

The Long-Term Dynamics of Partisanship and Issue Orientations

Benjamin Highton University of California, Davis
Cindy D. Kam Vanderbilt University

Partisanship and issue orientations are among the foundational concepts for behavioral researchers. We seek to understand their causal relationship. One view suggests that party identification, as a central and long-standing affective orientation, influences citizens' issue positions. Another view claims that issue orientations influence party identification. We take both theories into account in this article and argue that the direction of causality may depend upon the political context. Using the Political Socialization Panel Study, we analyze the long-term dynamic relationship between partisanship and issue orientations. The results from our cross-lagged structural equation models are inconsistent with a single, time-invariant, unidirectional causal story. The causal relationship between partisanship and issue orientations appears to depend upon the larger political context. In the early period from 1973 to 1982, partisanship causes issue orientations. In the later period, from 1982 to 1997, the causal arrow is reversed, and issue orientations significantly shape partisanship.

The relative importance of party identification and issue orientations in the belief systems of ordinary citizens has been a topic of interest at least since the publication of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960/1980).¹ The authors of *The American Voter* argue that durable, psychological attachments to parties are the basis of partisan identifications that have “profound influence across the full range of political objects” (Campbell et al. 1960/1980, 128). While at odds with traditional democratic theory, this view contends that party identification shapes, much more than it is shaped by, citizens’ attitudes toward nationally debated issues (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960/1980; Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979; Goren 2005; Miller and Shanks 1996; Stokes 1966).² In contrast, others give issues a more prominent causal role, with party affiliation being much more the result, rather than

the cause, of policy positions (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Achen 2002; Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Jackson 1975; Page and Jones 1979). As Fiorina argues, “[T]he ‘issues’ are *in* party identification,” (1981, 200) rather than party identification being “in” the issues.³

Scholarly interest in the relationship between party identification and issue attitudes is easy to understand because answers to the “What causes what?” question have profound implications for the interpretation of mass politics and the meaning of political outcomes. For example, toward the end of his seminal essay on “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” Converse (1964) analyzed the meaning of Nazi party electoral success between 1928 and 1932. From his perspective that issue preferences (and ideology) were peripheral to ordinary citizens’ political beliefs, he reasoned that those voting for the Nazis were not

¹The original data used in this article are publicly available at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>). Syntax files necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the paper are available from the authors upon request. Full question text and full results for the tables appear in the online appendix, which is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/JOP>.

²Goren (2005) focuses on core values, which he views as causally prior to issue positions. His finding that partisanship shapes values more than values shape partisanship would imply that partisanship shapes issue positions.

³Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002), while making the case for over-time stability in partisanship, do not exclude the possibility of partisanship being responsive to issue orientations (especially as they are connected to prominent social groups). What they do reject is the possibility that partisanship responds much, if at all, to short-term political evaluations, like retrospective judgments about economic performance and presidential approval.

endorsing the substantive content of the party's platform. More generally, he claimed that "the true motivations and comprehensions of [mass] supporters may have little or nothing to do with the distinctive beliefs of the endorsed elite" (Converse 1964, 249). Reflecting on the finding that the "less expected flow from prior party loyalties to issue positioning seemed remarkably strong," Converse concluded that a "running assumption of standard democratic theory, as well as many of the later 'rational' models" was incorrect (Converse 1975, 117). A radically different understanding emerges when "party affiliation decisions are issue-based political decisions" (Jackson 1975, 181). In this situation, "The fundamental result is that voters are trying to use elections and their support for one party or another to influence the course of public policy" (Jackson 1975, 184). By this logic, voluntary support for a party, be it the Nazi party, or any other party, implies support for the policies it endorses. Clearly, then, the structure of belief systems in the mass public carries great significance for understanding the meaning of voting behavior, collective public opinion, election outcomes, and party alignments and realignments.

In this article, we revisit the question of the interdependence of partisan affiliation and issue orientations. As we explain below, while previous research makes important contributions, we provide new insights through a theoretical framework that considers how the direction of causality between partisanship and issues may depend on the larger political context. Instead of arguing that partisanship (always) causes issue positions or that issue positions (always) cause partisanship, we suggest that the political context may play an important role in conditioning the direction of causality between these two foundational constructs. We test these ideas using panel data from two distinct cohorts covering a period of time spanning several decades. Our research design allows for variation in political context, especially with respect to the rise of cultural issues in the 1980s and 1990s, thus enabling us to speak to long-term dynamics in the relationship between issue orientations and partisanship.

Alternative Theoretical Approaches

The authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960/1980) first articulated the view that party identification lies at the heart of citizens' belief systems. Partisanship, to Campbell et al., is a psychological

group identification that operates as an enduring social identity, like religious affiliation. "As a consequence of the many psychological functions performed by one's identification with the group, the citizen is given answers to a multitude of questions: What should I believe? What is the nature of reality? What should be done, what should not be done?" (Miller and Shanks 1996, 121). Partisanship can serve as a "perceptual screen" (Campbell et al. 1960/1980, 133) that reinforces one's identification over time so that "the partisan voter will carry to the polls attitudes toward the newer elements of politics that support his long-standing bias" (Stokes 1966, 127).⁴ Applied to the case of issue orientations and preferences, this process leads to a noteworthy "reversal":

[I]n theory of course the party usually has little rationale for its existence save as an instrument to further particular policy preferences. . . . The policy is the end, and the party is the means. . . . The reversal for the mass public is of course a rather dramatic special case of one of our primary generalizations: The party and the affect toward it are more central within the political belief systems of the mass public than are the policy ends that the parties are destined to pursue. (Converse 1964, 240–41)

Reflecting on the original study and subsequent analyses, Converse concludes that ". . . for the vast bulk of the overlap between policy positions and party choice in voting, party loyalties constitute the prior, or causal, term" (Converse 1975, 133). Over time, an impressive body of research has located partisanship at the core of citizens' political belief systems. Party identification is found to be a stable, enduring attitude (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) while issues orientations are seen more as the result, rather than the cause, of partisanship (Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979; Goren 2005; Miller and Shanks 1996). The literature on political socialization, too, contributes to this view by "tracing back to the early years of adolescence a stable, inertial component of party identification" (Sears and Valentino 1997, 61; also see Sears and Funk 1999). Moreover, the vast literature on party cues suggests parties can drive opinion formation and

⁴There is not complete consensus on the theoretical underpinnings for the view that party identification is central. While Campbell et al (1960/1980) emphasize the "perceptual screen," Green and colleagues (Gerber and Green 1998; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) downplay this aspect and instead place more weight on straightforward social identity and party images. In a similar vein, Bartels considers both explanations and concludes that "Partisan bias in political perceptions plays a crucial role in perpetuating and reinforcing sharp differences in opinion between Democrats and Republicans" (2002, 138).

change across a variety of domains including issues (e.g., Bartels 2002; Coan et al. 2008; Conover and Feldman 1989; Feldman and Conover 1983; Jacoby 1988; Kam 2005; Mondak 1993a, 1993b).

Of course, political scientists are not unified in this view. A series of influential theoretical and empirical studies challenges the claim of partisanship's centrality (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Achen 2002; Downs 1957; Fiorina 1981; Franklin 1984; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Jackson 1975; Page and Jones 1979). These studies argue that citizens form and alter their partisanship in response to a range of factors including their evaluations of political leaders, economic assessments, and most importantly—from the perspective of this paper—parties' stands on issues. Rather than adjusting their issue positions to conform with their partisanship, this line of research suggests that citizens alter their partisanship to bring it in line with their issue preferences. The theoretical basis for the claim that issue orientations are more central than partisanship is grounded in the view that due to their social and economic positions in society, people develop different interests and values which translate into preferences for different policies. In describing his use of demographic variables as instruments for policy preferences, Jackson notes that the "demographic variables are expected to be related to people's ideological orientations, political values, and how they are affected by different public policies. . . . For example, blue-collar workers will favor a very different mix of inflation and unemployment than bankers, industrialists, and professionals, and race will be highly correlated with individuals' views on integration policy, and so on" (1975, 163). From this perspective, issue orientations are largely exogenous to the political process. As a result, when faced with the question of "party choice," people develop affiliations based on where the parties currently stand on the issues. A party identification that is independent of issue positions does not make sense according to this view.

Adjudicating Between the Alternative Approaches

There has been no clear resolution to the debate about the relative centrality of partisanship and issues in the minds of ordinary citizens. However, there has been some important progress that serves as the foundation for this paper. First, beginning with Green and Palmquist (1990), Green and his collaborators have extensively analyzed the indicator typically used to

measure party identification (the NES 7-point self-classification item) and have found that while it is highly reliable, it is not perfectly so; individuals' self-placements are caused by their partisan identifications and random measurement error. After correcting for measurement error, the apparent stability of partisanship grows, and the room for influence by other factors, including issue orientations, is diminished. The same is true for issue orientations as Achen (1975), Erikson (1979), Feldman (1989), and Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) have shown. The straightforward implication of these studies is that validly estimating the interdependence of partisanship and issue orientations requires that measurement error in both be addressed. In addition, whereas in earlier studies it was common to analyze cross-sectional data and use demographic variables as instruments for partisanship and issues to correct for measurement error (Jackson 1975; Page and Jones 1979), panel data are more commonly used now.⁵ The ability to use current and lagged values of partisanship and issue orientations provides more leverage while reducing the need to make assumptions that are probably incorrect.

We identified three recent studies that have overcome many of the methodological problems of earlier work. Layman and Carsey (2002b) and Carsey and Layman (2006) analyze the interdependence of issue positions (social welfare, race, and culture) and partisanship using three NES panel studies (1956–1960, 1972–1976, and 1992–1996). They use a Wiley and Wiley (1970) correction for measurement error and estimate models where current values of partisanship and issues are determined by lagged values of each. The results indicate that where interdependencies exist, the stronger causal effects go from partisanship to issue positions rather than from issues to partisanship. Even among the subsample of respondents hypothesized to be most likely to evince issue-based party conversion, the apparent effects of partisanship on issues are stronger.⁶ Goren's (2005) focus is somewhat different, focusing on values (e.g., limited government and traditional morality), the

⁵In order for models to be "identified" with cross-sectional data, it is necessary to assume that at least one exogenous variable causes partisanship, but not issue orientations, and at least one other exogenous variable causes issue orientations, but not partisanship. The plausibility of the assumptions is often dubious and alternative assumptions tend to produce highly divergent results (Miller and Shanks 1996, Appendix D).

⁶Among respondents for whom the issue is "salient" and who are "aware" of party differences, the standardized coefficients indicating the causal effect of partisanship on issues and issues on partisanship, respectively, are .08 and .06 (abortion), .39 and .11 (government services), and .16 and .14 (aid to Blacks).

ostensible precursors to issue positions. Like Carsey and Layman (2006), Goren (2005) estimates a cross-lagged model on the 1992–94–96 NES panel data. The central finding is that values are more responsive to partisanship than the reverse. “Put simply, the estimates . . . yield fairly strong support for the partisan influence hypothesis and no support for the political values influence hypothesis” (Goren 2005, 891). The consistent message from these three studies is that partisanship is more central than issues or values.⁷

While these studies make important contributions, we see room for further insight. Here, we address a question about the political context in which people form, develop, and update their political attitudes. Generally, the existing theoretical arguments that lead one to locate either partisanship or issues as more central rest on individual-level theories that place atomized individuals in a vacuum: there is little regard to the larger political environment. But, we argue that it is possible for the political context to play an important role in conditioning the direction of the causal relationship between partisanship and issues. For the most part, during quiescent times, it may be that citizens take cues from parties; if party elites endorse a particular stance on an issue, the rank and file likely toe the party line. However, during other times, issues may become especially salient to individuals. In these periods people may be motivated to adjust their partisanship to bring it into alignment with their positions on the issues. This process might occur when, for example, party elites themselves align on new issues or realign on old ones, thereby altering the bases of party cleavages. Or, the process might occur when nonpolitical elites raise the salience of particular issues and endorse the position of a particular party. Related, and perhaps complementing the process, is if the social identities and social groups impinged by and associated with the parties become more than usually salient.⁸ In short, we suggest that when the salience of issues changes from one period to the next, then the centrality of

issues relative to partisanship may shift as well, resulting in a change in the direction of the causal flow between partisanship and issue orientations. This view complements and extends the theoretical claim in Carsey and Layman (2006) that at the individual level, people for whom issues are more salient will display more issue-based party conversion than those for whom issues are less salient. Here we turn to the larger political environment as a possible cause of salience and the relative centrality of issues and partisanship.⁹

Our study also moves beyond previous work in several other important ways. The studies discussed above, along with earlier analyses of panel data on partisanship (e.g., Fiorina 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983), cover relatively short periods of time, either two or four years.¹⁰ The accumulated evidence of the relative stability of partisanship and issue orientations leads us to believe that longer time spans may be more appropriate to uncover the nature of the dynamic relationships. For example, Stoker and Jennings (2008) emphasize developmental processes underlying both partisanship and issue positions that unfold over decades.¹¹ Further, over short periods, specific political events may exert undue influence. Goren (2005, 893–94) recognizes this with regard to the 1992–96 NES panel and the unusual partisan politics of the time, which included the Republicans’ winning control of both the House and the Senate for the first time in 40 years in the 1994 congressional elections. To this we would add the possibility that the short-term NES panels may speak more to the influence of elections than longer term processes of

⁷Abramowitz and Saunders (1998) also use the 1992–96 NES panel study and analyze the causal relationships between ideological identification and partisanship using a cross lagged model. While they find substantially stronger causal effects from ideology to partisanship, because they make no correction for measurement error in either concept, drawing a confident conclusion is not possible. Similarly, Levendusky (2009) analyzes change in partisanship and issue positions using the same panel data—also without modeling measurement error—and reports that issue positions appear to change more in response to partisanship than vice versa.

⁸We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for making us aware of this point.

⁹It is also worth noting that this study is not the first to focus on how the political context influences the relationship between partisanship and issues. Most of the individual-level studies we discuss below in the section on “The Political Context: Parties and Issues, 1970–2000” locate the cause for growing mass party polarization (i.e., the correlation between partisanship and issue attitudes) in the political context—namely the extent of party polarization among political elites. What is new here is the claim that the political context may influence the causal interdependencies between partisanship and issue orientations.

¹⁰For an exception, see Sears and Funk (1999), in which the authors estimate stability coefficients for partisanship (and other orientations) among gifted individuals, from 1940 to 1977.

¹¹Stoker and Jennings analyze the strength of the relationship between partisanship and issues over time and note that the process by which constraint increases may be due to people adjusting their partisanship in response to their issue preferences or vice versa. They acknowledge that “the question of which of these processes is generating higher constraint is an important one” (2008, 622) and that “the implications of such gains vary dramatically depending upon whether party identification is being shaped by, or is shaping, issue commitments” (633). Because their focus is elsewhere, they do not attempt to provide an answer.

change because all the interviews are conducted immediately before or after national elections. If, as a result of any of these considerations, partisanship was made especially salient by the national elections (indeed, by what was called the “Republican Revolution” in 1994), then Goren (2005) and Carsey and Layman (2006) may speak more to the effects of important political events on political attitudes in the short-term, but not to the more general question considered here. For all of these reasons, drawing conclusions about long-term processes of change on the basis of previous research is quite difficult, requiring substantial extrapolation. By using a panel dataset that spans multiple decades, we are able to examine the long-term dynamics of partisanship and issue positions.¹²

Another way in which we build on and go beyond prior studies is through a simultaneous, rather than sequential, consideration of multiple issue attitudes. By analyzing the relationship between partisanship and one issue at a time (Carsey and Layman 2006; Layman and Carsey 2002b) or partisanship and one value at a time (Goren 2005), previous studies implicitly assume that there are no causal interdependencies among issues or among values and that they are uncorrelated. For example, consider a model of partisanship and cultural attitudes that finds a causal effect of the latter on the former. If cultural attitudes are correlated with racial attitudes and racial attitudes cause partisanship, then the exclusion of racial attitudes from the model will lead to attributing its causal effect to culture. Because attitudes across issues and values tend to be correlated, excluding one or more while estimating the causal relationships between another and partisanship will lead to biased estimates of causal flows.

Finally, in a departure from the approaches employed in previous work, we focus on broad issue orientations rather than specific policy preferences or values. Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) make a strong case that answers to individual survey items about particular policy preferences and group affect along with small batteries of questions thought to tap specific values may be productively conceived as reflecting broad issue orientations. For example, when people are asked their preferences on the standard 7-point scale about government guaranteed

jobs, their answers reflect their underlying views about social welfare policy, though not perfectly due to measurement error caused by factors like vagueness in question wording and response categories. To accurately and validly locate respondents’ relative attitudes, multiple indicators tapping a variety of aspects within an issue domain are necessary.¹³ Layman and Carsey (2002b) and Carsey and Layman (2006) rely on single indicators that, while providing leverage to estimate measurement error, raise concerns about construct validity. The same is true for Goren (2005), which relies on just two or three indicators to tap values. If people have broad issue orientations related to social welfare, then a single or small number of indicators are unlikely to be adequate to validly differentiate the relative ordering of respondents.¹⁴

The Political Context: Parties and Issues, 1970–2000

A noticeable change in the connections between partisanship and issues has emerged over the last several decades. Although party differentiation on social welfare and economic issues has been a long-standing feature of the party system, a pattern of increasing party polarization has taken root. For party elites, recent decades have seen a substantial increase in party polarization over the primary dimension of party conflict—social welfare (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997, 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Equally important, whereas racial issues formerly existed along a separate dimension, “with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1967 Open Housing Act, this second [racial] dimension has slowly declined in importance and is now almost totally absent” (Poole 2005, 2). Racial issues have been “drawn into the first [social welfare] dimension . . . because race-related issues became, increasingly, redistributive ones—welfare,

¹²To be sure, we also acknowledge weaknesses of relying on such data, namely that it requires focusing on just one or two cohorts, which raises questions about the generalizability of the results. In addition, the data lack some of the useful questions—like issue salience—included in the NES surveys, which limits our ability to examine fully the variability across individuals in causal interdependencies.

¹³Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) create their issue scales by relying on questions about specific policy alternatives, questions traditionally used as indicators of “values,” and group feeling thermometers. As described below, we follow this approach to construct our measures of broad issue orientations.

¹⁴By including the variety of indicators used in Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008), our issue measures cannot, by any means, be considered measures of specific policy preferences. Hence we use the term “issue attitude” or “issue orientation.” In the Discussion and Conclusions section, we consider whether our results are driven by the selection of items we analyze and report that they are not.

affirmative action, food stamps, and so on. . . . Race and redistribution have merged into one voting dimension in Congress” (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 323).

Increased party polarization and the merging of economic and racial issues have also become evident in the mass public. A growing number of studies has tracked how the relationship between partisanship and issue preferences has evolved over recent decades.¹⁵ We now know that differences between Democrats and Republicans in the mass public with regard to policy preferences have steadily been growing. Carmines and Stimson (1989) first made the case with regard to racial issues and a host of other studies follow the process to the present along with extending the range to other issues (e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Brewer 2005; Claassen and Highton 2009; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Hetherington 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002a; Levendusky 2009; Stimson 2004). The confluence of racial and economic issues is evident from studies like that of Gilens (1999), which links racial attitudes and opinions about welfare. Likewise, Kinder and Winter (2001) identify similarities in the causes of opinions on social welfare and racial issues.¹⁶

While the interrelationship among partisanship and racial and economic issues was undergoing change, new issues emerged and became the subject of party conflict. The 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the birth of the “counterculture,” and the Supreme Court’s 1973 decision on *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion. While what we will refer to as cultural and moral issues clearly increased in salience during the decade, they did not become the subject of significant party conflict until the 1980s. From that time to the present, as on racial and economic issues, increasing party differentiation on cultural and moral issues has been the trend (Adams 1997; Carmines and Woods 2002; Stimson 2004).

Thus a clear picture of growing party polarization on issues characterizes recent decades of American politics. Racial and social welfare issues have merged

together, and the parties have moved further apart on this dimension. Cultural and moral issues emerged in the 1980s, and the parties have moved apart on this dimension as well. At the same time, while elite party polarization marks both periods, the *level* of party polarization increased more significantly beginning in the Reagan years, so much so that by 1997 the level of overall party polarization in the U.S. Congress reached a level not seen since the 1920s (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Based on McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal’s (1997, 2006) computations for Congress, party polarization increased modestly in the 1970s followed by truly substantial increases in the 1980s and 1990s.

For our theoretical purposes, an important question regards the extent to which issue-based concerns underlie partisan attitudes and “party resurgence.” Hetherington (2001) relies on traditional NES questions and shows, among other trends, an increase in the total number of party likes and dislikes.¹⁷ Using the coding conventions developed by Gilens, Vavreck, and Cohen (2007), we differentiate the reasons people give for liking and disliking the parties based on whether they are based on issue or other considerations; specifically, we categorized “issue” and “other” responses to the questions in the 1972–2000 time period to span the years covered by the panel data. Figure 1 reports the results. The top line in the figure replicates the pattern identified by Hetherington (2001), showing a steady increase over time in the average total number of responses. The middle line of the figure shows that the growth was entirely due to an increase in the number of issue-related responses, increasing from a bit less than 2 to almost 3. The average number of “other” responses (the bottom line of the figure) actually declined a bit from just over 1.0 to just below 1.0. The implication is that issues became more salient in conceptions of partisanship over time. These data do not demonstrate whether partisanship drives issue orientations or whether issue orientations drive partisanship, but to the extent that the nature of the causal interdependence is influenced by the political context as we have suggested, one would expect that partisanship is being influenced by issues more in the latter period than in the former period.

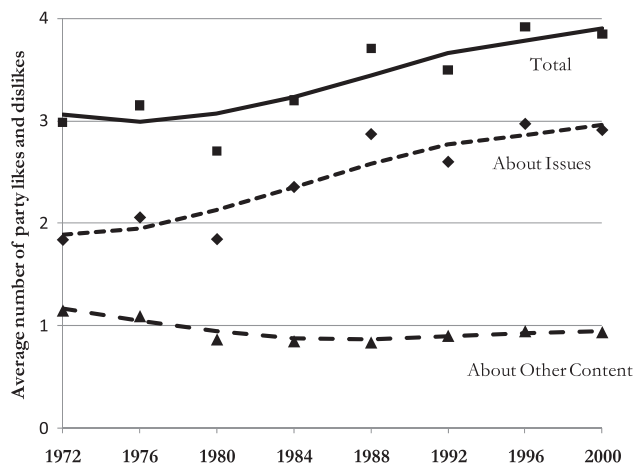
Theoretical perspectives that locate partisanship at the center of belief systems lead to the hypothesis that individuals adjusted their issue orientations in response to the changes among party elites. Theories that make issues central predict just the opposite: citizens adjust their partisanship to be more closely aligned with their issue orientations. If the process

¹⁵These studies are typically based on pooling multiple cross sectional survey samples (usually the NES) over an extended period of time (e.g., Bafumi and Shapiro 2009). Their important contributions derive from developing a portrait of the macro changes in the nature of the links between party identification and policy preferences and connecting those changes to the growing polarization among political elites. While providing the foundation for our investigation, they do not delve into the nature of the causal interdependencies analyzed here.

¹⁶Some even go so far as to argue that race and the social welfare state have been intertwined for most of American history (see, e.g., Quadagno 2000).

¹⁷After reaching a nadir with a mean of 2.7 responses in 1980, steady increases appear thereafter.

FIGURE 1 Issue Salience over Time



The figure reports the average number of responses to the open-ended questions about likes and dislikes about the parties, the average number of responses about issues, and the average number of responses about other content. The smoothed lines are lowess fit lines.

Source: ANES Cumulative Data File

depends on the political context as defined by the level of party-issue salience, then a single unidirectional causal flow will not be evident in our examination of the long-term dynamic relationship between partisanship and issue orientations. Instead, the direction of causality will depend upon the political context.

Estimating the Dynamic Relationship between Partisanship and Issue Orientations over the Long Haul

To identify the causal relationship between partisanship and issue orientations, we utilize the Political Socialization Panel Study. This study provides us with an excellent opportunity to disentangle the causal effects of partisanship on issue orientations and the effects of issue orientations on partisanship over an extended period of time. The sample consists of high school seniors in the Class of 1965, who were randomly selected from a national probability sample of 97 high schools across the country. The first wave of the study, conducted in 1965, consists of in-person interviews with 1,669 high school seniors and in-person interviews with one or both of the student's parents. The 1973 follow-up wave reinterviewed the

youth sample, as well as one of the parents.¹⁸ The 1982 follow-up wave reinterviewed the youth sample, when respondents were in their mid-thirties, as well as the parent sample.¹⁹ A final, fourth wave occurred in 1997 and reinterviewed the original youth respondents (now some 32 years after the initial interview).²⁰

This panel dataset provides us with the advantage of tracking the dynamics of partisanship and issue orientations among the youth cohort over a relatively long period of time, during an era in which the political parties themselves were undergoing programmatic change as discussed above. Moreover, the parallel interviews of youth and parents provide us with some leverage on disentangling whether our results are attributable to period, life-cycle, or cohort effects.²¹

The Political Socialization Study offers reasonably rich instrumentation—with the exception of the 1965 wave. Franklin (1984) analyzes the Political

¹⁸Of the original 1,669 youth respondents in 1965, 1,119 were reinterviewed in 1973. For the 1973 survey implementation, mail-back questionnaires were used for an additional 229 respondents. For the parent respondents, 1,562 were originally interviewed in 1965. 1,118 were reinterviewed in person in 1973 (and an additional 61 completed mail-back questionnaires). We exclude all mail-back respondents from our analyses, since several key questions were omitted from the shorter mail-back questionnaire. This yields a 67% retention rate for the youth respondents and a 72% retention rate for the parent respondents between 1965 and 1973.

¹⁹In 1982, 958 youth respondents were reinterviewed (and an additional 82 completed mail-back questionnaires). For parents, 816 respondents were reinterviewed in person (and an additional 82 completed mail-back questionnaires as well). This yields a 62% retention rate for the youth respondents and a 57% retention rate for the parent respondents between 1965 and 1982.

²⁰In 1997, 927 youth respondents were reinterviewed (either in-person or via telephone, with an additional eight respondents who completed a mail-back questionnaire). This yields a 56% retention rate between 1965 and 1997. Parental respondents, alas, were not interviewed in 1997.

²¹There is one "minor disadvantage" (Franklin 1984, 466) in using the Political Socialization Study (PSS). Because the initial sample starts with individuals in their senior year of high school, the PSS sample is likely to be unrepresentative of those who dropped out of high school. We compared the sample of socialization study youth respondents who survived until the fourth wave with a sample of similarly aged individuals from the 1997 Current Population Survey (CPS), which is considered a representative national sample of individuals. In the CPS, 11% of respondents had less than a high school degree; in our sample, since respondents were interviewed in their senior year, we essentially lose individuals who do not obtain the high school degree. Among individuals who did receive a high school degree, the distributions of educational attainment across terminal high school degree, some college, and college were similar across the CPS and the PSS. The implication is that our analyses may not be generalizable to the least educated individuals. Still, the overwhelming benefit of the PSS lies in its time horizon: no other study of partisanship and issue orientations has investigated the dynamic relationship over the long haul, across different political contexts.

Socialization Study to identify the relationship between partisanship and issue orientations, but he focuses only on the 1965–73 waves, which represent a very short time period compared with the full potential of the dataset, and the set of variables that he uses in 1965 are quite limited.²² Because we seek to examine the relationship between partisanship and issue orientations, we focus our attention on the second, third, and fourth waves of data collection (the available instrumentation in 1965 is insufficient for our purposes to support even rudimentary analysis). In our analyses of three waves of the youth respondents (1973–1982–1997) and two waves of the parent respondents (1973–82), we model our latent constructs with several issue items that were asked in identical form across the years.

We model the latent construct, *Partisanship*, using a single indicator (the conventional 7-point scale).²³ We model two broad issue orientations: *Racial/Economic Issue Orientations* and *Cultural Orientations*.²⁴ The first broad issue orientation, *Racial/Economic Issue Orientations*, is represented by 12 indicators: feelings towards Whites, Blacks, unions, and big business; influence of unions, big business, the poor, people on welfare,²⁵ and Blacks; government's role in guaranteeing jobs and a good standard of living; school integration; and government's role in helping Blacks. *Cultural Orientations* are represented by eight indicators: feelings towards women, police, and military; influence of women; rights of the accused; legalization of marijuana; women's role;

²²For example, the 1965 questionnaire only included four of the feeling thermometer items that we analyze (Whites, Blacks, unions, and big business). It did not include the influence in politics battery. It had only two usable policy opinion items: one on school integration and one on school prayer. Because we placed a high priority on keeping the instrumentation the same across waves in order to protect our ability to derive causal inferences from the analyses, we elected not to use the 1965 wave.

²³We also represented partisanship using three indicators: the 7-point scale along with feelings towards Democrats and feelings towards Republicans, following Goren (2005). The results were similar in substantive and statistical significance. See online Appendix B for complete question wording for this item and all other items we analyze.

²⁴We initially modeled three separate issue orientations: race, economics, and culture. The first two were so highly correlated (which is not surprising given how they have become intertwined at the elite level), with some items that could have loaded on both, that we decided to combine the two into one issue orientation. This decision is further supported by an exploratory factor analysis that included all the racial/economic indicators. Two factors were extracted. All items loaded on the first (suggesting a single substantive dimension) and all the feeling thermometer items loaded on the second (suggesting systematic measurement error induced by the feeling thermometers.)

²⁵The *Influence of People on Welfare* item is used in the parent analysis but not in the youth analysis, as it was not measured in 1997.

and prayer in schools. It is worth noting that for both issue orientations, the various indicators are measured using different question formats (see, e.g., Campbell and Fiske 1959 on the benefits of multitrait multimethod measurement).²⁶ All items appear in identical format in all waves that we analyze.²⁷

We correct for measurement error in three ways. First, because some slippage likely exists between the observed 7-point scale response measuring party identification and the unobserved latent construct of *Partisanship*, we estimate the degree of measurement error using a Wiley-Wiley model (Wiley and Wiley 1970).²⁸ Second, because common instrumentation among items might induce nonrandom correlation between the items, we model two latent measurement factors: *Feeling Thermometer Measurement Error* and *Influence Measurement Error* (see, e.g., Bollen 1989). In each wave, the feeling thermometer items load freely on *Feeling Thermometer Measurement Error*, and the influence items load freely on *Influence Measurement Error*.²⁹ And third, we allow the disturbance terms for the remaining policy items to correlate with identical items asked in other waves.³⁰

We analyze the data using cross-lagged structural equation models. These models enable us to gain

²⁶Following Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008), to increase the number of items available for measuring our latent concepts and increase confidence that the constructs reflect broad issue orientations rather than more narrow aspects of them, we use attitudes toward relevant groups in each issue domain in the constructions of the issue orientation scales. When we run the analyses with only policy preferences, the results are largely similar, although we lose some leverage in parsing out measurement error. We report on these results in the Discussion and Conclusions. Also following Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008), we imputed missing data based on intraconstruct indicators measured contemporaneously. (Partisanship was imputed using feelings toward Democrats and Republicans.) Rates of missingness were quite low. The average rate of missingness across the indicators was 3% (the median was 1%). Across respondents, virtually all (95%) answered at least 90% of the items.

²⁷We also analyzed fuller models that took advantage of all available (relevant) items in each wave. For example, this allows us to include opinion on abortion (which only appears in 1982 and 1997). The substantive and statistical results using these more fully specified models were similar.

²⁸This choice is consistent with that in Layman and Carsey (2002b) and Carsey and Layman (2006). The resulting estimate of the error variance is .021 for the parent sample (estimated using the three-wave 1965–1973–1982 responses) and 0.014 for the youth sample (estimated using the three-wave 1973–1982–1997 responses).

²⁹The two constructs are uncorrelated with each other and with the substantive latent constructs.

³⁰For example, in the three-wave youth analysis, the disturbance terms for *Government Help Blacks* (1973), *Government Help Blacks* (1982), and *Government Help Blacks* (1997) are freed to correlate with each other.

purchase on causality by using multiple equations to model current partisanship and current issue orientations as a function of past partisanship and past issue orientations. The cross-lagged specification enables us to identify which reciprocal, causal relationships are stronger than others.³¹ In this fashion, the cross-lagged causal processes are similar to Granger causality in time-series work: one variable X is said to “cause” another variable Z at time t because a significant relationship appears between the prior values of X on current values of Z , holding constant past values of Z (Finkel 1995, 25–26). For example, in a particular time period (from $t-1$ to t), if partisanship influences cultural issue orientations, then we would expect that being a Republican rather than a Democratic in time $t-1$ will influence how culturally conservative one is in time t as Republicans and Democrats diverge on cultural issues, while taking account of preexisting differences on cultural issues in time $t-1$. The three cross-lagged equations that we estimate are:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Partisanship}_{i,t} &= \alpha_1 + \beta_1 \text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} \\ &+ \gamma_1 \text{Race/Economic Issue Orientations}_{i,t-1} \\ &+ \delta_1 \text{Cultural Orientations}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{1i,t} \\ \text{Race/Economic Issue Orientations}_{i,t} &= \alpha_2 \\ &+ \beta_2 \text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} + \gamma_2 \text{Race/Economic Issue} \\ &\text{Orientations}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{2i,t} \\ \text{Cultural Orientations}_{i,t} &= \alpha_3 + \beta_3 \text{Partisanship}_{i,t-1} \\ &+ \delta_2 \text{Cultural Orientations}_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{3i,t} \end{aligned}$$

The terms β_1 , γ_2 , and δ_2 represent the degree to which past values of each construct predict current values. For example, if partisanship in time $t-1$ is perfectly translated into partisanship in time t with no effects of issue orientations, then coefficient β_1 should equal one, and the coefficients γ_1 and δ_1 should equal zero. The same logic applies for the coefficients γ_2 and δ_2 . If the coefficients γ_1 and δ_1 are nonzero, then some changes in partisanship from time $t-1$ to time t can be accounted for by racial/economic or cultural issue orientations in time $t-1$. For our purposes, given our concern with the interdependency of partisanship and issue orientations, we are especially interested in the estimates of γ_1 and δ_1 in the *Partisanship* equation, β_2 in the *Race/Economic Issue Orientations* equation, and β_3 in the *Cultural Issue Orientations* equation.

³¹See the logic of this in Campbell and Stanley (1963), on “cross-lagged correlations.” Layman and Carsey (2002b), Goren (2005), and Carsey and Layman (2006), too, employ cross-lagged models in their analyses.

Table 1 reports the estimates of the stability coefficients (β_1 , γ_2 , and δ_2) for all the constructs across cohorts and periods.³² Because the latent constructs are each derived from different numbers of indicators with varying amounts of systematic and random measurement error, and constructed using factor loadings that are allowed to vary across time, they have different units of measurement, which makes comparison of unstandardized estimates problematic. Therefore, Table 2 (and subsequent tables) reports standardized estimates, which are commonly reported for analyses like those we conduct. The standardized coefficients tell us how much change a standard deviation shift in a lagged latent construct induces in a current latent construct. All indicators (and latent constructs) are coded such that higher values indicate more conservative responses.

For both the parent and youth cohorts we can compare the stability coefficients across constructs and within periods. For the youth cohort we can also observe the patterns of change in the stability coefficients from the first period (1973–82) to the second (1982–97). The results are consistent with the proposition that partisanship was more central than issues in the first period and that issues became more central in the in the second period. For the parents, in the 1973–1982 period, the highest level of stability is observed for partisanship ($\hat{\beta}_1 = .960$). Cultural orientations ($\hat{\delta}_2 = .819$) and racial/economic orientations ($\hat{\gamma}_2 = .735$) are also quite stable, but not to the degree of partisanship. For the youth cohort, cultural orientations appear modestly more stable than partisanship during the 1973–82 period (.801 versus .777), followed by racial/economic issue orientations (.610).³³ But,

³²The model for the parents displays reasonable fit, with a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.062 (values around .05 indicate good fit; values under .08 indicate reasonable fit), a $\chi^2/\text{d.f.}$ ratio of 4.264 (values under 5 indicate reasonable fit), and a root mean square residual = .005 (values of 0 indicate perfect fit). Likewise for the youth; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058 with a $\chi^2/\text{d.f.}$ ratio of 3.701 and a root mean square residual = .005. See online Appendix A for detailed results on how the indicators load on the respective constructs.

³³While not insubstantial, the stability observed for each construct among youth respondents is smaller than that estimated for their parents. This is not particularly surprising. According to life-cycle theories of attitude formation, one would expect to see lower levels of stability among the younger cohort compared with the older cohort of parents, because they were younger during the period (beginning it at age 26 and ending it at 35) and still likely undergoing the process of crystallization (Campbell et al. 1960/1980; Sears and Valentino 1997). Likewise, generation effects might also be at play given that the youth cohort came of political age during an especially turbulent period in American political and social history.

TABLE 1 Stability Coefficients for Partisanship and Issue Orientations

	1973–82	1982–97
Parents		
Partisanship	.960**	n/a
Race/Economics	.735**	n/a
Culture	.819**	n/a
Youth		
Partisanship	.777**	.593**
Race/Economics	.610**	.750**
Culture	.801**	.803**

Table entries are standardized estimates from cross-lagged structural equation models.

Maximum-likelihood estimation. See online Appendix A for full results.

N=848 and N=795 for parents and youth, respectively.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Political Socialization Study.

notice the nature of change from the 1973–1982 period to the 1982–97 period. The stability of partisanship drops from .777 to .593. This is striking given that the youth cohort had grown older and age is typically associated with partisan stability. It might be the case that the diminished stability was due to the greater amount of time covered in the second period (15 years versus 9 years in the first). However, neither the stability of cultural nor racial/economic orientations dropped noticeably. The stability of cultural orientations barely changed (.803 versus .801) and the stability of racial/economic orientations increased (.750 versus .610).

These stability coefficients provide some suggestions about the relative centrality of partisanship versus issue orientations in these time periods. The high stability of partisanship among the parents during the first period appears along with an observed decline in the stability of partisanship among the youth from the first to the second period. This decline among youth was not matched by declines in cultural and racial/economic orientations, thus suggesting partisanship was more central to belief systems in the first, relative to the second, period.

Estimates of the cross-construct effects provide more direct evidence on the causal interdependence between issue orientations and partisanship. First, consider the cross-construct effects between racial/economic orientations and partisanship that appear in Table 2. For the parents, partisanship in 1973 appears to influence racial/economic orientations in 1982 ($\hat{\beta}_2 = .100$, $p < .05$), while there is only a modest apparent effect of racial/economic orientations in 1973 on partisanship in 1982 ($\hat{\gamma}_1 = .042$) that does not reach conventional levels of statistical

TABLE 2 Causal Interdependencies between Racial/Economic Issue Orientations and Partisanship

	1973–82	1982–97
Parents		
Partisanship → Race/Economics	.100*	n/a
Race/Economics → Partisanship	.042	n/a
Youth		
Partisanship → Race/Economics	.135**	.028
Race/Economics → Partisanship	.096*	.180**

Table entries are standardized estimates from cross-lagged structural equation models.

Maximum-likelihood estimation. See online Appendix A for full results.

N=848 and N=795 for parents and youth, respectively.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Political Socialization Study.

significance. Among the youth, partisanship in 1973 also influences racial/economic orientations in 1982 ($\hat{\beta}_2 = .135$, $p < .01$), and the effect diminishes considerably from 1982 to 1997 ($\hat{\beta}_2 = .028$). In contrast to the parent cohort, racial/economic orientations do appear to influence partisanship in the first period ($\hat{\gamma}_1 = .096$, $p < .05$) among the youth. But the effect almost doubles in the second period ($\hat{\gamma}_1 = .180$, $p < .01$). Over time, then, it is quite clear that the influence of partisanship diminished while the influence of racial/economic orientations increased.

The patterns of cross-construct effects between cultural orientations and partisanship—shown in Table 3—provide further evidence for change in the nature of the causal flows. In the first period, for both the parent and youth cohorts, partisanship appears to shape cultural orientations ($\hat{\beta}_3 = .160$, $p < .01$ and

TABLE 3 Causal Interdependencies between Cultural Issue Orientations and Partisanship

	1973–82	1982–97
Parents		
Partisanship → Culture	.160**	n/a
Culture → Partisanship	-.029	n/a
Youth		
Partisanship → Culture	.085*	.069
Culture → Partisanship	-.053	.104**

Table entries are standardized estimates from cross-lagged structural equation models.

Maximum-likelihood estimation. See online Appendix A for full results.

N=848 and N=795 for parents and youth, respectively.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Source: Political Socialization Study.

$\hat{\beta}_3 = .085$, $p < .05$, respectively) without a reciprocal influence of cultural orientations on partisanship ($\hat{\delta}_1 = -.029$ and $\hat{\delta}_1 = -.053$, respectively). In the 1982–97 period, the apparent influence of partisanship on cultural orientations is diminished ($\hat{\beta}_3 = .069$) and no longer reaches a conventional level of statistical significance while the influence of cultural orientations on partisanship increases to .104 ($p < .01$). Thus, just as in the case of racial/economic orientations and partisanship, partisanship emerges as more influential in the first period and cultural orientations as more influential in the second.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have built on previous research and applied methodological insights regarding the measurement of key concepts to an analysis of panel data spanning 25 years to understand the long-term dynamic relationship between partisanship and issue orientations. Our results suggest that a single, simple, unidirectional causal story between partisanship and issue orientations is unlikely. We found that over several decades neither partisanship nor issue orientations are singularly more central in respondents' belief systems. In the first period (1973–82) partisanship appeared more central than issues. For the parents, the stability of partisanship was greater than that for either of the issue orientations. For the youth cohort, partisanship also evinced substantial stability, which was greater in magnitude than that for racial/economic orientations, though it trailed cultural orientations. More importantly, partisanship in 1973 influenced both issue orientations in 1982 among the parent and youth cohorts. During this wave, issue orientations did not predict partisanship for parents and only racial/economic orientations affected partisanship for youth. The pattern of results observed for the 1973–82 period conforms more closely to the theoretical perspective that places partisanship at the center of ordinary citizens' belief systems and that sees issues as caused by partisanship. Partisanship influenced issue orientations much more than it was influenced by issue orientations.

In contrast, the results for the second period (1982–97) suggest that issues became more central than partisanship. The stability of partisanship for the youth cohort *decreased* substantially from .777 in the first period to .593 in the second, despite the fact that respondents grew older, and aging is typically associated with greater partisan stability. Moreover, there

were no declines in stability for the issue orientations; if anything, racial/economic issue orientations became more stable, and cultural orientations stayed quite stable across time. Clearly, the relative stability of partisanship versus issue orientations diminished considerably.

Even stronger evidence of the centrality of issues relative to partisanship in the second period comes from the cross-construct results. In the first period, partisanship significantly drove issue orientations; however, in the second period, these effects were small and statistically insignificant. Yet, both cultural and racial/economic issue orientations acquired a significant effect on partisanship in the second period. Thus the pattern for the 1982–97 period ran opposite to that for the 1973–82 period: issues appeared to shape partisanship more than partisanship shaped issue positions. Our results suggest issue-based change in partisanship derives from both racial/economic issue orientations as well as cultural issue orientations. If anything, the impact of racial/economic issue orientations on partisanship is larger in magnitude than the impact of cultural issue orientations on partisanship, a finding that runs counter to claims that cultural forces were the sole engine driving party realignment in the last decades of the twentieth century. In any case, our results from the 1982–97 period demonstrate that issue orientations were responsible for driving partisanship, and partisanship did not drive issue orientations during that time. This is an about-face from the previous wave.

These results stem from an analysis using 20 or so indicators per year that include affect towards social groups along with more conventional measures of policy preferences and maps them onto two issue dimensions. As discussed earlier, this decision was based on Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008). We acknowledge that the resulting measures are broader than what scholars have typically deemed “issue preferences” and that is why we refer to them as “issue orientations.” To test whether the findings depend on the inclusion of these nontraditional indicators, we reestimated the youth model including only the seven more conventional indicators of policy preferences.³⁴ The results, shown in Table 4, are entirely consistent with the findings reported above. From the first period to the second stability in partisanship declines from .799 to .635 while stability, in issue preferences increases from .747 to .872. During the first period, there is a noticeable influence of partisanship

³⁴With so few indicators (three tapping race/economics and four tapping culture), construct validity becomes a serious problem. To mitigate this we modeled a single underlying issue dimension based on the shared variance across all seven indicators.

TABLE 4 Partisanship and Issue Preferences among Youth Respondents, 1973–1982–1997

	1973–82	1982–97
Stability Coefficients		
Partisanship	.799**	.635**
Issues	.747**	.872**
Causal Interdependencies		
Partisanship → Issues	.114**	–.052
Issues → Partisanship	–.005	.195**

Table entries are standardized estimates from cross-lagged structural equation model.

Maximum-likelihood estimation.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

N=795

Source: Political Socialization Study.

on issues (.114, $p < .01$) without a reciprocal effect (–.005). In contrast, during the second period the pattern is reversed. Partisanship no longer predicts issues, while issues strongly predict partisanship (.195, $p < .01$). Thus substantial change in the nature of the causal interdependencies appears whether we use the fuller array of issue orientation indicators or the more narrow set of conventional policy preference indicators.

We also considered whether the patterns of results were driven by particular subsets of the sample. Given the dramatic partisan realignment that has taken place in the South, the possibility that the results are driven by southerners should be considered. To investigate, we partitioned the sample, reestimated the models, and found no notable differences.³⁵ Because studies of partisanship sometimes exclude African American respondents, we also estimated the models with blacks included and excluded and found no meaningful differences in the findings. Finally, we examined differences across levels of political sophistication,³⁶ on the idea that those who are more politically attuned may be the ones who are more responsive and likely to exhibit the shifts in the causal directionality of partisanship and issue orientations. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, our analysis revealed no systematic differences across

levels of political sophistication.³⁷ Hence, the patterns that we have unearthed appear to reflect general changes in the causal relationship between partisanship and issue orientations during the time period of study.

Our design protects us against several alternative explanations. We have found two entirely different patterns of cross-construct causality in a comparison that spans several decades. That change is not from comparing two different groups of people, but rather, the *same individuals* across time. Moreover, the comparison in the first wave between parents and youth suggests that what we have uncovered is not merely a cohort effect, with youth respondents simply being different from their parents, since the structural relationship between partisanship and issue orientations was very similar across parents and youth in the first wave.³⁸ Our results also run against what standard socialization accounts would suggest: crystallization (growing stability) for all constructs with age and growing similarity in attitudinal structure between the youth and parent cohorts when their ages are closer (youth in the second period and parents in the first). Neither, of course, is what we uncovered.

We have suggested that changes in the political context may be responsible for the changes in the relative centrality of partisanship and issue

³⁷Why are there no apparent differences associated with political sophistication? A full explanation is beyond the bounds of this paper, but there are at least several plausible possibilities to consider. One is that we have a less than ideal sample for investigating differences across information, education, and attentiveness. The sample consists of youth who were still enrolled in the twelfth grade, at a time when a nontrivial proportion did not make it that far. We may not have enough of a distribution at the lower-tail to produce differences across levels of sophistication. Another possibility is that we lack the ideal variables for stratifying the sample. The salience of particular issues might best be measured by an issue importance question, but such a measure is not available in the dataset. A third possibility is that the differences simply are not there. A failure to find differences between the more and less informed is not unheard of in the literature (and, indeed, might be more prevalent were it not for publication bias against null results). For example, Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) look for differences by political information with regard to issue voting and fail to find them. From this, they conclude that the previous studies that do report them may suffer from not properly taking into account measurement error. Bartels (2002) finds “party bias” in how people update their political beliefs to be equally prevalent among the more and less informed.

³⁸Whether the pattern of change for the youth cohort was matched by the parents (and other cohorts) remains an open question. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the higher stability of partisanship for the parents in the 1973–82 period compared to the youth may indicate less susceptibility to changes in causal flows in the second period. Ideally, we would have observed more cohorts across periods to better understand the pervasiveness of the change in causal flows.

³⁵We examined regional differences in three ways: partitioning the sample for those born in the South versus not born in the South; those living in the South at the time of the 1965 interview versus those not doing so; and those living in the South at the time of the 1973 interview versus those not doing so. None of these analyses turned up any systematic differences by region.

³⁶We examined differences across education, political knowledge, and interest in politics.

orientations. The evidence for this claim is based on the observation that party ideological polarization among political elites grew more substantially in the 1980s and 1990s and that issue salience in party evaluations was higher in the latter period as well (as shown in Figure 1). Thus the period of issue orientation centrality coincides with the period of heightened issue salience. Our explanation is similar to the theory of belief system constraint developed by Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976). They argued that levels of constraint are responsive to the “political stakes,” which are determined, in part, by the degree of issue polarization between the parties. While their empirical claim of increased constraint in 1960s and 1970s, compared to the 1950s, turned out to be a methodological artifact (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1978), with the benefit of hindsight we see that there was not much difference in party polarization between 1970s and the decades that immediately preceded it. The truly substantial increases happened later, in the 1980s and the 1990s. And it was during this time that we find heightened issue salience and issue orientations to be more central than partisanship.

Elite party polarization may influence issue salience in the mass public, which in turn influences the relative centrality of issues and partisanship in ordinary citizens’ belief systems. It is also plausible that issue salience in the mass public is a cause of elite party polarization. Assessing which provides a better account is beyond the bounds of this paper, but we do note that the question is an important one theoretically because the former implies a “top-down” process while the latter implies a “bottom-up” one. Either way, the results reported here are important because they provide the basis for the proposition that the relative centrality of issues and partisanship over the long term is not fixed as many, including Converse (1964), have often implied. Rather than a one-way flow of causality that persists over time, the dynamic relationship between partisanship and issue orientations appears to be context dependent.

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Benjamin Highton is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis, CA 95616-8682.

Cindy D. Kam is Associate Professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37235-1817.