Assessing Ideological Content In Party Preferences: Political Dimensionality in Five Democracies

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Abstract

Scholars have long argued that most citizens do not think in ideological terms. This conclusion is problematic given the other finding that citizens are poorly informed about politics. If citizens are poorly informed, it does not make sense to assess ideological thinking using answers to questions people know little about. We test the ‘innocence of ideology’ thesis in a novel way using survey data collected in multiple elections in five democracies as part of the Making Electoral Democracy Work project. Applying multidimensional scaling with bootstrapping, we produce two-dimensional representations of citizens’ party and leader preferences, how much they like or dislike each party. We find that citizens’ party and leader evaluations reflect an underlying ideological dimension in varied contexts in different countries. While citizens clearly like parties at one location on the left-right scale more than those at other locations, voters of different parties do not place themselves on the left-right scale in a clearly different way. Moreover, citizens in most countries are incapable of clearly placing parties on the left-right dimension.
Introduction

Scholars have long pointed to the low level of political knowledge of most citizens and to the lack of ideological structure behind their political beliefs (e.g. Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964). However, the first conclusion precludes the second using the type of data that is generally used to support it. If individuals have low political information, then it makes little sense to look for ideological structure in their answers to political questions they likely have not thought much about. Rather than looking for ideology in political opinions, we look for ideology in preferences for objects citizens are exposed to throughout their adult lives, political parties and leaders.

In order to analyze such preferences, we apply multidimensional scaling (MDS) using the innovative approach suggested by Jacoby and Armstrong (2014) which involves using bootstrapping in order to create confidence regions for the MDS point configurations. We then compare these MDS representations of party and candidate preferences to two other means of assessing mass ideology. We show the distributions of ideological self-placements of supporters of each party and we present the distributions of citizens’ placements of each party on the left-right scale. If responses to these questions have ideological content, we should be able to observe differences in the distributions across political parties. We find that citizens’ party like-dislike scores correspond much more closely to conventional views of political ideology than their self-placement on the same scale or that of the parties along it.

In contrast to existing assessments of ideological structure which focus exclusively on the United States, we assess ideology in elections in five countries, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland, using survey data from the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project. The data we use come from elections to both national and regional legislatures. The surveys are of mass publics in regions that are both central and peripheral. Some of the latter regions even have strong regional nationalist identities and parties. We will see that even in these cases, the publics’ ratings of the parties there reflect conventional left-right ideology, even though ideology in those contexts tends to overlap with regional nationalism.

Literature on Ideology at the Mass Level

Ever since systematic research began to be conducted into the political behaviour of mass publics, numerous scholars have noted the low level of sophistication of citizens especially in the United States. Converse (1964) and Campbell et al. (1960) found that Americans’ political knowledge is quite low and that only a small fraction of them actually use ideology when discussing politics and that large proportions of the population have shifting opinions on various issues. This was particularly true among people with low political information, education and political involvement. Converse (1964) concluded that large portions of the electorate do not have meaningful beliefs even on highly salient issues.
Later, this reality was summed up in the assertion that, in contrast to the strong ideological positions of elite political actors, citizens are ‘innocent of ideology’ (Kinder and Sears, 1985).

Assessments of ideological thinking, however, have generally been based on answers to survey questions on substantive political issues. This is problematic given a contradiction between two key claims in the literature on citizens’ low levels of political sophistication. If citizens have little political information, how can we expect the political views they express to reflect ideology? It is no surprise that when citizens are asked to answer questions on issues they likely have not thought much about they answer in a non-ideological way. More recent research points to other ways citizens may be ideological.

Since the 1980s, work coming out of political psychology has pointed to the emotional underpinnings of political behaviour (e.g. Druckman and McDermott, 2008; Granberg and Brown, 1989; Lodge and Taber, 2013; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen, 2000; McDermott, 2004; Sniderman, Tetlock and Brody, 1993). Numerous scholars now assert that politics is not just about cognition but is just as much about emotions. Some see affect and reason as complementary explanations for political behaviour. Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen (2000) argue that emotions allow people to rely on existing predispositions via the disposition system and warn them of threats that require further attention via the surveillance system and stimulate people to engage in reasoning. Of particular relevance to this paper is the notion that emotions provide citizens with summary evaluations that govern decision making irrespective of novel considerations and that these affect behaviour prior to conscious awareness. Ideological thinking is thus not necessary. All that is necessary for political decision making is that people have evaluations of various political objects, which they only update when they face threatening circumstances.

Lodge and Taber (2013) go even further in their exploration of the affective bases of political behaviour. They argue that all social objects, like political parties and leaders, are stored in long-term memory accompanied by an affective charge. Citizens have on-line tallies they update using new information, which they then forget (Graber, 1988; Lodge and Taber, 2005). Thus, what is really of interest is that political objects are associated with affect in long-term memory and that this affect is triggered automatically when people are exposed to the objects. If affect is triggered automatically when individuals are presented a political object, such as the name of a party or a leader, it is possible that people can evaluate leaders or parties without relying on cognitive processing. Moreover, if individuals forget why they develop a particular evaluation of a party or leader, their evaluations of those objects may actually be more reflective of ideology than any conscious thinking. We assess this affect using questions asking respondents how much they like or dislike various parties and leaders.

Further justification for avoiding substantive questions to assess the ideological structure of mass publics can be found in another explanation of how individuals might make political decisions without much political knowledge. A number of scholars have suggested that citizens make use of heuristics or short-cuts to come up with positions on political issues that are the same they
would have if they were fully informed (Sniderman, Tetlock and Brody, 1993; Lupia, 1994). An example from the work of Lupia (1994) is knowledge of the positions of the key actors in the debate on automobile insurance in California, which allowed poorly informed individuals to vote the same way highly informed individuals did. However, if people have to rely on cues to answer substantive questions then their opinions are less likely to be divided on the basis of ideology. For example, in the case of the main shortcut identified by Lupia in the California insurance reform elections, knowledge that the insurance industry was opposed to a proposal that was favourable to consumers made voters more likely to support that proposal. However, if a large number of consumers used this cue, then opinion was strongly skewed in favour of the proposal. If this is the case on most issues of government policy, then answers to questions on such issues would contain no ideological content.

The ideological structure we expect to find in party preferences might not even result from individual cognitive processes. Converse (1964) suggests that constraint, the fact that different facets of belief systems tend to go together can be social. Belief systems may be rooted in the particular interests and information available in particular segments of the population. Also, belief systems are diffused by a small of individuals who sell them in “packages”. (Converse, 1964, p.211). Converse finds that such constraint is limited in the case of issue opinions. However, he does not consider the possibility of constraint among party preferences. Citizens may not actually internalize the elements of such belief systems, but they may nonetheless exhibit constraint among their ratings of various parties and leaders: they like parties of the left/right and dislike parties of the right/left due to the same social processes.

This paper shows that left-right ideology does in fact resonate at the level of the mass public across a range of democracies. In all the elections included in this study, citizens have preferences that clearly correspond to differences related to ideology, although in some contexts, notably where there is a strong regional politicized identity, ideology overlaps with other divisions. This paper does show, however, that the literature claiming that citizens are non-ideological has some truth. Citizens in several democracies do not identify with ideological positions that correspond to their preferred parties, even though they like parties that correspond to particular ideological positions and dislike parties that correspond to the opposite position. We also show that citizens are no better at distinguishing parties on the left-right spectrum.

Data

The data we use are surveys conducted by the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project. Since 2011, the project has been surveying the population in two regions in each of five countries during national and regional elections. While different countries have different words to describe different levels of government, for this paper, national elections are elections to the legislature representing the entire country, and regional elections are those to the
legislatures representing the largest substate units. So far, the surveys have been completed in the following elections:

- Germany: Lower Saxony, national (2013), Lower Saxony, regional (2013), Bavaria national (2013), Bavaria, regional (2013),

To be clear, for national elections, surveys were conducted on independent samples in each of the two regions covered in each country.

The variable used to measure citizens’ perceptions of the political world is a question asking respondents to place themselves on a scale from 0 to 10 based on how much they like/dislike various political parties and leaders, where 0 means that they strongly dislike a party or political actor and 10 means that they really like it. This question is midway between ideological self-placement and vote choice. It avoids assuming ideology is behind political preferences as placement on the left-right scale does as well as the strategic considerations that influence vote choice. It thus constitutes a fairly pure indicator of citizens’ party preferences. We use multidimensional scaling (MDS) to produce a dimensional representation of these preferences.

In order to compare the results using these like-dislike questions to more conventional measures, we use two additional questions. One asks respondents to place themselves on a left-right scale from 0 to 10. The other question involves respondents placing parties along the same dimension.

**Multidimensional Scaling**

Multidimensional scaling (MDS) refers to a family of data analysis methods all of which portray the data structure in a spatial fashion, easily assimilated by the untrained eye (Young, 1987). MDS pursues two objectives: visualizing dissimilarities data and identifying underlying dimensions of judgement (Borg, Groenen and Mair, 2013). Obtaining an MDS representation takes dissimilarities data, showing how different various units are from each other (here political parties and leaders) and produces a spatial representation of those units. In the analyses in this paper, we produce dissimilarities using the line-of-sight method developed by Rabinowitz (1976), which orders parties and leaders from most similar to most dissimilar.\(^1\)

\[^1\]In order to produce line-of-sight dissimilarities, we used the LOS function for R written by Bill Jacoby, which he graciously shared with us.
Coordinates for the various points are then found using a distance function, which assigns distances between points representing objects based on the dissimilarities between those objects. Equation (1) shows what a distance function looks like: $d_{ij}$ is the distance between points i and j, $\delta_{ij}$ represents the dissimilarities between objects i and j, and $e_{ij}$ is the error, the amount of dissimilarity our representation fails to account for. Here we use non-metric MDS, which uses a monotonic function to assign distances to dissimilarities. In other words, the non-metric MDS method we use finds a set of distances among points which reflect the dissimilarities among the points: the more dissimilar two objects are, the greater the distance between them in the MDS output.

$$d_{ij} = f_m(\delta_{ij}) + e_{ij}$$ (1)

Unlike conventional MDS, which merely describes the dissimilarities among a set of stimuli, we used MDS with bootstrap resampling in order to produce a representation of the uncertainty in the MDS representation by creating confidence regions. This method, proposed by Jacoby and Armstrong (2014), involves, first producing a matrix of dissimilarities among the objects and applying MDS to it using the full sample. After that, the procedure involves taking random samples with replacement, from the original sample, calculating dissimilarities based on these bootstrapping samples, and producing MDS representations of those dissimilarities. We also apply a Procrustean transformation to the point configurations from each replication in order to find the optimal rotation, dilation, and translation to make them as similar as possible to the point configuration produced at the first step.\(^2\) Using the points that result at each iteration, we created 95% confidence ellipses. These are analogous to confidence intervals, which are conventional in frequentist statistics, with the interpretation that if we were to replicate the same procedure a large number of times on random samples, the confidence region would contain the true position of a given stimulus point in 95% of the replications (Jacoby and Armstrong, 2014). Like Jacoby and Armstrong (2014), we ran 50 replications of the MDS procedure.

The full samples we used for MDS included only respondents who answered all the like-dislike questions. While this form of listwise deletion does limit the generalizability of the findings, since we can assume that there is nothing random about the missing data, it does not prevent us from comparing the MDS representations to the other ideological representations we present below, using the same samples. If the MDS point configurations are more reflective of ideology than the same respondents’ ideological self-placements and their placements of the parties on the same scale, this shows that their party preferences contain more ideological content.

The MDS configurations we produced are all two-dimensional. In order to ensure that we have selected the appropriate dimensionality, we conducted MDS representations using one, two, and three dimensions. We then compared the conventional measure of fit, stress for the three configurations for each election.

\(^2\)The R code to produce the Procrustean transformation came from Dave Armstrong’s BSMDS package.
In no case, did stress significantly decrease when increasing the dimensionality from two to three, while it did decrease significantly when going from one to two dimension. In other words, the fit generally improved when we increased the dimensionality from one to two but not when we increased it from two to three, suggesting that a two dimensional representation is appropriate. \(^3\)

Where necessary to improve interpretations, we rotated or flipped the point configurations in order to ensure that parties and leaders on the left are on the left and those who are on the right actually appear on the right. This does not violate the principles of MDS and does not change the fit of the MDS solution. It merely ensures that the results are easy to interpret.

**MDS Representations of Party Preferences**

**Canada**

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3There were, however, two cases, the Spanish national election in Madrid and the Ontario regional election, where the stress was unusually low even with only one dimension. These cases may have degenerate solutions due to the small number of stimuli (parties and candidates) we have to work with there. We, therefore, remain prudent in interpreting the results from these cases.
Here are the configurations of points and confidence ellipses that resulted from the MDS procedure with bootstrapping applied to the data from Canada. In the Ontario election, we can see that respondents’ party ratings clearly distinguish between parties of the left, on the one hand, and parties of the right, on the other, along the horizontal axis. The fact that the confidence regions do not overlap suggests that people can distinguish among the parties. Respondents do not distinguish, however, among the three parties and their leaders to the left of the Progressive Conservatives and their leader Tim Hudak, the Ontario Liberal Party (OLP), the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Green Party (GP). They do, however, distinguish the incumbent, OLP, from the other parties along the vertical axis.

In Quebec, ideology similarly lurks behind party evaluations. The Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ) and its then leader, Jean Charest are located on the right. The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), which is ambivalent on many issues, and its leader, François Legault, are located in the centre of the point configuration. The various parties of the left and their leaders are all located at the extreme left of the MDS representation, with the Parti Québécois and its then leader, Pauline Marois slightly to the right of that cluster, which probably reflects reality. The left region of the plot suggests that respondents in Quebec do not distinguish among parties of the far left, but their evaluations do reflect the fact that the PQ is less leftist than the other parties on the left.

There may be some overlap here between left-right positioning of the parties on this axis and another major dimension of political conflict in Quebec. Party positioning on this axis, in addition to being consistent with ideology, is also nearly consistent with positions on the issue of Quebec independence. While the PLQ is clearly opposed, the CAQ has an ambiguous position and the PQ is in favour, with the other parties to its left being even stronger supporters of independence for the province. The only exception is the Green Party (PVQ) and its leader, Claude Sabourin who do not have clear positions on this issue and, therefore, should be located to the right of the PQ.

**France**

In France, we can also see a clear ideological division between parties of the left and parties of the right, although, interestingly, the far-right Front National (FN) and its leader, Marine Le Pen, are actually placed somewhat closer to the centre of the configuration than the more centre-right Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP) and its then secretary-general, Jean-François Copé. Moreover, there is a lot of overlap between the more extreme left-wing parties like the Front de Gauche (FdG), the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), on the one hand, and the more moderate Parti socialiste (PS), on the other. One major difference between the capital region, Île-de-France (IDF) and the peripheral region, Provence, is that in the former, respondents seem to place the centrist Mouvement Démocrate (MoDem) and Nouveau Centre (NC) and their respective leaders, François Bayrou and Hervé Morin, more towards the centre. Whereas, respondents in Provence place the MoDem with the left and the NC
with the right. Nevertheless, in both regions, as in the two Canadian regions, respondents clearly distinguish between parties of the left and parties of the right in their evaluations.

Figure 2: France

Germany

In Germany, the MDS shows different configurations of party preference in the two regions, Lower Saxony and Bavaria. In Lower Saxony, the ellipses at the national level suggest that respondents distinguish between three groups of parties. One includes the CDU (the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union) and its leader Angela Merkel along with its former coalition partner, FDP (Free Democrats). Another consists of the SPD (Social Democrats), the Greens, and the Left. Finally, there is a cluster made up of the AfD (Alternative for Germany), Free Voters, and the Pirates. Within each group, a considerable overlap exists (except for CDU and FDP). On the horizontal axis, the location of SPD, the Greens, and the Left on one end and CSU, FDP and Merkel are on the other (but not very far from the other group), suggests that this axis reflects an ideological dimension of left-right continuum. The large ellipses of the AfD and the Pirates along this axis indicates that voters cannot easily identify their location along the left-right dimension. Moreover, the relatively close location of CDU and Merkel to SPD, the Greens, and the Left along this
dimension might reflect the movement of Merkel towards the center and left in recent years. However, other than the relatively new AfD, Free Voters, and the Pirates, voters in Lower Saxony distinguish parties on the left from parties on the right.

At the regional level, the horizontal axis, with SPD and the Greens on the left and CDU and FDP on the other end, forms a left-right dimension. The vertical axis, with the Left and the Pirates on the one end and the CDU, SPD and their leaders on the other end, can be interpreted as a mainstream-niche dimension.

In Bavaria, the MDS at both the regional and national levels has a similar interpretation. The horizontal axis reflects an ideological dimension. In this case it seems that the voters distinguish better between the leftists, centrists, and rightists parties and between the different parties in each group. On the vertical axis, CSU, Merkel, SPD, Greens and FDP are on one end, the Left are in the middle, and the Pirates are at the other end. These locations suggest that this is a mainstream-protest dimension. The wide ellipse of the Free Voters along this continuum at the national level suggests that it is hard to locate this party on this dimension.
Figure 3: Germany
Spain

In Spain, respondents also appear to be able to distinguish between parties of the left and parties of the right. In Catalonia, similarly to Quebec, there seems to be some overlap between nationalism and ideology. In the regional election, extreme left parties, like the Candidatura d’Unitat Popular (CUP), Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Iniciativa per Catalunya (ICV) and the latter two parties’ leaders, Oriol Junqueras and Joan Herrera, respectively, appear to the left of the moderate Socialist Party (PSC) and its then leader Pere Navarro. The conservative Partido Popular (PP) and its leader Mariano Rajoy are located on the right. However, the centre-right nationalist party Convergència i Unió and its leader Artur Mas are located in the cluster of parties on the far left, while the centrist party, Ciutadans, which actively opposes regional nationalism, and its leader Albert Rivera are located on the right closer to the PP. Furthermore, the far right Plataforma per Catalunya (PxC), a party with anti-immigrant positions, is located in the centre, perhaps due to the ambivalence of its position on the nationalist issue.
Figure 4: Spain

Catalonia Regional (2012)

Catalonia National (2011)

Madrid National (2011)
In the national election in the same region, there also is a clear distinction between parties of the left and the main party of the right, the PP. The left-wing nationalist party, ERC, and the head of its list, Alfred Bosch, are located with the other left-wing parties. However, unlike in the regional election, the centre-right, CiU and its national leader, Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida are located closer to the centre. Similarly to the regional election, the far-right PxC is located in the centre and the anti-nationalist, Unión Progreso y Democracia (similar to Ciutadans) is located on the right with the PP. Nevertheless, in both the regional and national elections in Catalonia, respondents seem to be able to distinguish parties of the left from parties of the right and, generally, with the exception of the PxC, can distinguish centrist parties from more extreme parties. Like Quebec, there is also a significant amount of overlap between nationalism and the left-right dimension, with nationalist parties being placed towards the left and anti-nationalist parties towards the right. It is not clear how to interpret the vertical axis though.

In Madrid, politics seems quite simple with the left-wing Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Izquierda Unida (IU), along with their leaders, on the left and the PP and UPyD on the right, along with their leaders. Like in Catalonia, there may be some overlap with regional nationalism in the sense that UPyD, an anti-nationalist party, is placed as far right as the PP. However, there also seems to be a Catalan nationalist dimension in the national election in Madrid. The two Catalan political leaders Madrid respondents were asked about, both of whom were candidates in the national election, just not in Madrid, are placed at the top of the vertical dimension, with all other parties and leaders at the bottom.
Figure 5: Switzerland
Switzerland

In Switzerland, the MDS representation offers an interesting representation of ideological perception among voters. In both Lucerne and Zurich at the national as well as the regional level, the left-right ideological dimension is represented on the horizontal axis. At the national level in Lucerne, SVP (Swiss People's Party) is on the right side and the Greens and the Greens-liberals are at the other extreme. The right-wing Schweizer Demokraten is located even further right than the SVP.

In the regional election in Lucerne, the right-wing SVP is located on the right and the Greens, their leader, Adrian Borgula, and the SP (the Social Democratic Party) are located on the left. The centrist liberal party FDP is in between the two extremes. The ellipses suggest that, at the regional level in Lucerne, it is easier for voters to distinguish between left, centre, and right parties. At the national level, however, this distinction is harder. At the national level in Zurich, the SVP is on the right end and the Greens are on the other. At the regional level, EDU and SVP are on one end, the EVP and CVP in the middle, and SP on the other end. In Zurich it is evident at both the national and regional levels that it is harder for voters to distinguish between parties in the center, hence the ellipses overlap considerably.

Does this Mean that Citizens Correctly Use Ideological Language?

Having found that citizens' party preferences quite clearly reflect an underlying ideological dimension in varying contexts, we move on to assess whether citizens use left-right language in a reasonable way. We do this in two ways. We analyze the distribution of left-right self-placements of citizens who voted for each party. We then look at respondents' placements of each party on the same dimension.

In several of the MEDW surveys, like in other surveys, respondents were asked to place themselves and the main parties on a left-right scale from 0 to 10. The first question was asked in 12 surveys and the second was asked in nine cases. If their answers have any ideological content, we would expect two results. First, the distributions of ideological self-placements should in some way reflect differences in parties. In other words, supporters of parties of the left should be distributed to the left of supporters of parties of the right. Second, the distributions of respondents' party placements on the same scale should be at least somewhat distinct. In order to make these tests conservative, we have limited the samples in each election to those individuals who answered all the party and candidate like-dislike questions. In other words, we only use the ideological self-placements of those individuals who would be most likely to think ideologically, those who we already know have ideological preferences.\footnote{This does not mean that respondents who did not answer all like-dislike necessarily questions do not have ideological preferences. We just have no way of knowing. We consider this unlikely though, since they chose not to answer questions regarding party preferences and are,}
Figure 6 shows the ideological self-placements of people who said they already voted for or would vote for each party in each election. The mean left-right placement for each party is identified with a dot and a line stretching out left and right denotes the region of the scale that is covered by 95% of the distribution. These are thus analogous to conventional confidence intervals. We can see that the distributions almost always overlap. The only exceptions are in the two French cases. In sum, the distributions of ideological self-placements by party are in no way as distinct as the MDS representations presented above.

therefore, likely to be less engaged in politics
Figure 7 shows the distribution of respondents' (all those who answered all like-dislike questions) placements of the parties on the left-right scale. Even more than self-identifications, respondents party placements have a large amount of overlap. The most distinct distributions are in the two French cases, but, even there, there is considerable overlap.

Please note that these graphs show the distribution of ideological placements for each party from respondents who answered all party like-dislike questions.
Conclusion

We have shown that citizens’ party preferences do reflect an underlying ideological structure. This is true even though citizens’ ideological self-placements do not correspond closely to the parties they support and in spite of the fact

5 Please note that these graphs show the distribution of party placements by respondents who answered all party like-dislike questions.
that they are incapable of placing parties in an ideologically meaningful way on a left-right scale.

We should keep in mind one caveat. Our demonstration of ideological structure in party preferences and in particular that citizens distinguish among parties on the basis of ideology depends crucially on the bootstrapping method proposed by Jacoby and Armstrong (2014). If the confidence regions created using bootstrap re-sampling from the original sample are too small, for example, citizens are not as good as they appear to be. Nevertheless, the difference between the ideological dimensionality underlying party preferences and citizens’ ability to place themselves and their parties on the left-right scale is so stark, that at the very least, we can claim that citizens’ party preferences more clearly reflect ideology than their conscious self-identifications and their identifications of party positions.

References


