



The American Panel Survey

Use of the “Liberal” and “Progressive” Labels by Democrats

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In their debate before the New Hampshire primary, Secretary Hillary Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders engaged in a heated discussion over who best fit the label of “progressive,” with the implicit argument that being progressive was being liberal, or at least not being moderate.¹ Neither candidate was readily identifying as a liberal while campaigning to an overwhelmingly liberal primary electorate. Incidentally, Sanders has bluntly stated, “I’m not a liberal. Never have been. I’m a progressive who mostly focuses on the working and middle class.”²

For some time, we have been curious about how Democrats in the general public use these labels so on occasion we have asked panelists in The American Panel Study, a national probability sample, how they describe themselves. In the fall of 2014, we asked a question in which people could identify themselves as conservatives, moderates, or liberals, or perhaps nothing, and then later, in the same survey, we asked them whether they identify themselves as conservatives, moderates, or progressives, or perhaps nothing. The results give us some clues about the political use of these terms.

Some background. The term “progressive” reentered American political parlance in the 1960s. In their book **Ideology in America**, Christopher Ellis and James Stimson note a shift in the imagery of American liberalism that began in the 1960s and the advent of the Great Society programs. While the New Deal era fostered images of liberals that were associated with the interests of “common man,” the Great Society era, with the help of leading Republicans and conservatives, led to a new connotation for the term. Liberalism came to be associated with big government, excessive spending, aggressive federal regulation, and support for minorities. In response, many Democrats avoided use of the term “liberal” and often used the term “progressive” as a substitute.

The spat between Clinton and Sanders reflected the warped language that Democrats have accepted. Neither Sanders nor Clinton explicitly accepted that they are liberals. Instead, they fussed over what a real progressive looks like. Oddly, for Sanders, a politician cannot be both moderate and progressive because to be progressive is to be liberal and not moderate. Clinton probably wishes the whole issue would go away because she almost certainly wants to use the term progressive when it suits her and does not want the term progressive to be perceived as a mere synonym of liberal.

Now to how Democrats in the public label themselves. Democrats exhibit far less homogeneity than Republicans in the ideological labels they choose. Slightly more Democrats identify as “liberal”

than “progressive.” About 57 percent of Democrats call themselves liberals, while roughly 50 percent of Democrats identify as progressive. Most of the other Democrats, whether we use liberal or progressive in our question, refer to themselves as moderates. In contrast, over 80 percent of Republicans identify as conservative, with most of the rest choosing the moderate label and very few taking the liberal or progressive label. These party differences suggest why Democratic politicians are more sensitive about how they are labeled.

Yet, among Democrats, the findings from *The American Panel Survey* suggest, most moderate and liberal Democrats in the electorate view the terms progressive and liberal as equivalent. In August of 2014, panelists were asked to identify themselves ideologically using the common seven-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. In September 2014, the same individuals were asked the same question, but replacing “liberal” with “progressive.” Table 1 displays Democrats' responses to these questions. Over three-fourths of liberal Democrats adopted the progressive label (very progressive, progressive, somewhat progressive), while only 17 percent of moderate Democrats chose to call themselves “progressive.” This value is roughly equivalent to the proportion of liberal Democrats not choosing the progressive label.

However, Democrats who initially identified themselves as moderates were less consistent than liberals. Only one in five moderates (about 4 percent of all Democrats, or 17 percent of moderate Democrats) switched from moderate to progressive when progressive replaced liberal. In fact, more moderates became conservative or avoided labeling themselves. Moderates, like people who identify only weakly with one party or the other, appear to hold their ideological label less firmly, on average, than stronger ideologues and partisans. **Nevertheless, very few Democrats nationally appear to find the term “progressive” more fitting for themselves than the term “liberal.”**

Table 1: Ideological Labels Chosen by Democrats, 2014 (in Percent)				
	August 2014 Liberal	August 2014 Moderate	August 2014 Conservative	August 2014 Don't Know
September 2014 Progressive	77	17	13	19
September 2014 Moderate	17	60	53	8
September 2014 Conservative	5	14	27	15
September 2014 Don't Know	2	8	7	58
Total*	100	100	100	100
N=555				
*Due to rounding, totals may not foot to 100.				

What kinds of Democrats accept the liberal and progressive labels? We offer a preliminary answer to this question with the help of a statistical estimate of the effect of some key political and demographic variables on choosing progressive and liberal labels. Table 2 shows the correlates of choosing “liberal” and the correlates of choosing “progressive” over other labels.

Table 2: Determinants of Democrats' Self-Labeling				
Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: 1=Liberal; 0=Other		Dependent Variable: 1=Progressive; 0=Other	
	Age	0.007 (0.006)	-0.012 (0.007)	0.003 (0.006)
Female	-0.005 (0.196)	0.037 (0.221)	0.106 (0.194)	0.175 (0.229)
White	0.246 (0.204)	0.365 (0.227)	0.726* (0.200)	0.876* (0.234)
Education	0.351* (0.061)	0.252* (0.068)	0.247* (0.058)	0.118 (0.070)
Income	0.017 (0.031)	0.003 (0.034)	0.048 (0.030)	0.041 (0.035)
Liberal Policy Views	-	1.589* (0.232)	-	2.069* (0.251)
Strong Partisanship	-	0.846* (0.230)	-	0.744* (0.237)
Constant	-4.071* (0.710)	-3.324* (0.808)	-3.422* (0.685)	-2.476* (0.821)
N	524	515	524	515
Log Likelihood	-320.51	-264.06	-326.84	-252.61
Likelihood ratio chi-square	59.51 (5)*	159.00 (7)*	61.09 (5)*	196.56 (7)*
Sample consists of panelists identifying as Democrats who participated in both the August 2014 and September 2014 waves of TAPS. Statistically significant relationships indicated by *. * p < 0.05. Estimates obtained using logistic regression. Standard errors in parentheses.				

For each label, the table shows that more liberal policy views and stronger Democratic partisanship are strongly related to a tendency to choose the label over moderate or conservative. These relationships are stronger than any of the relationships for demographic variables. That much is expected.

Another pattern summarized in Table 2 is more noteworthy: There is a tendency for better-educated and white Democrats to use the liberal and progressive labels (and, to a lesser extent, the progressive label) more than less-educated and non-white Democrats. Education appears to be related to willingness to use the liberal label, even once we control for differences in political views and strength of partisanship. This relationship is weaker for use of the progressive label.

The progressive label is used more frequently by white Democrats than by non-white Democrats, even once we account for the effects of political views and partisan strength. In fact, a small

majority of all ethnic categories among Democrats select the liberal label, while 58 percent of white Democrats and only 42 percent of non-white Democrats select the progressive label.

On net, then, the shift from the liberal label to the progressive label in our questions loses few whites and well-educated Democrats, but loses some non-white and less-educated Democrats. More evidence: Although white Democrats call themselves liberal at higher rate than non-white Democrats, the difference between the two rates is not substantial (59 percent versus 52 percent). In contrast, while white Democrats identify as progressive at a nearly identical rate (58 percent), but only 41 percent of non-white Democrats do so. This difference in self-identification is most pronounced for black Democrats (59 percent liberal, 36 percent progressive). Similar patterns occur for higher and lower levels of education.

Overall, nationally, Democrats who call themselves liberals readily accept the progressive label, too. In the Clinton-Sanders kerfuffle, both candidates wanted to display progressive credentials, presumably to prove that he or she was truly progressive—er, liberal—to New Hampshire Democrats. But neither used the term liberal. This is unlikely to be due a concern about Democrats' aversion to the term liberal. If anything, it is due to a concern about how a liberal label that might hurt them with a larger audience that includes Democratic moderates, non-liberals, non-progressives, and non-Democrats who might have voted in the New Hampshire primary and who certainly will vote next fall. In the meantime, the episode may have caused some confusion for some Democrats, particularly a few less-educated, non-white Democrats who are willing to call themselves liberals but not progressives. There are few of them in New Hampshire.

Non-Democrats' perceptions of liberals and progressives await consideration in another report.

About the Authors

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About *The American Panel Survey*

The American Panel Survey (TAPS) is a monthly online panel survey of over 2,200 people. Panelists were recruited as a national probability sample with an addressed-based sampling frame. The survey is conducted by GfK Knowledge Networks for the Weidenbaum Center at Washington University. Individuals without Internet access were provided a laptop and internet service at the expense of the Weidenbaum Center. In a typical month, about 1,700 of the panelists complete the online survey. Analyses in this report use weights based on CPS benchmarks. Technical information about TAPS is available at taps.wustl.edu.

Notes

1. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-democrats-debate-idUSMTZSAPEC2416OGVD>
2. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/12/upshot/class-or-ideology-my-conversation-with-bernie-sanders.html?_r=2&referrer=&abt=0002&abg=