Lost in Issue Space?
Measuring Levels of Ideology in the American Public

Michael Barber
Brigham Young University
barber@byu.edu

Jeremy C. Pope
Brigham Young University
jpope@byu.edu

Abstract

There is substantial debate about the degree to which American citizens think ideologically. In fact, though there is a continuum of views, many scholars can be classified as ideological minimalists, who believe issue preferences are largely unconnected to one another. There is another camp that takes a maximalist stance by suggesting that the American public are deeply ideological. It is plain that both of these perspectives cannot simultaneously be correct. Using multiple surveys we show that both perspectives are incomplete in their understanding of the American public. Our results illustrate that even though ideology predicts individual positions exceptionally well, any such measure only captures a fraction of the complexity of voter attitudes. Measuring the predictive power and structure of ideology in the American public is critical to fully understanding how Americans reason through politics.

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Within the field of American politics there are two schools of thought, existing side-by-side, spread throughout the meeting rooms of most conferences, each exerting a great deal of influence, yet clearly in contradiction to one another. Following the lead of Converse (1964), some scholars (Achen and Bartels, N.d.; Bartels, 2008; Broockman, Forthcoming) argue for a kind of ideological minimalism where theories of preferences simply should not be rooted in a spatial model of voting or other forms of ideological preference because citizens do not just lack ideological constraint comparable to elites, but actually have particular issue positions that are mostly unconnected to one another. Converse asserted that the typical citizen cannot possibly meet the high standard of real constraint—meaning positions that reflect the ideological elites. Instead, he argues that the two groups, “elites and masses,” are separated by a “continental shelf” meaning that typical citizens and members of Congress simply cannot be compared. While ideology is incredibly important to elites, it has essentially no value for typical citizens because they do not think in such terms.

In contrast with this line of literature is another group of scholars who suggest precisely the opposite: not only does ideology predict behavior very well, but it does so in essentially unidimensional fashion because voters are sorted into two ideological camps (Abramowitz, 2013; Bishop, 2009; Jacobson, 2012; Campbell and Cannon, 2006). ¹ They subscribe to a kind of ideological maximalism where everything important about politics is contained in the ideological differences between the mass parties. In the extreme, these “deep” differences in society actually cause government “dysfunction.” For instance, Abramowitz (2013) writes that “the American public, and especially the politically engaged segment of the public, is deeply divided over the same issues that deeply divide political elites today” (p. 12). The quotation implies a single dimension that works very similarly for both the mass public and the elected leaders, a dimension that explains most of political debate.

It is plain that both of these perspectives cannot simultaneously be correct. One cannot believe that citizens lack ideological constraint, have unconnected issue positions and then also believe that people are ideological beings divided on the issues in basically the same way as elites. At least one cannot do this consistently. And yet both of these camps are prominent in political

¹Some scholars have even found correlations between “every significant or suggestions chromosomal region related to Conservative-Liberal attitudes” something they believe is critical for “attitude formation and constraint, particularly during critical neurological development in childhood, which corresponds to the same critical period of social learning and cultural assimilation of values” all in an effort to “offer a better understanding of political ideology” (Hatemi et al., 2011, p. 281).
science. Both are influential and their adherents continue to talk past one another.

This paper is an effort to force a conversation between those two streams of research. We show that both perspectives have a point, but that each is incomplete in their understanding of the American public. The maximalists are right that ideology—as measured by a standard item response model—can be used to predict voter attitudes on individual issues. It does so across a host of groups and levels of citizen engagement. However, the minimalists are right that the individual connections between any set of issues are, at best, very weak. These two facts help explain why, even though ideology predicts individual positions reasonably well (in fact as well as does partisanship), any such measure only captures a fraction of the complexity of voter attitudes. In general, voter attitudes should be seen as complex (multi-dimensional), in contrast with elites where similar measures indicate a much simpler (unidimensional) space that describes virtually all of their attitudes. In showing all of this, we hope to begin a larger conversation about careful measurement of citizen and voter ideology, a subject that has, so far, often merely been shoehorned into explanations of elite representation or has relied too often on self-classification measures. To truly make progress we must go beyond these limitations.

**Literature & Theory**

In this section we describe two differing views of the American public’s thinking and processing of political issues. The two outlooks differ dramatically, yet both are similar in that they make take very extreme positions on how the American public process politics. To make sure that we characterize the views of each of these camps, and to avoid the criticism that we are building straw-men in our critique of these two schools of thought, we will use a number of quotations and references to recent work from each camp.

Despite their ubiquity, measures of ideology, and particularly the spatial model of political choice, have received significant criticism of late, especially when this model is used to analyze dyadic representation of legislators and constituents (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014; Rogowski, forthcoming; Sniderman and Stiglitz, 2012; Lewis and Tausanovitch, 2015). Broockman (Forth-
coming) goes further than most by arguing that “ideology” tells us about consistency but does not “say much” about citizen views on any given issue because ideological scales:

tend to capture citizens’ degree of ideological consistency across policy domains (‘this citizen has liberal views on two-thirds of issues’) but say little about citizens’ views within domains, on issues themselves. . . .[F]or the vast majority of citizens who support an idiosyncratic mix of liberal and conservative policies, their middling scores imply nothing about their view on any issue, not allowing us to do better than guessing when predicting which side of an issue they are likely to be on (p. 28 - 29).

Grossmann and Hopkins (2015) are much more open to the power of ideology for describing voters—but only Republican voters. They paint a picture of a partisan electorate where ideology is a powerful predictor of voter behavior, but only on the Republican side. On the left, while “[s]ymbolic liberals represent one important element of the larger Democratic coalition” ideology does not serve as the organizing principle in the same way that it does on the right, because for Democrats “abstract ideology does not serve as a fundamental bond unifying the party membership as it does for Republicans” (p. 134).

The disdain for simple spatial models spills over into broader theories of lawmaking and representation. Hacker and Pierson (2014) mock the “master theory” of Anthony Downs, saying that the “contemporary politics often looks very different than the world described by Downs [more closely resembling] the world depicted by E. E. Schattschneider—a world in which policy and groups loom large, the influence of voters is highly conditional, and the key struggle is not over gaining office but over reshaping governance” (p. 634). Broockman and Ahler (2015) deny the utility of using Downsian spatial models because such thinking about voters relies “on the faulty assumption that citizens’ policy preferences are ideologically rooted.” Instead of ideology, they argue that voters are more interested in “seeing politicians represent their personal pattern of issue views,” a pattern that may have nothing at all to do with conventional ideology.

Admittedly there are differences in the way these minimalists argue and debate. Broockman, for instance, with his argument that all attitudes are different and should be treated separately, is arguing a point fundamentally different from Converse’s claim that comes much closer to asserting non-attitudes. What unites them is that neither one sees a prominent role for ideology to play in the American public.

In a somewhat similar vein, Bartels writes that “voters have a strong tendency to support any policies that seem to work, and to punish leaders regardless of their ideology when economic growth is slow” (p. 216). Though we doubt he would deny the importance of ideology altogether, he sees a more fruitful way of describing politics without resorting to ideology.
Achen and Bartels (N.d.) argue that voters cannot be really rescued from the “charge that they are too uninformed or too disengaged to play a meaningful role in the democratic process” (p. 2). Instead they believe that not even conventional theories of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981) permit a view of voters consistent with our normative beliefs about democracy. “A satisfactory defense of democracy will have to be built upon more realistic grounds” (p. 26). Bartels goes so far as to call the electorate “irrational” (see also Caplan (2007) for a similar characterization).

All of this literature draws to one degree or another on ideological minimalism to describe either citizens or voters. But it is far from the only claim about citizen ideology in political science. A competing camp of ideological maximalists have a completely different view of the public. In the eyes of these scholars, the American public are deeply divided and adhere to ideologically consistent beliefs that mirror the ideological divide that exists among elites and elected officials in Washington. (Bishop, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Campbell and Cannon, 2006) Emphasizing voters more than the broad public, Abramowitz (2012) says that “voters with relative coherent ideological preferences choose between parties with relatively clear and distinct ideological positions. At least on the electoral side, the conditions for responsible party government have largely been met” (p. 61). He explicitly connects voters (though not always citizens more broadly) with partisan elites. In this he is hardly alone as others argue that a “coincidence of partisan differences across issues results in a bimodal distribution of aggregate preferences among voters . . . so the electoral process sustains elite polarization” (Jacobson, 2012, p. 1612).5

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more dramatic claims of ideological maximalism have won favor in the press where headlines like “Polarization is Dividing American Society, Not Just Politics” (Cohn, 2014) are relatively common and commentators like Ezra Klein comment that “perhaps the single most important fact about American politics is this: the people who participate are more ideological and more partisan, as well as angrier and more fearful, than those who don’t” (Klein, 2014). The idea that American society—not just politics but society in general—is divided into two camps, completely polarized by ideology, seems ever-present in political reporting. These arguments exist among scholars of politics (Jacob, 2014)6 and religion as well (Putnam and Campbell, 2012).

5Layman et al. (2010) describe the way in which extreme party members have converted their issue positions to make the core of the party’s activists similar across a range of issues.

6Jacoby states that “It seems reasonable to characterize such sharp differences in feelings about fundamental values as the existence of a culture war, . . . And, [these results] cast serious doubt on arguments that political conflict in America takes place within relatively narrow boundaries of acceptable discourse.” (Jacoby, 2014, p. 767-768)
These two schools of thought generate clear hypotheses about the power of ideology in American politics, specifically the power of ideology to predict attitudes.

- **Minimalist hypothesis**: ideology is unable to predict respondent positions on individual issues, either for most citizens, or for a specific subgroup, because individual issues are not even connected to one another.

- **Maximalist hypothesis**: a single dimension of ideology—closely connected to the partisan elites—predicts not just individual issues, but the entire system of citizen beliefs.

Note that these two hypotheses are essentially the opposite of one another—a single dimension of ideology either predicts everything or it has virtually no predictive power at all.

We argue that reality lies in between the extreme positions of the minimalists and maximalists. To visualize our claim about the predictive power of ideology consider Figure 1. Here we present a hypothetical relationship (using simulated data) between two items. In the left-hand panel the the two items are independent of one another. This is the idea behind true ideological minimalism where ideology plays no role. The relationship between one’s position on issue ‘X’ has no bearing or relationship to the position one takes on issue ‘Y’. On the other hand, in the right-hand panel we see true ideological maximalism where two distinct camps (presumably the divided public discussed above) are divided by ideology. These two distinct camps are tightly clustered and homogenous on their issue positions. Furthermore, their ideological positions (the x-axis) are excellent predictors of their positions on individual issues (y-axis).

In contrast to the minimalist and maximalist arguments, we believe a better map of mass opinion resembles the center panel, where ideology (x-axis) displays clear and obvious predictive power—citizens are engaging in a kind of ideological thinking—but the correlation and predictive power are not strong enough to truly be described as polarization.\(^7\) The center panel reflects the loosely organized character of ideology in the American public. Certainly, the center panel would not fit the maximalist camp’s view of an America deeply divided by the issues of the day. However, it also does not fit the minimalist argument where ideology fails to exert even the smallest amount

\(^7\)One possible explanation for the center panel is that voters are indeed polarized, but that measurement error in their survey response lowers the correlation across issues (Zaller, 1992). We discuss in later sections why we believe that this is not the case but rather that the public have well-formed issue positions that are minimally correlated.
of predictive power. Both the minimalists and the maximalists reject the panel in the middle—which we contend comes closest to reality. They do so, however, for different, but related reasons. As we will argue, each camp incorrectly extrapolates from their chosen point of emphasis.
Figure 1: Each panel shows the relationship between two concepts. On the left, two individual items are independent of one another. On the right, ideology predicts issues extremely well (issue Y is merely a stand-in for the broader pattern). In the middle the ideology scale is moderately correlated with the item.
The minimalists begin by noting that individual issues are essentially unrelated (as in the left panel of Figure 1). They thus conclude that it is not possible that any collection of these issue positions could lead to a meaningful measure of “ideology.” As they would put it (see above), for the vast majority of citizens we can do no better than guess at their positions. The maximalists, on the other hand, begin by noting the power of ideology to classify and predict respondent attitudes and thus argue that citizens must be divided into two ideological camps that resemble the partisan camps of elites in Congress. According to the maximalist thesis, the messy correlation in the middle panel simply cannot be correct (or, at best, only applies to the least involved subsets of citizens). Because of the strong relationship between ideology (the x-axis of the right panel) and issue positions (the y-axis of the right panel), there must be similarly strong connections across all individual issues.

Both sides of the current debate clearly make important points. **Minimalists** see the weak connections between people’s particular issue attitudes and assume that the aggregation of these weakly correlated issues must also lead to a similarly weak measure of ideology. They are correct about the lack of connections between people’s issue attitudes (see figure 2 below), but wrong to believe in the implication that ideology will therefore fail to predict issue attitudes. By their argument, a useful single dimension of ideology cannot be extracted because there is not much there to begin with. Yet, as we will show, the collection of these weakly correlated issues yields a recognizable measure of ideology that can be quite useful in studying contemporary American politics.

**Maximalists** make the opposite mistake. They begin by recognizing the power of ideology (a conclusion minimalists would dispute). For instance, it is much more true among the mass public in the 21st century that liberals (however one measures it) are more likely to be Democrats and conservatives are more likely to be Republicans, something that was not the case in the mid-20th century. In this, they are right to note that a single ideological dimension explains much of the voting behavior and issue positions of the public, likely more than would have been true fifty years ago. They err, however, in believing that this single dimension explains most of the divide in American politics or the connections between elites and masses. As we will show, the general public (even the most politically active segment of the public) simply do not achieve such a level

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8Though, in this paper, we confine ourselves to contemporary measures.
Lane (1962) showed that citizens have deeply complex ideologies in their beliefs. In some instances people emphasize things that are concrete, knowable and proximate, while in other cases they will sometimes embrace abstract principles and aphorisms. What came out of his interviews is that the thinking and processing of political issues of even a relatively homogenous locale (he termed it Eastport) is extremely complex. Citizens, as he suggests, do not have consistent beliefs that are rooted in a mass system used by everyone. According to the maximalists, since Lane and Converse, America has changed. Perhaps it was true that a “continental shelf” divided the elites from the masses in their time, but these data are over fifty years old and deserve revisiting. Parties now offer much stronger signals to show voters how to think ideologically (Hetherington, 2001). A variety of things have sharpened the ideological signal being sent from Washington. While we do not intend to assess these factors here,\textsuperscript{9} we simply note that scholars agree that elected officials have become more unidimensional, sorted, and polarized in their issue positions (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006; Persily, 2015) and that in the contemporary political environment, the masses reflect this behavior, but only roughly and weakly.

We suggest that the predictive power of ideology lies in between the extreme positions of the ideological minimalists and maximalists. We also suggest that the more interaction with the political system one has, the more likely a person is to hold positions that are similar to elites. Ideology should thus do a reasonably good job of predicting the particular issue positions of survey respondents, but perform poorly if asked to explain all of voter ideology on a single dimension of liberalism / conservatism because no respondent interacts with the system so often, with such intensity, or within the institutional framework that truly mirrors elected members of Congress. As Lane observed in the early 1960s, people’s conceptions of politics are simply too complicated to be captured by a single dimension of ideology.

This makes the key difference between the mass public and elites the difference between cocktail party opinions and strategic ideological opinions necessary to hold together an ideological coalition (Noel, 2013). Ordinary people have little need for their opinions to be consistent. They

\textsuperscript{9}A number of scholars have studied the causes of increased sorting and polarization among elites. Some of the current explanations include changes in the media environment (Prior, 2007), fundraising and the nature of campaigns (Barber, 2016), and internal rules and procedures in Congress (Bianco and Sened, 2005).
have no long-term political allies that must be satisfied on high-stakes votes. Their opinions can change often, sometimes with little cost or fuss beyond some difficult connections. Elected members of Congress and other party leaders must hold to a kind of ideological rigidity because the coalition demands it. Even if, deep in her heart, a legislator does not care whether tax rates will be lowered (raised), her allegiance to the Republican (Democratic) Party means that inconsistent support of this principle could have serious costs. There is a substantial difference between being a member of the coalition and being an observer and occasional supporter of the coalition.

Obviously, this argument requires careful attention to measurement. In the next section we lay out both our measures and the specific reasons for choosing this measurement strategy. We then turn to a pair of specific data sources useful for testing our claims about ideology (the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey and the Pew 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey). We then demonstrate the claims laid out above and conclude with a discussion of the implications of our results.

**Measures and Data**

Scholars of ideology typically measure citizen preferences in one of three ways. First, they can use self-classifications, such as a respondent’s self-styled liberalism or conservatism. This has many advantages. For one thing it is a measure of self-understanding. Voters who define themselves as “liberal” incontestably accept the label. But this method is problematic in two important ways. Ellis and Stimson (2012) point out that many citizens are symbolically conservative, but operationally liberal. People revere the symbols of conservative traditions (God, country, self-reliance) but they take liberal positions on many public policies. This means that self-classification is an inherently muddy and problematic concept. Some voters who might seem liberal in terms of the policy issues in public debate will classify as “conservative” when asked. The other reason self-classifications are problematic is that they inherently ask people about a single (undefined) dimension. This is useful because politics is often organized (especially at the elite level) into a single dimension, but it may not be the way that voters think about their complete set of beliefs. If Ellis and Stimson are right that there are at least two groups of people—some focusing more on policy and some more focused on symbol and personal life—then this implies at least some degree
Beyond self-classification, a second option for measuring citizen preferences is to simply ask about a single issue. Single questions—ungrouped with others—can provide a scale (with at least two options, but often more) for a citizen’s opinion on a particular issue. This has the advantage that such questions are more easily defined as voters clearly know this is about government spending or abortion, or something else. In such cases, though question wording is still important, we can rely on the idea that voters know their opinion on a particular issue and need not be able to compare it to any other issue. The problem with this second measurement strategy, of course, is that ideology is inherently about the connections between the issues, not just how people feel on individual, discrete issues. The very idea of ideology goes much further than preferences on any particular question. As Converse (1964) described the electorate, very few people fit into the upper tier of voters whose views correlate with the parties and are able to describe the symbols and reasoning necessary to connect those issues into a complete ideology—in the American context a single-dimension of ideology. Yet he labelled that level as the pinnacle of ideological thinking and argued that it accurately described members of Congress.

Furthermore, there is a deeper problem with both of these measures of ideology. Neither one permits aggregation into a cardinal measure of ideology. Over three decades ago, as Poole and Rosenthal approached the question of measuring ideology in Congress they argued that what was needed was a cardinal measure of ideology (Poole and Rosenthal, 1985). Quoting Duncan MacRae (1958) they aimed for the “operational definition of distance” so that they could produce an interval scale, arguing that this sort of measure bridges a “crucial gap” (p. 357). Though Poole and Rosenthal have ably bridged that gap for years with respect to congressional ideology, citizens or voters have, so far, mostly been shoehorned into choice models that mirror their work. Perhaps that is reasonable, but it seems to us that voters deserve their own attention. As we argue here, once we focus our attention on voters we see the myriad ways in which they are quite different than elites—most notably, though we can create a single dimension that describes their political thinking, people are not nearly as well-described by a single ideological dimension as are elites.

Because of measurement issues like these, we follow a strategy that flows from the work of Poole and Rosenthal among others: building modeled ideology based on a series of issue questions. Such modeled ideology (discussed in more detail below) aggregates preferences on multiple questions.
and models preferences as a function of a voter’s latent “ideology.” In this sense, models of ideology can produce an “ideal point” (for one or more dimensions) for each voter. Though costly in terms of questionnaire space and respondent time this measurement strategy has the advantage of being much more comparable across respondents and allowing scholars to make explicit comparisons between different groups who have all received the same set of questions. This approach is quite common and has grown in popularity with the advent of large-N national surveys (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Jessee, 2009; Peress, 2013). The self-classification issues, while not completely solved, are set to the side in favor of measuring a person’s policy positions on a cardinal, (typically) unidimensional scale.

To carry out this strategy, we take data from two recent and frequently-used large-N surveys of Americans. Each of these surveys contain a number of questions regarding respondents’ positions on a range of issues that are or have recently been debated by members of Congress. We then also incorporate the roll call votes of members of the Senate on many of these same issues. The 2012 installation of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) asked respondents 10 questions that were designed to mimic roll call votes that are cast in Congress. Each question posed a binary option to respondents by asking them if they supported or opposed a particular policy. These policies related to tax policy and budgets, health care and birth control policy, free trade, ending “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” and the Keystone Pipeline. The specific question wording for these 10 questions is included in the Supplemental Materials. We also use data from the 2014 Pew Research Center’s survey on political polarization in America. In this survey the respondent is presented with two different statements regarding issues that are often debated between the contemporary parties. For example, one question asks respondents “...whether the first or the second statement comes closer to your own views - 1. Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient. or 2. Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.” We use 10 of these questions from the survey. The exact wording for each question is also contained in the Supplemental Materials.

The two datasets are similar in some respects (forced choice binary questions for a national sample), but quite different in other respects such as survey mode and question content. This is important for our thesis. In such disparate environments we are able to find patterns that are not just broadly similar, but are nearly indistinguishable. While we do believe that some
survey characteristics might change things slightly, the results here give us great confidence that we are finding reliable patterns that are true of public opinion broadly and not a particular set of respondents or questions.

**Empirics**

In this section we describe the character of the public’s ideological thinking (and some key subsets of the public). First we look at individual issues and show that the minimalists are right that such issues are largely uncorrelated and, presumably, very weakly connected to one another. However, we then demonstrate that despite this lack of connection between issues a single dimension of ideology does tell us quite a bit about a given respondent’s issue positions. In this sense the maximalists are correct. However, we then go on to show that the single dimension of ideology does not nearly capture the complexity of voter thinking in the same way that it does elite beliefs.

**Individual Issue Positions**

We begin by considering the correlation between individual issues in both the CCES and Pew data. The minimalist position argues that there should be little to no correlation across different issue positions of voters. Figure 2 shows that in most cases this is correct. Correlations between issues tend to be quite low for the typical survey respondent. In fact, in many cases the correlation approaches zero. In the CCES survey the average correlation between issues is 0.18. In the Pew survey the average is slightly higher (0.21). This correlation—though far from zero—is not terribly high.

There are relatively higher correlations between a few different issues. For example, a voter’s position on the recently debated “birth control exemption” that would allow employers to refuse to offer certain contraceptives as part of their health insurance plans to employees correlates quite highly with opinions over ending “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” (.4), the Affordable Care Act (.48), and one’s opinion regarding repealing the Affordable Care Act (.51). While we might expect a high correlation between the birth control exemption and opinions of the Affordable Care Act (given their close connection to the broader issue of access to health care), it is less obvious why voters’ opinions would hold together on issues of birth control and Don’t Ask Don’t Tell. Similarly,
respondents’ opinions on the second tax cut question are nontrivially correlated with several other issue questions.\footnote{It is, of course, possible that the salience of the issues is of significant importance. For now, we set aside questions of salience in much the same way that models of elites set aside such questions.}

While a few issues show some relationships among survey respondents, the overall correlations in both surveys are quite low, thus lending evidence to the minimalist argument. Furthermore, the correlations in the surveys are dramatically different from issue correlation in the Senate. The right panel of Figure 2 shows issue correlation for eight roll calls that were recently cast in the Senate that also appeared on the CCES survey. The difference between the mass public and elites is stark. In the Senate, the average issue correlation is 0.67, which is dramatically higher than the correlation between the same issues in the mass public. In fact, the minimum correlation in the Senate (excluding the U.S. Korea Free Trade Agreement, which cuts across traditional partisan lines) is higher than the maximum correlation value among voters.

One potential criticism of these results is that issue correlation does mimic that of elites, but only among a particular subset of the population. To assess this claim we subset the CCES data in three different ways. We first look at those who are least likely to participate in politics by considering those who reported not voting in the 2012 election. Among these respondents, the average issue correlation is lower than the total survey population (0.14). Among validated voters, the average correlation increases to 0.21. Finally, we identify a sample of respondents who we expect to be significantly more informed and engaged in politics. Campaign donors should be the most likely to mimic the issue constraint of elites given their involvement in the political arena and willingness to pay such high costs (their donations) of participation. Among those who reported giving money to a political candidates, the average issue correlation increases, but is still far from that of elites (0.31). We show in the Supplemental Materials the issue correlations for each issue among these subsets.\footnote{The same subset analysis of the Pew data show similar patterns. Mean issue correlation among non-voters is 0.08, for voters is 0.24, and for donors is 0.37. We note that for each of these measures there is a significant amount of over-reporting, but we see no reason to believe that the over-reporting dramatically alters any of our conclusions.}

Given these results, when looking at individual issue correlations, the minimalist argument appears to win out handily. Voters’ positions on individual issues are not strongly correlated, even among those who are most involved in politics. The maximalist stance of a deeply ideological public is not supported by these data in the slightest. Lest this evidence be read as overwhelming support
for the minimalist argument over the maximalist theory, we will show in the next section that when one begins from a different starting point (i.e. with an issue scale rather than individual issues) the data fail to support the minimalist position.
Figure 2: Correlation of Issue Positions - The left panel shows the issue correlation matrix among CCES respondents. The middle panel shows issue correlations for the Pew respondents. The right panel shows issue correlations for Senators. Individual issue positions among voters are on average not highly correlated. On the other hand, individual issue positions among Senators are highly correlated.
One explanation for the minimal correlation across issues is that voters do not actually have well-developed positions and their responses to these survey questions are simply expressions of non-attitudes or “top of the head” thinking (Zaller, 1992). However, when we examine the same issue questions in the CCES panel dataset, we find significantly higher correlation within issues across two years of time. The average correlation among these issues across time is 0.46. This is significantly higher than the across issue correlations among the American public and suggests that while there is little correlation across issues, the general public indeed have well-formed issue positions that are stable across time. Table shows the correlation among issues between 2012 and 2014 for the six issue questions that were asked in the panel.

<table>
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<td>Ryan Budget Agreement</td>
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Table 1: Correlations between 2012 and 2014 survey responses, CCES Panel - While the across issue correlations are quite low among the American public (Figure 2), this figure shows that within issue correlations across time are significantly higher.

The Power of The First Dimension of Ideology

To estimate the ability of ideology to inform us of the issue preferences of citizens we use the survey questions in the CCES and Pew surveys to create several different ideological measures. The basic idea is that out of the ten votes in the CCES (or Pew Survey) we use nine of those votes to estimate a one-dimensional ideal point for each respondent. Using this ideal point estimate we then see how well each of these measured ideologies of respondents predict the votes of those
same respondents on the omitted vote. If, as claimed by the ideological minimalists, ideology does not inform us of the issue preferences of voters, then the ideal point estimated using the nine votes should be a poor predictor of the tenth omitted vote. If on the other hand, as claimed by the ideological maximalists, voters are fundamentally ideological in their thinking, then the ideal point estimated using the nine votes should strongly predict how respondents feel about the tenth omitted vote. With ten votes, we repeat this process ten times, omitting a different vote in each model and using the remaining nine votes to generate an ideal point estimate for each respondent.

To estimate the ideological positions of survey respondents, we use a standard one-dimensional ideal point model that produces one estimate for each respondent (Clinton, Jackman and Rivers, 2004). If citizens or voters consider issues in a way that is similar to the grouping of issue preferences by elites, then this parameter will represent the degree to which a person is liberal or conservative on a unidimensional policy scale. However, it could be the case that voters consider issues differently from elites, whereupon the ideal point estimates would be arrayed according to some other dimension that is unique to voters. While ideal points are latent values, they are estimated by using observed data. Most often these observed data are roll call votes cast in Congress where legislators vote “yea” or “nay” on a range of proposals (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997). Following others (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Jessee, 2009), we adapt this method to survey respondents where expressions of support for policies on a survey are analogous to a “yea” vote in Congress.

To obtain the ideal points, we estimate a Bayesian item response model of the following form:

$$Pr(y_{ij} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_j x_i - \alpha_j) \quad (1)$$

In this model, which follows Clinton, Jackman and Rivers (2004), $y_{ij}$ is the expressed preference of respondent $i$ on policy $j$, with $y_{ij} = 1$ indicating support for the policy. This vote is determined by the voter’s latent ideal point $x_i$ as well as parameters $\beta_j$ and $\alpha_j$ which are specific to each vote. The estimation of the model produces $\hat{x}_i$, which is the estimated ideal point of each respondent.

\textsuperscript{12}In the Supplemental Materials we report the same results, but using the self-described ideology of the respondent from a 7-point Likert scale question as the independent variable rather than the modeled ideal point. The results are quite similar to those reported in the main paper.
Using that estimated ideal point, we then estimate the following model:

\[ P_r(y_{i}^{\text{omitted}} = 1) = \frac{\exp(\alpha + \beta \hat{x}_i)}{1 + \exp(\alpha + \beta \hat{x}_i)} \]

which is a simple logit model with only one covariate – the estimated ideal point of each respondent. The dependent variable of the model is the binary vote choice of each respondent on the omitted vote not used to create the ideal point for each respondent. Using this model, we then assess how well the estimated ideal point predicts the voter’s response to the omitted vote. To assess the model fit, and because the response option is binary, we use the percent correctly classified as a measure of the model’s accuracy. In the Supplemental Materials we also show a different measure of model fit by looking at the value of the coefficient on ideology as well as the standard error of that estimate. The results are substantively similar.

To benchmark how well the model of ideology predicts vote choice, we conduct the same analysis but replace the estimated ideal point on the right hand side of the equation with a series of dummy variables measuring the party identification of the respondent. With near universality scholars identify partisanship as one of the most powerful predictors of voter’s issue preferences (Bartels, 2000). Thus, how well ideology does at predicting preferences can be measured by comparing its performance to a similar model that uses partisanship in the same way. Because of the unique relationship between strong partisans, weak partisans, independent leaners, and pure independents on vote choice and issue preference (Magleby, Nelson and Westlye, 2011) we create seven dummy variable and include six of those seven dummies in the model (we omit the variable for pure independents). We then use the same measure of model fit as before by looking at the percent of observations correctly classified by the model.

Figure 3 shows the results of these models. The left panel of the figure shows the results for the ten different models that use the ten questions contained in the CCES survey. The middle panel shows the same results but using the questions in the Pew survey. Each point shows the percent correctly classified by the model. The labels on the y-axis indicate the survey question that was omitted from the ideal point model. This question is then the DV of the logit model. The ideal point used in each model is then created by combining the remaining nine questions listed on the y-axis. Circles indicate the percent correctly classified when using the ideal point to predict
the respondent’s choice. Triangles indicate the percent correctly classified when using partisanship to predict the respondent’s choice.

In both the CCES and Pew surveys, the ideal point estimates do quite well at predicting the respondent’s choice in the omitted vote. This is the case in two different ways. First, the percentage correctly classified is consistently quite high. In the CCES survey the best prediction is obtained using the Ryan Budget as the omitted vote and dependent variable. The model correctly classifies nearly 80% of all observations. In the Pew survey (middle panel of Figure 3) the model predictions range between 60% correctly classified and 80% accuracy. At the low end of the CCES data, the U.S. Korea Free Trade Agreement model correctly classifies only slightly more than half of all observations. In the Pew survey the least accurate model uses the question of U.S. military involvement overseas as the dependent variable and correctly classifies slightly less than 60% of the observations. Overall, the average percent predicted correctly among the ten votes is 72% in the CCES survey and 69% in the Pew survey. If the claims of ideological minimalists are right, the model that uses the respondent’s ideal point as the predictor should not be good at predicting the omitted vote. For instance Converse (1964), looking at issue correlations from 1958, states that “The matrix representing the mass public...is exactly the type that textbooks advise against using for factor analysis on the simple grounds that through inspection it is clear that there is virtually nothing in the way of organization to be discovered. Of course, it is the type of broad organizing dimension to be suggested by factor analysis of specific items that is usually presumed when observers discuss ‘ideological postures’ of one sort or another” (p. 230). Contrary to this statement, while Americans’ attitudes on individual issues do not correlate strongly with one another (Figure 2 shown above and in 1958 when Converse was writing), when grouped together into a “broad organizing dimension,” the mass public’s issue positions can be predicted with a relatively high degree of accuracy using a one dimensional model of ideological preferences. We can do substantially better than “guessing.”

Perhaps more important than the actual predicted accuracy of the models is the performance of the ideological model compared to a model that uses partisanship as the predictor, given the well established relationship between partisanship and issue preferences. According to this metric, the ideological model performs excellently. In each case the ideological model is at least as accurate
as the partisan model in predicting respondents’ issue preferences. This is true in both the CCES and Pew surveys. In the supplemental materials we replicate this result by including both partisanship and ideology in the same model to predict the omitted vote. Even after accounting for party, ideology is a strong predictor of one’s issue position.

Though we will make more of the comparison to elites below, it is worth pausing here to compare these results to those of U.S. Senators. The final panel of figure 3 shows the predictive power of a model of ideology on vote choice among elites. To conduct such a model we take eight roll call votes that were cast in the Senate that also appeared on the CCES survey in 2012 (giving us strong comparability across populations). Using these eight votes we conduct the same procedure as outlined above—create an ideal point by scaling seven of the eight votes together and then using that estimated ideal point to predict the senators’ votes on the omitted vote. After doing this eight times—once for each vote—we then plot the percent of observations correctly classified in the right panel of Figure 3. The results diverge from the other two panels of Figure 3 that use citizen responses and are much more accurate. In many cases the predicted accuracy approaches 100%. Thus, while ideology does powerfully predict the preferences of the average citizen, the predictive power of those models does not compare to the same level of accuracy as when applied to elites in office. This is consistent with a scenario in which voters are not using an all-encompassing unidimensional ideological scale when deciding their position on any one particular issue. Rather, one dimension gets the researcher quite far, but not nearly as far as when working with members of Congress. This is an important piece of evidence as it suggests that respondents ideologies are a coarse reflection of the activity going on in the elite institutions of Congress. We will develop this point further below.

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13 Similar to our findings, Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder (2008) find that the aggregation of a number of survey items performs nearly as well as partisanship in predicting presidential vote choice.

14 A naive model in which all observations are predicted to be 1’s or 0’s could be perfectly accurate if the data contained nothing but successes or failures. However, these votes were highly contentious and significantly divided the parties in nearly every case. Thus, the vote counts are far from unanimous, meaning that the extremely high accuracy of the models is not simply due to predicting unanimous successes or failures, but rather from the ability of the covariate to predict the outcome.
Figure 3: Predicting Votes Using Ideology - The points show the percent of observations correctly classified from a logit model with the issue position (y-axis label) as the dependent variable and the ideal point (circles) or partisanship (triangles) of the respondent as the independent variable. For example, we predict a respondent’s opinion on the Keystone Pipeline using an ideal point generated from the other 9 votes shown in the figure.
Subgroup Analysis

While we have shown that ideology does well at predicting the issue preferences of citizens, it is possible that this is not the case for certain subgroups of voters. We begin by considering an argument that perhaps ideology is especially poor at predicting the preferences of moderates and independents. We then consider the other side of this argument by investigating the degree to which more active and informed members of the public mimic the ideological consistency of elites.

Broockman (forthcoming) pays particular attention to those that identify as moderate on traditional ideological scales. For example, he states, “A citizen with a moderate score on an ideological scale is likely to support some liberal policies in some areas and conservative policies in some others, but we have no way of knowing in which” (p.14). This suggests that the models we describe above should be particularly good at predicting the preferences of liberals and conservatives, but be especially bad at predicting the preferences of those in the middle of the ideological spectrum. If moderates are in fact inconsistent extremists rather than voters who prefer truly moderate policies, then the ideological model should fail to predict their issue positions.

To test this prediction we take the ideal point scales that we have estimated and divide the population into those who identify as either liberal, moderate or conservative. We then re-estimate the logit models and predict the respondents’ preference on the omitted vote among these subsamples of survey respondents. If moderates’ issue preferences are especially idiosyncratic, then the ideal point models estimated using the nine binary questions in the survey should not do well at predicting voters’ preferences on the tenth, omitted vote. Furthermore, the model should perform worse when estimating the same model using the moderate portion of the sample than when estimated using the liberal or conservative sample of the survey.

We find that this is actually not the case. Rather, we find that the model performs equally well when using the liberal, conservative or moderate subsets of the population. The left column of Figure 4 illustrates this. Each point shows the average predictive power of the 10 models run among

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15 On a 7-point scale, we consider only those who answered 4 as moderates. If anything, this should bias our findings against finding ideological effects among moderates since we have excluded even those who are nearest the center of the scale (those answering 3 or 5) but express a mild preference for one side or the other. In the Pew data ideology is asked using a 5 point scale. We take those who responded with a 3 as moderate in this case.

16 We also estimate these same models by splitting the population based on their estimated ideal point score. Dividing the sample into thirds, we take the most liberal third, middle (moderate) third, and the most conservative third of the population and re-estimate the models. The results are similar to the self-reported ideology models shown in the main text. The interested reader can find these results in the Supplemental Materials.
Figure 4: **Predicting Votes - Subsets of Respondents:** In the left panels we subset the data to include those who self-identify as liberal, moderate or conservative. In the right panels we subset the data to include either those who identify as Democrats, Independents, or as Republicans. The points show the average percent of observations correctly classified from the logit models with the issue positions as the dependent variable and the ideal points of the respondents as the independent variables.

these different subsets of the public. The individual ten models from each survey are contained in the Supplemental Materials and show similar results. Looking at the left panels of Figure 4 we see that the model performs equally well among conservatives, moderates, and liberals. Each point is the percent of observations correctly predicted by the model. In each case, the estimated ideal point does quite well at predicting the outcome of the tenth, omitted vote. Furthermore, there is
no significant decrease in performance when considering only those voters whose ideal points are in the middle of the distribution.\textsuperscript{17}

Similarly, we also subset the survey respondents by those who identify with either political party and those that consider themselves to be independent of the parties. Again, using each subset of respondents we estimate logit models to see how well these estimated ideal points predict respondents’ opinions of the vote that is omitted from the ideal point model. The results suggest that the ideological model works well among partisans (of either party) and independents alike. The right column of Figure 3 displays these results. In both the Pew and CCES surveys the models correctly classify a significant majority of the observations. Furthermore, there is no significant difference in the predicted accuracy of the model when it is estimated using only those who identify as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. These results run counter to the arguments of Grossmann and Hopkins (2015), who suggest that ideological consistency is much more prevalent among Republican voters than among Democrats or independents. Our results, on the other hand, suggest that ideological reasoning is equally likely to occur among these three different groups.\textsuperscript{18}

Maximalists emphasize the polarized and ideological nature of different subsets of the population. They point to the most engaged portions of the American public when discussing the polarized and ideological public. For example, Abramowitz states: “Based on past research, we would expect ideological thinking to be more prevalent among the well informed and politically engaged than among the poorly informed and politically disengaged, and it is the well informed and politically engaged whose opinions matter most to candidates and officeholders.” To test these claims, we subset the data as we did above; however, this time we divide the data by levels of political activity. We divide the population into four groups: non-voters (Pew: 43%, CCES: 17%), general election voters (Pew: 57%, CCES: 83%), primary election voters (Pew: 32%, CCES: 35%), and campaign donors (Pew: 20%, CCES: 32%). We then compare how well the models fit the data among these different subsets of the population. According to the maximalist argument, we should see the more engaged segments of the population begin to mirror the behavior of elites in Congress.

Figure 5 shows the results of this test. We see that while it is true that the model performs

\textsuperscript{17}We note that this test is on data that explicitly excluded the option of a middle category (the question format was a kind of forced choice, though respondents could elect to not answer the question). In a setting with more “moderate” options we might expect different effects.

\textsuperscript{18}We present the remainder of the questions in the Supplemental Materials. The results are much the same. Independents and moderates perform as well as partisans, conservatives, and liberals in nearly every case.
better among the more engaged segments of the population, the largest gap is between voters and elites. Even among campaign donors—a small slice of the population—the model does not perform as well as it does when run using data from U.S. Senators. In fact, in both the CCES and the Pew survey the donor model is closer to the non-voter model than it is to the Senate model. This gap nicely illustrates the “continental shelf” that Converse suggested separated elites from the masses, even the most engaged segment of the masses.

![CCES Subset by Activity](image1)
![Pew Subset by Activity](image2)

Figure 5: **Predicting Votes - Subsets of Respondents:** The points show the average percent of observations correctly classified from the logit models with the issue positions as the dependent variable and the ideal points of the respondents as the independent variables. Each point shows a subset of the population. The last point (triangle) shows the predictive accuracy of the model when run on U.S. Senators.

**The Limited Power of The First Dimension of Ideology**

The results presented thus far run strongly counter to the prediction of the ideological minimalists. Contrary to their assertion that ideology provides little information about individual issue preferences, we have shown that, in fact, ideology provides a great deal of information about issue preferences. This is true across a wide range of issues, when using a variety of question wordings, among different subgroups of the population, and in different survey contexts. Furthermore, ideology is at least as useful as partisanship when making these predictions. All of this appears to be true for most sets of the mass public. Does this mean that the maximalists are correct? So far as they argue that ideology does a good job of predicting individual positions, they are. However, their claims go much further and address issues of polarization among both elites and the masses.
If ideology really divides society into two competing camps, then this first dimension of ideology should account for most of the issue positions of most citizens—or at least some subset of citizens.

However, if ideology in the public is less organized and not truly the source or root of ideological polarization in Congress, we should see a multidimensional arrangement of respondent beliefs (Treier and Hillygus, 2009; Ansolabehere et al., 2006). We have already seen how respondent attitudes are not as precisely predicted as are the votes of senators (see Figure 3). We now consider how much of the variation in these data is explained by the first dimension. Our point of comparison is the Senate since the implication of the maximalists is that the roots of congressional dysfunction and polarization can be found in the mass public. Since Senators, members of the highest elected body in the government, are those who are most constrained and ideologically consistent, do voters look like them? If voters use a unidimensional policy space to structure their views on each policy issue, we should expect the answer to that question to be ‘yes’ and consequently the first dimension to be comparable to the Senate in its ability to explain the overall variation in the data.

We continue along this line of inquiry by taking the questions used in the previous section and applying a simple principal component analysis. If voters considered issues in a truly one-dimensional manner, then one single dimension would explain the overwhelming majority of the variance in the responses to the questions. If, on the other hand, there were no connection between issues, then the first dimension would do quite poorly at explaining much of the overall variation in the data. For example, if there were no relationship between the ten questions included in the survey, then the first dimension would explain no more than 1/10th of the total variance in the data. Any improvement beyond this amount is due to correlation between the various questions.
Figure 6: **Proportion of Variance Explained by First Eigenvalue** - Using the 10 roll call questions included in the CCES, and Pew surveys as well as the 8 Senate Roll calls, we see that the first dimension explains vastly more variance in the Senate than among regular voters. However, among voters, the first dimension nevertheless explains nearly 1/3 of the total variance in the data.
Figure 6 shows the proportion of variance explained by each latent dimension that is estimated using the principal components analysis. The results from the CCES and Pew surveys are quite similar to one another. The first dimension explains about 30% of the overall variance in the data. This is a dramatic improvement over a naive model in which there is no correlation between questions or issues, suggesting that the first dimension of ideology is meaningful for citizens. And yet, before extending this finding too far, we note the dramatic difference between the first two panels in Figure 6 and the third panel, which shows the same principal components analysis for the eight roll call votes taken in the Senate that also appear in the CCES survey. In the Senate, the first dimension explains 75% of the variance in the data, consistent with past studies that find congressional voting is structured primarily along one dimension of political conflict (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Clinton, 2006).

Putting this finding in perspective is important. There is a very clear first dimension that structures the ideological preferences of the public. And, in this sense, the public can be described as having a kind of functional ideology that coarsely imitates the structure of debate in Congress. Some might argue that since the first dimension explains so much more variance than higher dimensions that those dimensions are simply mush and should be discarded. That might be a reasonable decision and so we make no strong claims here about the “best” number of dimensions for a model of the public. Our point has more to do with the proportion of variance explained by that key first dimension because that is what shows the “continental shelf” (Converse, 1964) between the public and their leaders. The first dimension of ideology for the mass public fails to approach the same level of explanatory power as it does when considering elected officials in Congress. Though the minimalists are wrong to believe that a single measure of ideology could not predict much at all, their ideological skepticism is quite valid when applied to dimensionality and the power of that first dimension to explain the beliefs of respondents. The ideological structure of the American public is dramatically different from that of Congress. The public are much less constrained and often take positions that are out of line with the single dimensional framework that structures conflict in Congress.

\(^{19}\)Of course this would require inspection of those individual dimensions, a discussion that goes beyond what we can fit into this paper. Furthermore, previous work examining this question suggests that the American public are best described by two-dimensions (Carmines, Ensley and Wagner, 2011).
Figure 7: Proportion of Variance Explained by First Eigenvalue - Subsets of the Public

Moving from left to right, we consider an increasingly informed and constrained subset of the general population. As we do so, the first dimension explains more of the overall variance in public opinion on the ten issues used in the CCES survey.
One potential criticism of these results is that while the public overall are generally not constrained, certain portions of the public do hold ideologically consistent positions that mirror the constraint of elites and elected officials. For instance, Lupton, Myers and Thornton (2015) argue that political sophistication constrains attitudes—see also Stimson (1975) and Jennings (1992)—and for a group of citizens they call “hyper-sophisticates” they can do so at levels that approach elites (which they measure as party convention delegates). To test this proposition, we consider various subsets of the CCES survey and investigate the proportion of variance explained by the first dimension of a principal components analysis. We begin by looking at the least likely group to face ideological constraint, non-voters. The left panel of Figure 7 shows that the proportion of variance explained by the first dimension decrease to 24% when considering non-voters. This is still dramatically higher than a naive model with no correlation between issues (showing that ideology still matters for all segments of the population), but it is lower than the 30% among the entire sample. When considering voters in the 2012 general election, the proportion of variance explained increases to about 34%.²⁰

Moving towards those who are even more informed and involved in politics increases the power of the first dimension even further. Analyzing respondents in the CCES who indicated having donated money to a political candidate in the last two years increases the proportion of variance explained to 45%. We look specifically at donors because of their willingness to pay a particularly costly signal (giving money) to indicate their interest and understanding of the political system. To push the analysis to the extreme, we further consider our own version of “hyper-sophisticates” to see if we can find a segment of the population that fits the maximalist argument by truly mirroring the ideological thinking of elected officials. These are people who are incredibly informed and involved in politics. We define these sophisticates as those who have voted, donated money, volunteered for a political campaign, are highly interested in the news and public affairs, identify as very liberal or very conservative, and furthermore identify as strong partisans. This is truly a very thin slice of the American public and includes those that previous research suggests would be most likely to behave as elected officials do in the structuring of their political preferences (Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008). This group consists of a mere 2% of the CCES survey—a small

²⁰We use the Catalyst validated vote variable to avoid the potential for over reporting of voting, which is common in self-reports of voting.
minority indeed. Among this slice of the population the explanatory power of the first dimension does increase above that of campaign donors (53%), yet it still fails to achieve the same level as that of Senators. And if this tiny slice of the American public does not achieve that level of constraint then no slice is going to get there.

In every case the first dimension explains a large share of the variance. However, while this dimension increases in power as we consider more informed and involved segments of the populations, even among the most informed and involved slice of the population, the first dimension is still far less powerful than among elected officials. Even when we limit ourselves to the most plausible group of people to look like elites—a group that represents, at best, two out of every one-hundred citizens—the first dimension of the measure captures only one half of the variation in their opinions. A comparable measure captures over three-quarters of the variation of Senators. Again, hyper-sophistocates are as similar to non-voters in the structure of their issue positions (or lack of structure thereof) as they are to elected officials. There is no strong comparison to be made between elites and the masses.

Discussion

This paper has essentially been an exercise in promoting “perspective.” To some that may seem pedestrian, but we regard it as an important contribution to the sub-field of public opinion that contains a great many contradictory findings. Some may be surprised at the diametrically opposed views—ranging from the idea of a polarized public to a non-ideological public. But that is the state of the literature as it stands where many perspectives talk past one another. It is our hope to bring the tools of item-response and ideological analysis to the study of public opinion. Despite the challenges of that task, there are a few clear lessons that have emerged and suggest the proper perspective.

As the minimalists correctly argue, it is unambiguously true that individual issue preferences are only minimally correlated. Of course there is variation across the issues. Two issues about health care will have a higher correlation than will an issue about health care and another about free trade. Still, using multiple datasets, we find that issue correlations are simply not strong. This fact does seem like it would suggest that ideology is unimportant or even non-existent. However,
we have shown that those relatively weak correlations add up to something important. This seems to be the case because even though individual issues do little to predict one another, these same issues can be collected into a bundle that scrapes together the available information into a relatively robust single-dimension measure of ideology. In fact, this scale does about as well as individual partisanship—perhaps the key variable in political behavior and public opinion—at predicting mass political attitudes on individual issues. Any variable that captures a third of the variation deserves the attention of social scientists interested in measurement.

Despite the power and importance of this dimension, maximalist claims of polarization and an electorate organized into two ideological camps are strikingly overblown. This is not because ideology is unimportant—far from it, ideology actually predicts as well as does partisanship. The issue is the claims being made by the maximalists. The power of the first dimension of ideology simply cannot accomplish as much for citizens as it does for elite behavior—a comparison implied by those who claim that the roots of congressional polarization and dysfunction can be found in the electorate. It is not the case that ideology organizes everything for the masses. Public opinion is simply much, much more disorganized than elite opinion. It would require a complicated, high dimensional model of mass opinion to even approach the predictive power achieved with the first dimension of a model for the Senate. The study of American politics has long been divided into two sub-fields—instiutions and mass behavior. As complicated as the attitudes of elite actors in those institutions can be, their complexity pales in comparison to the sheer disorganization of mass attitudes. Nevertheless, the predictive power of the first dimension of ideology among Americans is large enough and sufficiently structured to suggest that the American public exhibit a form of “functional ideology” wherein their issue positions can be well-predicted and are structured in the same (but messier) way as elite opinions.

These broad patterns hold for multiple subsets: for various stripes of partisans, for different levels of ideology, for voters, for donors, and even for the hyper-sophisticated—a level of interest and engagement with politics so far above the average citizen that the comparison is questionable. We obviously cannot analyze every dataset and every single subset possible, but given the data we have examined so far it is extremely difficult to imagine what type of data would be necessary to break this broad pattern. We conclude that the minimalists and maximalists have simply extended their conclusions beyond what the data supports. They are, alternatively, suggesting that the
public is either immune to ideology or captured by it, when the truth is predictably between those two poles. The public imitates the ideological cues they pick up from elites. The stronger their connection to politics, the better the imitation. But ideology in the mass public remains imitative; it never really approaches the organization seen in the congressional parties.

We argue that both of the maximalist and minimalist hypotheses can be rejected in favor of a simpler idea of imitative ideology—where citizens adopt, to some degree, the positions of the party with which they affiliate and interact. The more interaction with politics one has, the more they adopt those positions—though no individuals truly reach the ideological pinnacles achieved by elite members of the parties because citizen ideology simply does not bear a strong resemblance to elite patterns of thinking. An apropos analogy would be that members of Congress provide a signal (Lupia, 1994) to the rest of the country regarding the composition and structure of modern ideology. American elites adopt positions on issues as they arise. They develop explanations for their positions and link those positions to other issue positions with various explanations, continually crafting the meaning of “liberal” and “conservative.” This is typically done within the context of the legislative arena, where the structures, rules, and incentives of the electoral process further sharpen the definition and meaning of modern ideology. The vast majority of Americans, however, only receive a very blurry version of the ideological signals being broadcast by elites. In this way, the residual ideology possessed by the mass public is dramatically less defined and much less loosely held together. In this way, we suggest that it is in reality only an imitation, and not the true source of ideology. Much like children clumsily mimic the actions of their parents, citizens mimic the beliefs of their chosen party, but only on some issues some of the time. Their mimicry never achieves the consistency necessary for the ideological maximalists to be right about a polarized public.

While we do not have the space within this manuscript to sufficiently test the imitative nature of the public’s ideology, we believe that what we have shown here is consistent with this hypothesis and suggests more attention be given to the ideological thinking of citizens and voters. This requires careful measurement of the preferences of the American public. Thus far, in some respects, roll call analysis has mostly been applied to the public sheerly for purposes of studying representation (i.e., how often legislators vote with their constituents). Without disputing the

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21 See Noel (2013) for a discussion of the origins of ideology, perhaps from outside of the institutions.
need for that useful project, the mass public deserves more attention outside of the question of representation. This is true for many reasons, but the one most strongly shown here is that the mass public is simply not well described by the unidimensional models of self-classified ideology or partisanship. Those variables capture important ways in which citizens are connected to the political system, but are not, in themselves, measures of citizen thinking. This fact alone implies that the fit between the elites and the masses is always going to be weak in some respects—a truth that should be obvious in a republic where at best (in the most important and prominent elections) only six out of ten citizens bother to vote. This project is likely to take the form of showing how voters develop and use the language of ideology to understand and make sense of elites, but are less likely to apply this language and symbolism to their own thinking.

It can be somewhat dissatisfying to take a middle course of prudence as opposed to the strident and inherently more interesting positions at the extremes. However, an accurate depiction of reality is far more valuable than a provocative but exaggerated of that reality. We thus conclude that to get a full picture of ideology, and to use it in predictive models, one needs to respect the great power of ideology and responsibly acknowledge its limitations. Most of all we need to engage in a broader project of measuring it better.
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