Why representatives are ideologists though voters are not*

AMIHAI GLAZER and BERNARD GROFMAN

School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine, CA 92717

Abstract. Though few voters appear to hold consistent ideological views, the roll call votes of congressmen and senators can be well predicted by ideological terms. An explanation for this puzzle is that ideology allows candidates to succinctly explain their views. Because it is difficult to explain detailed positions to voters, a candidate who presents his position in ideological terms may be able to defeat a candidate who supports a set of issue positions that would, *in toto*, be preferred by a majority of well-informed voters were the voters aware of all the views of that candidate. This effect can be a powerful one. Moreover, ideology may be a source of electoral stability, and a means of providing regularity and structure to elite political debate.

1. Introduction

Studies of the link between the attitudes of voters and the behavior of elected officials report contradictory findings about the role of ideology.

1. Most voters are not ideological. As Axelrod aptly put it (1967: 51) 'there is no well-defined ideology widely shared by the public to relate issues to each other.' (For the debate about the meaning of ideology, see Converse, 1969, 1970, 1974, 1980; Pierce and Rose, 1974; Judd and Milburn, 1980; Judd, Krosnick and Milburn, 1981; Norpoth and Lodge, 1985; reviews in Pierce, Beatty and Hagner, 1982; and Tedin, 1987.)

2. Nevertheless, congressmen vote ideologically. For example, Poole and Daniels (1985) show that congressmens' votes on bills can be very well explained by assigning each congressman a position on a one-dimensional scale and then predicting that each issue has a cutoff value such that congressmen with scores above that value vote Yes on a specified bill and that congressmen with scores below that value vote No.

3. In addition, congressmen act as if the overall ideological preferences of their constituents mattered. Glazer and Robbins (1985) report that a congressman who must seek reelection in a district that was changed by redistricting will

become more liberal by 8 points for every 10-point increase in the liberalism of his district. Johannes and McAdams (1981) find that, other things equal, an incumbent congressman loses the votes of 1.5 percent of the electorate for every 10-point increase in the distance between his ideology and that favored by the voters.

4. Candidates of opposite parties show strong ideological differences even after controlling for constituency differences. For example, when a Republican replaces a Democratic congressman, the new incumbent has a lower ADA score than the representative he replaces (Brady and Lynn, 1973; Fiorina, 1974). Similarly, senators from similar constituencies but different parties show great differences in their ideologies (Bullock and Brady, 1983; Poole and Rosenthal, 1985). Indeed, comparing senators from the same state but of opposite parties we find that in recent decades the Democrat is to the left of the Republican 94% of the time, with an average difference in ADA score of over 40 points (Grofman, Griffin and Glazer, 1987).

This paper offers an interpretation of ideology that is consistent with these seemingly contradictory findings. In particular, we explain how a candidate who presents most of his views in simple one-dimensional terms may be able to defeat a candidate who adopts positions that a fully informed electorate would prefer, but which cannot be described with an ideological label.

The key to our explanation is that ideology allows a candidate to concisely state his positions on a host of issues. Though this insight is not new (see, e.g., Downs, 1957; Buchanan and Tullock, 1962; Will, 1983; Kalt and Zupan, 1984), its implications for political competition have not been fully analyzed. We explicitly describe the use of ideology in a spatial voting model, we demonstrate that the informational aspects of ideology can be very important, and we explain how the use of ideological labels by candidates is self-reinforcing.

Our analysis does not require that all (or even most) voters vote in ideological terms. Rather we are concerned with the electorate as an aggregate. Low levels of ideological consistency in individuals are compatible with considerable ideological consistency among age cohorts (Inglehart, 1985), or among social or demographic groupings (Feld and Grofman, 1988). Looking at the media treatment of ideology, we see comments to the effect that 'Edward Kennedy has maintained his 1960s liberalism in the face of a move to the right among the American electorate' (Tedin, 1987: 67). We believe such statements are perfectly meaningful in terms of the behavior of individuals at the elite level and in terms of aggregate-level changes in the views of the American electorate. Also, even if many voters ignore ideology and policy when comparing candidates, we can take our model to apply to those voters who use something like a Downsian calculus. Because they are potential swing voters, candidates will find it critical to attract such voters.

2. Ideology as a label

Our explanation of ideology builds upon the work of Poole and Daniels (1985). Suppose each congressman and senator is assigned a number that describes how liberal he is. If such an ordering has meaning, then for most bills we could determine a level of liberalism such that most senators or congressmen more liberal than that would vote one way on a particular bill, and politicians more conservative would vote the other way. Poole and Daniels indeed find that ideology measured on a simple liberal-conservative dimension is a powerful predictor: it explains 85% of all the roll call votes cast by members of the House and Senate over the years 1959 to 1980. A constituent can know how his congressman or senator will vote on almost all bills simply by knowing the politician's ideology. This also means that in stating his ideology a candidate conveys quite a bit of information; to say he is a liberal gives a fairly accurate picture of where the candidate stands on most issues. Instead of voters having to know the candidate's positions on hundreds of issues, constituents know that a candidate whose liberalism score is 60% will vote quite similarly to the candidate whose liberalism score is 50% to 70%.[1]

Note that some, but not all, collections of positions can be expressed in ideological terms. Suppose there are two issues, say strip mining and abortion. To simplify what are, of course, issue continua, we can take the conservative position as favoring strip mines and opposing abortion, and the liberal position as opposing strip mines and favoring abortion. We call these the conservative and liberal positions because in roll call votes these issues are found to be related and to coincide well with the usual left-right characterizations of congressmen. This means, however, that candidates who favor both strip mining and abortion cannot explain their positions ideologically. To use an ideological label as a shorthand for their views, they would either have to favor strip mining and oppose abortion, or conversely. More generally, if we treated attitudes toward strip mining and toward abortion as separate issue continua, then the only ideological positions would be those that lie on some line in two-dimensional space.

As Will (1983: 11) complains:

[T]he most frustrating aspect of a life of public argument is the assumption by the . . . public that the arguer, because he bears a particular political label, must have a particular predictability. This gives . . . a dispiriting sense of being a captive of conventional but inadequate categories. It is not unreasonable for people to think that ideas come in clusters, like grapes. They think that if a person holds a certain belief, then he probably subscribes to certain other specific ideas − not because the others are logically entailed by the first ideas, but because the others just seem, as a matter of custom, to come stuck together with the first idea.

Note that under this interpretation of ideologies as labels, ideology need have no psychological meaning, voters need have no coherent ideological views, and ideology need not have any logical consistency. Ideology is merely a shorthand for expressing positions on numerous issues.[2] Adopting ideological categories is like putting on a preknotted tie; it requires very little work and the consequences for one's appearance are clear in advance.

Our main task is to show that a candidate who speaks to the public primarily in terms of ideological position can often defeat a candidate who tries to specify his positions on each (or at least many) of the issues. The difficulty, as is well known, is that if voters care about more than one issue then, in general, any candidate who adopts a set of positions on these issues can be defeated because there exists a different set of positions preferred by a majority of the voters (see McKelvey, 1979); that is, no core exists for the majority voting game. This says that if Candidate A presents a particular ideology, then the other candidate, Candidate B, can adopt a set of issue positions that would defeat Candidate A. The conclusion depends heavily on the assumption, however, that voters know how Candidate B differs from Candidate A on *all* the issues.

But voters may not be completely informed about the candidates. Though under conditions of perfect information Candidate B could defeat Candidate A, in fact many voters will hear only about Candidate B's stand on some of the issues, not on all. If voters are risk averse, so that they are reluctant to support a candidate whose positions on many issues are unclear, then a candidate who uses an ideology will, other things being equal, attract more votes than a candidate who attempts to specify his positions without the benefit of the shorthand ideology provides. Ideology effectively provides a 'default' position on every possible issue. It is as if the world were a Chinese checkerboard with only a few holes – only the few combinations of issue positions which neatly fit the holes can be easily understood by a significant number of voters.

3. Ideology and imperfect information

To be more precise about what voters know, define a message as information a voter receives about a particular action or position taken by a candidate. Examples of messages are a news report on television, a commercial by a candidate, a statement about the candidate by his opponent, a paragraph in a newspaper story, or a rumor heard by a voter. Though the number of potential messages a voter hears can be very large, any particular voter may not hear all commercials aired. Similarly, it may happen by chance that a particular voter hears or remembers none of these commercials, or perhaps that all the messages he hears mention a candidate's position on national defense, but not on social security.
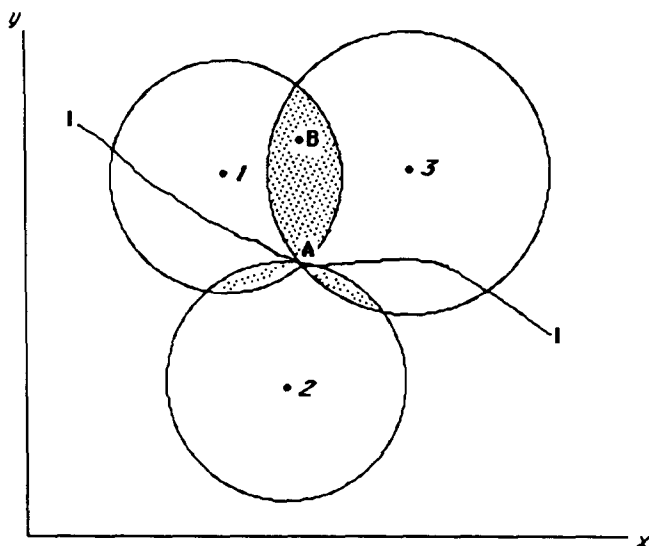
Figure 1.

A candidate whose positions conform to an ideology need only mention that ideology in his messages. A voter who hears a single message describing that ideology can locate the candidate on all the issues. A candidate with positions that are not ideologically consistent must issue many different types of messages — his positions on national defense, strip mining, abortion, and so on. For simplicity, we suppose that the only element of imperfect information concerns the ability of voters to locate the positions adopted by candidates. Attempts to persuade voters to change their own preferences are not part of our story.

To be more concrete, consider Figure 1 which assumes that there are three voters (1, 2, and 3). Suppose all policies consist of choosing the values of only two variables, x and y (for example, x can represent the level of defense spending and y the level of welfare spending). We use standard simplifying assumptions in the literature by letting each voter's preferences be depicted with circular indifference curves centered around his ideal point; these ideal points are represented in the Figure as points 1, 2, and 3. A voter prefers a policy represented by point w over a policy represented by point z if, and only if, the distance from his ideal point to w is less than the distance from his ideal point to z. Voter 3 in Figure 1, for example, prefers policy B over policy A, while voter 2 prefers A over B. Let Candidate A adopt an ideology which implies that

he will support the policy represented by point A in the Figure. All points within the shaded areas represent policies which at least two voters prefer over policy A. For example, both voters 3 and 1 prefer policy B over policy A. If the other candidate, Candidate B, chose a policy, such as B, located in one of the shaded areas, and the voters knew that Candidate B supported that policy, Candidate B would win the election by winning the support of at least two of the three voters.

We consider here a simple ideology, one that can be described on a one-dimensional liberal-conservative scale. In a world of multiple issues it is reasonable to believe that not all policies can be explained and reconciled in ideological terms. Indeed, if all combinations of policies could be described in ideological terms, there would be no disadvantage to using an ideology, and the problem of concern here would be of no interest. Let the set of positions that can be described by an ideology lie along curve II. Observe that Figure 1 assumes that curve II does not intersect any of the shaded areas. If point A were the median voter projection onto curve II, we can be certain that no point on that curve can defeat A (see e.g., Feld and Grofman, 1987). This means that Candidate B cannot offer a winning position which is ideological in nature, but must instead specify his positions along each of the two dimensions, x and y.

Thus, to specify his position, Candidate B must issue two types of messages – one type for his position on issue x, and another for his position on issue y. Each of Candidate A's messages need only describe his ideology. If voters 1 or 3 hear all types of Candidate B's messages, both will support Candidate B over Candidate A.

It is not obvious whether a voter who hears Candidate B's position on only one of the issues will support him; that depends on the voter's belief about Candidate B's position on the other issues. Indeed, suppose that a voter, Smith, believes that Candidate B's positions on all but one of the issues are the same as Candidate A's. Then an application of work by Shepsle (1979) proves that, in general, there exists at least one set of positions such that no change from that set on only one issue will be preferred by a majority of the voters. Even if Candidate A cannot describe a position that is so immune to defeat, Smith may fear that the reason he has not heard about Candidate B's position on some issue is that Candidate B knows that the position would not be popular with the voters. Or a voter can be risk-averse. Though Smith may believe that with some positive probability Candidate B's positions on all the issues are attractive ones, Smith will also realize that with some probability Candidate B supports policies that Smith dislikes intensely, but about which Smith heard nothing during the campaign.

More generally, we can view each voter's utility from the election of a particular candidate as a function of the positions that he thinks the candidate holds. A voter who does not have perfect information about the positions of a candi-

date may have some idea of the probability distribution of the candidate's position on each issue. For simplicity suppose that this distribution is fully described by its mean and variance, both of which are known to the voter. A voter's utility from a candidate can then be written as u $(M_1, M_2 \ldots M_n, V_1, V_2, \ldots V_n)$, where there are n issues under consideration, M_i is the expected value of the candidate's position on issue i, and V_i is the variance of the candidate's position on that issue. We suppose that voters are risk averse, that is, that $\partial U/\partial V_i < 0$.

On some issues voters may know the candidates' stands even without the benefit of any messages from them. That is, for some issues V_i may be small or even zero. On other issues, however, voters may not have strong prior beliefs about the candidates' positions. If a candidate explains his positions on these issues in ideological terms, the values of $V_1 \ldots V_n$ will be small, but the values of $M_1 \ldots M_n$ are constrained to be positions which are ideologically consistent. A candidate may, if he wishes, explain some, or even all, of his positions in non-ideological terms. But since this requires the candidate to issue a greater number of different types of messages, a candidate who adopts a non-ideological position on some issue increases the voters' uncertainty about the candidate's positions. That is, a candidate who adopts a non-ideological position on issue 1, and ideological positions on all other issues, will cause the values of $V_2 \ldots V_m$ to be higher than if the candidate adopted ideological positions on all the issues. Adopting a non-ideological position on issue 2, in addition to a non-ideological position on issue 1, will cause a further increase in $V_3 \ldots V_m$, and probably an increase in V_1 as well. A candidate may therefore do better by adopting somewhat unpopular positions, about which voters have little uncertainty, than by attempting to describe positions which are more popular but which generate great uncertainty in the minds of the voters about what the candidate stands for.

In some circumstances a candidate may find that the views of his constituents on some issue differ so much from the position implied by any ideology that it is worthwhile to separately state his position on that issue; for example, a fiscally conservative candidate may nevertheless support a pork barrel project for his district. This is not, however, likely to be the best strategy to follow on all issues.

Numerical calculations demonstrating this point are worked out in an appendix available from the authors. The main points of the demonstration are as follows. First, under reasonable assumptions about the number of messages a typical voter hears, a non-ideological candidate could win only if he issues about ten times as many messages or commercials as the ideological candidate. Second, the probability that the non-ideological candidate wins is a decreasing function of the fraction of voters who would approve of his positions, a decreasing function of the amount of information voters have about the two

candidates, and an increasing function of the number of issues voters care about. Indeed, for sufficiently low levels of information held by the voters, the non-ideological candidate will lose to the ideological one even if the non-ideological candidate's advertising expenditures are several orders of magnitude greater than the ideological candidate's expenditures.

4. Discussion

Our reasoning suggests that congressmen will reflect their constituents' ideologies not only on important issues, but also on unimportant ones, such as antitrust, rice subsidies, or civil service annuities.

Consider first an incumbent who presented an ideological platform in the last election and who does not have perfect information about the voters' preferences. The incumbent does know, however, that he won the last election. It is therefore more likely than not that a majority of the voters who compared the implicit or explicit platforms of the candidates approved of the positions implied by the ideology that the incumbent candidate presented in the previous election. Adopting the same set of positions is therefore likely to prove popular in subsequent elections as well.

Second, the reasoning used above in explaining the relative advantages of ideological and non-ideological platforms also applies once a candidate wins election. Voters who discover that a congressman who claims to be a liberal supported a bill that other liberals opposed, may fear that the congressman is not as liberal as he claims, and that he may not have views they favor on other, more important, bills that the voters at the moment know little about. The incumbent can, therefore, increase his credibility by voting ideologically even on unimportant bills.

An added prediction of the model is that the desire of incumbents to present consistent ideological positions limits the influence of special interest groups. Consider a group which favors legislation that would bring it great benefit.[3] Suppose that support for this legislation contradicts the position implied by the candidate's ideology on some issue. Even if voters would not object to such legislation *per se*, the candidate may fear that favoring it will increase the uncertainty in the minds of voters about the ideology of the candidate – if the candidate violates his ideological positions on this issue, perhaps he does so on other issues as well, so that voters become less sure of the candidate's positions on these other issues. Risk-averse voters would find the candidate less attractive, and the candidate may find the electoral cost of supporting special interest legislation to be too high.

Though we have not attempted to explain how ideological labels may first arise,[4] we do claim that once they exist candidates have an incentive to use

them. Moreover, each candidate's use of ideology can further reinforce its meaning. Suppose, for example, that initially 80% of congressmen with ADA scores above 70 oppose strip mines. A newly elected congressman who comes from a state where strip mining is not a salient issue and who espoused a liberal ideology will nevertheless find it wise to oppose strip mines. Failure to do so casts doubts on his liberal credentials and thus on the general predictability of his voting pattern. The congressman will decide to vote the way most congressmen with his ideology vote. This will cause a further increase in the proportion of congressmen with that ADA score who vote in a particular way. In succeeding elections, therefore, the ideology will be an even better predictor of roll call votes, which can further enhance the benefits to a candidate of using ideology as a label.

A final implication of our reasoning is that ideology should play a larger role in a candidate's campaign the less voters know about him. In particular, a voter may believe he knows more about an incumbent than about the typical challenger. Arthur Sanders (1982) uses survey data concerning the 1980 presidential election to test this hypothesis. He estimates a regression which attempts to predict each respondent's evaluation of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and John Anderson on a feeling thermometer. An important explanatory variable is the absolute value of the difference between a voter's self-placement on an ideology scale and his beliefs about the ideologies of the candidates. A similar difference score is used for issue positions. Issues and ideology were important in explaining a voter's feelings towards all three candidates. The most interesting finding is that ideology was more important in evaluating unknowns (Anderson and Reagan) than in evaluating the best-known candidate (Carter). As Sanders (1982: 183) puts it, 'it seems as if the less visible the candidate and the less information about the candidate's issue positions, the more powerful such [ideological] identification is in candidate evaluation.'

Notes

1. Kalt and Zupan (1984) reach corroborating results in their study of senatorial votes on the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, which required the restoration of strip mined land to its pre-mining state. It was passed by Congress in 1974 and 1975, vetoed by President Ford, and signed into law by President Carter on 3 August 1977. Ideology (here measured by the scores of the pro-environment League of Conservation Voters), is the most important variable in explaining how senators voted on the bills. Kalt and Zupan go further in asking whether a senator's vote on a bill unrelated to strip mining predicts his vote on that economic issue. More precisely, they wish to explain on how many of the 21 roll call votes concerning strip mining a senator voted in favor of tighter controls. Their explanatory variables include a senator's position on a bill imposing the death penalty, on a bill that would expand sex education, on a bill concerning development of the neutron bomb, and on a bill forbidding the immigration of avowed communists. In each case, a senator who voted the liberal position would, on average,

vote favorably for strip controls on six more occasions than would an otherwise similar senator. A voter can thus predict how his senator will vote on strip mining by knowing how the senator voted on some other, apparently unrelated, issues.

2. A candidate can claim to be a Barry Goldwater conservative or a John Kennedy liberal, or he can give examples of his positions: he can say that he is the type of person who would vote in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment, or against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, and that therefore he is also the type of congressman who would oppose military intervention in other areas. That is, the candidate may talk about the issues to portray his ideology or preferences.

3. See McCormick and Tollison (1981) for an exposition of the opposite view — that special interests will have a large influence on legislation.

4. However, as Will (1983: 12) aptly puts it, 'labels are reasonable, because a reasonable person's political judgments are not random. The familiar cluster of ideas manifest consequences and affinities that express political temperaments as well as political philosophies. Political ideas cluster; people cluster politically.' For example in the U.S. Congress we have the well-known 'lib-lab' lobby whose coalescence comes to define the 'liberal' position on issues. (Cf. Buchanan and Tullock's, 1962, discussion of logrolling.)

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