

# In Search of Left/Right Beliefs in the Canadian Electorate\*

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## Introduction

The starting point for this article is a paradox. On the one side, journalists persist in using the labels “left-wing” and “right-wing” to describe politics as though their audiences were familiar with these concepts. In fact, there appear to be few doubts in the media that this terminology makes sense to their readers and viewers. On the other side, researchers insist that these ideological labels enjoy little currency in the Canadian population. Ogmundson has observed, for example, that “the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ are not generally understood by North American respondents in the way that they are understood by intellectuals,” and he warned that “any data emerging from the direct use of these words in survey research must therefore be treated with extreme caution.”<sup>1</sup> In his opinion, Canadians probably confuse the left/right distinction with the

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1 R. L. Ogmundson, “A Note on the Ambiguous Meanings of Survey Research Measures Which Use the Words ‘Left’ and ‘Right,’” this JOURNAL 12 (1979), 800. Similar doubts concerning Canadians' understanding of left/right are expressed in Ronald D. Lambert and Alfred A. Hunter, “Social Stratification, Voting Behaviour, and the Images of Canadian Federal Political Parties,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 16 (1979), 302. Compare. Ronald D. Lambert, “Question Design, Response Set and the Measurement of Left/Right Thinking in Survey Research,” this JOURNAL 16 (1983), 135-44.

question of what is right, in the sense of what is correct, proper or legitimate.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose here is to explore the extent of understanding of the concepts “left” and “right” in the general population and the variable definitions given to these concepts. We infer meaning on the part of respondents in the following four ways: the themes contained in the definitions that they offer; the kind of affect attached to the concepts; the content of attitudes associated with their self-descriptions as left or right; and the ways in which left/right structures their perceptions of the federal political parties. The first two approaches address people’s own ideas and feelings about left and right, while the latter two approaches are inferential in nature and speak to the construct validity of the concepts.

### *Definitions of Left/Right*

Asking respondents what they understand by left and right is the most direct way to tap people’s comprehension of the concepts. This is what Laponce did in questionnaire surveys of Canadian, American and French university students in 1962 and 1968.<sup>3</sup> In 1962, respondents were asked the following open-ended question: “When you read or hear the word ‘left’ [‘right’] used in a political sense, what images or ideas come to your mind?” He reported that respondents from all three countries associated communism, Marxism and socialism with the left, and conservatism, free enterprise, the past and the status quo with the right. In 1962 and again in 1968, he asked students to rate each of 23 concepts on a four-point left/right scale. Respondents positioned the concepts of worker, USSR and atheism on the left and the concepts of shopkeeper, doctor, banker, army officer, religion, past, rich, old and whites on the right.

In the 1970s, Barnes, Kaase and an international team of scholars asked respondents in a number of European nations and in the United States about left and right.<sup>4</sup> Respondents used a left/right self-rating

2 David Butler and Donald Stokes noted the same problem in *Political Change in Britain: The Evolution of Electoral Choice* (2nd ed.; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974), 332-33.

3 Jean A. Laponce, *Left and Right: The Topography of Political Perceptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), chap. 6; “Note on the Use of the Left-Right Dimension,” *Comparative Political Studies* 2 (1970), 481-502.

4 Samuel H. Barnes and Max Kaase (eds.), *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979). Concerning popular understanding of left/right, see also Jean Laponce, “In Search of the Stable Elements of the Left-Right Landscape,” *Comparative Politics* 4 (1972), 458; Butler and Stokes, *Social Change in Britain*, 328-34; Ronald Inglehart and Hans D. Klingemann, “Party Identification, Ideological Preference, and the Left/Right Dimension Among

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**Abstract.** We report on findings from alternative ways of assessing the meaning given to "left" and "right" by respondents in the 1984 National Election Study. Approximately 40 per cent of the sample supplied definitions of the concepts: in comparison, about 60 per cent stated their feelings toward left-wingers and right-wingers and described their political orientations using a seven-point left/right rating scale. Left signified socialism or communism for about one-half of those who supplied definitions, and dislike for left-wingers seemed to be associated with these conceptions of left. Right, which was much more highly regarded than left, signified conservatism for one-quarter of those who defined the term. We also factor analyzed respondents' self-ratings on the left/right scale along with their answers to 15 attitude statements. Left was weakly associated with support for labour's use of the strike weapon. In a criterion group of respondents who had completed university and who had ventured definitions of left and right, self-ratings correlated with factors tapping attitudes toward the military and toward economic disparity and social welfare. As expected, respondents' ratings of themselves on the left/right scale were more similar to their ratings of their preferred parties than to their ratings of other parties. The relationship between self-ratings and ratings of preferred parties generally varied directly with the strength of party identification. We conclude with some observations about the political utility of political labels such as left and right.

**Résumé.** Cet article s'attache à l'interprétation à donner aux images de « gauche » et de « droite » entretenues par l'électorat canadien, telles que révélées par le sondage pan-canadien de 1984. Alors qu'environ 40 pour cent des personnes définissent ces concepts, 60 pour cent expriment leurs attitudes à l'égard des gauchistes et des droitistes et situent leur orientation politique sur une échelle de sept points s'étendant de l'extrême-droite à l'extrême-gauche. Environ la moitié des personnes définissant la gauche l'associent au communisme ou au socialisme, d'où leur aversion pour les gauchistes. La droite, beaucoup plus prisée, évoque le conservatisme chez le quart des gens. Les gauchistes tendent à appuyer le recours à la grève et les diplômés universitaires, selon qu'ils sont de droite ou de gauche, manifestent des attitudes caractéristiques à l'égard du militarisme, des disparités économiques et des mesures sociales. Tel que prévu, il y a un lien net entre, d'une part, l'orientation partisane et son intensité et, d'autre part, l'étiquette de gauchiste ou de droitiste qu'on s'attribue et qu'on attribue aux partis politiques. L'article se termine par une évaluation de l'utilité politique de telles étiquettes.

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scale and answered the question, "What do you mean by 'left' ['right'] in politics?"<sup>5</sup> The results for the American respondents are most relevant to our study of Canadians. Approximately one-third of the Americans defined one or both concepts ideologically, compared to 2 per cent who mentioned political parties or social groups, and another 16 per cent who gave affective responses.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Americans tended to associate left/right with liberal/conservative, often as extreme forms of liberalism and conservatism.

Western Mass Publics," in Ian Budge, Ivor Crewe and Dennis Farlie (eds.), *Party Identification and Beyond* (London: John Wiley, 1976), 248. For the cognate concepts of liberal/conservative, see: Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, "The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications," *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (1981), 636-40; Norman R. Luttbeg and Michael M. Gant, "The Failure of Liberal/Conservative as a Cognitive Structure," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 49 (1985), 82.

5 Hans D. Klingemann, "Measuring Ideological Conceptualizations," in Barnes and Kasse (eds.), *Political Action*, 229.

6 *Ibid.*, 232.

### *Affect Toward Left/Right*

Meaning is to be found, second, in the affect or feeling that people invest in concepts. In our case, we used separate questions to measure respondents' definitions of left/right versus their feelings toward the two concepts. We expected, of course, that right would be more favoured than left in Canadian society, and went on to ask what it is in people's thinking about left that troubles them.<sup>7</sup> We assume that there is a relationship between meaning and affect, so that the way in which people symbolize ideological concepts provides at least some of the warrant for their feelings. We therefore report on how different groups of respondents, categorized first by their feelings toward right-wingers and left-wingers, and second by their self-descriptions on the left/right scale, defined these concepts.

### *Belief Correlates of Left/Right*

Ogmundson's work is the source of some predictions on attitudinal correlates of left/right, notwithstanding his skepticism concerning popular understanding of these terms. Arguing that left/right is multidimensional instead of unidimensional, Ogmundson reasons that economic and social or religious continua underlie left/right judgments.<sup>8</sup> We assessed the dimensionality and content of left/right by factor analyzing respondents' self-ratings on a seven-point scale along with their positions on a battery of normative statements.<sup>9</sup> These statements

- 7 The assumption of greater regard for the right than the left is supported in the following studies: David J. Elkins, "The Perceived Structure of the Canadian Party Systems," this JOURNAL 7 (1974), 510; James E. Curtis and Ronald D. Lambert, "Educational Status and Reactions to Social and Political Heterogeneity," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 13 (1976), 194; Barry J. Kay, "An Examination of Class and Left-Right Party Images in Canadian Voting," this JOURNAL 10 (1977), 132, 138; Lambert, "Question Design," 140.
- 8 Rick Ogmundson, "On the Measurement of Party Class Positions: The Case of Canadian Federal Political Parties," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 12 (1975), 572. Other researchers have suggested the same two dimensions for liberal/conservative. See, for example, Conover and Feldman, "Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications," 635. Laponce, especially, has documented the religious origins and meanings inherent in left/right ("Dieu—à droite ou à gauche?" this JOURNAL 3 [1970], 257-74).
- 9 A number of researchers have attempted to determine the meaning of left/right and liberalism/conservatism indirectly through correlations. For example, see the following on left/right: Roger Gibbins and Neil Nevitte, "Canadian Political Ideology: A Comparative Analysis," this JOURNAL 18 (1985), 577-98; Ronald Inglehart and Dusan Sidjanski, "The Left, the Right, the Establishment and the Swiss Electorate," in Ian Budge, et al. (eds.), *Party Identification and Beyond*, 235-39. See the following on liberal/conservative: Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in D. E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 227-29; Conover and Feldman, "Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications," 627-28, 634-35; Luttbeg and Gant, "Failure of Liberal/Conservative," 86-90.

were designed to represent a variety of issues that we thought might be related to left/right. These included the economic and social dimensions discussed by Ogmundson, as well as items about labour and the military. We had in mind not only testing the hypothesis put forward by Ogmundson, but also inferring the meaning of left/right from the content of the factor or factors with which the left/right self-ratings might correlate.

### *Party Identification Correlates of Left/Right*

A fourth approach to the meaning of left/right is to ask whether people use these terms in ways that are consistent with their partisan loyalties. If the left/right distinction is of any moment for electoral behaviour, voters should place themselves on the left/right scale closer to their preferred parties than to the parties they reject. In addition to proximity, the correlations between self-ratings and ratings of preferred parties should be higher than the correlations between self-ratings and ratings of nonpreferred parties. If left/right is a salient consideration in people's political thinking, then this tendency should be accentuated for respondents who strongly identify with a party.

It is not our intention in this article to address the sticky problem of causality. It is possible that voters' self-placements determine their choice of party; but it is also possible that left/right definitions of self and parties serve to justify or make sense of choices that have been made on grounds other than left/right ideology.<sup>10</sup> In either case, a meaningful relationship between voters' descriptions of themselves and political parties is necessary if we are to attach any significance to left/right thinking.

### **Data Source and Measurements**

The data used in the present analyses were taken from the 1984 Canadian National Election Study.<sup>11</sup> The sample design was a multi-stage, stratified cluster sample of the electorate, with systematic oversampling of the less populous provinces. The raw sample of 3,377 respondents has been weighted ( $N=3,380$ ) to make it nationally representative in terms of population, age, gender and urban-rural composition.

The left/right variables were drawn from answers to three kinds of questions. The first questions were open-ended and asked respondents to define the terms left and right, as follows:

10 See Asher Arian and Michal Shamir, "The Primarily Political Functions of the Left-Right Continuum," *Comparative Politics* 15 (1983), 139-58.

11 R. D. Lambert, S. D. Brown, J. E. Curtis, B. J. Kay and J. M. Wilson. 1984 National Election Study Codebook, Preliminary Version (Waterloo, 1985).

Sometimes in Canada people use the labels ‘‘left’’ or ‘‘left-wing’’ and ‘‘right’’ or ‘‘right-wing’’ to describe political parties, politicians and political ideas. I’m going to ask you what these terms mean to you. If either or both of them don’t really have any meaning for you, please say so.

First, what does the idea ‘‘left’’ or ‘‘left-wing’’ mean to you? Anything else? What does the idea ‘‘right’’ or ‘‘right-wing’’ mean to you? Anything else?<sup>12</sup>

Second, we asked respondents to report their feelings toward left-wingers and right-wingers, using the standard 100-point ‘‘feeling thermometer.’’ An index was created by subtracting the left-rating from the right-rating and recoding the difference scores into four categories, as follows: like left more than right (–100 to –1); left=right (0); like right more than left (1 to 44); like right much more than left (45 to 100). The categories were defined empirically so that each one contained about one-quarter of the respondents who used the two thermometers. To anticipate our results, the categories also reflect the fact that the proportion who favoured right over left was about double the proportion who favoured left over right.

The third group of questions asked respondents to describe themselves, the federal political parties and their leaders on the seven-point left/right rating scale.<sup>13</sup>

We also factor analyzed respondents’ answers to a battery of 15 normative statements and their self-ratings on the left/right scale.<sup>14</sup>

- 12 We asked the following question after the open-ended questions about left and right: ‘‘What do you think is the main difference between ‘left’ and ‘right’ or between ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’? Anything else?’’ We have analyzed the answers to the questions asking separately about left and right because the response rates for them were higher than for the question that combined left and right.
- 13 The introductory statements reads as follows: ‘‘For the next few questions I would like you to use this scale which goes from left to right, with 1 being the most to the left and 7 being the most to the right.’’ A card displaying the scale was shown to the respondent. Respondents were then asked the following: ‘‘When you think of your own political opinions, where would you put yourself on this scale?’’ They were also asked to rate the federal Liberal, Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties, in that order.
- 14 Respondents were asked the following: (1) The government should see that everyone has adequate housing; (2) Doctors and hospitals should not be allowed to extra bill or charge patients more than what the government health plans pay them; (3) The difference between the rich and the poor is too great in Canada; (4) Government employees should not have the right to strike; (5) During a strike, management should not be allowed to hire workers to take the place of strikers; (6) It is not the responsibility of government to assure jobs for unemployed Canadians; (7) Canada should increase its military contributions to NATO; (8) People with high incomes should pay a greater share of the taxes than they do now; (9) The government should see to it that older and retired people have enough money to live on; (10) The US and its allies should aim for superiority in nuclear weapons; (11) The government should increase the employment opportunities available to women; (12) There should be capital punishment for anyone convicted of murder; (13) Pornographic magazines and

## Findings

### *Proportions Attempting Definitions of Left and Right*

About 40 per cent of the sample ventured definitions of left and right. Approximately 60 per cent of the sample stated their feelings toward left-wingers and right-wingers on the feeling thermometer, or denied any affect toward them, while the remaining respondents said that they did not know. The self-rating scale was also used by about 60 per cent of the respondents.

Before categorizing respondents' answers further, we checked Ogmundson's suspicion that people misunderstand the words by confusing them with what is right or wrong. On the face of it, the results suggest that this fear is groundless. Only 7 out of 1,350 respondents who answered merely equated the concept of right with what is right and 2 out of the 1,380 respondents said that left was wrong. Perhaps it was inevitable that some Canadians would seriously or frivolously associate the terms with left-wingers and right-wingers in hockey, but there were only four who did so. Two respondents volunteered the idea of a right-hand man (as in the expression "man Friday") and four others identified the term with handedness. The overwhelming majority of respondents who attempted to define the concepts, though, did so in quite sensible ways—even if they did not always agree with the preferences of academics and journalists.

### *Definitions of Left/Right*

Having recorded respondents' answers to the open-ended questions in detail, we constructed coding categories for them based on what other researchers have done with comparable information<sup>15</sup> and to take account of emergent themes in people's answers. In reading the tables presenting people's definitions of left and right, it should be noted that the percentages for second mentions were based on the total numbers of respondents who offered the relevant first mentions, and not on the totals who gave second mentions. This means that the second mentions sum to less than 100 per cent, and that the first and second mentions together sum to well over 100 per cent. Doing this, however, permits us to refer to the combined percentage of respondents who mentioned a particular definition first and second.

movies should be censored; (14) The decision to have an abortion should be the responsibility of the pregnant woman; (15) People who are homosexuals should be permitted to teach school. The response options were: strongly agree; agree somewhat; neither agree nor disagree; disagree somewhat; strongly disagree. "No opinions" were declared missing.

15 In particular, see Samuel Evans and Kai Hildebrandt, "Technical Appendix," in Barnes and Kaase (eds.), *Political Action*, 559-62.

TABLE 1

THEMES IN RESPONDENTS' DEFINITIONS OF LEFT AND RIGHT\*

Theme	Left		Right	
	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention
Communism	13.9	5.4	0.8	0.3
Socialism	28.8	5.0	1.8	0.3
Liberal	3.7	0.4	2.8	0.3
Conservative	1.8	0.3	23.4	1.8
Fascist	0.1	0.1	2.1	1.0
Change	6.9	3.7	7.5	3.7
Free enterprise	2.2	3.1	15.3	5.0
Democracy	1.5	0.9	6.2	3.7
Equality	0.7	0.9	—	—
Welfare	6.1	2.3	0.9	1.8
Role and size of government	0.2	0.6	0.4	0.6
Other attitudes, issues	1.5	1.2	2.1	1.0
Parties, leaders, politics	9.1	1.4	9.3	1.2
Interest groups, groups favoured	5.6	3.8	13.3	5.0
Evaluations, affect	15.0	2.6	10.4	2.1
Other; uncodable	3.0	0.5	3.6	—
N=	1,380		1,350	
As a %=	(40.8)		(39.9)	

\* Second mentions were percentaged on the basis of the total number of respondents who provided first mentions. See text for definition and measurement of variables.

Table 1 presents respondents' answers to the two concepts separately in terms of a range of themes or topics.<sup>16</sup> Of those who volunteered definitions for left, 33.8 per cent equated it with socialism and another 19.3 per cent with communism. Given the high percentages for socialism and communism, we checked how many respondents giving one of them on the first mention proceeded to give the other on the second mention. Of those who defined left in terms of communism first, 15.6 per cent mentioned socialism second. And, of those who equated left with socialism in their first mention, 13.1 per cent mentioned communism second. In other words, individual respondents tended to give one or the other response, but not both responses. Beyond communism and socialism, another 17.6 per cent gave evaluative

16 A theme was coded for negative instances (for example, opposition to socialism) as well as positive instances (for example, support for socialism).



definitions (for example, [dis]honest, [un]principled, "red-neck," "candy-ass," opportunistic, error-prone),<sup>17</sup> followed by 10.6 per cent who specified orientations toward social change (for example, orthodox, modern, favour the status quo, old-fashioned, avant-garde), and 10.5 per cent who cited political parties, leaders and politics.

One-quarter of the respondents (25.2 per cent) defined right in terms of conservatism in their first or second mentions. Free enterprise was the second most important theme, reported by 10.3 per cent of the respondents. This was followed by 18.3 per cent who associated right with groups in society that benefit from it. Reference in the latter case was generally made to the upper classes, the wealthy and the powerful. Evaluations ranked fourth with 12.5 per cent of first and second mentions. The few references to communism or socialism tended to identify right in opposition to these ideologies.

### *Relationship Between Definitions of Left/Right and Self-Definitions*

In Tables 2 and 3, we present respondents' definitions of left and right, respectively, according to where they located themselves on the left/right scale. In Table 2, leftists (79.4% of them) and rightists (73.3%) were more likely to define left than were centrists (52.4%). Of those who ventured definitions of left, 30 to 40 per cent of each category specified socialism. Another fifth of the leftists pointed to whose interests are favoured, and 27.3 per cent of rightists linked left with communism. Orientations toward social change accounted for 19.2, 10.5 and 6.1 per cent of first and second mentions, going from left to right. It is noteworthy that only 3.3 to 5.1 per cent equated left with liberalism.

Table 3 tells virtually the same story about respondents' abilities to define right as Table 2 has to say about the left. That is, 76.8 per cent of leftists, 72.7 per cent of rightists and 50.7 per cent of centrists defined right. It is apparent from Table 3 that right meant conservatism for 24.6 per cent of rightists, 26.3 per cent of leftists and 28.1 per cent of centrists. Right signified whose interests in society are served for 29.5, 17.6 and 13.0 per cent of the respondents, moving from left to right. The figures for free enterprise were 16.2, 19.0 and 24.1 per cent, reading in the same order. In addition, 14.0 per cent of right-wingers cited democracy and 18.2 per cent of left-wingers mentioned attitudes generally opposed to social change.

17 It is also undoubtedly the case that some of the "substantive" answers merely expressed respondents' feelings; unfortunately, we cannot separate out these responses except to code as evaluations answers that were patently evaluative in nature.

TABLE 2  
DEFINITIONS OF LEFT BY RESPONDENTS' SELF-DESCRIPTIONS ON THE LEFT/RIGHT SCALE\*

Theme	Leftist		Centrist		Rightist	
	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention
Communism	3.6	4.2	13.0	5.0	20.4	6.9
Socialism	27.0	5.2	24.6	4.5	34.7	5.4
Liberal	3.1	0.2	5.1	—	3.2	0.5
Conservative	1.5	0.2	3.4	0.2	0.9	—
Fascist	0.3	—	—	0.5	—	—
Change	15.7	3.5	6.8	3.7	2.6	3.5
Free enterprise	2.0	1.6	3.6	3.5	1.6	4.0
Democracy	2.1	0.6	1.5	1.0	1.1	1.0
Equality	1.4	1.6	1.0	1.5	0.1	0.3
Welfare	9.6	5.2	6.5	1.7	4.6	1.5
Role and size of government	—	0.3	0.1	0.7	0.4	0.7
Other attitudes, issues	3.7	1.6	1.6	1.0	0.1	1.0
Parties, leaders, politics	8.5	1.3	7.3	1.0	8.8	1.8
Interest groups, groups favoured	11.5	9.0	5.1	2.2	3.0	2.5
Evaluations, affect	7.1	1.9	19.0	1.5	16.4	4.0
Other; uncodable	2.9	0.6	1.1	0.7	2.0	0.2
N=	310		401		605	
As a % =	(79.4)		(52.4)		(73.3)	

\* On the 7-point left/right scale, leftists=1, 2, 3; centrists=4; rightists=5, 6, 7. Second mentions percentaged on number of first mentions. See text for definition and measurement of variables.

TABLE 3  
DEFINITIONS OF RIGHT BY RESPONDENTS' SELF-DESCRIPTIONS ON THE LEFT/RIGHT SCALE\*

Theme	Leftist		Centrist		Rightist	
	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention
Communism	0.3	—	0.9	0.2	0.9	0.5
Socialism	2.1	—	1.8	0.2	1.8	0.5
Liberal	1.9	0.3	3.0	0.5	3.1	—
Conservative	24.1	2.3	26.8	1.3	22.6	2.0
Fascist	1.9	1.0	2.8	0.8	1.9	1.2
Change	10.5	7.7	9.3	3.6	5.4	2.2
Free enterprise	13.2	3.0	14.9	4.1	17.6	6.5
Democracy	4.2	1.7	5.3	2.6	8.3	5.7
Welfare	0.8	2.7	0.7	2.1	1.1	1.3
Role and size of government	0.5	0.7	—	0.5	0.6	0.7
Other attitudes, issues	2.2	1.3	1.2	0.5	1.9	1.2
Parties, leaders, politics	8.9	2.3	7.9	1.0	9.3	0.7
Interest groups, groups favoured	20.5	9.0	14.2	3.4	9.7	3.3
Evaluations, affect	7.4	4.0	9.8	3.1	12.0	1.0
Other; uncodable	1.4	—	1.4	—	3.8	—
N=	300		388		600	
As a % =	(76.8)		(50.7)		(72.7)	

\* On the 7-point left/right scale, leftists=1, 2, 3; centrists=4; rightists=5, 6, 7. Second mentions percentaged on number of first mentions. See text for definition and measurement of variables.

*Relationship Between Definitions and Feelings About Left/Right*

We have already noted that right-wingers were much more highly regarded than left-wingers, by a margin of about two to one. We look next at how people defined what they liked or disliked. Tables 4 and 5 display respondents' definitions of left and right according to the index, described earlier, measuring their differential feelings toward left-wingers and right-wingers. The more people disliked the left compared to the right, in Table 4, the more they defined the left in terms of communism. The more people preferred the left, the more they emphasized orientations to change and the different interests in society served by the left (for example, the poor, the disadvantaged, the working class). About one-third of each category of respondents associated the left with socialism, though we may suppose that the valence attached to socialism in the different categories probably differed as well.

Table 5 reports the results for definitions of right. The more positive respondents felt about right compared to left, the more they defined right in terms of free enterprise and the less they defined it in terms of orientations toward social change and favouring differential interests in society. Approximately one-quarter of each category of respondents associated conservatism with the idea of right. As in the case of socialism and the left, however, it is probably the case that the valence attached to conservatism differs across the four categories of respondents.

Since we examined the relationship between meanings and affect in Tables 4 and 5, it behooves us to look more closely at definitions that were coded as specifically evaluative in Table 1. To recall, 17.6 per cent of first and second mentions for left were affective or evaluative in nature, compared to 12.5 per cent of first and second mentions for right. We found, first, that only 7.4 per cent of all the evaluations applied to left were positive, compared to 51.0 per cent of the evaluations of right. Second, scarcely anybody who rated left-wingers lower than right-wingers on the feeling thermometer had anything kind to say about the left. Even 65.6 per cent of the people who rated left more favourably than right tended to make negative judgments about the left. In the other categories of respondents, there was virtual unanimity in the application of negative attributes to left. Third, the more positive respondents were toward right compared to left on the thermometer, the more they made positive references to the right in the definitional question. Indeed, 21.7 per cent of those who preferred left-wingers to right-wingers nonetheless made positive references to the right.

Since the classification scheme for respondents in Table 5 is based simply on relative feelings toward right-wingers and left-wingers, both targets might fall within the cold (negative) or warm (positive) ranges of the thermometer. This might account for some of the anomalies noted in

TABLE 4

PERCENTAGES OF THEMES MENTIONED AS DEFINITIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF LEFT, BY FEELINGS TOWARD LEFT-WINGERS AND RIGHT-WINGERS\*

Theme	L>R		L=R		L<R		L<<R	
	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention
Communism	4.6	2.4	10.3	6.8	13.8	5.7	25.2	9.3
Socialism	27.5	6.4	28.8	5.5	30.7	4.0	36.3	5.2
Liberal	3.9	0.9	4.0	—	3.4	0.6	2.4	0.3
Conservative	2.3	0.3	1.7	1.3	3.2	—	0.4	—
Fascist	—	—	—	0.8	—	—	—	—
Change	15.1	4.0	7.3	8.0	3.5	1.7	2.0	2.4
Free enterprise	1.6	1.5	3.6	2.1	3.1	4.0	1.4	5.2
Democracy	2.0	0.3	1.9	1.3	0.9	0.3	1.1	1.4
Equality	2.0	1.5	0.2	1.3	0.7	1.1	—	0.7
Welfare	9.8	4.0	5.7	4.6	8.5	1.1	0.6	1.0
Government role, size	0.2	0.3	0.2	—	—	2.0	0.7	0.3
Other attitudes, issues	2.7	1.5	0.3	2.5	1.5	1.4	0.7	0.3
Parties, leaders, etc.	7.6	1.2	9.0	1.3	8.4	1.7	8.6	1.4
Interests favoured	12.6	7.9	7.8	4.2	1.8	1.4	2.4	3.1
Evaluations, affect	7.7	2.4	16.1	1.3	16.9	2.6	16.3	2.1
Other; uncodable	0.3	0.6	3.0	—	3.7	—	1.8	0.7
N=		328		237		349		290
As a %=		(82.0)		(54.1)		(74.6)		(78.0)

\* Column headings: left more favourably evaluated than right; left and right evaluated equally; left less favourably evaluated than right; left much less favourably evaluated than right. Second mentions percentage on number of first mentions. See text for definition and measurement of variables.

TABLE 5

PERCENTAGES OF THEMES MENTIONED AS DEFINITIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF RIGHT, BY FEELINGS TOWARD LEFT-WINGERS AND RIGHT-WINGERS\*

Theme	L>R		L=R		L<R		L<<R	
	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention	1st mention	2nd mention
Communism	0.4	—	—	—	0.5	—	1.0	1.4
Socialism	1.8	—	1.6	—	2.1	—	1.8	0.4
Liberal	1.0	0.3	3.0	0.9	5.4	0.9	2.4	—
Conservative	24.2	2.1	26.3	1.8	28.0	1.7	18.4	2.4
Fascist	2.4	1.5	4.5	1.8	1.6	0.9	0.3	0.4
Change	10.4	6.7	6.7	4.4	4.9	2.9	6.2	1.7
Free enterprise	13.0	3.1	13.9	4.8	16.3	7.5	22.0	5.2
Democracy	2.0	2.8	3.8	6.1	6.6	2.9	10.8	5.2
Equality	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Welfare	1.1	1.8	1.0	4.4	1.1	1.7	0.8	0.7
Government role, size	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.7	0.3	—	1.0
Other attitudes, issues	1.4	1.2	1.8	0.9	1.6	0.6	2.3	1.0
Parties, leaders, etc.	7.9	1.5	10.3	1.3	9.0	1.4	10.8	0.3
Interests favoured	23.3	8.0	16.7	4.4	9.7	4.3	7.8	3.1
Evaluations, affect	9.5	4.6	6.9	1.3	8.9	1.2	12.9	1.7
Other; uncodable	1.0	—	2.7	—	3.7	—	2.6	—
N=	326	228	228	345	286	286	286	286
As a %=	(81.3)	(52.0)	(52.0)	(73.7)	(76.9)	(76.9)	(76.9)	(76.9)

\* Column headings: left more favourably evaluated than right; left and right evaluated equally; left less favourably evaluated than right; left much less favourably evaluated than right. See text for definition and measurement of variables.

the results. To check on this possibility, we repeated the analysis using the leftist/centrist/rightist classification scheme based on respondents' self-ratings. Basically the same pattern of results emerged from this analysis. In addition, however, we found a greater tendency for respondents to employ emotionally charged words to define the left and the right, as we move from leftists to centrists to rightists. This pattern was distinct from the greater tendency to use evaluative labels to define the left than the right.

#### *Relationship Between Self-Definitions and Political Attitudes*

Factor analysis permitted us to infer the meaning of left/right from the content of any factor or factors with which respondents' self-descriptions on the left/right scale correlated. First, we analyzed the answers of all respondents who provided answers on the full set of items. Five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 emerged, using a varimax rotation. We established a factor loading of .400 or greater for inclusion of an item in the interpretation of a factor. The highest loading for the self-rating, however, was only .360, and this occurred for a factor defined by the two attitude statements about labour and strikes—that is, whether government workers should be denied the right to strike and whether management should be forbidden to hire workers to replace strikers. People who saw themselves on the left were more supportive of labour's use of the strike weapon.

In addition to this factor, which we have labelled "Strikes," left/right loaded weakly on two other factors. We have interpreted the first of these factors as a "Welfare" factor because it was defined by three statements about the responsibility of government for adequate housing, the economic welfare of senior citizens and women's employment opportunities. The second factor, here labelled "Military," consisted of two items about increased Canadian military contributions to NATO and support for a policy of nuclear superiority on the part of the United States and its allies. Leftists were more likely to support government intervention in the economy for social purposes and to downplay the role of the military. The relationship of left/right to the following two factors was negligible. A "Morality" factor had to do with support for capital punishment, censorship of pornography in films and magazines, and tolerance for homosexual teachers in the school system. An "Abortion" factor was defined by a single item which was marginal to all of the other factors.

We also factor analyzed the answers given by respondents who possessed university degrees and who defined both left and right. Given that these words are part of the vocabulary of a minority of the population, and given that this minority is reasonably well educated and sophisticated in the ways of its culture, then we can regard these

respondents as a criterion group.<sup>18</sup> The results of the factor analysis, again with a varimax rotation, are presented in Table 6. This time, left/right loaded on two factors. First, it loaded .434 on a factor defined by attitudes toward the disparity between the rich and the poor, higher taxes for people with high incomes and extra-billing by doctors and hospitals. Second, it loaded  $-.468$  on a factor defined by attitudes toward support for NATO and US nuclear superiority. These factors accounted for 21.2 and 7.2 per cent of the variance, respectively. In addition, left/right had a weaker loading (.310) on a factor defined principally by beliefs about the government's responsibility for providing adequate housing, but on which the two labour or strike issues also loaded. This factor explained 5.0 per cent of the variance. Once again, there was no appreciable association with the morality (censorship and gay teachers) and abortion issues.

We also factor analyzed the answers given by the least educated category of respondents for purposes of comparison. In their case, six instead of five factors produced eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The loading for the left/right rating did not exceed .17 for any of the factors.

#### *Left/Right Ratings and Party Identification*

Meaning can be inferred, finally, from the ways in which left/right thinking structures respondents' perceptions of their relations with the party system. Even if people's understanding of these concepts is highly variable, the concepts might nonetheless have sufficient reach to pattern their perceptions of themselves and the political parties. Table 7 presents the mean ratings that respondents assigned to themselves and to each of the three federal parties on the left/right scale, with contingency controls for the direction and strength of party identification.<sup>19</sup> The difference between the means for New Democrats'

- 18 We also checked the definitions of left and right given by respondents in this criterion group. Comparing their answers with the answers given by less educated respondents, respondents in this criterion group were more likely to define both concepts in terms of orientations toward social change, interest groups and various specific issues. They were less likely to cite themes having to do with parties, leaders and politics and to use judgmental descriptions as definitions. In addition, the highly educated respondents in the criterion group placed less emphasis on communism and more emphasis on socialism in their definitions of left. Conservatism and free enterprise figured more prominently in their definitions of right. The criterion group strategy was also employed by Gibbins and Nevitte, "Canadian Political Ideology," 580-81.
- 19 The percentage of respondents who rated themselves to the left of centre (that is, 1, 2 or 3 on the 7-point scale) was 11.6 per cent. When asked to recall where they were five years before, in 1979, 15.2 per cent placed themselves on the left. (The actual figure for a different sample of respondents in the 1979 National Election Study was 14.1%). In 1984, 36.8, 17.4 and 5.4 per cent rated the NDP, the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives to the left of centre. For comparisons with the earlier National Election Surveys, see Lambert, "Question Design," 140.



TABLE 6  
 FACTOR ANALYSIS OF LEFT/RIGHT SELF-RATINGS AND NORMATIVE STATEMENTS FOR HIGHLY EDUCATED  
 RESPONDENTS WHO DEFINED THE CONCEPTS OF LEFT AND RIGHT\*

Factors =	I	II	III	IV	V	h <sup>2</sup>
<i>Items:</i>						
Higher taxes for high incomes	.649	.065	.087	-.075	-.001	.47
Rich/poor difference too great	.583	-.178	.219	.127	.148	.50
No medical extra-billing	.525	-.194	.066	.036	-.054	.40
Government, retirees and money	.350	-.029	.350	-.007	-.079	.37
No government duty for jobs	-.324	.174	-.259	-.167	-.087	.32
Increase support for NATO	-.012	.751	-.072	-.145	-.006	.60
US nuclear superiority	-.132	.625	-.068	-.018	.022	.45
Left/right self-rating	.434	-.468	.310	.055	-.040	.56
Favour capital punishment	-.027	.333	-.212	.222	.278	.31
Government and adequate housing	.154	-.102	.696	.048	.066	.54
No civil service strikes	-.231	.304	-.390	.043	.102	.36
Government and women's jobs	.332	-.040	.334	.294	.029	.38
No hiring scabs during strikes	.308	-.285	.333	.075	-.057	.36
Women's right to abortion	.025	-.110	.053	.732	-.222	.61
Censor movies, magazines	.029	-.073	.143	-.119	.602	.42
Permit homosexual teachers	-.010	-.307	.286	.168	-.492	.45
Variance Explained =	21.2%	7.2%	5.0%	3.5%	3.1%	

\* Factor analysis with varimax rotation; N=322. See text for complete statements.

TABLE 7

MEAN SCORES ON THE LEFT/RIGHT SCALE FOR RATINGS OF SELF AND THE THREE FEDERAL POLITICAL PARTIES, BY DIRECTION AND STRENGTH OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION<sup>a</sup>

Party identification	Self	Liberal Party	Conservative Party	New Democratic Party	(N)
<i>Liberal</i>					
Total	4.37 <sup>b</sup>	4.49	5.09	2.83	(540-563)
t=		-2.25*	-9.19***	21.03***	
dif. <sup>c</sup> =		0.12	0.72	1.54	
Strong	4.45	4.43	5.03	2.77	(123-128)
t=		0.14	-2.80**	10.71***	
dif.=		0.02	0.58	1.68	
Moderate	4.34	4.54	5.08	2.87	(268-278)
t=		-2.96**	-6.90***	15.46***	
dif.=		0.20	0.74	1.47	
Weak	4.37	4.48	5.16	2.83	(144-152)
t=		-0.91	-6.38***	9.52***	
dif.=		0.11	0.79	1.54	
<i>Progressive Conservative</i>					
Total	4.94	3.75	5.20	2.82	(662-692)
t=		15.29***	-5.73***	25.24***	
dif.=		1.19	0.26	2.12	
Strong	5.28	3.45	5.26	2.47	(173-179)
t=		10.43***	0.06	16.63***	
dif.=		1.83	0.02	2.81	
Moderate	4.89	3.88	5.22	2.87	(371-394)
t=		10.88***	-5.63***	18.81***	
dif.=		1.01	0.33	2.02	
Weak	4.61	3.80	5.03	3.13	(116-117)
t=		4.23***	-3.37***	7.35***	
dif.=		0.81	0.42	1.48	
<i>New Democrat</i>					
Total	3.44	4.54	5.29	3.35	(258-267)
t=		-7.93***	-12.26***	1.57	
dif.=		1.10	1.85	0.09	
Strong	3.53	4.34	5.32	3.22	(86-90)
t=		-3.28**	-5.65***	2.61**	
dif.=		0.81	1.79	0.31	
Moderate	3.46	4.65	5.27	3.46	(125-133)
t=		-6.00***	-9.10***	0.36	
dif.=		1.19	1.81	0.00	
Weak	3.17	4.64	5.22	3.29	(43)
t=		-4.74***	-8.26***	-0.51	
dif.=		1.47	2.05	0.12	

a See text for definition and measurement of variables.

b Mean scores for self differ marginally in various comparisons because of varying Ns.

c Dif.= Difference between self-rating and party rating.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

self-ratings and ratings of the NDP was statistically nonsignificant, as expected. The t-test for Conservative respondents vis-à-vis the Conservative party was significant ( $p < .001$ ), and marginally so for Liberal respondents vis-à-vis their party ( $p < .05$ ). In each case, however, the difference score between self-ratings and ratings of each of the parties was smaller for preferred parties than for nonpreferred parties. When strength of identification was controlled, the t-tests for differences between self-ratings and ratings of the Liberal and Conservative parties were nonsignificant for the strong identifiers, as predicted. Although the difference for strong New Democrats was statistically significant, the means for moderate and weak identifiers were not.

Table 8 reports the correlations between left/right self-ratings and ratings of each of the three parties, as well as between pairs of parties, specified by the direction and strength of respondents' party identification. First, while most of the correlations were significant before strength of identification was controlled, the correlations between respondents and their preferred parties were clearly greater. Second, the magnitude of the correlations between self-ratings and preferred parties varied directly with the strength of party identification. All of these correlations were highly significant, except where New Democrats were concerned. Third, the correlations between self and nonpreferred parties were generally negative, with the notable exception of Liberal identifiers' descriptions of themselves and the NDP. These correlations were significantly positive for strong and moderately strong Liberals. Fourth, Liberal and Conservative respondents tended to produce positive correlations between their ratings of the Liberal and New Democratic parties, while New Democrats produced positive correlations between their ratings of the two older parties.

### Discussion and Conclusions

It comes as no surprise that a minority of the sample was able to define left and right. We are more impressed with the finding that the kinds of answers by respondents who did volunteer definitions made as much sense as they did. For the most part, respondents invoked themes having to do with socialism, communism, conservatism, free enterprise, the economic interests favoured by each tendency, specific political figures and parties, and orientations toward social change—and generally in what might be considered the appropriate directions. Moreover, these themes are very consistent with each other and conform rather well with the kinds of definitions reported by Laponce in his pioneering work.<sup>20</sup>

20 Laponce, *Left and Right*, 117, 119, 122-23. See also Paul Stevenson, "Class and

TABLE 8  
LEFT/RIGHT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RATINGS OF SELF AND FEDERAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND BETWEEN RATINGS OF PARTIES, BY DIRECTION AND STRENGTH OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION<sup>a</sup>

Correlations between	Party identification	Self & Liberal Party	Self & Conservative Party	Self & New Democratic Party	Liberal Party & Conservative Party	Liberal Party & New Democratic Party	Conservative Party & New Democratic Party	(N)
<i>Liberal</i>	Total	.491***	-.020	.189***	-.129***	.323***	-.131***	(540-563)
	Strong	.571***	-.228**	.233**	-.339***	.282***	-.164*	(123-129)
	Moderate	.564***	.015	.258***	-.042	.325***	-.146**	(268-279)
	Weak	.307***	.154*	.028	-.045	.350***	-.066	(144-152)
<i>Progressive Conservative</i>	Total	-.122***	.475***	-.187***	-.182***	.092**	-.212***	(662-701)
	Strong	-.330***	.607***	-.212**	-.217**	.194**	-.063	(173-180)
	Moderate	.017	.465***	-.154***	-.164***	.095*	-.258***	(371-402)
	Weak	-.095	.291***	-.147	-.161*	-.155*	-.299***	(116-119)
<i>New Democrat</i>	Total	-.341***	-.437***	.626***	.343***	-.356***	-.433***	(257-267)
	Strong	-.202*	-.573***	.706***	.267**	-.457***	-.534***	(86-90)
	Moderate	-.476***	-.408***	.659***	.370***	-.288***	-.360***	(123-133)
	Weak	-.313*	-.061	.182	.537***	-.406**	-.369**	(43-44)

a See text for definition and measurement of variables.  
Levels of significance: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Perhaps only academics, trained in the niceties of definition and argument, would assume that people who are unable to define concepts will not know how and when to use them. Beyond the 40 per cent of the respondents who obliged our request for definitions of left and right, however, another 15 to 20 per cent used the left/right scale to describe themselves and the federal political parties. Moreover, the descriptions provided by the latter category of respondents resembled the descriptions given by the more "knowledgeable" respondents.<sup>21</sup> The principal difference between these two kinds of respondents lay in the fact that knowledgeable respondents perceived a much more polarized party system than did respondents who were unable to define the terms. In other words, knowledgeable respondents perceived a much clearer choice among the three parties.

For some critics, however, the most important test of meaning will be found in the factor analyses. They may well argue that, if definitions of left and right are not distinguished at the policy level, we had best abandon these concepts as lacking in intellectual clout. Although there is little evidence of policy differences associated with left and right in the general population, the results are stronger for the criterion group of highly educated respondents. In their case, the left/right ratings loaded moderately on two factors, one of them support for the military and the other concerned with economic inequalities in Canadian society.

The results for the criterion group permit us to comment on one of the issues raised by Ogmundson.<sup>22</sup> It will be recalled that he posited a pair of economic and broadly social or religious dimensions underlying the left/right distinction. However, we found no evidence of a connection between left/right self-descriptions and the morality and abortion factors. These results are not an artifact of limiting the analysis to the responses of the most educated respondents among whom, perhaps, the social and moral dimensions might be less salient. When we analyzed the answers of the least educated respondents, we found no evidence that left/right loaded substantially on any of the factors that emerged.

Left-Wing Radicalism," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 14 (1977), 280-82.

21 It is noteworthy that respondents who did not define left and right produced the same order among the parties, with the NDP on the left, the Liberals in the centre and the Conservatives on the right. "Knowledgeable" respondents, however, saw the NDP farther to the left and the Conservatives farther to the right than did respondents who failed to define left and right. While the mean rating for the Liberals was 4.2 in both cases, the spread between the NDP and the Conservatives was 1.4 scale points for people who did not define the concepts, compared to 2.5 scale points for those who did. In short, knowledgeable respondents perceived a more polarized party system. This difference does not appear to be attributable to respondents' own position on the left/right scale, since the self-rating for knowledgeable respondents was 4.4, and for the less knowledgeable respondents, it was 4.3.

22 Ogmundson, "On the Measurement," 572.

It should also be observed that the military and economic factors probably represent examples of what Inglehart calls "materialist" values in his definition of the values of left/right.<sup>23</sup> In his view, the advanced industrial nations of the West have undergone an historic shift in their value priorities. Where once they were primarily oriented to materialist values, having to do with the satisfaction of safety and sustenance needs, today they are increasingly oriented to postmaterialist values, having to do with the satisfaction of aesthetic, intellectual and social needs. Inglehart suggests a certain affinity between the left and postmaterialist values, although there is evidence of some support for these values on the right, as well. Strictly speaking, however, our analyses do not test Inglehart's ideas about the value content of left/right because the battery of attitudinal statements does not provide sufficient coverage of postmaterialist concerns.

From our point of view, the factor analyses involving left/right and political attitudes do not exhaust what is significant about left/right. There was clear evidence of the much greater positive affect associated with right as opposed to left; and there was evidence for the patterning effect of left/right on respondents' perceptions of themselves and the political parties. Even when they were unable to define the concepts verbally, a significant portion of the sample could nonetheless use the terms and express feelings toward them. Taken together, these findings point to some of the ways in which left and right labels function to connect voters to the party system. At a minimum, they provide cues to distinguish good parties from bad parties and "us" from "them."<sup>24</sup>

It seems to us that what is uniquely powerful about the concepts of left and right is their capacity to say something to different, though no doubt overlapping, audiences. For those with sufficient knowledge of politics to understand, they mean something as abstract as values and provide general standards against which to judge society and politics. For others, perhaps lacking in abstract political knowledge, they are labels to which affect is attached, no doubt under the tutelage of the mass media about who and what is left or right, and they are applied and

- 23 Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), chap. 2: "Value Priorities and Socioeconomic Change," in Barnes and Kaase (eds.), *Political Action*, chap. 11. Compare, James Savage, "Postmaterialism of the Left and Right: Political Conflict in Postindustrial Society," *Comparative Political Studies* 17 (1985), 448-49; Ronald Inglehart, "New Perspectives on Value Change: Response to Lafferty and Knutsen, Savage, and Böltken and Jagodzinski," *Comparative Political Studies* 17 (1985), 485-532.
- 24 Sniderman and his colleagues discuss the contribution of positivity and negativity to the psychological processes of assimilation and contrast. See Paul M. Sniderman, Robert A. Brody, Jonathan W. Siegel and Percy H. Tannenbaum, "Evaluative Bias and Issue Proximity," *Political Behavior* 4 (1982), 118.

responded to accordingly. Together, these constituencies account for about one-half of the electorate. Although this is a long way from unanimity, it is also worth remembering that politics is not a consuming passion or even a preoccupation for a sizeable proportion of the electorate.

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