# Left and Right: Empty Vessels, Essential Core, or Family Resemblance?

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The language of left and right is a metaphor that links the concept of political disagreement to the relative positions of points along a single straight line through space. Most scholars trace the political origins of the words left/right to the seating arrangement of the Estates General in the years leading up the French Revolution (Remond, 1966; Laponce, 1981; Eatwell and O'Sullivan, 1989; Bobbio, 1996). Radical democrats and their sympathizers sat to the left of the king; supporters of the clergy and the aristocracy sat to his right. This provided a shorthand way of writing and talking about the main line of political disagreement in French society. It was purely an accident of history that the revolutionaries sat to the left and the supporters of the establishment sat to the right. If the groups sat on different sides, or the king sat at the other end, then what was left would be right, and what was right would be left. In this respect, the left/right seating arrangement was arbitrary. What was not arbitrary, however, was that the people on each side chose to sit with certain people, and against certain other people. Indeed, the seating arrangement reflected a line of political disagreement that predated by many years, and perhaps by many thousands of years, the seating arrangement itself (Eatwell and O'Sullivan, 1989; Noel and Therien, 2008).

Political objects, whether people or parties or manifestos, do not agree and disagree with each other for no reason. They agree with each other to the extent that their sets of politically relevant properties (ideas, interests, policy preferences, and so on) are compatible; they disagree with each other to the extent that these properties are incompatible.[1] Political disagreement is about the relationship between multiple objects and multiple properties. This is why references to a "left-wing party with a right-wing policy" or a "right-wing party

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[1]This paper conceptualizes an object as a row of properties. See also Noel (2012, 4). The paper uses the words "object" and "properties" in lieu of "actor" and "characteristics" so as not to restrict the generality of the argument; however, for most purposes, these words are interchangeable.

with left-wing policy" make sense. If not for the fact that left/right refers to multiple properties, then how could we say that an actor was "left-wing," given that it held a "right-wing" property? And if not for the fact that left/right refers to multiple actors, then how could we say that a property was "right-wing," given it possession by a "left-wing" actor? This is also why, if we reversed the categories of left and right, the actors and properties that are now "close together" and "to the left" would still be just as "close together," except "to the right;" and the actors and properties that are now "close together" and "to the right" would be equally "close together," except "to the left." As we shall see, conceptualizing left/right as the relationship between multiple objects and multiple properties raises a level of analysis problem that is inherent to the study of political disagreement.

There is a need for conceptual precision in the social sciences, particularly as political scientists draw increasingly on the tools of the natural sciences to explain the connections between concepts, such as "left/right," that have emerged, for the most part, from common speech. Explanations are inefficient when the *explanandum* is imprecise (Sartori, 1970; King, Keohane and Verba, 1994) and they are unsatisfactory when the *explanan* is imprecise (Hall, 1986). To the extent that we do not know precisely what a concept is, it is correspondingly difficult to explain what causes it, and correspondingly unsatisfactory to use it in a causal explanation of anything else.

This paper develops the concept of left/right in five parts. The first part examines the connection between the words "left" and "right"and the concept that they signify, a connection which draws attention to the fact that these words signify, in effect, *clusters* of *sets* of *properties*-the clustering of "ideologies" or "belief systems," to speak in somewhat looser language. Section 2 examines two level of analysis problems raised by this conception of political disagreement. The object-group problem involves whether to think about belief systems as a individual-level or a group-level concept, and the object-property problem involves whether to think about the patterns of political agreement as clusters of objects or clusters of properties. The third section identifies, defines, and outlines the theoretical and methodological implications of four "pure types" of potential connections between sets of properties-deterministic, essential core, empty vessel and family resemblance. These different ways of conceptualizing political disagreement figure prominently in existing accounts of left/right, but, as section 4 suggests, they are not all equally capable of resolving the level of analysis problem in the study of political disagreement. Finally, the fifth section concludes by discussing the implications of these different conceptions of political disagreement for left/right in particular, especially with respect to the measurement of "distance" between objects, a critical component of spatial models. The conclusion is that the metaphor of "family resemblance" offers the most theoretically satisfactory and empirically plausible conception of left/right.

# 1   Conceptualizing Left/Right

As symbols, the words "left" and "right" are arbitrary and hollow (de Saussure, 1959), but the concept that they signify is not. Two key properties define a concept: the extension of the concept, or the list of things to which the concept refers, and the intension of a concept, or the set of criteria that determine whether or not a thing belongs in the extension of the concept. The extension of the concept "book" is the set of all books; the intension of the concept book are the criteria that determine whether an object belongs in the extension of the concept - i.e., the list of properties that an object must possess in order to be considered a book.

The extension of left and right is inherently relative. Indeed, the key property that left/right space shares in common with political disagreement is that the objects of interest in both contexts are discussed in relation to each other. A point cannot have a position in left/right space except in relation to some other point. An actor cannot agree or disagree except in relation to some other actor. There is no universal point of reference in left/right space, or in political disagreement, to which all actors can be compared.

The intension of left/right, on the other hand, may not be relative. There may be a fixed definition of what it is that moves an object "to the left" and "to the right." Even among two people with identical information about the Democratic and Republican parties, for example, and where one person considers both the Democrats and the Republicans to be very close together and "right-wing," while the other person considers the parties to be very far apart, with the Democrats "on the left" and the Republicans "on the right," the intension of left and right may be precisely the same in both cases-the two people may simply have different points and frames of reference. A person with a wide frame of reference may consider both parties close together and to the right of their point of reference, whereas a person with a narrower frame of reference may consider the parties far apart, with one party to the left of their point of reference and the other party to the right of it. Even so, both people may share precisely the same understanding of what "moves" political actors to the left and to the right, and thus the same understanding of which of the parties was "to the left," and which "to the right," of the other. They may both agree, in other words, that the Republicans are to the right of the Democrats. Defining left and right in terms of the intension of the concept involves outlining what it is that moves an actor "to the left" or "to the right."

It is the intension of left/right that scholars seek when they set out to discover the meaning of these words. The word "discover" is important. Some concepts acquire their intensional meaning via construction, rather than discovery. In scientific nomenclature, for example, named categories classify objects that share certain specific characteristics. Scientists constructed the category "vertebrate," for instance, for the purpose of categorizing all animals with a spine. Thus, when the concept was first created, the intension of the concept - the criteria for an object's inclusion in the extension of the concept - was created along with it. It is therefore possible to infer, a priori, that the objects to which

these concepts refer possess certain characteristics.

In the case of the concept signified by left and right-or, in the United States, liberal and conservative-scholars must discover the intension by inferring it from the properties of the objects in the extension of these concepts. "What I call 'political liberalism,'' George Lakoff (1996, 26) writes, "*characterizes the cluster of political positions supported by people called 'liberals' in our everyday political discourse*: support for social programs; environmentalism; public education; equal rights for women, gays, and ethnic minorities; affirmative action; the pro-choice position on abortion; and so on." In identifying the characteristics of conservatism, Herbert McClosky (1958, 30) explained, "we have made an earnest effort...*to extract from the tradition of self-styled conservative thought*, and especially from the writings of Edmund Burke, a set of principles representing that tradition as fairly as possible." In constructing the left/right scale in the Comparative Manifesto Research Project-a scale which "... generally opposes emphases on peaceful internationalism, welfare and government intervention on the Left, to emphases on strong defence, free enterprise and traditional morality on the Right" Budge et al. (2001, 21-2) note that "...[a] first question about its construction is why issues were grouped this way. There is after all no logical or inherent reason why support for peace should be associated with government interventionism...[and] the three concerns of the Right could in theory vary quite independently of each other. *The fact remains however that ideologies and parties do put them together.*" Similarly, Benoit and Laver (2006, 130) "...define the policy content of the left-right scale, a priori, *on the basis of prior knowledge* of the political system under investigation. This involves deciding, *on the basis of the available evidence*, that left and right in the system under investigation are primarily about economic policy, for example, or about some combination of economic and social policy." Finally, Jean Laponce Laponce (1981) begins his classic study of left/right by noting "at no point in the following chapters do I impose my own definition, my own perception, my own 'vision' of what is left and what is right." As these examples illustrate, researchers discover the intension of the left and the right a posteriori, by observing the properties of actors on the left and the right; they do not invent the intension, a priori, by their very definition of the words.

Inferring the intension of a concept from the properties of objects in the extension of the concept raises a puzzle: how is it possible to infer the intension of "left" and "right" from observations about the properties of actors in the extension of these concepts, when knowing what actors are in the extension of these concepts requires some understanding of the intension of the concepts in the first place (i.e., on the properties that actors must possess for inclusion in the extension)? The short answer, as the case of the Estates General illustrates, is that the words left and right apply to observed patterns of political disagreement. This raises the level of analysis problems identified at the outset. One the one hand, a pattern of disagreement may refer to observations, across a domain of issues, about how political actors (parties, voters, politicians etc) cluster with certain other actors, and against still other actors, in terms of the properties (policy positions, beliefs and so on) that they possess-some politicians, for exam-

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ple, agree more often with each other than they do with other politicians (Poole, 2005; Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006). One the other hand, however, a pattern of political disagreement may refer, across a domain of actors, to how certain properties cluster together with certain other properties, and against still other properties, in terms of the actors to which they belong-some issue positions (e.g., support for abortion rights), for example, occur more often in actors that hold some other specific issue positions (e.g., support for strict environmental regulations), and less often in actors that hold some other specific issue positions (e.g., opposition to gay marriage) (Budge et al., 2001; Converse, 1964). To be sure, these are closely related, but they are not two sides of the same coin. Even if support for abortion always occurs with support for same-sex marriage, and therefore these properties cluster together perfectly from among a broader range of properties, the actors that hold these properties may, across this broader range of properties, be less similar to each other, and more similar to other actors. As the next section outlines, the level of analysis problem is inherent to the study of political disagreement.

# 2   Level of Analysis Problems

"In any area of scholarly inquiry," Singer (1961, 77) observed, "there are always several ways in which the phenomena under study may be sorted and arranged for purposes of systematic analysis. Whether in the physical or social sciences, the observer may choose to focus upon the parts or upon the whole, upon the components or upon the system. He may, for example, choose between the flowers or the garden, the rocks or the quarry, the trees or the forest, the houses or the neighborhood, the cars or the traffic jam, the delinquents or the gang, the legislators or the legislative, and so on." There are two layers of a level of analysis problem that bedevil the study of political disagreement. The first involves groups and their objects and the second involves objects and their properties.

## 2.1   The Object-Group Problem

Philip Converse (1964, 207) defined an ideology, or a "belief system," as "...a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence." By "constraint," in turn, he meant, first, "...the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes" (Converse, 1964, 207); and second, "...the probability that a change in the perceived status (truth, desirability, and so forth) of one-idea element would psychologically require, from the point of view of the actor, some compensating change(s) in the status of idea-elements elsewhere in the configuration" (Converse, 1964, 208). This twofold definition of constraint exemplifies the object-group problem in the study of political disagreement. How could a researcher predict, "given initial knowledge that an individual holds a

specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes," except on the basis of how the researcher, or other people, put these same attitudes together? This implies that ideology is external to the individual. Yet, how could a researcher know whether "...a change in the perceived status (truth, desirability, and so forth) of one-idea element would psychologically require, from the point of view of the actor, some compensating change(s) in the status of idea-elements elsewhere in the configuration," except by asking or otherwise gaging how the actor interprets the connection between these idea-elements? This implies that ideology is internal to the individual. This is a key outstanding question in the study of ideology: is an ideology, or a "belief system," a property of an individual or of a group? Without an answer, we risk conceptualizing it in one way (e.g, as a properties of individuals) and measuring it the other (e.g., using factor analysis).[2]

At one extreme, an ideology - or what might be called a personal ideology - applies to a single individual. It is a cognitive filing system, the way that a person categorizes information into preexisting mental folders and the way that they shuffle these folders together. It is as much about how they value and prioritize information, as organize it (Freeden, 1996). Two people, for example, may agree about the range of living things to which the concept of equality applies, but disagree about the value or the importance of equality vis-á-vis some other concept; two other people may agree about the value and importance of equality, but disagree about the range of living things to which the concept of equality applies; and still other people may lack altogether a concept of "equality," or, for that matter, of "living things." Each of these scenarios is a manifestation of differences in personal ideology. A personal ideology is about the mental folders that a person has, and about how he or she values, prioritizes and links these folders together. It is, as Jost (Jost, 2006) points out, a psychological concept.

At the other extreme, an ideology – or what might be called a "group" or a "public" ideology – is a sociocultural concept, a collectivity's "Weltanshchau-ung" (Manheim, 1949, 58), their way of seeing the world: the way things are, the

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[2]Nowadays, ideology as belief system is the dominant conceptualization of ideology-at least in American political science (Freeden, 1996, 15). As Jost point out (Jost, 2006, 652), some of the most prominent definitions of ideology include "an organization of opinions, attitudes and values," (Adorno et al., 1950, 2); "an organization of beliefs and attitudes" (Rokeach, 1968, 123-4); "a pattern or gestalt of attitudes" (Billig, 1984, 446); and "an interrelated set of attitudes and values..." (Tedin, 1987, 65). Definitions of ideology as belief system abound (Johnston, 1988; Cochrane, 2010). These definitions, Jost (Jost, 2006, 653) rightly observes, "...are psychological in nature. They conceptualize ideology as a belief system of the individual that is typically shared with an identifiable group." Whether the belief system of an individual must be shared with a group as a matter of a typical definition, or is typically shared with a group as a matter of fact, is unclear-it is unclear not just in Jost's characterization of these definitions, but also in the definitions themselves. Perhaps for this reason, Hans Noel (Noel, 2012, 3) abandons altogether the common practice of defining an ideology as a belief system. "To be politically relevant," he observes, "an ideology must be shared by a number of politically relevant people. Otherwise, it is just one person's belief system." I use the word ideology and belief system interchangeably, but not do require that a belief system apply only to an individual.

way things work, and the way things should be. Marxism, fascism and liberalism are among the most prominent examples of public ideologies in the Twentieth Century, but one could just as easily list other, less explicitly political ideologies, like atheism, scientific realism, and the mental aspects of Catholicism and Islam, colonialism and anti-colonialism, and so on. Public ideologies are products of human consciousness–"acts of creative synthesis," as Converse (1964, 211) put it–but they exist outside the mind of any single person (Manheim, 1949, 59). In this respect as in others, a public ideology is a veritable language (Aiken, 1964, 37), a system of symbols with its own internal rules about the meaning, order, and interconnections of concepts. A public ideology proposes authoritative meanings for "essentially contested concepts," it creates hierarchies of ideas, and it provides common "terms of reference" for communities of individuals

Karl Manheim (1949) wrestled with the question of how to conceptualize the relationship between the ideology of a group and the personal ideologies of its constituent objects. On the one hand, conceptualizing a group in terms of specific idea elements shared in common by the objects within that group is an exceedingly individualistic and unrealistic conception of group ideology. "The individual members of the working class...do not experience all the elements of an outlook which could be called the proletarian Weltanschauung," Manheim (1949, 52) observed. "Every individual participates only in certain fragments of this thought-system, the totality of which is not in the least a mere sum of these fragmentary individual experiences." On the other hand, however, conceptualizing idea elements as if they belong to a group, independently of the idea elements of the objects that comprise it, is no less awkward. "There is no such metaphysical entity as a group mind which thinks over and above the heads of individuals, or whose ideas the individual merely reproduces" (Manheim, 1949, 2). This raises the question of how ideologies (i.e., sets of properties) cluster together, which in tern raises the second level of analysis problem.

## 2.2   The Object-Property Problem

The clustering of multiple objects and multiple properties generates two closely related ways of describing a pattern of political disagreement. One approach focuses on how different properties fit together (Converse, 1964; Budge et al., 2001; Benoit and Laver, 2006; Klingemann et al., 2006)–for example, whether support for wealth redistribution tends to occur in actors that also support same-sex marriage and oppose tax cuts, or whether opposition to abortion also occurs in actors that support capital punishment and oppose immigration. Another approach focuses on how objects cluster together-for example, how legislators or political parties form into coalitions, given their respective sets of properties. These ways of conceptualizing political disagreement raise two related but different analytical questions: why do objects cluster together with some objects, and against other objects, in terms of the properties that they possess? And why do certain properties cluster together with some properties, and against other properties, in terms of the objects to which they belong? The first question involves identifying the properties that separate the objects in one cluster

from the objects in the other cluster(s). The second question involves explaining, in effect, why certain objects possess the properties that they possess. A full and complete theory of left/right disagreement must answer both questions, but these questions are not asking the same thing. The answer to the second question, which is especially important from the perspective of psychology, does not guarantee an answer to the first question, which is especially important from the perspective of game theory. As we shall see in the next section, coherent groups may form the interconnections between the properties of objects, even when there is no property, and thus no cluster of properties, that is common and exclusive to the objects in the group.

## 3   Types of Connections

There are four "pure types" of possible connections between ideologies (i.e., sets of properties): deterministic, essential core, empty vessel, and family resemblance.[3] Each of these types of connections features prominently in existing literature on left/right.

The deterministic connection defines a group ideology on the basis of a set of properties that is common and exclusive to the constituent objects in the group. The objects in these groups do not necessarily align with each other on all of their properties, but they do align on a subset of their properties. Indeed, the subset of properties on which the actors align is the defining property of the group-it is, in other words, the intension of the category. In defining conservatism, for example, Herbert McClosky (1958, 36) explained that "we have concentrated upon those attitudes and values that continually recur among acknowledged conservative thinkers." "By the same token," he continued, "we have tried to avoid attitudes or opinions that seemed to us situationally determined and which, for that reason, appear to be secondary and unstable correlates of liberal or conservative tendencies." Jean Laponce employed a similar conception of a group when he set out to discover the "stable elements" of left/right disagreement, i.e., the characteristics of the left and the right that were constant across time and space (Laponce, 1981). In the deterministic conception, $a_1...n$ are objects in the group A if, and only if, there is an intersection of properties $p_i...p_n$ that applies to every object in the group A and to no objects in the group Not-A.

In the "essential core" connection, the actors in different clusters are bound together not by their shared properties, but by the common connection of their properties to some underlying essential core, such as equality vs inequality, change vs stability, and so on (Bobbio, 1996). George Lakoff (1996) adopts an essential core conception of the liberal-conservative divide in the United States when he uses the concepts of "nurturing mother" and "authoritarian father" as metaphors for the idea-elements in the liberal and conservative camps, respectively. In an essential core conceptualization, objects are bound together not by their shared connection to each other-although they may share many

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[3]These are "pure type" connections because they may well be used in combination with each other.

things in common-but by their shared connection to a property of the group as a whole. One object may share one subset of its properties in common with a nurturing mother (e.g., its position on taxing and spending), while a different object may share an altogether different subset of its properties in common with a nurturing mother (e.g., its positions on crime and punishment). Thus, it is possible that two objects on one side may share no distinguishing characteristics in common with each other, even though they both may share the same number of characteristics in common with the "essential core" of the group. This is a popular conception of left/right–it underlies, for example, the *Kieskompas* voter literacy application, a tool created by political scientists and deployed in at least 14 countries, which aims to help voters align themselves with political party platforms during election campaigns (Krouwel, 2012). In the essentialist conception, actors $a_1...a_n$ are equally members of Group A with essential core $b_1...b_n$, if, for every a, there is an equally sized subset of properties $p_1...p_n$ intersecting the elements $b_1...b_n$.

What if there is no property that is common and exclusive to the objects in a category, and no essential core? The prevailing answer, at least in political science, is that the category would not be "content specific" (Nevitte, Bakvis and Gibbins, 1989)-it would be an "empty vessel" whose meaning depended on whatever content people poured into it. Indeed, the debates about the meaning of ideological categories–and especially about the meaning of left and right–center on empirical and interpretive questions about whether there is some common characteristic or essential core that threads together the actors in each category. Neither side of this debate, however, disputes what the absence of a common characteristic, or an essential core, would imply (see, for example, Bobbio (1996)). If the category has a common characteristic or an essential core, then it has a fixed meaning; if it has neither of these things, then it has no fixed meaning. Benoit and Laver (2006), for example, posit that the left-right scale "...having no fixed definition in terms of its substantive policy content, is likely to vary in meaning as we move from country to country." In finding, empirically, that it does, they reach the "pessimistic conclusion" that "...the substantive meaning of the left-right dimension is so context-dependent, it may be impossible for any single scale to measure this dimension in a manner that can be used for reliable or meaningful cross-national comparison" (Benoit and Laver, 2006, 143). Nevitte, Bakvis and Gibbins (1989, 502) observe that "[n]otions of 'left' and 'right' are not bounded or locked into particular meaning structures. Rather the meaning attached to 'left' and 'right' are open and dynamic; they evolve through common discourse." "But if the substantive meaning of left/right changes as left/right absorbs new issues," they continue, "then significant conceptual problems arise. How do we assign precise meaning to the terms 'left' and 'right'? Do they mean the same things to the same groups in different societies? Or do they mean the same things to different groups in the same societies? The central point is that the ability of left/right to operate as an assimilative super-dimension derives from the fact that the scale is not content specific." Both of these examples raise empirical and interpretive question about whether there is, in fact, something that the actors in these categories

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share in common, but they also raise an important conceptual question in the conclusion that they draw from their evidence: is there a way in which actors can cluster together such that, first, there are no specific characteristic that all of the actors in a cluster share in common (contrary to the deterministic conception); second, there is no common abstract core to which the characteristics of all actors in the category align (contrary to the essentialist conception); and yet third, the meaning of the category is fixed and content-specific (contrary to the empty-vessel conceptualization)?

The concept of "family resemblance" offers an affirmative answer to this question. A family resemblance refers to a "...network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing..." such that the similarities between objects "...crop up and disappear" as one moves from object to object, much like a family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 1968, 66). If the first actor in a group of four shares certain characteristics in common with the second actor, different characteristics in common with the third actor, and still different characteristics in common with the fourth actor; and if the fourth actor shares some of its characteristics in common with the second actor, and different characteristics in common with the third actor; and so on for the second and third actors; then the four actors clearly "resemble" each other when they are lined up next to one another and in comparison to some other family, but there is no common property, and no "essential core," that holds them together. As we move from actor to actor within a family, new similarities "crop-up" and old ones "disappear." Yet, the families are not "empty vessels," "content-neutral," or "context-dependent." Clear differences between groups are readily apparent. The actors in a family share more properties in common with each other than with the actors in the other family. Thus, the metaphor of family resemblance implies that there is no property and no essential core that holds the actors in a category together at the same time as it affirms the meaningfulness, the "content-specificity," of the category itself.

## 4  Implications for Left/Right

The deterministic and essential core conceptualizations are both attractive from the standpoint of explaining left/right. If some element of human psychology, genetics or social influence, for example, explained why some actors had properties $p_1...p_n$ and other actors did not, or if it explained why certain properties tended to occur together and not with certain other properties, then that element would address both aspects, outlined above, of a full and complete explanation of left/right disagreement: it would explain why actors cluster together with some actors, and against other actors, in terms of the properties that they possess; and it would explain why certain properties cluster together with some properties, and against other properties, in terms of the actors to which they belong. This type of unified explanation is possible, provided that there is some set of properties that cluster together, and that this set of properties is what distinguishes and unites the objects in a group.

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Despite their attractiveness analytically, the deterministic and essentialist conceptions have problems. The deterministic conception is theoretically acceptable but empirically problematic. A deterministic connection is consistent with an object-level explanation of political disagreement insofar as it clusters objects together in terms of the properties that they share in common with each other. Thus, it offers an explanation for why individual objects cluster together in groups. Empirically, however, it seems problematic. It is unlikely that all left-wing objects, for example, hold *any* single property of the left, let alone *every* single property of the left. If, on any given issue, the left-wing actor with the deviant position is not found, then it is probably lurking somewhere for someone else to discover, thus collapsing the house of cards that is the deterministic conception of left/right.

The essentialist conception, on the other hand, suffers from precisely the opposite problem. A critical difference between the deterministic and essentialist conceptions is that, in the former, it is the specific elements that actors share in common with each other that defines the core property of the group, whereas, in the latter, it is the elements that the actors share in common with some core property of the group that defines their connection to each other. The essentialist conception allows actors in each cluster to differ from one another in terms of their properties, which makes it plausible empirically, but it does not provide an object-level explanation for why actors cluster together in the first place, which makes it problematic theoretically. It is not readily apparent, from an individual-level of analysis, why two actors would work together by virtue of their common similarity to some abstract property of a group rather than by virtue of their concrete similarities to each other. If one actor has "nurturing mother" positions on the welfare state, the environment, and gay marriage, but not on crime and punishment or immigration or foreign policy; and another actor has "nurturing mother" positions on crime and punishment, immigration, and foreign policy, but not on the welfare state, the environment, or gay marriage; then these actors would be unlikely to join together in a group, even though they both share an identical position on this hypothetical metric of "nurturing motherness." The essentialist conception may be a fine way of describing the similarities between the properties of objects in a group, but it provides little guidance for understanding and thus explaining why the objects in a group joined together in the first place.

The fundamental premise of the empty vessel conception, in its purest form, is that knowledge of an actor's position on one issue provides no guidance about that actor's position on some other issues. By extension, therefore, it provides no basis for claiming that different actors fit more or less closely together into a left and a right. Although the empty vessel conception is theoretically satisfactory and, in theory at least, empirically possible, its most radical form is at odds with a left/right understanding of political disagreement. If there is no connection between different properties in terms of the objects to which they belong, then why do we associate some properties with "the left" and other properties with "the right?" The answer, from the perspective of the empty vessel conceptualization, is that these associations are purely a matter of as-

signing dichotomous labels to every line of political division (Corbetta, Cavazza and Roccato, 2009, 624-5). This raises the question of why do we not associate all lines of division with the left/right divide? Even so, none of these questions are evidence that the empty vessel conception is wrong; indeed, as one broadens the historical or comparative vantage point, the deterministic conceptualization appears less and less plausible, and the empty vessel conceptualization more and more attractive. In a less pure and more realistic form, the empty vessel emerges whenever people distinguish between different "dimensions" of the left or the right, without also providing any reason for why the objects on those supposedly different dimensions are categorized using precisely the same words.

A family resemblance conception of left/right disagreement provides a bridge between the deterministic and empty vessel conceptions, while also opening the possibility of resolving the level of analysis problems that are inherent to political disagreement. A family resemblance is not defined by eye color, chin, or height; it is not defined by eye color, chin, and height; and it is not defined in terms of whether people with green eyes tend to have long chins and short statures. It is defined, rather, by the extent to which two or more people share a greater number of properties in common with each other–any properties–than they do with others. It is about "overlapping" and "crisscrossing" characteristics rather than any set of common characteristics, or an essential core. Thus, the concept of family resemblance provides a basis for understanding left/right as clusters actors that are more likely to agree with each other than with the actors in the other cluster, even though there may be no specific point, let alone set of points, on which all of the actors in each group agree.

Figure 1 provides a visualization of a family resemblance for six objects on nine issues of disagreement–for the purpose of illustration, imagine that there are only nine issues and three possible positions on each issue.[4] In this example, two clear groups emerge–a left and right. It does not matter whether red is right and blue is left, or vice versa; this gets back to the argument at the outset that the words themselves are arbitrary. What is not arbitrary, however, is that two groups emerge. In both groups, each object shares three issue positions in common with every other object in the group, and not more than two issue positions in common with any object in the other group.

This scenario highlights three key points about a family resemblance conception of left/right disagreement. First, and contrary to the essentialist conception, the formation of the two groups makes sense from an individual-level perspective. Each actor allies with the actors with whom they share the largest number of common positions. Second, and contrary to the deterministic conception, there is no position, let alone set of positions, that is shared in common by all of the objects in either group. Similarities crop up and disappear as we move from object to object. Third, and contrary to the empty vessel conception, there is a clear basis for clustering issue positions (i.e., properties). Issue positions that are held by a greater number of left-wing than right-wing objects

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[4]In reality there are many more than nine issues, and many more than three possible positions on most of these issues. A greater number of issues and possible positions, however, would make the concept of family resemblance easier rather than more difficult to illustrate.

Figure 1: A Family Resemblance Conception of Left/Right Disagreement
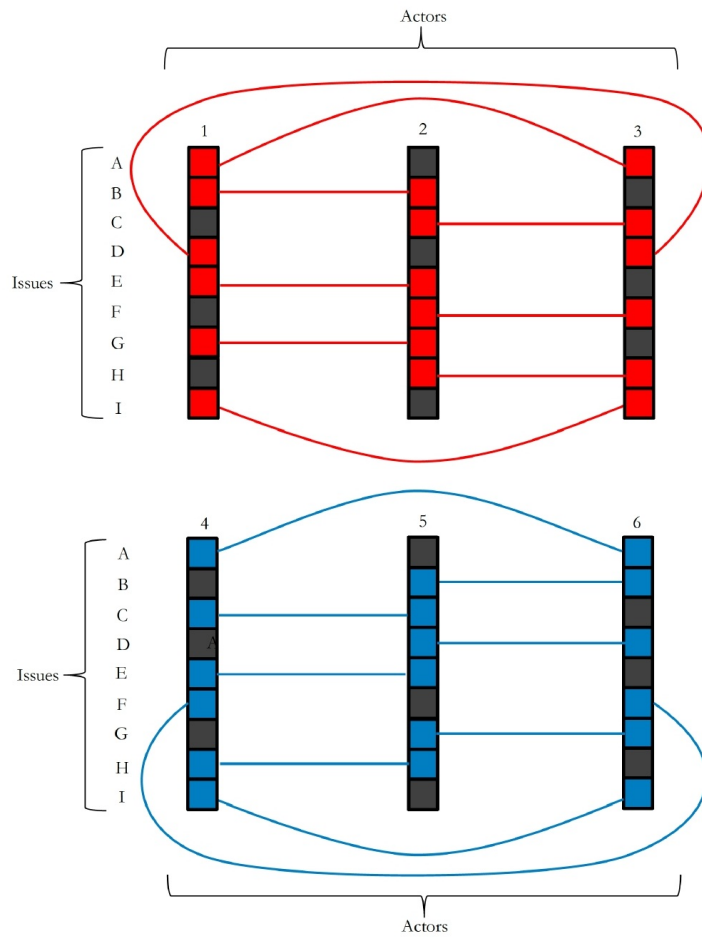
are left-wing positions, issue positions that are held by a greater number of right-wing than left-wing objects are right-wing positions, and issue positions that are held by equal numbers of left-wing and right-wing objects are neither left nor right. Notice, also, that there is no clear "wedge" issue in this scenario. Despite the lack of consensus on every issue for both groups, a group could not generate division by exploiting the lack of consensus in the other group without also generating division within its own group. If, for example, objects 1 and 3 politicized the first issue in an effort to drive a wedge between object 5 on the one hand, and objects 4 and 6 on the other, objects 1 and 3 would also drive a wedge between themselves and object 2, thus wielding no net benefit to themselves or their group.

Taken together, the concept of family resemblance may well provide a way of resolving the level of analysis problems inherent to the study of left/right disagreement in particular, and political disagreement more generally. It provides a way of bridging the group-object problem by allowing a group to come together from nothing more than the inter-connections between the properties of the constituent objects, while also allowing the core properties of a group to be something more than properties of the constituent objects that comprise it. In this way, it is consistent with both a group-level and an object-level picture of political disagreement. At the same time, it provides a way for different properties to cluster together in clear and meaningful ways, thus satisfying a property-level image of left/right. Understanding left/right, and ideology more generally, means bridging the group-object and object-property levels of analysis. The concept of family resemblance has a foot in both camps.

## 5    Conclusion

What is the connection between political disagreement as an aggregate-level concept and political disagreement as an individual-level concept? The answer to this question is important for political science. Group-level theories are of little interest to science unless they account for the behavior of the individual actors that comprise the groups (Olson, 1965); individual-level theories are of little interest to politics unless they account for why individuals cluster together in groups. Even so, conceptual murkiness is no adequate solution to this conundrum. A concept with no clear definition explains nothing.

Although the language of left/right is arbitrary, the concept is not. Political disagreement refers simultaneously to multiple objects and multiple properties. This generates different ways of describing the connections between objects and properties. This paper has outlined four different conceptions of these connections: deterministic, essentialist, empty vessel, and family resemblance. In the deterministic conception, the common and exclusive properties that connect the objects to each other define the core properties of the group. In the essentialist conception, the properties that the objects share in common with some core property of the group defines their connection to each other. In the empty vessel conception, there is no greater tendency of some properties to cluster with each

other, or against each other, in terms of the objects to which they belong. And in the family resemblance conception, the probability that objects share the same properties is the defining feature of the group, but there is no single property or set of properties that binds the objects in a group together. These different conceptions have implications for thinking about, and measuring, left/right political disagreement.

Consider, for example, the concept of distance, the key concept in spatial models of politics (Poole, 2005). One way of measuring distance involves putting a number of issues together in a scale or an index, and then comparing actors to one another in terms of their average position across that set of issues. In one variant of this approach, researchers lump different issues together and code them so that, on each issue, "socially liberal" positions are at the high end and "socially illiberal" positions are at the low end. An actor's average score across the range of issues measures the extent to which that actor's properties accord with the "essence" of social liberalism. The position of different actors on this scale is then sometimes compared to other actors in order to calculate the distance between them. A different way of measuring distance, however, involves averaging the difference between actors across a range of issues. The average overall distance between two actors, in other words, is the sum of the distance between the actors on every issue divided by the number of issues. Notice the critical difference between these two approaches. From the standpoint of the first conception, the distance between two actors is a function of the distance of their averages across a range of policy positions. From the perspective of the second approach, the distance between two actors is a function of the average of their distances across a range of policy positions. The distance of the averages is not the same as the average of the distances–indeed, they are not even close to the same. The first way of measuring distance is more suitable for conceptions of political disagreement–such as the essentialist conception–that prioritize the connections between different properties, and it is less suitable for conceptions of political disagreement that prioritize the actual tangible connection between different actors (see for example, Poole (2005); Poole and Rosenthal (1997)). Not surprisingly, conceptual differences beget different measures, different measures beget different evidence, and different evidence begets different explanations.

This paper argued that the most promising conception builds from the concept of "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1968). The concept of family resemblance offers the possibility of overcoming the level of analysis problems that are inherent to the study of political disagreement. It also provides a way for explaining the persistence of the language of left/right, even in the face of important cross-sectional and cross-time variations in what it is that these words encapsulate. If, for instance, what is left and what is right in any country bears a family resemblance to what is left or what is right in other countries, then the persistence of the language makes sense, even in the face of cross-national variations, and even in the face of no single property that applies in all countries. Similarly, in a cross-time perspective, the left and the right may well change slightly from time to time, so that the intension of these concepts bear a strong family resemblance to each other over any short period of time, and a weaker

family resemblance–but perhaps a family resemblance nonetheless–over a very long period of time. In either case, there is no reason to expect, nor even to demand as a requirement of "meaning," that some common feature characterize the left or the right in all countries at all times. These words may carry meaning in the absence of any such deterministic and defining property. Left/right is an inherently comparative concept. It about multiple objects and multiple properties. Variations in *how* objects are similar to each other is not the same as the absence of similarities altogether.

All of these are necessary reasons for adopting a family resemblance conception of left/right, but they are not sufficient reasons–neither alone nor in combination. Ultimately, it is the empirical evidence that must adjudicate between the theoretically acceptable possibilities proposed here–the deterministic, empty vessel, and family resemblance conceptions. On this front, there is nowadays an accumulation of data, perhaps even an embarrassment of riches, which could facilitate an empirical test of these different conceptions. Until that analysis is completed, however, the family resemblance conception is merely a promising contender. It is not, however, entirely devoid of empirical support. Long before data were plentiful and easily accessible, Rene Rémond, in his painstaking history of the political right in France, posed the seemingly basic question: "What then is the man of the Right?" "Of course we have a general concept of this term," Remond (1966) continued,

> personal experience and memory bring to mind several characteristic examples such as a landed proprietor, an industrialist, a simple peasant, a career officer, or even a doer of good works. But what do these men have in common? On what do they agree which makes them all vote for the same ticket despite differences in background, occupation, and condition? Is a man of the Right secular or clerical? Habit answers like an echo, "clerical," but the map of France indicates entire regions such that as that of the East-Center where at present the drift to the Right seems to move at the same pace as the growth of religious indifference. Authoritarian or liberal? Next to men whose entire program can be summed up in the desire to reinforce the authority of the State sit others whom one does not have to press very hard to make them admit that the State is a kind of absolute evil. This line of argument could be continued: other examples would only uselessly lengthen the list of variations and would add nothing to the force of the demonstration. Each affirmation automatically gives birth to its opposite, contradictions become the rule, and the anomalies become so numerous that they raise doubts even about the most commonly accepted ideas. Thus, the more one tries to define the Right the more its outline changes, its features blur, its aspect decomposes.

This property-by-property image of left/right disagreement provides little basis for clustering actors into a left and a right. Rémond, in fact, explained these

clusters as a vestige of French history. But this explanation has its own problem. The actors on the left and right are not only categorized using the same word, but they are also more likely, as Rémond himself observes, to work together – to "vote for the same ticket," as he put it. So what is the image of left/right disagreement through the lens of an object-by-object, or actor-by-actor perspective? If the concept of family resemblance holds up to empirical scrutiny, then the actors on each side do fit together – not all in the same way, and perhaps not even to the same extent – but clearly together nonetheless.

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