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Measuring left–right and libertarian–authoritarian values in the British electorate

ABSTRACT

Butler and Stokes' authoritative analysis of the British electorate concluded that in general voters' political attitudes were poorly formed and, in consequence, unstable and inconsistent. This paper re-examines this question by developing and evaluating multiple-item scales of two core dimensions of mass political beliefs: left–right and libertarian–authoritarian values. The scales are shown to have respectable levels of internal consistency, high levels of stability over a one-year period, and to be useful predictors of support for political parties. In these respects they compare favourably with other commonly used indicators of political attitudes, values and ideology (left–right self–placement, postmaterialism and attitudes to nationalization). This superiority applies across different levels of political involvement. Contrary to the conclusions of earlier research into mass political ideology in Britain, therefore, it is contended that in general the electorate has meaningful political beliefs. Moreover, as the scales developed in this research form part of the British and Northern Irish Social Attitudes Series and recent British Election Studies, they provide an important resource for further studies of political culture in the UK.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional approaches to attitude measurement in public opinion surveys and election studies have typically involved a single forced-choice question or a short battery on each topic. The latter are often constructed from a more or less *ad hoc* combination of items included in the surveys. Even where questions have been designed to provide multiple indicator measures of political attitudes, they have focused on contemporary political issues rather than underlying dimensions of ideology and values. Consequently, the selection of attitude items has not usually been directed towards the construction of reliable and valid scales of central political beliefs, but rather towards topicality (for an exception see Feldman 1988).

An alternative approach has focused upon respondents' judgments of the meaning of abstract terms such as 'left–right' or 'liberal–conservative', often with the use of visual self–placement scales. Again, however, these approaches are flawed in that they assume high levels of sophistication

and the ability to relate abstract concepts to political preferences, and, in the case of open-ended techniques, the ability to articulate them in the context of a structured interview. Unsurprisingly, doubts have been raised about the ability of respondents to think in the abstract way required when doing such tasks (Butler and Stokes 1974: 329).

Given the limitations of these methods of attitude assessment it is perhaps not surprising that authors such as Butler and Stokes, following on from Converse's seminal contribution (Converse 1964), should have discovered such low levels of temporal stability that they questioned the very existence of well-formed attitudes in the British electorate: 'It seems more plausible to interpret the fluidity of the public's view as an indication of the limited degree to which attitudes are formed towards even the best-known policy issues.' (Butler and Stokes 1974: 281). As we shall show, however, this conclusion does not make sufficient allowance for the limitations of the measurement instrument – a single question about the issue of nationalization – used by Butler and Stokes for assessing the stability of core political beliefs.

Single item measures of core political beliefs suffer from a variety of limitations when compared with multiple-indicator scales. Single questions are unable to address the complexity of multi-faceted topics, whereas multiple-item scales enable the assessment of attitude consistency across a range of social and political issues, so that the common thread provided by the value position they tap can be detected. Single item measures are also more likely to be affected by idiosyncratic interpretations of the question being asked than are multiple-item scales, (when using batteries of questions we can expect random errors to cancel out and reliability to increase.¹) And, of course, multiple-item scales give greater levels of discrimination than are usually available from responses to a single statement.

The instability of the public's political attitudes and the consequent doubt cast upon their ontological status might therefore be an artefact caused by problems of measurement. Even where multiple indicators have been used to measure core political beliefs, they have tended to assume that political attitudes are arrayed uni-dimensionally along a left–right ideological continuum – an assumption that has been shown to be implausible in numerous studies (e.g. Luttbeg and Gant 1985; Himmelweit et al. 1985; Heath 1986a; Fleishman 1988). To address these problems, the objective of our recent research (see Evans and Heath 1995; Heath, Evans and Martin 1994) has been to examine the consistency, stability and predictive power of batteries of questions designed to tap underlying value positions rather than topicality, and through this to develop reliable and valid multiple item scales of the public's core political values.²

We propose that these core values form two dimensions: one has been termed the socialist versus laissez-faire – or left–right – dimension and the other, the libertarian – or liberal³ – versus authoritarian dimension. The

former can be interpreted as concerned with equality and the latter with personal freedom (cf. Rokeach 1973). Previous exploratory analyses have suggested that these values constitute a significant and meaningful element of the public's political beliefs.⁴ Moreover, items designed to measure left–right and libertarian–authoritarian values have for several years formed sections of the British Social Attitude Surveys (i.e. Jowell et al. 1988, 1990, 1991, 1992), and the Northern Irish Attitude Surveys (i.e. Stringer and Robinson 1991, 1992, 1993), as well as the British Election Study (Heath et al. 1991). If found to have suitable properties they can therefore provide a resource for both cross-sectional and time series analyses of core political beliefs and their relation to political behaviour and social structure (for examples of work in this vein see Harding 1988; Curtice and Gallagher 1990; Curtice 1992; Evans 1993; Duffy and Evans 1995; Evans and Duffy 1996).

METHOD

The left–right and libertarian–authoritarian scales are measures of core beliefs constructed by the method of summated ratings – more usually known as Likert scaling. Likert scales typically use 5–7 point attitude statements, often with an agree vs. disagree format. To construct a Likert scale the constituent items are simply added together (after reversing scores on oppositely worded statements). It is assumed that each item is a parallel measure of the same underlying concept (although each may tap slightly different aspects of it). Each item is therefore assumed to be monotonically related to the underlying attitude continuum, and the items as a group are assumed to measure only the attitude under consideration. The technique assumes equal intervals between response values: i.e. agree to strongly agree is equivalent to disagree to strongly disagree. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), because each item may contain considerable measurement error and/or specificity, a strength of Likert scaling is that it does not give too great an importance to any particular item.

Likert scales often contain about 20 or more items, and their reliability can be extremely high. But the number of items places severe burdens on questionnaire length. The scales included in the BSA and BES are an attempt to measure the main ideological dimensions reliably, but without adding excessively to questionnaire length.

The reliability of the scales is assessed in two ways. Firstly, through measures of internal consistency. This is assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach 1951), which is an estimate of reliability related to the average inter-item correlation.⁵ As a set of items with a high alpha can still have a multi-dimensional structure (Cortina 1993), we also use Principal Components Analysis to examine the dimensionality of the responses.

Secondly, reliability is assessed through test-retest correlations. Since

political values are taken to be relatively stable attributes of belief systems, a reliable measuring instrument ought to yield stable measurements over time (see Carmines and Zeller 1979; Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). In contrast, because political issues change their character over time, attitudes towards specific issues would not be expected to be stable. To estimate test-retest reliability we shall examine the correlations between attitudes in two surveys conducted a year apart. Such a time gap prevents memory effects from artificially increasing the reliability estimates, and is likely to be a reasonable estimate of correlations over much longer periods (see Converse 1964).

Validity is assessed via a test of the scales' ability to predict partisanship. This is a form of construct validity, in that it involves examining whether our measures predict other variables in theoretically prescribed ways. Thus if it is known that political values are related to left-right partisanship, a test of construct validity would involve examining the associations between scores on the values scales and Labour versus Conservative voting. Clearly, this sort of test depends upon the presence of well-established theories about the relations between the construct being tested and the variables used to assess its validity. In the case of left-right political values, this assumption appears to be unproblematic: the mainstream British political system is generally considered to be anchored on a left-right axis, with the Labour and Conservative parties representing, respectively, the two poles. With regard to libertarian-authoritarian values, however, a clear criterion of construct validity is not so evident. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that they will predict some of the major party political preferences, particularly those relating to the centre parties for which the left-right confrontation may be less relevant.

We also examine the reliability and validity of alternative measures of political attitudes that appear to tap left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values, and which have frequently been used in public opinion and election studies. For the left-right dimension we compare the Likert scale with the widely used self-placement technique for measuring left-right ideology (cf. Barnes and Kaase 1979), and a question on the core issue, in British politics, of attitudes towards the nationalization of industry. The Likert scale measuring the libertarian-authoritarian dimension is compared with Inglehart's measure of postmaterialism (Inglehart 1977, 1990), a widely-used scale which relates primarily to issues of liberalism, freedom and attitudes towards authority.

THE STUDY

Two surveys were conducted using a sample of respondents from those who had originally taken part in the 1983 British Election Study (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985). The first set of interviews were conducted by trained personnel from Social and Community Planning Research in

1985. Respondents were then re-interviewed one year later. The response details are as follows

Study 1 – issued n = 419, total contacted 367, interviews = 283 (77.1 per cent of those contacted)

Study 2 – issued n = 283, total contacted 259, interviews = 216 (83.4 per cent of those contacted)

Further information on the surveys can be obtained from Heath (1986b).

FINDINGS

The Dimensionality of the Items in the Scales

The scales were developed by constructing initial pools of 20 or so items to tap each of the left–right and libertarian–authoritarian dimensions. The items were selected partly from previous questionnaires and partly devised specifically for this purpose. In general, the items were of a more abstract kind, rather than ones which asked the respondent to evaluate the current state of affairs, hence they were less likely to be time-specific. Items which had relatively low correlations with the overall scale were deleted through item analysis.

Before examining the reliability and validity of the resulting shortened scales we checked whether the left–right and libertarian–authoritarian items are measuring distinct dimensions of political values. A principal components analysis of the questions used in the scales indicated that there were indeed two main factors (see Appendix Table A.1 for details).⁶ After Varimax rotation, the first was easily interpretable as a left–right factor relating to attitudes towards equality; the five items from the left–right scale had by far the highest loadings. The second factor clearly corresponds to our libertarian–authoritarian scale. The factor analysis thus confirms the presence of two orthogonal dimensions in the dataset.⁷ We shall therefore examine the characteristics of the two scales separately.

Analysis of the Left–Right Dimension

We first examined the reliability of the left–right scale. This uses responses to the following items combined to form a scale in which a high score equals a left-wing position

- Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off.
- Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers.
- Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth.

- There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.
- Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.

It can be seen that these items focus almost exclusively on issues of inequality and exploitation. It would of course be possible to construct alternative scales which measured attitudes to, for example, unions or to socialism. However, on theoretical grounds equality represents the more central value (cf. Rokeach 1973). Indeed, nationalization or planning may be thought of as *means* rather than as *ends* in themselves and hence are inappropriate as components of a value scale.

Reliability is assessed first through the internal consistency method. Carmines and Zeller (1979: 51) suggest that reliabilities as indicated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient should be at least .70 and preferably around .80 for widely used scales. On this criterion, the results were extremely promising. A reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained. We repeated the exercise in the second wave of interviews. In this second wave the reliability of the scale increased slightly to 0.84.⁸

Our next step was to check whether the left–right scale showed acceptable stability over time. The correlation (Pearson's) between respondents' scores on the five-item egalitarianism scale in the first and second wave of interviews was 0.79. To provide a yardstick for comparison, we calculated the corresponding correlations for alternative measures of 'left–right' attitudes. In both waves of interviewing we had administered a visual left–right scale (cf. Barnes et al. 1979). Respondents were instructed as follows

In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. On this card are boxes running from the left to the right. Please tell me the letter of the box that best describes *your own views*.

Contrary to the findings of Butler and Stokes (1974), respondents were in general willing to place themselves on the left–right scale. In the second round of interviewing, however, we asked two open-ended follow-up questions after the visual scale. 'What did you understand the word "left" to mean?' and 'What did you understand the word "right" to mean?'. Interestingly, although only eight respondents did not know where to place themselves on the left–right scale, 39 said that they did not know what 'left' meant. The remaining 177 respondents gave a total of 308 answers of which only 59 per cent could be said to correspond unambiguously with even a broad-based conception of what political scientists mean by 'left' (that is, answers which said that 'left' meant in favour of working-class, poor, ordinary working person or against the middle class, the rich, or business; answers which associated the left with Communism, Marxism, socialism, the Labour Party, or against Conservatism, fascism, etc.; and answers which associated the left with specific names such as Benn, Hatton, Scargill). Among the other answers the most

common (given 45 times) were ones which defined the left as people who are extreme, dogmatic or militant but without any mention of the content of their extremism. On the meaning of 'right' there were again 39 respondents who answered that they did not know. The remainder gave 259 answers, of which only 58 per cent correspond closely to the political scientist's concept. Among the answers the most common (given 30 times) defined the right as moderate, middle of the road, centrist, or as liberal, Labour not communist.

Notwithstanding the widespread confusion about what left and right might mean, the correlation between respondents' self-placement on the scale in the two waves of interviews was respectable, at 0.54, but well below that obtained by the Likert scale. Moreover, we found that even a single item from the left-right scale could yield higher correlations over time than the visual scale. Thus the question 'ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nations' wealth' (the key question in the five-item left-right scale – it has the highest item-total correlation) yielded a correlation of 0.60 and the question 'there is one law for the rich and one for the poor' yielded a correlation of 0.59 between the two waves of interviewing.

We also considered the over time stability of attitudes towards nationalization. Previous work indicates that attitudes to nationalization are one of the best predictors of support for the parties (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985; Heath et al. 1991). At the same time, Butler and Stokes found rather low stability (Kendall's tau-b rank correlation of 0.40) between 1963 and 1964 in responses to their question about attitudes to nationalization (Butler and Stokes 1974: 280).

We used a somewhat different wording from Butler and Stokes, as their formulation has become rather dated.⁹ We asked respondents

On the whole would you like to see more or less state ownership of industry, or about the same amount as now?

The correlation (Kendall's tau-b) was 0.52 (Pearson $r = 0.44$), decidedly higher than Butler and Stokes had achieved although still below that achieved by the 'value' question 'ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth' (Kendall's tau-b of 0.58). The results from the tests of over time stability thus confirm the conclusions drawn from our first exercise in assessing reliability using Cronbach's alpha.

Analysis of the Libertarian–Authoritarian Dimension

A relatively satisfactory scale with a reliability of 0.77 was obtained with the following ten items

- Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values.
- For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence.

- Schools should teach children to obey authority.
- The law should always be obeyed even if a particular law is wrong.
- Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards.
- People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.
- The welfare state makes people nowadays less willing to look after themselves.
- Organizing public meetings to protest against the government should be allowed.*
- Publishing leaflets to protest against the government should be allowed.*
- Organizing protest marches and demonstrations should be allowed.*

* Responses to these questions are recoded to be consistent with the other items in the scale (a high score equals a libertarian position).

The questions on stiffer sentences and actions allowable in protesting against the government had been asked in a somewhat different format from those in the main battery (offering three and four response options respectively instead of the five offered in the main battery). For the second round of interviewing, these questions were standardized. In the second round, the reliability of the scale increased slightly to 0.79.

The next step was to check the stability of the scale over time. As in the case of the left–right scale, the correlation was high, Pearson's R being 0.82. This was again higher than that obtained on individual questions, though stability was surprisingly high for some individual questions as well; for example, in the case of the death penalty the correlation between responses in the two waves of interviewing was 0.55.

The reliability of the scale was then compared with that obtained using Inglehart's measure of postmaterialism (Inglehart 1977). In the most frequently employed version of Inglehart's measure respondents are asked

If you had to choose from among the items on this card, which are the *two* that seem most desirable to you?

maintaining order in the nation

giving people more say in important political decisions

fighting rising prices

protecting freedom of speech

People who select 'maintaining order' and 'fighting rising prices' as their two priorities are defined as materialists. People who select 'more say' and 'freedom of speech' are defined as post materialists. The

remainder (the majority of most samples) are defined as mixed cases.¹⁰ This scale was administered to half the sample in both waves of interviewing (a somewhat modified version was administered to the other half).

Inglehart's measure performed rather poorly in our tests, the correlation (Pearson's) between the two waves of interviews being 0.40, which is not only well below the level attained by the 10 item scale, but is also lower than that obtained in many of our *individual* value questions.¹¹ While Inglehart's instrument has the merit of brevity, its low stability over time would seem to make it an unsatisfactory measure of basic values in comparison with the Likert scale approach.

Finally, in order to save on questionnaire length when using the scales in time series surveys such as the BES, in which space for new questions is particularly limited, a six-item version of the libertarian–authoritarian scale was developed. This scale omits the items on protest marches, leafleting, public meetings and welfare provision. Examination of the reliability of this shorter scale found it to be little different from that of the full length scale (Study 1, $\alpha = 0.72$; Study 2, $\alpha = 0.70$). Its over time correlation (0.79) was also of similar magnitude.

EXAMINING THE PREDICTIVE POWER OF THE SCALES

If our measures are tapping core political values, they must surely relate to politics itself. We shall not attempt to directly adjudicate between the left–right scale and the libertarian–authoritarian scale as to their predictive power. Clearly, they measure different things and are likely to predict different sorts of political preferences. None the less, it is of some interest to examine how the scales relate to support for the political parties.

The most natural way to assess the validity of measures of the left–right dimension is to see how well they predict support for the Conservative and Labour parties. The results in this respect were encouraging.

As our dependent variables we chose two questions which we had devised for the second wave of interviewing. These were

Please choose a phrase from this card to say how you feel about the:

Conservative Party . . . strongly in favour, in favour, neither in favour nor against, against, strongly against?

Labour/Liberal/Social Democratic Party . . . strongly in favour (etc.)?

We preferred these to the more usual dichotomous dependent variables (for example, whether respondents supported the Conservative Party or not), as we found that the assumptions that residuals are normally distributed and of equal variance were not met with such measures.

TABLE I: *Predicting party support using different measures of political attitudes*

Political attitudes measures	Respondent favours:	
	Conservative Party R	Labour Party R
5 item left–right scale	0.59	0.53
Visual left–right scale	0.47	0.40
'Nationalization' question	0.43	0.33
Libertarian–authoritarian scale	0.32	0.29
Postmaterialism index ¹	0.17 ^{ns}	0.01 ^{ns}
N = 214		

Notes: All correlations significant @ $p < 0.01$ unless otherwise indicated.

¹ For postmaterialism index $n = 107$, ns = not significant.

The correlations between these attitudes towards the Labour and Conservative parties and the various measures of political beliefs are shown in Table I.

It can be seen that the left–right Likert scale is clearly a better predictor of support for the Conservative and Labour parties than either the visual self-placement scale or the nationalization policy question. The libertarian–authoritarian scale is also a far stronger predictor of support than is the Inglehart measure, which has no significant association with support for either party.

We also regressed support for the Conservatives and support for the Labour Party on respondents' position on left–right and libertarian–authoritarian value scales simultaneously. The addition of the libertarian–authoritarian scale to the model containing just the left–right scale increased the R^2 for support for the Conservatives from 0.35 to 0.41. For Labour, R^2 rose from 0.28 to 0.33. These increases in variance explained were significant although not very large, indicating that the libertarian–authoritarian scale makes a modest additional contribution to the variance explained by the left–right scale.

In explaining support for the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties we have to use a somewhat different tactic. People on the left will oppose them because the parties lie to their right, while people on the right will oppose them because they lie to their left. A linear additive model will thus be inappropriate. A simple way to overcome this is to examine two sets of relationships. In one we examine the effects of the political attitude measures on support for the Liberals while excluding respondents who identify with the Labour Party (who will generally be on the left) from the analysis, while in the other we exclude Conservative identifiers, who are on the right.

Proceeding in this way (see Table II), we find that both the left–right

TABLE II: *Predicting support for the Liberal Party*

Political attitude	Support for the Liberal Party:	
	Excluding Labour supporters	Excluding Conservative supporters
	R	R
5 item left–right scale	0.22	–0.28
Visual left–right scale	0.30	–0.10 ^{ns}
'Nationalization' question	0.13 ^{ns}	–0.24
Libertarian–authoritarian scale	0.34	–0.04 ^{ns}
Postmaterialism index ¹	0.08 ^{ns}	–0.06 ^{ns}
	N = 129	N = 148

Notes: All correlations significant @ $p < 0.01$ unless otherwise indicated.

¹ For postmaterialism index N = 65 and 74 respectively

ns = not significant.

and libertarian–authoritarian scales discriminate Liberals from Conservatives, as does the visual self-placement scale (similar results were also obtained for the SDP; attitudes to which correlate 0.73 with attitudes towards the Liberals). Among respondents on the left, however, the only significant effects are for the left–right scale and the nationalization item.

The left–right scale is thus the only measure which predicts Liberal support on both sides of the left–right divide. The visual self–placement scale predicts support among respondents on the right, but not the left, and the nationalization item predicts support among those on the left, but not the right. Libertarian–authoritarian values are the strongest predictors of Liberal support on the right, but do not discriminate Liberal from Labour support. In comparison, however, postmaterialist values have no significant effect on Liberal Party support among respondents on either the left or the right. Again, therefore, both of the values scales eclipse the performance of the alternative measures.

The next step was to attempt to replicate the findings for the values scales using the 1987 Election Study. This provides an independent assessment of the characteristics of the scales in a survey with a far larger number of respondents than the panel study ($n = 3826$; response rate = 70 per cent, for more details see Heath *et al.* 1991: Appendix). It also tests whether the scales, which were developed during a period when there were no national elections, perform similarly under conditions where political awareness is likely to be heightened.

A principal components analysis resulted in two distinct factors, thus reproducing the factor structure and pattern of item loadings discovered in the earlier study (details available on request). The reliability of the scales was almost identical to those discovered previously, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.82 for the left–right scale and 0.73 for the

TABLE III: *Predicting party support in the BES survey*

Political attitude measures	Support for:		Support for Liberal Party:	
	Conservative	Labour	Excluding Conservatives	Excluding Labour
	R	R	R	R
Left–right scale	0.58	–0.57	0.15	–0.22
Libertarian–authoritarian scale	0.31	–0.21	–0.01 ^{ns}	–0.13
N =	(3086)	(3086)	(2214)	(2005)

Notes: All correlations significant @ $p < 0.01$ unless otherwise indicated.
ns = not significant.

shortened six-item version of the libertarian–authoritarian scale (the BES uses the reduced version in order to save on questionnaire length).

Table III shows that, as with the panel study, the left–right scale strongly predicts support for the Conservative and Labour Parties. The effects of the libertarian–authoritarian scale are less substantial, but still highly significant. When the libertarian–authoritarian scale is added to the left–right scale the variance in Conservative and Labour support explained increases significantly (from 34 to 42 per cent and from 32 to 36 per cent respectively).

Also as before, the left–right scale predicts Liberal support among both left- and right-wing respondents, while the libertarian–authoritarian scale predicts support for the Liberals by people on the centre/right of the political spectrum, but not for people on the centre/left.¹² In general, the analysis of the Election Survey provides support for the patterns of prediction obtained in the panel study.

Examining the Scales Among Groups with Different Levels of Political Involvement

A final test of the effectiveness of our measures is whether they predict partisanship effectively among respondents who are not politically attentive or involved. Such respondents might not be motivated to understand politics in terms of issues and ideologies and may therefore be less likely to have well-formed attitudes towards political issues (see Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). We reason that techniques of attitude measurement which rely on abstract judgments, or knowledge of particular policy issues, are likely to be less successful in explaining the political preferences of the less politically involved respondents than are the values scales, which require only a generalized grasp of the position of the main parties at a level that is not as abstract – and therefore not as

cognitively demanding – as the self-placement scale (see Converse, 1964; and Sniderman, Brody, Tetlock et al. 1991). To evaluate this possibility we divided the sample obtained with the second wave of the methodology study into ‘high political involvement’ and ‘low political involvement’ groups. If the scales predict partisanship similarly for both groups, then they will have passed a quite stringent test of their effectiveness in identifying meaningful aspects of political beliefs across diverse sections of the electorate.

Involvement in politics is indicated by the amount of times respondents reported talking about politics with either a first named or second named person.¹³ Evenly sized groups of high and low involvement respondents are obtained by dividing a composite scale of ‘frequency of talks about politics’ into groups composed of people who discuss politics with more than one person often or occasionally (high involvement), and those who report not talking about politics, or only talking with one person occasionally (low involvement).¹⁴ These measures are more useful indicators of political involvement than are other proxies sometimes used, such as ‘attention to news media’ or ‘campaign interest’ in that they measure *active* involvement with politics, and not just at elections. Frequency of discussion about politics is also a more discriminating measure of political involvement than are most indicators of political behaviour, given that in a representative sample few people are likely to engage in any political activity other than voting in a General Election.

Table IV compares the correlations between the various measures of values, ideology and attitudes, and partisanship among ‘high involvement’ and ‘low involvement’ groups, as well as stability estimates. To reduce the complexity of the information presented, the main divisions in party support are measured by subtracting support for the Labour Party from support for the Conservative Party (the two are correlated at -0.66), which gives a useful summary of right- versus left-wing partisanship. We do not present analyses of centre party support as the cell sizes which result from dividing the sample even further are undesirably small.

Table IV shows that the stability of left–right and, in particular, libertarian-values is a little lower among the politically uninvolved than among those who discuss politics frequently. Nevertheless, the levels are still far higher than the comparison measures (the nationalization item for the left–right scale and the postmaterialism index for the libertarian–authoritarian scale). As expected, the stability of visual self-placement scale among the politically uninvolved drops to an exceptionally low level. This suggests that ideological self-location of this sort probably has little meaning for the politically uninvolved.

From Table IV it can also be seen that although visual self-placement is strongly related to partisanship within the high involvement group, it is only weakly related to it within the low involvement group. The

TABLE IV: *Comparing different measures of political attitudes among high and low political involvement groups*

Political attitude measures	Stability t1-t2		Labour/Conservative Party Support	
	Political involvement:		Political involvement:	
	High R	Low R	High R	Low R
5 item left-right scale	0.82	0.76	0.67	0.54
Visual left-right scale	0.71	0.28	0.62	0.27
'Nationalization' question	0.51	0.41	0.47	0.38
Libertarian-authoritarian scale	0.89	0.70	0.47	0.14 ^{ns}
Postmaterialism index ¹	0.40	0.43	0.15 ^{ns}	0.10 ^{ns}
N = 214				

Notes: All correlations significant @ $p < 0.05$ unless otherwise indicated.

¹ For postmaterialism index $n = 107$, ns = not significant.

association between the nationalization item and partisanship is generally moderate to weak for both groups. By comparison, the left-right values scale attains a consistently high association across levels of involvement.

The finding that the libertarian-authoritarian scale is not a significant predictor of left-right partisanship among the low involvement group is noteworthy, but it is unlikely to have resulted from poor measurement. If the scale's measurement was problematic among respondents with low levels of political involvement, we would have expected to find that its over time stability was also very low. Stability is lower than among high involvement respondents, but it is still rather high. Thus the failure to find an association between libertarian-authoritarian values and Labour-Conservative partisanship is probably a reflection of the low partisan relevance of libertarian issues for the low involvement group. This interpretation accords with research into class and educational differences in the relevance of different types of issues to partisanship – non-economic issues and values tend to be less relevant for the partisanship of working-class voters (who tend to be less involved in politics) than they are for those in the middle class (see Heath and Evans 1988) – and questions of personal and political freedom have often been claimed to have special political significance for the highly educated (Inglehart 1990), who tend to be more involved in politics than other groups.

In summary, the left-right values scale has far more stability and more robust patterns of association among the low political involvement group than does the ideological self-placement scale. It is also a generally more

stable and stronger predictor than is the nationalization item. The libertarian–authoritarianism scale, in turn, has higher levels of stability and predictive power than the postmaterialism index, especially among the politically involved.

CONCLUSIONS

It has often been claimed that mass electorates do not have consistent and stable political belief systems.¹⁵ This view rests in the main, however, upon evidence obtained using relatively weak measures of political attitudes. In this paper we have shown that when examined in a more appropriate fashion the British electorate *does* have consistent and stable views on underlying value principles, which in turn would seem to be useful for explaining support for the main political parties both during and between elections.

It is possible, of course, that British political attitudes have become more sophisticated since the 1960s, when Butler and Stokes did their path-breaking work. Thus our finding that left–right and libertarian–authoritarian beliefs have structure and stability might be less a product of the method we have adopted than a reflection of real change in the political awareness of the electorate. In defence of the methodological and theoretical position adopted here, however, it should be noted that the ‘real change’ interpretation is not consistent with the findings of analyses which have looked at the relationship between attitudes and vote over time (see Heath et al. 1991: ch. 3). Moreover, both the left–right and libertarian–authoritarian values scales have considerably greater stability, and predict party support far more effectively, than do comparable indicators of political attitudes *measured contemporaneously*. Thus the improvements in stability and prediction over the sorts of measures used in earlier research would appear to result from better measurement – using multiple items that do not require knowledge of specific policy issues, whilst at the same time avoiding contentless abstraction – rather than changes in voters’ political sophistication.

The relative advantages of the left–right and libertarian–authoritarian scales over the other measures also extend to sections of the electorate with low levels of involvement in politics, and who therefore might not be expected to have well-formed political ideologies. This is especially true with respect to comparisons with the visual left–right self-placement scale, which has such low reliability among politically uninvolved respondents as to be arguably worthless as a measure of their ideological positions. All things considered then, the weight of the evidence in favour of the effectiveness of left–right and libertarian–authoritarian values scales is such that it seems reasonable to conclude that these dimensions of political values are more significant and

widespread elements of the electorate's political beliefs than are attitudes towards specific issues, post-material values, or ideological self-placements – at least as usually measured.¹⁶

It is none the less noticeable that responses to the items forming the left–right scale are more internally consistent than are those to the items in the libertarian–authoritarianism scale, and although both dimensions of political values predict party support, the libertarian–authoritarian scale has markedly weaker effects.¹⁷ We cannot of course determine with certainty whether these differences are because respondents really have more consistent attitudes about economic equality or because we devised poorer questions about libertarian–authoritarian issues. However, given that similarly lower levels of internal consistency have also been found with other scales measuring liberal or libertarian values (i.e. McClosky and Zaller 1984; Heath, Evans and Martin 1994), the differences between the two scales are probably not a consequence of our particular choice of items. This conclusion is also suggested by the high levels of over time stability obtained with the libertarian–authoritarian scales. It should also be remembered that the libertarian–authoritarian scale is a more robust measure than its nearest competitor, the commonly used postmaterialism index.

The libertarian–authoritarian scale also offers substantively important insights into politics which would not be observed by focusing on the left–right dimension. Thus the ability of the libertarian–authoritarian scale to predict support for the Liberal Party amongst respondents on the political right – but not on the left – indicates its usefulness for identifying asymmetries in the competition between the three main parties: on the libertarian–authoritarian, Liberal Party supporters are not in the centre of a dimension defined at its poles by the Conservative and Labour Parties, rather, they occupy the same position as supporters of the Labour Party. This may be one factor which makes Liberal–Labour alliance more likely than a Liberal–Conservative alliance in the event of a hung parliament. Moreover, although of only limited importance at the time of this study, it has been suggested that the issues associated with the libertarian–authoritarian dimension may in time compete with the traditional left–right dimension for a central position in British political conflicts (on this see, for example, Lipset 1981: 509–21). Libertarian–authoritarian values may therefore prove to be increasingly relevant to an understanding of politics in the age of the 'new' Labour Party, in which an increased acceptance of free market policies and a decline in the emphasis given to traditional 'class issues' might increase the possibility of electoral differentiation along other dimensions of values.

We conclude that contrary to the claims of earlier research into political behaviour in Britain, the electorate's political attitudes are not random and unstable, neither are they constrained along a single left–right dimension, instead they are structured within a value framework involving dimensions of both left–right and libertarian–authoritarian beliefs – and

possibly several others. When measured suitably, these values appear to form consistent, stable and consequential elements of British political culture.

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NOTES

1. When using a larger number of items the signal being produced by the true attitude should be more detectable against the unpatterned noise produced by random variation (see Nunnally and Bernstein 1994).

2. Much of this work has been done under the auspices of the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends, Nuffield College, Oxford and Social and Community Planning Research, London.

3. We prefer 'libertarian' to 'liberal' in part to avoid confusion with the Liberal Party, and also because in America, in particular, the term liberal has an economic as well as social, political and moral connotation.

4. For example, factor analyses of the British Election Studies and of the British Social Attitudes Surveys have found that left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values are the two main factors that account for the variance in the data sets in question (Heath 1986a; Heath et al. 1991; Himmelweit, Humphreys and Jaeger 1985; Robertson 1994). Fleishman (1988) has found similar patterns in the USA. It is likely therefore that the two values are relatively orthogonal, which may partly account for the low levels of constraint, as indicated by the average correlation between responses to attitude items, often discovered between political attitudes in studies which have assumed that issues can be ordered on a single dimension of political ideology (i.e. Converse, 1964).

5. In classical test theory, alpha is an

estimate of the correlation of a test with an alternative form (with equivalent, i.e. parallel, items) containing the same number of questions (see Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). Unlike the average inter-item correlation, alpha is monotonically related to the number of items in a scale – with more items it increases.

6. Respondents who answered 'don't know' have been assigned to the middle category for the relevant item.

7. A Principal Components Analysis using an oblique rotation (Oblimin) also indicated that the two dimensions were not noticeably correlated, as did the lack of a significant association between the Likert scales constructed using the two sets of items ($r = -0.12$ $p > 0.05$). It should be kept in mind, however, that this degree of orthogonality is likely to result from the direction of the question wording in the two scales in conjunction with the presence of acquiescence. Thus agreement with the left-right items, which are worded in a left-wing direction, and with the libertarian-authoritarian items – which are worded in a 'right-wing' direction – would tend to reduce the association between the scales. See Evans and Heath (1995) for further discussion and empirical analysis of this issue.

8. Research using the scale in Northern Ireland finds a very similar alpha of 0.81 (Duffy and Evans 1995).

9. Butler and Stokes stated that: 'There's a lot of talk about nationalizing industry'. They then asked respondents whether a lot or a few more industries should be nationalized, whether there

should be no change, or whether some nationalized industries should be privatized (Butler and Stokes 1974: 461).

10. Inglehart (i.e. 1977) also presented a twelve item measure of postmaterialism. However, the majority of research on postmaterialism has been conducted using the shorter measure.

11. Kendall's tau-b was 0.37 for the Inglehart measure, 0.46 for 'death penalty', and 0.55 for the libertarian-authoritarian scale.

12. The weaker effects of the libertarian-authoritarian scale on Liberal support are attributable, in part, to the use of only the shortened version of the scale in the BES. Similar attenuation occurs when using the shortened version in the panel study.

13. This information was elicited as follows: 'We are interested in finding out when people talk about politics, not just about elections, but about all kinds of political matters'. Respondents were then asked to think of two people who they 'talk to most often about politics'. Respondents who reported talking about politics were then asked, for each person they mentioned: 'About how often do you talk to this person about politics . . . very often, say at least once a week . . . fairly often, at least once a month . . . not very often, several times a year . . . rarely, once a year or less?'

14. Very similar results are also obtained using information about frequency of conversation with just one other person. For more information on the development of the frequency of the political discussion measures see Evans and Lalljee (1996).

15. Although see Zaller and Feldman (1992) for a recent theoretical re-evaluation of the 'non-attitudes' thesis.

16. We should note that as the scales are not balanced for direction of question wording, their high reliability is likely to result at least to a small degree from correlated errors due to acquiescence response bias (see Evans and Heath 1995). Significantly, however, the differences in the reliability – and in the patterns of correlations with criterion variables – of similar balanced and unbalanced scales is sufficiently small and restricted in scope

(Evans and Heath 1995) to justify the use of the unbalanced scales we have tested here for sociological analyses of British (and Northern Irish) social attitudes.

17. The left-right scale also fares well in terms of both reliability and validity when compared with a similar set of scales developed using data from the American National Election Study (Feldman 1988). It is more reliable than Feldman's measures of beliefs about equality of opportunity ($\alpha = 0.72$), economic individualism ($\alpha = 0.65$) and free enterprise ($\alpha = 0.63$), and is a far stronger predictor of party support. (In Feldman's study the strongest correlation between core beliefs and party identity was $r = 0.26$.)

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APPENDIX

TABLE A.1: *Loadings on the first two dimensions of the Varimax rotated Principal Components Analysis of the left–right and libertarian–authoritarian items*

	Left–right	Libertarian–Authoritarian
Fair share (S43F)	.798	.062
Management (S43M)	.797	–.130
One law for rich (S43L)	.787	–.011
Redistribute income (S43D)	.748	.095
Big business (S43E)	.737	.067
Protest marches (S54C)	.183	.676
Publish leaflets (S54B)	.130	.649
Public meetings (S54A)	.234	.606
Stiffer sentences (S43E)	–.202	.598
Traditional values (S53A)	–.226	.579
Obeys authority (S53D)	–.168	.563
Death penalty (S53C)	.085	.561
Censorship necessary (S53P)	.076	.493
Welfare state (S53J)	.233	.456
Law should be obeyed (S53L)	.027	.439