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How Norms Shape the Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics

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Abstract: *How should ideology be understood, and should we be concerned if Americans lack it? Combining widely used survey questions with an incentivized coordination game, we separately measure individuals' own policy preferences and their knowledge of what other ideological group members expect them to believe. This allows us to distinguish knowledge of ideological norms—what liberals and conservatives believe ought to go with what—from adherence to those norms. We find that a nontrivial portion of those reporting ideologically inconsistent preferences do so knowingly, suggesting their lack of ideological constraint can be attributed to pragmatism rather than innocence. Additionally, a question order experiment reveals that priming ideological norms before measuring policy preferences promotes ideological adherence, suggesting ideological constraint is at least partially attributable to norm-conformity pressure. Together, these findings raise the question whether ideology is actually desirable or if it instead allows elites to reverse the direction of accountability.*

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Despite the prominence of ideological terminology in political discourse, no consensus definition of ideology has ever existed (Gerring 1997; Sartori 1969). As a result, its meaning and connotation have drifted over time (Knight 2006). Although ideology once implied dogmatism and closed-mindedness (e.g., Sartori 1969),[1] it has come to be more closely associated with political sophistication.

This latter interpretation owes much to Converse (1964), who characterized ideologically organized belief systems as a higher "level of conceptualization" compared to belief systems organized around group interests or the "nature of the times." By introducing this hierarchical view of belief systems, he helped to foster an association between ideology and sophistication, rather than dogmatism.[2] Thus, although primarily

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[1] To Marx and Engels (1970), ideology functioned as "false consciousness" that prevented the proletariat from rising up, thereby allowing the bourgeoisie to maintain control. Subsequent theorists expanded this idea to all ideologies, not just those on the right (Sartori 1969; Bawn 1999). In the early twentieth century, the closed-mindedness of Nazi, fascist, and communist ideologies were often contrasted with American pragmatism (Knight 2009). Recent works on moralization of political attitudes suggest similar implications (Delton, DeScioli, and Ryan 2019; Ryan 2017) and sometimes relate moralization to ideological reasoning (Haidt 2012).

[2] Although subsequent work often equates constraint with sophistication (Luskin 1987), Converse's own view was nevertheless complex; see, e.g., his discussion of "reversals," whereby citizens seem to show high levels of consistency on race-related matters due to prejudice rather than political awareness.

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intended as an empirical contribution, Converse's famous chapter had the effect of reframing the debate over the conceptualization of ideology.

By casting ideology in this light, his work raised alarm about the apparent "innocence"[3] of the American public, showing that most people lacked the political awareness necessary to form ideologically constrained (or even stable) policy preferences. As a result, subsequent discussion shifted toward the question of whether Converse's empirical conclusions were accurate (e.g., Achen 1975; Zaller and Feldman 1992) and, if so, how democracy could function without a more sophisticated electorate (e.g., Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).[4]

Our purpose is to revisit the question that inspired *Ideology and Discontent* (Apter 1964), the volume in which Converse's chapter originally appeared: how should ideology be understood, and what is its role in democracy? Converse's empirical conclusions have withstood the test of time (Freeder, Lenz, and Turney 2019; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017): Only a small, highly engaged segment of the American electorate consistently organizes their policy preferences around an ideology. But what are the implications? When Americans express ideologically inconsistent preferences, is it necessarily the product of innocence, as the literature has typically assumed since Converse? And if more of the electorate were to hold ideologically constrained beliefs, would it necessarily benefit American democracy?

In the pages that follow, we return to Apter's (1964) call for a "fresh appraisal of the concept of ideology," arguing that ideologies are bound together, in large part, by social norms not necessarily by principles. We show that the expression of ideologically *inconsistent* preferences does not necessarily imply a lack of awareness of those norms and thus need not reflect innocence. Moreover, expressing ideologically *consistent* preferences is at least partially the product of a motivation to conform to group norms and thus need not indicate sophistication or benefit democracy.

Ideological Identity and Norms

Converse (1964) conceived of ideology as a belief system in which idea-elements were bound together by some organizing structure—what he called *ideological constraint*. As such, ideologies may serve as useful tools for making sense of politics, imbuing information and events with greater meaning, and allowing citizens to engage in behavior that "increasingly approximates that of sophisticated 'rational' models" (227).

However, Converse himself pointed out that, in practice, such belief systems tend to be acquired not by individuals reasoning their way to a coherent ideology but through social transmission—primarily from elites to the masses. "Consumers" of ideology might supply "personal innovations on the fringes" (212), but ideologies are "synthesized" by elites—a view that is widely shared (Aldrich 1995; Gerring 2001; Noel 2013). As Converse put it, "however logically coherent a belief system may seem to the holder, the sources of constraint are much less logical in the classical sense than they are psychological–and less psychological than social" (1964, 209).

But, if elites "synthesize" the ideologies the public "consumes" (Converse 1964), might this put elites in a position to manipulate the public, as others have theorized (Marx and Engels 1970; Sartori 1969)? The answer depends on what motivates ideological constraint. To the degree citizens hold beliefs consistent with a particular ideology, is it because they find the logic of that ideology persuasive or because they feel pressure to conform to the norms associated with that ideology? Do ideological identifiers feel at liberty to make "personal innovations on the fringes" of their belief system (Converse 1964, 212), or do they worry such behavior will subject them to sanctioning by fellow group members?

Studies have shown that ideologies function as social identities, not just belief systems (Conover and Feldman 1981; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Malka and Lelkes 2010; Mason 2018; Pickup, Kimbrough, and de Rooij 2021). As such, we argue that ideological identity should also promote group-conformity motivation. While all ideologies have some sort of logical or quasi-logical structure (Converse 1964), this sort of (quasi) logic does not appear to be what holds the idea-elements of individual identifiers' belief systems together (Coppock and Green, 2022). We theorize that ideological constraint is, to a significant extent, the product of conformity to ideological group *norms*. Thus, an ideology is not merely a guide to "what goes with what" in politics, but an argument for what *ought* to go with what according to those who share an identity and particularly the elites who synthesize and disseminate these ideas. These norms are what define (and reinforce) the boundaries between "us" and

[3]We follow convention by using the term "innocence" rather than ignorance.

[4]Converse (1964) linked knowledge of what goes with what to stability of policy attitudes over time and constraint *between* policy preferences. We focus primarily on the latter.

"them" and are therefore often zealously enforced by group members.[5]

Norms inform ideological identifiers what idea-elements belong to a given identity, and as long as ideological group members share norms, consistency with those norms will exhibit as ideological constraint. Knowing an individual believes A provides information about the probability that they believe B. In this way, an individual's ideology can be, at least partially, constrained by norms and not just logic and principles.

Those who espouse beliefs and preferences consistent with the norms of their group get to call themselves "legitimate" liberals or conservatives. Those who do not conform to group norms risk being labeled pretenders or even traitors.[6] Under this interpretation, an individual may initially support a political candidate, party, or movement for simplistic, narrow, or naïve reasons having little to do with ideology. But, once a sense of ideological identity takes hold, they will feel pressure to conform to ideological group norms, and their belief system will appear increasingly "constrained" (for evidence of a positive feedback loop, see Pickup, Kimbrough, and de Rooij 2020). As a result, those in a position to shape "what goes with what" will have substantial influence over group identifiers.

Thus, we are led back to concerns similar to those raised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: ideology seems to have the potential to reverse the direction of democratic accountability. If ideological identifiers feel pressure to conform to belief systems disproportionately "synthesized" by the very elites democracy seeks to hold accountable (Converse 1964), then it is voters, not elites, who are being held in check. In this case, as Sartori argued, "ideologies are the crucial levers at the disposal of elites for obtaining political mobilization and [...] mass manipulation" (1969, 411). And, in theory, such manipulation via ideology does not require ideological identifiers to have an understanding of the logic behind an ideology. It only requires ideological identifiers to be aware of their group's norms and feel pressure to conform to them (Akerlof and Kranton 2000; Chang, Chen, and Krupka 2019; Pickup, Kimbrough, and de Rooij 2020). While only 20%–30% of Americans seem to organize their beliefs ideologically (Kalmoe 2020), about three-quarters express an ideological identity (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), suggesting that these concerns are relevant for a large portion of the population, even if they have yet to be fully realized.

Using a nationally reflective sample (YouGov) of those who express an ideological identity,[7] we test our theory in three stages, each providing new insight. The first key insight of our approach is that *what goes with what is a matter of normative consensus* and must be measured accordingly. Thus, we first show how to determine where ideological norms exist and where they do not, by introducing a measurement strategy that separately elicits (1) injunctive norms (i.e., shared expectations about which issues members of an identity group *ought* to support/oppose) and (2) group members' personal preferences on the same set of issues.[8] We show that beliefs about injunctive norms regarding what group members ought to support are indeed widely shared (but may not always correspond to researchers' perceptions). Moreover, our analyses reveal that normative beliefs exhibit more structure than personal preferences, suggesting that individuals may be more aware of "what goes with what"—according to their ideological identity group—than measures of their policy preferences would suggest.

This leads to the second key insight of our approach: *awareness of group norms and adherence to those norms are two different things.* This distinction is critical for understanding the role of ideology. It is what makes it possible to distinguish those who lack ideological consistency (i.e., hold personal preferences not aligned with group norms) due to innocence from those who lack consistency because they knowingly defy group norms. Following Sartori (1969), we refer to the latter as *pragmatists.* Our survey reveals that a significant portion of the electorate is aware of "what goes with what" in the sense that they know which policies they are expected to support or oppose according to other members of their ideological identity group. However, this awareness is often accompanied by personal preferences that do not conform to ideological norms. Thus pragmatism—not just innocence—explains a significant portion of the electorate's lack of ideological consistency, as measured by reported preferences. A majority of both liberals and conservatives report pragmatic disagreement on at least one issue.

[5]The question of what ought to go with what is a matter of perpetual debate among elite "synthesizers" of ideology (Noel 2013).

[6]Although not often discussed in the context of ideology, social pressure (Sinclair 2012) and self-presentation concerns (Berinsky 2004; Klar and Krupnikov 2016) shape political opinions and behavior. See also Shmargad et al. (2022) for recent evidence of normative influences on civility online.

[7]See the online supporting information Appendix A (pp. 2–3) for sampling procedures and Appendix B for sample demographics (pp. 4–6).

[8]Some of our measures focus on government policies, while others focus on cultural issues that represent (potentially) important points of ideological division in public discourse. For economy of language, we use the terms "issue" and "policy" interchangeably.

This evidence of pragmatic disagreement then highlights why it is necessary to reconsider the motivations underlying ideological constraint: is ideological constraint merely the product of principled reasoning, and thus exogenous to normative expectations, or, as suggested by our approach, does constraint result from the pressure to conform to norms of "what goes with what" synthesized by the very elites a democracy seeks to hold accountable (i.e., to be ideologically consistent)? To answer this question, we conduct an experiment in which we randomize whether ideological group norms are measured, and thus primed, prior to measuring personal preferences.

We observe that priming individuals to think about group norms shifts their reported policy preferences in the direction of those norms. This casts doubt on arguments that equate ideological constraint with sophistication and leads to our third key insight: *constraint is at least partially the product of motivation to be consistent with norms.* And, since elites have an outsized role in constructing these norms (Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin 2020; Bicchieri and Funcke 2018), this provides a means by which they can shape the preferences of even well-informed voters (or perhaps especially well-informed voters) who are motivated to adhere to the norms of their ideological group.[9] Thus, to the extent that elites are responsible for synthesizing ideological group norms, our evidence underlines Sartori's (1969) concern regarding elite manipulation of ideological identifiers. In this light, evidence of pragmatic disagreement—which would typically be interpreted as innocence, since knowledge of group norms is rarely measured (although see Freeder, Lenz, and Turney (2019) for a recent exception)—may actually be a hopeful sign for American democracy.

Research Design

We designed a survey to measure both ideological identity-based normative expectations and personal preferences regarding social and economic issues that span the gamut of topics that motivate political debate in the United States. To assess whether an ideological group norm exists for a given issue, and whether a given individual is aware of the norm, we focused on respondents who had already self-identified as liberal or conservative (74% of the sample). We asked them how much *other liberals [conservatives]* would approve (or disapprove, or neither) if *they* (the respondent) were to vote for a candidate who supported a given policy or issue. Response options ranged from strongly disapprove (0) to strongly approve (10), or don't know (see the online supporting information, p. 7).[10]

To incentivize accuracy and reduce the likelihood of projection bias, we used an economic game called a coordination game to measure norms (see e.g., Chang, Chen, and Krupka 2019; Krupka and Weber 2013; Kimbrough and Vostroknutov 2016). Respondents were told that we would choose one of the issues at random and compare their response to the most common response selected by others who shared their identity on that issue. If their response matched the modal response of their ideological group on that issue, they would receive a $2 bonus payment. Otherwise, they would receive no bonus. Thus, respondents had an incentive to report the normative assessment that they thought was most likely to be shared by others who shared their ideological identity.

This is the definition of an injunctive social norm: a set of shared beliefs about what group members ought to do in a given context. Our coordination game thus incentivized participants to accurately report their knowledge of their identity group's norms with respect to policy positions. For instance, if there is widespread agreement among conservatives that they ought to support candidates who favor immigration restriction, then conservative respondents who know this will maximize their payoff by reporting that conservatives expect one another to approve of voting for such a candidate (and disapprove of voting for a candidate who opposes immigration restriction). This gives us a sense of what conservatives think a conservative *ought* to believe and do and what they *ought not* to believe and do.

Other benefits to measuring normative expectations using incentivized coordination games include reduced noise in responses (see e.g., Fouraker and Siegel 1963; Smith 1976), reduced likelihood that people will project their own views onto those who share their identity, and reduced social desirability bias, since monetary incentives to report truthfully provide a counterweight to these possible motivations. A separate sample was asked an unincentivized version of the questions, for comparison. Consistent with past work, across items, incentives often yielded responses with smaller

[9]See Groenendyk (2013) for a similar argument.

[10]Those who place themselves at the center of the 7-point ideology scale or gave no placement were randomly assigned to either answer questions about liberals or conservatives. These results are available in the online supporting information (pp. 9–10) and discussed in the section on robustness checks below. In our robustness checks section, we describe how the results we obtain using these injunctive norms measures, which match our conceptualization, replicate using descriptive norms measures, which provide an imperfect conceptual match but are simpler to measure.

interquartile ranges. However, this was most pronounced for issues with the most extreme levels of expected approval/disapproval (see the online supporting information, p. 11).

We also asked participants, "how much do you support or oppose" each issue.[11] By measuring study participants' beliefs about their group's norms separately from their policy preferences, we can address three important questions. First, we examine the existence of ideological norms: *to what degree is there a normative consensus within ideological identity groups on a given policy (i.e., do group members agree upon what ought to go with what)?*

We say that an injunctive norm exists when a majority reports that group members expect approval or disapproval of an issue position.[12] For example, we would say that among liberals there is a norm that one supports legalized abortion if a majority of liberals report that liberals expect one another to approve of this position. We categorize norms on the basis of what most people believe is the norm rather than the position that most people hold. This is consistent with the definition of an injunctive norm: shared beliefs about what others expect. It is possible for norms to be out of alignment with the personal preferences of the majority. For example, it is possible that a majority of conservatives believe there is a norm to believe the Bible is the Word of God while a majority of conservatives don't actually believe this. This phenomenon is known as "pluralistic ignorance" and is relatively rare.

Once we have identified the issues on which group norms exist and the issues on which they do not, we can then use our individual-level data to better understand why some people do and others do not exhibit ideological constraint. This allows us to address our second question: *to what extent does failure to report ideologically constrained preferences on some issues arise from a lack of knowledge of group norms (innocence) versus pragmatic disagreement?*

Since Converse (1964), scholars have typically worked under the assumption that a lack of ideological constraint indicates political innocence. Even Converse's most ardent critics accept this premise, arguing *not* that he misinterprets the nature and origins of constraint, but that he underestimates the structure and stability of voters' belief systems (e.g., Achen 1975). Our framework leads us to question this standard assumption. Normatively inconsistent policy preferences need not result from innocence, even when norms are clear. At least some individuals might be aware of normative expectations and defy them anyway. Our data allow us to assess the degree to which this is the case. At the individual level, our measures also allow us to assess *awareness* of group norms. If an individual *correctly* predicts that a majority of group members expect approval (or disapproval) for supporting a given issue, then we say they are *aware* of the group norm. Whether they are motivated to conform to that norm is a separate question for which we use our measure of personal policy preferences across the same set of issues.

The combination of these two measures (preferences and normative expectations) allows us to classify individuals' positions *on each issue* into types: ideologically consistent, pragmatic, and innocent. Someone is ideologically consistent if they are aware of the ideological group norm and report issue preferences *consistent* with that norm on a given issue. A pragmatist is aware of the norm on a given issue but nevertheless expresses policy preferences *inconsistent* with that norm, suggesting intentional inconsistency. Someone is innocent if they are *unaware* of the group norm on a given issue, regardless of their expressed policy preferences. Across issues, people may be aware of (and report preferences consistent with) some norms but not others. Note that, as long as ideological group members share norms, the proportion of issues on which a person holds ideologically consistent preferences indicates the extent to which they hold an ideologically constrained belief system. We discuss our method of classification in more detail below. An implication of the fact that preferences and norms need not coincide is that ideological group norms may exhibit more structure than group members' personal preferences. We assess this possibility via factor analysis and by comparing a measure of the ideological constraint of an individual's personal preferences to a measure of the ideological consistency of their norm expectations.

Our final set of analyses exploit the fact that we randomized whether the personal preference or norm elicitation questions were asked first. Up to now, we have described analyses of policy preferences measured prior to norms. We now shift focus to the full sample, leveraging the randomized question order experiment to answer our third question: *is ideological constraint merely*

[11]This was measured on a 0 (*oppose*) to 10 (*support*) scale. This measure of policy preferences was unincentivized. While accuracy concerns are relevant to people's reporting of norms knowledge, personal policy preferences are subjective by definition, and so we have no means of verifying whether these reports are accurate.

[12]We don't require exact agreement on the intensity of approval/disapproval, but rather that a majority agrees about which "side" their group is on. The existence of a norm is defined as a majority of respondents indicating shared expectations of approval (6–10) or disapproval (0–4) on the 0–10 scale. *Note*: a majority is not guaranteed because respondents can indicate they expect neither approval nor disapproval (i.e., 5 on the scale) or that they don't know.

the product of knowledge, or is it the product of knowledge plus conformity motivation?

To answer our previous questions, we restricted our analysis to participants asked to report their preferences before reporting their normative expectations. This ensured that our results were not biased by priming norms. But what happens when we prime people to think about their group's norms before asking them about their own policy preferences? In our final set of analyses, a question-order manipulation allows us to compare the unprimed preferences of half of our sample to the other half of our sample in which group norms were primed prior to eliciting individual policy preferences. We then analyze which group exhibits more norm conformity and therefore constraint.[13] This experiment allows us to assess whether ideological constraint is exogenous or at least partially motivated by the desire to conform to group norms.

In this sense, our design parallels an experiment conducted by McGuire (1960) and described by Converse during his discussion of logical constraint (1964, 209). In McGuire's experiment, study participants were primed with syllogistic propositions that bound certain ideas together. This reduced the logical inconsistency in responses to questions pertaining to these ideas in a subsequent survey. While Converse cites this as an example of logical constraint, he argues that, in the context of political beliefs, such constraint is unlikely to play much of a role. Rather than logical or psychological, Converse argues that the source of constraint is primarily social. Thus, our experiment may be viewed as a test of whether ideology is indeed socially constrained, as Converse suggests (in this case by norms), using methods similar to McGuire.

A key feature of our design is that, unlike many priming exercises, our prime provides respondents with no new information—rather, we merely encourage introspection about the normative expectations that come with their membership in an identity group. Thus, we are able to cleanly identify an effect of group norms that is not confounded with an informational effect.

If our conceptualization of ideological constraint as norm conformity is apt, those who are primed to think about group norms should be more likely to report preferences consistent with those norms (i.e., ideologically constrained preferences). In this case, by motivating study participants to change their preferences, ideology—or more precisely the increased salience of ideological group norms—would actually be the *cause* of preference instability (often characterized as evidence of "nonattitudes").[14]

Using the platform provided by YouGov, we conducted our survey and experiment on a nationally reflective sample of self-identified conservatives and liberals. The liberal and conservative samples ($N = 497$ and 464, respectively) are broken down as described in Table 1. Additional information about the sampling dates and sample is available in the online supporting information (pp. 2–6).

Results

We organize our presentation of results around the three questions outlined in the previous section. First, we examine the extent of normative consensus among conservatives and liberals, highlighting cases in which our results depart from the typical assumption of ideological group consensus. Then we exploit our novel measurement of ideological constraint to show that there is a fruitful distinction between lack of constraint driven by innocence and lack of constraint driven by pragmatism. Finally, we show that priming group norms before eliciting preferences increases ideological consistency and therefore constraint, suggesting social conformity motivation.

> *Result 1:* On most issues, there is a clear normative consensus. That is, ideological group members express majority agreement on "what ought to go with what," but issues vary in the degree to which they depart from perfect consensus. In some noteworthy cases, where prior research has assumed consensus (e.g., on health care among conservatives), no such consensus seems to exist.

We first present results from the incentivized norm-elicitation questions designed to test for the existence of consensus on what goes with what. Since we conceptualize "what goes with what" as a set of broadly shared (injunctive) norms, we test for the existence of

[13] It is arguably possible that asking beliefs first could influence responses to the norm questions through projection, but by incentivizing accurate responses to these questions, we expect to have reduced the effect of preferences on the expression of normative expectations. Regardless, such an effect would only make our test more conservative by making norm conformity appear stronger than otherwise in the baseline group.

[14] This preference instability would be systematic as opposed to the random instability observed by Converse (1964). Of course, one might argue that systematic preference change, in response to conformity pressure, is even more indicative of "empty" opinions and detrimental to democratic accountability.

TABLE 1 Sample Breakdown

	Incentivized	Unincentivized
Norms primed	liberals: 123 conservatives: 113	liberals: 123 conservatives: 126
Norms unprimed	liberals: 126 conservatives: 105	liberals: 125 conservatives: 120

normative consensus by measuring the extent to which respondents agree that other liberals/conservatives would approve/disapprove if they supported a candidate advocating a given position. If a sizable majority of group identifiers agree on what the group sanctions, then there is consensus within the group, and it can be said that a clear ideological norm exists. As agreement declines, so does the clarity of the ideological norm.

Figure 1 reports the proportion of liberals/conservatives who expected approval (0–4) or disapproval (6–10, whichever is largest) for each policy. (Note: The denominator includes those who answered 5 (*neither approve nor disapprove*) and "don't know.") There is a striking degree of normative agreement on most issues, among both liberals and conservatives, respectively, but the strength and clarity of these norms varies from issue to issue. And, in a few cases, there is no majority agreement at all. Liberals appear unclear on whether to expect approval or disapproval from other liberals for supporting legalized prostitution. Conservatives are equally unclear on childcare and health-care spending. On other issues, there is majority agreement, but just barely. For example, only about 55% of liberals believe other liberals would disapprove if they supported a candidate who favored stiffer criminal sentencing, and only 60% believed other liberals would disapprove if they supported a candidate who favored the death penalty or increased spending on defense. Among conservatives, we see a similarly small majority who expect disapproval for environmental spending.

Determining why norms exist for some issues and not others is beyond the scope of this article, but in some cases the lack of norms seem to be attributable to a lack of elite consensus. For example, the lack of a clear norm on health-care spending for conservatives is not entirely surprising given the difficulty Republicans have had articulating a clear alternative to the Affordable Care Act. Conservatives are probably clear that they are expected to be opposed to "Obamacare" but less clear on what they should favor and the implications for spending.

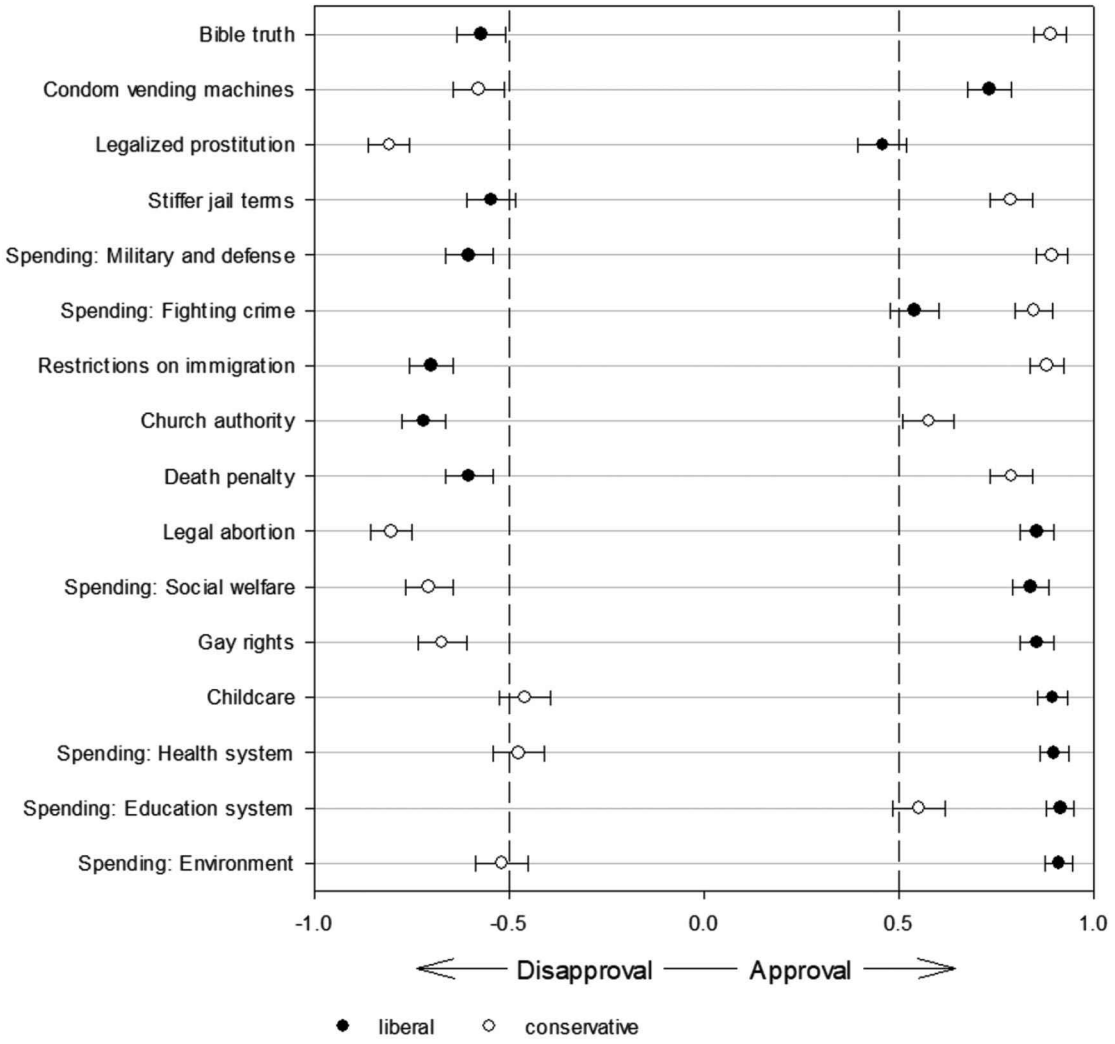
Typically, researchers assume liberals and conservatives are on opposite sides of these sorts of "position issues" (Stokes 1963), but this need not be the case. In Figure 1, two clear exceptions stand out in which liberals and conservatives share the same norm: both liberals and conservatives expect approval for support of spending on education and spending on fighting crime.

These results show why it is important to assess the existence of consensus on norms prior to measuring whether people's belief systems are constrained by those norms. When scholars define what goes with what based on their own assessments of what constitutes a liberal versus a conservative position, they implicitly assume that clear (and opposite) norms exist, but this may not be the case. Our results suggest that, on many issues, standard assumptions hold, but there are noteworthy exceptions. On issues as seemingly ideologically clear-cut as health-care spending, conservatives show a lack of normative consensus. On some issues, norms may be asymmetric—clearer on one side of the spectrum than the other. On issues like legalized prostitution, childcare, defense spending, and environmental spending, norms are relatively strong on one side and weak on the other. Asymmetry and a lack of consensus on some issues may help to explain why, for example, many self-identified conservatives' take policy positions typically associated with liberals (see Ellis and Stimson 2012). Thus, researchers should take care to avoid mistaking lack of a clear norm for public naivete and should not necessarily assume that issue positions are symmetric across identity groups.

> *Result 2:* Separately measuring normative consensus and preferences reveals that estimates of ideological constraint based only on reported preferences tend to overestimate "ideological innocence." It is common for ideological group identifiers to be aware of a norm without conforming to it—in other words, to exhibit pragmatism. Moreover, strength of ideological identity negatively predicts pragmatism (and positively predicts ideological consistency).

The results in Figure 1 are indicative of structure underlying normative expectations, similar to Converse's (1964) static constraint, but within norms rather than

FIGURE 1 Norms: Liberals versus Conservatives



Notes: Figure illustrates proportion of identifiers that expect approval/disapproval for supporting the issue. When liberal and conservative point estimates are on the opposite sides of 0, norms are opposites. When the absolute distance from 0 differs, it suggests asymmetry in norm strength. When point estimates are on the same side of 0, it indicates both groups have the same norm. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

personal preferences. To better understand static constraint, we consider how individual-level ideological constraint compares to individual-level normative expectations. We know from the literature that there is wide variation in constraint, with only a small portion of the population exhibiting consistently liberal or conservative preferences. But is this because people are unaware of "what goes with what," as scholars often conclude? If individual normative *expectations* are more consistently liberal or conservative than individual *preferences*, this would suggest that this conclusion needs revision: individuals may have awareness of ideological norms but choose to express preferences inconsistent with those norms.

We conduct this test in two ways. First, we run a factor analysis on the respondents' preferences on the 16 issues and then repeat this using the respondents' normative expectations regarding the same issues. We use the principal-factor method to analyze the correlation matrix, and we retain the first factor. This gives us a measure of how well a single latent (liberal-conservative) factor explains the variance within and across normative expectations and allows us to compare this to how well a single latent factor explains variance within and across personal preferences. The first factor explains 37% of the total variance in the respondent's preferences. Meanwhile, it explains 52% of the variance in normative expectations. Turning to individual issues, we find that a

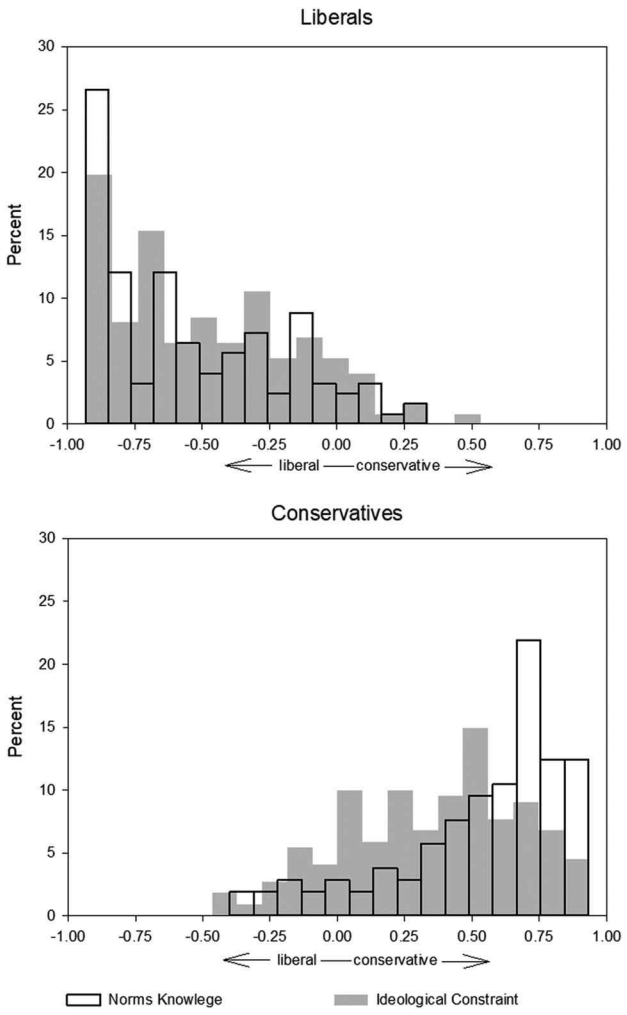
single latent factor explains more variance in normative expectations than in preferences on every single issue.[15] This all suggests greater ideological consensus on norms than on expressed personal preferences.

For a second test, we construct a typical measure of the degree to which individuals have ideologically constrained policy preferences and an analogous measure of the degree to which individuals have consistently liberal or conservative normative expectations. Following existing literature (e.g., Luskin 1987), we operationalized ideological constraint by calculating the proportion of issues on which a given individual's preferences matched the conservative position (i.e., were on the same side as the conservative norm) and subtracting the proportion of issues on which the individual's preferences matched the liberal position (i.e., were on the same side as the liberal norm).[16] The range of the resulting measure is −1 to 1. For conservatives, values closer to 1 indicate greater ideological consistency. For liberals, values closer to −1 indicate greater ideological consistency.

To measure knowledge of normative expectations, we calculate the proportion of issues on which the individual's expectations are consistent with conservative normative consensus and subtract the proportion of issues on which the individual's normative expectations are consistent with liberal consensus. The range of the resulting measure is again −1 to 1; values closer to 1 indicate expectations consistent with the conservative consensus, and values closer to −1 indicate expectations consistent with the liberal consensus. The extent to which an individual's normative expectations are consistent with the consensus of their ideological identity group reflects their knowledge of ideological norms (norms knowledge).

Figure 2 shows how study participants are distributed on our two measures, allowing us to compare knowledge of ideological group norms to ideological constraint.[17] By comparing the two distributions one can see that having a high level of norms knowledge is somewhat more common than holding highly constrained preferences on the very same issues. While there is substantial overlap between these distributions, normative expectations are clearly (and statistically) more

FIGURE 2 Norms Knowledge versus Ideological Constraint Scores



Notes: Colored histograms illustrate the proportion of issues on which the individual took the position most supported by conservatives minus the proportion of issues on which the individual took the position most supported by liberals. White histograms illustrate the proportion of issues on which the individual's normative expectations are consistent with most conservatives minus the proportion of issues on which the individual's expectations are consistent with most liberals. The greater skewedness of the white histograms compared to the colored histograms indicates that both liberals ($p < .001$) and conservatives ($p < .001$) have more norms knowledge than constraint in personal preferences would suggest.

[15]Results are reported in the online supporting information (p. 12). We examine the difference between preferences and norms along a single liberal-conservative ideological dimension. Of course, additional factors (i.e., dimensions) explain additional variance in both preferences and norms. For example, two factors explain 51% of the variance in preferences and 64% of the variance in norms.

[16]We define support for/opposition to an issue as the ideologically constrained position when a majority of at least one ideological group expects approval/disapproval for that position and at least a plurality of the other ideological group expects disapproval/approval. When the norm on an issue is the same for liberals and conservatives (true for spending on crime and education), we exclude the issue from analysis.

[17]We include respondents who were asked the unincentivized norm questions. While the incentivization reduced noise on some issues, the overall level of expected (dis)approval changed only slightly (online supporting information, p. 11) and the larger sample increases our power.

extreme than preferences. A *t*-test rejects the null hypothesis that the average difference between ideological constraint and normative expectations is zero for both liberals (difference: 0.1; p-value $< .001$) and conservatives (difference: 0.2; p-value $< .001$). Liberals and conservatives are more consistent in their normative expectations than they are in their personal preferences. Thus, lack of ideological constraint may not necessarily connote ignorance of what goes with what. Instead, it appears that a significant number of individuals may be pragmatic—defying normative expectations when they disagree with their fellow ideological group members.

To assess how well this explanation fits the data, we shift our focus from comparing aggregate distributions to identifying all instances in which individuals report a policy preference that is *inconsistent with* the normative consensus of their ideological group. We then separate these inconsistencies into knowing and unknowing disagreements. When an individual knows that their position on an issue is inconsistent with the group norm but holds that position anyway, they are being pragmatic. When an individual unknowingly holds an inconsistent position, they are exhibiting ideological innocence.

We find that 96% of liberals and 98% of conservatives are ideologically inconsistent on at least one issue. For the average liberal, 37% of inconsistencies are attributable to pragmatism, and for conservatives 39% are attributable to pragmatism. Second, while there is considerable variation in the (in)consistency of individuals' positions, approximately 63% of liberals and 73% of conservatives are pragmatic on at least one issue. This evidence provides further support for the view that it is important to separate knowledge of what goes with what from ideological consistency. To report policy preferences inconsistent with one's ideology and/or other preference need not indicate innocence.

For further support of this view, in the online supporting information (pp. 13–16), we classify each individual on each policy as ideologically innocent, pragmatically inconsistent, or ideologically consistent, and we estimate a panel multinomial logit model which shows that political knowledge and quantity of education negatively predict ideological innocence (vs. ideologically consistency) but do not predict pragmatism. Meanwhile, strength of ideological identity predicts ideological consistency, but more by reducing pragmatic disagreement than by reducing innocence. Going from the weakest to the strongest ideological identity is associated with a 35-percentage-point increase in ideological consistency, which reflects a 30-percentage-point decrease in pragmatism and 5-percentage-point decrease in innocence. This provides noncausal evidence for the view that ideological consistency is partly driven by norm conformity (a point to which we return below).

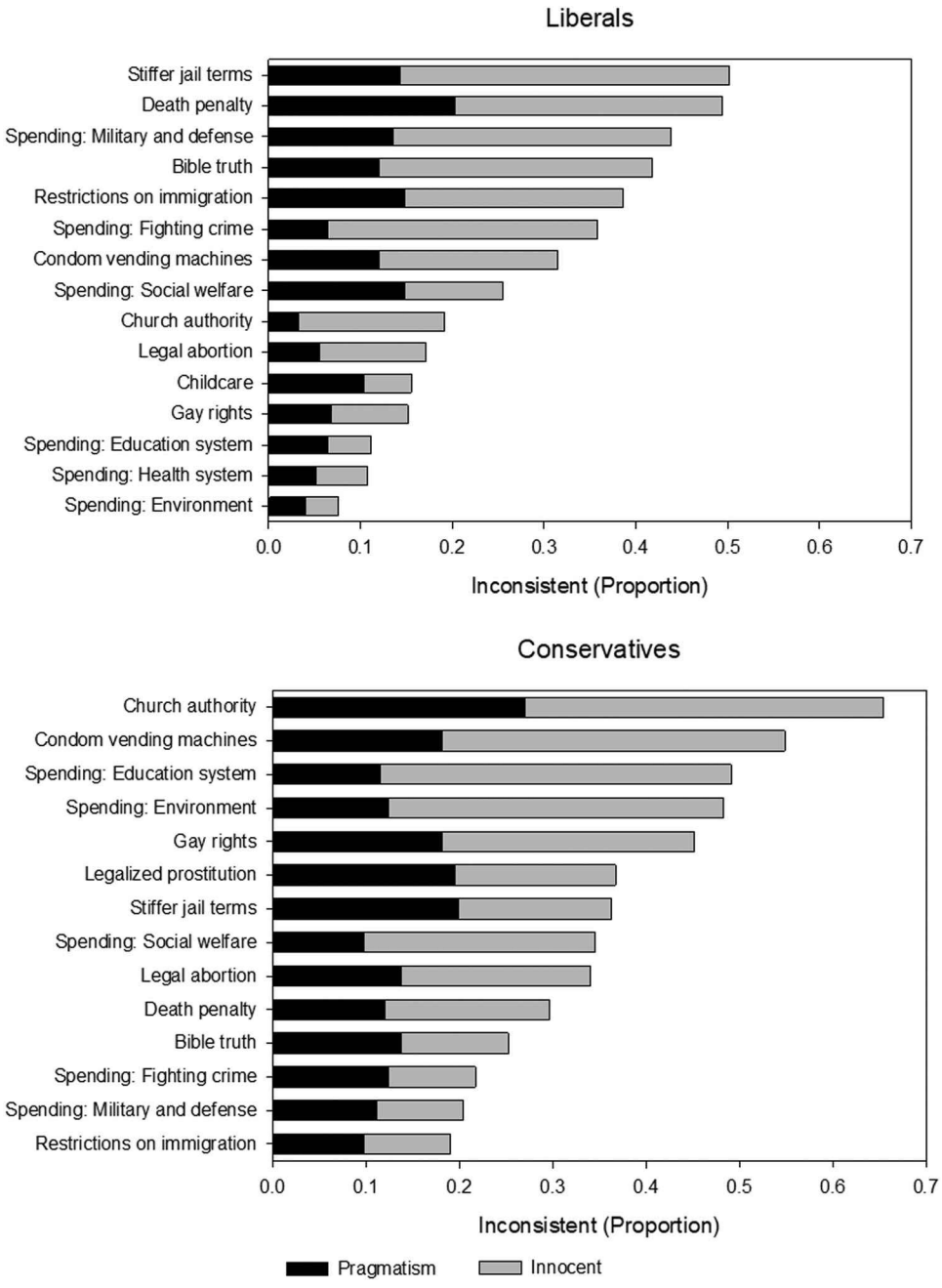
Next, we analyze the sources of inconsistency issue by issue. Figure 3 shows, for each issue, the total share of respondents who hold positions inconsistent with their ideological identity group's norm and the share of those inconsistencies attributable to pragmatism versus innocence. Each bar represents the percentage of norm-inconsistent preferences reported on a given issue. The dark segment of the bar represents the portion of that inconsistency attributable to pragmatism, while the light portion of the bar represents the proportion attributable to innocence. On issues where norm-inconsistent preference reporting is high (e.g., stiffer jail terms among liberals and education spending among conservatives), most of the inconsistency appears to result from innocence. On such issues, there is a relative lack of norm clarity. But, in other cases, norm inconsistency is less prevalent, and pragmatism plays a role as large or larger than innocence. For example, the vast majority of conservatives are aware that other conservatives support restrictions on immigration, but half of those who report inconsistent preferences simply disagree with this stance. Likewise, most liberals are aware that other liberals support more spending in domains such as education, health care, and the environment, but many personally express more austere preferences.

It is also worth noting that, while the degree of pragmatism and innocence vary from issue to issue, there is less variation in pragmatism compared to innocence. For example, across issues, rates of innocence vary from 4% (environmental spending) to 36% (stiffer jail terms) for liberals, and from 9% (restrictions on immigration) to 39% (church authority) for conservatives. This wide variation suggests that innocence is likely a function of issue salience and norm clarity, as one would expect. On the other hand, pragmatism does not appear to vary in this way. The standard deviation of innocence across issues is 0.11 for both liberals and conservatives, while the standard deviation of pragmatism is only 0.05. This is what one would expect if pragmatism were a function of individual-level conformity motivation (or lack thereof) as opposed to macrolevel issue characteristics.

> *Result 3:* Ideological constraint is (at least in part) caused by norm-conformity motivation, suggesting scholars may wish to think twice before portraying the ideologically constrained citizen as the ideal citizen.

According to Converse (1964), ideological belief systems facilitate the formation of stable preferences (i.e., "real" attitudes as opposed to "nonattitudes"). And,

FIGURE 3 Decomposing Inconsistency: Pragmatism versus Ideological Innocence



Notes: Figure shows the percentage of all respondents who reported a preference inconsistent with their ideological group norm. We decompose this inconsistency into that which is attributable to pragmatism and innocence. We define a pragmatist as an individual who correctly identified the group norm (thereby showing awareness of their inconsistency) and an innocent individual as one who failed to identify the group norm (thereby showing a lack of awareness of their inconsistency).

in turn, stable preferences provide the basis for democratic accountability (Achen 1975). But is it possible that some of those who express ideologically consistent positions do so because they know what is expected of them and capitulate to those expectations (i.e., the group norm) even when they would otherwise express different preferences? To the degree people change their policy preferences to adhere to group norms, the assumed

implication of constraint is reversed: in such a case, knowledge of what goes with what would not serve as a foundation for the formation of *stable* preferences but would instead catalyze people to *change* their preferences in response to conformity pressure.

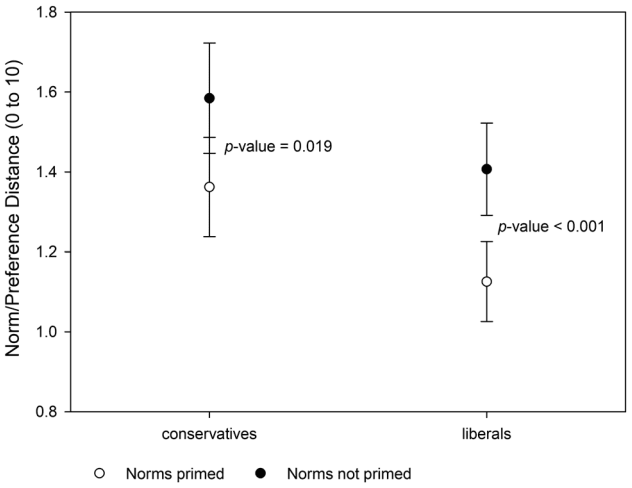
Our evidence comes from our priming experiment in which we manipulated question order so that half of study participants received the incentivized question about the normative expectations of their group prior to reporting their personal preferences (primed treatment) and the other half reported their preferences prior to answering the norms questions (unprimed control). If ideological constraint is driven, even in part, by a desire to conform to group norms, then respondents should report more norm-conforming preferences in the primed treatment.

To determine whether priming normative expectations moves individuals towards group norms, we constructed a continuous measure of norm conformity: the absolute value of the difference between the individual's expressed personal policy preferences and their expectations regarding the norm for each issue. We then averaged across all issues, yielding a measure of the total distance between personal policy preferences and expectations about group norms. This gives us a continuous measure of norm conformity, where larger values indicate lower levels of conformity, and smaller values represent higher norm conformity.[18] The theoretical range of this distance measure is 0 to 10, but empirically it ranges from 0 to 6.8.

We then compared the difference in this distance for those in the norm primed and unprimed conditions (Figure 4) using a difference of means *t*-test. For conservatives, the effect of priming normative expectations on the preference/norm distance is −0.22 (*p*-value: .019) and for liberals it is −0.28 (*p*-value < .001). These negative effects indicate that priming caused ideological identifiers to bring their policy preferences into line with their normative expectations, and the effect magnitudes are 23% and 29% of a standard deviation of the distance measure, respectively. Thus, not only are these results statistically significant; they are also substantively large. On issues for which there is a norm, the drive to express preferences consistent with those norms increases ideological constraint.

[18]For a norm to exist, by our operationalization, a majority must agree on it. Thus, even if some misperceive what the majority believes to be the norm and thus adjust their preferences in the "wrong" direction, the majority will be moving in the "correct" direction, toward the norm, yielding aggregate results.

FIGURE 4 Priming Effects on Norm Conformity (Preference/Norm Distance Measure)



Notes: Y-axis reports the average of the absolute value of the distance between a respondent's preference and normative expectation, on each issue. Values closer to zero reveal greater conformity. For conservatives, the effect of priming norms on the preference/norm distance is −0.22 (*p*-value = .019) and for liberals it is −0.28 (*p*-value < .001). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Robustness Checks

In addition to the results reported so far, we also carried out a number of robustness checks. First, as a placebo test, we examined whether our experimental treatment affected the difference between preferences and normative expectations among *nonidentifiers*. Nonidentifiers are those who placed themselves at the midpoint of the ideological scale or gave no placement, indicating no liberal or conservative identification. These individuals were randomly assigned to be asked norms questions about either conservatives or liberals. In our previous test, question ordering mattered because asking about group norms first primed individuals to think about those norms when reporting their own preferences. There should, however, be no norm-priming effects among individuals who reported no ideological identity, since they were asked about the norms of a group that was not their own and thus should not be subject to conformity pressure. As expected, the question ordering had no statistically significant effect on nonidentifiers' responses (difference of means: −0.083; *p*-value: .666). Also, as one would expect, these nonidentifiers are typically less knowledgeable about the norms of groups with which they do not identify than ideological identifiers.

Second, we adopted two different approaches to assure that our main results are not an artifact of our measurement strategy. Thus, we replicated our results using measures that elicited descriptive norms rather than injunctive norms. Whereas our injunctive norms questions measured shared beliefs about what group members ought to do/believe by virtue of their membership in the group, our descriptive-norms questions measured beliefs about what other group members actually do/believe (i.e., how much other liberals/conservatives, in fact, support/oppose each issue.) The question wording and results are reported in the online supporting information (pp. 17–20). We see some small quantitative differences, as respondents naturally make a distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms. Nevertheless, the within-issue correlation between the descriptive and injunctive norms measures range from 0.76 to 0.89, depending on the issue, and the qualitative conclusions reached in the article are unchanged if we substitute data from the descriptive-norm questions.

To further ensure that our results are not driven by the use of a Likert scale measuring approval/disapproval of issues in the abstract, we also replicate our survey experiment in a new design employing an alternative measurement strategy that elicits descriptive norms about which specific policy solutions each group favors on a given issue (see the online supporting information, pp. 21–26). In this study, respondents recruited via Prolific were presented with five specific issue positions on gay rights and immigration, respectively, and were incentivized to guess which of the five is most commonly held by other members of their ideological identity group. Again, our treatments varied the presence of norm priming through a question-order manipulation. As before, norm priming clearly reduced the probability of reporting a personal preference inconsistent with the perceived group norm, and in this design, the effects were even stronger. Among liberals, it reduced this probability by 10% for both gay rights (p-value: .0025) and immigration (p-value: .0012). Among conservatives, it reduced this probability by 10% for gay rights (p-value: .0934) and 16% for immigration (p-value: .0051).

Finally, given Americans' famous lack of ideological consistency, we compared the strength of ideological norms in American politics to the strength of ideological norms in British politics to see whether focusing on structure in norms rather than preferences would close the ideological gap between the two countries' electorates on the same set of issues (See the online supporting information, pp. 27–30). On every issue, American liberals show weaker normative consensus than British left-wingers, and the ratio is statistically significantly greater than one for 10 out of 16 issues. Among conservatives, the distinction is less clear. On some issues, norms are clearer in the United States, and on other issues, they are clearer in the United Kingdom. This emphasizes that the innocence of a population may be overestimated when innocence is defined as holding nonconforming preferences rather than, as we propose, lack of awareness of group norms.

Discussion

Converse (1964) showed that most Americans lack ideologically constrained belief systems, but what are the implications? Since publication of his famous chapter, much attention has been devoted to Converse's empirics, often taking for granted the idea that American democracy would be better off if the electorate held ideologically constrained preferences, but is this necessarily the case? We revisit this question using a novel measure of ideological norms and measuring personal policy preferences independently from awareness of these norms. The technique enables us to show that a nontrivial portion of those typically characterized as ideologically innocent are not actually so naïve, but instead pragmatic.

Additionally, we find that ideological constraint is motivated, at least in part, by the desire for group conformity, rather than principled reasoning. Thus, it appears that low ideological constraint might not be such a bad thing after all, and high ideological constraint might not always be so desirable. We believe these findings justify increased attention to how ideology is understood in the scholarly literature and American politics more broadly.

As we write, many self-identified conservatives refuse to wear masks or get vaccines against COVID-19, arguing that such measures infringe on their personal freedoms. While it is certainly possible that conservatives are being persuaded by this logic, our findings suggest they may simply be conforming to norms against masking and vaccination because they feel social identity pressure. Such behavior signals group allegiance to fellow conservatives, especially to elites who have fueled these ideas and often stand to benefit from them politically or financially. If this is indeed what is happening, it would constitute an important realization, undermining the notion that ideology facilitates democratic accountability and instead supporting the view that ideology facilitates elite manipulation of public opinion.[19]

[19]This further complicates the link between ideology and representation (see Ahler and Broockman 2018).

In addition to shedding light on current events, our findings may also provide insight into how the role of ideology is changing over time. Although Americans have clearly sorted into ideologically distinct parties (Levendusky 2009), enabling even relatively uninformed voters to correctly draw links between issues, ideologies, and parties (Goggin, Henderson, and Theodoridis 2020), scholars debate whether the American electorate is becoming more ideologically oriented (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017; Wattenberg 2019; Kozlowski and Murphy 2021; Lelkes 2016). Consistent with Malka and Lelkes (2010), our results suggest that norm-conformity pressure derived from ideological identity serves as the "glue" that holds diverse beliefs and preferences together. This view is distinct from the notion that belief systems are *dynamically constrained*, to use Converse's (1964, p. 208) phrasing, by (quasi) logic and principles. In other words, norm conformity may lead to a correlation between preferences (i.e., static constraint) without there being a causal relationship between those preferences (i.e., dynamic constraint). Consistent with our findings, recent research shows that dynamic constraint is rare compared to static constraint (Coppock and Green, 2022), suggesting (static) constraint is primarily the product of social-conformity pressure and not deduction from principles. Thus, it may be simultaneously accurate to say contemporary American politics is not particularly ideological, in the classical sense of reasoning from principles (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), while also holding that (static) ideological constraint is on the rise, particularly among politically knowledgeable Americans (Kozlowski and Murphy 2021; Wattenberg 2019). As ideological norms become clearer, the pressure to conform should increase (amplified by, e.g., social media), thereby motivating ideological identifiers to adopt the beliefs and preferences of fellow liberals and conservatives, even if they would not do so otherwise.

Finally, our approach may also help to explain puzzling asymmetries in American politics. For example, self-identified conservatives often take policy positions associated with liberals (Ellis and Stimson 2012) even though conservatives tend to be more ideologically aware (Lelkes and Sniderman 2016). Such inconsistency may result from pragmatic rejection of group norms or from lack of clear norms on those issues. In the latter case, such deviations from conservatism may not constitute deviations from conservative principles but rather intragroup disagreements over the nature of what ought to go with what (e.g., Noel 2013). In short, just as clear party branding often drives what may otherwise appear to be policy-driven polarization (Dias and Lelkes 2021), the clarity of ideological norms likely affects the degree to which opinions and behavior appear to be driven by ideology.

Overall, we believe our results have vital implications, which we hope will reinvigorate the once energetic scholarly debate over the conceptualization and ramifications of ideology. Near the end of his chapter, Converse (1964) considers how his findings square with the Nazi takeover of Germany, pointing out that the mass base of the Nazi party seems to have been attracted by the promise of change and policies favoring their economic interests, not by the party's ideology. Thus, any attempt to understand the rise of Nazism through the lens of ideology is bound to fail. This is an astute point, but it is also true that Nazism did take hold, and while Nazi voters may not have initially been attracted by the party's ideology, many did eventually adopt it. This is consistent with Sartori's view of ideology as a tool used by elites to mobilize the masses in service of "fanaticism and messianism" (1969, 411). Thus, it is vital to research ideology, not because it provides a foundation for the masses to form policy preferences, but because ideological identity may allow elites to manipulate citizens, perhaps especially those who are relatively knowledgeable and engaged (Bawn 1999; Marx and Engels 1970; Sartori 1969).

While scholars debate Converse's empirical conclusions, both sides typically equate lack of ideology with lack of sophistication, focusing on whether "ideological innocents" are capable of fulfilling their role in democracy. To whatever degree ideology does or does not play a role in structuring mass beliefs, our results challenge this assumed link. Knowledge of "what goes with what" is certainly important, but the implications of this knowledge depend on an individual's motivations. To the degree this knowledge simply enables individuals to engage in social conformity, it need not always serve to increase democratic accountability.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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