Do Belief Systems Exhibit Dynamic Constraint?

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Abstract

As described in Converse (1964), belief systems are dynamically constrained if a change in one idea-element causes a concomitant change in a related idea-element. While an enormous literature is dedicated to the study of static constraint (the extent to which individuals hold political views that "go together"), very little theoretical or empirical work has developed the concept of dynamic constraint since Converse's original formulation. We fill this gap with a new formalization of the theoretical argument and evidence from survey experiments conducted variously on online convenience samples, a nationally representative sample, and a convenience sample of political elites. Our results indicate that even among subjects whose belief systems are manifestly constrained in the static sense, a change in one attitude does not necessitate changes in related attitudes. We conclude that on the whole, weak levels of dynamic constraint underscore Converse's thesis about the limited extent of ideological thinking in the mass public.

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A half-century after its publication, Philip Converse's (1964) essay "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" remains at the forefront of public opinion scholarship. Its provocative thesis is that unlike "elites" (elected officials and party activists), members of the "mass public" (ordinary voters) typically hold political opinions that are a loosely structured mélange of liberal and conservative ideas. Members of Congress, for example, hold opinions that predictably reflect the worldview of either the left or right (Bafumi and Herron, 2010). Conservatives in Congress resist social entitlement programs, support law-and-order policies, and seek to promote patriotism and traditional social values. Congressional liberals, by contrast, seek to expand the social safety net, promote the rights and well-being of disadvantaged groups, express concern about excessive police or military force, and challenge traditional values and the hierarchies that they engender. Among voters, these liberal or conservative ingredients are often jumbled together. On the whole, the public appears relatively moderate when their policy views are averaged across different issue domains, but as Ahler and Broockman (2015) point out, ideologically centrist citizens tend to support many policies that are not moderate.

Converse coined the term "constraint" to describe the interconnectedness of different political opinions. In a widely-quoted passage (p.2), he defines a "belief system" as "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence." The coherence of a belief system may be assessed at a given point in time or by tracing its elements over time. In reference to the former, Converse (p.3) uses the term "static" constraint "to mean the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes." Converse's empirical assessment of static constraint demonstrates the "fragmentation" and "narrowness" of mass belief systems (p.54) by showing the weak correlations between survey responses to questions about assorted policy topics (p.31). In the decades since the publication of Converse's essay, static constraint has remained the focus of the vast empirical literature on belief systems. Although scholars have pointed out that static constraint in the mass public may be underestimated when gauged by simple correlations (Achen, 1975; Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008) and that constraint appears to operate more strongly now than in Converse's day (see Freeze and Montgomery (2016) and Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) on mass constraint), it remains the case that in both absolute terms and in comparison to elites, ordinary voters hold opinions that are weakly correlated across different policy domains.

Much less attention has been paid to what Converse calls "dynamic" constraint or "interdependence." This characteristic of belief systems concerns "the probability that a change in the perceived status (truth, desirability, and so forth) of one idea-element would psychologically require, from the point of view of the actor, some compensating change(s) in the status of idea-elements elsewhere in the configuration." (p.3) Converse contends that dynamic constraint operates weakly if at all among ordinary voters, who tend to acquire new policy opinions via "social" transmission (p.8) rather than through a principled reconciliation of new and old opinions. As a consequence, mass belief systems tend to span a narrow range of policy domains (p.5), too narrow to imbue election outcomes with meaning as ideological mandates (pp.58-64).

The data requirements for assessing *dynamic* constraint are more demanding because the measurement process requires an initial change in an "idea-element" whose ramifications can

be traced within and across policy domains. For studies of this sort to generate statistically meaningful conclusions, the initial change must be genuine (not a sampling fluke), sizable (so that its ramifications can be detected with reasonable precision), and brought about by domain-specific causes (so that concomitant changes in policy views across domains cannot be attributed to environmental forces that affect opinions in multiple domains). Converse (1964, 1970) did not offer direct evidence of this kind, perhaps because he believed that mass attitudes were fundamentally unstable and that any dynamic adjustment was likely to be ephemeral. In those rare instances where other scholars have assessed the degree of dynamic constraint in mass opinion, they have leveraged seismic political events, such as the abrupt change in U.S.-Soviet relations under Perestroika (Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992), the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Kinder and Kam, 2010), or the tax revolt of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Sears and Citrin, 1982). Of these studies, only Peffley and Hurwitz (1992) both addressed the topic of dynamic constraint directly and used panel data to track individual attitudes over time. To our knowledge, dynamic constraint has not been studied experimentally. In this paper, we present a series of experiments in which opinion change is induced in a controlled manner in order to assess whether opinion change in one domain produces concomitant change in opinions in other domains.

Consistent with Converse's argument about the narrowness of mass belief systems, our experiments show that change in one idea-element tends to precipitate little or no change in other cognate issue domains. When dynamic adjustment occurs, it operates narrowly, within the same policy domain, and temporarily, dissipating within a few days. Indeed, our experiments underscore Converse's contention that apparent static constraint may actually exaggerate the functional interdependence of a belief system, for even when respondents display a high degree of consistency in their policy opinions across domains, opinion change occurs in a localized and fragmented fashion. We conclude by considering some of the macro-level implications of weak dynamic constraint, focusing in particular on the disjointed way in which changes in "policy mood" (Stimson, 1991) unfold.

What are the Empirical Implications of Dynamic Constraint?

Unlike constructs such as conservatism, trust in government, or political knowledge, dynamic constraint is not a psychological trait that lends itself to measurement via standard psychometric tools. We cannot simply quiz people repeatedly about their opinions or beliefs in order to zero in on the latent trait of interest. Instead, dynamic constraint must be detected by tracing the ripples of some exogenous source of opinion change. For example, if a person becomes convinced that government spending is rife with corruption and waste, does she become more supportive of tax cuts designed to trim the fat in government (Sears and Citrin, 1982)? The breadth of the belief system is suggested by the distance between the initial locus of change and responses to questions about less directly related topics. For example, does this respondent also become more supportive of a constitutional amendment to require a balanced budget?

Although evidence of such ripple effects would seem to suggest a dynamic process by which people maintain consistency among the various components of a far-reaching belief system, this interpretation itself hinges on additional assumptions about the underlying process that leads

to opinion change across different domains or across different facets of the same domain. The purpose of this section is to make these assumptions explicit.

In order to formalize the observable implications of dynamic constraint, we posit a set of four variables, only some of which are directly observed. These are:

- I (unobserved). Ideology, or the set of functional interdependencies that may influence political attitudes.
- Y_A (measured). Attitude A, as measured by the response to a survey question on issue A.
- Y_B (measured). Attitude B, as measured by the response to a survey question on issue B.
- Z_A (manipulated or set by nature). Information A, which is a causal factor that is directly relevant to issue A but not directly relevant to issue B. Z_A is crucial because it is the factor that may set in motion the change in Y_A that may or may not be accompanied by a change in Y_B.

Notably absent from this list are the set of other unobserved factors that may influence ideology, attitude A, and attitude B, such as background beliefs, demographics, and culture. The implications of the model do not hinge on whether these unobserved factors result in ideology and attitudes being intercorrelated or not. Indeed, we expect them to be correlated for some individuals (such as members of the political elite) and less correlated for others (such as members of the mass public).

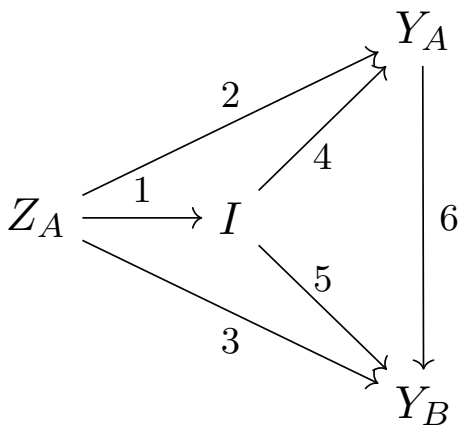
To this set of four variables, we apply a set of assumptions that are equivalent to a family of exclusion restrictions.

> **Assumption 1** (Exogeneity). We assume that Information A (Z_A) has no ancestors, i.e., it is randomly assigned or is otherwise exogenous. No paths lead from I, Y_A, or Y_B to Z_A.
>
> **Assumption 2** (Acyclicity) We assume a particular temporal ordering: Ideology (I) may affect attitudes (Y_A and Y_B) but attitudes do not affect ideology. Y_A may affect Y_B but not vice-versa. This choice amounts to requiring that Z_A affects one attitude "first," and this ordering is reflected in the "A" subscript on the Z_A variable.
>
> **Assumption 3** (Functional Interdependence). Ideology (I) may or may not influence attitudes, but if it affects one attitude, it affects both. Suppose that, contrary to assumption 3, we allowed ideology to affect one attitude but not the other. This "ideology" would not deserve the name; instead it would be another among dozens of other unobserved factors that independently set the level of one attitude or another.

These assumptions can be used to zero in on the observable implications of dynamic constraint. We operationalize Converse's "functional interdependence" by defining dynamic constraint as an effect of Z_A that is mediated by I. That is, if the *mechanism* by which Z_A affects attitudes is changes in ideology, then we would conclude that attitudes are dynamically constrained. If Z_A affects outcomes through pathways that do not include ideology (i.e., through direct paths only), then we would not conclude that attitudes are dynamically constrained because there is no sense in which the idea-elements are bound together.

Figure 1 represents a causal graph in which our four variables are interrelated by 6 direct paths. No other paths could be added to this figure without violating some or all of assumptions

Figure 1: Model of Attitude Change with All Paths Consistent with Assumptions 1-3



1-3. The figure represents a theory of attitude change in which dynamic constraint plays a role in shaping attitudes: there is a path leading from Z_A to I and paths from I to Y_A and Y_B. Figure 1 is one of 32 possible configurations of paths that are consistent with assumptions 1-3. Each configuration of paths coincides with a distinct theory of how exogenous changes in the information environment and ideology interact to induce changes in opinions. The other 31 graphs have the same nodes but a different combination of paths connecting them. We arrive at 32 possible graphs because there 6 total paths, but by assumption 2, paths 4 and 5 are either both present or both absent: $2^5 = 32$. Some of these graphs include paths from Z_A to Y_A and Y_B that pass through I, some do not. Table 1 enumerates the 32 possible graphs according to the presence or absence of the paths shown in Figure 1. For example, model 1 in the first row of the table has paths from Z_A to I and Y_A but excludes all other direct relationships. Model 10 has all possible paths and is the model represented in Figure 1.

In the empirical sections below, we will report on a series of studies in which some exogenous event Z_A occurs and we measure subjects' attitudes Y_A and Y_B. As noted above, I is unmeasured. Our studies can turn out one of four ways: We could observe that Z_A affects Y_A, Z_A affects Y_B, both, or neither. Which theories of attitude change (i.e., which of the 32 path diagrams) could have generated each pattern of evidence?

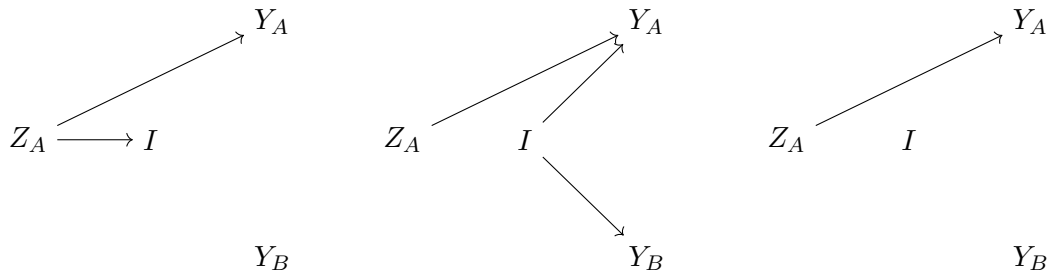
Table 1 is organized by the four empirical patterns that our experiments could reveal. If we find that Z_A affects Y_A but not Y_B, we know that (under assumptions 1-3), one of the first three models must have generated the data. If we find that Z_A affects Y_B but not Y_A, the data must have been generated by one of models 4 through 9. If Z_A affects both Y_A and Y_B, then any of the 17 models marked as model 10 through 26 could be responsible; if Z_A affects neither, any of the last six models could be the correct one.

What should we conclude under each of the four possible outcomes? A belief system is dynamically constrained if the effects of Z_A on Y_A and Y_B are mediated by ideology, and not otherwise. If we observe that Z_A affects Y_A only, we can draw a clean inference because none of the models that can generate such a pattern of evidence feature paths from Z_A to Y_A and Y_B that pass through I. If Z_A affects neither Y_A nor Y_B, we could conclude that the effects

Table 1: 32 Models of Dynamic Constraint, Organized by the Evidence they Generate

	$Z \to I$ Path 1	$Z \to Y_A$ Path 2	$Z \to Y_B$ Path 3	$I \to \{Y_A, Y_B\}$ Paths 4 and 5	$Y_A \to Y_B$ Path 6
	Models generating evidence that Z_A affects Y_A only				
1	yes	yes			
2		yes		yes	
3		yes			
	Models generating evidence that Z_A affects Y_B only				
4	yes		yes		yes
5	yes		yes		
6			yes	yes	yes
7			yes	yes	
8			yes		yes
9			yes		
	Models generating evidence that Z_A affects both Y_A and Y_B				
10	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
11	yes	yes	yes	yes	
12	yes	yes	yes		yes
13	yes	yes	yes		
14	yes	yes		yes	yes
15	yes	yes		yes	
16	yes	yes			yes
17	yes		yes	yes	yes
18	yes		yes	yes	
19	yes			yes	yes
20	yes			yes	
21		yes	yes	yes	yes
22		yes	yes	yes	
23		yes	yes		yes
24		yes	yes		
25		yes		yes	yes
26		yes			yes
	Models generating evidence that Z_A affects neither Y_A nor Y_B				
27	yes				yes
28	yes				
29				yes	yes
30				yes	
31					yes
32					

Figure 2: Models Consistent with Data Showing Effects of Information on Attitude A Only



(a) Model 1 (b) Model 2 (c) Model 3

are not mediated by ideology, but that claim is undermined by the lack of effects to mediate in the first place. If we find that Z_A affects Y_B only, we do indeed have evidence against dynamic constraint, but we might be concerned that the labels are simply misapplied: if Z_A affects Y_B only, it seems likely that Y_B should by rights be labeled Y_A in most applications. If we obtain evidence that Z_A affects both Y_A and Y_B, then dynamic constraint is possible, however, only 8 of the 17 models consistent with such a pattern feature dynamic constraint. Put another way, evidence that treatment affects both target and nontarget attitudes is a necessary but not sufficient condition for demonstrating dynamic constraint.

As we will show in the empirical sections below, our results come closest to the scenario in which Z_A affects Y_A only. For this reason, we explore the models consistent with that pattern of results in more detail in Figure 2. All three models are small variations on a theme: Z_A affects Y_A *directly*, i.e., without being mediated by ideology. If it is the case that the effects of Z_A on Y_A are not mediated by ideology, we can conclude that subjects' belief systems are not dynamically constrained. If we do find a pattern of evidence that shows Z_A affects Y_A only, we will not be able to adjudicate between these three models.[1]

The experiments to follow will generate data on Z_A, Y_A, and Y_B but not I. This theoretical exercise has shown how the data that we obtain from these experiments will map on to the substantive quantities of interest. If we observe effects of our treatments on multiple attitudes, we cannot come to firm conclusions about the extent to which attitudes are dynamically constrained. If, on the other hand, we observe effects on target issues only, we can conclude that ideology does not mediate these effects and hence, attitudes are not dynamically constrained.

[1]Furthermore, it might be that different models apply to different individuals. In model 2, ideology still plays a role in constraining attitudes, but *not* in a dynamic fashion. In models 1 and 3, ideology plays no such role, and the only difference is whether or not Z influences this ineffectual "ideology." An intriguing possibility is that different models may hold for different individuals. For example, some individuals exhibit a high level of *static* constraint. Model 2 might do the best job of explaining their attitudes, while models 1 and 3 might best explain the attitudes of those exhibiting low levels of static constraint.

Study 1: Four Tests of Dynamic Constraint with Mass and Elite Subject Pools

We begin with a survey experimental investigation of the effects newspaper opinion pieces, the results of which were first reported in Coppock, Ekins and Kirby (2016). The experiment was conducted twice: first with a sample of 3,001 Mechanical Turk (MTurk) respondents and again with a sample of 2,181 "elite" respondents. The elite sample was constructed from mailing lists of hill staffers, journalists, political professionals and financial industry workers. Subjects were randomly assigned to read one of four op-eds or a control condition, before answering a series of policy attitude questions related to each of the four op-eds.[2]

This design is ideal for assessing the presence or absence of dynamic constraint.[3] The treatment op-eds were all real-world opinion pieces that were published in national outlets (the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and Newsweek) and advocated libertarian policy positions on transportation infrastructure, the flat tax, veterans healthcare, and the financial industry.[4] Accordingly, the outcome variables (see box below for question wordings) are all scored so that higher values indicate higher agreement with the libertarian position. Each treatment op-ed is associated with a "target" attitude that is measured with four outcome questions each. For a visualization of the design of Study 1, see Figure 3. It describes how respondents in each sample were randomly assigned to the five experimental conditions before answering four attitudinal questions in each issue area, for a total of 16 outcomes. Within each treatment-control comparison, we can assess the effects of treatment on target and nontarget issuses.

Table 2 shows the demographic composition of each experimental sample according to their age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, partisanship, and ideology. Compared with the MTurk sample, the elites are much older, more male, and whiter. The elites have received far more formal education, with nearly three-quarters having attended graduate school. Interestingly, the elites are more partisan than the MTurk respondents, but a higher proportion nevertheless report themselves to be moderate or libertarian. These demographic differences are all highly statistically significant and moreover, are relevant for the question at hand because elites are widely viewed to be more ideological in the sense of knowing what goes with what.

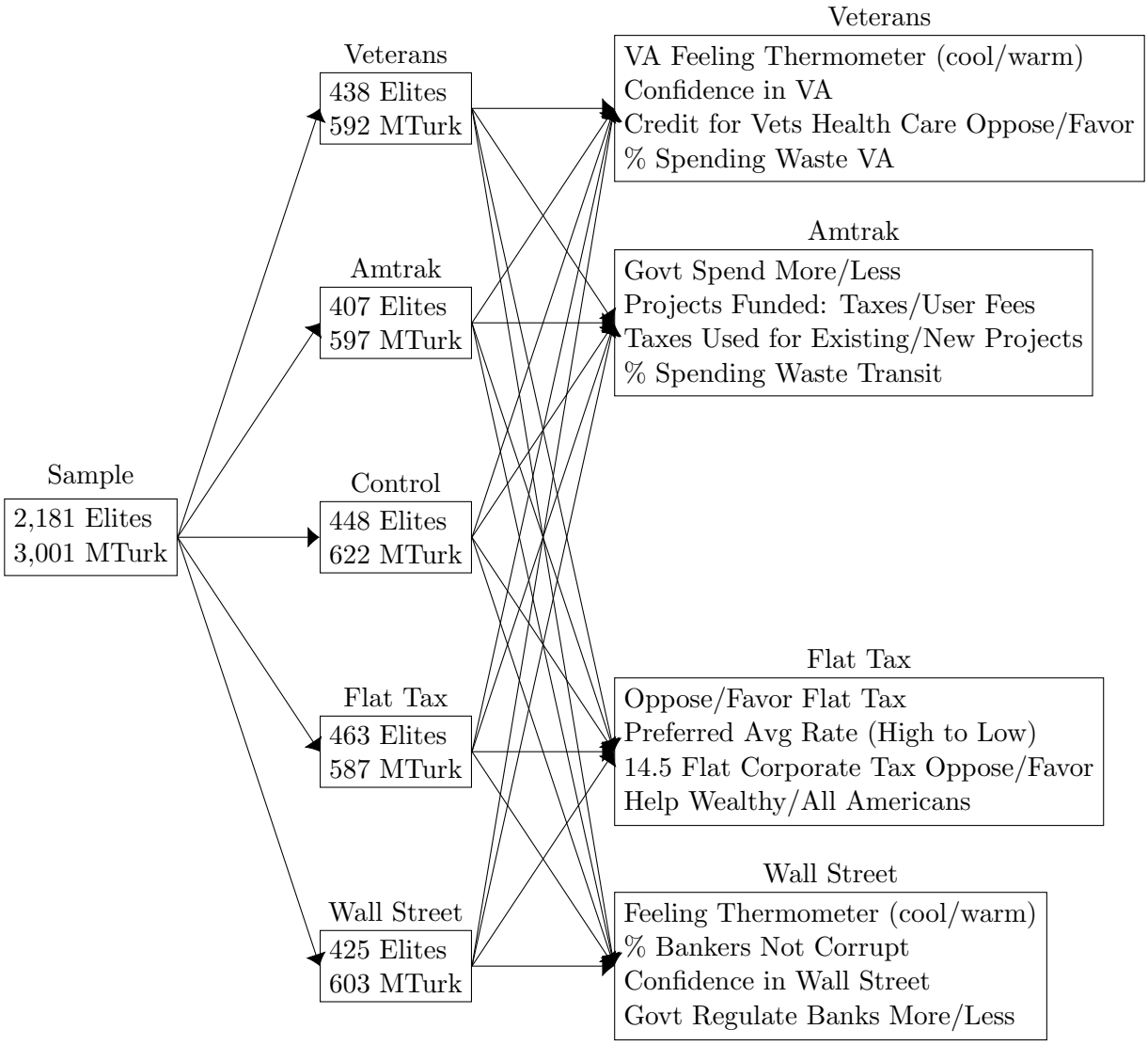
We can confirm the notion that elites exhibit higher levels of static constraint than our MTurk respondents by estimating the extent to which subjects' responses to these outcome questions are intercorrelated. Figure 4 plots the Pearson correlations for all pairwise combinations of the 16 outcome questions (16 choose 2 = 120 pairs). The correlations in the MTurk sample are plotted on the horizontal axis, while the correlations in the elite sample are plotted on the vertical axis. Pairs of outcomes that measure the same attitude are plotted as blue triangles, while pairs of outcomes that measure different attitudes are plotted as red circles. For both

[2] In the MTurk version of the experiment, subjects could also be assigned to a fifth op-ed on climate change. We omit this treatment arm for clarity of presentation, but the subtanitve results we find for the other treatments are strongly paralled in the climate change arm. Please see Coppock, Ekins and Kirby (2016) for details.

[3] The design of Study 1 is inspired by Hopkins and Mummolo (2015). Study 2 is a direct replication of that original study on two new samples.

[4] See the appendix for the full text of the op-eds.

Figure 3: Study 1 Experimental Design



Study 1: Outcome Variables

Amtrak Outcomes:

1. Do you think the government should spend more, less, or about what it does now on transportation and infrastructure? [1: A lot more, A lot less]
2. Would you prefer government pay for building and maintaining roads and infrastructure through raising taxes for transportation spending, or through charging user-fees, like paying tolls when you drive on the highways? [1: Fund entirely through tax increases, 4: Both Equally, 7; Fund entirely through user fees]
3. If the government raised taxes to pay for more transportation spending, do you expect that money would primarily go toward building new infrastructure projects or maintaining and improving existing infrastructure? [1: Entirely toward NEW infrastructure projects, 4: Both Equally, 7: Entirely toward maintaining EXISTING infrastructure]
4. For every dollar the government spends on transportation and infrastructure projects, about how many cents do you think are spent inefficiently? [Slider 0 - 100, How Many Cents Spent Inefficiently?]

Flat Tax Outcomes:

1. Would you favor or oppose changing the federal tax system to a flat tax, where everyone making more than $50,000 a year pays the same percentage of his or her income in taxes? [1: Strongly Favor, 7: Strongly Oppose]
2. What percentage of income, from 0 to 100, do you think Americans should pay in federal taxes on average? [Slider 0 - 100, Average Tax Rate]
3. Do you favor or oppose reducing the business and corporate tax rate to 14.5% percent? [1: Strongly Favor, 7: Strongly Oppose]
4. Do you think a flat tax on incomes over $50,000 without tax deductions or credits will do more to help all Americans or do more to help wealthy Americans? [1: Do more to help ALL Americans, 7: Do more to help WEALTHY Americans]

Veterans Outcomes:

1. How would you rate your feelings toward the Department of Veterans Affairs (the VA) on a scale of 0 to 100, where a rating of 100 means you feel as warm and positive as possible and 0 means you feel as cold and negative as possible? How do you feel toward... [Department of Veterans Affairs]
2. How much confidence do you have in the Department of Veterans Affairs' ability to care for veterans? [1: A Great Deal, 7: None At All]
3. Would you favor or oppose changing the healthcare system for Veterans to a system where the government provides additional money sufficient for Veterans to purchase a government-approved health insurance plan from private health insurance companies? [1: Strongly Favor, 7: Strongly Oppose]
4. For every dollar the government spends on Veterans Benefits, about how many cents do you think are spent inefficiently? [Slider 0 - 100, How Many Cents Spent Inefficiently?]

Wall Street Outcomes:

1. How would you rate your feelings toward the following on a scale of 0 to 100, where a rating of 100 means you feel as warm and positive as possible and 0 means you feel as cold and negative as possible. How do you feel toward... [CEOs; Wall Street Bankers; Government Regulators]
2. What percentage of Wall Street bankers, from zero to one hundred, do you think are corrupt? [Slider 0 - 100: % Wall Street Bankers Corrupt]
3. How much confidence do you have in Wall Street bankers and brokers to do the right thing... [1: A Great Deal, 7: None at all]
4. Compared to what it's doing now, do you think the federal government needs to regulate banks and financial institutions [1: A lot more, A lot less]

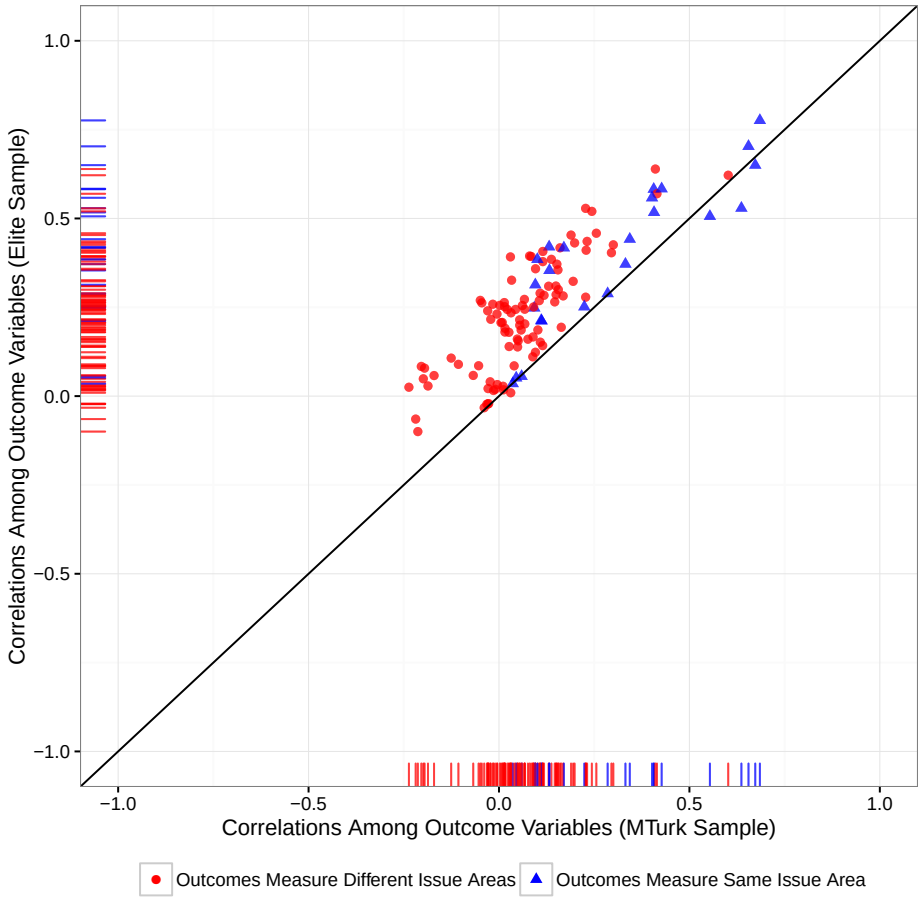
Table 2: Demographics by Experimental Sample

	Elites	MTurk
18 - 29	7.2	45.1
30 - 39	17.6	30.7
40 - 49	19.2	12.2
50 - 59	25.0	8.8
60+	31.1	3.2
Male	67.9	52.1
Female	32.1	47.9
Black	3.1	6.5
Hispanic	4.1	5.8
White	83.0	77.5
Other	9.7	10.2
Less than High School	0.0	0.5
High School	0.5	9.8
Some College	3.1	38.3
College	24.9	39.0
Graduate School	71.6	12.4
Strong Democrat	31.5	19.8
Not very strong Democrat	14.3	25.4
Lean Democrat	10.1	15.5
Independent	11.9	15.4
Lean Republican	7.0	7.1
Not very strong Republican	12.3	11.0
Strong Republican	12.8	5.7
Liberal	28.2	44.5
Moderate	36.7	26.5
Libertarian	11.7	6.2
Conservative	19.3	18.2
Other	4.2	4.6
N	2181	3001

All entries are sample percentages.
Within demographic category, all cross-sample differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$ in all cases).

the MTurk and elite samples, the inter-item correlations are stronger for the pairs that measure the same attitude than pairs that measure different attitudes. Consistent with a large empirical literature on the differing levels of static constraint among elites and ordinary voters, elites' attitudes are more strongly correlated than MTurk respondents' attitudes. The plot shows that nearly all 120 measured correlations lie above the 45 degree line. On MTurk, the average correlation between attitudes in different domains was 0.06; the average correlation between attitudes in the same domain was higher, but still modest at 0.29. In the Elite sample, the average correlation between attitudes within domain was 0.22 while the average across domains was 0.39.[5]

Figure 4: Correlations among Outcome Variables by Study Sample



This familiar pattern of static constraint (high levels among elites but low levels among "ordinary" voters) is strongly contrasted by the uniformly low levels of dynamic constraint shown in Figure 5. The figure has 16 panels, each of which corresponds to the effects of an op-

[5]The reported correlations make no correction for measurement error in survey responses. Such corrections tend to make these correlations substantially higher (Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008; Freeze and Montgomery, 2016).

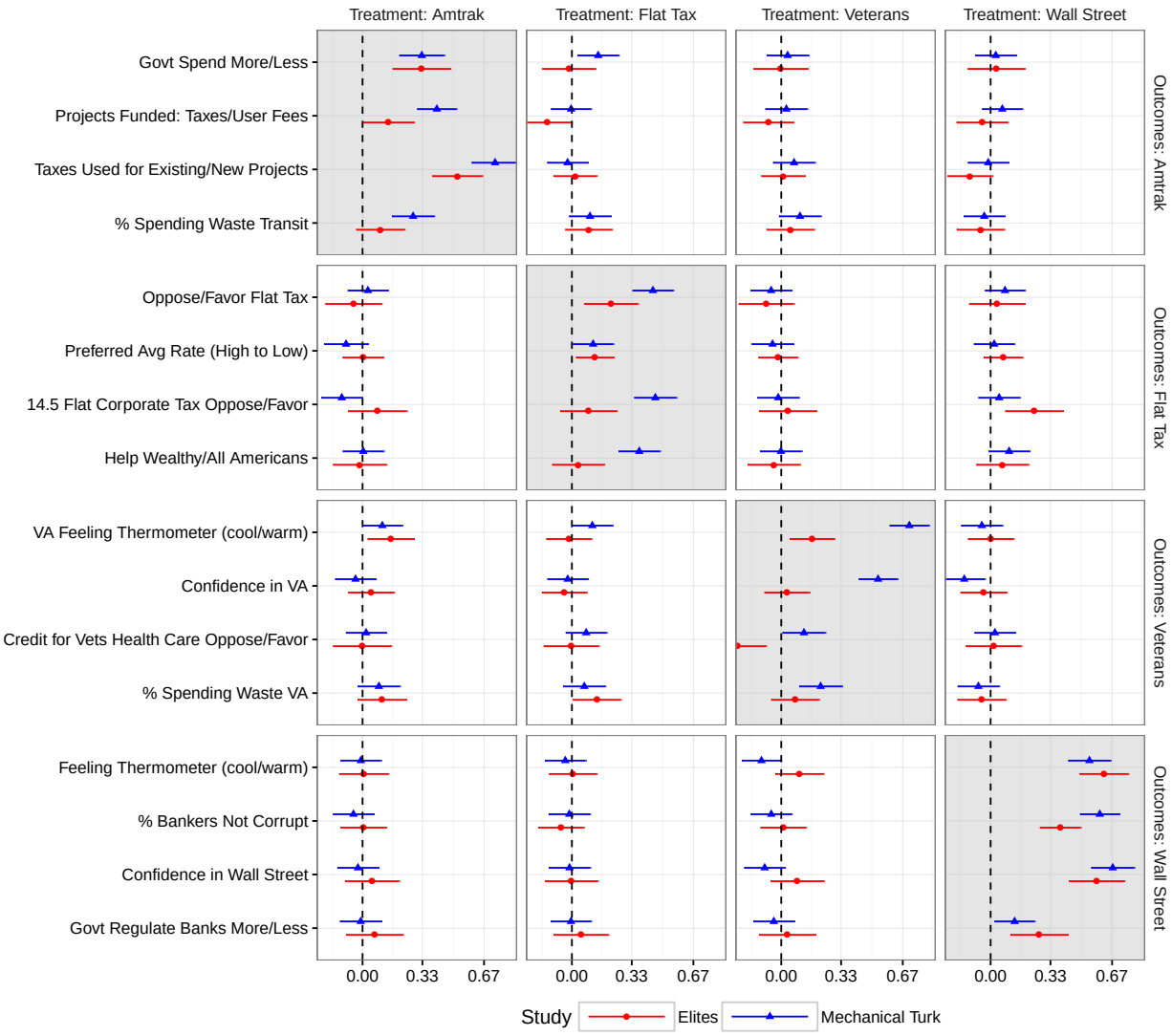
ed on a set of outcome measures. The rows of panels correspond to the four attitudes, each of which are measured with four questions each. The columns are separate treatments. The points and bars within each panel represent treatment effect estimates and 95% confidence intervals; estimates from the elite study are plotted in red circles and estimates from the MTurk study are plotted in blue triangles. The shaded panels on the diagonal indicate treatment effect estimates for each op-ed on target issues (the estimated effects of Z_A on Y_A, to use the terminology from above) while the nonshaded panels on the off-diagonals show the estimated effects of treatment on the nontarget issues (the effects of Z_A on a series of Y_B's.).

All effects are standardized, so that an estimate of 0.25 indicates that the treatment group mean was 0.25 standard deviations higher than the control group mean. Proceeding diagonally down from the top left panel to the bottom right panel, we observe strong effects of information on target issues. Among both elites and MTurk respondents, the effects of the Amtrak treatment on the Amtrak outcomes hover around one-third of a standard deviation. Treatment effects on the third question in the Amtrak set of outcomes (regarding how subjects expect new taxes to be spent) were especially large, at 0.52 SDs among elites and 0.73 SDs on MTurk. Similarly strong effects are present in the MTurk sample for the effects of the Flat Tax and Veterans treatments on their target issues, while the effects of these treatments are more muted in the elite sample. The Wall Street treatment had the largest effects on its target issue of any of the treatments, averaging nearly 0.5 standard deviations in both samples. Out of the 32 estimated treatment effects on target issues, 27 are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ or better. If we apply the Benjamini-Hochberg (1995) multiple comparisons correction to the associated p-values, 26 estimated effects remain significant.

The panels on the off-diagonals display the effects of op-eds on nontarget issues. In nearly every case, the estimates are very close to zero. Out of 96 estimated effects on nontarget issues, only 8 of the effects are significant, but when we apply the Benjamini-Hochberg correction, none of these estimates is deemed significant.

Figure 5 provides clear evidence against dynamic constraint. The precision weighted average of all treatment effects on target issues is 0.22 in the elite sample and 0.42 on MTurk. By contrast, the precision weighted average of effects on nontarget issues is tiny in both samples: 0.01 standard deviations in the elite sample and 0.004 on MTurk. This constitutes evidence that these treatments do indeed affect their target issues (Z_A affects Y_A) but do not affect nontarget issues (Z_A does not affect Y_B). Recall that none of the models in Table 1 that are consistent with this pattern of evidence include a role for ideology as a mediator of exogenously-induced changes in opinions.

Figure 5: Effects of Newspaper Op-eds on Target and Nontarget Issues



Study 2: Frame Breadth (Replications of Hopkins and Mummolo (2015))

Our second study is a pair of replications of Hopkins and Mummolo (2015). That paper aims to assess the "breadth" of framing effects, finding that "framing effects are narrow." (p.1) We present two replications of that design, using the identical treatment stimuli and outcome measures. One replication was carried out on Mechanical Turk ($N = 2,972$) and the other was conducted among a nationally-representative sample assembled by GfK ($N = 3,140$).

The design of Study 2 is analogous to Study 1 (shown in Figure 3). Subjects were randomly assigned a control condition or to read one of four short statements that put a pro-conservative frame on a salient policy debate.[6] In contrast to the long-form arguments that were employed in Study 1, these treatments are all short paragraphs that stake out a position but do not provide detailed arguments. Each statement was preceded by "The argument below was recently made by a U.S. Senator. Please take a moment to read the argument carefully and then tell us what you think." The four treatment frames to which subjects could be randomly assigned were:

> *Crime*: America is very vulnerable to violent crime, with forty-two Americans murdered every single day on average. Innocent people can be killed in their front yards. Across the country, we have to do everything we can to reduce the threat of violent crime. We have to stop violent criminals before they act. This means cracking down on the smaller offenses that all too often lead to violent crime, and making sure that convicted criminals always serve out their full sentences.
>
> *Health Care*: Health care is one of the most complicated issues we face. It involves 1 of every 6 dollars spent here in the United States. The health care system includes millions of doctors and nurses and thousands of hospitals and clinics. Together, they regularly make decisions that can mean life or death. The government in Washington can't even balance its own budget. How can we trust it to run something as complicated as the health care system?
>
> *Stimulus*: With a recession as deep as this one, there are more than 10 million unemployed Americans, and it's going to take years for our economy to recover. In February 2009, the government in Washington made things worse by passing an $800 billion stimulus package, which is more than $2,500 for every person living in this country. Now, it looks like a lot of that money didn't help the economy. Unemployment is still very high. The money went to pork-barrel projects and federal bureaucrats rather than creating jobs for unemployed Americans. The government in Washington can't even balance its own budget. How can we trust it to spend so much taxpayer money?
>
> *Terror*: The September 11th attacks and the news that al-Qaeda was planning new attacks on U.S. soil show how vulnerable America still is to terrorists. Innocent people can be killed while traveling to visit family or going to work. Across the country, we have to do everything we can to reduce the threat of terrorism. We have to stop terrorists before they act. This means conducting more frequent searches of suspicious people boarding planes, trains, subways, and buses.

[6] Our design differs slightly from the design in Hopkins and Mummolo (2015). In the original study, subjects who were not in control were first randomly assigned to see one statement, then answer two policy questions, then to see a second statement before answering the remaining questions. In our study, subjects are randomly assigned to see one argument (or nothing) before answering all four policy questions. Our design is somewhat easier to analyze, but the differences in design do not have implications for the substantive interpretation of results.

Spending preferences were measured on a 1-7 scale (1: Decreased a lot, 7: Increased a great deal) in all four issue areas. The questions read "Should federal spending [on dealing with crime/on health care/to stimulate the economy/on the war on terrorism] be increased, decreased, or kept the same?" These questions plausibly measure both subjects views each in each policy area as well as their federal spending preferences in general. Outcomes were assessed with a single question in each issue area, for a total of four outcome questions.

Table 3 compares the MTurk and GfK samples in terms of their demographic characteristics. With the exception of gender, all demographic differences are statistically significant. The GfK sample is older, less well educated, more Republican, less independent, and less Democratic.

Table 3: Demographics by Experimental Sample

	GfK	MTurk
18 - 24	10.6	21.2
25 - 34	20.0	41.7
35 - 44	16.1	18.5
45 - 54	15.9	10.5
55+	37.4	8.1
Male	48.7	48.3
Female	51.3	51.7
Less than High School	12.2	0.4
High School	29.7	9.6
Some College	28.7	41.6
College	16.5	36.0
Graduate School	13.0	12.4
Strong Democrat	18.4	19.8
Not very strong Democrat	15.5	24.5
Lean Democrat	19.1	15.3
Independent	3.9	14.4
Lean Republican	18.6	7.1
Not very strong Republican	10.5	12.2
Strong Republican	14.2	6.8
N	3140	2972

All entries are sample percentages. GfK entries incorporate sampling weights.
Cross-sample differences by age, education, and partisanship are all statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Figure 6 shows our results in a format that is analogous to Figure 5: the columns refer to the four different treatments, the rows to the four different outcome measures, the ATE estimates are plotted separately for GfK (red circles) and MTurk (blue triangles). Our findings largely match those reported in Hopkins and Mummolo (2015, Figure 3): mild effects for the target

issues and mostly null effects on the nontarget issues.

Our results differ from those reported in Hopkins and Mummolo (2015) in one case only: the *Stimulus* treatment appears to have affected all four outcomes. On its face, this result appears to lend some support for the conclusion that attitudes are dynamically constrained, because here we have an example of a treatment affect both target and nontarget issues. However, the *Stimulus* treatment explicitly advocated that the federal government spend less money across the board. The outcome questions all assessed attitudes in various policy domains by asking subjects whether the federal government should increase or decrease spending in each of those domains. In our view, the fact that this treatment affected *spending* preferences across domains does not constitute dynamic constraint because in some sense, the "target issue" of this treatment is all spending preferences. In the theoretical language developed above, we are assessing the effects of Z_A on Y_{A1}, Y_{A2}, ..., rather than the effects of Z_A on Y_A, Y_B, ...

We measured the effects of all four treatments again after 10 days. The effects of the stimulus frame on the nontarget issues were no longer distinguishable from zero after this relatively brief interval, supporting the idea that the treatment did not induce an ideological change in thinking about spending which then affected spending attitudes across a wide variety of domains. Instead, these results are consistent with the interpretation that the framing effect of the *Stimulus* treatment induced a short-term change in all spending preference questions.

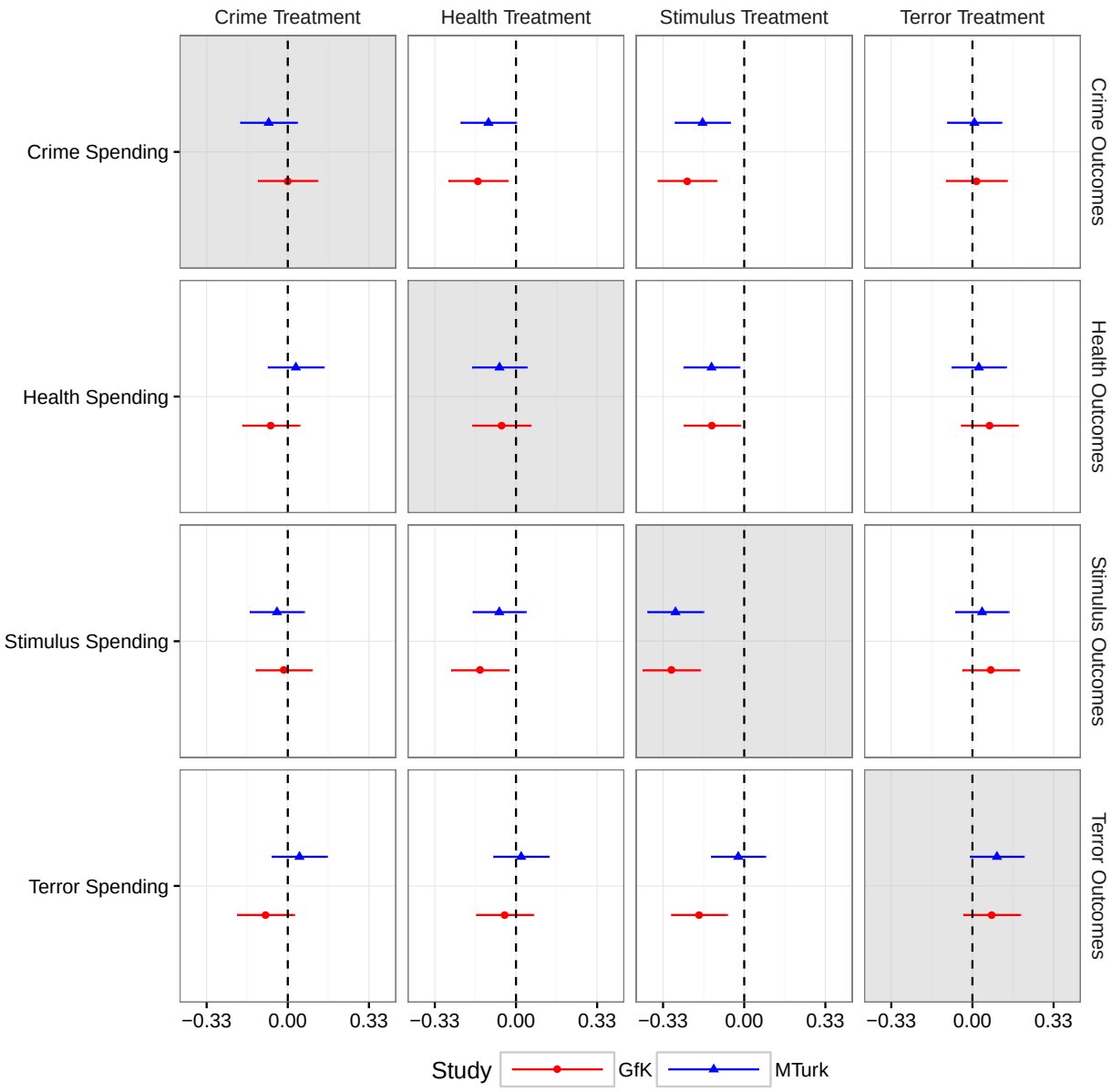
Conclusion

The experiments presented above have three broad implications. First, by demonstrating the limited extent to which opinion change in one domain precipitates opinion change in other domains, the evidence underscores Converse's contention that mass belief systems tend to be narrow and disjointed. For example, moving people on tax policy has no detectable effect on their opinions on the topic of veterans' healthcare let alone an issue like railroad infrastructre that is conceptually more distant from the locus of opinion change. In Study 1, information induced significant opinion change on target issues in 27 of 32 opportunites, but in only 8 of 96 opportunities did it induce significant changes on nontarget issues. This pattern of narrow opinion change has been noted in other studies (e.g., Finseraas and Kotsadam 2015[7]), but ours is the first systematic attempt to assess dynamic constraint experimentally across a range of substantive domains.

Second, in those instances in which interventions do induce opinion change on an array of issues simultaneously, as in our replication of the Hopkins and Mummolo (2015) experiment, these effects dissipate quite quickly. After two weeks, the *Stimulus* prime, which had initially moved spending preferences in multiple domains, no longer had detectable effects on any spending preference. One interesting exception to this pattern of narrow and ephemeral change is the finding by Broockman and Kalla (2016) that doorstep conversations between canvassers and voters on the subject of transgender rights affected not only policy opinions on that issue but also on the issue of gay rights. This instance of dynamic constraint is reminiscent of Converse's

[7]This study finds that randomly induced exposure to immigrants reduces negative stereotypes about them but does not change policy preferences regarding immigration or the social welfare benefits to which they are entitled.

Figure 6: Effects of Arguments on Target and Nontarget Spending Preferences

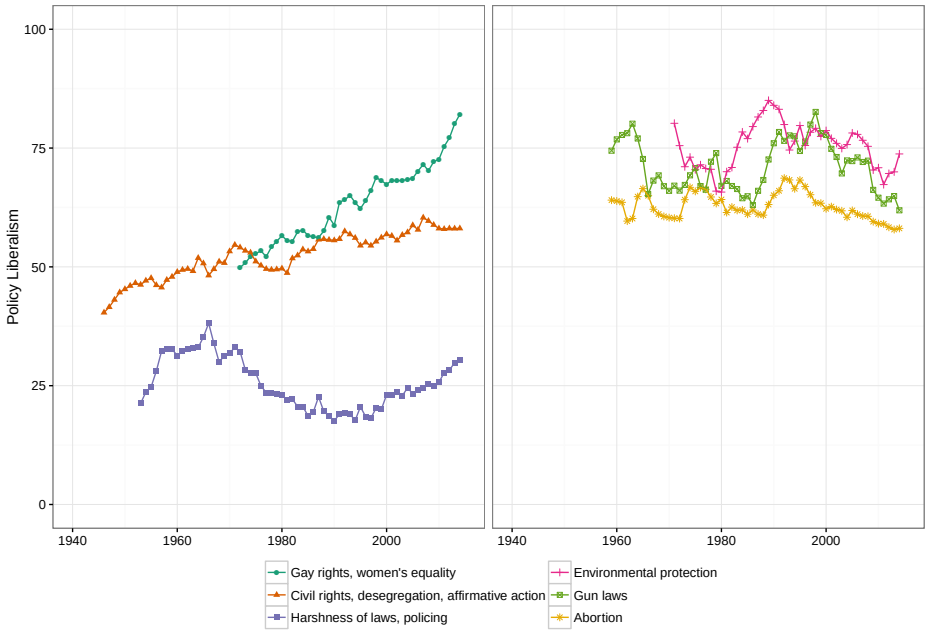


argument (p.38-42) that attitudes in the domain of race and civil rights are unusual in terms of their persistence and coherence because they allow people to reason based on group evaluations rather than ideological ones.

Third, weak dynamic constraint is evident even among subgroups that display relatively high levels of static constraint. Although their opinions across issues were initially more correlated, the elite subject pools in our studies responded to information in a manner similar to the mass subject pools. Elites changed their opinions significantly on the targeted issue but not on related topics – despite the fact that their opinions on these topics were correlated initially. Although elites have a clearer sense of how idea-elements in an ideological belief system fit together, when one idea-element changes, elites do not spontaneously adjust these elements so as to make them consistent. It may be, as Lenz (2013) suggests, that reconciliation among issue positions occurs among elites when party and ideological leaders articulate their issue stances and the principles that underlie them.

What are the macro implications of low levels of dynamic constraint? Perhaps the most direct implication is the prediction that trends in policy preferences will tend to be disjointed across issues. This proposition is readily assessed thanks to the work of Coggins et al. (2012), which builds on the pioneering "policy mood" analysis by Stimson (1991). Assembling a vast array of publicly available survey data, these authors track trends in 56 opinion domains ranging from civil rights to foreign aid, using factor analysis to construct scales using data from different survey organizations and different question wording.

Figure 7: Six Policy Moods



One of the most interesting findings to emerge from their dataset is that trends in public opinion do not track in a consistently liberal or conservative fashion within or across issue

domains. Consider, for example, the left panel of Figure 7, which depicts trends in three related issue domains: civil rights (desegregation, affirmative action), gender equality (gay rights, women's rights), and due process rights (harshness of laws, police tactics). The gender equality series shows a steep liberal trajectory since the 1970s, while the due process series moves in a conservative direction from the 1970s through the 1990s, rebounding from 2000 on. The civil rights series moves in a liberal direction with occasional conservative downturns that do not consistently coincide with trends in either of the other two series. When we look across issue domains to environmental protection, abortion rights, and gun control, we see public opinion moving in a conservative direction on the latter two issues since the late 1990s. Trends in environmental protection are more muted, and the turning points in this series do not seem related to the other two. In sum, the six series move over time but not necessarily in tandem with one another. Just as Converse (p.58-64) warned against taking the ideological pulse of the public from election results, caution is warranted when ascribing a change in ideological outlook to shifts in multi-issue indexes that gauge policy mood.

With the benefit of several decades of aggregate opinion data and the advent of large-scale experimental studies of public opinion, contemporary scholarship is now able to fill in the gaps in Converse's empirical case against dynamic constraint. It seems that the evidence in favor of Converse's position is even stronger than he suspected.

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A Study 1: Experimental Stimuli

This section includes reproductions of four op-eds:

Treatment	Title	Author	Publication
Amtrak	The Amtrak Crash: Is More Spending the Answer?	Randal O'Toole	Newsweek
Flat Tax	Blow Up the Tax Code and Start Over	Rand Paul	The Wall Street Journal
Veterans	The Other Veterans Scandal	Michael F. Cannon and Christopher Preble	The New York Times
Wall Street	Wall Street Offers Very Real Benefits	Thaya Knight	USA Today

Newsweek

The Amtrak Crash: Is More Spending the Answer?

BY **RANDAL O'TOOLE** 5/13/15 AT 4:46 PM

It is too soon to tell what caused the Amtrak train crash that killed seven people on May 12. But advocates of increased government spending are already beginning to use the crash to promote more spending on infrastructure and are criticizing Republicans who voted to reduce Amtrak's budget the day after the crash.

Yet there is a flaw in the assumption that spending more money would result in better infrastructure. In fact, in some cases, the problem is that too much money is being spent infrastructure, but in the wrong places.

The reason for this is that politicians prefer to spend money building new infrastructure over maintaining the old. The result is that existing infrastructure that depends on tax dollars steadily declines while any new funds raised for infrastructure tend to go to new projects.

We can see this in the Boston, Washington, and other rail transit systems. Boston's system is $9 billion in debt, has a $3 billion maintenance backlog, and needs to spend nearly $700 million a year just to keep the backlog from growing. Yet has only budgeted $100 million for maintenance this year, and instead of repairing the existing system, Boston is spending $2 billion extending one of its light-rail lines.

Similarly, Washington's Metro rail system has a $10 billion maintenance backlog, and poor maintenance was the cause of the 2009 wreck that killed nine people. Yet, rather than rehabilitate their portions of the system, Northern Virginia is spending $6.8 billion building a new rail line to Dulles Airport; D.C. wants to spend $1 billion on new streetcar lines; and Maryland is considering building a $2.5 billion light-rail line in D.C. suburbs.

On the other hand, infrastructure that is funded out of user fees is generally in good shape. Despite tales of crumbling bridges, the 2007 Minnesota bridge collapse was due to a construction flaw and the 2013 Washington state bridge collapse was due to an oversized truck; lack of maintenance had nothing to do with either failure.

Department of Transportation numbers show that the number of bridges considered structurally deficient has fallen by more than 50 percent since 1990, while the average roughness of highway pavement has decreased. State highways and bridges, which are almost entirely funded out of user fees, tend to be in the best condition while local highways and bridges, which depend more on tax dollars, tend to be the ones with the most serious problems.

Before 1970, almost all of our transportation infrastructure was funded out of user fees and the United States had the best transportation system in the world. Since then, funding decisions have increasingly been made by politicians who are more interested in getting their pictures taken cutting ribbons than in making sure our transportation systems run safely and smoothly.

Proponents of higher gas taxes and other increased funding on infrastructure may talk about crumbling bridges, but what they really want is to spend more money on new projects that are often of little value. For example, they want high-speed trains that cost more but go less than half the speed of flying and light-rail trains that cost more but can move fewer people than buses.

This country doesn't need more infrastructure that it can't afford to maintain. Instead, it needs a more reliable system of transport funding, and that means one based on user fees and not tax subsidies.

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Blow Up the Tax Code and Start Over

Apply a 14.5% flat tax to personal income and to businesses. Cut deductions. Watch the economy roar.

By RAND PAUL
June 17, 2015 7:09 p.m. ET

Some of my fellow Republican candidates for the presidency have proposed plans to fix the tax system. These proposals are a step in the right direction, but the tax code has grown so corrupt, complicated, intrusive and antigrowth that I've concluded the system isn't fixable.

So on Thursday I am announcing an over $2 trillion tax cut that would repeal the entire IRS tax code—more than 70,000 pages—and replace it with a low, broad-based tax of 14.5% on individuals and businesses. I would eliminate nearly every special-interest loophole. The plan also eliminates the payroll tax on workers and several federal taxes outright, including gift and estate taxes, telephone taxes, and all duties and tariffs. I call this "The Fair and Flat Tax."

President Obama talks about "middle-class economics," but his redistribution policies have led to rising income inequality and negative income gains for families. Here's what I propose for the middle class: The Fair and Flat Tax eliminates payroll taxes, which are seized by the IRS from a worker's paychecks before a family ever sees the money. This will boost the incentive for employers to hire more workers, and raise after-tax income by at least 15% over 10 years.

Here's why we have to start over with the tax code. From 2001 until 2010, there were at least 4,430 changes to tax laws—an average of one "fix" a day—always promising more fairness, more simplicity or more growth stimulants. And every year the Internal Revenue Code grows absurdly more incomprehensible, as if it were designed as a jobs program for accountants, IRS agents and tax attorneys. Polls show that "fairness" is a top goal for Americans in our tax system. I envision a traditionally All-American solution: Everyone plays by the same rules. This means no one of privilege, wealth or with an arsenal of lobbyists can game the system to pay a lower rate than working Americans.

Most important, a smart tax system must turbocharge the economy and pull America out of the slow-growth rut of the past decade. We are already at least $2 trillion behind where we should be with a normal recovery; the growth gap widens every month. Even Mr. Obama's economic advisers tell him that the U.S. corporate tax code, which has the highest rates in the world (35%), is an economic drag. When an iconic American company like Burger King wants to renounce its citizenship for Canada because that country's tax rates are so much lower, there's a fundamental problem.

Another increasingly obvious danger of our current tax code is the empowerment of a rogue agency, the IRS, to examine the most private financial and lifestyle information of every American citizen. We now know that the IRS, through political hacks like former IRS official Lois Lerner, routinely abused its auditing power to build an enemies list and harass anyone who might be adversarial to President Obama's policies. A convoluted tax code enables these corrupt tactics.

My tax plan would blow up the tax code and start over. In consultation with some of the top tax experts in the country, including the Heritage Foundation's Stephen Moore, former presidential candidate Steve Forbes and Reagan economist Arthur Laffer, I devised a 21st-century tax code that would establish a 14.5% flat-rate tax applied equally to all personal income, including wages, salaries, dividends, capital gains, rents and interest. All deductions except for a mortgage and charities would be eliminated. The first $50,000 of income for a family of four would not be taxed. For low-income working families, the plan would retain the earned-income tax credit.

I would also apply this uniform 14.5% business-activity tax on all companies—down from as high as nearly 40% for small businesses and 35% for corporations. This tax would be levied on revenues minus allowable expenses, such as the purchase of parts, computers and office equipment. All capital purchases would be immediately expensed, ending complicated depreciation schedules.

The immediate question everyone asks is: Won't this 14.5% tax plan blow a massive hole in the budget deficit? As a senator, I have proposed balanced budgets and I pledge to balance the budget as president.

Here's why this plan would balance the budget: We asked the experts at the nonpartisan Tax Foundation to estimate what this plan would mean for jobs, and whether we are raising enough money to fund the government. The analysis is positive news: The plan is an economic steroid injection. Because the Fair and Flat

Tax rewards work, saving, investment and small business creation, the Tax Foundation estimates that in 10 years it will increase gross domestic product by about 10%, and create at least 1.4 million new jobs.

And because the best way to balance the budget and pay down government debt is to put Americans back to work, my plan would actually reduce the national debt by trillions of dollars over time when combined with my package of spending cuts.

The left will argue that the plan is a tax cut for the wealthy. But most of the loopholes in the tax code were designed by the rich and politically connected. Though the rich will pay a lower rate along with everyone else, they won't have special provisions to avoid paying lower than 14.5%.

The challenge to this plan will be to overcome special-interest groups in Washington who will muster all of their political muscle to save corporate welfare. That's what happened to my friend Steve Forbes when he ran for president in 1996 on the idea of the flat tax. Though the flat tax was surprisingly popular with voters for its simplicity and its capacity to boost the economy, crony capitalists and lobbyists exploded his noble crusade.

Today, the American people see the rot in the system that is degrading our economy day after day and want it to end. That is exactly what the Fair and Flat Tax will do through a plan that's the boldest restoration of fairness to American taxpayers in over a century.

Sen. Paul, a Republican from Kentucky, is running for his party's presidential nomination.

The New York Times

The Other Veterans Scandal

By MICHAEL F. CANNON and CHRISTOPHER A. PREBLE JUNE 15, 2014

WASHINGTON — THE Department of Veterans Affairs is mired in scandal. More than 57,000 veterans have been waiting at least three months for a doctor's appointment. Another 64,000 never even made it onto a waiting list. There are allegations that waits for care either caused or contributed to veterans' deaths.

But another, even larger problem with the Department of Veterans Affairs is being overlooked: Even when the department works exactly as intended, it helps inflict great harm on veterans, active-duty military personnel and civilians.

Here's how. Veterans' health and disability benefits are some of the largest costs involved in any military conflict, but they are delayed costs, typically reaching their peak 40 or 50 years after the conflict ends. Congress funds these commitments — through the Department of Veterans Affairs — only once they come due.

As a result, when Congress debates whether to authorize and fund military action, it can act as if those costs don't exist. But concealing those costs makes military conflicts appear less burdensome and therefore increases their likelihood. It's as if Congress deliberately structured veterans' benefits to make it easier to start wars.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is supposed to help wounded veterans, but its current design makes soldiers more likely to get killed or injured in the first place. The scandal isn't at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The scandal is the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Is there a better way? We propose a system of veterans' benefits that would be funded by Congress in advance. It would allow veterans to purchase life,

disability and health insurance from private insurers. Those policies would cover losses related to their term of service, and would pay benefits when they left active duty through the remainder of their lives.

To cover the cost, military personnel would receive additional pay sufficient to purchase a statutorily defined package of benefits at actuarially fair rates. The precise amount would be determined with reference to premiums quoted by competing insurers, and would vary with the risks posed by particular military jobs.

Insurers and providers would be more responsive because veterans could fire them — something they cannot do to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans' insurance premiums would also reveal, and enable recruits and active-duty personnel to compare, the risks posed by various military jobs and career paths.

Most important, under this system, when a military conflict increases the risk to life and limb, insurers would adjust veterans' insurance premiums upward, and Congress would have to increase military pay immediately to enable military personnel to cover those added costs.

Consider how this system might have prevented Congress's misbegotten decision to authorize President George W. Bush to invade Iraq. In 2002, the Bush administration played down estimates that the war would cost as much as $200 billion, insisting the cost would be less than $50 billion. To give you a sense of how mistaken this was: The economists Linda J. Bilmes and Joseph E. Stiglitz put the cost of veterans' benefits alone, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, at roughly $1 trillion.

Like others before her, Hillary Rodham Clinton has admitted that voting to authorize the Iraq invasion was a "mistake," though she "made the best decision I could with the information I had." How many members of Congress would have voted differently if confronted with the long-term health and disability needs of the troops they had already sent into Afghanistan and those they were sending into Iraq? How many would have pressed harder to end the wars sooner if they had to confront the mounting cost of veterans' benefits, in addition to the wars' other growing costs, every year the wars dragged on?

The alternative system we propose combines the universal goal of improving

veterans' benefits with conservative Republicans' preference for market incentives and antiwar Democrats' desire to make it harder to wage war. Pre-funding veterans' benefits could prevent unnecessary wars, or at least end them sooner. We can think of no greater tribute to the men and women serving in our armed forces.

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Michael F. Cannon is the director of health policy studies, and Christopher Preble is the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies, at the Cato Institute.

USA TODAY
A GANNETT COMPANY

Wall Street offers very real benefits: Opposing view

But headlines focus on the bad behavior.

Thaya Knight *7:16 pm May 26, 2015*

Not every person on Wall Street is a morally corrupt Gordon Gekko. Do Wall Street traders want to make money? Yes. Are they generally people who thrive in a fast-paced, competitive environment? You bet. And that is a good thing.

At its core, here's what Wall Street does: It makes sure that companies doing useful things get the money they need to keep doing those things. Do you like your smartphone? Does it make your life easier? The company that made that phone got the money to develop the product and get it into the store where you bought it with the help of Wall Street.

When a company wants to expand, or make a new product, or improve its old products, it needs money, and it often gets that money by selling stock or bonds. That helps those companies, the broader economy and consumers generally.

When we have flashing headlines about Wall Street traders acting badly, as we had last week with news of five major banks pleading guilty to criminal charges, it is very easy to hate Wall Street. But we only hear headlines about the worst behavior.

No one writes news stories about traders who go about their business every day, carefully complying with the many (and there are many) rules and regulations that govern their work. Also, the financial sector, which is usually what people mean when they say "Wall Street," isn't only or even mostly the big banks.

There are small firms, banks, funds and advisers that make up a large portion of our financial industry. While the news about corruption, corporate welfare and lawbreaking is very bad, it doesn't mean the entire industry is rotten. Or, more important, that we don't need it.

Wall Street could be better. We could eliminate regulations that crowd out competition for the big banks. We could reform the system to do away with "too big to fail," making it harder for bad traders to get away with bad behavior. Either way, we shouldn't lose sight of the very real economic and social benefits Wall Street provides.

Thaya Knight is associate director of financial regulation studies at the Cato Institute.