

# CITIZEN COMPETENCE AND THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT\*

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## ABSTRACT

Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), this paper first examines a cross-national difference in the extent to which electorates think ideologically. Our analysis shows that the ability of voters to place themselves in the ideological space and place themselves “correctly” varies greatly by country. More importantly, we find that some institutional arrangements contribute to voters’ ability to do so. Next, we examine the direction of the distortion induced by low-levels of political information and ask: why are some populations placing themselves more to the left or to the right than their full-information placement. Our findings also indicate a role for institutional arrangements in explaining the direction of the distortion in ideological thinking attributed to political knowledge.

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## Introduction

Nearly four decades ago, Converse (1964) convincingly demonstrated that most Americans understand very little about the *parlance* of politics. While terms like liberalism and conservatism abound in elite discourses, very few Americans understand their meaning. We know, for example, that many people are not even capable of placing themselves on an ideological scale. More recent work in the area, has also shown that among those who place themselves, many do so wrongly. Given more knowledge about politics, these same people who hold different ideological positions (Althaus 1998, Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996), possibly positions more in line with their underlying interests and values.

But, despite this sharp cleavage between the elites and the masses, politics, in the U.S. and elsewhere, remain organized in large part around ideologies like liberalism and conservative or left and right.<sup>1</sup> Thus the disjunction between the elite and the mass carry important implications for the democratic process because it makes it hard for most voters to understand political debates and even harder to participate in them. Consequently, many voters find themselves excluded or alienated by the workings of day-to-day politics.

While we know a great deal about ideological thinking at the individual level, we know very few about how it varies between countries. Politics, in some parts of the world, is harder fought. The number of parties competing for votes also varies greatly from one country to another. Similarly, parties in some places of the world present voters with more clearly defined ideological platforms than in others. In addition, the quality and quantity of political information that reach the mass also varies from one place to another. Thus we ask: do particular institutional arrangements affect ideological thinking in the mass? That is, are there some institutional arrangements that promote (or hinder) ideological thinking?

Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), we examine the ability of electorates to think ideologically using two criteria. First, we evaluate voters' ability to place themselves in the ideological space where parties compete for votes. Second, we assess the extent to which electorates place themselves "correctly," given their underlying interests, values, and knowledge of politics. We then identify the country/election-level determinants that explain the two criteria, or prerequisites, for ideological thinking. The results show that the ability of voters to place themselves in the ideological space and place themselves "correctly" varies greatly by country. But, more importantly, we find that some institutional arrangements contribute to voters' ability to do so. Third, and finally, we examine the direc-

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<sup>1</sup>Admittedly, voters rely on other kinds of information than a party or candidate's ideology (e.g., government performance, candidates' traits, etc.), but the importance of ideology simply cannot be ignored because it permeates politics.

tion of the distortion induced by low-levels of political information and ask: why are some populations placing themselves more to the left or to the right than their full-information placement. The findings also indicate a role for institutional arrangements in explaining the direction of the distortion in ideological thinking attributed to political knowledge.

## Defining Ideological Thinking

Ideological thinking occurs when people make use of ideological terms like liberalism and conservatism or left and right and understand what they stand for. Moreover, ideological thinking implies that voters are capable of placing themselves on the ideological space and that the positions they adopt reflect their underlying interests and values. Thus the ability to place oneself ideologically and to do so in line with one's interests and values are two important prerequisites for ideological thinking.

Placing oneself in the ideological space is the minimum prerequisite for ideological thinking. Still, a significant portion of voters does not understand what ideologies stand for and fail to offer any placement whatsoever. Instead, they either express that they do not know where to place themselves on an ideological scale or simply refuse to answer the question.<sup>2</sup>

Now, placing oneself in the ideological space is one thing. Placing oneself "correctly," that is in line with one's interests and values, is another. In recent years, scholars have examined the ability of people to place themselves on ideological and issue-specific scales, given their level of political knowledge (Althaus 1998, Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). Their findings show that many people would place themselves differently if they were more informed.<sup>3</sup> The magnitude of the distortion between actual placements and full-information ones is substantial and cannot be ignored.

Another interesting dimension of this distortion is its *direction*. Althaus (1998), for example, shows that a fully knowledgeable electorate would prefer a more dovish and interventionist foreign policy and more progressive social policies. The results from Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) also show that a more informed electorate would generally favor more progressive social policies. But what about the distortion in ideological thinking? Are some electorates placing themselves more to the left (or right) than they would if they were more informed? And, if

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<sup>2</sup>Admittedly, some people may prefer not to share their ideological inclinations, but, we believe, that in most cases those who refuse to answer the question are most likely to do so because they do not know how to answer the question.

<sup>3</sup>Their approach is not perfect as it presupposes that the more informed place themselves more "correctly" on such scales than the less knowledgeable. We believe this is a reasonable assumption and adopt it for our own purposes.

so, why?

## Ideological Thinking and the Institutional Environment

While we know a great deal about the determinants of ideological thinking at the individual-level, very little is known about the role of institutional arrangements on ideological thinking. In this paper, we attempt to explore how the institutional environment affects ideological thinking. Specifically, we examine how peculiar institutional arrangements affect: 1) the ability of electorates to place themselves in the ideological space, 2) the magnitude of the distortion at the electorate-level between actual and full-informed ideological placements, and 3) the direction of this distortion, i.e., the signed magnitude of the distortion. Thus the object of study here is not the individual but the electorate as a whole.

We explore these questions using data from Modules 1 and 2 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The CSES is an ideal source of survey data for our study because it includes a variety of countries and elections, a comparative measure of ideological thinking and political knowledge across countries and elections, and relevant questions regarding demographic attributes. In total, 80 elections from more than 40 countries are included in the two CSES modules. Yet, our analysis extends to 55 elections from 33 countries because some relevant survey data are unavailable for some countries. The list of countries, election years, and the number of respondents is presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 Here]

As a measure of ideological thinking at the individual-level, we use a question asking CSES respondents to place themselves on an eleven-point ideology scale (0-10), where 0 denotes the extremely left (liberal) position, 10 the extremely right (conservative) position, and 5 the midpoint. Respondents could either place themselves on the scale or report “don’t know” or “no answer” to the question. From this question we create our dependent variables aggregated at the country/election-level.

The first dependent variable of interest is simply the proportion of the electorate that does not indicate any ideological position. This variable is measured by counting the percentage of respondents, in each country survey, that either refused to answer the question or indicated that it did not know where to place themselves. Figure 1 displays the mean ideological scores (panel A) and the proportion of respondents choosing “don’t know” or refusing to answer (panel B).

[Figure 1 Here]

As Figure 1 panel A clearly indicates, most countries place themselves around the midpoint on the ideological scale. The mean placement is 5.16, that is, slightly to the right, and the standard variation is rather low at .75. The most leftist placement is that of Germany 1998 at .406. The most rightist placement is Mexico 2003 at 6.48.

Panel B of Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents in each country/election that offered a “don’t know” response or refused to answer the placement question. On average, 16.54 % of respondents were not able to place themselves on the ideological scale. This variable, however, shows larger variation with a standard variation equal to 11.38. The lowest proportion is found for the 2002 Netherlands election where merely 1.52% of the respondents could not place themselves on the scale. The highest proportion, for its part, is found in Taiwan 1996 where nearly half the respondents (47.85%) could not place themselves.

The second dependent variable measures the magnitude of the distortion between the electorates’ actual and full-informed ideological placements. To measure this magnitude, we follow the methodology adopted in Althaus (1998) and Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) where we simulate how respondents would place themselves on the ideological scale given full information. The procedure is as follows. We first estimate the following model separately for each country/election year:

$$[Ideology]_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1[Education]_i + \beta_2[Income]_i + \beta_3[Age]_i + \beta_4[Male]_i + \beta_5[Know]_i + (\beta_6[Education]_i + \beta_7[Income]_i + \beta_8[Age]_i + \beta_9[Male]_i) \times [Know]_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  denotes respondent  $i$  and  $\epsilon_i$  denotes an individual-specific error term. The information about the respondents’ level of education, income, age, and gender are obtained from the CSES as reported by the respondents. These socio-demographic variables are used here as proxies for interests.<sup>4</sup>  $[Know]_i$ , for its part, denotes political knowledge and is measured using respondents’ ability to correctly place party on the same left-right (liberal-conservative) scale by counting midpoint placements as wrong. The variable ranges from 0 to 6.

After estimating equation (1) for each country/election year, we store the estimates and simulate the ideological placements of respondents using these estimates and their actual demographic attributes. We then set their level of political knowledge to the highest value (i.e., at 6) and compute their full-information ideological placement. We take the mean of this score as a measure of the ideological country/election level full-information placement.

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<sup>4</sup>In order to maximize the number of country/election observations, we minimize the number of demographic variables included in equation (1). For example, we excluded marital and employment status because some election surveys include no information on these attributes.

The magnitude of the distortion at the electorate level is thus obtained by taking the absolute difference between the actual and full-informed ideological mean placements for each country/election observation. The greater the difference, the larger the magnitude of the distortion in ideological thinking at the aggregate level.

Figure 2 panel A presents the magnitude of the distortion by country/election. The distribution shows some variance (standard deviation of .25) but the country/election distortions are generally low—all are less than one point on the 11-point scale. The mean distortion is a mere .25. The largest distortion is found in Sweden 1998 (.714) and the smallest in Germany 2002 (.002).

[Figure 2 Here]

The third, and last, dependent variable is obtained in the same way then the distortion variable excepts that instead of taking the absolute difference between the actual and full-informed mean placements on the ideological scale we simply take the signed difference. This gives us the direction of the distortion. Positive values denote a rightist or conservative bias, while negative values denote a leftist or liberal one. Specifically, an election/country showing a positive (negative) value indicates that the electorate is more to the right or conservative (left or liberal) than it would be if it were more politically informed.

Figure 2 panel B presents, for its part, the direction of the distortion. There appears to be a very slight rightist bias in how electorates place themselves in the ideological space (the mean is .08). Of the total, 24 place themselves more to the left than they should given higher levels of political knowledge while 31 place themselves more to the right. The largest leftist bias is found for Poland 1997 (-.654) and the largest rightist for Sweden 1998 (0.714).

## Explaining the ability of electorates to think in ideological terms

The first and second dependent variables, as argued earlier, are measures of the ability of an electorate to think in ideological terms. As they are both measures of ability, we believe the country-level determinants of each should be the same. We consider here variables having to do with political institutions and the party system. Some vary over time as well as across countries—operationally, given the timing of the observations, with the election. Others vary, at least, in practice, over a span of a just a few decades, only with the country. Here goes the list:

*District Magnitude.* This variable distinguishes countries with single-member legislative districts with the winner decided by simple plurality (1), with countries using proportional

representation (PR) rules, given small (2), medium (3) or large (4) districts.<sup>5</sup> We argue that as district magnitude increases the more competitive elections are, and harder fought elections should increase voters' exposure to political debates. Consequently, countries with proportional rules and large districts should show higher ideological thinking among the masses.

*Age of Democracy.* Some countries have been holding elections for a longer time than others. We believe that the longer a country has been operating under democratic rules, the longer its electorate should also have also been exposed to ideological debates between the parties competing for votes. Thus ideological thinking should be stronger in countries with longer democratic traditions. This variable measures the number of years from the election survey year to the first democratic election of the last democratic period when this distinction is needed. We take the log of this variable to include in the equation.

*Effective Number of Parties.* We argue that more numerous parties should increase the ability of voters to think in ideological terms because a political environment where many parties compete for votes is likely to be harder fought. In such a scenario, parties not only compete aggressively for votes by also for some of the ideological space. Debates and exchanges between parties is likely to be highly ideological, especially among the small to midsize parties who propose more polarized ideological platforms. We use the Laasko and Taagepera (1979) measure of the effective number of parties, which gives less weight to marginal parties. The measure is  $ENP = 1/\sum s_i^2$  where  $s_i$  is the proportion of seats of the  $i$ th party in the lower chamber. The measure is based on the CSES's information about the six largest parties.

*Party Extremity.* Parties nearer the center are less ideologically driven than parties located in the peripheries. Thus we believe that ideological thinking is most likely in countries where parties are generally more ideologically extreme. We measure the extremity of the parties by taking the parties' mean absolute distance from the midpoint (5). This variable ranges from 0 (when all the parties are exactly at the midpoint) to 5 (when they are all at 0 or 10). Note that we take the "real" locations of the parties from the CSES expert ratings.

*Income.* We use income *per capita* as a proxy for economic development. As compared to less developed economies, more advanced ones like those found in North America or Western Europe are increasingly structured around white collar occupations. We believe that these kinds of occupations generally tend to be more politically impinged than those more typically found in less developed economies. Specifically, we believe that white workers tend to be more exposed to political information and, in some cases, have even incentives to process it as part of their job. We take the log of this variable to include in the equation.

*Income equality.* Income *per capita* gives an indication of "how" rich a country is. But,

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<sup>5</sup>Small districts elect less than 6 members, medium districts elect between 6 and 15 members and large ones elect more than 15.

unfortunately, this measure does not tell us much about how the income is being redistributed among its citizens. In some countries like Brazil, for example, income is highly concentrated among a small proportion of the population, indicating important income inequality. We argue that ideological thinking should be higher in countries with high income equality. Thus we also include the product term of income with income equality to account for income redistribution. Our expectation is that high-income countries with high income equality should show more ideological thinking than similarly rich countries with high inequality.

Thus we regress the proportion of people unable to place themselves in the ideological space and the magnitude of the distortion on the six variables presented above and the interaction between income and income inequality. Note that an electorate with a high ability to think in ideological terms is one that shows high levels of ideological placement (or low levels of no-placement) and a small magnitude of the distortion associated with full-information preferences.

Table 2 presents the coefficient estimates obtained by ordinary least squares with Efron robust standard errors. The results comport in part with expectations. First, we find that the ability of electorates to place themselves in the ideological space is higher in older democracies, i.e. the older a democracy, the lower the proportion of its citizens unable to place themselves ideologically. Second, we find that countries where parties are generally more ideologically extreme tend to show more ideological thinking. Specifically, the more extreme parties are in one country, the lower the proportion of voters in that country unable to place themselves ideologically. But, contrary to expectations, we find that countries where many parties compete for votes show higher ideological non-placement. That is, as the number of effective parties competing in lower chamber elections increases the higher the proportion of its citizens unable to place themselves in the ideological space. We expect that as the number of parties increases that the electoral environment would be more competitive, offering more opportunities for voters to be exposed to ideologically-charged political debates. The results, however, indicate the contrary. Presumably, as the number of parties competing for votes increases, the more “confused” voters find themselves and the less able they are in thinking ideologically. Finally, we find no effect for district magnitude, income and income inequality (and the interaction of the last two) on the proportion of electorates to place themselves in the ideological space.

[Table 2 Here]

We also regress the country/election-level distortion from full-information placement on the same independent variables. The results are presented in Table 3. The results are not very encouraging. Indeed, although most coefficient estimates carry the right sign none of

them show statistical significance. The results are quite surprising but could be due to the small magnitude of the distortions. As mentioned earlier, none of the magnitudes exceeds one point on the 11-point scale. The absence of any substantial finding may thus be due to our inability to measure well the “real” magnitude of the distortions.

[Table 3 Here]

## Explaining the bias in ideological thinking between electorates

The third variable is distinct from the first two because it is not a measure of an electorate’s ability to think in ideological terms, but rather a measure of the bias in ideological thinking attributed to political knowledge. Thus we explore here how institutional environments shape ideological preferences. Specifically, this third dependent variable gives an indication of not only the magnitude of the distortion in ideological thinking attributed to political knowledge but also its *direction*. That is, it measures the extent to which some electorates place themselves more to the left (negative values) or to the right (positive values) than they would place themselves if they were more politically informed. We identify three country/election-level characteristics that could explain the direction of the distortion.

*Public Employment.* We believe that countries with a large public employment workforce would tend to place themselves more to the left than they would if they were more politically informed. Specifically, we believe that many public employees may overwhelmingly rely on cues from their environment to form their political preferences and less on their underlying values and interests. As a consequence, they may identify with the left more than they would if more informed.

*Union Density.* We also believe that countries with a large union density should also tend to place themselves more to the left than they would if they were more informed. Just like public employees, we believe unionized workers may too rely largely on cues from their union leaders to form their political preferences and less on their own interests and values.

*Party System Ideology Bias.* There is a possibility that the ideologies expressed by electorates be a reflection of the options they have. In other words, party systems that tend to be more leftist or rightist overall may exert an influence on how electorates think. Therefore, we expect that party systems more to the left (right) should induce a bias in ideological placement also more to the left (right).

We regress the signed magnitude of the distortion on these three variables. The results are presented in Table 4. In line with expectations, we find that countries that show a party system ideological bias produce the same bias in the electorate. Specifically, party systems that are more to the right (left) show electorates that also place themselves more to the right

(left) than they would if more informed. Public employment and union density, for their part do not show any statistically significant effect.

[Table 4 Here]

## Conclusion and Implications

This paper examines how institutional environments affect ideological thinking and how they may shape political preferences. We find that institutions affect both. More precisely, the findings indicate that citizens in older democracies are more able to place themselves in the ideological space than citizens in younger ones. We also find that in countries where more extreme parties compete for votes the proportion of citizens unable to place themselves in the ideological space is lower. But, contrary to expectations, we find that countries where many parties compete for votes show higher ideological non-placement, presumably because such environments confuse voters more than help them. Finally, note that countries that show a party system ideological bias produce the same bias in the electorate. That is, party systems that are more to the right (left) show electorates that also place themselves more to the right (left) than they would if more informed.

These preliminary findings are interesting because they suggest that institutions, in addition to the more known individual-levels determinants, have some kind of influence over ideological thinking and political preferences. We know from other studies that electoral institutions, for example, affect political behavior, including electoral participation and vote choice. This paper, although focusing on a distinct object, indicates that institutional environments can also have substantial effects on how people think about politics.

Many things remain to be done in this study. First, we may question ourselves about the role of other factors like the media or the workforce composition. We know from other studies that public media tend to be more politically informative than private media. Consequently, we can imagine that citizens in countries where the audience share of the public media is large have greater opportunities to expose themselves to political debates. The workforce composition is also something that could be explored more deeply. If Luskin is right that some occupations are more politically impinged than others, then we could evaluate the argument by breaking down the workforce into white vs. blue collar workers. Similarly, a country's demographic characteristics like the population age distribution or its ethnic composition may all affect the ability of electorates to think in ideological terms. In a few words, there is still a lot of work ahead before this study

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Table 1: The List of Countries, Election Years, and the Number of Respondents

ID	Country	Election Year	N of Respondents
1	Albania	2005	1076
2	Australia	2004	1454
3	Australia	1996	1546
4	Belgium-Flanders	1999	1952
5	Brazil	2002	2086
6	Bulgaria	2001	1375
7	Canada	2004	1516
8	Canada	1997	1686
9	Czech Republic	2002	813
10	Czech Republic	1996	1126
11	Denmark	2001	1853
12	Denmark	1998	1738
13	Finland	2003	1113
14	Germany	2002	2582
15	Germany	1998	1754
16	Hungary	2002	1011
17	Hungary	1998	1398
18	Iceland	2003	1073
19	Ireland	2002	2061
20	Israel	2003	647
21	Israel	1996	692
22	Italy	2006	663
23	Japan	1996	939
24	Korea	2000	1100
25	Korea	2004	1170
26	Mexico	2000	1420
27	Mexico	2003	1589
28	Mexico	1997	1853
29	Netherlands	2002	1383
30	Netherlands	1998	1870
31	New Zealand	2002	1298
32	New Zealand	1996	3879
33	Norway	2001	1850
34	Peru	2006	1857
35	Poland	2001	1505
36	Poland	1997	1814
37	Portugal	2002	1594
38	Portugal	2005	2099
39	Romania	2004	1466
40	Romania	1996	1093
41	Russia	1999	1576
42	Slovenia	2004	524
43	Slovenia	1996	1217
44	Spain	2004	761
45	Spain	1996	843
46	Sweden	2002	1060
47	Sweden	1998	1028
48	Switzerland	2003	1266
49	Switzerland	1999	1773
50	Taiwan	2001	1499
51	Taiwan	1996	955
52	UK	2005	762
53	UK	1997	2553
54	Ukraine	1998	1050
55	USA	2004	946

Table 2: The Impact of Institutional Environments on Ideological Thinking: Electorates's Ability to Place Themselves Ideologically

Dependent Variable	Estimates
Intercept	1.764 (1.437)
District Magnitude	-0.017 (0.016)
Log Age of Democracy	-0.063* (0.024)
Effective Number of Parties	0.022* (0.013)
Party Extremity	-0.051* (0.030)
Gini Coefficient	-0.066 (0.045)
Log GDP per capita	-0.152 (0.149)
Gini $\times$ Log GDP per capita	0.007 (0.005)
Adjusted $R^2$	0.365
N	55

Note: Efron robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable is the proportion of DK and refusals. \*  $p < .05$  (one-tailed tests).

Table 3: The Impact of Institutional Environments on Ideological Thinking: Magnitude of the Distortion Attributed to Political Knowledge

	(1)
Intercept	59.900 (299.797)
District Magnitude	4.460 (3.690)
Log Age of Democracy	2.917 (3.391)
Effective Number of Parties	-0.474 (3.425)
Party Extremity	6.639 (6.124)
Gini Coefficient	1.688 (10.262)
Log GDP per capita	-4.985 (31.485)
Gini $\times$ Log GDP per capita	-0.237 (1.072)
Adjusted $R^2$	0.005
N	55

Note: Efron robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable is the size of the absolute difference between the simulated and original ideological scores. The larger values of the dependent variable denote higher distortion. \*  $p < .05$  (one-tailed tests).

Table 4: The Impact of Institutional Environments on the Magnitude of the *Signed* Distortion Attributed to Political Knowledge

	(1)
Intercept	0.066 (0.258)
Public Employment	-0.792 (4.197)
Union Density	0.001 (0.003)
Party Ideology	0.132* (0.067)
Adjusted $R^2$	0.041
N	41

Note: Efron robust standard errors are in parentheses. The dependent variable is the size of the difference between the simulated and original ideological scores. The positive values of the dependent variable denote a bias toward right or conservative ideology, while the negative values denote a bias toward liberal or left ideology. \*  $p < .05$  (one-tailed tests).

Figure 1: Mean Ideology and Nonresponse across Countries

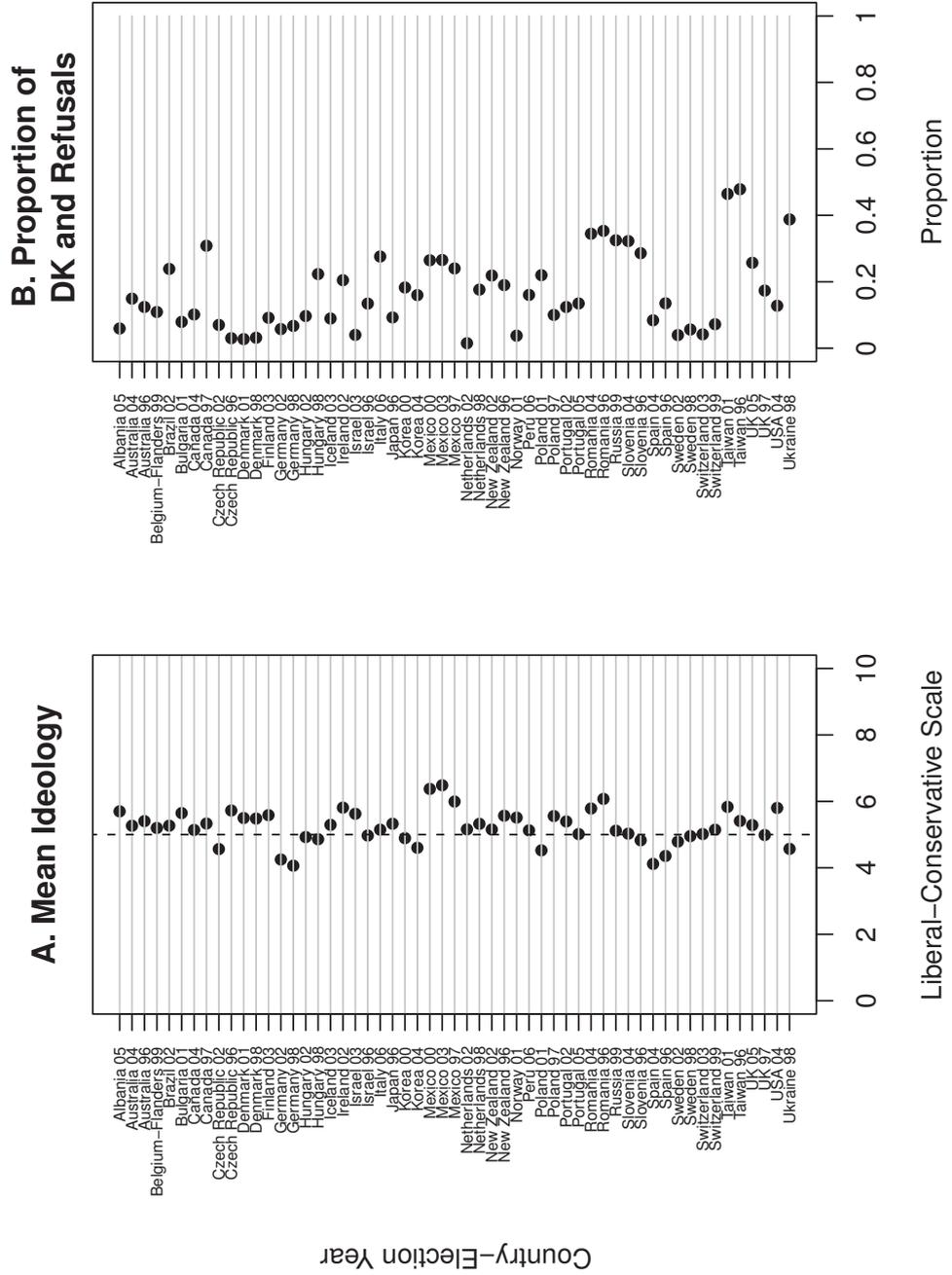


Figure 2: Differences between Simulated and Original Scores

