Ideology and Party Identification: A Learning Design

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Abstract

This paper describes an instructional project used to teach students enrolled in American National Government classes principles about ideology and party identification. The data were drawn from questionnaires administered on the first day of classes from 1985 through 1998. The relationships between the party identifications and ideologies of students were similar to the relationships found in the general population.

Much has been written about party identification since its formulation by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes in their 1960 study of *The American Voter*.[1] Even though it involves self-assessment by requiring the respondent to simply state what his or her party attachment is, it has turned out to be a very stable characteristic which has a lot of usefulness in explaining political behavior. McAllister and Wattenberg conclude that party identification is "one of the more enduring and stable components of mass political behavior." [2]

One of the persistent themes found in the literature is that in the United States, persons who identify with the Democratic Party are more likely to take liberal positions on policy issues. They also are more likely to see themselves as "liberals." Persons who identify with the Republican Party, on the other hand, are more likely to take "conservative" positions on policy issues and see themselves as "conservatives." Indeed, some studies indicate that strong Democrats are even more likely to be "liberals" than weak Democrats, and that strong Republicans are more likely to be "conservative" than weak Republicans. [3]

Furthermore, a study by Hayes and Moran-Ellis showed that party identification in England "exerts an independent and statistically significant effect on attitudes toward homosexuals," although those relationships were secondary. The more important relationships were between anti-homosexual attitudes and age and education: Anti-homosexual views were found to be most prevalent among the older and less educated persons. [4]

With respect to changes in party identification over time, Crotty reports that there has been a decline in the number of adults who identify with either party, an increase in the number of adults who call themselves conservative, and a decrease in the number of adults who call themselves liberal. Education also was reported to be a factor: 26% of persons with some college called themselves liberal, while 39% called themselves conservative. [5]

The Research Project

In this paper, I will discuss a project I use in my American National Government classes at Henderson State University to teach principles learned from the literature on ideology and party

identification. First, I will describe the research I undertook, using students who took the course from 1985 through 1998. Second, I will show how I use the data to explain ideology and speculate about changes in student attitudes over time. Third, I will show how I use the data to illustrate the relationship between ideology and party identification.

It is recognized at the outset that the database was not drawn from a random sample of any population. While this means no inferences can be made to other populations, it does not destroy the data's usefulness in confirming theories, since the students can be seen as an experimental group. Another characteristic of this database is that it is divided into three time frames. That makes it possible to speculate about the impact of the political environment on the reported relationships, especially on those relationships which changed over time.

The data were drawn from questionnaires administered to students present on the first day of class each semester, before there was any time for class instruction to influence them. Students were told that the questionnaires were to be turned in anonymously and that the results would be used later in class. The same questionnaires were administered during the entire 13-year period of this project.

There were two parts to the questionnaire. The first part measured the students' party identification by asking them to indicate whether they were strong Democrat, weak Democrat, independent, weak Republican, or strong Republican. The second part assessed the students' ideology by asking them to agree or disagree with seven public policy statements. Those statements were:

1. The government should do more to guarantee adequate medical care for everyone regardless of their income.
2. The government should guarantee a minimum level of income for all families.
3. The military draft should be instituted.
4. The rules should be changed to make it easier for police to make searches without warrants.
5. Pornography should be outlawed.
6. The government should do more to guarantee equality for women.
7. Civil rights laws should be passed to forbid discrimination against homosexuals.

The purpose of the project was to provide data from the students themselves which would illustrate the following teaching points:

1. Personal ideology is multidimensional: Persons are liberal on some issues and conservative on others.
2. Liberals and conservatives identify with both parties. (Two other ideologies are included in the study, for the sake of completeness. However, since the major ideologies in the United States are liberalism and conservatism, those are the two which are emphasized.)
3. However, the stronger the students' attachment to the Democratic Party, the more likely it is that they will take liberal positions on the public policy issues studied.

In addition to providing data to illustrate the three teaching points, the project allows us to

compare changes in student attitudes across time, and speculate about the factors which contributed to any changes.

Multidimensionality of Ideology

Drawing on the work of Maddox and Lilie[6], four ideologies were identified from the data: liberal, conservative, populist, and libertarian. The four ideologies were defined by two variables: (1) Attitude toward government intervention to regulate the economy and promote equality and (2) Attitude toward the expansion of civil liberties.

Liberalism was defined as that ideology which supports the expansion of civil liberties and government intervention in the economic/equality dimension. Conservatism was defined as that ideology which opposes the expansion of civil liberties and government intervention in the economic/equality dimension. Libertarianism was defined as support for the expansion of civil liberties and opposition for government intervention in the economic/equality dimension. Populism was defined as opposition to the expansion of civil liberties and support for government intervention in the economic/equality dimension. One insight which students could readily grasp from this approach is that neither liberalism nor conservatism is consistent in its support for or opposition to "big" or "little" government. On the other hand, libertarianism consistently supports "little" government, while populism consistently supports "big" government. Figure 1 below may be helpful in clarifying these relationships.

Figure 1

	Favor government intervention to regulate the economy and promote equality	Oppose government intervention to regulate the economy and promote equality
Favor expansion of civil liberties	Liberalism	Libertarianism
Oppose expansion of civil liberties	Populism	Conservatism

The next step was to identify the ideological positions on each statement. Specifically, the liberal positions were to agree with the economic/equality statements (medical care, guaranteed annual income, equal rights for women, and equal rights for homosexuals) and to disagree with the civil liberties statements (draft, police search powers, and pornography laws). The conservative positions were the reverse. Libertarians respond to the economic/equality issues in the same manner as conservatives and to the civil liberties issues in the same manner as the liberals. Populists respond to the economic/equality issues in the same manner as the liberals and to the civil liberties issues in the same manner as the conservatives.

The number who took the liberal, conservative, libertarian, and populist positions on each issue are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Ideological Responses--1985-1998

Issue Area	Liberal Response	Conservative Response	Libertarian Response	Populist Response
Government Role in Medical Care	1154	317	317	1154
Guaranteed Annual Income	575	893	893	575
Re-instituting the Draft	1037	426	1037	426
Relaxing Restrictions on Police Searches	1058	409	1058	409
Outlawing Pornography	612	859	612	859
Civil Rights for Women	953	512	512	953
Civil Rights for Homosexuals	544	922	922	544
*Total Responses **n=10271**	**5933** **[58%]**	**4338** **[42%]**	**5351** **[52%]**	**4920** **[48%]**

*Percentages total 200% because the responses were paired: liberal or conservative and libertarian or populist. Thus, the same base [10271] was used to calculate the responses of both

pairs.

A cursory examination of the responses on a screen in class helps students understand why labeling persons as liberal, conservative, libertarian, or populist is problematic. The ideological position of individuals changes with the issues. For example, a majority of the students took the liberal position on health care policy but took the conservative position on the guaranteed income issue.

After learning that large numbers of people switch ideological positions from issue to issue, students often ask if there are people who are consistently liberal, conservative, libertarian, or populist. We call those persons "ideologues," and further analysis of our data illustrates that only a very few students turned out to be ideologues. On the seven issues used in this survey, seven per cent of the students were ideologues. The breakdown is shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Proportion of Ideologues

Liberals	3.4%
Libertarians	2.0%
Populists	.9%
Conservatives	.6%
Total	7.0%

Changes Over Time

Another interesting dimension of the data is that is has been collected over a 13 year period. This permits analysis of changes over time. For purposes of this undertaking, three time periods were used: 1985-1988, 1989-1993, and 1994-1998. Table 3 depicts these changes. For the sake of simplicity, the data are limited to the "liberal" responses. From those numbers the percentage of conservative, libertarian, and populist responses can be calculated by the reader if desired.

Table 3
Ideological Change Over Time*

	1985-88	1989-93	1994-98
Medical Care	75.3%	83.5%	77.4%
Guaranteed Income	39.6%	38.2%	39.8%

Draft	67.4%	71.0%	78.0%
Police Searches	73.1%	71.6%	70.8%
Pornography Laws	36.4%	46.1%	45.8%
Women's Rights	61.9%	66.8%	69.0%
Gay Rights	31.9%	38.8%	45.5%

*The responses are percentages who took the liberal positions on the issues.

Overall, the tendency toward liberalism has increased over time. It should be kept in mind that these respondents were not a random sample of any population. They were simply the students who took American National Government courses from me during the 13 years of the study. Nevertheless, some interesting conclusions can be drawn.

First, the tendency toward liberalism among the students stands in contrast with the nationwide trend away from liberalism.

The time in which the surge of liberalism on the medical care issue occurred included the years in which the Clinton administration made its big push for major reform in this area. Hillary Clinton was going around the country conducting hearings in which many personal experiences of denied or inadequate health care were widely publicized.

Opposition to the draft increased significantly over the time of this study. Publicity about Clinton's alleged "draft dodging" may have heightened the students' awareness of this issue, contributing to a growing support for volunteer armed forces. Liberalism also increased significantly on the women and gay rights issues. This occurred during a time when the country experienced a retrenchment in support for affirmative action. Nevertheless, the continued publicity surrounding feminism and gay rights, and perhaps Clinton's making gay rights a campaign issue, seem to have had an impact on student thinking. An increase in liberal thinking about pornography laws can be noted, too, in spite of the courts' willingness to make it easier to secure convictions in pornography cases.

Conservatism, on the other hand, grew in student attitudes toward police searches. Perhaps this reflected the growing concern in society about crime and the courts' loosening of restrictions on police searches and interrogations during this same time frame.

With the exception of attitudes about guaranteed annual income, students in this study showed significant changes in attitudes from 1985-88 to 1994-98. Overall, my analysis above suggests that the attitudes of these students were influenced by what was taking place in the political world. One possible optimistic conclusion would be that our students are coming into American National Government classes with a lot of sensitivity to the country's political issues.

Teaching About Ideology and Party Identification

Another instructional use of the data is to help students understand the relationship between party identification and ideology. While national data are readily available to do the job, I have found that using data from the students themselves is an excellent starting point. They are very interested in the responses of their fellow students and can more easily understand the significance of their own answers. After showing how party identification and ideology are related among the students in the class, it is easy to turn to national data to see if their own connections are consistent with nationwide patterns.

The approach taken here was to study the per cent liberal responses to each of the issue-statements, arrayed on the basis of the strength of party identification. (As indicated above, once we know the extent of liberal responses, the extent of other responses can be calculated if desired.) Table 4 depicts those responses for the entire 13 year period of the study, with party identification reflected in rank order rows from strongest Democrat to weakest Democrat (i.e. strong Republican).

Table 4
Percent Liberal Responses

Party	Medical Care	Guar. Income	Draft	Police Search	Porno-graphy	Civil Rights Women	Civil Rights Gays
Strong Democrat	83%	50%	68%	78%	40%	76%	41%
Weak Democrat	82	42	72	76	36	72	40
Independent	81	38	75	73	45	67	41
Weak Republican	70	31	67	65	39	55	28
Strong Republican	67	34	64	66	45	46	26

N = 1312

The best way to interpret Table 4 is to look at the percentages one issue at a time and go down the columns. The first row represents persons who have the strongest attachment to the Democratic Party, and as we go down a column, we are moving further and further away from people who have attachments to the Democratic Party. On the medical care issue, for example,

the percentage of liberal responses consistently declines as we go down that column. That consistent pattern is not found in all issue areas, but generally the lower numbers are found in the Republican rows. There were only two policy areas in this study which were not very helpful in separating Democrats from Republicans: draft and pornography. A large majority of the students oppose the draft, regardless of their party identification. Also, a majority of them believe pornography should be outlawed, regardless of their party attachment.

An intuitive way to measure central tendency, taking into consideration the inconsistent as well as the consistent patterns is to average the liberal responses along party lines. Those averages are reflected in Table 5.

Table 5
Average Liberal Responses by Party Identification

Strong Democrats	62.3%
Weak Democrats	60
Independents	60
Weak Republicans	50.7
Strong Republicans	49.7

The percentages decline as we go down the column, reinforcing the visual analysis of Table 4: Students who identified with the Democratic Party were more likely to take liberal positions on issues than the students who identified with the Republican Party. Nevertheless, there were many students in both parties who took liberal positions, and there were many students in both parties who took conservative positions.

Overall, the strongest relationships between party identification and ideology were found on issues which directly involve economics: health care, guaranteed income and civil rights laws for women and gays (which would include equal employment opportunities). That is not surprising in view of the greater likelihood that lower income persons will identify with the Democratic Party. [7]

A final interesting question, though not central to the purpose of this paper, is whether changes in partisanship among the students are similar to the changes which are taking place among the general population. As indicated at the beginning of this paper, the number of persons who identify with either party has been decreasing in the general population. Among students in this study, the number of partisans remained about the same until 1993 (62.1 per cent from 1985-88 and 62.6 per cent from 1989-93). However, from 1993-98 the number of students who identified with either party dropped to 54.9 per cent, which was consistent with what has been occurring nationwide.

Conclusion

Surveying students and then doing computer analysis of the results takes a lot more time than merely sharing with them data from the literature on political science. However, when I teach principles by drawing upon the students' own responses, the level of student discussion suggests to me that a lot of learning is taking place. Their enhanced interest in their own responses may go a long way in explaining the apparent ease with which they grasp the ideas being taught. After analyzing their own responses, students more readily grasp similar data I present to them from the political science literature. And they see that they are not very different from the population as a whole.

Endnotes

1.
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Biography

Jeddy LeVar, professor of political science and Chair of the Department of Social Sciences, received his Ph.D. in Political Science in 1973 from the University of Florida. He received his bachelors and masters degrees in political science from Brigham Young University in 1960 and

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