

**Do Polarized Issues Carry More Weight in Voters' Electoral  
Choices? Empirical Evidence from a Novel Measurement  
Approach**

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February 2024

## **Abstract**

In this paper, we investigate whether and, if so, to what extent polarized issues wield more influence over voters' electoral choices. Doing so requires a valid way to measure issue importance. To this end, we formulate a novel measurement approach employing conjoint experimental designs to elicit issue importance. Unlike prevailing methods, ours is firmly grounded in the potential outcomes framework and intended to minimize respondents' burden. In the aftermath of the 2022 Congressional midterm elections, we implemented this approach on a nationally representative sample of 2,109 U.S. registered voters. Using the resulting estimates, we study the relationship between issue importance and their polarization. We consider two notions of political polarization: policy and partisan polarization. Our findings reveal that partisan polarization exhibits a strong and significant correlation with issue importance, whereas policy polarization does not. This finding has noteworthy implications for American voters' electoral behavior and raises questions about our measurement approach.

## Introduction

**I**SSUE voting holds a prominent place in our understanding of electoral behavior (Downs 1957; Carmines and Stimson 1980; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). According to this paradigm, voters seek to elect candidates whose policy positions closely match their beliefs. Consequently, when making electoral choices, voters chiefly consider candidates' policy positions and how much they align with their own.

All else equal, voters favor candidates whose positions closely align with their views on a particular policy issue. That said, political debates involve a wide array of matters. Hence, voters must consider candidates' positions on multiple issues. A voter is unlikely to agree with a candidate on every relevant issue. Thus, voters must often trade off candidates' views on different topics, leading them to assign weights to issues and prioritize some over others.

Despite extensive research on issue voting, we have a limited understanding of the correlates of the relative importance of policy issues in voters' electoral choices (Dennison 2019). This study seeks to begin filling this void by exploring the relationship between issue importance and the polarization surrounding them. Our central hypothesis is that issues over which positions are more polarized carry more weight in voters' decisions than those on which a consensus prevails in the population.

This hypothesis can be justified in multiple ways. We discuss three of them. Firstly, voters tend to focus their attention on polarized issues. Even when politicians give equal attention to two distinct issues, voters may not allocate the same attention and amount of cognitive processing to both. This is due to the scarcity of mental resources, leading individuals to be selective about the information they absorb and memorize. Theoretical studies have confirmed that rationally inattentive voters tend to pay more attention to contentious issues (Matějka and Tabellini 2020).

More innocently, voters' attention may be psychologically drawn to divisive issues. This emphasis on controversial topics is likely amplified by the actions of political actors and the media, as they frequently give more coverage and prominence to those. For instance, prior studies have shown that moderates are less likely to run in Congressional elections than extremists (Thomsen 2014). By definition, extremist candidates tend to emphasize their campaign on polarized issues. More generally, to capture voters' attention and highlight differences with their opponents, candidates

may emphasize issues over which their position differs extensively from their opponents' (Simas and Ozer 2021).

In any event, it is reasonable to assume that voters' attention will ultimately be reflected in the weight they assign to policy issues. All else equal, voters will be more responsive to candidates' positions on topics they are well-informed about. On the other hand, voters are likely to ignore candidates' positions on issues they lack familiarity with and, as such, over which they lack definitive opinions.

Secondly, voters may attribute greater weight to polarized issues because their resolution heavily depends on the election's outcome. For topics on which a consensus already exists, the electoral result may have a lesser impact on the policy outcome. This is because even if a candidate with opposing views is elected, they are likely to recognize the unpopularity of their stance and be compelled by public opinion to abandon it. Consequently, the policy outcome is more likely to align with the prevailing consensus. In the case of a policy issue over which the electorate is divided and polarized, the elected candidate will not face the same pressures. Instead, they are prone to interpret their victory as confirmation and validation of their position, viewing it as evidence that the electorate has settled the debate in their favor. Then, that issue's resolution is more likely to reflect the elected candidate's stance.

Thirdly, as voters engage in partisan sorting, a process through which they align their party affiliation and policy positions, their perception of the importance of different policy issues will vary. In particular, they are more likely to change parties if doing so leads to a better alignment with their chosen party over significant issues (Carsey and Layman 2006; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; McCarty 2019). This dynamic should ultimately result in a strong correlation between issue importance and the degree to which policy positions on them are polarized along partisan lines.

We empirically investigate the relationship between issue importance and polarization in the context of the 2022 Congressional midterm elections in the United States. Before this study, no such empirical assessment had been undertaken. We consider two notions of political polarization: policy and partisan polarization. Policy polarization occurs when voters' positions are concentrated around two extremes, leading to a high prevalence of disagreements over which policy to pursue. On the other hand, partisan polarization occurs when voters' positions are sorted along partisan lines or, in other words, when policy stances are strongly correlated with partisan identity. We uncover

that partisan polarization is significantly and strongly linked to issue importance, whereas policy polarization is not. Consequently, our hypothesis, at least as it pertains to partisan polarization, stands confirmed by the data.

Studying the relationship between issue importance and another variable requires a valid approach to measuring the former. Unfortunately, past research has not supplied such a measurement approach. Historically, researchers have relied on self-reported measures, which consist of asking participants in survey studies to assign the importance of different policy issues a number from one to ten or name the issues they care about the most. The ease of implementing these measures has made them attractive. However, it is still dubious that this approach generates meaningful responses connected to voters' electoral behavior (Niemi and Bartels 1985; Wlezien 2005; Johns 2010; Bartle and Laycock 2012; Leeper and Robison 2020). A fundamental explanation for this phenomenon is that voters' decision-making processes are mainly subconscious and unconscious, making it difficult to articulate all the factors and motives influencing their choices.

In reaction, political science has shifted its focus towards measures of issue importance derived from either experimental or observational choice data (Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Schofield et al. 1998; Thurner 2000; Ansolabehere and Puy 2018). This paper expands on previous studies using conjoint experiments to elicit issue importance. Specifically, we conducted a survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of 2,109 U.S. registered voters shortly after the 2022 Congressional midterm elections. During this experiment, participants were presented with 19 proposals. Their task was to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each proposition. Afterward, participants were asked to choose between six pairs of hypothetical candidates running for Congress. Through rigorous analysis of this rich experimental data, we infer how much voters' likelihood of voting for a candidate increases when they share the same position over a policy issue. We assert that this represents a valid measure of issue importance.

We are aware of three recent contributions closely related to ours: Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018), Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020), and Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022). We build and improve upon their respective approaches in two critical ways: firstly, by streamlining the design of the choice tasks, and secondly, by redefining the causal quantity of interest. In previous papers, participants were typically asked to choose between two candidates, and these candidates had policy platforms randomly generated from multiple policy positions (ranging

from two to five) covering various issues (between three and eight). The resulting trade-offs can seem abstruse, even for an individual with considerable policy expertise. Our approach involves simpler choices, as respondents must choose between two candidates with binary positions on two policy issues. This is the simplest task that allows us to infer the relative importance of policy issues in voters’ electoral choices. Also, it is a reasonably accurate approximation of the political world, as political actors already tend to dichotomize policy issues. More importantly, it substantially lightens respondents’ burden in the hope that the resulting measures will more accurately reflect the genuine preferences of voters.

Regarding the causal quantity of interest, the main problem with the measure of issue importance estimated by Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018), among others, is that it may, unfortunately, lead to a misleading portrayal of the relative importance of policy issues, as demonstrated by recent methodological studies on causal quantities of interest in conjoint experiments (Abramson, Kocak, and Magazinnik 2022; Bansak et al. 2022). The analysis by Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020) avoids this pitfall, but their structural measure of issue importance lacks a clear and natural interpretation directly related to electoral behavior. Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022) estimate a measure of issue importance closely resembling ours but do not discuss its theoretical and methodological foundations. To address these concerns, we formally define a novel estimator of issue importance that can be naturally interpreted in percentage points. Our approach is firmly rooted in the potential outcomes framework, which sheds light on the aspects of voters’ preferences it captures. Also, this formalization provides insights into the failings of previous approaches and why accurate elicitation of issue importance can only be accomplished through carefully designed experiments.

Recently, Cavallé, Chen, and Van der Straeten (2022) also introduced a novel approach to measuring issue importance. Like ours, their technique acknowledges the limitations of self-reported measures in revealing voters’ priorities. Often, survey respondents express significant concern for many topics, making it challenging to ascertain the hierarchy of their priorities. This situation arises, among other things, because respondents are placed in a “world of abundance,” where their choices over one issue do not impact subsequent options. Thus, with self-reported measures of issue importance, participants have no incentives to contemplate trade-offs between various topics. To address this problem, the authors propose a new design called “Quadratic Voting for Survey

Research” (QVSR). In this setup, participants receive a fixed budget to purchase votes, enabling them to express their views on various policy proposals. The cost of acquiring additional votes follows a quadratic pattern, meaning that casting more votes to express additional support or opposition to a proposal becomes increasingly expensive. Therefore, respondents are incentivized to thoughtfully consider their level of concern for policy issues and prioritize those that genuinely matter to them. The efficacy of conjoint experiments in eliciting issue importance is grounded in a similar logic. These two experimental designs force participants to confront dilemmas imposed by choices between imperfect alternatives. However, conjoint designs more authentically portray the electoral decision-making environment voters face. This increased realism lends them more credibility for measuring issue importance in the electoral context. In contrast, QVSR better reflects the trade-offs between policies’ benefits and direct or opportunity costs, which are undeniably relevant to policymaking but rarely considered in election campaigns.

In addition to its implications for political science, our paper holds significant methodological and substantive relevance to the literature on attitude strength in psychology (Howe and Krosnick 2017). Issue importance can be likened to attitude strength in the issue voting’s context. Here, we showcase an innovative approach to measure attitude strength in binary choices, which has potential applications beyond politics. Also, our paper explores the relationship of attitude strength with an important dimension of social identity, namely, partisanship.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we formally define the causal conception of issue importance we aim to measure. Next, we provide a comprehensive overview of the experimental design employed to measure issue importance and polarization, accompanied by a description of the underlying statistical methodology. We then present our findings on issue importance and polarization separately and in relation to each other. Finally, we derive insights from these results, emphasizing their significance in furthering our understanding of issue importance and its relationship with political polarization.

## **The Causal Conception of Issue Importance**

We consider electoral contests between two candidates, respectively labeled 0 and 1. In this context, voters’ task is straightforward: they are presented with candidates’ policy profiles and must decide

which one to vote for. Let  $Y_i(\boldsymbol{\theta}_0, \boldsymbol{\theta}_1)$  denote the probability that voter  $i$  chooses candidate 1 when candidate 0 has policy profile  $\boldsymbol{\theta}_0 \in \Theta$  and candidate 1 has policy profile  $\boldsymbol{\theta}_1 \in \Theta$ , where  $\Theta$  is the set of all possible policy profiles.

A policy profile  $\boldsymbol{\theta}_j \in \Theta$  consists of  $k$  elements, each representing the position of candidate  $j$  on some issue. To make policy issues more tangible, we condense them into succinct reform proposals. For example, we encapsulate the complex issue of abortion into the following proposition: “The right to an abortion should be guaranteed by federal law.” Provisionally, each component of a candidate’s policy profile can be understood to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the corresponding proposal.

Following the pure theory of issue voting, we assume that all pertinent information for voters’ decision-making is contained in the candidates’ policy profiles. Accordingly, candidates’ labels do not convey information valuable to voters’ electoral choices. In this case, interchanging the policy profiles between candidates 0 and 1 should merely result in a reversal of the candidates’ probability of being chosen by a particular voter:

$$Y_i(\boldsymbol{\theta}, \boldsymbol{\theta}') = 1 - Y_i(\boldsymbol{\theta}', \boldsymbol{\theta}) \text{ for all } \boldsymbol{\theta}, \boldsymbol{\theta}' \in \Theta.$$

Our conception of issue importance relates to the relative intensity of voters’ preferences on policy issues as reflected in the extent to which their electoral choices are sensitive to candidates’ positions over them. In other words, we envision issue importance as being proportional to the magnitude of the effect of candidates’ policy positions on voters’ support. The underlying logic is simple: the heavier a policy issue weighs in voters’ electoral choices, the greater the influence candidates’ stances on that issue will have on their choices.

Before we move on, it is crucial to distinguish issue importance from issue salience as they represent separate albeit potentially correlated concepts. Issue salience pertains to the level of attention political actors, including candidates, allocate to policy issues. It is typically measured by the extent to which individuals actively seek information or engage in discussions and debates related to specific policy matters. In general, we expect voters to pay greater attention to issues carrying a higher weight in their choices. Also, voters may ascribe a greater weight to policy issues politicians frequently discuss. However, issue importance, as we define it, centers on the effect of



candidates' policy positions on voters' electoral choices. Accordingly, it has a narrower definition and is directly related to electoral behavior.

A naive approach to measuring issue importance would be considering the effect of candidates' raw policy positions on voters' choices. For example, we could estimate the extent to which voters are more or less likely to vote for a candidate who supports enacting a federal law safeguarding the right to seek an abortion compared to one who holds the opposite view. More generally, we can estimate for each issue the extent to which voters are more inclined to vote for a candidate who agrees with the corresponding proposal compared to one who opposes it. With these estimates in hand, the reader might be tempted to interpret their magnitude as a measure of issue importance. This approach has been employed by eminent scholars, including Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018).

The problem with this approach lies in its failure to recognize that the effect of candidates' positions on individual voters' choices critically depends on their preferred position. Indeed, all else equal, voters are more likely to support a candidate whose policy positions align with their views on a particular issue and are less likely to vote for a candidate with opposing views. Accordingly, espousing a policy proposal will increase the chances of a candidate being selected by proponents of the proposal while diminishing the probability of being chosen by opponents.

This heterogeneity in voters' responses dilutes the overall effect of candidates' policy positions on voters' choices, pulling it closer to zero. This occurs because this effect is calculated by averaging conditional effects with different signs depending on voters' preferred position. To illustrate this, let us consider the example of an electorate evenly divided on a given policy issue, with half of the voters supporting the underlying proposal and the other half opposing it. Assuming that the magnitude of the effect of candidates' policy positions on voters' support conditional on their preferred position is constant across all voters, the estimated impact of candidates' policy positions on voters' support will be null, as the positive effect on supporters cancels out the negative impact on opponents. Nonetheless, the behavior of individual voters is still, by assumption, strongly influenced by candidates' positions on that issue. This measurement approach hides that reality.

This argument is consistent with the observations made by Abramson, Kocak, and Magazinnik (2022) and Bansak et al. (2022) regarding the causal effect of candidates' attributes on voters' support and, more specifically, how it aggregates voters' heterogeneous preferences. In short,

their analysis reveals that average effects can paint a deceptive portrait of voters’ preferences because they concurrently capture the intensity and direction of voters’ preferences. For instance, a negative average effect might conceal a situation where most voters support a policy proposal, but the opposing minority is more sensitive to this policy issue. Therefore, the magnitude of the unconditional effect of candidates’ policy positions on voters’ decisions does not reflect issue importance accurately. This inconsistency arises because the latter relates to the intensity of voters’ preferences, whereas the former encompasses the strength and direction of these preferences.

We introduce an alternative approach that accounts for the heterogeneity in voters’ responses. This approach involves recasting policy profiles to denote whether the candidate agrees or disagrees with the voter’s stance on each policy issue. Specifically, we assign a value of 1 to  $\theta_{jk}$  if candidate  $j$  agrees with the voter on issue  $k$ , and  $-1$  otherwise. Accordingly,  $\theta_{jk}$  now captures the interaction of candidates’ and voters’ policy positions. With this reformulation, we formally define issue importance as the causal effect of agreeing with a candidate’s position on a policy issue on a voter’s probability of voting for that candidate. This is consistent with the logic underlying our conception of issue importance: when voters are deeply concerned about a specific issue, they tend to be uncompromising and only vote for candidates who share their views. Conversely, if voters do not attach significant importance to a topic, they are more likely to compromise and vote for a candidate with whom they disagree on that specific issue.

Formally, we measure the relative importance of a policy issue through the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of agreeing with a candidate’s stance on that issue on the probability of a voter choosing them over the opposite candidate:

$$\bar{\pi}_\ell = \mathbb{E} [Y_i(\boldsymbol{\theta}_0, \boldsymbol{\theta}_{1,-\ell}, \theta_{1\ell} = 1) - Y_i(\boldsymbol{\theta}_0, \boldsymbol{\theta}_{1,-\ell}, \theta_{1\ell} = -1)], \quad (1)$$

where the expectation is computed over all individuals in the population as well as over the joint distribution of candidate 0’s policy positions and candidate 1’s positions on policy issues excluding issue  $\ell$ .<sup>1</sup> Note that  $\theta_{j\ell}$  refers to the  $\ell^{\text{th}}$  component of candidate  $j$ ’s policy profile, while  $\boldsymbol{\theta}_{j,-\ell}$

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1. In general, the effect of a policy issue on the probability that a voter selects a candidate varies based on the other values in the candidates’ policy profiles. Specifically, the impact of agreeing with a candidate on a policy issue can be influenced by two factors: (i) the candidate’s positions on other policy issues, and (ii) the policy positions of the alternative candidate. To generate a statistic capturing the average effect of a single issue, we can “average out” these other factors. This is what the AMCE does.

denotes the remaining components. It is important to note that the joint distribution remains constant regardless of the position of candidate 1 on issue  $\ell$ . In other words, it is independent of the candidate’s stance on the topic of interest. This is crucial for the marginal nature of the effect described in Equation (1). Indeed, the equation quantifies the change in voters’ choices resulting from altering the  $\ell^{\text{th}}$  component of candidate 1’s policy profile while keeping all other factors fixed, including the distribution of other relevant factors.

Without loss of generality, we can focus solely on the effect of candidate 1’s policy positions on voters’ responses. Indeed, if we assume that candidates 0 and 1 are a priori identical and that all factors relevant to voters’ decision-making are captured in their policy profiles, any modification in candidate 0’s policy profile should have a symmetric effect on the likelihood of this candidate being chosen by voters.

With either experimental or observational choice data, an estimate of the AMCE can easily be derived by computing the difference between the probability of a voter choosing a candidate they agree with on issue  $\ell$  and the probability of voting for a candidate they disagree with on that specific issue:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta_\ell = & \mathbb{P}(\text{Voting for a candidate} \mid \text{Agreeing with the candidate on issue } \ell) \\ & - \mathbb{P}(\text{Voting for a candidate} \mid \text{Disagreeing with the candidate on issue } \ell). \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

If treatment assignment is independent of potential outcomes, then  $\Delta_\ell$  consistently captures the AMCE of a voter agreeing with a candidate’s stance on issue  $\ell$  on their likelihood of choosing that candidate. One way to ensure this is the case is to randomize attributes in policy profiles.

Admittedly, the depiction of policy issues via reform proposals and the binary nature of political actors’ positions play a significant role in this approach. This is also one of the main distinctions between our approach and the one employed by Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018) and Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020). In the context of general elections, this assumption does not result in a substantial loss of generality, as political actors already tend to adopt conflicting and dichotomous stances. This assumption may have more significant repercussions when depicting primary candidates, as they may espouse more nuanced positions over one side of the policy space. An argument could be made that allowing for a more detailed and refined representation of policy

issues and positions would enhance the flexibility and generalizability of our approach. However, respondents are likely to struggle to understand the subtleties inherent to these representations. This would lead to confusion and, ultimately, noise. Respondents are much better equipped to adjudicate dichotomous issues.

Relatedly, although this concern applies to all experimental designs and all ways of representing policy issues, including those of Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018), Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020), and Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022), our findings might be affected by the specific wording of the reforms chosen to represent policy issues. To prevent our findings from being disproportionately influenced by the representation of policy issues, we deem it crucial to select propositions that political parties could genuinely discuss and differ on. We further investigate this issue in the Results section.

## Experimental Design

The prospect of estimating issue importance using observational data may appear enticing. Indeed, by fielding a survey, we can gather information about voters' policy preferences and electoral choices.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, we can collect data on candidates' stances on policy issues. Equipped with this information, estimating issue importance using the estimator outlined in Equation (2) is straightforward.

It would be reasonable to expect the resulting measures of issue importance to reflect the relative weight of policy issues in voters' electoral choices because these measures are derived from data closely linked to voters' decisions. However, there are significant limitations to the observational approach. In elections, voters are presented with a limited set of alternatives. These alternatives have fixed policy profiles. Thus, treatment assignment for a given election is determined solely by subjects' views, causing potential outcomes to vary systematically between treatment and control groups. Also, voters' decisions are influenced by non-policy factors, especially candidates' characteristics, which are difficult to account for systematically. The observational approach has limitations regarding the range of issues it can study. For instance, it can only consider issues on

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2. We do not address some factors that negatively impact the credibility of self-reported electoral choices. One such factor is the presence of biases, such as the "winner effect," which can influence subjects' willingness to report their choices accurately. These biases undermine the reliability of survey data in general, not specifically that of our experiment.

**Table 1: Policy Proposals**

#	Issue	Proposal
1	Abortion	The right to an abortion should be guaranteed by federal law
2	Climate Change I	Corporations should be taxed based on the carbon emissions they produce
3	Climate Change II	The government should provide more incentives to increase the use of hybrid and electric vehicles
4	Climate Change III	Power companies should be required to use more energy from renewable sources
5	Climate Change IV	We should plant a trillion more trees worldwide to absorb carbon emissions in the atmosphere
6	Climate Change V	The federal government should give a tax credit to encourage businesses to develop technology that captures and stores carbon emissions
7	Defense	The federal government should reduce its defense spending
8	Deficit	The federal government should eliminate its deficit
9	Democracy	The Electoral College should be eliminated, and the candidate who wins the most votes nationwide should be elected President
10	Education	The government should provide universal, high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds
11	Gun Control	The federal government should create a central database to track all firearm sales
12	Health Care	The federal government should create a national single-payer health care insurance program to replace existing private health insurance plans
13	Higher Education	Public colleges and universities should be free for students from low- and moderate-income families
14	Immigration	The government should establish a way for immigrants who are here illegally to stay legally
15	Marijuana	The recreational use of marijuana should be legal nationwide
16	Minimum Wage	The federal minimum wage should be raised to \$15 per hour
17	Racial Equality	Descendants of people enslaved in the United States should be paid reparations
18	Social Security	The federal government should reduce Social Security benefits to ensure the program's perennity
19	Taxes	The highest marginal federal personal income tax rate should be reduced to 35%

Imagine you had to choose in the past midterm elections between two candidates for Congress, A and B. The two candidates were asked about their positions on two issues. Their answers are reproduced below.

Candidate A	Candidate B
The highest marginal federal personal income tax rate should be reduced to 35%	The highest marginal federal personal income tax rate should NOT be reduced to 35%
The federal government should create a central database to track all firearm sales	The federal government should NOT create a central database to track all firearm sales

Given only the above information, who would you have voted for in the past midterm elections? If the positions are the same, please pick either one.

- I would have voted for Candidate A
- I would have voted for Candidate B

Question 1 of 6



Figure 1: Example of a Conjoint Question

which candidates have taken a stance while leaving unexamined latent and universally supported issues. Lastly, candidates strategically select which issues to publicly address, presumably based on their perception of their relative importance. This strategic behavior introduces biases that can be likened to those observed in spatial estimates of legislators' ideal points (Clinton and Meirowitz 2001).

Given the difficulties inherent in estimating issue importance using observational data, we opt for an experimental approach. In particular, we implement a fully randomized conjoint design. This methodology addresses many of the shortcomings associated with the observational approach. Firstly, it enables us to construct hypothetical policy profiles in which candidates' positions are independently distributed from voters' characteristics and issues' relative importance. Also, this design allows us to evaluate the weight of topics candidates on which candidates have not yet taken a stance or on which all candidates share the same position. Lastly, the experimental approach allows us to collect richer data on voters' choices by presenting them with multiple pairs of hypothetical candidates and eliciting repeated observations.

Our survey instrument consists of two sets of questions. The first set elicits subjects' views on various policy issues. Specifically, we inquire about their support or opposition to 19 proposals spanning 15 policy areas. Topics were selected to encompass a mix of prominent and potentially overlooked policy issues. Reform proposals were deliberately crafted to be concrete, capturing elements over which realistic disagreements between candidates could arise. The resulting propositions are listed in Table 1.

For each prompt, subjects are provided with five options: (i) Strongly support, (ii) Somewhat support, (iii) Neutral, (iv) Somewhat oppose, and (v) Strongly oppose. To streamline the analysis and neutralize individual-level variations in the use of response scales, we consolidate the five options into three categories, keeping their orientation but disregarding their strength: (i) Support, (ii) Neutral, and (iii) Oppose.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of subjects' responses to the initial set of questions can be seen in Figure S1 in the Online Appendix. Additionally, Figure S2 presents the distribution of subjects' responses to these questions, categorized by their self-reported party identification.

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3. Including a neutral option is valuable as it enables us to collect a broader range of responses and capture the full spectrum of subjects' opinions. By offering subjects the choice to select a neutral option, we respect their uncertainty or lack of a strong inclination towards agreement or disagreement. This reduces the likelihood of subjects leaving these fields blank and enhances the overall quality of our data collection.

In the second stage of our experiment, we present subjects with six conjoint questions. Each question introduces two hypothetical candidates for Congress, candidates A and B. These candidates are solely characterized by their policy platforms, representing their positions on two specific policy issues.<sup>4</sup> All other characteristics of the candidates are assumed to be identical. In each conjoint question, policy proposals are randomly selected without replacement from the 19 prompts listed in Table 1. The assignment of prompts is independent across conjoint questions and equally probable, ensuring a diverse combination of policy issues being paired together. The candidates' positions on each policy issue are independently determined, with an equal chance of either agreement or disagreement with a given policy proposal. The candidates can have the same position on a particular policy issue.

Figure 1 illustrates a typical conjoint question. In this example, the positions of candidates A and B on two policy issues, taxes and gun control, are presented in a table. Candidate A supports reducing the highest marginal federal personal income tax rate and creating a database to track all firearm sales. In contrast, Candidate B opposes these two proposals. Based on this information, subjects are asked to choose which candidate they would have voted for in the past midterm elections. In the first stage of our experiment, respondents have already indicated their opinions on these policy prompts. Thus, it is straightforward to determine whether the respondent agrees or disagrees with their selected candidate on the issues of taxes and gun control.

To understand how answers to conjoint questions reveal the relative importance of policy issues in voters' electoral choices, consider the four policy profiles outlined in Table 2. These represent all the possible combinations of policy positions for two candidates, short of one in which both candidates share the same position on both issues. We recast policy profiles to indicate whether a given voter agrees or disagrees with candidates A and B on issues 1 and 2. This voter's choices for profiles (a), (b), and (c) offer no information about the relative weight of issues 1 and 2 in their preferences. Indeed, in these profiles, the voter does not need to trade off their preference for one candidate based on one issue with their preference for another candidate based on the other issue. The only profile for which the voter's choice reveals the relative importance of both issues is (d).

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4. We previously emphasized the distinction between issue importance and salience. In conjoint questions, we allocate equal space—thus identical salience—to both issues in a policy profile. In actual elections, candidates may highlight one issue over another in their messaging. This differing emphasis can significantly influence voters' choices. Our experimental design does not account for this.



**Table 2:** Examples of Policy Profiles

(a)		
	Candidate A	Candidate B
<b>Issue 1</b>	Agreement	Disagreement
<b>Issue 2</b>	Agreement	Agreement

(b)		
	Candidate A	Candidate B
<b>Issue 1</b>	Agreement	Disagreement
<b>Issue 2</b>	Disagreement	Disagreement

(c)		
	Candidate A	Candidate B
<b>Issue 1</b>	Agreement	Disagreement
<b>Issue 2</b>	Agreement	Disagreement

(d)		
	Candidate A	Candidate B
<b>Issue 1</b>	Agreement	Disagreement
<b>Issue 2</b>	Disagreement	Agreement

In this scenario, a vote for candidate A means that they prioritize issue 1 over issue 2. Conversely, a vote for candidate B suggests they place a greater weight on issue 2 over issue 1.

Our survey experiment was carried out by YouGov, with a sample of 2,109 U.S. registered voters who were interviewed online from November 9 to 18, 2022. Respondents were selected from YouGov’s opt-in panel to ensure national representativeness. The survey sample was weighted based on gender, age, race, education, and the respondents’ vote in the 2020 Presidential election. The weights ranged from 0.1 to 4.2, with an average weight of 1.0 and a standard deviation of 0.4. All results presented in this paper are computed using these weights.<sup>5</sup> Ethical considerations are discussed in the Online Appendix.

## Statistical Methodology

### Issue Importance

With the experimental data collected as above, it is straightforward to estimate the measure of issue importance  $\Delta_i$ , as defined in Equation (2), using a non-parametric approach analogous to the

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5. The use of weighting in survey experiments has been a topic of recent debate in the literature (Franco et al. 2017; Miratrix et al. 2018). We present weighted estimates in the body of the paper because our overarching goal is to make inferences about the relative importance of policy issues in the population as a whole and not only in our sample. The Online Appendix contains unweighted estimates of issue importance and polarization. Our objective in presenting these unweighted estimates is to demonstrate that our substantive findings are unaffected by weighting. We note that there is little difference between the weighted and unweighted estimates, presumably because our sample is representative of the population of interest in any case.

one proposed by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014). The Online Appendix contains a detailed outline of this procedure.

Admittedly, the measure  $\Delta_i$  has a significant limitation related to how the notions of agreement and disagreement are defined. We assume that a candidate and a voter agree on a policy issue only when they share their view on the related policy proposal. Conversely, they are considered to disagree when they hold opposing views on the proposition. This definition leaves out cases in which respondents have stated to be neutral over issue  $i$ , as they neither agree nor disagree with candidates who take definitive positions.

It would be valuable to incorporate cases in which respondents express their neutrality on policy issues in our measure of issue importance. Indeed, if voters are genuinely neutral over a policy issue, they remain indifferent to its outcome and do not factor it into their electoral choices. As a result, topics with a higher proportion of voters affirming neutrality are less likely to influence electoral decisions, resulting in diminished overall importance attached to those issues.

To this end, we put forth the following measure of adjusted issue importance, which reflects the percentage of voters who identify as neutral on that issue:

$$\begin{aligned} \tilde{\Delta}_i = & \mathbb{P}(\text{Voting for a candidate with whom they agree on issue } i) \\ & - \mathbb{P}(\text{Voting for a candidate with whom they disagree on issue } i). \end{aligned}$$

The comparison embedded in  $\tilde{\Delta}_i$  is the opposite of the one implied by  $\Delta_i$ . While  $\Delta_i$  compares the probability that a candidate is chosen by voters who agree and those who disagree with them on issue  $i$ ,  $\tilde{\Delta}_i$  compares the likelihood that voters agreeing and disagreeing with the candidate they chose. Nevertheless,  $\tilde{\Delta}_i$  bears a close relationship to  $\Delta_i$ . Indeed, leveraging the fact that the experimental design implements fully independent randomization of policy profiles, it can be easily shown that the following holds:

$$\tilde{\Delta}_i = (1 - \mathbb{P}(\text{Voter is neutral on issue } i)) \times \Delta_i.$$

This equation reveals that  $\tilde{\Delta}_i$  applies a penalty to estimates of  $\Delta_i$  proportional to the share of subjects who are neutral. This approach is equivalent to calculating the AMCE of agreeing with a candidate's stance on a policy issue on the likelihood of voting for them considering all subjects,

including neutral ones, supposing that the effect on the latter equals zero.

## **Issue Polarization**

So far, we have dedicated our discussion to the measurement of issue importance. Before turning to our findings, which put into relation issue importance and political polarization, we must describe how we conceptualize and measure the latter.

We define political polarization as the depth of the differences in opinions and beliefs over policy issues across a polity (McCarty 2019, ch. 2). This general concept can manifest in different manifestations. Here, we consider two of its possible forms. One is called “policy polarization,” characterized by a deep division of policy views in the public, with two opposing groups holding opposite positions. Concretely, this manifests in a high prevalence of disagreements between voters. Another form of polarization is known as “partisan polarization,” according to which citizens’ policy positions closely align with their ideological or partisan affiliations. In this case, voters’ partisan identity strongly predicts their stance on policy issues.

Although these two notions of polarization are distinct, they are generally correlated. For instance, when policy attitudes strongly align with party affiliations, this can lead to substantial disagreements in the entire electorate. The reverse does not always occur: even if the electorate is divided on policy issues, partisans from different parties may be equally divided. In other words, partisan sorting can contribute to policy polarization, but the same level of policy polarization does not necessarily reflect the same degree of partisan sorting.

For each issue, we wish to derive a polarization measure from the weighted distribution of policy positions observed among respondents to our survey. Various measures can be used to quantify political polarization, each capturing a unique facet of this phenomenon. Consequently, we propose two polarization measures, each associated with one of the two conceptions defined earlier.

Firstly, we employ the Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (HHI) to quantify the intensity of divisions in policy attitudes within the electorate, thus reflecting policy polarization. The HHI finds its roots in economics, where it measures the relative size of firms within an industry and the level of competition between them. In political science, the HHI is the basis for estimating the effective number of political parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). Applications of the HHI can also be found in other fields, such as biology and physics.

Formally, the HHI measures the probability that two randomly chosen voters hold the same position on a given issue. To compute this measure, we sum the squares of the proportions of voters adhering to each policy position:

$$\text{HHI}_i = \sum_m p_{im}^2,$$

where  $p_{im}$  represents the proportion of voters who hold position  $m$  on issue  $i$ . A lower value of the HHI indicates a more divided distribution of policy positions, less agreement, and more polarization among voters. It can be calculated by considering the distribution of subjects' positions—including or excluding neutral responses.

Secondly, to quantify the intensity of the correlation between policy attitudes and partisan affiliations, reflecting partisan polarization, we employ the Mutual Information (MI) of Party Identification and Policy Positions. This statistical measure, rooted in information theory, quantifies the mutual dependence between two random variables. It is analogous to the standard correlation coefficient for discrete variables and extends to instances of non-linear dependence.

The MI quantifies the difference between the joint distribution of the variables and the product of their marginal distributions. Accordingly, it measures the extent to which knowing a voter's partisan affiliation helps to impute their policy positions, thereby improving the likelihood of our predictions. Formally, the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions is calculated as follows:

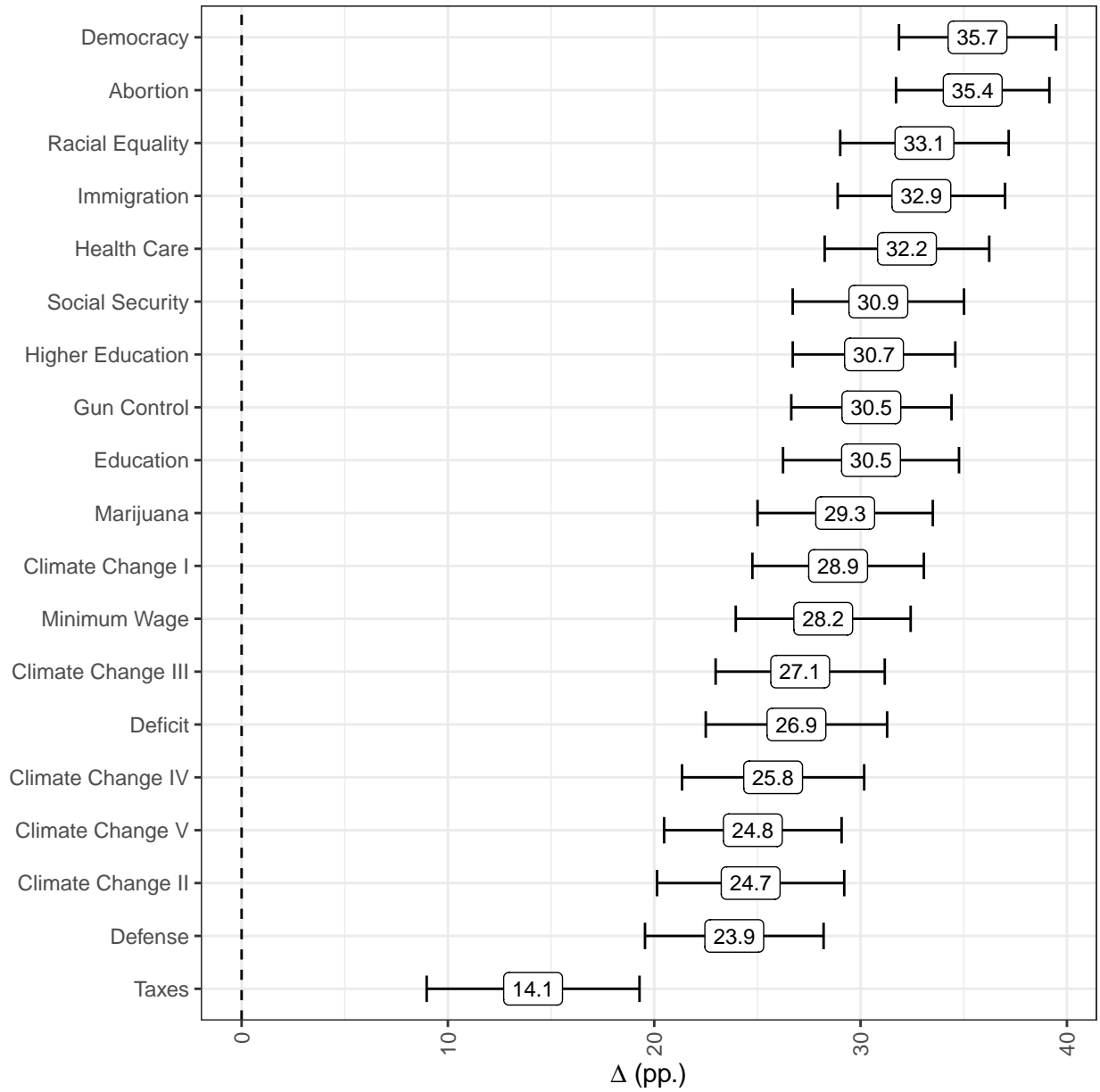
$$\text{MI}_i = \sum_m \sum_n p_{imn} \times \log \left( \frac{p_{imn}}{p_{im} \times p_{in}} \right),$$

where  $p_{imn}$  represents the proportion of voters who hold position  $m$  on issue  $i$  and have partisan identification  $n$ , and  $p_{in} = \sum_m p_{imn}$  represents the proportion of voters with partisan identity  $n$ .

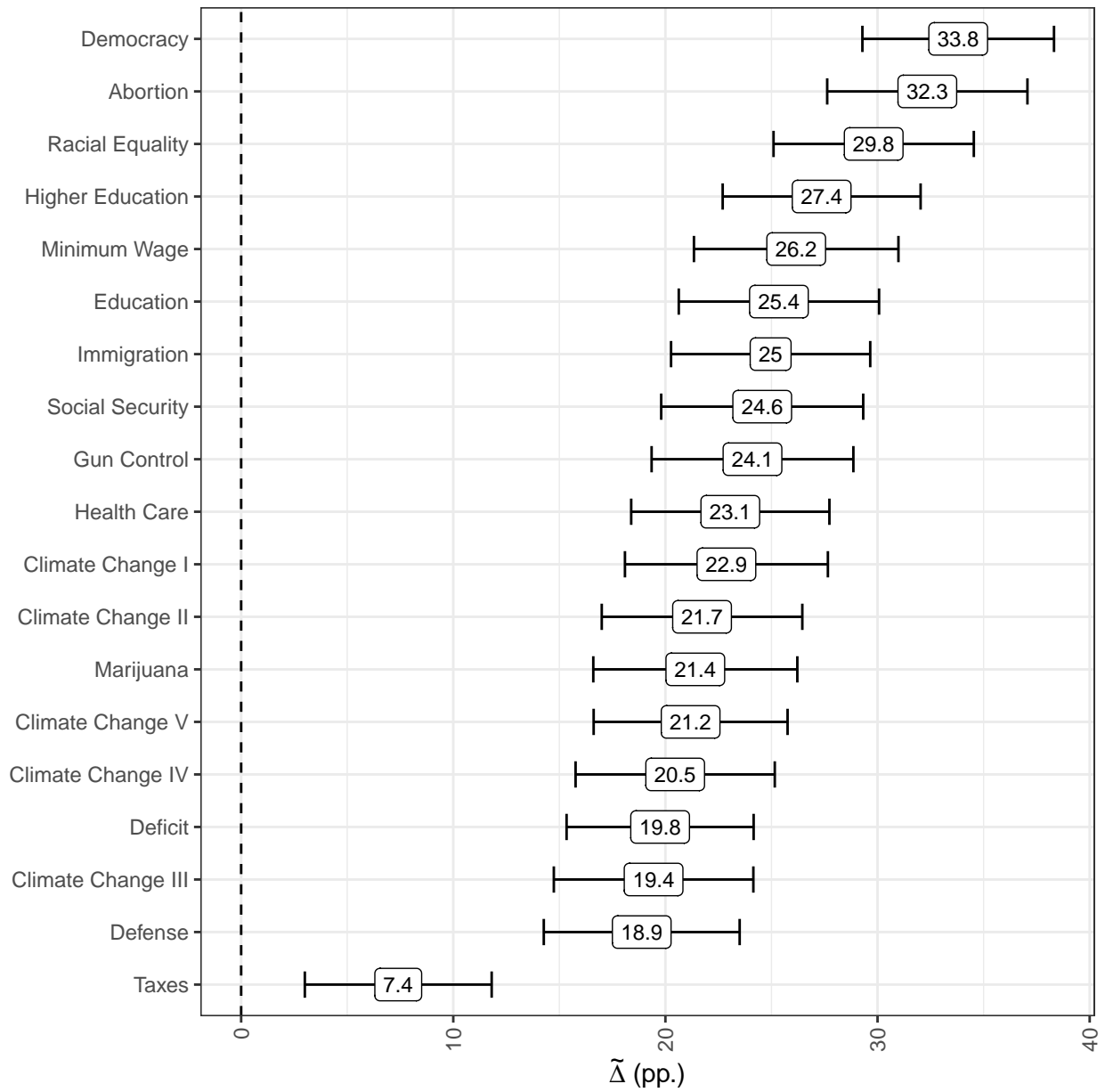
## Results

### Issue Importance

Figures 2 and 3 depict estimates of our measures for issue importance, denoted by  $\Delta$ , and adjusted issue importance, denoted as  $\tilde{\Delta}$ , respectively. These figures illustrate point estimates, with higher values reflecting greater importance, along with their 95% confidence intervals. Policy issues are arranged in descending order of the magnitude of their point estimate.



**Figure 2:** Issue Importance by Policy Issue



**Figure 3:** Adjusted Issue Importance by Policy Issue

To begin, we consider the estimates of issue importance displayed in Figure 2. As a reminder, this measure reflects the extent to which a voter is more likely to support a candidate whose stance aligns with theirs relative to a candidate with opposing views. All estimates demonstrate statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. This implies that, across the topics examined, voters are more inclined to vote for candidates who share their viewpoints rather than those who hold conflicting positions.

Significant variation is observed in issue importance across different issues. In particular, estimates span a range of 14.1 to 35.7 percentage points. The difference between the estimates of the most and least important issues exhibits statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. This implies that our measure effectively differentiates between issues with different weights in voters' electoral choices. The three issues with the highest estimated importance are Democracy, Abortion, and Racial Equality. Conversely, the three issues with the lowest weights are Climate Change, Defense, and Taxes.

As previously mentioned, our measure of issue importance does not account for the choices made by respondents declaring to be neutral on a given issue. To address this limitation, we have put forth above a measure of adjusted issue importance that accounts for the proportion of neutral respondents. Before delving into estimates of adjusted issue importance, note that we observe a correlation between our measure of issue importance and the proportion of participants who identify as neutral. Specifically, there is a significant negative correlation between issue importance and the fraction of nonaligned voters, with a coefficient of  $-0.86$  (see Figure S3 in Online Appendix). This finding suggests that voters are more likely to be neutral over issues that have a lower impact on the electoral choices of those affirming to hold definite positions.

We now discuss the estimates of adjusted issue importance depicted in Figure 3. This measure assesses the difference between the proportion of chosen candidates who align with voters' views and the percentage of selected candidates who hold opposing views. All estimates demonstrate statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. This implies that voters systematically choose a significantly higher proportion of candidates who share their views rather than those with opposing opinions.

Like those of issue importance, the estimates of adjusted issue importance exhibit considerable variation, ranging from 7.4 to 33.8 percentage points. Adjusted issue importance demonstrates

slightly more variability within this range than plain issue importance. Estimates of the least and most decisive issues exhibit a statistically significant difference. Consequently, our measure of adjusted issue importance discriminates well between the least and most important issues. Among the policy issues considered, Democracy, Abortion, and Racial Equality have the highest importance. In contrast, Climate Change, Defense, and Taxes have the lowest weights.

Note that we observe a strong positive correlation between issue importance and adjusted issue importance, with a coefficient of 0.93 (see Figure S4 in Online Appendix). Consequently, altering our measure of issue importance to account for neutral voters ultimately has little impact on the relative ordering of issues. This is particularly true for the three most and least important issues, as they remain identical with both measures. Also, recall that adjusted issue importance is derived by reducing issue importance proportionally to the share of neutral subjects. Thus, it consistently yields lower values than issue importance.

Substantively, our estimates of issue importance reveal a compelling and meaningful pattern about the nature of the 2022 congressional midterm elections. Specifically, they corroborate the perception that contemporary politics is centered around a so-called “culture war,” as issues directly associated with this notion, such as Abortion, Democracy, and Racial Equality, take preeminence in voters’ electoral choices. Conversely, traditional themes that have long been central to American political debates, such as Defense, the Deficit, and Taxes, seem to wield little influence on voters’ electoral choices.

In closing this section, we explore how the exact formulation of policy proposals influences the estimates of issue importance and adjusted issue importance. Given the complexity of policy issues, we condensed them into short reform proposals. We acknowledge that different propositions stemming from the same issue may vary in importance to voters. To assess the sensitivity of our results to this design choice, we narrow our focus to the policy area of Climate Change and consider five distinct proposals associated with it. We compare the resulting estimates of issue importance and adjusted issue importance across propositions.

Despite some variability in estimates, the differences between the estimates of issue importance and adjusted issue importance across policy proposals do not reach statistical significance, nor are they substantively meaningful. Estimates of issue importance range from 24.7 to 28.9 percentage points, while those of adjusted issue importance range from 19.4 to 22.9 percentage points. In-



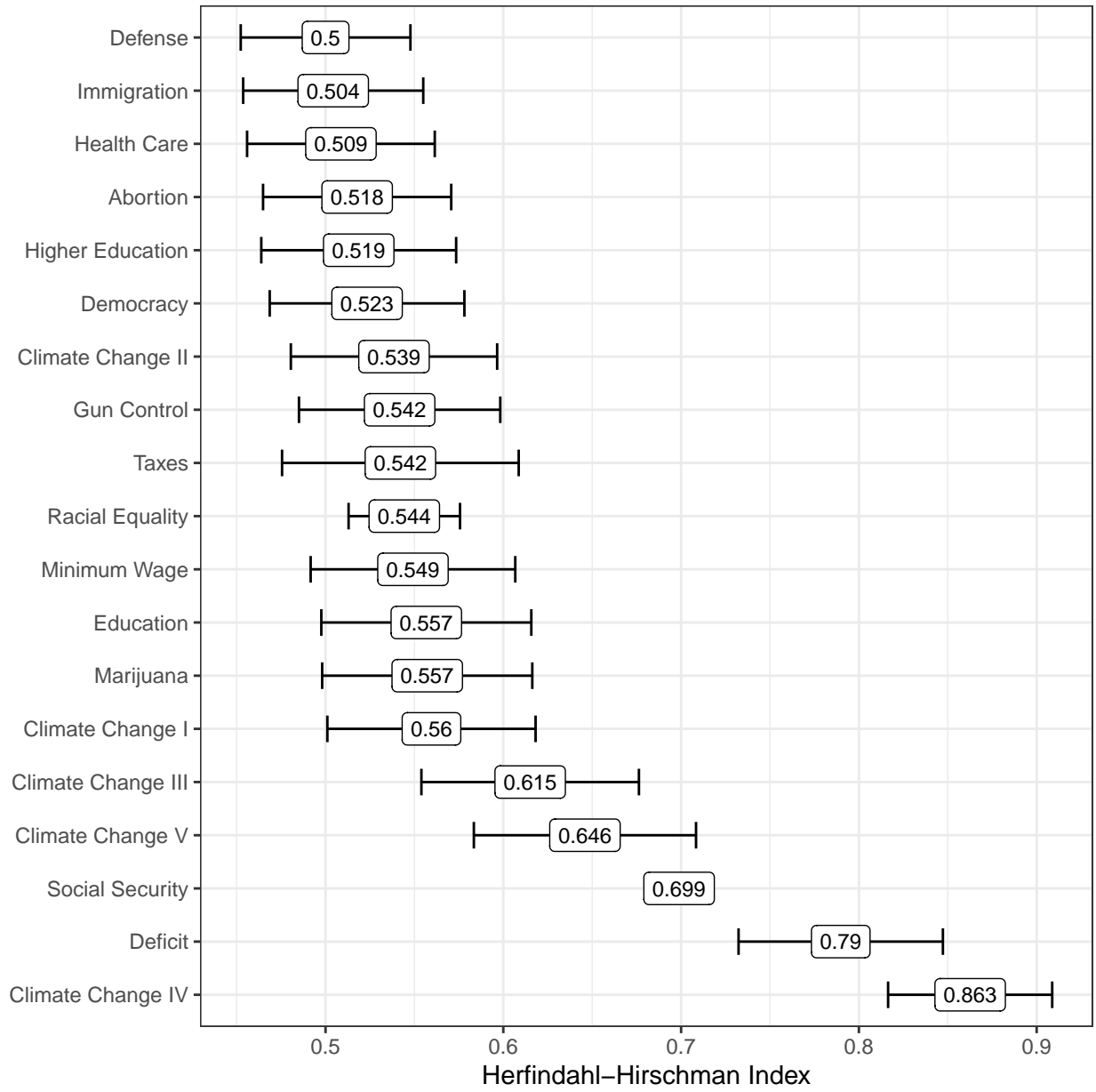
terestingly, estimates tend to cluster into two groups, showing minimal to no significant variation. The first group includes policy proposals centered around economic and financial aspects, such as carbon taxation and incentives for hybrid and electric vehicles. In contrast, the second group consists of propositions focused on renewable energy, tree planting, and carbon capture and storage. These findings indicate that although there might be slight variations in estimates, the importance attributed to different policy proposals in a specific policy domain remains consistent within coherent clusters. Also, they suggest measures of issue importance are not overly influenced by our choice of policy proposals.

## **Issue Polarization**

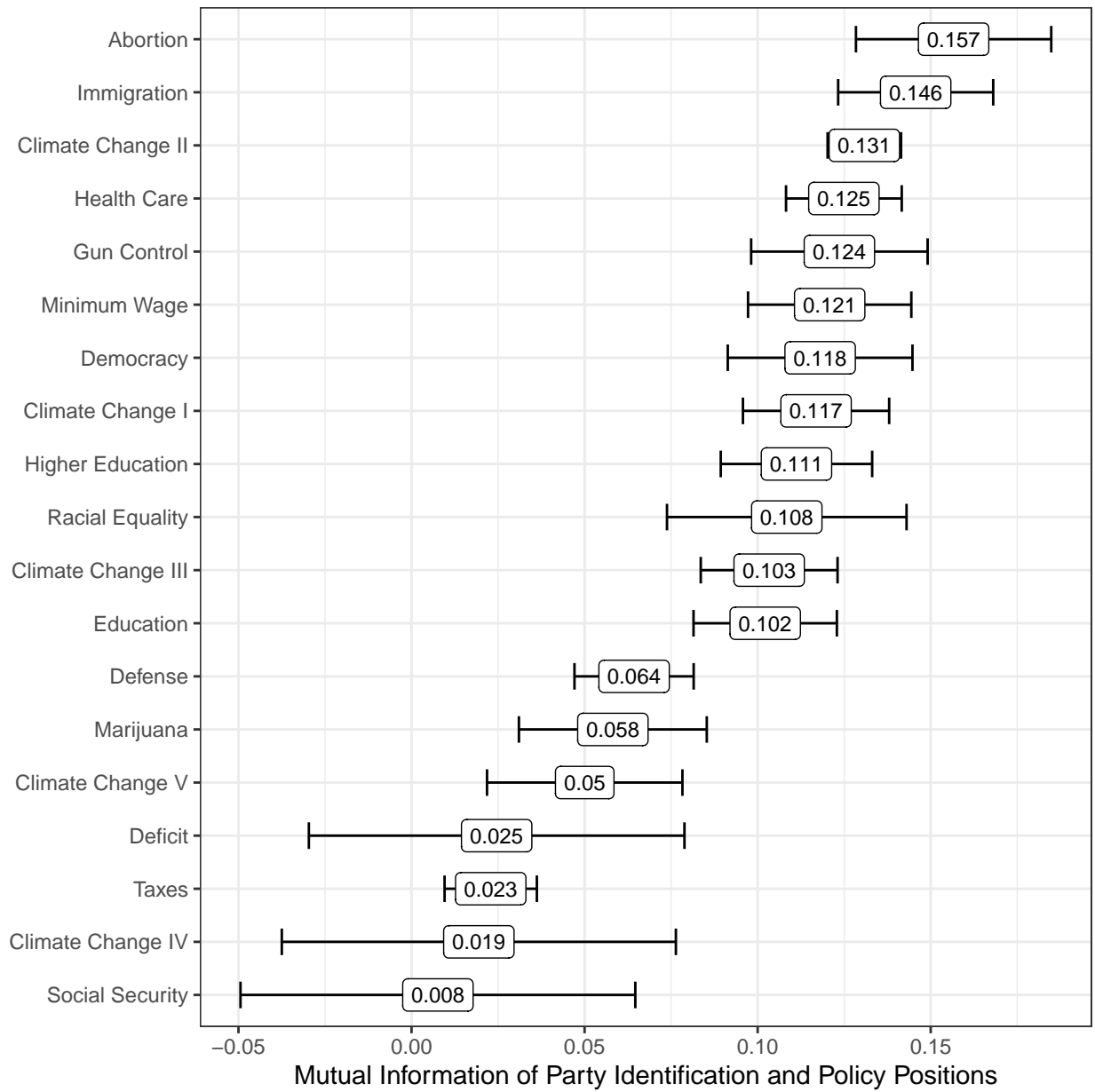
Figures 4 and 5 depict estimates of the HHI and the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions for the 19 policy proposals considered in our survey experiment. These figures illustrate point estimates along with their 95% confidence intervals. In both figures, issues are arranged in descending order of the prevailing level of polarization.

Recall that the HHI quantifies how deeply policy attitudes are divided in the electorate. Specifically, it represents the probability that two randomly selected voters hold the same position on a particular issue. Thus, an increase in the HHI indicates a higher level of consensus among voters and, consequently, a lower polarization in their positions. To compute the HHI, we consider the distribution of subjects' policy positions, excluding those who identify as neutral. For comparison, you can find the value of the HHI calculated using the distribution of subjects' policy positions, including neutral responses, in Figure S5 (see Online Appendix).

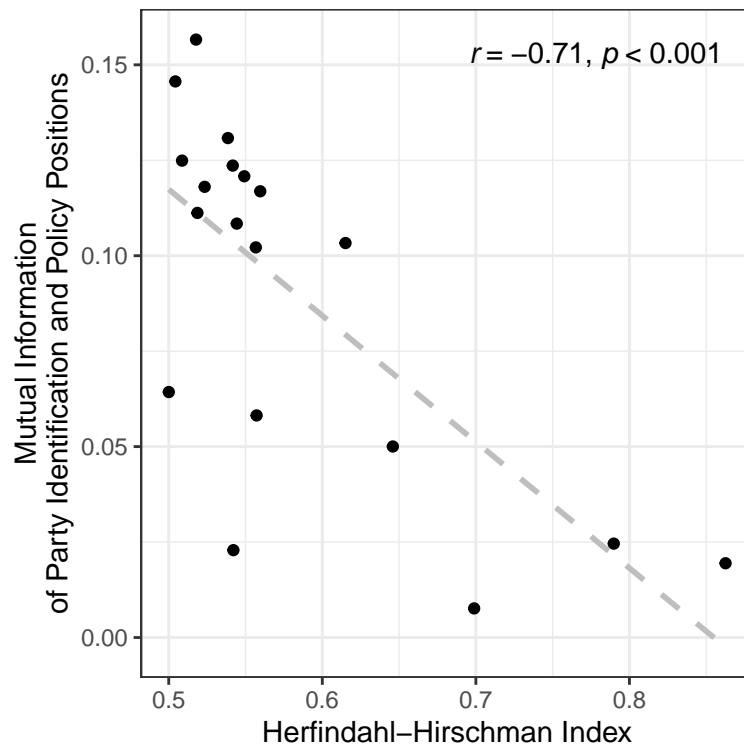
Estimates show that the electorate is considerably divided over the policy issues we consider. The values of the HHI show modest variation across issues, indicating a consistent and substantial level of disagreement in the public. For most matters, the probability of two randomly selected voters sharing the same position falls within a relatively narrow range of 0.5 to 0.56. This suggests that voters' attitudes are evenly split on these issues, as seen in the case of Defense and Immigration, for which there is an equal likelihood of agreement or disagreement between two randomly chosen voters. This finding raises apprehensions about the effectiveness of the HHI in effectively discriminating between policy issues. On the other hand, there are five specific issues from three policy areas — namely, Climate Change, the Deficit, and Social Security — for which the prob-



**Figure 4:** Herfindahl-Hirschman Index by Policy Issue



**Figure 5:** Mutual Information of Party Identification and Policy Positions by Policy Issue



**Figure 6:** Relationship between the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index and the Mutual Information of Party Identification and Policy Positions

ability of agreement between two randomly selected voters is higher than or equal to 0.62. This indicates a higher level of consensus among voters over these policy issues.

To supplement the vision of political polarization offered by the HHI, we also consider the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions. Recall that this measure reflects how much policy attitudes are sorted along partisan lines. A higher value of the MI reflects a greater partisan polarization.

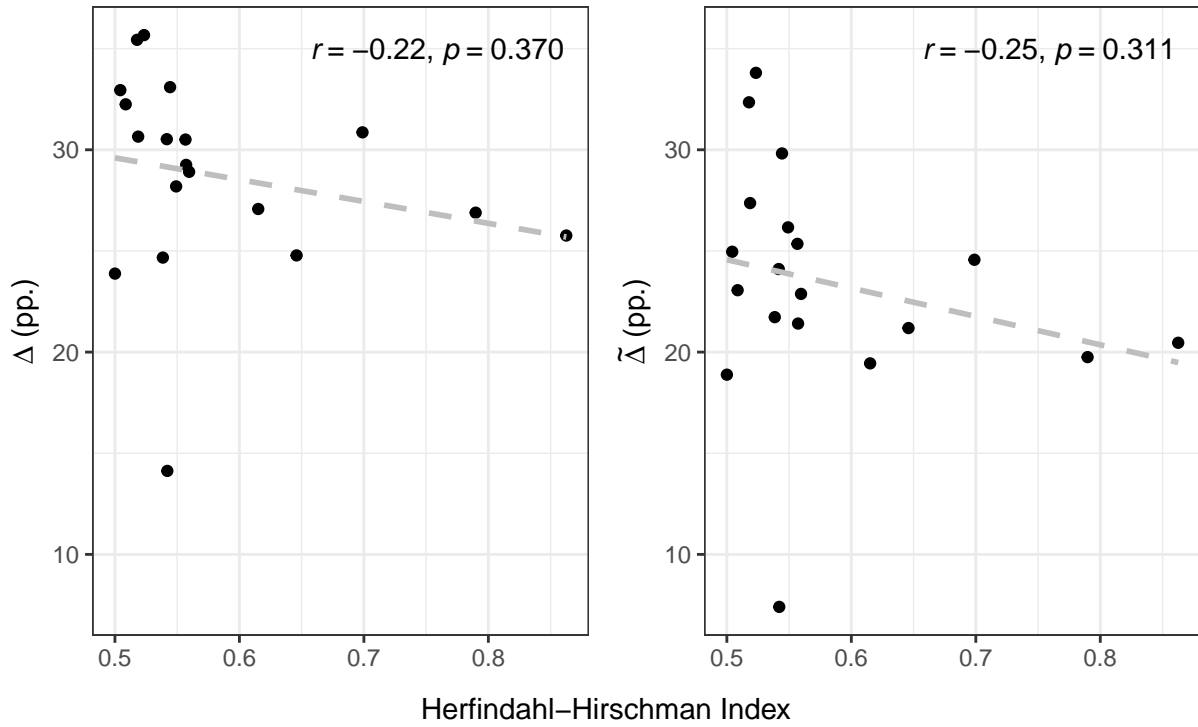
In contrast to the HHI, which showed little variability between issues, the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions exhibits considerably more fluctuation across policy issues. This suggests that the MI is more useful in differentiating policy issues. Notably, policy attitudes about Social Security, and to a lesser extent, the Deficit and Taxes, are virtually independent of voters' party identification. In contrast, positions on the issues of Abortion and Immigration show significant divides along partisan lines.

As anticipated, the HHI and the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions show a strong correlation, as depicted in Figure 6. Specifically, both measures have an absolute correlation coefficient of 0.71. Although these two measures are correlated, they capture distinct aspects and manifestations of political polarization, each maintaining its relevance. That said, due to its higher variability, the MI displays better potential than the HHI in effectively differentiating the degree of polarization prevailing over various policy issues.

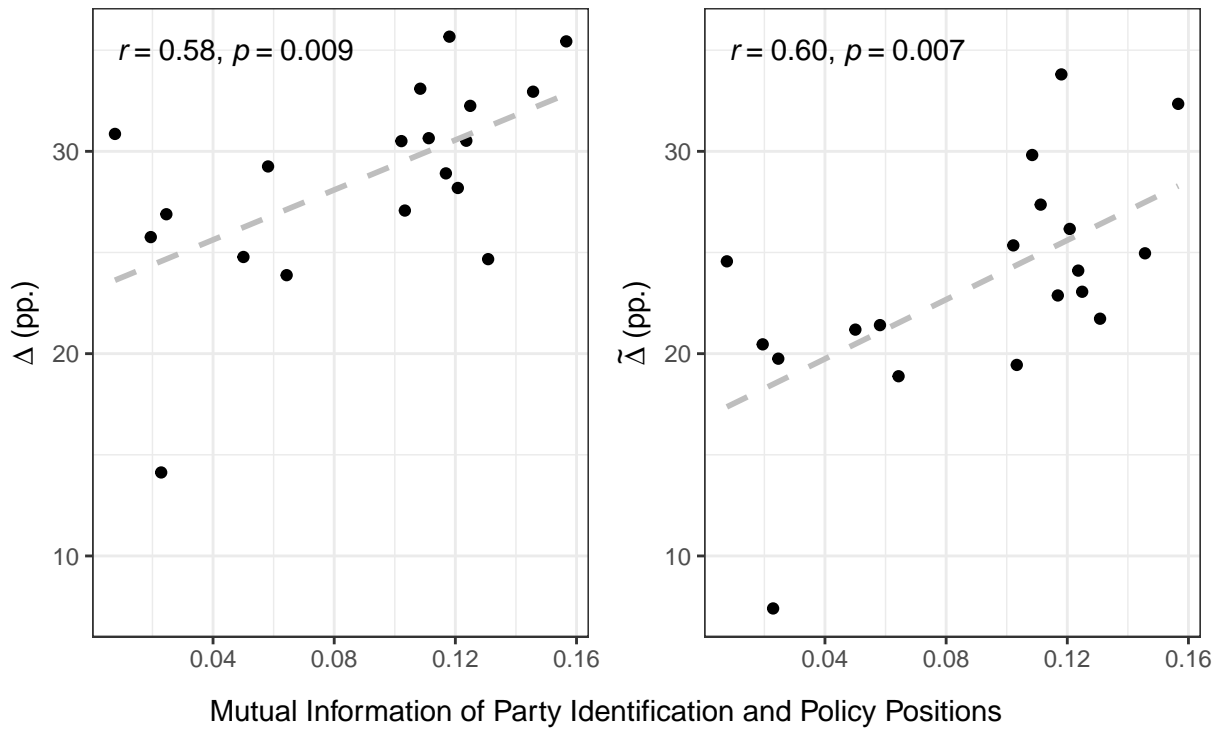
## **Relationship between Issue Importance and Polarization**

Now that we have described our findings about issue importance and polarization independently, we turn to the main objective of this paper, which is to investigate the relationship between issue importance and polarization. In particular, we aim to assess the hypothesis that issues with higher levels of polarization carry a greater weight in voters' electoral choices than issues over which a consensus prevails.

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the relationship between our measures of issue importance and adjusted issue importance on the  $y$ -axis, and the HHI and the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions on the  $x$ -axis, respectively. From these figures, we immediately notice that although there is no statistically significant correlation between issue importance and policy polarization, there is a strong and significant correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization. This means



**Figure 7:** Relationship between Issue Importance and the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index



**Figure 8:** Relationship between Issue Importance and the Mutual Information of Party Identification and Policy Positions

that, on average, issues over which voters' positions are more polarized along partisan lines hold greater importance in their electoral choices compared to issues over which attitudes are similarly distributed across parties. The correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization is significant at the 99% confidence level. Also, variations in the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions predict approximately 34% of the variations in issue importance across policy issues. Overall, our hypothesis is supported by the data, at least as it pertains to partisan polarization.

Since the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions demonstrates a better ability to predict issue importance than the HHI, it emerges as the most relevant measure of polarization when assessing the relationship between issue importance and polarization. This finding is relatively astounding. The reason is that although our experimental design intentionally primed respondents to disregard candidates' partisan affiliations and to focus solely on candidates' policy positions, the relative weight they attribute to policy issues still appears to be related to partisan considerations, namely, the extent to which policy positions are divided along partisan lines. In contrast, it is not shocking to observe that policy polarization has no significant relationship with issue importance since the former varies little across issues, as noted above.

In concluding this section, we emphasize the role of our innovative measurement approach in exploring the relationship between issue importance and polarization. The Online Appendix contains Figure S11, which illustrates the relationship between the absolute value of the effect of candidates' raw policy positions on their likelihood of being chosen and our measures of polarization. The observed relationship diametrically contradicts our theoretical expectations and our findings. Indeed, contrary to our projections, highly polarized issues then seem to carry a lower weight in voters' electoral choices. We contend that this outcome does not accurately reflect the relationship between issue importance and polarization. Instead, it reflects the limitations of the naive measurement approach, as we extensively discussed above. In particular, the result appears to be a byproduct of how the effect of candidates' policy positions aggregates voters' preferences. Recall that the average impact of candidates' policy positions is calculated by summing up various effects conditional on voters' preferred positions, which have different signs depending on whether voters support or oppose the corresponding proposal. This averaging process leads to the dilution of the effect of candidates' positions. When the distribution of voters' policy positions is more polarized, the average impact tends to converge toward zero, resulting in a diminished absolute value.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper makes a dual contribution. Firstly, we formulated a novel approach for measuring issue importance. Most of our effort was devoted to formally defining the causal conception of issue importance within the potential outcomes framework, a task that had not been previously undertaken. This allows us to articulate the shortcomings of previous measurement approaches in capturing this concept and demonstrate the need for meticulously designed experiments to measure it reliably. Having formally defined the causal conception of issue importance, conjoint experiments naturally emerge as a reliable method for measuring it.

We implemented our approach on a nationally representative panel of 2,109 registered voters interviewed immediately after the 2022 Congressional midterm elections. Participants were presented with two sets of questions. The first set sought their opinion on 19 proposals covering 15 policy areas. The second set consisted of six conjoint questions in which participants had to choose between two hypothetical candidates whose policy platforms were randomly generated. Although very simple, this task closely emulates the choices and trade-offs voters encounter in actual elections. This lends substantial credibility to the resulting estimates.

Secondly, leveraging the estimates of issue importance we derived, we explored the relationship between issue importance and the degree of political polarization surrounding policy issues. Although there are several reasons to believe that polarized issues play a substantial role in voters' electoral choices, no effort had been made to explore empirically this relationship before this study. One likely explanation for this is the limited availability of authoritative methods to measure issue importance until now.

We consider two distinct conceptions of political polarization: policy and partisan polarization. Although issue importance is not correlated with policy polarization, a strong and statistically significant correlation exists between issue importance and partisan polarization. This observation is noteworthy and somewhat surprising, as our experimental design actively and deliberately discouraged respondents from considering candidates' partisan affiliations.

Since it is impossible to manipulate the importance or polarization of an issue, we cannot definitively claim a causal relationship between these two variables. For instance, the direction of causality remains undetermined. Political polarization on a particular issue could result in an



escalation of its importance. Equally, the heightened importance of a topic could contribute to its polarization. Both phenomena likely coexist.

Naturally, we may regard our findings not only as valuable insights into the electoral behavior of American voters but also into our measurement approach. Considering the strong correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization, concerns about the validity of our experimental approach may arise, chiefly because voters might not truly make choices in the manner assumed by our methodology. Our experimental design portrays a world of pure issue voting, in which voters consider candidates' policy positions and vote for those whose views most closely align with theirs, irrespective of their partisan affiliations. However, voters, particularly those with strong partisan leanings, may be influenced by candidates' partisan affiliations when choosing who to vote for. Our decision to omit parties from our experimental design stems from the fear that the effect of candidates' partisan affiliations would overshadow the policy effects we are interested in. Hence, our survey instrument intentionally avoids mentioning political parties to prime subjects to set aside partisan considerations from their decision-making process. That said, this should not impose a meaningful limitation if we suppose that voters do not have direct preferences over candidates' partisan affiliations but mostly use them as informational signals to impute candidates' policy positions. The same would be true if voters' preferences over candidates' partisan affiliations and policy positions were separable.

Still, partisan considerations may spill into our experiment and, ultimately, into our findings. For instance, subjects interested in candidates' partisan affiliations might attempt to infer it from the displayed characteristics, namely, the candidates' policy positions. Likewise, respondents may attempt to infer candidates' positions on other issues by extrapolating from the two positions shown, relying on the correlations expected in the real world between candidates' stances on policy issues, themselves strongly tied to partisanship. If it were the case, this might, admittedly, fuel the correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization, as issues with the highest partisan polarization are, by definition, the most predictive of candidates' partisan affiliations.<sup>6</sup> However, before interpreting our findings as definitive evidence of "partisan leakage," it is imperative to remember that we are faced with our incapacity to establish a causal relationship between the two

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6. Technically, this would question the marginal nature of the AMCE, as the distribution of the candidate's policy positions over other issues would no longer be independent of candidates' shown positions, as we assumed throughout our analysis.

variables. We do not know which specific characteristics of polarized issues cause their heightened importance or if the causation even runs in that direction. However, we note that the alleged behavior would require a high, perhaps improbable, level of sophistication from subjects. Unsophisticated subjects are more likely to take our questions at “face value.” In this case, it would be more sensible to interpret our findings as evidence that issue importance precedes partisan polarization.

In any event, it is noteworthy that, in an experimental setting in which partisan considerations are intentionally subdued, the electoral choices of individuals exhibit a significant correlation with the partisan standing of policy issues. This could stem from either the deeply ingrained influence of partisan considerations in voters’ minds or the tendency of parties to compete fiercely over policy issues weighing heavily on voters’ electoral choices. Someone convinced that voters are unsophisticated and have little knowledge of politics may prefer the latter explanation, but this perspective falls within the realm of speculation. It could also reflect the depth of partisan considerations in voters’ minds, so profound that it transcends their supposed lack of sophistication.

Finally, we generally acknowledge that deviations from issue voting can undermine our capacity to elicit the relative weight of issues through our experimental methodology, as our estimates are then susceptible to capture things other than policy preferences. To our knowledge, this has not been meaningfully discussed before. With this paper, we wish to spark a discussion on this matter. Although our approach is imperfect, conjoint experiments in which respondents are asked to choose between hypothetical candidates undeniably offer the best feasible option to causally infer the relative importance of policy issues in voters’ electoral choices. Among other things, further research is needed to understand how including dimensions other than policy positions, including candidates’ partisan affiliations and personal characteristics, such as gender, race and ethnicity, and profession, would affect our estimates of issue importance and whether alternative phrasing might better prompt voters to focus solely on the displayed considerations.

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