

How the Progressive Label Affects Ideological Assessments of Others

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Abstract

Despite increasing levels of ideological polarization among party elites, activists, and partisans, only Republican Party elites consistently and explicitly identify their ideological dispositions as conservatives. Democrats tend to shy away from calling themselves liberals and instead identify as *progressives*. What effect does this label have on how candidates and citizens are viewed? We argue that the progressive label communicates ideological information suggesting that the person associated with the label holds a more liberal ideological position, but less so than an explicit liberal label would suggest. We find strong support for our expectations using data drawn from two survey experiments. Our findings suggest that the progressive label offers candidates a strategic means by which to communicate their left-leaning ideological preferences while avoiding the unpopular reputation of the word *liberal*.

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In American party politics, the Republican Party tends to be ideologically conservative while the Democratic Party tends to be ideologically liberal. The American parties have also become increasingly distinct from one another ideologically (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 2006), which should make the parties' ideological differences more apparent to citizens. In addition, levels of mass polarization have increased over the past several decades (Abramowitz, 2010) as has polarization among party activists (Layman et al., 2010). Beyond policy and ideology, partisans' evaluations of the opposing party have also become increasingly negative (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). Given that elites, activists, and citizens have all become increasingly ideologically polarized, one might expect elites to rely more on their ideological labels during campaigns as a tool to appeal to their more ideologically extreme supporters.

Most Republican candidates are quick to identify themselves as conservatives to the extent that the label has become ubiquitous among the party's members. Democrats, on the other hand, rarely publicly identify themselves as liberals in the contemporary era. Research consistently shows that American citizens are more likely to self-identify as conservatives than they are to call themselves liberals (Ellis and Stimson, 2012). This imbalance in symbolic identification may encourage Republicans to use ideological labels while discouraging Democrats from doing the same. Additionally, there is some evidence that the liberal label can be harmful for Democratic candidates (Neiheisel, 2016). This suggests that Democratic candidates might need to seek an alternative strategy for use when signaling their general predispositions. Rather than calling themselves liberals, contemporary Democrats tend to make use of a different label: the progressive label. What kind of information does this label confer to citizens about the bearer of such a label?

We argue that the progressive label communicates information to citizens about the subject of the label's ideological disposition because the term has been used by politicians of both parties as a stand-in for more explicit ideological language, almost exclusively in reference to Democratic candidates. The term *progressive* means something different to

people today than it did to President Theodore Roosevelt and others in the early 20th century. We posit that the term's contemporary political meaning is a more moderate cognate of the political meaning of the term *liberal*. In other words, people who are identified as progressives should on average be viewed as more ideologically liberal than people who are not identified as anything, but these people should be viewed as less liberal than a person who is explicitly identified as such.

To test our theory, we conduct two survey experiments in which respondents were asked to assess the ideological position of a politician or a non-political figure to whom either no label, a liberal label, or a progressive label was randomly attached. We find strong and consistent evidence across our experiments that both the liberal and the progressive labels inform participants' opinions by leading them to view the person described in the experiments as more ideologically liberal, but those people who are described as progressives are viewed as being less ideologically extreme than are the people characterized as liberals. These results suggest that the progressive label may be electorally advantageous for Democratic politicians because it allows them to communicate positional information to citizens while avoiding the unpopularity and extremity of the liberal label.

1 The Centrality of Heuristics in Public Opinion

Much of the classic research on American public opinion and political behavior suggests that people care little, know little, and pay little attention to politics (Campbell et al., 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Despite these formidable limitations, people are still able to form attitudes about politics and political figures by making generous use of heuristics. These heuristics provide citizens with cognitive shortcuts that allow them to simplify the complex social world in which they live (Conover and Feldman, 1989; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989; Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). These simplifications allow them to quickly form

judgments on various political topics.

The heuristics that citizens use to judge political figures, for example, may come from several sources. Many heuristics stem from the characteristics of the figure. There is evidence that people’s assessments of political figures can be influenced by the figures’ religious identities (Jacobsmeier, 2013), sex (Koch, 2000), and race (McDermott, 1998). Party labels can also powerfully inform citizens’ views of political figures (Rahn, 1993). In addition, candidates’ discussion of issues and their positions on those issues can further influence people’s ideological assessments of candidates (Banda, 2016). In sum, people’s views of politicians and other people seem to be informed by various types of labels and information cues associated with those people. Democrats’ use of the progressive label to describe themselves is common today.¹ In this research, we focus on how the progressive label affects citizens’ ideological assessments of people who are identified as such.

1.1 Public Opinion and the Progressive Label

We argue that in contemporary American politics, the progressive label functions as a stand-in for the liberal label. In the context of electoral politics, candidates use the label to signal citizens that they hold liberal policy positions. The label is potentially useful because it should influence citizens’ ideological assessments of the subject of the label while avoiding the negative valence that is associated with the liberal label (Neiheisel, 2016). Because the contemporary use of the term is fairly new and is less explicit than a clearly stated ideological position, the progressive label should push assessments of people’s ideological positions towards the liberal end of the ideological spectrum, but less so than an explicit liberal label might.

¹Though we discuss the use of the progressive label by Democratic candidates in the bulk of this paper, we should note that third party and independent candidates might use the label. Candidates in nonpartisan elections might also find the label useful.

Our expectations are as follows: (1) citizens should assess people who are identified as progressives as being more ideologically liberal than a person who has no identification and (2) they should assess people identified as progressives as being less ideologically liberal than a person who is explicitly identified as a liberal.

2 Research Design

We test our theory using data drawn from experiments embedded in two different surveys. Both surveys were administered by Qualtrics, and the samples were representative of adult Americans.² Qualtrics recruits participants through online advertisements. Those who are interested register to participate in surveys for rewards like gift cards. Qualtrics then advertises surveys to registered users who match the characteristics prioritized by the researchers who wish to conduct surveys. In the case of this research, these characteristics were respondents' age, sex, and education level. Surveys run until two conditions are met: (1) the number of responses commissioned by researchers have been recorded and (2) the sample is representative of the target population based upon U.S. Census data. 1,168 people participated in the first survey; 1,000 completed the second.

Participants in both surveys were first asked to answer a series of demographic and political questions before they took part in the experiments. After completing the pretest questions, participants took part in the experiment embedded in their survey. We describe each in greater detail below, but the general design of both was identical. Participants were randomly exposed with equal probability to one of three treatments. We manipulated one piece of information across these treatments: whether or not a label was attached to the person. In the control treatment, there was no label. In the remaining experimental treat-

²The first survey was conducted from April 14th - 19th of 2015 while the second was collected between September 14th and 19th of 2016.

ments, the person was either labeled as a liberal or as a progressive. These are the “liberal label” and the “progressive label” treatments. The treatment received by a respondent thus represents the independent variable in our analyses.

After treatment exposure, participants were tasked with assessing the ideological position of the subject of the experiment. Responses were coded 1 for “very conservative,” 2 for “conservative,” 3 for “somewhat conservative,” 4 for “moderate,” 5 for “somewhat liberal,” 6 for “liberal,” and 7 for “very liberal.” Thus our dependent variable ranges from 1 to 7 with higher values indicating higher levels of ideological liberalism. Given the experimental nature of our data, we test our expectations using a series of difference of means tests.

2.1 Experiment 1: Ideological Assessments of Politicians

The first experiment asked participants to assess the ideological position of a hypothetical politician running for mayor. The text of the treatment read as follows:

Roger Hewitt is a candidate running for mayor in a city in a nearby state. He is 52, married, and a father of two children. He has experience running a successful small business and is a veteran of the U.S. Navy. He has previously been elected to serve as a member of a school board and of the city council. [[blank] / **He describes himself as a liberal politician.** / **He describes himself as a progressive politician.**]

We manipulated the last sentence — bolded and bracketed above — in our treatments. The control treatment had no final sentence. Hewitt was described as a liberal politician in the liberal label treatment and as a progressive in the progressive label treatment. We plot the mean ideological assessments of Hewitt by treatment in Figure 1. Before we assess our expectations, note that the mean assessment of candidate Hewitt among members of the control group is about 3.8. Thus in the absence of political information, participants on average assess very close to the midpoint of the ideological scale. In other words, they tend to label him as an ideological moderate.

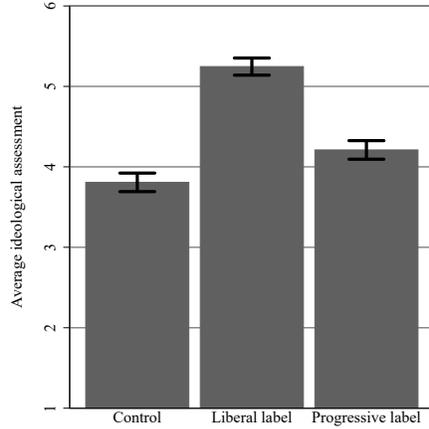


Figure 1: Mean ideological assessments by treatment along with 95% confidence intervals of mayoral candidate Roger Hewitt.

These data are congruent with our expectations. Hewitt is assessed on average as being about 1.44 units more liberal when he is identified as being a liberal ($t = 18.07$, $p \leq 0.01$) relative to when he lacks a label in the control treatment. He is similarly viewed as being more liberal on average — by about 0.4 units — by participants who were exposed to the progressive label in comparison to the assessments made by those who received the control ($t = 4.84$, $p \leq 0.01$). We also observe that the progressive label appears to lead to less liberal assessments of Hewitt than does the liberal label ($t = -12.95$, $p \leq 0.01$); the distance between these two means is about 1.04 units. Given that the dependent variable has a seven point scale, these differences are substantively meaningful.

These results thus suggest that citizens' ideological assessments of political figures are responsive to the progressive label. Progressive candidates are on average viewed as being more liberal than are candidates who lack a label. They are also viewed as being less liberal than candidates who are explicitly labeled as liberals. We next turn to assessments of non-political figures.

2.2 Experiment 2: Ideological Assessments of Citizens

Participants in the second experiment were tasked with assessing the ideological disposition of a person who was not explicitly identified as a political figure. Instead, this hypothetical person was supposed to be an average citizen. The text of the experiment was as follows:

Steven Hewitt is a 30 year old man from Dayton, Ohio. He graduated from college with an engineering degree about eight years ago with a 3.3 GPA. He is married and has one child. In addition to his job as an electrical engineer, he also serves on the school board and volunteers for several [**local / liberal / progressive**] organizations.

We once again manipulated only the text that is bracketed and bolded above. In this case, that means we manipulated only a single word in each treatment. The control treatment identified the organizations as “local,” which should not communicate any ideological information. The organizations were identified as liberal in the liberal label treatment and as progressive in the progressive label treatment. We again plot the mean ideological assessments of Hewitt in Figure 2. As was the case in the previous experiment, participants who received the control treatment tended to assess citizen Hewitt as a moderate as evidenced by the mean evaluation of almost exactly 4 on the 1 to 7 ideological scale.

These results are similar to those produced by the first experiment. As expected, citizen Hewitt was viewed on average as being more liberal when he was connected with the progressive label ($t = 4.21$, $p \leq 0.01$) or to the liberal label ($t = 10.60$, $p \leq 0.01$) than he was when he was only identified as volunteering for local groups. The differences between the means produced by the experimental treatments and the control were 0.43 (progressive label) and 1.06 (liberal label) units respectively. Hewitt was also perceived as being about 0.63 units less liberal by those who were exposed to the progressive label than he was by participants who received the liberal label ($t = -6.14$, $p \leq 0.01$). The magnitude of these

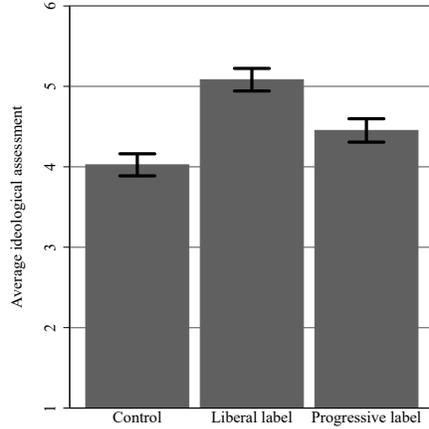


Figure 2: Mean ideological assessments by treatment along with 95% confidence intervals of citizen Steven Hewitt.

effects are also once again substantively meaningful.

3 Conclusion

These results match our expectations. Exposure to the progressive label leads citizens to assess candidates and non-political figures as being more ideologically liberal, but less so than does exposure to the more explicitly ideological liberal label. Thus it appears that the progressive label communicates ideological information, but in a more modest way than more explicit language might.³

These results lead us to three major implications. First, the progressive label may offer strategic candidates an avenue by which to communicate their liberal preferences to citizens without using the unpopular liberal label (Neiheisel, 2016) and in a way that communicates

³Some readers may be concerned that the effects of the experimental treatments may be conditioned by some key individual-level characteristics. In the appendix, we estimate models in which we interact experimental treatment indicators with party identification, level of education, and political attention. These characteristics did not substantially alter the substance of our findings. This indicates that our results are largely robust to the effects of partisan perceptual screens and political knowledge that people may come to possess with higher levels of education or interest in politics, thus strengthening the external validity of our experiment.

less ideological extremity. This can be useful electorally as the progressive label may allow candidates to differentiate themselves from their opponents without portraying themselves as extremists. Second, the progressive label appears to affect assessments of non-political figures, which implies that it is meaningful beyond strictly political contexts. The information communicated by the label, then, is not necessarily specific to judgments made only in explicitly political contexts. Third, the meaning of progressivism may be different among activists and the general public. Activists in recent years have described candidates and policies that are further to the left as more progressive. Our results suggests that the opposite is true in that progressive-labeled people are only viewed as being *somewhat liberal* on average, i.e. as more moderate than liberal-identified candidates.

Future work might consider how the progressive label affects citizens' feelings towards various political objects. Researchers might also study how assessments of the character traits and issue positions of candidates and non-political figures are affected by the label. Future research might also focus on how the progressive label affects assessments in the presence of powerful information cues like party labels. Finally, studying what drives people to identify as progressives and how that identity shapes opinion and behavior would add to our understanding of mass politics in the U.S.

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