

Ideological Bipolarization

Or the effect of stereotyping on the perception of ideological positions

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Abstract

In political discourse ideological labels (“left” and “right”) frequently carry a double meaning. First, they are meant to provide a synthetic description of actors’ preferences over a set of political issues, which are bound together by some core values or belief systems that might vary substantively across contexts. Second, they are often used to describe actors’ membership to political groups, whose contours can be more or less sharply-defined depending, again, on the context. While much research on ideology tends to focus on the first view, some exceptions suggest that the second one should be given more attention. Indeed, given the high demands in sophistication required to make sense of issues in a coherent way, as required by the definition of belief systems, ideologies as group labels may be even more accessible to the most of the citizens. In this study I discuss one implication of viewing ideological categories as political groups. Building on research on stereotyping, I argue that social-categorical nature of ideology leads to perceiving reduced differences between actors belonging to the same ideological group, while magnifying those between actors belonging to different groups. This, in turn, leads to a perception of the political space as bipolarized, that is made of two homogeneous and sharply distinct political groups.

Introduction

This paper reviews the relevant literature on ideology and the ideological labels, argues for the importance of considering the categorical aspect of left and right, and discusses the impact of a simple cognitive bias such as stereotyping on people's perceptions of party positions. While ideology is often regarded as a fundamentally continuous construct, this study contends that the use in the common political discourse of synthetic categories such as "left" and "right" (or "liberal" and "conservative") can lead to a distorted perception of the ideological space as "bipolarized". This has implications for the way in which political behaviors such as ideological voting are understood and interpreted, and for our general understanding of what determines political distinctions in a given context.

After several decades of research in political psychology, we are now fairly confident that people implicitly use the words "left" and "right" in reference to different core values that originate in different cognitive styles and dispositional traits, and are projected into peripheral attitudes towards contextually-relevant issue objects. While this side of ideology is by far the most widely investigated by political scientists, it is also the one requiring greater cognitive abilities and motivation to work at full force (Jost et al., 2009a). In other words, this "operational" side of ideology is likely to be fully understood only by a minority of the mass public. Nevertheless, left and right are strongly related to party preferences and other kinds of political evaluations for a far greater proportion of citizens in many political contexts (see Fazekas and Méder, 2013; Lachat, 2008; Vegetti, 2014). This is likely because people rely more often on a "symbolic" side of ideology, which is meant to reflect their attachment to political groups that are defined by ideological categories. These two aspects of ideology own different functions. The first, the actual policy content of ideological labels, allows people to organize the matters of political disagreement around the lowest possible dimensionality (Benoit and Laver, 2006). The second, the symbolic component of ideology, helps people recognizing what are the political groups competing for the power. While the first function has been broadly explored by political science and psychology literature, the latter has been so far overlooked.

I contend here that the second function of ideology is very important, and this is primarily because its fundamentally categorical view of left and right can bear consequences for how people perceive the political space.

Social psychology has been concerned for long time about the impact of categorization and stereotyping on people's perception of social stimuli (see Hogg and Abrams, 1998). This discussion has not been extended to political stimuli so far, and this is likely because the left-right has almost exclusively been treated as a continuum. However, when its categorical nature is taken into account, there are reasons to expect the same psychological processes identified by studies on stereotyping to take place as people are to evaluate political objects. One of these processes, namely the *accentuation principle* (Tajfel, 1981) is discussed here. In this view, one of the consequences of stereotyping is that it will prompt people to perceive stimuli belonging to the same group as more similar, and stimuli belonging to different groups as more different, than they actually are. The application of this effect to the perception of party ideological stands is discussed.

Ideology and ideological categories

The categories “left” and “right”, as well as “liberal” and “conservative”, are probably the most widely used terms across modern democracies to qualify anything related to politics. One can use them to define a party or a candidate, but also a program, a reasoning or an idea. A certain legislation can be said to be left-wing or right-wing, and a politician who votes for it can be qualified as a left-wing or right-wing politician too. Although many societies throughout history have experienced the rise of movements that claimed their non-involvement with the distinction between left and right, it is hard to find in practice a political statement that can not be put into one of the two categories (Bobbio, 1996). This is so because these terms have been associated throughout history with a long series of events, characters, social groups, political coalitions, concepts, and many other politically-relevant phenomena that have come to cumulatively define the nature of the political contrasts in the vast majority of democracies in the world.

Ideologies are said to own a “symbolic” and an “operational” component (Jost et al., 2009a). To the extent that ideologies have a symbolic value, left and right are abstract categories containing objects that are politically charged, but at the same time are not necessarily relevant for any substantive political discourse. Examples of these include actual symbols such as the hammer and sickle or the swastika, personalities such as Margaret Thatcher or Che Guevara, images such as the “Tank Man” on Tiananmen Square (just

to mention some political symbols that spread across countries), as well as colors, clothing styles, and so on. Probably, for some people even friends, relatives and acquaintances could bear a symbolic ideological value, to the extent that they got to be associated to one label in one's own experience. On the other hand, the operational component of ideology refers to the concrete policy direction that one implies when talking of left and right. For instance, some people may call themselves "right-wing" because they oppose same-sex marriages, while others may do it because they want the government to cut on social services.

In political science, the operational component of ideology is the one that has been more thoroughly investigated. One reason for this is the ability of ideological categories to capture positions on a wide array of issues from the most disparate policy domains. This is made possible by their abstract nature, which makes concepts of left and right flexible enough to cover potentially all dimensions of political contrast. Downs, the first and most cited advocate of this approach, defines ideology «as a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing such a society.» (Downs, 1957, p. 96). In his view, ideology has the function of helping people making sense of party positions on a potentially high number of political issues on the one hand, and helping parties maintaining identifiable profiles in a constantly changing society on the other. In this view, endorsed by many political scientists dealing with spatial models, ideology is a *short-cut device*, or a simplification that helps people understanding an otherwise too complex political reality (see e.g. Hinich and Munger, 1994).

This functional view is paired with a set of assumptions about *how* ideology can fulfill its overarching function in a multidimensional political conflict. In this respect, political ideologies are generally described as *belief systems*, i.e. as coherent sets of values that guide people's policy preferences, but also cognitions, behaviors, goals and self-explanations of the reality. This definition builds in particular on Converse's highly influential work. According to Converse, a belief system is a «configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence» (Converse, 1964, p. 207). In other words, the defining feature of ideology is its ability to provide coherence to a person's views across different political topics. When it gets to define the mechanisms by why ideologies are able to do so, Converse points out the importance of semi-logical associations stemming from abstract principles, or world views, that are driven by the political elites.

With some refinements, this conceptualization is still widely accepted by political scientists (see Feldman, 1988, 2003; Gerring, 1997; Knight, 2006). More recently, social psychologists devised a bottom-up approach to investigate the origins of ideological constraint, asking what are the cognitive and motivational needs that drive people towards embracing some certain worldviews. In general, scholars seem to converge on identifying two relevant core dimensions of ideology, one capturing acceptance versus rejection of inequalities, and the other capturing openness to social change versus maintenance of the status-quo (Jost, 2006). These attitudes are in turn founded in a set of personality traits, social incentives and emotional responses to stimuli, such as reactions to threat and anxiety (Jost et al., 2003, 2009a,b). Other scholars moved even further down the reductionist lane, investigating the inheritable nature of political attitudes (Alford et al., 2005), as well as their foundation within neurocognitive processes (Amodio et al., 2007) and physiological reactions (Oxley et al., 2008).

The symbolic component of ideology went far more overlooked over the years. The interest for this aspect came in direct response to Converse's work. In particular, Converse noted that most of the American public seemed to hold "nonattitudes" rather than attitudes, i.e. their answers to political attitude questions appeared to be made up on the spot, rather than coming from ideological considerations. In fact, one important implication of Converse's conceptualization was the relatively high level of political sophistication required for citizens to be defined as ideologues, a requirement that was met by very few people in the mass public (see Converse, 2000; Jost, 2006; Saris and Sniderman, 2004). At the same time, different scholars showed that while a substantial portion of the electorate was not able to tell much about the policy meaning of left and right, the use of these categories had a strong predictive power on people's political behaviors (Holm and Robinson, 1978; Klingemann, 1979; Levitin and Miller, 1979).

In the most insightful piece of work elaborating over these premises, Conover and Feldman (1981) provide a conceptual effort to explain the use of ideological categories independently from their issue content. Building on the "symbolic politics" framework, the authors regard ideological labels as political symbols, i.e. as attitude objects that are able to «evoke and mobilize human emotions» (Sears, 1993, p. 113). In this view, people's reactions to political stimuli are assumed to be driven by long-lasting predispositions that persist throughout their life, and trigger their affective responses every time they encounter new symbols related to or resembling the old ones

(Sears et al., 1979). In other words, symbolic politics theory excludes any role of self-interest in influencing people's attitudes towards political objects, leaving everything in the hands of emotional reactions (see also Kinder and Sears, 1981; Sears et al., 1980).

Conover and Feldman partially integrate this perspective, concluding that people's ideological self-categorizations are made by a *cognitive* component, (equivalent to the operational component discussed above), and by an *evaluative* component (their affect towards the social groups associated to the ideological categories). In their view, policy issues can have both a direct effect, by defining the cognitive content of the ideological labels, and an indirect effect, by providing further associations that will influence people's evaluations. For instance, people may evaluate the "liberals" more positively, if they associate them to an issue position that they like (Conover and Feldman, 1981, p. 622). However, in general, people's ideological self-categorization should be driven mainly by their evaluation of the social groups defined by the categories. Although not explicitly pointed out, this implies definition of ideological identity as a form of *group identity*. In this view, when a person defines herself as e.g. a "leftist" or a "liberal", she is voicing her membership to a specific social group.

In a way, this view of ideology is very centered on American politics, in particular on the Michigan conceptualization of party identification (see Johnston, 2006). In this respect, people's evaluations of ideological groups might simply reflect their evaluations of partisan groups, prompted by the dual nature of the American political landscape. This idea is somewhat contrasted by the empirical assessment of the independent influence of the two on people's political behaviors (Holm and Robinson, 1978; Levitin and Miller, 1979). In multiparty contexts, where left and right categories count more than one actor at the elite level, people's ideological identifications might rather reflect their social-structural position (e.g. class), which is represented by groups of parties on either category (see Schmitt, 2009, for a discussion of multiple party identifications). However, this seems not to be the case. In a rare qualitative comparative study of ideology, Klingemann (1979) shows that the tendency to define "left" and "right" in terms of political parties or social groups is even more pronounced in European countries such as the Netherlands, Britain, Germany and Austria, whereas in the US the use of the categories seems to reflect a Manichean tendency to qualify ideological groups as "good" and "bad". Other scholars suggest that left-right categories reflect nothing more than the structure

of party competition (see Fortunato et al., 2014). In a study about Israel, Arian and Shamir (1983) show how the varying meaning of the labels does not correspond to policy-based ideological changes, but to changes in the structure of party competition. As they argue «[the] labels do not necessarily correspond to “natural” political entities: they were invented, not discovered, by political analysts for the political establishment. They are used to label and to identify the good or the bad, the right and the wrong, the desirable and the despicable. The stigma or the distinction that often accrues to each label should be understood as an artifact with political intent and content.» (p. 142).

The question whether the symbolic component of ideology reflects partisan identification, social-structural group membership or any other kind of politically-charged collective identity, can be regarded as a context-specific variant of a more general definition of left and right as *categories designating political groups*. This allows to reorganize the discussion over the “operational” versus the “symbolic” component of ideology by suggesting two different functions of ideology that are fulfilled by the two components. One is to *organize the matters of political disagreement around the lowest possible dimensionality*, allowing for the maintenance of one single ideological discourse when new issues arise. This task is mostly accomplished by the value structure of ideology, that provides logical coherence among all the concrete issue positions that are taken by the actors. Another function of ideology, which is often overlooked by political science and psychology literature, is to *define what are the political groups competing for power*. In this sense, left and right are nothing else than group labels that allow people to easily recognize whether other actors (e.g. politicians, fellow citizens) are “in-groups” or “out-groups”, that is to say, whether a policy outcome representing a win-win solution is possible with them, or whether their win would necessarily imply one’s own loss. In sum, next to defining “what goes with what” (Converse, 1964), ideology can also help people recognizing “who goes with whom”.

Psychologically, the processes defining people’s ideological self-placement in this context are the same posited by “social identity” theory, and consist mostly in their *awareness* of being members of such groups, and in their sense of emotional *attachment* to them (Tajfel, 1981). To clarify what “group” means in this context, a good starting point is the classic minimal definition adopted in social psychology, namely «two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly

the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category» (Turner, 1982, p. 15). Of course, because left and right are strictly *political* identifications, some specifications are necessary. Most notably, they are likely to be acquired, rather than ascribed, i.e. they are subject to choice (Huddy, 2001). This implies that people's attachment to ideological categories might be, when these are relevant, even stronger and more self-confident than in the case of other group identities.

However, what is most important about this definition is that it emphasizes the potentially *categorical* character of left and right, as opposed to their view as poles of a continuum. This has some implications for how people perceive the political space. Social psychology has been concerned for long time on the impact of categorization on people's perception of stimuli, with a special focus on stereotyping. This discussion has not been extended to political stimuli so far, and this is likely because the left-right has almost exclusively been treated as a continuum. However, if its categorical nature is taken into account, there are reasons to expect the same psychological processes identified by studies on stereotyping to take place as people are to evaluate political objects. These processes, in turn, will have some implications for the projections of the political space that people will form in their minds. The next two sections will deal with these issues.

Assimilation and contrast effects on the perception of political stimuli

Research on categorization and stereotyping has been concerned for long with understanding the cognitive processes underlying people's beliefs about others, with a particular focus on the attribution of characteristics to different social groups' members. This body of research builds on Allport's (1954) intuition that stereotypes and prejudices are not symptoms of nearly-pathological personality types (as suggested for instance by much research on authoritarianism), but rather products of simple cognitive mechanisms that take place in context.

The most important of these mechanisms is *categorization*. This is the process by which individuals organize stimuli coming from the surrounding environment into groups, and decide which stimuli are similar and which are different from one another. Categorizing is a very basic cognitive task

that nevertheless plays a fundamental role for individuals' ability to adapt to their environment. Its function is to allow people to attain knowledge and understanding from available information (McGarty et al., 2010). How this process actually works, that is what categories are and how they are represented in people's minds, is subject to debate. While the classic approach viewed categories as collections of both necessary and collectively sufficient characteristics, more recent perspectives conceptualize them as combinations of abstract prototypes and concrete examples (McGarty et al., 2010; Rosch, 1978; Schneider, 2004; Smith and Zárate, 1992). In this view, objects are quickly categorized by evaluating their similarity to some ideal types, consisting in either abstract representations, or recollections of real-world instances, or both. To give an example from the realm of politics, people can categorize a statement such as «we will increase government spending on education» as being “left” or “right” depending on its resemblance to their abstract prototype of a “left” and “right” statement (about the same topic), or on its similarity to other statements stored in their memory and associated to the two categories.

Furthermore, categorization is supposed to be based on a certain amount of theorizing about the relationships between object features (Murphy and Medin, 1985). This perspective is particularly relevant here, as it closely resembles the classic definition of ideologies as *belief systems* elaborated by Converse (1964). According to this view, individuals hold ideas about what are the relevant object features for a certain categorization and why. Moreover, they know how object features are associated to one another, that is to say, what makes categories coherent. Finally, the roots of the associations providing categories with internal coherence can also allow people to tell how different categories relate to each other (Schneider, 2004). For instance, knowing that «more unemployment benefits» and «more proportional taxation» are both policies that pursue higher economic equality, can help people categorizing them as 'left-wing' policies, and at the same time recognize a key distinction between “left-wing” and “right-wing” policies, that is the emphasis on economic equality. In other words, the process of categorization is not supposed to be based exclusively on object similarity, but also on a certain amount of associational thinking about objects' features¹.

¹Note that, in spite of the emphasis on the “theorizing”, the associations that form the bases for categorization can be also take place automatically. See Hilton and von Hippel

In spite of its fundamental role, the process of categorization is what leads to the formation of stereotypes. In fact, stereotypes are generalizations of some features associated to a certain category to all the members of that category. Thus, while categorizing implies putting objects into groups based on their characteristics, stereotyping implies attributing characteristics to objects based on their belonging to a certain group (Stangor and O'Brien, 2010). Social psychologists have proposed some explanations for why people rely on stereotypes, which resemble the same reasons why people engage in categorization in the first place. According to a common perspective individuals own limited cognitive resources, and rely on categories and stereotypes to make sense of the environment by reducing the information burden (see Allport, 1954; Fiske, 1998; Taylor, 1981). However, stereotypes can also help people inferring information not directly given by immediate experience (Oakes and Turner, 1990). In this view, stereotyping can actually *provide* information about objects' features in situations where their category membership is known. This is more likely to happen when people are confronted to new or unfamiliar stimuli, such as out-group members or novel social contexts. In sum, while individuals categorize essentially to learn from the information coming from the environment, categories and stereotypes are often used subsequently to attribute information to less known (or too complex) stimuli. Thus, stereotypes complete people's experience by integrating their direct perception of stimuli with beliefs related to their group membership. As we shall see, this process is of particular relevance when people organize political stimuli according to ideological categories.

One important implication of stereotyping for perception is what Henri Tajfel called the *accentuation principle* (see Tajfel, 1981). Briefly, the accentuation principle posits that the perception of the magnitude of a series of stimuli (e.g. the height of a group of people) belonging to different categories (e.g. their nationality) will be biased in a way such that stimuli belonging to the same category will be perceived as more similar, and stimuli belonging to different categories as more different, than they actually are. According to Tajfel, in order to work, the accentuation principle requires one important condition: that the dimension of interest and the superimposed categorization are somehow correlated. To give an example, if a person has to judge the height of a series of men and women, there will be an accentuation effect if and only if men tend to be taller than women. While

(1996).

this point may seem trivial, it is indeed quite important, as it shows how the distorting effect of stereotyping is a by-product of the the simplifying function of categorization. In the absence of a correlation between gender and height, knowing the gender of the persons would be completely useless for the aim of evaluating their height. However, given the presence of a correlation, this effect allows an assessment of the stimuli that maximizes the differentiation while minimizing the amount of information needed.

One intuitive yet often overlooked specification is that the accentuation principle operates when the judgements are *relative*. Obviously, if one has to evaluate the magnitude of one single stimulus, there is no real room for any perception of accentuated similarity or difference to take place—unless it is evaluated against the prior knowledge that one has about the category that the stimulus is said to belong. Thus, the accentuation principle is based on the anchoring effect that stimuli (or memory of stimuli or categories) exert on one another. All in all, two are the processes that compose the accentuation principle. One is called *assimilation*, and consists in the minimization of the magnitude differences between stimuli belonging to the same category, while the other is called *contrast*, and refers to the exaggeration of the differences between stimuli belonging to different categories.

Assimilation and contrast effects have been observed to operate in many different domains, including the evaluation of lengths of simple lines (Tajfel and Wilkes, 1963), the perception of heights of men and women (Nelson et al., 1990), the recall of average temperatures across different months (Krueger and Clement, 1994), and even the perception of colors (Goldstone, 1995). Given their strength and robustness, such effects should be there also when people evaluate political stimuli, such as parties or candidates. More specifically, when left and right are regarded as relevant political categories, people should implicitly stereotype on them too, perceiving the actors belonging to the same ideological group as more similar, and the actors belonging to different groups as more different, *on issue dimensions that are believed to correlate with the categorization*. This includes virtually each and every issue on which parties take somewhat different stands. In other words, this process should affect people's perception of parties and candidates on all the issues that are politically "meaningful" (Wessels and Schmitt, 2008) in a given context. Of course, this the accentuation principle should have a particularly prominent effect on the perception of *ideological* positions themselves. The next section will deal with this case.

Political stereotyping and ideological bipolarization

In political science, the left-right is almost exclusively regarded as a continuous space, where actors are positioned on different sides and distributed with varying degrees of extremity. However, a lot of conceptual work has been done where the categorical nature of left and right is suggested. Such work is mostly concerned with conceptualizing the “symbolic” component of ideology, namely the part of ideology that reflects different political groups competing with one another, rather than different worldviews. While the most of the studies concerned with this aspect have been busy justifying a view of ideology that departs from the classic “Downsian” approach, the implications of such view have been largely overlooked. However, given the pervasiveness of the accentuation principle discussed by Tajfel (1981), these implications should be relevant even for those who are merely interested in the “operational” side of ideology.

At the most abstract level, ideology is a continuous trait. There can be different degrees of ideological extremity in each direction, and the less radical views on both sides can find great room for compromise. In many real-world situations, moderates on both sides hold preferences that are more similar to those of the moderates on the opposite sides than to the preferences of the most extreme people on their own side. This can be due to several reasons. One is that people on the left and on the right can hold very polarized preferences on one issue, but very similar preferences on another issue. So, in the hypothetical case where both issues factor in the same way on the left-right, their overall ideological views will be more similar than in the case where their preferences diverge on both issues (for a thorough discussion about this point, see Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Besides, people’s views can simply be moderate enough to stand in a grey area between left and right. Many times, economic differences between moderate left-wing and right-wing parties are reduced to relatively minor corrections to a dominant paradigm (e.g. more or less controls over largely free markets) while more extreme views on either sides can endorse entirely new paradigms (e.g. socialist or green economy, etc.). In sum, because of its overarching nature, ideology lends itself to be a truly continuous construct. Yet, this is all about its policy side.

When left and right are treated as group categories, and when such

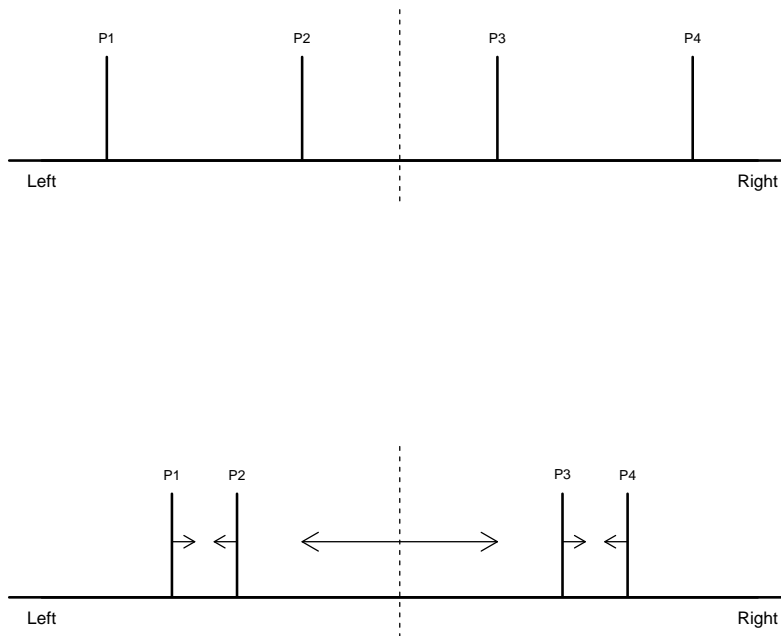


Figure 1: Accentuation effect on the perception of party ideologies.

categorization becomes a relevant criterion to represent the political space, we should expect assimilation and contrast effects to take place as people evaluate political parties. More importantly, the distortions produced by these effects should affect how people perceive the parties' substantive ideologies. As we saw in the previous section, categorization and stereotyping are useful to people as they allow them to organize complex amounts of information, and to attribute unknown features to stimuli based on their category membership. Considered the complexity of actors' ideologies, and the impossibility for the average citizen to collect all the necessary information to judge political parties on their objective policy stands, it is likely that categories will be heavily used to "guess" where parties' actual ideological positions are (i.e. how moderate or extreme), as well as where their policy stands.

Assimilation effect implies in this context that parties categorized as members of the same ideological group will be perceived as more ideologically similar than they actually are. Thus, for instance, a socialist and a social-democrat party will be thought to hold akin ideological views, in spite of that being hardly the case. *Contrast* effect implies that parties belonging to different categories will be perceived as more different from one another than they actually are. So, a social-democratic and a moderate liberal party will be seen as very distant from one another, while in reality they views might be not so different. These two processes are shown in Figure 1.

This phenomenon is defined here ideological *bipolarization*, namely the division of the political space into two contrasting blocks, which are internally homogeneous but very different from one another in their ideological stands. In fact, this definition is rather close to the original definition of *polarization*. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the latter as «[t]he accentuation of a difference between two things or groups; division into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of beliefs or opinions; an instance of this.»². Moreover, a similar view of polarization as a function of both groups' internal homogeneity and mutual distance has been proposed in the field of economy by Esteban and Ray (1994), which posit it as a better instrument to determine social inequalities.

Of course, what is being discussed here as bipolarization is actually the

²See "polarization, n.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146757?redirectedFrom=polarization&> (retrieved June 30, 2013).

product of a perceptual bias that affects people's judgement of partisan ideologies when the relevance of left and right *as political categories* is high, that is to say, when their group-defining feature prevails. In fact, given the importance of policy distinctiveness recognized by many studies, it is very hard to imagine a situation where parties would actually gather around two different poles. On the other hand, there is some evidence suggesting that people's perceptions of parties' ideological similarity is influenced by their coalitional behavior (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). If we admit that two parties joining a coalition together can be interpreted by the voters as an indicator of their membership to the same political group, this finding can be regarded as evidence of an assimilation effect at work.

One last point that needs to be discussed regards what determines the relative importance of the continuous "operational" component and the categorical "symbolic" component of ideology. Arian and Shamir (1983) offer a persuasive argument: they are *cues* provided by the elites. In some cases, political parties or candidates will stress some aspects instead of others, depending on what is more convenient to them. At a very general level, it is reasonable to assume that the prominence of one component in respect to the other will depend to a large extent on what the actors talk about when they use the ideological categories. If they associate them to policy issues, substantiating their claims with examples of what a left and a right positions represent on a certain topic, the mass public will be more knowledgeable of the associations between the categories and their policy content. On the other hand, if elites use the terms to refer to themselves or other political groups, as mere synonyms of "us" and "them", then the public will learn that left and right are all about groups struggling for power, and will regard them as group labels. All in all, the varying function that ideological categories have across different political systems can be treated as an aspect of political *culture*. To understand this aspect in larger detail will mean essentially to understand what people think about when they think about politics.

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