

On Symbolic Conservatism in America

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Abstract

In this paper we undertake an historical analysis of scattered pieces of polling data on identification with liberalism and conservatism in America. We combine the pieces in a dimensional analysis, producing an estimate of self-identification for the period before around 1970, when measurement of self-identification became common and high quality data exist. Then we build a continuous time series of self-identification for 1937 to 2006. It shows quite dramatic movements. The rest of the paper is devoted to analyzing and explaining those movements.

One of the central concepts of American political behavior, ideological self-identification is nearly indispensable to our understanding of voting behavior. There it often appears as an independent variable, where it is often called simply “ideology.” A great deal of work has been done explaining the micro-foundations of ideological self-identification and the ways in which it does—and does not—affect the political decisions that citizens make (see for example (Jennings 1992, Knight 1985, Jacoby 1995). But the over-time variation in ideological identification is little studied chiefly because—as we shall see—its most interesting variations occurred in an era where self-identification went largely unmeasured in the voting studies.

The longitudinal literature on self-identification (see (Box-Steffensmeier, Knight & Sigelman 1998, Robinson & Fleishman 1984, Robinson, A & Fleishman 1988, Smith 1990, Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson 2002, Stimson 2004) finds little movement to explain. After self-identification first appeared in national election studies it has changed a bit in response to political or economic events, but the changes are so modest as to easily be overlooked or misinterpreted. In this paper, we seek to examine the dynamics of ideological self-identification before regular academic surveys, looking to shed light on both the history of self-identification in the American electorate and how the landscape of ideological identification in the contemporary American electorate may have evolved.

Our larger task, of which this paper is part, is coming to terms with the contradiction in American ideologies, a contradiction often seen in joint preferences for both conservative symbols and liberal policy action (Free & Cantril 1967, Ellis & Stimson 2007). We wish to understand why the American public, in the aggregate, supports “liberal” public policies of redistribution, intervention in the economy, and aggressive governmental action to solve social problems, while at the same time identifies with the symbols—and ideological label—that rejects these policies. At the individual level, we want to explain why so many individual citizens—as much a third of the electorate, depending on the measures employed—holds such “conflicted” operational and symbolic views. But before we can do that, we first must understand each of the pieces. The piece that concerns us in this paper is ideological self-identification and, in particular, how adoption of conservative self-images came to dominate American politics.

The principal problem that prevents such an understanding is that we have previously had access to self-identification only since about 1970. We have observed a large conservative plurality—a majority of those who chose one of the two labels—despite the fact that citizens, by and large, hold liberal preferences for public policy. We have speculated that things were once different, a “before” and “after” scenario when only the “after” was observed. Here we labor hard to come to terms with the “before,” ideological self-identification in the decades before measures of it became routine. At the very least, we suspect that what happened before the 1970s has helped to shape the attitudes that Americans have toward the “liberal” and “conservative” labels and the ways in which citizens use these labels to approach the political world and pass judgment on candidates, parties, and policies.

This paper thus serves two purposes. The first is to delve into the “prehistory” of American public opinion research, before national academic surveys became commonplace, making sense of the diverse data that are available to develop a time-serial measure of ideological self-identification. The second is to analyze this time-series, using it to understand critical shifts—and enduring themes—in the ideological self-identification of the American public.

1 Building a Historical Portrait of American Ideology

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

We have over 1,700 such surveys for that 40 year span. Their question formats are reasonably similar, so that we can be relatively sure that—minor differences aside—these questions are tapping the same concept of “liberal-conservative” self-identification. And they richly overlap in time so that question effects can be readily observed and leveraged. Next to perhaps

presidential approval and partisanship, ideological self-identification is the best measured longitudinal construct in all of American politics.

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

We believe that there is good data in these series, and that we can use that data to provide reasonably reliable insight into self-identification in this period (and how it compares to the more modern context). But the style of our analysis will accordingly be quite different. The good data of later years naturally yield a dimensional solution so that getting to a valid annual time series is a mechanical process. The survey data go into a dimensional algorithm and an annual time series emerges from it. For the years before 1968 our task will begin more in the style of anthropology, our evidence is like stray fossils, bits of pollen, and scattered pottery shards from various locations from which we put together a grand story. We pull any and all available data from a number of survey houses, using questions that get at the basic concept of how individuals orient themselves, using ideological language, to the political world. These data, too, need to be validated, tested, and run thorough an algorithm to produce a coherent, longitudinal measure. But for these years, the task is far more difficult.

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

exist. We begin with the analysis of shards.

1.1 The Pre-history of Ideological Self-Identification: 1936–1967

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

Table 1: Which Party Would You Join?

“Party”	Percent
Liberal	47%
Conservative	53%
Total	100

Gallup Organization, May 11-May 16, 1936
N = 1,500 (approx.)

The question is a strange one, at least from the perspective of the 21st Century. And ultimately we are unable to include it in our series to come—because its wording is not comparable to similar queries in later years. We present it here because it is the first question asked about ideological self-identification, and (see Table 1), because it tells us something important about ideology in the time of the New Deal. It tells us that “liberal,” FDR’s preferred term for those whose supported his programs, was unable to gain majority support in the months just before FDR produced his crushing victory over Alf Landon and conservatism.

Thus begins a pattern, continued to the present day, in which the name for an ideology which supports highly popular programs is itself unpopular. Knowing of FDR’s landslide, and knowing that the election was contested largely over the New Deal programs of spending and social welfare that party

elites then and now associate with the label of political “liberalism,” we would have expected a support for “the liberal party” something like the actual support for FDR. It was certainly more popular than in the modern context, where, ‘conservative’ is preferred to ‘liberal’ by nearly a 2-to-1 margin. But it was still a loser.

The Raw Materials Our search for queries about ideological self-identification, broadly construed, produced 78 usable items in the span 1936–1970, almost two per year on average.¹ They come from a variety of survey houses, all of which attempted to get at the ideological thinking of American citizens in diverse ways. It is from these questions that we begin our task of developing a longitudinal measure of ideological self-identification. The questions are of five general types:

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

This series of questions, asked by Gallup in 1936–1938 and by ORC once each for Eisenhower (1957) and Johnson (1964) paint a picture of preference for more liberal government as exactly even with conservative preferences in 1936 and then declining substantially thereafter. (See Figure 1.²) The last two points in the series are asked about different presidents in a quite different context, with an almost 20 year gap in the middle. We present them

¹Some are split half samples from the same survey, so the actual number of observed occurrences is smaller than 78.

²Figure notes: In this and figures to come we graph the percent giving the liberal response divided by the number choosing either liberal or conservative. Thus 50 is the natural neutral point where sentiment is equal in both directions. Also note that these are line graphs with considerable gaps in between survey years, so that the spacing of years on the horizontal axis is very uneven.

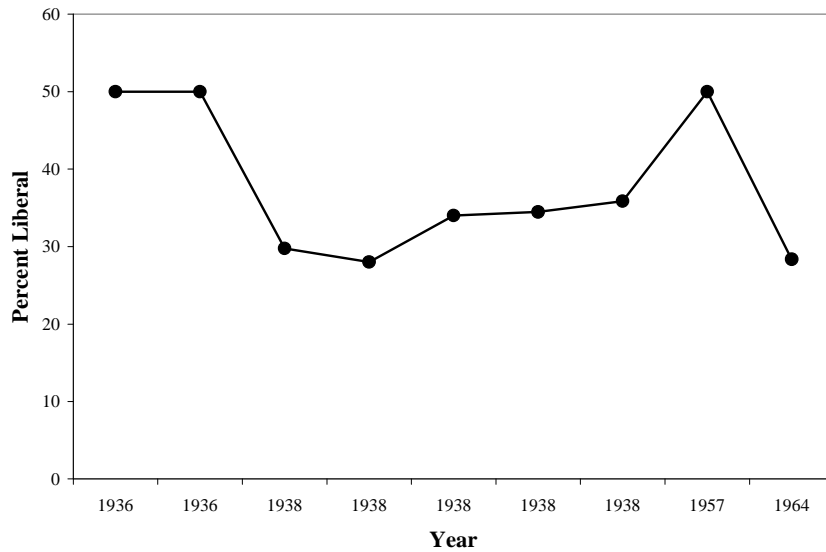


Figure 1: The Administration Series: 1936–1964(1936 data have “stay the same” coded as liberal)

for descriptive interest, but assuming comparability here is not reasonable and we shall not do so for purposes of developing the longitudinal measure.

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

The Go left series is the only question form which uses the more abstract, and somewhat European, “left” and “right” in order to define the ideological terms. The evidence is thin, but the definitions appear to aid the liberal cause a bit. The phrase “labor and other liberal groups” gives this term a labor-

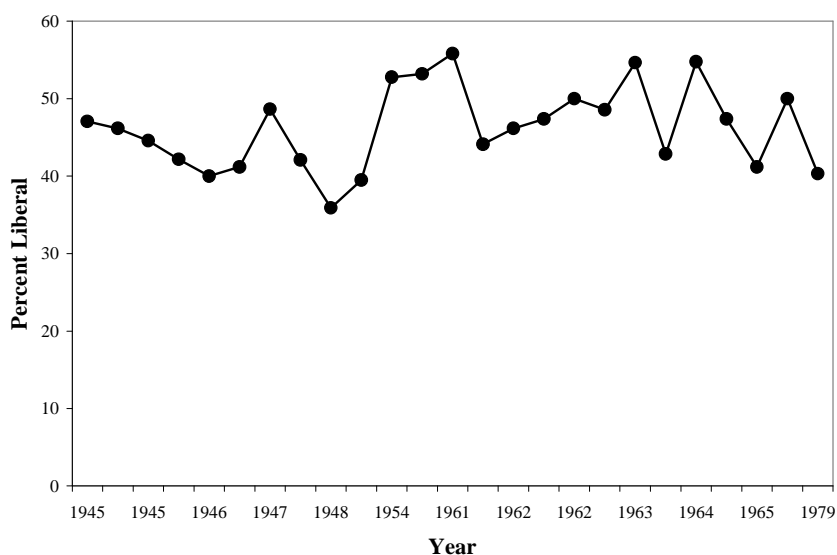


Figure 2: The Goleft Series: 1945–1979)

and economic-issues related context that we know it often lacks (Conover & Feldman 1981). In the modern context, we know the term “liberal” from its more pejorative connotations in both political- and non-political situations (recklessness, elitist, lacking standards), not from its political connotations that explicitly link it to government policies that favor labor, taxation, and redistribution (Sears & Citrin 1985). Apparently, orienting “liberal” to “labor” and “conservative” to “business” connects the ideological symbols to the more familiar material of party images. Even here, though, the term “liberal” fails to gain consistent majority support.

Identification These are minor variations on self-identification for the period 1937 to present. Example: “In politics, do you regard yourself as a radical, a liberal, or a conservative?”

The identification questions are by far the most similar to modern self-identification probes asked in major academic and commercial surveys. We will exploit that similarity when the time comes to link old to new estimates. As with some of the other series, we can see a break after 1964-65 (see Fig-

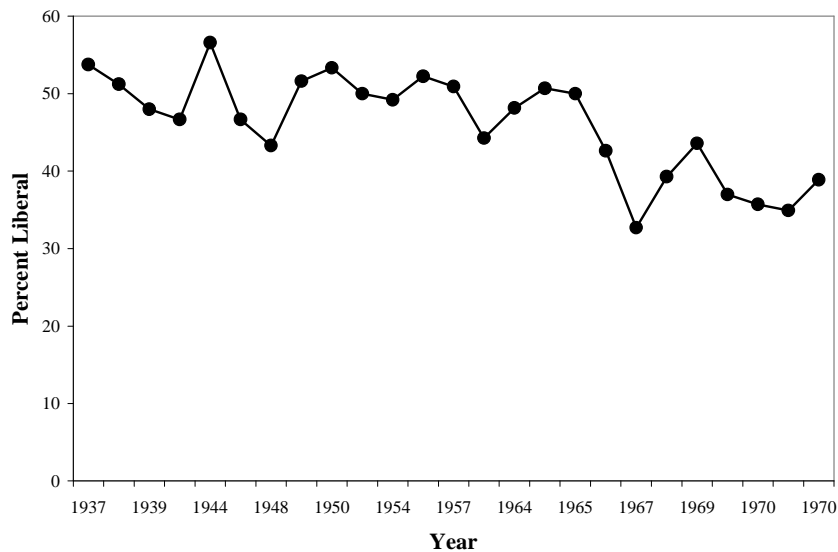


Figure 3: The Ident Series: 1937–1970)

ure 3) in which the level of self-identified liberalism appears to undergo a permanent decline. We will return to that issue when we have a clean final series in hand.

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

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

Preference These are preferences for future outcomes. Example: “Which type of man would you prefer to have elected President in November (1944)–one who is known as liberal, or one who is known as conservative?” The

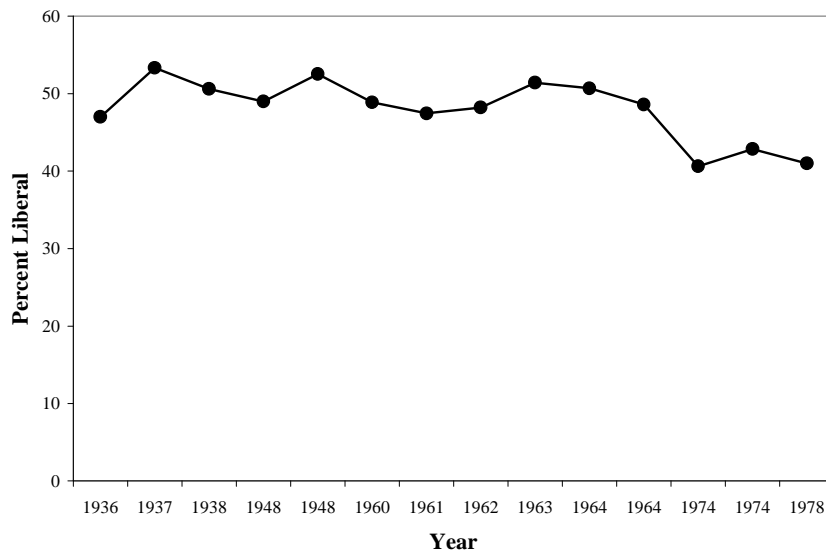


Figure 4: The Join Series: 1936–1978)

modern versions of this question concern the Supreme Court and come after the 1968 Nixon campaign politicized the Court’s ideological balance. We are uncomfortable about them, but will explore their properties.

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

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

1.1.1 Putting them All Together

We wish to estimate a series for 1936–1970 from these five pieces. A first task is to decide what to use and what not to use. That decision is to use four

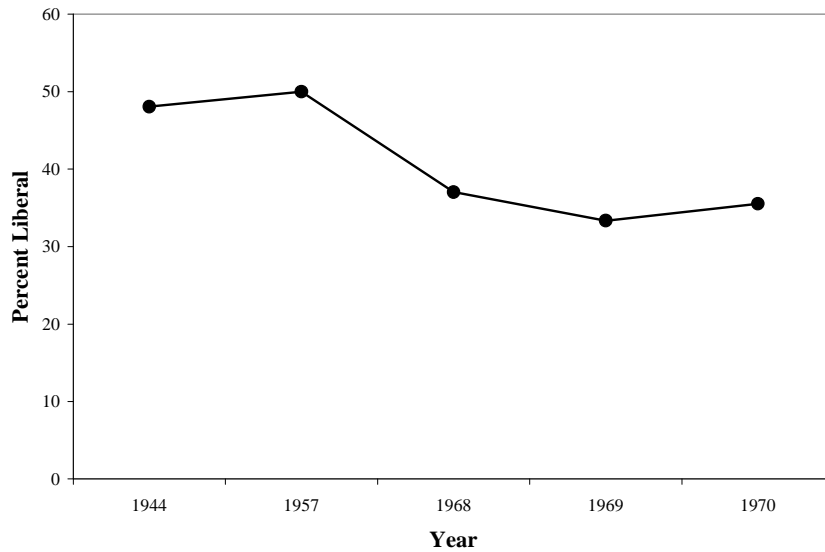


Figure 5: The Preference Series: 1944–1970)

of the five scraps, but not the Administration series. It is non comparable because it asks about different presidents in the first place and then even the Roosevelt data for 1936 and 1938 cannot be used because the questions include a middle category, “stay about the same,” for 1936 but not 1938.

In a quite exploratory fashion we ask if the four scraps move in parallel to one another and are therefore believable indicators of the underlying concept, self-identification. To answer that question we perform an exploratory dimensional analysis of the four for the period 1936–1970. The result is reported in Table 2.

Table 2: The Dimensional Solution for Four Items: 1936–1970

Variable	Years	Loading
Go to Left	11	.36
Identification	17	.96
Party to Join	9	.68
Preference	5	.96
Estimated explained variance is 61.4%		

There we see that the “Go to Left” measure is somewhat different than the other three, but has enough common variance to merit inclusion. It is much less variance than the other three, not showing the large movements displayed by the others in the 1940s and 1960s. Perhaps the connection to labor and business keeps it steady while the unanchored connotations of “liberal” and “conservative” fluctuate with the issues and groups of the times.

The estimated series is pictured in Figure 6, which displays the estimated latent series (as a solid line) superimposed upon the data points which produced the estimate. What one wishes to see in such a display is that the estimation of the latent variable has not been too creative, that the summary measure looks reasonably like the data which produced it.

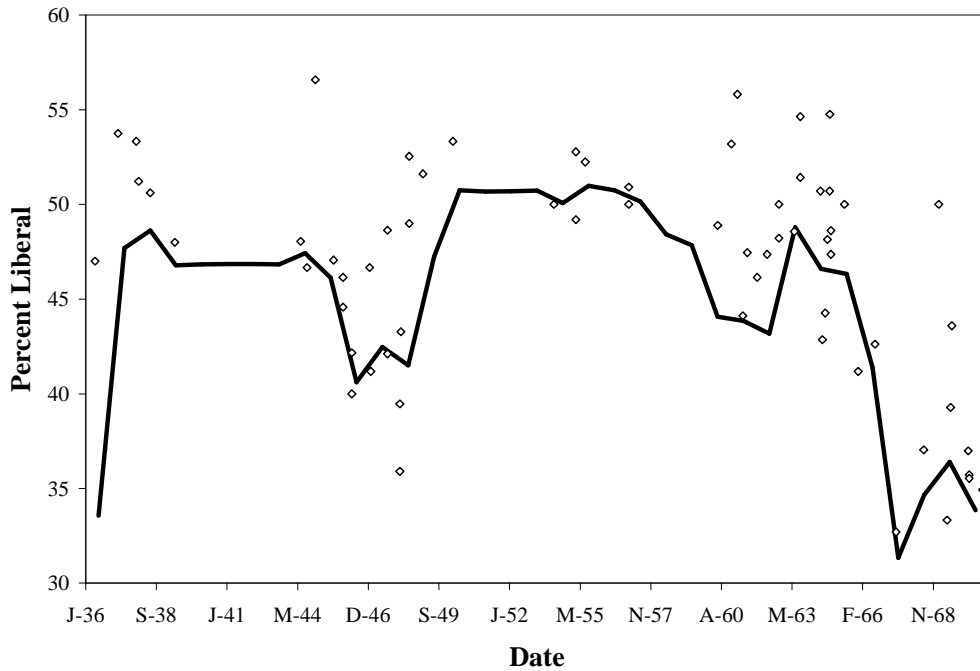


Figure 6: The Estimated Series for 1936–1970: Actual Data Points and Estimated Series

There is one movement in Figure 6 which is very suspicious, the sharp increase in liberal identification between 1936 and 1937. This is a data comparability problem, which we alluded to earlier. The estimate is driven by a single data

point with non comparable coding. In further work we will drop that case and start the series in 1937.

Other movements in the graph correspond both to the raw data and to what we know about the historical context. One can see a very large drop in liberal identification in the mid to late 1960s, which we have seen before in the individual series. And there is a large temporary drop in about 1946. We know from the history of congressional elections that 1946 and 1966 marked the largest congressional election losses to that time of the then dominant New Deal coalition.³ So we are not surprised to see a turn away from liberal identification at the same times.

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

1.2 A Complete Series

We now have two series, 1937–1970 and 1968–2006—the latter not yet shown, but easily produced. What we want is one continuous series covering the entire span. To get there we require one more assumption.

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

An opportunity to bridge the gap presents itself in assuming continuity between what we have called the Identification series:

³And the permanent movement beginning in the late 1960s presaged the end of democratic dominance of the White House.

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

asked by Gallup and others and a newer Gallup question:

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

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

With this assumption in hand we have overlap between old and new and it becomes possible to estimate a dimensional solution for the entire time span. For data we have the universe of survey research questions on self-identified ideology from 1937 to 2006. These are 1741 individual reports of national percentage marginal results forming 18 separate question series, that is 3 of the 4 old series, 14 new ones, and one combined.

A combination of sketchy information in the prehistory period and exceptionally rich after the late 1960s, overall the data are exceptionally rich. We present information on the structure of a solution for ideological self-identification in Table 3, with variables (question series) arranged by the number of years coverage they provide.⁴

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

The goal of all this effort is seen in Figure 7, where we present the estimated

⁴The question series are named for the organization that first used a particular question or used it most often. But the data include the probes of other organizations when they have used the same questions.

Table 3: Items and Loadings for the Estimate of Liberal-Conservative Self-Identification

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

series of self-identification from the 1930s into the 21st Century.⁵ The growth of conservatism and the decline of liberalism are both widely assumed in popular commentary. We find some support for that story, especially when considering the broad sweep of 20th century history. But not for its extreme version, that liberals were once a ruling majority. The decline of liberal self-identification is an obvious impression of Figure 7, but it is important to note that it is a decline from minority status, averaging around 44% of those who declared themselves either liberal or conservative, to a smaller minority status, about 35% in recent years.

⁵The estimated series in print form can be found in the Appendix and is available in electronic form at Stimson's UNC website.



Figure 7: Ideological Self-identification: 1937–2006)

The Liberal Majority? So where does the liberal majority story come from? There are no more than a scattering of polls that seem to suggest it. One can find polls in which there are more self-declared liberals than conservatives, 18 of them to be exact, the highest of which, a NORC poll of 1944, has liberals at 57%.⁶ But that is by no means the dominant story: one can also find 52 surveys in the period before 1970 where liberals are the minority, with numbers that range down to the upper twenties. A simple average of all surveys before the abrupt break of 1966 has self-declared liberals at 46.8%—a large minority to be sure, but still a minority.⁷

Nor is it the case that there is a particular brief era when liberalism reigned. The 18 surveys with liberal majorities are scattered over four decades, surrounded in each by more numerous samplings in which there are conservative majorities. The “liberal” identification has never been truly dominant in American politics, even when Democratic policymakers, making sweeping

⁶There are also 8 polls in which the numbers of liberals and conservatives are equal.

⁷And of course if we take that 46.8% as our best estimate, students in a first semester statistics course could calculate the expected number above the 50% mark due to sampling. It would not be zero.

changes in the size and scope of the welfare state, were regularly winning elections. In the current era, with relatively evenly-split political parties and closely-contested elections, the “liberal” identification never comes close to majority status—even during times when opinions for public policy tilt fairly far to the left (Stimson 2004). Further, the preference for the “liberal” label over the “conservative” one has been steadily declining since at least the 1970’s, even while preferences for ‘liberal’ public policy—not to mention “liberal” political candidates—have vacillated, but have not trended downward, during this time period.

1.2.1 One Phenomenon or Two?

Our explanatory problem has been the proportion of self-declared liberals in America, *relative* to the numbers of self-declared conservatives. That is the phenomenon to be explained. But we ask here whether we have really two phenomena, why people choose to identify as liberals and why others choose to identify as conservatives. Is one the complement of the other, or do we need separate theories for liberal and conservative identifications.

To answer that question we estimate separate series for proportions choosing liberal and conservative over time. These estimates (see Figure 8), begin to speak to the question of whether we have one phenomenon (with mirror image results) or two independent movements.

The figure shows a strange parallelism in the early decades, with the numbers of liberals and conservatives rising and falling in parallel, not in opposition. This probably reflects the early tradition in commercial surveys of attempting to force respondents into categories even when they indicated unwillingness to choose. These consist of questions with neither “moderate” or “don’t know” responses offered as legitimate choices, follow ups intend to push respondents off the neutral point, and maybe even allocation of undecideds into choices. When more of these devices are in play, then the numbers of both liberal and conservatives rises. And when respondents are given more freedom to choose not to answer, then both fall in parallel. This is the principal reason for using relative percents as our explanatory variable. They are not similarly subject to manipulation by such devices.

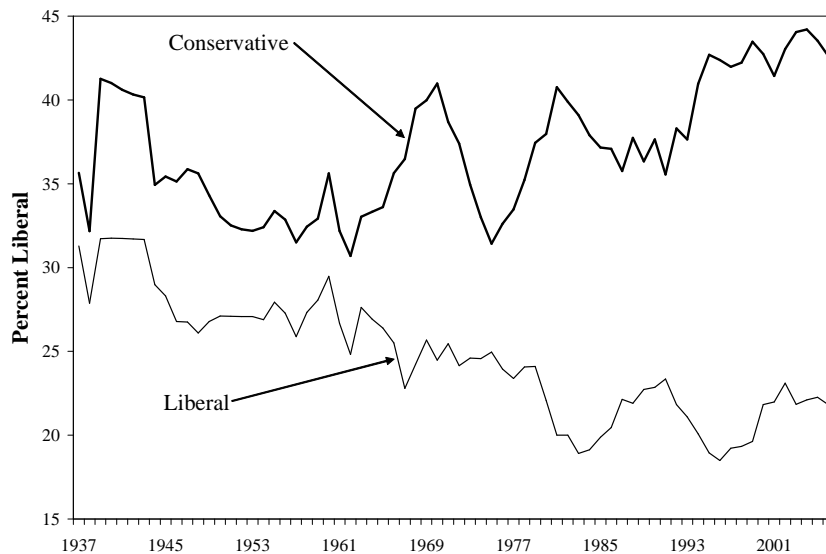


Figure 8: Separate Estimates of Liberal and Conservative Self-identification

Overall, the impression that emerges from Figure 8 is of a single phenomenon with mirror-image effects. In the years after the 1960s conservative movements show a little more variability than liberal ones. We speculate that the numbers of conservative identifiers rise and fall with, among other things, the popularity of particular conservatives. The lesser movements among liberals might be due to the fact that liberal politicians, for example Bill Clinton, distance themselves from the term “liberal” and so they can be quite popular without much affecting identification with liberalism.

2 Explanations for Growing Conservative Identification

Everything to this point has been measurement. We turn now to the task of explaining movements in self-identification. We first pause to consider the properties of our time series. It is, to begin, notably data rich. Something on the order of two million people have contributed their assessments of where

they stand on ideology over the 70 year span. If we had a rolling cross section with two million respondents, it would be no surprise if every year to year movement, no matter how small, were statistically significant.

That data richness shows in the crisp patterns of Figure 7. Not only is the decline dramatic in the mid-1960s—we'll set it at 1966—but even the year to year movements after that are highly patterned. What one does not see, even in the earlier series, is the year to year zig-zag pattern which is the signature of sampling error. When the series moves left or right in one year, that is, it is very likely to continue in that direction the next year and the year after that. To be sure, these data originate in survey samples and sampling error must be present. It is just very small relative to true variation. Thus, if we do not succeed in explaining this systematic variation, it will be because we lack theoretical imagination, not because it is not, in principle, explainable.

Note that some of the patterns which appear dramatic in the figure are actually quite small, the kind of things survey analysts routinely ignore because they are smaller than expected sampling fluctuation. The 1960s decline, for example, is quite dramatic in the figure, not because it is large, but because self-identification is so tightly wedged into a small space of variation that any real change looks dramatic.

We have two sorts of explanatory problem to deal with in this series. The big obvious one is why liberalism was once a near majority and then precipitously declined to a level closer to half the numbers of self-described conservatives. This is but a ten point shift, more or less. But ten points for a voting age population of about 200 million people is a very large number. Given the demonstrated role that elite framing of ideological terms has on ideological-self identification for at least large subsets of the American electorate (Ellis & Stimson 2007, Jacoby 2000), the reasons for the initial unpopularity—and, just as importantly, the steadily decreasing popularity—of the liberal label (and vice versa for the conservative label) have their roots in the political context.

The second problem is to explain the back and forth movements in shorter time spans. These are movements of three or four or five points, but much too systematic to ascribe to chance. We have good theory that works to explain year-over-year vacillations in public opinion on specific policy issues

(Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson 2002, Wlezien 1995), and we will bring that theory to bear here.

We shall provide a bit of historical commentary intended to highlight basic facts of the self-identification series and then finish with a statistical modeling exercise that more rigorously tests the components.

2.0.2 FDR and the Politics of the 1930s

We come upon our topic, not at the beginning, but midstream. Our first measure of identification with liberalism has 47% of Americans subscribing in one way or another to the term.⁸ So the data are no help in figuring out where this symbol originated.

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

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

⁸Since the numbers of liberals and conservatives in this 1936 poll adds up to 100% of respondents, it is obvious that the numbers are an exaggeration (for both) of what respondents would have said had they been given an opportunity to say “neither” or that they had no views or that they did not understand the question.

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

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

In the coming primaries in all parties, there will be many clashes between two schools of thought, generally classified as liberal and conservative. Roughly speaking, the liberal school of thought recognizes that the new conditions throughout the world call for new remedies.

Those of us in America who hold to this school of thought, insist that these new remedies can be adopted and successfully maintained in this country under our present form of government if we use government as an instrument of cooperation to provide these remedies. We believe that we can solve our problems through continuing effort, through democratic processes instead of Fascism or Communism. . . .

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

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

unchecked—return, in effect, to the kind of Government we had in the twenties. . . . [Fireside Chat, June 24th, 1938]⁹

We know that some large proportion of those who tuned into the fireside chats bought into the idea of liberalism, but somewhat fewer than those who supported Roosevelt. That number would survive almost unchanged through World War II, the tense early years of the Cold War, and through the quiescent 1950s. And then it started changing again.

2.0.3 LBJ and the Less Than Great Society

We know with some precision *that* something happened in the 1960s to dramatically affect the percentages of citizens who identified with the “liberal” label, and we know with some precision *when*. The *why* will require more speculation. Between 1963, when the Kennedy assassination made Lyndon Johnson president and 1967, the third year of LBJ’s Great Society, the ranks of self-identified liberals fell by 10.5 points—about one fourth—and never recovered. (See again Figure 7.) That movement would have been huge had it been temporary. As a permanent shift it is a dominant story of American politics—especially the politics of self-identification—in the Twentieth Century. It goes directly to the heart of the modern phenomenon we now work to explain—the disdain for the “liberal” label despite the popularity of many “liberal” social programs.

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

⁹From The American Presidency Project, americanpresidency.org

assiduously to avoid the label. John Kennedy would not be the last liberal president. But he would be the last who would call himself a liberal.

That leaves us wondering what precisely happened. We know what was going on in American politics at the time, and that was a lot. It was a busy decade. The Kennedy assassination rocked a nation that believed such things could not happen in America and produced an accidental president in Lyndon Johnson. But of course Johnson was no longer accidental after reelection by a landslide vote one year later.

The Great Society That landslide itself might figure in the explanation. It produced a Democratic Congress with, for the first time, a solid liberal majority. That majority, spurred on by an ambitious White House, was ready to manufacture legislation in mass quantity, a bill a day. The Democratic Congress had a solid liberal majority in each committee and on the floors of both houses. After years of “half a loaf” compromises with the Republicans and the southern wing of the Democratic Party, there would be no compromise—and essentially no conservative participation—in the 89th Congress. Legislation written in the White House would whisk through Congress, often unchanged.

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

The Poverty Program, as it would come to be called, focused particularly on the urban poor. Not merely a package of benefits, it was intended to allow the poor to organize for their own benefit and to fight City Hall to do so. Community Action Programs directed immense amounts of Federal money to urban areas and set up governance over that spending by boards that largely excluded local public officials and called for “maximum feasible

participation” of the poor. It would be empowerment by conflict, and the conflict was not long in coming. In city after city there would be a struggle for control of the CAP’s by poor people and their representatives which featured, not surprisingly, an absence of political skill and a great deal of anger at “the man.” It was a largely unappealing show, all financed by Federal dollars.¹⁰

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

The riots were a body shock to American politics, events which were not unprecedented in American history but certainly were without precedent in the television age. The televised images were ugly, showing human behavior at its worst. The collapse of civil order in the face of angry mobs was a picture of America coming apart at the seams. Quite probably they are a big part of the story of declining support for the idea of liberalism as well. If one wanted a program evaluation for the efficacy of the Great Society, the riots provided one. It had failed. More than having failed; it had made things visibly worse. This is a harsh judgment and to some degree certainly unfair. But pretty clearly it is a judgment which large numbers of Americans reached from the simple facts at hand. Whether a hypothetical program evaluation performed under better conditions would have reached a different conclusion didn’t much matter. Public opinion makes its own rules for

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

making judgments.

The New Clientele of Liberalism The New Deal had for clients the working people of America. In one phrase, it was “the common man.” Thus liberalism was conjoined with pictures of workers, often unionized, hard-working people, playing by the rules, and trying to get ahead. It is hard to imagine an image better suited to politics than being with and for the common man. And in an era where African Americans were “invisible,” the common man of political imagery was white.

With the coming of the Great Society there was a new clientele of liberalism, the poor—and the nonwhite. The focus of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty was the underclass of people whose usual defining characteristic was that they did not work.¹¹ And although there were—and are—more poor white people than Black people, the image of poverty from the very beginning was Black.¹² If one asks whose face was seen in stories about poverty of that time, it was the Black single mother who lived on public assistance. The “welfare mom” affected attitudes of entitlement (See (Gilens 2000) for documentation of the Black face of poverty and welfare.) The result of these images was a starkly unsympathetic figure.

Americans on average value work and they value marriage. And of course white America finds it much easier to be sympathetic with white people struggling to get along than Blacks in the same situation. If liberalism was about improving the lives of welfare moms, large numbers of Americans willing to reject the label. “Welfare” itself, meaning public assistance to families with children, stands out among public programs for its unpopularity. Whereas heavy majorities of Americans endorse increasing the scope and size of funding of almost all government programs, welfare is the exception, the program a majority would like to see cut. So if liberal came to mean someone who wanted more and better welfare, then it was doomed to be unpopular. Clearly the image fit Lyndon Johnson.

¹¹Although even in more recent surveys, support for spending to help “the poor,” broadly defined, usually enjoys strong support, showcasing even further the strong racial component of opposition to government spending on poor citizens.

¹²Blacks were disproportionately likely to be poor, but at only about ten percent of the population, that disproportion was not large enough to overcome the small numbers.

The symbolism that came to surround the Great Society thus helped to produce the dramatic operational–symbolic disconnect in American political attitudes that we take as a constant today. New Deal-type spending, redistribution, and social welfare policies enjoyed—and largely, still enjoy—majority support among American citizens. Preferences for particular issues of public policy generally come from individuals’ reactions to the specific program social goal in question (Jacoby 2000), and most of the specific social goals that were either a part of or grew out of the New Deal and Great Society—e.g, education, Medicare and public health, public works, social security, and even economic security for citizens willing to work—remain popular. But ideological self-identification is formed largely as a reaction to symbols associated with the ideological labels themselves (Conover & Feldman 1981). The symbols and images of the “Fireside Chat” “liberalism” were changed irreconcilably in the 1960’s.

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

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

The beginning of a visible antiwar movement among liberals came with Eugene McCarthy’s presidential campaign in 1968. It become substantial when

Robert Kennedy, a more central image of American liberalism, entered the fray. And it dominated the airwaves with first protests during the Democratic convention of 1968 and later a string of Washington protests against the Nixon version of the war. As antiwar blended with long hair and counterculture, the formerly button-down image of liberalism would undergo considerable change.

2.0.4 After the 1960s

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

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

This is a curious case where what is individually rational, for individual politicians to avoid the liberal label, may be collectively non rational, as they become subject, as a class, to being associated with an ever more unpopular label as it goes undefended. And as popular politicians avoid the liberal label, it provides an opportunity for their conservative opponents to fill the vacuum with unpopular personalities, e.g., Teddy Kennedy, and causes, e.g., “Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion” from the 1972 presidential campaign. Indeed, berating the stereotypical ideas and images associated with the word “liberal”—but not, importantly, the specific social programs that underlie the label—is virtually the *raison d’être* of conservative talk radio.

The asymmetrical linguistic war sets up a spiral in which “liberal” not only *is* unpopular, but *becomes* ever more so. Thus we expect to see a downward trend in liberal identification as progressive generations of citizens experience the term only in its negative usage. We will model that prospect below.

Thermostatic Response Finally, we wish to explain the shorter-term, but still systematic, fluctuations in ideology. In the matter of policy views there is a well-established view—originating with Wlezien (1995)—that public opinion generally runs counter to the views of current policy (and the current party control of the White House). One can make an argument that a public which is modally moderate should reject the policies of both left and right, wanting to be left of (i.e., more moderate than) right policies and right of left policies. We see this in particular with respect to preferences on government spending, where a government policy that increases spending on a certain program usually reduces the percentage of people who support spending “more” on that program (and vice-versa for spending less). The status quo moves, in other words, and a generally moderate public responds accordingly. It is not so clear that this should carry through to ideological identification. The logic isn’t quite as clean. But the evidence of thermostatic response for the forty or so years where the measurement is exceptionally good is quite strong. The public in the aggregate moves toward liberalism when conservatives are in power and toward conservatism when liberal policies dominate.

We can imagine citizens not strongly committed to left or right identification who move with the times. As one ideology plays out too long and becomes associated with failure and scandal—or simply with government giving us more of the kinds of policies that that ideology produces, they move toward the other. Weakly liberal when Democrats take power, over time they become weakly conservative as the images associated with liberalism become unfavorable or time-worn. And of course the reverse. What we expect to see then is movements counter to the party of the White House which are associated with its time in office.

Now we put these ideas to the the test in a statistic model of liberal identification.

3 A Statistical Model

We have developed three explanations of movements in self-identification. Each will find a simple operationalization in the model to come. Most importantly we model the transition from liberalism as robust minority view—an almost majority—to the decidedly weaker force of today. For that we will entertain a simple intervention model, a step downward in liberal identification beginning in 1966.¹³

For the downward trend after the intervention, we create a counter variable which is zero until 1965 and then incremented uniformly after that year. Thus the trend we model is not for the entire history of the series, but only after the 1960s intervention, which our logic predicts.

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

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

The coefficient for party control, the thermostatic effect, is cleanly estimated. The effect, -0.18 points per year in office, produces about a point and a half shift after an eight year span or a little over two points for 12. Recall that the measure is extremely precise for the years in which this effect is estimated. Two points is not huge, but it is noteworthy when the total variation, high to low, is on the order of ten.

¹³We have considered dynamic specifications of the Box-Tiao variety (Box & Tiao 1975). These produce estimates of dynamics—the δ in ω_0/δ —that are quite small, about 0.40, and therefore indicate approximately linear effects. We choose the linear specification to gain the more flexible multivariate modeling associated with regression.

Table 4: Explaining the Movement in Self-Identification

Variable	Regression Coefficient and Error	Regression with AR(1) Correction Coefficient and Error
Great Society Intervention	-5.92* (0.65)	-4.37* (0.95)
Party Control Duration	-0.18* (0.05)	-0.06 (0.08)
Post-intervention Trend	-0.09* (0.02)	-0.12* (0.04)
Intercept	43.65 (0.32)	43.43 (0.72)
ϕ_1		0.66* (0.11)
N	70	70
R ² (adjusted)	0.83	

* $p < 0.05$

The coefficient on the post-1960s trend is smaller still. But for a trend that runs for forty years in the current data, the ultimate effect, -3.6 points, is not at all small. Ignoring the cycles of party control, the decline of liberal identification is the addition of the negative intervention and the trend, which jointly predict an almost ten point drop by the end of the series.¹⁴

We graph the data series and the regression predictions in Figure 9. One can see that the main patterns of variation are well explained. The cyclical swings associated with party control appear to be underestimated. Although some systematic variation remains, it is not obvious where one would turn next for explanation.

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

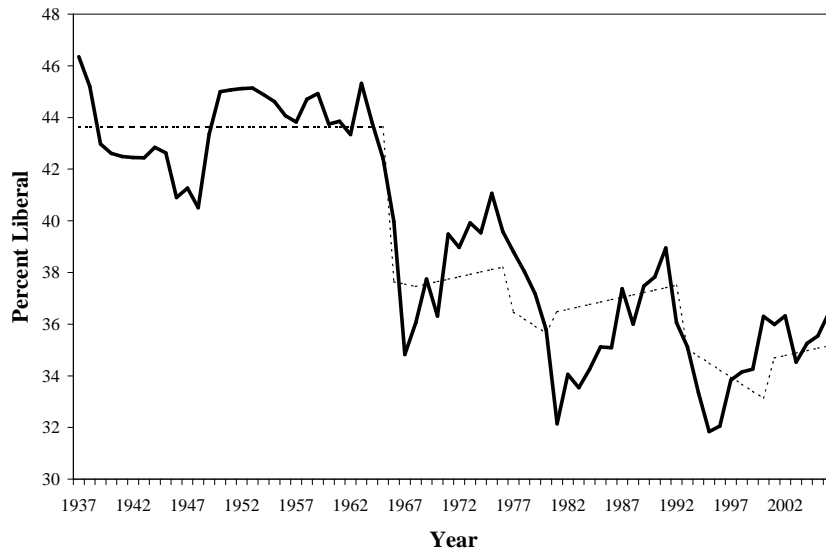


Figure 9: Self-Identification: Actual and Regression Prediction

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

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

¹⁵Part of the problem is that the effect seems always to occur, but is irregular in duration. Thus, for example, the drop-off during the four years of the Carter Administration is of comparable magnitude to the gain during 12 years of Reagan and Bush. Our regression

enthusiasm. Perhaps there is really nothing there.

4 Conclusions: Building the Conservative Symbolic Majority

Using a rich, if non-traditional, collection of survey data, we have developed a time series of ideological self-identification in the American electorate from the New Deal Period to the present day. The goal in this paper was to gain a better understand of the history of ideological-self identification in the American electorate, attempting to explain at least broad shifts in how citizens conceive of ideological language.

We have seen a steep decline in symbolic liberalism that corresponds with observed changes in American political discourse, in particular changing the dominant symbols of ideological liberalism from the white working-class American of FDR to the largely non-white underclass—as well as the counterculture movement—of the 1960s and beyond.

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

The logic that links changes in the political context to changes in the ideological self-identifications in the American electorate is consistent with what we know of Americans' feelings toward politically relevant groups and symbols, with how citizens form ideological self-identifications, and with the factors that elites consider when framing their own political arguments. But we need to do more to add empirical rigor to this logic, explicitly linking the changes that we observe in American political discourse—the ones that, by our theoretical account, seem to happen contemporaneously with the decline

specification fails to deal with this irregularity and thus evidence of irregular effect becomes evidence of non effect.

in popularity of the liberal label—to changes in how Americans perceive and use ideological terms.

We also wish to understand why “liberal,” while certainly a more popular term during the New Deal era than today, was never able to gain a clear majority of the American electorate, even when Roosevelt was handily winning elections and when the social programs he explicitly tried to link to symbolic “liberalism” were quite popular. We hypothesize elsewhere (Stimson 2004, Ellis & Stimson 2007) that the reason the term “conservative” is more popular than “liberal” is not only because of liberalism’s negative connotations for the symbols of American politics, but also because of the appeal of term “conservative” in non-political contexts (lifestyle choices and religious morality, for example). It is possible that it was these connotations that drove the term conservative to still be relatively popular, even when conservatism as a political philosophy was a loser.

A Data Appendix

Table 5: Liberal and Conservative Self-Identification: 1937–2006

Year	Estimate	Year	Estimate	Year	Estimate	Year	Estimate
1937	46.35	1955	44.62	1973	39.93	1991	38.95
1938	45.20	1956	44.07	1974	39.54	1992	36.06
1939	42.98	1957	43.83	1975	41.07	1993	35.12
1940	42.62	1958	44.70	1976	39.59	1994	33.35
1941	42.49	1959	44.93	1977	38.80	1995	31.84
1942	42.45	1960	43.75	1978	38.03	1996	32.06
1943	42.44	1961	43.86	1979	37.17	1997	33.83
1944	42.85	1962	43.35	1980	35.79	1998	34.15
1945	42.64	1963	45.33	1981	32.14	1999	34.26
1946	40.90	1964	43.80	1982	34.05	2000	36.30
1947	41.26	1965	42.40	1983	33.53	2001	35.99
1948	40.50	1966	39.97	1984	34.25	2002	36.32
1949	43.36	1967	34.82	1985	35.12	2003	34.53
1950	45.00	1968	36.06	1986	35.09	2004	35.26
1951	45.08	1969	37.74	1987	37.37	2005	35.55
1952	45.12	1970	36.31	1988	36.00	2006	36.43
1953	45.15	1971	39.49	1989	37.47		
1954	44.89	1972	38.97	1990	37.83		

Revisions and updates, if any, will be posted to Stimson's UNC website.

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