What Are We Measuring When We Measure Ideology?
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Abstract
The measurement of the ideology of legislators and other political elites has a long history in political science. More recently, researchers have begun to focus on measuring the ideology of individual citizens, often analyzing survey respondents’ positions across different policy items and sometimes attempting to estimate citizen ideology alongside the positions of political elites including legislators or candidates for office. While these efforts have produced important findings, the assumptions underpinning many of these analyses have not been directly tested. I present results showing that the structure of ideology for citizens differs in important ways from that of political elites. I then assess the impact of this finding on some previous results using ideology estimates. Finally, I consider the estimation of the ideology of constituencies (e.g. states or congressional districts). I show that the way that constituency ideology is conceptualized and operationalized can have profound impacts on the resulting estimates, raising questions about the distribution of constituency ideologies, particularly in relation to the distribution of the ideology of individual citizens and also that of legislators and candidates.