

Public Attitudes about the Senate Procedure:  
A Panel Study of Partisan, Ideological, and Racial Attitudes toward the Filibuster

Word Count: 7727

Abstract

The change in party control of the Senate resulting from the 2020-2021 elections creates an opportunity for us to test important hypotheses about public support for reforming a practice that is often said to define the special character of the institution—the filibuster. Exploiting a three-wave panel survey fielded in the August 2020-February 2021 period, we find that few Americans accurately identify the cloture threshold. Despite the limited public knowledge of Senate procedure, we confirm the expectation that Democrats and African Americans favored filibuster reform more than other Americans *even before* the 2020 election that moved Senate Democrats from minority to majority status. We also confirm the expectation that the switch from a Republican to a technical Democratic Senate majority widened the gulf of Americans who support and oppose filibuster reform. Finally, we confirm that knowledge of the cloture threshold conditions the effects of party on attitudes about filibuster reform.

## Introduction

The change in party control of the Senate resulting from the 2020-2021 elections creates an opportunity for us to test important hypotheses about public support for reforming a practice that is often said to define the special character of the institution—the filibuster. We do so with a panel study in which public views were measured months before the November 2020 elections, in November just after the elections when the Senate majority remained unclear, and in February of the next year after the Georgia runoffs produced a 50-50 Senate and, with a Democratic vice president, a technical majority for the Democrats. For months before and then throughout that period leading Democrats discussed the importance of the filibuster as an obstacle to action on the program of the expected and eventual winner of the presidential contest, Democrat Joe Biden.

These developments implicate central concerns of political science. As the study of how humans govern themselves, political science makes the causes and consequences of choices about institutions, policy-making processes, and procedural rules a central focus of the discipline. An issue that arises in all democratic contexts, the balance between majority rule and minority rights, has been central to studies of the U.S. Congress (Binder 1996, 2006). In this report, we are concerned with how the American public understands and evaluates the Senate's cloture rule. Rule XXII requires a three-fifths constitutional majority (60 votes when all seats are filled) to close debate and acquire a vote on a debatable measure or motion, which includes most regular legislation. With increasing frequency over recent decades, the rule has been exploited by the minority party to obstruct action by the majority, which has produced majority party procedural moves, including the use of the "nuclear option" At the time of this writing in early 2021, senators, and activists have been giving "filibuster

reform”—reducing the threshold for cloture—considerable attention. As we will see, even media attention to the issue spiked after the 2020 elections. We ask whether this attention reached the American public and altered attitudes about the Senate practice.

Central to modern understanding of Senate practices are the partisan, ideological, and institutional implications of super-majority rule. We will not review senators’ views of filibuster reform in this paper in detail except to hypothesize that public views are shaped by their expressed views of the subject. With the Republicans losing majority control in the transition from the 116th to 117th Congresses, our panel provides a unique opportunity to measure the effect of knowledge, partisanship, and political context on the American public’s understanding for the filibuster practice and views about reform.

Exploiting a three-wave panel survey of about 1000 Americans that was fielded in the August 2020-February 2021 period, we find that few Americans accurately identify the cloture threshold. The percentage who can identify the threshold increases from about 15 to 20 percent (a 33 percent increase) from before the 2020 election to three months after the election, but, obviously, familiarity remained rare. We also find that political knowledge, rather than education, attentiveness to politics, and other factors that often are correlated with an accurate understanding of the cloture rule, is distinctive and related to an ability to identify the threshold.

With the most modest familiarity with the details of Senate rules and practice, the American public exhibits only a modest change in attitudes about filibuster reform, however this holds regardless of that familiarity. Nevertheless, we confirm the somewhat surprising expectation that Democrats, and African Americans favored filibuster reform—a move to simple-majority cloture for regular legislation—more than other Americans *even before* the 2020 election that moved Senate Democrats from

minority to majority status. We also confirm the expectation that the switch from a Republican to a (technical) Democratic Senate majority shifted the partisan and ideological mix of Americans who support and oppose filibuster reform. Finally, we confirm that political knowledge--in this case, knowledge of the cloture threshold--conditions the effects of party on attitudes about filibuster reform.

### Previous Studies

In general, studies find a strong but malleable relationship between attitudes about political processes and partisan or policy commitments. The most significant changes occur after elections or during legislative episodes (Anderson and LoTempio 2002). Studies of the “winner effect”—the influence of being on the winning side of an election and attitudes about politics – find a variety of changes that range from confidence that votes are counted accurately to general happiness (Sinclair, Smith, and Tucker 2018; Berinsky, *et al.*, no date). Berliner (2020) found that election results flip respondents’ preferences over constraints on presidential power, specifically a president’s prerogative to keep documents secret from the public. The current study expands on this literature by analyzing such a shift with a cognitively difficult issue over an election cycle where there was much uncertainty about which party would control Congress.

Few studies of public attitudes about Senate filibuster practices have been conducted. On a few occasions since the 1930s, pollsters have quizzed national samples about the filibuster. As Smith and Park (2013) detail, the general pattern in polls conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion, renamed the Gallup Organization in 1958, is that when a majority of respondents favors a measure (say, civil rights legislation) that is being filibustered, a majority opposes the filibuster practice,

and vice versa. Typically, the Gallup polls were conducted when a Senate filibuster was underway or just blocked action on a very salient measure, with a large number of “don’t know” responses reported in some of the Gallup polls even at those times (1937; 1963).

Smith and Park (2013) asked a panel about attitudes toward the filibuster before and after Senate action on healthcare reform legislation in late 2009. Republicans started with a somewhat stronger pro-filibuster attitude and exhibited a significant pro-filibuster shift during the episode, both consistent with the minority status of Republicans in the Senate at the time. Democrats showed an anti-filibuster shift during the episode, although it was weaker than the pro-filibuster shift among Republicans. The study also found that a weak relationship between general procedural attitudes (about majority rule and minority rights) and filibuster attitudes existed before Senate action, but general principles correlated with filibuster attitudes much more weakly after the episode as pro-majority rule Republicans became more likely to approve of the filibuster during the episode. Change in filibuster attitudes need not be symmetric across the parties.

Park and Smith (2016) report findings from a survey experiment in which the American public’s attitudes about majority rule and minority rights in legislative bodies were examined. They find wide support for both majority rule and minority rights and demonstrate that views of majority rule and minority rights can be moved once we introduce respondents to the partisan implications of procedural rules. Moreover, they find that higher levels of political sophistication are associated with stronger partisan effects on attitudes about the balance between majority rule and minority rights in Congress. It is not surprising, then, that a survey experiment in which information about election fraud is manipulated affects perceptions of the legitimacy of the outcome

and that supporters of Donald Trump were more susceptible to that manipulation in 2020 (Berlinski, *et al.*, no date).

We learn from these studies that some procedural principles are held by Americans, but most of those principles are not held so strongly that partisan and policy attitudes cannot influence how they are applied in specific contexts (see, for example, Bolsen et al. 2014; Feldman 1988). In any context, we would expect that the strength of other dispositions and elite cues, along with dispositions about democratic procedures, to determine the pliability of procedural attitudes expressed in survey responses.

#### Elite Attention, Sophistication, and Partisan Cues

Social science has long understood that public attitudes are shaped by the information they receive (Zaller 1992) as well as by a partisan screen that affects how and from whom you receive information (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). Early life socialization generates some lasting attitudes that are not easily changed, but cues from political elites and opinion leaders may continue to frame and prime throughout life (Bartels 1984). In receiving cues from elites, the general public can be influenced to respond to public events and survey questions, altering the balance of opinion and reshaping opinion in groups that selectively receive cues (Gilens and Murakawa 2020).

Political science also has explored the effects of political sophistication and attentiveness on the reception of elite cues. While the politically sophisticated and attentive public may be most aware of the political values at stake at any time, they also are the most likely to be influenced by partisan interests and accept the new arguments offered by party elites about proper parliamentary procedure in new circumstances (Levendusky 2010). Additionally, there is some evidence that race structures how cues

are received (Kuklinski and Hurley 1994).

The political process, of course, involves tradeoffs among values that many, if not most, Americans share. A prominent example is that balance between majority rule and minority rights that democratic political institutions often are designed to address. A large majority of Americans favor both majority rule and minority rights, which are given considerable emphasis in basic civic education (Smith and Park 2013; Park and Smith 2016).

In recent years, minority obstruction in the U.S. Senate has become particularly frequent and, from time to time, subject to media coverage (Koger 2010; Smith 2014; Warwo and Schickler 2006). In 2013, after years of minority Republican obstruction to action on both executive and judicial nominations, Democratic leader Harry Reid (D-NV) raised a point of order that a simple majority could invoke cloture on nominations other than Supreme Court nominations. The presiding officer ruled against the point of order, but a majority reversed the ruling to accept Reid point of order. This “reform by ruling” is commonly called the “nuclear option.” After regaining a Senate majority in the 2014 elections, with most Republicans seeking to repeal ACA and some of them advocating filibuster reform, Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) and other Senate Republicans insisted that their long-term position in favor of retaining the filibuster for legislation was in the long-term interest of the conservative cause (Bolton 2015; Chait 2015). Two years later, in 2017, with a Republican in the White House, Republicans extended simple majority cloture to Supreme Court nominations. They abbreviated debate on nominations with the nuclear option in 2019.

The issue of “filibuster reform” entered discourse among Democrats in the 2020 election cycle. Warning what would happen to the Democratic agenda if the party won the White House and the Senate in 2020, Democratic presidential candidates Senator

Elizabeth Warren, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, and Governor Jay Inslee advocated filibuster reform in early 2019.<sup>1</sup> In July 2020, former President Barack Obama added to the mix in endorsing an effort to bar filibusters if filibustering block action of voting reforms.<sup>2</sup> After Obama's comments, the Democratic presidential and vice presidential nominees softened their long-standing opposition to reform when they took the position that the issue would have to be considered if Republicans obstructed action on legislation they deemed essential to pass.<sup>3</sup>

The issue percolated in specialized media during the months of the presidential campaign. After the election, media attention focused on the prospects for action on president-elect Biden's legislative agenda and the tactics to circumvent minority obstruction. Media attention spiked after the Georgia elections gave Democrats a technical majority in a Senate with a 50-50 party split and a Democratic vice president (Figure 1). Indeed, with partisan and ideology interests aligned as the Democrats were about to take majority control of the Senate, partisans of both parties filled opinion pages and social media with views about supermajority cloture. Several Senate Democrats who had been quiet about the issue proclaimed the need for reform. Even leaders of the two Senate parties exchanged sharp words on the subject in public venues and on the Senate floor. Although the spike in attention was remarkable, total coverage

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Yglesias, "The Democratic Debate Over Filibuster Reform, Explained: Nobody Runs on Senate Procedure, But Without Changing it, Nothing is Going to Happen." *Vox*, April 5, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/5/18241447/filibuster-reform-explained-warren-booker-sanders> [accessed March 17, 2021].

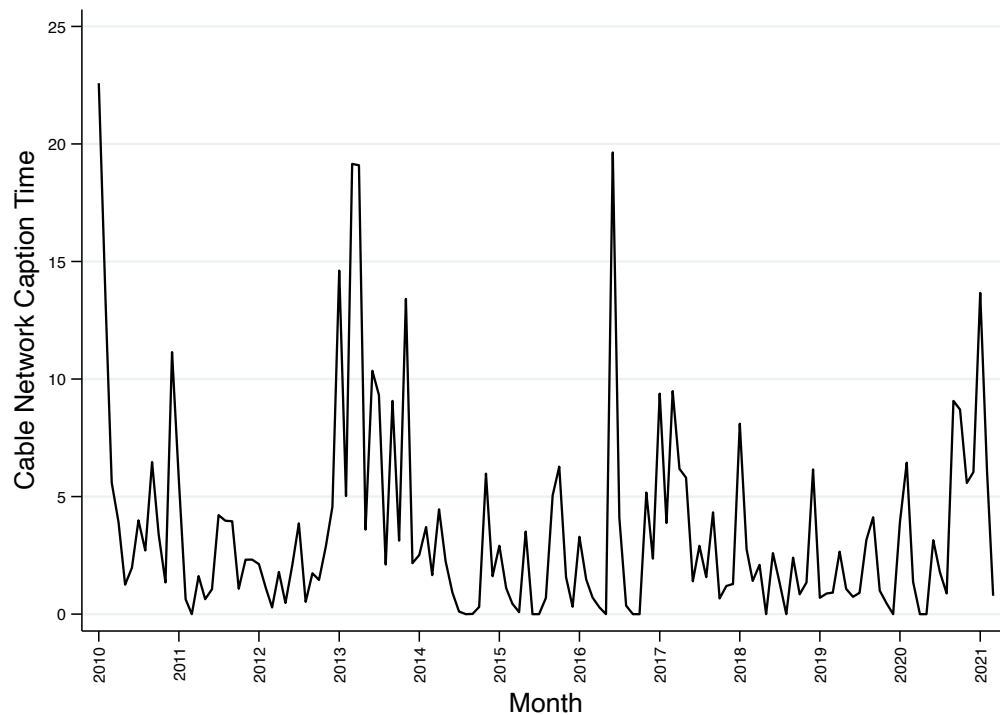
<sup>2</sup> Max Cohen, "Obama Calls for End of 'Jim Crow relic' Filibuster If It Blocks Voting Reforms," *Politico*, July 30, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/30/barack-obama-john-lewis-filibuster-388600> [accessed March 17, 2021]

<sup>3</sup> Natasha Korecki and Laura Barron-Lopez, "How Biden's Resistance to Filibuster Reform Began to Crack," *Politico*, March 17, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/17/white-house-filibuster-reform-476900> [accessed March 17, 2021].



in mainstream news outlets was spotty, lacked detail, and largely limited to the cable networks and online outlets for political news.

Figure 1. Monthly Cable Television News Attention to the Senate Filibuster, 2010-2021.



Source: <https://tvnews.stanford.edu>. Monthly aggregates using “Senate” and “filibuster” as search words.

A development central to the 2020 election year was attention given to the issue of race. Most conspicuous were the protests following the murder of George Floyd, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the subsequent attention given to police reform and civil rights. Getting less attention was the advocacy of Color of Change and other social justice groups for District of Columbia statehood.<sup>4</sup> The post-election challenges to vote counts in heavily Democratic states and in Georgia were

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<sup>4</sup> [https://colorofchange.org/press\\_release/51-for-51-joins-forces-with-color-of-change/](https://colorofchange.org/press_release/51-for-51-joins-forces-with-color-of-change/) [accessed March 17, 2021].

viewed by many as having deep racial implications and renewed calls for stronger federal voting rights protections. The legislative obstacle posed by the Senate filibuster practice was implicated and drew attention to the longstanding connection between minority obstructionism in the Senate and civil rights legislation. A coalition of conservative Republicans and southern Democrats could generally block such legislation from coming to a floor vote, from anti-lynching bills in the 1920s, through civil rights legislation of the 1950s (Binder and Mann 1995; Binder, Lawrence, and Smith 2002) Of course, the NAACP and other civil rights groups have long advocated filibuster reform.<sup>5</sup>

These developments illustrate prominent features of the landscape of support and opposition to filibuster reform among senators and other elites and define hypotheses about the how public attitudes may have evolved during the 2020 election cycle. One feature is short term and partisan—the party holding the Senate majority (or expected to do so) supports simple majority cloture or similar reform in order to reduce the ability of a minority to block action on its legislation. Another feature is long term and ideological—conservatives argue that, over the long run, the three-fifths majority threshold for cloture makes it easier to protect status quo policies and block the expansion of federal programs. In the case of Senate Republicans, this combination of interests led them to kill filibustering for Supreme Court nominations but resist the temptation to do so for regular legislation. Senate Democrats leaned in favor of filibuster reform historically, but, at least until recently, proved uninterested when in the minority (Smith 2014).

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.naacp.org/latest/filibuster-reform/> [accessed March 17, 2021].

The connection between race and the filibuster also appeared to refocus African Americans and liberals on Senate procedure in 2020 and 2021. Particularly after the Trump campaign began to challenge election counts in several states, black civil rights leaders called attention to the need for federal legislation to strengthen the Voting Rights Act and the necessity of overcoming a filibuster to get it. These developments raise the possibility that black Americans were again sensitized to the issue of filibuster reform over the months before and after the 2020 election.

Another feature of long-standing debates about the filibuster is that reform is opposed by senators concerned about the Senate as an institution or their role in it. Traditionalists—President and former Senator Biden among them—have long emphasized the value of requiring large majorities for action on major issues, senators' ability to debate issues at length, and the power of an individual senator to slow down action and force attention to an issue. These civic and personalistic arguments emphasize the rules unique to the Senate that senators and outsiders frequently observe are essential to preserving the role of the Senate in the American policy-making process.

These partisan, ideological, racial, institutional, and personal calculations that senators articulate are not likely to be understood by many, if not most, Americans. Nevertheless, the spike in attention to the issue after the 2020 presidential elections may have temporarily exposed more Americans to the partisan, ideological, racial, and institutional considerations articulated by opinion leaders during that period. That possibility motivates this investigation.

## Hypotheses

Previous studies and changes in the political landscape in 2019-2021 generate some uncertainty about the impact of developments in the 2020 election cycle on public

attitudes about the filibuster practice. Previous studies lead us to posit that (a) few Americans have an accurate understanding of the filibuster practice and yet (b) Americans' views of the filibuster practice follow the cues of political elites with whom they share partisan or ideological interests. As noted, some Democratic elites, even while their party was a Senate minority, were eager to end the filibuster practice. Democrats would have had doubts about their ability to acquire a Senate majority in the 2020 elections—particularly after election day when it became obvious that gaining a 50-50 tie in the Senate would require victories in both Georgia run-off elections in early January. Only after the somewhat surprising wins in both Georgia races was the (technical) majority status of the Democrats created.

The stepwise shift in party control lead us to expect a stepwise shift in public attitudes, which we measure in a three-wave panel survey. Our first set of hypotheses regards American's knowledge of Senate practice. We anticipate finding a general lack of knowledge, but one that is structured by politically salient factors with learning taking place with increased media attention. We then turn to support for filibuster reform where we test expectations surrounding partisanship, political context, and race. The hypotheses refer to the three waves of the study (August 2020, post-election November 2020, and February 2021).

#### Knowledge of Senate Practice

H1. Few Americans have accurate knowledge of the cloture threshold.

H2. Knowledge of the cloture threshold became more widespread between Waves 2 and 3. (b) The improvement is greatest for Democrats.

H3. Knowledge of the cloture threshold is positively related with education level, political knowledge, interest in politics, and strength of partisanship and ideology.

H4. Improvement in knowledge of the cloture threshold between Waves 1 and 3 is positively related with years of education level, political knowledge, interest in politics, and strength of partisanship and ideology.

#### Support for Simple Majority Cloture

H5. In Wave 1, support for filibuster reform is associated with partisanship and race.

H6. Democrats became more favorable to filibuster reform over the three waves, even more so between Waves 2 and 3; Republicans, and whites became less favorable to filibuster reform over the three waves, even less so between Waves 2 and 3.

H7: Partisan and racial effects are greatest among individuals familiar with the filibuster rules.

#### Data and Methods

We are able to examine partisan effects on filibuster attitudes by exploiting a three-wave panel in the field in 2020 and 2021 (details in Appendix). The first wave was fielded in August 2020 when Republicans were in the majority. The second wave went to the field a week after the November 3 election at a time when the Senate outcome was in doubt. The third wave was fielded in February 2021 after the Georgia Senate races and party control of the Senate were settled. As we have demonstrated, media attention to the filibuster practice spiked between the second and third waves.

The sample was drawn from the general population AmeriSpeak panel of the National Opinion Research Center for adults 18 and older. For some of the analysis, we limit the estimates to panelists who participated in all three waves. All estimates reported here are based on wave-specific sampling weights created on the basis of age, sex, race/ethnicity, and census division unless otherwise indicated. The sample sizes of the three successive waves—1567, 1354, and 1211—reflect the expected level of attrition in a panel of that length.

The survey instrument asked about both knowledge of the cloture threshold and opinion about reform and provides a unique opportunity to determine how party control alters modern American views of Senate practice. The two questions we use here:

[Knowledge] How many votes are required to end debate and get a vote on normal legislation in the U.S. Senate?

1. 51 votes, a simple majority
2. 60 votes, a three-fifths majority
3. 67 votes, a two-thirds majority
4. 75 votes, a three-fourths majority
5. Unanimous approval, normally 100 votes
77. Not sure

[Reform] The current Senate rule allows a minority of senators to block a vote on legislation with a filibuster. A three-fifths majority, or 60 votes out of 100 senators, may force an end to the filibuster and get a vote on legislation.

How strongly do you favor or oppose changing the Senate rule so that a simple majority of 51 senators may end debate and get a vote on normal legislation?

1. Strongly favor
2. Favor
3. Neither favor nor oppose
4. Oppose
5. Strongly oppose

For knowledge, we recode responses to correct and incorrect (including “not sure”) for most statistical estimates shown below. In neither case is the parliamentary term “cloture” used in the question. The reform question informs the respondent of the 60-vote threshold. The operational measures are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Measures		
Variable	Survey Measure	Wave/Profile <sup>1</sup>
Correct	How many votes are required to end debate and get a vote on normal legislation in the U.S. Senate? 1=yes; 0=no	1, 2, 3
Reform	The current Senate rule allows a minority of senators to block a vote on legislation with a filibuster. A three-fifths majority, or 60 votes out of 100 senators, may force an end to the filibuster and get a vote on legislation.  How strongly do you favor or oppose changing the Senate rule so that a	1, 2, 3

	<p>simple majority of 51 senators may end debate and get a vote on normal legislation?</p> <p>1=Strongly favor 2=Favor 3=Neither favor nor oppose 4=Oppose 5=Strongly oppose</p>	
Political Knowledge	<p>principle component of 9 political knowledge questions</p>	3
Education	<p>1=less than high school; 2=high school graduate; 3=vocational/ teach school/some college; 4=bachelor's degree; 5=post-graduate/ professional degree</p>	Profile
Political Interest	<p>1=extremely interested 2=very interested 3=moderately interested 4=slightly interested 5=not interested at all</p>	3
Ideological Strength	<p>0=moderate 1=weak 2=moderate 3=strong</p>	Profile
Partisan Strength	<p>0=independent 1=weak 2=moderate 3=strong</p>	Profile
Party	<p>1=strong Democrat 2=moderate Democrat 3=weak Democrat 4=Independent 5=weak Republican 6=moderate Republican 7=strong Republican</p>	Profile
Female	<p>0=male 1=female</p>	Profile
Age	age in years	Profile



Income	9 levels for household income	Profile
Black <sup>2</sup>	1=yes; 0=no	Profile
Hispanic	1=yes; 0=no	Profile
Asian	1=yes; 0=no	Profile
2 or More Races or Ethnicities	1=yes; 0=no	Profile
Other		Profile
<sup>1</sup> AmeriSpeak panelists complete a profile survey when joining the panel.		
<sup>2</sup> White non-Hispanic is missing category for race dummy variables.		

The hypotheses call for multivariate estimates of the effects of covariates of individual-level knowledge and reform for the three waves, both in the cross section and for change across the waves. To illustrate the effect of party on change in attitudes about reform, we also estimate two difference-in-differences equations: one for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change and the other for Wave 2-to-Wave 3 change. In each case, we estimate the effect of intervening events using a standard difference-in-difference equation given by:

$$Y_{it} = \delta W_{it} + \gamma P_i + \beta W_{it} \times P_i + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where  $Y_{it}$  is a measure of support for filibuster reform,  $W_{it}$  is an indicator variable to denote the survey wave,  $P_i$  is an indicator for party, and  $\beta$  is the treatment effect. The difference-in-differences design makes the assumption of “parallel trends”: that support for reform in one party, if untreated, would have followed a similar trend as support for reform in the other party. For the Wave 1-to-Wave 2 equation, the treatment is the election outcome before Wave 2; for the Wave 2-to-Wave 3 equation, the treatment is the determination of the Senate majority before Wave 3. The difference-in-differences null hypothesis is that the lines depicting level of reform support for the two partisan groups are parallel—both parties respond to events in the same way—so  $\beta = 0$ .

## Findings

### Cloture Knowledge

Knowledge of the threshold for cloture is very limited and remained limited through the third wave. Overall familiarity increased slightly from Wave 2 to Wave 3—and more among partisan than independents (Table 2). Still, it is only in the third wave that respondents in the aggregate did as well as random chance. While their familiarity with cloture remained very limited, Figure 1 shows how knowledge changed by party over the course of the panel. While there was an increase between Wave 3, the parties moved in tandem, with no significant difference growing between them. These patterns are consistent with H1, but provide only mixed support for H2.

Table 2. Percent Correctly Identifying 60 Votes (3/5s Majority) as Threshold for Cloture, by Party and Wave.				
	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Total
August 2020	16.6	12.1	18.2	16.4 (100.0)
November 2020	14.5	9.9	14.4	13.7 (100.0)
February 2021	23.8	12.8	23.2	21.8 (100.0)

While the overall increase in awareness is quite marginal, it raises the possibility that the characteristics of respondents giving correct answers evolved over the three waves. However, as Table 3 indicates, only the domain of general political knowledge predicts an accurate response reliably and consistently across all waves. Political knowledge, as distinct from education level, predicts a correct response, but the

strength of partisanship and ideology, age, gender, education, and income do not. This does not change much over the three waves. Political knowledge additionally had a positive and reliable coefficient in the model estimating change between waves, which suggests that public attention to the filibuster was most likely to be absorbed by Americans already generally knowledgeable about politics.

Table 3. Correlates of Correctly Identifying 60 Votes (3/5s Majority) as Threshold for Cloture (Logit Estimates).				
	Cross Section August 2020	Cross Section November 2020	Cross Section February 2021	Correcting Change from Wave 1 to Wave 3
Political Knowledge	0.33 (0.06) ***	0.29 (0.06)***	0.46 (0.06)***	0.34 (0.07) ***
Education	0.01 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.10)	-0.07 (0.09)	-0.03 (0.10)
Political Interest	0.25 (0.10) *	0.02 (0.10)	0.22 (0.09)*	0.19 (0.11)
Ideological Strength	0.07 (0.10)	0.19 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.10)
Partisan Strength	-0.13 (0.10)	-0.32 (0.10)**	-0.01 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.10)
Party	0.16 (0.05)**	0.04 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.06)
Female	-0.15 (0.20)	-0.14 (0.21)	0.07 (0.19)	0.36 (0.21)
Age	0.04 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.13 (0.06)*	-0.17 (0.06)**
Income	0.02 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Black	0.67 (0.35)	0.76 (0.33)*	0.038 (0.29)	0.14 (0.33)
Hispanic	-0.19 (0.31)	0.29 (0.27)	0.06 (0.25)	-0.04 (0.29)
Asian	0.43 (0.36)	-0.52 (0.50)	-0.27 (0.43)	0.14 (0.45)
2 or More Races or Ethnicities	0.22 (0.89)	0.20 (0.77)	-0.08 (0.86)	-1.16 (1.36)
Other	-0.05 (0.76)	0.12 (0.74)	-0.11 (0.72)	-0.20 (0.89)
Intercept	-4.91 (0.71)***	-2.76 (0.65)***	--4.72 (0.62)***	-3.90 (0.70)***
Note: The full political knowledge battery was asked in Wave 3 so these estimates are limited to Wave 3 panelists. * $p < 0.05$ , ** $p < 0.01$ , *** $p < 0.001$				

No factor other than political knowledge consistently predicted correct responses in the cross-sectional estimates. Republicans were slightly more likely to correctly

identify the cloture threshold than others in the multivariate estimates for Wave 1. Age, partisan strength, and race are similarly each significant for a single wave, but not again. Interest in politics is positive distinguishable from zero in Wave 1 and Wave 3, which is consistent with the political knowledge finding that those who are generally aware politically are most likely to provide a correct answer. These results support H3 for political knowledge with moderate support for political interest.

The last column in Table 3 reports estimates for the covariates of a move from incorrect to correct response between Wave 1 and Wave 3. The estimates confirm the improvement is correlated with political knowledge but not for other similar factors. Again, younger Americans were more likely than others to improve their accuracy. H4 is supported only for political knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

## Reform

Americans lean in favor of simple-majority cloture, but a plurality was indifferent in each wave. Table 4 shows the proportion who favor or oppose reform over the three waves. Opinion firmed up and sorted a little by February, after the spike in attention to the issue and the changed majority party in the Senate. Particularly important is the rise in opposition to reform by February. Even then, however, nearly two of five Americans had no opinion. Among Republicans, opposition grew from 20.6 percent in August to 33.4 percent in February. The balance of Democratic support and opposition changed little between those two months, with the those favoring reform outnumbering those opposed by better than 5-to-1. Table 5 presents the proportion of

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respondents who support or strongly support filibuster reform, presenting a trend that corresponds with previous expectations.

Table 4. Attitude about Simple-Majority Cloture, in Percent.				
	Strongly Favor or Favor	Neither Favor Nor Oppose	Strongly Oppose or Oppose	Total
August 2020	41.7	44.0	14.3	100.0
November 2020	32.2	46.3	20.5	100.0
February 2021	36.8	39.1	24.1	100.0

Table 5. Percent Who Strongly Favor or Favor Simple Majority Cloture		
Wave	Democrats	Republicans
Wave 1	51.6%	32.9%
Wave 2	45.9%	27.7%
Wave 3	57.2%	17.5%

Table 6 presents the correlates of filibuster reform support in each wave, as well as the variables associated with change from the first to third waves to address H5. The two factors that are significant in every wave are ideology, with more liberal respondents supporting reform, and race, with African Americans supporting reform. Identifying as a Democrat makes a respondent more likely to support the filibuster over the course of the survey, as does being younger.

Table 6. Correlates of Support for Filibuster Reform (OLS Estimates).				
	Wave One	Wave Two	Wave Three	Change From Wave One to Wave Three
Correct	-0.179 (0.086) *	-0.210 (0.111)	-0.202 (0.097) *	0.079 (0.11)
Party	-0.017 (0.022)	-0.071 (0.024) **	-0.164 (0.025) ***	-0.179 (0.027)***
Ideology	-0.119 (0.024) ***	-0.091 (0.028) **	-0.157 (0.029) ***	-0.020 (0.030)
Education	-0.083 (0.031) **	-0.051 (0.036)	-0.126 (0.037) ***	-0.076 (0.039)
Political Interest	0.091 (0.032) **	-0.020 (0.038)	0.060 (0.038)	-0.023 (0.040)
Female	-0.077 (0.065)	0.038 (0.075)	0.015 (0.077)	0.025 (0.082)
Age	0.099 (0.020) ***	0.057 (0.024)	0.009 (0.023)	-0.090 (0.025)***
Income	0.004 (0.008)	0.012 (0.010)	0.012 (0.010)	0.012 (0.010)
Black	0.564 (0.124)**	0.402 (0.139) **	0.300 (0.135) *	-0.286 (0.147)
Hispanic	0.101 (0.092)	0.085 (0.105)	0.113 (0.106)	-0.013 (0.113)
Asian	0.035 (0.134)	0.005 (0.169)	0.380 (0.183) *	0.340 (0.195)
2 or More Races or Ethnicities	-0.186 (0.287)	-0.122 (0.289)	0.141 (0.328)	0.269 (0.350)
Other Race or Ethnicity	0.172 (0.284)	-0.235 (0.293)	0.073 (0.343)	-0.088 (0.367)
Intercept	3.563 (0.217) *	3.573 (0.249) ***	4.408 (0.246) ***	1.048 (0.267)***
Note: The full political knowledge battery was asked in Wave 3 so these estimates are limited to Wave 3 panelists. * $p<0.05$ , ** $p<0.01$ , *** $p<0.001$				

Race is the only factor which is significantly and consistently related to filibuster support outside of partisanship and ideology. African Americans are more likely to express support for filibuster reform. This is consistent with H6, where we anticipate that the historic roadblock that the filibuster has been to civil rights legislation will create an antipathy between Black people and that aspect of Senate procedure. This finding is notable, not just for helping us characterize the makeup of filibuster attitudes, because it is insensitive to changes that occur over the course of the panel. There is no

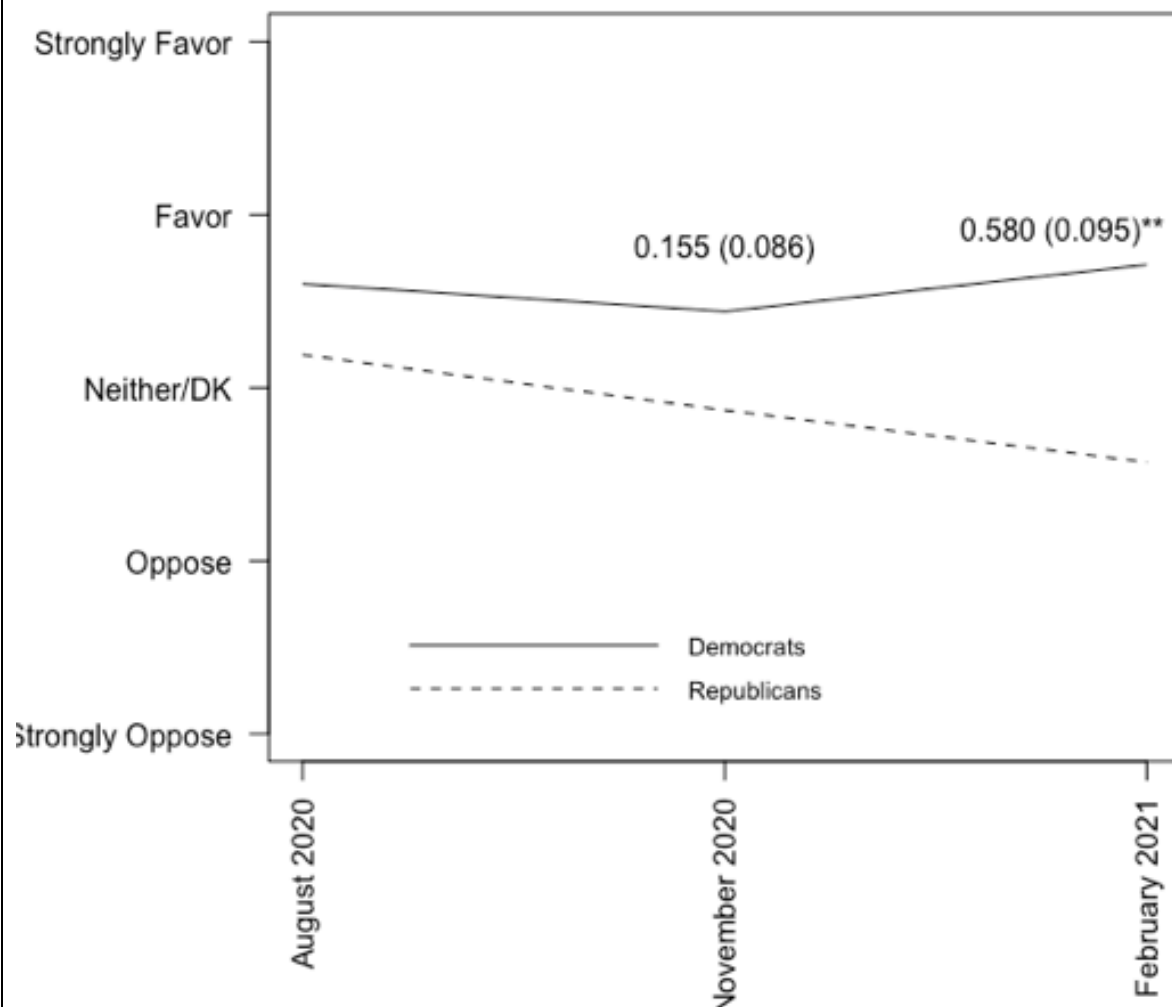
significant change in attitudes toward the filibuster for African Americans between the first and final waves. This result indicates that Black attitudes are consistent regardless of party control.

Figure 2 illustrates the mean level of support for reform (simple majority cloture) for Democrats and Republicans over the three waves and reports the difference-in-differences effects for the election and the switch in majority status. In August, contrary to the expectations dictated by the immediate party status of the parties, but consistent with the longer-term liberal preferences and the opinion expressed by many Democratic elites in the lead up to the 2020 elections, Democrats were more supportive of reform than Republicans. The difference, however, was less than one rank on the five-point scale and did not reach standard significance levels. This modest difference continued to November when the Senate control remained in doubt.

The difference expanded considerably and became statistically significant by February, after the Georgia elections determined the Senate majority. Plainly, Americans responded in opposite ways. In fact, the process was fairly symmetric--between November and February, Republicans soured on filibuster reform about as much as Democrats' pro-reform views firmed up. This is consistent with the core hypothesis, H6.

In Figure 3, we show the trend for race over the waves. Like the partisan findings, there was no distinguishable change in the difference between Blacks and others between August and November, but a clear shift occurred between November and February. This increased the distance between the racial groups by about a third of a point on the five-point scale. Blacks, though, report the strongest average support throughout the survey, and still ended up more supportive than those with larger effect sizes. This is also consistent with H6.

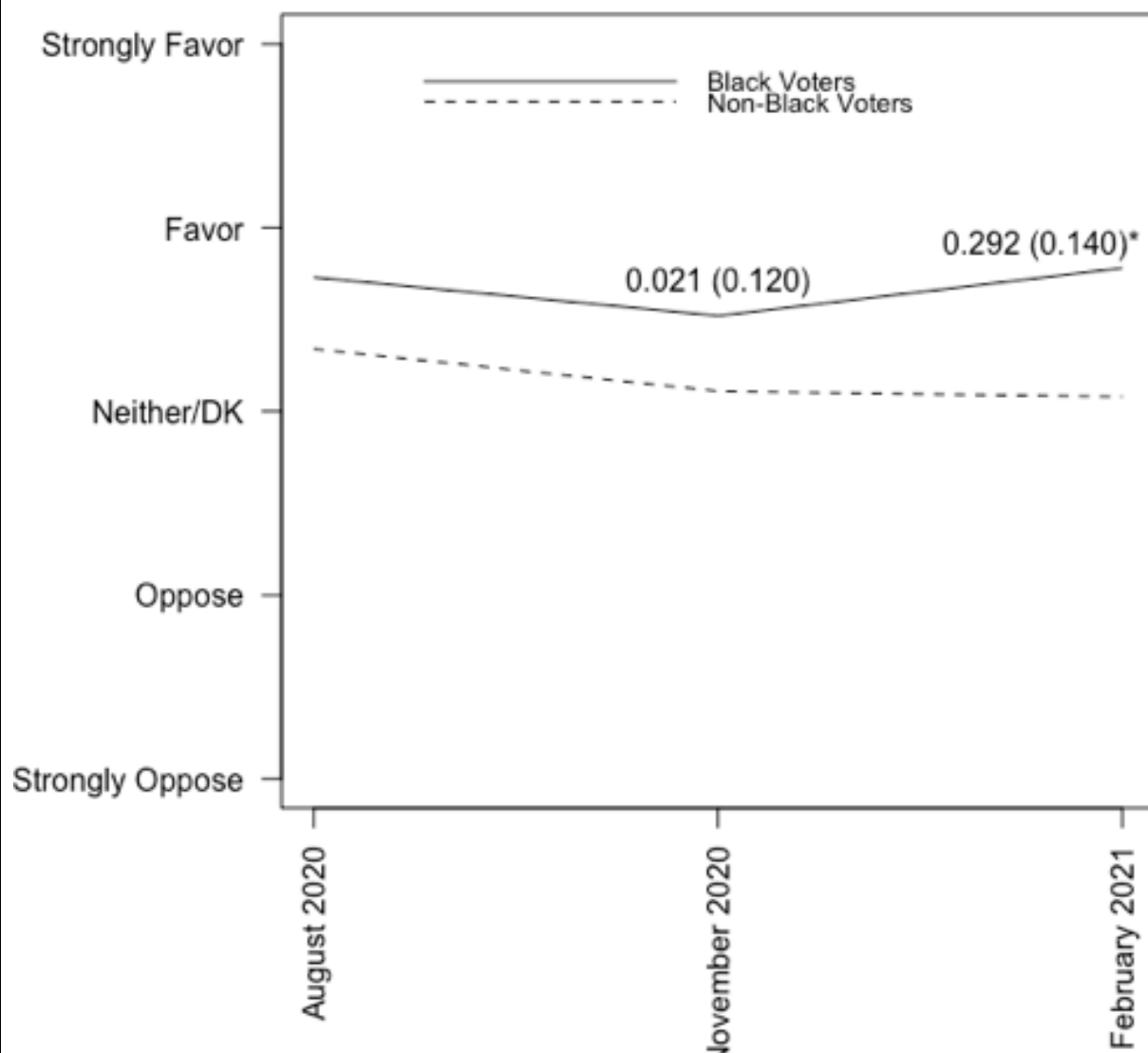
Figure 2. Mean Support for Filibuster Reform by Party and Wave, with Difference-in-Differences Estimates.



Note: Difference-in-differences estimates are values for  $\beta$  for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change (election effect) and for Wave 2-Wave 3 change (majority status change).



Figure 3. Mean Support for Filibuster Reform by Race and Wave, with Difference-in-Differences Estimates.



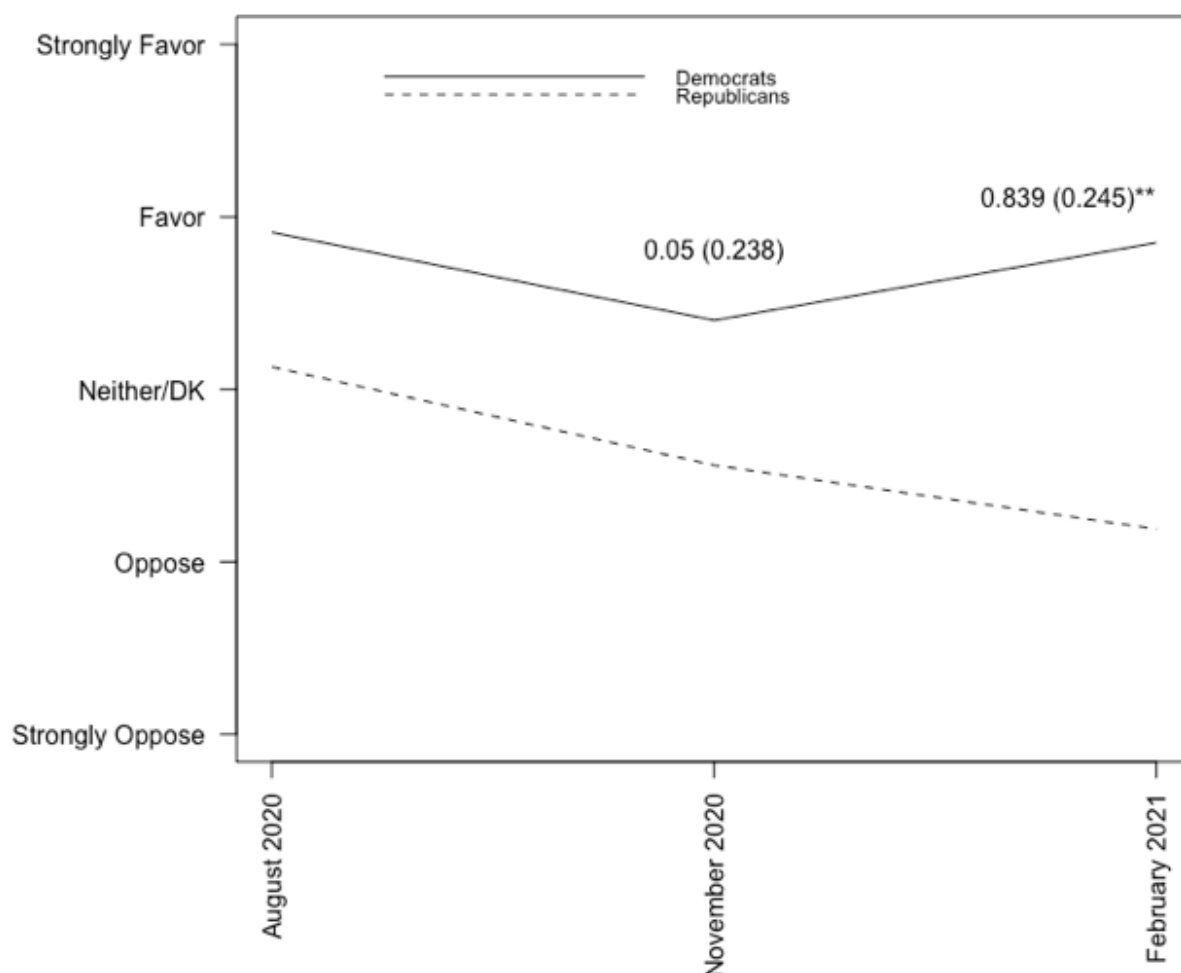
Note: Difference-in-differences estimates are values for  $\beta$  for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change (election effect) and for Wave 2-Wave 3 change (majority status change).

To address H7, that individuals who knew the filibuster threshold would show the strongest effects, we present the support for reform in each wave, separated out by whether the respondents were able to correctly identify the number of seats needed to

end debate in Figures 4 and 5. Among correct identifiers, the overall pattern looks similar to the main result, with no perceptible difference increasing between August and November. However, November to February shows a very large increase, separating those Democrats and Republicans by over a full point on the scale. For people that did not correctly identify the threshold, we see, for the first time in this study, a shift occur between the first and second waves. Those Republicans and Democrats moved away from each other by November but did so with a much greater magnitude going into February. However, this coefficient is still just over half of the change that occurred with the correct identifiers. The results of partisan movement are consistent with H7.

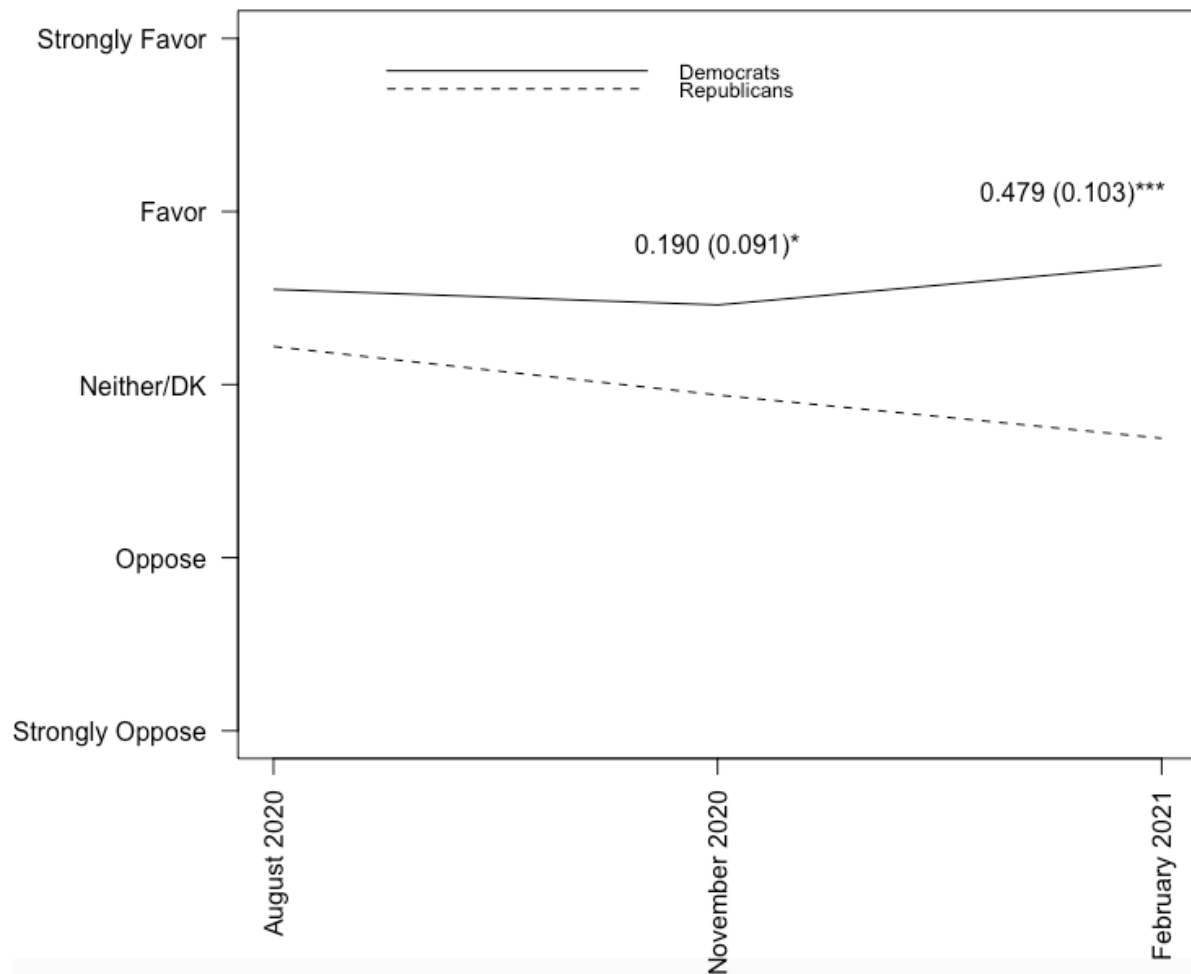
Curiously, comparing African American respondents to those of other races based on correctly identifying the threshold, as we do in Figures 5 and 6, reveals an opposite pattern. Correct identifying Black people show no perceptible movement between Waves 1 and 3; there is no discernable difference-in-differences and any change between the two groups is nearly entirely attributable to non-Black respondents. This could speak to crystalized attitudes of politically savvy Black people who either are long since familiar with the use of the filibuster with blocking legislation for racial justice or developed concrete attitudes after Black Lives Matter became a political force in the Summer of 2020. By contrast, Figure 7 shows that Black people who could not identify the threshold are driving the pattern we saw among all African Americans. The support runs roughly parallel until the period between Waves 2 and 3, when Black people in that group became more favorable to reform. Thus, H7 is rejected with regards to racial groups.

Figure 4. Mean Support for Filibuster Reform by Party and Wave For Respondents Who Could Correctly Identify The Cloture Threshold, with Difference-in-Differences Estimates.



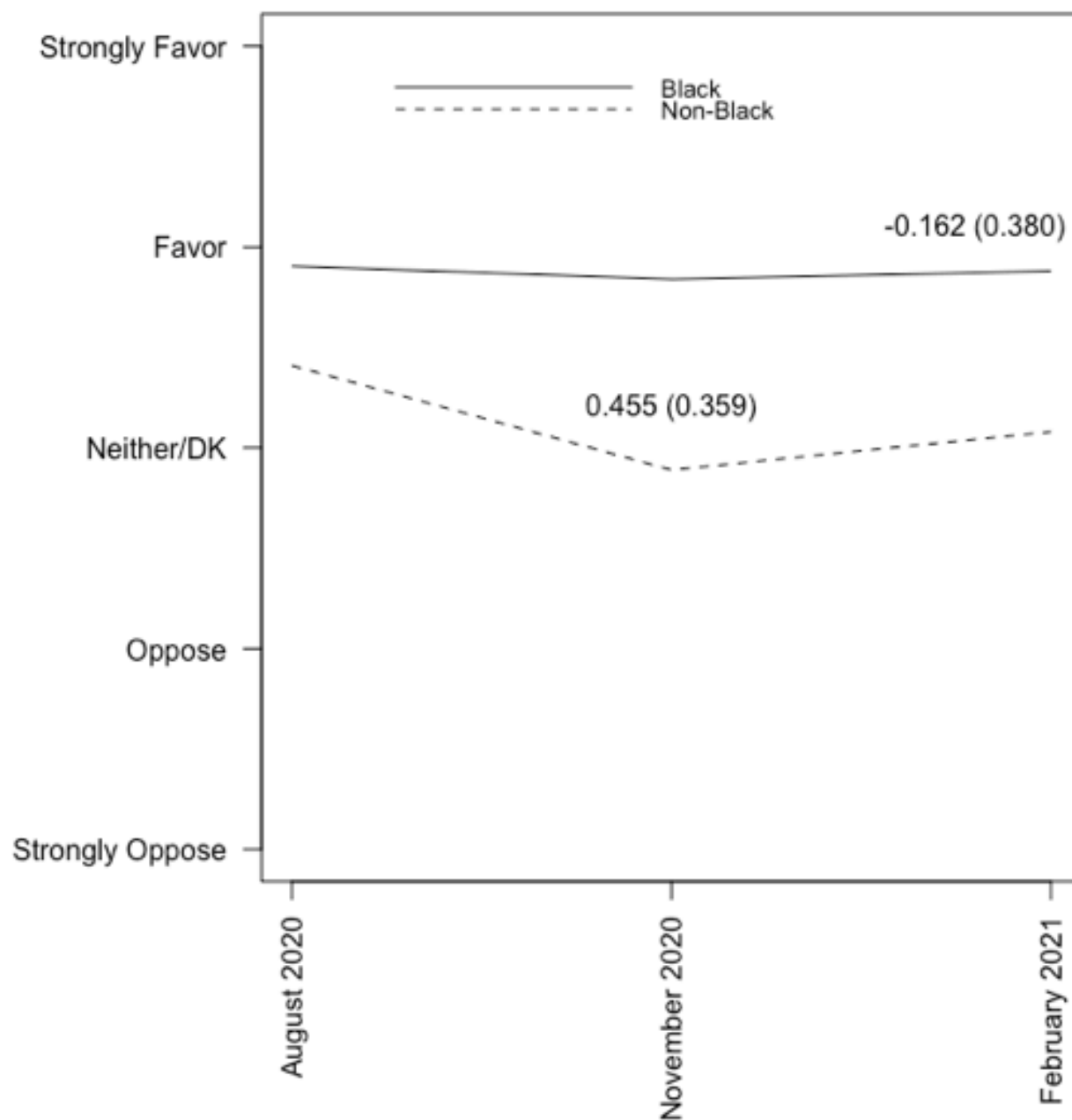
Note: Difference-in-differences estimates are values for  $\beta$  for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change (election effect) and for Wave 2-Wave 3 change (majority status change).

Figure 5. Mean Support for Filibuster Reform by Party and Wave For Respondents Who Could Not Correctly Identify The Cloture Threshold, with Difference-in-Differences Estimates.



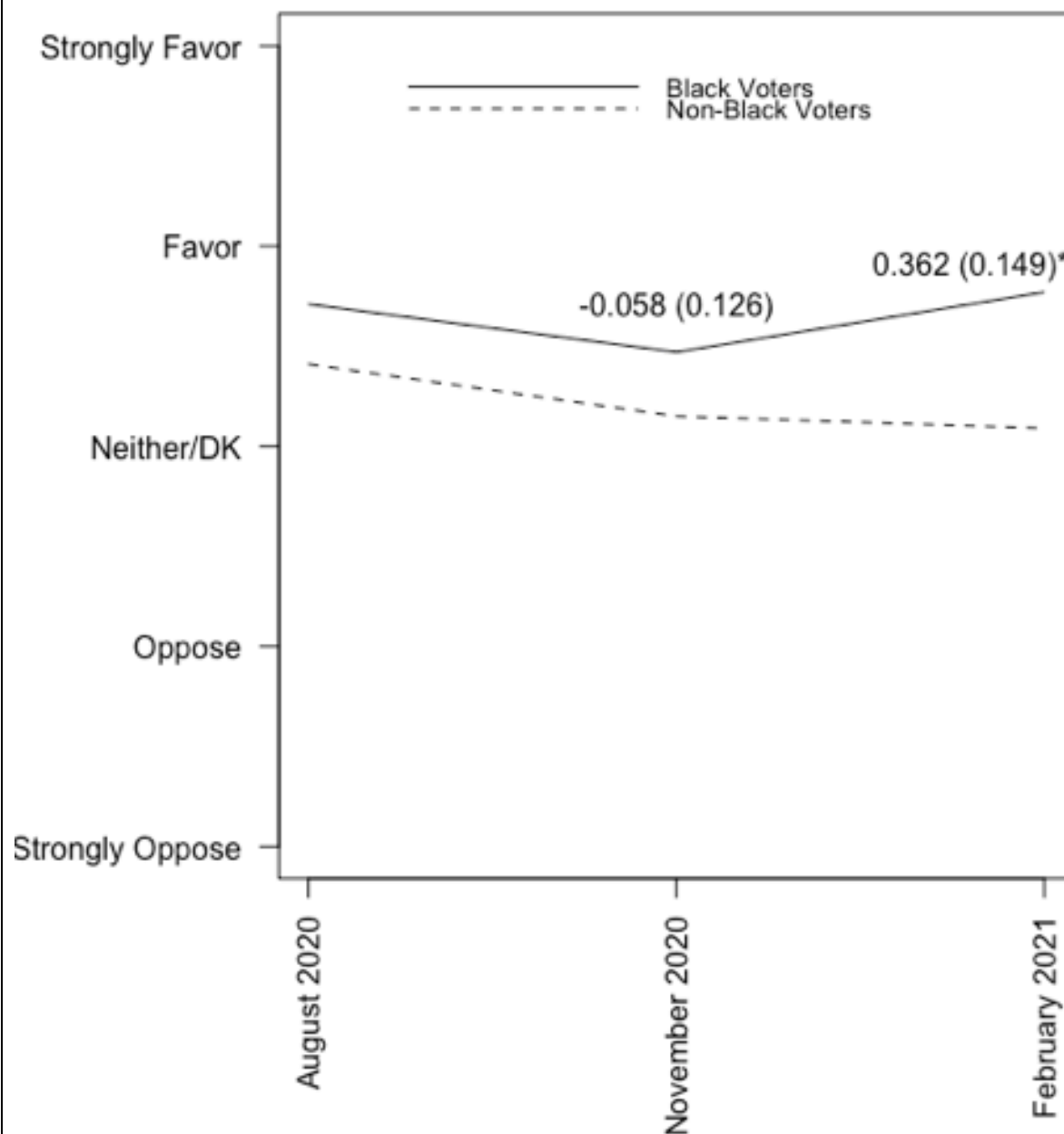
Note: Difference-in-differences estimates are values for  $\beta$  for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change (election effect) and for Wave 2-Wave 3 change (majority status change).

Figure 6. Mean Support for Filibuster Reform by Race and Wave for Individuals who Could Correctly Identify the Filibuster Threshold, with Difference-in-Differences Estimates



Note: Difference-in-differences estimates are values for  $\beta$  for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change (election effect) and for Wave 2-Wave 3 change (majority status change).

Figure 7. Mean Support for Filibuster Reform by Race and Wave for Individuals who Could Not Correctly Identify the Filibuster Threshold, with Difference-in-Differences Estimates.



Note: Difference-in-differences estimates are values for  $\beta$  for Wave 1-to-Wave 2 change (election effect) and for Wave 2-Wave 3 change (majority status change).

## Conclusion

Exploiting a panel survey of about 1000 Americans that was fielded in the August 2020-February 2021 period, we find that few Americans accurately identify the cloture threshold. The percentage who can identify the threshold increases from about 15 to 20 percent over the six months of the panel, but familiarity remained rare and in its highest showing, only reached a proportion consistent with guessing at random. We also find that political knowledge, rather than education, attentiveness to politics, and other factors that often are correlated with an accurate understanding of the cloture rule, is distinctive and related to an ability to identify the threshold.

Party, race, and knowledge of Senate practice are strong influences on opinions about filibuster reform. Even when in the minority, and prior to any clear signal of electoral victory, most Democrats reliably support reform. We also found a clear racial dimension to filibuster views. However Democratic support grew when Democrats clearly obtained the majority, and just as fast Republicans soured on filibuster reform, showing shifts of similar magnitude against reform as Democrats showed for it. We show not only that trend, but how it interacts with knowledge about the filibuster. Partisans who were familiar with the filibuster showed a much larger shift in attitudes with the change in party control.

The present analysis is the first to systematically characterize the relationship between race and filibuster reform. While many have identified the filibuster as a hindrance to civil rights legislation, we show that race is strongly related to opinions about reform. Black Americans are consistently more likely to support filibuster reform. Black Americans familiar with the filibuster saw no shift in attitudes, while those unfamiliar did, even though there was no significant difference in knowledge by race.

Our middle wave proved informative. Views after the November election, which left the Senate majority uncertain, trended to the “don’t know” response with dips in support for reform. Again, the findings demonstrate the sensitivity of Americans, at least at the margin, to the cues received about the political implications of election outcomes.

Even on issues of congressional procedure, where knowledge is scant and the issues are complex, respondents were responsive to elite partisan cues. This holds even when the respondent was not aware of the filibuster threshold beforehand. In general, the public does not have much knowledge or clearly formed opinions about the more obscure aspects of government process, but will follow prominent members of their party and their party’s majority status when deciding their preferences on institutional reform.



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## Appendix: Survey

*Sample.* A general population sample of U.S. adults age 18 and older was selected from AmeriSpeak Panel of the NORC at the University of Chicago for this study. The sample for this study is selected from the AmeriSpeak Panel using sampling strata based on age, race/Hispanic ethnicity, education, and gender (48 sampling strata in total). The size of the selected sample per sampling stratum is determined by the population distribution for each stratum. The survey is completed online by most respondents; less than five percent of respondents complete the survey by phone.

AmeriSpeak® is a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. Randomly selected US households are sampled using area probability and address-based sampling, with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame. These sampled households are then contacted by US mail, telephone, and field interviewers (face to face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings. While most AmeriSpeak households participate in surveys by web, non-internet households can participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by telephone. Households without conventional internet access but having web access via smartphones are allowed to participate in AmeriSpeak surveys by web. AmeriSpeak panelists participate in NORC studies or studies conducted by NORC on behalf of governmental agencies, academic researchers, and media and commercial organizations.

*Weights.* Weighting makes only a modest difference because of the stratified sampling. The weighting procedure begins with panel weights, which are computed as the inverse of probability of selection from the NORC National Frame (the sampling frame that is used to sample housing units for AmeriSpeak) or address-based sample. The panel weights are further adjusted to account for unknown eligibility and nonresponse among eligible housing units. The household-level nonresponse adjusted weights are then post-stratified to external counts for number of households obtained from the Current Population Survey. Then, these household-level post-stratified weights are assigned to each eligible adult in every recruited household. Furthermore, a person-level nonresponse adjustment accounts for nonresponding adults within a recruited household. The resulting panel weights are raked to external population totals associated with age, sex, education, race/Hispanic ethnicity, housing tenure, telephone status, and Census Division. The external population totals are obtained from the Current Population Survey. The weights adjusted to the external population totals are the *final panel weights*. The weights for this study are adjusted to account for and adjust for survey nonresponse for those sampled.