CHAPTER 1: THE INDICTMENT OF THE AMERICAN VOTER

U.S. presidential campaigns revolve around competing visions of the good and just society. During campaign season, the candidates frequently invoke the terms “liberal”, “moderate”, and “conservative” to describe these visions. They do so in their stump speeches and political advertisements, when they debate one another before tens of millions of television viewers, and when responding to questions posed by journalists and citizens in various forums. Their words are covered by national and local newspapers and magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*. Network and cable news shows provide wide-ranging coverage. Hard news programs like *Meet the Press* and *The News Hour* assess the ideological proclivities of the candidates. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert spoof conservatives on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, while Rush Limbaugh and Laura Ingraham lambaste liberals on talk radio. On the World Wide Web political bloggers at Daily Kos and Redstate dissect the candidates’ philosophies in real time. In short, liberal-conservative rhetoric is everywhere during presidential campaigns.

Consider some memorable lines delivered at the national party conventions over the past 20 years. To begin in 1988, Ronald Reagan declared “It's time to talk issues; to use the dreaded ‘L’ word; to say the policies of our opposition and the congressional leadership of his party are liberal, liberal, liberal.”¹ Four years after the Democratic debacle of 1988, Bill Clinton sought to claim the political center: “We offer our people a new choice based on old values. We offer opportunity. We demand responsibility. We will build an American community again. The choice we offer is not conservative or liberal. . . . It is different. It is new. And it will work.” At the 2000 GOP convention, George W. Bush presented himself as the center-right candidate: “Big government is not the answer. But the alternative to bureaucracy is not indifference. It is to put conservative values and conservative ideas into the thick of the fight for justice and opportunity. This is what I mean by compassionate conservatism.”² Finally, recall Barack Obama’s post-partisan yearnings at the 2004 Democratic convention: “there are those who are preparing to divide us—the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of ‘anything goes.’

Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America–there is the United States of America.”

These examples illustrate how political leaders use liberal-conservative labels to converse with voters during presidential campaigns. They do so because these labels summarize and transmit essential information about the candidates to prospective voters, such as the general political philosophy each subscribes to and their positions on a multitude of specific issues. Those who are comfortable using ideological frames of reference follow the dialogue without difficulty. When a candidate is described as conservative, exceptionally sophisticated citizens—those who are deeply informed about government and politics and skilled at putting this knowledge to use—can infer that the candidate is for the free enterprise system, lower taxes, abortion opposition, strong defense, and so on. And when they hear the opponent described as liberal, they understand this candidate takes opposing positions on these issues. Knowing where the candidates fall on the liberal-conservative continuum, sophisticated citizens can utilize a simple and effective rule: choose the candidate who lies closer to them on the liberal-conservative spectrum. Policy voting is thereby assured.

What of those who quickly scan the front page of the local paper before turning to the sports pages? What of those who pause briefly, if at all, on Headline News before switching to Jeopardy? What about those who surf the web for everything but political news? What about those who have never listened to Keith Olbermann or Glenn Beck, who have never read Paul Krugman or David Brooks, who know more about the latest celebrity scandal than that size of the federal budget deficit? Do these individuals know what liberalism and conservatism mean? Can they use ideological labels to summarize preferences on multiple issues? Will they ground their votes in abstract ideological principles?

The scholarly answer to each of these questions is “no”. When it comes to infusing ideological labels with explicit policy content, few citizens do so effectively. Those who do not know what ideological labels imply about public policy are hard pressed to evaluate candidates

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4 Policy voting is often equated with issue voting. Throughout this book I will use the “policy voting” phrase more broadly to denote choosing on the basis of liberal-conservative orientations, specific political issues, and core political principles.
using abstract policy criteria. Typically, such individuals are also in the dark about specific issues. Hence, policy voting seemingly lies beyond their reach.

This pessimistic view has defined the study of voting behavior for over half a century. In 1960, Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960: 542) concluded their seminal work *The American Voter* on this dour note: “Some individuals . . . know what they want their government to do and they use their vote in a very purposive manner to achieve within their power the policy alternatives that they prefer. Such people do not make up a very large proportion of the electorate.” Nearly half a century later Kinder (2006: 199) declared: “when it comes to politics, most citizens are ideologically innocent: indifferent to standard ideological concepts, lacking a consistent outlook on public policy, in possession of genuine opinions on only a few issues, and knowing damn little.”

The normative corollaries attending this empirical portrait are bleak. In some recent reflections, Converse (2006: 310) declared:

I cannot say that voters have to be users of the ideology heuristic to vote ‘sensibly.’ On the other hand, since it offers unusual powers of economy in both understanding arriving flows of political information and in retaining it, and since the world of politics is objectively complex and the voter is a cognitive miser, its use is to be recommended, and the fact that it is not widely understood is, to me, a central indicator of the problem surrounding voter competence.

It is probably true that location on the liberal-conservative dimension represents the ultimate political shorthand, the political heuristic *par excellence*, in American political discourse. But since it is rare for voters to rely on ideological criteria to guide candidate choice, the possibility of widespread policy voting appears remote. Moreover, ordinary citizens perform no better when it comes to specific issues. Here, too, large swaths of the electorate lack crystallized preferences on specific policy proposals.

*On Voter Competence* presents a more optimistic view of the capabilities of the American voter. In this book, I argue ordinary citizens choose on the basis of abstract political principles, but that professional students of electoral behavior have missed this because they have searched for evidence in the wrong places. Once we turn away from liberal-conservative orientations and issue preferences to focus on domain specific principles, we discover that all people hold and use abstract policy orientations to guide candidate choice in U.S. presidential elections. Contrary to
the indictment leveled by the scholarly community, those who are not terribly sophisticated about public affairs prove as adept as their more sophisticated counterparts at grounding their presidential votes in broader political principles.

Three principles, which map directly onto the major policy cleavages that have divided the Democratic and Republican parties at the national level for the past several decades, are paramount: economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism. My key claims are that attitudes toward core principles are (1) available in the minds of citizens regardless of how much or little they know about government and public affairs; (2) function as central policy orientations in the attitude structures of both politically sophisticated and unsophisticated citizens; and (3) guide presidential selection to a comparable degree for voters across the sophistication spectrum. In short, the critical point to take away from my book is that virtually all citizens hold genuine policy predispositions and rely heavily on these when casting their presidential ballots. Insofar as we can equate the development and use of abstract policy predispositions with citizen competence, the American voter performs far better than has been recognized.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CORE POLITICAL PRINCIPLES

How can ordinary citizens who are too unsophisticated to vote based on ideological criteria or issue preferences learn to ground their choices in core political principles? This is the key question animating my book. What makes this an intriguing question is the well-documented fact that most citizens know relatively little about public affairs, what liberalism and conservatism mean, and details about specific public policies. To address this puzzle I begin by defining core principles and explaining how they differ from liberal-conservative orientations and issue preferences, the mainstays of research on policy voting. I sketch the conceptual distinction here before elaborating it at length in chapter 2.

Core political principles represent bottom-line judgments about the proper course of action to take in the major policy domains that comprise American politics (Peffley and Hurwitz 1985; Miller and Shanks 1996). They are crowning postures that guide political judgment and shape preference formation in a particular issue area. I focus on three capstone principles: economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism. I examine these principles because they have mapped onto the party system in a predictable manner for the past several decades. Since
political conflict between presidential candidates, other partisan elites, and the major parties has long been defined by these dimensions, it makes sense to search for evidence that the American public conceptualizes policy along these lines. Put otherwise, ordinary citizens do not think about politics in terms of abstract ideological postures or a plethora of specific issues. Instead, they view politics through the lens of the fundamental cleavages that define American politics.

I now present the definitions. First, attitudes toward economic welfare reflect the degree to which someone favors or opposes efforts by the national government to ensure material security for a wide array of disadvantaged or potentially needy groups in American society, such as the elderly, the middle class, the working class, the poor, the homeless, and so on. Economic liberals endorse these efforts without equivocation while economic conservatives view them with much trepidation. Second, the principle of moral absolutism focuses on the nature of good and bad, right and wrong. To be precise, moral absolutism concerns the degree to which people feel moral values and behavior are divinely inspired, immutable, and applicable in all situations and at all times and therefore must be defended from challenge. Attitudes toward the principle reflect how positively or negatively one reacts to these claims (Hunter 1992; Barker and Tinnick 2006). The morally orthodox endorse these views and cannot abide relativistic value systems. As a result, society must defend orthodox positions from any challenge or threat. In contrast, moral progressives reject the idea that a single, non-negotiable system of moral truth applies universally and see little need for defending such a system. Third, by militarism I mean the degree to which someone approves of using military force in the national security arena over softer forms of power, such as diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise. Hawks are very comfortable with military force whereas doves prefer the tools of statecraft.

Having defined core principles, I now distinguish them from other types of policy attitudes, namely liberal-conservative predispositions and issue attitudes. To begin with liberal-conservative predispositions, it may strike some that the principles articulated above are simply

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5 Core political principles should also be distinguished from personal values. Very briefly, core principles are centered on what should be done in a given policy domain, whereas personal values revolve around the importance individuals attach to abstract normative goals (Rokeach 1973; Schwartz 1992). Hence, core principles operate on political attitudes and behavior alone whereas personal values apply to a much wider range of judgments in all aspects of life (e.g., consumption choices, career choices, attitudes toward art, and so on). I expand on these differences in chapters 6.
manifestations of a broader ideological worldview rather than distinct psychological constructs. If so, the conceptual distinction between ideology and core principles essentially vanishes. Now, if people adopt consistent left or right wing positions across all three dimensions, we might conclude that location on the liberal-conservative continuum would summarize these positions effectively. To illustrate, someone deeply committed to economic welfare, moral relativism, and foreign policy dovishness could be placed close to the liberal end of the ideological continuum. Conversely, someone more enthusiastic about limited government, orthodox morality, and military power would reside at the opposite end of the spectrum. For such individuals, liberal-conservative placements would summarize general political principles as well as preferences on many specific issues.

It turns out that very few people think about politics this way. For most people liberal and conservative self-placements do not reflect an overarching worldview that subsumes a wide range of tightly constrained political assumptions, beliefs, and issues preferences. Perhaps 10 percent or so of the public uses the liberal-conservative continuum this way. For the remainder of the electorate, liberal-conservative evaluations are not economical summaries of positions taken on core principles, specific issues, and other political objects.6

So, what do liberal-conservative orientations reflect in the minds of those who hold them? These attitudes are best viewed as evaluations of a salient social group or two or whatever symbol people happen to associate with these labels (Levitin and Miller 1979; Conover and Feldman 1981; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Sears 2001). For many people, liberalism and conservatism are tied to their feelings about blacks and whites. For some the labels represent “feminists” or “tree huggers” or “big business” or “Bible thumpers”. For others, the labels connote a political symbol, such as “big government”, “family values”, and so on.

Another critical point to underscore is that the propensity to develop, hold, and use liberal-conservative orientations is conditional on political sophistication. Not everyone develops liberal-conservative attitudes. Instead, this happens for those who pay enough attention to politics to learn something about the groups and symbols associated with ideological labels (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Among those who pay relatively little attention to politics, liberal-conservative orientations fail to develop. So, even though these attitudes do not reference abstract ideas, they still fail to take hold in the minds of large swaths of the electorate.

6 I document this claim in the next chapter.
Turning to issue preference, I define this construct as feelings about a specific positional issue or policy controversy. Examples include abortion, health care reform, the war in Iraq, tax cut proposals, Social Security privatization, and so on. Given that issue preferences pertain to a single policy controversy in one issue area while core principles represent crowing postures that transcend particular issues in that area, the conceptual distinction between them should be clear. As was the case for liberal-conservative orientations, political sophistication influences the development of issue attitudes. Those who are knowledgeable about politics or deeply concerned about a given issue are more likely to hold firm attitudes compared to their more apathetic brethren. To put it another way, genuine attitudes on the issues of the day are not distributed across the public writ large, but instead, are concentrated in isolated pockets of well-informed issue publics.

To reiterate, core principles, liberal-conservative attitudes, and issue preferences, represent distinct types of policy attitudes. Core principles are crowning postures that reflect what government should do in a given policy domain. Liberal-conservative attitudes are evaluations of a limited number of social groups or political symbols tied to these labels. Issue attitudes reflect evaluations of specific policy proposals on offer in a given campaign. Since the manifest content of each policy entity differs, the attitudes can be distinguished from one another.

OVERVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

To date, the study of policy voting has been almost completely confined to liberal-conservative orientations and specific issues. For both, politically sophisticated voters hold a larger number of genuine policy attitudes and are more adept at grounding their choices in them than the uninformed. Multiple studies demonstrate that knowledgeable citizens alone base their votes on liberal-conservative orientations (Knight 1985; Neuman 1986; Goren 1997; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). For most voters these attitudes are neither reflective of overarching worldviews nor imbued with rich policy content, but instead, revolve around gut-level feelings toward sundry social groups and political symbols. Even among the most sophisticated third or so of the public, ideological voting is probably best viewed as an expression of symbolic affinity for a given
candidate rather than an attempt to send policy signals about what the candidate should do if elected.

Likewise, accumulated research finds that those who are knowledgeable about politics in general or about some controversy in particular issue-vote more than those who lack such knowledge or motivation (Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Anand and Krosnick 2003). But such individuals are exceptional. Thus, issue voting is confined to various subsets of the electorate, to the relatively few who are well informed or care passionately about a single issue.

*On Voter Competence* accepts that most Americans are innocent of ideology and fuzzy on specific issues, but it rejects the corollary that their votes are untouched by policy concerns. In the pages that follow, I argue that economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism are genuine and enduring policy predispositions that shape voter choice to a comparable degree for politically aware and unaware citizens. It matters little whether people know a great deal about government and politics; whether they prefer *The News Hour* or *Jeopardy*; whether they read Thomas Sowell and Frank Rich or Stephen King and Nora Roberts. Nearly everyone acquires and subsequently uses core principles to guide candidate choice.

The central question my book seeks to answer is this: how can citizens who are too unsophisticated about politics to master liberal-conservative terminology and the details of public policy develop core principles and use these to evaluate presidential candidates? At this point, it should prove helpful to preview the argument I make in the next two chapters. First, I draw upon the Eagly-Chaiken definition of the attitude construct to argue that liberal-conservative predispositions, issue preferences, and core principles are best conceptualized as different types of policy attitudes. Eagly and Chaiken (1993: 1) define an attitude as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor.” This inclusive definition covers the gamut from dispositional states that endure over time to temporary evaluations constructed as demanded by the situation. I apply this conceptualization to the study of policy attitudes and predispositions.

Next, I argue that all citizens develop and maintain genuine attitudes toward economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism. By develop and maintain, I mean that core principles

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7 Throughout my book I use the terms “political sophistication”, “political knowledge”, and “political awareness” interchangeably.
are available in the minds of nearly all voting age adults. To understand how people acquire these, it is essential to recognize that the idea represented by each principle is sufficiently clear that it can be evaluated without difficulty. In contrast to ideological labels, whose meaning is not obvious to the uninitiated, there is no need to learn what “government help for the underprivileged” or “moral truth” or “military force versus diplomacy” mean. Large stores of political knowledge are not a prerequisite for deciding how one feels about these ideas. Instead, since meaning is self-evident evaluation follows automatically upon exposure.

While this may be so, it cannot address the question of whether citizens receive sufficient exposure to evaluate the principles in the first place. There are compelling grounds for believing that they do. This is because presidential candidates, the political parties, and the news media have spent decades furnishing the public with reinforcing cues about the major policy cleavages in the United States. Public discourse has revolved around the role the federal government should play in the economic welfare domain since Franklin Roosevelt established the New Deal in the 1930s; around what moral vision should prevail in American society since Richard Nixon wove the “social issue” into the political fabric of American society in the late 1960s and early 1970s; and about the proper use of military force once Nixon assumed responsibility for Vietnam in 1969.

Since these cleavages have been highly salient and the parties have taken consistent positions on them for many years, people need not monitor elite debate in real time to learn what the major policy dimensions are. Campaign discourse and political culture are rich in redundant cues that tell the same story about political conflict election after election and year after year (Feldman 1989; Rahn et al. 1990). Although most people are ignorant about the meaning of liberalism and conservatism and remain oblivious to the latest controversy preoccupying the chattering classes in Washington DC and New York, they understand where the fault lines lie in the political system. As such, they can form meaningful impressions about the core policy dimensions that drive American politics. Put simply, the principles of economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism are available in the political belief systems of ordinary citizens.

Next, I integrate classic and contemporary work in political psychology to argue that core principles function as the central policy orientations in the minds of most citizens. Centrality refers to the relative position a given attitude assumes within attitude hierarchies. Political attitudes do not exist in isolation from one another, but rather, are linked together in broader
associative networks (Converse 1964; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). The key distinction in these structures is between their central and peripheral elements. Central attitudes systematically constrain peripheral evaluations without, in turn, being shaped by them. Put otherwise, core principles function as enduring predispositions that shape short-term political evaluations. Since people have experience using these principles to guide the construction of issue preferences and an assortment of other short-term evaluations, they can be readily applied to problem of candidate choice.

Lastly, I argue that core principles drive the presidential vote to an analogous degree for sophisticated and unsophisticated voters. Since most people hold genuine views on economic welfare, the nature of moral truth, and the use of military power, and have used these predispositions to construct an array of short-term preferences, they should encounter little difficulty applying them to candidate evaluations as long as they recognize where the candidates stand on each dimension. Since the two parties have taken clear and consistent stands on these principles for decades, reminders of which appear regularly in political debate and throughout the course of each and every presidential campaign, most voters develop a sense that Democrats stand to the left of the GOP on each dimension. In this way, cue consistency and redundancy facilitate principle-based choice. In contrast to ideological and issue voting, both of which are conditional on prior knowledge and interest, principle-based voting is not limited to isolated subsets of the electorate. Instead, core principles shape candidate choice for nearly everyone.

To reiterate, we must broaden our conceptual definition of policy voting beyond liberal-conservative orientations and issue preferences to include core political principles. Once we do, we find that core principles are available in the minds of all citizens, serve as central predispositions in mass belief systems, and shape the presidential vote to an analogous degree for the politically sophisticated and unsophisticated. The combination of political ignorance and ideological naiveté bemoaned so often and so vociferously by so many does not preclude widespread policy voting in the American electorate. Put simply, policy voting occurs far more often than we have been led to believe.

CONTRIBUTIONS
Numerous variants of democratic theory hold that if the people are to rule in any meaningful sense of the term, they must play a significant role in the determination of public policy (Pennock 1979). For that to happen, ordinary citizens must hold genuine policy attitudes and use these to guide their choices come Election Day. The question of whether citizens meet these conditions has spawned a tremendous amount of empirical research over the years. Despite an occasional dissent (e.g., Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008), the dominant view holds that many people lack genuine ideological attitudes and issue attitudes, thereby implying that policy voting lies beyond the reach of the typical American voter (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Converse et al. 1969; Knight 1986; Neuman 1986; Luskin 1987; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). The normative corollary is clear: most people fail to meet a key criterion for demonstrating political competence. This is perhaps the most unsettling charge in the indictment against the American voter.

By challenging this perspective, On Voter Competence contributes to the study of electoral behavior, political psychology, and citizen competence on several fronts. First, scores of studies have raised serious question about the nature of policy attitudes in the mass public. The most pessimistic accounts maintain that everyday people lack the motivation and ability to develop, hold, and use genuine policy attitudes. This generally holds with respect to evaluations of ideological labels and specific political issues. However, it does not apply to all classes of policy orientations. By demonstrating that economic welfare, moral absolutism, and hawk-dove predispositions are available, durable, and consequential, my book shows that abstract principles occupy a central position in political attitude hierarchies. In essence, core principles lie in the sweet spot of mass belief systems, neither too abstract like liberal-conservative worldviews nor too concrete like preferences regarding specific issues to elude all but the most diligent citizens.

Second, my work speaks directly to the question of how much policy voting occurs in U.S. presidential elections. Decades of research have shown that ideological and issue voting are concentrated among highly engaged segments within the public. While agreeing with this position, I reject the implication that policy voting necessarily lies beyond the reach of the less informed. Instead, economic welfare, orthodox morality, and militarism–the central policy attitudes in mass belief systems–drive candidate choice to a comparable degree for all voters. My
statistical analyses of election survey data from the last six presidential elections yields unequivocal support for this proposition. Policy voting is broad and deep in the mass public.

Third, my work challenges key tenets of the sophistication interaction model that dominates the study of political psychology, public opinion, and voting behavior. It has long been clear that political awareness is prerequisite for the acquisition, development, maintenance, and deployment of liberal-conservative predispositions (Converse 1964; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). I have no quarrel here. However, ardent defenders of the model go farther than this by claiming the ability to use general predispositions is always conditional on sophistication. For instance, Zaller (1992: 25) states that “the impact of people’s value predispositions always depends on whether citizens possess the contextual information needed to translate their values into support for particular policies or candidates, and the possession of such information can . . . never be taken for granted.” In a similar vein, Luskin (2002: 220) maintains that “[t]here are many reasons to think sophistication important, but perhaps its greatest importance lies in its conditioning of the relationship between values and policy and candidate preferences, which can be expected to be tighter among the more sophisticated.” By demonstrating that individuals across the sophistication divide hold meaningful core principles and apply them with equal felicity to their electoral choices, my findings suggest the prevailing view is too facile. While sophistication often facilitates desirable political behaviors, its absence need not preclude them.

This is not to say that sophistication is irrelevant. As I show in chapter 4, sophistication promotes attitude stability for core principles and party identification. Moreover, evidence in chapter 7 reveals that sophistication augments ideological voting. The sophistication interaction model possesses some validity. However, these are difference in degree rather than differences in kind. Put otherwise, the sophistication gradient is mild rather than steep. My book affirms that sophistication matters in some ways, but not nearly as much as is often supposed.

Fourth, my work speaks to questions about political representation. Liberal-conservative ideas represent the lingua franca of political elites. Because of this, many analysts hold that ideology must serve as the primary policy mechanisms linking ordinary citizens to their elected representatives. Given widespread ideological innocence and weak attitudes on most issues, the possibility for meaningful policy linkages is seemingly precluded. Against this view, my findings suggest that policy representation is alive and well in the United States. Since economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism serve as the foundational elements of mass belief systems and
project squarely onto the major policy cleavages that divide the parties, policy representation does indeed transpire.

Lastly, *On Voter Competence* has implications for evaluating the political intelligence of the American voter. Normative and empirical theories of democracy maintain that policy views should play an important role in guiding voter choice (e.g., Pennock 1979; Fiorina 1981). Policy views signal what people want the national government to do and allow individuals to hold elected officials accountable for their performance in office. Since my work shows that virtually all citizens hold genuine attitudes toward the fundamental principles that define issue conflict in the U.S. and use these to reward or punish the candidates and parties on Election Day and signal the direction government should take in a given policy domain, fears about voter incompetence are overblown, sometimes wildly. Put simply, the typical American voter performs reasonably well as judged by this tenet of democratic theory.

To sum up, my approach to studying voter psychology differs from prior treatments in three fundamental respects. First, the standard view holds that many if not most people lack genuine policy predispositions. In contrast, I show that economic welfare, moral absolutism, and militarism represent central elements in the belief systems of all citizens. Next, the conventional wisdom presumes that policy voting, defined as using liberal-conservative and issue attitudes, is found only among sophisticated strata within the electorate. My results demonstrate that when our framework for conceptualizing policy attitudes is broadened to include core principles, ordinary citizens prove more than capable of policy voting. Finally, whereas standard approaches claim that unsophisticated voters are politically incompetent because they do not policy-vote, my evidence challenges this view. People may not bring liberal-conservative frames of reference to bear on their electoral choices and they may know little about the details of specific policies, but they know what they want the government to do in the major issue areas that constitute American politics and choose candidates more likely to pursue desired courses of action.

**PLAN OF THE BOOK**

Let me preview what is to come throughout the book. In the second and third chapters, I elaborate the conceptual and theoretical framework that guides the subsequent empirical analyses. Chapter 2 explicates the key concepts. I begin discussing the Eagly-Chaiken (1993)
definition of the attitude construct and then apply it to the three classes of policy attitudes that lie at the center of my work: liberal-conservative attitudes, issue attitudes, and core political principles. The chapter concludes with my discussion of the sophistication construct.

Moving onto chapter 3, I integrate these concepts into a theory of voter choice. In the first half of the chapter, I adapt the requirements of issue voting laid out by the authors of The American Voter to argue that citizens must satisfy three conditions to vote using policy attitudes, whether these be liberal-conservative predispositions, core principles, or issue preferences. The conditions are availability, centrality and position matching. When policy attitudes are available in long-term memory, function as central elements within attitude hierarchies, and are matched to the positions held by the respective candidates, policy voting is likely to occur. I also consider the role political sophistication plays in conditioning policy voting for each class of attitudes. A series of theoretical and empirical considerations lead me to posit that ideological and issue voting will be a function of political sophistication and engagement. The more politically informed someone is the more heavily she will rely on liberal-conservative attitudes and issue preferences to guide her vote. In contrast, and most importantly, I posit that the use of core principles will not depend on sophistication, which is to say that the politically aware and unaware ground their votes in core principles in a similar fashion.

My theoretical framework posits that core principles are available in the minds of everyone. Empirically, this implies that responses to opinion items designed to measure latent principles will be structured coherently and equivalently for individuals at different levels of knowledge. Moreover, I expect to find that responses to the items are reasonably stable over time across sophistication-stratified groups. Chapter 4 tests these predictions. After describing my data and key measures, I then analyze opinion data from a series of National Election Study (NES) surveys to test whether core principles are structured the same way and to the same degree for citizens across the awareness spectrum. This is precisely what I find. I then use data from the 1992-94-96 NES panel to estimate the temporal stability of core principles for individuals in different knowledge subgroups. My analyses reveal that attitudes toward economic welfare and moral absolutism are quite stable, and furthermore, that stability increases somewhat in the more sophisticated samples.\(^8\)

\(^8\) Data limitations prevent me from estimating the stability of militarism. Fortunately, comparable analyses of the stability of militarism carried out elsewhere yields a similar conclusion (Peffley and Hurwitz 1993).
In chapter 5, I undertake a systematic examination of the centrality condition. According to my theory, core principles should function as central policy orientations that shape short-term political preferences. To test this proposition, I use NES panel data to estimate a series of dynamic constraint models whereby current positions on core principles and short-term evaluations are modeled as a function of lagged positions for both variables. My estimates demonstrate that both economic welfare and moral absolutism shape short-term evaluations like issue preferences and presidential performance evaluations to a much greater extent than they are shaped by them. Moreover, these effects hold at different levels of sophistication.

Having examined some of the consequences of core principles, I turn to their origins in Chapter 6. Drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives from political science and social psychology, I argue that party identification, prejudice, and basic human values should affect how individuals evaluate core principles. I test these expectations using data from three national surveys, two of which were designed to explore the origins of economic welfare and moral orthodoxy. As luck would have it, the 1991 National Race and Politics Survey contains items sufficient to model the origins of militarism. My analysis shows that while party and prejudice manifest some influence over core principles, the effects of personal values prove more consistent and significantly larger across the board. Critically, this generally holds for the sophisticated and unsophisticated alike. These findings speak directly to the question of citizen competence. Insofar as citizens are expected to evaluate public policy on the basis of abstract normative criteria rather than simplistic group-cues, my results suggest that citizens perform exceptionally well on this score.

Chapter 7 tackles the question of how core principles affect voter preferences. I begin by summarizing the leading theories of voter choice: the partisan voter model (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002); the retrospective voter model (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981); and the sophistication-interaction model (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Next, I use data from the 1988-2008 NES surveys to model the presidential vote as a function of variables drawn from each theoretical perspective alongside my indicators of economic welfare, moral conservatism, and militarism. My analysis demonstrates that core principles systematically affect candidate choice in every election and, most critically, that the unsophisticated rely as much as the sophisticated on them. This does not mean that sophistication is irrelevant, however. Consistent with prior work I find that when
citizen cast their ballots sophistication promotes reliance on liberal-conservative attitudes. Lastly, using NES panel data I show that core principles measured several years before a given presidential election accurately predict whom voters select in those elections. These results suggest that when it comes to the presidential vote core principles function, like party identification, as long-term factors in mass belief systems.

Chapter 8 concludes the book. It begins with a restatement of the argument, summarizes the key results, and highlights the limitations of what I have done and can reasonably claim. The bulk of the chapter considers the broader substantive and normative implications my findings have for evaluating American politics, democratic citizenship, and representative democracy. To begin with the substantive concerns my work suggests that the major theoretical perspectives on voter choice and political sophistication should be overhauled. By positing that the ability to develop, hold, and use abstract policy orientations is conditional on political sophistication, most classic and contemporary models of voter decision making sell the voter short while simultaneously exaggerating the necessity of sophistication. While these perspectives may have been true at some point in the past, my results show that citizens now policy-vote regardless of how much or little they know about politics.

In substantive terms, my results speak to questions regarding candidate and party strategy in presidential elections. Since the public is somewhat economically liberal and the Democratic Party is judged more competent on the economic welfare dimension, it makes sense that Democratic candidates emphasize their commitment to this principle. In contrast, the Republican Party has often been seen as stronger on the moral and, until recently, foreign policy dimensions. Unsurprisingly, GOP candidates stress these points during political campaigns. Many observers of American politics excoriate the GOP for diverting attention from the “real” bread and butter issues that voters should care about by focusing on symbolic matters, such as the counterculture of the early 70s or gay rights during the Clinton and Bush eras. Leaving aside the question of what voters are supposed to care about, my analysis suggests that Republican elites behave rationally by emphasizing those policy dimensions on which they have an advantage. In contrast, Democrat leaders behave less rationally when they downplay their commitment to economic welfare in order to contest policy ground held firmly by the GOP.

Next, I raise some tough questions about the desirability of political sophistication. Normative and empirical theorists have identified numerous markers of good citizenship (e.g.,
Thompson 1970; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Among the most important of these is the ability to formulate beliefs about what is best for the polity and communicate these ideas to elected officials. My work demonstrates that citizens perform this function reasonably well regardless of how politically aware they are, which lends credence to my claim that ordinary citizens are politically competent. And while sophistication is frequently celebrated for promoting features of good citizenship, such as political participation, political tolerance, support for democratic norms, and other desiderata, the dark side of sophistication has been less widely noted. While I accept that sophistication has many positive effects, it has some negative consequences for citizenship that must be acknowledged in order to reach informed judgments about the relationship between sophistication, citizenship, and political competence. To the extent that sophistication promotes selective perception, motivated reasoning, biased information processing, uncritical partisan loyalty, ideological rigidity, and so on, its status as normatively sacrosanct should be questioned. This is not to say that ignorance is preferable to knowledge, but rather, that political knowledge has both positive and negative effects for democratic life. The question then becomes whether we can move toward the developed of more sophisticated public free of some of the liabilities of sophistication.