

**Americans' Understanding of Ideological Labels:  
Evidence from Parallel Conjoint Experiments in Mass and Elite Samples**

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## Abstract

Political scientists have long argued whether the American electorate exhibits ideological thinking and how it may be different from that of elites. Most published studies, however, rely on correlational analyses and stratify by education to proxy the mass–elite divide. We address these gaps by implementing a novel conjoint experiment simultaneously on a common sample of U.S. adults and an original sample of legislative staffers. Respondents are presented with profiles of hypothetical individuals described in terms of race, gender, partisanship, and substantive issue positions – and then asked to rate these profiles on the standard seven-point ideological scale. We find that even when the party label is present, ideological assessments are dominated by issue positions and that the corresponding effects are mostly similar for mass and elite respondents. These findings have important implications for the literature on voters’ ideological sophistication and for the promise of policy representation in the United States.

*Keywords:* conjoint experiment, ideology, policy preferences, political sophistication, representation

Ideology is an important concept in political science scholarship (Carmines and D’Amico 2015; Feldman 2013; Jost et al. 2009), as there is widespread use of the labels “liberal” and “conservative” in American politics. Candidates for political offices often describe themselves and their opponents in these terms, and similar descriptions are the norm in the media. According to popular logic, ideology can be used to facilitate substantive representation – the preferences of voters and candidates map onto the ideological scale and voters can thus choose the closest candidate (Downs 1957). But for this type of voting rule to produce representatives whose policy positions match those of their constituents, two major assumptions must hold. First, members of the public must understand the correspondence between the sets of positions on economic, cultural, and racial issues and the ideological labels. And second, the way voters understand ideological labels must align with what is conveyed when the candidates and their positions are described in these terms. If voters and elites have different things in mind when they see and use the terms “liberal” and “conservative,” there can be a mismatch between actual and perceived policy representation. Thus, it is crucial to examine the way both the public and political elites understand ideological labels.

To be sure, political scientists have devoted a great deal of time to questions about the nature of ideology in the electorate. Most of this work, however, relies on self-reported survey responses and correlational analyses. This does not allow for causal claims and makes it difficult to disentangle the effects of issue positions from the effects of partisanship and other identities, such as race and gender, that can also influence impressions of ideology. Moreover, most works lack unique elite samples,<sup>1</sup> and instead just focus on differences related to levels of political knowledge or education to address questions of differences between those with different levels of political sophistication. As such, we contribute to the study of ideology and its implications for representation by addressing these gaps in the existing literature.

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<sup>1</sup> For notable exceptions, see Jennings (1992) and Lupton et al. (2015).

We present the results of an original conjoint experiment fielded in parallel among (1) a sample of U.S. adults drawn from the general population; and (2) a sample of elites drawn from a pool of state and federal legislative staffers. Our design incorporates an experiment within an experiment: half of respondents see profiles' race, gender, partisanship, and issue positions whereas the other half does not get the party information. The results show that profiles' positions on cultural, economic, and racial issues all affect assignment of ideological labels independently of other provided attributes like race and gender and that these effects do not depend on whether information on profiles' partisanship is provided or not. Besides some differences on the conservative end of the scale, the translation of issue positions into ideological scores is mostly similar in the mass sample and the elite sample. Overall, our findings suggest that voters' unfamiliarity with ideology as well as the divide between masses and elites have been overstated – and thus have encouraging implications for democratic representation in contemporary U.S. politics.

### **Expectations**

We hypothesize that partisan and demographic information will not completely dominate and that cultural, economic, and racial issues will all significantly affect placements on the ideological scale.<sup>2</sup> So although there is some evidence that identities matter more than issues (Mason 2018), we instead side with works showing that even when the party cue is available, people can and do use policy positions when making political judgements (Chong and Mullinix 2019; Orr and Huber 2020; Clifford et al. 2025). Most relevantly, respondents make significant use of the stated issue priorities when estimating whether a candidate was either a liberal or a conservative (Goggin et al. 2020). We build on this work in several ways and thus, expect to add even more evidence of individuals' abilities to link policies to ideological labels.

We did not preregister any expectations about the similarity of the public and elite samples.

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymized preregistration: [https://osf.io/shxqm/overview?view\\_only=1c97fbf4a0be4ed5ac4eeb20f56af919](https://osf.io/shxqm/overview?view_only=1c97fbf4a0be4ed5ac4eeb20f56af919)

However, we expect to find only modest differences between the two. Our contention is that increased polarization among legislators and political activists has sharpened the signals sent by this top stratum and made ideological understanding more accessible for even those at the lower end of the political knowledge scale (Hare and Poole 2014; Collitt and Highton 2021). Indeed, in more recent iterations of the American National Election Study (ANES) the gaps between the most and least informed are not as large as those observed in earlier samples (Simas 2023). This finding is also supported by recent analyses showing that “along with the increasing knowledge, the importance of knowledge in associating opinions on individual issues with LibCon responses was decreasing” (Kollman and Jackson 2026, 10). Subsequently, we expect that individuals in both samples will use issue positions in a similar fashion.

### **Data and Methods**

In June and July of 2025, we fielded two parallel conjoint survey-experimental studies: one on a regular sample of U.S. adults (mass sample) and one on a sample of political professionals (elite sample).<sup>3</sup> Respondents for the mass sample were recruited using CloudResearch Prime Panels, and 4,066 of them completed the survey. Respondents for the elite sample were federal and state legislative staffers in the United States. Though the ideal may have been to survey the elected officials themselves, we contend that the close working relationship between those officials and those who are selected to work for them make staffers a more than adequate proxy, as “staff play a key role in transmitting expertise and developing policy positions among legislators and thus in the operations and effectiveness of Congress” (Montgomery and Nyhan 2017, p. 746).<sup>4</sup> Staffers were recruited by sending invitations with the anonymous survey link to professional email addresses

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<sup>3</sup> The study adheres to APSA’s Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. See the Online Appendix for further details.

<sup>4</sup> Our conceptualization of elites is also consistent with Converse (1964), who notes that although he uses a sample of U.S. House members, one “would expect the same general contrast to appear if the elite had been a set of newspaper editors, political writers, or any other group that takes an interest in politics” (p. 30).

purchased from LegiStorm, a research organization that specializes in information on politicians and political staffers. Of the more than 13,000 staffers on the list, 461 completed the survey.<sup>5</sup>

Demographics of both samples are available in Table A1 of the Online Appendix, but of note is the fact that when compared to the mass sample, the elite sample was younger, more educated, and more affluent as well as had larger shares of males, whites, and liberals.

One common way that researchers have attempted to assess individuals' levels of ideological thinking is by looking at the correlations between their own issue opinions. But just because an individual's issue positions are not consistently liberal or conservative, it does not necessarily mean that they are not aware of what issue positions should be labeled liberal and conservative. A significant portion of liberals and conservatives know which policies they should support given their ideological identifications but still hold policy preferences that run contrary to those labels (Groenendyk et al. 2023). Thus, we focus on how individuals incorporate information about issue positions into their perceptions of the ideology of others.

Respondents in both samples were presented with a conjoint experiment that exposed them to profiles of hypothetical individuals and asked them to assess the ideology of those individuals on the seven-point scale ranging from 1 = *Extremely liberal* to 7 = *Extremely conservative*. Each respondent saw and rated nine unique profiles. One randomly assigned half of respondents (partisanship condition) saw profiles described in terms of six attributes: demographics (race/ethnicity and gender), partisanship (Democratic, Independent, or Republican), and positions on three political issues (economy, culture, and race). The demographic attributes were presented first, and issue positions were presented last. The order of attributes within these blocs was randomized between

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<sup>5</sup> We did not keep a log of invalid email addresses, but automatic responses indicated that many of our emails were undeliverable and many of those contacted were no longer serving in their listed staff positions. So, while the vast majority of those contacted did not complete the survey, we estimate that the response rate among those who actually received the email was closer to 5–6%.

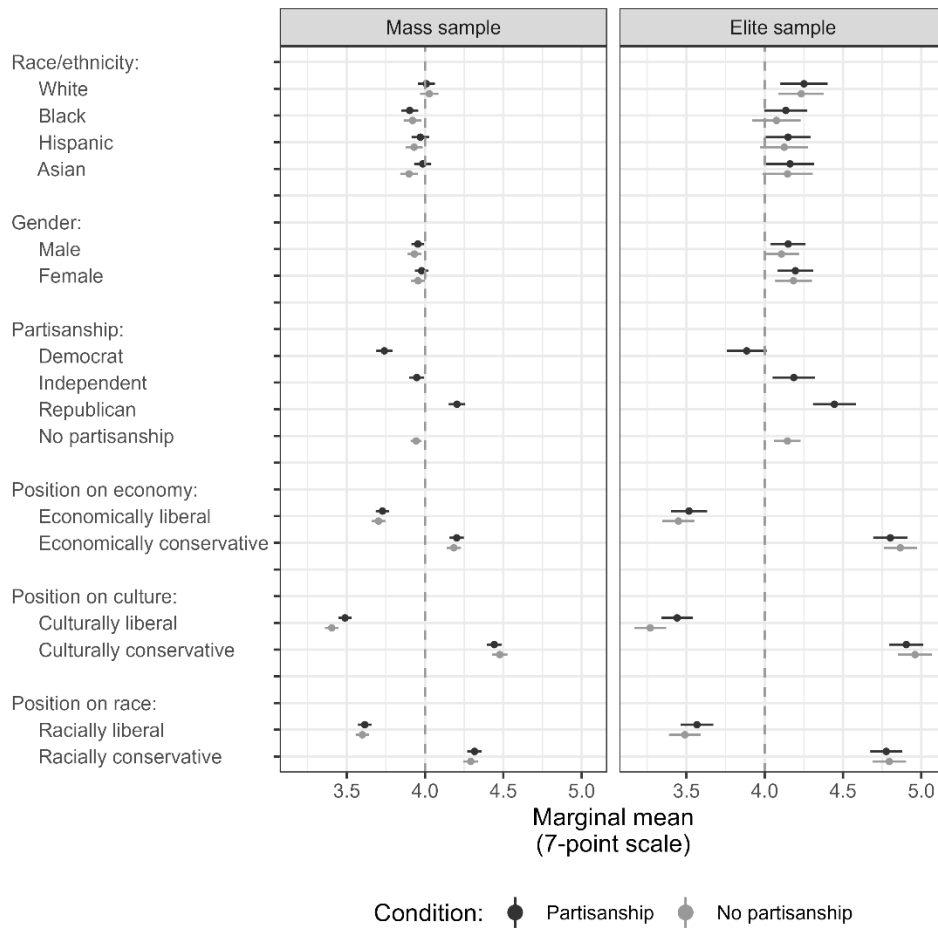
respondents. The other half of respondents (no-partisanship condition) completed a similar task but without the partisanship attribute.

Our experimental design differs three major ways from that used previously (Goggin et al. 2020). First, our treatments present specific issue positions modeled after those featured on recent waves of the ANES (e.g., “There should be a government health insurance plan for everyone” or “Medical expenses should be paid by individuals through private insurance plans”) rather than just issue priorities (e.g., “Improving healthcare”). Second, our respondents are asked to rate the profiles on the full seven-point ideological scale instead of simply choosing between “liberal” and “conservative.” These changes push beyond general knowledge of issue ownership and provide a direct test of how different policy preferences map onto the various ideological positions. Lastly, we include an attribute that explicitly signals the partisanship of the profiles that we ask respondents to rate. The inclusion of the party label is important because it addresses the concern that issue positions are only utilized to the extent that they signal party identification; finding that issue positions matter when party information is provided will strengthen our claim of a causal connection between those positions and perceptions of ideology. All attribute values were independently randomized with uniform distributions. See the Online Appendix for the list of attributes with possible values (Table A2) and sample conjoint profiles in the two conditions (Figures A1 and A2).

## **Results**

Figure 1 presents the results of the conjoint experiment for the two samples (mass vs. elite) and the two conditions (partisanship and no-partisanship) in terms of marginal means. All presented results account for the experimental design and cluster standard errors by respondent. They show that ideological assessments do not depend on whether information on profiles’ partisanship is presented or not. This is an encouraging finding given widespread concerns about information equivalence in survey experiments (Dafoe et al. 2018). In both partisanship and no-partisanship conditions,

race/ethnicity and gender of profiles do not impact ideological assessments. Instead, in both the mass sample and the elite sample ideological assessments primarily depend on issue positions of the profiles. Figure A3 in the Online Appendix shows that this holds even when we split the mass sample by college education. Issue positions are consistently the strongest predictors of ideological ratings, though to a somewhat lesser degree among those without a college education.



**Figure 1.** Conjoint results  
*Note.* See Table A3 in Online Appendix for numerical results

But though the two samples are quite similar, the presented comparison suggests that the effects of issue positions on ideological assessments are somewhat larger in the elite sample than in the mass sample. Marginal means also indicate that these differences are primarily driven by the

differences in assessments of profiles with conservative positions. To more fully probe this finding and account for demographic differences between the two samples, we implement additional regression analyses. We subset observations to keep the relevant profiles' attribute values constant (e.g., select all profiles described as taking liberal positions on economy) and predict their ideological assessments with respondents' characteristics. The results are presented in Table 1. They show no consistent differences in assessments of liberal issue positions, but elite respondents rate conservative positions on all three issues with somewhat higher scores.

**Table 1.** Differences in ideological assessments between mass and elite respondents

	Profile with a liberal position on:		
	Economic issues	Cultural issues	Racial issues
Elite vs. Mass Respondent	-0.20*** (0.05)	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)
	Profile with a conservative position on:		
	Economic issues	Cultural issues	Racial issues
Elite vs. Mass Respondents	0.53*** (0.05)	0.37*** (0.05)	0.35*** (0.05)

*Note.* Positive = more conservative score. Standard errors in parentheses. Respondent-level controls: age, gender, education, income, race/ethnicity, and ideology. See Figure A4 in the Online Appendix for full results.

\*\*\* p < .001, \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05

Our research design does not allow us to speak to why we observe these differences at the conservative end of the scale. These findings could be tied to Donald Trump, as his policy positions and influence over the Republican Party have been shown to influence perceptions of conservatism (Amira 2022; Hopkins and Noel 2022), but more research is needed to move beyond just speculation. Yet even though we find differences in the magnitude of the effects of issues, the fact remains that both the public and elites connect policy positions to ideological labels.

### Conclusion

In this paper, our goal has been to explore how Americans understand ideological labels and whether these understandings differ between the mass public and the political elite. Results from a conjoint survey experiment fielded in parallel on a standard sample of U.S. adults and a sample of

legislative staffers show that assignments of ideological scores to conjoint profiles are based primarily on their issue positions, even when the information on profiles' partisanship is provided. This not only reinforces recent arguments for an increased relationship between issue positions and ideology in the electorate (Kollman and Jackson 2026; Zingher 2022; Kozlowski and Murphy 2021; Hare 2022), but our ability to more fully distinguish between substance and identity provides important causal evidence that is lacking from this largely observational work.

We also find relatively few differences between the masses and the elites. These results more directly speak to the original concerns about differing understandings of ideology leading to breakdowns in representation. Most other works illustrate stratifications in ideological thinking by focusing on political knowledge or education. While we would not argue that ideological understanding is uniform across all individuals, the similarity of our findings across the two samples stands in stark contrast to the “continental shelf” between elites and masses” (Converse 1964, 66) uncovered by prior work, but also has significant, more positive implications for the potential for substantive representation in the contemporary political environment.

Though an important advance, our contribution is certainly not the last word in the ongoing debate about the nature of ideology, and there is still much work to be done. Again, more research is needed to account for why we observe differences on the conservative end of the scale that we do not see on the liberal end. Such investigations should also take up questions of how this may impact representation. Additionally, while we show that people can connect issue positions to ideological labels when placing others, future research should further probe why this is not always apparent when individuals are placing themselves and what role norms play in this phenomenon (Groenendyk et al. 2023). Extensions of this sort are important for better understanding not just the nature of policy representation, but also the various ways in which campaign rhetoric, media, and party messaging can be used to facilitate or hinder it.

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## Online Appendix

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## **Research ethics**

The survey-experimental design did not use deception and did not expose participants to potential harms. Before agreeing to participate in the survey, respondents read information about the study's goals and content. Since no deception was used, there was no special debriefing. Participants did not receive compensation directly from the investigators. Participants in the mass sample were compensated by CloudResearch; the size and nature of the compensation are proprietary information. There are no other issues that are pertinent to the principles of respect of persons, beneficence, and justice as outlined by the Belmont Report that the investigators are aware of.

Person 1 of 10

Please review the profile described below, then answer the question.

<b>Gender</b>	Male
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	Black
<b>Partisanship</b>	Independent
<b>Views on economy</b>	There should be a government health insurance plan for everyone
<b>Views on culture</b>	Gay or lesbian couples should be permitted to adopt children
<b>Views on race</b>	Preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong

How would you describe this person's ideology?

Extremely liberal

Liberal

Slightly liberal

Moderate

Slightly conservative

Conservative

Extremely conservative

**Figure A1.** Sample profile, partisanship condition

Person 1 of 10

Please review the profile described below, then answer the question.

<b>Gender</b>	Female
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	White
<b>Views on culture</b>	Gay or lesbian couples should NOT be permitted to adopt children
<b>Views on race</b>	Blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion
<b>Views on economy</b>	There should be a government health insurance plan for everyone

How would you describe this person's ideology?

Extremely liberal

Liberal

Slightly liberal

Moderate

Slightly conservative

Conservative

Extremely conservative

Figure A2. Sample profile, no-partisanship condition

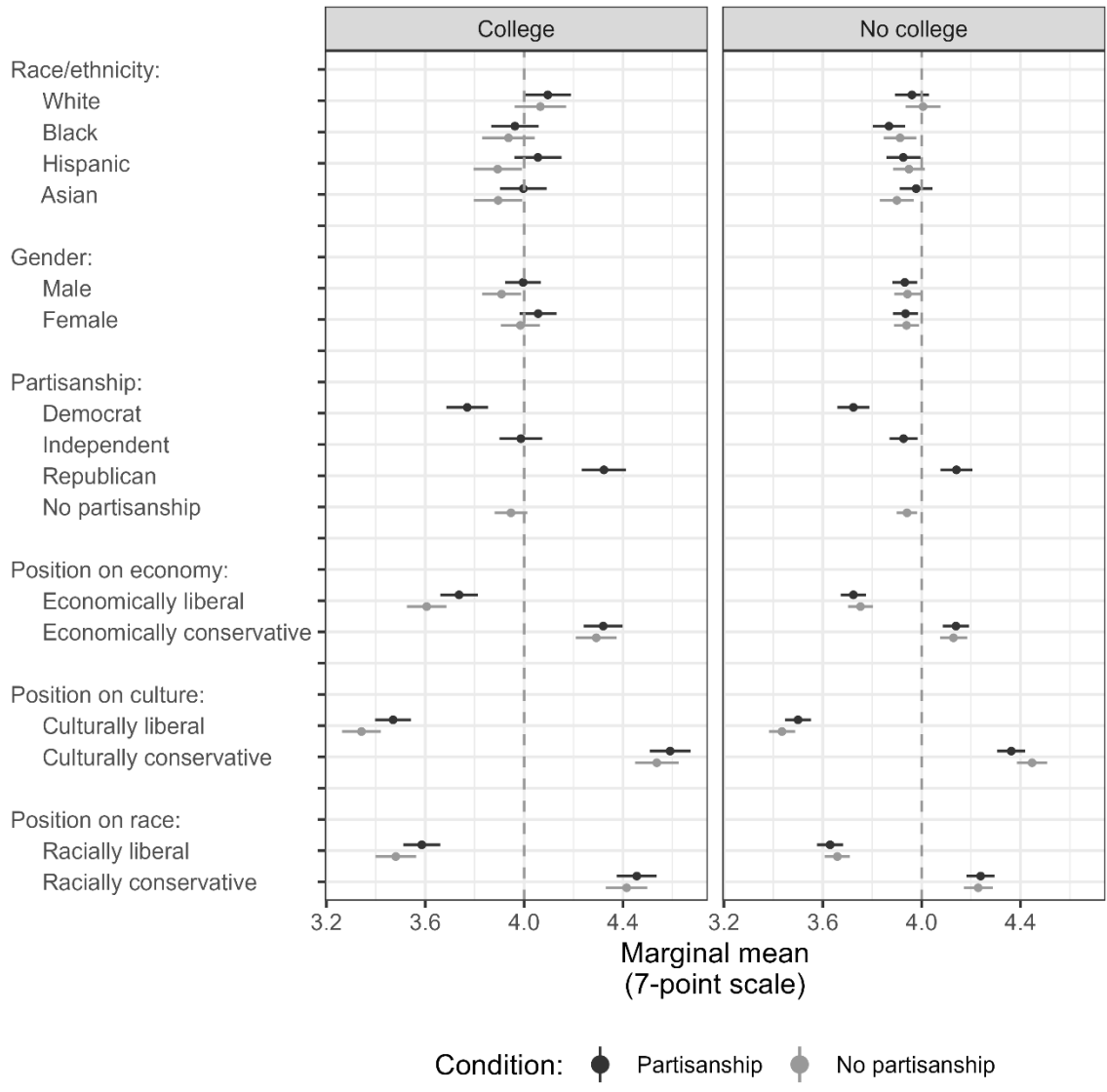


Figure A3. Conjoint results by education, mass sample

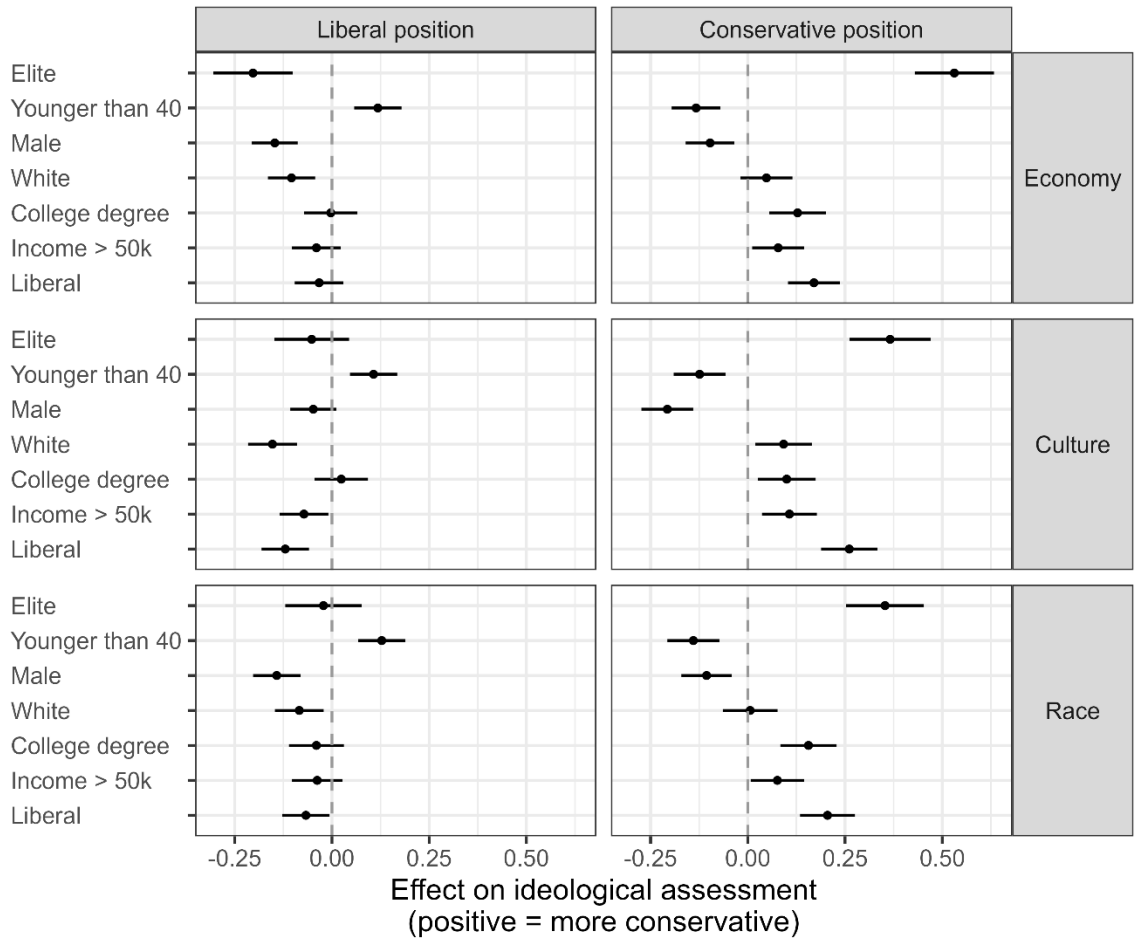


Figure A4. Predictors of ideological assessments

**Table A1.** Demographic differences between the two samples

	Mass sample	Elite sample	Difference
Younger than 40	0.42	0.70	0.27*** (0.02)
Male	0.40	0.59	0.20*** (0.02)
White	0.67	0.80	0.12*** (0.02)
College degree	0.34	0.96	0.61*** (0.02)
Income > 50k	0.55	0.92	0.37*** (0.02)
Liberal	0.32	0.60	0.29*** (0.02)

*Note.* Standard errors for difference estimates in parentheses.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

**Table A2.** Conjoint attributes and values

	Values	Aggregate positions
Race	White	
	Black	
	Hispanic	
	Asian	
Gender	Male	
	Female	
Partisanship	Democrat	
	Independent	
	Republican	
Position on economy	Government should provide more services even if it means an increase in spending	Economically liberal
	Government should provide fewer services in order to reduce spending	Economically conservative
	Government should see to people's jobs and standard of living	Economically liberal
	Government should let each person get ahead on their own	Economically conservative
	There should be a government health insurance plan for everyone	Economically liberal
	Medical expenses should be paid by individuals through private insurance plans	Economically conservative
Position on culture	Abortion should always be permitted without restrictions	Culturally liberal
	Abortion should never be permitted with no exceptions	Culturally conservative
	Gay or lesbian couples should be permitted to adopt children	Culturally liberal
	Gay or lesbian couples should NOT be permitted to adopt children	Culturally conservative
	Transgender people should use bathrooms that match their gender identity	Culturally liberal
	Transgender people should use bathrooms that match their sex at birth	Culturally conservative
Position on race	Government should improve the social and economic position of blacks	Racially liberal
	Blacks should improve their social and economic position themselves	Racially conservative
	Blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion	Racially liberal
	Preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong	Racially conservative
	Government should see to it that blacks get fair treatment	Racially liberal
	Whether blacks get fair treatment is not the government's business	Racially conservative

**Table A3.** Conjoint results, marginal means

	Mass sample		Elite sample	
	Partisanship	No-partisanship	Partisanship	No-partisanship
Race				
White	4.01 (0.03)	4.03 (0.03)	4.25 (0.08)	4.23 (0.07)
Black	3.90 (0.03)	3.92 (0.03)	4.14 (0.07)	4.08 (0.08)
Hispanic	3.97 (0.03)	3.93 (0.03)	4.15 (0.07)	4.13 (0.08)
Asian	3.99 (0.03)	3.90 (0.03)	4.16 (0.08)	4.15 (0.08)
Gender				
Male	3.95 (0.02)	3.93 (0.02)	4.15 (0.06)	4.11 (0.06)
Female	3.98 (0.02)	3.96 (0.02)	4.20 (0.06)	4.18 (0.06)
Partisanship				
Democrat	3.74 (0.03)		3.89 (0.07)	
Independent	3.95 (0.03)		4.19 (0.07)	
Republican	4.20 (0.03)		4.45 (0.07)	
No partisanship		3.94 (0.02)		4.15 (0.04)
Position on economy				
Economically liberal	3.73 (0.02)	3.70 (0.02)	3.52 (0.06)	3.45 (0.05)
Economically conservative	4.20 (0.02)	4.18 (0.02)	4.80 (0.06)	4.87 (0.05)
Position on culture				
Culturally liberal	3.49 (0.02)	3.40 (0.02)	3.44 (0.05)	3.27 (0.05)
Culturally conservative	4.44 (0.02)	4.48 (0.03)	4.90 (0.06)	4.96 (0.06)
Position on race				
Racially liberal	3.62 (0.02)	3.60 (0.02)	3.57 (0.05)	3.49 (0.05)
Racially conservative	4.32 (0.02)	4.29 (0.02)	4.78 (0.05)	4.80 (0.06)
<i>N</i>	4,066		461	

*Note.* Positions on the seven-point ideological scale from 1 = *Extremely liberal* to 7 = *Extremely conservative*. Standard errors in parentheses