

These are classic studies of individuals' political attitudes, in which Converse concludes that the public's attitudes change frequently and are not well organized.

Banaji, Mahzarin R., and Larisa Heiphetz. "Attitudes." In *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th ed., Vol. 1, ed. Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Gardner Lindzey. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of recent research on attitudes in the field of psychology.

Gronke, Paul, and Brian Newman. "FDR to Clinton, Mueller to ?: A Field Essay on Presidential Approval." *Political Research Quarterly* 56(2003): 501–512.

This article provides an excellent review of the research on presidential approval.

Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

After analyzing public opinion polls conducted between 1935 and 1990, Page and Shapiro conclude that public opinion at the aggregate level is quite stable over time. In addition, their book provides a detailed picture of the public's attitudes toward many important policy issues.

Petty, Richard E., and John T. Cacioppo. *Communication and Persuasion*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986.

Zaller, John R. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Important insights on the effects of communication on attitudes are contained in these two books. Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model and Zaller's receive-accept-sample model have greatly enhanced our understanding of persuasion and attitude change.

Gallup Presidential Job Approval Center, [www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx)

The American Presidency Project, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php)

These two Web sites provide extensive presidential approval data. The Gallup site allows you to analyze levels of presidential approval among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.

### PART III

## Do Citizens Organize Their Political Thinking?

ARE PEOPLE'S POLITICAL opinions on different issues related to one another? That is, is there some consistency across views, or does knowing citizens' views on one issue not help predict their views on other issues? Assessing consistency can be tricky, but one yardstick that has been used is political ideology. With this approach, a person with all conservative views would be considered to have more consistent attitudes than someone with a mixture of liberal and conservative views. But is ideology the best yardstick? And, if it is, what is the best way to measure the degree of ideological thinking and ideological organization of people's political opinions? The first chapter of this section takes up these topics, while the other two chapters move beyond ideology to consider a range of factors that might shape people's attitudes.

Why should we care if the public organizes its political thinking? Answering this question brings us back to the normative topic of citizen competence. Can citizens function effectively in a democracy if their political views are not well organized? The chapters in this section speak to questions such as these; we hope you will ponder them as you proceed.

## CHAPTER 5

# Ideological Innocence and Critiques

IN JUNE 2003, Bill O'Reilly and Al Franken appeared together at Book-Expo America, a convention for book publishers, sellers, and authors. O'Reilly, the host of *The O'Reilly Factor* on the Fox cable channel, and Franken, a former comedian on *Saturday Night Live* turned political commentator and, since 2009, a U.S. senator, were at Book-Expo to talk about their new books. Franken's book, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*, criticizes Republicans and right-leaning pundits and journalists, including those on Fox, for bending the truth to fit their aims. Not surprisingly, O'Reilly was annoyed by the arguments contained in Franken's book as well as its tone. Their appearance at the convention ended in a shouting match. *USA Today* began a news story about the event with this sentence: "Bill O'Reilly, the *conservative* talk show host, first decried political commentators who 'call people names.' Then he called Al Franken, the *liberal* humorist, an 'idiot.'"<sup>1</sup>

O'Reilly and Franken are not the only political figures to be labeled conservative or liberal. News coverage of the Supreme Court often uses these terms. In June 2011, for example, the Court issued "the most significant employment discrimination decision in more than a decade," according to Nina Totenberg of National Public Radio.<sup>2</sup> The question facing the justices was whether over 1 million female Wal-Mart employees could join together in a class-action lawsuit alleging sex discrimination in salary and promotion decisions. A *New York Times* journalist reported the decision as follows: "The court divided 5 to 4 along ideological lines"; when answering the key question, "The court's five more conservative justices said no, shutting down the suit and limiting the ability of other plaintiffs to band together in large class actions."<sup>3</sup>

Consider also the 2011 congressional debate over how to balance the federal government's budget. One of the many items under discussion for reduced spending was subsidies to farmers. Why were farm subsidies up for discussion? According to one reporter, "after taking a beating from constituents concerning their Medicare proposal last month, Republicans are eager to find an area of common ground with Democrats. Farm subsidies seem to fit the bill; conservatives condemn them as

intrusions into the free market, liberals denounce them for encouraging environmentally harmful overfarming, and both sides see them as a form of corporate welfare.”<sup>4</sup>

While media coverage of political debates often describes key actors as either liberal or conservative, what does it mean to be a liberal or a conservative? Do these terms carry any meaning for you? In particular, do you gain a greater understanding of the topics presented in the news stories if you know them? Liberalism and conservatism are the two dominant ideologies in U.S. politics. A political **ideology** is “an interrelated set of attitudes and values about the proper goals of society and how they should be achieved.”<sup>5</sup> Put another way, “If an attitude is a strand of feeling, then an ideology is a rope of intertwined attitudes and related fibers.”<sup>6</sup> Two aspects of these definitions are worth emphasizing. First, an ideology consists of attitudes that are coherent and related to one another.<sup>7</sup> Second, an ideology does not refer to just any set of related attitudes but, rather, to beliefs about society and especially the proper role of government. In the American context, **conservatives** emphasize order, tradition, individual responsibility, and minimal government intervention, particularly in economic matters. **Liberals**, in contrast, believe that government intervention in the economy is sometimes necessary to combat features of the free market (such as discrimination and low wages). Liberals also value equality, openness to dissenting views, and civil rights.

According to many democratic theorists, citizens and politicians need to communicate effectively with one another so that, among other reasons, citizens can evaluate the performance of elected officials and these officials can know the political preferences of the citizens. Communication between citizens and leaders is enhanced if the two groups talk about politics using the same terms. This does not occur, however, at least according to Philip Converse’s classic work on political ideology. Conducting his research in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Converse concluded that political elites are much more likely than citizens to organize the political world ideologically along a liberal-conservative continuum. Not only are citizens less likely to think about politics ideologically, the terms *liberal* and *conservative* carry little meaning for many people. Public understanding of political debates is threatened by such a lack of understanding. As Converse put it, “The more impoverished [a citizen’s] understanding of the term [conservative or liberal], the less information [the term] conveys. In the limiting case—if he does not know at all what the term means—it conveys no information at all.”<sup>8</sup> Further, low knowledge of ideology and uncommon ideological reasoning among the public is, at least to some, evidence that the public is not capable of democratic citizenship.

Converse’s work ignited a firestorm of research, with many scholars trying to resurrect a more respectable view of citizens’ capabilities. In this chapter, we review the research that challenges Converse’s arguments on theoretical, conceptual, and

methodological grounds. First, however, we detail Converse’s original argument and the methodology on which his study relies.

### CONVERSE’S CLAIM: IDEOLOGICAL INNOCENCE

The overarching goal of Converse’s research was to examine the belief systems of citizens and elites. He defines a **belief system** as “a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence.”<sup>9</sup> Although Converse prefers the term belief system rather than ideology, he does admit that the two are closely related. Further, as we will soon see, to determine whether the public’s beliefs are joined in coherent systems, he uses the liberal-conservative ideological dimension as one of his gauges. As for constraint, Converse refers to the degree to which we could predict a specific attitude of someone knowing her attitude toward a different political object. When a belief system is present, “if a person is opposed to the expansion of social security,” we can judge that “he is probably a conservative and is probably opposed as well to any nationalization of private industries, federal aid to education, sharply progressive income taxation, and so forth.”<sup>10</sup> Constraint, for Converse, means that people’s political attitudes are related to each other because they derive from an overarching worldview (such as a political ideology).

### Do People Demonstrate Ideological Thinking?

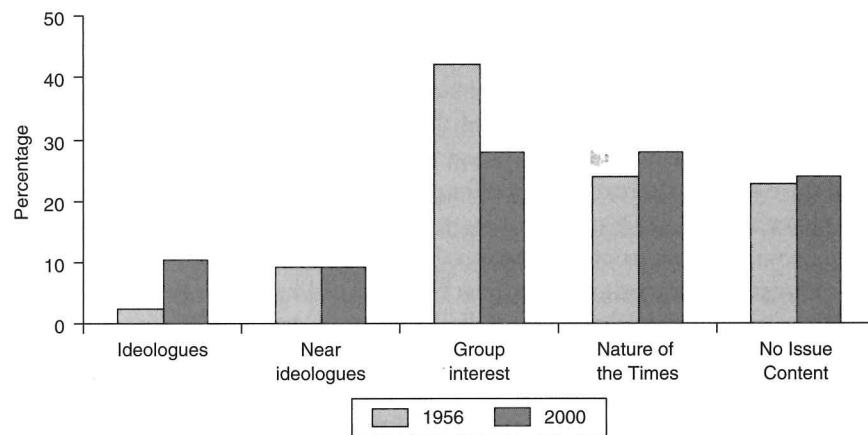
Converse’s overall conclusion, as we have already mentioned, was that elites were much more likely to possess belief systems compared with the general public. This conclusion is based primarily on his analyses of the 1956, 1958, and 1960 American National Election Studies (ANES) panel study. To understand and evaluate Converse’s conclusions, you need to know what evidence he used to make his arguments. Thus, we summarize here Converse’s study in depth. For his first analysis, Converse examined the degree to which respondents in 1956 used ideological language in response to questions about the political parties and the two major party candidates for president. This series of questions began: “Is there anything in particular that you like about the Democratic Party? Is there anything in particular that you don’t like about the Democratic Party?” Respondents were then asked for their likes and dislikes of the Republican Party and the candidates (Democrat Adlai Stevenson and Republican President Dwight Eisenhower).

Such **open-ended questions** allow respondents to discuss politics using their own terms and language, thus providing important insights into how people conceive of the political world. From his analysis of the responses, Converse categorized the public into five groups based on the degree to which people used an abstract benchmark, such as the liberal-conservative ideological continuum, to evaluate the parties and politicians.<sup>11</sup> Those individuals who did use this continuum, such as by differentiating the parties based on ideology and correctly linking

specific policy positions of the parties to this ideology, were labeled Ideologues.<sup>12</sup> The second group—Near Ideologues—included people who used ideological labels such as liberal or conservative but perhaps did not fully understand the meaning of these terms or did not use ideology as their primary tool for evaluating politics. One example here is a man who liked *both* the “liberalness” of the Democrats and the “conservative element in the Republican Party.”<sup>13</sup> All told, only about 11.5 percent of the public was classified as either an Ideologue (2.5 percent) or a Near Ideologue (9 percent; see the lighter bars in Figure 5-1).

Far more common were people who conceptualized politics in terms other than ideology. The largest category was Group Interest citizens, who made up 42 percent of the respondents. These individuals tended to discuss the parties and candidates in terms of whether they favor the interests of specific groups, such as the man who disliked Republicans because “[t]hey are more for big business” or the woman who liked that the Democrats “have always helped the farmers.”<sup>14</sup> Nature of the Times was the label Converse applied to his fourth group. People in this group (24 percent of the public) linked the parties or candidates with the current state of the nation. More specifically, parties in charge during times of peace or prosperity were evaluated more favorably than were those who ruled during war or economic downturns.

**Figure 5-1 Levels of Conceptualization among the American Public, 1956 and 2000**



Sources: Adapted from Table I of Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), 218, and Table 10.1 of Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Helmut Norpoth, William G. Jacoby, and Herbert F. Weisberg, *The American Voter Revisited* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 279.

The final group in Converse’s classification evaluated the parties and candidates on grounds other than issues. No Issue Content citizens included those who used personal characteristics to evaluate candidates, were not sure what either political party stood for (even when they identified with one of the parties), or did not follow politics closely enough to discuss parties or candidates. This final group made up 22.5 percent of the citizenry, nearly twice that of the Ideologues and Near Ideologues combined. To Converse, these results clearly demonstrated that most members of the public do not think about political parties and candidates ideologically.

Replication of this part of Converse’s study in recent decades has been rare. Fortunately, however, Michael Lewis-Beck, William Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert Weisberg did just this recently.<sup>15</sup> Relying on the open-ended likes and dislikes questions in the 2000 ANES (regarding George W. Bush, Al Gore, and the Republican and Democratic parties), these researchers categorized respondents into the five groups first created by Converse. As demonstrated by the darker bars in Figure 5-1, the number of Ideologues among the public was higher in 2000 than in the 1950s, whereas the Group Interest category was smaller. Despite these changes, the two largest categories continued to be Group Interest and Nature of the Times, each containing 28 percent of the public. Following closely behind was No Issue Content with 24 percent. As was the case in the 1950s, in 2000 these three categories were all significantly larger than the Ideologues (10.5 percent) or Near Ideologues (9 percent). The following are illustrative examples of the responses provided for each of these five categories in 2000:

- Ideologue:** Likes Bush because “He is for limiting government. . . . He wants to lower government spending and stop government interference. . . . He wants to reduce the deficit and provide tax cuts.” Dislikes the Democratic Party because “They want more taxes and more government at the federal level.”
- Near Ideologue:** Dislikes the Democratic Party because “I feel like they’re too liberal” but does not elaborate this statement further. Likes the “conservative views” of the Republican Party and “appreciate[s] that they will take stands not to make people feel good, but to do what’s right.”
- Group Interest:** Likes Gore because of “[h]is health care reforms, so that senior citizens will not have any out-of-pocket expenses.” Dislikes Bush’s health reform plans because “[s]enior citizens will be out of their pocket expenses. The upper income will get the benefit, the lower and middle income will suffer.”

- Nature of the Times: Dislikes Bush because "He is a Republican. I have been in construction for the last 33 years and every time there has been a Republican in office, I've been in the unemployment line."
- No Issue Content: Likes Bush because of "[h]is sincerity. He surrounds himself with good people and he is well connected."<sup>16</sup>

### Do People Recognize Ideological Terms?

Moving on and mostly moving away from open-ended questions, Converse next assessed the degree to which people could recognize the terms liberal and conservative. Even if ideological reasoning was uncommon among citizens, public understanding of these terms could be more common. To address this possibility, in 1960 Converse asked respondents, "Would you say that either one of the parties is more *conservative* or more *liberal* than the other?" Those answering yes were then asked which party is more conservative and then why they characterized that party as more conservative. Nearly 40 percent of the respondents either did not recognize these terms or were unable to attach any meaning to the terms.

Among those who did identify the ideological leanings of each party and did attempt to discuss the meaning of conservatism, there was variation in the correct use of the terms and in the breadth of ideological thinking apparent in the answers. Converse concluded that about 17 percent did not correctly apply the terms or did not provide a correct meaning for conservatism, whereas 29 percent provided correct meaning but demonstrated only a narrow understanding of the ideologies. Typically, these respondents discussed ideology only in terms of which party spends more money and which saves more. Republicans are more conservative, one person explained, because "they vote against the wild spending spree the Democrats get on."<sup>17</sup> The remaining respondents, about 17 percent, recognized the ideological terms, identified the Democrats as liberal and the Republicans as conservative, and displayed a more thorough understanding of liberalism and conservatism. Although this segment of the public is larger than the 11.5 percent that displayed ideological thinking in response to the open-ended questions about parties and candidates, it is still a small percentage of the public.

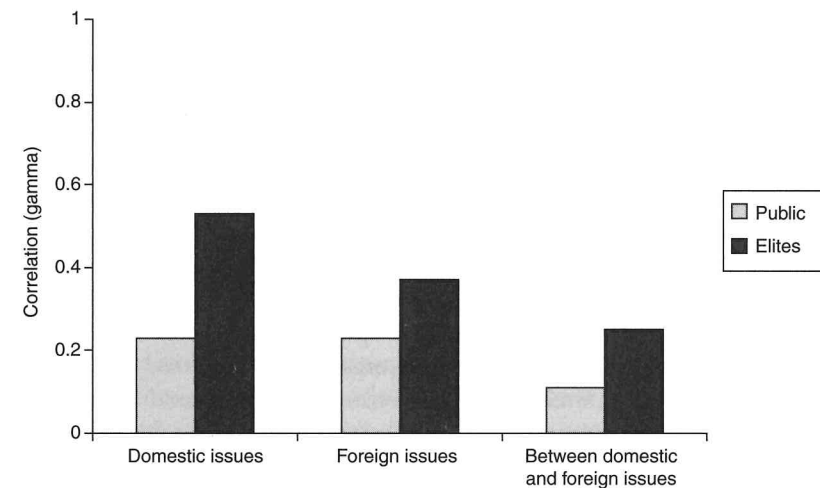
### Are Individuals' Attitudes Constrained and Stable?

So far, Converse's analyses suggest that most people do not use the liberal-conservative ideological spectrum to organize their political thinking. This, however, does not mean that the political views of most people are unorganized. Perhaps beliefs are organized along other criteria. **Attitude constraint**, in other words, may exist among the public even though the political worldview that is constraining the attitudes is not liberal or conservative ideology. Converse tested this assumption two ways. First, using the 1958 ANES data, he looked at the relationship between a number of issue opinions to see whether opinions toward

an issue (such as federal education aid) correlated with opinions on another issue (such as public housing). Because liberals tend to support federal government spending on education and government provision of public housing, and conservatives tend to oppose both, if most of the public organize their issue opinions along this ideological continuum, we would expect these opinions to be highly correlated among the public. Yet what if people who support federal education aid also tend to oppose public housing? This would suggest a different organizing framework. If this is the case, we would still see high correlations between the attitudes, albeit in the opposite direction, with support for one issue correlated with opposition to the other.

Examining the relationships between four domestic issues and three foreign affairs issues, Converse in fact found very low correlations among the public, leading him to dismiss the possibility that the public's beliefs are constrained along any dimension. Further, he compared the correlations of the public with those of political elites (in this case, congressional candidates) and found that belief constraint is much higher among the elites. See Figure 5-2, which presents the average correlations (specifically, gamma coefficients) separately for domestic issues and foreign issues, and then for a comparison between all domestic and all foreign issues. As you can see, correlations (and thus belief constraint) were higher among elites than the public for all three comparisons.

Figure 5-2 Relationships between Issue Opinions for the American Public and Political Elites, 1958



Source: Adapted from Table VIII of Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), 229.

Second, Converse compared people's issue attitudes in 1956 with their opinions on the same issues in 1958 and again in 1960. This is the analysis we presented at the beginning of Chapter 4. As you recall, the levels of **attitude stability** were quite low. The correlation (expressed in this case with tau-b coefficients) between opinions on school desegregation in 1958 and 1960 was .43, whereas the correlation over time on the issue of federal housing assistance was .29. In contrast, respondents' party identification was much more stable across these two years (tau-b = .73), demonstrating that party affiliation does not change as much as do issue opinions. Further, Converse found that people's issue opinions fluctuated as much between 1956 and 1958, and between 1958 and 1960, as they did between 1956 and 1960. Given the longer time frame of the last period, we might expect less stability than over a two-year period. But this pattern was not apparent in Converse's data, leading him to conclude that the public "contains significant proportions of people who, for lack of information about a particular dimension or controversy, offer meaningless opinions that vary randomly in direction during repeated trials over time."<sup>18</sup>

### *Groups as a Source of Belief Constraint*

Although Converse argued that most Americans did not possess an ideologically constrained belief system, he did find one source of belief constraint among the public—attitudes toward social groups. Converse's respondents were asked two policy questions that referenced African Americans (or Negroes, the common label in the 1950s). One queried public support for the federal government to ensure public schools are desegregated, and the other assessed whether the government should ensure that African Americans are not discriminated against in employment and housing. The correlation between opinions on these two items was .57, much higher than the average relationship among public opinion toward the entire range of domestic policy issues that Converse examined (see Figure 5-2). Further, the correlation between these two items among elites was actually lower than for the public (.31).

In sum, Converse's conclusions were that (1) the public does not think about political parties and candidates ideologically, (2) recognition and correct use of the terms liberal and conservative are quite rare, (3) constraint across a variety of issue positions is low, and (4) attitude consistency over time is low. Citizens do appear, however, to organize their political opinions around views of prominent groups. Elites, in contrast, use ideology to organize their political thinking, as is evident by their higher levels of attitude constraint. If these results seem to confirm elite democrats' assumptions that the public is not well equipped for democratic governance, they should. In fact, empirical findings such as Converse's led to the development and refinement of the theory of democratic elitism. Elite democrats assume that the public is neither engaged in nor well informed about politics, which should contribute to their low levels of ideological understanding

and use of ideology to organize their thinking. Other theorists, particularly those with a more optimistic view of the public's capabilities, found Converse's work limiting and looked to other explanations to account for his findings.

### **CRITIQUES OF CONVERSE**

Converse's research received much attention at the time of publication, has spurred countless commentaries and studies (some supporting and some opposing his conclusions), and is still influencing public opinion scholars today. His work was referred to as "celebrated" and "influential"; but it was also called "notorious" by one scholar,<sup>19</sup> and another described it as an "enduring milestone" and a "millstone," the latter because of the "misleading criteria Converse used to assess political competence and electoral responsibility."<sup>20</sup> As these quotations suggest, Converse's work was not well received by all. Over the years, critiques have come from many quarters. We summarize and evaluate key counterarguments next. As you will see, each argument provides a somewhat different criticism of Converse, but none provides evidence or reasoning that undermines his entire body of evidence.

### *The Political Context*

Were Converse's results due to the nature of the times? Several people have argued that the 1950s was an especially nonideological time in the nation's politics, thus producing the low levels of ideological thinking measured by Converse. This was a decade of (relatively speaking) **consensual politics**. Disagreements between the political parties were minor, the political environment was not dominated by the discussion of conflictual issues, and the public was not very tuned in to politics. Politics during the 1960s and 1970s was much more **ideologically contentious**. Battles raged over civil rights, the United States was involved in what became a controversial war in Vietnam, the economy took a downturn, riots broke out in many cities, and President Richard Nixon was forced to resign as a result of the Watergate burglary. These salient issues increased public attention to political matters and divided the Democrats and Republicans quite publicly as the two parties openly debated their differences over these matters. Did these changed times result in citizen views that were more ideologically grounded during this time period? Some early evidence suggested yes.

In their analysis of public attitudes between 1956 and 1976, Norman Nie, Sidney Verba, and John Petrocik concluded that the public's belief systems did become more constrained over time.<sup>21</sup> Much as Converse did, Nie and his colleagues examined the gamma correlations between pairs of issues in each of these years. These issues included a few domestic issues (such as welfare and school integration) and one foreign policy issue (the Cold War). As we know from Converse's work, the average correlation between the issue pairs was quite low for 1956, 1958, and 1960. Beginning in 1964, however, the average correlation increased substantially, rising to .41 from .13 in 1960 (see Figure 5-3). To Nie et al., this was