

Are Voter Decision Rules Endogenous to Parties' Policy Strategies? A Model with Applications to Elite Depolarization in Post-Thatcher Britain

Caitlin Milazzo University of Exeter
James Adams University of California at Davis
Jane Green University of Manchester

While spatial modelers assume that citizens evaluate parties on the basis of their policy positions, empirical research on American politics suggests that citizens' party attachments often drive their policy preferences, rather than vice versa. Building on previous findings that partisanship is less salient to British citizens than to Americans, we argue that British citizens predominantly update their partisanship to match their policy beliefs. We further argue that because policy salience declines when parties converge, citizens' policy beliefs exert diminishing effects on their party evaluations as parties depolarize on a focal policy dimension—i.e., that voter decision rules are an endogenous function of parties' policy strategies. We find support for these hypotheses via individual-level analyses of British election panel survey data between 1987 and 2001. We also find that the reciprocal policy-partisan effects we identify extend to different subconstituencies of British citizens including the more and less educated and politically engaged.

The reciprocal relationship between citizens' policy preferences and their party evaluations has motivated extensive scholarly research, in both Europe and the United States.¹ Numerous studies assess whether citizens evaluate parties on the basis of policy considerations, a *policy-driven* process, or whether parties instead cue their preexisting partisans to adopt the party's policy outlook, a *party persuasion* process (see, e.g., Carrubba 2001; Carsey and Layman 2006; Dancey and Goren 2010; Evans and Andersen 2004; Gabel and Scheve 2007; Goren 2005). These issues are critical for understanding elections, party strategies, and political representation. With respect to representation (e.g., Dalton 1985; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Golder and Stramski 2010; McDonald and Budge 2005; Powell 2000), if party elites shape citizens' policy beliefs then public opinion may simply mirror these elites' own viewpoints, and the correspondence between mass and elite opinion tells us little about whether parties provide faithful policy representation. With respect to parties' policy strategies, the spatial model

of elections (e.g., Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Kedar 2009; Meguid 2008) posits that citizens choose parties based on their policy positions rather than vice versa and proceeds to analyze how strategic political elites should position their policies to attract electoral support. However, if the real-world causal relationship actually runs from voters' party evaluations to their policy positions, then the spatial approach is problematic for illuminating parties' policy strategies.

We advance two arguments about the reciprocal relationships between British citizens' policy preferences and their party attachments. First, building on previous findings that partisanship is less salient to European—and specifically British—citizens than it is to Americans (e.g., Shiveley 1979; Westholm and Niemi 1992), we argue that the dominant causal relationship for British citizens will run from their policy beliefs to their party evaluations, rather than vice versa (the *policy primacy hypothesis*). We further argue, however, that policy considerations are not always salient to voters. When party elites adopt less

¹An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/jop>. Data are available at <http://www.esds.ac.uk/> and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results will be made available at <http://caitlinmilazzo.com>.

polarized positions on a focal policy dimension, the dimension becomes less salient and thereby exerts less influence on citizens' party attachments. Therefore, citizens' decision rules are an *endogenous* function of parties' policy positions (the *elite depolarization hypothesis*). Finally, we evaluate whether policy primacy and elite depolarization effects apply disproportionately to electoral subconstituencies of educated and politically engaged citizens, or whether, alternatively, these effects extend approximately equally throughout the electorate (the *equal reactions hypothesis*).

We evaluate the policy primacy, elite depolarization, and equal reactions hypotheses via individual-level analyses of British election survey panel data between 1987 and 2001—a time period when Labour and Conservative party elites depolarized significantly on the left-right dimension²—and find support for each hypothesis. Specifically, we conclude that during the initial part of the 1987–2001 period, when the parties were polarized on policy issues relating to the left-right dimension, British citizens reacted to the parties' positions by updating their party evaluations to match their left-right preferences, but not vice versa—a pattern that supports the policy salience hypothesis. However, during the latter part of this period, when British voters perceived ideological depolarization between Conservative and Labour party elites, citizens were significantly less likely to update their party attachments to match their left-right preferences, a pattern that supports the elite depolarization hypothesis. Finally, we find that these patterns extended to the subconstituencies of the more and less educated, affluent, politically knowledgeable, and engaged, a conclusion which supports the equal reactions hypothesis.

The Reciprocal Relationships between British Citizens' Policy Preferences and their Party Support: Hypotheses

In the United States, the debate over the reciprocal influences of citizens' partisanship and policy beliefs has intensified in recent years. The conventional wisdom of the 1970s and 1980s—that mass partisanship was

weakening and was largely driven by other political evaluations, including policy-based considerations (Fiorina 1981; Jackson 1975; Markus and Converse 1979; Page and Jones 1979; Wattenberg 1984)—has been challenged by research that documents strengthening partisan ties that exert increasing effects on vote choice, largely exogenous to short-term political evaluations (e.g., Bartels 2000; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Hetherington 2001). Over the past decade scholars have extended this debate by analyzing reciprocal partisan-policy influences across different issue domains including political values (Goren 2005) and racial, social welfare, and cultural issues (Carsey and Layman 2006; Dancy and Goren 2010; Highton and Kam 2011; Layman and Carsey 2002). Although these studies reach conflicting conclusions about whether (and to what extent) citizens' attitudes influence their partisanship, they conclude that partisanship significantly influences citizens' policy attitudes and political values. This latter finding suggests that partisanship remains central to American citizens' identities, and that partisan loyalty, while perhaps not the “unmoved mover” posited by the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), remains sufficiently salient that citizens experience pressure to bring their policy beliefs in line with party affiliations.

Studies on European political behavior suggest several reasons why British citizens' partisanship may be less central to their self-images than are policy beliefs and political values. First, scholars question the meaning of party identification in Western Europe, and its correspondence with the concept in the United States. Whereas party identification displays notable stability in the United States, it corresponds much more closely with vote choice in Britain and in Europe (see Clements and Bartle 2009)—demonstrating greater volatility—rather than anchoring party support (see Butler and Stokes 1969). This suggests that the assumption that party identification represents a salient identity is problematic in a British context. European scholars also emphasize the political salience of other voter attributes such as social class and religion, which shape voters' social identities—and their policy attitudes—to a greater extent than party identification (Shiveley 1979; Thomassen 2005; Westholm and Niemi 1992). Indeed, some scholars argue that the concept of party identification as a social identity simply does not apply to British citizens (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009) or to European electorates more generally (e.g., Dalton 2008, chap. 9). Additionally, the American and European electorates display contrasting over-time trends in mass partisanship. Whereas the strength of party identification has increased in the United States over

²We restrict our analysis to the 1987–2001 period because the 2005 and 2010 British Election Study (BES) surveys omits the relevant policy questions, while the pre-1987 BES policy questions have different endpoints and (in some cases) wordings. We focus exclusively on the left-right dimension because the only four consistently available policy scale questions pertain to left-right economic issues.

the past two decades (e.g., Bartels 2002; Hetherington 2001, 2009), a reverse process of *partisan dealignment* has occurred across much of Europe (see Berglund et al. 2005), a pattern most clearly documented in Britain (Clarke et al. 2009; Clarke and McCutcheon 2009; Denver 2003). As British voters have become less attached to political parties since the 1970s, we expect partisanship to exert weaker effects on citizens' policy beliefs.

The considerations outlined above imply that, *contra* Americanists' findings that citizens take policy cues from party elites, the dominant causal relationship in Britain should run from citizens' policy preferences to their party attachments:

H1 (The Policy Primacy Hypothesis): For British citizens, the dominant causal relationship is from their policy preferences to their party attachments, rather than vice versa.

Policy-Based Influences on Partisanship: The Importance of Party Positioning

In their empirical analyses of the reciprocal relationships between Americans' policy beliefs and their partisanship, Carsey and Layman (2006) conclude that citizens update their partisanship in response to policy-based considerations if—and only if—they perceive policy differences between parties *and* consider the issue to be salient. In all other scenarios, i.e., those where citizens fail to perceive party policy differences and/or where citizens do not find the issue to be salient, citizens' policy considerations exert minimal effects on their party attachments. In important and related research, Highton and Kam (2011) demonstrate that debates relating to economic, racial, and cultural policies were more salient to American citizens during the 1980s and the 1990s—a period when Democratic and Republican party elites polarized over these issues—than was the case during the 1970s, when the parties offered less polarized positions.

The Carsey-Layman and Kam-Highton findings suggest that voters' tendencies to update their party attachments to match their policy preferences are *endogenous* to party elites' policy positioning: specifically, the less polarized the parties' positions on the focal policy or ideological dimension, the less we should expect citizens' positions on this dimension to drive partisanship. This is true for two reasons. First, when the policy distance that separates rival parties declines, citizens are less likely to perceive policy differences between the parties, which Carsey and

Layman (2006) identify as a necessary condition for citizens' policy beliefs to move their partisanship. Second, party elites have fewer incentives to campaign on issues that do not distinguish the party from its opponent(s), since such dimensions may be less relevant even to those voters who perceive party differences. This argument meshes with the Highton-Kam finding that policy debates were more salient to Americans during the 1980s and 1990s—a time of increasing elite polarization—than during the 1970s when elites were less polarized. These considerations motivate our second hypothesis:

H2 (The Elite Depolarization Hypothesis): As parties depolarize on a focal policy or ideological dimension, British voters' preferences on this dimension will exert less influence on their partisanship.

Do Partisan- and Policy-Based Updating Processes Differ across British Subconstituencies?

The literature on American political behavior highlights theoretical and empirical reasons to expect educated and politically aware citizens to experience disproportionate pressure to align their party evaluations and their policy beliefs. Theoretically, insofar as high levels of education and political engagement motivate citizens to monitor elite political discourse (and help them make sense of this discourse), the educated and politically engaged should display enhanced awareness of parties' policy positions, which may motivate these citizens to reciprocally update their partisanship and policy beliefs (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). Empirically, as discussed above, Carsey and Layman (2006) find that only citizens who perceived policy differences between the Democratic and Republican parties engaged in policy-based updating of their party attachments, while Baldassari and Gelman (2009) and Claassen and Highton (2008) find that educated and politically engaged citizens disproportionately updated their policy beliefs and/or their partisanship in response to American elites' growing polarization.³

By contrast, previous research by Adams and his coauthors (Adams, de Vries, and Leiter, forthcoming; Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2009) presents theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that reciprocal

³By contrast Dancey and Goren (2010, 696) do not identify significant differences in the reciprocal partisan- and policy-based updating processes by political awareness and media exposure, although the authors emphasize that the small sample sizes in their analyses leave this issue unsettled.

policy-partisan linkages will *not* differ across British subconstituencies. Theoretically, because British parties' parliamentary delegations—in common with the party delegations in most Western European democracies—are highly unified, they convey clear policy cues to citizens, so that the challenges of perceiving and reacting to British party elites' policy cues plausibly place lesser cognitive demands on citizens than do the more ambiguous and diffuse policy messages that American party elites convey to the public.⁴ British elites' policy promises (and behavior in parliament) should thereby register even with citizens who possess limited information about politics and who come from modest educational backgrounds. Empirically, previous research documents that citizens in Western European democracies hold quite accurate perceptions of parties' policy positions (see, e.g., Pierce 1988 70–71; Stevenson and Vonnahme 2009), and, furthermore, that these perceptions are similar among the subgroups of the more and less educated, affluent, and politically engaged (Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2009; Adams, de Vries, and Leiter, forthcoming). These considerations motivate our third hypothesis:

H3 (The Equal Reactions Hypothesis). British citizens' tendencies to reciprocally update their policy beliefs and their party evaluations will be similar across different subconstituencies within the British electorate.

Empirical Analyses

Great Britain is an ideal testing ground for our hypotheses because the two dominant political parties, Labour and the Conservatives, were polarized on economic and social welfare policy during the 1980s (the Margaret Thatcher era) which allows to us to evaluate the policy primacy hypothesis, but the parties depolarized on these issues post-1990 (see, e.g., Budge 1999; Norris 1999; Webb and Farrell 1999) so that we can evaluate the elite depolarization

⁴The high levels of cohesion of parliamentary delegations in western European parliamentary democracies, compared to the United States, occur in part because such unity is crucial for maintaining a working majority for the party (ies) in government, and also because the selection of parliamentary candidates is a more centralized process, enhancing European party leaders' abilities to punish MPs that do not vote in favor of the party's policy positions (see, e.g., Sartori 1968; Tavits 2009).

hypothesis.⁵ (In the next section we evaluate the equal reactions hypothesis.) The Conservatives' selection of Margaret Thatcher as party leader in 1975 contributed to ending the "Postwar Settlement," a long period of relative policy consensus between Labour and the Conservatives. Thatcher, who became Prime Minister following the Conservative victory in the May 1979 General Election, shifted her party rightward over time by advocating reduced state intervention in the economy, an expanded role for the free market, a diminished role for trade unions, and the virtues of personal responsibility, hard work, and entrepreneurship. This right-wing policy emphasis sharply differentiated the Conservatives from the left-leaning Labour Party, which strenuously opposed Thatcher's policy initiatives (Norton 2001).

The party policy depolarization that has characterized British politics in the period following Thatcher's resignation as Prime Minister (and Conservative Party leader) in 1990 stems primarily from three factors. First, Thatcher was succeeded by a series of leaders (notably John Major from 1990 to 1997 and William Hague from 1997 to 2001) who adopted more moderate policy approaches, particularly on public services. Second, the Conservatives' well-publicized internal divisions during the 1990s hindered their ability to convey a clear policy message to the public, thereby blurring the party's image as a strongly right-wing party (see Denver 1998). Third, Tony Blair, who was the Labour Party leader from 1994 to 2007 and Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007, dramatically moderated Labour's policy platform by advocating lower taxes and reduced welfare dependency, and by emphasizing law and order, fiscal prudence, and personal responsibility.⁶

Trends in British Election Study (BES) respondents' party placements on the policy scales included in the BES confirm that the British electorate perceived the Labour-Conservative policy polarization during the

⁵The Liberal Democrats have at times played an important role in postwar British politics, but we restrict our analysis to Labour and the Conservatives. Between 1987 and 2001 (the period of our study), the Conservatives (1987–97) and Labour (1997–2001) governed in single-party governments and exercised a virtually monopoly on policymaking. The Liberal Democrats were more likely to conduct locally based, candidate-centered campaigns similar to U.S. Congressional elections (Katz and King 1999), and identification with this party is far less widespread than is identification with Labour and the Conservatives (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005).

⁶A range of analyses support this interpretation of the policy-based depolarization of the two major British parties post-Thatcher, including estimates of experts' party placements (Benoit and Laver 2006; Laver 1998), Labour and Conservative party elites' left-right self-placements (Green 2011), and manifesto content analysis of party left-right positions (Bara and Budge 2001).

Thatcher era, along with the striking depolarization post-Thatcher. Table 1 reports the mean positions that BES respondents ascribed to the Labour and Conservative parties along the four policy scales included in each BES between 1987 and 2001, that relate to preferences for providing social services versus cutting taxes; support for income redistribution; preferences for fighting inflation versus lowering unemployment; and, support for nationalization of industry. (We restrict our analysis to the 1987–2001 time period because the 2005 and 2010 BES studies did not include these policy scale questions, while the pre-1987 BES policy questions had different endpoints and (in some cases) dramatically different question wordings.) These mean party placements are along a series of 1–11 scales for which higher numbers denote a more right-wing position. The computations reported in the rows labeled “Lab-Con gap” represent the difference between respondents’ mean placement of the Conservative Party and their mean placement of Labour along the focal policy dimension.⁷ The computations show that in 1987, during the Thatcher era, BES respondents placed Labour roughly five units to the left of the Conservatives (on average), an immense distance along the 1–11 policy scales (see the bottom row of Table 1). However voters’ perceptions of Labour-Conservative policy differences declined dramatically over time, as respondents’ placements of both parties shifted sharply towards the center. Between 1987 and 2001 the magnitude of the perceived Labour-Conservative policy gap across the four policy scales declined from 4.97 policy units in 1987, to 4.33 units in 1992, to 3.61 units in 1997, and to 2.27 units in 2001, less than half the magnitude of the perceived policy gap in 1987, although respondents continued to perceive meaningful party policy differences in 2001.⁸

The American literature on mass partisan polarization emphasizes the changing relationship between citizens’ party loyalties and their policy beliefs. According to this *partisan sorting* perspective, the widening policy gap between Democratic and Republican party elites has prompted a sorting of Democratic and Republican partisans’ policy preferences in the electorate, i.e., the difference between the mean policy preferences of rank-and-file Democratic partisans versus those of rank-and-file Republicans has increased over time (see, e.g., Abramowitz and Saunders 1998;

⁷The texts of the policy scale questions are presented in the online appendix available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/jop>.

⁸We estimate statistically significant differences in respondents’ mean placements of the Labour and Conservatives parties in each cross-section ($p < .01$), along with a statistically significant decline in the magnitude of this perceived Labour-Conservative policy gap across each successive observation.

Carmines and Stimson 1989; Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Hetherington 2009; Levendusky 2009). Table 2, which reports BES respondents’ mean self-placements on the policy scales, displays patterns of mass-level partisan sorting in Britain. For each policy scale in each election year, the table reports the mean self-placement computed for all respondents, for all Conservative partisans, and for all Labour partisans.⁹ We also report the policy distance between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour identifiers (the ‘Labour-Conservative partisan gap’), which provides an index of the degree of partisan sorting on the policy scales. The computations show that in 1987 Conservative partisans placed themselves roughly 2.8 units to the right of Labour partisans (on average) along the 1–11 policy scales (see the bottom row of Table 2), but that the gap between the mean self-placements of the rival parties’ supporters narrowed over time, to 2.4 units in 1992, to 1.8 units in 1997, and to 1.7 units in 2001.¹⁰ To the extent that this mass-level partisan sorting was a response to elite depolarization, this raises the question of whether citizens switched their party support to match their policy beliefs, or their policy beliefs to match their preferred party’s policy positions.

Finally, we highlight an interesting contrast between the policy depolarization patterns of British party elites and their supporters. The computations in Table 1 show that BES respondents perceived that Labour and Conservative party elites converged continuously on policy over the entire 1987–2001 period and that this perceived elite convergence actually accelerated between 1997 and 2001, when the mean perceived Labour-Conservative policy gap declined from 3.61 units to 2.27 units. By contrast, the figures reported in Table 2 show that while the British parties-in-the-electorate depolarized significantly between 1987 and 1997—when the gap between the rival supporters’ positions declined from 2.8 units in 1987 to 1.8 units in 1997—this partisan sorting process slowed considerably between 1997 and 2001, with the gap between the rival supporters’ positions measured at 1.8 units in 1997 and 1.7 units in 2001. We will argue below that our

⁹Party identification categories were computed using the question, ‘Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as... [Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat...] or what?’ We note that we recomputed the means reported in Table 2 while controlling for the strength of party identification and the patterns of partisan-based depolarization were identical to those we discuss below.

¹⁰These differences between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour partisans are statistically significant in each cross-section ($p < .01$), and the decline in the magnitude of the computed Labour-Conservative partisan gap between 1987 and 2001 is statistically significant ($p < .01$).

TABLE 1 British Election Study Respondents' Mean Placements of the Labour and Conservative Parties, 1987–2001

		1987	1992	1997	2001
Social Services	Labour	3.03	2.83	3.59	4.17
	Conservatives	7.16	7.06	6.94	6.21
	Lab-Con gap	4.13	4.23	3.35	2.04
Nationalization	Labour	2.92	3.59	4.66	5.45
	Conservatives	9.14	8.38	8.00	7.50
	Lab-Con gap	6.22	4.79	3.34	2.05
Inflation/unemployment	Labour	2.33	2.98	3.14	3.73
	Conservatives	6.38	6.44	6.16	5.88
	Lab-Con gap	4.05	3.46	3.02	2.15
Redistribution	Labour	2.95	3.08	3.49	4.65
	Conservatives	8.43	7.90	8.21	7.47
	Lab-Con gap	5.48	4.82	4.72	2.82
Average Lab-Con gap (4 scales)		4.97	4.33	3.61	2.27

Notes. The numbers reported in the table are the mean positions that British Election Study respondents ascribed to the Labour and Conservative parties along the issue scales, computed, for each scale in each year, over all respondents who gave a valid party placement on the scale. The rows labeled “Lab-Con gap” report the difference between the mean placements of the Conservative Party and the mean placement of the Labour Party. All four scales are from 1 to 11, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses. The texts of the policy scale questions are reported in the online appendix.

elite depolarization hypothesis, which posits that the electoral salience of a focal policy or ideological dimension declines when party elites depolarize on this dimension, explains why mass-level depolarization in Britain slowed after 1997, even as the public perceived increased elite-level convergence between 1997 and 2001.

Methodology: Structural Equation Models Applied to British Panel Data

The dramatic changes in British voters' perceptions of elite policy differences between 1987 and 2001 allow us to evaluate the policy primacy and the elite depolarization hypotheses. The policy primacy hypothesis posits that for British citizens the dominant causal relationship runs from their left-right policy orientations to their party attachments, not vice versa. The elite depolarization hypothesis implies that as British party elites depolarized during the middle and later parts of the 1987–2001 period, voters' economic and social welfare policy positions exerted diminishing influences on their partisanship. To evaluate these hypotheses we analyze data from BES panel studies from 1987–92, 1992–97, and 1997–2001.¹¹

¹¹As discussed above (see footnote 2), we cannot measure British citizens' policy beliefs post-2001 because the BES surveys no longer include the same policy scale questions, and we cannot compare citizens' policy beliefs pre-1987 with their beliefs during the 1987–2001 period because of changes in the BES policy scale question wordings and endpoints beginning in 1987.

Consistent with the approaches of Goren (2005), Carsey and Layman (2006), Highton and Kam (2011), and Dancy and Goren (2010), we evaluate our hypotheses using cross-lagged structural equation models, where we estimate latent constructs for citizens' party attachments and their left-right policy preferences using survey responses across multiple waves of each panel study, and we then estimate the lagged effects of latent constructs upon each other.¹²

When measuring constructs such as party attachments and issue preferences via survey data, survey characteristics such as question wording or the features of the response categories may introduce measurement error, which can lead the researcher to underestimate the stability of individuals' preferences (Achen 1975; Ansola-behere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Green and Palmquist 1990). Structural equation modeling attenuates the bias associated with measurement error, which facilitates estimates of the reciprocal relationships between citizens' left-right preferences and their partisanship.

Measuring citizens' partisan attachments and left-right preferences. American politics scholars typically conceptualize partisanship using a

¹²Structural equation modeling uses observed variables to estimate latent constructs and estimates the correspondence between these observed variables and constructs by determining the amount of variance in the observed variable explained by the latent construct. We estimate “stacked” models (pooling data for all panel surveys) to evaluate whether the latent constructs effects vary over time.

TABLE 2 Changes in British Election Study Respondents' Mean Self-Placements on the Policy Scales, 1987–2001

		1987	1992	1997	2001
Social Services	All	4.5	4.1	3.7	3.9
	Lab partisans	3.6	3.1	3.2	3.4
	Con partisans	5.2	5.0	4.4	4.6
	Lab-Con gap	1.6	1.9	1.2	1.2
Nationalization	All	6.4	5.6	5.3	5.1
	Lab partisans	4.4	4.1	4.6	4.5
	Con partisans	7.9	7.0	6.4	6.1
	Lab-Con gap	3.5	2.9	1.8	1.6
Inflation/unemployment	All	3.5	3.5	3.6	4
	Lab partisans	2.3	2.8	3	3.5
	Con partisans	4.5	4.1	4.4	4.7
	Lab-Con gap	2.2	1.3	1.4	1.2
Redistribution	All	5.0	4.5	4.1	4.8
	Lab partisans	3.1	2.8	3.0	3.8
	Con partisans	6.7	6.1	5.9	6.6
	Lab-Con gap	3.6	3.3	2.9	2.8
Average Lab-Con gap (4 scales)		2.8	2.4	1.8	1.7

Notes. The numbers reported above represent the British Election Study respondents' mean self-placements on the policy scales relating to social services, nationalization of industry, trade-offs between unemployment and inflation, and income redistribution. Mean self-placements are given for all respondents ("All"); for all respondents who reported that they identified with the Labour Party ("Lab partisans"); and for all respondents who reported that they identified with the Conservative Party ("Con partisans"). The figures given in the rows labeled "Lab-Con gap" report the differences between the mean self-placements of Conservative and Labour partisans on the policy scale. All four scales are from 1 to 11, with higher numbers denoting more right-wing responses.

unidimensional scale ranging from strong Republican to strong Democrat, with independents located in the middle. Britain, however, features a major third party, the Liberal Democrats, along with several smaller parties that consistently gain parliamentary representation.¹³ Use of a unidimensional partisan scale (anchored by strong attachment to Labour at one end and by strong attachment to the Conservatives at the other) would force us to make questionable coding decisions about how to classify partisans of the Liberal Democrats (and of other, smaller, parties) along a scale where we must also place independents (see Clarke et al. 1979; van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983). We therefore create two latent partisan constructs, *Labour Attachment* and *Conservative Attachment*. By emphasizing the respondent's *degree* of support for each party, we can analyze how the relationship between respondents' policy preferences and their attachment to each party changes as the parties depolarize—i.e., we are not forced to assume that the relationship between a respondent's

policy preferences and their party attachment is the same for both parties. Both constructs are modeled using two indicators, where each indicator has five categories: the first indicator is a question that elicits respondents' degrees of support for (or opposition to) the focal party, and the second is a combination of two BES questions regarding party identification and the strength of partisan identification.¹⁴ Both party attachments scales range from zero to one, with higher values denoting stronger attachment to the party.

We estimate the latent construct for respondents' left-right orientations using the four policy scales introduced earlier, which relate to income redistribution, support for social services, nationalization of industry, and, trade-offs between unemployment and

¹³These smaller parties include the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Scottish National Party (BNP), Plaid Cymru, the Green Party, the U.K. Independence Party, and the British National Party (although the BNP and the U.K. Independence Party have not won seats in parliament).

¹⁴Using multiple indicators for each latent construct allows us to correct for measurement error (see, e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). We further correct for measurement error by allowing the measurement errors associated with each indicator to be correlated over time. This assumption is less restrictive than that used in the traditional Wiley-Wiley model which specifies that the error variances are uncorrelated over time (Wiley and Wiley 1970). The texts of the questions that were used to create the *Labour Attachment* and *Conservative Attachment* constructs are given in the online appendix.

inflation. Each issue pertains to long-standing debates in British politics relating to the Left-Right economic dimension.¹⁵ All issue scales are rescaled to fall between 0 and 1, with higher numbers denoting a more right-wing position.

Modeling the reciprocal relationship between Left-Right preferences and party attachments. The models estimating the reciprocal effects of an individual i 's party attachments and left-right orientations are given below:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Left-Right preference}_i(t) &= \alpha_1 + \lambda_1[\text{Left-Right preference}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_1[\text{Labour Attachment}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_2[\text{Conservative Attachment}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \varepsilon_{1i}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Conservative Attachment}_i(t) &= \alpha_2 + \lambda_2[\text{Conservative Attachment}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_3[\text{Left-Right preference}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \varepsilon_{2i}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Labour Attachment}_i(t) &= \alpha_3 + \lambda_3[\text{Labour Attachment}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \beta_4[\text{Left-Right preference}_i(t-1)] \\ &+ \varepsilon_{3i}(t) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

The parameters denoted by λ represent the effects of the latent construct during the first time period ($t-1$) on the same construct in the second time period t . For example, in equation (1), λ_1 denotes the effect of respondent i 's left-right preferences at time ($t-1$) on her left-right orientations at time t , while in equation (2) the parameter λ_2 denotes the effect of the respondent's attachment to the Conservative Party at time ($t-1$) on Conservative attachment at time t , and so on. These λ parameters capture the *stability* of the constructs over time, with higher values denoting greater stability. The cross-lagged effects, represented by the β parameters, denote the effect of one latent construct on another. Thus, in equation (1), β_1 represents the impact of the respondent i 's Labour attachment in the first period ($t-1$) on her left-right preferences in the second period t , while in equation

(2), β_3 denotes the effect of i 's left-right preferences in period ($t-1$) on her attachment to the Conservatives in period t .

Results

Our primary models are two-wave analyses of the first and last waves of each panel.¹⁶ Table 3 reports the unstandardized estimates of the stability coefficients (the coefficients λ_1 , λ_2 , and λ_3 in equations 1–3) for each of the latent constructs in each panel, as well as the unstandardized estimates of the cross-lagged effects of party attachments and left-right preferences (the coefficients β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , and β_4 in equations 1–3).¹⁷

The estimates reported in Table 3 show that for the initial panel (1987–92) the stability coefficient estimate on left-right orientations (1.00) greatly exceeds the stability estimate on attachment to Labour (0.74) and attachment to the Conservatives (0.71), but that for the second and third panels the stability coefficient estimates on left-right preferences decline sharply—to 0.73 for the 1992–97 panel and to 0.61 for the 1997–2001 panel—while the stability estimates on party attachments increase, from the 0.70–0.75 range for the 1987–92 panel to above 0.90 for the 1997–2001 panel. These estimates imply that British citizens' left-right policy preferences were stable during 1987–92, when the parties were polarized on left-right policy issues, but that citizens' left-right

¹⁶We estimate all models using AMOS 7.0, which uses maximum likelihood techniques to obtain estimates even in the presence of missing data (Andersen 1957). Therefore, while we limit our analysis to respondents who were interviewed in both waves, but we do not omit respondents who failed to respond to one or more of the survey questions used. Moreover, though each BES panel study contained at least three waves, the 'middle' waves in each study omitted some (and in one case, all) of the policy scale questions. In supplementary analyses, we estimated parameters for three-wave models based on a reduced set of survey questions, and these estimates supported similar substantive conclusions to the two-wave estimates.

¹⁷We estimated two models to determine whether differences between the estimates on the latent constructs were statistically significant. In the first we allowed the structural parameters to vary. In the second we constrained these parameters to be equal across each panel (i.e., the coefficients λ_1 , λ_2 , λ_3 , β_1 , β_2 , β_3 , β_4 in equations 1–3 were specified as being equal across the three panels). If the difference between the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistics for the unconstrained and constrained estimations is significant (degrees of freedom equal to the number of constraints imposed), we conclude that there are meaningful differences in the structural parameters across time. The difference between the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistics was 85.5. Twenty-one constraints were imposed, and the difference between the constrained and unconstrained models was significant ($p < 0.001$). Hence, we report estimates for the unconstrained model in Table 3.

¹⁵Principle factors factor analyses indicate that, in all panels, the four-issue scales load on to a single dominant dimension (left-right). We also estimated separate models for each issue scale to address the possibility of different dimensions (Goren 2005). Our substantive conclusions were unchanged.

TABLE 3 Party Attachment-Ideology Cross-Lagged Structural Models

	1987-1992		1992-1997		1997-2001	
	Coefficient (S.E)		Coefficient (S.E)		Coefficient (S.E)	
Stability Coefficients						
Labour Attachment → Labour Attachment	.74**	(.04)	.76**	(.03)	.93**	(.03)
Conservative Attachment → Conservative Attachment	.71**	(.05)	.57**	(.03)	.94**	(.06)
Left-right preferences → Left-right preferences	1.00**	(.10)	.73**	(.08)	.61**	(.05)
Structural Coefficients						
Left-right preferences → Labour Attachment	-.62**	(.08)	-.38**	(.07)	-.16**	(.06)
Labour Attachment → Left-right preferences	-.05	(.03)	-.05*	(.02)	-.07**	(.02)
Left-right preferences → Conservative Attachment	.49**	(.09)	.52**	(.08)	.16*	(.06)
Conservative Attachment → Left-right preferences	-.03	(.04)	-.06	(.03)	-.01	(.02)
N	1608		1924		2445	
Model Fit						
χ^2 (df = 26)			1441.5			
Δ_1/Δ_2			.97/.97			
ρ_1/ρ_2			.95/.96			

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$.

Notes. The coefficients reported in the table were estimated for the specifications given by equations (1–3) in the article. See the text of the paper for the descriptions and codings of the variables. Sources: 1987–92, 1992–97 and 1997–2001 British Election Study panels. Entries are unstandardized, maximum-likelihood estimates (the standard errors for these estimates are reported in parentheses). Factor variances, error variances, error covariances, and disturbances omitted for clarity.

preferences destabilized during the post-Thatcher period as the parties depolarized. The estimates also denote a statistically significant increase in the stability of citizens' party evaluations—and a significant decrease in the stability of their left-right orientations—between 1987 and 2001.¹⁸

The estimated cross-lagged effects of party attachments and left-right preferences, also presented in Table 3, pertain to our evaluations of the policy primacy and the elite depolarization hypotheses. The policy primacy hypothesis states that for British citizens the dominant causal relationship is from their policy beliefs to their party attachments, rather than vice versa—i.e., that our lagged estimates of the effects of citizens' left-right preferences on their party attachments (represented by the coefficients β_3 – β_4 in equations 2–3) should significantly exceed the coefficient estimates on the lagged effects of party attachments on left-right preferences (represented by the coefficients β_1 and β_2 in equation 1). The elite depolarization hypothesis implies that as British party elites depolar-

ized on policy during the post-Thatcher period, the estimated effects of citizens' left-right preferences on their party attachments should decline, i.e., these estimates should be significantly smaller for the 1997–2001 BES panel than for the 1987–92 panel.

The parameter estimates reported in Table 3 support both hypotheses. For the 1987–92 panel, which covers a period when Labour and Conservative party elites were polarized on the left-right dimension, citizens significantly updated their party attachments to conform to their left-right preferences, but not vice versa—a pattern that supports the policy salience hypothesis. Specifically, the coefficient estimate -0.62 ($p < .01$) of the lagged effect of BES respondents' left-right preferences on their Labour attachments, and the coefficient estimate $+0.49$ ($p < .01$) of the lagged effect of left-right preferences on Conservative attachments, imply that citizens who held right-wing policy views in 1987 displayed significant tendencies to *negatively* update their Labour evaluations and to *positively* update their Conservative Party evaluations in 1992, compared to citizens who held more left-wing policy viewpoints in 1987. By contrast, we find no evidence that citizens took policy cues from party elites between 1987 and 1992, i.e., the coefficient estimates of the lagged effects of party attachments on citizens' left-right policy preferences are near zero and are statistically insignificant. These

¹⁸To evaluate whether there were statistically significant differences in the stability coefficient estimates across the panels, we analyzed the z-scores associated with these differences. The z-score associated with the difference between our estimate of the left-right stability coefficient for the 1987–92 panel and that for the 1997–2001 panel exceeded ± 1.96 which is statistically significant, as did the z-scores associated with the differences in the party attachment coefficient estimates.

TABLE 4 Subconstituency-Based Analyses: Political Engagement

	1987-1992		1992-1997		1997-2001	
	Coefficient (S.E)		Coefficient (S.E)		Coefficient (S.E)	
High Engagement						
Stability Coefficients						
Labour Attachment → Labour Attachment	.85**	(.07)	.99**	(.07)	.87**	(.06)
Conservative Attachment → Conservative Attachment	.70**	(.09)	.62**	(.05)	.90**	(.05)
Left-right preferences → Left-right preferences	.81**	(.18)	.71**	(.12)	.63**	(.08)
Structural Coefficients						
Left-right preferences → Labour Attachment	-.47**	(.12)	-.36**	(.12)	-.03	(.10)
Labour Attachment → Left-right preferences	-.01	(.05)	.01	(.06)	-.08*	(.04)
Left-right preferences → Conservative Attachment	.56*	(.22)	.42**	(.12)	.07	(.09)
Conservative Attachment → Left-right preferences	.04	(.06)	.02	(.05)	-.01	(.05)
N	516		471		604	
Low Engagement						
Stability Coefficients						
Labour Attachment → Labour Attachment	.75**	(.08)	.78**	(.06)	.87**	(.05)
Conservative Attachment → Conservative Attachment	.65**	(.10)	.43**	(.08)	.94**	(.06)
Left-right preferences → Left-right preferences	1.25**	(.38)	.87**	(.22)	.43**	(.13)
Structural Coefficients						
Left-right preferences → Labour Attachment	-.74*	(.31)	-.68**	(.18)	.01	(.17)
Labour Attachment → Left-right preferences	.07	(.06)	-.04	(.04)	-.10**	(.03)
Left-right preferences → Conservative Attachment	.85**	(.28)	.87**	(.22)	-.11	(.14)
Conservative Attachment → Left-right preferences	.03	(.08)	-.13*	(.09)	-.00	(.06)
N	461		698		776	
Model Fit						
χ^2 (df = 172)	390.4		314.3		380.7	
Δ_1/Δ_2	.96/.98		.97/.98		.96/.98	
ρ_1/ρ_2	.93/.96		.94/.97		.94/.97	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < .01$.

Notes. Sources: 1987–92, 1992–97 and 1997–2001 British Election Study panels. Entries are unstandardized, maximum-likelihood estimates (the standard errors for these estimates are reported in parentheses). Factor variances, error variances, error covariances, and disturbances omitted for clarity. The coefficients reported in the table were estimated for the specifications given by equations (1–3) in the article. See the text of the article for descriptions and codings of the variables.

patterns support the policy primacy hypothesis, that for British citizens the dominant causal relationship is from their left-right policy preferences to their party evaluations, not vice versa.

A comparison of the estimated effects of citizens' left-right preferences on their party attachments across the three panels also supports the elite depolarization hypothesis, that as party elites depolarize on a focal policy or ideological dimension, voters' positions on this dimension exert less influence on their partisanship. As discussed above, we conclude that BES panel respondents' left-right orientations exerted significant effects on their party attachments between 1987 and 1992, a period when party elites were polarized on left-right issues. However the estimated impact of left-right preferences on party

attachments declines across the later time periods, as party elites converge on policy: for the 1997–2001 panel the coefficient estimates of the lagged effects of respondents' left-right policy preferences on their attachments to the Labour and Conservative parties are only -0.16 and +0.16, respectively. These estimates are statistically significant ($p < .05$) but they are much smaller than the corresponding estimates for the 1987–92 panel (-0.62 and +0.49), and the differences between the parameter estimates across these two panels are statistically significant ($p < .01$).¹⁹ Thus we conclude that as Labour and Conservative party

¹⁹We evaluated the statistical significance of the differences in these cross-lagged parameter estimates between the 1987–92 and the 1997–2001 panels using the approach outlined in footnote 17.

elites depolarized on left-right policy issues during the post-Thatcher era, citizens' left-right preferences exerted declining influences on their party attachments. This pattern supports the elite depolarization hypothesis.

Finally, at no point during the 1987–2001 period do we find that citizens' party attachments exerted substantively significant effects on their left-right preferences, a result that continues to support the policy primacy hypothesis. For all three panels the coefficient estimates of the lagged effects of respondents' attachments to the Conservative Party on their left-right policy preferences are near zero and are statistically insignificant (in fact they are in the wrong direction), while the coefficient estimates of the effects of Labour attachments on left-right preferences—which fall below $-.08$ for all three panels—are much smaller than the reciprocal estimates of the effects of left-right preferences on Labour attachments.

Are There Individual Differences? Evaluating the Equal Reactions Hypothesis

We next evaluate the equal reactions hypothesis, that British citizens' tendencies to reciprocally update their policy beliefs and their party evaluations are similar across different subconstituencies in the electorate. This hypothesis is critical for the desideratum of *equal representation* because if the members of some subconstituencies—such as the educated, affluent, and politically engaged—are disproportionately responsive to parties' policy positions, then party elites may be motivated to appeal to these subgroups on policy grounds at the expense of less educated, affluent, and politically engaged citizens. To evaluate the equal reactions hypothesis we reestimated our structural models on subgroups of BES panel respondents subdivided by education, income, newspaper readership, and political knowledge.²⁰ In these analyses, which we report in supplementary materials,²¹ we found no

²⁰We subdivided respondents according to whether they were above or below the median in their level of schooling; whether respondents were above or below the median in reported income; and whether respondents reported reading a daily newspaper. For political knowledge we subdivided respondents by above or below median scores on a political knowledge quiz, comprised of six true-false questions about British politics (sample question from 1992: 'True or false: Neil Kinnock is the Labour leader'). This political knowledge quiz was not included in the 1987–92 BES panel, and so our knowledge-based analyses were confined to the 1992–97 and 1997–2001 panels.

²¹See the online appendix available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/jop>.

evidence that educated, affluent, newspaper reading, or politically knowledgeable citizens displayed different reciprocal patterns of policy- and partisan-based updating, in comparison to less educated, affluent, and knowledgeable citizens (along with those who did not read newspapers): for each subgroup our parameter estimates on the cross-lagged effects of left-right preferences and party attachments continued to support the policy primacy hypothesis and the elite depolarization hypothesis, and the magnitudes of these parameter estimates were similar across different subgroups.

In order to further substantiate the equal reactions hypothesis we also estimated our structural models on subgroups of BES respondents who scored significantly above and below the median on a composite political engagement index. With respect to the subconstituency-based analyses summarized above, one might object that while no single citizen characteristic—i.e., education, income, or newspaper readership—is sufficient to identify a subset of voters who display substantively different reciprocal patterns of policy- and partisan-based updating, citizens who possess combinations of these attributes might be especially likely to update their party attachments in response to their policy preferences (or vice versa). We reestimated our structural models on two groups of BES panel respondents. The first was a *high-engagement* group consisting of BES respondents who possessed all three of the following attributes: they were above the median in income; they were above the median in education; and, they read a daily newspaper.²² This high-engagement subgroup comprised 25–30% of the BES respondents in each panel. The second subgroup consisted of *low-engagement* respondents who possessed at most one of the attributes listed above, a grouping that comprised 30–35% of the respondents in each panel. Table 4 displays our parameter estimates for these two subgroups. Note first that for both subgroups the estimated effects of left-right policy preferences on party attachments are large and statistically significant for the 1987–92 and 1992–97 panels, while the reciprocal estimated effects of party attachments on left-right preferences are small and (mostly) insignificant for each panel—a pattern which supports the policy primacy hypothesis—and that for both subgroups the estimated impact of left-right preferences on party attachments declines sharply across time, which supports the elite depolarization hypothesis.

²²We were unable to incorporate political knowledge into our engagement index. As discussed in footnote 20, the political knowledge quiz was not administered in the 1987–92 BES panel.

With respect to comparisons between subgroups, we find no evidence that politically engaged citizens disproportionately updated their party attachments to match their left-right preferences (or vice versa), compared to less-engaged citizens. First, as noted above, neither subgroup displayed substantively significant tendencies to update their left-right policy preferences in response to their party attachments. Second, a test of the differences between groups indicates that the differences between the estimates of the stability and the cross-lagged coefficient estimates across these two subgroups are not statistically significant.²³ Third, to the extent that our coefficient estimates differ across subgroups it is in fact the *less* politically engaged respondents who display (modestly) stronger tendencies to update their party attachments to match their left-right orientations! We certainly do not conclude from this that less engaged British citizens are actually the most strongly motivated by left-right policy considerations, since this difference is not statistically significant and moreover there is no theoretical rationale for this pattern. However, this comparison drives home the point that our analyses provide no support whatsoever for the proposition that politically engaged British citizens disproportionately update their party evaluations in response to their left-right preferences (or vice versa), compared to less-engaged citizens.

Conclusion

While spatial modelers posit that citizens evaluate political parties based on policy considerations, empirical research on American politics suggests that this causal relationship is often reversed, i.e., that citizens' party support drives their policy preferences. Building on previous findings that partisanship is less influential for European citizens than for Americans, we argue that British citizens will typically update their party attachments to match their policy preferences, rather than vice versa (the policy primacy

hypothesis). We further argue, however, that because policy salience declines when party elites converge on a given policy dimension, British voters' left-right policy preferences will exert diminishing influence on their party attachments as parties depolarize (the elite depolarization hypothesis). We report individual-level structural equation analyses of British election panel survey data between 1987 and 2001, which support both hypotheses. In addition, we find that citizens' tendencies to reciprocally update policy beliefs and party evaluations are similar across different subconstituencies stratified by education, income, political knowledge, and engagement, a pattern that supports the equal reactions hypothesis.

We believe our findings are important for four reasons. First, our U.K.-based findings in support of the policy primacy hypothesis stand in sharp contrast to the findings reported by American politics scholars. The U.S.-based literature on the reciprocal linkages between partisanship and policy attitudes concludes that the predominant pattern is for citizens to update their policy preferences to match their party ID, not vice versa (Carsey and Layman 2006; Goren 2005; Layman and Carsey 2002). By contrast, we conclude that during periods of elite polarization, the causal influence of British citizens' policy viewpoints on their party attachments is stronger—and the effect of British citizens' party attachments on their policy beliefs is weaker—than it is in the United States.

Second, our findings have an important—and positive—implication for political representation: namely, that when British party elites take polarized positions on a salient policy or ideological dimension, voters will choose parties based on their policy viewpoints rather than vice versa. This pattern is reassuring since it is arguably most critical that citizens apply policy-based voting criteria to salient policy dimensions that sharply divide the parties (e.g., Golder and Stramski 2010; McDonald and Budge 2005; Powell 2000). By contrast, our findings suggest that citizens' policy views exert far weaker effects on their party evaluations when the policy dimension is less salient, which is likely to occur when the parties are not polarized on the dimension. Yet in these latter scenarios, policy-based voting by citizens is arguably less critical for policy representation.

Third, and related, our findings suggest that British party elites have electoral incentives to provide more equal representation of different subconstituencies than do American politicians. American politics scholars conclude that elected officials respond disproportionately to the policy viewpoints

²³We estimated two models to determine whether differences between the coefficient estimates on the latent constructs for the two groups were statistically significant, one where the coefficient estimates $\lambda_1, \lambda_2, \lambda_3, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$ in equations (1–3) were constrained to be equal across the two subgroups, and a second where these coefficient estimates were allowed to vary. The difference between the chi-square goodness-of-fit statistics for the unconstrained and constrained estimations was not statistically significant (with degrees of freedom equal to the number of constraints), and so meaningful differences were not present in the structural parameters between high- and low-engagement respondents.

of affluent and educated citizens (see, e.g., Bartels 2008; Gilens 2005; Griffin and Newman 2005), a pattern of *unequal representation* that plausibly stems in part from American politicians' perceptions that the members of these privileged subgroups respond disproportionately to elites' policy behavior. By contrast, our finding that British subconstituencies of more and less educated, affluent, and politically knowledgeable citizens display similar tendencies to update their party evaluations in response to their policy beliefs, may motivate British party elites to provide *equal representation* of these different subgroups' collective policy preferences.

Fourth, our analyses document the shift away from the policy-based electoral politics of the Thatcher era to the current period of British politics, in which voters' left-right policy beliefs exert weaker effects on their party attachments. Clarke et al. (2004, 2009) document that the British general elections of 2001 and 2005 turned primarily on citizens' performance-based "valence" considerations relating to party elites' abilities to manage the economy, to address security issues such as crime and terrorism, and to efficiently deliver public services. Our analyses—which demonstrate that British citizens' policy beliefs drove their party attachments during the Thatcher era, but that British citizens post-Thatcher are less likely to update their partisanship in response to left-right policy considerations—help trace the evolution towards the current era of British politics that Clark et al. document, in which performance-based issues assume a more prominent role.

In future research we plan to extend our analyses to other European electorates and also to additional dimensions of political conflict besides left-right issues.²⁴ We also plan to explore the implications of our findings for spatial models of elections. In particular, our findings imply that party elites face a complex strategic calculation when they attempt to project the electoral consequences of shifting their policies, because they must account not simply for how such policy shifts affect the party's spatial *proximity* to the voters in the electorate, but also for how these shifts alter the *salience* that voters attach to different issue dimensions (see, e.g., Meguid 2009). Our findings suggest that accounting for these effects can create a more realistic model of real world electoral competition, and thereby enhance our

²⁴Unfortunately, we cannot perform parallel analyses of other dimensions in British politics, because the four policy scale questions relating to social services, nationalization, income redistribution, and inflation/unemployment, are the only scales included across all three BES panels.

understanding of parties' election strategies and of political representation.

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Caitlin Milazzo is Associate Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Exeter, Exeter EX4 4RD United Kingdom.

James Adams is Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Davis, Davis, CA 95616.

Jane Green is Research Fellow in the Institute for Social Change at the University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL United Kingdom.