

Side by Side Worlds Apart: Liberals' and Conservatives' Distinct Perceptions of Political Reality

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ABSTRACT

People's desired policy change is a function of two factors: their preferences for future policies and their perceptions of current policies. Political scientists, pollsters, and pundits know a good deal about people's policy preferences but surprisingly little about people's policy perceptions. In this paper, we report the results of a project that involved collecting and analyzing original survey data not merely on respondents' preferred policies but also on their beliefs concerning the current nature of public policies. The results suggest people differ markedly not just in the policies they want but also in the policies they believe are currently in place. Integrating preferences with perceptions is important because the degree to which preferred policies deviate from perceived policies predicts variations in a variety of meaningful variables including political involvement, intensity of feelings, response to political disagreement, and support for extralegal tactics.

Imagine two people, both of whom believe proper governmental policies strictly punish rulebreakers rather than display compassion toward them. These two individuals differ, however, in the extent to which they believe current policies do in fact “strictly punish” rulebreakers, with one convinced policies are firm and punitive but the other equally convinced existing policies in the form of lax sentences and cushy penitentiaries do nothing but mollycoddle criminals. These two individuals are likely to desire quite different degrees of change in current policies and perhaps also to involve themselves with the political arena in fundamentally different ways. The degree of policy change desired is a critical element of politics and measuring this desire for change is impossible absent knowledge of people’s perceptions. In this article, we establish people’s perceptions of current policy realities as a variable worthy of attention by demonstrating its relevance to desire for policy change as well as to a range of concepts tapping people’s political activities and orientations.

Strictly speaking, perceptions of the political world should be the same for all individuals residing in a given political unit. To continue with the example above, people may have different preferences on the appropriateness of the death penalty, mandatory sentences, and legal rights for the accused but the factual realities of a given criminal justice system are just that. It is an established fact, for example, that, in 2010, reading Miranda rights to the accused was judicially mandated across the United States, 2,424,279 individuals were incarcerated in American prisons, 3,261 were on death row, and 38 were put to death. Residents live in the same larger culture and have the same opportunity to acquire these and other relevant facts. Why might they have such different perceptions of policy reality?

The reasons are numerous. One obvious source of perceptual variations is that, even though a multitude of media outlets are available to them, people tend to use only a few. Particular outlets can paint quite a different picture of policy reality; for example, a steady dose of Fox News is likely to lead to different perceptions than a steady dose of CNBC. Whatever the reason for people gravitating toward particular outlets in the first place, the fact remains that reality is almost certainly colored by the particular media environments in which people operate even though all live in the same country.

Variations in the political coloration of the work and family environments likely have similar effects. A drumbeat of anecdotes about poorly equipped armed forces or abuse of food stamps may lead to perceptions of policy reality that would not apply if they were replaced with tales of corporate greed and police misconduct. Another possible reason for perceptual variations is that people's differing physiological constitution may lead them to sense and to experience the world differently. Some are more physiologically sensitive to violations of order (Amodio et al. 2007); some to violations of purity (Smith et al. 2011); and some to violations of security (Oxley et al. 2008). As a result, people may have different policy perceptions not just because of the lenses provided by family, coworkers, and media personalities but also because of their internal cognitive and physiological lenses—whatever the source of these internal differences.

Our goal here is not to identify the reason people might see current political realities so differently but rather to measure these differing policy perceptions, interact them with policy preferences so that desire for policy change from the status quo can be computed, identify the types of individuals likely to desire greater or lesser change, and, finally, delineate the consequences of variations in perceptions and therefore of variations

in the extent of policy change desired. Our underlying suspicion is that perceptual differences exacerbate the ideological conflicts typifying the modern political arena. If this is true, political perceptions have been given inadequate attention in previous scholarly work.

Literature Review

It is an understatement to note that the bulk of survey research in the area of politics has focused on citizens' varying preferences for political parties, candidates, ideologies, and policies. Still, perceptual differences have not been completely ignored and in fact have long drawn scholarly interest (e.g., Lippmann 1922). For example, the notion that partisanship introduces a perceptual screen through which individuals interpret the facts around them can be traced back to *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 133). Gerber and Green (1999) similarly note that partisan differences may lead individuals to reach different interpretations after observing the same objective set of facts. Previous research also investigated the perceptual differences across ideological rather than partisan groups (e.g., Conover and Feldman 1981; Brady and Sniderman 1985; Farwell and Weiner 2000).

The focus of this previous research, however, typically has been on people's perceptions of particular partisan or ideological camps. Thus, Campbell et al. find that, in their 1950s samples, Republicans reported a more favorable perception of the Republican Party and of its candidate, Dwight Eisenhower, while Democrats, predictably, displayed a more favorable perception of the Democratic Party and Adlai Stevenson (1960; Chp. 3). The research on ideology similarly reports that liberals have more favorable perceptions of liberals than of conservatives and that the opposite is true of conservatives. To be more

specific, Farwell and Weiner find that liberals perceived conservatives to be less generous and judicious than conservatives while conservatives perceived liberals to be less generous and judicious than conservatives (Farwell and Weiner 2000).

The unifying feature of previous work in the area is its interest in perceptions of the opposing camp, whether the divide is defined on the basis of partisanship, ideology, or campaigns. As important as perceptions of political opponents are, we submit value also exists in researching variations in people's perceptions of existing policies. In other words, we propose shifting attention from the differences in liberals' and conservatives' perceptions of each other to the differences in liberals' and conservatives' perceptions of existing public policies. Previous research seems to have had no interest in measuring policy perceptions in a fashion that allows them to be related to policy preferences. The closest to an exception to this statement may be Hurwitz and Peffley's intriguing finding that conservatives are more likely than liberals to see the international community as being populated by belligerent and expansionist states, with the policy desires of both ideological groups best seen as flowing from these perceptual differences (1990).

Part of the reason for the dearth of attention may be a longstanding unwillingness to admit that policy perceptions could be tethered only loosely to reality. Perceptions of the political "enemy" are likely to be colored by emotion but perceptions of the current policy status quo seem likely to be more grounded in dispassionate facts. As Campbell et al. assert, "perceptions are not free-floating creations of the individual voter...They are tied in fundamental ways to the properties of the stimulus objects that are perceived...As a result, the flow of historical reality has enormous influence on the electorate's perceptions of its political environment" (1960: 43). More recent research, however,

casts a somewhat different light on perceptions, indicating that individuals may be able to mold perceptions to their pre-existing preferences, preferences that are rooted in ideology (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006; Jost 2006; Gaines et al. 2007; Galdi, Arcuri, and Gawronski 2008; Taber, Cann and Kucsova 2009; Parker-Stephen 2011). This burgeoning work on motivated reasoning, hot cognition, implicit attitudes, and related concepts suggests that the assumptions underlying earlier research may have overstated the importance of “historical reality” and understated the degree to which voters exercise freedom in creating their own perceptions.

Regardless of the source of perceptions, to our knowledge no other research has empirically assessed the difference between policy perceptions and preferences in order to calculate the degree of policy change desired so that this variable can be used to explain variations in several political variables. This is the key contribution of the present study. We proceed by first measuring policy perceptions (and policy preferences), calculating total change desired, explaining variation in the degree of change desired, and then using the degree of policy change desired to account for variations in a range of key political variables including attitudes such as intensity of political beliefs and behaviors such as political participation.

Research Design

One of the challenges of conducting research on policy perceptions in a federal system such as the United States is that policies really are different from one part of the country to another. For example, the degree to which the criminal justice system stresses compassion rather than stern punishment is quite different in Texas than it is in Massachusetts. Twenty-four states currently have a “three strikes” or “habitual offender”

statute and 26 states do not. This wide variation in policies from state to state renders a national sample inappropriate for the analyses we hope to conduct; therefore, we were motivated to draw our sample from a single metropolitan area of a single state.

In the summer of 2010 we hired a professional survey organization to recruit a modest sample (N=343) of residents in the vicinity of [a Midwestern city]. Even though the initial contact was via phone subsequent to random selection from lists of telephone numbers (an appropriate mix of landline and cellphone lists), the recruited subjects had to be willing, in exchange for \$50, to travel to a location to complete the computerized survey as well as other tasks. In this sense, these procedures were not designed to result in a random national sample but they do have the advantages of permitting more complicated items than are possible over the phone and producing a sample that is drawn neither from undergraduates nor a pre-recruited bank of on-line responders. Most importantly, the restriction to a reasonably small geographical area means that, even with federal variations, at the time they complete the survey all respondents in the sample were surrounded by the same objective policy realities. The response rate was [get response rates—or something like them—from BOSR]. The demographics of the resulting sample are consistent with other adult samples (54 percent female, mean age 45, modal family income category (27 percent of sample) \$40,001 to \$60,000, 55 percent having at least some college experience; according to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* comparable figures for the entire U.S. population are 51 percent female, median age 39 (this includes those younger than 18), 17 percent with a family income of \$40,000 to \$59,999, 56 percent having at least some college experience). Demographically, our sample is notably non-representative of other samples of U.S.

adults only in the sense of race—it is overwhelming (greater than 90 percent) white. With that one potential exception, we can think of no reason why the sample employed here should produce results that are fundamentally misleading with regard to the relationship between policy perceptions and preferences. Having said this, our primary motivation in conducting this study is to encourage other scholars to perform similar studies on policy perceptions at other times and with different samples. In that fashion, it will be possible to make more generalizable statements regarding the nature and changeability of people’s policy perceptions.

Upon arrival, participants completed an informed consent form before being ushered to a computer terminal so that they could begin answering the survey items. The first substantive battery of the survey posed six parallel items in the following format: “Setting aside what you prefer, the most accurate description of the political system in our society is that...” Subjects were then to place their perception of the policies of the political system on a scale from 1 to 10. The first item ranged from “its policies are guided by traditional values” (1) to “its policies openly tolerate new lifestyles” (10); the second from “our leaders are decisive and firm” (1) to “our leaders are cautious and open to dissenting opinions” (10); the third from “its policies do everything possible to protect against external threats” (1) to “its policies do not stress protection and security” (10); the fourth from “its policies strictly punish rule-breakers” (1) to “its policies display compassion for rule-breakers” (10); the fifth from “its policies benefit the rich even if they are undeserving” (1) to “its policies benefit the poor even if they are not making an effort” (10); and the sixth from “government is involved in most every facet of society” (1) to “government is only minimally involved in society” (10).

The major means we will employ to categorize individuals across the political spectrum is the most straightforward: we asked participants to self-identify their political ideology. The specific item was worded as follows: “Labels are often misleading, but in general do you consider yourself liberal, conservative, or something in between?” The five available options were liberal, moderate leaning liberal, moderate, moderate leaning conservative, and conservative. Lumping together liberals and moderates leaning liberal, and lumping together conservatives and moderates leaning conservative creates a reasonably balanced distribution with 97 liberals, 115 moderates, and 128 conservatives, reflective of the slightly conservative proclivities of the region of the country from which the sample was drawn as well as the larger reticence of many people across the country to refrain from labeling themselves liberal.

Differing Perceptions of Political Reality

Our initial hypothesis is that liberals and conservatives differ markedly in the way they perceive the political world. More specifically, we believe liberals perceive the policies and practices of the country to be more in line with “conservative” positions while conservatives perceive these policies and practices to be more in line with “liberal” positions. This expectation is consistent with the fact that the fans of many sports teams believe realities (for example, decisions of the referees) are tilted in favor of the opposing team. More systematically, previous research reports that most individuals perceive media content to be “hostile,” or ideologically at odds with, their personal preferences (e.g., Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt 1998; Turner 2007). Following this pattern of perceiving the world as being distant from personal desires, liberals are likely to believe

objective policy reality is conservative just as conservatives are likely to believe it is liberal. Figure 1 shows that these expectations are accurate.

(Figure 1 about here)

For each of the six items, compared to self-identified liberals, conservatives' perceptions of the country place it further from locations generally deemed to be those desired by conservatives: traditional values, firm leaders, protection from external threats, strict punishment of rulebreakers, policies that benefit the rich, and a government that is only minimally involved in society. For their part, liberals place policy reality closer to that desired by conservatives. These differences in liberals' and conservatives' perceptions of political reality are statistically significant for five of the six items. The only exception is the item on leaders being cautious and open to dissent or being decisive and firm. This result deals with the item that is least a substantive political issue (and more a preference for governing style). Moreover, it is best to recall that this survey was conducted in the summer of 2010, about a year and a half into the Obama Administration and not that long after the completion of eight years under President George W. Bush. The economy was limping along, the healthcare debate had heated up, and President Obama's approval ratings were declining. Given the recent change of leadership to a President they viewed with suspicion or worse, it may have been particularly difficult for conservatives at that time to endorse "firm and decisive" leadership during an Administration with which they had important policy differences.

The largest difference in perceptions appears for the item on whether policies in the United States benefit the poor or the rich. Liberals firmly believe that policies benefit the rich, "even if they are undeserving," with a mean score of just 3.38 on the scale

running from 1 to 10 with 1 being “policies benefit the rich” and 10 being “policies benefit the poor.” For their part, conservatives see the policies of the country tilting much more heavily toward benefiting the poor, “even if they are not making the effort,” with a mean for conservatives of 5.92 on this item, fully 2.54 higher than liberals. Conservatives see the poor as the great beneficiaries of current policies and practices in the United States whereas liberals perceive the rich as being the primary beneficiaries. Even if liberals and conservatives had the same ultimate objectives for the country, which, as we will see shortly, they do not, they would advocate much different slates of redistribution-relevant policy changes merely because of their perceptions of current realities.

Other items also show big differences in the perceptions of liberals and conservatives, including the emphasis government is perceived to place on protection from out-group threats (a difference of 1.16), the extent to which rule-breakers are sternly punished as opposed to being shown compassion (a difference of 1.09), the degree to which traditional values are emphasized over a tolerance of new lifestyles (a difference of .64), and the extent to which the government is involved in all facets of society (a difference of just .54). This latter item is interesting in that it reveals both conservatives and liberals see the government as heavily involved in all facets of society. Conservatives registered 7.66 on the 1-10 scale but liberals registered almost as high at 7.12. This result may be attributable to the nature of the times and the degree to which the heated debate on the prospects of expanding healthcare addressed activist government, it may be attributable to the generally conservative nature of the region of the country from which the sample was drawn, or it may simply reflect the reality that the

government is indeed relevant to most facets of life. In any event, in our sample, conservatives do see government as being involved in more facets of the economy than liberals but the difference is surprisingly small.

In sum, when it comes to the nature of governmental policies in the United States, liberals and conservatives appear to have fundamentally different visions of what they *perceive* current policies to be. These respondents all came from the same state so the results cannot be attributed to differing policies from state to state; thus, even though policies and practices are basically identical for all of these participants, those who are liberal and those who are conservative see these policies and practices as being quite different.

Figure 1 also includes information on the policy perceptions of the 115 moderates in our sample. Moderates, as might be expected, for the most part situate themselves between liberals and conservatives in their policy perceptions. It is interesting to note, though, that in this sample at least the perceptions of self-identified moderates tend to be more like the perceptions of liberals than those of conservatives. A difference of means test (one-way ANOVA) indicates that at least one category mean is significantly different from the others for all perception measures except that for firm/cautious leadership ($p > .10$). Post hoc tests (least significant distance) show moderates differ significantly ($p < .05$) from conservatives on four of the six perceptions, while having no significant difference on the remaining two items (firm/cautious leaders and minimal/activist government). In contrast, moderates differ significantly from liberals on only on one item; moderates average 4.21 on the item tapping perceptions of whether policies benefit the rich or poor while the liberal mean is 3.38. Across all items, moderates perceptions

average .45 points difference from liberals; the comparable difference with conservatives is .67.

Introducing Differing Political Preferences into the Mix

After the participants answered several other items dealing with personal choice matters, especially their decisions in a set of hypothetical economic games, they were then presented with a battery of items parallel to the six analyzed above only this time the lead-in read, “Setting aside the way the political system actually is, which of these captures the way you would most like it to be (mark any number from 1 to 10)?” Thus, in this battery, participants reported their preferences rather than their perceptions but otherwise the six items are perfectly parallel. Figure 2 provides the comparisons of the preferences of liberals, moderates, and conservatives. We focus first on the contrast between self-described liberals and conservatives.

(Figure 2 about here)

It will come as no great surprise that liberals evince more liberal political preferences than do conservatives on these six issues. Our purpose in presenting Figure 2 is not to demonstrate the painfully obvious but rather to provide some perspective on the importance of differences in perceptions that was reported in Figure 1. Interestingly, there is one policy on which liberals and conservatives have much larger differences in preferences than they do on the others: whether or not the country should be guided by traditional values or, alternatively, should be tolerant of new lifestyles. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being tolerant of new lifestyles and 1 being guided by traditional values, the mean liberal preference would have the country at a 7.52 whereas the mean conservative preference would have the country at 3.91, a difference in preferences of 3.61.

Other areas give evidence of substantial, but much smaller, preferential differences. Conservative preferences for firm rather than cautious leadership exceed liberal preferences by 2.02 on the 10-point scale, conservative preferences for government to be only minimally involved in society exceed liberal preferences by 1.64, conservative preferences for sternly punishing rule-breakers rather than demonstrating compassion for them exceeds that of liberals by 1.49, conservative preferences for policies that stress protection from external threats exceed that of liberals by 1.15, and conservative preferences for policies that tilt toward the rich rather than the poor exceed liberal preferences by just 1.03.

Comparing the liberal-conservative differences in preferences to the differences in perceptions leads to several interesting observations. As would be expected, on most of the six areas, differences in preferences are greater than differences in perceptions. In one area—traditional values as opposed to new lifestyles—the gap is enormous; specifically, the gap in preferences is nearly three points larger than the gap in perceptions (3.61 to .64). Preference gaps also outstrip perception gaps for the firmness of leaders (2.02 to .27), the extent to which government should be involved in society (1.64 to .54), and, to a lesser extent, the degree to which rule-breakers should be sternly punished (1.49 to 1.09). What is more surprising, however, is that in two areas the preference gap between liberals and conservatives is actually smaller than the perception gap. In one of these—protection from external threats—the perceptual difference is basically the same as the preference gap (1.16 to 1.15) but in the final area—policies benefiting the rich as opposed to the poor, liberals and conservatives are substantially more different in their perceptions than in their policies (2.54 to 1.03). This means that

when it comes to policies affecting redistribution, such as taxes and welfare, the main reason liberals and conservatives appear to be so different is more a function of differing perceptions of reality than their differing preferences for a perfect world.

As was the case for perceptions, moderates again tend to be tucked between liberals and conservatives though here moderates tend to differentiate themselves from liberals as well as conservatives. A difference of means test (one-way ANOVA) shows significant differences across the ideological categories for all six variables. Post hoc tests (least significant difference) show moderate preferences, on average, to be significantly different from conservative preferences on four of the six items (the exceptions being punish strictly/display compassion and benefit rich/benefit poor). The same tests show moderate preferences to be significantly different from liberal preferences on five of the six times (the exception being minimal government/activist government). This pattern on preferences is clearly different from the pattern on perceptions. Moderates and liberals perceive policies in roughly the same way, but liberals clearly want those policies moved more to the left than moderates. Across all six items moderates are roughly equidistant from liberals and conservatives, with an average mean preference .95 points lower than liberals and .85 points higher than conservatives.

Combining information on both perceptions and preferences makes it possible to get a more complete understanding of the differences in the degree of policy change desired by liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Change is a function not just of preferences even though most public opinion work on the topic is content to provide information solely on preferences. But without knowing where an individual perceives the country to be right now, knowing their ultimate preferences does not provide

complete information on the policy changes they believe to be necessary for their preferences to become reality. The survey items we introduce here permit us to merge perceptions and policies, thereby permitting conclusions on the mean policy change desired by liberals and by conservatives. Combining the data presented in Figures 1 and 2, allows computation of the mean desired change in each policy area by each ideological group.

(Figure 3 about here [currently shows up as Figures 3 and 4])

The results are intriguing. Setting aside moderates, the biggest difference in the policy change desired by the liberals and conservatives in our sample is in the area of traditional values versus tolerance for new lifestyles. Liberals want policies to move 2.82 closer to the “tolerance for new lifestyles” pole than they believe the country is at now. For their part, conservatives want policies to move 1.43 in the opposite direction, toward the “guided by traditional values” pole. Thus, the total difference in direction and movement is 4.25 whereas if only preferences were measured the difference between liberals and conservatives on this issue would appear to be a smaller but still sizable 3.61.

The next largest difference in policy change desired is in the area of redistribution. Liberals want policies to move 2.75 closer to the “benefiting the poor” pole than they believe the country is at now. Conservatives, on the other hand, want policies to move .82 in the other direction, toward policies that “benefit the rich.” In this case, recognition of the sum total to which liberals and conservatives want change is grossly affected by including perceptions. If only policy preferences were tapped, the difference between liberals and conservatives would be taken to be a relatively modest 1.03, but when the substantial differences in perceptions of political reality are included

(see Figure 1), the real difference of 3.57 becomes evident. Compared to conservatives, liberals want policies to be only slightly more beneficial to the poor, so it would seem disputes on this issue should not be so bitter, but when account is taken of the marked differences in liberals' and conservatives' perceptions of the current situation, it becomes apparent that, though each side wants to get to a place that is not that different, because they believe the country is starting from such different points, the changes conservatives feel compelled to advocate are dramatically different from those of liberals. In fact, 77 percent of the difference in policy change desired on this issue comes from differences in perceptions not preferences.

The other four areas have smaller differences in the degree of policy change sought by liberals and conservatives. Conservatives tend to want more change than liberals (more on this shortly), no doubt a function of the fact that, as of the summer of 2010, both houses of Congress as well as the White House were in Democratic hands. Liberals in our sample wanted very little change with regard to policies relevant to protection from out-groups and treatment of rule-breakers and actually wanted shifts in policy in a conservative direction with regard to the degree to which government was involved with all factors of society. For their part, in these same three policy areas (protection from external threats, punishing rule-breakers, and scope of government), conservatives wanted major policy change in a conservative direction. The larger point is that a single-minded focus on preferences leads to a significant underestimation of the extent to which liberals and conservatives want change in the status quo. More precisely, adding across the six areas indicates that, *merely in terms of preferences*, the gap between liberals and conservatives is 10.94 (3.61 + 2.02 + 1.15 + 1.49 + 1.03 + 1.64) but that the

gap between liberals and conservatives *in terms of total desired change from current realities* is 17.16 (4.25 + 2.29 + 2.29 + 2.58 + 3.57 + 2.18). In other words, perceptual differences between liberals and conservatives account for more than one-third ($6.22 / 17.16 = 36.2$ percent) of the total difference in the policy changes desired by the two competing ideological groups. Once again it can be seen that analyses looking only at differences in raw preferences are doomed to underestimate the differences between the degree of change desired by liberals and by conservatives.

Accounting for Variations in Desire for Policy Change

Ideological groupings are anything but homogeneous and the reasons for individual variations in policy perceptions, policy preferences, and degree of policy change desired all remain unspecified. In order to take a first step toward identifying these reasons we created overall measures of policy perceptions, policy preferences, and differences between the two. We then attempted to account for variations in these concepts with a reasonably standard range of variables, including self-professed ideology, standard demographics (age, gender, and education), the two personality traits that are most consistently related to political orientations (conscientiousness and openness), and overall level of political interest. Given the potential nonlinearity of ideological identification [Dona-Gene--is there a citation here or has nonlinearity only been demonstrated for partisan leaners??], we included dummies for each self-identification option (liberal, liberal leaner, conservative leaner, and conservative), with moderates serving as the omitted category for estimation purposes.

(Table 1 about here)

We first account for variance in overall policy perceptions (see column 1). This variable is simply the additive total of each individual's six perceptions (see Figure 1) with the more liberal locations, as in Figures 1-3, still scored higher. The demographic and personality variables do not reveal much of interest except that more education tends to push policy perceptions toward the conservative pole of the spectrum. With regard to ideology, however, patterns become noteworthy. It would appear that, on the whole, liberals perceive the political system similar to the way that moderates (those in the omitted group) do. Liberals are not significantly different from moderates. Liberal leaners see policy realities as more conservative than do moderates but only by 2.5 points on a scale that runs from 6 to 59. Among conservatives, on the other hand, with other variables in the model controlled, leaners see policy reality as 2.90 points more liberal and full conservatives as 5.24 points more liberal than do moderates with both differences significant at the .05 level. Conservatives not only have different perceptions of political reality from liberals but in a multivariate model they also appear to have different perceptions than moderates.

A key question becomes whether this pattern of perceiving policy realities differently from everyone else is a persistent characteristic of conservatism or whether it is a product of the particular time when the survey was conducted. If items regarding policy perceptions had been posed during the Presidency of George W. Bush rather than of Barack Obama, would the perceptions of liberals have been significantly different from both conservatives and moderates? Given the fact that political scientists and pollsters rarely ask people about their perceptions, this is one of many questions that can not yet be answered but, given the results presented here, we very much hope that items

on perceptions become a standard part of the repertoire so that generalizations about over-time change can be made.

The second column in Table 1 repeats the analysis only for preferences. The results here are more expected: education and openness in personality tend to make preferences more liberal while political interest and conscientiousness tend to make it more conservative. The ideological variables perform as they should, with the preferences of self-identified liberals being much more liberal than moderates and with the preferences of self-identified conservatives being much more conservative than moderates. The preferences of ideological leaners fall nicely between moderates and ideologues. If anything, the preferences of liberals depart more from moderates than do the preferences of conservatives, a finding that forms an interesting contrast with perceptions, where liberals were little different from moderates. In 2010 and within our sample at least, conservatives were not distinguished by policy preferences that were inconsistent with the rest of the citizenry but they were distinguished by perceptions of policy reality that were different from both liberals and moderates. Once again, for the sake of coming to terms with the contours of the American electorate, it is important to determine the extent to which this conclusion is generalizable across space and especially time.

We then subtracted, for each of the six issue areas in Figure 1, policy perception from policy preference, before adding these six differences together to acquire a measure of overall desire for (conservative) policy change. The findings (the third column) suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, age and conscientiousness are associated with greater desire for policy change in the conservative direction while education and openness are

associated with greater desire for policy change in the liberal direction. Compared to moderates liberals and conservatives desire roughly equal overall levels of policy change, liberals (obviously) in a liberal direction and conservatives in a conservative direction.

Perhaps the most telling results, however, are in the final column of the table. Here we have totaled the absolute values of the perception-preference differences on each of the six items, thus making the issue not the direction of change desired but rather the overall degree of change desired. A zero on this variable would indicate that the policy world perceived and the policy world desired are one in the same; higher numbers would indicate greater aggregate differences between preferences and perceptions. Interestingly, education appears to reduce the distance between preferences and perceptions just as high political interest appears to increase the distance between preferences and perceptions. Moving to the ideological variables, compared to moderates, liberals perceive policy reality as about 3 points away from what they want it to be, for liberal leaners the difference between what they see and what they want is no different from moderates. Contrast these results to that for conservatives. Conservative leaners look like liberals—a 3 point difference between what they see and what they want relative to moderates. Conservatives, though, desire 10.41 points more policy change than moderates—fully 1.2 standard deviations—and 7.17 points more policy change than liberals. As of the summer of 2010 at least, conservatives were much more desirous of significant policy change than liberals and moderates. These findings raise an obvious question: Do behavioral and attitudinal consequences flow from the desire for major policy change?

Using Desired Policy Change as an Explanatory Variable

To answer this question, we correlated the overall measures of perceptions, preferences, and absolute desire for policy change with half a dozen variables dealing with people's involvement with and reaction to conflict in the political arena. These variables measure issue intensity (an additive index of 0 to 3 scales for each of 20 issue items ranging from gay rights to illegal immigration; individual issue responses were coded so that 3=strongly agree/disagree, 2=agree/disagree, 0=uncertain and added together); response to political disagreement (a 0 to 4 scale where 4=feeling extremely angry when someone disagrees on a political issue, 1=not bothered at all); support for lawbreaking (a 0 to 3 scale where 3=breaking the law is always justified for good causes, 1=breaking the law is never justified), political participation (a 0 to 5 scale indicating how many of the following subjects responding doing at any time; attending a political meeting or rally, working in a political campaign, contributing money to a cause, party or candidate, held any government office, communicated with a government official); voting (a 0 to 6 scale constructed from voting data obtained from the Secretary of State's office for the primary/general elections in 2006, 2008 and 2010), and partisan strength (a 0 to 4 scale where 0=independent, 1=independent, leaning partisan, 2=weak partisan, 3=strong partisan). The results are presented in Table 2.

(Table 2 about here)

In the first column of Table 2, significant relationships are evident between perceptions that policy reality is toward the liberal end of the spectrum and increased issue intensity, anger in reaction to political disagreement, lowered support for lawbreaking and partisan strength. Turning to Column 2, liberal preferences correlate with diminished issue intensity, increased support for lawbreaking, and diminished

tendencies to vote. The more telling results, however, are found in the last column of the table where we see that the larger an individual's overall desired policy change, the more likely that individual is to hold extreme issue attitudes, to become angry if someone disagrees with them politically, to get involved in the non-voting aspects of politics, to vote in elections, and to be a strong partisan. All these relationships are significant at the .05 level. There is also a weaker relationship ($p < .10$) between desired policy change and less support for lawbreaking. This finding seems at odds with the consistent pattern of the other results in column 3. It suggests that individuals who desire relatively larger degrees of policy change are somewhat less likely to support lawbreaking in support of a political cause. This may simply reflect the comforting notion that, at least in our sample, even citizens who want fairly radical policy changes are not willing to support extra-legal means of achieving those changes. This interpretation is supported by the distribution of the lawbreaking variable. Very few subjects (11 of 340) indicated that a good cause always justified lawbreaking. Considerably more (roughly a third) indicated lawbreaking was never justified, while the majority (roughly two-thirds) indicated lawbreaking was justified only under limited circumstances

With lawbreaking as an exception, however, the rest of the results present a fairly clear pattern. It appears as though individuals for whom policy realities are divorces from their policy preferences are the most likely to get involved in politics and to support more extreme approaches to politics. These relationships are much clearer when policy perceptions are incorporated so that the desire for change can be computed. Simply asking people their preferences does not provide the complete picture.

Still, while promising, the bivariate results do not include a robust set of controls. To further investigate how the desire of for policy change drives behavior and attitudes we constructed a multivariate model. To capture the behavioral/attitudinal dimensions presented in Table 2 we conducted a principal components analysis on these six variables, which produced a two factor solution (i.e. two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0; the two factors accounted for approximately 50 percent of the variance in the six input variables). When rotated (varimax) these two factors reflected a clear conceptual split. Factor one reflected engagement in politics, with high loadings for participation (.71), voting (.77), partisan strength (.61) and issue intensity (.54). Factor two reflected orientations to political conflict, with high loadings for political disagreement (.59) and lawbreaking (.80). High scores on factor one are associated with individuals who hold strong political opinions and seek to make those opinions count by getting involved in politics. High scores on factor two reflect people who are more likely to escalate political conflict; they are more likely to be angered by those who disagree with their political views and more likely support extra-legal means in support of their favored cause. These two factors serve as dependent variables for a multivariate model. We employ the same explanatory variables as we did in Table 1 except that this time we add the overall measure of desire for policy change (the final column from Table 2) and the results are presented in Table 3.

(Table 3 about here)

The results reported in Table 3 indicate the control variables performing more or less as one would expect. Compared to moderates, partisans of all stripes are more likely to have strong beliefs and be willing to absorb the costs of political participation to

advance those beliefs, and they are also more likely to escalate political conflict. Independent of partisanship, those interested in politics and older citizens are more likely to be politically engaged, but less likely to be willing to escalate political conflict. Education produces more political engagement, but has no impact on political conflict, and while gender has no impact on political engagement, females are less likely to escalate political conflict. The key finding reported in Table 3, however, is that even with all the controls, the relationship between the absolute degree of policy change desired and both dependent variables is positive and significant. While the unstandardized coefficients appear small, the (unreported) standardized betas suggest the desired degree of policy change often rivals that of partisanship. This suggests that the central message of the bivariate results reported in Table 2 holds up even with extensive controls. In short, those who believe policy realities to be seriously out of whack with their policy desires are more involved in and feel more intensely about politics, and react to political disagreement with anger or even a modest willingness to support extra-legal means to achieve their policy aims.

Conclusion

Former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously commented that “everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not to their own facts.” Though technically true, our findings suggest that, when it comes to politics, citizens do not take Moynihan’s remark literally. Liberals and conservatives report significant differences in their perceptions of political reality. Further, conservatives’ perceptions of policy reality, according to soundings taken on one sample in the summer of 2010, are significantly different from that of ideological moderates as well. These differences in perceptions, in turn, are a

large and heretofore unexplored component of the extent to which people desire different degrees of change from the status quo. Largely because of differences in perceptions rather than differences in preferences, conservatives' desire for policy change tends to be significantly greater than that of moderates and even liberals, suggesting that with regard to desire for change in the policy status quo at least, as of 2010 at least, some conservatives were not particularly conservative. Finally, varying desires for change in the policy status quo are positively correlated with holding intense views, becoming angry with a political interlocutor, being a strong partisan, believing breaking the law is justified in the name of a good cause, participating in politics, and even actually voting (not reporting to have voted) in elections.

We are not contending the causal order for all things political begins with the desire for policy change; concepts such as intensity of political views, strength of partisanship, and desire for policy change undoubtedly have complex and reciprocal relationships. Our intended contribution does not hinge on the claim that, say, policy perceptions cause strength of partisanship rather than the other way around. Rather, our intended contribution is in calling attention to the value of studying perceptions of the policy world. These perceptions vary wildly from person to person and feed directly into the extent to which people believe change in the policy status quo is necessary, which then connects logically with various attitudes and behaviors. Political preferences only tell a part of the story. Analysis needs to focus not just on what people prefer society to be in the future but also on what they perceive society to be right now.

Figure 1: Differences in Policy Perceptions

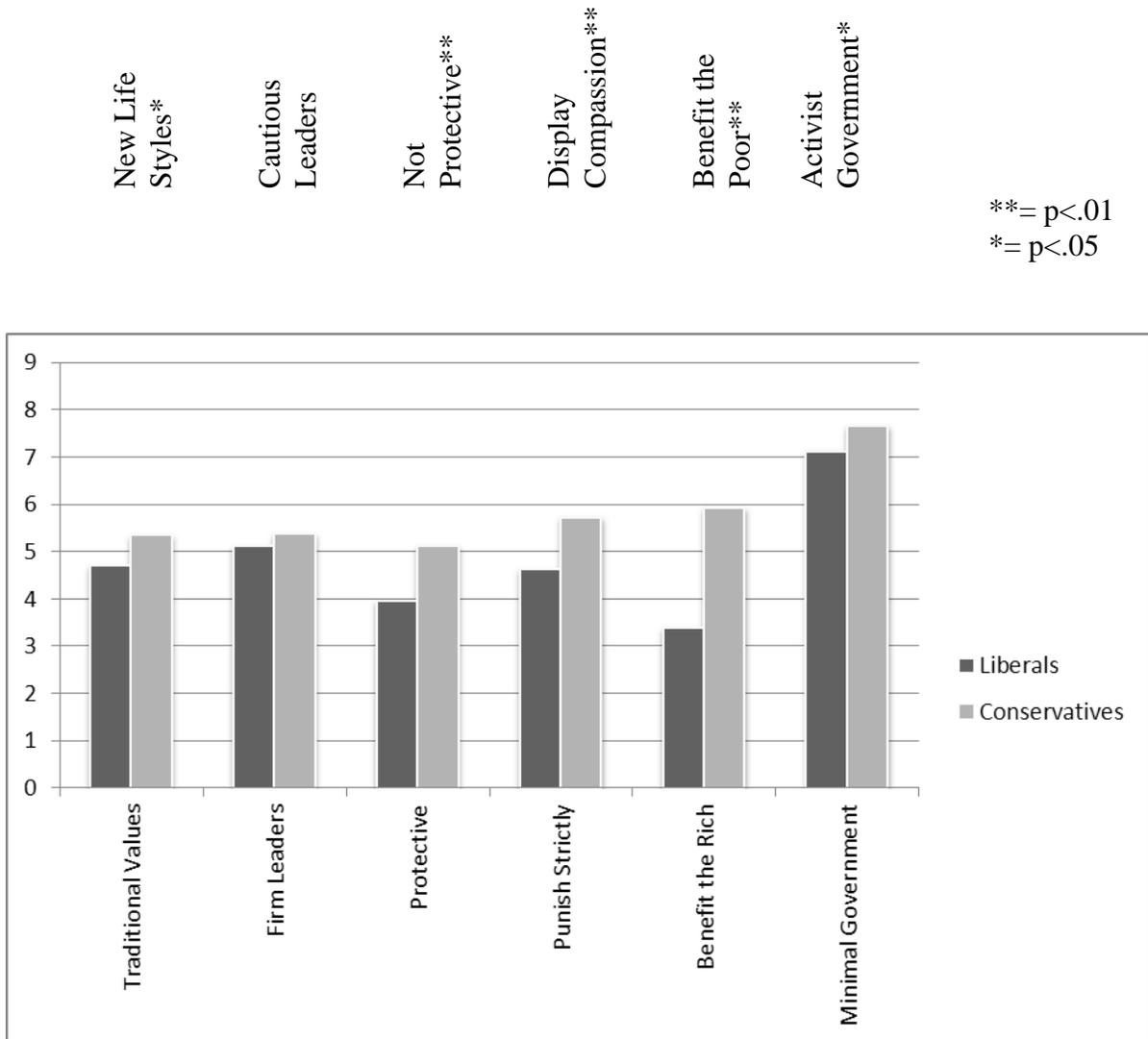
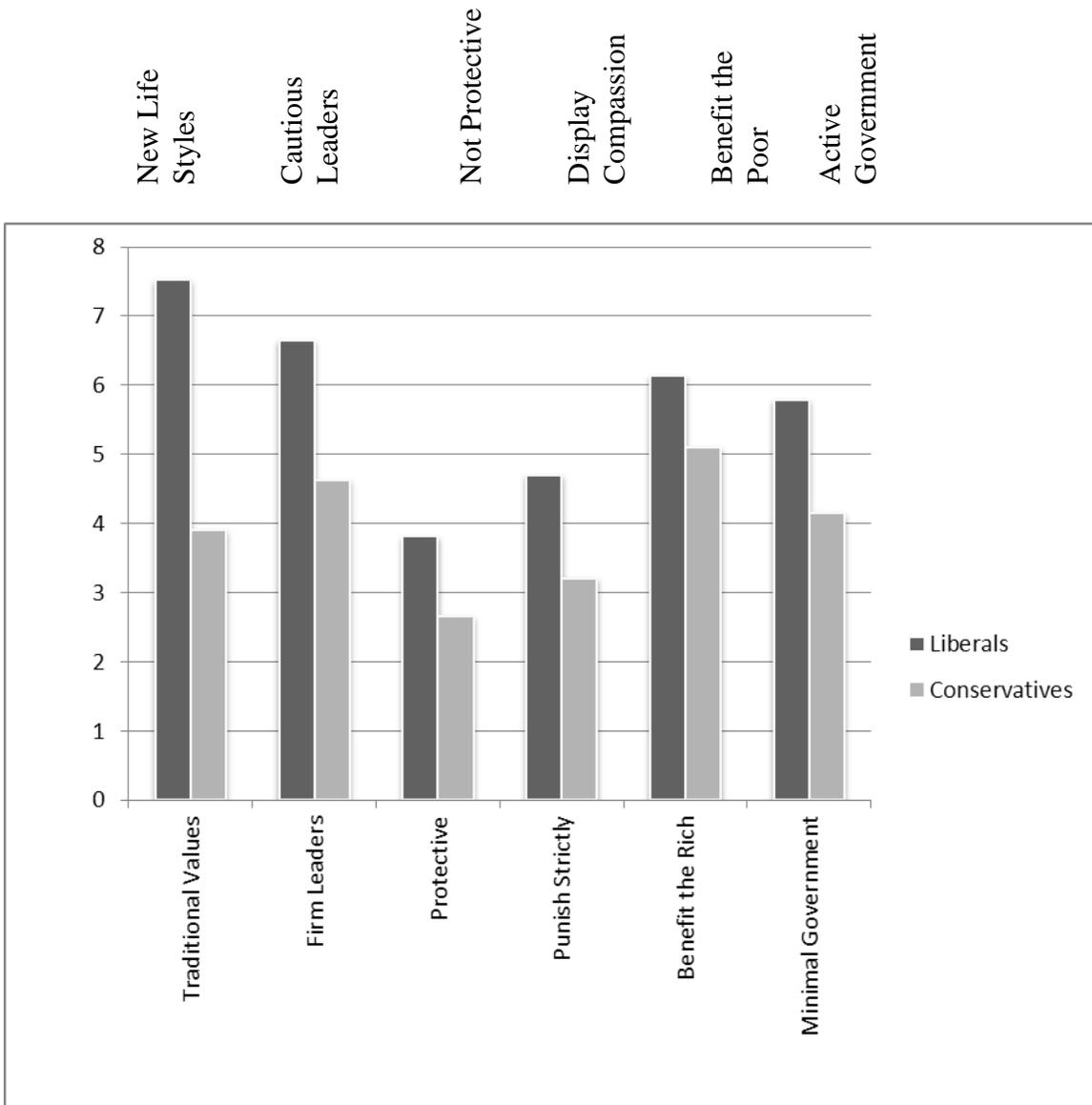


Figure 2: Differences in Policy Preferences*



*All findings
p<.01

Figure 3: Liberals Desired Policy Change

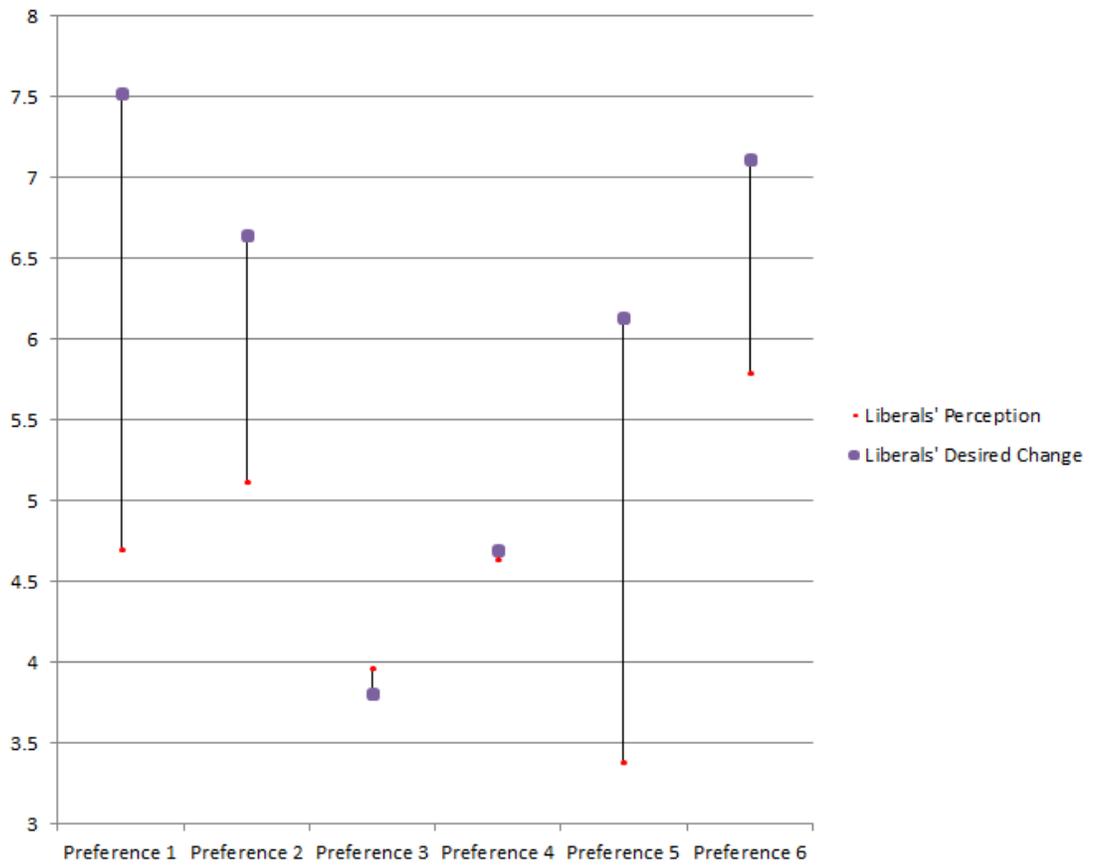


Figure 4: Conservatives Desired Policy Change

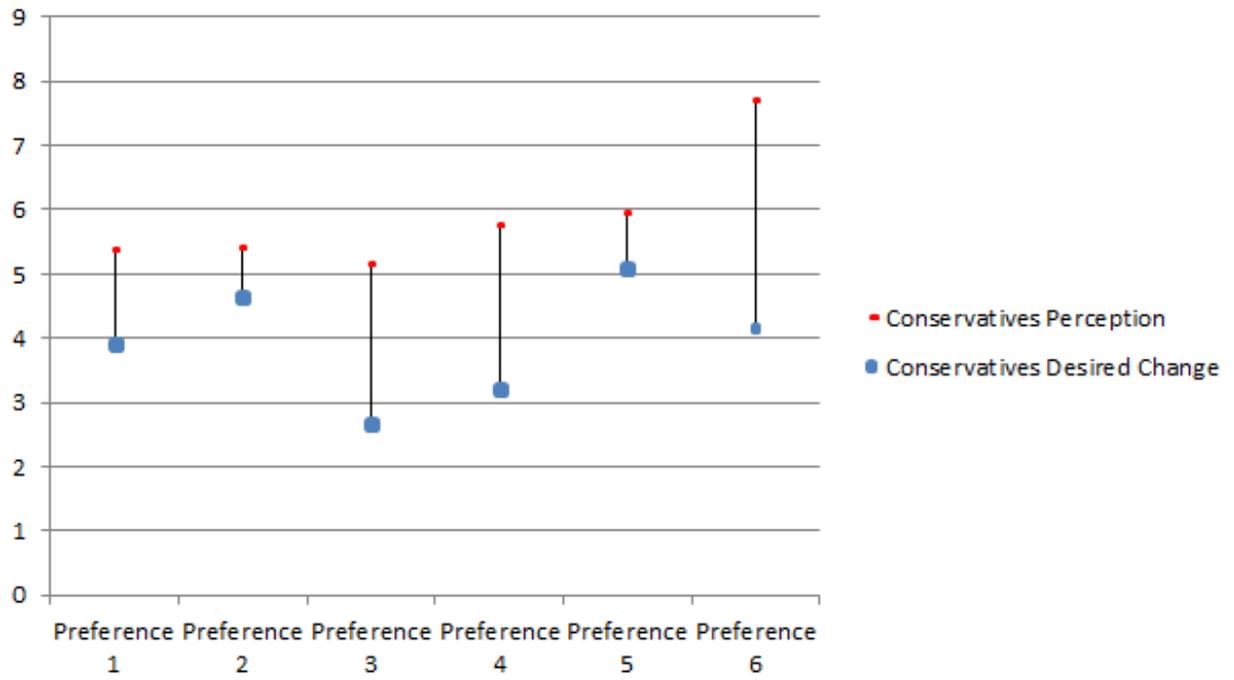


Table 1: Differences Between Perceptions and Preferences

Variable	Perceptions	Preferences	Desire for Conservative Policy Change	Absolute Degree of Policy Change Desired
<i>Liberal</i>	-1.5 (1.3)	8.8** (1.20)	-10.27** (1.81)	3.36** (1.5)
<i>Liberal Leaner</i>	-2.55** (1.04)	4.65** (.88)	-7.20** (1.41)	.75 (1.19)
<i>Conservative Leaner</i>	2.9** (.98)	-2.33** (.88)	5.21** (1.3)	3.42** (1.13)
<i>Conservative</i>	4.8** (1.01)	-7.4** (.95)	12.26** (1.4)	10.43** (1.2)
<i>Conscientiousness</i>	-.05 (.15)	-.47** (.14)	.42** (.21)	.17 (.18)
<i>Openness</i>	-.07 (.15)	.35** (.14)	-.42* (.22)	-.20 (.18)
<i>Political Interest</i>	-.05 (.09)	-.21** (.08)	.16 (.11)	.32** (.10)
<i>Age</i>	.05* (.03)	-.03 (.02)	.09** (.04)	.06* (.03)
<i>Education</i>	-.57** (.21)	.39** (.19)	-.96** (.29)	-.63** (.24)
<i>Gender</i>	-.21 (.71)	.08 (.64)	-.10 (.96)	.99 (.82)
<i>Constant</i>	34.48** (3.3)	33.6** (2.9)	.79 (4.48)	-1.34 (3.7)
<i>N</i>	339	339	339	339
<i>F</i>	6.9**	27.18	27.20**	11.33**
<i>R-2</i>	.17	.45	.45	.26

** = $p < .05$, * = $p < .10$

Table 2: Ideology, Preferences, Perceptions and Intensity of Political Views

	Perceptions	Preferences	Absolute Degree of Policy Change Desired
<i>Issue Intensity</i>	.18**	-.17*	.45**
<i>Reaction to Political Disagreement</i>	.09*	.03	.13**
<i>Support for lawbreaking</i>	-.19**	.17**	-.10*
<i>Political participation</i>	-.04	.01	.11**
<i>Voting</i>	.01	-.15**	.18**
<i>Partisan Strength</i>	.11**	-.04	.18**

N=340

* $p < .10$

** $p < .05$

Table 3: Issue Intensity, Ideology, Preferences and Perceptions

Variable	Political Engagement	Political Conflict
<i>Liberal</i>	.58** (.18)	.99** (.21)
<i>Liberal Leaner</i>	.45** (.13)	.70** (.16)
<i>Conservative Leaner</i>	.20 (.13)	.27* (.18)
<i>Conservative</i>	.90** (.15)	.26* (.18)
<i>Conscientiousness</i>	.007 (.02)	-.05* (.02)
<i>Openness</i>	-.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)
<i>Political Interest</i>	.05** (.01)	-.03** (.01)
<i>Age</i>	.03** (.00)	-.02* (.00)
<i>Education</i>	.08** (.03)	.05 (.03)
<i>Gender</i>	-.00 (.00)	-.19* (.11)
<i>Desired Degree of Policy Change</i>	.01** (.00)	.02** (.00)
<i>Constant</i>	-3.2** (.43)	1.33** (.52)
<i>N</i>	297	297
<i>F</i>	20.79**	5.69**
<i>R-2</i>	.44	.18

** = $p < .05$, * = $p < .10$