THE NATURE OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION IN MASS PUBLICS
PART III: CONSEQUENCES

Donald R. Kinder & Nathan P. Kalmoe
Department of Political Science
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Prepared for delivery at the
Annual Meeting of the Mid-West Political Science Association
Chicago, Illinois, April 22, 2010
Copyright by the Mid-West Political Science Association
In a famous and influential essay, Philip Converse (1964) concluded that most Americans are innocent of ideology: 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. Against this, when asked directly, many Americans are quite willing to describe themselves in ideological terms. The purpose of our paper (the third in a series of three) is to reconcile the results on ideological identification with the broad and otherwise well-supported claim of ideological innocence. Here we assess the consequences of ideological identification, focusing on voting in presidential elections in particular. We find that, properly estimated, ideological identification has a small effect on the vote; that this effect pales in comparison to the effects due to other standard ingredients of electoral choice, especially party identification; and that, absent considerable interest in politics, ideological identification plays no role at all. We conclude that, taken all around, the evidence on ideological identification fits comfortably with the general conclusion of ideological innocence.
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 often been more impressed with the imperfections 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 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 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.

After a penetrating analysis of national surveys carried out in the late 1950s, Converse concluded that the American mass public – any mass public, really – is largely innocent of ideology. Converse found most Americans indifferent to or mystified by standard ideological concepts; without a consistent outlook on public policy; in possession of genuine opinions on only a handful of the issues of the day; and (pardon us) knowing damn little. In a phrase, ideologically naïve.

Not everyone agreed, of course. Indeed, publication of Converse’s essay set off a huge scholarly commotion. But when all the evidence is considered and all the counter-arguments assessed, the original claim of ideological naïveté stands up very well (Kinder 1983, 1998).

And yet. At about the time the back-and-forth over the ideological appetite of the American public was beginning to subside, a new question was making its way onto the National Election Study (NES). 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). When asked directly in this way, 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; Levitin & Miller 1979). These empirical relationships are rather modest – statistical tendencies, not logical imperatives – but they show up with considerable regularity. Over the years, ideological identification has become a fixture in the behavioral analysis of politics – “nearly indispensable,” as Ellis and Stimson recently put it (2007, p. 4).
What does the now considerable literature on ideological identification have to say to the claim of ideological innocence? The answer is not immediately obvious. Ideological identification researchers have for the most part gone about their business without pausing to consider the larger debate on ideology.¹

This paper is the third in a series that seeks to reconcile the results on ideological identification with the claim of ideological innocence (Kinder & Kalmoe 2008, 2009). Our business here is to assess the consequences of ideological identification, focusing on voting in presidential elections in particular. If ideological identification turns out to play an important role in the vote, this, we say, would make trouble for the claim of ideological innocence. Perhaps the American public is less naïve than we have been led to believe.

We begin the old-fashioned way, with a definition. We specify what we mean by ideological identification, partly by drawing an analogy between it and party identification, perhaps the single most important concept in American election studies. Next we spell out how ideological identification is conventionally measured. In the next section of the paper, we identify two causal mechanisms that could plausibly account for the empirical relationship between ideological identification and presidential voting: selective perception and category-based reasoning. So informed, we then proceed in the heart of the paper to a series of empirical tests, each motivated by the same question: Does ideological identification affect presidential voting? In the concluding section, we gather together the various results and draw out their implications for the broader debate over the nature of ideology in mass publics.

**THE MEANING OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION**

According to *Webster’s*, identification is 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 is a psychological attachment of the self to a group defined by commitment to a sociopolitical program.²

Put this way, ideological identification is to ideological groups what party identification is to political parties. Both are forms of identification. Both entail a connection rooted in political commitments. Notice that party identification is not the same as formal membership; it is not the same as the vote. It is instead a psychological attachment (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes 1960).

Taking this conceptual resemblance between party identification and ideological identification seriously, we say that ideological identification, like party identification, is an aspect of identity. It is part of a person’s political self. Like party identification, ideological identification has both categorical and dimensional aspects. It is categorical, in that ideological groups – most notably in the contemporary American case, liberals and conservatives – are types or kinds.³ At the same time, ideological identification is 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.

**THE MEASUREMENT OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION**

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. (The National Election Study, like the General Social Survey, has a way of standardizing measures.) Table 1 presents the NES question, and the distribution of ideological identification in the American public the question elicits. The table is based on pooling NES surveys from 1972 to 2004 (N = 26,277).⁴
The first thing to notice there is the displacement of the distribution to the right. At every step out from the center, conservatives outnumber liberals. Perhaps more striking is how quickly the categories thin out from the middle. Ideological identification is not for everyone. Far from it. 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. Moreover, among those who claim an identification, more than one-third – 34.8% to be exact – select the exact mid-point of the scale.” Ideological moderation is the rule.5

Causal Mechanisms

Ideological identification and presidential voting are correlated. In the postwar period, self-described liberals tend to vote for the Democratic candidate; self-described conservatives tend to vote for the Republican (e.g., Jost 2006; Knight 1985; Levitin & Miller 1979; Miller & Shanks 1996). The question we raise here is whether it is reasonable to interpret this empirical regularity in causal terms. To what extent can we say that ideological identification explains presidential voting?

In our view, explanation requires specification of causal mechanism. It is not enough to establish an empirical relationship. It is not enough to rule out alternative explanations. Explanation also requires specifying the causal mechanism (or mechanisms) that can account for the relationship (Elster 1989).

In the case before us here, two mechanisms seem likely candidates to account for the relationship between ideological identification and presidential voting. Both depend on the analogy between ideological identification and party identification. In The American Voter, Angus Campbell and his colleagues argued that the vote decision “depends in an immediate sense on the strength and
direction of the elements comprising a field of psychological forces, where these elements are interpreted as attitudes toward the perceived objects of national politics” (1960, p. 9). In turn, attitudes toward the perceived objects of national politics – the Democratic candidate, the Republican candidate, the performance of government, and the issues of the day – were powerfully influenced by party identification. Most Americans thought of themselves as Democrats or as Republicans, and these attachments affected the vote by first affecting attitudes toward the fundamental elements of national politics.

What is the mechanism by which party identification influences attitudes toward candidates, government, and issues? One possibility is selective perception: “for most people the tie between party identification and voting behavior involves subtle processes of perceptual adjustment by which the individual assembles an image of current politics consistent with his partisan allegiance” (Stokes 1966, p. 127). Empirical tests generally validate Stokes’s conjecture. Evidence shows party identification to be a pervasive dynamic force shaping voters’ perceptions of key elements of the political world (e.g., Bartels 2002; Berelson et al., 1954; Jacoby 1988; Markus 1982; for a contrary view, see Gerber and Green 1999). Insofar as ideological identification operates the way that party identification does, selective perception may likewise account for the well-documented relationship between ideological identification and presidential voting. If liberals and conservatives see the political world differently – legal access to abortion as either a woman’s right to control her own body or as government violating the rights of the unborn – they will be inclined to end up voting differently.

A second possible causal mechanism underlying the power of partisanship and perhaps, by extension, ideological identification as well, is category-based reasoning. In contemporary cognitive science, categories are indispensable (Holyoak & Morrison 2005; Margolis & Laurence 1999). In their absence,
… mental life would be chaotic. If we perceived each entity as unique, we would be overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of what we experience and unable to remember more than a minute fraction of what we encounter. And if each individual entity needed a distinct name, our language would be staggeringly complex, and communication virtually impossible. Fortunately, though, we do not perceive, remember, and talk about each object and event as unique, but rather as an instance of a class or object that we already know something about (Smith & Medin 1981, p. 1).

Think of “Democrat” and “Republican” as mental categories. When voters recognize a particular candidate as belonging to one category or the other, they automatically infer important things about that candidate. Perhaps more important, they automatically invest the candidate with the affect they feel for the category in general. Category-based reasoning is an instance of what Robert Abelson once called “hot cognition”: reasoning is motivated and categories are laden with affect (Abelson 1963). Here is the way Angus Campbell and his colleagues put this point, working without benefit of the cognitive revolution that was still to come:

The fact that most elements of national politics are far removed from the world of the common citizen forces the individual to depend on sources of information from which he may learn indirectly what he cannot know as a matter of direct experience. Moreover, the complexities of politics and government increase the importance of having relatively simple cues to evaluate what cannot be matters of personal knowledge.

In the competition of voices reaching the individual the political party is an opinion-forming agency of great importance (p. 128). 6

Insofar as ideological identification operates the way that party identification does, category-based reasoning may account for the relationship between ideological identification and presidential voting (Jacoby 1991). Crucial to this process is recognition. If a presidential candidate is recognized as a liberal, voters who by their own definition are liberal will immediately believe things and feel things about the candidate. Beliefs and feelings that are part of the general category are recruited to the particular case. The process works just the same for conservative candidates and conservative voters. Liberals and conservatives may vote differently for categorical reasons.
We now have in hand two mechanisms – selective perception and category-based reasoning – that might plausibly account for the relationship between ideological identification and presidential voting. This is good, but we should keep in mind going forward that they are plausible only to the degree that the analogy between ideological identification and party identification holds up. That so many Americans forego thinking of themselves in ideological terms is a reason for skepticism. Selective perception increases with intensity of identification, but we have already seen that as far as ideological identification is concerned, moderation is the rule. Category-based reasoning requires voters to recognize a candidate as liberal or conservative, and there are good reasons, going back to Converse (1964), to doubt whether many Americans are equipped to do this. It is time to look at the evidence.

**IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AS AN EXPLANATION FOR PRESIDENTIAL VOTING**

We do not question that ideological identification and presidential voting are correlated. On this point, the evidence is overwhelming (e.g., Jost 2006; Knight 1985). The question we raise here is whether it is reasonable to interpret this relationship as causal. And in estimating the causal impact of ideological identification, we presume that panel data are best: that is, we explain vote at time $t$ as a consequence of ideological identification (and other factors) at time $t-1$. Bartels (2000) shows that cross-sectional models exaggerate the effect on vote due to party identification. The same is likely to be true for ideological identification.

The panel requirement leads us to three cases: 1976 (Carter versus Ford), 1980 (Reagan versus Carter), and 1996 (Dole versus Clinton). In the 1976 and 1996 contests, ideological identification is assessed two years before, at the time of the mid-term elections; in the 1980 case, ideological identification is assessed in January of the election year, just as the primary season is getting underway. In all three instances, vote is measured immediately after the election.
In the standard model, presidential voting is a product of party identification, judgments of the incumbent party’s economic performance, and opinions on the major issues of the day, written so:

\[ \text{Vote}_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Incumbent Economic Performance}_{i,t} + \beta_3 \text{Views on Policy}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon \]  

[1]

Here, Vote\(_{i,t}\) is respondent \(i\)'s reported vote, coded 1 if for the incumbent party and 0 if for the out-party (only Democratic and Republican votes are counted). Partisanship\(_{i,t-1}\) is based on the canonical question, coded from -1 (Strong Democrat) to +1 (Strong Republican). Incumbent Economic Performance\(_{i,t}\) = -1 if economic conditions have gotten much worse during the election year (in \(i\)'s judgment); 0 if economic conditions have not changed; and = +1 if economic conditions have gotten much better. And Views on Policy\(_{i,t-1}\) is based on \(i\)'s average response to a standard set of four issue questions: -1 means extreme right; 0 means neither right nor left; and +1 means extreme left. We estimate the model with probit regression, separately for each of the three elections. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2

| Ideological Identification and Voting for President |

As shown there, the standard model yields standard results. In Table 2 we see a huge effect of party identification; a sizable effect due to the economy (the incumbent party does better when economic conditions are seen as improving); and a significant effect of policy (voters who prefer more government spending on services and less spending on defense tend to vote Democratic). For students of presidential voting, this is utterly familiar.

To estimate whatever effect ideological identification might have on presidential voting, we simply added ideological identification to the standard model:

\[ \text{Vote}_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Incumbent Economic Performance}_{i,t} + \beta_3 \text{Views on Policy}_{i,t-1} + \beta_4 \text{Ideological Identification}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon \]  

[2]
where Ideological Identification is scored from -1 (Extremely Liberal) to +1 (Extremely Conservative). “Moderates” are coded as 0 on Ideological Identification, as are those who claimed no ideological identification. We coded the latter at 0 after discovering in preliminary analysis that the votes of the two groups – Moderates and those who rejected all ideological labels – were indistinguishable. As before, we estimated the equation with probit regression, and as before, the results are shown in Table 2.

Do we find an effect for ideological identification? Yes and no. On the one hand, the coefficient indexing the impact of ideological identification, $\beta_4$, is properly signed in all three cases. In 1976, 1980, and 1996 alike, liberals tend to vote for the Democratic candidate; conservatives tend to vote for the Republican candidate. And of course the effect of ideological identification is independent of the effects due to partisanship, assessments of the economy, and views on pressing matters of policy. On the other hand, the effect is relatively small, and it surpasses conventional levels of statistical significance in just two of the three contests (1976 and 1996, but not 1980). Furthermore, adding ideological identification to the standard model of presidential voting provides virtually no increase in predictive power. In 1996, for example, the standard model successfully predict 85.6% of voters’ choices without taking ideological identification into account and 85.9% when ideological identification is added in – an obviously miniscule improvement.

These findings depend on a specification that treats those voters who claimed no ideological identification as if they were ideological moderates. Suppose instead we estimate Equation [2] excluding from the analysis those who claimed no ideological identification? As things turn out (except for the inevitable reduction in the number of cases), the results for this specification are essentially interchangeable with those we present in Table 2.9

At the outset of this section, we justified our use of panel data on the ground that cross-sectional estimates would exaggerate the apparent effect of ideological identification on the vote.
This seems to be so. We estimated Equation [2] using the 1976, 1980, and 1996 NES cross-section studies. All variables were measured and scored as before. In each case, the cross-sectional estimate for the effect of ideological identification on presidential voting substantially exceeds the panel estimate reported in Table 2 (in 1976, .68 versus .47; in 1980, .53 versus .25; in 1996, -1.25 versus -.66). Because the effect of ideological identification is typically estimated with cross-sectional data, typical results exaggerate ideological identification’s potency. Properly estimated, the effect of ideological identification on presidential voting is small.

**IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION VERSUS PARTY IDENTIFICATION**

We began our paper by noting the resemblance between ideological identification and party identification. They are conceptual cousins, we said, and should be thought about in that way. But as an empirical matter, they differ from each other in important ways as well, and these differences need to be taken into account when comparing their effects on voting.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of both ideological identification and party identification, based on pooling National Election Study surveys from 1972 to 2004, with non-respondents included in the middle. As shown there, the two are distributed very differently. Ideological identification generally follows a dramatic version of the bell-shaped curve, with a tall, narrow spike at the center. When asked to identify themselves in ideological terms, a decisive majority of Americans either reject the terms altogether or embrace moderation. Extreme categories, on the left or on the right, are thinly populated. In contrast, the distribution of partisanship more closely resembles a box than a bell. Strong partisans are plentiful, even more common than Independents (and only a tiny handful fail to describe themselves in partisan terms). These are strong differences, and we need to take them into account in our assessment of the relative importance of ideological and partisan voting.

*Figure 1: The Distribution of Ideological Identification and Party Identification*
In the American Public

In order to do so, we make use of a procedure introduced by Bartels (2000) in his analysis of the decline and revival of partisanship. We want to estimate ideological and partisan voting in a way that incorporates both the effect on voting of distinct types of ideological identification and partisanship and the relative size of each type. First we code ideological identification into three variables: “Extreme”: -1 if extreme liberal, +1 if extreme conservative, and 0 for all other voters; “Average”: -1 if average liberal, +1 if average conservative, and 0 for all other voters; and “Slight”: -1 if slight liberal, +1 if slight conservative, and 0 for all other voters. (In each instance, those coded as 0 include moderates and those who claim no ideological identification at all.) Then we do the same for partisanship. “Strong” partisanship is coded -1 for Strong Democrats, +1 for Strong Republicans, and 0 for all others; “Weak” partisanship is coded -1 for weak Democrats, +1 for weak Republicans, and 0 for all others; and “Leaning” partisanship is coded -1 for leaning Democrats, +1 for leaning Republicans, and 0 for all other voters. (To parallel ideological voting, those coded as 0 include “pure” Independents as well as those few who claimed no partisan identification at all.)

Then we include both sets of variables – one set representing ideological voting, the other set representing partisan voting – in the standard presidential vote model:

\[
\text{Vote}_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Extreme Ideological Identification}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 \text{Average Ideological Identification}_{i,t} + \beta_3 \text{Slight Ideological Identification}_{i,t} + \beta_4 \text{Strong Partisans}_{i,t} + \beta_5 \text{Weak Partisans}_{i,t} + \beta_6 \text{Leaning Partisans}_{i,t} + \beta_7 \text{Incumbent Economic Performance}_{i,t} + \beta_8 \text{Views on Policy}_{i,t} + \varepsilon \quad [3]
\]

with all other variables measured and coded as before. In this set-up, the intercept reflects the baseline vote: that is, the vote cast by those who are neither partisans nor ideologues, who see no change in the economy, and who are at the exact center of disputes over policy. The coefficients for Extreme Ideological Identification, Average Ideological Identification, and Slight Ideological Identification reflect the degree to which the choices of voters with these types of ideological commitments depart from the baseline. And likewise for Strong, Weak, and Leaning Partisans.
Table 3 summarizes the probit results, again for each of three presidential elections separately. We expected the effects associated with party and ideological identification to be most pronounced among those at the extremes (strong Democrats and strong Republicans, extreme liberals and extreme conservatives) and least pronounced among those close to the center (leaning Democrats and leaning Republicans, slight liberals and slight conservatives). As Table 3 reveals, this expectation was handsomely confirmed for partisanship but not for ideology.

Table 3

I ideological Identification, Party Identification, and Voting for President

To summarize the electoral effect of ideological identification (again, following Bartels 2000), we calculate the average of these probit estimates – one for extreme, one for average, and one for slight – weighting each by the proportion of the electorate in the corresponding ideological type. For the electoral effect of partisan identification, the computation follows in exactly the same way. Put together in this manner, the two summary measures are sensitive both to the effect of ideological and partisan attachments on the vote (shown in Table 3) and the proportion of ideological and party identifiers of various types in the electorate. Estimates of ideological and partisan voting for each of the three presidential elections are presented in Table 4.10

Table 4

I ideological and Partisan Voting in Presidential Elections

The principal result shown there is how dramatically party identification dominates ideological identification in explaining the vote. There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with the greater potency of partisanship. When it comes to presidential voting, identifying with a political party is a more consequential commitment than is identifying with an ideological program. The second has to do with contrasts in distribution. To put it in a stylized way, the American political landscape is at once strongly partisan and ideologically moderate.

IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT
Mass publics are characterized by huge inequalities in political knowledge. Huge inequalities. Converse (1964, 1990) 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 an earlier paper (Kinder & Kalmoe 2008), we found that the nature of ideological identification varies qualitatively as a consequence of variation in a person’s general investment in political life. 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. We went so far as to suggest that differences in ideological identification associated with differences in the richness of knowledge people bring to politics are differences of kind. Consistent with these results, we expect the effect of ideological identification on presidential voting to diminish precipitously with declines in political information (cf., Jacoby 1991; Knight 1985; Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock 1991).

At the same time, we do not expect to find information playing a similar moderating role for party identification. Everyone, more or less, is at least acquainted with the two major political parties. Voters don’t have to be experts to know about the Democrats and the Republicans; they are regularly, nearly continuously, reminded of the place of partisanship in American politics. Ideology, on the other hand, does require expertise – political expertise, just what many voters lack.

To test the role of information in ideological and partisan voting, we make use of a judgment made by NES interviewers. At the conclusion of each interview, NES interviewers are asked to classify each respondent’s “general level of information about politics and public affairs” into one of five categories: very low, fairly low, average, fairly high, and very high. This simple rating turns out to be, perhaps surprisingly, a highly reliable and extremely useful measure of information (Zaller 1985, 1992; Bartels 1996), and we take advantage of it here.
To estimate the moderating role of political information, we create two interaction terms and drop them into our standard model of presidential voting (along with the main effect of information):

\[
\text{Vote}_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} + \beta_2\text{Incumbent Economic Performance}_{i,t} + \beta_3\text{Views on Policy}_{i,t} + \beta_4\text{Ideological Identification}_{i,t-1} + \beta_5\text{Political Information}_{i,t-1} + \\
\beta_6(\text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Information}_{i,t-1}) + \beta_7(\text{Ideological Identification}_{i,t-1} \times \text{Information}_{i,t-1}) + \varepsilon \quad [4]
\]

where Information is coded -1 (very low) to +1 (very high) and all other variables are measured and scored as before.

Under this specification, we expect \(\beta_6 = 0\) and \(|\beta_7| > 0\); that is, we expect political information to play no role in moderating party identification but a significant role in moderating the effect of ideological identification. The results, presented in Table 5, conform to expectations. The effect of party identification is strong, and it is strong without regard to the volume of political information voters command. In contrast, the effect of ideological identification is modest on average and – the crucial point here – heavily dependent on information. In 1976, 1980, and 1996 alike, the interaction between ideological identification and political information is significant.

**Table 5**

*Ideological and Partisan Voting in Presidential Elections*

*By Levels of Political Information*

The precise nature of the interaction between ideological identification and political information is spelled out in Table 6. There we present the estimated effect of ideological identification on the vote at three levels of information: low (-0.50 on the -1 to +1 rating scale), average (0), and high (0.50). For purposes of comparison, we provide the corresponding estimates for partisan identification as well.

**Table 6**

*Ideological and Partisan Voting in the 1976 and 1996 Presidential Elections*

*By Levels of Political Information*
As Table 6 indicates, party identification is a powerful determinant of the vote – for the poorly-informed, for the well-informed, and for those in between. Information has no moderating effect on partisan identification. The story is completely different for ideological identification. Table 6 suggests that ideological identification has no effect on presidential voting among the relatively poorly-informed, and only a modest effect among the average-informed (if indeed there is any effect at all). Ideological identification contributes appreciably to presidential voting only among the relatively well-informed. According to these results, ideological voting requires a certain level of engagement in politics, a threshold that many voters fail to cross.

CONCLUSIONS

In a famous and influential essay, Philip Converse (1964) concluded that most Americans are innocent of ideology: 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. Against this, when asked directly, many American are quite willing to describe themselves in ideological terms. The purpose of our paper has been to reconcile the results on ideological identification with the broad and otherwise well-supported claim of ideological innocence. Here we assessed the consequences of ideological identification, focusing on voting in presidential elections in particular. We find that, properly estimated, ideological identification has a small effect on the vote; that this effect pales in comparison to the effects due to other standard ingredients of electoral choice, especially party identification; and that, absent considerable interest in politics, ideological identification plays no role at all. All things considered, the findings for ideological identification fit quite comfortably with the original and broad claim of ideological innocence.12

Of course, we have examined only presidential elections (and only a small number of those). Of all American electoral contests, ideological terminology is surely most common in presidential races. Moreover, presidential elections are high-stimulus elections. In 2008, Obama and McCain
together spent roughly one billion dollars campaigning. If ideological identification is going to matter to voting anywhere, it should matter in presidential elections.

More generally, we expect the effect of ideological identification to depend on circumstances. Roughly-speaking, the role played by ideological identification should increase with the prominence of ideological discourse in the campaign and with clarity of the ideological differences provided by the rival candidates. This leads to a set of testable propositions: that ideological identification should matter more in some presidential elections (e.g., 1964, 1972) than in others; more at the end of presidential campaigns than at the beginning; and more in presidential elections than in other kinds of contests (Presidential > Senate > House). We intend to expand our empirical testing along these lines.

Another step we expect to take is to move our testing beyond voting. Do liberals and conservatives differ generally in their views of political life: in the political problems they worry about; in the assessments they offer of the health of the nation; in the opinions they take on matters of public policy? Do they differ because of differences in their ideological identification? We don’t know, but we aim to find out.

Throughout our analysis, we have supplied a comparison between ideological identification and its conceptual cousin, party identification. At every juncture, the evidence favored the latter at the expense of the former. Americans are much more likely to think of themselves as partisan than as ideological. When it comes to presidential voting, identifying with a political party is a more consequential commitment than is identifying with an ideological program. Party identification powerfully influences the vote regardless of the voter’s engagement in politics; ideological identification influences the vote only among voters who are substantially engaged in political life.

These sharp differences are 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 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. And 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 psychological attachment to a party (Markus & Converse 1979; Jennings & Markus 1984).

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. This makes liberalism and conservatism 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.

This brings us to the broader debate on ideological capacity. The great majority of Americans come to politics without an ideological axe to grind. Most have no acquaintance with and little interest in political philosophy. Their opinions appear haphazard: some are liberal, some conservative, and some, when examined closely, seem not to be opinions at all. Most Americans know little about what is happening in politics and even less about why. This, to a first approximation, is the unsettling conclusion reached by Philip Converse (1964) in his famous essay
on belief systems. So far, we see little in the evidence on ideological identification to disturb these claims.
FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION
AND PARTY IDENTIFICATION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

Source: 1972-2004 American National Election Study (ANES).
### Table 1
**Ideological Identification in the American Public**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Liberal</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>1,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Liberal</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>2,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate, middle of the road</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>6,206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Conservative</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>3,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>3,179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Conservative</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/Haven’t Thought Much about It</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>7,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1,337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.1</td>
<td>26,277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

### Question Wording

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?
### Table 2

**Ideological Identification and Voting for President**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[1]</td>
<td>[2]</td>
<td>[1]</td>
<td>[2]</td>
<td>[1]</td>
<td>[2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Identification</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>(.21)</td>
<td>-.66</td>
<td>(.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Performance</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views on Policy</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>(.10)</td>
<td>-.89</td>
<td>(.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>1007</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>687</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Predicted</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>77.6</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>85.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

### Table 3
**Ideological Identification, Party Identification, and Voting for President**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Identifiers</td>
<td>.89 (.36)</td>
<td>.21 (.58)</td>
<td>-.13 (.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Identifiers</td>
<td>.22 (.10)</td>
<td>.26 (.18)</td>
<td>-.52 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slight Identifiers</td>
<td>.18 (.09)</td>
<td>-.03 (.14)</td>
<td>-.15 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Partisans</td>
<td>.99 (.10)</td>
<td>1.36 (.17)</td>
<td>-1.37 (.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Partisans</td>
<td>.63 (.08)</td>
<td>.70 (.11)</td>
<td>-.76 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning Partisans</td>
<td>.45 (.09)</td>
<td>.41 (.16)</td>
<td>-.73 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Economy</td>
<td>.33 (.05)</td>
<td>-.08 (.17)</td>
<td>1.05 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views on Policy</td>
<td>-.26 (.11)</td>
<td>-.85 (.25)</td>
<td>.81 (.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.03 (.05)</td>
<td>.30 (.17)</td>
<td>.30 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1015</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo R²</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

### Table 4
**Ideological and Partisan Voting in Presidential Elections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideological Voting</strong></td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(    )</td>
<td>(    )</td>
<td>(    )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partisan Voting</strong></td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(    )</td>
<td>(    )</td>
<td>(    )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Weighted average probit coefficients, with jackknife standard errors in parentheses (still to come).

### Table 5
**Ideological and Partisan Voting in Presidential Elections by Levels of Political Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Identification</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.14)</td>
<td>(.27)</td>
<td>(.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Identification x Political Information</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>-.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.26)</td>
<td>(.50)</td>
<td>(.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>-1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Identification x Political Information</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.27)</td>
<td>(.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Information</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.09)</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
<td>(.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.05)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N    | 1021 | 466  | 740  |
| Pseudo R² | .25 | .29  | .48  |

*Note: Probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.*

### Table 6
**Ideological and Partisan Voting in Presidential Elections by Three Levels of Political Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Information Level</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideological Identification</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideological Identification</td>
<td>-.75</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Party Identification</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
<td>-1.41</td>
<td>-1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideological Identification</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.65</td>
<td>-1.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Probit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses (still to come).  
REFERENCES


NOTES


2 More specifically, we mean *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

3 *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.

4 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). Included in this avalanche was the ideological identification question, formatted in 7-point style.

Looking back on it, this was, perhaps, a mistake. The 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. Still, in our first paper on the topic (Kinder & Kalmoe 2008), we found that the standard question does a more than respectable job in measuring ideological identification. Measured in this way, ideological identification predicts other views as it should; is uncorrelated with things it should not be associated with; and is reasonably consistent over time.

5 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 midpoint. 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).

6 And from Stokes:

To the average person, the affairs of government are remote and complex, and yet the average citizen is asked periodically to formulate opinions about these affairs. … In this dilemma, having the party symbol stamped on certain candidates, certain issue positions, certain interpretations of reality is of great psychological convenience (Stokes 1966, pp. 126-127).
As Campbell and his colleagues put it, “Identification with a party raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation. The stronger the party bond, the more exaggerated the process of selection and perceptual distortion will be” (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 133).

The Views on Policy scales for the 1980 and 1996 models incorporate four policy items central to contemporary political divisions – attitudes toward government services and spending, government’s role in jobs provision, aid to minorities, and defense spending. Each item is coded between -1 (most conservative) and 1 (most liberal). The items are summed, and then rescaled between -1 and 1. “Don’t know” responses are coded as moderate answers at 0. The 1976 model is constructed identically, but with two items rather than four – government jobs and aid to minorities – because the 1974 ANES does not include items for services/spending and defense spending.

You might think that those voters who are set aside in this analysis by virtue of not claiming any ideological identification would turn out to be haphazard in their electoral choices. This would be incorrect. Their choice cannot be predicted by their ideological identification, of course, as they have none, but their choice can be predicted – and quite nicely – by the standard model, with party identification doing most of the work.

Here’s how we do this. The first three rows of the first column of Table 3 present the estimates of the effects of ideological identification on presidential voting in 1976. The estimated effects are .89 for “extreme” ideological identifiers, .22 for “average” ideological identifier, and .18 for “slight” ideological identifiers. Multiplying these estimated effects by the corresponding proportions of the electorate in each of the three ideological identification types (.03 for extreme ideological identifiers, .21 for average ideological identifiers, and .23 for slight ideological identifiers) yields an average probit coefficient of: \( (.03 \times .89) + (.21 \times .22) + (.23 \times .18) \) = .11. This is the summary measure of ideological voting in the 1976 presidential election. It appears along with the other summary measures in Table 4.

Another advantage of the interviewer rating is that it is reasonable to regard it as a roughly comparable measure over time.

It is rather late for a confession, but here one comes. The results we present here have excluded black voters. Why? Since 1964, blacks have voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic candidate. In the three elections we examined, the Democratic candidate took more than 85% of the black vote in each case. It seemed unlikely to us that variation in the black vote, how little of it there is, could be explained by variation in ideological identification (Dawson 1995; Tate 1993). In fact, when we estimated Equation [2] for black voters alone, we found this to be so. Whatever role ideological identification plays in the explanation of presidential voting, it does not extend to African Americans. This is another mark against the claim that ideological identification deserves a place in the standard model of presidential elections.