

Ideological Thinking as a Switching Mechanism in Presidential Candidate Evaluation

Howard Lavine and Thomas Gschwend *

Abstract

We examine the proposition that individual differences in the capacity for ideological thought act as a switching mechanism in candidate judgment, increasing reliance on policy considerations and decreasing reliance on the heuristic cue of party identification and on perceptions of candidate character when ideological capacity is high, and exerting the opposite effect – decreasing the role of issues and increasing the role of party ID and candidate qualities – when such capacity is low. Using American National Election Studies data from the 1984-2000 period, we find that ideological thinking consistently heightens reliance on issues and decreases reliance on candidate cues. We discuss the mechanisms by which ideological thinking regulates political choice, and assert its centrality in the political decision-making process.

The question of ideological thinking in the American electorate has preoccupied political scientists for nearly four decades. Enduring interest in the topic is based on what it implies about citizen competence, in particular, the capacity to comprehend and respond normatively to the character of elite political conflict. Early work on the topic focused on the nature and degree of ideological thinking in the mass public, and on basic conceptual, methodological, and epistemological issues.¹ More recent work has established the scope and impact of ideological thinking on mass political choice, and identified the dispositional factors that moderate when ideological thinking is likely to occur. This body of research indicates that strong partisans, the educated, the politically knowledgeable, those with cognitively accessible ideological reference points, and conceptual “ideologues” – all putative antecedents or indicators of a crystallized ideological outlook – evidence stronger relations between ideological self-identification on one hand and policy attitudes,² political values,³ partisan affiliation,⁴ candidate evaluation,⁵ and vote choice,⁶ on the other.

One of the major conclusions in this literature is that the capacity for ideological thought conditions how citizens perceive and evaluate objects in the political world. Whereas sophisticates are attuned to the abstract liberal/conservative character of political debate, nonsophisticates respond to political stimuli using simpler and more proximal (i.e., object-specific) considerations. Within the electoral realm, this suggests the existence of systematic differences in the types of information that voters attend to and habitually rely upon in forming their impressions of presidential candidates. In this research, we test a straightforward implication of this idea, variations of which have been hinted at in the literature in political psychology and political behavior,⁷ but never subjected to direct empirical scrutiny. In particular, we examine whether individual differences in ideological thought act as a switching mechanism in candidate judgment, increasing reliance on policy considerations and decreasing reliance on the heuristic cue of party identification and on perceptions of candidate character

when ideological capacity is high, and exerting the opposite effect – decreasing the role of issues and increasing the role of party and candidate qualities – when such capacity is low.

In the next section, we briefly situate the *switching mechanism hypothesis* within the context of dual-process theories of persuasion in social psychology,⁸ and within the work on cognitive heuristics and low information rationality in political science.⁹ These frameworks provide a strong conceptual basis for understanding when and why citizens will rely on easy-to-use “heuristic” information in their evaluation of candidates (e.g., personality assessments), and when, in contrast, they will rely on more difficult (but highly diagnostic) types of information (i.e., issues).

Dual-Process Thinking and Candidate Judgment

Dual-process theories in social psychology have shown that a wide variety of judgments and decisions are mediated by one of two qualitatively different modes of reasoning.¹⁰ When cognitive ability and processing motivation are high, judgments are characterized by extensive information processing and high levels of scrutiny to the central merits of an advocacy. In contrast, when ability and motivation are low, judgments are mediated by the use of simple rules of thumb that require little cognitive effort. Importantly, dual-process frameworks posit that information processing is strategic, such that individuals maximize their judgmental confidence by attending to the most diagnostic information when cognitive capacity is high, but switch to less diagnostic but easier-to-process information to achieve confidence when the capacity for elaborative thought is low.¹¹

That differences in cognitive capacity and processing motivation induce systematic variation in the use of low- and high-effort judgment strategies has direct implications for understanding when different types of electoral judgment strategies may prevail. According to the normative rational voter model, candidate policy stands are the most diagnostic type of information for making electoral choices.¹² Therefore, to maximize the “rationality” of their

candidate impressions, voters should attempt to obtain information about where the candidates stand on the issues, and then calculate the distance between their own positions and those of the candidates. However, the information costs associated with the learning of candidate positions and the calculation of issue distances may be prohibitive for many voters.¹³ According to low information rationality models, voters can eschew the difficult calculus of comparative issue proximity by relying instead on cognitive shortcuts or heuristic cues in rendering candidate judgments. In particular, by relying on the standing decision of party identification and on easy-to-use information about candidate character, voters can form meaningful appraisals of the candidates without expending excessive amounts of cognitive energy.

We assume that voters' primary motivational concern in the electoral realm is to form "accurate" judgments of the candidates – those that square with relevant facts and available information. Whether they accomplish this goal by relying principally on the high-effort judgment strategy of issue proximity or on a comparatively low-effort strategy involving partisan bias and/or candidate image should depend on their capacity for ideological thought. By definition, ideologically-minded citizens understand the structural basis of partisan issue conflict. In the American context, such voters are likely to recognize that Democratic candidates typically hold liberal issue positions and that Republican candidates typically hold conservative issue positions. They should also organize their own policy opinions along ideological lines. Given the relative ease of acquiring and using such information, issue distances should play a central role in the formation of comparative candidate judgments among ideological voters. Non-ideological voters, lacking both the requisite capacity and the incentives for systematic issue-based judgment, should fall back on comparatively low-effort cues in distinguishing between the candidates. In this research we focus on two such non-policy alternatives, the heuristic cue of party identification and perceptions of candidate character. First, as numerous scholars have noted, party identification is a standing decision of considerable inferential value, one that provides voters with a simple and readily available yardstick for making electoral

choices.¹⁴ Second, research indicates that judgments of presidential candidates are strongly rooted in assessments of candidate character. For example, Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk found that references to the personal attributes of the candidates far outnumber references to issues and parties in voters' open-ended comments about the candidates.¹⁵ By relying on assessments of candidate character, non-ideological voters can manage to form electoral judgments via familiar and well-rehearsed routines of impression formation that they employ in everyday life, and that require little in the way of cognitive effort or the capacity for ideological thinking.¹⁶ As Kinder has argued, 'judgments of [candidate] character offer citizens a familiar and convenient way to manage the avalanche of information made available to them each day about public affairs.'¹⁷

In sum, both dual process theories of social judgment and research on information shortcuts and heuristics suggest that candidate appraisal processes are likely to be quite heterogeneous in the electorate. Voters who encounter problems using the difficult calculus of issue proximity (or direction) to judge the candidates can readily rely on their standing party preference and on their assessments of the candidates' personality traits. Previous work has amply shown that issues, parties, and candidates play an intimate role in voters' appraisals of presidential candidates in American elections.¹⁸ What has not been established is whether the proclivity to organize the political world along ideological lines systematically stratifies the mass public's reliance on difficult- (i.e., issues) vs. easy-to-use information (i.e., party and candidates).¹⁹ Using data from the 1984-2000 NES, we provide a direct test of the switching mechanism hypothesis by examining: (1) whether issue proximity exerts a stronger influence on comparative candidate judgments as the capacity for ideological thought increases, and (2) whether party identification and judgments of candidate character exert a stronger influence on candidate judgments as ideological thought decreases. To test these hypotheses, we present separate OLS models of comparative candidate evaluation for each of the five election years, demonstrating that the switching mechanism is a highly robust phenomenon. Then, we present

the results of a structural equation model using pooled data, showing that ideological thought is an *intervening* variable, driven by both cognitive ability and political involvement, and in turn, directly moderating voters' degree of reliance on issues versus assessments of candidate character on overall candidate evaluation.

Data and Measures

Measurement of Ideological Thinking

To assess individual differences in citizens' propensities to employ ideological concepts in their political thinking, we relied on a procedure recently developed by Jacoby.²⁰ Using Mokken scaling to determine the unidimensionality underlying a set of empirical items, Jacoby found that ideological thinking in the mass public conforms to a cumulative structure, such that political stimuli vary widely in the extent to which the public views them in ideological terms, and that individuals who exhibit ideological thinking on difficult items also exhibit such thinking on all easier items. For example, Jacoby found that correct ideological placement of the parties and candidates (e.g., perceiving the Democratic candidate as more liberal than the Republican candidate) occurs more frequently than consistency between ideological and party identification (e.g., being both conservative and Republican), which is more frequent than consistency between ideological identification and specific policy preferences (e.g., being liberal and opposing school prayer). In our view, Jacoby's procedure has two principle virtues as a means of assessing individual differences in the propensity for ideological thought. First, it incorporates variation in both respondents and stimuli, producing an additive index of ideological thinking based on an underlying latent continuum of ideological difficulty. Second, it does not privilege any specific type of attitude object in gauging ideological thinking (e.g., issue consistency), but includes a broad range of objects and judgments, including feelings toward and correct placement of ideological groups, ideological identification, and consistency between ideological identification on one hand, and issues, partisanship, candidate evaluation, and vote choice on the other.

In the present research, we do not repeat Jacoby's scaling analysis.²¹ Instead, we simply used the items employed by Jacoby to calculate individual ideological thinking scores. Four types of items were included in each election year to assess the extent to which respondents judged political stimuli in ideological (liberal-conservative) terms: (1) correct placement of the parties and candidates along the ideological continuum; (2) self-identification as liberal or conservative (versus moderate or no identification); (3) feeling close to the consistent ideological group; and (4) consistency between ideological identification on one hand, and party identification, feelings toward ideological groups, and individual policy attitudes on the other (all policy items included in the NES for a given year were used in the assessment of ideological thinking; see the Appendix for a listing of issues and variable numbers).^{22, 23} Individual scores were computed by summing the number of ideologically correct responses.²⁴

Measurement of Issue Proximity

We used all pre-election survey issues for which both respondent attitudes and respondent perceptions of the candidates' attitudes were available. A single issue proximity score was constructed for each respondent in each election year by averaging all issues for which the respondent provided a valid response. As is shown in the Appendix, the NES surveys varied widely over election years in the number of issues that met our two inclusion requirements. Including ideological self-identification, this resulted in eight issues in 1984 and 1988, five issues in 1992, 11 issues in 1996, and 10 issues in 2000 (see the Appendix for a listing of the issues and NES variable numbers). The formula used to construct issue proximity was:

$$(\sum |V_{ij} - D_i| - |V_{ij} - R_i|)/n_j$$

where V_{ij} is voter j 's position on issue i , D_i is the mean perception of the Democratic candidate's position on issue i , R_i is the mean perception of the Republican candidate's position on issue i , and n_j is the number of valid policy responses provided by voter j .²⁵ Using respondents' mean placement of the candidates rather than each respondent's own placement helps to reduce

projection effects (i.e., “projecting” one’s own opinion onto the preferred candidate).²⁶ Issue proximity was coded in all election years such that higher scores represented greater voter issue similarity with the Republican candidate. Respondents who failed to answer at least half of the issue items in a given election year were excluded from all analyses. This resulted in the exclusion of 7.1% of the sample across election years (rates ranged from 2.3% in 2000 to 11.0% in 1984).

Measurement of Candidate Character

Following Miller et al.,²⁷ we assessed respondents’ perceptions of candidate character using the open-ended likes/dislikes probes. The likes/dislikes questions for candidates ask whether “there is anything in particular about [candidate] that might make you want to vote [FOR or AGAINST] him?” Four follow-up probes are provided (“Anything else?”). Thus, respondents are invited to provide up to five likes and five dislikes for each of the two major party candidates. In constructing character assessment scores, we used the “Experience and Ability,” “Leadership Qualities,” and “Personal Qualities,” NES master code categories. These categories capture respondents’ open-ended comments about the candidates’ personal qualities, including references to whether a candidate is “dependable,” “trustworthy,” “reliable,” “strong,” “decisive,” “experienced,” “dishonest,” and so on.²⁸ Thus, we excluded comments not related to candidate qualities, such as those related to issues, parties, and groups (e.g., the master code categories “Domestic Issues,” “Foreign Issues,” “Group Connections,” and “Government Activity/Philosophy”). These excluded categories included such comments as the candidate was “too liberal,” “for equality,” “anti government aid,” “pro lower taxes,” “cold war oriented,” and “in favour of broadening of relations with Russia.” Comparative character assessment scores were constructed by the formula: $(P_R + N_D) - (P_D + N_R)$, where P_R and P_D represent the number of positive comments about the Republican and Democratic candidates, respectively, and N_R and N_D represent the number of negative comments about the Republican and Democratic

candidates. Thus, comparative character assessment scores favour the Republican candidate when the number of positive references to the Republican candidate and the number of negative references to the Democratic candidate are high, and favour the Democratic candidate when the number of positive references to the Democratic candidate and the number of negative references to the Republican candidate are high.

Results

To test the switching mechanism hypothesis, three interaction terms were constructed. In the first, ideological thinking scores were multiplied by issue proximity scores; in the second, ideological thinking scores were multiplied by party identification scores; and in the third, ideological thinking scores were multiplied by character assessment scores. The hypothesis that ideological voters rely more on issues than do non-ideological voters is captured by a *positively* signed interaction of issue proximity x ideological thinking, such that the slope for issue proximity increases as the propensity for ideological thinking rises. The complementary hypothesis, that non-ideological voters rely more on party identification and/or on perceptions of candidate character than do ideological voters, is captured by *negatively* signed interactions of partisanship x ideological thinking and perceptions of candidate character x ideological thinking such that the slopes for partisanship and perceptions of candidate character increase as the propensity for ideological thought *decreases*. To facilitate comparison of the coefficients within and between analyses, all variables were recoded to a 0 to 1 scale. Moreover, to ease the interpretation of key interactions and to reduce multicollinearity between individual and cross-product terms, all variables involved in interaction terms (i.e., ideological thinking, issue proximity, party identification, perceptions of candidate character) were centred about their means (Aiken and West 1991).²⁹

Estimates of the effects on summary candidate evaluation (the thermometer score for the Republican candidate minus the thermometer score for the Democratic candidate, recoded to a 0-

1 scale) are shown in Table 1. An examination of the coefficients revealed, unsurprisingly, that the conditional effects of partisanship, issue proximity, and character assessments (when ideological thinking is at its mean, i.e., 0) were significant in every election. The table also reveals that the effects of issue proximity and perceptions of candidate character – but not party identification – are strongly conditioned in every election by respondents' propensities for ideological thinking. The coefficient for the issue proximity x ideological thinking interaction term is *positively* signed, statistically significant, and quite sizable in every election. By contrast, the coefficient for the character perception x ideological thinking interaction term is *negatively* signed, statistically significant, and sizable in every election. Finally, ideological thinking utterly failed to stratify the public's reliance on the standing cue of party identification, as only one of the interaction terms (1992) involving party ID approached significance (and this coefficient was incorrectly signed).³⁰

To interpret more precisely the manner in which ideological thinking altered voters' decision calculus, the conditional effects of issue proximity and character assessments on summary candidate judgment are displayed in Table 2. The table displays the coefficients for each of these factors at minimum and maximum levels of ideological thinking. As the variables all have a 0-1 range, they can be interpreted as the proportion of coverage on the dependent variable (i.e., comparative candidate evaluation) as the predictor variable moves from its minimum to its maximum value. As the top rows of the table demonstrate, the effect for issues on candidate evaluation is considerably larger among voters who parse the political world in ideological terms than among voters who lack awareness of the ideological structure of politics. Averaged across elections, candidate evaluation scores ranged across 33.0 percent of the scale as a function of issue proximity when ideological thinking was at its maximum (controlling for the other variables in the model). By contrast, candidate evaluation scores ranged across just 7.4 percent of the scale as a function of issue proximity when ideological thinking was at its minimum. This represents a substantial decline – more than seventy five percent – in the

reliance on issues in candidate judgment across levels of ideological thinking (alternatively, the effect of issues is more than four times larger at high than low levels of ideological thinking). By contrast, the bottom rows of Table 2 attest to the sharp *increase* in the reliance on assessments of candidate character as ideological thinking declines in the electorate. While the moderating effect is not quite as powerful as with issues, the decline in the reliance on character assessments as the propensity for ideological thinking increases (averaged across elections) is nearly 40 percent, with candidate evaluation scores ranging across 71.2 and 43.0 percent of the scale as a function of character assessment at low and high levels of ideological thinking, respectively. Thus, non-ideological voters would appear to compensate for their inability (or unwillingness) to calculate issue distances in judging the candidates by relying strongly on their perceptions of the candidates' personality qualities.

To examine the extent to which ideological and non-ideological voters rely differentially on issues, character assessments, and partisanship in rendering summary candidate evaluations, the pie charts in Figure 1 display (averaged across elections) the percentage effect of each of these three bases of judgment.³¹ As the charts show, maximally ideological voters rely in roughly equal measure on issues, character assessments, and partisanship in rendering evaluative judgments of the candidates. To be sure, these voters do not abandon the yardstick of standing party preference or the notion that character perceptions are an important normative aspect in making such decisions. However, ideological voters strongly supplement their stable political reference points and personality assessments with contemporary assessments of the candidates' policy positions. When ideological thinking falls to its mean, reliance on issues decreases precipitously, while reliance on character increases by half. Finally, as the chart shows, non-ideological voters rely heavily on character assessments and precious little on issues. In contrast to the large shifts in both issues and character, the effect of party ID is remarkably stable across levels of ideological thinking.

Finally, in Figure 2, we present the results of a pooled (1984-2000) structural equation model (via LISREL), showing that both cognitive ability (general information about politics and education) and political involvement (interest in politics, political activity, and media attention) influence levels of ideological thinking, and that ideological thinking in turn directly moderates voters' degree of reliance on both issues and assessments of candidate character on overall candidate evaluation.³² As the figure indicates, the model provides a very good fit to the data, and suggests that ideological thinking acts as a key *intervening* variable: Individuals who are cognitively able and motivationally involved in the realm of politics are more likely than the less able/involved to perceive and evaluate political stimuli through an ideological lens. Ideological thinking, in turn, fundamentally alters the manner in which voters judge candidates, increasing their reliance on issues and decreasing their reliance on character assessments when ideological thinking is high, and having the opposite effect when ideological thinking is low.

Conclusion

The question of ideological thinking is a longstanding and central concern in political science. The public's awareness of the left-right structure of political conflict is a primary marker of its political competence, with direct and even profound implications for communication and influence processes between elites and the mass public. According to major reviews on the topic, the distribution question is largely settled: the American electorate is neither super-sophisticated nor is it abysmally ignorant.³³ But as we demonstrate, neither is it homogenous. Some individuals, too few, to be sure, think abstractly about politics and form policy attitudes and other political beliefs that cohere both with their abstract ideological identifications and with each other. A great many others parse the political world through narrow and object-specific lenses and exhibit very little ideological organization among their opinions. In this research, we tested the proposition that ideological thinking operates as a switching mechanism in the candidate evaluation process, increasing the extent to which voters

use issues and decreasing the extent to which they use party identification and assessments of candidate character in forming their electoral preferences when ideological thinking is high, and exerting the opposite effect – increasing the role of party and character and decreasing that of issues – when ideological thinking is low.

Based on dual-process theories in social psychology and low information rationality models in political science, our perspective is that voters approach the task of candidate judgment strategically, focusing on those criteria that allow them to make the most reasonably informed electoral choices.³⁴ Ideologically-minded voters understand the structural basis of partisan political conflict, including its manifestation in the realm of policy issues. Ideological voters should therefore have little cognitive difficulty in using issue information to render candidate judgments. For non-ideological voters – those for whom the organizing principle of the liberal-conservative continuum is not an available cognitive construct – the information costs associated with learning the candidates' issue positions and calculating issue distances are likely to be prohibitive. We hypothesize that these voters switch to simpler criteria in rendering candidate judgments. In particular, we examined whether these voters rely instead on the heuristic cue of party identification and on easy-to-process information about candidate character. The switching mechanism proposition received considerable empirical support. Ideological voters relied substantially more on policy and substantially less on character judgments in forming appraisals of presidential candidates than did their non-ideological counterparts. Moreover, these effects were large in magnitude, and consistent across all elections from 1984 to 2000. However, the switching mechanism apparently did not involve differential use of party identification; ideological and non-ideological voters relied approximately equally on the standing cue of party ID.

Finally, the structural equation model results suggest that ideological thinking is an intervening variable. Both cognitive ability and involvement in politics give rise to ideological thinking, which in turn moderates voters' reliance on issues versus candidate qualities in the

electoral appraisal process. One important implication of these results is captured by the distinct roles that issues and candidates play in this process. In particular, while policy opinions are by no means entirely stable constructs,³⁵ it is the changing cast of presidential candidates that provides the dynamism in American electoral politics.³⁶ From this perspective, the electoral success of the Republican party over the last half century can be attributed to their nomination of better-liked candidates. As we have shown here, that dynamism – in character-based electoral judgment – is provided disproportionately by ideologically innocent voters, that is, voters who tend to be low in cognitive ability and political involvement. Thus, the short-term factors that tip presidential elections would seem to be driven largely by that segment of the electorate that fails to appreciate the ideological structure of political conflict.

However, this is not to say that candidate judgment strategies among non-ideological voters are irrational. First, given their limited ability to comprehend the liberal-conservative nature of political competition, such voters are arguably acting quite rationally in shifting their attention away from the complicated calculus of issue distances – which appears to require at least a modicum of ideological awareness – and toward the more familiar and well-rehearsed routine of personality impression formation. Second, as previous research on judgments of candidate character have shown, such assessments are not based on irrelevant aspects of character such as the candidate's attractiveness or physical stature.³⁷ Rather, they centre on highly relevant character themes, such as the candidate's perceived competence, integrity, and leadership qualities. In sum, the switching hypothesis, which we have shown to be a highly robust and substantively powerful electoral phenomenon, provides ideological and non-ideological voters alike with the tools to meaningfully appraise presidential candidates and make informed political choices.

Footnotes

* Department of Political Science, State University of New York, Stony Brook, and Mannheim Centre for European Social Research (MZES), University of Mannheim, respectively.

¹ W. Lance Bennett, 'The Growth of Knowledge in Mass Belief Systems: An Epistemological Critique'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 21 (1977), 465-500; Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, 'Belief System Organization in the American Electorate: An Alternate Approach'; in John C. Pierce and John L. Sullivan, eds., *The Electorate Reconsidered* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980); Paul R. Hagner and John C. Pierce, 'Levels of Conceptualization and Political Belief Consistency'; *Micropolitics*, 2 (1983), 311-48; Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962); James A. Stimson, 'Belief Systems, Constraint, and the 1972 Election'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 19 (1975), 393-417; John L. Sullivan, James E. Pierson, J. E., and George E. Marcus, 'Ideological Constraint in the Mass Public: A Methodological Critique and Some New Findings'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 22 (1978), 233-49; for reviews, see Donald R. Kinder, 'Diversity and Complexity in American Public Opinion', in Ada Finifter, ed, *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 1983); Paul M. Sniderman and Philip E. Tetlock, 'Interrelationship of Political Ideology and Public Opinion', in Margaret Hermann, ed, *Political Psychology* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1986).

² Robert J. Huckfeldt, Jeffrey Levine, William Morgan, and John Sprague, 'Accessibility and the Political Utility of Partisan and Ideological Orientations'; *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (1999), 888-911; William G. Jacoby, 'Ideological Identification and Issue Attitudes'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 35 (1991), 178-205.

³ Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip E. Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴ Huckfeldt et al., 'Accessibility and the Political Utility of Partisan and Ideological Orientations'; William G. Jacoby, 'The Impact of Party Identification on Issue Attitudes'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 32 (1988), 643-61.

⁵ William G. Jacoby, 'Levels of Conceptualization and Reliance on the Liberal-Conservative Continuum'; *Journal of Politics*, 48 (1986), 423-32; Kathleen Knight, 'Ideology in the 1980 Election: Ideological Sophistication Does Matter'; *Journal of Politics*, 47 (1985), 828-53.

⁶ Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁷ Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, 'The Role of Inference in the Perception of Political Candidates'; in Richard R. Lau and David O. Sears, eds, *Political Cognition: The 19th Annual Carnegie Symposium on Cognition* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986); Philip E. Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics'; in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), pp. 206-61; Ruth C. Hamill, Milton Lodge, and Frederick Blake, 'The Breadth, Depth, and Utility of Class, Partisan, and Ideological Schemata'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1985), 850-70; Jacoby, 'Levels of Conceptualization and Reliance on the Liberal-Conservative Continuum'; Knight, 'Ideology in the 1980 Election: Ideological Sophistication Does Matter'.

⁸ Shelly Chaiken, Akiva Liberman, and Alice H. Eagly, 'Heuristic and Systematic Information Processing within and beyond the Persuasion Context'; in James S. Uleman and Jon A. Bargh, eds., *Unintended thought* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), pp. 212-52; Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, 'The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion'; in L. Berkowitz, ed, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1986), Vol. 19, pp. 123-205.

⁹ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957); Arthur Lupia, 'Shortcuts versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections'; *American Political Science Review*, 88 (1994), 63-76; Arthur

Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); Samuel Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Sniderman et al., *Reasoning and Choice*.

¹⁰ In theory, the two modes form the endpoints of an elaborative processing continuum in which social judgments are based on a mix of low- and high-effort processes. Chaiken et al., 'Heuristic and Systematic Information Processing within and beyond the Persuasion Context'; Richard E. Petty and Duane T. Wegener, 'The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Current Status and Controversies', in Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope, eds, *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999). For a review, see Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope, eds, *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: Guilford, 1999).

¹¹ The paradigmatic finding in this literature is that in high ability/motivation settings, attitude change is mediated by the effortful processing of the quality of the persuasive arguments, but not by available heuristic cues such as the expertise or attractiveness of the communicator. In contrast, in low ability/motivation settings, heuristic cues but not persuasive arguments mediate persuasion. For a review, see Alice H. Eagly and Shelly Chaiken, *The Psychology of Attitudes* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993).

¹² Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, James M. Enelow and Melvin J. Hinich, *The Spatial Theory of Voting: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹³ These costs are exacerbated by the candidates' incentives to present ambiguous policy positions, and by the media's tendency to emphasize non-issue aspects of elections such as candidate image, the "horse race," and campaign strategy. See R. Michael Alvarez, *Information and Elections* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Pamela Johnston Conover

and Stanley Feldman, 'Candidate Perception in an Ambiguous World: Campaigns, Cues, and Inference Processes'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 33 (1989), 912-39; Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980); Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Benjamin I. Page, *Choices and Echoes in Presidential Elections* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Kenneth A. Sheplse, 'The Strategy of Ambiguity: Uncertainty and Electoral Competition'; *American Political Science Review*, 66 (1972), 555-68.

¹⁴ Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960); Hamill et al., 'The Breadth, Depth, and Utility of Class, Partisan, and Ideological Schemata'; Richard R. Lau and David Redlawsk, 'Advantages and Disadvantages of Cognitive Heuristics in Political Decision Making' *American Journal of Political Science*, 45 (2001), 951-71; George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen, *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*; Wendy M. Rahn, 'The Role of Partisan Stereotypes in Information Processing about Political Candidates'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 37 (1993), 472-96.

¹⁵ Arthur H. Miller, Martin P. Wattenberg, and Oksana Malanchuk, 'Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates'; *American Political Science Review*, 80 (1986), 521-40.

¹⁶ Donald R. Kinder, 'Presidential Character Revisited', in Richard R. Lau and David O. Sears, eds, *Political Cognition* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986); Miller et al., 'Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates'; Wendy M. Rahn, John H. Aldrich, Eugene Borgida, and John L. Sullivan, 'A Social-Cognitive Model of Candidate Appraisal', in John A. Ferejohn and James H. Kuklinski, eds, (*Information and Democratic Processes*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Kinder, 'Presidential Character Revisited', p. 235. It has also been argued that personality assessments function "schematically," allowing voters to make additional inferences about candidate behaviour by relying on implicit cognitive theories associated with the traits of competence, integrity, and so on. See Miller et al., 'Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates'; Richard R. Lau, 'Political Schemata, Candidate Evaluations, and Voting Behavior', in Richard R. Lau and David O. Sears, eds, *Political Cognition* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986).

¹⁸ Rahn et al., 'A Social-Cognitive Model of Candidate Appraisal'; for a review, see Donald R. Kinder, 'Opinion and Action in the Realm of Politics', in D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, and G. Lindzey, eds, *Handbook of Social Psychology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp. 778-867.

¹⁹ Miller et al., 'Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates' found that education was *positively* associated with mentioning candidate qualities in the NES open-ended likes/dislikes probes. While this finding would appear to contradict our switching mechanism hypothesis, it does not address the question of voters' *reliance* on candidate qualities in judging the candidates. In fact, these authors found that education fails to exert much of a moderating influence in this respect (see Table 7, p. 534).

²⁰ William G. Jacoby, 'The Structure of Ideological Thinking in the American Electorate'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (1995), 314-35.

²¹ Jacoby, 'The Structure of Ideological Thinking in the American Electorate'.

²² We left out the two items dealing with consistency between ideological identification on one hand and candidate evaluation and vote choice on the other, as candidate judgment is the main dependent variable in our analysis. Moreover, we left out two other types of items used by Jacoby – identifying the more conservative party and open-ended definitions of ideological terms – as these items did not scale consistently with the other items in Jacoby's analysis.

²³ Ideological placements were deemed correct if the Republican party was placed to the right of the Democratic Party, and if the Republican candidate was placed to the right of the Democratic candidate on the 7-point ideological placement scale. Respondents were deemed as having an

ideological self-identification if they placed themselves at a non-neutral point along the 7-point scale (i.e., not 4). Respondents felt close to the consistent ideological group if liberals responded as “feeling close to” liberals but not conservatives, and vice-versa for conservatives.

Respondents’ ideological self-identifications were considered consistent with their partisan identifications and their policy attitudes if their scores were on the same side of the 7-point scales for both items (i.e., 1, 2 or 3 for liberal/Democrat, and 5, 6, or 7 for conservative/Republican). Finally, ideological self-identifications were considered consistent with ideological feelings if respondents felt warmer toward the ideological group to which they identified (i.e., for liberals, if the feeling thermometer score for the group “liberals” was higher than the feeling thermometer score for the group “conservatives,” and vice-versa for conservatives). These codings are identical to those used by Jacoby, ‘The Structure of Ideological Thinking in the American Electorate’.

²⁴ Mean proportional ideological thinking scores (on a transformed 0-1 scale) ranged from .23 in 1984 to .38 in 2000. Across election years, the “easiest” item tended to be correct ideological placement of the candidates, which ranged from .55 in 1984 and 1988 to .68 in 1996. The “hardest” items tended to be consistency between ideological self-identification and individual policy attitudes. For example, in 1984, the mean for consistency between ideology and guaranteed health insurance was .10, and in 2000 the mean for consistency between ideology and government services was .16.

²⁵ Gregory B. Markus, ‘Political Attitudes during an Election Year: A Report on the 1980 NES Panel Study’; *American Political Science Review*, 76 (1982), 538-60.

²⁶ R. Michael Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, ‘Economics, Issues, and the Perot Candidacy: Voter Choice in the 1992 Presidential Election’; *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (1995), 714-44.

²⁷ Miller et al., ‘Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates’.

²⁸ For an identical coding method of perceptions of candidate character, see Howard Lavine, 'The Electoral Consequences of Ambivalence Toward Presidential Candidates'; *American Journal of Political Science*, 45 (2001), 915-29.

²⁹ Leona S. Aiken and Stephen G. West, *Multiple Regression: Testing and Interpreting Interactions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1991). We also include in the OLS models sex (female=1; male =0), race (black=1; otherwise=0), and the number of policy issues for which the respondent provided a valid opinion.

³⁰ The results were highly similar when (a) ideology was not included in the construction of issue proximity (b) 'directional' scores were substituted for issue proximity scores, see George Rabinowitz and Stuart MacDonald, 'A Directional Theory of Voting'; *American Political Science Review*, 83 (1989), 93-121; (c) political information and strength of party identification were entered into the model, both as "first-order" effects and in interaction with issue proximity, party ID, and perceptions of candidate character. The results are thus highly robust across model specifications and measurement strategies.

³¹ These percentages were calculated by summing the coefficients for issues, character assessment, and partisanship, and then dividing each coefficient by the sum. For example, for maximally ideological voters, the coefficients (averaged across elections) were .33, .28, and .44 for issues, party ID, and character, respectively. By dividing these coefficients by their sum (i.e., 1.05), the degree of reliance on each factor can be represented.

³² Cognitive ability scores were created by averaging respondents' levels of political information and education. Education was stratified into four categories: less than a high school diploma, high school graduate, some college, and BA degree or higher. Information was assessed in each election year with two items asking which party held the most seats in the House and the Senate before the election (these were the only information items repeated in each of the election years). Political involvement scores were created by averaging respondents' levels of interest in politics, political activity, and media attention. Political interest was assessed with two items in each

election year: “Would you say that you have been very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the political campaigns so far this year?” and “Generally speaking, would you say that you personally care a good deal which party wins the presidential election this fall or that you don’t care very much which party wins?” Media attention was measured with three items in each election year, asking respondents how frequently they watched national network TV news, read a newspaper, and read a weekly news magazine. Political activity was assessed by determining whether the respondent had engaged in each of the following five behaviours: influenced others’ vote choices, wore a button or put a sticker on the car, attended any political meetings or rallies, worked for a party or a candidate, and contributed money to a political party, issue, or group. Issue proximity and ideological thinking included only the items repeated in each election year: government spending, defence spending, job assurance, aid to blacks, women’s rights, and ideology. The 1992 data were excluded from the structural equation model, as their inclusion would have further reduced the pool of available issues. However, the results were similar when the 1992 data were included.

³³ Richard Niemi and Herbert F. Weisberg, eds, *Classics in Voting Behavior* (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993, p. 50); Philip E. Converse, ‘Assessing the Capacity of Mass Electorates’; *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3 (2000), 331-53.

³⁴ Chaiken and Trope, *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology*; Lupia and McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma*; Petty and Wegener, ‘The Elaboration Likelihood Model: Current Status and Controversies’; Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*; Sniderman et al., *Reasoning and Choice*.

³⁵ Converse, ‘The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics’; Stanley Feldman, ‘Measuring Issue Preferences: The Problem of Response Instability’; *Political Analysis*, 1 (1989), 25-60.

³⁶ Donald E. Stokes, ‘Some Dynamic Elements in Contests for the Presidency’; *American Political Science Review*, 60 (1966), 19-28.

³⁷ Kinder, 'Presidential Character Revisited'; Markus, 'Political Attitudes during an Election Year: A Report on the 1980 NES Panel Study'; Miller et al., 'Schematic Assessments of Presidential Candidates'; Samuel Popkin, John W. Gorman, Charles Phillips and Jeffrey A. Smith, 'Comment: What Have You Done for Me Lately: Toward an Investment Theory of Voting'; *American Political Science Review*, 70 (1976), 779-805.

³⁸ Gregory B. Markus and Philip E. Converse, 'A Dynamic Simultaneous Equation Model of Electoral Choice'; *American Political Science Review*, 73 (1979), 1055-70.

Table 1. Summary Candidate Evaluation as a Function of Ideological Thinking, Issue Proximity, Party Identification, Character Assessment, and Control Variables.

	<i>Election</i>				
	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Issue Proximity	.25*** (.02)	.17*** (.02)	.11*** (.02)	.17*** (.02)	.08*** (.02)
Party Identification	.26*** (.01)	.28*** (.01)	.27*** (.01)	.26*** (.01)	.17*** (.01)
Character Assessment	.67*** (.03)	.64*** (.03)	.62*** (.03)	.62*** (.03)	.57*** (.02)
Female	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.02* (.01)	.00 (.01)
Black	-.08*** (.01)	-.04** (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Ideological Thinking	-.016 (.01)	.01 (.06)	-.015 (.01)	.05*** (.01)	.017 (.01)
Ideological Thinking X Issue Proximity	.25*** (.06)	.29*** (.06)	.32*** (.06)	.14* (.06)	.27** (.07)

Table continued on next page

Table 1 continued

	<i>Election</i>				
	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
Ideological Thinking X Party Identification	.06 (.05)	-.04 (.04)	.14*** (.04)	.03 (.05)	.04 (.06)
Ideological Thinking X Character Assessment	-.28*** (.10)	-.36*** (.11)	-.33*** (.09)	-.20* (.10)	-.23** (.08)
Number of Valid Policy Responses	.01 (.03)	-.05 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	-.06 (.04)	.01 (.03)
Constant	.60*** (.03)	.60*** (.03)	.50*** (.04)	.55** (.04)	.50*** (.03)
R^2	.67	.60	.63	.69	.69
N	1,553	1,520	1,632	1,252	1,695

Note: Entries are OLS coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. *= $p < .05$; **= $p < .01$; ***= $p < .001$.

Table 2. Effects of Issue Proximity and Character Assessment on Candidate Evaluation at Minimum and Maximum Levels of Ideological Thinking.

	<i>Election</i>				
	1984	1988	1992	1996	2000
<i>Effect of Issue Proximity</i> on Candidate Evaluation:					
Minimum Ideological Thinking	.19	.09	.02 ^{ns}	.12	-.05 ^{ns}
Maximum Ideological Thinking	.44	.38	.34	.26	.23
% Decrease (High to Low)	57%	76%	94%	54%	100%
<i>Effect of Character Assessment</i> on Candidate Evaluation:					
Minimum Ideological Thinking	.75	.74	.71	.69	.67
Maximum Ideological Thinking	.46	.38	.38	.49	.44
% Decrease (Low to High)	39%	49%	46%	29%	34%

Note: All coefficients are $p < .001$, except for the effect of issue proximity among minimally ideological voters in 1992 and 2000 (which are superscripted as “ns”).

Figure 1. Effects of Issue Proximity, Party ID, and Perception of Candidate Character on Comparative Candidate Evaluation at Minimum, Mean, and Maximum Levels of Ideological Thinking.

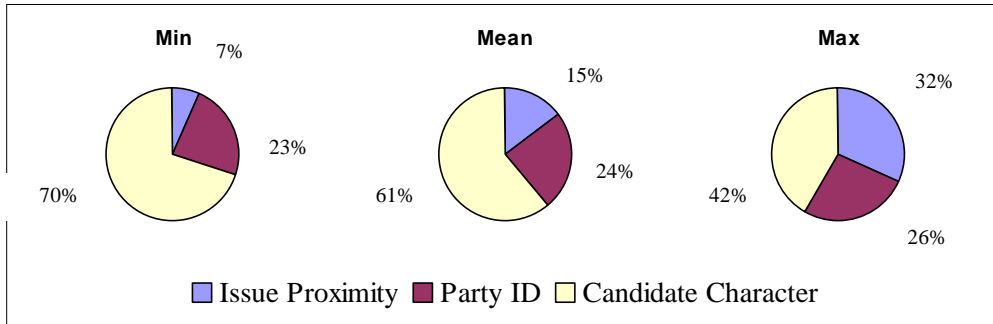
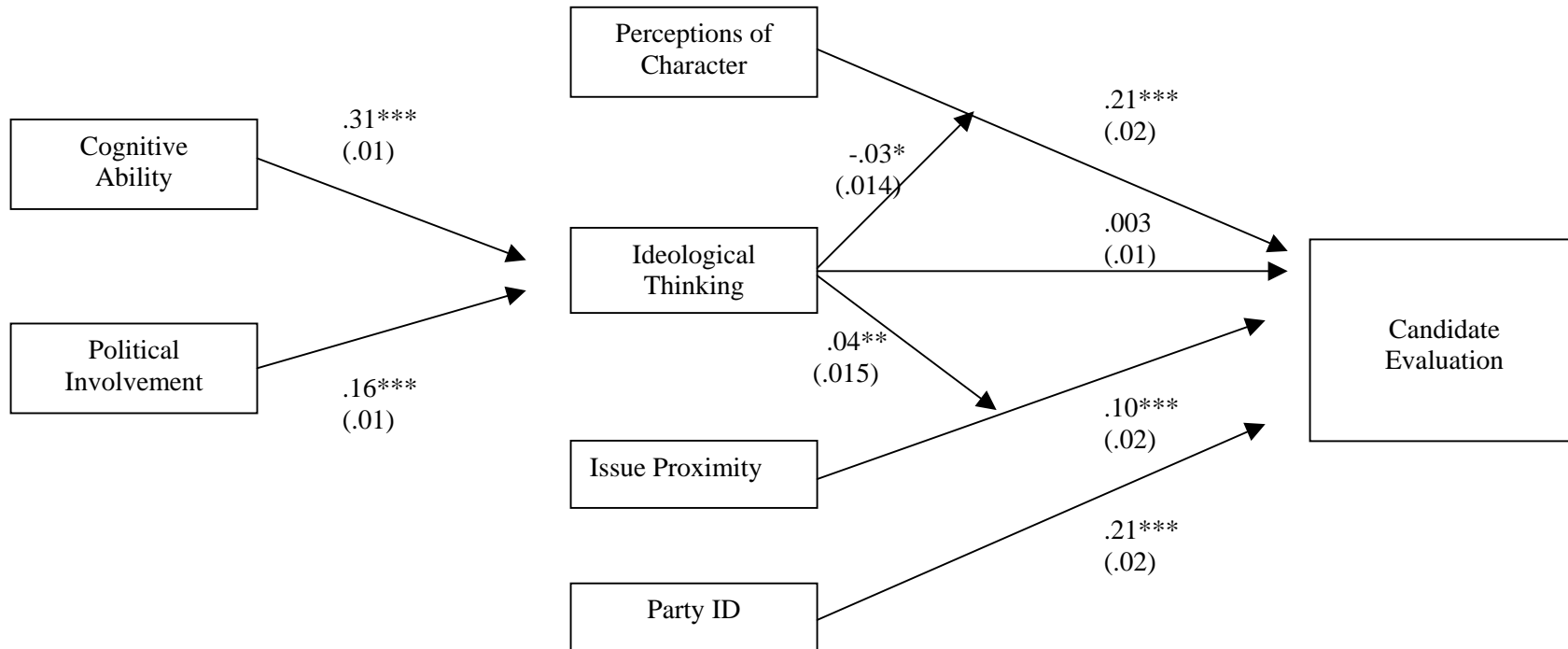


Figure 2. Structural Equation Model Results of Pooled Data (1984-2000; excluding 1992).



Notes: Maximum likelihood estimates based on the correlation matrix. Coefficients are standardized effects. $N = 5,710$. $CFI = .946$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Partisanship is allowed to exert an effect on character (significant path not shown).³⁸ The following errors are allowed to co-vary: ideological thinking and ideological thinking \times issue proximity, ideological thinking and ideological thinking \times character, issue proximity and ideological thinking \times issue proximity, and character and ideological thinking \times character.

Appendix: Issues Included in the Measurement of Ideological Thinking and Issue Proximity, by Election (1984-2000). Issues Included in Issue Proximity Scores are Asterisked.

1984:

v369: Ideology*
v375: Government services/spending*
v382: Minority aid*
v388: Involvement in Central America*
v395: Defence spending*
v401: Social/economic status of women*
v408: Cooperating with Russia*
v414: Job assurance*
v423: Abortion
v1038: School prayer
v1058: Government health insurance
v1074: School busing

1988:

v228: Ideology*
v302: Government services/spending*
v310: Defence spending*
v318: Government health insurance*
v323: Job assurance*
v332/v340: Aid to blacks/Aid to minorities*
v368: Cooperation with Russia*
v387: Women's rights*
v395: Abortion
v852: Laws protecting homosexuals against job discrimination
v854: Capital punishment
v856: Affirmative action in hiring and promotion
v868: School prayer
v869: Black student quotas

1992:

v3509: Ideology*
v3701: Government services/spending*
v3707: Defence Spending*
v3718: Job assurance*
v3732: Abortion*
v3724: Government support of social and economic position of blacks
v3801: Women's rights
v5923: Laws protecting homosexuals against job discrimination
v5925: Homosexuals serving in the army
v5927: Gay adoption
Appendix, continued.

1992, continued

v5931: Government integration of schools
v5933: Capital punishment
v5935: Preferential hiring and promotion of blacks
v5945: School prayer
v5947: Black student quotas

1996:

v960365: Ideology*
v960450: Government services/spending*
v960463: Defence spending*
v960479: Government health insurance*
v960483: Job assurance*
v960487: Aid to blacks*
v960503: Abortion*
v960519: Crime reduction*
v960523: Jobs vs. environment*
v960537: Environmental regulation*
v960543: Women's rights*
v961193: Laws protecting homosexual against job discrimination
v961195: Homosexuals serving in the army
v961197: Capital punishment
v961208: Affirmative action in hiring and promotion
v961214: School prayer
v961217: Gun control

2000:

Face-to-Face Respondents:

v000446: Ideology*
v000545: Government services/spending*
v000581: Defence spending*
v000615: Job assurance*
v000641: Aid to blacks*
v000674: Affirmative action
v000694: Abortion*
v000707a or v000707b: Jobs vs. Environment*
v000724: Homosexuals serving in the military
v000731: Gun Control*
v000748: Gay adoption
v000749: Capital punishment

Appendix, continued.

2000 Face-to-Face, continued.

v000754a or v000754b: Women's rights*

v000771: Environmental regulation*

v001478: Laws protecting homosexuals against job discrimination

Phone Respondents:

v000446: Ideology*

v000550: Government services/spending*

v000587: Defence spending*

v000620: Job assurance*

v000645: Aid to Blacks*

v000674: Affirmative action

v000694: Abortion*

v000713: Jobs vs. Environment*

v000724: Homosexuals serving in the military

v000731: Gun Control*

v000748: Gay adoption

v000749: Capital punishment

v000760: Women's rights*

v000776: Environmental regulation*

v001478: Laws protecting homosexuals against job discrimination