Ideology in America

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Preface

The Ohio ballot of 2004 featured a vote on an amendment banning gay marriage. It passed by a large margin. And the same was true in Arkansas, in Georgia, in Mississippi, in Montana, in North Dakota, in Oklahoma, and in Utah. All of these states, most conservative leaning, had ballot measures, and all were lopsided victories for the anti side of the gay marriage debate. The average vote was about 70% for the ban, 30% against.

There was never a large prospect that legal gay marriage was imminent in these states. The bigger story was the possible impact on the election for the president of the United States. The theory was that the ballot measures would mobilize large numbers of culturally conservative usual nonvoters to make a rare trip to the polls and then incidentally vote for George W. Bush, whose campaign was tightly linked to the opposition to gay marriage.

The ballot measures did coincide with increased turnout, particularly in more culturally conservative areas. And in Ohio, critical to Bush's Electoral College victory and won with a margin of just over a hundred thousand votes, the increased conservative turnout might have been enough to put Bush over the edge. Whether or not decisive, the popular narrative of the election in the weeks-long postmortem left an indelible impression that appeal to cultural conservatism in the United States was, as it had been many times before, a formula for Republican electoral success.

Bush wasted no time translating his victory into a proposal for governing. "Let me put it to you this way," he said; "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it. It is my style."

And then the president set about turning his campaign promise for private accounts in the Social Security system into legislation. The Bush proposal would direct some proportion of the payroll tax contributions of younger workers into private, self-managed accounts, with the presumption that much of the investment would be in stocks with a higher return than the government bond investments of the Social Security system. The new program would dismantle, or at least greatly change, the system of government-financed income security for the elderly in place since the New Deal.

The complication of the proposal was that the Social Security system, as designed, was a system of intergenerational transfer. The current contributions of younger workers, that is, were already dedicated to the retirement support of the generation of their parents and grandparents. Thus the issue was not merely whether to replace a government-held account with a private one but also how to finance the current and future generations of recipients when the money they would require would be redirected into private accounts.

The proposal contemplated borrowing the additional money, a matter of trillions of dollars, when the federal deficit was already growing out of control. Since the demography of the baby boom already had the Social Security system in a deficit in 20 years or so, when the amounts paid out would exceed the amounts coming in, that additional financing was widely seen as a threat to the existing system. Supporters of the current Social Security system worried, and not without reason, that when the debt came due and younger workers were well started with private accounts, the reckoning would involve major cuts to traditional Social Security benefits to balance the books.[1]

As the proposal wound its way to Capitol Hill, the public weighed in. In polls, but perhaps more importantly in personal comments to members of Congress, very large numbers of actual and potential recipients voiced concern that the Bush proposal was a threat to the future of Social Security. The public, it was clear, was in no mood for experimentation. It had been living with the existing system for almost 70 years, liked it, and wanted it to continue unchanged in the future. In an uncertain world, Social Security was a rock, something that could be counted upon.

[1] Bush offered the assurance that the promises of Social Security would always be kept. But since the financial crisis to the system loomed a good decade at least after he would have left office, that was a promise that he was powerless to keep.

As members heard that outpouring, doubts began to arise. "Political capital" or not, Republicans began to become nervous that establishing private accounts would be seen as opposed to the continuation of Social Security, long famous as the "third rail of American politics." It became clear that such a proposal would likely have Republicans going it alone, with no Democratic support. And although the votes of Democrats were not needed, the political cover of bipartisanship was.

Thus the messages going back to the White House from Capitol Hill began to replace enthusiasm with reserve, reserve with caution, and, eventually, caution with fear. Republicans had heard approving responses when they characterized the Social Security system as "bankrupt." But now, as they proposed to change it, the message of public opinion become starkly supportive of the status quo.

Congressional Republicans were looking for a way out. It was provided to them by Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. Grassley read the tea leaves of public sentiment and declared that he found so little support for the Bush proposal that he declined even to schedule hearings on the bill. It was going to die anyhow, but that was the final whimper of Bush's most important policy proposal.

But the failure of Bush's plan to overhaul Social Security was more than about a simple misreading of how much "capital" Bush had indeed earned by appealing to a culturally conservative electorate. As it turns out, the role that gay marriage played in shaping the 2004 results was probably misread, too. Although the public was clearly uneasy about homosexual relations and was willing (particularly in culturally conservative states) to express its support for "traditional marriage" at the ballot box, it was uneasy – and was growing more so – about the possibility of providing government a means to regulate gay and lesbian unions out of existence entirely.

And despite the fact that "moral values" famously topped the list as the most important problem facing the nation in 2004 exit polls, "values" turned out to be only a small part of what voters, particularly swing voters, were thinking about in the election.[2] There is also precious little evidence that "values" voters turned out in higher rates in 2004 than in elections prior. Bush's victory was in all likelihood much more a result of a fairly good economy – and some residual "rally around the flag" enthusiasm following September 11 and the invasion of Iraq – than it was about these sorts of cultural concerns.

[2] See Hillygus and Shields 2005 for a thorough discussion of this point.

So, which nation are we? Are we the one that holds dear cherished symbols of marriage, family, and tradition and resists real or perceived efforts to encroach on these symbols? Or the one that so strongly supports Social Security as a government benefit for retirement that it would not hear of any conservative experiments in lessening the government role, even by a relatively popular newly reelected president?

The theme of this book is that we are both Americas, the one that reveres the symbols of tradition and the one that fervently supports a redistributive pension system for seniors. We are one and the same, a symbolically conservative nation that honors tradition, distrusts novelty, and embraces the conservative label – and an operationally liberal nation that has made Social Security one of the most popular government programs ever created.

Our story here of gay marriage and a failed proposal to change the retirement system is just an illustration. Symbolic conservatism is much more than marriage. And it is much more than – fundamentally different from – culturally conservative politics as defined by the religious right. It is respect for basic values: hard work, striving, caution, prudence, family, tradition, God, citizenship, and the American flag. And the ranks of Americans who cherish these values is no fringe activist minority; it is the mainstream of American culture. It is also not explicitly political, except in the sense that strategic political elites have tried to make it so. It is woven into the fabric of how ordinary citizens live their lives.

And for the other side, operational liberalism, Social Security is also no exception. Most Americans like most government programs. Most of the time, on average, we want government to do more and spend more. It is no accident that we have created the programs of the welfare state. They were created – and are sustained – by massive public support.

Our plan of attack is to tell both stories, of why Americans predominantly identify as conservatives, when at the same time supporting a liberal government role in a wide range of particular circumstances. We will not try to resolve the conflict between them. We will embrace it as the right story of what America is: both liberal and conservative.

Clearly many Americans, authors and most potential readers included, are not both liberal and conservative. The political class, of which we are jointly members with our readers, lines up symbols to match policy, or the reverse. That fact can make us forget that many citizens do not do so. This group is a very large proportion of the electorate and, so far as we can tell, always has been. We will give these people sustained attention, trying to understand why the default ideological identification of America

seems to be "conservative," while the default attitude toward government programs is support for more.

BACKGROUND

The research of which this book is the product originated when we were both at the University of North Carolina. The discovery of conservative symbolic dominance is as easy as looking at the most recent question on liberal and conservative self-identification. The appreciation of operational liberalism was a more subtle and gradual process. It began with initial work on the study of public policy mood (Stimson 1991). One cannot compile all of the survey questions on domestic policy issues without eventually noticing that liberal responses to such queries consistently outnumber conservative ones.

The conflict between symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism is developed more fully in *Tides of Consent* (Stimson 2004). There the group to be called "conflicted conservatives" was first observed in a treatment of a small section of one chapter. But that chapter ends more in a question mark than a conclusion. It left us both struck by the idea that contradiction was more normal in American politics than it was aberrant. We determined somehow to get to the bottom of that. This book is the product of about six years of joint effort toward that end.

Our first conception is that the problem for our research was to explain why so many people could simultaneously embrace conservative symbols and liberal policy preferences. And we have done that, particularly in Chapters 6 and 7. But along the way we decided that it was not as simple as one large, but nonetheless deviant, group – that understanding American ideology more generally would be a necessary step along the way. That is what we have endeavored to do.

We are ourselves a bit conflicted. The two authors are on opposite sides of political debates as often as not. When we write about liberals and conservatives, it is not like a cowboy movie in which the good guys wear white hats and the bad guys black. We are likely to disagree over who should wear which hat. But we share a scientific commitment to getting the theory and facts right, which makes working together easy, fun, and profitable.

And if one of us is right and the other one wrong, it is probably not going to be decided who is which in the pages of this book.

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The Meaning of Ideology in America

The state of ideology in America is contentious. We cannot agree whether the United States is predominantly a nation of the left, of the right, or of the center. We cannot agree even whether it is reasonable to characterize American politics in terms of left and right. Fifty years after the masterful undertaking of Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) we still do not know how to characterize American ideology.

We care about ideology in considerable measure because it bears on something about which we care even more, election to office. Elections should decide whose claims should be honored. If the United States really is a nation of the right, then the party of the right should win most national elections. It does not. Nor of course does the party of the left fare any better. Alternation in electoral success does not necessarily make us a nation of the center. And despite the vagaries in ideological thinking at the individual level highlighted by Converse (1964) and others, it is not as simple as dismissing the American public as "nonideological," either.

Further, public ideology bears – or at least in standard democratic theory, should bear – on public policy outcomes. If the public wants policy to move in a particular ideological direction, it should be able to use the instruments of electoral control to place into office policymakers who will be more likely carry out its wishes. And policymakers, if they care about either representing public will or being reelected, should listen. But this again presupposes that the public can send clear and consistent ideological signals, that it can know whether it wants policy to move to the "left" or to the "right" and can communicate its desires to policymakers. We know from decades of research that it is not entirely clear that it can

meet even these very basic demands that representative democracy places on it.

In this volume, we work to understand the nature of ideology in the American mass public. Our wish for this volume is not so much to have the final word on the subject, which is clearly impossible. What we would like to achieve is to have most of the words that follow ours at least comprehend the conundrum over ideological *symbols* and ideological *preferences* that will be our central theme. For a very large proportion of what is written, particularly in the popular media, is at variance with sets of facts that have long been known, but rarely appreciated. We wish to show that American mass ideology has two conceptions, often existing quite independently of one another in the minds of citizens and performing quite different functions in the political system. Understanding the dualistic nature of political ideology, and shedding light on its implications, is the subject of what is to come.

1.1 THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

The language of ideology is itself contentious, and a product as much of social forces and political strategy as of 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, politicians, journalists, citizen activists, and even the mass public speak.

"Liberal," "liberalism," "conservative," "conservatism": Few conversations about politics in the United States can avoid at some point using these words. The big picture of American politics is often a struggle between liberal and conservative sentiments over symbols, over policy, over even culture. But what do the words mean? We must at the outset concede confusion and ambiguity. 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. If, for example, Barack Obama is the nation's most visible "liberal," then what Obama says and does becomes the definition of liberalism in practice. When conservatives talk about the true meaning of conservatism in this era, they often turn to the words and deeds of the

former president Ronald Reagan as a guidepost. 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.

1.1.1 American Liberalism

We turn now to the business of defining what is meant by liberal and conservative, trying not to be creative or comprehensive, but rather to summarize, as succinctly as possible, the culturally standard views. Our desire here is to lay out a set of beliefs that is common – but not necessarily universal – to actors who call themselves liberals or conservatives. This is something less abstract than philosophy because our concern is the real politics of the street. But we try here for a little more perspective than the stump speech, to draw out the doctrines that are relatively timeless rather than the themes that work for the moment.

Equality of opportunity is a core component of liberalism. The idea is that success in life's endeavors ought to result from intelligence, determination, discipline, and hard work, and not from the circumstances of one's birth. America, like all other societies, has a class system that tends to limit equality of opportunity in real life circumstances. Although this system is far from being frozen or having its upper levels impenetrable, life's achievements and one's place in this system are strongly predictable from the circumstances of birth. The playing field slants in the direction of the wealth and status of one's parents. Equality of opportunity does not exist but is a goal toward which liberalism constantly strives.

Government is the instrument through which the uneven playing field can be leveled. Thus liberals support public policies that redistribute income from rich to poor, and they support policies such as public schools that provide the tools by which equality might be achieved. Liberals believe that government ought to act in the economy in a variety of ways, to permit collective bargaining, to ensure a minimum wage, to

guarantee that benefits such as old age pensions and health care insurance are available to all.

Liberals believe that a market economy, whatever its virtues in the efficient creation of prosperity, is a beast that needs the firm hand of government to tame it. They also wish to prevent those who have obtained a monopoly of economic resources from enriching themselves unduly at the society's expense.

There is also the issue of government as regulator, the notion that left to their own devices, corporate interests will concentrate power to avoid competition, producing bad social outcomes. Government's role is to regulate the economic environment to prevent such abuses. Also there are situations where some of the costs of production are externalities, passed on to society, rather than paid for by the consumer or producer of the product. Examples include the regulation of industrial pollution or other economic activities that create social harm as a by-product of profit seeking.

American liberals have never embraced the idea of nationalizing industries that are currently private, as their European counterparts did. But, with some exceptions, they have usually opposed efforts to privatize current government activities.

Part of government's job is to establish standards. There is no advantage to driving on the left- or the right-hand side of the road, for example, but there is a huge advantage in having a rule that dictates *which* side. Such regulation benefits all and is not controversial. But beyond this, liberals also believe in regulation – within limits – of business. Rejecting the "unseen hand," or the inherent equilibrating virtue of the market, they believe that private economic power, left unchecked, will be used in ways harmful to the social order. Mindful that the economist's abstraction of a free market, a market in which no buyer or seller is large enough to affect the market, does not in fact exist in the United States, they are ready to check the market distortions that arise from the economic power of a small number of dominant buyers or sellers. And in financial markets they support regulation designed to prevent insiders from using their greater knowledge to exploit outsiders.

In the social sphere, liberals advocate freedom from intrusion on private decisions. Government, in particular, ought not act as enforcer of doctrines that have their origin in religion. Not alone in belief in equality under law, liberals have nevertheless been more ready to use the tools of government to attain that equality. They are more zealous about protecting the rights of disadvantaged groups such as African Americans, women, and homosexuals. That often puts them at odds with the

institutions, such as organized religion, that sustain the traditional order and resist change.

1.1.2 Conservatism

On most matters, conservatives believe that citizens, families, and communities, not the federal government, are the driving forces behind successful, thriving societies. Conservatives question both the moral imperative and the practical ability of government to remediate social problems and correct market failures, instead believing that private citizens, operating without the encumbrances of government constraints, are more effective in motivating growth, innovation, and opportunity. Conservatives are comparably less concerned about equality of economic outcomes than they are about long-term improvements in standard of living provided by economic growth.

While conservatives believe broadly in equal opportunity, they typically take the view (as in the title of Milton and Rose Friedman's classic book, *Free to Choose*) that expanding market freedom and providing the ability to choose one's own economic path are comparably more important, and ultimately more prosperous for all citizens, than government-based efforts to reduce income differences (Friedman & Friedman 1990). These types of attitudes extend to views on how "opportunity" is best provided. Conservatives typically view the private provision of social benefits, perhaps encouraged by public policy (e.g., through the form of school vouchers or tax credits to provide for one's own income security), as more desirable than government-controlled efforts in support of the same goals.

Conservatives strongly oppose government-based efforts to equalize economic outcomes, typically supporting non-redistributive tax policies and opposing programs (such as extended welfare benefits) that are perceived to confer benefits to citizens who have not earned them. Conservatives generally believe that the problems of the underprivileged are best addressed by charity and private social responsibility and support organizations (especially faith-based organizations) that work to address those problems.

Most conservatives cede an active role for the government in some arenas. They believe that government has a responsibility to provide an environment for safe, effective transactions among participants in the marketplace and to work to expand market freedoms. Government should help to enforce private property rights and private contracts and should

work to promote free trade and market economies both domestically and abroad.[1]

Beyond this, however, conservatives typically advocate a limited role in regulating market activity. Free markets, whatever excesses they might have, are seen as the single greatest pathway to long-run economic growth and prosperity, and government intervention in them stifles both innovation and the ability of a citizenry to allocate resources in a way that it sees fit. Thus policies designed to regulate the functioning of markets, or to provide protections to some types of actors (e.g., hourly workers) within the marketplace, are seen as undesirable. Mainstream conservatives do not see markets as perfect but do believe that in most cases, government-based antidotes to market imperfections are worse than the disease.

When it comes to cultural matters, there is substantially greater diversity of opinion. The modern brand of conservatism, at least of the post-Reagan era, typically believes in a strong government role in promoting traditional values and enforcing social order. These conservatives believe that social, religious, and cultural institutions have developed into their current state because of the wishes and desires of citizens and thus reflect a society's roots and core values. They believe that such institutions provide norms of behavior and social interaction that allow societies to function effectively. They are thus skeptical of challenges (especially government-based ones) to traditional social order, particularly those that challenge traditional religious perspectives or seek to diminish the role of religion in the public sphere.

Other conservatives believe that social and cultural freedoms are analogues to market freedoms, and that it is not the government's job to regulate the private behavior of consenting adults. The former view has defined American ideological "conservatism" in recent decades, but the latter remains strong and enduring, particularly among affluent or intellectual conservatives.

1.1.3 A Brief History of the Debate

Liberalism

Both the words "liberal" and "conservative" stretch quite far back in American history. But the historical usage of the words was so different

[1] It is perhaps indicative of the confusion behind the usage of ideological language that such expansion of market freedoms, typically advocated by free-market conservatives, is often discussed as trade or economic "liberalization."

as to be almost unrecognizable. At the time of the American Revolution the words basically connoted attitudes toward the old institutions, monarchy and established church. Liberals opposed the old institutions and conservatives supported them. Such a debate continued for a century or more in Europe, where liberals championed a republican form of government and conservatives favored restoration of the monarchy and the aristocracy. But the American Revolution virtually eliminated any idea of monarchy, aristocracy, or state religion, so that it is not much exaggeration to say that the United States had only liberals in its early history.

We know the term "liberal" has a very long history, but with a quite different connotation from its current usage – as support for freedom *from* government intervention in all matters. Prior to the 1930s, the label was used rarely, if at all, by mainstream politicians of any political persuasion in the United States. So how did a program of activist government intervention in the economy become "liberalism"? The answer, at least in large part, lies in the strategic political considerations of Franklin D. Roosevelt. We know that his prepresidential views were strongly shaped by the "progressivism" of his illustrious ancestor Theodore. He took "progressive" to mean a propensity to action, that when problems arose, it was government's obligation to identify them and act decisively to resolve them.

Thus when FDR assumed the presidency, he did what came naturally in fashioning an intensive effort by the national government to involve itself deeply in a broken American economy. The doctrine, from his campaign slogan, was "The New Deal." And people who were part of that program, or supported it, became "New Dealers." Roosevelt was in search of a term for this program, one that would embed it in American traditions – even though it was a departure from tradition in almost every regard – and one that stayed well clear of the "isms" that were ominously gaining force on the European stage at the time. Because the Democratic Party brand was itself in fairly high disregard at the time, he also needed a label that would help to attract the vote of otherwise sympathetic citizens, particularly Republicans, who dare not vote for a candidate who labels himself as a "Democrat" (Rotunda 1986).

FDR hit upon "liberal" for its positive association with freedom and for its absence of any link with the fascism, socialism, and communism that were threatening and unpopular in American opinion. And thus a novel term for a belief in activist government involvement in the economy, and activist particularly in support of those most in need, became part of the American lexicon. Roosevelt called himself, his ideas, and his

programs "liberal," which he contrasted to the views of their opponents, "conservative."

We have FDR's words from a 1938 "fireside chat" where he discusses the words themselves:

> In the coming primaries in all parties, there will be many clashes between two schools of thought, generally classified as liberal and conservative. Roughly speaking, the liberal school of thought recognizes that the new conditions throughout the world call for new remedies.
>
> Those of us in America who hold to this school of thought, insist that these new remedies can be adopted and successfully maintained in this country under our present form of government if we use government as an instrument of cooperation to provide these remedies. We believe that we can solve our problems through continuing effort, through democratic processes instead of Fascism or Communism. . . .
>
> Be it clearly understood, however, that when I use the word "liberal," I mean the believer in progressive principles of democratic, representative government and not the wild man who, in effect, leans in the direction of Communism, for that is just as dangerous as Fascism.
>
> The opposing or conservative school of thought, as a general proposition, does not recognize the need for Government itself to step in and take action to meet these new problems. It believes that individual initiative and private philanthropy will solve them – that we ought to repeal many of the things we have done and go back, for instance, to the old gold standard, or stop all this business of old age pensions and unemployment insurance, or repeal the Securities and Exchange Act, or let monopolies thrive unchecked – return, in effect, to the kind of Government we had in the twenties. . . . (Fireside Chat, June 24, 1938)[2]

The meaning of liberalism as a policy stance has broadened, but not fundamentally changed, since Roosevelt. FDR, whose support base included millions of racially conservative southerners, carefully avoided too obviously taking sides on the central issue of southern politics. But with the politics of the 1960s racial equality would begin to be included as a central value of liberals. And later still liberals would embrace expanding equality to other traditionally marginalized social groups, as well as the government regulation aspect of environmentalism. But the liberalism of Barack Obama's time is not terribly different from that of Franklin Roosevelt's.

Conservatism

America itself had to be old before "conservative" could come to mean support for the old order. And thus the usage comes and goes after the Civil War. It pops up again in the 1920s, when the policies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover were characterized as conservative with

[2] From the American Presidency Project, americanpresidency.org.

part of its modern connotation, meaning then government of minimal size and scope. This label was not embraced by those to whom it was attached, however. Hoover, among others, argued that his views more fully embraced the ideals of classical "liberalism" by privileging citizens over government and private action over government coercion. Hoover argued, in fact, that his views, not Roosevelt's, should be the ones labeled "liberal" (Hoover 1934). The "conservative" label was first used in full force by supporters of FDR and the New Deal, as a way to help them stake clearly their claim to the "liberal" label and clearly distinguish their views from those of their opponents (Rotunda 1986).

The labels stuck, however, and conservatism suffered a long period as the minority view in American politics. Reeling from the Great Depression and the New Deal that it engendered, conservatism as a movement went into the background, only to be revived as quite another doctrine, opposition to communism (both foreign and domestic) in the 1950s. Conservatives of that era feared the Soviet Union and then communist China and also feared the prospect that American institutions were riddled with hidden communists, ready to subvert America.

The beginnings of the modern conservative movement can be traced to the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater in 1964, in which the most visible platform was Goldwater's book, *The Conscience of a Conservative*. Goldwater refocused conservatism on domestic affairs, beginning the first coherent attack on the welfare state legacy of Franklin Roosevelt. And on the issue of the moment, civil rights for African Americans, Goldwater for the first time defined opposition to government promotion of civil rights as an extension of conservative ideas.[3]

The philosophy of modern-day conservatism has its roots in the politics of Ronald Reagan, who capitalized on the tarnished image of Jimmy Carter, the cold war, and the perceived failure of government-based solutions to the economic and social malaise of the late 1970s, to reinvigorate "conservatism" as the label of individual and market freedom. Reagan's speech from the 1980 Republican National Convention helped to crystallize images of the "new" brand of ideological conservatism as that which promoted individual freedom over government power:

> "Trust me" government asks that we concentrate our hopes and dreams on one man; that we trust him to do what's best for us. My view of government places

[3] "Liberal" and "conservative" had long had a racial connotation in the South, but liberalism on race was a distinctly minority position among the dominant white population, and conservatism was almost the exclusive preserve of the Dixiecrats of the time.

trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs – in the people. . . .

Work and family are at the center of our lives; the foundation of our dignity as a free people. When we deprive people of what they have earned, or take away their jobs, we destroy their dignity and undermine their families. We cannot support our families unless there are jobs, and we cannot have jobs unless people have both money to invest and the faith to invest it. These are concepts that stem from an economic system that for more than 200 years has helped us master a continent, create a previously undreamed of prosperity for our people, and has fed millions of others around the globe. That system will continue to serve us in the future if our government will stop ignoring the basic values on which it was built and stop betraying the trust and good will of the American workers who keep it going.[4]

One further ingredient, the emergence of the religious right as a central player in conservative politics, then added the final piece to the definition of modern conservatism.[5]

1.2 THE TWO FACES OF IDEOLOGY IN AMERICAN POLITICS

The politically engaged reader has certainly found much that is familiar in these fairly simple accounts of ideological positions. Liberals, by and large, support the expansion of government power where necessary to provide equal opportunity and remediate social injustice. Conservatives, by and large, support economic freedom and traditional patterns of social order. This is clearly true at the level of political elites, where issue and ideological positions are relatively stable and well defined and are as ideologically polarized as they have been at any time in recent decades (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal 2006; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope 2004). But at the level of the individual citizen, the nature of ideology is more complicated.

We know that many citizens know and care little about politics, so we expect that preferences are not as neatly organized, or ideologically coherent, for most people as they are for the political elite. But we will argue that there is also something systematically distinct, and fundamentally disconnected, about the nature of American mass ideology. The

[4] Speech transcript obtained from the National Center for Public Policy Research: www.nationalcenter.org.

[5] See Adams 1997 and Layman and Carsey 2002 for discussions of the evolution of religious and culturally traditional perspective to the principles of modern conservatism.

disconnect is between how the public thinks of itself with respect to two different conceptions of "ideology": *symbolic* and *operational*.

Symbolic ideology is a representation of how citizens think about themselves: whether they consider their views to be liberal, conservative, moderate, or something else. Operational ideology is grounded more explicitly in concrete decisions, what citizens think the government should or should not be doing with respect to important matters of public policy. At the elite level, of course, these are largely one and the same: Policymakers who are readily identifiable as conservatives tend to support some version of the "conservative" philosophy that we have outlined previously, and the same is true for liberals. But for citizens, it is another matter entirely.

The central theme of this book is that the United States is a nation of both the left and the right. We shall see that Americans, on average, have a strong affection for the symbols of conservatism. They like the word "conservative." They like to apply the word to themselves (in matters of politics and elsewhere). And they tend to like parties and candidates better when they are associated with conservatism. We shall characterize this tendency as "symbolic conservatism."

But when we examine the concrete views of Americans for questions of public policy, we shall find a similar (on average) affinity for solutions of the left. Facing a choice between a larger government that takes on more responsibilities, spends more, and taxes more and the opposite, smaller government with less spending and lower taxes, Americans on average choose more and bigger over less and smaller.[6] We shall characterize this tendency as "operational liberalism."

We are not the first to make this observation. Writing in 1967, Free and Cantril noted, "The discrepancy between symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism is . . . so marked as to be almost schizoid, . . . " So the observation that symbolic and operational attitudes are in conflict is venerable, if not very much appreciated.

The task that lies before us in this book is to work through the evidence on this point, to study its macroimplications, and, finally, to explain why both conservative symbols and liberal policy choices are jointly so appealing to so many Americans. Having both symbolically conservative

[6] The reader should take seriously our frequent qualification "on average." The patterns we observe are net pluralities of sentiment. Such statements as we make here would be obvious falsehoods if taken as universals.

and operationally liberal pluralities implies that a large number of Americans must cling to conservative symbols while advocating liberal policies. We shall locate these particular people and try to explain why they can embrace such conflicting attitudes.

1.3 PLAN OF THE BOOK

In what follows, we attempt to come to grips with the liberalism and conservatism in the American mass public. As we will see, understanding how the public conceives of itself ideologically is not as simple as describing which of the two ideological boxes we have described here is a better fit. At a minimum, we must come to grips with the fact that the American public holds, and acts on, two separate conceptions of ideology, one operational and one symbolic.

We begin by understanding the two conceptions of ideology separately. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the concept of operational ideology. We first provide an overview of what we mean by operational ideology, and the myriad ways that scholars have worked to measure and understand it. We also attempt to understand the extent of operational liberalism in the American public and provide an explanation for why citizens, in the main, prefer liberal to conservative policy solutions. Operational ideology is necessarily a messy concept, and we use Chapter 2 to introduce readers to the mess. In Chapter 3, we work toward making more sense of the concept (and the data), looking beyond individual survey questions to understand how the public structures its operational preferences, both cross-sectionally and over time.

In Chapter 4, we deal with the symbolic side of ideology, how individual citizens (and the public as a whole) think of themselves in ideological terms. We grapple with the meaning of the ideological labels themselves and delve into the history of the meaning and relative popularity of the terms, working toward an understanding of the historical roots and evolving nature of the terms themselves.

The next three chapters work to understand the microfoundations of the paradox that is at the core of the book: that the public is at the same time operationally liberal and symbolically conservative. Chapter 5 lays the groundwork for this analysis, exploring the extent of individual-level disconnect between operational and symbolic ideology. Chapters 6 and 7 get to the heart of the matter, offering general explanations for the preponderance of conservative self-identification, but liberal preferences. Chapter 6 explores the role that lifestyle and religious factors have in

shaping self-identification, positing that at least for some, political conservatism is an identification formed well outside – and, in many cases, not even connected to – preferences on the issues that constitute the core of American political conflict. Chapter 7 addresses linkages between citizens and political elites, positing that "conflicted conservatism," the holding of conservative identifications but liberal preferences, is not necessarily a contradiction at all, but instead a natural result of the way that political conflict is framed by policymakers and the mass media.

Finally, Chapter 8 works to draw the book together, addressing the implications of this operational-symbolic conflict for understanding American policy dynamics and the nature of political discourse in the United States. Our explanations of the operational-symbolic disconnect raise more questions for democratic theory than they answer; here we suggest some ways to conceptualize what the paradox means for democratic politics, and some ways that future work might be able to push our understanding forward.

4

Ideological Self-Identification

In the aftermath of the stunning upset victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980 Americans were asked whether they thought of themselves as "liberal," "moderate," or "conservative." The "liberal" designation drew 18%, while more than twice that number (37%) claimed the title "conservative." This was consistent with the conservative sweep, up and down the ticket, that characterized the 1980 elections. The preponderance of conservative over liberal self-designations was much the same in 1984, when Reagan was reelected; in 1988, when his vice president, George H. W. Bush, succeeded him in office; and in 2000 and 2004, when the younger Bush was elected and reelected. When conservatism predominates, as expected, conservative candidates win.

But what is not expected is that conservative self-identification also predominates – the numbers are in fact quite similar – when liberals win, as in 1976 (Jimmy Carter), 1992 and 1996 (Bill Clinton), and 2008 (Barack Obama). In the election of Barack Obama in 2008 there were a few more liberals (20%) and slightly fewer conservatives (35%), but had ideological self-identification driven that election outcome, John McCain would have won by historic numbers. In fact, if identification were the driver, all presidential elections of the era in which we have measures of ideological self-identification would have been Republican landslides. In the modern era, that is, conservative predominance in matters of self-designation is more a constant than a variable. An explanation for the predominance clearly is needed.

4.1 IDEOLOGY AS SELF-IDENTIFICATION

In this chapter, we work to come to grips with the symbolic side of ideology, that rooted in self-identification. Here, we set aside discussions from the previous chapters on preferences of specific matters of public policy, in an effort to get a sense of how the public *thinks* of itself ideologically: how the public views its own ideological leanings. As we will see, the message that we get from an understanding of the symbolic side of ideology is far different from what we have seen with respect to operational preferences.

Ideological self-identification measures are now commonplace in empirical models of voter behavior (where they are often referred to simply as measures of "ideology"), and many commercial polls include self-identification questions.[1]

We are not the first to study this topic, of course. There is small but growing literature on "macroideology"(see Box-Steffensmeier, Knight, & Sigelman 1998; Robinson & Fleishman 1988; Smith 1990; Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson 2002; Stimson 2004), which seeks to explain over-time variations in the aggregate liberalism and conservatism of American citizens. But aside from relatively minor variations in response to political and economic events, this literature generally finds little movement to explain. Since self-identification questions first appeared regularly in national election studies, the proportion of citizens identifying as liberals or conservatives has changed at the margins – and, to be sure, has changed systematically – but the changes are so modest as to be easily overlooked or misinterpreted.

In this chapter, we seek to examine the dynamics of ideological self-identification from a new perspective. We wish to go back into the "prehistory" of survey research, in an effort to understand the dynamics of ideological identification before research into its nature became commonplace. Doing so, we believe, can help greatly inform our understanding of why the American public's symbolic views diverge so markedly from its operational ones.

Our larger task, of which this analysis is a part, is coming to terms with the contradiction in American ideologies, a contradiction often seen in

[1] In the past three decades, there has developed a rich history of the study of ideological self-identification in the cross-sectional, individual-level, tradition, of political behavior. We know a good deal about the ways in which self-identification can (or cannot) help to structure political belief systems and guide political choices (Stimson 1975, Jennings 1992, Knight 1985, Luttbeg & Gant 1985, Jacoby 1995, Treier & Hillygus 2009).

joint preferences for both conservative symbols and liberal policy action. But before we can do that, we first must understand each of the pieces. The piece that concerns us here is ideological self-identification and, in particular, how adoption of conservative self-images came to dominate American politics.

The principal problem that prevents such an understanding is that we have previously had access to self-identification only since the early 1970s. In these 40 or so years of data, we have observed a consistently large conservative plurality – a majority of those who chose one of the two labels. We speculate that matters were once different, a "before" and "after" scenario when only the "after" was observed. Here we work to come to terms with the "before," ideological self-identification in the decades before measures of it became routine. At the very least, we suspect that what happened before the 1970s has helped to shape the attitudes that Americans have toward the "liberal" and "conservative" labels. And it has altered the ways in which citizens use these labels to pass judgment on candidates, parties, and policies.

This chapter thus serves two purposes. The first is to delve into the history of American public opinion research, before national academic surveys became commonplace, making sense of the diverse data that are available to develop a time-serial measure of ideological self-identification. The second is to analyze this time series, using it to understand critical shifts – and enduring themes – in the ideological self-identification of the American public.

4.2 BUILDING A HISTORICAL PORTRAIT OF SYMBOLIC IDEOLOGY

Our first task is to build an annual time series of self-identification.[2] Such a series is the answer to the question, "How do Americans think of themselves?" For the last 40 years, that task has been quite easy. Survey organizations, both academic and commercial, have been asking national samples of Americans how they see themselves in ideological terms with reliability, frequency, and regularity.

We have more than 1,700 such surveys for that 40-year span. Their question formats are reasonably similar, so that we can be relatively sure that – minor differences aside – these questions are tapping the same

[2] Much of the material in the following section is derived from that presented in Ellis and Stimson 2009.

concept of "liberal-conservative" self-identification. And they richly overlap in time so that any possible question effects can be readily observed and taken into account in measurement. Next to perhaps presidential approval and partisanship, ideological self-identification is the best measured longitudinal construct in all of American politics.

Before 1968 is a different story entirely. Surveys that asked about ideological self-identification were rarer and question formats were far less comparable among the surveys that did exist. For the period 1936–1967 we have found exactly 78 instances of organizations posing self-identification questions. They are of various formats, some not very similar to more modern queries. The different question formats have little overlap in time, so that whether or not they are measuring the same thing often becomes a matter of assumption rather than direct evidence. The earliest of these queries, Gallup work in the late 1930s, are conducted using quota sampling, so that it is something of a matter of faith that they accurately represent the U.S. population at the time.

We believe that there are good data in these series, and that we can use that data to provide reasonably reliable insight into self-identification in this period (and how it compares to the more modern context). But the style of our analysis will accordingly be quite different. The good data of later years naturally yield a dimensional solution, so that getting to a valid annual time series is a mechanical process. The survey data go into a dimensional algorithm, and an annual time series emerges from it. For the years before 1968 our task will begin more in the style of anthropology. We pull any and all available data from a number of survey houses, using questions that get at the basic concept of how individuals orient themselves, using ideological language, to the political world.

These data, too, need to be validated, tested, and processed by an algorithm to produce a coherent, longitudinal measure. But for these years, the task is far less straightforward. We, of course, much prefer the simple measurement technology and consistent question wording of the later years. But then a full story of the emergence of left-right ideology in American politics could not be told, because much of that story unfolded before the consistent measures became available.

4.2.1 Ideological Self-Identification: 1936–1967

While the American public was ratifying the "New Deal" by giving Franklin D. Roosevelt the then-biggest landslide victory in modern American electoral history in 1936, the Gallup organization fielded the

TABLE 4.1. *Which Party Would You Join?*

Party	Percentage
Liberal	47
Conservative	53
Total	100

$N = 1,500$ (approx.).
Gallup Organization, May 11–May 16, 1936.

first – at least the first that we know of – query about self-identification. A national sample was asked in May 1936, "If there were only two political parties in this country – Conservative and Liberal – which would you join?"

The question is a strange one, at least from the perspective of the 21st century. And ultimately we are unable to include it in our later series – because it is asked in this form only one time, making it impossible to sort out how comparable its dynamics are to those of other questions. We present it here because it is the first question asked about ideological self-identification, and (see Table 4.1) because it tells us something important about ideology in the time of the New Deal. It tells us that "liberal," FDR's preferred term for those whose supported his programs, was unable to gain majority support in the months just before FDR produced his crushing victory over Alf Landon and conservatism.

Thus begins a pattern, continued to the present day, in which the name for an ideology that supports highly popular programs is itself unpopular. Knowing of FDR's landslide, and knowing that the election was contested largely over the New Deal programs of spending and social welfare that party elites then and now associate with the label of political "liberalism," we would have expected a support for "the liberal party" something like the actual support for FDR. "Liberal" was certainly more popular than in the modern context, where "conservative" is preferred to "liberal" by nearly a two-to-one margin. But it was still a loser.

4.2.2 The Raw Materials

Our raw materials are rich collections of self-identification queries of the modern period and a much thinner record we shall piece together

to observe the evolution of identification in the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Our search for queries about ideological self-identification, broadly construed, produced 78 usable items in the span 1936–1970, almost two per year on average.[3] They are from a variety of survey houses, which attempted to get at the ideological thinking of American citizens in diverse ways. It is from these questions that we begin our task of developing a longitudinal measure of ideological self-identification.

The important task is putting them together to see whether we can extract common movement over time from these disparate materials. The parallelism that we see in their behavior is encouraging evidence that we can.

The early queries on ideological self-identification form roughly five different question formats.

Administration

These questions use the language of "liberalism" and "conservatism" to ask about the direction that particular administrations should follow. Example: "Should President Roosevelt's second administration be more liberal, more conservative, or about the same as his first?" This taps ideological preference, but of course relative to where the administration is now. Since most of this series is about FDR, it makes sense to use only FDR questions and not introduce the bias of having different response to different presidents.

This series of questions, asked by Gallup in 1936–1938 and by ORC once each for Eisenhower (1957) and Johnson (1964), paint a picture of preference for more liberal government as exactly even with conservative preferences in 1936 and then declining substantially thereafter. (See Figure 4.1.)[4] The last two points in the series are asked about different presidents in a quite different context, with an almost 20-year gap in the middle. We present them for descriptive interest, but assuming comparability here is not reasonable and we shall not do so for purposes of developing the longitudinal measure.

[3] Some are split half samples from the same survey, so the actual number of observed occurrences is smaller than 78.

[4] In Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 we graph the percentage giving the liberal response divided by the number choosing either liberal or conservative. Thus 50 is the natural neutral point where sentiment is equal in both directions. Also note that these are line graphs with considerable gaps in between survey years, so that the spacing of years on the horizontal axis is very uneven.

FIGURE 4.1. The Administration Series, 1936–1964 (1936 data have "stay the same" coded as liberal)

"Go Left"

These (Gallup) questions ask respondents what "government" – or sometimes newly elected presidents – should do. Example: "Which of these three policies would you like to have President (Harry) Truman follow: 1. Go more to the left, by following more of the views of labor and other liberal groups? 2. Go more to the right, by following more of the views of business and conservative groups? 3. Follow a policy halfway between the two?" These differ from the administration series in that they are not relative to current ideology and policy. This series spans 1945–1979, Truman to Carter, but with big gaps in that span (see Fig. 4.2).

The Go left series is the only question form that uses the more abstract, and somewhat European, "left" and "right" in order to define the ideological terms. The evidence is thin, but the definitions appear to aid the liberal cause a bit. The phrase "labor and other liberal groups" gives this term a labor- and economic-issues related context that we know it often lacks (Conover & Feldman 1981). In the modern context, we know the term "liberal" from its more pejorative connotations in both political and nonpolitical situations (recklessness, elitist, lacking standards), not from its political connotations that explicitly link it to government policies that

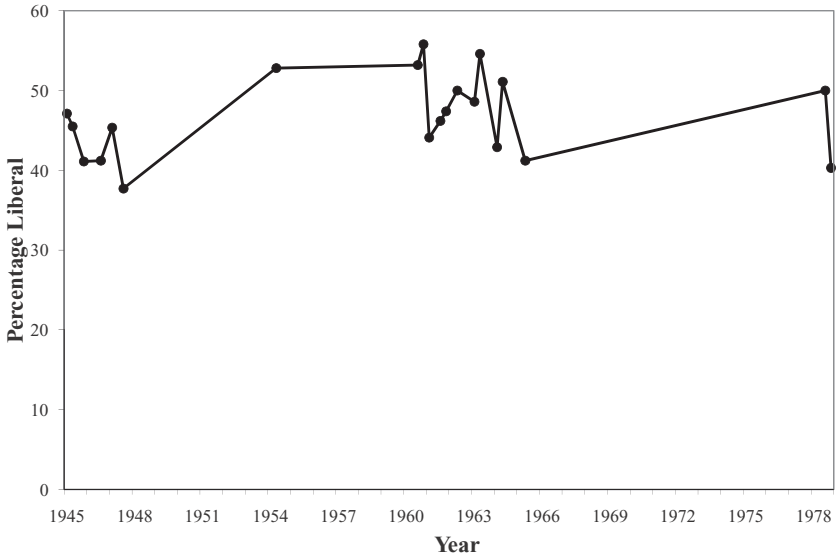

FIGURE 4.2. The Go Left Series, 1945–1979

favor labor, taxation, and redistribution (Sears & Citrin 1985). Apparently, orienting "liberal" to "labor" and "conservative" to "business" connects the ideological symbols to the more familiar material of party images. Even here, though, the term "liberal" fails to gain consistent majority support.

Identification

These are minor variations on self-identification for the period 1937 to present. Example: "In politics, do you regard yourself as a radical, a liberal, or a conservative?"

The identification questions are by far the most similar to modern self-identification probes asked in major academic and commercial surveys. We will exploit that similarity when the time comes to link old to new estimates. As with some of the other series, we can see a break after 1964–1965 (see Figure 4.3) in which the level of self-identified liberalism appears to undergo a permanent decline. We will return to that issue when we have a clean final series in hand.

Party to Join

These are hypothetical questions about what a respondent would do if the party system had one pure liberal party and one conservative one. They are asked for the period 1936–1978. Example: "Suppose there were

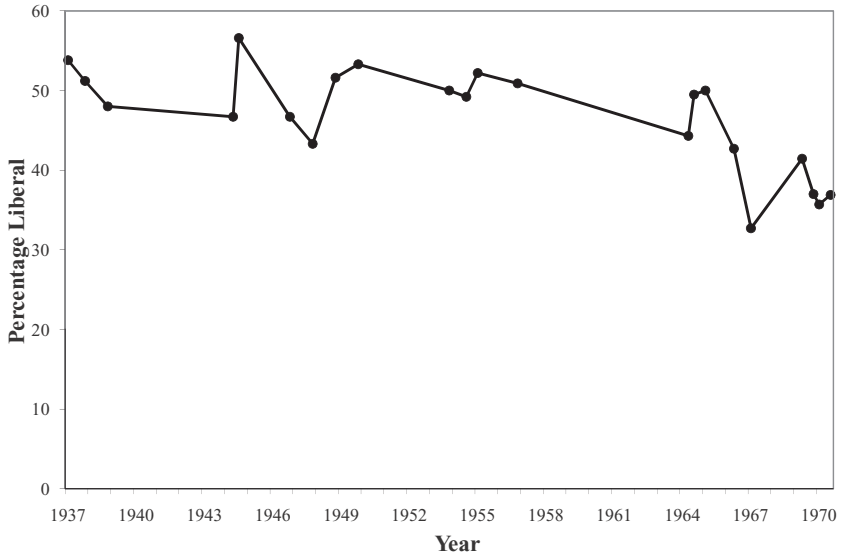

FIGURE 4.3. The Identification Series, 1937–1970

only two major parties in the United States, one for liberals and one for conservatives, which one would you be most likely to prefer?"

The hypothetical "Which party would you join" series is seen in Figure 4.4. It traces a relatively smooth path from 1936 through 1964 and then, as do others, drops off to a new lower level.

Preference

These are preferences for future outcomes. Example: "Which type of man would you prefer to have elected president in November (1944) – one who is known as liberal, or one who is known as conservative?" The modern versions of this question concern the Supreme Court and follow the 1968 Nixon campaign, which politicized the Court's ideological balance. We are uncomfortable about them but will explore their properties.

The Preference series seems more gap than data with one reading in the 1940s, one in the 1950s, and then three closely spaced in the late 1960s. (See Figure 4.5.) Like the others, it shows a drop-off to a new lower level at some time in the middle 1960s.

Putting Them All Together

Before constructing our full series, we wish to see whether we can estimate a single, coherent measure of self-identification for 1936–1970 from these five pieces. A first task is to decide what to use and what not to use. That

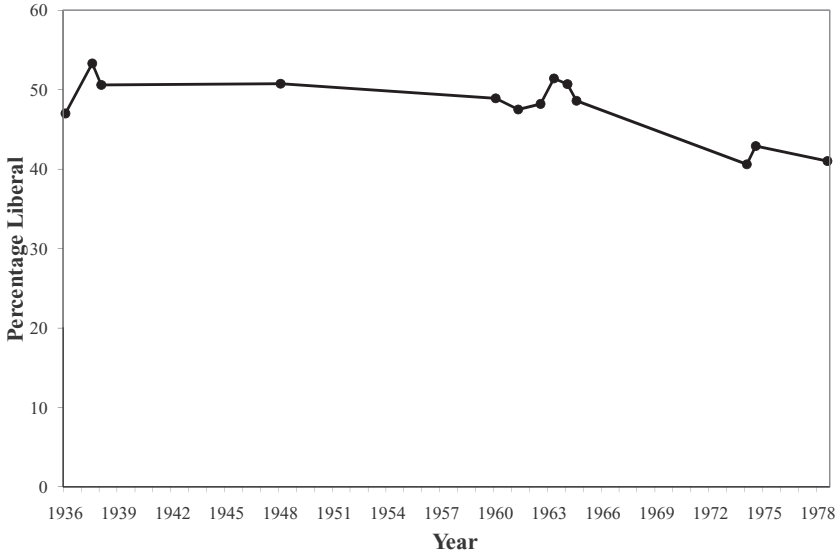

FIGURE 4.4. The Party to Join Series, 1936–1978

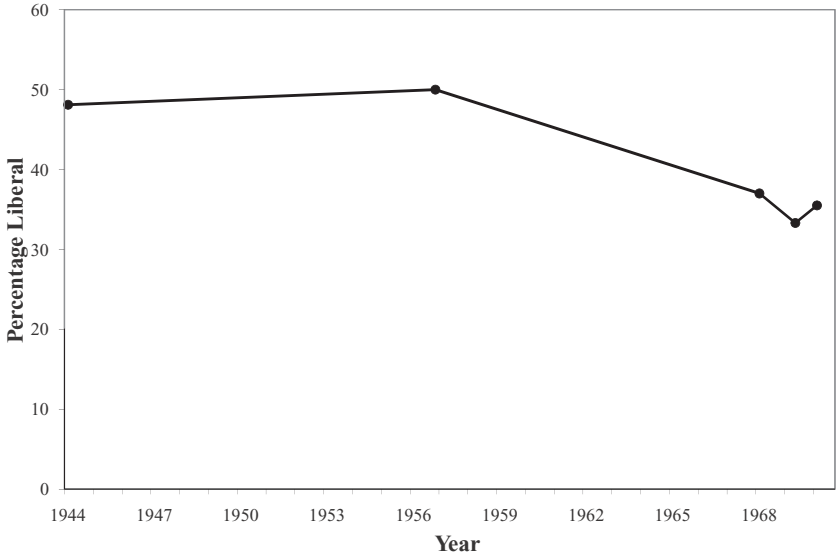

FIGURE 4.5. The Preference Series, 1944–1970

TABLE 4.2. *The Dimensional Solution for Four Items, 1936–1970*

Variable	Years	Loading
Go to left	11	.36
Identification	17	.96
Party to join	9	.68
Preference	5	.96

Estimated explained variance is 61.4%.

decision is to use four of the five scraps, but not the Administration series. It is noncomparable because it asks about different presidents, and even the Roosevelt data for 1936 and 1938 cannot be used because the questions include a middle category, "Stay about the same," for 1936 but not 1938.

In a quite exploratory fashion we ask whether the four scraps move in parallel to one another and are therefore believable indicators of the underlying concept, self-identification. To answer that question we perform an exploratory dimensional analysis, using the dimensional extraction technology described in Chapter 3, of the four for the period 1936–1970. The result is reported in Table 4.2.

There we see that the "Go to Left" measure is somewhat different from the other three but has enough common variance to merit inclusion. It is much less variable than the other three, not showing the large movements displayed by the others in the 1940s and 1960s. It differs from the others in actually defining left – "the views of labor and other liberal groups" – and right – "the views of business and other conservative groups." Perhaps the connection to labor and business keeps it steady while the unanchored connotations of "liberal" and "conservative" fluctuate with the issues and groups of the times.

The estimated series is pictured in Figure 4.6, which displays the estimated latent series (as a solid line) superimposed upon the data points that produced the estimate. What one wishes to see in such a display is that the estimation of the latent variable has not been too creative, that the summary measure looks reasonably like the data that produced it.[5]

Other movements in the graph correspond both to the raw data and to what we know about the historical context. One can see a very large drop

[5] There is one movement in Figure 4.6 that is suspicious, the sharp increase in liberal identification between 1936 and 1937. This is a data comparability problem, which we alluded to earlier. The estimate is driven by a single data point. In further work we will drop that case and start the series in 1937.

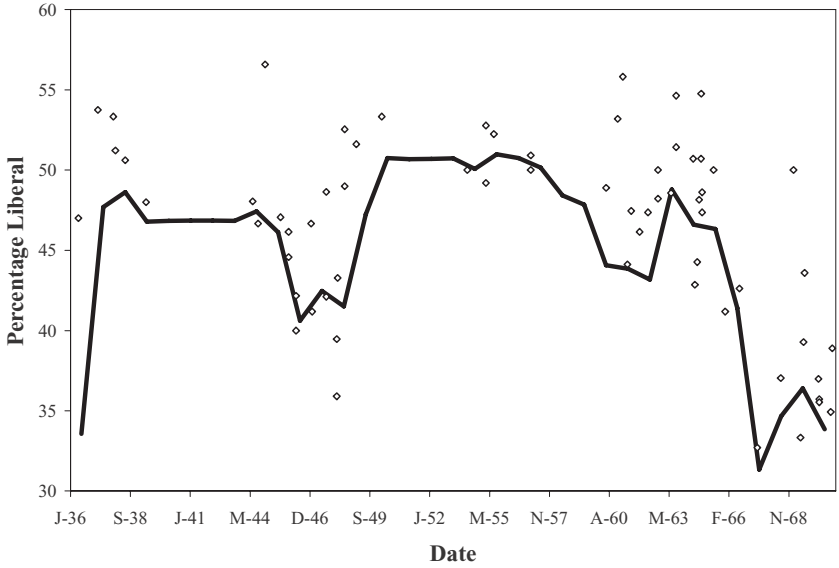

FIGURE 4.6. The Estimated Series, 1936–1970: Actual Data Points and Estimated Series

in liberal identification in the mid- to late 1960s. This is a very significant and consequential drop, and we see evidence of it in each of the individual series for which we have data. And there is a large temporary drop in about 1946. We know from the history of congressional elections that 1946 and 1966 marked the largest congressional election losses to that time of the then-dominant New Deal coalition.[6] So we are not surprised to see a turn away from liberal identification at the same times.

In all, the performance of the dimensional solution is reassuring. We can estimate self-identification with some confidence for this period before the time when measures became abundant. The remaining measurement task is to solve for a series that covers the entire 70-year span.

4.2.3 A Complete Series

From roughly 1970 on, we have a substantial amount of ideological self-identification data. These data are derived from more modern queries on ideological self-identification, asked more or less regularly by major

[6] And the permanent movement beginning in the late 1960s presaged the end of Democratic dominance of the White House.

academic and commercial survey houses. These kinds of data are commonly employed in studies of macroideology (Box-Steffensmeier, Knight, & Sigelman 1998; Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson 2002). What we want is one continuous series that allows us to bridge the early data with the later data. To get there we require one more assumption.

None of the five "prehistory" series is continued in identical form after measurement of self-identification became common at the end of the 1960s. But we can bridge the gap by relaxing the idea of "identical." Given the strong longitudinal covariation of quite different measures that we have seen with the older data and will see again with the newer and better materials, we are comfortable, at least in this instance, in not demanding that the questions be identical to be comparable.

An opportunity to bridge the gap presents itself in assuming continuity between what we have called the Identification series – "*In politics, do you regard yourself as a liberal or conservative?*" asked by Gallup and others – and a newer Gallup question: "*Taking everything into account would you say that you, yourself, are more of a liberal or more of a conservative in politics?*" posed to national samples from 1969 to 1987. That amounts essentially to assuming that the lead-in phrase, "Taking everything into account," does not materially affect the response.

With this assumption, we have overlap between old and new, and it becomes possible to estimate a dimensional solution for the entire time span. For data we have the universe of survey research questions on self-identified ideology from 1937 to 2006. These are 1,741 individual reports of national percentage marginal results forming 18 separate question series – 3 of the 4 old series, 14 new ones, and 1 combined.

Using the same dynamic dimensional extraction technique that we use to create the series from the older data, we combine all of our self-identification questions into a single analysis. We present information on the structure of a solution for ideological self-identification in Table 4.3, with variables (question series) arranged by the number of years coverage they provide.[7]

The result is seen in Figure 4.7, where we present the estimated series of self-identification from the 1930s into the 21st century.[8] The growth

[7] The question series are named for the organization that first used a particular question or used it most often. But the data include the probes of other organizations when they have used the same questions.

[8] As would be expected given that the questions are all geared toward tapping the exact same concept – liberal-conservative self-identification – there is no interpretable or systematic second dimension that can be extracted from this analysis.

TABLE 4.3. *Items and Loadings for the Estimate of Liberal-Conservative Self-Identification*

Organization and Format	Years	Loading
CBS/*New York Times*	26	0.81
Michigan/National Election Study/GSS	25	0.75
NBC/*Wall Street Journal*	21	0.08
ABC/*Washington Post*	20	0.12
Gallup format 4	19	0.77
Roper	19	0.79
Gallup format 1	18	0.96
Harris format 2	16	0.65
Go to Left	12	0.57
Gallup format 3	11	0.91
Gallup format 2	10	0.78
Party to Join	10	0.84
Yankelovitch Partners	10	0.92
Preference	7	0.48
Harris format 1	6	0.89
Gordon Black/*USA Today*	5	0.46
Yankelovitch	5	0.78
National Opinion Research Center	3	0.98

Estimated explained variance is 52.0%.

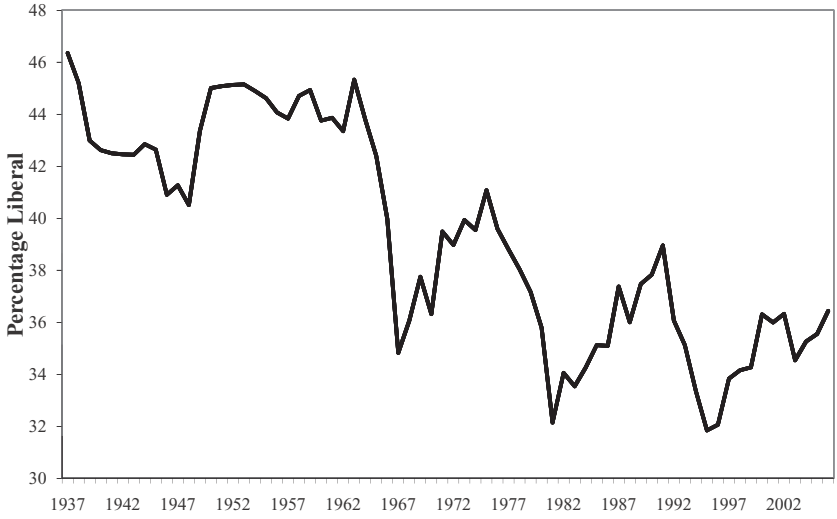

FIGURE 4.7. Ideological Self-Identification, 1937–2006

of conservatism and the decline of liberalism are both widely assumed in popular commentary. We find some support for that story, especially when considering the broad sweep of 20th century history. But we do not find support for its extreme version, that liberals were once a ruling majority. The decline of liberal self-identification is an obvious impression of Figure 4.7, but it is important to note that it is a decline from minority status, averaging around 44% of those who declared themselves either liberal or conservative, to a smaller minority status, about 35% in recent years.

Was There Ever a Liberal Majority?

We know that Americans hold operationally liberal preferences on a wide variety of political issues, especially on the issues of spending and social welfare that alone defined the party system for much of the 20th century. But were Americans ever *symbolically* liberal? There is a scattering of survey results that seem to suggest it. One can find polls in which there are more self-declared liberals than conservatives, 18 of them to be exact, the highest of which, a National Opinion Research Center (NORC) poll of 1944, has liberals at 57%.[9] But that is by no means the dominant story: One can also find 52 surveys in the period before 1970 where liberals are the minority, with percentages that range down to the upper twenties. A simple average of all surveys before the abrupt break of 1966 has self-declared liberals at 46.8% – a large minority to be sure, but still a minority. Of the more than two thousand surveys after 1968, exactly one, a General Social Survey study from 1975, has a slim liberal plurality, 29% to 28%.

Nor is it the case that there is a particular brief era when liberalism reigned. The 18 surveys with liberal pluralities are scattered over four decades. The "liberal" identification has never been truly dominant in American politics, even when Democratic policymakers, making sweeping changes in the size and scope of the welfare state, were regularly winning elections. In the current era, with relatively evenly split political parties and closely contested elections, the "liberal" identification is never close to majority status. Further, the preference for the "liberal" label over the "conservative" one has been steadily declining since at least the 1970s, even as preferences for "liberal" public

[9] There are also eight polls in which the numbers of liberals and conservatives are equal.

policy – not to mention "liberal" political candidates – have not exhibited similar trends during this period.[10]

Clearly symbolic ideology is something very different from operational ideology. By the operational measure America is unmistakably dominated by the left. By the symbolic measure it is unmistakably dominated by the political right. This conflict, a central theme of much of what we will have to say in the following chapters, means that an inference based upon either one alone – which is to say, most of what has been written about American ideology – is wrong. We will have to come to terms with the fact that Americans tend to want to call themselves "conservative" while they advocate big government liberalism.

4.3 EXPLANATIONS FOR GROWING CONSERVATIVE IDENTIFICATION

We turn now to the task of explaining movements in self-identification. We have two sorts of explanatory problems to deal with in this series. The obvious one is why liberalism was once a near-majority and then precipitously declined to a level closer to half the numbers of self-described conservatives. This is but a 10-point shift, more or less. But 10 points for a voting age population of about 200 million people is a very large number. Given the demonstrated role that elite framing of ideological terms has on ideological self-identification for at least large subsets of the American electorate (Schiffer 2000, Jacoby 2000), the reasons for the initial unpopularity – and, just as important, the steadily decreasing popularity – of the liberal label have their roots in the political context.

[10] Our scale has been constructed by using the standard definition of macroideology: the proportion of self-declared liberals in America, relative to the numbers of self-declared conservatives. But we also ask whether we really have two phenomena, (1) why people choose to identify as liberals and (2) why others choose to identify as conservatives. Is one the complement of the other, or do we need separate theories for liberal and conservative identifications? To answer that question we have also estimated separate series for proportions of citizens who identify as "liberal" and "conservative" over time. These series show a strange parallelism in the early decades, with the numbers of liberals and conservatives rising and falling in parallel, probably reflecting the early tradition in commercial surveys of attempting to force respondents into categories even when they indicated unwillingness to choose. When respondents are given more freedom to choose a "moderate" option or not to answer, then the series diverge in ways that make intuitive sense, with the percentage choosing "liberal" rising as the percentage choosing "conservative" falls, and vice versa. This is the principal reason for using relative percentages as our explanatory variable. They are not similarly subject to manipulation by such devices.

The second problem is to explain the back and forth movements in shorter time spans. These are movements of 3 or 4 or 5 points, but much too systematic to ascribe to chance.

4.3.1 FDR and the Politics of the 1930s

We have alluded in Chapter 1 to the critical role of Franklin D. Roosevelt in creating a new connotation – support for the New Deal – for liberalism. Because Roosevelt was seen as helping ordinary working people and the unemployed during the depression, his preferred description of his own ideology became associated with "the common man." And unlike many such claims in politics, this one really was believed. FDR and liberalism favored the common man and the opponents of both did not, siding instead with business and the rich. The "liberal" label allowed Roosevelt to provide a compelling alternative to the "conservative" symbolism popular in American politics for decades (Rotunda 1986).

We know that these images took because they were still to be found in the survey responses of American voters two decades later when the authors of *The American Voter* asked respondents what they liked and disliked about the two parties. The matter of parties is a lot easier for ordinary people to fathom than is ideology, and so the link of "common man" to the Democratic Party is more robust than is the association with the party's ideology, liberalism. As late as 1964 the majority response to a feeling thermometer measuring affective orientation to "liberals" is a noncommittal 50, an indication that most were not at all sure who those liberals were. But for those who could make the link, it is very hard to imagine a more positive political image than being for the common man.

We know that some large proportion of those who tuned into FDR's fireside chats bought into the idea of liberalism, but somewhat fewer than those who supported Roosevelt. The liberal label failed to gain majority support under Roosevelt, but the percentage of citizens who called themselves "liberal" was much higher than it is now. In the 1930s nearly half of all citizens who chose an ideological label identified as liberals. That number would survive almost unchanged through World War II, the tense early years of the cold war, and the quiescent 1950s. And then it, along with the meaning of the ideological term in the eyes of the mass public, started changing again.

4.3.2 LBJ and the Less Than Great Society

We know with some precision *that* something happened in the 1960s that dramatically affected the percentages of citizens who identified with the "liberal" label, and we know with some precision *when*. The *why* will require more speculation. Between 1963, when the Kennedy assassination made Lyndon Johnson president, and 1967, the third year of LBJ's Great Society, the ranks of self-identified liberals fell by 10.5 points – about one-fourth – and never recovered. (See again Figure 4.7.) That movement would have been huge had it been temporary. As a permanent shift, it is a dominant story of American politics in the 20th century.

In the transition year from Kennedy to Johnson, 1963–1964, the ranks of self-identified liberals declined by 1.5 points. That is larger than typical year-to-year movements, but not so large as to be remarkable. From 1964, while LBJ was winning a landslide reelection, to 1965, there was another drop of 1.4. After 1965, when the 89th Congress set about passing everything in Johnson's "Great Society" package, the drop was more remarkable, another 2.4 points – on top of the previous 2.9. And then in 1967 there was a really big drop, 5.2 points, the largest one-year movement in the history of the series. That marked the end of "liberalism" as a competitive ideological force, and the beginning of the modern pattern where those who are in fact liberals try assiduously to avoid the label. John Kennedy would not be the last liberal president. But he would be the last who would call himself a liberal.

That leaves us wondering what precisely happened. We know what was going on in American politics at the time, and that was a lot. It was a busy decade. The Kennedy assassination rocked a nation that believed such things could not happen in America and produced an accidental president in Lyndon Johnson. But of course Johnson was no longer accidental after reelection by a landslide vote one year later.

That landslide itself might figure in the explanation. It produced a Democratic Congress with, for the first time, a solid liberal majority. That majority, spurred on by an ambitious White House, was ready to manufacture legislation in mass quantity, a bill a day. The Democratic Congress had a solid liberal majority in each committee and on the floors of both houses. After years of "half a loaf" compromises with the Republicans and the southern wing of the Democratic Party, there would be no compromise – and essentially no conservative participation – in the 89th Congress. Legislation written in the White House would whisk through Congress, often unchanged.

For all of the frustration that it brings, majorities who are forced to compromise with a powerful minority are probably saved from their worst impulses. The compromises themselves, that is, are likely to smooth off the edges of positions that might be controversial and embarrassing in the long run. No such moderating force existed in the 89th Congress. It passed what its liberal majority wanted to pass, without need to compromise. By the normal standards of American politics, that Congress committed legislative excess.

That legislation would include a Medicare program that was popular from the start and a lasting legacy to Johnson. And, too, it included a historic voting rights bill that put an end to a hundred years of deliberate political exclusion of African Americans. But that was just the beginning. Lyndon Johnson had produced a program called the "Great Society," which was a radical extension of the "liberalism" popularized by FDR in the New Deal. The Great Society would reach beyond the "common man" who had been the focus of the New Deal to give benefits and political voice to an underclass of Americans who lived below the common standard.

The poverty program, as it would be called, focused particularly on the urban poor. Not merely a package of benefits, it was intended to allow the poor to organize for their own benefit and to fight City Hall to do so. Community Action Programs (CAPs) directed immense amounts of federal money to urban areas and set up governance over that spending by boards that largely excluded local public officials and called for "maximum feasible participation" of the poor. It would be empowerment by conflict, and the conflict was not long in coming. In city after city there would be a struggle for control of the CAPs by poor people and their representatives that featured, not surprisingly, an absence of political skill and a great deal of anger. It was a largely unappealing show, all financed by federal dollars.[11]

The Race Riots

The 1960s produced a revolution of rising expectations of the urban poor, and particularly the black urban poor. With the federal government enlisted in the cause of black civil rights and then seeking to eliminate poverty in America, there was reason to think that the future would be brighter than a bleak past. In the American South progress was real. The

[11] This is chronicled in a highly critical appraisal by the scholar and later U.S. senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1969). His title, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, gives the flavor of the account.

1960s marked the beginning of the end of Jim Crow de jure segregation, which had characterized the region since Reconstruction. But in urban America legal segregation was not the issue. Its demise, mainly south of the Mason-Dixon line, generated no progress in black communities in the North.

It was debatable whether Community Action Programs would *ever* significantly improve the lives of the urban poor. But certainly they had not done so by summer 1965, while they were still the subject of congressional action, or by 1966, when they were too new and too small to matter much. The rising expectations and the absence of real change in the urban ghettos, brewed with incendiary hot weather and sometimes brutal local police behavior, produced race riots in a great many American cities in the summers of 1965, 1966, and 1967. There were horrendous events featuring mobs of angry people looting and burning their own communities in the ghettos of urban America.

The riots were a body shock to American politics, events that were not unprecedented in American history but certainly were without precedent in the television age. The televised images were ugly, showing human behavior at its worst. The collapse of civil order in the face of angry mobs was a picture of America coming apart at the seams. Quite probably they are a big part of the story of declining support for the idea of liberalism as well. If one wanted a program evaluation for the efficacy of the Great Society, the riots provided one. It had failed. More than having failed; it had made matters visibly worse. This is a harsh judgment and to some degree certainly unfair. But pretty clearly it is a judgment that large numbers of Americans reached from the simple facts at hand. Whether a hypothetical program evaluation performed under better conditions would have reached a different conclusion did not much matter. Public opinion has its own rules for making judgments.

The New Clientele of Liberalism

The end result of the Great Society era was a change in the type of citizen whom the public associated with the "liberal" label. The liberalism of FDR's New Deal had for clients the working people of America: "the common man." Thus liberalism was conjoined with pictures of workers, often unionized, hardworking people, playing by the rules and trying to get ahead. The "common man" was an image that most Americans could readily support. And in an era when African Americans were "invisible," the common man of political imagery was white.

With the beginning of the Great Society there was a new clientele of liberalism, the poor – and the nonwhite. The focus of Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty was the underclass of people whose usual defining characteristic was that they did not work.[12] And although there were – and are – more poor white people than black people, the image of poverty from the very beginning was black.

Kellstedt (2000, 2003) documents the rapid changes in media framing of government spending and "the poor" in the mid-1960s, showing that after around 1965, the framing of mass media coverage of poverty changed markedly, with dramatically increasing numbers of references to "black poverty," "ghettos," and other images that changed the way Americans viewed both poverty and government spending to alleviate it. This change in framing served to fuse in the American mind government spending, the welfare state, and a largely unsympathetic portrait of a black underclass.[13] If one asks whose face was seen in stories about poverty of that time, it was the black single mother who lived on public assistance. The "welfare mom" affected attitudes of entitlement (see Gilens 2000 for documentation of the black face of poverty and welfare). If liberalism was about improving the lives of welfare moms, large numbers of Americans were willing to reject the label. "Welfare" itself, meaning usually public assistance to single-parent families with children, stands out among public programs for its unpopularity. Whereas heavy majorities of Americans endorse increasing the scope and size of funding of almost all government programs, welfare is the exception, the program a majority would like to see cut. So if "liberal" began to mean someone who wanted more welfare, then it was doomed to be unpopular.

4.3.3 Evidence of the Changing Associations of "Liberalism"

The assertions we have made about the changing associations of liberals and liberalism are all in principle testable. What is required is evidence

[12] Spending to help "the poor," broadly defined, usually enjoys strong support, showcasing even further the strong racial component of opposition to government spending on poor citizens.

[13] Importantly, Kellstedt also shows that despite the fact that media mentions of black poverty declined sharply after this particularly contentious time in American politics, race and the welfare state, separate domains during the pre-1960s era, continued to be viewed as one and the same by the electorate through the rest of the 20th century. This suggests that whatever happened in the late 1960s to change the way Americans thought about the relationships among race, poverty, and "liberalism" persisted even after the 1960s.

of association between various images and the concept "liberal" before and after the beginning of the Great Society, race riots, and so forth. Alas, they are mostly only in principle testable because most of the survey questions that would have permitted documenting changing associations were never posed.

The principal problem is that the American National Election Studies series, the source of most data on the valence of images of various kinds, did not pose the liberal versus conservative question until 1972, six years or so after the key changes had occurred. And if it had, most of the images in question were also not measured at the key moments of declining liberal identification.

But we do possess another measure, the "feeling thermometer" for "Liberals" first posed in 1964.[14] As would be expected, this measure is highly correlated with self-identification, with correlations ranging from around .55 to .65, depending upon whether those answering "50" are included or excluded.

Blacks

But we remain unable to measure some key images, for example, "the common man," at any time. And we are unable to observe most images in the late 1960s time of transition. So we will make the most of the limited materials that exist. For a single case, that of feelings toward liberals and feelings toward blacks, we have a "before" reading (1964). That is only partly relevant, because our theory is that liberalism became associated with aid to the black underclass, not simply with blacks. And we know that association with blacks predated the Great Society. "Liberal" always meant racial liberal in the South. And in the rest of the country, three years of liberal support for civil rights, culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was a pretty substantial cue linking liberals to blacks.

[14] The initial question wording, changed very slightly over the years, is "There are many groups in America that try to get the government or the American people to see things more their way. We would like to get your feelings towards some of these groups. I have here a card on which there is something that looks like a thermometer. We call it a 'feeling thermometer' because it measures your feelings towards groups. Here's how it works. If you don't know too much about a group or don't feel particularly warm or cold toward them, then you should place them in the middle, at the 50 degree mark. If you have a warm feeling toward a group or feel favorably toward it, you would give it a score somewhere between 50 degrees and 100 degrees, depending on how warm your feeling is toward the group. On the other hand, if you don't feel very favorably toward some of these groups – if there are some you don't care for too much – then you would place them somewhere between 0 degrees and 50 degrees." The key word is "Liberals."

FIGURE 4.8. Correlations Between Liberals Thermometer and Blacks Thermometer

Nonetheless, the evidence of association of "liberal" with "black" is relevant. The data, correlations between the thermometer scores for liberals and for blacks, are seen in Figure 4.8.

The evidence of Figure 4.8 is broadly consistent with our expectations. Liberal, that is, was already associated with support for blacks in 1964, at the height of the civil rights movement. But that association doubled over the next eight years in the period of the riots and the poverty program. Before Lyndon Johnson and the Great Society, liberalism was weakly associated with support for blacks – and whatever that implies for the thermometer respondents. Afterward the association became powerful.[15]

Labor Unions

We have measures of support for labor unions for a similar period. This also is a far from ideal fit to our concept of the "common man" as the image of liberalism. Labor unions advocate the interests of common

[15] We show data in Figure 4.8 and subsequent figures through 1980 to focus attention on the changing associations between group-based preferences and symbolic liberalism over the period we see as critical to the codification of conservative dominance in American politics. After the 1980 period, the associations in each of the later figures either stablize or grow at a slower rate than the period we highlight here.

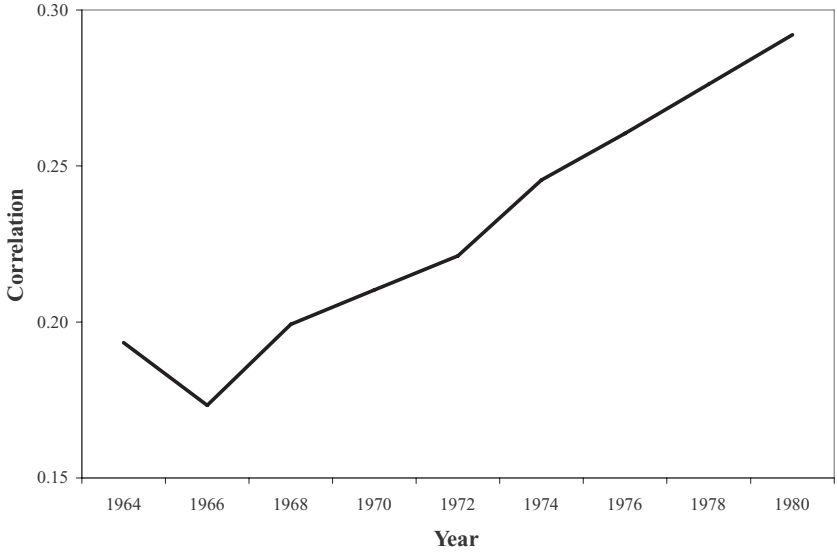

FIGURE 4.9. Correlations Between Liberals Thermometer and Labor Unions Thermometer

working people but have been unpopular, even among middle- and working-class citizens. And the image of labor, and particularly its leaders, is sullied by allegations of corruption and criminality. Thus while liberals do indeed support labor unions, that support is more in the background than the foreground. The image of unions is not one with which elected politicians are eager to associate.

The pattern of Figure 4.9 is broadly similar to that of blacks. Association grows over time. The correlations, however, are ever so slightly higher at the beginning and lower at the end than in the case of blacks, indicating a slight reduction in relative terms of the role of working people in favor of the poor. Part of this is a pattern we shall see repeatedly, that all associations of response to liberals seem to increase over time as the term seems to evolve from one of quite limited connotation to one of strong associations.

Urban Unrest

After the fact of the riots of 1965 to 1968, ANES respondents were asked how they felt about the riots and rioters. The question posed a trade-off between using force to quell the riots and correcting the problems

FIGURE 4.10. Correlations Between Liberals Thermometer and Urban Unrest: Signs Inverted

of poverty and unemployment that gave rise to them.[16] Americans tilted strongly toward viewing the rioters in negative terms with more than 50% advocating greater use of force to put down the riots compared to a little more than half that number (26%) advocating dealing with the urban problems. Given this strong negative response, any association of rioting with liberalism would be expected to be a harmful association.

That association did indeed grow. (See Figure 4.10.) Attitudes toward rioters were somewhat connected ($r = .19$) to attitudes toward liberalism when the question was first posed in fall 1968, which is after the last of the long hot summers of the 1960s. The attitude linkage then grew by about half over the next eight years.

The initial public response by many American liberals was to treat the riots as an extension of the civil rights protests that preceded them, arguing that the riots proved the necessity of doing more to aid inner city blacks. White America, which had been swayed by the quiet dignity of

[16] The item wording is "There is much discussion about the best way to deal with the problem of urban unrest and rioting. Some say it is more important to use all available force to maintain law and order – no matter what results. Others say it is more important to correct the problems of poverty and unemployment that give rise to the disturbances. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

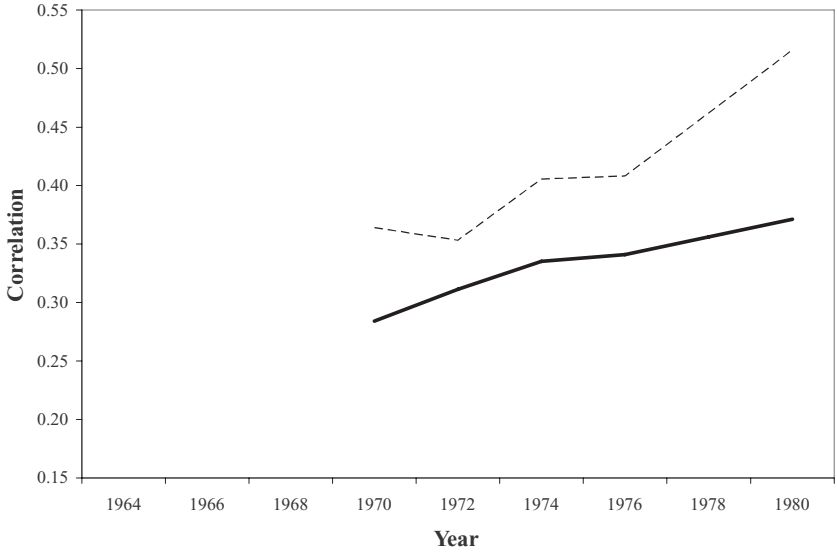

FIGURE 4.11. Correlations Between Liberals Thermometer and Thermometers for Black Militants (dashed line) and Civil Rights Leaders (solid line)

the nonviolent civil rights protests, responded with anger to the televised images of violence and looting. Stealing a TV set from a looted appliance store, after all, was not a lot like standing up to troopers, dogs, and fire hoses to demand voting rights. Liberal sympathy for the plight of the rioters fell on deaf ears.

Two Kinds of Black Leaders

Occurring too late to be helpful on untangling the events of the 1960s, we have additional thermometer scores for "Black Militants" and for "Civil Rights Leaders." These begin in 1970 and show the same trend toward growing association that we have seen with other series (Figure 4.11). "Black Militants" we think of as uncompromising figures who were critical of established Civil Rights Leaders and more inclined to riots as protest than to peaceful civil disobedience. The riots were largely spontaneous mass events and largely leaderless. Civil Rights Leaders were already a vanishing breed when the question was first posed in 1970. Martin Luther King, the great symbol of civil rights, was assassinated in 1968 and not replaced by anyone of comparable stature. So both of these feeling thermometers evoke warmth or coldness toward figures that were pretty well undefined by the 1970s, when the questioning began.

What we see in Figure 4.11 is a quite similar response to these ill-defined people. In the late 1960s the Black Militants and the Civil Rights Leaders were often opponents, offering differing views for the achievement of black progress. So it is a little surprising to see that the public reactions to both are similar. Both, that is, are increasingly associated with liberalism as time passes.

People on Welfare

Attitudes toward "people on welfare" is our last bit of evidence. It is exactly the right sort of question for our assertion that welfare moms became the new image of liberalism. But alas the question is posed for the first time in 1976, a full decade after the action. What we learn is that there is a robust association between views of welfare recipients and views of liberals, $r = .31$. These data tend to confirm our story but are not useful at all for sorting out the important question of when the association began.

Most of the specific social goals that either were a part of or grew out of the New Deal and Great Society – such as education, Medicare and public health, public works, Social Security, and economic security for citizens willing to work – remain popular. But ideological self-identification is formed largely as a reaction to symbols associated with the ideological labels themselves (Conover & Feldman 1981). What we see in all our evidence is that the symbols of liberalism became charged with symbols of race and of racial riot and of protest. Americans *are* on balance liberals in their responses to specific policy issues. But they *see* liberalism as something else, a sympathy for a largely unpopular racial minority, which demands, riots, and protests.

The Vietnam War and the American Counterculture

The war in Vietnam was a dramatic and painful experience in American life. It has all the hallmarks of an explanation for substantial ideological change save one, timing. The story is plausible in many respects. The war, for example, produced widespread liberal opposition to the foreign policy of the United States for the first time. Liberals could not be accused of lack of patriotism when, for example, they ardently supported the foreign policies of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy. "Liberal" is associated with protests in the streets before Vietnam, but not the ragtag disorder of what Vietnam protests later became.

The problem with a Vietnam hypothesis to explain declining liberalism is that the events that plausibly could have produced large-scale

change largely occurred after about 1968, when the shift away from liberal identification had already occurred. To be sure, there were events in say 1965–66. The acceleration of the war and the first use of regular army (which is to say, draftees) occurred in 1965. But one needs to remember that the war was initially popular, the nascent antiwar movement largely an intellectual debate on the sidelines of American politics. And it was Lyndon Johnson, perhaps the most liberal president ever, who was the number one symbol of hard-line support for the war.

The beginning of a visible antiwar movement among liberals occurred with Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign in 1968. It became substantial when Robert Kennedy, a more central image of American liberalism, entered the fray. And it dominated the airwaves with first protests during the Democratic Convention of 1968 and later a string of Washington protests against the Nixon version of the war. As antiwar blended with long hair and counterculture, the formerly button-down image of liberalism would undergo considerable change.

A more complicated story is possible. The race riots and the least popular part of the Great Society were temporary on the American political scene. Perhaps the abandonment of liberal identification that we have observed would also have been temporary had not the Vietnam War protest provided another reason for abandoning liberalism. So we might imagine that domestic chaos and opposition to America's foreign policy in time of war formed a one-two punch. After they got over Watts's "Burn baby! burn!" Americans were exposed to Jane Fonda in North Vietnam and "Hell no, we won't go!" in the streets.

Whether Vietnam was the driving cause or not, the events of the 1960s and the emergence of the American counterculture also helped to erase FDR's hoped-for image of the "liberal" as the straightlaced working-class family who plays by the rules and works hard to get ahead. Instead, "liberal" became the label used to define hippies, peace protesters, and people generally divorced from the American mainstream – such as, the "Acid, Amnesty, and Abortion" supporters from the 1972 presidential campaign. FDR fashioned "liberal" as a term used to signify "common-sense idealism," a label that would represent the interests and values of ordinary Americans (Freidel 1991). The humorist P. J. O'Rourke, in his efforts to skewer American liberalism, describes the changing image nicely:

> Liberal is, of course, one of those fine English words, like lady, gay, and welfare, which has been spoiled by special pleading. When I say "liberals," I certainly

don't mean openhanded individuals or tolerant persons or even Big Government Democrats. I mean people who are excited that one percent of the profits of Ben & Jerry's ice cream goes to promote world peace.

These negative associations did not necessarily extend to images of the Democratic Party itself – declines in Democratic identification or feelings toward Democrats did not occur nearly as dramatically over this period. Of all left-leaning symbols in American politics, "liberal" stands nearly alone in its unpopularity.

After the 1960s

What happened in the 1960s, whatever explanation one chooses, produced a new reality in which "liberal" became, on balance, an unpopular term. Before that the numbers of self-declared liberals were almost as large as those of conservatives, and the image of liberalism was that of political figures like four Democratic presidents, Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson. Liberalism in the minds of citizens, we presume, was about taking care of the common man, Social Security, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and so forth.

What changed after the decline of liberal identification was that astute politicians on the left stopped using the term "liberal" to describe themselves. Before the change the public saw "liberal" aligned with popular Democratic programs. In one speech one would hear "I am a liberal" conjoined with "I believe in enhancing the Social Security System, . . . raising the minimum wage, . . . protecting working people, . . . expanding support for public education," and on and on. After the change all those same policy proposals would still be heard, but without the word "liberal" as a summary.

This is a curious case where what is individually rational, for individual politicians to avoid the liberal label, may be collectively nonrational, as they become subject, as a class, to being associated with an ever more unpopular label as it goes undefended. And as popular politicians avoid the liberal label, it provides an opportunity for their conservative opponents to fill the vacuum with unpopular personalities and causes.

The asymmetrical linguistic war sets up a spiral in which "liberal" not only is unpopular, but *becomes* ever more so. Thus we expect to see a downward trend in liberal identification as progressive generations of citizens experience the term mainly in its negative usage, the "L-word" as it came to be called when used to tar Michael Dukakis in 1988.

4.3.4 Thermostatic Response

Finally, we wish to explain the shorter-term, but still systematic, fluctuations in ideology. We have seen strong evidence of thermostatic response to party control of the White House when it comes to operational preferences. It is not so clear that this should carry through to ideological identification, since operational preferences often ask about one's own views relative to the status quo – so a change in the policy environment should lead to a change in preferences. Ideological identification, by contrast, is generally considered to deal in absolutes, with views that should be unrelated to the political context. But one can make an argument, following the theoretical discussion in Chapter 3, that a public that is modally in between the ideological positions of elite left and right should reject the policies of both, wanting to be left of (i.e., more moderate than) right policies and right of left policies. We can imagine citizens not strongly committed to left or right identification who move with the times.

As one ideology plays out too long and becomes associated with failure and scandal – or simply with government's giving us more of the kinds of policies that that ideology produces – they move toward the other. Weakly symbolically liberal when Democrats take power, over time they become weakly symbolically conservative as the images associated with liberalism become unfavorable or time-worn (and vice versa).

4.4 A STATISTICAL MODEL

We have developed three explanations of longitudinal movements in self-identification. Each will find a simple operationalization in the model to come. Most important, we model the transition from liberalism as robust minority view – almost a majority – to the decidedly weaker force of today. For that we will entertain a simple intervention model, a step downward in liberal identification beginning in 1966.[17]

For the downward trend after the intervention, we create a counter-variable that is 0 until 1965 and then incremented uniformly after that

[17] We have considered dynamic specifications of the Box-Tiao variety (Box & Tiao 1975). These produce estimates of dynamics – the δ in ω_0/δ – that are quite small, about 0.40, and therefore indicate approximately linear effects. We choose the linear specification to gain the more flexible multivariate modeling associated with regression.

TABLE 4.4. *Explaining the Movement in Liberal Self-Identification*

Variable	Regression Coefficient and Error	Regression Coefficient and Error
Great society intervention	−5.97*	−2.65*
	(0.64)	(0.71)
Party control duration	−0.12*	−0.05*
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Postintervention trend	−0.10*	−0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)
Liberal identification ($t - 1$)		0.60*
		(0.09)
Intercept	44.12	17.58
	(0.34)	(4.11)
N	70	70
R^2 (adjusted)	0.84	0.90

* $p < 0.05$.

year. Thus the trend we model is not for the entire history of the series, but only after the 1960s intervention, which our logic predicts.

For the thermostatic effect we have a counter for number of years in office that begins at 1 for the inaugural year of a party takeover (i.e., implicitly treating follow-ons of the same party as a continuation, not a new regime) and is then incremented until the party is defeated. This is multiplied for Republican regimes by −1 so that continuation in office hurts whichever ideology is associated with the incumbent president. Again, we expect a negative coefficient, with movement *away from* the party in power.

We put it all together in the first column of Table 4.4, where we present a linear regression of the three effects combined. We find support for each of the three ideas. Most important is the nearly 6-point permanent drop (−5.97) in the mid-1960s. Both in substance and in variance explained, this is the key component of the model.

The coefficient for party control, the thermostatic effect, is cleanly estimated. The effect, −0.12 point per year in office, produces about a 1-point shift after an eight-year span.

The coefficient on the post-1960s trend is smaller still. But for a trend that runs for 40 years in the current data, the total effect, nearly 4 points,

is not at all small. Ignoring the cycles of party control, the decline of liberal identification is the addition of the negative intervention and the trend, which jointly predict an almost 10-point drop by the end of the series.[18]

The regression model of column 1 presumes no autocorrelation, which of course is usually problematic with time series regressions. To deal with the issue we estimate a similar model with a lagged dependent variable, used to clean up serial correlation and to take into account the dynamic properties of the ideological identification series, where it would be expected that some part of the conservative identification in a given year will persist into the following year. The results, in the second column, are similar but not identical to the linear specification.

The greatest change is that the post-1960s linear trend is reduced by more than half to a level that is not significant (but still correctly signed). In effect, what we see is that this trend counter is competing with autocorrelation and the persisting impact of the other two variables in this dynamic specification, and autocorrelation is winning the competition.

4.5 CONCLUSIONS: BUILDING THE CONSERVATIVE SYMBOLIC MAJORITY

The goal in this chapter was to gain a better understanding of the history of ideological self-identification in the American electorate, attempting to explain at least broad shifts in the way citizens conceive of ideological language.

We have seen a steep decline in symbolic liberalism that corresponds with observed changes in American political discourse, in particular changing the dominant symbols of ideological liberalism from the white working-class American of FDR to the largely nonwhite underclass – as well as the counterculture movement – of the 1960s and beyond.

This period, we believe, saw the start of the move toward the current state of ideological self-identification in the United States, where liberalism as a symbolic term is out of favor even with citizens who express support for liberal candidates and policies. None of these changes dampened support for the largely popular – and operationally liberal – policies

[18] Estimating linear trends from sample time series is always dicey, for in the *long run* they go off to infinity – or in this case, to a number of self-identified liberals that tries to go below 0! So trend estimates need to be qualified a bit as appropriate only for a defined period.

of the New Deal. But the symbols associated with liberalism have dramatically changed.

The logic that links changes in the political context to changes in the ideological self-identifications in the American electorate is consistent with what we know of Americans' feelings toward politically relevant groups and symbols, with how citizens form ideological self-identifications, and with the factors that elites consider when framing their own political arguments.

Putting the pieces of these three chapters together shows us a portrait of American ideology that is deeply disjointed. When it comes to specific policy preferences, the American public is always left of center, even when it is electing Republicans to office, and even in the most conservative years. But when it comes to symbolic identification, the public is always right of center, even when electing Democrats, and even in liberal political environments. In the following chapters, we dig beneath these aggregate findings, in an effort to understand this operational symbolic "paradox" in public opinion. Doing so will force us to come to grips with the fact that operational and symbolic ideology are not two sides of the same coin, but rather divergent orientations and identities that have vastly different political implications.