

# Political Sophistication and the Dimensionality of Elite and Mass Attitudes, 1980–2004

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Among the terms central to the literature on political attitudes have been complexity and constraint, with some scholars asserting that increased complexity—political sophistication—constrains political attitudes to a single ideological dimension while others argue that complexity instead leads to a multidimensional attitude structure. We investigate the role of sophistication in structuring issue attitudes using a unique survey of Democratic and Republican party elites in conjunction with the American National Election Studies (ANES). The two surveys allow us to compare directly the structure of elites' and mass issue attitudes. We hypothesize that elites' attitudes are unidimensional and mass attitudes are multidimensional. The difference, we argue, is that political sophistication constrains elites' attitudes to a single ideological dimension, whereas much of the mass public is not fully capable of making the necessary connections between ideology and issue attitudes. The results of comparisons between elite and mass attitude structures from 1980 to 2004 support our hypotheses.

**M**ore than 30 years ago in an essay originally entitled “Enough Already about Ideology!” Donald Kinder (1983) encouraged scholars of political behavior to move beyond debating the existence and structure of ideology in public opinion. Ideology's role in structuring mass political attitudes is relatively minimal, and much of the mass public does not exhibit attitudinal constraint. Still, abandoning ideological research is problematic because evidence suggests that a single ideological dimension explains elite behavior (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Moreover, ascrib-

ing “ideological innocence” to the American people masks individual differences in ideological thinking among the electorate (Jacoby 1995). Our goal in this article is to investigate empirically the structure of issue attitudes among elites and the mass public by directly comparing each group's reliance on the liberal-conservative ideological continuum.<sup>1</sup> We demonstrate that as political sophistication increases, issue attitudes become constrained to a single dimension, as with political elites and the most sophisticated segment of the mass public.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, increases in attitudinal con-

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1. An online appendix containing supplementary material for this article is available at the “Supplements” link in the online edition. Data and supporting materials necessary to replicate all empirical results are available on the corresponding author's Dataverse at <https://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/robertnupton>.

2. Our findings describe the structure of political attitudes in the United States and may not hold in other contexts, particularly multiparty systems. For example, some scholars argue that multiple cross-cutting dimensions underlie party competition in Europe (Gabel and Hix 2002; Hix 1999; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2006; Kriesi et al. 2006; Warwick 2002). However, other evidence suggests that a single socioeconomic left-right dimension structures elite competition (van der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Other studies find that multiple dimensions underlying both parties' and citizens' issue attitudes are correlated (Gabel and Anderson 2002; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Marks et al. 2006; Marks and Steenbergen 2002; Stoll 2010). Instructively for our purposes, Bakker, Jolly, and Polk (2012) demonstrate that the degree to which three dimensions—economic left-right, social left-right and European integration—are correlated illustrates the dimensionality of the policy space and, importantly, that this dimensionality varies across countries.

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straint among elites during a period of political polarization are reflected in the attitude structure of the most politically sophisticated citizens, but not among the mass public as a whole.

Examining theories set forth in *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960) and Converse (1964, 1970), as well as their critics, we begin by addressing the debate between scholars who argue that complexity—political sophistication—and constraint are compatible aspects of belief systems and those who argue that the concepts are irreconcilable. Then, we outline a theory stressing the compatibility of complexity and constraint: as individuals become more politically sophisticated, their attitudes are more likely to be constrained to a single dimension represented by the liberal-conservative continuum in American politics. Any lack of constraint we see is not because the public is thinking about politics ideologically, but because it is not. In this way, ideology serves to simplify the political world for sophisticated citizens.

Although previous studies examine the influence of political sophistication on ideological thinking and constraint (e.g., Hamill, Lodge, and Blake 1985; Jennings 1992; Knight 1985; Levitin and Miller 1979; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Stimson 1975), this study is the first to test explicitly the influence of sophistication on these critical variables in a direct comparison of the dimensionality of elite and mass attitudes. By further exploring the relationship among sophistication, ideological thinking and constraint, we have brought the distinctions between elites and the mass public into clearer focus.

### THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND CONSTRAINT

*The American Voter* discusses the structure (or lack thereof) of mass political attitudes as the “problem of ideology” (Campbell et al. 1960). Campbell et al. (1960) define ideology as a broad, coherent organizational framework for structuring individuals’ attitudes. Similarly, Converse (1964) characterizes ideology as a set of “capping abstractions” or “crowning postures” that provides a reliable structure to wide-ranging constellations of issue attitudes based on the individual’s position on the liberal-conservative continuum. If attitudes are structured meaningfully along the liberal-conservative dimension, then they should exhibit constraint, or “functional interdependence” (Converse 1964, 209). Explaining his rationale, Converse writes, “Economy and constraint are companion concepts, for the more highly constrained a system of multiple elements, the more economically it may be described and understood” (1964, 214). That is, if individuals structure their attitudes on the basis of

a few abstract principles relating to the liberal-conservative continuum, then we should be able to predict an array of individuals’ issue attitudes given that we know their attitude on a single issue.

In the wake of Converse’s assertion that “large portions of the electorate do not have meaningful beliefs” (1964, 245), scholarly attention became sharply focused on issues of measurement error (Achen 1975; Converse and Markus 1979; Norpoth and Lodge 1985), as well as substantive debates regarding purported increases in ideological thinking among the mass public over time (Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1978; Field and Anderson 1969; Nie and Andersen 1974; Pomper 1972; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1978). The current substantive and empirical verdict seems to be that the mass public consists of various proportions of stable opinion holders, vacillating changers and durable changers (Hill and Kriesi 2001, 410), and that differences in response variation can be attributed to political awareness and opinion strength, as opposed to measurement error.

Many scholars argue that the underlying trait thought to produce attitudinal constraint—ideology—is in fact multidimensional (Luttbeg 1968; Marcus, Tabb, and Sullivan 1974; Weisberg and Rusk 1970), hierarchical (Peffley and Hurwitz 1985) or even nondimensional (Conover and Feldman 1981). Treier and Hillygus (2009) argue that individuals are ideologically ambivalent—meaning that a sizable portion of the electorate possesses conservative attitudes toward economic issues and liberal attitudes toward social issues (and vice versa)—cross-cutting the unidimensional ideological continuum. Therefore, according to this view, the conception of the mass public as being devoid of constraint can be attributed to the multidimensionality of ideological thinking. Stimson (2004) and Ellis and Stimson (2012) argue that the observed inconsistency between policy preferences and ideological self-identifications among the mass public is a result of “conflicted” individuals simultaneously expressing support for symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism.

And yet, how do we reconcile the fact that elite discourse is conducted unidimensionally? Poole and Rosenthal (1997) convincingly show that members of Congress often behave as if politics and issues are structured unidimensionally along the traditional liberal-conservative ideological continuum. The apparent disconnect between how political elites (elected officials and party activists) and the mass public structure their political attitudes is a question of continuing concern for scholars. For example, Hill and Kriesi (2001) suggest that if differences in stability and constraint among the mass public are attributable to differences in relative levels of political sophistication across individuals, then

we should expect to observe even more pronounced differences between political elites and the mass public. Additionally, Layman, Carsey, Green, Herrera, and Cooperman (2010) show that activists' attitudes have become more extreme toward social welfare, race and abortion and other cultural issues. Given that activists influence the attitudes of both elected officials and the electorate, activists' growing extremism should be important not only for understanding ideological constraint and coherence over time, but also in how elites separate themselves from the public. However, a direct comparison of the dimensionality of elite and mass public attitudes has never been conducted.<sup>3</sup>

One study comparing elite and mass attitudes in the United States was conducted by M. Kent Jennings (1992).<sup>4</sup> Jennings examines attitudinal constraint and stability among elites and the mass public using the Convention Delegate Study (CDS), a survey he conducted in every presidential year from 1972 to 1992 (with the exception of 1976) with Warren E. Miller.<sup>5</sup> The delegates are considered "elites," both in Jennings' study and in ours, because of their extraordinarily high level of involvement with politics. As Jennings writes, "Almost by definition, and most assuredly according to their self-reports, the delegates are superactivists" (1992, 423). Indeed, Layman et al. describe convention delegates as the "most active and visible participants in party politics" (2010, 330). Jennings reports that the delegates' issue attitudes (and evaluations of various political and social groups) demonstrate both greater ideological constraint and over-time stability than those of the mass public, a finding that he attributes to differences in the two groups' level of political involvement. The current study contributes to the literature by testing directly if specific qualities operationalized to represent political sophistication—interest, involvement and knowledge—produce marked differences in ideological thinking and, importantly, dimensionality between elites and the mass public, as well as within the mass public.

3. Some recent studies locate elites and the mass public in the same ideological space (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Jessee 2009), but these studies assume unidimensionality and do not attempt to compare the dimensionality of elites' attitudes to that of mass public attitudes.

4. Another notable exception is the study of members of the French National Assembly conducted by Converse and Pierce (1986), who report that the legislators possess more structured and constrained political attitudes than does the French public.

5. Others scholars continued the CDS series in the years 2000 and 2004. The CDS consists of mail-in surveys of delegates to the Democratic and Republican national party conventions for all years except 2004, when the survey was conducted via email and a follow-up survey was mailed to Republican delegates. The full methodology of the studies is contained in Miller and Jennings (1986) and Layman et al. (2010).

## SOPHISTICATION AND THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL ATTITUDES

We argue that elites' attitudes will clearly conform to a unidimensional structure representing ideology, and that apparent deviations from this structure in mass opinion are a result of a lack of political sophistication that inhibits ideological thinking. One of our primary theoretical motivations is previous scholarship investigating the role of sophistication in differentiating between ideological and nonideological determinants of political attitudes in the mass public.

Recall that the authors of the seminal works on ideology argue that complexity—political sophistication—implies constraint. The essential aspect of this claim, again, is that the underlying source of attitudinal constraint exhibited by sophisticated individuals is the liberal-conservative continuum, as these individuals think of the world in abstract, "liberal" and "conservative" terms. As Luskin notes, despite the fact that sophistication does not on its face necessitate reliance on these terms, "sophistication and abstraction are theoretically and empirically entwined" (1987, 862). Indeed, a substantial body of literature shows that for sophisticated citizens, ideological self-identifications are important determinants of candidate evaluations (Stimson 1975), vote choice (Knight 1985), an array of issue attitudes (Jacoby 1991; Kuklinski, Metlay, and Kay 1982; Sniderman et al. 1991; for a notable exception, see Goren 2004), polarized evaluations of liberals and conservatives (Federico 2007) and coherent value structures (Jacoby 2006; Michaud, Carlisle, and Smith 2009). Whether measured in terms of knowledge of political facts (Federico and Schneider 2007; Zaller 1992), education (Sniderman et al. 1991), a combination of education and conceptualization (Jacoby 1988), a combination of education, political interest and knowledge (Knight 1985) or a combination of intelligence, political interest and knowledge (Luskin 1990), studies consistently demonstrate that sophisticated citizens are more likely to structure their issue attitudes according to the liberal-conservative continuum than are their peers. Other studies show that this reliance on the liberal-conservative continuum explicitly fosters a unidimensional attitude structure.

For example, Stimson (1975) examines the dimensionality of issue attitudes using factor analysis during a single election year and concludes that increased sophistication reduces attitudes to a single dimension. Moreover, Jacoby (1995) reports that a cumulative, liberal-conservative scale fits the structure of certain mass attitudes well. Importantly, he argues that although many respondents are able to locate themselves and the parties on the liberal-conservative continuum, they nonetheless are unable to orient other, more specific issue attitudes ideologically. The inability of a wider

range of issue attitudes to conform to a single scale is a result of individuals not making the connections between ideology and issue attitudes.

Taken together, research on mass attitudes alone, as well as that comparing elite and mass attitudes, leads us to hypothesize that sophistication is the key factor in distinguishing the structure of elite and mass issue attitudes. Because elites are highly politically interested, involved and knowledgeable, we expect that their attitudes are oriented ideologically and thus constrained by the underlying unidimensional continuum. In contrast, we expect that a lack of political sophistication leads most of the mass public to structure only certain attitudes ideologically, producing a lack of attitudinal constraint. In other words, much of the mass public does not possess the cognitive and motivational characteristics that connect ideology and issue attitudes. If our argument is correct, then we should observe that as sophistication and thus ideological thinking increases, as with the most sophisticated segment of the mass public, individuals' attitude structures become unidimensional, mirroring the benchmark of attitudinal constraint demonstrated by the elite sample.

#### DATA AND METHOD

We examine elites' attitudes toward an array of issues that might constitute a political ideology using the 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2000 and 2004 CDS. We compare the resulting structure to that obtained from an examination of mass attitudes using data from the CPS American National Elections Studies (ANES) for the same years.<sup>6</sup> We specify two-factor confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models in each year in order to examine the structure of elite and mass attitudes. Items loading on the first factor are core social welfare issues plus other spending items representing the socioeconomic foundations of the liberal-conservative continuum, or the basic "spend-save" dimension in American politics (Converse 1964). Items loading on the second factor are cultural issues such as abortion, the role of women in society and attitudes toward homosexuals, which also are indicators of the liberal-conservative continuum.<sup>7</sup> Invest-

6. Slight differences in question wording exist across the two studies, and in some years different questions are used to assess the same substantive issue attitudes. The number of issues included in the analysis differs across years due to the fact that the number of identical questions appearing on the two studies differs across years. The number of issues examined in each year varies from six to 12, and the total number of distinct issues examined is 17. A full list of question wording for both studies in each year is available in the online appendix.

7. Our factor specification is drawn from previous studies uncovering distinct economic and cultural dimensions underlying mass public issue

attitudes (Feldman and Johnston 2013; Layman and Carsey 2002; Stimson 2004; Treier and Hillygus 2009).

8. The two forms of evidence that we examine—the factor correlation and the factor loadings—capture the two forms of attitudinal constraint—horizontal and vertical, respectively—described by Converse (1964). More specifically, issue attitude interdependence evidences "horizontal constraint," and a high correspondence between ideological self-identifications and issue attitudes evidences "vertical constraint," both of which are implications of ideological thinking (e.g., Federico 2007).

tigating the role of political sophistication in fostering ideological thinking and attitudinal constraint using factor analysis allows us to observe the potentially critical differences that exist in the dimensionality of attitudes not only between elites and the mass public, but also within the mass public.

An initial expectation for the factor analysis involves the relationship between the individual attitudes and the specified factors. If our argument is correct, then each of the individual attitudes among elites and the most sophisticated segment of the mass public should correlate highly with the specified factors—attitudes toward spending on government services with factor one, and attitudes toward abortion with factor two, for example. Attitudes for all but the most sophisticated segment of the public, on the other hand, should correlate with the specified factors, but at much lower levels, indicating the often weak interrelationships among mass political attitudes and the idiosyncratic sources underlying many of them.

The key expectation for the factor analysis involves the correlation between the two factors. A result consistent with a unidimensional structure is one in which the factor correlation is high, indicating ideological constraint—although items are specified to load on separate factors, if the factors are highly correlated, then an underlying, overarching organizational principle exists to connect all of the issue attitudes, and specifying additional factors contributes little to capturing attitude structure.<sup>8</sup> If our hypotheses regarding the ideological thinking and attitudinal constraint among elites and the mass public are correct, then the factor correlation should near one for elites—indicating a unidimensional structure—and be much lower for the mass public, indicating a multidimensional structure. Importantly, the correlation for the full mass public sample should be non-zero, indicating the public's at least limited reliance on the liberal-conservative continuum. Additionally, the factor correlation for the most sophisticated segment of the mass public should approach that of elites.

Because sophistication plays such a central role to our argument, we now wish to explain how we measure the concept, which represents the cognitive and motivational

attitudes (Feldman and Johnston 2013; Layman and Carsey 2002; Stimson 2004; Treier and Hillygus 2009).

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factors that we believe produce ideological thinking and constraint. Previous studies have termed the variable “political awareness,” “expertise” or “political knowledge.” In this study, we create a summary index from three variables—political interest, involvement and knowledge—to provide a meaningful test of our hypothesized relationship among political sophistication, ideological thinking and constraint.<sup>9</sup> Political interest ranges from 0 to 3 according to the respondent’s self-reported interest in the political campaign (Luskin 1990). Political involvement ranges from 0 to 5 according to the number of campaign-related activities in which the respondent participated (Converse 1975; Judd, Krosnick, and Milburn 1981). Political knowledge ranges from 0 to 3 according to the ANES interviewer assessment of the respondent’s general level of political information (Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992).<sup>10</sup> Higher values indicate greater levels of political interest, involvement and knowledge, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

In order to examine our hypotheses, we stratify our sample into three groups representing the lowest, middle and highest thirds of the mass public based upon individuals’ political interest, involvement and knowledge.<sup>12</sup> We observe large and consistent differences in levels of political knowledge and political interest. Involvement, though, appears to be the single greatest difference among segments of the mass public. This finding is consistent with previous studies concluding that involvement is an important determinant of sophistication and constraint (Federico and Hunt 2013; Granberg and Holmberg 1996; Jennings 1992; Knight 1985; Leighley 1991; Verba and Nie 1972). Stratifying the mass public into three groups thus enables us to see more clearly how political sophistication varies within the electorate (Converse 2000). The mean value of the political sophistication index for the lowest third of the mass public is 2.207, compared to 4.372 for the middle third and 6.202 for the

highest third. The summary statistics show that only individuals in the most sophisticated third of the sample score in the top half of the sophistication index. The results from 2004 are worth noting because the mean value of the sophistication index in that year is noticeably higher than in previous years included in the analysis. Examining the value for each segment of the mass public, however, shows that the increase is largely attributable to the most sophisticated third, an observation that will become clearer in the next section. Below, we test our theory that differences in political sophistication among various segments of the mass public contribute to observed differences in attitude structures.

## RESULTS

We begin our analysis by comparing the attitude structure of elites and the full mass public sample. We next investigate the extent to which political sophistication influences ideological thinking and constraint within the mass public. Finally, we examine the relationship between ideological self-identifications and the dimension underlying political attitudes for elites, as well as for various strata of the mass public.

Let us first examine the results for elite and mass attitudes from a single year, 2000. Below are the factor loadings for each variable and the factor correlations for the 2000 CDS and ANES.<sup>13</sup> Turning first to the elite results, Table 1 shows that each issue attitude is highly correlated with its specified factor. Attitudes toward the first eight issues in column one—representing core social welfare issues plus environmental and defense spending—correlate highly with the first latent factor. Attitudes toward the remaining three issues—representing cultural issues—correlate highly with the second factor. Crucially, however, the factor correlation between the two specified factors, 0.875, approaches one, consistent with a unidimensional attitude structure. In other words, disparate issue attitudes specified to load on separate factors are in fact a product of, and thus constrained by, a single underlying structure, the canonical left-right ideological dimension representing the basis of contestation in American politics.

The results for the 2000 ANES are not nearly as clean. Although a few of the issue attitudes correlate highly with the specified factors, several others do not. The items with

9. Full question wording for all of the variables used to construct the political sophistication index in each year is available in the online appendix.

10. Similar results are obtained when knowledge of political facts is used to measure respondents’ political knowledge for the years 1988–2004. These results for the year 2000, as well as the correlation between the two operationalizations of political knowledge in each year, are available in the online appendix.

11. The index ranges from 0 to 11 in all years except 1984, when the index ranges from 0 to 10 due to the fact that two questions, donating money to a political candidate and donating money to one of the political parties, are combined into a single question.

12. The mean value of the political sophistication index and that of each of its components, as well as the distribution of the index for the full mass public sample and the mass public stratified samples in each year, are located in the online appendix.

13. These results are consistent with those for every other year in the analysis, which are available in the online appendix. All estimates were generated from structural equation models (SEM) in STATA 12. Estimates generated from generalized structural equation models (GSEM) in STATA 13 are substantively similar to those reported in the article. The main results for the GSEM models are available in the online appendix.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results for the 2000 CDS and ANES

Variable	Socioeconomic Factor		Cultural Factor		CDS	ANES
	CDS	ANES	CDS	ANES		
Services	.879	.641				
Welfare	.778	.447				
Government insurance	.807	.472				
Child care	.772	.585				
Schools	.757	.523				
Aid to blacks	.714	.472				
Environment	.739	.473				
Defense	.667	.401				
Abortion			.703	.406		
Homosexual affect			.802	.680		
Homosexual job discrimination			.894	.600		
<b>Factor Correlation</b>					.875	.537
<b>Fit Indices</b>						
RMSEA					.093	.054
SRMR					.032	.039
CFI					.949	.922
TFI					.935	.900
CD					.975	.888

the lowest factor loadings—defense spending and abortion—suggest that the respective factors do not explain a high percentage of the variance in these attitudes and that their underlying sources perhaps are different than the dimensions specified in the analysis. Also noteworthy is that the factor loadings for each issue attitude are considerably lower than those observed for the elite sample, again indicating that the attitudinal constraint exhibited by elites is not present among the mass public as a whole. This point is underscored further by comparing the factor correlation for the mass public sample, 0.537, to that obtained for elites, 0.875. Despite the existence of some attitudinal constraint, the results provide support to our hypothesis that the mass public relies on ideology only limitedly, rather than as an overarching structure for organizing political attitudes. At least two dimensions underlie mass opinion, and, as evidenced by the low factor loadings for several of the items, idiosyncratic sources unique to various individual issue attitudes seem to underlie a nontrivial portion of mass opinion. Deviations from a unidimensional structure are the result of the public not making necessary connections between ideology and issue attitudes due to a lack of political sophistication.

The results presented for the year 2000 generalize to the other years under consideration. This evidence is provided

in the left-hand panel of Figure 1. Consistent with our argument, the factor correlation for elites in each year is extremely high, indicating a unidimensional attitude structure. The contrast to the results for the mass public could not be starker. In each year, although the factors correlate moderately—demonstrating the mass public's limited reliance on the left-right continuum to structure political attitudes—the results, combined with the low factor loadings for several attitudes, evidence a paucity of ideological thinking and thus constraint among the mass public.

The results presented in this section are entirely consistent with Jennings' (1992) findings. We argue that issue attitudes are more highly interdependent for the delegates than for the mass public because elites' attitudes are derived from a single abstract dimension, which we further argue is ideology. Issue attitudes of the mass public instead appear to be generated by two or more dimensions. The difference in constraint between elites' and the mass public is a result of differences in sophistication. Politically knowledgeable and motivated elites conceptualize politics in ideological terms, which produces constraint according to the underlying liberal-conservative continuum. In order to demonstrate further the role of political sophistication in structuring political attitudes, we next examine its effect on ideologi-

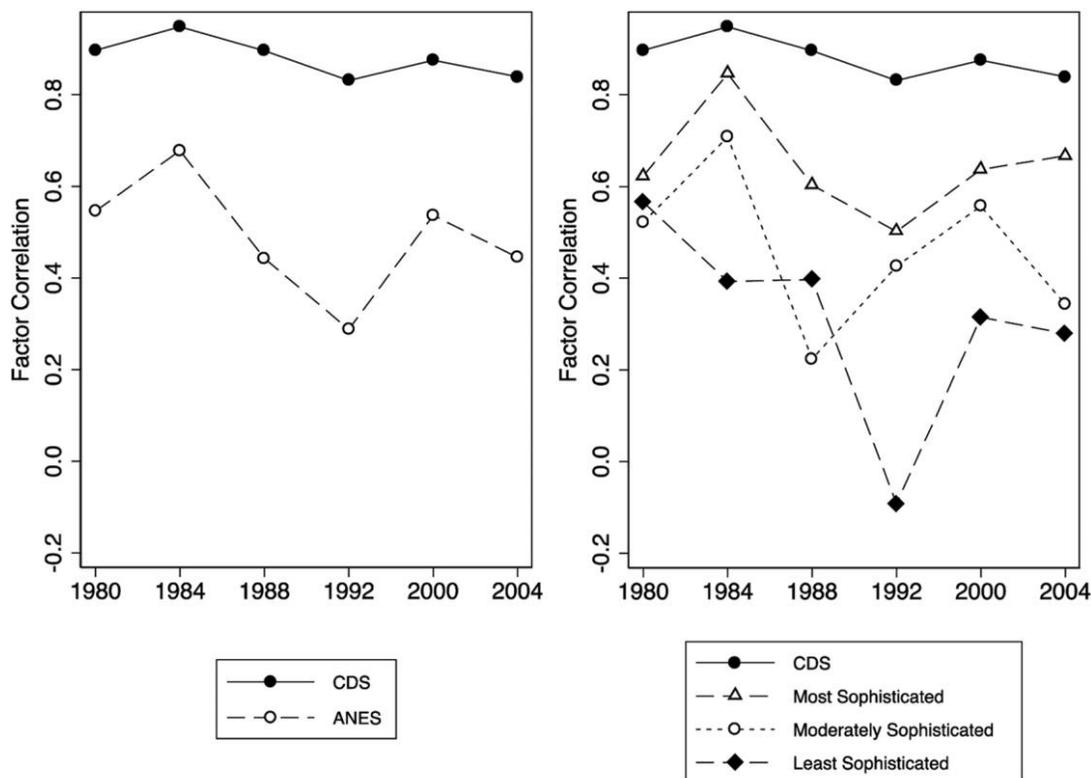


Figure 1. Plot of factor correlations for elites and the mass public. The right-hand panel presents the correlations for the mass public conditioned on political sophistication.

cal thinking and constraint among various strata of the mass public.

### Sophistication and Constraint in the Mass Public

We stratify our samples into thirds based on our measure of sophistication in order to investigate more fully our hypothesis that a lack of sophistication is driving the apparently multidimensional structure of mass opinion.<sup>14</sup> If our argument is correct, then as sophistication—and thus ideological thinking and constraint—increases, the factor correlation also should increase. The factor correlations for the stratified samples for each year included in the analysis are shown in the right-hand panel of Figure 1. The factor correlations for elites are also included.

The results again conform to our expectations. Turning once more to the specific results for the year 2000 is useful for highlighting the graphical evidence presented in Figure 1. The factor loadings for each issue attitude and the factor correlations for the stratified samples of the mass public are displayed in Table 2. Among the least sophisticated third of

the sample, a couple of core social welfare issues load moderately well on factor one, but a few others do not, and attitudes toward race, the environment, defense and abortion all load poorly on the specified factors. The loadings testify to the idiosyncratic sources of these issue attitudes among less sophisticated members of the mass public. Additionally, the factor correlation is 0.315. Given that sophistication is positively related to the individual factor loadings and the factor correlation, we argue that the likelihood of this portion of the public being ideologically ambivalent is low. Rather, this segment of the mass public lacks attitude structure. Examining the results for more sophisticated citizens, we see that the factor loadings and factor correlation increase as expected: For example, the factor correlation for those in the middle third is 0.557; and, for citizens occupying the top third of the sophistication scale, the factor correlation is 0.637. Moreover, in 2004, as elites' attitudes continue to polarize, the differences in constraint across sophistication groups heighten. The factor correlations for the least, moderately and most sophisticated segments of the mass public in that year are 0.312, 0.363 and 0.710, respectively. The evidence presented thus far indicates that our measure of political sophistication effectively discriminates ideological thinking and attitudinal constraint among the mass public.

14. The alpha reliability coefficient for the sophistication scale in each year is as follows:  $\alpha = 0.642$  in 1980, 0.623 in 1984, 0.664 in 1988, 0.654 in 1992, 0.631 in 2000, and 0.668 in 2004.

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results for the 2000 ANES Conditioned on Sophistication

Variable	Socioeconomic Factor			Cultural Factor			
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High	
Services	.632	.601	.674				
Welfare	.313	.482	.606				
Government insurance	.315	.449	.573				
Child care	.595	.510	.604				
Schools	.511	.418	.563				
Aid to blacks	.268	.493	.652				
Environment	.359	.459	.534				
Defense	.217	.301	.591				
Abortion				.279	.404	.505	
Homosexual affect				.786	.587	.770	
Job discrimination				.441	.611	.661	
<b>Factor Correlation</b>							
					Low	Middle	High
					.315	.557	.637
<b>Fit Indices</b>							
RMSEA					.031	.053	.076
SRMR					.046	.048	.053
CFI					.950	.905	.913
TFI					.936	.878	.889
CD					.884	.854	.934

### Ideology?

We have shown that the attitude structures of elites and the most sophisticated members of the mass public are unidimensional. We also have provided evidence that less sophisticated members of the mass public use this dimension only limitedly to organize their political attitudes. Thus far, however, we have relied on our a priori specification of this dimension as ideology. As an additional piece of evidence to demonstrate that the underlying dimension we are reporting is, in fact, ideology, we present below correlations between individuals' ideological self-identifications and the socioeconomic factor for the stratified samples of the mass public.<sup>15</sup>

Recall that for politically sophisticated citizens, ideological self-identifications are an important determinant of issue attitudes (e.g., Jacoby 1991). If our theory is correct and the dimension we have discussed throughout this analysis really is ideology and generates the constraint we observed in the previous section among elites and the most politically sophisticated members of the mass public, then correlations between it and ideological self-identifications should

15. Similar results are obtained from an analysis correlating ideological self-identifications and the cultural factor. These results are available in the online appendix.

be low for the less sophisticated segments of the mass public, higher for more sophisticated citizens and highest for political elites. These correlations are presented below in Figure 2.<sup>16</sup>

Examining the evidence from the CDS in the left-hand panel of Figure 2, we see that the correlations are extremely high for elites—approaching one in most years, similar to the high factor correlations for the elite sample reported earlier. Additionally, 95% confidence intervals show very low variability in the estimates. The results provided here and earlier support our argument that the dimension upon which elites' attitudes are structured is, in fact, ideology. The open circles in the left-hand panel of Figure 2 represent the results for the mass public, and the evidence once again tells a starkly different story than the one we observed for elites. On average, the magnitude of the correlations is less than half of that obtained for elites. These results testify to the fact that the mass public relies only limitedly on ideology as an overarching mechanism for structuring political attitudes. Additionally, although constraint among the mass public increases markedly over this time period, further analysis

16. Figures 2 and 3 were created by estimating factor scores and then estimating correlations between these factor scores and ideological self-identifications.

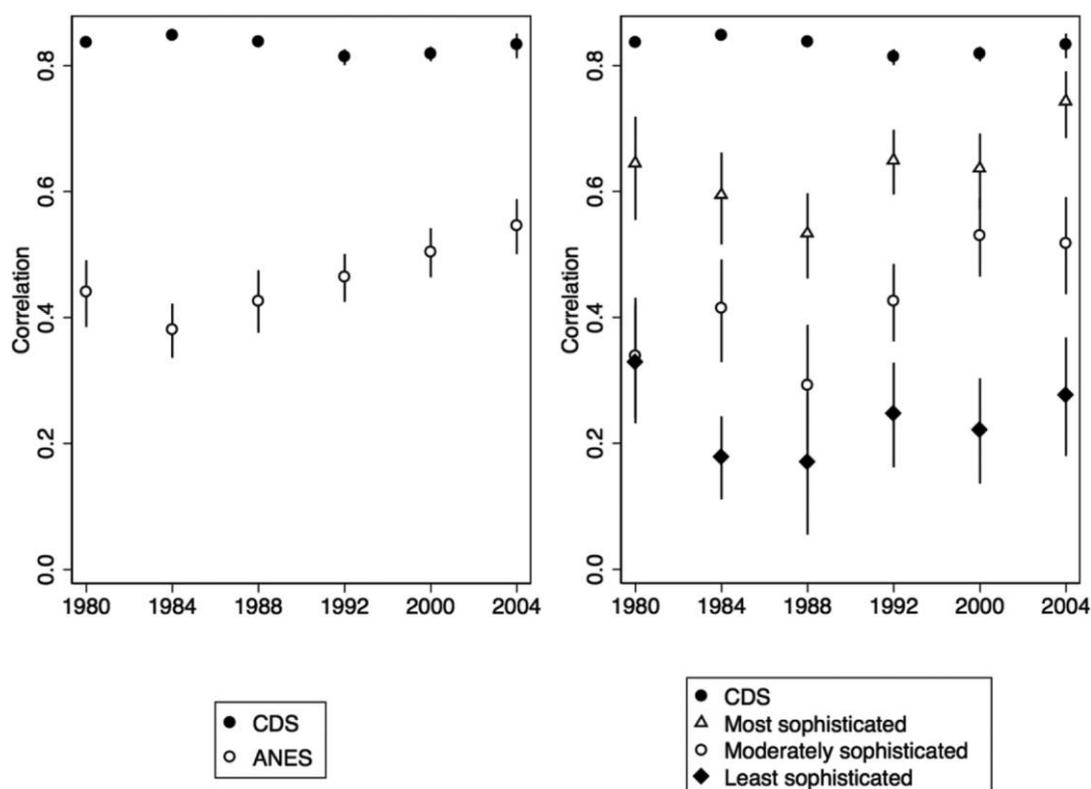


Figure 2. Correlations between ideological self-identifications and the socioeconomic factor for elites and the mass public. The right-hand panel presents the correlations for the mass public conditioned on political sophistication. Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

shows that the increase is driven almost entirely by the most politically sophisticated stratum of the electorate.

The right-hand panel of Figure 2 presents the results for the mass public stratified samples. In each year, the correlation between ideological self-identifications and the socioeconomic factor is very low for the least sophisticated third of the sample and improves for the middle third of the sample, but the difference in ideological constraint appears to lie between these two groups and the most sophisticated citizens in the sample. For these respondents in the top third of the sample in each year, the correlation is high and significantly different from either of the lower two groups in all but one year (2000). Importantly, the correlations between ideological self-identifications and the underlying dimension for the stratified samples demonstrate that apparent increases in ideological constraint among the mass public in recent years are largely confined to the most sophisticated citizens, who are politically interested, involved and knowledgeable. Over the past two decades, these individuals' attitude structures have become more like those of elites, but the trend does not appear to be occurring among other, less sophisticated segments of the mass public. The heterogeneous response among the mass public to increasing elite polarization is consistent with previous work associating political sophistication and elite opinion lead-

ership (Claassen and Highton 2009; Layman and Carsey 2002; Zaller 1992).

The empirical results presented in this section support our arguments regarding the ideological thinking and constraint of the mass public. Much of the mass public's issue attitudes are not structured coherently according to a single broad, unifying principle, or, in the case of less sophisticated citizens, even two principles. As a result, these citizens' issue attitudes are not interdependent and bear little relation to their self-identifications as "liberal" or "conservative." However, an important caveat to this general finding is that ideology does appear to play an important role in structuring the political attitudes of more sophisticated citizens. These politically sophisticated individuals possess the cognitive and motivational characteristics necessary to connect ideological self-identifications and issue attitudes. Moreover, increases in constraint among these more politically sophisticated citizens have been marked in recent years, wholly consistent with theories suggesting that the most politically active individuals are most likely to reflect elite polarization (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006). The important flipside to the finding is that less politically sophisticated members of the mass public show virtually no increase in constraint over the time period included in the analysis.

Still, even as the results show important differences in attitude structure within the mass public, we thus far have not demonstrated the origins of the extraordinarily high levels of constraint found among elites. An important aspect of Jennings' (1992) study, for example, is that he did not uncover a level of constraint among any segment of the mass public—even among the most involved citizens—approaching that of elites. We contend that political sophistication is what distinguishes elites from the mass public. However, political elites simply may be qualitatively different from the mass public, or perhaps we are not properly operationalizing sophistication and thus not capturing the variable driving ideological thinking and constraint. In order to investigate this question more fully, we stratify the ANES surveys further to obtain the correlation between ideological self-identifications and the underlying dimension for individuals we term “hyper sophisticates.” These citizens are rated by the ANES interviewer as possessing a “very high” general level of political information, report being “extremely interested” in the year’s political campaign and have participated in at least one campaign event during the election year. The results for this analysis are shown in Figure 3. The estimated correlations for these hyper sophisticated members of the mass public are remarkably similar to those obtained for elites in all but one year.<sup>17</sup> The estimates are higher than those obtained for even the top third of our sophistication scale.

We conclude that elites are not wholly set apart from the mass public, or elite qua elite. Rather, elites’ ideological thinking and constraint results from their extraordinary interest and involvement in, and knowledge about, politics. Contra Jennings (1992), we observe levels of constraint approaching, and even equaling, elites among the most interested, involved and knowledgeable members of the mass public. Furthermore, the results lend support to our argument that constraint is, in fact, a result of ideological thinking owing to political sophistication, and not, for example, blind partisanship. If strong partisans, regardless of sophistication, exhibited constraint, then one could argue that the situation was one of partisans thinking ideologically, as opposed to sophisticates thinking ideologically. The results contradict the theory of partisans blindly showcasing an ability to know “what goes with what.” Although strong partisans do generally exhibit greater constraint than other individuals in the sample, the differences are largely insignificant within sophistication categories.<sup>18</sup> Most impor-

17. The exception is 1988, which is due to extreme variability owing to an unfortunately small sample size.

18. This result is consistent with previous literature suggesting that partisanship helps individuals connect issue positions to the liberal-conservative continuum (e.g., Baldassarri and Gelman 2008).

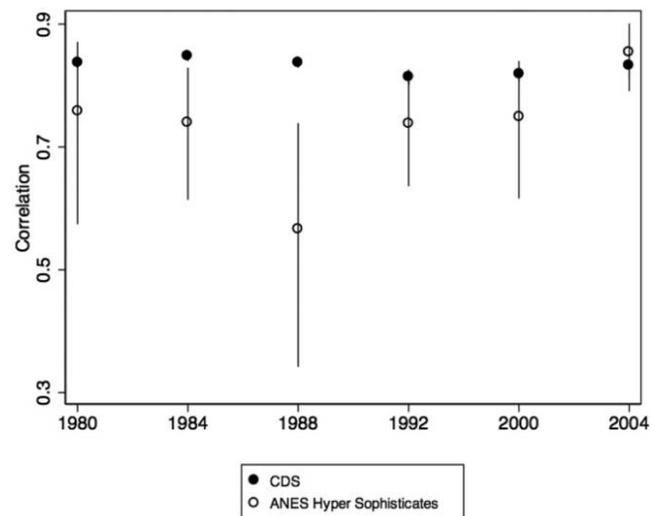


Figure 3. Correlations between ideological self-identifications and the socioeconomic factor for elites and mass public “hyper sophisticates.” Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

tantly, at all levels of partisan strength, greater sophistication is associated with dramatic increases in constraint.<sup>19</sup> Of course, noting just how small a percentage of the electorate can be categorized as “hyper sophisticated” is important—no more than 5% in any year included in the analysis. These hyper sophisticates may foster the all-important two-way communication between elites and the rest of the mass public. This question must be left to future research to answer.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In providing an explicit and systematic comparison of the structure of elite and mass issue attitudes over a 24-year period, we hoped to accomplish four primary objectives. First, we hoped to provide some conclusion to the debate regarding the relationship between political sophistication and constraint. Our confirmatory factor analysis results unambiguously demonstrated that one dimension underlies the attitudes of political elites on a variety of issues ranging from core social welfare programs to environmental regulation to cultural issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. Highly sophisticated elites, characterized by their extraordinary interest and involvement in, and knowledge about, politics, structure their political attitudes according to the basic left-right ideological dimension in American politics.

Second, we endeavored to explain why mass attitudes deviate from this structure by stratifying the mass public

19. Full tables of results conditioned on partisan strength are available in the online appendix.

according to a measure of political sophistication capturing what we argued are the cognitive and motivational determinants of ideological thinking and constraint. Although we found that one dimension structures a significant amount of mass opinion, a great deal more of mass political attitudes are not explained by the underlying trait, ideology. Our results on this point have important implications for the study of American public opinion.

We found that the minimal attitudinal constraint exhibited by the mass public is the result of a lack of political sophistication. The results are consistent with scholars who argue that it is not “just measurement error” that produces an apparent lack of constraint among the mass public (e.g., Converse 1970; Knight 1985; Markus and Converse 1979). Although much of the mass public orients some of its attitudes ideologically, and can for the most part place candidates and parties on the proper side of the ideological continuum (e.g., Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde 2007; Jacoby 1995), most citizens lack the cognitive and motivational characteristics necessary to link ideology and issue attitudes. Precisely because the least sophisticated citizens are those who exhibit multidimensional structures, we argue that deviations from a unidimensional structure are a function of attitude incoherence. The attitudes of relatively politically unsophisticated citizens arise on many issues from idiosyncratic sources. Our results are therefore also consistent with previous work demonstrating the multidimensionality of mass attitudes (Feldman and Johnston 2013; Treier and Hillygus 2009). However, the results presented in this article notably depart from these studies in suggesting that sophistication and constraint are intertwined—as one increases, so too does the other. Multidimensional attitude structures are less, rather than more, complex than unidimensional ones.

Third, we sought to identify specifically the origins of elites’ extremely high level of ideological thinking and attitudinal constraint. Previous studies have identified differences in the reliance on the liberal-conservative continuum among elites and the mass public, but they either stopped short of demonstrating, or were unable to demonstrate, why these differences exist. In this article, we demystified the source of elite constraint by showing that the degree of ideological thinking and constraint of the most politically interested, involved and knowledgeable—“hyper sophisticated”—members of the mass public is on par with the elites in our study. These results, we argue, demonstrate further that the key distinction between elites and the mass public is not that elites are wholly set apart from the electorate and thus unique in their unidimensional conception of the political world. Rather, we argue, the distinction is political

sophistication in the form of knowledge and motivation, which appears to be the link connecting diverse issue attitudes into a coherent structure—characterized by the interdependence of issue attitudes and association between ideological self-identifications and issue attitudes—producing ideological constraint. Differences in political sophistication explain the variation in the degree to which citizens engage in ideological thinking, and there exists in the mass public a group whose interest and involvement in, and knowledge about, politics enables them to structure their attitudes similarly to elites. We suspect that these individuals enable two-way communication between elites and the rest of the mass public.

A fourth and final contribution owing to the most recent evidence in our study is that apparent increases in ideological thinking and constraint among the mass public are largely confined to the most sophisticated citizens, contrary to some arguments describing the changing nature of the American electorate (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). Our findings bring into sharper relief the distinction between the politically interested, involved and knowledgeable and those in the mass public who find politics too abstract and uninteresting. Time will tell whether increasing and prolonged elite polarization eventually will be reflected in broader segments of the mass public in the form of greater attitudinal constraint.

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