Do Polarized Issues Carry More Weight in Voter Decision-Making? Insights from the 2022 Congressional Midterm Elections

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether polarized issues weigh more heavily in voters' electoral choices. To address this question, we formulate a methodology that uses conjoint experiments to measure how responsive respondents' electoral choices are to agreeing or disagreeing with candidates' policy positions on policy issues, which we argue reflects their importance. Our approach is grounded in the potential outcomes framework and designed to minimize the burden on respondents. Immediately after 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 measure the correlation between issue importance and their polarization. We consider two types 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 offers new insights into the electoral behavior of American voters.

Keywords: Congressional midterm elections, conjoint experiments, issue importance, political polarization

Introduction

Issue voting holds a prominent place in our understanding of electoral behavior (Downs 1957; Carmines and Stimson 1980; Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). This paradigm is grounded on the premise that voters seek to elect candidates whose policy positions closely match their preferences. Accordingly, when making electoral choices, voters primarily consider candidates' policy positions and how much they align with their own.

Issue voting presumes that voters favor candidates whose views on a policy issue align with their own. However, in choosing who to vote for, political debates typically involve a range of topics. Thus, voters must consider candidates' positions on multiple issues. A voter is unlikely to agree with a candidate on every relevant issue. Therefore, voters must often trade off candidates' views on different topics, leading them to assign weights to issues and prioritize some over others. These weights are of natural interest to political scientists seeking to understand voters' electoral choices.

Despite extensive research on issue voting, our understanding of the factors correlated with the importance of various policy issues in voters' electoral choices remains limited (Dennison 2019). This article focuses on the relationship between issue importance and political polarization. Instead of developing a comprehensive theory on this relationship, we seek to test the following hypothesis: issues marked by greater polarization hold more importance in voters' choices than those on which a large consensus exists.

This hypothesis can be justified in several ways. We discuss three of them in turn.

First, voters are likely to pay more attention to polarized issues. This may be due to the emphasis political actors place on them. Indeed, politicians can strategically influence and manipulate issue salience (Iyengar 1991; Vavreck 2009). For instance, to highlight their differences with their opponents, candidates may emphasize issues over which they have markedly divergent positions (Simas and Ozer 2021). Even when politicians devote equal attention to two issues, voters may not allocate the same attention to both. Indeed, the scarcity of mental resources forces individuals to be selective about the information they absorb, and theoretical research suggests that rationally inattentive voters tend to focus more on contentious issues (Matějka and Tabellini 2020). In any case, we expect voters' attention to be reflected in the relative importance of policy issues in their electoral choices. All else equal, voters will be more responsive to candidates' positions on issues they are well-informed about and less responsive to positions on issues they are less familiar with and lack strong opinions about.

Second, voters may place greater importance on polarized issues because their resolution heavily depends on the election's outcome. For issues on which a consensus exists, election results will have a lesser impact on the policy outcome. Even if a candidate with a different view is elected, they are likely to recognize their stance's unpopularity and feel compelled to abandon it. In such cases, the policy outcome will reflect the prevailing consensus. For polarized issues, the elected candidate will not face the same pressures. In fact, they are likely to interpret their victory as evidence that the electorate has resolved the debate in their favor. In this scenario, the policy outcome is more likely to align with the elected candidate's stance.

Third, the relative importance of policy issues can influence voters' behavior as they engage in partisan sorting, aligning their party affiliation with their policy positions. In this process, voters are more likely to change parties to reflect their views on important issues (Carsey and Layman 2006; Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; McCarty 2019). As a result, there should be a strong correlation between the importance of an issue and the extent to which policy positions on that issue are polarized along partisan lines.

We empirically investigate the relationship between issue importance and political polarization in the context of the 2022 Congressional midterm elections in the United States. We consider two conceptions of political polarization: policy and partisan polarization. Policy polarization occurs when voters' positions are distributed around two extremes, leading to a high prevalence of disagreements about 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 reveal 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, is confirmed by the data.

Studying the relationship between issue importance and any other variable requires a reliable approach to measuring the former. 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, debates exist about whether 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). The main concern about this approach's validity is that voters' decision-making processes are predominantly subconscious and unconscious, making it challenging to articulate all the factors and motives influencing their choices.

In response, political science has redirected its focus towards measures of issue importance estimated

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from 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 assess issue importance. Specifically, we administered a survey experiment to 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, respondents were asked to choose between six pairs of hypothetical candidates running for Congress, who were randomly assigned binary positions (agrees or disagrees) over two policy proposals.

We propose to measure the importance of an issue by how much a voter's probability of supporting a candidate increases when the candidate shares their position on that issue. This approach is based on a simple premise. When an issue holds little importance to voters' choices, they are willing to choose candidates whose views on that issue differ from their own. Therefore, while voters will typically prefer candidates who share their views, their choices will be less influenced by candidates' positions on that issue. Conversely, when an issue is important to voters' choices, they always choose candidates with whom they agree, even if they disagree on other topics. In such cases, agreeing with a candidate's position on the issue will significantly increase a voter's probability of supporting that candidate.

Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018), Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020), and Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022) authored three recent studies closely related to ours. Our work builds on and improves their methodologies in two ways: first, by simplifying the choice tasks, and second, by redefining the causal quantity of interest. Typically, previous studies required respondents to choose between two candidates whose policy platforms were randomly generated from multiple positions (ranging from two to five) across various issues (between three and eight). The resulting trade-offs could be intricate, even for knowledgeable respondents. Our approach involves simpler choices in which respondents must decide 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 reasonably approximates the political world, where political actors tend to dichotomize policy issues. By easing the cognitive burden on respondents, we seek to derive measures that more accurately reflect voters' genuine preferences.

Our second contribution is the careful and precise definition of the causal quantity of interest, ensuring it reliably measures issue importance. This contribution echoes recent methodological research on causal quantities of interest in conjoint experiments (Abramson, Kocak, and Magazinnik 2022; Bansak et al. 2022).

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These studies have shown that alternative measures of issue importance derived from conjoint experiments can misrepresent the relative importance of policy issues. While Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020) avoid this issue with a structural measure of importance, the latter lacks a clear and intuitive interpretation. On the other hand, Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022) propose a measure of issue importance similar to ours but do not elaborate on its theoretical or methodological foundations. We define a novel measure of issue importance that is interpretable in percentage points. Grounded in the potential outcomes framework, our method clarifies the specific aspects of voters' preferences it captures, highlights the limitations of alternative approaches, and underscores the need for carefully designed experiments.

Our methodological and substantive contributions are also relevant to psychology, particularly in the study of attitude strength (Howe and Krosnick 2017). Indeed, we can liken issue importance to attitude strength in issue voting's context. Our work showcases a novel approach to measuring attitude strength in binary choices, with potential applications beyond politics. Also, we examine the relationship between attitude strength and a critical aspect of social identity: partisanship.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we formally define the causal conception of issue importance that we seek to measure. Next, we provide a detailed description of the experimental design used to elicit issue importance and polarization and an explanation of the underlying statistical methodology. We then present our findings on issue importance and polarization, both individually and in relation to one another. Finally, we draw broader conclusions from these results, highlighting their contribution to 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 scenario, the voters' task is straightforward: they are presented with both candidates' policy profiles and must decide which candidate to vote for. Let $Y_i(\theta_0, \theta_1)$ denote the probability that Voter i chooses Candidate 1 when Candidate 0 has policy profile $\theta_0 \in \Theta$ and Candidate 1 has policy profile $\theta_1 \in \Theta$, where Θ is the set of all possible policy profiles.

A policy profile $\theta_j \in \Theta$ consists of k elements, each representing the position of Candidate j on some issue. To make policy issues more tangible, we summarize them into succinct reform proposals. For example, we represent the complex issue of abortion through the following proposal: "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 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:

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

Our conception of issue importance is related to the relative intensity of voters' preferences as reflected in the extent to which their electoral choices are sensitive to candidates' positions over policy issues. In other words, we regard issue importance as 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.

We must distinguish issue importance from issue salience as they are separate albeit potentially correlated concepts. In our framework, issue salience pertains to the level of attention political actors give to policy issues. It is typically measured by the extent to which individuals actively seek information or engage in debates and discussions related to policy matters. We expect voters to pay more attention to issues with a greater weight in their preferences. Also, voters may ascribe a greater importance to the policy issues frequently discussed by politicians. However, issue importance relates to the effect of candidates' policy positions on voters' electoral choices. Consequently, it has a narrower definition directly related to electoral behavior.

A naïve approach to measuring issue importance from choice data involves 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, 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).[1]

The problem with this approach is that it fails to recognize that the effect of candidates' positions on individual voters' choices depends critically 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, supporting a policy proposal will increase the probability that a candidate is chosen by proponents of the proposal while diminishing the likelihood of being selected by opponents.

This heterogeneity in voters' reactions 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 obscures that.

This discussion echoes the recent observations of Abramson, Kocak, and Magazinnik (2022) and Bansak et al. (2022) about the causal effect of candidates' attributes on voters' support and, specifically, how it aggregates voters' heterogeneous preferences. Their analysis reveals that average effects can paint a deceptive portrait of voters' preferences because they capture the intensity and direction of voters' preferences. For instance, a negative average effect might conceal a situation wherein most voters support a policy proposal, but the opposing minority is more responsive to this policy issue. Therefore, the magnitude of the average effect of candidates' policy positions on voters' decisions does not reflect the importance of an issue. 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 put forth an approach that accounts for the heterogeneity in voters' responses. It involves recasting policy profiles to represent whether the candidate agrees or disagrees with the voter's stance on each issue.

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1. In an extension of their main analysis, Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018) estimate the effect of candidates' policy positions on their support, conditional on respondents' self-reported partisan leanings. This is related to our measurement approach to the extent that respondents' self-reported partisan learnings are correlated with their policy positions.

Concretely, we assign a value of 1 to θ_{jk} if Candidate j agrees with the voter on issue k, and -1 otherwise. Therefore, θ_{jk} captures the interaction of candidates' and voters' 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 aligns with the logic behind our conception of issue importance. When voters care deeply about an issue, they tend to be uncompromising and only vote for candidates who share their views. Conversely, if voters do not attach much importance to an issue, they are more likely to compromise and vote for a candidate with whom they disagree.

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 voters choosing them over the opposite candidate:

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

where the expectation is taken over all individuals in the population and the joint distribution of Candidate 0's policy positions and Candidate 1's positions on policy issues, excluding issue ℓ.[2] $\theta_{j\ell}$ refers to the ℓth component of Candidate j's policy profile, while $\boldsymbol{\theta}_{j,-\ell}$ denotes the remaining components. The joint distribution remains constant regardless of the position of Candidate 1 on issue ℓ. 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 ℓth 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 this candidate's probability of 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 ℓ

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2. 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, the AMCE "averages out" these other factors.

and the probability of voting for a candidate they disagree with on that specific issue:

$$\Delta_\ell = \mathbb{P}\left(\text{Voting for a candidate} \mid \text{Agreeing with the candidate on issue } \ell\right)$$

$$- \mathbb{P}\left(\text{Voting for a candidate} \mid \text{Disagreeing with the candidate on issue } \ell\right). \tag{2}$$

If treatment assignment is independent of potential outcomes, then Δ_ℓ consistently captures the AMCE of a voter agreeing with a candidate's stance on issue ℓ on their probability of choosing that candidate. One way to ensure this is the case is to randomize attributes in policy profiles.

Our methodology depends on the representation of policy issues with reform proposals and the binary nature of candidates' positions. This is a key distinction between our approach and that of Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018) and Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan (2020). Although this assumption is somewhat restrictive, it is unlikely to result in a substantial loss of generality for general election candidates, who typically adopt dichotomous and opposing stances. Its consequences may be more pronounced for primary candidates, who might espouse nuanced positions on the same side of the policy space. Incorporating more detailed and nuanced representations of policy issues and candidate positions might improve the flexibility and generalizability of our approach. However, whether respondents could grasp all the subtleties inherent to these representations is uncertain, as they could also generate confusion and noise. Respondents are better equipped to adjudicate dichotomous issues. Therefore, while some issues may be better represented by a spectrum of nuanced policy positions, binary policy proposals are well-suited for capturing many others.[3]

Admittedly, our approach to representing political conflict does not consider the opportunity costs inherent in policymaking. Indeed, we reduce political conflict to a series of discrete binary choices. In reality, policy issues often affect one another. For instance, taxation influences the resources available in other policy areas. However, it is unlikely that otherwise unsophisticated voters consider these intricate trade-offs when making electoral choices. This view is fueled by the frequent cases of candidates winning elections after making untenable electoral promises that conspicuously overlook these trade-offs.

Finally, 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),

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3. For instance, the proposal "The Federal Reserve should combat inflation" is not an ideal candidate because its opposite, "The Federal Reserve should NOT combat inflation," fails to capture the true nature of the political divide on that issue. While candidates may disagree on approaches to combating inflation, typical voters might not fully understand or be particularly concerned with these intricacies. Voters generally favor candidates who prioritize addressing inflation but may not hold strong preferences about the specific means employed. In contrast, the other proposals we test focus on concrete policy measures.

and Sides, Tausanovitch, and Vavreck (2022), we acknowledge that our findings may be affected by the specific wording of the proposals chosen to represent policy issues. We assess the degree to which this is the case by examining five distinct proposals on climate change, for which we compare the estimates of issue importance. More generally, choosing which issues to consider, how to condense them into binary proposals, and whether to frame these proposals in conservative or liberal terms all present valid methodological interrogations that require further study. For example, adding some issues while removing others could ultimately impact our findings. In the interim, we must interpret our findings as reflecting the relative importance of policy issues within the context of the other issues tested and their specific representations.

Experimental Design

At first glance, using observational data to estimate issue importance seems appealing. By conducting a survey, we can gather information on voters' policy preferences and electoral choices.[4] Simultaneously, we can collect data on candidates' stances on key policy issues. With this data, we can apply the formula in Equation (2) to estimate issue importance.

After all, 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 they are derived from data closely linked to voters' decisions. However, the observational approach presents severe limitations. In elections, voters are presented with a limited set of alternatives. The latter have fixed policy profiles. Consequently, 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. Also, the observational approach is constrained regarding the range of issues it can study. For instance, it can only consider issues on 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 present in spatial estimates of legislators' ideal points (Clinton and Meirowitz 2001).

Given the challenges of estimating issue importance with observational data, we opt for an experimental

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4. Note that some factors adversely affect the credibility of self-reported electoral choices. For instance, biases such as the "winner effect" may influence subjects' willingness to report their electoral choices accurately. These biases undermine the reliability of survey data in general.

Table 1: Policy Proposals

#	Issue	Proposal
1	Abortion	The right to an abortion should (NOT) be guaranteed by federal law
2	Climate Change I	Corporations should (NOT) be taxed based on the carbon emissions they produce
3	Climate Change II	The government should (NOT) provide more incentives to increase the use of hybrid and electric vehicles
4	Climate Change III	Power companies should (NOT) be required to use more energy from renewable sources
5	Climate Change IV	We should (NOT) plant a trillion more trees worldwide to absorb carbon emissions in the atmosphere
6	Climate Change V	The federal government should (NOT) give a tax credit to encourage businesses to develop technology that captures and stores carbon emissions
7	Defense	The federal government should (NOT) reduce its defense spending
8	Deficit	The federal government should (NOT) eliminate its deficit
9	Democracy	The Electoral College should (NOT) be eliminated, and the candidate who wins the most votes nationwide should (NOT) necessarily be elected President
10	Education	The government should (NOT) provide universal, high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds
11	Gun Control	The federal government should (NOT) create a central database to track all firearm sales
12	Health Care	The federal government should (NOT) create a national single-payer health care insurance program to replace existing private health insurance plans
13	Higher Education	Public colleges and universities should (NOT) be free for students from low- and moderate-income families
14	Immigration	The government should (NOT) establish a way for immigrants who are here illegally to stay legally
15	Marijuana	The recreational use of marijuana should (NOT) be legal nationwide
16	Minimum Wage	The federal minimum wage should (NOT) be raised to $15 per hour
17	Racial Equality	Descendants of people enslaved in the United States should (NOT) be paid reparations
18	Social Security	The federal government should (NOT) reduce Social Security benefits to ensure the program's perennity
19	Taxes	The highest marginal federal personal income tax rate should (NOT) be reduced to 35%

YouGov

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

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Figure 1: Example of a Conjoint Question

approach. We employ a fully randomized conjoint design, which addresses many limitations of the observational approach. First, this design allows the construction of hypothetical policy profiles where candidates' positions are distributed independently of voters' characteristics and issues' relative importance. Additionally, it enables us to assess the weight of topics candidates on which candidates have not yet taken a stance or all candidates share the same position. Finally, the experimental approach allows the collection of richer data on voters' choices by presenting them with multiple pairs of hypothetical candidates and gathering repeated observations.

Our survey instrument consists of two sets of questions. The first elicits subjects' views on various policy issues. Specifically, we inquire about their support or opposition to 19 proposals spanning 15 policy areas. We chose a mix of prominent and potentially overlooked policy issues likely to be relevant in the 2022 congressional elections. To identify topics, we reviewed national surveys conducted during the summer and early fall of 2022, mirroring issues they highlighted. By including 15 topics and 19 proposals, we aimed for a comprehensive selection. 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. Note that climate change is represented through five distinct policy proposals. This allows us to evaluate how sensitive our estimates of issue importance are to the specific proposals we select to represent policy issues.

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 consolidated the five options into three categories, keeping their orientation but disregarding their strength: (i) Support, (ii) Neutral, and (iii) Oppose.[5] The distribution of responses to the initial set of questions is found in Figure S1 in the Online Appendix. Additionally, Figure S2 presents the distribution of responses to these questions, categorized by respondents' self-reported party identification.

In the second stage of our experiment, we present subjects with six conjoint questions. Each question confronts 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.[6] All other

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5. 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 hesitation or lack of a strong inclination towards agreement or disagreement. This reduces the likelihood of respondents leaving these fields blank and, as such, improves the overall quality of our data.

6. We previously emphasized the distinction between issue importance and salience. In conjoint questions, we allocate equal

characteristics of the candidates are implicitly assumed to be identical. In each conjoint question, two policy proposals are randomly chosen without replacement from the 19 prompts listed in Table 1. Each candidate is subsequently assigned a binary position (agrees or disagrees) on these policy proposals. The candidates' positions are independently determined, with an equal chance of either agreement or disagreement with a policy proposal. Note that the candidates may have the same position on a particular issue. The assignment of prompts is independent across conjoint questions and equally probable, ensuring a diverse combination of policy issues being paired together. We intentionally confined the options to two candidates with binary positions on two policy issues. This makes the choices as simple as possible for respondents while still enabling the measurement of the relative importance of policy issues. Nonetheless, this environment is not unrealistic, as congressional candidates typically strategically focus their campaigns on a few key issues (Riker 1983; Sides 2006).

Figure 1 illustrates a typical conjoint question. The positions of Candidates A and B on two policy issues, taxes and gun control, are presented in a table. In this example, Candidate A advocates for lowering the highest marginal federal personal income tax rate and creating a database to track all firearm sales, while Candidate B opposes both proposals. Based on this information, participants are asked to select the candidate they would have supported in the past midterm elections. In the first stage of our experiment, respondents expressed their views on these policy prompts, making it straightforward to determine whether they agree or disagree with their chosen 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 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). 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.

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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 asymmetric 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
Issue 1	Agreement	Disagreement
Issue 2	Agreement	Agreement

(b)

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Issue 1	Agreement	Disagreement
Issue 2	Disagreement	Disagreement

(c)

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Issue 1	Agreement	Disagreement
Issue 2	Agreement	Disagreement

(d)

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Issue 1	Agreement	Disagreement
Issue 2	Disagreement	Agreement

YouGov administered our survey experiment to 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 enhance 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.[7] Ethical considerations are further discussed in the Online Appendix.

Statistical Methodology

Issue Importance

With the experimental data collected as described above, it is straightforward to estimate the measure of issue importance Δ_i, as defined in Equation (2), using a non-parametric approach analogous to the one proposed by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014). The Online Appendix contains a detailed outline of this procedure.

A key limitation of Δ_i is its narrow definition of agreement and disagreement. It assumes that a

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7. 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.

candidate and a voter agree on a policy issue only if they explicitly share the same view on the related proposal. Conversely, they are considered to disagree if they hold opposing views on the proposal. This definition excludes cases in which respondents have expressed neutrality over issue i, as they neither agree nor disagree with candidates who take definitive positions.

Incorporating the cases in which respondents expressed their neutrality on policy issues in our measure of issue importance would be valuable. 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. Consequently, topics with a higher proportion of voters affirming neutrality are less likely to influence electoral decisions, resulting in a lower overall importance attached to those issues.

To this end, we propose the following measure of adjusted issue importance, which accounts for the share of voters who identify as neutral on that issue:

$$\tilde{\Delta}_i = \mathbb{P}\left(\text{Voting for a candidate with whom they agree on issue } i\right)$$

$$- \mathbb{P}\left(\text{Voting for a candidate with whom they disagree on issue } i\right).$$

The comparison implied in $\tilde{\Delta}_i$ is the opposite of the one implied by Δ_i. While Δ_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. Nonetheless, $\tilde{\Delta}_i$ bears a close relationship to Δ_i. Leveraging the fact that the experimental design implements fully independent randomization of policy profiles, it can be easily shown that the following holds:

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

This equation shows that $\tilde{\Delta}_i$ applies a penalty to estimates of Δ_i proportional to the share of neutral respondents. This 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, assuming 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 various forms. 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, although partisan sorting is generally associated with policy polarization, the same level of policy polarization does not necessarily reflect the same degree of partisan sorting.

For each issue, we seek 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.

First, we measure policy polarization with the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), a metric commonly used in economics to evaluate the concentration of firms within an industry and the level of competition among them. In political science, the HHI is used as a measure of the effective number of political parties in electoral systems (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). This metric also has applications in other disciplines, such as biology and physics.

The HHI is the probability that two randomly selected voters share the same position on a given issue. It is calculated by summing the squares of the proportions of voters supporting each policy position:

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

where p_{im} denotes the proportion of voters holding position m on issue i. A lower HHI value signifies a more divided distribution of policy positions, indicating less consensus and greater policy polarization. The

HHI can be calculated with the observed distribution of policy positions with or without neutral responses.

Second, we measure partisan polarization using the Mutual Information (MI) of Party Identification and Policy Positions. This statistical measure, rooted in information theory, quantifies the degree of mutual dependence between two random variables (Cover and Thomas 2005). It is analogous to the standard correlation coefficient for discrete variables and extends to instances of non-linear dependence.

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

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

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

Results

Issue Importance

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the estimates of our measures for issue importance, denoted by Δ, and adjusted issue importance, denoted as $\tilde{\Delta}$, respectively. These figures show 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 estimates.

First, we consider the estimates of issue importance displayed in Figure 2. 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 are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. This implies that, across the topics considered, voters are more inclined to vote for candidates who share their viewpoints rather than those who hold conflicting positions.

There are sizeable variations in the importance of policy issues in voters' choices, with estimates ranging from 14.1 to 35.7 percentage points. The differences between the least and most important issues are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, suggesting that our measure effectively distinguishes
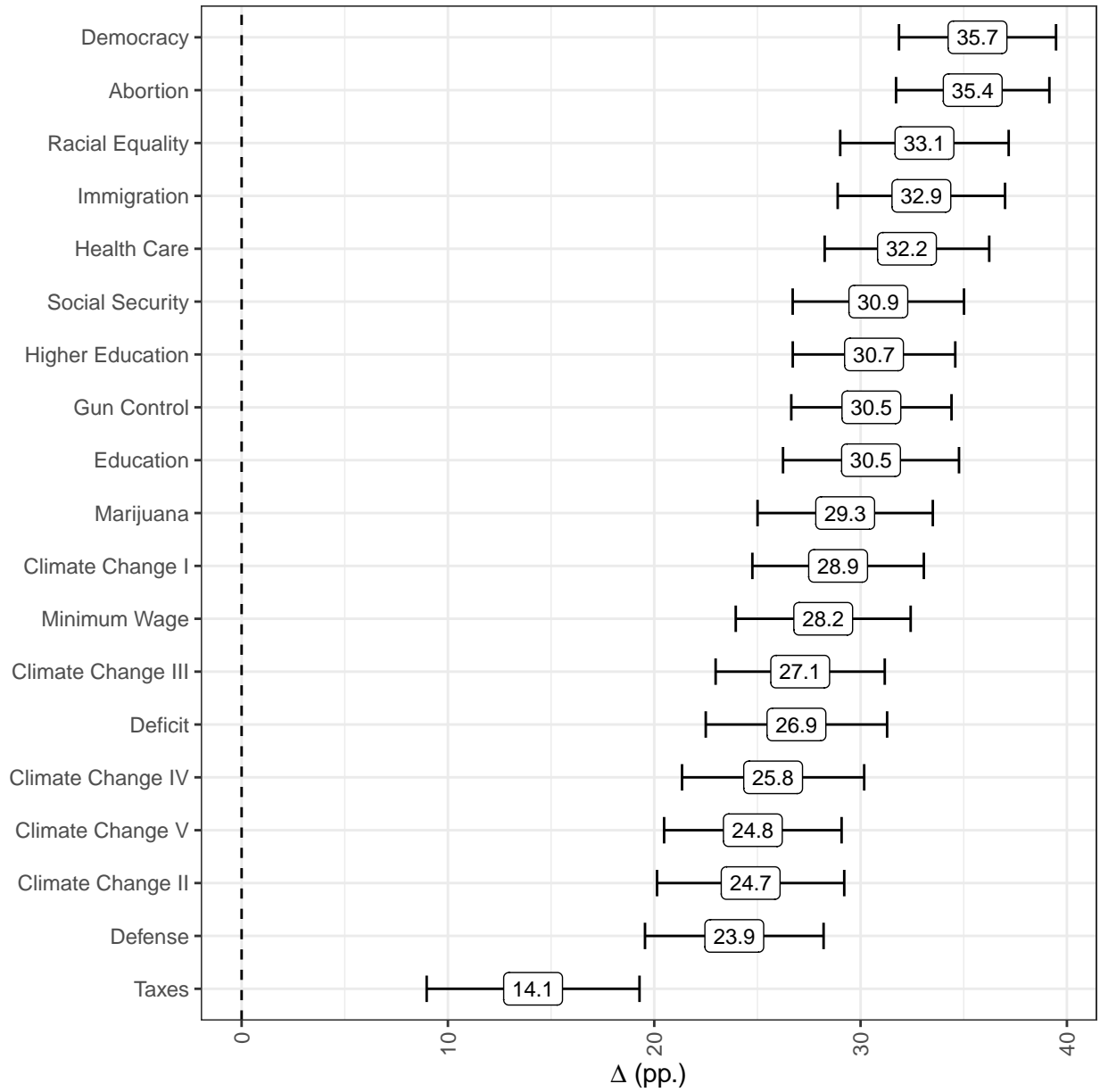
Figure 2: Issue Importance by Policy Issue
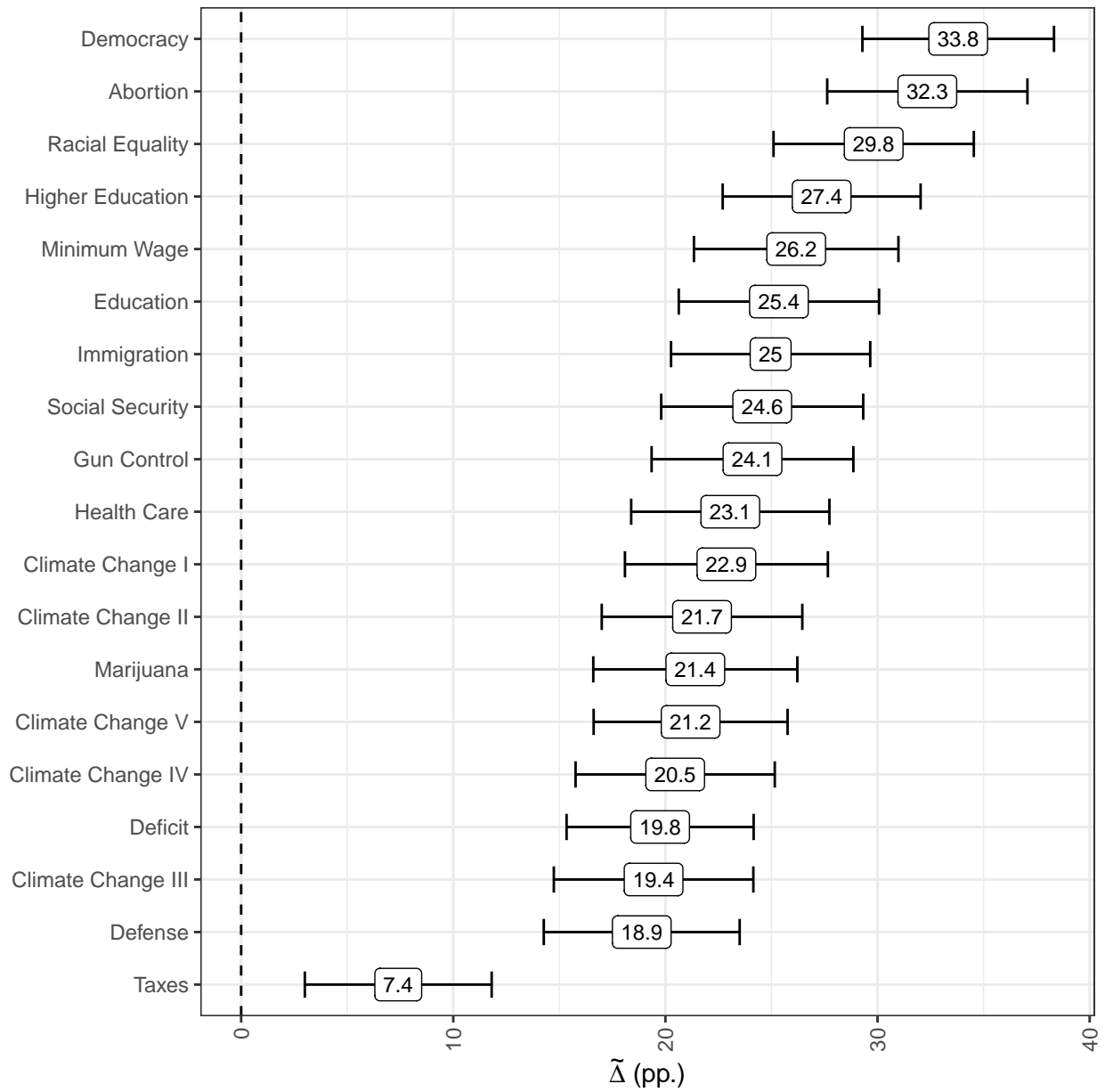
Figure 3: Adjusted Issue Importance by Policy Issue

between issues with different levels of importance. The three issues with the highest estimated importance are Democracy, Abortion, and Racial Equality, while the three issues with the lowest weights are Climate Change, Defense, and Taxes.

As previously mentioned, our measure of issue importance excludes the choices made by respondents neutral on a given issue. To address this restriction, we have put forth above a measure of adjusted issue importance that accounts for the share 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 holding definitive positions.

Second, we analyze the estimates of adjusted issue importance shown in Figure 3. This measure reflects the difference between the proportion of chosen candidates who share voters' policy views and the proportion of those who hold opposing views. All estimates are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

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 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, adjusted issue importance has consistently 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 the so-called "culture wars," 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 preeminent in American political debates, such as Defense, the Deficit, and Taxes, seem to wield little influence on voters' electoral choices.

To conclude this section, we investigate how the exact formulation of policy proposals influences the estimates of issue importance and adjusted issue importance. We condensed policy issues into short reform proposals. Different proposals on the same issue may vary in importance to voters. To assess the sensitivity of our results to this design choice, we focus our attention on climate change and analyze five proposals, comparing the resulting estimates of issue importance and adjusted issue importance.

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. Interestingly, 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 excessively influenced by our choice of policy proposals.

Issue Polarization

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the 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 depict point estimates along with their 95% confidence intervals. In both figures, issues are arranged in descending order of the prevailing level of polarization.

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 without those who identify as neutral. For comparison, you can find the value of the HHI calculated using the distribution
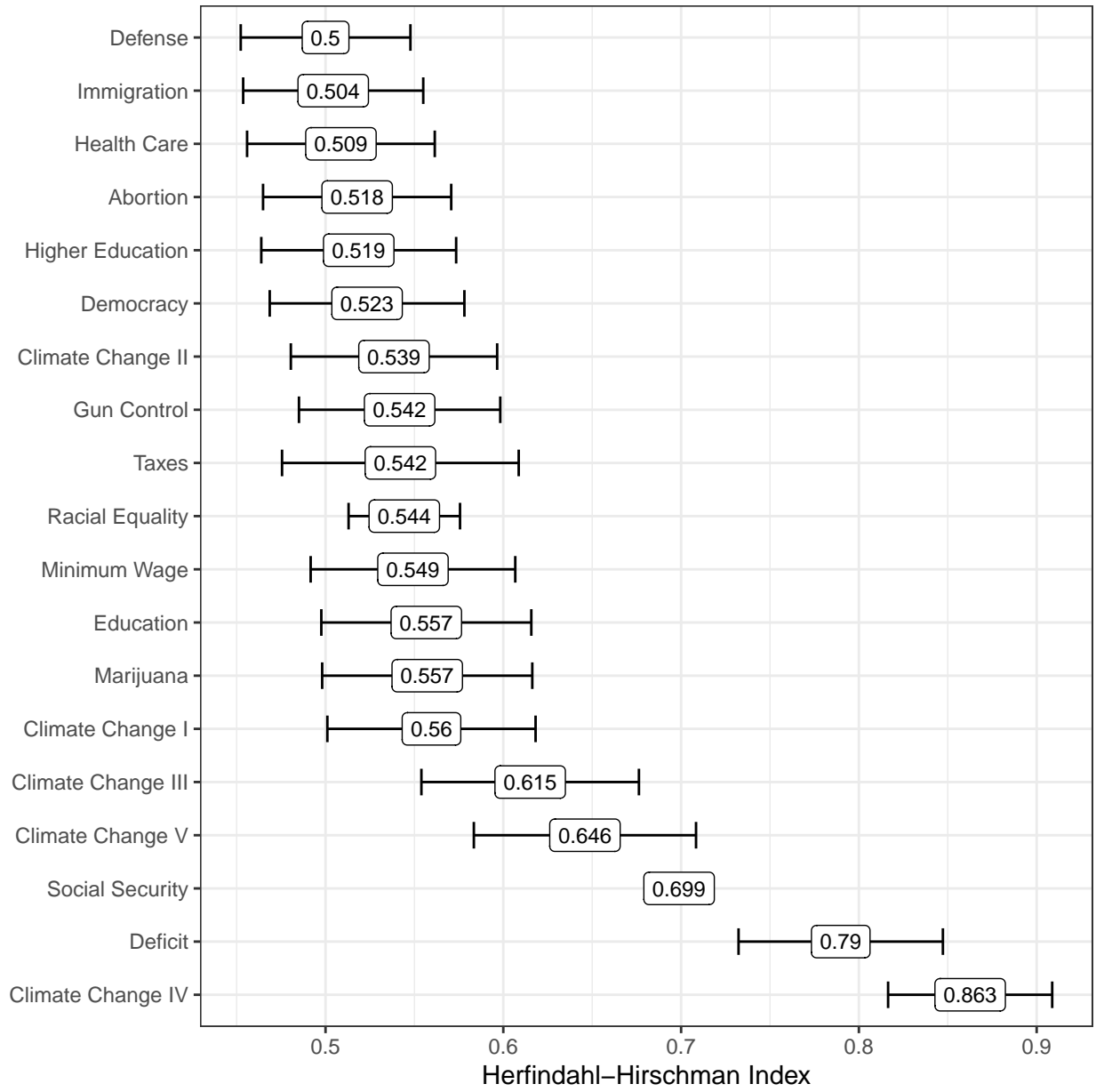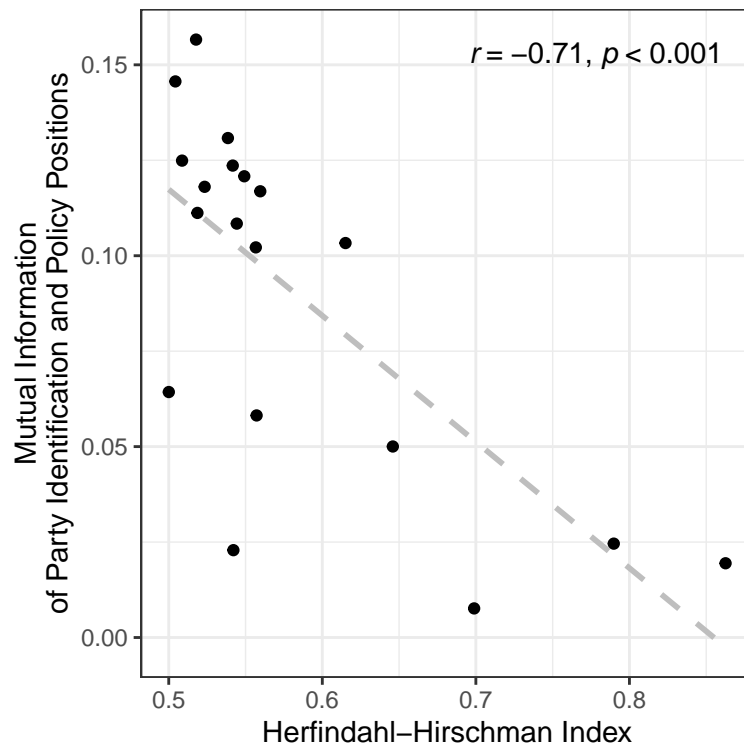
Figure 4: Herfindahl–Hirschman Index by Policy Issue
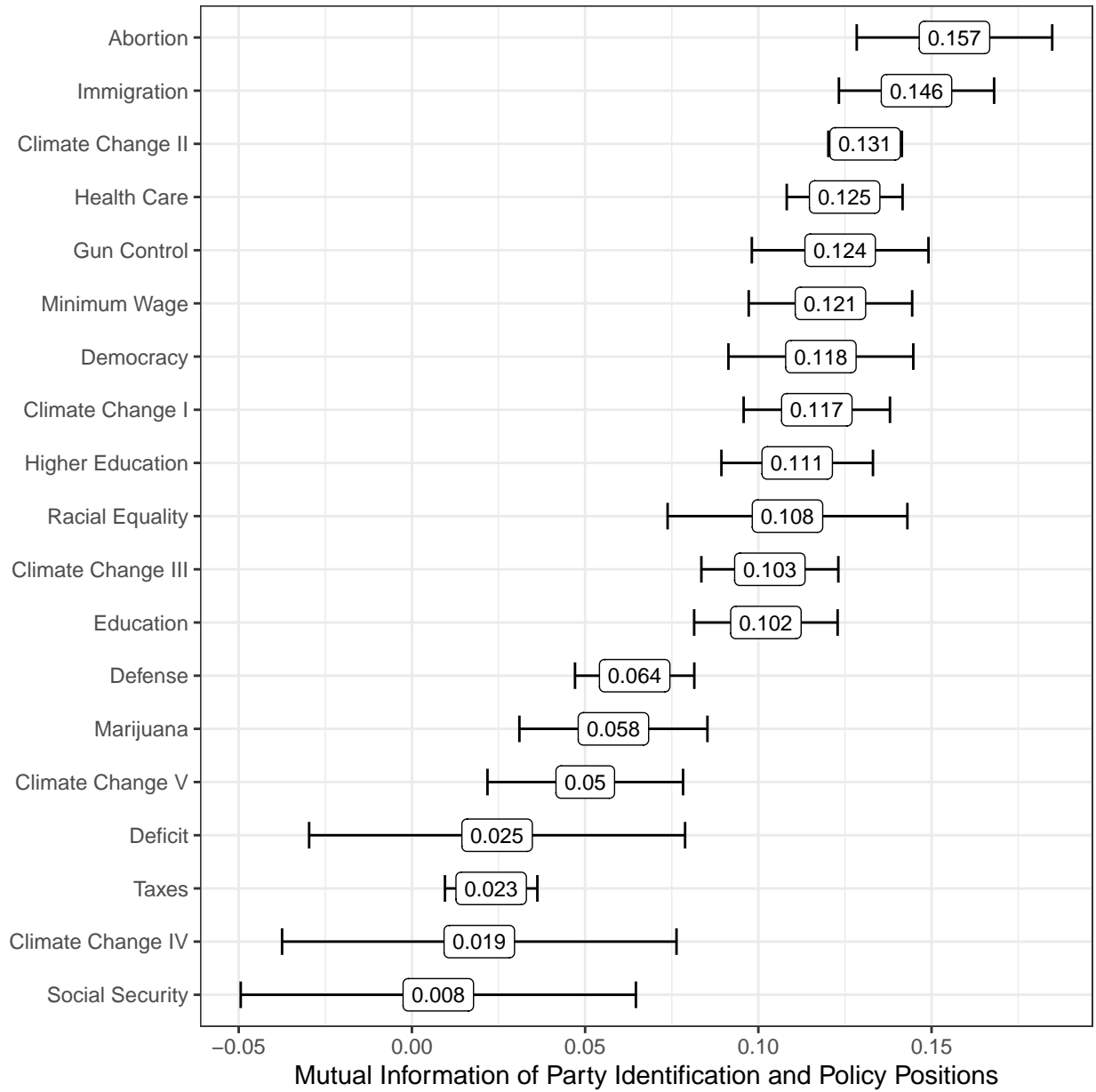
Figure 5: Mutual Information of Party Identification and Policy Positions by Policy Issue

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

of subjects' policy positions with 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 concerns 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 probability 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 complement the HHI's perspective on political polarization, we also consider the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions. This measure reflects how much policy attitudes are sorted along partisan lines. A higher value of the MI reflects a greater level of 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 expected, the HHI and the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions exhibit a strong correlation, as depicted in Figure 6. Both measures have an absolute correlation coefficient of 0.71. While these measures are correlated, they each capture distinct manifestations of political polarization, each retaining its relevance. That said, due to its higher variability, the MI displays better potential than the HHI in effectively differentiating the degree of polarization that prevails over various policy issues.
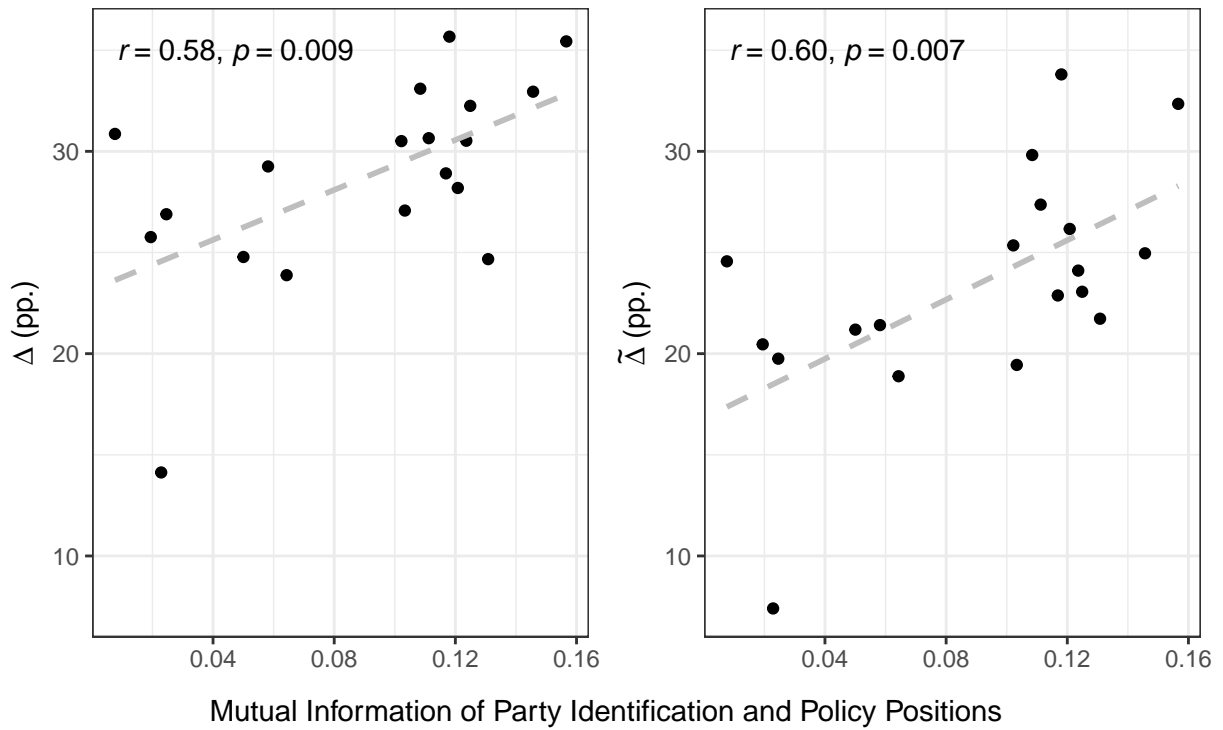
Relationship Between Issue Importance and Polarization

We now turn to this paper's primary objective: investigating the relationship between issue importance and polarization. We seek to determine whether issues with higher levels of polarization carry a greater weight in voters' electoral choices than issues over which a consensus exists.

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate the relationship between our measures of issue importance and adjusted
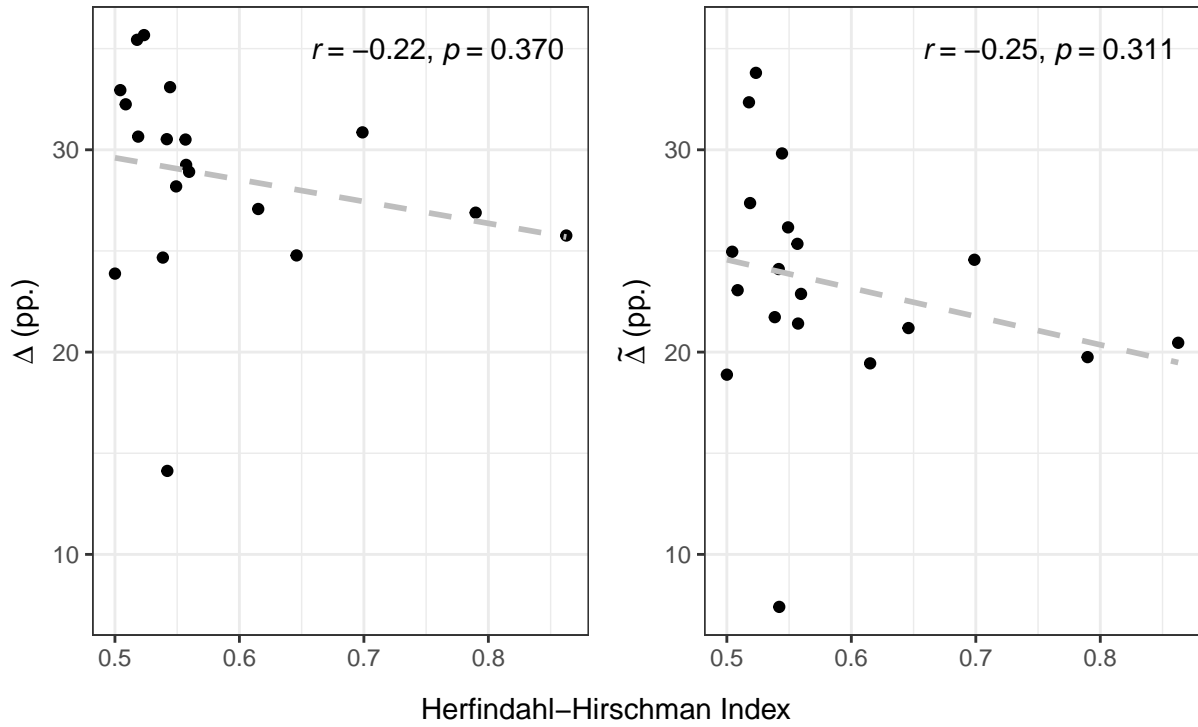
Figure 7: Relationship between Issue Importance and the Herfindahl–Hirschman Index

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

issue importance on the *y*-axis and the HHI and the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions, respectively, on the *x*-axis. Although no statistically significant correlation exists between issue importance and policy polarization, a strong and significant correlation is observed between issue importance and partisan polarization. This implies that issues over which voters' positions are more polarized along partisan lines tend to be of greater importance in their electoral choices than issues over which opinions are similarly distributed across parties. The correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization is significant at the 99% confidence level, with variations in the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions predicting approximately 34% of the variations in issue importance across policy issues. On the whole, our hypothesis, at least as it pertains to partisan polarization, is supported by the data.

Since the MI of Party Identification and Policy Positions exhibits 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 surprising. 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.

To conclude, we underscore the value of our measurement approach in this analysis. Figure S11 in the Online Appendix illustrates the relationship between the absolute value of the effect of candidates' policy positions on their likelihood of being chosen and our polarization measures. The observed relationship contradicts both our theoretical expectations and findings, as highly polarized issues appear to exert less influence on voters' electoral choices. We argue that this result does not accurately reflect the relationship between issue importance and polarization but rather reveals the limitations of the naive measurement approach discussed earlier. Specifically, this result is the byproduct of how the effect of candidates' policy positions aggregates voters' preferences. Recall that the average effect of candidates' policy positions is obtained by summing the effects conditional on voters' preferred positions, which have different signs depending on whether voters support or oppose a given proposal. This aggregation process dilutes the unconditional effect of candidates' positions. When voters' policy positions are polarized, the average effects converge to zero, leading to a smaller absolute value. Thus, our findings underscore the need to account for heterogeneity in voters' preferences when measuring the importance of issues in conjoint

experiments.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper makes a dual contribution. First, we formulated an approach for measuring the importance of issues. Most of our effort was devoted to formally defining the causal conception of issue importance within the potential outcomes framework. This allows us to articulate the limitations of previous measurement approaches and highlight the need for meticulously designed experiments to measure this concept reliably. After formally defining the causal conception of issue importance, conjoint experiments stand out as the most effective method for eliciting it.

We implemented our approach on a nationally representative panel of 2,109 registered voters immediately after the 2022 Congressional midterm elections. Participants answered two sets of questions. The first set directly solicited their opinions on 19 proposals spanning 15 policy areas. The second set featured six conjoint questions in which participants chose between two hypothetical candidates with randomly assigned policy platforms. While straightforward, this task simulates the trade-offs between the imperfect alternatives that voters encounter in actual elections, enhancing the credibility of the resulting estimates. Despite their limitations, conjoint experiments remain the most effective method for assessing issue importance, second only to manipulating actual elections.

Second, leveraging our estimates of issue importance, we investigated the relationship between issue importance and political polarization. Although there are several reasons to believe that polarized issues hold a greater weight in voters' electoral choices, this relationship has not been previously empirically studied. A likely explanation for this is the lack of authoritative methods to measure issue importance until now.

We considered two conceptions of political polarization: policy and partisan polarization. Although issue importance is not correlated with policy polarization, we observed a strong and statistically significant correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization. This observation is noteworthy and somewhat unexpected, considering that our experimental design intentionally dissuaded respondents from considering candidates' partisan affiliations by omitting any references to them.

Since it is impossible to manipulate an issue's importance or degree of polarization, we cannot definitively demonstrate a causal relationship between these variables. In particular, the direction of causality remains undetermined. Political polarization may lead to a rise in the importance of an issue. Similarly, the heightened

importance of an issue may fuel polarization. In practice, both phenomena likely coexist.

Our findings offer valuable insights into the electoral behavior of American voters. Yet, we are faced with the following question: How should we understand our estimates of issue importance, considering that voters do not necessarily engage in pure issue voting? Given the strong correlation between issue importance and partisan polarization, concerns about the validity of our experimental approach might arise. Indeed, voters, particularly those with strong partisan leanings, might be influenced by candidates' partisan affiliations when choosing who to vote for. Our deliberate decision to omit parties from our experimental design stemmed from the apprehension that the effect of candidates' partisan affiliations would dwarf the policy effects we are interested in measuring. Accordingly, our survey instrument intentionally avoided citing political parties to prime respondents to set aside partisan considerations from their decision-making process. This should not impose a meaningful limitation if we assume that voters do not have direct preferences over candidates' partisan affiliations but use them solely as informational signals to impute candidates' policy positions. The same is true if voters' preferences over candidates' partisan affiliations and policy positions were separable.

However, we cannot dictate how respondents ultimately make their decisions. Therefore, partisan considerations may spill into our experiment and findings. For instance, respondents interested in candidates' partisan affiliations may seek to infer it from the candidates' policy positions. Similarly, respondents may try to infer candidates' positions on other issues by extrapolating from the positions shown, relying on the correlations expected in the real world between candidates' stances on different policy issues, themselves strongly tied to partisanship. If it were the case, this could 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.[8] This challenge stems from the general observational equivalence between "partisan intoxication" and policy voting, as stressed by Fowler (2020). Before concluding that our findings definitively reflect partisan intoxication, it is crucial to acknowledge our inability to establish a causal relationship between these variables. We cannot determine whether polarized issues inherently drive increased importance or whether the relationship operates in the opposite direction. However, this behavior might demand a high, perhaps improbable, level of sophistication from respondents. Less sophisticated individuals are more prone to interpret our questions at "face value." In this scenario, it would be more reasonable to interpret our findings as evidence that issue importance precedes partisan polarization.

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8. This would challenge 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.

In any event, it is remarkable that electoral choices are strongly correlated with the partisan nature of policy issues, even in an experimental setting where partisan considerations are deliberately obscured. This could confirm the deep-seated influence of partisan considerations on voters' opinions or the inclination of parties to compete fiercely over policy issues that weigh heavily on voters' choices. Those who believe voters are simple and lack deep political knowledge might favor the latter explanation. However, this view is purely speculative. It similarly suggests that partisan considerations are so ingrained in voters' minds that they transcend any apparent or supposed lack of sophistication.

Overall, deviations from issue voting challenge our ability to accurately determine the relative weight of policy issues using our experimental methodology. These deviations make our estimates susceptible to capturing factors other than policy preferences. After all, voters are unlikely to make decisions exactly as presumed by the pure theory of issue voting. While issue voting certainly explains part of voters' decisions, other factors influence electoral choices. Therefore, issue voting alone does not fully explain all electoral decisions. Many studies have sought to assess the empirical validity of various electoral decision-making theories (e.g., Lenz 2012). Still, our paper underscores the need for additional research, opening new avenues and perspectives. Future research should carefully investigate how incorporating relevant attributes other than policy positions, such as candidates' partisan affiliations and personal characteristics like gender, race, ethnicity, and profession, explicitly into our experimental design affects our estimates of issue importance. Titelman and Lauderdale (2024) offer compelling leads in that respect. Future research should also explore alternative designs that more actively and explicitly discourage respondents from considering partisan affiliations in their decision-making process. Finally, future research should evaluate how the performance of our measurement approach compares to that of other methods.

Statements and Declarations

Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

The data collection and analysis procedures for this study were reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at our institution.

Data Availability

The data and code required to replicate the results reported in this paper will be made available in a public repository upon publication.

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