
Ideology

Assessing its impact on political choices

By *Carlos Elordi*

Are views on fiscal matters or the role of the state—expressed by ideological preferences—likely to affect political choices? For most of the last three decades, the answer given by political scientists has been “no;” in many empirical studies, the *general* public has been portrayed as “naive” and lacking in ideological consistency.¹ Here, however, I argue ideology is one of the most important indicators of political choice, and indirectly makes socioeconomic conditions more meaningful.

Past studies of ideology have focused mainly on economic values. The argument contends that economic values are organized in terms of a “left-right” continuum and that this dimension affects the way citizens vote.² Specifically, those on the left vote Democratic, while those on the right vote Republican.

For this analysis, I have defined ideology using traditional “economic values” interpretations. This definition, in turn, relates to the struggle between those who wish to foster economic and social equality and those who oppose it. In modern countries, these conflicts have involved questions of private versus government ownership and the role of the state as a mechanism for allocating economic goods. Those on the right emphasize economic competition, personal freedom and private property rights. In political terms, these values are translated into a desire for a small state, resistance against government regulation, and opposition to notions of social and economic equality engineered by government. Those on the right favor equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome.

On the left, people support an active state role and favor the elimination or the reduction of existing social and economic inequalities. They usually advocate the regulation of markets and private companies and the redistribution of the national income via progressive taxation.³ The left also emphasizes workers’ participation in the corporate decision-making process, while the right opposes the role of unions and workers’ representatives, particularly when they interfere with the production process.

Are differences in ideological beliefs related to socioeconomic differences as well? I assume that there is a connection, despite the thesis of the declining impact of class on ideology.⁴ These connections have been stressed for decades, suggesting that those with lower income and education support the redistribution of wealth and the more well-to-do favor income inequalities and private property rights.⁵

In the analytical model shown in Figure 1, ideology in the United States is measured by six questions from the 1990 World Values Survey. Respondents selected between favoring economic equality or the need for income differentiation; the nationalization of industries versus private property; individual versus public responsibilities; private versus public business management; and the value of competition. There was also a question concerning wealth distribution. For this analysis, the questions were organized so that those responses more supportive of state intervention and income equality were on the left and those stressing individual initiatives and free enterprise were on the right. Socioeconomic status was measured by education and income levels and the interviewer’s classification of the respondents’ social class. Party preference was arrayed assuming that the Democrats are on the left and the Republicans on the right.

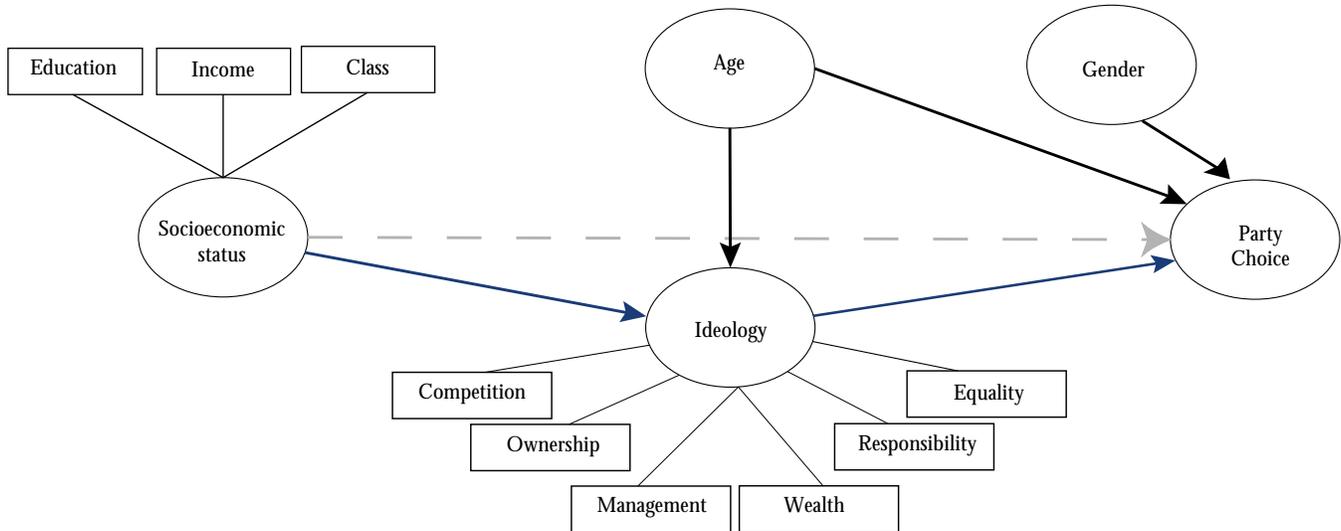
The American public shows overwhelming support for individual competition, but the responses to the other items in the ideology battery are more balanced. There are clearly rifts in relevant economic areas. The proportion of those who favor income differences, for example, is nearly the same as the those favoring greater income equality.

To determine whether these individual responses correspond to ideological differences between the left and the right we tested the model empirically, and found that all the questions except one reflect our definition of ideology (a question measuring whether people believe that wealth can be distributed so that there is enough for everyone does not produce the expected result). The questions regarding individual responsibility, competition, and private versus government ownership of businesses are the most important indicators of ideological disposition.

Carlos Elordi is a Ph.D. candidate in political science, University of Connecticut.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model for Measuring the Impact of Ideology on Political Choices



With ideology and socioeconomic status established, we can now ask: does ideology have an effect on party choice? If so, is it independent of socioeconomic characteristics? Does socioeconomic status have a direct impact on party choice, as early studies have suggested, or is it mediated through a respondent's ideology?

In Figure 1, this relationship is indicated by the blue line that goes from "ideology" to "party choice." People on the left tend to favor the Democratic Party; those on the right opt for Republicans. While this result may seem commonsensical, it refutes the thesis that citizens lack coherent and structured ideological beliefs. Variables such as gender and age have a smaller impact, with women and the elderly more likely to prefer Democrats.

A second important finding is that, when it comes to expressing party preference, socioeconomic status is important as long as it is mediated by ideology. Again, in Figure 1, the blue line that goes from "socioeconomic status" to "ideology" indicates a strong relationship. The impact of socioeconomic status on party choice is indirect. The dashed line that connects "socioeconomic status" with "party choice" indicates that the relationship between these two variables is not statistically significant.

Accordingly, those with higher socioeconomic status are much more likely to have "rightist" orientations and to select

Republicans as their party choice. Those with lower socioeconomic status favor a stronger state role and are more inclined to endorse Democrats.

From this analysis we can conclude that ideology, as it has been represented by economic considerations, still plays an important role in defining party preference. Further, while socioeconomic differences do not have a direct impact on party choice, it seems to be articulated through ideological orientations, thus refuting the hypothesis that ideologies are no longer anchored in structural variables and status location. In short, if a person of a certain socioeconomic status is not thinking in terms of ideology, socioeconomic status will have no impact on that person's party choice. ●

Endnotes

¹Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp. 206-261.

²Elinor Scarbrough, *Political Ideology and Voting: An Exploratory Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

³Oddbjørn Knutsen, "Left-Right Materialist Value Orientations." In J.W. Van Deth and Elinor Scarbrough (eds.), *The Impact of Values* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴See Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁵Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1960).