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Christopher Ellis and James A. Stimson
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Ideology in America

Public opinion in the United States contains a paradox. The American public is symbolically conservative: it cherishes the symbols of conservatism and is more likely to identify as conservative than as liberal. Yet at the same time, it is operationally liberal, wanting government to do and spend more to solve a variety of social problems. This book focuses on understanding this contradiction. It argues that both facets of public opinion are real and lasting, not artifacts of the survey context or isolated to particular points in time. By exploring the ideological attitudes of the American public as a whole, and the seemingly conflicted choices of individual citizens, it explains the foundations of this paradox. The keys to understanding this large-scale contradiction, and to thinking about its consequences, are found in Americans' attitudes toward religion and culture and in the frames in which elite actors describe policy issues.

Christopher Ellis is assistant professor of Political Science at Bucknell University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has previously taught at North Carolina State University. His work has been published in the *Journal of Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Political Science and Politics*, *Electoral Studies*, and *Journal of Public Opinion and Parties*.

James A. Stimson earned his B.A. from the University of Minnesota and his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina. Stimson is former President of the Midwest Political Science Association and Treasurer of the American Political Science Association. He has authored or coauthored six books: *Yeas and Nays* (with Donald R. Matthews), *Issue Evolution* (with Edward G. Carmines), *Public Opinion in America*, *The Macro Polity* (with Robert S. Erikson and Michael B. MacKuen), *Tides of Consent*, and *Mandate Politics* (with Larry Grossback and David A. M. Peterson). A Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he has won the Heinz Eulau and Gladys Kammerer awards of the American Political Science Association. He is founding editor of *Political Analysis* and has authored articles in all the major journals of political science.

Advance Praise for *Ideology in America*

"In this excellent book, Ellis and Stimson use a sophisticated methodological approach to trace the ebb and flow of ideology in American public opinion over the past 75 years. Their insights are relevant to a variety of audiences. For journalists, commentators, and pundits, Ellis and Stimson show that the public's liberal-conservative orientations cannot be extracted readily either from election results or from public opinion survey questions. For academics, they elaborate on the scholarly consensus that the mass public is largely 'innocent of ideology.' Instead, they demonstrate systematic patterns in the ways that citizens 'misuse' liberal-conservative terminology to describe their own political orientations. This book represents a major step forward in understanding how ordinary citizens think about the political world."

– William G. Jacoby, Department of Political Science, Michigan State University; ICPSR, University of Michigan

"In this extended treatment of the paradox of symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism Ellis and Stimson present important evidence for the continuation of the phenomenon first uncovered by Free and Cantril in 1967. They demonstrate that these 'conflicted conservatives' remain numerous despite the apparent polarization of the electorate in the recent past, that they differ from the general electorate, and that they are a force sufficient to change close presidential election outcomes. This is accomplished against the background of a fascinating account of the decline in the symbolic resonance of liberal identification since the 1930s, and of the nonpolitical meanings of conservatism."

– Kathleen Knight, Columbia University

"This is a compelling book on an interesting and important topic. Ellis and Stimson provide a driving analysis of seemingly every facet of the match and mismatch between people's policy preferences and ideological identification in America. Predictably strong on social science, the book also is accessible, readable, and engaging. *Ideology in America* is as good as it gets."

– Christopher Wlezien, Temple University

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CHRISTOPHER ELLIS
Bucknell University

JAMES A. STIMSON
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

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Preface

The Ohio ballot of 2004 featured a vote on an amendment banning gay marriage. It passed by a large margin. And the same was true in Arkansas, in Georgia, in Mississippi, in Montana, in North Dakota, in Oklahoma, and in Utah. All of these states, most conservative leaning, had ballot measures, and all were lopsided victories for the anti side of the gay marriage debate. The average vote was about 70% for the ban, 30% against.

There was never a large prospect that legal gay marriage was imminent in these states. The bigger story was the possible impact on the election for the president of the United States. The theory was that the ballot measures would mobilize large numbers of culturally conservative usual nonvoters to make a rare trip to the polls and then incidentally vote for George W. Bush, whose campaign was tightly linked to the opposition to gay marriage.

The ballot measures did coincide with increased turnout, particularly in more culturally conservative areas. And in Ohio, critical to Bush's Electoral College victory and won with a margin of just over a hundred thousand votes, the increased conservative turnout might have been enough to put Bush over the edge. Whether or not decisive, the popular narrative of the election in the weeks-long postmortem left an indelible impression that appeal to cultural conservatism in the United States was, as it had been many times before, a formula for Republican electoral success.

Bush wasted no time translating his victory into a proposal for governing. "Let me put it to you this way," he said; "I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it. It is my style."

And then the president set about turning his campaign promise for private accounts in the Social Security system into legislation. The Bush proposal would direct some proportion of the payroll tax contributions of younger workers into private, self-managed accounts, with the presumption that much of the investment would be in stocks with a higher return than the government bond investments of the Social Security system. The new program would dismantle, or at least greatly change, the system of government-financed income security for the elderly in place since the New Deal.

The complication of the proposal was that the Social Security system, as designed, was a system of intergenerational transfer. The current contributions of younger workers, that is, were already dedicated to the retirement support of the generation of their parents and grandparents. Thus the issue was not merely whether to replace a government-held account with a private one but also how to finance the current and future generations of recipients when the money they would require would be redirected into private accounts.

The proposal contemplated borrowing the additional money, a matter of trillions of dollars, when the federal deficit was already growing out of control. Since the demography of the baby boom already had the Social Security system in a deficit in 20 years or so, when the amounts paid out would exceed the amounts coming in, that additional financing was widely seen as a threat to the existing system. Supporters of the current Social Security system worried, and not without reason, that when the debt came due and younger workers were well started with private accounts, the reckoning would involve major cuts to traditional Social Security benefits to balance the books.[1]

As the proposal wound its way to Capitol Hill, the public weighed in. In polls, but perhaps more importantly in personal comments to members of Congress, very large numbers of actual and potential recipients voiced concern that the Bush proposal was a threat to the future of Social Security. The public, it was clear, was in no mood for experimentation. It had been living with the existing system for almost 70 years, liked it, and wanted it to continue unchanged in the future. In an uncertain world, Social Security was a rock, something that could be counted upon.

[1] Bush offered the assurance that the promises of Social Security would always be kept. But since the financial crisis to the system loomed a good decade at least after he would have left office, that was a promise that he was powerless to keep.

As members heard that outpouring, doubts began to arise. "Political capital" or not, Republicans began to become nervous that establishing private accounts would be seen as opposed to the continuation of Social Security, long famous as the "third rail of American politics." It became clear that such a proposal would likely have Republicans going it alone, with no Democratic support. And although the votes of Democrats were not needed, the political cover of bipartisanship was.

Thus the messages going back to the White House from Capitol Hill began to replace enthusiasm with reserve, reserve with caution, and, eventually, caution with fear. Republicans had heard approving responses when they characterized the Social Security system as "bankrupt." But now, as they proposed to change it, the message of public opinion become starkly supportive of the status quo.

Congressional Republicans were looking for a way out. It was provided to them by Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. Grassley read the tea leaves of public sentiment and declared that he found so little support for the Bush proposal that he declined even to schedule hearings on the bill. It was going to die anyhow, but that was the final whimper of Bush's most important policy proposal.

But the failure of Bush's plan to overhaul Social Security was more than about a simple misreading of how much "capital" Bush had indeed earned by appealing to a culturally conservative electorate. As it turns out, the role that gay marriage played in shaping the 2004 results was probably misread, too. Although the public was clearly uneasy about homosexual relations and was willing (particularly in culturally conservative states) to express its support for "traditional marriage" at the ballot box, it was uneasy – and was growing more so – about the possibility of providing government a means to regulate gay and lesbian unions out of existence entirely.

And despite the fact that "moral values" famously topped the list as the most important problem facing the nation in 2004 exit polls, "values" turned out to be only a small part of what voters, particularly swing voters, were thinking about in the election.[2] There is also precious little evidence that "values" voters turned out in higher rates in 2004 than in elections prior. Bush's victory was in all likelihood much more a result of a fairly good economy – and some residual "rally around the flag" enthusiasm following September 11 and the invasion of Iraq – than it was about these sorts of cultural concerns.

[2] See Hillygus and Shields 2005 for a thorough discussion of this point.

So, which nation are we? Are we the one that holds dear cherished symbols of marriage, family, and tradition and resists real or perceived efforts to encroach on these symbols? Or the one that so strongly supports Social Security as a government benefit for retirement that it would not hear of any conservative experiments in lessening the government role, even by a relatively popular newly reelected president?

The theme of this book is that we are both Americas, the one that reveres the symbols of tradition and the one that fervently supports a redistributive pension system for seniors. We are one and the same, a symbolically conservative nation that honors tradition, distrusts novelty, and embraces the conservative label – and an operationally liberal nation that has made Social Security one of the most popular government programs ever created.

Our story here of gay marriage and a failed proposal to change the retirement system is just an illustration. Symbolic conservatism is much more than marriage. And it is much more than – fundamentally different from – culturally conservative politics as defined by the religious right. It is respect for basic values: hard work, striving, caution, prudence, family, tradition, God, citizenship, and the American flag. And the ranks of Americans who cherish these values is no fringe activist minority; it is the mainstream of American culture. It is also not explicitly political, except in the sense that strategic political elites have tried to make it so. It is woven into the fabric of how ordinary citizens live their lives.

And for the other side, operational liberalism, Social Security is also no exception. Most Americans like most government programs. Most of the time, on average, we want government to do more and spend more. It is no accident that we have created the programs of the welfare state. They were created – and are sustained – by massive public support.

Our plan of attack is to tell both stories, of why Americans predominantly identify as conservatives, when at the same time supporting a liberal government role in a wide range of particular circumstances. We will not try to resolve the conflict between them. We will embrace it as the right story of what America is: both liberal and conservative.

Clearly many Americans, authors and most potential readers included, are not both liberal and conservative. The political class, of which we are jointly members with our readers, lines up symbols to match policy, or the reverse. That fact can make us forget that many citizens do not do so. This group is a very large proportion of the electorate and, so far as we can tell, always has been. We will give these people sustained attention, trying to understand why the default ideological identification of America seems to be "conservative," while the default attitude toward government programs is support for more.

BACKGROUND

The research of which this book is the product originated when we were both at the University of North Carolina. The discovery of conservative symbolic dominance is as easy as looking at the most recent question on liberal and conservative self-identification. The appreciation of operational liberalism was a more subtle and gradual process. It began with initial work on the study of public policy mood (Stimson 1991). One cannot compile all of the survey questions on domestic policy issues without eventually noticing that liberal responses to such queries consistently outnumber conservative ones.

The conflict between symbolic conservatism and operational liberalism is developed more fully in *Tides of Consent* (Stimson 2004). There the group to be called "conflicted conservatives" was first observed in a treatment of a small section of one chapter. But that chapter ends more in a question mark than a conclusion. It left us both struck by the idea that contradiction was more normal in American politics than it was aberrant. We determined somehow to get to the bottom of that. This book is the product of about six years of joint effort toward that end.

Our first conception is that the problem for our research was to explain why so many people could simultaneously embrace conservative symbols and liberal policy preferences. And we have done that, particularly in Chapters 6 and 7. But along the way we decided that it was not as simple as one large, but nonetheless deviant, group – that understanding American ideology more generally would be a necessary step along the way. That is what we have endeavored to do.

We are ourselves a bit conflicted. The two authors are on opposite sides of political debates as often as not. When we write about liberals and conservatives, it is not like a cowboy movie in which the good guys wear white hats and the bad guys black. We are likely to disagree over who should wear which hat. But we share a scientific commitment to getting the theory and facts right, which makes working together easy, fun, and profitable.

And if one of us is right and the other one wrong, it is probably not going to be decided who is which in the pages of this book.

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This project began at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which brought the two authors together and provided a wonderfully stimulating environment. We thank the Department of Political Science; the American Politics Research Group; and a large number of colleagues, faculty and graduate students, who contributed to our work in myriad ways.

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