

and still others are the opposite of extraverted (introverted). Of the “Big Five,” it turns out that political ideology is related to the first two. Liberals tend to be more open to new experiences, whereas conservatives are more conscientious.<sup>53</sup> Because we generally think of political views as following from personality traits, rather than the reverse, these results provide a framework for explaining why some people are liberal and some are conservative. Converse would probably argue in response to this that no matter how permanent an individual’s ideology is, there is still little evidence that ideology helps to provide attitude constraint or that people use their ideology to make sense of the political world. True enough, but connecting ideology to core personality traits suggests a permanence (our personalities do not change that much throughout our lives, after all) and foundation for a person’s ideology that Converse’s claims of ideological innocence do not.

### *Growth of Liberal and Conservative Media*

Compared with prior decades, ideologically oriented news outlets are today more common. Whether it be cable television stations, talk radio, or Internet blogs, citizens now have many choices for strictly liberal or strictly conservative news.<sup>54</sup> The growth in ideological news has especially occurred on the conservative side, with Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio program and *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox News channel as salient examples. Liberal news programming is also on the rise; the cable channel MSNBC’s weeknight line-up now contains liberally oriented programs. Not only do these liberal and conservative media sources exist, but people’s choice of news sources is related, at least in part, to their ideology. Compared with the general public, for example, *The O’Reilly Factor’s* viewers and Limbaugh’s listeners are significantly more likely to be conservative (36 percent versus 72 and 80 percent, respectively). Whereas 19 percent of the public is liberal, the percentage of liberals among the audience for two of MSNBC’s shows is higher (33 percent for *Hardball with Chris Matthews* and 35 percent for *The Rachel Maddow Show*).<sup>55</sup> This evidence suggests that an individual’s ideology influences her choice of news and that people choose to be exposed to information that supports their own ideology, perhaps reinforcing it.<sup>56</sup> We do need to be careful not to overstate this news influence, however, particularly because the audiences for liberal or conservative outlets are still smaller than for mainstream news. In 2010, 40 percent of the public regularly read a daily newspaper and 28 percent regularly watched the evening news on ABC, NBC, or CBS. In contrast, only 16 percent regularly listened to talk radio, 10 percent regularly watched *The O’Reilly Factor*, and 3 percent viewed *The Rachel Maddow Show* on a regular basis.<sup>57</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Few, if any, works have influenced public opinion scholarship to the extent that Converse’s “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics” has. The piece has been called the “foundation stone of political-behavior research”<sup>58</sup> and a veritable

cottage industry of research on public ideology arose after its 1964 publication. Some of that research confirmed Converse’s findings, whereas other studies, including many that we have discussed in this chapter, presented alternative conclusions. Our goal in this chapter has been to present this work while also providing counterarguments to specific points to help you sort through the claims and counterclaims as you think about whether you support Converse or his critics. Our own view, with which you might disagree, is that many of Converse’s core conclusions have stood the test of time. Chief among these is that members of the public tend not to see the political world in ideological terms. When asked to evaluate candidate and parties, after all, ideologically oriented responses are still fairly rare. And recall that, when asked whether they consider themselves to be liberal or conservative, significant portions (as high as 35 percent at one point) of the public responded that they had not thought enough about this topic to classify themselves. The proportion of the public that self-identifies has increased of late, as has the attractiveness of ideologically oriented media, perhaps suggesting that ideological thinking is on the rise. Time will tell whether this is indeed a new trend.

One of Converse’s key concerns, and the topic with which we began this chapter, was the degree to which citizens and elites think about and discuss politics using the same terms. Converse found that elites are much more likely to possess ideologically constrained belief systems. Elite constraint has rarely been studied since Converse’s work was published, but research examining this topic has confirmed Converse’s finding. As one public opinion scholar writing a recent review of belief systems research put it, “Subsequent work has tended to confirm Converse’s picture of a tiny stratum of well-informed ideological elites whose passionate political debates find little echo, or even awareness, in the mass public.”<sup>59</sup>

What are the implications of this disconnect between the public and its leaders? For one, it is more difficult for citizens to evaluate and constrain, if necessary, elite behavior if they do not understand the nature of elite policy decisions. This undermines democratic governance, certainly the type of governance assumed by participatory democrats, who hope that citizens will fairly routinely monitor the actions of leaders. Even elite democrats believe that the public should hold elected officials accountable during election time, a task that becomes difficult if these two groups do not think about and discuss politics using the same terms. Governing may also become difficult for leaders. With their belief systems more ideologically constrained, “it presumably becomes more difficult for [elites] to fashion agendas and priorities that can appeal to large swatches of a more variegated, unconstrained rank and file.”<sup>60</sup>

Finally, if the public tends not to think ideologically and if many members of the public do not organize their beliefs along an ideological continuum, is it fair to conclude that public attitudes are fleeting and not well reasoned? We are

not prepared to draw that conclusion, and we hope you will wait as well. In the next chapters, we describe other sources of people's political beliefs, including personality, values, self-interest, group attitudes, and historical events. Whether these alternative sources are as politically meaningful as or more meaningful than ideology and whether they revive a view of the public as more competent for democratic politics than Converse concluded are topics that we encourage you to consider as you read Chapters 6 and 7.

### KEY CONCEPTS

attitude constraint / 138	ideologically contentious / 141
attitude stability / 140	ideology / 134
belief system / 135	in-depth interviewing / 149
black political ideology / 150	liberals / 134
consensual politics / 141	Likert question / 143
conservatives / 134	measurement error / 146
ethnographic research / 151	open-ended questions / 135
heuristics / 157	question wording / 143

### SUGGESTED SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

- Converse, Philip E. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter. New York: Free Press, 1964.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

The first source is Converse's classic study, in which he outlines his argument for ideological innocence and presents survey data as evidence to support his conclusions. The second is a replication of a seminal work in voting behavior, *The American Voter*, published in 1960. Lewis-Beck et al. update this earlier book, using data from 2000 and 2004. Chapters 9 and 10 replicate portions of Converse's 1964 study.

- Is Democratic Competence Possible?* Special issue of *Critical Review* 18 (2006).
- MacKuen, Michael B., and George Rabinowitz, eds. *Electoral Democracy*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2003.

The special issue of the journal *Critical Review* contains a republication of Converse's 1964 "Nature of Belief Systems" paper (which is currently out of print) along with twelve essays that comment on research conducted on this topic since 1964. The issue ends with an interesting response essay by Converse in which he addresses some of the arguments of his critics. *Electoral Democracy* is also a collection of essays that explore themes related to Converse's work, including factors that influence people's opinions and interactions between the public and elites.

- Dawson, Michael C. *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Lane, Robert E. *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does*. New York: Free Press, 1962.

The authors of these books discuss and examine political ideology in ways quite different from Converse. Lane and Harris-Lacewell argue that ideology is best uncovered using methods other than surveys, such as interviews or ethnographic research. Dawson and Harris-Lacewell further demonstrate that group-based thinking should indeed be considered political ideology.

- "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011, <http://people-press.org/2011/05/04/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology/>.

This Web site presents the results of the Pew Research Center's 2011 efforts to classify Americans into one of nine political typologies. These typologies include some ideologically based ones (Staunch Conservatives and Solid Liberals, for example). For a fun exercise, click on the "Quiz: See Where You Fit" link, answer the questions that appear, and find out your political type.