Most Americans Understand "Liberal" and "Conservative": Re-evaluating *Self-Reported Political Ideology*

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Abstract

In an influential study, Yeung and Quek (2024) contend that most Americans do not understand basic ideological terms like "liberal" and "conservative," and that Americans' self-reported ideologies shift when these ideological terms are replaced with operational definitions. These findings cast doubt on the validity of the standard self-reported ideology measure that many political scientists use. We show several of these claims are largely driven by issues surrounding data quality and measurement in Yeung and Quek's (2024) Lucid survey. Using ad hoc data quality metrics from their reproduction data, we demonstrate that their Lucid sample includes many low-quality survey respondents who bias several of their findings. In a Connect replication study with rigorous data quality controls, we show that Americans maintain moderate-to-high knowledge about the positions endorsed by liberals versus conservatives. While we replicate Yeung and Quek's (2024) finding that Black, female, and less politically sophisticated Americans are less ideologically knowledgeable, we find that most Americans grasp the core substantive cleavages that divide "liberals" and "conservatives," even if they themselves are generally not strict ideologues. Our findings bolster the construct validity of self-reported ideology and underscore the importance of survey data quality.

Keywords: Ideology, Political Knowledge, Public Opinion, Survey Methodology, Measurement, Replication.

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While scholars often use self-reported ideology measures anchored by the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in surveys, there is a rich literature questioning Americans' ideological consistency (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Ellis and Stimson (2012) and others often find that many Americans symbolically identify as conservatives while maintaining operational policy preferences that are liberal. This symbolic-operational distinction carries important measurement implications: if self-reported ideology primarily reflects symbolic identity, then self-reported ideology may mischaracterize individuals' substantive beliefs.

Recently, Yeung and Quek (2024) extend this literature, arguing that many Americans' understandings of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" are misaligned with their operational definitions—that is, Americans lack *ideological knowledge*. In turn, they question whether self-reported ideology is affected by symbolic associations between ideological terms and partisan groups. Yeung and Quek (2024) is the most-read *Political Science Research & Methods* publication from 2024, speaking to its important contributions.

This note evaluates Americans' ideological knowledge. We first assess data quality robustness in Yeung and Quek (2024), finding that low-quality Lucid respondents bias their ideological knowledge estimates downward. Then, in a pre-registered Connect replication study,[1] we show that Americans have higher ideological knowledge, particularly when shifting from abstract ideological principles to concrete policy positions. Overall, while our findings cannot rule out the possibility that self-reported ideology partly reflects symbolic associations with partisan identities, we find that most Americans do understand the core operational underpinnings of liberal–conservative ideology.

Yeung and Quek (2024): *Self-reported political ideology*

We begin by reviewing Yeung and Quek (2024) (hereafter Y&Q), a widely-read article evaluating ideological knowledge and self-reported ideology measures. First, Y&Q use a

[1] Anonymized OSF pre-registration: https://osf.io/sjv2y.

national Lucid survey to assess Americans' understanding of the terms "liberal" and "conservative." They find that many Americans are unfamiliar with these terms' operational underpinnings. Specifically, Y&Q find that in "close-ended questions that draw on textbook definitions of ideology to test individual knowledge about these terms, respondents' performance is not much better than mere guessing." Their four-item measure, outlined in Table 1, prompts respondents: "Does the following belief define a liberal, a conservative, or neither?" [Don't know is also a response option.]

Item	**Ideological Knowledge Statement**	**Answer**
1	"The government should play an active role in supporting social and political change."	Liberal
2	"Social institutions and the free market solve problems better than governments do."	Conservative
3	"A powerful government is a threat to citizens' freedom."	Conservative
4	"The government should play a strong role in the economy and the provision of social services."	Liberal

Table 1: Yeung and Quek (2024) Ideological Knowledge Items

On average, Lucid respondents correctly answered just 1.94/4 items. Given respondents would average ∼1.33/4 items by guessing, these results imply that Americans' ideological knowledge is dismally low. Further, Y&Q find ideological knowledge is especially low for "Blacks, women, and the less politically sophisticated," as well as liberals and Democrats.

Second, in a question-wording experiment, Y&Q manipulate ideology measures to include operational definitions of "liberal" and "conservative" and/or exclude these terms in favor of definitions (Table 2). They find that self-placements are sensitive to excluding ideological terms: self-placements moderate for both Democrats and Republicans, and partisan-ideological sorting attenuates. This led Y&Q to "question the validity of standard

measures of ideology, which solicit self-reported ideology without providing respondents with a clear definition of ideological terms."

We argue that Y&Q's question-wording experiment admits two interpretations. The first, emphasized by Y&Q, is that ideological labels are symbolic partisan cues; since Americans lack operational ideological knowledge, their polarized self-placements on labeled measures may reflect symbolic associations between partisan and ideological groups. However, an alternative explanation for question-wording effects is that they reflect differences in the operational considerations respondents rely on when given labels versus definitions. Because Y&Q's definitions emphasize a subset of policy preferences regarding the government's size and scope—an abstract dimension where attitudes are less sharply polarized than on other salient issues (as we show later)—removing ideological labels may lead respondents to consider a less polarized subset of issues when self-reporting ideology, inducing moderation. Notably, this alternative interpretation is possible only if respondents understand the issue positions associated with liberals and conservatives. Thus, how to interpret these question-wording effects critically hinges on Americans' level of ideological knowledge.

Ideology Measure	Question Wording	Response Options
Labels-Only (Standard)	We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	1 – Extremely liberal 2 – Liberal 3 – Slightly liberal 4 – Moderate; middle of the road 5 – Slightly conservative 6 – Conservative 7 – Extremely conservative
Labels + Definitions	We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. **Liberals** believe that the government should play an active role in supporting social and political change, and support a strong role for the government in economic and social matters. **Conservatives** believe that the government should uphold traditional values, and that government intervention in economic and social matters should be as little as possible. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	
Definitions-Only	Some people believe strongly that the government should play an active role in supporting social and political change, and they support a strong role for the government in economic and social matters. Suppose these people are on one end of the scale, at point 1. Other people believe strongly that the government should uphold traditional values, and that government intervention in economic and social matters should be as little as possible. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.	1 – Government plays strong and active role 2 – 3 – 4 – Middle of the road 5 – 6 – 7 – Government intervenes as little as possible

Table 2: Yeung and Quek (2024) Ideology Question-Wording Experimental Conditions

Yeung and Quek (2024): Data Quality Robustness

This section assesses data quality in Y&Q's 2022 Lucid survey. Lucid is an online, non-probability panel used frequently for social scientific research. While initial evidence on Lucid's data quality was promising (Coppock and McClellan 2019), recent evaluations show that Lucid respondents are prone to inattention (Aronow et al. 2020; Ternovski and Orr 2022; Stagnaro et al. 2024). Y&Q do implement one data quality filter—dropping respondents who finished the survey in under 5 minutes (3.3% of completes)—but considering the scope of Lucid's data quality issues, this single exclusion criterion may be inadequate to ensure robust data quality. In this section, we identify data quality issues in Y&Q's Lucid sample and their consequences for estimating ideological knowledge and question-wording effects.

Data Quality Metrics

Y&Q's Lucid survey does not have direct response quality measures (e.g., attention checks), but we construct two ad hoc metrics using variables in their reproduction data:

1. **Item-Level Speeding**: Respondents completed four political knowledge items to evaluate the ideology knowledge measure's convergent validity. We define item-level speeding as answering an item in under 1/2 its median time. 851/3,828 respondents sped on two or more items; in this subgroup, the median time spent per item is less than 3 seconds, suggesting that these respondents are not reading the items.
2. **Bogus Responses**: About one-third of the Lucid sample answered an open-ended prompt to define liberal or conservative (n=1,196). We coded these for bogus responses (Appendix 3), such as non-sequiturs (e.g., "willing to buy") and garbled text (e.g., "Gygvghhbh"). Merely 'incorrect' responses were not coded as bogus. We identified 186/1,196 open-ended responses as bogus.

To validate these data quality metrics, we draw on insights from Westwood et al. (2022), who show low-quality responses induce unusual correlations in surveys. For example, inattentive respondents often answer questions randomly, biasing correlations toward zero. Similarly, respondents who straight-line (by selecting identical responses across items) will bias

correlations toward 1. Therefore, we can validate the ad hoc data quality metrics by testing whether they correspond with unusual correlations in the Lucid dataset.

We create subsamples at each level of item-level speeding (0-4) and bogus responding (0/1), and compare correlations across subsamples to nationally-representative benchmarks from the 2020/2024 American National Election Study (ANES). First, we examine two variables that should be strongly correlated: 7-pt ideology and 7-pt partisanship. Figure 1A shows partisanship-ideology correlations as functions of item-level speeding and bogus responses against ANES benchmarks (r=0.74/0.75). The subsamples with zero instances of item-level speeding and non-bogus responding have partisanship-ideology correlations similar to the ANES benchmarks. However, the correlations attenuate significantly for item-level speeders and bogus responders, suggesting random responding in these subsamples.

Next, Figure 1B tests for straight-lining. The Lucid study includes two ideological items: a 7-point government spending/services item where higher responses indicate *support* for spending and services, and a 7-point job guarantee item where higher responses indicate *opposition* to job guarantees. Because these items place economic liberalism at opposite ends of their response scales, they should be negatively correlated. Indeed, the ANES benchmark correlations are r=-0.60/-0.61, and we observe similarly negative correlations for respondents who never sped or gave bogus open-ended responses. However, as item-level speeding increases, these correlations steadily weaken, eventually crossing zero and becoming positive. Respondents who provide bogus open-ended responses exhibit a similar pattern. This sign reversal is consistent with increasing levels of straight-lining among low-quality respondents.

Overall, these analyses show that data quality is substantially worse for item-level speeders and respondents who provided bogus open-ended responses. We thus define a subsample of 906/3,828 Lucid respondents "flagged" as low-quality for speeding on two or more knowledge items or giving bogus open-ended responses.[2]

[2]Appendix 4 assesses other item-level speeding thresholds.

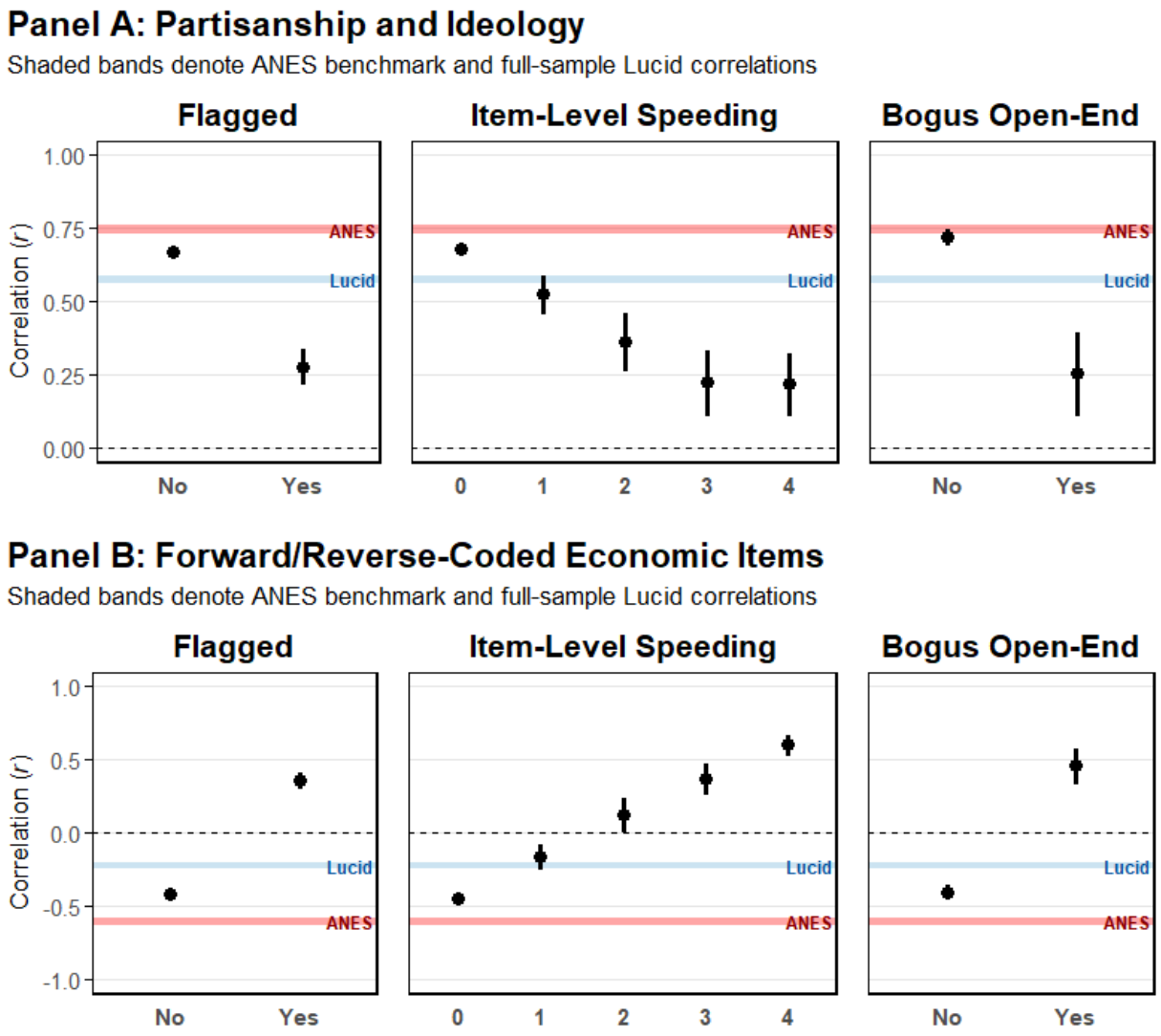

Figure 1: Correlations Across Data Quality Metrics. Source: Lucid.

Robustness: Ideological Knowledge Estimates

Y&Q find that, on average, Lucid respondents correctly answer 1.94/4 ideological knowledge items ($\hat{\pi} = 0.48$). However, their sample includes low-quality respondents. In simulations (Appendix 5), we show that under reasonable assumptions low-quality respondents will correctly answer fewer than 2/4 ideological knowledge items, on average. Thus, if the true ideological knowledge mean exceeds 2/4, its estimate will be biased downward by low-quality responses.

Indeed, Figure 2 shows that non-flagged respondents averaged 2.10/4 items correct

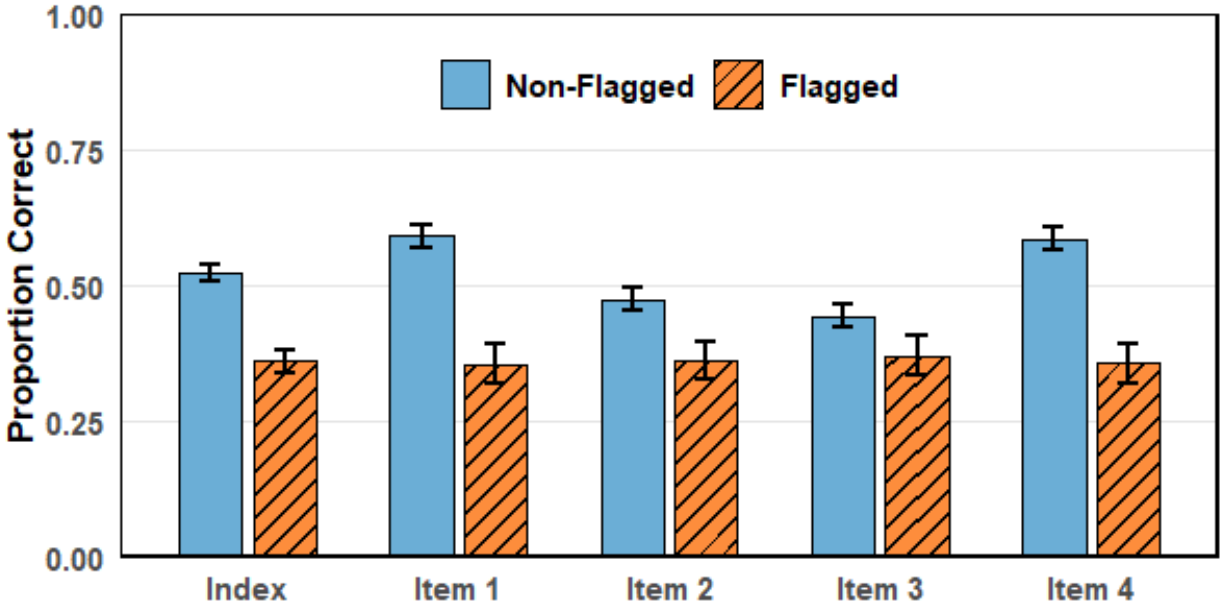

Figure 2: Distributions of Ideological Knowledge by Data Quality. Source: Lucid.

($\hat{\pi} = 0.52$) while flagged respondents averaged just 1.45/4 ($\hat{\pi} = 0.36$)—doing only narrowly better than mere chance. These gaps are significant on all four items ($p<0.001$), but larger on items 1 and 4 than items 2 and 3. Thus, low-quality responses do not fully explain Americans' poor performance on items 2 and 3. Overall, however, low-quality respondents appear to bias Y&Q's estimate of ideological knowledge downward.

Although the ideological knowledge topline is sensitive to low-quality respondents, the subgroup differences Y&Q identify are robust: liberal, Democratic, Black, female, and less politically knowledgeable Americans remain less ideologically knowledgeable after excluding low-quality respondents (Appendix 9). For example, while women's mean ideological knowledge increases from 1.62 to 1.75 excluding flagged respondents, men's mean also increases from 2.28 to 2.47.

Robustness: Question-Wording Effects

Y&Q's question-wording experiment compares three ideology measures: (1) a standard measure anchored by "liberal" and "conservative"; (2) the standard measure plus definitions for "liberal" and "conservative"; (3) a measure with definitions but without ideological la-

bels. They find removing ideological labels makes "Democrats less likely to self-identify as liberals and Republicans less likely to report as conservatives" and "substantially reduces the estimated degree of partisan-ideological sorting." These results suggest that ideological polarization and sorting are more symbolic than substantive phenomena.

Although randomized, the longer definition conditions require more respondent effort, raising concerns about differential measurement error across conditions. Likewise, omitting ideological labels removes a response heuristic and may similarly lead to differential measurement error from low-quality respondents. Considering 25% of Lucid respondents were flagged as low-quality, the question-wording effects risk being biased by systematic differences in measurement error across conditions.

Figure 3 tests for bias in the question-wording experiment by comparing partisans' self-placements across conditions and subsamples (higher values indicate more conservative self-placements). For Republicans, the question-wording effects are unchanged by excluding flagged respondents: Republicans moderate in the Definitions-Only condition. For Democrats, however, two results change after excluding flagged respondents: the difference-in-means for the Labels-Only and Definitions-Only measures decreases from -0.47 ($p<0.001$) to -0.19 ($p=0.063$)[3], and the difference between the Labels-Only and Labels+Definitions measures increases from 0.14 ($p=0.133$) to 0.28 ($p=0.004$).[4] Thus, Y&Q's claims that Democrats' self-placements moderate after omitting ideological labels, but are unaffected by the addition of operational definitions, are sensitive to response quality corrections.

Notably, differences between the Labels-Only and Labels+Definitions conditions remain small for non-flagged respondents. There are several plausible explanations for this pattern. Respondents may not meaningfully engage with the definitions—skimming them

[3]Within-subject estimates are likewise biased (Appendix 6).

[4]More Democratic respondents are flagged as low-quality (30% versus 16% of Republicans), so excluding flagged respondents has more pronounced effects on the Democratic subsample. We suspect this asymmetry arises because Democrat was listed first in the PID measure.

or relying on ideological labels as shortcuts—when those labels provide sufficient guidance (Krosnick 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991). Alternatively, respondents—especially ideologically knowledgeable ones—may rely on pre-existing understandings of ideological labels even when ideological terms are defined. Because the design does not allow us to adjudicate between these explanations, we interpret these results cautiously.

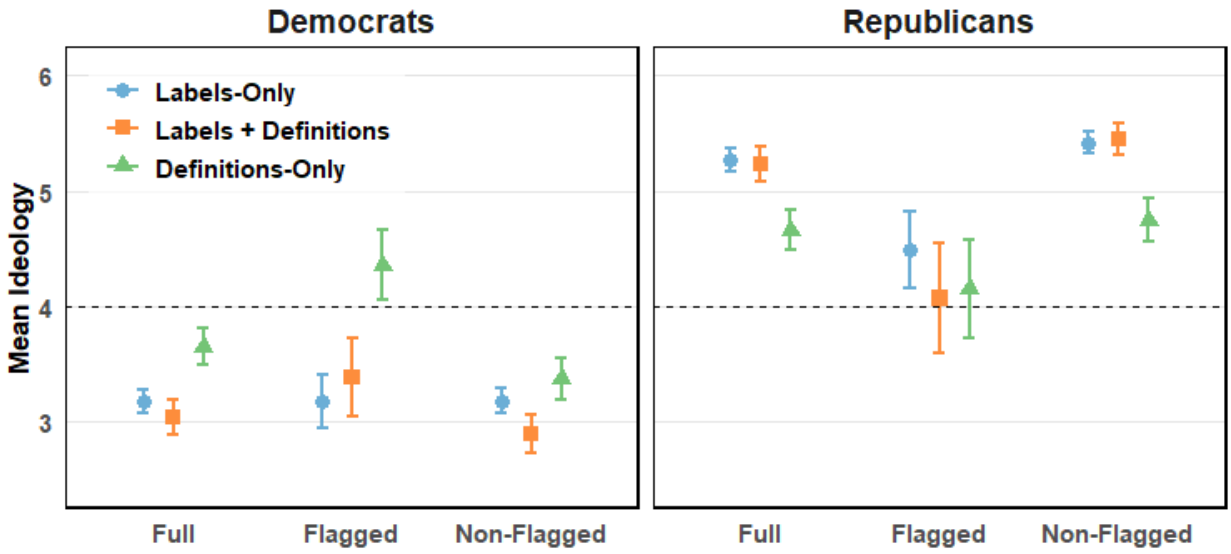

Figure 3: Ideological Self-Placements by Measure and Subsample. Source: Lucid.

Finally, Table 3 tests Y&Q's claim that partisan-ideological sorting weakens when ideology is measured without ideological labels. As expected, the partisanship-ideology correlations strengthen in all conditions when flagged respondents are excluded. Crucially, however, the differences-in-correlations across conditions persist without flagged respondents. Thus, Y&Q's finding that partisan-ideological sorting attenuates in the definitions-only condition holds: sorting is less pronounced when ideology is defined as preferences regarding government involvement in the economy and society without references to ideological labels.

	Labels-Only	Labels + Definitions	Definitions-Only
Full Sample	0.58	0.56	0.26
Non-Flagged	0.67	0.67	0.37
Flagged	0.32	0.19	-0.08

Table 3: Pearson Correlations, Partisanship and Ideology. Source: Lucid.

Out-of-Sample Replication

Y&Q emphasize an informational interpretation of their question-wording experiment: if respondents lack ideological knowledge, ideological labels may shape self-placements via symbolic partisan associations. However, these results are consistent with an alternative interpretation: for knowledgeable respondents, differences across ideology measures may reflect variation in which operational considerations are brought to mind by ideological labels versus definitions. Given the importance of ideological knowledge in itself and for interpreting the question-wording effects, we conducted a pre-registered replication study to re-estimate Americans' ideological knowledge.

Design

In April 2025, we surveyed 500 Americans via CloudResearch's online Connect panel. A recent systematic evaluation of online survey panels finds that Connect boasts significantly better data quality than Lucid (Stagnaro et al. 2024). We used Census-matched quotas on age, sex, and race/ethnicity and an ANES-matched quota on partisanship. Because our Connect sample ended up overrepresenting college graduates, we education-weight the sample to match American Community Survey benchmarks.

Our Connect sample is smaller than the Lucid sample, which could lead to a larger random sampling error. However, our Connect sample has 80% statistical power to identify item-level differences of 6-percentage points or more, making this replication study well-powered to detect meaningfully large differences in ideological knowledge. Further, sampling

error is just one error that could affect our estimates, and it is arguably the least concerning as a random error. We primarily designed the Connect replication to address three systematic biases in survey-based knowledge estimates:

1. **Inattention**: Inattentive respondents may respond randomly or straight-line, biasing knowledge estimates **down**.
2. **Guessing**: Respondents may guess when they do not know the answer (Vidigal 2024). Guessing produces some correct answers by chance, biasing knowledge estimates **up**.
3. **Cheating**: Respondents in online surveys are able to search for answers (Clifford and Jerit 2016), biasing knowledge estimates **up**.

To mitigate inattention, we collected responses via Connect with two attention checks (97% pass rate overall). To measure guessing without deviating from Y&Q's prompts, we had respondents report how certain they were about their answers after each item (Vidigal 2024). To reduce cheating, we implemented Graham (2022)'s recommendations, giving respondents an "honesty pledge" and embedding JavaScript in Qualtrics to track if respondents left the survey during the knowledge items. All respondents accepted the honesty pledge and 91% never left the survey.

Results

Figure 4 shows the Connect response distributions for each ideological knowledge item with corresponding certainty levels. Our topline finding is that Connect respondents averaged 2.45/4 items correct ($\hat{\pi} = 0.61$)—a 0.51-item difference compared to Y&Q. Respondents performed best on items 1 and 4, picking the correct answer 75% and 71% of the time, respectively. Respondents performed decently on item 2, with 55% selecting the correct answer. However, only 43% of Connect respondents correctly answered item 3. Figure 5 shows Connect respondents show significantly greater ideological knowledge than Lucid respondents, except for on item 3—a result we will return to later.[5]

[5]Estimates remain consistent across additional data quality controls (Appendix 11).

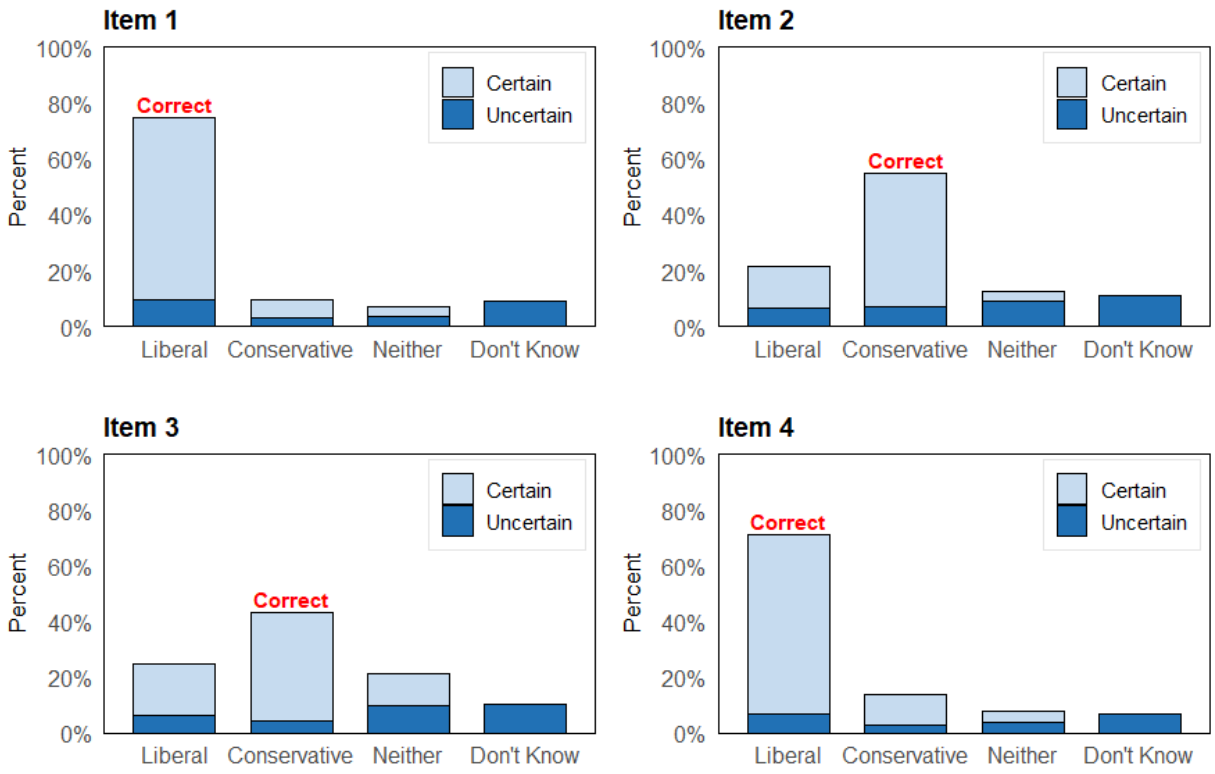

Figure 4: Ideological Knowledge Response Distributions. Source: Connect.

Re-examining Y&Q's claims regarding subgroup differences, the Connect sample replicates their findings that moderates, women, and Black Americans have less ideological knowledge (Appendix 9). However, we do not find that liberals and Democrats, respectively, have less ideological knowledge than conservatives and Republicans.

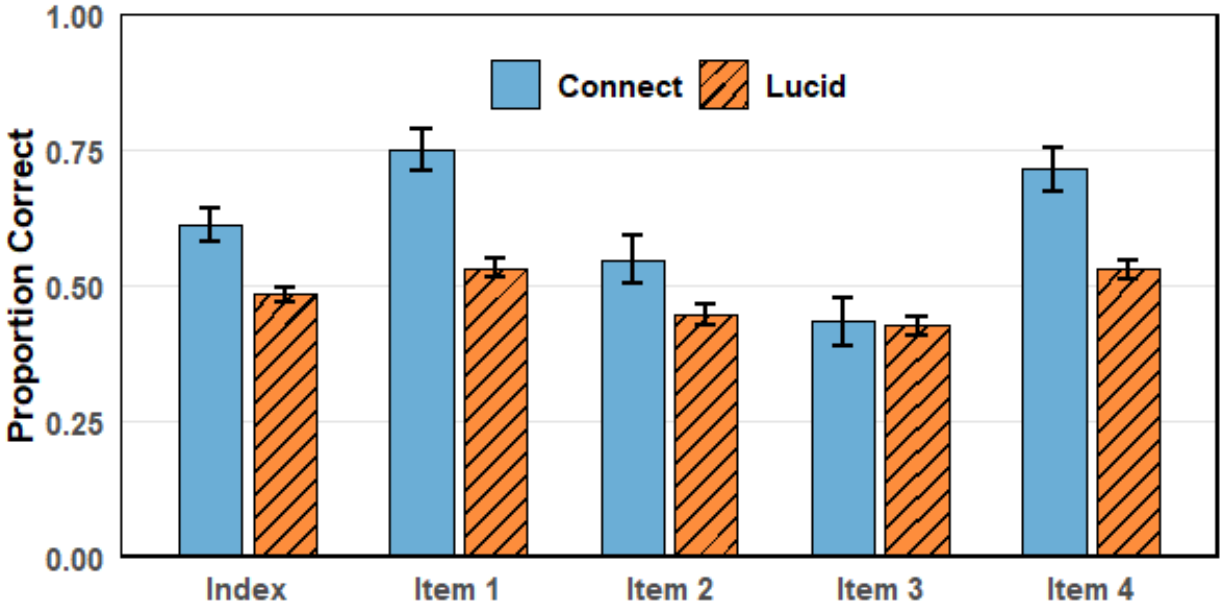

Figure 5: Ideological Knowledge by Sample. Sources: Lucid, Connect.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Ideological Knowledge

This section evaluates the validity of Y&Q's ideological knowledge measure. Y&Q justify their measure of ideological knowledge by appealing to textbook (ideal-type) definitions of "liberal" and "conservative." However, the prompts for their ideological knowledge items do not instruct respondents to consider textbook definitions rather than real-world liberals' and conservatives' expressed viewpoints. Therefore, disagreements with Y&Q's coding scheme may reflect differences in how respondents interpreted these items. For example, a respondent who understands conservatives' positions on abortion and immigration enforcement (among other issues) might reasonably conclude that item 3, "A powerful government is a threat to citizens' freedom," is not a conservative viewpoint. Given how these items are posed to respondents, we contend that their validity hinges on whether each statement describes a view where liberals' and conservatives' real-world positions and ideal-types align. Otherwise, respondents may be penalized for recognizing that ideological groups' positions sometimes deviate from ideal-type textbook definitions.

We use the Connect study to evaluate measurement validity by posing Y&Q's ideological knowledge items to respondents in 6-pt agree-disagree formats. Table 4 lists mean item agreements for liberals and conservatives with differences-in-means. Three of the four ideological knowledge items meaningfully differentiate liberals and conservatives: items 1, 2, and 4 (all $p<0.05$). But on item 3, conservatives agree just 0.06-points more than liberals that "A powerful government is a threat to citizens' freedom" ($p=0.106$). Thus, although Y&Q define "conservative" as the correct answer to item 3, real-world liberals and conservatives hold similar views about government threats to freedom. Because liberals' and conservatives' views are not clearly differentiated on item 3, we argue that it is an invalid ideological knowledge test. This is consequential because Americans' purported ideological knowledge deficits are largest on item 3. Critically, the omission of item 3 increases estimated ideological knowledge from 0.61 to 0.67 (Connect) and 0.52 to 0.55 (Lucid, non-flagged). Thus, omitting an invalid item increases Americans' estimated ideological knowledge.

	Item 1: Active Gov't	**Item 2:** Free Markets	**Item 3:** Gov't Threat	**Item 4:** Gov't Economy
Liberals	0.82	0.47	0.49	0.84
n = 228	[0.79, 0.84]	[0.43, 0.51]	[0.45, 0.53]	[0.81, 0.86]
Conservatives	0.53	0.66	0.55	0.56
n = 187	[0.48, 0.57]	[0.62, 0.70]	[0.49, 0.60]	[0.51, 0.61]
Difference	0.29	-0.19	-0.06	0.28
n = 415	[0.24, 0.34]	[-0.24, -0.13]	[-0.13, 0.01]	[0.22, 0.33]

Table 4: Ideological Knowledge Agreement by Item with 95% CIs. Source: Connect.

The results in Table 4 raise a broader point: the degree to which an item distinguishes liberals from conservatives may shape respondents' ability to map issue positions to ideological groups. To further demonstrate the relationship between ideological polarization and ideological knowledge, we examine ideological knowledge for four salient issues—abortion, gun control, healthcare, and border control.

As shown in Table 5, Americans are exceptionally knowledgeable about liberals' and conservatives' positions on each highly polarized issue (84–92% correct). They are also

more knowledgeable about these issue positions than they are about abstract government size/scope principles, which are also less polarized. These new analyses show that most Americans can recognize operational differences between liberals and conservatives, though they are more apt to do so on polarized issues than abstract principles.

Item	**Issue**	**Polarization**	**% Correct**
Immigration	Build border wall	0.56	92%
Abortion	Protect abortion rights	0.53	92%
Healthcare	Repeal ACA	0.45	84%
Gun Policy	Ban assault rifles	0.37	86%
Y&Q Item 1	Active government supports change	0.29	75%
Y&Q Item 4	Government role in economy/services	0.28	71%
Y&Q Item 2	Free markets solve problems	0.19	55%
Y&Q Item 3	Government threatens freedom	0.06	43%

Table 5: Ideological Polarization and Knowledge Across Issues. Source: Connect.

Discussion

Interpreting Question-Wording Effects

What do our findings imply for interpreting Y&Q's question-wording experiment? We argued their design admits two interpretations: ideological labels may introduce symbolic partisan cues, or they may function as heuristics that allow respondents to draw on a broader set of policy positions when locating themselves ideologically.

Our findings bear directly on these interpretations. Americans exhibit considerable knowledge of liberals' and conservatives' positions on polarized issues, but modest knowledge of abstract ideological principles regarding government size/scope. This likely reflects the fact that ideological groups do not consistently adhere to textbook principles of limited versus expansive government (e.g., immigration enforcement). As such, respondents may draw on

different operational considerations when forming ideological self-placements.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that respondents in Y&Q's definitions-only condition may be drawing on less polarized operational considerations than when ideological labels are present. In contrast, ideological labels may cue a broader set of policy positions—including polarized issues not referenced in Y&Q's definitions, some of which run counter to the principles emphasized in those definitions—leading to polarized self-placements. Thus, the observed moderation on the definitions-only measure does not uniquely imply symbolic responding, but also differences in operational considerations.

These interpretations have implications for the validity of self-reported ideology. Self-reported ideology likely reflects a weighted combination of symbolic and operational reasoning that varies across respondents, particularly as a function of ideological knowledge. And even for respondents reasoning operationally, their self-placements may vary based on the issues brought to mind by ideological labels versus definitions. Consequently, shifts in self-placement across ideology measures do not necessarily preclude operational reasoning—at least for respondents with sufficient ideological knowledge.

Ideological Knowledge Estimates: Connect vs. Lucid

The difference-in-proportions of ideological knowledge between Connect and Lucid is 0.13 (26%), rising to 0.17 (33%) for the three valid items. We consider three explanations for this discrepancy.

Composition: Compositional imbalances between the Lucid and Connect samples could, in theory, lead to differences in ideological knowledge since dropping flagged Lucid respondents shifts several demographic marginals (e.g., age). However, in Appendix 2, we reweight the non-flagged Lucid subsample back to its original demographic composition, and our findings are unchanged (Hainmueller 2012). Further, reweighting the Lucid sample to exact match the Connect sample only diminishes the sample-level difference-in-means by 0.01 item.

Timing: The Lucid survey was fielded in 2022; the Connect survey in 2025. It is possible

that ideological terms became more accessible between 2022 and 2025, perhaps due to increased media use of ideological language (Kollman and Jackson 2026). However, the trends documented by Kollman and Jackson (2026) unfold over decades, and political knowledge generally exhibits short-term stability (Zaller 1992). The discrepancies we observe (26–33%) would require unusually rapid change. Further, there is little evidence of corresponding change in a related indicator: in the 2020–2024 ANES, the share correctly identifying the Republican Party as more conservative increases just 1.8% (1.4pp). Thus, it seems unlikely that a three-year difference in timing can explain such large sample-level discrepancies.

Data Quality: We suspect data quality likely explains the sample-level differences in ideological knowledge. Dropping flagged Lucid respondents attenuates the sample-level difference-in-means from 0.51 to 0.35 items. Further, our ad hoc metrics are surely imperfect at filtering low-quality Lucid respondents, which could explain residual sample-level differences.

Conclusion

This note casts new light on Americans' understanding of liberal–conservative ideology. We re-evaluate Y&Q's (2024) widely-read claim that most Americans do not understand ideological terms. We show that low-quality respondents bias their ideological knowledge estimates downward, but leave subgroup differences unchanged. In a pre-registered Connect replication study, we find substantially higher ideological knowledge. These results underscore the importance of survey quality and replication in public opinion research.

More broadly, our findings contribute to a growing literature on the meaning and use of ideological self-placement. Our finding that Americans exhibit moderate-to-high levels of ideological knowledge is consistent with recent work showing that ideological labels increasingly align with policy preferences (Kollman and Jackson 2026). However, like Y&Q and others (Jefferson 2024), we find this knowledge is not universal; women, the less well-

educated, and Black Americans exhibit less familiarity with ideological terms. Finally, our results qualify interpretations of ideological self-placement based on question-wording experiments: when Americans possess sufficient ideological knowledge, differences across labeled and unlabeled measures may reflect variation in operational reasoning, not only symbolic attachments. As such, we contend that ideological self-placement remains a meaningful—if multifaceted—measure of Americans' political beliefs.

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