The Origins & Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications Revisited

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Abstract   This paper examines the permanence of differences in the psychological underpinnings of ideological self-identifications. Previous research has suggested that conservatives differ from liberals insofar as their self-identifications as such are best explained as the product of a negative reaction (both to liberalism generally and to the groups associated with it in particular) rather than a positive embrace. However, this paper demonstrates that the dynamics underlying the formation of ideological self-identifications are not static reflections of inherent differences in liberal and conservative psychologies but rather evolve in response to changes in the political environment. Whereas feelings (positive or negative) toward liberalism played a decisive role in shaping individuals' ideological self-identifications during the New Deal/Great Society era of liberal and Democratic political hegemony, the subsequent resurgence of political conservatism produced a decisive shift in the bases of liberal and conservative self-identifications. In particular, just as conservative self-identifications once primarily represented a reaction against liberalism and its associated symbols, hostility toward conservatism and its associated symbols has in recent years become an increasingly important source of liberal self-identifications.

Keywords   Ideological self-identification · Critical referents · Symbolic meaning

Scholarship in the field of political psychology has suggested that the dynamics underlying the formation of liberal and conservative ideological self-identifications differ significantly. In particular, Conover and Feldman's (1981) analysis of the cognitive and symbolic sources of ideological self-identifications demonstrated that

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liberalism and conservatism are the products of different points of reference. Whereas conservative self-identification stems largely from antipathy toward liberalism and the groups associated with it, liberal self-identification is considerably less strongly related to negative affect toward analogous symbols of conservatism. Instead, it is largely a product of positive evaluations of liberalism and of groups perceived as the beneficiaries of "liberal" policies (Conover and Feldman 1981). However, it is unclear whether these different points of reference are the result of the inherent differences in liberal and conservative psychologies that have been identified by a large body of scholarship (e.g. Adorno et al. 1950; Eysenck 1954; Tomkins 1964, 1978, 1982; Tetlock 1983; Stone 1986) and have therefore been historically constant or whether they were simply transient reflections of the political environment at a particular point in history. Conover and Feldman themselves expressed agnosticism with regard to this question, merely speculating that the domination of the nation's political discourse in the 1960s and 70s by issues brought to the fore by the "New Left" may have been the cause of these differences and that political developments unfolding in the 1980s would result in conservatism and its symbols acquiring greater salience. Although this is a question that is of great significance, it is one that the literature has failed to directly address. While this silence was initially understandable given the lack of appropriate comparative data, a natural experiment providing the opportunity to answer this question and draw more general conclusions regarding the formation of ideological self-identifications now exists due to the subsequent displacement of the New Deal/Great Society political regime by the "New Right" political regime.

In particular, since 1981 Republicans have held the presidency for 19 of 29 years, captured majorities in both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years in 1994 and held them for most of the next 12 years, appointed over half of the current membership of the United States Supreme Court, achieved the enactment of a number of policies long championed by conservatives, and generally pushed the terms of political discourse to the right. Therefore, this paper updates Conover and Feldman's analysis of the psychological roots of ideological self-identifications by analyzing more recent data. This directly addresses the question of whether the resurgence of political conservatism in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s led to liberals' and conservatives' self-identifications as such no longer representing primarily either a positive or negative evaluation of liberalism and its associated symbols but instead representing in equal measure a positive or negative evaluation of conservatism and its associated symbols. The results of this analysis reveal that not only is this the case but that reactions to conservatism have come to play the dominant role in forming Americans' political identities that reactions to liberalism once played. Thus, the process through which ideological orientations are formed is not a fixed one but rather a fluid one in which changes in the dominant national political coalition serve as catalysts for changes in the relative salience of groups symbolic of liberalism and conservatism and thereby of generic evaluations of liberals and conservatives. Just as elections are frequently referenda on incumbents in which evaluations of challengers are relatively unimportant, the groups and ideology associated with the governing regime function as more important objects of political orientation than the groups and ideology associated with its less visible and less powerful opponents.

The Origins of Ideological Self-Identification

The theoretical premise underlying Conover and Feldman's research is a rejection of traditional perspectives that ascribe ideological self-identifications to self-placement on either a one or two-dimensional political spectrum on the basis of issue positions. Instead, building upon Kerlinger's (1967, 1984) theory of "critical referents," those espousing this view of ideological self-identification maintain that it is inappropriate to view liberal and conservative self-identifications as representing opposing positions on either a single ideological continuum or on dual economic and social continua. Instead, they argue, these self-identifications should be viewed as incommensurable attitude systems based upon different critical referents. This is to say that the referents that are critical to the formation of one self-identification may be relatively unimportant to the formation of the other. Moreover, widespread public confusion regarding the actual distinction between the meanings of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" guarantees that such referents are generally not issue-based. Instead, they are reactions to politically charged symbols (such as, for example, busing and the civil rights and anti-war movements) that are significant insofar as they are reflective of cultural conflict. It is these assessments of political symbols derived from individuals' social self-identification rather than the congruence of individuals' (usually poorly defined) political ideology with liberal or conservative principles that are the basis of the generic evaluations of liberals and conservatives ultimately responsible for ideological self-identifications. This account of ideological self-identification has received extensive support from a large body of scholarship demonstrating that attitudes toward key reference groups are more important determinants of political behavior than issue positions (e.g. McCormick 1974; Sears et al. 1979, 1980; Conover 1984; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989; Kinder and Sanders 1996).

The centrality of critical referents to ideological self-identification was underscored by Conover and Feldman's analysis of data from the 1976 National Election Study. This analysis revealed only a weak relationship between issue positions and self-identifications, demonstrated that self-identifications are driven more by affect toward critical referents, discovered that there are marked differences in the referents that are significant to evaluations of liberals and conservatives, respectively, and found that evaluations of liberals exert a greater influence upon self-identifications. Specifically, among issue considerations only respondents' views on economic issues affected their self-identification in any significant way. This effect was overshadowed, however, by the more important effect of evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives and of the attitudes towards groups symbolic of liberalism and conservatism that contribute to these evaluations. Positive evaluations of liberals were most strongly associated with warm feelings toward symbols of the New Left and cold feelings toward symbols of capitalism while positive evaluations of conservatives were most strongly associated with warm feelings toward symbols of capitalism, the status quo, and social control and with racial conservatism. These findings also supported Conover and Feldman's thesis regarding the lack of bipolarity in ideological self-identifications. Only one referent, affect toward capitalism, was significant in shaping evaluations of both

liberals and conservatives and this referent was far more salient in shaping evaluations of conservatives than it was in shaping evaluations of liberals. Most significantly, this lack of bipolarity also extended to these evaluations themselves insofar as they displayed considerable independence. While positive evaluations of conservatism by self-identified conservatives were nearly synonymous with negative evaluations of liberalism, positive evaluations of liberalism by self-identified liberals neither guaranteed nor precluded negative evaluations of conservatism. Thus, the causal order posited by Conover and Feldman, in which group evaluations rooted in social self-identification contribute to evaluations of the ideological labels associated with those groups that in turn contribute to ideological self-identifications (with evaluations of liberals making a more significant contribution), presents a social psychological model of ideological self-identification that differs significantly from issue-based models. As previously discussed, however, this finding was derived from data representing a particular moment in political time and cannot be generalized without controlling for the national political environment. Therefore, it is necessary to update the analysis to include data from periods in which the balance of power between (and thus the presumed salience of) liberalism and conservatism differed significantly.

Corroborating Evidence

The need for such a reexamination is underscored by the fact that these findings have been mirrored by other research revealing a similar lack of political bipolarity in other contexts. Perhaps the most significant contribution to this body of scholarship has been Weisberg's (1980) research demonstrating that it is not only ideological self-identifications, but also partisan self-identifications that are characterized by a lack of affective polarization. Responding to perceived inadequacies in the partisan self-identification literature in terms of its false conceptualization of the partisan spectrum as a single continuum with independents located in the center, Weisberg presents data indicating that partisan self-identification is more multidimensional than traditionally thought. Specifically, Weisberg's data demonstrate that, contrary to prevalent assumptions, Democratic self-identification is not necessarily the polar opposite of Republican self-identification and vice versa and political independence is not necessarily the midpoint of a Democratic-Republican continuum. Instead, a substantial portion of the public feels warmly toward both political parties just as a substantial portion feels cold toward both parties and these attitudes do not necessarily correlate with attitudes toward political independence. Voters may be both independents and party supporters or, just as likely, identify as neither. Thus, rather than being correlated in a coherent manner, attitudes toward Democrats, Republicans, and independents are largely unrelated. This suggests that, as is the case with regard to ideological self-identifications, these groups systematically differ in the extent to which their members construct their partisan identity as a reaction against opposing partisan identities. Somewhat more recent research conducted along the same lines, such as analyses of National Election Studies data from the 1980s by Kamieniecki (1988) and Alvarez (1990), has reached fundamentally similar conclusions.

Moreover, a direct link between Weisberg's findings and Conover and Feldman's theory of critical referents is provided by Katz (1979), whose findings Weisberg discusses in demonstrating the inconsistency of unidimensional conceptions of partisanship with data regarding changes in partisan self-identification. Katz's research indicates that when strong partisans change their self-identification the change is not, as theories conceptualizing partisanship in terms of a unidimensional continuum would predict, generally in the direction of a weak identification with the same party. Instead, it is just as often in the direction of a strong identification with the opposite party. While Katz attributes this to a distinctive psychology that characterizes strong partisans and this may be the case, these findings also provide support for the theory of critical referents. Specifically, if ideological and partisan self-identifications were, as traditionally conceptualized, the product of a set of consistent issue positions, it would be unlikely that individuals could so rapidly and fundamentally change their positions on multiple issues so as to change their self-identification directly from strong liberal/Democrat to strong conservative/Republican or vice versa. Under Conover and Feldman's critical referents model, however, it is by no means implausible that individuals could quickly change the relatively small number of critical referents upon which their political self-identifications are based in response to changes in the political environment altering the political salience of group affinities. Most importantly, this potential for rapid turnover in critical referents also provides reason to believe that such changes in the political environment would lead to change in the relative salience of ideological labels as critical referents.

The proposition that ideological self-identifications are fundamentally rooted in attitudes toward social reference groups rather than in ideology has also been supported by more recent scholarship examining the dynamics of changes in partisan self-identification. As Green et al. (2002) illustrate, partisan self-identification is relatively weakly correlated with issue positions and is best explained as the product of positive feelings toward the constellation of groups associated with a political party. Thus, changes in partisan self-identification are driven primarily by changes in the social images of parties. The prominent role played by group affinities also extends to the formation of specific issue positions as policies are consistently evaluated through the prism of group interests. For instance, as Federico and Sidanius (2002) demonstrate, the correlation between hostility toward African Americans as a group and opposition to policies such as affirmative action is not simply, as has sometimes been suggested by research examining the role of affect toward social reference groups in forming political attitudes (e.g. Brady and Sniderman 1985), a product of relatively unsophisticated individuals relying upon affect as a heuristic device. Instead, attitudes toward policies are inextricable from attitudes toward policies' target populations at all levels of political sophistication. Indeed, this pattern is often particularly pronounced among highly sophisticated individuals as they are more likely to be aware of the impact of policies upon both favored and disfavored social groups and thus more capable of adjusting their views regarding those policies accordingly (Federico 2004, 2006). This is consistent with other research illustrating the overall importance of the social construction of issues and policies in shaping both issue positions and policy outcomes (Schneider and

Ingram 1993), particularly with regard to facially race neutral issues such as criminal justice (Peffley and Hurwitz 2002; Federico and Holmes 2005) and welfare (Gilens 1995) that have acquired considerable racial valence.

While the centrality of group evaluations to political thinking is therefore well documented, what is less well documented is whether changes in the national political environment may have a priming effect that causes certain group evaluations to assume particular importance. Research suggesting that this is the case has been presented by Koch (1994), who demonstrates that the influence of social self-identifications (and by extension the group evaluations associated with them) upon voting behavior is not constant but rather contingent upon the extent to which an ever-changing political environment renders such self-identifications politically salient. Furthermore, as analyses of public opinion formation (e.g. Taylor and Fiske 1978; Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992) have demonstrated that individual opinions are disproportionately influenced by recent considerations it is reasonable to assume that a similar process is at work in the formation of ideological self-identifications. In particular, given the dominant national political coalition's control over the policy agenda, reactions to the groups associated with this agenda and to the ideology it represents are likely to constitute a more immediate, and therefore more salient, consideration in choosing an ideological self-placement than are reactions to other groups and other ideological labels.

Suggestions of New Ideological Dynamics

Evidence indicating that this is the case and that the political ascendancy of the New Right resulted in groups symbolic of conservatism becoming particularly salient sources of political identity ultimately represents the most compelling reason for revisiting the psychological bases of liberal and conservative self-identifications. As conservatives have increasingly wielded political power and as symbols of conservatism have acquired newfound cultural prominence, affect toward both has become an increasingly important determinant of ideological self-identification. Specifically, research conducted subsequent to the rise of the New Right in the 1980s has suggested that negative affect toward certain symbols of the new Republican Party has become an increasingly important component of liberal identity. Such research has most commonly focused upon the polarizing effect of the political mobilization of the "Religious Right" as part of the New Right coalition. As Bolce and DeMaio (1999a, b) demonstrate, the widespread public perception of the Republican Party as having been captured by the Religious Right and the belief among many in the electorate that this represents a serious threat to civil liberties and to the separation of church and state has led to a political landscape in which negative attitudes toward conservative Christians have become an increasingly robust predictor of ideological and partisan self-identification. Analyzing responses to feeling thermometer questions relating to Christian fundamentalists in National Election Studies spanning the 1980s and 1990s, Bolce and DeMaio discovered that Christian fundamentalism has become nearly synonymous with the Republican Party (see also Green and Guth 1988). The

resulting correlation between self-identified liberalism and hostility toward conservative Christians became especially marked following the 1992 presidential campaign, during which the party began to emphasize social and cultural issues to a greater extent than it had previously (Bolce and DeMaio 1999b). This trend has been but the most visible manifestation of attitudes toward socially conservative reference groups attaining newfound political salience as a result of the New Right regime's defining tactic of dividing the New Deal coalition by sparking "culture wars" through the politicization of issues such as abortion and gay rights (Sundquist 1984; Hunter 1991).

Furthermore, the New Right has also given rise to a number of particularly polarizing figures that have served as sources of both intense popular adulation and intense popular antipathy, suggesting a likely increase in the salience of the generic conservatism they have come to represent. Playing a major role in this respect was the de facto leader of the Republican Party during most of the 1990s, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, a congressional leader who embraced a highly public, confrontational, and ideological leadership style dedicated to realigning American politics that was qualitatively different from the leadership style of his less visible predecessors (Strahan and Palazzolo 2004). The newfound prominence of conservatives in government was also underscored by the simultaneous emergence of conservative talk radio and cable news generally (driven in particular by controversial figures such as Rush Limbaugh with over 20 million weekly listeners and Bill O'Reilly with over 17 million weekly viewers) as politically influential cultural phenomena that galvanized opinion among liberals and conservatives (Bolce et al. 1996; Hart 2003). Perhaps most importantly, not only did Republicans subsequently capture control of the presidency and both houses of Congress for the first time in nearly half a century in 2000, they did so with a president at the top of their ticket, George W. Bush, who even quite early in his presidency was the most polarizing president in the history of public opinion polling (Jacobson 2003). Moreover, particularly divisive and controversial Bush administration policies such as those associated with the "War on Terror" and the invasion of Iraq were regularly framed by the media as reflections of dogmatic adherence to a distinctive neo-conservative ideology (e.g. Atlas 2003; Drew 2003; Fidler and Baker 2003; Lind 2003), suggesting an increase in the salience of the generic conservatism with which neo-conservatism has come to be conflated.

More generally, there is reason to believe that the emergence of the New Right also more fundamentally recalibrated the manner in which Americans construct their orientation toward politics. As Newman (1989), Sundquist (1984), and others have observed, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 represented, if not a critical election, a critical turning point. This is the case insofar as ideological differences between candidates had in preceding elections rarely stood in such clear contrast, with Reagan offering voters a consistent and highly ideological conservatism that had not been offered by more centrist Republican nominees such as Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and that would consistently characterize the party in subsequent elections (Levine et al. 1997). Thus, it is probable that this development did much to increase the salience of conservatism as a symbol as conservatism no longer attempted to accommodate the liberal consensus of the New Deal/Great Society era

by blurring ideological distinctions but rather increasingly assumed the political offensive. Therefore, updating Conover and Feldman's analysis of the psychological bases of ideological self-identifications is likely to reveal both continuity and change. On the one hand it is likely that differences in the referents critical to forming evaluations of liberals and conservatives and of their respective symbols have been historically constant, as has been the fact that the sources of these evaluations are primarily social psychological rather than issue-based. On the other hand it is also likely that evaluations of conservatives have superseded evaluations of liberals as the most powerful determinant of ideological self-placements as a consequence of the increased prominence and influence of groups and individuals symbolic of conservatism.

Data & Methods

In testing the prediction that Conover and Feldman were quite prescient when they speculated that "…with the emergence of the 'New Right'…evaluations of conservatives may come to have a stronger impact on self-identifications in future years" (1981), the data analyzed were drawn primarily from the 2004 National Election Study. These data consisted of information regarding respondents' ideological self-identifications and evaluations of liberals and conservatives as well as information regarding respondents' positions on policy issues and affect toward social groups. Thus, three general categories of variables were employed: (1) ideological self-identifications, (2) evaluations of ideological labels, and (3) the potential cognitive and symbolic sources of the meanings of these labels.

Ideological self-identification was measured in terms of responses to a question asking "…[w]hen it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, [or] extremely conservative…?" Respondents were asked to place themselves on a corresponding seven-point scale, with higher scores representing more conservative self-identifications.

Evaluations of ideological labels were measured in terms of respondents' feeling thermometer ratings of liberals and conservatives. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate their feelings toward liberals and conservatives, respectively, on scales of 0–100, with higher ratings representing "warmer" and more positive evaluations.

Measurement of the cognitive sources of political meaning was based upon responses to questions relating to specific policy issues. These responses were grouped into three categories representing the three major policy domains examined by Conover and Feldman (economic, racial, and social issues) and then summed to produce three scales representing composites of respondents' views on these issues. Although many of the policy-related questions in the 1976 National Election Study did not appear in the 2004 National Election Study due to their becoming either irrelevant or less salient as a result of political and social change, the policy questions that have replaced them largely tap into the same ideological cleavages. Thus, for example, questions relating to issues at the forefront in the 1970s such as the failed Equal Rights Amendment and school desegregation have been replaced

by questions with more contemporary resonance such as questions relating to gay rights and affirmative action. In constructing the scales the responses were summed to produce an overall score for each respondent on each scale, with higher scores representing more conservative views. The three scales, the issues used to construct them, and their reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha) are as follows:

I_1 *Economic Issues*—government-run health insurance, government services and spending, guaranteed jobs and standard of living (.731)
I_2 *Racial Issues*—affirmative action, government aid to minority groups (.643)
I_3 *Social Issues*—abortion, laws to protect homosexuals, sex roles (.567)

Measurement of the symbolic sources of political meaning was based upon respondents' feeling thermometer ratings of twenty social groups respondents were asked to evaluate, groups that may be symbolic of societal cleavages. These ratings were factor analyzed to determine precisely where these societal cleavages lay. This analysis revealed four factors with Eigen values greater than two (see Table 1).

Table 1 Symbolic meaning scales and their components, 2004

Group	S_1: Socially mainstream	S_2: Socially marginal	S_3: Conservative	S_4: Liberal
Middle class people	**.778**	−.012	.158	.057
Elderly	**.712**	−.049	.171	.186
Young people	**.688**	.121	.107	.198
Poor people	**.660**	.117	.129	.328
Blacks	**.642**	.457	.179	.116
Asian Americans	**.640**	.558	.146	−.011
Jews	**.634**	.458	.189	−.012
Southerners	**.595**	.116	.445	.011
Whites	**.574**	.232	.389	.092
Illegal aliens	−.092	**.664**	−.060	.377
Gays and lesbians	.095	**.651**	−.240	.272
Hispanics	.518	**.651**	.221	−.021
People on welfare	.304	**.455**	.111	.348
Christian fundamentalists	.172	−.055	**.767**	.061
Big business	.162	.104	**.716**	−.111
Military	.214	−.135	**.697**	−.015
Catholics	.436	.301	**.447**	.040
Labor unions	.080	.055	.126	**.755**
Feminists	.096	.338	−.078	**.730**
Environmentalists	.324	.149	−.192	**.684**
Eigen value	4.719	2.587	2.488	2.134
% Of variance explained	23.594	12.933	12.438	10.671
Reliability	.894	.683	.697	.701

Note: Entries are factor loadings from a principal component analysis. Reliabilities are Cronbach's Alpha

These factor loadings then formed the basis for creating four additive scales. These scales were created by summing respondents' ratings of the groups comprising each of the factors, with higher scores on the scales representing more positive views of the groups comprising them.

The first of these four clusters of groups is composed of relatively non-controversial and mainstream groups such as, for example, whites, middle class people, and the elderly. Interestingly, blacks and Jews, who in Conover and Feldman's analysis were associated with somewhat controversial symbols of the "Reformist Left" such as people on welfare and civil rights leaders, now comprise part of this cluster of mainstream groups, perhaps reflecting increased racial and religious tolerance. The second scale, on the other hand, consists of polarizing and decidedly non-mainstream groups generally associated with liberalism such as illegal aliens, gays and lesbians, and people on welfare. Somewhat incongruously, Hispanics also load as part of this factor, perhaps indicating that the nation's Hispanic population as a whole has become conflated with illegal aliens due to the increased salience of the issue of illegal immigration. The third scale, consisting of groups such as Christian fundamentalists, big business, and the military, is symbolic of conservatism and of the modern Republican Party. Curiously, it also includes Catholics, perhaps reflective of modern American political cleavages being characterized more by a divide between the secular and the religious than by historical divides between adherents of different religions. Finally, the fourth scale, consisting of labor unions, feminists, and environmentalists, represents some of the core liberal constituency groups of the Democratic Party.

Findings

In order to assess the basic contours of the relationship between evaluations of ideological labels and ideological self-placements, an ordered logit regression of ideological self-placements on evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives was performed. As expected, respondents' ideological self-placements are strongly influenced by their evaluations of ideological labels (see Table 2). Evaluations of ideological labels explained 58% of the variance in ideological self-placement, a substantial increase over the 36% of the variance in ideological self-placement explained by evaluations of ideological labels in Conover and Feldman's analysis of 1976 data. This stronger relationship between evaluations of ideological labels and ideological self-identifications may reflect the fact that the realignment of American political parties along cleavage lines created by the rise to prominence of social and cultural issues (and the redefinition of the meanings of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" that this entailed) was still in progress in 1976. While this temporarily created a disconnect for many between a self-identification rooted in earlier cleavage lines and the new meaning taken on by that ideological label, this realignment was largely complete by 2004. Furthermore, although evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives are strongly related to self-identification, they are, as Conover and Feldman also found, more weakly related to each other than would be expected by bipolar models, with a Pearson's r correlation of −.209.

Table 2 Ordered logit models estimating the effect of evaluations of ideological labels on ideological self-identification, 1988–2008

Variable	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008
Evaluation of liberals	−.042*** (210.168)	−.048*** (348.247)	−.061*** (352.296)	−.043*** (112.681)	−.056*** (241.482)	−.044*** (316.193)
Evaluation of conservatives	.039*** (176.198)	.050*** (313.591)	.060*** (293.389)	.055*** (151.559)	.071*** (332.465)	.048*** (329.860)
Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke)	.342	.435	.541	.428	.579	.405
χ^2 (df)	476.900*** (2)	874.456*** (2)	865.447*** (2)	294.970*** (2)	693.530*** (2)	703.547*** (2)
−2 log likelihood	1249.817	1443.151	934.477	891.538	834.430	1219.684
N	1188	1601	1170	551	844	1406

Note: Entries in cells show ordered logit coefficients with Wald in parentheses

*** $p < .0005$

While this provides support for the continued validity of Weisberg's and Conover and Feldman's conclusions regarding the lack of political bipolarity among the American public, this is a stronger negative correlation than was found by Conover and Feldman. As does the relatively higher R^2, this stronger negative correlation indicates, perhaps for the aforementioned reasons relating to political realignment, somewhat greater ideological coherence in the American public of 2004 than in the American public of 1976.

Most significantly, as predicted, evaluations of conservatives exerted a stronger effect upon ideological self-identifications than evaluations of liberals. In order to place this finding into broader historical context, the relationship between evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives and ideological self-placement in preceding and succeeding years was assessed by also examining data from the 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 National Election Studies as well as from the 2008 National Election Study (see Table 2). This analysis indicated that the increase in the importance of evaluations of conservatives in shaping ideological self-placements that has occurred since 1976 does not represent the culmination of a gradual increase in the relative salience of evaluations of conservatives vis à vis evaluations of liberals. In fact, the relative salience of these evaluations was comparable and fairly stable (with evaluations of liberals generally more significant) between 1988 and 1996 prior to undergoing a pronounced shift in 2000 as evaluations of conservatives superseded evaluations of liberals in salience. Thus, the historical trajectory of changes in the bases of ideological self-placements in response to changes in the national political environment may best be characterized as a delayed crystallization. The reasons for this crystallization likely lie with the New Right threatening to finally translate its growing political clout into unchecked power, which indeed it did as the Republican Party captured control of the presidency and both houses of Congress for the first time since 1955 in the 2000 elections. This suggests that the determinants of ideological self-placements may be

more responsive to electoral results and changes in the control of key institutions than to less tangible changes in political discourse and orthodoxy. Consistent with expectations, by 2008 the relative salience of ideological evaluations had returned to near parity (although evaluations of conservatives continued to be more significant) following the Democrats' takeover of Congress in 2006.

To determine whether this crystallization actually represented a change in the general salience of conservatism or whether the relationship between evaluations of ideological labels and ideological self-placements is spurious and contingent upon respondents' views on policy issues and the social groups symbolic of these issues, further analysis was conducted of the 2004 National Election Study (as the apparent salience of evaluations of conservatives peaked in 2004). First, two additional ordered logit regressions using the issue position and symbolic meaning scales were performed (see Table 3). The first regressed respondents' self-identifications on the three issue position scales and the four symbolic meaning scales while the second regressed self-identifications on the issue position and symbolic meaning scales as well as on evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives. The results provide support for the continued validity of Conover and Feldman's basic premise that respondents' placements on the symbolic meaning scales are significant primarily insofar as they contribute to evaluations of ideological labels, which are the most immediate determinant of ideological self-identification. Once included in the equation in the second model, evaluations of ideological labels had the strongest impact of any of the variables upon ideological self-identification. Most

Table 3 Ordered logit models estimating the effect of placements on issue position and symbolic meaning scales and evaluations of ideological labels on ideological self-identification, 2004

Variable	Reduced model	Full model
Issue position scales		
I_1: Economic issues	.151*** (38.513)	.136*** (29.126)
I_2: Racial issues	.053 (2.193)	.008 (.046)
I_3: Social issues	.129*** (17.099)	.066* (4.165)
Symbolic meaning scales		
S_1: Socially mainstream groups	.001 (1.097)	.000 (.000)
S_2: Socially marginal groups	−.006** (10.836)	−.005* (7.277)
S_3: Conservative groups	.015*** (65.247)	.005* (6.632)
S_4: Liberal groups	−.015*** (43.748)	−.006* (5.382)
Evaluation of ideological labels		
Evaluation of liberals	–	−.039*** (49.494)
Evaluation of conservatives	–	.061*** (106.875)
Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke)	.550	.672
χ^2 (df)	427.331*** (7)	588.654*** (9)
−2 log likelihood	1571.730	1347.920
N	620	620

Note: Entries in cells show ordered logit coefficients with Wald in parentheses

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .0005$

importantly, evaluations of conservatives exerted a stronger effect upon self-identifications than did evaluations of liberals. Furthermore, all of the group ratings that were significant predictors of ideological self-identification when evaluations of ideological labels were not included in the model declined in significance when evaluations of ideological labels were included. This indicates, as Conover and Feldman concluded, that they function primarily as contributors to these evaluations.

Having established that it is evaluations of conservatives that are the most powerful and the most immediate determinants of ideological self-identification, additional analysis was conducted to ascertain which referents are most influential in forming these evaluations and whether issue positions might nonetheless indirectly contribute to ideological self-identifications in a significant way via evaluations of ideological labels. Thus, an ordinary least squares regression estimating the effect of respondents' placements on the issue position and symbolic meaning scales on their evaluations of liberals and their evaluations of conservatives was performed. This analysis revealed that, as predicted by Weisberg and by Conover and Feldman, the critical referents associated with positive evaluations of conservatives continue to differ from those associated with positive evaluations of liberals (see Table 4). Specifically, positive feelings toward liberals are primarily a product of positive feelings toward groups associated with liberal policies such as labor unions, feminists, and environmentalists and, to a lesser extent, positive feelings toward controversial groups such as illegal aliens, gays and lesbians, and people on welfare. Positive feelings toward conservatives, on the other hand, are primarily a function of positive feelings toward groups associated with conservatism such as Christian fundamentalists, big business, and the military and, to a lesser extent, positive feelings toward non-controversial groups such as middle class

Table 4 Ordinary least squares models estimating the effect of placements on issue position and symbolic meaning scales on evaluations of ideological labels, 2004

Variable	Evaluation of liberals	Evaluation of conservatives
Issue position scales		
I_1: Economic issues	$-.524^*$ (-2.640)	$.443^*$ (2.270)
I_2: Racial issues	$-.050$ $(-.168)$	$.696^*$ (2.373)
I_3: Social issues	$-.627^*$ (-2.477)	1.021^{***} (4.119)
Symbolic meaning scales		
S_1: Socially mainstream groups	$.010$ (1.157)	$.038^{***}$ (4.664)
S_2: Socially marginal groups	$.059^{***}$ (4.151)	$.001$ $(.042)$
S_3: Conservative groups	$-.038^*$ (-2.705)	$.154^{***}$ (11.097)
S_4: Liberal groups	$.202^{***}$ (11.590)	$-.056^{**}$ (-3.285)
Adjusted R^2	.494	.511
F	79.244^{***}	84.403^{***}
N	620	620

Note: Entries in cells show unstandardized coefficients with t in parentheses

$^*\ p < .05$, $^{**}\ p < .005$, $^{***}\ p < .0005$

Table 5 Ordinary least squares models estimating the effect of placements on issue position scales on placements on symbolic meaning scales, 2004

Variable	S_1: Socially mainstream groups	S_2: Socially marginal groups	S_3: Conservative groups	S_4: Liberal groups
I_1: Economic issues	1.246 (.940)	.347 (.522)	2.982 (4.468)***	−3.629 (−7.413)***
I_2: Racial issues	−4.593* (−2.189)	−5.884*** (−5.646)	1.999 (1.912)*	−4.064 (−5.314)***
I_3: Social issues	2.659 (1.603)	−5.610*** (−6.790)	4.622 (5.516)***	−2.919 (−4.749)***
Adjusted R^2	.006	.157	.144	.281
F	2.208	37.880***	33.871***	79.500***
N	620	620	620	620

Note: Entries in cells show unstandardized coefficients with t in parentheses

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .0005$

people, the elderly, and whites. Most significantly, it is affect toward these symbolic groups rather than issue positions that are most determinative of evaluations of both liberals and conservatives, providing further evidence for the continued validity of Conover and Feldman's critical referents model and the relative infirmity of issue-based models.

Conducting further analysis to assess the extent to which affect toward these groups may merely be a function of respondents' positions with regard to the political issues associated with them indicated that this is not the case and that the primary sources of feelings of coldness/warmth toward symbolic groups lie elsewhere (see Table 5). Regressing each of the four symbolic meaning scales on the three issue position scales revealed that the influence of issue positions on group evaluations is fairly weak, with issue positions explaining only 16% of the variance in group evaluations on average. Thus, the evaluations of conservatives that have become the most salient source of ideological self-identification are ultimately based more upon affect than upon ideology.

Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the basic processes underlying the formation of ideological self-identifications are historically generalizable. Feelings of closeness toward groups stemming from social self-identification contribute to an affinity toward the ideological labels associated with them that ultimately leads to self-identification with those ideological labels. However, the relative salience of these affinities toward ideological labels is contingent upon the extent to which proponents of the ideologies associated with them are able to wield power and control the political agenda. Thus, while differences in affect toward groups traditionally symbolic of liberalism remain, as many of the major political issues associated with these groups (such as the Equal Rights Amendment, government

guarantees of employment and a minimum standard of living, and universal healthcare) largely faded from view as the policy proposals that gave rise to them came to be regarded as political fantasy in a more conservative era, the salience of the liberalism they represented faded as well. Consequently, individuals came to orient themselves politically on the basis of their affect toward groups symbolic of ideological cleavages more relevant to contemporary political debates. As these debates naturally had their terms defined by the policy agenda of the (until recently) politically dominant Republican Party, it is the groups most closely associated with this agenda and the generic conservatism that they have come to represent that have become the most critical referents for ideological self-identification. As a result, evaluations of conservatives have supplanted evaluations of liberals in significance due to their greater relevance to selecting amongst competing alternatives. Given the recent electoral eclipse of the New Right Republican Party in favor of a resurgent Democratic Party, it is to be expected that this dynamic will once again shift as the terms of national political debates are increasingly defined by the left. In particular, as groups symbolic of liberalism such as organized labor have emerged from political exile and acquired newfound influence under unified Democratic control of the presidency and Congress and as longtime liberal priorities such as (near) universal healthcare have been realized as concrete policies rather than abstract slogans, evaluations of liberals will be as relevant as ever in this new political environment.

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