

Priority Voting: Reconsidering the Role of Issue Salience in American Voting Behavior

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Scholars variously argue that the American electorate has promoted elite polarization, become more ideologically extreme in response to elite behavior, or responded only limitedly to elite change. However, issue salience—the importance that voters attach to specific political issues—is largely absent from these debates. Using two instrument formats for measuring issue salience (traditional ratings and a set of original rankings), we consider the extent to which each set of survey responses conform to a low-dimensional attitudinal structure. We then compare this structure to the more familiar left-right dimension recovered from stated issue position data. For voters across levels of political sophistication, we find that issue priorities relate consistently (and independently of issue positions) to partisanship and candidate choice, and that issue salience is a potential cause of party defection when voters' priorities conflict with their policy preferences.

Keywords: mass political behavior, issue salience, policy voting, measurement models

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1. Introduction

Democratic competition over public policy is as much a struggle for issue attention as a dispute over issue positions. Cognitive constraints, finite agenda space, and strategic considerations all conspire to restrict the number of issue concerns that policymakers can address at any given time. Representation, though usually evaluated in terms of mass-elite positional congruence on a single ideological dimension (or, occasionally, multiple issue dimensions), first requires lawmakers' attention to the matters that voters find salient. Ultimately, the extent to which the electorate exercises control over the political agenda is a central component of the democratic process (Dahl, 1989), and public policy scholarship shows us that problem definition—determining which issues deserve policymakers' time and energy—lies at the heart of government business (Kingdon, 1984; Boydstun, 2013; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 2015). Indeed, democratic politics must first filter a universe of manifold policy concerns into a manageable agenda before it can contest the issues themselves (Riker, 1986; McCombs, 1997). Accordingly, our understanding of voting behavior in contemporary American politics requires us to consider voters' policy priorities alongside their issue positions, affective evaluations, and other political preferences and choices.

Certainly, we are not the first to highlight the role of issue salience in voters' political universes. Seminal models of public opinion have long noted and accounted for heterogeneity in the issues that voters and groups consider to be important. Namely, we should expect to find that voters place greater weight on issues or considerations they find most salient when making political evaluations. Personal issue salience or importance may stem from a longstanding commitment to a particular policy concern (as in the issue public hypothesis [Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990]), or it may instead represent a more temporary priming effect produced by media or elite attention to the topic (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010). In either account, the influence of personal issue importance on political behavior are conceptualized and measured in terms of *conditional* effects. That is, most relevant work considers the role of issue salience in moderating the influence of policy positions on voter choices, usually by estimating an interaction term between measures of personal issue preferences and importance. Policy proximity should have the largest effects on voting behavior when it concerns salient issues—a reasonable expectation that has nonetheless proved difficult to detect in empirical studies (e.g., Leeper and Robison, 2020).

In this paper, we shift focus to instead consider the direct effects of issue salience on voter behavior, something that is notably absent from standard models of vote choice, partisan identification, and other political evaluations. This is especially surprising given a long and robust literature on issue ownership (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996), one which has demonstrated that citizens consistently associate certain issues with each of the parties (e.g., crimes and taxes with the Republican Party; the environment and health care with the Democratic Party). These issue associations are highly stable over time, based on the level of attention that parties devote to issues and the makeup of their demographic constituencies, and frequently lead voters to believe that one party is better equipped to handle certain issues (though see Walgrave,

Lefevre and Tresch 2012). The issue ownership literature implies that voters can directly use their salience attitudes to guide their electoral choices as an alternate means of policy voting, a proposition that (to our knowledge) has yet to be explicitly formalized and tested.

In this paper, we connect the issue ownership and issue public literatures to postulate the existence of an independent attitudinal dimension representing voters' policy priorities. That is, we test the extent to which voters' issue salience attitudes (whether measured through traditional importance ratings [e.g., "Not at all important" to "Extremely important"]) or a novel rankings format) can be represented with an abstract latent dimension(s) in the same way that policy preferences can be represented in a unidimensional or low-dimensional ideological space. To the best of our knowledge, ours is the first work to explicitly model a priority dimension that citizens can use to orient their own perceptions and choices in a way that is related to—but conceptually and empirically distinct from—left-right positional ideology.

Our analysis advances our understanding of how voters have come to organize their issue priorities in a polarized political environment in several ways. One of these contributions is methodological, in which we develop and test a novel measure of citizens' issue priorities. In past work, issue salience has usually been measured using a ratings format: respondents are asked to rate the importance of an issue on a Likert scale ranging from "not important" to "very/extremely important." This format is especially susceptible to the problems of differential item functioning (in which responses are not interpersonally comparable) and non-differentiation (caused when respondents rate all or nearly all items identically; in this case often at the highest level of importance) (Krosnick and Alwin, 1988; Jacoby, 2006). Hence, the ratings-based measure fails to directly reproduce the tradeoffs required by the nature of political competition and determine the issues that voters consider priorities. Reliance on the ratings-based format has also made it impossible to determine whether past findings that issue salience has negligible effects on political behavior are simply an artifact of measurement error (Leeper and Robison, 2020; Hanretty, Lauderdale and Vivyan, 2020; Rice, Schaffner and Barney, 2021).

We employ two strategies to address these limitations of standard issue importance ratings. First, we rearrange the raw ratings into a series of pairwise comparisons indicating whether the respondent rated the former or latter issue in the pair as more important (ties are treated as missing). This approach (adopted from Poole, 2005) leverages the fact that ratings are *intrapersonally* comparable. Second, we develop and field an alternate survey instrument that asks respondents to *rank* the four issues (from a bank of 16–18 issues) they consider to be most important. We argue that the rankings-based format possesses better measurement properties than the traditional ratings-based format because it forces realistic trade-offs in issue prioritization.¹

¹ However, because most surveys use the ratings-based format to measure issue importance, analyzing ratings allows us to greatly expand the scope of our analysis.

Crucially, however, both measures (ratings and rankings) yield similar substantive findings. First, issue priorities are highly structured along a single dimension that corresponds to general liberal-conservative ideological conflict, such that issue priorities are clearly sorted by partisanship. Second, issue priorities are a significant predictor of political choice behavior, controlling for policy positions and standard demographic factors. Our results thus suggest that policy priorities shape party and candidate choice independent of issue attitudes. Moreover, our results show that priorities can reinforce the effect of individuals' policy attitudes if the two align, or else the former can be cross-cutting and drive citizens away from the party or candidate toward whom their issue positions push them.² Finally, our results suggest that issue priorities serve as a way for citizens with mixed or inconsistent policy preferences to nonetheless approximate left-right ideological thinking in their evaluations of the political world. While the effects of policy proximity are (consistent with past work) most pronounced among those with ideologically consistent policy positions, left-right policy priorities have larger relative behavioral effects among voters holding ideologically scrambled policy positions. These findings underscore the need to more thoroughly incorporate issue salience into the study of polarization in the contemporary American electorate.

2. Issue Priorities in a Polarized Electorate

Scholarly and journalistic accounts alike suggest that Democratic and Republican elected officials and activist coalitions are not only ideologically polarized (e.g., Hare and Poole, 2014), but also that the major party elites fundamentally prioritize different concerns (Petrocik, 1996; Egan, 2013; Grossmann, 2014). These policy commitments are closely intertwined with parties' ideological positions (e.g., Adams, 2016). Republicans are committed to movement conservatism emphasizing small government, lower taxes and fewer regulations on private enterprise, whereas Democrats promote the amelioration of inequality via appeals to social groups (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016). Indeed, statistical analyses show that Democratic and Republican officeholders even speak different languages, rhetorically jousting with competing phrases such as "estate tax" and "death tax," or "undocumented workers" versus "illegal immigrants" (Gentzkow, Shapiro and Taddy, 2019). These divergent rhetorical and governing approaches lead voters to perceive parties to "own" political issues (e.g., Petrocik, 1996), perceptions that are reinforced by policy demanders' pressure on the parties to act on issues that the parties own (Egan, 2013; Karol, 2009). That is, major party candidates and their affiliated networks cause voters to link the parties inextricably to specific issues and bring their party attachments and issue priorities into alignment (Neundorf and Adams, 2018; Gruszczynski, 2019).

This leads to our first hypothesis: Policy priorities are polarized by partisanship. That is, we anticipate that longstanding and prominent emphasis among Democratic elites on issues such as income inequality, social welfare policy and civil rights, for example,

² This finding is consistent with recent studies which show that issue salience can mitigate even the powerful documented effects of party cues on citizens' issue attitudes (e.g., Bechtel et al., 2015; Ciuk and Yost, 2016; Mullinix, 2016).

should draw individuals for whom these issues are salient to the party. The same should be true of Republicans and issues such as tax cuts and immigration. New research empirically verifies the existence of intense value conflict among Democrats and Republicans: the former value highly equality, whereas the latter value freedom and morality (Jacoby, 2014). We argue that these unambiguous value distinctions should interact with party rhetoric to carry over into issue priorities polarized along party lines.

However, although our theory connects issue priorities to traditional left-right ideological conflict, we also hypothesize that priorities represent a separate dimension that exerts independent effects on political behavior. This hypothesis is motivated by a wealth of psychological and political science literature. Research in psychology demonstrates that attitudes are deemed important when they impinge upon an individual's self-interest, social identities and core values (Howe and Krosnick, 2015; Krosnick, 1990), and political science scholarship in the American and comparative contexts documents the role of issue salience in performance evaluations (de Vries and Giger, 2014; Edwards, Mitchell and Welch, 1995; Fournier et al., 2003), party choice (Downs, 1957; Neundorf and Adams, 2018; Pardos-Prado, Lancee and Sagarzazu, 2014; van der Brug, 2004), and satisfaction with democracy (Reher, 2014). All of these studies conducted in a variety of party and institutional settings highlight the distinct potential of issue salience to influence citizens' political affiliation and choice.

We argue that an ideologically polarized American political landscape represents a perfect ground for observing these salience effects because polarization raises policy stakes and delivers individuals higher benefits from "winning" and of course higher costs from "losing" on issues of great importance to them. Thus, issue priorities have the potential to pull voters closer to their preferred parties and candidates when individuals' priorities are aligned with their issue attitudes, or else the former can repel voters from the party and candidates predicted by issue positions alone when priorities crosscut issue positions.

Indeed, the phenomenon of issue ownership and issue voting outlined above has been shown to operate primarily through issue salience, as opposed to party competence on the issue or even the ideological proximity of the voter to the party on the issue (Egan, 2013). Walgrave et al. (2012; 2015) term this process "associative ownership," whereby citizens render an issue-based vote only if they perceive the party as "owning" an issue and if the issue is deemed personally important (see also Bélanger and Meguid, 2008). Moreover, evidence suggests that candidates and parties shape their appeals to target "issue publics," blocs of voters for whom certain considerations—policies or social group concerns—are especially important (Krosnick, 1990; Hutchings, 2001; Schaffner, 2005; Sides and Karch, 2008). Elite actors, then, seemingly recognize and attempt to leverage the influence of issue salience to voters' electoral choice.

Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that issue priorities may be more effective than issue positions in tapping into certain politically relevant cleavages. For instance, at least in the American context, standard left-right political conflict poorly captures materialist-postmaterialist divisions (Carmines and Layman, 1997). Issue prioritization

more directly reflects politically consequential manifestations of differences between material and postmaterial concerns (Hersh and Schaffner, 2018). This and other sources of intra-party policy cleavages will often (perhaps usually) be overlooked by a singular focus on policy positions, since it is these positional differences that constitute the fundamental partisan battle lines.

We also note that issue priorities complement directional or discounting model-based accounts of why we observe behavior that is out of line with the standard spatial proximity model. That is, voters with slightly left or right-of-center preferences on a particular issue have incentive to support a more extreme candidate who is more likely to force action and induce policy change (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989). Voters who prioritize particular issues (especially non-technical “easy issues”) are more likely to employ a directional logic in their voting decisions (Adams, Bishin and Dow, 2004; Kedar, 2005; Thaler, 2015). Likewise, priorities involve broad, directional policy concerns in contrast to a set of more nuanced issue positions. Policy priorities, then, offer another pathway to left-right conceptualization above and beyond policy proximity—especially when the behavioral effects of spatial proximity are muted by conflicting or cross-pressuring policy positions (Stoetzer, 2019; Fowler et al., 2023).

We next turn toward our rankings-based measure of issue salience before testing our hypotheses regarding the partisan nature, structure, and effects of policy priorities in the contemporary American electorate.

3. Measuring Issue Salience: Incorporating Tradeoffs with Ratings and Rankings

The profusion of political controversies requires trade-offs on the part of both voters and political elites. Voters must decide between candidates and parties, none of whom will share a voter’s position on every issue. Political elites must compete not only over policy outcomes, but also for limited agenda space.³ Parties must make strategic decisions about which issues to emphasize: those that serve to satisfy and strengthen existing coalitions, or those have the potential to expand coalitions (Karol, 2009). In both cases, voters, candidates, and parties must—deliberately or not— place greater weight or emphasis on some issues than others. All issues may be important, but only some can be priorities.

With this in mind, an ideal survey instrument should reflect the nature of political competition; i.e., it should require respondents to prioritize some issues over others, because this is what citizens must do when they decide which candidate or party will get their vote, contributions, or support. In primary elections, this can involve a directional logic: supporting a candidate who is the most forceful advocate on a personally important issue, even if other candidates hold similar positions on that issue (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Aldrich and Alvarez, 1994). In general elections, moderates and policy cross-pressured voters must weigh issue preferences when deciding between

³ Indeed, agenda manipulation and control are often the most effective means of determining policy outcomes (Riker, 1986).

Democratic and Republican candidates (Hillygus and Shields, 2008; Treier and Hillygus, 2009; Fowler et al. 2023). In theory, there is no reason that a series of ratings questions could not be used to construct a valid rank order of an individual’s preferences over a set of choices. For instance, we can imagine a respondent using feeling thermometers to rate a series of candidates and then infer an ordering of that respondent’s most-to-least preferred candidates from those ratings. However, we cannot construct valid rank orders from ratings when respondents rate multiple (or even all) choices at the same point on the rating scales: a problem known as non-differentiation (Krosnick and Alwin, 1988). Non-differentiation is especially acute in situations where all of the alternatives are desirable; for instance, when attempting to measure the relative importance of core values such as equality, liberty, and social order (Jacoby, 2006). In these sorts of cases, the ratings format allows respondents to evaluate all choices as equally important, ignoring the inherent trade-offs between the values. Consequentially, use of the traditional ratings format to measure personal issue salience may underestimate the influence of citizens’ policy priorities in models of voting behavior.⁴

To measure issue salience in a way that requires respondents to confront these trade-offs, we developed and fielded a rankings survey instrument in the 2016 and 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES).⁵ The question begins with the prompt:

Usually there is no candidate who shares all of our positions on the important issues facing the country. All of the issues listed below are important, but which of the following are the MOST important to you in terms of choosing which candidate you will support?

And then asks respondents, “Please rank which four of these issues are MOST important to you (1: Most important, 2: Second most important, 3: Third most important, and 4: Fourth most important).” Respondents then drag and drop their choices (randomized from the list below) into four numbered boxes:

Abortion	Health care	Social Security
The national debt and government spending	Immigration	Taxes

⁴ For instance, Leeper and Robison (2020, p. 246) note that “the lack of significant interactions [between issue positions and issue importance in presidential vote choice models] is being driven largely by a lack of precision at low levels of subjective importance.” That is, the ratings format provides insufficient variation to distinguish between null effects and measurement error.

⁵ A screenshot of the question as seen by respondents to the 2016 CCES is provided in the appendix. The instrument we describe is identical to the one fielded in the 2018 CCES, except the later survey also includes “trade” and “diplomacy and foreign policy” as options.

Economic growth	Income inequality and poverty	Terrorism and homeland security
Environment and climate change	Jobs and unemployment	The size of the military
Gay and transgender rights	Morality and religious liberty	
Gun control	Race relations	

We then code the responses in two ways. The first is a binary indicator of whether or not the respondent ranked the issue in their top four or not. The second is a scale with values corresponding to how highly ranked the issue is: 0 if the respondent did not rank the issue, 1 if the issue is ranked fourth, 2 if the issue is ranked third, 3 if the issue is ranked second, and 4 if the issue is ranked first (most important). Generally, we prefer use of the binary indicator (ranked vs. not ranked) because individuals do an increasingly poor job of assessing the relative importance of different factors in their decision-making process as they move beyond what they consider to be the most important factor (Rabinowitz, Prothro and Jacoby, 1982).

4. Results

4.1 Partisan Differences in Issue Priorities

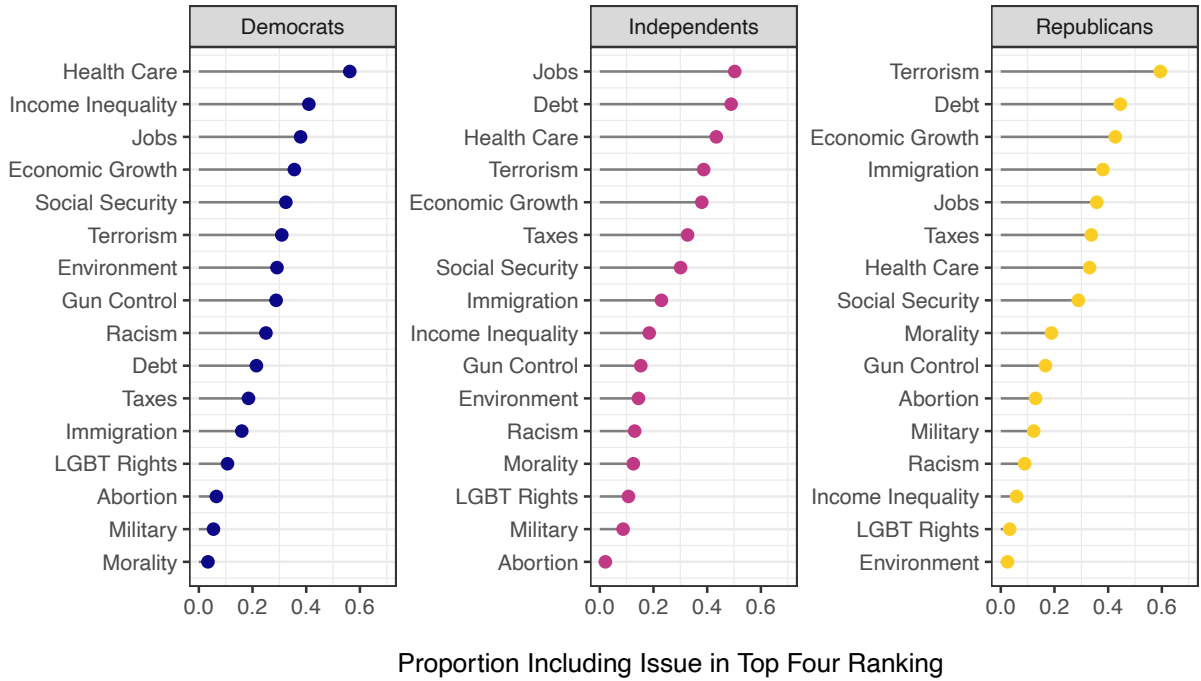
We begin our analysis of the salience rankings data from the 2016 and 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES) by simply looking at the percentage of pure independents, Democrats, and Republicans who ranked each of the sixteen issues in 2016 (eighteen in 2018) as one of their four most important issues.⁶ Figure 1 reports the breakdown of issue priorities by partisanship. We see that issues such as economic growth and jobs are personally salient across partisan groups; while others, such as abortion and gay rights, have low salience across partisan groups. This is not the norm, though. On fourteen of the issues in 2016 (fifteen in 2018), there are significant differences between the proportions of Democrats and Republican who include the issue in their top four ranking.⁷ The partisan divides in salience are largest on issues we would likely expect: health care and income inequality are highly salient for Democrats, while terrorism and economic growth are highly salient for Republicans.

⁶ Throughout the paper, we classify leaners as partisans.

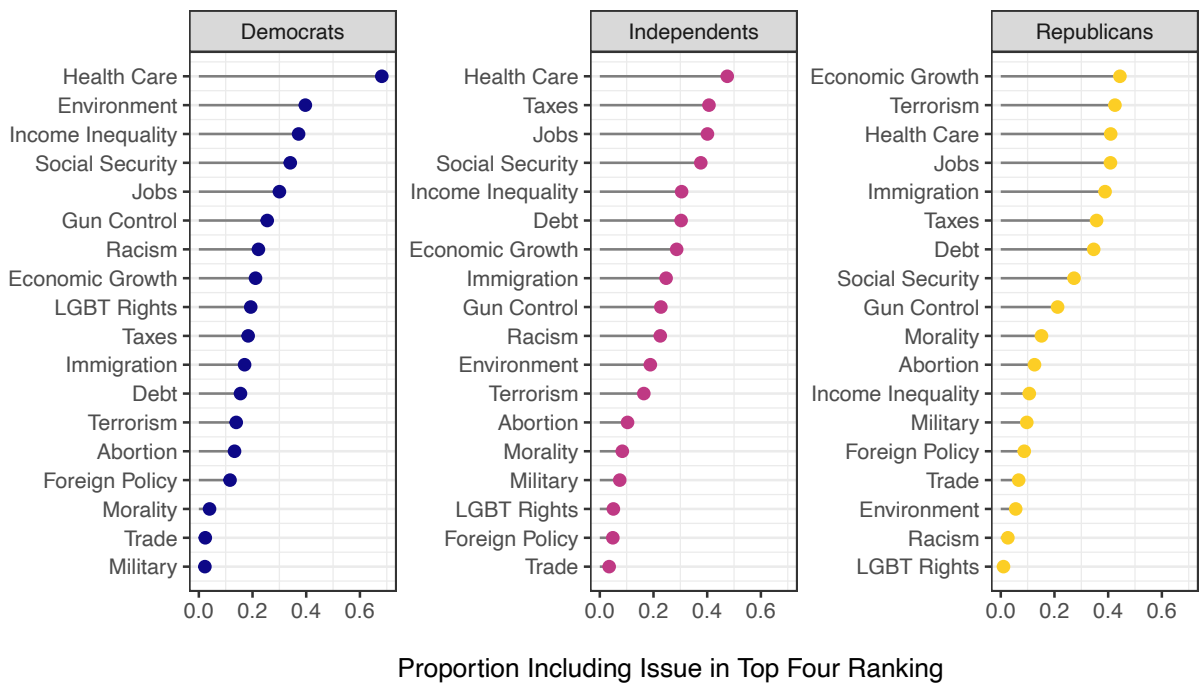
⁷ Only jobs and Social Security produce partisan differences that are not significant at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed) in 2016. In 2018, only the differences on abortion, gun control, and foreign policy are not significant.

Figure 1: Distribution of issue priorities by partisanship. Values denote proportion of respondents ranking issue as one of their top four most important issues.

2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study



2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study



The salience of the environment, immigration, income inequality, LGBT rights, morality, racism, and taxes also divide Democrats and Republicans, albeit to a lesser extent. Even issues that are widely salient, such as health care, feature significant differences between partisan groups. Figure 1 confirms the existence of a yawning partisan divide over which issues qualify as national priorities.

We next consider how voters organize their issue priorities. Specifically, how constrained are citizens' issue priorities along a single dimension—one that parallels the unidimensional nature of partisan and ideological conflict in contemporary American politics? To address this question, we create a series of “votes” that entail all (120) pairwise comparisons between the sixteen issues (abortion|national debt, abortion|economic growth, . . . , taxes|terrorism). For each comparison, respondents are treated as “voting” on which of the two issues is more important. Specifically, they are coded 1 (or yea) if they rank the first issue more highly than the second issue, 0 (or nay) if they rank the second issue more highly than the first issue, and missing otherwise.

This allows us to use Poole's (2000) Optimal Classification scaling method to estimate respondent positions along a latent dimension(s) of issue priorities. This is analogous to using roll call votes or stated issue positions to infer political actors' positions in latent ideological space. Here, we are testing the extent to which respondents' attitudes about issue importance are organized by a single dimension, as well as the relationship of this dimension to standard left-right partisan/ideological conflict. The advantage of using Optimal Classification in this context is that it is both flexible (makes no strict parametric assumptions about the functional form of individual utility) and returns readily interpretable fit statistics (percentage of votes correctly classified and aggregate proportional reduction in error [APRE]) that can be used to assess the number of dimensions underlying the observed choice behavior.⁸

The results show that Optimal Classification correctly classifies 82.9% of 2016 CCES respondents' issue ranking choices in one dimension (with an APRE value of 0.483). These values are 83.7% and 0.495 for the 2018 CCES data.⁹ The inclusion of additional dimensions provide only marginal improvement in model fit, indicating that citizens' issue priorities are well structured along a single latent dimension. To assess the substantive meaning of this dimension and its relationship to partisan and left-right ideological differences, we plot the distribution of Democratic and Republican respondents along the dimension as well as the mean positions of respondents who

⁸ The proportional reduction in error (PRE) statistic measures the improvement the model offers over simply classifying all choices at the modal category. A PRE value of 0 indicates no improvement, a value of 1 indicates complete improvement (perfect classification). The APRE statistic aggregates the PRE values for each vote.

⁹ For comparison, DW-NOMINATE (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007) correctly classifies 87.2% of Congressional roll call votes (with an APRE value of 0.622) over the history of the US Congress with a two-dimensional, constant common space model.

rate each issue in the top category of importance in Figure 2 or rank each issue as one their top four most important issues in Figure 3.¹⁰

It is immediately apparent from Figures 2 and 3 that partisans are polarized over issue priorities, with Democrats clustered to the left and Republicans clustered to the right. It is important to emphasize that only the issue rankings were analyzed by the Optimal Classification algorithm, and so any partisan or ideological differences that do arise must be because those differences are reflected in the way voters evaluate the relative importance of issues. The left-right ordering of the issues along the latent dimension is largely consistent with the results in Figure 1. The issues of LGBT rights, income inequality, and the environment are the furthest left; while the issues of morality, military strength, and terrorism are the furthest right. Jobs and unemployment scales as the most centrist issue.

In substantive terms, this means that respondents with lower scores on this dimension are more likely to rank the cluster of liberal issues (LGBT rights, income inequality, and the environment) as higher priorities than centrist issues like jobs and unemployment, while respondents with higher scores are more likely to do the same for the cluster of conservative issues (morality, military strength, and terrorism). More to the point, not only do Democrats and Republicans disagree about their ideal policies on matters like unemployment, but also do not necessarily agree that such issues constitute top priorities and require attention. Partisans are exceedingly unlikely to view the other side's issues as important.

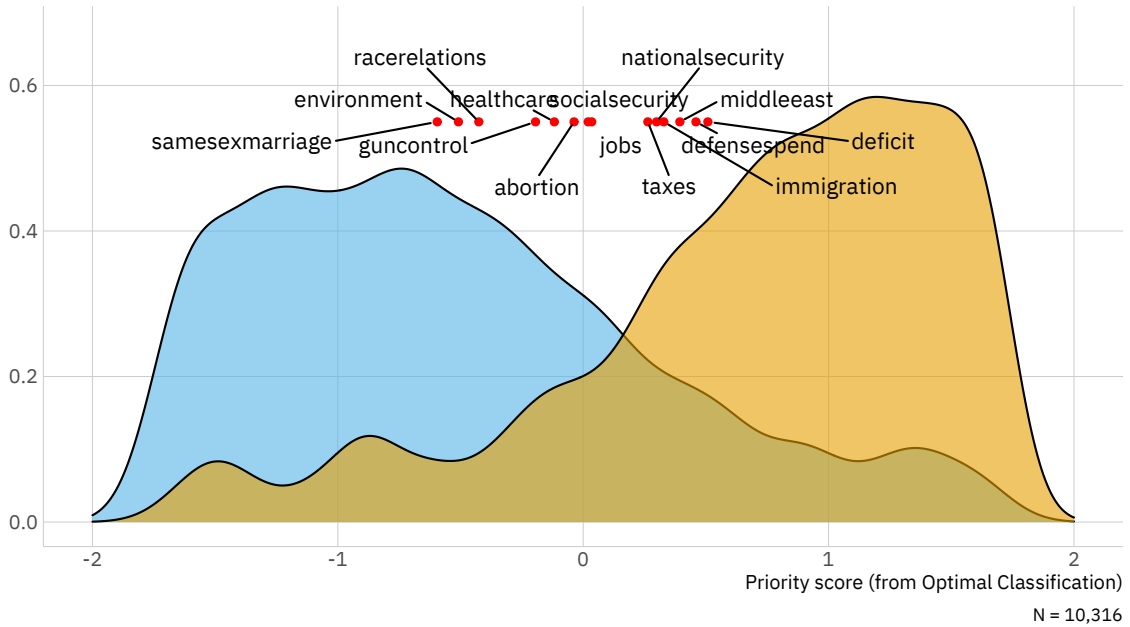
These results indicate that voters' issue priorities are: (1) polarized along party lines, (2) well organized along a single, latent dimension, and (3) that this dimension represents a left-right priorities continuum, with issues at either extreme unlikely to warrant even acknowledgment by those on the opposite end of the dimension. We next examine the implications of polarized priorities by exploiting the cross-pressures seen in Figures 2–3 (i.e., Democrats with rightward issue priority scores and Republicans with leftward issue priority scores) to assess the explanatory power of these measures in models of voting behavior, stratified by level of political sophistication.

¹⁰ We could also show the cut points between each of the issue pairs; but with hundreds of cut points, we think this would be an inefficient way to represent the relationship between the issues and the recovered dimension.

Figure 2: Distribution of issue priority scores from Optimal Classification scaling of issue salience ratings. Points mark the mean score of respondents who rated the issue in the top category of importance. Democratic respondents shown in blue, Republican respondents in yellow.

2015 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Common Content)

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents



2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Common Content)

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents

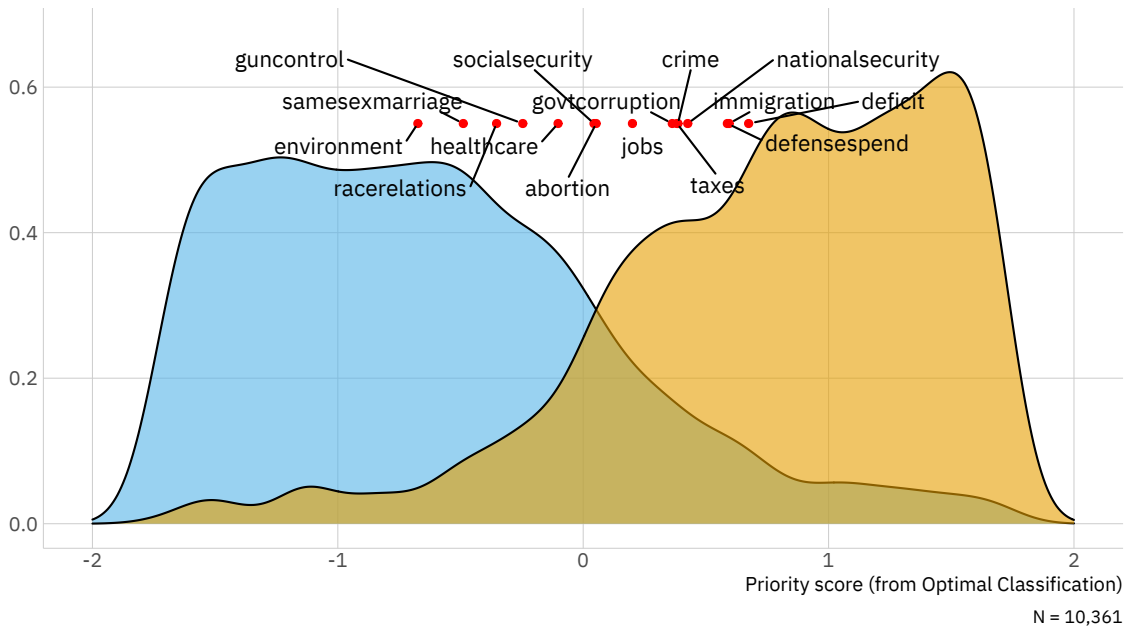
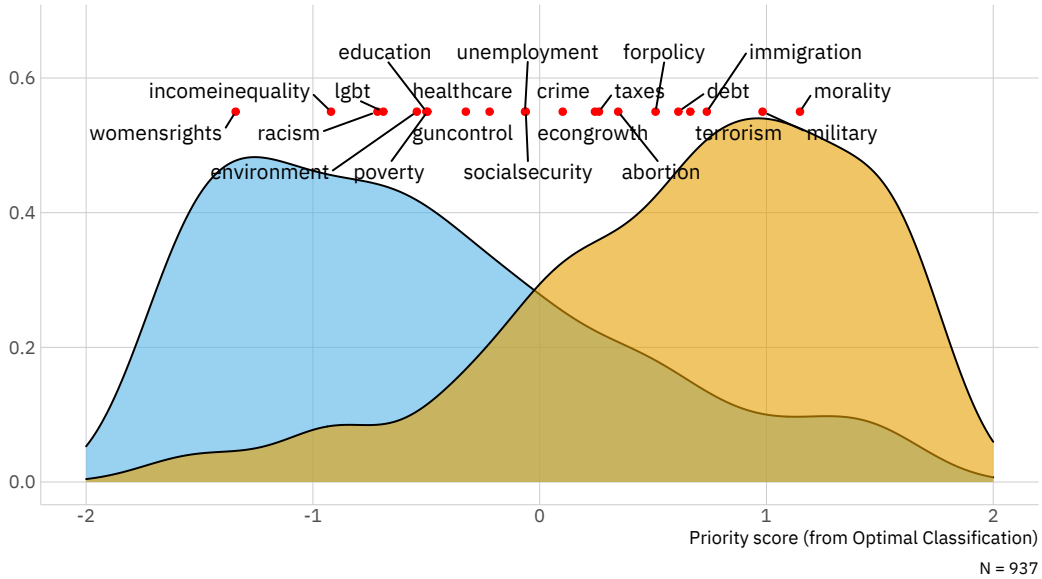


Figure 3: Distribution of issue priority scores from Optimal Classification scaling of issue salience rankings. Points mark the mean score of respondents who included the issue in their top four rankings. Democratic respondents shown in blue, Republican respondents in yellow.

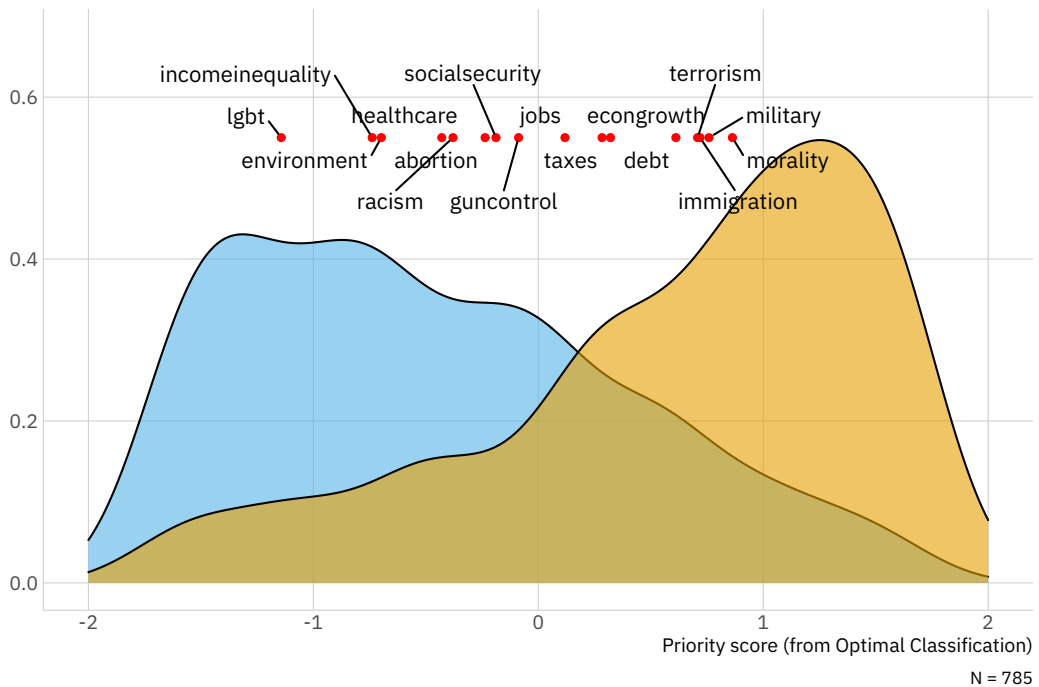
2016 American National Election Pilot Study

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents



2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Single Module: Rankings)

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents



4.2 Issue Priorities and Political Behavior

Finally, we consider the role of issue priorities as determinants of political choice behavior. Do issue priorities contribute explanatory power to existing behavioral models based on demographic factors and policy views? If so, do issue priorities serve to amplify the effects of left-right policy preferences, and do they exert additive effects? And finally, how does its influence vary by level of political sophistication? To address these questions, we test the performance of our measure of issue priorities in three familiar models of political behavior concerning party identification, ideological self-placement, and candidate evaluations.¹¹ Both models include standard demographic variables (age, gender, education, and income, race, and religiosity; as well as party identification in the candidate preference model) as predictors alongside terms measuring the additive and interactive effects of voters' issue priorities and left-right policy positions.¹² Policy consistency is measured using the proportion of each respondents' stated policy positions that were correctly classified by a unidimensional model (i.e., the Optimal Classification algorithm). Based on this fit statistic, we divide respondents into "Low", "Middle", and "High Consistency" terciles.

To measure issue priorities, we use the Optimal Classification scores developed in Section 4.1, which are derived from the issue salience ratings/rankings. To measure respondents' left-right policy positions, we also use Optimal Classification to scale responses to 52 policy preferences questions on the 2016 CCES (57 issues in the 2018 CCES) concerning major Congressional roll call votes and other issues such as Syria, gun control, immigration, abortion, the environment, gay marriage, affirmative action, and government spending and taxes. Consistent with Jessee (2009), we find a one-dimensional ideological model captures most of the variation in respondents' policy attitudes, correctly classifying 80.6% of respondent choices with an APRE of 0.492 in 2016 (81.7% of choices with an APRE of 0.517 in 2018). Accordingly, we use the one-dimensional Optimal Classification scores as our measure of left-right policy positions.

As expected given the left-right ordering of the issues along the priorities dimension, the priority and policy scores are correlated ($r = 0.56$ in 2016, $r = 0.59$ in 2018), but not so highly as to indicate that the two measures are tapping an identical construct. Rather, incongruities between positional and priority dispositions are likely a meaningful source of cross-pressures for voters in contemporary American politics, especially when considered on top of other ideological inconsistencies present in voters' minds (e.g., Carmines, Ensley and Wagner, 2011).

It is probably not too great of a leap to imagine otherwise moderate/moderately liberal voters who place a high priority on conservative issues like immigration or the military;

¹¹ Party identification, ideological self-placement and relative candidate preferences (differences in feeling thermometers) are all analyzed using OLS regression.

¹² Both policy and priority scores are normalized to have a mean of 0 and a variance of 1.

or to imagine otherwise moderate/moderately conservative voters for whom liberal issues like health care or the environment are salient. Indeed, about a quarter of respondents (27.6% in 2016, 24.2% in 2018) have policy scores more liberal than the mean policy score and priority scores more conservative than the mean priority score (or vice versa). This is somewhat of a twist on the standard conception of policy cross-pressures, and its implications for political behavior are examined in the model results shown in Figures 4–5.

Figures 4–5 plot the predicted effects of policy positions and priorities from regression models of various measures of political behavior. While the effect size of policy scores are generally enhanced by higher levels of political sophistication, this is not the case for priority scores. Indeed, in several cases priority scores are more weakly related to choice behavior for moderately and highly positionally consistent voters.

Figure 4: Effects of policy priorities and positions on political behavior. Priority scores estimated from salience ratings.

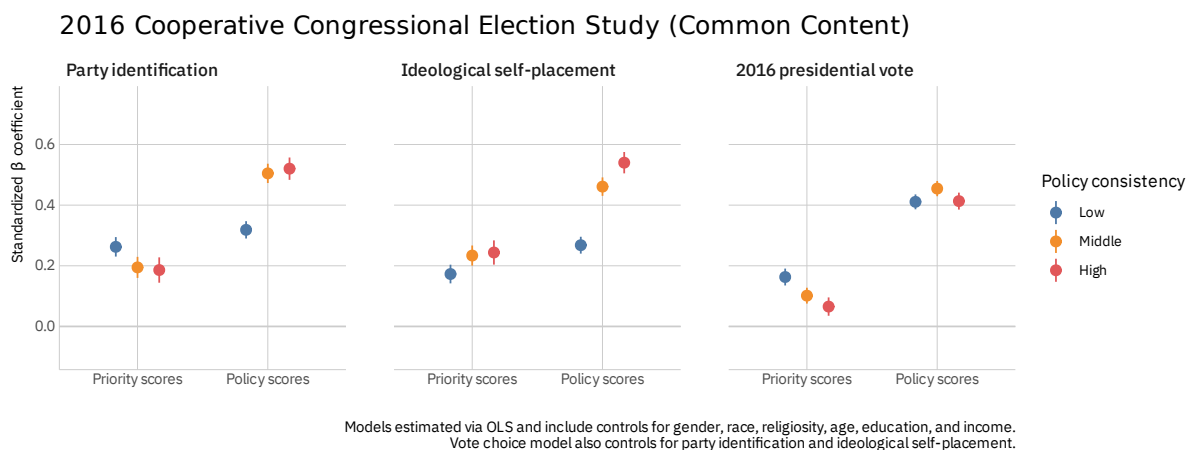
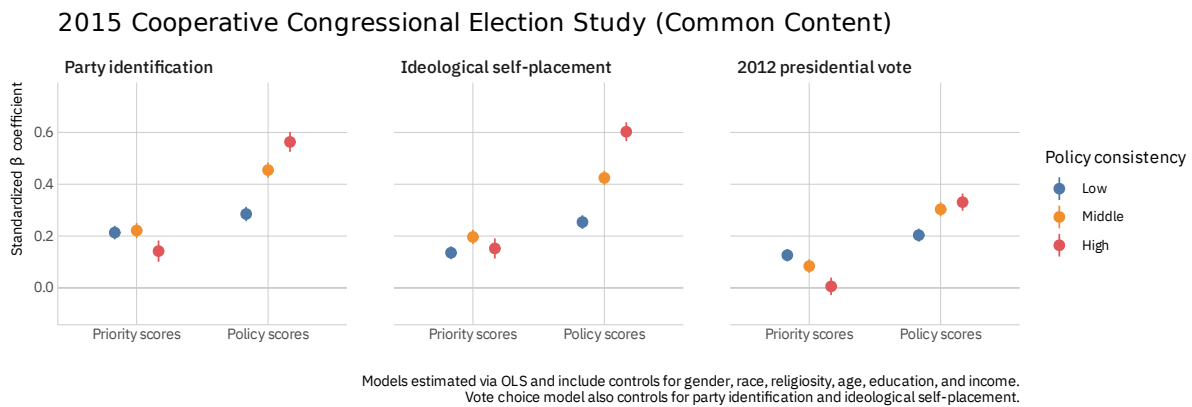
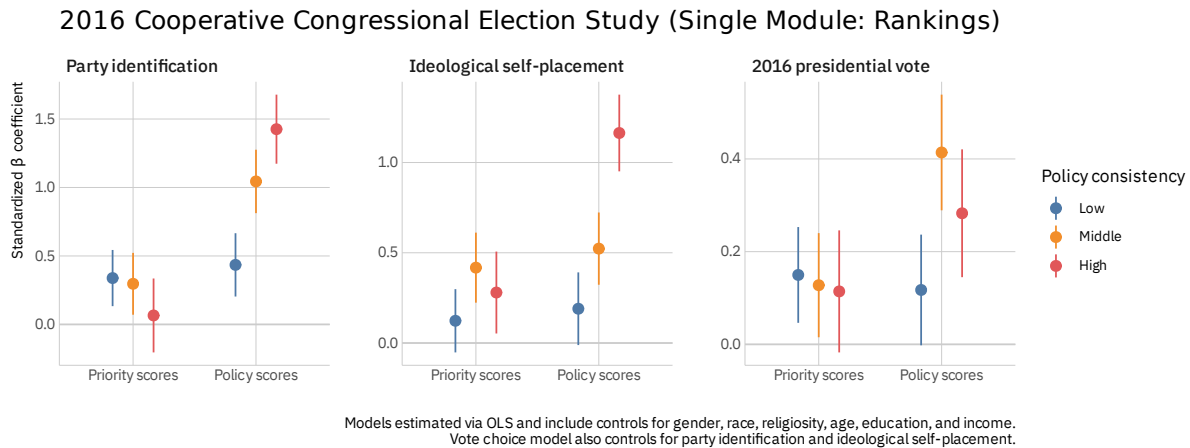
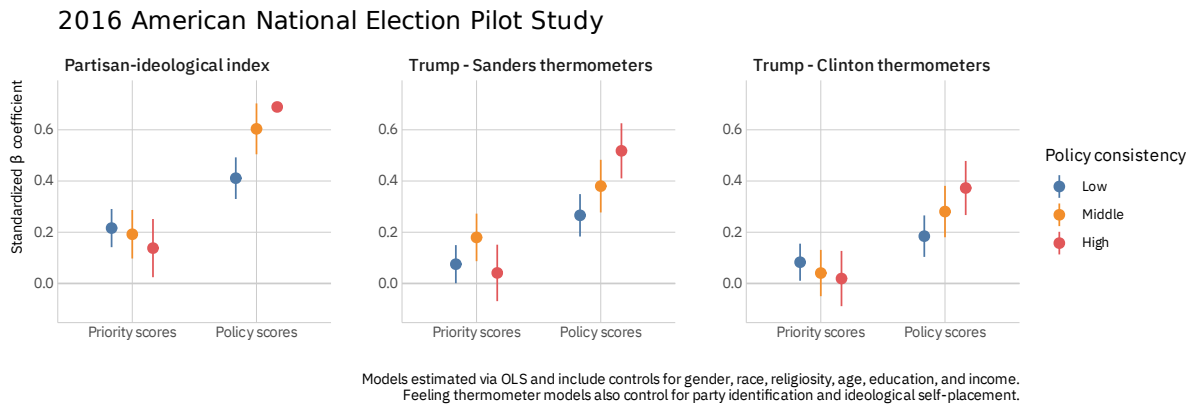


Figure 5: Effects of policy priorities and positions on political behavior. Priority scores estimated from salience rankings.



Policy priorities, though less influential than policy positions across models, are nonetheless meaningful predictors of partisanship and candidate preference. Looking first at the partisanship model, a voter with a perfectly centrist policy score would be modeled as a Democratic leaner if she holds liberal issue priorities, but as a Republican leaner if she holds conservative issue priorities. Likewise, voters at the furthest left and right ends of the ideological spectrum are pushed towards stronger identification with the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively, if their issue priorities correspond to their policy views. Such voters who instead have cross-cutting issue priorities have weaker partisan ties.

This basic pattern is also seen in the ideological identification and candidate evaluation models. Across all measures of political behavior, citizens with consistent policy priorities and positions are stronger partisans and more predictable voters, while those who are cross-pressured between their policy attitudes and which issues they find salient are weaker partisans and less predictable in their vote choice.

4.3 Longitudinal Results from the 2011-2019 VOTER Panel Survey

As another check on our results, we use panel survey data (from the 2011-2019 Views of the Electorate Research Survey) in an attempt to gain causal leverage and guard against the possibility of projection effects (e.g., Lenz, 2012.) Specifically, we construct policy priority scores using responses to the initial (baseline) wave of the survey conducted in 2011 and consider its effects on political behavior measures in later (2016 and 2019) waves. The results, shown in Figures 6–8, provide corroborating evidence that policy priorities are: (1) well-structured along a single attitudinal dimension; (2) highly stable across time; and (3) exert independent effects on partisanship, ideological identification, and candidate choice.

While Figures 6 and 7 reproduce earlier analyses in a longitudinal context, Figure 8 is new. It uses an alluvial format to chart the movement (or lack thereof) of survey respondents across the three panel waves (2011, 2016, and 2019) on the priorities dimension, dividing voters into five quintiles at each wave. Figure 8 speaks to the temporal stability of voters' priority-based ideal points. Movement between quintiles over this eight-year period is minimal and mostly limited to adjoining quintiles (e.g., from "Left" to "Center Left" or vice versa).

Figure 6: Priority scores by partisanship. Values of priority scores and party identification correspond separately to wave.

2011-2019 VOTER Panel Survey

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents

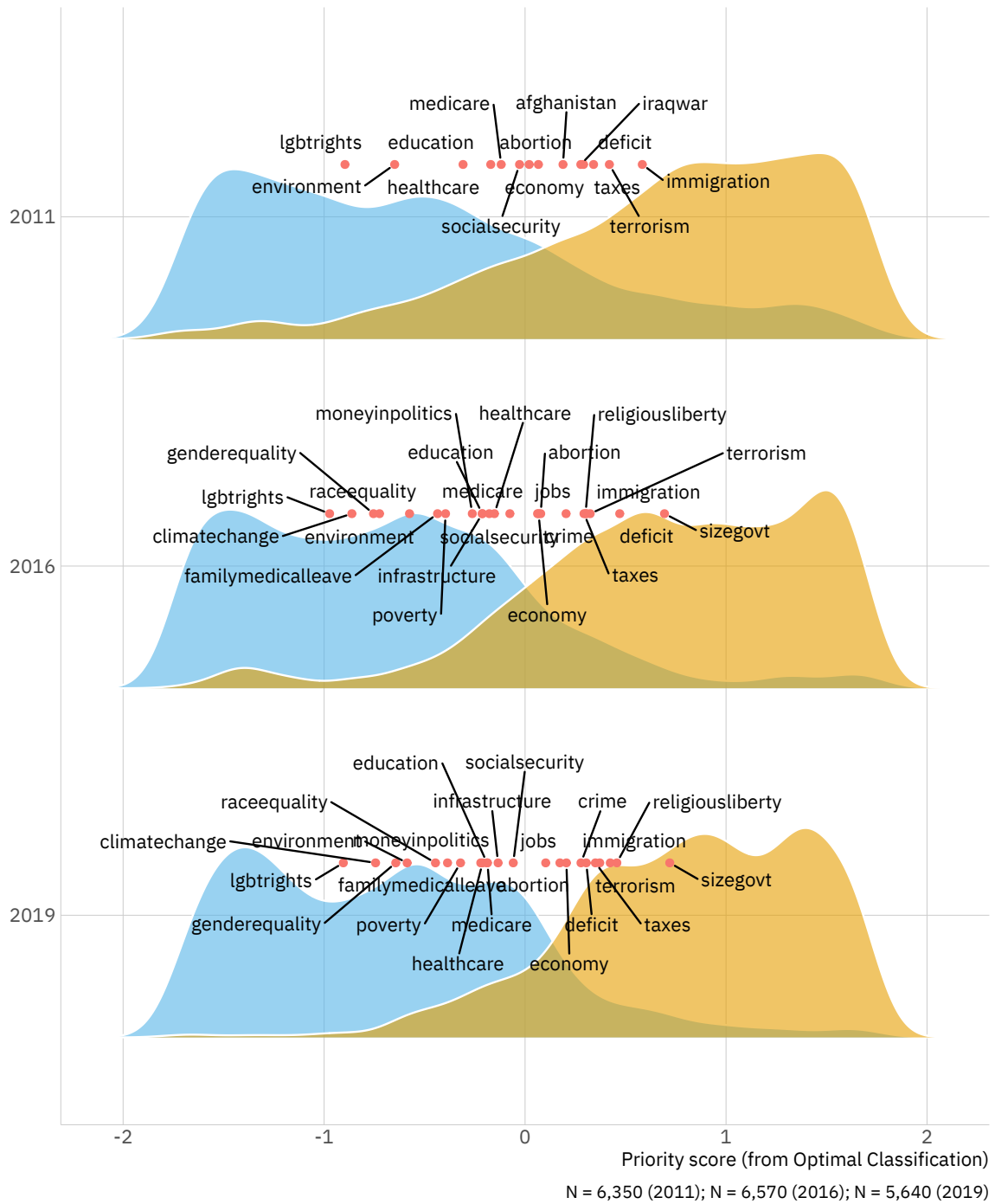


Figure 7: Panel-based estimates of the effects of policy priorities and positions on political behavior, conditioning on policy consistency.

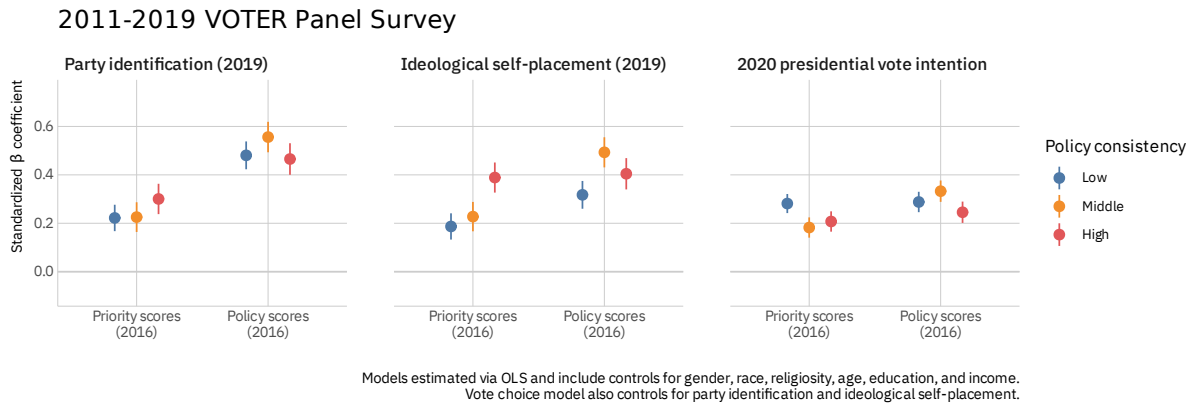
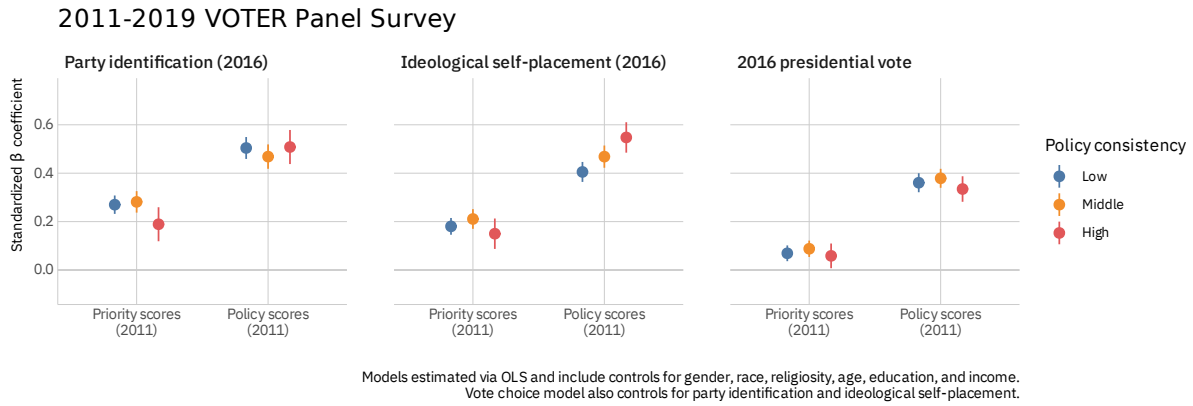
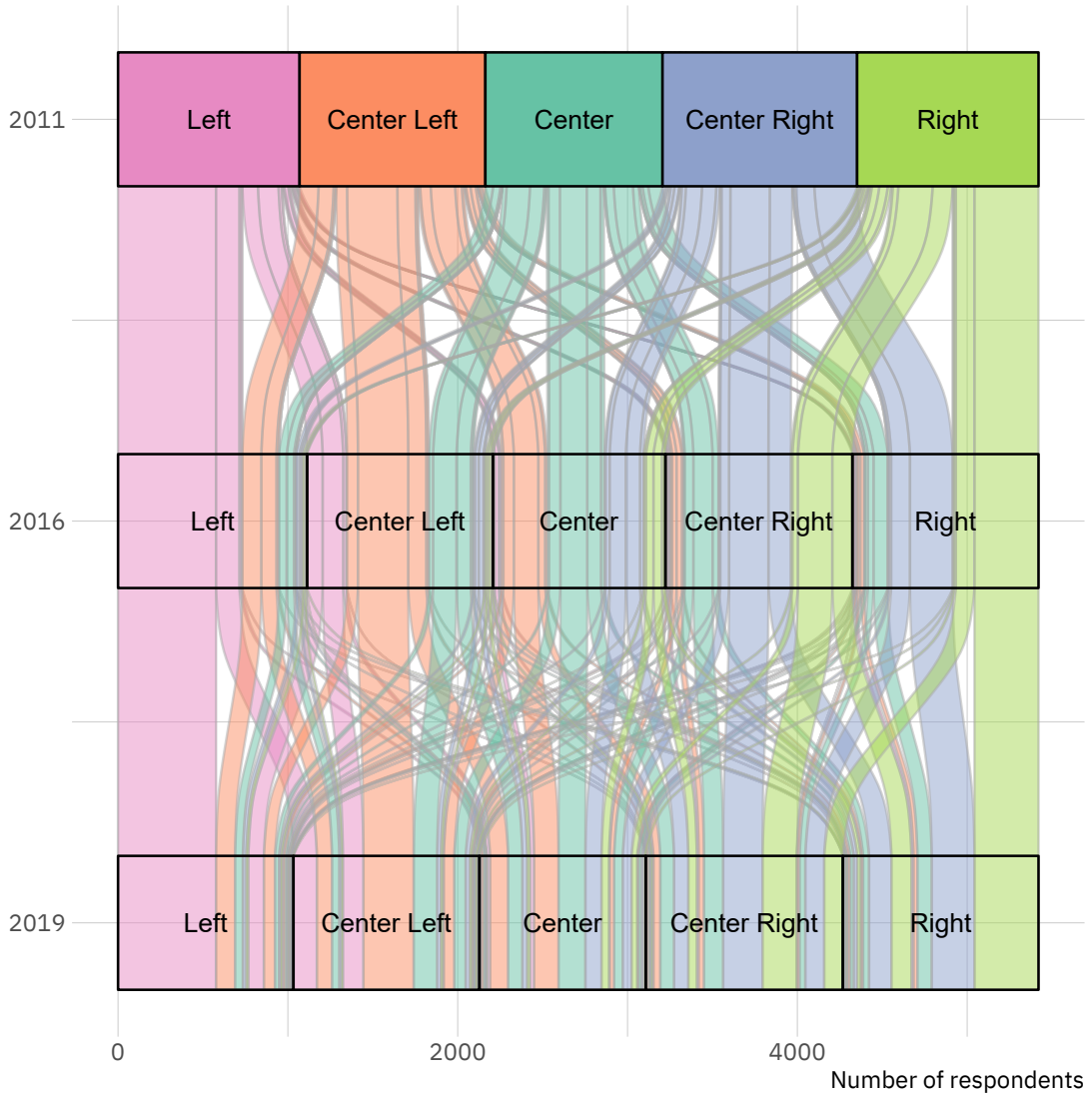


Figure 8: The temporal stability of policy priorities.

2011-2019 VOTER Panel Survey

Respondents binned by priority scores.



5. Discussion

The critical difference among elections is the problem concern of the voters, not their policy attitudes.

John R. Petrocik (1996)

Saliency has long been a central concept in models of voting behavior, but has suffered from its reliance on ratings-based measure. In this paper, we have reconsidered the manner in which we measure issue saliency and developed an alternative rankings-based instrument. This format, which requires respondents to decide which of a small number of issues merit attention, offers a more valid approximation to the choices required of citizens by the political environment.

The scaling analysis of the rankings data reveals that voters possess coherent, well-structured attitudes about which issues are (and are not) priorities. Indeed, a single latent dimension of issue priorities correctly classifies more than 80% of respondent choices. The substantive meaning of this dimension is closely related to the familiar left-right continuum, with respondents at one extreme more likely to find issues such as income inequality, environmental protection, and LGBT rights important to them; while others are preoccupied more with issues like taxes and terrorism, as well as immigration and standards of moral decency. Past work has theorized that issue saliency provides a mechanism for an uninformed electorate to express meaningful political preferences at the ballot box. Our results confirm that citizens hold well-organized rankings of issue importance, and further employ these attitude structures to guide their voting behavior independent of their policy positions.

On the other hand, the configuration of issues along this priorities dimension propels mass polarization in subtle but profound ways. The stark division of partisans along this dimension means that, on many issues, members of one party see no need to even approach the negotiation table. It is not simply that they disagree on the solution—they don't even agree that many of these issues are a real problem. Though true of any issue, those at the extremes of the priority dimension—issues like the environment and the national debt—likely require harsh trade-offs. These include, for instance, some combination of new taxes and cuts to entitlement spending are needed even to slow down even the rate of increase in the national deficit. Bipartisan agreements on such matters seem even further out of reach when we consider the chasm along the priorities dimension.

Our results make clear that issue priorities reinforce but do not mirror existing partisan or ideological cleavages. While approximating left-right conflict, they also create or expose internal party divisions. While the overall influence of the priority dimension on political behavior is modest compared to the traditional policy dimension, both effects are closer to parity among voters with an ideologically consistent mix of positional preferences. Among voters and elites, the struggle for the soul of the parties often involves which policies it pursues—and which it ignores.

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Supplementary Appendix

Format of the issue salience rankings survey item



Which of the following issues are the most important to you in terms of choosing which political candidate you will support? Please rank which four of these are the most important to you.

Drag your choices onto the numbered boxes on the left to rank each of the characteristics below.

<i>Most Important</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Gay and transgender rights
<i>Second most important</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Gun control
<i>Third most important</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Income inequality and poverty
<i>Fourth most important</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Economic growth
	<input type="checkbox"/> The size of the military
	<input type="checkbox"/> Abortion
	<input type="checkbox"/> Race relations
	<input type="checkbox"/> Terrorism and homeland security
	<input type="checkbox"/> Environment and climate change
	<input type="checkbox"/> Health care
	<input type="checkbox"/> Immigration
	<input type="checkbox"/> The national debt and government spending
	<input type="checkbox"/> Morality and religious liberty
	<input type="checkbox"/> Jobs and unemployment
	<input type="checkbox"/> Social Security
	<input type="checkbox"/> Taxes

