

Political awareness and the identity-to-politics link in public opinion

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Abstract: Members of different social groups often hold distinctive political attitudes. Research shows substantial divides based on characteristics like religion, race, gender, and sexuality, suggesting a straightforward “identity-to-politics” link. But making that link requires some knowledge and understanding of politics, which not everyone has. As a result, I show, political awareness often moderates the link between social identity and political views. Among the least engaged, identity is only weakly related to politics, and the differences between groups are muted. As awareness increases, the connection between group membership and political attitudes tightens, and the magnitude of identity gaps grows. The substantive impact of awareness varies across groups, and there are notable exceptions to these findings. In general though, the identity-to-politics link — and thus many of the divisions attributed to demographic characteristics — is conditional on political awareness.

Keywords: Political awareness; identity politics; public opinion

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Members of different social groups often hold distinctive political attitudes. Research shows substantial differences in partisanship and policy preferences based on characteristics like religion (Campbell, Layman and Green, 2020; Cohen and Liebman, 1997; Layman, 2001), race and ethnicity (Hajnal and Lee, 2011; Saavedra Cisneros, 2017), gender (Conover, 1988; Ondercin, 2017; Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte, 2008), sexuality (Hertzog, 1996; Schaffner and Senic, 2006; Lewis, Rogers and Sherrill, 2011; Worthen, 2020), union membership (Frymer and Grumbach, 2021; Kim and Margalit, 2016), and military service (Klingler and Chatagnier, 2014), among others. These differences suggest a straightforward “identity-to-politics” link in public opinion (see Lee, 2008; Hajnal and Lee, 2011; Junn, 2006), echoing early research that claimed “a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preference” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944, 27).

But making the link between social identity and political views requires some interest in, and understanding of, politics, which not everyone possesses to the same extent. Knowledge of “what goes with what” (Converse, 1964, 238) — or which groups are supposed to align with which political views — is far from universal (Claassen et al., 2021; Kane, Mason and Wronski, 2021). Much of the literature suggests that elite cues, party policies, and the news media help citizens link their social identities to politics. But only attentive voters are likely to be exposed to this information, leaving the less-engaged still out of the loop (Zaller, 1992, 1996).

As a result, this paper argues, the identity-to-politics link in public opinion is often moderated by political awareness.¹ I draw on pooled American National Election Studies (ANES) and Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES) data to study a wider range of social groups than past research — including identities grounded in religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, union membership, and military veteran status. For most of these groups, the strength of the identity-to-politics link increases with political awareness. Among the least en-

¹ This is sometimes labelled sophistication, engagement, attention, or knowledge; in this paper, I treat these terms as essentially synonymous. A more formal definition follows shortly.

gaged, identities are often only loosely tied to partisanship or policy preferences. As awareness increases, the relationship between group membership and political attitudes strengthens, and the gaps between voters with different social identities widen.

The impact of awareness varies substantially across groups. Awareness is associated with particularly large increases in liberal attitudes among Black, Jewish, secular, and LGBT voters, and in conservative attitudes among evangelical Protestants. In contrast, the evidence is mixed for gender, veteran, and Hispanic identities, and there is no evidence that Asian respondents' views vary with engagement. In most cases, though, the findings show that the identity-to-politics link — and thus the attitudinal differences between social groups — is conditional on political awareness.

I begin by discussing the nature of the identity-to-politics link, before explaining why it requires some political awareness, and then the specific hypothesis tested in this study.

The identity-to-politics link in public opinion

As Lee (2008, 458) defines it, the basic premise of the identity-to-politics link is that “individuals who share a demographic label—e.g., African American, Latino, Asian American, Arab American—will also share common political goals and interests and act in concert to pursue them” (see also Junn 2006; Hajnal and Lee 2011). This idea has deep roots, with early public opinion researchers noting that different groups “think and behave politically in distinctive ways” (Campbell et al. 1960, 295; see also Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944).

Since then, numerous studies have documented substantial gaps in political attitudes based on social identity. LGBT Americans, for example, are more likely to identify as liberal Democrats, to hold progressive policy views, and to support Democratic candidates (Hertzog, 1996; Schaffner and Senic, 2006; Lewis, Rogers and Sherrill, 2011; Strolovitch, Wong and Proctor, 2017; Worthen, 2020). Likewise, research highlights the distinctively liberal views of secular (Camp-

bell, Layman and Green, 2020) and Jewish (Cohen and Liebman, 1997) Americans; Black (Dawson, 1995; White and Laird, 2020), Hispanic (Saavedra Cisneros, 2017), and Asian (Masuoka et al., 2018) Americans; women (Conover, 1988; Ondercin, 2017; Lizotte, 2020; Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte, 2008); and union members (Frymer and Grumbach, 2021; Kim and Margalit, 2016). Of course, not all social groups lean to the left. Scholars have also documented identities linked to distinctively *conservative* attitudes, including military veterans (Klingler and Chatagnier, 2014), evangelical Protestants (Layman, 2001), and men (Ondercin, 2017).

Plenty of identities — non-veterans, un-unionized workers, straight cisgender voters, etc — are unlinked to politics. There is no inevitable connection between a given demographic characteristic and distinctive attitudes (Huddy, 2001). Rather, scholars have outlined several conditions under which we should see an identity-to-politics link. These fall into two camps: those that see a direct path from identity to policy preferences, and those that envisage an indirect path via partisanship.

In the first, “direct” account, Taeku Lee (2008) outlines five steps through which membership in a social group leads to distinctive political views (see also Hajnal and Lee 2011, 114-118): (1) the group exists as a defined category; (2) individuals identify as group members; (3) members share common interests; (4) members agree that mainstream politics is the appropriate venue to pursue those interests; and (5) members agree on which parties, candidates, and policies will best further those interests. Not all social groups meet all these conditions. But on this account, the identity-to-politics link proceeds relatively directly from group membership to distinctive political attitudes via an assessment of shared interests.

A second set of accounts sees identity as *indirectly* linked to politics, via partisanship (Layman, 2001; Page and Jones, 1979). In this view, group membership leads to partisan identities, which in turn shape policy preferences. For Green, Palmquist and Schickler (2002, 8), for example, when developing a partisan allegiance, citizens “ask themselves two questions: What kinds of social groups come to mind as I think about Democrats, Republicans, and Independ-

dents? Which assemblage of groups (if any) best describes me?”. The more voters see a party as aligned with their own social groups, the more likely they are to identify with it (Claassen et al., 2021; Mason and Wronski, 2018). And once voters adopt a party identity, they are highly likely to take on its policy positions too. In this way, identity can be linked to political attitudes far removed from group interests via its impact on partisanship (Layman, 2001, Ch.7).

Identity can lead to distinctive political attitudes directly through an evaluation of group interests, or indirectly through partisanship, or both. But making these connections requires effort. Given the public’s variable interest in politics, we should not assume that everyone has what Converse (1964, 234) described as “interstitial ‘linking’ information” about “what goes with what”. Knowledge of the parties’ group coalitions varies substantially (Claassen et al., 2021; Kane, Mason and Wronski, 2021). And even early scholars who claimed that social identities “determine” political views acknowledged that “there may be many group members who are not really aware of the goals of their own group. And there may be many who, even if they were aware of these goals, would not be sufficiently interested in current events to tie the two together consciously” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944, 149; see also Converse 1964, 234-8).

So how do voters learn to link their identity with politics? Numerous accounts argue that information communicated by elites helps to make the connections clear. For example, some researchers highlight direct messages from group leaders and politicians. Dawson (1995, 57) argues that “black political and economic elites” communicate whether “a given government policy is good or bad for the racial group”. Similarly, Frymer and Grumbach (2021, 229) attribute liberal racial attitudes among union members to “signals from leaders, organizers, and labor-associated Democratic candidates”. Other research points to information drawn from the parties’ platforms. In this vein, Turnbull-Dugarte (2020, 520) suggests that LGB liberalism is a response “to parties’ positions on gay rights issues” and Cohen and Liebman (1997, 425) trace the roots of liberal Jewish attitudes in part to the Democratic Party’s traditional protection of

“vulnerable minority group[s]”. Elite messaging and policy stances can help voters link their social identities to political attitudes.

Media coverage of politics and the demographics of elected officials may also signal how voters are “supposed” to align their views. For example, Ondercin (2017) shows that the gender gap in partisanship varies in response to the gender composition of elected officials. Similarly, Catholics’ attitudes have shifted with changes in the partisan affiliations of high-profile Catholic politicians (McDermott, 2007). More generally, news stories about how groups in the electorate vote could communicate to individuals how they themselves should think (Burden, 2008). Whether stated explicitly or not, the media may communicate what social groups “go with” what politics.

These arguments all share a common thread. Information provided by elites — group leaders, politicians, the media and others — can help voters see the links between their social identities and political views. But not everyone is equally likely to get this information. A long literature shows that elite influence on public opinion varies systematically with engagement, potentially making the identity-to-politics link conditional on voters’ political awareness.

The importance of being aware

For elite communication to influence public opinion, citizens must at a minimum be exposed to it. But such exposure depends critically on voters’ political awareness, “the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics *and* understands what he or she has encountered” (Zaller, 1992, 21). Following previous work, I conceptualize this as a disposition (Prior, 2019) — a “general propensity for reception of news and public affairs information” (Zaller, 1996, 22) rather than attention to any particular story or source. Highly aware voters are those who are chronically attuned to news media and more likely to be exposed to political information in general.

This general attention to politics increases the likelihood that individuals receive messages and cues from “trusted opinion leaders who bundle attitudes in ideological packages” (Kalmoe and Johnson, 2021, 3). Inattentive citizens are unlikely to come across such information, or to comprehend it fully if they do. Highly aware voters, in contrast, are more likely to get the message and incorporate it into their own thinking (Zaller, 1992, 1996; Margolis, 2018, Ch. 6). As a result, politically aware voters are more likely to connect their predispositions and values to political views in ways that echo elite rhetoric (Federico and Sidanius, 2002; Claassen and Highton, 2009; Jones and Brewer, 2020).

Of particular relevance to this paper, highly aware citizens are more likely to know which social identities “go with” which political views. The more politically attentive are more likely to describe parties in terms of their group coalitions (Rothschild et al., 2019), to correctly identify the leanings of religious identifiers (Campbell, Layman and Green, 2020, Ch. 5), to be aware of partisan stereotypes about demographic groups (Burden, 2008) and to infer issue positions based on candidates’ gender (Sanbonmatsu, 2003). More aware voters are more likely to see the links that elites draw between social groups and political attitudes.

Might awareness also help voters link their *own* social identities to politics in this way? Some previous research supports this line of reasoning, although the evidence is mixed and often rests on analysis of a single identity group. For example, more attentive LGB people are more likely to vote for Democrats (Lewis, Rogers and Sherrill, 2011); more aware religious traditionalists to vote Republican (Layman, 2001, Ch.7). For other groups, the results are less consistent. Saavedra Cisneros (2017, Ch. 7) finds that greater awareness among Hispanic voters leads them to more strongly identify as Democrats; other work suggests it leads to Republican identification (Hajnal and Lee, 2011, Ch. 6). Finally, Delli-Carpini and Keeter (1996, Ch.6) report that differences in policy preferences between groups (such as the gender gap on abortion, or religious gaps on LGB rights) often increase with political knowledge.

These studies mostly limit their focus to one identity type, or a specific policy area, at a

time. Whether awareness strengthens the link between social identities and political views more generally is unknown. I propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Among members of politically-aligned groups, greater awareness is associated with more group-consistent partisanship and policy preferences.

H1 is formulated broadly, and so I note several points here. Although I follow calls for political psychology to study a broader range of groups (e.g., Huddy, 2001), the survey data I use still only ask about a limited number. For clarity, Table 1 lists each of the identities included in these analyses.

H1's expectations for each group are based on its partisan alignment. For Republican-aligned groups, greater awareness should be associated with more conservative policy preferences and Republican partisanship. For Democratic-aligned groups, greater awareness should lead to more *liberal* and *Democratic* views. H1 makes no predictions for groups without a partisan alignment, since elite messaging about those identities' politics is mixed or non-existent.

Following the identity-to-politics link literature, decisions about a group's political alignment were made based on three sources: (1) previous academic research; (2) the party affiliation of elected officials from the group; and (3) the vote choice of group members in presidential elections. Details are in online appendix A1, but take evangelical Protestants as one example. Their categorization as Republican-aligned is based on (1) research that documents the ties between the GOP and evangelical groups (e.g., Layman, 2001); (2) evidence that around 90% of evangelical Members of Congress identify as Republicans (Mathew, 2018); and (3) evidence that evangelical voters lean Republican, voting for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton by 37 points according to the 2016 CCES. I therefore count evangelical Protestants as a Republican-aligned group, and expect more aware evangelicals to hold more conservative/Republican views. Similar assessments are made for each identity.²

² Most cases are clear-cut. An argument could be made for White identity being Republican-aligned (see Jardina

Table 1: Social identity groups studied in this article and hypothetical expectations

	Social identity group	Group more aligned with	Relative to less aware members, H1 expects more aware members to be
Religion	Evangelical Protestants	Republican Party	More conservative/Republican
	Jewish respondents	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Secular respondents	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Mainline Protestants	Neither party	No expectations
	Catholics	Neither party	No expectations
Race/ethnicity	Black respondents	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Hispanic respondents	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Asian respondents	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	White respondents	Neither party	No expectations
Gender	Women	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Men	Republican Party	More conservative/Republican
Sexuality	LGBT respondents	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Straight cisgender respondents	Neither party	No expectations
Union membership	Union members	Democratic Party	More liberal/Democratic
	Non-members	Neither party	No expectations
Veteran status	Veterans	Republican Party	More conservative/Republican
	Non-veterans	Neither party	No expectations

Note: See online appendix A1 for details of how each group's partisan alignment was decided.

Finally, H1 makes no predictions about which identities are most strongly linked to politics. It is agnostic about whether we should see greater differences associated with race than with gender, for example Its claim is just that *within* each party-aligned group, more politically aware members are more likely to hold attitudes consistent with the group. I return to possible explanations for the varying impact of awareness on different groups after presenting the main results.

2019), and this group voted for Trump by 13 points. There are few elite cues about how White voters should behave, however, and majorities of both parties' officeholders are White. I therefore count them as unaligned.

Putting identity, politics, and awareness in order

Although most of the literature assumes identities shape political views, recent scholarship suggests that causal path can be reversed. Egan (2020), for example, uses GSS panel data to show that some respondents change their reported identities over time to match their political beliefs. Liberal Democrats in early waves were more likely to switch into claiming LGB, secular, Black, Asian, and Hispanic identities later on; conservative Republicans to later claim Protestant and born-again identities (see also Margolis, 2018, for similar findings on religion). H1 is deliberately agnostic about whether identity leads to politics or vice versa: all it says is that awareness should strengthen the link between them. After all, any pressure to align identity and politics (in whichever order) rests on knowing how they are *supposed* to be linked — which is more likely for the most engaged (Margolis, 2018, Ch.6).

The identities studied here do, however, vary in their likely endogeneity to politics. Some tend to be transmitted from parent to child (like race and ethnicity) and thus developed prior to political attitudes; others acquired in adolescence (like LGBT identity) or adulthood (like union membership and veteran status) and thus formed after political views (Egan, 2012). They also vary in how fluid and influenced by politics they are, as Egan (2020) documents. Although the focus of this paper is on how awareness moderates the relationship between identities and political views, I also examine how its impact varies across groups.

This raises questions about where in the causal order awareness falls, however. Previous research sees it as “a relatively long-term and stable characteristic of individuals” (Claassen and Highton, 2009, p539) that is unlikely to change in response to political views. A related concept, interest in politics, likewise shows “immense individual-level stability” over time (Prior, 2019, 352). In terms of its development in the life cycle, the roots of awareness appear to lie in childhood (Prior, 2019) or genetics (Arceneaux, Johnson and Maes, 2012). This suggests

awareness comes temporally prior to, and is exogenous from, political views.³

Ultimately, determining the causal relationships between these three variables is beyond the scope of this paper. H1 poses a more modest and first-order question: does awareness moderate the link between identity and politics? At the same time, the range of identities studied offers some leverage on the impact of awareness on different groups, which I turn to after the main analyses.

Data and methods

I use pooled CCES data from 2016 and 2018, and pooled ANES data from 2008, 2012, and 2016. Unlike other potential sources, these surveys (1) included numerous attitudinal items; (2) measured political awareness; and (3) interviewed enough respondents to create large subsamples of identity groups (in the CCES, there are 124,600 total respondents; in the ANES, 12,506). Descriptive statistics and question wordings are in online appendix A2. I analyze each dataset separately, but the coding of variables is largely consistent across sources.

Political attitudes: I constructed two dependent variables from each survey, coded to range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more liberal responses. *Party identity* was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from Strong Republican (0) to Strong Democrat (1). *Policy preferences* is an index of attitudes on multiple issues, with at least 18 items from each survey. Each item was coded to range between 0 (most conservative position) and 1 (most liberal), and then a simple mean taken. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .84 to .94, depending on the survey, suggesting these form reliable indices.⁴

Respondent identities: *Religion* is coded as mainline Protestant (the reference category

³ A further complication is that identity *strength* could be related to awareness, if those who feel more closely linked to a group are more likely to learn about politics as a result. I discuss this possibility, and some evidence bearing on it, at the end of the paper.

⁴ Additional models using ideology and presidential vote choice as dependent variables reached similar substantive conclusions as those presented here; results are in online appendix A4.

in models); evangelical Protestant; Catholic; Jewish; secular; and those of other religions. In both surveys, respondents were asked directly if they identified as Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, among other faiths. To distinguish between evangelical and mainline Protestants, the ANES data rely on the specific church respondents belonged to, the CCES data on a follow-up question asking if respondents identified as evangelical. “Secular” respondents are those who said they never attended religious services and did not think of themselves as part of a religion (in the ANES), or those who selected atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” when asked to describe their religion (in the CCES). *Race and ethnicity* is coded as White (the reference category); Black; Hispanic; Asian; and those of other races. *Gender* is a binary variable, with values of 1 for women, 0 for men. For *LGBT* identities, both surveys measured sexual orientation, but only the CCES included transgender identities. For ease of exposition, I use the term “LGBT” to discuss the results, but note that the ANES estimates for LGBT people do not include transgender respondents who identified as straight. *Union membership* is an indicator variable, with 1 signifying those in a union, 0 everyone else. *Veteran* is likewise coded as 1 for those who served in the military, 0 otherwise.

Political awareness: Following previous work (e.g., Zaller, 1992, 1996; Federico and Sidanius, 2002; Kalmoe and Johnson, 2021), I use an index of items capturing factual knowledge of, and self-reported attention to, politics. In keeping with the conceptualization of awareness as “habitual news reception” (Zaller, 1996, 22) these measure general political information and engagement rather than attention to specific sources or events.⁵ Each survey included between ten and seventeen such items (Cronbach’s alpha ranged from 0.72 to 0.89). I took each respondent’s average score, and then calculated their percentile ranking within their survey, to create a measure that is comparable across datasets. These percentile scores were divided by

⁵ General knowledge items have limitations, not least that varying item salience can inflate differences between groups (Pérez, 2015a). Models that measure awareness just with attention to politics, however, yield the same substantive results (see online appendix A4). In general though, researchers should be cautious when comparing social groups on the basis of knowledge items alone.

100, so the variable ranges from 0 (least aware) to 1 (most aware). Full details are in online appendix A3.⁶

Other covariates: All models control for other characteristics. To measure *income* comparably, respondents are coded into quintiles by survey year: the resulting scale runs from 1 (poorest fifth) to 5 (richest). *Education* is a five-category variable (those with less than high school; high school; some college; a BA; or advanced degree). An indicator variable references currently *married* respondents. *Age* is measured in years. *Religiosity* is based on how often the respondent attends religious services, ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (more than once a week). *Region* is coded as South (the reference level), Midwest, Northeast, or West, based on Census definitions of each state. I also control for the survey year, given these are pooled data.

Models and presentation of results: Separate linear regression models are fitted for each dependent variable and dataset. Survey weights are used throughout. All of the identity measures are interacted with political awareness. Coefficients and standard errors are shown in online appendix A4. Results are presented here as predicted values: I simulate each model with control variables held at their mean or modal value and calculate predicted party identity and policy preferences on the 0–1 linear scale, given different levels of awareness. As examples of “less” and “more” aware voters, in the text I discuss estimates for those in the 10th and 90th awareness percentiles, respectively.

⁶ Regression models predicting political awareness, shown in online appendix A3, find small but significant differences between groups. As in previous work, (e.g., Delli-Carpini and Keeter, 1996, Ch.4), the largest gaps are based on gender (where women are estimated to score .10 points lower than men on the 0–1 scale) and race (where Black respondents score .05 points, and Asian respondents .06 points, lower than Whites). None of the other differences are greater than 0.05 points, indicating that identifying with a politically-aligned group does not necessarily translate into greater awareness.

Awareness and the identity-to-politics link

As a case study and introduction to how the results are presented, I first show how awareness moderates the identity-to-politics link for one group in particular, LGBT Americans.

Linking LGBT identity to politics

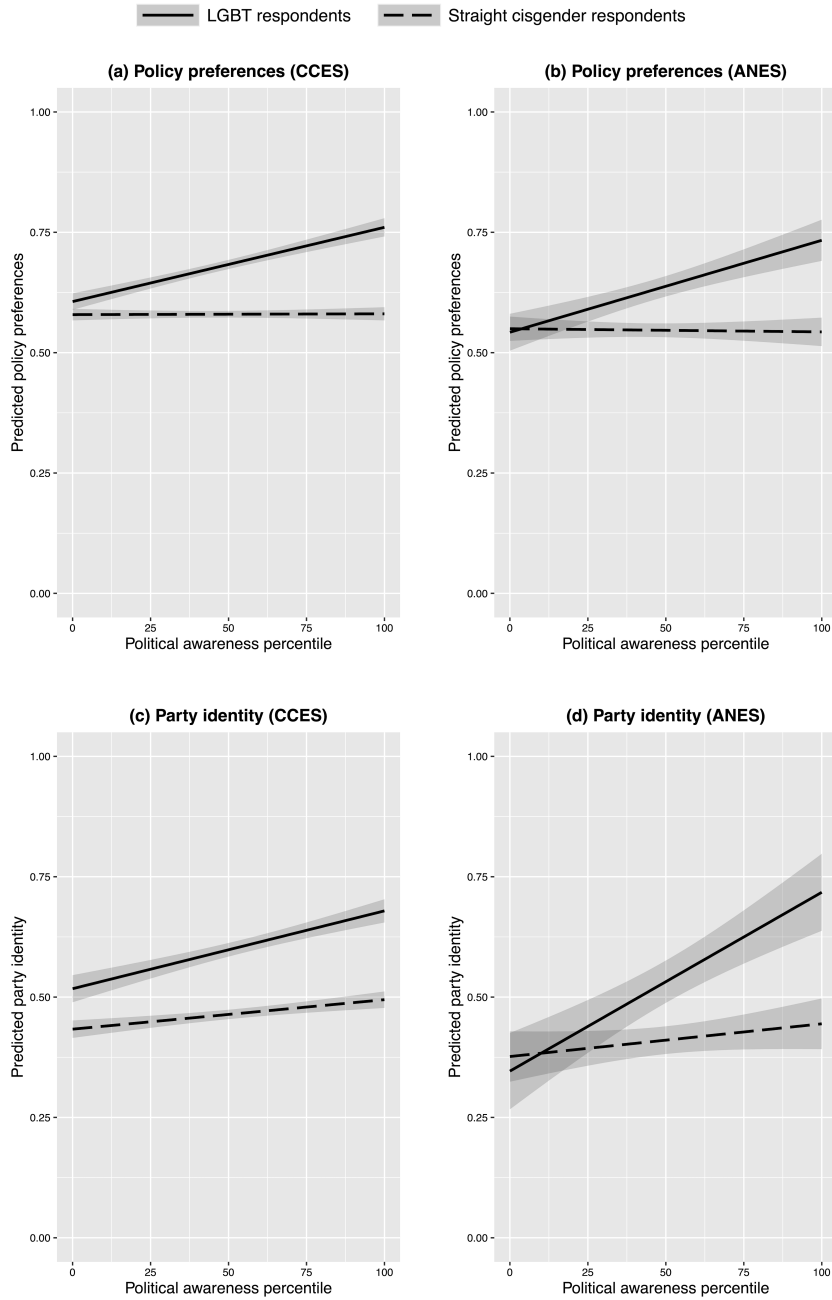
Figure 1 shows predicted values for LGBT respondents (solid lines) and straight cisgender respondents (dashed lines), across the range of political awareness. Recall that the dependent variables are coded from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more liberal policy preferences and Democratic partisanship.

In every case, as awareness increased, so too did LGBT respondents' liberalism.⁷ Take, for example, respondents' policy preferences in the CCES, shown in plot (a). Less aware LGBT respondents (those in the 10th percentile of awareness) are predicted to score .62 [95% confidence intervals=.61, .64] on the 0–1 scale. More aware LGBT respondents (those in the 90th percentile) were much more liberal, scoring .74 [.73, .76]. The ANES estimates in plot (b) show a similar pattern: less aware LGB voters had predicted scores of .56 [.53, .59]; more aware LGB voters, .71 [.68, .75]. The same is true for respondents' party identity. In the CCES, more aware LGBT respondents were more Democratic (moving from the 10th to 90th awareness percentile is associated with an increase from .53 [.51, .56] to .66 [.64, .68]). A similar shift in the ANES data is associated with an increase from .38 [.31, .45] to .68 [.61, .75]. In line with H1, greater awareness is associated with more liberal views among LGBT respondents.

The same is *not* true for straight cisgender respondents, a politically unaligned group. This indicates that awareness is moderating the impact of politicized LGBT identities and not working as a liberalizing force in and of itself. For straight cisgender Americans, greater awareness is

⁷ Supplementary models in online appendix A4 break this out by lesbian/gay; bisexual; and transgender identities. The results suggest liberal views increase with awareness consistently for each subgroup, with the exception of transgender respondents, where the results are more mixed.

Figure 1: Predicted policy preferences and party, by LGBT identity and political awareness



Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals, simulated from regression models shown in online appendix A4. Higher values indicate more liberal policy preferences and Democratic partisanship. ANES estimates are for LGB respondents and straight respondents only.

associated with either no change or slightly more liberal views. The largest substantive change is for party identity in the ANES, shown in plot (d), which increased from .38 [.34, .43] at the 10th awareness percentile to .44 [.39, .48] at the 90th. This increase of .06 points is small, however, both in absolute terms, and relative to the equivalent increase of .30 points for LGBT respondents.

The results support H1's conjecture that awareness moderates the identity-to-politics link. The more politically aware a LGBT respondent was, the more likely they were to echo elite alignments and identify as Democrats with liberal policy views. But what of other social groups? In the next section, I replicate these analyses for the other identities studied.

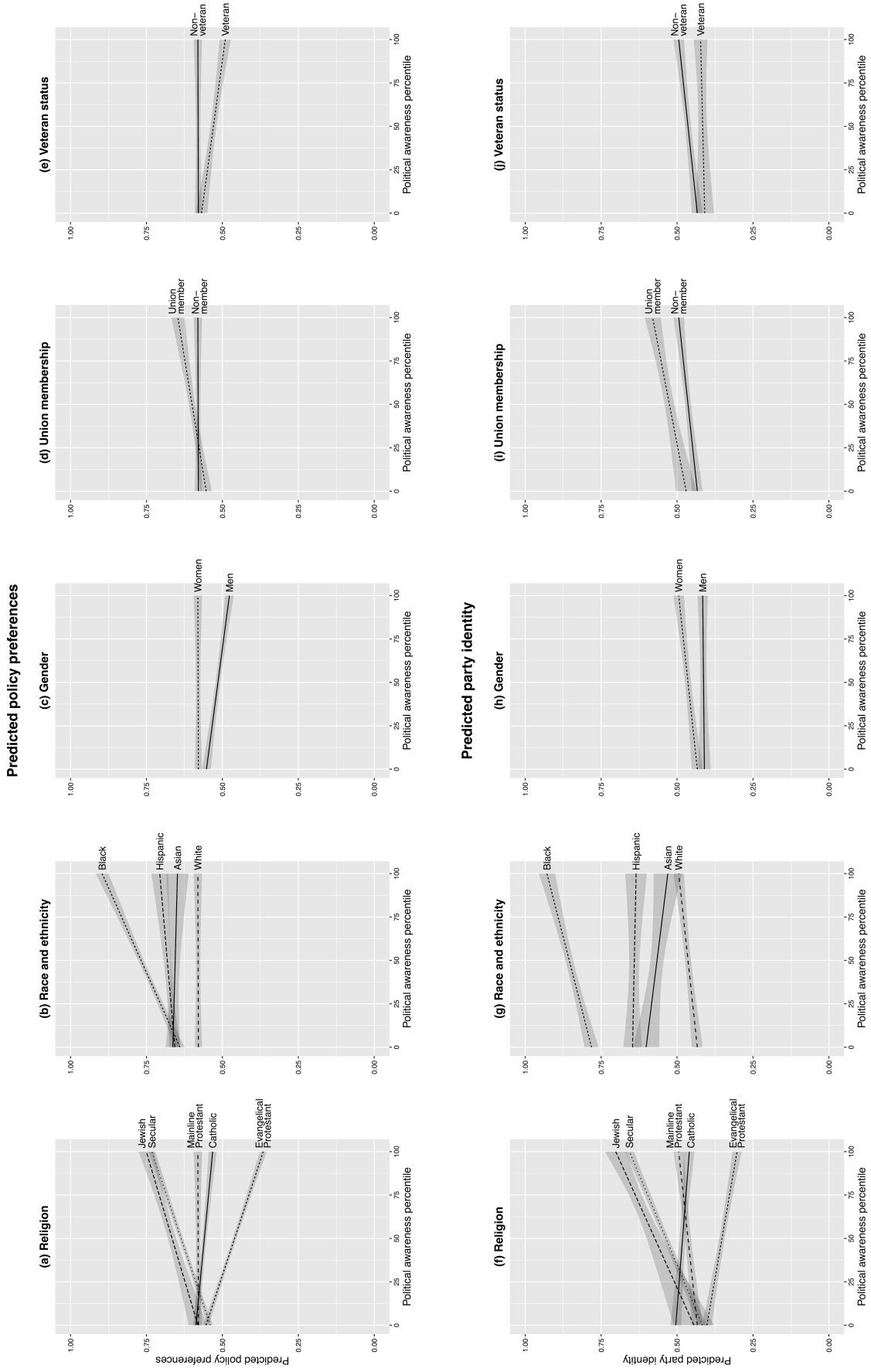
Awareness and the identity-to-politics link for other groups

To streamline the analyses, I focus on the estimates from the CCES (models of the ANES data are in online appendix A4 and largely show the same results). Figure 2 replicates the analyses from Figure 1(a) and (c) for each set of identities; predicted policy preferences are shown in the top row of plots and party identity in the bottom row.

The plots in Figure 2 present a large array of estimates — sixteen identity groups across two dependent variables at different levels of awareness — but the results are generally consistent with H1. For members of politically-aligned groups, greater awareness is associated with more group-consistent attitudes. There are important exceptions, and the magnitude of awareness' impact varies across groups, both of which I discuss shortly. The general take home though is that, as with LGBT voters, awareness strengthens the link between identity and politics.

This can be seen most clearly for religious identities, shown in plots (a) and (f). Among Jewish and secular respondents — two groups aligned with the Democratic Party — greater awareness is associated with more progressive views. For Jewish respondents, moving from the 10th to 90th percentile of awareness is associated with an increase in liberal policy views from .60 [.57, .62] to .73 [.71, .75], and an increase in Democratic partisanship from .47 [.41,

Figure 2: Predicted policy preferences and partisanship, by social identity and political awareness



Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals, simulated from regression models using CCES data shown in online appendix A4.

.53] to .68 [.65, .70]. Secular voters show the same pattern, with liberal preferences predicted to increase from .56 [.55, .57] to .71 [.70, .72] and Democratic identity from .44 [.43, .45] to .63 [.62, .65]. The more aware these respondents were, the more liberal their attitudes.

Awareness is also associated with a stronger link between evangelical Protestant identity and politics. Given the elite alignment of that group with the Republican Party, this results in more *conservative* attitudes (i.e., a negative slope in Figure 2(a) and (f)). As awareness increases from the 10th to the 90th percentile, evangelicals are predicted to take more conservative policy positions (from .54 [.53, .54] to .38 [.37, .39]) and to be more Republican (from .39 [.38, .41] to .31 [.30, .33]). In line with elite communication about their group's political allegiances, more aware evangelicals were more likely to hold conservative attitudes.

The estimates in plots (a) and (f) also show that awareness has little effect on groups that are *not* politically aligned, such as mainline Protestants and Catholics. For these groups — like straight cisgender respondents in Figure 1 — there are only marginal differences between the least and most aware. This is again evidence that awareness in and of itself has little impact on political attitudes. Rather, distinctive views appear to result from a combination of individual awareness and information about the group's political allegiances.

There are similar, albeit more nuanced, results for the other identities. The estimates for race and ethnicity, shown in plots (b) and (g), show that more aware Black voters hold more liberal policy positions and identify more strongly as Democrats. Moving from the 10th to 90th percentile, policy views are predicted to increase from .67 [.65, .68] to .87 [.85, .89] and party identity from .80 [.78, .82] to .91 [.89, .94]. Highly engaged Black respondents were more likely to align their views with those of Black elites.

This is *not* consistently true, however, for Hispanic or Asian respondents, despite elite alignment with the Democratic Party. Highly aware Hispanic respondents hold marginally more liberal policy views (a minor increase from .66 [.65, .68] to .70 [.68, .73]). Otherwise there are no observable differences. Unlike for Black Americans, awareness has no reliable impact

on the link between Asian or Hispanic identity and politics. These differences between racial and ethnic groups are hard to explain definitively. Models of the ANES data, presented in online appendix A4, reach the same conclusions, suggesting this is not a function of the CCES sample. One possibility is that information about elite political alignment, widespread among Black Americans (White and Laird, 2020, Ch.2), is less broadly available for Hispanic and Asian Americans. Another is that the identity-to-politics link is weaker for pan-ethnic Hispanic and Asian identities in general (see McClain et al. 2009 and Lee 2008 for summaries), and so awareness does not impact these groups in the same way. Certainly, the null effects are a useful reminder to avoid “the wholesale transference of concepts” developed about one group to others without careful thought (McClain et al. 2009, 481; see also Junn 2006).

Turning to gender identities, plots (c) and (h) show that differences between men and women increase with awareness, but the reason for this varies by dependent variable. For policy preferences, greater awareness is associated with more conservative views among men (a shift from 0.54 [0.53, 0.56] to 0.48 [0.47, 0.50]) but no changes among women. Conversely, for party identity, awareness is linked to more Democratic partisanship for women (shifting from .44 [.42, .46] to .49 [.47, .50]) but no changes among men.

These results echo several findings from the literature on gender differences in public opinion. First, gender gaps are often “modest and inconsistent”, with more persistent differences emerging in partisanship than policy preferences (Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte, 2008, 31). Second, gender gaps may be due to men becoming more conservative, women becoming more liberal, or both (e.g., Ondercin, 2017). And third, gender gaps in different policy domains have different causes. For some political attitudes, women’s greater egalitarianism appears to play a large role; for others, differences are attributed to feminist consciousness, economic self-interest, or gender role socialization (Lizotte, 2020; Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte, 2008). If the causes of the gender gap are diverse in origin, perhaps we should expect awareness’ role in linking them together to be diverse too.

For the final two groups — union members and veterans — the results are mostly consistent with H1. For union members, moving from lower to higher awareness is associated with a liberal shift in policy views from .56 [.55, .58] to .64 [.62, .66] and a Democratic shift in partisanship from .48 [.45, .51] to .57 [.55, .59]. For veterans, greater awareness is predicted to lead to more conservative policy preferences (from .56 [.54, .58] to .50 [.48, .51]), although there is no statistically significant difference in their partisanship. The literature on veterans' attitudes is more limited than that on the gender gap, but it too reports variable results. The results here align with that literature's call for "broader theory building and empirical investigation of veterans' politics" (Klingler and Chatagnier, 2014, 688).

To summarize: more aware respondents are generally more likely to hold attitudes that mirror their group's political alignments. For nine of the eleven politically aligned identities, greater engagement was associated with more group-consistent attitudes on at least one measure. As awareness increased, so did the liberalism of Jewish, secular, Black, women, LGBT, and unionized respondents, and the conservatism of men, evangelical Protestants, and veterans. For these groups, awareness tightened the link between identity and politics in ways consistent with H1's expectations. In contrast, there was no real effect for Asian or Hispanic voters. For these groups, greater awareness was not associated with more liberal Democratic views, as expected by H1. Overall, however, the more aware a respondent was, the more likely they were to align their political attitudes with their social identities.

Identity gaps increase with awareness

As a consequence of these patterns, identity gaps grow substantially with political awareness. I calculate the first difference in policy preferences between groups given different levels of awareness.⁸ Table 2 presents estimates of differences between groups for those at the 10th,

⁸ To simplify the presentation of results, here I show just the CCES estimates of differences in policy preferences.

50th, and 90th percentiles of awareness, holding other independent variables constant. Positive values indicate a group is more liberal, negative values that they are more conservative, again on the 0–1 scale.

As in previous work, many of these groups hold divergent preferences *on average*. Consider the middle column of estimates, for those at the median level of awareness, where we see significant gaps based on identity. Jewish and secular respondents are more liberal than evangelical Protestants, veterans more conservative than non-veterans, Black respondents more liberal than White respondents, and so on.

But focusing on average differences misses that the *size* of identity gaps varies with awareness. Take the same examples as above. For those in the 10th awareness percentile, Jewish and secular respondents were only slightly more liberal than evangelical Protestants (the first differences are .06 [.04, .09] and .02 [.02, .03]). But among the 90th percentile, the gaps widen dramatically, to .35 [.33, .37] and .33 [.32, .34], respectively. Similarly, the Black-White gap grows from .09 [.07, .10] to .29 [.27, .31] as we move across the awareness scale. And for the least aware, veterans are estimated to be $-.02$ [$-.03$, $-.00$] more conservative than non-veterans, a gap that widens to $-.08$ [$-.10$, $-.07$] among the most aware.

Seven of the nine identity gaps estimated in Table 2 are significantly larger at the 90th percentile of awareness than at the 10th. The exceptions are, again, for the differences between Hispanic, Asian, and White respondents. The size of the Hispanic-White gap increases only marginally (from .08 [.07, .10] to .12 [.10, .14]), and the Asian-White gap shows no change (it is .08 [.06, .10] for the least aware, .07 [.04, .10] for the most). For all of the other groups, however, differences in policy preferences were substantially larger (indeed, between three and thirteen times larger) among the most politically aware.

To be clear, this is not to say there are *no* identity gaps among the least aware. Even at the 10th percentile of awareness, there are still differences in the expected directions for most groups (the exception is for union members, who are predicted to be more conservative

Table 2: Identity gaps in policy preferences, by political awareness

Gap between...	10th percentile of awareness	50th percentile of awareness	90th percentile of awareness
Evangelical Protestants and Jewish respondents	.06 [.04, .09]	.21 [.19, .22]	.35 [.33, .37]
Secular respondents	.02 [.02, .03]	.18 [.17, .18]	.33 [.32, .34]
White respondents and Black respondents	.09 [.07, .10]	.19 [.18, .20]	.29 [.27, .31]
Hispanic respondents	.08 [.07, .10]	.10 [.09, .11]	.12 [.10, .14]
Asian respondents	.08 [.06, .10]	.08 [.06, .09]	.07 [.04, .10]
Straight and LGBT respondents	.04 [.03, .06]	.10 [.09, .11]	.16 [.15, .18]
Men and women	.03 [.02, .04]	.07 [.06, .07]	.10 [.08, .11]
Non-members and union members	-.02 [-.03, -.00]	.02 [.01, .03]	.06 [.04, .08]
Non-veterans and veterans	-.02 [-.03, -.00]	-.05 [-.06, -.04]	-.08 [-.10, -.07]

Note: First differences between groups in policy preferences as measured in the CCES, with 95% confidence intervals, simulated from regression models shown in online appendix A4. Positive values indicate that the second group holds more liberal preferences than the first, negative values that they hold more conservative views.

than non-members at low levels of awareness). Awareness is not the whole story: even in the absence of political engagement, there is a modest identity-to-politics link. But awareness magnifies these differences. The distinctive gaps between social groups that previous scholars have identified widen with awareness and narrow among the least engaged.

How the impact of awareness varies across groups

The results so far show that, for most groups, more aware members hold more identity-consistent attitudes. But this relationship is not the same for all groups, as indicated by the varying slopes of lines in Figures 1 and 2. To estimate the impact of awareness, I calculate the first difference in policy preferences between members of the same group at the 10th and 90th percentile of awareness.⁹ Since awareness is expected to lead to more liberal attitudes

⁹ Unlike in Table 2, which calculates the gap between members of different groups with the same level of awareness, this estimates the gap between members of the same group with different levels of awareness

for Democratic-aligned groups, but more conservative attitudes for Republican ones, I take the absolute value as an easily comparable measure of awareness' impact.

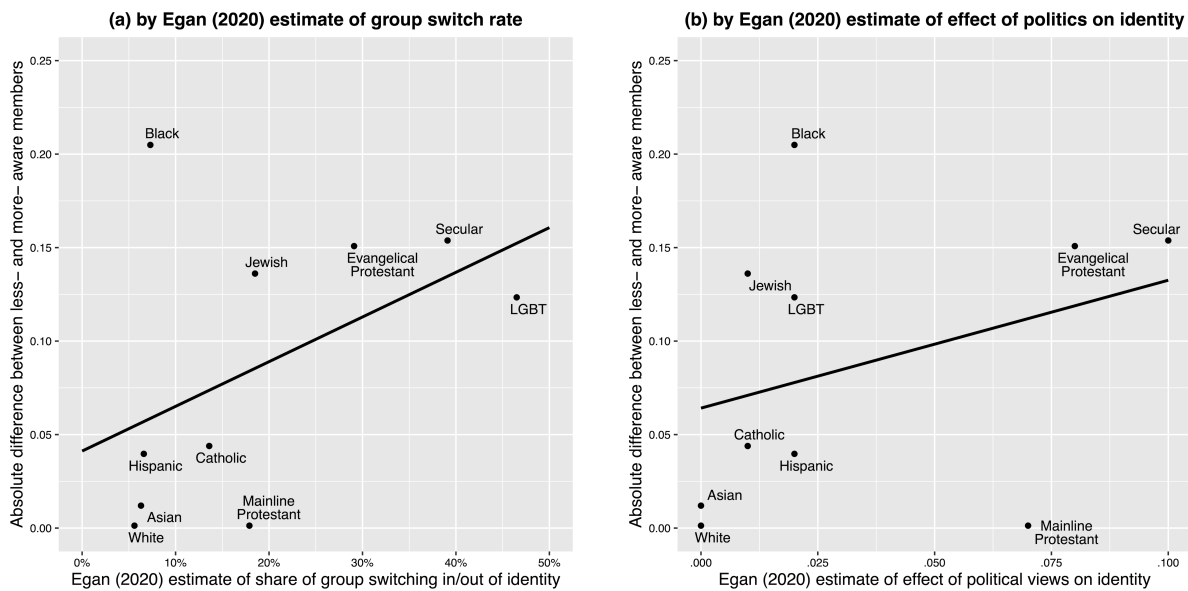
Doing so suggests four rough groupings of identities. First, awareness has the largest impact on Black policy preferences. Highly aware Black respondents hold policy views that are .20 [.19, .22] more liberal than less aware Black respondents. Awareness has a sizable impact on the second group of identities, albeit smaller than for Black voters: evangelical Protestants (for whom the absolute difference between more and less aware respondents is .15 [.14, .16]); Jewish (.14 [.12, .16]); secular (.15 [.14, .16]); and LGBT (.12 [.11, .14]) respondents. A third grouping consists of identities for which awareness matters, but only to a small degree: union members (a .07 [.06, .09] difference), veterans (.06 [.05, .08]), men (.06 [.05, .07]), and Hispanics (.04 [.02, .06]). Finally, for the remaining groups, there are no significant differences in policy views between the least and most aware members.

Why does awareness matter more for some groups than others? One potential answer lies in how fluid a given identity is. Recall the growing evidence that some voters switch their identities to reflect their political views (Egan, 2020; Margolis, 2018). Such switching is more likely for groups with permeable boundaries (Huddy, 2001; Egan, 2020) and among those who are highly engaged with politics (Margolis, 2018, Ch. 6). As a result, we might expect the impact of awareness to be greatest within groups that are particularly fluid in the face of politics.

Measuring this fluidity is challenging, but Egan (2020) provides two sets of estimates for various groups, based on multiple GSS waves: (1) the group's "switch rate", the share of members that switched in or out of the identity between waves; and (2) the effect of politics on an identity, which is the difference between liberal and conservative respondents' likelihood of switching into (or out of) the group. Egan (2020) provides these estimates for 10 of the identities studied here.¹⁰ Figure 3 shows how the impact of awareness on each group —

¹⁰Gender, union, and veteran identities are not included in Egan's study. His estimates are based on different

Figure 3: Impact of awareness on policy preferences, by estimates of identity fluidity taken from Egan (2020).



Note: Absolute difference in predicted policy preferences between group members at the 10th and 90th awareness percentile, calculated from regression model using CCES data. Estimates of group switch rate and effect of politics on identity are taken from Egan (2020).

again measured as the absolute difference in policy preferences between less and more aware members — varies with the estimates of group fluidity.

The small number of data points precludes a formal analysis, but the evidence suggests at most a weak relationship between how fluid a group’s identity is and how much awareness impacts its members. Some identities are relatively fixed, based on Egan’s estimates, but show a significant impact of awareness on attitudes (e.g. Black or Jewish identities). Others are relatively fluid, but there are few differences between the least- and most-aware members (e.g. Mainline Protestants). The impact of awareness does not necessarily vary with the fluidity of an identity. Since it is based on a small number of estimates and cannot disentangle the precise causal mechanisms at play, this should be treated as a preliminary conclusion. But it indicates

data, and different coding, than used here. Still, they are the best available estimates of fluidity to date.

that awareness can strengthen the relationship between identity and politics for stable and fluid identity groups alike.

Discussion and supplementary analyses

These analyses cover many identities and estimates. Overall, the results mostly support H1: awareness tightens the link between social identity and political attitudes. Three overall points can be made. First, greater political awareness is generally associated with more group-consistent attitudes for evangelical, Jewish, secular, Black, women, men, LGBT, unionized, and veteran respondents. There are no real effects for Asian or Hispanic Americans, however. Second, and as a result, most identity gaps in public opinion widen with awareness. Among the less engaged, there are only muted differences between social groups. As attention to politics increases, so does the distinctiveness of different identities. And third, the impact of awareness varies substantially across groups, with particularly large effects among Black, Jewish, secular, evangelical, and LGBT identities.

Supplementary analyses shed additional light on two questions about the identity-to-politics link more generally. One is why identity affects preferences on issues far removed from group interests. Evidence suggests an indirect link from identity to policy views via partisanship (see Layman 2001, Ch.7; Page and Jones 1979). Online appendix A5 replicates the models of policy preferences controlling for party identity. This significantly reduces, but does not entirely remove, the impact of awareness, suggesting that identity is linked to party, which in turn links to policy views, and that all of these relationships are magnified by awareness.

Another query is whether awareness is simply a proxy for concepts like identity strength and group consciousness (see McClain et al., 2009; Conover, 1988; Huddy, 2001). Perhaps those with stronger attachments to a group are more likely to learn about politics, and it is actually the former that drives distinctive attitudes. The ANES included limited measures of linked fate and identity importance for several of the racial, ethnic, and religious groups. As shown in

online appendix A6, models that control for these factors produce estimates of awareness that are substantively highly similar to those reported here. This suggests that awareness helps to link identity and politics in ways that are distinct from the important contributions of identity strength or group consciousness found in other studies.

Conclusions: The conditional identity-to-politics link

A recurring finding in public opinion research is that political awareness affects the structure and content of voters' attitudes. Those who pay the most attention to politics are most likely to be exposed to elite messaging (Zaller, 1992, 1996), which helps them see the links between disparate attitudes, or “what goes with what” (Converse, 1964, 238). As a result, the more politically aware are better able to link their predispositions with specific policy preferences in ways that echo elite communication (e.g., Federico and Sidanius, 2002; Kalmoe and Johnson, 2021; Claassen and Highton, 2009; Jones and Brewer, 2020).

This paper shows that awareness can also help voters link their own social identities to political views. Although early researchers declared that “social characteristics determine political preference” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1944, 27), the identity-to-politics link is not so simple (Lee, 2008; Hajnal and Lee, 2011). Elite messaging in the form of politicians' rhetoric, parties' positions, and news media coverage might help voters see what the links are “supposed” to be. But not everyone is paying attention. While the most engaged receive information that links their identities to political views, the least engaged are unlikely to get the message. As a result, the identity-to-politics link is conditional on awareness.

Across multiple social identities, greater awareness is associated with more group-consistent attitudes. For groups aligned with the Democratic Party, like Black, LGBT, or secular voters, more aware members are more likely to hold liberal policy preferences and to identify as Democrats. For groups aligned with the GOP, like evangelical Protestants or veterans, greater

awareness is associated with more conservative and Republican beliefs. As a consequence, the magnitude of many identity gaps in public opinion increases with attention to politics. Among the less aware there are only muted differences between social groups; for the most aware, these gaps widen dramatically. The link between social identities and political views tightens with engagement.

Awareness does not have an equal impact on all identities. It is particularly consequential for the views of Black, secular, Jewish, evangelical, and LGBT respondents. But there are no real effects for Asian or Hispanic respondents, echoing findings of relatively weak pan-ethnic identities among these groups (e.g., McClain et al., 2009; Lee, 2008). And the results for gender and veteran identities are uneven across dependent variables, underscoring earlier work about their inconsistent effects (e.g., Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte, 2008; Klingler and Chatagnier, 2014). There is only a weak relationship between the effect of awareness on a group and how fluid that identity is. This suggests the results are not being driven by those groups for whom social identity is particularly endogenous to political views, but require further study. For now, the main take-home is that greater awareness is frequently associated with more group-consistent attitudes.

As with any study, there are limitations here that also point to avenues for further work. This paper shows how awareness moderates the identity-to-politics link, but fundamental questions remain about the link itself. For one, what is the causal ordering of these variables? There is growing evidence that political views can lead to the adoption of identities, as well as vice-versa (Egan, 2020; Margolis, 2018). Understanding when and why these different causal pathways are activated is a vital area for future work. Second, why is the identity-to-politics link stronger for some groups than others? We lack explanations of when and why group memberships have “political kick” (Junn, 2006, 33), a task that will require more theorizing about the nature of identities themselves (Huddy, 2001). And third, why does identity affect views on policies that are far removed from a group’s interests? The supplementary analyses here support claims of

an *indirect* link via partisanship (Layman, 2001; Page and Jones, 1979), but require a different research design to disentangle. More study is needed on all these fronts.

The data sources used here limit the conclusions we can reach, too. Although I investigate a wide range of groups, many others exist but are not measured by the ANES and CCES. Missing here are class identities, as well as groups beyond demographic characteristics, like feminists, gun owners, or environmentalists.¹¹ Even the identities that *are* covered are not fully inclusive. Neither the ANES or CCES accounted for queer identities beyond LGBT, and the ANES did not measure transgender identity at all. Both surveys treat gender as a male/female binary. More work, with better measures of identity, is needed to fully understand how group memberships shape public opinion. Finally, the data do not capture how elites communicate about these groups' politics. The intensity of messaging about "what goes with what" presumably varies across groups, in ways that might help to explain why some identities are more closely linked to politics than others.

Despite their limitations, these findings contribute to ongoing work on identity politics. As Pérez (2015*b*, 156) sums up the field, "many scholars believe group identity matters politically, yet a fog hangs over *when* and among *whom* it is politicized". Likewise, Junn (2006, 34) argues that "research should seek to systematically observe the situations under which social identities become political, how consciousness is forged, and when participation is mobilized." The results here show that political awareness is one condition under which the identity-to-politics link is strengthened. For the least engaged, connections between social group memberships and political views are often weak or non-existent. But with greater awareness comes a tighter link between the two, and more substantial gaps between groups in the electorate.

At their broadest, the results also speak to a larger literature on voter sophistication. It is sometimes assumed that identity politics is the province of the least informed. Looking

¹¹ Some of these are included in the ANES. Preliminary analysis suggests awareness tightens the identity-to-politics link for these groups too.

for a simple shortcut, the logic would go, the less-engaged rely on their own social group memberships to make sense of the political world. This is not the case. Among the least aware, there are only minor differences between groups. Identity gaps are at their widest among the most sophisticated. This is because identity politics — like most political reasoning — requires some knowledge of, and interest in, public affairs. As a result, it is the *most* aware, not the least, who are most likely to link their social identity to their political views.

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