Searching for the Center:
an investigation into the political center in American politics

Steven M. Karceski

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2024

Reading Committee:

Edgar Kiser, Chair

Sarah Quinn

Steven Pfaff

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Sociology

University of Washington

Abstract

Searching for the Center:
an investigation into the political center in American politics

Steven M. Karceski

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Edgar Kiser

Department of Sociology

This dissertation explores the contemporary meanings of the political center within the American political discourse, as used in academic research, through the various accounts of self-described advocates for the political center, according to public opinion, and through self-identification in social surveys. It contains three chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. One chapter creates a typology of the different meanings of the political center. The typology groups meanings into categories of the depoliticized center, the citizen center, the political actor center, and the elite consensus center. The next chapter explores in detail the meanings of the center when it is determined by public opinion: when the median or net support represent the center, or when quantitative ideological measures are used to determine the center. Finally, the last chapter uses rare survey data that asks respondents whether they identify with the political center. The frequency of identification with, and the demographic and political characteristics associated with, the terms "centrist" and "moderate" are investigated. I conclude with a proposed theoretical model of the political center and suggestions for additional research on the topic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a tremendous debt gratitude to my committee, Edgar Kiser, Sarah Quinn, Steven Pfaff, and Daniel Bessner. Edgar, Steve, and Sarah read countless versions of the work included in the dissertation and spent hours talking with me about the ideas contained within it. They each had an immeasurable impact on the final product. I cannot thank them enough. And Dan agreed to serve as my GSR when I really needed one, and needed one quickly. His feedback from a historical perspective will be very important as I move the project forward.

Other people in the Department of Sociology that helped through graduate school include Bob Crutchfield, Sara Curran, Kyle Crowder, and Nathalie Williams. A special thanks is owed to Jerry Herting for always serving as a listening board for methodological ideas, chatting about soccer, and financing the purchases of many pitchers of beer. Finally, Susanna, Fatema, and Ulrika and the rest of the UW administration and staff; they were always incredibly helpful and supportive. I owe them a lot.

To my graduate student friends, especially my cohort, who helped make graduate school an enjoyable journey. Special thanks to Vic, Maria, Marco, Chris, John, Joan, Andrea, Frank, Lindsey, Breon, Tim, Thiago, Emily, and everyone else that enjoyed talking about research, playing soccer or softball, and taking part in pub nights at Big Time, Schultzy's, or the College Inn.

I wouldn't have made it this far without Kivan Polimis and Charles Lanfear. Both are wonderful friends and continue to be incredible resources. Kivan, in particular, has spent more time talking to me about the political center than anyone else.

Thanks to the people who have heard me present this work in the ASA political sociology panels, SSHA, UW SocSem, NYU Abu Dhabi, and at the IFFS in Stockholm. I benefited from countless comments and criticisms, and the project is much better for it.

I owe a special thanks to my friends in Sweden: Malcolm Fairbrother and Pontus Strimling. The two of them continue to come through with generosity and kindness. Working with them gave me skills and experience that significantly improved the project.

Thanks to all the people who were willing to talk with me about politics and the center. A few friends, in particular, who often advocated for the political center, showed me that the center means different things to different people, and claiming the center is a position that people take when they believe themselves to be above tribalism, extremism, and even ideology itself. These conversations also showed me how unaware of aggregate public opinion even the most educated Americans tend to be.

Thanks to the Karceskis, Larges, Alexanders, and Welches. My family has been endlessly supportive throughout my graduate school career.

Finally, I cannot possibly articulate everything my amazing partner Bekah has done to help me through this dissertation. Whether sharing meals, watching movies, taking trips, going on hikes, walking our dog, or discussing my project itself, as well as politics or social theory, no one played a bigger role in helping me get through this dissertation. I can't wait to continue our life together, along with Daphne, as we move to Maine.

DEDICATION

For my mother, Dawn.

Chapter 1
Introduction

This dissertation is an investigation into the meaning of the political center. The center is commonly evoked in American political discourse, but the meaning of the concept and its associated terms – centrist, centrism, and moderate – are rarely defined and often used in a manner that facilitates projecting a range of different meanings upon it. It is a floating signifier in that it can mean a variety of things, depending on the individual using the term and the context in which it is used. For some, especially the self-described centrists who advocate for the political center – the center is a good thing, and practically anything they view in a positive light can be said to be centrist.

My dissertation represents an effort to better understand the meanings of the political center. The analyses presented use media articles, books from advocating for the political center, social science scholarship, and public opinion data to explore the different meanings but also identify key contradictions across the identified meanings. I create a typology of the political center (chapter two) and consider the meanings of the political center rooted in public opinion data (chapters three and four). In chapter three, I use multiple approaches to determine which policy positions can be considered to represent the center. In chapter four, I compare the individuals who (1) identify with the center (via "centrist" or "moderate") with (2) the individuals most likely to hold preferences systematically aligned with the center (via the median position).

In the typology (chapter two), I identify a set of distinct meanings of the political center. The center can refer to a normative depoliticized orientation toward politics, where the center is represented by the absence of partisanship and ideology, both of which only prevent politicians, party organizations, and voters from realizing the objective, rational, pragmatic, and/or neutral

potential of the center. Here centrism is a way to move beyond irrational and extreme partisanship and tribalism. The center can also refer to a central location within a defined space, primarily the space of citizens in terms of their policy preferences (what is popular or middle ground) and members of Congress according to their legislative voting behavior (in terms of bipartisanship). Finally, the center is often used to describe positions associated with the interests of the elite. These include Schlesinger's "vital center" (liberal democratic capitalism in the style of the New Deal), anti-populism, incrementalism, and a orientation toward policy categorized as socially liberal and economically (sometimes "fiscally") conservative (or "libertarian"), with a constant emphasis on balanced budgets and "fiscal responsibility" (often as a means to oppose social spending, and almost never in support of tax increases).

One of the key findings of the dissertation is that the policies presented as the center tend to look quite different from empirically-driven determinations of the center within the space of public preferences, what I call the "citizen-focused" center. Throughout the dissertation, I use this citizen-focused center as a benchmark for comparison with the other presentations of the center. I do this because, if the center is to be a good thing, then I believe it should converge with the only meaning of the center that is necessarily aligned with the goal of democracy: the rule of the many rather than the rule of the few. Aside from this one assumption – that democracy is a desirable goal (albeit an imperfect one[1]) – I do my best to avoid taking partisan or ideological positions and let the evidence speak for itself.

The discourse around the political center tends to blur together the different meanings. Inaccurate conclusions are likely to emerge when there is a failure to distinguish between the different meanings. For example, media outlets constantly suggest there is an electoral advantage for candidates positioning themselves in the center (Douthat 2016; Pildes 2021), but

[1] Many scholars of democratic responsiveness acknowledge the imperfections of any existing, real world democratic political system. Notably, theories of democracy require the often unmet condition of a highly attentive, engaged, and informed public, but many scholars who note this still point out that many existing alternatives are not as good, and so it remains that democracy, while imperfect, is still the best political system that humans have come up with (see Page and Gilens 2017).

also label billionaires like Michael Bloomberg and Howard Schultz "centrists" (Burns 2019; Edmondson 2019). Both billionaire "centrists" (who also describe themselves this way) held positions that were relatively conservative on economic issues and relatively liberal on social issues. A reader of the *New York Times* might (reasonably) think the public desires policies that fall into the socially liberal and economically conservative categories, but evidence from public opinion surveys suggest this is actually the least popular political orientation – such "centrists" might be successful (although these two were not), but it would have nothing to do with their political platforms.

Consider another example, also discussed in chapter two. In 2021, a bill to provide COVID relief was opposed by the "centrist" and "moderate" Senator Kyrsten Sinema precisely because it included an increase in the federal minimum wage (Edmondson 2021; Jaffe 2021). Sinema is associated with the center because she is more likely to vote with Republicans when compared to other Democrats (she is relatively "bipartisan"). However, the feature of the bill that she explicitly opposed, the increase in the federal minimum wage, was remarkably popular (Davis and Hartig 2019), even in her own state (Blank 2021); increases to the minimum wage almost always are (Bartels 2016). If "centrists" receive electoral advantages, as even some political scientists claim (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hall 2019), then it might seem that support for an unpopular position (one marker of Sinema's "centrism") can lead to electoral advantages. There is no evidence that supporting unpopular positions can increase electoral popularity (Ahler and Broockman 2018), but media outlets frequently imply that the association with the political center holds electoral advantages (Scott 2003; Stephens 2019; Zernike 2006).

Without distinguishing differences between the meanings of the center (something that almost never happens), a consumer of mainstream American political media might think a politician who is centrist on the grounds of bipartisanship, is also non-ideological, rational, pragmatic, and popular among voters. I do not engage in judgements on whether political positions are ideological, rational, or pragmatic, but I do compare what is presented as the

center to public opinion data. I conclude that what is presented as the center – as bipartisan, as non-ideological, pragmatic, and rational – is often *not* popular and is often related in some way to the interests of elites.

Ultimately, the discourse of the political center appears to be an attempt to brand the interests of the elite, generally reflecting a status quo bias, as if their interests represent partisan compromise, ideological neutrality, rationality, pragmatism, and that their interests are actually what the public also wants. I believe this makes more sense in the context of two major themes identified in political scholarship: the spread of neoliberalism and the occurrence of asymmetric polarization. Importantly, while there is little dispute over whether these trends occurred among political actors (parties, politicians, policy makers, etc.), there is little evidence that comparable rightward shifts occurred among members of the public.

The rest of the chapter is divided into two sections. The first discusses the literature on polarization and neoliberalism to set the stage for the findings in the other chapters. The second outlines the other chapters in the dissertation.

1.1 The shifting center: asymmetric polarization and neoliberalism

The literature on polarization and neoliberalism offer a potential explanation of why the political center is a confusing place. A clear understanding of the concepts of polarization and the rise of neoliberalism will provide an informative context for understanding how the different groups (citizens and political actors) have changed over time. Both asymmetric polarization and neoliberalism suggest a rightward shift among political actors, particularly with respect to economic and market-related policy. However, the evidence does not support the notion that the rightward shift was in response to citizen demand; a comparable shift to the right did not occur within the public. This means, over time, the center of the political actor space has moved further from the center of the citizen space.

1.1.2 Polarization

The mainstream discourse on polarization, like with centrism, doesn't always articulate the groups or spaces in which polarization is said to be occurring. Here I discuss the literature on polarization between the two major parties and polarization occurring in the public. For the same reasons it's often assumed the center of citizen preferences is equivalent to the center of partisan actors, it's often assumed polarization between the parties in congress is a sign of polarization among citizens. However, I argue (and I'm not alone; see Gilens 2012) that citizen preferences cannot be derived from the actions of elected representatives, and for that reason we cannot assume polarization in Congress is a result of polarization in the public (Campbell 2018 offers a different perspective).

There is little doubt that politicians and political parties in the United States have become more polarized. Influential quantitative scholarship inferring 'ideology' from Congressional voting behavior shows the average distance between members of each party (closer distances indicate more similar voting behavior) has increased quite consistently over the last fifty or so years (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1984). Some scholars, rather than calling this ideological polarization, suggest what is actually occurring is better characterized as increasing partisanship (Bonica 2014); members of different parties have become less and less likely to vote with members of the other party. Either way, polarization between parties and the actors within them is occurring.

A significant amount of the polarization is due to the party realignment that occurred over the same period. In the 1960s American political parties became more centralized and nationally-oriented (Mudge 2018a). Congressional actors became more disciplined on salient ideological issues: the Democrats became more liberal, especially once they adopted a pro-civil rights stance, and Republicans became increasingly conservative. For example, most of the conservative Southern Democrats either retired (without equivalent replacement) or switched to

the Republican Party, and the same thing occurred with the set of liberal Republicans. This meant a realignment of political partisanship along ideological lines, and decreased the likelihood of bipartisan compromise, making it more challenging than it was in the past (Drutman 2020).

This doesn't *necessarily* mean that members of either party have become more extreme, as it is often assumed (see Halstead and Lind 2001). If the distribution of ideological preferences in Congress remained constant, but more liberal members were sorted into the Democratic Party and more conservative members into the Republican Party, the average ideology for each party would diverge. In other words, at least *part* of the polarization, which is often interpreted as growing extremism, is simply due to realignment.

However, we also know the polarization is *asymmetric* (Hacker and Pierson 2005); the measures used to represent ideology suggest the Republican Party has moved more conservative/right than the Democratic Party has moved liberal/left (by some estimates the Democratic Party has barely moved more liberal at all). In other words, the polarization among political actors (politicians and parties) has primarily occurred because of the rightward shift of Republican Party politicians. This also implies the center of the space between the two parties has been pulled further to the right while polarization has occurred.

One limitation of the measures used in demonstrating polarization is that they are not designed to separate the degree of polarization for specific issues. DW-NOMINATE[2] (Lewis et al. 2020), the ADA's LQ (Americans for Democratic Action n.d.), and the donation-based CF Scores create a single, unidimensional ideological score (Bonica 2015), meaning there is no way to know whether polarization between the two parties has occurred uniformly across all issues (which is very unlikely) versus polarization occurring to varying degrees (or not at all)

[2] Technically, the DW-NOMINATE has two dimensions, but in practice the second dimension is rarely used. Further, while a second dimension would certainly provide additional information, it still would fail to capture changes with respect to specific policies or policy areas.

depending on the issue area. This is a criticism other scholars have made at attempts to measure democratic responsiveness using aggregated measures of candidate and voter ideology (Ahler and Broockman 2018; Jacobs and Shapiro 2002).

Therefore, there is strong evidence of polarization among political actors and the parties, however, (1) part of the polarization is due to party realignment (reorganization along partisan lines) and not necessarily due to growing extremism (at least in both directions), (2) the polarization is asymmetric (the Republicans have shifted much more than Democrats), and (3) the polarization discussions typically do not indicate the degree which it is occurring across different issue areas.

While the evidence of political actor polarization is convincing, evidence for polarization within the public is very mixed. Fiorina (2017) takes the strong position that the public has not polarized, Abramawitz (2011) finds increasing polarization in the public to be a great concern, and Campbell (2018) argues the public is, in fact, the driving force behind polarization among political actors. Conclusions are dependent on the definitions used for polarization and the groups for which polarization is said to be occurring. For example, Fiorina and Abramawitz both agree polarization is occurring most among the highly engaged, but they just disagree over how this should be characterized relative to the population as a whole. Further, alignment can occur between ideological, partisan, and issue-based measures, and the term polarization has also been used to describe the growing social distance perceived by many, feelings of hostility toward other political identities called "social" polarization (Mason 2015). The polarization literature is vast, but here I attempt to identify key themes relevant to the current project.

First, it is fairly clear that increasing ideological coherence within the two major parties is associated with a similar, albeit slower and weaker, alignment between ideology and party identity in the public; self-identified Democrats (Republicans) are more likely to identify as

liberal (conservative) than in the past[3]. Using data from the American National Election Study, Abramowitz (2011:44) shows the correlation between party identity and ideology (on a liberal-conservative scale) has increased from a little over 0.3 (the upper bounds of a 'weak' Pearson correlation) in 1972 to over 0.6 (a 'moderate' correlation) in 2004. But it's important not to read too deeply into this fact. For instance, it's also true that (1) more Americans identify as conservative than liberal, yet (2) more Americans identify as Democrat than Republican (and even more identify as Independent), and, (3) when it comes to actual issues, self-identified ideology is only weakly associated with issue preferences (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). This suggests a more identitarian style of polarization, rather than a preference-based or substantive polarization.

On the third point above, scholars have studied the degree to which party identity and ideology are, separately, associated with policy preferences on a variety of issues. In one of the most comprehensive studies on these relationships, Baldassari and Gelman (2008) show that correlations between partisanship and ideology (separately) and issue/policy preferences are generally weak correlations (the highest correlations they find are around 0.3), but the correlations have been, slowly, increasing over time. The correlations are stronger and have increased more for party identity than ideology, and the largest increases occurred among the 'moral' issues in both cases. Other scholars find similar estimates. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) estimate the correlation between policy preferences and partisanship to be 0.18 and find the correlation increasing at a rate of 0.04 per decade. For ideology, the correlation is 0.23 with an

[3] Another thing to point out is (1) a lot of people gravitate to the middle of the ideological range presented in surveys (this is true of all scales, not just ideology), (2) over the period of increasing polarization the number of Americans identifying as "Independent" (not with either party) has increased dramatically (identity with both major parties has been declining steadily since the 1990s), and (3) the correlations are based on placing this "Independent" category in the middle of party scale (from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican"). So, it is possible (and testable) that the increasing alignment (correlation) between ideology and party identity is driven by fewer and fewer Americans identifying with either party, and instead as "Independents." Put another way, the finding could be the result of coercing "Independents" into a middle position on a party identity scale (and this is the standard way of dealing with Independents).

average increase of 0.01 per decade. Yet, in both cases, the limited polarization the authors find is driven by the high-information, highly engaged citizens, a point emphasized by Abramowitz (2011). In general, scholars conclude there is only "limited" evidence of issue alignment: "This is too little evidence, we conclude, to talk about actual issue alignment" (Baldassari and Gelman 2008:434).

The research cited here suggests, even though we see (a) an increase in the correlation between party identity and ideological identity and (b) a weak but increasing relationship between policy preferences and party identity (and to a lesser extent with ideology), and there is still (c) little or no increase in correlations between issue preferences, meaning citizens generally do not hold positions consistent with our understandings of political ideology (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; also see Converse 2006 [1964]).

This section reveals a few important implications from the scholarship on polarization pertaining to the study of the political center. First, the polarization between members of the two parties in Congress is difficult to deny. In terms of voting behavior, members of the two parties vote more similarly to other members of their party and are less likely to vote with members of the other party than in the past. The polarization is asymmetric: the Republican Party's shift to the right (or more Republican-partisan) significantly outweighs any shift to the left. And polarization is represented in an aggregated, unidimensional space, meaning we are unable to separate the issues for which partisan actors are moving further apart.

Second, the evidence of a parallel polarization among the public is mixed. The ideological associations of each party has become more salient over time and people are more likely to sort into their party on ideological grounds than before. Issue preferences are weakly, but increasingly, associated with party identity and ideology (and the increase is primarily driven by high-information, high-education, politically engaged individuals). Yet there is weak evidence of issue alignment; the correlation between preferences on different issues is very weak and not increasing.

1.1.3 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an ideological orientation characterized as a pro-market orientation focusing on economic-related issues, especially the welfare state, taxation, regulation, privatization, and free trade. According to Stephanie Mudge, neoliberalism is marked by the belief that "markets are both the means and ends of government" (Mudge 2018b:502). It's often associated with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations (see Prasad 2006), as their administrations marked a period in which neoliberalism took hold in the Western world, but it also took hold within "center-left" parties around the world (Centeno and Cohen 2012; Mudge 2018a).

Associations between the Republican Party and neoliberalism are very common (Harvey 2007; Prasad 2006), but more recent studies of neoliberalism also emphasize the influence of the neoliberal ideology among political elites within both parties or specifically within the Democratic Party. The argument is, since the Republican Party and its politicians were already positioned relatively conservative, the broad shift to the right, in terms of the state's relationship with the market, had more of an impact as the Democratic Party moved closer to the Republicans.

The Democratic Party has traditionally been the party of the left and the less-advantaged. However, over time the Democratic Party has looked less and less like this characterization. Scholars have documented the pro-market shift within the Democratic Party through various mechanisms. Mudge (2018a) describes the changes within the Democratic Party by focusing on the party's connections to economic experts, who shifted away from the Keynesians in the FDR administration, to an emphasis on free-trade, less-interventionist regulatory policies, and less redistribution. Other scholars document a similar phenomenon focusing on the change of culture within various government offices, primarily pushed by center-left actors within the Democratic party, that emphasized economic efficiency over "rights, universalism, equity, and limiting corporate power," all reflecting an "economic style of

reasoning" (Berman 2022:4). One historian ties the change to the ideological beliefs of politicians and other actors within the Democratic Leadership Council, who effectively won control of the party and pushed "personal responsibility" to justify reducing universalism in the welfare state, strongly opposed organized labor and other "special interests" (by which they meant grassroots racial, gender, and environmental justice groups), and an embrace of private and corporate control over operations previously administered by the state (Geismer 2022). The result, as Martin Gilens notes, is that "On many regulatory and market-oriented economic issues, then, the policy orientations of the two parties have become much more similar, if not indistinguishable" (Gilens 2012:167).

While the shift to the right among political actors is well established, there is no evidence of a comparable shift in the public. In general, most policy preferences are stable in the aggregate (Page and Shapiro 1992) and the American public tends to hold left or liberal leaning positions, particularly on economic issues (Drutman 2017; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). But this is not how political actors seemed to view the situation. During the Reagan administration, rightward shifts in economic policy were justified by politicians and in the press because they were said to simply reflect shifting preferences of Americans (Ferguson and Rogers 1986a). However, despite regressive changes to the tax structure, cuts to welfare assistance programs, and reduced regulations on business and corporations, the public preferences may have actually shifted *to the left* on economic issues during the first term of the Reagan administration. At a minimum, the public did not move to the right (Page and Shapiro 1992). Politicians claimed New Deal policies were no longer popular and the party needed to shake its association with them, yet some scholars show evidence that the public's association of the Democratic Party with popular New Deal policies was an asset (Ferguson and Rogers 1986). This hasn't changed since the Reagan administration. Data from the General Social Survey consistently shows stable left-leaning preferences on a variety of economic-related issues, including social security, assistance to the poor, and spending on education and health care, to name a few. Public

support for increasing the minimum wage has consistently held large majorities (Bartels 2016), increasing taxes on high incomes and corporations holds strong majorities, and one scholar finds Americans, even many Republicans, are "proud" to pay taxes (Williamson 2017). Drutman (2017) shows that roughly half of 2016 Republican voters hold what can be characterized as liberal or egalitarian economic preferences, and scholars have long noted the American public is ideologically conservative but programmatically liberal, meaning they support conservative positions in the abstract, but support liberal positions when it comes to specific policies (Free and Cantril 1968; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015; Page and Jacobs 2009a). Taken together, the evidence is in sharp contrast with the idea that neoliberalism has been associated with, even less *caused by,* a rightward shift in aggregate public opinion.

There was, however, a shift in party identification and voting that is reflective of neoliberalism. Numerous studies find the composition of Democratic Party supporters and voters has changed in key ways over the last 50 years. Picketty (2020) compares the top 10% Democratic Party vote share to the bottom 90% (Democratic vote share for the top 10% minus that for the bottom 90%) in terms of education, income, and wealth. In 1972, the top 10% in terms of education were more likely to vote for Democrats than the bottom 90%, but this wasn't true for income or wealth. By 2016, the Democrats were supported by even greater shares among the top 10% educated (a 23 percentage point gap) and income (a 5 PP gap), and the wealth gap shrunk from -22 PP in 2000 (in favor of Republicans) to about -4 PP in 2016. Other scholars have noted the growing support for the Democratic Party among professionals (Manza and Brooks 1999), individuals who, compared to the rest of the American public, generally hold positions more liberal on social issues and more conservative on economic issues (Brint 1994). According to one historian, the Democratic Party shifted from a party representing autoworkers to one representing the material preferences of educated, affluent, socially liberal suburbanites (Geismer 2014).

Taken together, this evidence suggests the Democratic Party has shifted to become the party preferred by the well-educated and high income earners (and it's on track to being the preferred party of the wealthiest Americans). In general, the highly educated, high income earning, and wealthy individuals have disproportionately more influence on party politics compared to the less-educated, lower income, non-wealthy individuals (Bartels 2016; Beramendi, Besley, and Levi 2022; Gilens and Page 2014). Regardless of whether educated and affluent supporters are pushing the party to the right, or the party's shift to the right attracting the more educated and affluent, its clear shift is occurring in both domains. Importantly, while there has been a shift in party identification, the absence of an aggregate shift in public opinion suggests the neoliberal turn was not a response to changes in the preferences of the public as a whole.

1.1.4 The centers have moved apart

Table 1.1 summarizes the conclusions from the polarization and neoliberalism literature as they relate to the spaces of citizen preferences and political actors/parties.

Table 1.1 Findings from literature on polarization and neoliberalism

	Parties and political actors	Citizens
Polarization	Significant, increasing, and asymmetrical, but limited to a single dimension (we can't separate polarization by issue area)	Increasing party-ideology association, weak and increasing partisan-issue association (weaker for ideology-issue), little or no evidence of issue alignment
Neoliberalism	Strong evidence that both parties are shifting to the right, importantly the Democratic Party	No evidence of right-shift in public policy preferences on economic issues

There is strong support for both polarization and the neoliberal turn among political actors. As parties have become more ideologically coherent politicians have sorted into them

according to their own ideology more so than in the past. When scholars quantify the ideology or partisanship of elected officials within Congress, they reveal the two parties are moving apart, with the Republicans moving further to the right than Democrats to the left. There is evidence that a similar sorting has occurred within the public, but mostly along identitarian divisions rather than in terms of policy preferences, which tend to be quite stable. The pro-market neoliberal turn can be found in both parties, as they embraced free trade, deregulation, corporate monopolies, and a weakened welfare state. Yet no similar shift in preferences can be found among the members of the public.

These conclusions provide several potential justifications for pursuing the center. Polarization among political actors is measured by how dissimilar members of different parties tend to vote. This means, by definition, bipartisan voting – voting along with members of the other party – has become increasingly rare. One common meaning of the center is oriented around the particular issue of legislative gridlock. Fewer centrist political actors means less legislation is passed, and even when legislation is passed it tends to be more partisan, sometimes more extreme, than would otherwise be the case. Calls for more politicians in the center are often meant to address the problem of legislative gridlock and the lack of bipartisan compromise (Broadwater 2020; Hughes 2016; Peterson and Hughes 2018). If there were more centrists, then Congress could "get stuff done" (DeBonis 2018; Edmondson 2021).

Another possibility is that calls for the political center are attempting to align the center of the political actor space with that of citizens. I have yet to see a self-described "centrist" advocate for pushing the political actor space to the left, although some critics of the center have noted this might provide an electoral advantage because so many policies on the left are popular (Hasan 2019). Instead, it appears the mainstream discourse around the center and the self-described centrist or moderate politicians who advocate for the center are actually trying to do the exact opposite: bring the center of the citizen space closer in line with political actor space by shifting the public to the right.

To be clear, there is not much evidence that it works. This point is discussed more in the conclusion, but, in short, the literature on elite manipulation of public opinion suggests such efforts are often ineffective (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). They may succeed in the short term, they may have more success in certain domains (like foreign affairs) over others (domestic policy), but it has proven remarkably difficult to change the underlying attitudes that influence public preferences for policy.

1.2 Outline of the dissertation

In the remainder of this introductory chapter I outline the rest of the dissertation. It contains four additional chapters. Chapter two describes a typology of the political center. Chapter three uses the citizen-focused meaning of the political center to investigate which policies can be considered in line with the center, and chapter four explores the individuals who identify with the political center. The conclusion (chapter five) revisits the findings from the other chapters and discusses a theory of the political center informed by the analyses presented here.

Chapter two

The political center is often vague in meaning and rarely explicitly defined. If the center was always *only* vague there wouldn't be much to say about the uses of the concept. Fortunately, sometimes the center does mean something. The second chapter proposes a typology for classifying different meanings of the political center. I find when the meaning of the center is elaborated on, or even hinted at, it tends to fall into one or more distinct categories. The first category is the depoliticized center, where the center refers to the engagement with politics absent of bias or tribalism with respect to partisanship or ideology. The depoliticized center can be observed whenever the center is presented as rational, objective, pragmatic, neutral, or technocratic.

The second and third categories relate to instances in which the center refers to position within a defined space, either the citizen space or the political actor space, or the space occupied by political parties. The center of the citizen space, when defined in terms of average or median political preferences (or the individuals who hold such positions), is the group of citizens democratic theories suggest a responsive democratic system will be responsive to. The center of the political actor space is typically measured in terms of legislative behavior, where the center is the point of bipartisan compromise and a lower propensity of partisan loyalty.

The last category encompasses references to the center that, more or less, reflect positions in line with the interests of economic elites. Here the center, including the "vital center," is used to refer to New Deal-style capitalist democracy, anti-populism, incrementalism, or a set of policies that are relatively liberal in the social domain and relatively conservative (or in favor of the free market) in the economic domain. The top issue for self-described centrists is balanced budgets ("fiscal responsibility") and a related restraint with respect to social spending (often through "entitlement reform").

I follow the typology with a discussion of the contradictions often found in the references to the political center. I organize the discussion comparing the citizen-focused center with the actions of politicians identified with the center and the libertarian orientation toward policy often declared to represent the center.

Chapter three

The third chapter shifts to an empirical analysis of the center of the citizen space as it relates to policies, operationalizing the center in terms of what policies are popular as well as what I begin by examining estimates of citizen preferences on a large set of policies from three datasets (Cooperative Election Study, Voter Study Group Nationscape, and the General Social Survey). I identify the positions that represent the median and identify the net position (either support or oppose) for each policy. This is the most basic way of identifying the center, but I also

consider stricter thresholds based on partisan identities: policies where the net and median positions are the same for both Democrats and Republicans.

I also create several different quantitative measures of a policy's ideology which are informed by the public opinion data. If net support is higher among conservatives, Republicans, or voters who preferred the Republican presidential candidate than it is among liberals, Democrats, or Democratic presidential voters, then the policy is considered to be conservative. The larger the difference in net support, the larger (in absolute terms) the ideological measure will be. The policies with smaller differences are considered relatively centrist compared to policies with larger differences. These measures are also compared to a statistical approach using singular value decomposition (SVD) that maps on very closely to the other measures. I used the full set of measures (which are highly correlated with each other) to identify the policies located in the middle of the distribution and show the policies located in the center are not particularly popular; the degree of agreement (in terms of net support or opposition) is not greatest in the center. In fact, I find, with a few notable exceptions, liberal positions tend to receive the most support, and this is true even among independents and individuals identifying with the middle of the ideological scale. Policies scored near the middle have a greater *potential* for agreement (since partisan disagreement leads to larger measures), but despite this computational constraint in favor of the center, the center is not particularly popular.

Chapter four

The fourth chapter explores two different ways of identifying individuals in the political center. The first is self-identification. I located one survey that asked a rare question: how well do respondents feel the terms "centrist" and "moderate" (among other terms) describe them. The second considers individuals who agree with the median position (individuals with centrist *preferences*). I create a measure of the proportion of positions each respondent in the Voter Study Group's Nationscape survey takes a position consistent with the median on the same set

of policies used in chapter three, and also use a related measure created with SVD that isolates the tendency to take median positions from the effect of ideology (since liberal positions tend to be more popular). Then, to explain both identification with the center and centrist preferences, I use regression analyses to determine the demographic and political characteristics associated with each measure. I find that the characteristics associated with self-identification with the center are often the opposite of the characteristics associated with centrist preferences.

Unfortunately, the data do not allow me to explore the connection between identification with the center and centrist preferences; the Voter survey, which includes the questions related to identification, only asks respondents for their preferences on a very small set of policies (primarily variations of one specific policy area), which also means a comparable SVD measure cannot be created. At the risk of pushing an ecological fallacy, it does appear that the people who identify explicitly with the center, particularly "centrist," are systematically different from the individuals who tend to agree with the median position on a large set of policy issues.

Conclusion

In the last chapter I summarize the key takeaways from chapters two through four and also outline a theory of the political center informed by the analyses in this dissertation. The theory focuses on the way in which the meanings of the political center relate to each other, including elites, political actors, citizens, media, and think tanks. I suggest elites' influence on politicians and through the media (and think tanks, which operate through the media) results in a presentation of the center that is reflective of the economic interests of elites but also framed according to the "depoliticized" version of the center described in the next chapter. I conclude with suggestions for future research on the political center.

Chapter 2
A typology of the political center

In a recent paper a group of political scientists argue there is a "need for renewed attention to the middle of the American political spectrum" (Fowler et al. 2022:643). This paper takes up the call, but rather than exploring what these particular authors' understanding of the political middle, I argue the "political center" is itself polysemic – it simultaneously holds multiple meanings. In some contexts, the political center is an example of a "floating signifier," which is "in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning" (Lévi-Strauss 1987:63). In such cases, especially when used by self-identified centrists in the public sphere, references to the political center appear to serve as a descriptor for anything that is preferred. The political center also holds a "tacit dimension," a feature that protects it from a critical examination: "...propositions and opinions shared by a group and so obvious to it that they are never fully or systematically articulated" (Hirschman 1997:69; also see Polanyi 2009).

References to the political center include the terms moderate, centrist, the vital center, and centrism. In the U.S. context, the terms are often used interchangeably, and while some will certainly disagree with specific components of the presented typology, that is the point. Despite its ubiquity in political science, history, and political sociology, there is no consensus on the meaning of the political center. The aim here is not to declare a *correct* meaning, but to classify the various meanings in a typology.

The typology is informed by news media, social science, history, and communication from advocates for the political center. I use key insights from scholarship on American politics to categorize the various meanings of the political center. The meanings are grouped into three general categories: the depoliticized center, the spatial centers, and the elite consensus center.

The depoliticized category refers to instances where the political center conveys something non-political, non-ideological[4], non-partisan, and unbiased; the center is *outside* of politics. The center is therefore free from conflict, ideological rigidity, partisan loyalty, and value-based judgment. Nested within the category is another, related expert-driven version of the political center. It conveys similar ideas of objectivity and rationality, but is more specific in that the means to determine appropriate policy is rooted in expertise.

The spatial category refers to cases where the center refers to a space within politics, specifically within the spaces of political actors (politicians and party organizations) and citizens. In the space of political actors, the center is presented as the solution to legislative gridlock and polarization. The center represents bipartisanship and compromise, with the ultimate goal of increasing legislative productivity. The center in the citizen space represents the will of the people; if political actors respond to this center, the goal of representative democracy will be achieved.

Finally, the elite consensus center can be thought of as a combination of the depoliticized and spatial meanings – at least in terms of presentation, but with an orientation toward the interests of elites. The category includes various representations of the "vital center," moderation meant to convey incrementalism, and the socially liberal, economically conservative orientation commonly associated with the political center.

Next the compatibility of the different meanings are discussed, and whether the failure to identify distinct centers results in contradictions. At best, the discourse around the American political center is confusing. At worst, it is anti-democratic, often implying what the public

[4] Throughout the paper, the term "ideology" is used to echo the way in which the term appears in the materials considered to inform the typology. Providing a definition of ideology would give the impression that others employ the term with a consistent meaning in mind; this is not the case. In many cases the term ideology appears to be interchangeable with "bias," but in others it is used in a more conventional sense to convey a relatively coherent descriptive and/or normative worldview, especially as it relates to policy preferences.

wants is unpopular, impractical, and irrational, while polishing elite-preferred policies with a "centrist" veneer.[5]

The contradictions resulting from the floating and tacit features of the political center are most apparent in the tendency to assume the center of the political actor space (often defined by Congressional legislators or political parties) is the same as the center of the public or voter space (especially the median preferences of the public). Polarization scholars define the center within the space of political actors according to legislative behavior. The more a politician votes with members of the other party, the more centrist or moderate they are (Abramowitz 2011; Hall 2019; Thomsen 2017). Public opinion scholars locate the center within the citizen space, focusing on the preferences of the public, where the median position on any given issue often represents the center (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

Yet in order for the political actor and citizen preference spaces to be equivalent, especially the median public opinion version, the American political system would need to represent the preferences of the public in an unbiased, although perhaps noisy, fashion – without systematic biases toward the preferences of certain groups. While some may argue for this characterization of unbiased pluralism, a large number of scholars have argued the American democracy is biased in important ways (American Political Science Association Task Force 2004; Bartels 2016; Canes-Wrone 2015; Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Ferguson 1995; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). However, the claim that politicians and parties gain an electoral advantage by moving to the center of the political actor space remains common among journalists (Harwood 2001; Martin and Ember 2019; Zernike 2006), social scientists (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Hall 2019; Hall and Thompson 2018), and advocates the political center (Halstead and Lind 2001; Lieberman 2021; Wheelan 2013).

[5] Credit to Spencer Piston for the term "centrist veneer."

The discourse around a COVID-19 relief bill illustrates the issues with this assumption. In 2021 a COVID relief bill was blocked by the "centrist" Senator Kyrsten Sinema specifically because she opposed "a minimum wage increase" (Edmondson 2021; also see Jaffe 2021). Sinema is said to be centrist because she is willing to vote with members of the Republican Party, at least more so than the average Democrat. Yet this particular centrist position – opposition to an increase of the federal minimum wage – is sharply at odds with the preferences of the American public. In fact, the American public has long supported increases to the minimum wage (Bartels 2016) and recent polling suggests a large majority of Americans support an increase to $15 (Davis and Hartig 2019; Dunn 2021; Reuters Staff 2021). Further, polling showed strong majorities supported the legislation as a whole, with one estimate suggesting the bill, if passed, would have been the most popular major piece of legislation from Congress since the last time the minimum wage was increased in 2007 (The Economist 2021). In other words, the center of the space of partisan actors, represented by Sinema's vote with Republicans, is not the same as the center of the space of public preferences.

Examples such as this are common. After describing the typology, the paper shifts to focus on these and other major contradictions in discussions of the political center. The contradictions are framed in terms of the supply (what is presented as the center) and compared to the demand with respect to citizen preferences. The paper concludes with a discussion of why centrism is such a useful concept for political actors, but also why an effective centrist political movement is unlikely to occur. Since the political center is most-often claimed by elites, it is best characterized as a discursive tool used to present the interests of the few as natural, neutral, rational, and sometimes even popular.

2.1 Data and methods

To inform my typology I analyzed articles and writing from mainstream media, discussions of the political center in academic work, and writings form advocates (individuals and organizations) of the political center. Mainstream media sources from various sources – 150 articles from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* (50 from each) from the early 1980s through 2022 – but many others were located after the initial collection.[6] In addition to media accounts, the typology is also informed with work from academics, organizations, and popular press books advocating for centrism. The academic work includes studies of polarization (Abramowitz 2011; Hall 2019; Thomsen 2017; Utych 2019), public opinion (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Page and Gilens 2017:219–20; Weaver 2002:116), and historical accounts highlighting past events and styles of governing labeled centrist or moderate (Brown 2016; Garfinkle and Yankelovich 2005; Jacobs and Milkis 2022). Finally, the materials from self-described centrists include books (Altmire 2017; Halstead and Lind 2001; Hill 2009; Lieberman 2021; Wheelan 2013), political organizations (U.S. Centrist Party, Forward Party, No Labels), and think tanks (Third Way, Brookings).

Explicit definitions of the political center are exceptionally rare. Among political dictionaries and encyclopedias, entries for centrism, centrist, moderate, and the political center are vague and sometimes absent (Collin 2004; McLean and McMillan 2009). The materials considered here are no different. It is rare for anyone to explicitly define the political center in the media, in academic work, and even among the advocates. However, careful reading of the material reveals a set of distinct meanings. These meanings are presented in the next section.

[6] Articles were located through keyword searches: centrist, centrism, moderate, vital center, and political center. Articles covering politics outside the United States were excluded.

2.2 Typology

This section presents a range of meanings and themes associated with the political center. The meanings are organized around three general categories: the depoliticized center, the spatial centers, and the elite consensus center. Within each are nested distinct but related concepts. While I treat each separately – as distinct concepts – they very often appear simultaneously with other meanings. It is not the case that they all appear in every depiction of the political center, but distinct individual meanings quite often coexist with others. For example, if a politician is said to represent the center of the partisan (political actor) space, it is also common for the writer to suggest the politician is ideologically unbiased (representing the "depoliticized" center), or holds appeal for the average American voter. The books written by advocates for the political center generally cast a wide net in terms of what the center means. The fact that, in practice, a multitude of meanings often appear together blurs the fact that the meanings themselves are distinct. The contradictions and misleading implications of this practice is explored in the discussion section.

A quick note on the literal meaning of the center or of "moderate." Sometimes the centrist position simply refers to the middle several options. If one group is pushing Medicare for All and the other a fully privatized health care system, then a public option could be considered a middle ground position since it allows for a system that blends together both the public and private. However, it is not always easy to situate policy options on a linear dimension. I will not spend too much space discussing this manifestation of the political center because it is entirely determined by the options being discussed in the political discourse, which is known to be highly subject to agenda-setting forces,[7] which is itself not unique to the political center.

[7] For a recent review of the literature on agenda setting, see Carpenter (2023).

2.2.1 The depoliticized center

The first general classification of the political center – the "depoliticized" center[8] – is found when the center is evoked in reference to uncovering or setting free a rational, universal consensus that should guide political decision making. Similar to the political center itself, "depoliticization" is a contested concept, but here I use the term to refer to "the set of processes (including varied tactics, strategies, and tools) that remove or displace the potential for choice, collective agency, and deliberation around a particular political issue" (Fawcett et al. 2017:5; also see Hay 2007). The key point is that a range of issues, whatever they may be, are viewed as being outside of the realm of legitimate political debate, like when policies are said to be "common sense" or simply the "right" policy. In addition, the presentation of a consensus makes the traditional left-right distinction irrelevant (Avlon 2004; also see Mouffe 2005:30), as was the case with the "Third Way" (Giddens 2000). This version of the political center frames partisan conflict as "imposing… artificial tradeoffs."(Halstead and Lind 2001:4).
I identify two key strands within the depoliticized center. One focuses on the issue of political tribalism and ideological bias, where the center is a place free from ideology, party loyalty, and extremes. The other advocates for a technocratic style of politics, where decision making is guided by unbiased expertise.

In the first, the common way to downplay political conflict is to posit that observed political conflicts are simply a product of irrational, so-called tribal commitments and untamed extremists on the fringes who have captured each of the two dominant parties (Avlon 2004; Halstead and Lind 2001). These barriers prevent political actors from enacting policies consistent with the public interest. Here the depoliticized center suggests a space free from partisan loyalty and ideological rigidity, where a "sane, pragmatic majority" exists in the public (Wheelan 2013:13). The center conveys a possibility of politics absent of the tribal extremism

[8] While the term used here is the "depoliticized center," the discussion was also informed by scholarship employing different concepts such as "anti-politics" (Mouffe 2005) and "post-democracy" (Crouch 2020).

dominating both major parties by "constantly evoking a space beyond politics to invent what are unmistakably political arguments"(De Velasco 2012:2). De Velasco finds President Clinton, identified as a "centrist," presented his version of the political center as the solution to the contemporary problem of partisanship, as a call to bring politics back to an American mainstream. In such depictions, the center is the key to unlocking positive political change and the antidote to the highly polarized partisan landscape. On the one hand, it is simply an appeal for American citizens and political actors to focus on points of agreement rather than conflict. On the other, it dismisses the possibility of legitimate political conflict altogether.

The depiction of the political center as a non-ideological, neutral expression of common sense cannot be overstated. Ideological bias, or even ideology itself, is implied to be absent in the political center. Scholars can imply "centrist" or "moderate" political actors are non-ideological by contrasting them with "ideological" candidates (Campbell 2018; Thomsen 2017; Utych 2019). The Centrist Party describes itself to have a foundation to be built on evidence, reason, and logic (The Centrist Party 2020) and advocates for the political center consistently linked the concept to the use of "common sense " (Howard 2019; Kasai 2019; Kranz 2018; Lieberman 2021; No Labels 2023; Third Way 2023).

This first version of the depoliticized center is the most ambiguous of the meanings. It best exemplifies the "floating signifier" feature of the political center, where advocates of centrist can claim just about any position to be "centrist," just as calls for "common sense" do not arrive at a universal consensus. For example, consider this list of concepts the late Senator Joseph Lieberman (2021) associates with the political center in his book, *The Centrist Solution*: bipartisanship, compromise, constructive disagreement, respectful debate, civility, getting stuff done, the absence of ideology, standing up to party leadership, moderation (not necessarily moderates, but sometimes moderates), the middle ground, opposing extremism, mixing liberal and conservative positions, compassionate conservatism, fighting terrorism, "the law," pursuing military action despite public opposition, market-based approaches to environmental problems,

problem-solving, swing voters, independent partisans, the center of self-reported ideology, the midpoint between reason and faith, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, the Electoral College, the Three-Fifths Compromise, and Kosher-Cajun fusion cooking ("centrist cuisine").

The second meaning of the center nested within the depoliticized category – the technocratic version – offers a bit more specificity. Here the center is meant to convey a rational, expert-driven form of policy making that is, importantly, also free from ideological and partisan bias. Scholars of expertise note that, when viewed as legitimate, experts hold "knowledge-based authority" (Brint 1990:363), which can be used to inform policy decisions. So rather than linking the center to common sense, this subcategory instead ties the center to rational expertise.

Centrism can be marked by two distinct sources of expertise: technical training and experience. In the technocratic version, knowledge-mastering experts operate freely from the influence of ideology, partisanship, any other normative motivations or special interest influence. Experts trained in social science, policy analysis, or other policy-relevant fields command knowledge average citizens do not hold, making them more qualified to make policy decisions. The presentation of technical expertise is exemplified by the self-described centrist (or "center-left") think tanks (such as Third Way, Brookings, and the Progressive Policy Institute) that house their own researchers, publish policy reports and books, and continuously comment on the policy discourse.

The other type of expert is similar to what sociologists call "layperson" or "experience-based" expertise (Eyal 2019:8–9). Although far from being "laypersons" themselves, candidates like Howard Schultz and Michael Bloomberg – both commonly identified as centrist (Relman 2018; Scherer and Jan 2019) – are not viewed as authorities because of technical training or credentials in policy analysis. Rather, Schultz and Bloomberg can be viewed as authorities because their success as business owners demonstrates their competence and, as in other legitimate claims to expertise, it shows they are qualified to make judgements on public issues, especially those pertaining to business and the economy.

In both cases, positions are said to be guided by reason, common sense, and "pragmatism" (Shear and Crowley 2020). Instead of acting according to partisan commitments, experts simply support what is "sensible" (Garfinkle and Yankelovich 2005), "right," "smart" (see Sandel 2020:92–94). The right or smart position might not be popular[9], often making positions associated with this meaning of the center associated with difficult, even courageous[10], decision making (Lieberman 2021). While technically undemocratic, such instances are justified on the grounds that voters do not always vote in their own interest (sometimes due to partisan bias) and citizens regularly benefit from the guidance of experts, especially when it comes to decision making on "technical" issues that require expert knowledge (Achen and Bartels 2016; Brint 1990; Collins and Evans 2009).

The technocratic version is presented as an objective, rational approach to political issues, where the correct policy positions are derived from the consensus among experts. However, a depiction of expertise rooted in reality reveals an "expert-driven" position can change depending on the views of the particular experts being consulted (Collins and Evans 2009). The goal of an expert-consensus is even more elusive in the context of the contemporary think tank arena which, not always but very often, serves as a marketplace for experts to produce knowledge in support of the preferences of the interests funding the organization (Medvetz 2012). In practice, the composition of think tank donors suggests the knowledge they produce disproportionately represents the interests of corporations and the wealthy and it is not difficult to find examples where expertise is abused, such as in the case of experts from think tanks denying the existence of climate change (Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman 2008) or the

---

9 The US Centrist party notably points out the center is not about what is popular. The website states the Centrist Party will "support things that are not necessarily popular but required to help our communities move forward" (The Centrist Party 2021).

10 Lieberman is not alone in suggesting pursuing the center is a brave act. This is an interesting framing of the center, especially given the supposed popularity of the center. This argument suggests that, while the center is generally popular (as are centrists), centrists sometimes bravely oppose specific popular positions. So the center can be both popular and unpopular, a point that echoes the contradiction between the claims that centrists receive electoral advantages but also that voters, to their own fault, do not vote for centrists.

dangers of tobacco (Oreskes and Conway 2011). This makes the selection of experts fundamental to the perception of the expert-backed position (Eyal 2019; Mudge 2018a), and evidence suggests political actors and the media privilege experts housed in think tanks over experts from the academy (Medvetz 2012; also see Luker 1999).

Proponents of the political center suggest decreased political engagement and declining partisan identification is caused by polarization and tribalism that turns off many Americans (Halstead and Lind 2001; Lieberman 2021; Wheelan 2013). In their view, if Americans could just move beyond the tribalism and polarization characterizing the current state of the political system, the policies resulting from the underlying, rational consensus could be then realized. Yet the scholars focusing on depoliticization, anti-politics, and post-democracy argue the presentation of a consensus and the corresponding exclusion of meaningful alternatives is part of why citizens lose faith in the political system, politicians, and political parties (Fawcett et al. 2017; Mouffe 2005). Each camp focuses on the same phenomena – tribalism, polarization, and dissatisfaction with political parties and the system at large – yet what one camp views as the answer to the problem the other views as the cause of it.

2.2.2 The center of a political space

The second general category includes references to the political center that characterize it as a location in a unidimensional ideological space ranging from liberal to conservative, or a similar partisan space including Democrats and Republicans. The center can refer to an abstract position, such as the declaration that a policy is ideologically in the middle, but also to a location within an ideological distribution among citizens/voters or political actors.

Determining the center

Within the spatial category, there are several distinct approaches to determine the center or moderate position. The first approach is simply identifying the center as a midpoint within a space. For example, centrist citizens have been identified this way on self-reported ideological scales (Adler 2018). On a seven point ideological scale (1-7), the center can be the single middle

response (4) or a set of responses in the middle of the range (3-5). A similar logic is applied to the partisan space, as self-identified independents (Lieberman 2021) and swing voters (Morgan and Lee 2019; Wheelan 2013) are often said to represent the center. The lack of partisan identification or loyalty is interpreted to signify an ideological (partisan) position that lies between liberal (Democrat) and conservative (Republican).[11] The midpoint is sometimes used in terms of policy positions, but it often is not clear what a midpoint would be or whether a midpoint is meaningful.[12]

---

[11] This is a problematic assumption. Not all independents hold ideological positions that lie in between liberal and conservative, or partisan loyalties between Democratic and Republican. While many Independents operate as "hidden partisans," a non-trivial share of the American public does not prefer either major party (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), and this does not necessitate such citizens falling in the middle. Of course, aggregating the preferences of this group will still likely lead to a position near the middle.

[12] Defining the center as a group of people who systematically take middle ground positions is an attractive but often arbitrary approach. Survey questions rarely allow respondents to choose between multiple policy options. Imagine a survey asks respondents the level at which they feel the federal government should set its minimum wage. Participants could be presented with different hourly wage levels – say, $0, $7.25, $10, $15, and $20. In this case, the middle ground position-takers would probably gravitate to $10, or maybe also to $7.25 and $15, depending how we define the center. But there is no reason to think there is anything special about the center if it is defined this way, especially given the way survey questions on policy are typically designed. The minimum wage example above is just one question (one I've personally never seen in a social or political survey). In order to identify a group that systematically takes middle ground positions, you would need a large set of questions that provide a range of options like the minimum wage question described above. This is not how surveys typically collect preferences on policies. If multiple response options are presented, they often are oriented around the strength of the attitude (e.g. "strongly" versus "somewhat" oppose), and middle categories are often neutral, like neither agree nor disagree, or not sure.

However, for the sake of argument let's imagine a large survey asks participants for their preferences on a whole host of policies and provides them with multiple options in each policy area. In the example above, it is easy to see how the options should be ordered – from lowest (eliminating the federal minimum wage) to highest ($20/hour). But what if we were interested in preferences on revenue use from carbon pricing? How would we ideologically order response options of household-level dividends, reductions in sales taxation, investments in green energy, or investments in carbon capture? The ordering is relatively arbitrary, therefore the median position will be dependent on how the policies are ordered. In the case of the minimum wage, or other things like top marginal tax rates, the ordering is straightforward. But in other cases it is not obvious, meaning there is no middle ground to be taken nor can a median position be determined.

Further, the middle ground positions are determined by the options provided. If the minimum wage question above instead included options for $0, $5, $7.25, $10, and $12, then the middle would be $7.25 instead of $10 (or $5-10 instead of $7.25-15). Adding more options that lean in the direction of one extreme will move the middle position or positions further in that direction. In other words, the middle position can be manipulated simply by the selection of options. Even if surveys were better suited to capture this middle position-taking behavior, and identify a group within society that systematically takes such positions, so what? Why would this be an important political group? Unless the preferences of this group also coincide with the median position of the public, then pandering to this group achieves no

The midpoint can also be identified within a space representing the aggregation of a set of preferences. This midpoint through "diversity" approach[13] occurs when average ideological positions with the set collectively net out to a value near the middle of the ideological dimension. For example, on the same ideological scale described above, if there were separate questions asking for ideologically-coded positions on multiple items, and the scores were averaged out for each respondent, then those near the middle of the range of the averaged scores could be considered centrist or moderate. As Ahler and Broockman (2018) point out, using this approach can lead to a diverse set of extreme preferences to be interpreted as an overall centrist or moderate position. Further, important information on the positions is ignored – socially liberal and economically conservative positions could be indistinguishable from socially conservative and economically liberal positions. Nevertheless, it is still a common approach for identifying the center within different spaces. Aggregated ideological measures of legislative votes are used to identify centrists precisely in this manner, and when the political center is characterized as socially liberal and economically conservative (as is quite common), it is centrist because the liberal and conservative positions net out to a middle position.

The other approach is to use a statistic to capture the middle or center of the distribution, such as the median or mean. Whatever the median position is, that is the center (I examine a large set of public preferences to determine the "center" according to this meaning in chapter three). According to Jacobs and Shapiro, "centrist" opinion refers to the "policies preferred by most Americans" (2000:6).[14] Therefore, the median or "centrist" voter refers to a (possibly imaginary) voter who holds preferences consistent with the median position among

---

improvement in terms of democratic responsiveness. Politicians responding to this group might actually make the system less responsive to aggregate public preferences.

[13] The term "diversity" is borrowed from Ahler and Broockman (2018).

[14] There are other ways we can imagine a median voter. We could imagine a median voter as a voter who votes for the candidate who receives the amount of support representing the median in the election. In other words, whoever votes for the winner of an election in a two candidate race could represent the median voter. If we include non-voters or abstentions, then the median position will very likely be non-voting, as long as we assume their preferences fall in between the space occupied by the two major parties (which is exactly the assumption made when independents are classified as occupying the middle space).

the public on all issues (I explore median position taking as a way of operationalizing the center in chapter four). Regardless of whether such voters exist, the median voter model suggests political parties can optimize their votes by appealing to these positions (Black 1948; Downs 1957).

The information presented in Table 2.1 helps illustrate the difference between the approaches. The midpoint approach means options B and E represent the center. If we consider diversity in aggregation, the combinations of either (1) A and F or (2) C and D would also mark the centrist position. Using the median approach, it would be options B and D. It is clear that without even considering the space in which the center is defined, the variety of ways in which the center of any given space is determined reveals several possible distinct meanings of the political center.

Table 2.1 Hypothetical scenario for determining "the center."

Issue area	Ideology	Policy	Public Support
Social policy	More liberal	Option A	29%
	Somewhere in between	Option B	51%
	More conservative	Option C	20%
Fiscal policy	More liberal	Option D	55%
	Somewhere in between	Option E	25%
	More conservative	Option F	20%

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that many claims about the political center are often relative assessments specific to certain situations. A position or politician can be "more centrist" than other positions or politicians (closer to the middle of some dimension) but might not be considered "centrist" on its own. It is far easier to take a position that a policy is more liberal or conservative than alternatives than it is to declare a position is *neither* liberal nor conservative.

Note on ideology

The center of the ideological space, on its own, is difficult to discuss because the other two categories (the citizen and political actor centers) are situated in spaces oriented according to a unidimensional ideological space or the related concept of partisanship (also often conceptualized on a single dimension). When an abstract ideological center is referred to, it most often implies that what is neither liberal nor conservative represents an absence of ideology, which is consistent with the form discussed in the previous section on the "depoliticized center."

However, in other instances a similar ideological center manifests in comparisons between policy options. In such cases it typically takes the midpoint approach. For example, if considering different minimum wages – such as $10, $15, $20, and $25 – the middle positions are relatively more centrist or moderate than the options at either the low (relatively right or conservative) and high (relatively left or liberal) end. If the options were changed instead to eliminating the minimum wage (the most conservative), keeping it at $7.25, or increasing it to $15 (the most liberal), the middle option – not changing the minimum wage – could be considered the "centrist" position. When the center is purely a product of the options being considered, then it is ultimately determined by those who are able to influence the options being considered and debated. Control over the agenda or over the range of public debate is itself a manifestation of power (Hunter 1953; Lukes 1974). Such instances of agenda setting and its related ideological power have received deserved scholarly attention (Berman 2018; Carpenter 2023; Mudge 2018a) but these concepts are not unique to references to the political center. There is much more to say on the uses of the political center with specific reference to citizens and political actors.

Citizen-focused centrism

Any references to instances in which the center refers to citizens or voters are classified as the "citizen-focused" center. The citizen-focused center is often presented in a positive light

because it represents the essence of majoritarian democracy – the 'voice of the people' – and, by definition, it cannot represent an extreme with respect to citizen preferences. Candidates and policies consistent with this meaning of the political center – representing the median or majority preferences of citizens – offer the potential to bridge polarized divisions and unite the country around a centrist agenda, ultimately increasing responsiveness of representative politics and leading to a convergence between mass public preferences and policy.

Discussions of the center with reference to the public are abundant. Further, different forms of determining the center can apply to the citizen space. The midpoint approach is not uncommon in political discourse or in social science research. As noted above, Adler used self-reported ideology and the midpoint approach to identify the political center among survey respondents (2018) and self-identifying "Independents" – when assumed to be situated in the space in between Democrats and Republicans – represent a similar midpoint version of the center within the partisan space. To my knowledge, no prior studies have investigated explicit identification with the center – "centrist" or "moderate" – and this is a focal point of chapter four.

The median approach is frequently found in scholarship, especially among scholars of public opinion (Manza, Cook, and Page 2002). "'Centrist opinion' refers to the median voter or citizen in the distribution of public opinion and not to an ideologically fixed 'left' or 'right.'" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2002:59). References in the media and within the polarization scholarship rarely cite public opinion when discussing "the center," but still often contain the assumption that centrist candidates or positions hold the potential of appealing to "a broad swath of Americans" (Chollet 2019). This meaning is often applied in the context of elections, where the best bet for either party to win a general election "is electing somebody in the middle" (New Hampshire Governor John Lynch, quoted in Burns 2019). A centrist Democratic candidate, for example, can "pick up support from independents and even from some disgruntled moderate Republicans" (Cardwell 2004), and if politicians stray too far to either the left or right extreme

they can be electorally punished, since "there is a center that has to be responded to" (Seib 2020). Suggesting centrist or moderate candidates are more electable, or are capable of pulling votes from the party opposite of the candidate's member party, or that 'moving to the center' will help in a general election, implies a mechanism of appealing to the preferences of the public (see Wood and Lee 2009).

The diversity approach is employed when a collection of policy preferences that are given ideological values are aggregated (either averaged or used to create a latent ideological measure). The center is represented by the individuals situated near the middle of the score produced by aggregation. Ahler and Broockman (2018) point out nothing is necessarily moderate about this group, often given the moderate label; an individual with an equal number of extreme liberal and conservative positions can appear to be moderate when the diversity approach is used.

Fowler et al. (2022) examine this possibility by distinguishing between three different types of moderates: Downsian centrists, ideologically confused moderates (no identifiable ideological pattern to preferences), and individuals who are not well-represented on a single ideological dimension (such as people who are liberal on social issues but conservative on economic issues). The last two types fit within the critique of the diversity approach, but the Downsian centrists are different.

Fowler et al.'s "Downsian" centrists represent individuals who (1) "have preference across policy questions that are well approximated by an ideal point on an underlying liberal-conservative ideological dimension" and (2) "will sometimes give liberal answers to policy questions and sometimes conservative answers, but the pattern of responses for Downsian moderates will be well described by the same left-right dimension that explains responses of liberal and conservative Downsians" (Fowler et al. 2022:646). In this case the point is not that some positions are conservative and some are liberal: for anyone to be located in the middle of an ideological range, this is an unavoidable condition when policy questions allow for binary

responses (often a midpoint is not even an option). The point is that a single underlying ideological dimension, created from aggregated preferences, describes the middle positions of these Downsian moderates.

Relevance for democratic responsiveness

In the median voter model (Black 1948; Downs 1957; Hotelling 1929), parties that occupy, move toward, or are relatively closer to the center of citizen preference will gather more support from citizens when compared to candidates closer to either the extreme positions on the left or right. The effect creates an incentive for elected politicians and parties to move toward median positions, or else risk being retrospectively punished (Fiorina 1981). A move toward the middle of this space means a move closer to the 'center of gravity,' reducing the aggregate ideological distance from that candidate (or party platform) and the collection of citizen preferences. This model can also be modified to apply to a more narrow population of interest, offering the potential to create subcategories within this meaning, such as within the population of voters, or supporters or registered members of a particular party (as in the context for party primaries). In short, these theories suggest significant electoral benefits of taking positions in proximity to the median position within the relevant population.

However, even if the center is implied to be in a space other than citizen preferences (such as politicians or parties), or the meaning of the center is explicitly not linked to citizen preferences at all (as in the case of depoliticized centrism) it is still often implied that the mechanism for an electoral advantage is through citizens or voters. This is potentially problematic; the only meaning of the center that *necessarily* fits within the implications of the median voter model is that of the public opinion scholars who employ the median approach. Political actors that modify their positions to appeal to the citizen center as defined by the midpoint and diversity approaches will not necessarily receive the electoral advantage. It may be that the median positions line up with the midpoint (there tends to be a bias in favor of middle

options in surveys) and the diverse set of positions adopted by a political actor will align with the orientation in the public, but there is no guarantee it will be the case.

Aggregation throws away the information that allows for testing whether specific policies are in line with public preferences. Using aggregated measures, like a policy "mood" (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002), only allow analysts to consider effects of overall changes in aggregated ideological measures on individual policies; aggregate measures do not allow analysts to consider whether the public gets the *specific* policies it wants (Jacobs and Shapiro 2002). If assessing representation of public preferences in policy is the goal, the more important approach is then to consider preferences for specific policies to determine whether there is "issue agreement" (Ahler and Broockman 2018) between policy and public preferences.[15]

Political actor centrism

The center can also be identified within the space of political actors such as legislators and political parties. It is difficult to find examples of the political actor center that explicitly or implicitly represent the median approach; all examples arrive at the center through the midpoint approach, and very often through aggregation (diversity). Political actors are said to be more "centrist" or "moderate" if their behavior, typically legislative voting, is closer to members of the other party when compared to other members of their own. In the opening example, Krysten Sinema is defined as a centrist according to this logic.

Scholars of political polarization typically define the center according to average voting records of legislators. One of the most cited studies on the electoral effects of ideology uses a measure from the organization Americans for Democratic Action (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002). The "Liberal Quotient" (LQ) is calculated with House and Senate roll call votes on a selection of

[15] There is a legitimate question as to whether politicians should respond to the public given it often lacks full information across all political issues, and in fact holds little information on politics at all. However, citizens often rely on cues from trusted leaders and social networks to make informed political judgments, in the aggregate public opinion appears to be quite rational, and there are no clearly-superior alternatives to a democratic system where political actors respond to the preferences of the public (Gilens 2012; Page and Shapiro 1992). Even though this form of democracy has its flaws, it is still the best system available.

twenty "key votes" in each year. If a politician votes "liberal" on all twenty issues, they would have an LQ of 100%. If they vote against the liberal position on all twenty issues, they receive an LQ of 0% (Americans for Democratic Action 2017). Scores closer to 50% are considered more moderate/centrist compared to the "extreme" Democrats (Republicans) with higher (lower) LQs (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002). Other measures of ideology or partisanship[16] include the widely-used DW-NOMINATE (Lewis et al. 2020; Poole and Rosenthal 1985) scores based on all legislative roll call voting (not just a selected subset), and the CFscore (Bonica 2014, 2018) which measures candidate ideology based on their campaign contributions.[17]

Quantitative measures of ideology[18] or partisanship allow for precision comparing political actors, but it is also common for scholars to mark the center by the broad categories of conservative Democrats (like the “Blue Dog” Democrats; see Hook and Crittenden 2014) and liberal Republicans (Abramowitz 2011; Garfinkle and Yankelovich 2005; Thomsen 2017). These classifications describe members of each party holding positions closer to the other party. Such political actors are willing to engage in bipartisan compromise, which was far more common in a previous era where Congress was better characterized as a multiparty, rather than a two party, system (see Drutman 2020). The decline of the political center within the legislative space (polarization) is linked with an increase in gridlock and a decline in overall legislative productivity (Abramowitz 2011; Brown 2016; Hall 2019). Thus, promoting the center in the political actor space offers the potential to cure the American political system of polarization and the related lack of legislative productivity. In fact, the themes of bipartisan compromise and legislative productivity are frequently present in references to the political center.

---

[16] Despite the claims to measure ideology, other scholars suggest these scores only measure partisanship and can only be considered a proxy for ideology. Adam Bonica (the creator of the CFscore) suggests the DW-NOMINATE is more accurately classified as a measure of partisanship and that the CFscore does a better job capturing ideology (2014).

[17] These measures of political actor ideology/partisanship are not calibrated according to public opinion. The ADA, as noted above, is based entirely on the position of a politician based on their actions, relative to other politicians. The measures only map positions within the political space, meaning there is no guarantee the center of the measures lines up with the center of Americans’ preferences.

[18] Here ideology refers to an accumulation of policy preferences.

The emphasis on bipartisan compromise and legislative productivity is especially likely to be a feature of media stories with reference to the political center. Bipartisanship and bipartisan compromise refer to instances where politicians reach "across the aisle" (Hughes 2018), "compromise to break the gridlock" (Broadwater 2020), and try "meeting in the middle" (Seib 2009) to find common ground with members of the other party, in the "dying art of legislative compromise" (Hook and Crittenden 2014). The primary emphasis of political actor centrism is on its promise “to get things done” (Senator Doug Jones, quoted in Hughes 2018). In media accounts what is or should be getting done is frequently not mentioned. Legislative production is presented as good in and of itself. Referring to the self-identified "centrist" Problem Solvers Caucus, one member described the group by emphasizing exactly this point.

> "The common denominator is that we are just interested in getting things done," said Sen. Tom Carper (D., Del.), another of the group's leaders. "We care less about whether ideas are liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican – we want to get things done" (Bendavid and Hitt 2009).

In our political system marked by an inability to pass bipartisan legislation, a relatively high number of veto points, and general gridlock maintaining the status quo, it should not be surprising that legislative productivity is often viewed in a positive light. However, legislative productivity is not always in the public interest. If policy responsive to the preferences of the public is the goal, at times, gridlock can also serve as a barrier to legislators passing policies opposed by the public (Gilens 2012:208–14).

Recent scholarship has called into question whether political actors in the center are actually responsible for increased legislative productivity and whether their pivotal position is associated with a corresponding exercise of power. The common argument is that, if the legislature is divided, then those who sit in the middle can tip the scales in either direction, consistent with the Sinema example highlighted at the beginning of this chapter. While the logic of the claim might pass initial scrutiny and fit with anecdotal evidence, scholarship suggests the patterns displayed by centrists in the political actor space actually contradict this claim.

Chaturvedi demonstrates that, in practice, centrists (identified using scores of ideological voting records) are less likely to deliver speeches on the floor or propose amendments (2017). Instead of taking advantage of their positional power, they are more likely to defer to leadership, suggesting these actors in the center are more concerned with winning elections than pushing their own agenda, and they often perceive their electoral prospects as relatively more precarious.

One final note on the political actor center: like the citizen center, the political actor center is also dynamic. The center of the political actor space changes when the underlying factors shaping the actions of elected officials also change: their own preferences, those of their constituency, the influence of party leadership, donors, special interest groups, and highly engaged supporters. Marriage equality, climate action, and marijuana legalization are a few recent examples of changes in partisan legislative voting behavior. When this occurs, the political actor center shifts accordingly. Further, in the context of "asymmetric polarization" – the observation that the Republican Party has shifted further to the right than the Democratic Party has shifted to the left (Hacker and Pierson 2005) – over time, this implies the center between the two parties has shifted to the right. Scholarship on the spread of neoliberalism, marked primarily by the bipartisan adoption of free-market economic policies (Gilens 2012; Lachmann 2020) also suggests the center has shifted to the right in recent decades, particularly with respect to policies related to governing economic activity (Meeropol 1998; Mudge 2018a). These implications were discussed in more detail in the introductory chapter and are also explored further in the discussion section of the present chapter.

2.2.3 The center as elite consensus

The last group refers to a collection of meanings where the political center refers to various arguments for the existence of an elite consensus. Here "elite" primarily refers to economic elites, who may express a wide range of policy preferences, in general, but on issues related to taxation, social welfare spending, and market regulation, their material interests tend to push them in a specific, market-friendly direction (Bell 1958; Domhoff 1967; Mills 1956; Page,

Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Winters 2011). Some of the themes grouped in this category overlap with previously discussed meanings, but the distinct feature holding this category together is that in each case the political center is associated with the interests of economic elites.

While it may not be true that such a consensus actually exists, or ever existed, the depictions of the political center highlighted in this category are a collection of instances in which what is said to be the center is in line with status quo-maintenance or specific policy positions reflecting interests of the elite. The elite consensus representation of the center is evoked both by proponents and critics of the political center, and therefore it can be presented both in a positive and negative light. The author of the *Centrist Manifesto*, Charles Wheelan, makes the connection between his vision of the political center and economic elites crystal clear when he claims, "Rich Americans are not the problem (as populist Democrats would have us believe). *They are the solution*" (emphasis in original, Wheelan 2013:48).

The vital center

The term "vital center" was introduced to the American mainstream by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.. In his book, *The Vital Center*, Schlesinger advocated for liberal, democratic capitalism consistent with the New Deal. This set of institutions, found in the United States in the post-war period, was able to fend off threats from both the radical left (communism) and to the totalitarian right (fascism). The consensus in support of New Deal-style, welfare state capitalism – in his view, the *vital center* – was able to strike a balance between solidarity and individualism, limit excessive economic and political power, and block the viability and appeal of either extreme (Schlesinger 1949). The"vital center" was not a spatial position within domestic American politics – the "middle of the road," as he put it – rather it was a position situated between the left and right in a "global context" (Schlesinger 1997).[19]

[19] The term “vital center” was also picked up in the 1990s by Bill Clinton and other members of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a point which Schlesinger himself took issue with (Schlesinger

Jacobs and Milkis (2022) offer a similar depiction of a "vital center" composed of the legitimacy of liberal values and democratic institutions, "a shared consensus on political norms" (2022:5), and the presence of "strong" political parties. Like Schlesinger, the authors present the vital center as a consensus, but they depart from Schlesinger in an important way. They argue U.S. political parties have placed excessive emphasis on presidential races and executive power to the detriment of "strong" – localized, decentralized – political parties which ensured elites had restraints on their power within each party. This, in turn, cultivated trust in parties and political institutions. Further, Jacobs and Milkis suggest the New Deal Democrats and Franklin Delano Roosevelt pushed an "executive-centered administrative state" (2022:96) that brought the party closer to organized labor and civil rights groups, and pulled the party away from the vital center. In other words, while the New Deal was fundamental to Schlesinger's vital center, here the actions of the administration that delivered the New Deal took measures that moved the country away from it.

The center as incrementalism

Another manifestation of the political center nested under this umbrella is advocacy for incrementalism and moderation over rapid change. This is consistent with the literal meaning of "moderate"; incrementalism is viewed as a middle ground between maintaining the status quo and radical change.

"Moderate" was used this way by Martin Luther King Jr. in "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In the letter he expresses his distrust of the "White moderate."

> …I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I

1997). For Clinton and the DLC they used the “vital center,” and “centrism” more broadly, to refer to a style of politics consistent with their effort to move the Democratic Party closer to the Republicans, especially when it came to positions on the free market and economic regulation. It represented a move toward the center of the political actor space as described above (also see Baer 2000).

> can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season" (1963).

In this meaning of the center, significant (often progressive) change is framed as extreme and the "moderate" or "centrist" position is to oppose it. Elites often prefer the maintenance of the status quo – the current complex of social, economic, and political institutions is the source of their status and power (Mills 1956). Arguments against progressive changes might have the goal of preventing a loss of status or power. The "reactionary" arguments described by Hirschman (1991) – perversity, futility, and jeopardy – are similar in that they argue against various forms of change that reduce elite power. In the reactionary arguments, even if the goals are shared, it is suggested efforts to enact change to fix social problems will only backfire (making the problem worse), they will simply not work, or they might help the issue but at too great a cost.

The political center is frequently presented in opposition to change. For example, the editorial board of *New York Times* called the "centrist" candidates in the 2020 Democratic Party the "truth-tellers on Medicare for All, the Green New Deal, free health care for undocumented immigrants from everywhere, slavery reparations and more" (2019). One recent study found "centrist" media outlets portrayed the Green New Deal in a negative light, framing it as extreme, childish, and naive (Morris 2021). Media accounts routinely highlight centrist and moderate political actors' opposition to spending or tax increases, often proposing less of each as an alternative (Seib 2009).

Elite preference center

The final meaning of the political center nested within the elite consensus is a specific set of policy positions associated with the political center and political actors identified as centrist or moderate. Since at least the 1990s and the emergence of the Democratic Leadership Council, the center has often been represented by a socially liberal, economically conservative orientation (see Lind 1995), sometimes framed as "progressive social conscience with pro-growth economic

views" (Wolff 2015), this libertarian set of positions qualifies as centrist because it contains both liberal and conservative positions. When combined together they produce ideologically diversity and a midpoint in an aggregated ideological space. The socially liberal, economically conservative version of the center is also a very good characterization of the preferences of economic elites (Page et al. 2013; Page and Gilens 2017).[20] The opposite orientation – socially conservative, economically liberal – is *never* associated with the political center, despite the fact it would represent a set of ideologically diverse positions, and do so using the exact same logic as in the case of the libertarian orientation.

Centrist (and not-*centrist) policies*

The libertarian version of the center occasionally appears in social science scholarship (Hall 2019:19–20) and it is prevalent in mainstream media. Policies associated with the centrist or moderate label typically fit into this meaning. These include debt reduction and fiscal responsibility (Hughes 2016), hawkish foreign policy (van Zuylen-Wood 2019), tax cuts (Scott 2003), spending cuts primarily through entitlement reform (Glaeser 2011), free trade (Barr and Devroy 1994), and a general pro-market disposition. The emphasis on fiscal balance primarily operates through opposition to spending programs, particularly "entitlement" programs like Social Security and Medicare, which is also a major concern of the advocates of the political center (Avlon 2004; Halstead and Lind 2001; Wheelan 2013).

Table 2.2 presents the results of an analysis of 150 newspaper articles from from the early 1980s through 2022, fifty articles each from the *New York Times*, *the Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Each policy position said to be centrist or moderate or attributed to a figure labeled a centrist or moderate was tracked, as well as each policy explicitly declared as not centrist or moderate, and those explicitly opposed by centrists or moderate political actors.

[20] Professionals, too, are also found to hold policy preferences that are, on average, to the left of the American public on social issues and to the right of the public on economic issues (Brint 1994).

Table 2.2 The policy boundaries of the center

Centrist	Not-centrist
Debt reduction	Increasing taxes
Fiscal responsibility/balanced budgets	Spending
Hawkish foreign policy/defense	Universal healthcare
Tax cuts	Class war
Entitlement reform	Green New Deal
Free trade	Increasing spending
Limits to spending	Free college
Reduction in spending	Increasing the minimum wage
Free enterprise	Pro-Life on abortion

The set of policies associated with centrism generally fall into categories considered economically conservative, or supporting the free market. Despite the "socially liberal, economically conservative" characterization often used to describe centrism, the social aspect is not what centrists spend the most time talking about, or what journalists most often identify with centrism. Instead the centrist positions are disproportionately focused around fiscal conservatism, lower taxes, and a pro-market orientation. The emphasis on fiscal balance primarily operates through opposition to spending programs, particularly "entitlement" programs like Social Security and Medicare. Given this, the focus on lowering taxes is also interesting. Fiscal responsibility and entitlement reform are also large concerns for the self-identified centrists who write books advocating for centrism (Halstead and Lind 2001; Wheelan 2013).

The boundary of the political center is also frequently marked by positions explicitly said to *not* represent the center or positions opposed by political actors identified as centrist. Such positions include tax increases (Confessore 2011; Stein 2022), spending increases (Seib 2009), single payer health care (The Editorial Board 2019), climate mitigation (although certain

market-based approaches are currently advocated by self-identified centrists[21]), and opposition to raising the federal minimum wage (Edmondson 2021; Rosenbaum and Times 1989). More often than not, the center is positioned as opposition to left leaning (rather than right leaning[22]) economic and social welfare policies.

Scholarship on income-based differences in political preferences reveals, compared to the average American, the affluent (top 20% of income earners) tend to be more liberal on social issues but more conservative on issues related to economic regulation, fiscal policy, and welfare spending (Gilens 2012). Another study, using a survey of "Economically Successful Americans," offered a window into the policy preferences of the economic elite (Page et al. 2013). The sample was mostly composed of individuals with average incomes greater than one million dollars with the majority falling in the top one percent of wealth holders (and an average just over fourteen million dollars in wealth). A minority of these "millionaires" supported a minimum wage "above the poverty line" (40%), "national health insurance financed by tax money" (32%), expanding Social Security (3%), and reducing "inequality by heavy taxes on the rich" (17%) (Page and Gilens 2017:116). However, in each case, a majority of Americans supported the position. The

---

[21] Support for the fossil fuel industry has marked the centrist position (McCain Nelson, Hook, and Murray 2013), while concern for the environment was not centrist (Harwood 2001). More recently this may have changed. Currently the centrist position is generally in favor of climate change mitigation, specifically on the issue of rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement. This represents a significant shift in what is characterized as the center. Some of the leading proponents of the political center reflect the change as well. Ted Halstead, self described centrist and coauthor of *The Radical Center* (Halstead and Lind 2001), founded the Climate Leadership Council (CLC) in 2017. The CLC is a group of public figures and scholars (including Greg Mankiw, Larry Summers, Janet Yellen, and Ben Bernanke) that authored "The Conservative Case for Carbon Dividends" (Baker et al. 2017; also see Halstead, Mankiw, and Feldstein 2017) and the "Bipartisan Climate Roadmap" (Baker and Schultz 2021). In fact, in recent years climate change mitigation has become one of the key components of centrist platforms, supported by candidates like Michael Bloomberg and Howard Schultz and pushed by centrist organizations like Third Way (n.d.). However, not all climate change mitigation policies are associated with the political center.

[22] There are a couple notable cases in which the centrist position is to oppose right leaning positions. With respect to tax cuts, this occurs when the cuts are viewed as extreme and fiscally irresponsible, as in the case of the Bush tax cuts (Leonhardt 2010) and the Brownback "tax experiment" (Peters 2012). It also can occur in debates over health care policy, depending on the context. In a 2014 article, two Democratic politicians were identified as centrist because they voted against the ACA, putting them at odds with the majority of the Democratic Party (Peterson 2014). But years later during the Trump administration, the repeal of the ACA was at odds with the centrist position (Peterson and Armour 2017; Stephens 2019), and in one case the improvement of the ACA marked the center (Shear and Crowley 2020).

elite preference center fits quite well within these preferences and they are often at odds with mass preferences.

2.3 Discussion

One of the interesting features of the discourse around the political center is the widespread presence of contradictions and misleading implications. This section discusses these general themes, and does so with the framing that the "supply" of the political center – what is presented as the center – often does not match the demand- – the specific citizen center according to median public opinion. I organize the discussion into three main points: (1) the 'center' of the political actor space does not neatly match on to the center of the citizen preference space, (2) the self-identified and often-labeled "centrist" politicians do not directly follow public opinion, and (3) the American public is not socially liberal and economically conservative, as the center is most-often said to be.

2.3.1 The political actor and citizen spaces

Scholarship provides several reasons to doubt the center of the political actor space (the "supply" in this case) is equivalent, or roughly equivalent, to the median position within the citizen space (the "demand"). If it were true, it would imply the political system, more or less, responds to the interests of the public. There may be the presence of noise – it is unlikely (and perhaps undesirable) that political actors could ever be perfectly responsive to the median preferences of citizens – but in a functioning democratic system there should be unbiased representation of the public's desires, especially when it comes to issues they find salient (Burstein 2014).

The literature on democratic responsiveness provides insight into relative locations of the two centers. Scholars debate the extent to which American elected representatives respond to the will of the public and prominent scholars fall on both sides. Those that argue the US government is overall responsive (Burstein 2003; Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Stimson 2015)

note the correlation between policy and preferences is not perfect, but argue the relationship between public preferences and policy is sufficient. Several studies of aggregate public opinion conclude that, on average, policy decisions are influenced by majority public opinion and generally responsive to changes in public opinion (see Canes-Wrone 2015 for a review of the literature).

Scholars more critical of America's democratic responsiveness argue the associations between average citizen preferences and specific policies are weakened or disappear altogether when taking into account the differences in power across social groups. Gilens and Page conclude that when controlling for the preferences of high income earners and elite/corporate interest groups, "the general public has little or no independent influence" (2014:572). The notion that the affluent or elites have disproportionate power can be found in the work of prominent scholars of American politics (Domhoff 1967; Hunter 1953; Mills 1956; Schattschneider 1960). Such scholars highlight how professional and social ties between politicians and the economic/social elite and the class background of politicians themselves bias political representation. A recent review of the literature concludes there is a large divergence between what people want and what they get from the US government, and that it responds to the preferences of certain groups far more than others (Canes-Wrone 2015). This conclusion – of biased representation – alone suggests the center of public preferences is not in line with the center of political actors.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the polarization literature also suggests these centers, if they were once aligned, have likely moved apart. While the existence of polarization among the public ("mass polarization") is debated (Abramowitz 2011; Fiorina 2017; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2010), the existence of polarization among the major political parties ("elite polarization") is well documented. Influential quantitative scholarship inferring ideology from Congressional voting behavior shows the average distance between members of each party (closer distances indicate more similar voting behavior) has increased over time (Abramowitz

2011; McCarty et al. 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1984). Some of the polarization can be explained by realignment and the nationalization and centralization of party organizations (Mudge 2018a) – Democrat politicians have become more consistently liberal and Republicans more consistently conservative. The quantitative measures of roll call voting demonstrate political actors voting with members of the other party has become increasingly rare (McCarty et al. 2006).

If the two parties moved in equal magnitude toward their respective ideological poles, the gap between the parties (the space that could be considered the center) would also grow larger. However, scholars observe elite polarization as asymmetric, specifically that the Republicans have moved farther to the right than the Democrats have moved to the left (Hacker and Pierson 2005), which implies the center of the political actor space has been pulled to the right over time. This observation is reflected in quantitative measures of Congressional activity like the DW-NOMINATE.

Also discussed in the introduction, the literature on the spread of neoliberalism offers another reason to suspect the center of political actors has shifted to the right. While the definition is debated, in general, neoliberalism refers to an ideological orientation characterized by a belief that the market is the appropriate tool to solve not only economic but also social problems. According to Stephanie Mudge, the "distinctive logic of neoliberalism is that markets are both the means and ends of government…" (Mudge 2018b:2). Neoliberalism is often associated with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations (Prasad 2006). These administrations marked a period which saw the expansion of free markets, deregulation, privatization, and the decline of decommodifying welfare policies. More recently, studies have expanded the focus to include the role of the Democratic Party (and other "center-left" parties in the OECD) in the spread of neoliberalism, some arguing it was the actors in and around the Democratic Party that had a greater influence in completing the neoliberal turn. Republicans were already more supportive of the market, so the turn of the Democratic Party toward free trade, means-tested

welfare, deregulation, and a general "economic style of reasoning" (not to mention its move away from organized labor) pushed the two parties closer together on economic issues (Berman 2018; Geismer 2022; Mudge 2018a). According to Martin Gilens, "On many regulatory and market-oriented economic issues, then, the policy orientations of the two parties have become much more similar, if not indistinguishable."(Gilens 2012:167)

These shifts to the right were not caused by political actors following trends in public opinion. After the election of Ronald Reagan, donors and political actors affiliated with the Democratic Party took the electoral loss to mean they needed to move the party to the center in order to increase their electoral appeal (Ferguson and Rogers 1986a). In particular, this meant moving the party away from domestic New Deal policies. However, the assumption that Reagan's electoral success was driven by a rightward shift in the public was unsubstantiated. Writing during Reagan's first term, two observers note "there is little direct evidence that mass public sentiment has turned against the domestic programs of the New Deal" and, if there were shifts in public opinion, "most have tended to run against the direction of public policy" (Ferguson and Rogers 1986b). Further, the Democrats arguably still benefited from an association with the New Deal; "Democratic Party identification with traditional positions on New Deal issues was a major party strength, not a weakness" (Ferguson and Rogers 1986b). Other scholars confirmed this noting "the policy right turn of the Reagan years cannot be accounted for as a response to public demand" (Page and Shapiro 1992:170). Thus, the shift to the right in the political actor space did coincide with a comparable shift in the public, meaning the "supply" of the political actor center moved to the right of the demand of public opinion.

2.3.2 "Centrists" and the use of public opinion

Several scholars have examined the extent to which political actors are aware of public opinion and, when they are, how it is used. Susan Herbst demonstrates that the very concept of public opinion varies across political actors such as staffers, politicians, and journalists. Such actors often lack the resources to conduct sufficient polling themselves, and instead they rely on

a mix of op-eds, interactions with interest groups and lobbyists, and contact with constituents to construct their perceptions of public preferences. Such actors often dismiss public opinion polling altogether under the belief that it represents the views of an easily manipulated and uninformed public (Herbst 1998). More recent scholarship shows political actors often have a poor understanding of their constituents' preferences. On average, they overestimate public support for conservative policies and underestimate support for liberal policies (Broockman and Skovron 2018).

But not all politicians are ignorant of public opinion. Presidential administrations since John F. Kennedy studied aggregate public opinion and commissioned their own polls, creating a "public opinion apparatus" (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). However, it does not follow that administrations holding this information on public opinion then "pander" to the public (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Instead, studies reveal they use public opinion to "craft" language used to reframe their own preferred policies in a manner to optimize public appeal, treating it as "a malleable object to be molded to support them and their policies" (Druckman and Jacobs 2015:119).

One study focuses on the use of public opinion by President Bill Clinton. For the present study, Clinton is the most interesting case since there is no president more closely associated with the political center than Clinton (Avlon 2004; Brown 2016; Dionne 1998; Harwood 2001; Lieberman 2021). If the meaning of the political center attached to Clinton was consistent with the median public opinion, then his administration might consult public opinion in order to follow the median position. That was not the case. As in other presidential administrations, Clinton used public opinion not so he could structure his proposed policies in line with the preferences of the public ("pander" to them), but to "craft" language around his preferred policies in an effort to change public preferences to match his own. In the case of healthcare reform, Clinton only consulted public opinion *after* he determined his preferred policy (scholarship suggests politicians generally pursue their own policy preferences rather than those

of the public; see Carnes 2013). Clinton oversaw numerous changes that "failed to mirror public opinion" (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995:xii)[23] and ultimately his policy decisions are better explained by a pursuit of his own personal political goals and the goals of the supporters, activists, and interests groups he valued. According to Druckman and Jacobs, "political elites are mostly concerned with the demands of particular, privileged segments of the electorate that are affluent, well organized, and/or politically valued" (Druckman and Jacobs 2015:119). Clinton is considered a centrist because his policy record marked a departure from the "old" Democratic Party of the New Deal , because he compromised with Republicans to pass legislation, and because he pursued an agenda more friendly toward free markets than previous Democrats. While these claims to the center are each valid, it is not true that he was responding to the center of public opinion.

2.3.3 Socially liberal, economically conservative

The general orientation of policy preferences identified most often associated with the political center – socially liberal, economically conservative – present another example for which the supply of the center does not match the demand. Studies of public opinion suggest the American public is ideologically (or philosophically) conservative but programmatically (or operationally) liberal (Free and Cantril 1968; Grossmann and Hopkins 2015), others characterizing the American public as "conservative egalitarians" (Page and Jacobs 2009b:97). The American public identifies with ideas associated with conservatism when it comes to self-identifying on an ideological scale and reporting preferences on the general role of the state, its size, and its power. However, when it comes to specific policy positions, the American public

[23] The list provided by the authors includes “campaign finance reform, tobacco legislation, Clinton’s proposals in his first budget for an energy levy and a high tax on Social Security benefits (despite his campaign promise to cut middle-class taxes), the North American Free Trade Agreement (at its outset), U.S. intervention in Bosnian as well as House Republican proposals after the 1994 elections for a ‘revolution’ in policies toward the environment, education, Medicare, and other issues” (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000:xii). In the case of NAFTA, other scholars conclude its design was ultimately shaped in the interests of elites rather than by the preferences of the public (Fairbrother 2020).

leans liberal. Majorities of Americans hold liberal positions with respect to macroeconomic policy, civil rights, healthcare, labor, education, the environment, energy, transportation, crime, welfare, and commerce (see table 1 in Grossmann and Hopkins 2015:122). Another attempt to map out the ideological positions of American voters shows the socially liberal, economically conservative orientation represents only 3.8% of the American public (Drutman 2017).

In general, the depiction of the center is consistent with public preferences the more abstract the issue is, but tends to depart from public preferences as specificity increases. Public opinion on the federal deficit illustrates the point. The federal debt is possibly the issue of greatest concern for self-identified centrists and advocates of centrism and the approach favored by those identifying with the political center is "entitlement reform": reducing federal dollars going to fund "entitlement" programs such as Social Security and Medicaid.

The positions presented as representing the center can be compared to public opinion data from the Voter Study Group's Nationscape survey (Tausanovitch and Vavreck 2021).[24] A majority of Americans view reducing the national debt as a "top priority" (52%), and another 38% believe it is important but not the top priority (a combined 90%). Very few Americans feel the deficit is unimportant (about 8%) or that nothing needs to be done to address it (less than 3%). The public is well-represented by the centrist concern over the public debt.

However, when it comes to the public's preferred solutions there is a departure from what is presented as the center. Figure 2.1 displays the proportion of the public supporting raising taxes, and cutting spending on the military, Medicare, and Medicaid. Raising taxes "on Americans with incomes over $250,000 a year" is the most popular option among the public: 64% of Americans strongly or somewhat favor the position. Cuts to military spending is the second most favored position (a combined 38%), followed by cuts to Medicaid (23%) and Medicare (14%). Raising taxes on incomes over $250 thousand is the most favored position

[24] The figures use the provided weights to generate nationally-representative estimates.

across all political identifications: Democrats (77%), Independents (59%), Republicans (56%), and "something else" (45%; for this group raising taxes is the plurality, with the second highest is cutting military spending at 33%).

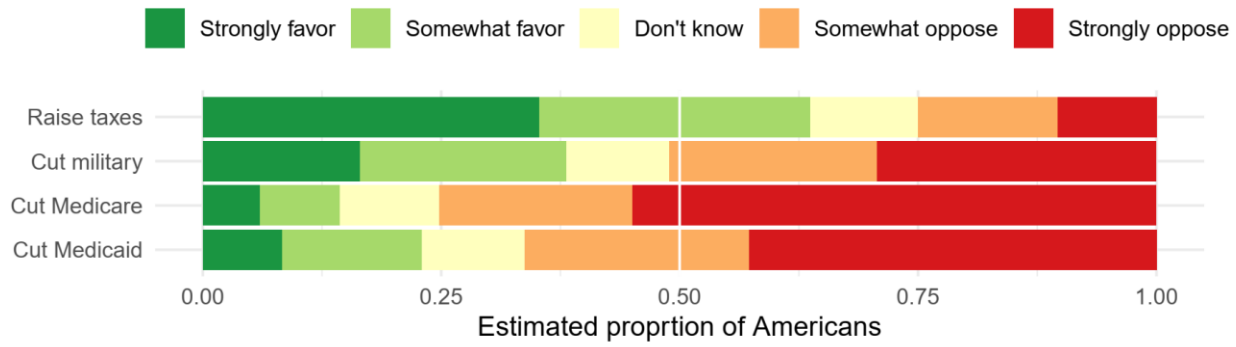

Figure 2.1 Public support for different approaches to dealing with the federal debt

Political commentators have noted this contradiction in the context of recent billionaire "centrist" candidates. A description of Howard Schultz notes the unpopularity of his approach to the public debt: "When it comes to how he might address the $22 trillion debt, he resists talking about raising taxes or cutting military spending — two broadly popular ideas that might offend members of his social cohort — and instead focuses on cutting entitlements, a broadly unpopular idea" (van Zuylen-Wood 2019).

In chapter three, I provide a more in-depth examination of the public opinion center for a large set of policies in various domains. I create ideological measures for each policy – using self-reported ideology, partisan identification, and party vote in presidential elections – to consider the association between a policy's ideological score and its net agreement (the share of the public that supports a policy minus the share that opposes it). The analysis reveals a significant association showing liberal policies (according to my measures) are on average more popular. This finding is robust to multiple specifications and across different ideological measures. The association even holds when only considering the net agreement among self-

identified moderates (for the measures using ideology) and independents (for the measures using partisanship). Despite claims that the American public can be characterized as right-leaning centrists (Galston 2019), there is significant evidence that the public leans to the left in its policy preferences.

2.4 Conclusion

The political center is a messy concept. This paper attempts to articulate the various meanings held by the "political center," but more work is needed to capture meanings missed here, to explore how they have changed over time, and to uncover how the center might take on specific meanings in certain political and geographic contexts. The hope of this study is that when social scientists, historians, pundits, and centrist advocates argue for or critique the political center, they can be more explicit in how they are using the concept.

More explicit transparency in the meanings of the center is important because the discourse around the political center, not always but often, represents a phenomenon where labeling a position or actor "centrist" or "moderate" gives the impression that it is unbiased, rational, popular, or a point of compromise. Social theorists identify a form of power that dominates the discourse by presenting certain interests as feasible and desirable (Lukes 1974). Power is not only expressed through physical force, but also through shaping what people view as desirable and right; to get people to desire things consistent with the interests of those in power (Blyth 2007). Political actors often try to manipulate public opinion, to move the public toward their own preferences, although such efforts often fall short (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

The elite consensus center I describe represents such an attempt. The dominant depiction of centrism in the mainstream media is a defense of the neoliberal status quo, but branded to appear popular, smart, pragmatic, and a point of compromise that would resolve political conflict. In a democratic setting, popularity can produce legitimacy. To say that you

hold a centrist position is to imply that everyone is on your side, and this may have consequences. If you believe your opinions are shared by a large share of fellow citizens, it could be more empowering than if you felt few people shared your views. If you believe your preferences are unpopular or impractical or infeasible, it could suppress motivation to take action, especially when your preferences are shared by a large majority (Noelle-Neumann 1993).

Democratic responsiveness in the United States is biased, and the collective centrist discourse combined with the failure to define distinct and incompatible meanings, can result in concealing the lack of responsiveness in the political system. In its current dominant form, the centrist discourse is an obstacle for democratic responsiveness. It is anti-political in its effect in shaping how people think about politics; it presents politics as if differing groups are only disagreeing about policy for tribal reasons, not because of real interests. This will not help alleviate problems with the American political system; it will only further its dysfunction.

Chapter 3
Mapping the public opinion center

> *Overall, there's a basis for saying that the U.S. is a centrist country that leans modestly to the right.*
>
> - William Galston (2019)

It's not uncommon to hear that America is actually composed of a large group of "centrists" or "moderates" who are poorly served by the two major parties, who desire an alternative located in the space between the Democrats and Republicans. People like William Galston (quote above) stress this point, but also note that the public *leans to the right*. It may be true that Americans are dissatisfied with the two major parties (identification with "independent" is significantly higher than in the past) but it is probably wrong to use this conclusion to place the public in between the two major parties, and even more wrong to suggest the public leans to the right. This claim is based on self-identification: more Americans identify as conservative than liberal, not on public preferences.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, journalists, academics, and political actors commonly refer to the political center, centrists, moderates, and centrism, but the meaning of these terms is multivocal and often vague. The political center can refer to a anti- or post-political presentation of politics (often taking a technocratic or expert-driven approach to policy making), it can refer to bipartisan cooperation in legislatures, and it can refer to citizens who either (1) systematically take middle ground positions or (2) blend conservative and liberal positions so their collective preferences net out to what appears to be a middle ground position. Finally, among certain scholars of public opinion (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), the 'center' simply refers to the most popular position (the median or mean position) on any given issue.

In this chapter I investigate this last meaning of the political center to explore (1) which policies are popular overall (according to the median or mean position) and thus represent the median version of the political center, (2) the policies that are popular among both self-identified Republicans and Democrats (a partisan identity-driven center), and (3) which policies represent the political center according to several quantitative measures of a policy's ideology. The analyses show that, in terms of policy preferences, there is no evidence that the public is particularly fond of the center, much less that they lean to the right. This chapter explores the "demand-side" of the political center (see the previous chapter). It ultimately shows that the demand (discerned through an examination of public opinion on a range of policies) is not biased toward the center, but, on average, toward policies that are viewed by the public as more left or liberal. This is partly conditional on the domain – in the areas of crime and foreign policy the public is more likely to favor conservative leaning policies – but the evidence overall suggests left-leaning policies are more popular than policies either in the center or on the right, especially in the area of health, environmental, and immigration policy.

3.1 Data

This chapter uses data from three nationally representative social and political surveys to identify policies that represent the political center according to the median or popular meaning. Numerous social surveys ask respondents for their preferences on a wide range of policies and issues. The American National Election Study(2021), World Values Survey, and the International Social Survey Programme, to name a few, contain thousands of responses from national surveys conducted all around the world, and include large samples of respondents in the United States. Given the focus of the study on the United States context, I will focus on three data sources of public opinion data: the Voter Study Group's Nationscape Survey, the Cooperative Election Study (formerly the Cooperative Congressional Election Study), and the General Social Survey. The questions included in the analysis are only from waves administered

from 2019 to the present, with the goal of keeping the data relevant to the present as much as possible.

Voter Study Group

Some of the data presented in this document come from the Voter Study Group‘s (VSG) Nationscape Survey Data Set (Tausanovitch and Vavreck 2021). The study was administered in weekly waves over three ’phases’. The first phase began on July 18, 2019 and the third phase ended on February 3, 2021. In total, the data set contains 494,796 observations. All data was collected after 2018. The VSG questions include an option for respondents to indicate they "don't know." These responses are coded so that they are situated within the support and oppose positions, meaning "don't know" is the median position if neither support or oppose achieves a majority.

Cooperative Election Survey

I also use data from the nationally-representative Cooperative Election Study (CES) (Dagonel 2021; Kuriwaki 2018). I use cumulative common content and cumulative preferences files. The waves for 2019, 2020, and 2021 – a total of 104,700 observations – are included in the analysis. The CES questions often do not allow respondents to opt out of answering (such as a "don't know" response).

General Social Survey

General Social Survey (GSS) questions on spending preferences were gathered for analysis (Davern et al. 2024). All data come from the 2021 and 2022 waves (the 2020 wave was disrupted by COVID). These questions ask respondents whether they feel government spending in different domains is too high, about right, or too low. These are also coded to reflect the direction in which respondents feel spending should change; too high takes a value -1, about right 0, and too low +1. The average response for each domain thus reflects the proportion of

respondents desiring more spending in the domain minus the proportion desiring less, which I refer to as the "net spending preference."

3.2 The center as the median or net position

In this section the political center defined by the median and average positions is explored on a set of 131 policy positions from the VSG (68), CES (35), and GSS (28). This version of the political center holds particular significance in studies of electoral politics and democratic responsiveness. The median or average position within the public is suggested to be the target of strategic political actors with the goal of optimizing their electoral chances. It is this 'center' that, within the framework of the median voter model (Downs 1957), should be pursued by rational actors within political parties. Further, the median or average positions within the public is the basic approach to understanding what the public wants, which is then often used as a means to determine the extent to which a political system facilitates policy changes that are sensitive to changes in public opinion, and for which there is a gap between what the public wants and what it gets (Canes-Wrone 2015).

Per the discussion in chapter two, certain policy positions are often associated with or contrasted against the political center, collectively defining the boundaries of the political center. In mainstream media outlets, and academics and public proponents of the political center, the common theme in the policies said to represent the center include fiscal responsibility (including concern over the public debt), constrained social spending (opposition to large scale spending in the areas of social welfare), the general support of free markets (with a few important exceptions), opposition to various forms of progressive taxation, and general opposition to a range decommodifying and redistributive welfare policies.

I argue that the multivocal nature of the political center facilitates a distortion of mass opinion as it is perceived by the public. In effect, declaring certain positions as "centrist"

suggests they are popular among the masses, which has important implications within any democratic society. But are the positions most-often associated with the political center representative of median or average positions within the public? This document answers this question by exploring what the citizen center actually looks like according to different approaches.

3.2.1 Policy preferences by issue area

This section contains summaries of the aggregate public preferences organized in ten policy areas. Each policy area contains a table (or two) with a list of policies and the weighted proportion of Americans who support the policy and oppose it, as well as the median and "net" positions. The data source is also indicated in the last column. All tables are sorted according to the net position. Net positions are likely to be different depending on the source. For example, the questions in CES force respondents to select either support or oppose, whereas the VSG allows respondents to take an undecided ("not sure") position. This means the net positions from the CES dataset will likely have higher absolute values in their net positions than policies from the VSG for comparable items.

The net position is the weighted proportion of Americans supporting the policy minus the weighted proportion of Americans opposing it. The net position tells us whether more people support or oppose a policy. Compared to the net position, the median is a much more conservative measure, at least when a "not sure" response is available to participants (if not, they will be the same since responses can either be support or oppose). If a policy is supported by a majority, then the median position will necessarily also be "support." However, policies that have a median position of "not sure" (or "maintain" in the case of the spending questions), can have a net position in either direction. For example, imagine a survey question where the estimated shares of the public supporting and opposing a position are 30 and 20 percent. This would mean the net position +10 percentage points (PP). It is true that more people support the

position than oppose it (a ten PP difference), but it would be misleading to say that the public supports this position given an estimated half of the population does not have an opinion on the matter. For this reason, this section focuses on both the median and net positions.

Abortion

Table 3.1 summarizes twelve survey items related to abortion policy. American preferences for abortion are bound by strong opposition to both (1) a complete ban on abortion and (2) unrestricted access to abortion. Americans want legal access to abortion: the net position is -60 percentage points (PP) in the CES and -40 in the VSG. This includes support for abortion in cases outside of of rape, incest, or when the pregnancy or giving birth poses serious health risks (+29 PP), opposition to making abortion legal only under certain conditions (-8 PP), opposition to providing firms the ability to decline coverage of abortions under health insurance plans (-10 PP in CES), and opposition to *blocking* the use government funds to be spent on abortions (-6 PP). Further, Americans generally support the position "Always allow a woman the right to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice" (+13 PP).

Table 3.1 Abortion

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Total prohibition of abortion	Oppose	-0.600	0.200	0.800	CES
Never permit abortion	Oppose	-0.403	0.205	0.607	VSG
Abortion any time	Oppose	-0.341	0.221	0.562	VSG
Late term abortion	Oppose	-0.323	0.220	0.544	VSG
Allow employers to decline coverage of abortions	Oppose	-0.103	0.448	0.552	CES
Allow abortion only under certain cases	Oppose	-0.078	0.461	0.539	CES
Prohibit government expenditures for abortion	Oppose	-0.063	0.468	0.532	CES
Firms deny abort. coverage	Not sure	-0.063	0.353	0.416	VSG
Require abortion waiting period	Not sure	0.039	0.388	0.349	VSG
Always allow abortion as a matter of choice	Support	0.133	0.566	0.434	CES
Ban abortion after 20 weeks	Support	0.191	0.595	0.405	CES
Abort. other than rape/incest/risk	Support	0.294	0.561	0.268	VSG

However, there are limitations to Americans' general support for abortion. While the public wants abortion to be accessible in general, there is strong opposition to completely

unrestricted access, especially with respect to the timing of the procedure. Permitting "late-term" abortion is strongly opposed (-32 PP), as is allowing abortion “at any time during the pregnancy” (-34 PP). Requiring a waiting period prior to the procedure is net supported (+3 PP), but the share of those who support and oppose are each less than 40%.

The evidence suggests that a large share of the American public is consistently opposed to banning or limiting access to abortion, unless it pertains to restrictions on abortions occurring later in the pregnancy. This is actually a case in which the public appears to strongly oppose extremes at both ends – both a complete ban and completely unrestricted access, suggesting the middle ground or middle range position are good representations of the median-driven center.

Guns

Table 3.2 shows preferences on gun policy. Americans' preferences on guns are nuanced in a way similar to those toward abortion. There is significant opposition to a complete ban on all guns (-47 PP), but various forms of restrictions are very popular. These include a ban on assault rifles (+28 PP VSG, +18.3 CES), requiring background checks for gun purchases (+74 PP CES, + 78 PP VSG), limiting the magazine capacity in guns to 10 bullets (+21, although the median is "not sure"). Further, a substantial majority of Americans oppose making concealed carry permits easier to get (-20 PP).

Two policies related to transparency in gun ownership present appear to contradict each other. The full text of each survey question helps explain why this might be the case. The first, from the CES: "Prohibit state and local governments from publishing the names and addresses of all gun owners" (+12 PP); the second, from the VSG: "Create a public gun registry of all gun owners" (+30 PP VSG). The public appears to both support and oppose publicly-accessible information on gun owners, but the key feature distinguishing the two is the mention of home addresses. Opposition to publishing addresses of homeowners might be due to the fact that

firearms are one of the most commonly stolen items in home burglaries. Publishing the locations of guns might be viewed as making it easier for burglars to find them.

Table 3.2 Guns

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Ban all guns	Oppose	-0.472	0.197	0.669	VSG
Ease ability to obtain concealed-carry permits	Oppose	-0.201	0.399	0.601	CES
Prohibit publishing gun owner names/addresses	Support	0.117	0.559	0.441	CES
Ban assault rifles	Support	0.183	0.591	0.409	CES
Limit gun magazines to 10 bullets	Not sure	0.206	0.492	0.286	VSG
Ban assault rifles	Support	0.278	0.565	0.287	VSG
Public gun registry	Support	0.299	0.550	0.251	VSG
Background checks for gun purchases	Support	0.736	0.868	0.132	CES
Background checks for all gun sales	Support	0.781	0.856	0.075	VSG

Overall, the American public opposes an outright ban on firearms, but supports a wide range of restrictions that might make gun ownership safer. In particular, the public's support for access to guns does not extend to assault rifles and weapons with large magazines. Americans value the right to own guns in the context of hunting and self-defense (Carlson 2023), but large magazines and assault rifles appear to be viewed as excessive and beyond what is necessary to achieve either of these goals.

Immigration

The two data sets contain thirteen policies related to immigration. Responses generally reflect preferences for granting citizenship to migrants and opposition to various policies that would break up families or prevent them from reuniting. In fact, the only policies where the median position can be considered *anti*-immigration are those relating to the US-Mexico

border, with the caveat that, when these policies include building a wall, they become unpopular.[25]

Table 3.3 Immigration

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Separate illegal immigrant parents and children	Oppose	-0.463	0.179	0.642	VSG
Ban immigration from predominantly Muslim countries	Oppose	-0.357	0.201	0.558	VSG
Reduce legal immigration by 50 percent over the next 10 years by eliminating the visa lottery and ending family-based migration.	Oppose	-0.180	0.410	0.590	CES
Deport the undocumented	Not sure	-0.117	0.336	0.453	VSG
Increase spending on border security, including building a wall	Oppose	-0.097	0.452	0.548	CES
Withhold funding from police failing to report illegal immigrants	Oppose	-0.049	0.476	0.524	CES
Charge immigrants who enter the U.S. illegally with a federal crime	Not sure	-0.011	0.384	0.395	VSG
Shift from family-based to merit-based immigration	Not sure	0.086	0.332	0.246	VSG
Require proof-of-citizenship for money wires	Not sure	0.215	0.488	0.273	VSG
Path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants	Support	0.254	0.527	0.273	VSG
Increase the number of border patrols on the US-Mexican border	Support	0.285	0.642	0.358	CES
Grant conditional legal status to undocumented	Support	0.335	0.667	0.333	CES
Path to citizenship for all child immigrants	Support	0.540	0.694	0.154	VSG

Support for offering a path to citizenship for migrants who have entered the United States is robust across multiple survey questions. Providing a path to citizenship for

[25] This general pattern of American views on immigration is remarkable when contrasted against the political discourse that often presents immigration as a highly contested, "culture war" issue. Given the evidence presented here, it would be quite questionable to categorize Americans, in the aggregate, as anti-immigration. This is especially true when they are compared to public preferences and existing policies in other industrialized nations. Only 33 countries in the world have "unrestricted" birthright citizenship ("jus soli") – the US is one of them, while not a single country in Europe has a comparable policy (most of the countries are in North, Central, and South America, with a handful in Africa and Oceania; see Collman 2018) . Birthright citizenship is not a charged political issue in the US, and it receives significantly more public support than in other European countries, including Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, Austria, and Germany (Levanon and Lewin-Epstein 2010). In the US, even a majority of self-identified Republicans believe that children *not even born in the US,* who migrated to the country as children, should have a path to citizenship (author's analysis of the VSG Nationscape data). This puts the US significantly to the left of its economic peers in Europe on the issue of immigration.

undocumented immigrants is quite popular (+25 PP), even more popular when certain conditions are met (three years of holding a job and paying taxes, no felony convictions; +34 PP), and higher yet when the migrants in question enter the country as children (+54 PP). Consistent with this pattern, Americans do not support policies that would deport all undocumented immigrants (-12 PP) or charge undocumented immigrants with a federal crime (-1 PP; in both cases, the median position is "not sure"). Selectively banning migration from "predominantly Muslim" countries is very unpopular (-36 PP), and a majority of Americans oppose withholding federal funding for police departments who do not report undocumented migrants (-5 PP).

As noted above, there are only a few issues for which the American public can fairly be viewed as anti-immigration. Increasing funds to monitor the border US-Mexico is very popular when asked on its own (+29 PP), but when the question includes a mention of building a wall the public's position reverses (-10 PP). It's possible the former is driven more by fear of drug-related crime (often associated with the border), but the differences between the two items suggests building a wall is very unpopular. The public also supports (without a majority) blocking money wires sent by people without citizenship when the money is sent to people outside of the US (+22 PP). Remittances have been linked to the funding of international terrorism (Markussen and Svendsen 2005), but sending money out of the country might also be perceived as a drain on domestic economic activity.

Americans strongly oppose separating children from their parents after entering the country without legal permission (-46 PP) and oppose a change in policy to end family-based immigration policy and the visa lottery when it is claimed to reduce the rate of immigration by 50% over ten years[26] (-18 PP). However, when directly asked about switching from a family-

[26] This survey question is multi-barreled. It contains three components: (1) ending the visa lottery, (2) ending family-based immigration policy, and (3) reducing the rate of *legal* immigration by 50% over a ten year period (which is stated to be a result of the other two components). It is a poorly designed survey question.

based to merit-based immigration system, the public preferences are less clear. The position is net supported (+9 PP), but is supported by only 33% of the public and this particular question has the highest share of "not sure" responses of all the sixty eight policy questions from the VSG dataset (42%).

Labor and welfare

This section considers policies related to labor and social welfare. Only one position is net opposed (limiting trade, although the median response is "not sure"); all others are net supported. Most, but not all, of the policies are generally associated with a left-leaning or liberal economic orientation, marked by different forms of decommodification (i.e. decoupling the well-being of citizens from the volatility of the market). Americans support a guarantee in housing ("provide housing for all Americans who could not otherwise afford it") and in jobs ("guarantee jobs for all Americans"), both by large margins (+28 PP and +38 PP). Sixty-two percent (+38 PP) of the public supports increasing the federal minimum wage to $15, and 68% (+52 PP) of Americans would like to see a requirement that employers provide twelve weeks of paid maternity leave for their employees.

The question on right to work laws (+12 PP) is the only item that is generally considered economically conservative – in this case anti-labor – although the wording of the question ("allow working in unionized workplaces without paying dues") might not necessarily lead to that interpretation. This finding, paired with the net support for strengthening unions (+12 PP), reveals a contradiction in preferences for union-related policy (although the intended outcome of one is clearer than that of the other). However, both questions have very high shares of "not sure" responses (neither achieve a majority support or opposition), giving the impression that the American public does not feel particularly strong about either position.

Two items on foreign trade reveal another contradiction. Americans have mixed views on limiting foreign trade (-19 PP, median is "not sure"), but when it comes to limiting trade with a specific county – China – the public is overall supportive (+22 PP).) items that are not

obviously partisan are placing tariffs on goods imported from China (+22 PP) and increasing spending on infrastructure and transportation (+57 PP). Free trade – inconsistent with tariffs on China – has been supported by political and economic elites within both parties, while the public shows a general support for "free trade."

Table 3.4 Labor and welfare

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Limit foreign trade	Not sure	-0.190	0.271	0.461	VSG
Strengthen unions	Not sure	0.117	0.395	0.278	VSG
Right to work law	Not sure	0.124	0.404	0.280	VSG
Tariffs on goods imported from China	Support	0.215	0.607	0.393	CES
Housing guarantee	Support	0.281	0.531	0.250	VSG
$15 minimum wage	Support	0.378	0.619	0.241	VSG
Jobs guarantee	Support	0.383	0.599	0.217	VSG
12 wks. paid maternity leave	Support	0.523	0.681	0.159	VSG

The evidence is consistent with the characterization of Americans as “both ideologically conservative and programatically liberal” (Ferguson and Rogers 1986), or “conservative egalitarians” (Page and Jacobs 2009). The public opposes restrictions on individual rights (like working for a unionized firm without being a union member), but wants to take measures to ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to achieve a minimal standard of living.

Taxation

Americans' preferences on taxation reveal a mix of support for progressive and regressive changes to the tax structure. A tax or tax system is "progressive" when payments, measured as a share of income, increase as wealth and/or income increase. Income taxes are generally progressive since the marginal tax rate is higher for higher income levels. A regressive tax is one where the share of income paid in taxes is higher at lower income and wealth levels than it is at higher levels. Taxes on consumption are generally considered regressive, since there

is a minimum amount of consumption required to survive and the consumption share of income declines as income increases, especially with respect to more essential forms of consumption. When the subject of the tax is income, the public holds broad support for progressive taxation. Raising taxes on families with incomes greater than $600,000 is very popular (+42 PP). Raising taxes on families making over $250,000 receives net support (+12 PP, "not sure" is the median), and when this policy change is paired with the detail that the revenues would be used to decrease the public debt, public support jumps nearly 20 PP to 64% (+38 PP). Even reductions in taxes that result in making the structure overall more progressive are popular: Americans want taxes of families making less than $100,000 annually to be lowered, a position supported by a remarkable 72% of Americans (+59 PP).

Table 3.5 Taxation

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Raise taxes on families making over $250,000	Not sure	0.116	0.450	0.334	VSG
Eliminate the estate tax	Not sure	0.288	0.492	0.204	VSG
Decrease deficit by raising taxes on Americans with incomes over $250,000 a year	Support	0.381	0.635	0.254	VSG
Enact a tax on wealth for high net worth households	Support	0.391	0.580	0.189	VSG
Raise taxes on families making over $600,000	Support	0.420	0.627	0.207	VSG
A tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products	Support	0.555	0.77	0.223	VSG
Cut taxes for families making less than $100,000 per year	Support	0.590	0.723	0.133	VSG

The public also supports some forms of regressive taxation. A full 77% of Americans support taxing cigarettes and tobacco products (+56 PP). This is classified as a "sin" tax; a regulatory tax designed to discourage certain types of behavior. Sales taxation does not exist because general consumption is viewed as bad, but we do tax alcohol, tobacco, sugar, cannabis, and gambling because less consumption of these goods is viewed as desirable, either for the individual doing the behavior (e.g., it is unhealthy to smoke or consume large amounts of sugar)

or for society as a whole (e.g., alcohol can lead to drunk driving-related deaths and domestic abuse). Sin taxes tend to be more popular than other types of taxation.

The data show a mixed message when it comes to taxing wealth. Nearly a majority (49%) of Americans support eliminating the estate tax (+29 PP), a tax on inherited wealth and assets. On the other hand, taxing wealth itself is supported by 63% of Americans (+42 PP). The opposition to the estate tax has puzzled scholars for years. Since very few Americans will ever have enough wealth to meet the minimum threshold required to have estate tax liabilities, it is not in the rational interest of the vast majority of Americans to eliminate it (see Bartels 2005). However, more recently, one scholar discovered this irrational position can be explained by the widespread misunderstanding of the number of households affected by the tax (Piston 2018). About two thirds of Americans, and even a majority of "well informed" respondents, overestimate the percentage of Americans subject to the estate tax. Those who are aware that it affects less than 1% of households are far more likely to oppose its repeal. Further, when this information was provided in experimental studies, a plurality of respondents supported keeping the estate tax (Piston 2018). The diffuse misunderstanding of the policy is likely due to misleading information spread by persistent campaigns to repeal the estate tax (Graetz and Shapiro 2006; Martin 2013).

Healthcare

The next area includes eleven policies related to healthcare. Table 3.6 demonstrates significant support for (1) protecting existing government-run health care programs (Medicare and Medicaid) and (2) expanding the presence of government in the health care system.

Table 3.6 Healthcare

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Cut Medicare to cut deficit	Oppose	-0.614	0.142	0.756	VSG
Cut Medicaid to cut deficit	Oppose	-0.437	0.228	0.665	VSG
Restore ACA mandate requiring everyone to be insured	Oppose	-0.214	0.393	0.607	CES
Abolish private health insurance	Not sure	-0.157	0.282	0.439	VSG
Repeal the Affordable Care Act	Oppose	-0.068	0.466	0.534	CES
Lower the eligibility age for Medicare from 65 to 50	Support	0.175	0.588	0.412	CES
Enact Medicare-for-all	Not sure	0.213	0.497	0.284	VSG
Provide Medicare for all Americans	Support	0.221	0.610	0.390	CES
Provide government-run health insurance to all Americans	Support	0.229	0.513	0.284	VSG
Provide the option to purchase government-run insurance to all Americans	Support	0.439	0.614	0.175	VSG
Subsidize health insurance for lower income people not receiving Medicare or Medicaid	Support	0.491	0.642	0.151	VSG

The public strongly opposes cuts to Medicare (-61 PP) and Medicaid (-44 PP) when the money saved would be used to fund reductions in the public debt.[27] Repealing the Affordable Care Act is opposed by 53% of Americans (-7 PP), although reintroducing the individual mandate is quite unpopular (-21 PP).

While Americans oppose the abolishment of private health insurance (-16 PP, the median is "not sure"), the table reveals robust support for the expansion of government run programs in the health care sector. In particular, expanding Medicare is generally popular. Lowering the eligibility age is supported by 59% of Americans (+18 PP). "Providing Medicare for all Americans" is supported by 61% of Americans (+22 PP in the CES), although when framed as "Medicare-for-all" support drops to just below 50% (49.7%, +21 PP in the VSG). A similar policy without the "Medicare" brand, "Providing government-run health insurance to all Americans" (commonly known as "single payer"), is supported by 51% of Americans (+23 PP) and what is

[27] For reference, as reported above, net support for raising taxes on annual incomes over $250K as a means to reduce the public debt was +38 PP.

commonly known as a "public option" ("the option to purchase government-run insurance") is supported by 61% of the public. Finally, for low income people unable to qualify for Medicare or Medicaid, the American public would like to see them receive health insurance subsidies to make sure they can afford coverage (64% support, +49 PP).[28]

Environment, climate, and energy

The next table summarizes public preferences for policies related to the environment, climate, and energy. Overall, the table demonstrates strong support for regulations that would require a higher reliance on renewable energy and reduction in carbon emissions.

Table 3.7 Environment, climate, and energy

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Ban nuclear power	Not sure	-0.045	0.332	0.378	VSG
Remove barriers to domestic oil and gas drilling	Not sure	-0.012	0.325	0.337	VSG
Enact a Green New Deal	Not sure	0.145	0.369	0.224	VSG
Require states use a minimum amount of renewable fuels	Support	0.246	0.623	0.377	CES
Raise average fuel efficiency	Support	0.298	0.649	0.351	CES
Allow EPA to regulate carbon dioxide emissions	Support	0.298	0.654	0.346	CES
Cap carbon emissions to combat climate change	Support	0.308	0.601	0.165	VSG
Make a large-scale investment in technology to protect the environment	Support	0.435	0.607	0.144	VSG

The first three items in the table do not receive a majority in either support or opposition. Banning nuclear power is net opposed (-5 PP), as is removing barriers to drill for oil and gas within the United States (-1 PP); in both cases roughly 1/3 of responses indicate they are

[28] Skeptics might point out that, sure, people want more government programs in the healthcare industry when how it would be paid for is absent. This does not appear to be the case. A poll from AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs also asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement “Americans should pay less for their health care, even if it means paying more in taxes” or “Americans should not pay more in taxes, even if that means paying more for their health care.” An estimated 62% of Americans support more taxation and lower health care costs, compared to 36% who oppose more taxation and accept the higher costs (The SCAN Foundation/Associated Press 2022).

"not sure." Enacting a Green New Deal has a much larger net position (+15 PP), but even more respondents indicate they are "not sure" about the policy.

The rest of the policies in the table are supported by a large majority (60%+) of Americans. Americans support requirements that increase energy generation from renewable sources. Sixty-two percent of Americans support (+25 PP) requiring every state to "use a minimum amount of renewable fuels (wind, solar, and hydroelectric)" in electricity generation, "even if electricity prices increase a little," and 65% (+30 PP) support increasing the average non-commercial vehicle fuel efficiency from 40 miles per gallon to almost 55 by 2050. Other popular regulatory changes include expanding the reach of the Environmental Protection Agency to include the regulation of carbon dioxide (+30 PP) and capping carbon emissions (+31 PP). Finally, the public strongly supports "large-scale investments in technology to protect the environment" (+44 PP).

Foreign policy and defense

This section summarizes public preferences on policies that relate to foreign support for other countries, military intervention, and national defense. The picture painted in this section is mixed: aversion to using the military to pursue non-defense goals, conditional support for aiding other countries, and continuing to maintain our own military. However, the share of responses indicating "note sure" is higher in this section than in any other (excluding the CES questions), suggesting the public has fewer well-formed opinions in this area.

Military intervention is very unpopular in the pursuit of energy resources (-59 PP) and the spread of democracy (-59 PP). Even intervention in the case of genocide is opposed by a majority (-8 PP), as is using the military to aid the UN in efforts to uphold international law (-7 PP). However, intervention is supported when the goal is combating terrorism (+26 PP) or protecting our allies in the case they are attacked (+52 PP).

Table 3.8 Foreign policy and defense

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Approve of military ensuring oil supply	Oppose	-0.591	0.205	0.795	CES
Approve of military to assist in spread democracy	Oppose	-0.587	0.206	0.794	CES
Reduce size of military	Oppose	-0.381	0.195	0.576	VSG
Cut military support to Israel	Not sure	-0.143	0.245	0.388	VSG
Cut defense to cut deficit	Oppose	-0.134	0.380	0.514	VSG
Approve of military to intervene in genocide or civil war	Oppose	-0.080	0.460	0.540	CES
Approve of military to help the United Nations uphold international law	Oppose	-0.070	0.465	0.535	CES
Strengthen ties with Russia	Not sure	-0.018	0.295	0.313	VSG
Cut Egypt military support	Not sure	0.024	0.271	0.246	VSG
Cut Saudi military support	Not sure	0.136	0.360	0.225	VSG
Approve of military to destroy terrorist camp	Support	0.258	0.629	0.371	CES
Approve of military to protect US allies under attack	Support	0.521	0.760	0.240	CES

Policies that would remove military support for Israel (-14 PP), Egypt (+2 PP), and Saudi Arabia (+14 PP) all have a median of "not sure" (accounting for 37%, 48%, and 42% respectively). The same is true for strengthening ties with Russia (-2 PP). All four of these questions fall in the top 10 (of the 68 items from VSG) in share of "not sure" responses.

Still, the data shows strong support for maintaining the size of the military. Reducing the size of the US military is opposed by 58% of Americans (-38 PP) and cutting defense spending to help pay off the debt is opposed by 51% (-13 PP).

Other issues

The last table groups together a diverse set of policies that don't fit within the other categories. Policies fit within the domains of education, elections, and political correctness, as well as other highly politicized social issues. Together, the public preferences presented in the table reflect a mix of both liberal and conservative positions.

In the area of education, the median position is "not sure" on school vouchers (-7 PP), which would allow parents to choose which school gets their tax-funded voucher. A majority also support allowing the Ten Commandments to be present in school buildings and courthouses (+24 PP). The forgiveness of all college student debt (+12 PP) doesn't receive majority support, but a majority of the public does support a policy that would allow students to attend state schools without accruing debt (+34 PP). The public does not, however, approve of racial preferences in college admissions (-33 PP).

Table 3.9 Other issues

Policy	Median	Net	Sup.	Opp.	Source
Allow racial preferences in higher education	Oppose	-0.329	0.203	0.532	VSG
Make gay marriage illegal	Oppose	-0.323	0.260	0.583	VSG
Reparations for descendents of slaves	Oppose	-0.275	0.239	0.513	VSG
Ban the death penalty	Oppose	-0.243	0.266	0.509	VSG
Tax-funded vouchers for private or religious schools	Not sure	-0.073	0.312	0.385	VSG
Enact public financing of elections	Not sure	0.019	0.295	0.276	VSG
Forgive all student debt	Not sure	0.124	0.470	0.346	VSG
Empower a non-partisan commission to draw electoral districts	Not sure	0.212	0.390	0.178	VSG
End the culture of political correctness	Not sure	0.216	0.456	0.239	VSG
Allow Ten Commandments in schools and courthouses	Support	0.235	0.517	0.282	VSG
Pass a law protecting people from being fired for speaking their minds even if what they say isn't politically correct	Not sure	0.239	0.486	0.247	VSG
Provide additional federal funding for police forces across the US	Support	0.288	0.529	0.240	VSG
Legalize marijuana	Support	0.299	0.569	0.270	VSG
Ban corporate campaign contributions	Support	0.332	0.513	0.181	VSG
Debt free state college	Support	0.340	0.585	0.245	VSG
Allow transgender people to serve in the military	Support	0.373	0.592	0.220	VSG

Another set of questions focuses on the democratic process. A majority of Americans support banning "corporate campaign contributions" in US elections (+33 PP). The public is relatively undecided on the issues of using public money to finance elections (+2 PP) and

empowering "a non-partisan commission to draw electoral districts" (to prevent gerrymandering, +21 PP); both have very high shares of "note sure" responses.

The remainder of items in the table reveal a mix of liberal and conservative positions held by the American public. On the liberal side, 58% of Americans oppose making same-sex marriage illegal (-32 PP), 56% support the legalization of marijuana (+30 PP), and 59% support allowing transgender individuals to serve in the US military (+37 PP). On the conservative side, a majority oppose reparations for African American who are descendents of slaves (-28 PP), 51% oppose banning the death penalty (-24 PP), and 53% support increasing federal funds for police forces around the country (+29 PP). Two questions related to free speech and political correctness fail to reach a majority in either direction: ending the "culture[29] of political correctness" (+22 PP) and making it illegal to fire employees for saying things politically incorrect (+24 PP).

3.2.2 Spending Preferences

The size of the government is a common topic within American political discourse. The General Social Survey has a set of questions that ask Americans how they feel about different areas of government spending; is the amount of spending too low, too high, or about right? I recode these responses to indicate the directional change desired by the response: too low takes a value of +1, too high a value of -1, and about right a value of 0. The median and a measure of net spending preference (the weighted proportion of those wanting more spending minus those wanting less) are calculated for each spending area.

The spending questions in the GSS fall into three naturally-ordered categories, therefore the median position is more meaningful for these questions than for those in the previous sections. In the previous section, it is a judgment to place "not sure" responses in between

[29] Technically this isn't really a policy, nor is there an obvious policy-based approach to achieving the goal.

support and oppose, albeit a judgment that makes the median position more conservative than it would be if they were omitted. In this section, the median is more meaningful in itself, since the three response categories of too much, about right, and too little can be placed in a clear order.

Some of the domains are very similar – this is intentional. The GSS uses multiple versions with distinct language for some of the domains. For example, one question asks about spending on "welfare" and another on "assistance to the poor." Sometimes the difference in language leads to a large difference in support, as in the case of welfare, but in other cases (like "health" versus "improving the nation's health") different language does not appear to have a significant impact.

Table 3.10 summarizes the American public's preferences on twenty-eight spending domains. The median position is to decrease spending in only two, closely related domains: assistance to other nations (the net spending preference is -48 PP) and foreign aid (-47 PP). In ten spending domains the public's median position is to maintain current levels of spending (the response is that the spending is "about right"). These include assistance to blacks (-8 PP), military, armaments and defense (-6 PP), welfare (-3 PP), space exploration (-2 PP), national defense (+1 PP), assistance to Blacks (+27 PP), law enforcement (+28 PP), parks and recreation (+33 PP), mass transportation (+34 PP), and scientific research (+35 PP). In some cases the net support is quite high – the last five of the ten listed exceed +25 PP. In each of these spending domains the percentage of Americans wishing to see less spending is less than 20%, less than 10% for the last two. In four of the last five domains (all other than "parks and recreation") the plurality is to increase spending.

However, the median position of the measure is the one consistent with the Downsian model and the "centrist public opinion" according to certain public opinion scholars (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), and the median position suggests the public desires spending to remain at current levels in these domains.

The median position is a preference for increasing spending in sixteen domains. Each domain has at least a 40+ PP net spending preference and the maximum percentage in favor of decreasing spending is 15%, with ten of the sixteen under 10%.

Table 3.10 Spending preferences (GSS)

Spending domain	Median	Net	Increase	Decrease
Assistance to other nations	Decrease	-0.480	0.112	0.592
Foreign aid	Decrease	-0.469	0.102	0.571
Assistance to big cities	Maintain	-0.081	0.256	0.337
Military, armaments and defense	Maintain	-0.056	0.277	0.333
Welfare	Maintain	-0.027	0.305	0.332
Space exploration	Maintain	-0.017	0.231	0.247
National defense	Maintain	0.007	0.288	0.282
Assistance to Blacks	Maintain	0.266	0.455	0.188
Law enforcement	Maintain	0.275	0.471	0.195
Parks and recreation	Maintain	0.325	0.366	0.042
Mass transportation	Maintain	0.335	0.420	0.085
Scientific research	Maintain	0.349	0.438	0.089
Improving the conditions of Blacks	Increase	0.374	0.527	0.153
Solving problems of cities	Increase	0.396	0.550	0.154
Developing alternative energy sources	Increase	0.431	0.555	0.125
Highways and bridges	Increase	0.431	0.510	0.079
Social Security	Increase	0.523	0.580	0.057
Drug rehabilitation	Increase	0.525	0.622	0.096
Health	Increase	0.545	0.666	0.121
Assistance for childcare	Increase	0.549	0.615	0.066
The environment	Increase	0.562	0.673	0.110
Drug addiction	Increase	0.575	0.662	0.087
Improving and protecting the environment	Increase	0.578	0.680	0.102
Addressing crime	Increase	0.587	0.668	0.081
Improving and protecting the nation's health	Increase	0.590	0.670	0.079
Assistance to the poor	Increase	0.630	0.711	0.082
Improving the nation's education system	Increase	0.666	0.733	0.066
Education	Increase	0.679	0.751	0.072

Four of the items relate to deviance and urban life (it seems to be a fair assumption that the problems of large cities are generally believed to be related to crime and drug use). While the net preference for "assistance to big cities" is to decrease spending (the median is to maintain; see above), Americans would like to see more spending on "solving the problems of big cities" (+40 PP). The public would also like to see more spending on drug rehabilitation (+53 PP), drug addiction (+58 PP), and addressing crime (+59 PP). Americans are less enthusiastic about increasing spending on "law enforcement" (with a median of "maintain"), but clearly are concerned with crime and the negative consequences associated with drug use, which is a growing cause of death in the United States (Case and Deaton 2020).

Increasing environmental and climate-related spending is consistently supported by large margins. The majority of Americans desire more spending to develop alternative energy sources (the assumption is that this is interpreted as renewable or non-fossil fuel energy sources; +43 PP), on the environment (+56 PP), and on "improving and protecting the environment" (+58 PP). These items are consistent with the findings in the previous section that show significant support for investment to protect the environment.

The table also demonstrates ample support for increasing spending in various areas of the welfare state. Large majorities of Americans support increasing spending on Social Security (+52 PP), on "health" (+55 PP), assistance for childcare (+55 PP), "improving and protecting the nation's health" (+59 PP), and assistance to the poor (+63 PP). Further, spending more to improve "the condition of Blacks" (a group that is, on average, poorer than the average American) is supported by 53% of the public (+37 PP).

The three remaining spending domains are infrastructure and education. A majority of Americans think the government should spend more on highways and bridges (+43 PP), and the two domains for which the largest shares of the public supports increasing spending relate to spending on education: "improving the nation's education system" (+67 PP) and "education" (+68 PP).

The data presented in table 3.10 demonstrates substantial support for additional government spending in a wide range of areas, aside from assistance to other countries. Only two median positions are to decrease spending, and only six of the twenty eight spending items have a negative net spending preference. Some scholars observing the large support for higher spending are skeptical that the public takes into consideration how the spending would be paid for; i.e. the public simply wants free stuff. But we can see this is not the case across the board, and there is substantial variation in support across spending domains. Further, the strong support for increasing progressive taxation on high incomes and wealth, suggest the public is open to certain means of raising government revenues that could pay for, at least part of, the spending increases they desire.[30]

3.3 Agreement across party identity

The previous section explores the idea that the median and net position represents the center. But are there other, more restrictive ways to think about the positions that represent the political center? Using the same data (aggregate public preferences), I explore two additional approaches to determine which policies represent the political center in terms of popularity. Both consider the political center with the additional dimension of partisanship. The first is to determine which policies have the same net position (i.e. agreement) for both self-identified Republicans and Democrats. The second is stricter, requiring the median position to be the same across both party identifications. In the second, I do not consider a position to represent the political center if the median position is "not sure"; only positions that are clearly in support or opposition are considered. This only applies to items from the VSG, not the CES which does

[30] The argument about spending is important. If spending is to go up, additional revenue will be required to cover the cost, so it would be valuable to know if the public is also willing to pay for the additional costs. But, when public opinion data reflects individuals' preferences for lower taxes (e.g., individuals desire their own tax payments to decrease), the symmetrical argument is never present: are survey responses on taxation meaningful when respondents are not provided with information on how the tax payments will be spent?

not offer a "not sure" response or the GSS where the middle category ("about right") is meaningful.

Figure 3.1 shows the policies that fall into these two categories for the policies from the CES and VSG datasets. The top panel displays the policies for which the median position (support or oppose) is the same for both Democrats and Republicans. The lower panel shows the policies that have agreement in net position but not the same median position. The policies in each panel are sorted by average net position across both party identifications. Figure 3.2 shows the spending preferences from the GSS that meet the thresholds of median (top panel) and net (bottom panel) cross partisan agreement.

This section will discuss the two figures together, grouping the policies and spending domains together into key areas to identify themes in the positions that can be considered to represent the political center according to partisan agreement in the median and net positions. In the area of reproductive health, both the median Democrat and Republican oppose a complete ban on abortion. In net preferences, those identifying with each party oppose a never permitting abortion and allowing abortion at any time, but both support allowing abortion in cases other than rape, incest, and high risk pregnancies. Partisans generally agree in their opposition to the ends of the spectrum, opposing a complete ban and allowing the procedure at any point during the pregnancy, but also supporting abortions outside of the special cases mentioned above. The points of partisan agreement demonstrate support for moderate positions in the area of abortion policy.

In the area of guns, the policy to require background checks for gun purchases has a median position of support among self-identified Democrats and Republicans. In fact, background checks on purchases is the most popular policy in the entire Nationscape dataset. Partisans of both types also share a median position in opposition to a ban on all guns. The net agreement panel also reveals cross partisan support for a public gun registry (notably not the version that includes disclosing addresses). In sum, supporters of both parties do not want to

see a complete ban on all guns, but they do want gun ownership to be more regulated and more transparent.

In the area of immigration, the median member of both parties supports a path to citizenship for immigrants entering the US as children, but that is the only position with median agreement. Restricting money wires to only people with citizenship is net supported by Democrats and Republicans, while both banning immigration from predominantly Muslim countries and separating immigrant families receive agreement in net opposition. Republicans and Democrats only agree on a few of the immigration policies – only 3 of the 13 – but they both show a desire for giving children a path to citizenship and preventing the separation of immigrant families. The restrictions on money wires likely relate to either a fear of economic consequences of remittances or possibly a fear that money moving abroad could be used for nefarious or illegal activities.

In the area of labor and welfare, supporters of both parties hold the median position in favor of requiring employers to provide twelve weeks of paid maternity leave and establishing a government jobs guarantee. The median position also agrees on more spending for "assistance to the poor" (but not "welfare") and more spending on Social Security, and the net position is in agreement on spending more on assistance for childcare. Democrats and Republicans also have net position agreement in support of right-to-work laws. Americans identifying with both parties desire more economic benefits and protections for new mothers, the elderly, the poor, and, to a lesser extent, parents. They also agree (more than disagree) on the right for employees to choose to not pay dues to a union while working in a unionized workplace.

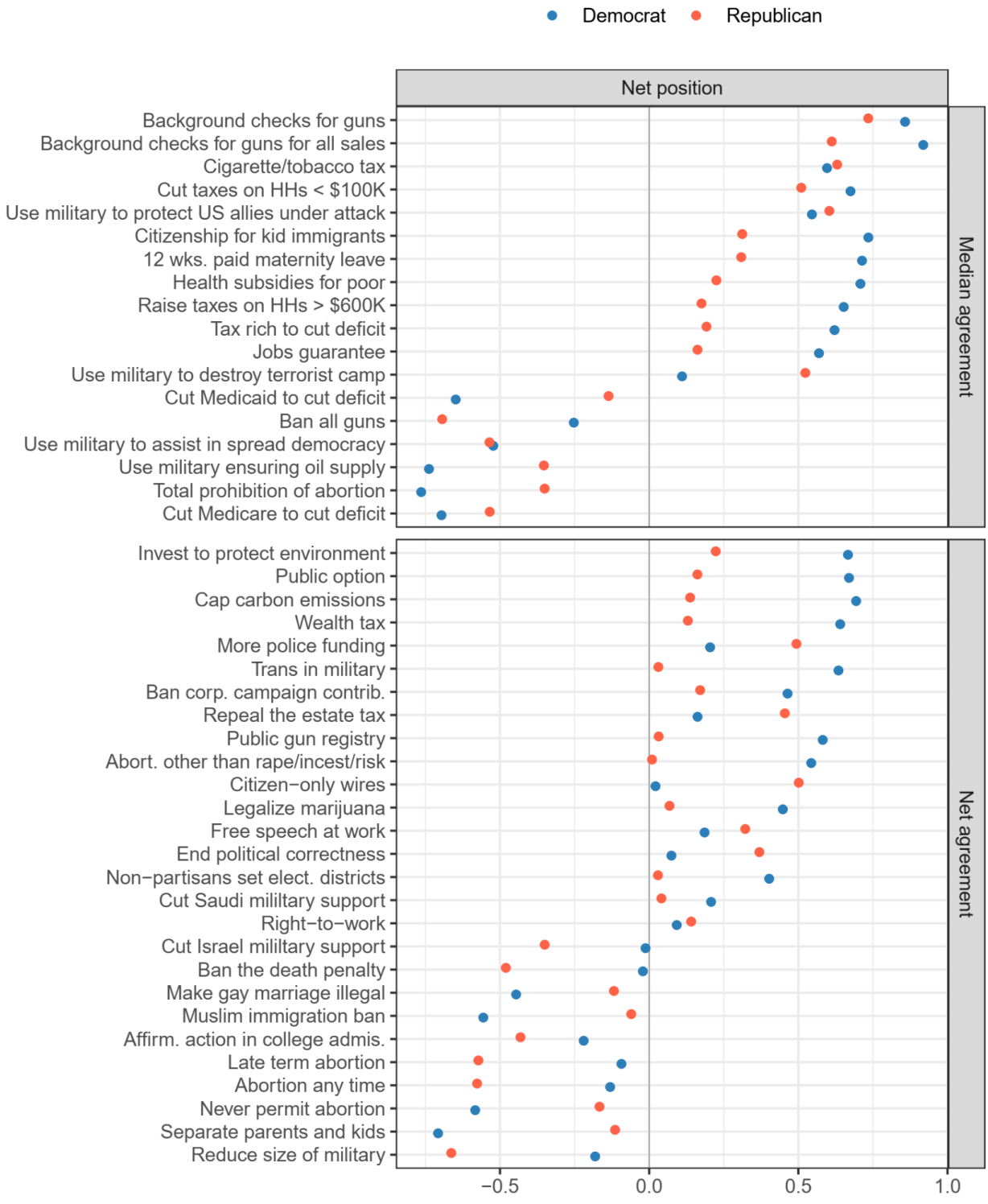

Figure 3.1 Median and net position agreement for major party identities (Nationscape and CES)

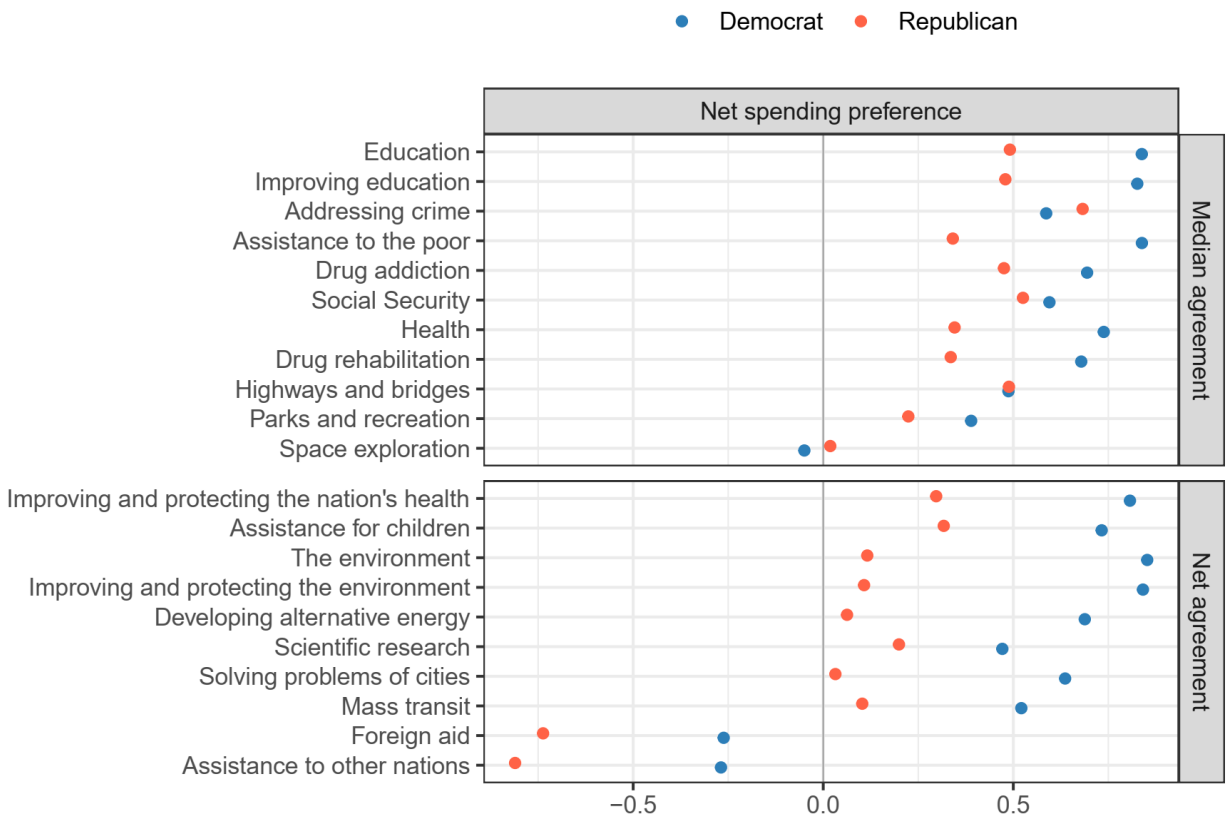

Figure 3.2 Median and net spending agreement for major party identities by domain

In the area of taxation, the median Democrat agrees with the median Republican to support the taxation of tobacco production, lowering taxes for households earning less than $100,000, raising taxes on households earning more than $600,000, and agrees on increasing taxes on all households earning more than $250,000 in order to pay down the public debt. Their net positions also agree on taxing high net worth households and eliminating the estate tax. Two of these positions are regressive: taxing tobacco products and eliminating the estate tax. The rest of the positions, if enacted, represent modifications to the tax structure that would make the system more progressive, lowering taxes on middle and lower income households while raising them on households with higher incomes.

In the area of healthcare, median Democrats and median Republicans both support providing healthcare subsidies for the poor and increasing government spending on "health," and oppose cutting either Medicaid or Medicare in order to reduce the public debt. They have net agreement in support of a public option (the option of government run health insurance) and increasing spending on improving the nation's health. Each one of these positions demonstrates support for expanding the state's involvement in the provision of healthcare.
In the areas of the environment and climate, the median Democrat and Republican do not agree on any of the policies or changes in the various spending domains, but there is some agreement in net positions. Democrats and Republicans both have net support for investing in technology to protect the environment, cap carbon emissions, increasing spending on developing alternative energy sources, and increasing spending on "the environment" and "improving and protecting the environment."

In the area of foreign relations and defense, median partisans in both camps support the use of military force to protect US allies and destroy terrorist camps, but oppose it to "spread democracy" or secure oil. The positions for which they agree in terms of net positions include decreasing foreign aid and "assistance to other nations," as well as allowing trans people to serve in the military and cutting military support to Saudi Arabia. The net position for both parties opposes cutting military support for Israel and reducing the size of the military. Among supporters of both parties, cutting military spending is generally unpopular, as is foreign aid, but the popularity of providing military support for other countries is conditional on the specific country.

The remaining items represent a range of different policy and spending areas. Several relate to criminal justice, deviance, and urban society. Both the median position among Democrat and Republican is supportive of increasing spending on addressing crime, drug addiction, and drug rehabilitation, and the net position in both parties is in support of increasing funding for police, legalizing marijuana, and spending more to solve the problems of

cities. The findings here echo other scholarship showing a persistent and often growing fear of crime[31], especially urban crime, despite the fact that crime rates – both violent and property – have declined significantly over the last 30 years (especially property crimes; see Gramlich 2024). The social and public health consequences of drug use, on the other hand, have, in fact, increased as the rates of opiate use and drug-related deaths have increased in recent decades (Case and Deaton 2020), making the bipartisan concern over drug use an understandable position among members of the public.

In the area of politics, the net positions among Democrats and Republicans support banning corporate campaign contributions and placing non-partisan groups in charge of legislative redistricting. These policies address some of the most pressing issues in the functioning of American politics: private corporate power influencing the political process and gerrymandering that rigs districting weakens the representativeness of the political system.

Three items related to infrastructure spending: median agreement to spend more on highways and bridges, and net agreement on increasing spending on mass transportation and maintaining current levels of spending on parks and recreation (there are only two spending domains with median positions of "about right": this and space exploration). Of all the items, across all data sources, spending on highways and bridges has the smallest partisan difference: +48.7 PP for Democrats and +48.9 PP for Republicans. In a sense, consistent with the logic of this section, improving America's physical infrastructure is arguably the most centrist policy position.

The last four items are net positions in opposition to allowing "racial preferences in college admissions" and banning same-sex marriage, and in favor of preventing employees from being fired for saying things that are not politically correct and ending the culture of political correctness.

[31] Ferguson and Rogers (1986) show this is the only domain in which there is compelling evidence that the public moved to the *right* since the early 1980s, a finding later corroborated by Page and Shapiro (1992).

3.3.1 Popularity and agreement as the center

The findings here echo the findings of other scholars who study American public opinion in the aggregate, including Page and Shapiro (1992), Page and Jacobs (2009), and the general finding that Americans are ideologically conservative but programmatically (specifically) liberal (Free and Cantril 1968; Grossman and Hopkins 2015).

Much of the scholarship on public opinion focuses on partisan differences in preferences and, because of this focus, tends to give less attention to the policy positions for which there is a relatively large degree of agreement (see Baldassarri and Park 2020). Spending so much time focusing on what distinguishes differences in preferences across party identifications, or even voting behavior, serves as a distraction from positions held by large majorities of citizens, especially for positions in which there is a large degree of cross-partisan agreement.

Of course there are caveats, but the overall picture of the political center – as defined according to the median and net positions, and the median and net agreement between Democrats and Republicans – reveals a public that leans toward relatively moderate (middle ground) positions on abortion, guns, and immigration, toward an expansion of government involvement in the healthcare sector, toward redistribution of income and wealth through taxation, toward higher wages and greater worker and family protections (i.e. a more robust welfare state), maintaining the size of the military, but engaging in less military intervention, unless it pertains to terrorism or helping our allies.

3.4 Quantitative measures of policy ideology

We often hear about certain policies being too extreme or too ideological in one direction or another. We also hear that certain positions are centrist or moderate (see The Editorial Board 2019). But these judgements on the ideological positioning of policies are typically not based on

any systematic approach, rather they are claims made by individuals based on their own perceptions of preferences (as people appear to attempt to claim what is said to represent the political center). Further, such claims also need to appear to reasonably represent some meaning of the center for the claim to be taken seriously.

Here I outline a systematic approach to identifying the ideology of specific policies so that we can better judge which policies represent the center of an ideological space, and how different measures of policy-level ideology relate to a policy's popularity.

This section employs five distinct approaches to determining the ideology of policies. Due to the computational approaches used, the ideological measures for policies across different data sources are not always comparable. For this reason, I use only one data set. The Nationscape survey includes more policy questions than the CES and more than the spending items in the GSS, and for these reasons it is preferred to create the ideological policy-level measures (although the other data sets are brought back into the analysis later on in the chapter).

The ideology of a policy can be calculated in several ways using information from the survey respondents who support or oppose it. Respondents' self-reported ideology, partisan identity, and voting behavior can be used to determine the ideology of a policy. Using these three measures, the average ideology, or partisanship, or party voted for for each response (support, oppose, not sure) can be calculated, as can the proportion of support among liberals/conservatives, Democrats/Republicans, and Trump/Biden voters (for this measure, observations were only used after votes were cast for the 2020 election).

While these measures of policy are informative, they also end up being highly related to each other. I also add an alternative measure of a policy's ideology, using a technique called singular value decomposition (SVD), a procedure closely related to principal-component analysis (Martin and Porter 2012). This allows extracting factor-like vectors at both the respondent and policy levels, and two of these vectors contain useful information for thinking about the orientation of individuals and policies. The first vector is closely linked to self-

reported ideology and the ideological measures created using ideology, partisanship, and voting behavior. The second vector relates to the likelihood that individuals support or oppose the policy once the effect of the first vector is isolated (i.e. the first vector is orthogonal to the second and all subsequent vectors).

Rather than defining the center according to what is popular, this approach allows us to examine the connection between a policy's ideological position and its popularity. Are the policies that are more popular also closer to the ideological middle? The answer, in short, is not necessarily, although policies with more "centrist" measures have a higher ceiling (in absolute terms) of popular agreement than policies with measures placing them in the far left or right.

3.4.1 Calculating a policy's ideology

I use data on respondent-level ideology, partisan identity, and presidential voting (in the 2020 election) to calculate ideological scores for the sixty-eight policies from the VSG Nationscape survey.

Quantitative measures of a policy's ideology can be calculated using characteristics from survey respondents combined with their preferences for policies. If more Democrats than Republicans support a policy, it seems fair to say that the policy is understood to be more liberal or Democratic (in a partisan sense) than if more Republicans supported the policy than Democrats. This is the basic logic used to create these measures. Across all measures, negative values correspond with more liberal policies or policies supported by more Democratic Party identifying or voting individuals.

Support, not sure, and oppose responses for each respondent and for each policy item are coded as +1, 0, and -1. These numbers are then multiplied by ideology (-2 for very liberal to +2 for very conservative), partisan identity (-1 for Democrat, 0 for independent/other, and 1 for Republican), and 2020 presidential vote (same as for partisan identity with 0 for did not vote or

other). A weighted mean is then calculated for each policy and the measure is divided by its standard deviation, placing all measures on a comparable scale.

These measures will, however, be influenced by the ideological and partisan composition of the sample (and thus the country). For example, there are more people who identify as and vote for Democrats than Republicans and this will impact the ideological measures. An alternative way of measuring ideology is to calculate the net position for each policy within the ideological, partisan, and voting categories (such as liberal, Democrat, and voted for Democrat) and subtracting the liberal and Democratic measures from the conservative and Republicans measures. This treats the groups as if they are composed of equal shares of the population. Table 3.11 displays a hypothetical scenario with three policies that demonstrate the difference between the two measures. The measures are not directly interpretable given they are converted to standard deviation units. The key takeaway is that the measures change to give more weight to the Republican positions when the groups are treated equally.

Table 3.11 Hypothetical scenario and two ideology measures

	Democrat			Republican			Measure	
Policy	**Prop.**	**Support**	**Oppose**	**Prop.**	**Support**	**Oppose**	**Type 1**	**Type 2**
Policy A	0.33	70%	20%	0.22	30%	65%	-1.54	-1.60
Policy B	0.33	15%	80%	0.22	25%	70%	0.74	0.38
Policy C	0.33	50%	45%	0.22	55%	40%	0.11	0.19
Policy D	0.33	55%	40%	0.22	70%	25%	0.32	0.57

These measures show the ideology and partisanship of respondents who support the policy relative to those who oppose it (those who aren't sure are included in the denominator but do not affect the left/right direction of the policy). If a policy has a slightly negative score, that means those supporting the policy are, on average, more liberal or more Democratic in their party preference or voting behavior.

A statistical approach with singular value decomposition

Another way of measuring ideology is through statistical techniques that calculate independent, linear measures that explain variation in a set of variables, sometimes by measuring latent features of the data. Factor analysis, principal component analysis, and latent class analysis are such techniques. Here I perform a technique related to principal component analysis to extract values at both the individual and policies levels. The process is called single value decomposition (SVD). While these measures are not exactly "ideology" in the conventional sense, they represent an empirically-driven approach to determine the clustering of preferences across a large set of policies.

The procedure requires a single matrix A with m x n matrix, where m is the number of respondents in the VSG Nationscape survey and n is the number of policies (selected from the list described above). Each element in the matrix represents the preference for the policy. Responses are coded so that support for a policy takes a value of +1, opposition -1, and "not sure" a value of 0. In certain sections, the VSG survey uses a rotating, randomized selection of policies to prevent over-burdening respondents, and other policy questions are included only in certain waves. In other words, the dataset contains a number of missing values. A complete matrix is necessary for SVD and thus requires imputation. Missing data were imputed[32] using the "mice" package in R, which performs multiple imputation by chained equations (Buuren 2018; Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn 2011). Once imputed, matrix values were mean-centered and converted to units equivalent to the variable-specific standard deviation.

From this matrix, the SVD procedure extracts additional matrices U, S (a diagonal matrix), and V so that the product of all matrices produced by SVD is the original matrix A

[32] Certain policies had very large shares of missing data. To test whether the imputed values had a significant impact on the SVD calculations, I performed the procedure on two sets of data: one with only responses to policies meeting a minimum threshold for missingness and another with observations for all policies (missingness was over 90% for some of the policies). The policy-level vectors were nearly identical for the policies included in both datasets, so I used the dataset that allowed for v vectors to be created for all policies (the fully-imputed dataset).

(Martin and Porter 2012; Schoon, Melamed, and Breiger 2024: Appendix B). The *U* and *V* matrices contain vectors orthogonal to all others within the matrix. SVD produces the matrices so that each of the vectors within *U* and *V* accounts for descending amounts of variation in the original matrix, until reaching full explanation as the number of vectors (both *u* and *v*) reach the number of rows and columns, respectively.

The first singular vector *u* is the "grouping that has the largest mean-square overlap" (Martin and Porter 2017:840) with the policy preferences of the individuals in the dataset. The second *u* vector offers the second-largest explanatory power of the variation in preferences among individuals, and so on, and the same logic applies to the vectors *v* within the *V* matrix. Other scholars using SVD are often interested in the underlying features that correlate with the *u* vectors. In one study of social norms and morals, the authors find the first *u* vector correlates strongly with political ideology (Eriksson et al. 2024). Another application of SVD using Congressional roll call votes finds the first *u* vector is a strong predictor of a politician's partisanship and the second with the politician's tendency to vote with the majority (Martin and Porter 2017). I model this second approach by using individual-level policy preferences rather than on Congressional roll call voting.

I use three calculations produced by the SVD procedure. The first is the individual level *u* vector, from the *U* matrix from the SVD procedure, which is then used to create a policy-level measure in the same way that was done for the ideology measure: for each policy, the weighted mean of *u**position (-1, 0, or +1)[33]. The second and third are the first and second *v* vectors. The first *v* vector is related to ideology. The second is mathematically unrelated (orthogonal) to the

[33] Since the *u* vector is a continuous measure it is only calculated according to the first type. To calculate a policy score in the second type I would need to create cutoffs for the measure which would then be used to group responses together in order to get separate net position calculations. Identifying as liberal (conservative) or a Democrat (Republican), or voting for a Democrat (Republican), presents a clear boundary, whereas the vector calculated from SVD has no direct theoretical connection to comparable categories.

first and, according to the study cited above (Martin and Porter 2017), might be linked to the policy's popularity among members of the public situated in both ideological or partisan camps. If the first *u* vector is related to ideology, it would be easy to tell using the individual level data from the VSG. The Pearson correlation coefficient between ideology (a five category ideology measure from -2 for very liberal to +2 for very conservative) and the first *U* vector is 0.611. Regressing ideology on *u* in a bivariate ordinary least squares model produces an R^2 of 0.37 (37% of the variance in ideology can be explained with the *u* vector).[34] For social science research (especially survey research), this is a relatively strong correlation and high R^2.

3.4.2 Comparing measures

When combined with the six measures of ideology described above (two for each of ideology, partisanship, and party vote), it adds up to a total of nine different measures for each policy. Table 3.11 presents the correlation matrix containing the policy level measures and each policy's net support (proportion in support of a policy minus the proportion who oppose). The labels are shortened to ideo (ideology), party (party identity), and vote (party voted for in the 2020 presidential election), and each contain the number of the type of measure: 1 marks the first measure, 2 marks the measure giving equal weight to each ideological camp.

There are two important features in table 3.12. First, if the second policy-level *v* vector ("v_2") actually measures a sort of bipartisan (or cross-ideological) appeal (to measure the likelihood that members of camps would agree on a policy position), then we would expect the measure to relate to the overall net popularity of a policy. The Pearson correlation coefficient between v_2 and net support is quite high at 0.72. A bivariate regression using v_2 to predict net support gives an R^2 of 0.51, meaning it explains 51% of the variance in net support. As a

[34] In some sense the *u* is a valid measure of ideology. The SVD procedure measures how responses cluster together and calculates vectors that explain variation in responses, each one explaining the optimal variation while being orthogonal to all previous vectors. In other words, it is an empirical measure of the way in which individuals' policy preferences, reflecting their normative and descriptive view of the world, cluster together in the public.

comparison, the second largest correlation with net support is with the first party identification measure (-0.44) which also has the second highest R^2 at 0.19, both significantly lower than that of v_2.

Table 3.12 Policy ideology measure correlations

	Net	Ideo1	Ideo2	Party1	Party2	Vote1	Vote2	U	V	V2
Net	1	-0.205	-0.312	-0.438	-0.379	-0.384	-0.361	-0.404	-0.409	0.715
Ideo1	-0.205	1	0.987	0.963	0.972	0.975	0.979	0.971	0.972	0.176
Ideo2	-0.312	0.987	1	0.975	0.991	0.984	0.986	0.982	0.982	0.101
Party1	-0.438	0.963	0.975	1	0.989	0.995	0.993	0.991	0.993	-0.049
Party2	-0.379	0.972	0.991	0.989	1	0.990	0.989	0.985	0.984	0.007
Vote1	-0.384	0.975	0.984	0.995	0.990	1	1.000	0.995	0.995	0.013
Vote2	-0.361	0.979	0.986	0.993	0.989	1.000	1	0.994	0.994	0.034
U	-0.404	0.971	0.982	0.991	0.985	0.995	0.994	1	0.998	0.007
V	-0.409	0.972	0.982	0.993	0.984	0.995	0.994	0.998	1	0.000
V2	0.715	0.176	0.101	-0.049	0.007	0.013	0.034	0.007	0.000	1

Second, the ideological measures (ideology, partisan identity, partisan vote, u_1, and v_1) are all *highly correlated* with each other. On just sixty-eight observations, the lowest Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.96 between the first type ideology and party identification measures. The highest correlation coefficient is actually 1.00 between the two measures calculated using the party voted for as a proxy for ideology – the vote shares for Trump and Biden were close, meaning the measure giving equal weight for Trump and Biden voters wouldn't lead to a significant change. This suggests the measures are highly related to each other and validates the notion that the measures from the SVD approximate ideology.

Figure 3.3 displays all nine measures for all sixty-eight policies. All measures are divided by their standard deviation to place them on a comparable scale. The x-axis can be interpreted as the distance in standard deviations each policy is from the center, or the point at which a policy is equally liberal (Democratic) and conservative (Republican). The colors indicate the category of measure (ideology, partisan, vote, or SVD) and the shape of the data point indicates

the type of measure (v_1 is grouped with type 2 measures that give equal weight to the category groups). The policies are sorted from the most conservative/Republican to the most liberal/Democratic.

One feature that stands out is, on average, the values of v_1 (the first policy-level factor from SVD) are higher than the other measures; the v_1 measures are quite consistently to the right of the other measures on the x-axis. Another feature that stands out is that the policies track well on to popular understandings of liberal and conservative. The highest (most conservative) ranked policies include deporting the undocumented, criminalizing immigration, granting firms the ability to deny health insurance coverage of abortions, allowing the Ten Commandments in schools and government buildings, and separating immigrant children from their parents. The lowest (most liberal) ranked policies are single payer healthcare, Medicare-for-All, the Green New Deal, a $15 minimum wage, and the ability to attend state colleges debt-free. Note that some of the policies identified as very liberal are also quite popular (like the $15 minimum wage), meaning an extremely liberal policy can still be popular. The connection between a policy's ideology and popularity is explored in the next section.

3.4.3 Which policies are in the middle?

Figure 3.3 shows the range of ideological measures for each policy. How can we go about identifying the "centrist" policies? Determining the center requires selecting some arbitrary cutoff to serve as a boundary for what is and is not representative of the political center. I choose -0.5 to +0.5 standard deviations to create a boundary for the political center: if any of the nine measures has a data point within the one standard deviation range centered on zero I consider it to be centrist.

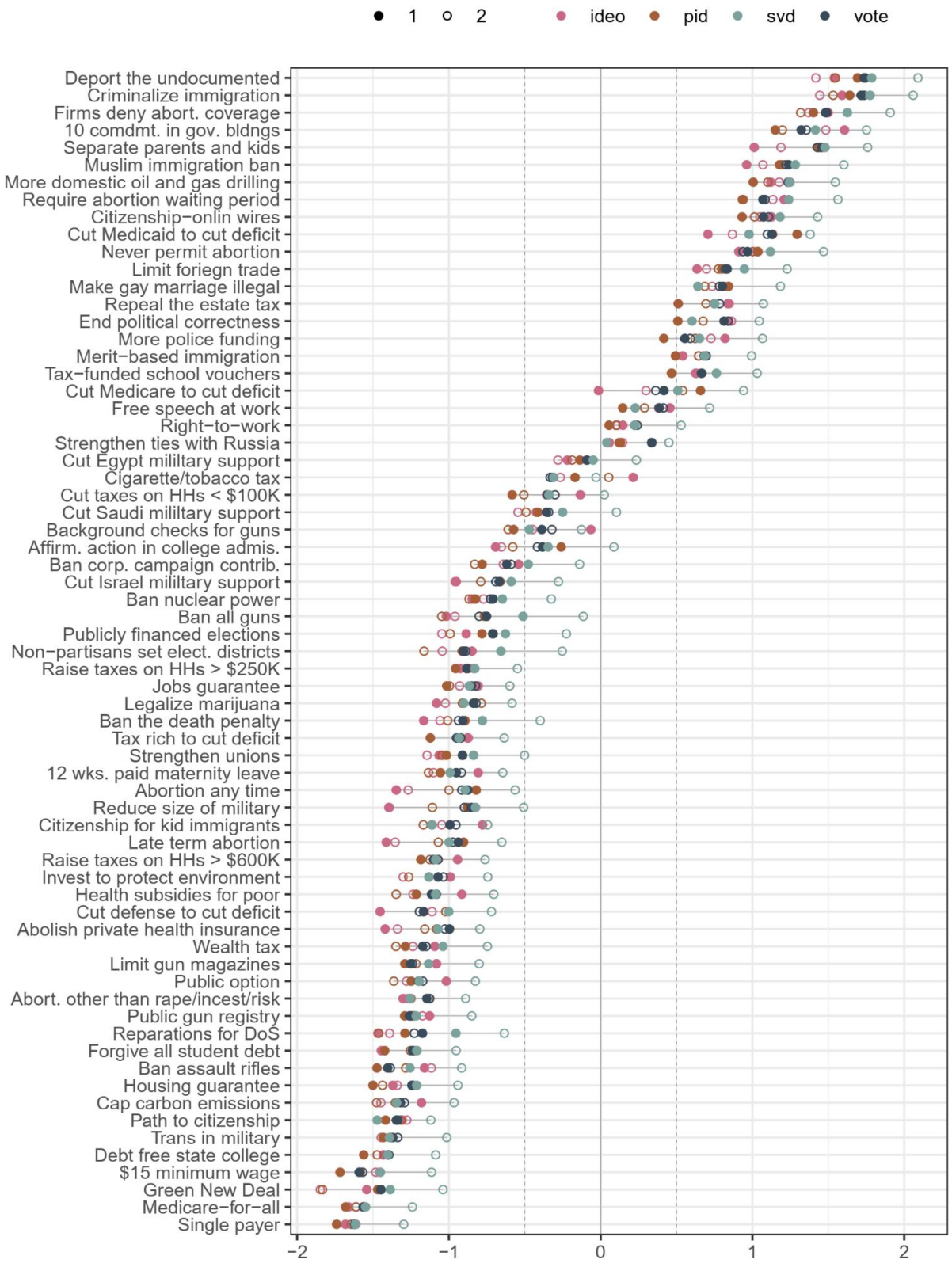

Figure 3.3 Policies ranked by ideological measures (positive values are more conservative)

Figure 3.3 includes two vertical dashed lines marking the -0.5 and +0.5 intercepts on the x-axis. These policies represent those with the most cross-ideological or cross-partisan agreement (where ideology or partisanship explains preferences the least). This cutoff gives us twenty centrist policies, which are presented in table 3.13 along with the average of the nine ideological measures.

Table 3.13 includes a broad range of policies in the areas of criminal justice, the political process, energy, foreign policy, guns, immigration, taxation, political correctness, and the approaches to reduce the public deficit. The policies with the lowest absolute value of the mean ideological measures are taxes on cigarettes and tobacco products, withdrawing military support from Egypt, strengthening ties with Russia, and right-to-work laws.

How should we interpret these policies? What does it mean for them to be "centrist"? Simply put, all the measures approximate, in different ways, the difference in support between liberals and conservatives, or Democrats and Republicans. The closer to zero the measure is, the smaller the gap in support between the partisan or ideological groups and the less informative partisanship or ideology is at predicting support. The next section will explore the connection between a policy's ideology, but based on this understanding of the ideological measures, there is no feature of the measures that makes us think they would relate to its popularity. The more "centrist" a policy is, there is a higher ceiling (potential) for agreement in the public (since the measures are informed by disagreement), regardless of whether it's support or opposition (this will be discussed more in the next section). However, there could also be "centrist" policies for which the public does not have strong opinions whatsoever.

3.4.4 Ideology and popularity

A large feature of the discourse implies that what is centrist is also popular. If the center is defined according to what is popular, then the connection is obvious. But if the center is defined

according to partisanship or ideology, which is computationally independent of a policy's support, then we can actually test for a connection between the two.

Table 3.13 Centrist policies

Policy	Mean measure
Ban the death penalty	-0.894
Empower a non-partisan commission to draw electoral districts	-0.834
Enact public financing of elections	-0.748
Ban all guns	-0.746
Ban nuclear power	-0.715
Withdraw military support for the state of Israel	-0.699
Ban corporate campaign contributions	-0.578
Allow racial preferences in higher education	-0.406
Background checks for all gun purchases	-0.375
Withdraw military support for Saudi Arabia	-0.340
Cut taxes for families making less than $100K	-0.319
A tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products	-0.145
Withdraw military support for Egypt	-0.103
Strengthen the U.S. ties with Russia	0.202
Allow working in unionized workplaces without paying dues	0.204
Pass a law protecting people from being fired for speaking their minds even if what they say isn't politically correct	0.377
Decrease deficit by cutting Medicare spending	0.464
Tax-funded vouchers for private or religious schools	0.664
Shift from family-based to merit-based immigration	0.672
Provide additional federal funding for police forces across the US	0.681

Compositional constraint

There is some truth in the idea that there is a connection between the political center and popularity. The first section discussed the definition of the political center according to which positions are popular (support/oppose a policy, or increase/decrease spending in an area). The measures of ideology created in this section might not necessarily relate to a position's popularity, but do the composition of the groups that inform the measures, they also provide constraints on how popular a position can be. For example, if all Republicans oppose a policy

and all Democrats support it, then it would have the maximal "Democratic" ideological (partisan) measure. But this also means that the popularity of a position (measured in net support), is constrained by the fact all Republicans oppose it. The highest level of support the position can have is the share of Democrats, plus the share of independents who support the policy, minus the share of Republicans. Visually, the constraint takes the form of a diamond when the ideology is plotted on the x-axis and the net support is plotted on the y-axis.

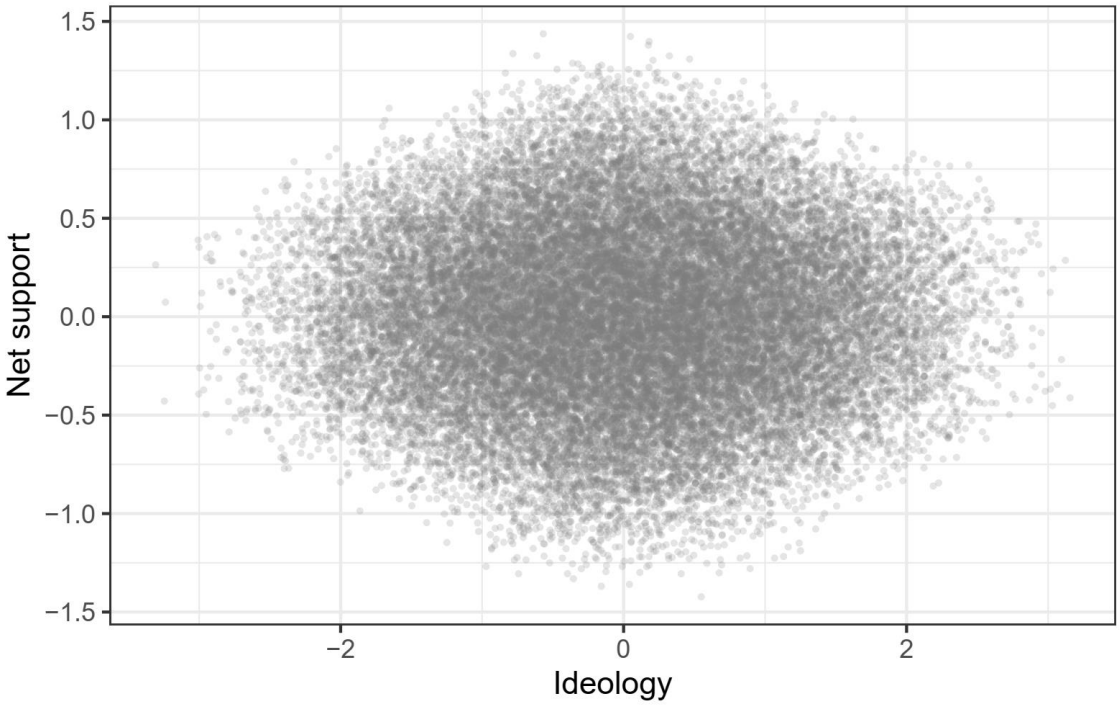

Figure 3.4 Hypothetical space of policy ideology and net support

Figure 3.4 visualizes the distribution of simulated data with somewhat realistic constraints[35]. The numbers of the axes are not important (they don't match on to the values

[35] I randomly generated support, opposition, and not sure responses for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents with the constraint that the sum of all three measures must equal 100%. Then I calculate net support for each group, calculate an ideological measure (net support among Republicans - net support among Democrats), and compare it to the overall net support. Figure 3.4 shows the plot if the Democrats and Republicans make up the same share of the population. When the share of Democrats is increased, the diamond shape tilts: the maximum point moves to the left (more negative) on the x-axis and the minimum point moves to the right. In the US, there are in fact more Democrats than Republicans,

used here), but the shape displayed in the figure demonstrates the natural constraints to the measures. In the center of the figure, the popularity of a position has the highest ceiling and lowest floor (maximum/minimum possible value), and the space in which the values of net support can exist narrows as the ideology of a policy becomes more conservative or liberal. The claim that centrist policies are more popular is not necessarily true, but what is definitely true is that policies at the extremes cannot possibly have the same level of popularity (or agreement) as policies in the middle. In other words, the discourse around the political center in American politics is correct in that there are limits to the share of people who agree on positions as they become closer to the ideological extremes. However, this does not mean that policies in the middle are more popular.

Are centrist policies more popular?

Figure 3.5 plots the relationship between a policy's ideological measures and their measure of net support. The colors represent whether the policy is classified as liberal (blue), centrist (purple), or conservative (red). The centrist category classifies as all policies with one of the nine measures that falls within the -0.5 and 0.5 standard deviation range (all measures were converted into units in terms of their standard deviations). All policies with lower ideological values are classified as liberal, and all with higher as conservative. The horizontal lines represent the range for that policy across all nine ideological measures and the dot represents the average of the nine measures. A solid black OLS line is included to show the overall relationship between the mean of the ideological measures and net support.

According to Figure 3.5, the answer to the question, "are centrist policies more popular," is pretty straightforward: no. In fact, the OLS line in the figure suggests that the net support for policies is highest as policies are more liberal and declines as policies become more

---

and this means, purely due to the composition of the groups making up the measures, a measure of ideology based on partisan difference has greater potential for greater support among liberal policies and greater opposition among conservative policies.

conservative. The policies with the greatest net agreement (absolute value of net support), are classified as centrist, but many in the center also have very low agreement and have net support near zero.

Figure 3.5 is informative, but the possibility of a compositional effect remains possible. Are the more liberal/Democratic policies more popular because there are more Democrats in the US? One way to address this question is to determine how the ideological scores impact the net support for policies among individuals who are *not* Democrat (liberal) or Republican (conservative). In other words, we can look at support among (1) Independent partisans and individuals identifying with "other" parties ("non-partisan") and (2) those who identify as moderate on the ideological scale. The net support for the non-partisan group is completely independent from the partisan calculations and that of the moderates is independent of the policy measures that use self-reported ideology. These measures are similar to out-of-sample tests, given the observations used to measure support are completely separate from the observations used to calculate a policy's ideology.

Figure 3.6 shows the relationship between the partisan and ideological measures that give equal weight to each group (Democrat/Republican, liberal/conservative). In the calculation of the ideological measures, the omitted groups are independent partisans and those identifying with other parties (for the partisanship measure), and ideological moderates (for the ideological measure). The net support is calculated for each policy only from the omitted groups. I also include the v_1 vector calculated from the SVD procedure described above and compare it to the average between the moderate and independent net support.

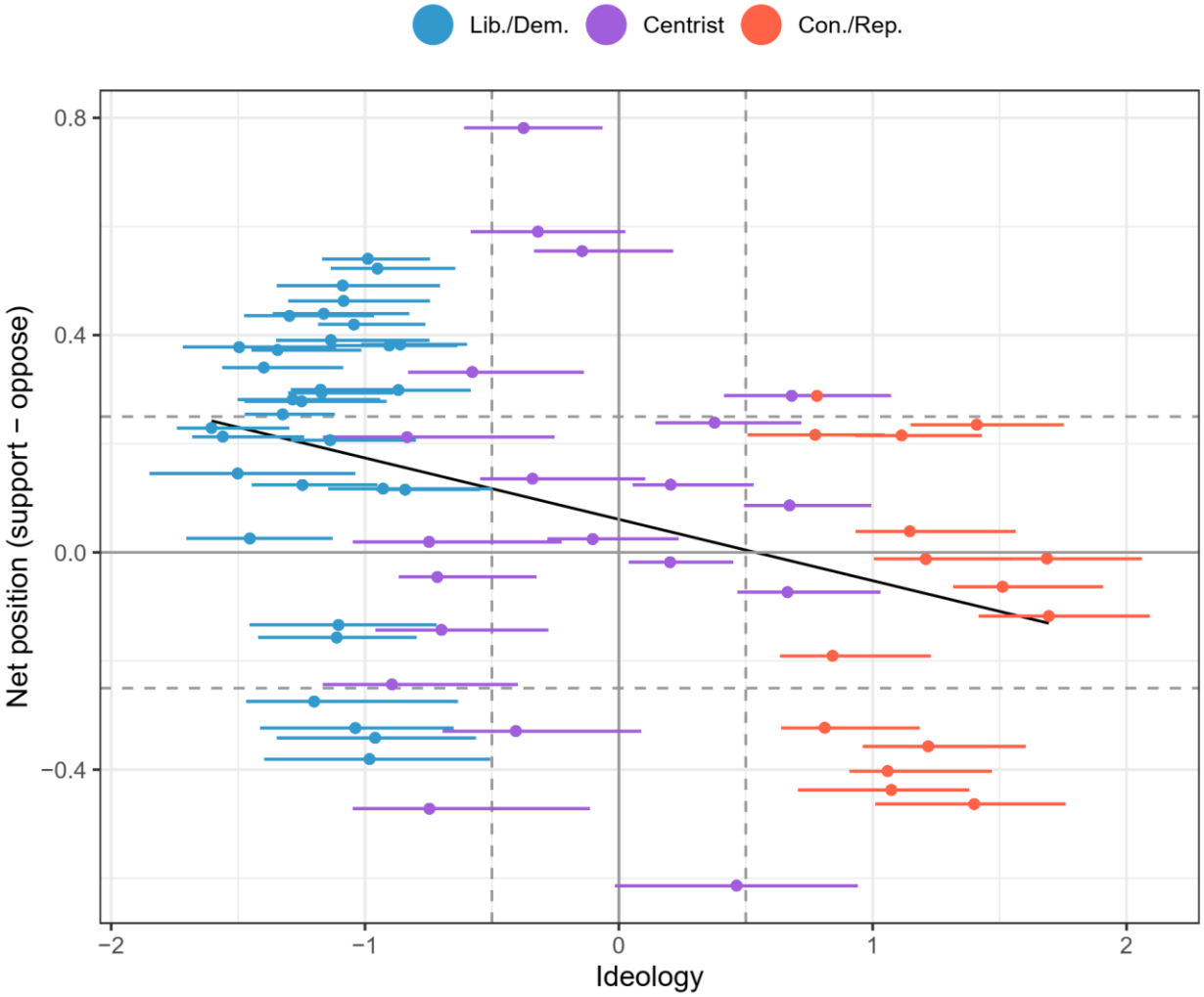

Figure 3.5 Ideological measures and estimated net support among Americans (Nationscape)

Figure 3.6 shows that the connection between the ideological measures and a policy's support is not dependent on the composition of partisanship and the distribution of ideology within the public. More Democratic policies generally receive greater support among Independents and more liberal policies receive greater support among moderates. Even those who locate themselves in the middle of the ideological range, on average, tend to prefer positions scored as liberal when compared to policies in the center or on the conservative end. Further, the inclusion of the SVD's v_1 vector and its OLS line demonstrates that the association is robust across the different measures of ideology, regardless of whether it was calculated from

partisanship, ideology, voting behavior, and the more sophisticated statistical approach using SVD.

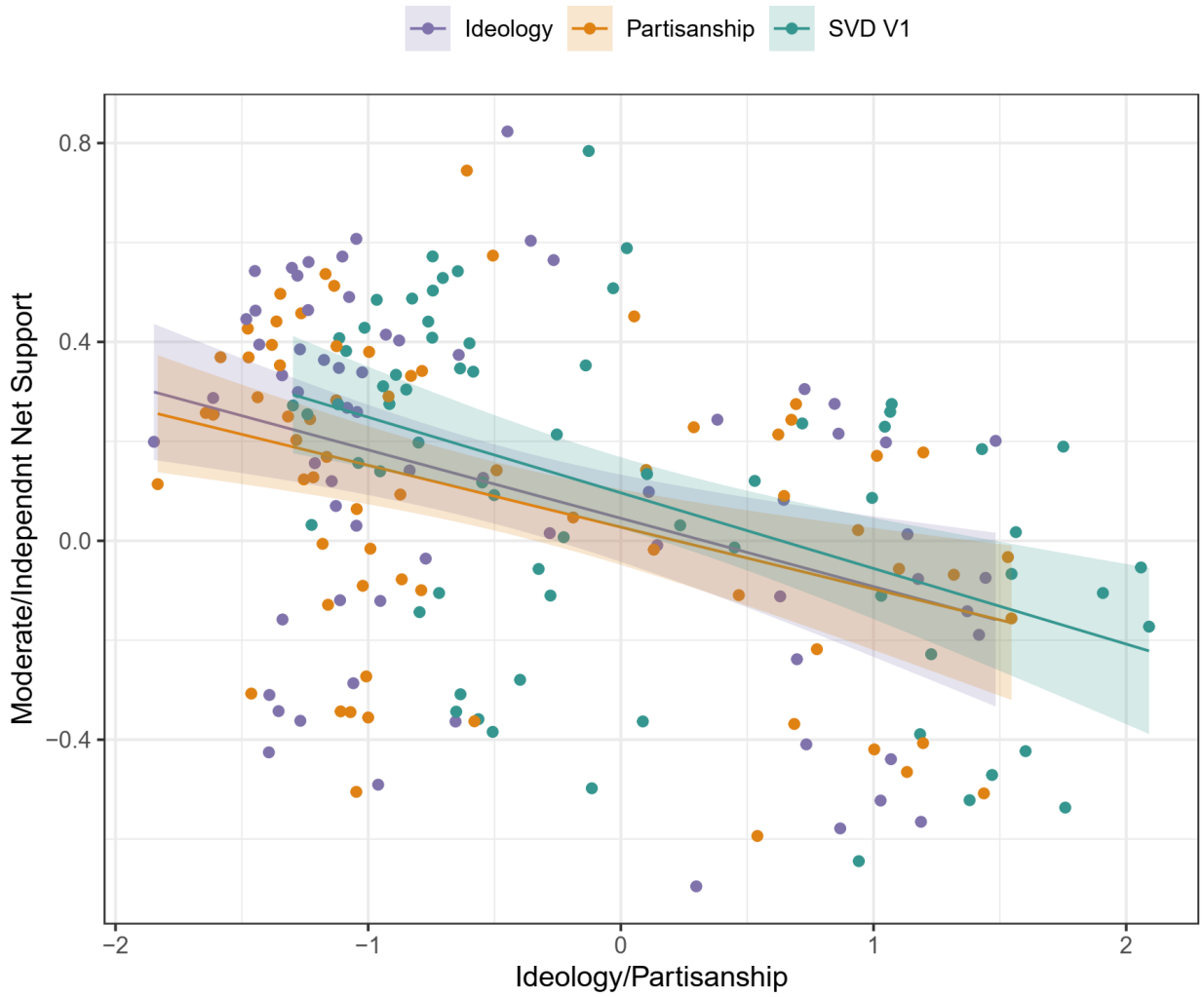

Figure 3.6 Ideological and partisan measures and net support among moderates and independents

Adding the GSS and CES back in

Since the ideological measures are so highly correlated with each other (see Table 3.11), the simple measures of partisanship and ideology can be used to create comparable measures in the CES and GSS data sets – the concern that the SVD-produced measures are not comparable across data sets does not apply to these.

For each policy or spending item across the data sets, I calculate the net support among Democrats, Republicans, liberals, and conservatives. I create partisan and ideological measures subtracting the Democratic net support from the Republican net support, and the liberal from the conservative. I also calculate the net support measures for non-partisans (independents and other party supporters) and self-identified moderates. Adding the additional data sets gives us an additional fifty-seven policy-level observations for a total of 125 (30 from CES and 28 from GSS).

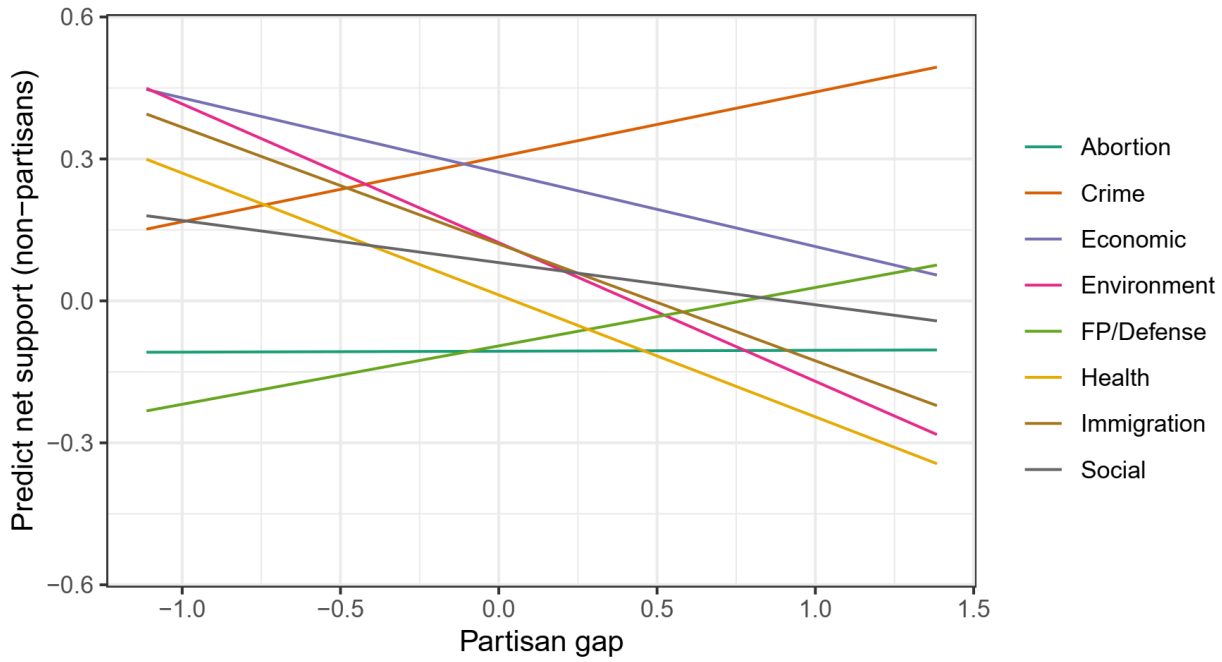

Figure 3.7 Predicted net support among non-partisans according to partisan gap and issue

I fit OLS models to regress non-partisan net support on the partisan net support gap ("partisan gap") for all 125 policies. These include a bivariate model with partisan gap as the only predictor, another adding a squared partisan gap term, another with interactions between the partisan gap and the data source, and the last with an interaction between the partisan gap and a issue area category variable that indicates whether the policy is in one of eight domains:

abortion, crime, economic, environment, foreign policy/defense, health, immigration and social.[36]

In all specifications, the models with the quadratic models do not significantly improve model fit (goodness of fit measures that penalize additional terms suggest these models are less preferable to the bivariate, linear models), nor are the squared terms themselves significant. If the center offered the greatest appeal, we would expect the model to reveal an upside down (inverted U) shape, but this is not the case.

Figure 3.7 shows the predicted non-partisan net support from the interaction model that allows the relationship between the partisan gap and support to vary within each issue category. The relationship between partisan gap and net support is negative for most of the issue categories, but positive for a few. In the areas of crime (criminal justice, drugs, policing) and foreign policy/defense (military spending, the use of military force, and military support for specific countries) the association is negative; the public leans more conservative in these areas. In the area of abortion the line is flat, meaning the connection between the ideology of the policy and support is weak or non-existent. The association is negative in the "social" area (guns, racial inequality, civil rights, education, and political issues like gerrymandering and campaign finance) and the economic category (taxes, trade, labor, welfare, and infrastructure). The association is even stronger and negative in the areas of immigration, the environment, and health.

3.5 Conclusion

If the center is defined by what is popular, then determining the center is straightforward. The median and net positions offer a clear picture of the political center. The first section of this chapter explores this version of the center in detail.

[36] The social and economic categories catch the issues that don't fall into the other categories.

If the center is not defined by what is popular, but rather from empirically-driven ideological measures, then we can examine the connection between the ideology of a policy and its popularity. I create such measures of policy ideology from individual-level characteristics (as well as the SVD statistical approach) to identify patterns in response variation among the policies within the VSG data set. These measures reveal the connection between a policy's ideology and its popularity. I find no evidence that policies located in the middle of these ideological measures receive any sort of advantage – they are not more likely to be popular, especially when compared to more liberal policies. In other words, if the center is defined this way – according to these or similar quantitative measures – then there's no reason to think the center will be popular, or that pursuing a centrist agenda would be electorally advantageous or good for the functioning of democracy, as it is often claimed.

Taken together, the analyses presented in this chapter refute the notion that the American public prefers policies in the middle, or that the public leans to the right (aside from a few issue areas). These findings are in sharp contrast to the characterizations of the center as libertarian – socially liberal, economically conservative – as is often suggested in the media, among certain social scientists, and those advocating for the political center (as discussed in chapter two). Further, this chapter exposes the contradiction in claiming that the center receives electoral advantages *and* is best represented by constrained spending, low taxation, and a weakened social spending. The argument that political actors supporting the policies aligned with the "elite consensus" (as described in the previous chapter) is a weak one.

Chapter 4
Who are the centrists?

Very little is known about who identifies as "centrist" or "moderate." Amidst much discussion about the political center (see chapter two), commentators often frame the center in terms of the policies those in the center desire from politicians. In the previous chapter, I explored different ways of thinking about the political center with respect to public preferences, and identified the policies and general patterns from several conceptual and methodological approaches. Ultimately I demonstrate that such policies are often quite different from the libertarian, socially liberal, economically conservative policy orientation most often claimed to represent the center.

However, the ways in which I defined the center in the previous chapter provide no insights into the individuals who choose to *identify* with the political center. In fact, there is no systematic study of the individuals who do. This is partly due to the fact that social and political surveys almost never explicitly ask respondents to identify with these terms. We know more about (1) individuals who place themselves in the middle of an ideological range, (2) swing voters, and (3) independent partisans, but these groups tend to be made up of, in no small part, people with low political information and/or interest. Further, there is no reason to think they voluntarily identify with the political center, much less a *strong* identification.

Thus, there is a gap in knowledge as it pertains to identification with the center among members of the public. In this chapter I aim to fill this gap. In it, I fit a series of regression models to explore the characteristics associated with explicit identification with the terms "centrist" and "moderate." From there, I compare these characteristics to those from another series of models predicting (a) an individual's propensity to take positions consistent with the median and (b) a measure created with singular value decomposition (SVD) that tracks onto an individual's likelihood of taking a median position after taking ideology into account (since

liberal policies tend to be more popular, liberal individuals are more likely to take median positions).

This chapter relies on data from two political surveys. The first data source is the November 2019 wave of the Voter Study Group's Voter Survey. The data asks respondents a rare question: how strongly they identify with the terms "centrist" and "moderate." The survey asks this separately from and in addition to the standard self-reported ideological scale. The second data source, the Voter Study Group's Nationscape survey (used in the previous chapter), contains questions that ask respondents for their preferences on a large set of policies.

These two data sets allow me to approach the question (who are the centrists?) from two distinct angles: (1) self-identification with the terms "centrist" and "moderate," and (2) identifying the center as the individuals who are most likely to hold policy preferences that systematically align with the median position in the public (the "center" according to public opinion scholars).

Regression analyses are used to determine the people most likely to identify as centrist and moderate, as well as those who are mostly likely to hold preferences in line with the political center defined according to the median position. The findings are then compared to the hypotheses laid out in the next section.

There are a few key takeaways from the analyses. First, identification with the center, particularly "centrist," is less common than many who advocate for the center claim. Second, identification with the center center is positively associated with being male, consuming a lot of political news, identification with cross-cutting partisan-ideological categories (liberal Republican or conservative Democrat), and voting for Clinton in 2016 and Trump in 2020 (but not the other type of swing voter). For income and education, there is a curvilinear relationship with identifying with the center; identification is greatest at the high and low ends of the distribution.

Third, with respect to holding centrist preferences the picture looks very different. Since the data set used in the analysis contains far more observations, statistical significance is found in far more of the relationships. But some of the significant associations in the identification models are very different from the characteristics associated with holding median preferences. Females, for example, are more likely to hold preferences consistent with the median. Liberal Republicans are less likely and conservative Democrats more likely to hold median preferences, and swing voters switching (or planning to switch) from Trump to Biden are more likely and those switching from Clinton to Trump are less likely to have preferences in line with the center. For income, the association is the opposite as it is with identification: the highest likelihood of having median preferences occurs in the middle of the income distribution (although the relationship has less symmetry at the high and low ends). For education, there is evidence for a curvilinear relationship in some models, but the overall pattern suggests the groups most likely to hold median preferences are those in the middle.

Fourth, I test whether identification with anti-populism and libertarianism are associated with identification with the political center. Despite the association of the center with anti-populism, there is actually a weak but significant positive association with "centrist" and identification with "populist." "Centrist" is associated with "libertarian" but to a lesser extent. The most remarkable part of the analysis is that many of the associations with centrist and moderate are positive, providing support for the idea that it can mean different things to different people. For example, "Alt-right" and "Anti-Fascist" are both positively correlated with "centrist."

The analyses show there are important differences between those who identify with the political center and the presentation of the center in the media. Further, the people who identify as centrist and moderate might not have preferences that are consistent with the center in terms of median position taking. Thus, this section offers additional evidence that the political center can mean a variety of different things and can mean different things to different people.

4.1 Who identifies as centrist? Who holds centrist preferences? And how do these relate to each other?

This chapter considers two versions of the political center and examines the individual characteristics associated with each. The first is self-identification. I take advantage of a survey that directly asks respondents how well a list of political-ideological terms describe them, including centrist and moderate. I fit two sets of logistic and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to predict identification with these two labels. One set of models uses demographic and political characteristics, such as education, income, employment status, partisan identity, religious affiliation, and racial categories. The other considers the associations between centrist and moderate identifications and other political/ideological labels.
The second set of models explores a different concept of the political center, where individuals are considered more "centrist" the more likely they are to take positions consistent with the median position within the public. This relates to the median voter model and the idea that appealing to the political middle provides electoral advantages.

4.1.1 Hypotheses

We know much more about these public figures who identify or are associated with the political center (politicians, public intellectuals, media figures, etc.) than we do of those identifying with the center who are more typical members of the public. As discussed in the second chapter, the dominant presentation of the political center highlights a socially liberal and economically conservative orientation toward policy, an emphasis on partisan compromise, opposition to populism and radical change, and a depoliticized and anti-political approach. Further, with a few notable exceptions, most of the political figures associated with the political center are male-presenting, mostly white, and almost entirely affluent, a point punctuated by

the billionaire "centrists" such as Howard Schultz. The hypotheses presented below are oriented around testing whether the more public-facing centrists resemble the members of the public who identify with or act in line with the political center.

Demographic-based hypotheses

These hypotheses consider whether the political center resonates more with affluent, educated, male, and white individuals. Variables for household income and highest degree attained are available from both data sets. Gender is measured as male or female, and race is measured in multicategory measures. Across the two data sources, the measures are not identical, but very close.

*H1: The center appeals to the affluent***.** Centrism, as often presented in the media, tends to be a label associated with pro-business, neoliberal, and disproportionately billionaire individuals. I use household income categories to create estimates of household income; the midpoint within the range of each category is used, and the measure is logged so that percentage changes in income estimates are equivalent across the range of values[37]. Unfortunately I cannot speak to identification among the millionaires and billionaires, since incomes that large are not measured and such individuals tend not to participate in surveys (Page et al. 2013; Page, Seawright, and Lacombe 2019), but the measures will tell us whether there is variation according to income within an income range representing most of America.

H2: The center appeals to the highly educated. Similar to H1, research on professionals suggests they hold positions to the left of the public in the domain of social issues and to the right of the public on economic issues (Brint 1994; Manza and Brooks 1999), the common orientation associated with the center (e.g. see Hall 2019). Professionals are set apart by their

[37] I also fit the models with dummy variables for each income bracket (less the reference category). The overall pattern is very similar (the interpretation is the same), and the goodness-of-fit measures are identical, so I opted for the simpler measurement.

educational attainment (lawyers, doctors, academics, etc.), so individuals with higher levels of education might also be more likely to identify with the political center.

H3: The center appeals to men more than women and *H4: the center appeals to White more than non-White Americans*. In addition to being predominantly affluent and "professional," the politicians identified with the center and the individuals who advocate for "centrism" are disproportionately male and white. While there is no systematic analysis that demonstrates this, the Blue Dogs and Democratic Leadership Council are predominantly white men, and the more current Problem Solvers Caucus (associated with the self-described "centrist" organization No Labels) is composed of only men in its house caucus (two Hispanic, the rest white) and contains three white men and two white women in its senate caucus. We might also see disproportionate identification with the center among white men in the survey data.

Ideological-based hypotheses

These hypotheses relate to two claims about the ideology of the center. The first is the claim that people in the center find socially liberal and economically conservative positions appealing. The Voter Study does not include enough policy questions to test this hypothesis in terms of actual preferences, but it does ask respondents how well "libertarian" describes them. The second is that, among certain scholars, the center is associated with anti-populism (Jacobs and Milkis 2022), but no one has tested whether this understanding of the concept is true among non-elite (non-academic) Americans. The survey also asks respondents how well "populist" describes them.

H5: The center is positively associated with "libertarian" and *H6 the center is negatively associated with "populist."* Both questions are operationalized as binary indicators indicating the terms describe respondents "very" or "extremely" well, and continuous measures that indicate the strength of identification with the terms.

Political identity-based hypotheses

Centrism is more often discussed in the space of Democratic Party politics than it is in its Republican counterpart. While there are notable centrist and moderates in both parties, my analysis of news articles discussing the center (described in chapter two) demonstrates that more "centrists" are associated with the Democratic rather than the Republican party. *H7: identifying with the political center is more common among Democrats than it is among Republicans*.

As discussed in the section on the *depoliticized center* in chapter two, the center is very often associated with non-partisan and non-ideological individuals. These individuals are said to lack loyalty to partisan and ideological divisions – they think and vote independent of these categories. We can see if this idea resonates in the public with measures of partisanship and ideology, as well as "swing" voting behavior. It is often claimed, in the context of Congress, that the center is represented by the liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats, although both have become increasingly rare over time. Perhaps members of the public who fall into these cross-cutting camps are also more likely to associate with the political center.

H8: The center appeals to conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans and *H9: The center appeals to swing voters*. Binary indicators are created to reflect these specific ideology and partisanship combinations, and past voting behavior and future intent to vote for a specific party or candidate are used to create a measure of swing voter intent.

Interest in political news

The last hypotheses relate to media consumption. I anticipate the term "centrist" in particular is more prevalent among the people with a high interest in political news[38], since I

[38] It might also be the case that the term centrist will be more salient among people with high interest in political news, representing more of a moderating effect. I tested whether this was the case with models predicting *knowing* about the terms "centrist" and "moderate" (a binary indicator of marking anything other than "not sure"). Familiarity with "centrist" is associated with being male, older, higher levels of education, identifying Hispanic, interest in politics, and Twitter use. However, I believe this does not require alternative model specifications because the analytical approach used here includes OLS models

suspect the concept of the center is more salient among people in the media and policy analysis space than it is among the general public[39]. The two surveys contain different questions asking respondents about their interest in political news. *H10: People who pay more attention to political news are more likely to identify with the political center.*

4.2 Data

The analyses in this chapter rely on two data sets, both from the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group (VSG). The first is the Views of the Electorate Research ("Voter") Survey (2021). In the November 2019 wave, respondents were asked whether they identify with each item in a set of nineteen political terms, including "centrist" and "moderate." The wave has a sample size of 5,900 and includes weights for creating national-level estimates. The wave also includes a host of demographic and political questions, but it unfortunately includes only a small number of policy-related questions.

Second, the VSG Nationscape survey. This survey was conducted in weekly (non-longitudinal) waves over the years 2019-2021 (although not every week over this period). The sample is just shy of half a million responses and it contains a large set of questions asking respondents for their preferences on specific policies. For more information on the VSG Nationscape, see the previous chapter. The Nationscape data is used (1) to create the policy-preference matrix used to perform singular value decomposition to extract factor-like vectors at the individual and policy levels, and (2) to explore a definition of the center that focuses on the

that predict association with centrist and moderate on a scale, and these models exclude the "not sure" responses. If news interest was just a moderator then there would be no effects from the covariates mentioned above, but this isn't the case.

[39] I also analyzed the open-ended responses from the American National Election Study to see how often "centrist" and "moderate" are mentioned. The publicly available questions ask respondents to discuss what they like and dislike about the Democratic and Republican Parties, as well as presidential nominees for each party. Mentions of centrist, centrism, and political center appear in 0.01% of the responses, and moderate and moderation appear in 0.09% of responses. Even references to the "middle" only appear in 0.92% of responses.

people with a propensity to agree with the median position in aggregate public opinion (the medians are calculated with sixty-eight policy questions from this data source).

4.2.1 How often do people identify with the center?

In the Voter Survey wave, respondents were asked, "People use different words to describe their ideological views. How well do each of the following terms describe you?" The list includes Christian, Traditional, Anti-Fascist, *Moderate*, Conservative, Environmentalist, Progressive, Liberal, Feminist, Nationalist, Green, Democratic Socialist, Libertarian, Populist, Fundamentalist, Socialist, Alt-Right, Radical, and *Centrist*. For each, respondents indicate whether they feel the term describes them extremely well, very well, moderately well, slightly well, or not well at all, but also allows them to mark "Not sure." Figure 4.1 summarizes the responses to all 19 terms. All estimates are weighted and the terms are sorted according to the sum of Extremely and Very well responses.

The evidence suggests the "centrist" identity is not particularly popular among Americans. A combined 12% of Americans feel the term "centrist" describes them "extremely" (4.6%) or "very" (7.3%) well, and another 16% feel it describes them "moderately" well (for a combined total of 28%). This places "Centrist" as the 12th ranked term, falling just behind Green and Nationalist and ahead of Democratic Socialist and Libertarian.

Moderate, however, is significantly more popular, coming in as the 5th ranked term (also according to "very" and "extremely well" responses. An estimated 29.4% of Americans feel "moderate" describes them extremely (12.7%) or very (16.7%) well, with another 22.0% who feel "moderate" describes them "moderately" well (a cumulative sum of 51.3% when including the *moderately moderate*). Moderate falls behind Christian, Traditional, Anti-Fascist[40], and Conservative. The three terms with the lowest identification are Socialist, Alt-Right, and Radical.

[40] It is very unlikely that all respondents who identify with "Anti-Fascist" are thinking of the "Antifa" movement (is it even fair to call it a movement?) that received extensive media coverage during 2020. It is much more likely that most people think fascism is bad and thus identify with a position that is explicitly opposed to fascism. Further, a lot of respondents might not have a good idea as to what "fascism" means,

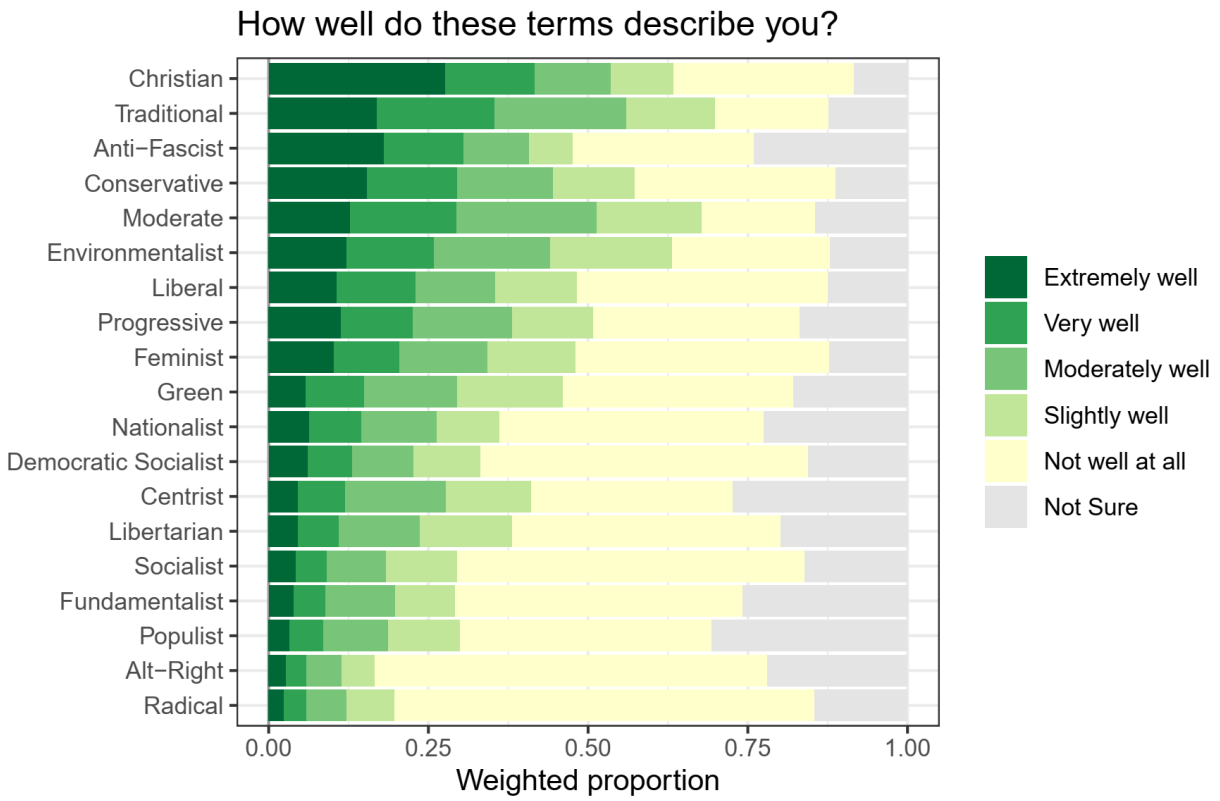

Figure 4.1 Identification with various political and ideological terms. The figure summarizes identification with nineteen political/ideological terms from the VSG Voter Survey. Respondents select how well they feel each term describes them on a scale from not well at all to extremely well; they can also select "not sure." All estimates are weighted to approximate the share identifying with each term at the national-level. Not sure responses are included.

Other estimates of the share of Americans who occupy the center suggest the political center represents a large share of Americans. The U.S. Centrist Party claims, in bold text on its homepage, "America is 70% CENTRIST" (2020). Former Senator Joseph Lieberman claims that independent partisans are centrists (Lieberman 2021), which would put them around 40% of the American population (Jones 2024), although this estimate may be different depending on the survey. Another similar estimate comes from William Galston (2019). His survey of the American political landscape showed "43% of respondents opted for the center." These estimates are much closer to the share of Americans who identify with the term "moderate" but appear to be significantly higher than the share of Americans who actually identify as "centrist."

since there seems to be a lot of confusion as to the meaning of the term even among academics and public intellectuals (Bessner 2023).

4.3 Identification with "centrist" and "moderate"

Who are these people who identify with the political center? Writing that discusses the political center often makes claims about who is and who isn't centrist. To my knowledge, these claims always rely on other measures that are used to approximate the political center, such as independent partisans, selecting the middle of an ideological range (Adler 2018), or swing voters (Bacon 2022). It would be a stretch to assume members of these groups all think of themselves as representatives of the political center. Even the collection of individuals that place themselves on the middle of the ideological scale, sometimes but not always labeled "moderate," should not be treated as a meaningful political group as much as an expression of ideological innocence (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017).

Rather than speculate on who makes up the political center, the focus of this section is on the people who explicitly identify with it: the centrists and moderates.

4.3.1 Predicting identification with centrist and moderate

In this section I use survey data that asks respondents an exceedingly rare question: how well do the terms "centrist" and "moderate" describe you? I use this survey data (the November 2019 VSG "Voter' survey) to examine what influences whether an individual identifies as centrist or moderate, both in terms of individual level characteristics and in terms of the other political and ideological labels. I use Logit and OLS regression models to predict binary and continuous measures of identification with the terms.

The models include covariates for age, gender, sexuality, education, race and ethnicity, ideology, income, employment status, sexual orientation, homeownership, gun ownership, religion, union membership. The models also include binary indicators of identification as conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, and *intent* to swing, indicating a respondent's

stated intent to switch from voting for the Democratic presidential candidate in 2016 to the Republican candidate in 2020, and vice versa.

Figure 4.2 displays the estimated coefficients for four models, two OLS and two Logit, one of each predicting identification with centrist and moderate. The dependent variables (DVs) are indicated by the color of the data points: orange for centrist, gray for moderate. The Logit models use binary dependent variables coded as one when the respondent indicates the term describes them extremely or very well; all other responses are coded as zero. The OLS models predict the response on a continuous numeric scale where higher values indicate a stronger identification with the term. Due to the large number of coefficients and limited space, Figure 4.2 excludes the estimated values for some of the categorical predictors that did not have significant effects: employment characteristics and sexual orientation.

When applicable, reference categories are displayed on the right side of each grouping panel. For example, the education variables have a reference category of high school graduate ("HS grad"). The references category for partisan identity is Independent; for news interest and Twitter use the reference categories represent moderate interest or use; for religion it is none (no religious affiliation); and for the racial and ethnic categories the reference category is White (non-Hispanic).

4.3.2 Results

The factors that lead to identification with centrist and moderate are quite similar. There is not a single case where the effect of a covariate is significant and opposite across the two DVs, although many factors are significant for one of the identifications but not the other. In other words, when one characteristic is positively (negatively) associated with "moderate" it is likely to be also positively (negatively) associated or not significant with "centrist."

None of the variables for employment status or sexual orientation significantly affected the association with centrist or moderate. Religious identification is largely non-significant, aside from Catholics, Orthodox (Eastern or Greek), and Jewish individuals being more likely to

identify as moderate (in all three cases, the effects are significant in both Logit and OLS models), but not centrist.

Some of the covariates have relatively small but still significant effects on identification with the political center. Individuals residing in union member households (with one or more union members present) are more likely to identify as both centrist and moderate (compared to individuals from non-union households). Evangelicals ("born again" Christians) are more likely to associate with centrist than non-Evangelicals (Logit only). Older individuals are more likely to identify as moderate, but not centrist, and gun owners are more likely to identify as centrist (OLS only) and moderate (both) when compared to non-gun owners and individuals without guns in their home.

The race variables show there is very little effect of race on identification with the center. Only Hispanic identification has a significant effect; it has a small positive association with moderate (both) and centrist (Logit only).

Educational attainment (measured by the highest degree achieved) has a different relationship with centrist than for moderate identifications. For moderate, identification is higher among four year college graduates (both) and respondents who did not complete high school (OLS only), compared to high school graduates, but none of the other education categories are associated with significant differences. For centrist, the association is U-shaped, where identification is highest at both the high and low ends of educational attainment and all categories are significantly different from high school graduates (the reference category) except for individuals with an associates degree (both Logit and OLS).

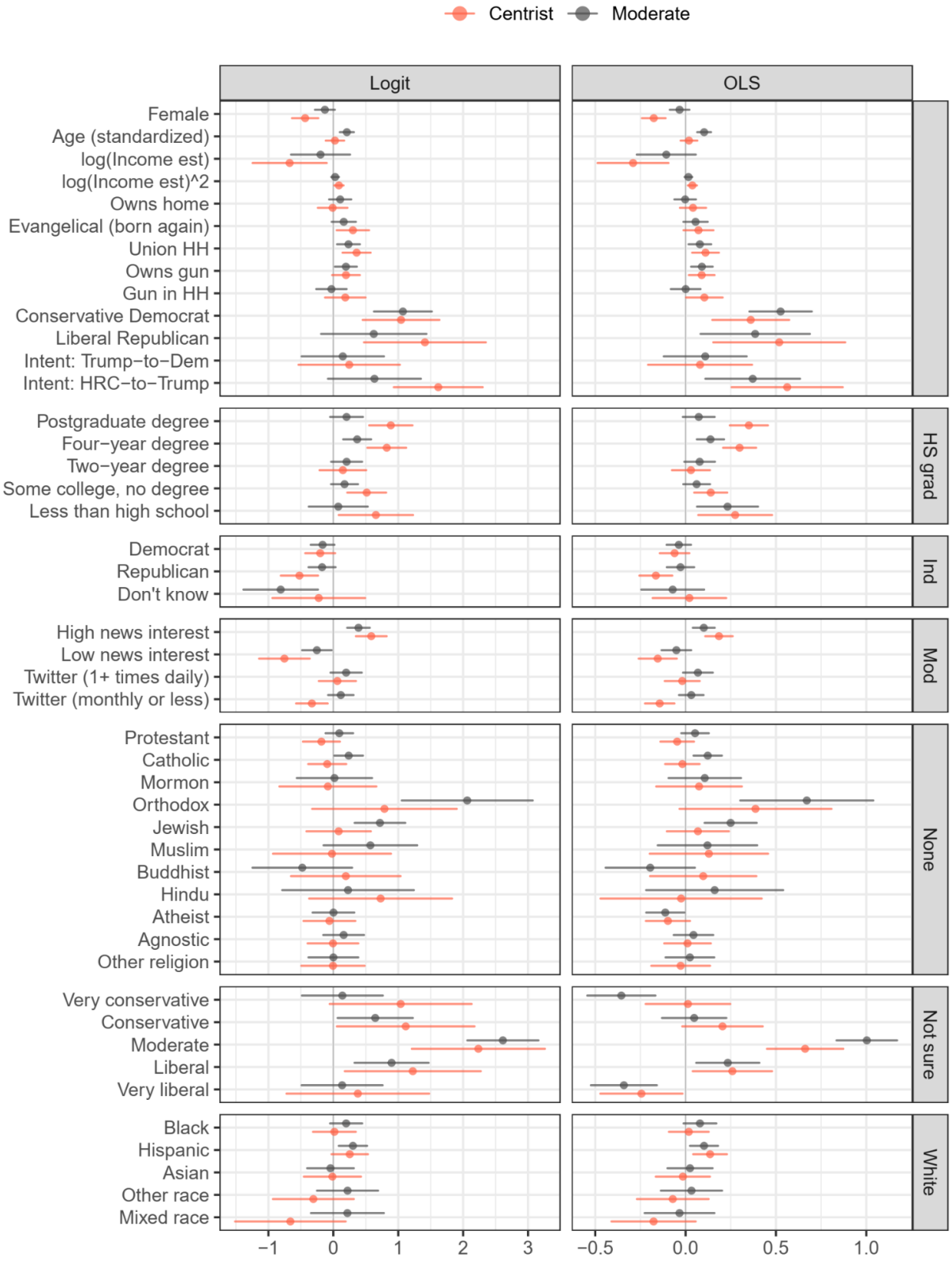

Figure 4.2. Coefficient plot for four models predicting identification with the political center

Partisanship plays an interesting role in an individual's identification with the political center. Compared to independents, Republicans are less likely to identify with centrist, but not moderate, but this is not the case for Democrats. Respondents indicating they are "not sure" of their partisan identification are less likely to identify with moderate (Logit only), but not centrist. Further, individuals who identify with conventionally opposing partisan and ideological categories are also more likely to associate with the political center: conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans are more likely to identify as both centrist and moderate (liberal Republicans are more likely to identify with moderate only in the OLS model). Finally, the variables measuring swing voting – voting for a different party in 2016 compared to 2020 – are only significant for the swing voters that switched from Hilary Clinton in 2016 to Donald Trump in 2020 are more likely to identify with centrist (Logit and OLS) and moderate (Logit only).

Identification with centrist and moderate is also related to (1) interest in news coverage of government and public affairs and (2) an individual's reported Twitter use. The binary indicator of high interest in political news is associated with a higher likelihood of identifying with both centrist and moderate, and low interest in political news is associated with a lower likelihood of identifying as centrist (but not moderate). Compared to moderate use of Twitter (a few times a week to a few times a month), low use (once a month or less) is associated with a lower likelihood of identifying as centrist, but this is not the case for identification with "moderate."

Not surprisingly, ideology is highly significant across the models. Ideology is measured as binary indicators of each of the five response options: very liberal to very conservative. The reference category is "not sure," meaning all estimated effects are the expected difference in the outcome relative to this category. In the logistic models, respondents are more likely to identify as centrist and moderate when they identify with conservative or liberal, but not *very* conservative or liberal, and even more so when they identify with "moderate", the middle point

of the scale. The OLS models show a similar pattern, except that the "very liberal" respondents are significantly less likely to identify as centrist or moderate, and "very conservative" respondents are less likely to identify as moderate, all in comparison to the "not sure" reference group.

The last variable is household income. The models include the log of the household income estimate and its squared term, allowing income to take a curvilinear relationship with the dependent variables. For identification with "centrist," the coefficients are significant in the both the logistic and OLS models (the coefficients are not significant for moderate), but in order to interpret the relationship between household income and identification with centrist and moderate, it is easiest to plot predicted values across the range of income values. Because income is measured as the log transformation of the household income estimate, to make the plot easier to interpret the figure presents the exponentiated values (i.e. back to estimates in $1000s) and log-transforms the x-axis. The predicted centrist and moderate values across the household income estimates, from all four models, are presented in Figure 4.3.

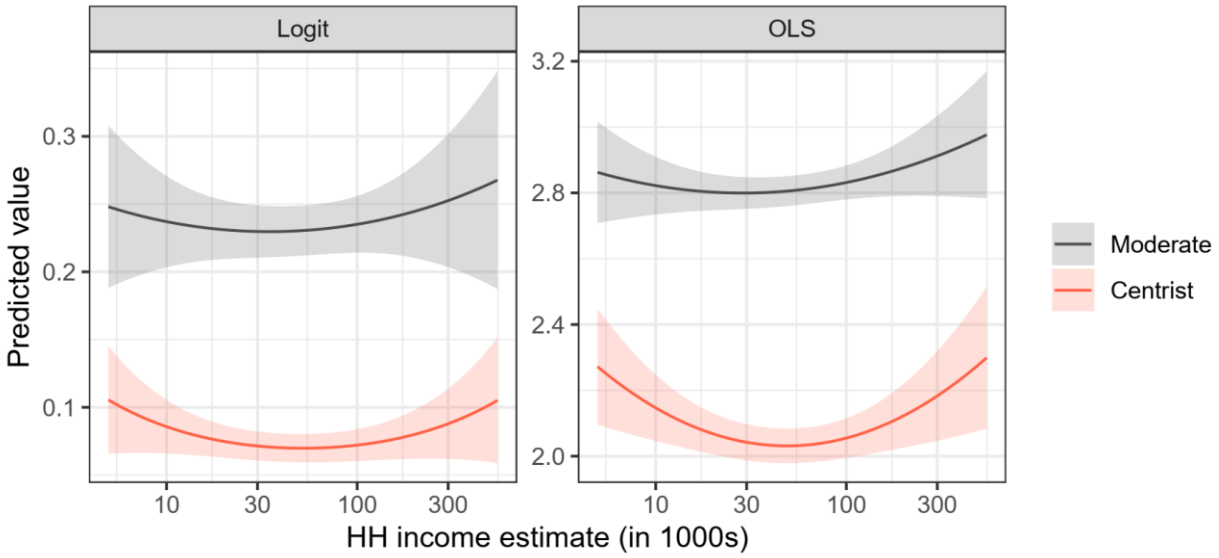

Figure 4.3 predicted values by income from the logit and OLS models. The logit panel shows the predicted probability of respondents reporting the terms centrist and moderate describe them extremely or very well. The OLS panel shows the predicted value on the scale indicating the strength of identification with centrist and moderate, a five point scale ranging from 1 (not well at all) to 5 (extremely well). The models were estimated with the log of the estimated household income (calculated as the midpoint of the bounds of each household income bracket), with all other covariates held at their mean value.

Similar to the relationship with education, Figure 4.3 shows the highest association with "centrist" at the both ends of the distribution. The lowest household income estimate ($5K annually) roughly approximates the same predicted values at the highest value ($500K+, coded as $550K). The average association between household income and identification as moderate takes a similar form on average, but there is no statistically significant relationship between income and identification as moderate.

In sum, the model results reveal a few interesting patterns in the identification with the political center. Individuals more likely to identify with the term centrist include people who pay close attention to political news, who regularly use Twitter, who identify as Hispanic, who identify as a conservative Democrat or a liberal Republican, who voted for Clinton in 2016 but plan to vote for Trump in 2020, and the individuals who are at the low and high ends of the distributions of household income and educational attainment. Less likely to identify with the center are females (as compared to males), Republicans (compared to Independents), individuals with low interest in political news, and individuals identifying as "very liberal."

4.4 Centrism as the propensity to agree with the median

The "centrist" position is sometimes equated with the median position (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). In this conceptualization, to determine the centrist position on a given policy, simply determine the median position in the relevant public, which could be within a nation, subnational unit, county, city, or any defined political space. The previous chapter described national centrist public opinion within the United States, and here again I'll focus on the median position within the American public.

The median position is an interest to scholars of democratic responsiveness. It is the median position that Anthony Downs famously argued rational political parties would pursue to

optimize electoral vote share (Downs 1957). Political actors who position themselves close to this center should receive more electoral support than politicians who are farther from it.

In contrast to the previous section, which explored the group of people who *identify* with the terms centrist and moderate, this section focuses on the group of people who *act* centrist, or systematically take positions consistent with the center (median) of public preferences.
Who are the individuals who hold preferences most closely in line with the median preference center? Another way of operationalizing the political center is by measuring the propensity of an individual to take policy positions consistent with the median; the more often they do, the more centrist I consider them to be.

This section uses two operationalizations of the median-position-taking center. The first is the proportion of positions on which an individual agrees with the median. The measure is useful but potentially biased by the fact that not all respondents are asked the identical set of questions. The second measure is the second U (u_2) vector from singular value decomposition (SVD). The approach is modeled after another study that used legislative voting behavior to demonstrate that the second factor from SVD predicts an individual's likelihood of voting with the majority, once partisanship is accounted for (Martin and Porter 2017). Inspired by their approach, I test whether the u_2 corresponds to the probability of an individual to take the median position (it does) and predict its value with the same set of covariates used to predict median position-taking.

4.4.1 Median position-taking as the center

For each respondent in the VSG Nationscape data set, I calculate the share of the positions that line up with the median position calculated from the full sample. For example, if a respondent was asked to report their preferences (support, oppose, not sure) on thirty five policies (from the total of sixty eight) and their preferences matched the median for twenty of the policies, then the respondents measure would be 20/35 or 0.57.

The drawback of using this measure is that respondents were not presented with the same set of policies – they were only shown a subset of the sixty eight policies. This means that the median calculation is not directly comparable across respondents. The proportion of median positions for a respondent who received a subset of policy questions that are more popular than average is biased compared to a respondent who received a set with average or below average level of popularity. However, unless the selection of policies a respondent receives is determined by other characteristics of interest – demographics, political views, or the policy preferences themselves – then the effect of this in the aggregate should be additional noise rather than bias. The set of policy questions were selected at random, meaning there should be no bias in the aggregate. But, in the models presented below, to help address this issue on the individual level, I control for the relative popularity of each subset (the policies presented to an individual respondent) by including a measure of average net support for each respondent.

4.4.2 The u_2 vector as a measure of the center

Due to the potential drawbacks of the median propensity measure and useful properties of the factors produced from SVD, I also use the second individual-level *U* vector from SVD as a measure of an individual's centrism. I will show this measure ("U2" in all figures) strongly predicts an individual's propensity to hold preferences consistent with the median, but what is most useful about this measure is that it is, by design, orthogonal to the first SVD vector from the *U* matrix, the one that strongly correlates with ideology. In other words, the measure captures an individual's propensity to take positions with the median position that is relatively independent of ideology, and completely independent of the SVD vector that approximates ideology.

Recall the SVD procedure described in the previous chapter, particularly the use of SVD to map the behavior of legislators in Congress. Martin and Porter (2017) used Congressional roll call voting records – coded as +1 for yea, -1 for nay, and 0 for an abstention or absence – to

perform the SVD on a matrix where each row represents a legislator and each column a bill. The authors use "two-mode truncation" to extract two vectors from both individual (*U)* and bill (*V*) level matrices. The SVD identifies groupings where "the largest mean-square overlap with the actual groups voting for or against each bill is given by the first left singular vector u_1 of the matrix, the next largest by the second left singular vector u_2, and so on."

The first *U* vector (u_1) is a continuous numeric variable that captures the similarity in voting across legislators, which, it turns out, approximates the partisanship of legislators. In other words, when extracting a single linear measure that explains the maximum amount of variance in the matrix of legislative votes, this measure is closely related to partisanship. This should not be a surprise, particularly in a highly polarized legislative setting like the United States Congress.

Consistent with Martin and Porter (2017), in the previous chapter, I found the SVD performed on the VSG Nationscape (VSG) data provides a similar first vector. The first first *U* vector (u_1) associated with a respondent's self-reported ideology with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.71. The related first *V* vector (v_1) (measured at the policy level) is highly related to policy-level measures of ideology that use self-reported ideology, partisanship, and presidential voting (the Pearson correlation coefficients were 0.97 or higher between the ideological, partisan, voting, and both SVD measures).

Further, Martin and Porter (2017) find the second vectors – u_2 and v_2 – are strongly related to a legislator's propensity to vote with the majority, a characteristic the authors refer to as "bipartisan" (also see Porter et al. 2007). It is an empirical question whether or not the same logic applies to the VSG data; does the second *U* vector relate to the likelihood an individual agrees with the median position, after taking into account the ideological or partisan nature of the position?

Validating the u_2 measure

To validate the association with the v_2 vector and taking a median position I fit ordered beta regression models (Kubinec 2022) that predict an individual's probability of taking a median position. The ordered beta regression offers an approach to modeling a dependent variable bound by a specific range, in this case 0 and 1, which also includes values 0 and 1 (the approach is ideal for proportions like the one used here).

Figure 4.4 displays the predicted proportion of an individual's positions that match the median position on the y-axis, and the value of six vectors from the *U* matrix on the x-axis. The *U* vectors are divided by their standard deviation to place them on a comparable scale, although the range of values still vary across measures. The first two vectors are presented in color, the rest in gray. Confidence intervals are included but the high number of observations, and resulting low standard errors, places them tightly around the lines making them difficult to see.

Figure 4.4 shows that the first two *U* vectors have substantive effects on the predicted proportion of an individual's median positions. The first ("U") has a strong negative effect; the lowest values (most "liberal" individuals) are most likely to take the median position on a given policy, and the highest values (the most "conservative") are least likely to take the median position. This reflects the finding from the previous chapter that on average liberal policies (or those supported in greater proportion by Democrats or those voting for the Democratic presidential candidate) receive greater support. Part of this is from the composition of the public – there are more Democrats than Republicans – but, as the previous chapter demonstrated, it is also true that, among the non-partisans and respondents declaring moderate ideology, more liberal or Democratic policies receive greater support than conservative/Republican policies.

The second vector from the *U* matrix ("U2") also has a significant and substantive effect on an individual's share of positions in agreement with the median positions. At its lowest values, individuals are likely to agree with the median position roughly 25% of the time, and about 70% of the time at its highest values. All other subsequent vectors are significant (due to

the high number of observations) but substantively result in little explanation of the proportion of preferences an individual has that are consistent with the median position.

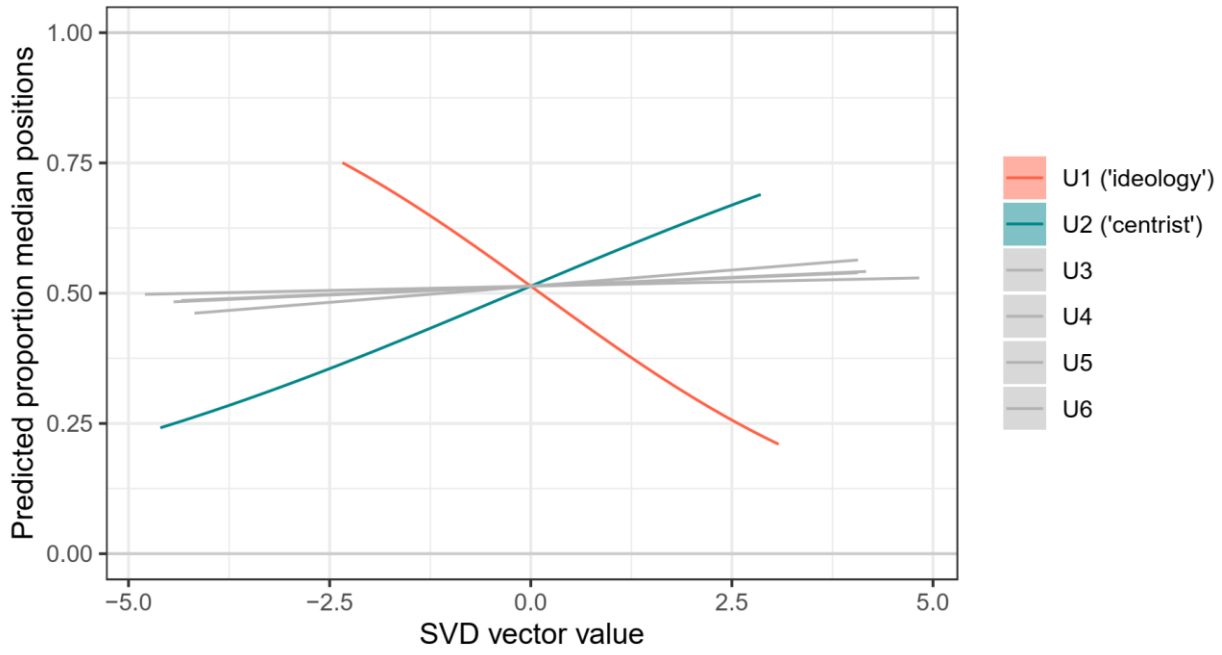

Figure 4.4. The predicted proportion of an individual's positions that match the median by u_1, u_2 , and four subsequent vectors from the U matrix. The figure demonstrates the diminishing significance of the U vectors, as only the first two are associated with substantive differences in predicting the share of median positions taken. The predicted values are generated from an ordered beta regression model (Kubinec 2022) which ensures the predicted values are bound by zero and one, and can include zero and one.

Figure 4.4 supports the notion that the use of SVD by Martin and Porter (2017) is also applicable to the policy preference data in the VSG Nationscape survey. The first vector is closely related to an individual's ideology (0.71 correlation coefficient), and the second is a measure, independent of the first ideological vector, that predicts a respondent's propensity to take positions consistent with the median; higher values indicate a respondent is more likely to support the "centrist" position, after accounting for ideology.

Predicting centrist position taking

Figure 4.5 displays the estimated coefficients from three OLS[41] models. The first ("Med 1") predicts the proportion of median positions and is estimated with no additional controls (only the covariates shown in the table). The second model ("Med 2") also predicts the proportion of median positions but also adds the first *U* vector to account for its independent effect on taking the median position[42] (as shown in Figure 4.4 above). The last model predicts the second *U* vector ("U2"). Both dependent variables are standardized, meaning the coefficients can be interpreted in terms of standard deviations for each.

Covariates were selected to match, as closely as possible, the models presented earlier in the chapter (Figure 4.2), those that predicted identification with the terms centrist and moderate. This was mostly achieved, with four notable exceptions. First, the variable for home ownership was not reproducible in the Nationscape dataset (the question was only asked for a small subset of the sample). Second and third, the Nationscape dataset includes questions on language spoken in the household and native born status which were not available in the Voter survey; these are included in the model presented here. Fourth, the question about social media use in the Voter survey asks specifically about the frequency of Twitter use, whereas the question in the Nationscape data asks whether the respondents consumed political news from Twitter *or Facebook* in the last week, therefore the variable is capturing something a bit different[43].

---

[41] All three dependent variables are numeric, but technically the proportion of median positions is bound by zero and one, as described in Figure X. Fitting other models using the same ordered beta regression approach does not substantively change the findings, and fitting OLS models, while not perfect, provides coefficient estimates that are much easier to interpret. OLS is far more computationally efficient. In addition to the models presented here, I also fit models with state-level fixed effects. This also did not substantively change the results, and has the drawback of eliminating the possibility of generating predicted values through conventional means.

[42] The first model has an R-squared of 0.26 and the second – with the first *U* vector – is 0.55. The controlling for ideology dramatically improves model fit. This is illustrated in Figure 4.4.

[43] There are a few other concepts that are measured differently, although not significantly, across the two data sets. For example, the education variable in the Voter survey has a category for some college but no degree, which is not in the Nationscape, and the Nationscape has a category for vocational degree, which is not in the Voter survey. These are minor differences as the most meaningful variation in the range of educational attainment is still captured in both measures.

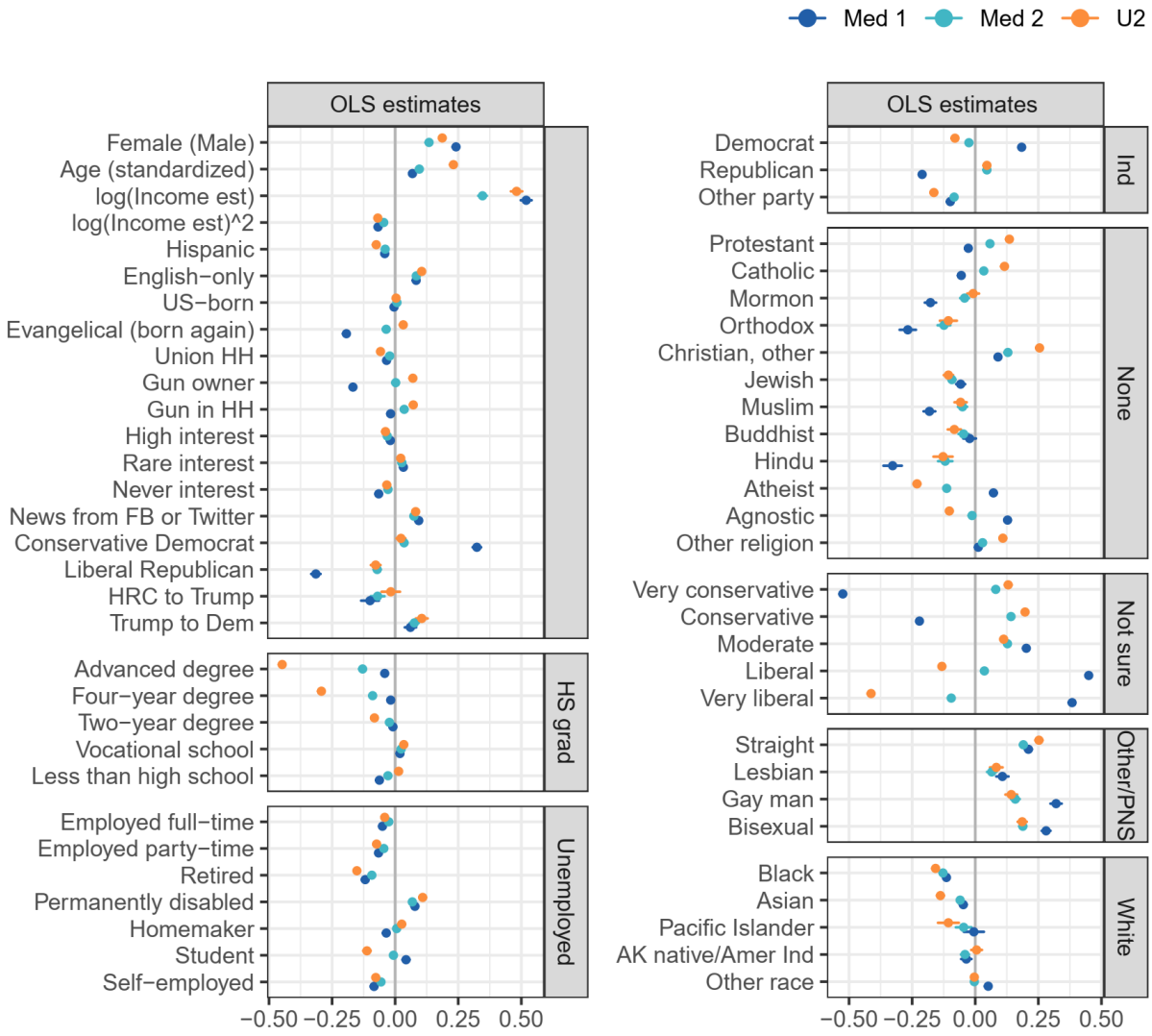

Figure 4.5. Predicting the proportion of an individual's positions consistent with the median and the u_2 factor from SVD with individual-level characteristics. In addition to the displayed covariates, the three models also include a control for the average of the net support across the policies the respondent was presented with (respondents were presented with a subset of all the policies). The "Med 1" model shows the control and the displayed covariates only. The "Med 2" and "U2" (where the DV the second SVD vector, u_2) is models also includes a control for the first SVD vector u_1 (which is highly correlated with ideology).

Most of the coefficient estimates shown in Figure 4.5 are statistically significant[44], which was not the case in Figure 4.2. The model contains almost one hundred times the observations,

[44] I was initially concerned the effects found in Figure 4.5 were influenced by the composition of the groupings measured as covariates in the model. For example, are females more likely to take the median position because there are more females? To address this concern, I took random samples from the full data set that gave relatively equal weight to all the categories used in the model. This made the composition of the subsample very different from the full sample. I then performed the same procedure as

which dramatically increases the likelihood of finding statistically significant effects. For this reason, all coefficients except for two controls are displayed. The first and second models (Med 1 and Med 2) include the respondent-specific average net support of the policies on which they report their preferences (to account for the fact that different respondents see different sets of policies). The second and third models (Med 2 and U2) include the first *U* vector to isolate the effect of the covariates after accounting for this "ideology" SVD vector.

In general, when the estimate from the first model is greater than the estimate from the other two, that suggests the members of that category are relatively more liberal than the comparison group. When the first model estimates are lower than the other two, then the group is relatively conservative (at least in terms of the first *U* vector). Since self-reported ideology is also part of the model, the difference between the coefficients is reflecting the "ideology" captured by the *U* vector that isn't captured in self-reported ideology. Since my interest is primarily in the tendency to align with the median regardless of ideology, I will primarily focus on the estimates from the second and third models.

First I'll discuss the findings from the models not related to the hypotheses. Religious identification has moderate impacts on the dependent variables. Protestants, Catholics, other Christians, and members of "other" religions are more likely to take the median position. Identification with Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Atheist is associated with a lower likelihood of taking the median position.

All sexual orientation categories are more likely to take median positions compared to the "other" and prefer not to say responses. The group most likely to take the median position is the "straight" group, but the estimate is not much higher than that of bisexuals and gay men (the lesbian group is a bit lower).

---

before – used multiple imputation (MICE) to complete the matrix of individual responses for all policies and performed SVD to extract the first two vectors from the *U* matrix – and found the results did not substantively change. The coefficients were different, but the relative size and direction of the effects were quite consistent. Importantly, the effects from all the most interesting findings – income, gender, age, and education – were consistent across the two data sets.

In the area of employment all the effects are relatively small. Full-time, part-time, retired, and self-employed categories are all negatively associated with median position taking in comparison to the unemployed reference category (as are students, but only in the third model). Permanently disabled is the only category associated with a higher share of selecting the median (homemakers are as well, but only in the third model).

Other small but significant associations in the models include negative associations with the covariates for union households, and positive associations with the covariates for english-only households and having a gun in the household (and gun owners in the third model). Evangelical (born again) is both positively (third model) and negatively (second model) associated with the dependent variables, but these effects are very small.

Lastly, the ideological categories show an interesting pattern. In the first model, the group with the highest estimated share of median positions is liberal (higher than very liberal), and each category more conservative has an effect lower than the previous one. However, once the first *U* vector (associated with ideology) is controlled for, the effect of ideology switches. In the second model (Med 2), moderate and conservative (slightly higher) are the most likely to take the median position, with the lowest values occurring among liberal and very liberal (the only negative estimate). The pattern is similar but more pronounced in the third model (U2), although the largest effect is found among conservative, then very conservative, and the estimates continue to decrease moving from moderate to very liberal.

The ideological variables are a little tricky to interpret in the last two models given the control for the first SVD vector. The first vector is a factor that explains the most amount of variation in policy preferences that a single predictor can explain. It is highly related to self-reported ideology, but it predicts an individual's policy preferences better than and separate from self-reported ideology. They are highly related (with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.71) but not the same. This means the second and third models in Figure 4.5 show the estimated effects of *self-reported* ideology after controlling for a computed factor that is highly

related to self-reported ideology. In other words, independent of how liberal or conservative an individual's aggregate preferences are, we can see the isolated effect of an individual's identification with the ideological categories.

The covariates related to hypotheses reveal additional interesting associations. Females are more likely to take a median position when compared to males, and taking median positions is also more likely to occur among older individuals. The racial categories appear to explain only a small amount of variation in median-position taking. Black, Asian, and Pacific Islanders are all less likely to take median positions relative to white Americans, but the size of the effects is small. Those identifying as Alaska natives/American Indians and with "other race" are no less likely to take median positions when compared to whites. Hispanic identifying individuals (a measure separate from the racial categories) is negatively associated with the dependent variables.

Partisanship, like self-reported ideology, is sensitive to the inclusion of the SVD control. In the first model (without the u_1 vector), Democrats are most likely to select the median position, and Republicans the least (compared to independents, the reference category). In the second and third models the partisan associations with the DVs flips: Democrats are less likely and Republicans more likely to select the median position/have a higher u_2 value. The "other party" category has a negative association in all models.

The ideological u_1 control also has a strong effect on the cross-cutting party-ideology covariates. Without the u_1 vector ("Med 1"), conservative Democrats are much more likely and liberal Republicans much less likely to take median positions. With the u_1 vector control, the estimated effects are much smaller but they do not flip directions. The fact that the cross-cutting categories line up with the partisan identity, rather than the ideological orientation, suggests party identity has a larger impact on these groups than their self-reported ideology.

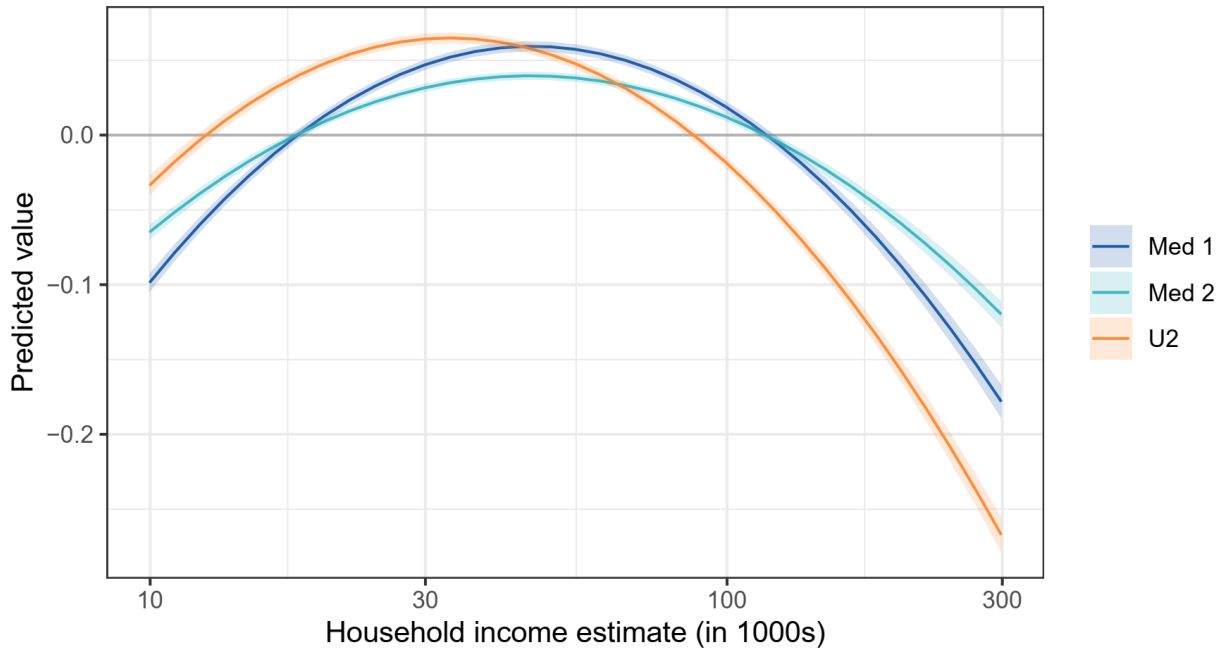

Figure 4.6 the predicted median position share and u_2 value across the range of household income estimated in the VSG Nationscape survey. The model was fit with the log of the measure of the income estimate but this was exponentiated and the x-axis was logged for the figure in order to display the estimate in terms of household incomes in thousands of USD. The model includes a term of the squared log of the income estimate which allows the relationship to take a curvilinear form.

Swing voting has a small but significant effect on the DVs. The models include two separate categories indicating swing voting or the intent to "swing" (some waves of the VSG Nationscape were before and others were after the 2020 election). The first is, among 2016 Hilary Clinton (HRC) voters, who reported voting or the *intent* to vote for Donald Trump in 2020 ("HRC to Trump"). The second, indicates respondents who voted for Trump in 2016 but either switched or plan to switch to the Democratic nominee (prior to Biden winning the primary) or Biden (after he won the primary).

All the swing voting effects are small but all except for the HRC to Trump in the model 3 (U2) are significant. Voters than going or planning to go from Trump to Biden (or the Democratic nominee), are associated with a higher share of median positions, and swing voters going from Hilary Clinton to Donald Trump are associated with a lower share of median positions. Put differently, applying the centrist-as-the-median definition, the Dem-to-Rep swing

voters are *less* likely to hold median preferences, and the Rep-to-Dem voters are *more* likely to hold median preferences.

The effect of education varies across the measures. The general pattern is one where the highest values are located at the levels of vocational school and high school graduate (the reference category) – both middle or lower-middle categories. Aside from in the first model (Med 1), the lowest values are expected at the highest levels of education. This pattern is most pronounced in the third model (U2), where individuals with advanced degrees are a measure that is about one half of a standard deviation lower when compared to individuals whose highest degree is a high school diploma.

Individuals who report high interest in political news ("most of the time") hardly differ from those who report that they rarely or never follow political news (compared to the reference category of "some of the time"). Individuals reporting they have heard political news via Facebook or Twitter in the last week are more likely to agree with the median position than those who do not.

Last to be discussed is income. The income coefficients are consistent, significant, and substantial across all three model specifications. As with the identification models in Figure 4.2, the inclusion of the squared term means it is easiest to interpret the results with predicted values across the range of income levels in the data. The income measure is a midpoint estimate from the bounds of each income bracket. The measure was log transformed so that a percentage change is treated as equivalent across the income estimate values.

Figure 4.6 shows the predicted values from all three models over the range of household income estimates. The values are exponentiated to convert them back into 1000s of USD and the x-axis is log transformed. The plot shows the predicted share of median positions and the u_2 value first increase as income rises, but then start to fall as income continues to increase (the inflection points are between $30-50K, depending on the model). The income levels with the

highest predicted share of median positions occur in the middle of the income range, and the lowest at the top end, which is most pronounced in the third (U2) model.

4.4.3 Libertarian, but not populist?

Two hypotheses cannot be addressed with the analyses presented above. The models do not indicate whether individuals identifying with the political center ("centrist" or "moderate") are more likely to identify as libertarian and less likely to identify as populist.

As presented in Figure 4.1, the VSG Voter survey includes questions asking respondents how well a set of nineteen political/ideological terms describe them. In this section, I explore the connection between the different terms and terms associated with the political center.

As with centrist and moderate, the terms libertarian and populist can be operationalized in two ways. The first is the binary variable, where 1 indicates the term describes the individual "very" or "extremely" well, and all other responses (including "not sure") are coded as zero. The second is the continuous measure, where the highest association "extremely well" is coded as 5 and the lowest association "not well at all" is coded as 1. The second approach allows for more variation between the variables but is limited in that the "not sure" responses are excluded.

Correlations

The first thing to consider is whether identification with centrist and moderate correlate with libertarian and populist. Figure 4.7 displays the Pearson correlation coefficients with confidence intervals that demonstrate the strength of association between identification with centrist (left panel) and moderate (right panel). The color of the points indicates the way the measure was created; orange points indicate the binary variables and blue points represent the continuous measures. The panels are sorted separately so the terms with the highest average correlation coefficients across the binary and continuous measures are at the top of the list.

To start, none of these correlations, in either panel, are particularly strong (these are all what other authors consider to be within the range of "weak" associations; for example, see Baldassarri and Gelman 2008).

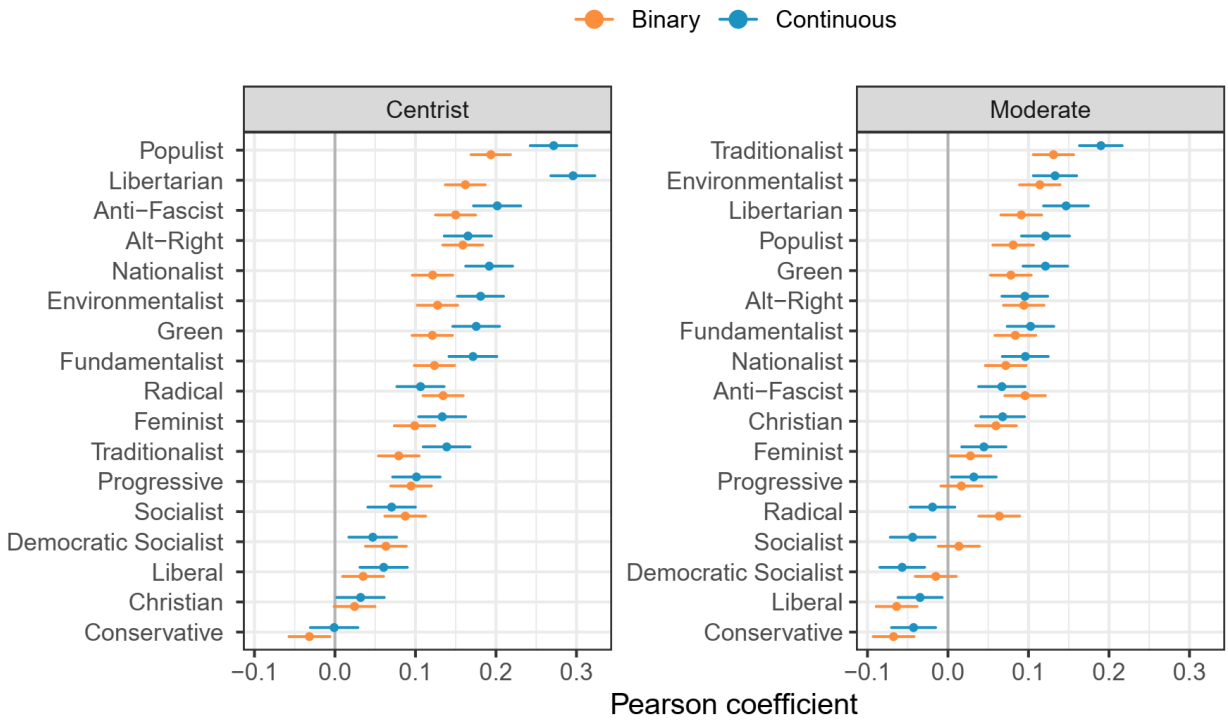

Figure 4.7 Pearson correlation coefficients between centrist and moderate and seventeen other political and ideological terms. The binary measures indicate respondents reporting the terms describe them "very" or "extremely" well. The continuous measures take a value of 1 through 5 that increase as the association with the term increases.

In the centrist panel, what stands out is how many of the correlation coefficients are positive. Centrist has a negative correlation with only one term – conservative – and this is only the case in the binary measures (the continuous measure is about zero). However, the highest average correlations with centrist are between it and populist and libertarian, followed by anti-fascist and alt-right. The lowest correlations are between centrist and conservative, Christian, liberal, and Democratic Socialist.

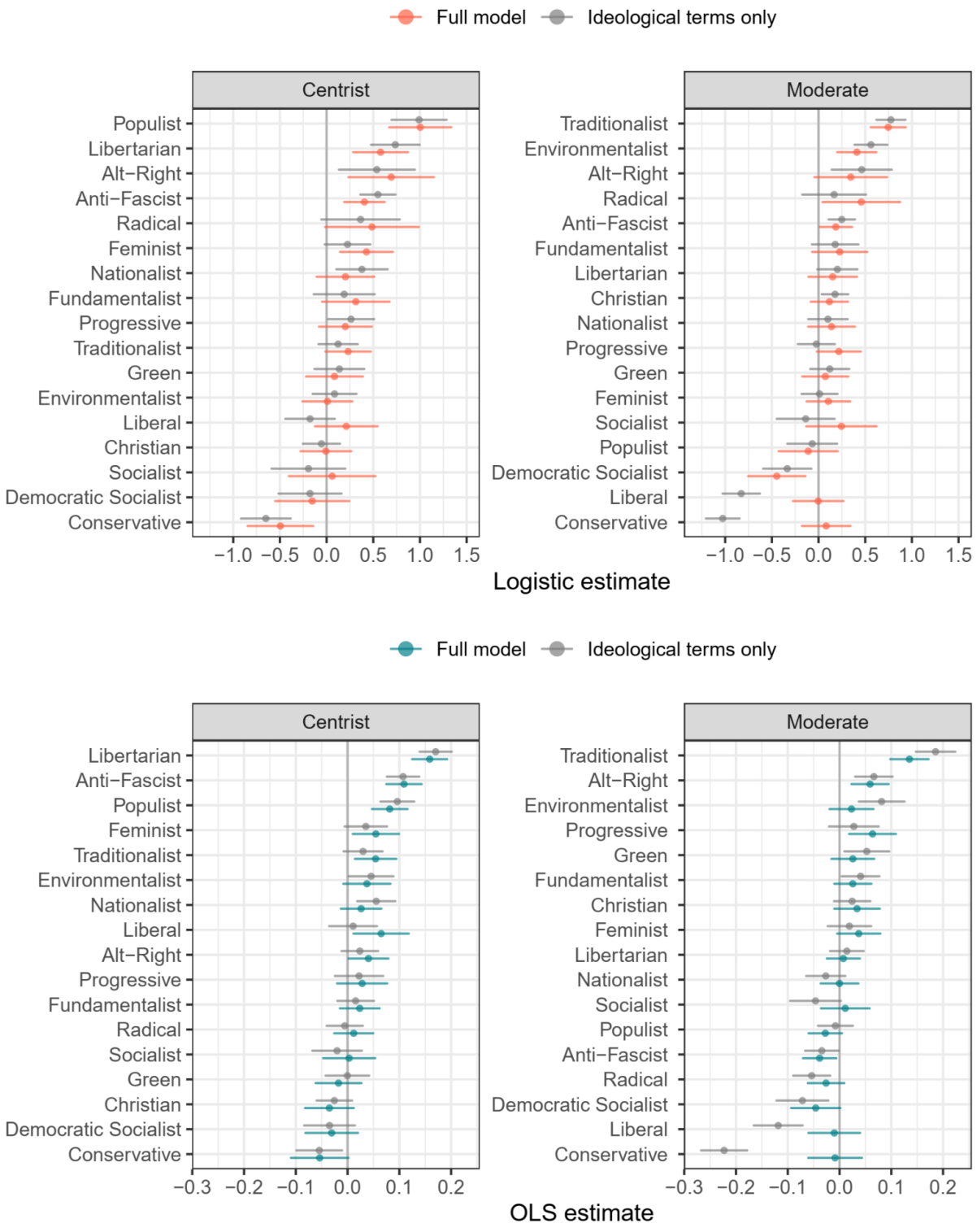

Figure 4.8 Logit and OLS estimates for models predicting identification with centrist and moderate. The full models also include the other covariates used in the models displayed in table 4.2.

The moderate panel also reveals a large share of positive correlations, although to a lesser extent than in the centrist panel. Twelve of the seventeen terms are positively correlated (at least the point estimates) across both the binary and continuous measures (two additional correlations are positive only among the binary measures: radical and socialist). Libertarian and populist are both positively associated with moderate, but with lower ranks and Pearson coefficients when compared to centrist.

These findings suggest centrist is associated with a wide range of other political terms, but this feature is not unique to the term centrist. Two terms have positive correlations more often than centrist: Alt-Right and populist. Populist seems to be another term lacking a consistent meaning – 27% of respondents indicate they are "not sure" when asked how well it describes them. However, the term "Alt-right" would be expected to be more clear in its ideological orientation, but this doesn't appear to be the case. Self-reported ideology is more highly correlated with fundamentalist, Christian, traditionalist, and nationalist than it is to Alt-Right. Alt-Right is not even negatively correlated with progressive, democratic socialist, socialist, feminist, or environmentalist (the correlations are all positive, although very weak).

Logit and OLS models

Figure 4.8 contains four panels; two showing output from logistic models (top) and two showing output from OLS models (bottom), one of each for the two dependent variables (centrist on the left, moderate on the right). The logistic models are fit with the binary indicators of respondents identifying strongly with centrist and moderate and the OLS models are fit with continuous variables indicating the strength of identification with centrist and moderate, ranging from "not at all" (1) to "extremely well" (5). Given the relatively large share of "not sure" responses, this restricts the dataset to 3,144 observations for these models (the logit models contain 5,100 observations). Within each panel, the color of the point estimates and the confidence intervals (95%) indicates whether or not the model includes just the covariates shown ("Ideological terms only") or also includes (but doesn't display) the covariates included in

figure 4.2 (a whole range of demographic and political variables" "Full model"). The terms are sorted according to the average estimate across both models in each panel.

The top two terms associated with centrist in the Logit models (top left panel) are Libertarian and Populist. Alt-Right, Anti-Fascist, Feminist (full model only), and Progressive (ideological model only) are also positively and significantly associated with centrist. Only conservative is significantly and negatively associated with centrist. In the OLS panel (lower left), Libertarian has the highest association with centrist, followed by Anti-Fascist and Populist (all three are significant associations). Centrist is also significantly and positively associated with Feminist (full model only), Traditionalist (full model only), Environmentalist (ideological model only), Nationalist (ideological terms only), and Liberal (full model only). Conservative (ideological model only) is the only ideological term negatively and significantly associated with centrist.

In the top right panel (Logit), moderate has the highest positive association with Traditionalist and Environmentalist, but also is significantly and positively associated with Alt-Right (ideological terms only), Radical (full model only), Anti-Fascist (ideological model only), and Christian (ideological model only). Moderate is negatively and significantly associated with Democratic Socialist, as well as liberal and conservative (both only for the ideological models). In the OLS panel (lower right), moderate again has the strongest association with Traditionalist, followed by Alt-Right. Moderate is also positively and significantly associated with Environmentalist (ideological model only), Progressive (full model only), Green (ideological model only), and Fundamentalist (ideological model only). Moderate is significantly and negatively associated with Anti-Fascist, Radical (ideological model only), Democratic Socialist (ideological model only), Liberal (ideological model only), and Conservative (ideological model only).

4.5 Discussion

This chapter takes a novel approach to exploring the center by considering the individual level characteristics that influence, first, whether Americans identify with the political center (as "centrist" or "moderate") and, second, whether they take positions that align with the median position, an alternative framework for conceptualizing individuals aligned with the center. There is value just in the descriptive findings presented in this chapter alone, since to my knowledge no scholarly investigation of this kind currently exists. However, I also aim to compare the findings to several claims made about the political center and also assess whether the political actors and public figures who identify with the center are representative of the center of the American public as identified here, as outlined in the hypotheses stated at the beginning of the chapter.

Throughout this section I will discuss the center in two different ways. The first is identification with the political center. This refers to the models (shown in figures 4.2 and 4.3) that predict identification with the terms "centrist" and "moderate." The second is what I refer to as *median position taking*, including having high values of the u_2 vector from SVD (explored in figures 4.5 and 4.6).

Income, education, gender, and race

Hypotheses 1-4 posit relationships between individual level demographic characteristics and identification with the political center and centrist position-taking behavior. Affluent, highly educated, male, and white individuals are suspected to be more likely to identify with and act more centrist.

Identification with centrist (but not moderate) is highest at the extremes of the income distribution. The notion that higher income individuals are more likely to identify with the center is partially correct; association with centrist increases from the middle range to the high

range, but it is also higher at the lower ends of the distribution. The association between income and identification with "moderate" was not significant.

Median position-taking is most common among members of households in the middle of the income distribution. The association here is almost exactly the opposite of the association between income identifying with the center, but it is somewhat different because there is less symmetry than in the case of identification; the predicted median position-taking at the lower end is significantly higher than what is predicted at the high end. In other words, acting centrist is least likely to occur among those with the highest incomes. H1 is somewhat supported by the evidence when it comes to identification, but is rejected when considering median position taking.

The association between education and identification with centrist, but again not moderate, is similar to that of income. Individuals with postgraduate degrees and bachelor's degrees are the most likely to identify as centrist, followed by individuals who did not complete high school and those who have some college but no degree. Individuals completing high school degrees or two-year degrees are the least likely to identify with centrist. Identification with "moderate" is only significantly different (from HS grads) among individuals with four-year degrees (with mixed evidence for a positive association among those with less than high school). The association between acting centrist and education is quite different. The model specifications show a curvilinear relationship – the highest estimates are among those with vocational school and high school graduates – but the lowest education levels are not associated with comparably low levels. In sum, overall, the hypothesis that higher educated people are more likely to identify as centrist is somewhat supported, but lower levels of education are also more likely to identify as centrist. When it comes to median preference taking, the association is in the opposite direction of the hypothesis, and this is particularly pronounced in the model predicting u_2 from SVD. H2 is partially supported in terms of identification but quite readily rejected with respect to median position taking.

Females are less likely to identify with centrist, but not moderate, when compared to males, but they are more likely to act centrist compared to males. Therefore the hypothesis is supported in the identification measures but not in the behavioral measures, for which the evidence not only doesn't support, but suggests the exact opposite of the hypothesis. Taken together, H3 is supported with respect to identification but rejected when median position taking is considered.

Among all the racial categories, only the Hispanic group is associated with higher identification with the political center, and more so in the case of moderate than centrist. In terms of median position taking, individuals identifying as Black and Asian are less likely to take median positions compared to white-identifing individuals, but this is not true of any of the other racial categories, and the "other" racial categories is even associated with a higher share of median positions in the first model. This offers limited support for H4, but only with respect to acting centrist.

Ideological identifications

The two hypotheses related to libertarian and populist identifications suggest identifying with the political center is positively associated with identifying as libertarian and negatively associated with identifying as populist. The evidence shows a positive association between libertarian and centrist, and to a lesser extent moderate, but this is also true of populist. In the case of centrist, the associations with libertarian and populist remain even after accounting for associations with all other ideological terms, and when accounting for the other covariates included in figure 4.2. Further, it appears that these terms, and centrist in particular, are positively associated with a range of both conservative and liberal ideological identifications. Thus, H5 is supported while H6 is rejected.

Partisanship, cross-cutting identities, and swing voting

H7 posits Democrats are more likely to be associated with the political center when compared to Republicans. Republicans are less likely to identify as centrist (but not moderate) when compared to independent partisans, while Democrats are not found to be significantly different than independents. Further, Democrats are more likely to take median positions in the model that does not include the u_i vector (and Republicans less centrist), but when it is included the associations flip (and decrease in magnitude). H7 is supported somewhat in the case of identification, but only conditionally in the case of median position-taking.

The cross-cutting categories – liberal Republican and conservative Democrat – are positively associated with centrist and moderate identification (moderate in the OLS model only). However, conservative Democrats are positively (albeit with a very small effect size) and liberal Republicans negatively associated with taking the median position. H8 is supported in the analysis of identification (especially with centrist) but only conservative Democrats fit within H8 with respect to median position taking.

Certain swing voters are more likely to identify as centrist and moderate. Voters who voted or report planning to vote for Trump in 2020 after voting for Hilary Clinton in 2016 are more likely to identify as centrist when compared to non-swing voters, and in one model they are also more likely to identify as moderate. But when instead considering median positions, the other swing voting category is associated with the center: individuals who cast a vote for Trump in 2016 but either voted for or report intending to vote for the Democratic candidate in 2020. The Dem-to-Rep swing voters are less likely to act centrist in two of the three models. H9 is supported, but it is dependent on the particular type of swing voter, and the effects are opposite depending on the measure.

Interest in politics

The last hypothesis (H10) suggests individuals with higher interest in political news are also more likely to associate with the political center. For both centrist and moderate, individuals reporting high interest in political news are more likely, compared to those with moderate interest, to identify with centrist and moderate. Low interest is associated with lower identification with centrist, as well as moderate, but only in the logit model. Interest in political news plays only a small role in median position-taking. All effects are small, but the highest and lowest interest categories are negatively associated with acting centrist, while with the "rare" interest category the outcome variables are positively associated. H10, therefore, is supported with respect to identification, but not in the case of taking median preferences.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter investigates the political center by asking two questions: Who identifies with the center (centrist or moderate)? And, who takes positions aligned with the center? The chapter greatly expands knowledge on the political center with respect to these two ways of operationalizing the concept. In particular, the analyses reveal three important features of the political center.

First, the dominant depiction of the center, as presented in the media (and discussed in more detail in chapter two), only partially resembles the individuals who identify with the political center and is sharply different from the individuals most likely to behave as centrists. Second, there is a difference between identifying as centrist and identifying as moderate. With respect to the hypotheses, practically all the associations of interest had stronger effects for centrist identification than for identification with moderate; identification with centrist is influenced, to a greater extent than moderate, by the variables for income, education, gender, race, partisanship, swing voting, and interest in political news.

Third, given differences between having centrist preferences and identifying with the political center, and since centrist position taking is, by design, related to aligning with the median position, this suggests there is no reason to think politicians appealing to self-identified centrists (perhaps also moderates) will result in increasing the political system's responsiveness to public policy preferences. Therefore, there is no empirical evidence to suggest pandering to the individuals who identify as "centrist" would be a good thing for the functioning of the American democratic system.

The analysis of the ideological terms in particular underscores the notion that the "center" in politics is a term that can mean almost anything. This reflects the long-standing claim that Americans are ideologically innocent, a finding made famous by Phil Converse (1960) in the 1960s. Converse found that the labels liberal and conservative are poor predictors of an individual/s preferences on policy issues and most Americans fail to identify the ideas that distinguish the two orientations. While self-reported ideology has increased in its association with partisanship (the parties have become more clearly associated with an ideological orientation, and the public realizes this), more recent studies have shown that self-reported ideology still does a poor job of explaining policy preferences (Baldessarri and Gelman 2008, Kinder and Kalmoe 2017).

This seems to be the case for the terms of the political center. Compared to "liberal" and "conservative," "centrist" and "moderate" are probably less understood by members of the public. This should not be surprising, given the range of different meanings that exist in discussions among political figures, journalists, policy wonks, academics, and the individuals who advocate for the political center (described in chapter two).

Chapter 5
Conclusion

This concluding chapter revisits the major takeaways from the previous chapters and also outlines a new theoretical framework for thinking about the political center and its role in American politics.

5.1 Summary of findings

Chapter two: a typology of the political center

Chapter two explores the different meanings of the political center. I identify four key meanings of the political center: depoliticized, citizen, political actor, and elite. The depoliticized center represents any instance in which the center is said to represent a space beyond political conflict, ideological rigidity, tribalism, and extreme partisanship. It often takes a technocratic flavor, suggesting the center is simply the correct, rational discovery of a careful assessment of all the possible policy paths. In this version of the center, practically anything can be said to be centrist, and thus pragmatic, reasonable, or common sense.

The next two centers deal with political spaces defined by citizens and the other by parties and elected officials ("political actors"). There are different ways of defining the center in the citizen space, but the most meaningful and relevant for theories of democracy is where the center is defined according to the median position. The center of the political actor space is most often identified according to a politician's engagement in bipartisanship. Scholars of polarization often define the center in this manner, typically according to aggregate measures that measure similarity in legislative roll call voting across individuals; the more an individual votes with the *other* party, the closer they are to the political center.

The last meanings of the center focus on references to an elite consensus. The "vital center" and the "moderate" opposition to radical change represent a preference for the status

quo, particularly the maintenance of current political and economic institutions and opposition to those who distrust the establishment. This last category also includes the policies that are most often associated with the political center – a socially liberal and economically conservative set of positions, with a strong emphasis on fiscal responsibility manifested through opposition to social spending. These are consistent with the positions expressed by the very wealthy (Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013).

I conclude the chapter by discussing issues I identify in the discussions of the political center. In it I argue the primary source of contradictions within the political center discourse is the conflation of the citizen and political actor centers. I first revisit the discussion of polarization and neoliberalism, which suggests the right-turn that can be observed among the parties and politicians cannot be linked to a comparable turn in the public. Further, I discuss the literature on politicians' knowledge of public opinion and whether they *pander* to it or not. The research overwhelmingly refutes the notion that politicians pander to public opinion, and this is most notably true for the U.S. president most identified with the political center, Bill Clinton. Finally, I conclude by briefly demonstrating the socially liberal, economically conservative orientation identified with the center is not a good representation of aggregate public opinion in America. This last point is further explored in the next chapter.

Chapter three: policies of the political center

In the third chapter I consider the policies that can be considered to represent the political center. I use several different approaches to determine the center. First, I consider the median positions from a set of 131 policies from three data sources. The discussion is divided into issue areas related to abortion, guns, immigration, labor and welfare, taxation, healthcare, climate and environment, foreign policy, a category with a collection of the remaining policies, and a separate section that examines spending preferences from the General Social Survey. The findings are too numerous to recount here, but it is worth highlighting that in certain domains

in which the media presents the public as highly polarized, like abortion, guns, and immigration, there is more agreement than media accounts would lead us to believe. In all three areas, the public tends to oppose the more extreme positions in large numbers.

Next I consider the policies that represent the center by meeting a stricter requirement; agreement via the median or net position (% of support - % of opposition) for both Democrats and Republicans. I find a total of eighteen policy positions for which the median position is the same among both Democrats and Republicans. Both groups support background checks for gun purchases, progressive changes to income tax policy (middle class tax cuts, increases for households earning over $600k/year, and taxing households earning over $250k/year to reduce the deficit), the introduction of a cigarette tax, a jobs guarantee, providing citizenship for all undocumented children, requiring employers provide twelve weeks of paid maternity leave, providing health insurance subsidies for the poor, and the use of the military to destroy terrorist camps and protect our allies. Both groups oppose banning all firearms, cutting Medicaid or Medicare to reduce the deficit, a complete ban on abortion, and using the military to secure oil or to spread democracy. Further, another eleven spending items receive the same median position among Democrats and Republicans: partisans want more spending in the areas of education, "improving education," addressing crime, assistance to the poor, drug addiction and rehabilitation, Social Security, health, highways and bridge, and parks and recreation, and both groups want spending to remain the same in the area of space exploration.

Aside from middle class tax cuts and possibly the use of military force against terrorists and in aid of U.S. allies (foreign policy is typically discussed more abstractly, if at all), the positions identified here do not align with the positions most often claimed to represent the center. This is especially true of the spending items, since general opposition to social spending is one of the most common markers of the political center.

The last component of chapter three contains an analysis of the connection between a policy's ideology and its popularity. I create several different measures of the ideological nature

of a policy using partisan, ideological, and voting distinctions among survey respondents. I consider a policy to be more liberal if the net support is greater among self-identified liberals than it is among conservatives. I do the same for Democrats and Republicans, and individuals who report voting for Democratic versus Republican presidential candidates in the most recent election. I also use two measures derived from the matrix operation "singular value decomposition" (SVD), which provides factor-like measures at both the individual and policy levels (similar to the approach used in principal component analysis). It turns out the measures are all highly correlated with each other (0.97 is the weakest correlation coefficient).

The analysis provides overwhelming evidence that the American public not only does not appear to prefer the policies located in the middle, but tends to prefer policies that are determined to be liberal. To make sure this finding was not dependent on the composition of the American public (the fact that there are more Democrats than Republicans), I used net support measures for each policy calculated from independents and another from people identifying in the middle of the ideological range; the relationship holds. When breaking out the policies into different policy domains, there are three areas in which liberal policies, on average, do not receive more support than conservative policies: criminal justice (conservative policies are more popular), foreign policy and defense (conservative policies are more popular), and abortion (no association, flat slope). In all other areas – economic policy, environmental, health, immigration, and other social issues – the relationship is positive.

Chapter four: who are the centrists?

In the last substantive chapter I explore the individuals associated with the political center, using two different approaches: self-identification and median preference taking. I formulate several hypotheses related to the different meanings of the center described in chapter two, and a few others based on observing the descriptive characteristics of the individuals who tend to associate with the center – disproportionately affluent, educated, white

men. Then I fit a series of models with different specifications and operationalizations of the dependent variables, and regress them on a large set of variables measuring available demographic and political individual-level characteristics, and also compare the identification variables with identification with two other ideological terms: libertarian and populist.

One key takeaway from the regression analyses are that certain groups *most likely to identify with the center* (particularly as "centrist"), such as males, both high and low income earners, and both high and low educational attainment, are some of the same groups *least likely hold centrist preferences*. I also find swing voters switching from Clinton in 2016 to Trump in 2020 are more likely to identify with the center but less likely to take centrist preferences, and the same is true for liberal Republicans (conservative Democrats are more likely to both identify and take positions consistent with the center). This suggests that identification with the center is associated with taking less 'centrist' positions, at least using this particular meaning of the center. Given this evidence, it seems likely that appealing to the self identified centrists would mean something different from appealing to the center defined by median preferences. Of course, the data does not allow a direct test to support this, since the measures only exist in separate data sets.

5.2 A theory of the political center

In this section I attempt to make sense of the findings presented above by combining them into a means of explaining how the meanings of the political center relate to each other. The neoliberal turn and the asymmetric nature of polarization suggest economic policy and the culture of policymaking in the United States has become more favorable to the free market over the last 50 years.

Whether they were responsible for the right turn or not[45], the current group of elites benefit from the complex of political and economic institutions from which they derive their power by holding positions of influence (Domhoff 1967; Mills 1956). It is in the rational interest of elites to want to maintain the current political and economic institutions, or modify them in a way that expands their power and resources. Evidence suggests the economic elites hold policy preferences that are significantly more conservative than the American public when it comes to issues of taxation, regulation, and social spending (Page et al. 2013; Winters 2011).

Elites can influence policy through a variety of mechanisms, attempting to to keep it from moving to the left or pushing it further to the right. I focus on the mechanisms related to my typology of the political center: the political actor space, the citizen space, and the depoliticized center. The media and think tanks also play important but less central roles (at least with respect to the relationships highlighted here).

Elites can use their resources to influence politicians. They do this through hiring lobbyists (Domhoff 1978), contributions to candidates and political action committees (Ferguson 1995), access to politicians (Page, Seawright, and Lacombe 2019), and sometimes run for office themselves (Carnes 2013, 2018). Research that separates policy preferences by income groups suggests high income earners have much more influence over policy than the middle or lower income groups (Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Lupu and Pontusson 2024). Systematic studies of the preferences of the very wealthy (top 1%) are exceptionally rare, but the few that exist suggest their preferences are even more influential than the high income earners typical surveys are able to identify (Page, Seawright, and Lacombe 2019). Further, U.S. legislators, judges, and presidents tend to be from professional class background and wildly overrepresent the very wealthy, and this tends to shape the policies they pursue while in office toward the policies most often associated with the center (Carnes 2013; 2018).

[45] This is somewhat debated, but let's just assume that individuals in positions of power were able to use that power to push their agenda, not deterministically, but probabilistically.

Elites can also influence the media. Many media outlets are owned by wealthy families or large corporations. Some of the most influential media scholars begin with the assumption that the media is controlled by elites and they use their power over the media to attempt to manipulate the views of the public (see Zaller 1992). Politicians can also influence media messages by providing information and access, creating incentives for media employees to maintain relationships to ensure future information and access (Bennett 2016). Mainstream media promotes[46] the idea that the "center" is further to the right than the median preferences of the American public. As described in chapter two, the dominant presentation of the policies that occupy the political center is quite similar to the policies preferred by the very wealthy – lower taxes, looser regulations, and reductions in social spending. The presentation of the center in the media largely reflects the interests of economic elites and does so in the style of the depoliticized center. Elite-preferred policies are framed to be rational, pragmatic, non-ideological, neutral, common sense, not extreme, and even popular. Even the politicians most likely to be described as "centrist" or "moderate" tend to be either neoliberal politicians (like Clinton and other members of the Democratic Leadership Council, the New Democrats, and the Blue Dog Democrats) or are linked with corporate interests (Klein 2015), and media accounts link these individuals to the depoliticized version of the center.

Media outlets also report on research from elite-funded think tanks (much more so than academic social science research; see Luker 1999) which can mask elite interests in a veneer of objective expertise (Medvetz 2012). Several think tanks either embrace the centrist label or are often associated with the political center (Brookings, Third Way, Progressive Policy Institute, Niskanen), many of which tend to promote market-based policies, although more research is

[46] Media messaging is typically not directly dictated by the owners. Rather, people are hired so their views are acceptable or consistent with the perspectives of ownership and advertisers, employees understand what type of stories can and can't be covered, and employees who step out of line are removed from influential positions (Bennett 2016; Herman and Chomsky 2002).

needed to determine whether such organizations associated with the center push policies more in line with the political actor or elite versions of the center, or the citizen-focused version.

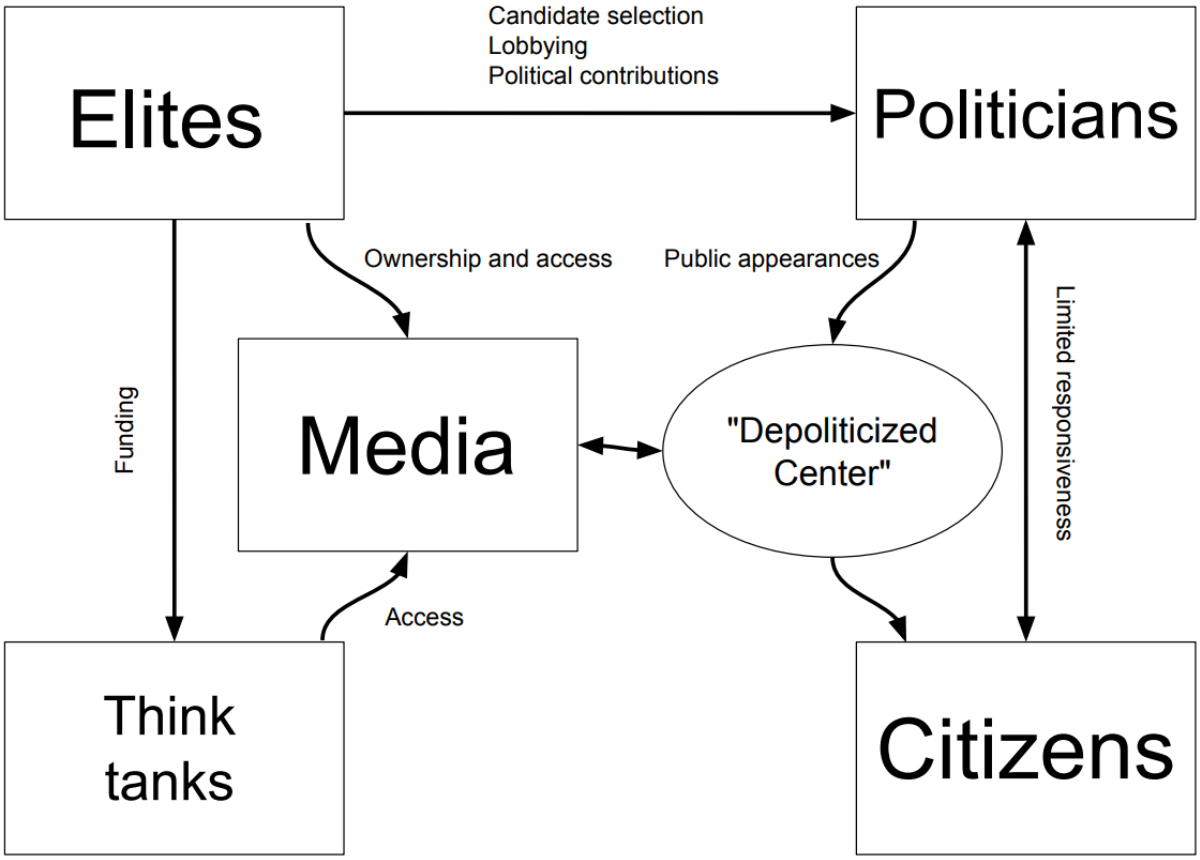

Figure 5.1 The political center

The relationships are mapped out in Figure 5.1, but there is one last link to discuss: the link between the public and citizen spaces. Politicians influence the center of the citizens in that they can influence the most engaged and loyal partisans, and citizens influence politicians in that they vote them into office. Both of these effects are limited. The highly engaged partisans are not a large share of the public, so it is unlikely that changing their preferences can shift the center very much. In the other direction, citizens can only hold politicians responsive to the extent that they have different options to vote for. Candidate selection processes, an additional

point of elite influence, can result in non-competition on certain issues, often issues related to economic policy. If voters are presented only with candidates who lean to the right on economic issues, then they are stuck with those options (and corporate and elite interests often donate to both parties). This type of "non-competition" is explained by the tendency for only candidates with a minimum but significant amount of financial resources to be able to compete in election (Ferguson 1995), and significant fundraising often, but not always, comes from wealthy individuals.

In sum, I argue the depoliticized center is shaped by media presentations of the center, which are influenced primarily by ownership and politicians, who are also, in turn, elites or influenced by elites. I believe the discourse of the political center functions to control the meaning of the political center, a vague concept that likely sounds nice and appeals to many (at least until further articulated). Control of the meaning of the political center serves two functions. First, if it works to actually shift the preferences of the public it would bring them closer to the political actor center and the interests of elites. Second, it functions to convince citizens and politicians that the center of public preferences is actually further to the right than it in fact is.

With respect to the first function, the centrist discourse does not appear to be working. If the ruling class was able to easily manipulate public opinion then we would likely see much less support for progressive income and corporate taxation, wealth taxation, a higher minimum wage, more environmental protection, more public infrastructure, and stricter corporate regulations. As explained in the introductory chapter, the neoliberal shift took form in policy, but not public opinion. Scholarship suggests elite attempts to manipulate the public often fail, especially in the long run (Druckman and Jacobs 2015; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Zaller 1998), so the observation that the centrist discourse has not shifted public preferences closer in line with elite interests should not be a surprise.

However, I suspect the second function is more successful. To say that a politician or policy represents the center is to imply that it is common sense, pragmatic, rational, and popular. While there is not good evidence of a shift in the center of public opinion, the political center discourse likely shapes *perceptions* of public opinion, as well as the feasibility of seeing one's preferences realized in policy.

The "spiral of silence" posits that believing your preferences are in the minority can have important political consequences (Noelle-Neumann 1993). People who think they are representative of a minority are sometimes less willing to express their ideas due to concern they may be controversial. In effect, the fact that the citizen center remains to the left of the political actor center might be facilitated in part by the dominant presentation of the political center. Those who desire policies that are actually popular might not realize this is the case. The perception of holding a minority view can impact willingness to engage in politics (Scheufele and Eveland 2001).

5.3 Future studies of the political center

As other scholars have noted, the political middle has received relatively little attention among scholars. My research shows the very concept of the political center (or "middle") is so poorly defined it allows the concept to take several distinct meanings.

My dissertation represents an attempt to expand the collective knowledge on the political center with a focus on defining the different meanings, but also exploring the citizen-focused center with respect to centrist policy, identification with the center, and the propensity to hold preferences consistent with the median position. However, there are other, potentially fruitful angles to approach the study of the political center.

Comparative

My focus has been on the United States. While there is likely to be some overlap in the meanings of the center across national contexts, certain aspects of the center I describe are likely to be found elsewhere. In Europe, for instance, centrist parties often are associated with a technocratic approach to politics, similar to what I describe in the discussion of the depoliticized center. A comparative approach to studying the political center around the world would be very informative, especially given the existence of "centrist" parties in many parts of Europe.

Historical

In addition to the comparative angle, a historical study of the meaning of the political center, either globally or just within the United States, would be very informative. How did the term evolve to become associated with neoliberalism and corporate/elite interests? No doubt historians have touched on the topic, but I have yet to see a thorough account tracing the history of the concept within politics.

Spiral of silence

Related to the discussion in the previous section, I am interested in further exploring the possibility that a centrist framing shapes perceptions of aggregate public opinion. This question is well suited for survey research. As far as I know, few surveys actually ask respondents what they think the rest of the public thinks about policy. A survey asking respondents to estimate public support for policies that are key within the discourse on the political center would be very useful in determining whether the discourse is effective in this respect.

References

Abramowitz, Alan. 2011. *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press.

Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Adler, David. 2018. *The Centrist Paradox: Political Correlates of the Democratic Disconnect*. *SSRN Scholarly Paper*. ID 3214467. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.

Ahler, Douglas J., and David E. Broockman. 2018. "The Delegate Paradox: Why Polarized Politicians Can Represent Citizens Best." *The Journal of Politics* 80(4):1117–33. doi: 10.1086/698755.

Altmire, Jason. 2017. *Dead Center: How Political Polarization Divided America and What We Can Do about It*. First Sunbury Press edition. Mechanicsburg, PA USA: Sunbury Press.

American National Election Studies. 2021. "ANES 2020 Time Series Study Full Release."

American Political Science Association Task Force. 2004. "American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality." *Perspectives on Politics* 2(04):651–66. doi: 10.1017/S153759270404040X.

Americans for Democratic Action. 2017. *ADA 2017 Congressional Voting Record*. Washington, D.C.: Americans for Democratic Action.

Americans for Democratic Action. n.d. "ADA Voting Records." Retrieved July 18, 2024 (https://adaction.org/ada-voting-records/).

Avlon, John P. 2004. *Independent Nation: How the Vital Center Is Changing American Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Harmony Books.

Bacon, Perry, Jr. 2022. "4 Things to Know about America's Crucial Swing Voters." *Washington Post*, November 6.

Baer, Kenneth S. 2000. *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Baker, James A., Martin Feldstein, Ted Halstead, N. Gregory Mankiw, Henry M. Paulson, George P. Shultz, Thomas Stephenson, and Rob Walton. 2017. *The Conservative Case for Carbon Dividends*. Washington, D.C: Climate Leadership Council.

Baker, James A., and George P. Schultz. 2021. *Bipartisan Climate Roadmap*. Washington, D.C.: Climate Leadership Council.

Baldassarri, Delia, and Andrew Gelman. 2008. "Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion." *American Journal of Sociology* 114(2):408–46. doi: 10.1086/590649.

Baldassarri, Delia, and Barum Park. 2020. "Was There a Culture War? Partisan Polarization and Secular Trends in US Public Opinion." *The Journal of Politics* 82(3):809–27. doi: 10.1086/707306.

Barr, Stephen, and Ann Devroy. 1994. "Clinton Vows Commitment To Centrism; Defiant President Urges Moderate Democrats to `Join Me in the Arena." *The Washington Post*, December 7.

Bartels, Larry M. 2005. "Homer Gets a Tax Cut: Inequality and Public Policy in the American Mind." *Perspectives on Politics* null(01):15–31. doi: 10.1017/S1537592705050036.

Bartels, Larry M. 2016. *Unequal Democracy: the Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bell, Daniel. 1958. "The Power Elite-Reconsidered." *American Journal of Sociology* 64(3):238–50. doi: 10.1086/222467.

Bendavid, Naftali, and Greg Hitt. 2009. "Senate Centrists Press Agenda." *Wall Street Journal*, March 25.

Bennett, W. Lance. 2016. *News: The Politics of Illusion*. Tenth Edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Beramendi, Pablo, Timothy Besley, and Margaret Levi. 2022. *Political Equality: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?* London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Berman, Elizabeth Popp. 2018. "Thinking Like an Economist." *Elizabeth Popp Berman*. Retrieved November 29, 2019 (https://epberman.net/thinking-like-an-economist/).

Berman, Elizabeth Popp. 2022. *Thinking like an Economist: How Efficiency Replaced Equality in U.S. Public Policy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bessner, Daniel. 2023. "Does American Fascism Exist?" *The New Republic*, March 6.

Black, Duncan. 1948. "On the Rationale of Group Decision-Making." *Journal of Political Economy* 56(1):23–34.

Blank, Lew. 2021. "A Majority of Arizona Voters Want to Raise the Minimum Wage to $15." *Data For Progress*. Retrieved November 8, 2022 (https://www.dataforprogress.org/blog/arizona-voters-support-15-minimum-wage).

Blyth, Mark. 2007. "One Ring to Bind Them All: American Power and Neoliberal Capitalism." Pp. 109–35 in *Growing apart?: America and Europe in the twenty-first century*, edited by J. Kopstein and S. Steinmo. Cambridge University Press.

Bonica, Adam. 2014. "Mapping the Ideological Marketplace." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(2):367–86. doi: 10.1111/ajps.12062.

Bonica, Adam. 2015. *Avenues of Influence: On the Political Expenditures of Corporations and Their Directors and Executives*. *SSRN Scholarly Paper*. ID 2313232. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2313232.

Bonica, Adam. 2018. "Inferring Roll-Call Scores from Campaign Contributions Using Supervised Machine Learning." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(4):830–48. doi: 10.1111/ajps.12376.

Brint, Steven. 1990. "Rethinking the Policy Influence of Experts: From General Characterizations to Analysis of Variation." *Sociological Forum* 5(3):361–85. doi: 10.1007/BF01115092.

Brint, Steven G. 1994. *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Broadwater, Luke. 2020. "No Labels, Planning Centrist Push in New Congress, Taps Larry Hogan." *The New York Times*, December 15.

Broockman, David E., and Christopher Skovron. 2018. "Bias in Perceptions of Public Opinion among Political Elites." *American Political Science Review* 112(3):542–63. doi: 10.1017/S0003055418000011.

Brown, David S. 2016. *Moderates: The Vital Center of American Politics, from the Founding to Today*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Burns, Alexander. 2019. "Is There Room in 2020 for a Centrist Democrat? Maybe One or Two." *The New York Times*, January 30.

Burstein, Paul. 2003. "The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda." *Political Research Quarterly* 56(1):29–40. doi: 10.1177/106591290305600103.

Burstein, Paul. 2014. *American Public Opinion, Advocacy, and Policy in Congress: What the Public Wants and What It Gets*. New York, NY USA: Cambridge University Press.

Buuren, Stef van. 2018. *Flexible Imputation of Missing Data*. Second edition. Boca Raton: CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group.

Buuren, Stef van, and Karin Groothuis-Oudshoorn. 2011. "Mice: Multivariate Imputation by Chained Equations in R." *Journal of Statistical Software* 45:1–67. doi: 10.18637/jss.v045.i03.

Campbell, James E. 2018. *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America*. Second printing and first paperback printing. Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Canes-Wrone, Brandice. 2015. "From Mass Preferences to Policy." *Annual Review of Political Science* 18(1):147–65. doi: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-050311-165552.

Canes-Wrone, Brandice, David W. Brady, and John F. Cogan. 2002. "Out of Step, Out of Office: Electoral Accountability and House Members' Voting." *American Political Science*

Review 96(1):127–40. doi: 10.1017/S0003055402004276.

Cardwell, Diane. 2004. "Preaching the Values of Centrism and Embracing the Style of Clinton." *The New York Times*, January 23.

Carlson, Jennifer. 2023. *Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy*. Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University press.

Carnes, Nicholas. 2013. *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Carnes, Nicholas. 2018. *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office--and What We Can Do about It*. Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Carpenter, Daniel. 2023. "Agenda Democracy." *Annual Review of Political Science* 26(1):193–212. doi: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-051921-102533.

Case, Anne, and Angus Deaton. 2020. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Caughey, Devin, and Christopher Warshaw. 2022. *Dynamic Democracy: Public Opinion, Elections, and Policymaking in the American States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Centeno, Miguel A., and Joseph N. Cohen. 2012. "The Arc of Neoliberalism." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38(1):317–40. doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150235.

Chaturvedi, Neilan S. 2017. "Kings of the Hill? An Examination of Centrist Behavior in the U.S. Senate." *Social Science Quarterly* 98(5):1250–63. doi: 10.1111/ssqu.12362.

Chollet, Derek. 2019. "Why Democrats — and All Americans — Should Embrace Centrism." *Washington Post*, May 7.

Collin, Peter H. 2004. *Dictionary of Politics and Government*. 3. ed. London: Bloomsbury.

Collins, Harry, and Robert Evans. 2009. *Rethinking Expertise*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Collman, Ashley. 2018. "More than 30 Other Countries Recognize Birthright Citizenship — Here's the Full List." *Business Insider*, October 30.

Confessore, Nicholas. 2011. “Cuomo’s Centrism Draws Praise but Stirs Suspicion.” *The New York Times*, April 6.

Converse, Philip E. 2006. “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics (1964).” *Critical Review* 18(1–3):1–74. doi: 10.1080/08913810608443650.

Crouch, Colin. 2020. *Post-Democracy: After the Crises*. 1st ed. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity.

Dagonel, Angelo. 2021. “Cumulative CES Policy Preferences.”

Davern, Michael, Rene Bautista, Jeremy Freese, Pamela Herd, and Stephen L. Morgan. 2024. “General Social Survey 1972-2024.”

Davis, Leslie, and Hannah Hartig. 2019. “Two-Thirds of Americans Favor Raising Federal Minimum Wage to $15 an Hour.” *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved May 28, 2021 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/30/two-thirds-of-americans-favor-raising-federal-minimum-wage-to-15-an-hour/).

De Velasco, Antonio. 2012. *Centrist Rhetoric: The Production of Political Transcendence in the Clinton Presidency*. Lanham; Lanham: Lexington Books Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated.

DeBonis, Mike. 2018. “Centrist Lawmakers Band Together to Demand House Reforms from next Speaker.” *Washington Post*.

Democracy Fund Voter Study Group. 2021. “Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) Survey.”

Dionne, E. J. 1998. “High-Wire Centrism.” *The Washington Post*, March 6, A25.

Domhoff, G. William. 1967. *Who Rules America?* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Domhoff, G. William. 1978. *The Powers That Be: Processes of Ruling Class Domination in America*. 1st ed. New York: Random House.

Douthat, Ross. 2016. “Can the Democrats Move Right?” *The New York Times*, November 30.

Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Boston: Addison Wesley.

Druckman, James N., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2015. *Who Governs? Presidents, Public Opinion,*

and Manipulation. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Drutman, Lee. 2017. *Political Divisions in 2016 and Beyond: Tensions Between and Within the Two Parties*. Washington, D.C.: The Democracy Fund.

Drutman, Lee. 2020. *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dunn, Amina. 2021. "Most Americans Support a $15 Federal Minimum Wage." *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved May 28, 2021 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/22/most-americans-support-a-15-federal-minimum-wage/).

Edmondson, Catie. 2019. "Bloomberg Rebukes Trump While Deflecting Criticism of His Own Centrist Views." *The New York Times*, January 25.

Edmondson, Catie. 2021. "Kyrsten Sinema and the Thumbs-Down That Enraged the Left." *The New York Times*, March 7.

Enelow, James M., and Melvin J. Hinich. 1984. "Probabilistic Voting and the Importance of Centrist Ideologies in Democratic Elections." *The Journal of Politics* 46(2):459–78. doi: 10.2307/2130970.

Erikson, Robert S., Michael MacKuen, and James A. Stimson. 2002. *The Macro Polity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Eriksson, Kimmo, Pontus Strimling, Irina Vartanova, and Brent Simpson. 2024. "Societal Variation in Moral and Everyday Norms Can Be Explained with a Simple Model: A New Theory and Cross-Cultural Evidence."

Eyal, Gil. 2019. *The Crisis of Expertise*. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity.

Fairbrother, Malcolm. 2020. *Free Traders: Elites, Democracy, and the Rise of Globalization*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fawcett, Paul, Matthew V. Flinders, Colin Hay, and Matthew Wood. 2017. "Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance." Pp. 3–27 in *Anti-politics, depoliticization, and governance*, edited by P. Fawcett, M. V. Flinders, C. Hay, and M. Wood. Oxford, United

Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Ferguson, Thomas. 1995. *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. University of Chicago Press.

Ferguson, Thomas, and Joel Rogers. 1986a. *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang.

Ferguson, Thomas, and Joel Rogers. 1986b. "The Myth of America's Turn to the Right." *The Atlantic*, May, 43–53.

Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Fiorina, Morris P. 2017. *Unstable Majorities: Polarization, Party Sorting, and Political Stalemate*. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University.

Fiorina, Morris P., Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2010. *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. 3rd edition. Boston, MA: Longman.

Fowler, Anthony, Seth J. Hill, Jeffrey B. Lewis, Chris Tausanovitch, Lynn Vavreck, and Christopher Warshaw. 2022. "Moderates." *American Political Science Review* 643–60. doi: 10.1017/S0003055422000818.

Free, Lloyd A., and Hadley Cantril. 1968. *The Political Beliefs of Americans: A Study of Public Opinion*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Galston, William A. 2019. "Polarized America Still Has a Big Middle." *Wall Street Journal*, December 3.

Garfinkle, Norton, and Daniel Yankelovich, eds. 2005. *Uniting America: Restoring the Vital Center to American Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Geismer, Lily. 2014. *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party*. Princeton, N..J.: Princeton University Press.

Geismer, Lily. 2022. *Left Behind: The Democrats' Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality*. First edition. New York: PublicAffairs.

Giddens, Anthony. 2000. *The Third Way and Its Critics*. Cambridge, UK : Malden, MA: Polity Press ; Blackwell Publishers.

Gilens, Martin. 2012. *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*. 1st ed. Princeton, N..J.: Princeton University Press.

Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. 2014. "Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens." *Perspectives on Politics* 12(3):564–81. doi: 10.1017/S1537592714001595.

Glaeser, Edward L. 2011. "A Time for Radical Centrists." *New York Times*, April 26.

Graetz, Michael J., and Ian Shapiro. 2006. *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gramlich, John. 2024. "What the Data Says about Crime in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*. Retrieved June 9, 2024 (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/24/what-the-data-says-about-crime-in-the-us/).

Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2015. "Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats: The Asymmetry of American Party Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 13(1):119–39. doi: 10.1017/S1537592714003168.

Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2005. *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Hall, Andrew B. 2019. *Who Wants to Run? How the Devaluing of Political Office Drives Polarization*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Hall, Andrew B., and Daniel M. Thompson. 2018. "Who Punishes Extremist Nominees? Candidate Ideology and Turning Out the Base in US Elections." *American Political Science Review* 112(3):509–24. doi: 10.1017/S0003055418000023.

Halstead, Ted, and Michael Lind. 2001. *The Radical Center: The Future of American Politics*. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday.

Halstead, Ted, N. Gregory Mankiw, and Martin S. Feldstein. 2017. "A Conservative Case for

Climate Action." *The New York Times*, February 8.

Harvey, David. 2007. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harwood, John. 2001. "Democratic Centrists Declare Cease-Fire With Liberals to Establish United Front." *Wall Street Journal*, July 16.

Hasan, Mehdi. 2019. "AOC, Sanders, and Warren Are the Real Centrists Because They Speak for Most Americans." *The Intercept*. Retrieved August 24, 2019 (https://theintercept.com/2019/02/26/democratic-party-centrism-aoc-sanders-warren/).

Hay, Colin. 2007. *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Herbst, Susan. 1998. *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Reprint Edition. New York: Pantheon Books.

Hill, John L. 2009. *The Political Centrist*. Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press.

Hirschman, Albert O. 1991. *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press.

Hirschman, Albert O. 1997. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*. Twentieth anniversary ed. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Hook, Janet, and Michael R. Crittenden. 2014. "Lawmaker Retirements to Hit Centrist Ranks." *Wall Street Journal*, January 15.

Hotelling, Harold. 1929. "Stability in Competition." *The Economic Journal* 39(153):41–57. doi: 10.2307/2224214.

Howard, Philip K. 2019. *Try Common Sense: Replacing the Failed Ideologies of Right and Left*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Hughes, Siobhan. 2016. "Democratic Centrists Are Keeping Low Profile at Convention." *Wall*

Street Journal, July 28.

Hughes, Siobhan. 2018. "Centrist Democrats Get a Boost as Doug Jones Joins the Senate." *Wall Street Journal*, January 2.

Hunter, Floyd. 1953. *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*. Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Pr.

Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1995. "The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 59(2):163–95.

Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2000. *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 2002. "Politics and Policymaking in the Real World: Crafted Talk and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness." Pp. 54–75 in *Navigating Public Opinion: Polls, Policy, and the Future of American Democracy*, edited by J. Manza, F. L. Cook, and B. I. Page. Cary, United States: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.

Jacobs, Nicholas F., and Sidney M. Milkis. 2022. *What Happened to the Vital Center?: Presidentialism, Populist Revolt, and the Fracturing of America*.

Jacques, Peter J., Riley E. Dunlap, and Mark Freeman. 2008. "The Organisation of Denial: Conservative Think Tanks and Environmental Scepticism." *Environmental Politics* 17(3):349–85. doi: 10.1080/09644010802055576.

Jaffe, Alexandra. 2021. "Centrist Democrats Flex Muscles, Create Headaches for Biden." *The Associated Press*, February 22.

Kasai, Nathan. 2019. "How to Embrace Commonsense Gun Safety Legislation." *Third Way*. Retrieved August 18, 2023 (https://www.thirdway.org/memo/how-to-embrace-commonsense-gun-safety-legislation).

Kinder, Donald R., and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2017. *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological*

Innocence in the American Public. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

King, Martin Luther Jr. 1963. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *Liberation: An Independent Monthly* 8(4):10–16.

Klar, Samara, and Yanna Krupnikov. 2016. *Independent Politics: How American Disdain for Parties Leads to Political Inaction*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Klein, Ezra. 2015. "No One's Less Moderate than Moderates." *Vox*. Retrieved September 13, 2020 (https://www.vox.com/2014/7/8/5878293/lets-stop-using-the-word-moderate).

Kranz, Michal. 2018. "Meet the Common Sense Coalition — the Bipartisan Group of Senators Who Ended the Government Shutdown." *Business Insider*, January 23.

Kubinec, Robert. 2022. "Ordered Beta Regression: A Parsimonious, Well-Fitting Model for Continuous Data with Lower and Upper Bounds." *Political Analysis* 31(4):519–36. doi: 10.1017/pan.2022.20.

Kuriwaki, Shiro. 2018. "Cumulative CES Common Content."

Lachmann, Richard. 2020. *First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship: Elite Politics and the Decline of Great Powers*. London ; New York: Verso.

Leonhardt, David. 2010. "Centrist, and Yet Not Unified." *The New York Times*, January 20.

Levanon, Asaf, and Noah Lewin-Epstein. 2010. "Grounds for Citizenship: Public Attitudes in Comparative Perspective." *Social Science Research* 39(3):419–31. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.12.001.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1987. *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. London: Routledge.

Lewis, Jeffrey B., Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet. 2020. "Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database." Retrieved October 10, 2020 (https://voteview.com/).

Lieberman, Joseph I. 2021. *The Centrist Solution: How We Made Government Work and Can Make It Work Again*. New York, NY: Diversion Books.

Lind, Michael. 1995. "The Radical Center or Moderate Middle?" *The New York Times Magazine*,

December 3.

Luker, Kristin. 1999. “Is Academic Sociology Politically Obsolete?” *Contemporary Sociology* 28(1):5–10. doi: 10.2307/2653841.

Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*. London ; New York: Macmillan.

Lupu, Noam, and Jonas Pontusson, eds. 2024. *Unequal Democracies: Public Policy, Responsiveness and Redistribution in an Era of Rising Economic Inequality*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Manza, Jeff, and Clem Brooks. 1999. *Social Cleavages and Political Change: Voter Alignments and US Party Coalitions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Manza, Jeff, Fay Lomax Cook, and Benjamin I. Page, eds. 2002. *Navigating Public Opinion: Polls, Policy, and the Future of American Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Markussen, Peter, and Gert Tinggaard Svendsen. 2005. “Industry Lobbying and the Political Economy of GHG Trade in the European Union.” *Energy Policy* 33(2):245–55. doi: 10.1016/S0301-4215(03)00238-6.

Martin, Carla D., and Mason A. Porter. 2012. “The Extraordinary SVD.” *The American Mathematical Monthly*.

Martin, Isaac William. 2013. *Rich People’s Movements: Grassroots Campaigns to Untax the One Percent*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Martin, Jonathan, and Sydney Ember. 2019. “Bernie Sanders-Style Politics Are Defining 2020 Race, Unnerving Moderates.” *The New York Times*, March 9.

Mason, Lilliana. 2015. “‘I Disrespectfully Agree’: The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization.” *American Journal of Political Science* 59(1):128–45. doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12089.

McCain Nelson, Colleen, Janet Hook, and Sara Murray. 2013. “Agenda Gives Centrists Pause.” *Wall Street Journal*, January 23.

McCarty, Nolan M., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

McLean, Iain, and Alistair McMillan. 2009. "Center Party." in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Medvetz, Thomas. 2012. *Think Tanks in America*. Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Meeropol, Michael. 1998. *Surrender: How the Clinton Administration Completed the Reagan Revolution*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Mills, C. Wright. 1956. *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morgan, Stephen L., and Jiwon Lee. 2019. "Economic Populism and Bandwagon Bigotry: Obama-to-Trump Voters and the Cross Pressures of the 2016 Election." *Socius* 5:2378023119871119. doi: 10.1177/2378023119871119.

Morris, Hanna E. 2021. "Constructing the Millennial 'Other' in United States Press Coverage of the Green New Deal." *Environmental Communication* 15(1):133–43. doi: 10.1080/17524032.2020.1812686.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2005. *On the Political*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Mudge, Stephanie L. 2018a. *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism*. Harvard University Press.

Mudge, Stephanie L. 2018b. "Neoliberalism and the Study of 'isms'." Pp. 502–15 in *The SAGE Handbook of Political Sociology: Two Volume Set*. 55 City Road: SAGE Publications Ltd.

No Labels. 2023. *Common Sense Policy Booklet*. Washington, DC: No Labels.

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1993. *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. 2011. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Climate Change*. Paperback edition, Nachdruck. New York London Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Page, Benjamin I., Larry M. Bartels, and Jason Seawright. 2013. "Democracy and the Policy

Preferences of Wealthy Americans." *Perspectives on Politics* 11(1):51–73. doi: 10.1017/S153759271200360X.

Page, Benjamin I., and Martin Gilens. 2017. *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do about It*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Page, Benjamin I., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2009a. *Class War? What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Page, Benjamin I., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 2009b. *Class War?: What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Page, Benjamin I., Jason Seawright, and Matthew J. Lacombe. 2019. *Billionaires and Stealth Politics*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peters, Mark. 2012. "Centrist Republicans Feel the Heat in Kansas." *Wall Street Journal*, July 19.

Peterson, Kristina. 2014. "House Centrists in Both Parties Are Under Attack." *Wall Street Journal*, July 6.

Peterson, Kristina, and Stephanie Armour. 2017. "GOP's Health-Bill Woes Show New Power of Party's Centrist Wing." *WAll Street Journal*, May 3.

Peterson, Kristina, and Siobhan Hughes. 2018. "House GOP Leaders Fend Off Immigration Push by Centrist Republicans." *Wall Street Journal*, June 13.

Piketty, Thomas. 2020. *Capital and ideology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Pildes, Richard H. 2021. "How to Keep Extremists Out of Power." *The New York Times*, February 25.

Piston, Spencer. 2018. *Class Attitudes in America: Sympathy for the Poor, Resentment of the Rich, and Political Implications*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY:

Cambridge University Press.

Polanyi, Michael. 2009. *The Tacit Dimension*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press.

Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 1984. "The Polarization of American Politics." *The Journal of Politics* 46(4):1061–79. doi: 10.2307/2131242.

Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 1985. "A Spatial Model for Legislative Roll Call Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 29(2):357–84. doi: 10.2307/2111172.

Porter, Mason A., Peter J. Mucha, M. E. J. Newman, and A. J. Friend. 2007. "Community Structure in the United States House of Representatives." *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and Its Applications* 386(1):414–38. doi: 10.1016/j.physa.2007.07.039.

Prasad, Monica. 2006. *The Politics of Free Markets: The Rise of Neoliberal Economic Policies in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Relman, Eliza. 2018. "Michael Bloomberg Is Weighing a 2020 Run as a Centrist Democrat." *Business Insider*, September 17.

Reuters Staff, Reuters. 2021. "Majority of Americans Support $15 Minimum Wage, Reuters/Ipsos Poll Shows." *Reuters*, February 25.

Rosenbaum, David E., and Special To the New York Times. 1989. "MAN IN THE NEWS; Two New Leaders With a Willingness to Listen and a Willingness to Deal: Richard A. Gephardt." *The New York Times*, June 15.

Sandel, Michael J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*. Hinsdale, Ill: Dryden Press.

Scherer, Michael, and Tracy Jan. 2019. "Howard Schultz' Challenge to Democrats: Nominate a Centrist for President and I'll Abandon My Independent Campaign." *Washington Post*, February 14.

Scheufele, Dietram A., and William P. Eveland Jr. 2001. “Perceptions of ‘Public Opinion’ and ‘Public’ Opinion Expression.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 13(1):25–44. doi: 10.1093/ijpor/13.1.25.

Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr. 1949. *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*. Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press.

Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr. 1997. “It’s My ‘Vital Center.’” *Slate Magazine*, January 10.

Schoon, Eric W., David Melamed, and Ronald L. Breiger. 2024. *Regression inside Out*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

Scott, Janny. 2003. “A Centrist, Lieberman Fights For Votes in an Extremist Era.” *The New York Times*, December 8.

Seib, Gerald F. 2009. “Centrist Bloc Finds a Voice Amid Senate Stimulus Debate.” *Wall Street Journal*, February 6.

Seib, Gerald F. 2020. “Biden Declares Political Center Alive and Well.” *Wall Street Journal*, December 23.

Shear, Michael D., and Michael Crowley. 2020. “Biden Cabinet Leans Centrist, Leaving Some Liberals Frustrated.” *The New York Times*, December 19.

Stein, Jeff. 2022. “With Sinema’s Help, Private Equity Firms Win Relief from Proposed Tax Hikes.” *Washington Post*, August 8.

Stephens, Bret. 2019. “Howard Schultz Derangement Syndrome.” *The New York Times*, February 1.

Stimson, James A. 2015. *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*. Second edition. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Tausanovitch, Chris, and Lynn Vavreck. 2021. *Democracy Fund + UCLA Nationscape*. Los Angeles, CA: Democracy Fund Voter Study Group.

The Centrist Party. 2020. “Centrist Party Platform.” *The Centrist Party*. Retrieved August 18, 2023 (https://uscentrist.org/platform/, https://uscentrist.org/platform/).

The Centrist Party. 2021. “Tenets of the Centrist Party.” *The Centrist Party*. Retrieved August 18, 2023 (https://uscentrist.org/platform/tenets/, https://uscentrist.org/platform/tenets/).

The Economist. 2021. “Joe Biden’s $1.9trn Stimulus Package Is One of the Most Popular Bills in Decades.” *The Economist*, February 26.

The Editorial Board. 2019. “A Centrist Debate Shutout.” *Wall Street Journal*, August 28.

The SCAN Foundation/Associated Press. 2022. *AP-NORC/SCAN Foundation Survey*. Question 8: 31119844.00007. Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research: Cornell University.

Third Way. 2023. “Dodgeball: Analyzing the No Labels ‘Common Sense’ Agenda.” Retrieved August 18, 2023 (https://www.thirdway.org/memo/dodgeball-analyzing-the-no-labels-common-sense-agenda).

Third Way. n.d. “Climate and Energy.” Retrieved August 30, 2023 (https://www.thirdway.org/issue/climate-and-energy).

Thomsen, Danielle M. 2017. *Opting out of Congress: Partisan Polarization and the Decline of Moderate Candidates*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Utych, Stephen M. 2019. “Man Bites Blue Dog: Are Moderates Really More Electable than Ideologues?” *The Journal of Politics*.

Weaver, R. Kent. 2002. “Polls, Priming, and the Politics of Welfare Reform.” Pp. 106–23 in *Navigating Public Opinion: Polls, Policy, and the Future of American Democracy*, edited by J. Manza, F. L. Cook, and B. I. Page. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wheelan, Charles J. 2013. *The Centrist Manifesto*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Williamson, Vanessa S. 2017. *Read My Lips: Why Americans Are Proud to Pay Taxes*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Winters, Jeffrey A. 2011. *Oligarchy*. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wolff, Michael. 2015. “The Only Hillary Alternative.” *USA TODAY*, May 25.

Wood, B. Dan, and Han Soo Lee. 2009. “Explaining the President’s Issue Based Liberalism: Pandering, Partisanship, or Pragmatism.” *The Journal of Politics* 71(4):1577–92. doi: 10.1017/S002238160999020X.

Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

Zaller, John R. 1998. “Monica Lewinsky’s Contribution to Political Science.” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31(2):182–89. doi: 10.2307/420248.

Zernike, Kate. 2006. “Pelosi’s Ascendancy in House Puts a Close Liberal Ally in the Spotlight.” *The New York Times*, November 25.

van Zuylen-Wood, Simon. 2019. “Is Centrism Doomed?” *The Washington Post*, June 4.