



# Carriers of the Creed: Examining Democrats' Commitment to Egalitarianism as Principle and Policy

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## Abstract

The Democratic Party is a coalition of interests sharing a common desire to use government to ameliorate societal inequities. Research shows that the party's programmatic policy appeals engender attitudinal consistency among Democratic identifiers, although less work explores the connection between these partisans' core values and specific policy positions. In this article, we propose and test a theory linking self-identified Democrats' political sophistication to their commitment to a central core value—equality—and attitudes toward group-specific policies designed to benefit Blacks, gays and lesbians and the poor, respectively. We expect that beneficiaries will support their group-specific policy uniformly, but that political sophistication moderates non-target group Democrats' support, as greater awareness should increase non-group members' willingness to further the party's cardinal core value. Results from 2008–2016 CPS American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys support our key hypotheses and illuminate a coalitional linchpin of one of the two major American political parties.

**Keywords** Core values · Egalitarianism · Sophistication · Party coalitions

## Introduction

Scholarly evidence shows that the Democratic Party is a coalition of organized interests, whereas the Republican Party is an ideological faction whose unifying cause is movement conservatism—defined by a commitment to laissez faire economic

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policies and traditional morality (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). These fundamental differences are observable in the parties' organizational structures, rhetoric and platforms (Azari, 2014; Freeman, 1986; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2015, 2016; Rhodes & Johnson, 2017; Russell, 2018), as well as the political attitudes of elite and mass party identifiers alike (Lelkes & Sniderman, 2016; Lupton et al., 2017). Republicans conceptualize politics ideologically in terms of the size and scope of government. GOP membership and identity are defined by fealty to conservative ideological principles and symbols, manifested in an attachment to an abstract belief in limited government, individualism and the "American way" (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). Democratic officeholders, activists and adherents in the electorate are much less likely to invoke broad ideological concepts, as they instead adopt the language of group benefits and focus predominantly on specific policies aimed to redress social group grievances (Campbell et al., 1960; Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016; Hagner & Pierce, 1982; Lelkes & Sniderman, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

This behavior may lead one to believe that the Democratic Party is organized to exploit identity politics for electoral advantage in an increasingly demographically diverse nation, but we suspect that deeper, more fundamental principles anchor the contemporary Democratic coalition in order to promote policy unity. Whereas current scholarship conceptualizes liberalism as the horse-trading of benefits among the various social groups that compose the Democratic Party, we argue instead that a profound commitment to the value of equality inspires a disparate coalition of social groups to support policies from which they do not directly benefit.

As Noel (2012, p. 157) incisively writes, "We tend to use the word coalition to describe groups of actors who act together for strategic or at least conscious reasons. But if we are agnostic about the origins of constraint, then ideology defines a coalition." This article represents our analysis of the Democratic Party's egalitarian ideological roots. Specifically, we argue that a belief in equality is the "glue" that coheres the Democratic coalition, as the commitment to a more equal society undergirds activists' and adherents' effort to use social and economic policy to help vulnerable citizens, many of whom the party argues face persistent discrimination. Egalitarianism, we contend, is a chief component of ideological liberalism.

In this article, we explore and explain variation in support for this central Democratic Party organizing principle, both generally and as it pertains to specific social groups composing the party's electoral coalition. We begin by investigating Democrats' abstract egalitarianism, and then we analyze their support for group-specific policies designed to assist Blacks, homosexuals and the poor, respectively, three of the party's key constituent groups. In doing so, we articulate and test a theory that political sophistication relates to support for each policy among non-target group members. Whereas target group members—policy beneficiaries—should support programs designed to help their group, other Democrats are expected to experience a disconnect between their abstract egalitarianism and the policies dedicated to

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<sup>1</sup> The data and code necessary to reproduce all of the empirical results in this article are located on the *Political Behavior* Database within the Harvard Dataverse Network at the following address: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/IAD3SQ>.

achieving that core value, especially given that some of these policies may exact a real or perceived burden on these individuals. However, more sophisticated Democrats should understand and appreciate that these group-specific policies serve to promote the linchpin of the party coalition: equality. The analyses in this article rely on pooled 2008, 2012 and 2016 CPS American National Election Studies (ANES) survey data, which allow us to investigate Democrats' commitment to general and group-specific social, political and economic equality over three recent presidential election cycles.<sup>2</sup>

## Egalitarianism and the Democratic Party

Egalitarianism is the belief that reducing or eliminating political, social and economic disparities would improve society. The tension over whether these existing inequalities are a problem requiring government redress—versus a natural and even desirable state of affairs—is central to American political thought (Lane, 1959). The egalitarian order has historically been “complex and breakable” (King & Smith, 2005, p. 76) because even those committed to equality have differed on what equality entails and its ultimate goal (King & Smith, 2005, p. 76; Verba & Orren, 1985a, 1985b; Walzer, 1983). The drive toward equality during the Revolutionary and Jacksonian periods, the Civil War, the populist and progressive eras, the New Deal, the Great Society and today has been most successful when narrowly directed toward specific groups (Verba & Orren, 1985a, 1985b) or policies (King & Smith, 2005). The most significant and impactful expressions of the egalitarian order were the adoption of the 14th and 15th Amendments (King & Smith, 2005, p. 78) and what Grossmann (2014, p. 185) refers to as “The Long Great Society” era that enshrined a dramatic expansion in the “scope of government in nearly every policy area and across all branches of government,” deeply institutionalizing egalitarian precepts throughout American law and policy. This egalitarian posture is now a fundamental component of the Democratic Party's ideological liberalism.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that egalitarians are more likely than other citizens to support social welfare spending (Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2008, 2012; Jacoby, 2006), assistance to racial minorities (Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Kinder & Saunders, 1996) and gay rights (Brewer, 2003), as well as to identify as Democrats (Keele & Wolak, 2006; Lupton et al., 2020). Today, equality appears as a partisan issue because those most committed to an egalitarian political order have embraced the Democratic Party even if differences on what equality requires continues to endure (Verba & Orren, 1985b, pp. 124–147).

Indeed, the individuals and groups composing the Democratic coalition are mobilized, sustained and empowered by their collective commitment to a belief in equality that manifests itself in a wide array of platform promises to alleviate societal ills

<sup>2</sup> Our choice of years does not affect our analytical results; models dating back to 2000 return identical results. Additionally, all results are robust to the inclusion of year fixed-effects. We present these analytical results in the supplemental online appendix.

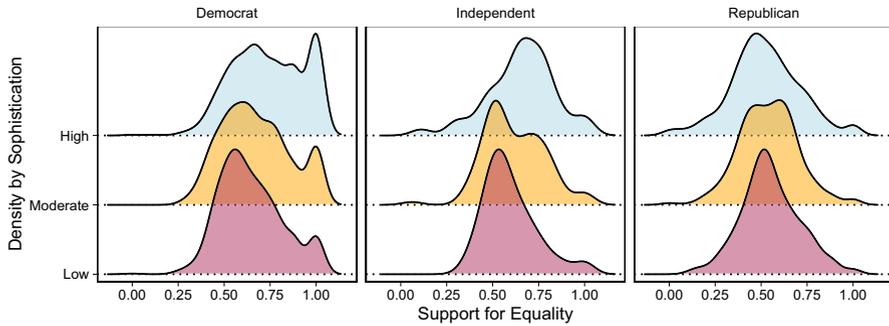
through government action (Gerring, 1998; Noel, 2013). Surveys of the mass public reveal that Democrats' most preferred core value is equality (Ciuk, 2017; Jacoby, 2006, 2014), indicating that a more egalitarian existence is their ideal societal end state (Rokeach, 1973). However, our theory is that egalitarianism is not espoused uniformly across the Democratic Party coalition. Rather, we expect that sophistication should condition support for this principle given sophistication's role in the reception and acceptance of elite cues (Carsey & Layman, 2006; Claassen & Highton, 2009; Zaller, 1992). We therefore hypothesize that egalitarianism in contemporary elections will be most pronounced among more sophisticated Democratic identifiers, who are most likely to process and internalize the party's egalitarian messaging (Bakker et al., 2020).

Elite actors such as members of Congress, public intellectuals and party activists construct and communicate party ideologies and party platforms, but political sophisticates in the electorate are necessary for internalizing these ideologies and putting them into practice with their ballots. Sophisticates are therefore valuable conduits for the all-important two-way communication between elites and masses, and they are the "carriers of the creed" who help ensconce party principles among the broader party coalition. We therefore anticipate that more politically interested, involved and knowledgeable adherents will express a greater commitment to a long-standing and increasingly salient abstract party principle and its attendant public policies. We begin our empirical analysis below by examining support for egalitarianism among Democrats conditioned by sophistication.

We utilize the standard four-item ANES egalitarianism battery to measure support for abstract egalitarianism.<sup>3</sup> These questions, featured prominently in contemporary portraits of public opinion, broadly capture the extent to which respondents believe that inequality is a problem requiring government attention. The items suit our investigation because they measure respondents' postures toward equality generally, separate from any proposed policy remedy for existing inequalities. We use the four items to estimate a graded response model predicting egalitarianism among self-identified Democrats. We recode the variable to range from zero to one, where higher values represent greater egalitarianism.

Our key theoretical variable is political sophistication, which we argue should relate positively and significantly to egalitarianism. We operationalize sophistication as a combination of individuals' political interest, involvement and knowledge. Each of these three items captures a factor that enables individuals to comprehend complex information and integrate it into a coherent belief system (e.g., Luskin, 1987)

<sup>3</sup> The egalitarianism battery has been featured on every ANES Time Series Study since 1986, although the number of items was reduced from six to four in 2016. Thus, the pooled data represent our analysis of the four long-running questions in 2008, 2012 and 2016. For 2008 and 2012, we can compare the four- and six-item scales. The four-item scale is slightly less reliable, but the correlation between the two scales is 0.948. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the four-item scale is 0.662. Additional details regarding the egalitarianism scale, as well as the full question wording for every item used in the empirical analyses in this article, are provided in the online appendix. We also present in the appendix models that account for differential item functioning across levels of sophistication. These results are substantively identical to those presented here.



**Fig. 1** Density plot of egalitarianism conditioned on sophistication and partisanship, 2008–2016 ANES

and has been shown to distinguish between large segments of the mass public (Jewitt & Goren, 2016; Lupton et al., 2015). Specifically, we estimate a graded response model combining respondents' self-reported interest in the year's election campaign and participation in five campaign related activities, as well as interviewers' assessment of respondents' level of general political information. We then recode the resulting scale to range from zero to one, where higher values are associated with greater sophistication.<sup>4</sup>

For ease of interpretation, we have divided our sophistication scale into thirds. In addition to being more interested and involved in, and knowledgeable about, politics, sophisticates tend to be more educated, older and possess stronger partisan attachments compared to those with low or moderate political sophistication. Figure 1 below presents the distribution of support for equality conditioned on sophistication and partisanship for the pooled sample. This descriptive analysis shows that Democrats at all levels of sophistication are rather egalitarian, as a majority of even the least sophisticated identifiers score in the upper half of the egalitarianism scale. Nonetheless, the figure makes clear that sophistication sharply conditions support for this core value. As a point of comparison, we observe that sophistication relates weakly to support for equality among independents and is slightly negatively correlated with sophistication among Republicans. Bivariate hypothesis tests indicate that the relationship between sophistication and abstract equality is statistically significant for Democrats, evidencing meaningful variation in endorsement

<sup>4</sup> Although the political sophistication scale's reliability is marginal ( $\alpha = 0.601$ ), we note that the scale is frequently used in the literature (e.g., Enders & Armaly, 2018; Lupton et al., 2015; Redlawsk, 2002) and is consistent with longstanding conceptualizations of the variable. We also create a political sophistication scale replacing the interviewer's assessment of the respondent's level of general political information with an item indicating whether the respondent correctly identified which party controls the House of Representatives. All of our main results are robust to this measurement choice. Finally, we create a political information scale from items available across each analysis year—results from models using this measure as a proxy for political sophistication are broadly consistent with those presented here. Further details of the sophistication scale and results of these alternative model specifications are located in the online appendix. Additionally, a simple additive scale correlated with the latent variable at 0.99 and all results hold when using this scale.

**Table 1** Predicting Egalitarianism among Democrats, 2008–2016 ANES

Variable	Coefficient (standard error)
Political sophistication	0.176* (0.025)
Partisan intensity	0.004 (0.006)
Ideological self-identifications	– 0.025* (0.004)
Female	0.015 (0.010)
Income	– 0.004 (0.005)
Age	– 0.001* (0.000)
Education	0.017* (0.005)
Black	0.074* (0.012)
Latinx	0.002 (0.013)
Other race	0.013 (0.019)
Constant	0.623* (0.031)
<i>n</i>	1,467
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.140

\* $p < 0.05$ 

of a fundamental coalitional principle.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Democrats are significantly more egalitarian than both independents and Republicans at all levels of sophistication.

In order to understand better the correlates of Democrats' support for abstract egalitarianism, we specify an ordinary least squares regression model in which the dependent variable is our equality scale and our primary explanatory variable is the sophistication index. Here, we use the full range of sophistication values rather than

<sup>5</sup> The bivariate correlation between the sophistication and egalitarianism scales among Democrats is 0.244 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Among Republicans, the correlation is – 0.078, and for independents it is 0.066. We present in the online appendix a model similar to that presented in Table 1 for the entire sample in which we interact sophistication with partisanship. The results confirm the bivariate analyses. However, we conducted supplemental analyses showing Republicans' anti-egalitarian posture on the level of policy. Namely, among older Republicans, sophisticates are more likely to oppose Social Security relative to their less sophisticated co-partisans, and among wealthier Republicans, sophistication negatively relates to support for government services. These results are available in the online appendix.

splitting the scale into thirds.<sup>6</sup> These model results are shown in Table 1, where the entries represent coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

The results support our argument that political sophistication is associated with greater egalitarianism, controlling for other factors. Consistent with our theory, we observe that the most interested, involved and knowledgeable Democrats are more likely to be egalitarian relative to their less sophisticated co-partisans. Egalitarianism is especially relevant to this committed and attuned Democratic electoral bloc. Moreover, the estimated difference in egalitarianism across levels of sophistication is substantively noteworthy: Moving from the minimum to the maximum of our sophistication scale is associated with an increase in support for equality from 0.601 to 0.777, which represents about a one standard deviation shift.

These findings demonstrate that Democrats are egalitarians, but that a key individual difference variable—political sophistication—shapes their support for this underlying coalitional principle, above and beyond even the strength of partisan attachments and symbolic ideological identifications. We next examine whether and how sophistication influences Democrats' support for specific policies designed to ameliorate social, political and economic inequalities facing three important constituent groups.

## Sophistication and Support for Group-Specific Equality

The preceding preliminary analysis supports our contention that sophistication promotes Democrats' egalitarianism in principle. In this section, we more fully elucidate the moderating role of sophistication in the relationship between Democrats' social group membership and attitudes toward group-specific equalizing policies. Our theoretical framework builds upon the group-based nature of public opinion and the role of sophistication in the adoption of elite party positions. Let us address these twin components of our theory in turn.

We argue that support among target group members for group-specific equalizing policies will not depend on political sophistication because the policies are sufficiently clearly tied to group interests that even the least aware individuals in the group will recognize and endorse the policies' aims. Consider the three group-specific domains we examine: racial policies, aid to the poor and measures to eliminate discrimination against gays and lesbians. Government policy in each of these domains directly and obviously promotes a group interest, the situation most likely to promote policy support. Prior literature in this area provides the basis for our

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<sup>6</sup> As shown in Table 1, we control for standard attitudinal and demographic correlates. We note that white is the omitted racial reference category.

expectation that target group members need not be politically sophisticated to understand that supporting these policies behooves their social group.<sup>7</sup>

There are of course other important constituent groups composing the contemporary Democratic coalition. We focus our analyses on these three social groups due to ANES question availability, specifically the match between conceptualization and operationalization of group interest variables. We did, however, examine attitudes toward policies designed to eliminate discrimination against women in the workplace and society writ large. This analysis, presented in the online appendix, shows that men and women Democrats nearly universally support the ANES policy items aimed to increase gender equality, consistent with recent work documenting minor policy gender gaps among Democrats (Barnes & Cassese, 2017). Although having only these three tests of our hypothesis is somewhat lamentable, we believe that these group-specific policies nonetheless offer valuable analytical leverage—assistance to Blacks, affirmative action, welfare and aid to the poor exemplify longstanding domains of policy contestation, whereas gay and lesbian issues represent a relatively newer source of partisan division. Moreover, all three policy areas relate immediately to well-defined group interests.

The two racial policies that we analyze involve two enduring, controversial remedies to racial inequalities that have historically divided the Democratic Party: government assistance to Blacks and affirmative action (Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). We expect that Black Americans, as the target of these policies, will support efforts to help their social group overcome entrenched social, political and economic discrimination. Indeed, a wealth of previous evidence underscores acute Black-white differences in attitudes toward conspicuously racial policies. Stated simply, Black Americans are more supportive of policies to ameliorate racial disparities in social, political and economic outcomes (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Dawson, 1994; Hutchings & Valentino, 2004; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Tate, 1993). We therefore anticipate that Black Americans at all levels of sophistication will support assistance to, and affirmative action in hiring for, their group.

As with racial policy alternatives that have periodically frayed the Democratic coalition (e.g., Kinder & Sanders, 1996), commitment to defeating poverty has not been universally shared. Although the lot of the poor has been a hallmark of the Democratic plank, Democrats have not always adopted a common vision for achieving this goal. And, evidence shows that poorer and more financially insecure citizens are more likely to support progressive taxation, tax credits and other anti-poverty programs relative to their wealthier counterparts (Faricy, 2017; Franko et al., 2013; Page et al., 2013). Therefore, we expect that low-income citizens at all levels of sophistication will be likely to support the two anti-poverty programs we analyze, aid to the poor and traditional welfare.

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<sup>7</sup> Although some scholarship downplays the role of self-interest in public opinion (e.g., Sears & Funk, 1990), the concrete policies that we examine are among those most likely to engender self-interest considerations because they directly affect target groups (e.g., Sears & Citrin, 1985). Importantly, we do not posit that policies aiding one's social group need to benefit one personally in order to motivate one's policy support because, as Huddy (2013) notes, group interest considerations are often more politically powerful than self-interest calculations.

Finally, although less work studies attitudes toward gay and lesbian policies—including those we examine, protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination, marriage equality and gay and lesbian child adoption—given these policies' more recent entry into the partisan fray, existing scholarship shows that self-identified homosexuals are more likely than others to extend greater tolerance to the LGBT community (Miller et al., 2017). All of this evidence highlights the group-based orientation of American politics and motivates our expectation that individuals belonging to groups benefitting directly and unequivocally from a proposed policy solution will support that policy, irrespective of the individuals' interest and involvement in, and knowledge about, politics. Connecting the policy to the group's benefit is sufficiently simple that even disinterested and apathetic identifiers can do so straightforwardly. Why, though, do we anticipate that sophistication will condition non-target group Democrats' support for these policies?

Activists, intellectuals, policy entrepreneurs, interest groups, labor organizations and elected officials have fostered the Democratic Party's evolving and increasingly complete embrace of equality across social welfare, racial and cultural policy domains (Carmines & Stimson, 1989; Feinstein & Schickler, 2008; Frymer & Grumbach, 2021; Karol, 2009; Layman et al., 2010; Noel, 2013, 2016; Schickler, 2013; Wolbrecht, 2000). These and other rich scholarly accounts of party change offer varied explanations regarding the timing and impetus for policy changes across issue domains, but their shared conclusion is unmistakable: The contemporary Democratic Party has coalesced around the commitment to a more equal polity. As Verba and Orren (1985b, p. 386) wrote even a generation ago, "Equality appears on the public agenda as a thoroughly partisan issue... divisions within the Democratic Party confuse its stand on equality... but the problem is eased by the fact that the mass of Democratic supporters, though nearer the center than the Democratic leaders, are still much closer to the leaders of their own party than they are to the Republican leaders."

We hypothesize that sophisticated Democrats today are even nearer their party leaders in their embrace of egalitarianism as principle and policy. Consistent signals communicating this posture toward leveling the proverbial playing field should resonate among the most interested, involved and knowledgeable party faithful, who are attuned to elite messaging and predisposed to endorse it (Bakker et al., 2020; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Converse, 1964; Jewitt & Goren, 2016; Zaller, 1992). Prothro and Grigg (1960, p. 291) find in their classic political tolerance study that "endorsement of democratic principles is not a function of class as such (of which income is also a criterion), but of greater acquaintance with the logical implications of the broad democratic principles." Democratic sophisticates are similarly acquainted with their party's core values, and thus they are more likely than their less sophisticated co-partisans to understand that a full commitment to equality requires support for specific policy proposals designed to achieve a more equal society, the essence of the contemporary Democratic Party's platform.

## Empirical Analyses of Attitudes toward Group-Specific Equality

In order to investigate racial group differences in commitment to these specific policies, we first estimate a model comparing white, Black and Latinx Democrats' support for a two-item scale combining aid to Blacks and affirmative action, controlling for respondents' abstract egalitarianism and the other covariates included in the models shown above in Table 1.<sup>8</sup> We recode the racial policy scale to range from 0 to 1, where higher values reflect greater policy support. We also include in the model a series of multiplicative interaction terms involving political sophistication and each of the race dummy variables in order to evaluate whether sophistication moderates any observed racial differences in support for these policies. Recall our expectation that Black identifiers will support the policies consistently across all levels of sophistication, whereas white and Latinx identifiers' policy support will increase with sophistication, as these individuals will be better able to understand, and be more committed to, the connection between their party's key core value and its policy manifestations relative to their less sophisticated counterparts. We present the results of these conditional models in column 1 of Table 2, and we also present them graphically in Fig. 2 for ease of interpretation. We also report in the online appendix replications of the analyses presented in this section for independents and Republicans, as we anticipate that the results we report below apply only to self-identified Democrats.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 2 presents predicted support for the two-item racial policy scale. Consistent with our theory, Black Americans at all levels of sophistication strongly support policies aimed to improve their social group position. These citizens, regardless of their political engagement, understand and appreciate these equalizing efforts, which is reflected in their uniformly high support for aid to Blacks and affirmative action. The comparison to white and Latinx Democrats is stark: Less sophisticated respondents identifying with these racial groups are far less likely than their Black counterparts to support policies targeting Blacks' plight. Less sophisticated whites are particularly opposed to these policies, as their predicted support for the two-item

<sup>8</sup> Each dependent variable in this section is constructed using a graded response model. Details regarding these variables' construction are available in the online appendix.

<sup>9</sup> We also specified models featuring three-way interactions involving social group membership, egalitarianism and sophistication in order to assess the marginal effect of egalitarianism conditioned on sophistication across groups. In other words, the three-way interactions reveal the degree to which sophistication moderates the connection between egalitarianism and the group-specific policies among individuals belonging to each social group. Consistent with our hypotheses, the relationship between egalitarianism and racial policy attitudes is strongest among more sophisticated whites. Additionally, although the three-way interaction involving income, egalitarianism and sophistication is non-significant, we do find that egalitarianism is more relevant among wealthier respondents. We find null results in a model predicting support for gay and lesbian rights. We are cautious not to overinterpret these results given the difficulty of estimating models with three-way interaction terms, especially considering our relatively small sample sizes. The results of these supplemental analyses are available in the online appendix.

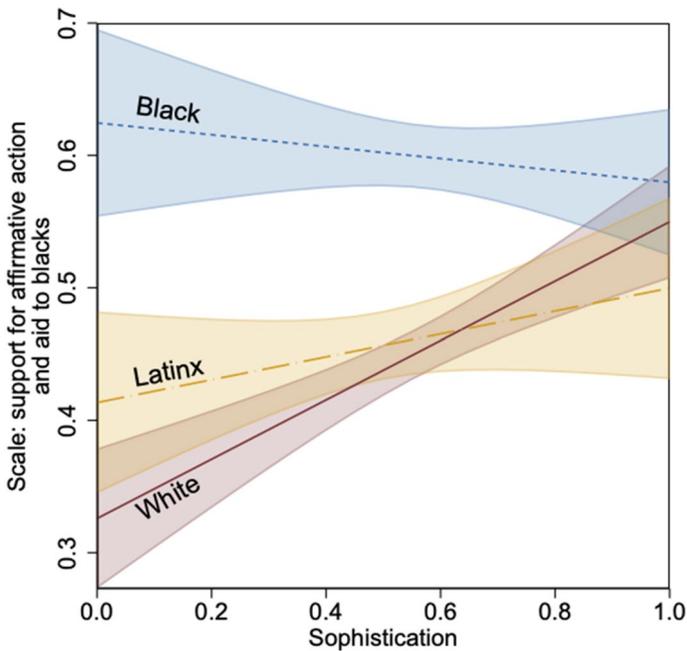
**Table 2** Predicting Democrats' Group-Specific Commitment to Egalitarianism, 2008–2016 ANES

Conditional models predicting democrats' support for group-specific public policies

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Aid to Blacks	Aid to the poor	Gay and lesbian rights
Political sophistication	0.239* (0.049)	– 0.239* (0.082)	0.126* (0.049)
Black	0.296* (0.048)	0.063* (0.017)	– 0.215* (0.024)
Latinx	0.087* (0.046)	0.039* (0.018)	– 0.098* (0.025)
Other race	0.216* (0.074)	0.052* (0.027)	– 0.058 (0.037)
Income	– 0.004 (0.005)	– 0.018* (0.006)	0.004* (0.001)
Sophistication × Black	– 0.270* (0.078)		
Sophistication × Latinx	– 0.113 (0.082)		
Sophistication × Other race	– 0.323* (0.130)		
Sophistication × Income		0.107* (0.028)	
Egalitarianism	0.277* (0.037)	0.266* (0.037)	0.254* (0.065)
Partisan intensity	0.029* (0.008)	0.028* (0.008)	0.006 (0.011)
Ideological self-identification	– 0.001* (0.000)	– 0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Age	– 0.021* (0.007)	– 0.079* (0.017)	– 0.004* (0.001)
Education	0.006 (0.007)	– 0.013* (0.007)	0.035* (0.008)
Female	– 0.010 (0.014)	– 0.003 (0.013)	0.053* (0.019)
Constant	0.236* (0.054)	0.713* (0.063)	0.487* (0.065)
Observations	1,276	1,424	955
R-squared	0.207	0.103	0.216

Cell entries are Unstandardized OLS coefficients; standard errors in parentheses

\* $p < 0.05$



**Fig. 2** Estimated support for aid to Blacks/affirmative action among Democrats, conditioned on race, 2008–2016 ANES

scale is significantly lower than that among Latinx respondents, who themselves are significantly less likely to endorse the policies compared to Blacks.<sup>10</sup>

Less sophisticated white and Latinx Democrats' opposition to these racially equalizing policies represents a slippage between the party's commitment to egalitarianism and its natural policy extensions, perhaps because the policies foster a sense of group competition and a belief that their enactment expenses one's own racial group (e.g., Bobo & Hutchings, 1996). Consistent with our theory, in the absence of the sophistication required to receive and internalize party cues emphasizing the importance of group-specific racial policies for realizing Democrats' ultimate objectives, less sophisticated non-beneficiaries are less likely to support these policies.

Crucially, however, sophistication diminishes these inter-group differences, eliminating them among the most sophisticated respondents. That is, more politically interested, involved and knowledgeable white and Latinx Democrats do in fact appear to translate their abstract commitment to equality to concrete, group-specific policies. Sophistication's substantive effects are sizeable: The most sophisticated whites support these group-specific policies substantially more than their less

<sup>10</sup> We wish to underscore that the Latinx community is not monolithic, as this group incorporates an array of diverse cultures. Nonetheless, we believe that our results evince broad group differences in issue attitudes across policy domains, but we acknowledge that a complete analysis of Latinx political attitudes and behaviors would require a more granular analysis.

sophisticated counterparts. In other words, the former individuals appear willing to endorse leveling policies consistent with their abstract vision of a more equal society. We should note that these differences exist even after controlling for respondents' egalitarianism, ideological self-identifications and partisan strength, meaning that our inferences do not merely reflect more sophisticated Democrats' greater abstract egalitarianism, liberalism or partisan commitment.<sup>11</sup>

We next test for the same dynamic across income groups, as we wish to test our claim that sophistication moderates observed income-based differences in support for policies designed to decrease poverty and enhance poorer citizens' quality of life. We examine anti-poverty attitudes by predicting support for a two-item scale combining traditional welfare and aid to the poor among low-, middle- and high-income Democrats. We again recode the policy scale to range from 0 to 1, where higher values reflect higher program support. These results, presented in column 2 of Table 2 and Fig. 3 below, illustrate that low-income citizens indeed support anti-poverty alternatives more than either their middle- or high-income counterparts, but that these differences only exist at low to moderate levels of political sophistication. Unexpectedly, we find that sophistication is associated with decreasing support for these policies among the low-income group, although we emphasize that these individuals exhibit relatively high support across sophistication levels (and we are cautious not to overinterpret this pattern given the small sample size of low-income Democratic sophisticates).<sup>12</sup>

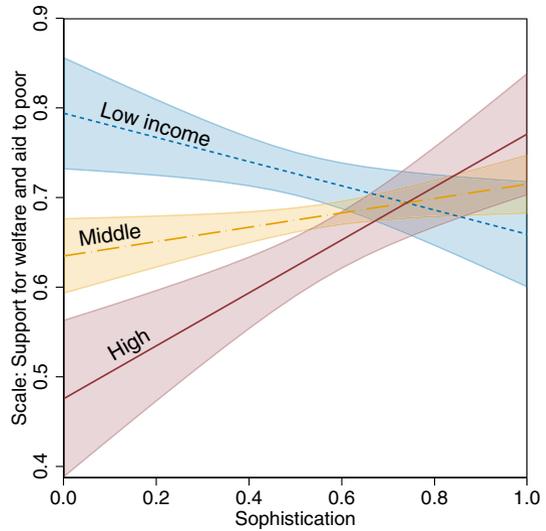
These findings reinforce our observation gleaned from analyzing racial policy attitudes: The target group—here, low-income respondents—expresses consistently high support for programs specifically designed to improve their lives, but other self-identified Democrats—here, wealthier ones—are less likely to endorse these same leveling policies, which offer economic benefits to a potentially competing intra-party group. However, these group differences evaporate as sophistication increases. Politically interested, involved and knowledgeable Democrats support these anti-poverty programs across the income distribution. For example, the wealthiest Democrats are as likely to support poverty relief as the poorest ones among the politically sophisticated. Regardless of sophisticates' lack of personal benefit from these social welfare programs, they robustly support a crucial component of the party's policy agenda dedicated to increasing economic equality.

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<sup>11</sup> Given the contribution of racial prejudice to whites' racial policy attitudes (e.g., Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kinder & Winter, 2001) and ostensibly race-neutral social welfare policy attitudes (Enders & Scott, 2019; Gilens, 1999; Kellstedt, 2003; McCabe, 2019; Tesler, 2012), we also specified models predicting support for aid to Blacks/affirmative action and welfare/aid to the poor, respectively, restricted to white respondents incorporating the four-item ANES racial resentment scale. Racially resentful whites are predictably less likely to support these policies. However, more sophisticated whites remain more likely to support both types of group-specific equalizing policies, controlling for racial resentment and the other covariates shown in columns 1 and 2 of Table 2. We obtain identical results when we replace the measure of racial resentment with either a measure of explicit prejudice or a measure of group preferences created using feeling thermometers. Results of these analyses are available in the online appendix.

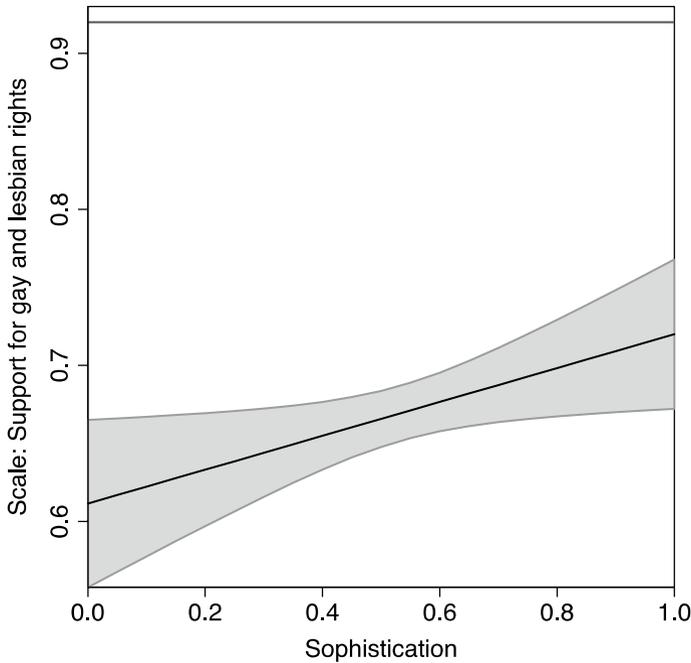
<sup>12</sup> We also may be observing this result because income could be a particularly crude proxy for low-income Democratic sophisticates, as these citizens may be less reliant on traditional welfare because they have working knowledge of the "submerged state" (Mettler, 2011).

**Fig. 3** Estimated values of support for welfare/aid to poor among Democrats, conditioned on income, 2008–2016 ANES



Our final test of social group differences in support for group-specific policies is to examine attitudes toward salient cultural issues. Specifically, we create a three-item scale combining individuals' attitudes toward protection of gays and lesbians from employment discrimination, as well as toward marriage equality and gay adoption. Because the adoption item is dichotomous, we estimate a hybrid IRT model with a two-parameter logistic component for it. We again recode the policy scale to range from 0 to 1, where higher values reflect greater policy support. Although these questions common to the most recent ANES surveys do not encompass the range of policies aimed to grant fuller equality to LGBTQ+ Americans, the items are nonetheless useful for interrogating group differences in support for an increasingly important Democratic policy plank. The 2012 Democratic Party platform included support for marriage equality for the first time, and by 2016 the platform included a range of commitments to reduce discrimination facing LGBT persons (the word “transgender” appeared on the platform for the first time in 2016, for example). This transformation should be especially welcomed by individuals identifying as part of the LGBT community, as well as sophisticated non-LGBT persons who we argue will be the most likely to adopt the party's new, pro-equality official policy positions in this domain.

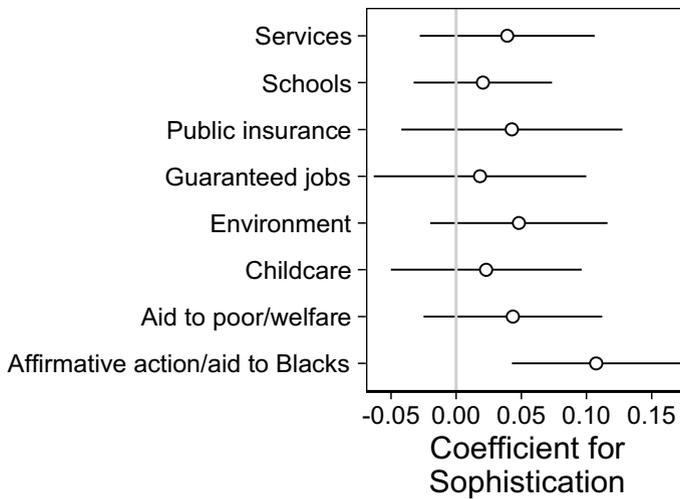
We face two analytical hurdles comparing the target group's attitudes toward these policies to the attitudes of other Democrats. First, support for these policies among self-identified gay and lesbian Democrats exhibits extremely little variation. For example, nearly 90% of gay and lesbians offer full support across all



**Fig. 4** Estimated support for policies designed to reduce discrimination against gays and lesbians, conditional on self-identified sexual orientation, 2008–2016 ANES. The horizontal line in the plot represents the average support among gay and lesbian Democrats

three items. Second, only about 6% of the sample identifies as gay, lesbian or bisexual, so a test of the difference in conditional effects is underpowered. Therefore, we estimate the relationship between sophistication among heterosexual Democrats and compare that to the average support among self-identified gay and lesbian Democrats in our sample. These results are shown in column 3 of Table 2, and Fig. 4 below presents the relevant comparison graphically. The horizontal line in Fig. 4 at 0.93 represents the average policy support among gay and lesbian Democrats. This result evidences what is by now a familiar theme: Members of the social group intended to benefit from the Democratic Party’s preferred equalizing policies almost uniformly endorse those policies. These individuals need not meet any threshold of political sophistication to recognize that supporting these policies improves their social group’s access to social, political and economic resources. However, among non-policy beneficiaries, sophistication conditions support for remedies to these various inequities.

Figure 4 shows that more sophisticated Democrats are significantly more likely to support the measures relative to other heterosexual co-partisans, although we note that a meaningful gap remains between even the most sophisticated heterosexual Democrats and their homosexual counterparts. Just as sophisticates are more likely to have internalized and accepted their party’s egalitarian position toward racial and anti-poverty programs, so too have they adopted the party’s stance toward novel



**Fig. 5** The relationship between sophistication and policy attitudes. All variables are coded so that higher values represent greater policy support

cultural issues on the political landscape, namely those affecting the lives and experiences of gay and lesbian Americans. In all of these policy areas spanning multiple dimensions of political contestation, sophisticated Democrats are the most committed to group-specific policy solutions to American inequality.

### Following or Seeking?

A potential weakness that we identify is that our sophisticated survey respondents may be, as Zaller (2012) fears, answering questions “correctly” by mastering “what goes with what” (Freder et al., 2019) rather than exhibiting a commitment to programs that mitigate equality. In other words, sophistication may simply be associated with more liberal survey responses. Such a finding would be consistent with the literature on “following,” or individuals adopting views that are consistent with their political party (Campbell et al., 1960; Carsey & Layman, 2006; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Lenz, 2012). Individuals holding attitudes informed by core values may also be seeking out parties and leaders that affirm and support these positions (Converse, 1964). In order to examine the possibility that sophistication is associated with liberal policy positions generally—rather than group-specific leveling policies, as we have argued—we investigate the relationship between our sophistication scale and attitudes toward a range of government spending items, including childcare, the environment and public schools, as well

as government services more broadly, plus attitudes toward health insurance and guaranteed jobs. We also include in this analysis two of our original outcome variables—aid to Blacks/affirmative action and aid to poor/welfare—without the group-based interaction terms (e.g., for welfare and aid to the poor, we do not interact sophistication with income). For ease of comparison, we recode each variable to range from zero to one and estimate the models using linear regression. Figure 5 presents the results, where the plotted points represent coefficients with 95% confidence intervals.<sup>13</sup>

We observe that only for aid to Blacks/affirmative action is the relationship between sophistication and policy attitudes statistically significant at traditional levels. Particularly interesting is that the coefficient for support for aid to the poor and traditional welfare is not significant in this model, indicating that the relationship between sophistication and this group-specific public policy exists only among non-policy beneficiaries (i.e., wealthier respondents). We are cautious not to over-interpret null findings given the possibility of Type II errors—that is, given the noise inherent to such an analysis, we emphasize that we do not view these findings as conclusive evidence that sophistication is unrelated to policy positions on these issues. However, the results decidedly contradict the notion that sophisticated respondents simply mimic party positions across all issues. We note that the median *p*-value is 0.228. We therefore conclude that respondents' mere knowledge of the party's positions does not drive our main analytical findings. Rather, we conclude that sophistication fosters Democrats' support for abstract egalitarianism and specific policies designed to provide social, political and economic equality for their party's constituent groups. The conviction that the government's role is to promote equality—beyond knowing “what goes with what”—is the tie that binds the contemporary Democratic Party.

## Discussion and Conclusion

We endeavored in this article to explore the ideological underpinnings of one of the two major American political parties, the Democratic Party. Based on previous studies tracing the origins and expansion of the party's commitment to equality via networks of affiliated intellectuals (Noel, 2012, 2013), party platforms (Gerring, 1998) and interest groups (Schickler, 2013), our goal was to explore policy commitment to this central coalitional core value.

Evidence and experience with the contemporary American political system shows that egalitarianism—the belief that society is unjustly and dangerously unequal, and that the government should act to remedy existing inequalities—is the coalitional linchpin of the Democratic Party. We tested the depth and breadth of Democrats' fealty to this core value using a novel research design linking individuals' social

<sup>13</sup> We present full models results, including control variables, in the online appendix, where we also present results from ordered logistic regressions for those variables featuring few categories. Our substantive conclusions from these models are identical to those presented here.

group membership and position to their support for group-specific public policies designed to assist several integral constituent groups.

Our empirical analyses showed across three separate policy domains that despite Democrats' abstract egalitarianism, those who do not benefit from group-specific policies inherent to the party's equalizing agenda are far from enthusiastic toward those policies. These findings support and extend recent work exploring white political identity (Jardina, 2019), a concept that motivates whites to oppose racially equalizing policies not due to out-group hostility, but rather to in-group favoritism. Our results implicate in-group favoritism across policy domains, as rank-and-file Democrats are far less likely to support policies that do not bestow benefits upon their particular social group. These policy differences presented a theoretical puzzle regarding the unifying force in the Democratic Party: How does the party sustain an egalitarian posture given considerable opposition to equalizing public policies among the party in the electorate?

We argued that political sophistication is important for answering this question because interested, involved and knowledgeable Democrats are likely to serve as "carriers of the creed" whose commitment to overriding coalitional goals is unwavering. Sophisticates are keenly aware of what partisanship entails, and they are most likely to internalize, and strive to achieve, the party's core values. Our empirical analyses of Democrats' attitudes toward group-specific racial, social welfare and cultural policies in three recent presidential election years consistently confirmed our hypothesis regarding sophistication's role in fostering support for these policies. Sophistication leads Democrats to endorse egalitarianism in principle and in practice.

Our findings are important for understanding the nature and extent of partisans' commitment to one of the two major political party's coalitional core values, which galvanizes elected officials, activists and mass public adherents. The fact that a majority of self-identified Democrats are broadly egalitarian is relevant in its own right because this value animates the party's electoral appeals and platform positions. Still, the attitudinal fissures that we anticipated at the level of policy are real and persistent, which is why our revelation that the most aware and involved partisans are willing to endorse policies from which they gain no direct, tangible benefit is crucial for coalition maintenance. Every political movement relies on appeals to ideals beyond potential voters' self-interest, and our results show that politically sophisticated Democrats have signed on to the party's egalitarian agenda, a goal that the Democratic Party has moved slowly but inexorably toward over at least the last half-century.

Although evidence suggested that our results are not driven merely by sophisticated respondents' more liberal positions across the board, a potential weakness of our study is that sophisticated survey respondents could be engaging in "cheap talk," or adopting their party's preferred position with no real commitment to the proposed policies. We believe that this prospect is limited given Democrats' observed real-world behavior. For example, residents of wealthy Fairfield County, Connecticut—like their counterparts in other upscale, blue counties—routinely vote to increase their own tax liability in the pursuit of a more equal society.

We acknowledged that attitudes toward gender equality represent a notable analytical omission given the enduring and widening gender gap in American politics—women are now considerably more likely to identify as, and vote for, Democrats relative to men (e.g., Norrander, 1999; Ondercin, 2017). These differences are at least partly due to the Democratic Party's greater support for women's rights (Wolbrecht, 2000), and likely also due to the increasing number of Democratic women in Congress (Thomsen, 2015), who in turn are important for representing women's interests (Swers, 2002) and attracting women to the Democratic Party. Prior work shows few significant attitudinal differences among men and women Democrats (Barnes & Cassese, 2017), and ideological sorting is at least partly responsible for the contemporary partisan gender gap aligning liberal men and women with the Democratic Party (Gillion et al., 2020), eliminating intra-party differences in gender attitudes. Still, additional work is needed to understand better partisans' commitment to resolving inequities facing women, who represent the majority of the Democratic Party electoral coalition.

Furthermore, we would like to expand the number of analyzed policies, issue areas and values in order to paint a fuller picture of the nature and extent of Democrats' and Republicans' commitment to their myriad aligned social groups. For example, we would like to explore more the breadth and depth of Republicans' anti-egalitarian, limited government foundations, as well as GOP identifiers' adherence to moral traditionalism. We have sketched the contours of these orientations, but a complete examination of values' role in contemporary American party coalition maintenance demands a book manuscript.

Several recent works examine the Republican Party's ideological tenor and behavior (e.g., Barber & Pope, 2019; Sides et al., 2018). Our focus in this paper was instead on the other major American political party, the Democrats, who are often overlooked in studies of values and ideology because the party is conceptualized as largely devoid of philosophical principles (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016). Our analysis showed that the Democratic Party coalition is in fact united by a commitment to egalitarianism, which is driven mostly by sophisticates in the electorate who support public policies from which they do not benefit directly. Our results lend insight into the maintenance and perseverance of the world's oldest continuously operating political party as it strives to implement public policies consistent with its central core value, equality.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest to disclose.

**Research Transparency** The data and code necessary to reproduce all of the empirical results in this article are located on the *Political Behavior* Database within the Harvard Dataverse Network at the following address: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/IAD3SQ>.

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