

Political Extremism -- Left, Center, and Right

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This paper formalizes Lipset's theory of political extremism and applies its axioms and derivations to guide empirical research. A latent structure analysis of measures of the issues from a survey of the 1992 U.S. electorate produced a three-class Left-Center-Right classification of voters. Given that ideological consistency may indicate a propensity toward political extremism, this study finds that this propensity now is strongest in the Right class and not in the Left and Center classes.

In *Political Man*, Seymour Martin Lipset devotes a major portion of Part 1, The Conditions of the Democratic Order, to assess extreme movements across the political spectrum -- Left, Right, and Center (chapter 5) -- and the relationships between social class and authoritarianism (chapter 4). Lipset ([1959] 1981, p. 116) innovatively defined the workers' propensity toward authoritarianism in terms of cognitive complexity:

The proposition that the lack of a rich, complex frame of reference is the vital variable which connects low status and a predisposition toward extremism does not necessarily suggest that the lower strata will be authoritarian; it implies that, other things being equal, they will choose the least complex alternative. Thus in situations in which extremism represents the more complex rather than the less complex form of politics, low status should be associated with *opposition* to such movements and parties.

To test his hypothesis Lipset conducted several three-variable contextual analyses in which he assessed the relationship between higher status workers who were skilled or well paid and lower status workers who were unskilled or poorly paid and their choice of an authoritarian, extreme party (the communist party), in two contexts: when the party

had numerically strong support (a simple choice) or weak support (a complex choice). Communist parties with weak support had rather complex ideological appeals whereas Left parties with strong support had less complex messages (p. 117):

Where the [Communist] party is small and weak, it cannot hold out the promise of immediate changes in the situation of the most deprived. Rather, such small extremist parties usually present the fairly complex intellectual argument that in the long run they will be strengthened by tendencies inherent in the social and economic system. For the poorer worker, support of the Swedish Social Democrats, the British Labor party, or the American New Deal is a simpler and more easily understood way of securing redress of grievances or improvement of social conditions than supporting an electorally insignificant Communist party.

Lipset's theory of authoritarian workers will be supported empirically if the low status workers choose the simpler choice whether or not that party is anti-democratic and if the higher status workers choose the more complex choice whether or not that party is anti-democratic. Lipset summarized his findings by stating (p. 117):

The available evidence from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Canada, Brazil, and Great Britain supports this point. In these countries, where the Communist party is small and a Labor or Socialist party is much larger, Communist support is stronger among the better-paid and more skilled workers than it is among the less skilled and poorer strata.

Two axioms, a derived theorem, and a corollary formalize his theory:

Axiom 1: People with propensities toward political extremism will tend to choose the simpler political alternative rather than the more complex.

Axiom 2: Internally consistent political ideologies (like party lines) are simpler than more complex political perspectives.

Theorem 1: People with propensities toward political extremism will tend to have internally consistent political ideologies because such ideologies are simpler than more complex political perspectives.

Corollary 1: The tendency to choose simpler rather than more complex political alternatives (i.e., political extremism) may appear at any point along the political continuum -- Left, Right, and Center.

Lipset then studies political extremism across the political spectrum concentrating (p. 129) “on the politics of the center, the most neglected type of political extremism, and that form of ‘left’ extremism sometimes called ‘fascism’ -- Peronism -- as manifested in Argentina and Brazil.” One table shows that in a small New England town “nineteenth century liberals” (i.e., those who opposed large corporations and trade unions) disproportionately supported Joe McCarthy’s methods compared with conservatives and labor liberals. All of the other tables are from countries other than the United States for time periods circa the mid-20th century or earlier.

By studying the contemporary political continuum in the United States this analysis updates and expands the range of Lipset’s theory of extremism and advances cumulative findings about voting. It assesses data from an election night survey of citizens who voted in the three-way 1992 presidential election between Bill Clinton, Ross Perot, and President George H. W. Bush (for details see Smith, 1999). A latent structure

analysis of four issues defines a best-fitting three-class Left, Center, and Right political continuum -- a two-class Left and Center versus Right classification fits less well. The analysis probes some consequences and determinants of different positions on this latent structure, focusing on the sectors that may support political extremism.

The Validating Constructs

To understand the three-class Left-Center-Right latent structure it is best to understand first the measures of the issues that compose it and the following validating constructs. Three axial interests -- economic equity, social equality, and the public's health -- theoretically organize along a Left to Right continuum the electorate's political predispositions and the issues. These themata shape the platforms of the political parties and do much to define the philosophies of liberalism and conservatism.

Economic equity pertains to the scope of governmental responsibility for countervailing against concentrated economic power and for equitable distributions of economic and educational resources. To ameliorate the effects of stratification by social class, Roosevelt's New Deal and Truman's Fair Deal aimed to ameliorate economic inequity. The index used here combines an item about protection of U.S. companies and jobs (versus free trade) and an item about the importance of the economy in determining one's vote. In these data women, poor people, and ethnic minorities support governmental interventions that promise more economic equity. As discussed later, they are also less likely to be in the Right class.

Social equality pertains to civil, social, and constitutional rights for groups that some people derogate. It expresses the effects of nominal categories like race, ethnicity, gender, older age, and religion. Since people with these characteristics may have

experienced the pains of discrimination, they have an interest in social equality, which Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the subsequent civil rights legislation aimed to bring about. Three social categories -- employed women, ethnic minorities, and older people (age 50+) -- compose this additive index, which, because of the limitations of its indicators, generally has weaker effects than the others. Even so, respondents classified as desiring social equality exhibit perceptions of governmental ineffectiveness.

Public health interests pertain to health care reform, a healthy rather than a polluted environment, and women's choice concerning child bearing or abortion. Its index is composed of two correlated dimensions: favoring health care reform and environmental concern. The former is indicated here by these responses: health care was very important in deciding which presidential candidate to vote for; the president should concentrate on "completely overhauling the present system" rather than "maintaining the present system but making improvements in it where necessary;" and indicating that a system similar to Canada's is preferred to a mixed private and public healthcare system. The items' index and an indicator of universal access to health care (which indirectly taps favorable attitudes toward abortion) are strongly correlated. Environmental concern is indicated here by stating that a company's environmental record is important when forming an opinion about it and by stating that the president should "concentrate on protecting the environment even if that means the loss of some jobs, rather than "moving more slowly on environmental issues that might cost jobs." Summing the dichotomized indices of environmental concern and healthcare reform forms the index of public health interests. The resulting index correlates strongly with the universal access indicator.

Summing the dichotomized indices of economic equity, social equality, and public health forms a Left versus Right continuum of interests that is correlated with universal access to healthcare, political ideology (liberal, centrist, conservative), party identification (Democrat, Independent, Republican) and vote; see Table 1.

Table 1
The Political Interests Clarify the Meanings of the Partisan Predispositions and the Voting Choice

Political Interests:					
	Economic Equity	Social Equality	Public Health	Universal Healthcare Access	Left vs. Right Political Interests Continuum
Partisan Predispositions:					
Liberal Ideology	0.15*	0.06***	0.26*	0.15*	0.19*
Democratic Party Identification	0.23*	0.15*	0.19*	0.12*	0.23*
The Voting Choice:					
Voted for Clinton	0.27*	0.15*	0.24*	0.20*	0.27*

Notes: * p <= .0001, ** .0002 < p < .01, ***p = .036. Kendall's Tau quantifies the associations.

The Issues

The Economy

Because a direct, single question about the importance of the economy as a determinant of vote has ambiguous meanings, and because its marginal proportions are too skewed, to assess the economic issue this study uses two items that assess presidential economic interventions. One question asks: “On the economy, should he concentrate on economic expansion and jobs even if that means a higher deficit (41 percent) or should he concentrate on first getting the deficit under control (59 percent)?” The other question asks: “On regulation, should he concentrate on regulating industry to protect consumers (41 percent) or reducing regulation to make American businesses more competitive (59

percent). In 1992 the first alternative answer to each question was the liberal response; the second, the more conservative response. The additive index composed of these items thus assesses support for economic expansion and regulation of industry and classifies about 19 percent of the respondents as wanting both presidential economic interventions, 44 percent as wanting one of the interventions, and 37 percent as opposing both interventions -- those in opposition favored bringing the deficit under control and reducing regulation of businesses. This index of the economic issue has positive associations with support for governmental interventions about economic equity, social equality, and public health, and for the Left (see Table 2). It also has positive associations with core political variables -- liberalism, Democratic identification, and vote for Clinton.

Health Care Reform

During the 1992 election campaign politicians discussed numerous health care plans (Smith 1993, pp. 56-65). On the Left were proposals for a national health care system similar to Canada's; this reform would require a maximum of governmental participation and radical change. In the Center at the beginning of the campaign Clinton supported the Pepper Commission's mandated employer-provided insurance with "play or pay," which required some new public insurance. Toward the end of the campaign Clinton endorsed "managed competition," but stipulated that the plan must provide universal access and limits to spending. Both plans built on the existing mixed private and public sector systems but required extensive change. On the Right President Bush offered his voucher-based, private-sector plan, which aimed to ameliorate problems of

Table 2. Some Correlates of the Issues and Their Three-Class Latent Structure

Four Issues and Their Composite Three-Class Left, Center, Right Latent Structure:								
Correlates of the Issues:	The Economy	Health Care Reform	Concern for Environment	Character Not Very Important	Modal Latent Structure	Higher Probability of Being in the Left Class	Higher Probability of Being in the Right Class	Higher Probability of Being in the Center Class
Political Interests:								
Economic Equity	0.20*	0.16*	0.19*	0.09**	0.23*	0.21*	-0.23*	0.08**
Social Equality	0.07***	0.05 (n.s.)	0.10**	-0.02 (n.s)	0.10**	0.07***	-0.09**	+0.01(n.s.)
The Public's Health	0.22*	0.37*	0.21*	0.13*	0.29*	0.29*	-0.38*	0.01(n.s.)
Left on Political Interests Continuum	.25*	0.28*	0.21*	0.08**	0.30*	0.28*	-0.33*	0.04(n.s)
Partisan Predispositions:								
Liberal Ideology	0.22*	0.26*	0.15*	0.19*	0.28*	0.26*	-0.28*	0.01(n.s.)
Democratic Party Identification	0.24*	0.25*	0.18*	0.17*	0.28*	0.27*	-0.30*	-0.01(n.s.)
Candidate Characteristics:								
Voted For Clinton	0.28*	0.30*	0.21*	0.27*	0.32*	0.33*	-0.35*	-0.01(n.s.)
Universal Healthcare Access	0.17*	0.20*	0.08**	0.11*	0.19*	0.21*	-0.21*	-0.02 (n.s.)
Character Not Important	0.13*	0.14*	-0.01(n.s.)	--	0.19*	0.32*	-0.23*	-0.11*
Delegitimation of Authority: Crime & Drugs and Gridlock VIP	-0.01(n.s.)	.03(n.s)	0.22*	-0.18*	0.03 (n.s.)	0.02 (n.s)	-0.08**	0.13*

Notes: * $p \leq .0001$, ** $.01 > p > .0001$, *** $.05 > p > .01$. Kendall's Tau quantifies the associations. Coefficients that are not statistically significant are denoted (n.s.). The cell with -- indicates that the same item is being used to assess both variables. Jay Magidson and his Latent GOLD computer program provided the estimates of the three class latent structure. The deligitimacy index is composed of items about Gridlock and Crime and Drugs.

lack of insurance in the small business market.

A typology can classify these plans: one dimension ascertains whether the plan required extensive involvement of the federal government or whether the plan melded private and public systems; the other dimension ascertains the scope of the reform, whether the plan required radical change or only amelioration of the present system. Two dichotomized questions directly gauge these aspects of health care reform and form an appropriate index. One question ascertains whether the respondent trusted federal involvement in health care – “If the federal government operated the health care system in this country, do you think we would have a system that is much better, somewhat better (52 percent), somewhat worse, or much worse (48 percent) than the system we currently have.” The other question ascertains whether the respondent believed that radical change was necessary -- “The existing health care system in the United States is so flawed that we should get rid of it and start over with a completely new approach” (45 percent) -- versus amelioration -- “The existing health care system in the United States has many good qualities and we should keep it and try to make it better” (55 percent). The resulting index has three categories: those who trusted federal participation and desired radical change; or, in other words, favored comprehensive reform (+ + = 29 percent); those who supported some reform (+ - or - + = 39 percent); and those who opposed comprehensive reform (- - = 32 percent). The latter preferred minimal governmental intervention in the health care system and amelioration of the problems of the present system but not radical change.

This index strongly predicts the responses to the other items about health care reform ($p < .0001$): voters who desired comprehensive reform believed that the president

should completely overhaul the system; they preferred government-provided health care to a mixed private and public system; they said that health care reform was a very important factor in their choice of a candidate; and they wanted all Americans to have universal access to healthcare, which included abortion rights. When questioned about whether they had enough information concerning changes in the system, about 28 percent of those who desired comprehensive reform responded positively compared with 18 percent of those in opposition. The latter were concerned about choice of physicians -- the difference was about 15 percentage points. As expected, support for comprehensive reform was associated with the Left: pro-reformers were more likely than anti-reformers to support governmental interventions aimed toward economic equity, social equality, and the public's health (see Table 2). Compared with the Right, liberals, Democrats, and voters for Clinton all supported reform; Independents and Perot voters held intermediate positions. Compared to the anti-reformers, the pro-reformers were more likely to say that a candidate's character was not very important in determining their vote.

The Environment

To assess environmental issues, environmental protection should be untangled from the loss of jobs. Consequently, the environmental issue is best gauged by this single item: the environment was a very important factor in determining which candidate to vote for (47%) versus it was not very important (53%) -- rather than by an index of the available items, which serve to clarify its meaning. This indicator of environmental concern has positive associations with agreement that the president should protect the environment even if there is loss of some jobs, with agreement that a company's environmental record is important in forming an opinion about it, and with the index of

these two items. Unlike the economic and health care issues, environmental concern is associated with indicators of delegitimation -- gridlock, crime and drugs, and their index. Environmental concern is associated with Left positions on the political continuum: with interests concerning economic equity, social equality, and public health; with liberalism, Democratic identification, and vote; but not with the character issue (see Table 2).

The Character of the Candidates

About 52 percent said the character of the candidates was a very important factor in determining their choice of candidate; 48 percent said the opposite. Most likely, this question assessed the voters' perceptions of differences between President Bush and Bill Clinton. Because of the negative campaign waged by some Republicans against Clinton (they accused him of 'slickness' and 'waffling' on issues, adultery, draft evasion, and marijuana use) and the pro-family and pro-life campaign of the Republicans, those most concerned about the character of the candidates voted for Bush and those less concerned voted for Clinton -- Perot voters were in the middle. Voters who favored universal access to health care (which includes women's health services) were more likely to say that character was not an important determinant of their vote. When jointly controlled public health interests and the healthcare reform issue do not explain that relationship. Thus, the character issue in part reflects a candidate's position on women's choice -- pro-life Republicans attribute character flaws to pro-choice Democrats.

Regarding ideology and party identification, liberals and Democrats were less concerned about presidential character than conservatives and Republicans. Those less concerned about character leaned toward the Left: they tended to support governmental interventions for economic equity, the environment, and healthcare reform (see Table 2).

Like the single-item indicator of environmental concern, concern about character has a positive association with delegitimation of governmental authority -- gridlock, crime and drugs, and their index -- but, paradoxically, these two measures of concern are unrelated. Employed women are less concerned about character than homemakers and housewives; they also are more likely to favor universal access to health care.

Latent Structure of the Issues

To these four issues Jay Magidson's Latent GOLD computer program fitted two latent structures that appropriately conceptualize the economic and health care issues as ordinal variables and the environment and character issues as nominal attributes (Vermunt and Magidson 2000; Hageaars 1993; Goodman [1974] 1978; Lazarsfeld 1954). The three-class model (bootstrap $p = .053$) fits better than the two-class model (bootstrap $p = .000$) and is the preferred classification.¹ For the two-class model the proportions in each cluster are Left and Center = .78 and Right = .22; for the three-class model the proportions are Left = .20, Center = .68, and Right = .12 -- based on these issues the vast majority of voters are in the Center class. Table 2 above presents the correlations of the political interests, predispositions, and candidate characteristics with the modal three-class latent structure (not corrected for measurement error) and with the posterior probabilities of being in each class. As expected, the Left class and its probability correlate positively with the validating items; the Right class and its probability correlate negatively. For the Center class only the importance of the candidates' character and delegitimation of governmental authority are salient.

Because people who are consistent ideologically have a simpler view of the world than those who are ideologically inconsistent, Lipset's theory indicates that the former

are more likely to have stronger propensities toward political extremism than the latter. By assessing which people have consistent ideologies and by locating them on the latent structure of the issues, we can determine which categories -- Left, Center, and Right -- are now more disposed toward political extremism

Table 3
The Political Interests Clarify the Meanings of the Partisan Predispositions and the Voting Choice

	True Three-Class Model			True Two-Class Model	
	Left	Center	Right	Left&Center	Right
Cluster Size	0.20	0.68	0.12	0.78	0.22
The Issues as Indicators:					
The Economy					
Both items plus	0.66	0.09	0.00	0.24	0.03
One plus one minus	0.32	0.52	0.18	0.49	0.26
Both items minus	0.02	0.39	0.82	0.28	0.71
Mean	2.36	3.31	3.81	3.04	3.68
Healthcare Reform					
Both items plus	0.51	0.28	0.00	0.37	0.01
One plus one minus	0.39	0.46	0.04	0.46	0.16
Both items minus	0.10	0.26	0.96	0.17	0.83
Mean	2.59	2.99	3.96	2.80	3.82
The Environment					
Is Very Important	0.51	0.51	0.02	0.53	0.18
Is Not Very Important	0.49	0.49	0.98	0.47	0.82
Mean	1.49	1.49	1.98	1.47	1.82
Character of the Candidates					
Is Not Very Important	0.69	0.47	0.24	0.55	0.27
Is Very Important	0.31	0.53	0.76	0.45	0.73
Mean	1.31	1.53	1.76	1.45	1.73
Modal Left-Center-Right					
1 Left	0.64	0.07	0.00	0.23	0.01
2 Center	0.35	0.88	0.22	0.75	0.48
3 Right	0.00	0.05	0.78	0.02	0.51
Mean	1.36	1.98	2.77	1.80	2.50

Note -- Fit Statistics:

Ordinal Models	Parameters	Squared Log Likelihood	Schwarz BIC	Akaike AIC	DF	P-Value	Bootstrap P P-Value (S.E.)
Two-Class Model	11	54.57	-110.09	6.57	24	0.0004	0.000 (---)
Three-Class Model	16	31.96	-98.39	-6.04	19	0.0320	0.053 (.0071)
Differences (2-Class - 3-Class)		22.61	-11.70	12.61	5		

Note: Smaller values of BIC and AIC and higher P-values indicate a better fit of the model.

Table 3 provides the needed data. It relates the true latent classes for the three-class and two-class models to the conditional probabilities of response for each item and to the modal classifications; it also presents the fit statistics. For each issue the conditional probabilities of response indicate that those in the Left class are less ideologically consistent than those in the Right class, many of whom oppose all governmental interventions aimed toward equity, equality, and health. In the three-class model for the economy issue .82 of the Right gave consistently negative replies (- -) whereas only .66 of the Left gave consistently positive replies (+ +). For healthcare reform the conditional probabilities are .96 versus .51; for the environmental issue, .98 versus .51; and for the character issue, .76 versus .69 -- in these data the Right is more prone toward political extremism than the Left. The Center is ideologically inconsistent but leans toward the Left: in the three-class model respondents classified as Center take middling positions (+ - or - +) on the economic and healthcare issues and on character; on the environmental issue they are the same as the Left. The two-class model combines most of the Center with the Left and contrasts this combined cluster with the Right, who again are much more ideologically consistent than the Left & Center. The cross-tabulations of the true classifications with the modal classifications confirm that the Right has higher proportions in the ideologically consistent (--) cells than the Left (++): for the three-class model the proportions are .78 (Right) compared with .64 (Left); for the two-class model the proportions are .51 (Right) compared with .23 (Left).

Table 4
Cross-Tabulation of the True Three-Class Latent Structure of the Issues with Ideology, Party Identification, and Vote

		True Three-Class Latent Structure		
		Left	Center	Right
Cluster Size		0.20	0.68	0.12
Covariates:				
Political Ideology				
Liberal		43.7%	27.3%	11.0%
Center		32.6%	35.1%	17.2%
Conservative		22.9%	35.5%	69.5%
Missing		0.9%	2.1%	2.3%
Party Identification				
Democrat		55.8%	37.5%	12.9%
Independent		24.1%	29.7%	28.3%
Republican		17.5%	30.5%	56.3%
Missing		2.7%	2.3%	2.4%
The Vote Choice				
Clinton		64.5%	41.3%	12.6%
Perot		14.8%	23.0%	16.9%
Bush		17.2%	31.1%	65.7%
Missing		3.5%	4.6%	4.9%

Table 4 relates the true three-class model with the political predispositions and vote. The high concentration of conservatives in the Right class (69.5 percent) compared with the diffusion of the Left as liberals (43.7 percent) and centrists (32.6 percent) underscores the ideological consistency of the Right and its propensity toward extremism. However, about the same percentage (55.8 percent) of the Left are Democrats, as of the Right (56.3 percent) are Republican.

The Center's vote made Clinton's victory decisive. Clinton's vote share from the Center was 28.1 percent ($= .68 * 41.3$ percent) whereas Bush's vote share was 21.1 percent ($= .68 * 31.1$ percent). Disregarding the vote of the Center, the vote shares were much closer: Clinton's Left plus Right share was 14.4 percent ($= 12.9$ percent + 1.5 percent); Bush's Left plus Right share was 11.3 percent ($= 3.4$ percent + 7.9 percent) for a difference of 3.1 percentage points. When the contributions from the Center are added in

the totals are Clinton = 42.5 percent and Bush = 32.4 percent, for a large percentage point difference of 10.1.

Of the seven exogenous social categories available for analysis, only males, whites, and the middle and higher economic levels have reduced-form effects on the Right (to Left) latent structure. However, in a logistic regression when the intervening political predispositions are also controlled, the effects of these social categories drop out -- their effects on the Right class operate through conservative political ideology and Republican party identification. The proportional odds ratios are: conservatives = 3.1, centrists = 1.4, Republicans = 3, and Independents = 2. All indicate alignment with the Right class rather than with the Left class; the $R^2 = .09$.

Discussion

The candidates positions on the issues affected the outcome of the 1992 election: Clinton, running as a moderate New Democrat, got a much larger share of the Center's vote than George H. W. Bush, thus making his victory decisive. A three-class latent structure of the issues classified as Left 20 percent of the voters, as Center 68 percent, and as Right 12 percent. Apparently, the latter have a propensity toward political extremism (Bell 2002): The Right consistently opposed governmental interventions directed toward economic expansion and regulation, comprehensive health care reform, and environmental protection; their pro-life attitudes led some to be concerned about the candidates' character. The Left was less ideologically consistent than the Right. Of the Left, 43.7 percent were liberal, 32.6 percent were centrists, and 22.9 percent were conservatives, whereas of the Right, 69.5 percent were conservatives, 17.2 percent were centrists, and only 11 percent were liberals. Thus, in 1992 there was "one Right," which

uniformly opposed governmental interventions directed toward economic equity, social equality, and the public's health, and "two Lefts," both of which exhibited consistency on the economic issue but responded more diffusely on the more social issues of health care reform and the environment (Lipset [1959] 1982, p. 510). Of the 68 percent classified as Center, 27.3 percent were liberals, 35 percent centrists, and 35.5 percent were conservatives -- the Center is less prone toward extremism than the Right.

Endnote

¹ The three-class model has the more favorable Akaike AIC and a better probability of fit. However, the two-class model has the more favorable Schwarz BIC. The reduction in the likelihood squared from the two-class to the three-class model is 22.61 and this costs 5 degrees of freedom, or 4.52 per degree of freedom. For the AIC this represents a real improvement of the three-class model over the two-class model since $4.52 > 2$, the critical value for the AIC. The BIC for the three class model does not indicate a real improvement since $4.5 < \ln(N) = \ln(954) = 6.86$. Because the three-class model has the better probability of fit it is the preferred model.

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