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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 examines if the attitudes and opinions of voters in the United States cleave into coherent subgroupings. Scholars have documented how Americans are increasingly likely to anchor their understanding of how issues “go together” by referring to the platforms of the Republican and Democratic Parties (Baldassarri & Gelman 2008; Pew 2014).  This has led to a sense of a widening philosophical gap in the center of public opinion as moderates and independents -- who hold apparently “inconsistent” views (compared with “consistent” Republicans or Democrats) -- appear to disappear from public discourse and political organizing; and this only deepens scholars’ concern over the polarization of the American public (DiMaggio et al 1996).  How consistent are viewpoints of most party members? Are there any coherent ideological groupings for moderate and independent Americans?  Can we find them?  Do multiple researchers reach the same conclusions about the number, content and relationships between these citizens’ views?  I reexamine the Pew political typology survey to answer these questions, employing a k-means cluster analysis of 19 variables to define unique clusters of the opinion space among Americans.  The cluster analysis does produce some independent subgroups, but -- surprisingly -- they are (a) not quite as distinct (or coherent) as analysts may have previously suggested and (b) the transition from more liberal to more conservative groupings is not quite as fluid as the customary scale would imply.  Radar plots with standardized values make these results apparent.  Overall, this research provides evidence as to the limitations of the liberal-conservative scale as a baseline for evaluating opinion space and the benefits of identifying silos of opinion through ideological realities.

----Citations----

Baldassarri, D., & Gelman, A. (2008). Partisans without constraint: Political polarization and trends in American public opinion. *American Journal of Sociology*, *114*(2), 408.

DiMaggio, P., Evans, J., & Bryson, B. (1996). Have American's social attitudes become more polarized? *American Journal of Sociology*, 690-755.

Pew Research Center, June, 2014, “Political Polarization in the American Public”