics. This will particularly be the case if they have electoral support for their position. When they leave office is when things are likely finally to change. Those from their own party who replace them will usually be aligned with the party’s new position (often no longer very new). All the things that made it awkward and difficult for their predecessors are reasons that the new candidates will find it advantageous to align with the party. And one need not be cynical. They might align because they believe. Candidates of a new generation that comes along after an issue evolution is in progress get to choose their party. They will not chose one in which their views are misfit.

Story 2: Voters: Voters too will divide pro, con, or neutral. But most will have far less intense preferences than do the professional politicians, and none will have a *public* commitment to a prior position. As compared to the professionals, then, the neutral segment will be far more numerous. Thus the voters can move to support their party’s new position far more easily than

can the more rooted professionals in politics. Fewer will be out of line in the immediate aftermath of the critical moment.

Out of line voters may feel some discomfort, but don't face the practical difficulties of professional politicians. Some will remain with their party and out of line with its new position for a lifetime. New voters will come on the scene without previous loyalties and find it easier to align correctly. They develop support for the party positions, both old and new, in the process of cementing a bond with their party. So population replacement eventually produces alignment.

Voters then begin to enforce issue discipline on politicians. The mechanism is primary elections. Primary elections have two important characteristics that lead to such a role. One is that turnout is miniscule. Where twenty percent or so of those who could vote actually choose to do so, it will predictably be the twenty percent hard core. It will be voters who have intense rather than casual issue commitments. It will be those most involved, most informed.

The information environment they face lends itself to enforcing discipline. In general elections the link of issues to party makes it easy to know who stands for what, easy to choose between them. The party label just in itself encapsulates a lot of useful information. Primary elections, in contrast, lack anything comparable. Voters are in a bind, trying to tell the difference between numerous candidates -- not just two -- who often take positions so similar to one another that it becomes very difficult to pry them apart. That is particularly true on the issues that define party conflict; every candidate in the primary will have nearly identical views, nearly identical records.

Given the difficulty of finding any daylight between candidate positions on the standard issue set, the new issue emerges as the leading possibility for making the voting decision. Republicans in recent rounds of primaries, for example, nearly all advocate small government and major income tax cuts. And the Republican faithful which turns out to vote in primaries pretty uniformly supports that message. How then to decide between candidates? Focus necessarily turns to criteria where differences might be found. Abortion in this context can become the chief basis for a vote. If all candidates are about equally conservative on social welfare and size of government issues, then if some are pro-life on abortion and some are pro-choice, the pro-life candidates will be the winners. Even though the abortion issue is a secondary party stand, it thus can become the primary basis of success or failure in the primary.

In this context there is a certain inevitability to the long term. As the party begins to align on a new issue, like abortion, it is initially difficult for candidates to be out of line. As the evolution proceeds, eventually it becomes nearly impossible to survive in intra-party politics unless aligned with the dominant party position. The primary election mechanism insures that once started, a new issue commitment will eventually run to completion. A party cannot cast itself in a new direction on an issue that matters and then later cast it off or ignore it. Once this process starts the alignment of voters with issue stands carries the parties along in the direction initially chosen.

Issue Bundles

When we ask what is consistent with what, there seem always to be some positions married to others. So, for example, Republicans who have long advocated small government, now advocate major income tax cuts as a means to reduce the size of government. The two positions go together, seem to be logically linked. Young voters who don't know electoral history in this context would be shocked to discover that no one ever combined these two positions in most of the post New Deal era. For most of that period Republicans advocated fiscal prudence -- that is, balanced budgets -- and gave no thought to tax cuts. (And the one modern income tax cut came from the Democratic Kennedy Administration.) But once Ronald Reagan adopted the tax cut in his 1980 platform -- characterized as "voodoo economics" by primary opponent George Bush -- the tax cut came to seem logically linked to core Republican beliefs.

The key idea here is that things "seem" logically linked. But if we take out our deductive logic toolkit to demonstrate that link, in virtually every case we fail. What seems to go together do not in fact have logical connections. Seeming to go together Converse (1964) long ago pointed out is more a matter of psychology (what symbols are shared) and social learning (what kinds of ideas are learned together in one's social background). The key thing in both these cases is that our idea of consistency is *learned*. It is something that is not objectively true, but is rather socially constructed. We get used to the idea that certain positions are advocated together by the same people at the same times and places and come to believe that they must be logically tied.

If nothing *is* naturally connected, the corollary is that anything can come to *seem* connected. If liberalism seems to dictate support for abortion choice, for example, it might have been the case, given different circumstances in the early 1970s, that exactly the opposite connection became "logical." Time is a critical factor in this bundling process. The first time one sees two totally separate issue positions advocated by one party or candidate, they seem to be just that, two ideas espoused by one source. But as time passes and those same two ideas are repeatedly advocated together, for example, liberalism and choice, then they come to seem related. As the process runs to ultimate conclusion, we begin to see the two as two facets of the same thing and think that they are inseparable.

With this little theory in hand we can now ask the question, "How many dimensions does it take to structure the attitudes of American voters?" We have the elements of an answer. We know that a two party system tends to create a single issue division that is stable over time, that it generates new issues as a predictable response to the needs of otherwise losing parties to shake up the system, and that these new issues gradually become incorporated into the old issue configuration with the passage of time.

The answer to the dimension question is then "one plus." The plus is the residue of novel issues which at any given time is still novel, still independent. Although each new issue ultimately becomes incorporated into the main dimension of conflict, new issues come along often enough -- say something on the order of every 3 to 5 presidential election cycles -- and take so long to fully incorporate that the residue is always present. So when we go looking for the glue that holds issue positions together over time we should expect to find one clean dimension and on top of that some systematic "undissolved particles" of attitude toward the newer conflicts.

We will not find the new issues themselves because they are already aligned with the old for many people and cannot now be pried apart.

No Social Dimension: It is common for pundits to divide American politics into economic and social issues, with the implication that they are two and separable. Even if that were once the case (and we can't know because most such commentary is not based on systematic data analyses, hence not subject to disconfirmation), the dynamic of issue evolution should have resolved two into one by now. What I can say is that there is no discernable social dimension in the survey data. There are social issues, but these issues align with the main division of the parties.

I propose to the reader a commonsense test of issue independence. Find an example issue, say school prayer, "creation science," or gay rights and ask, can I say which side of the issue is liberal and which is conservative? If the answer is "Yes," as it is for me, then these issues cannot be independent. They are just pieces of the common issue bundle on which liberals and conservatives regularly disagree.

If the issue evolution theory is correct, what should we expect for evidence? First, if new issue controversies truly are novel, we should be able to date when they were added to the active political agenda. Then we should be able to show that they were not associated with the parties before that date. And then we should be able to show that they become associated over time.

I look here at three lively possibilities, race, women's role, and abortion to see if they track as predicted.

Three Issue Evolutions

The evidence of an issue evolution will be a new issue that is not associated with the existing alignment of issues to party and then becomes so. That requires the measurement of a single issue over a long span of time so that we can assess whether or not it is associated with party. For a criterion of association we have party identification, what respondents say in response to "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?" (with follow-ups to measure strength of identification on a seven point scale from Strong Democrat to Strong Republican).

I select one question from the issue domain in question, the chief criterion being that it is posed in identical terms over a long span of time. Then it is a simple matter to observe for each year the correlation of party identification with the issue measure. If things are as simple as the theory -- and they nearly are -- then we should see no correlation at the outset of a new issue. That means that the issue has nothing to do with the existing alignment, what I mean by "new" in partisan terms.³ Then we should see that correlation grow over time as the parties begin to align.

³. Of course no issue is ever new in the stronger sense of never having been thought of before. If it were, it would not be a question in a survey. Racial controversies, for example, are older than the country. But race was a new as a partisan issue in 1964, the first time in modern America that the two parties squared off on opposite sides of the question.

That growth will be dynamic, that is, a process that once started carries itself along into the future. There is no comparably easy standard for being fully aligned as the zero correlation standard for nonaligned. But if we observe a sequence of years in which the correlation stops growing, we can be fairly confident that the process has run its course.⁴ We can then estimate a smooth underlying model of the issue evolution that best fits this pattern of correlations. I begin with race, the issue for which the theory was first developed.

Case 1: Race

Before 1964 the politics of race was a politics of region, North vs. South. Because Democrats came disproportionately from the South, the Republican Party was slightly more liberal on racial matters than the Democrats. In 1964 Barry Goldwater first voted “No” on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 -- probably the single most visible act of legislating of the Twentieth Century -- then became the Republican candidate for president, and then used his “No” vote in a vigorous attempt to add the South to the Republican column.⁵ Thus began the process, continuing to this day, in which Republicans became the conservative party on race and the Democratic South ceased to exist.

“Evolution” is a critical part of the issue evolution story. The emphasis of this theory is on the process that ensues after such a critical moment, the way in which thousands of candidates and millions of voters begin sorting themselves along new lines. That evolution is seen in Figure 1 in the growth of correlations between racial attitudes (here captured by an item about government involvement in desegregating schools) and partisanship over the period roughly 1964 to 2000. Each bar is a correlation between race and party for a particular year. Negative in the one measurement before the 1964 campaign, we see a modest positive correlation capturing the immediate effect of adding the racial dimension to party politics and then an uneven growth over the following election years.

⁴. We can use the New Deal/welfare state controversies as a standard for what a mature alignment would look like. An item on government responsibility for employment -- the best available continuous measure which taps the basic welfare state controversies -- serves as an indicator of what is possible. Its correlation with party identification averages .28.

⁵. And he “succeeded,” winning five deep South states while losing the rest of the nation. See Carmines and Stimson (1989) for a much more detailed and elaborate telling of the racial issue story.

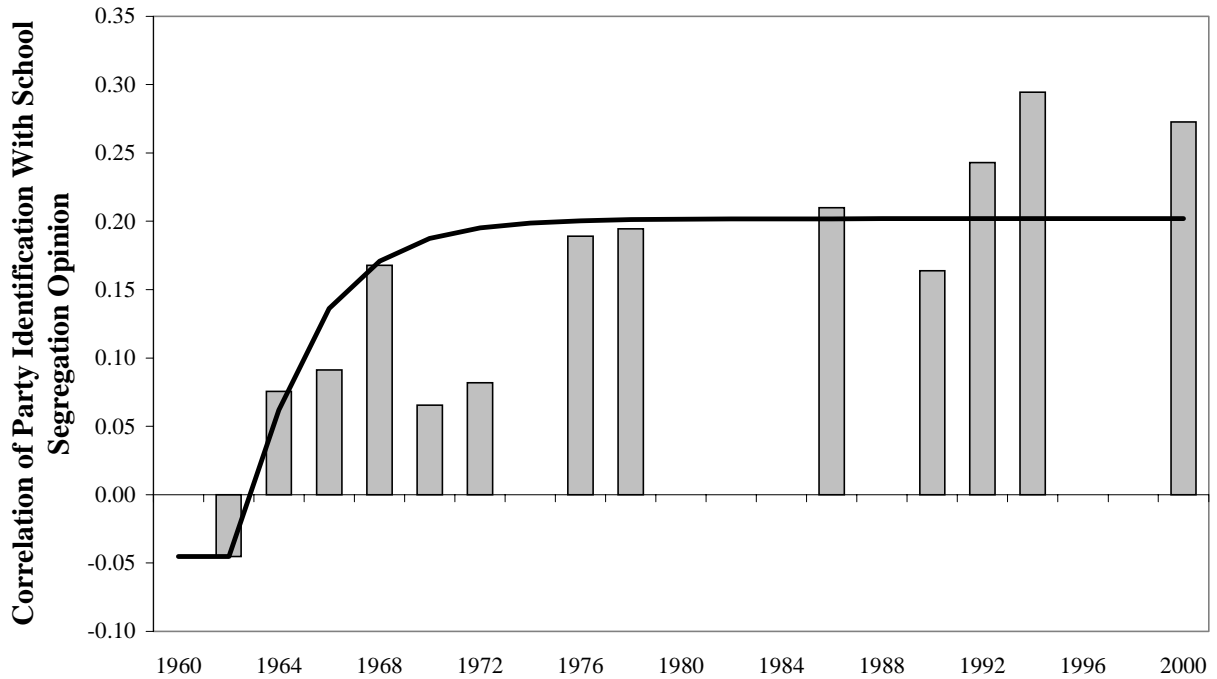


Figure 1. Correlations Between Partisanship and School Desegregation Attitudes: National Election Studies, 1960 to 2000

The smooth line drawn through the bars of Figure 1 is the best fitting simple model of the issue evolution process.⁶ It tracks the process from its negative baseline level through a smooth evolution, culminating ultimately in an equilibrium state in which no further alignment occurs. The parameters which determine the shape of the line suggest that the equilibrium was effectively reached by about 1980 and that the process has run its full course.

Case 2: Women

The women's movement of the late 1960s came from outside the party system. With half of all voters at stake, both parties naturally positioned themselves as pro-woman. More a cultural than a political phenomenon at the outset, what women wanted from government mainly was a prohibition on the employment discrimination which was then widespread and accepted. Because of a peculiar history, that non-discrimination by gender had been added to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, almost an afterthought, that battle was won even before the women's movement began to build mass appeal. The movement focused on the more symbolic Equal Rights Amendment. The ERA, first introduced in 1923, had been on the legislative agenda, without any success, for almost fifty years. In that time both political parties routinely endorsed it, but endorsement did not lead to action. When finally adopted by Congress in 1972, the fight

⁶. For those who care about the mathematics, (and there is no reason that one need to care), the model is a first order transfer function for an intervention which is scored zero before 1964 and one in 1964 and all subsequent years.

was joined. Adopted with a seven year ratification limit, the ERA fairly quickly was ratified by a majority of states and seemed well on its way to the required three fourths. The early success spawned an opposition of people who found the ERA a threat to the traditional order. The opponents, the core of what would eventually become the religious right, moved on the state capitals to reverse the tide. Close to success, the ERA stalled in the late 1970s, when Congress passed a controversial extension of the ratification.

The Republican Party, a traditional ERA supporter, switched sides in its 1980 platform written for the Reagan campaign. Reagan's base, as it had been when he unsuccessfully tried to oust Gerald Ford in 1976, drew heavily from the organized forces of the anti-ERA campaign. Highly visible at the moment, that platform sent a signal that conservatism and feminism would be on opposite sides. Perhaps for his issue stands and perhaps for something about the man, Ronald Reagan, what ensued was a situation rare in American politics in which candidate and then president Reagan had a different appeal to men than to women. Although the difference was not large, it drew attention because we were accustomed to gender not being relevant to politics. The women's movement, which had been largely outside partisan politics, began to see the Reagan administration, and with it the Republican Party, as the enemy of women's rights.⁷

The eight years of the Reagan presidency saw the schism with the women's movement grow. (See the correlations of Figure 2. The measure is the "women's role" scale from the National Election Studies, where the poles are "equal roles in running business, industry, and government" and "A woman's place is in the home.") Although Reagan seemed to be gaining at least as much male support as female opposition, his vice president, George H. W. Bush, declared himself "kinder and gentler" in his 1988 campaign. Perhaps for that reason, or maybe just a case of coincidence, the growing polarization by gender attitudes lessened in that year.

⁷. Lest the partisan story seem too simple, it is notable that former first lady Betty Ford was the honorary chair of the ERA ratification campaign for 1981. Reagan's conservative supporters began the movement away from support for women's rights, but the movement was far from complete in the early 1980s.

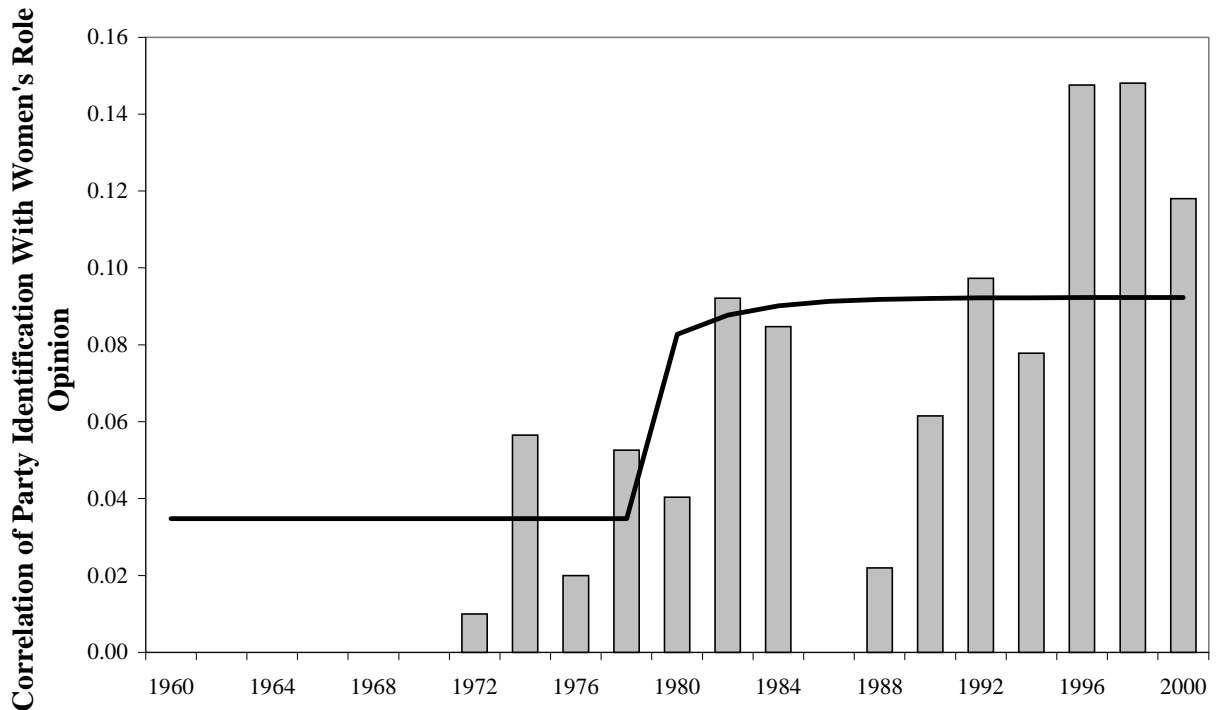


Figure 2. Correlations Between Partisanship and Women's Role Attitudes: National Election Studies, 1960 to 2000

The Bush administration witnessed a fight over the "Family and Medical Leave Act," which Bush vetoed. Not gender specific, it gave rights for unpaid leaves without employer sanctions to "parents." But since most parenting responsibilities fall on women -- and child care is a crucial problem in women's struggle for equality in the workplace -- the act was seen as a women's issue. Becoming part of the 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton promised to sign such an act and a Democratic Congress promptly passed one in 1993, which Clinton signed. The period after 1988 produced growing evidence of alignment of attitudes toward women and identification with the parties.

We can capture the full process in the model of the effect (the smooth line of Figure 2.) In this case we see a very rapid buildup in polarization over the span of the Reagan years, which increases, but only modestly, in the decade after. This case, like the racial case, seems to suggest that the evolution is nearly complete (the model is approaching its estimated equilibrium level.) But the fact that the three highest correlations ever are the last three occasions observed suggests that there may still be room for growth.

Case 3: Abortion

Abortion was a state issue before the famous *Roe V. Wade* decision. The trend in the states then was toward liberalization, moving from absolute prohibitions to abortions available when a doctor certified a need for one, usually on psychiatric grounds. Given wide variation in state laws, abortion was good for the travel industry. If the law was restrictive where a woman lived, she could fly somewhere else where it was not. Access to abortion was related to family income. Depending upon where you lived, if you could pay the fee, you could find a physician

who would declare that pregnancy was a serious threat to the mother. Or, if you had the income, you could bypass the local law to take advantage of a more lenient one somewhere else. The pro-life forces were not yet organized -- and with law on their side found little need to organize. *Roe* changed all that.

At the time of *Roe* abortion attitudes were associated with social class. It was middle class women who were more likely to assert a right to control their reproductive destinies. Since class is loosely associated with the party system, that meant that Republicans on average were more pro-choice than Democrats.⁸ And the author of *Roe*, Justice Harry Blackman, was a Republican, one of Richard Nixon's choices of "strict constructionist" judges to balance off the liberalism of the Warren Court.

Unlike the previous cases, race and women's role, there is not a single dramatic event one can point to as the origin of the partisan polarization on abortion. Republicans, in the same conservative 1980 platform that opposed the ERA proposed a constitutional amendment that would ban abortion. Democrats opposed the ban. But because many Republicans were pro-choice on abortion (most notably Reagan's vice presidential choice, George Bush⁹) and many Democrats pro-life, the parties shied away from pushing abortion out front as a campaign issue. But what the parties did not do, individual candidates did. They began to see advantage in pushing their abortion views in primary election contests. Those correctly aligned with their party's views could mobilize the activist primary voters by an appeal on this always emotional issue. In a two candidate race, taking the correct side on abortion was a winning strategy in both parties. Thus Republicans began to advertise themselves as pro-life while Democrats did the same pushing choice.

⁸. And before *Roe* the Catholic Church was the only organized force opposing access to abortion. Democrats were slightly more likely to be Catholics than Republicans.

⁹. The abortion issue caught all the Bush's out of line with their party. George H. W. Bush had a pro-choice record in Congress. His wife, Barbara, resisted the pull of party and remained quietly pro-choice while her husband switched sides from necessity. And George W. is reported to have opposed the constitutional amendment to ban abortion in an unsuccessful run for Congress in 1978.

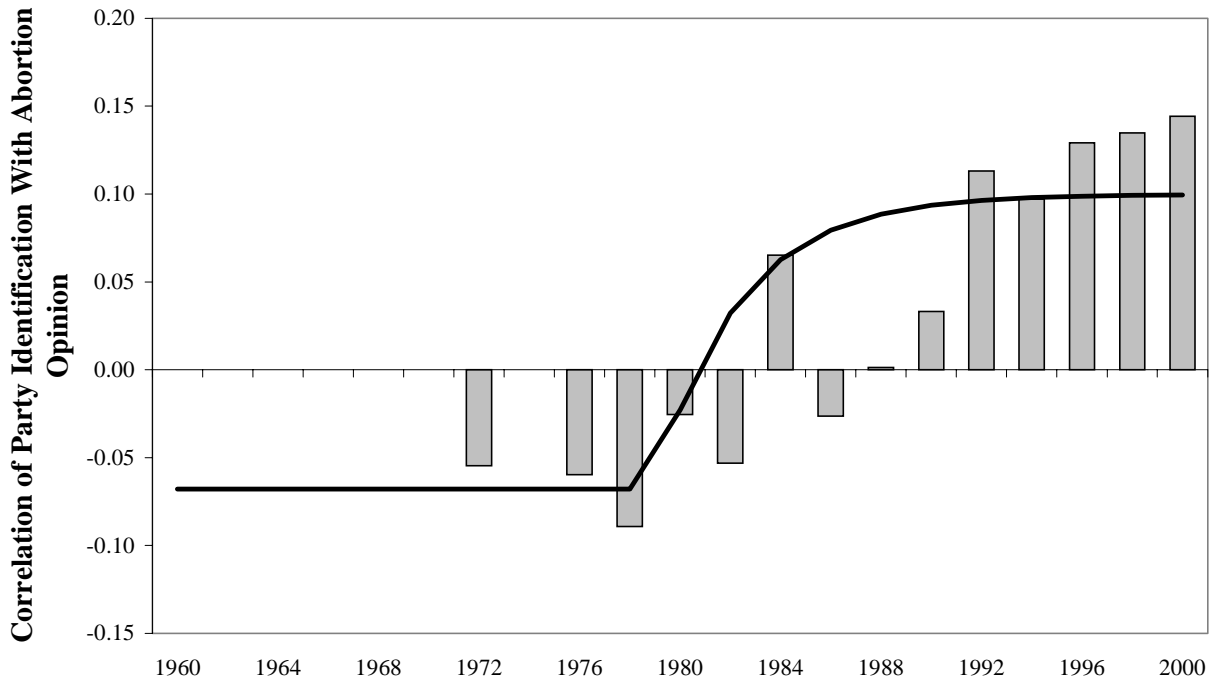


Figure 3. Correlations Between Partisanship and Abortion Attitudes: National Election Studies, 1960 to 2000

The dynamics of abortion, seen in Figure 3, are a little slower than the other cases and appear still incomplete. There are still pro-choice Republicans and pro-life Democrats, but fewer and fewer. Probably we can expect a more complete sorting by party over the coming few election cycles. As it becomes ever more the case that voters think about their abortion views when they choose to become Democrats or Republicans, what we do not expect is a reversal. The momentum of alignment pushes forward.

Thus all three cases we have seen are moving toward a settled conclusion. The fact that all three seem to be nearly over is a consequence of having chosen issues that have been around long to assess their history. Newer conflicts, like that over gay rights, might well be in a take-off stage as these others conclude. But we can't know; the data are still too thin, the process too new.

Now, theory of new issues in hand, I am ready to proceed to the central questions, what do Americans want government to do and how do preferences change over time?

Preferences for Liberalism and Conservatism

Begin with seven issues sorted into domains by our conventional understanding. These issues, involving taxes, education, race, healthcare, environment, cities, and welfare, are classified by the obvious expedient of what the question asks. If questions ask about education controversies, they are education questions. If environment, then environment questions and so forth. There is no confusion. For each of them we then estimate the average movement over time of the related bundle of queries.

The question then is do we have seven independent policy domains? Do we have seven sets of controversies each moving back and forth over time responding to the events and conditions of its own domain? To get a sense of how much is general and how much is specific, I put them all together in one graph in Figure 4a. To cram them all together when education and environment are popular and welfare and taxes unpopular, I standardize the data to the common average across all areas (and also the common standard deviation). That gives us the visual opportunity to observe whether they seem to move together or separately.

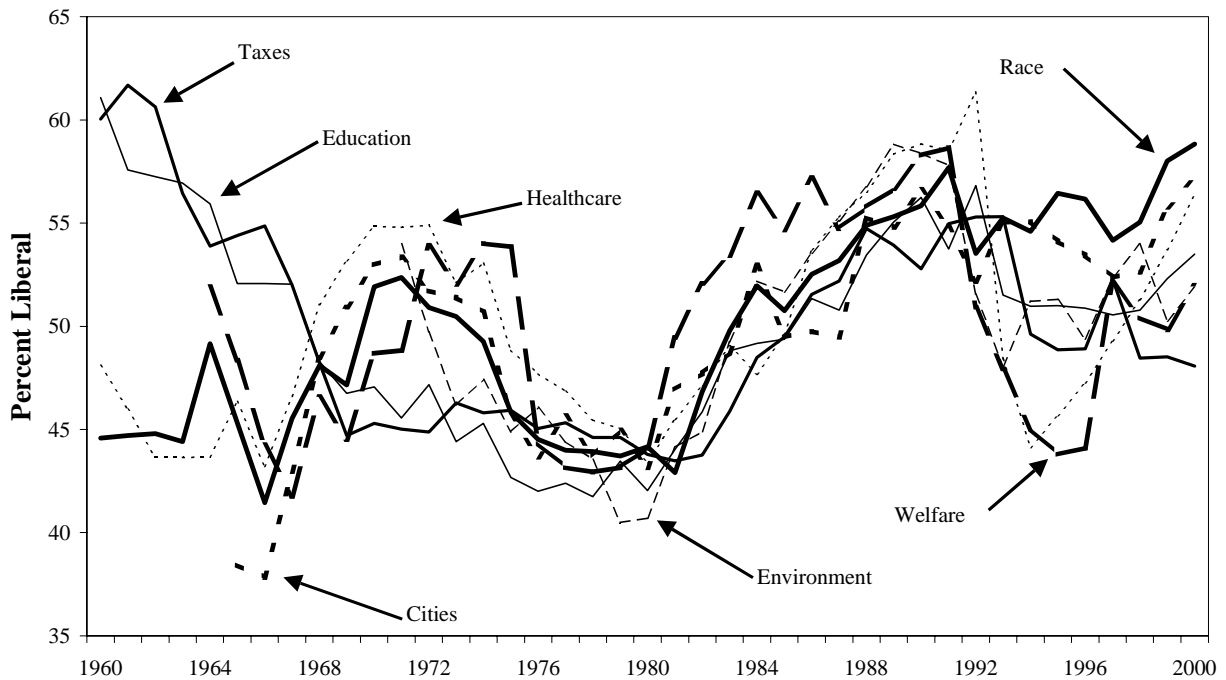


Figure 4a. Issue Dynamics of the Welfare State: Seven Domestic Issue Domains Collapsed Together

What impresses me is how little of each domain is specific. We can see that racial attitudes have a little trend toward liberalism not shared with the others and that education and tax attitudes were more liberal at the beginning of the 1960s than were the others. A reaction to urban race riots induces some conservatism to the mid-1960s in race and cities. But after that the seven different domains behave as if they were just seven different measures of the same thing.

Now imagine that we had taken the seven series of Figure 4a and just averaged them together. That single measure would tell us the net liberalism and conservatism of Americans, at least on this issue set. That is shown in Figure 4b.

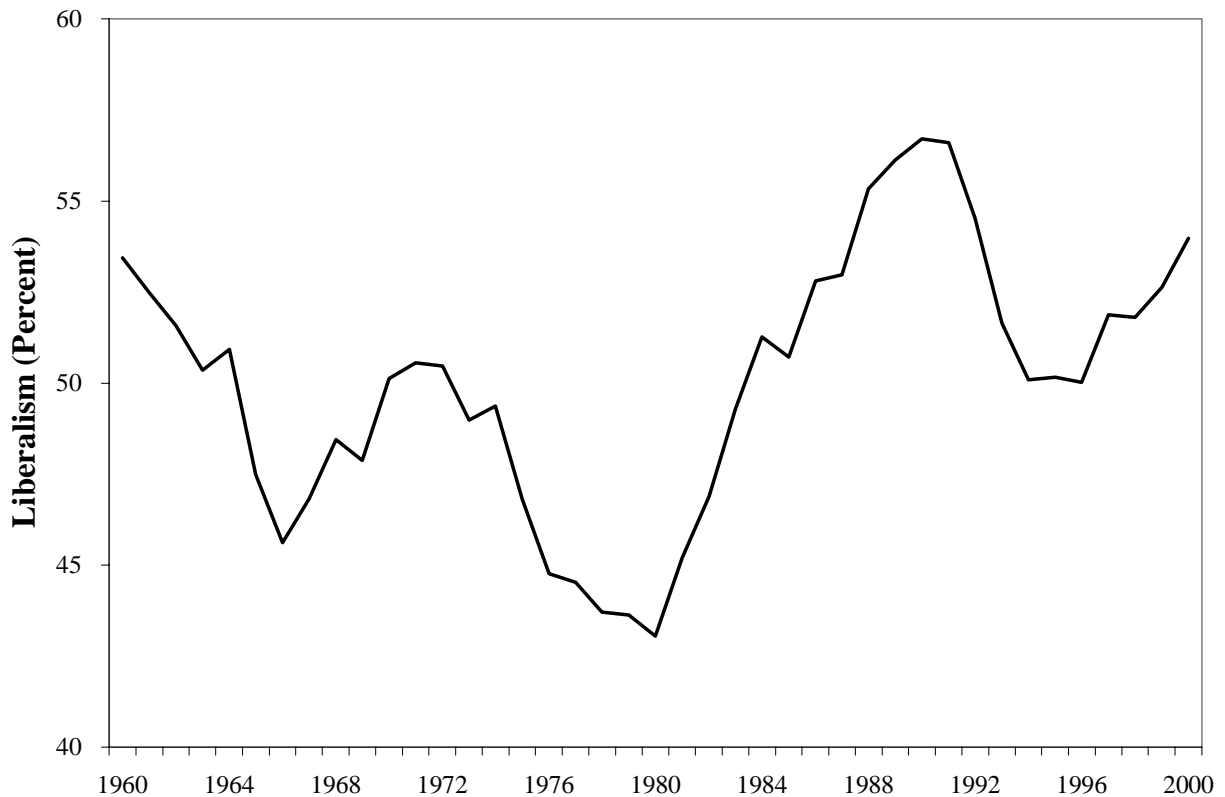


Figure 4b. An Estimate of National Preference Liberalism As An Average of the Seven Welfare State Issues of Figure 4a

The average naturally captures what was seen in all the individual series, liberalism in the early 1960s, followed by growing conservatism over the 1970s, peaking with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, followed by a return to liberalism in the run up to Bill Clinton's 1992 recapture of the White House, followed by increased conservatism once Clinton took office. The simple average of Figure 4b is close to an answer to the question, "What do Americans want government to do?"

It isn't quite the whole answer because it excludes numerous small controversies that did not produce long time series of survey questions and of course it is only the welfare state/size of government dimension to American politics. More desirable would be a summary measure of all the dimensions of opinion that exist and one that incorporates everything in the record of surveyed domestic opinion. Also, the analysis thus far required me to make judgments about what items tapped what controversies, what belonged and what didn't. It would be desirable to have a measure that emerges free of such prior decisions.

For that we need a technology to accomplish the same feat as the averaging of Figure 4b, but where averaging itself won't work. What we want is the ability to uncover the latent dimensions of attitude that lie beneath expressed preferences. Such a technology exists but would require a substantial digression into mathematics to describe it, which I choose not to do

here.¹⁰ Taking all domestic policy preferences ever measured in the period 1952 to 2001, we solve for the dimensions of latent opinion, the "considerations" in Zaller and Feldman's (1992) terms.

To put things which are different together requires that we have at least a common scheme for indexing the result of a survey question. That common scheme takes all the possible answers of a question and groups them into three categories, liberal responses, conservative responses, and neutral (or missing) responses.¹¹ It discards the neutral and creates an index which is:

$$\text{Liberalism Index} = 100 \left\{ \frac{\text{Liberal Percent}}{(\text{Liberal Percent} + \text{Conservative Percent})} \right\}$$

Thus, imagine a question which asks whether or not government should do more in a particular area with responses more, 30 percent, less 20 percent, about the same (or other) 50 percent. Then the index is $100\{30/(30+20)\} = 60$. In this scheme then 50 is a neutral point which occurs when equal numbers prefer more and less government. The data for analysis consist of liberalism index scores for all the domestic policy preferences in the public record of survey research that are repeated in two or more years (so that change can be observed). These 2144 individual survey findings are arranged into 181 series over time. The solution operates by explaining as much as possible of the over time variation in the 181 series with a small number of latent dimensions.

Figure 5 begins a description of the solution. Two latent dimensions are found. The first and considerably more powerful (explaining about 70 percent of the systematic variation), is the main left v. right dimension of American politics. A secondary dimension accounts for the remaining 30 percent.

We can get a sense of what the dimensions are by seeing which policy domains they are associated with. In Figure 5 I have selected for display the 21 series which are available for 20 or more years of the 50 year span (1952 to 2001).¹² Each is an individual survey item, named

¹⁰. But see Stimson (1998), Appendix 1 for a treatment of the technique.

¹¹. The direction of coding is arbitrary. It doesn't matter whether or not my judgment is right. If I got a particular item backwards, it would work just as well and produce the same ultimate solution.

¹². The limitation on items to 20 or more years is from the numbers that can be displayed without confusion and overprinting. If the set were expanded beyond these, the next items, by order of loading on the first dimension, would be (1) education, (2) health, (3) race, (4) guns, (5) environment, (6) economics, (7) health, (8) race, (9) environment, (10) environment, (11) size of government, (12) size of government, and (13) health. The set of items in the figure are quite representative of those not displayed. Additions to the second dimension, however, are less clearly related to those displayed, leaving me cautious about the interpretation.

here only by the domain from which it comes. The right hand side of the figure, i.e. those items which load strongly on the main dimension, is the set of controversies that regularly divide the two political parties, taxes, welfare, cities, environment, race, education and so forth. Defense (spending) occupies much the same space. Coded as the opposite of domestic spending preferences, it behaves as the guns vs. butter off-an-on debate would suggest. Those who want more domestic spending want less defense spending and vice versa. (If defense had been coded the same as domestic issues, it would occupy the extreme left-hand-side of the figure. How it is coded does not matter for the mathematics of the solution.)

The conflict over gun control, which does not have its roots in the New Deal Party system nonetheless behaves pretty much as if it were a standard part of the left-right cleavage. An issue on spending for space exploration shows a weaker alignment which is consistent with its generally lesser salience in American politics.

The second dimension, up and down in the figure, is harder to interpret. Most notable is that the items which are highly positive have to do with crime and criminals. One is about how harshly convicted criminals should be treated and other two concern the ultimate harsh penalty, death. At the other end, down in the figure, are issue preferences such as gun control and education, which might be considered alternate remedies for social deviance. Thus the dimension might be thought of as hard line vs. soft line. Because the underlying dimension is weaker as are most of the loadings on it, interpretation must be a little uncertain. One possibility is that this is merely the “plus” of the one plus dimensions my little theory leads me to expect. If so, it may be no more than some systematic variation that clumps together as a kind of mathematical residue, but making no sense for politics.

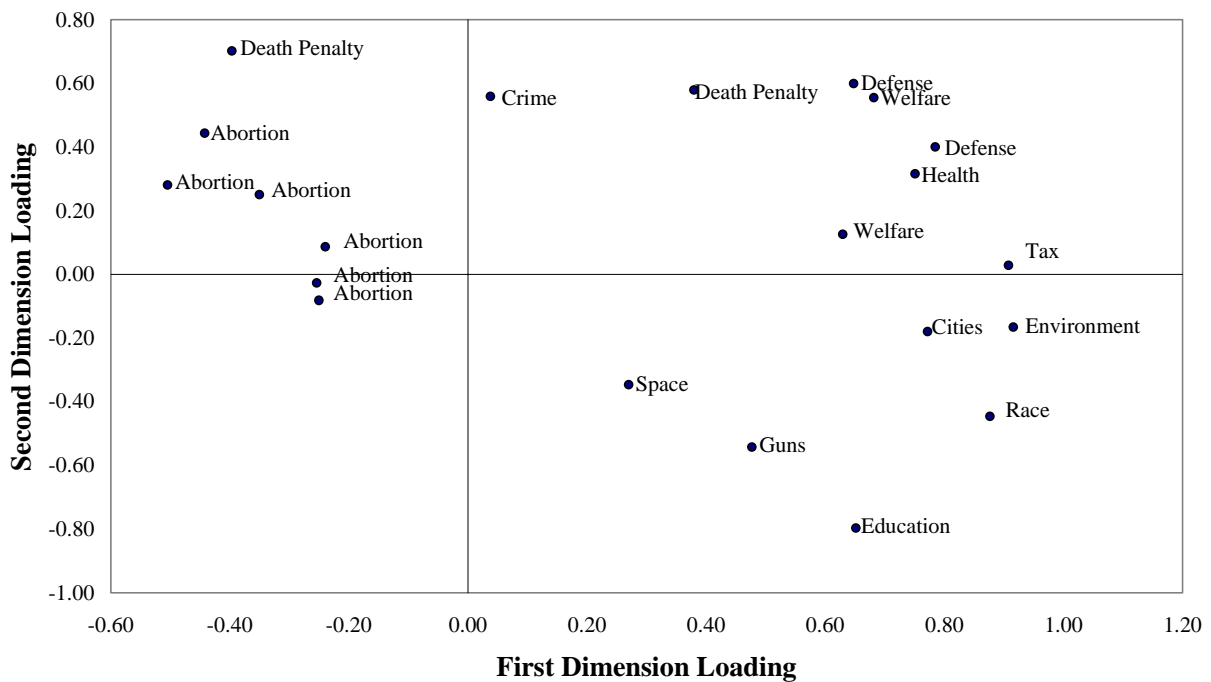


Figure 5. Two Underlying Dimensions of Policy Preferences: Loadings on Derived Latent Dimensions of Preference

Abortion, an issue on which there are numerous and excellent measures, does not particularly fit either dimension. But the cluster of abortion items in the same space on the left side clearly indicates that various abortion attitudes fit with one another, if with nothing else. Indeed the only reason the issue is included here is to demonstrate that it doesn't fit (and avoid the appearance of choosing issues to get a desired result.) The evidence says that it adds nothing to a measure of liberal or conservative preferences.

The purpose of dimensional analysis is not the analysis, but extracting the dimensions that we uncover. That result is seen in Figure 6, where the two extracted dimensions are displayed. This, particularly the critical first dimension, is the result for which we have traveled a road of theory and number crunching. It is the central measure of what Americans want from government.

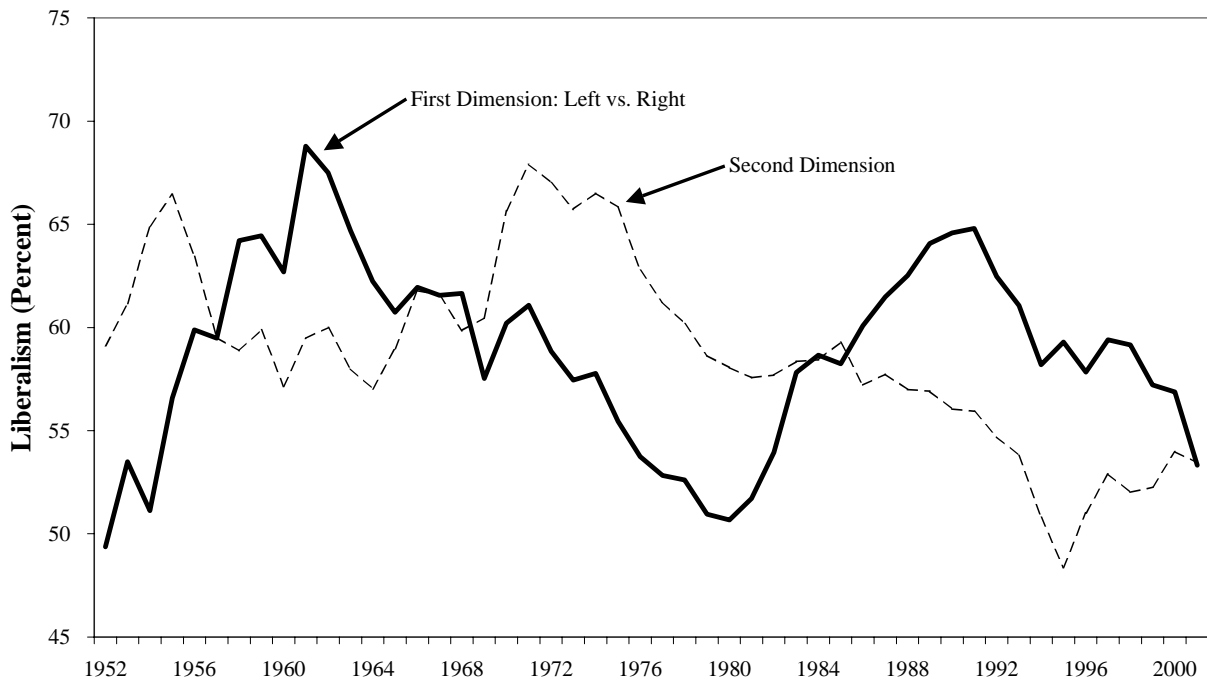


Figure 6. The Derived Two Dimensions of Policy Preferences.

So familiar that it hardly needs to be introduced, this extracted dimension, called Public Policy Mood in my earlier work (Stimson 1998; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002), this measure of preferences looks just like that in Figure 4b. The difference is that the former was based on a selected set of data and designed to appeal to reader intuition that the garden variety average is a sensible way to combine several measures. This measure is the result of applying a dimensional analysis to all available survey items, even those like abortion preferences known to follow a different track.

To put the matter bluntly the first dimension of American public opinion is the welfare state and size of government controversy that divides the parties. That is definitely not a surprise. It is what we would have expected from a theory of issue spaces.

What do we make of Figure 6? Are the ups and downs of these measured preferences just zigs and zags, random movements around a stable level. Or do they follow a pattern. Are they meaningless or meaningful? One pattern emerges fairly strongly. Preferences "zig" upward (toward liberalism) when Republicans control the White House and "zag" downward when Democrats are in charge. Indeed much of the observed movement of the figure is exactly that, movements in policy preference away from the chosen direction of the party in power.

These movements, it is important to note, are entirely in abstract preferences, where the questions make no references to the administration, its policies, or successes or failures therein. They ask respondents what they want "government" (or sometimes "the government in Washington" or "the federal government") to do. After a particular party is in power, and regardless of its standing, the public wants less of the kind of policies it is pursuing.

Figure 7 captures this effect. By merely taking the annual estimates and rearranging them as the beginning and end points of party spans of control of the presidency, that pattern emerges. The only periods in which liberalism of preferences has gained ground have been during the Republican administrations of Eisenhower, Reagan, and Bush (the first George Bush). Three spans of Democratic control have produced most of the gains for conservatism in this half century. The one exception, when preferences did not move contrary to the direction of the White House, was the 1968-1976 period, when Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford left the nation more conservative than it was when Nixon took office.¹³ Even including the exception, the three spans of Republican control produced a net gain of 17 points in liberalism. The three spans of Democratic control similarly move the nation rightward by about 10 points.

Does it matter? Look at elections as a test. Each of these spans of party control ended by a defeat at the hands of the opposition and in each case preferences had moved beyond the tipping point in the direction of that successful opposition. This is seen most clearly in two Republican eras, the eight Eisenhower years and the twelve of Reagan and Bush. Both eras saw landslide re-elections of popular Republican presidents followed by a quick turn to the other party.

We also bring expectations from our popular culture. It holds the 1960s to have been a time of great liberalism, the 1980s equally conservative, and so on. That also can be seen in Figure 6. Our single measure of preferences makes two full cycles, conservative to liberal to conservative to liberal and back again toward conservative. And two of these loops correspond to what our culture says should be the case. But there is a difference too. The preference measure is ahead of cultural expectations. It shows the famous liberalism of the 1960s building in the late 1950s, peaking at the beginning of the decade, not its middle or end. And the same story holds for the 1980s; the conservatism starts earlier and ends earlier than we might have

¹³. Perhaps we should point to Kennedy and Johnson as the exception. Because conservatism gained only a near trivial one point in the manifestly liberal 1960s, Richard Nixon inherited a very liberal public opinion -- near its all-time high -- and could not have been expected to move it further in that direction.

thought. It is as if we notice the change in the cultural reflection of political views, not in the views themselves.

The liberalism we see of the 1960s is the liberalism that produced the Kennedy Administration and then fueled it, in full force at the outset of the civil rights movement. It is not the liberalism of the youth revolt or the anti-Vietnam War protest. These came later, after the political impetus of liberalism was spent. But it is the cultural manifestations that have come to color our images of the 1960s. They clearly were something different, a mass movement of style (its emphasis the lack thereof) more than substance. Long hair and ragged clothes produced no policy consequences to speak of. The impetus of liberalism had its last fling in the Great Society legislation of 1965. As the decade became the colorful time we remember, the U.S. government became as quiescent as it had been in the early Eisenhower era. There was much talk of politics in the era, not much action.

The 1980s are the mirror image of the 1960s. Conservatism peaked with the election of Ronald Reagan; it was not produced by him. The 1980s did see pretty fundamental change in Washington, but even more than the 1960s we can date it precisely. The first 100 days or so of the Reagan Administration produced it all. The Spring of 1981 saw Reagan's tax cut, his one serious effort to limit domestic spending, and the buildup of defense. The rest of the Reagan years, and the 1980s generally, were a time of conservative retreat. Just as we see in measured preferences, the nation saw then a public opinion that encouraged conservative action before it happened and then said "enough" when it did. Reagan was in command of the budget battle of 1981, the key time in which priorities were reshaped rightward. Seven subsequent Reagan budgets were labeled "dead on arrival" when sent up to the Hill.

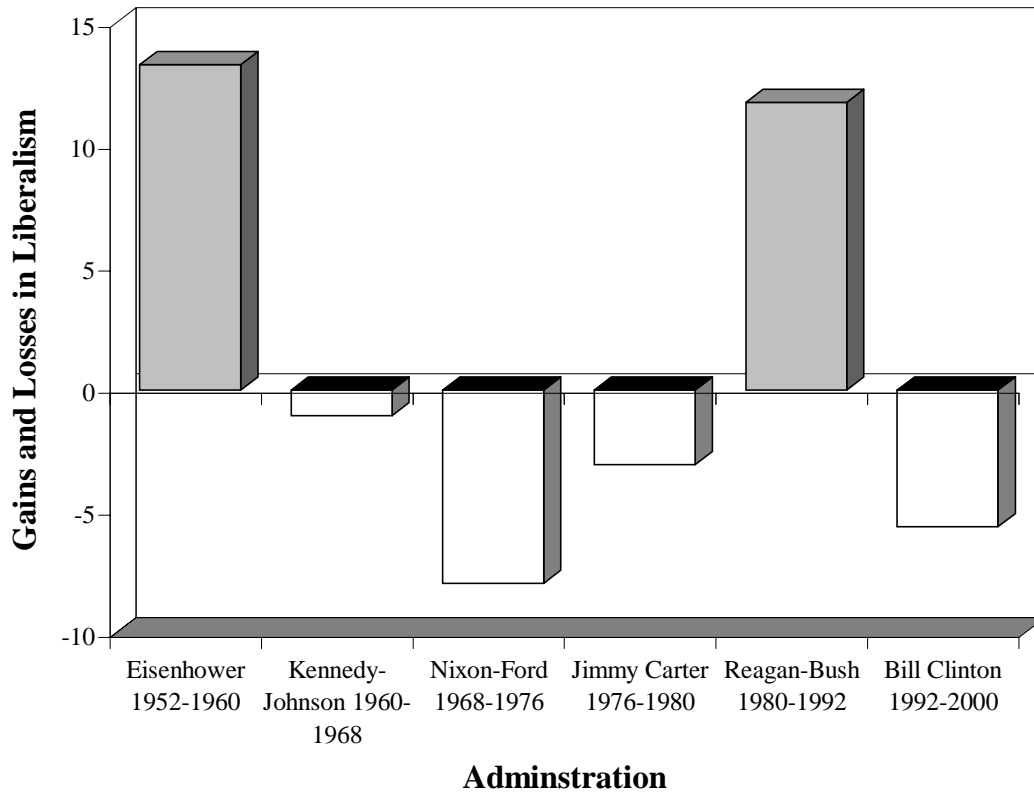


Figure 7. Changes in Liberal and Conservative Preferences by Administration in Power

The run-up to liberalism preceding Bill Clinton is less expected. Just as we were half a decade or so behind the curve expecting liberalism when we got Richard Nixon, the expectation of conservatism in the 1980s would not have predicted the electoral success of a liberal Democrat.¹⁴ But it appears as dramatic as the conservatism which produced Reagan twelve years before. And like that conservative trend, it began to disappear quickly after the election.

As we see the ebb and flow of preferences, beyond that picture we can also see the normal dominance of liberalism. All this ebb and flow takes place, that is, in the liberal end of the spectrum, about the neutral point of 50 on the graph. When Americans are asked whether they want government to do more or spend more -- implicitly to tax more -- in general they say yes a lot more often than no. That conclusion springs from the hundreds of different sorts of survey questions that we have. The pattern is not universal. Americans do not want government to spend more on "welfare," for example. But over all issues and controversies, more dominates

¹⁴ This measure dates from an original produced in my 1991 book, which was subject to some public ridicule at the time, showing, as does the Figure, that the current era was far from the conservatism that commentators all agreed was then dominant. The moral is not that I have great political intuition; it is simply what the data said (and more than I was prepared to believe.). Perhaps the moral should be to treat political commentary with due skepticism.

less. Americans are operationally liberal; given a choice of more government or less, they generally choose more.

Does that mean that we are in some fundamental sense liberal? Not so fast. There is another angle to consider.

Ideology: Operational And Symbolic

For a long time we have had a simpler approach to the matter of ideology, just asking. Since the mid 1950s survey organizations have posed a number of questions along the line of "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a conservative, a liberal, or what?" And, despite some misgivings about the quality of the measure, we have used the answers to characterize the American electorate.

Consider these self-descriptions the symbolic side of ideology. Respondents, that is, in answering these sorts of questions are associating themselves with the symbols of whatever it is that "liberal" and "conservative" mean. There is a problem with this symbolic ideology at the outset; about a third of those asked the question do not answer. They tell us that they don't think in those terms, that they don't know what the words mean, and they are right.¹⁵ So we are characterizing only two thirds of the American public, generally those who are better educated and more involved in politics, when we use these data.

So what do we learn simply by asking? The picture is quite different than what we have seen from policy preferences. The most striking difference is that on average, the answer is opposite. While we have seen that most Americans prefer a government that does more rather than less -- they are, that is, operationally liberal -- asked to describe their political identity, almost two of three choose the label "conservative" over the label "liberal." The joint conclusion, something we have long observed (Free and Cantril 1967), is that Americans on average are symbolically conservative and operationally liberal. This is a puzzle that needs a solution, a problem that will gain my focus for the remainder of this paper.

Before observing the trends in symbolic ideology, it is worth noting how much confusion this puzzle causes our politics. Because both sides of the puzzle are reliably true, commentators on both side of American politics can always make their case about the "real" America, even while disagreeing fiercely with one another. Look at symbolic ideology and it is true that conservatism dominates liberalism. Look at preferences for what government does and it is true that preferences most of the time favor more rather than less. It is tempting in this puzzling situation to resolve it by asking which of these findings is real and which is illusion. But that

¹⁵. On occasion prompts are added to force a response even after respondents have said that they do not think in ideological terms, usually on the order of "Well, if you were forced to choose one of those two, which one would it be?" What we learn from doing so is that the responses to the follow-up seem quite meaningless, telling us that respondents weren't being reticent about their views, they truly didn't know what the words meant.

won't get us far because both sides seem quite real. The contradiction is in the views of the American people, not just in the analysis.

The basic facts of ideological self-identification are captured in Figure 8, a compilation of 19 different series of queries, 1162 individual readings in all. The most striking fact of the responses is the dominance of conservative over liberal identifications. Setting aside the large numbers of people who don't use the words at all or call themselves moderates¹⁶ -- together almost half of all those asked the question -- on average about 62 percent of the remaining half who take sides take the conservative side. The variation around that is quite small, with liberalism commanding the identification of 45 percent of Americans at its peak and reaching a low of 33 percent on several occasions.

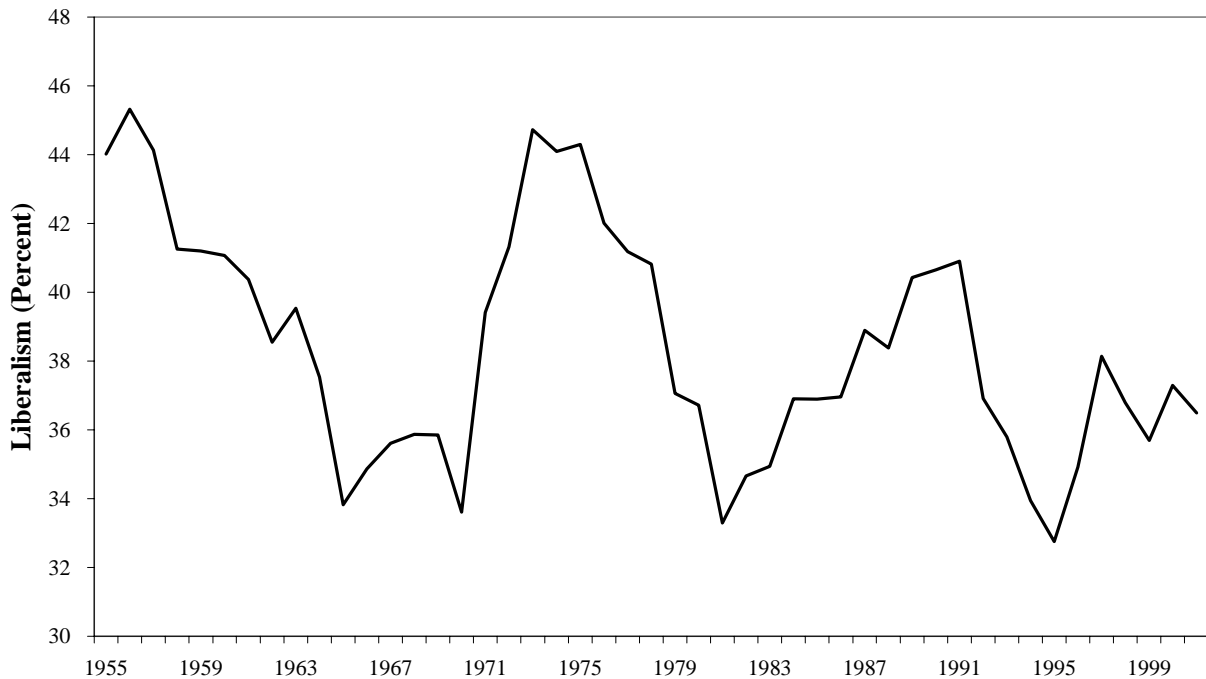


Figure 8. Ideological Self-identification: Percent Liberal of Those Who Class Themselves “Liberal” or “Conservative”

Notice also what we do not see. One might expect to see liberalism in the 1960s, conservatism in the 1980s, and so on, our cultural memory of the eras of American politics. What the data say, in contrast, is that conservatism has always been the dominant symbolic preference of American voters. The variation in it is not "then" and "now," the observed cycles are of shorter duration. They appear large in the figure only because the range of variation is so

¹⁶. I will have little to say of symbolic moderates because we can't separate true moderates, those who know what the debate is about and choose a middle position, from the numerous respondents who don't know what the words connote at all and therefore grab onto "moderate" as a safe response that does not require them to admit their ignorance.

small than any movement looks large. On a scale for the possible range of zero to one hundred, the series would look like a flat line with an occasional small movement. These small movements, however, are highly systematic. With huge numbers of individual surveys contributing to the estimates, the bumps and wiggles are definitely not chance variation.

I have put off the question of what people mean when they style themselves liberal or conservative. We know what politicians and commentators mean when they use those words, usually the size and scope of government.¹⁷ Do ordinary people mean the same thing and do they mean it consistently? The answer to both questions appears to be no. As we will soon see, some don't know what the words mean at all. Others use the words in a fashion that changes with the times. That helps explain some of the movements in Figure 8. The high point of modern liberalism, for example, is seen in the early 1970s, when liberal came to mean briefly that someone was opposed to the Vietnam War. Further, we know that what liberals and conservatives in the public think the words mean differs. They do not, that is, see themselves at opposite ends of the same issue debate, but see the issues differently (Conover and Feldman, 1981). It is like a tug of war between two sides that can't agree what is the rope they are pulling on.

To deal with these questions of connotation and to untangle the puzzle of symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism, we need to turn to individual responses. That is my task here.

Why Is It That So Many "Conservatives" Want Bigger Government?

The National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys offer an opportunity to deal with individual response and change over time. Incorporating 22 separate cross-sectional surveys from 1973 through 2000, they allow us to look at individual attitudes and connect them to one another. In particular we can isolate "symbolic" liberalism and conservatism and then associate that with the operational attitudes that appear to be in conflict.

The easy part is isolating the symbolic ideologues. A common question on self identification, "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal--point 1--to extremely conservative-- point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?", allows that. We just let liberals and conservatives be who they say they are. Then we can build scales of attitude to approximate the preferences isolated in Figure 6. For that task I choose six items on spending for national priorities, focusing on those that come from the New Deal issue cluster and divide the parties.¹⁸ Each of them asks if spending is too

¹⁷. Political theorists write a lot about "liberalism" with a wholly different connotation. Indeed the nineteenth century liberalism concepts virtually define what is commonly meant by conservatism. I use the "street" connotation, the one that aligns with the party system.

¹⁸. Others, not used, ask about such things as highways, space travel, and national parks and do not divide the population along the same lines as do the traditional fights over big government.

little, too much, or about right for the issue in question. The issues chosen are education, race, cities, environment, healthcare, and welfare, the traditional battleground of the welfare state.

For each issue we know how liberal and conservative politicians stand, liberals consistently advocating more in each area and conservatives less. Those who respond that spending is “too little” we regard as operational liberals and score +1. Those who say it is “too much” we regard as operational conservatives and score -1. Then for the six program areas adding up the scores gives us a net operational liberalism measure with a possible range of -6 to +6. We know from earlier analyses to expect that the electorate will be more liberal on average - it has to be if there are more conservatives than liberals but people prefer more to less spending on average.

The spending data, summarized over the 36 thousand people interviewed over the span of 1973 to 2000, are given in Figure 9. They show the operational liberalism we expect. Despite a variation between liberals and conservatives at the individual level, for the whole electorate the net preference is for increased spending. The median preference of +2 is consistent with preferences to increase four programs and cut two, or increase two and cut none and so forth. Increases on average dominate cuts. This electorate is operationally liberal by definition.

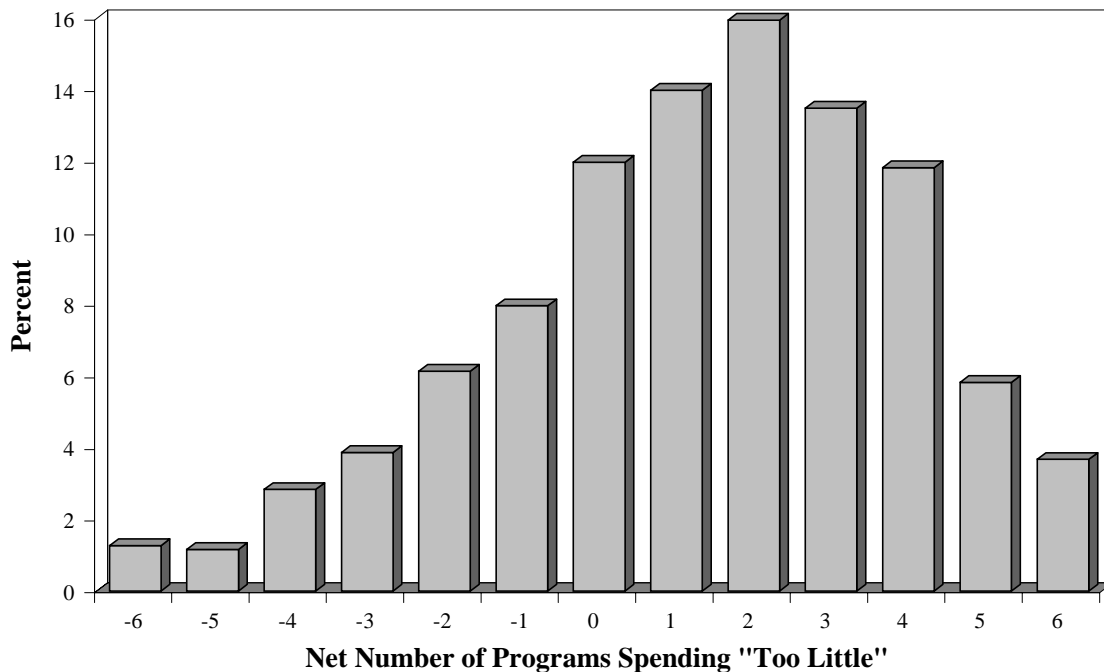


Figure 9. The Domestic Spending Preferences of Self-Described Conservatives: Net Percent Saying “Too Little” in Six Program Areas.

The issue is how symbolic and operational attitudes align, or fail to. Are symbolic liberals (by self-identification) operational liberals (by preference?) Are symbolic conservatives also operational conservatives? Before we address that central concern we need to satisfy ourselves that the preferences measured at the individual level in the GSS studies is related to the preferences extracted from the survey research record. When we recover the time dimension in

these data, does it track what we already know? That is accomplished in Figure 10, where exactly the same preference series from the earlier Figure 6, the first dimension of policy preferences, is displayed against the average for all GSS respondents by year on spending for the six welfare state programs. The measurement scales are different. Preferences (on the left vertical axis) are measured as the net percent choosing the liberal side. The GSS net spending indicator (on the right vertical axis) is scored as the average number of programs to be increased over those to be cut.

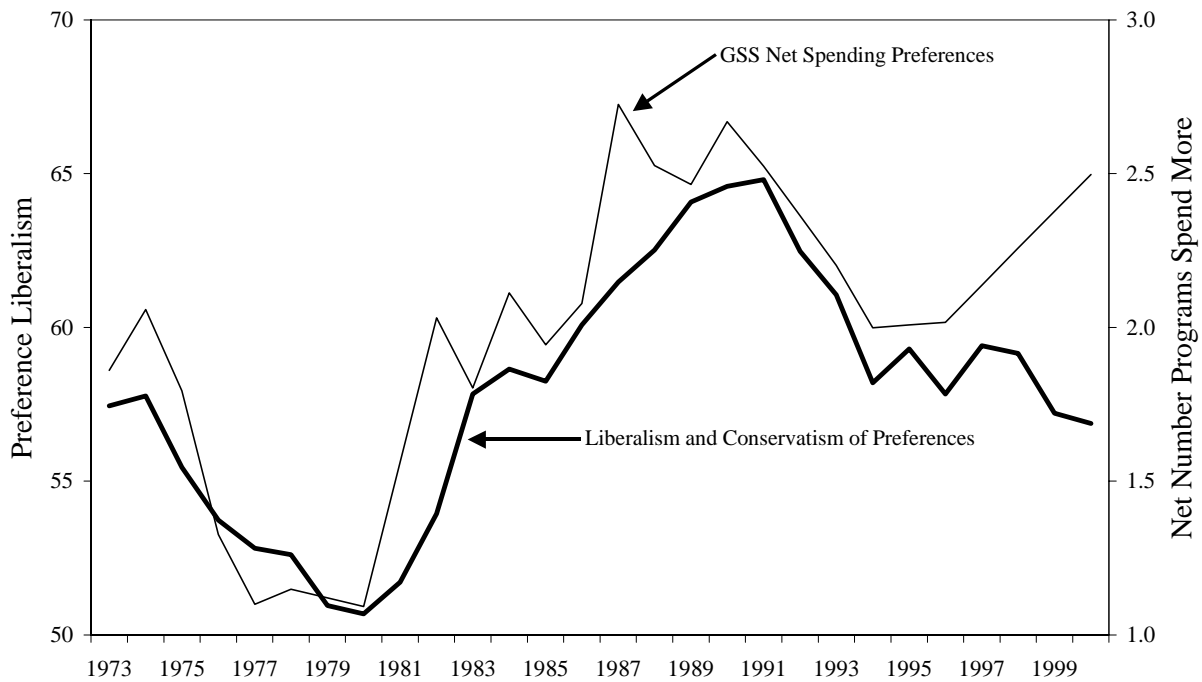


Figure 10. GSS Net Spending Preferences Compared to Preference Liberalism from Figure 6: 1972 to 2000

Clearly these two measures of the same preference for big government concept track one another well over time. They are about as highly correlated as is possible for two independently estimated series. That means that the spending data, on average, form a valid indicator of operational ideology.

The goal of this individual level measurement exercise is that with both operational and symbolic measures for each respondent, we can now confront the contradiction between symbolic and operational. The zero neutral point on the spending scale is a natural cut point. We will call those who want to increase more than cut operational liberals, those who want to cut more than increase operational conservatives. Excluding the confusing symbolic moderates and those at the zero neutral point on spending, we are left with four possibilities. Two of them are the obvious cases, consistent liberals and conservatives who combine symbolic and operational ideologies, "conservatives" who want to cut government spending, "liberals" who want to increase it. More interesting are the inconsistent cases, particularly the numerous symbolic conservatives who are operational liberals.

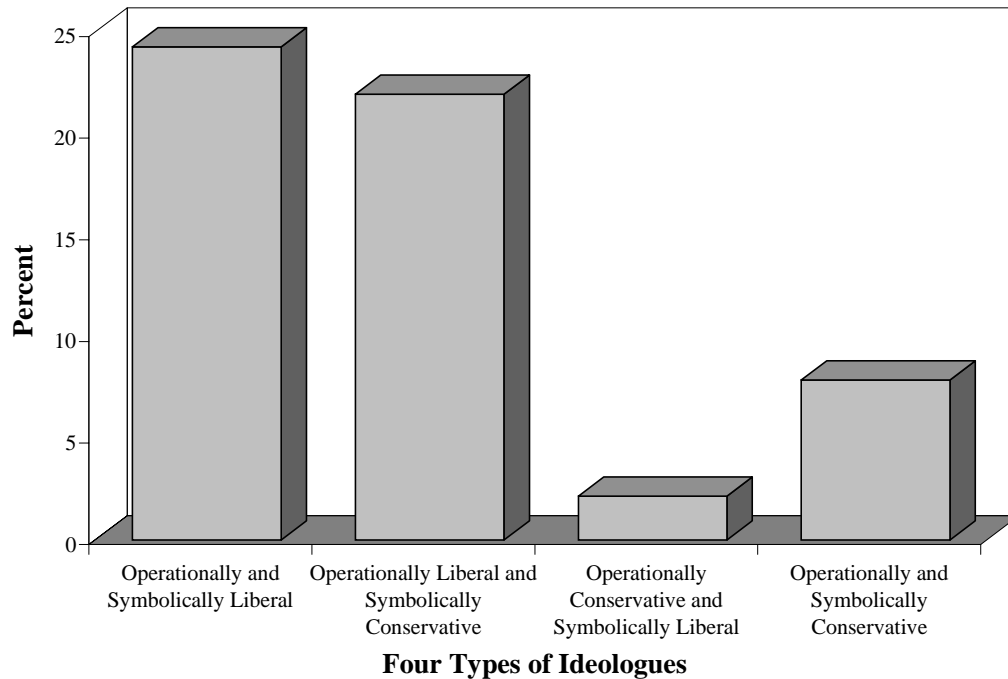


Figure 11. The Composition of Self-Declared Ideologues (Moderates Excluded) by Consistency With Domestic Spending Preferences

Figure 11 shows that the symbolically conservative and operational liberal are a very large group, 22 percent of all GSS respondents over the years. This is the beginning of the resolution of the operational-symbolic puzzle. Lots of people think of themselves as conservatives and act like liberals. The opposite group, operational conservatives who are symbolic liberals, at only 2 percent of the electorate, is easier to understand; they probably just do not know what "liberal" and "conservative" are supposed to mean. Something more systematic must explain the "liberal-conservatives."

Who Are the operationally Liberal Symbolic Conservative's?

Given the high level of observed inconsistency between operation and symbol, there are two routes to an explanation. We can ask why the conservative symbol is so popular or why the liberal spending is? Each presumes that the inconsistency can be resolved.

Imagine somebody who was newly arrived in America, let's say from Mars, where there may or may not be life, but there are no liberals or conservatives. Confronted with the knowledge that one side is called liberal (but does not call itself that) and the other side conservative, how might our Martian choose? Well, having learned the English language to communicate with Earthlings, he or she might gravitate toward "conservative." Knowing nothing about politics, the word conservative connotes "thoughtful," "hardheaded," and "prudent." We approve conservative estimates, conservative hypotheses, and conservative investments. Stripped of political content, "conservative" is a good thing, an adjective more likely to praise than condemn. "Liberal" is not so good. Liberal sex is promiscuity. Liberal graders lack standards. In general, out of politics the word is closely synonymous with "easy,"

meaning overboard and without discipline. So perhaps some number of those who style themselves "conservative" just like the image and really do not know the political content of the word.

The alternative tack is to treat the symbolic attachment as real and meaningful and then question whether attitudes toward spending are really operationally liberal. It is possible that citizens can approve of more spending in a variety of areas and not consider that somebody -- and ultimately probably they themselves -- will have to pay for it. There is some evidence that this is true; enthusiasm for spending always outdistances willingness to increase taxes.¹⁹ But we shall soon see that symbolic conservatives do not look very conservative on other sorts of issues thought to divide liberals and conservatives.

We can learn a little by isolating the "conflicted" conservatives and asking what kinds of people they are. We know that gender is associated with political views, women more likely to be liberal, men conservative. This is more strikingly so among consistent liberals and conservatives, women 54 percent liberal and men only 38. The gender break among the conflicted conservatives, 53 to 47, looks like that of liberals. We would expect an association with education, since being conflicted implies not knowing well what the political terms mean. There is an association, but not as strong as I would have expected. About 66 percent of consistent liberals and conservatives have high school education or less. This rate rises to 74 percent among conflicted conservatives. Voter turnout, which often is associated with attributes of political sophistication, is only slightly associated with being conflicted between operational and symbolic ideology. Consistent conservatives vote at a very high level in presidential elections, 84 percent by self report for the most recent presidential election. Consistent liberals are less likely to vote, reporting 68 percent turnout. The conflicted conservatives look like the liberals on turnout with a rate of 69 percent.

Are the operationally liberal symbolic conservatives really liberal? On a frequently posed question that gets at the divide over the fundamental role of government in reducing the income differences that emerge from the private economy, the conservative position is that government should stay out of it. Yet 36 percent of all self-identified conservatives advocate government efforts to equalize incomes, and that rises to 43 percent among the conflicted operationally liberal conservatives as opposed to the mere 19 percent amount the consistent conservatives.

¹⁹. But beware the facile conclusion that people just aren't smart enough to grasp the connection between spending and taxing. We know what citizens hear about government spending, both from politicians and independently from the mass media. That message is perfectly uniform; that much government spending is wasteful and unnecessary. Thus it is not inconsistent for citizens to believe that much more could be spent on their approved priority programs and that the new spending could come from that giant reservoir that Ronald Reagan called "waste, fraud, and abuse." President Reagan, it should be noted, never could find those lines in the budget that candidate Reagan marked for elimination.

On a wholly different and wholly non-economic issue, capital punishment, the conservative position is support. That is seen in a 90-10 ratio of support over opposition among consistent conservatives. Opposition rises to a still minority 21 percent opposition among the conflicted conservatives. And 77 percent of conflicted conservatives advocate required gun permits. On affirmative action, the conflicted conservatives are about exactly in between consistent liberals and consistent conservatives. On government involvement to guarantee jobs, they split 28 to 28 for and against, the rest neutral. On government involvement in general 28 percent call for more as against 36 wanting less. These people are not very conservative.

Nor are the conflicted conservatives social conservatives or closet racists. Nor are they falsely conscious of their social position. They see themselves much like consistent liberals and conservatives. In these areas too they are in between real liberals and real conservatives, not really one or the other. If we are going to call them conservatives, what they call themselves, then we have to reformulate our idea of conservatism to make it look a lot like liberalism.

Does it matter at all that these people who seem pretty liberal in their preferences think of themselves as conservatives? Yes, it does. It means that candidates and parties that call themselves by that same label will in general be more appealing to them. Because they think of themselves as conservative, Republican candidates are much more appealing to them than their liberal preferences would dictate. Consistent liberals report having voted for the Democratic candidate in the most recent presidential election, (relative to the year in which they were interviewed), 77 percent of the time, compared to 15 percent for the consistent conservatives. The conflicted conservatives are in between, at 38 percent, pulled both ways by liberal preferences and conservative symbols. And it is the same story for party identification. The conflicted conservatives are a little more Republican (37 percent) than Democratic (32), but not decisively on one side or the other as are consistent liberals and conservatives.

This gives some leverage on electoral politics in America. Divide all voters into four groups, the consistent liberals and conservatives on the one hand and the conflicted conservatives and wholly nonideological "moderates" on the other. The consistent ideologues are written off by both parties as beyond reach. They are the core ideological constituencies of the two parties. Elections then center on the battleground groups, the non-ideological and the conflicted conservatives. The nonideological do not respond to ideological appeals and so the parties seek their votes by claiming that they are more competent, more patriotic, and more moral than the opposition. The parties promise results to them, peace and prosperity, not policies.

The conflicted conservatives are the interesting group. Large enough to swing all elections one way or the other, their votes are potentially available to both parties. They want liberal policies and respond to specific Democratic appeals to do more and spend more on various domestic priorities. They think of themselves as conservatives and respond to Republican identification with conservatism. Which is the stronger appeal, liberal policies or conservative symbols, is a close call and so varies with the times. Where demand for liberal policies is at a low ebb as in 1980, symbols prevail and Republicans win. When that demand is strong, think 1960 or 1992, then the policies carry the day and Democrats win. That makes these voters hugely important in determining outcomes.

The conflicted conservatives dictate normal campaign strategy for both parties. From the Democratic side the liberal policies are an asset and the liberal symbol is a liability. The strategy for dealing with this is to emphasize the specific, over and over, saying "we will do this, we will do that, we will do the other thing," all the while staying as far away from the symbol "liberal" as is possible. Democratic candidates never call themselves liberals; they know it is bad politics. (We "know" that they are liberals, but that knowledge comes from their Republican opponents, who brand them "liberal" at every opportunity.) Bill Clinton is the archetype of the successful Democratic appeal. Calling himself a "new Democrat," the meaning of which is exactly "not liberal," his every speech was rich in detailed policy proposals. Called a "policy wonk," for every problem in America he had thought about what sorts of government action would be useful and was willing to propose it. Clinton's whole eight year administration can be seen as a struggle between policy and symbols. When Clinton could deal in policy specifics, as for example in his State of the Union speeches, his public standing was high; Americans were willing to follow where he led. When he was successfully tarred by "liberal" symbolism, as for example, in the 1994 midterm election after two years of liberal symbolism, he could find no audience for his policy proposals.

The Republican strategic imperative is opposite. Republicans do well when they deal in symbols and lose ground when they talk specific policies; symbols are an asset, policies a liability. So Republican candidates call themselves "conservative" at every opportunity; they craft speeches to allow them say it in many different ways and not appear repetitive. And of course one way of saying it is to call their opponents "liberals," which they also do as often as opportunity permits. The Republican tack on policies is to talk ends over means, general dispositions over specific plans. Matched head to head, Republican policy proposals will usually lose the competition to Democratic proposals. Republicans cannot credibly claim to do more or spend more than the party that is known for doing and spending. So not allowing that head to head matching is the smart thing for Republicans to do. Democrats say "I will do x." Republicans say "I have a plan to achieve x" and do not talk about its details. They would avoid policy proposals altogether if they could, but it would be a disadvantage for one party to appear to have a plan and the other not. So talking about goals and talking about plans without specifying details is what works. George W. Bush illustrates the Republican strategy well. Calling himself a "compassionate conservative," the practical meaning of which was conservative who would spend money on education, he at once combined the symbolic appeal of conservatism and neutralized a Democratic advantage on education spending. His every speech and debate emphasized his general conservative orientation toward government. His opponent, Gore, said what he would do. Faced with the same questions, Bush said what attitude he would bring (pragmatic conservatism) toward dealing with the same issues.

If they do not bring order to American politics, the conflicted conservatives do provide some entertainment.

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