

# Public Opinion

## Best Practices and Trends over Time

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Week 5

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# Outline

- Three Parts.
- Methodology.
- The Structure of Attitudes.
- Trends in Public Opinion Research.

# Public Opinion

- Sample → Population. We wish to take a sample from the population and make an **inference** about the population from that sample.
- Sampling. This is the process of observing responses, often in a **poll**. A sample can be a **probability** or **non-probability** sample. Beware the latter!
- Simple Random Sampling. All population “units” have an equal probability of being included in a sample. This is a type of **probability sample**. A probability/SRS does not guarantee a representative **cross-section**, but on average, the characteristics of the sample mirror that of the population.
- Polls. The poll or survey is a measure of public opinion. Public opinion represents the aggregated opinion of the sample.

# Sampling

- What happens when the sampling methodology is non-random/non-probabilistic?
- *“Some feel there is too much disagreement in politics and Washington politicians should compromise on public policy; others feel that it is important for Washington politicians to stand up for their beliefs, regardless of whether this leads to disagreement. What do you think? Do you think that Washington politicians should be more willing to compromise and less concerned with getting what they want? Or, Washington politicians should be less willing to compromise and more concerned with getting what they want?”*

## A Computer Example

- Assume the following population – 15% young, 50% middle aged, and 35% senior. Now, let's draw one sample of  $n = 100$  from that population.
- Sample 1: Middle=60, Senior=28, Young=12.
- Sample 2: Middle=59, Senior=26, Young=15.
- Sample 3: Middle=51, Senior=36, Young=13.
- Let's just continue doing this 1000 times. Then, take all these individual samples and take the average across the samples. Look what happens:
- Average: Middle=50.081, Senior=34.961, Young=14.958

# Sampling Error

- The difference between the sample and the true population is called **sampling error**.
- It's random and “cancels out” by averaging multiple samples.
- We shouldn't expect a sample to be a perfect mirror of the population.
- This is often defined as the **Margin of Error**, which is a measure of uncertainty surrounding the pollsters estimates.
- What does it mean if we say that the Republican candidate should earn 51% of the vote, with an MoE of 3%?

# Sampling Issues and Measurement

- Face-to-face, phone (landline and cell), and internet are all used in public opinion research.
- They each present unique issues, due to sampling concerns and the nature in which the survey is conducted.
- Measurement: How questions are worded can make a huge difference in the outcome of an opinion poll.

# Sampling Issues and Measurement

- Question types: Closed-ended and open-ended. Gradations (e.g., Likert, Agree-Disagree, Semantic Differential).
- Tips: Avoid “loaded language,” double-barreled questions, and jargon; strive for balance, objectivity, easy-to-interpret questions. Use caution with sensitive topics, so as to avoid “social desirability.” The survey is conversation between the respondent and the interviewer. If questions are poorly conceived, they will be misunderstood and this will produce an inaccurate result.



## An Example: Conflict and Consensus

- “Some feel there is too much conflict in politics and Washington politicians should compromise on public policy. Do agree that Washington politicians should be more willing to compromise and less concerned with getting what they want? Or, do you disagree?”
- “Some feel there is too much conflict in politics, but that Washington politicians should stand up for what they believe and do what’s right. Do agree that Washington politicians should stand up for what they believe and do what’s right? Or, do you disagree?”
- “Some feel there is too much conflict in politics. Politicians should negotiate and compromise and inform their constituents about their actions. What do you think?”

# Understanding Political Attitudes

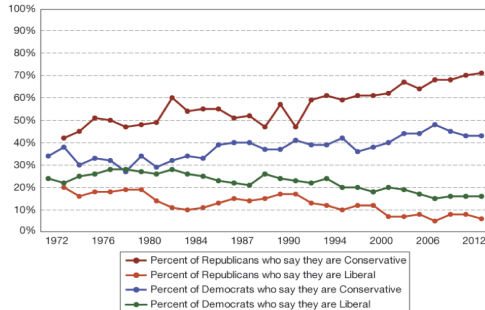
- The importance of Party Identification (PID).
- “Leaners” and “partisans.”
- Two trends: *Polarization* and *Sorting*.

# Understanding Political Attitudes

- Polarization: Ideological extremity. The parties have grown more ideologically distant.
- Sorting: The relationship between ideology and PID has increased.

# This is Sorting

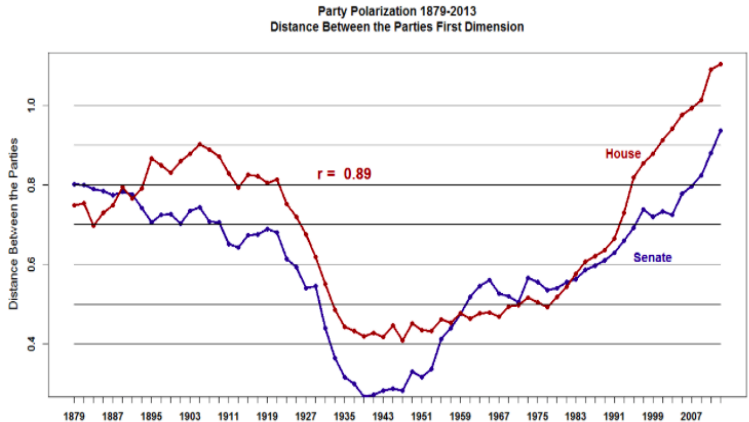
**Figure 5.2 Trends in the Relationship Between Party Identification and Political Ideology**



**SOURCE:** General Social Survey, Cumulative Data File (1974–2014).

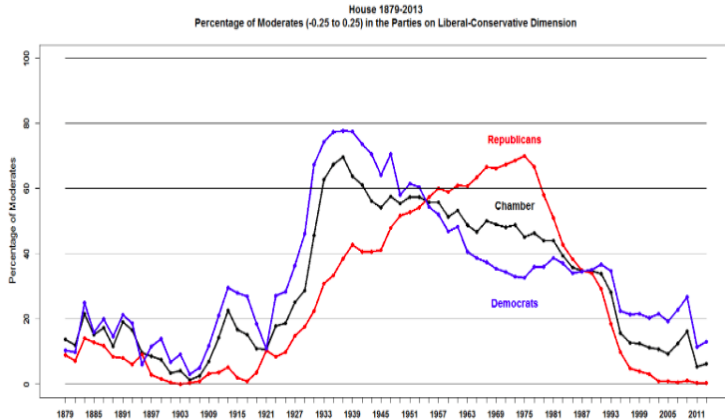
# Polarization

- Polarization has increased in American politics.
- Among elites (e.g., the congress), and
- the mass public (?).
- Polarization versus sorting.



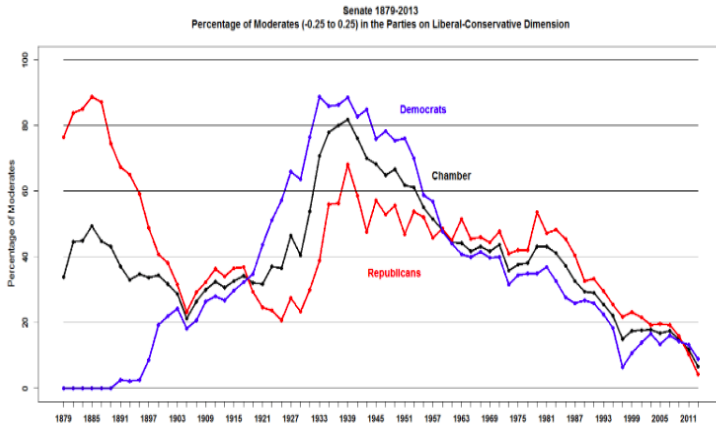
*Polarized America / voteview.com*

Source: Voteview.com



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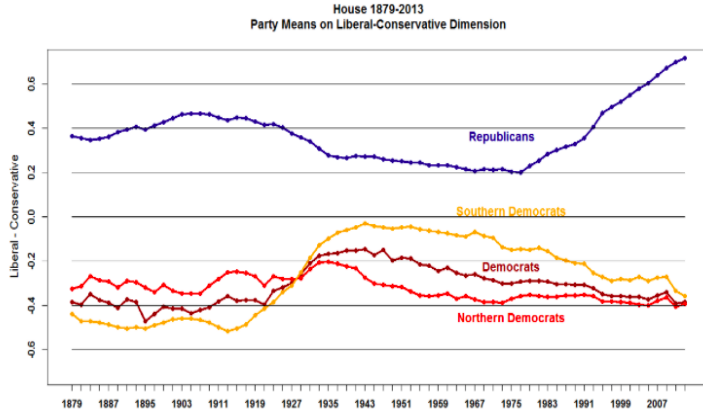
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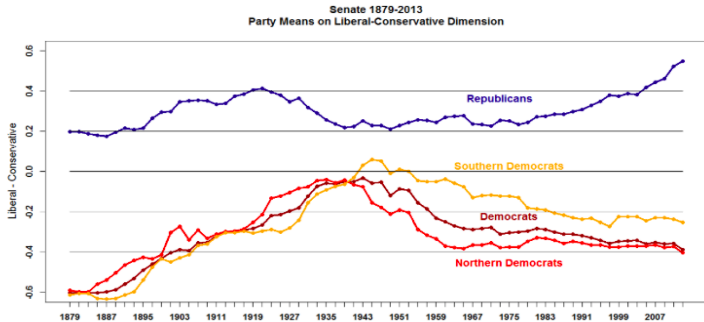
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# Belief Systems

- Institutional Mechanisms.

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- Consider Abramowitz and Saunders (2008):



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- Belief systems represent the ways in which beliefs “go together.”

# Ideology and The Michigan School

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- Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes' *The American Voter*.
- Levels of Conceptualization:
  - Ideologues:** Use liberal and conservative terms.
  - Group Benefits:** Benefits for particular groups.
  - Nature of the Times:** Non ideological, often personal considerations. Selection based on single issues.
  - No Issue Content:** Little political knowledge and use non political cues (e.g., looks, religion).

## 6. VOTING, MEDIA, AND TOLERANCE

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TABLE 6.1  
Levels of Conceptualization Over Time

<i>Levels of Conceptualization</i>	1956	1960	1964	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988
Ideologues	12%	19%	27%	26%	22%	21%	21%	19%	18%
Group benefit	42	31	27	24	27	26	31	26	36
Nature of the times	24	26	20	29	34	30	30	35	25
No issue content	22	23	26	21	17	24	19	19	21
N	1,740	1,741	1,431	1,319	1,372	2,870	1,612	2,257	2,040

*Note:* From *Controversies in voting behavior* (3rd ed., p. 89), by R. Niemi and W. Weisberg (Eds.), 1993, Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.

# Converse (1964)

- Consistency or **Constraint**. Do beliefs go together?

**Sources of Constraint:**

**Logical**

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**Social**



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  - Logical
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  - Social
- **Attitude instability**. Beliefs also change over time.
- **Lacking Sophistication**

TABLE VII — Constraint between Specific Issue Beliefs for an Elite Sample and a Cross-Section Sample, 1958<sup>a</sup>

	DOMESTIC					FOREIGN		
	Employment	Education	Housing	F.E.P.C.	Economic	Military <sup>a</sup>	Isolationism	Party preference
<i>Congressional candidates</i>								
Employment	—	.62	.59	.35	.26	.06	.17	.68
Aid to education		—	.61	.53	.50	.06	.35	.55
Federal housing			—	.47	.41	-.03	.30	.68
F.E.P.C.				—	.47	.11	.23	.34
Economic aid					—	.19	.59	.25
Military aid						—	.32	-.18
Isolationism							—	.05
Party preference								—
<i>Cross-Section Sample</i>								
Employment	—	.45	.08	.34	-.04	.10	-.22	.20
Aid to education		—	.12	.29	.06	.14	-.17	.16
Federal housing			—	.08	-.06	.02	.07	.18
F.E.P.C.				—	.24	.13	.02	-.04
Economic aid					—	.16	.33	-.07
Soldiers abroad <sup>b</sup>						—	.21	.12
Isolationism							—	-.03
Party preference								—

a. Entries are tau-gamma coefficients, a statistic proposed by Leo A. Goodman and William H. Kruskal in "Measures of Association for Cross Classifications," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 49 (Dec., 1954), No. 268, 749. The coefficient was chosen because of its sensitivity to constraint of the scalar as well as the correlational type.

b. For this category, the cross-section sample was asked a question about keeping American soldiers abroad, rather than about military aid in general.

Source: Converse (1964, Table VII., p. 229)

TABLE VIII -- Summary of Differences in Level of Constraint within and between Domains,  
Public and Elite (based on Table VII)

	<i>Average Coefficients</i>			
	<i>Within domestic issues</i>	<i>Between domestic and foreign</i>	<i>Within foreign issues</i>	<i>Between issues and party</i>
Elite	.53	.25	.37	.39
Mass	.23	.11	.23	.11

Source: Converse (1964, Table VIII., p. 229)

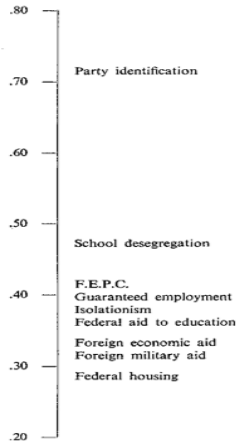


Figure 3. Temporal stability of Different Belief Elements for Individuals, 1958-60\*.

Source: Converse (1964, Figure 3, p. 240)

# Contemporary Approaches

- **Temporal and Methodological Limitations.** Constraint varies across time; PID and other shortcuts were less pervasive in other decades (e.g., the 1960s and 1970s, *The Changing American Voter*, (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976))

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- **Conceptual Limitations.** Group attachment, instead of logical system of beliefs (Conover and Feldman 1981).

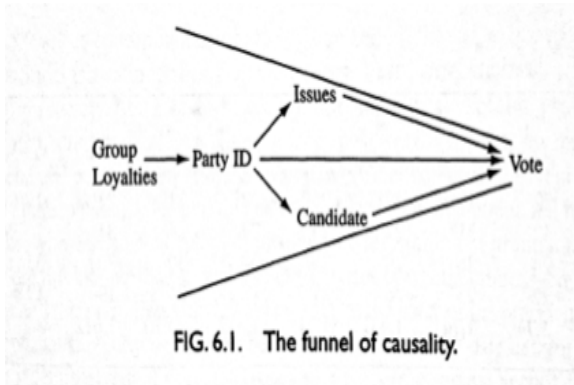


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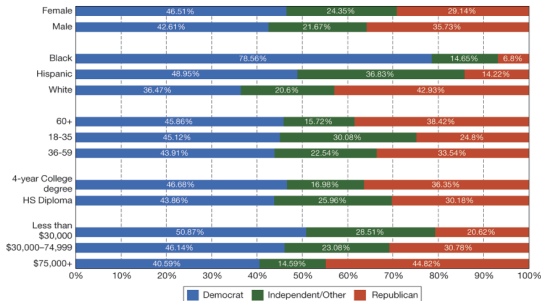
- Most decisions are made through the lens of one's party attachments
- Is a weak party system ideal?



Source: Cottam, Dietz-Uhler, Masters and Preston 2010, page 136

# Groups

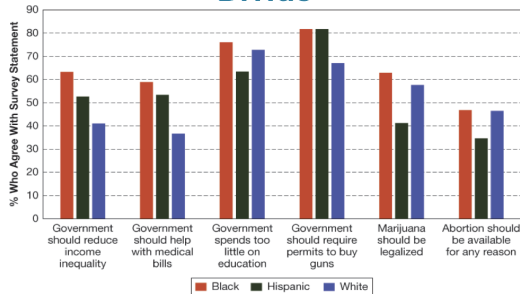
## Figure 5.3 Party Identification Among Various Demographic Groups, 2012



**SOURCE:** General Social Survey (2014).

# Racial and Ethnic Differences

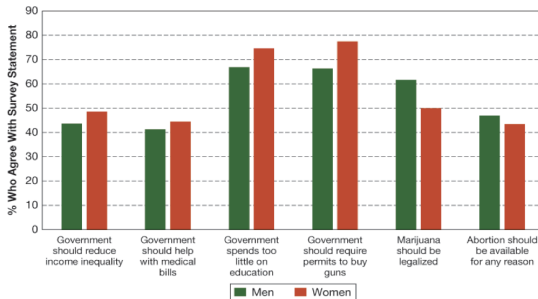
## Figure 5.4 The Racial and Ethnic Divide



**Source:** Data from General Social Survey (2014).

# Gender Differences

## Figure 5.6 The Gender Gap



**SOURCE:** Data from General Social Survey (2014).

# Bringing it all Together

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- **Think critically about survey research!**
- Sampling, inference, and measurement.
- **Mass public and elite polarization has increased in recent decades**
- This may be partially attributed to the growing ideological homogeneity of the Democratic and Republican Parties (i.e., sorting).

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- *The American Voter* and Converse (1964) suggest that voters are largely non ideological. Instead the average American thinks in group centric terms.
- Yet, conservatism and liberalism are meaningful labels for many voters – a symbolic identity.
- **Politics is often seen through the lens of party attachments (leaners included).**
- **There are important racial, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic differences in public policy preferences.**