CANDIDATES AND ISSUES IN THE 1980 CAMPAIGN:
The Ideological Connection

Steven Finkel and Helmut Norpoth

The notion that ideological perceptions in the mass public are shaped to some extent by elites and political candidates is widespread in the public opinion literature. However, there has been a lack of empirical research directly demonstrating the links between elites and the masses whose thinking they supposedly cue and structure. This paper attempts to show, through magnitude scale data collected over time in the 1980 campaign, the significant impact of political candidates in altering ideological perceptions of political stimuli. The chief "carrier" of ideology in 1980 is shown to be Ronald Reagan, whose strong issue stands and ideological label influenced perceptions of specific issues' ideological content. The findings are discussed in terms of both measurement problems in the ideology literature and more general theories of elite and environmental influences on mass political thought.

Recent empirical research on ideology in the mass electorate has attempted to move beyond descriptive analysis, i.e., assessing the number of ideologues at a given point in time, and to analyze the sources and influences on an individual's level of ideological sophistication. Although there are important problems with even the descriptive analyses that have still not been resolved (see the recent exchange of Abramson, 1981, and Nie et al., 1981), it seems clear that there has been a general increase in the number of voters in the post-1964 period who are familiar with, and at least partially understand, the basic liberal-conservative ideological dimension (Nie et al., 1976; Miller and Miller, 1976; Klingemann and Wright, 1973). The question remains, though, as to why and how this change came about.

Most scholars agree that The American Voter-inspired view (Campbell et
of rising levels of education as responsible for any rise in "level of conceptualization" does not explain the increase; the percentage of ideologues at different education levels seem to increase uniformly over time (Nie et al., 1976; Abramson, 1982). The most plausible alternative hypothesis is the "nature of the times" explanation, that voters have responded to heightened ideological discourse in presidential campaigns and politics generally after 1964. As Nie et al. (1976) explain, "the data on levels of conceptualization do support the hypothesis that the way in which citizens conceptualize the political realm is dependent on the political content to which they are exposed" (p. 121). Similar explanations may be found in Asher (1976) and Niemi and Weisberg (1976), among other works, and this characterization of the public's post-1964 response to the environment is approaching the status of a truism in explaining observed changes in the electorate over time.

Smith (1980) extended the discussion of the "nature of the times" argument to the measurement realm, suggesting that the set of questions commonly used to tap ideological sophistication is invalid and unreliable and measures instead only how people respond to ideological rhetoric or discussion in the political environment. To the extent that this is true, the increases reported in the post-1964 period are not of "true" ideological awareness, but only of familiarity with ideological language.

Notwithstanding the measurement difficulties (see Abramson, 1981; Nie et al., 1981; Hagner and Pierce, 1982), the notion that familiarity with ideological concepts in the mass public is dependent on the nature of the political discourse of elites certainly has a plausible ring. The more that ideological cues are transmitted by elites to voters, and the clearer these cues are, the more likely it is that citizens will show some ideological grasp of politics. However, there has been no explicit validation of this idea in the empirical literature. Most research bestows ad hoc descriptions of the ideological content of a given campaign and then uses this to explain the rise or drop in the public's ideological awareness. Niemi and Weisberg (1976), for example, characterized the 1964, 1968, and 1972 elections as ones where elites "commonly used ideological terms," and Petrock (1980) characterized the 1976 contest as a diffuse, non-issue-based, post-Watergate election. These facts are then used to explain the increase in conceptual sophistication until 1972 and the slight drop reported in 1976. What is missing from these analyses is a demonstrated empirical link between the cue givers and the receivers, between elites and the masses whose thinking they supposedly cue and structure.

There are several possible reasons why this link has not yet been specifically established. First is the lack of direct investigation into elite actions, discussions, or policy positions as causes of ideological awareness. The analyses discussed thus far contain no information on perceived policy