

Neither Ideologues, nor Agnostics: Alternative Voters' Belief System in an Age of Partisan Politics *

Delia Baldassarri[†]

Amir Goldberg[‡]

Abstract

How do Americans organize their political beliefs? This paper argues that party polarization and the growing prominence of moral issues in recent decades have catalyzed different responses by different groups of Americans. The paper investigates systematic heterogeneity in the organization of political attitudes using Relational Class Analysis, a graph-based method for detecting multiple patterns of opinion in survey data. Three subpopulations, each characterized by a distinctive way of organizing its political beliefs, are identified: *Ideologues*, whose political attitudes strongly align with either liberal or conservative categories; *Alternatives*, who are instead morally conservative but economically liberal, or vice versa; and *Agnostics*, who exhibit weak associations between political beliefs. Individuals' sociodemographic profiles, particularly their income, education, and religiosity, lie at the core of the different ways in which they understand politics. Results show that while Ideologues have gone through a process of issue alignment, Alternatives have grown increasingly apart from the political agendas of both parties. The conflictual presence of conservative and liberal preferences has often been resolved by Alternative voters in favor of the Republican Party.

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[†]Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, New York University.

[‡]Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University.

Introduction

American politics over the last four decades has been characterized by increased partisanship and growing polarization in Congress, campaigns and the political debate (Abramowitz & Saunders 1998, Layman, Carsey & Horowitz 2006, McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal 2006). While lay observers have been quick to adopt a “culture wars” narrative (Hunter 1991, Frank 2004), scholars remain divided as to how, and to what extent, ordinary citizens have responded to the polarization of the political elite (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2011, Fiorina & Abrams 2011, Abramowitz 2011). Disagreements exist on two questions in particular: whether or not recent historical trends – such as a growing alignment between citizens’ party identification and their political positions – reflects ideological divisions in the electorate (DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson 1996, Abramowitz 2011, Bartels 2000, Bafumi & Shapiro 2009, Baldassarri & Gelman 2008), and whether Americans are more strongly influenced by their moral values than by their economic interests when deciding which party to vote for (Bartels 2008, Legee, Wald, Krueger & Mueller 2002).

Yet these studies often overlook an important piece of the puzzle: that different Americans frame the political debate in consistently different ways, and that growing partisan polarization and the emergence of moral issues have, elicited a variety of different responses from the American public. Consequently, recent scholarship has not fully appreciated the growing disconnect between parties’ ideological stances and the political preferences of a large portion of American citizenry. For instance, a widely accepted argument in the literature on partisan alignment is that party polarization has made it easier for voters to identify with a political camp because parties have become more distinguishable on a broad set of issues (Hetherington 2001, Levendusky 2009). However, growing divisions in parties stances on moral, economic, and civil rights issues may have also made it equally *more difficult* for some Americans to identify wholeheartedly with either the Republican or Democratic party.

Imagine a high-earning and secular Manhattan lawyer, squeezed by her progressive leanings on moral issues and her support for fiscal austerity; or a working-class devout

churchgoer torn between his moral conservatism and redistributive economic interests. If economic issues had exclusive hold over these voters' political choice, they would find it easy to identify with the Republican and Democratic party, respectively. But if topics such as same-sex unions and abortion also factor into voters' political decision-making, then these two hypothetical voters would find it difficult to fully identify with either political camp. Because religion and class do not tightly overlap, some citizens find themselves in sociodemographic positions which are incompatible with the political offer. And because moral issues have become more salient in recent years, these so-called cross-pressured voters find it more difficult to reconcile their seemingly incongruent ideological orientations. More generally, in a context in which parties have clearly defined, alternative positions on multiple issue dimensions, voters who do not fully subscribe to a party's positions on *all* dimensions may find it harder to define their political allegiance.

Thus, the questions of political polarization and whether morality trumps economics cannot be answered by an overwhelming 'yes' or 'no.' Rather, we contend that the answers to these questions depend on whether or not individuals' political preferences on a broad array of issues are in alignment with the mainstream political debate, as it is conventionally construed. Our argument has three components. First, we posit that individuals differ qualitatively, and systematically, in the ways in which they structure their political preferences. Rather than thinking about voters exclusively in terms of the liberal-conservative polarity we extend Converse's classic notion of a 'belief system' and explore the possibility that there exists heterogeneity in the ways in which Americans organize their political preferences. Second, we argue that sociodemographic characteristics – particularly class and religiosity – account for this divergence in political belief systems. Finally, we maintain that while those whose ideological positions are congruent with the mainstream political discourse have responded favorably to increased polarization, those whose positions are incongruent had to deal with difficult trade-offs.

We analyze cross-sectional data from the American National Election Studies over a period of twenty years between 1984 and 2004. We use a graph-based method, Relational

Class Analysis (henceforth RCA, Goldberg 2011), in order to look for systematic heterogeneity in public opinion. RCA enables us to divide our respondents into groups, each subscribing to a distinctive political logic according to which certain opinions are correlated with one another.¹

In the first part of the analysis, we demonstrate that the American public is comprised of three groups, each characterized by a different structure of beliefs: *Ideologues*, whose organization of political attitudes on all issue domains is consistent with the prevalent liberal-conservative polarity; *Alternatives*, who dissociate between moral and economic conservatism by adopting what are normally considered liberal views on moral issues and conservative views on economic and civil rights issues, or vice versa; and *Agnostics*, whose political beliefs are only weakly associated with one another. This division has been consistent throughout the twenty year period under investigation.

Our contribution extends beyond a simple descriptive account of how people’s political preferences are differently organized. In the second part of the analysis we show that people’s social identities are implicated in generating these alternative belief systems. Namely, individuals whose combinations of religious and class identities result in inconsistent political interests – high-earners with weak religious commitments, and low-income believers – are over-represented amongst the Alternatives. These ‘rich and secular’ or ‘poor and religious’ citizens are motivated by combinations of interests that make it particularly difficult to be consistently conservative (or liberal) on both moral and economic issues. Indeed, they deviate from the orthodox understanding of politics, adopting a political logic in which conservatism and liberalism are not entirely at odds.

In the third and final part of the analysis we chart the different trajectories taken by each group in response to increased polarization and the growing salience of morality-based politics. We find that while Ideologues became more ideologically consistent in their opinions on economic and moral issues, Alternatives’ positions on both dimensions became increas-

¹In contrast to previous research, this approach does not require any presuppositions about how political beliefs are organized, or how sociodemographic attributes (e.g., education) or cognitive capabilities (e.g., political knowledge) structure political opinion.

ingly oppositional to one another. Moreover, whereas Alternatives' moral convictions had a significant impact on their partisan identity already in the nineteen eighties, these beliefs became relevant for other voters, together with civil rights and foreign policy issues, only a decade later. And while economic issues have consistently trumped moral issues for Ideologues throughout the twenty year period, Alternatives have followed their conservative leanings, whether on economic *or* moral issues, since the early nineteen nineties. Starting with Clinton's election in 1992 – remembered, amongst other things, for Republican candidate Pat Buchanan's emphatic declaration of a cultural war “for the soul of America” – the conflictual presence of conservative and liberal preferences has been, more often than not, resolved by Alternatives in favor of the Republican Party.

Taken together, these findings cast a new light on recent trends in American public opinion, demonstrating that party polarization and the growing discursive visibility of moral issues have not simply brought about a more divided electorate. Rather, these shifts appear to have catalyzed different responses by different groups of Americans. Whereas Ideologues have gone through a process of issues alignment, Alternatives have grown increasingly apart from the political agendas of both parties. Moreover, our findings suggest that cross-pressured voters' political behavior cannot be understood as the overarching predominance of one ideological dimension over the other: while some resolve this tension in favor of their economic orientations, others' partisan identifications are couched in their moral beliefs. Our assumption of ideational heterogeneity, and the analytical strategy we adopt to pursue it, make these differences visible. Only by examining each group separately are we able to distinguish between these two opposing trends which, in the aggregate, offset one another.²

²Our results raise important methodological questions concerning the limitations of traditional analytical techniques, which assume population homogeneity in the organization of political beliefs. Failing to recognize the heterogeneity of political belief systems may lead to biased evaluations of the impact of social identities on political behavior.

Partisan polarization and the rise of moral issues

The late nineteen sixties was a period of political transition in the U.S. The New Deal Coalition between labor unions, white Southerners, intellectuals, the working-class, and ethnic and religious minorities, which had dominated American politics in the preceding three decades, was unraveling as class-based politics was being replaced by divisions over civil rights and the Vietnam War. The following decades saw a wide umbrella of topics rooted in moral disagreements gradually moving to the fore. From the Moral Majority of the nineteen eighties to the Christian Coalition of the nineteen nineties, conservative religious organizations occupied the national stage and took an active role in shaping primaries and electoral campaigns. Abortion, gay rights, and family values became heatedly contested issues, while traditional economic disagreements over taxation and welfare seemed to be fading into the background (Fiorina & Abrams 2011, Manza & Brooks 1999, Gross, Medvetz & Russell 2011).³

During the same time, American politics grew increasingly partisan and polarized (Abramowitz & Saunders 1998, Bartels 2000, Fiorina & Abrams 2008, Hetherington 2001, Levendusky 2009, McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal 2006). Congresspersons, candidates and political activists did not only become more extreme in their partisan views, they also consolidated these views along new political dimensions. Whereas divisions on moral and civil rights issues crossed party lines up until the mid nineteen seventies, today, parties have become more internally homogenous and antithetical to one another along those axes (for a review, see Layman, Carsey & Horowitz 2006). Scholars have debated how these changes map onto the political preferences of American voters, asking whether moral issues have supplanted class politics and whether public opinion has become more polarized as a consequence.

³The reasons for the rising salience of moral issues in American politics are complex, and are far from consensual. Some have argued that they are rooted in the appeal of post-material issues – such as environmentalism, civil liberties and ethnic diversity – to a prospering postwar middle-class decreasingly concerned by traditional material anxieties. Others have pointed to shifts in the partisan alignment of white working-class voters, particularly in the South, deterred by the successes of the civil rights movement and alienated by the Democratic Party’s adoption of a socially progressive agenda.

Has morality supplanted class politics?

Some observers have argued that the intensification of morality-based politics in the last three decades constitutes a sea-change in American politics. Proponents of this position contend that religious divisions have emerged as the most prominent social cleavage in American society, pitting traditionalists against secularists and progressives in an all-out “culture war” (Hunter 1991, Shogan 2002, Bishop 2008, and see Williams 1997 for a critical overview). Bush’s successful presidential bids in 2000 and 2004 seem to have reinforced the impression that value-voting has reconfigured the electorate into two geographically concentrated political camps, a heartland dominated by moral conservatism and a liberal stronghold on both coasts. The culture war thesis maintains not only that moral concerns trump economic interests but that religious divisions have colored economic debates in religious hues, making moral conservatism consonant with a belief in laissez-faire economics (Wuthnow 1988). This has made it easier for those disposed to traditionalism to support, or at least accept by default, free-market ideology. Journalistic accounts have promoted this narrative with considerable success. In *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), for example, journalist and historian Thomas Frank popularized the idea that Bush’s electoral success rests on ‘hot-button’ cultural issues which have steered the attention of white working-class voters away from their economic interests, leading them to embrace an anti-elitist moral conservatism and, ultimately, to vote for the Republican Party.

Systematic analyses of public opinion data have reached far less dramatic conclusions, however. In a strong rebuttal of Frank’s argument, Bartels (2006) finds that Americans on the lower rungs of the income ladder continue to give more electoral weight to their economic interests than to their moral beliefs. Contrary to Frank’s assertions, he demonstrates that low-income white voters “had not become less Democratic in their voting behavior” (p. 204). Even fervent churchgoers, although slightly more sensitive to moral debates than

their secular counterparts, continue to place more emphasis on their economic interest than their moral concerns (Bartels 2008).⁴

Support for these findings comes from a variety of additional studies. The arguments they put forward often follow one of two lines of reasoning. The first debunks the contention that low-class voters are no longer predominantly motivated by their material interests. Whether measured as income or as education, these studies provide ample evidence that class remains a significant determinant of political partisanship and that working-class voters in particular have not been lured en-masse to vote for the Republican Party (Fischer & Mattson 2009, Hout, Brooks & Manza 1995, McVeigh & Sobolewski 2007).

Other studies strongly undercut the image of an American electorate divided by religion. Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder (2006), for example, find that the relative impact of moral beliefs on voting does not vary across religious groups and that bread-and-butter concerns outweigh morals even for Evangelicals Protestants. Similarly, Greeley & Hout (2006) concede that “there might be a link between Conservative Christian religious convictions and political behavior but it is modest, even by social science standards” (p. 65). They find that low-income Protestants, like other Americans on the lower end of the income distribution, are less likely to vote Republican than their higher income counterparts are. As Layman & Green (2006, p. 61) conclude, “cultural wars are waged by limited religious troops on narrow policy fronts under special political leadership, and a broader cultural conflagration is just a rumour.”

Cross-pressured voters and the bi-dimensionality of the political space

Though the American public does not appear to be fervently engaged in the so-called culture wars, it has nevertheless undergone a process of partisan alignment over the last three decades: voters’ preferences on a large set of political issues have become increasingly consistent with their party identification. Although noticeable on most issue domains, this

⁴Bartels (2006) concluded that “the overall decline in Democratic support among voters in Frank’s white working class over the past half-century is entirely attributable to the demise of the Solid South as a bastion of Democratic allegiance” (p. 211).

trend has been particularly prominent in relation to moral (also referred to as ‘social’ or ‘cultural’) issues (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008).⁵ Because the two major parties have grown significantly apart during this period, they have also become more easily distinguishable from one another. Consequently, they have become better at sorting individual voters into ideologically distinct subpopulations.

This has lead several scholars to conclude that elite polarization has made it easier for voters to adopt a party’s positions because parties’ ideological stances have become more consistent and therefore more recognizable (Levendusky 2009, Hetherington 2001). However, this argument rests on the assumption that voters’ beliefs have become compatible with their parties’ ideologies on a wide range of politically contested issues. But systematic studies of public opinion do not find evidence for an increase in issue alignment – the process of voter opinions becoming ideologically consistent with one another – in the U.S. population as a whole. In fact, the level of ideological constraint between Americans’ opinions on morality, economics, civil rights and foreign policy remains as low today as it was roughly four decades ago (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008, DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson 1996, Evans 2003, Davis & Robinson 1996, Layman & Carsey 2002).⁶ What most scholarship has not considered is that the growing salience of moral issues has forced voters whose positions on ‘values’ and the economy are oppositional to one another to confront this incongruence.

Political commentators have long identified such cross-pressured constituencies as potential electoral game-changers. Reagan’s success in the nineteen eighties was, at least in some part, attributable to his capacity to appeal to low-income white voters who were traditionally considered part of the Democratic Party’s electoral base. These working-class social conservatives, who became known as ‘Reagan Democrats,’ found themselves in a position whereby each of the two major parties spoke either to their material or cultural interests. Party strategists often target voters who are similarly faced with an electoral

⁵Whereas in 1972 voters’ positions on topics such as abortion or gay rights were not correlated with their party identification, by the turn of the century knowing whether a respondent was pro-choice or pro-life increased the capacity to correctly predict his partisan allegiance by 20%.

⁶Increased alignment between moral positions and other issue domains is apparent only among individuals with high levels of income, and those who are more educated, politically active, and interested in politics (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008).

double bind: the most sought-after demographic in the 1996 presidential election seemed to be the suburban middle-class ‘soccer mom,’ overburdened by driving her children between after-school activities in the family minivan, while working-class ‘NASCAR dads,’ with their presumably traditionalist world views, captured the imagination of political pundits eight years later.⁷

Though often simplistic, such catchy labels rest on the intuition that these so-called swing voters are positioned on the intersections of different, and often non-overlapping social divisions, each pushing in potentially opposing political directions. They echo with Lipset’s (1981) three-decade-old observation that Americans’ political attitudes are structured by two different dimensions, one that follows traditional class lines, the other shaped by post-material concerns. These two perpendicular dimensions overlap with different axes of social cleavage. Whereas attitudes on economics correlate with class, attitudes on moral issues correlate with religious orthodoxy (Davis & Robinson 1996). Cross-pressured voters are those who find themselves in positions that correlate differently with each dimension.

As long as parties differentiated only along a single political dimension – economics – the tradeoff faced by these voters remained implicit. However, when parties began differentiating on their positions on abortion or gun control, voters caught at the intersection of conflicting economic interests and moral preferences were left without a natural partisan home. While the alignment between moral and economic issues has made it easier for those voters whose opinions on both dimensions are consonant with one another to identify with either party – leading to greater party sorting – it has equally made it more difficult for voters whose opinions are ideologically incongruent to do the same. We therefore expect that different sociodemographic dimensions, particularly class and religiosity, correlate with ideology and partisan identification differently for cross-pressured voters than they do for

⁷A similar tension underpins several other popular categories that have been used to identify specific subgroups of the electorate, such as the ‘South Park Republicans,’ a term coined by gay conservative commentator Andrew Sullivan to connote a generation of educated young Republicans who “believe we need a hard-ass foreign policy and are extremely skeptical of political correctness” but are also socially liberal on many issues (Anderson 2005, p. 99). Or ‘Wired workers,’ information technology professionals who have benefited from the new economy and consequently espouse fiscally conservative positions but who tend to be socially liberal on issues ranging from gun control and global warming to civil rights and abortion.

mainstream voters.

Yet traditional approaches to the analysis of public opinion data cannot take this complexity into account. Scholars conventionally model the relationships between sociodemographic characteristics, political preferences and partisanship as if these were homogenous across the population. This analytical strategy is based on the implicit assumption that voters subscribe to a singular political belief system. In fact, standard models of political behavior, following Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes’s (1960) “funnel of causality” argument, assume the following causal pattern:

$$\textit{Sociodemographic characteristics} \rightarrow \textit{Political preferences} \rightarrow \textit{Voting behavior}$$

Such models tend to study the impact of sociodemographic attributes and political preferences on partisanship in “statistical isolation.” Religious commitments, for example, are assumed to increase conservative preferences on issues pertaining to morality, and therefore the likelihood of voting Republican, *net of other effects*. But what if one is religiously orthodox and on the lower rungs of the income ladder? The electoral implications of being morally conservative may be interpreted by such an individual quite differently from someone who is higher positioned on the income ladder and whose economic and moral interests are better aligned with one another.

Consequently, we argue that it is necessary to consider citizens’ political preferences as making up an interdependent gestalt, rather than a collection of independent attitudinal vectors. Though the bipartisan structure of American politics imposes a dichotomy between two ideological camps, such homogeneity of views is not reflected in voters’ political preferences. Thus, regression models studying partisanship and the relative weight of different issue domains should take into account the various ways in which people structure their political preferences. Extending on Converse (1964), we posit that voters rely on *multiple* belief systems to forge their political allegiances.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Multiple Belief Systems

Converse defined a *political belief system* as a “configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence” (Converse 1964, 207). His seminal research on this topic as well as the work of numerous scholars following him, has usually led to the conclusion that only a small proportion of the public, often referred to as ‘ideologues,’ can appreciate the political debate using abstract categories such as ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative,’ while most citizens exhibit limited levels of constraint and coherence in the overall organization of their political beliefs.⁸

Most scholars, following Converse, measure ‘constraint’ using bivariate relationships (e.g., correlation coefficients), or, alternatively, summary indices (e.g., factor scores). Such approaches, however, either presuppose or overlook the overall pattern of political attitudes that characterizes a belief system. In contrast, we take Converse’s idea of functional interdependence between attitudes one step forward and operationalize it as the system of interdependencies between attitudes as a whole, rather than one pair at a time. We conceptualize a belief system as a network of interconnected political beliefs.

As illustration, imagine a multidimensional ‘belief space’ in which each dimension measures opinion on one political issue. Individuals’ positions in this space correspond to their political preferences. Constraint refers to the extent to which positions on various issues are bound together, thus leaving certain areas of the space largely unoccupied (Martin 2002). These empty spaces represent political opinion combinations that are inconsistent with the logic upon which the belief system is structured. Our analytical focus on constraint therefore shifts attention from what people believe, to *how their beliefs are organized*. Conservative and liberal pundits such as Rush Limbaugh or Jon Stewart, for example, who are opposed to one another essentially on every political issue imaginable, nevertheless subscribe to the same belief system. They appear to agree on what the political debate is about, even

⁸According to this framework, citizens greatly differ in their levels of political sophistication, thus in their capacity to understand politics using established ideological categories. Most citizens are, in fact, “innocent of ideology” (Converse 1964; see also Campbell et al. 1960, Luskin 1987). This result has been shown to be very robust and stable over time and across cultures (Carpini & Keeter 1993 Popkin 1991, Popkin & Dimock 1999, but see Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder (2006) for a different view).

if they substantively disagree on which political outcomes are preferable. The underlying logic that informs their beliefs is implicit in the set of entailments that make certain opinions congruent, or incongruent, with one another. Empirically, this implies focusing on the *relationships* between political preferences, rather than examining preferences discretely (Goldberg 2011, DiMaggio 1997, DiMaggio 2010).

Shifting the analytical focus to how opinions relate to one another enables treating political beliefs as systems, rather than independent attitudes. But if Americans’ understandings of politics are underlaid by competing political logics, as we argue, it is equally important that such an analytical approach also allow for the existence of multiple belief systems. This is very different from how politics is normally apprehended. Mainstream discourse construes political issues almost exclusively through the conventional liberal-conservative opposition.⁹ Similarly, academic literature conventionally operationalizes constraint by assuming a singular structure of political beliefs. The common expectation is that individuals who are liberal on economic issues are similarly liberal on civil rights and moral issues, and vice-versa. Consequently, those who appear to diverge from the mainstream are described as less sophisticated in their ability to reason politically.¹⁰

Yet it is important to make an analytical distinction between divergences that are the result of weak opinion constraint and those that present an alternative, internally coherent, belief system. Consider a group of hypothetical respondents asked about their opinions on three policies: affirmative action, gay rights and health care reform. We would expect those subscribing to a liberal ideology to be in favor of all three policies, and those defining

⁹The media is often baffled by figures who do not fit neatly into this dichotomy. Consider the late essayist and polemicist Christopher Hitchens as an example. An avid and outspoken atheist, who described himself as a Marxist, Hitchens often sided with conservatives on issues concerning the U.S. response to the September 2001 attacks and the rise of radical Islam. Labeled a ‘contrarian’ and ‘iconoclast,’ practically every interview or article on Hitchens in the last decade of his life asked whether his seemingly opposing opinions on religion and national security made the former socialist, in essence, a neo-conservative.

¹⁰An important strand of work has focused on the cognitive processes underlying political decision-making, arguing that “people make up their minds in different ways” (Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock 1991, 8). This work is based on the premise that individuals differ qualitatively in how they think about politics, relying on different schemata and employing different heuristics (Baldassarri 2012, Lupia, McCubbins & Popkin 2000, Kinder & Sears 1985, Kuklinski 2001, Popkin 1991, Zaller 1992). Most often than not, however, these studies assume ex-ante that different cognitive strategies are related to citizens’ levels of education and ‘political sophistication.’

themselves as conservative to be against them. Figure 1 plots these respondents on a stylized belief space. Respondents plotted in black, and marked with a plus sign, seem to follow the conventional liberal-conservative logic: they either support or oppose (to varying degrees) all three policies (i.e., subject D). Those plotted in gray, and marked by a dot (i.e., subjects A, B, and C), deviate from this pattern: their position on gay rights is opposed to their positions on the two other issues. Examined individually, these deviations might seem like misunderstandings of what the political debate is about. Yet taken together, these supposedly unsophisticated individuals exhibit a coherent pattern of political attitudes; their organization of preferences constitutes an alternative to the dominant belief system.

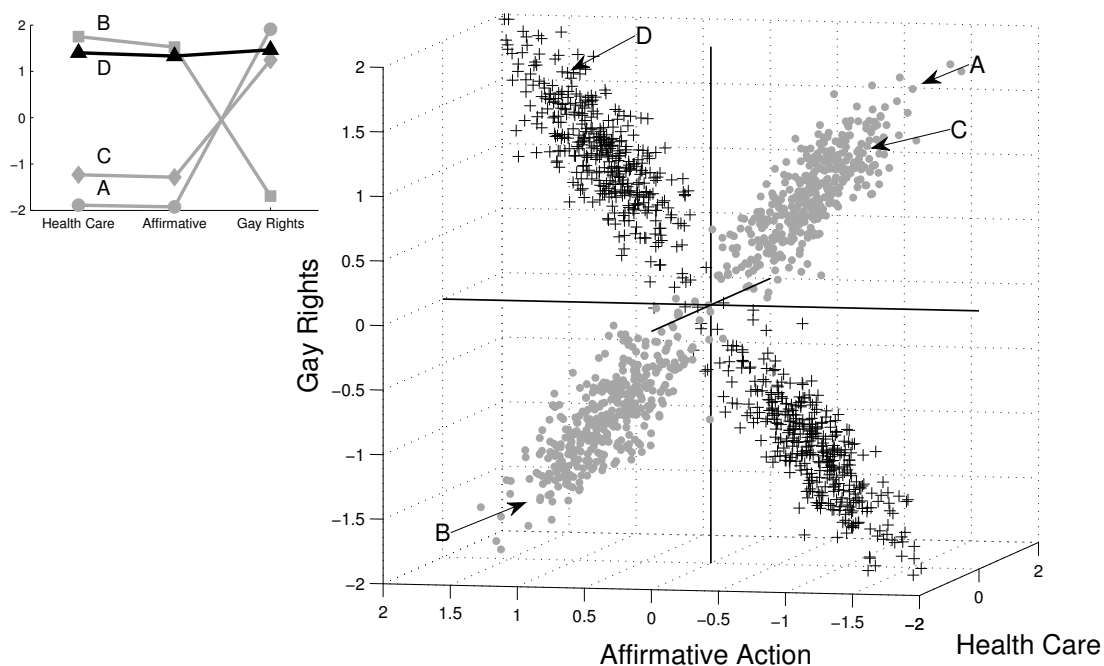


Figure 1: Hypothetical belief space. Respondents plotted in black and marked with a plus sign (i.e., subject D) organize their preferences according to the liberal-conservative divide on all three policy issues, while respondents plotted in gray and marked by a dot (i.e., A, B, and C) structure their preferences on an opposition between gay rights and the other two issues. The inset plots the relationship between political preferences for subjects A, B, C, and D.

Our expectation is that not all respondents who depart from the liberal-conservative belief system are misinformed about politics. Rather, we argue that when such heterogeneity

is systematic – when it is consistent within groups of respondents – it can be understood as evidence for multiple belief systems. We adopt an operational definition of a belief system without directly engaging with the concept of ideology, nor assuming that individuals are conscious or necessarily capable of coherently articulating the ideological logic underpinning their political attitudes.¹¹ The hypothetical respondents depicted in gray in Figure 1, to continue our illustrative example, appear to be adhering to a distinctive political logic, whereby support for redistributive and regulatory policies is understood as oppositional to the promotion of gender-based personal liberties. We can only speculate about the subjective interpretations that inform this understanding. Nevertheless, our hypothetical black and gray respondents seem to be enacting different ways of thinking about how these three different political issues relate to one another. The meanings that our respondents associate with these issues inhere in those relationships (Mohr 1998).

Empirically, accounting for heterogeneity in the organization of political beliefs requires addressing three methodological limitations endemic to analytical strategies commonly used in studies of public opinion and political cognition. First, as the underlying logic of a political belief system inheres in the relationships between political opinions, *preferences must be examined in relation to one another, not independently*. Second, because these relationships vary across groups of individuals, *we must avoid a priori assumptions about which opinions are correlated with one another*. Otherwise, we risk privileging dominant understandings of the political debate and neglecting others. Finally, *the relationship between sociodemographic variables and political attitudes can vary across political belief systems*. Decomposing the population into predetermined socio-demographically homogenous groups may actually mask the predictive effects of these variables.

We use Relational Class Analysis (Goldberg 2011) to overcome these limitations. RCA divides a survey sample into groups of respondents that exhibit distinctive patterns of

¹¹For an elaboration, see Turner’s (2000) discussion of “backstage cognition.” As Converse himself points out, “however logically coherent a belief system may seem to the holder, the sources of constraint are much less logical in the classical sense than they are psychological - and less psychological than social” (Converse 1964, 209). Indeed, even the prevalent liberal-conservative system is rife with logical inconsistencies: for example, conservatives’ support for strict restrictions on abortion may appear logically irreconcilable with their opposition to similar restrictions on gun ownership.

opinion across a set of attitudinal variables. It does so inductively, without making any assumptions about how opinions are patterned, or which patterns are likely to be exhibited by what kinds of respondents (e.g. based on their sociodemographic attributes). To achieve this goal, the procedure transforms a survey sample into an undirected graph. The vertices in this graph correspond to individual respondents, and edge weights correspond to a metric called relationality, which measures the extent to which two respondents who are connected by an edge follow a similar pattern of responses. If different groups of respondents organize their opinions using different rationales, the graph should cluster accordingly.

Recall that our purpose is not to classify respondents with similar opinions. Rather, it is to find those respondents whose patterns of political attitudes are similar even if, like respondents A and B in Figure 1, they express opposing beliefs. This is why RCA uses relationality to generate the graph. Relationality calculates within-respondent differences in opinion between all pairs of variables, and compares these differences across two respondents. These differences are identical across the two respondents if their responses follow the same pattern. The more identical the differences, therefore, the greater the relationality between the two respondents. After generating the graph, the RCA procedure subsequently divides it into groups, such that relationality is maximized within group, and minimized across groups. Each group – like the two depicted in Figure 1 – is characterized by a distinctive pattern of relationships between opinions, suggesting that its members organize their political beliefs using the same rationale, even if deployed in opposite directions (as is the case of respondents A and B).

In Converse’s terminology, RCA identifies overlapping belief systems and assigns respondents to these belief systems respectively. It is particularly suited for detecting individual heterogeneity in the composition of political preferences while overcoming the limitations which, as we discuss above, are inherent to traditional analytical approaches. RCA is an inductive procedure that does not rely on presuppositions about how issues or individuals are interrelated. Other existing methods that explore underlying latent variables, such as factor analysis or latent class analysis, either look at respondents in the aggregate to group

variables together (as is the case of factor analysis), or look for groups of individuals who provided substantively similar responses (e.g. latent class analysis), while overlooking the relationships between these responses. Neither technique examines intra-variable and intra-respondent variability simultaneously as RCA does (for more information about the formal implementation of RCA and its robustness, see SI1).

A word of caution is in order here. While RCA allows us to identify groups of respondents that exhibit distinctive patterns of opinion, we cannot, with survey data alone, determine the underlying psychological processes that generate these patterns. Nevertheless, we can make reasonable assumptions about these causes, and how they relate to people’s location in sociodemographic space (Knoke 1994). As Converse (1964, 211) puts it, attitudinal “co-occurrence has obvious roots in the configuration of interests and information that characterize particular niches in the social structure.” For the reasons cited above, people whose understandings of the political debate are informed by a similar logic should display similar patterns of political opinion. We therefore interpret different axes of movement in a belief space, of the kind illustrated in Figure 1, as the empirical signature of ideological constraint. Where we refer to respondents’ ‘understandings,’ we do so as shorthand for our inference that similar patterns of opinion originate in similar schematic modalities of political meaning (DiMaggio 1997). In the following analyses, we map these modalities, and how they are underpinned by social structure.

Data and Analysis

We apply RCA to data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and replicate the analysis for all years available for the period 1984-2004.¹² ANES includes a large number of attitudinal questions on political issues, ranging from state economic intervention and spending to civil rights, morality, and foreign policy.¹³ We classified attitudinal questions

¹²Unfortunately, substantial changes in the survey instrument made it impossible to replicate the analysis for 2008. Moreover, years 1990, 1998, and 2002 had too many missing answers to be included. See SI2 for a detailed description of the data included in the analysis.

¹³We considered all the attitude questions that were asked at least three times and received a sufficient number of responses (cfr. Baldassarri & Gelman 2008 for a discussion of temporal comparability problems).

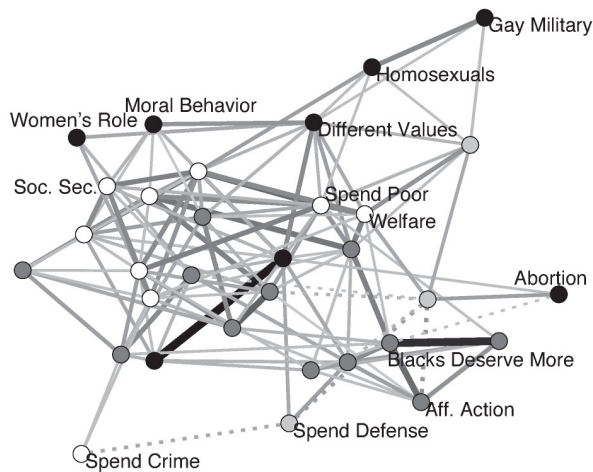
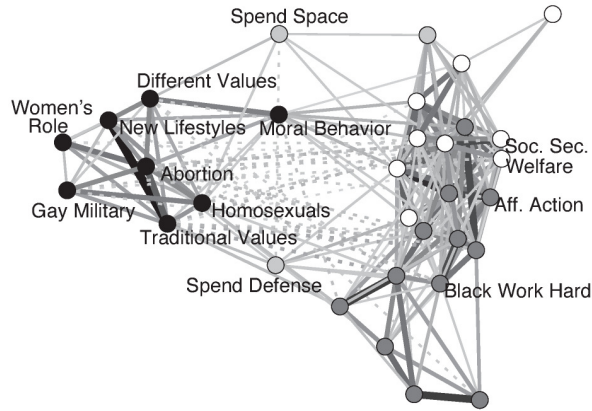
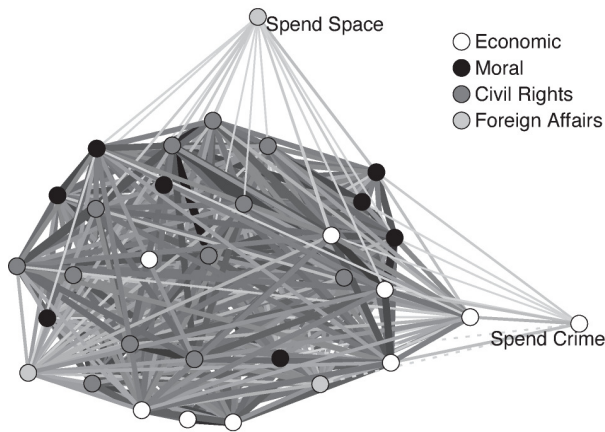
into four different issue domains: Economic; Civil Rights; Morality; and Security/Foreign Policy. Examples of Economic issues are government involvement in the provision of health insurance and jobs, and federal spending on the poor, welfare, and food stamps. Civil Rights issues concern the treatment of African Americans and other minorities, as well as opinions on affirmative action and equality of opportunities and chances. Moral issues include abortion, gay rights, women’s role in society, traditional values, and new lifestyles. Finally, Security and Foreign Policy issues (hereafter referred to as Foreign Policy issues) comprise, among others, international cooperation, federal spending on defense, the space program and international aid. For a detailed account of all the variables used in the analysis see SI2.

Analysis I: Ideologues, Alternatives, and Agnostics

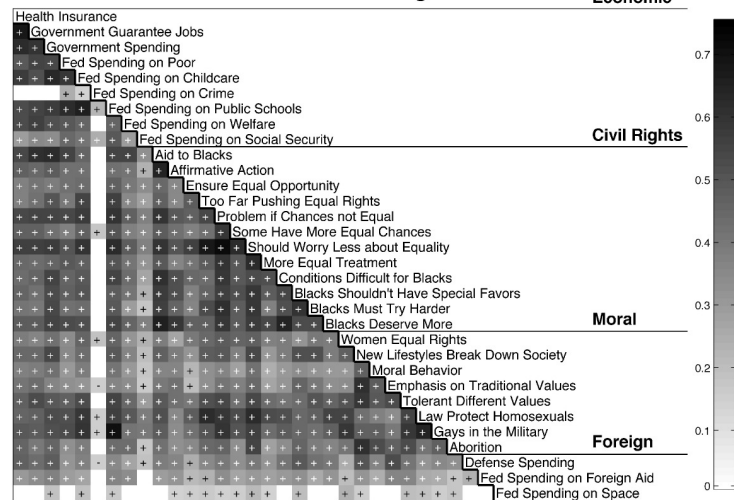
We begin by closely examining responses from 2004. Our application of RCA to the data resulted in a partition of respondents into three groups of comparable sizes (that include 33%, 40%, and 27% of the population, respectively). For each group, we represent the belief network by looking at the correlations between political preferences. The strength and direction of the correlation coefficients are visually represented in Figure 2. In the right column we show this information in matrix form; political issues are grouped by issue domain. In the left column we use network visualizations to better reveal the overall structures of the three political belief systems: each node corresponds to a political attitude (nodes are color-coded by issue domain), and we draw edges connecting political attitudes when correlation coefficients are statistically significant (at $\alpha = 0.05$). Solid lines represent positive correlations, and dashed lines negative correlations. Line shades and widths are proportional to the strength of the correlation.¹⁴

Members of the first group exhibit a densely interconnected belief network. Following Converse, we call them *Ideologues*. Ideologues organize their political attitudes according

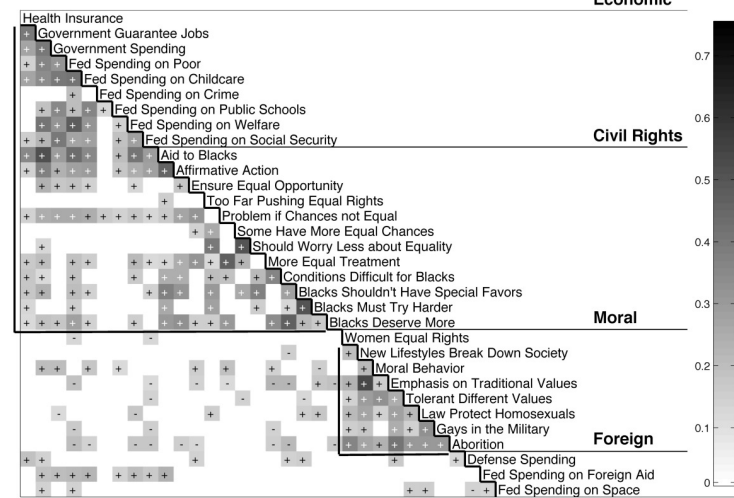
¹⁴All the diagrams are standardized such that the widths and shades of all the edges/cells on the graphs/matrices correspond to the exact same levels. Networks are spatially drawn using the Furchtman-Reingold algorithm so that distances between nodes inversely correspond to the edge weights connecting them. Otherwise, the spatial position of each node is insignificant.



2004 Ideologues



2004 Alternatives



2004 Agnostics

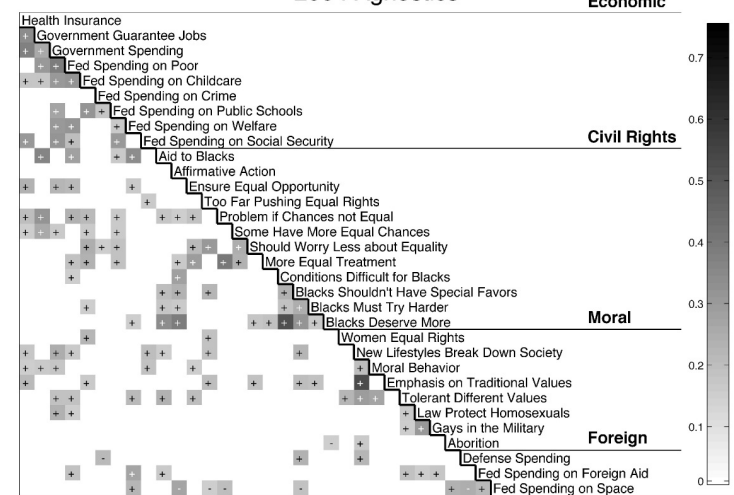


Figure 2: Belief networks and correlation matrices for 2004.

to the conventional liberal-conservative ideological continuum and show very high levels of constraint among issues across all four issue domains. Conversely, members of the second group – the *Alternatives* – do not fully adopt the liberal-conservative framework. Their position on economic (white nodes) and civil rights issues (dark gray nodes) is dissociated from their preferences on moral issues (black nodes). As the negative correlations suggest, in 2004, Alternatives tend to be morally conservative and economically liberal, or vice versa (i.e., a member of this group who is pro-life is likely to support economic redistribution and affirmative action, and vice versa). Finally, members of the third group exhibit weak associations among political beliefs: their network is relatively sparse. Unlike in the two other groups, correlations within issue domains in this group are sporadic and weak; no coherent pattern of belief organization is readily apparent. It seems that members of this group are, generally, not as politically consistent as their peers are. For lack of a better term, we characterize them as *Agnostics* for the remainder of the analysis. Further analyses, which are not reported, provide suggestive evidence that this group is characterized by a subtle decoupling between attitudes specifically relating to African-Americans, and those relating to economic and civic inequality. Members of this group are systematically more conservative than their peers on issues explicitly pertaining to race. We suspect that these individuals’ thinking about politics is, perhaps unconsciously, shaped by racial intolerance, but we do not pursue this line of investigation any further in the present paper. The remainder of this analysis mostly focuses on the other two, more clearly structured, groups. We use Agnostics as the benchmark against which the distinctiveness of the two other groups is measured.

A political belief system is a fundamental and durable component of the political landscape. While at any given moment in time the political discourse tends to concentrate on a few salient issues and neglects others, the overall organization of beliefs is the “shared grammar” that guarantees continuity over time (Manza & Brooks 1999, Converse 1964). Thus, if our findings describe Americans’ belief systems, as we argue, as opposed to fleeting issues that animate particular campaign years, they should be temporally consistent. We

applied RCA over a period of twenty years and found staggering similarities in the results.¹⁵

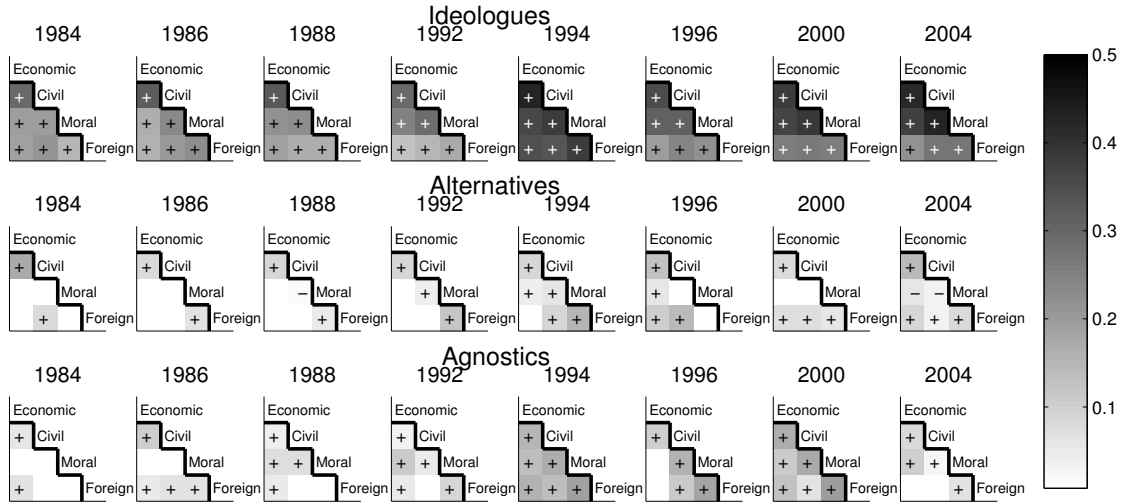


Figure 3: Time consistency: cross-domain correlation matrices by group over time. Each cell represents the average correlation between all pairs of variables in the two issue domains the cell corresponds to. Each matrix corresponds to a particular survey year in one of the three RCA groups. Cell shades correspond to correlation strengths, and the plus and minus signs to the correlation direction.

The belief structure of each of the three groups remained surprisingly stable over time. Since different questions were asked in different survey years, we cannot compare correlations between specific pairs of questions over time. Nevertheless, we are able to examine the overall correlation structure between the four issue domains. These are reported in Figure 3. Each of the matrices in this figure summarizes the correlations between pairs of issue domains in one survey year, for one of the three groups. Each matrix cell represents the average weighted correlation between all pairs of variables in the two issue domains the cell corresponds to (see SI3 for more details). For instance, the top cell in each matrix reports the intensity and sign of the average weighted correlation between economic and civil rights issues: in the Ideologue group in 2004, the average correlation between pairs of

¹⁵For all years but one, the RCA algorithm detected three groups, which clearly exhibited Ideologue, Alternative and Agnostic patterns. RCA produced a partition into four groups only for data from 1996, and merging the additional group with one of the three other groups only insignificantly decreased within-group relationality. This allowed us to maintain a tripartite division throughout the twenty-year period. For a more detailed description of how the RCA procedure was implemented, consult SI1.

economic and civil rights variables was 0.43. Overall, throughout the entire twenty year period, 33.7% of the respondents are classified as Ideologues, 41.0% as Alternatives, and 25.3% as Agnostics.¹⁶

Figure 3 visualizes the opinion patterns that differentiate the three groups from one another. Ideologues are characterized by very strong correlations between all issue domains. Ideologues who are conservative on moral issues, in other words, tend to be conservative on other issues as well. Alternatives, in contrast, tend to dissociate between their opinions on morality and their opinions on economics or civil rights, while Agnostics appear to be a mere pale version of Ideologues.

How distinctive is Alternatives' decoupling between their moral and economic positions? Does it indeed represent an alternative to the dominant belief system? We argue that the pattern of constraint between issue domains that characterizes Alternatives is substantively different from that exhibited by the two other groups. To investigate this further, we generate two multivariate models, in which we model economic conservatism as a function of moral and civil rights conservatism, respectively. We construct scales for each of the issue domains by rescaling all attitudinal variables on a zero to one range, and averaging respondents' opinions on each issue domain in each year. We interact the independent variable in each model with group dummies, using Agnostics as the reference group. Including all groups in one model allows us to compare relationships between issue domains across groups. We pool observations across all years, and include year fixed effects, which allows us to compare the relationships between issue domains across groups net of yearly fluctuations.¹⁷ If Alternatives are inherently different from Ideologues and Agnostics, we should find that issue domains correlate differently with one another in this group.

Figure 4 plots the marginal effect estimates produced by these models. They clearly illustrate the substantial, and statistically significant differences between the three groups.

¹⁶Though the relative size of each group fluctuates throughout the time period, there are no clear trends and group sizes remain consistent within a fixed range.

¹⁷We conducted further analyses, whereby we model economic conservatism using random slope multi-level models by year. Such models account for the possibility that issue domains correlate differently within each group across years. Estimates from these models are almost identical to the estimates reported here.

On the one hand, Ideologues and Agnostics present similar cross-domain attitudinal relationships. But these relationships are dramatically stronger in the former group. In fact, Ideologues’ positions on all three domains are so tightly constrained that moral or civil rights conservatism in this group corresponds to a three standard deviation increase in economic conservatism. On the other hand, these cross-domain correspondences follow a different pattern in the Alternative group. Two differences are particularly apparent. First, the relationship between moral and economic conservatism in this group is effectively non-existent: morally conservative Alternatives are as likely as morally liberal Alternatives are to be economically conservative. Second, the relationship between Alternatives’ positions on civil rights and economics is not only strong, it is also significantly stronger than it is for Agnostics. Overall, these patterns clearly demonstrate Alternatives’ distinctiveness. Whereas Ideologues and Agnostics adhere to conventional descriptions of the American electorate as comprised of sophisticated and ideologically less competent voters, Alternatives exhibit a unique pattern of beliefs.

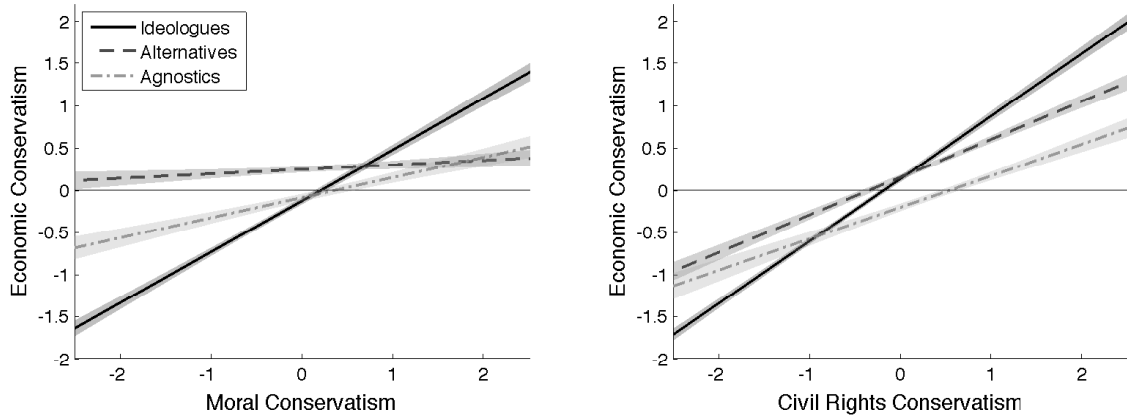


Figure 4: Cross-domain relationships by group. Lines represent marginal effects, estimated in a model where the variable on the X-axis is interacted with RCA group dummies (with Agnostics as the reference group), and year fixed effects are included. The model on the left hand diagram, for example, is (see SI5 for more details):

$$Econ_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Ide_i + \beta_2 Alt_i + \beta_3 Moral_i + \beta_4 Ide_i * Moral_i + \beta_5 Alt_i * Moral_i + \epsilon_i$$

Shades correspond to 95% confidence intervals.

In other words, Alternatives are not individuals who are merely unable to reason in con-

ceptually consistent ways. In SI4 we provide a variety of further analyses that demonstrate that their beliefs are far more organized than Agnostics', and are constrained by a strong interdependence between the three issue domains. Moreover, this group is not comprised exclusively of doctrinarian socially-liberal economic conservatives (often called 'libertarians'), or their mirror image. In fact, most Alternatives are somewhere between these two extremes (see SI2 for more details). What makes this group unique is its members' tendency to decouple support for individual liberties on moral issues, from support for policies that reduce economic and group-based inequalities. Given that mainstream political discourse in the U.S. is dominated by two oppositional ideological camps, it may seem surprising that such a large proportion of Americans espouses a combination of political attitudes that is not championed by prominent political parties. As we demonstrate in the following two sections, the rejection of the liberal-conservative framework is rooted in Alternatives' socio-demographic profiles.

Analysis II: The Socio-demographic Foundations of Political Belief Networks

How do these different ways of structuring political opinion relate to the various dimensions of social differentiation in American society? Scholars have long examined how different social attributes such as class, religion and racial identity are related to political preferences (Manza & Brooks 1999). Yet they have mostly considered these relationships in isolation, focusing on single social and ideological dimensions. In contrast, given that different people organize their political beliefs in different ways, we expect to find that the relationship between sociodemographic variables and political attitudes varies across cognitive frameworks. We explore this possibility by examining the sociodemographic organization of the belief space. First, we study whether the relationship between various sociodemographic characteristics and issue preferences varies across belief systems. Second, we model the likelihood of belonging to either the Ideologue or Alternative group as a function of one's position in sociodemographic space. We expect to find that class and religiosity correlate with one another differently in each group.

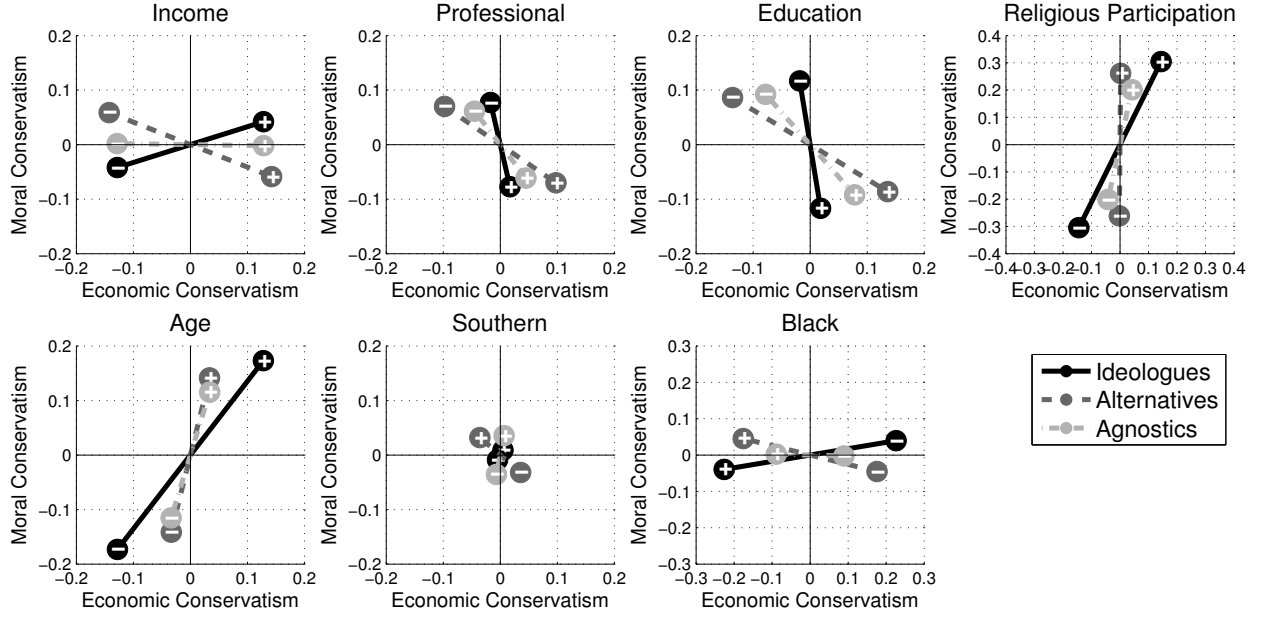


Figure 5: Belief Spaces. Each of the seven diagrams in this figure represents the mapping of one sociodemographic attribute onto a bi-dimensional belief space (the economic dimension on the X axis, the moral dimension on the Y axis). For each group we draw a line in this space. The coordinates that define the two extremes of the line correspond to the mean correlation between the sociodemographic attribute in question and the variables that make up either the economic or moral opinion categories, averaged over the twenty-year period. The plus and minus signs represent high and low sociodemographic values respectively. The lines connecting these coordinates outline the direction and magnitude of the relationship between the sociodemographic variable and opinions on economic and moral issues.

Figure 5 visualizes a bi-dimensional ‘belief space’ with the the economic dimension on the X axis, the moral dimension on the Y axis.¹⁸ Each panel represents the relationship between a sociodemographic variable and political preferences for each of the three groups (using color coded lines). The coordinates that mark the two extremes of each line correspond to the mean correlation between the sociodemographic attribute in question and the variables that make up the relevant opinion category (economic or moral), averaged over the twenty-year period under study. The plus and minus signs represent high and

¹⁸On the whole, the belief space is structured by additional dimensions. To make the diagram more interpretable, we focus only on these two axes of opinion variance. Similar results are obtained when economic opinions are replaced with civil rights opinions, suggesting that economic and civil rights conservatism correlate similarly with social background in all three groups.

low sociodemographic values, respectively. The lines connecting these coordinates illustrate the direction and magnitude of the relationship between the sociodemographic variable and opinions on economic and moral issues; they visualize how ideological disagreements map onto social divisions in each group.

For example, the upper left diagram plots the location in the belief space of the highest and lowest income categories in each of the three groups. In the Ideologue group, high income is, on average, positively correlated both with economic and moral conservatism, as indicated by the black line. In the Alternative group (dark gray line), high income is similarly correlated with economic conservatism, but is negatively correlated with moral conservatism. In the Agnostic group (light gray line), high income is correlated only with economic conservatism, while there is no relationship with opinions on morality. High earners tend to be economically conservative in all groups, but they have opposing views on moral issues: while high-income Ideologues are also morally conservative, their Alternative peers tend to be morally liberal, and their Agnostic peers morally indifferent.

The diagrams also illustrate that the more professional and more educated tend to be morally liberal in all groups, consistent with previous findings (e.g. Brooks & Manza 1997). However, it is only amongst the Alternatives that these two attributes are also strongly associated with economic conservatism. Similarly, religious participation and age are strongly associated with moral conservatism in both groups, but only in the Ideologue group they are associated with economic conservatism (as one would expect, religiosity is strongly correlated with moral conservatism in all three groups). Surprisingly, however, living in the south accounts for almost no variability in opinions on either dimension in either group. This means that if we account for the composition of political preferences, the north-south divide disappears (consistent with Gelman 2009). Finally, African-Americans tend to be economically liberal in both the Ideologue and Alternative groups. While they tend to be slightly morally liberal in the Ideologue group, they lean toward moral conservatism in the Alternative group.

On the whole, the sociodemographic decomposition of the belief space suggests that the

relationship between social positions and political preferences is contingent on the overall organization of beliefs; various social divisions correlate differently with political opinions in each group. In particular, class (as measured by income) and religious attendance play different roles in the Ideologue and Alternative groups: whereas in the former both are associated with moral and economic conservatism, in the latter their associations are oppositional. High-income individuals who subscribe to the Alternative belief system are, like their Ideologue peers, economically conservative, but, unlike them, they are morally liberal; similarly, religious Alternatives are morally conservative like their Ideologue peers, but differ by being economically moderate, on average.

Dividing the population into different belief communities uncovers a systematic relationship between income and moral conservatism that is obscured by these opposing trends. Over the entire population, income and moral conservatism are insignificantly correlated with one another; knowing one's income provides no information on one's moral opinions. Yet examined separately, each group exhibits a different relationship between income and positions on morality.¹⁹ What can explain this difference?

If the overlap between people's class and religiosity has a bearing on how they combine their political preferences, then we should find that the interaction between the two explains how respondents combine their political beliefs. To test this possibility, we modeled the odds ratio of being assigned to the Ideologue group (versus being assigned to the Alternative group) as a function of an interaction between income and religious attendance. Figure 6 plots this odds ratio as modeled by a multinomial logistic regression (cf. the caption and SI5 for further details). We find, in support of our initial expectation, that high-income individuals who regularly attend religious services are more than twice as likely to be Ideologues as their low-income counterparts. High-income individuals who never attend religious services, on the other hand, are 10% less likely to be Ideologues than their low income counterparts. The slope of the line changes from positive to negative as a function of religious attendance. In other words, high-income & religious or working-class &

¹⁹Over the entire population the correlation coefficient between moral conservatism and income is effectively 0. This result is consistent whether Agnostics are included or excluded from the sample.

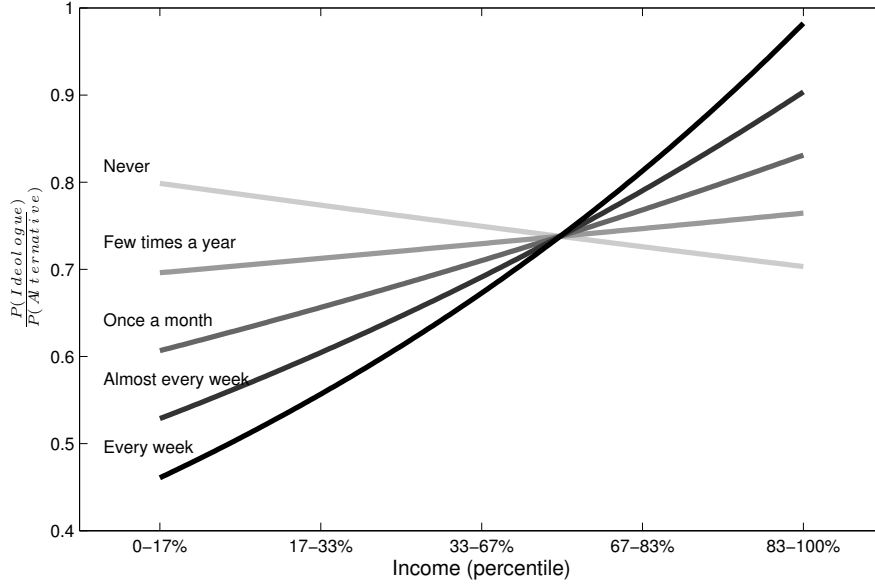


Figure 6: Multinomial logistic regression for group membership. This diagram plots the estimated odds ratio of being assigned to the Ideologue group, compared to being assigned to the Alternative group, as a function of an interaction between income and religious participation. The data are pooled across the twenty year period. Formally, the model is described as follows:

$$\log\left(\frac{P(RCA=Ide_i)}{P(RCA=Alt_i)}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 income_i + \beta_2 religious_i + \beta_3(income_i * religious_i) + \alpha^T X + \epsilon_i$$

where X represents control variables (sociodemographic and year dummies, see SI5), and α and β are regression coefficients. Each of the five lines plotted in the diagram corresponds to one of the five religious participation categories. The income variable is categorized by percentile to make it comparable across years.

non-religious individuals are more likely to align with the liberal-conservative ideology. In contrast, non-religious high-earners and religious low-earners orient toward the Alternative group. The latter occupy social positions that push them to take ideological stances that are seemingly contradictory. To reconcile this tension they deviate from the orthodox liberal-conservative framework to adopt an alternative way of conceptualizing politics.

Analysis III: The Consequences of Political Belief System Heterogeneity

How do citizens define their partisan allegiances given their conflicting interests and competing understandings of the political debate? And how have they responded to the two major parties' increased ideological alignment? Ideologues' positions on morality and economics are congruent with the two major parties' stated ideologies; choosing a political camp therefore poses little challenge for these voters. But for Alternatives, selecting one party over the other necessarily entails suppressing one ideological orientation in favor of another. How is this cognitive dissonance resolved, especially in light of growing partisan polarization and the increasing salience of moral issues? Both with respect to opinion polarization, and with respect to the relative weight of moral and economic issues, we find that different processes are at work in the Alternative group, compared to the Ideologues and Agnostics.

Examining opinion constraint over time suggests that Ideologues and Alternatives responded very differently to the growing alignment between economic and moral issues in mainstream political discourse. Figure 7 plots trends in issue alignment in the three groups over time. As is clearly visible, Ideologues' positions on economic, civil rights and moral issues became increasingly aligned with one another over the years. This increase is particularly pronounced on issues relating to morality: the correlation between moral issues and economic (or civil rights) issues roughly doubled in intensity over the twenty year period in this group (from 0.2 in 1984 to 0.4 in 2004). In contrast, the correlation between economic and moral positions remained mostly insignificant amongst the Alternatives, and by 2004 moral opinions became significantly negatively correlated with opinions in the two other domains. Thus, while Ideologues reacted positively to the polarization of the political elite, Alternatives have resisted the pressure to adjust their political opinions to the changing political landscape.

In light of this disconnect between Alternatives' and parties' positions, how do voters define their partisan allegiances? Do their economic worldviews trump their opinions about morality when ultimately deciding on whom to vote for? To answer this question, we first

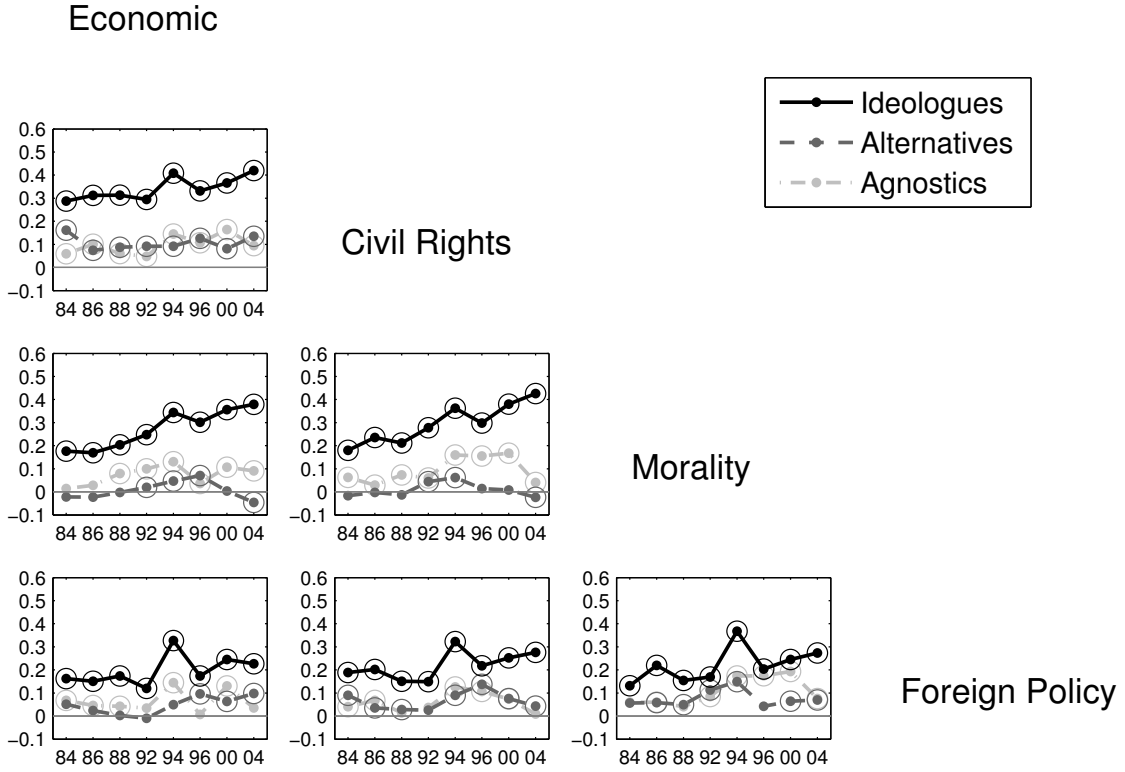


Figure 7: Trends in pair correlations between issue domains by group. Each diagram plots the average correlation between all pairs of issues in two given issue domains over the twenty-year period. The uppermost figure, for example, plots the average correlations between economic and civil rights issues. A circle indicates that the average correlation is statistically different from zero at the $\alpha=0.05$ level.

modeled respondents' party self-identification (on a seven-point scale) as a function of their positions on each of the four issue domains. Recall that we construct issue domain scales by rescaling all variables on a zero to one range, and averaging respondents' responses on each set of issues per given year. Coefficients were estimated using a fixed-effects OLS model, and a variety of sociodemographic variables were included as controls (see SI5 for details). In order to explore temporal trends, we divided the sample into two periods, before and after 1990. The reason for choosing 1990 as our cutoff year was twofold. First, while discord over moral worldviews was brewing well before the nineteen nineties, it was not until the beginning of that decade that moral issues became a central feature of public political

debate (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2011). The early nineteen nineties marked an important historical transition – the end of the Cold War – as well as the end of a decade dominated by Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Moral issues that were hitherto overshadowed by foreign policy and economic concerns were beginning to take center stage.²⁰ Second, as Figure 7 illustrates, Ideologues’ political constraint, especially insofar as moral views were aligned with other issue domains, started to follow an upward trend in 1992. It appears that these voters began responding favorably to polarization roughly during this time.

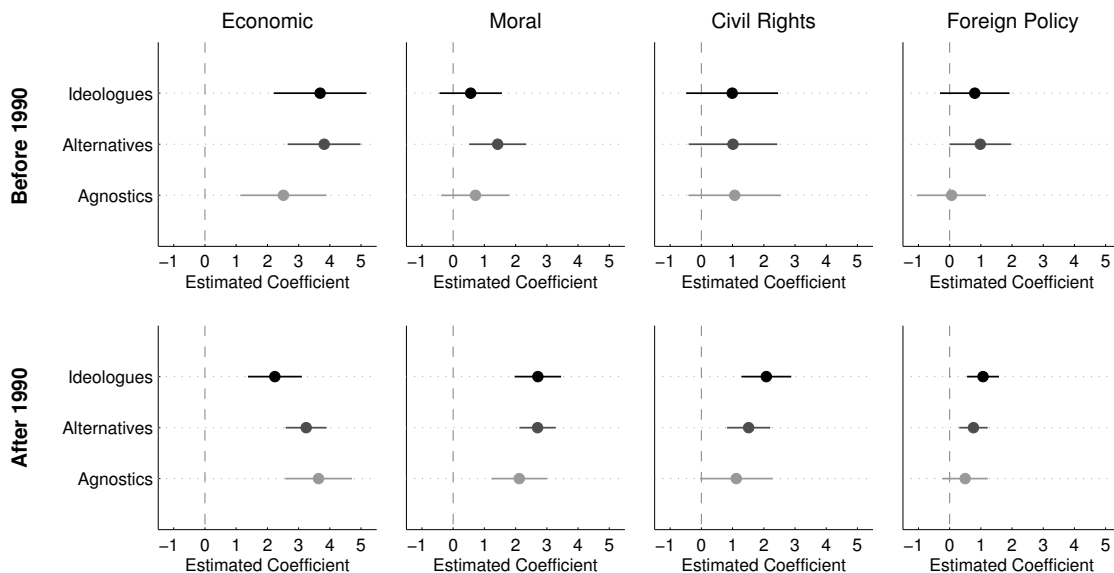


Figure 8: OLS regression of party identification (party self-identification on a 7-point scale, ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican): Plot of the estimated coefficients and 95% CI for economic, civil rights, moral and foreign policy scales for each of the RCA groups. Each scale ranges from 0 to 1, such that a high score corresponds to a conservative opinion. The upper panel reports estimates for the 1980s, and the lower panel for the 1990s and early 2000s. The data are fitted using the following model:

$$PartyID_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Econ_i + \beta_2 Moral_i + \beta_3 Civil_i + \beta_4 Foreign_i + \alpha_1^T X + \alpha_2^T Z + \epsilon_i$$

where X represents sociodemographic variables and Z year dummies (see SI5), and α and β are regression coefficients.

As the results reported in Figure 8 demonstrate, economic concerns remained central

²⁰The various sociopolitical processes underlying this change are, of course, far more complex, but are beyond the scope of this article. While some conservative activists undoubtedly promoted moral arguments well before 1990, these issues became the focus of public debate only by the beginning of the nineteen nineties (Gross, Medvetz & Russell 2011).

for voters’ partisan identification throughout the twenty year period. Starting in 1990, the three other issue domains significantly increased in importance for all Americans.²¹ Moral issues exhibited the most dramatic rise: estimated coefficient sizes more than doubled in all groups across the two periods, increasing more than five-fold for Ideologues. These findings are consistent with previous work which has argued that, despite the growing salience of moral issues, economic concerns remain the mainstay of political partisanship (Bartels 2006, Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder 2006).²² However, our results also indicate that whereas moral issues began capturing the attention of Ideologues only during the nineteen nineties, they carried significant weight for Alternatives as early as the nineteen eighties.²³ Presumably, Alternatives were confronted by their dissonant opinions on economics and morality as the culture war was shaping up, and before ‘values’ became a central and inescapable feature of political campaigning.

Yet examining each of these opinion dimensions independently from one another might miss an important part of the story. Recall that while economic and moral positions are correlated for Ideologues, they are decoupled, at times even significantly antithetical to one another, for Alternatives. Whereas for the former the two dimensions reinforce one another, the latter need to decide which dimension takes precedence. It is therefore likely that the relative weight of one issue domain on political partisanship varies as a function of opinions on the second issue domain. Yet modeling the two dimensions independently cannot take

²¹Note that the issues domain scales are included as independent variables in the same model. Coefficients therefore correspond to the estimated effect of each issue domain on partisanship net of opinions on the three other domains. While coefficients for moral and civil rights domains increased for all groups, these results are also consistent with the divergent paths taken by each group in light of growing polarization: while the variance explained by this model increased from 32.3% to 51.8% for Ideologues before and after 1990, and from 12.8% to 25.0% for Agnostics, it insignificantly decreased for Alternatives from 30.1% to 29.1%. In other words, while parties became better at sorting Ideologues and Agnostics, they remained as good at sorting Alternatives after 1990 as they were in the previous decade.

²²We use the same modeling strategy – regressing party identification on opinion summary indexes – that is employed by these studies. We do so primarily for consistency, but also in order to highlight how our analytical approach makes visible underlying patterns that traditional approaches to public opinion analysis overlook.

²³In additional analyses which we do not report here, we pooled all yearly observations and included a dummy variable for observations post-1990, rather than dividing the sample into two subsamples before and after 1990. We interacted this period dummy with the four issue domain scales. Effect estimates are robust to this modeling strategy and, in particular, moral issues remain significantly predictive of party identification both before and after 1990 only for Alternatives.

this mutual reinforcement or attenuation into account (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2011).

To account for this interdependence, we computed a second set of models, in which the relationship between economic and moral issues is captured by the difference between respondents' economic and moral conservatism, which we refer to as the economic-moral delta, or ΔEM in short (see caption and SI5 for further details).²⁴ A ΔEM value close to 4 corresponds to significantly high economic conservatism and significantly high moral liberalism, and similarly a value close to -4 corresponds to significantly high moral conservatism and significantly high economic liberalism. Respondents on both extremes of the scale are those whose positions on the two issue domains are oppositional to one another. Values around 0 identify individuals who are consistently conservative, or liberal, on both issue domains. We modeled party self-identification as a function of the ΔEM and its squared term, to take into account the interdependence between both opinion domains in answering the question of whether economic issues trump moral issues. Models were computed separately for each group.

The results are presented in panels A and B of Figure 9 (cf. caption and SI5 for further details). Economic issues consistently trump moral issues for Ideologues whether before or after 1990. Irrespective of their positions on issues such as gay rights or abortion, Ideologues' partisan identification ultimately aligns with their economic opinions. Yet this relationship is far more nuanced for Alternatives. During the nineteen eighties, like their Ideologue counterparts, Alternatives leaned in the direction of their economic opinions, especially when their economic opinions were significantly more conservative than their opinions on morality. But starting in 1990, a pronounced curvilinear relationship between ΔEM and party identification appears. Whether economically conservative and morally liberal, or the other way round, Alternatives were more likely to identify with the Republican Party. The more their opinions on economics and moral values were oppositional to one another, the more strongly Alternatives' political identification aligned with their conservative leaning.

²⁴Formally, $\Delta EM_i = \bar{E}_i - \bar{M}_i$, corresponds to the difference between respondent i 's mean level of economic conservatism, \bar{E}_i , and mean level of moral conservatism, \bar{M}_i , both centered on 0 and rescaled to have a standard deviation of 1.

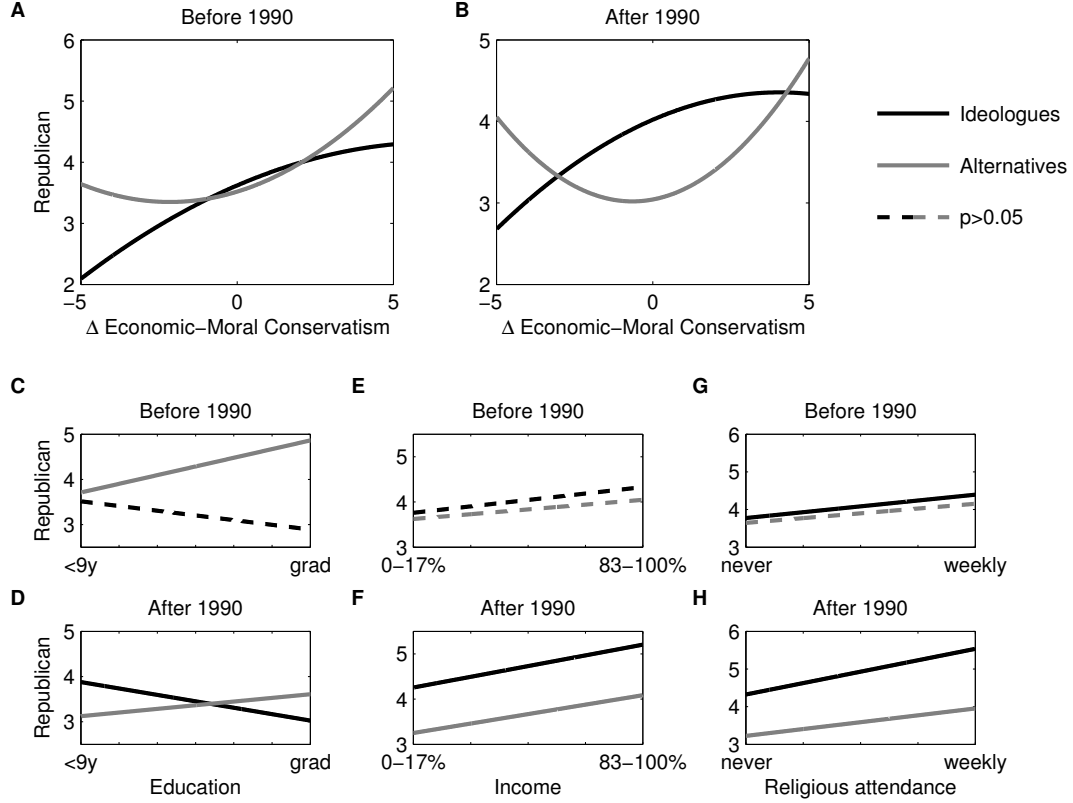


Figure 9: Party identification by RCA group. OLS predictions of party self-identification on a 7-point scale, ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican, as a function of the difference between one's degree of conservatism on economic and moral issues (A, B), education (C, D), income (E, F), and religious participation (G, H). The data are pooled across two periods, before and after 1990, and fitted using the following model:

$$PartyIdent = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 * R * \Delta EM + \alpha_2 * R * \Delta EM^2 + \beta_1^T * R * X + \beta_2^T Z + \epsilon$$

where X represents sociodemographic variables and Z year dummies (see SI5), and α and β are regression coefficients. R represents interaction terms that allow effects to vary by RCA group.

In other words, the different relationships between particular political attitudes and party identification in each group suggest that the effect of political preferences on voting behavior is mediated by one's overall organization of beliefs.

What about the relationship between citizens' social background and partisanship? As panels E to H illustrate, the relationship between income and religious attendance on partisan identification intensified in both groups, and in the same direction, after 1990. It appears that both class- and religious-based political cleavages were deepening across the entire population starting in the early nineteen nineties. But unlike class and religiosity, education correlates differently with partisanship across both groups. Whereas educated Ideologues – net of the effects of income and other sociodemographic characteristics – are more likely to self-identify as Democrats (especially after 1990), their Alternative counterparts are more likely to gravitate toward the Republican Party. We interpret this finding as suggestive of how education plays different roles in orienting citizens politically. On the one hand, various accounts have linked education with greater receptiveness to moral and social liberalism (Brooks & Manza 1997). But education – particularly college education – exposes individuals to rational visions of society which are consonant with free-market ideology (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez 1997). Indeed, as Figure 5 illustrates, while educated Alternatives tend to be economically conservative, educated Ideologues are not. It appears that in each group education interacts with actors' interpretations of the world to highlight a different dimension of political reality, and, ultimately, push in opposite partisan directions.

Together, these results paint a multilayered collage. On the one hand, moral issues increased in salience for all voters, and political cleavages mapping to income and religious disparities became more pronounced. But these trends had different partisan repercussions for different Americans. In particular, whereas some resisted the lure of value-voting, others have prioritized morals over economics. For Ideologues, despite their increasing sensitivity to moral debates since the early nineteen nineties, economic interests continue to suppress whatever attenuating effects their moral beliefs might have on their partisan identities.

But for Alternatives, economic interests do not overwhelmingly trump moral convictions. Rather, Alternatives who espouse traditionalist beliefs on abortion, gender roles, etc., and who are disposed toward Keynesian economics, tend to orient politically with their moral convictions. The pendulum swings the other direction for Alternatives who are free-market supporters, but culturally and socially progressive: they prioritize their economic interests. These two sets of individuals, ideologically caught between a rock and a hard place, are presumably those swing voters who have the potential for deciding elections, and in the 1984-2004 period, they were more likely to give their conservative leaning precedence and identify as Republicans.

Discussion

Partisan trench warfare of the kind that characterized debates over the federal budget in 2011 and 2013 is but one recent example of the strong ideological divisions unabatedly separating the two major parties. Politicians' and pundits' reactions to practically every item attracting the news-cycle spotlight seem as if they are following the same script. Whatever the issue at stake, it is almost certain that it will generate diametrically opposed responses on Fox News and MSNBC. Yet ordinary citizens do not appear to be consulting this script; at least not all of them. As our results demonstrate, during the twenty years stretching between 1984 and 2004, Americans were divided into three different belief communities, each characterized by a distinctive way of framing the political debate.

Beneath the ideologically dichotomized rhetoric promoted by politicians and the media lays an ideationally heterogeneous public. As we demonstrate, this heterogeneity is systematic and consistent throughout the last few decades. Only one third – those whom we label Ideologues – align their opinions with mainstream ideological polarities. Agnostics, in contrast, exhibit a loosely coupled belief structure. Taken together, these two groups conform to longstanding descriptions of the American public as constituted by a group of sophisticated individuals who understand politics through conventional ideological categories, and a less-knowledgable group of individuals who are instead “innocent of ideology”

(Converse 1964, Kinder & Sears 1985). However, Alternatives, the largest group in our sample, challenge this contention. Alternatives interpretation of politics is incompatible with the conventional ideological framework, but not in an incoherent way. Indeed, they consistently dissociate their preferences on moral issues from their economic and civil rights attitudes. Their deviation from the orthodox political polarity makes sense in that it accommodates their otherwise irreconcilable interests and social identities, thus challenging the assumption that there is only one ‘correct’ way of understanding politics.

The heterogeneity of political belief systems does not simply derive from differences in levels of political sophistication (see SI6 for an analysis of this aspect), but in individuals’ social identities: people with different sociodemographic profiles structure their political preferences in systematically different ways. Given the predominance of moral and economic issues in political discourse, it is difficult for those who are pushed in different ideological directions by their religiosity or economic status to find a comfortable position along the liberal-conservative continuum. Their solution has been to adopt a political worldview that harmonizes their seemingly opposing political interests.²⁵

Implications for Understanding American Politics

Moving beyond the assumption of population homogeneity to consider the socio-cognitive heterogeneity of American public opinion, we were able to cast new light on current debates on political polarization and the relative importance of moral issues in shaping partisan identities. The substantive payoff of our approach has been twofold.

First, while students of American politics agree that partisan battles, and the language with which they are waged, have become increasingly divisive in recent decades, they also find that this increased polarization is not fully reflected in the electorate at large. Reports of a fragmenting American public appear to be widely overstated (Fiorina & Abrams 2008, Fis-

²⁵From this perspective, Alternatives, as well as Ideologues, can be understood within a “rational voter” framework (Downs 1957). In Downs’ original framework voters and parties are positioned in the same ideological space, and voters maximize their utility by choosing the party that is closer to their political preferences. However, for Alternatives the process of party selection is not straightforward, because the political offer does not fully map onto their position in the belief space. They are consequently equidistant from both major parties.

cher & Mattson 2009, Baldassarri & Gelman 2008). Our findings reconcile these seemingly oppositional empirical facts. We find that while Ideologues have responded favorably to growing polarization by aligning their moral views with their opinions on economic policies, Alternatives have resisted the pressures of choosing the same ideological camp on both dimensions. Together, these two opposing trends cancel each other out. This finding explains why studies of public opinion have found little evidence for alignment between voters' moral and other preferences, even as the political discourse has become increasingly polarized on themes such as abortion and gay rights. By overlooking socio-cognitive heterogeneity in the population, scholars confounded these two mutually offsetting trends. Thus what may appear like an American public unresponsive to a polarizing political elite is, in fact, a two-pronged electorate responding differently to polarization. For some voters elite polarization has made it easier to define their political allegiance, for others neither the Republican nor the Democratic political agenda constitutes a satisfactory representation of their political preferences. Citizens' religiosity and class, and whether or not the two are compatible with how the mainstream political debate is structured, explain this bifurcation.

Second, our findings shed light on the effects of the growing salience of morality-based politics on partisan identification. Whereas popular understandings of the political zeitgeist in the American heartland suggest that working class whites have been swayed by conservative moral rhetoric seemingly against their material interests, systematic public opinion analyses find that bread-and-butter concerns still have greater influence on these voters' partisan identification than issues such as abortion or gay marriage. Our results indicate that neither of these two narratives is entirely correct. Consistent with studies that argue that class politics has not waned, we find that economic concerns remain paramount for Ideologues. But these voters do not need to choose between their moral worldviews and economic interests, as their opinions on all dimensions are aligned with the dominant ideological framing of the political debate. In contrast, members of the Alternative group are those who are more strongly confronted by an incongruence between their opinions on both dimensions and mainstream partisan ideology. It is in this group that we find working class

voters with conservative moral orientations. Contra the argument about the persistence of class voting, we find that these blue-collar traditionalists are more likely to self-identify as Republican. In the same group we also find individuals on the upper-end of the income and educational distributions who support free-market economics and fiscal austerity. For these social progressives, economics outweigh opinions on morality as they too are more likely to identify as Republicans. In other words, moral issues trump economic interests for some working class Americans, but not for others. However, for all voters in the Alternatives group, conservatism ultimately trumps their progressive inclinations, whatever dimension their progressivism is on.

Working-class religious Americans are more likely to support the Republican Party, but so are high-earning, educated, non-religious Americans. The belief system that characterizes Alternatives derives from the tension these individuals face in combining their economic and religious social identities. Of course, there are plenty of other, potentially conflicting identities. Why have some identities crystallized in a shared system of beliefs, while others have not? We argue that this has to do with the growing importance of moral issues in the political discourse in the U.S. Alternatives held ideologically incongruent opinions on morality and the economy as early as the Reagan years, but only in the following decade, once ‘values’ became prominent, their alternative belief system was activated.

The political offer plays an important role in building the cognitive framework within which people operate. Our results suggest that since the early nineteen nineties, when Americans hold seemingly competing opinions, they were more likely to privilege their conservative views, and identify with the Republican Party. We believe this is in part due to the ambiguous and potentially self-contradictory ideological stances taken by the Republican Party. In fact, over the past four decades both neo-liberal and ultra-conservative advocates have found voice in the Republican Party, as recurrent infighting at the the Republican National Convention reminds us.²⁶ To some political commentators, neo-liberal support for

²⁶“As Christians Pull the G.O.P. to the Right, Its Leaders Argue Over Holding the Center”, *New York Times*, June 27, 1994; “ ‘Cultural War’ of 1992 Moves In From the Fringe”, *New York Times*, August 30, 2012; see also Pennings (1994) for an account of Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition divisive impact on G.O.P. conventions.

economic deregulation and ultra-conservative support for moral restrictions might appear conceptually at odds with one another; nonetheless, these views have found a way to co-exist in the Republican Party, thus making the party more appealing to “ideologically heterodox” voters, and contributing to the crystallization of an alternative belief system. Our typology of voters may be useful for future research interested in understanding the rise and transformative capacity of the American conservative movement since the nineteen nineties.

The insights gained from our analysis inherently depend on our methodological approach, which provided a vantage point that traditional approaches to public opinion data do not afford.

Methodological Contribution

“Belief systems have never surrendered easily to empirical study and quantification” (Converse 1964, p. 206). The opening line of Philip Converse’s influential study succinctly captures the gap between theories of public opinion and how they are borne out in empirical studies. Indeed, the study of belief systems, as well as more recent research on political sophistication and heterogeneity, developed amid discussions concerning analysis and measurement. Our research contributes to the study of public opinion by overcoming a few important analytical limitations that previous research suffers from, thus better fulfilling its theoretical objectives.

First, our method has high fidelity to Converse’s original concept of constraint. Unlike conventional studies that either examine summary indices or look at dyadic correlations between pairs of variables, RCA measures the extent to which a complete set of variables covary with one another. The relationships that this methodological approach uncovers correspond to what Converse calls a ‘belief system:’ a configuration of ideas whereby elements are interdependently bound together. A belief system does not prescribe what positions citizens are allowed to have; nevertheless, it limits the space of possible opinion combinations by determining which beliefs are congruent with one another. The underlying categories –

such as liberal and conservative – that structure this limited space of possibilities are latent in the network of relationships between beliefs. Examining these beliefs independently of one another necessarily overlooks how they systematically coalesce, if at all. On the other hand, using summary indices forces an a-priori assumption about how beliefs depend on one another. Our approach inductively reveals the belief network, without presupposing its structure.

Second, we take Converse’s construct one step further by exploring the possibility of the co-existence of multiple, and competing, belief systems. Students of public opinion have acknowledged, and at times attempted to explore, this possibility. Yet these attempts have often been constrained by the methods conventionally used for examining opinion constraint. In his seminal paper, Converse (Converse 1964) finds that intellectual elites exhibit high degrees of opinion constraint. The implications are that those who exhibit lower opinion interdependence have an incomplete understanding of the political debate. Because public opinion analyses are dominated by the prevalent conceptualization of politics as divided into two political camps, many studies, whether explicitly or implicitly, effectively make similar assumptions. Davis & Robinson’s (1996) otherwise insightful analysis, for example, in criticizing the ‘culture war’ thesis accepts, by default, the contention that those who simultaneously take orthodox and progressive opinions on religious issues employ a ‘muddled’ moral cosmology. Yet the group of voters we call Alternatives are not necessarily misinformed about politics. Rather they construe political meaning in a different way than Ideologues do. Our approach allows for the possibility that different Americans understand politics by relying on altogether different sense-making schemes (Goldberg 2011). This is quite different from distinguishing between voters on the extent to which they diverge from the mainstream conservative-liberal dichotomy.

Finally, contrary to the “funnel of causality” analytical tradition (Campbell et al. 1960), we demonstrate that social differences do not ‘linearly’ map onto ideological and political cleavages and that we cannot assume population homogeneity in the organization of political beliefs. Whereas, for example, high-income Ideologues tend to be morally conservative, their

Alternative counterparts are likely to be morally liberal. Thus, income is insignificantly correlated with moral ideology over the population as a whole. A similar inconsistency holds even when examining the effects of socio-demographics on political identification net of other social dimensions. When holding other variables constant, education predicts identifying as a Democrat in the Ideologue group, but as a Republican in the Alternative group. In sum, the relationship between voting and sociodemographic attributes is mediated by one’s belief system, and thus education, income and religiosity have different effects on partisanship for different people.²⁷ Examining these relationships in the aggregate, as most conventional analyses do, potentially obscures such differences.

Overall, we contend that the bi-dimensionality of the U.S. political space and changes in the political offer require a more complex understanding of the relationship between social identity and partisanship than most statistical analyses of public opinion data usually assume.²⁸ Taking into account the heterogeneity of political belief systems in American public opinion, we demonstrated that the way in which people organize their political preferences is rooted in their social identities, sometimes defying dominant political conceptions. Our results showed that the relationship between political attitudes and party identification is mediated by the political belief system individuals adopt: partisanship is more than a zero sum game between class-based and value voting.²⁹

²⁷In looking for the working class voters that have supposedly abandoned liberal politics, Frank (2004), and consequently his detractors, treat the non-college educated or those on the lower end of the income distribution as monolithic wholes. In contrast, our approach has been to classify respondents on the basis of the underlying logics structuring their political opinions. This allows us to find how neither social group exhibits a consistent pattern of ideological and partisan orientation.

²⁸Morris Fiorina and his collaborators, criticizing “literally hundreds of electoral analyses” (p. 178), raised an important methodological issue related to the bi-dimensionality of the political space. Namely, they showed that changes between elections in the position of the candidates, and in particular candidates differentiation along the moral dimension, “can produce the appearance of voter change even in the absence of the latter” (p. 184), due to the fact that “when candidates diverge on an issue dimension, voters will appear to weight that dimension more heavily even if their own preferences and decision rules do not change” (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope 2011, p. 178). We move this line of reasoning a step forward, arguing that, though the bipartisan structure of American politics imposes a dichotomy between two ideological camps, such homogeneity of views is not reflected in voters political preferences.

²⁹Class and religion are central for party identification in other countries as well. In national electorates across Europe, for example, multiple dimensions of cleavage interact in complex ways with political choice (Evans & de Graaf 2012). Our analytical approach may be useful for shedding light on the complex interplay between various dimensions of sociopolitical cleavage in these political cultures.

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