

Reconceptualizing the “Levels of Conceptualization”: Toward a Typology of Political Arguments*

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Abstract

In this paper, we recast The American Voter’s “levels of conceptualization” framework as a typology for narratives that emerge in political discussion, rather than as a measure of political sophistication. We embed a paired comparison exercise in a survey fielded to a nation-wide sample; individuals were asked to indicate which of two arguments they would be more likely to use in everyday discussion—the arguments in these repeated comparisons correspond to the levels of conceptualization framework. Based on the results of Bradley-Terry models, we examine general preferences of respondents, and further explore differences among Republicans and Democrats, and among respondents presented with more party-centric and more candidate-centric versions of the prompts. We also evaluate the paired comparison responses against coded like/dislike comments collected from the same respondents prior to the completion of the comparison exercises. We find little relationship between individuals’ open-ended comments and their evaluations of the arguments presented to them. We conclude by reflecting on these differences, and note how our results demonstrate the need for scholars to better model how individuals actually engage with politics.

Keywords: Political Sophistication; Public opinion; Survey Experiments; Political Arguments

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1 Introduction

How people think about politics and how people talk about politics are two subjects that we almost always approach via survey research, even as we know many of the ways in which survey research is an imperfect representation of individual preferences (Zaller and Feldman 1992), let alone more complex cognitive structures. In understanding individuals' conceptions of politics, one central set of questions revolves around attitudes toward the major parties. In *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), one important discussion relates to individuals' "level of conceptualization" about the political system. In this telling, asking individuals about positive and negative traits of the parties can reveal how they think about politics.

In contemporary American politics, attitudes toward parties are closely tied not only to cognition and conceptualization, but to affective reactions and expression. Affective polarization and negative partisanship are real phenomena that can be identified through survey questions (e.g., Iyengar and Westwood 2015), but it does not follow that affectively polarized individuals think about and talk about politics in purely affective terms. Although written in a different political milieu, one of the big takeaways from *The American Voter* is that most voters can draw distinctions between the parties that are at least somewhat cognitively richer than a mere in-group/out-group distinction.

As we make the step from how people think about politics to how they talk about politics, the challenges of capturing these phenomena through survey research grows even larger. To draw a stylized contrast, there is a chasm between—at the one extreme— individuals' (often quick and affective) responses to survey questions and, at the other extreme, the ideal of deliberative democracy. But even in everyday political discussion (perhaps a more modest contrast), we might expect the modal discussion to contain at least some substantive content, even if it is still charged with feeling. Everyday discussion may be shaped by homophily and vary in its level of sophistication (e.g., Mutz 2006), but discussion in disagreeable "dyads" is unlikely to consist entirely of ad hominem attacks, and discussion in agreeable ones surely goes beyond mutual affirmations. Most individuals have occasion to praise their preferred party or critique the out-party, or to hear

such praises or critiques from others, in terms of arguments related to *something*, whether it's their values, policy positions, group interests, or societal outcomes.

We argue that a fuller understanding of discussion, and of how individuals' interface with politics, can be gained by thinking about political arguments—not those related to specific policy positions a la high school debate, but general arguments about parties and the political system. In a polarized political environment, it is easy to dismiss the persuasive power of arguments alone (but see, (e.g. Fishkin et al. 2020; Petty and Cacioppo 1984), but studying arguments can also give us insights into patterns of both cognition and social interaction. For example, Groenendyk and Krupnikov (2021) find that whether an interaction feels like “debate” or “deliberation” affects the extent to which individuals rely on motivated reasoning. Focusing on the appeal of arguments gives us insight into the flavor and substance of everyday discussion, and the use of the “/dislikes” battery in *The American Voter* and subsequent work offers an existing framework for cataloguing the variation in how people think about parties and the political system.

Our paper proceeds as follows: first, we discuss the “levels of conceptualization” framework in Campbell et al. (1960), and its original characterization, as a measure of political sophistication (along with the critiques of that characterization). Second, we argue for a recasting of that framework; we assert that the categories developed in *The American Voter* can serve— and perhaps serve better—as a typology of arguments in favor of or against political parties and candidates. Third, we describe a methodology for assessing the appeal of these types of arguments to individual survey respondents, using the method of paired comparisons and Bradley-Terry models (see e.g., Loewen, Rubenson and Spirling 2012). Fourth, we present preliminary results from Bradley-Terry models, exploring variance in the appeal of arguments across political parties, across levels of political knowledge, and across more party-centric vs. more candidate-centric versions of the prompts. Finally, we compare the results of the Bradley-Terry models to a set of open-ended responses (i.e., an *American Voter*-style likes/dislikes battery) asked of the same individuals prior to the comparison exercise.

2 The “Levels of Conceptualization” Redux

It’s difficult to overstate the impact of *The American Voter* (1960) on the study of political behavior in mass-publics. While Campbell et al.’s introduction of the concept of partisanship is perhaps the book’s most celebrated (and cited) contribution, the study was also among the first to advance the idea of political sophistication. Campbell and colleagues coded the open-ended likes and dislikes about the parties and candidates in several years of the National Election Studies Series, sorting the mass public based on its “levels of conceptualization.” That is, the researchers placed individuals into categories—lettered A to D—based on the degree to which they displayed (non-) ideological thinking. These levels were as ranked as follows, from “highest” to “lowest”:

- Level A: Ideology and Near-Ideology
- Level B: Group Benefits
- Level C: The Nature of the Times
- Level D: The Absence of Issue Content

The now familiar conclusion from this exercise was that few Americans during the 1956 presidential election (specifically, just over 10%) could be placed in the highest tier; the plurality of respondents were assigned to Level B (group benefits). A replication of this study by Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) on the 2000 electorate expanded the pool of “ideologues” to 20% (and shrunk the portion of respondents assigned to Level B), but otherwise found support for many of Campbell et al.’s original conclusions, at least when using like/dislike information and similar coding approaches. In the wake of *The American Voter*’s assessment, decades of scholarship would debate the presence and degree of ideological constraint in the American public. Meanwhile, researchers concerned about democratic capacity shifted attention to heuristics (e.g., Simon 1985). At the same time, the levels of conceptualization were criticized on the basis of their difficulty to employ/code, their reliability, and their validity. A prominent critic of the framework has been Smith (e.g., 1989), who long-ago labeled the levels of conceptualization “false measures of ideological sophistication” (1980); he argues that they are not valid measures of how people approach politics, but an artifact

of recall during the survey-response. Lewis-Beck et al.'s (2008) reflection on Smith's concerns is particularly noteworthy, for they suggest that if Smith is right, "any taxonomy constructed from those responses merely reflects the content of recent political discourse and rhetoric, rather than the fundamental structural abstractions underlying individual-level political thinking" (294).

3 "The Levels" as Arguments, not Measures of Sophistication

Few would argue that the American public is characterized predominantly by ideological constraint. And, contemporary debates are far more focused on identity, affective polarization, misinformation, and motivated reasoning than by an emphasis on political sophistication. We take Smith (e.g., 1980; 1989) and others' critiques seriously, but see an opportunity to re-cast rather than cast-off "the levels" approach. That is, if "levels of conceptualization" are not a valid measure of sophistication—but rather, perhaps, a reflection of political discourse—they might be useful for understanding how people actually consume and interact with politics. Thus, we think about "the levels" as not being a hierarchy, but as a typology for approaching political narratives as they enter the everyday, unstructured conversations that occur in individuals' social networks (e.g., Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

In introducing the levels of conceptualization typology, Campbell et al. (1960) begin with the idea of "frames of reference... [used] to assess political events" (216-217). In other words, how do individuals think about political conflict, especially between the two major parties? How an individual thinks about politics and discusses politics need not be identical, but it stands to reason that one's cognitive schema about politics should influence both the arguments one makes and the way one reacts to arguments made by others.

In discussing political arguments here, we share Campbell et al.'s focus on the party system as the central object of interest. This stands in contrast with much of the work on political arguments, which often focuses on factual information (e.g., Bullock et al. 2015; Nyhan and Reifler 2010) and its impact on policy positions (e.g., Druckman and McGrath 2019; Gaines et al. 2007).¹

¹Another strand of the literature focuses on arguments from elites to constituents and the extent to which constituent preferences (Grose, Malhotra and Parks Van Houweling 2015) or identities (Christenson, Lin and Makse 2021) shape reactions to those arguments.

In turn, those studies are centered on information processing more generally and, in particular, concerns over motivated reasoning. That is, “arguments” are treated as conveying information, and a primary concern is whether individuals will update/adjust prior beliefs in response to new information (Taber, Cann and Kucsova 2009). The fact that partisanship so powerfully shapes responses to these more specific patterns of information processing makes it all the more important to understand how people make and process arguments about the fundamental partisan divide in the political system. Some previous work in political science and political psychology has tried to characterize different types of arguments. At the most basic level, research has distinguished between “high quality” and “low quality” arguments (e.g., Petty and Cacioppo 1984), while other research has classified arguments according to the emotions they induce (e.g., Arceneaux 2012) or the scope of conflict they relate to (e.g., Taber et al. 2009).

4 Data and Design

Our data come from a nation-wide, two-wave, online panel study conducted via *Lucid’s* “Fulcrum Exchange.” All participants were U.S. residents over 18 years old; the study was fielded in English. Lucid initially invited 1,500 individuals to take the survey—this included approximately 1,000 self-identified Democrats, as well as a smaller sample of Republicans and Independents. Wave 1 was launched on February 14, 2020 and closed on 2/22/2020 (pre-COVID shutdowns). The authors administered the second wave based upon emails provided by respondents at Wave 1. Wave 2 was conducted after Election Day, launching on Tuesday, November 17th 2020 and closing on November 29, 2020. Nearly 700 individuals completed the follow-up study, for a roughly 45% retention rate over the 8-month span.

To assess individuals’ preferences for the types of arguments comprising the levels of conceptualization framework, we rely on the method of paired comparisons, in which respondents are presented with a choice between two options and asked to indicate which option they prefer. Specifically, each page of the survey presented two options with the following question prompt: “Which of these arguments better captures how you would talk about your support for [PARTY NAME] to a friend?” Response options were tailored to the party for which the respondent had identified

with in a question earlier in the survey; only respondents who expressed a preference for one party completed these questions.

The response set consists of ten arguments: two each from five categories (“types”) that correspond to levels identified in *The American Voter*.² Values arguments refer to abstract ideological positions about the role of government in society. Issues arguments make reference to specific policy positions held by the candidate or party. Groups arguments make identity-based appeals on behalf of a party or candidate. Times arguments speak to a candidate or party’s successes in contemporary events. Personality arguments ascribe character traits to a candidate or party. The specific arguments (“subtypes”) within each type are found in Figure 1.³

The ten arguments are arranged into a total of 40 argument pairs (respondents are never asked to choose from between two arguments from the same type), and each respondent is provided 12 randomly selected pairs. After removing unusable responses, we are left with 566 respondents who completed the paired comparisons battery, and a total of 6,510 paired comparisons.⁴

In addition this baseline, party-centric version, we also randomly assigned some respondents to a candidate-centric condition in which the arguments are posed in relation to the major presidential candidates (Biden and Trump). In Campbell et al. (1960) and subsequent work, levels of conceptualization are constructed based on responses to likes/dislikes questions regarding both presidential candidate and political parties generally. Respondents may, however, find different arguments more persuasive depending on the referent. For example, given Donald Trump’s populist rhetoric, the “everyday Americans” argument may be more appealing to Republicans as a pro-Trump argument than as a generically pro-Republican argument.

²We depart slightly from Campbell et al. (1960) in adding a fifth “issues” category. This is consistent with subsequent studies building on the levels of conceptualization concept, most notably (Nie, Verba and John 1976). We also do not have a category corresponding to the “no content” subtype of Campbell et al.’s “Level D,” as we doubt any respondents would select arguments such as “I prefer the Party because my parents did.”

³Of course, many other specific arguments could be included as exemplars of the five main argument types. We make no claims that these specific arguments are the only suitable ones.

⁴Although all respondents were given 12 paired comparisons, some did not complete all of them, so the total is fewer than the expected 6,792 comparisons.

Figure 1: Wording of Paired Comparison Options

Argument Type	Argument Subtype
Values	<i>Size of government:</i> “I prefer ___ views on the size of government” <i>Inequality:</i> “I prefer ___ views on how the government should address inequality”
Issues	<i>Social issues:</i> “I prefer ___’s positions on social issues (e.g. abortion, gun control)” <i>Economic issues:</i> “I prefer ___’s positions on economic issues (e.g. health care, taxes)”
Groups	<i>People like me:</i> “A ___ administration would be much better for people like me.” <i>Everyday Americans:</i> “___ looks out for everyday Americans and not special interests.”
Times	<i>Economic growth:</i> “The ___ Party is more successful at producing a strong economy.” <i>COVID:</i> “The ___ Party has a better plan for addressing COVID-19.”
Personality	<i>Get things done:</i> “The ___ Party has the kind of candidates who get things done.” <i>Honest and sincere:</i> “The ___ Party produces more sincere and honest leaders.”

5 Measuring Argument Performance

To measure the “performance” of the ten arguments (i.e. their propensity to be chosen by respondents), we estimate Bradley-Terry (hereafter, BT) models (Bradley and Terry 1952), which can be utilized to ascertain the relative persuasiveness of arguments based on paired comparisons (Loewen et al. 2012).

We produce two models for the entire sample of respondents: one with the five broad “types” of arguments and another with the ten “subtypes” that offers additional insight into the performance of specific prompts. Insofar as BT models are GLM models, they generate coefficient estimates for individual arguments, relative to a single baseline argument. The coefficient plots for argument type and argument subtype appear in Figures 2 and 3.

While these estimates can be found in the Appendix (see Table 2), we find it more intuitive to present predicted probabilities derived from these models. Specifically, Table 2 provides the

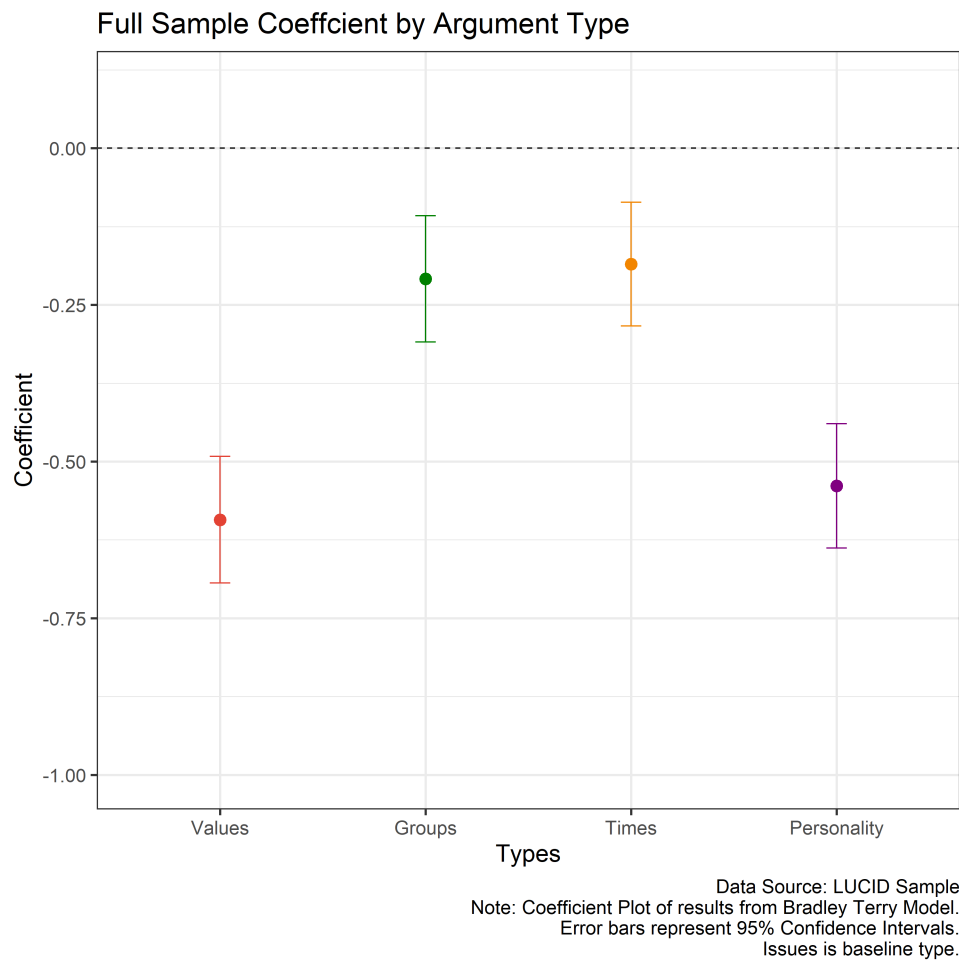


Figure 2: The coefficients for all four conditions are statistically significant.

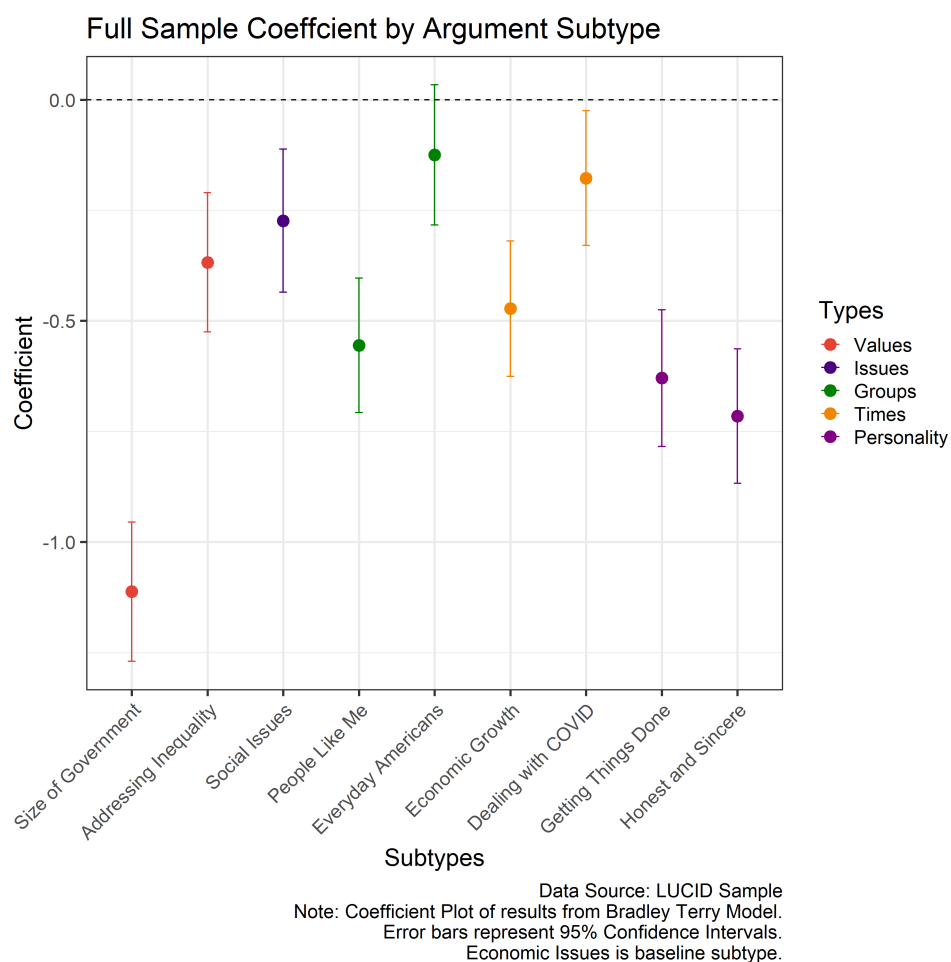


Figure 3: The estimates for most subtypes—within types—are significantly different from one another.

Table 1: Performance of Arguments, by Type and Subtype

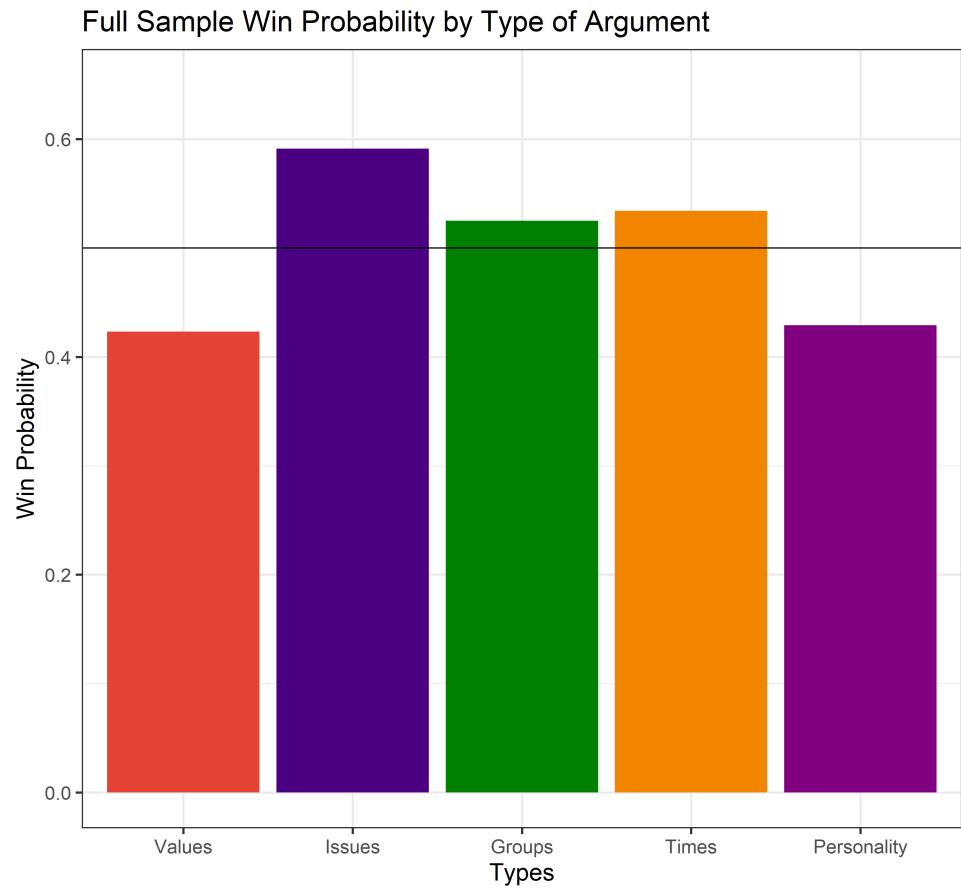
Argument Type	Win Probability	Argument Subtype	Win Probability
Values	42%	Size of Government Inequality	32% 50%
Issues	59%	Social Issues Economic Issues	56% 63%
Groups	53%	People Like Me Everyday Americans	48% 59%
Times	53%	Economic Growth COVID	50% 57%
Personality	43%	Get Things Done Honest and Sincere	44% 42%

predicted probability of a given argument being chosen by the respondent when matched with a randomly chosen second argument, and Figures 4 and 5 visualize this information.

Among the five types, “issues” is clearly the type of argument which performs most strongly, with “values” and “personality” performing the least strongly. Overall, however, what stands out is the relative parity of the five types of arguments, with none commanding more than a 60%, or less than a 40%, win probability. This provides, at least at first glance, a sharp contrast with Campbell et al. (1960) and subsequent studies of the levels of conceptualization which find sizable differences in the number of persons assigned to each levels category.

However, there is also a good deal of variance within argument types. Four of the five categories have differences across subtypes of 7% or larger, with the most dramatic difference occurring between the “size of government” and “inequality” prompts in the “values” type.

Next, we consider how the above results differ by partisanship, and by whether the prompts were presented as traits of political parties or of presidential candidates. In Figures 6 and 7 we illustrate how the performance of each argument type varies by partisanship (the results are similar), and on whether it was presented as an argument in support of a political party or in support of a presidential candidate (corresponding coefficient plots for these analyses appear in the appendix, Figures 8 and 9). In comparing the party and candidate conditions, for four of the five types there was a significant difference. When asked about arguments in favor of their preferred party, re-



Data Source: LUCID Sample
Note: Win probability calculated from Bradley Terry Model.
Depicts the probability a particular respondent chooses that argument type over the others.

Figure 4: Among the five types, “issues” is the type of argument that performs most strongly

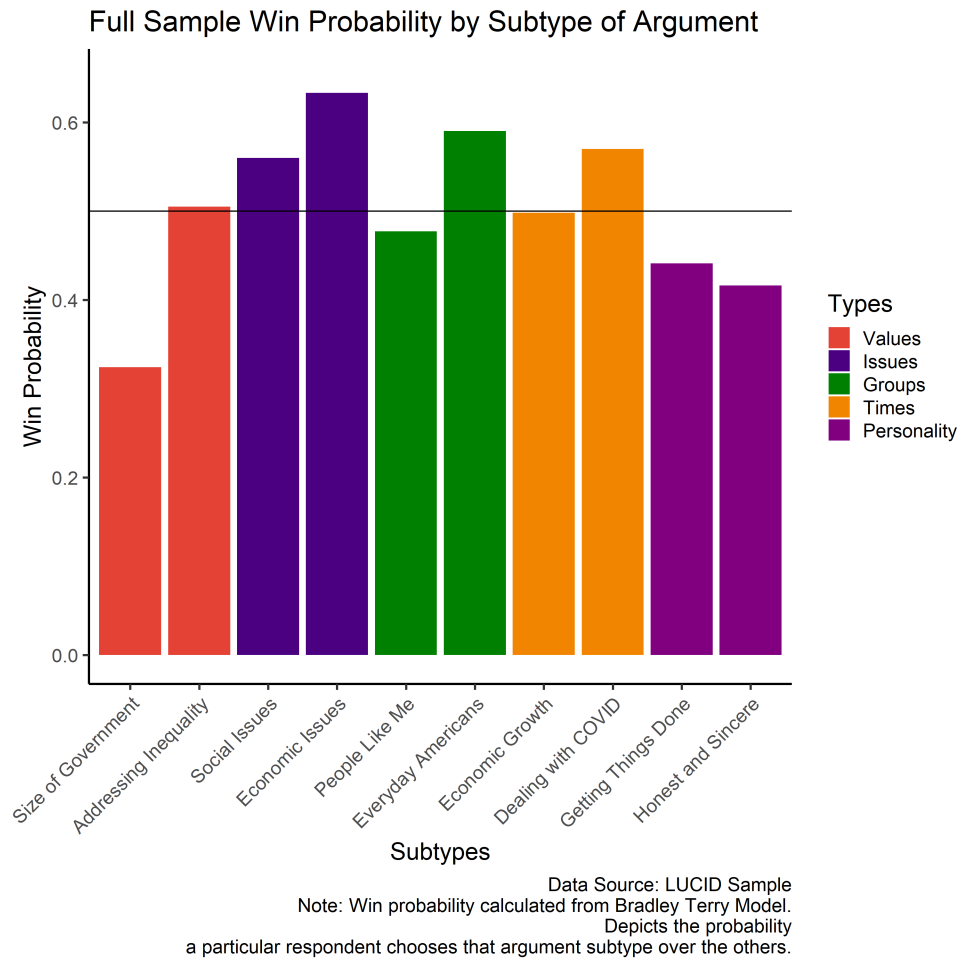


Figure 5: For four of five types, there is a significant difference by subtype

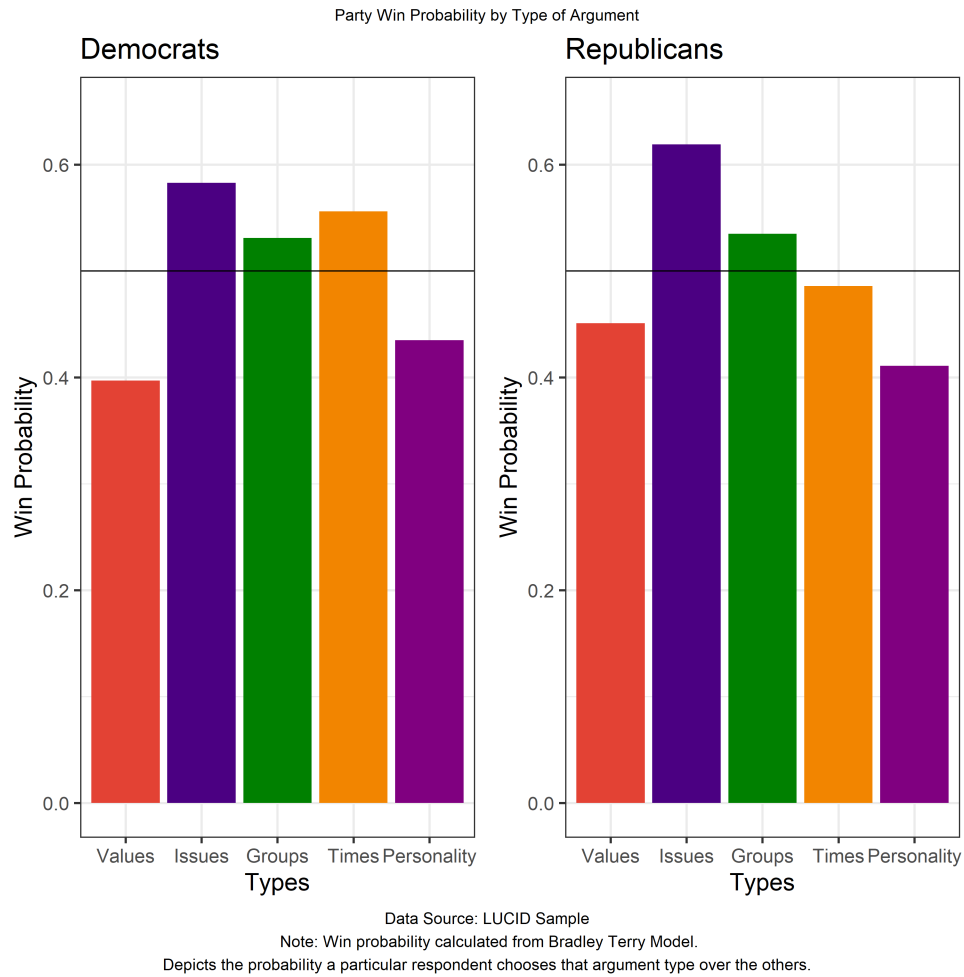


Figure 6: Partisan preferences for types of arguments are similar

spondents were more likely to prefer arguments in the values and issues types, while the times and personality types performed more strongly in the context of supporting a specific presidential candidate.⁵

6 Comparing Open-Ended Responses to Paired Comparisons

Prior to the paired comparison exercise, we asked respondents to provide open-ended likes and dislikes about either the parties or candidates (respondents were randomly assigned to one or the other). Specifically, individuals were presented with the following instructions: “Is there is anything in particular about (candidate/party) that has made you want to support (him/it), and is

⁵While these contrasts are intuitive, they also have an important implication for treating the levels of conceptualization as an ordered scale of sophistication: respondents consistently score “higher” when asked about parties than when asked about candidates.

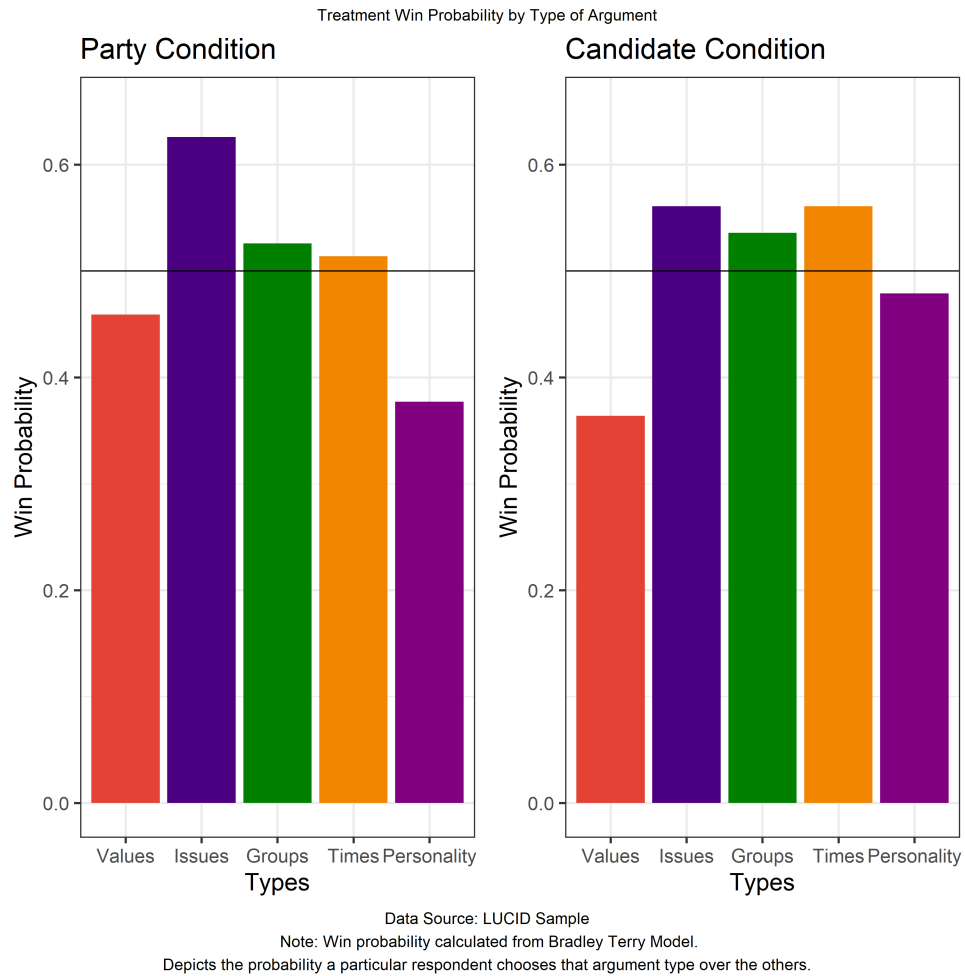


Figure 7: Some differences emerge for values, issues and personality based on condition

there anything that has made you not want to support (him/it)?” Respondents were then given one follow-up request (on a subsequent page), urging them to elaborate/list additional considerations: “Is there anything else you can think of?”

For now we focus on individuals assigned to the party condition. While many respondents wrote *something* in this section of the survey, only about 1/2 (n=156) assigned to these questions provided any kind of meaningful answers.⁶ Two of the authors independently coded the open-ended responses for the valid responses, recording the number of comments judged to be about values, issues, groups, “the times,” and personality, respectively.⁷ The coders were quite close in terms of their overall counts of comments (on average, just over 1 comment off one another), as well as in their total within categories (<1 comment off, on average, for values, issues, and groups; just ≥ 1 for “the times” and personality). The coders then discussed all discrepancies, producing the reconciled version of the coded data used for analysis. The mean number of total statements for respondents was 5.6. Within categories, the average number of statements was highest for “the times” (mean=1.5), followed by issues (mean=1.36), values and personality (mean=1.07 for each), and groups (mean=.70).

To assess the extent to which responses to our paired comparison prompts and *The American Voter’s* likes/dislikes battery are tapping into a common set of preferences, we reorganize these comment counts to take a similar form to the paired comparisons data. That is, for both forms of data, we create ten observations per respondent: one for each pair of argument types. For example, in the values-issues pairing, “values” would be the first argument and “issues” would be the second argument. Each pair of arguments is then coded using values of: 1, 0, -1 where a “1” indicates a preference for the first type of argument, a “-1” indicates a preference for the second type, and a “0” indicates a “tie.”

In the paired comparisons data, preference is determined by the argument selected in match-ups between the types of arguments; a tie would occur if the respondent faced two values-issues choices

⁶The survey was extensive, and we attribute the drop-off in this exercise more to the length of the survey than anything else.

⁷The authors referred to the coding explanations in *The American Voter* for guidance.

and selected one type on one occasion and the other on the second occasion. In the open-ended response data, preference is determined by counting the number of comments in each category; if a person provided more “values” comments than “issues” comments, they were treated as preferring values arguments.

After excluding missing observations (where a respondent never faced a choice between a given pair of argument types in the paired comparison data), we are left with 1,188 observations. As a simple test of these two measures’ comparability, we calculate the correlation between the two, which is statistically significant, but a very weak $r = 0.08$. (The Spearman rank-order correlation is also 0.08.) Moreover, 28% of argument-pair scores indicate one preference based on the paired comparisons data and the opposite preference based on the open-ended response data.

7 Discussion

The way respondents offer arguments in an open-ended format is very dissimilar to their preferences for arguments as revealed in a question that explicitly asks them to reflect on the use of arguments in everyday conversation. We are not arguing, at least on this basis alone, that one of these approaches is better, or that the likes/dislikes battery does not reveal anything about individuals’ cognitive approach to understanding politics. We would argue, however, that the traditional use of the levels of conceptualization does not necessarily reflect how people discuss politics outside the survey research context. For example, a person might respond to an interviewer in terms of top-of-mind considerations such as policy positions and current events, while in everyday conversation, the same person might be likely to deploy, or be more receptive to, arguments regarding group identities.

8 Conclusion

Campbell et al.’s “levels of conceptualization” organize the mass public into a hierarchy. Others have noted the problems with their exercise, as well as with the conventional interpretation of their exercise. As we discussed previously, we largely second those critiques, though we caution scholars not to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” That is, while the levels would seem

to be a dubious approach to classifying political sophistication, the idea of classifying how the public engages politics in their daily lives is a worthwhile—and important— goal. Re-purposing Campbell et al.’s levels into (non-hierarchical) types of arguments revealed interesting patterns across respondents. And, a comparison with the more familiar, open-ended responses—within individuals—suggests that what people say about what they like/dislike about the parties when prompted likely has little relationship to the ways they are more/less likely to engage others about politics.

More work is clearly needed to elucidate the differences between typical like/dislike batteries and the paired comparison approach that we have introduced here. However, we’d argue that thinking in terms of arguments shows promise, and may help scholars better understand what actually matters when it comes to mass-elite interactions, and political reasoning and behavior more broadly.

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Appendix

Table 2: Bradley-Terry Model Estimates

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	All Respondents	Candidate Condition	Party Condition
Values	-0.59 (0.05)**	-0.65 (0.07)**	-0.55 (0.07)**
Groups	-0.21 (0.05)**	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.34 (0.07)**
Times	-0.19 (0.05)**	0.00 (0.07)	-0.36 (0.07)**
Personality	-0.54 (0.05)**	-0.27 (0.07)**	-0.82 (0.07)**
N	4,289	2,113	2,176
Log Likelihood	-3744.87	-1841.62	-1875.11

Notes: # $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Baseline category is “Issues”. Bradley-Terry Models do not have a constant term.

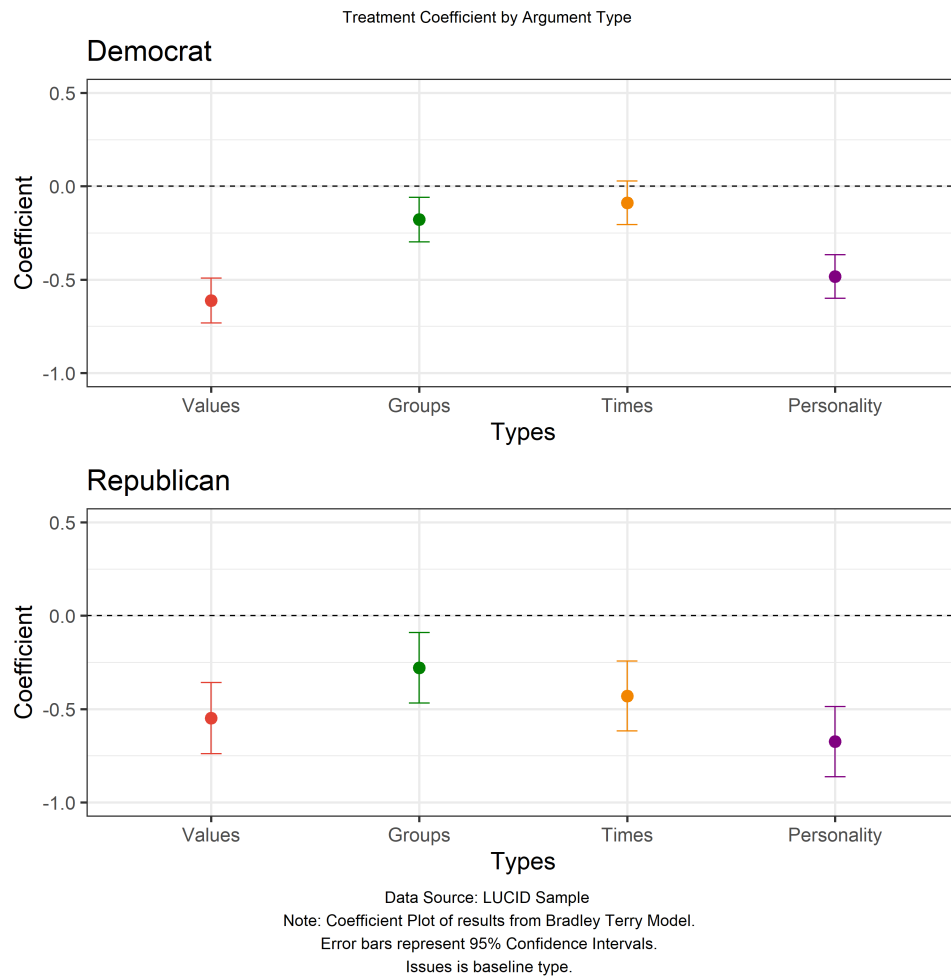


Figure 8: The estimates are similar for Republicans and Democrats.

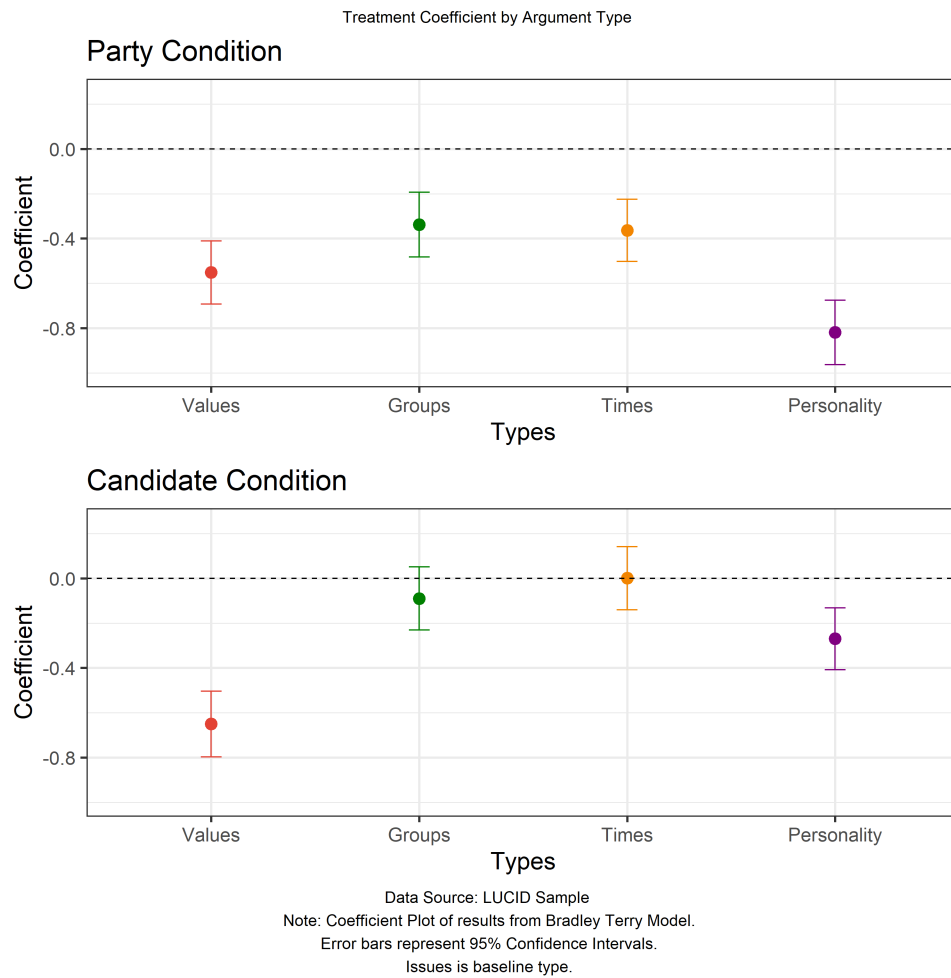


Figure 9: All types are significant in the party condition.