

In a more polarized era more and more citizens are structuring their beliefs along ideological lines, just as politicians do.

*While politics in the US has long been split along the left-right, liberal-conservative spectrum, most academics have assumed that these divisions had historically not percolated through to how most Americans see themselves. In new research which draws on election data, **Caitlin E. Jewitt** and **Paul N. Goren** find that people are now more able to structure their beliefs along the left-right dimension than they were in 1980. As debates between political elites have become more polarized, many more Americans who are ideologically engaged are now thinking about issues and organizing their policy positions just as politicians do.*



While political elites have long organized their beliefs and ideologies on the left-right liberal-conservative spectrum, for decades, research and popular wisdom suggested that most Americans were not doing so. Academic opinion has held that a majority of Americans were ideologically incompetent, unable to structure their thinking in the left-right terms that dominated American politics, creating a divide between elite discourse and public comprehension. If ordinary Americans do not or cannot understand the major ideological divide dominating American politics, how could they understand the major policy divisions, evaluate candidates for office, and participate fully in their democratic duties?



Our new research suggests that at least a portion of citizens are now better able to structure their policy beliefs along the liberal-conservative ideological dimension than they were in the 1980s. In fact, the level of ideological structure among citizens who identify as liberals or conservatives, who are politically informed, and who participate in politics has increased over time. In the age of polarization, the most ideologically engaged citizens not only improved dramatically, but they now equal political elites in terms of ideological consistency and structure.

There are compelling reasons to expect that at least some Americans should now be more able to organize their beliefs along the liberal-conservative dimension. Since the 1970s, American politics has become increasingly polarized – more ideologically extreme members have replaced moderates in the US Congress and the parties have moved further away from one another. The media environment has also changed drastically. The news cycle is now 24 hours a day and the media has fragmented into specialized, often ideological, outlets. As a result, ordinary citizens should get louder and clearer signals from political elites about “what goes with what” in terms of ideological organization.

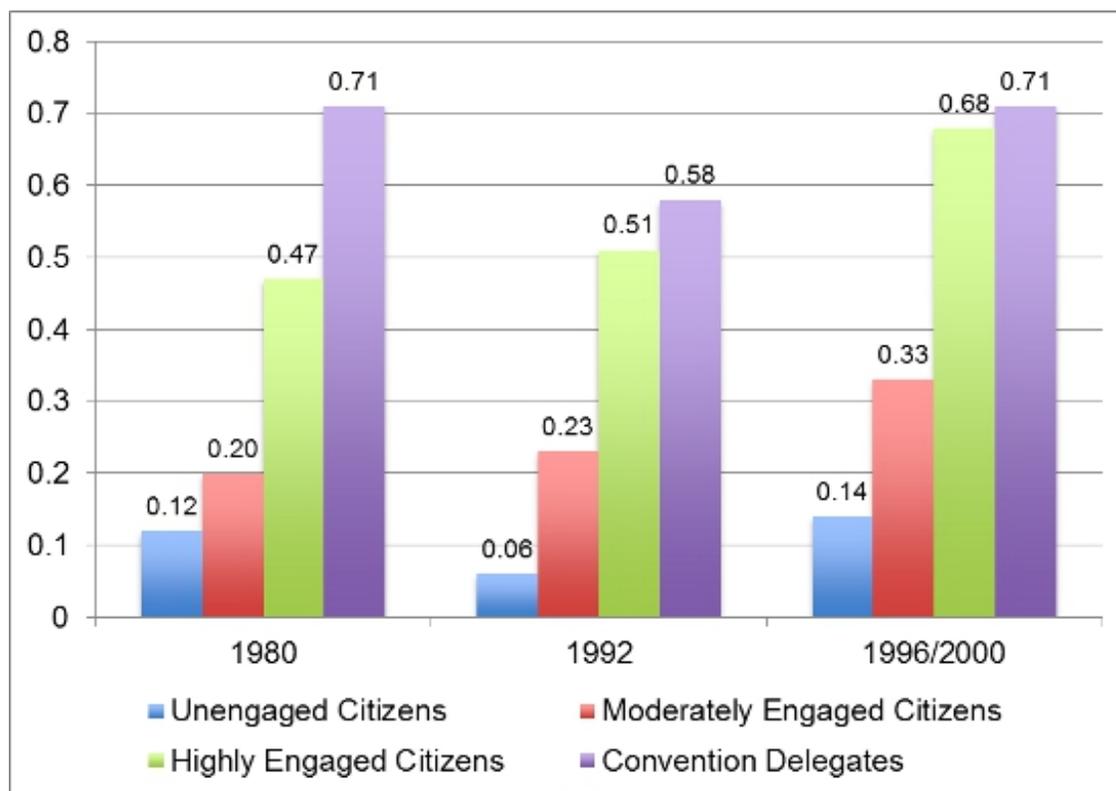
Not all citizens will receive these cues from political elites and the media to the same extent. Thus, we do not expect all citizens to be capable of structuring their political beliefs along the liberal-conservative spectrum to the same extent. For instance, those who do not pay attention to politics or the media should not be affected by the stronger cues. Consequently, we subdivide citizens based on their level of ideological engagement before comparing the ideological structure of political elites and ordinary citizens. If citizens self-identified as liberal or conservative or extremely liberal or conservative, we consider them ideologically attached. We used the National Election Study’s interviewer assessment of the respondent’s general level of information about politics and political affairs to tap political awareness. Finally, we measured political involvement based on how many political actions (such as displaying a campaign button or working for a candidate) the respondent participated in. We then combined these measures to create three categories: ideologically engaged, moderately engaged, and ideologically unengaged.

To determine how well ordinary citizens organize their political beliefs, we compare them to delegates to the National

Conventions. Delegates to the Republican and Democratic National Conventions are an ideal comparison for several reasons. First, delegates are more knowledgeable about and interested in politics than the average person. Second, their participation in the presidential nominating process represents a significant step above and beyond the involvement in politics of most Americans. Delegates navigate a multi-step process to be selected to attend the Convention and then they put forth the effort and time to travel and attend the Convention itself and participate in the party functions. Finally, many delegates to the National Conventions hold or have held elected office. While National Convention delegates are not representative of all political elites, they are a subset of political elites available for comparison.

Drawing on a subset of similarly worded questions from the National Election Studies from 1980, 1992, and 1996 and Convention Delegate Studies from 1980, 1992, and 2000, we compared ideological consistency and structure between delegates and the three subsets of ordinary citizens. Figure 1 shows the results of our bivariate correlations, where correlations closer to 1 indicate greater attitude consistency, or beliefs that are more tightly organized along the liberal-conservative spectrum. Our analysis of the 1980 data suggests that even the most engaged citizens do not approach political elites in terms of left-right structure on cultural/moral, national security and business/regulation issues in the pre-polarization era.

Figure 1 – Attitude Constraint Correlations for Ordinary Citizens and Delegates



Note: Pearson correlations for additive scales based on National Election Study and Convention Delegate Study data. All variables have been coded to be positively related.

In order to compare ideological consistency between delegates and ordinary citizens after the onset of increased elite polarization, we looked at data from 1992. This data indicates that when asked about social welfare, cultural/moral, and national security issues, delegates demonstrate a high level of ideological structure. Unlike in 1980, we also find a higher level of structure for the ideologically engaged in 1992. We do not find the same level of ideological organization among moderately engaged and unengaged citizens in 1992. Essentially, the ideologically engaged are more capable than they were in 1980 but we see no similar improvement among the less ideologically

engaged segments of the population.

In an additional comparison between ordinary citizens in 1996 and delegates in 2000, we find further evidence to support our conclusions. Delegates remain ideologically consistent, but the most ideologically engaged citizens hold policy beliefs that are almost as tightly constrained as the delegates.

Overall, we conclude that ideologically engaged citizens organize their policy views in a more coherent fashion than ideologically unengaged citizens. Additionally, ideologically engaged citizens' policy positions have become more consistent over time. Finally, we find that differences between political elites and ordinary citizens have begun to dissipate as the ideologically engaged citizens have caught up. Our results show that for a portion of Americans, policy considerations are far more important than they were in 1980. As elite discourse has become more polarized and the media more clearly broadcasts these divisions, some Americans have responded by conceptualizing issues and organizing policy positions as elites do.

This article is based on the paper, 'Ideological Structure and Consistency in the Age of Polarization' in American Politics Research.

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