

# Social Groups and Ideological Belief Systems: Fresh Evidence on an Old Theory\*

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## Abstract

We present novel evidence for the central role of social groups in promoting belief systems in the American public. Using historical and contemporary data, we first show that people have a rich knowledge of the social groups that support and oppose group-relevant policies (e.g., feminists and abortion). This knowledge historically exceeds people's knowledge of where political parties or ideological groups stand on these issues. We find that when people know which social groups support a policy, their attitudes towards the policy reflect their attitudes towards its supporters and opponents. This promotes the development of what Philip Converse called ideological coherence: People who know which groups support or oppose a policy are more likely to 1) hold stable policy positions over time and 2) organize their attitudes into consistently liberal or conservative bundles. Group-policy knowledge rivals other measures of political sophistication in its ability to generate ideological coherence.

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Decades of research suggests that the American public is not ideological. Most people hold a mix of right- and left-wing issue positions, and on many issues, they hold no meaningful position at all. The liberal-to-conservative spectrum, which features so prominently in elite political discourse, plays a minimal role in organizing mass political attitudes (Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) provide an excellent overview of recent evidence; but see Ansolabehere et al. (2008) and Freeder et al. (2019) for other perspectives). If much of the mass public does not use ideological principles to organize their attitudes or evaluate candidates, how then do they approach the political world?

In his foundational 1964 essay, Converse suggested that prominent social groups, rather than ideological principles, may serve as organizing objects in many Americans' belief systems. Noting that many people explained their partisanship with references to racial groups or social class, Converse argued that for much of the mass public, political belief systems could arise from people's awareness that an array of different policies affect the same core social groups; for example, the interconnectedness of attitudes towards crime, school busing, and civil rights could boil down to a single question: "are you sympathetic to [African-Americans] as a group?" (Converse, 1964, 38). However, Converse writes, "we have no direct empirical evidence supporting this illustration" (Converse, 1964, 39). Despite being central to Converse's influential theory of belief systems in the mass public, and related to a rich literature on social groups (Mason, 2018; Ahler and Sood, 2018; Achen and Bartels, 2017), this prospect has yet not been empirically explored.

We test Converse's proposition that social groups structure mass opinion. First, we show that many political issues are linked in the public mind to particular groups that support or oppose them. People are quite knowledgeable about where social groups stand on political issues—in some cases, more knowledgeable than they are of where the major parties stand. In the 1970s, for example, African Americans were generally more supportive of economic redistribution than white Americans, and 68 percent of people knew this fact. Only 51 percent, however, knew that Democrats were more supportive of economic redistribution than Republicans.

We then replicate two of Converse's central empirical tests of ideological coherence in the mass public. The first concerns over-time stability of issue positions. We show that people who

know which social groups support or oppose a policy are more likely to maintain the same attitude towards the policy months and years later. We argue this stability arises from the fact that people's attitudes towards social groups are highly stable (e.g., (Converse, 1964)); when an issue is linked to a social group, a stable attitude towards the linked social group will generate more consistent evaluations of the issue. This pattern is not reducible to knowledge of partisan positions or general measure of political knowledge.

Second, we investigate how people organize their political attitudes across policy domains. We find that when people associate social groups with political issues, social group attitudes create what Converse calls ideological constraint: that is, people who know which groups support and oppose a policy hold consistently liberal or conservative positions across issues related to those groups. This ideological constraint arises from a process in which attitudes towards policies linked to the same group are correlated due to their common source; negative attitudes towards a group foster negative attitudes towards an array of policies associated with that group. Strikingly, we find that social group knowledge rivals knowledge of party positions and general measures of political sophistication in its ability to predict ideological constraint. Social group knowledge is especially important for people with less political information: respondents who have below-average political knowledge, but who know where social groups stand on policy issues, show as much coherence between pairs of issue attitudes as high-knowledge respondents.

Approaching ideological coherence as a function of social group attitudes advances our understanding of public opinion in three important ways. First, despite social groups playing a central role in Converse's 1964 essay, and a rich literature on social groups more generally, no empirical work directly tests whether, or how much, social groups induce ideological constraint. We find support for Converse's hypothesis that for much of the mass public, social groups generate belief systems.

Second, our findings clarify the limitations of knowledge about party positions in organizing attitudes. Prominent theories argue that belief systems in the mass public arise when people learn where parties or ideological thought leaders stand on issues (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992; Lenz,

2012). Our findings suggest that these accounts give social groups short shrift. We find that social group knowledge explains attitude structure when parties' positions are unclear, only recently clear, or not salient. When the parties disagreed internally about issues like gay marriage and government-provided healthcare, knowledge about which groups were linked to these issues was the strongest predictor of stability and constraint.

Finally, we emphasize the value of measuring the knowledge voters say they use to make sense of politics—not just the information included in traditional political knowledge batteries. We find that some people who are categorized as low-knowledge based on their responses to factual questions have the information they need to form stable and constrained attitudes towards issues related to social groups. This suggests that more of the public has sufficient knowledge to approach politics in a reasoned manner than levels of factual knowledge suggest.

# **1 Theory**

## **1.1 Group Knowledge**

Our central claim is that when people associate social groups with a political issue, they form attitudes towards the issue that are 1) durable over time and 2) linked to attitudes towards other policies associated with those groups.

The starting point of this theory is knowledge: for social group attitudes to affect policy attitudes, people must know (or have beliefs) about linkages between social groups and policies. Many policies in American politics are linked, both in political discourse and in public opinion, to a relatively small set of groups. We do not think it necessary or realistic that people know the position of every social group on every issue. Instead, we suggest that people associate policies with particular groups that demand or benefit from them.

These group-policy links are clearest in the case of policies that directly benefit a particular constituency: the legalization of gay marriage is associated with LGBT people, and food stamps are associated with the poor. Other policies are associated with the kinds of people who demand

them. Feminists demand equal pay for women, business groups demand industry deregulation, and environmentalists demand environmental policy.

In other cases, groups become linked to policies when they are paired, explicitly or implicitly, in communications from media and political elites. Elites sometimes explicitly communicate the kinds of people they wish the public to associate with a policy; a famous example is Ronald Reagan's invocation of the "welfare queen" image to associate welfare policies with the undeserving poor (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007). But often, explicit linkages are unnecessary. People can associate policies with groups by inferring from context the kinds of people who might benefit, or by observing the kinds of people who are linked to the policy in their lives or in media. In an example of the latter, Gilens (2009) demonstrates that media images of black, rather than white, poverty have forged an association between African Americans and welfare policy.

We emphasize that like all forms of political knowledge, knowledge about the groups who demand or benefit from policies is unevenly distributed in the populace. However, we expect that for many important policies, this knowledge will extend beyond the most politically engaged citizens and into portions of the public who pay little attention to party politics and political news. People can passively absorb information about the groups associated with a policy through exposure to political messages, interpersonal conversations, or media portrayals that make these linkages clear. Mere exposure, incidental or otherwise, to discussion of a policy should be sufficient to link it to a relevant social group.

Our second claim is that when people know the groups that support or oppose a policy, their attitude towards the groups will affect their attitude towards the policy. This is not a new claim: much previous work suggests that people use their attitudes towards a policy's beneficiaries as a heuristic in evaluating the policy (e.g. Petersen et al. (2011); Nelson and Kinder (1996)), or that affect towards a policy's beneficiaries colors evaluations of the policy's value (Gilens, 2009). However, prior work in this area is primarily experimental: subjects are given information linking a policy to a particular type of person, and researchers observe resulting shifts in their policy support. We seek to document the existence of this knowledge "in the wild"—that is, that much of the public

knows which groups are associated with important policies, absent any researcher intervention. We argue that attending to the distribution of group knowledge that naturally arises in the public provides important leverage in understanding how group attitudes constrain public opinion.

Returning to the case of welfare policy and African-Americans illustrates this point. (Gilens, 2009) finds that priming the recipients of welfare as black rather than white decreases support for welfare spending among whites. Gilens, among others, has also found that public opinion surveys show an observational relationship between racial resentment and support for welfare and other economic programs (Gilens, 2009; Kinder and Mendelberg, 2000, 56). Combining this evidence, it seems that people's welfare attitudes reflect underlying racial resentment because African-Americans and welfare have been linked in the public's mind. But who are the people who make this link without being primed in an experimental setting? How large a portion of the electorate are they, and how many know where party or ideological groups stand on the issue? Answering these questions can help us understand why, and for whom, group attitudes constrain public opinion.

## **1.2 Stability and Constraint**

In his influential account of ideology in the mass public, Philip Converse argues that the issue attitudes of many Americans are incoherent and "idiosyncratic;" rather than holding well-thought-out policy positions that are linked to an underlying ideological predisposition, people's attitudes are unorganized and often changing.

Idiosyncratic attitudes have two markers: they change over time, and they are not organized into liberal or conservative issue bundles (Converse, 1964, 44-48). For example, Converse asked a set of respondents whether the federal government should provide funding to needy school districts. Converse then asked those same respondents the same question two years later and found that many respondents gave much different answers. Furthermore, answers about school funding were only weakly related to positions on other issues; knowing a respondent's opinion about education spending conveyed little information about how the respondent felt towards privatizing infrastructure, for example. Rather than holding sets of liberal or conservative positions, the mass

public seemed to have idiosyncratic attitudes that they often seemed to make up on the spot.

Converse took these idiosyncratic—that is, unstable and unconstrained—issue positions as evidence that “large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time” (Converse, 1964, 50-51).

However, Converse suggested that attitudes towards issues associated with social groups may be less idiosyncratic than other issue attitudes. Comparing the stability of attitudes towards several issues, “the items that stand out as most stable,” he said, “are those that have obvious bearing on a population grouping” (Converse, 1964, p. 46-67). And when discussing the associations between attitudes towards different issues, he noted that less informed people may have interrelated attitudes towards multiple policies that concern African Americans — more interrelated, even, than attitudes towards those same issues among the highly informed (p.38-41). We explore this possibility here.

We argue that the interaction of group-policy knowledge with underlying affect towards social groups generates both attitude stability and attitude constraint. Turning first to stability, we argue that knowledge of the groups that support and oppose a policy provides a consistent way to evaluate the policy. A key reason that issue attitudes fluctuate over time is that people judge issues based on different criteria at different times, depending on what information is salient (Zaller, 1992). Judging policies by the groups that demand or benefit from them is a common and cognitively easy shortcut (Petersen et al., 2011). When people have absorbed information about the groups associated with an issue, those groups provide an easy and consistent heuristic with which to form attitudes towards the issue. If attitudes towards groups are reasonably stable, then, people with the requisite knowledge to evaluate an issue using their group attitudes will have consistent issue attitudes over time. People knowledgeable about an issue’s group linkages therefore ought to have more stable attitudes towards the issue than people who do not have this information.

For example, consider the issue of welfare programs. Someone asked their opinion of welfare at two different times might have different aspects of the issue at the top of their mind when providing an opinion. Considering its inefficiencies could lead to a negative attitude, while a recent

news story about its aid to poor children could promote a positive one. Linking the issue of welfare to a particular group of people—in the account of Gilens (2009), the black, urban poor—provides a consistent yardstick with which to judge the issue over time.

When a group attitude serves as the basis for judging a single issue consistently over time, the result is attitude stability; when a group attitude serves as the basis for judging multiple issues across domains, the result is attitude constraint. We consider someone’s attitudes to be “constrained” if their attitude towards policy issue X correlates with their attitude towards policy issue Y through a common cause.

Constraint between issue attitudes arises naturally from a process in which attitudes towards policies are based on attitudes towards those that support or oppose a given policy: attitudes towards policies linked to the same group will be correlated due to their common source. For example, the racialization of both welfare and crime and punishment (e.g., Mendelberg (2001)) would mean that support or opposition to each of these policies is linked to affect towards African-Americans. Our expectation is that when people perceive or know two policies to be linked to the same group, they are more likely to hold consistently liberal or conservative positions on those issues.

We echo Converse’s argument that group-related issue attitudes ought to display more stability and constraint than other issue attitudes, though we add the caveat that this should only be true when people are aware of the group-issue linkages in question. However, we depart from Converse’s contention that group-related reasoning is too limited to produce a non-idiosyncratic public. Because group-policy links can be learned through many sources, including popular media, nonpolitical news, and direct experience, the public need not be attentive to political elites to develop group knowledge. Consequently, people across the spectrum of political sophistication know the issue positions of social groups, and this knowledge serves as a potential source of constraint for many in the mass public.



### 1.3 Group Knowledge in a Partisan Context

Recent work on the structure of belief systems centers political parties. This scholarship argues that voters who learn their party's position on an issue adopt that position, creating both ideological stability and constraint (Lenz, 2012; Freeder et al., 2019; Achen and Bartels, 2017). The role we attribute to social groups in this paper mirrors the effect other scholars attribute to party and ideological leaders: when people know how social groups they favor or disfavor stand on an issue, they adopt an attitude towards the issue that aligns with favored groups. We argue that cues from parties and social groups are not substitutes, but complements. Social groups and partisanship vary in relative importance over the political life cycle of an issue.

We expect knowledge about issue-group linkages to be most influential when the parties' positions on an issue are undifferentiated, unclear, or recently taken. When an issue first becomes salient, it may take time for political elites to send clear signals about the partisan and ideological ties of the policy. However, policies rarely become salient without demanders and beneficiaries. The group memberships of these advocates may be ubiquitous in discussions of a policy, even when party positions are absent. In the time between an issue becoming salient and its partisan implications becoming clear, even the most partisan voters may rely on the issue's group ties in forming attitudes towards it. Furthermore, because we expect information about the groups that support a policy to permeate the mass public more quickly than information about the party that supports a policy, group-issue linkages can remain important even once the most attentive people have absorbed the parties' positions.

For example, in the 1990s, gay marriage became a topic of national political debate. The positions of the national Democratic and Republican parties were not immediately clear. However, other visible social groups — most notably, LGBT organizations and conservative Christian organizations — were tightly linked to the issue. We therefore expect that in the 1990s, most Americans did not associate either party with gay marriage, but did know the positions of LGBT people and conservative Christians. Consequently, attitudes towards these social groups should initially play

a more central role than party in stability and ideological coherence on this issue. However, as the parties' relative positions on gay marriage continue to crystallize, party may become increasingly important for shaping attitudes.

Finally, while knowledge of party positions is higher now than it has been since the beginning of modern political behavior research, there remain Americans who do not know where the parties stand and issues on which the parties are not differentiated. In these cases, we expect group knowledge to be the key source of constraint in public opinion. Consequently, even in contexts like the modern United States, where many people follow ideological or partisan cues, group knowledge still creates stability and constraint.

## **2 Analysis and Results**

To test our hypotheses about the role of group position knowledge in public opinion, we rely on data from the American National Election Studies. These data consist of surveys of nationally representative samples of the American public, carried out regularly in election years since the 1950s. In particular, we draw on two studies. The first is the 1972-1974-1976 panel study, which interviewed 1,320 respondents at least four times during this four-year period. The second is the 1992-1997 panel study, which interviewed combinations of fresh and repeated respondents in 8 waves over these 6 years. We then supplement these data with a diverse national sample recruited through Lucid Theorem in August 2020, and a sample recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk in April-May of 2020. As we describe further below, these surveys each included questions about respondents' perceptions of the positions of social groups.

### **2.1 Knowledge**

We first document levels of knowledge in the American public about the positions of social groups on group-related issues. The American National Election Studies asks respondents their positions on a range of political issues each year. They also ask respondents where they believe

most Democrats and Republicans stand on issues and, in a handful of years, where they believe “most white people” and “most black people” stand on various policies. For example, respondents are often asked whether they believe that the “government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living...or if the government should just let each person get ahead on his own.” Respondents are then able to place their own attitudes on a 1-7 scale. On that same 1-7 scale, respondents then rate what they believe most Democrats believe, what most Republicans believe, most black people believe, and so on.

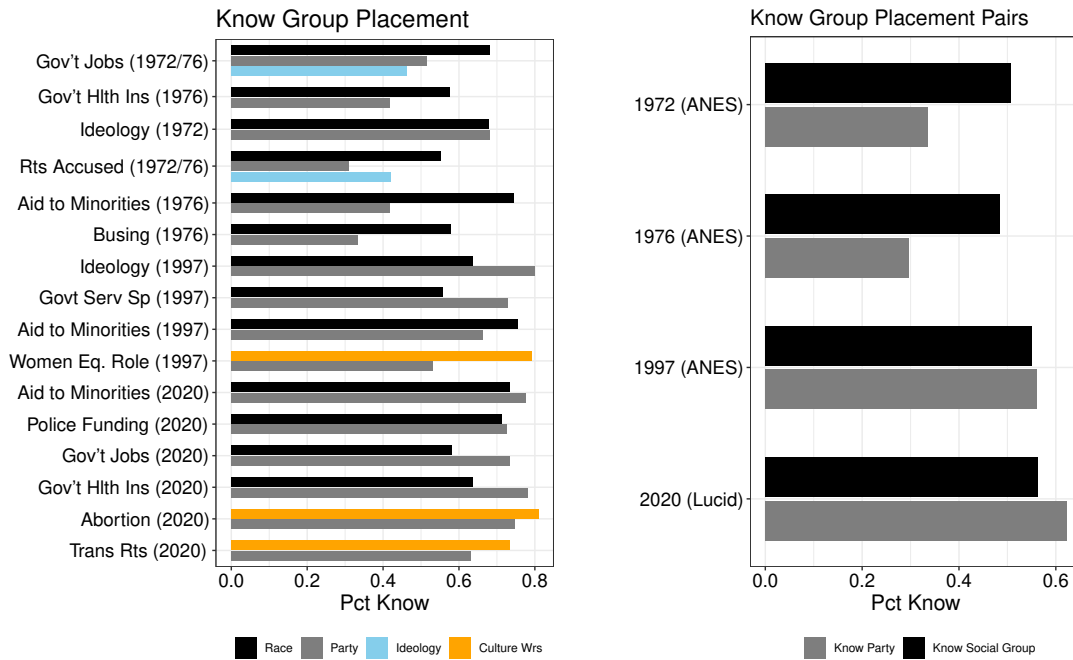
We use these questions to measure respondents’ knowledge about the positions of social groups on political issues. We code a respondent as correctly placing racial groups if they perceive that most whites hold more conservative preferences on the policy than most blacks. (Across each of these policies, whites do have more conservative preferences than blacks (Brady and Sniderman, 1985, 1064).) Likewise, in the case of party (and ideological groups), we code the respondent as correctly placing the parties if the respondent perceives the Republican party (or conservatives) to be more conservative than the Democratic party (or liberals). Respondents who place the parties or racial groups in reverse positions, at the same point, or indicate that they “don’t know,” are labeled as not knowing.<sup>1</sup>

Our results focus mostly on race, as these were the questions most commonly (or in some years exclusively) asked, but we follow a similar process for several policies related to cultural issues: gender equality in the 1997 ANES, and abortion access and rights for transgender people in the 2020 LUCID sample. For each question, respondents are asked to place Evangelical Christians on the issue scale. For the question on gender equality and transgender rights, respondents are also asked where they think most LGBT people place themselves on the scale. On abortion, we ask where feminists would place themselves on the scale. We code respondents as knowing which group supports which policy if they place evangelical Christians to the right of LGBT people/feminists.

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<sup>1</sup>Very few people place the parties or racial groups on the “wrong sides” of one another. Rather, respondents who do not place the groups on the correct sides overwhelmingly place them at the same points or simply state that they “don’t know.” See Supplemental Appendix 1.

Figure 1: Party and racial group position knowledge



The left panel shows the proportion of respondents who correctly place White people to the right of Black people (gray bars), Republicans to the right of Democrats (black bars), conservatives to the right of liberals (blue bars), and evangelical Christians to the right of LGBT people/feminists (orange bars) for each policy position. The right panel shows the proportion of respondents who correctly place the relevant groups on any two issue areas, averaged by year. For example, in 1972 66% of respondents knew where the racial groups stood on jobs and 58% knew where racial groups stood on the rights of the accused and about 48 percent where racial groups stood on BOTH jobs and rights of the accused.

We find that many people, even if they lack traditional knowledge about politics (e.g., where parties stand on issues, who holds a majority in Congress), have a rich knowledge of where various social groups stand. Figure 1 presents voter knowledge about the placement of racial groups and parties on issues.

The results in the left-hand panel of Figure 1 are striking. First, in the 1970s, people generally had a weak sense of where the parties stood on policy issues. Even on economic policy, which the parties had clearly differed on since the inception of the modern two-party system, and which consumed much of the political agenda at the time, fewer than 50 percent of respondents perceived Republicans to be more conservative. On race-related policies, party knowledge falls even lower—despite the Democratic Party clearly emerging as the leftward party on civil rights in the 1960s. Even in the culturally polarizing 1972 election, most voters did not know where the parties stood on crime or racial issues.

Knowledge of where racial groups stand on various policy issues is much higher. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people are often successful at identifying where racial groups stand on racial issues. But even on economic issues, voters in the 1970s had a good sense of where racial groups stood—particularly when compared to their knowledge of party positions.

By 1997 respondents had become more knowledgeable about the parties' positions on racial and economic issues; knowledge on these issues met or surpassed knowledge of racial group positions, and levels remained similar in 2020. However, 1997 respondents' knowledge of the parties' views on gender-related issues lagged far behind their knowledge of relevant social groups' positions. Though this gap has narrowed in 2020, it has not yet completely closed.

The patterns in issue knowledge become even starker when analyzing knowledge of issue pairs: that is, what percentage of people know where the social groups stand on both policy X and policy Y? If we think that social groups generate ideological constraint between issues, which we do, then it is important to examine knowledge about how groups are linked to multiple issues. The right-hand panel of Figure 1 displays respondents' ability to correctly place parties/social groups on pairs of issues. For example, in 1972 66% of respondents knew where the racial groups stood on jobs and 58% knew where racial groups stood on the rights of the accused; about 48 percent knew where racial groups stood on BOTH jobs and rights of the accused. We repeat this for every combination of issues and, for the sake of space, plot the average proportion of correct placement across all issue pairs for social group knowledge (black bars) and party knowledge (gray bars) in each available year.

On average, about a third of respondents could place the parties on both of any two issues in the 1970s, but about half of respondents could correctly place the racial groups. By the 1997 and 2020 polls, party knowledge had nearly doubled to around 60 percent. However, in both time periods, an average of around half of respondents correctly placed social groups on issue pairs. As knowledge of party positions increased substantially over this time period, around half of Americans were consistently in possession of knowledge about social group positions.

Knowledge of where parties and groups stand on issues is not evenly distributed among re-

spondents. In each year, interviewers for the American National Election Study are asked to rank respondents on a scale from 1 to 5 to measure their general knowledge levels. Table 1 breaks down group placement knowledge of issue pairs by how the American National Election Studies’ interviewer ranked the respondent’s general political knowledge. For the 2020 LUCID sample, we measure general knowledge by responses to questions about basic political facts (e.g, how long is a Senator’s term). High knowledge respondents have a better sense of where both parties and racial groups stand on issues. However, low knowledge respondents were more than twice as likely to know where racial groups stood as where the parties stood on those same issues in the 1970s. By 2020, this gap had disappeared; low knowledge respondents are now about as able to place social groups accurately on issue pairs as they are to place parties correctly.

Taken together, these results suggest that knowledge about the social groups that support and oppose important political issues is common in the American public. About half of respondents are able to place social groups correctly on any given pair of social-group related issues—a proportion that is relatively unchanged over the past 50 years. Americans’ ability to place parties on issues, however, has grown quickly over this time period. While group placement knowledge used to be far more common than party placement knowledge among people with generally low political knowledge, both are now about equally common.

**Table 1: Party and race placement knowledge by interviewer-rated knowledge**

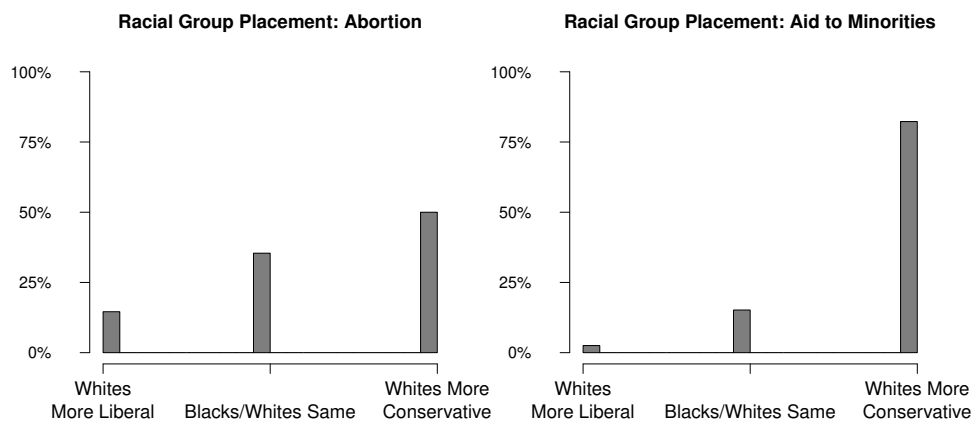
	(1) Below Avg: Pct Know Party	(2) Below Avg: Pct Know Group	(3) Above Avg: Pct Know Party	(4) Above Avg: Pct Know Group
Avg. 1972	15%	38%	45%	56%
Avg. 1976	13%	27%	43%	60%
Avg. 1997	32%	39%	67%	63%
Avg. 2020	42%	41%	73%	63%

Each cell represents the proportion of respondents at a given knowledge level who accurately place the racial/party groups on every possible pair of two issues, averaged across all pairs, with each row representing a different year’s survey.

We take these results as evidence that voters learn which groups support and oppose group-related from their political context. However, Brady and Sniderman (1985) provide an important

alternative explanation for this knowledge: a process of projection. The projection account sees voters' own issue attitudes as the source of their perceptions of the attitudes of social groups.<sup>2</sup> Brady and Sniderman argue that people attribute attitudes that are similar to their own to groups they like and attitudes dissimilar to their own to groups they dislike. For example, a white person who dislikes black people attributes positions to black people that are very unlike the white person's own positions.

Figure 2: **Histograms of racial group placement differences among conservatives.**



The x-axis represents the difference between the placement of black and white people on each issue, with positive numbers indicating black people placed further to the left than white people. We subset the data to 1) people who feel more positively to whites than blacks and 2) people who indicate they are more conservative on each policy item.

Brady and Sniderman provide compelling evidence that projection plays some role in perception of social groups' attitudes. However, the projection account leaves important patterns unexplained. Most importantly, projection cannot account for observed differences in knowledge of a group's positions across different issues (as, for example, in Figure 1).

To illustrate this, consider a group of respondents who a) feel warmer towards white people than black people, b) are conservative on the issue of abortion, and c) are conservative on the issue of aid to minorities. How might these people judge the positions of white and black people on these issues? A projection account would predict that on both abortion and aid to minorities, they should overwhelmingly attribute more liberal attitudes to black people than white people. In our

<sup>2</sup>That is, the opposite of our account.

account, the predictions for the two issues are different: the issue of aid to minorities is linked to racial groups, while the issue of abortion is not. Therefore, we expect many respondents to know black people are more liberal than whites on aid to minorities, but we expect fewer respondents to do the same on the issue of abortion.

Figure 2 shows the positions attributed to black and white people on abortion (on the left) and aid to minorities (on the right) among the subset of respondents to our 2020 Lucid survey who feel warmer towards white people than black people and are conservative on both issues. On the issue of aid to minorities, the pattern both we and the projection account predict is borne out: more than 75% of respondents know that black people are more liberal than whites. However, on the issue of abortion, only half place blacks to the left of whites and a third of respondents place the racial groups at the same position — a choice that makes little sense if respondents are projecting their attitudes onto the racial groups.

Instead, this pattern fits with our hypothesis that respondents associate government aid to minorities with racial groups to a greater extent than they do abortion policy. While we do not doubt that projection plays some role in perceptions of groups' positions, especially when a person does not know the group's position, the evidence presented in this section suggests that people make meaningful distinctions between issues on the basis of their social group ties<sup>3</sup>.

## 2.2 Issue Attitudes

Our second core claim is that voters use knowledge about where groups stand on issues to form attitudes towards those issues. We expect that, for example, when someone perceives that black people support economic redistribution, their attitude towards black people will affect their attitude towards economic redistribution. A similar association ought *not* exist, however, among people who are not aware that black people support economic redistribution.

Figure 3 shows this broadly to be true. The left panel presents the relationship between place-

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<sup>3</sup>SA. 2.1 conducts a small experiment in which we shift people's attitudes on the environment and then see if they attribute their changed attitudes into a changed perception of groups the like/dislike. We find no evidence that in this context, people attribute their attitudes to their perception of other groups.



ment knowledge, group attitudes, and issue attitudes for an especially stark issue: the government guarantee of jobs. The top and bottom graphs divide respondents into those who do not know that black people are more liberal than white people on this issue (top graph) and those who do (bottom). The x-axis represents racial attitudes, measured by the difference between ratings of black and white people on a feeling thermometer. This ranges from much warmer towards blacks at -1 to much warmer towards whites at 1. The y-axis represents attitudes towards government guaranteed jobs, ranging from strongly in favor at 0 to strongly opposed at 1. A positive slope means that people who are more racial conservative (measured by having more positive feelings towards whites than towards blacks) hold more conservative economic attitudes.

The top-left panel shows that racial conservatives and racial liberals have effectively the same attitudes on government-guaranteed jobs among people who do not perceive this policy to be supported more by blacks than whites. The flat red trend-line going from left to right represents this pattern.

However, the bottom-left panel shows that racial conservatives and liberals who *do* perceive differences between racial groups are much more polarized on this question. The positive slope (red line) going from left-to right reflects this. That is, people who express warmer feelings towards whites than blacks are more conservative on a government guarantee of jobs, but only if they perceive that policy to be supported by more blacks than whites.

We are interested in the difference in the slope between the bottom and top panel. When the difference is positive and significant, the relationship between group attitudes and issue attitudes is stronger among those who can accurately place the groups than among those who cannot. For the sake of space, we pool across all issues for each year and calculate the precision-weighted average difference in slopes across all issues between respondents who associate groups with a policy and those who do not. Figure 3 presents the results.

Line 1 of the right panel of Figure 3 suggests that the pattern in the left-hand panel holds across issues and years: when people know a group supports a policy, their attitudes towards the policy's supporters predict their attitudes towards the policy better than when they do not know which group

Figure 3: Correlations between racial attitudes and issue attitudes for respondents with and without group placement knowledge



**Left Panel:** The top and bottom graphs divide respondents between those who do not know that black people are more liberal than white people on this government guarantee of jobs (top graph) and those who do (bottom). The x-axis represents racial attitudes, measured by difference between ratings of black and white people on a feeling thermometer. This ranges from much warmer towards blacks at -1 to much warmer towards whites at 1. The y-axis represents attitudes towards government guaranteed jobs, ranging from strongly in favor at 0 to strongly opposed at 1. A positive slope means that people who have more positive feelings towards whites compared to blacks, corresponds with holding more conservative economic attitudes. **Right Panel:** The right panel presents difference in slope between those that know and do not know group positions (difference in red-line slopes between top and bottom panel), averaged across issues. Positive coefficients mean the relationship between group attitudes and issue attitudes is stronger for issues on which a respondent can accurately place the racial groups than for issues on which they cannot.

supports the policy.<sup>4</sup>

This empirical pattern is consistent with our theory. However, prior work suggests several alternative explanations for this pattern. We explore four here.

First, it could be that party knowledge explains the association between issue and group attitudes; people who can correctly place social groups may also be better able to place parties, and this party knowledge could account for the greater alignment between their group and issue attitudes. To test this, we divide respondents into two groups: those who can accurately place the parties on each issue, and those who cannot. If the effect of group knowledge on issue attitudes

<sup>4</sup>Individual policy results are located in Section 2 of the Supplemental Appendix (henceforth SA).

were reducible to party knowledge, the size of the interaction coefficient would decrease among respondents who do not know the parties' positions. Line 2 of Figure 3 shows those respondents who know the parties' positions, and line 3 shows respondents who do not know the parties' positions. For each year, respondents who do and do not know the parties' positions have coefficients that are not significantly different. Knowledge of party positions therefore cannot account for the effect of knowledge of group positions.

A related possibility is that the effect of race is reducible to people knowing that African-Americans are allied with the Democratic party and whites tend toward the Republican party (or comparable knowledge for cultural issues). This knowledge could link racial attitudes to issue attitudes through the intermediate step of party. Although the ANES does not contain questions that allow us to assess this, our survey conducted on Lucid in 2020 asked respondents which social groups aligned with which party. Lines 4 and 5 split the sample between those that know and do not know group-party alignments; the coefficients do not significantly differ, so we conclude that knowledge of which social groups align with which party does not explain the relationship between social group knowledge and group-issue attitude alignment.<sup>5</sup>

A third alternative explanation is that the effect of social group knowledge is reducible to the effect of general knowledge—people who know where the racial groups stand simply know more about politics and are therefore more likely to have aligned racial and policy views. To test this, we split the sample into three groups based on how the ANES interviewer judged each respondent's overall political knowledge: above average, average, or below average<sup>6</sup>. Lines 6-8 in Figure 3 repeat the analysis from line 1 for each of these three groups. Subjects from all three levels of political knowledge produce coefficients of similar sizes; within each level of knowledge, knowing a racial group's position increases the effect of the racial attitude on the policy attitude.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Knowledge of social group-partisan alignment is lower than knowledge of where those same social groups stand on group-relevant policy issues.

<sup>6</sup>As before, knowledge in the 2020 survey is measured using a battery of factual political knowledge questions.

<sup>7</sup>Section 2 of the SA repeats this model with individual fixed effects, and the results are robust to this specification. Fixed effects allow us to capture variation within individuals, across issues, which helps eliminate the alternative explanation that general knowledge explains the effect of group-policy knowledge. For example, a positive coefficient in a FE model means that a racial conservative who knows whites are more supportive than blacks of policy X, but not that whites are more supportive of policy Y, has a more race-based attitude towards issue X than issue Y.

These results concur with the common finding that attitudes towards policies reflect attitudes towards the groups associated with them. However, they suggest that this well-established pattern primarily—and for some issues, only—exists among people who know where the social groups stand on the issue. This pattern cannot be reduced to the effects of other forms of political knowledge, including knowledge of party positions, group-party alignments, or general political information.

### 3 Temporal Stability

We next turn to the topic of attitude stability. The results in the previous section suggest that when voters know which groups support and oppose a policy, their attitudes towards the policy reflect their attitudes towards the groups. Group attitudes can then serve as a consistent basis for evaluation of the issue, leading to stable preferences over time.<sup>8</sup> This section tests the prediction that people who know an issue’s supporters and opponents have more stable attitudes towards the issue.

We test this proposition using data from the 1972-1974-1976 ANES panel, the 1992-1994-1996 ANES panel, and a three-wave panel of respondents recruited on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (n=665).<sup>9</sup> The Mechanical Turk panel was conducted in the late Spring 2020, and it spanned approximately 1 month.

To measure attitude stability for each respondent, we take the standard deviation of each person’s responses to an issue question across each of the three survey waves. (All variables are re-scaled to range from 0-1.) People who have stable attitudes will have scores closer to 0, while people who have less stable attitudes will have higher scores.<sup>10</sup> We compare levels of stability between respondents who do and do not place the relevant social groups correctly on each issue.

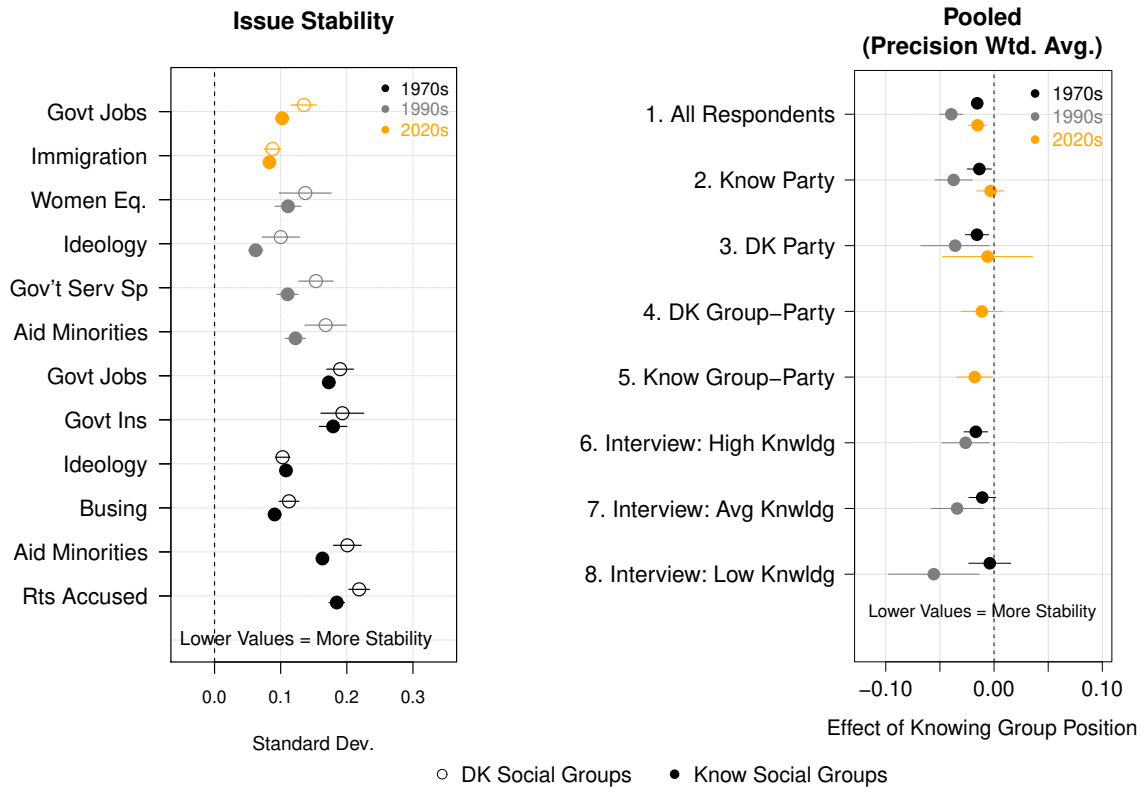
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<sup>8</sup>Converse, and decades of research that followed, find that voters when asked the same question at different points in time, tend to give different answers.

<sup>9</sup>The group knowledge questions are included in the 1997 pilot study, which then can be linked to the 1992-1994-1996 panel.

<sup>10</sup>In his 1964 article, Converse measure constraint by correlating responses between survey waves. We replicate Converse’s results in SA. 3; results are consistent.

Figure 4: **Temporal Stability**



Lower values (lower standard deviation in change of attitude) represent more over-time attitude stability. A value of 0 means that a respondent gives the exact same response in each survey. Higher values mean the respondent gives more varied answers across policy questions. **Left Panel:** Closed circles represent the average standard deviation of respondent’s attitudes across survey waves if they know the social group’s position. Open circles represent the average standard deviation of respondent’s attitudes across survey waves if they do not know the social group’s position. **Right Panel:** Each coefficient represents the average difference in stability between those that know and do not know the social groups. For example, the top black point in the right hand panel represents the average difference (precision weighted) of each set of black circles in the left-hand-panel.

The left-hand panel of Figure 4 shows that people who know where the social groups stand on issues have more stable attitudes, albeit to varying degrees, across each question in the sample.

To analyze broader trends, the first line of the right-hand panel of Figure 4 presents precision-weighted averages, across all issues, of the difference in attitude stability between respondents who do and do not know the groups’ positions on each issue. This pattern is consistent with our argument that knowledge of social group positions produces stability in issue attitudes.

However, as in our discussion of issue attitudes, other factors could explain this pattern—most notably, knowledge of party positions. Prominent theories of belief systems focus on models of social learning in which people organize their attitudes by learning what issue positions “go

together” from parties and other political leaders (Converse, 1964; Noel, 2013). People who know where the parties stand on important issues tend to share their party’s positions, and these positions tend to be stable (e.g., Freeder et al. (2019); Lenz (2012)). Knowledge about the parties’ positions, if correlated with knowledge of groups’ positions, could explain the levels of stability among those with high social group knowledge.

To test this alternative explanation, we divide respondents into groups based on whether they know the parties’ positions on each issue. (Correct responses place the Republicans to the right of Democrats and white people to the right of black people.) We then plot the effect of group knowledge on attitude stability among respondents who do and do not know the parties’ positions in the second and third lines of Figure 4. In each year, respondents who do and do not know the parties’ positions look similar: within both groups, respondents who know a policy’s supporters have more stable attitudes than those who do not. It appears that knowledge of party positions cannot explain the effect of group knowledge on issue stability.

Lines 4 through 8 of Figure 4 address the other alternative explanations discussed in the previous section: the effect of group knowledge on stability could be attributed to knowledge of which parties the groups support (lines 4-5), or to general political knowledge (6-8). Lines 4 and 5 compare respondents who do and do not know which parties the social groups in question support; the difference in stability between people who can and cannot place the social groups are similar. Lines 6-8 divide respondents by their level of interviewer-rated political knowledge. Across all three levels, respondents who know the groups’ positions have more stable attitudes than those who do not.

Next, we investigate the possibility of change over time in the relative importance of knowledge of group and party positions in attitude stability. As discussed above, partisanship has grown stronger over the period from our earliest data to our most recent; we therefore compare the relationship between stability and party and group knowledge over the course of time. We first create an index measure of stability by averaging the stability measure across all issues for each respondent and, for ease of interpretation, multiply this value by 100. We regress this stability

measure on the percent of policies on which respondents place groups correctly, the percent of policies on which they place the parties correctly, and then both. We expect that as voters are able to correctly place groups on more policies, the standard deviations in their attitudes over time will decrease—that is, they will hold more stable attitudes.

Table 2: Temporal Stability

	1972-74-76 ANES			1992-94-96 ANES			M-TURK 2020		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
% Place Group Correct	-3.22*** (0.62)		-2.93*** (0.68)	-5.26*** (1.31)		-4.27** (1.44)	-3.95*** (1.01)		-0.46 (1.06)
% Place Party Correct		-1.51** (0.57)	-0.61 (0.62)		-4.01** (1.29)	-2.54 (1.42)		-9.98*** (1.10)	-9.57*** (1.20)
Constant	17.54*** (0.45)	16.26*** (0.36)	17.68*** (0.47)	15.54*** (0.96)	14.77*** (0.96)	16.60*** (1.11)	12.38*** (0.70)	18.42*** (0.98)	18.33*** (1.01)
<i>N</i>	1488	1487	1481	320	323	319	665	665	664

Standard errors in parentheses

Avg. Standard Deviation 1970s x 100 = 16; Avg Standard Deviation 1990s x 100 = 13; Avg Standard Deviation 2020 x 100 = 10

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The outcome is the average standard deviation of a respondent's attitudes across each issue multiplied by 100. Lower values equal more over-time stability. A value of zero means that a respondent gave the same answer to policy X in each year. % Place Group Correct is scaled 0-1 and represents the percent of times a respondent correctly places groups in the correct position.

Table 2 shows the effect of moving from correctly placing no groups on policy issues to correctly placing 100 percent. In each case, group and party position knowledge predict more stable attitudes in bivariate models. When the two types of knowledge are pitted against one another, in the 1970s and 1990s panels, we find that social groups are a much stronger predictor of attitude stability than is party. This is striking: for several decades after Converse wrote, it appears that social groups generated stable preferences. By 2020, however, the effect of party knowledge dominates. As party has generally become more influential in Americans' political behavior, its power to structure issue attitudes has grown.

### 3.1 Social Groups and Ideological Constraint

We now turn to our final topic: ideological constraint. If, as we argue, people form policy attitudes based on their attitudes towards the groups that demand or benefit from the policy, constraint should arise naturally among attitudes towards issues that relate to the same group. That

is, if a social group (e.g., African Americans, Evangelical Christians, feminists) is associated with multiple issues, attitudes towards those issues ought to be related due to their shared group basis. *However, we expect this to happen only, or much more strongly, among people who are aware of the group-issue associations.*

We test this prediction primarily in the case of which racial groups support policies, as we have the most data for these issues, but for one policy pair in 2020 — abortion and transgender rights — we use groups associated with cultural issues (see discussion in section 2.1). We expect that people who link a set of social groups to multiple group-related policies will show more ideological constraint between attitudes towards those policies.

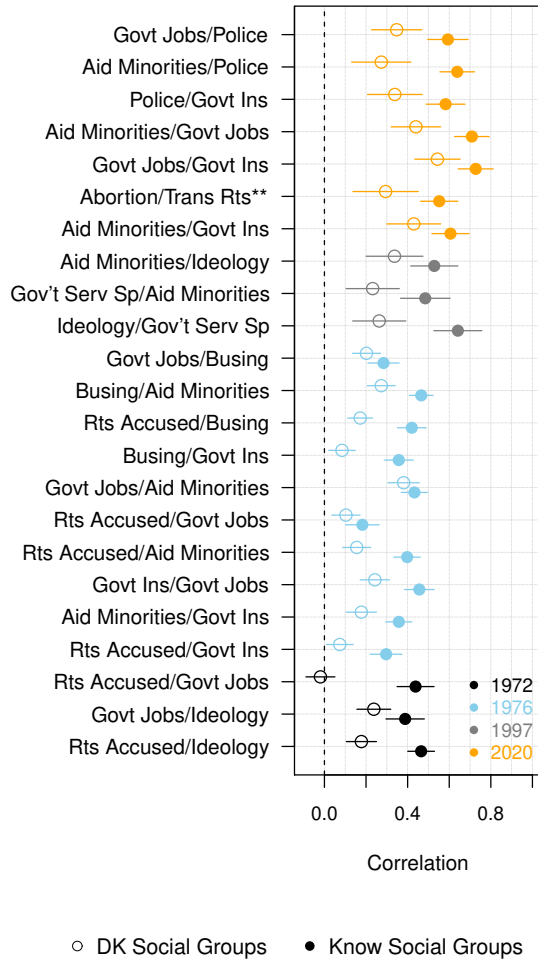
Figure 5 shows group knowledge and constraint for each possible issue pair. Each point represents the correlation between attitudes for a pair of issues among people who do and do not accurately place the relevant groups on both issues. Across every pair of issues, spanning 50 years, people who know where the social groups stand on both policies show stronger relationships between issue attitudes. These data are consistent with the hypothesis that social groups create constraint among this set of issues for a substantial portion of the American public.

As in our analysis of stability, we then pool the issues together into precision-weighted averages of constraint across all issue pairs. To make the years more comparable, we include only pairs of race-related issues in these averages. We use these averages to address two alternative explanations familiar from previous sections: that 1) knowledge of party positions or 2) general political knowledge explains constraint among people who know social groups' positions. These tests are presented in Figure 6 and Figure 7, respectively.

Figure 6 confirms that people who know both parties' positions package issues together at a much higher rate than people who do not know the parties positions. Yet respondents who do not know the parties' positions still link attitudes together, albeit at a lower rate. Can higher party knowledge explain constraint among people who know where groups stand? It cannot: even among people who don't know where the parties stand, people who know the groups' positions exhibit higher levels of constraint. The effect varies across years on which the ANES asks these questions;



Figure 5: **Ideological Constraint by Correct Placement of Social Groups**



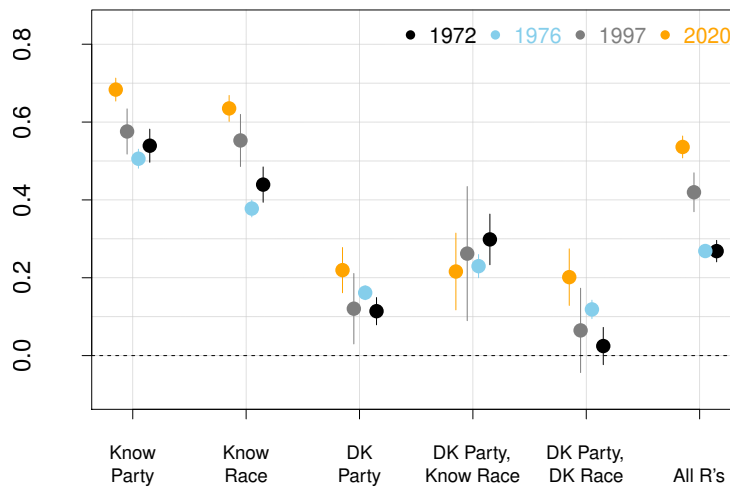
Each set of points are correlation coefficients between the sets of issues listed on the left-hand column. Closed circles represent the correlation between the issue pairs for people who know the social group positions on those issues. Open circles are those that do not know both group positions. As group knowledge increases, people show more constraint (higher correlations) between issue attitudes.

it disappeared by 2020, but it is starkest in 1972: respondents who don't know the party positions and don't know racial positions link policy dimensions together at an average correlation of .03. Knowing where racial groups stand on issues increases constraint to a correlation of close to .3. In other words, while respondents with party knowledge exhibit the most constraint, much of the constraint among people who don't know the parties' positions is confined to people who can place the racial groups.

Figure 7 presents the average constraint between issue pairs by levels of general political knowledge. As expected, above-average knowledge respondents show more ideological constraint

than below knowledge respondents (columns 1 and 2). However, below-average knowledge respondents who accurately place social groups have levels of constraint that approach those of above-average knowledge respondents; below-average knowledge respondents who cannot place the social groups have little appreciable constraint at all. At least in these cases, knowledge of racial group positions allows low-knowledge respondents to display a level of constraint similar to that of their high-knowledge peers.

Figure 6: Average Constraint by Party and Group Knowledge

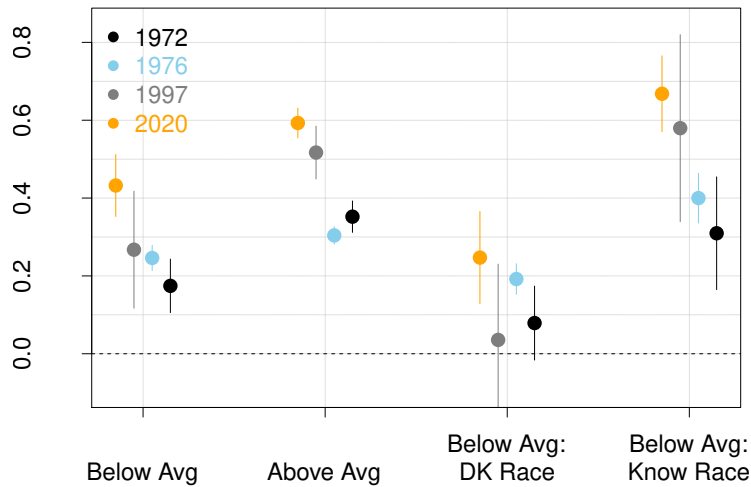


Each point represents the average correlation coefficient for each dyad of issue attitudes available in the given year. For comparison, the far-right column is the average of the correlation coefficients shown in Figure 5.

Crucially, many more low information voters have historically been more knowledgeable about social group positions than party positions. For example, in 1972, only 15% below average respondents correctly placed the parties on sets of issues, compared to 38% that successfully placed racial groups on issue sets (see Table 1). This suggests that not only do low information voters use group knowledge to generate ideological constraint, social groups appear to have been the primary organizer of political attitudes in lower-knowledge Americans in the 1970s.

Finally, we examine the effect of partisan versus social group knowledge over time. We create an individual measure of constraint by measuring the standard deviation across each respondent's answers in a given year (each question is on a 1-7 scale, recoded to range from 0 to 1). Voters who have high levels of ideological constraint (e.g., express consistently liberal positions across issues)

Figure 7: **Constraint by general political knowledge and group knowledge.**



Each point represents the average of issue pair correlations across all possible issue pairs in each year's ANES. Columns divide respondents based on their interviewer-rated knowledge and, in columns 3 and 4, whether they know the social group positions on both issues in the pair.

have a standard deviation closer to 0, while respondents who have less constraint have a higher standard deviation between answers. We again multiply the standard deviations by 100 for ease of interpretation. For example, in 1997, we took the standard deviation of a respondent's answers across three policy questions: liberal-conservative placement, aid to minorities and government services and spending. The average standard deviation was .17 in 1997.

Using this measure of constraint, we then compare respondents by the percent of times they correctly place the parties and social groups across policies. We expect that as people are able to correctly place groups on more issues, the standard deviation between a respondent's policy attitudes will decrease (that is, constraint between attitudes will increase).

Table 3 shows the effect of moving from correctly placing no groups on policy issues to correctly placing 100 percent. In the 1970s, knowledge of party and group positions both predict constraint; when both are pitted against each other, the effect of racial group knowledge is twice as large. However, by 1997, the effect appears to have flipped, with party knowledge responsible for more variation in constraint. Indeed, when included in the same model, the effect of party is about 4 times that of knowing racial positions in 1997 (column 6). This pattern then persists in the 2020 sample, with the dominance of party knowledge growing even further. As was the case in

our analysis of stability, group knowledge was the strongest predictor of constraint in the 1970s, but the relative importance of party knowledge has grown over time.

Table 3: Individual Constraint

	1970s Pooled			1997			2020		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
% Place Race Correct	-8.60*** (0.68)		-7.23*** (0.72)	-4.06** (1.52)		-1.70 (1.62)	-6.33*** (1.78)		-0.34 (2.02)
% Place Party Correct		-6.32*** (0.68)	-3.79*** (0.72)		-7.52*** (1.52)	-6.84*** (1.65)		-13.06*** (1.88)	-12.87*** (2.21)
Constant	31.29*** (0.48)	28.63*** (0.38)	32.09*** (0.50)	19.94*** (1.11)	22.77*** (1.21)	23.37*** (1.35)	25.86*** (1.36)	31.51*** (1.56)	31.59*** (1.64)
<i>N</i>	3969	4018	3968	503	503	502	538	537	537

Standard errors in parentheses

Avg Stndrd Deviation 1970s x 100 = 26; Avg Stndrd Deviation 1997 x 100 = 17; Avg Stndrd Deviation 2020 x 100 = 22

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

The dependent variable is the standard deviation across each respondent's answers, multiplied by 100 (for the sake of interpreting the coefficients). A value of 0 means that a respondent gives the exact same response across each question asked. Higher values mean the respondent gives more varied answers across policy questions. The 1970s pooled data includes year fixed effects.

## 4 Stability and Constraint: Change over Time

Results in the previous two sections suggest that the role of party in generating attitude stability and constraint has increased over the course of our three time periods, while the relative importance of social groups has declined. What explains the over-time substitution of party for social group as the primary organizer of belief systems?

One explanation is that it takes time for partisan cleavages to trickle down to the electorate (Stoker and Jennings, 2008), and the parties have now been divided on the issues we measure for several decades. When issues first become salient, parties may not immediately differentiate themselves. However, issues rarely become salient without visible social groups advocating for and against them. These visible social groups are the primary available source of issue attitudes before party positions become clear, but will give way to partisanship if an issue becomes the object of sustained and polarized partisan debate.

For example, in the 1970s, the parties had only recently divided on racial issues, and were only

beginning to differentiate themselves on the issues of gender and sexuality that rose to prominence in the 70s and 80s. By 2020, the parties have been deeply polarized across racial and cultural issues for decades; the electorate has had time to learn where the parties stand and need not rely on group cues.

Another explanation is that party sorting since the 1970s has left fewer ideologically cross-pressured voters. That is, there are fewer conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. Voters who are ideologically at odds with their party might rely more on social group positions, and less on party positions, when forming their issue attitudes. We find that across time, people who are out-of-step with their party (e.g., a liberal Republican), but know social group positions, show much more constraint than people who are out of step with their party and do not know social group positions (see Figure 6 in the SA). However, for people who are in-line with their party (e.g., a liberal Democrat), the effect of social groups is smaller. This holds equally true in 2020 as in the 1970s. However, in the 1997 and 2020 samples, there are far fewer people who are ideologically out-of-step with their party. A similar pattern emerges for temporal stability (see also Freeder et al. (2019)).

For both of these reasons, party positions have become more important in structuring belief systems. However, they highlight two cases in which social group positions may still guide issue attitudes. When new issues arise on which the parties' positions are recent or unclear, and among people for whom party cues are at odds with their ideological leanings, social groups still have a role to play in organizing Americans' issue attitudes.

## **5 Conclusion**

We argue that knowledge about which social groups support or oppose policies is central for forming durable political attitudes and ideological constraint in the mass public. First, many people are knowledgeable about the types of groups that support or oppose policies. This knowledge has historically exceeded knowledge of where parties or ideological groups stand on those same

issues. Second, people use their knowledge about policies associated with groups to form their policy attitudes: people who know which groups demand or benefit from a policy have attitudes towards that policy that reflect attitudes towards its supporters or opponents. Finally, we show that knowledge of group-policy linkages creates more ideological coherence. People who know that different policies affect the same group are more likely to 1) organize their attitudes into liberal and conservative packages and 2) hold more durable attitudes over time.

The effects of group placement knowledge are not reducible to party placement knowledge or to general political knowledge. The patterns we detect are also not fully explainable via projection or inference of groups' views from their party alignments. Our confidence in a causal relationship between group placement knowledge and policy attitudes is bolstered by the many papers that observe changes in policy attitudes when researchers experimentally induce linkages between policies and beneficiary groups (e.g. Jensen and Petersen (2017)). However, alternative explanations remain; people who know the groups associated with policies “in the wild,” without researcher intervention, may differ from those who do not in ways we cannot isolate here.

Though our theory applies to any group seen to demand or benefit from a policy, our evidence here largely focus on race- and gender-related issues. These are particularly important cases given the centrality of racial groups to the modern American party system (Schickler, 2016) and the more recent rise to prominence of issues related to gender and sexuality. Future work on other issues not yet subsumed by party may elucidate the role of social group knowledge in nonpartisan issues in a hyperpartisan time.

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