

In today's world of intense ideological conflict at the elite level, the nature of mass belief systems has changed dramatically since the last time Converse's famous levels of conceptualization (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964) were coded in 2000. This paper shows that the percentage with well-developed belief systems based on a clear understanding of public policy choices has increased substantially since then. It also introduces a new category termed "policy wonks" to reflect a sub-category that Converse only referred to in passing but which is now quite common. Unlike respondents whom I classify as "concept ideologues" in this paper, policy wonks do not employ overarching concepts such as liberalism/conservatism or the scope of government. Rather, policy wonks just refer to at least three public policy stands when asked what they like and dislike about the major parties and presidential candidates. Although it was very rare for citizens in the 1950s to show a clear belief system based on the specific choices of government action, today's highly intense and polarized policy debates have made programmatic-oriented belief systems quite common. A close examination of policy wonks shows that they are just as politically knowledgeable and consistent on issue dimensions as concept ideologues (i.e., those who employ ideological terms). Hence, policy wonks possess a well-defined belief system based on employing an understanding of public policy, thereby befitting Converse's criteria for classification at the top level of conceptualization.

The substantial increases in both concept ideologues and policy wonks accounts for virtually all of the increase since the 1980s in respondents whose partisanship matches their ideology (i.e., conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats). Not only are respondents at the top of levels of conceptualization more numerous than they used to be, but being more consistent than they used to be has led to a marked increase in the overall correspondence between partisanship and ideology. On the other hand, the decrease in ideologically inconsistent partisans (i.e., liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats) has occurred across all conceptualization levels. Thus, party polarization is a combination of: 1) better-developed belief systems increasing ideological-partisan consistency; and 2) partisan sorting decreasing partisans who are out step with their party's ideological stance.

Past research has shown that Republicans are substantially more likely to be ideologues whereas Democrats are much more inclined to conceptualize politics in terms of group benefits. This pattern was quite evident in the 2008 and 2012 American National Election Study (ANES) responses that I personally coded. However, two developments occurred in 2016 that dramatically reshaped the partisan nature of belief systems. First, the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party evidenced a great deal of ideological thinking, thereby pushing Democrats to a record percentage at the top level of ideological conceptualization. Second, the voters who supported Trump in the Republican primaries were much less likely to be ideologues or policy wonks than those who supported more traditional Republican candidates. These developments combined to make Democrats and Republicans more similar than ever before in terms of ideological conceptualization in 2016.

## Reconceptualizing the Levels of Conceptualization

The levels of conceptualization measure was introduced in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) based on Philip Converse's close reading of what 1956 survey respondents said when asked what they liked and disliked about the Democrats and Republicans, as well as Eisenhower and Stevenson. In writing up this chapter entitled "The Formation of Issue Concepts and Partisan Change," Converse left an excellent roadmap for future replications by providing a set of examples of each level and sub-level of conceptualization. Each example consisted of a verbatim transcript of what a respondent said, as well as an explanation for Converse's coding decision. All told, Converse supplied 24 examples for the four basic categories of ideologue, group benefits, nature of the times, and no issue content.

As I started to do levels of conceptualization coding based on the Excel spreadsheets of open-ended comments in recent ANES surveys, I found myself frequently writing the following note: "clear belief system; no ideological concepts." The pattern of responses I was referring to was that the respondent would discuss numerous specific policies, but without expressing any overarching concepts such as liberalism vs. conservatism or the degree of federal involvement in the economy. Based on my reading of Converse's examples in *The American Voter*, I initially coded these respondents simply as ideologues. Converse indicated that in addition to expressing abstract thinking a respondent qualified as an ideologue by showing evidence of a well-defined belief system involving the application of current or past policy stands to evaluations of parties and/or candidates. As Converse put it, such respondents "had highly differentiated images relevant to one or another ideological content domain, yet failed to introduce the generalized concepts that are normally used to summarize and order these perceptions in sophisticated debate." (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 233). His example of such an ideologue involved a respondent who remarked that the Democrats were for higher social security/old age pensions and better conditions for workers, whereas the Republicans opted not to take actions to end the great depression (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 233).

Based on my own reading of microfilmed 1950s and 1960s ANES hand-transcribed interviews years ago, I knew that this policy-oriented pattern was relatively rare in the era that Converse developed his levels of conceptualization measure. However, it quickly became apparent that this was a very common way for respondents to conceptualize politics in recent-day ANES interviews. After writing the observation of "clear belief system; no ideological concepts" for about 10 percent of the first 300 cases I coded, I decided to create a sub-category to keep track of this pattern. I also realized that I needed to develop a clear standard for qualification of a clear belief system based on employing policy criteria. In my judgment, someone who mentioned one or two policy issues was typically oriented around how his or her favored group would be helped or hurt. But once someone mentioned three distinct policy issues, they were usually putting together the building blocks of a platform for governing. For example, someone who said they liked Trump because he would increase military spending and reduce immigration and disliked Clinton because she would increase taxes expressed a clear grasp of some of the most fundamental policies debated in the 2016 campaign. In light of today's common terminology of calling someone who focuses on the details of public policy a "wonk," I have opted to term these respondents "policy wonks."

A set of actual examples from the 2016, 2012, and 2008 ANES surveys will provide a brief overview of the sorts of responses that were made by people whom I coded as policy wonks. The

first example (R301748) comes from a woman in her 30s interviewed in 2016 who had a college degree and worked as a registered nurse:

*Likes Reps:* I do like some of their policies about military spending, handling the Middle East, um, and handling China, trades with other countries.

*Dislikes Reps:* I don't like that they're against gay marriage; against abortion; their views on health care.

*Likes Dems:* I agree with a lot of their policies, healthcare for everyone, let's see what else. I like their views on gay marriage, abortion, and the tax on the wealthy.

*Dislikes Dems:* I don't particularly like the issue on military spending and I don't particularly like, let's see, some of the issues with you know the Middle East. How we're handling refugees coming in. Um...trading with China.

*Likes Trump:* There's some of his policies that I'm ok with - maybe 1 or 2 policies.

*Dislikes Trump:* Lack of experience; I don't agree with a lot of his policies; he's just too hot headed; I don't trust him; I think he's been running a negative campaign.

*Likes Clinton:* Gender; experience; her policies.

*Dislikes Clinton:* Her email incident, the trusting issue; I'm not 100% for all her policies.

This respondent was clearly very focused on multiple questions of public policy, but also conflicted, with some of her views favoring the Democrats and others favoring the Republicans. Reflecting her mixture of liberal and conservative views, she placed herself as a moderate on the 7-point ideology scale in both her pre- and post-election interviews. And on the 0-10 left-right scale in the CSES part of the survey, she placed herself right in the middle – equidistant from her placement of each party on the same scale. In short, even though this woman did not express any ideological concepts, she did express a well-defined belief system based on her opinions of various current questions of public policy. I have little doubt that Converse would have coded such a respondent as an ideologue in his coding scheme.

The second example (R1989) comes from a man in his 40s interviewed in 2012 who had a college degree and worked as an administrator in a nursing home:

*Likes Reps:* A few key points -- I like their views on defense of the US, their economic policies, creating jobs, and building the economy.

*Dislikes Reps:* Their views on abortion. This goes for both the parties -- the uncooperativeness with working with the other party.

*Likes Dems:* No.

*Dislikes Dems:* Their tax policies, health care reform, and stimulus spending. Wanting to increase taxes on the rich; I don't agree; I believe the rich already pay their own share.

*Likes Romney:* Economic policy. His plan to create jobs and get rid of Obamacare.

*Dislikes Romney:* There are things I don't like but not so bad to vote against him. I don't agree with his belief on right to life.

*Likes Obama:* No.

*Dislikes Obama:* Obamacare, foreign policy, economic policy, amount of debt the government has incurred. I don't like his statement he made to the Russian president how he would be able to help him after the election is over. The protection of US citizens overseas; also, allowing countries to develop nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Not showing enough support for Israel. Reducing the United States nuclear arsenal while other countries have not.

As to be expected from the negative evaluations expressed here about the policies of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, this respondent said he was a conservative in both the pre- and post-election interviews. And on the 0-10 left-right scale, he placed himself at 8 while placing the Republicans at 9 and the Democrats at 1. The one point difference between his views and his perception of the Republicans perhaps reflects his difference with the GOP on abortion. In short, this respondent had a clearly thought-out belief system based on public policy even though he expressed no mention of ideological concepts.

Our third example (R432) is from a 2008 interview with a man in his 50s who had some college education and reported being permanently disabled:

*Likes Reps:* There seems to be an infusion of whenever we elect a Republican president of perhaps--things are going to get good, unrealistic feeling, we are always disappointed.

*Dislikes Reps:* They seem to always put us in a hole, economically, our relationship with other countries, with the world in general, we seem to come out looking forward/look how the nations, either the Islamic or Muslim world look at us now for our involvement in the Middle East, look at our lack of interest in the genocide in Africa, Rwanda -- we didn't do a damn thing.

*Likes Dems:* They're more realistic at where we stand in relationship to the world community, all the problems in there, they take a more realistic approach to things, they have a more humanistic approach and feeling for the world problems--health, economic/usually the subcommittees, congressional and Senate try to subsidize certain programs so they might continue so the US can be looked on as a benevolent nation--the peace corps, international food program.

*Dislikes Dems:* They always let us down. They can't seem to finish what they start. They back down on vital important issues where they will concede--various committees--you get like a case of glass half-full--it's actually half-empty--I've been disappointed with their performance.

*Likes McCain:* No.

*Dislikes McCain:* His age, his voting record, his ideology on foreign policy, as far he seems to be in the main Republican change of thought camp so far as dealing with oil policies, intrusive actions, involving other countries, he's really so similar to Bush. And look at the mess we are in now--it hasn't worked and it isn't working. It's like where his priorities are where money should go, like education vs oil interests, stuff like that, priorities are screwed.

*Likes Obama:* I'm just hoping his age and his outlook on policy--he's not, he seems fresher, fresher ideas, maybe a different approach on a lot of our policy. Financially, I hate to say it, but when you really read the platform, unfortunately it's still the party platform--there really is nothing new--income tax incentives, it's been done, you could almost say I would have voted for Clinton, but since she's not in the race I'm picking the lesser of two evils.

*Dislikes Obama:* No.

Although this respondent actually mentions the term “ideology,” there are not any broad concepts employed but rather a wide range of policies and government programs. The level of detail in his policy comments is quite impressive, including some discussion of congressional committees and the Democratic Party platform. His closed-ended responses nicely match his rather liberal outlook on specific policies. In the pre-election interview he placed himself at the slightly liberal point on the 7-point ideology scale and in the post-election interview he moved himself a bit left to the point simply labeled as “liberal.” On the 0-10 left-right scale, he placed himself at 2,

while placing the Democrats 2 points to the right at 4 and the Republicans at the most right-wing point at 10.

These three examples from 2008-2016 illustrate how respondents who actively use public policy questions in their party and candidate evaluations possess a well-defined belief system that should be near the top level of any measure of conceptualization. A detailed analysis of political knowledge and ideological constraint/consistency by my revised measure of the levels of conceptualization will bolster this point.

Before examining my revised measure in detail, however, it is important to assess how the policy wonk category has emerged and grown over time. As will be shown shortly, this is a substantial-sized group in today's electorate, averaging 11 percent of those interviewed in the 2008-16 period. With policy wonks being so common in today's conceptualization of politics, it is probable that this pattern did not just suddenly appear over the last several elections. Yet, previous replications of Converse's levels of conceptualization did not mention this pattern of responses at all. How they missed the development of policy wonks is the subject of the next section of this paper.

### **The Emergence of Policy Wonks**

Other scholars have replicated the levels of conceptualization measure based on responses to open-ended questions about the major parties and presidential candidates in the 1960-1988 elections as well as the 2000 election. None of these replications mentioned respondents whose belief system centers on evaluations of policy issues. Nevertheless, such respondents clearly existed once I carefully examined the specific master coding that was done for the open-ended questions in the studies conducted between 1972 and 2000. For example, in the 1988 and 2000 ANES surveys, I found 192 cases where the respondent had offered at least six policy responses and yet were coded as either group benefits or nature of times on the conceptualization scale. This amounted to about 5 percent of the entire sample in each year. Furthermore, I realized that these respondents would clearly meet my criteria for classification as a policy wonk unless they had repeatedly mentioned the same one or two policies.

Using the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File, I created a count of the number of specific policy comments made by each respondent for the 1972-2000 period.<sup>1</sup> I determined that there were 1,214 cases coded as either group benefits or nature of the times in which a respondent had made at least three policy comments. (Fortunately, there was not a single case with three policy comments coded as no issue content). I reviewed each of these cases individually, examining each specific code to see if these respondents had referred to at least three distinct questions of public policy. Admittedly, this method is less reliable than reading a transcript of what respondents actually said, as I did for the 2008-2016 surveys. Some cases were clear as day, but others involved codes that were so similar that it was hard to judge whether the respondent was just talking about the same issue in somewhat different terms. In 48 percent of the 1,214 cases examined, I judged that the respondent probably should have been coded as a policy wonk by my criteria of mentioning three distinct policies. In addition, I changed a small number of cases from nature of the times to group benefits because the respondent mentioned a policy or two that I had considered group benefits in my coding, such as abortion or gun control.

Two examples of respondents that previous investigators had coded as group benefits but which I recoded as policy wonks will serve to illustrate my recoding process. In these cases, the

best I can do is to outline the codes mentioned by each respondent. (One would have to go back to the original hand-transcribed interviews to see how respondents actually phrased each comment). Nonetheless, as reflected by these two examples, I believe the evidence was reasonably clear that the respondent employed numerous public policy issues in his/her discussion of the parties and candidates.

My first example (R642) is from a 2000 interview with a man in his 40s who was a High School graduate and worked as a truck driver:

*Like Reps:* Against government activity; economy better under them; less concerned with environmental protection; against aid to parochial schools; for strong military.

*Dislike Reps:* Party is poorly organized/ineffective.

*Like Dems:* No.

*Dislike Dems:* General assessment of ideas.

*Like Bush:* For lower taxes; against government activity; for strong military; for aid to parochial schools; would meddle less in world problems.

*Dislike Bush:* No.

*Like Gore:* No.

*Dislike Gore:* Against lower taxes; overly concerned about environmental protections; too much for government activity.

This respondent was coded as group benefits, presumably because of the way he phrased some of his comments. Yet, the sheer number of policy responses indicates that his political belief system is mostly oriented around major policy concerns. As to be expected from this man's consistently conservative policy views, he placed himself as an "extreme conservative" on the 7-point ideology scale.

The second example comes from 1984 – the year that I found that policy wonks first became a very significant group. This interview (R1060) was with a woman in her 50s who had dropped out of High School and was a retired administrative assistant:

*Like Reps:* General positive assessment of their economic policy.

*Dislike Reps:* Their policy on law and order; they provide too much foreign aid; they are against senior citizens; they oppose reform of tax loopholes; they oppose the nuclear freeze.

*Like Democrats:* They are for the common man; they take a hard line on criminals; they are the party of JFK, they are good for the country; they are pro-education.

*Dislike Dems:* They are too divided amongst themselves.

*Like Reagan:* No.

*Dislike Reagan:* Don't like his wife; he's against the nuclear freeze; he's against reform of tax loopholes; he's against welfare programs; he's against abortion.

*Like Mondale:* He's the lesser of two evils.

*Dislike Mondale:* He is uninspiring; don't like his running mate.

This respondent was quite concerned with many of the policies of the Reagan administration. In line with her opposition to Reagan's course of public policy, she placed herself at the liberal point on the 7-point ideology scale. Yet, this respondent was classified as group benefits, probably because of her one mention of Republicans being against senior citizens.

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, the policies of the Reagan Administration coincided with a substantial increase in the percentage of policy wonks. Table 1 shows that there were relatively few policy wonks in the entire sample during the 1980 election, but after Reagan’s policies took hold policy wonks increased to 9 percent by the end of the Reagan years – a level that it has remained at or above ever since.

**Table 1.** Levels of conceptualization, 1980-2016

	<u>'80</u>	<u>'84</u>	<u>'88</u>		<u>'00</u>	<u>'08</u>	<u>'12</u>	<u>'16</u>
Concept Ideologues	21	19	18		19	25	29	29
Policy Wonks	2	6	9		9	11	13	9
[Ideologue OR Wonk]	[23]	[25]	[27]		[28]	[36]	[42]	[38]
Group Benefits	29	24	31		29	29	31	30
Nature of the times	30	32	21		22	16	16	16
No issue content	18	20	21		21	19	12	16

*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks; 2000: William Jacoby’s coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks; 2008-2016: author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses.

**Table 2.** Levels of conceptualization among voters, 1972-2016

	<u>'72</u>	<u>'76</u>	<u>'80</u>	<u>'84</u>	<u>'88</u>		<u>'00</u>	<u>'08</u>	<u>'12</u>	<u>'16</u>
Concept Ideologues	25	27	27	25	23		24	31	35	33
Policy Wonks	3	1	2	7	11		12	14	13	11
[Ideologue OR Wonk]	[28]	[28]	[29]	[32]	[34]		[36]	[45]	[48]	[44]
Group Benefits	27	26	31	25	33		30	28	30	30
Nature of the times	31	27	28	29	21		22	16	15	14
No issue content	15	19	12	14	11		13	11	7	12

*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks; 2000: William Jacoby's coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks; 2008-2016: author's coding of ANES open-ended responses.

The archived data from the 1970s is limited to just respondents who participated in both the pre- and post-election interviews.<sup>2</sup> Because of this limitation of the 1970s data, Table 2 restricts the analysis to just respondents who claimed to have voted, thereby enabling comparisons from 1972 to 2016. Naturally, limiting the scope to voters only increases the percentage who are ideologically and policy oriented, as first reported in *The American Voter* long ago. (Campbell et al., 1960). This time series shows that policy wonks among voters averaged about 2 percent for the three elections from 1972 to 1980. Again, one can see that the policies of the Reagan Administration led to a substantial increase in policy wonks by 1988. From 1988 to 2016, the percentage of policy wonks among voters averaged 12 percent – roughly six times the level found for the 1972-1980 elections.

Why did this change occur during the Reagan Administration? The most likely answer is that this was the first presidency in the history of the ANES (1948- ) to promote a clear agenda that represented a major shift in the course of public policy in numerous ways. In reviewing the specific codes that led me to classify 1984 and 1988 respondents as policy wonks, I saw many comments of support or opposition to Reagan's triumvirate of key policies: cutting taxes, increasing military spending, and reducing welfare. Furthermore, the Reagan years also saw a president and his party being outspokenly conservative on a range of relatively new social issues, such as abortion, gun control, and environmental protection. These policy matters were also frequently on the minds of policy wonks in the Reagan era, and have become even more prominent in the elections since then.

Why were policy wonks not coded as ideologues in previous replications of Converse's levels of conceptualization? After all, Converse did refer to this pattern as one of his examples of ideologues, and the various examples I have provided of policy wonks show these respondents mentioned key building blocks of conservative or liberal approaches to governing. One can only speculate about such coding decisions made long ago, but I suspect that a specific focus on ideology as opposed to the broader question of belief systems was at work. Kathleen Knight did the coding throughout the 1980s, and her primary area of interest was on the role of ideological concepts in politics (Knight, 1984, 1985). The coding of the 2000 survey was done by two graduate students under the guidance of William Jacoby, whose major field of inquiry was also political ideology. (Jacoby, 1991; 1995) Hence, with the major concern of the investigators being ideological concepts, the coding of ideologues was narrowed to just respondents who mentioned ideological terms or outlined the basic concept of one or the other. The respondents that I identified as policy wonks were coded as group benefits if there was any mention of a group within that individual's responses, or alternatively as nature of the times if no group was mentioned.

However, I believe that a broader focus on how people conceptualize politics leads to an expectation that policy wonks have highly developed political systems akin to those who employ ideological concepts. The next section of this paper demonstrates that policy wonks are indeed more like concept ideologues than group benefits or nature of the times respondents on multiple indicators of political sophistication.



## Measures of Political Sophistication and Belief System Constraint

Any good measure of levels of conceptualization should be linearly related to various measures of political sophistication. Converse's original levels of conceptualization performed very well in this respect. The question to be resolved regarding my reconceptualization of this measure is whether policy wonks belong with concept ideologues near the top, or rather in a middle level, as reflected by previous coding of the 1980s and 2000 responses. My hypothesis is that policy wonks represent a sophisticated group that belong with the concept ideologues. This hypothesis is partly based on how Converse classified policy-oriented respondents in 1956. In addition, it is rooted in my own impressions of the 374 respondents whom I classified as policy wonks in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 surveys. I found these respondents' remarks to be generally well reasoned, demonstrating a good grasp of some of the major policies addressed in the campaign. In many cases, policy wonks discussed more issues than concept ideologues did. My more specific coding of the 2016 open-ended data found that the average policy wonk offered 6.2 issue comments, as compared to 3.0 for concept ideologues, 1.5 for group benefits, 1.4 for nature of the times, and of course 0.0 for no issue content respondents.

**Table 3a.** Mean percent correct on political knowledge questions by level of conceptualization, 1980-2016

	<u>2008-16</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>1980s</u>
Concept Ideologues	62	63	65
Policy wonks	<b>56</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>60</b>
Group Benefits	41	44	43
Nature of the times	35	43	39
No issue content	27	28	24

**Table 3b.** Interest in the campaign by level of conceptualization

	<u>2008-16</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>1980s</u>
Concept Ideologues	76	66	69
Policy wonks	<b>72</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>67</b>
Group Benefits	64	53	55
Nature of the times	62	52	48
No issue content	40	28	31

*Note:* Very interested = 100, Somewhat = 50, Not Much = 0

*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby's coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author's coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

In addition to being very talkative about the issues of the day, policy wonks are clearly quite knowledgeable and interested in presidential campaigns. Tables 3 and 3a show these patterns for all three eras for which I have coded policy wonks. In each year, I constructed a measure of

political knowledge based on the percentage of correct answers to factual questions about politics (e.g., which party has the majority in the House, the ability to identify current political leaders, knowing the approximate unemployment rate, etc.). The consistent finding in Table 3 is that policy wonks are only slightly less knowledgeable than concept ideologues, whereas group benefits and nature of the times respondents have a substantially weaker grasp of basic political facts, and no issue content respondents have the least knowledge. Similar patterns were found with regard to interest in the presidential campaign. On a 0-100 scale, concept ideologues averaged the highest level of interest at 70, followed closely by policy wonks at 69, with group benefits registering at 57, nature of the times at 54, and no issue content respondents at a lowly 33.

Political knowledge and political interest often translate into a coherent belief system. There are numerous ways to assess the nature of belief systems with recent datasets, including examining various measures of liberal-conservative ideology. Table 4 presents a variety of data regarding the stability and consistency of ideological preferences. Converse emphasized in his research that a sophisticated political belief system involved stable attitudes that did not change from an initial interview to a follow-up interview. Fortunately, both the pre and post-election ANES interviews in the 2008-2016 period asked respondents to place themselves on a 1-7 liberal-conservative scale, or to say that they “haven’t thought about it.” The first section of Table 4 compares stability coefficients by levels of conceptualization. Although policy wonks did not actively discuss ideological concepts in their open-ended responses, it is quite apparent that they have stable ideological preferences when asked. The stability correlation for wonks is nearly as high as for ideologues, with the other categories exhibiting far less ideological stability, and in the order one would expect.

Another way of measuring whether a respondent has a true, well-considered, ideological position is to compare his/her ratings on various measures of ideology. In addition to the 7-point scale with labels ranging from “extreme liberal” to “extreme conservative,” ANES respondents have regularly been asked to rate “liberals” and “conservatives” on a 0-100 feeling thermometer scale. Subtracting a respondent’s rating of liberals from his/her rating of conservatives yields a -100 to 100 scale that measures ideological preference akin to the 7-point scale. If respondents within a level of conceptualization have a good grasp of ideology, then the correlation between their placement on the 7-point scale and the liberal minus conservative feeling thermometer measure should be highly related. As can be seen in the second segment of Table 4, this is indeed the case for concept ideologues as well as policy wonks. Perhaps most importantly, these correlations show that policy wonks were much more ideologically consistent than group benefits or nature of the times respondents in all three eras. Thus, the policy wonks I identified by reading the interviews from 2008-2016 definitely resemble the policy wonks that I identified by merely reviewing the coded responses from the 1980s and 2000.

In recent ANES surveys, people have also been asked to place themselves on a 0-10 left-right scale as part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) section of the interview. As the terms “left” and “right” are used less often in the United States than in other established democracies, even some of the most ideologically aware respondents might be unfamiliar with these terms. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the correlations between the left-right scale and the two liberal-conservative scales are generally lower than the other correlations in Table 4. Yet, the pattern of concept ideologues and policy wonks showing far more ideological consistency than the other levels of conceptualization is again quite clear.

**Table 4.** Stability correlations and correlations between different measures of ideology by levels of conceptualization

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 Stability correlation (r) of Ideological Identification in pre and post interviews (DK and Haven't Thought about it coded as Moderate)

	Concept Ideologue	Policy Wonk	Group Benefits	Nature of Times	No Issue Content
2008-2016 combined	.891	.840	.619	.458	.385

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 Correlation (r) of and ideological placement and liberal/conservative feeling thermometer placements

	Concept Ideologue	Policy Wonk	Group Benefits	Nature of Times	No Issue Content
<b>2008-16</b>	.766	.733	.544	.447	.326
<b>2000</b>	.738	.703	.387	.464	.128
<b>1980s</b>	.751	.630	.401	.397	.171

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 Correlation (r) of and ideological placement and left-right placement

	Concept Ideologue	Policy Wonk	Group Benefits	Nature of Times	No Issue Content
<b>2008-16</b>	.777	.665	.350	.185	.218

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 Correlation (r) of and liberal/conservative feeling thermometer placements and left-right placement

	Concept Ideologue	Policy Wonk	Group Benefits	Nature of Times	No Issue Content
<b>2008-16</b>	.689	.661	.385	.321	-.064

*Note:* For all the variables in this table, don't know or haven't thought about it are recoded to the midpoint in order to preserve the maximum number of cases.

*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby's coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author's coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

Finally, another important concept to examine by levels of conceptualization is issue constraint, i.e., how responses on various issue dimensions relate to one another, as well as to ideological placement. Respondents who have well-defined belief systems based on a good understanding of the debates conducted by political elites should show more consistency than those whose belief systems are defined by group benefits or the nature of the times. In order to examine this topic, I created three broad issue indices from the 2016 ANES survey consisting of responses on: 1) traditional partisan issues; 2) social issues; and 3) issues specific to Donald Trump’s campaign. Traditional partisan issues consisted of responses to questions about support for defense spending, increasing the minimum wage, taxing millionaires, aid for African-Americans, government intervention in health care insurance, and government spending in areas like health and education. Social issues represent issues that have long cut across the party coalitions and tap personal values far more than economic considerations. The 2016 items that made up the social issue index were abortion, the death penalty, gun control, marijuana legalization, and same sex service and marriage questions. Donald Trump’s campaign brought to the forefront a number of issues that either were new to the public agenda or represented a major departure from the norm for a Republican presidential nominee. These positions involved building a wall at the Mexican border, ending birthright citizenship, deporting unauthorized workers, opposing admission of Syrian refugees, limiting foreign imports, opposing free trade agreements, and torturing suspected terrorists.

**Table 5.** Constraint by Levels of Conceptualization, 2016

	Concept Ideologue	Policy Wonk	Group Benefits	Nature of Times	No Issue Content
r--Social & Trump issues	.595	.734	.360	.231	.386
r--Traditional & Trump issues	.540	.676	.412	.343	.335
r--social & traditional issues	.764	.712	.502	.390	.321
r--ideology & traditional issues	.802	.692	.549	.464	.099
r--ideology & social issues	.760	.742	.457	.461	.170
r--ideology & Trump issues	.583	.649	.389	.286	.069

*Sources:* Author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses in the 2016 ANES as merged with the in-person dataset.

As hypothesized, the correlations displayed in Table 5 demonstrate that concept ideologues and policy wonks clearly possess the most constrained political belief systems. On measures involving just traditional partisan and/or social issues, there is a linear relationship between attitudinal constraint and the levels of conceptualization, with policy wonks evidencing just slightly less consistency than concept ideologues. However, in all the cases where Trump issues are included, the correlations are actually highest for the policy wonks. Thus, policy wonks were the best equipped to incorporate their views on the new issues or positions raised by Donald Trump into their political worldview -- relating them to their stand on the 7-point ideological scale, as well as to their stands on traditional partisan issues and social issues. If part of issue sophistication is being aware of current debates and updating one's belief system based on an assessment of newly raised issues, then it would seem that policy wonks are a quite sophisticated group.

In sum, the evidence is overwhelming that policy wonks represent a highly politically involved group that should be grouped with concept ideologues on the levels of conceptualization. They are very knowledgeable about political facts, highly interested in politics, and show high levels of issue and ideological constraint. Previous replications of Converse's levels of conceptualization measure from the 1980-2000 period overlooked a major development in the belief systems of ordinary Americans. A larger percentage of the public possessed a sophisticated political belief system during the 1980-2000 period than previously realized. Furthermore, this segment of the electorate has continued to increase substantially in recent issue-charged elections.

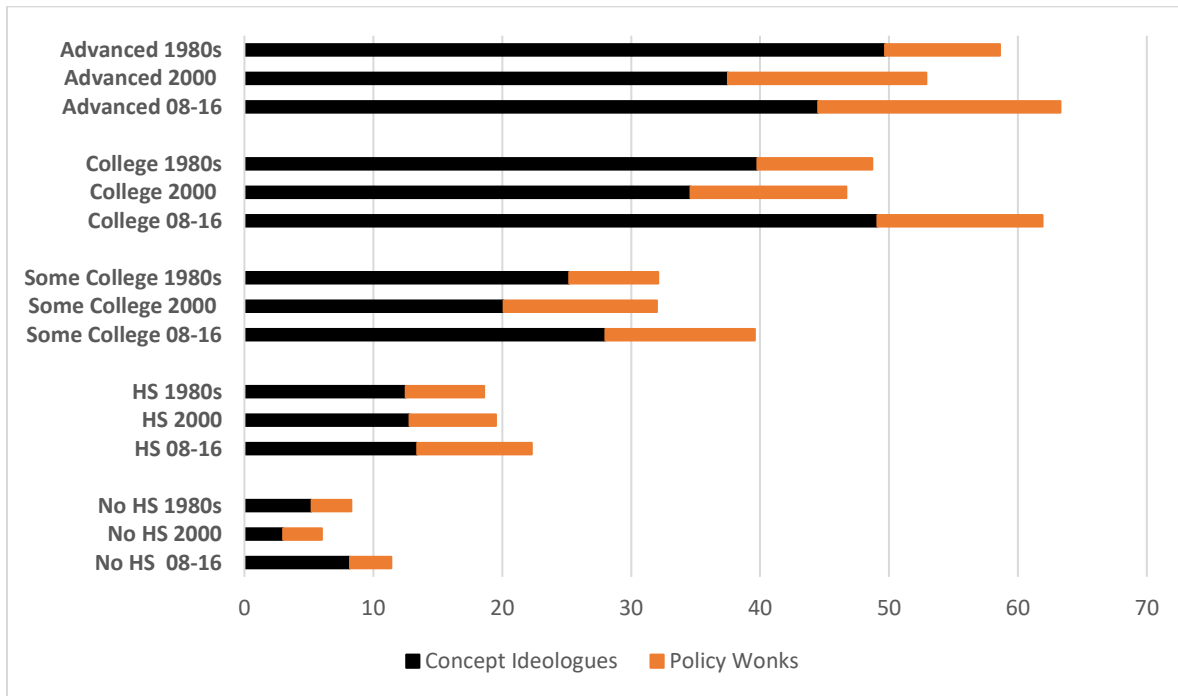
### **Is the Increase in Ideologues and Policy Wonks Due to Higher Education Levels?**

The fact that the percentage of Americans with sophisticated belief systems has risen is hardly surprising in light of the increase in educational attainment since 1980. From its inception with Converse's classic analysis it has been well established that respondents who have reached a high level educational achievement are more likely to evaluate politics in terms of ideological and/or public policy concerns. Thus, the increase in educational achievement levels during the period covered in this paper should account for at least some of the increase in ideologues and policy wonks since Reagan was elected president. Between 1980 and 2016, the proportion of the ANES sample that had not graduated from High School declined from 27 to 9 percent whereas the percentage that had attained a college degree increased from 16 to 33 percent. As college-educated respondents were over 7 times as likely to be concept ideologues or policy wonks as those without a High School degree in 1980, the changes in the educational distribution should have increased the numbers of ideologues and wonks. A simple reweighting of the 1980 data with the 2016 educational levels yields an estimate that the percentage of ideologues/wonks should have increased from 23 to 31 percent based just on the changes in educational achievement. Thus, roughly half of the increase in ideologues and wonks can plausibly be attributed to educational attainment.

Figure 1 displays the relationship between education and the highest levels of conceptualization in the three eras analyzed in this paper. Within each educational level, there is evidence of an increase in ideologues and wonks over time. At the same time, there is also evidence of an increasing relationship between education and the higher levels of conceptualization. The percentage of ideologues and wonks among those with just a High School education or less has always been quite small and has only budged upwards a small amount. In contrast, the increase has been quite substantial among respondents with either some college or a

college degree, with graduate school trained respondents being limited somewhat by their already very high levels of sophistication. Thus, the relationship between education and higher levels of conceptualization has become stronger over the years, with the educationally advanced increasingly picking up on ideological and policy arguments.

**Figure 1.** The relationship between education and the top levels of conceptualization, 1980s to 2016



*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby’s coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

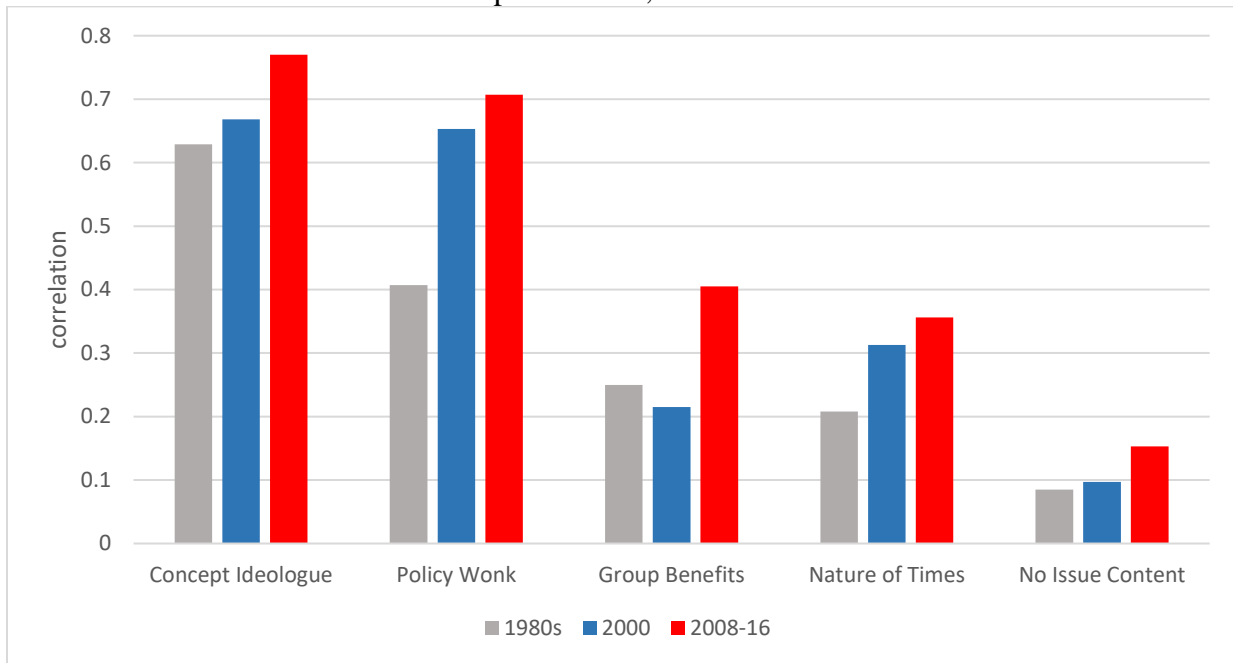
### Levels of Conceptualization and the Party-Ideology Nexus

Some crucial political concepts that higher educated people are likely now picking up on are the increasingly clear ideological and policy positions coming from party elites. The two major parties have become far more ideologically coherent at the elite level, as documented by numerous studies of congressional voting patterns and party platforms (citations here). Other studies have confirmed that more ordinary Americans are matching their partisanship to their ideology with greater frequency, but not nearly at the same level as the elites. (Hetherington, 2001; 2009) If concept ideologues and policy wonks are sophisticated political observers who are unusually keyed into political debates, the nexus between party and ideology should be especially strong for them.

Figure 2 demonstrates that the correlation between party identification and the 7-point ideological scale is indeed much stronger for concept ideologues and policy wonks compared to the other levels of conceptualization. In the 2008-2016 data, the shared variance for ideologues

and wonks is over 50 percent for these two groups of respondents whereas it does not exceed 16 percent for any of the other groups. All the conceptualization levels show some evidence of an increase in the party-ideology connection, but this trend is especially true for ideologues and wonks.

**Figure 2.** Correlation between party identification and ideological placement by levels of conceptualization, 1980s to 2016

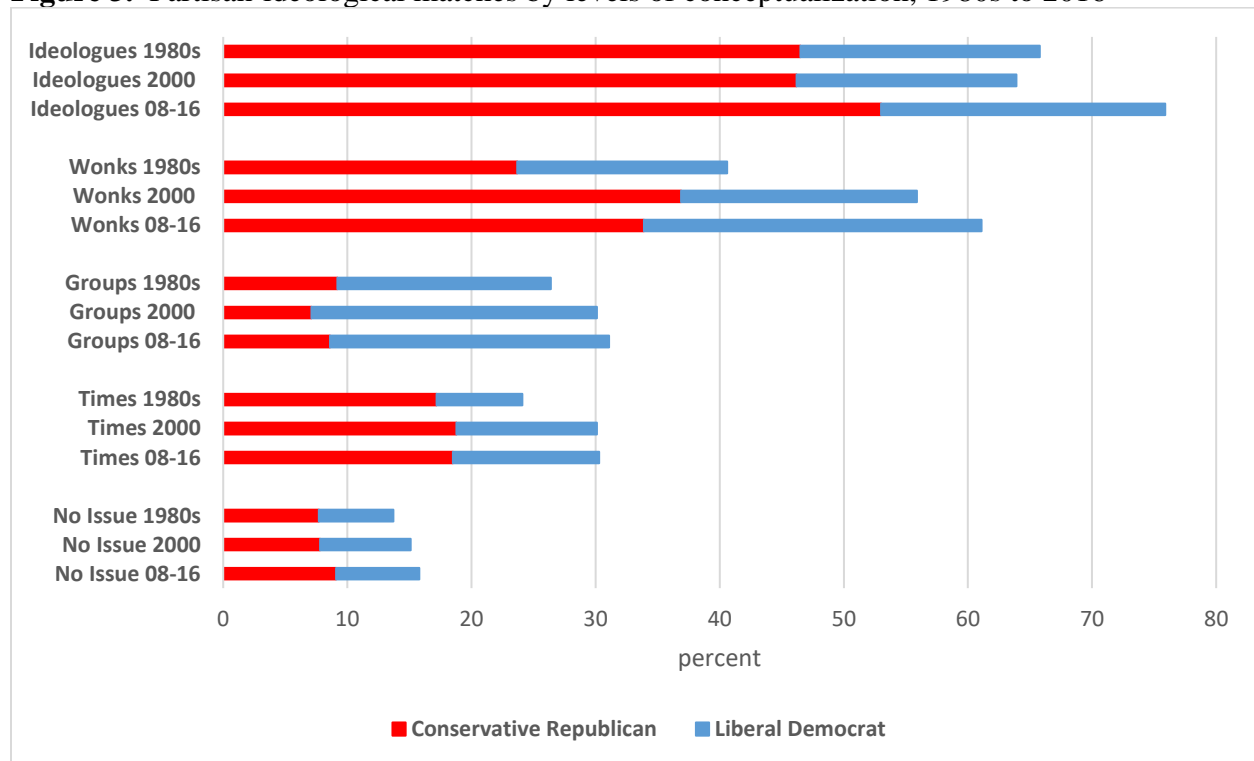


*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby’s coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

One reason that the increase in the nexus between party and ideology has been so widespread is that two separate processes have taken place – one in which respondents increasingly choose an ideology that matches their party, and the other in which they become less likely to claim an ideological label sharply out of step with their party. I hypothesized that the matching of Republicans to conservatism and Democrats to liberalism represents a relatively sophisticated level of thinking that will be increasingly centered on those who actually think like ideologues and wonks. On the other hand, I hypothesized that the decline of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans represents a set of choices that requires much less understanding, and thus should be found among all levels of conceptualization. In other words, it is still relatively difficult to match party and ideology correctly, but it is relatively easy to avoid an obviously incorrect pairing. These two processes are akin to what Abramowitz (2010) discusses as ideological matching and Fiorina (2017) terms ideological sorting. It was my hypothesis that Abramowitz’ focus is the province of concept ideologues and policy wonks, whereas Fiorina’s focus is on a process that should be evident at all levels of conceptualization.

As hypothesized, Figure 3 demonstrates that concept ideologues and policy wonks have always contained the highest percentage of ideologically consistent partisans (i.e., conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats). Furthermore, these two groups have become even more consistent in recent years despite starting at a fairly high level. All told, ideologues and wonks accounted for 64 percent of conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats in 2008-2016, as compared to just 49 percent in 2000, and 47 percent in the 1980s. Hence, the vast majority of the increase in the matching of party and ideology has occurred because of the growth of ideologues and wonks as well as their increasing ability to link their ideological position to their party identification.

**Figure 3.** Partisan-ideological matches by levels of conceptualization, 1980s to 2016



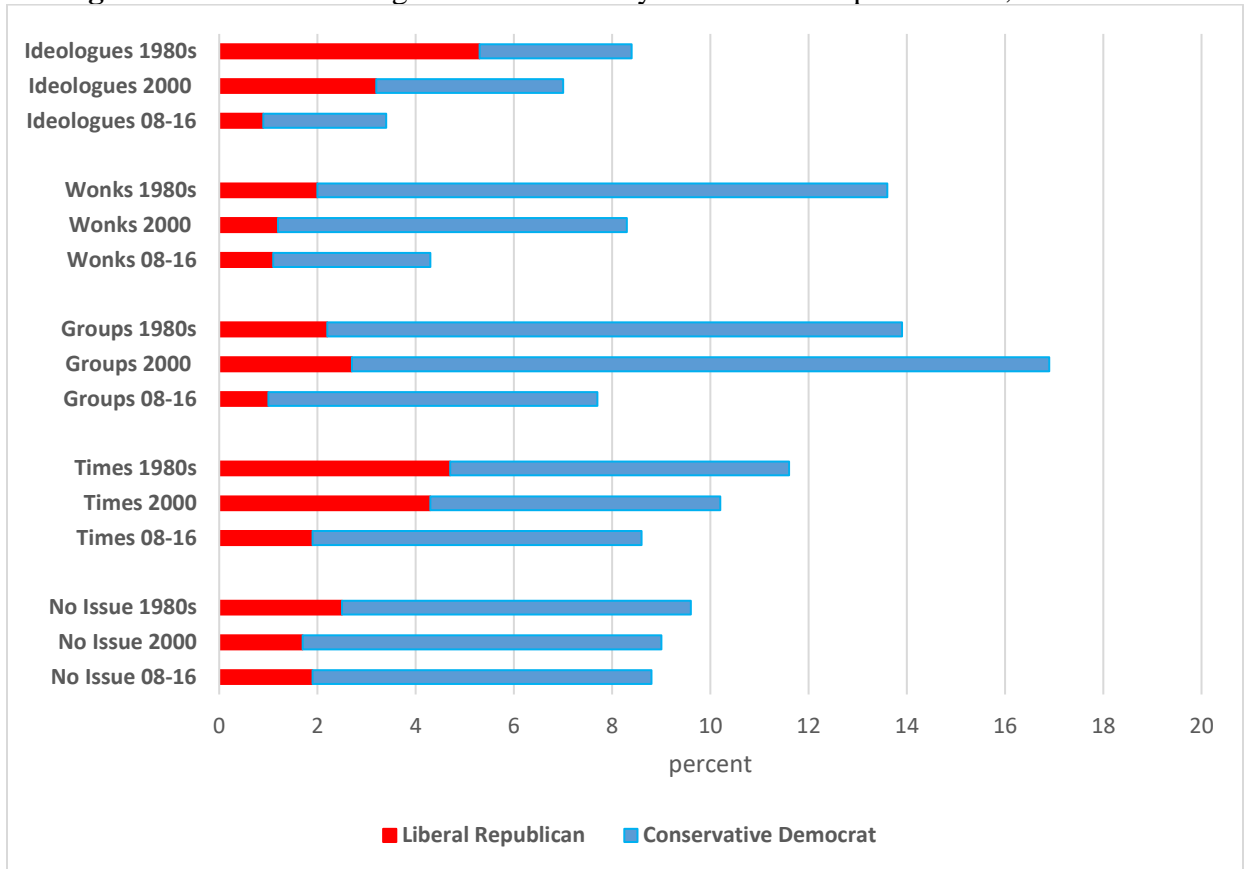
*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby’s coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

In contrast, the patterns for ideologically inconsistent partisans (i.e., liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats) are quite different, as shown in Figure 4. Whereas consistency between party and ideology clearly increases as one moves up the levels of conceptualization, inconsistency is much more evenly distributed. Most importantly, the data show that respondents in all conceptualization levels have moved away from partisan-ideological inconsistency. Unlike the case with ideologically consistent partisans, the percentage of ideologues and wonks among those whose party conflicts with their ideology has not changed over time, ranging narrowly from 21 percent in the 1980s, to 20 percent in 2000, and to 22 percent in 2008-16.



In sum, my twin hypotheses have been confirmed. Matching one’s party to ideology is a difficult process that has been centered largely amongst concept ideologues and policy wonks. Avoiding mismatches between partisanship and ideological placement, on the other hand, has proved to be a much easier process that has taken place across all the levels of conceptualization.

**Figure 4.** Partisan-ideological mismatches by levels of conceptualization, 1980s to 2016



*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby’s coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

### The Shrinking Conceptualization Gap between Republicans and Democrats

The data on the party-ideology nexus reflects a pattern that has been often noted in recent years – namely that Republicans are more likely to be ideologically and policy inclined than Democrats. Grossman and Hopkins (cite here) have called attention to this phenomenon, including some analysis of the ideological conceptualization measure. The data presented in Figure 3 makes it clear that Republicans made up a significantly larger proportion of concept ideologues and policy wonks than Democrats in all three eras.

Although combining datasets from 2008-2016 smooths out many patterns, it obscures what I observed to be a notable shift in how Democrats and Republicans conceptualized politics between 2012 and 2016. The stunning insurgency campaigns of Donald Trump on the right and Bernie Sanders on the left, moved the party coalitions in opposite directions on the levels of conceptualization measure. Donald Trump represented a far less ideological figure than other recent Republican nominees. As a novice politician who had supported Democratic candidates in the not-too-distant past, Trump was not driven by ideology. Although he could talk a good game regarding some conservative policies, on issues like foreign trade his stand sharply contradicted traditional conservative free market dogma. Furthermore, as emphasized by Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck (2018), Trump’s appeal was more rooted in identity politics than the Republican Party had ever seen before. At the same time that Donald Trump was moving the Republicans away from an emphasis on ideology, the progressive movement represented by Bernie Sanders led some Democrats away from their usual group-based way of thinking and more towards ideological and policy concerns. Far more than most Democratic presidential contenders, Sanders openly discussed and emphasized ideological concepts, proudly promoting progressivism and democratic socialism.

Because of the relatively small sample size of subgroups in the 2016 ANES face-to-face sample, I decided to take advantage of the availability of the larger web sample that the ANES also conducted and code these responses as well. Unfortunately, web responses to open-ended questions are generally not as detailed as those in face-to-face interviews and a substantially larger percentage of the web sample declines to provide any open-ended comments.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, a comparison of my levels of conceptualization coding for the two samples found that the patterns of political knowledge and ideological and issue constraint were nearly identical across the levels of conceptualization. Hence, the concept is equivalent in these two samples even though the measurement instrument is different.

**Table 6.** A Comparison of the 2016 In-person and Web Samples

	% Ideologues or Wonks in the <b>In-person</b> Sample	% Ideologues or Wonks in the <b>Web</b> Sample
All respondents	38	34
All voters	44	44
Trump general election voters	48	48
Clinton general election voters	40	38
Third party general election voters	48	44
Trump primary voters	51	45
Other GOP primary voters	72	62
Clinton primary voters	30	28
Sanders primary voters	58	48

*Sources:* Author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with in-person and web datasets.

Table 6 demonstrates that the percentage of voters who were concept ideologues or policy wonks was actually identical in the two samples. Most importantly, the similarities in voter subsamples between the web and in-person interviews clearly substantiates several important findings about how Democratic and Republican voters changed in 2016. First, it is clear that the gap between Democratic and Republican voters in 2016 was relatively narrow in terms of the percentage of ideologues and wonks. Second, Trump primary voters definitely moved the Republicans away their normal focus on ideology and/or policy. Third, on the Democratic side, the greater tendency for supporters of Bernie Sanders than Hillary Clinton to think in terms of ideological concepts or policies moved the Democratic coalition away from its traditional focus on group benefits in 2016.

### **Conclusion: The Value of Open-Ended Comments and Prospects for the Future**

One day while I was coding the open-ended ANES questions, I was having lunch with a group of Social Scientists from a variety of disciplines when the discussion turned to the subject of what ordinary people think about politics. Interestingly, a colleague from the Department of Economics mused about how it would be great if someone could just have a short conversation with a random sample of the American public to see how people talk about politics in their own terms. One of my colleagues turned to me and told the group that this was effectively what I had been doing recently. Indeed, reading the open-ended responses to the questions about the candidates and parties in the ANES surveys is akin to having a short semi-structured conversation with a random sample of the electorate.

One of the criticisms often stated about these open-ended questions is that people simply respond with remarks that they judge to be socially acceptable based on what they hear on the news. Although I cannot deny that this is sometimes evident, the great advantage of these questions is that they allow respondents to express their political thoughts in their own words and framework. Moreover, having read all these responses carefully, I can attest to the fact that many respondents did not mince words, taking. This was especially true in 2016. For example, respondents who said they would not vote for Trump explained their views with remarks like:

“He is out of his cotton picken mind” (case 344)  
“He’s a maniacal moron” (case 477)  
“I will be unhappy all my life if he gets the presidency because he will ruin this country” (case 597)  
“He is the reincarnation of Hitler” (case 0610)  
“He is an egotistical buffoon” (case 1384),  
“He is an arrogant fascist and a bombastic narcissist” (case 1809)  
“Extremely unpresidential – monkey in a suit” (case 2104)  
“I wouldn’t trust him walking my dogs” (case 2195).

On the other side of the political fence, respondents often expressed extreme dislike for Hillary Clinton, as illustrated by remarks like:

“The only time you can tell when she is lying is when her mouth is open” (case 64)  
“She is a devious person – evil” (case 408)

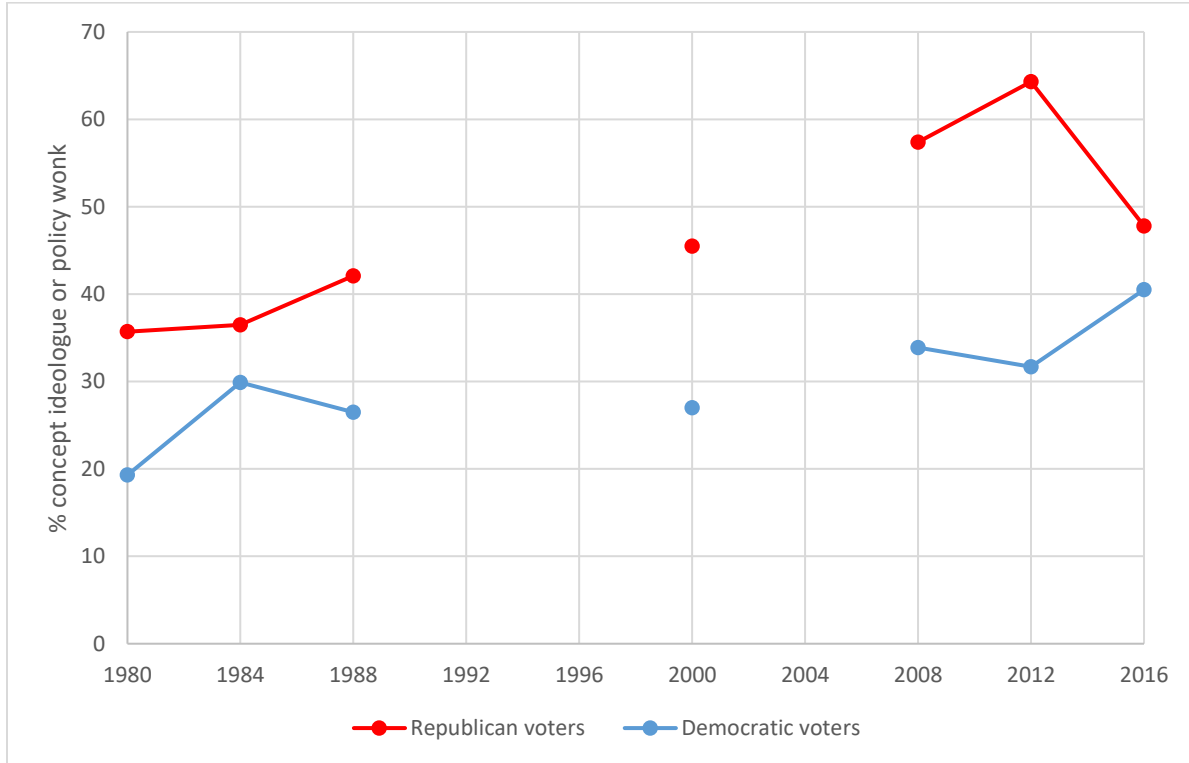
“She treats the little people like garbage” (case 546)  
“I want to throw something at the TV every time she comes on” (case 559)  
“She’s anti-American; she should be brought up on treason” (case 605)  
“She is a power hungry superficial fake individual who only cares about herself” (case 1244)  
“She is possibly the most corrupt and evil person to ever run for high office in the U.S. (case 2347)  
“She belongs in jail and has no business to rule over other people” (case 2626)

Such fascinating comments are often found in today’s interviews. Although they are naturally on the extreme side of the political spectrum, they illustrate the fact that most respondents take presidential elections quite seriously in today’s world. This is certainly the impression that I came away with after reading open-ended responses from 3,407 random in-person interviews from the 2008-2016 American National Election Studies. In the 2016 ANES interviews, 61 percent said they cared a great deal about the outcome of the election and another 22 percent said they cared a lot. In examining what these respondents said about what they liked and disliked about the parties and candidates, I believe these respondents really meant it when they said they cared who won.

When I tell people about the nature and quantity of the open-ended responses I read, they often ask whether I now feel more optimistic or pessimistic about the American electorate. My answer is definitely more on the positive side. It is certainly true that politics is not as central to most people’s everyday lives as family, work, friends, etc. Yet, what respondents say to open-ended questions reveals that presidential politics is a topic that most voters have well-considered views about. Very few voters currently do not mention any issues at all – only 10 percent in the interviews conducted between 2008 and 2016.

Of course, what I was really looking for was evidence of whether respondents thought in liberal/conservative terms, or with a consistent set of policy stands. Previous analyses of the ANES open-ended data have found that relatively few voters meet one of these criteria. As I have shown in this paper, by overlooking respondents who mention at least policy issues just because they do not discuss an overarching ideological framework resulted in an underestimate of American voters’ sophistication. With the addition of policy wonks to concept ideologues, the percentage of voters at the top of levels of ideological conceptualization was higher than previously reported. Furthermore, by the 2008-2016 period, wonks and ideologues constituted an impressive 45 percent of presidential election voters.

**Figure 5.** Percentage of voters who were ideologues or wonks, 1980-2016



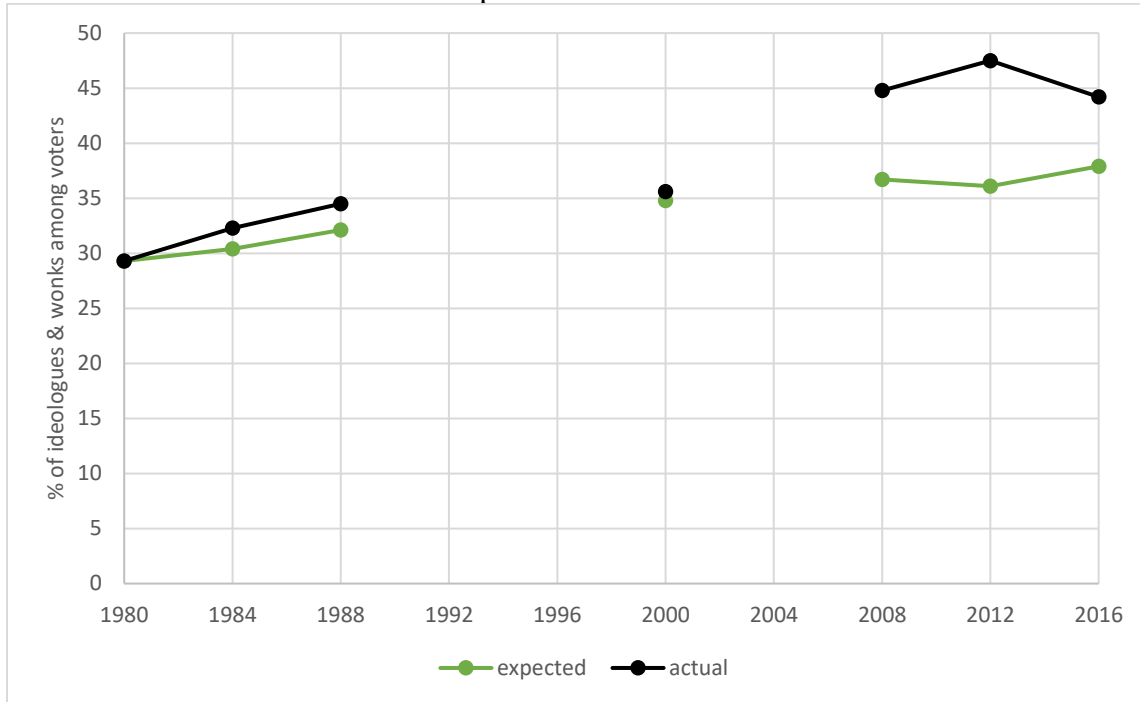
*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby’s coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author’s coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

In part, the increase at the top levels of conceptualization was predictable based on changes in the educational distribution of the electorate since 1980. Figure 5 compares the expected percentage of ideologues and wonks based on the educational distribution in each year to the actual percentages found in each individual survey. Between 1980 and 2000, the actual observations track what one would have expected based on educational levels. However, in the highly polarized environment of the 2008, 2012, and 2016 elections, the actual percentage of ideologues and wonks has been substantially higher than educational changes would have led us to expect. It is easy to infer what has driven this new pattern: as elites have polarized and political debates have become more centered on policy and ideology, the public has picked up more and more on these cues. The old wisdom from *The American Voter* that the public is not generally up to the task of deciding what government shall do is no longer operative. Almost half of the voters do in fact focus on ideology or a series of policies when they make their presidential choice.

As generational replacement continues to push the educational achievements of America’s voters upwards in the foreseeable future it may not be long before over half of the electorate fits into the concept ideologue or policy wonk camps. Furthermore, if Democrats maintain their newfound ideological fervor and Republicans return to their normal belief system pattern, then the nature of mass belief systems will move even further in this positive direction. In this era when the foundations of American democracy and its norms seem to be under siege, the finding that so

many voters have belief systems based on clear public policy and ideological preferences should be seen as welcome news.

**Figure 6.** Expected percent of Ideologues and Wonks among voters based on educational levels compared to actual observations



*Sources:* 1980-88: Pierce/Hagner/Knight archived datasets as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES datasets; 2000: William Jacoby's coding of open-ended responses as recoded by the author for policy wonks and merged with ANES dataset; 2008-2016: author's coding of ANES open-ended responses and merged with ANES datasets.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The specific codes that I counted in the ANES cumulative file were as follows: 903-904, 906-907, 909-910, 912-913, 915-916, 918-919, 921-922, 924-925, 930-933, 944-945, 947-948, 950-951, 963-964, 969-978, 980-981, 983-984, 986-987, 989-990, 992-993, 995-996, 1002-1003, 1005-1006, 1008-1009, 1015-1016, 1020-1021, 1023-1024, 1029-1030, 1039-1040, 1041-1042, 1044-1045, 1048-1049, 1057-1058, 1060-1061, 1063-1064, 1066-1067, 1069-1070, 1104-1005, 1106-1107, 1108-1109, 1111-1112, 1114-1115, 1121-1122, 1126-1127, 1131-1132, 1136-1137, 1160-1161, 1165-1166, 1168-1169, 1171-1176, 1185-1186, 1191-1192.

<sup>2</sup> As every respondent was asked the open-ended questions in the pre-election interview, there is no explanation I can think of for the exclusion of pre-election data for respondents who dropped out of the panel study. The one Principal Investigator (John C. Pierce) whom I was able to contact regarding this matter had no recollection why this was the case.

<sup>3</sup> To partly compensate for the relative lack of detail in the written responses to the open-ended candidate and party questions in the web sample, for cases that were ambiguous I also examined the open-ended responses to the most important problem question. In listing their the three most important problems they perceived for the country, some respondents revealed additional ideological or policy concerns that helped me make individual coding decisions.