

THE MODERATE MYSTIQUE: THE MEANING OF “MODERATE” AND SHIFTS IN  
IDEOLOGICAL LABEL MEANING, 1990-2021

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Americans' ideological identities—their meanings, relationships to policy, and effects—have captivated political scientists for decades. Beginning with the claim that citizens lack ideological thinking almost altogether (Converse 1964), efforts have been made to uncover the labels' meanings, pathways to self-identification, influence on vote choice, relationship to racial attitudes, and influence on polarization—both policy and affective (Conover and Feldman 1981; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Levitin and Miller 1979; Enders and Scott 2018; Mason 2018). Ideological identity has basked in unending academic attention, especially the liberal and conservative labels. “Moderate”, however, has garnered substantially less attention.

This lackluster attention stands in contrast to the sheer number of citizens who identify as moderate. According to recent Gallup data on Americans' political ideology, moderates constitute the second largest share of those who identify with a group behind conservatives (36%), encapsulating 35% of the American public with liberals at 25%.<sup>1</sup> Roughly 59 million voters or 115 million citizens prefer the moderate label. These are meaningful proportions. Furthermore, for the last two decades, the percentage of Americans identifying as moderate has varied between 35 and 45% but faced no massive declines in usage as other labels have (Coggins and Stimson 2017). Self-identified moderates constitute a substantial—and potentially hugely influential—portion of the electorate; yet, we conject, both societally and academically, we have faint understanding of what “moderate” means, beyond “the middle” (questionable itself), to the American polity, and even less about those who choose the label.

It is the former issue—not knowing what “moderate” as an ideological label connotes to the American public—that sits at the center of this study. Before endeavoring to understand the moderate individuals or exploring the full breadth of behavioral consequences that such a selection entails, since historically understudied, we must establish a foundational understanding of “moderate” from which to operate. We ask, therefore, what “moderate” means to the American public.

For the ideologues, the very idea of posing the same question seems frivolous. Knowledge of how the American public views liberals and conservatives feels as accessible as common sense. In the mind of Americans, the quintessential “liberal” votes Democratic, supports liberal policies like the New Deal-era economic safety net, is open to new experiences, pushes back on the status quo, and lives in urban areas visiting the abstract art exhibit while sipping their oat milk lattes (see Jost 2017 for a comprehensive summary on ideological characteristics). Conservatives, on the other hand, are associated with Republican vote preferences, support for conservative policies such as abortion restrictions, defend the status quo and strong social norms like an emphasis on traditional families, and live in rural areas flying large American flags at their post-church carnivorous backyard barbeques (see Jost 2017 for a comprehensive summary on ideological characteristics).

A description of a prototypical moderate or symbols associated with the ideological label do not come to mind as readily. This disconnect between the steady popularity of the moderate label and the dearth of understanding motivates this paper's analysis. We do not know, broadly speaking, what the label “moderate” connotes in the minds of the American public. Lacking a corresponding party or clear policy platform, the meaning of moderate ideology remains ambiguous, especially compared to the liberal and conservative labels. Yet no less than 35% of the American electorate selects the label each year. “Moderate” is alluring to citizens. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/328367/americans-political-ideology-held-steady-2020.aspx>

Uncovering the symbolic meaning of the moderate label is our main goal, but this study asks questions about the nature of the ideological labels more broadly as well. That is, to understand “moderate” necessitates a broader updated analysis of the meaning of “liberal” and “conservative”. Analyses of ideology are by nature comparative. Since liberal, conservative, and moderate all stem from the same spectrum, at least in the abstract, knowing how they relate to one another and help citizens parse out the political world is an integral component of each label’s meaning. Meaning strength, consequences for political behavior, and level of constraint or policy-matching mean little for one label when not in the context of how other labels function. Furthermore, that how American elites and citizens perceive and relate to one another has shifted is undeniable. Elite polarization, mass polarization and social sorting have fostered a palpably *different* moment, one of increased animosity and characterized by a decreasing ability to see past difference and get along (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Abramowitz 2010 (or, for the other side, Fiorina and Abrams 2008); Mason 2018). We seize the opportunity, therefore, to ask: what did “moderate” mean before these shifts, and how did it relate to the ideologues, and what does that landscape look like now? Concurrently, do the ideologue labels—seeming bastions of meaning stability (Conover and Feldman 1981 to Zschirnt 2011)—exhibit any changes in meaning and relationship under these new pressures?

We begin by establishing a baseline understanding of what moderate means to the public, while considering the same question for liberal and conservative. Indicative of the dearth of attention given to the moderate label, only one reliable data source taps this question (1990 to 1992 ANES merged dataset). Using analyses of feeling thermometer evaluations of all three ideological labels and 25 salient social and political groups, we ask: what did “moderate” mean to the American public then? Did it function like the liberal and conservative labels symbolically and affectively with citizens linking certain groups to the term? Did “liberal” and “conservative” mean, in 1990, what we expect based on existing research? Baseline meanings in hand, we turn to a 2021 replication and extension dataset<sup>2</sup> to investigate the ways in which ideological label meaning, definition strength, and relationships to one another have changed over time. With increasing social sorting and affective polarization, do liberal and conservative hold steady in their meaning? Do the labels continue to denote entirely different perspectives on the political realm, as previously shown (e.g., Conover and Feldman 1981), or has polarization driven their meanings into increased relationship with one another?

Broadly construed, we aim to evaluate the meaning, definition clarity, and relationship between *all three* ideological labels in an increasingly polarized and socially-sorted context. To do so, we must first take stock of the existing literature across a variety of interrelated concepts to inform our theory, hypotheses, and methods. We turn first to what we know about the moderate label.

### **What We *Do* Know About the Moderate Label**

The long and short of it is not much: few studies address the moderate label or self-identified moderates directly. Adams et al. (2017) show that moderates weigh candidate ideology and policy stances less than liberals and conservatives when making voting decisions. Similarly, Treier and Hillygus (2009) establish that the origins of moderate identification pull very little from issue positions. Only 17% of self-identified moderates have centrist policy preferences—those that fall

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<sup>2</sup> Study commissioned by Bucknell Institute for Public Policy, data collected by YouGov America Inc., San Francisco, CA.

within the middle tercile on both the social and economic dimensions. Rather, a sizable share of moderate identifiers is cross-pressured between the economic and social dimensions. “Moderate,” it would appear, for some Americans refers less to a position of centrism between liberal and conservative policies or candidates than it does a remedy for views that do not fit the unidimensional nature of elite belief systems. These studies suggest that selection of “moderate” implies political behavior quite distinct from the ideologues—and an unclear meaning begins to coalesce, one largely defined by its eschewing of the classically conceptualized ideological spectrum.

Pivoting from self-identified moderates to the meaning of the moderate label to Americans broadly, Claassen, Tucker, and Smith (2015) reveal the term to be both popular and shrouded in confusion for the public. When asked to take a policy position and then label their position ideologically, nearly all mistakes—a liberal or conservative position being labeled as something else—involve the moderate label. The most common mismatch is the use of the moderate label to describe a liberal issue position. Self-identified liberals and conservatives, not just moderates, misuse the moderate label, although liberals misuse the term more than conservatives. In part, this may reflect liberals’ and conservatives’ aversion to associating their own beliefs with the other ideological team—or avoiding attributing certain policies to their own label, even when it should be. However, the magnitude to which “moderate” is misused by Americans broadly hints at a meaning undefined and therefore more fluid and easier to assert. Without clear associations of “moderate” with specific issues or other referents for citizens to form an associated schema from which to gauge the label’s applicability to specific policies, “moderate,” it seems, may mean very different things to different respondents.

Taken together, the existing research probing the moderate label helps us understand less about what the moderate label *does mean* and more about what it evidently *does not mean* to the American public. We endeavor to fill that gap. Moderate does not, it seems, always mean an assertion of centrism that binds its adherents to ideological middle ground and against extremist candidates. It does not restrain self-identified moderates from holding constrained liberal or conservative belief systems. To the broader American public, it does not always, or even most often, imply classically conceptualized moderate policy, being misused to describe liberal preferences. With such a negative—that is, lack of—meaning for the moderate label, much remains unexplained. To unearth the American polity’s understanding of “moderate,” we must begin at the foundational level. “Moderate” in politics originates from the liberal to conservative ideological spectrum and this study intends to uncover the connections, or lack thereof, between all three ideological labels; hence, we turn to the fundamentals of ideology and the labels broadly construed.

### **What is Ideology?**

Conceptualizing ideology as knowledge of the abstract principles of liberalism and conservatism and the resulting ability to formulate coherent structures of policy preferences aligning with one’s ideological identity, Converse (1964) uncovered a lack of “ideological thinking” for most citizens. Most Americans, that is, identify with one of the labels (often quite strongly) but possess strikingly limited policy knowledge. Despite the dearth of public knowledge of ideological principles, Levitin and Miller (1979) emphasize the significance of ideological identifications to political behavior, specifically candidate perceptions and vote choice. Even those unable to distinguish between the liberal and conservative position on issues—a hallmark case of missing ideological thinking in Converse’s (1964) conceptualization—respond to political stimuli in accordance with their identity. Ideological identity influences individuals regardless of their knowledge of ideological principles or their own policy preferences, often because the symbols and images associated with the labels are

powerful heuristics (Coggins 2017; Conover and Feldman 1981). That is, ideological identification carries significant meaning outside of policy.

Moreover, according to Levine, Carmines, and Huckfeldt (1997), ideological identification's influence is increasing overtime, even scrambling partisanship, a notably stable political characteristic. Bafumi and Shapiro (2009) push the argument even further, characterizing "The New American Voter" as, more precisely, "The New Partisan Voter" due to their uncovering that twenty-first century partisanship is more deeply ideological and issue-based along the liberal-conservative dimension than in the previous thirty years. It is not only that ideology is scrambling partisanship, but also partisanship and ideology—however conceptualized by citizens—are moving into alignment, reinforcing individuals' commitment to both when they commit to one.

Deepening the conceptualization of ideology as outside of policy preferences, Ellis and Stimson (2012) conceptualize ideology as two components: operational and symbolic. Operational ideology encapsulates the specific issue positions individuals hold. Symbolic ideology is self-identification. The authors therefore treat self-identification as a separate yet powerful form of ideological thinking. Critically, Ellis and Stimson (2012) show that many Americans divorce the two dimensions of ideology. People can and do identify as conservatives, believing deeply that their identification represents themselves, while holding not a single conservative issue position. The authors posit that this stems from the positive extra-political, symbolic meaning attached to the conservative ideological label. People self-identify because of what the words "liberal" or "conservative" mean to them and to broader society in a context entirely unrelated to abstract ideological principles, further substantiating the claims that "liberal" and "conservative" are packed with powerful symbols and images.

Conover and Feldman (1981) uncover the micro-level process of individuals' self-identification that underlies the macro-level operational-symbolic divorce examined by Ellis and Stimson (2012). The ideological labels—liberal and conservative—act as powerful political symbols whose meaning stems from the social and political symbols individuals associate with them. How people evaluate—positively or negatively—the labels and their associated symbols drives self-identification. For example, someone who links positive affect to the police, the military, and the symbols of capitalism, and associates those groups and items with the conservative label, in turn, feels warmly towards the label. This positive evaluation of the label itself impels the individual to select the conservative ideological label. Conover and Feldman (1981) find strong support for the model, implying that for the American public the nature of ideological self-identification is hugely symbolic. Choosing to be liberal or conservative is more akin to selecting an extra-political identity than any consideration of policy stances, even for those who successfully align policy preferences with their label. Malka and Lelkes (2010) find further evidence of the divorce of ideological identity from substantive meaning.

Additionally, Conover and Feldman (1981) demonstrate that the meanings of "liberal" and "conservative," although varying slightly from person to person, are discernable at the aggregate level. The American public reaches some level of consensus on which symbols link to each label. In addition to questioning the narrative of "ideology as policy summary", Conover and Feldman (1981) challenge the notion of a bipolar ideological identification continuum. The antecedents to positive evaluation of each label (and, therefore, self-identification) are not contrasting evaluations of the same symbols, but instead are entirely different sets of considerations. The pathways by which individuals come to select the conservative label differ from the pathways to the liberal label. That is,

instead of viewing the political world from different sides of the same coin, liberals and conservatives employ entirely different currencies in their evaluations.

Noting the significant change in the political tenor with the rise of the New Right, Zschornt (2011) analyzes the 2004 ANES and compares it to Conover and Feldman's (1981) 1976 ANES results. Although the symbols positively associated with each label remain stable—liberals connected to actors pushing against the status quo and more controversial groups, conservatives to protectors of the status quo and less controversial groups—it is not always that liberal identification stems from a positive embrace of the term and conservative from a negative rejection. In other words, when liberal policy is dominant on the political agenda, individuals' ideological self-identifications—both liberals and conservatives—are predicted better by their evaluations of “liberals” than “conservatives.” With a changing political context, the balance of negative versus positive affect shifts for each label. It does so quite slowly as 2000 marked the conservative eclipse of liberal importance, despite the rise of the New Right occurring nearly 20 years before. Despite the change, Zschornt (2011) does not find a substantial increase in the negative correlation between evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives, hinting that Conover and Feldman's (1981) assertion of different currencies holds. Certain attributes of ideological self-identification and label meaning, therefore, are subject to the shifting tides of the political waters, others are not. Although not as much time has passed between today and Zschornt's (2011) update to Conover and Feldman's (1981) seminal work, the political environment has yet again undergone major shifts, elucidating a need to reconsider the ways in which ideological label meaning may or may not remain stable.

### **Bringing it Together**

Three interrelated trends comprise the preeminent political context changes of the past thirty years: elite polarization, mass polarization, and social sorting. That American political elites have polarized on policy is uncontested (Enders 2021; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Ideological polarization among the public finds more mixed support (Enders 2021; Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011). Both elites and the public have been shown to affectively polarize, however. Citizens *feel* more distaste and animosity towards members of their out-party and out-ideological group now than ever before, regardless of if their policy preferences differ (Mason 2015, 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018). Intensifying individuals' emotions towards the other team is the deepening psychological connection felt towards partisanship and ideological label because the terms function as social identities and have aligned with other salient attributes like race and religion (Mason and Wronski 2018). This process creates “mega-identities” which, combining the emotional and psychological impact of multiple identities, are powerful influences on individuals' perceptions, behavior, and emotions (Mason 2018).

While it is true that the American public may still not “think ideologically” in the sense that Converse (1964) meant, the ideological labels carry significant meaning and importance to individuals. This meaning is predominantly symbolic, based on the association of other groups and actors with the ideological labels, and, for the liberal and conservative terms, broadly understood and agreed upon. The core question at hand is whether these findings hold for the moderate label. Does “moderate” function like “liberal” or “conservative” to the public? Does it carry a largely accepted and primarily symbolic meaning? Further, given more recent evidence that while many facets of the self-identification process and label meaning remain stable over time, others react to changes in the political context, we ask how all three labels have reacted to recent polarization and social sorting. Will the symbolic meaning of the ideological labels—derived from which groups citizens associate them with *and* how they relate to one another—shift in the face of these trends?

We first approach the moderate label, positing a theory of meaning fluidity leading to the lack of a stable definition, especially compared to the ideologues. From that basis for moderate and adding in the established definitions of liberal and conservative, we suggest that on the surface the ideological labels remain calm in the face of shifting tides, but there is churning underneath, affecting the way each draws meaning from the others.

### **Moderate Meaning Fluidity**

The meaning of the ideologue labels is clear both academically and in broader society, primarily because we operate in a binary political realm. Liberals and conservatives. Republicans and Democrats. Even most independents lean heavily in one direction.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, sorting has led to increased overlap of party and ideology (Levendusky 2009). The team lines are clearly drawn, with many nonpolitical characteristics advancing an unbridgeable chasm between the two sides.<sup>4</sup> Liberals like abstract art with its ambiguity and interpretation; conservatives prefer realism for its certainty (Carl, Richards, and Heath 2019). Conservatives keep their rooms neat and tidy whereas liberals find less discomfort in a mess (Carney et al. 2008). Liberals let their guard down easily while conservatives constantly monitor for threat (Carraro, Castelli, and Macchiella 2011). More central to meaning than the characteristics ascribed to each are the social groups to which citizens tether them. To be liberal is to support protestors, environmentalists, feminists, and the changing of society and policy for the benefit of marginalized groups. Conservative signifies approval of big business, Christians, and the defenders of the status quo such as the police and military (Conover and Feldman 1981).

“Moderate,” on the other hand, gleans little defined meaning from the “this-or-that,” two-sided political system. In fact, quite the opposite. There is no moderate party. Technically no liberal or conservative party exists either, but in the socially sorted, polarized political arena, the party label and ideological label come to mean very similar things to most of the public (Mason and Wronski 2018; Levendusky 2009). There is no *Conscience of a Moderate* centralizing our conception of the label. Without an associated party, rhetoric, or set of symbols and images of the prototypical identifier, the meaning of “moderate” hangs in limbo. “Moderate” so rarely stands on its own the way “liberal” and “conservative” do, instead functioning as a modifier for other terms (moderate Republican, moderate Democrat), that symbols essentially never “stick” to the label. Social groups are rarely tied to the label, either. A movement pushing for social change is often labeled reformist or radical, thus categorized as liberal. Any group or entity resisting the demands for change must then be conservative (or associated with it). Unable to conform to the “this or that” categorization scheme off which American politics thrives, “moderate” remains perpetually undefined at the aggregate level.

Some may assert that the term does not need to fit into one team or the other to have meaning for it is, by definition, the midpoint between liberal and conservative. Extant research has shown, however, that it does not denote a midpoint to the American public. “Moderate” is the most misused label, consistently applied to positions far from “middle of the road.” Moderate identifiers often do not perceive more extreme candidates as ideologically distant from them when casting votes—that is, they do not seem to perceive “moderate” as a claim of “middle.”

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/03/14/political-independents-who-they-are-what-they-think/>

<sup>4</sup> Despite Conover and Feldman’s (1981) finding that the idea of antecedents to ideological identity formation not being bipolar. It is more the rhetoric we use within our own parties and especially in the news media landscape (Atkinson 2017).

This theory of an unfixed meaning for “moderate” yields a set of hypotheses about the relationship between symbols and evaluations of the label. Because our goal is to establish a meaning—or lack of—for the moderate label *before* the impacts of polarization and social sorting so we can adequately analyze such impacts on all three ideological labels, these hypotheses pertain just to the ANES 1990 to 1992 merged file.

**Moderate Meaning H1:** Feeling thermometer evaluations of societal and political groups are not strongly correlated with evaluations of the moderate label in 1990.

**Moderate Meaning H2:** Feeling thermometer evaluations of societal and political groups are strongly correlated with evaluations of the liberal and conservative labels in 1990.

Contrasting the strong correlations between “liberal” and “conservative” and social groups citizens connect to them and the weak relationships between any symbolic social group feeling thermometer and the moderate label highlight two features of the theory at work. First, strong relationships between symbols and the ideologue labels underscore both the symbolic roots of ideological identity and the consensus undergirding liberal and conservative meaning. Given the media’s attention to and everyday discussion of political activity such as policymaking, campaigns, and protests in liberal/conservative and Democrat/Republican rhetoric, this makes sense. Second, the weakness of such relationships for the moderate label demonstrates public uncertainty of what moderate means. Not enough individuals have the same solidified schema of the label, so not enough symbolic evaluations inform moderate evaluation on the aggregate level to generate strong correlations. Symbols that could be associated with the moderate label have already been parsed into liberal/conservative and Democrat/Republican associational maps, leaving little fodder for the moderate label. Our third hypothesis is:

**Moderate Meaning H3:** Evaluations of the moderate ideological label are not significantly related to evaluations of the liberal or conservative ideological labels in 1990.

In the model put forth by Conover and Feldman (1981), such a finding would indicate that moderates also approach the political realm from an entirely distinct “currency” as opposed to a different side, or, the middle, of the same ideological coin. Further implications exist for the moderate case. Such a finding not only shows a distinct view on politics, but also casts doubt on the idea that “moderate” simply means a rejection of the ideological spectrum. If individuals who have a positive view of “moderates,” perhaps because of a distaste for the ideologues and political conflict, were to evaluate liberals and conservatives negatively, we would see strong negative correlations between evaluations of the moderate label and evaluations of both liberals and conservatives. However, we hypothesize that “moderate” denotes something unrelated to liberals or conservatives—that the moderate label is distinct in its own regard—so we do not expect such relationships. Moderate meaning in hand, we turn to the impact of recent political environment changes.

### **Calm on the Surface, Churning Below**

With the moderate label’s weak and unclear meaning added to the specifically defined and widely held ideologues’ meanings, we turn now to uncovering how polarization and social sorting have impacted all three by comparing the 1990 data to that from 2021. All three ideological labels appear calm on the surface: the foundational components of their meaning does not change, despite the shifting political waters. Polarization and social sorting have deepened the existing binary divides and



coalitions. Liberals continue to be viewed as progressive, open to new experiences, and supportive of social change. Conservatives conjure up images of tradition, hierarchy, and preference for the status quo. Without any meaning to begin with, the moderate label flounders in limbo, garnering only weak associations denoting its unclear meaning to the American public. Such is reflected in three additional hypotheses:

**Ideologue Meaning H1:** The liberal label is positively correlated with positive evaluations of reformist and radical social groups both in 1990 and 2021.

**Ideologue Meaning H2:** The conservative label is positively correlated with positive evaluations of groups representing the content and defense of the status quo both in 1990 and 2021.

**Moderate Meaning H4:** The moderate label garners no strong symbolic correlates in both 1990 and 2021.

Beneath the façade of continuity, however, is a churning beneath, catalyzed by polarization and social sorting. Social sorting aligns specific groups—ideological, racial, and religious—with partisanship. As it increases, so too does citizen perception of the “correct” alignment of identities (Mason and Wronski 2018). Many of the groups parsed into partisan camps are reflected in the symbolic items grounding the ideological labels’ meanings. Because of the increased perception of “correct” and “incorrect” alignments, and increased antipathy towards the other team, the strength of each label’s meaning will increase, we hypothesize. The number of citizens who “correctly” tether liberals and conservatives to the social groups they represent will increase and so too will how positively or negatively they feel towards those groups, leading to strengthening correlations between each ideologue label and the groups grounding their meaning. This is captured by the hypothesis below. The moderate label again experiences no change.

**Label Strength H1:** The correlations between both the liberal and conservative label and their respective social groups will increase from 1990 to 2021.

The changed political environment influences not only the strength of liberal and conservative definitions, but also how Americans glean meaning for each based on their opposition to one another. As political identities align, citizens more regularly view the out-ideological group as an out-party group and thus as competition. The emotional weight of one’s partisan, ideological, racial, and religious identity merge, generating negative perceptions of the other ideological label much stronger than when cross-cutting identities were more prevalent (Mason and Wronski 2018). Americans increasingly regard “liberal” and “conservative” as entirely antithetical, not only on an abstract policy spectrum, but in terms of whose needs they represent. If I am a conservative, liberal now does not just mean someone who wants to increase taxes, but instead signifies someone who stands *against* my religion, my race, and my way of life. That oppositional relationship to my identity becomes more central to what “liberal” means to me. Not only is my antipathy towards liberals more central to how I view conservatives, but I increasingly view my stance against the groups that liberals most often represent as integral to what conservative means. With social sorting, more and more individuals know which social groups go with both “liberals” and “conservatives” and feel more strongly warm or cold towards said groups. Even individuals who may not select an ideological label sense this deepening divide and view liberal and conservative meanings as more overlapping and antagonistic. Because of this, individuals rate their own group more warmly than the outgroup on the feeling

thermometer scale, and we hypothesize that the negative correlation between evaluations of liberals and conservatives will thus increase. We also hypothesize that for liberals and conservatives the strength of the correlations with the out-label's central symbolic social groups will increase from 1990 to 2021. This prediction contradicts a pivotal finding of Conover and Feldman (1981)—that of “different currencies.” We hypothesize that individuals no longer derive their positive affect towards the liberal label predominantly upon transferring the positive feelings they have towards groups they view as “liberal.” Instead, positive affect for either label is drawn from a more mixed well of emotions: positive towards the groups associated with the label they view positively *and* in reaction to groups tied to the other label that elicit a negative reaction. While perhaps not yet different sides of the exact same coin, we may be dealing with quarters and dimes instead of dollars and euros. These predictions for the ideologue labels are captured below:

**Relational Meaning H1:** the negative correlation between evaluations of liberals and conservatives will increase from 1990 to 2021.

**Relational Meaning H2:** the strength of negative correlations between social group items and “liberals” and “conservatives” will increase from 1990 to 2021.

Much like with symbolic meaning, because of its unconformity to the binary competition of American politics, the hypotheses below reflect the lack of change in the moderate label's relationship to liberals and conservatives and the groups they represent. Liberal and conservative derive more of their meaning from their definitions as opposing one another because polarization and social sorting deepen the binary, yielding less cross-cutting identities and individuals. Moderate modifies both parties just the same as before.

**Relational Meaning H3:** the correlations, positive or negative, between evaluations of moderates and evaluations of liberals and conservatives will not significantly change from 1990 to 2021.

**Relational Meaning H4:** the strength of negative correlations between social group items and “moderates” will not change from 1990 to 2021.

To summarize, we will implement the 1990 dataset to ground our understanding of the moderate label's meaning and to check that the social groups we expect to be connect to liberals and conservatives hold in that data. We then turn to comparing the 1990 results to data from 2021 to ascertain whether our theory about the changing relationships between liberals and conservatives—but not moderates—is supported. Specifically, we hypothesize that the moderate label will garner no strong meaning (no strong correlations with social group items) in 1990 nor in 2021, and that the evaluations of the moderate label will be unrelated to evaluations of liberals and conservatives in both years. We hypothesize that the strength of correlations between social groups and “liberals” and “conservatives” will increase from 1990 to 2021 (all the while being stronger than those between social groups and moderates) and that the strength of the negative relationship between evaluations of liberals and conservatives will increase between the two sets. We turn now to discussing the data and concept operationalization.

## Research Design

This paper intends to uncover what, if any, meaning the moderate ideological label carries to the American public. Further than that, we aim to understand to what extent “moderate” operates like

“liberal” and “conservative,” if it does at all, and how the meaning of all three ideological labels has shifted in the face of substantial changes to the political environment. To do so we will undertake two cross-sectional analyses, one in 1990 and one in 2021, and compare both within and across the two iterations. Specifically, we will analyze the correlations between evaluations of the ideological labels and political symbols, as well as between the ideological labels themselves. We employ two large surveys of the American electorate. As opposed to a more specific, micro-level understanding that the study of individuals’ unique definitions of the moderate label may yield, utilizing a large-n survey allows us to parse out commonly understood associations and meanings. What we desire to understand is not what “moderate” means to each individual member of the polity, but rather to what degree the larger society has a clear conceptualization of the label, and from which symbols “moderate” meaning is constructed.

Considering we seek aggregate information, and a large representative survey best suits our goals, we first employ the ANES 1990 to 1992 merged file, a compilation of two time series studies (1990 and 1992) and the 1991 pilot study. Our second dataset is an author designed replication (with updates) conducted by YouGov, commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy.<sup>5</sup> The rationale for a mixed-source approach emanates from the limited inclusion of one key survey item in nearly all available electorate-wide surveys: the “moderates” feeling thermometer question. In fact, to the best of our knowledge, only the 1990 to 1992 merged ANES file posed that question to respondents before the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy’s survey. To compare across multiple years for consistency of results and to gauge over time changes, therefore, we employ the two. We discuss operationalization in the following sections.

*Label meaning.* Existing research has repeatedly underscored the symbolic nature of ideological self-identifications (cite). Despite a traditional conception of ideology as coherently connected policy preferences, much of what citizens ascribe to the labels does not comport with this idealization. Instead, label meaning stems from the extra-political associations individuals make with salient groups, actors, and symbols—they choose an ideological label based on the perceived social meaning and desirability of the identity (Conover and Feldman 1981; Ellis and Stimson 2012; Coggins and Stimson 2017). Thus, our definition of label meaning is correlational and affective. Individuals have opinions on salient social and political groups, and they come to evaluative conclusions about them. Feelings about societal groups then carry over to the ideological labels with which citizens associate said groups. It is not a process of deliberating whether the abstract principles of conservatism align with the stated goals of businessmen—it is a much simpler process than that, and thus we implement a simple correlation of the symbols and the labels.

*Evaluations of Ideological Labels.* Evaluations of the ideological labels were measured via feeling thermometer items that ask respondents to rate the terms on a scale of 0 to 100 how “cold” (0) or “warm” (100) they feel towards “liberals,” “conservatives,” and “moderates.” Values above 50 indicate a positive evaluation and those below indicate a negative evaluation of the term.

The seminal work of Conover and Feldman (1981) predicated our limited choice of data when looking to discern the meaning of the moderate label. In their model, evaluations of the ideological labels, operationalized as feeling thermometer ratings, powerfully predict self-identification and are themselves related to political symbols. A moderate feeling thermometer is the crux of asking what

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<sup>5</sup> In the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy study, 10 of the feeling thermometer items posed in 1990 were asked, as well as 10 new items derived from those posed by the 2020 ANES cross-sectional file for updated political relevance.

the ideological label means to the American public—regardless of whether respondents self-identify as moderate, the positive or negative affect they ascribe to the potent symbols connected to “moderate” impacts the affect they associate with the moderate label itself. That is, symbols correlated to evaluations of the moderate label help us understand what it means. We assume, like Conover and Feldman (1981), that the ideological labels, including moderate, hold more affective than cognitive meaning. Utilizing a survey that asks the moderate feeling thermometer is thus indispensable. The only existing dataset option was, therefore, the ANES 1990 to 1992 merged file which we employ as the baseline set. To investigate the ideological label meanings in a polarized and socially sorted context, we utilize a YouGov America study commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy in December of 2021.

*Symbolic Associations.* Pulling again from Conover and Feldman (1981), to measure the symbolic associations respondents hold with the labels we utilize feeling thermometer items for relevant social and political groups. We believe that the meaning of “moderate” will be rooted in the groups and actors citizens perceive as inhabiting the same part of the political arena as moderates—and whether respondents view the related groups positively or negatively. Twenty-five different groups were rated from 0 to 100 based on how “cold” or “warm” respondents feel towards the named groups. Evaluations over 50 are considered positive and below considered negative. The twenty-five items represent all feeling thermometer items asked about groups of people that are socially and politically relevant but not directly tied to the government itself (i.e., Congress).<sup>6</sup> Since this study is an exploratory endeavor aiming to uncover meaning associated with the moderate label, we included every relevant item to avoid missing possible associations.

We choose to focus on symbolic items and not potential policy preference correlates with the moderate label. Conover and Feldman (1981) as well as Ellis and Stimson (2012) among others have found consistent strong evidence for the symbolic, as opposed to policy-driven, nature of ideological identification. We operate off the assumption that, if the moderate label carries meaning for the American public, it will be primarily symbolic in nature—thus investigating the symbolic components of “moderate” follows. While potential policy-based connections citizens make with “moderate” as a term are important, we believe them to be less central to how most Americans perceive the term and its application to the political realm. What we hope to gauge is the gut-level, affective response citizens have to the moderate label—and to ascertain where that reaction comes from. Powerful symbols that represent social cleavages present a more promising lead than cut and dry spending questions or even cultural questions.

Our investigation involves two cross-sectional analyses, one in 1990 to lay a foundation for moderate label meaning (or the lack thereof), and one in 2021 to gauge the response of all three ideological labels to prominent shifts in the political landscape over the thirty-year span and to corroborate our findings for moderate meaning. Both the content of each label’s meaning as measured by *which* symbolic items citizens associate with the terms and the extent to which the

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the nature of the panel dataset asking certain items—like the integral moderate feeling thermometer—only in one of the three years, and other crucial items—like the liberal and conservative feeling thermometers, among others—in two or all three, we chose to average individuals’ feeling thermometer ratings of items asked more than once during the panel. We then dropped all respondents for whom the standard deviation of their feeling thermometer ratings exceeded 15 degrees. Fifteen degrees seems, to our judgment, a reasonable amount of variation for items gauging affect—a more abstract concept—years apart from one another. Doing so still yielded a large enough number of respondents for reliable analysis on each item and may have also helped us weed out respondents erratic across all responses and thus helped strengthen our results.

public agrees upon a label's meaning measured by the *strength* of symbolic correlations will be analyzed. The degree to which citizens connect the meaning of one label to either of the other two is elucidated by comparing overlap or lack of in symbolic content and through analysis of the correlations of feeling thermometer evaluations of each label on one another. Again, although perhaps simplistic in nature, we believe these methods to capture the quite straightforward way in which individuals come to understand the ideological labels: through association with potent symbols and the emotions those related symbols elicit.

## Analysis and Results

### *Establishing Moderate Meaning (ANES 1990 to 1992 Merged File)*

We begin with the puzzle of “moderate” meaning and with the 1990 to 1992 ANES merged file to establish a fundamental understanding of what moderate means (or does not mean) to the American public before moving forward with all three ideological labels in the 2021 data. First, we ask what the understudied moderate label means, investigating which symbolic groups are associated with the label and the correlational strengths, which indicate how widely any definition of the label is understood in the public. Because of the strong binary system in American politics in which moderate finds little room to stand on its own, oftentimes simply acting as a modifier for other actors, we expect the label to carry no strong definition to the American public. We computed the correlations between twenty-five symbolic items—feeling thermometer scales for social groups—and the “moderates” feeling thermometer item to test this conjecture. The results are presented in Table 1 alongside the correlations between the same twenty-five items and the “liberals” and “conservatives” feeling thermometer items for a comparison of strengths.

Looking at the moderate label's correlates generally, two basic observations emerge: correlations are weaker than those with “liberals” and “conservatives,” and, correlations typically fall directionally between the two. Correlations between symbolic items and the moderate ideological label falling in the center of those with liberals and conservatives suggests that some sense of “centrism” or “middle ground” does surround the meaning of “moderate.” For example, “anti-war protestors” are more strongly correlated with “liberals” (0.4530\*) and “conservatives” (-0.2267\*) than “moderates” (0.2029\*), but positively associated with liberals versus negatively with conservatives.

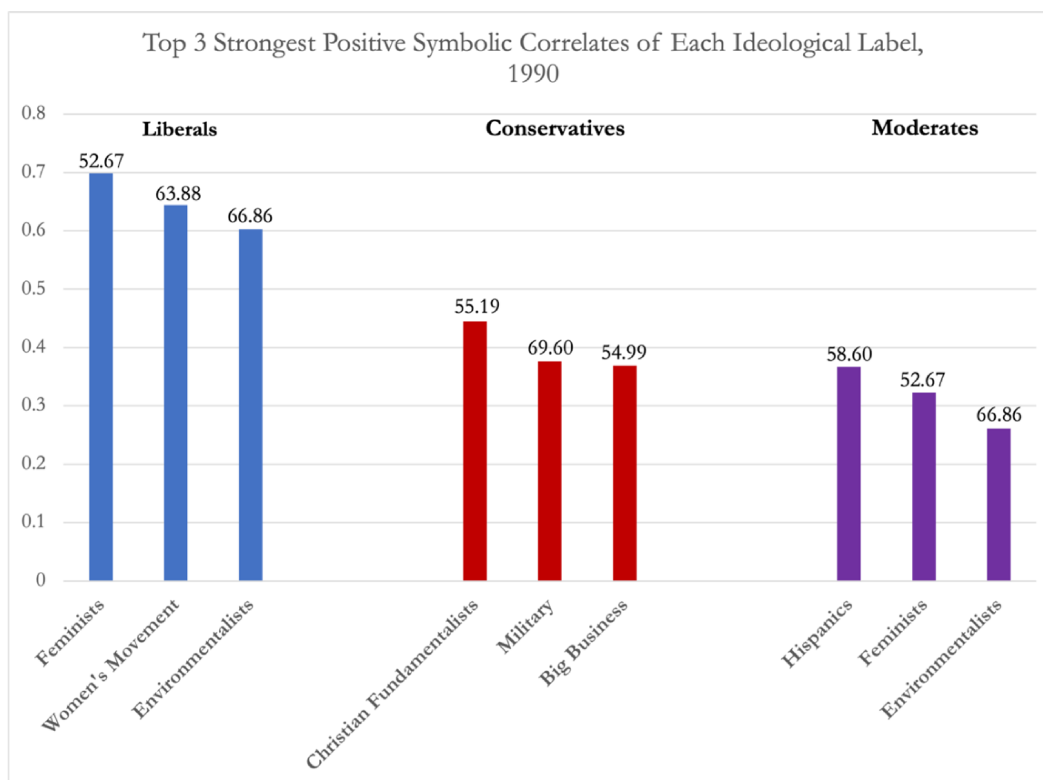
Despite the value of Table 1 displaying all the correlations between symbols and labels, to parse out the specific meaning of the moderate label and its strength to the American public, Figure 1 is more effective. It displays the three strongest positive symbolic correlates of each ideological label. Such presentation allows for clear investigation of whether the results support our hypotheses since the three core symbols of each label and their strength are directly compared.

In support of our first two moderate meaning hypotheses, Figure 1 shows that the symbols tied to “moderate” in Americans' minds are weak compared to the strength with which we understand and agree on the meaning of liberal and conservative. The strongest correlation with the moderate label, Hispanics at 0.3672, is as strong as the third strongest conservative symbolic item, big business (0.3693), and nearly half the strength of the strongest liberal meaning item, feminists (0.6984). Since the news and day-to-day discourse around “moderate” tend to tether the label to other actors, muddying the waters for “moderate” as it cannot be clearly assigned to a team within the binary political system, perhaps individuals define it so differently that in the aggregate the associations of certain symbolic items are weak. While the American polity agrees on which groups are associated with the ideologues, the symbolic meaning of moderate is not strongly held. At this point we must note that while the strongest correlates of the liberal label dwarf the moderate label correlates, the

strength of symbolic associations with the conservative label only slightly exceed moderate. Thus, the liberal label carries the clearest connotation to the American polity of all three, at least in the early 1990s.

<b>Social Group Feeling Thermometer</b>	<b>Liberals</b>	<b>Moderates</b>	<b>Conservatives</b>
People on welfare	0.3228*	0.1064*	-0.0003
Supporters of abortion	0.3015*	0.0923*	-0.1760*
Opposers of abortion	-0.2118*	-0.0669*	0.2649*
Catholics	0.1490*	0.1571*	0.1992*
Big business	0.0923*	0.1426*	0.3693*
The military	-0.0131	0.038	0.3764*
Southerners	0.0436	0.0972*	0.3343*
Jews	0.1590*	0.1450*	0.2323*
Gay men and lesbians	0.4080*	0.1709*	-0.1474*
Christian Fundamentalists	-0.1339*	-0.0193	0.4452*
Asian-Americans	0.1686*	0.2172*	0.2439*
The police	0.0109	0.0996*	0.3640*
Anti-war protestors	0.4530*	0.2029*	-0.2267*
Housewives	0.1353*	0.2357*	0.1301*
The elderly	0.1435*	0.2204*	0.1082
Blacks	0.3441*	0.1970*	0.1973*
Labor unions	0.3713*	-0.0004	-0.0292
The Women's Movement	0.6446*	0.1520*	-0.2113*
Poor people	0.2750*	0.0699	0.1568*
Feminists	0.6984*	0.3233*	-0.3491*
Hispanics	0.4043*	0.3672*	0.1501
Environmentalists	0.6030*	0.2616*	-0.1541
Whites	0.0824	0.1369*	0.3552*
Illegal immigrants	0.2526*	0.0856*	0.0078
Immigrants	0.1747*	0.1909*	0.1538*

**Table 1.** Correlations between all twenty-five social and political group feeling thermometer items and the three ideological label feeling thermometer items (ANES 1990-1992 merged file).



**Figure 1.** Top 3 strongest symbolic items positively correlated with each ideological label (ANES 1990 merged file). The numbers above each bar are the full-sample mean feeling thermometer evaluation of each respective symbolic item.

Nuancing our second moderate meaning hypothesis, the conservative label does not garner symbolic correlates equally as strong as those to the liberal label. In fact, the third strongest symbolic association with the conservative label—big business (0.3693\*)—only slightly exceeds the strongest moderate symbolic connection (Hispanics 0.3672\*). Such a finding is concurrently surprising, in that it seems to buck the effects of immediate political environment, and unsurprising when considered within existing literature on “liberal” and “conservative” meaning. First, coming off the heels of Reagan-era attacks on “liberal,” the clarity of that label’s meaning among the public is entirely predictable—the weaker definition of “conservative” simultaneously held is unanticipated given that rhetoric in the Reagan-era focused also on defining and extolling “conservative.” Second, however, this finding comports with extant literature on the unpopularity of the liberal label and “conflicted conservatives” (Coggins 2017; Ellis and Stimson 2012). It comes as no surprise, given the intense racialization and radicalization of the liberal label—and the lack of politicians stepping in to reshape its meaning—that Americans have such clear and strong ideas of what “liberal” means (Coggins and Stimson 2017). Furthermore, not only is the cultural conception of liberal widespread, but the definition of conservative—or at least why individuals choose the label—widely varies. Ellis and Stimson’s (2012) “conflicted conservatives” and “cultural conservatives” obviously define the label differently than many other Americans. More conflicting meanings held on an individual basis may contribute to weaker aggregate associations with the conservative label. Although nuanced by an only slightly stronger or more widespread consensus on the conservative label, our theory that the moderate label bucks a widely accepted meaning—at least a strong, nearly universally understood one—still stands.

Rounding out our investigation into the moderate label’s meaning in 1990, our third moderate hypothesis probes to what degree evaluations of “moderates” are related to evaluations of “liberals” or “conservatives.” Conover and Feldman (1981) found a positive evaluation of one label does not guarantee a negative view of the other; in other words, despite the bipolarity of the ideological spectrum in the abstract, the American public does not treat the labels as antagonistic. We hypothesize that evaluations of the moderate label are unrelated to evaluations of “liberals” and “conservatives.” Such a finding points to “moderate” carrying a distinct meaning as opposed to being simply a rejection of or antipathy towards liberals and conservatives—in 1990. We will return to this hypothesis in 2021 later. To test this, we correlated evaluations of each of the three ideological labels on each other. The results are presented in Table 2.

Feeling Thermometers	Correlation
Moderates x Conservatives	0.2038*
Moderates x Liberals	0.2653*
Liberals x Conservatives	-0.3903*

**Table 2.** Correlations between feeling thermometer evaluations of the ideological labels (ANES 1990-1992 merged file).

The results show that the affect ascribed to moderates is only slightly associated with liberals and conservatives. Although we expected no relationship, this is not a full rejection of our hypothesis given the weakness of the correlations. Slight, positive correlations between the moderate label and both ideologue categories may exist because of discourse that uses “moderate” to modify both Democrats and Republicans.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in finding that moderate evaluations do correlate with liberal and conservative evaluations, the relationship is not in the direction that would be expected by the theory that “moderate” signifies a rejection of the ideological spectrum or of the ideologues. The data also show that evaluations of moderates and liberals are slightly more correlated than moderates and conservatives—but again, both correlations are weak. Moderate, it appears, does not simply imply an antipathy towards liberals and conservatives.

Broadly, these results from 1990 support our theory of moderate label meaning. Americans only weakly tie symbolic items to the moderate label, especially in comparison to “liberal.” Perhaps each individual, irrespective of self-identification, holds a strong conception of what “moderate” connotes, but on a societal level a clear picture is harder to find. It is not, however, that moderate means a rejection of “liberal” and “conservative.” Instead, like Conover and Feldman (1981) wrote about the ideologues, moderate may entail a distinct currency of political perception, rather than a different side—or the midpoint—of the same coin. Utilizing the one year for which the moderate feeling thermometer item was posed, we have established a baseline understanding of the meaning of the moderate label—a lack of strong substance. We turn now to an analysis of the symbolic content of the moderate label, the social groups most closely associated with “moderates.”

#### *More on Moderates (ANES 1990 to 1992 Merged File)*

We did not hypothesize on the moderate label’s symbolic content because we hold that the crux of the moderate label’s meaning is about strength—showing that moderate meaning is weakly held in comparison to the ideologues—as opposed to content. However, interesting results call for

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<sup>7</sup> Again, the parties and the ideological categories are not synonymous, but evidence points to their increasing overlap in both those who identify as each and perceived meaning (see Levendusky 2009 and Conover and Feldman’s (1981) discussion of the connection between the “Republican” and “conservative” feeling thermometers.

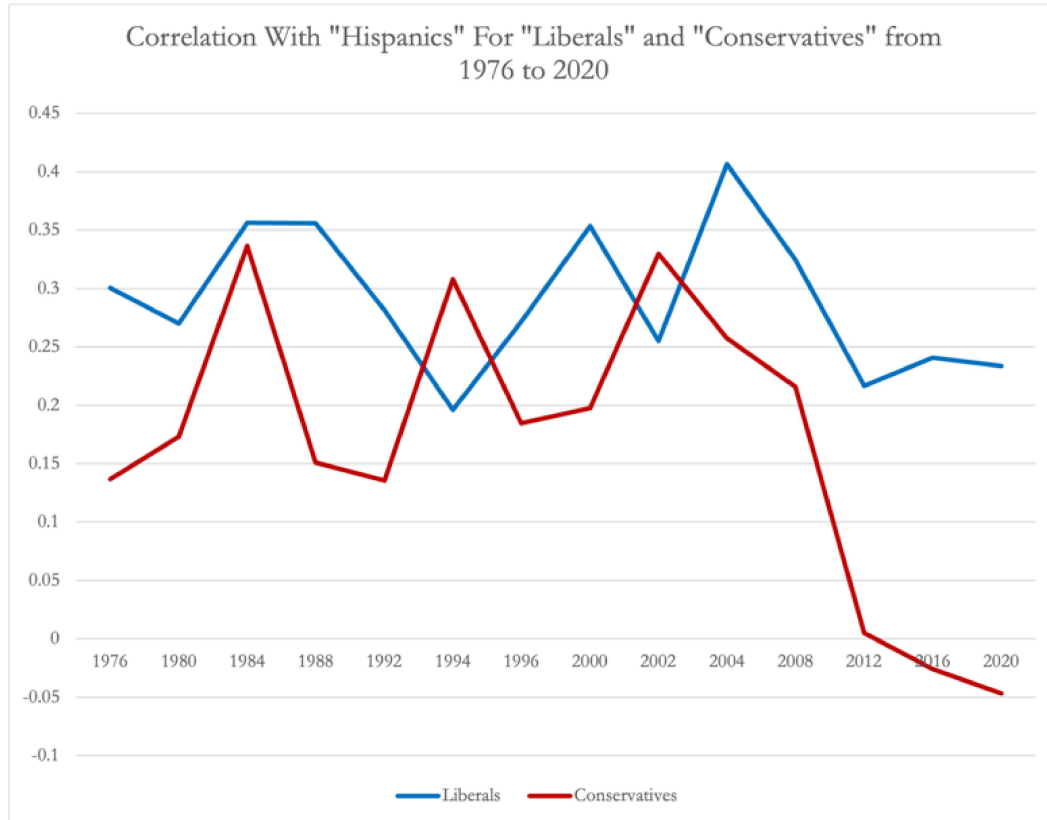


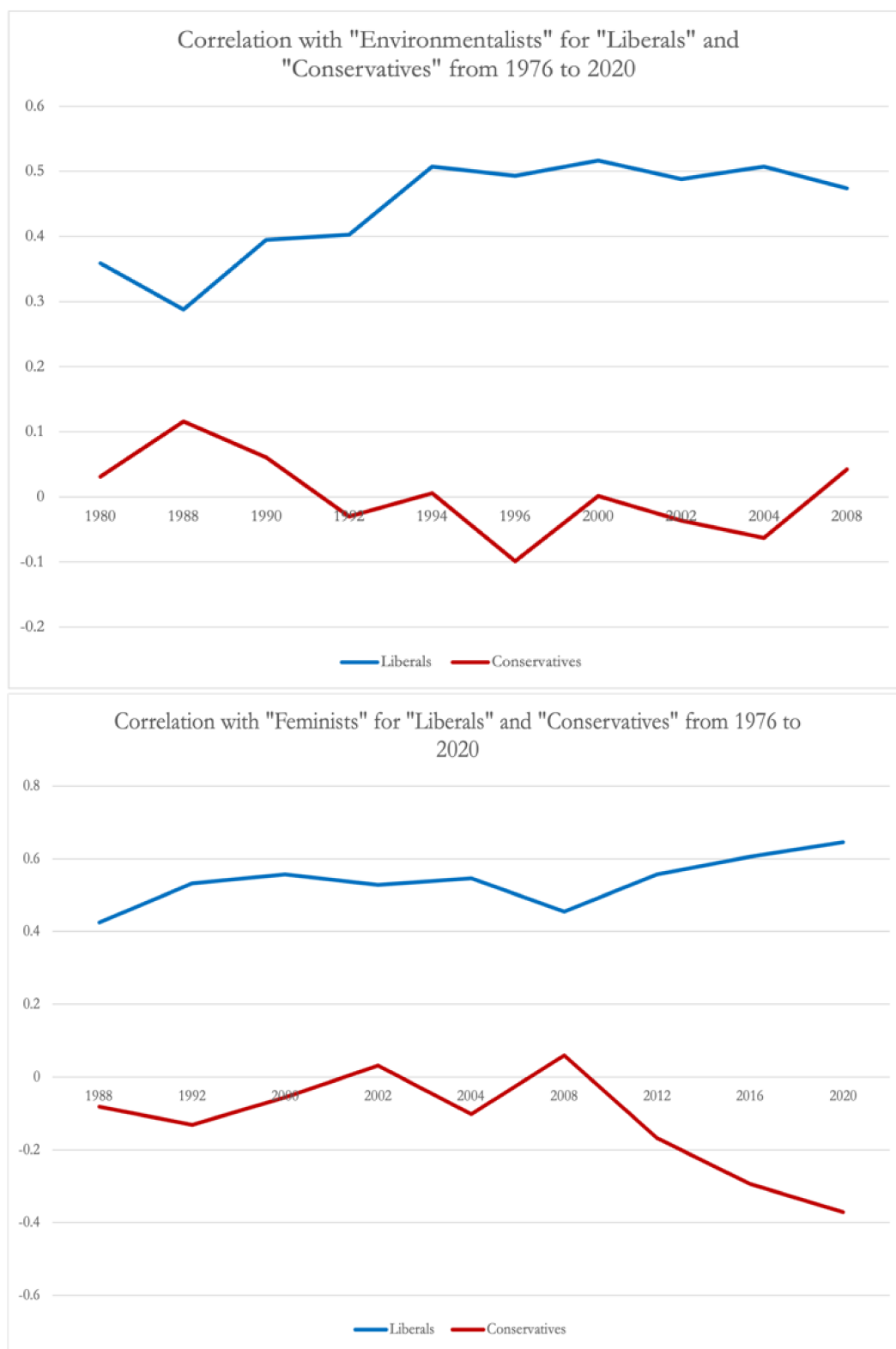
discussion. Two of the symbols most strongly correlated with the moderate label, “feminists” and “environmentalists,” overlap with liberal label meaning. However, the two are strongly correlated with the liberal label while achieving only weak correlations with “moderate.” The overlap may indicate something about the meaning of the moderate label untethered from a direct symbolic association. In the context of the unpopular liberal label, the moderate label may represent a more appealing ideological option for many, but one that is not abandoning ship entirely [i.e., Ellis and Stimson’s (2012) conflicted conservatives]. The most common meaning of the moderate label might be like that of the liberal label because to many, moderate means “liberal” without saying a dirty word. In essence, “moderate” may behave as a home for “true” liberals who feel pushed out of their old ideological camp. Such a conjecture finds support in the work of Claassen, Tucker, and Smith (2015), among others, who show that the most common misname of policy positions is labeling a liberal stance “moderate.” While in context of traditionally defined ideological doctrine that choice may be a “mistake,” perhaps for many the misname is quite intentional.

Adding in the strongest associated group—Hispanics—adds another layer of confusion to the meaning of “moderate.” Evaluations of “Hispanics” are almost as strongly connected to evaluations of “moderates” as “big business” is to “conservatives” (0.3672\* to 0.3693\*). One potential explanation for the importance of “Hispanics” evaluations to the moderate label, as well as “feminists” and “environmentalists,” is one of issue salience. In the early 1990s, immigration, specifically from Latin America and Mexico, occupied the minds of many Americans with the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and later the Immigration Act of 1990. Feminism, although often relegated to studies of the 1960s and 70s, was still a potent force; Anita Hill testified before Congress in 1991. Environmentalism also persevered into the 1990s as a movement with which to be reckoned. The symbols (and the issues they represent) most correlated with the moderate label may not yet have undergone “issue evolution” and become settled features of the American political landscape (Carmines and Stimson 1986). In their theory of issue evolution, Carmines and Stimson outline how elite behavior and rhetoric surrounding new issues in the political realm—painting them in partisan terms and clarifying which team stands for what—interacts with mass public response. A critical moment occurs when mass polarization along a new issue line is finally perceptible—and this response often comes far after the initial elite clarification of a new issue as public response is slow and inertial. Before the critical moment, however, elites have framed the issue but the mass electorate has not yet adjusted their schema of correlations to accommodate. Perhaps the moderate ideological label serves to essentially “catch” these unsettled issues in the minds of citizens. Not yet seeing the issues in a clearly parsed out binary way, citizens associate them with the label that can describe both teams, connecting two things viewed as the gray space of a black and white world.

To preliminarily check the possibility that moderate serves as a home for unsettled topics in the political realm, we analyzed the correlation between evaluations of “liberals” and “conservatives” with each of the three symbolic items strongest tied to “moderates” in the 1990 dataset. The results are displayed in Figures 2 through 4 below. Each symbol—“Hispanics,” “environmentalists,” and “feminists”—although not perfectly linear, shows clarification between liberal and conservative over time. Most drastically is the divergence between liberal and conservative correlations with “Hispanics” beginning in 2004 and deepening through 2020. “Feminists” shows a similar pattern with the clarity increasing sharply around 2008. In essence, what these figures show is that the issues most strongly correlated with the moderate label (although weak correlations) in 1990 had not reached their full level of ideological team differentiation yet. If citizens do not yet recognize these issues—and the symbols representing them—in bipolar, “this-or-that” terms yet, it concords that they connect it to the label that does not fit in that schema either. The moderate label’s meaning,

although weakly held, could be rooted in its nature as a catch-all for items of which citizens are unsure. While issues are evolving—before the critical point when it is clear which ideology/party stands for what—moderate could be the default.





**Figures 2-4.** Over-time correlations between “liberals” and “conservatives” and the three social groups strongest correlated to “moderates” in the 1990 data: “Hispanics,” “environmentalists,” and “feminists” (ANES cumulative file). Each feeling thermometer was asked beginning and ending in

different years; “Hispanics” from 1976 to 2020, “environmentalists” from 1980 to 2008, and “feminists” from 1988 to 2020.

Next, we return to our core theory, shifting from the moderate label in isolation to uncovering how liberal, conservative, and moderate change—or not—in the presence of polarization and social sorting.

*Label Meaning Continuity (ANES 1990 to 1992 Merged File and 2021 YouGov Data)*

We hypothesized, based on Conover and Feldman (1981) and Zschrnt (2011), that the liberal label would continue to be linked to groups viewed as pushing against the status quo in both 1990 and 2021, and the conservative label to those defending it. Polarization deepens the divide between the two teams—partisan, ideological, race-based, and religious, as social sorting aligns these identities. A deeper divide leads to citizens digging into what they know, so we do not expect the definitions of liberal and conservative to change. Moderate, not linked to anything to begin with, similarly has no strong correlations with social groups in 2021. To test, we replicate the methods applied to and outputs created from the 1990 data. Twenty social group feeling thermometer items were correlated with feeling thermometers for all three ideological labels, and the results are displayed in Table 3 below. From Table 3, we create Figure 5 which displays the three strongest positive social groups correlated with each ideological label.<sup>8</sup>

We find strong support for these hypotheses in the data. In 1990, the liberal label—connected most strongly to evaluations of “feminists,” “the women’s movement,” and “environmentalists”—continues to call to mind groups who represent the radical and reformist left. It does so, too, in 2021 with “feminists” carrying over and sharing the spotlight with “Black Lives Matter” and “The #MeToo Movement,” forming the liberal label’s three strongest positive correlates. Those who seek to disrupt the status quo—be it the patriarchy or the ecologically detrimental operation of American capitalism—through methods either socially acceptable or repugnant—say, female workers asking for equal pay or college students burning bras in the streets—define what it is to be “liberal” to the American public. From the full sample mean feeling thermometer evaluations recorded at the top of each social group correlation bar, we see that the strength of these group’s connection with the liberal label does not translate into popularity with the American public. In fact, all three social groups connecting to liberal in 2021 receive a lukewarm evaluation from the public (46.23, 51.12, and 47.52). This differs from the results from the 1990 data when the mean feeling thermometer evaluations of all three items most correlated to “liberals” surpassed fifty, indicating a warmer reception. The 2021 results underscore the findings of Coggins and Stimson (2017) and Ellis and Stimson (2012) that the liberal label—while widely understood—holds a predominantly negative meaning to much of the public.

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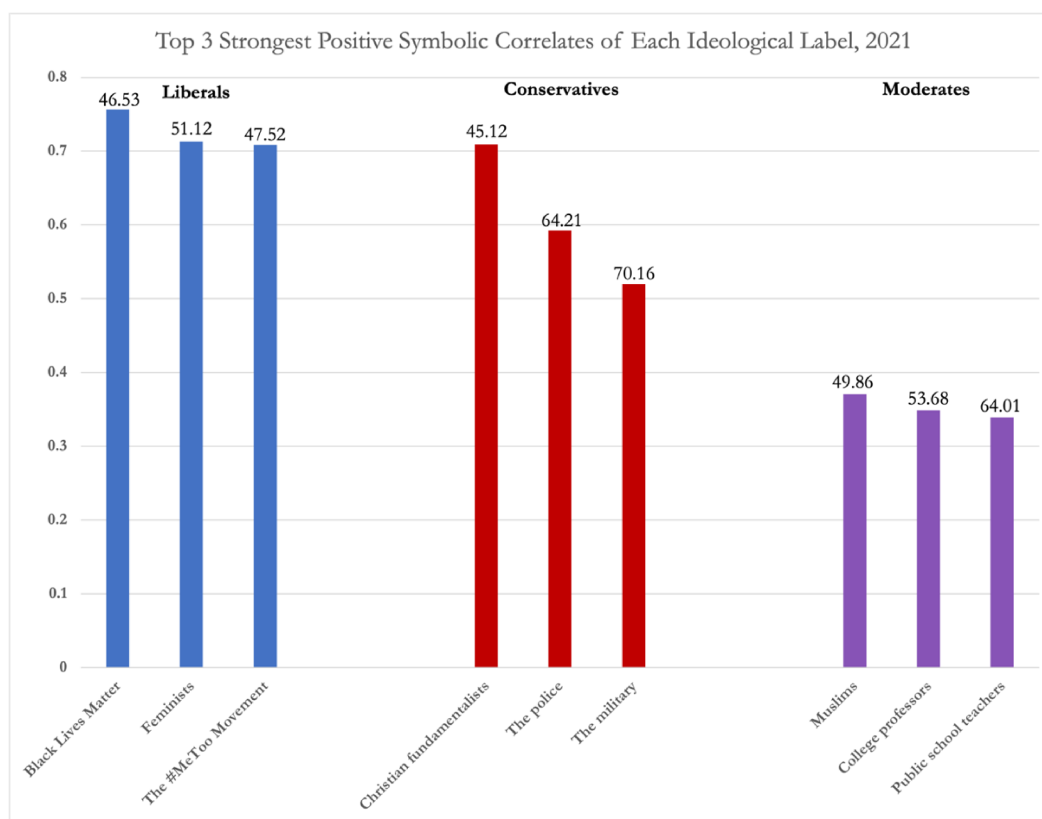
<sup>8</sup> For Figure 5, and all results from the 2021 dataset other than Table 3, the correlations between “Republicans” and “Democrats” and any of the three labels are not included because these items are clearly political groups as opposed to social. They were included in the study because of their inclusion in the 2020 ANES which served as a reference point and yield interesting results which just happen to be outside the scope of this paper.

<b>Social Group Feeling Thermometer</b>	<b>Liberals</b>	<b>Moderates</b>	<b>Conservatives</b>
Christian fundamentalists	-0.3900*	-0.0002	0.7092*
Feminists	0.7131*	0.2493*	-0.3996*
Big Business	-0.0224	0.2857*	0.4538*
Gays and lesbians	0.5907*	0.2854*	-0.3755*
Muslims	0.5944*	0.3706*	-0.3173*
College professors	0.6992*	0.3486*	-0.3406*
Public school teachers	0.6010*	0.3391*	-0.2972*
Public school unions	0.6851*	0.2128*	-0.4220*
The police	-0.2903*	0.2576*	0.5928*
Transgender people	0.6172*	0.2643*	-0.3960*
BLM	0.7563*	0.1514*	-0.5628*
The #MeToo Movement	0.7081*	0.2096*	-0.4716*
Rural Americans	-0.2426*	0.2391*	0.4838*
Hispanics	0.3124*	0.2934*	-0.0786*
Blacks	0.3892*	0.2480*	-0.1869*
Illegal immigrants	0.6227*	0.1734*	-0.3931*
Whites	-0.0889*	0.2366*	0.3822*
The military	-0.2547*	0.2319*	0.5200*
Republicans	-0.5169*	0.0323	0.8189*
Democrats	0.7652*	0.2970*	-0.4227*

**Table 3.** Correlations between all twenty social and political group feeling thermometer items and the three ideological label feeling thermometer items (YouGov data commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy, 2021).

In 1990, the conservative label—tied to “Christian fundamentalists,” “the military,” and “big business”—also accords with our hypothesis. “Big business,” a symbol of capitalism, and “Christian fundamentalists” represent the status quo of American life economically and religiously. “Christian fundamentalists,” however, may not represent the status quo as much as other religious groups, particularly “Protestants,” would, but that item was not posed in this dataset and Christian fundamentalists still captures both the broadly religious and specifically Christian components of traditional American identity. “The military” represents a group that defends the status quo. In 2021, “big business” is replaced with “the police” so our hypotheses remain supported as the police further represent defense of the status quo. Social groups that embody the status quo—our system of economics and tradition of Christian identity—and those that defend it through widely accepted, even admired, institutions—the police and military—ground what conservative means to Americans. Turning to the mean feeling thermometer evaluations of each social group correlated with conservative (the numbers above each bar), we see that in 1990 all three groups were positively perceived by the whole public (55.19, 69.60, and 54.99). In 2021, however, “Christian fundamentalists” garner a cooler evaluation overall (45.12) whereas the other two items linked to conservative (the police and the military) foster unquestionably positive evaluations (64.21 and

70.16, respectively). Despite the substantial shift in the full public’s view of “Christian fundamentalists,” the social groups correlated with conservative garner, overall, more positive evaluations than those correlated with liberals.



**Figure 5.** Three strongest positive symbolic feeling thermometer items associated with each ideological label (YouGov data commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy, 2021). The bars mark the correlation between that item and the ideological label. The whole sample mean feeling thermometer evaluation of each symbol are above each bar.

We hypothesized that the moderate label garners no strong symbolic correlates in either 1990 or 2021, indicating continuity in label meaning even if it is continuity in a lack of meaning. We previously established that in 1990 the label was only weakly tied to social groups. In 2021, we see the same occur. The top three correlated social groups are Muslims, college professors, and public-school teachers (all three correlations falling below 0.4). All three correlated social groups, therefore, change between 1990 and 2021; however, our hypothesis centered on the strength of the correlations, which remain effectively unchanged (in both years all fall below 0.4). “Moderate” remains largely amorphous to the public both in 1990 and in 2021.

We previously conjectured that “moderate” serves as a home for true liberals eschewing the liberal label. Interestingly, in both 1990 and 2021 the strongest correlate of the moderate label is a prominent out-group to white, Christian identity: Hispanics and then Muslims. From our issue evolution figure above (Figure 2), we saw that a positive evaluation of “Hispanics” corresponding with a positive evaluation of “liberals” did not crystallize until far after the issue emerged on the agenda. The same could be said for the symbolic item “Muslims” as it grew more salient in the U.S. post-9/11 context and especially after 2016 with “Muslim bans” becoming a topic on the political

agenda, but not yet settled for much of the American polity. College professors and public-school teachers also present potentially unsettled issues in relation to controversial debates on the teaching of critical race theory, academic freedom, and the manifestation of liberty disputes in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many political sophisticates and those consistently tuned in to the news and rhetoric of elites may see these issues as already settled, extant research demonstrates the slow, inertial reaction of the public in accommodating new issues into their political schemas (Carmines and Stimson 1981; Zschirnt 2011). In both 1990 and 2021, in addition to support for our hypothesis, we find preliminary evidence that the weakly held meaning of the moderate label could be tethered not to actual symbols, but rather a *type* of symbol: new on the agenda and yet unsorted in the minds of many citizens.

The results displayed in Figures 1 and 2 also provide evidence for our hypothesis that the ideologue labels would increase in strength from 1990 to 2021. We hypothesize that since social sorting groups “liberal” and “conservative” in with other salient identities and provides more substance to citizens’ schemas of prototypical members of each group, the meaning of the ideologue labels will grow in clarity and strength. Concurrently, we hypothesize that the moderate label will maintain a meaning only weakly understood because it lacks a foundational meaning to have strengthened and social sorting essentially “snags” almost all symbolic items and associates them with one of two teams, leaving even fewer symbols for the moderate label. The results show support for both conjectures. The liberal label, which had the clearest definition in 1990, has still increased in strength. The strongest correlate in 2021, Black Lives Matter (0.7563), is a solid increase upon the strongest symbolic association in 1990, feminists (0.6984). All three of the strongest items related to the liberal label exceed 0.70. The meaning of the conservative label was weaker held in 1990 than liberal, with the strongest correlate (Christian fundamentalists) only achieving a correlation of 0.4452 and none reaching 0.50. In 2021, however, the story is quite different. Although still more weakly held than the meaning of liberal, the gap between the two has substantially decreased. The strongest symbolic correlate of conservative in 2021, again “Christian fundamentalists,” surpasses the 0.70 bar. The next two most closely related items—the police and the military—each surpass 0.50 at 0.59 and 0.52 respectively.

The moderate label, unlike the ideologues, shows no change in meaning strength. The strongest symbolic correlate in 1990, Hispanics, at 0.367 is effectively indistinguishable from the strongest correlate in 2021, Muslims, at 0.371. Affective polarization and social sorting reinforce the bipolar nature of politics, and “moderate” remains outside of this schema with no pre-existing meaning to strengthen; thus, in the changing political context its meaning remains unclear and weak to the American public.

#### *Relations Between all Three Ideological Labels (ANES 1990 to 1992 Merged File and 2021 YouGov Data)*

While the strengthening of label meanings certainly indicates an impact of polarization and social sorting, we posit that their influence on the ideological labels runs even deeper. For the ideologues, we hypothesize that the negative correlation between evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives will increase from 1990 to 2021. This would demonstrate that as social sorting aligns multiple politically relevant identities along one binary, the out-ideological group becomes grouped in with a “team” that is entirely antithetical to the other (Mason and Wronski 2018). Combined with the heightened animosity of affective polarization, citizens begin to derive more and more meaning of liberals and conservatives from their stance against one another rather than strictly from a positive affect towards the groups each represent. We further hypothesize that the negative correlations between each label and the social groups central to the out-label’s meaning will increase

from 1990 to 2021. Again, social sorting is the main culprit: as social identities align, citizens have stronger conceptions of which groups each label represent and they feel more negatively towards the out-groups and see said out-groups as against their own identities. Because of this, one's identity as liberal or conservative draws from a mixed well of positive affect towards the groups aligned with one of the labels *and* negative affect towards the social groups perceived as antagonistic to one's collective political identity. Combined, these hypotheses point to the ideological label meanings growing closer to bipolarity—they are coming to mean to citizens the opposite of one another, and attract individuals because of that, contradicting Conover and Feldman's (1981) finding of "different currencies." Affective polarization deepens the existing cleavage instead of fostering a new divide, so the moderate label, already without strong meaning because of its nonconformity to this system, does not experience changes between 1990 and 2021. We hypothesize that correlations between evaluations of moderates and liberals and moderates and conservatives will not strengthen from 1990 to 2021, nor will the negative correlations between social group items and "moderates." To test these hypotheses, we correlated feeling thermometer evaluations of all three ideological labels against one another, as reported in Table 4, and generated Table 5 and 6 which display the top three strongest positive and negative social group correlates for each label in 1990 and 2021.

Feeling Thermometers	Correlation
Moderates x Conservatives	0.0572
Moderates x Liberals	0.2856
Liberals x Conservatives	-0.5432

**Table 4.** Correlations between feeling thermometer ratings of the ideological labels (YouGov data commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy, 2021).

The results support our hypotheses about the ideologue labels increasingly finding meaning in their antagonism with one another. Table 4 displays the results of correlating feeling thermometer evaluations of all three labels with each other. We see that in 2021, the correlation between evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives is -0.5432, an increase from that in 1990, -0.3903. While this correlation is not "strong," it is an increase, and points to the fact that we can no longer state that evaluations of the two labels are only "slightly" correlated. Social sorting and affective polarization have altered the relationship between the meaning of both liberal and conservative, bringing the American public's understanding more into line with the abstract spectrum—that is, bipolar. It appears that this is not true for all Americans, as the correlation is still weaker than would be expected if most held this view, but evidence for the beginning of a shift is strong.

Further evidencing that liberal and conservative draw upon their opposition to one another for meaning in the American public is the increase in the strength of negative correlations between each label and the social groups representing the out-label. From Table 5 we see that in 1990, of the two the central negative associations with the liberal label one overlapped with the top three positive associations of the conservative label. Two of the conservative label's negative associations overlapped with liberal label meaning. The correlations are weak, however: not a single negative correlation with either ideologue label surpasses 0.4, and for the liberal label does not pass 0.3. In 2021, the story is much different. Table 6 shows that the liberal label's strongest negative correlations are the three items founding the conservative label's meaning. The conservative label's three strongest negatively correlated symbolic items overlap with two of the liberal label's three



strongest positively correlated items. The strength of the correlations stands out even more than the increasing alignment of symbolic items.

<b>Top Strongest Positive and Negative Symbolic Correlates of Each Ideological Label, 1990</b>				
	<b>Positive</b>		<b>Negative</b>	
<b>Liberals</b>	Feminists	0.6984	Opposers of abortion	-0.2118
	The Women's Movement	0.6446	Christian fundamentalists	-0.1339
	Environmentalists	0.6030	*	
<b>Conservatives</b>	Christian fundamentalists	0.4452	Feminists	-0.3491
	The military	0.3764	Anti-war protestors	-0.2267
	Big business	0.3693	The Women's Movement	-0.2113
<b>Moderates</b>	Hispanics	0.3672	Opposers of abortion	-0.0669
	Feminists	0.3233	**	
	Environmentalists	0.2613	**	

**Table 5.** The three strongest positive and three strongest negative social group item correlations for each ideological label (ANES 1990 to 1992 merged file).

\*The only other social group negatively correlated with liberals was “the military,” but the correlation (-0.0131) did not achieve statistical significance so is not reported.

\*\*The only other two social groups negatively correlated with moderates were “Christian fundamentalists” and “labor unions,” but neither achieved statistical significance (-0.0193 and -0.0004, respectively) so they are not reported.

<b>Top Strongest Positive and Negative Symbolic Correlates of Each Ideological Label, 2021</b>				
	<b>Positive</b>		<b>Negative</b>	
<b>Liberals</b>	Black Lives Matter	0.7563	Christian fundamentalists	-0.3900
	Feminists	0.7131	The police	-0.2903
	The #MeToo Movement	0.7081	The military	-0.2547
<b>Conservatives</b>	Christian fundamentalists	0.7092	Black Lives Matter	-0.5628
	The police	0.5928	The #MeToo Movement	-0.4716
	The military	0.5200	Public school unions	-0.4220
<b>Moderates</b>	Muslims	0.3706	*	
	College professors	0.3486	*	
	Public school teachers	0.3391	*	

**Table 6.** The three strongest positive and three strongest negative social group item correlations for each ideological label (YouGov data commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy, 2021).

\*Only one social group (Christian fundamentalists) was negatively correlated with the moderate label. It did not, however, reach statistical significance (-0.0002) and thus is not reported.

In particular, the meaning of conservative is quite negative (pulling from negatively correlated social groups), with Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement, and public-school unions garnering negative correlations above 0.4. Liberal label meaning is less strongly negative, but still a substantial increase from 1990; the strongest negative correlation in 2021 is -0.3900, nearly double that of the strongest negatively correlated item in 1990 at -0.2118. Most convincing to the claim that negative correlations with the out-label's associated groups have increased in their centrality to the label's meanings is the finding that the social group most strongly correlated to liberals, Black Lives Matter (0.7563), is the third strongest correlate with the conservative label with the sign in the other direction (-0.5628). Citizens more consistently tie a negative response to Black Lives Matter to a positive evaluation of conservatives than they do "the military" or "big business," two social groups consistently found to have strong connections to the label (Conover and Feldman 1981; Zschirnt 2011).<sup>9</sup>

With the combination of the increasing strength of the negative correlation between evaluations of liberals and conservatives and the increasingly strong negative correlations between each label and social groups symbolic of the other, it is hard to deny that something about the liberal and conservative labels' relationship to one another in the minds of Americans has drastically changed in the past thirty years. Unlike Conover and Feldman (1981) who found that evaluations of liberals and conservatives were only slightly negatively correlated and that negative associations with the opposing label's central items were only loosely related to label meaning, in this new political era of affective polarization and social sorting, each label's meaning is more strongly derived from an antipathy to the other's symbolic connections. Although the two labels still draw much of their meaning from different symbolic associations, negative relationships are becoming more central to meaning and the overlap in items underscores a changing nature of the labels' meaning. Whether these finding calls negates the concept of the ideologues as two distinct currencies is undecided; however, the lack of antagonistic meaning between the two is a thing of the past. While they may not be different sides of the same coin yet, the relationship between the two currencies does appear to be changing—if not dollars and euros, perhaps we are dealing with quarters and dimes.

Contrastingly, much like meaning strength, the moderate label displays no shifts in its relationship to either of the other two labels from 1990 to 2021. The correlation between evaluations of moderates and evaluations from conservatives shifts from weak in 1990 (0.2038) to virtually non-existent in 2021 (0.0572) and the importance and strength of negative social group correlations effectively displays no change from either. In 1990, the moderate label garnered one statistically significant yet substantively meaningless negative association with "opposers of abortion" (-0.0669). Not a single symbolic item in 2021 achieved a statistically significant negative correlation with "moderates." So, while the ideologue labels show fundamental shifts in the way their meaning is constructed among American citizens especially in their relation to one another, the moderate label remains unchanged

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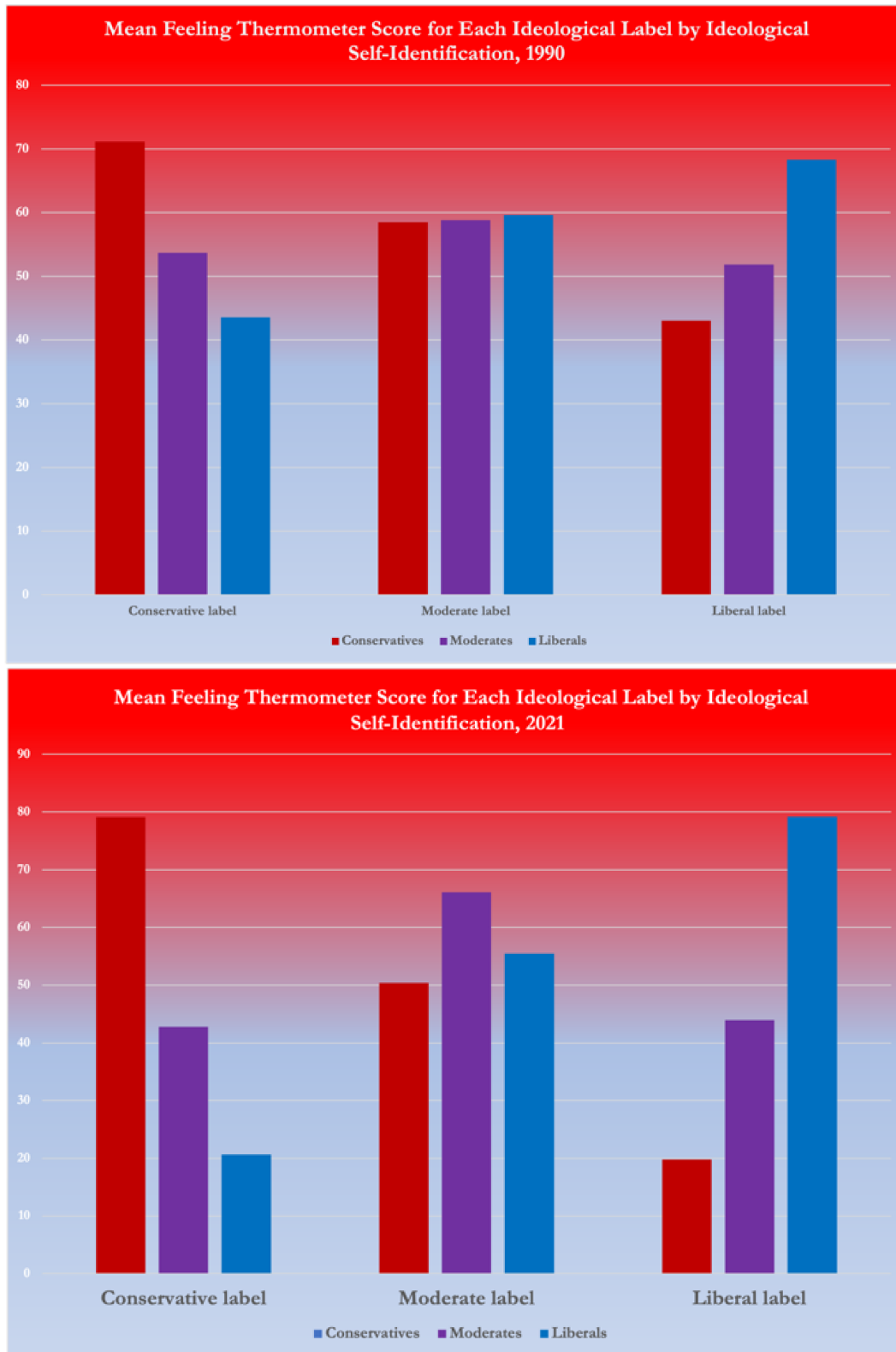
<sup>9</sup> We acknowledge that "Black Lives Matter" was not an item posed in earlier studies of ideological label meaning—nor could it given its recent emergence on the political scene—but the overlap in social group correlations with opposing signs between the two labels is still a substantial shift from previous findings.

in many regards. These findings concord with our theory: without any firm meaning to begin with, even considerable shifts in context that affect numerous attributes of the political world will not impact the moderate label because there is nothing to influence. This is especially true when the changes to the political environment involve a deepening of the binary system that leaves the moderate label with little to no meaning because it does not accord with citizens “this or that” categorization schema. Other changes to the political environment could reasonably influence the moderate label—perhaps even leading to it gaining a strong meaning to the American public—but the trends of the past twenty years or more do not point to such results emerging anytime soon.

#### *Touching on Affective Polarization*

Finally, we preliminarily investigate the impact of affective polarization on ideological identification. While changes in the clarity of ideologue label meaning and the centrality of negative associations demonstrate shifts in the operation of the labels for the American public, the hallmark consequence of affective polarization is increased ingroup favoritism (and positive emotions towards the ingroup) and outgroup distaste (and negative emotions towards the outgroup) (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2015, 2016; Mason and Wronski 2018). Although not an inherent factor of polity-level ideological label meaning, shifts in how those who select a label perceive the others hints at the depth of affective polarization and social sorting. Existing literature demonstrates the impact of affective polarization on the ideologues (Mason 2018; Malka and Lelkes 2010). We seek to include the moderate label and self-identified moderates to expand considerations of the impacts of affective polarization on all who take an ideological self-identification. Not only does analyzing this question add to the ongoing discussion of affective polarization’s effects on the American public, but expanding such analyses to include the moderate label also aid in answering how the moderate label does and does not act like the ideologue labels. Answers to the questions of do moderates display signs of affective polarization and how do self-identified moderates evaluate all three labels will help define the moderate label’s meaning compared to the ideologues.

We calculated the mean feeling thermometer ratings of each ideological label by self-identification in both 1990 and 2021. Figures 6 and 7 below present the results. Looking at the 1990 results, it is immediately clear that the conservative and the liberal labels look distinctly different from “moderate.” Each shows substantial variation in how the different ideological groups feel towards each other and themselves. Specifically, we observe the predicted “ingroup love” and “outgroup distaste”: liberals evaluate the liberal label much warmer than the conservative label, and vice versa for conservatives (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). The moderate label, on the other hand, shows almost no variability in ratings across the ideological groups. All three groups produce mean evaluations of the label within 1.5 points of each other: liberals rate moderates 59.60, conservatives yield a mean of 58.48, and moderates rate themselves at 58.83. Through a lens of label meaning, it would thus seem that all three ideologue groups appear to reach some sort of consensus on their lukewarmness towards the moderate label. For liberals and conservatives, this makes sense: “moderate” falls between ingroup and outgroup in their minds just as it does on the ideological spectrum. For moderates, however, this finding is more puzzling. The mean feeling thermometer evaluation of the moderate label by self-identified moderates is positive, so that facet of Conover and Feldman’s (1981) model of ideological identity formation continues to apply. However, we do see evidence that this connection might be more prominent for the ideologues than moderates, potentially pointing to a label meaning that is emotionally, not just symbolically, different than that of liberal and conservative.



**Figures 6 and 7.** Mean feeling thermometer evaluations of each ideological label by self-identification. Figure 6 (top) is from the ANES 1990 to 1992 merged file and Figure 7 (bottom) is from YouGov data commissioned by the Bucknell Institute for Public Policy in December 2021.

Pivoting to the results from 2021, we find clear evidence of affective polarization between the ideologues deepening in the past thirty years, as predicted, and shown in existing literature (Mason 2018). Liberals and conservatives each evaluate their own label warmer in 2021 than in 1990. In 1990, liberals' mean feeling thermometer score for the liberal label was 68.31 and in 2021 it was 79.18. Conservatives shifted from 71.12 to 79.08. More drastic than the change in ingroup love is that of outgroup distaste: liberals and conservatives each evaluated the opposing label at a mean score of around 43 in 1990 (43.04 and 43.59, respectively). In 2021, the mean evaluations nearly halve, with liberals evaluating conservatives with a mean score of 19.81 and conservatives evaluating liberals at 20.66. Where liberals and conservatives display roughly a ten-point increase in ingroup love, there is a twenty-point decrease in outgroup distaste. Interestingly, self-identified moderates do exhibit notable shifts in their mean feeling thermometer evaluations of both their self-selected label and liberals and conservatives. In 1990, moderates' mean feeling thermometer rating of the moderate label was 58.82; in 2021 it increased to 66.07. Alongside just over a seven-point ingroup love increase, moderates exhibit just over a ten-point decrease in their mean evaluation of conservatives and around a seven-point decrease in their mean evaluation of liberals (53.71 to 42.76 and 51.83 to 43.95, respectively). The gap between 2021 moderate evaluations of ingroup and outgroup pales in comparison to the ideologues and still points to a different degree of emotional tethering to one's identity as that ideological group. However, something about the nature of ideological identity in the past thirty years has shifted how moderates view themselves and the ideologues, despite no clarification of meaning. This finding leaves a significant puzzle going forward. If the moderate label's meaning is not symbolic in the same way as the ideologues (stemming from social group associations) yet a substantial portion of the American public continue to choose the label and perceive the three labels differently, then "moderate" must mean something clear, at least to those who identify with it.

## Discussion

Ideological moderates remain enigmas within the American popular political consciousness. News sources and analysts love to cover the group, predicting which candidates they will support and attempting to capture the rhetoric or strategies victorious in the fight for "the moderate vote." Concurrently, we know remarkably little about the individuals who make up the self-identified moderate category. Little academic work focuses on the consistent one-third of Americans and a prototypical example of "a moderate" does not come to mind like a blue-haired, radical feminist liberal or a bible-thumping, strait-laced conservative. To dig into who identifies as moderate and why—filling in the missing gaps in our collective narrative—we must first ask what "moderate" means. We need to understand what the American public thinks of when they hear the term "moderate" and ascertain whether the label functions at all like "liberal" and "conservative." In today's polarized and socially sorted political world, understanding what the moderate label means to the public necessitates a longitudinal view: what did it mean before the political shifts of the twenty-first century, and how does that meaning inform what the label means now. It also calls for a comparative analysis that asks how does moderate concord, or not, with the operation and influence of "liberal" and "conservative."

We theorize that in the aggregate, the moderate label has no unified meaning to the American public. Lacking a corresponding party or clear policy platform, the meaning of moderate ideology remains ambiguous and unrelated to symbolic items that clearly define perceptions of the liberal and conservative labels. Many individuals' understandings of the political realm are predominantly associational. They know what goes with what, but not why, and thus knowledge is founded on images and symbols instead of abstract principles. Much filling in of these associational maps occurs

inactively; people watch or read the news not to learn what liberal and conservative mean, but if they consistently hear “liberal” tied to Democrats and criticisms of government spending amounts, a meaning for the label coalesces. Or, if individuals are socialized in an environment that champions openness to new experience and inclusion, and likewise claims a liberal ideology, a meaning for the label coalesces. Since the use of “moderate” applies to both Democrats and Republicans and because its employment as an adjective, except when speaking of the voting bloc, is more common than using moderate as a standalone concept, there are few referents exclusively tied to moderates upon which a definition can be built. Without a solid symbolic foundation grounding individuals’ attraction to “moderate,” two of the major environmental influences that have reshaped the political landscape— affective polarization and social sorting—have had little to no effect on the way in which moderate meaning is constructed and self-identified moderates perceive the political world. This differs considerably from the ideologues, for whom the symbolic definitions are clearly defined and widely held by the American public. The clarification of the identities associated with each ideological team and the deepening emotional connection individuals feel to their ideological labels as part of their many other salient identities shifts foundational aspects of the nature of ideological identity to the American public. While the surface of Americans’ ideological identities remains calm and consistent—the symbolic referents (or lack of) persisting over the past fifty years—beneath there is a churning, specifically in how the ideological groups perceive their own identity’s relationship to the others.

Overall, we found support for our theory and its related hypotheses. Focusing first on label meaning, we found that compared to the liberal and conservative labels, the strength of Americans’ symbolic associations with “moderate” falls short of being considered robust and widespread both in 1990 and in 2021. The conservative label had weaker correlated symbolic content than the liberal label in 1990, just edging out the moderate label, but this trend ended in 2021 as the conservative label’s symbolic associations increased in strength to nearly meet the liberal, which also experienced clarification between 1990 and 2021. Furthermore, we also found evidence that the moderate label means something to the American polity independent of how individuals view liberals and conservatives. Evaluations of moderates were only slightly positively correlated with evaluations of liberals and conservatives in both years. The correlation between evaluations of liberals and evaluations of conservatives, on the other hand, grew markedly stronger in the negative direction between 1990 and 2021, evidencing the changing relationship citizens perceive between the two. Not only did the negative relationship between evaluations of the two increase, but the centrality of negatively correlated symbolic items also increased. Specifically, we found that the strength of negative symbolic items increased for both the liberal and conservative labels, and the third strongest correlate of the conservative label in 2021 was a negative association with Black Lives Matter, the strongest symbolic referent for liberal label meaning. This points to a shift in how the meaning of liberal and conservative is constructed to the American public, from one based almost solely on positive affect towards groups transferring to the label to more “mixed bag” of positive and negative sentiments. While not a rejection of the “different currencies” finding (Conover and Feldman 1981), this evidence shows that polarization and social sorting may be moving the labels towards more similar currencies. Given that the moderate label lacks a crystallized definition, we found no change in the centrality of negative evaluations.

Interestingly, the results point to self-identified moderates affectively polarizing from 1990 to 2021, with their mean feeling thermometer score for “moderates” increasing while that for both “liberals” and “conservatives” decreasing, although to a much lesser degree than the ideologues. Additionally, in 1990 it appeared one attribute of the moderate label Americans widely agreed upon was a tepid

response to it, with mean feeling thermometer evaluations of “moderates” hovering around 60 for all three groups. In 2021, something shifted with both moderate evaluations of their own label increasing and ideologue evaluations of moderates decreasing. Therefore, despite the moderate label lacking strong symbolic meaning to the American public, it must carry some meaning for a substantial portion of the electorate continues to identify with it and attach enough of an emotional connection to “moderate” to display signs of reaction to the polarizing political environment.

## Conclusion

Looking forward, a few attributes of our methodology could be adapted, and some added, in efforts to better our understanding of the moderate label. First, given the look into differential conceptions of the moderate label that disaggregating evaluations by ideological self-identification yielded, separating responses by other characteristics like race and gender could be beneficial. This may represent the next best step in ascertaining what the moderate label means to individuals since it appears to have a weak meaning in the aggregate yet remains undeniably attractive to a portion of the populace. Second, although prior research repeatedly highlights the symbolic nature of ideological identification, adding in a study of policy correlates to look for any operational associations individuals make with the moderate label could help more fully flush out any potential aggregate meaning, or further emphasize the lack thereof. Third, factor analyzing symbolic feeling thermometer items to create indices representing dominant cleavages in society and correlating those with the labels might round out the analysis of their meaning. By doing so we could assess which macro-level concepts, like rapid social change or religiosity, as opposed to micro-level social groups ground the labels’ meanings.

Not only could the methods for studying the aggregate American perception of the moderate label be bettered, but our findings also indicate interesting questions for future research to pursue. The first stems from the potential connection between the moderate label and new, unsettled issues on the political agenda. A formal analysis of whether the presence of “newer” symbolic items connected to the moderate label in both 1990 and 2021 represents a fluke or function of an absolute lack of aggregately held meaning, or if the meaning of the moderate label to the American public is a stopover point or catch-all for unknown components of the political realm. Another consideration is whether surveys have asked the right questions to decipher the meaning of the moderate label. If we really want to dig into what “moderate” means, we should reflect on what it could reasonably mean given personally held understandings and aim to ask appropriate items. For example, if we believe that moderate could denote, to some individuals, a principled approach to politics that centers around bipartisanship, compromise, or at least a true belief in the value of middle-ground, we could ask feeling thermometer items or other questions that probe that—“bipartisanship,” “polarization,” or other similar concepts. Tailored survey items may answer the puzzle better than any combination of or ingenuity applied to existing measures. Considering that we found self-identified moderates do display consequences of affective polarization, we would be remiss to not further probe the differences between liberals, conservatives, and moderates related to their evaluations of their own ideological labels and the other groups. Is moderate affective polarization rooted in an attraction to their own label, a distaste for the other two or for the perceived antagonism of the political realm, or something else? How do self-identified moderates’ levels of affective polarization both ideological and partisan compare to those whose ideological identity aligns with their partisan team? Such questions have relevance for our understanding of moderates and for the pressing consequences of affective polarization and social sorting—perhaps illuminating reason for hope in the face of oft lamented trends.

Finally, we turn to the normative implications of our theory and findings. Despite shining some light on how the American public views the moderate label, the findings of this study concurrently underscore just how much remains unknown about the functioning of the moderate label and about self-identified moderates. We do not know, conclusively, how the moderate label continues to capture such a segment of the populace without a strong, classically conceived symbolic meaning. We do not know, therefore, why individuals are attracted to describing themselves as moderate or what they mean when describing individuals or policies as such. It could be that for moderates, models of ideological identification that successfully explain the phenomenon for ideologues are simply not applicable. A consistent one-third of the American electorate remains enigmatic and uncharted. Our findings, much like previous scholarship on moderates, exemplify how the group and label operate differently than the ideologues, further warranting future research into the nature of the label and its implications for political behavior. If moderates really are swinging elections and, like Ellis and Stimson's (2012) "moveable middle," driving much of the thermostatic response to politics, this study represents only one of what needs to be many steps towards deeper understanding. Outside of the moderate label, uncovering shifts, even slight ones, in how the ideologue labels derive their meaning especially in relation to one another points to the startlingly deep effects of affective polarization and social sorting. Liberals and conservatives may not only view their identity as liberal or conservative as oppositional to the other team because of its grouping with partisanship, race, class, or religiosity, but they may come to perceive that opposition as part of the very meaning of the labels, a further divorcing from the policy preference roots the labels were once believed to have.

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