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# The Measurement of Political Ideologies and Its Implications for Education

Andrea Marchesi

**ABSTRACT:** *Focusing on the research topic of political ideologies, which is understudied in Italy, this paper provides a reflection about the eventual role of a validated measurement instrument for analysis in educational contexts. After defining the ideological concepts under consideration (conservatism-liberalism continuum), a synthetic presentation of the methodological approach is offered in the second section. The third section reflects on the role of schools as agents of political socialization in reproducing specific values, which constitute the ideological dimension of interest. Indeed, following a sociological approach that focuses on everyday life, Italian students are embedded in educational contexts which much research would consider focus on so-called 'democratic' values, that is, oriented towards tolerance and equality of rights. The conclusions summarize the main contributions of the work and discuss the limits of the approach adopted.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Liberalism-Conservatism, Sociology of everyday life, Socialization, Anti-liberal tendencies, Quantitative methods*

## Introduction

Political ideologies, as addressed from a quantitative point of view after World War II with the work of Adorno *et al.* (1950), seems to be an understudied and even underestimated research topic within the Italian social and political context. Nevertheless, the 'left-right' political spectrum is still considered fundamentally important in analyzing political opinions in Western European countries (Bobbio, 1994; Barisione, 2004). These national contexts are characterized by party systems which are dominated by opposing coalitions that place

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themselves on this *continuum*, whose poles have historically been associated with specific political ideologies: conservatism and liberalism (Bobbio, 1994). An ideology is defined as a relatively structured and complex system of beliefs, opinions and representations (Barisione, 2004). Therefore, as a latent historical and social phenomenon that, albeit changing over time, subtly structures the attitudes of the subjects in their everyday lives, whether political or not. Indeed, ideologies are formed by opinions (Kenig and Blaževska-Stoilkovska, 2015), which are manifest indicators of otherwise unobservable attitudes (Thurstone, 1928), and which are constituted by a strong evaluation component about issues and events in the world (Rosemberg and Hovland, 1960; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Lazar, 1995). Consequently, opinions, characterized by a constitutive value part, are the manifest component of attitudes, shared by a population as evaluative guidelines. They refer to one specific culture, structured through an ideology, whose elements are ‘taken for granted’ (Barisione, 2011).

This paper comes within the field of quantitative research, offering a reflection on how an accurate measurement of political ideologies can inform education systems about anti-liberal or conservative attitudes. The concepts that will be considered in the follow paragraphs mainly concern political socialization and the so-called ‘sociology of everyday life’, focusing on ‘common sense’, which is shared and unproblematized within a population. These analyzes move from a previous, currently unpublished, study (Marchesi, 2019), centered on the quantitative methodology of scaling (Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003), which allows the construction and the validation of a detection scale for latent constructs to develop synthetic indices. The aim of this article is to reflect on the possibilities that approaching political ideologies as latent constructs rather than cognitive shortcuts (Elff, 2018), and measuring them through a quantitative approach may present to the analysis of political socialization and education systems. As will be discussed later on, in Italy the education system is considered generally characterized by specific values – often defined as ‘democratic’ (Fischer, 2007) –, pertaining to a precise pole of the continuous ideological dimension that is herein considered. Such consideration is relevant in the moment of political opinion collection, because it gives researchers a chance to hypothesize on different frequency distributions of the items, and different scores obtained by the developed synthetic index. After taking into account the conceptualization of the ideological dimension, the Italian measurement scale validated by Marchesi

(2019) is presented, to offer the central reflection of this article, concentrating particularly on the opportunity offered by such an index for the investigations within school contexts.

## 1. How can political ideologies be defined and what are the elements that constitute them?

Considering that the ‘left-right’ *continuum* does not saturate the ideological-political space that characterizes Western countries (Elff, 2018), it constitutes a fundamental dimension in the political context of Western countries, and is considered by Bobbio (1994) as still characterized by a prominent explanatory and informative force. The literature unanimously affirms that the two poles have historically and socially been joined by two opposing political ideologies, namely conservatism and liberalism. Over the course of the Twentieth century, a variety of different definition proposals about these concepts have spread (Barisione, 2004; Selvestrel *et al.*, 2013). However, in this paper, which, as mentioned above, continues the work of a previous study (Marchesi, 2019), the conceptualizations used are characterized by being as wide as possible, in order to accommodate all manifold facets that may be evident in the actual party systems, and at the same time the very specific, in order to avoid the often-highlighted conceptual overlap with other contiguous but different constructs (in most cases, for example, the concept of conservatism is considered to coincide with that of authoritarianism: see Selvestrel *et al.*, 2013).

Given the above measures, conservatism is characterized by «needs of order, structure, closure, certainty [...] and discipline» (Everett, 2013: 1). Therefore, as aimed at the maintenance of the *status quo* and social inequalities, conceived as natural and necessary (Kirk, 1953). Conversely, liberalism is defined as concerning a high tolerance of social ambiguity and complexity, and as an openness to both new events and new experiences (Everett, 2013: 1). It can be noted that these definitions consider the two constructs as associated to two opposite poles of a linear *continuum*.

As underlined by a multitude of scholars, political constructs are often differentiated into economic components and social components (D’Albergo, 2014). Not even the ideological political concepts studied here, whose reference *contin-*

*uum* summarizes a set of information and political attitudes ‘taken for granted’ in everyday life, can avoid this distinction (Barisione, 2011). Therefore, the social (or cultural) component is conceived as concerning the preservation of human moral traditions, recalling the conservative philosopher Kirk (1953: 8). Conversely, the economic component focuses on government involvement and regulation of private property (Hiel and Kossowska, 2007; Crowson, 2009). This last definition leads this component to be very close to the so-called economic liberalism, understood by Barisione (2004) and by other scholars as the extreme economic conservatism.

## 2. The ‘pilot study’ and the measurement scale validation process

Starting from the conceptual definitions provided, a scale of conservatism-liberalism for both the social and economic components was constructed, using a so-called ‘opportunistic’ sample (Berchmans and Rimano, 2002), made up of bachelor’s and master’s degree students at the University of Milan-Bicocca, regularly enrolled in the academic year 2017-2018. Indeed, according to the quantitative methodology used to meet the research objectives, in order to validate a scale, it is not necessary to have a ‘representative’ sample of the reference population, but rather no fewer than 300 cases (Kline, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003). The final sample consists of 661 respondents, to whom two different scales were applied: the latest Italian conservatism-liberalism scale by Barisione (2004), and the Italian translation of the latest Anglo-Saxon scale by Everett (2013). This sample is predominantly female (77.7%), and is limited to age groups between 18 and 34 (with an average of 22.8). In this way it falls within the theorized extension of the ‘youth’ life stage, as defined in the Italian context (Buzzi *et al.*, 2002). Thus, in terms of age the sample is tendentially ‘homogeneous’.

Another paper (Marchesi, 2019) aims to provide the punctual disclosure of the items and statistical analyses developed in constructing the scale. Herein it is enough to consider the elements that the cited authors (Barisione, 2004; Everett, 2013) take into consideration, starting from the same conceptualization of the dimensions provided in the previous paragraph of this article. The topics considered in both the components of the ideological *continuum*, social and economic, which are common both to Barisione (2004) and Everett (2013), but also

to the broader philosophical, psychological and sociological theories regarding the ideological dimension of conservatism-liberalism, are now discussed. See *La misurazione del conservatorismo* (Marchesi, 2019), for the full list of items (both initial and final), their formalization into questionnaire and their analyses: mainly exploratory factorial, observing the explained variance by the components extracted and the factor loadings, and of Cronbach's Alpha (not less than 0,70) as a reliability measure (Kline, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003). The criteria followed allow the validation of a unique scale of conservatism-liberalism, composed of nine items, which concerns both the social and economic components.

Social conservatism-liberalism is historically associated to Kirk's (1953) theory, and is characterized by the prominence given to religion, so-called traditional values, family, patriotism, security and militarism. The first three elements focus on the dimension of stability and maintenance of the *status quo*, which is also defined by relations of inequality, understood by conservatives as 'natural' (*ibidem*). These themes go alongside views about abortion and marriage, with are still considered relevant by both Barisione (2004) and Everett (2013) due to their relation to family and traditional moral values, which are fundamental for conservatives and 'refused' as a basis for social coexistence by liberals. Finally, the patriotism element concerns the stability of inter-group relationships, ascribing a fundamental value to the national context, while security and militarism are focused on the defense of this national context and its values. These values, according to Kirk (1953), refer back to the ancient traditions of humanity.

On the contrary, from the economic point of view, the *continuum* shows fewer elements. First of all, the conservatives reject, in opposition to the liberals, the involvement of the government in the free market, to which they attribute a not-indifferent prominence as a place where competition between individual actors renders the natural inequalities between individuals evident, attributed to a different innate nature and a different commitment in working terms (Kirk, 1953; Hiel and Kossowska, 2007; Crowson, 2009). In concomitance with this, liberalism defends social redistribution as a means of contrasting precisely these mechanics of inequity, while the conservatism ideology is defined by a contrasting attitude, also due to a general reticence from individuals with greater economic resources to pay more taxes and receive less in terms of welfare. In this case, it is prominent to underline that the elements constituting each dimension are being debated in 'extreme' terms, that is, as ideally considered by those who

**TAB. 1.** *Items constituting the validated conservatism-liberalism scale using a 5-point Likert-type scale. Introductory question: ‘How much do you agree with the following statements?’ (‘Qual è il tuo grado di accordo con le seguenti affermazioni?’)*

ITEM	ITEM (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)	DIMENSION
Sono favorevole alla libertà di abortire legalmente	I am in favor of the freedom to legally abort	Social/Cultural
Lo stato interviene troppo nelle nostre vite	The state intervenes too much in our lives	Economic
Lo stato dovrebbe fare un considerevole sforzo per fornire un’adeguata difesa militare	The state should make a considerable effort to provide adequate military defense	Social/Cultural
La religione è parte integrante della cultura italiana	Religion is an integral part of Italian culture	Social/Cultural
Il matrimonio tra persone di sesso diverso è un atto fondamentale per costruire una vera famiglia	Marriage between people of different sex is a fundamental act to build a true family	Social/Cultural
I valori tradizionali sono molto importanti per me	Traditional values are very important for me	Social/Cultural
Il governo dovrebbe svolgere un ruolo minore nella gestione dell’economia	The government should play a minor role in the economy	Economic
L’unità della famiglia è un valore da preservare	The family unity is a value to be preserved	Social/Cultural
La regolamentazione sul possesso di armi dovrebbe essere meno severa	The regulation about gun ownership should be less severe	Economic

would place themselves at the exact opposite poles of the *continuum*, and not in more ‘moderate’ positions closer to the ‘center’. Finally, Everett (2013) also introduces a further element within its economic conservatism-liberalism scale, which must be analyzed herein: gun ownership. Although it may be considered specific to the United States context, where the scale was actually validated, and therefore not applicable in Italy, this topic proves to have acceptable loadings even in its current version. This may be due to the fact that gun ownership has a double interpretation: on the one hand, as a will to impose no limits on the commercialization of products in the free market, and, on the other, as a defense of private property, a constitutive element both of conservatism, both economic and social, and of competition in the free market (Everett, 2013; Kenig and Blaževska-Stoilkovska, 2015).

Table 1 offers the set of items that constitutes the validated conservatism-liberalism scale, composed by both the *continuum* dimensions. The data collection took place through a 5-point Likert-type scale, from ‘Strongly disagree’ (*Molto in disaccordo*) to ‘Strongly agree’ (*Molto d’accordo*), and constituted by six items

concerning the social/cultural dimensions and three concerning the economic dimension. Therefore, the two factors factorial structure obtained is further synthesizable into just one factor: it cannot differentiate between the facets in which the dimension under consideration usually divides, but instead is able to obtain univocal information about conservative and liberal attitudes.

Once the constitutive elements of both dimensions of the ideological *continuum* are analyzed, the following part considers the main topic of this article: the opportunity that a synthetic index of conservatism-liberalism for quantitative analyses in education systems can offer. As will be showed, this theoretical reflection, which takes its cue from an empirical component briefly presented in this article, relates to the so-called 'common sense' and to the conceptualizations coming from the sociological branch centered on everyday life, here in turn interrelated with political sociology.

### **3. What can an index of liberalism-conservatism say about anti-liberal attitudes in educational contexts?**

In surveys about systems of thought and opinion, to focus on everyday life, defined as «the set of environments, practices, relationships and universes of sense in which men and women spend the most of their time in an ordinary and recurrent way, according to the phases of their biographical path and according to the roles in which they are involved» (Jedlowski, 2003: 174, my translation), is relevant also for political topics. Indeed, ideologies constitute themselves as systems of thought 'taken for granted' (Barisione, 2011) that structure attitudes, and therefore as methods of evaluation of issues and events in the world (Rosemberg and Hovland, 1960; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). The activities of the everyday life dimension are both a source of production for the symbolic order and social representations, and moments of socialization and reproduction of these representations and, consequently, of social roles (Jedlowski and Leccardi, 2003). Indeed, everyday life constitutes as the place of continuous reproduction of the 'common sense' which is dominant in a community, but also as the basis for the possible questioning of such 'taken for granted' (*ibidem*). 'Common sense' can be defined as a set of beliefs, 'maxims' characterized by practical aims, views of reality and ways of putting it to theme that refers to everyday life,



transmitted through socialization processes, and which recalls the dimension of the past (Jedlowski, 1994). It is a set of unproblematized certainties, which provides expectation systems in social situations, ensuring stability to the set of meanings that make up the culture itself, and assuming also a normative dimension, encompassing not only what 'everybody knows' but also what is socially considered 'right' (Jedlowski, 1994; Jedlowski and Leccardi, 2003). When talking about political systems of thought or about political cultures, the process of political socialization allows the internalization and continuous reproduction of ideologies, intended as social and historical phenomena that in turn structure attitudes (Glasberg and Shannon, 2011; Neundorf and Smets, 2017).

Starting from these considerations, the measurement indices of political ideologies, in this case of conservatism-liberalism, offer a synthetic view of all the facets in which this ideology is evident and manifest. In this particular case, focusing mainly on the conservative pole, the constructed index also allows the synthetic observation of various anti-liberal or conservative tendencies, that is, against equal rights and opportunities, and in favor of maintaining the *status quo* and the resulting inequalities. A prominent point in this discussion concerns the exclusion of an item from the final the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), focused on the extraction of the latent dimension that underlies all the opinions considered. In the scale validation process, despite the fact that the topic of gender stereotypes and role inequalities between men and women was taken into consideration through an item proposed by Barisione (2004), that is 'When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to work than women' (*In condizioni di scarsità di lavoro gli uomini dovrebbero avere più diritto ad ottenerlo delle donne*), the EFA excluded this element from the final scale. For this reason, this topic was not addressed in the previous paragraph, when the elements of the *continuum* were analyzed.

Considering the liberal pole as synthesizing the tendencies of equality of rights and of openness and tolerance with respect to what is socially 'different' and 'complex' (Everett, 2013: 1), the aforementioned index also offers the chance to analyze the location of respondents with respect to this ideology, in both social/cultural and economic terms. This may be relevant within educational contexts, which, according to the literature, are defined as contexts where equality of rights, civil coexistence and respect and tolerance for what is considered 'different' is promoted (Corradini *et al.*, 2003; Fischer, 2007). Therefore, this is linked

to socialization processes, of which educational contexts are crucial actors (Fischer, 2007; D'Agati and Molito, 2014). Indeed, together with others as mainly family and political parties, school systems are prominent players as regards political socialization. This concept refers to the process through which individuals learn and subsequently internalize a lens of political understanding of their perceptions about the ideal organization of political power and the world at large, perceptions that, in turn, give shape to and define people's behaviours in social and economic fields (Glasberg and Shannon, 2011; Neundorf and Smets, 2017). Through this process of socialization, individuals learn and shape political attitudes, thus they acquire values and opinions that constitute a specific ideology, learning a specific political culture accordingly (Glasberg and Shannon, 2011; Barisione, 2011). Research on political socialization in school systems mainly concentrates on the primary and secondary levels, leaving higher level of education understudied, despite much research supporting the idea that university can serve as another supplemental and prominent site for political socialization, especially in the formation of political values (Patel, 2011). Universities, such as University of Milan-Bicocca, where the validation study of the Italian conservatism-liberalism scale was carried out, are the main subjects in higher education socialization processes. Therefore, it is possible to ask: are university students, situated in an everyday context characterized by values purely tending towards liberal pole, actually less conservative than the population?

Unfortunately, the gathered data does not give an answer to this question for two main reasons: the sample is not representative, given that it was not required for a scale validation process according to scaling methodology (Nemeyer *et al.*, 2003); and data using specifically the items listed in Table 1 are not available, not even in other existing surveys. What can be done, on a purely explanatory level with reference to a research topic understudied in Italy, is to focus attention on some questions available in wider datasets. These items will be obviously different from the ones proposed in the scale, but they aim to analyze respondents' opinions on the same topics. Therefore, again for purely explorative purposes, frequency distributions of two items proposed in the presented 'pilot study' and two items proposed in the *Eurobarometer* (2018) survey, concerning facets of conservative ideology, are compared. In the second study mentioned, a sufficient variety of items related to the elements of the previously discussed *continuum* is not provided; therefore, it is not possible to construct

a synthetic index to compare with the one obtained. Therefore, the attention shifted to two items, more similar to two present in the questionnaire distributed to University of Milan-Bicocca students: ‘free trade’ (namely, free market) for the economic dimension, and ‘security’ for social dimension. In both cases, the set of university respondents results in showing opinions that are more tending towards the liberal pole than the Italian sample of the *Eurobarometer* (*ibidem*) study. Indeed, taking into account the security item, 75.5% of Italian respondents considers this topic very or quite positive, with respect to 39.4% of Bicocca students, and only 5.3% considers it very negative, compared to 9.0%. In this case, the comparison is carried out comparing it with the question, submitted to the «opportunistic sample» (Berchmand and Rimano, 2002) ‘The state should make a considerable effort to provide adequate military defense’. Similarly, 74,1% of the Italian *Eurobarometer* (2018) survey sample strongly or somewhat agrees with free market, and 5.1% strongly disagrees, unlike, respectively, 17.0% and 8.1% resulting in the analysis of university students presented. In this second case, the comparison item is ‘The government should play a minor role in the economy’.

This merely exploratory analysis aims to show a substantial different way of evaluating the same issues between the entire Italian population and a small section of its university students. Nonetheless, it is of particular interest to highlight how most of the respondents of the «opportunistic sample» (Berchmans and Rimano, 2002), consisting of students of the University of Milan-Bicocca, place themselves on the *continuum* in positions more tending towards the liberal pole, but mostly less extreme, closer to the ‘center’ of the dimension. Since the analyses of Wilson and Patterson (1968), the ideological tendencies defined as ‘rightist’ are associated with older age, a ‘correlational structure’ between age and ideology also confirmed by further and subsequent studies about political ideologies (inherent both conservatism-liberalism and authoritarianism-libertarianism).

## Conclusions

This reflection focuses on the concept of ‘political culture’, defined as the set of orientations and meanings ascribed to a social and political system, but also

as the set of cultural elements (meanings, norms, values, orientations, ideas) that create a political identity and can favor the development of a sense of belonging to a political wing or a political party (Santambrogio, 2001). Attitudes are rooted within a 'common sense'. These are shared by a collectivity and intended as evaluative orientations concerning specific issues, and therefore related to the shared set of values, being conceptions of what is socially right, or orientations and guidelines about what is considered desirable in social or political life (Barisione, 2011: 589-91). Given that political ideology has a social and historical character, it is considerable as a cultural product that structures political attitudes, which in turn manifest themselves through political opinions. Opinions are defined as direct answers expressing approval or disapproval about a specific issue (Lazar, 1995), 'guided' by an ideological system (Barisione, 2011). From childhood, the subjects are socialized to different systems of representations and beliefs that are 'taken for granted' and reproduced in the everyday sphere of life (Jedlowski and Leccardi, 2003). Among the various leading actors of this process, school systems are secondary socialization agents that reflect specific ideas about the society at large. Specifically, they are considered to develop liberal and tolerance values (Fischer, 2007; D'Agati and Molito, 2014). The availability of data restricts the analyses provided in this paper to university students. However, as previously stated, in tertiary education, young adults particularly develop their political values according to the political socialization actors, therefore also according to the educational contexts with which they are compared (Patel, 2011).

In this first exploratory study about political attitudes of university students, it can be concluded that the latter are characterized by ideas tending more towards liberalism than the totality of the Italian population. Indeed, the practices and interactions of everyday life are constituted as sources and moments of reproduction of roles, meanings, norms and social values (Jedlowski and Leccardi, 2003). In this case, everyday contexts are merely scholastic-university, characterized by certain liberal ideas as previously discussed, and therefore socializing towards the liberal pole of the ideological *continuum*, whose specific elements are shaped by political elites, before spreading among citizens (Sarlamánov and Jovanoski, 2014; Elff, 2018). Indeed, political actors, such as parties, influence the voters' development of strongly directed systems of thought and visions of the world (Barisione, 2011). They are not merely

political socialization agents, but they are also the main protagonists in the cultural production of political values.

To conclude, there is also a prominence of developing further studies based on surveys characterized by synthetic ideological indices, aiming to understand precisely the spread of political ideologies, mainly following a temporal and diachronic perspective. Any eventual research in school systems would make it possible to organize activities and workshops within educational contexts, a practice that is already carried out in Italian universities, for example through courses such as 'Gender, politics, institutions'. The very development of this training course within the formative offer of the University of Milan-Bicocca could be the reason why the item concerning gender stereotypes does not load on the latent ideological dimension, according to the results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). Indeed, it must be highlighted that the survey was realized in a context, concerning a Milan university, situated both geographically and in economic, social and cultural terms (ISTAT, 2013).

The finding that school systems seem to be more oriented towards liberal ideas could play a prominent role in electoral results (Sarlamano and Jovanoski, 2014). However, it must be borne in mind that even families and political elites, responsible for the constitution and initial diffusion of the constituent elements of political ideologies, play a socialization role that reinforces or competes with the scholastic one. The role and prominence of the school as a socialization actor has not been sufficiently studied in Western countries (Neundorf and Smets, 2017). Furthermore, it is difficult to claim that all Italian school contexts can offer the same type of socialization in terms of political values. Indeed, there are different models of education in this sense, adopted by schools on the basis of a multiplicity of variables (Dubet, 2015): keeping these variables under control, and analyzing the different opinions of the students themselves, can constitute an interesting perspective of research within the educational, pedagogical and political research fields.

The main critical issue of this reflection concerns the use of an unrepresentative sample for the descriptive analysis of the items belonging to the validated Italian conservatism-liberalism scale. As already widely discussed, this is due to the fact that, within the validation procedures, this characteristic is not required (Kline, 1993; Netemeyer *et al.*, 2003). However, this aspect must be underlined when opting for a comparison between different samples, such as the one operat-

ed here. Despite being an exploratory approach, aimed at highlighting the existence of different models of political opinion between the wider population and the university population in Italy, this paper can only be considered as a starting point for further and more in-depth analyses, aimed at investigating the spread of political ideologies in the education system. Although the data presented refer to the university population, therefore a tertiary education context, the herein proposed approach can be repeated in primary and secondary school contexts. Indeed, according to the literature, the development of political values takes place above all in early adulthood, therefore subjects who decide to continue their studies in this phase of their life face particular contexts of socialization. In this regard, if interest is aimed at under 18 age groups, problems could arise in terms of scale invariance: it could be difficult to observe the constitution of political opinions about particular issues, such as abortion, in childhood and early adolescence.

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