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“To see differently in this way for once, to want to see differently, is no small discipline”



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The Fallacy of Essential Ideological Constructs in American Political Science

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Part I: Introduction

On March 6, 2013, Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) filibustered the confirmation of John Brennan, who had previously been criticized on the left for his role in the Bush administration's antiterrorism tactics,¹ as director of the CIA. The headline on the front page of the *New York Times* read "Senate Filibuster Scrambles Both Left and Right," and the *Washington Post* described how Paul took a position on antiterrorism more liberal than most of the Democratic caucus.² In the eventual confirmation vote, a majority of Republicans opposed Brennan while a majority of Democrats supported him. The journalistic accounts reflected the common usage of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in popular parlance over the last dozen years: opposition to the executive branch's tactics in the War on Terror has been understood as liberal or left-leaning and support for the executive branch's tactics in the War on Terror has been understood as conservative or right-leaning.

It will be interesting to see how long this "scrambling" of left and right lasts. Was it an anomalous vote in the Senate? Perhaps liberal and conservative members of Congress will return to their previous voting patterns on the next vote relating to antiterrorism policy. Will the scrambling last only until the White House changes parties again? Perhaps conservatives and Republicans will return to supporting CIA officials like Brennan (as they did during the Bush years) once their party is back in power, and liberals and Democrats will return to

¹ Jane Meyer, "Black Sites: A Rare Look inside the C.I.A.'s Secret Interrogation Program," *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2007, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/08/13/070813fa_fact_meyer/?printable=true. Elana Schor, "Leading Candidate to Head CIA under Obama Withdraws from Running," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/nov/25/obama-white-house-cia-brennan>. Glenn Greenwald, "Nomination Ignores War Crimes," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2013/01/07/the-right-or-wrong-experience-for-the-job/by-nominating-john-brennan-obama-is-ignoring-war-crimes>. Alex Kane, "5 Terrifying Facts about John Brennan," *Salon*, January 8, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/01/08/5_terrifying_facts_about_john_brennan/.

² *New York Times*, March 8, 2013, A1. Peter Finn and Aaron Blake, "CIA Chief Confirmed After Debate Over Drones," *The Washington Post*, March 8, 2013, A4.

opposing CIA officials like Brennan (as they did during the Bush years) once they are out of power. Or, will the scrambling last beyond a change in the White House? Perhaps a “libertarian” or “Old Right” strand of conservatism will become more influential in the Republican Party and the GOP will return to being more isolationist than the Democratic Party (as it was in the 1910s-40s and 1990s with politicians like Robert Taft and Pat Buchanan). Or perhaps an “internationalist” or “hawkish” strand of liberalism will become more influential in the Democratic Party (as it was under the administrations of FDR, Truman, Kennedy, LBJ, and Clinton). This scrambling of left and right, and the evolution of the meanings of liberalism and conservatism in the future, will be intriguing for political analysts to follow.

Whether this change in the meanings of “liberalism” and “conservatism” lasts for a day, a month, a year, an administration, a couple decades, or longer, it is the job of political scientists to recognize such changes, measure them, and analyze them. The current field of American political science, however, does very little to recognize or analyze the dynamic nature of political ideology. Instead, American political scientists largely assume that the content of political ideology is stable, and only write about how individuals, parties, and nations move left or right along static continua. This article argues that the meanings of ideological constructs like “liberal” and “conservative” evolve over time, and that the current political science literature could improve its understanding of political ideology by recognizing this fact.

Spatial Models of Political Ideology

To those who follow American politics closely, it was not surprising to see a “libertarian-right, progressive-left coalition on transparency issues” when some libertarian Republicans and progressive Democrats united to oppose the Brennan confirmation.³ What was interesting for political scientists, however, was the partisan cleavage over Brennan’s nomination: thirty Republicans and three Democrats joined Sen. Paul. In the vernacular and journalistic understanding of left and right, thirty-one Republicans, but only three Democrats, took the “far left” position. Given this disproportion in the coalition of

³ Robert M. Chesney, quoted in Richard W. Stevenson and Ashley Parker, “Paul Filibuster on Drone Program Scrambles Politics of Left and Right,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2013, A18.

libertarian Republicans and progressive Democrats, it seems likely that the senators' votes had at least as much to do with partisanship as "libertarian" or "progressive" ideology: if Brennan had been Bush's nominee instead of Obama's the numbers of votes may very well have been reversed. Time will tell whether these positions of partisan expediency lead to any durable change in the meanings of liberalism and conservatism.

Paradoxically, because a majority of Republicans took the "far left" position on the Brennan nomination, political scientists who measure "liberal" and "conservative" scores for members of Congress using roll call votes defined the "far left" opposition to Brennan as a "conservative" vote and the "right-leaning" support of Brennan as a "liberal" vote.⁴ Thus, Bernie Sanders (I-VT) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) became more "conservative" by showing their opposition to Brennan's record under presidents Bush and Obama in prosecuting the War on Terror. Likewise, Tom Coburn (R-OK) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) became more "liberal" by supporting him.

The point of this story is not that formal models of political phenomena, like Poole and Rosenthal's spatial models of political ideology, must be able to account for all cases of political behavior.⁵ Models are, by definition, simplistic and general representations that cannot capture all of reality. Spatial modelers of ideology admit that antiterrorism policy does not map easily onto the liberal-conservative dimension.⁶ The point of this story is to illustrate how both the journalists and the scientists are arguably correct in their opposing definitions of liberalism and conservatism because the meanings of these ideological constructs are constantly in flux. These words mean whatever they are commonly understood to mean by a given language community.⁷ Thus, the *Washington Post* was relying on a commonly understood meaning of "left" and "right" ("dovish" left and "hawkish" right) when it wrote that Paul was "taking a position on an antiterrorism program that was far to the left of [the Democratic] caucus." Similarly, spatial modelers of ideology relied on another commonly understood meaning of "left" and "right" (Democratic left and Republican right) when it characterized whatever the majority of Republicans voted for as

⁴ "Senate: Votes on Cloture and Confirmation of John Brennan as CIA Director," Voteview Website, University of Georgia, March 10, 2013, <http://voteview.com/blog/?p=782>.

⁵ Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology & Congress* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

⁶ "Senate: Votes on Cloture and Confirmation of John Brennan as CIA Director," Voteview Website.

⁷ Ronald Rotunda, *The Politics of Language: Liberalism as Word and Symbol* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986).

conservative and whatever the majority of Democrats voted for as liberal. Many people in the relevant linguistic community could understand and accept either definition.

It remains to be seen which understanding is “correct.” Was the Brennan confirmation vote, as in the journalistic characterization, an anomaly where conservatism still means hawkish antiterrorism and liberalism still means dovish antiterrorism? Or did the Brennan confirmation vote, as in the scientific characterization, represent a new meaning of liberal and conservative where support for the administration’s antiterrorism is liberal and opposition to the administration’s antiterrorism is conservative. Politicians, party leaders, political activists, and ordinary citizens in the relevant language community will determine how short-lived or durable this change is in the meanings of these words by the way that they use these words in their writing and conversation. It is the job of political scientists to analyze and explain these changes. The current literature does not fully recognize that the content of ideology changes, and so does not offer an adequate explanation of how it changes.

Ideology Defined

The concept of “ideology” itself has a long and varied history. Famously, Marx described ideology as the culture, conventions, and ideas that give the illusion of coherence in a social superstructure that sits atop a base of real contradictions in the relations of material production.⁸ For Marx, as the relations of production change across time and place, the corresponding superstructure and ideology will also change. In a similar vein, Karl Mannheim defined ideology as having (as opposed to utopia) an inherently conservative function: “the collective unconscious of certain groups,” in Mannheim’s theory, obscures “the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it.”⁹

Among American social scientists, the negative and conservative connotation of ideology as “masking” was replaced with a more positive and progressive conception of ideology as a system of ideas that lends coherence to the various attitudes and opinions of individuals. Going back to Woodrow Wilson’s writings in the late nineteenth century,

⁸ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology” (written 1845-46, first published in Moscow by the Marx-Engels Institute in 1932), in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978).

⁹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1936), 40.

American political scientists long hoped that American politics would be more ideological like European politics: offering ideologically distinct parties for voters to choose between and hold responsible to pursue the democratic interests of the mass electorate.¹⁰ Franklin Roosevelt was somewhat successful in characterizing the two major parties as ideological and in opposition, but his “conservative” Republican opposition was at first loath to play along with that characterization. After many years of hoping that ideological parties could move American politics in a different direction, social scientists in the mid-twentieth century concluded that Americans were either irrationally wedded to a single ideology maintaining the status quo¹¹ or not ideological at all.¹²

Converse’s seminal definition of “belief systems” has frequently been accepted as the definition, when it is defined, of ideology in the more recent scholarly literature: “a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence.”¹³ The concept of “constraint” or “functional interdependence” has been the key for Converse and later political scientists in measuring ideology. “In the static case, ‘constraint’ may be taken to mean the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes.” This definition is useful for analyzing and measuring political ideology, but political scientists also need to recognize Converse’s important qualifier: “in the static case.” The nature of an ideology’s constraint, and the particular elements it holds together, are constantly evolving. Thus, to speak about how an individual, a party, a state, a region, or a nation has become more or less “liberal” or “conservative” over time, or to compare political actors from different time periods on an ideology spectrum, requires careful attention to how the meaning and content of “liberal” or “conservative” has changed over that same period of time. To rely on a “snapshot” understanding of a

¹⁰ Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981). E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942). The American Political Science Association, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties,” *American Political Science Review* 44 (1950).

¹¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955).

¹² Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” *Ideology and Its Discontents*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

¹³ Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” 207. Zaller’s more recent, and more nuanced, definition of ideology, which dispenses with the idea that individuals have “true” preferences, has also been influential. Zaller conceives of ideology as the ratio of “liberal” and “conservative” considerations held by an individual, and at their disposal, at any given time. John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

particular ideology risks committing the fallacy of presentism, in which contemporary understandings are read back in history and applied anachronistically to other eras.¹⁴

Ideology and American Political Science

Ideology is a political phenomenon that has attracted the attention of all the major research traditions in American politics, but none of these approaches has provided a theory of political ideology that, like Marx, explains the dynamic nature of ideology. The political behavior subfield, drawing on theories and methods from sociology and psychology, examines ideological sophistication, ideological identification, and operational ideology, but none of these concepts considers how the content of an ideological construct changes over time and place.¹⁵ The rational choice subfield, drawing on theories and methods from economics, conceives of ideology through spatial models and assumes that ideology can best be represented as a static continuum. Individuals, parties, and even nations are said to move left and right along this continuum, but little attention is paid to how the content of this continuum evolves. The American political development subfield, paying attention to history, recognizes that party ideology can, potentially, evolve, but ultimately claims that American parties contain a core of unchanging and continuous ideological content.

The American intellectual history discipline, on the other hand, has recognized the fundamental mutability of ideological constructs in American history,¹⁶ and my aim is to apply that insight to the political science discipline. This paper shows how the content and meaning of the two currently dominant ideologies in American politics, liberalism and conservatism, lack any essential meaning across time, and how this oversight in the political science literature gives us an incomplete understanding of how political ideology operates in American politics. The following section describes the fallacy of essential ideological constructs, and the succeeding sections of the paper will show how this fallacy limits, and sometimes even distorts, current theories about political ideology. While qualitative approaches recognize the potential mutability of ideology, they lack enough data points to see that change has occurred. Quantitative approaches, on the other hand, have accumulated

¹⁴ The useful metaphor of a “snapshot” view, in contrast to a “moving picture” view, comes from Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ This classification of the literature is described in Stephen A. Jessee, *Ideology and Spatial Voting in American Elections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15-16.

¹⁶ Hyrum Lewis, “Historians and the Myth of American Conservatism,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 12:1 (2012): 27-45.

a mountain of data points, but their theories ignore the question of change and, thus, the mass of data is not used to effectively explain the nature of American political ideology.

Part II: The Fallacy of Essential Ideological Constructs

Whether through the influence of analytic philosophy, the “linguistic turn,” structuralism, postmodernism, historicism, or post-structuralism, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have increasingly turned away from the idea that concepts or ideas can exist outside of a community and language. Most late modern philosophers do not believe, like Hobbes, that the task of philosophy is to determine the “correct” words or definitions associated with supposedly fixed and universal concepts.¹⁷ Instead, for contemporary historians, the task of intellectual history is simply to reveal what a particular speaker in a given historical context could have intended from a particular speech act, and to avoid anachronistic uses of ideas and language from contemporary intellectual discourse in analysis of the past.¹⁸

Likewise, twentieth century social theorists treat social categories like race, sex, gender, or nationality as social constructs whose meanings change across time and place.¹⁹ Contemporary political scientists have largely followed suit, and recognize how these social categories are constructed in different ways in different cultures and places.²⁰ Similarly, contemporary social theorists have abandoned the idea that ideological categories like liberal and conservative have fixed and universal meanings.²¹ However, paradoxically, many political scientists continue to assume that ideological categories somehow represent essential doctrines that transcend time and place.

¹⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 22-26.

¹⁸ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* VIII:1 (1969): 3-53.

¹⁹ See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

²⁰ See, for example, Lisa Bedolla, *Fluid Borders: Latino Power, Identity, and Politics in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Reuel R. Rogers, *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception, or Exit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Stephen T. Leonard and Joan C. Tronto, “The Genders of Citizenship,” *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007): 33-46; Ann Towns, “The Status of Women as a Standard of ‘Civilization’,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15 (2009): 681-706; Ariela Julie Gross, *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²¹ See, for example, Raymond Geuss, “Liberalism and Its Discontents,” *Political Theory* 30:3 (2002).

As Hyrum Lewis has pointed out, ideological constructs are simply heuristic devices that can be useful in a given time and place to categorize and analyze different ideas and people in a general way.²² It may be useful as a heuristic, for example, to talk about “liberals” and “conservatives” in contemporary national American politics. In recent years, these terms have increasingly come to mean whatever is currently advocated by the Democratic and Republican Parties, respectively, although these terms are occasionally distinct. In contemporary politics, using “conservative” as shorthand might signify stances on a host of policy issues: for example, pro-life, decreased taxes, or hawkish foreign policy. Similarly, using “liberal” or “progressive” as a shorthand might signify stances on a host of policy issues: for example, pro-choice, increased taxes on the wealthy, decreased militarism, or increased spending on programs for the poor. These ideological constructs can be useful heuristics, but to attribute some long-lasting, universal, or essential meaning to these terms confuses our understanding of society and politics.

Even in a given time and place, these constructs can be slippery concepts. For example, if you survey a neighborhood of a few hundred people asking them to place themselves on a liberal-conservative scale, you may get a roughly even split of “liberals” and “conservatives,” but there will probably be a great variety within those two simplistic categories. If someone identifies as a conservative, this could mean a variety of potentially contradictory things, including: that they voted for Mitt Romney in 2012, that they voted for Barack Obama in 2012 (as many self-identified conservatives did), that they voted for Gary Johnson in 2012, that they are a member of the local Tea Party group, that they are slow and cautious about social change, that they want radical social change shrinking the size of government, that they want the government to spend more money on programs like Medicaid and Social Security, that they want tax cuts in spite of budget deficits, that they want to balance the budget, that they want America to become less involved in the world, or that they want more foreign intervention fighting terrorism. You could get as many contradictions as you do answers, including many people with no opinion on these issues; but each of those positions are held by people describing themselves as “conservative.” The point is that even in a very restricted time and place you could get radically different ideas all lumped together under a common ideological construct.

²² Lewis, “Historians and the Myth of American Conservatism” (2012).

This problem only becomes exacerbated when you expand your survey across time and place. To survey an entire city or state would only increase the complexity and diversity. Try comparing your survey results of Montana conservatives with South Carolina conservatives or Arkansas liberals with California liberals. Try comparing results from national surveys taken in 1992, 1972, and 1952. The problems of ideological consistency even within a very small and defined time and place only become much greater. It becomes very clear that people do not always mean the same things when they use the same words. Sometimes, in fact, they mean the opposite things when they use the same words.

Different points in American history have yielded radically different meanings of political terms. The words “liberal” and “conservative” were used much less frequently, and in very different contexts, before the New Deal. Sometimes these words might refer to an ideology and sometimes simply to a disposition. Many people used the term “liberal” in the nineteenth century to mean someone who wanted to limit government and promote free trade; and in academic contexts, it often retains this meaning. Many people in the 1930s used the term to mean someone who wanted to expand government’s role in the economy but not create trade barriers. Many people used the term in the 1970s to mean both government intervention in interstate commerce *and* international trade barriers. In the 1940s, “liberal” often referred to someone who wanted America to intervene in world affairs. In the late 1960s, “liberal” often referred to someone who wanted the opposite. In the 1980s, it often meant someone who wanted higher taxes. In the 1990s, a “liberal” might be someone who proclaimed, “The era of big government is over.” In the 2000s, it has meant someone who wanted to provide universal health insurance and extend previously enacted tax cuts. The same exercise could be done for conservatives. Different people in different eras can use the same words in radically different, often opposing ways.

In addition to these post-New Deal, vernacular American uses of the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” as political ideologies associated with the two major parties, there are also many other uses. Before the current ideological era, which associates liberalism with the Democratic Party and conservatism with the Republican Party, “liberalism” was used on both sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to a

political ideology in support of the move from traditional, feudal society to modern, capitalist society. In America, this term was associated with both the Democratic and Republican Parties. Different, but related senses of the word continue to have some currency in academic writings like Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* and Theodore Lowi's *The End of Liberalism*, where Lowi distinguishes between old and new liberal public philosophies: capitalism and interest group pluralism. In European and American academic circles, a commitment to *laissez faire* economic policy may be referred to as "neoliberalism," usually in a critical vein. Additionally, in a variety of academic disciplines informed by philosophy, "liberalism" is a worldview associated with the modern West in which the self is understood as an autonomous, rational, and possessive subject.

There are entire academic disciplines committed to analyzing this kind of all-encompassing liberalism, and I will not attempt to deal with these other uses of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in this paper. Instead, I will address the conventional understandings of the words as used by journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens, and which form the basis of analyzing ideology in American political science. In this section, I have shown how the content of these ideological constructs have taken on very different, and sometimes opposite, meanings across time and place, and that it does not make sense to speak of "liberalism" and "conservatism" as long-standing, continuous concepts with essential or universal meaning. I will now review some of the most important work in political science that makes this false assumption. I single out those authors who I believe have written the best and most influential scholarship in the discipline. Rather than criticizing their work as sloppy, I instead hold it up as what I believe to be excellent scholarship—the best in the field—that could still be improved by recognizing the dynamic nature of political ideology as American intellectual historians have recently recognized.

Part III: Qualitative Approaches in the American Political Ideology Literature

The earliest approaches to studying ideology in American politics used qualitative methods. These approaches typically take the time to describe the substantive content of ideologies at various times, but usually omit important data points that would reveal ideology as dynamic rather than static. In this section, I will briefly review a few of these authors'

arguments, and show how missing data points allow them to argue for a static character to American political ideologies.

Tocqueville's Democracy and Aristocracy

Arguably, the first political scientist to study American politics was the French social and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville, and Tocqueville's use of the terms "aristocracy" and "democracy" may be the starting point for the political science discipline's use of essentialist ideological categories today. In line with the historically minded approach to politics prevalent among nineteenth century intellectuals, Tocqueville set up a dichotomy between "aristocracy" and "democracy"—not only as regime types (as in Aristotle) or social states (as in Montesquieu) but as historical eras.

Noticing that the first political parties of modern Europe were divided on this issue of aristocracy or democracy, Tocqueville claimed that almost all political parties "are more or less linked to one or the other of the two great parties that have divided men since there have been free societies [...] some of them work to narrow the use of public power, the others to extend it [...]. Aristocratic or democratic passions are readily found at the foundation of all parties."²³ Writing about America in 1835, it was easy for Tocqueville to recognize the Federalists, Hamiltonians, National Republicans, and Whigs as "aristocratic" parties wanting to restrict popular power in opposition to the Anti-Federalists, Jeffersonians, Democratic-Republicans, and Jacksonian Democrats as "democratic" parties wanting to extend popular power. However, American politics changed rapidly after Tocqueville's visit, and in the following years it would become difficult to argue that the parties were fundamentally divided on this cleavage.

The great divide between an aristocratic party and a democratic party was complicated by many cross-cutting factors: first, the issue of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century, and later, other issues like religion and industrialization. Presumably, the Republican Party of Lincoln was the heir to the Whig Party and the Democratic Party of Douglas was the heir to the Jacksonian Democratic Party. It was arguably the Republicans and

²³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 170.

abolitionists of the North who wanted to extend popular power by freeing African-American slaves rather than the Democrats of the South, who instead wanted to extend human slavery into the West. Many of the abolitionists of the Free Soil, Liberty, and Republican Parties were motivated by religion and democratic ideas of human equality, while many of the slave advocates of the Democratic Party were motivated by racial and aristocratic ideas of human inequality. Later in the nineteenth century, it could be argued that the Bourbon Democrats like Grover Cleveland wanted to restrict popular power through *laissez faire* policies while Republicans wanted to extend popular power through social welfare programs for poor veterans and widows.²⁴ In the post-World War II era, Northern Republicans advancing civil rights legislation seemed to be the democratic party of extending popular power while Southern Democrats resisting civil rights legislation seemed to be the aristocratic party of restricting popular power. Since the rise of the Religious Right and social conservatism, the Republican Party has become the populist party of blue-collar “middle America” voters while the Democratic Party has become the party of upper class, educated elites.²⁵

Had he been able to observe these post-1835 data points, Tocqueville could have been prevented from characterizing the ideologies used by political parties as static. Relying on only a few empirical observations over the course of a few decades, Tocqueville had a biased sample of American history. Historical developments since 1835—including industrialization, urbanization, racial conflict, class conflict, and religious polarization—have all complicated Tocqueville’s theory of one overarching cleavage between two fundamental ideologies. Tocqueville’s historical position in the 1830s made it impossible for him to anticipate these future developments, but in this section I will demonstrate how modern political scientists have continued to adopt Tocqueville’s framework and blind spots in their histories of American political parties and ideologies.

²⁴ T. Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁵ For example, in the 2008 election, Obama won a majority of voters with postgraduate degrees and voters with income higher than \$200,000.

Hartz's Liberal Democracy and Conservative Whiggery

Louis Hartz continued to use Tocqueville's framework of aristocratic "right" in opposition to democratic "left," but after viewing an additional 120 years of American history after Tocqueville, Hartz concluded that the class conflict found in Europe did not exist in America. Lacking a feudal past, Hartz argued that America has no "toryism" on its "right" or "radicalism" on its "left." The boundaries of American political thought are formed by the more centrist "liberalism." The left-leaning "Liberal Reform" of Woodrow Wilson and Louis Brandeis has no opposition from a "Tory" party, and the right-leaning "Whiggery"²⁶ of the Republicans has no significant socialist or radical opposition. Thus, "Whiggery became for the Progressives a frightful 'conservatism,' whereas it itself became 'progressive' or 'radical,' a set of terms which meant nothing insofar as Western history of Western political alignments as a whole went."²⁷

Hartz's story is very similar to Tocqueville's up to 1835, except that he believed, unlike Tocqueville, that even the first American political parties were "small parties" inscribed within the liberal consensus. After the adoption of the Constitution, the Hamiltonian Federalists remained on the "right," in opposition to the party of Jefferson on the "left." After the Jeffersonian Era, in Hartz's narrative, the Jacksonian Democrats represented the left and the antebellum Whig Party represented the right. In the century following the Civil War, the Republican Party of Grant, McKinley, Coolidge, and Hoover represented the right in opposition to the Democratic Party of Bryan, Wilson, and FDR.

Hartz's theory of two continuous parties with unchanging ideologies within American liberal culture does not account for the dynamic nature of political ideology. First, Hartz conspicuously leaves out a sufficient discussion of the most significant event in the history of the United States under the Constitution: the Civil War. In Hartz's framework, at the time of the Civil War, the Republican Party should be the "conservative" party and the Democratic Party should be the party of "liberal reform." However, the original Republican Party of the 1860s was made up of abolitionists, former Free-Soil Party members, and

²⁶ Hartz uses "Whig" and "Whiggery" to refer to an ideological camp and socioeconomic class related to (but not to be confused with) the American Whig Party of the mid-nineteenth century. In this article, when referring to the ideology, as described by Hartz, I will use quotation marks. When referring to the political party, I will not use quotation marks.

²⁷ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 29.

former Liberty Party members, in addition to many former Whigs. In the early 1870s, the “Liberal Republicans” were an important faction that opposed President Grant. The Democratic Party around the time of the Civil War, on the other hand, represented the interests of landed property and slave owners. Hartz also says little about the first few decades of the twentieth century when the Republican Party was often more “progressive” than the Democratic Party. The Civil War, Reconstruction, and Progressive Eras turn Hartz’s narrative on its head, and Hartz must pass over these episodes briefly because they do not fit his theory.

Second, Hartz’s analysis could not have allowed him to foresee the emergence of postwar American conservatism, which came to exert a significant influence on the Republican Party, in the years following the publication of his book. For Hartz, conservatism was either the political thought of wealthy “Whigs”—like Carnegie—on the conservative end of the liberal spectrum of American politics, or it was reactionary thinking beyond the bounds of the liberal political spectrum like Fitzhugh’s “Toryism.” However, in the postwar decades a “conservative” movement emerged which went beyond this narrow definition of “whiggery.” Hartz’s inability to recognize the beginnings of this movement in 1955 was a result of his identification of Locke as the only viable source of political theory for Americans, and his limited understanding of how Locke could be used. The conservative movement showed that other political theorists, like Edmund Burke and Adam Smith, could be used to support political objectives similar to Hartz’s “Whigs”; that Locke could be used in different ways other than simply the Alger myth; and that religion could play an important role in determining American political thought.

APD’s Analysis of Party Ideologies

With the emergence of APD as a self-referential subfield within American politics in recent decades, scholars have again turned to the history of American party ideologies. These authors, whose analysis is informed by political history and change over time, are often much more attentive to the problems of overly broad generalizations about ideology in other subfields. However, they also continue to use the framework of Tocqueville and Hartz that sets up a fundamental opposition between two political ideologies, divided over class, that have an unchanging core of meaning. Two notable and important recent works in this genre

have been written by Gerring (1998) and Brewer and Stonecash (2009).²⁸ Both books attempt to lump various segments of American history into large eras of party ideology consistency. While more sensitive to the evolutionary and contingent character of party ideology than Tocqueville or Hartz, these authors are still committed to maintaining a fundamental separation between a monolithic liberal party and a monolithic conservative party.

Gerring on the Essence of Party Ideologies

Gerring's theory and categorization scheme is an improvement on the existing literature for several reasons. First, by dividing the Whig-Republican Party into two different eras, he shows how the neoliberal, free market policies advocated by Reagan and Goldwater in the twentieth century differed dramatically from the anti-liberal, protectionist policies advocated by the Whigs and the Republicans in the nineteenth century. Second, by dividing up the Democratic Party into three different eras, he shows how the limited government, *laissez-faire* policies of Jefferson, Jackson, and Cleveland differed dramatically from the interventionist and redistributionist policies advocated by Bryan, Wilson, Roosevelt, and Johnson. He also shows how the slaveholding or Jim Crow policies of Jefferson, Jackson, Douglas, Bryan, Wilson, and Roosevelt differed from the anti-Jim Crow policies of Kennedy, Johnson, Carter, and Clinton. These important distinctions are often glossed over in the conventional narratives of party ideology history.

However, Gerring ultimately contends that not only have the major parties been ideologically coherent and differentiated, they have also been stable. First, the divisions in party ideology that he does allow are still too broad: the "National Republican Epoch" stretches over the course of a century, and the "Jeffersonian Democrat" and "Neoliberal Republican" eras go on for almost as long. Second, he argues that certain ideas have characterized the Republican Party across these divisions from "Whiggism to Reaganism," and the Democratic Party from Thomas Jefferson to William Jefferson. "It might be said

²⁸ John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, *Dynamics of American Political Parties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

that through all periods of American history one party has [...] been more concerned with preserving social order and liberty, the other has emphasized equality.²⁹

Several points in the history of American party ideologies contradict this generalization. As mentioned earlier, Lincoln's Republican Party was more concerned with equality than Douglas' Democratic Party. Southerners accused the "Black Republicans" of being concerned with anything but social order. Cleveland's Democratic Party advocated exactly the kind of *laissez faire* policies that Republicans are supposed to have advocated to earn them the label of the party of liberty in Gerring's account. Similarly, Clinton's Democratic Party cut federal spending as a percentage of GDP, balanced the budget, and passed welfare reform, while George W. Bush's Republican Party later did the reverse: expanded the size of the federal government and the federal deficit more than any previous president, expanded Medicare, and increased the role of the federal government in public education. Many episodes in American history do not fit this idea of a party of *laissez faire* economic freedom against a party of redistribution and equality. After making sensible, if overly broad, distinctions between ideological eras in American party history, Gerring contradicts himself by attempting to draw a simplistic distinction between two ideologies to cover all time.

Brewer and Stonecash on the Essence of Party Ideologies

Brewer and Stonecash's work also provides a helpful framework for understanding the history of American party ideologies, but it also ultimately perpetuates the myth of two parties continuously representing two fundamentally consistent ideologies. The authors' theoretical argument is correct: American political parties are characterized by change as they attempt to balance both policy goals and constituencies. They admit that there are many factors which cause this change over time, but they insist that class ideology is ultimately the over-arching theme that separates two fundamentally different ideological camps, and that America's two parties have continuously represented these two essential ideologies:

For much of American history there have been two major parties to represent these broad differences. Democrats have largely represented those less well off or those who struggle to prosper in a capitalistic society. Who comprises the party's base has changed enormously

²⁹ Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America*, 20.

over time, but the Democratic Party's concern for the have-nots has persisted. Republicans, on the other hand, have largely defended free markets and represented those who have fared relatively well. [...] After all, as Key pointed out, 'Politics generally comes down to a conflict between those who have and those who have less.' Partisan conflict in the United States has always reflected this cleavage to some degree.³⁰

It is convenient that the authors begin their analysis of American politics with the "Post-Bellum" Era because that allows them to avoid trying to argue that the Republican Party's opposition to slavery represented a commitment to free markets and the interests of those "who have fared relatively well." Furthermore, their assertion that the Republican Party has "largely defended free markets" is also wrong. During the first half of its history from the 1850s to the 1920s, the GOP was a party that, relative to the Democratic Party, advocated for higher tariffs, greater federal regulation of both international and interstate trade, and increased federal spending on both infrastructure and social welfare. Up until the New Deal, which is most of American history, the Republican Party was typically less committed to free markets than the Democratic Party.

The authors' narrative also cannot explain conservatism's "populist" element in recent decades. At the same time that many lower income, rural voters have moved to the Republican Party, many upper income, urban voters have moved to the Democratic Party. As the authors admit in their introduction, other factors like race, religion, culture, and foreign policy are, in addition to class ideology, also important. What they fail to see is that insisting on a dichotomy of class conflict as the underlying ideological issue leaves too much of American political history unexplainable. To make the history of American political ideology fit their theory of two, fundamental, unchanging ideological camps in opposition, the authors must neglect or gloss over those eras that do not fit the theory.

A common theme among the APD scholarship is to avoid those times and places where the historical evidence contradicts the underlying ideological essentialist theory. Thus, Brewer and Stonecash begin their narrative in 1876, and Hartz says very little about race, slavery, abolitionism, Lincoln, or the Civil War. When he does mention Lincoln in passing, Hartz claims that Andrew Carnegie and Horatio Alger are "the children of Lincoln's

³⁰ Brewer Stonecash, *Dynamics of American Political Parties*, 3-4.

achievement.”³¹ In Gerring’s account, the Whig-Republican “national epoch” runs from 1828 to 1924 and the Republican “neo-liberal epoch” runs from 1928 to 1992. At the dividing line between these two epochs, the party ideology is muddled. Coolidge, who assumed office and was returned to office in the “national” era, would more accurately be described as a free-market, *laissez-faire* “neoliberal” than a strong-government, protectionist, nationalist. Likewise, contrary to simplistic and conventional accounts, Hoover, who falls into Gerring’s “neoliberal” era, would more accurately be described as a Progressive nationalist than a conservative *laissez-faire* ideologue.³² Similarly, it does not make much sense to refer to Eisenhower and Nixon as “neoliberals.” They governed as Keynesians who accepted the social democratic state of the New Deal, and believed that the federal government should intervene for the benefit of the economy.³³

From Tocqueville to Brewer and Stonecash, qualitative approaches to the study of American political ideology have continually perpetuated the myth of two essential, universal ideologies locked in uniform battle over the course of American history. In reality, the positions of the Federalist, Democratic-Republican, Democratic, Whig, and Republican Parties have changed frequently over the course of American history. Furthermore, their associated ideologies—including Hamiltonianism, Jeffersonianism, republicanism, democracy, whiggism, liberalism, and conservatism—have also frequently changed in meaning and content. The APD literature is currently hampered by the perpetuation of this myth. Future APD work should include more data points in its analysis—even those data points that do not support the theory of static ideology.

Part IV: Quantitative Approaches in the American Political Ideology Literature

In contrast to these qualitative approaches, in recent years many quantitative approaches have compiled large data sets about political ideology. Although these approaches do not overlook important data points, the content of this data is not understood in a way that allows scholars to understand how political ideology has changed over time, and, as a result, the conclusions they draw about political ideology are incomplete.

³¹ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 199.

³² Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 261.

³³ Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 359.

American Political Behavior and Political Ideology

Within the political behavior subfield, most of the work on ideology has focused on the attitudes of ordinary American citizens measured through surveys. Notably, the American National Election Surveys regularly ask respondents to identify their political ideology by placing themselves on a 7-point, liberal-conservative continuum with the following options: extremely liberal (1), very liberal (2), somewhat liberal (3), moderate (4), somewhat conservative (5), very conservative (6), and extremely conservative (7). In addition, ANES regularly asks respondents to place their attitudes on various public policy issues on a 7-point scale. The available responses to these issue questions are framed in a way that allows NES analysts to code these responses on the same 7-point scale as the political ideology identification question ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative.

The architects of the ANES first published *The American Voter* in 1960.³⁴ The authors claimed that their abstract ideological structure of a 7-point scale was the best way to measure political attitudes.³⁵ They differentiated liberal and conservative as “the degree to which the government should assume interest, responsibility, and control over [...] other sectors of society.”³⁶ To their credit, the authors concede that “a viewpoint that is liberal in one time or place may be conservative in another.” They point out that “in late eighteenth century Europe [...] after an epoch of close government control, the new and radical doctrine was one of ‘laissez-faire.’”³⁷ In contemporary discourse, in contrast, the “liberal doctrine” is often one of close government control and ‘laissez-faire’ is the “conservative doctrine.” Of course, the authors did not have to go all the way back to eighteenth century Europe—they could have just cited pre-New Deal America (only a few decades in their past) when “liberal” was still frequently used in the limited government meaning.³⁸

³⁴ Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

³⁵ Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 193.

³⁶ Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 194.

³⁷ Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 194. It is true that this was the new doctrine in Europe, but the word “liberal” was not actually used to describe those groups of ideas in late eighteenth century Europe; Raymond Geuss points out that the term was first used to describe a political party in Spain in 1811 that advocated for a constitutional monarchy as in Britain. Geuss, “Liberalism and Its Discontents,” 321.

³⁸ Rotunda, *The Politics of Language*.

Still, the authors attempt to define some essential meaning of liberalism and conservatism in the modern era, but their very definitions have proved to be unstable in the intervening years. For example, the authors defined “liberal” foreign policy as interventionist and “conservative” foreign policy as isolationist—the opposite of the way we often use the meanings today in the wake of the Cold War and the War on Terror.

These American political behavior scholars hypothesize the relationship of socioeconomic status and ideology in terms of, first, ideological self-interest and, second, ideological personality. In terms of ideological self-interest, they explain that “individuals who already enjoy high prestige under the status quo should not, on the basis of self-interest, wish to have existing arrangements tampered with: in short, they should be conservative in orientation. But individuals who are not faring well under existing arrangements should be ‘liberal’ or ‘radical’ advocates of change in social and political institutions.”³⁹

Setting aside the simplistic assumptions of self-interest in this hypothesis, conservatism does not always mean status quo and liberalism does not always mean radical change. In the contemporary scene, although Tea Partiers may call themselves conservative, they want anything but the status quo: notably, they want to repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and radically change the level of federal government spending and deficits. Many contemporary liberals do not want radical change—they simply want to maintain the liberal policy achievements of a Democratic Congress and Presidency in 2009 and 2010. Other “liberals” may even be reactionary: famous liberal economist Paul Krugman makes it no secret that he would like America to return to the economic policies of the 1940s and 50s. Despite the attempts of post-hoc ideology theorists like Russell Kirk, there is nothing inherent in “liberalism” or “conservatism” that tells us that ideology’s attitude toward change.⁴⁰ Whether “conservatism” or “liberalism” desires the status quo or change depends entirely upon the meaning of that term in a given time and place, the particular

³⁹ Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, 203.

⁴⁰ In *The Conservative Mind*, Russell Kirk takes common understandings of conservatism in 1955 and attempts to trace some consistent genealogy of conservative ideas from the eighteenth century to himself. Not surprisingly, he traces the genealogy in a way that highlights the thinkers he prefers over others, and in a way that would help him define “conservatism” in his preferred way. To take one person’s definition of conservatism as *the* definition of conservatism across all time and place, as Herbert McClosky did in 1958, is incredible.

issue to be changed or maintained, and the issue positions of the ideology in relation to that issue's current status. It is historically contingent.

In terms of ideological personality, Campbell et al. turned to Herbert McClosky's hypothesis that whether someone is conservative or liberal is not a product of socioeconomic status but personality traits like intelligence and social-psychological anxiety.⁴¹ But, of course, American history is full of examples of self-styled conservatives and liberals who do not exhibit the personality characteristics that McClosky associated with a particular interpretation of Kirk's book. For example, McClosky's "straightforward conservative statement" that "if you start trying to change things much, you usually make them worse" does not describe the beliefs of contemporary Tea Partiers, many of whom would describe themselves as "conservative" because they believe they can radically change Washington for the better—not the worse. Similarly, McClosky's "straightforward conservative statement" that "all groups can live in harmony in this country without changing the system in any way" would certainly not apply to many contemporary self-styled conservatives who want radical immigration reform—without this change in the system, according to these "conservatives," they see no prospects for harmonious living. These are only two examples, but for every "straightforward conservative statement," there are myriad historical counter-examples where the "conservative" position is the complete opposite of the one attributed to all conservatives in all times by McClosky in 1958.

McCloskey, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes were founding giants in the American political behavior subfield, and contemporary scholars continue to base their work on their founding insights. Unfortunately, this legacy includes a contemporary commitment to the false conception of ideological constructs as enduring, essential concepts that transcend time and place.

Macropolitics of American Political Ideology

James Stimson has long been a leading scholar in the field of macropolitics, public opinion, and political ideology. In his most recent book with Christopher Ellis, the authors insightfully point out that, although a plurality of survey respondents identify themselves as

⁴¹ Herbert McClosky, "Conservatism and Personality," *The American Political Science Review* 52:1 (1958).

“conservative,” a plurality of survey respondents also choose issue positions that map onto the “liberal” end of the liberal-conservative scale.⁴² The authors go on to make an important distinction between symbolic ideology and operational ideology. These are valuable conceptual insights, but when the authors use data on surveys administered over time, they fail to explain how the changing meaning of these words across time and space affects the conclusions to be drawn about ideology.

Contemporary political scientists using quantitative measures of ideology, chastened by linguistic and historicist critiques from other disciplines, typically preface their work with some rhetoric about the potential variation in meanings of words across time, but usually follow this qualification with a claim about some essential and universal meaning of ideological constructs. In the following passage, Ellis and Stimson do an excellent job of describing—in a nuanced way—first, how the use of ideological terms like “conservative” and “liberal” is inevitable, because they are the heuristic devices that all of us use to make sense of vast ideological phenomena in political life; second, how the meanings of these terms change over time; and third, how the meaning of these terms are determined by usage (and not, I should point out, by any *a priori* theoretical definition—except insofar as the theoretical writings of scholars affect common understandings and usage of the terms):

The language of ideology is itself contentious, and a product as much of social forces and political strategy as anything stable or immutable. But we have little choice but to embrace it, to write about liberalism and conservatism as understood in everyday politics. These are the terms in which real political actors [...] speak. [...] The meanings of the terms themselves, even among elites and political sophisticates, are not immutable. And many citizens clearly bring different connotations to the terms than we do. There is, however, a reality defined by usage. When political actors are publicly labeled—by themselves or by others—with these terms, then their particular constellations of views on the issues of the day become the reality [...]. So all is not subjective. The words cannot mean whatever we want them to mean. There has to be a core of shared cultural connotation in order to permit sensible conversation. There is also a time dimension to meaning. As issues come and go and political agendas reshape, the core defining issues of ideological discourse will change. Change is rarely radical and rarely abrupt, but it is nonetheless the case that emphases change. But, too, there is continuity. It is by and large the same liberals arguing with the same conservatives over the new issues. So that continuity limits the possibility of rapid change and usually ensures that old connotations and issues survive the transition to the new.⁴³

⁴² Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson, *Ideology in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Ellis and Stimson, *Ideology in America*, 2-3.

Although it would be more accurate to say that the language of ideology is *much more* a product of “social forces and political strategy as anything stable or immutable,” the authors are correct that these are the terms in which we speak and these are the heuristics we use to make sense of the world. This is all the more reason to be careful about how the meanings of these words change across time and place.

After an insightful and nuanced discussion of the protean nature of ideological constructs, the authors nonetheless conclude that “continuity” overrides “change” in ideology and go on to dismiss the issue by assigning essential meanings to “liberalism” and “conservatism.” Part of the reason for this mistake is a misconception in the broader literature that politicians and political actors do not change their stances on issues and remain in the same ideological space throughout their careers. Thus, according to this logic, since the “same conservatives” and the “same liberals” debate different and changing issues, the meanings of these terms are stable. However, as David Karol has recently pointed out, politicians and parties frequently change positions and stances, so that even if the “same conservatives” and the “same liberals” may be opposing each other over different issues over time, the meaning of “conservatism” and “liberalism” could still have changed.⁴⁴

Ellis and Stimson define the core of “liberalism” to be a belief in “equality of opportunity,” a desire to use government to level the “playing field,” a belief that the market economy must be “tamed” by government regulation, a desire to set “standards,” and a “desire to protect the rights of disadvantaged groups.” Even using this vague language, there are many instances where “liberalism” did not follow these definitions. Before the New Deal, “liberalism” stood for the opposite of most of the positions listed by Ellis and Stimson. Even after the New Deal, it is unclear that these positions uniquely define liberalism in opposition to conservatism. Many conservatives, no doubt, would also claim that they believe in “equality of opportunity” and in overcoming the “disadvantages given by circumstances of birth,” but conservatives would claim that liberal public policies, whatever they might be in a given time and place, have actually led to perpetuating “disadvantages given by circumstances of birth” while claiming that conservative policies are those that have led to overcoming such disadvantages.

⁴⁴ David Karol, *Party Position Change in American Politics: Coalition Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The authors conspicuously leave out of their definition of liberalism foreign policy issues or cultural policy issues. Liberalism's meaning with respect to many (but not all) economic policy issues made a sharp and durable shift in the 1930s, but shifts on foreign policy and cultural issues have not been as durable. In the 1940s, liberalism often meant hawkishness in foreign affairs and conservatism often meant isolationism. This changed in the 1960s and 70s when liberalism increasingly became associated with pacifism and conservatism increasingly became associated with a hawkish foreign policy. This changed again after the Cold War when conservatism evolved in a more isolationist direction, while liberalism evolved in a more foreign interventionist direction. Only a few years later, after 9/11 occurred under a Republican presidency, conservatism evolved to mean hawkishness again.

Social issues like abortion and gay marriage were hardly on the political radar before the 1970s. To the extent that they were, the "conservatives" in the Republican Party often took stances more tolerant of these deviations from social norms than "liberals" in the Democratic Party. The meaning of liberalism shifted in the 1960s and 70s to mean certain positions on social issues, and the meaning of conservatism shifted in the 1970s and 80s in a corresponding direction.

Ellis and Stimson concede that "liberalism" meant something different before the New Deal than after the New Deal, but they argue that it has been consistent since then: "the liberalism of Barack Obama's time is not terribly different from that of Franklin Roosevelt's."⁴⁵ On the contrary, the difference between the two liberalisms is significant. The liberalism of Barack Obama's time has goals (in addition to instituting universal health care) of stopping climate change, legalizing gay marriage, passing stricter gun legislation, and using drone strikes on terrorists. This is not the liberalism of Roosevelt's time. While Obama repealed "Don't Ask Don't Tell" to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military, Franklin Roosevelt gained political notoriety by investigating and prosecuting homosexuals in the U.S. Navy before being nominated for the Vice Presidency. The two liberalisms are

⁴⁵ Ellis and Stimson, *Ideology in America*, 8.

very different because the meaning of liberalism has changed dramatically in the intervening period.

Despite the constantly changing content of these ideological constructs, Ellis and Stimson use their extensive survey data to create “public policy mood” scores over long periods of time and compare policy moods across history. For example, according to their data, the American public had a roughly 60 percent liberal score in the late 1950s, and again a half century later. But what does it mean to say that the American public is as liberal today as it was in the 1950s? This description does not make much sense, and conclusions drawn from the macropolitics literature in this way often distorts rather than improves our understanding of political ideology.

Formal Modeling of American Political Ideology

Within the rational choice subfield of American politics, most of the work on ideology has focused on the attitudes of political elites measured through roll call votes and mapped onto spatial models of a liberal-conservative continuum. The foundation for this work was laid by Downs,⁴⁶ but the most prominent contemporary scholarship has been written by Poole and Rosenthal and those that have used their NOMINATE scores. In different variations on their basic Nominal Three-step Estimation technique, Poole and Rosenthal measure the “ideology” of every member of Congress throughout American history by measuring which other members of Congress they tended to vote with and how often.⁴⁷ The more an MC votes with Democrats (or Democratic-Republicans or Jeffersonian Republicans), the more liberal her NOMINATE score will be. The more an MC votes with Republicans (or Whigs or Federalists), the more conservative her NOMINATE score will be.

Although they admit that their continuum is merely an “abstraction,” they go on to label this abstraction “ideology.” Based on their particular operationalization of ideology, Poole and Rosenthal claim that Congressmen’s ideology is largely static over the course of their careers, and that American politics has had no real ideological realignment since the

⁴⁶ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

⁴⁷ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Ideology and Congress* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2007).

Civil War.⁴⁸ They fail to explain that what they refer to as “liberal” and “conservative”—the two poles along which they classify every Congressional roll call vote—has taken on a myriad of different meanings since the Civil War. To speak of an ideological construct like “liberal” as a shared empirical phenomenon between 1860s “liberal” congressmen from Indiana, 1890s “liberal” congressmen from Nevada, 1960s “liberal” congressmen from Massachusetts, and 2000s “liberal” congressmen from Nebraska misleads more than it informs. Certainly, the “liberalism” of Grover Cleveland was different from the “liberalism” of Franklin Roosevelt, which was in turn different from the “liberalism” of George McGovern—and not just a difference in quantity, but in quality. Each of those men understood themselves to mean very different things when they used the term “liberal.”

Poole and Rosenthal’s NOMINATE scores are an impressive feat of data compilation and quantitative analysis. In deriving their NOMINATE scores, they code millions of roll call votes cast by thousands of MCs over hundreds of years. Given the mountain of data they collect, they cannot take the time to describe the meaning and content of these millions of votes. They concede that they are merely using the term “ideology” as “shorthand” to describe the tendency in voting behavior of MCs, but they also hypothesize that “ideology” (understood in the conventional meaning of the term and as used by Converse) is what constrains MC voting behavior. However, it is unclear what ideas, bound together in what structure, acting as a constraint in what way, are constraining MC voting behavior in the form of ideology over time. It is unclear what it means to say that a politician in 1950 and a politician in 2000 have the same NOMINATE score and, thus, the same ideological constraint. Clearly, the issues being voted on, the content of the ideas informing ideology, and the logic of constraint that holds these ideas together, change dramatically over time.

This does not stop the authors, or the many political scientists who use their data, from making comparisons of politicians from different sessions of Congress over time. Poole and Rosenthal also produce NOMINATE scores for presidents based on their revealed preferences on various roll call votes. Using these scores, political analysts have concluded that in the past seventy years, George W. Bush was the most conservative

⁴⁸ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

president and Jimmy Carter was the most liberal president.⁴⁹ But what does that mean? Bush's "conservatism" in the 2000s was the exact *opposite* of his fellow "extreme conservatives" in the immediate postwar era. For example, President Bush and Congressman Howard Buffett (father of Warren Buffett and representative of Nebraska's Second Congressional District in the 1940s and 50s) have very similar NOMINATE scores of .72 and .70. Bush's version of conservatism represented massive increases in federal debt through tax cuts and increased spending on the military, federal funding of public education, and federal funding of prescription drugs for the elderly. His administration was notorious for expanding executive power and expanding U.S. military power overseas. The conservatism of Rep. Buffett, on the other hand, advocated the exact opposite: balanced budgets, federal government austerity, decreased spending on the military, isolationist foreign policy, and cutting back on the kind of social programs that Bush expanded. Buffett was a member of the "Old Right" that took libertarian positions on foreign intervention, federal spending, and federal debt. The two politicians had exactly opposing political views within American political culture but the same NOMINATE scores.

Jimmy Carter's ranking as the most liberal president of the past 70 years also does not square with common usage understandings of the term "liberal" either during his political career or today. An evangelical Christian from Georgia, Carter positioned himself as a moderate Southern Democratic governor in national politics. He endorsed moderate Democratic senator Scoop Jackson in the 1972 Democratic nomination contest and campaigned as a moderate in 1976. During his presidency, on balance, he did not push radical legislation in either direction, and in his re-election bid in 1980, he had to fight off a primary challenge from the left by Ted Kennedy. It is anachronistic and does not make much sense to say that Carter was more "liberal" than the originators of the New Deal, the Great Society, and what has come to be known as "Obamacare."

Despite these anachronisms and nonsensical conclusions, the polarization literature is filled with these kinds of comparisons. As a result, Pierson and Hacker inform us that

⁴⁹ "An Update on Political Polarization (through 2011) — Part III: The Presidential Square Wave," Voteview Website, University of Georgia, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://voteview.com/blog/?p=317>. Nate Silver, "How Liberal is President Obama?" *The New York Times*, April 29, 2011, <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/29/how-liberal-is-president-obama/>.

American politics is “off center” because it has been captured and held hostage by an extreme-right group of conservatives who have taken over the Republican Party.⁵⁰ The evidence given by the authors include the stable “national mood” scores of American citizens over time calculated by Stimson, the increasingly conservative NOMINATE scores of Republican politicians over time calculated by Poole and Rosenthal, and Republican control of government. The problem, of course, is that it is not clear what it means to say that the American citizens have the same ideology score they did decades ago or that American politicians have more conservative ideology scores than they did decades ago. Viewed on purely substantive grounds, George W. Bush’s “compassionate conservative” policies actually had much in common with his ideological enemies from whom he supposedly moved the country away: liberals of the New Deal and Great Society.

“Extreme conservatives” of the Bush variety kept intact the “liberal” policies implemented by FDR and LBJ with one exception: conservatives enacted tax cuts so that government’s activities were run at a deficit. On economic welfare issues, New Deal and Great Society policies like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid were not rolled back by conservatives, but instead expanded. On foreign policy issues, the conservative Bush administration pursued a hawkish foreign policy just like the liberal Democratic presidents who preceded him: Wilson, FDR, Truman, JFK, and LBJ sent troops and fought wars in Europe, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and Bush sent troops and fought wars in the Middle East.⁵¹ On social issues, it does not make sense to say that contemporary conservative positions on abortion and gay marriage are more “conservative” than the stances of liberals like FDR, Truman, JFK, and LBJ. To say that an individual, a party, or even a country has moved “left” or “right” over time requires extensive qualification of what those movements actually mean, substantively, over time. Otherwise, conclusions drawn from the data can mislead more than clarify.

⁵⁰ Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Hawkish foreign policy is much more a product of executive power than it is of “conservatism” or “liberalism.” Both ideologies, when in control of the White House, tend to pursue the same foreign policy.

Part IV: Conclusion

Ideological constructs like liberal and conservative can be useful heuristics used by political scientists to categorize and analyze political phenomena. However, these terms must be used carefully—recognizing when they can take on different meanings in different contexts. Ignoring this characteristic of social constructs can cause political scientists to make erroneous inferences about the subjects they study. They might be attributing ideas to political actors that are very different, or even the opposite of, what that political actor and those around him understand his ideas to be. This might make conclusions easier to draw and theories easier to build, but they will be false and misleading. Just as American intellectual historians are giving up the “myth” of an essential and universal meaning of ideological constructs, so, too, should American political scientists.

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