

Voter ideology in Western democracies: An update

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Abstract. In this article, we update and expand the measure of voter ideology we originally proposed in this journal in 1998. Our new measure combines party manifesto data most recently updated by Budge et al. (2001) with election return data. Assuming the comparability and relevance of left-right ideology, we estimate the median voter position in 25 Western democracies throughout most of the postwar period. With this measure, we are able to make cross-national comparisons of voter ideology among these countries, as well as cross-time comparisons within individual countries.

Introduction

In our earlier article published in this journal, we developed measures that allow meaningful comparisons of party and voter ideology across different countries as well as across different time periods (Kim & Fording 1998). Although we developed measures of party *and* voter ideology, our emphasis was primarily on voter ideology. Since it was not feasible to describe the exact shape of the voter distribution on an ideological dimension in all Western democracies, we estimated the *median* voter position in these countries as our indicator of voter ideology. To do so, we first developed a measure of party positions using party manifesto data compiled by Budge, Robertson, Hearl, Klingemann and Volkens (Budge et al. 1992) and updated by Volkens (1995). We then estimated the median voter position by combining our party ideology measure with election return data for each country.

Since then the party manifesto data have been expanded to include 25 Western democracies and updated up to 1998. In this article, we expand and update our measures of party and voter ideology utilizing the newest manifesto data. In the first section, we describe how we operationalize the concept of 'ideology'. In the following section, we present cross-national and cross-time comparisons of voter ideology in 25 Western democracies (listed in the Note to Figure 2).

Measurement of voter ideology: an operationalization

Our measure of ideology rests on three basic assumptions about how voters think and behave when making voting decisions: (1) we assume that a left-right ideological dimension can be found in most industrialized democracies, (2) that it is an important and often primary determinant of vote choice in Western democracies and that it has been so for the entire postwar period, and (3) we assume that the left-right dimension is comparable across countries (see Kim & Fording 1998: 76–77).

Assuming the comparability, continuity and relevance of the left-right dimension, it is then possible to develop a measure of the ideological position of a particular electorate that is comparable across countries and across time. To do so, one must first begin to conceive of elections as large-scale opinion polls. In this sense, one might think of ballots as questionnaires that instruct the ‘respondent’ to choose the party that is closest to them on a left-right ideological scale. Assuming we have accurate, comparable interval-scale measures of party ideology for each party in an election, we can then treat election results, along with the corresponding measures of party ideology, as a grouped frequency distribution and calculate fairly reliable estimates of measures of central tendency such as the median and the mean. In other words, we infer ideological tendencies based on the rational choices of ideological voters.

Measuring party ideology

Such a strategy requires the completion of two major estimation tasks. First, it is necessary to develop a reliable, interval-level measure of party ideology that is comparable across countries and time. We construct such a measure based on manifestos (platforms) issued by parties at the time of each election. Our measure of party ideology is based on manifesto data originally collected by Budge, Robertson, Hearl, Klingeman and Volkens (Budge et al. 1992) and most recently updated by Budge et al. (2001). The newest manifesto data set, which includes 25 major democracies and spans most of the postwar period, is based on an exhaustive content analysis of manifestos (platforms) issued by all significant parties competing in each postwar election. The data set employs a total of 56 common categories, including external relations categories (e.g., anti-imperialism), freedom and democracy categories (e.g., human rights), political system categories (e.g., governmental and administrative efficiency), economic categories (e.g., nationalization), welfare and quality of life categories (e.g., environmental protection), fabric of society categories (e.g., multiculturalism) and social group categories (e.g., underprivileged minority

groups). For each document, the data represent the percentage of all statements comprised by each category. In effect, this standardizes the data with respect to document length, yielding a measure of party emphasis that is comparable.

We develop a measure of ideology for each party in each election in each of the 25 countries. The first task in measuring party ideology is to define 'left-right ideology' and to choose an appropriate set of categories that capture the left-right dimension. 'Ideology' is a set of ideas that relate to the social/political world and that provide a general guideline for some action (Mahler 1995: 36–37). As such, 'ideology provides politicians with a broad conceptual map of politics into which political events, current problems, electors' preferences and other parties' policies can be fitted' (Budge 1994: 446) and thus incorporates a broad range of political, economic and social issues.

There have been a few recent attempts to identify a left-right dimension utilizing party manifesto data. Each of these studies uses a correlation-based statistical technique, such as factor analysis or principal components analysis, to identify a common left-right dimension from an analysis of manifesto data (Bowler 1990; Budge & Robertson 1987; Laver & Budge 1993; Warwick 1992). The most comprehensive measure is that of Laver and Budge (1993) in that they analyze all countries and the entire period in the data set. They use a series of exploratory factor analyses to identify potential combinations of categories to build a left-right scale. From these analyses, they identify 13 categories as comprising left ideology and another 13 as comprising right ideology. These 26 ideological categories consistently loaded together in their factor analyses (Ibid.: 24–27). Based on their analyses of the entire data set, we use the same 26 categories in our attempt to build a measure of party ideology in 25 industrialized democracies during the postwar period.

The data in the manifesto set are collected such that statements in each of these 26 categories demonstrate either pro-left or pro-right tendencies. Based on these 26 categories, we first develop separate measures of left and right ideology for each party in each election for these countries in the following manner:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{IDLeft} &= \Sigma \text{ Pro-Left Categories} \\ \text{IDRight} &= \Sigma \text{ Pro-Right Categories} \end{aligned}$$

In other words, IDLeft represents the percentage of all party statements that advocate left-wing positions and IDRight represents the corresponding percentage of all party statements that represent right-wing positions. We then compute our measure of party ideology (IDParty) as follows:

$$\text{IDParty} = (\text{IDLeft} - \text{IDRight}) / (\text{IDLeft} + \text{IDRight})$$

We assume that voters evaluate parties on their net ideological position (scores) with respect to the left-right dimension. The measure is thus computed by subtracting the rightist score from the leftist score (%leftist statements – %rightist statements), then dividing by the total percentage of leftist and rightist statements. This procedure yields a measure of party ideology that ranges from –1 to 1, where the larger score indicates greater support for leftist policies. For ease of presentation and interpretation, we transform this measure so that it takes on a possible range of 0 to 100.¹

Measuring voter ideology

Having developed a measure of party ideology, our second major estimation task is to estimate the median ideological position within the electorate of each country, at each election. We proceed in a series of three steps. First, for each election, we obtain ideology scores for each party in that election and place the parties on an ideological dimension by their score. Second, for each party, we find an interval on this dimension where its supporters are located. This was done in the following manner: for each party we calculate the midpoint between this party and the one immediately left of it and another midpoint between this party and the one immediately right of it. We assume that those who vote for this party fall into this interval between these two midpoints on the left-right ideological dimension. This is a simple application of Euclidean preference relations: voters choose the candidates/parties that are closest to them. Voters on the left side of this interval will vote for the party on the left of this party, and the ones on the right side of this interval will vote for the party on the right of it (see Kim & Fording 1998: 92–93).

Third, for each election, we find the percentage of the vote received by each party (from Mackie & Rose 1990, supplemented by the Annual Data Yearbook of the *European Journal of Political Research*). At this point, we have the percentage of the electorate that falls into each interval that we have created. Having now transformed the data to a grouped frequency distribution, we estimate the median position by using a formula outlined in almost any introductory statistics text (we use Bohrnstedt & Knoke 1982: 52). The particular variant of this formula that we use is as follows:

$$M = L + \{(50 - C)/F\} * W \quad (1)$$

where:

M = Median voter position (ideological score).

L = The lower end (ideological score) of the interval containing the median.

C = The cumulative frequency (vote share) up to but not including the interval containing the median.

F = The frequency (vote share) in the interval containing the median.

W = The width of the interval containing the median.

Having created a measure of voter ideology for 25 countries for 364 election years, we then compute a yearly series of voter ideology scores within each country. We estimate missing (nonelection) years by using linear interpolation, which assumes a steady change in ideology between elections. While we realize that ideology is not likely to change this steadily in every case, we feel that in general this approach is reasonable since it is likely that ideology is relatively stable in the short term. More importantly, estimation of missing years facilitates comparisons across countries which would otherwise be biased due to the irregularity of the timing of elections across countries (see Kim & Fording 1998: 80–84; Kim & Fording 2002).

Voter ideology: cross-national and cross-time comparisons

In Figure 1 we present a cross-national comparison of the average ideological scores of 21 Western democracies during the entire period 1945–1998. In sum, Figure 1 presents a snapshot describing the entire period of analysis. During this period, it is clear that Norway, Luxembourg and Sweden have been the

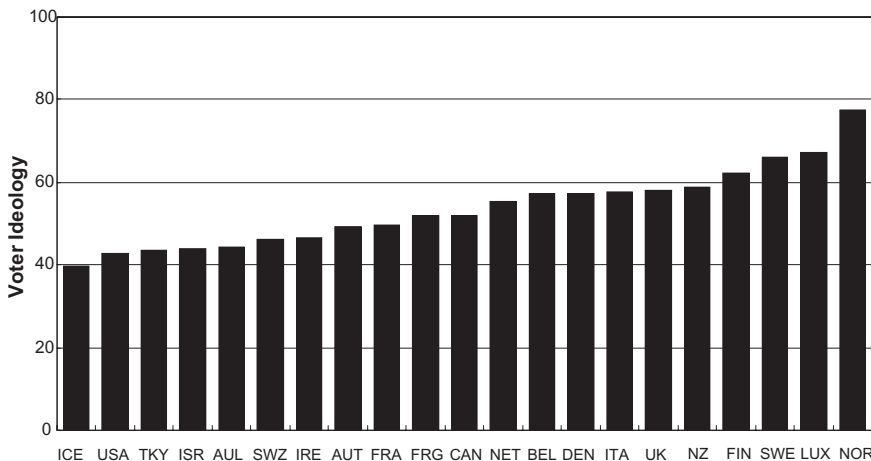


Figure 1. Voter ideology in Western democracies, 1945–1998 (average median voter position).

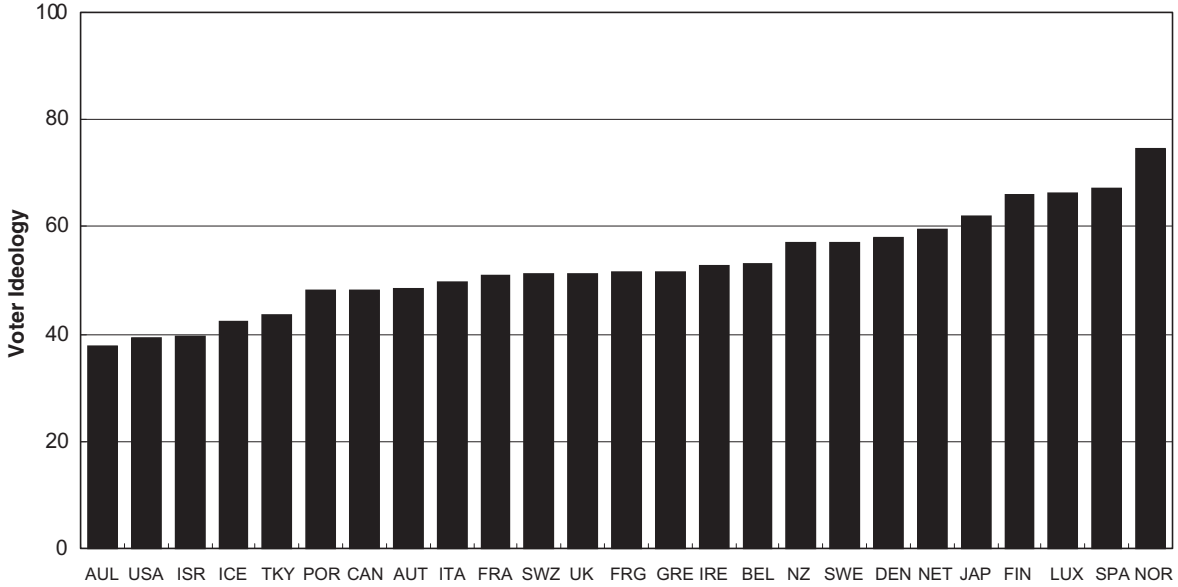


Figure 2. Voter ideology in Western democracies, 1974–1998 (average median voter position). (Note: The 25 countries included in the data set are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. All political parties included in the data set for these countries are listed in the codebook accompanying the manifesto data.)

most left-leaning states, while Iceland, the United States and Turkey have been at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum of Western democracies.

There are four countries in the manifesto data set for which the data are available for shorter time periods (Greece, Japan, Portugal and Spain). To take advantage of all of the information in the data set, we present a cross-national comparison of the average ideological scores of 25 Western democracies during the period 1974–1998 in Figure 2. During this period, we see roughly the same set of most left-leaning and right-leaning states, with the exception of Spain replacing Sweden as one of the most left-leaning countries.

Next, we examine *aggregate* movement in ideology among our panel of countries between the years 1950 and 1994, the years for which ideological scores are available for all 21 countries in Figure 1. The results of this analysis can be found in Figure 3, which displays ideology scores averaged across these countries. Consistent with conventional wisdom, Figure 3 indicates that the period of the 1960s and early 1970s was indeed a relatively left-leaning period followed by shifts to the right in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Although Figure 3 displays ideological movement among most countries in our sample, there is no reason to believe that all of these countries have followed this identical pattern during this period. Indeed, although the majority show some type of movement toward the left during the 1960s, in general there are significant differences across countries in the magnitude of such ideological shifts, not only during the 1960s, but throughout the entire period of analysis. Although a presentation of all 25 countries is beyond the scope of this

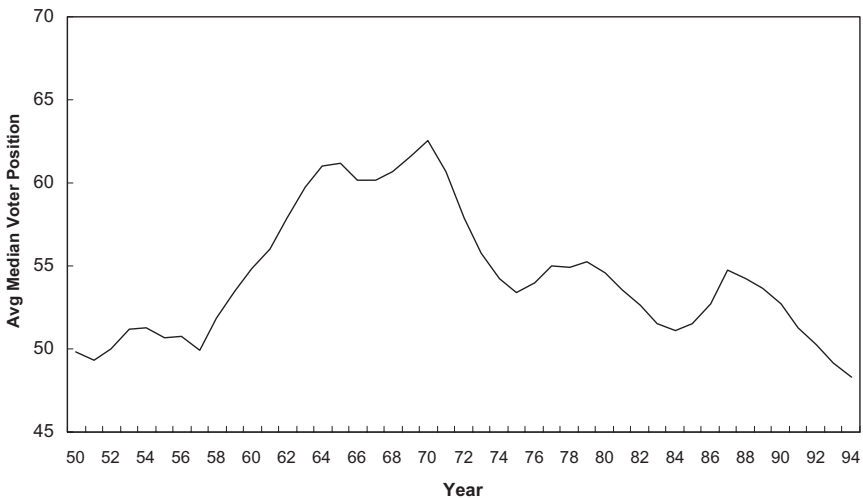


Figure 3. Voter ideology in Western democracies, 1950–1994.

article, we present two examples of different patterns of ideological movement in Figure 4. This Figure displays ideological movement in both the United States and Iceland, and we can see that although there have been some shifts, voter ideology in the United States has been relatively stable as it has stayed between the ideological scores of 35 and 50 for most of the period of analysis. Voter ideology in Iceland, however, displays a different pattern with greater short-term fluctuations.

Although space does not permit a presentation of each individual country, we can get some idea of the relative ideological volatility across countries during this time period by computing the standard deviation for each country series. Since our measure of voter ideology is comparable across countries,

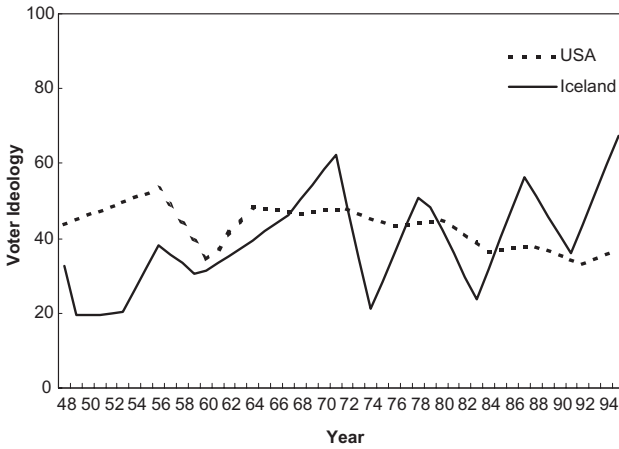


Figure 4. Examples of ideological stability and volatility.

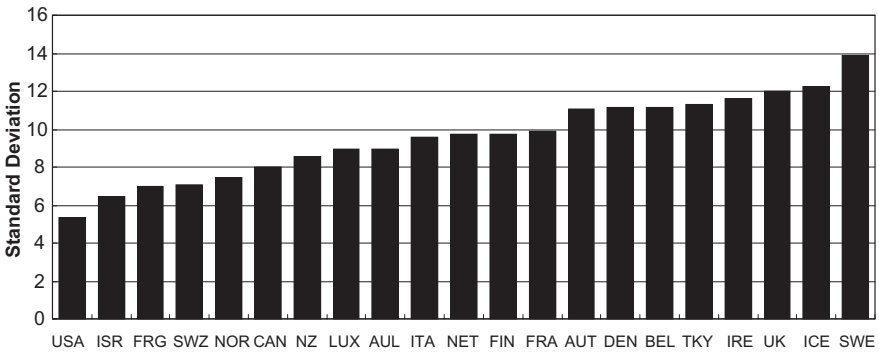


Figure 5. Ideological volatility, 1945–1998.

such a measure of ideological volatility is comparable as well. Figure 5 presents such a comparison. During this period, the United States, Israel and Germany have maintained relatively stable ideological trends, while voter ideology in Sweden, Iceland and the United Kingdom has exhibited significant variation over the years 1945 to 1998. It needs to be noted that here the standard deviation analysis captures different types of ideological volatility – for example, some countries exhibit an ideological pattern with continued short-term fluctuations (e.g., Iceland and Ireland). Other countries have experienced just a few periods of marked ideological shifts (e.g., Sweden in the 1990s and Austria in the 1970s and the 1990s). Still others have shown gradual, but significant, change (e.g., the United Kingdom). Countries with all of these types of ideological change scored high on the volatility analysis in Figure 5.

In our earlier piece, we also examined ideological trends among the English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States) separately from the other Western democracies in order to investigate the claim that the rightward movement which begins in the 1970s and extends into the 1980s in Figure 3 is not common to all the countries in our sample and that it is either most pronounced, or even entirely driven, by a movement toward the right among the English-speaking democracies. Such a possibility is suggested by Francis Castles (1990), who argues that, in recent years, a movement toward the right has been strongest in these countries, as evidenced by the economic policies of these countries.

Our investigation with the new data set in Figure 6 largely confirms our earlier findings. First, though a divergence in ideology can be seen among the two sets of countries, the real departure between the ideologies of the English-

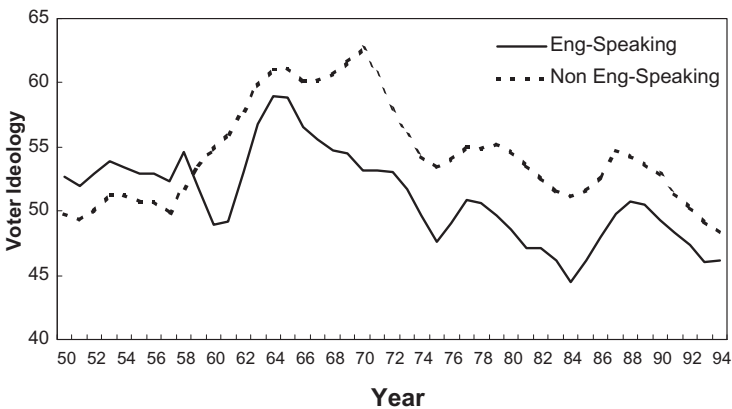


Figure 6. Voter ideology in Western democracies.

speaking and other Western countries occurred in the late 1950s rather than the 1980s. Since then, these two groups of countries have maintained a fairly substantial distance in ideology, with non-English-speaking countries substantially more left-leaning than English-speaking countries. Second, and more importantly for the question at hand, these two groups of countries have displayed similar trends in voter ideology. Generally speaking, both groups experienced a general shift to the left during the 1960s, as we might expect given the fact that this was a period of relative economic prosperity throughout the West. We also find that both groups began to shift back to the right during the early 1970s, which also coincided with the first oil shock and the subsequent downturn in most Western economies.

The fact that these trends were, at least to some extent, a common experience among Western democracies contradicts evidence presented by Host and Paldam (1990) that suggests that 'international opinion swings' do not exist among Western nations. With regard to Castles' argument that the shift toward the right in the 1980s has been stronger in English-speaking countries, we need to note that he is talking about a *policy* shift to the right in these countries. Since the magnitudes of shifts to the right in *voter ideology* in the 1980s are quite similar in these two groups of countries, this suggests a non-ideological explanation for the *differences* Castles finds between the two sets of countries.

Discussion

In this article, we have updated and expanded the Kim-Fording measure of voter ideology that originally appeared in this journal. Our updated measure largely confirms many interesting insights concerning voter ideology in Western democracies provided by our original measure. The trends in ideology in these countries themselves are important findings, but there are many other ways to use our measures of party and voter ideology either to study political phenomena in ways that were not previously feasible or to improve existing research in comparative politics (see Kim & Fording 1998: 88–91). The research presented in this article should therefore be considered as the beginning point of a larger body of research concerning the origin of voter ideology, its impact on government and public policy, and the development of theories of democracy.

Note

1. Although we use the same manifesto categories as Laver and Budge (1993), we construct our measure of party ideology somewhat differently. Their measure is equivalent to the

numerator of our measure or, in other words, the difference of IDLeft and IDRight as a percentage of all statements in the document. We believe that the denominator of our measure should be restricted to the total number of left-right statements only since we necessarily assume that voters evaluate parties strictly with respect to the left-right dimension. Regardless of this difference in the two measures, the two are nearly identical in empirical terms as they are correlated at 0.96.

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