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Source: *Political Behavior*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (September 2013), pp. 453-479
Published by: Springer
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43653078
Accessed: 31-10-2019 16:20 UTC

ORIGINAL PAPER

What does "Political" Mean to You?

Jennifer Fitzgerald

Abstract   How do regular people define the term "political"? This original study gives Americans and Canadians an opportunity to express their interpretations of the concept. It identifies a great deal of inter-personal variation in terms of how many and what kinds of topics people perceive as the stuff of politics. And this variation comes in predictable patterns: the findings reveal correlations between socio-political attributes (such as gender, nationality and ideology) and the boundaries people draw around the political domain. The study also provides insight into the ways people distinguish the political from the non-political in their minds. And importantly, individuals' interpretations of the term "politics" relate systematically to other measures of self-reported political behavior including political interest and frequency of political discussion. These results can be used to refine survey analysis and to broaden knowledge of day-to-day citizen politics.

Keywords   The political · Categorization · Comparative political behavior · Validity · United States · Canada

The field of political behavior has benefitted in recent years from research that examines the cognitive and habitual connections between individuals and the political realm. People connect with politics on a day-to-day basis by taking an interest in political affairs and following political events; they engage in politics by talking with others about political issues. Among political scientists, there seems to be growing consensus that the hard-to-see dimensions of routine political behavior warrant greater attention. Yet gaining insight into the nexus between ordinary people and the world of politics is difficult because it tends to reside in spheres that are socially intimate and

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psychological. As a result, researchers have applied innovative techniques such as snowball sampling (Huckfeldt and Mendez 2008), participant observation (Walsh 2004), focus groups (Conover, Searing and Crewe 2004) and quasi-experimentation (Klofstad 2009) to study informal political behavior.

These advances make it an exciting time to work in this area of research. They also make it a propitious time to step back and pose some fundamental questions about how regular people conceptualize the political. How do average citizens define politics? Is there consensus among people as to where the pedestrian ends and the political begins? These queries are important as their answers stand to enhance our understanding of how people relate to the political arena.

Probing people's ideas about what is political also advances the study of political behavior because many scholarly contributions rely on survey instruments containing the term "political."[1] When behaviorists survey individuals about their level of political interest, attention to political news, frequency of political discussion, and nature of political participation among other things, heterogeneity in respondents' understanding of what counts as political could threaten the validity of the resultant findings.

This paper presents results of an exploratory study that asks people about what *they* think of as political. It provides insight into how citizens associate this concept with various topics, measuring features and correlates of people's perceptions. It also examines the different ways people distinguish the political from the non-political in their minds. Specific questions that motivate this paper include: Are there topics that everyone views as political or is the term highly subjective and context dependent? Are public conceptualizations of the term chaotic or are there discernible patterns within and between societies? Do people's definitions of the political matter for their responses to survey instruments that hinge on the term "political"?

The analysis establishes that regular people often disagree with one another over what the term "political" signifies. Americans and Canadians were presented with a range of topics (poverty, same-sex marriage, oil drilling…) and asked to identify all those that they view as political in nature. This exercise reveals that some people have broader interpretations of the political sphere than others; that is, some people operate with a sense that very few themes are political while others perceive many as such. There are also major inter-individual differences in terms of what *kinds* of things register as political. And clear correlations exist between people's social and political attributes (such as nationality, gender and ideology) and the boundaries they draw around "politics." Importantly, people's ideas about what is political relate

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[1] Examples of such questionnaire items include:

"How interested would you say you are in politics?" World Values Survey.

"When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally or never?" World Values Survey.

"How often do you read the political content of a newspaper?" International Social Science Programme.

"In political matters, people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. How would you place your views on this scale?" General Social Survey.

"Dis/Agree: I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics." American National Election Studies.

systematically to their reported political interest, attention to politics, frequency of disagreement and number of political discussants.

Another part of the survey prompted respondents to provide their own definitions of what "political" means. These conceptualizations reveal heterogeneity but also patterns consistent with insights from prior qualitative work. Some definitions of the political cast it as government-related; some associate politics with controversy. The evidence presented below suggests that when identifying "political" topics, respondents consider what kinds of things government does, what they think government should do, and which issues garner public conflict. Such findings signal that as scholars of public opinion devise increasingly inventive ways to study mass behavior, they should devote attention to some basic conceptual matters. The present study generates new insights and provides an instrument that can be replicated in future surveys.

The Study

The central purpose of this study was to establish whether people have vastly different ideas about what counts as political. It was also designed to identify patterns in people's conceptualizations of politics, such as cross-national variations. It is a localized, transnational study which facilitates a somewhat controlled comparison between Americans and Canadians. Here, I describe the community of interest and introduce the central survey items.

Port Huron, Michigan, and Sarnia, Ontario, sit on opposite banks of Lake Huron where it empties into the Saint Clair River. Though governed by different systems, these two cities are part of a single Blue Water regional community. A symbol of the transnational dimension of this community is the International Symphony Orchestra (ISO). This is a non-profit musical association that draws performers, members and supporters from both sides of the waterway. They perform their concerts (around 25 per season) in both cities.[2] The study at hand recruited survey participants from the members and friends of the ISO.[3] 241 persons completed the survey: 117 in the US and 124 in Canada.

The sample of survey respondents is neither nationally nor regionally representative. Participants are connected to each other through their ties to the ISO. They reside in the same transnational community, and they are either music lovers or civic minded or both. They also skew old, white and educated relative to their national populations. Rather than a drawback for the analysis, their similarities make these participants ideal for this study because they facilitate a tough test of the thesis that individuals hold dissimilar conceptualizations of the political. Because

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[2] Additional examples of their connection include the Blue Water Beat (an online forum publicizing events on both sides of the border), the two-year Blue Water International Sculpture Exhibit that spans the entire area, the Seaway Sounds Chorus (a singing organization with members from both sides of the bridge), and the presence of local Sarnia radio and television stations on Port Huron dials (and vice versa).

[3] Participants were invited to participate in a "Support your Symphony" survey; no details about the questionnaire were revealed in advance. The survey was administered over two consecutive days in two locations: in Port Huron on Saturday and Sunday mornings and in Sarnia on these afternoons.

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these respondents have much in common, their levels of difference can be interpreted as conservative estimates.

The study includes a central item to measure individuals' conceptions of the political. It reads:

> "Now, some questions about what you consider to be 'political.' Imagine that you are the Editor of a political magazine. Your main job is to decide what kinds of stories to include in the magazine. Please look at the following article topics, and circle the ones that would be most applicable. In other words, choose the ones that are 'political.' This should be your only consideration."

Following this prompt are 33 topics from which to choose. Many come from the political behavior literature. They include poverty (Iyengar 1990), education (Page and Shapiro 1983), stem cell research (Nisbet 2005), child care (Kershaw 2004), global warming (Nisbet and Myers 2007), same-sex marriage (Conover and Searing 2005), energy (Bolsen and Cook 2008), public prayer (Huckfeldt 2007), unemployment (Clarke et al. 2005), foreign aid (Taber, Cann and Kucsova 2009), national parks and space exploration (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004). Remaining items come from a random sample of *Time Magazine* articles published between 2004 and 2009.

Respondents are provided a conceptual category (the political) and charged with establishing which topics belong within it. This gives participants a high level of control over construction of the concept. This item also allows for a multidimensional analysis of people's conceptualizations: we can see from the findings which topics people choose and we can also establish how many topics people choose. Additionally, an open-ended component of the questionnaire further prompts respondents to report their own working definitions of the term "political" to provide greater insight. The survey also contains questions about people's sociopolitical characteristics and habits—including their levels of political engagement and details about their political discussions. Together, these items yield a rich set of measures for unpacking the nature, causes and implications of variation in political conceptualizations.

Theoretical Expectations

Predicting Inter-Individual Variation

I propose here that there is significant heterogeneity across individuals when they conceptualize the political. Furthermore, failure to account for this variation limits what researchers can infer from survey items that hinge on the word, "political." If we do not know how individual survey participants define for themselves what is political, then our inferences based on such items are questionable in terms of validity (Cook and Campbell 1979). Research into individual interpretations of certain words or statements has a long pedigree, dating back most notably to the Asch (1952) experiments. Asch found that simple phrases can be differently interpreted by individuals depending on a range of factors. Yet, uncertainty over the

ways survey respondents interpret the political has not attracted much attention. Existing studies from American and comparative behavior motivate such an inquiry.

Eliasoph, for instance, surveys individuals and observes, "…when I gave people questionnaires asking whether they had engaged in political activity or conversation, the varieties of methods for defining 'political' and 'activity' were much more interesting than the yes/no answers I eventually recorded in the questionnaire" (Eliasoph 1998: 14). She notes, "…what is interesting is precisely how citizens come to define some issues, and some contexts, as 'political' and some as 'not political,' in interaction" (15).Wyatt and Kim (2000) also acknowledge that we do not know how survey respondents interpret the political. They write, "First we asked what 'politics' means for ordinary Americans. Does the phrase 'talking about politics' focus attention too narrowly on the workings of government itself, on personalities, bureaucratic institutions, campaigning, 'courthouse' and inside-the-Beltway issues, and not enough on the wide variety of topics that have broader political relevance in the ordinary conversations of everyday life? Is talk about education or crime included when respondents say that they participate in conversations about politics?" (Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000: 76). These studies signal that there is wide variation in political conceptualizations.

Other research uncovers discord over interpretations of different key concepts. Lane's classic dissection of American public opinion reveals a range of definitions held by his interview subjects when they put concepts such as freedom and government into their own words (Lane 1962). Similarly, Conover, Crewe and Searing (1991) explore the meaning of citizenship in focus groups, revealing diverse conceptualizations. Using a large-n approach, some comparative behavior work unpacks people's interpretations of survey items. For instance, Canache, Mondak and Seligson (2001) examine political support, or "satisfaction with democracy." They find that interpretation of this concept varies considerably from respondent-to-respondent. Similarly, Bratton et al. (2004) uncover variation in the ways people understand the term "democracy"; respondents tend to supply either procedural or substantive dimensions when asked, "What, if anything, does democracy mean to you?" (Bratton et al. 2004: 68). Other research also identifies heterogeneity in people's conceptualizations of democracy (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007; Seligson 2004).

Together, these works motivate the expectation that regular people differ in their interpretations of concepts that are central to the study of political behavior. Support for this interpretive perspective would come in the form of significant variation in people's ideas about what is political. People are thus expected to lack consensus with respect to the breadth of the political and to the classification of certain topics as political in nature.

Predicting Patterned Variation

If, indeed, people differ measurably in their political conceptualizations, the next investigative step is to ask whether these interpretations are chaotic or patterned. American and comparative behavior studies of various phenomena provide findings to direct this line of inquiry. Some of these works point to factors that shape

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people's fundamental perceptions of the political world. Others demonstrate links between key socio-political characteristics and behavioral dependent variables that contain the term "political." These works establish theoretical expectations for the statistical analyses presented below.

Why might people hold differing conceptions of the term, "political"? Comparative survey work points to the national context for understanding variation in the ways people interpret key concepts. For instance, Conover, Crewe and Searing (1991) find that Americans tend to hold different interpretations of the concept of citizenship as compared to Britons. And cross-national surveys reveal variation at the country level in the ways people conceptualize and evaluate democracy (Canache and Seligson 2001; Bratton et al. 2004; Dalton et al. 2007; Seligson 2004). Several kinds of political behavior are also found to vary considerably across countries, as people engage in ways that draw on long-standing national traditions (Almond and Verba 1963; Gamson 2002). Levels of political interest (Inglehart 1981) and political discussion (Bennett, Flickinger and Rhine 2000) differ significantly across national contexts. Explanations for such differences are generally linked to cultural and institutional factors; the socializing effects of different national contexts shape the way people interpret the political world. As such, we should expect Canadians and Americans to hold different conceptualizations of what is political. And we may also expect Canadians to have broader conceptualizations given Canada's larger public sphere (Esping-Andersen1990; Burns and Verba 2001).

Another approach to explaining variation across individuals is rooted in political orientations and attitudes. Political ideology and partisan affiliations, in particular, have been shown to influence the way people perceive and interpret the world around them. A host of studies demonstrate that an individual's perception of information is conditioned by her attachment to a political party (Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2002). Experimental studies reveal, for instance, that partisanship shapes the way information is classified and remembered (Lodge and Hamill 1986) and that ideological conservatives and Republicans differ from liberals and Democrats in how they perceive something as fundamental as candidate skin tone (Caruso and Balcetis 2009). Furthermore, existing studies find that ideology and partisanship are linked to variation in specific behaviors such as political deliberation (Cook et al. 2007). And others show that those with partisan attachments are especially likely to participate in political discussion (Straits 1991) among other political acts (Kenny 1992). Taken together, these studies motivate two sets of predictions. First, an individual's categorization of issues as political will relate to where she stands on the left–right ideological scale. Conservatives, for instance, could be expected to hold a narrower conception of what is political—as compared to liberals—based on their support for limited government. Second, partisans will likely differ from non-partisans. Theories of heuristic processes and cue-giving (Converse 1975; Mondak 1993) drive a prediction that partisans identify more topics as political—when compared to non-partisans—due to the signals they receive from parties.

Certain kinds of social experiences can also influence how people perceive the political world. Relevant studies point to the implications of non-political

engagement for political behavior (i.e. Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). A prominent example is organizational participation; membership in associations is linked to the ways people think about and engage in the political realm (Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; Putnam 1993; Verba and Brady 1995). As a function of this participation, individuals may learn about more issues that could be categorized as political. It is therefore reasonable to expect that those who are highly participatory in the organizational sphere would have broader ideas about what is political than would those who do not participate. These same individuals may also identify more salient topics as political as compared to less active respondents.

An experiential-learning mechanism could also underpin the effects of education. Past work shows that political knowledge influences how receptive a person is to political messages (Zaller 1992). This demonstrates that cognitive biases accompany political sophistication, and it implies that such biases could influence how an individual conceptualizes the political. Existing research also suggests that education relates to various behavioral proclivities such as routine participation in political discussion (Bennett and Rhine 2000). We might expect, therefore, that educated respondents will have more encompassing views of the political sphere.

Finally, membership in certain social categories—specifically gendered and generational categories—can be expected to influence people's views of the political. With respect to gender, socialization theories posit that women are raised to view the world differently than men and that their life experiences reinforce those differences (Jennings 1983; Verba and Schlozman 1997). As a result, the term "political" may evoke different associations for women and men. Supporting research finds that private-oriented dimensions of politics are more relevant than public dimensions for women (Burns and Verba 2001), that young males and females gravitate toward different kinds of political activities (Hooghe and Stolle 2004), and that women and men know different kinds of things about politics (Stolle and Gidengil 2010). These studies show that fundamental political orientations can be gendered. Research on various sorts of political behavior further suggests that women and men approach politics differently. Women have lower levels of political interest (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Berelson and McPhee 1954; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hayes and Bean 1993; Verba, Burns and Schlozman 1997) and they are less likely to engage in political discussion and persuasion (Conover and Crewe 2002; Hansen 1997). Based on this set of studies, the resultant expectation is that men and women are likely to identify different items as political, and that men will likely have more expansive views of politics as compared to women.

Similarly, it may be that older people have different ideas about what "political" means compared to those who are younger. Research into cohort effects shows that different political eras can shape basic political orientations (Sears and Valentino 1997). And other behavioral studies find that older people are more interested in politics (Curtis and Lambert 1976; Glenn and Grimes 1968; Lupia and Philpot 2005), more likely to talk about politics (Hibbing, Ritchie and Anderson 2011) and more knowledgeable about it (Kwak et al. 2005; Ridout et al. 2004). Therefore, older respondents may have broader views of the political due to their accumulated life experiences, and they may disagree with younger respondents about what kinds

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of topics are political. Overall, the socializing processes associated with gender and age likely shape people's mental maps of politics.

To summarize, Canadians, liberals, partisans, joiners, the educated, men and the elderly are expected to hold the most expansive conceptualizations of the political. And each of these traits likely relates to the kinds of topics an individual identifies as such.

Predicting Variation in Political Definitions

Beyond establishing statistical correlations between certain characteristics and political conceptualizations, this paper aims to unpack the ways people associate different topics with politics. How do people define the political and how does this shape their ideas about what topics qualify as political? As noted above, a qualitative component of the survey asks respondents to provide their own open-ended definitions of the term "political." This item provides clues about how people go about categorizing something as such.

Existing studies offer guidance on what to look for within these respondent-generated definitions: people's conceptualizations of politics include a public dimension that relates to governmental functions and a controversy component that emphasizes conflict. Walsh (2004) evokes both of these themes, explaining that her subjects, "typically describe 'politics' as consisting of elections, debates involving Democrats and Republicans, and occasionally elected officials carrying out their duties. They consider politics as controversy…Specifically, talking about politics is 'opinionated' talk; unless a person holds controversial opinions…the conversation is not political" (Walsh 2004: 38). More decisively, Lane's subject, Rapuano, evokes the idea that government and politics are inextricably linked when he states, "There ain't anything that's unpolitical that's government" (Lane 1962: 146). Conover and Crewe's (2002) focus groups seem to support a controversy approach to defining politics: American and British citizens perceive a connection between the public nature of various topics and the level of societal discussion they generate.

As will be presented below, simple descriptive analysis of people's definitions identifies these governmental and controversy themes. But how, exactly, do people draw on these conceptual definitions to associate different topics with politics? By coding definitions according to the governmental and controversy categories and incorporating these new variables into statistical analysis, it is possible to more fully explore the process of categorizing a topic as political. Literature cited above and in previous sections can be leveraged to formulate three conditional, interactive hypotheses aimed at explaining the breadth of a person's political conceptualization.

For those who supply a governmental definition, it seems straightforward to expect that they will view something as political to the extent that government is involved in it. This implies that people living under different government systems would conceptualize the political differently. This proposition translates into an interactive hypothesis: *persons who live in countries where government responsibilities are expansive will have broader views of the political than do individuals living under more constrained governments—particularly if they draw on a governmental-institutional interpretation of the political*. For instance, the

expansiveness of different welfare systems may shape citizens' expectations of government, which would in turn affect what respondents consider to be political. The US-Canada comparison is useful here: Canada is substantially more involved than the US in providing many public services such as child care and health care (Hall and Soskice 2001). So a Canadian drawing on a government-institutional conceptualization of the political should have an especially broad view of what the political sphere encompasses.

Yet there is also the possibility that a governmental definition influences the categorization process by raising normative considerations. This squares with Kuklinski and Hurley's observation that, "categorization evokes affect" (1996: 127). Drawing on a governmental definition might lead an individual to think not about what government *does* do but what it *should* do when delineating the political. Lane (1962) introduces this idea when he contextualizes Rapuano's politics-as-government statement by noting that this particular subject's opinion of politics is quite negative. Rapuano makes an affective judgment about government when he links it to politics. This translates into an expectation that negative feelings toward government activity underpin a narrow conceptualization of the political. The proposition can be tested in interactive terms: *conservatives will report that fewer topics qualify as political as compared to liberals—particularly if they draw on a government-normative interpretation of the political.*

Turning to the conflict-based definition of the political, it should be the case that the more topics an individual identifies as controversial, the more topics she will categorize as political. To understand how this process operates, it is important to ask how an individual develops the perception that an issue is controversial in the first place. Social or political engagement might impel somebody looking through a conflict-definition lens to think of more things as political, since broader networks can be associated with exposure to discord (Mondak et al. 2010) and new information (Huckfeldt et al. 1995). Experience with discussion and deliberation can equip a person to identify topics that engender public controversy. This could lead those with many social experiences and contacts to identify more topics as political. If this mechanism operates as proposed, then: *individuals who belong to a range of organizations will have broader conceptualizations of politics as compared to non-members—particularly if they draw on a conflict interpretation of the political.*

These three conditional hypotheses lay out the expectations for individuals drawing on government-institutional, government-normative and conflict-based interpretations of the political. They are tested below, illuminating the associative mechanisms at work when respondents go through the political categorization exercise.

Analysis

Is There Variation in Interpretations of the Political?

Figure 1 presents the percent of respondents who identify each of the 33 listed topics as political via the survey's editorial task. It demonstrates that there is a great

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deal of heterogeneity with respect to the themes that different people consider political. The topic identified by the most respondents is tax cuts; about 87 % of the sample considers tax cuts a political issue. This is followed by nuclear weapons and the cost of education. The topics that are most rarely identified as political are women in sports, museum exhibitions and diet pills. These two poles represent points of relative consensus. Most respondents agree that tax cuts are political and that diet pills are not. Yet between these extremes there exists a high level of discord.

From these items a *Topics Count* variable is generated to represent conceptual breadth. This is an additive scale reflecting the number of items a respondent identified as political. Figure 2 shows how much variation exists in the breadth of people's conceptions. The average number of items selected is just over fourteen; the values range from 1 to 33. Together, Figs. 1 and 2 demonstrate that there is much variation in terms of the content and the expanse of people's notions of the political.[4]

Does the Variation Follow Predictable Patterns?

What explains the breadth of a person's political conceptualization? To answer this question, the Topics Count variable is modeled as a function of respondents' political and social characteristics. Predictors represent factors that existing work identifies to be significant, as detailed in the theoretical discussion above. *Canadian* measures the citizenship of the respondent. *Conservative* denotes a respondent's self-placement on a seven point left-to-right ideology scale. *Partisan* indicates whether the respondent claims to support any party. *Memberships* is an index of organizational participation. The survey asks if a respondent is a member of the following types of organization: religious, environmental, humanitarian, professional, consumer, recreational, political party, ISO. The resultant summary scale reflects a person's overall diversity in organizational participation. *Education* ranges from high school (or less than high school) degree to post-bachelor's qualifications. *Male* signifies gender and *Age* simply ranges from lowest to highest in the sample. Finally, a control variable, labeled *Form*, is included in all models to account for the

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[4] Attention to the context created by the survey is in order. All participants were presented with the exact same item list, which could lead to concerns that a shorter list might have generated different outcomes. For instance, results might be influenced by floor or ceiling effects in that such a long list led respondents to think that some—but not all—items must be political. A conclusive response to this concern is not possible with the data here. However, two aspects of the study make this less of a pressing matter than it might otherwise be. First, this is not a representative sample and so it cannot speak beyond the present group of respondents to questions of what, exactly, "political" means in the minds of the masses. Therefore, the stakes of a particular item not being identified as political due to survey design are limited. Second, the main goal of this study is to identify heterogeneity across people in their views of the political. And since the same instrument was used for all participants, this is easier to identify. Still, future use of this instrument should include tests of the survey context's influence. Another potential concern is that the ordering of items influences people's choices. To test for this, a simple correlation between the percent of respondents who chose each item and its placement in the list was calculated, showing no significant relationship. Rank-ordering the items by column (assuming people worked downward by column), the correlation is −.05 (sig. = .762). Ranking them by row (assuming people worked from left to right by row), the correlation is −.03 (sig. = .882).

Conceptual Detail:
**Percent of respondents identifying topic as political**
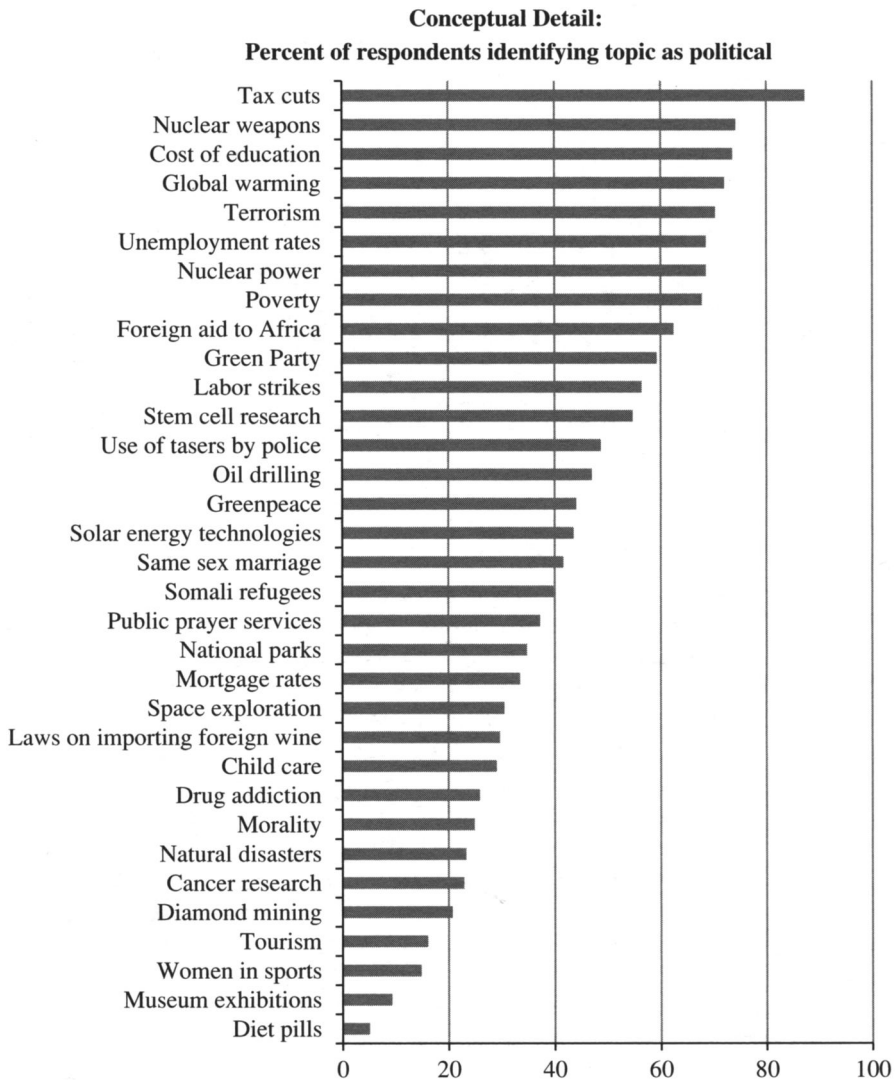
Fig. 1 Represents the percent of respondents who identify each of the 33 listed topics as political

survey version completed.[5] And in each model the standard errors are clustered by the day of the survey (Saturday or Sunday) to account for the effects of daily news and other contextual factors. Variables are coded to run from 0 to 1. This is a negative binomial regression model because the dependent variable is a count measure.[6]

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[5] Two versions of the questionnaire facilitated some experimental manipulations, though they do not apply directly to the survey items at hand and they appear after all of the key variable items.

[6] It does not fit the requirements for a poisson model as the variance is greater than the mean.

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Conceptual breadth:
Distribution of number of topics identified as political
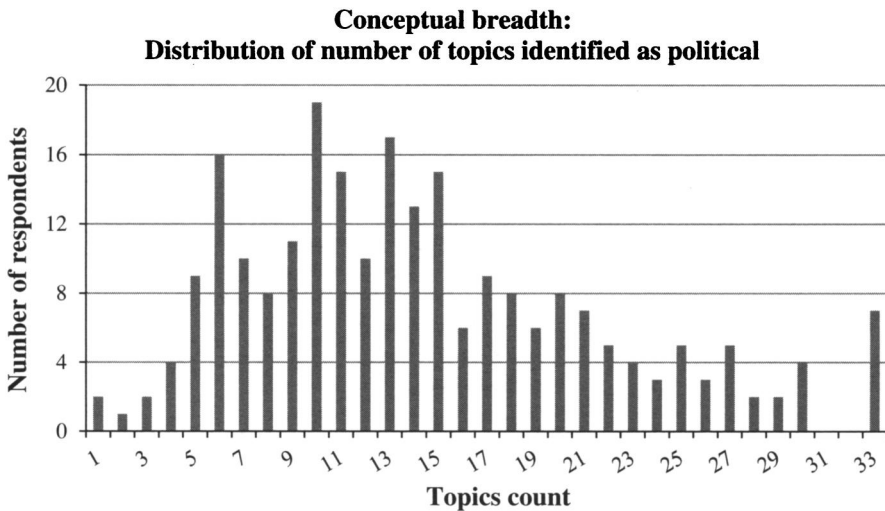
Fig. 2 Variation in terms of the expanse of people's notions of the political

Table 1 presents the results. Significant predictors of conceptual breadth in order of impact are ideology, partisan affiliation and citizenship. The substantive interpretation made possible by Clarify (King and Wittenberg 2000) shows that strong conservatives identify three fewer topics as political than do strong liberals—all else equal. Partisans choose 1–2 more topics than non-partisans. Canadians identify one more theme to be political as compared to Americans; the effect of gender has half the strength of this impact.

Though these are not dramatic effects, consider that these characteristics come in bundles that may have additive influence. A liberal, partisan, male Canadian in this study finds over 21 % more items on the list to be political as compared to his opposite on these dimensions. There may also be interactive effects that are not obvious from this analysis. Importantly, the results reveal meaningful predictive relationships, suggesting that contexts, experiences and ideologies relate in coherent ways to the mental boundaries people draw around the political.

Beyond unpacking how expansive a person's definition is, the data make it possible to model *which* items an individual identifies as political. Table 2 condenses the results of 33 logit models, each predicting the likelihood of selecting a particular topic as political (1 = selected, 0 = not selected). "Plus" and "minus" signs denote the direction of statistically significant relationships (at the 95 % level). Superscript letters in the table denote factor loadings, as analysis of the topic variables yielded five useful factors: Economy (e), Energy (n), Care (c), Global (g) and Religion (r).[7] In Table 2 the items are organized by factor so that patterns specific to different kinds of topics are discernible.

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[7] Exploratory factor analysis (using varimax rotation) identifies the underlying structures of respondents' item selections. Because the topics listed in the editorial instrument are dichotomous, and because such data is not ideal for factor analysis, an additional component of the survey was integrated into this process. Directly following the topics listing, the survey reads, "Now, of these topics, please rank the

Table 1 Conceptual breadth: predicting number of items identified as political

Predictor	Negative binomial regression model			
	Coeff	SE	Sig	Substantive effect[a]
Canadian	.10	(.04)	*	1.43
Conservative	−.21	(.06)	*	−3.12
Partisan	.11	(.02)	*	1.58
Memberships	.10	(.35)		
Education	.14	(.17)		
Male	.05	(.01)	*	.71
Age	−.08	(.30)		
Form (control)	.06	(.10)		
Constant	2.56	(.11)	*	
−2XLog likelihood	1310.0			
R^2 (Cox-Snell)	.05			
n	196			

* $p < .05$

[a] Calculated via Clarify in Stata: effect on DV count of manipulating predictor from its minimum to its maximum value

If people respond to national context to delineate the political, then welfare state distinctions should prompt Canadians over Americans to choose topics like child care and poverty, since the Canadian government is significantly more active in service provision along these lines (Bambra 2005). Similarly, conservatives should be especially *un*likely to choose topics that relate to government control over spheres such as energy or the environment. And if people make judgments based on knowledge of issues, the partisan, social engagement, and education measures should be significant, positive predictors for a range of items that are highly salient in politics such as the economy or perhaps religion. If socialization plays a role, then gender and age should have detectable effects, as well.

Table 2 displays the patterns associated with selecting each of the items, demonstrating the nuances of conceptual detail. It provides partial support for the above-stated hypotheses. One striking pattern is that Canadians are more likely than Americans to view all of the "care" topics (denoted by superscript "c") as political: tasers, child care, poverty and refugees. Canadians are also more likely to select

Footnote 7 continued
three *most* political." Responses to this prompt combine with the original variable into an ordered scale: $0 =$ not political, $.5 =$ political, $1 =$ one of the most political topics. Topics that did not yield a full range of values (for instance, nobody chose diet pills as a "most" most political topic) were excluded from the factor analysis (omitted topics are italicized in Table 2), leaving 24 items. Given the sample size of 241, this provides an acceptable ratio between respondent and item of 10 to 1 (Everitt 1975; Preacher and MacCallum, 2002). The factor analysis results are in Appendix Table A2. The five reported factors were selected for this further analysis because they had Eigenvalues greater than 1 and at least three variables with loading scores over .5.

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Table 2 Conceptual detail: predicting whether topic is identified as political

	Canadian	Conservative	Partisan	Memberships	Education	Male	Age
Tax cut[e]				+	+		−
Unemp[e]	+						−
Mortgage[e]		+	+		+		
Nuclear weap[n]	+	−				−	
Nuclear power[n]		−	+	+		+	
Oil[n]	−	−		+	+		
Solar[n]	+	−			−	+	−
Tasers[c]	+						
Childcare[c]	+						
Poverty[c]	+						−
Refugee[c g]	+						
Foreign aid[g]	+						+
Greens[g]		−		−		+	
Greenpeace[g]		−				+	
Stem cell[r]			+				
Same-sex[r]	−		+			+	
Morality[r]					+		
Prayer[r]	−		+				
Disaster		−					
Cancer					−		
Cost of educ		−			+		+
Warming	+	−	+	+		+	
Terrorism			+	+		−	
Strikes			+			−	
Park		−					+
Space						−	
Wine		−				+	−
Addiction	+					+	
Diamond		−			+		−
Tourism		−					
Women sport						−	+
Museum	+						
Diet pill	+	−		−	+		−

Results from 33 logit models

Superscript letters denote underlying factors: [e] economy, [n] energy, [c] care, [g] global, [r] religion

Italicized topics were not included in the factor analysis (see footnote 7)

drug addiction, which may evoke similar associations with government aid programs. Another pattern is that conservatives do not consider energy- and environment-related topics to be political. It may be that people on the political right want government to stay out of these matters so they do not think of them as political.

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Partisan attachments only work in a positive direction and the bulk of their effects reside within the religious sphere. Partisans are more likely than non-partisans to view stem cell research, same-sex marriage and public prayer as political. They are also especially likely to identify terrorism as political, which relates if that topic is interpreted in religious fundamentalist terms. Cues from political leaders may prompt people to associate these topics with politics, since they are all live political issues. Indeed, global warming—another theme partisans consider political—was a topic on many leaders' lips during the time of the survey as the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit was taking place.[8]

Memberships, education, gender and age all have less consistent directional effects, but they are relevant for many choices. One observation is that socially engaged folks may have their fingers on the pulse of what is popularly construed as political within the ISO social network. They are especially likely to think tax cuts are political, and this is the most agreed-upon political topic in the list (per Fig. 1). They are also less likely than other people to think of diet pills as political, and this was the least chosen topic among respondents. Furthermore, some of these results may point to a "personal salience" mechanism not anticipated: women are especially likely to think that women in sports is political; the educated view the cost of education as such. Importantly, these results strongly suggest that respondents' selections are conditioned by the way they define "political" in the first place. This possibility is considered immediately below.

Do Respondents Hold and use Different Political Definitions?

The open-ended question asking respondents to put the political into their own words helps to further unpack the mental processes at work. People's spontaneous definitions of "political" contain the government and controversy dimensions introduced above. Over 38 % of the 185 respondents who put forth their own definitions use the word "government" (or some derivation of it). Here are a few examples.

> *It means anything related to government bodies.*
> *Political means the government, which is schools, hospitals, etc.*
> *To do with governing a specific group or entity.*
> *Political is government and how much or little it is involved with personal life.*

There is also an emphasis on competition and discord in many people's definitions. Respondents with this conceptualization evoke ideas about taking

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[8] Content analysis of the media environment in the week preceding the survey event (conducted December 12–13) reveals that global warming was highly publicized. The 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference took place from December 7–18. Front pages of two US newspapers and two Canadian papers were examined for coverage from December 5–11. *The New York Times* ran three front-page stories that related to the summit; The Port Huron *Times Herald* made no mention of it. In comparison, the *Toronto Sun* published six front-page stories about the conference and the *Sarnia Observer* ran an article that previewed a local public event planned for December 12 in support of the summit. The summit was big news in both countries and as Fig. 1 shows, it was rated the fourth most "political" topic. But it appeared to be bigger news in Canada. Perhaps as a result, Canadians were especially likely to consider global warming a political topic per Table 2.

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different sides on issues, pointing to competing interests and conflicting beliefs among people and politicians. About 34 % of respondents who define the political include this dimension. Examples include:

> *When different people...have an interest in an issue to which others may be opposed. The issue then becomes 'political.'*
> *Political means standing firmly for one side of an issue and not yielding to the beliefs of others.*
> *It means that you believe in a certain way of ruling your community/country. For instance, favoring business so people have work or favoring poor people so they can eat.*
> *Political means thinking certain ways about issues like abortion (no- or pro-choice) or the war in Iraq (bring soldiers home now or keep fighting)...*

These definitions yield two dummy variables: one for *Government definition* the other for *Controversy definition*. And though these are not mutually exclusive definitional components, they are negatively correlated with each other.[9]
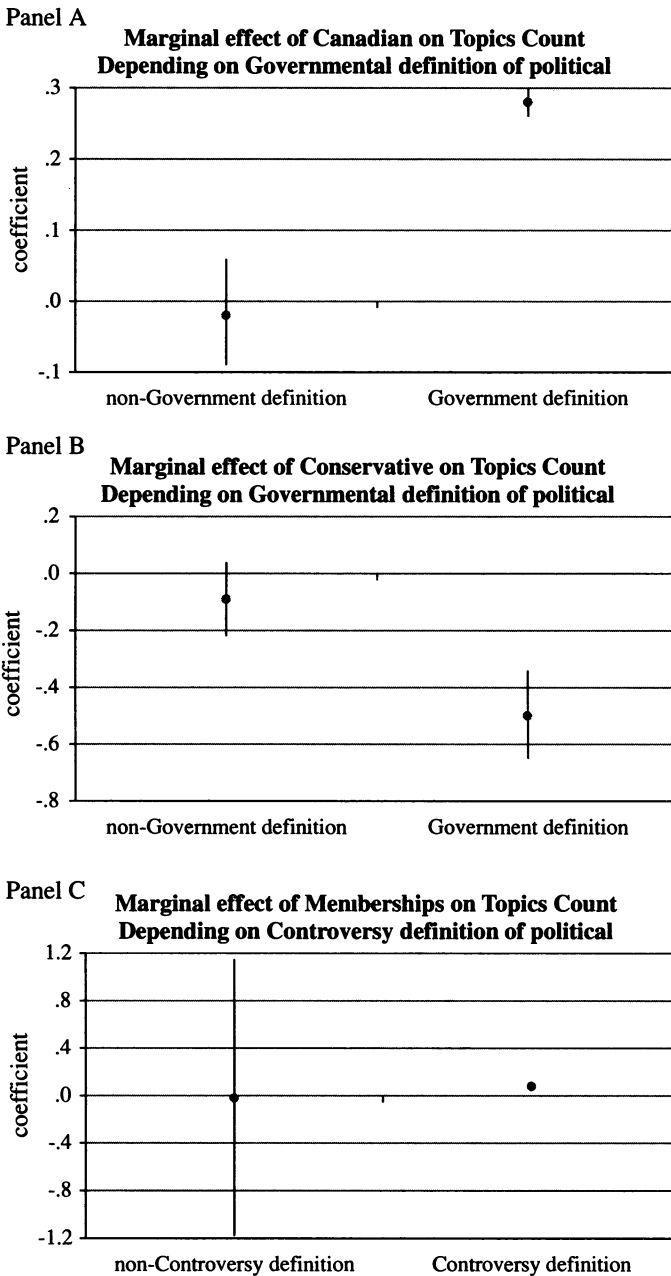
If respondents categorize topics as political through a governmental-institutional mechanism, they make judgments about the political nature of things based on whether government is involved in them. The expectation is that Canadians who hold this kind of a definition should have especially expansive views of the political sphere. To test this, we look at the effect of being Canadian on the breadth of a person's political conceptualization as it is conditioned by whether he or she defines "political" in terms of government. Figure 3, Panel A presents marginal effects as calculated via an interactive version of the model in Table 1, in which Canadian is interacted with Government definition.[10] As expected, the coefficient for Canadian increases from −.02 (not statistically significant) when "government" is not in the definition to .22 (statistically significant)[11] when it is. This finding supports the idea that de jure government responsibility can matter for categorizing things as political. It also supports the interpretation of the positive Canadian coefficient in Table 1: it reflects institutional context.

The other mechanism proposed to explain how people draw upon governmental definitions posits that people view something as political depending on what they think governments should do. If this is the case, then conservatives who define "political" as governmental should choose fewer topics in comparison to conservatives who do not define it as such. Figure 3, Panel B tests this idea, presenting marginal effects for Conservative when Government definition equals 0 as compared to when it equals 1.When definitions are not governmental, the relevant coefficient for the Topics Count is −.09 (not significant). When definitions are governmental, the effect of conservatism is −.50 (significant). These findings conform to the interactive expectations. And they lend support to the idea that

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[9] Though not investigated here, it is likely the same person would draw on different sets of considerations depending, for instance, on the social or informational context.

[10] Full interactive models are not presented in this paper; they are available from the author.

[11] Vertical bars represent 95 % confidence intervals.

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Panel A

Marginal effect of Canadian on Topics Count
Depending on Governmental definition of political

Panel B

Marginal effect of Conservative on Topics Count
Depending on Governmental definition of political

Panel C

Marginal effect of Memberships on Topics Count
Depending on Controversy definition of political

Fig. 3 Estimates calculated using lincom in Stata 11 from negative binomial regressions on the Topics Count. Predictors in all models: Canadian, conservative, partisan, memberships, education, gender, age. Panel A: includes Government definition and Government definitionXCanadian. Panel B: includes Government definition and Government definitionXConservative. Panel C: includes controversy definition and Controversy definitionXMemberships

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conservatives have more bounded political conceptions (per Table 1) because they prefer limited government.

As suggested above, a person who is active in society can be exposed to more viewpoints and issues than somebody who is less engaged. If this is so, and if the proposed controversy mechanism is valid, then an interactive effect between Memberships and Controversy definition should be visible. Figure 3, Panel C depicts this relationship. Though the coefficient is small and does not greatly shift between conflict-based definers and others, the estimate is only statistically significant for those who define politics in terms of controversy.[12] The results imply that tuned-in individuals who conceptualize politics in terms of controversy become aware of politicized issues through frequent civic cues.

The survey provides another opportunity to test the relevance of this controversy mechanism. A "headline" experiment followed the 33-topics item. Respondents received the cue,

> "Please keep your Editor's hat on. Here are some headlines of stories that you could run. Please read through each one and decide whether or not it belongs in your political magazine (again, the only consideration should be whether the story is political or not)."

One set of survey participants received this headline as one of their options: "Town hall meeting: Unanimous agreement over future of homeless shelter," while the other set of respondents read the same headline but with "vigorous debate" replacing "unanimous agreement."[13] To establish whether randomly assigned respondents were likely to think of the vigorous debate meeting as more obviously political than the unanimous agreement meeting, simple descriptive statistics are useful. 72 % of those who received the unanimous agreement treatment selected this headline as political and this percentage is consistent for those who define the political in terms of controversy and for those who define it differently. Yet when faced with categorizing the vigorous debate headline, 81 % of conflict definers selected it as political while only 75 % of those supplying other definitions did so. Figure 4 presents this comparison graphically, showing that conflict definers as a group were especially sensitive to the differing levels of public controversy.[14] This supports the proposition that some people consider the publicly controversial to be political and that this shapes the ways they conceptualize politics.

Does the Variation in Political Definitions Matter?

A central component of the argument advanced here is that people's conceptions of the political matter for other behavioral phenomena. The survey includes measures of the following: level of political interest, frequency of attention to politics, frequency of disagreement with political discussants and number of political

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[12] An interactive analysis for partisanship reflects similar patterns but does not achieve significance.

[13] The survey participants were randomly assigned to a set of headlines depending on whether the day of their birth was an even or odd number.

[14] The difference for conflict definers is statistically significant at the .95 level.
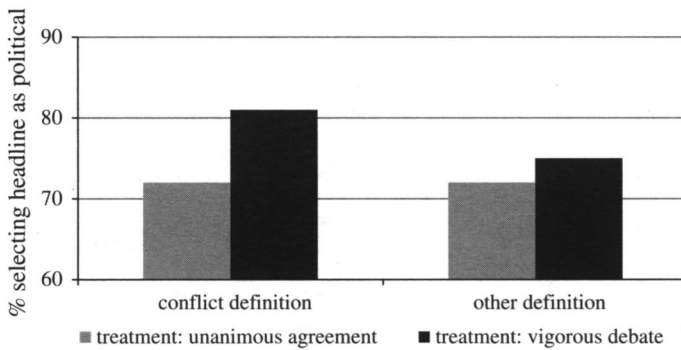
Fig. 4 Experimental headline manipulation: impact on conflict definers versus others

discussants. Does a person's conceptualization of the political relate to her responses to survey questions about such things? Models of these dependent variables include the breadth of a person's conceptualization of the political (per the Topics Count) as the key independent variable of interest. Statistically significant, positive coefficients for this measure would support the argument that variation in public views of the political has implications for how we should study and understand a range of behavioral phenomena.

Table 3 presents the results of four models. Three are ordered logistic regression models and the fourth is a poisson regression (as the dependent variable counts the number of people with whom a respondent discusses politics). Together, the results reveal that the conceptual breadth of the political is a significant and positive predictor of all four dependent variables. These results are not substantively interpretable, so Appendix Table A1 presents the predicted value changes associated with each significant independent variable. Conceptual breadth of the political is among the strongest predictors of each dependent variable, consistently out-performing other significant predictors: gender, age, ideology and partisan affiliation. These findings support the assertion that the ways people perceive the political relate systematically to measures of other kinds of political behavior.[15]

Discussion

This study draws attention to the differences across individuals, groups and national publics with respect to what topics they categorize as political. Americans and Canadians, women and men, old and young, partisans and independents, liberals and conservatives have differing perceptions of politics. Out of 33 topics, not one evokes consensus among respondents. The closest participants come to full agreement is that 95 percent concur that diet pills are not political. Instead, the mean

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[15] Importantly, political interest, attention, disagreement and discussion probably shape people's conceptualizations of the political. As such, no directional, causal claims are advanced here.

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Table 3 Predicting key dependent variables with conceptual breadth of the political

Predictor	Pol. interest			Pol. attention			Pol. disagreement			Pol. discussants		
	Ordered logit			Ordered logit			Ordered logit			Poisson reg.		
	Coeff	SE	Sig	Coeff	SE	Sig	Coeff	SE	Sig	Coeff	SE	Sig
Topics Count/ breadth	.43	(.06)	*	.92	(.20)	*	.91	(.26)	*	.86	(.14)	*
Canadian	−.24	(.30)		.41	(.46)		−.26	(.38)		−.04	(.16)	
Conservative	−.23	(.09)	*	−.17	(.08)	*	−.67	(.11)	*	−.27	(.38)	
Partisan	.34	(.33)		.62	(.12)	*	.17	(.69)		−.19	(.31)	
Memberships	2.79	(.02)	*	2.11	(.14)	*	−.02	(.29)		.87	(.20)	*
Education	−.04	(.50)		1.61	(.10)	*	−.06	(.10)		.06	(.33)	
Male	.45	(.12)	*	.00	(.09)		.13	(.07)	*	.10	(.07)	
Age	.29	(.23)		−.09	(.50)		.86	(.42)	*	−.38	(.22)	
Form	.07	(.16)		−.55	(.54)		.05	(.19)		−.20	(.04)	*
−2XLog likelihood	325.4			390.2			390.8			130.2		
n	196			196			196			182		

* $p < .05$

percentage of respondents who view a topic as political is 42. This signals that there is nothing simple about defining the political, and that survey participants' minds can go to very different places when answering questions that hinge on this term. And recall that the sample is comprised of people who have many things in common, as they are members of the same local organizational network. This implies that a randomly drawn set of respondents would exhibit greater variation. But this high level of similarity among respondents is also a limitation of this study. Due to the unrepresentative nature of the sample, one cannot extrapolate from these findings to establish what Americans and Canadians actually think of as political. Instead the contribution is laying bare the conceptual heterogeneity that exists among the masses and providing insight into how and why people characterize certain topics as political. These findings can be used in two main ways moving forward: in service of theoretical development and in offering practical strategies for survey researchers.

As for theoretical development, researchers should consider how differing views of the political shape the effects of key independent variables in existing studies. A prominent example is gender; women are found to lag behind men on a range of political behaviors. Mechanisms offered to account for such gender disparities include conflict aversion, educational inequities, and the dearth of female electoral candidates. But according to Tables 1 and 2, men and women operate with different conceptualizations of the political realm. On average, women hold less expansive conceptualizations, resulting in a narrower repertoire of relevant topics in which to take interest or to discuss. Men and women also differ in their views about what kinds of topics are political. For instance, men are more likely to consider the Green

party and Greenpeace to be political topics, meaning that conversations about these organizations may be considered political by a man but not by a woman. These conceptual differences likely shape men's and women's responses to survey questions about their political behavior. Therefore, gendered findings should be reconsidered in terms of the mechanisms that produce them.

Certain findings related to central dependent variables could also benefit from reevaluation. For example, the dynamics of interpersonal political communication and persuasion represent a rapidly growing area of research. A recently published article on the role of personality in political discussion proposes, "When a co-worker tries to start a political conversation over a current hot-button issue, one type of person might jump headlong into a heated argument; another might politely downplay any disagreement; while another might simply refuse to discuss controversial political matters" (Hibbing and Anderson 2011: 602). Per the present study, another consideration should be that some people might interpret the topic as political, others as non-political, and this might condition their course of action. Indeed, this understanding could shape the ways different individuals experience the event, as perceived politicization affects how people interpret and act on information (Dalton and Huckfeldt 1998) and how they articulate their opinions (Lau and Jessor 1990). Moreover, one might avoid this kind of political discussion for purposes of etiquette (Eliasoph 1998) or out of a desire to avoid conflict (Mutz 2006).

With respect to practical implications, this study shows that the term "political" and its derivations should receive careful treatment from survey researchers. Existing work signals a few paths forward. Surely, one way to address the situation is to include relevant socio-political controls in statistical models to address the differential interpretations of relevant survey questions. Some of the correlates to include are identified here, though others such as race and geographic location might also matter. Fortunately, most publications on relevant phenomena take such a modeling path.[16]

Another solution would employ survey questions that provide clearer cues; more specific language can direct respondents' minds in the desired direction. Bratton (2010) suggests the use of anchoring vignettes to reduce participant confusion. Seligson (2004) recommends replacing ambiguous terms like "democracy" with more tangible language. Wyatt and Kim (2000) avoid the word "politics," developing a battery of nine topics and asking people if and where they talk about them. At base, these strategies reduce the validity concerns associated with using "political" as a central survey term. However, they do not confront the issue that we cheat ourselves theoretically when we do not directly explore heterogeneous interpretations of the political.

A different approach is to investigate variations in political conceptualization. Conover and Searing (2002) advocate the use of focus groups for unpacking how citizens think about core terms and ideas. Canache (2012)argues for open-ended

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[16] Importantly, a number of strategies exist for boosting validity of survey items, particularly when administering cross-national studies. See Davidov et al. (2011), Jowell et al. (2007) and Reeskens and Hooghe (2008).

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survey questions that allow respondents to articulate key terms in their own words. Pursuing these strategies would yield new insights into the ways people conceptualize the political realm. However, the resources are not always available for such endeavors.

The present study takes an approach that stands between the strategies of controlling for and deconstructing conceptual variation. It asks respondents to serve as editors of a political magazine and tasks them with choosing relevant topics. This is a survey-friendly instrument that yields insights into a person's understanding of the political. It is also readily code-able and can be used in a number of ways for analysis. An extension could be to ask if there are other topics not listed that should be considered for the magazine. This would give the respondents greater voice in the composition of the political.

Future work should seek to more fully unpack the ways people categorize things as political. Most importantly, to learn what people think of when they encounter the word "political" (or "politics") we should give people an opportunity to tell us. At base, this line of inquiry has potential to enrich our understanding of day-to-day, pedestrian politics. This will move research agendas forward, contribute to knowledge in the field of behavior, and ultimately put researchers in better touch with the people we seek to understand.

Appendix

See Appendix Tables A1, A2, A3.

Table A1 Absolute estimates of key variables' substantive impact

Predictor	Average effect across DV values			
	Pol. interest Ordered logit	Pol. attention Ordered logit	Pol. disagreement Ordered logit	Pol. discussants Poisson reg.
Topics Count/breadth	.07	.10	.07	.15
Canadian				
Conservative	.03	.02	.05	
Partisan	.06	.06		
Memberships	.39	.21		.15
Education		.16		
Male	.07		.01	
Age			.06	

Based on models in Table 3

Generated using Clarify in Stata 11

Absolute effects calculated as average impact of predictor across all values of the dependent variable

Table A2 Factor analysis

Religion (r)		Global (g)		Care (c)		Energy (n)		Economy (e)	
Public prayer	.80	Greens	.84	Poverty	.74	Nuclear power	.77	Mortgage rates	.72
Same-sex	.74	Greenpeace	.77	Child care	.70	Nuclear weapons	.75	Unemployment	.69
Stem cell	.66	Foreign aid	.64	Taser	.67	Oil	.57	Tax cuts	.63
Morality	.51	Somali refugee	.52	Somali refugee	.52	Solar energy	.56	Cost of educ	.18
Oil	.44	Strikes	.29	Nuclear weap	.31	Somali refugees	.25	Solar energy	.18
Mortgage	.29	Global warming	.29	Unemployment	.30	Mortgage rates	.18	Greens	.16
Greenpeace	.28	Same-sex	.26	Foreign aid	.28	Greenpeace	.18	Foreig aid	.16
Cancer	.25	Public prayer	.23	Natural disaster	.28	Strikes	.15	Same-sex	.13
Child care	.24	Tax cuts	.16	Strikes	.23	Stem cell	.14	Terrorism	.11
Somali refugees	.22	Nuclear power	.14	Global warming	.21	Terrorism	.13	Nuclear weap	.07
Solar energy	.19	Poverty	.13	Morality	.11	Cost of educ	.11	Poverty	.06
Tasers	.16	Oil	.12	Cancer	.11	Public prayer	.11	Tasers	.05
Strikes	.15	Natural disaster	.12	Cost of educ	.09	Tasers	.10	Somali refugees	.05
Greens	.10	Terrorism	.11	Same-sex	.06	Foreign aid	.08	Child care	.05
Global warming	.04	Solar energy	.10	Solar energy	.05	Unemployment	.08	Nuclear power	.05
Nuclear weap	.03	Cost of educ	.09	Public prayer	.04	Global warming	.07	Morality	.03
Terrorism	.03	Nuclear weap	.06	Mortgage rates	.03	Child care	.07	Natural disaster	.02
Tax cuts	.03	Unemployment	.06	Oil	.03	Natural disaster	.04	Cancer	.00
Cost of educ	.01	Child care	.04	Stem cell	-.03	Greens	.04	Global warming	-.01
Nuclear power	-.02	Mortgage rates	.04	Greenpeace	-.04	Same-sex	.02	Public prayer	-.02
Foreign aid	-.05	Morality	.02	Greens	-.04	Poverty	.00	Strikes	-.05
Natural disaster	-.14	Cancer	-.01	Terrorism	-.05	Tax cuts	-.01	Greenpeace	-.06
Unemployment	-.18	Tasers	-.05	Nuclear power	-.06	Morality	-.02	Oil	-.07
Poverty	-.25	Stem cell	-.19	Tax cuts	-.14	Cancer	-.11	Stem cell	-.07

Table A3 Key survey items (in order of survey appearance)

Generally speaking, how interested in politics would you say you are? Very interested, Somewhat interested, Not very interested, Not at all interested

How *often* do you pay attention to what's going on in politics? All the time, Most of the time, Some of the time, Once in a while, Only during major electoral campaigns, Never

How frequently do you speak with your friends, family, and/or acquaintances about politics? Very frequently, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never

In an average week, about *how many people* do you talk with about politics?

Now, some questions about what you consider to be 'political.' Imagine that you are the Editor of a political magazine. Your main job is to decide what kinds of stories to include in the magazine. Please look at the following article topics, and circle the ones that would be most applicable. In other words, choose the ones that are 'political.' This should be your only consideration.

Now, of these topics, please rank the three *most* political.

Please keep your Editor's hat on. Here are some headlines of stories that you could run. Please read through each one and decide whether or not it belongs in your political magazine (again, the only consideration should be whether the story is political or not).

Are you a member of any of the following types of organizations? Please mark all that apply.

Church or other religious organization, Environmental organization, Charitable or humanitarian organization, Union or other professional organization, Consumer organization, Sports or recreational organization, Political party, The International Symphony Orchestra, Any other? Please describe.

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 represents strong left and 7 represents the strong right?

In what year were you born?

What is your gender? Male, Female

Of which country are you a citizen? USA, Canada, Other

What is the highest educational level that you have attained?

A 10-year-old asks you what the word "political" means. How do you answer this question?

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