Measuring Political Ideology and Social
Status: A Comparison of U.S. and European Scales
Used on the 1983 General Social Survey

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In 1983 the General Social Survey conducted two experiments to test response differences between U.S. and European measures of political ideology and social status. The primary purpose was to demonstrate within the context of a cross-sectional instrument design whether differently-scaled variables produce similar results with respect to their relationships with other pertinent variables.

The standard question used by GSS and the National Election Studies for determining political ideology reads,

> We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conserva-
> tives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the
> political views that people might hold are arranged from
> extremely liberal-point 1-to extremely conservative-point 7.
> Where would you place yourself on this scale.

Along with that question (POLVIEWS) which was asked of half the sample, the GSS also asked the other half of the sample this question, which is used in the Eurobarometers:

> In political matters, people talk of "the left" and "the
> right." How would you place your views on this scale? (Show
> card K. Do not prompt. If respondent hesitates, ask R to try
> again.)

The scale for this question (POLVIEWX) runs from 1 (left) to 10 (right).

Table 1 indicates the frequency distributions for POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX in both their uncollapsed and collapsed forms. The distributions are quite similar between the two measures in both the uncollapsed and collapsed forms. The only difference is that POLVIEWX has about twice as many DK's as POLVIEWS even though the interviewer is instructed to solicit an answer from the respondent if he hesitates to answer on the POLVIEWX question. This might suggest that a greater proportion of the respondents had difficulty placing themselves on a Left-Right political ideology spectrum than on the Liberal-Conservative Spectrum. However, this difference might be the result of POLVIEWX not having an explicit middle category like POLVIEWS has. It might

TABLE 1

Uncollapsed and Collapsed Frequency Distributions

for POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX, 1983

POLVIEWS	N	%	N	%	POLVIEWX	N	%	N	%
	Uncollapsed		Collapsed			Uncollapsed		Collapsed	
Extremely Liberal	16	2.0 ⎫			Left 1	16	2.0 ⎫		
Liberal	67	8.4 ⎬	181	22.6	2	17	2.2 ⎪	156	19.9
Slightly Liberal	98	12.2 ⎭			3	46	5.9 ⎬		
Moderate, Middle of the Road	319	39.8	319	39.8	4	77	9.8 ⎭		
Slightly Conservative	142	17.7 ⎫			5	311	39.6	311	39.6
Conservative	108	13.5 ⎬	270	33.7	6	102	13.0 ⎫		
					7	82	10.4 ⎪		
Extremely Conservative	20	2.5 ⎭			8	46	5.9 ⎬	263	33.5
DK	31	3.9	31	3.9	9	14	1.8 ⎪		
TOTAL	801	100			Right 10	19	2.4 ⎭		
					DK	55	7.0	55	7.0
					TOTAL	785	100		

be that some of those who were undecided on POLVIEWS chose the "Moderate,

Middle of the Road" category, an alternative not open to those who were

undecided on the POLVIEWX question.

To test whether these two variables measure "political ideology" in

the same way, cross-tabulations were run on these variables in both their

uncollapsed and collapsed forms with 45 other variables in the 1983 GSS which

dealt with various political and social attitudes as well as other relevant

variables relating to one's political views.

The most notable finding seems to be the lack of strong correlations

across this wide range of attitude variables as seen in Table 2. Only in

several instances do the correlations exceed .20, most notably with the party

identification variable. One would expect a strong correlation with party

identification, of course, since party ID is another type of measure of

political ideology.

Second, the mean gammas for the 7-point scaled variable POLVIEWS are

larger than those of the 10-point scaled variable POLVIEWX for 35 of these 45

variables. This is noteworthy since one might have expected the more refined

10-point scale to produce higher gammas. Andrews and Withey in their work on

social indicators of well being show that seven-point scales have higher

correlations than do 3-point scales with the other items in their study. They

suggest this is because the 7-point scales "provide more sensitive indications

of respondents' feelings than do the 3-point scales." (1976:86) Other

research indicates that three category scales capture 80-90 percent of the

variation while seven-category scales capture nearly 100 percent (cf. Cochran,

1968; Connor, 1972; Ramsay, 1973).

The mean difference in the gammas is not large in their uncollapsed

forms. Only the abortion items produce a large difference (.17). The overall

TABLE 2

A Comparison of POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX With
Various Groupings of Social and Political Measures*

	Uncollapsed				Collapsed			
	Polviews	Polviewx	Diff.	Signif. Diff.	Polviews	Polviewx	Diff.	Signif. Diff.
HELPBLK, HELPFUL, HELPNOT, HELPPOOR, HELPSICK, EQWLTH	.17	.11	.06	.05	.17	.13	.04	.08
ABDEFECT, ABNOMORE, ABHLTH, ABPOOR, ABRAPE, ABSINGLE, ABANY	.14	-.03	.17	.14	.15	-.04	.19	.14
SEXEDUC, PILL, PORNINF, PORNMORL, GRASS	.19	.11	.08	.10	.19	.12	.07	.10
NAT ITEMS	.11	.04	.07	.11	.12	.05	.07	.09
NAT SCALE	-.16	-.08	.08	.16	-.18	-.11	.07	.18
RACESCHL	-.17	-.12	.05	.14	-.17	-.13	.04	.07
RUSSIA, JAPAN, ENGLAND CHINA, DRAFT, USUN, USINTL	.08	.01	.07	.10	.08	.01	.07	.06
CAPPUN, WIRTAP	-.27	-.18	.09	.26	-.29	-.20	.09	.16
BUSING	.19	.25	.06	.25	.19	.28	.09	.09
PARTYID	.26	.22	.04	.04	.27	.23	.04	.04
MEMPOLIT, MEMUNION	.05	.17	.12	.09	.06	.19	.13	.00
ALL ITEMS	.16	.11	.05	.12	.16	.11	.05	.10

*Numbers are gammas. See Appendix for an explanation of this table.

means for POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX are .16 and .11 in their uncollapsed forms.

Thus, while there are differences in how these two measures relate to these 45

items, the differences are not extremely large.

In their collapsed forms the gammas and gamma differences are quite

similar to those in the uncollapsed versions. The means for "All Items" for

both POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX are the same in the collapsed versions as in the

uncollapsed versions. It seems apparent that collapsing the number of

response categories by recoding makes little difference in the ability of

these two variables to measure political ideology.

Several possibilities may account for the higher correlations found

for the 7-point POLVIEWS question than for the 10-point POLVIEWX question.

First, it is likely that U.S. respondents are more familiar with the terms

liberal and conservative which are part of the lexicon of American politics

than with the terms left and right which have a strong basis in European

politics. A second possibility is that respondents faced with a large number

of response categories, most of which have only a numerical description, are

likely to be confused by such a scale and will select categories with less

precision than if there were fewer categories to choose from or if all the

categories had delineations.

In order to determine whether these two questions are perceived the

same way by different demographic groups, correlations were run on five such

variables: age, education, respondent's income, family income, and the Hodge-

Siegel-Rossi job prestige scale. As seen in Table 3, the age variable has a

large correlation (.20) with POLVIEWS, but only a .05 correlation with

POLVIEWX. This indicates a significant linear relationship between one's

political views as measured by a liberal-conservative continuum and age--those

who are older are more likely to be conservative. No such relationship exists

between age and POLVIEWX.

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TABLE 3

Pearson Correlations of POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX with
Selected Demographic Variables

	Age	Education	Rincome	Income	Prestige
POLVIEWS (Liberal-Conservative)	.20*	-.01	.08*	.05	.07*
POLVIEWX (Left-Right)	.05	.09*	-.03	.06	.04

*Significant at .05 Level.

Another similar scaling experiment on the 1983 GSS was done for social status testing whether there are differences between the traditional U.S. measure, CLASS, and its European counterpart, RANK. The remainder of this paper will address these differences as well as discuss whether U.S. and European measures more closely approximate each other in the realm of political ideology or social status.

Table 4 represents the frequency distributions for CLASS and RANK. CLASS is a four value ordinally-scaled variable with values: Lower, working, middle, and upper. RANK is measured from 1(Top) to 10(Bottom). The question CLASS which has been used on the GSS since 1972, reads,

> If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?

and the question RANK, used by ZUMA, reads,

> In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and those that are towards the bottom. Here we would have a scale that runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?
>
> HAND SCALE AND PENCIL TO RESPONDENT. LET RESPONDENT MARK SCALE. Be sure that the mark is within one of the boxes. Record answer below.

As with the POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX variables, these two variables show a substantial difference in the DK categories. While 2.2 percent of respondents on the variable RANK answered DK, no one answered DK on the CLASS variable. However, the number of DK's for the European measure is substantially lower than the DK's for the other European measure in this study, POLVIEWX which had 7.0% DK's.

Similar to the analysis done in Table 3, correlations were run on CLASS and RANK by several demographic variables. Table 5 reveals that except for age, the differences between CLASS and RANK are larger than between POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX. Only for the income variable do CLASS and RANK approximate one another in the strength of correlation. Also, all five of the correlations with CLASS are significant whereas only three are significant with RANK. Further, for each demographic variable the orrelations are higher with CLASS than RANK. Table 5 provides ample evidence that CLASS is a better indicator of social status than is RANK since we would expect high correlations for these two social status measures with similar social status measures such as income, education, and job prestige.

Table 6 illustrates that in their uncollapsed versions CLASS and RANK have smaller mean gamma differences across these variable groupings when compared with the mean differences between POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX. This is true for both the "mean difference" and "significant mean difference." The CLASS variable generally produces stronger correlations with these 45 variables than does RANK. For 30 of the variables, CLASS has a higher correlation than does RANK. In 12 variables RANK has a higher correlation and in 3 variables CLASS and RANK produce the same correlation. This is consistent with the previous analysis of POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX in which the U.S. measure resulted in higher correlations for most of these 45 items.

TABLE 4

Frequency Distributions for CLASS and RANK, 1983

CLASS	N	%	RANK*	N	%	N	%
	Uncollapsed				Uncollapsed	Collapsed	
Lower	46	5.8	Bottom 1	15	1.9	15	1.9
Working	374	46.8	2	9	1.1		
Middle	349	43.7	3	39	5.0	186	23.7
Upper	30	3.8	4	60	7.7		
DK	0	0	5	78	9.9		
TOTAL	799	100	6	241	30.7		
			7	98	12.5	501	63.9
			8	112	14.3		
			9	50	6.4		
			Top 10	65	8.3	65	8.3
			DK	17	2.2	17	2.2
			TOTAL	784	100		

*The order of the values for RANK have been inverted to facilitate comparison with CLASS.

TABLE 5

Pearson Correlations of CLASS and RANK With
Selected Demographic Variables

	Age	Education	Rincome	Income	Prestige
CLASS	.12*	.35*	.26*	.30*	.37*
RANK	-.04	.24*	.07	.26*	.21*

*Significant at .05 Level

Important political issues of contemporary American politics seem to produce the greatest differences between CLASS and RANK. Busing, with a difference of .19, the NAT scale of spending issues (.13) and RACESCHL (.13) dealing with the extent of school integration acceptable to the respondent are highly visible issues. This is an important determination of whether CLASS and RANK are similar measures since one would not expect large differences on low salience issues for which most people don't have firm opinions. But on salient issues such as busing, school integration and spending on a wide range of social programs one would expect many people to have informed, knowledgable opinions. The fact that we find large differences in correlations between CLASS and RANK on these salient issues can be attributed to a fundamental difference in how the public understands these two social status measures.

As mentioned previously, large differences between POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX were less frequent, with only abortion producing a large difference (.17). This is consistent with the interpretation just given since abortion is perhaps the most visible and salient political issue which divides the public along ideological lines. The fact that other issues such as busing do not produce large differences as well may indicate that the differences between POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX are more subtle than between CLASS and RANK.

When RANK is collapsed into a four value variable, the gammas are very similar to those of the uncollapsed gammas across all the categories. Again this indicates that larger response categories do not provide greater measurement accuracy.

TABLE 6

A Comparison of CLASS and RANK With
Various Groupings of Social and Political Measures*

	Uncollapsed				With RANK Collapsed			
	CLASS	RANK	Diff.	Signif. Diff.	CLASS	RANK	Diff.	Signif. Diff.
HELPBLK, HELPFUL, HELPNOT, HELPPOOR, HELPSICK, EQWLTH	.12	.12	.0	.05	.12	.14	.02	.04
ABDEFECT, ABNOMORE, ABHLTH, ABPOOR, ABRAPE, ABSINGLE, ABANY	-.20	-.13	.07	.13	-.20	-.14	.06	.13
SEXEDUC, PILL, PORNINF, PORNMORL, GRASS	-.0	-.07	.07	.0	-.0	-.10	.08	.06
NAT ITEMS	.04	-.03	.07	.02	.04	-.03	.07	.02
NAT SCALE	.11	-.02	.13	.13	.11	-.0	.11	.11
RACESCHL	-.07	.06	.13	.14	-.07	.12	.19	.07
RUSSIA, JAPAN, ENGLAND CHINA, DRAFT, USUN, USINTL	-.11	-.08	.03	.01	-.11	-.11	.01	.02
CAPPUN, WIRTAP	-.17	-.11	.06	.17	-.17	-.09	.08	.17
BUSING	.26	.07	.19	.26	.26	.04	.22	.26
PARTYID	.18	.17	.01	.01	.18	.22	.04	.04
MEMPOLIT, MEMUNION	-.01	-.04	.03	.23	-.01	-.0	.01	.23
ALL ITEMS	.15	.11	.04	.07	.15	.12	.03	.08

*Numbers are gammas. See Appendix for an explanation of this table.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of these two experiments on the 1983 GSS was to determine whether U.S. and European scaling techniques could measure political ideology and social status in the United States in similar ways.

The findings suggest that POLVIEWS, the liberal-conservative measure, tends to have stronger correlations with political and social attitudes than does POLVIEWX. Second, collapsing these two variables into a smaller number of categories does not change the strength of their relationships with these 45 variables. This would indicate that political ideology measured with extended 7 or 10-point scale does not increase measurement precision for this variable.

The standard GSS question, CLASS, also correlates higher with more of these 45 items than does its European counterpart RANK. Collapsing RANK into a four value variable does not produce any substantial changes in the strength of its relationship with these variables or in the differences between it and CLASS.

A final point in the difference between these U.S. measures and their European counterparts is that the number of DK's is substantially higher for the European measures RANK and POLVIEWX than the U.S. measures CLASS and POLVIEWS. U.S. respondents are less familiar, it would seem, with these European measures and thus tend to place themselves in the DK category with more frequency.

APPENDIX

Technical Notes for Tables 2 and 6

The numbers represented in Tables 2 and 6 are mean gammas. The gamma means within each group were computed by summing the individual gammas taking into account the sign of each gamma and dividing the summed gammas by the number of variables in the subgroup.

POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX were collapsed according to the scheme depicted in TABLE 1. RANK was collapsed according to the scheme depicted in Table 4.

The mean difference is the difference between the mean of POLVIEWS and POLVIEWX within each subgroup. The same convention is used for CLASS and RANK.

The significant mean difference is the absolute difference between POLVIEWS (CLASS) and POLVIEWX (RANK) for each variable in the subgroup divided by the number of variables in the subgroup. When a gamma was not significant at the .05 level the gamma was set to zero.

The NAT items consist of NATSPAC, NATHEAL, NATDRUG, NATARMS, NATCITY, NATEDUC, NATAID, NATCRIME, NATRACE, NATFARE, NATENVIR. NATENVIR was excluded from the additive NAT scale because of its low intercorrelation with the other NAT items.

The RACESCHL scale consists of RACFEW, RACHAF and RACMOST.

For some variables the values were reversed so that within each subgroup all the variables would have the same liberal-conservative (Left-Right) expected direction.

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