

THE MIDDLE CHILD: WHAT DOES MODERATE MEAN?

Lucie House

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Approved by:

Pamela J. Conover

Michael B. MacKuen

James A. Stimson

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ABSTRACT

LUCIE HOUSE: The Middle Child: What Does Moderate Mean?
(Under the direction of Pamela J. Conover.)

While research demonstrates liberal/conservative self-identification to be a meaningful identity, moderate self-identification is viewed as relatively meaningless. This description is more likely the result of lack of study of moderates, rather than a careful study of the meaning of “moderate.” The focus of the present study is to determine whether or not identification with the label “moderate” represents a group identification. This project represents the first formal exploration into the psychological foundations of moderate self-identification. This project asks the following very basic question: To what extent does self-categorization as a moderate represent psychological meaningful group identification? In order to answer this question, I use social identity theory to study moderate self-categorization. This paper also uses original measures to study the content of the meaning of “moderate.” I find that moderate does represent a self-identification, and that there is a distinct pattern of meaning for the category.

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Introduction

Three decades of public opinion data show that about thirty percent of the electorate consistently categorizes themselves as “moderate” in response to questions about ideological self-placement.¹ Indeed, according to most recent data, thirty-six percent of the public categorizes as “moderate,” making it more popular than liberal and conservative.² Despite its popularity among the American public, “moderate” has been largely ignored in political behavior research. As a result, we do not know what it means to be “moderate” when it comes to politics.

This, then, is the principle motivation for the present study. Specifically, I explore the following question: Why do people choose to call themselves moderate when it comes to politics? In addressing this question, one approach is to simply measure how people describe themselves as “moderate.” However, past research (Conover and Feldman 1981) has focused on two features of ideological self-identification: the psychological meaning and the substantive meaning. The implication of this research is that ideological self-placement shapes political decision-making precisely because self-placement represents a psychological identification.

Given the role of group identification in understanding self-identification, it is important to examine how “moderate” is evaluated by the public. In this study, I assume that how people define a social category is contingent on whether or not the category is psychologically meaningful. Therefore, I examine the substantive and psychological meaning of “moderate.” In doing so, I draw upon social identity theory and theories of ideological self-identification to generate a two-step empirical test of my hypotheses. First, I consider what self-categorization as “moderate” means. In doing so, I analyze whether or

¹ The American National Election Study Cumulative File, 1980-2008.

² Gallup Poll, 2012.

not individuals identify with “moderate.” Once I demonstrate that “moderate” is a group identification, I develop expectations for the sources of meaning of “moderate” and test my predictions using original measures. My approach here differs from previous research on ideological identities because I directly measure identification with “moderate” using a psychological measure of group identification. In addition, I use cognitive interviewing to design original measures of the sources of meaning based on how individuals define “moderate” for themselves.

The Psychology of Ideological Self-Identification

Liberal and Conservative Self-Identification

Early studies of political behavior suggested that ideological labels carry little meaning for the public (Converse 1964); however, empirical evidence has since shown that self-placement as “liberal” or “conservative” represents a group identification (Conover and Feldman 1981; Deaux et al. 1995; Zschornt 2011). These findings are a principal impetus for the present study. As such, this study follows the framework of previous studies that have pursued the question: why do people call themselves “liberal” or “conservative?” (Conover and Feldman 1981; Converse 1964; Jacoby 1991; Levitin and Miller 1979; Zschornt 2011). Following this research, the accepted view of liberal and conservative self-placement is that these categorizations represent psychological identities for most citizens. The proposed link between self-placement and identification is supported by the finding that positive evaluations of reference groups (and other political symbols) are positively associated with self-categorization (Conover and Feldman 1981; Zschornt 2011). Under this view, positive attachments to ideological labels are triggered not by self-placement, but by the evaluative meaning of the labels. Conover and Feldman (1981) argue that “ideological self-placement reflects a ‘psychological attachment’ to a particular group” (p. 624). In essence, ideological self-placement is conceptualized as a group identification.

What does it mean for ideological self-placement to reflect an ideological identity?

As explained by Conover and Feldman (1981), ideological identities are structured in terms of psychological meaning and substantive meaning. Substantive meaning refers to how the public defines “liberal” and “conservative,” whereas psychological meaning represents the psychological attachment to the group. The distinction between the two has substantive implications because it draws the line between an objective group membership and a group identification. To the extent that an ideological label holds only substantive meaning to a person, than self-placement does not represent an ideological identity. It is important to note, however, that psychological attachment to a label depends, in part, on the substantive meaning. Therefore, my approach to understanding the meaning of “moderate” relies both on uncovering the psychological significance of “moderate” as well as the meaning of the label itself.

To this point, I have posited that the categories “liberal” and “conservative” hold psychological significance for people who label themselves in this way. As such, self-placement is considered a statement of group identification. Borrowing from social psychology, the current model of self-identification establishes the psychological significance of ideological labels by focusing on substantive meaning. Conover and Feldman (1981) (see (Zschornt 2011) for more evidence) argue that the psychological meaning of “liberal” and “conservative” stems from the definition and evaluation of these labels. That is, the substantive meaning of “liberal” and “conservative” play a central role in the group identification model of self-identification. In more concrete terms, a person chooses liberal or conservative based on an emotional attachment to what that label represents. The meaning of a label can come from two different types of sources: political symbols or issue preferences. However, it is important to recognize that the strongest relationship is between self-placement and political symbols. Specifically, empirical tests of this argument show that salient social groups often serve as the content of meaning of ideological labels (Conover and Feldman 1981; Zschornt 2011).

So, previous research suggests that the group identification framework should be useful in understanding why people call themselves “moderate.” From this perspective, psychological significance and the content of the label are crucial to determining what it means

when someone labels themselves as “moderate.” The next step, then, is to examine how these two factors contribute to moderate self-identification. While Conover and Feldman’s work certainly provides the impetus for this study, their model is not sufficiently generalizable to the study of moderate self-identification. Therefore, I rely on a social identity theory to proceed with my study of “moderate” self-identification. Adopting this approach is both theoretically and empirically practical. One, the theoretical premise of Conover and Feldman’s model is entirely consistent with the definitional tenets of a social identity. Further, social identity theory (SIT) is a more direct theory of the psychological structure of group identification. It is at this point, then, that I turn to social identity theory to guide my study of “moderate.”

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory (SIT) is appealing to the study of moderate categorization for three reasons. First, Conover and Feldman’s (1981) model, while generally useful for thinking about the meaning of moderate, is theoretically and empirically limiting. That is, the model and methodological approach are limited to the study of liberal and conservative self-identification. In contrast, SIT is specifically designed to apply to all social groups in general. Therefore, I rely on SIT for building a theoretical and empirical approach to study “moderate.”

Second, the transition from Conover and Feldman’s model to SIT does not drastically change the theoretical framework. Their model of self-identification is consistent with the definitional tenets of a social identity, and, can therefore be reinterpreted through the lens of social identity theory. In other words, the structure of ideological identities as outlined by Conover and Feldman (1981) mirrors the components of social identities according to SIT. Indeed, the definition of a social identity states that social identification processes involve awareness of being a member of a group combined with “the value and emotional significance attached to the membership” (Tajfel 1978, p. 3). Therefore, from this perspective, a psychological attachment to a group is the result of two things: the meaning of the social category and the positive evaluation of the meaning (Tajfel 1978,

1982). For example, if an individual identifies as a southerner in a particular context, then of what “southerner” means influences the emergence of identification as well as how the individual acts as a group member. Revisiting the preceding model, because ideological self-placement is linked to positive evaluations of the meaning of ideological labels, liberal and conservative identities fit the definition of social identity.

Consistent with Conover and Feldman’s argument, social identity theory suggests that both substantive and psychological meanings are central to understanding when and how social identities develop. Indeed, experimental findings support the interpretation that the substantive meaning of a social category contributes to the significance of group identifications (Diehl 1990; Oakes 1996; Reynolds, Turner and Haslam 2000). In particular, meaning has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of group prototypes and/or distinctiveness. That is, individuals define social categories in terms of “a set of attributes, attitudes, and behaviors that an individual uses to define and evaluate a category and compare the self to others” (Hogg and Williams 2000, p. 83). The empirical record consistently shows that identification emerges when individuals assign the attributes of the group prototype to themselves³ (Reynolds, Turner and Haslam 2000). It is at this point, researchers would argue, that the category takes on psychological importance (Diehl 1990; Reynolds, Turner and Haslam 2000). In this case, individuals identify with a category based on their positive evaluation of its meaning.

Described in this fashion, then, a group identification signals the presence of meaning. In effect, in the process of identification, the meaning of a category becomes psychologically significant to the self. Therefore, the meaning of a social category plays a critical role in two ways: positive attachment to the meaning makes categorization psychologically meaningful and this meaning also informs how a person acts as a member of the group.⁴

³ In effect, this is the same argument that Conover and Feldman pose in developing their model. Because individuals see the prototype as self-defining once deindividuation has taken place, that definition of the category first must allow them to positively evaluate themselves against other groups. Therefore, social identity theory suggests that the role of meaning is precisely that people positively evaluate a label and develop a psychological attachment based on this evaluation.

⁴ In their discussion, Conover and Feldman allude to the same role of meaning of ideological labels in the political context. Specifically, they argue that the content of ideological labels should influence how these identifications are used in the political context. They conclude that the symbols linked to

Critically, then, the meaning of an ideological label is relevant to political behavior only when self-categorization represents identification.

To this point, then, a principal benefit of the social identity approach is theoretical. Specifically, social identity theory enforces a two-step approach to studying moderate self-identification. Recall, although the substantive meaning of a category plays a role in the emergence of identification, it also influences how the individual behaves as a group member. Therefore, the relationship between meaning and identification demonstrates that the study of the meaning of an ideological label is not simply a matter of understanding what citizens define it to mean. Rather, it is a part of a larger question about whether or not people actually identify with the label. In other words, an individual might define “moderate,” but that definition is only significant in the political context if it has psychological significance. On the other hand, there is no real value to exploring the meaning of the label or the impact of self-categorization if “moderate” is simply a categorization. It follows from this that two factors must be taken into account when studying the meaning of self-identities: the meaning of self-categorization and the meaning of the label. Therefore, in the next section I explore the question of what it means to categorize as “moderate,” followed by expectations for what the label means.

Here, I have argued that SIT is useful for the study of moderate self-identification because it provides a more general approach and is theoretically consistent with Conover and Feldman’s definition of ideological identities. Finally, SIT provides a simplified approach to the measurement of identification. Therefore, the third benefit of SIT is empirical. Recall, a substantial portion of research in the social identity tradition—especially studies focused on measuring psychological identification—is concerned with developing an approach that is applicable to all social groups. As a result, a great deal of research exists on the measurement of psychological significance and meaning. This research allows for a more direct measurement of identification, and, as I will discuss later, I rely on SIT in designing a methodological approach to study the content of “moderate.”

ideological identifications should “influence [voters] evaluations and ultimately their vote choice” (p. 642).

A Case for Moderate Identification

The Meaning of Self-Categorization as “Moderate”

The motivating question of this study is: Why do people call themselves “moderate” when it comes to politics? Both Conover and Feldman’s model and SIT provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for asking and answering this question: understanding the structure of self-identification requires consideration of how people describe themselves as “moderate” and the psychological significance of labeling the self as “moderate.” In the next section, I consider these two components of identity separately as they apply to moderate identification.

To begin with, liberal and conservative self-categorization is a statement of ideological identification such that these labels hold psychological significance for individuals. I hypothesize that self-categorization as “moderate” is also a statement of group identification for those people who label themselves in this way. According to SIT, this would mean that “a specific social categorization of the self becomes psychologically real” (Hogg and Williams 2000, p. 87). In more concrete terms, a person can be said to identify with “moderate” when two criteria hold: they categorize themselves as “moderate” and the meaning of that category is perceived as self-defining. To perceive a category as self-defining implies a positive evaluation of the category. Therefore, saying that someone finds a category to be self-defining is equivalent to a person having a positive attachment to the meaning of “moderate.”

Considering these expectations, a key empirical issue is developing a measure of identification. Conover and Feldman use a measure of psychological group identification that relies on a combination of cognitive and affective items from a national survey to measure (1) self-categorization and (2) affective attachment to an ideological label. Their measure leans heavily on the theoretical link between a positive evaluation of a label and psychological significance. One way, then, of approaching the question of what self-categorization as “moderate” means is to mirror Conover and Feldman’s methodological strategy and investigate positive attachment to political symbols associated with moderate.

However, social identity theory offers a simplified approach to assessing whether or not moderate is an ideological identity. With regard to measuring identification, theoretical and empirical evidence converge on the idea that identities have a dimensional structure. As a result, most research on social groups relies on multidimensional scales as a direct measure of group identification. In the analysis that follows, I use a multidimensional measure developed by Roccas et al. (2008). Consequently, my empirical approach differs from that of Conover and Feldman,⁵ but effectively incorporates more precise measures of this concept. Now that I have developed expectations for moderate self-identification, I next consider how people might describe “moderate.”

Measuring what “moderate” means

If moderate self-categorization represents a group identity, how do people define what it means to be a moderate? To begin with, previous research posits that the meaning of a label can originate from multiple sources—cognitive sources, symbolic sources (Conover and Feldman 1981; Levitin and Miller 1979), or recognition of distinctiveness (Tajfel 1972; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Oakes 1996). With respect to ideological labels, Conover and Feldman (1981) find that the content of “liberal” and “conservative” is more often symbolic, as opposed to cognitive⁶ (see Zschirnt (2011) for additional evidence). Conover and Feldman broadly conceptualize symbolic content as socially constructed. That is, various political symbols become associated with ideological labels within the social context so that these associations are widely shared and recognized by the public as a whole. In their study, Conover and Feldman (1981) specifically conceptualize symbolic sources of meaning as “symbols of social conflict such as various groups and issues” (p. 622) and operationalize this concept using group thermometer ratings that naturally fall into clusters along these salient social cleavages.

⁵ See Zschirnt (2011) for a replication of Conover and Feldman’s approach to measuring group identification.

⁶ Conover and Feldman (1981) expect that the public associates political symbols with ideological labels because ideological labels have “sparse cognitive meaning” for the public. From this perspective, ideological labels are powerful precisely for their symbolic meaning, whereby symbolic sources are much more likely to generate affect than issue preferences.

Generally, I assume that the content of moderate is linked to social and political symbols. However, I expect the specific content of “moderate” to differ from that of “liberal” and “conservative.” Conover and Feldman’s conceptualization of symbolic content rests on the premise that the public has positive (or negative) reactions to the political symbols linked to “liberal” and “conservative.” Within this framework, the public evaluates ideological labels based on their association with groups symbolizing traditional left/right conflict. While the content of “moderate” might include left/right political symbols, this conceptualization is very specific to the content of “liberal” and “conservative.” It is my contention that the measure of the meaning of “moderate” needs to be broadened beyond groups symbolizing left/right cleavages⁷ (while still considering left/right symbols as possible sources of meaning). Thus, in measuring the meaning of “moderate,” I encounter a theoretical and empirical obstacle. The extant research does not provide any additional clues into what “moderate” might mean to the public, and I have discarded previous empirical strategies used to measure the substantive meaning of ideological labels. Therefore, I outline a new approach for conceptualizing and measuring substantive meaning based on the SIT framework.

Social identity theory suggests that the best way to understand the meaning of “moderate” is to allow individuals to define it for themselves (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1979). In this case, then, my approach to defining “moderate” adopts the social identity perspective that self-perceptions are crucial in defining a label, but that social factors play a prominent role in constructing the meaning of labels such as moderate. Insofar as the meaning of ideological labels can be thought of as an intersection of political symbols and left/right cleavages, it seems reasonable to posit that the meaning of “moderate” might be similarly constructed. These considerations are reflected in the strategy I use to measure the content of “moderate.” Specifically, I included two important steps in developing these measures. First, I used cognitive interviewing as a pre-test measure that allowed individuals to elaborate on what “moderate” means to them without any

⁷ It is important to note that I still consider left/right political symbols to contribute to the meaning of “moderate.” However, I reject the notion that the meaning of “moderate” should be completely limited to liberal and conservative symbols.

constraints (Beatty and Willis 2007). I interviewed fifty self-identified moderates and, from their responses, identified three consistent patterns. In addition, the measures in the study blended self-descriptions with “public” descriptions of what moderate means. By using popular symbols of what moderate means, I maintained the theoretical argument posited both by Conover and Feldman and SIT that social construction plays a role in defining social categories.

Three Clusters of Symbolic Meaning of “Moderate”

Understanding what moderate means requires reliable and valid scales, so that these new measures answer the question of why and how people identify as “moderate” in the political context. Before constructing scales, I define three possible clusters of meaning of “moderate.” These three clusters emerged from open-ended interviews with self-identified moderates who were asked to elaborate on their description of what being “moderate” means to them. From these interviews, I identified three potential clusters of meaning for “moderate,” which I have labeled: “ideological mixture,” “moderation as a political philosophy,” and “anti-partisan.” In addition to cognitive interviews, I consider existing literature on political moderation because the meaning of “moderate” is likely to be symbolic. As such, these conceptualizations include political theorists’ descriptions of political moderation as well as previous research on a moderate “ideology.”

“Ideological Mixture”

The ideological mixture cluster represents a perception of moderate as meaning a blend of liberal and conservative views. Under this interpretation, people choose moderate because they hold both conservative and liberal views. The popular statement “I am fiscally conservative, but socially liberal” would fall in this category. To some degree, such meaning may be issue-oriented in so far as people see moderate as representing issue preferences that are neither entirely liberal nor conservative, making it an ideological

source of meaning.⁸ This interpretation of moderate is consistent with research by Treier and Hillygus (2009) who find that moderates' issue preferences fall between a liberal and conservative dimension.⁹ On this account, moderates are voters holding some liberal views and some conservative views.

To be clear, this definition is not the same as ambivalence, nor would I argue that moderate self-categorization represents ambivalence. Ambivalence denotes simultaneous positive and negative feelings towards a single attitude object (Cacioppo, Gardner and Berntson 1997). For example, individuals who are ambivalent about abortion policy see a tension between the good and bad aspects of that policy (Alvarez 1997). This means that citizens who are ambivalent are looking at attitude objects, such as policies or candidates, from both sides of the same coin. Past research emphasizes that ambivalent individuals are uncertain over their feelings toward a policy issue which influences their electoral decision making (Lavine 2001) and political participation (Alvarez and Nagler 1995). However, with respect to moderates, I argue that empirical evidence suggests that defining “moderate” as an “ideological mixture” does not represent uncertainty over the choice of liberal or conservative. Moreover, Treier and Hillygus (2009) show that moderate is not correlated with attitude ambivalence; rather, their findings indicate that self-categorized moderates hold definitive views across issue domains and were not uncertain in their opinions.

Moderate as a “political philosophy”

As a second option, individuals may think of “moderate” as an approach to governing and assessing political issues. Conceived in this way, “moderate” describes a philosophy of politics that rejects extremity and ideological purity. In essence, this definitional cluster describes “moderate” as an approach to political decision-making, such that citizens identify as moderate because they have a “pragmatic approach to politics.” This per-

⁸ One way to determine this is to examine the content of open-ended questions.

⁹ However, one limitation of Treier and Hillygus's (2009) findings is that they locate moderates spatially and not based on how moderates themselves perceive the category.

ception of moderate is influenced by socially constructed symbolic definitions of political moderation discussed by historical and modern political theorists.

Political philosophers from Aristotle to Thomas Fuller have written about moderates in political life. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Fuller rejected the notion that “moderate” described ambivalence: ‘Moderation is not a halting betwixt two opinions, nor is it lukewarmness.’ This description of “moderate” complements my conceptualization that “moderate” is presented as a distinct social category with symbolic content. Additional efforts to give a definition to “moderate” include Calhoun’s (2006) description of moderates as compromising and pragmatic. Calhoun (2006) posits, “moderation rebukes the corrosive partisanship from the Right or the Left. . . a principled commitment to mediation of intractable political disputes” (p. 276).

Similar descriptions of political moderation also appear in more public discourse. For example, David Brooks, a *New York Times* editorialist, offers a definition of “moderate” that echoes the earlier philosophical explanation of pragmatic politics. Like Fuller, Brooks rejects the notion that moderates are “tepid.” Instead, Brooks expands on the idea that moderates are pragmatists bringing a sense of level-headedness to politics. Echoing the sentiments expressed in my interviews, Brooks applauds moderates because their solutions to policy dilemmas rely more on the situation than dogmatism. As a final word, Brooks succinctly describes a moderate as someone who possesses “self-restraint, intellectual openness, and equipoise” (Brooks 2012). Brooks’ description of a political moderate mirrors many of the definitions offered by subjects in my interviews. Subjects consistently described themselves as seeing nuance in political issues, such that moderates recognize that there is no right answer to policy issues one hundred percent of the time. In combination with descriptions given by interview subjects, these more public descriptions of moderate create a cluster of meaning that I conceptualize as a pragmatic approach to politics or governing.

Anti-Partisan

Finally, people might identify as moderate because, to them, the label represents a rebuke of liberal and conservative approaches to politics. This final cluster, which I call the “anti-partisan,” represents those individuals with a strong dislike of “liberals” and “conservatives.” In this case, “moderate” might be viewed as a way to express a feeling of exasperation over “partisan bickering” and cynicism about the political process. Indeed, SIT emphasizes the role of comparison with the out-group in shaping definitions of the in-group. Moreover, these citizens appear to perceive moderate as a label that rejects the ideas offered by both liberals and conservatives. Consequently, this understanding might also be motivated by a dislike for liberals and conservatives, combined with the opinion that both sides are unable to offer good ideas. This meaning might also be tied to the political philosophy approach, as it is a product of peoples distaste with extreme approaches to politics. However, definitions in the anti-partisan category see moderate as only representing a distaste for extremes in politics and see liberals and conservatives as wholly responsible for this extremism.

To summarize, three clusters of meaning of “moderate” were identified from existing literature and cognitive interviews. In order to test whether or not these clusters represent the substantive meaning of “moderate,” I used these clusters as a basis for developing a second stage test of the meaning of moderate using a student sample. In the section that follows, I discuss the scales designed to tap each of these clusters of meaning.

Measures

The analysis presented here addresses both the substantive meaning and psychological meaning of “moderate.” First, I use group identification measures to establish moderate as a social identity. Then, I present original measures to show how people perceive the label “moderate.”

The data for this analysis come from a survey of 280 undergraduates enrolled in Introductory Political Science classes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

in February 2013. My survey differs in a key respect from other studies of ideological identities: it directly measures the strength of social identity for ideological groups and uses original measures to assess self-definitions of moderate. The entire survey is available in the appendix. Participants were 18 to 20 years old ($M= 18.97$), with most being first year students. The sample was majority female (57%) and overwhelmingly liberal and Democratic.¹⁰ Only 10% of the sample self-identified as moderate.

The self-categorization¹¹ measure in this survey uses the traditional ANES question that measures ideological self-placement: “[w]hen it comes to politics, do you usually think of yourself as extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate or middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, [or] extremely conservative?” This question is only used to measure self-categorization in an ideological group. The results from this question are not considered to be statements of ideological self-identification. The percentage of respondents in each of the ideological groups was as follows, 12% moderate, 54% liberal, and 36% conservative.¹²

The survey also included measures of partisanship again employing ANES standard question wordings and responses options. Party identification was measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). In addition, respondents completed questions on issue positions, party feeling thermometers, and political sophistication.

¹⁰ This “oversampling” of liberal created major issues for statistical analysis that will be addressed later.

¹¹ The self-placement measure is used to capture categorization—an essential, but by no means complete—measure of ideological identification. Additional measures are needed to determine if categorization has any psychological meaning.

¹² This sample is not reflective of the percentages of a national sample of the population. According to most recent polls, the electorate self-identification breaks down as 30% moderate, 30% conservative, and 25% liberal. I believe the small number of moderates is due to the large number of liberals—most likely due to the nature of the college campus where the respondents are enrolled. This oversampling of liberals and under sampling of moderates was unexpected and introduces procedural issues discussed in the analysis section.

Measuring Social Identity

Social identity is assessed using a measure of identification with groups developed by Roccas et al. (2008). Recall, Conover and Feldman (1981) use feelings toward reference groups as a measure of identification, rather than directly measuring psychological identification with a specific group. Consequently, my use of a multidimensional measure of identification introduces a new method of measuring self-identification in political science.

The scale employed in this study was designed to capture affective, cognitive, and evaluative components of social identification with a group (Cameron 2003; Hinkle et al. 1989; Roccas et al. 2008). It includes 15 items that measure respondents' identification with a group on four modes of identification: superiority, deference, commitment, and importance. This scale has proven to be a reliable and robust measure of social identity for a diverse set of groups including professional groups and nationalities. My survey included all original scale items except those measuring identification on the deference mode because "moderate" as a group is not likely to be associated with strong leaders or well-organized hierarchy. However, Roccas et al. (2008) contend that the other modes capture identification with a variety of groups, including artificial groups with arbitrary boundaries. Further, strong social identification can be homogeneous, meaning group members identify on only one mode. Respondents completed this scale for their preferred ideological label, indicating how much they agreed with the statements on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).¹³ The final twelve items used for the analysis appear in Table 1:

¹³ For data analysis, responses were reverse coded so that higher numbers indicated stronger social identity. Strongly disagree was coded as 0 and strongly agree was coded as 4.

Table 1: Items of the Group Identification Scale by Subscale

Subscale	Items
Superiority	<p>Liberals and conservatives can learn a lot from moderates.</p> <p>Compared to liberals and conservatives, moderates are particularly good.</p> <p>Relative to other groups, moderates are a good group.</p> <p>Moderates are better than liberals and conservatives in most respects.</p>
Importance	<p>I feel strongly affiliated with moderates.</p> <p>Being a moderate is an important part of my identity.</p> <p>It is important to me that others see me as a moderate.</p> <p>It is important to me that I view myself as a moderate.</p>
Commitment	<p>When I talk about other moderates I usually say “we” instead of they.</p> <p>I often think about the fact that I am a moderate.</p> <p>In my everyday life, I often think about what it means to be a moderate.</p> <p>In general, being a moderate is an important part of my self-image.</p>

Measuring Sources of Meaning

I developed a close-ended measure of meaning based both on previous work (Calhoon 2006; Brooks 2012; Conover and Feldman 1981; Tajfel 1978; Treier and Hillygus 2009) and extensive pre-test interviews with self-identified moderates. Specifically, I interviewed 50 adults in my pre-test, ages 24-70 from almost every region in the United States¹⁴. Then, I created original measures designed to tap each of the three clusters based on my theoretical expectations. Again, these three clusters are assessed: (1) ideological mixture (2) moderate as a ‘political philosophy’, and (3) anti-partisan. These were measured in two different formats. The first measure was a 15-item scale partially based on a scale developed by Hawkins and Nosek (2012) to assess the meaning of political independence.¹⁵ In addition, I used a set of five either-or statements.¹⁶

¹⁴ There was a range in political interest in the pre-test sample. Pre-test subjects were selected based on self-identification as moderate and contacted via email and phone for interviews. The interview occurred in two parts: first, interviewees were given a first-draft of the meaning scale. They were asked to answer the questions and provide feedback. Then, the interviewees were asked to define “moderate” in their own words.

¹⁵ The original scale presented to respondents on the survey included fifteen items, but 3-items were dropped due to low reliability. Table 2 shows the 12 items used for the analysis, but the original fifteen items are in the appendix.

¹⁶ Survey questions are in the appendix.

The first set of items is shown in Table 2, and the items are grouped by cluster of meaning.¹⁷ I adapted Hawkins and Nosek’s (2012) scale to measure the meaning of “moderate” and to reflect the three conceptualized definitions.¹⁸ The clusters of meaning were measured in terms of responses to why participants called themselves “moderate.” Respondents rated each item for how well the statement described them on a scale from 1 “strongly agree” to 5 “strongly disagree.”

¹⁷ Scale items were designed to measure each of the three clusters of meaning, so that a similar number of items represented each of the meanings. However, two of the three items dropped from the scale were from the rejection category. This is where the cognitive interviews contributed to the measurement of moderate. The wording used by the subjects, in combination with the Hawkins and Nosek (2012) scale, informed the design of each item.

¹⁸ As an example of this, “My views do not fit into any one ideology or party platform” is changed to “My views do not fit into any one ideology, so I call myself a moderate.”

Table 2: Frequency Distributions for Meaning Items

Items	Response Categories			
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean
Mixture				
My views do not fit into any one ideology.	55%	34%	21%	3.7
Some of my views are more conservative, while others are more liberal.	71%	18%	11%	4.0
Both liberals and conservatives offer good ideas when it comes to politics.	75%	25%	0%	4.5
My beliefs overlap with liberals and conservatives, so it does not make sense to just pick one.	64%	25%	11%	3.8
Political Philosophy				
I stay away from extremes when it comes to political issues.	35%	57%	8%	3.2
I don't want to be seen as too liberal or too conservative.	21%	52%	27%	3.4
I prefer to think for myself rather than feel like I have to be conservative or liberal on any issue, so I call myself a moderate.	54%	34%	23%	3.6
I avoid taking extreme views on political issues, so I think moderate fits me best.	27%	65%	10%	3.1
When it comes to political issues, it often takes me awhile to decide where I stand.	55%	36%	1%	3.9
Anti-Partisan				
I do not like either liberals or conservatives.	<1%	20%	79%	1.7
I reject the policies advocated by BOTH liberals and conservatives.	<1%	24%	75%	1.8

Responses on these items were combined to form a summary scale,¹⁹ where a score of 5 indicates very strong agreement with the description of “moderate.” The mean correlation among all 12 items was .12, and an additive scale had an estimated reliability of .44. This is strong evidence that the items are not measures of an underlying construct, and that the three clusters were distinct measures of what moderate means. Then, using 12 of the 15 items, three subscales were constructed. First, responses on four items were combined to form a scale measuring “ideological mixture.” The Cronbach’s alpha statistics for

¹⁹ The relatively small ratio of subjects (N=30) to meaning scale items (20) excluded the possibility of examining the factor structure of the scale.

this subscale reached acceptable levels of reliability ($\alpha = .85$) and the mean inter-item correlation among these items was .27. Next, three items from the summary scale were used to create a measure of the second cluster, “political philosophy.” The estimated reliability for all four items included in the questionnaire was .52. However, reliability increased to acceptable levels when one item was removed ($\alpha = .67$).²⁰ Finally, none of the items included to measure “anti-partisan” combined to form a reliable scale (average inter-item correlation $r = .12$ and $\alpha = .55$).²¹ Cross-validation did not improve scale reliability. This result is not surprising given the descriptive statistics in Table 2 showing a large majority of respondents disagreed with these items.

Scale Correlation

The “anti-partisan” subscale is weakly correlated with the other two subscales ($r = .20$). The other two subscales, mixture and political philosophy, are moderately correlated ($r = .32$), but the correlation is weak enough to consider these scales as empirically distinct constructs.

²⁰ The item that was removed from the scale: “I don’t want to be seen as too liberal or too conservative.” The item did not correlate with any of the other subscales, so it was dropped as a measure of “moderate.” Responses on the paired statements items are consistent with this result. Overall, respondents choosing “moderate” wholly rejected definitions that described “moderate” as being lukewarm or ambivalent.

²¹ The reliability scores for the “rejection” subscale revealed that this scale was not an acceptable measure for the meaning of “moderate.” However, I will note that the nature of this work is exploratory, so this result can be used to further advance the understanding of the perceived meaning of “moderate.”

Table 3: Paired Statements Items

Statements	Frequency
(1)	
A. Some of my political views are liberal, while others are conservative, so I consider myself to be a moderate.	90%
B. Most of my political views fall somewhere in between liberal and conservative, so I consider myself to be a moderate.	10%
(2)	
A. I think both liberals and conservatives offer good ideas when it comes to politics, so I call myself a moderate.	88%
B. I reject the policies and views advocated by both liberals and conservatives, so I call myself a moderate.	12%
(3)	
When it comes to political issues, it's best to hear the debate on a problem before coming up with a solution so I call myself a moderate.	77%
My views on political issues are fairly consistent regardless of the debate on a problem, so I call myself a moderate.	23%
(4)	
I avoid taking extreme views on political issues, so I think moderate fits me best.	89%
I take extreme liberal positions on some issues and extreme conservative positions on other issues, so I think moderate fits me best.	11%
(5)	
I do not pay much attention to what other people are talking about or doing in politics, so I am a moderate.	27%
I follow politics closely and feel very frustrated by the intense partisan bickering, so I am a moderate.	73%

In addition to the items described above, I included a set of 5 paired alternative items another set of items designed to measure the clusters of meaning presented above. These items are shown in Table 3. Respondents were instructed to assess which statement out of a set of two best represented why they call themselves a moderate. This format was chosen to provide additional evidence for construct validity and more substantive information about how people perceive “moderate” as self-defining. The first group of items asks about perceptions of political views in relation to liberals and conservatives, or whether moderates see themselves as adopting a mixture of liberal and conservative

views. If people do not choose moderate because it represents an “ideological mixture,” then those who do might wholly reject the “conservative” and “liberal” label. This is represented in the second set of statements which measures the belief that “moderate” defines someone who is anti-partisan or wholly rejecting of liberals. The conceptualization of “moderate” as representing a “political philosophy” is presented in the third group. Similarly, the fourth group measures the extent to which respondents see moderates as a group that avoids extremity in politics. In the final group, respondents are presented with their perceptions of the relationship between being “moderate” and general level of interest in politics. Here, I give respondents the opportunity to indicate the role of interest in politics in labeling themselves as “moderate.”

Social Identity and Ideological Self-Identification

Results

My main expectation is that moderate self-categorization represents a group identification. In order to test this prediction, I first consider the reliability of the scale as a measure of identification. Then, I measure the level of identification across all three groups, liberals, conservatives, and moderates in order to compare moderates to liberals and conservatives.

Table 4: Estimated Reliability of Social Identity Scales

Measure	Total Sample N=280	Liberals N=101	Conservatives N=169	Moderates N=30
Importance	.69	.70	.71	.59
Commitment	.59	.66	.70	.45
Superiority	.78	.88	.77	.85
Total Scale	.67	.77	.72	.55

Table 4 reports the estimated alpha reliability scores of the group identification questionnaire for this sample. Group identification was measured using an additive 12-item scale on which a score of 1 indicated no identification and 5 indicated very strong identifi-

cation. The summary scale was a moderately reliable measure of liberal and conservative identification ($\alpha = .72$ and $.77$ respectively), but estimated reliability was weaker for moderate responses. Liberal and conservative responses were analyzed as two separate groups for the reliability measures, and, as expected, the response patterns are similar between the two groups. I also calculated alpha coefficients for each of the three subscales between liberals, conservatives, and moderates. These results showed that the subscales formed a more reliable measure of identification for liberals and conservatives than for moderates. In the moderate group, the superiority subscale was strong ($\alpha = .72$), but both the commitment and importance subscales did not reach acceptable levels of reliability.²²

Table 5: Average Social Identity Scores By Group

	Liberal		Conservative		Moderate	
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Social Identification	2.8	.80	2.9	1.12	1.9	1.19
Superiority	3.2	1.16	3.1	.92	2.9	.96
Commitment	3.5	.90	3.2	1.16	1.3	.88
Importance	2.5	.85	2.7	.88	1.8	1.02

Bold figures are statistically significant.

To test the key hypothesis that moderate is a social identity, I calculate group identification scores for all respondents and then average levels of identification within each of the groups. I created a group identification score by coding each response on the scale from one to five, where one is weakest and five strongest. These scores are presented in Table 5. From this, I then calculated participants' average scores on the summary identification scale and each of the three subscales. Recall, I expected to find similar levels of identification among liberals, conservatives, and moderates. Therefore, my next step was to compare the overall identification scores for liberals and conservatives in order to ensure that both groups exhibit minimal levels of identification. On the summary scale, the mean score for liberals is 2.8 and conservatives have an almost identical mean score of

²² This is consistent with the findings presented in the following section, which show that the moderates identified most strongly on the superiority subscale. Therefore, it is consistent that estimated reliability would be highest for moderates on the superiority subscale.

2.9. This confirms my expectations that (1) liberal and conservative are social identities and (2) we should see similar levels of identification between these two groups.

Next, I test my expectation that individuals would identify as “moderate,” and that the levels of identification would be similar to those of liberals and conservatives. I analyze liberals and conservatives as one group in comparison to moderates, rather than have three groups for comparison.²³ Again, I first calculated the mean response on the summary identification scale and each subscale for moderate respondents and liberal/conservative respondents together, which is shown in Table 5. Then, I used a one-way analysis of variance to estimate the effect of self-placement on identification levels. Contrary to my expectations, moderate self-placement had an effect on overall levels of identification, such that levels of identification differed significantly between self-categorized moderates and liberals/conservatives, with liberals and conservatives having overall higher levels of social identification than moderates. Thus, liberals and conservatives more strongly identify with their respective groups than self-categorized moderates.

This result shows the effect of moderate on overall levels of identification. However, it is necessary to analyze identification on each of the three subscales for a more comprehensive (if not more appropriate) understanding of the nature of identification between moderates and liberals/conservatives. So, I analyzed levels of identification with each of the three dimensions of identification across the two groups. Empirically, it is important to make such comparisons on each dimension because the theory posited by Roccas et al. (2008) argues that identification isolated to one dimension can still represent meaningful group identification. I discuss this issue in detail below. The main effect of moderate self-placement was insignificant for the superiority subscale: respondents in the moderate category had similar levels of identification on the superiority subscale as those in the liberal and conservative category. In addition, the results in Table 4 confirm that the levels of identification on this dimension are high for all three groups. For the importance and commitment items, however, there was a significant main effect for self-placement

²³ This decision is supported by my theoretical argument, but the results to this point also support combining liberals and conservatives into one group for analysis. The results in Table 4 demonstrate that the mean scores for these two groups are nearly identical across the summary scale and subscale.

indicating moderates have lower levels of identification than liberals and conservatives for those two dimensions of identity. These results are crucial to understanding the extent and nature of moderate identification because they demonstrate that people identify with “moderate.” Specifically, moderate is a group identification, however, it is focused on the superiority dimension, with much weaker evidence of identity on the commitment and importance dimensions.

The results outlined above demonstrate that, overall, moderates have lower levels of identification as compared to liberals and conservatives. While useful in characterizing the comparative strength of identification between these groups, the results inadequately characterize the nature of moderate identification. Specifically, there is a difference between no identification and low identification, and further analysis is needed to explore the qualitative difference between these groups. Principally, a person who weakly identifies with a group is substantively different from a person who does not identify at all. While the identity might not be especially salient to the person who weakly identifies, the group is still a relevant part of the self-concept. Thus, “moderate” might not be consistently relevant, but the identity still holds psychological significance for how a person thinks of herself in the political context.

With this in mind, I take another look at the comparative identity profiles of moderates and liberals/conservatives in order to see how the specific levels of identification on each dimension compare across groups. Roccas et al. (2008) explicitly point out that a multidimensional scale is a necessary and useful empirical tool for measuring identification because some group identities will be isolated to a single dimension. Therefore, a multidimensional scale can capture the different ways individuals think about themselves as a member of a group. To this point, Roccas et al. (2008) advocate that scores should be used to create profiles to describe how people identify with a group and as a tool for determining an identifier from a non-identifier. Therefore, the mean scores presented in Table 4 also show that moderate self-categorization is representative of weak identification on two of the scales, but is much stronger on the superiority scale. Indeed, the mean scores for moderates are above a threshold of “no identification.”

Discussion

These results confirm the theoretical rationale for the scale developed by Roccas et al. (2008)—identification is multidimensional and some groups may only load on one dimension. The multidimensional measure allowed me to compare psychological identification between groups beyond just the overall strength of their identification profiles. By looking at the levels of identification on each dimension, I was able to confirm my expectation that respondents did identify with “moderate.” The lower levels of moderate identification are not evidence of “no identification”; rather these findings simply overall show that moderate is a thinner identity than liberal and conservative identities.

In addition to allowing for a comparison of the overall levels of identification, the identity profile measures provide information about the psychological and substantive meaning of group identification. The psychological meaning of “moderate” is evidenced by the strong levels of identification on the superiority dimension. Thus, confirming that moderate is a social identity. In terms of substantive meaning, the identity profiles reveal that moderates conceptualize their identity based on comparisons with liberals and conservatives, while liberals and conservatives rely on a much broader conceptualization of their identities. As was reviewed earlier, Roccas et al. (2008) contend that the levels of identification on the different modes provide information about the meaning of a group identification. Therefore, moderates partially derive their identity from positive distinctiveness of their group from other groups. This finding is important because social identity research is consistent in confirming that positive differentiation of the in-group is almost always present when an individual psychologically identifies with a group (Oakes and Turner 1980; Tajfel 1978; Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Sources of Meaning

Results

The previous analysis confirmed that moderate self-placement represents a social identity. The next step is to determine why people label themselves as part of this group, or

what they perceive this group identification to mean in substantive terms. As noted earlier, three clusters of meaning are considered as possible sources. To test the contribution of each of these clusters, scores on each of the meaning subscales are analyzed.

Referring to Table 2, the distribution of responses on each of the subscales provides a descriptive picture of respondent's perceptions of the meaning of "moderate." Individuals were much more likely to define "moderate" as meaning a mixed preference for liberal and conservative approaches to politics (the "ideological mixture" cluster). Consequently, this is evidence that people do perceive "moderate" to represent a definition close to, if not exactly like, my conceptualization of the mixture meaning.²⁴ These patterns fit with my construction of the scale items, which showed the mixture subscale to be the most reliable measure of the definition of "moderate." Not only did these results demonstrate that people preferred this meaning, but they also show that individuals strongly associated some definition with the label "moderate." This finding provides further support to the expectation that moderate would be an identity because individuals define this label to have meaning. From this, I can conclude that individuals evaluate moderate as a mixture, which directly influences their self-categorization as "moderate."

The results for the other two subscales were not as strong, especially for the anti-partisan subscale. Clearly, individuals do not self-categorize as moderate because they define "moderate" as a rejection of liberal and conservative. This pattern of results is theoretically consistent with the strong association between "moderate" and "ideological mixture," such that I would not expect someone to simultaneously eschew liberal and conservative approaches and describe themselves as possessing both liberal and conservative positions. The meaning of "moderate" is clearly clustered around this idea that a moderate is someone who adopts liberal and conservative positions, such that I would expect a negative relationship between the ideological mixture and anti-partisan subscale. The evaluations of the items measuring moderate as a political philosophy, while still

²⁴ The mixture items are not phrased to capture ambivalence. I am confident that the "mixture" subscale does not measure "moderate" as meaning ambivalent. The survey items included in this subscale are intentional in highlighting that "moderate" means holding strong or settled views that lie on both sides of the spectrum—and not a lukewarmness about both sides simultaneously.

weak, fared better.²⁵ In particular, a majority of individuals view moderate as describing an approach to politics rather than a description of political views. Further, almost all of the respondents described themselves as moderate because it is best to hear the debate on a problem before coming up with a solution.²⁶

If the subscales created from the Likert items are a reliable measure of meaning, then the results from the subscales should be consistent with those from the paired statements. Correlational analyses, as well as descriptive statistics, using the paired statements are evidence of construct validity. Correlations between responses to the three subscales and the paired statements were mostly reliably positive. More importantly, these patterns confirm the strong findings for the “ideological mixture” cluster of meaning. Over eighty percent of respondents chose the item representing an ideological mixture as opposed to the alternative item. Both items that were included as a potential measure of this cluster were strongly correlated with the “ideological mixture” subscale. Two items measuring the “political philosophy” cluster were highly correlated with the two “ideological mixture” items, but not the ideological mixture subscale. The correlation among these two items was also high ($r = .25$). Consistent with this finding, nearly 100 percent of the sample described themselves as moderate because “they prefer to hear the debate on a problem before coming up with a solution.” Even though the “political philosophy” cluster did not perform strongly in the previous analyses, it could still be argued that the specific content of “moderate” might still include elements from this cluster. The third group of items, designed to measure the “anti-partisan” cluster, did not correlate with the items in that subscale. However, the item using “frustration

²⁵ I took a risk in creating an original measure based on cognitive interviewing because it was a challenge to translate interviewee responses into coherent scale items. Future research would benefit from additional pre-tests of the final scale items to test for coherency. One of the problems with these items might be that people just did not understand what the scale was asking.

²⁶ Because of the strong performance of some of the political philosophy items, I would reconsider the performance of the political philosophy scale as a reliable measure of meaning. The conceptualization of this category appears to be appropriate in the sense that people do like to call themselves moderate because it describes a pragmatic approach. However, the operationalization of this was ineffective because the scale items did not form a reliable construct. In the future, scale items might be developed that focus more on the “pragmatic approach” than on the comparison that picking a side denotes extremism or dogmatism.

over partisan bickering” as a description of moderate was correlated with the “political philosophy” subscale ($r = .21$).

One of the more important findings from these results is the reliability of the measures created to assess self-definitions of “moderate.” The results from both of the scale measures and the open-ended questions were consistent with clusters identified earlier, and, in addition the “ideological mixture” was strongly identified as a definition of “moderate” across all of the measures of substantive meaning. When identifying the definitions associated with the label, moderates were much more likely to associate themselves with a definition of “moderate” that incorporated a mixture of liberal and conservative approaches. While this analysis is not conclusive, the findings do support my contention that moderate is not chosen out of apathy or lack of understanding. Moderates in this study clearly demonstrated a tendency to define “moderate” to mean something associated with their political beliefs and preferences.

In order to gauge the accuracy of the predicted sources of meaning, a direct open-ended question was included to allow respondents to give a self-definition of moderate.²⁷ Respondents were asked, “When you say you are a moderate, what does that mean to you?” Up to two answers were coded for every respondent. Initially, the first mentioned response to the following question was coded into one of three categories. The coding scheme was reduced to two categories because all thirty answers fit into two of the existing categories originally identified in pre-tests and discussed earlier as sources of meaning. Table 6 reports the percentage of respondents using each cluster of meaning in their definitions of “moderate.” The greatest share of the responses fit into the mixture category, with respondents using very similar language to describe their perceptions of moderate. The following quotes reflected definitions that fit the “mixture” meaning: “I am conservative on some issues, while liberal on others and I generally fall somewhere in the middle” and “I just find that both sides can say things that fit my specific views on politics.” Other statements that drew on liberal and conservative perspectives were: “I like some

²⁷ Respondents answered the open-ended question before reading the meaning subscale items to avoid priming effects.

things that liberals say and some things that conservatives say, so I do not think that picking one of them is the right choice for me” and “I would say to me moderate means that you would vote for a Democrat or a Republican depending on the issue.”

In addition, one third of the responses described moderate as an approach to politics similar to the “moderate as a philosophy” definition. One respondent said, “I think taking a moderate approach to politics is better than trying to come at it from the extremes.” Another expressed a similar middle-of-the-road sentiment, “I am not extreme Republican or Democrat, I find middle ground between both parties to be best.” In addition, another statement pointed to moderate as a more “level-headed” way think about politics.

Table 6: Frequency distribution and correlations of self-definitions of Moderate

	Describing as a meaning of moderate	Subscale Correlations	
		Ideological mixture	Political philosophy
Ideological Mixture	78%	.31	.25
Moderate as ‘political philosophy’	39%	.21	.29

Again, the pattern of responses here confirms the findings for both measures of each cluster. Correlational analysis shows that the open-ended responses were positively correlated with the corresponding subscale, such that respondents who described “moderate” consistent with the “ideological mixture” cluster selected this description of moderate in the scale format. The results of this analysis provided stronger support for the “political philosophy” cluster than the scale item results. For the open-ended descriptions, respondents relied on language consistent with this cluster. Given respondents strong preference for the “political philosophy” description in the paired statements, there is evidence that this cluster should still be considered as a potential source of meaning of “moderate.”

Moderates and Political Sophistication

Finally, I used statistical analysis to test the hypothesis that moderates are simply less sophisticated voters who are uninterested in politics. I ran an OLS regression to measure

the relationship between self-identification and political sophistication. I estimated the effect of sophistication on self-identification to see if increased political sophistication decreased the likelihood of moderate self-identification. The results were not significant, showing that lack of interest in politics does not predict moderate self-identification ($p > .215$).²⁸ At least in this sample, moderates were just as likely as conservative and liberal identifiers to be interested in politics and knowledgeable about politics.²⁹

Conclusions

Group identities have a powerful influence on political behavior. Using new and original measures, I have developed a theoretical and methodological framework for exploring the nature of moderate self-categorization. My aim in this research was to better understand moderate self-identification in order to assess whether or not moderate should be considered a meaningful political identity. My analysis has provided initial support for my expectation that moderate is a group identity. In examining the meaning of self-categorization as “moderate,” I focused on whether it represents a group identification, or, alternatively, is it simply a categorization that carries no meaning. Moderate proved to be a group identification similar to liberal and conservative; however, the strength and dimensionality of these identities were different. For moderates, group identification was rooted in positive differentiation from liberals and conservatives; while liberals and conservatives exhibited a multidimensional identity. The difference between these two groups could be a result of the limited sample; however, the strength of moderate identification on the superiority mode might indicate that these identities have different meanings to group members. This would mean that we might expect key differences in how and why these identities influence political behavior. Future research should look more closely at the differences between the meanings of these ideological identities.

²⁸ I examined the effect of political interest and attention on social identity strength separately among liberals, conservatives, and moderates and found no major differences. This is because liberals, conservatives, and moderates did not differ in levels of attention and interest.

²⁹ Overall, this sample of respondents expressed moderate to high levels of political interest and attention. Over 80% of the sample indicated being somewhat to very interested in politics and about 75% indicated they paid some attention to politics.

In addition to confirming my expectations about moderate self-identification, the findings have important implications for understanding the substantive meaning of moderate. The results presented here demonstrate that “ideological mixture” is most strongly attached to “moderate.” However, this definition is only one possible cluster and citizens might perceive additional meanings attached to “moderate.” “Political philosophy” contributed to people’s description of what it means to be “moderate” in pre-tests and the open-ended portion of the survey. Further, the strength of identification on the superiority mode indicates that this definition of “moderate” might capture at least some portion of the public’s perception of the label. Specifically, the social identity literature suggests that in-group/out-group comparisons are a principle contribution to the definition of a category, where the concept of positive distinctiveness contributes to an individual’s conceptualization of their group membership their behavior as a group member. This understanding of the meaning of social categories is reflected in the “political philosophy” and “anti-partisan” clusters of meaning. Looking ahead, future research should examine how perceptions of liberals and conservatives contribute to the meaning of “moderate.” Additionally, we may see how results on the political philosophy subscale differ in a more representative sample.

The findings presented here address important theoretical and empirical issues. Theoretically, measuring the meaning of “moderate” extends research on ideological identification and social identity. My findings suggest that failing to understand “moderate” as a group identification could cause inaccurate predictions and explanations of voting behavior and other areas of political decision-making. This suggests that the gap in the literature about moderate self-identification needs to be addressed because we could be missing a key factor that influences political behavior on both the micro and macro levels. As such, future research should not only address the meaning of “moderate,” but also consider how “moderate” as a group identification shapes political outcomes. Moreover, understanding moderate self-placement takes on significance in a polarized political climate among party elites and activists (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006) because citizens identifying as moderate may withdraw from the democratic process because their opinions

are not reflected by any “group member” in leadership (Noelle-Neumann 1984).

This is not the first study to rely on social identity to study ideological self-identification. However, it does emphasize the theoretical and empirical value of using social identity theory to study ideological self-identification. Moreover, the group identification scale is an innovative measure of ideological self-identification, and it proved to be effective. Importantly, the results provide further support for alternative measures of self-identification beyond the traditional 7-point scale. Future research should consider a group identification measure as a tool for measuring ideological identities in order to improve understanding of self-identification and its role in shaping American political behavior. Although the scale used to measure identity did not yield strong results for moderate self-identification, it was a valid and reliable measure of liberal and conservative self-identification. In addition, the use of original measures of meaning took an important step in conceptualizing “moderate” based on self-definitions, rather than on a researchers attempt to project meaning onto the category.

Given the limits of my data, the results are not definitive answers to these questions. These findings are presented with an acknowledgement that the sample used in limits the generalizability of the results. Looking ahead, a random sample would improve the reliability and validity of the results, especially on the identity scale items. While a different sample might yield more generalizable results, the initial findings begin to answer why people choose to label themselves as “moderate.” In particular, my findings do lend support to the hypothesis that moderate is an ideological identity. However, the results are suggestive that a better understanding of moderate self-placement is needed. Specifically, research should examine the meaning of moderate as a political identity, rather than a categorization or self-placement.

APPENDIX

Political Sophistication Questions

Some people don't pay much attention to politics, and some people do. In general, how much attention do you pay to politics?

- A lot
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

Some people aren't very interested in politics, and some people are. In general, how interested are you in politics?

- Very much interested
- Somewhat interested
- Not at all

Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the House of Representatives?

- Republicans
- Democrats

How much of a majority is required for the US Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

- Simple majority
- 3/5 (three-fifths)
- 2/3 (two-thirds)
- 3/4 (three quarters)

Would you say that one of the parties is more conservative than the other at the national level?

- Yes
- No

IF YES: Which party is more conservative?

- Republicans

- Democrats

Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?

- The president
- Congress
- The Supreme Court

Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Joe Biden?

- Secretary of State
- Speaker of the House
- Vice President
- Secretary of Defense
- White House Chief of Staff

Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by John Kerry?

- Director of the CIA
- Secretary of Defense
- Secretary of State
- U.S. Senator
- White House Chief of Staff

Sources of Meaning

Likert Scale Items adapted from Hawkins and Nosek (2012)

Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. We're interested in how you see yourself as a moderate/liberal/conservative. Please consider each statement and tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement. Please read each item carefully and consider how it applies to your feelings about your ideological identification.

(ITEMS AND RESPONSES IN MATRIX FORM: STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE, STRONGLY DISAGREE)

1. I prefer to think for myself rather than feel like I have to be conservative or liberal on any issue, so I call myself a moderate.
2. My views do not fit into any one ideology, so I call myself a moderate.

3. When it comes to political issues, it often takes me awhile to decide where I stand.
4. Some of my views are more conservative, while others are more liberal.
5. I stay away from extremes when it comes to political issues.
6. I don't want to be seen as too liberal or too conservative.
7. I reject the policies advocated by BOTH liberals and conservatives.
8. Both liberals and conservatives offer good ideas when it comes to politics.
9. My beliefs overlap with liberals and conservatives, so it does not make sense to just pick one.
10. I do not like either liberals or conservatives.
11. I don't like to label myself.
12. I really don't pay much attention when it comes to political issues.
13. I am unclear about the meaning of liberal and conservative.

Paired Statements—Original measures

For each pair of statements, pick the ONE that you think comes closest to why you call yourself a moderate. It is alright if the statements are not an exact reflection of your views—just pick the statement that comes closest to how you feel.

(PAIR OF STATEMENTS PRESENTED IN BINARY MATRIX)

Question 1:

- A. Some of my political views are liberal, while others are conservative, so I consider myself to be a moderate.
- B. Most of my political views fall somewhere in between liberal and conservative, so I consider myself to be a moderate.

Question 2:

- A. I avoid taking extreme views on political issues, so I think moderate fits me best.
OR
- B. I take extreme liberal positions on some issues and extreme conservative positions on other issues, so I think moderate fits me best.

Question 3:

- A. I reject the policies and views advocated by both liberals and conservatives, so I call myself a moderate. OR
- B. I think both liberals and conservatives offer good ideas when it comes to politics, so I call myself a moderate.

Question 4:

- A. I do not pay much attention to what other people are talking about or doing in politics, so I am a moderate. OR
- B. I follow politics closely and feel very frustrated by the intense partisan bickering, so I am a moderate.

Question 5:

- A. When it comes to political issues, its best to hear the debate on a problem before coming up with a solution, so I call myself a moderate. OR
- B. My views on political issues are fairly consistent regardless of the debate on a problem, so I call myself a moderate.

Group Identification Scale (Roccas et al. 2008)

Next, we would like for you to tell us about being a moderate relative to being a part of other ideological groups. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

(RESPONSES IN MATRIX FORM: STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE, STRONGLY DISAGREE)

- I feel strongly affiliated with moderates
- Liberals and conservatives can learn a lot from moderates.
- Being a moderate is an important part of my identity.
- Compared to liberals and conservatives, moderates are particularly good.
- It is important to me that I view myself as a moderate
- It is important to me that others see me as a moderate.
- Relative to other groups, moderates are a good group.
- When I talk about other moderates I usually say we instead of they.
- Moderates are better than liberals and conservatives in most respects.
- I often think about the fact that I am a moderate.
- In general, being a moderate is an important part of my self-image.
- In my everyday life, I often think about what it means to be a moderate.

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