

# Ideological Label Meaning: Is my 'liberal' your 'liberal'?

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## 1 Introduction

Self-identification on the liberal-conservative continuum of interest to study not only because it assumes individuals are politically literate to a given degree, but shows individuals are evaluating themselves comparatively and developing meaning to ideological labels. The liberal-conservative continuum is treated as a continuum because the concepts has observed properties such as low perceptible distinct difference around the middle of the continuum, however, distinct differences among the extreme elements on the ends of the continuum.

While studies have shown the meaning of ideological labels on the liberal-conservative continuum varies depending on the individual, it will be interesting to shed insight into possible causal affects of how individuals derive the meaning of ideological labels. The liberal-conservative continuum is a continuum because the concepts has observed properties such as low perceptible distinct difference around the middle of the continuum, however, distinct differences among the extreme elements on the ends of the continuum.

The purpose of this study to is investigate if any relationships exist between self-placed ideological label and ideological label meaning such to have

an impact on the placement ideological label of the Democratic and Republican parties. The hypothesis of the study is that self-placed extremes will place the opposing party as ideologically extreme.

The literature review will attempt to find a causal mechanism that might support/not support the speculated opposition hypothesis, such that a self-placed extremely liberal or extremely conservative will place opposition party as an ideologically extreme element on the opposite end of the continuum because of an opposition to the party's placed ideology. This would cause the respondent to place the given party as ideologically extreme as a comparative measurement to self-placement such that how individual evaluates a given party is estimated to have an affect on self-placement.

Studying self-placed extremes imply a degree of awareness of political atmosphere and this is estimated to result in a comparative distance from the median of placed situation, and respondents take a extreme element such to remain distinct. The awareness of the liberal-conservative continuum for the self-placed extreme would imply self-placed extremes identify with the opposite of the placement of the opposing party in theory.

## 2 Theory

The ideological labels, liberal and conservative, are American versions of common political terms used in political analysis; a system of liberal-conservatism has been used in political science for over 200 years to map ideological relationships.<sup>1</sup> Converse (1964) and Downs (1957) define ideology on the liberal-conservative continuum as a select belief system or political philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Research suggests a multitude of definition of ideological labels and how ideological labels are constructed.

Malka and Lelkes, (2010) define ideology as an, "integrated substantive worldview, composed of ideationally inter-connected values and beliefs".<sup>3</sup> Converse (1964) and Downs (1957) define ideology on the liberal-conservative continuum as a select belief system or political philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Haidt, Graham,

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<sup>1</sup>Asher Arian and Michal Shamir. "The Primarily Political Functions of the Left-Right Continuum". In: *Comparative Politics* 15:2 (1983), p. 139.

<sup>2</sup>Shawn Treir and Sunshine Hillygus. "The Structure and Meaning of Political Ideology". In: *American Political Science Association Conference*. 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Ariel Malka and Yphtach Lelkes. "More than ideology: Conservative-liberal Identity and Receptivity to Political Cues". In: *Soc Just Res* 23 (2010), p. 156.

<sup>4</sup>Treir and Hillygus, "The Structure and Meaning of Political Ideology".

and Joseph (2009) find, from a psychological standpoint, self-placement stems from individual and collective narratives that are constructed from experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Self-placement on the liberal-conservative continuum is one measurement of ideological identification.<sup>6</sup> Evidence suggests ideological self-placement is related to political attitudes and values and substantive policy preferences.<sup>7</sup> Much research suggest ideological self-placement is symbolic in consideration as well as group affiliation and parental socialization rather than issue preferences.<sup>8</sup> Treier and Hillygus (2005) found support that self-placed ideology is influenced by symbolic or evaluative of partisanship.<sup>9</sup> Classical research suggests that ideological labels are a reflection of opinion of self-placed groups rather than issue preferences.<sup>10</sup>

Gerring (1997) collected an assortment of definitions of 'ideology' and concluded ideology has a multitude of definitions. Of the definitions sampled, Seliger's (1976) theory is that ideology is a set of ideas with which drives social and political action in an attempt to change the social order.<sup>11</sup> Arian and Shamir (1983) make the argument that ideology, for those with high political interest, represents ideological content as well as scientists and elites have used ideological labels to define observations.<sup>12</sup> This is important to consider while investigation respondents of self-placed extreme ideology.

Evidence suggests ideological self-placement is the result of a known substantively inconsistency with opposite label.<sup>13</sup> This could support the 'opposition' hypothesis such that a self-identified extreme would evaluate the ideological label of a given party and conclude the party's ideology is a danger to the social order, thus self-identifying as the opposition party; this may be true such that an extreme opposition to an ideology would cause an

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham. "Above and Below: Left-Right: Ideological Narratives and Moral Foundations". In: *Psychological Inquiry* 20 (2009), p. 100.

<sup>6</sup>Treier and Hillygus, "The Structure and Meaning of Political Ideology".

<sup>7</sup>Malka and Lelkes, "More than ideology: Conservative-liberal Identity and Receptivity to Political Cues".

<sup>8</sup>Treier and Hillygus, "The Structure and Meaning of Political Ideology".

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>John Gerring. "Ideology: A Definitional Analysis". In: *Political Research Quarterly* 50:4 (1997), pp. 957–994.

<sup>12</sup>Arian and Shamir, "The Primarily Political Functions of the Left-Right Continuum".

<sup>13</sup>Malka and Lelkes, "More than ideology: Conservative-liberal Identity and Receptivity to Political Cues".

individual to identify as in extreme opposition.

This same logic can also be applied to Rejai's (1991) theory that beliefs and values affect ideological label meaning, Loewenstein (1953) theory of social arrangements, and Adorno et al.'s (1950) theory on cultural associations<sup>14</sup> that an individual would assume an opposing identification based on the placement of a given party's beliefs, values, social arrangements, and cultural associations to political attitudes.

If this is the case, relationship between self-placement and party placement for some individuals would change in accordance with the modern polarization of social issues. This may also support a relationship that among any self-identified label, it is likely an individual would place a given party as opposite to public awareness of given party ideological label under the assumption he/she evaluates the increasing polarization of the party as a strict adherence to ideology for conservatism and leniency of ideology for liberalism, explaining possible variance among label definitions.

Marx and Engels (1970) and Duverger (1951/1959) estimate ideology meaning is affected by social class and attitudes<sup>15</sup> which may support that self-identified extremes will place opposition party as unfavorable to a particular social class.

Conover and Feldman (1981) studied the origins of the self-identified liberal-conservative continuum. The study sought to find the causal relationship between the evaluation of ideological labels and self-identification such that how an individual views an ideological label will affect how that individual views his/her ideology. The study found evaluations of liberals and conservatives explained 36 percent of the variance in ideological self placement while the reverse, how self-placement affects how liberals and conservatives are evaluated, is a negatively weak relationship.<sup>16</sup>

Given this study, how an individual evaluates a given party can be assumed to have an affect on self-identification, therefore it is safe to assume a distinction is the cause of substantive policy preference differences. Following this assumption, a label distinct from a given party will cause an individual to self-identify as an opposing label connecting the 'opposition' hypothesis.

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<sup>14</sup>Gerring, "Ideology: A Definitional Analysis".

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman. "The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications". In: *American Journal of Political Science* 25:3 (1981), p. 617.

### 3 Methods

The variables used will be taken from the ANES Cumulative Data Set; years 2012 and 1992 were selected. The dependent variable in this study will be the ANES variable name, VCF0503 and VCF0504, respondent party-placement of the Democratic and Republican party, respectively, on the liberal conservative continuum such that on the low end of the continuum, 1, lies extremely liberal to an increasing conservatism towards extreme conservative, 7. The independent variable in this study is the ANES variable VCF0803, respondent self-placement on the liberal-conservative continuum from 1, extremely liberal to 7, extremely conservative.

First, the independent and dependent variables will be organized on a column with the calculated column percentages indicated for each the Republican (1) and Democratic party (2) for the year 2012 such that the resultant party placement ideological label is sorted by self-placed ideological labels. Next, the standard deviation and mean of the Republican (3) and Democratic (4) party placement distribution will be calculated across all self-placed ideological labels and self-placed extreme conservatives and extreme liberals. The standard deviation and mean across labels will also be taken for the Republican and Democratic parties for years 1992. The data will then be compared.

Lastly, for the years 2012 (7) and 1992 (8) various regressions were performed to test the correlation between the independent and dependent variables. For the independent variable, only self-placed broad conservatives (slightly conservative, conservative, and extremely conservative) and, separately, self-placed broad liberals (slightly liberal, liberal, extremely liberal) were scaled continuously in order of increasing liberalism or conservatism, with extreme liberalism and extreme conservatism as distinct, highest valued element for a total of three continuous elements for each, the liberal and conservative ideologies. For the dependent variable, party placement was sorted into increasing liberalism for the Democratic party, and increasing conservatism for the Republican party. The liberal continuum is from slightly liberal increasing to liberal and then to extreme liberal. The Republican party was scaled from increasing conservatism: slightly conservative, to conservative, and then to extremely conservative as the distinct end element. The simple regression is not looking for causation, but rather simply correlation. A p-value of less than 0.05, the conventionally accepted p-value of statistical significance, to indicate a relationship exists.

## 4 Findings

Table 1-2 show the resultant party placement for the Republican and Democratic party along the liberal-conservative continuum, respectively, as a column percentage of all self-placed ideological labels from extremely liberal, 1, to extremely conservative, 7. The largest percentages of resultant party placement were circled per ideological label group. For example, in Table 2, forty-four percent of self-placed slightly conservative place the Democratic party as liberal and since no other percentage for self-placed slightly conservatives is greater than forty-four percent, forty-four percent was circled. Table 1-2 shows the percentage distribution of majority of self-placed respondent party placement; the Democratic and Republican parties are majority placed on the liberal and conservative, respectively, elements of liberal-conservative continuum.

Table 1 shows the majority of respondents given self-placement place the Republican party as extremely conservative if self-placed as broadly liberal (i.e. slightly liberal, liberal, extremely liberal) and moderate, and place the Republican party as conservative if self-placed as broadly conservative (slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative) and moderate. The percentage ranges for broadly liberals ranges from sixty-six percent for extreme liberals and forty-four percent for slightly liberals.

The high majority of self-placed extreme liberals place opposing Republican party as extremely conservative; this is an observation that would support the opposition theory as the opposition party results in extreme placement for self-placed extremes. The relationship indicates that self-placed extremes perceive the opposing party as extreme as well as a result of this ideological difference.

Table 2 shows the majority of respondents given self-placement place the Democratic party as liberal if self-placed broadly liberal, moderate, and slightly conservative and place the Democratic party as extremely liberal if self-placed conservative or extremely conservative. The ranges for broadly liberal range from forty-four to thirty-one percent. It is observed that the high majority of self-placed extreme conservatives place the Democratic party as extremely liberal; this observation is consistent with the hypothesis that respondents would place the opposing party as extreme as an extension of extreme self-placement; there is an observed relationship such that self-placed extremes perceive the opposing party as extreme as a result of ideological difference.

Tables 3-6 shows party placement distribution standard deviation and mean across all self-placed labels as well as self-placed extreme conservatives and self-placed extreme liberals. The mean of the opposing ideological self-placement, extreme liberal for Republican party, and extreme conservative for Democratic party was circled.

Table 3 shows Republican party placement standard deviation and mean for the year 2012. The results show a variance between the mean of Republican party placement across all self-placed ideological labels and the mean of both self-placed extreme conservatives and self-placed extreme liberals. There is a sixteen percent different towards the conservative element of the liberal-conservative continuum of the mean of self-placed extreme liberal labels and mean across all party-placement labels.

Table 4 shows the relationship between party placement of self-placement labels for year 1992. There is a thirteen percent difference towards the conservative element of the liberal-conservative continuum between self-placed extreme liberals and all self-placed labels. The percent differences of the years 2012 and 1992 are observations that are consistent with the hypothesis of this study such that self-placed extremes place the opposing party as more extreme, or closer to the distinct elements on the liberal-conservative continuum.

Table 5 shows Democratic party placement standard deviation and mean for the year 2012. The results show a variance between the mean of Democratic party-placement across all self-placed ideological labels and the mean of both self-placed extreme conservatives and self-placed extreme liberals. There is a twenty-one percent different towards the liberal element of the liberal-conservative continuum of the mean of self-placed extreme conservative label and mean across all party placement labels. This is supportive of the relationship that self-placed extremes place the opposing party as more extreme, or closer to the distinct elements on the liberal-conservative continuum to a significant degree.

Table 6 shows the relationship between Democratic party placement of self-placed labels for year 1992. There is a three percent difference towards the liberal element of the liberal-conservative continuum between self-placed extreme conservatives and all party-placement labels. The hypothesis of this study is not consistent in explaining the observations of standard deviation and mean of Democratic party-placement and self-placed extreme conservative labels.

Shown in Tables 3-6, there is high variance among the mean value of

Republican party placement for years 2012 and 1992 between extreme conservatives and extreme liberals. There is also moderate variance in the mean value of Democratic party placement in year 2012 for extreme conservatives and liberals; the year 1992 has little variance for extremes in the mean of Democratic party placement. This illustrates there is variance in ideological label meaning of self-placed extreme ideological types.

Table 7 shows various regression analysis results of placed liberal-conservatism of self-placed broad liberal and broad conservatives. The results show that as the conservatism of self-placed broad conservatives increases, respondents will place Democratic party as increasing liberal as indicated by the conventionally accepted p-value of statistical significance. There is also a statically significant correlation that as a broad liberal's liberalism increases, the respondent is more likely to place the Republican party as increasingly conservative. This correlation is true with self-placed broad conservatives and the Democratic party as well as self-placed broad liberals with the Republican party for years 2012 and 1992, Tables 7-8, respectively.

This relationship was observed in four or four cases and no consistent relationship was observed in the other four cases such that self-placed extreme conservatives and extreme liberals are correlated with increasing party placement of extremely liberal and extremely conservative, respectively. Since the increasing liberal-conservatism of self-placed respondents is correlated with increasing liberal-conservatism of party placement, this is consistent with the hypothesis such that as extremism increases, the opposing party is placed as more extreme.

## 5 Discussion

The findings suggest there is a multitude of definitions of party placement label suggesting a multitude of meaning of labels. The standard deviation of the analysis illustrates the variance among self-placed labels.

The percent differences of the years 2012 and 1992 are observations that are consistent with the hypothesis of this study such that self-placed extremes place the opposing party as more extreme, or closer to the distinct elements on the liberal-conservative continuum.

The relationship between self-placed extreme ideological label and party placement such that opposing party is places as ideologically extreme is respondent is self-placed as ideologically extreme. The relationship indicates



that self-placed extremes perceive the opposing party as extreme as well as a result of this ideological difference. The research suggests much evidence that would provide causal mechanisms for why this relationship has been observed.

Research suggests self-placement is affected by substantive policy preferences such that a self-placed extreme would place opposing party as ideologically extreme in opposition, taking the distant label on the continuum. Research also suggests self-placement is evaluative of partisanship.

The findings suggest the more distinct on the ideological continuum, such as increasingly liberal or conservative, the more likely will place the opposing party as increasing liberal or conservative such as a comparative measurement. Since the increasing liberal-conservatism of self-placed respondents is correlated with increasing liberal-conservatism of party placement, this is consistent with the hypothesis such that as extremism increases, the opposing party is placed as more extreme.

The limitations in the regress analysis is that self-placement precedes party placement in time, rather than party placement precedes self-identification in time such as research would suggest. The regression seeks to find a correlation between these variables in the sequence because an increase of ideological label distinction would then be associated with an increase in party placement distinction on the continuum.

The findings are supported by research that suggests self-placement is a reflection of opinion of self-placement of groups, in this case, the Republican and Democratic parties. This actual relationship may actually be reversed such that party placement label precedes self-placement in time; this is because the respondent would place themselves as opposition to placed party label. However, if this relationship were to be true, there would still be a resulting correlation between self-placement and party-placement.

## 6 Data

Table 1: Column percentages of all self-placed ideological labels, from extremely liberal, 1, to extremely conservative, 7, and the resultant Republican Party placement on continuum for year 2012.

<i>Year 2012: Republican Party Placement</i>							
Party Placement	Self-placement on liberal-conservative continuum						
	Extr Lib	Lib	Slt Lib	Mod	Slt Con	Con	Extr Con
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Liberal	1.0	0.8	1.4	6.0	3.3	3.3	9.2
Liberal	3.6	2.5	3.8	6.0	4.6	2.9	5.3
Slightly Liberal	2.6	1.4	3.5	7.5	6.0	3.3	1.5
Moderate	5.7	3.2	4.9	18.9	11.4	13.1	11.7
Slightly Conservative	2.1	4.1	7.2	9.9	13.3	27.6	25.2
Conservative	19.1	30.6	35.1	25.5	41.2	40.5	35.4
Extremely Conservative	66.0	57.3	44.2	26.2	20.3	9.3	11.7

Table 2: Column percentages of all self-placed ideological labels, from extremely liberal, 1, to extremely conservative 7, and the resultant Democratic Party placement on continuum for year 2012.

Party Placement	<i>Year 2012: Democratic Party Placement</i>						
	Extr Lib	Lib	Slt Lib	Mod	Slt Con	Con	Extr Con
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Extremely Liberal	19.5	9.0	9.1	14	28.5	44.6	57.8
Liberal	31.3	44.3	44.0	28.9	36.7	36.9	21.8
Slightly Liberal	23.6	30.7	27.0	16.4	12.8	5.5	3.4
Moderate	11.8	12.7	12.0	26.7	11.1	4.3	4.9
Slightly Conservative	6.7	1.3	6.0	6.4	5.2	2.0	3.4
Conservative	5.1	1.1	1.4	5.5	3.7	4.9	2.4
Extremely Conservative	2.1	0.9	0.5	2.2	2.0	1.7	6.3

Table 3: Year 2012: Republican Party placement distribution standard deviation and mean across all self-placed labels and extreme conservatives and liberals.

	<i>2012: Republican Party Placement</i>	
	Std Dev	Mean
All labels	1.627	5.4
Extreme Conservatives	1.72	4.91
Extreme Liberals	1.386	6.25

Table 4: Year 1992: Republican Party placement distribution standard deviation and mean across all self-placed labels and extreme conservatives and liberals.

	<i>1992: Republican Party Placement</i>	
	Std Dev	Mean
All labels	1.448	5.26
Extreme Conservatives	1.784	4.9
Extreme Liberals	1.022	6.02

Table 5: Year 2012: Democratic Party placement distribution standard deviation and mean across all self-placed labels and extreme conservatives and liberals.

	<i>2012: Democratic Party Placement</i>	
	Std Dev	Mean
All labels	1.456	2.63
Extreme Conservatives	1.757	(2.07)
Extreme Liberals	1.494	2.78

Table 6: Year 1992: Democratic Party placement distribution standard deviation and mean across all self-placed labels and extreme conservatives and liberals.

	<i>1992: Democratic Party Placement</i>	
	Std Dev	Mean
All labels	1.402	3.06
Extreme Conservatives	2.027	(3.04)
Extreme Liberals	1.173	2.96

Table 7: Year 2012: Various regression results of placed liberal-conservatism of Democratic party and Republican party for self-placed broad liberals, and broad conservatives,

	<i>Party Placement: 2012</i>	
	Republican	Democratic
Conservatives	-.211*** (.027)	.234*** (.025)
Liberals	.152*** (.024)	.048 (.028)

*Note:* \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 8: Year 1992: Various regression results of placed liberal-conservatism of Democratic party and Republican party for all self-placed broad liberals and broad conservatives.

	<i>Party Placement: 1992</i>	
	Republican	Democratic
Conservatives	-.028 (.046)	.324*** (.049)
Liberals	.162*** (.049)	.054 (.289)

*Note:* \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

## References

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