Causes and Consequences of Ideological Persistence: The Case of Chile[*]

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Abstract

How can we explain a stable electoral competition sustained by a weak party system? We argue that ideological identification can stabilize electoral competition, acting as a substitute for weak and delegitimized political parties. We study Chile, a case with weakening parties but with stable and highly ideological electoral events. We first provide descriptive evidence of the past decades using repeated cross-sectional data, showing stability in ideological identification and a sharp decline in partisan identification. In addition, we present the results of an original conjoint experiment. Findings suggest that ideological alignment weighs considerably more than issue alignment when voters choose a candidate. We explore the origin of ideological stability, showing that highly intense political events —such as a plebiscite to end a dictatorship— can have long-term effects on identification with any ideology. Our study allows us to understand how electoral competition can be affected by long-lasting identities that survive the decline of political parties. As partisan identification is declining worldwide, our argument is potentially applicable beyond the Chilean case.

Keywords: Ideology, Partisanship, Identity, Chile.

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1 Introduction

Strong political parties play a crucial role in the health of democratic systems: they structure political competition (Gallagher et al., 2011), mobilize the electorate (Verba et al., 1978), solve collective action problems (Aldrich, 1995), and facilitate accountability (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Consequently, we can hardly imagine a successful democracy with parties that lack connection with voters and do not affect people's electoral choices.

The case of Chile is puzzling, as the country has stable electoral competition sustained by an increasingly weak party system. Scholars have identified that parties have weak roots in society (Luna, 2014; De la Cerda, 2022), do not represent the interests of the electorate (Luna and Altman, 2011; Luna and Rosenblatt, 2012), and cannot translate voters' demands into policy (Morgan and Meléndez, 2016; Disi and Mardones, 2019).[1] In this sense, we should expect an unstable, personalistic, and volatile electoral competition. However, we observe the opposite. Until 2019, center-left and center-right coalitions dominated the electoral arena in presidential and parliamentary elections (Bonilla et al., 2011). Even the newly incorporated political actors —Frente Amplio and Republicanos— can be classified into a traditional left-right spectrum (Visconti, 2021). Finally, although there have been presidential candidates with vague ideologies, they have quickly disappeared,[2] or adopted more clear ideological stances.[3] Elections, therefore, are more stable and predictable than expected in a country with weak political parties.

Although party identification is declining, we do not observe an analogous process regarding ideological identification. We posit the persistence of ideology among voters is a key factor explaining stability in electoral competition. While ideology is usually defined as a set of political attitudes, it also comes with an affective component (Jost, 2006), meaning that it goes beyond preferences over individual policies (Mason, 2018). Therefore, ideology is not only a collection of

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[1]There is extensive evidence showing how partisanship has dramatically decreased in Chile since the transition to democracy in 1990 (Morales, 2011; Navia and Osorio, 2015; Bargsted and Maldonado, 2018).

[2]Such as Francisco Javier Errazuriz ("Fra Fra"), who competed in the 1989 presidential election and obtained 15% of the votes but quickly stopped being a relevant political actor.

[3]Such as Franco Parisi, who competed as an independent candidate in 2013 but created a party to compete in the 2021 election and backed the right-wing candidate Jose Antonio Kast in the runoff election.

preferences over issues but also a social identity, similar to partisanship or religion (Green et al., 2002; King, 2019). Hence, we interpret ideological voting as an expression of identities with effects that can survive the weakening of the party system. In fact, as we expect to demonstrate, ideological persistence —even without strong parties— acts as a stabilizing force, a type of "glue" that articulates electoral competition.[4]

Research on ideological voting starts with the median voter theorem, which claims that people choose the closest party to their position on a left-right scale (Downs, 1957). Further research has shown that voters' placements on the ideological continuum are consistent over time (Knight, 2006; Jost et al., 2009), and they can help us to explain people's electoral choices (Fleury and Lewis-Beck, 1993; Calvo and Murillo, 2019). While we do not deny a spatial component in ideological voting, we claim that for voters who identify with an ideology, it will be very costly to cross the ideological spectrum, even if they are closer on preferences over issues with candidates of the opposite side.

To test this argument, we first provide descriptive evidence about trends in partisanship and ideology in the last three decades, using repeated cross-sectional data. We complement this analysis using an original panel study implemented between 2021 and 2023. We show that ideological identification has been very stable, unlike partisanship, which exhibits a sharp decline over time. Moreover, our results suggest that ideology is the main factor explaining voting in key elections. Likewise, we show that voters have very volatile issue preferences, even in a short period of time.

Second, we provide causal evidence, comparing ideological versus issue voting. We use an original conjoint experiment with a large sample size and multiple rounds, implemented before the second round of the 2021 Chilean presidential election. This allows us to analyze, among multiple subsamples, whether ideological alignment matters more than issue alignment when voters choose a candidate; following our argument, congruence in ideology must have higher weight than agreement over a single issue. Disentangling the relevance of policy agreement and ideological

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[4]Our argument applies more to national elections. Local elections and plebiscites are usually more volatile and less ideologically grounded (Díaz Rioseco et al., 2006; Giannini et al., 2011; Morales and Belmar, 2022; Altman et al., 2023).

alignment is a key component to better understanding voters' preferences and behaviors (Dias and Lelkes, 2022).

Our results indicate that ideological voting consistently trumps issue voting. In other words, when making an electoral decision, voters are more likely to choose a candidate aligned on ideology instead of candidates aligned on preferences over issues. For example, we find that a left-wing pro-immigration voter would prefer to vote for a left-wing anti-immigration candidate than for a right-wing pro-immigration. Conversely, a right-wing anti-migration voter will be more likely to support a right-wing pro-migration candidate than a left-wing anti-migration one. We provide several robustness checks for this basic result, including analyzing respondents with ideologically inconsistent preferences over issues, following the rationale of Orr et al. (2023).

We further explore the emotional component of ideology by analyzing open-ended questions (see Appendix E). We observe that right-wing and left-wing respondents attribute moral virtues to their own ideology and wickedness to the opposite. In this sense, there is an in-group / out-group distinction framed in moral terms.

Why does Chile have such a strong ideological identification? We explore the role of a highly intense political event framed in ideological terms, namely, the 1988 plebiscite that ended 17 years of dictatorship. The 1988 plebiscite was a critical milestone in defining people's political identity. In fact, support and opposition to Pinochet were articulated around two broad coalitions: the center-left, who were against him, and the right, who supported him (Valenzuela and Constable, 1989). As a result, the concepts of left and right were strongly attached to the evaluation of this 17-year-long dictatorship.

Using a regression discontinuity design, we show that eligibility to vote increased ideological identification by more than 30 percentage points. Given the stability that Chilean electoral politics has exhibited after such an event, we believe that the positions acquired then endured the passage of time. This finding suggests that highly salient political conflicts framed in ideological terms can have a profound impact on ideological identification. In addition, they can shape stable social identities around groups such as "the left" and "the right" that go beyond traditional political parties

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and survive a transformation of the party system. Such political identity can produce an analogous effect to party ID, causing an attachment to the in-group and hostility towards the opposite ideological group.

We provide different pieces of evidence showing how ideology is the key factor that structures electoral competition in Chile and that ideological identification largely originated in the 1988 plebiscite. We argue that the coherent way to interpret these results is to consider ideology as a social identity. Using this framework, we can tie ideological identification to a sense of belonging to a social group (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019), which affects how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them. This process can eventually lead to a group attachment that may get politized under certain circumstances —such as the 1988 plebiscite in Chile. We claim that understanding ideology this way is a compelling way to explain this article's results.

This study allows us to understand the relevance of ideology in a context of weak party identification, such as Chile (Navia and Osorio, 2015), which may extend other contexts with declining party systems (Dalton, 2016; Lupu, 2016; Mainwaring, 2016; Dassonneville and Hooghe, 2018). In addition, our findings challenge a voting model purely based on electoral accountability over issues that neglect the importance of long-lasting identities. Indeed, we claim that when ideology becomes a social identity, it can contribute to the stability of electoral competition, acting as the backbone of the political system.

2   Context

The case of Chile provides an ideal opportunity to study ideology as the structuring force of electoral politics. Chile has had a long history of ideological competition that dates from the early 20th century (Valenzuela, 1978). Unlike other Latin American countries, political parties have typically positioned themselves clearly along the left and right ideological spectrum, and voters have used that information to make consistent electoral decisions (Zechmeister, 2015; Calvo and Murillo, 2019). In fact, recent evidence of congressional roll-call voting in Congress clearly

shows that parties are aligned on a left-right scale (Argote, 2023). The role of ideology became more profound by the end of the seventeen-year-long military dictatorship in 1990, as support and opposition to the regime were articulated along ideological lines —with the right supporting it and all the left-of-center spectrum opposing it. This configuration shaped the post-authoritarian political competition, creating a new political cleavage (Tironi and Agüero, 1999).[5]

The left-of-center parties have been associated with a more progressive or social democratic platform, advocating for greater income redistribution and more state intervention. Right-wing parties have leaned towards a more conservative social agenda with market-oriented values, emphasizing economic freedom and limited government intervention (Luna, 2014). This partisan landscape remained stable until the 2010s decade, when new parties emerged on the left, challenging the center-left establishment represented by the Concertacion, a political alliance that united the centrist Christian Democrats with the leftist Socialist Party. The main leader of these new challengers was Gabriel Boric, whose meteoric political career catapulted him to the presidency in 2021.

Right-wing parties also had challengers. A new far-right party —Partido Republicano— started to make strides in 2017; by 2021, their presidential candidate, Jose Antonio Kast, defeated the traditional center-right, advancing to the second round of the presidential election. Even if the advancement of new political parties has changed the partisan landscape, such realignment can be described using ideological lenses, as the new actors are clearly identifiable with a position in the left-right spectrum (Sazo, 2023).[6]

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[5]In the case of Latin America, ideology has been shown to be an important predictor of people's electoral decisions (Saiegh, 2015), and there is evidence of voters belonging to coherent ideological groups (Wiesehomeier and Doyle, 2012). However, there are a few countries where the left-right semantics are less relevant, such as Ecuador (Zechmeister, 2015).

[6]A factor that has become relevant in understanding Chilean politics but that does not have clear ideological definitions is the increase in political disaffection (Joignant et al., 2016; Segovia, 2017) and anti-elite attitudes (Somma et al., 2021; Rhodes-Purdy and Rosenblatt, 2023; Titelman and Sajuria, 2023; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2024).

3 Descriptive Evidence

3.1 Data and Measures

In this section, we draw on two data sources. First, we use the publicly available data collected by Centro de Estudios (CEP) between 1994 and 2023. Each cross-section of the CEP survey, which was conducted face-to-face in all its iterations, is nationally representative. In most of the waves, CEP has asked about ideological and partisan identification. Second, we engaged in primary data collection, using Netquest, a research firm with a large experience in Latin America. This data was collected online, using a quota approach resembling the Chilean census, stratifying in key demographics such as age, gender, region, and education. This data collection effort is part of a larger project whose aim is to study political attitudes using panel data. We collected the first two waves (3,965 and 3,075 observations, respectively) in November and December 2021. Two years later, in 2023, we recontacted about 25% of the original sample, leaving us with a sample size of 1,065 respondents. We use waves two and three for the descriptive analysis presented in this section. We will indicate which sample we are using in the figure or table notes.[7]

To measure ideology, we asked about self-positioning on the left-right scale, where 1 means extreme left and 10 means extreme right. We defined a left-wing person as one who responded between 1 and 4; a right-wing person as someone positioned between 7 and 10; and a centrist person as one choosing either 5 or 6 (see the distribution of ideology in Figure A1 in the Appendix). Approximately 75% of the sample identified with some ideological position in the first wave of the panel data. Meanwhile, we define party affiliation as equal to one if the respondent identifies with any party, zero otherwise.

We also use questions about preferences over policy issues, including immigration, feminism, and the role of the state in the economy. In the case of immigration, we asked the following ques-

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[7]Given that recontacting respondents is, most likely, not random, there is a risk of sampling bias and potentially external validity problems. To avoid this problem, we use census-based weights for the core of the paper's analysis. See Appendix C for a lager explanation and for the results using weights

tion: "With respect to immigration, could you tell me which statement is closer to your beliefs?" The answers were i) The government should decrease the number of immigrants by closing the border or expelling illegal immigrants; ii) The government should encourage immigration; iii) The government should keep the current policy, keeping the same number of immigrants. Regarding feminism, we asked "Do you consider yourself a feminist?" and the answers were either yes or no.

3.2 Results

When looking at the trend of ideology over time using repeated cross-sectional data (Figure 1), we observe high levels of stability. In fact, the percentage of respondents identified with either the right or the left is almost identical in 2023 compared to 1995 —18% and 20%, respectively. There is, however, a transitory increase of respondents identified with no ideology, peaking in 2019, precisely in the middle of an acute social and political crisis, whose main theme was a generalized discontent with the political establishment (Argote and Visconti, 2023). [8]
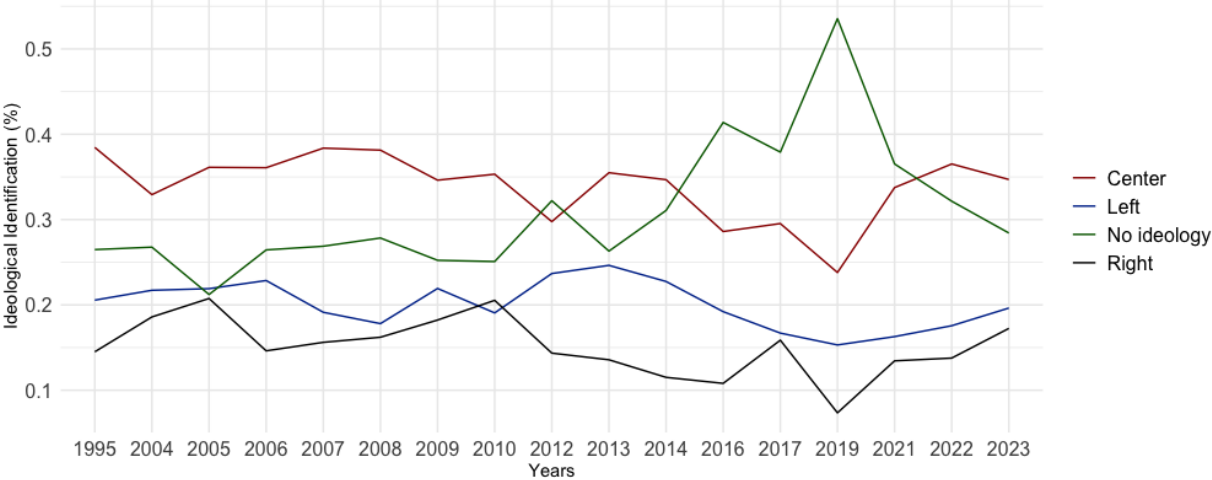

Figure 1: Ideology Over Time 1995-2023
Source: CEP. Number of observations: 38,388

However, the trends in partisanship show a very different picture. Figure 2 displays party identification over time: if in 1994, more than 70% of Chileans identified with any of the existing

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[8]When looking at how ideology correlates with electoral decisions, we also see an important divide. In fact, Tables A5 and A4 show that the last two elections in Chile were clearly divided along ideological lines.

parties, such percentage decreased to 36% in 2023. It is worth noting that, again, the lowest levels of party identification occurred in 2019; since then, there has been a slight resurgence, which is mostly explained by the rise of the far-right Republican party.[9] The analysis of issues over time also shows high degrees of instability, as Figure A2 shows. For example, pensions were not even a priority in the 90s and early 2000s, but they rose to the top by 2019. On the contrary, although poverty was a key issue in the 90s, it is less of a priority nowadays.
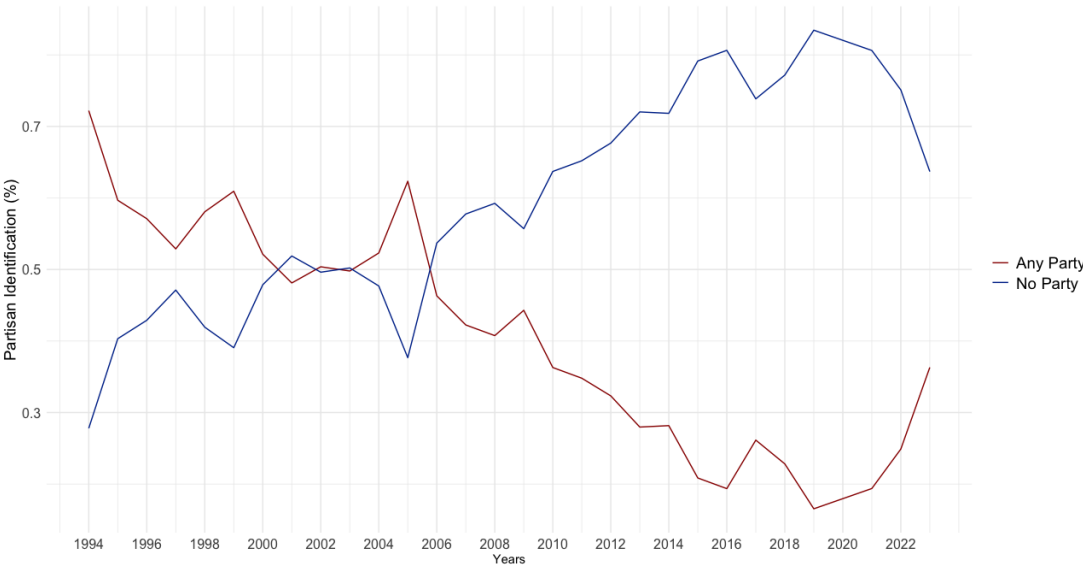

Figure 2: Party Affiliation Over Time 1994-2023
Source: CEP. Number of observations: 78,432

We can now turn to the descriptive analysis of our panel data over two waves. Figures A3 and A4 show the distribution of ideology in 2021 and 2023. We see that both distributions are practically identical; the only change is a tiny decrease among people without ideology. However, such comparison only shows the aggregate distribution, without considering possible changes *within* respondents. In Table A1, we observe changes among the same respondents surveyed two years apart.[10] We see that 71% of the sample maintained their position, and an additional 10% switched from center to independent or vice versa. Thus, there is practically no change in practically 80% of the sample. Moreover, less than 1% of respondents (7 in total) changed from left (right) to right

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[9]In the last wave of the CEP survey, 10% of Chileans identified with the Republican Party.

[10]For the sake of space, we do not distinguish between the direction of the change. For instance, we collapsed in the same category, the change from Center to Left and the change from Left to Center.

(left). There is some transit between center and right, which is expected since the priorities in the country have become issues more associated with the right.

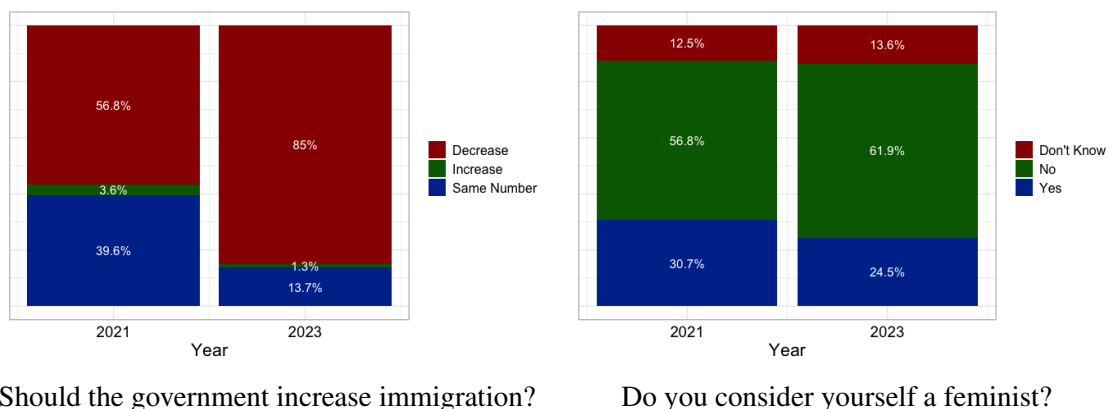Should the government increase immigration? Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Figure 3: Preferences over issues (Two Waves)
Source: Netquest panel. Number of unique observations: 1,065

However, this stability is not mirrored when analyzing preferences over key issues, even considering the same people over time. The left panel of Figure 3 shows the percentage breakdown of what the government should do about immigration. We see a striking increase of about 30 percentage points among the people who want to decrease the number of immigrants in only two years. Regarding feminism, in the right panel of Figure 3, we also see a five percentage point decrease among people identified as feminists.[11] The analysis of the panel data clearly shows a big swing to conservative positions among key issues. However, this shift does not materialize in an increase in ideological identification with the right.

What does it mean to identify with the right or the left? Table 1 displays the percentage of agreement with a battery of issues, including topics related to law and order, the economy, the role of the state, and cultural issues. This descriptive analysis provides several insights. First, we see that two of the three topics with more disagreement across left and right belong to what has been called "cultural issues", such as abortion and equal marriage. The other topic is the use of the military in dealing with a civil conflict in Chile's southern region; not surprisingly, the right firmly supports that policy, whereas the left opposes it. Then, there is a level of disagreement

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[11] See Figure A5 the distribution of respondents who believe the state should nationalize the main companies.

over economic policies —nationalization of the main industries or the size of the state—, although the disagreement is not as pronounced as we may have expected. For instance, more than half of left-wing people believe in reducing the size of the state and that criminals have too many rights. Finally, we see a virtual agreement in questions about the role of the state in the economy and in views about democracy. In fact, surprisingly, a large majority of right-wing respondents believe in increasing the minimum wage and with the notion that the state should be the main provider of public services.

Table 1: Issue Agreement by Ideology

Issue / % Agreement	Right	Left	Absolute gap	Total
Use the military in the southern region	86	13	74	44
Abortion until three months	27	83	56	54
Equal Marriage	37	88	51	63
State should nationalize the main industries	24	63	39	45
Criminals have too many rights	96	64	32	84
Reduce size of the state	82	51	31	69
Death penalty	72	42	30	61
State main provider of public services	74	97	23	88
Increase jail time for criminals	97	82	15	91
Increase minimum wage	86	98	12	93
Democracy best form of government	85	91	6	82

Source: Netquest panel. Number of unique observations: 3,075

The main takeaway from the analysis of ideology by issue is that there is no linear correspondence between ideology and issues. In fact, whereas there are gaps in cultural issues and in the use of the military, the disagreement over topics related to law and order and the economy is smaller than anticipated and, in some cases, practically non-existent.

4 Experimental Evidence

4.1 Data and Research Design

In the first wave of the panel data described in the previous section —administered in 2021—, we included a conjoint experiment,[12] which allowed us to explore the idea of ideology more in-depth.[13] Our rationale was the following: if ideology is the structuring force of electoral competition, and its meaning goes beyond preferences over issues, there are two observable implications. First, ideological alignment should matter more than issue alignment when voting for a candidate, as congruence in social identity must have higher weight than agreement over a single issue. Second, a better way to define ideology is to use self-identification on the left-right scale instead of a sum of preferences over policies. Accordingly, we designed our study to test these two propositions empirically.

4.1.1 Horse Race: Ideology Versus Issues

To test whether ideology matters more than specific issues, we first selected an issue with a clear difference between the left and the right, namely, immigration, whose phrasing was described in the previous section. When looking at the cross-tabulation by ideology (Table 2), we clearly see that decreasing immigration is typically associated with the right, whereas maintaining the same policy is the option preferred by the left.[14]

Then, we did the following exercise: we identified a subsample of respondents who are both right (left) and anti (pro) immigration.[15] In other words, we took the subset of people who identify

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[12]We preregistered the design and analysis of the conjoint experiment in Open Science Framework.

[13]In Appendix C, we provide more details about the sample, comparing it to the census. Moreover, we present the results using different types of weighting approaches.

[14]This question about immigration was also used in the previous section (Figure 3). The distribution between such Figure and Table 2 differs because, in the latter, the sample size is larger, as we used all respondents for that particular wave.

[15]Note that we define pro-immigration as a respondent who believes in either keeping the same policy towards immigration or encouraging it.

Table 2: Attitudes Towards Immigration by Ideology

	Left	Right	Total
The government should encourage immigration (%)	8.7	3.3	5
The government should keep the current policy (%)	56.3	26.6	39.1
The government should reduce immigration by closing the borders or expelling illegal immigrants (%)	35.1	70.1	55.9
Total	**764**	**699**	**3,075**

The percentages displayed are the column percentages. We omitted centrists and respondents who do not identify with an ideology on the left-right scale, to provide a clearer contrast between left and right.

with an ideology and with a preference for an issue.[16] For each of the described subgroups, we administered a *conjoint experiment*, presenting profiles of two hypothetical candidates for president of Chile. For each candidate, we simultaneously randomize six different attributes: i) ideology (left or right), ii) gender (man or woman), iii) age (35, 45, 55, and 65 years old), iv) support for feminism (Yes or No), v) proposal about immigration (new restrictions, or no restrictions), and vi) proposal about crime (more punitive or less punitive). We repeated the experiment five times per respondent . Table A2 displays an example of two possible profiles.

As the reader may have realized, we included preferences over immigration policy to mimic the subsamples defined above; precisely, the point of this analysis is to determine whether people with an ideological identification and a preference over an issue would prioritize ideology or issue alignment when choosing a candidate. Importantly, for every issue in the conjoint experiment, we use two levels per attribute to help us comparing ideological positions (e.g., left vs. right) and across preferences over issues sharply (e.g., pro or anti-immigration).

Among the subsamples, we estimated the marginal means, that is, the predicted value of a given attribute or combination of attributes. As the outcome is binary, the marginal mean takes values between 0 and 1.[17] The regression equation can be described as follows:

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[16]See percentages in Table 2

[17]For the main analysis, we also estimated the average marginal component effect (AMCE) (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Results are in Appendix A.

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Right_i + \beta_2 Female_i + \sum_{j=1}^{3} \tau_j Age(j)_i + \beta_3 Feminist_i + \beta_4 AgainstImm_i + \beta_5 Punitive_i + \varepsilon$$

Where Y_i represents a binary choice for respondent i. The coefficients of interest are β_1, the effect of being right-wing as opposed to left-wing, and β_4, the effect of being against immigration.[18].

In addition, we interacted two attributes of the conjoint experiment ideology and immigration issue. This exercise aimed to analyze whether, for example, the effect of right-wing ideology was still prominent among pro-immigrant candidates. To this end, we estimate the following regression:

$$Y_i = \delta_0 + \delta_1 Right_i + \delta_2 AntiImm_i + \delta_3 Right*AntiImm_i + \delta_4 Female_i + \sum_{j=1}^{3} \tau_j Age(j)_i + \delta_5 Feminist_i +$$
$$\delta_6 Punitive_i + \varepsilon$$

Here, the coefficients of interest are δ_1, δ_2, and δ_3, the latter representing the interaction term between both attributes.

In all models, we cluster the standard errors at the respondent level. It is important to discuss upfront how realistic it is to observe a misalignment between ideologies and issues —e.g., a left-wing anti-immigration candidate. Given the proportional electoral system and the large number of parties in the Chilean context, it is credible to find such profiles. Indeed, several center-left politicians have taken a restrictive view towards immigration, including current president Boric, who recently stated that illegal immigrants will be expelled from the country if they do not get legal status (Reyes, 2022).

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[18]In the results section, we present the results for the defined subgroups. For the complete result of all attributes, see Figures A10 and A11

4.1.2   Is Ideology Just a Sum of Issues?

The second implication is that self-identification is more important than the sum of preferences over individual issues. Therefore, the correct definition of ideology should be self-identification instead of agreement with a set of issues that we may expect to align with either left or right.

To test this proposition, we created an alternative definition of ideology by selecting preferences over five issues. Crucially, people must have consistent preferences over these topics in the direction that we may think corresponds with either left or right. Thus, we defined a right-wing person as follows: someone who agrees with i) reducing the size of the state, ii) using the military to tackle political violence in Chile's southern region, iii) criminals having too many rights, iv) reducing the number of immigrants and v) who disagrees with abortion until three months of pregnancy. Regarding the left, we defined a leftist person as follows: someone who agrees with i) equal marriage, ii) increasing the minimum wage, iii) abortion, iv) that the state should own the main companies, and v) that the state should be the main provider of health care and education.[19] Note that we did not use exactly the same issues for both left and right, as we sought to define them by issues that really matter to them.[20] After defining ideology in this way, we estimate the regression described before.

4.2   Results Conjoint Experiment

Clearly, respondents in both subsamples consider ideology more important than the stance towards immigration. In the case of the left and pro-immigration subgroup, Figure 4 displays the marginal mean of left-wing ideology and the immigration attribute. We see that the marginal mean of a candidate with a leftist ideology is 0.71 [CI: 0.67, 0.74]; in contrast, these respondents are practically indifferent regarding immigration. A similar trend is observed in the rightist subsample: the marginal mean of right-wing ideology is considerably higher than the one about new

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[19]Bear in mind that there is an implicit "and" statement in between the issues, not an "or" statement. This means that respondents must agree with all these issues to qualify for the subsample.

[20]Table A3 presents the sample size of each subgroup, including the ones defined in the previous section.
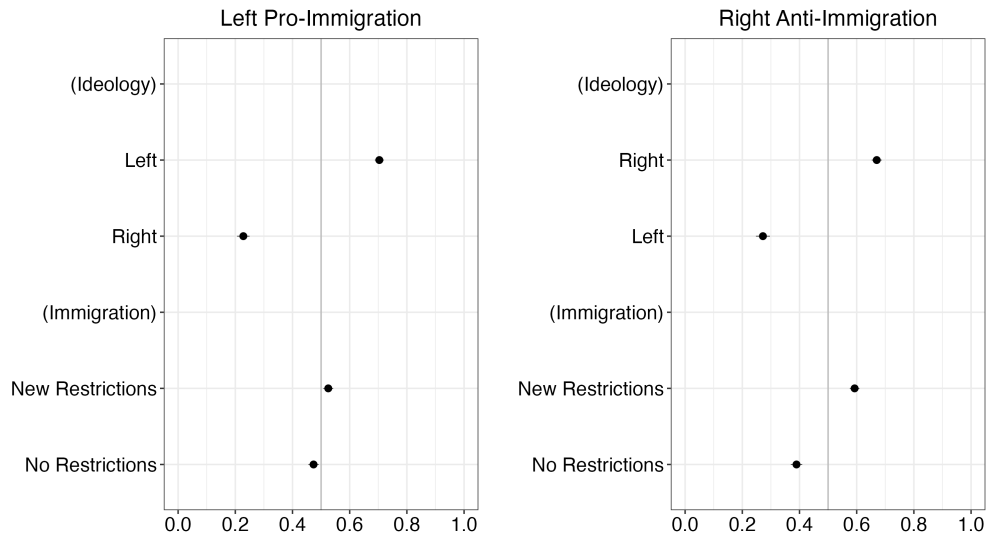
restrictions on immigration.

Figure 4: Marginal Means Ideology and Immigration

The outcome is the preference for a given candidate. The other conjoint attributes are omitted (see Appendix A for the complete results). Coefficients represent the marginal means. The dots represent the point estimates, and the lines 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Number of observations Left and pro-immigration Subsample: 4,960 (496 survey participants). Number of observations Right and Anti-Immigration Subsample: 4,900 (490 survey participants).

When looking at the interaction terms between immigration and ideology, a similar pattern emerges. Figure 5 shows that being a left-wing candidate is clearly more relevant than being pro-immigration for this subgroup. Indeed, the marginal mean of a leftist pro-immigration candidate is practically identical to the one of a left-wing anti-immigration candidate. Among the right-wing subsample, there is a clear preference for right-wing candidates who propose no restrictions to immigration (Marginal Mean: 0.54, 95% CI: [0.51, 0.58]), compared to leftist anti-immigrant (Marginal Mean: 0.34, 95% CI: [0.30, 0.38]). In practice, this means that these right-wing respondents are not willing to choose a left-wing candidate, even if they propose more restrictions on immigration (see Figures A6, A7, A8 and A9 for the AMCE and the interacted AMCE for both subsamples).

Now, we turn to analyze the results when using an alternative definition of ideology. In Figure A12, we observe that for both left and right, the effect of ideology —defined as a summary of policy preferences— seems totally irrelevant. In fact, a left-wing pro-immigration person, defined
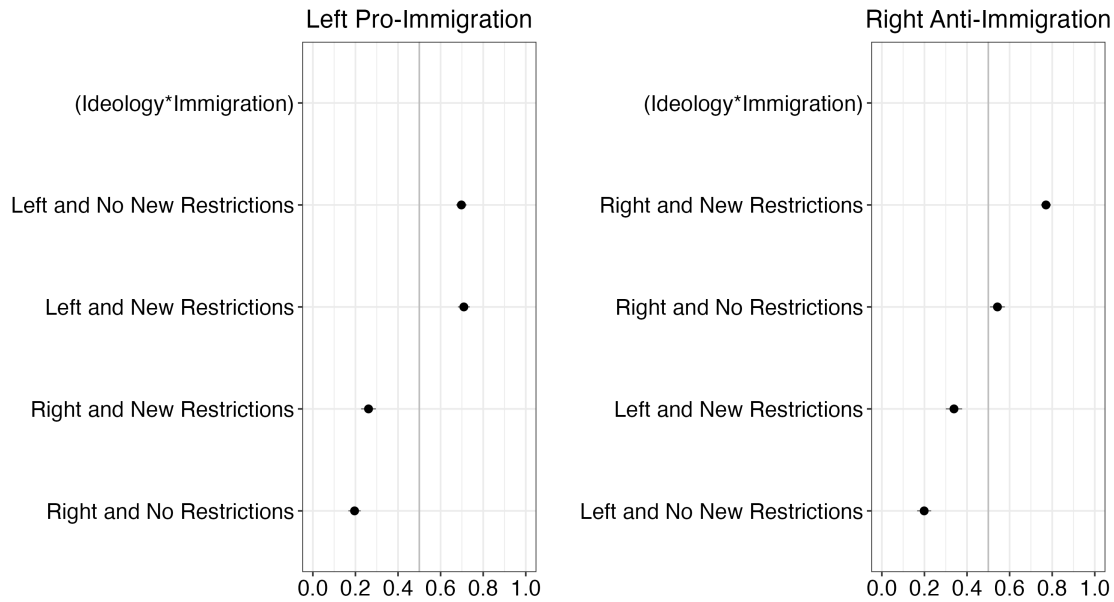
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Figure 5: Marginal Means Interaction between Ideology and Issues

The outcome is the preference for a given candidate. The other conjoint attributes are omitted (see Appendix A for the complete results). Coefficients represent the marginal means. The dots represent the point estimates, and the lines 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Number of observations Left and pro-immigration Subsample: 4,960 (496 survey participants). Number of observations Right and Anti-Immigration Subsample: 4,900 (490 survey participants).

this way, seems to be indifferent even between a leftist or a rightist candidate and between pro or anti-immigration candidates. The same applies to the case of the right. In fact, the eight estimated marginal means are around 0.4. This finding suggests that ideological identification is not correctly captured by just eliciting preferences over a sum of issues. In other words, when asking a person about their ideology, what matters is the position they reveal because it signals their own identity.

4.2.1 Ideologically-inconsistent respondents

In this section, we follow the logic Orr et al. (2023) in their analysis of affective polarization in the US. According to their logic, to determine whether polarization is driven by loyalty to an in-group or by policy disagreement, they analyze whether partisan inconsistent people —that is, respondents who identify with a party but have one policy position that is inconsistent with most of adherents of such party— have a better perception of a co-partisan or someone who agrees with them in that specific issue. They claim that if a partisan person follows the party line in every

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important issue and expresses a preference for a co-partisan, there is no way to determine whether such a person is motivated by party loyalty or policy agreement. In our setting, we can make an analogous claim: if a respondent identified both with a policy position and an ideology prefers a candidate aligned in ideology instead of someone aligned on an issue, it does not necessarily imply that people care more about ideology than policy agreement. Instead, it could mean that ideological alignment signals policy agreement in a large set of issues. To adjudicate between the policy agreement versus the loyalty hypotheses, we engage in a similar exercise to the one proposed by Orr et al. (2023). Among ideologically inconsistent people, we analyze whether agreement on issues matters more than agreement over ideology. If the latter holds, it would suggest subjects prefer ideological loyalty, as ideology would prevail over a policy stance that is the opposite of the in-group. In particular, we selected four new subsamples of people who are against the majority of their ideological group: leftists anti-immigration, rightists pro-immigration, leftists anti-feminists, and rightists feminists. Among these groups, we estimated the marginal means.

Figures A13 and A14 show the marginal means —non interacted and interacted, respectively— among respondents who are ideologically inconsistent with regard to immigration. Clearly, ideological alignment continues to prevail, as respondents prefer the candidate of the same ideology instead of the one who agrees with their immigration stance. The same applies regarding the feminist issue: again, these ideologically inconsistent respondents care much more about ideological alignment (see Figures A15 and A16). Thus, even in cases where respondents defy the position of their ideological group, we observe a prevalence of ideological voting.

4.2.2 Robustness Checks, External Validity and Conjoint Diagnostics

As robustness checks, we present two additional analyses: first, the role of ideology against two alternative issues, namely, crime and feminism. Two, the relevance of ideological alignment versus a disagreement over two issues. Moreover, we present conjoint diagnostics and address potential external validity issues. In general, our results are consistent with the idea that ideology prevails. For more details, see Appendix B for robustness checks, Appendix C for external validity,

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and Appendix D for conjoint diagnostics.

5   Tracing the Origin of Ideological Identification

So far, we have shown that ideology has been stable over time and that it is the key factor explaining electoral decisions. The next step is to better understand the origin of ideological identification in the last decades. To this end, we focused on a key historical event that might have crystallized people's ideological attitudes: the 1988 plebiscite, which asked whether the Pinochet dictatorship should continue for eight more years or not.[21]

The 1988 plebiscite in Chile was crucial in the country's history. It marked a turning point regarding the rule of General Augusto Pinochet and the dictatorship that started in 1973. The plebiscite was held on October 5, 1988, and it asked Chilean voters whether they approved of extending Pinochet's presidency for another eight-year term. People could vote YES to express support for extending Pinochet's rule or NO to end his regime and begin the transition to democracy (Boas, 2015).

We argue that eligibility to participate in this plebiscite could have been key in defining people's ideological attitudes. Even though participants and non-participants were both exposed to the campaign, the former could have experienced this process differently, as they had a say in the first free and fair election in decades. Consequently, we exploit that some voters were barely eligible to vote in the October 5th, 1988, plebiscite, given their day of birth, whereas others were not. Citizens needed to be 18 years old on the day of the election to be able to participate. Therefore, eligibility to vote was determined by the day of birth, creating a discrete threshold.[22] Therefore, we compare people who were 17 at the time of the plebiscite (control) against those who were barely 18 (treatment).

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[21]Other events have also shown to affect people's ideological considerations in Chile, such as exposure to disasters (Visconti, 2022) and unfulfilled labor market expectations (Cox, 2024).

[22]Note that registration to vote was voluntary, but once registered, voting was mandatory. More than 90% of adults registered (Toro et al., 2007). Thus, strictly speaking, the estimand of this analysis is the intent to treat effect —eligible voters being the assigned to treatment—, although there are high levels of compliance

We use the CEP survey data, from 1995 to 2017, to estimate a regression discontinuity design in time (RDiT), where days until the plebiscite is the running variable, and treatment is a dichotomous variable equal to one when respondents are eligible to vote, zero otherwise (Hausman and Rapson, 2018; Carreras et al., 2021). We grouped the survey years into four periods, roughly coincidental with presidential mandates, in order to address whether the passage of time affects the results: (i) 1996-2005, (ii) 1996-2009, (iii) 1996-2013, and (iv) 1996-2017.

As explained above, eligibility to vote is the treatment (i.e., born before October 5th, 1970), and days after and before eligibility to vote is the running variable, which can take positive and negative values. For example, -1 means that the respondent was born on October 6, 1970, implying that s/he was not eligible to vote by one day. The outcome of interest is to express any ideological identification (1: any values between 1 and 10 in the ideological spectrum, 0: none). The estimate the following local-linear regression discontinuity specification:

$$Y_{is} = \alpha + \beta_1 (Days)_{ics} + \beta_2 (Eleg)_{is} + \beta_3 (Days * Eleg)_{is} + \delta_s + \lambda_m + \varepsilon_s \qquad (1)$$

Where the outcome of interest Y, of individual i, surveyed in wave s, is regressed on days until the plebiscite, being eligible to vote $((Eleg)_{is})$ and the interaction between the two, which allows for varying slopes at both sides of the threshold. δ accounts for survey and λ for municipality fixed effects. The parameter of interest is β_2, the effect of being eligible to vote on ideological identification at the cutoff. Also, we weighted the observations using a triangular kernel, assigning importance to respondents closer to the cutoff, and we rely on the MSE optimal bandwidth (Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2022). Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.[23] In Appendix F, we conduct a continuity test using two placebo pre-treatment covariates: gender and education (i.e., subjects' characteristics that should been affected by being above or below the cutoff). The assumption is that we should observe a smooth transition at the cutoff, and that expectation is confirmed by obtaining null results when using both covariates as the outcomes.

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[23]We restrict the analysis to people with birthdays +/- 150 days from October 5th, 1970 to generate a reasonable bandwidth.

Figure 6 provides the RD estimates for the four above-mentioned periods. We consistently observe that being eligible to vote in the 1988 plebiscite significantly increases the probability of identifying with any ideology.[24] We can see that there is a large impact and that this experiences only a slight decrease over time. In the first 16 years of democracy (until year 2006), the average effect of the plebiscite was an increase in reporting an ideology of 50 percentage points (95% CI: [42, 60], MSE bandwidth: 39 days). Meanwhile, when expanding the analysis to the first 28 years of democracy (until 2017), the average effect of the plebiscite was an increase in reporting an ideology of 33 percentage points (95% CI: [7, 59], MSE bandwidth: 34 days). Therefore, even though the effect of plebiscite has diminished its impact, it has had long-term effects on the salience of ideology in Chile. In this sense, we confirm the expectation that highly salient political events make people more conscious of their political positions, generating long-lasting ideologies. These findings align with previous results showing that ideology is relevant in explaining how people understand and evaluate reparation and political forgiveness after the dictatorship in Chile (González et al., 2013; Balcells et al., 2022).

6   Discussion

Our article demonstrates the stability of ideological identification, even in the context of a weakening party system. Likewise, we show that ideological alignment is more important than alignment with specific issues when people make electoral decisions and that ideological identification can increase significantly in intense political events. We interpret our results by suggesting that ideology can become a social identity, that is, that becomes a feature that defines how voters understand the political world.

A social identity is based on the notion of social categorizations, where humans classify others into groups to organize and better understand the social world. This process can eventually lead

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[24]An alternative explanation is that the effect of participation eligibility in the plebiscite is the effect of voting for decades. However, almost everyone who was eligible to register to vote did so for the 1988 plebiscite and the first presidential election in 1989 (Toro et al., 2007). As a result, keep voting across the 90s and 00s is true for both treated (barely eligible to vote in 1988) and control respondents (barely not eligible to vote in 1988).
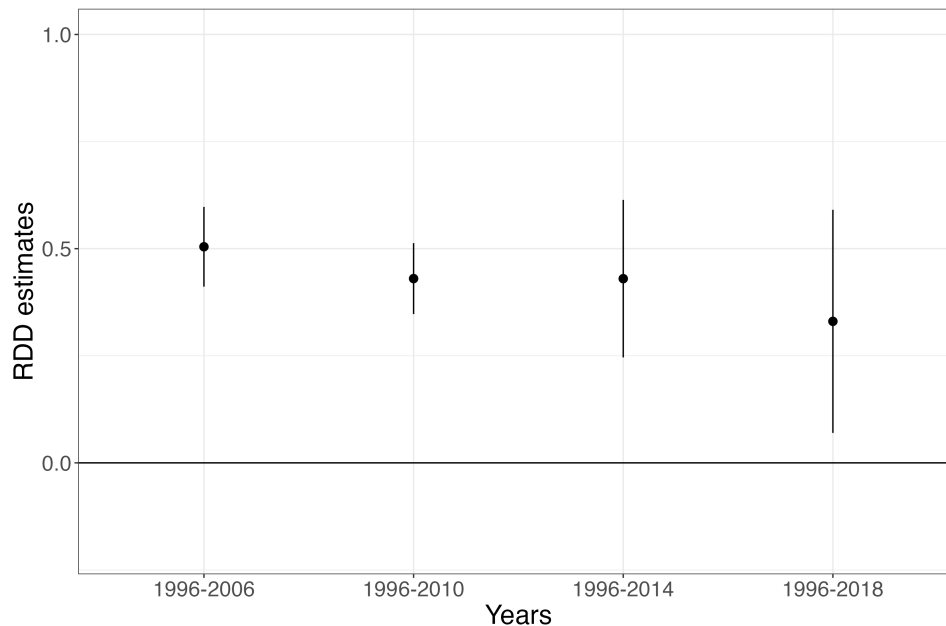
Figure 6: RD Estimates: Effect of Eligibility to Vote in the 1988 plebiscite on Ideological Identification

to a group attachment, which typically implies the identification of an out-group (Tajfel et al., 1979). Importantly, many types of groups can potentially become social identities, such as groups defined by age, race, ethnicity, and party identification (Norris and Mattes, 2003; Cameron, 2004; Kuo et al., 2017; Green et al., 2002; Trachtman et al., 2023). In addition, scholars have identified different factors that transform group membership into an identity, such as intense political events (Tilly, 2003), social conflicts (Kim and Zhou, 2020), personal experiences (Bernstein, 2005), or cultural changes (Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2019).

A key question is how a social identity can become politicized. A good example is the case of ethnicity in Latin America. While this is a multiethnic and multicultural region, ethnic and cultural minorities have been historically neglected by the states (Van Cott, 2007; Madrid, 2012). However, in recent years, ethnic mobilization has been on the rise, translating into successful ethnic parties, such as MAS in Bolivia (Alberti, 2015; Anria, 2018). Therefore, a non-historically salient group membership can mutate into a relevant political identity with substantive electoral implications. A second example of a politicized social identity is partisanship, particularly in the United States.

Green et al. (2002) argue that party identification in the United States can be understood as a social identity similar to religion. In this framework, party ID goes beyond a running tally of voters' evaluations (Fiorina, 1981). Conversely, these attachments emerge early in life and persist for a long time; there could be a change, although it usually happens slowly. Likewise, Mason (2018) claims that ideological labels in the US, such as liberal and conservative, are also a more powerful predictor of electoral behavior than ideology based on issues, because, precisely, there are identities attached to such labels.

Political identities have consequences. Indeed, scholars have identified effects on electoral choices (Andersen and Heath, 2003), political preferences (Klar, 2013), non-political attitudes (Phillips and Carsey, 2013), and even participation in protests (DeLeon and Naff, 2004). Likewise, it could also have perverse effects, such as an intensification of prejudice, in-group and out-group biases, and negative attitudes toward the opposition party (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018; Miller and Conover, 2015).

Some critics of the role of ideology hold that voters do not understand the meaning of left and right (Converse and Pierce, 1986); therefore, they will struggle to vote following traditional spatial models, where voters minimize positions between them and the competing candidates. Precisely, group membership does not require a sophisticated understanding of the policies promoted by each side; instead, it just requires identification with your in-group and differentiation with your out-group. Highly salient events, such as a military coup and a long dictatorship, where support and opposition to a contentious political actor are based on ideological terms, clearly signal voters the connotations of supporting a given position. Thus, voters can choose their ideology to belong to a social group, even if they do not notice the policy differences between left and right.

Another potential line of criticism is that ideology represents a signal of preferences over a bundle of issues, as (Orr et al., 2023) argues in the case of partisanship. Therefore, voting based on ideological alignment would just mean choosing a candidate with issue alignment on a set of policies, and not only one. We claim that we present several pieces of evidence to refute that point. First, we define ideology as a set of preferences over issues in Figures A12, finding that under such

definition, ideological alignment is irrelevant. Second, we test the importance of ideology against two issues (Figure B3), generally finding support for our hypotheses. Third, we find that ideology prevails even in issues where respondents are ideologically inconsistent (A13, A14, A15 and A16).

For some readers, our argument may imply that ideological preferences are static. Although we claim ideology is stable over time, we do believe that specific events could detonate a certain realignment. In fact, as we demonstrated before, the 1988 plebiscite was a key issue in realigning preferences in a dichotomous way, where the centrist Democracia Cristiana coalesced with the left, which is at odds with the party's historical position. More recently, we may consider the constitutional plebiscite of 2022 —which happened as a by-product of the 2019 social outburst— as a new moment of realignment, as centrist voters decided to favor the position of right-wing parties. In this sense, there are critical junctures that may move the ideological needle, although not as fast as, for instance, preferences over specific policies.

Even though our argument and evidence are centered around Chile, we believe they can be applied more broadly. For example, political parties and party systems have collapsed in multiple Latin American countries, affecting their brands (Lupu, 2016). However, voters can still have consistent and stable political attitudes, even with weak partisan loyalties. For instance, we can see how fujimorismo and anti-fujimorismo in Peru and petismo and anti-petismo in Brazil articulate electoral competition in these countries (Cyr and Meléndez, 2016; Samuels and Zucco, 2018), similar to the left-right divide in Chile.

7   Conclusion

In this article, we have established the following facts: 1) Ideological identification has been stable in Chile in the past 30 years, contrary to partisanship; 2) People can rapidly change their preferences over issues but not their ideological positioning; 3) Ideological alignment is much more relevant than issue alignment when voters make electoral decisions; 4) Ideology is more than preferences over a set of policies; and 5) Ideological identification substantively increases in highly

intense political events.

We claim that a plusible intepretatiion of these results is to consider ideology as a social identity, such as religion (Ammerman, 2003) ot partisanship (Bankert et al., 2017). For the literature of political behavior, these findings imply that ideological labels can work as a "social identity cue" for voters (Green et al., 2004), and as a result, be of extraordinary power when predicting people's electoral choices. As opposed to classic retrospective accountability arguments that mainly rely on how people evaluate the incumbent (Fiorina, 1981) or to accountability theories that consider the selection of ideal types to deliver policy (Fearon, 1999), we argue that ideology works as a strong identity marker that goes beyond the role of single issues when explaining how people vote.

We also contribute to long-lasting debates on Latin American politics. Most of the literature explaining Chile's relative political stability compared to other Latin American countries highlights the role of parties and the high levels of institutionalization (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). Therefore, having old, national, and well-organized parties has been used to explain stable electoral competition (Mainwaring, 1999). Instead, we argue that stability can happen even when parties are weak if there is an identity, such as ideology, that acts as a stabilizing factor in the electoral dispute.

It is important to emphasize that we analyze approximately half of the sample, namely, either left—or right-wing voters. In this sense, our argument applies mainly to these voters. Thus, an obvious question remains: what about the other half of respondents, those who either identify as centrists or do not have an ideology? One possibility is that a fraction of such voters could be considered latent ideological voters, mimicking the electoral behavior of the explicitly ideological voters (Visconti, 2021). In other cases, people may guide their electoral decisions by anti-establishment sentiments, therefore choosing independent candidates (Argote and Visconti, 2023; Titelman and Sajuria, 2023). Finally, there could be a third group that might be considered "innocent of ideology", that is, without a clear grasp of the basic meaning of left and right. This latter group is, most likely, less politized and unwilling to vote. Thus, they would need to coordinate behind a non-ideological candidate to be able to bring instability and unpredictability to the electoral competition, which is an unlikely scenario for a group that is less committed to politics. It is

important to notice that the work that uses party identification as a social identity in the US also focuses on around half of the electorate that considered themselves Democrats or Republicans. Therefore, it is not unusual to study a large section of the electorate rather than the electorate as a whole.

Regarding the measurement of ideology, research has highlighted some of the limitations of using the traditional left-right scale, as people may have different understandings of these concepts. Therefore, being left (or liberal) or right (or conservative) could mean various things for different respondents (Yeung and Quek, 2024). However, we prefer to rely on a traditional left-right ideological self-identification since we want to capture how people define themselves, regardless of what they understand as left or right. For our argument, it is way more relevant the self-identification with an ideological position than coherence over a set of policies.

Future research could illuminate the role of ideology on moderate or centrist voters. We excluded this group from the main analysis to be able to make direct (and binary comparisons) between different ideologies and different issues. However, subsequent studies could zoom in on these subgroups of voters to better understand their decision-making process. For instance, an interesting research question is whether centrist voters are as ideological as, say, left-wing ones, or instead, their centrism equals pragmatism and an emphasis on issues.

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