Part II

The Foundations of Political Preferences
Chapter 4

Ideology and Public Opinion

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Few concepts in the study of public opinion have attracted as much attention as that of ideology. While social scientists have always shown a keen interest in the nuts and bolts of belief systems, the resurgence of bitter divisions between the left and right has brought the topic back to the forefront of scholarship and lay discussion alike. In this chapter, I review past and present work on the nature of ideology and its consequences for public opinion. I begin by addressing the definitional question of what ideology actually is. Next, I provide an overview of several decades’ worth of research on what attracts individuals to different ideological postures like liberalism and conservatism and when individuals think and make judgments about issues and candidates in ways that reflect ideology. As we shall see, these two aspects of ideology do not always go hand-in-hand. While most citizens willingly identify themselves as “liberals” or “conservatives,” only those who have absorbed a great deal of information from political leaders think about politics in terms of these ideological categories and express opinions that are consistently liberal or conservative. Finally, I expand on the question of when citizens rely on ideology by suggesting that information is not the whole story. To this end, I review evidence suggesting that citizens must possess both political information and a strong desire to appraise things as “good” or “bad” in order to think ideologically and express ideologically consistent opinions.

What is Ideology?

While the concept of ideology has a familiar ring to it, students of public opinion—including political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists—have struggled to settle on a common definition of what it is. As a result, those who dive into the topic may find themselves adrift on a sea of competing interpretations. Nevertheless, in public opinion research, the most important working definitions of ideology do repeatedly converge on a number of crucial claims. First, ideologies are belief systems or frameworks of interrelated ideas. That is, they consist of opinions, values, and beliefs about the nature of social reality that can be grouped together under some common
social theme, e.g., moving society in the direction of greater justice and equality. In the language of psychology, this claim suggests that ideologies are schemas—i.e., organized clusters of ideas about social and political life that have been stored away in long-term memory. Second, ideologies are shared by and reflect the life situations of groups of individuals. In this respect, a given ideology is typically not idiosyncratic; it is held in common by a group of people living in a particular social and historical context and it expresses the opinions, values, and concerns they have developed as a result of the challenges and opportunities present in that context. Third, ideologies are both descriptive and prescriptive in nature. That is, they both provide an interpretation of society as it currently exists and offer normative guidelines about how society should ideally be organized and the acceptable means for attaining political goals.

Thus, ideologies can be thought of as shared belief systems that reflect some group’s understanding of the social world and its vision of what that world should ideally look like. However, this definition tells us very little about how ideological belief systems are organized. On this point, there has also been a good bit of debate among scholars about the nature of the ideological beast. On one hand, the standard assumption is that ideological positions can be ordered according to the familiar “left–right” spectrum. This perspective suggests that ideological phenomena can be boiled down to a single belief dimension anchored by preferences for equality and openness to social change on the left end of the spectrum and by preferences for hierarchy and preservation of the status quo on the right end. In this usage, the terms “left” and “right” date back to seating arrangements in the French National Assembly during the revolutionary era, which placed the more conservative factions on the right side of the hall and the more radical factions on the left.

This understanding of the structure of ideology continues to inform current scholarship, and it receives support from a number of sources. To begin with, use of a single left–right spectrum is clearly the norm among those most involved in political action and political decision making, i.e., “political elites” in government, party and activist organizations, the media, and academia. Similarly, the most well-informed and politically active members of the general public also rely strongly on the basic left–right dimension in their thinking and political judgments. Finally, a great deal of evidence suggests that individuals who place themselves at different positions on the left–right spectrum tend to adopt correspondingly different opinions about issues connected with the core distinctions of equality versus inequality and openness to change versus the status quo, especially if they are politically well informed. That is, self-described liberals are more likely to take liberal positions on specific issues, whereas self-described conservatives are more likely to take conservative stances on the same issues.

Of course, ideological self-placement and the general liberalism or conservatism of one’s issue preferences rarely align in a simple one-to-one
fashion. In this regard, researchers have been careful to distinguish between symbolic (or philosophical) ideology and operational ideology. Symbolic ideology refers to whether one generally identifies oneself as a “liberal,” “conservative,” or some moderate position in between; while operational ideology refers to one’s average left–right position across issues, especially those relevant to government spending. Importantly, evidence suggests that these two types of ideology do not coincide for many citizens. An example of this is Free and Cantril’s classic finding that many Americans living in the middle of the twentieth century were simultaneously “philosophical conservatives” and “operational liberals,” opposing “big government” in the abstract but offering strong support for the individual programs that made up “big government.”

More recently, Stimson has noted that over two-thirds of those who identify as symbolic conservatives are operational liberals on the issues. Thus, even in situations where citizens do appear to rely on a single left–right spectrum, their belief profiles may differ at the levels of general identification and actual judgments about issues. We return to this point about the lack of concordance between left–right self-placement and issue opinions below.

While the notion of a single ideological dimension is simple and consistent with a great deal of evidence, other scholars have argued that citizens’ ideological views may have more than one dimension. “Multidimensional” approaches of this sort come in a number of forms, but the most common variant argues that ideology can be characterized in terms of two different content dimensions. Broadly speaking, the first dimension reflects one’s preference for equality versus inequality in social life, while the second dimension reflects one’s preference for openness versus social order. These “dual process” models suggest that the two dimensions are governed by distinct but related sets of psychological processes. Importantly, this postulate suggests that the dimensions may operate somewhat independently. Thus, while the notion of a single left–right spectrum implies that a “right-wing” orientation on one dimension (e.g., a preference for inequality) should be accompanied by a right-wing orientation on the other (e.g., support for social order), the dual-process approach suggests that one’s views on the two dimensions need not be perfectly congruent with one another.

Indeed, two dimensions of this sort appear to recur repeatedly in analyses of various kinds of social and political beliefs. For example, researchers interested in human values—abstract beliefs about desirable social goals or modes of conduct—suggest that the former can be arrayed according to two such dimensions. The first dimension deals with “self-transcendence versus self-enhancement,” and it reflects one’s concern for power and rank. This dimension is anchored by values like benevolence and universal concern for others at one end and values like power and achievement at the other. The second deals with “openness versus conservation,” and it reflects one’s concern for security and order. This dimension is anchored by values like self-direction at one end and tradition and conformity at the other. Similar dual dimensions
have been identified in studies of political extremism, which suggest that ideologies can be distinguished in terms of their level of support for equality versus inequality, on one hand, and their level of intolerance for alternative points of view, on the other. The dual-process approach also finds an echo in public-opinion research suggesting that there are distinct dimensions corresponding to attitudes about “economic” issues (e.g., regulation of business, social spending) and “social” issues (e.g., gay rights, abortion). A similar dichotomy manifests itself at the level of differences between political parties across nations, with research suggesting that parties compete with one another for votes along two dimensions corresponding to concern for equality and preferences regarding tradition versus change.

So, which of these perspectives is correct? Is ideology best thought in terms of a single left–right dimension, or multiple dimensions corresponding to preferences regarding equality and social openness? While the bulk of the data suggests that two dimensions of ideology are in fact present, it is also clear that these dimensions are not completely independent of one another and that they may be very highly aligned among the politically engaged. In this vein, a number of theorists have suggested that having multiple dimensions of political evaluation makes many political decisions more difficult. Many common political choices—such as who to vote for or which party to affiliate with—are dichotomous in nature: there is a left-wing option and a right-wing option. If one’s preferences on the two dimensions are not aligned, political choices become more fraught with conflicts and tradeoffs. This implies that individuals who are most involved in political decision making—including not just political professionals, but also the most informed and politically involved segments of the mass public—would benefit most from a belief system in which the two dimensions of ideology overlap with one another to form a single left–right axis.

Consistent with this argument, attitudes associated with the equality and openness dimensions are more likely to be aligned with one another among the highly informed and involved and among elected officials. Research also suggests that intensified political competition may lead multiple ideological dimensions to collapse more cleanly into a single left–right dimension. For example, cross-national comparisons reveal that the equality and openness dimensions are more likely to be positively correlated in countries with established systems of party competition with distinct left-wing and right-wing options. Moreover, once a second dimension of ideological competition arises in a political system, it tends to become aligned with the existing dimension, such that parties and politicians that support equality also tend to support openness and freedom. Thus, while there may be multiple dimensions of ideology, they are seldom fully independent of one another—and the need to effectively organize political competition and decision making may lead to considerable overlap between the dimensions among those most engaged in politics.
What Attracts People to Different Ideological Positions?

Having discussed the issue of what ideology is, I turn to the question of what attracts people to various ideological positions. Working from a variety of theoretical perspectives, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists have brought a great deal of data to bear on this question. From this welter of research a number of answers have emerged. While some of these answers have a decidedly “social” feel and center on features of an individual’s social environment, such as his or her social position and group memberships, others focus more on processes within individuals, such as their psychological needs, personality traits, and even their genetic make-up. At a glance, Figure 4.1 summarizes some of the most important factors that attract people to particular ideological positions. Below, I review these factors in more detail.

**Identifications and Relationships**

As one might expect, social relationships—both with other individuals and with groups—are a major influence on citizens’ ideological inclinations. In general, we tend to adopt the views of those we like, identify with, or otherwise have some social connection to. For example, psychological research suggests that activating a desire for closeness to a significant other leads individuals to align their own social and political opinions more closely with those of that significant other.
with the perceived views of the other. In turn, this increased similarity in opinions produces a “shared reality” that helps solidify the relationship in question.24

Research on political socialization—the process by which individuals learn about the political world and acquire their opinions and views from others—also illustrates the role of relational influences on the acquisition of ideological positions.25 In this vein, decades of research suggest that ideological positions are likely to be transmitted from parents to children, especially if both parents have similar beliefs and discuss politics frequently and if bonds within the family are close.26 Similarly, reference groups—groups that people use as a standard for evaluating themselves and their behavior—also have a strong influence on ideological affinity.27 That is, we tend to adopt the views of groups we relate to in some way. This was famously demonstrated by Theodore Newcomb in his study of female undergraduates at Bennington College.28 Newcomb’s undergraduates were largely conservative in their views when they first arrived at Bennington, having come from fairly well-off Eastern families. However, the Bennington environment itself—consisting of faculty and older students—was largely liberal. Accordingly, Newcomb’s undergraduate subjects moved further and further to the left the longer they were at Bennington, as they came to identify more with the campus social environment; the only exceptions were undergraduates who remained unusually close to their families while at college. Naturally, these reference-group effects are not limited to one’s college environment. They are also quite evident with respect to a number of more politically relevant group identities, such as one’s religion, region, or occupational category.29

These relational influences on ideology also appear to be stronger at some times than at others. In general, parents, peers, and reference groups have their strongest effects on ideological affinity during late adolescence and early adulthood, before a person’s identify is fully fleshed out.30 Moreover, the resulting identifications tend to persist as long as a person’s pattern of relationships with other individuals and groups does not change markedly. For example, this pattern was notably evident in Newcomb’s Bennington study: while Newcomb observed profound changes in his subjects’ attitudes over the course of college, follow-up interviews later in their adult lives revealed little additional change.

**Group Interests**

Another relational influence on ideological affinity follows from identification with groups, namely, the pursuit of those groups’ collective political interests. In general, a long line of theorizing—derived mainly from economics—suggests that individuals should make political choices that reflect self-interest. However, a wide variety of research suggests that personal self-interest has only minor effects on what people believe ideologically; that is, calculations
about one’s own economic interests or the interests of one’s family have little influence on political attitudes.31

Nevertheless, the perceived collective interests of the social groups one identifies with do tend to influence ideology, especially when people are highly aware of their identity as a member of particular group. Generally speaking, members of groups with low social status, less power, and/or fewer resources tend to be more egalitarian and left-wing in their political outlook, while members of more privileged groups gravitate toward the right.32

However, this effect is not a simple “reflective” one: not all individuals who identify with a group adopt group-interested ideological positions. In fact, for some members of less well-off groups, the group-interest motive may be countered by other motives, such as the need to avoid the uncertainty or insecurity that might come from challenging the political status quo.33 Thus, the effect of group interest—while often present—is rarely total.

Psychological Needs

Moving away from the level of broader social influences on ideological affinity, a great deal of research suggests that one’s preference for the left versus the right may be heavily shaped by various psychological needs. In particular, attraction to different positions on the left–right spectrum is not random but systematically rooted in one’s underlying level of comfort with uncertainty and threat. This body of work finds that strong needs for certainty and security correlate with greater conservatism—as support for the status quo allows individuals to stick with what is known, familiar, and safe—whereas weaker needs for certainty and security are associated with greater liberalism. This argument was first and perhaps most famously made by the authors of The Authoritarian Personality, who suggested that attraction to far-right ideological positions (as opposed to liberal or left-leaning positions) was driven by an “authoritarian personality” type consisting of nine interrelated tendencies, such as rigid moral conventionalism, aggressiveness, submission to idealized leaders, and a preoccupation with power and toughness.34 In turn, this intolerant type was explained using some of Sigmund Freud’s ideas about the management of anxiety. Specifically, Adorno and his colleagues argued that harsh childrearing led authoritarians to “repress” hostility toward their parents and other traditional authorities and “project” it outward onto the scapegoats and outsiders often targeted by right-wing political ideologies (e.g., minorities, those who desire social change). This need-based perspective was echoed by other early theorists as well.35

While these models—and the Adorno et al. model in particular—were later the subject of numerous theoretical and methodological criticisms,36 the notion that ideological affinity may be rooted in some underlying feature of psychological functioning has persisted. In this vein, psychologist Bob Altemeyer has updated the authoritarianism construct, relabeling it right-wing
authoritarianism and characterizing it more simply as a learned constellation of three attitudes: conventionalism, “authoritarian submission” to traditional social authorities, and “authoritarian aggression” toward disliked outgroups. More recently, John Jost and his colleagues—echoing the scholars mentioned above—have reiterated and provided much new evidence for the view that support for the right is associated with need for certainty and security, whereas support for the left is associated with greater tolerance for uncertainty and potential social danger.

Other psychological approaches have suggested that different sets of needs may account for preferences in different domains of political belief. As noted above, many researchers have suggested that ideology may consist of two dimensions—one corresponding to one’s preference for equality versus inequality and the other corresponding to one’s preference for openness versus order. In turn, these two dimensions may each be related to a distinct set of psychological needs. For example, Duckitt and Sibley argue that the equality dimension reflects one’s orientation toward social hierarchy and depends on the value one places on superiority, achievement, and power, while the openness dimension reflects one’s orientation toward traditional morality and social conformity and depends on the value one places on order and security in social life. Moreover, each dimension may be connected with a distinct worldview—either the extent to which one believes that the world is a competitive, violent place, in the case of the equality dimension, or the extent to which one believes that it is a dangerous place, in the case of the openness dimension. People who see the world as a dangerous place tend to prefer order, conformity, and security, which attracts them to conservative positions on social issues related to religion, gender, and social convention. In comparison, people who see the world as highly competitive place a premium on social hierarchy and social dominance, which attracts them to those aspects of conservatism which favor inequality, particularly in the economic realm. Thus, the needs for certainty and security highlighted by the “classic” models of ideological affinity reviewed earlier may actually be pertinent to only some of the political concerns that distinguish the left from the right—namely, those dealing with openness and freedom versus tradition and order.

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS

Another set of psychological approaches to ideology has focused on how individual differences in personality might account for variation in ideological sympathies. By “personality,” these approaches refer to set of characteristics possessed by a person that uniquely shape his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors across various situations. Speculation about links between personality traits and politics has long been a preoccupation among psychologists. For example, several of the scholars discussed earlier—including the authors of The Authoritarian Personality—were interested not only in how needs for
certainty and security might shape political sympathies, but also in how these needs might be shaped by enduring personality differences between individuals.\(^4^1\) However, the dominant framework for examining the relationship between personality and ideology in recent years has been the “Big Five” model of personality traits.\(^4^2\) Using analyses of personality adjectives found in everyday language, this model boils variation in personality down to five key dimensions. These include extroversion, one’s level of sociability and assertiveness; agreeableness, one’s level of altruism and concern for others; conscientiousness, one’s level of concern for social duty, responsibility, and impulse control; emotional stability, one’s level of even-temperedness or freedom from negative emotion; and openness to experience, one’s level of interest in novelty, complexity, and originality.

Numerous studies by psychologists and political scientists alike have examined relationships between these five dimensions and support for the left versus the right. This impressive body of work is reviewed in detail elsewhere in this volume,\(^4^3\) so I will touch only on its key findings. In this regard, the Big Five dimensions that have the most consistent relationships with ideological affinity are openness to experience and conscientiousness. While openness is typically associated with greater support for the left, conscientiousness is usually associated with greater support for the right.\(^4^4\) The relationships between each of these dimensions and ideology are not negligible in size; indeed, they are similar in magnitude to the relationships between ideology and key demographic variables like education and income. In contrast, the relationships between the other three Big Five dimensions and ideology are far less consistent across studies, and they also tend to vary across issue domains (i.e., economic issues versus social issues) and social groups (e.g., blacks versus whites).\(^4^5\)

**The Role of Genetics**

Finally, researchers in a number of disciplines have begun to explore the possibility that ideological sympathies may at least in part be genetically shaped and transmitted.\(^4^6\) This view is a sharp departure from most work on ideology in public-opinion research, which has traditionally assumed that ideological affinity is socially learned from parents, peers, and important social groups. This line of work generally relies on what is known as the “classic twin design” in order to estimate what proportions of the variation among individuals in political opinion is due to genes, common environmental influences (i.e., those shared by members of a family), and unique environmental influences (i.e., those not shared by family members).\(^4^7\) The method does this by comparing the attitudes of identical twins, who effectively share 100 percent of their genetic makeup; and fraternal twins, who share roughly 50 percent of one another’s genetic heritage. This fixed difference between identical and fraternal twins in genetic relatedness, along with the assumption that a given
pair of twins—whether identical or fraternal—is subject to the same level of environmental influence, allows the researcher to tease apart the relative impact of genes and environment.

Studies using this and other related methods have found strikingly large effects of genes on ideological opinions. Specifically, some 40 percent to 50 percent of the variability in left–right political opinions among individuals appears to be attributable to genetic differences as opposed to differences in social environment.48 Interestingly, however, genetics does not appear to contribute to differences in partisanship, although it may have an influence on the strength of people’s partisan identifications.49 Although much work remains to be done, research does not suggest that the influence of genes on political attitudes is direct; rather, genes are believed to influence intermediate phenotypes or observable traits related to social behavior (e.g., orientations toward threat or social order), which then affects specific attitudes in the domain of politics (e.g., social conservatism). Thus, while social influences on ideological affinity are undoubtedly important, at least some portion of what people believe politically may in fact be linked to their genetic makeup. Future work will need to build on this promising new perspective on the origins of ideological affinity, particularly with respect to the question of exactly which intermediate characteristics account for the relationship between genetic differences and differences in ideology.

When Do People “Use” Ideology?

Thus far, I have discussed ideology primarily in terms of attraction to particular ideological identities or positions along the left–right spectrum. However, as noted at the outset, ideologies are belief systems. Besides some crowning posture or identity—like liberalism or conservatism—they consist of an interlocking web of opinions, values, and interpretations of existing social reality that go along with that posture. For example, an identification with the political left implies a wide range of issue opinions across a variety of domains—support for welfare spending, support for gay rights, support for diplomacy over the use of force in international relations, and so on. Moreover, it implies support for general value postures (e.g., preferences for equality and self-direction) as well as certain beliefs about the nature of the social world (e.g., inequality stems from structural factors like discrimination as opposed to an individual lack of ability or effort). Indeed, as we have seen, the general ideological label a person adopts typically has consequences for their opinions about specific issues: those who identify themselves conservatives tend to adopt conservative issue positions, while those who identify themselves as liberals tend to adopt liberal issue positions.

But where do these broader belief packages come from? Public opinion researchers have long noted that the sheer force of logic is not sufficient to explain why certain issue positions get linked together as part of an
ideological whole; as just one example, there is no apparent reason why opposition to legal abortion should go together with support for lower taxes as part of the contemporary “conservative” belief package. As such, most scholars have come to regard ideologies as products of convention—or more specifically, the culture of the groups that share the ideology. Nevertheless, most perspectives on ideology suggest that the social activities which give rise to ideological content are disproportionately the province of narrow elites within the groups that share different ideologies—usually powerful and unrepresentative ones. This emphasis is perhaps most evident in the classical sociological tradition and in Marxist approaches to social science, both of which have argued—albeit with different evaluative implications, depending on the writer—that the discursive content of ideologies should disproportionately represent the interests of powerful groups and justify states of affairs the latter benefit from. Other approaches have placed a similar emphasis on the construction of belief packages by small, highly involved segments of the population. However, in these models, the focus is less on the role of dominant groups whose interests color the content of ideologies and more on the role of the “political elites” discussed earlier—the politicians, activists, and media figures whose activity develops the constellations of positions, values, and interpretations of reality that make up different ideological positions. From this perspective, groups of political elites in competing political parties coalesce around particular interests and values and construct belief packages reflecting those interests and values. These opposed packages of opinions and positions then serve to psychologically “anchor” the ends of the left–right spectrum in a particular context; they make up the ideological “menu” from which members of the mass public typically make their political choices (e.g., votes).

The flip side of this notion of “elite opinion leadership” is that the beliefs held by citizens at the mass level are typically not constructed by the citizens themselves. Rather, the content associated with different ideological positions is acquired by members of the mass public when they “take cues” about what to believe from political figures who share their basic partisan or ideological identifications. Thus, for most people, the packages of issue opinions, values, and views associated with a particular ideological posture are learned from those more highly involved in politics. This raises an important question: to what extent does the content associated with particular ideological positions fully diffuse to the broader public? By and large, decades of research suggest that most citizens do not learn the full set of “correct” opinions and views associated with the ideological identity they claim, even when they do claim a left–right position. On one hand, at least 66 percent of individuals are willing to place themselves on the left–right spectrum and label themselves as liberals, conservatives, or something in between. On the other hand, most citizens—even if they do adopt an ideological position—fail to pick up the broader systems of opinions and views associated with particular ideological positions in elite discussion.
Perhaps the most important demonstration of this incomplete learning of ideology was provided by Philip Converse in a famous essay on “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” In this essay, Converse reviewed findings taken from large surveys of American political elites and everyday citizens conducted during the 1950s. To begin with, Converse demonstrated that most members of the general public showed what political scientists refer to as a low “level of conceptualization”—that is, only a minority typically characterized political parties and candidates in terms of ideological categories like liberalism and conservatism. Similarly, most people were not able to explain the philosophical differences between conservatism and liberalism, and they were not able to accurately indicate which issue positions “go along” with each of these two ideological categories. Moreover, most citizens showed relatively low levels of ideological constraint, i.e., they do not take consistently liberal or consistently conservative positions across different issues. Finally, the issue opinions of most citizens showed little stability over time—that is, they tend to fluctuate randomly over time, which is not what we would expect if opinions were more deeply anchored in an overarching ideological posture like liberalism or conservatism. Importantly, in each of these cases, Converse found that his samples of political leaders showed far more ideological sophistication: on average, they revealed a higher level of conceptualization, they understood the meaning of ideological labels better, and their issue opinions showed greater constraint and stability over time.

To Converse, this suggested that the issue opinions of a large portion of the general public were effectively “non-attitudes.” That is, in most cases, survey respondents were neither interested in nor informed about the issues they were queried on, and they definitely did not use a common left–right standard when making judgments about them. Accordingly, they offered off-the-cuff, “doorstep” opinions that showed little structure, ideological or otherwise. Although there has been some debate about whether the public’s apparent ideological innocence is really an artifact of imperfect measurement and about the extent to which the average citizen makes greater use of ideology than in the past, much of the research in this area has followed Converse in concluding that most citizens’ political preferences are not structured by ideology. Other lines of work have demonstrated a similar lack of ideological structure in citizens’ opinions. For instance, to refer back to an example from earlier, recall that several researchers have noted a lack of concordance between symbolic and operational ideology—that is, there are many citizens who label themselves as “conservatives” while taking issue positions that lean toward the left.

Naturally, the conclusions reached by Converse and others have somewhat negative implications for democracy, as they suggest that much of the citizenry is too disengaged from politics to form “real” opinions about crucial issues and organize their opinions in an ideological fashion. This has led many scholars to ask what factors allow citizens to think in ideological terms and
adopt opinions that are consistent with the ideological positions they claim. At the mass level, the main factor governing the acquisition of ideological content is exposure to flows of information from leading political figures, which is highest among those with a strong interest in politics, the highly educated, those who see themselves as politically competent, and members of relatively privileged social groups.62

Individuals who receive a good deal of political information over time eventually build up elaborate political knowledge structures in long-term memory, leading to the development of political expertise.63 As a result, highly informed citizens are more likely to have learned what goes with what politically, i.e., the specific issue positions and views about the world that go along with being a liberal, a conservative, or something in between. In turn, this knowledge results in patterns of thinking and opinion which more closely resemble those of political leaders. So, for example, well-informed citizens are more likely to make active use of concepts like liberalism and conservatism in explaining differences between parties and candidates,64 and they show higher levels of ideological constraint in their opinions toward different issues.65 They are also more likely to possess operational issue positions that match their symbolic ideological identifications.66 Moreover, it even appears to be the case that the psychological needs commonly linked to ideology—such as needs for certainty and security—predict differences in ideological sympathies only among those who possess a great deal of political information.67 Thus, information appears to be central not only to the learning of the full range of content associated with particular ideological positions, but also to the ability to “choose” the ideological position that best satisfies underlying psychological needs.

On the whole, the sheer volume of data suggesting that the well informed are more likely to think and make judgments in ways that reflect a mastery of ideological content has had a profound effect on how public opinion researchers understand the phenomenon of ideology. Indeed, even a brief look at the literature on the topic makes it clear that researchers have adopted a largely information-based perspective on the use of ideology: the consensus view is that a given citizen will think about political actors in an ideological way and adopt an ideologically consistent set of opinions to the extent that he or she has successfully received political information and stored it away in long-term memory in the form of an organized knowledge structure. While this focus on information has greatly improved our understanding of when ideology becomes relevant to the political behavior of the average citizen, it is not without its hazards. In particular, it sidesteps the question of whether citizens also have to be motivated to use political information in certain ways in order for that information to result in “ideological” patterns of thought and judgment.

I return to this key point below. At this juncture, though, it should be noted that the poor mastery of ideological content that follows from a lack of
information does not make citizens incapable of being political. In this respect, other orientations that are not strictly ideological but which have some political content or relevance—like values and social group memberships—may serve many of the same functions as the more complex ideological belief systems discussed above: they provide cues about what positions to take on various political issues, justify one state of affairs over another, and so on. Among others, these “proxies for ideology” include core political values such as egalitarianism, moral traditionalism, and self-reliance, which even information-poor citizens may be able to use in making political judgments. Similarly, much evidence suggests that reference groups—like one’s social class, racial or ethnic group, or religious affiliation—can be used as cues about what positions to take or how to vote by individuals at all levels of information. Finally, standard surveys may not be able to detect discursive frameworks that differ from the ones offered by political leaders. Since these techniques are best used to detect “ideology” in the conventional left–right sense, they may miss idiosyncratic belief systems that are as elaborate and internally consistent as those offered by elites and which serve all of the important functions of ideology (e.g., organizing different opinions together under common themes, justifying political action, explaining the world).

Indeed, in-depth interviews of citizens with low-to-average levels of political information have shown that normal conversation can reveal coherent “ideological” understandings of political reality that nevertheless depart from the left–right framework used by political elites.

**Information, Motivation, and the Use of Ideology**

As noted above, public-opinion researchers generally regard the use of ideology as being an informational problem. As a wide range of research has shown, citizens are more likely to think about politics in ideological terms and express ideologically consistent opinions about issues if they possess larger stores of political information. To the extent that citizens possess enough information to understand what goes with what ideologically, they are assumed to use that information. However, in psychology, a growing body of work suggests that key needs, goals, and wants determine if and how prior information is used to make judgments. This trend suggests that public opinion research on ideology might benefit from a closer look at the role of motivation—that is, a closer look at how people’s needs or goals shape their use of political information pertinent to the content of ideology. In a series of recent studies, I have attempted to fill this gap by proposing that information is more likely to predict ideologically guided thinking and judgment when citizens are motivated to use political information in certain ways.

But what motives lead citizens to use information in an ideological way? My studies suggest that the critical motive is the need to use information for evaluative purposes. Specifically, I argue that the relationship between
information and reliance on ideology should depend on factors that
strengthen people’s tendency to evaluate people and things as “good” or
“bad.” Since ideology provides an overarching framework for the evaluation
of many different objects, information about the content of various ideo-
logical positions should be of greater importance to those motivated to make
evaluative judgments about the things they encounter—regardless of whether
this motivation comes from personality traits, characteristics of the situation
the individual finds himself or herself in, or a general interest in politics.73

This point leads to a simple hypothesis: citizens who possess large stores of
political information will be particularly likely to think about politics in ideo-
logical terms and express ideologically consistent issue positions when they
also approach politics with a high level of evaluative motivation. The neces-
sary “motive to evaluate” may come from a number of sources. For example,
these include individual differences in personality like the need to evaluate,
i.e., the extent to which an individual is motivated to spontaneously form
evaluations of experiences, ideas, and social objects as either “good” or
“bad.”74 While the need to evaluate is a very general motivation that encour-
ages people to form more opinions—and stronger opinions—across a variety
domains, individuals with a high need to evaluate are particularly likely to
be politically opinionated.75 Other potential sources of evaluative motivation
are more specific to politics, such as the extent to which the political domain
itself is seen as important and relevant to the self (i.e., personal
involvement).76

Regardless of its source, a motive to evaluate things should have important
effects on how individuals think about politics and make judgments about
political issues. As we have seen, ideology provides a common reference point
that helps citizens reach a consistent set of conclusions about the nature of the
social world and how to confront various political issues. Moreover, having a
clear ideological position may simplify important political choices that are
fundamentally evaluative in nature, like which party is the best one to join or
which candidate is the best to vote for. This suggests that the understanding
of ideology provided by political information may be more useful to those
who feel the need to have opinions about the things they encounter. Since
ideology offers a handy mental rubric for the evaluation of multiple issues,
candidates, and political questions, information about the content of the left–
right distinction should be more useful to people who want to form opinions.
Consequently, well-informed citizens who are also high in evaluative motiva-
tion may be particularly inclined to rely on ideology, increasing the extent to
which their political thinking is colored by ideological categories and the
degree to which their issue opinions are ideologically consistent with one
another.

In contrast, information may make little difference among citizens who
lack a strong evaluative motive. Instead of relying on their knowledge of the
content of ideology, these individuals may make political judgments in a more
fragmented, episodic way. As such, their thinking and opinions may be influenced less by a common ideological reference point than by whatever is salient at the time. An overall representation of this model can be found in Figure 4.2; the dashed arrow pointing from evaluative motivation to the connection between information and the use of ideology indicates the aforementioned role of evaluative motivation in turning the influence of information on ideological thinking and judgment “on” and “off.”

Using data from four large surveys of American adults, I have provided a consistent body of evidence for this hypothesis. In particular, in several studies, I have used a short measure of the need to evaluate to assess evaluative motivation in terms of individual personality differences. Analyses using this measure have repeatedly shown that politically well-informed survey respondents are more likely to think about politics in ideological terms and express ideologically consistent issue opinions when they are also high in the need to evaluate. For example, using data from the 1998 and 2000 American National Election Studies (ANES), I found that information more strongly predicted ideological constraint—the degree to which one expresses consistently liberal or consist-

![Diagram](image-url)  
*Figure 4.2 Information, Motivation, and the Use of Ideology: A General Model.*
ent conservative issue positions—among those high in the need to evaluate.\textsuperscript{77} Figure 4.3 presents the results of this analysis for the 1998 ANES Pilot.

Moreover, in the 2000 and 2004 ANES, I have shown that expertise was more strongly associated with a tendency to evaluate ideologically antagonistic groups, candidates, and parties in opposite ways among those with a high need to evaluate.\textsuperscript{78} That is, the well informed were more “consistent” in their evaluations of competing actors—for example, evaluating conservatives and Republicans positively if they evaluated liberals and Democrats negatively—if they were also high in the need to evaluate. I have found similar patterns with respect to other outcomes indicative of a strong reliance on ideology. For instance, in another set of analyses using the 2000 ANES, I demonstrated that well-informed survey respondents are more likely to explain the differences between the Democratic and Republican parties in ideological terms when they are also high in the need to evaluate.\textsuperscript{79}

In a more recent study, I have found similar results using other variables that should encourage individuals to form opinions.\textsuperscript{80} As noted earlier, factors specific to the political domain—such as personal involvement in politics—should also strengthen the relationship between information and reliance on ideology. Accordingly, using data from the 2004 ANES and a national survey of my own construction, I found that political information more strongly predicted ideological constraint among respondents who were highly interested in politics and who indicated that their political attitudes were central to their sense of who they are. Similarly, a second indicator of personal involvement in politics—strength of partisanship—had a similar effect: information more strongly predicted constraint among those who identified as “strong” Democrats or Republicans.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4_3.png}
\caption{Information and the Need to Evaluate as Predictors of Ideological Constraint (source: based on Christopher M. Federico and Monica Schneider, “Political Expertise and the Use of Ideology: Moderating Effects of Evaluative Motivation,” Public Opinion Quarterly 71 (2007): 221–252. Data for the graph are from the 1998 ANES Pilot).}
\end{figure}
Conclusion

As Philip Converse noted almost a half-century ago, ideologies have often “served as primary exhibits for the doctrine that what is important to study cannot be measured and that what can be measured is not important to study.” Since then, public-opinion research has made considerable progress not only in overcoming the difficulties inherent in studying ideology, but also in reinforcing the importance of ideology as an explanatory concept. In this chapter, I have attempted to provide the reader with an overview of this body of work. Specifically, I have tried to address the questions of what ideology is, which social and psychological factors attracts citizens to one ideological posture rather than another, and when citizens use the full range of content associated with various ideological postures in order to think about the political world and form opinions about major political topics.

As we have seen, ideologies—defined here as belief systems that reflect some group’s understanding of the social world and its preferences about how that world should be ordered—are clearly relevant to mass opinion in certain respects. Ideologies of the left and right play a key role in the organization of opinion-holding and debate among political leaders and other elites. Moreover, under the influence of various identifications and interests, psychological needs and traits, and perhaps even their genetic inheritance, most members of the general public are sufficiently attracted to one ideological posture or another to place themselves on the left–right spectrum as liberals, conservatives, or something in between. However, at the mass level, far fewer citizens actually adopt the full range of views and opinions that “go along” with these postures. In an effort to explain this state of relative ideological innocence, researchers have focused in particular on the role of information received from political leaders, repeatedly observing that well-informed citizens are more likely to think about politics in ideological terms and express opinions that are ideologically consistent with one another. Building on this perspective, my own work suggests that the motivation to use information in a specifically evaluative way may also matter, such that well-informed citizens are more likely to think about politics ideologically and express ideologically consistent issue opinions when they are also strongly driven to form opinions of things as good or bad. Thus, while ideology plays a key role in the organization of political discussion in the political system as a whole, its influence in the political lives of individual citizens depends heavily on how much they know about politics and how they are motivated to use that knowledge.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Adam Berinsky, John Jost, and Jaime Napier for their comments and suggestions.


22. Duckitt and Sibley, “A Dual Process Model.”

23. Stimson, Tides of Consent.

24. For a discussion, see Jost et al., “Political Ideology,” p. 322.


30. Alwin et al., Political Attitudes Over the Lifespan; Sears and Levy, “Childhood and Adult Political Development.”


33. Jost et al., “Political Ideology.”


37. Ibid.

38. Jost et al., “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition.”


40. See Mondak and Hibbing, “Personality and Public Opinion,” this volume (Chapter 10).

41. Jost et al., “Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition.”

42. Mondak and Hibbing, this volume.

43. Ibid.


45. Gerber et al., “Personality and Political Attitudes.”

46. For additional review, see Mondak and Hibbing, this volume.


48. Ibid.

55. Erikson and Tedin, American Public Opinion; Stimson, Tides of Consent.
61. Stimson, Tides of Consent.
64. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems.”
65. See Delli Carpini and Keeter, What Americans Know About Politics. While these results suggest that most citizens do not learn the content of various ideologies in all their glorious detail, they should not be taken as a sign that the poorly informed are utterly devoid of ideological understanding. Rather, it is merely the case that those less exposed to political information flows understand and use the content of ideology less competently and with less elaboration than those who receive more information; on this point, see Jost et al., “Political Ideology.”
66. Stimson, Tides of Consent.
68. Jost et al., “Political Ideology.”
69. See Feldman, “Values, Ideology, and the Structure of Political Attitudes.” Here, “values” should be distinguished from ideologies in that the latter are usually more abstract and encompassing. In this respect, ideologies are usually thought of as tying together multiple values into a larger posture.
70. Berelson et al., Voting; Campbell et al., The American Voter.
71. Robert E. Lane, Political Ideology (New York: Free Press, 1962). There is one caveat worth mentioning in the context of this argument: it is not clear that all individuals who fail to show an understanding of the discursive content associated with the left–right distinction are in fact using their “own” ideologies. If this were the case, we would observe substantial attitude stability even in the absence of left–right understanding. However, such stability is rarely observed, and it tends to be higher among those who are politically well informed; on this point, see Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems,” and Zaller, The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.
74. Ibid.
79. Federico and Schneider, “Political Expertise and the Use of Ideology.”
80. Federico and Hunt, “Political Expertise, Political Interest, and Reliance on Ideology.”