POLITICAL BELIEF NETWORKS:

Socio-Cognitive Heterogeneity in American Public Opinion. *

Delia Baldassarri† Amir Goldberg‡

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Abstract

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

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

Introduction

Although trends in partisanship and public opinion polarization have been heavily debated in recent years, scholars have rarely focused on the growing disconnect between parties' ideological stands and the political preferences of a consistent part of American citizens. This article shows that almost a third of the American population holds a combination of political preferences that is at odds with the current political offering, and we investigate how these people, who are economically liberal and morally conservative, or *vice versa*, go about defining their political allegiances in an era of increased partisan divisions.

American politics over the last four decades has been characterized by increased partisanship and growing polarization in Congress, campaigns and the political debate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Bartels 2000; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). This has led to stronger partisan alignment in public opinion: voters' preferences on a large set of political issues have become increasingly consistent with their party identification (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Carmines and Wagner 2006; Leege, Wald, Krueger, and Mueller 2002). Although visible in most issue domains, this trend has been particularly prominent in relation to moral (aka social or cultural) issues.[1] A widely accepted argument in the literature on partisan alignment is that party polarization has made it *easier* for voters to identify with a party because parties have become more distinguishable on a broad set of issues (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009). But there are good reasons to believe that growing divisions in parties' stances on moral, economic, and civil rights issues have also made it *more difficult* for certain 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 white working-class devout churchgoer torn between his moral conservatism and redistributive economic interests. If

[1] Whereas 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%.

economic issues had exclusive hold over voters' political orientations, both would find it easy to identify with either the Democratic or Republican party. But if topics such as same-sex unions and abortion 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 offering. 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 party's positions on *all* dimensions may find it harder to define their political allegiance.

In the light of the increased polarization and growing importance of moral issues in American politics, scholars of public opinion have recurrently addressed two main questions: whether American voters have become more polarized, and whether moral issues have become more important than economic issues in determining partisanship and voting choice. Our unique contribution to this debate is predicated on the idea that the answer to both questions depends on whether individuals' political preferences on an array of economic, civil rights, and moral issues are ideologically compatible with one another. We make three main arguments. First, we posit that individuals differ qualitatively, and systematically, in the ways in which they understand the political debate and correspondingly structure their political preferences (Analysis I). Rather than thinking about voters exclusively in terms of the liberal-conservative polarity we explore the possibility that there exists heterogeneity in the ways in which they organize their political preferences. Second, we argue that sociodemographic characteristics - particularly class and religiosity - account for this divergence in political belief systems (Analysis II). Finally, we address the above mentioned questions and 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 (Analysis III).

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 (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.[2] Our analysis demonstrates that the American public is comprised of three groups, each characterized by a different understanding of the political debate: *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. First, 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 but secular' or 'poor but 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.

Second, we find that different voter types responded differently to growing partisan polarization: whereas Ideologues became more ideologically consistent in their opinions on economic and moral issues, Alternatives' positions on both dimensions became increasingly

[2] In 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.

oppositional to one another.

Finally, we find that moral issues carried significant weight among Alternatives already in the 1980s, while they became relevant for all voters, along with civil rights and foreign policy issues, only since the 1990s. Moreover, 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 1990s. Starting with Clinton's election in 1992 - remembered, amongst other things, for 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. It has also made it harder for many voters to find a party that would match their political preferences. In fact, as a consequence of the increased partisan polarization, Alternatives have grown increasingly apart from the political agenda of both parties, while Ideologues have gone through a process of issue alignment. In the aggregate, both trends offset one another, and were therefore not visible to scholars adopting more conventional analytical approaches. Moreover, our findings suggest that cross-pressured voters' political behaviors cannot be understood as the overarching predominance of one ideological dimension over the other. Rather, whereas some resolve this tension in favor of their economic orientations, others' partisan identifications are couched in their moral beliefs. [3]

[3] Our 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 1960s 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 1980s to the Christian Coalition of the 1990s, 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.[4]

Coincidentally, American politics was also characterized by greater partisanship and polarization in Congress, campaigns and the political debate (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Bartels 2000; Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Congressmen, candidates and political activists did not only become more extreme in their partisan views, they also consolidated their 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 of public opinion have debated how these changes map into the political preferences of American voters, namely asking whether moral issues have supplanted class politics and whether public opinion has become more polarized.

[4] The 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?

Lay observers have often argued that the intensification of morality-based politics in the last three decades constitutes a sea-change in American politics, contending that religious divisions have emerged as the most prominent social cleavage, pitting traditionalists against secularists and progressives in an all-out "culture war" (?). 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. For instance, in *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), 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 to vote for the Republican party.

The academic debate has dealt with similar issues, although coming to quite diverse conclusions. In a strong rebuttal of Frank's argument, Larry Bartels found that less affluent voters attach less weight to social issues than economic issues (2006). Namely, contrary to Frank's assertions, Bartels showed that low-income white voters "had not become less Democratic in their voting behavior or less conservative in their views about economic or social issues. Nor could (he) find any evidence that they cared more about social and cultural issues than about bread-and-butter economic issues" (p. 204). Even fervent churchgoers, although slightly more sensitive to moral issues than their secular counterpart, continue to place more emphasis on their economic interest than their moral concerns (Bartels 2008, p. 90-93).[5]

[5] Bartels concluded that "the overall decline in Democratic support among voters in Franks white working

Support for these findings comes from a few other studies. In a thorough test of the relative weight of economic and moral dimensions, Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder (2006) conclude that "economic issues have much more weight in voters' minds than moral issues" and "the weight of moral issues does not vary across social groups: even Protestant Evangelicals and rural voters place more emphasis on economic than moral issues" (p. 99). Greeley and Hout, in *The Truth About Conservative Christians* (2006), argue 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), and that the opinion gap between Conservative and Mainline Protestants is very small. Moreover, they show that poor Protestants, like poor people in general, are much less likely to vote Republican than rich Protestants do. Along similar lines, Layman and Green (2006) conclude "that the 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" (p. 61). Finally, there is ample evidence that social class, measured either as income or education, remains a significant determinant of political partisanship (Evans 2000; Fischer and Mattson 2009; Hout, Brooks and Manza 1995; McVeigh and Sobolewski 2007).

In sum, aggregate public opinion analyses contradict the popular view of the dominant role of moral issues in determining partisanship and voting choice, and minimize the role of religiosity, while confirming the persistent relevance of economic issues and the class cleavage. However, as we will discuss later, scholars have so far ignored the heterogeneity of voters' belief systems and how these belief systems mediate the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and political preferences, on the one hand, and partisanship, on the other.

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class over the past half-century is entirely attributable to the demise of the Solid South as a bastion of Democratic allegiance" (Bartels 2006, p. 211).

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

Moving away from the generic, although suggestive, narrative of cultural wars, scholars have also provided a more nuanced view of the extent and nature of the divisions in American politics. As a consequence of the increased polarization between parties, political activists, and in Congress, American public opinion has undergone a process of partisan alignment in recent decades, whereby voters' political preferences have become more consistent with their partisan identities. Since parties are more polarized, they are also better at sorting individuals along ideological lines. Although this has occurred on all issue domains, partisan alignment is particularly visible on moral issues (Baldassarri & Gelmann 2008, Bafumi & Shapiro 2009, Hetherington 2001, Levendusky 2009).

A widely accepted argument stemming from this literature is that party polarization has made it easier for voters to identify with a party because parties have become more distinguishable on a broad set of issues. This position, however, implies that voters do share party positions on all those issues, and therefore that partisan alignment has been accompanied by a process of issue alignment, according to which citizens have become more coherent in organizing their preferences on diverse types of issues. In contrast, analyses of aggregate trends suggest that there is no evidence for such a process in the population as a whole: the constraint between moral, economic, civil rights and foreign policy issues has remained very low over the last forty years (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; DiMaggio et al. 1996; Evans 2003; Davis and Robinson 1996; see also Layman and Carsey 2002).[6] In a context in which parties have clearly defined, alternative positions on multiple issue dimensions, voters who do not fully subscribe to party's positions on *all* dimensions may find it harder to define their political allegiance. How can a low-income, highly religious African-American voter reconcile liberal tendencies on economic redistribution and civil rights with moral conservatism? Similarly, will a wealthy, non-religious voter identify with the Republican party for its economic policies, or with the Democratic party's moral progressivism?

[6] Increased 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 and Gelman 2008).

Political commentators have long identified such cross-pressured constituencies as potential game-changers – aka swing voters. For instance, Reagan success in the 1980s was, at least in part, due to his capacity to appeal to low-income voters on moral grounds. These working class social conservatives became later know as Reagan Democrats. While, 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. Eight years later, the working-class 'NASCAR dads,' with their presumably traditionalist world views, captured the imagination of party strategists.[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, i.e., economic issues, the tradeoff faced by these voters remained implicit. However, when parties started to also differentiate along the moral issues dimension, voters caught at the intersection of conflicting economic interests and moral preferences were left without a natural partisan home. While the alignment of moral and economic issues has made it easier for those voters whose opinions on both dimension are consonant with one another to identify with either party – leading to greater party sorting – it has equally made it more difficult for

[7] A similar tension underpin several other 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 define the generation of educated young Republicans who "believe we need a hard-ass foreign policy and are extremely skeptical of political correctness" but also are socially liberal on many issues (Sullivan 2001). Or the 'Wired workers', information workers in the computer, Internet and communications fields, that have profited from the new economy and want it to grow. They tend to be socially liberal on issues ranging from gun control, global warming, civil rights and abortion, but are fiscally conservative, and favor tax cuts, school vouchers and investing Social Security trust funds in the market.

voters whose opinions are ideologically incongruent to do the same. This paper focus on the sociodemographic background and political leaning of these cross-pressured voters, distinguishing them from those voters whose political beliefs are in line with the party offering and dominant political discourse. We expect that different sociodemographic dimensions correlate differently with ideology and partisan identification for cross-pressured than for mainstream voters. To pursue this possibility, we adopt an analytical strategy that differ from most scholarship.

Traditionally, scholars 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, traditional 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 in the lower rungs of the income ladder? Being morally conservative may have a certain effect on voting patterns for those people who are also conservative on economic and civil rights issues, and a different effect for those people who are instead liberal on other issue domains. This observation becomes particularly relevant in analyzing an historical period, such as the last thirty years of American politics, in which the political offering has indeed become more distinct along multiple issue domains.

Morris 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" (p. 179). 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. 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 (1993), we posit that voters rely on *diverse* 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 1993, 207). His seminal research on this topic as well as the work of numerous scholars following him, demonstrates that a limited proportion of the public, often called "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]

Despite its immense influence, most empirical analyses of public opinion do not fully capture Converse's idea of functional interdependence between attitudes: they either focus on individual attitudes, or model 'constraint' using summary indices (i.e., factor scores) or

[8] According 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 1993; 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 Kinder xxx; Popkin 1991, Popkin & Dimock 1999, but see Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder (2006) for a different view).

dyadic relationships between variables (i.e., correlation coefficients). In addition, analyses of constraint rely, in practice, on the assumption that there is a single way of structuring political views, namely the conventional opposition between liberal and conservative positions across a spectrum of political issues. Individuals who are liberal on economic issues, are also expected to be liberal on civil rights and moral issues, and vice-versa. Existing analytical strategies therefore cannot account for the multiplicity of political logics that, we argue, underlies Americans understandings of politics.

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). People may frame their understanding of politics in similar terms, even if they take different substantive positions. Conservative and liberal pundits such as Rush Limbaugh or Jon Stewart, for example, employ very similar logics in conceptualizing the political debate in the U.S., despite their vehement disagreements. Subscribing to the same belief system therefore does not imply having identical attitudes, but rather being in agreement on which opinions go with one another. Empirically, this implies focusing on the *relationships* between political preferences, rather than examining preferences discretely (Goldberg 2011, DiMaggio 1997, DiMaggio 2010). Following Converse we therefore think of a belief systems as a network of interconnected political attitudes.

Mainstream political discourse construes political issues almost exclusively through the conventional liberal-conservative opposition.[9] And while there has been a wide array of studies suggesting that people employ different political rationales, scholarly work often accepts, by default, this standard political division. Thus, those who seem to diverge from the mainstream are often labeled as simply less sophisticated in their ability to reason po-

[9]The 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.

litically (Converse 1993). [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 themselves as conservative to be against them. Figure 1 plots these respondents on a stylized belief space. Respondents plotted in red, 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 blue, 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.

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 of multiple belief systems.[11] To explore this possibility, we use Relational Class Analysis (RCA, Goldberg 2011). RCA divides a sample of respondents into groups that are undergirded by different belief networks, in other words, that exhibit distinctive patterns of relationships between beliefs. Members of the same group do not necessarily hold the same

[10] An 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 (**?**, 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' level of education and 'political sophistication.'

[11] Our goal is to identify alternative political logics that are systematic, not to capture individual idiosyncrasies. We identify political *Weltanschauungs* that are shared by different social groups and that are shaped by the political offer and macro-institutional arrangements (Baldassarri & Schadee 2006, Lupia, McCubbins & Popkin 2000, Kuklinski 2001).

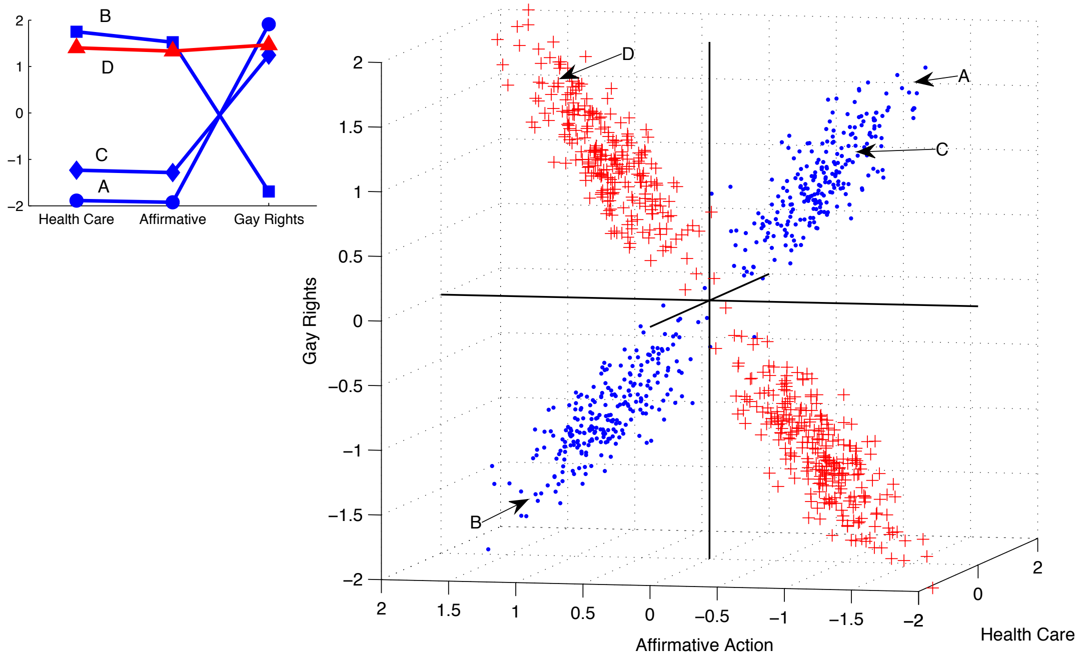


Figure 1: Hypothetical Belief Space. Respondents plotted in red and marked with a plus sign (i.e., subject D) organize their preferences according to the liberal-conservative divide on all three policy issues, while respondents plotted in blue and marked by a dot (i.e., A, B, and C) structure their preferences 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.

opinions, however. For example, respondents A and B in Figure 1 express opposing opinions on all three issues. Nevertheless, they both exhibit the same pattern of interdependences between opinions, suggesting that they organize their beliefs using the same rationale, even if deployed in opposite directions. By examining patterns of responses in the aggregate, RCA distinguishes between different groups of respondents that exhibit distinctive patterns of opinions, such as the two groups depicted in Figure 1.

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.

Our analytical strategy is particularly suited for detecting individual heterogeneity in the composition of political preferences while overcoming these limitations. It both inductively identifies the organization of coexisting political belief systems, and assigns respondents to the resulting groups, without relying on assumptions 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 the respondents in the aggregate to group variables together (as is the case with factor analysis), or look for groups of individuals who provided substantively similar responses, while overlooking the relationships between these responses. Neither technique examines intra-variable and intra-respondent variability simultaneously as RCA does.

We achieve this goal in three steps: first, we generate a matrix of relational similarity between respondents, which measures the extent to which each pair of respondents follows an identical pattern of associations between responses. Second, using a spectral partitioning method, we divide this matrix into groups of people identified by similar belief systems. Third, for each of the groups identified, we generate an issue-by-issue correlation matrix to illustrate the different ways in which networks of beliefs are organized. For more information on the method see Supporting Information 2 (SI2) and Goldberg (2011).

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 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 Supporting Information 1 (SI1).

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 directionality 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

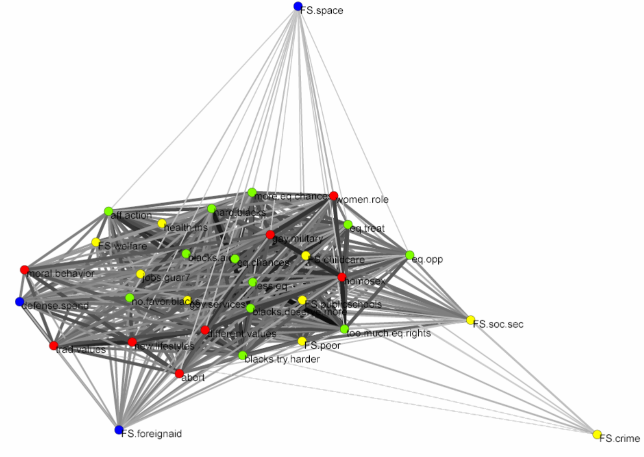
[12] Unfortunately, substantial changes in the survey instrument made it impossible to replicate the analysis for 2008. Moreover, years 1990, 1998, and 2002 had too many missing answers to be included. See supporting materials for a detailed description of the data included in the analysis.

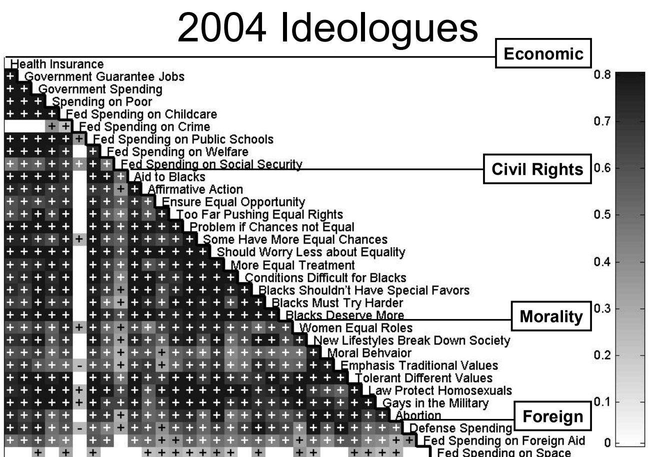
[13] We considered all the attitude questions that were asked at least three times and received a sufficient number of responses (cfr. Baldassarri & Gelmann 2008 for a discussion of temporal comparability problems).

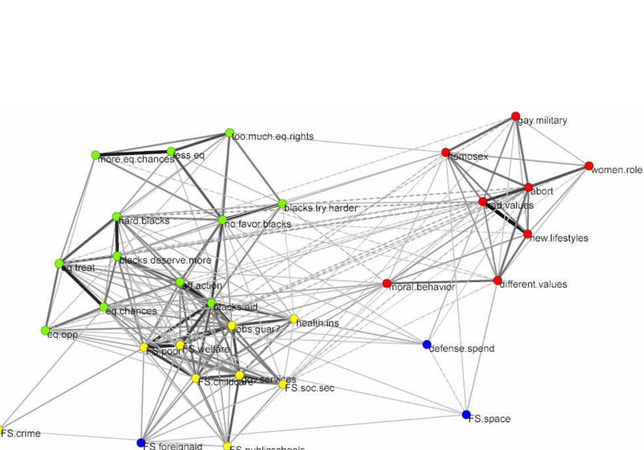
structures of the three political belief systems: each node corresponds to a political attitude (nodes are color-coded by issue domain), and we draw edges connecting political attitudes when correlation coefficients are statistically significant (at $\alpha = 0.05$). Solid lines represent positive correlations, and dashed lines negative correlations. Line shades and widths are proportional to the strength of the correlation.[14]

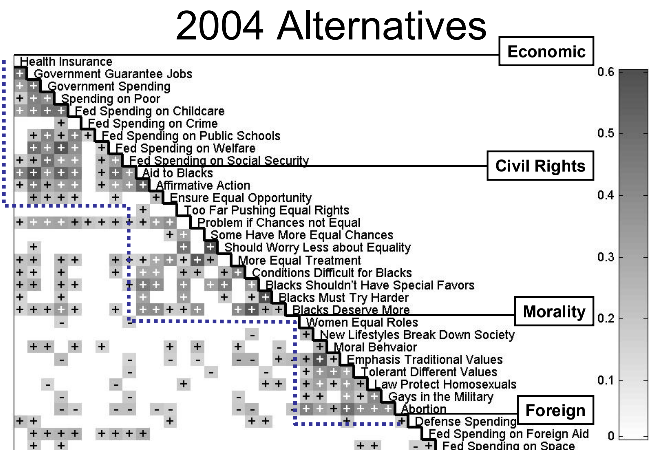
Members of the first group exhibit a densely interconnected belief network. Following Converse, we call them *Ideologues*. Ideologues organize their political attitudes according to the liberal-conservative ideological continuum and show very high levels of constraint among issues across all four issue domains. Conversely, members of the second group – the *Alternatives* – do not fully adopt the liberal-conservative framework. Their position on economic (yellow nodes) and civil rights issues (green nodes) is dissociated from their preferences on moral issues (red nodes). As the negative correlations suggest, in 2004, Alternatives tend to be morally conservative and socially liberal, or vice versa (i.e., a member of this group who is pro-choice is likely to oppose economic redistribution and the promotion of civil rights). 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

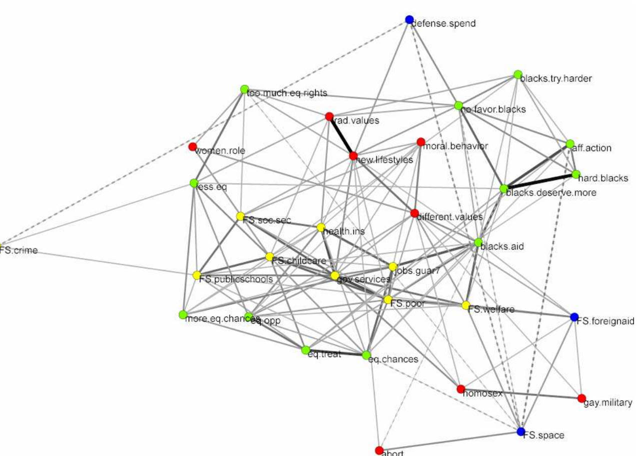
[14]All the diagrams are standardized such that the widths and shades of all the edges/cells on the graphs/matrices correspond to the exact same levels. Networks are spatially drawn using the Furchtman-Reingold algorithm so that distances between nodes inversely correspond to the edge weights connecting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











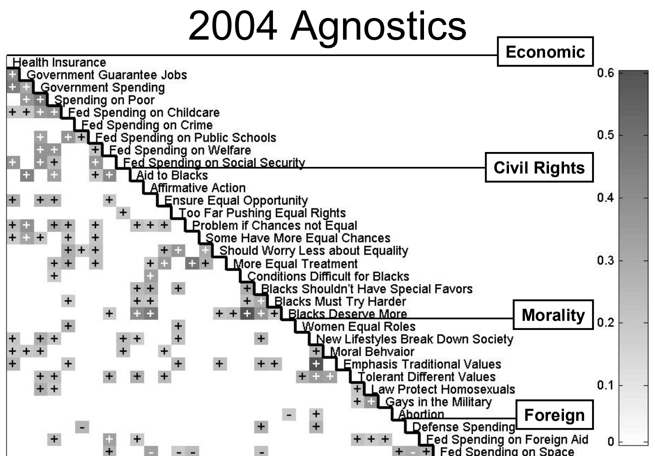


Figure 2: Belief Networks and Correlation Matrices.

mostly focuses on the other two, more clearly structured, groups.

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. 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]

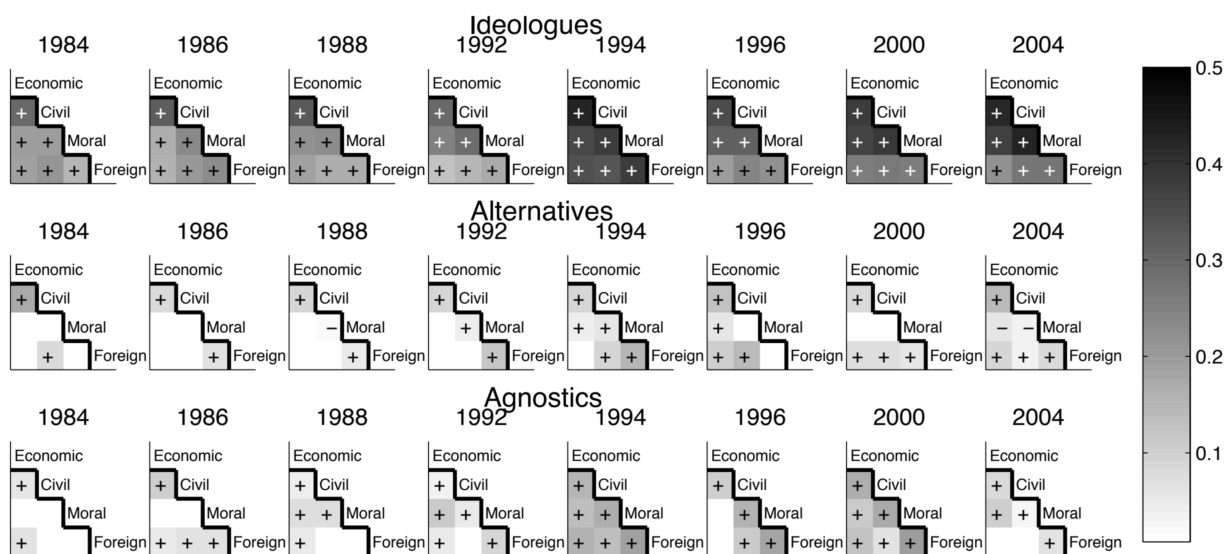


Figure 3: Time Consistency: Correlation Matrices by Group over Time. Each cell represents the average correlation between all pairs of variables in the two issue domains the cell corresponds to. Each matrix corresponds to a particular survey year in one of the three RCA groups. Cell shades correspond 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

[15]For 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 SI2.

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 SI4 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 economic and civil rights variables was 0.43. Over the entire period, the Ideologue group is characterized by extremely high correlation coefficients for all issue domain pairs.

The Alternative group presents a substantial dissociation between economic and civil rights issues, on the one hand, and moral issues, on the other. With the exception of the period 1992-1996, in all years the relationship between moral and economic or civil rights issues is insignificant or even negative, as shown previously for 2004. Further visual inspections of the belief networks, as well as a factor analysis, confirm the tendency among Alternatives to decouple their preferences on moral issues from their opinion on other issues. Throughout the period under study, and particularly in 1994 and 1996, opinions on moral issues are far apart from those on economic and civil rights issues, even when correlations between them are significantly positive. (Belief network graphs are available from the authors, while results from factor analysis are reported in SI3). Finally, in all years, the Agnostic group is a pale version of the Ideologue group exhibiting comparatively weak positive, or insignificant, correlations between issue domains.

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

The ways in which people organize their belief systems is rooted in their socio-demographic profiles. Scholars have long examined how different social attributes such as class, religion and racial identity are related to political preferences. Yet they have mostly considered these relationships in isolation, focusing on single variables, and without considering the in-

terdependence of political attitudes. Though informative, this strategy may be misleading: if different people organize their political beliefs in different ways, the relationship between sociodemographic variables and political attitudes might vary across cognitive frameworks. We pursue this possibility by examining the sociodemographic organization of the belief space. First, we study whether the relationship between various sociodemographic characteristics and issue preferences vary across belief systems. Second, we model the likelihood of belonging to either the Ideologues or Alternatives group as a function of one's sociodemographic profile.

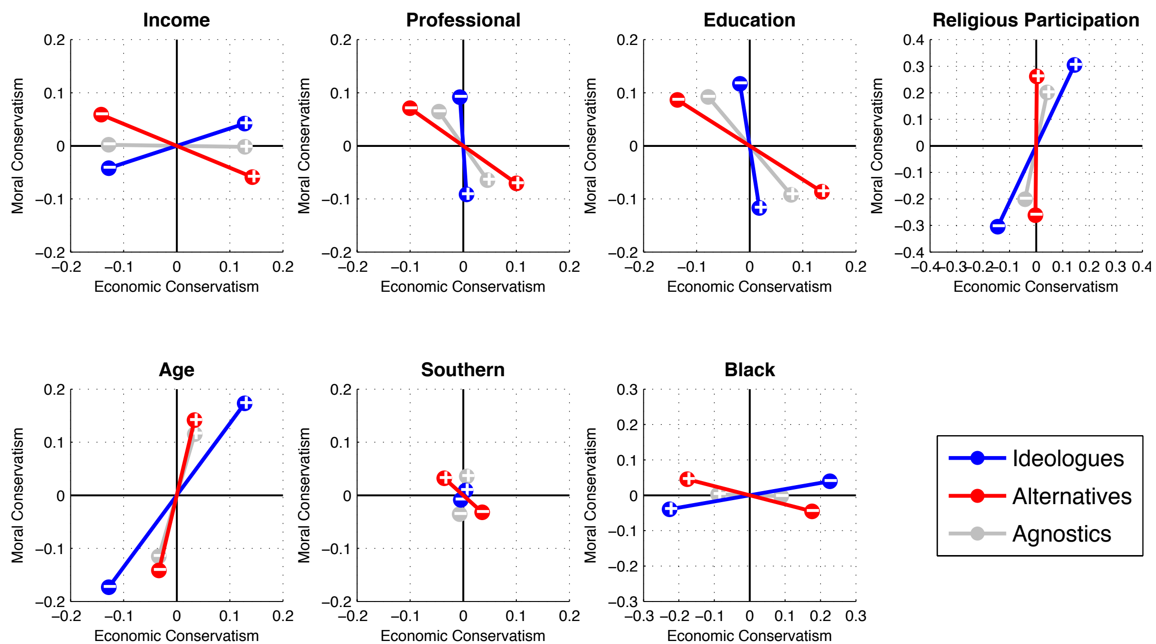


Figure 4: Belief Spaces. Each of the seven diagrams in this figure represents the mapping of one sociodemographic attribute onto a bi-dimensional belief space (the economic dimension on the X axis, the moral dimension on the Y axis). For each group we draw a line in this space. The coordinates that define 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 4 visualizes a bi-dimensional 'belief space' with the the economic dimension on

the X axis, the moral dimension on the Y axis.[16] Each panel represents the relationship between one sociodemographic variable and political preference 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 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 blue line. In the Alternative group (red line), high income is similarly correlated with economic conservatism, but is negatively correlated with moral conservatism. In the Agnostic group (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

[16] On 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.

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 Ideological peers, economically conservative, but unlike them 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.[17] Yet examined separately, each group exhibits a different relationship between income and positions on morality. 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

[17]This result is consistent whether Agnostics are included or excluded from the sample.

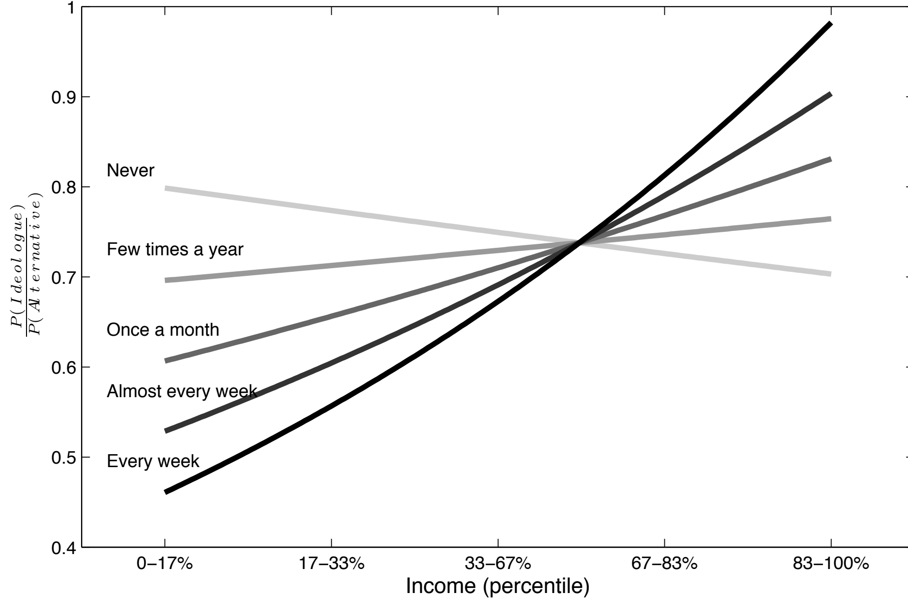


Figure 5: Multinomial Logistic Regression for Group Membership: Plot of the interaction between Income and Religious Attendance. This diagram plots the odds ratio of being assigned to the Ideologue group, compared to being assigned to the Alternative group, as a function of an interaction between income and religious participation, as modeled by a multinomial logistic regression. The data are pooled across the twenty year period. The model is described by the following formula: $log(\frac{P(RCA)=I}{P(RCA)=A}) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 * income + \alpha_2 * religious + \alpha_3 * (income * religious) + \beta^T X + \epsilon$

where X represents control variables (sociodemographic and year dummies, see Supporting Materials), 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.

to the Alternative group) as a function of an interaction between income and religious attendance. Figure 5 plots this odds ratio as modeled by a multinomial logistic regression (cfr. caption 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 & 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 understanding 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 ideological alignment of the parties? 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 Alternatives compared to the Ideologues and Agnostic groups.

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 6 plots trends in issues 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.

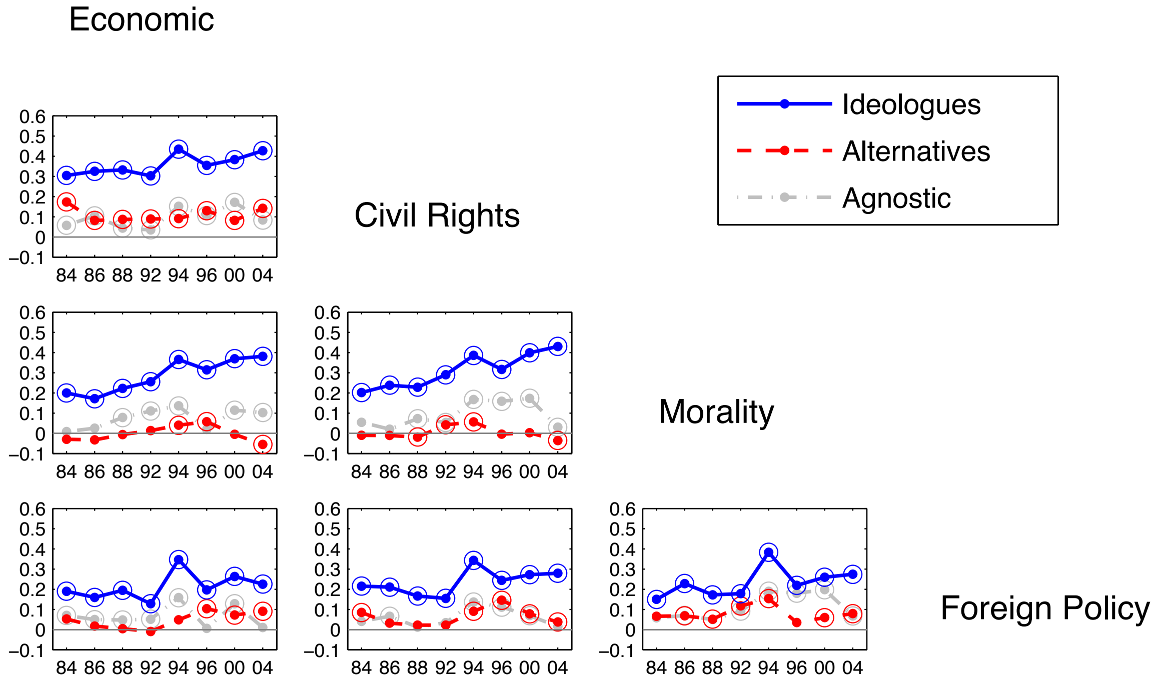


Figure 6: Trends in Pair Correlations between Issue Domains by Group. Each figure plots the average correlation between all pairs of issues in two given issue domains over the twenty-year period. The uppermost figure, for example, plots the average correlations between economic and civil rights issues. A circle indicates that the average correlation is statistically different from zero at the α=0.05 level.

In the 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 modeled respondents' party self-identification (on a seven-point scale) as a function of their positions on each of the four issue domains. We construct issue domain scales by standardizing 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 1990s, it was not until the beginning of that decade that moral issues became a central feature of public political debate (Fiorina et al. 2011). The early 1990s 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. [18] Second, as Figure 6 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.

As the results reported in Figure 7 demonstrate, economic concerns remained central for voters' partisan identification throughout the twenty year period. Starting in 1990, the three other issue domains significantly increased in importance for all Americans.[19] 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 for voters, economic concerns remain the mainstay of political partisanship (Bartels 2006, Ansolabehere, Rodden & Snyder 2006).[20] However, our results also indicate that whereas moral issues began capturing the attention of Ideologues only during the 1990s, they carried significant weight for Alternatives as early as the 1980s. Presumably,

[18]The 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 1990s (Gross, Medvetz & Russell 2011).

[19]Note 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.

[20]We 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.

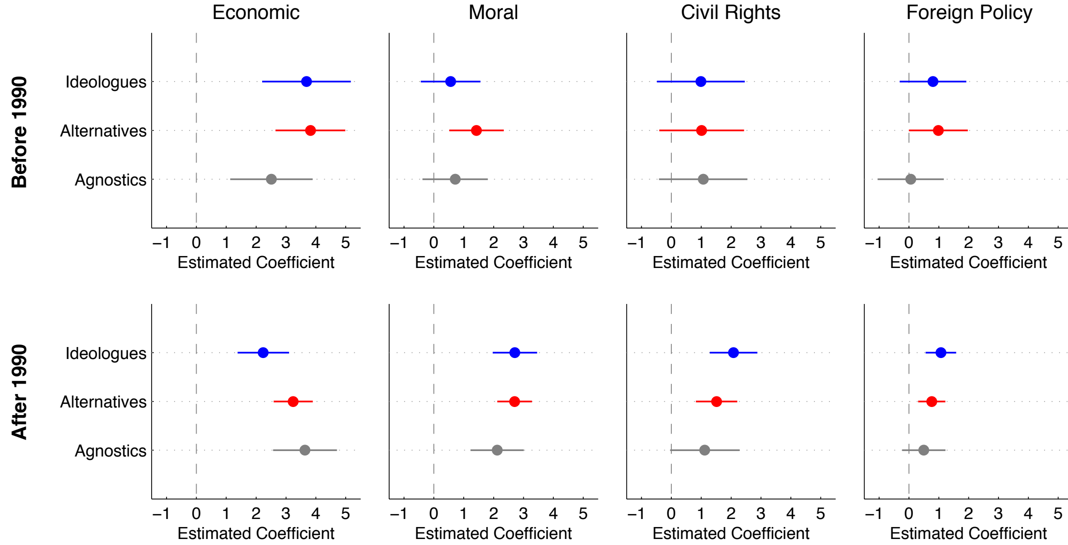


Figure 7: OLS Regression for Party identification (party self-identification on a 7-point scale, ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican): Plot of the estimated coefficients and 95% CI for economic, civil rights, moral and foreign policy issues for each of the RCA groups. Panel A reports results for the 1980s, Panel B for the 1990s and early 2000s. The model controls for the usual set of sociodemographic variables. The data are fitted using the following model: $PartyIdent = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 * Economic * R + \alpha_2 * Moral * R + \alpha_3 * CivilRights * R + \alpha_4 * ForeignPolicy * R + \beta_1^T * R * X + \beta_2^T Z + \epsilon$ where X represents sociodemographic variables and Z year dummies (see SI), and α and β are regression coefficients. R represents interaction terms that allow effects to vary by RCA group.

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 this mutual reinforcement or attenuation into account (Fiorina et al. 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).[21] 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 Fig. 8. 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 1980s, 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 identifi-

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

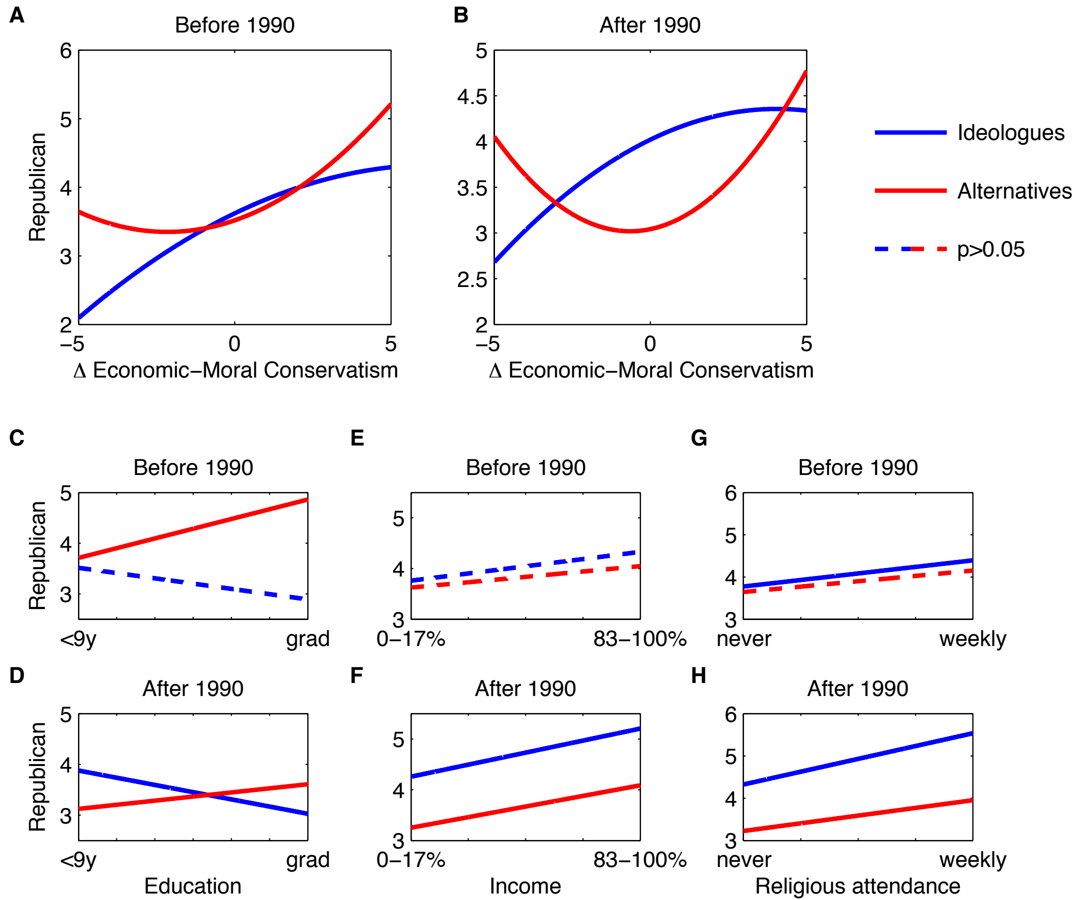


Figure 8: Party Identification by RCA group. OLS predictions of party self-identification on a 7-point scale, ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican, as a function of (A) the difference between one's degree of conservatism on economic and moral issues, (B) education, (C) income, and (D) religious participation. The data are pooled across the twenty-year period, and fitted using the following model:

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

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

cation aligned with their conservative leaning. 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 positions and partisanship? As panels E-G 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 1990s. 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 4 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 1990s, 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 gender roles and normative social order, 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 last two decades, 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 national debt in summer 2011 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 understanding the political debate.

Beneath the ideologically dichotomized rhetoric promoted by politicians and the media lays an ideationally heterogenous public. As we demonstrate, this heterogeneity is systematic and consistent throughout the twenty year period. 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 American public as constituted by a group of highly sophisticated individuals who understand politics through its ideological categories, and a second group of individuals who are instead 'innocent of ideology' (Converse 1964, Kinder

xxx). However, our third group, the Alternatives, challenges 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, but has its underpinnings in individuals' social identities: people with different sociodemographic profiles understand the political debate in systematically different ways. Namely, Alternatives' deviation from the orthodox political view "makes sense" in that it effectively accommodates their otherwise irreconcilable interests and social identities. 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 makes room for their seemingly opposing political interests.[22]

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.

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

[22]From 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.

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 and Abrams 2008; Fischer and Mattson 2009, Baldassarri and Gelman 2008). Our findings reconcile these seemingly oppositional empirical facts. We find that while Ideologues have responded favorably to growing polarization by aligning their opinions on morality with their opinions on economics, 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 moral and other issues, even as political discourse has become increasingly polarized on themes such as abortion and gay rights. By overlooking socio-cognitive heterogeneity in the population, scholars were not able to identify these two mutually offsetting trends, focusing instead on a misleading image produced by examining both in the aggregate. 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 people elite polarization has made it easier to define their political allegiance, for other citizens neither the Republican nor the Democratic political agenda constitute 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 ide-

ological 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. In this case, 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 who espouse an alternative understanding of the political debate, 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 speculate this has to do with the growing importance of moral issues in the political discourse in the U.S., and, moreover, the ambiguous and potentially self-contradictory ideological stance that underlies rhetoric emanating from the Republican Party. Our results suggest that when Americans hold seemingly competing opinions, they are more likely to privilege their views which are conventioanlly seen as conservative, and identify with the Republican Party. We believe that the political offering plays an important role in building the cognitive framework within which people operate. Over the past four decades both neo-liberal and ultra-conservative advocates have found voice in the Republican Party. To political commentators, neo-liberal support for economic deregulation and ultra-conservative support for moral restrictions might appear at odds; 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 concerned with understanding the transformative rise of the American conservative movement since the 1980s.

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, 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 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 excavates 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 (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, and the reality it corresponds to. 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 and 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, we demonstrate that social differences do not 'linearly' map onto ideological and political cleavages. 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. This 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. Examining these relationships in the aggregate, as most conventional analyses do, potentially obscures such differences. [23]

Overall, we contend that the bi-dimensionality of the U.S. political space and changes in the political offering, require a more complex understanding of the relationship between social identity and partisanship than most statistical analysis usually assume. 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 demographic profiles and social identities, often 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.[24]

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[23]In looking for the working class voters that have supposedly abandoned liberal politics, Frank, 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 understandings of politics. This allows us to find how neither social group exhibits a consistent pattern of ideological and partisan orientation.

[24]Class 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 and de Graaf 2012).

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