The NSA Party: Public Opinion on the NSA leaks

In early June 2013, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and *Der Spiegel* revealed leaks from a former Booz Allen Hamilton employee, Edward Snowden, describing large, previously unknown programs run by the US National Security Agency (NSA) to collect email metadata and phone records on millions of Americans, along with large-scale monitoring of internet traffic and the diplomatic communications of allies (Ball 2013). Public reaction to the revelations has been mixed; some Americans consider it an invasion of privacy, while others consider it necessary for national security. This paper explores the factors contributing to the differences in public opinion on the programs, both from a theoretical perspective and using data from recent polls. Looking at the contributions of ideology and party suggests that party loyalty plays a significant role in Americans' perceptions of the NSA programs.

We begin by exploring theoretically the factors which affect public opinion about the NSA. One likely factor is ideology. The contribution to public opinion on the NSA from ideology is somewhat complex, as the issue does not fit comfortably into the usual left-right scale. The modern right is in general in favor of a smaller government, but also more concerned about national security; for example the PATRIOT Act was originally authored by Republicans. Conversely, the modern left accepts big government but is generally more skeptical of the security establishment (Erikson and Tedin 2011, Sec. 3-2). Thus we must consider a two-dimensional ideological scale, with economic ideology on one axis and social ideology on the other. We expect that economic beliefs should have little influence, while the socially libertarian should oppose PRISM and the socially authoritarian should support it.

Political party, too, should show a significant contribution to public opinion on PRISM, especially to the extent that it is a national security issue. Traditionally, the Democratic party

would be expected to care more about privacy, but the current program is led by the Obama administration, Democrats may actually be more likely to support the programs than Republicans (Erikson and Tedin 2011, Sec. 3-3). Thus the issue of PRISM to some extent can serve as a test of party loyalty versus party ideology; if Democrats support PRISM more than Republicans, then loyalty on this issue trumps ideology, and conversely.

Of the usual demographic factors, most seem unlikely to contribute. One potential exception is age. Younger people have spent more of their lives on the internet and thus may feel more personally the effects of metadata collection. Furthermore, younger people tend to be more socially libertarian (Erikson and Tedin 2011, Sec. 7-3).

We now turn to test these hypotheses with data from various recent polls; there are many to choose from. We focus primarily on the Gallup poll of June 10–11, Pew polls of June 6–9, June 12–16, and July 17–21, the ABC/Washington Post poll or June 12–16, and a Reason-Rupe poll of September 4–8; the latter gives the most detailed breakdown by demographics and ideology. The headline results vary widely, presumably due to both time and methodology, from showing 33% of respondents in support and 55% in opposition in the Reason-Rupe poll (Ekins 2013) to 56% in support and 41% in opposition in the earliest Pew poll (Dimock June 10, 2013). The surveys agree that age is the only demographic factor that makes a significant contribution, but party affiliation and ideology both have significant effects.

When it comes to ideology, the Reason-Rupe poll provides the richest dataset. The poll asks respondents to self-identify as conservative, libertarian, liberal, progressive, or moderate, and also ranks them as conservative, libertarian, liberal, communitarian, or centrist based on their answers to other questions; in their classification conservatives and libertarians prefer greater economic freedom, and libertarians and liberals prefer greater personal freedom. In the self-

identification, there are few differences, except that the 8% of respondents who identify as

libertarians are significantly more likely to oppose the surveillance than to support it, 13% to

80%. As classified by the poll, liberals and communitarians are more in favor of the programs,

while libertarians oppose them, and conservatives and centrists are in between (Ekins 2013).

Interestingly, the support for the program breaks more on economic lines than on social ones,

contrary to expectations. (The exact numbers are in Table 1.) It is possible that this is an

intrinsic effect, or it is possible that it is more a result of the party loyalty effects.

On the question of party, all of the surveys agree: Democrats generally support PRISM,

while Republicans oppose it. Both parties are deeply split on the issue, but the NSA polls much

better with Democrats than with Republicans (see Table 2 for details). This suggests that party

loyalty (in particular, approval of the Obama administration) can trump ideological concerns,

since *a priori* the Democrats would be expected to oppose the programs. A further test of this

hypothesis is offered by a similar Pew survey question from 2006.   The overall levels of support

were similar, but in the 2006 poll, Republicans were much more likely to support surveillance

programs than Democrats (Dimock June 10, 2013). This strongly supports the hypothesis that

party loyalty has a significant effect on public attitudes about the issue.

By examining the contribution of political party affiliation and ideology to public opinion

on the newly revealed NSA programs, we see an interesting division. While most demographic

factors do not significantly affect opinion, the effects of ideology are pronounced, but somewhat

different than might be expected. Further, the significant and shifting correlation with party

affiliation suggests that opinions are influenced as much by party loyalty as by actual ideology;

the party in power tends to support whatever the NSA does, while the other party opposes it.

This is an interesting reflection of how party affects our political system.

Tables of Poll Results

Self-identified political philosophy				Position on ideological landscape[1]			
Total	33	8	55	Total	33	8	55
Conservative (30%)	34	8	56	Conservative (19%)	32	6	58
Libertarian (8%)	13	4	80	Libertarian (20%)	21	6	70
Liberal (16%)	46	5	47	Liberal (16%)	36	5	55
Progressive (5%)	35	8	54	Communitarian (15%)	46	10	41
Moderate (22%)	39	9	47	Middle (30%)	27	11	55

Table 1. Responses to the Reason-Rupe poll, September 4–8, 2013, for the question "Some say the National Security Agency's, or N-S-A's program to collect phone call records and Internet data on millions of Americans is needed to fight terrorism, others say it's a violation of Americans' privacy. Which comes closer to your own view?" The percentages are for "Needed to fight terrorism", "Both" (vol.), and "A violation of Americans' privacy", respectively; "Don't know" and refusals are omitted.

Pollster	Dates	Total	Republican	Democrat
ABC-Wash. Post[2]	5/11/2006	51 47	75 23	37 61
Pew	6/6–9	56 41	52 47	64 34
Gallup	6/10–11	37 53	32 63	49 40
ABC-Wash. Post	6/12–16	58 39	49 50	73 24
Pew	6/12–16	48 47	45 51	58 38
Pew	7/17–21	50 44	44 50	57 36
Reason-Rupe	9/4–8	33 55	29 57	42 47

Table 2. Polls broken down by party. Question phrasings varied; the one asking most specifically about approval or disapproval of the actual program as it exists was chosen. All numbers are support/oppose or the equivalent; other volunteered answers are omitted. Polls are in 2013 unless specified.

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1   Based on responses to a set of other questions.
2   Results reproduced in the Pew survey published June 10 (Dimock June 10, 2013).

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17.267 Democracy in America
Fall 2013