# Social Groups as the Source of Political Belief Systems: Fresh Evidence on an Old Theory[*]

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## Abstract

We present novel evidence that attitudes towards social groups are responsible for structuring political belief systems. First, we show that most Americans have a rich knowledge of the social groups that support and oppose group-relevant policies (e.g., feminists and abortion). This knowledge often exceeds people's knowledge of where Democrats and Republicans or liberals and conservatives stand on these same issues. Second, we show that when Americans do know which social groups support a policy, their attitudes towards the policy reflect their attitudes towards its supporters and opponents. Third, this knowledge promotes what Philip Converse called ideological coherence: Americans who know which groups support or oppose a policy are more likely to hold stable policy positions over time and to organize their attitudes into consistently liberal or conservative bundles. Strikingly, knowledge of social groups' policy views rivals knowledge of parties' positions in its ability to generate attitude stability and constraint.

Sixty years ago, in what has become one of the most widely cited articles in the study of political behavior, Philip Converse argued that the American public was not ideological (1964). He demonstrated that many people's attitudes towards political issues changed readily over time, and their attitudes towards different issues were not consistently liberal or conservative. In other words, Americans' attitudes were not stable or ideologically constrained.[1]

Characterizing stability and constraint in issue attitudes has been a central goal for scholars of political behavior in the years that have followed Converse's essay. While explanations vary, the field has coalesced around an account that centers on cues from political elites: people attentive to politics form issue attitudes based on signals from the party or ideological leaders they prefer (Converse (1964); Zaller (1992); Hetherington (2001); Lenz (2012); Freeder et al. (2019)). In this account, party and ideological elites' signals are the main source of stability and constraint in Americans' attitudes; for the sizable portion of the public that does not receive these cues, attitudes remain unorganized and unstable.

However, in a less-referenced portion of his 1964 essay, Converse suggested another explanation: attitudes towards prominent social groups could provide stability and constraint in Americans' issue attitudes. Noting the durability and interconnectedness of attitudes towards racial issues, he argued that attitudes towards core social groups could structure attitudes towards a network of related policies. 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 not yet been empirically explored.

We provide evidence that attitudes towards social groups structure political belief systems. We find that people are quite knowledgeable about where social groups stand on political issues—in

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[1]Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) provide an excellent overview of recent evidence on this topic; but see Ansolabehere et al. (2008) and Freeder et al. (2019) for other perspectives.

some cases, more knowledgeable than they are about 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 show that this knowledge of group positions explains substantial variation in two features of public opinion scholars have studied for decades: response instability over time, and constraint between issue attitudes. Strikingly, we find that social group knowledge rivals knowledge of party positions and general measures of political sophistication in its ability to predict attitude stability and ideological constraint.

First, we address 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 quite stable (e.g., (Converse, 1964; Sears and Funk, 1999; Tesler, 2014)). 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.

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 constraint: that is, people who know which policies a group supports and opposes hold consistently liberal or conservative positions across issues related to that group. This constraint arises because 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. 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.[2]

Our results suggest that social groups can fill a role much like that of party or other political

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[2]Existing literature generally notes that the more educated and better engaged are more polarized and ideological (e.g., Abramowitz (2012); Barber and Pope (2018)).

elites in theories of social learning (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992; Lenz, 2012): when people know where a preferred social group stands on an issue, they can form an issue attitude aligned with their group preference. Knowledge of social group positions shapes Americans' attitudes much like—and sometimes more powerfully than—knowledge of party positions. We find that when parties' positions are unclear, only recently clear, or not salient, social group knowledge best explains attitude structure. Throughout the 1970s, social group knowledge was the dominant source of stability and constraint in Americans' issue attitudes; knowledge of party positions has surpassed it only relatively recently as the parties have taken clear, diverging positions on more issues.

The account presented here offers a new way—or rather, new evidence on an old way—of understanding how Americans organize their political beliefs. Research has long shown that many Americans explain their feelings about parties and candidates by referencing social groups (Converse, 1964; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Our evidence that social groups are central to belief systems echoes the accounts citizens have long offered for their own attitudes. If our goal is to understand which voters have the information needed to form stable and constrained political attitudes, we can benefit from measuring the knowledge voters often say they use to make sense of politics (Lupia, 2006).

# 1   Theory of Social Groups & Belief Systems

## 1.1   Americans' Knowledge of Social Group Attitudes

Our central claim is that when people associate social groups with a political issue, they form attitudes towards the issue that are more durable over time (attitude stability) and more consistent with their attitudes towards other policies associated with those groups (constraint). The interaction between group-policy knowledge and underlying affect towards social groups generates this stability and constraint.

The starting point of this theory is knowledge: for social group attitudes to affect policy at-

titudes, people must know (or have beliefs[3]) 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 any given policy with a particular group or set of groups, often groups who demand or oppose the policy.

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

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[3]Throughout, we refer to "knowledge" of policy-group linkages rather than beliefs about those linkages. We focus on comparing people who have correctly learned which groups are consistently associated with policies (e.g., whites more conservative on economic redistribution than blacks) in public discourse to people who have not learned those associations. The latter group is almost entirely people who do not perceive any group-policy link at all. Perceiving incorrect links (e.g. that white people are more supportive of aid to minorities than are black people) is, for the issues we examine here, rare; what low rates there are can likely be attributed to measurement error. See Supplemental Appendix 1.

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 often be sufficient to link it to a relevant social group.

We argue that when people know the groups linked to a policy, their attitude towards the groups will affect their attitude towards the policy. This claim parallels much previous work which shows 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. This leaves open the question of how strong these links are "in the wild"–that is, how 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  Social Group Knowledge Increases Attitude Stability & Constraint

In his influential account of ideology in the mass public, Philip Converse argues that the issue attitudes of many Americans are "idiosyncratic;" rather than 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, for example, conveyed little information about how the respondent felt towards privatizing infrastructure.

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 also 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; see also Tesler (2014); Sears and Funk (1999)). 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 promotes stable attitudes because it 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.

Knowledge of group-policy links promotes constraint in a similar way. 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. 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.

Constraint between issue attitudes arises naturally from a process in which attitudes towards policies are based on attitudes towards those who support or oppose the policy: attitudes towards policies linked to the same group will be correlated due to their common source. For example,

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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.

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 largely (although not exclusively on) political parties. This scholarship argues that voters who learn their party's position on an issue adopt that position, creating both 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 think of cues from parties and social groups not as substitutes, but complements, with social groups and partisanship varying 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 where they stand. 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 ab-

sent. 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, after the parties differentiated on the issue and knowledge of those differences diffused among the public, party became 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 many 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 stability and 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

### 2.1 Data and Measures

To test our hypotheses about the role of group position knowledge in public opinion, we rely on data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). 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 sets of studies. The first is the 1972, 1974 and 1976 ANES which includes both a cross-section and panel component.[4] 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 three-wave panel of respondents recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk in March-May of 2020.[5]

The American National Election Studies asks respondents their positions on a range of political issues each year. They also ask respondents where they believe the Democratic and Republican party 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 whites" and "most blacks" stand on that scale, where the Democratic party stands, where the Republican party stands, and so on.

We use these questions to measure respondents' knowledge about the associations between social groups and 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.[6]

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[4]The panel component interviewed 1,320 respondents at least four times during this four-year period.

[5]Sample demographics can be found in Section 5 of the SA.

[6]As mentioned above, 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 (e.g., whites more conservative than blacks) overwhelm-

By comparing respondents' placements of different groups on an issue, we can identify which respondents know that one group supports a policy more than a comparison group does. Though measuring knowledge of relative group support does not capture all the ways in which policies can be linked to particular groups, we expect the measure to capture most respondents who are aware that particular groups demand or benefit from each policy.

Our results focus mostly on race, as these were the questions most commonly (and in most 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.

## 2.2 Americans' Knowledge of Social Group Preferences

We first document levels of knowledge in the American public about the positions various social groups have on political issues. Using the questions described above, we calculate the percentage of Americans who correctly place social groups–and, for comparison, parties and ideological groups–on a variety of political issues. We find that many people have a rich knowledge of where various social groups stand. Figure 1 presents people's 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

ingly place them at the same points or simply state that they "don't know." See Supplemental Appendix 1. Results are robust to various coding schemes. See Fig SA.6 and SA.9 in the supplementary appendix.

Figure 1: **Party and Social Group Position Knowledge**
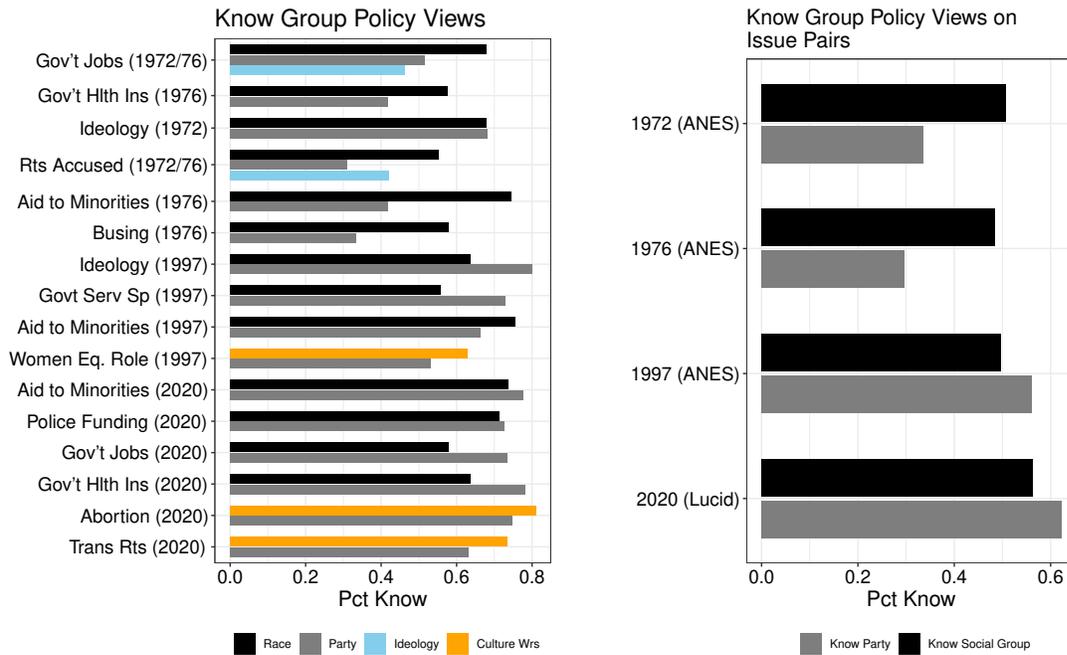
The left panel shows the proportion of respondents who correctly place White people to the right of Black people (gray bars), Republicans to the right of Democrats (black bars), conservatives to the right of liberals (blue bars), and evangelical Christians to the right of LGBT people/feminists (orange 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.

Republicans to be more conservative than Democrats. 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.

Knowledge of where racial groups stand on various policy issues in the 1970s 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 behind their knowledge of relevant social groups' positions. In 2020, this gap 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 government guarantee of 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.

To understand how knowledge of where parties and groups stand on issues is distributed in the electorate, we next break down respondent knowledge of party and social group policy views by more general political knowledge.[7] Generally knowledgeable respondents have a better sense of where both parties and social groups stand on issues. However, in the 1970s, low knowledge respondents were more than twice as likely to know where social groups stood as where the parties stood on the same issues. 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 parties.

Taken together, these results suggest that knowledge about the social groups that support and

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[7]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. 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).

Table 1: **Knowledge of Party and Social Group Policy Views among those with Low Political Knowledge**

|  | (1)<br>Pct Know Party | (2)<br>Pct Know Group |
|---|---|---|
| Avg. 1972 | 15% | 38% |
| Avg. 1976 | 13% | 27% |
| Avg. 1997 | 32% | 33% |
| Avg. 2020 | 44% | 43% |

Each cell represents the percent of respondents who have low scores on general political knowledge measures who know social groups' or parties' positions across all pairs of issues.

oppose important political issues is common in the American public[8]. About half of respondents are able to place social groups correctly on any given pair of social-group related issues–a proportion that is largely 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. As party knowledge has grown, however, group knowledge has not declined.

## 2.3   Social Group Knowledge Generates Attitude Stability

We next turn to the topic of of attitude stability. The results in the previous section suggest that many voters know which groups support and oppose important policy issues. For these people, we argue, group attitudes can serve as a consistent basis for evaluation of an issue, leading to stable preferences over time.[9] 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-

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[8]An alternative account for this knowledge is that respondents are projecting their views onto liked groups, as in Brady and Sniderman (1985). We do not find strong evidence that this is the primary explanation. See Section SA.2.1 for discussion.

[9]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. However, research shows that predispositions towards social groups (e.g., religion, race) tend to be more stable than specific policy attitudes (Converse, 1964; Sears and Funk, 1999; Tesler, 2014).

Figure 2: **Attitude Instability by Knowledge of Social Group Policy Views**
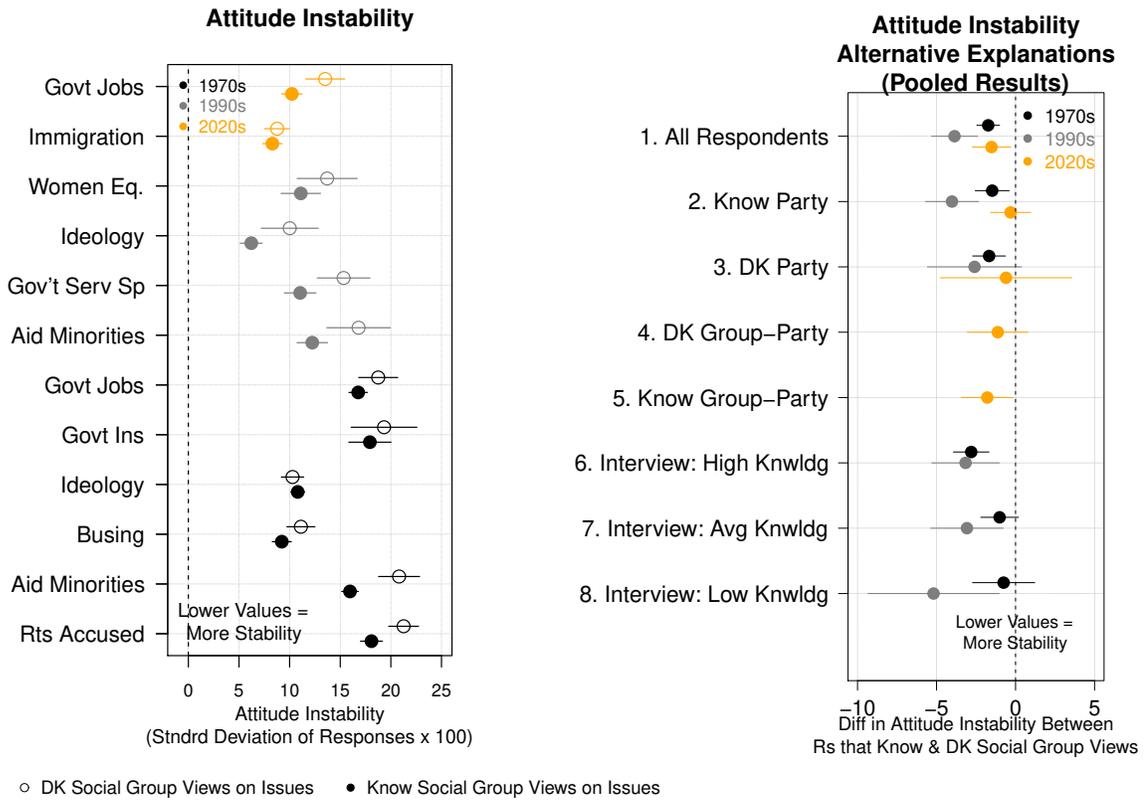


**Left Panel:** Lower values represent more stable attitudes over time. Point estimates represent the average standard deviation of a respondent's attitudes across survey waves. Closed circles include respondents who know the relevant social group's position; open circles represent those who do not know the social group's position. **Right Panel:** Each coefficient represents the average difference in stability between respondents who know and do not know the social groups' policy views. 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.

1996 ANES panel, and a three-wave panel of respondents recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk in Spring 2020 (n=665).[10] 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.[11]

We compare levels of issue attitude stability between respondents who do and do not place the

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[10]The group knowledge questions are included in the 1997 pilot study, which then can be linked to the 1992-1994-1996 panel.

[11]In his 1964 article, Converse measure constraint using the correlation between responses across survey waves. We replicate Converse's results in SA. 3; the results are consistent.

relevant social groups correctly on each issue. The left-hand panel of Figure 2 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.[12]

The first line of the right-hand panel of Figure 2 then 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. For example, the top black point in the right-hand panel represents the average difference in attitude instability between those that know and do not know the social groups' policy views in 1970s (this equals the average difference of each of the black points in the left-hand panel). In each period, on average, people who know the groups' positions have more stable attitudes than those who do not. This pattern is consistent with our argument that knowledge of social group positions produces stability in issue attitudes.

However, other factors could explain this pattern. First, it could be that knowledge of party positions explains the association between issue and group attitudes. 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. If the effect of group knowledge on issue attitudes were reducible to party knowledge, group knowledge would have no effect among people who do not know where the parties stand.

To test this alternative explanation, we divide respondents into groups based on whether they know the parties' positions on each issue. We then plot the difference in attitude stability between those who do and do not know social group's policy views in the second and third lines of Figure 2. In each year, respondents who do and do not know the parties' positions look similar: within both groups, respondents who know which social groups support a policy have more stable attitudes than those who do not. It appears that knowledge of party positions cannot fully explain the relationship between group knowledge and issue stability.

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[12]Figure SA.6 breaks down respondents who place groups at same point (or don't know), and those that place blacks as more conservative. Few respondents fall into the latter category and the results are robust.

A related possibility is that people know 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 Mechanical Turk in 2020 asked respondents which social groups aligned with which party[13]. Lines 4 and 5 of Figure 2 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 is similar in both groups. Together, these results suggest that knowledge of social groups' party alignments is not responsible for the relationship between group-policy knowledge and stable attitudes.

A third alternative explanation is that the effect of social group knowledge is reducible to the effect of general knowledge: that is, people who know where the racial groups stand simply know more about politics and are therefore more likely to have stable attitudes (Ansolabehere et al. (2008)). 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[14]. 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. Again, other forms of political knowledge cannot explain the relationship between social group knowledge and attitude stability.

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 attitude stability, party-placement knowledge and group knowledge over 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 stabil-

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[13]Knowledge of social group-partisan alignment is lower than knowledge of where those same social groups stand on group-relevant policy issues.

[14]Knowledge in the 2020 M-Turk survey is measured using a battery of factual political knowledge questions.

ity 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 parties and groups on more policies, the standard deviations in their attitudes over time will decrease—that is, they will hold more stable attitudes.

Table 2: Attitude Stability: Comparing Social Group Knowledge and Partisan Cues

|  | 1972-74-76 ANES | | | 1992-94-96 ANES | | | M-TURK 2020 | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) |
| % Place Group Correct | -3.23*** | | -2.81*** | -5.28*** | | -4.38** | -3.95*** | | -0.46 |
|  | (0.62) | | (0.68) | (1.31) | | (1.48) | (1.01) | | (1.06) |
| % Place Party Correct | | -1.76** | -0.91 | | -4.01** | -2.05 | | -9.98*** | -9.57*** |
|  | | (0.57) | (0.61) | | (1.29) | (1.44) | | (1.10) | (1.20) |
| Constant | 17.28*** | 16.09*** | 17.47*** | 15.36*** | 14.77*** | 16.17*** | 12.38*** | 18.42*** | 18.33*** |
|  | (0.45) | (0.35) | (0.47) | (0.92) | (0.96) | (1.06) | (0.70) | (0.98) | (1.01) |
| $N$ | 1780 | 1779 | 1773 | 324 | 323 | 323 | 665 | 665 | 664 |

Standard errors in parentheses

Avg. Standard Deviation 1970s x 100 = 16; Avg Stndrd Deviation 1990s x 100 = 13; Avg Stndrd 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. A value of zero means that a respondent gave the same answer to policy X in each year. Lower values equal more over-time stability. % 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 relationship between attitude stability and moving from correctly placing no groups on policy issues to correctly placing 100 percent. In each bi-variate model, group and party position knowledge predict more stable attitudes.[15]

However, when the two types of knowledge are pitted against one another, in the 1970s and 1990s panels, we find that social group knowledge is a much stronger predictor of attitude stability than is party knowledge. This is striking: for decades after Converse wrote, social groups generated stable preferences than did partisan knowledge. By 2020, however, it appears that 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.

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[15]Results are robust once controlling for demographic characteristics. See Fig SA.11.

## 2.4 Social Group Knowledge Generates Ideological Constraint

We next turn to 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 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. We test this prediction primarily in the case of which racial groups support policies, as we have the most data for these issues. However, for one policy pair in 2020 — abortion and transgender rights — we use groups associated with cultural issues (see discussion in section 2.2).

Figure 3 shows constraint between each possible pair of issues for respondents who do and do not know where the social groups stand on both issues. Each point represents the correlation between attitudes on 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 the previous section: that knowledge of party positions or general political knowledge explains constraint among people who know social groups' positions. These tests are presented in Figure 4 and Figure 5, respectively.[16]

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[16]As before, we label respondents who place racial groups at same point, or blacks as more conservative, as not

Figure 3: **Ideological Constraint by Knowledge of Social Group Policy Views**
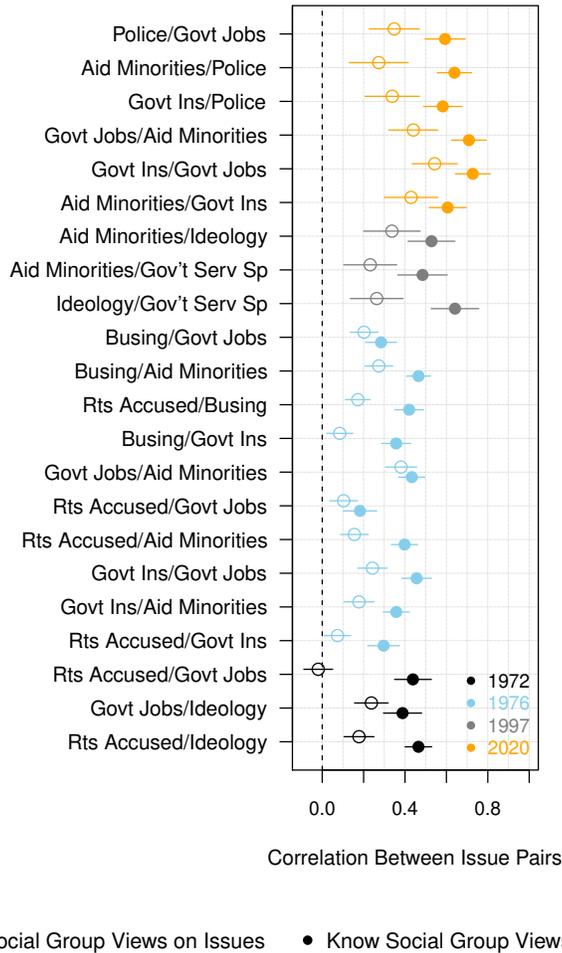


Each set of points are correlation coefficients between the sets of issues listed on the y-axis. Closed circles represent the correlation between the issue pairs for people who know the social group positions on those issues. Open circles are those that do not know both group positions. As group knowledge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

Figure 4 shows that, as previous work suggests, people who know both parties' positions package issues together at a much higher rate than people who do not know the parties' positions. However, among people who do not know where the parties stand, constraint is higher for respondents who know social groups' positions. For example, in 1972 respondents who do not know the party positions and don't know racial groups' 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

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knowing the racial group's position. Very few people fall into the latter category especially on both issues. Results are robust among respondents who place racial groups at same position or respond "don't know." See Figure SA.9.

constraint, much of the constraint among people who don't know the parties' positions is confined to people who can place the racial groups. The effect is strongest in 1972, but fades by 2020.

Figure 5 presents the average constraint between issue pairs by levels of general political knowledge. Other scholarship suggests that the more knowledgeable may have more ideologically consistent attitudes (Barber and Pope, 2018; Ansolabehere et al., 2008). As expected, above-average knowledge respondents show more ideological constraint than below-average 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 4: **Average Constraint by Knowledge of Party and Social Group Policy Views**
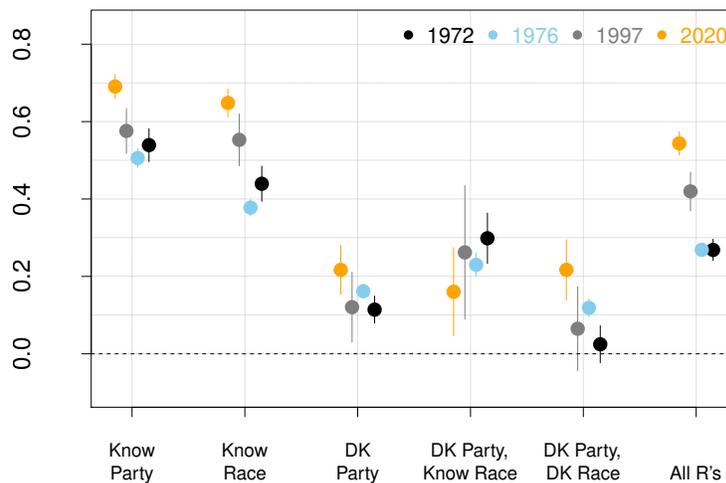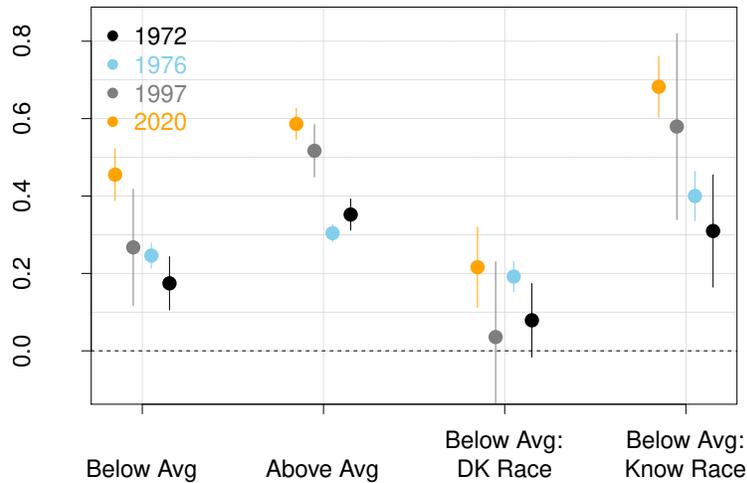


Each point represents the average correlation coefficient for each dyad of issue attitudes available in the given year. Columns divide respondents based on whether they know how the party and social groups stood on both issues in the pair. For comparison, the far-right column is the average of the correlation coefficients shown in Figure 3.

Crucially, many more low information voters have historically known about social group positions than party positions. For example, in 1972, only 15% of below-average knowledge 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

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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.

Figure 5: **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 general political knowledge and, in columns 3 and 4, whether they know the social group positions on both issues in the pair.

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) 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 cor-

Table 3: Individual Constraint: Comparing Social Group Knowledge and Partisan Cues

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

rectly placing 100 percent.[17] In the 1970s, knowledge of party and group positions both predict constraint. However, when both are pitted against each other, the effect of racial group knowledge is twice as large. By 1997, party knowledge becomes more predictive of constraint in both relative and absolute terms. 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.

# 3   Mechanism: Social Group Knowledge & Belief Systems

## 3.1   Social Group Knowledge Shapes Issue Attitudes

We have demonstrated that many Americans know the social groups that support important policies and that this generates attitude stability and constraint. A key intermediate step in our account is that knowledge about which social groups support a policy links social group attitudes to policy attitudes: for knowledge about these group-policy linkages to produce stability within

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[17]Results are robust once controlling for demographic characteristics. See Fig SA.15.

and constraint among issue attitudes, voters must use this knowledge to form attitudes towards those issues.

This section tests whether knowing where social groups stand on an issue leads people to form issue attitudes related to their attitudes towards social groups. We expect, for example, that when someone perceives that black people support economic redistribution more than white people, their racial attitudes will affect their attitude towards economic redistribution. A similar association ought *not* to exist among people who are not aware that black people are more supportive of economic redistribution.

Consistent with expectations, Figure 6 suggests that knowledge of group-policy linkages moderates the relationship between group attitudes and issue attitudes. To illustrate this relationship, the left panel presents the relationship between placement knowledge, group attitudes, and issue attitudes for an especially stark issue: the government guarantee of jobs.

The top-left panel shows that among people who do not know that blacks are more supportive of economic redistribution than whites, racial conservatives and racial liberals have effectively the same attitudes on government-guaranteed jobs. 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. The right-hand panel of Figure 6 shows the difference in slopes for all issues on each survey. In nearly every case, the coefficients in the right-hand panel of Figure 6 are positive and significant: group attitudes and policy attitudes are more strongly linked among people who know where the relevant groups stand on the policy.

Figure 6: **Issue Attitudes by Respondents Who Know & DK Social Group Policy Views**
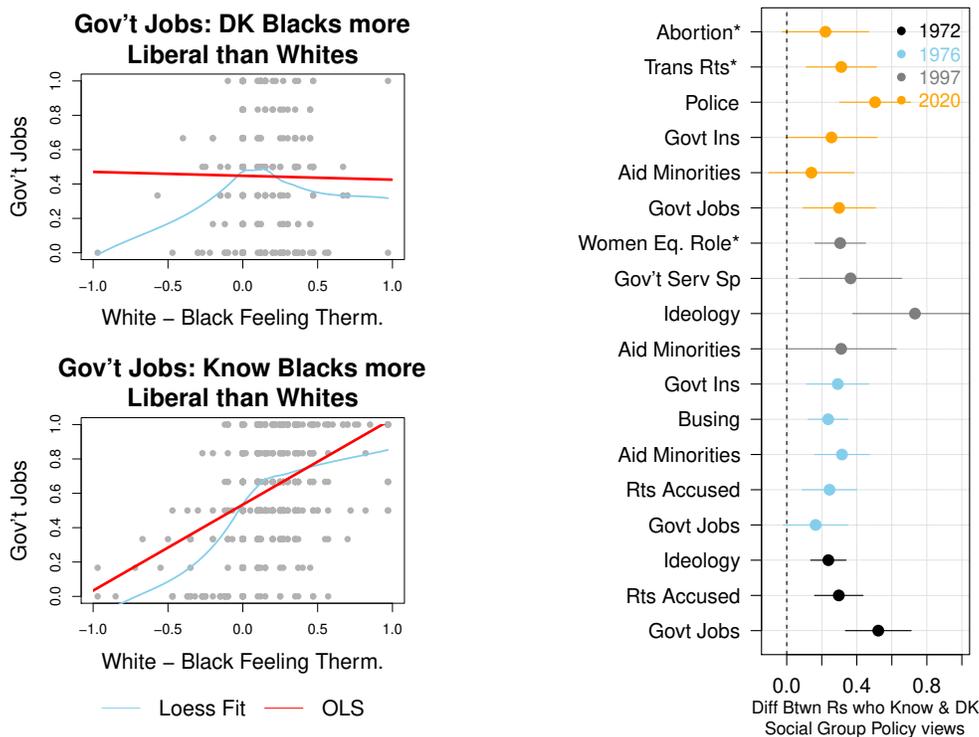


**Left Panel:** The x-axis is difference between ratings of black and white people on a feeling thermometer. Higher values represent warmer feelings towards whites. The y-axis measures attitudes towards government guaranteed jobs. Higher values equal more conservative attitudes. A positive slope means 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 social group policy views. Positive coefficients mean the relationship between group attitudes and issue attitudes is stronger for issues on which a respondent can accurately place the social groups than for issues on which they cannot. For example, the bottom point (on "Govt Jobs"), represents the difference in red slope lines between the top and bottom left-hand panel.

This empirical pattern is consistent with our theory. However, as discussed in the sections on stability and constraint, other factors may explain our results. For ease of comparison, we pool together 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. The first row of Figure 7 presents the results of Figure 6, collapsed into precision-weighted averages by year. The remaining rows of Figure 7 test alternative explanations for this relationship beyond the effect of social group knowledge (as done in previous sections).

First, knowledge of party positions may explain these trends. Line 2 of Figure 6 shows those respondents who know the parties' positions, and line 3 shows respondents who do not know the parties' positions. For each year, the effect of group knowledge is positive and significant for both

Figure 7: **Alternative Explanations for difference in Issue Attitudes, Group Affect and Social Group Policy Views**
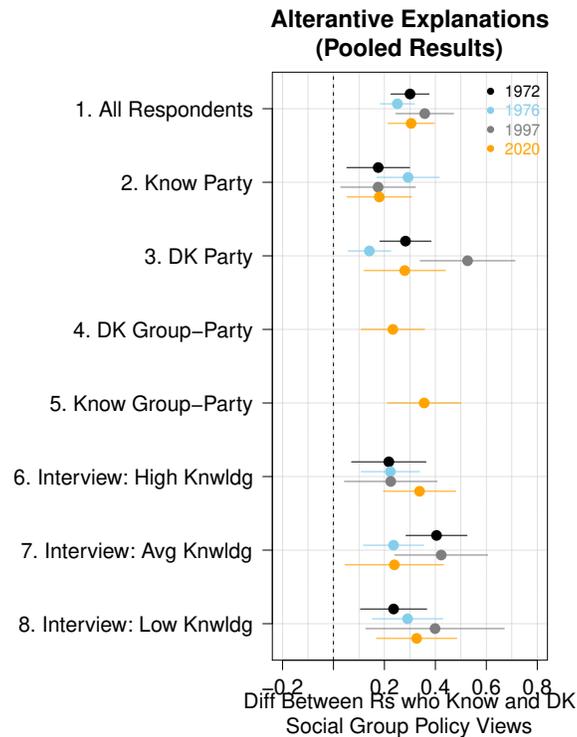


This figure explores alternative explanations for Fig. 6; line 1 shows the average by year of all points in the right-hand panel of Fig. 6. Each point represents the difference in the relationship between group attitudes and issue attitudes between respondents who know and do not know group policy views, averaged across issues. Positive coefficients mean the relationship between group attitudes and issue attitudes is stronger for respondents who can accurately place the social groups than for those who cannot.

groups; knowing group positions matters similarly for people who do and do not know where the parties stand. Knowledge of party positions therefore cannot account for the effect of knowledge of group positions.

Lines 4 and 5 split the sample between those that know and do not know group-party alignments (e.g., that blacks generally support the Democratic party). 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.

Lines 6-8 test the alternative explanation 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. Lines 6-8

in Figure 6 repeat the analysis from line 1 for below average, average and high average respondents as determined by interviewers for the American National Election Study.[18] Subjects from all three levels of political knowledge produce coefficients of similar sizes; within each level of knowledge, knowing a group's position increases the effect of the group attitude on the policy attitude. [19]

These results accord 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.

# 4   Discussion & Conclusion

We have argued 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 social 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 organize their attitudes into liberal and conservative packages and hold more durable attitudes over time.

However, our results 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

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[18]For the 2020 Lucid sample, as before, this was determined by factual questions about government/politics.

[19]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 other differences between people who do and do not know where the social groups stand explain the effect of this knowledge.

groups has declined. What explains the over-time shift towards party over social groups 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.

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 8 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)).

In short, party positions have become more important in structuring belief systems as parties have taken more clearly differentiated positions and people have sorted into parties that match their ideological leanings. As we have also seen, however, 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.

Though our theory applies to any group seen to demand or benefit from a policy, our evidence

here is limited to 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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