Does Ideology Matter?

An Examination of Attitudes Towards Tech Companies

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**Introduction**

Americans can experience attitudes (and ambivalence) towards a variety of political objects (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012, p. 2). One of those objects is tech companies, namely social media companies like Twitter, Facebook, and Google. Since their inception in the 1990s, tech companies “for all intents and purposes, become political powerhouses in their own rights” (Herrera and Sakr 2014, p. 13). Technology companies have impacted billions of people’s lives in positive ways, such as providing low-cost tools for organizing political protests (Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheafer 2013) and negative ways, such as being a platform to spread misinformation from Russia (Satarianao 2019). Social media has a wide variety of functions, but it has been a political object that people can engage with others about politics in discussion, follow the latest news, and/or livestream political debates.

According to recent Pew Research findings in the American Trends Panel (Smith 2018), technology companies and social media companies are viewed as biased. Their findings indicated that “72% of the public thinks it likely that social media platforms actively censor political views that those companies find objectionable” (Smith 2018, p. 2). Likewise, “43% of Americans think major technology firms support the views of liberals over conservatives, while 33% believe these companies support the views of men over women” (Smith 2018). Most notably, Republicans are mistrusting of technology and social media companies. They write that “85% of Republicans and Republican leaning independents think it likely that social media sites intentionally censor political viewpoints, with 54% saying this is very likely. And a majority of Republicans (64%) “think major technology companies as a whole support the views of liberals over conservative” (Smith 2018). These findings are not surprising given the vocal distrust from Republican politicians and the geographical and cultural difference of technology and social media companies being situated in states like California, New York, and in more liberal areas like Austin, Texas. Trump has also showed that he is mistrusting of technology companies because he recently directing federal agencies to explore ‘all regulatory and legislative solutions to protect free speech’” (Qtd in Romm 2019).

Nonetheless, Pew Research findings contradict the widely held notions of Republican economic policy of less regulation for private business (Brock 1986) when put into context of attitudes towards technology and social media companies. For instance, the findings indicated that:

Just over half (57%) of Democrats and Democratic leaners think major technology companies should be regulated more heavily than they are now, but that share falls to 44% among Republicans and Republican leaners…12% of Republicans say these companies should be regulated less than they are currently. That view is shared by 7% of Democrat (Smith 2018, p. 7).

As I will argue in this paper, the findings that Republicans are mistrusting of technology companies may be tied to something else besides partisanship –- ideology. The Pew Research center’s study was largely concerned with attitudes of Republicans and Democrats, but the study does not make a distinction between conservatives and republicans or liberals and Democrats. For instance, their findings are clear to point out that Republicans mistrust technology companies, but some questions are directly asking about bias towards liberals or conservatives, which is tied to ideology and not partisanship. In this research project on the matter of public opinion, I assert that ideology (I.e. their worldview) may be a driving force in the attitudes of respondents, rather than partisanship (I.e. affective orientation). Since this study began with interest in the opinions of Republicans/Conservatives, they will receive the most attention given the peculiar findings from Pew Research. This research questions below will be empirically tested with two regression models and comparing the two. My two research questions are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** Why are Republicans in favor of regulating social media companies?

**Research Question 2**: Is ideology impacting attitudes toward tech companies among respondents?

**Literature Review & Theory**

**Partisanship vs Ideology**

One of the most prevailing and cited conceptual definitions of partisanship is from Campbell (1960) in *The American Voter.* Campbell (1960) writes that partisanship is an “individual’s affective orientation toward an important group object in his environment” (p. 121). This school of thought is generally known as the “Michigan model,” due to subsequent scholars supporting this way of thinking for decades (Bartles 2000). Supporters of the Michigan model often assert that “most Americans have this sense of attachment with one party or another. And for the individual who does, the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior” (Campbell 1960). Partisanship is argued to be the biggest factor how voters see the political world (Bartles 2002 ; Levendusky 2009). In Westwood et al (2018), they believe that partisanship exerts a stronger psychological bond than affiliation with racial, religious, linguistic or ethnic groups.

Ideology has similarities to partisanship, even to the extent that there is a positive correlation between self-placement on both partisan and ideological scales (Levitan and Miler , 1979 ; Norpoth and Lodge 1985). However, ideology is more complex and understood as a worldview or a way to structure one’s beliefs and navigate through political issues. One of the most cited definitions of ideology is cited by Converse in the seminal piece, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” where he writes that ideology (or one’s belief system), is a “configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence” (1964, p. 207). Levendusky (2009) also views ideology as the relationship of ideas and constructs where as “ideology is a complex cluster of ideas encompassing not just a set of issue positions but also the connections between the issues themselves (e.g., how is one’s position on abortion related to one’s position on tax cuts)” (p. 4). Due to the complex nature of ideology, scholars such as Luttbeg and Gant (1985) wrote that survey respondents cannot distinguish between ideology and partisanship and cannot articulate ideology as argued in earlier research by Converse (1964). They further wrote that “respondent articulation of the words liberal or conservative in response to the "likes/dislikes" questions used since 1952 in the Survey Research Center…the most commonly used measure does not directly assess the ability of the public to use the words liberal and conservative in a meaningful way” (p. 81).

However, this is not to say that one’s ideology does not have an impact in people’s lives or shape how they view the world and others in competing ideological groups (E.g., Conservatives vs. Liberals). Jost (2006) argues that as a simple one-dimensional spectrum of left-right, ideology serves well because people in the United States freely talk about how liberal or conservative they are without qualifications. Ideology can also be a factor in how group sentiment and social attitudes are formed developing into a sense of solidarity (Schweitzer 1944, 418). According to Jost, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003), psychological needs to manage uncertainty and threat consistently give rise to politically conservative (more than liberal or moderate) opinions. This perceived threat is ultimately judged by their evaluation of political objects and actors as “good” or “bad” (Jarvis and Petty 1996). In the context of technology and social media companies, it would make sense that Republicans would be more in favor of regulating companies that have a perceived threat to their political affiliation or worldview. Other factors could include priming from political figures like Donald Trump or priming effects from media sources; however, the data available for this research project does not have data to support these claims or assertions.

**Theoretical Motivations Behind Regulating Technology and Social Media Companies**

The crux of this research project is that republicans are generally in favor of less government inference, less regulation, and are in favor of free market solutions (Brock 1986). In a question asked in the American National Election Studies (Table 1 and Table 2), Republicans were less likely to support government regulation for businesses because they did not believe it was good for society. These same beliefs are also held by conservatives.

Table 1. Proportions of Government Regulation Question in ANES for Party Identification

How much government regulation of business is good for society? [V162186]

Party Democrat Independent Republican

A Great Deal 9.638554 4.815133 2.995169

A lot 17.028112 11.521926 5.314010

Moderate 62.248996 62.166810 56.425121

A little 9.397590 18.744626 31.594203

None at all 1.686747 2.751505 3.671498

N 1245 1163 1035

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Source: ANES 2016

Proportions calcuatated by column.

Table 2. Proportions of Government Regulation Question in ANES for Ideology

How much government regulation of business is good for society? [V162186]

Ideology Liberal Independent Conservative

A Great Deal 10.7142857 4.1720991 2.7141645

A lot 19.9134199 10.4302477 4.8346056

Moderate 58.8744589 66.7535854 56.4037320

A little 9.7402597 16.1668840 32.4851569

None at all 0.7575758` 2.4771838 3.5623410

N 924 767 1179

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Source: ANES 2016

Proportions calcuatated by column.

From the findings from the 2016 ANES, one would predict that Republicans and Conservatives would not be in favor of social media companies because they are private businesses, as opposed to government entities. Yet this is not the case in the Pew Research findings in 2018. What theoretical reasons may explain what is happening in the attitudes of Republicans and Conservatives? According to their findings in 2012, “83% of conservative Republicans say regulation is harmful, up from 67% last year. A majority of moderate and liberal Republicans (59%) continue to say that government regulation of business usually does more harm than good, little changed from March 2011. I believe that there are two potential theories that can explain why Republicans/Conservatives favor regulation of technology and social media companies: Intra-Attitude Theory and Moral Foundations Theory.

**Cognitive Dissonance / Intra - Attitudes Theory**

In the seminal book, The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion, Zaller and Feldman (1992) write that people carry conflicting considerations on different issues. That being said, the first theory that may explain the conflicting attitudes and considerations from Republicans is cognitive dissonance theory, or more specifically, intra-attitudes theory, which is an update of the theory founded by Festinger in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957). Cognitive dissonance theory is important to public opinion because it is “the determinants of attitudes and beliefs, the internalization of values, the consequences of decisions, the effects of disagreement among persons, and other important psychological processes” (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019). Intra-attitudes theory builds upon cognitive dissonance theory that “individuals do not necessarily resolve the conflicts between attitude elements. They may even incorporate this conflict as an inherent characteristic of attitude” (Meffert, Guge, and Lodge, 2004, p. 64). According to Fabrigar, MacDonald, and Wegener (2014), an overall attitude toward an object might be influenced by evaluations of many specific attributes of the object or emotions associated with the object. Therefore, one could technically refer to many situations as involving inter-attitudinal structure even when only one object is considered (n.d.).

Attitudes towards technology and social media companies are also contradictory since technology and social media companies are part of so many American’s daily. According to the Pew Research findings, “74% of Americans say major technology companies and their products and services have had more of a positive than a negative impact on their own lives” (Smith 2018). This implies that Republicans and Democrats can be in favor of regulatory policies and even believe that technology and social media companies have too much power, but their behavior says otherwise. Behavior refers to the actions and responses to the attitude object. In my analysis, I will look further into the relationship between attitudes towards technology and social media companies and their social media use.

**Moral Foundations Theory**

There are notable questions on the American Trends Panel that directly ask questions related to ethics. For instance, one of the questions states, compared to other companies, do you think major technology companies are: more ethical, less ethical, or about as ethical as other companies? Likewise there was a question that asked, “How much of the time do you think you can trust major technology companies to do what is right?: From the results of the Pew Research findings, Republicans believed technology and social media companies to be less honest and ethical. To build upon those results from Pew, moral foundations theory may serve useful.

Moral foundations theory refers to the moral intuitions that individual may have and is theorized that all people have moral systems that organize their attitudes and beliefs, and even ideology. (Haidt & Graham 2007; Haidt & Joseph 2004). Moral systems are understood as “Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms” (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009, p. 1030). In many ways, moral systems share similarities to ideology. Some of the foundations include care for others, fairness, loyalty towards in-groups, authority (or recognizing hierarchies), and the last is purity. A sixth one, liberty, has been discussed but is not widely agreed upon (Smith and Baroni 2017). According to Haidth and Graham (2007), extremely liberal and extremely conservatives were all concerned with harm and fairness, but ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity, were more concerned with conservatives. While this may complicate the intra-attitudes theory, it may support that idea that conservatives sense a feeling of unfairness of technology and social media companies because of the threat to their ingroup loyalties. To counteract this sense of unfairness, conservatives’ resort to government bodies (authority) to resolve the issues that affect their ingroup.

**Data**

The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization established in 2004. The dataset used for this paper was collected by the Pew Research Center and was published through the efforts of the American Trends Panel created in 2004. The American Trends Panel is a representative panel consisting of randomly selected U.S. adults. All of the data used in this paper was published within the report titled “Public Attitudes Toward Technology Companies” that was published in 2018 (Smith 2018). The distribution of the left and right spectrum is evenly divided, and the dataset is fairly rich and diverse with survey questions that are not asked in other major surveys like the ANES. However, it is important to note that the American Trends Panel is only descriptive and does not have any tests of correlation or any regression analyses. In the table below (Table 3), I have included summary statistics to give an idea of the data that was used for this research project. Since there was not a middle ground to compare for both groups that was meaningful, I recoded the party and ideological variables to keep them even. Albeit, the sample size for ideology is smaller than partisanship.

Table 3. Summary Statistics of Republicans/Conservatives and Democrats/Liberals

**N\* Mean Median Standard Deviation**

**Ideology\*\* 2926**  3.01 3 1.13

Very Conservative 425

Conservative 1065

Liberal 947

Very Liberal 525

**Party ID\*\*\* 4494** 1.67 2 1.23

Republican 1209

Republican Lean 752

Democrat Lean 826

Democrat 1707

Source: Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel (2018)

\* Note: NA’s were removed from this research project. Moderates were removed from Ideology to compare to the Partisanship categories more easily.

\*\* 0 is coded as Very Conservative…3 is coded as Very Liberal.

\*\*\* 0 is coded as Republican…3 is coded as Democrat

Table 4. Breakdown of the overlap between Party Identification and Ideology

**Party ID** Republican Lean Republican Lean Democrat Democrat

**Ideology\***

Very Cons. 263 108 17 29

Conservative 649 281 37 85

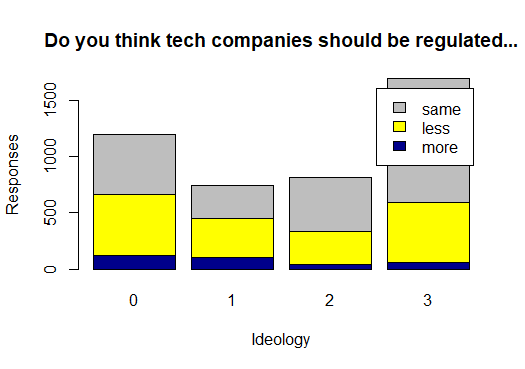
Liberal 15 22 207 696

Very Liberal 11 12 134 363

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** Source: Pew Research Center, American Trends Panel (2018)

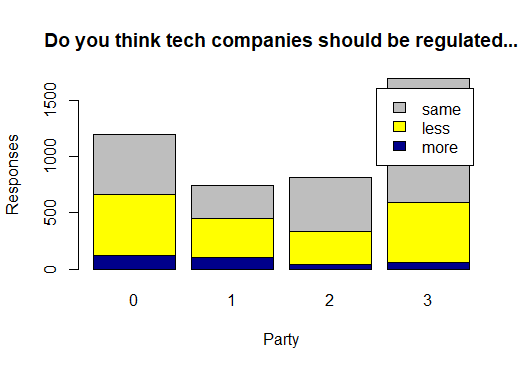
\*Moderates were removed from Ideology to compare to the Partisanship categories.

Figure 1. \* Breakdown of the Regulation Question in the American Trends Panel for Ideology



\* 0 is coded as Very Conservative…3 is coded as Very Liberal.

Figure 2. Breakdown of the Regulation Question in the American Trends Panel for Ideology \*



\* 0 is coded as Republican…3 is coded as Democrat

**Method**

The tables (Table 1 and Table 2) did not give this project much insight about the relationship between the regulation question, ideology, and partisanship, but to determine the relationship between attitudes and one’s political identity, multiple types of analyses will be used. Before the first and second stage, preliminary tests of correlation will occur. The first stage of this research paper is to determine the relationship between the regulation question, ideology, and partisanship. The second stage is to add more independent variables to see if certain variables have more strength than others because the questions related to trust, ethics, and fairness would support the moral foundations theory. It might also provide more insight about the differences between ideology and partisanship in the context of this study. The variables are included below, but each variable is described more in detail in the appendix of this research paper.

**Stage 1**

1. Regulation <- Party Identification
2. Regulation <- Ideology

Compare

**Stage 2**

1. Regulation <- Party Identification + Ethics + Trust + Lib/Con Pref
2. Regulation <- Ideology + Ethics + Trust + Lib/Con Pref

Compare

**Results**

To begin the statistical analysis, I calculated the correlations for Party Identification and Ideology with five different independent variables (Table 5).

Table 5. Correlation Table

Regulation Ethics Trust Lib/Con Pref

**Party ID**

**Pearson’s r** 0.20 0.008 -0.05 0.37

**p-value**  < 2.2e-16 0.5532 0.001 < 2.2e-16

**Ideology**

Pearson’s r 0.27 0.06 -0.03 0.38

**p-value <**2.2e-16 0.0006 0.040 < 2.2e-16

The preliminary results indicate that there is a stronger relationship between the question regarding regulation and ideology as opposed to partisanship. Furthermore, there is a slightly higher correlation between the Lib/Con Pref variable when compared to ideology as opposed to ideology. It is not surprising because the question directly asks respondents if technology companies are biased against certain ideological groups. Continuing with this project, I regressed ideology and partisanship on the regulation variable.

**Hypothesis**: I expect there to be a stronger relationship between ideology than partisanship.

Table 6. Results for Regressing Party on Regulation Question\*

**Coefficients:**

Intercept 12.91976

Party 1.05396

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Residual standard error: 6.155 on 4449 degrees of freedom

Multiple R-squared: 0.04264, Adjusted R-squared: 0.04243

F-statistic: 198.2 on 1 and 4449 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16

\*Regulation recoded Regulation 1 is 20 (more), 2 is 0 (less), 3 is 10 (same)

Table 7. Results for Regressing Ideology on Regulation Question\*

**Coefficients:**

(Intercept) 12.0485

Ideology 1.7920

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Residual standard error: 6.094 on 2927 degrees of freedom

Multiple R-squared: 0.07166, Adjusted R-squared: 0.07134

F-statistic: 225.9 on 1 and 2927 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16

\*Regulation recoded Regulation 1 is 20 (more), 2 is 0 (less), 3 is 10 (same)

From the results above, the variance in both analyses (), are low because it only explains less than 8% percent of statistical model. Nonetheless, there appears to be a slightly bigger for ideology. The coefficients were both positive, which does still support the hypothesis. The next step is to add other variables to see if there is any difference in the strength.

Table 8. Results for Regressing Party & Other Variables on Regulation Question \*

**Coefficients:**

(Intercept) 7.15849

Party 1.05049

Trust 1.97706

Ethics -0.06516

Lib\_Cons\_Pref 0.15798

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Residual standard error: 6.022 on 4356 degrees of freedom

(233 observations deleted due to missingness)

Multiple R-squared: 0.08458, Adjusted R-squared: 0.08374

F-statistic: 100.6 on 4 and 4356 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16

\*Regulation recoded Regulation 1 is 20 (more), 2 is 0 (less), 3 is 10 (same)

Table 9. Results for Regressing Ideology & Other Variables on Regulation Question\*

**Coefficients:**

(Intercept) 6.6379

Ideology 1.7697

Trust 2.0698

Ethics -0.3903

Lib\_Cons\_Pref 0.2816

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Residual standard error: 5.945 on 2866 degrees of freedom

Multiple R-squared: 0.1209, Adjusted R-squared: 0.1197

F-statistic: 98.53 on 4 and 2866 DF, p-value: < 2.2e-16

\*Regulation recoded Regulation 1 is 20 (more), 2 is 0 (less), 3 is 10 (same)

From the results above in the multiple regression analyses, when you add these particular independent variables, there appears to be better indicator of the variance in the model. The only outlier of the multiple regression analysis is the Ethics variable, which reveals a negative correlation.

**Discussion**

After conducting the analyses, the differences between ideology and partisanship appear to be minimal. Yet, it is still telling that the strength of the relationship between the regulation question and ideology does *at least* increase as opposed to the relationship to partisanship. When respondents are confronted with questions of bias towards ideology groups (liberals vs conservatives), they are more likely to be in supportive of economic policies that go against preconceived notions of their party or ideological lines. Considering there is a difference, I am somewhat perplexed why the Pew Research Center did not display the descriptive statistics regarding the evaluations from liberals or conservatives since the Lib\_Cons\_Pref measure asks about bias towards ideological groups, not Republicans or Democrats.

**Further Research**

Due to the numerous variables in the Pew Research dataset, I was not able to examine every variable, but this project attempted to analyze the most pertinent variables related to evaluations of technology companies regarding economic policy. One of these areas was the social media usage because there are questions asking respondents if they use Facebook, Google, Snapchat, and/Twitter. Another analysis could use cultivation theory (Potter 1993) as a guiding theory to examine if there is a relationship between social media usage and their perceptions of bias of technology companies. The type of platform a respondent uses on a daily basis could have some impact on their attitudes depending on the context. Immediate further research could explore the Pew Research dataset. Continuing research can employ more sophisticated statistical and empirical techniques find a clearer picture of the data or what it can say about ideology and partisanship and attitudes toward technology companies.

Further research outside of the dataset should address effects in two main areas: does news media have an impact on their attitudes, and lastly, does Trump’s attitudes toward technology and social media companies have any impact. One could approach could be adding more questions about respondent’s news media viewing habits (Fox News, CNN, etc.) or their opinions on Donald Trump.. Another approach could be a qualitative approach asking respondents about their experiences with social media and technology companies. Lastly, if respondents live near tech centers of the country (Austin, San Francisco, New York City, etc.), that might provide some insight as well since these technology companies would be impacting respondents lives through spatial means.

**Conclusion**

In closing, this research project provides some insight about the attitudes toward technology companies looking though the lens of ideology and partisanship. Albeit the differences are minimal as previous scholars as noted, my results do suggest that the minimal difference is still an increase regarding the relationship.

**Appendix[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Dependent Variables**

**Ideology**

F\_IDEO\_FINAL Self-reported ideology.

IDEO In general, would you describe your political views as…

[PROGRAMMING NOTE: REVERSE RESPONSE OPTION SCALE FOR RANDOM HALF OF RESPONDENTS]

1 Very conservative 2 Conservative 3 Moderate 4 Liberal 5 Very liberal

**Partisanship**

F\_PARTY\_FINAL Self-reported party identification.

PARTY In politics today, do you consider yourself a…

1 Republican 2 Democrat 3 Independent 4 Something else

F\_PARTYLN\_FINAL Self-reported party identification (lean).

ASK IF INDEP/SOMETHING ELSE (PARTY=3 or 4 or REFUSED): PARTYLN As of today do you lean more to…

1 The Republican Party 2 The Democratic Party

**Independent Variables**

**Ethics**

**TC4 [S]**

Compared to other companies, do you think major technology companies are…

1. More ethical
2. Less ethical
3. About as ethical as other companies **[anchor]**

**Lib/Con Pref**

**TC6b [S]**

Do you think major technology companies tend to…

1. Support the views of liberals over conservatives
2. Support the views of conservatives over liberals
3. Support the views of both equally **[anchor]**

**Regulation**

**TC5 [S]**

Thinking about the role of the government in regulating major technology companies, do you think these companies should be regulated…

1. More than they are now
2. Less than they are now
3. About the same as they are now **[anchor]**

**Trust**

**TC2a [S]**

How much of the time do you think you can trust major technology companies to do what is right?

1. Just about always
2. Most of the time
3. Some of the time
4. Hardly ever

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1. Note: All materials can be found in the Pew Research Materials folder submitted to Canvas. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)