

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 non-partisan social groups structure political belief systems. First, we show that most Americans have a rich knowledge of the social groups that support and oppose group-related policies. This knowledge often exceeds people's awareness of where Democrats and Republicans stand on these same issues. Then, we show that this knowledge promotes what Philip Converse called ideological coherence: Americans who know which groups support and oppose a policy are more likely to hold stable policy positions over time and to organize their attitudes into consistently liberal or conservative bundles. In the 20th century, knowledge of social groups' issue positions rivaled knowledge of parties' positions in its ability to generate attitude stability and constraint. However, as party identification has strengthened in recent decades, knowledge of parties' positions has become the most important source of structure in most Americans' belief systems.

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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, which has primarily focused on partisan cues, political 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 unstable and unorganized.

However, in a less-referenced portion of his 1964 essay, Converse suggested another explanation: attitudes towards prominent non-party social groups could provide stability and constraint in Americans’ issue attitudes.² 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; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), this prospect has not yet been empirically explored.

¹Kinder 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.

²In discussing “parties” and “groups” as separate constructs, we mean to distinguish explicitly partisan groups from other social groups, like race, class, and gender. Though partisanship can function like other social group identities, we maintain this distinction because prior literature on attitude stability and constraint has focused almost exclusively on party.

We show that attitudes towards social groups, coupled with knowledge of what policies those social groups support and oppose, structure political belief systems. Knowledge about where social groups stand on political issues is widespread—in some cases, more widespread than knowledge 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.

Because of this widespread knowledge, social groups can fill a role much like that of party or other political 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. The evidence we present here is focused on knowledge about racial groups, due to the nature of the data available on this topic; future work may take up the question of how this theory applies to other important social groups.

Knowledge of non-party social 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. 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 generates more consistent evaluations of the issue.

Similarly, when people associate a social group with multiple political issues, social group attitudes create what Converse calls constraint: people who know which policies a group supports and opposes hold consistently liberal or conservative positions across issues related to that group. Attitudes towards policies linked to the same group are correlated due to their common source; negative (positive) attitudes towards a group foster negative (positive) attitudes towards an array of

policies associated with that group.

The importance of social group placement knowledge varies over time. Throughout the 1970s, social group knowledge was the dominant source of stability and constraint in Americans' issue attitudes, but today party position knowledge has supplanted it. What might explain this variation? Building on a rich literature on social identity, social sorting, and affective polarization (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019; Mason, 2018), we find that party position knowledge is most powerful when people's social identities and group affect align with their party membership. Social group knowledge best explains stability and constraint when people's attitudes towards party-aligned groups are at odds with their partisanship (e.g., a racially conservative Democrat). As more people have come to belong to parties that match their group memberships or identities (an increase in what Mason (2016) calls social sorting), party knowledge has become more important in structuring belief systems. These findings extend a nascent scholarship on the interaction between affective polarization and issue attitudes (Dias and Lelkes, 2021; Orr and Huber, 2020).

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 non-party 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. By measuring the kinds of knowledge many voters say they use to make sense of politics, we can better understand which voters have the information they need to form stable and constrained political attitudes (Lupia, 2006).

Social Groups & Belief Systems

Social groups structure political behavior in myriad ways. A robust scholarship documents that social groups—including, but certainly not limited to partisan groups—are core to how people evaluate parties (Ahler and Sood, 2018; Achen and Bartels, 2017), candidates (Teele et al., 2018;

Crowder-Meyer et al., 2020), and issues (Tesler, 2014; Sears et al., 1979; Conover and Feldman, 1984). When these group memberships are internalized as a social identity, they can powerfully affect how people define their interests and view those inside and outside the group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). More broadly, the race, class, and gender groups people belong to equip them with norms and values that shape how they engage with politics (see Anoll, 2018; White and Laird, 2020, for example).

Recent work on affective polarization has underscored the primacy of group-related attitudes and emotions in political behavior³. Though this is an area of ongoing research, growing evidence suggests that group-related partisan considerations are more important to Americans' political behavior than their positions on policy issues (Huddy et al., 2015; Huddy and Yair, 2021; Dias and Lelkes, 2021, but see Orr and Huber, 2020). These findings raise questions about the extent to which issue positions, a key building block for theories of democratic accountability, are tied up with—and perhaps causally subsequent to—social group attitudes.

Building on this work, we ask what a social group-focused account of political attitudes can contribute to the field's longstanding quest to characterize belief systems in public opinion. If deep-seated prejudices against and favor towards social groups are tied to how Americans think about so many political objects, how might we expect people to organize their political beliefs? Prior work has documented the importance of party to belief systems. We argue that non-partisan social groups also act as central elements for stabilizing and unifying attitudes towards an array of political issues related to social groups.

Americans' Knowledge of Social Group Attitudes

Our central claim is that when people associate non-party 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). Knowledge of groups' positions links political issues to group attitudes, and this linkage generates

³Republicans and Democrats dislike, distrust, and discriminate against one another to a degree that has reached or surpassed antipathy between racial groups (Iyengar et al., 2012; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015).

stability and constraint.

The starting point of this theory is knowledge: for non-party social group attitudes to affect policy attitudes, people must know (or have beliefs⁴) about linkages between social groups and policies. Many policies in American politics are linked, both in political discourse and in public opinion, to a small set of groups. It is not 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. Though explicitly political groups (e.g. Republicans, liberals) are of course linked to policies, we focus here on non-partisan social groups, as these groups' links to policy have been less explored in work on belief systems.

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—that is, the policy's "target population"—by describing the group memberships and personal attributes of people the policy harms or helps (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). 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.

Like all forms of political knowledge, knowledge about the groups who demand or benefit

⁴Throughout, we refer to "knowledge" of policy-group linkages rather than beliefs about those linkages. We focus on comparing people who have learned which groups are consistently associated with policies (e.g., white people are more conservative on economic redistribution than black people) to people who have not. 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 black people) is, for the issues we examine here, rare; what low rates there are can likely be attributed to measurement error. See Section 1 in the Supplemental Information.

from policies is unevenly distributed in the populace. We expect that for many important policies, however, 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 often be sufficient to link it to a relevant social group.

When people know the groups linked to a policy, their attitudes towards the groups can affect their attitude towards the policy.⁵ For example, elites can damage the popularity of policies they dislike by pairing the policies with stigmatized groups (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Stereotypes of those stigmatized groups spill over onto evaluations of policies associated with them. Thus, group affect may influence policy attitudes through prejudice and negative associations. Positive group-related attitudes can also matter, as when someone supports a policy because they learn it benefits a group they like (Tesler and Sears, 2010).⁶

There is ample evidence that people's attitudes towards social groups affect their attitudes towards political objects associated with those groups, from diverse literatures on symbolic politics (Sears et al., 1979), heuristic use (Petersen et al., 2011), media effects (Gilens, 2009), issue framing (Nelson and Kinder, 1996), and the origins of ideological beliefs (Kerlinger, 1967; Conover and Feldman, 1981). However, this prior work generally has not described the mass public's knowledge of what policies are associated with what groups. 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

⁵We do not address where group identity or group affect comes from, but instead rely on other work that argues attitudes towards core social groups (e.g., racial groups) are acquired early in life and represent long-standing predispositions that are then capable of shaping political attitudes (Sears et al., 1979; Sears and Funk, 1999).

⁶Because we expect both positive and negative group affect to drive attitudes towards associated policies, we refer to "group attitudes" or "affect" rather than prejudice throughout the paper. Negative attitudes are generally a stronger predictor of constraint (and stability), but positive attitudes work similarly; see Sections 3.3 and 4.3 in the Supplemental Information.

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.

Yet, to our knowledge, there has been no exploration of how many people associate welfare policies with African Americans absent researcher intervention. This leaves open the question of how common knowledge of groups and associated policies is "in the wild"—that is, how much of the public knows which groups are associated with important policies, absent any researcher intervention. Answering this question can help us understand why, and for whom, group attitudes structure public opinion.

Social Group Knowledge Increases Attitude Stability & Constraint

In his influential account of ideology in the mass public, Philip Converse argues that many Americans do not hold well-thought-out policy positions that are linked to an underlying ideological predisposition; instead, their attitudes are "idiosyncratic." 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 reports in his 1964 essay that he asked a set of respondents whether the federal government should provide funding to needy school districts. He then asked those same respondents the same question two years later and found that many 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 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 non-party so-

cial 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.

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), perhaps because of the centrality of social groups to political thought (see, e.g., Achen and Bartels, 2017; Conover and Feldman, 1984). Attitudes towards social groups are relatively stable over time (Sears and Funk, 1999), so policy positions consistently based on social group attitudes should be stable as well. 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.

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. We expect 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, 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.

Because we expect social group placement knowledge to be widespread in the mass public, we also expect stability and constraint based on social group attitudes to be more pervasive than Converse's analysis would suggest. If people across the spectrum of political sophistication know the issue positions of social groups, this knowledge can serve as a source of organization in the belief systems of many in the mass public.

Group Knowledge in a Partisan Context

Recent work on the structure of belief systems centers on the effects of 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 where 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 following parties and social groups not as competing explanations, but as natural complements, with social groups and partisanship varying in relative importance between individuals and over time.

We expect knowledge about issue-group linkages to be most influential when the parties' positions on an issue are undifferentiated, unclear, or recently taken. For any number of reasons, partisan elites may not send clear signals about where they stand on an issue, and less-politically-attentive people may not receive the signals party leaders do send. However, policies rarely become salient without demanders and beneficiaries. The group memberships of these advocates can 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.

Even when parties' positions are clearly broadcast and widely received, knowledge of those

positions should matter more for some people than others. Recent work on the growing importance of partisanship suggests that party (and therefore, party positions) should matter most to people who are “socially sorted:” that is, people with social group memberships and attitudes that match their party identification (Mason, 2018; Wronski et al., 2021). People who are not sorted are likely to be cross-pressured by their partisan and social group attachments, and therefore should be less likely to rely solely on party position knowledge, even in an era when that knowledge is at a record high (Freeder et al., 2019).

Moving beyond particular issues and subgroups, the importance of partisanship to political behavior has grown substantially over the past 30 years. Americans increasingly see partisanship as a social identity, as evidenced by their growing preference for inparty members over the outparty (Iyengar et al., 2012, 2019). Work in this area has documented the effects of affective polarization on outcomes related to intergroup relations, like discrimination (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015), emotions (Huddy et al., 2015), and social distance (Huber and Malhotra, 2017). In other words, partisan groups have come to play a role more like what racial or cultural groups have played for decades, shaping attitudes and behavior towards ingroup and outgroup members. However, to our knowledge, this literature has not focused on the effect increasing partisan identity has had on partisan cue taking or attitude stability and constraint.

If our predictions are borne out, racial and cultural groups play another important role: they allow people to build coherent belief systems by forming attitudes based on their knowledge of where these groups stand on political issues. As partisan groups have come to play a more similar psychological role to that of other salient social groups, we expect they have come to shape belief systems in a more similar way as well. Freeder et al. (2019) provide evidence consistent with this: knowledge of parties’ positions has grown alongside polarization, leading more Americans to form stable, party-aligned issue attitudes. Otherwise, though, the implications of the increasingly group-like role of party for belief systems remain unexplored.

Analysis and Results

Data and Measures

To test our hypotheses about the role of group position knowledge in public opinion, we first draw on data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). These data consist of surveys of nationally representative samples of the American public, carried out 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. The second is the 1992-1997 panel study, which interviewed combinations of fresh and repeated respondents in 8 waves over these 6 years.⁷ We use these studies because they are the only years in which the ANES includes questions about where people think non-party social groups (e.g., racial groups) stand on political issues, which we use to measure knowledge of social group-policy links.

Because the ANES has not asked respondents to place social groups on policies since 1997, we supplement these data with a nationally representative cross-section recruited through NORC-Amerispeak in March-April 2021 (N=565) and a two-wave panel of respondents recruited through YouGov in March-April 2021 (N=451 in wave 1; N=347 in wave 2). NORC-Amerispeak maintains a probability-sampled nationally representative panel of respondents, and YouGov's online panel is a highly-regarded data source for academic surveys (Stoker and McCall, 2017). In these 2021 studies we, as closely as possible, replicate the question wording used on the ANES. For simplicity in presentation, we combine our 2021 samples.⁸

⁷The 1970s panel component interviewed 1,320 respondents at least four times during this four-year period. We also use the 1972 (n=2,705) and 1976 (n=2,248 cross-section (which includes some panelists). In the 1990s panel, 551 total respondents completed the final 1997 wave.

⁸Sample demographics can be found in Section 7 in the Supplemental Information, and questionnaire wording for the studies we conducted can be found in the Dataverse for this study. The 1976 ANES cross-section, YouGov and NORC data are weighted using post-stratification weights provided by the firms. The 1997 ANES surveys did not include post-stratification weights; due to concerns about representativeness, we constructed weights for these data. The 1972 cross-section and 1970s panel do not require post-stratification weights. Due to concerns of straight-lining in our 2021 online panels, we drop respondents from our YouGov sample who fail basic attention checks and respondents who straight-lined in our NORC-Amerispeak sample. We combine the 2021 samples by stacking them and including a survey fixed effect in all regression analyses. Data and replication materials can be found on the APSR Dataverse. See (O'Brian, 2022)

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 some years, where they believe social groups like “most black people” and “most white people” stand on various issues. 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 place their own attitudes on a 1-7 scale. On that same 1-7 scale, respondents then rate where they believe “most whites” and “most blacks” would place themselves on that scale, 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 the policies in our sample, whites do have more conservative preferences than blacks (Brady and Sniderman, 1985, 1064), though we detail two instructive exceptions in our results section.) 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.⁹

Racial and partisan groups are the only groups asked about in both the 1970s and 1990s, so much of our analysis focuses on knowledge of racial and partisan positions. However, in 1976 the ANES asked respondents where they believe “most businessmen” and “most poor people” stand on three economic policies; where “most men” and “most women” stood on a question of gender equality; and in 1997, where respondents believe “most Christian Fundamentalists” and “most Gays and Lesbians” stood on a question of gender equality. As above, we label that someone

⁹Few 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 state that they “don’t know.” See Section 1 in the Supplemental Information.

“knows” the groups’ positions if they place the more conservative group (businessmen, Christian Fundamentalists, men) to the right of the more liberal group (poor people, LGBT people, women) on the group related policy question.¹⁰

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.

The analysis that follows focuses on the role of racial group position knowledge, except where explicitly noted in the section describing levels of social group knowledge. Only racial group questions are included in both ANES time periods, and over-time comparison is important to our analysis. To ensure our contemporary data is comparable with these earlier surveys, our 2021 studies also focus on racial group knowledge.¹¹ We view race as an especially useful social category to study because racial groups are linked to a range of different policy areas (racial, economic, crime), which is valuable in studying constraint. However, Section 6 in the Supplemental Information replicates the results for the analyses that are possible with other social groups (class, gender and culture war issues); the results are consistent with those presented below.

Americans’ Knowledge of Social Group Preferences

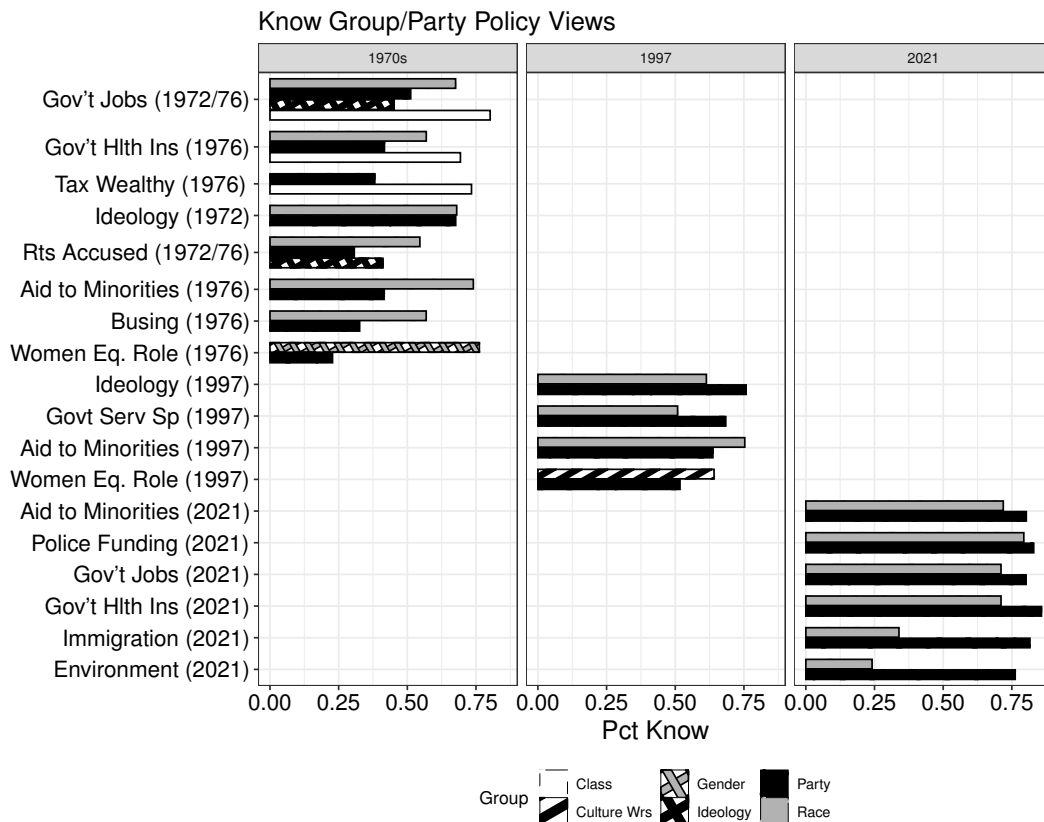
We first document levels of knowledge in the American public about the positions various social groups hold on political issues. Using the questions described above, we calculate the percentage of Americans who correctly place social groups—and, for comparison, parties and ideological groups—on a variety of political issues. Figure 1 presents levels of knowledge about the positions of partisan and social groups on all the issues for which placement questions were included on the

¹⁰On some gender issues throughout the late 20th century, men and women hold fairly similar positions. However, we still expect links between these policies and gender because the most visible demanders of gender equality are women’s/gender-based groups.

¹¹We include non-racial group results in Section 6 in the Supplemental Information. We also included non-racial questions in a 2020 Lucid survey which we have moved to the secondary appendix, available on the Dataverse, due to concerns about sample quality (Aronow et al., 2020). Results are consistent with other groups.

ANES or our contemporary surveys. We find that many people have a rich knowledge of where various social groups stand.

Figure 1: Party and Social Group Position Knowledge



Graph 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 (black crossed bars), businessmen to the right of poor people (white bars), men to the right of women (gray crossed bars), and evangelical Christians to the right of LGBT people/feminists (black striped bars) for each policy position. Data are from the 1972 and 1976 ANES cross-sections; the 1997 ANES pilot study; our 2021 NORC cross-section; and wave 1 of our YouGov study. For questions included in both 2021 surveys, we take an average. Because group knowledge is asked on government guarantee of jobs and rights of the accused in 1972 and 1976, we combine and then average the knowledge. Data are weighted; see footnote 8 for description.

The results in the left-hand panel of Figure 1 are striking. 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 for decades and which consumed much of the political agenda at the time, fewer than 50 percent of respondents perceived Republicans to be less supportive of redistribution 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.¹²

¹²In the 1970s, otherwise low knowledge respondents held especially high knowledge of where social groups stood compared to where parties stood. See Section 1.2 in the Supplemental Information.

Knowledge of where racial groups stood on various policy issues in the 1970s is much higher. Unsurprisingly, people can often identify where racial groups stand on racial issues. But even on economic issues, respondents in the 1970s had a good sense of where racial groups stood—particularly when compared to their knowledge of party positions. Knowledge of class groups’ positions on economic issues is even higher than knowledge of racial groups’. Finally, the proportion placing women to the left of men on the issue of women’s equality far outstrips the proportion placing Democrats to the left of Republicans¹³.

By 1997 respondents had become more knowledgeable about the parties’ positions on racial and economic issues; knowledge of party positions on these issues met or surpassed knowledge of racial group positions, and levels remained similar in 2021. However, 1997 respondents’ knowledge of the parties’ views on gender-related issues lagged slightly behind their knowledge of relevant social groups’ positions, perhaps a sign that parties’ positions on these issues were not yet clear.

We take these results as evidence that voters learn links between groups and group-related policies from their political context. However, it could be that people are simply knowledgeable about where social groups stand on all issues, regardless of those groups and issues being paired together in discourse. To test this, we included two policy questions on our 2021 survey — general immigration levels and environmental protection — which lacked an obvious connection to racial groups (the environment) or in which black and white respondents actually held similar positions (immigration levels), so we would not expect respondents to be accurate at identifying the relative positions of black and white people. Indeed, this is what we find: knowledge of racial groups’ positions on these issues is far lower than for the issues linked to race in public discussion.¹⁴

Taken together, these results suggest that knowledge about the social groups that support and oppose important political issues is common in the American public. At least half of respondents are able to place social groups correctly on any given social-group related issue, a proportion that

¹³In 1976, partisan divides on gender-related issues were relatively small, and the parties had not yet sent clear signals about their positions.

¹⁴Brady and Sniderman (1985) provide another alternative explanation for this knowledge: a process of projection. For further discussion of this alternative explanation, see Section 2.3 in the Supplemental Information.

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 on many issues, both are now about equally common: even on policies like government assistance to minority groups, knowledge of parties' positions is as high or higher than knowledge of racial groups' positions.

Social Group Knowledge Generates Attitude Stability

We next turn to the topic of attitude stability. The results in the previous section suggest that many voters know which social groups support and oppose relevant 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. 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 1992-1997 ANES panel, and a two-wave panel of respondents recruited on YouGov in Spring 2021. 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 (two waves for YouGov; we re-scale all policy variables to range from 0-1).¹⁵ For ease of interpretation, we multiply this number by 100. People who have stable attitudes will have scores closer to 0, while people who have less stable attitudes will have higher scores.¹⁶

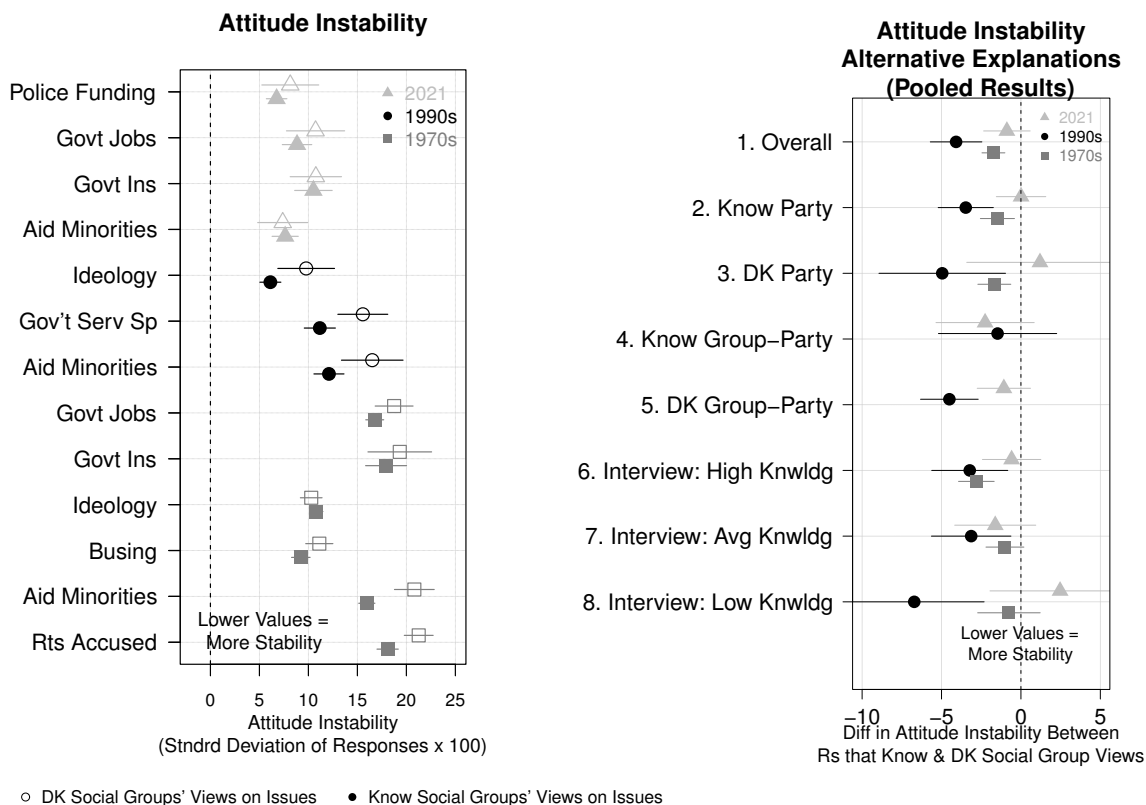
We compare levels of issue attitude stability between respondents who do and do not place the racial groups correctly on each issue. The left-hand panel of Figure 2 shows that people who know where the social groups stand on issues have more stable attitudes, albeit to varying degrees,

¹⁵The group knowledge questions are included in the 1997 pilot study, which then can be linked to the 1992-1994-1996 panel. For the 1970s ANES panel, we use the knowledge measures from the 1976 panel because all but one placement question is asked that year. The lone knowledge question included on the 1972 ANES, but not 1976 ANES, is ideological self-placement and therefore use the 1972 placement question from that year. In the 2021 YouGov sample, placement questions are asked in wave 1. Results are robust to when placement is measured: for the two questions with placement knowledge in 1972 and 1976, the results are the same, regardless of which year is used. We found similar results in a pilot study in which we asked placement knowledge in multiple waves.

¹⁶For alternative measurement strategies, see the section on additional stability results in the secondary appendix.

across each question in the 1970s and 1990s surveys.¹⁷ By 2021, however, this relationship has weakened.

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 racial 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 gray square (1970s) in the right hand panel represents the average difference (precision weighted) of each set of gray squares (1970s) in the left-hand-panel. Data are weighted; see footnote 8 for description of weighting. For full results as regression tables, see section 9 of the secondary appendix.

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 gray square in the right-hand panel represents the average difference in attitude instability between those that know and do not know the racial groups' policy views across all the issues in the 1970s panel. (This equals the average

¹⁷Section 3.3 in the secondary appendix breaks down respondents who place groups at same point (or don't know), and the few that place blacks as more conservative. The results are robust.

difference between each of the pairs of gray squares in the left-hand panel.) By 2021, people who can accurately place racial groups do not have appreciably more stable attitudes than those who cannot. However, in the earlier periods, 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.

The remaining rows of Figure 2's right panel test three alternative explanations for higher stability among people who know where racial groups stand. All three relate to the notion that people who know where racial groups stand are more likely to know more about other aspects of politics as well. First, it could be that knowledge of party positions explains the association between group knowledge and stability. People who know where the parties stand on important issues tend to share their party's positions, and these positions tend to be stable (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. For both groups, we then plot the relationship between group placement knowledge and attitude stability 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. Knowledge of party positions cannot fully explain the relationship between group knowledge and issue stability.

A related possibility is that people know that African-Americans are allied with the Democratic party and whites tend toward the Republican party. This knowledge could link racial attitudes to issue attitudes through the intermediate step of party.¹⁸ The 1997 ANES and 2021 YouGov survey contain questions that allow us to measure whether respondents know which social groups are

¹⁸This view aligns with recent scholarship on affective polarization that argues knowledge of group-party alignment drives partisan attachment (Wronski et al., 2021), which may then feed back into more stable attitudes.

aligned with which party.

Lines 4 and 5 of Figure 2 compare results among respondents who do and do not know which parties the social groups in question support. In 2021, the effect of social group knowledge on stability is similar in both groups. In 1997, the relationship is stronger among people who do not know the group-party alignments—the opposite of what we would expect if group-party alignment knowledge explained the effect of social group position knowledge. 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.¹⁹ 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 that the relative importance of knowledge about non-party social groups and party groups’ positions to attitude stability has changed over time. 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 placement knowledge over time. To do this, we first create an index measure of stability by averaging the stability measure across all issues for each respondent and, as in the earlier results, 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 parties and groups on more

¹⁹Knowledge in the 2021 YouGov survey is measured using a battery of factual political knowledge questions.

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

Table 1: Attitude Stability: Comparing Social Group Knowledge and Partisan Cues

	1972-74-76 ANES			1992-94-96 ANES			YOUNG 2021		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
% Place Race Correct	-3.23** (0.62)		-2.81** (0.68)	-4.83** (1.30)		-3.73** (1.37)	-2.61** (1.24)		-0.01 (1.26)
% Place Party Correct		-1.76** (0.57)	-0.91 (0.61)		-4.65** (1.29)	-3.42** (1.36)		-8.71** (1.38)	-8.70** (1.47)
Constant	17.28** (0.45)	16.09** (0.35)	17.47** (0.47)	15.20** (0.94)	15.48** (1.03)	16.95** (1.16)	10.62** (1.01)	16.17** (1.25)	16.17** (1.35)
<i>N</i>	1780	1779	1773	316	316	315	347	347	347

Standard errors in parentheses

Avg. Standard Deviation 1970s x 100 = 15; Avg Standard Deviation 1990s x 100 = 12; Avg Standard Deviation 2021 x 100 = 9

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$

The outcome is the average standard deviation of a respondent's attitudes across each issue (measured at different points in time) multiplied by 100. A value of zero means that a respondent gave the same answer to policy X in each survey wave. Lower values equal more over-time stability. % Place Race Correct is scaled 0-1 and represents the percent of times a respondent correctly places white people to the right of black people across each policy. Data are weighted; see footnote 8 for description.

Table 1 shows the relationship between attitude stability and group placement knowledge. In all bi-variate models, race and party position knowledge predict more stable attitudes.²⁰

When the two types of knowledge are pitted against one another, we find that in the 1970s, racial group knowledge is a stronger predictor of attitude stability than is party knowledge. In the 1990s, party and racial group knowledge are similarly strong predictors. This is striking: for decades after Converse wrote, social groups generated stable preferences as much or more than partisan knowledge. By 2021, 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.

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

²⁰Results are robust once controlling for demographic characteristics. See Section 3.1 in the Supplemental Information.

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. As in the previous section, we focus on racial group knowledge for reasons of data availability.²¹ For these analyses, we use data from the 1972 and 1976 cross-section, the 1997 pilot (cross-section), our 2021 NORC sample and wave 1 of our 2021 YouGov sample.

The left panel of Figure 3 shows constraint between each possible pair of issues (listed on the y-axis) for respondents who do and do not know where the social groups stand on both issues. We measure constraint by taking the standard deviation between each set of issue pairs. People with more constraint — that is people who consistently express liberal or conservative positions across issues — have lower standard deviations between issue pairs. Across each issue, people who know where social groups stand show more constraint between issue attitudes than those who do not.

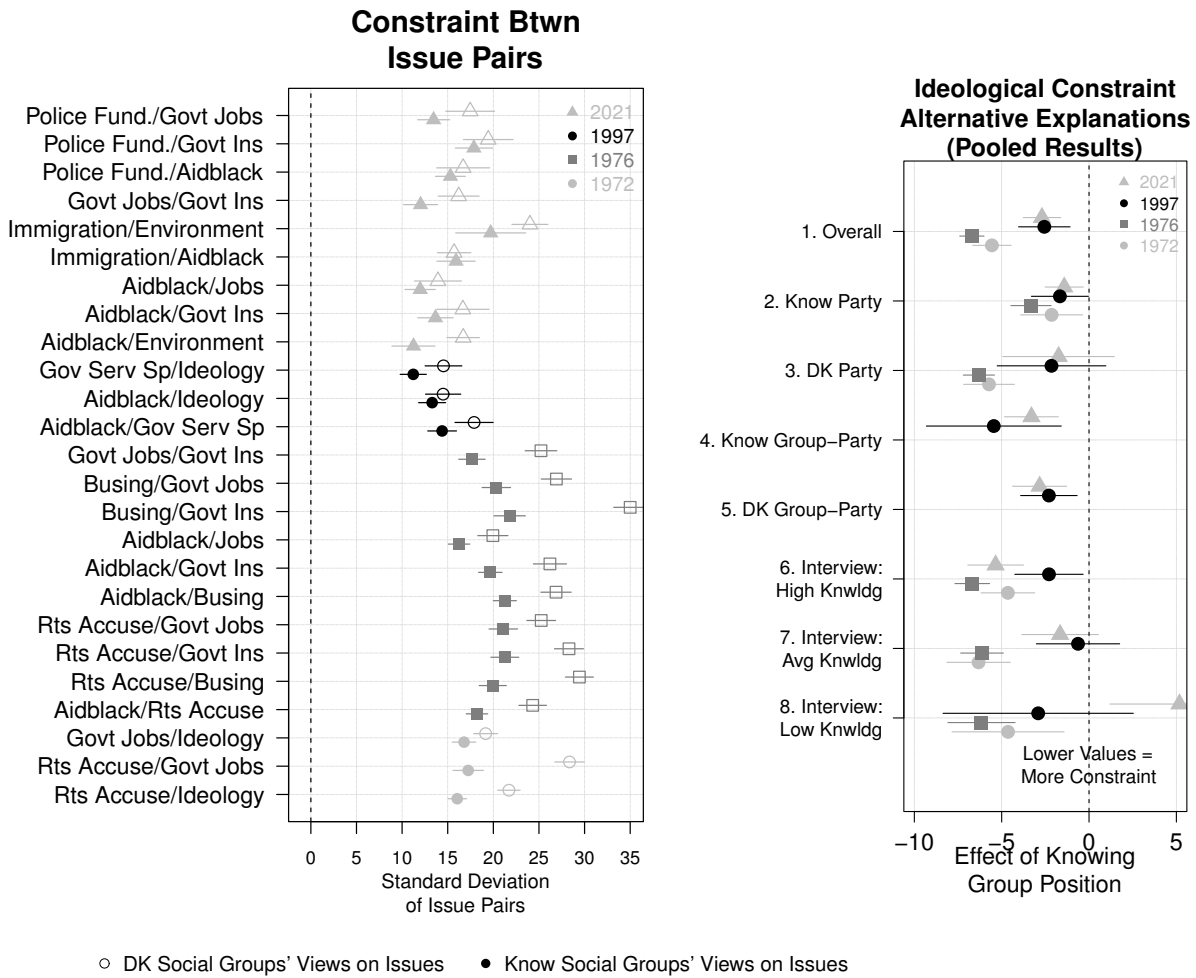
As in our analysis of stability, the right-hand panel of Figure 3 pools the issues together into precision-weighted averages of the relationship between group position knowledge and constraint across all issue pairs and explores several alternative explanations for these trends. Negative coefficients mean group-knowledge increases constraint (lowers the standard deviation).

This first line of the right-hand panel of Figure 3 suggests that in all years, people who know where the racial groups stand on issues have more constrained attitudes. However, as in the previous section, knowledge of parties' positions, knowledge of party-group links, or general political knowledge could explain this relationship. We therefore again divide respondents into groups based on these dimensions and see whether the relationship between group placement knowledge and constraint persists.

Lines 2 and 3 suggest the effect of group knowledge persists among both respondents who know and do not know the parties' positions on issues. Indeed, in three of the four data points,

²¹Results for other groups are available in Section 6 in the Supplemental Information. Similar results persist. We also conducted a small experiment in which we told people about a group-policy association and checked whether this increased constraint. A pilot suggested a modest increase in constraint, but in a replication using the NORC sample, our treatment failed to manipulate perceptions of group-policy associations.

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



Left Panel: Each set of points are the standard deviation between the issue pairs listed down the left column. Lower standard deviations represent more constraint between issue pairs. Closed circles represent the standard deviation between the issue pairs for people who know the racial group positions on those issues. Open circles are those that do not know both racial group positions. As group knowledge increases, people show more constraint (lower standard deviations) between issue attitudes. **Right Panel:** Each coefficient represents the average (weighted) difference in constraint between respondents who know and do not know the social groups' policy views. For example, the top set of points represents the average difference, by year, between the knowers and don't knowers from the data in the left-hand column. Data are from the 1972 and 1976 cross-section, 1997 pilot (cross-section), our NORC 2021 study and wave 1 of our 2021 YouGov study. For the sake of space, we pool the 2021 data and include a survey fixed effect. Data are weighted; see footnote 8 for description of weighting. For full results as regression tables, see section 9 of the secondary appendix.

group knowledge is a more powerful predictor of constraint among people who lack knowledge of party positions. Lines 4 and 5 results suggest the effect of group knowledge is also similar among those who do and do not know which groups stand with which party. Finally, lines 6-8 break down results by general political knowledge.²² With the exception of the lowest-knowledge group in

²²As before, we split the sample into three groups based on how the ANES interviewer judged each respondent's

2021, the effect of constraint is similar across all knowledge groups. Respondents across all levels of political knowledge have more constrained attitudes when they know where groups stand.

Building on this final result, we want to emphasize a core point. Other scholarship suggests that more politically knowledgeable people have more constrained attitudes (Barber and Pope, 2018; Ansolabehere et al., 2008). Our results align with this finding. 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. Knowledge of racial group positions allows low-knowledge respondents to display a level of constraint similar to that of their high-knowledge peers²³.

Finally, as in the case of stability, we examine the effect of party placement knowledge and racial group placement knowledge over time. We create an average individual measure of constraint by measuring the standard deviation across all of each respondent's positions on race-related issues in a given year (each question is on a 1-7 scale, recoded to range from 0 to 1). Respondents who have high levels of ideological constraint (e.g., express consistently liberal positions across issues) have a standard deviation closer to 0, while those who have less constraint have a higher standard deviation. 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 in 1997 was .16.

Using this measure, we then predict respondents' levels of constraint based on the percentage of times they correctly place the parties and racial groups across policies. We expect that as people are able to correctly place groups on more issues, the standard deviation between their policy attitudes will decrease (that is, constraint between attitudes will grow).

Table 2 shows the effect of group placement knowledge on constraint.²⁴ In the 1970s, knowl-

overall political knowledge: above average, average, or below average. Knowledge in the 2021 YouGov/NORC survey is measured using a battery of factual political knowledge questions.

²³See Section 4.3 in the secondary appendix for further analyses on this point.

²⁴Results are robust when controlling for demographic characteristics. See Section 4.1 in the Supplemental Informa-

Table 2: Individual Constraint: Comparing Social Group Knowledge and Partisan Cues

	1970s Pooled ANES			1997 ANES			2021 YOUNGOV/NORC		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
% Place Race Correct	-8.70** (0.68)		-7.46** (0.73)	-5.75** (1.60)		-3.99** (1.75)	-3.15** (1.35)		-1.56 (1.40)
% Place Party Correct		-6.06** (0.68)	-3.42** (0.73)		-5.76** (1.55)	-4.15** (1.69)		-6.46** (1.46)	-5.96** (1.52)
Constant	31.84** (0.48)	29.01** (0.38)	32.53** (0.50)	20.84** (1.15)	21.12** (1.19)	22.54** (1.34)	21.33** (0.91)	24.88** (1.30)	25.39** (1.37)
<i>N</i>	3969	4018	3968	484	485	484	967	967	967

Standard errors in parentheses

Avg Stndrd Deviation 1970s x 100 = 26; Avg Stndrd Deviation 1997 x 100 = 16; Avg Stndrd Deviation 2021 x 100 = 19

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$

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 and 2021 data are pooled, and include a survey fixed effect in each case. Data are weighted; see footnote 8 for description of weighting.

edge 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 (column 6). This pattern then persists in the 2021 sample, with party knowledge dominating group knowledge when pitted against each other. 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.

Mechanism: Social Group Knowledge & Belief Systems

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, 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

tion.

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* exist among people who are not aware that black people are more supportive of economic redistribution.

Consistent with expectations, Figure 4 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.

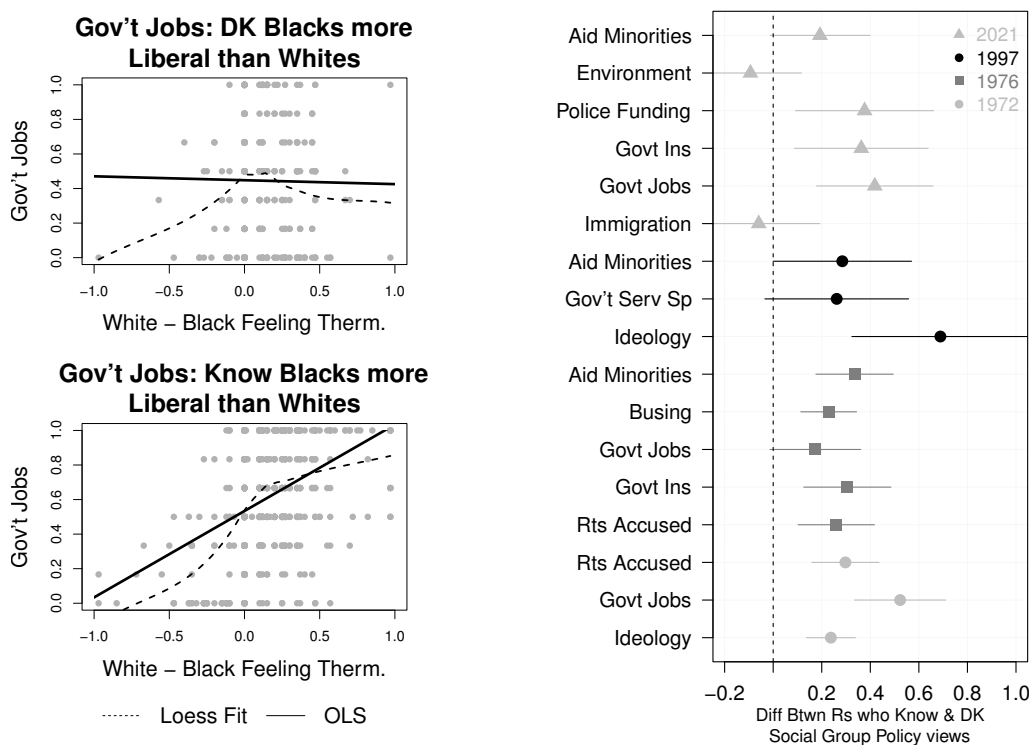
The top-left panel shows that among people who do not know that blacks are more supportive of economic redistribution than whites, racial conservatives and racial liberals have effectively the same attitudes on government-guaranteed jobs. The flat black trend-line going from left to right represents 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: 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 4 shows the difference in slopes for all issues on each survey. In nearly every case, the coefficients in the right-hand panel of Figure 4 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.²⁵

The results presented in this section accord with the common finding that attitudes towards policies reflect attitudes towards the groups associated with them. However, they suggest that this

²⁵Although we measure knowledge of differences with a binary “know” and “don’t know” here, larger perceived differences between groups generate a larger effect. See Section 2.5 in the secondary appendix.

Figure 4: 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. (Data from 1972 ANES). **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. The second-to-bottom point (on “Gov’t Jobs”), represents the difference in black linear slope lines between the top and bottom left-hand panel. Data are from the 1972 and 1976 cross-section, 1997 pilot (cross-section), our NORC 2021 study and wave 1 of our 2021 YouGov study. For full results as regression tables, see section 9 of the secondary appendix.

well-established pattern primarily—and for some issues, only—exists among people who know where the social groups stand on the issue in question.²⁶

What Explains Change over Time? Social Groups, Affective Polarization, and Partisan Sorting

The previous sections show that since the 1970s, the importance of party placement knowledge has grown and the influence of non-party social group knowledge has declined in structuring con-

²⁶See Section 2.1 in the Supplemental Information for analysis of alternative explanations analogous to those in the sections on stability and constraint.

straint and stability. Does this mean non-party group attitudes matter less to belief systems now than they did in the 1970s? Perhaps not: a large literature points to the centrality of groups to party identification and the recent increase in party's influence on political attitudes (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019; Achen and Bartels, 2017; Mason, 2018). This section explores the possibility that the overlap of group attitudes with partisanship drives the increasing importance of party knowledge.

One explanation for why party position knowledge has become more influential is the growth of affective polarization: over the past 40 years, people have come to like their own party more and (especially) the other party less (Iyengar et al., 2012). Indeed, Iyengar et al. (2012) find that partisan affective polarization surpasses polarization on other salient social cleavages, including race.

While scholars present multiple explanations for affective polarization's growth, a prominent literature argues it is the result of increasing alignment between party and other social identities like race or religion (Wronski et al., 2021; Mason, 2018; Mason and Wronski, 2018)²⁷. As the parties have become socially sorted, such that other group identities align with party identification, identification with one's copartisans has grown. Likewise, as social out-groups increasingly align with the opposing party, this fuels antipathy towards the out-party (Wronski et al., 2021). Social sorting has been particularly concentrated among whites sorting into the Republican party: between the mid-1990s and 2016, the proportion of whites in the Republican versus Democratic party has doubled (Mason and Wronski, 2018, 260).

If party identity becomes more important as party identification aligns with group affect, knowledge of party positions should be most important to belief systems among people who like groups in their party's coalition and dislike those in the other party's. People whose party membership is misaligned with their affect towards groups in the party's coalition (e.g., a racially conservative Southern Democrat in the 1970s), however, might be less attached to their party as they are pulled in different directions by the positions of the groups and parties they prefer. These non-sorted

²⁷Other explanations include the role of negative campaigns (Iyengar et al., 2012) or online interactions (Suhay et al., 2018). Though these are important, a full investigation of the causes of affective polarization is outside the scope of this paper, and we focus on social sorting because it bears most directly on the role of non-partisan social groups.

people should be less likely to structure their belief systems around party positions. If people with party-sorted group attitudes are more likely to organize their beliefs using party cues than people with non-sorted attitudes are, party position knowledge could be growing more important because the sorted people are now a larger portion of the electorate.

To test this possibility, we calculate the relative importance of racial group and party position knowledge among two groups: people whose affect towards racial groups aligns with their partisanship, and those whose affect is misaligned. Because black people are considered a part of the Democratic Party's coalition, we code a Democrat who feels more warmly towards black people than a reference racial group (here, white people) as having group attitudes that are "sorted" with their party. (As before, we measure affect using racial feeling thermometers.) Analogously, a Republican who feels more warmly towards white people than black people is also "sorted." "Non-sorted" respondents are those with the opposite pattern. Respondents who feel equally warmly towards both groups are excluded, as are pure independents (as they cannot be classified as sorted or non-sorted).

We then test the relationship between group and party placement knowledge on stability and constraint, now separating respondents into sorted and non-sorted groups. Table 3 presents regressions of attitude stability (columns 1-6) and attitude constraint (columns 7-12) on respondents' knowledge of racial groups' and parties' positions. Constraint and stability are measured, as in previous sections, using the standard deviation of attitudes across issues (constraint) and over time (stability). Negative coefficients suggest that knowledge decreases a respondent's standard deviation—that is, negative coefficients indicate increased stability and constraint.

The results are broadly consistent with our predictions: for both constraint and stability, the effect of party knowledge is larger among subjects whose racial affect aligns with their party membership. However, in most cases, the effect of party is negligible when affect towards the racial group and party are unaligned. For subjects whose racial affect and partisan affiliation are out of line, the effect of racial groups is often stronger. For subjects whose racial affect and partisan

Table 3: Average Effect of Knowledge by Alignment of Racial Affect & Partisanship

	STABILITY						CONSTRAINT					
	1970		1997		2021		1970		1997		2021	
	Sorted (1)	Not Sorted (2)	Sorted (3)	Not Sorted (4)	Sorted (5)	Not Sorted (6)	Sorted (7)	Not Sorted (8)	Sorted (9)	Not Sorted (10)	Sorted (11)	Not Sorted (12)
% Place Race Correct	-2.15 (1.42)	-4.57** (1.23)	6.80* (3.92)	-5.77 (4.99)	0.87 (2.08)	-6.82** (3.35)	-4.38** (1.40)	-13.15** (1.49)	-1.90 (5.35)	-4.66 (4.34)	-5.42** (2.42)	0.04 (3.29)
% Place Party Correct	-0.99 (1.21)	-1.01 (1.16)	-6.74 (5.00)	-0.98 (4.90)	-16.07** (2.16)	-6.05* (3.36)	-7.69** (1.33)	0.99 (1.50)	-2.88 (4.80)	-5.92 (4.05)	-5.70** (2.60)	-5.40 (3.46)
Constant	17.55** (0.99)	18.96** (0.89)	13.20** (4.56)	19.05** (2.88)	22.54** (2.00)	19.55** (3.13)	29.17** (1.20)	31.85** (1.26)	21.51** (3.77)	27.06** (3.39)	27.17** (2.46)	25.77** (3.29)
Observations	440	398	45	15	164	76	1,106	1,013	89	65	357	155

Note:

Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$

Negative values represent more stability and constraint. Sorted respondents are those who feel more warmly to the party aligned racial group (e.g., Republican who feels more warmly towards whites than blacks). Not sorted respondents are those who feel more warmly to out-party racial group (e.g., Democrat who feels more warmly towards whites than blacks). Dependent variable is standard deviation to battery of policy questions asked in the previous sections. “% Place Race” equals percent of times respondents correctly place whites to the right of blacks on each policy. “% Place Party” equals percent of times respondents correctly place Republicans to the right of Democrats.

affiliation are aligned, the effect of party is stronger²⁸.

These findings suggest the increasing importance of party position knowledge to belief systems is due, at least in part, to the growing alignment between partisanship and group attitudes. Because party position knowledge seems to be more important to sorted respondents than non-sorted ones, party position knowledge plays a larger role in public opinion as the proportion of people with party-sorted group attitudes increases.

The patterns shown here align with the broader view that the sorting of partisans along group-based lines is responsible for the growing importance of partisanship to Americans’ political attitudes. In this view, the strength of partisanship is not a sign that group memberships, attitudes, and knowledge matter less, but that they matter differently: group attitudes structure public opinion by strengthening the effects of partisan attachment.²⁹

While these data are suggestive, social sorting is not the only possible cause of party’s growing importance to belief systems. For example, scholarship on affective polarization shows that while

²⁸In the Supplemental Appendix, we perform a similar analysis using a different way of capturing strengthening partisan identity: how important party was to their identity. People who said party was less important had larger effects of social group knowledge on stability and constraint (and vice versa for those to whom party mattered more). See Section 5.1 in the Supplemental Information.

²⁹We run a similar analysis of sorting on attitudes towards Democrats/Republicans and Liberals/Conservatives. “Not sorted” respondents rely on group cues more heavily. We also find that group cues are particularly important when a person disagrees with their party. See Section 5.2 in the Supplemental Information for analysis.

people's ratings of the parties have diverged over time, ratings of racial and other social groups have come closer together (Iyengar et al., 2012, 12). This narrowing of polarization in affect towards other social groups, but increase in polarization in partisan affect, could bolster the role of party. Surprisingly, this explanation has not been explored. More generally, though scholars of affective polarization have begun to investigate its relationship with issue attitudes (Dias and Lelkes, 2021), the relationship between affective polarization and belief systems remains understudied and offers one promising avenue for future research.

Discussion & Conclusion

We have argued that knowledge about which social groups support or oppose policies is central to forming durable and constrained political attitudes in the American public. 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. This knowledge of links between policies and racial groups creates attitudes that are more stable and constrained. People who know that different policies affect the same racial groups are more likely to organize their attitudes into liberal and conservative packages and hold more durable attitudes over time. However, these “ideological” positions are organized based on group attitudes rather than liberal and conservative ideological beliefs.

Our results also suggest that the role of party in generating attitude stability and constraint has increased since the 1970s, while the relative importance of social groups has declined. Our analysis suggests that party cues are especially strong for respondents that are socially sorted — that is, people who feel warmly to racial groups aligned with their party — and weakest for those whose racial identity is out-of-line with party. As party and group membership have come increasingly sorted in recent decades (e.g., Mason, 2018), and attachment to party increases, party position knowledge has become more important. Groups still matter to belief systems, but today, they largely seem to work through parties.

These findings speak to core questions of democratic accountability. Scholars have long been concerned that Americans do not have the political knowledge they need to make informed choices, as knowledge of parties' positions on issues was historically low. If political conflict is fundamentally about competition between group interests, however, knowledge about groups' interests is key to understanding politics. Our results suggest many people possess this knowledge: most Americans have a good idea of where salient social groups stand on issues. This suggests people possess the knowledge they need to understand politics, a rosier picture for democratic accountability than much of the literature on political knowledge would suggest.

The ubiquity and impact of social group placement knowledge have practical implications. Party cues are not, as some have suggested, the only source of stability in Americans' issue attitudes (Freeder et al., 2019). If interest groups can tie a policy to a salient social group, they can foster attitudes that are stable and tied to broader systems of attitudes towards policies related to the group. Though racial realignment has brought the race-related policies and attitudes we study here fully into line with party, entrepreneurs in other issue areas may be able to forge stable and constrained attitudes that cross-cut party lines. Group-based issue coalitions of this kind could undermine the sorting that undergirds affective polarization.

Though our theory applies to any group seen to demand or benefit from a policy, data availability largely limits our evidence to analysis of race-related issues.³⁰ These are particularly important cases given the centrality of racial groups to the modern American party system (Schickler, 2016). However, precisely because race is so central to American politics, it is difficult to generalize our result to the importance of other groups' positions to belief systems. Extending these analyses more fully to other social groups and issue areas is an important area for future work. Additionally, the questions available on group placement did not cover issue areas on which parties' positions have remained unclear in current discourse. Future work on issues not yet subsumed by party may better elucidate the role of social group knowledge in nonpartisan issues in a hyperpartisan time.

³⁰Section 6 in the Supplemental Information replicates our findings with limited data on class-based social groups and economic policies, and groups at the core of the culture wars (Christian Fundamentalists and LGBT people). Results are consistent for other groups, too.

Statements and Declarations

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by institutional review boards at the University of California Berkeley and and Princeton University, and certificate numbers are provided in the text. The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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