

**THE NATURE OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION IN MASS PUBLICS
MEANING & MEASUREMENT**

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ABSTRACT

When asked directly, many Americans seem quite willing to describe themselves in ideological terms. Against this, in a powerful and influential analysis, Philip Converse (1964) concluded that most Americans are ideologically innocent: indifferent to standard ideological concepts, lacking a consistent outlook on public policy, in possession of real opinions on only some issues of the day, and knowing precious little. The purpose of our paper is to reconcile the results on ideological identification with the broad claim of ideological innocence. After carrying out multiple empirical tests across many different national surveys, we conclude: (i) taken all around, the evidence on ideological identification fits comfortably with the conclusion of ideological innocence; (ii) treating ideological identification as genuine identification – that is, as a central and enduring aspect of political identity – is probably unwarranted; and (iii) differences in the richness of knowledge that people bring to politics are highly consequential – in general and for the particular matter of ideological identification.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the idea of democracy is widely embraced – both by those who actually practice it and those determined to subvert it. But this is a modern turn; over the ages, political commentators have been more impressed with the imperfections and hazards of democracy than with its virtues. In *The Republic*, for example, Plato argued that democracy was dangerous: citizens possessed neither the experience nor the knowledge required for sound judgment; they acted on impulse, sentiment, and prejudice; and they were easily manipulated by leaders who “profess themselves the people's friends” (1974, p. 376).

Closer to our own time and place, many perceptive observers have concluded that ordinary citizens are simply not up to shouldering the burdens of democracy. In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann compared the predicament of the average citizen who wants to be a virtuous citizen to a fat man who aspires to become a ballet dancer (1925, p. 39). Likewise, Schumpeter (1942) argued against democracy on the grounds that the average citizen “is impatient of long or complicated argument,” is in possession of “weak rational processes,” is “not ‘all there.’” In Schumpeter's judgment, the typical citizen “drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again” (1942, pp. 257, 262).

For the most part, such arguments were advanced without benefit of systematic evidence. Schumpeter was right to say that in deciding whether the pre-conditions for democracy are actually met requires not “reckless assertion” but rather “laborious appraisal of a maze of conflicting evidence” (1942, p. 254) – but he did not undertake such an analysis himself. To be fair, in Schumpeter's time, there was not that much high-grade evidence to analyze. Which brings us to Philip Converse (1964) and his celebrated, or notorious, but certainly extraordinary analysis of belief systems in mass publics.

As we all know, after a penetrating analysis of national surveys carried out in the late 1950s, Converse concluded that most Americans are ideologically innocent: indifferent to standard ideological concepts, lacking a consistent outlook on public policy, in possession of real opinions on only some issues of the day, and knowing precious little. Qualitative, perhaps unbridgeable differences divided the political thinking of elites from the political thinking of ordinary people. Most Americans, in Converse's judgment, were incapable of following – much less actually participating in – what might be called democratic discussion.

Not everyone agreed. In short order, Converse's powerful analysis and unsettling conclusions provoked a huge scholarly commotion. But as we sift through the evidence and the arguments, we find Converse's claim of ideological naiveté to stand up well. It stands up well not only to scores of challenging analysis, but to transformations in the political landscape as well. On the question of whether the public should be expected to provide wise decisions, sound judgment, and sensible advice in matters of politics, the best single answer is still to be found in Converse's remarkable essay.²

And yet. At about the time the back-and-forth over ideological innocence was beginning to subside, a new question was making its way onto the National Election Study. Since 1972, those participating in election studies have been asked whether they think of themselves as liberals or conservatives, and if so, to locate themselves on a 7-point scale, stretching from extreme liberal (on the far left of the scale, naturally) to extreme conservative (on the far right). It turns out that when asked directly, many American seem quite willing to describe themselves in ideological terms. Moreover, those who say they think of themselves as liberals tend to favor redistributive welfare policies, social change, and left-leaning presidential candidates; those who say they think of themselves as conservatives tend to express misgivings about racial integration, favor capitalism, and give their votes to right-leaning candidates (e.g., Conover & Feldman 1981; Jacoby 1995; Knight 1985; Miller & Levitin 1979). Over the last 35 years or so, ideological identification has become a fixture in the behavioral analysis of political analysis – it has become, as Ellis and Stimson recently put it, “nearly indispensable” (2007, p. 4).³

What do the results on ideological identification have to say to the claim of ideological innocence? The answer is not immediately obvious. The now sizable literature on ideological identification is in many

respects informative. We have been happy to take advantage of the fine work of those who have gone before us. That said, ideological identification researchers have for the most part gone about their business without pausing to take up in a systematic way the larger debate on ideology. The exceptions – provided most notably by Conover and Feldman (1981) and by Levitin and Miller (1979) – represent important efforts to grapple with the larger debate, but they were offered early on, in the first blush of initial empirical returns. It seems appropriate now, these many years later, to return to this question with the hope of offering a more comprehensive and decisive analysis. Our purpose here is to reconcile the results on ideological identification with the claim of ideological innocence.⁴

To build a convincing answer, we start with foundation work – with a definition of ideological identification. In the next section of the paper, we introduce what has become the standard measure and use it to provide some basic information about the nature of ideological identification in the American mass public. Next, we show that the standard measure performs well on a series of demanding tests. Then, in the heart of the paper, assured that the standard measure is up to the task, we examine the relationship between ideological identification and three principal measures of ideological sophistication: command of ideological concepts; consistency of political belief; and stability of political opinion over time. The penultimate section of the paper then turns to the relationship between ideological identification and political knowledge, which played such a pivotal role in Converse’s original analysis of the American belief system. In the concluding section, we gather together these various results and draw out their implications for the debate over ideology.⁵

DEFINITION

Simply by naming our subject ideological *identification* – instead of, say, ideological *location* or ideological *self-placement* or ideological *self-classification* (Levitin and Miller 1979 deploy all three) – we are making a conceptual move. By doing so, we are saying, in effect, that the right way to think about our subject is in terms of identification. We do this deliberately but also provisionally. Conceiving of our subject as an aspect of identification provides our point of departure. We’ll decide whether this was the right move to make later on, after the results are in.

According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (10th edition), identification refers to a “psychological orientation of the self in regard to something (as a person or group) with a resulting feeling of close emotional association.” Ideological, derived from ideology, refers to “the integrated assertions, theories, and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.” As a starting point, then, we can say that ideological identification refers to a psychological attachment of the self to a group defined by commitment to a sociopolitical program (*cf.* Conover & Feldman 1981).

Defined this way, ideological identification resembles party identification. Put another way, the two concepts belong to the same category. If this is right, then conceptualization of party identification should provide us guidance in elaborating the concept of ideological identification.

Following this logic out, we turned to *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes 1960), the canonical text on party identification. There, Campbell and his colleagues define party identification to be a persistent attachment, or loyalty, to one of the two major political parties. It refers outwards to political groups but it resides within the realm of individual psychology:

Only in the exceptional case does the sense of individual attachment to party reflect a formal membership or an active connection with a party apparatus. Nor does it simply denote a voting record, although the influence of party allegiance on electoral behavior is strong. Generally this tie is a psychological identification, which can persist without legal recognition or evidence of formal membership and even without a consistent record of party support.

Both reference group theory and small-group studies of influence have converged upon the attracting or repelling quality of the group as the generalized dimension most critical in defining the individual-group relationship, and it is this dimension that we call identification (p. 121).

Most Americans, Campbell and colleagues go on to say, claim identity as Democrats or Republicans, and such identifications constitute a standing decision. Party identification is not immutable, but it is a “durable attachment, not readily disturbed by passing events and personalities” (Campbell *et al.* 1960, p. 151; also see Converse and Pierce 1985).

Taking seriously the conceptual resemblance between ideological and party identification, we arrive at the following working definition:

- (i) Ideological identification is a *psychological attachment* to an ideological group.

(ii) Ideological identification is an aspect of *identity*; it is part of a person's political self.

(iii) Ideological identification is *categorical*, in that ideological groups – most notably in the contemporary American case, liberals and conservatives – are types or kinds. (*Which* groups are featured in ideological identification is historically contingent and situationally specific. At different times and in different places, other ideological groups will hold sway. And even in the United States right now, liberalism and conservatism are not the only ideological types possibly commanding allegiance.)

(iv) Ideological identification is, at the same time, *dimensional*, in that psychological attachment to an ideological group varies continuously. For some people, attachment to an ideological group is effectively zero; for others identification to an ideological group constitutes a central aspect of identity; and there exist all shades in between.

(v) Ideological identification is enduring – it is an *abiding* sense of belonging.

THE STANDARD MEASURE

What has become the standard question for measuring ideological identification was introduced into the National Election Study in 1972 and has appeared regularly there ever since then. (NES and GSS have a way of standardizing measures.) It goes like this:

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arrayed from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. [Respondent is handed a card with a visual representation of the scale, with each of 7 points labeled.]

Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

- Extremely Liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly Liberal
- Moderate, Middle of the Road
- Slightly Conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely Conservative

- DK
- NA
- Haven't Thought Much About This

Those who replied don't know, or haven't thought about it, or (beginning in 1988) moderate or middle of the road, were then asked:

If you had to choose would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative?

- Liberal
- Moderate, Middle of the Road

Conservative
Refuses to choose
DK

Table 1 presents the distribution of ideological identification in the American public, measured in this way.⁶ The table is based on pooling National Election Study surveys from 1972 to 2004 (N = 26,277).

Table 1
Distribution of Ideological Identification in the American Public
1972-2004

A first and important point to make is that ideological identification is not for everyone. When offered the opportunity, many Americans say that they do not think of themselves as liberals or as conservatives. In National Election Studies carried out between 1972 and 2004, 27.1% opt out of identifying themselves in ideological terms.

Why do some identify and others not? If claiming an ideological identification can be thought of as a (mild) form of political participation, then the standard model of participation should help us answer this question.

Table 2 reports the results of predicting ideological identification from measures taken from the standard model of participation: such factors as resources, interest in politics, life-cycle, and so on (Campbell, Gurin & Miller 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes 1960; Verba & Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980). Shown there are probit coefficients (the dependent variable is coded 0 or 1, where 1 means that the person claims some ideological identification and 0 means not). The data come from the 1992 National Election Study.

Table 2
Predicting Ideological Identification
(Who Identifies Ideologically and Who Does Not?)

As Table 2 reveals, the standard participation model works quite well. We see huge positive effects due to education and engagement in politics, just as we see for other forms of political participation. Equally familiar from the political participation literature, we also see that elderly Americans and black Americans are somewhat less likely to claim an ideological identity. We see these results in the 1992 NES and we see them repeated in other surveys as well (e.g., the 2000 NES and the 2000-2002 NES Panel). It would seem that

people are inclined to claim an ideological identification for much the same reasons that propel them to take part in political life generally.⁷

When people say they have not thought much about whether they are a liberal or a conservative, we should believe them. They haven't (*cf.* Stimson 2004, pgs. 84-85).

Suppose we set aside this (large) group. What can we then say about the nature of ideological identification in the American public? Figure 1 displays the relevant distribution (excluding those who said, in response to the standard question, that they didn't know or hadn't thought about themselves in this way).

Figure 1
Distribution of Ideological Identification in the American Public
1972-2004

As shown in Figure 1, ideological identification generally follows the familiar bell-shaped distribution. Many Americans choose the ideological middle; extreme categories, on the left or on the right, are thinly populated at best. As a whole, the distribution is displaced substantially to the right, in the conservative direction. At each step out from the middle, conservatives outnumber liberals.

The most striking feature of the distribution is how many Americans, when asked to identify themselves in ideological terms, embrace moderation. In National Election Studies carried out between 1972 and 2004, more than one third – 34.8% to be exact – of those who claimed some acquaintance with ideological terms selected the exact mid-point of the scale, labeled “moderate, middle-of-the-road.”

Is the middle a real position – or is it, as Converse and Pierce (1986) argued in their extensive study of “*la gauche et la droite*” among French voters, mainly a refuge for the indifferent and confused? Converse and Pierce find, as we do, large numbers of the public “flocking” to the ideological mid-point. In the French case, the middle is overrun by citizens not much interested in politics, unable to say what distinguishes the left from the right, and confused over where to place French political parties along an ideological continuum. An occasional true believer of the ideological center there may be, but the typical centrist, according to Converse and Pierce is “a person who is neutral, uncommitted, or even thoroughly indifferent to or ignorant about this generic axis of political dispute” (p. 128). Converse and Pierce conclude that insofar as political warfare in

France takes ideological form, those who choose the ideological middle are “noncombatants” (Converse & Pierce 1986, p. 129; Levitin & Miller 1979).

Much of what Converse and Pierce say about the French public can be repeated for the American. By comparison to those who occupy other positions along the ideological dimension, Americans who choose the exact middle are less educated, know less about politics, care less about politics, and as we will see a little later on, they are much less likely to display command of ideological concepts.⁸ We are not prepared to go quite as far as Converse and Pierce, however, who suggest that in the analysis of “la gauche et la droite” in France, it is best to “to erase mentally” most of the center. We say this because when we compare those Americans who choose the middle against those who say at the outset that they do not think of themselves in ideological terms, the centrists enjoy very much the upper hand. Now it is the centrists who are better-educated; who know more about public affairs; who care more about politics; and who are much more likely to show that they understand ideological ideas. In every case, the differences are substantial. Going forward, our analysis will keep these two types – those who choose the ideological center and those who reject ideological terminology altogether – separate.

QUALITY OF MEASUREMENT

The business of this section is to test the adequacy of the standard measure of ideological identification. In order to investigate the relationship between ideological identification, on the one side, and standard measures of sophistication that figure prominently in the debate over ideological innocence, on the other, we need to be assured that we have an adequate measure in hand. To provide that assurance, we run the standard measure through a series of empirical tests.⁹

First is a straightforward test of convergent validity. For many years, respondents to NES surveys have been asked to name those groups they feel particularly close to – groups of people “who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings about things.” Respondents are asked about Catholics, the middle class, the elderly, and many more, including, conveniently for our purposes, both liberals and conservatives. Ideological identification, as assessed by the standard measure, should be closely associated with the likelihood of choosing (or rejecting) ideological groups. And as Figure 2 shows, it is.¹⁰

Figure 2
The Relationship between Ideological Identification
and Feeling Close to Ideological Groups

We find an equally impressive relationship between ideological identification and evaluation of ideological groups. The thermometer scale was invented for use on the NES as a general purpose measure of feelings toward social and political entities. The scale arrays feelings from very cold and highly unfavorable (0 degrees), on one end, to very warm and highly favorable (100 degrees), on the other. Among the objects regularly rated in this way are ideological groups: in particular, liberals and conservatives.¹¹ As we have defined it, ideological identification should be closely associated with thermometer score ratings of liberals and conservatives. As Figure 3 shows, the standard measure of ideological identification passes this test with flying colors as well.

Figure 3
The Relationship between Ideological Identification
and Ratings of Ideological Groups

Our next test considers the consistency of ideological identification. In the 1996 NES, the standard ideological identification question appeared in both the pre-election and the post-election interview. Table 3 shows that ideological identification is quite consistent from one occasion to the next. Nearly sixty percent of Americans chose exactly the same category over the two interviews; nearly another third moved only a single step from before the election to afterwards.¹²

Table 3
Consistency of Ideological Identification
Across an Election

One convenient way to summarize over-time continuity is provided by the Pearson correlation coefficient. The Pearson correlation represents the extent to which the relative ordering of individuals – in this case, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative – is the same on one occasion as it is on another. Regarding ideological identification, we find imperfect but substantial continuity: Pearson $r = 0.78$.

In the next set of tests, we take up the stability of ideological identification, again, as assessed by the standard measure. We begin with stability at the aggregate level. If ideological identification is, in fact, an *abiding* sense of belonging, then in the aggregate, we should expect to see little change in ideological

identification over time. Insofar as we do see change, it should be gradual and modest, not wild swings in one direction and then in the other.

For the most part, this is what we see. Figure 4 summarizes ideological identification in the American public from 1972 to 2004. The figure shows that conservatives enjoy a small but persistent advantage over liberals, and the magnitude of this advantage remains pretty much the same over the thirty-year period, from Nixon to Bush. Over these years at least, ideological identification experienced no major fluctuations, and certainly no realignments.¹³

Figure 4
Ideological Identification over Time
1972-2004

Stability at the aggregate level is of course perfectly consistent with tremendous (but largely offsetting) change at the individual level. Converse's (1964, 1970) original and unsettling analysis of opinion instability at the individual level took off from the observation of serene stability in the aggregate.

Table 4 summarizes the results from a series of empirical tests. For the sake of comparison, we present continuity correlations for both ideological identification (in the left-hand column) and party identification (in the right-hand column). We take up stability in the medium term first, making use of the 1972-1976 National Election Panel Study. Table 4 shows that ideological identification is reasonably stable across this four-year period (Pearson $r = 0.56$) but much less so than is party identification (Pearson $r = 0.79$). Party identification's advantage here is actually greater than it seems, since the calculation of the continuity coefficients sets aside those who do not think of themselves in ideological (in the first case) or in partisan terms (in the second) terms on either occasion. More than one-third of the sample disappears in the case of ideological identification (37.3%), compared to less than 2% in the case of party identification.

Table 4
Continuity of Ideological Identification
at the Individual Level

To estimate stability over the long haul, we drew upon the extraordinary study of political socialization created by M. Kent Jennings. In the spring of 1965, under Jennings's direction, a national sample of high school seniors was interviewed on a wide range of political subjects. Simultaneously and

independently, parents of the students were questioned as well, on many of the same subjects.¹⁴ High school seniors were first interviewed in the spring of 1965, as graduation approached. The same group was questioned again in 1973, once more in 1982, and on one final occasion in 1997. A measure of ideological identification appeared in the last three interviews.¹⁵ With the Jennings data, then, we can estimate the stability of ideological and party identification over the long haul, from 1973, as the erstwhile high school seniors were beginning to settle down – marry, finish school, start a family, launch a career – to 1997, their late middle ages.

Table 4 shows that over this 24-year period, ideological identification is impressively stable (Pearson $r = 0.40$) if not quite as stable as party identification (Pearson $r = 0.47$). Notice, also, that ideological identification shows signs of increasing consolidation over the life-cycle. We know that broad personality traits – like temperament – show substantial and increasing stability over the life span, reaching a high plateau by middle age (e.g., Caspi, Roberts & Shiner 2005; Fraley & Roberts 2004; Kagan & Snidman 2004; Roberts & DelVecchio 2000). Political predispositions show the same pattern: by the mid-thirties, consolidation and constraint begin to replace the “attitudinal fragmentation and disorder” of the young adult years (Jennings & Markus 1984; Jennings & Stoker 1999). This generalization seems to apply to ideological identification as well.¹⁶

Converse and Pierce (1985) argue that party identification should be more stable than “mere likes and dislikes” directed at the parties. This expectation follows from the assumption that party identification is an aspect of *identity*. Not “to be confused with any short-term surge of approval at some triumph of a party or its leadership” (1985, p. 145), party identification is rather “a sense of belonging which is abiding” (p. 146). They find, as expected, that party identification is substantially more stable than attitudes toward the parties.

We find the same to be true, using the 1972-1976 NES, as Table 5 reveals. Party identification is much more stable than “mere likes and dislikes” directed at the parties. Does ideological identification enjoy the same advantage? Not really. Table 5 shows that ideological identification is more stable than attitudes towards liberals and conservatives, but that the margin is miniscule.

Table 5
Identification More Stable than “Mere” Attitudes?

Our final test of the standard measure is to see whether we can detect gains associated with aging in propensity to claim an ideological identity. Age gains are an empirical regularity in the case of party identification (Converse 1969; Converse & Pierce 1985). The accumulation of party experience – voting, working on a campaign, donating money, registering – leads to a strengthening of party identification over the life cycle. Does the same thing happen with ideological identification? No, it does not. (See Figure 5.) To the contrary, propensity to claim an ideological identity (any ideological identity) declines with age, sharply so among the elderly.

Figure 5
Age Gains in Propensity to Claim an Ideological Identification?
(No)

Taken all around, these empirical tests suggest two conclusions. First, ideological identification does not appear to be as strong or as persistent an aspect of the political self as is party identification. We will return to this in the final section of the paper, when all our results have been presented. Second, and more important for immediate purposes, the standard measure of ideological identification performs quite well. The standard measure is closely associated with other forms of ideological evaluation and it is quite stable, in the short-term, in the medium term, and even over the long haul. These results give us confidence that we can proceed to the next and more substantive part of our analysis secure in the knowledge that we have in hand a reasonable measure.

IDENTIFICATION AND IDEOLOGY

In this section we pick up on the conversation with Converse. We do so by determining the relationship between ideological identification, on the one hand, and the principal measures Converse employed to test the public's appetite for ideological thinking, on the other. We take up, in turn, command of ideological concepts, consistency in views on policy, stability of political opinions over time.

COMMAND OF IDEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

Imagine American society stratified by political interest and capacity. At the top is a thin echelon of the best-educated and most deeply-engaged in political life. At the bottom are those who have no appetite

for politics whatsoever. In between come the ranks of ordinary citizens. Top to bottom, two striking transformations take place in the comprehension of politics, according to Converse (1964, p. 213).

First, the contextual grasp of “standard” political belief systems fades out very rapidly, almost before one has passed beyond the 10% of the American population that in the 1950s had completed standard college training. Increasingly, simpler forms of information about “what goes with what” (or even information about the simple identity of objects) turn up missing. The net result, as one moves downward, is that constraint declines across the universe of idea-elements, and that the range of relevant belief systems becomes narrower and narrower. Instead of a few wide-ranging belief systems that organize large amounts of specific information, one would expect to find a proliferation of clusters of ideas among which little constraint is felt, even, quite often, in instances of sheer logical constraint.

[And second,] the character of the objects that are central in a belief system undergoes systematic change. These objects shift from the remote, generic, and abstract to the increasingly simple, concrete, or “close to home.” Where potential political objects are concerned, this progression tends to be from abstract “ideological” principles to the more obviously recognizable social groupings or charismatic leaders and finally to such objects of immediate experience as family, job, and immediate associates.

Converse concludes that fragmentation and concretization “are not a pathology limited to a thin and disorganized bottom layer of the lumpenproletariat; they are immediately relevant in understanding the bulk of mass political behavior” (p. 213).

Converse came to his severe verdict partly because of Americans’ unfamiliarity with standard ideological concepts. Respondents to the 1956 election survey were asked to discuss the good and bad points of the two major political parties, and, in a parallel series of questions, to comment on the major presidential candidates. Those who referred to liberalism or conservatism or some other ideological notion in *any* of their answers numbered, according to Converse’s classification, less than 3 percent of the public. Near-ideologues, those who mentioned ideological concepts but appeared neither to rely upon them heavily nor to understand them very well, comprised another one-tenth of the national sample. Thus the great majority of Americans – nearly 90 percent – displayed no taste for abstract ideological ideas that were standard fixtures in sophisticated political analysis and commentary.¹⁷

The question for us is whether ideological identification is associated with command of ideological concepts. Conveniently for our purposes, a project led by Kathleen Knight has returned to the original

election study transcripts and replicated Converse's coding. Knight and her colleagues classified respondents into one of four categories: ideological (combining Converse's ideologue and near-ideologue), group benefits, nature of the times, and no substantive content.

Figure 6 displays the relationship between strength of ideological identification (along the horizontal axis) and command of ideological concepts (along the vertical). Strength of ideological identification is anchored on the low end by those who reject ideological terminology entirely and on the high end by those who claim to be ideologically extreme (either liberal or conservative).¹⁸ Command of ideological concepts is represented by the proportion classified as ideological. We expect this proportion to rise as we progress along the dimension of ideological strength, and this is exactly what Figure 6 shows. Ideologues are almost invisible among those who say they do not think of themselves in ideological terms; among those who choose the exact center of the ideological dimension, the proportion rises sharply, to nearly 20%; and it rises again, to over 30%, among those who claim some affinity for liberalism or conservatism.¹⁹

Figure 6
Strength of Ideological Identification and Command of Ideological Concepts

CONSISTENT VIEWS ON POLICY

Unfamiliarity with ideological terms could reflect conceptual innocence, or, less troubling, difficulties in the articulation of ideological ideas. Ideology might still flourish among the public if it turned out that many people simply could not enunciate the principles that in fact informed their beliefs. To distinguish between these alternatives, Converse computed correlations between opinions on topical issues for each of two groups, both interviewed in 1958: a national cross-section of the general public, and a smaller group made up of candidates for the United States House of Representatives. Both groups were asked their opinions on pressing domestic and foreign policy issues – such matters as aid to education, military support for countries menaced by Communist aggression, and the like. Positions taken by the candidates were much more internally consistent than were the positions expressed by the general public. Indeed, among the public, there was little consistency at all. Candidates tended to be liberal or conservative; citizens scattered all over the (ideological) place. Converse concluded that opinions expressed by ordinary citizens on particular issues

do not derive from general principles. Measly correlations across different topics reflected Americans' unfamiliarity with the abstract, ideological concepts that might have tied the topics together.²⁰

This leads to our second test: consistency of views on pressing policy questions should increase as strength of ideological identity increases. To see if this is so requires a wide ranging set of policy questions. The 1972 NES supplies a good set, covering Vietnam, busing, the role of women outside the home, isolationism versus intervention in foreign affairs, tax reform, abortion, foreign aid, health insurance, and whether the federal government should guarantee Americans a decent standard of living. We simply calculated inter-item correlations (Pearson r), separately for groups defined by strength of ideological identification. Figure 7 summarizes the results (the figure presents absolute values). As expected, consistency increases with strength of identification. Among those who failed to claim any ideological identity at all, there is barely any consistency to detect. The median correlation between opinions of policy among those who reject ideological terminology is just 0.097. In contrast, among those who claimed an extreme ideological identity, policy opinions begin to resemble a constrained *system* of belief; among this group, the median correlation rises to 0.247. This is what we see in the 1972 NES and it is exactly what we see in the 1976 NES as well.

Figure 7
Strength of Ideological Identification and Issue Consistency

STABLE OPINIONS OVER TIME (“REAL” OPINIONS)

In Converse's original analysis, not only did opinions on matters of policy appear unconnected to one another, they also seemed to wobble back and forth randomly over time. Eight of the policy questions that were included in the 1958 national survey were posed to the same people two years earlier, in the 1956 survey, as well as two years later, in 1960. Although there were virtually no aggregate shifts in opinion on any of these issues across this period, and despite precautions taken to discourage superficial replies, Converse uncovered a great deal of instability at the individual level. On average, less than two thirds of the public came down on the same side of a policy controversy over a two-year period, where one-half would be expected to do so by chance alone. Furthermore, a close inspection of the dynamics of this considerable re-shuffling led Converse to suggest that on any particular issue, the public could be partitioned into one of two

groups: the first made up of citizens who possess genuine opinions and hold onto them tenaciously; the second and typically larger group, composed of citizens who are quite indifferent to the issue and when pressed, either confess their ignorance outright, or out of embarrassment or misplaced civic obligation, invent an attitude on the spot – not a real attitude, but a “non-attitude.” Converse concluded that sizable fractions of the public “do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time.”

Non-attitudes are embarrassing for advocates of democracy. Their presence implies that people don’t know what they want from government. If Converse is right about non-attitudes then, as Christopher Achen (1975, 1227) once put it, “Democratic theory loses its starting point.”²¹

The prospect of non-attitudes takes us to our final test. Here we ask: do those who claim an ideological identity display greater over-time continuity in their views on policy questions? The answer, displayed in Figure 8, is no. Figure 8 presents continuity coefficients calculated from the 1972-1976 National Election Panel Study.²² The pattern is more complicated than our expectation. As Figure 8 shows, among those who say no to ideological terminology or who select ideological moderation, stability of opinion on policy is uniformly modest. Continuity coefficients do not sink below 0.20 but neither do they rise much above 0.60. In contrast, among those who claim to be strong liberals or strong conservatives, stability of opinion bifurcates. Continuity coefficients *either* approach perfection (abortion, racial busing) *or* collapse towards zero (tax reform, foreign aid). This suggests that extreme liberals and extreme conservatives *are* more likely to possess real opinions – which either they cling to resolutely or, in the face of new evidence and argument, relinquish in exchange for another.

Figure 8
Strength of Ideological Identification and
Over-Time Continuity of Beliefs on Policy

IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION & POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Mass publics are characterized by huge inequalities in political knowledge. *Huge* inequalities. Converse uses words like “staggering” and “astronomical” to describe the difference between elite and everyday command of political information, and his analysis of belief systems turns on this point. In his

analysis, a few think about politics in sophisticated ways, traffic easily in abstraction, and place current events in context. They are the well-informed, and they pick up new information easily and retain it readily. Many more spend little time on politics, care not at all for abstract political concepts, and when they think about political events, take them up one at a time, seeing little or no connection between them. They are the nothings, and for them news about politics is next to incomprehensible. In between are the rest, who muddle through, paying intermittent attention, alert enough to notice temporal associations between the party in power and conditions in the country or in their own lives, and prepared to lend their support to policies and candidates that favor their group.

So Converse claimed in his 1964 essay. His analysis reaches far and wide – he ends with speculations about abolition and the rise of the Republican Party and with the ideological advantages enjoyed by conservative movements – but it all starts, really, with differences in information.

Taking this point seriously leads us to question whether ideological identification is just one thing. We suggest that some people find the standard ideological identification question much more difficult than others. The very meaning of ideological identification will vary, we say, depending on the volume and accuracy and richness of information that people bring to politics.

Table 6 (mercifully, our last) assembles some evidence consistent with this conjecture. We see there, first of all, that the propensity to claim an ideological identity increases dramatically with increasing knowledge about politics.²³ We see that consistency of ideological identification from a pre-election interview to a post-election interview increases dramatically with increasing knowledge about politics. And last, we see that over-time continuity of ideological identification increases dramatically with increasing knowledge about politics.²⁴ These results imply that the nature of ideological identification – its meaning and significance for politics – likely depends on the degree to which it is part of the person’s general investment in political life.

Table 6
Ideological Identification as Sophistication
By Levels of Knowledge

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Taken all around, the evidence on ideological identification presented here fits comfortably with the conclusion of ideological innocence. More than one quarter of the American public simply rejects the invitation to describe themselves in ideological terms. Another twenty-five percent picks the middle of the road as their destination – more, it would seem, out of ideological indifference or confusion than a commitment to centrist principles. Even among those who claim some affinity to liberalism or conservatism, less than one third actually make use of ideological concepts in their assessment of parties and candidates. Based on these results, we see no reason to reopen the case made so forcefully by Converse more than 40 years ago. To the contrary, the results fortify the original verdict of ideological innocence. By and large, Americans do not come to politics with an ideological axe to grind.²⁵

A separate issue has to do with whether it is appropriate to treat ideological identification as *identification*. Is ideological identification properly thought of as a central and abiding aspect of a person's political identity? It is hard to say. The evidence is not that strong – and it appears even weaker when set against the evidence on party identification. Americans generally think of themselves as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. For the most part, they avoid the center, preferring to enlist psychologically in one of two parties. Such identifications are persistent; more robust than mere attitudes; and grow stronger over the life cycle. In all these respects, party identification really seems to be identification, and in all these respects, ideological identification suffers by comparison.

Why might this be? The difference is a reflection, we suggest, of the broader American political landscape.

A conspicuous and persistent feature of American politics is a stable two-party system. Political parties are actual entities, with organizations, resources, buildings, employees, and, so-to-speak, large megaphones. Campaigns are organized by the Democrats and Republicans; conventions are held by Democrats and Republicans; and candidates run for office as Democrats and Republicans. The basic language of partisanship – Democrat, Republican – pervades political discourse. Moreover, in the American system, citizens are regularly offered the opportunity to *act* on their partisanship: to vote, argue, work on a

campaign, give money, register, show up at a rally, and more. Such behavioral commitments reinforce and strengthen their psychological attachment to a party.²⁶

Things are very different for ideological identification. Recall that the standard ideological identification question begins: “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives.” Well, *do* we hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives? Not really. There is no stable two-ideology system. Even if so inclined, a voter cannot cast a ballot for the Liberal Party or the Conservative Party (except from occasional precincts in upstate New York). Liberalism and conservatism belong almost entirely to the realm of ideas. As such, they should be understood, as Rodgers once put it, writing about the American Creed, in how they are “put to use, and in this way fashioned and re-fashioned: not what the American political tradition means, but how various aspects of the Creed have been used: how they were employed and for what ends, how they rose in power, withered, and collapsed, how they were invented, stolen for other ends, remade, abandoned” (1987, p. 3). This makes liberalism and conservatism fun and fair game for intellectual historians – how FDR “invented” liberalism, say, or how classic liberalism has managed to claim the intellectual center of the contemporary American conservative movement – but rather less helpful to ordinary citizens trying to follow, not all that determinedly, what is going on in political life.

In the end, should we retain or abandon the language of identification? Consider Converse and Pierce (1986), who analyze ideological identification in France, based on longitudinal surveys that bookend the disorders of 1968. The vocabulary for describing the landscape of politics in ideological terms – “la gauche et la droite” – was of course invented in France. “At the time of the Revolution, the radicals sat to the left of the president’s box in the French legislative assemblies, and the conservatives to his right” (Converse & Pierce 1986, p. 111) – and remains today deeply embedded in French political culture. As part of their study, French citizens and elites (candidates for the National Assembly) were asked to place the French political parties on a 1-100 point scale (Echelle gauche-droite), and then to locate themselves on the same continuum. This question is not identical to the standard question we have examined here, but it bears a close resemblance. When referring to this question and the judgment it elicits, Converse and Pierce *never* use the language of identification. Instead, they say “personal location” or “personal position” or “self-

location.” The avoidance of the term identification seems deliberate. As one of the authors of *The American Voter*, Converse was more than familiar with the theory and language of identification; he and his colleague Pierce choose not to deploy such theory and language in this case. Perhaps they thought it would have been theoretically presumptuous or misleading to do so.²⁷

A final point we wish to emphasize has to do with political knowledge. Politics is a difficult subject, and not everyone cares to study it. Large numbers of Americans know little about political life, but a handful – the activists and the fanatics who live and breathe politics – appear to know practically everything. Differences in the volume and accuracy and richness of knowledge that people bring to politics are both enormous and consequential. This may be the most important lesson to be taken from Converse’s original paper.

Over the decades, we have learned that the well-informed differ from the poorly-informed in all kinds of important ways. They are more likely to express opinions in the first place. They are more likely to possess stable opinions – real opinions, opinions held with conviction. They are more likely to cite evidence in political discussions and to process information sensitively. The well-informed are better at retaining new information. They are more adept in the deployment of heuristics. They pick up and take into account vital pieces of new information more deftly. They vote more consistently with their political interests. And they are much more likely to take an active part in politics (e.g., Bartels 1988; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Fiske, Lau & Smith 1990; Fiske & Kinder 1981; Gilens 2001; Iyengar 1990; Lau & Redlawsk 2001; Mondak 2001; Price & Zaller 1993; Verba, Scholzman & Brady 1995; Zaller 1990, 1992).

Our results also show the vital importance of knowledge. We have found that the propensity to claim an ideological identity; the consistency of ideological identification; the over-time continuity of ideological identification: all increase dramatically with increasing knowledge about politics. Differences in ideological identification associated with differences in the richness of knowledge people bring to politics are *differences of kind*. The nature of ideological identification – its meaning and significance for politics – varies qualitatively as a consequence of variation in a person’s general investment in political life. Two identical

marks on a page: one might reflect something superficial; the other something deep – an identification, we might fairly call it.

TABLE 1
IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arrayed from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Identification	Percentage	N
Extremely Liberal	1.42	372
Liberal	6.75	1,773
Slightly Liberal	8.59	2,258
Moderate, middle of the road	23.62	6,206
Slightly Conservative	13.32	3,501
Conservative	12.10	3,179
Extremely Conservative	2.06	540
Don't Know/Haven't Thought Much about It	27.06	7,111
NA	5.09	1,337
Total	100.01	26,277

Source: 1972-2004 American National Election Study (ANES), Cumulative File.

TABLE 2
PREDICTING IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION
(WHO IDENTIFIES IDEOLOGICALLY AND WHO DOES NOT?)

Independent Variables	Probit Coefficient	p-value
Education	0.326	0.000
Income	0.001	0.753
Female	-0.037	0.047
Black	-0.109	0.000
Age	-0.002	0.010
Age>65	0.091	0.015
Engagement	0.508	0.000
Intercept	0.378	0.000
N	1,855	
Adjusted R ²	0.201	

Source: 1992 ANES.

TABLE 3
CONSISTENCY OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION
ACROSS AN ELECTION

	Post-Election Identification						
	Liberal 1	2	3	Moderate 4	5	6	Conservative 7
Pre-Election Identification							
1	7 41.18%	7 41.18%	0 0.00	2 11.76	0 0.00	0 0.00	1 5.88
2	3 2.59	84 72.41	18 15.52	8 6.90	2 1.72	1 0.86	0 0.00
3	0 0.00	25 16.23	78 50.65	40 25.97	10 6.49	1 0.65	0 0.00
4	2 0.65	10 3.27	33 10.78	187 61.11	52 16.99	20 6.54	2 0.65
5	1 0.46	1 0.46	9 4.13	57 16.15	101 46.33	46 21.10	3 1.38
6	0 0.00	2 0.80	2 0.80	19 7.63	42 16.87	171 68.67	13 5.22
7	1 3.03	2 6.06	0 0.00	0 0.00	0 0.00	7 21.21	23 69.70

Source: 1996 American National Election Study (ANES). $N=1,093$. Pearson $r = 0.78$.

TABLE 4
CONTINUITY OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION
AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL
(Pearson's r)

	Ideological Identification	Party Identification
1972-1976	0.56	0.79
1973-1982	0.45	0.65
1982-1997	0.58	0.64
1973-1997	0.40	0.47

Source: 1972-1976 NES Panel (1st row); Jennings Socialization Study (otherwise).

TABLE 5
IDENTIFICATION MORE STABLE THAN “MERE” ATTITUDES?
(Pearson’s r)

	Ideology	Party
Identification	0.57	0.80
Attitude toward Liberals/Democrats	0.54	0.46
Attitude toward Conservatives/Republicans	0.52	0.43

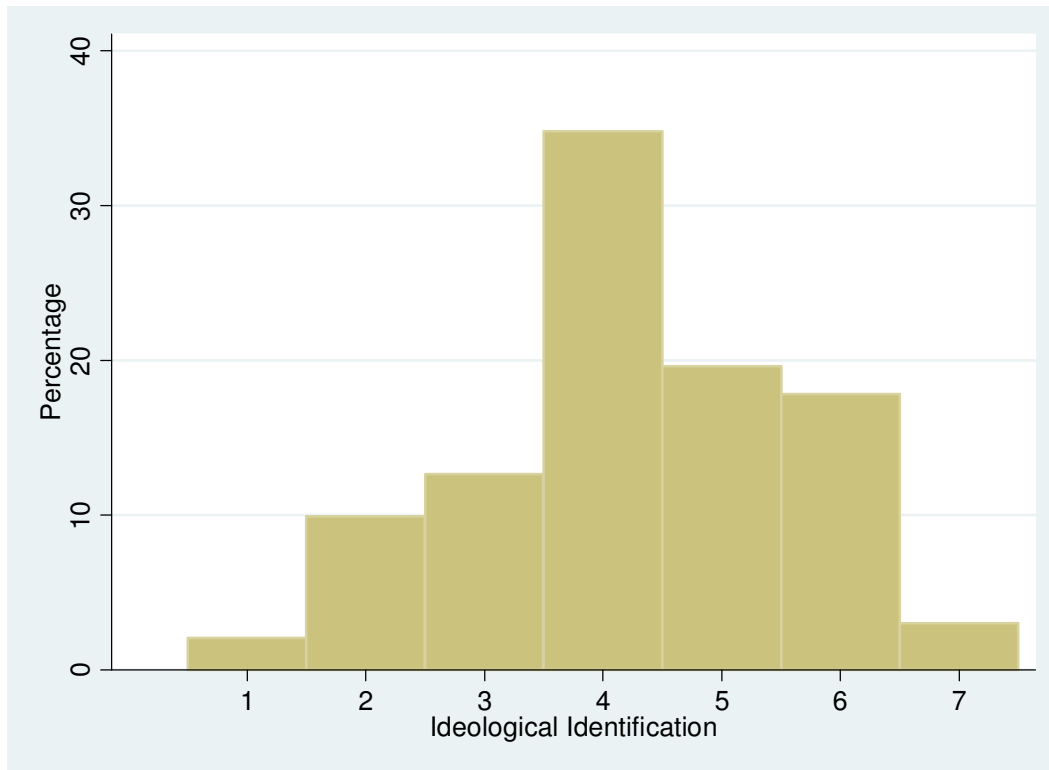
Source: 1972-1976 NES Panel.

TABLE 6
IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AS SOPHISTICATION
BY LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE

Political Knowledge	Identification (% claiming)	Consistency (Pearson's <i>r</i>)	Stability (Pearson's <i>r</i>)
Very High	92.0	0.89	0.77
Fairly High	83.4	0.78	0.59
Average	70.3	0.79	0.47
Fairly Low	48.0	0.52	0.35
Very Low	30.5	0.22	*

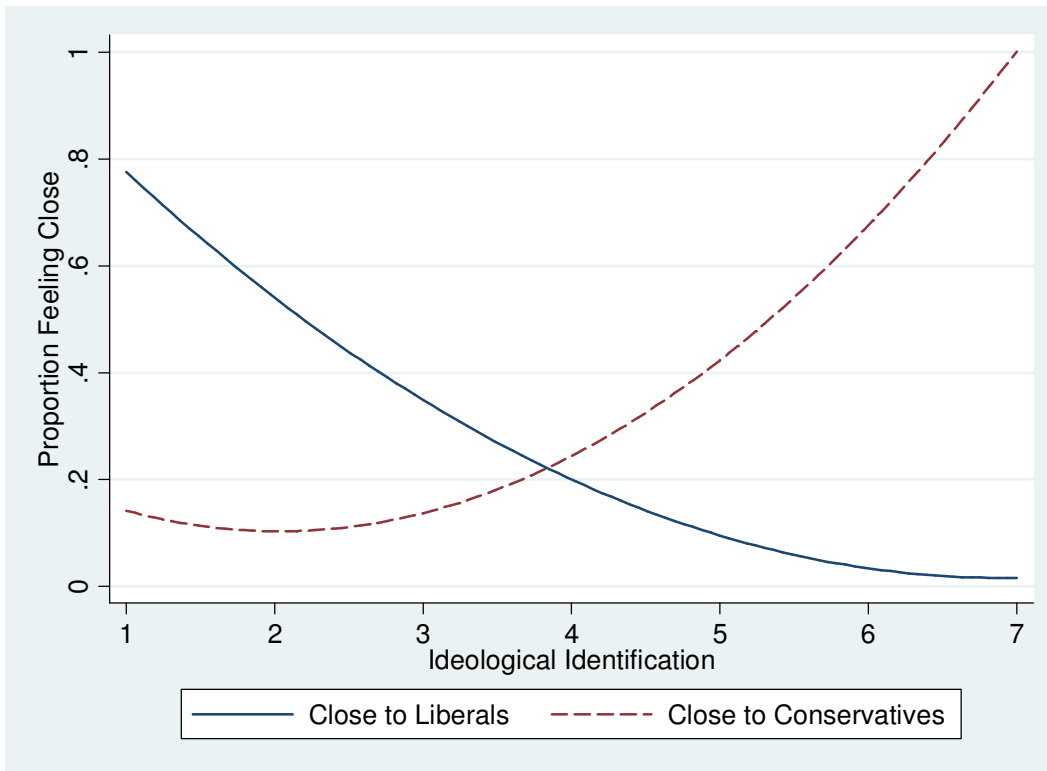
Source: 1972 National Election Study (column 1), 1996 Pre/Post NES (column 2), and 1972-1976 NES Panel (column 3). * < 10 cases.

FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC



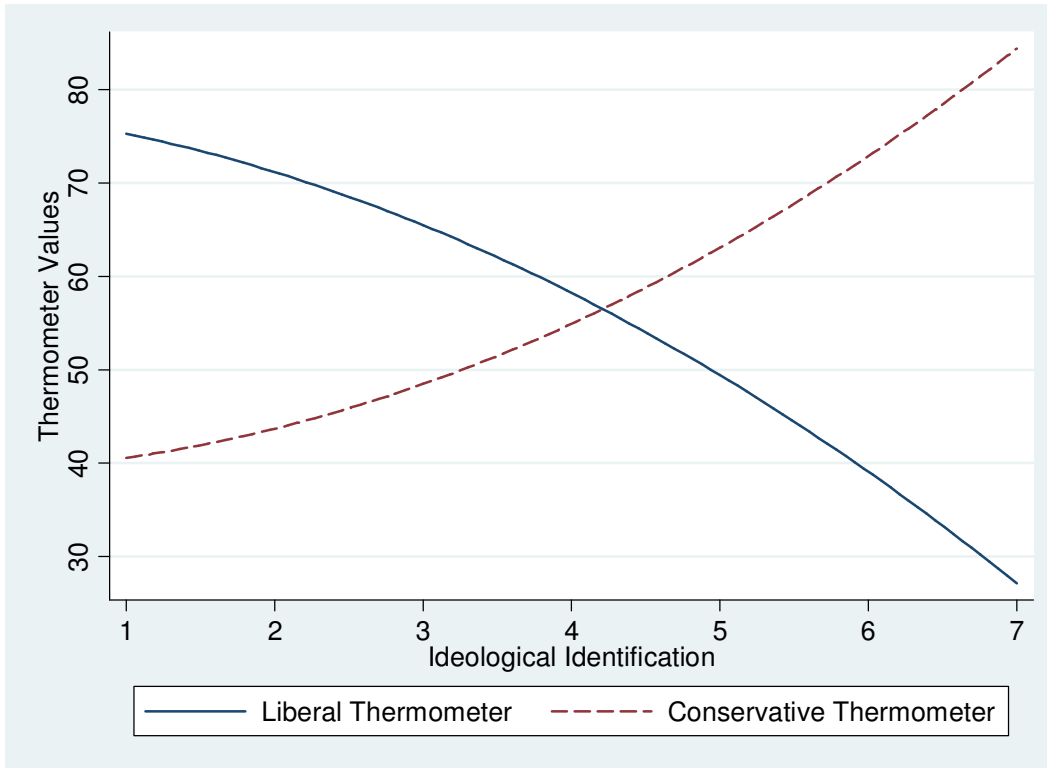
Source: 1972-2004 American National Election Study (ANES).

FIGURE 2
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AND
FEELING CLOSE TO IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS



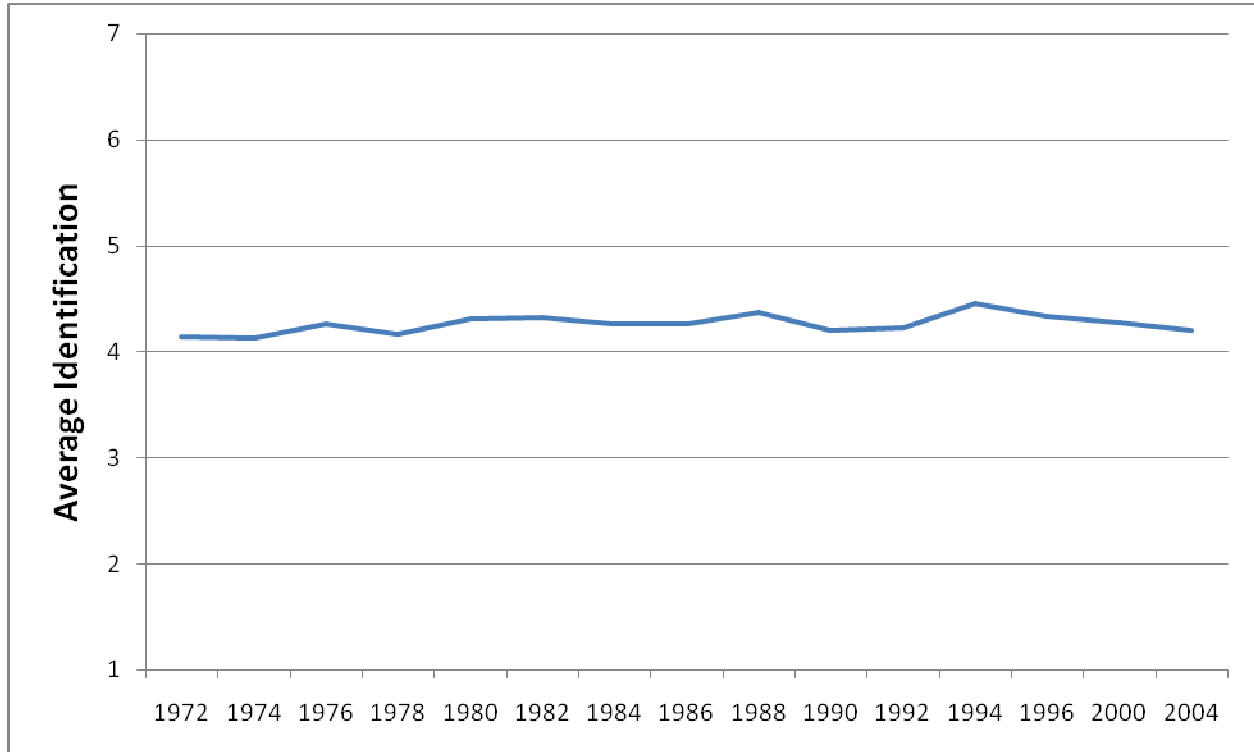
Source: 2000 ANES (face-to-face component).

FIGURE 3
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION
AND RATINGS OF IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS



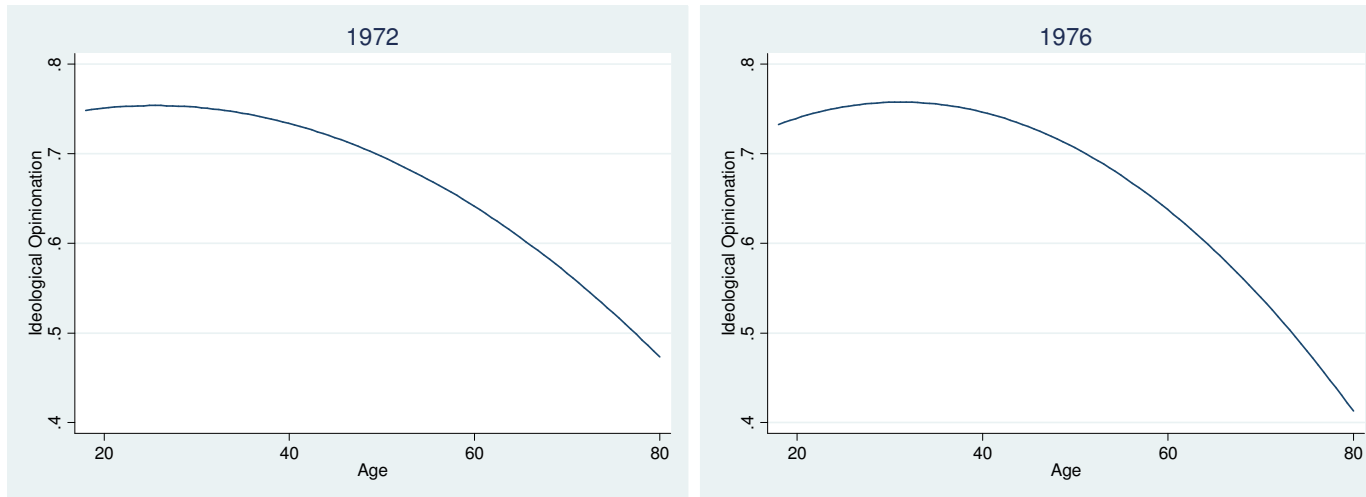
Source: 2000 ANES (face-to-face component).

FIGURE 4
IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION OVER TIME
1972-2004



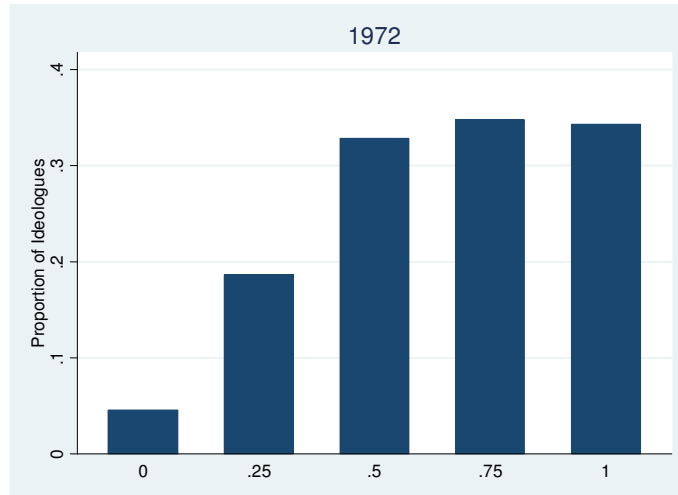
7 = Extreme Conservative; 1 = Extreme Liberal; 4 = Moderate, Middle of the Road.
Source: 1972-2004 ANES.

FIGURE 5
AGE GAINS IN PROPENSITY TO CLAIM AN IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION?
(No)



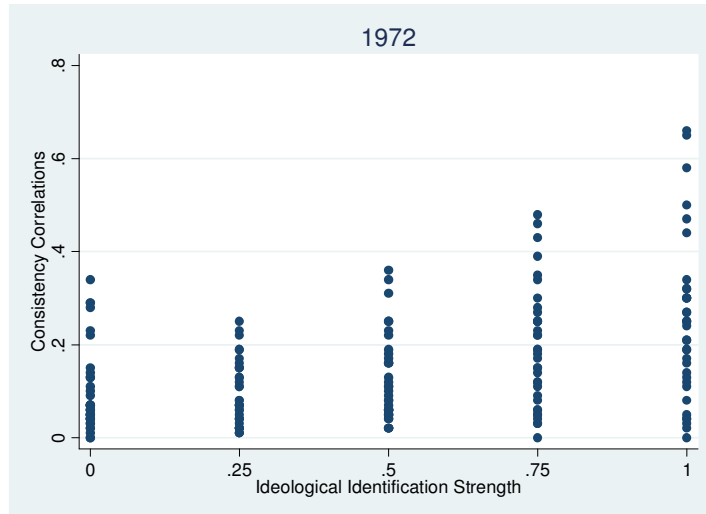
Source: 1972 and 1976 ANES.

FIGURE 6
STRENGTH OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AND
COMMAND OF IDEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS



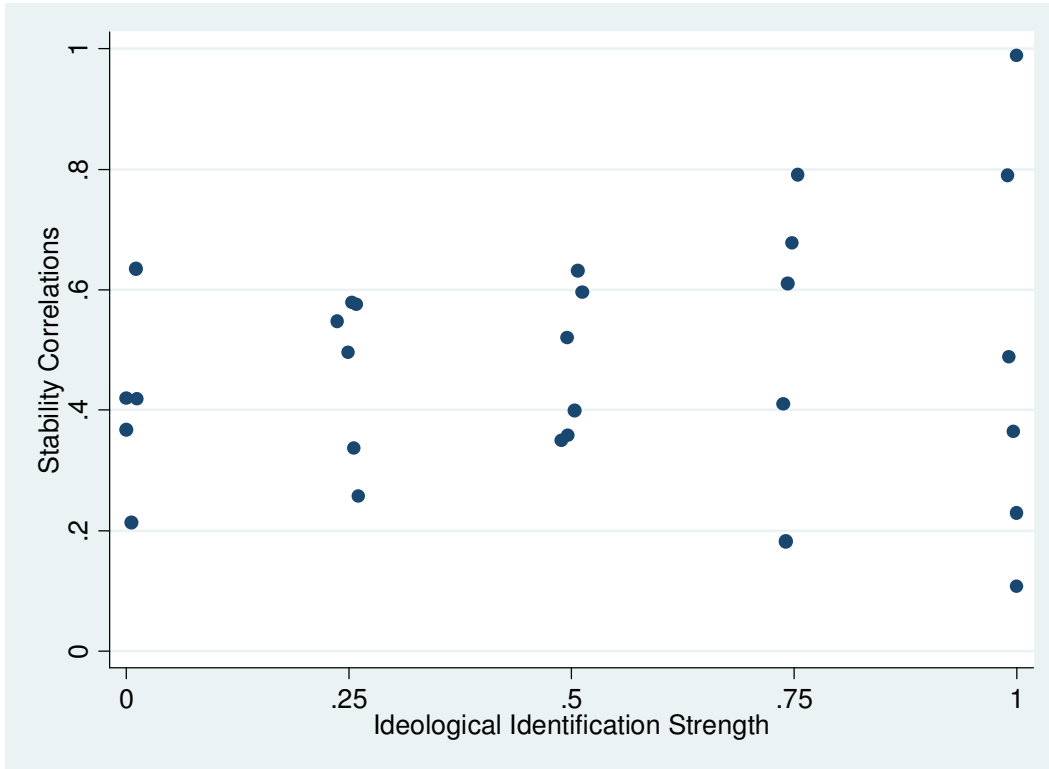
Source: 1972 NES.

FIGURE 7
STRENGTH OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AND
ISSUE CONSISTENCY



Source: 1972 NES.

FIGURE 8
STRENGTH OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AND
OVER-TIME CONTINUITY OF BELIEFS ON POLICY



Source: 1972-1976 ANES Panel.

APPENDIX

There are variations on the standard NES question. The most prominent poses the question in branching format. It goes like this:

When it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as a liberal, a conservative, a moderate, or what?

Liberal
Conservative
Moderate
Other

No, never
DK
NA
R has absolutely no understanding of terms “liberal” and “conservative”

Those who classify themselves as liberals or conservatives are then asked:

Would you call yourself a strong liberal/conservative or a not very strong liberal/conservative?

Strong
Not very strong

While those who classify themselves as moderates are asked:

Do you think of yourself as more like a liberal or more like a conservative?

Liberal
Neither, refuse to choose
Conservative

On theoretical grounds, we prefer the branching version. It maps more consistently onto what is meant by identification. It treats liberalism and conservatism as distinct types. It separates nominal identification from intensity of identity. These are all virtues, from the point of view that takes ideological self-categorization as identification. And finally and unsurprisingly, it mimics more closely the standard party identification question, which goes like this:

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?

Republican
Democrat
Independent
Other

DK
NA
Haven't thought much about this

Those who classify themselves as Republicans or Democrats are then asked:

Would you call yourself a strong Republican/Democrat or a not very strong Republican/Democrat?

Strong
Not very strong

While those who classify themselves as Independents are asked:

Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

Republican
No
Democratic

We prefer the branching question, though it is not used very often. Moreover, when the branching question does appear on surveys, it fails to include what we think of as a major virtue of the standard 7-point version: namely, the gentle invitation to decline to identify at all (“...or haven’t you thought much about this?”). This is regrettable; omitting this invitation no doubt encourages superficial responses; it presumes, against a truckload of evidence moving in the opposite direction, that every American has spent time thinking about liberalism and conservatism and has chosen which ideological camp they wish to join.

Thankfully, there is at least one high quality exception to this. The 2000 National Election Study included a randomized experiment: half the sample was assigned to the standard 7-point ideological identification question; the other half was assigned to the branching version of the ideological identification question. In the 2000 NES, both questions invited respondents to say that they did not think of themselves in ideological terms. This is not quite the crisp experimental comparison we would have liked, but it comes close. Our analysis concludes (with caveats aplenty that we are skipping over here) that under the branching question, the center is populated less and the extremes are populated more, compared to the standard question. This result aside, it is otherwise difficult to choose between the two.

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NOTES

¹ *Another* paper on ideology? Oh no. Especially unseemly coming from the one of us who once delivered an address to APSA under the title “Enough Already about Ideology.” That was in 1983. Every 25 years, whether we need it or not.

² We are moving quickly over a vast expanse of literature. For a review that justifies our conclusion, see Kinder (1983, 1998). We think, perhaps immodestly, that our effort at integration should be of interest regardless of whether the reader agrees with our reading of the literature set off by Converse’s (1964) analysis.

³ Insert here a quick summary of our major journal search, making the point that if not indispensable, ideological identification has certainly become commonplace in the analysis of voting and public opinion.

⁴ For exceptions in addition to Conover and Feldman (1981) and Levitin and Miller (1979), see Kuklinski and Peyton (2008); Knight (1985); and Converse (2008).

⁵ We conceive of this as a first paper in a (short) series. Our purpose here is to establish how best to think about and measure ideological identification. The next paper in the series will take up the political content of identification; next, the origins of identification; then, in the final paper, we’ll consider the consequences of identification.

⁶ This question was introduced at the time of a fever of interest in 7-point issue scales. Two such scales were tried out in the 1968 NES (one on urban unrest, the other on Vietnam), and then nearly a score of them became part of the 1972 Study (and succeeding studies, for that matter). Influenced by Downs’ theory of electoral competition and the surge of interest in the spatial voting model. Included in this avalanche was the ideological identification question, formatted in 7-point style.

Looking back on it, too bad. 7-point format presumes that a person’s position can be placed on a single continuous scale, anchored at both ends by extreme views. This may work for opinions on policy, but it may not be the most felicitous format for ideological identification. For more on measurement and question design, see Appendix.

⁷ The standard model of participation includes measures of social class – operationalized here as education and family income – on the idea that location in the class structure means access to ample or paltry resources that makes participation more or less likely (Verba & Nie 1972). To capture life-cycle and experience effects, the standard model includes age (age and age over 65, the latter coded 0 or 1), on the proposition that participation increases through adulthood and tails off after retirement (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980), as well as sex and race. And finally, the standard model includes a measure of global political engagement (Campbell, Gurin & Miller 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes 1960; Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995). We built a measure out of questions on: attention to the campaign; care who wins the presidential election; interest in the campaign; watch the campaign; read about the campaign; listen to radio about campaign; follow government and public affairs; discuss politics with family/friends.

Our model does not, alas, include civic skills. Activities at work or in religious organizations can foster political action by teaching skills – making speeches, participating in group decisions, planning and running meetings, writing letters – that politics often requires (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995).

Another feature our analysis neglects is mobilization. People take part in politics partly because they are asked to. Political mobilization is “the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate” (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, pp. 25-26). To enhance their chances of winning an election, or passing a bill, or modifying a ruling, or influencing a policy, elites may try to mobilize the public. They sponsor meetings and rallies, circulate petitions, request contributions, instruct citizens about the issues at stake and

how and when to act, drive voters to the polls, supply citizens with arguments with which to bombard their representatives, and more. In these various ways, elites underwrite the costs that are normally attached to participation (Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Tilly 1978).

We looked for evidence of mobilization – by treating campaigns as potential agents of mobilization or by distinguishing between general and mid-term elections – and found none.

⁸ In panel data, short-term (2000 pre-election to 2000 post-election), medium term (1972-1976), and long-term (1973-1997) alike, a fair amount of traffic between centrists and those who say that ideological terms are not for them. E.g., of those who said that ideological identity was not for them in the 2000 pre-election interview, about one-half said the same in the post-election. This means roughly one-half did claim an ideological identity. Far and away the most popular destination for these “movers” was middle of the road. Roughly one half of the movers chose moderate; the others were scattered thinly across the other categories.

⁹ Here we are building on Knight (1985).

¹⁰ The results in Figure 2 are based on the 2000 National Election Study. The 2000 installment of the NES included a mode experiment: one half the sample was interviewed in person; the other half by telephone. Figure 2 presents results from the personal interview component; the results from the telephone component are virtually indistinguishable.

¹¹ Here’s the exact question:

I’d like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I will use something we call the feeling thermometer and here is how it works:

I’ll read the name of a person and I’d like you to rate that person using the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favorable toward the person and that you don’t care too much for that person. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person whose name you don’t recognize, you don’t need to rate that person. Just tell me and we’ll move on to the next one.

Our first person is [for example] Bill Clinton. How would you rate him using the thermometer?

...

And still using the thermometer how would you rate the following: [next comes a list of groups, including “liberals” and “conservatives”]

¹² The amount of change is unrelated to length of time between interviews.

¹³ The General Social Survey series over roughly the same period tells the same tale.

Piecing together survey data from a variety of sources, Ellis and Stimson (2007) suggest that ideological identification showed considerable movement in the 20th century, but earlier on, too soon for us to detect with NES or GSS. In particular, after a liberal high point during the New Deal came a dramatic decline in the middle 1960s. This is fascinating, in part because of the emphasis placed upon these two periods as moments of party change if not full-blown realignment (e.g., Carmines & Stimson 1989; Converse 1976; Burnham 1970; Clubb, Flanigan & Zingale, 1980; Key 1955; Mayhew 2002; Sundquist 1973).

¹⁴ Jennings’s study starts with a national probability sample of 97 secondary schools (public, private, parochial); the schools were selected with probability proportionate to their size. Within each selected school, 15-21

randomly designated seniors were interviewed in person. Independently, face-to-face interviews were also carried out with the fathers of one-third of the seniors, the mothers of one-third, and both parents of the remaining third. Where the designated parent was permanently absent, the other parent, or parent-surrogate was interviewed instead. Interviews with at least one parent were obtained for 94 percent of the students. For more details on design and quality of the samples, see Jennings and Niemi (1981, Appendix A) and Jennings and Stoker (1999).

¹⁵ Alas, this is not quite the standard measure – it neglects, we are sorry to say, providing respondents with the explicit opportunity to say that they do not think of themselves in ideological terms.

¹⁶ We could go further into this question by undertaking a more refined processing of the raw continuity coefficients. “More refined” means partitioning the observed Pearson correlations into two components: a reliability component, reflecting the degree to which the measures are contaminated by error; and a stability component – “true stability” – reflecting the degree to which the two measures would be correlated if not for the attenuating presence of error. To correct for error of this kind, we could rely on the model developed by Wiley and Wiley (1970).

The Wiley-Wiley model requires observations at three points in time. The model assumes errors of measurement are well-behaved: in particular, that they are homoskedastic, that their mean is zero, and that they are uncorrelated with each other. Further, the model assumes that all unreliability can be attributed to the instrument. Converse (2001) – and most psychometricians – would say that unreliability belongs both to instrumentation and to respondents. See Palmquist and Green (1992); Wiley and Wiley (1970, 1974); Heise (1969); Converse and Markus (1979); and Achen (1983).

¹⁷ The most elaborate challenge to Converse’s conclusion is contained in Nie, Verba, and Petrocik’s *The Changing American Voter* (1976). Nie and associates argued that one of the several ways in which the American voter had changed since the 1950’s was by becoming more ideological. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik drew on citizens’ replies to the candidate and party questions, this time examining the series from 1952 to 1976. They reported that ideological reactions to candidates, virtually invisible in 1952, increased dramatically in 1964, became common by 1972, and then declined sharply in 1976, apparently in response to the ideologically bland character of the Carter-Ford contest. Thus, given proper circumstances, a substantial fraction of the American public appears quite capable of thinking “. . . in ideologically structured ways about parties and candidates (Nie *et al.* 1979, p. 116)”, a conclusion that quickly became the new conventional wisdom.

There were serious deficiencies in the new wisdom, however. Nie and associates worked not from verbatim readings of the original protocols, as had Converse, but from replies already coded by the SRC staff—from what is known in the trade as “Master Codes.” The Master Codes provide general coverage of the content of respondents’ replies, but with little attention to their quality. Hence, Nie *et al.*’s measurement of ideological reasoning was necessarily reduced to tallying up the incidence of ideological terms. A better test of the claim that American voters had changed requires closer replications of Converse’s original analysis. Fortunately, several such painstaking efforts have recently been published. They indicate that the American public’s use of ideological concepts *has* increased since the 1950s but that the increase has been glacial. For citations, see Kinder (1983, 1998).

¹⁸ More exactly, the scale is coded:

Haven’t thought about it = 0
Moderate, middle of the road = .25
Liberal or conservative leanings = .50
Liberal or conservative = .75
Extreme liberal or extreme conservative = 1.0.

¹⁹ The results presented in Figure 6 come from the 1972 NES. We find essentially the same thing when we repeat the analysis, this time drawing on the 1976 NES. Our results resemble those reported by Klingemann (1979).

²⁰ For a summary and interpretation of the evidence on consistency since Converse's original analysis, see Kinder (1983, 1998).

²¹ For two reasons at least, the case for non-attitudes seems even stronger now than when Converse introduced the idea. First of all, surveys have continued to show that, from one interview to the next, citizens in impressively large numbers wander from one side of a policy question to the other (e.g., Converse & Markus 1979). The second reason comes from new evidence on the stability of elite opinion. Converse launched his inquiry with an interest in whether leaders and publics were equipped to talk intelligibly to one another. His answer was no, but he actually provided rather little evidence on elites, and no evidence at all on the stability of their views. Now, however, we know that political elites hold onto their political beliefs much more resolutely than do common citizens (Converse & Pierce 1986; Jennings 1992; Putnam 1979). This suggests that non-attitudes primarily reflect the low information and casual attention that citizens ordinarily bring to politics, much as Converse originally suggested.

Does this mean that people who express non-attitudes have nothing at all to say? Not necessarily. John Zaller and Stanley Feldman (1992) argue that non-attitudes reflect not so much ignorance as confusion. They take as their point of departure the premise that the American political mind is teeming with potentially relevant considerations. Citizens do not know what to think, Zaller and Feldman suggest, because they cannot adjudicate among the various competing considerations that come to mind. In a clever study, they show that many Americans can generate justifications both for favoring and for opposing prominent government policies, and that such ambivalence is associated with instability in their opinions.

Suppose Zaller and Feldman are correct. Suppose non-attitudes are real, but not deeply considered; real, but unstable. What are government officials to make of advice composed disproportionately of such fragile attitudes? Does the Zaller and Feldman interpretation of non-attitudes make less trouble for democratic theory than did Converse's original view?

Perhaps. If in fact Americans have lots of things in mind out of which they might construct opinions, then whether or not they actually succeed in doing so might depend on whatever help they receive from others as to how issues should be defined and understood – or in the contemporary idiom, on how issues are *framed*. Political elites are constantly engaged in efforts to define issues their way. At the heart of such rhetorical efforts is a frame – “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987, 143). In effect, frames are “opinion recipes”: advice from elites about what ingredients, in what proportions, should be combined to form a good opinion.

Insofar as elites provide useful frames, citizens should be more likely to develop real opinions. And, in fact, they seem to do so. In a series of experimental demonstrations across a variety of issues, citizens are more likely to express an opinion when they are provided with helpful frames (e.g., Kinder & Nelson 2005; Kinder & Sanders 1996; Sniderman & Theriault 2004).

²² The panel component of the 1972-1976 NES includes these policy questions: busing, tax reform, abortion, foreign aid, health insurance, and whether the federal government should guarantee a decent standard of living.

²³ In these analyses, we rely on the interviewer's judgment of the respondent's level of knowledge, made in private at the close of the interview (Bartels 1996).

²⁴ These results are consistent with Converse and Pierce (1986), who find that ideological identification in France is more stable – much, much more stable – as involvement in politics increases. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) report the same result, with U.S. data.

²⁵ In this respect, our conclusion is compatible with those offered by Conover and Feldman (1981) and by Levitin and Miller (1979), pioneers in the empirical analysis of ideological identification.

This is what we see from the evidence we can collect. No doubt the real state of affairs is more discouraging for the ideology hypothesis. For the National Election Study, as expensive and methodologically scrupulous as

it is, manages to complete interviews with only about 75% of the originally targeted sample. Those who refuse to be questioned, or who are never contacted in the first place, are unrepresentative of the public as a whole: they are much less likely to take an interest in politics (Brehm 1993). And this means that ideological reasoning is less common among the American public than the evidence indicates.

²⁶ Evidence consistent with the claim of commitment is provided by Markus and Converse and, over the longer haul, by Jennings and Markus.

²⁷ Converse and Pierce (1986) began their study wondering whether ideological reasoning might be more highly developed among French voters than their American counter-parts. After extensive analysis, they concluded that it was not.