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| **Title** | Defining Opinion Space: A K-means Cluster Analysis of Pew’s Political Typology Survey |
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Abstract:

This paper seeks to address the questions of what is happening to the politically moderate in the United States. Through a recreation of Pew Research Bureau’s political typology survey, I perform a k-means cluster analysis to define unique clusters of opinion space among the sample of politically engaged Americans.

Current data has suggested that Americans are increasingly likely to identify with either one of the main political parties, leading to a sense of a widening philosophical gap in the center of public opinion as moderates and independents appear to disappear, much of the reason for speculation into the polarization of the American public. You may be surprised to see that despite identification increasing, no major shifts have occurred in most issue areas important to Americans. Thus, in order to evaluate what is occurring in the issue space of American public opinion, it is deemed useful to map ideological groupings that can more accurately portray the spectrum of public opinion.

K-means analysis gives us a rigorous method to identify ideological groupings. The process is done placing survey responses on valued scales and using either each question or each area of opinion as a dimension that defines the space. The algorithm used, then seeks to locate a particular number of centers such that they serve as centers around which the groupings may be defined. The variable of question in this project concerns the 19 variables originally used to create the political typology and the nine aspects of political ideology to which they correspond.

The identification of ideological clusters has many practical implications. First and foremost, changes in the underlying distribution greatly affects the assumptions of political organizers and politicians concerning their views of the electorate. Additionally, analyses such as these give insight into the mentalities of citizens and how voters’ issue attitudes go together on an ideological level.