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Policy Polarization among Party Elites and the Significance of Political Awareness in the Mass Public

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This article analyzes opinions about abortion, racial, and social welfare policies, comparing their determinants among citizens with different levels of political information over the past several decades. Hypothesizing that growing elite partisan polarization may have exacerbated the political implications of differences in political awareness, the authors examine how increasing clarity of party–policy linkages among political elites influences party–policy linkages in the mass public. The results show that only the well informed responded to the growing elite polarization by becoming more partisan in their opinions. Apparently, in the absence of the motivation to develop coherent opinions, even a simplification of the political environment does not close the gaps between those who are more and less aware about politics.

Keywords: *polarization; party identification; issues; political awareness*

The political significance of the low and unequal distributions of political awareness, knowledge, sophistication, and engagement in the mass public remains one of the central questions for public opinion scholars. To some, the dual facts that many people are politically ignorant and that political ignorance is associated with ongoing social, economic, racial, ethnic, and gender cleavages in society are cause for great democratic concern (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Althaus 1998, 2003). Others acknowledge the “low mean, high variance” aspect of the political awareness distribution but express at least some skepticism about the “minimalist” implications (e.g., Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000). Taking note of the ample availability and opportunities to use “shortcuts” and “heuristics,” these scholars argue that many citizens are capable, despite their lack of political knowledge, to form coherent political views.¹

Easily reconciling the divergent views is unrealistic. But there are commonalities from which to build to analyze the relationship between political awareness and the nature of public opinion. In this article, we focus on the “choice context” (Sniderman 2000),

which refers to the larger political environment in which citizens acquire political information and form their opinions. Aspects of the choice context include the media environment (Althaus 2003; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006; Prior 2007), electoral institutions (Lupia and McCubbins 1998), the level of policy debate (Claassen and Highton 2006), and location in the electoral calendar (Nicholson 2003). By investigating how the political context relates to the connection between political awareness and public opinion, we shift attention from whether political information matters to focus instead on the conditions that minimize or exacerbate the effects of political information on public opinion.

The part of the political environment we examine in this article is the party system, specifically the

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clarity of party–policy linkages among political elites (activists, party leaders, and elected officials). As many have documented, one of the most notable changes in the American party system over the past forty years has been the increased polarization of the major parties (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder 1999; Jacobson 2000; Fiorina 2005). The ideological and policy divides between Democratic and Republican political elites have grown substantially while the intra party variation has diminished considerably. Today, across many major policy areas the parties are more internally unified and stand in greater contrast to one another than at any time in the recent past.

The influence of this change toward increased clarity of party–policy linkages among political elites, an area of increasing interest for political scientists (e.g., Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002a; Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Brewer 2005; Fiorina 2005), is our substantive focus. The notion that the nature of the party–policy links among political elites influences the strength of party–policy links in the mass public can be traced to *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960, 179–83). A straightforward prediction from this work is that as the clarity of party–policy linkages increases among party elites, the strength of the connections between partisanship and policy preferences—“constraint” (Converse 1964)—increases in the mass public. Here, our focus is on how citizens’ political awareness structures the relationship between partisanship and policy preferences. The primary hypothesis we develop, which finds strong empirical support, alleges that the trend toward clarity among party elites has enhanced the political significance of the low and uneven distribution of political knowledge in the mass public. By linking the importance of political information to the nature of the political environment and the structure of public opinion, this study suggests that it is important to distinguish questions about the possibility of whether less informed citizens are equally responsive to changes in the political environment from ones about whether they actually are.

Party–Policy Links among Elites and within the Mass Public

In this article, we use the terms *political information*, *political knowledge*, *political awareness*, *political sophistication*, *political engagement*, and *political expertise* interchangeably. We use them to denote a relatively long-term and stable characteristic

of individuals pertaining to the degree to which citizens pay attention to, understand, and know about the political world (Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992). These concepts all refer to general aspects that are distinct from knowledge and information about particular political events, issues, and people.²

As numerous studies show and all scholars agree, most individuals in the mass public are not well informed about politics, while some are quite knowledgeable.³ Because typical citizens appear so poorly informed, the seemingly simple connections (to those who are well informed) between policy preferences and partisanship may not be evident in the mass public. As Converse (1964, 229) found, “For the public, in sharp contrast to the elite, party preference seems by and large to be set off in a belief system of its own, relatively unconnected to issue positions.” While primarily attributing this lack of constraint to characteristics of individuals, the political context was also implicated as a cause. In *The American Voter*, on finding little relationship between policy preferences and partisanship among cross sections of the mass public in the 1950s, Campbell and his coauthors (1960, 180) wrote,

There are as many possible criteria of party policy as there are spokesmen, factions, and legislative or executive behaviors by party members, and in the heterogeneous American parties, these several indicators may give contradictory accounts. Even where a basic thrust in party policy can be discerned, we know that at some times on some issues there is greater cleavage between the parties than at other times or on other issues. *Thus the stimuli to be discriminated are themselves more or less ambiguous.* (emphasis added)

According to this formulation, two aspects of party elites’ policy positions are important for determining the ambiguity in party–policy linkages: (1) the level of similarity among party elites within each of the parties and (2) the magnitude of differences between party elites across parties.

Over the past several decades both indicators have changed, with the result being substantially greater clarity in party–policy links among political elites. On questions of social welfare and economic redistribution, while party differences have long been evident, since the 1970s the parties have evolved to become more internally homogenous and stand in greater contrast to each other (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997, 2006).⁴ Echoing the logic elaborated in *The American Voter*, McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006,

34) comment that “[as] the parties polarized, [partisan] cues became much more informative.” Party–policy differences on racial issues can be traced at least as far back as 1964 and Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater’s opposition to the Civil Rights Act, which had been signed by Democratic president Lyndon Johnson. Since then, the “issue evolution” with regard to race has produced growing party differences along with increased intraparty similarity (Carmines and Stimson 1989). More recently, party–policy clarity over cultural issues, especially abortion, has emerged among political elites. Also characterized as an instance of issue evolution (Adams 1997; Carmines and Woods 2002; Stimson 2004), lack of differentiation between the Democratic and Republican party elites in the 1970s has given way to growing polarization with the result that elite party positions have grown to differ “from each other as much as night differs from day” (Brewer and Stonecash 2007, 120).

Following directly from the explanation for modest relationships between partisanship and policy preferences described in Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1964), one would expect that the changes toward increased party–policy clarity (and diminished ambiguity) among political elites would be associated with stronger relationships between partisanship and policy preferences within the mass public. Over the past several decades, this is precisely what has been observed (Carmines and Stimson 1989; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Adams 1997; Layman and Carsey 2002a; Stimson 2004; Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Brewer 2005).⁵ Party–policy links in the public are stronger now than they were in the 1970s. Our focus concerns the role of political awareness for the changes observed in the mass public. Does the increased clarity in party–policy linkages diffuse into the lower strata of the mass public? On issues where the parties have had longstanding differences, does continued divergence produce more change among the less informed? If these questions are answered affirmatively, then the political significance of political awareness will decline over time as differences in constraint between those who are more and less informed diminish. But this need not be the case. As we explain below, more plausible is the proposition that the opposite occurs and that the political significance of political awareness has been enhanced as a result of the increased clarity in party–policy links among political elites.

Hypotheses

Given the change in party issue clarity over the past 30+ years, we treat this period of American politics as

a quasi-experiment to analyze how party–policy clarity among political elites relates to the nature of information effects in public opinion. We analyze how the changes in elite polarization relate to changes in the mass public, stratified by political awareness. In a political environment where party–policy linkages become clearer among elites, the connection between partisanship and policy preferences within the mass public ought to strengthen as citizens receive more consistent communications from political elites. Noting that partisan cues have become less ambiguous, we consider how the political significance of differences in political awareness within the mass public may have changed. Over time, there are three possibilities regarding how this relationship may have changed.

For several reasons, we believe the most plausible hypothesis regarding the gap between the more and less politically aware is that it has grown during the period of increased elite party issue clarity. People who are less aware about politics derive few intrinsic and expressive benefits from following, knowing, and talking about politics. As a result, they have little incentive to attend to the signals emanating from political elites. To them, the political world of the 1970s may appear quite similar to the one of today because of a lack of much, if any, serious attention to policy and ideological debates. Indeed, using education as a proxy for the reception of political communications, Hetherington (2001) shows that the growing salience of partisanship in the mass public has been disproportionately concentrated among the better educated. Without much motivation to attend to and receive political communications from elites, there is little reason to expect much of a connection between partisanship and policy preferences among the less informed, irrespective of the level of clarity of the party–policy linkages among political elites.

In contrast to the less informed, the more politically aware among those in the mass public are more engaged and derive expressive gratification from following politics. They have an intrinsic incentive to pay attention to the political world and its changes. At any point in time when party–policy polarization exists among political elites, there is good reason to observe stronger party–policy linkages among the politically aware compared to the less aware (Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Over time we expect to observe responsiveness to the changing political context because these citizens are following and understanding politics. Combined with the prediction of little responsiveness among the less aware, we therefore expect the differences between the better

and less informed, with regard to the strength of party–policy “constraint,” to increase as the linkages become clearer among political elites.⁶

The second possibility about how the political significance of political awareness has changed in response to the increased clarity of party–policy linkages among political elites is that it has not. The theoretical basis for this hypothesis derives from the research on heuristics identifying a wide variety of ways that citizens might come to hold “coherent” views in the absence of slavishly reading the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* along with watching programs such as the *News Hour* on television. Whether relying on opinion leaders in their social networks, simple partisan cues, reasoning from affective judgments, or whatever, the less informed have ample ways for the structure of their opinion to reflect the changing political context (Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000). The mechanisms of opinion change among the better and less informed may be different, but the results will be similar. For example, Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau (1995) claim that while some citizens are exposed to political communications which they subsequently remember and that influence their judgments, others are responsive by processing communications “on-line” without storing them in memory. The implication is that the changing nature of communications from political elites will produce similar changes in the party–policy links across the informational strata of the mass public.

Equal responsiveness also follows from the logic of the “parallel public” model of aggregate opinion change elaborated by Page and Shapiro (1992) and Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002). Both studies find similar opinion change over time across different subgroups of the citizenry, which suggests that cross-sectional differences remain intact, neither increasing nor decreasing by much, even as the political context changes.⁷ Applied to the question of party–policy linkages in the mass public, the notion suggests that the differences (if any) in the strength of the links between party identification and policy preferences evident across the informational strata of the citizenry in the 1970s would remain similar, even as the clarity of party–policy links among elites changed over the subsequent thirty years. According to this view, the increased clarity should have produced roughly equal increases in party–policy links within the mass public, irrespective of political awareness.

The last possibility is that the increasing clarity of party–policy linkages may disproportionately benefit the less informed. If differences in political information are conceived as primarily reflecting differences in ability, then simplifying the political environment may reduce the political significance of political awareness. As we explained earlier, we think the opposite is more plausible, but a diminution is possible. Just such a pattern has been evident in some turnout studies that show that making registration easier narrows the turnout differences between the better and less educated (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Applying this notion to the question of partisanship and policy preferences produces the optimistic notion that the political relevance of political awareness will diminish as the less informed evince disproportionate strengthening of the connection between partisanship and policy preferences.

In sum, if the explanation for the relatively low level of constraint observed between partisanship and policy preferences documented by Campbell et al. (1960) and Converse (1964) derives from the lack of clarity in party–policy links among the political elites, then increased constraint in recent decades may derive from disproportionate change among the poorly informed, parallel change across the information strata, or disproportionate change among the well informed. Depending on the causes of differences in political awareness and whether differences are less about reception of relevant political information than how it is processed, the relationship between political awareness and the strength of party–policy links in the mass public may have remained the same or even declined. However, we hypothesize that responsiveness is a function of political awareness (which facilitates reception) with the more politically aware changing the most.

In the period under study, existing elite differences were enlarged and became clearer on the issues of race and social welfare. For abortion, lack of party clarity evolved into growing clarity. Ideally, we would have issues for which there had been no change in elite clarity and also a decrease in clarity. Issues of these types would provide greater analytical leverage. But with the two types that are available, as we elaborate below, we do have substantial leverage. In addition, while partisan elites were polarizing on issues, during this time other changes in the political context were ongoing, perhaps most notably the transition from the “broadcast” to the “post-broadcast” era (Prior 2007). While

it is possible that these other factors are responsible for the changing patterns of responsiveness we find, for a variety of reasons we contend that it is unlikely. After describing the research design and presenting the primary empirical results, we address this question in the discussion.

Research Design

To test the competing hypotheses about the relationship between the changing political context and the political significance of political awareness, we analyze the correlates of policy preferences using American National Election Studies (NES) data from 1972 to 2004. The earliest year in the analysis is 1972 because it is the first year for which there are questions about policy preferences that have continued to be asked in subsequent surveys to the present. Following other studies of information effects in policy preferences (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Althaus 1998, 2003; Gilens 2001), we model policy preferences as a function of a wide variety of demographic characteristics and party identification. The demographic characteristics (e.g., family income, education, race, gender, and age) are included to indirectly tap a variety of interests that might bear a systematic relationship to policy preferences. With these factors included, we focus on the relationship between partisanship and policy preferences in three areas: social policy (abortion), social welfare policy (government-guaranteed jobs and standard of living), and racial policy (the amount of effort the government should make to improve the socioeconomic position of blacks).⁸

To measure the nature of change, if any, in the moderating effects of political awareness, we differentiate respondents by political awareness and divide the survey data into three periods (1972–1982, 1984–1992, and 1994–2004).⁹ Because we are interested in how the structure of policy preferences varies with political awareness and the clarity of elite party–policy linkages (proxied by time period), we allow the effects of each independent variable to vary with political awareness and period. Within time periods, we estimate separate models for each of four levels of political awareness. We do this to allow greater flexibility in the type and magnitude of information effects in policy opinion than has typically been allowed for in previous research, which tends to estimate linear interaction effects between party identification (and the other independent variables) and political information (e.g., Althaus 1998, 2003).

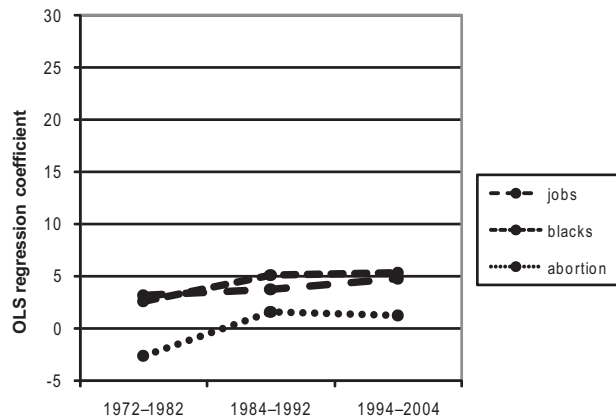
Our measurement of all the variables in the analysis is relatively straightforward. The demographic variables are very similar to those used in previous studies and represent an exhaustive list of characteristics believed to have some bearing on policy preferences: income, race, region (a set of dummy variables), education, home owner, union, female, age (and age squared), married, religious denomination (a set of dummy variables), frequency of church or synagogue attendance, years lived in community, occupation (a set of dummy variables), and labor force status.¹⁰ To measure partisanship we used the standard NES 7-point scale, rescaled to range from 0 (*strong Democrat*) to 1 (*strong Republican*).¹¹ Our measure of economic policy preferences is based on respondents' self-placements on a 7-point scale about government-guaranteed jobs and income. Likewise, racial policy preferences are measured with a 7-point scale about preferred levels of federal aid to blacks. The abortion question has four response categories. We coded each of these three issue questions to range from 0 (*most liberal*) to 100 (*most conservative*).

Finally, to measure political awareness, we sought items in the NES surveys that were regularly included during the time period under study and have been identified by other scholars (e.g., Smith 1989; Zaller 1992; Althaus 2003) as helping to differentiate the more and less politically informed. We rely on a total of fifteen indicators that are described in the appendix. In all of the years except one, at least thirteen were included.¹² To take into account the slightly different mixes of indicators available in each year, along with the fact that the difficulty of some knowledge questions depends on the political context,¹³ on a survey-by-survey basis we compute respondents' scores and then divide them into quartiles. Because there is little reason to believe that there is much temporal variation in the public's level of knowledge (Althaus 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), relying on categories defined by percentiles should not pose a problem.

Results

How have citizens in the different informational strata of the mass public responded as the party–policy links among political elites have become clearer? Our answer begins with the estimated partisanship effects for each of the three issues among the least informed quartile. Figure 1 displays the estimated effects of partisanship on policy preferences for citizens in the

Figure 1
Estimated Effect of Partisanship on Policy Opinion
(Political Information = Bottom Quartile)

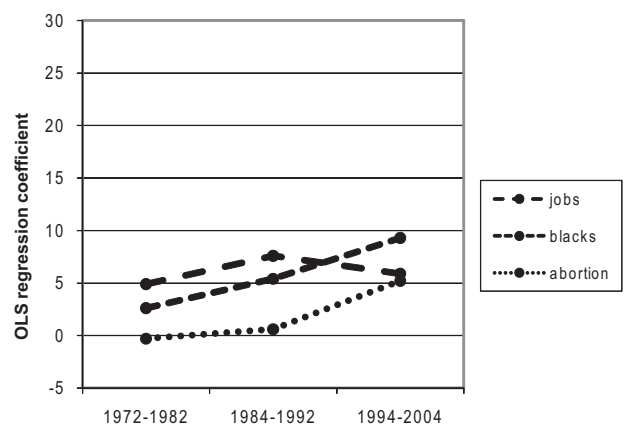


Note: OLS = ordinary least squares. The figure shows the estimated effect of party identification (coded on a 0 to 1 scale) on policy preferences (each coded on a 0 to 100 scale) in each period. The three issues are jobs (government-guaranteed jobs or income), blacks (federal government aid to blacks), and abortion (circumstances under which abortion should be allowed).

bottom quartile of the awareness scale. There are a total of nine estimates, one for each of the three issues in each of the three periods.¹⁴ For example, the estimated effect of partisanship on abortion policy preferences in the 1972–1982 period is -2.7 . With party identification coded to range from 0 to 1 and abortion preferences coded to range from 0 to 100, the estimated effect indicates that strong Republicans were marginally more liberal with regard to abortion than strong Democrats during this time (a mere 2.7-point difference on the 100-point scale that does not approach conventional levels of statistical significance). This is hardly surprising given that interparty differences on abortion among party elites were not manifest during this period.

The key question is whether, on the differentiation and growing interparty divergence among party elites, those in the mass public followed. Figure 1 clearly shows that among the least informed citizens there is no evidence of responsiveness. There was barely any effect of party identification in the first period, and there was hardly any noticeable effect in the second period (1982–1992) either, with an estimate of just 1.6. By the third period (1994–2004), after at least a decade of growing clarity, there was still virtually no connection between partisanship and abortion policy preferences; the estimated effect was

Figure 2
Estimated Effect of Partisanship on Policy Opinion
(Political Information = Third Quartile)

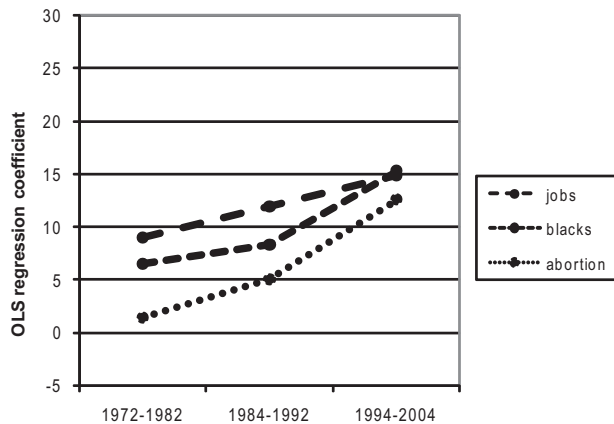


Note: OLS = ordinary least squares. The figure shows the estimated effect of party identification (coded on a 0 to 1 scale) on policy preferences (each coded on a 0 to 100 scale) in each period. The three issues are jobs (government-guaranteed jobs or income), blacks (federal government aid to blacks), and abortion (circumstances under which abortion should be allowed).

just 1.3. So despite the dramatic development of clarity in party–policy links among political elites, among the least informed in the mass public there has been no evidence of a growing connection between partisanship and abortion policy preferences.

If the lack of the appearance of any substantial growth in the connection between partisanship and abortion policy preferences among the least informed is because of the fact that abortion was a (relatively) new instance of interparty divergence, then a different pattern should be evident for the other two issues, where some amount of party elite divergence was already in place by the first period. The divergence on racial issues is commonly traced at least as far back as 1964, and differences in social welfare policy preferences between Democratic and Republican elites go back much further. Yet among the least informed in the citizenry, there is little evidence of party–policy correspondence on either of these issues during the 1972–1982 period. Nor, despite the increasing elite clarity since then, has there been evidence of responsiveness. In short, consistent with our hypothesis, across all three issues there appears to be no strengthening of the party–policy connections over the past thirty years among the least politically aware, even though there has been increased clarity of party–policy linkages among political elites.

Figure 3
Estimated Effect of Partisanship on Policy Opinion
(Political Information = Second Quartile)

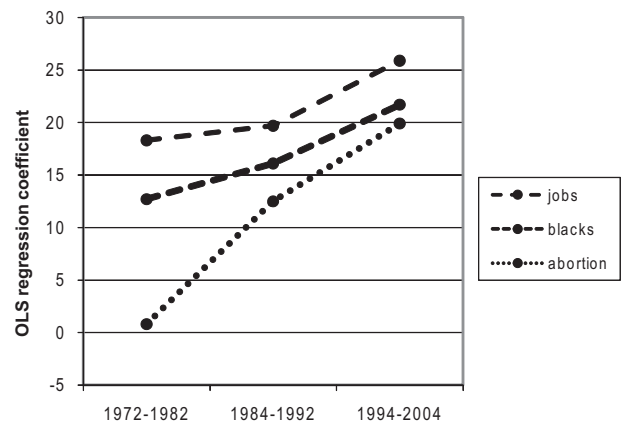


Note: OLS = ordinary least squares. The figure shows the estimated effect of party identification (coded on a 0 to 1 scale) on policy preferences (each coded on a 0 to 100 scale) in each period. The three issues are jobs (government-guaranteed jobs or income), blacks (federal government aid to blacks), and abortion (circumstances under which abortion should be allowed).

For citizens who scored in the middle quartiles of the awareness scale, there are weak and modestly changing partisanship effects. As shown in Figure 2, across all three issues, the largest estimated effect of partisanship among those in the third quartile is just 9.3, for aid to blacks in the 1994–2004 period. For those in the second quartile, the largest effect is 15.3, also for aid to blacks in the 1994–2004 period (Figure 3). Viewed longitudinally, there does appear to be some increase in the party–policy linkages within these two groups, but as will soon be apparent, they are smaller than what we observe among the most informed.

Our expectation was that in comparison to their less informed counterparts, greater responsiveness would be evident among the better informed. The results shown in Figure 4 corroborate this notion. In contrast to the less informed, those in the top quartile of the awareness scale display change that corresponds to that which was happening among political elites. On the issue of abortion, Figure 4 shows that while there was virtually no connection between party identification and abortion policy preferences in the first period when there was no divergence between party elites, in each subsequent period the relationship grew stronger. By the third period, the estimated partisanship effect for those in the top quartile was 19.9. Likewise, in the third period, the estimated effects of partisanship on aid to blacks and

Figure 4
Estimated Effect of Partisanship on Policy Opinion
(Political Information = Top Quartile)



Note: OLS = ordinary least squares. The figure shows the estimated effect of party identification (coded on a 0 to 1 scale) on policy preferences (each coded on a 0 to 100 scale) in each period. The three issues are jobs (government-guaranteed jobs or income), blacks (federal government aid to blacks), and abortion (circumstances under which abortion should be allowed).

government-guaranteed jobs or income also grew. For those in the top quartile, the estimated effects increased from 12.3 in the first period to 21.7 in the third for aid to blacks and from 18.3 to 25.9 for government-guaranteed jobs or income.

Taken together, Figures 1 to 4 suggest that responsiveness to the growing clarity in party–policy linkages among political elites was increasing with political awareness. Generally small and unchanging effects are apparent for the less informed, while larger and more responsive effects are evident among the better informed. These results are based on thirty-six regressions, one for each of the three issues in the three periods for each of the four awareness quartiles. In addition to the visual evidence we present in Figures 1 to 4, we also provide tests of whether changes in the strength of party–policy links were “statistically significant.” For each of the four awareness groups we estimated a single regression, and in each of these regressions we included party identification and two dummy variables to distinguish the second and third time periods (leaving the first as the baseline). We also included interactions between party identification and each of the period indicators.¹⁵ The interaction terms provide estimates of how different the effects of partisanship were in the designated period compared to its effect in the first period. If there was no real change, then we would expect

Table 1
Estimated Changes in the Effects of Partisanship
on Policy Preferences
(1972–1982 Period versus 1994–2004 Period)

Political Awareness	Policy Preferences Regarding:		
	Abortion	Aid to Blacks	Guaranteed Jobs or Income
Bottom quartile	3.99 (2.80)	2.68 (2.98)	1.53 (3.10)
Third quartile	5.56* (2.48)	6.71** (2.33)	1.03 (2.74)
Second quartile	11.09*** (2.37)	8.74*** (2.08)	5.83** (2.23)
Top quartile	19.15*** (2.10)	9.02*** (1.94)	7.59*** (1.88)

Note: Cell entries are the estimated changes and standard errors, in parentheses, in the effect of partisanship on the designated issue preference between the first (1972–1982) and last (1994–2004) periods. The estimates were obtained by estimating four ordinary least squares regressions, one for each awareness quartile. For the four models, party identification and all the demographic variables were included, along with interactions between each and dummy variables indicating the second and third periods. The table shows the results for the interactions between party identification and period 3, which are the estimates for how much different the effect of partisanship was in period 3 compared to the baseline (period 1). The Supplementary Appendix, available online at <http://prq.sagepub.com>, provides the full set of estimated baseline and interactive effects of partisanship.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

small coefficients in comparison to their standard errors. We would expect the opposite if real change did occur.

Table 1 reports the results of comparing the effects of partisanship, within levels of awareness, in the first (1972–1982) and last (1994–2004) periods for each of the three issues. The null hypothesis is that the effect of party identification was unchanged. The first row of estimates in Table 1 shows that for those in the bottom awareness quartile, we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no change across all three issues using conventional levels of statistical significance. This suggests that citizens in this awareness stratum were not responsive to the notable changes that had occurred among party elites.

While the increases shown in Figure 2 for those in the third quartile were smaller than for those in the top quartile (Figure 4), the statistical test does indicate that it is likely that there was at least some real change in party–policy links with regard to abortion and aid to blacks (both coefficients more than twice

exceed their standard errors) but not for government-guaranteed jobs or income. Finally, for those in the second and top quartiles, we can quite confidently reject the null hypothesis of no change for each of the three issues when comparing the effects of partisanship in the last period to its effects in the first. Thus, the statistical tests are consistent with the substantive results presented in Figures 1 to 4. To the extent that there was change in the strength of party–policy links in the mass public, it was disproportionately observed among the better informed.

Discussion

Over the past several decades, interparty differences and intraparty unity among political elites have been on the rise for a variety of issues including social welfare, race, and abortion. As a result, the “cueing messages” (Zaller 1992) emanating from Democratic party elites are now more consistently aligned with the liberal position on these issues, while those from Republican party elites are more consistently aligned with conservative positions. If ordinary citizens are responsive to the party–policy links among elites, then the connection between partisanship and policy preferences in the mass public should be stronger now than in previous periods. While previous research has confirmed this proposition for the public as a whole (Carmines and Stimson 1989; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Adams 1997; Stimson 2004; Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Brewer 2005), our focus has been on the question of how the degree of responsiveness depends on political awareness.

Among the less aware, we found little evidence that party–policy links have strengthened over time. This lack of responsiveness implies that these citizens either did not receive (directly or indirectly) or react to the changing cues from party elites. If they had, then while they might not be able to recall (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995) the considerations underlying the relationship, increased constraint would still be evident. Its absence suggests that less informed members of the mass public were not using effective heuristics or shortcuts that facilitated responsiveness to the substantial change in the party–policy links among party elites. Having found virtually no responsiveness with regard to the issue newly subject to partisan polarization (abortion) along with no responsiveness to the increased clarity on the issues over which there had already been

polarization (social welfare and race) suggests that there might be no issue over which the less aware would evince responsiveness to party elite clarity. If it takes the less informed more time but they are ultimately responsive to party–policy differentiation, then responsiveness would have been evident for social welfare and race, even if not for abortion.

In contrast to the less informed, among the well informed there has been a sizable strengthening in party–policy ties.¹⁶ Consequently, there has been no diminution of the political significance of political awareness as the political context simplified with greater consistency and clarity among party elites. Instead, to the extent that there was change, the differences between those more and less informed in the mass public grew larger.¹⁷ Our explanation draws on the differences in motivation that lead some to become more politically informed than others. We share the view that citizens “can” learn what they need to know (Lupia and McCubbins 1998) and that the political environment provides ample reliable opportunities to do so. Encyclopedic knowledge is by no means necessary. But if the lack of encyclopedic knowledge indicates low levels of political interest and engagement, then the key difference between those who are more and less knowledgeable about politics relates to motivation. Specifically, absent motivation to learn the parties’ positions on important issues, poorly informed citizens are at a disadvantage when attempting to use party cues to articulate political opinions on important issues.

In this article we have linked the changes in the clarity of party–policy linkages among party elites to disproportionate change in party–policy constraint among the more politically aware members of the mass public. While we cannot absolutely rule out alternative causes, the evidence strongly supports our interpretation. A central role for changes in elite clarity is apparent from the fact that the pattern of responsiveness for the issue where there was initially no elite party differentiation (abortion) was the same as the pattern observed for the issues where preexisting divergence grew larger (social welfare and race). The importance of elite party–policy clarity is also evident in the first period. Across all levels of political awareness there are no apparent connections between partisanship and policy preferences regarding the issue on which party elites had yet to become distinctive and polarized, while noticeable relationships, especially among the better informed, were evident for the issues on which there was already some amount of elite party–policy clarity. Because

we have not directly measured the clarity of party–policy linkages among political elites in the three policy areas and instead used time as a proxy, it is possible that some other factor that has also changed over time may be the actual cause for the changes in the structure of mass opinion we have demonstrated.¹⁸ For example, there have been ongoing changes in the media environment during the period covered by our study (Prior 2007).¹⁹ But if the media environment, or some other factor, were the primary cause, then we would expect increased differences between the more and less politically aware on other indicators of reception of political information that match the differential changes with regard party–policy constraint. One such indicator is knowledge of party control of Congress. Although the more politically aware displayed greater change relative to the less aware with regard to party–policy linkages over time, the differences between the more and less politically aware with regard to knowledge of party control has been largely unchanged.²⁰ This adds to the persuasiveness of our claim that changing clarity among party elites caused the disproportionate changes in the mass public that we found.²¹

Our results also speak to another question about the public’s political awareness. Prior and Lupia (2008, 180) show that “arbitrary attributes of survey interviews” tend to depress scores on knowledge tests. This provides an important reason to avoid drawing inferences about citizen competence simply on the basis of citizens’ scores on such measures. Instead, inferences should be based on whether scores on awareness measures are linked to other characteristics with more direct political meaning. As Converse (1964) explained in detail, “constraint” among elements in citizens’ belief systems is such a characteristic. By showing that constraint and changes in constraint vary with measures of political awareness, we have avoided the problem raised by Prior and Lupia. If citizens who are in our bottom quartile were there simply because of arbitrary aspects of how we measure political awareness but were otherwise similar to those in our top quartile, then on measures of constraint and responsiveness they would have appeared like those in the top quartile. The fact that they do not appear “as if” they were better informed suggests to us that there remain important differences that are not merely because of arbitrary aspects of how awareness is typically measured in surveys.

While we are confident that clarity in party–policy links among political elites is the cause of our empirical results, there is an important question left unanswered.

We conceived of party–policy clarity as the combination of two distinct components: intraparty similarity and interparty differences. Over time, clarity has increased because the variation in policy positions among elites within each of the parties has declined while the differences between the parties has grown. Party positions are more distinctive and further apart now than they were in the 1970s. But increased intraparty homogeneity and growing interparty differences need not go hand in hand. Suppose that over time both parties tended to lose their extremists and their moderates, leaving each party with its core supporters. The result would be greater homogeneity within the parties without greater difference between them.²² Would change of this nature produce greater constraint in the mass public? Maybe. Ideally we would have isolated the separate causal contributions of intraparty changes and interparty changes, but because both changed together we were unable to do so. However, it is not necessary that these changes occur together. Future research, perhaps through the use of experiments where one can manipulate one feature at a time, may provide additional insight into the important question of the nature of the mass public’s response to party elites.

Conclusion

In 1996 Larry Bartels surveyed the research of information and public opinion and wrote that the question of whether typical citizens who are generally poorly informed about politics are nevertheless able to use shortcuts and heuristics to appear “as if” they are fully informed remained unanswered. While “those who have viewed a well-informed electorate as crucial to the functioning of democracy have been too little burdened by the scientific demand for supporting evidence, the same could be said of those who have viewed the political ignorance of the average voter as largely or wholly irrelevant” (Bartels 1996, 195). In short, he suggested that “convincing empirical evidence simply has not been adduced one way or the other” (Bartels 1996, 202). Since then, there has been impressive theoretical development that works out the conditions under which poorly informed citizens can make “reasoned choices” (e.g., Lupia and McCubbins 1998), but the mounting empirical evidence showing sizable information effects in public opinion suggests that these conditions may often not be met (or are only partially met) in the actual political world (Bartels 1996; Althaus 1998, 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Gilens

2001). In this article we have attempted to move scholarship forward by identifying an aspect of the political context that contributes to the magnitude of information effects in public opinion. Future research into additional causes is clearly warranted as part of ongoing attempts to understand the significance of the uneven distribution of political awareness in the mass public.

The results of our analysis carry important implications beyond the particulars of this study. Consider the finding that voters are more likely to make choices that are consistent with their values, attitudes, and policy preferences in presidential elections marked by greater ideological polarization between the candidates in comparison to elections with less ideological polarization (Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Lau, Andersen, and Redlawsk 2008). The logic of the argument elaborated here implies that those most responsive to changes in the ideological character of elections will be the better informed. As a result, the increase in consistency will likely be concentrated among the politically aware with the consequence of enlarging the differences between them and the less informed. If this is the case, then our contribution reveals several trade-offs that appear to be inherent in democratic systems with near universal franchise. When competing parties offer distinctly different policy platforms and ideologies, the result is that the political significance of differences in political awareness grows larger. On the other hand, in systems that fail to approximate the responsible party model, the result is a more muddled set of choices, but the political consequences of information disparities are likely smaller.

Increased party elite clarity on issues makes it easier to understand politics and develop a constrained belief system. The finding that the more informed benefit disproportionately is similar to results showing that easing the voting process, through reforms such as early voting and voting by mail, produces disproportionate turnout increases among the better off so that “reforms designed to make it easier for registered voters to cast their ballots actually increase, rather than reduce, socioeconomic biases in the composition of the voting public” (Berinsky 2005, 471). The common thread is political motivation. Citizens lacking interest and motivation do not stand to gain as much intrinsic or expressive gratification as those who are more engaged, and therefore the effects of making things easier, whether through party elite clarity or institutional changes, exacerbate political differences rather than reduce them. For those interested

in realizing the democratic value of equality, attention therefore needs to be directed toward enlarging the population of politically engaged individuals. This is a difficult task that has become more difficult as citizens are increasingly able to pursue nonpolitical interests with greater ease (Prior 2007).

Appendix

Measuring Political Awareness

As described in the main text, we sought awareness indicators identified in previous research (e.g., Smith 1989; Zaller 1992; Althaus 2003) that were asked repeatedly during the period spanned by our study (1972–2004). For each year, we used all available indicators, constructed an additive scale, and then divided respondents into quartiles. Below we describe each indicator and identify the years, if any, for which it was *not* available.

Interviewer rating: Coded 0 to 4 based on National Election Studies interviewers' assessment of respondents' level of political information.

House majority (pre-election): Coded 0 or 1 based on whether respondents correctly identified the party controlling the House of Representatives before the election.

House majority (postelection): Coded 0 or 1 based on whether respondents correctly identified the party controlling the House of Representatives after the election. (Not asked in 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, or 2004.)

Senate majority (pre-election): Coded 0 or 1 based on whether respondents correctly identified the party controlling the Senate before the election. (Not asked in 1972, 1976, 1978, or 1980.)

Relative party ideological placement: Coded 0 or 1 based on whether respondents correctly placed the Democratic party to the left of the Republican party on the 7-point ideological scale.

Party conservatism: Coded 0 or 1 based on whether respondents correctly identified the Republican party as the more conservative of the two political parties. (Not asked in 1978, 1980, 1982, 1986, 1994, 1996, 1998, or 2000.)

House candidate name recall: Coded 0 to 2 based on whether respondents did not recall any House candidates' names and parties (0), recalled one House candidate's name and party (1), or recalled both House candidates' names and parties (2). (Not asked in 1972, 1976, or 2004.)

Presidential feeling thermometer: Coded 0 to 2 based on whether respondents did not provide a rating of the president (0), provided a rating of 50 (1), or provided a non-50 rating (2).

Vice presidential feeling thermometer: Coded 0 to 2 based on same coding rules as those used for presidential feeling thermometer.

Democratic party feeling thermometer: Coded 0 to 2 based on same coding rules as those used for presidential feeling thermometer.

Republican party feeling thermometer: Coded 0 to 2 based on same coding rules as those used for presidential feeling thermometer.

Democratic party likes: Coded 0 to 2 based on whether respondents provided no reasons to like the party (0), one reason to like the party (1), or two or more reasons to like the party (2). (Not asked in 1998.)

Republican party likes: Coded 0 to 2 based on whether respondents provided no reasons to like the party (0), one reason to like the party (1), or two or more reasons to like the party (2). (Not asked in 1998.)

Democratic party dislikes: Coded 0 to 2 based on whether respondents provided no reasons to dislike the party (0), one reason to dislike the party (1), or two or more reasons to dislike the party (2). (Not asked in 1998.)

Republican party dislikes: Coded 0 to 2 based on whether respondents provided no reasons to dislike the party (0), one reason to dislike the party (1), or two or more reasons to dislike the party (2). (Not asked in 1998.)

Notes

1. In a new line of research, Prior and Lupia (2008, 180) provide another rejoinder and argue that low scores on knowledge scales may simply be artifacts of how knowledge is measured and therefore "underestimate the public's true abilities."

2. To be sure, one common way to measure this relatively stable, long-term characteristic is by asking citizens questions about specific facts across different domains of the political world (Luskin 1987; Zaller 1992; Price and Zaller 1993; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

3. "The two simplest truths . . . about the distribution of political information in modern electorates are that the mean is low and the variance high" (Converse 1990, 372).

4. One way to quantify the change is with McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal's (1997, 2006) spatial estimates on the ideological locations of Members of Congress. Their DW-NOMINATE scores for House members show that ideological differences among Democrats (measured by the standard deviation of their ideological locations) declined 24 percent between the first (1972–1982) and last (1994–2004) periods we study in this article. Ideological differences among Republicans declined 16 percent. And the average difference between Democrats and Republicans increased 45 percent. (Note that these figures are based on our own analysis of the NOMINATE data made available through Keith Poole's voteview Web site: <http://voteview.com/dwnl.htm>.)

5. Some research in the wake of *The American Voter* claimed the turbulent political context of the 1960s and early 1970s caused increased constraint in the mass public compared to the relatively quiescent 1950s (Nie and Andersen 1974; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976). But the empirical evidence supporting the claim was shown to be the result of a methodological artifact because of changes in question wording (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1978; Smith 1989).

6. Over short periods of time (two years and four years), Layman and Carsey (2002b) and Carsey and Layman (2006) show that this is what happens. Through our analysis of differential responsiveness over three decades, we are able to determine whether the less aware lag but eventually manifest equal or at least

some responsiveness to the long-term changes in the political environment. What we are unable to do in our analysis of long-term adjustments to changes in the political environment is estimate the reciprocal causal relationships between partisanship and issue positions, a task that requires the kind of panel data employed by Layman and Carsey (2002b) and Carsey and Layman (2006).

7. "This uniformity of preference change across individuals points us to search for uniform explanations for the phenomenon, to responsiveness to real events and conditions as cause[s]" (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, 219).

8. While these issues tap the major ongoing and emerging policy cleavages between the parties, they are also the only policy questions that have been asked repeatedly and consistently since the early 1970s. Ideally, we would have included more issues, but data availability limited us to these three. There has been virtually no change in the format of the jobs and race questions. In the 1980 survey, the National Election Studies (NES) asked the same abortion question that was asked in 1972, 1976, and 1978, along with a modified version that was subsequently used from 1982 to 2004. To assure ourselves and readers that the question change is not responsible for changes we observe over time in the effects of political awareness, we note that the question did not change in the latter two periods (1982–1992 and 1994–2004), while the trend toward a stronger relationship between the awareness of abortion–partisanship relationship did.

9. All election years are included except 1974 and 2002. The NES surveys from these two years do not include the policy questions (abortion, government-guaranteed jobs, and federal aid to blacks in 2002 and abortion in 1974) present in all the other years. We divide the data into three periods rather than estimating yearly models to minimize the influence of idiosyncratic variation because of particular political events occurring in specific years while bringing into clearer relief the long-term changes, if any, in the structure of policy preferences. Another way to address this issue would be to estimate models that allow linear trends in the strength in party–policy linkages, by political awareness, similar to what Bartels (2006) does in his analysis of the relationship between issue preferences and presidential votes over time, by education. We elected to divide the data into periods to allow for the possibility of nonlinearities in changes, some of which are evident in Figures 1 to 4. That said, the same patterns of results are obtained whether the data are divided into periods or linear trends are specified.

10. All of the variables were either 0–1 dichotomies or coded on a 0 to 1 scale.

11. In preliminary analyses, we experimented with different ways of coding weak identifiers and leaners and found no appreciable differences in the results.

12. In 1998, nine of the fifteen items were included.

13. For example, while the more aware are more likely to know which party controls Congress, the difficulty of the question—indicated by the overall proportion of the sample that provides the correct answer—depends on contextual factors such as the presence of divided government (Bennett and Bennett 1993; Nicholson and Segura 1999).

14. The regression coefficients on which the figures are based are provided in a supplemental appendix, available online at <http://prq.sagepub.com>. Also included in that appendix are the standard errors, model fit statistics, and sample sizes.

15. In addition, we included interactions between all the other independent variables and the two time period indicators.

16. Following Althaus (1998, 2003) and Gilens (2001), we have modeled policy preferences as a function of partisanship, which implies that citizens alter their policy preferences to bring them into alignment with their partisanship. In reality, causality most likely runs in both directions. With regard to assessing responsiveness and changes in constraint, the direction of causality is less important than the strength of relationship and how it has changed. Even so, when we respecify the models making partisanship the dependent variable and policy preferences the independent ones, a nearly identical pattern of results emerges. Moreover, when explicitly allowing for the possibility of reciprocal effects in a panel study covering four years, Carsey and Layman (2006) found that even among those for whom the theoretical claim of policy preferences causing partisanship is strongest, the influence of partisanship on policy preferences was generally stronger than the influence of policy preferences on partisanship.

17. The same is true for perceptions of relative party locations on the issues. For government-guaranteed jobs or income and government aid to blacks (but not abortion), respondents have usually been asked where they perceive each party to be located. While there has been no change among the less informed in the average distance on either issue as clarity among party elites has grown, the perceived distance between the parties among the more politically aware is apparent.

18. As described earlier in the article, there is broad scholarly consensus on the long-term patterns of party elite change in the three issue areas studied in this article. We have found no dissent from the view that with regard to social welfare, race, and abortion, party clarity has increased. Thus, we do not believe it necessary to precisely quantify the changes in each policy area over time. Moreover, validly constructing policy-specific scales of party clarity that are comparable over a period of decades has proven an elusive quest. The data most commonly used to measure party elite positions are roll call votes in Congress. The problem is comparability over time because the "cutpoints" vary as political agendas change (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Karol 2007).

19. In terms of timing, party elite polarization precedes the development of stronger party–policy links in the mass public (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Adams 1997) and the general "resurgence" of mass partisanship (Hetherington 2001). If citizens simply respond to the media environment and elites respond to citizens, then elite clarity would follow from greater polarization in the public rather than precede it.

20. In the first period of our study, the gap between the most and least informed with regard to knowledge of party control was 74 percentage points. In the third period, the gap was a bit lower, 67 percentage points.

21. To be clear, we are not suggesting that changes in the media environment (and other long-term changes in political context) are not substantively important, only that they do not explain empirical results reported in this article.

22. In this case, the mean and median within each party would be unchanged, leaving the difference between the parties unchanged as well.

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