Brand Names and the Organization of Mass Belief Systems

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Abstract: Previous research finds that the political views of citizens exhibit minimal constraint: it is difficult to predict the position citizens take on one issue, given their position on another. We show that constraint is much higher than previously recognized. In the world of real politics, parties and elites attach brand names (e.g. "Democratic" and "Republican") to issues, thereby sending signals that help citizens respond coherently to an array of questions. Existing studies have measured policy preferences without presenting political brand names.

A sequence of experiments supports four conclusions: political brand names (1) markedly increase constraint; (2) enhance constraint across rather than within policy agendas; (3) promote constraint among the politically unsophisticated as effectively as among the sophisticated; and (4) generate ideological consistency as effectively as ideological brand names.

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Constraint is the most basic form of organization of belief systems. A lack of constraint—an inability to connect positions across issues—would raise deep problems for democracy. It would signify not only the limited competence of individuals to understand politics, but also a fundamental absence of shared understanding about political programs. So far as mass belief systems lack constraint, the positions citizens take on issues will have no more coherence than a deck of cards scattered at random on a floor. Under these conditions, it is not obvious what electoral representation can mean.

The hypothesis of minimal constraint in mass belief systems is now regarded as well-established. We show, however, that mass publics have appeared inept in reasoning about politics partly because standard studies delete signals that citizens characteristically receive in the real world. With even a minimal amount of information provided, the political ideas of mass publics are markedly more constrained than previous research has suggested.

1. Parties as Signaling Devices

A long line of research has established that people who identify with a political party tend to favor the candidates and policies of that party (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Jacoby 1988; Layman and Carsey 2002; Miller and Shanks 1996). These findings are consistent with a psychological theory of reference groups. According to reference group theory, "[T]he individual by his sheer identification with the group willingly accepts what he perceives to be the norms of the group" (Hyman and Singer 1968, 10). Jacoby (1988) identified parties as key reference groups. He also noted an important limitation: for a party to be effective as a reference group, supporters must know the party's norms and standards. Many people lack this necessary knowledge (Gilens and Murakawa 2002; Krosnick 1990).

Parties exist, however, not only as psychological dispositions within the heads of voters, but also as strategic actors that deploy political brand names. Parties coordinate positions, we

hypothesize, by attaching their brand names to policies and candidates. Through the use of brand names, they provide information about "what goes with what."

We propose an informational theory of group influence to complement the established psychological theory. Citizens can compensate for minimal levels of political knowledge by taking advantage of signals from political parties. The idea that parties are signaling devices underpins a growing body of research—for example, the recent wave of studies on the policy reputations of parties (e.g. Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart 2001). But previous research has not isolated the impact of party signals on constraint, or the specific conditions under which party signals promote constraint.

What signals do voters need to recognize "what goes with what?" There is increasing evidence that the views of citizens are correlated within policy agendas (Carmines and Layman 1997; Layman and Carsey 2002). Citizens can, for example, adopt consistent positions on questions of social welfare such as government job programs and government health insurance. Their views on cultural topics such as women's rights and the legalization of marijuana likewise tend to be interconnected. Connections between different policy agendas, on the other hand, are more difficult for the general public to recognize.

Carmines and Stimson's (1989) theory of issue evolution picks out political parties, acting in response to the dynamics of electoral competition, as the primary mechanism for issue bundling.[1] Through parties, policy agendas get connected at the elite level, even when the logical association between agendas is debatable. If citizens are to operate in the same framework as political elites, they need to recognize the connections. In signaling connections across diverse policy agendas, parties provide information to help voters coordinate their views.

Political parties, it is important to underline, are well positioned to serve as a source of *generalized* constraint. Other "visible social groupings" (Converse 1964) operate as well.[2]

Unions are one example; African Americans another. Visible social groupings, however, tend to develop positions on issues of immediate relevance to the group. The programs of the Democratic and Republican parties, in contrast, are comprehensive and, in the current political environment, ideologically polarized (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Party signals accordingly operate as ideological signals.

The question, though, is not just *what* kind of information parties provide, but also *who* is able to use the information. Signals from parties are simple, credible, salient, and continuous over long periods of time.[3] All these features—simplicity, credibility, salience, and continuity—increase the probability that party brand names will be effective not just for politically aware and sophisticated citizens, but also for relatively unsophisticated ones.

In all, then, we make four predictions: (1) party brand names markedly increase constraint; (2) brands principally promote constraint across rather than within policy agendas; (3) in the current political climate, party and ideological brands should be equally effective at promoting constraint; and (4) the informational effects of party brands diffuse widely through the general public, including the less sophisticated segments that comprise the mass of mass publics. All four predictions have normative as well as empirical implications.

2. Study Design and Measurement

We designed and carried out a sequence of studies to test our hypotheses. Each study involved a unique design that built upon and extended findings from the previous wave, but all had a common feature: they asked citizens to express preferences on public policy issues and then compared constraint with and without the aid of brand names. We describe this common structure before discussing each study in detail.

Constraint is classically defined as an ability to predict the position people take on one issue, given knowledge of their position on another (Converse 1964). Measures of issue

positions differ in many respects, but they typically aim at a neutral presentation of the political choice. In the National Election Studies (NES), for example, the interviewer describes two polar alternatives and asks respondents how close their position is to one pole or the other. To avoid advantaging one alternative over the other, the interviewer introduces each pole with the now-familiar phrase: "Some people think…. Other people believe…. What do you think? …"

This format has a strong rationale. Public opinion surveys seek to assess respondents' "true" opinions. Researchers accordingly word questions in ways that minimize or balance pressures to take one side rather than another.

The last thing parties and candidates seek, however, is to minimize pressure on voters. On the contrary, they package their candidates and policies alternatives attractively; frame issues in ways that draw support to their side and/or siphon support from the other; and, of immediate relevance, put brand names on candidates and policies. Moreover, the media, if only out of a need to keep the cast of characters straight for their audience, attach brand names to candidates and policies. Thus, for different but equally compelling reasons, no political advertisement or news story begins: "Some people think…, whereas other people believe…." It is instead the Democratic plan or candidate; the Republican party or candidate.

Ironically, in an effort to discover whether citizens think coherently, previous research has stripped them of information that helps them think coherently: political brand names. The common feature of all our experiments is to determine whether, when parties can signal their stances, citizens can think more coherently about politics than has been recognized.

We follow Converse (1964), Nie (1974), and other seminal contributors to the literature by first measuring constraint as the association between responses to pairs of issues at a single point in time. Among the various measures of inter-item association, we present tau-b for three reasons. First, tau-b possesses the same attractive properties as other statistics for ordinal

variables, such as the Goodman-Kruskal gamma. In particular, tau-b does not assume a linear relationship, and its absolute value stays the same when the investigator inverts the ranking of one or both variables. Second, tau-b remains stable even when the investigator "recodes" the data by merging or splitting categories, whereas gamma fluctuates considerably. Finally, tau-b is more conservative than gamma, which can overstate the relationship between two ordinal variables, especially when the number of response categories is small and, consequently, many observations are tied on one or both dimensions (Agresti 1976).

Our conclusions, however, do not depend on the use of correlational measures. We replicate our findings with five additional measures of constraint: (1) the proportion of citizens who took consistently liberal or consistently conservative positions on all issues (Weissberg 1976); (2) the proportion who located themselves at exactly the same point on the liberal-conservative scale for all issues; (3) the proportion who expressed nearly identical views—all within one point of each other—on all issues; (4) the standard deviations of response scores across a set of issues (Barton and Parsons 1977); and (5) the absolute distance between positions on issues (see Appendix). All findings in the paper are robust to these additional measures of constraint.

Our empirical analysis proceeds from simple to complex. We begin with an analysis of constraint for a single pair of issues; then turn to constraint within and between policy agendas; then compare party brands with ideological ones; and finally measure how the effects of brands vary with political sophistication.

3. Constraint for a Single Pair of Issues

Our first study involved constraint across a single pair of issues.[4] We asked a R.D.D. sample of 1007 U.S. adults about food stamps and tax cuts, two domestic issues with some distance between them.[5] For each issue we assigned some citizens to the "unbranded" condition,

which presented opposing perspectives on the topic without referring to political parties or ideologies. We placed the rest of the sample in the "branded" condition, where each opposing viewpoint carried a partisan or an ideological brand name. This design allowed us to identify the effect of brands on constraint.

In the case of food stamps, 476 respondents were randomly placed in the party-branded group and given the following script over the telephone:

> Now a question about food stamps, that is, government coupons that can be exchanged for food. The Democratic Party wants to increase government spending on food stamps. It says poor people need assistance in these economic times. But the Republican Party takes a different position. It says this kind of public assistance makes people too dependent on government.[6]

The remaining respondents were told that "some people" want to increase spending on food stamps, whereas "other people" take a different position. After hearing both sides of the issue, all respondents were asked whether they supported or opposed higher government spending on food stamps and how strongly they felt about their position.

In a similar fashion, respondents considered branded or unbranded versions of a question about tax cuts. The branded version, given to 498 citizens, went as follows:

> The Republican Party has put into law a plan to cut taxes. Experts agree that the plan has a 75 percent chance of creating many new jobs this year. But Democrats point out that even if the plan works, it will greatly increase the national debt and thus hurt future generations.[7]

The unbranded version was identical with two exceptions: "the government" rather than "the Republican Party" put the tax cuts into law, and "other experts" rather than "Democrats" pointed out the implications for the national debt. At the close of the question, the interviewer asked

whether respondents supported or opposed the tax cut, and how strongly they held their view. If citizens think along ideological lines, those who favor more spending on food stamps (a liberal initiative) should oppose the tax cut (a conservative one). The connection between the two policies should tighten with the introduction of party brands.

Table 1 displays the tau-b correlation between food stamps and tax cuts, conditional on party cues. When party cues apply to both issues, tau-b takes on a value of .40, but the value falls to .14 when parties are not mentioned. Both statistics have an asymptotically normal distribution, allowing us to conduct hypothesis tests. Taking into account the standard errors in the second column of the table, the difference between the tau-b's in the branded and unbranded conditions is .26 with a 95 percent confidence interval running from .12 to .40. Thus, it is almost certain (probability .99) that party brands increase constraint.[8]

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Thus far we have compared mass preferences in two pure cases: branding both issues versus branding neither. Table 1 shows that party cues increase constraint in mixed cases, as well, where only one issue in the pair bears a party label. For example, tau-b attains a value of .30 when citizens hear where the parties stand on tax cuts but receive no cues about food stamps. This is 16 points higher (confidence interval .02 to .30) than the pure unbranded case, a difference that almost certainly did not arise by chance. Likewise, attaching party brands to opposing sides of the food stamps debate tends to increase constraint, though the gain is smaller and estimated less precisely (confidence interval –.05 to .25) than in the other mixed case. Overall, the data convey a consistent message. Branding one issue increases constraint, and branding multiple issues adds even more structure to mass preferences.[9]

4. Constraint Within and Across Policy Agendas

The second step in the research program was to turn from constraint over a single pair of issues to constraint within and across policy agendas. As before, we presented opposing sides of the debate, included party brands in some cases but not in others, and estimated the association between pairs of issues in both the unbranded and the branded conditions. Our hypothesis was that party signals increase constraint in proportion to the distance between issues.

We selected five issues, which were mostly modeled on standard items in the U.S. National Election Study. Two of these issues belong to the social welfare agenda, which involves economic assistance to the disadvantaged; two involved social-cultural issues, namely gun control and the environment; and the final question concerned foreign policy. As Converse (1964, 229) observed, "there is some falling off of constraint *between* the domains of domestic and foreign policy," compared to constraint within each domain. We included the foreign policy item to test whether party cues can bridge the domestic-international divide by increasing the association between preferences at home and preferences abroad.[10]

Branded versions of the welfare items (*safety net* and *minority aid*) appear below.

Safety Net: The majority in the Democratic Party believes the federal government should make every effort to ensure that everybody has a good standard of living. The majority in the Republican Party believes each individual has a responsibility to get ahead on their own.

Minority Aid: The view of the Democratic Party is that the government in Washington should make a stronger effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. The view of the Republican Party is that blacks should take more responsibility for helping themselves.

Our design also included unbranded versions, which followed the standard NES format of attributing the opposing arguments to "some people" and "other people," rather than the two main parties. At the end of each item we asked citizens to take a side and indicate whether they felt strongly about it. The question format allowed us to measure preferences on a four-point scale, as in the first phase of experiments.

We grouped the safety net and minority aid questions because they were near-neighbors, both logically and in the minds of citizens. Some researchers treat questions about blacks and other minority groups as part of a racial domain, distinct from social welfare and cultural issues (Carmines and Layman 1997). That perspective makes sense for many policies involving blacks but it seems harder to sustain in this case, since the safety net and minority aid questions include similar logic and language. Both questions ask whether the government should provide economic assistance, and both make the counter-argument that individuals should take responsibility for themselves. Thus, the safety net and minority aid questions are close in cognitive space.

Moreover, previous research shows that citizens think about minority aid as an instance of social welfare (Huckfeldt and Kohfeld 1989). Our data, presented in detail below, lend further support to this contention. Finally, we checked the 2000 National Election Study and found that the (unbranded) tau-b correlation between safety net and minority aid was an impressive .33, outstripping most other inter-issue correlations in the study. Of course, some questions about minorities belong in a distinct domain, but ours fits with social welfare logically and empirically.

In the area of culture, we asked citizens about gun control and the environment. Unbranded versions referred to "some people" and "other people," whereas the branded versions went as follows:

Guns: The Democratic Party's position is that the federal government should make it more difficult for people to buy a gun than it is now. The Republican Party's position is that the rules should be about the same as they are now.

Environment: The Democratic Party thinks we need much tougher government regulations on business in order to protect the environment. But the Republican Party thinks that current regulations to protect the environment are already too much of a burden on business.

Finally, we asked about the right to wage preventive war against another country. This issue, so central to foreign policy, has been especially controversial since the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 to address a "gathering threat" to U.S. security. The branded text read as follows:

Military: The position of the Republican Administration is that the U.S. has the right to attack any country it thinks might attack the U.S. The position of the Democratic Opposition is that the U.S. should not attack another country unless that country has attacked the U.S. first.

Half of the 2274 respondents were given party-branded versions of all five items; the complementary group answered questions that did not contain party cues.[11] For each pair of issues, Table 2 presents tau-b in the branded and unbranded conditions and computes the difference between the two. Standard errors appear in parentheses. (Again, all our findings are robust to other measures of constraint, which we present in the Appendix.) We have organized the items according to the political distance separating them. Thus, panel A describes the relationship between issues on the same agenda: either social welfare or cultural conservativism. Panel B, in contrast, reports correlations across domestic agendas by coupling a social welfare question with a cultural one. Finally,

Panel C considers the linkage between domestic issues and foreign affairs, where Converse observed the steepest drop in constraint.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

We expected party signals to increase constraint across-the board, and we hypothesized that the effect of signals would grow with the distance between issues. Table 2 shows that we were partly right. Party brands increase constraint proportional to the distance between issues, but they exert almost no effect when issues come from the same policy agenda. Constraint between the two social welfare issues (Panel A, first row) is strong (.39) in the unbranded condition. Evidently citizens can draw the appropriate connection between safety net and minority aid, even in the absence of party cues. Offering a party label adds almost nothing in this situation: constraint rises by a single point, with a standard error four times as large. The second pairing in Panel A behaves similarly. The association between gun control and the environment, which cohabit the cultural domain, is .29 in the baseline condition. Party cues increase the coefficient by .05, a small and statistically insignificant gain. In short, when two issues come from same agenda, citizens can take ideologically coherent positions even without party cues, and party brands seem to add little.

The effect of party brands is pronounced, by contrast, for linkages across domestic agendas. The unbranded tau-b's are noticeably lower in Panel B than in A, presumably because some citizens have trouble connecting social welfare and cultural issues without an external cue. In that context, party signals make a considerable difference: they increase the index of constraint by 8-10 points in all but one case, involving minority aid. The small standard errors in the final column of Table 2 reassure that differences of this magnitude probably did not emerge by chance. Finally, Panel C summarizes constraint between foreign and domestic policy. Attaching party labels to policy positions makes a large difference indeed, adding between 7 and 17 points to our

measure of constraint. Thus, party signals bridge what Converse identified as a fundamental chasm, between preferences over domestic issues and preferences beyond the water's edge.

To help convey the magnitude of constraint when citizens have access to political signals, we now compare our findings with previous research. The benchmark study is Nie (1974). Summarizing results for 1964 and 1968, Nie concluded that "*all* of the domestic issues are highly intercorrelated and appear to reflect the kind of over-arching liberal/conservative ideology which is, the theory of mass beliefs suggests, beyond the capacity of the mass public."[12] After reviewing Nie's findings, Converse concluded, "…by 1968 group antagonisms within the electorate itself had reached a sufficiently politicized peak that *high* levels of consistency across issue domains could be maintained."[13] Nie and Converse reached these conclusions after examining the surprisingly large *gamma* coefficients for most pairs of issues. Taking 1968 as a reference year, the mean gamma in the Nie study was .46 for domestic issues on different agendas and .23 for pairings between domestic and foreign policy.[14]

Brand-assisted constraint is even higher than the admittedly substantial levels Nie observed. To facilitate comparison we computed gammas for each pair of issues in Table 2. The comparison cannot be exact, because gamma (unlike tau-b) increases when the investigator collapses the data into a smaller number of categories. Nie put responses to all questions on a trichotomous scale, whereas the policy preferences of citizens in our study took on four possible values: very liberal, somewhat liberal, somewhat conservative, and very conservative. Even with this built-in disadvantage, the average gamma in our study was .51 for domestic issues on different agendas and .45 (twice the value Nie observed) when we coupled domestic issues with foreign policy. It therefore seems reasonable to characterize constraint as "high" in the presence of party brands.

5. Ideological versus Party Brands as Sources of Constraint

We have shown that party cues contribute to ideological coherence among the mass public. When informed about the positions of the Democratic and Republican parties, citizens often espouse consistently liberal or conservative issue positions. Of course, the words Democrat and Republican are not the only brand names in American politics. In theory, it might be possible to generate high levels of ideological consistency by invoking "conservative" and "liberal" brand names directly. Converse (1964, 214) recognized this possibility:

> Under certain appropriate circumstances, the single word 'conservative' used to describe a piece of proposed legislation can convey a tremendous amount of more specific information about the bill—who probably proposed it and toward what ends, who is likely to resist it, its chances of passage, its long-term social consequences, and, most important, how the actor himself should expect to evaluate it if he were to expend further energy to look into its details.

Converse, however, anticipated that such cues would have little effect on most citizens. On his view, the single word "conservative" sends a powerful signal only if the recipient "bring[s] a good deal of meaning to the term, which is to say that he must understand the constraints that surround it. The more impoverished his understanding of the term, the less information it conveys." Put another way, only cognitively complex citizens can understand simple ideological signals. It follows that ideological cues should have little effect on the organization of mass beliefs. The counter-hypothesis, which we test, is that ideological cues exert a powerful effect on the electorate.

We also examine the effect of dual cues. In many political situations, citizens receive both partisan and ideological brands. During the course of a campaign or through exposure to the media, for example, citizens learn that "liberal Democrats" stand behind one policy or candidate,

whereas "conservative Democrats" favor another. It could be argued that two signals are better than one, giving citizens additional resources to achieve constraint. On the other hand, party and ideology are conjoined in the current political context. To the degree this is so, the two signals are redundant, and constraint in the dual-signal condition should approximate constraint with only one signal.

To test these hypotheses we conducted the Ideology Signaling Experiment.[15] Our goal was to select issues from different policy agendas and compare the effects of partisan, ideological, and dual cues. We drew three issues from our previous survey: providing a safety net, protecting the environment, and taking preemptive military action. In one condition we indicated that "liberals" took one side whereas "conservatives" took the other. In a second condition we signaled that "liberal Democrats" favored one side whereas "conservative Republicans" preferred the other. In all other respects, the question wording matched our prior study. This new experiment, combined with our previous one, provided data on the behavior of citizens in four situations: when they have no cues, party cues, ideological cues, or both.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 presents the estimated levels of constraint in all four situations. The results run against the cognitive complexity hypothesis. Ideological signals are as effective as party brands in boosting constraint across policy agendas. The mean value of tau-b in the ideological brand condition is .37, exactly the same as in the party brand condition. Moreover, both signals appear redundant. The mean level of constraint in the dual signal condition is .39, a statistically insignificant difference from either single-cue condition. In a political era where party and ideology converge, simple ideological signals contribute as much to constraint as party signals. (For further evidence using other measures of constraint, see the Appendix.)

6. The Effect of Political Signals on Educational Groups

To this point, we have focused on levels of constraint for the mass public as a whole. We now examine the effect of political signals for certain subsets of the population. As evidence about the minimal political knowledge of mass publics accumulated, researchers explored the use of heuristics in political choice (e.g., Popkin 1994; Lupia 1994). The overarching hypothesis was that, by taking advantage of judgmental shortcuts, citizens could overcome informational shortfalls and make coherent choices. Party was one of the first heuristics specified (e.g., Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993). But a stream of research has shown that the more politically informed are more likely than the less politically informed to take advantage of judgmental shortcuts (Brady and Sniderman 1985), including the ostensibly gut-level heuristic of partisanship (Dimmock 1997). Indeed, when the less politically informed attempt to exploit heuristics, they can wind up even more likely to make mistakes (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). The very success of the heuristics research program has thus opened an explanatory hole: we have gotten better at accounting for the choices of the more sophisticated, and worse at accounting for the decisions of politically unsophisticated citizens.[16]

Simple signals such as party and ideology carry special promise to close this explanatory hole. Attaching labels to policy alternatives may provide cues that are comprehensible even to the less politically sophisticated. Partisan and ideological cues may, therefore, serve as a basis for generalized constraint throughout the mass public. We hypothesize that such cues are as effective in generating constraint among the less sophisticated segment of the mass public as among the more.

We tested this hypothesis by estimating the effect of cues *conditional* on education.[17] To increase the precision of our estimates, we pooled data from the party-signal and ideological-signal studies.[18] We then classified respondents into two groups: those who received cues

(partisan, ideological, or both) and those who did not. The pooled sample included data about our trio of issues: protecting the environment, providing a safety net, and taking military action.

Table 4 presents constraint for three levels of education. This tripartite division demands a lot from the data by shrinking cell sizes and making estimates less precise. Nevertheless, two clear conclusions emerge. First, brand names add substantial coherence to the preferences of citizens in the lower educational strata. Giving brand names to someone without a college degree boosts tau-b by between 10 and 20 points. The standard errors around these estimates are small, making it likely that brand names help the least sophisticated organize their views consistently.

Second, cues enable citizens to behave as if they were members of a higher educational group. For each pair of issues, the cue-enhanced level of constraint among those who never completed college exceeds the tau-b of college graduates in the cue-less condition. Thus, political signals raise the very least educated to a level of coherent thinking previously observed only among college-educated citizens.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Previous research on heuristics would not lead one to anticipate these patterns. As Converse (2000, 336) has remarked on the operation of heuristics in general, "it takes information to generate new combinations of information, and this is true to the very top of the information hierarchy." The results in Table 4 (and in the Appendix) are a dramatic exception to this general rule. Our evidence shows that even the least educated partisans can achieve constraint across policy agendas with political signals.

7. Conclusion

The impression of minimal coherence in mass belief systems has become a starting point for contemporary research. It is an impression, however, based on observation of citizens' behavior in an atypical situation, when they are stripped of information ordinarily at hand. In real

politics, citizens receive cues from external sources. Political parties and elites arrange policies into coherent bundles and attach brand names, giving citizens the information they need to put together a consistent set of positions across an array of issues.

The effect of party and ideological brand names is remarkably general, diffusing throughout the population. At the same time, these brand names have a selective effect, strongly increasing constraint among certain combinations of issues but having a weaker effect on others. When issues come from the same domestic agenda, such as social welfare or culture, citizens express surprisingly coherent preferences *even in the absence of political signals*. This fact in itself challenges the widespread impression of minimal coherence of mass belief systems. As the logical distance between issues increases, though, native levels of constraint decline, creating room for political cues to affect the way citizens think about politics. With partisan and ideological signals, citizens can achieve significant levels of constraint not only within but also across domains, even bridging the gap between domestic and foreign policy.

Moreover, simple party and ideological cues do what other consistency-generators apparently cannot. Nearly all consistency-generators in the literature (e.g, values, judgmental heuristics, party identification itself) depend for their effectiveness on the sophistication of citizens. It has accordingly become puzzling how less sophisticated citizens achieve coherence, to the extent they do. Political signals, and in particular party and ideological cues, help resolve this puzzle. The gains in coherence from political brand names are as large among the least educated as among the most.

In a pioneering analysis, Kuklinski et al. (2001) show that an infusion of information can help citizens make coherent tradeoffs. Indeed, with the best information and incentives, less sophisticated citizens perform about as well as more sophisticated ones. As Kuklinski and his colleagues point out, however, they generate their strongest effects by providing “considerably

more direct guidance than citizens generally encounter in the political world" (p. 421). A strong point of our experiments, by contrast, is their external validity. Far from being artificial, the brand names in our experiments are ubiquitous in real politics. Our experiments show that the least sophisticated can make coherent choices with only minimal, ecologically common guidance from parties and elites.

In one sense, our study establishes a lower bound on constraint in mass belief systems. The signals in our experiments are extremely brief: we simply replace the phrase "some people" with the name of a political party or an ideological group, but otherwise follow the standard script survey researchers have employed for decades. In real politics citizens encounter deeper, more extensive cues, especially on issues central to an election. Candidates repeatedly state and justify their positions, and media reinforce the messages. With stronger and more regular signals, constraint could exceed the levels we find in this study.

In another sense, though, our experiments define an upper bound on constraint. All participants in our "branded" condition receive at least some information about where the Democratic and Republican parties (or liberals and conservatives) stand. This puts participants at an advantage relative to citizens who never encounter news about politics. With increasing penetration of the media in the lives of ordinary Americans, the proportion of citizens who are not exposed to party and candidate cues is dwindling. Nonetheless, the exposure rate among our subjects probably exceeds the exposure rate in the population as a whole. Moreover, our experimental design makes the signals salient at the moment of decision. Thus, citizens who insulate themselves from political discussion, and those who do not receive signals around election time, should exhibit less constraint than we find in our study.

Constraint increases substantially when we provide signals that are pervasive in real politics. If elites regularly provide cues, though, why must researchers repeat the information

when they administer a survey? And why do elites reiterate their messages day after day, year after year, even when communicating with people who got the signal many times already? We offer two conjectures for future research: repetition jogs the memories of citizens, especially on topics that may not be central to everyday thinking, and repetition reduces uncertainty by confirming that the party or ideological group still holds the positions it previously announced. These considerations may explain why politicians find it so useful to repeat their messages, rather than signaling once and for all.

Finally, our experiments suggest that, in the current environment, the names Democrat and Republican promote coherence as effectively as ideological brands. To some degree this finding may be time-dependent. If the U.S. party system were not organized along ideological lines, party cues probably would not lead citizens to take consistently liberal, moderate, or conservative positions on public policy. In those cases, the names "liberal" and "conservative" might be more effective at promoting ideological constraint. If parties take ideological stands at the elite level, though, we should expect similar patterns at the mass level due to the information conveyed by party cues.

One of the most important developments in research on public opinion has been the emergence of an understanding that political choice is context-dependent. At least three major sets of findings underpin this consensus. First, public preferences vary, depending on whether issues are framed to evoke a positive response or a negative one (e.g., Nelson and Kinder 1996; but see Druckman 2004). Second, research on ambivalence (e.g. Zaller 1992; Alvarez and Brehm 2002) finds that many people have roughly as many reasons to oppose a policy as to support it. How they incline on a particular occasion depends on whether the immediate context focuses attention on positive or negative considerations. Third, the literature on prospect theory

(e.g, Quattrone and Tversky 1988) demonstrates that the behavior of respondents varies with their contextual reference point.

Given the context-dependency of political judgments, it is tempting to conclude that citizens lack effective anchors for political choice. Either citizens have no genuine attitudes (Converse 1970), or they have attitudes but cannot translate them into consistent and coherent preferences over public policy (Bartels 2003).

This conclusion of the context dependency of public opinion appears to undercut the notion that ordinary citizens can choose coherently. If citizens line up on one side of the issue, then switch to the other, then back again, all because the judgmental context has been subtly changed, why—as a matter of democratic theory—should the convictions of citizens be taken into account?

Our focus on the role of political institutions—and in particular the party system—underlines the context dependency of political judgment but yields the opposite empirical and normative result. Political parties are the organizational expression of competing alternatives. They are, as a consequence, the dominant franchises in mass politics. Previous research on public opinion has not taken into account the role of political brand names. The result has been an impression of incoherence. Our experiments have examined the impact of brand names of different types and in different combinations. The result is a picture of a more coherent and politically grounded public opinion. This picture opens the door to a new exploration of the role of citizens.

[1] Carmines and Stimson choose as an example of issue bundling a coupling of substantively unrelated positions, focusing on the shift of positions of the Republican and Democratic parties on civil rights.

[2] Lupia (1994) and Lupia and McCubbins (1998) have provided an information-based account, demonstrating that citizens take cues from reference sources (e.g., interest groups in an insurance referendum), not as a product of psychological identification with them, but rather as a function of judgments about the expertise and trustworthiness of the group.

[3] See Druckman (2001) for a striking demonstration of the power of party brand names to extinguish judgmental biases.

[4] This study was carried out July 10-November 4, 2003, under the auspices of TESS, by the Indiana Center for Survey Research. The sample was nationwide, and interviews were conducted over the telephone. Phone numbers were randomly generated using the Genesys list-assisted method, which allows unpublished numbers and new listings to be included in the sample. Business and non-working numbers were purged from the sample. At each residential telephone number we randomly selected a respondent from all household members age 18 or older. Households were informed of the opportunity to receive a twenty dollar check when the selected respondent completed an interview. The response rate, using AAPOR's Response Rate 3 formula, was 29 percent.

[5] Virtually from the beginning of systematic research (e.g., Key 1961), tax policy has been identified as a policy without immediately evident connections to a range of domestic policies.

[6] In roughly 50 percent of the cases, the interviewer did not read the third and fifth sentences, introducing extra variation that is not our focus here.

[7] The chance of creating many new jobs actually took on values of 40, 50, 60, 75, or 90. We integrate over this variation in the analysis that follows.

[8] The probabilities are based on a directional (one-sided) hypothesis.

[9] OLS regression and ordered probit analyses support the same conclusions. We estimated bivariate regressions of food stamps on tax cuts, each measured on the unit interval from the most liberal (score of 0) to the most conservative (score of 1) policy stance. The estimated effects of tax cuts, with standard errors in parentheses, were .18 (.07) without brands, .32 (.08) when only food stamps carried a brand, .40 (.07) when only tax cuts did, and .54 (.07) when both issues had brands. In ordered probit analysis of the same four conditions, the estimated effects of tax cuts on latent support for food stamps were.17 (.06), .30 (.07), .38 (.07), and .52 (.07) respectively. Sample sizes were the same as reported in Table 1.

Interestingly, branding contributed to structure without substantially changing the marginal distribution of either variable. On the question of tax cuts, the percentage of citizens in each response category remained almost exactly the same, regardless of party brand names. Moreover, the mean score was 2.6 and the standard deviation was 1.1 in both the branded and unbranded conditions. Based on various statistical tests, including the Kruskal-Wallis rank procedure, we cannot reject the hypotheses that both samples came from the same population.

Party cues had only a minor effect on the marginal distribution of the other issue, food stamps. In both the control and the treatment groups, a majority of U.S. citizens opposed more spending on this government program. Moreover, the percentage expressing strong opposition hardly changed with party brand names. Branding did make food stamps somewhat more popular: 23 percent offered strong support in the unbranded condition, compared with 32 percent in the branded one. Consequently, it appears that the two samples came from different

populations. Nonetheless, discrepancies between the control and treatment groups were small: the mean and standard deviation were 2.1 and 1.2 in the unbranded condition, compared with 2.3 and 1.3 in the branded one. It appears, therefore, that branding contributed to coherence not by changing aggregate preferences, but by helping individual citizens get on the "correct" side of each issue.

[10] The multi-issue survey was conducted over the internet by Knowledge Networks between December 22, 2003 and January 6, 2004. Knowledge Networks uses list-assisted RDD sampling to recruit panel members from a sample frame consisting of the entire U.S. telephone population. It then provides each household with identical internet hardware, even if they currently own a computer or have internet access. Surveys are fielded to a random sample of active panel members. The panel recruitment response rate (based on AAPOR RR3) was 39 percent, and 77 percent of panel members who received our survey completed it.

[11] In our study of food stamps and tax cuts, we learned that party brands increase constraint without altering the mean and variance of the constituent variables. Similarly, in this second phase of experiments the means and standard deviations of the five policy issues were nearly identical in the branded and unbranded conditions; differences never exceed two-tenths of a point on a scale from 1 to 4. Moreover, a Kurskal-Wallis rank test confirms that, in 4 of the 5 policy areas, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that the branded and unbranded samples come from identical populations. Only the safety net item fails the test, evidently because the mean level of support for guaranteeing a good standard of living is slightly lower in the branded condition (2.6) than in the unbranded one (2.8). This difference in means is miniscule, though, and the standard deviations are perfectly matched. The phase-two findings thus replicate our phase-one finding that party brands do not change aggregate support for each policy. If brands nonetheless

contribute to constraint, it must be because they shuffle individuals within the distribution, helping them take ideologically consistent positions.

[12] Nie (1974, 550), italics in original.

[13] Converse (1975, 106), italics added for emphasis.

[14] Nie (1974, 553) presents data on five issues. We classify *welfare, integration* and *size of government* as belonging to separate domestic agendas, include fair treatment of blacks (which Nie calls *black welfare*) with integration, and treat *cold war* as an item about foreign policy.

[15] The experiment was funded by TESS and fielded by Knowledge Networks on December 21-29, 2004. The panel recruitment response rate (based on AAPOR RR3) was 31 percent, and 66 percent of panel members who received the survey completed it.

[16] See Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) for a broader analysis of the limits of judgmental heuristics in politics.

[17] We recognize that education is an imperfect measure of political sophistication. It is, however, a reasonable proxy for the purposes of this paper, and it is an important factor in its own right.

[18] The findings are nearly identical, but estimated less precisely, when we examine the data from each study separately instead of pooling the data from both studies.

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Appendix: Other Measures of Constraint

Our findings are robust to many measures of constraint in addition to tau-b. In this appendix we discuss five additional measures: (1) *consistent sides*: the proportion of respondents who provided consistently liberal or consistently conservative answers to all items, instead of taking liberal stands on some issues and conservative stands on others (see, e.g., Weissberg 1976); (2) *identical locations*: the proportion of respondents who placed themselves at *exactly* the same position on all 4-point scales, e.g. they located themselves at position 4 on all policy issues; (3) *near-identical locations*: the proportion of respondents whose answers to all questions fell within a single point of each other; (4) *standard deviations*: the standard deviation of policy positions on 0-1 scales, calculated for each individual and then averaged for the group (see Barton and Parsons 1977); and (5) *absolute differences*: the absolute difference between the respondent's location on one issue and his/her location on another, with both issues on 0-1 scales. *Higher* values of (1), (2) and (3) signify more constraint, as do *lower* values of (4) and (5).

Table A1 reanalyzes the effect of party brands on the relationship between food stamps and tax cuts. Each of the five additional measures reconfirms that brand names significantly increase the level of constraint.

[TABLE A1 ABOUT HERE]

Table A2 revisits the multi-issue study, in which we asked about safety net, minority aid, guns, environment, and the military. When we provided party brands, 33 percent of respondents took consistent sides on *all five* issues, versus only 24 percent in the absence of brand names. The introduction of brands similarly increased the share of respondents who adopted *identical* locations on all five issues or *nearly identical* locations (all five within a single point of each

other). Finally, standard deviations and absolute differences for all five issues, taken together, were lower with party brands than without them.

[TABLE A2 ABOUT HERE]

Table A3 deepens the analysis by presenting the absolute difference in response scores for each pair of issues separately, rather than for the set as a whole. As we saw with tau-b, brand names exert stronger effects within domains than across them.

[TABLE A3 ABOUT HERE]

Table A4 quantifies the effect of ideological as well as party brand names. Again, our principal conclusions hold. For each pair of issues, brand names increase constraint. Moreover, ideological brands increase constraint as effectively as party brands, and dual brands are largely redundant.

[TABLE A4 ABOUT HERE]

Table A5 confirms what we saw with tau-b: brands contribute significantly to constraint among members of all educational strata, including citizens who never attended college. In summary, the principal conclusions in the paper hold, regardless of how one measures constraint.

[TABLE A5 ABOUT HERE]

Table 1: Effect of Party Brands on Association between Food Stamps and Tax Cuts

(entries are tau-b estimates and standard errors)

Party brand	Estimate
Neither policy	.14 (.05)
Food stamps only	.24 (.05)
Tax cut only	.30 (.05)
Both policies	.40 (.05)

Note: Sample size was 269 for neither policy, 221 for food stamps only, 241 for tax cut only, and 238 for both policies.

Table 2: Effect of Party Brands on Constraint within and across Agendas

(entries are tau-b estimates and standard errors)

	Unbranded	Branded	Difference
(A) Constaint within domestic agendas			
Welfare: Safety Net and Minority Aid	.39 (.03)	.40 (.03)	.01 (.04)
Culture: Environment and Guns	.29 (.03)	.34 (.03)	.05 (.04)
(B) Constraint across domestic agendas			
Safety Net and Environment	.30 (.03)	.40 (.03)	.10 (.04)
Safety Net and Guns	.23 (.03)	.31 (.03)	.09 (.04)
Minority Aid and Environment	.24 (.03)	.27 (.03)	.04 (.04)
Minority Aid and Guns	.20 (.03)	.28 (.03)	.08 (.04)
(C) Constraint involving foreign affairs			
Military and Safety Net	.18 (.03)	.33 (.03)	.15 (.04)
Military and Minority Aid	.19 (.03)	.26 (.03)	.07 (.04)
Military and Environment	.20 (.03)	.37 (.03)	.17 (.04)
Military and Guns	.18 (.03)	.25 (.03)	.07 (.04)

Note: Each estimate is based on sample of at least 714 valid observations. The median sample size for the 20 entries in the unbranded and branded columns was 820, and the maximum was 977.

Table3: Relative Efficacy of Party and Ideological Brands

(entries are tau-b estimates and standard errors)

	Unbranded	Party Brand	Ideol Brand	Both Brands
Safety Net and Military	.18 (.03)	.33 (.03)	.36 (.04)	.34 (.04)
Safety Net and Environment	.30 (.03)	.40 (.03)	.40 (.04)	.41 (.04)
Military and Environment	.20 (.03)	.37 (.03)	.34 (.05)	.42 (.04)

Note: Each estimate in the "ideological brand" and "both brands" columns is based on between 303 and 386 valid observations. Estimates in the remaining columns are from Table 2.

Table 4: Constraint Conditional on Education

(entries are tau-b estimates and standard errors)

	Unbranded	Branded	Difference
Safety Net and Military			
No college	.15 (.05)	.33 (.03)	.18 (.06)
Some college	.20 (.06)	.28 (.04)	.08 (.07)
College degree	.21 (.06)	.42 (.04)	.22 (.07)
Safety Net and Environment			
No college	.27 (.05)	.37 (.03)	.10 (.06)
Some college	.31 (.05)	.41 (.04)	.10 (.06)
College degree	.34 (.05)	.46 (.03)	.12 (.06)
Military and Environment			
No college	.13 (.05)	.34 (.03)	.20 (.06)
Some college	.21 (.06)	.40 (.04)	.20 (.07)
College degree	.30 (.06)	.41 (.04)	.11 (.07)

Note: The branded condition includes party brands, ideological brands, and the combination of the two. Each entry in the table is based on a sample of between 211 and 731 respondents.

Table A1: Food Stamps and Tax Cuts

(standard errors appear in parentheses)

	Unbranded	Branded	Difference
Consistent sides	.56 (.03)	.68 (.03)	.12 (.04)
Identical locations	.33 (.03)	.42 (.03)	.09 (.04)
Near-identical locations	.63 (.03)	.74 (.03)	.11 (.04)
Standard deviations	.28 (.01)	.21 (.01)	-.07 (.02)
Absolute differences	.39 (.02)	.30 (.02)	-.09 (.03)

Note: The table compares cases in which neither issue was branded, versus cases in which both issues were branded. Smaller standard deviations and absolute differences indicate more constraint. Thus, the negative differences in the last two rows are consistent with the hypothesis that brands increase constraint.

Table A2: Constraint in the 5-Issue Study

(standard errors appear in parentheses)

	Unbranded	Branded	Difference
Consistent sides	.24 (.02)	.33 (.02)	.09 (.03)
Identical locations	.12 (.01)	.18 (.02)	.07 (.02)
Near-identical locations	.25 (.02)	.35 (.02)	.10 (.03)
Standard deviations	.36 (.01)	.32 (.01)	-.04 (.01)
Absolute differences	.39 (.01)	.34 (.01)	-.04 (.01)

Table A3: Absolute Differences in Response Scores

(standard errors appear in parentheses)

	Unbranded	Branded	Difference
(A) Constaint within domestic agendas			
Welfare: Safety Net and Minority Aid	.26 (.01)	.29 (.01)	.04 (.02)
Culture: Environment and Guns	.34 (.01)	.32 (.01)	-.02 (.02)
(B) Constraint across domestic agendas			
Safety Net and Environment	.38 (.01)	.30 (.01)	-.08 (.02)
Safety Net and Guns	.39 (.01)	.34 (.01)	-.05 (.02)
Minority Aid and Environment	.48 (.01)	.46 (.01)	-.02 (.02)
Minority Aid and Guns	.43 (.01)	.38 (.01)	-.05 (.02)
(C) Constraint involving foreign affairs			
Military and Safety Net	.41 (.01)	.33 (.01)	-.09 (.02)
Military and Minority Aid	.44 (.01)	.40 (.01)	-.05 (.02)
Military and Environment	.36 (.01)	.30 (.01)	-.07 (.02)
Military and Guns	.40 (.01)	.37 (.01)	-.03 (.02)

Table A4: The Effects of Party versus Ideological Brand Names

(standard errors appear in parentheses)

	Unbranded	Party Brand	Ideol Brand	Both Brands
Safety Net and Military				
Consistent sides	.58 (.02)	.68 (.02)	.68 (.02)	.68 (.02)
Identical locations	.42 (.02)	.50 (.02)	.50 (.03)	.50 (.03)
Near-identical locations	.61 (.02)	.71 (.02)	.71 (.02)	.71 (.02)
Standard deviations	.29 (.01)	.23 (.01)	.23 (.01)	.23 (.01)
Absolute differences	.41 (.01)	.33 (.01)	.32 (.02)	.32 (.02)
Safety Net and Environment				
Consistent sides	.60 (.02)	.70 (.02)	.68 (.03)	.70 (.02)
Identical locations	.43 (.02)	.52 (.02)	.45 (.03)	.50 (.03)
Near-identical locations	.64 (.02)	.73 (.02)	.73 (.02)	.73 (.02)
Standard deviations	.27 (.01)	.22 (.01)	.23 (.01)	.22 (.01)
Absolute differences	.38 (.01)	.30 (.01)	.32 (.02)	.31 (.02)
Military and Environment				
Consistent sides	.63 (.02)	.71 (.02)	.71 (.03)	.76 (.02)
Identical locations	.43 (.02)	.51 (.02)	.48 (.03)	.56 (.03)
Near-identical locations	.69 (.02)	.75 (.02)	.75 (.02)	.81 (.02)
Standard deviations	.26 (.01)	.21 (.01)	.21 (.01)	.18 (.01)
Absolute differences	.36 (.01)	.30 (.01)	.30 (.02)	.25 (.02)

Table A5: Constraint Conditional on Education

(standard errors appear in parentheses)

	No College		Some College		College Degree	
	Unbranded	Branded	Unbranded	Branded	Unbranded	Branded
Safety Net and Military						
Consistent sides	.57 (.02)	.68 (.02)	.59 (.03)	.64 (.02)	.58 (.03)	.71 (.02)
Identical locations	.43 (.03)	.53 (.02)	.43 (.03)	.47 (.02)	.40 (.03)	.48 (.02)
Near-identical locations	.58 (.02)	.71 (.02)	.63 (.03)	.68 (.02)	.62 (.03)	.75 (.02)
Standard deviations	.30 (.01)	.23 (.01)	.28 (.02)	.25 (.01)	.29 (.02)	.21 (.01)
Absolute differences	.42 (.02)	.32 (.02)	.40 (.03)	.36 (.02)	.41 (.02)	.30 (.02)
Safety Net and Environment						
Consistent sides	.60 (.03)	.69 (.02)	.61 (.03)	.70 (.02)	.58 (.03)	.70 (.02)
Identical locations	.43 (.03)	.53 (.02)	.44 (.03)	.49 (.02)	.42 (.03)	.46 (.02)
Near-identical locations	.64 (.03)	.72 (.02)	.65 (.03)	.72 (.02)	.62 (.03)	.75 (.02)
Standard deviations	.27 (.02)	.22 (.01)	.27 (.02)	.22 (.01)	.28 (.02)	.22 (.01)
Absolute differences	.39 (.02)	.31 (.02)	.38 (.02)	.32 (.02)	.39 (.02)	.31 (.02)
Military and Environment						
Consistent sides	.60 (.03)	.70 (.02)	.63 (.03)	.72 (.02)	.69 (.03)	.76 (.02)
Identical locations	.40 (.03)	.52 (.02)	.41 (.03)	.50 (.03)	.48 (.03)	.53 (.02)
Near-identical locations	.65 (.03)	.73 (.02)	.68 (.03)	.76 (.02)	.75 (.03)	.81 (.02)
Standard deviations	.28 (.02)	.22 (.01)	.26 (.02)	.20 (.01)	.22 (.02)	.18 (.01)
Absolute differences	.39 (.02)	.30 (.02)	.37 (.02)	.29 (.02)	.31 (.02)	.25 (.02)