

## More Important, but for What Exactly?

### The Insignificant Role of Subjective Issue Importance in Vote Decisions

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#### Abstract:

The nature of democratic governance is intimately connected with how citizens respond to candidate position taking. But when will a generally uninformed public base its vote choices on candidate positions? Since Converse scholars have argued that citizens should place greater weight on candidate positions on issues they consider personally important. However, this claim has received mixed empirical support. We revisit this question with compelling new evidence. First, we expand the limited temporal focus of existing work in our first study where we analyze all available ANES data on importance and issue voting between 1980 and 2008. We then overcome endogeneity concerns through a nationally representative conjoint experiment in which we randomize two candidate's positions on five issues. Results from both studies demonstrate that there is scant evidence that subjective issue importance consistently moderates the relationship between candidate positions and vote choices. We discuss the implications of these results for "issue public" theories of political engagement, for research on voting behavior, and for political representation.

**Keywords**

Issue importance; vote choice; issue voting; candidate positioning; experiment; issue publics

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‘Issue publics’ form the backbone of democratic politics. Citizens generally possess low levels of general interest in, and knowledge about, political matters (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).<sup>1</sup> However, many citizens place a high degree of subjective personal importance, a key characteristic of issue public membership, on a select few issues (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990). In turn, this sense of subjective importance should motivate individuals to gather information about the issue(s) they care most about and act in congruence with their related attitudes (Bolsen and Leeper 2013; Henderson 2014; Holbrook et al. 2005; Hutchings 2001; Iyengar et al. 2008; Krosnick 1988b; Visser, Krosnick, and Simmons 2003). Concerns over the ability of citizens to realize their interests through the political process may thus be abated due to this issue-specific interest and engagement.

One critically important test of the foregoing argument concerns voting behavior. If ‘issue publics’ are a salve for a generally uninterested populace then issue importance should drive not only issue-specific political engagement but should also make citizens more likely to translate their issue attitudes into vote choices. However, there is currently no consensus on whether issue *importance* facilitates issue *voting*, i.e. the tendency to support candidates with policy positions close to the voter’s own preferences. Issue publics theories, rooted in the psychology of attitude strength, dictate that citizens should rely more on important issues than unimportant issues in deciding for whom to vote. Yet prior studies on this front have yielded decidedly mixed results (cf. Fournier, Blais, Nadeau, Gigengil, & Neviite, 2003; Hinckley, Hofstetter, & Kessel, 1974; Krosnick, 1988; Niemi & Bartels, 1985). Moreover, these studies focus on observational evidence from a temporally limited number of electoral contexts. This is problematic as the individual examples of issue voting found in these studies may be spurious insofar as citizens are instead adopting the position of their favored candidate or

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<sup>1</sup> Replication materials for this study can be accessed via the Political Behavior Dataverse.

alternatively projecting their own position onto the candidate (Broockman and Butler 2017; Lenz 2009; Page and Brody 1972). The importance of the ‘issue public’ hypothesis demands additional evidence.

We contribute to understandings of the role of issue publics in democratic politics through two studies focused on whether subjective issue importance facilitates issue voting in the domain of U.S. Presidential elections. Balancing trade-offs related to internal and external validity, we attempt to triangulate upon an estimate of the moderating effect of issue importance on vote choice. In Study 1 we investigate data from seven ANES surveys covering the past thirty years of American politics (i.e. from 1980-2008) to provide the most comprehensive to date overview of the role of issue importance in voter decision making. Yet because issue positions taken by candidates might be closely related with other factors (such as partisanship), these analyses do not allow us to fully disentangle the potential contribution of issue opinions to voting behavior or clearly examine how subjective importance might moderate that relationship. In Study 2, we therefore utilize a candidate choice conjoint experiment in which a national sample of Americans was presented with five sets of candidate profiles wherein the characteristics of both candidates, including their positions on five issues, was fully randomized. The randomization of candidate characteristics enables us to make more internally valid inferences than prior work in this area, albeit in a non-campaign context. Notably, results from both studies converge on the same outcome: there is scant evidence that subjective issue importance consistently moderates the relationship between issue positions and vote choice. The influence of issue importance on vote choices thus appears to be small and highly variable. These findings have important implications for “issue public” theories of political engagement, for research on voting behavior, and for political representation as we discuss in the conclusion.

### **Issue Importance and Issue Voting**

Normative accounts of citizen behavior often place issues at the forefront with citizens judged as to their propensity to translate these issue preferences into appropriate vote choices (Dahl 1971; Disch 2011; Downs 1957). However, there exists some skepticism about whether citizens are likely to meet this standard given that many citizens lack knowledge about political matters and issue-based voting requires citizens to correctly map their policy preferences onto political alternatives. As a result of the public's general lack of knowledge, past research has often focused attention on potential moderating factors that may increase the weight of issue considerations in voters' decision calculus. Such moderating influences include elements of the issues themselves, i.e. whether an issue is 'hard' or 'easy' (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Hurley and Hill 2003), as well as individual-level influences such as a voter's emotional reactions to political candidates and parties (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Marcus and Mackuen 1993). Such studies suggest that voters may selectively vote based on their issue preferences thereby partially undermining the most pessimistic reading of citizen decision making.

Perhaps no other characteristic has as long and important a history as a potential facilitating factor for issue voting as the concept of 'issue public' membership, which is typically denoted by the sense of importance an individual attaches to a given issue. This idea, first suggested by Converse (1964), holds that citizens are unlikely to care about all issues to the same extent. Instead, while individuals may be apathetic regarding many political issues, one or more of them may be considered particularly important to pay attention to and act upon (Krosnick 1990). As such, we should expect to observe an increasing propensity for individuals to vote based on issue considerations as issue importance increases in intensity.

**Issue Public Hypothesis:** Higher levels of subjective issue importance will increase the influence of issue proximity on vote choice, all else equal.

The central intuition surrounding the ‘issue public’ hypothesis finds greater theoretical elaboration in research on attitude strength, which postulates that “individuals for whom an attitude is held more strongly will be more likely to act to express that attitude” (Holbrook et al. 2016, 4). Following Boninger et al. (1995, 160) we define attitude importance as indicating “an individual’s subjective sense of the concern, caring, and significance” attached to an issue attitude. A large body of research shows that importance has a distinctly *motivational* effect (Miller and Peterson 2004). Importance motivates information gathering and thus facilitates the accumulation of attitude-relevant knowledge, i.e. *learning* (Bolsen and Leeper 2013; Converse 1964; Henderson 2014; Holbrook et al. 2005; Iyengar et al. 2008). Importance also motivates *thinking* about the attitudinal object which should increase attitude accessibility and durability over time (Bizer and Krosnick 2001; Krosnick 1988a; Lavine, Borgida, and Sullivan 2000; Lecheler, de Vreese, and Slothuus 2009). Finally, importance motivates *acting* in order to express one’s attitude (Holbrook et al. 2016; Price et al. 2006; Visser, Krosnick, and Simmons 2003). The positive relationship between subjective importance and these factors supports the contention that issue voting should increase alongside the subjective importance of the issue.

Consistent with the foregoing, the conventional wisdom suggests that “people for whom a policy issue is highly personally important have been shown to place great weight on it when deciding how to vote” (Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2017). However, the empirical evidence regarding this claim is actually quite mixed. Previous studies have explored importance in one of two ways. First, some studies focus on the perceived *national* importance of the issue. However, while aggregate patterns of national importance appear to influence subsequent party and candidate rhetoric (Burden and Sanberg 2003; Spoon and Klüver 2014), research on the influence of national importance

judgments on issue voting tends to show little moderating influence (Johns 2010; Maggiotto and Piereson 1978; Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2017).

Other studies focus, as we do, on perceptions of *subjective* importance, i.e. how important the issue is to the individual. Here the results are decidedly mixed. While some studies show a positive relationship between subjective importance and the influence of issue preferences on vote choices (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977; Belanger and Meguid 2008; Fournier et al. 2003; Krosnick 1988b; Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2017; Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby 1982; Visser, Krosnick, and Simmons 2003), others find that importance does not meaningfully or consistently moderate issue voting (Granberg and Holmberg 1986; Grynaviski and Corrigan 2006; Hinckley, Hofstetter, and Kessel 1974; Jackson 1980; Niemi and Bartels 1985). As Johns (2010, 146) put it, the empirical results on this topic are “surprisingly patchy.”

One potential reason for these varying results concerning subjective importance may be methodological. Krosnick (1988b), for instance, notes that many studies prior to his used respondent/candidate distance scores that were likely affected by errors stemming from attitude projection, wherein voters infer candidates’ positions from their own issue stances. Krosnick corrects for this by using the study sample’s mean placement of the candidates rather than the respondent’s own placement of the candidates to calculate the distance between the candidates and the voter. Moreover, he notes that prior studies failed to include main effects when exploring interactions between issue distance and importance. However, while a positive interaction term consistently emerges after correcting for these issues, the statistical precision of this estimate varies. For instance, while the interaction between subjective importance and distance is positive and statistically significant in eight out of thirteen cases when these variables are the only ones used to predict the respondent’s vote choice, only *two* of these interactions remain significant at conventional levels of statistical significance

when included alongside partisanship and ideological self-placement (Krosnick 1988b, Table 4). Thus, even in the canonical study on the subject the evidence is rather mixed, leaving the matter largely unresolved.

Whether subjective importance moderates issue voting has important empirical and normative implications relating to voter rationality, political representation, and the health of democratic competition. The mixed empirical findings on this question are thus one reason why another investigation into their relationship is worthwhile. Beyond this normative motivation, we believe a re-examination is important for an additional reason. Existing work has relied on observational data to investigate the link between importance, issue attitudes, and voting. This raises questions about the validity of the inferences made by such studies. First, it may be difficult to disentangle the effects of issue voting and partisan voting when the two factors strongly align, as they are likely to do insofar as parties are reasonably distinct on public policies. Second, given limited candidate and party alternatives in U.S. elections and the relative infrequency of Presidential elections, there is quite limited variation in the combinations of issue positions, partisan labels, and other candidate characteristics that have ever been studied in this literature. Third, as already noted, individuals may project their own policy preferences onto candidates thereby making any observed relationship between issue attitudes and vote choice spurious; alternatively, policy preferences may follow from party positioning, yielding a similar issue (e.g. Lenz 2012). We address these potential issues via a candidate choice conjoint experiment wherein candidate characteristics, including partisanship and issue stances, are independently randomized. We elaborate on the nature of our design below.

### **Study 1: ANES (1980-2008)**

To investigate the moderating influence of subjective importance on issue voting in a real electoral context we turn to two types of ANES survey. First, we analyze data from the ANES Time Series and, specifically, the 1980, 1984, 1996, 2000, 2004, and the 2008 Time Series surveys<sup>2</sup> In addition, we also analyze data from the 2008 ANES Panel Survey, which was an online panel survey of respondents separate from the Time Series. This represents the most comprehensive analysis to date of issue importance in Presidential voting decisions, as prior observational studies only focus on elections up to 1996.

Respondents on each of these surveys were asked to place themselves and the candidates on a common issue scale, along with the importance of that issue to them personally, on a pre-election questionnaire. Across these eight surveys we thus have 48 distinct measures of relative proximity and subjective importance. Table OB1 provides an overview of these 48 questions. While the specific issues asked about on each survey varied, the issues capture some of the most important policy debates in American politics over the last three decades. Moreover, there exists variation in the policy content of the surveys. The questions to be analyzed include both economic and foreign policy questions, questions concerning moral or potentially ‘easy’ topics (e.g. abortion) as well as potentially more esoteric or difficult topics (e.g. the wisdom of regulating power plant emissions to fight global warming). They also capture policy debates both new (e.g. same-sex marriage) and old (e.g. government provision of health insurance) to American politics at the time of inquiry. Thus, the analyses below should provide a comprehensive view of the role of subjective importance in facilitating issue voting in recent American Presidential elections.

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<sup>2</sup> Respondents on the 2008 ANES Time Series were randomly assigned to either Ballot A, where they were asked about seven issues, or to Ballot B where six issues were queried about. We thus investigate the two ballots as if they were two separate surveys, yielding seven ANES Time Series surveys to analyze. Subjective issue importance was not asked on other ANES surveys during this time frame.

Our dependent variable is *Vote Choice*, here coded so that a score of 1 indicates that the respondent indicated voting for the Republican candidate, while a score of 0 captures voters for the Democratic candidate. To operationalize issue voting, we follow previous studies and focus on the degree of *Relative Issue Distance* between the respondent and the candidate (Krosnick 1988b; Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2017).<sup>3</sup> Issue distance was measured via the following formula:  $|\text{Respondent} - \text{Sample Mean Placement of the Democratic Candidate}| - |\text{Respondent} - \text{Sample Mean Placement of the Republican Candidate}|$ , which we rescaled to range from 0-1. Higher scores on this measure indicate greater proximity to the Republican candidate. Finally, *Subjective Importance* was asked on all the surveys but with a varying response format. In 1980 respondents could indicate how important the issue was to them on a scale of 0-100. The 1984 ANES Time Series allowed respondents to answer on a 1-4 scale. The remainder of the ANES, meanwhile, surveys used a 5-pt scale. We follow Krosnick (1988b) and Miller et al. (2017) in rescaling the 1980 importance ratings onto a 4-pt scale (0-59=0, 60-89=0.33, 90-99=0.66, 100=1), and also rescale the remainder of the importance items to fall on a 0-1 scale. Thus, the coefficient for *Issue Distance* should be positive and increasingly so as *Subjective Importance* also increases.

## Results

The Issue Public Hypothesis postulates a positive interaction between issue voting, as measured by the relative issue distance score, and issue importance. On each survey, we predicted vote choice via a logit model in which all the relative proximity measures, subjective importance indicators, and

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<sup>3</sup> This is not the only way of operationalizing issue voting. For instance, voters may alternatively vote directionally and simply favor the candidate that they perceive to be on their side of the issue (e.g. Adams, Bishin, and Dow 2004). Our goal is not to adjudicate between these rival theories of decision making. We focus on a proximity rule both because of its prominence in prior studies of issue importance and voting (i.e., Krosnick 1988b) and because Van Houweling and Tomz' (2008) experimental analyses suggest a proximity rule may be the most commonly used strategy by voters.

interactions between them were included.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the same set of control variables was included in all models: partisanship, ideology, retrospective economic evaluations, age, race, gender, education, and income. These variables were chosen for inclusion given their obvious importance in prior work on Presidential vote choices and due to their availability in all survey years.

Figures 1 & 2 provide an overview of the results of these models by plotting the average marginal effect of relative candidate issue distance across subjective importance in all 48 cases. One important point communicated by these figures is the varying influence of importance. While most interactions were positive in direction, as expected, a substantive minority (12/48) were *negative*. Furthermore, there exist various instances in Figures 1 and 1 where an ostensibly positive interaction yields a virtually flat line. While Figures 1 & 2 provide some evidence in favor of the issue importance hypothesis, it is clearly far from uniform.

To test the moderating role of importance, we conduct a series of Wald tests that consider the joint significance of the importance variable and the interaction term between it and the issue distance measure. We find little evidence of a consistent role played by subjective importance. In only 3 out of the 8 surveys did we observe a Wald test yielding a p-value below 0.05. The same pattern emerges when looking directly at the interaction coefficients themselves where only 8/48 interaction terms were both positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, in most cases it appears that a more restricted model, one excluding the interaction term, would be a better fit for the data. By random chance alone we would expect to approximately 2-3 of these interaction terms to be significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. As Figures 1 and 2 attest, the lack of significant interactions is being driven largely by a

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<sup>4</sup> See Online Appendix B for full model results. We have also done this on an issue-by-issue basis, which yields 48 models. Our basic conclusions remain the same. Indeed, these issue-by-issue models yield a slightly more pessimistic account. For instance, in only 6/48 cases would a Wald test for the inclusion of importance and the interaction term yield a significant test statistic.

lack of precision at low levels of subjective importance; in 22 of the cases we see a significant effect of proximity at the maximum level of importance, for instance, but many fewer significant coefficients at the lowest level of importance.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we do find some evidence in favor of the Issue Public hypothesis. However, this evidence is far from consistent and ultimately suggests that importance may have but a substantially variable influence in voter decision making in this context.

As Figures 1 & 2 attest, in most cases the interaction between subjective importance and relative proximity is positive in nature but with sufficient variation in the estimates that this data cannot support overly precise estimates of the statistical significance of the interaction term.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, one question could concern the substantive importance of these interactions, i.e. how *much* importance matters. To investigate this question while accounting for the different importance scales across surveys we calculated the average marginal effect of issue distance at both low (i.e. below the median on importance) and high (i.e. above the median) levels of importance for each interaction. Overall, the difference between these two statistics is not large, with a mean difference of approximately 5% (0.049; SD: 0.11); in other words, on average the influence of relative proximity is approximately 5% greater at high levels of importance than low. This difference is larger in those few cases where the interaction is more precisely measured; in the 40 cases where the interaction is not statistically

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<sup>5</sup> To address this lack of support, we re-estimate interactions using the binning estimator suggested by Hainmueller et al. (n.d.) and find little reason to believe a simple linear interaction is problematic (see Online Appendix E). Given the small range of possible values of the importance variable, we nearly always have some observations across its full domain mitigating the main concern with interaction analyses about bases inferences on extreme extrapolation.

<sup>6</sup> Such uncertainty may raise questions regarding the measurement of importance and its role in affecting these interactions. Notably, as part of a survey experiment three importance questions on the 2008 Time Series featured an alteration to their response options that led to significantly higher numbers of respondents saying the issues were of low importance. All items on the 2008 ANES Panel, moreover, featured this importance depressing alternative wording. Notably importance continues to play an inconsequential role in moderating issue voting in these cases despite the potential for enhanced precision in estimating the effects of issue distance at lower levels of importance afforded by the change in measurement. In addition, we experimentally induced lower levels of issue importance on one issue in Study 2 yet still did not find a meaningful interaction between importance and issue voting. Finally, in Online Appendix D we address the potential for social desirability to create a skew in the importance measures. We do this by subtracting from each individual importance report the respondent's mean score on all importance items. Notably we find the same pattern of results as in-text.

significant, the mean difference is 0.03 (SD:0.10), while this estimate jumps to 0.17 (SD:0.11) in the 8 significant interactions. We thus see some very qualified evidence in favor of the issue importance hypothesis; in most cases we see a positive interaction wherein subjective importance does not appear to be substantively bolstering issue voting, but a few cases where it does to a small degree.

### **Study 2: A Candidate Choice Experiment**

Choosing between candidates is an inherently complex task given that competing candidates will differ on several dimensions, including their personal characteristics and issue stances. While the influence of these factors is commonly studied using survey data (as in Study 1), such an approach has limitations: namely, candidate characteristics are not random and thus it can be difficult to disentangle the degree to which any given candidate feature is used by citizens when making up their minds about how to vote. We overcome some of the limitations of such data by employing a candidate choice conjoint experiment embedded in the second wave of a two-wave, online panel survey. This experimental approach involving hypothetical candidate choices – while somewhat artificial – enables us to clearly assess the independent effects of candidate characteristics on vote choices, while retaining the realism of voter decision-making between two alternatives and the external validity provided by a nationally representative sample.

We measure vote choices using a standard conjoint/vignette approach. Respondents were presented in sequence with five pairs of candidates (labelled Candidate A and Candidate B) and asked which candidate they would choose in an election for President. Each pair was presented separately and participants were first shown an example pairing to familiarize them with the experimental setup. The analytic advantage of a conjoint design is the fully random assignment of attributes across a variety of dimensions, which enables the unbiased estimation of effects of each dimension on the choice (Ballard-Rosa, Martin, and Scheve 2016; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Hainmueller,

Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Kirkland and Coppock n.d.; Peterson n.d.). In our case, we randomly manipulated the demographic (age, sex, religion, race, occupation, and military service) and political (partisanship and issue stances on five issues) characteristics of both candidates; see Table 1 for a listing of the attributes and dimensions that were manipulated and Figure 3 for an example. Because these characteristics were fully randomized we can obtain well-identified estimates of the “average marginal component effect” (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014) of each feature, including the influence of the candidate’s policy positions and hence the exogenously determined degree of issue distance between a respondent and each candidate.<sup>7</sup>

Our core dependent variable is *Candidate Choice*, which equals 1 if the respondent selected Candidate B and 0 if they selected Candidate A. As each respondent (n=743) was presented with five vignettes, we thus have a total of 3715 possible vignette choices to analyze. We will analyze these choices using OLS regression wherein we cluster standard errors at the respondent level to account for the non-independence of each respondent’s choices. Because candidates’ features are fully randomized, OLS provides unbiased estimates of the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of each candidate feature. The use of OLS instead of an alternative estimator (e.g., logistic regression) is in keeping with methodological guidance on the analysis of conjoint experiments (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014) and for consistency with previous work using these methods (e.g. Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Kirkland and Coppock n.d.); switching to a logit model yields substantively identical results. For the purposes of our main analyses, the data are structured as 3,715 rows (743

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<sup>7</sup> The order of this information was constant. As noted, the characteristics of both candidates were fully randomized, i.e. we did not restrict particular combinations of attributes. However, we did restrict the probability with which the race and religion characteristics were drawn to better reflect their population characteristics. The racial categories were drawn randomly with the following probabilities: 0.60 (White), 0.15 (Black), 0.15 (Hispanic) and 0.10 (Asian). The religion categories had the following probabilities of being drawn: 0.20 (Evangelical), 0.20 (Mainline), 0.20 (Catholic), 0.10 (Jewish), 0.10 (Muslim) and 0.20 (None). As a final note, one candidate was always a Democrat and the other a Republican. Which candidate was a Democrat/Republican was randomly assigned.

respondents x 5 candidate pairings), with the candidate choice measure regressed on indicators for each level of the randomly assigned candidate features and respondent characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

To test the Issue Public Hypothesis we need measures both of the relative distance of the respondent to both candidates and of the subjective importance of the issues involved. Such tests can often be difficult because asking respondents for their issue positions immediately before asking them to express vote choices may prime them to decide based upon proximity more than they otherwise would (a consistency bias). Similarly, asking respondents to report their positions (and the importance thereof) immediately after expressing vote choices may lead them to misreport the importance they attach to issues in light of the choices they just expressed. For these reasons, respondents were only asked about their issue positions and issue importance during the first wave of the panel conducted approximately one week before the experimental wave. Respondents were asked for their opinion on eight policy issues, with candidates in the choice experiment taking a position on five of these (see Table 1).<sup>9</sup> The additional issues not used in the experiment were asked about to reduce the potential for consistency biases. The issues included in the experiment range in terms of issue domain (i.e. foreign vs. domestic policy, cultural vs. economic) and national salience and thus should provide a good overview of the influence of issue attitudes and candidate positions on subsequent choices.

To measure the relative distance of the candidates, we first coded each of the five measures so that higher values indicate more conservative responses on the issue. We then calculated a measure of relative distance via the following formula, much as in Study 1:  $|\text{Respondent} - \text{Candidate A Stance}| - |\text{Respondent} - \text{Candidate B Stance}|$ , which we rescaled to range from 0-1. Scores greater than 0.5 on

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<sup>8</sup> Our results are the same when we fully stack the data such that each row is a vignette-candidate and proximity is measured as the level of proximity to the candidate in question; see Table OA6 and Figure OA12.

<sup>9</sup> See Figure OA4 for the distribution and sample means for all eight issues.

this variable indicate that the respondent is relatively more proximate to Candidate B than A on the issue, while scores below 0.5 indicate the opposite. Our second independent variable is *Issue Importance*. After providing their issue attitude on the first wave questionnaire, respondents were asked “How important is this issue to you personally?” with five response options: not at all, slightly, moderately, very, and extremely. The mean levels of importance for the five issues are: 3.24 (SD: 1.24; Immigration); 3.48 (1.28; Taxes on Rich); 3.48 (1.11; ISIS); 3.31 (1.21; Cap & Trade); 2.97 (1.17; Trans Pacific Partnership [TPP]).

Ratings of issue importance are determined by a multitude of factors (Boninger et al. 1995), so one notable element of our assessment of the role of issue importance is the inclusion of an importance manipulation experiment on the issue of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Respondents in the Baseline condition read the following: “As you may know, there has been some recent discussion about the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a potential trade agreement between the United States and twelve Asian countries.” The issue prompt for respondents in the Low Importance condition contained a further sentence reading “This is probably not relevant to you because Congress does not appear likely to ratify the treaty and even if they did it is unlikely to personally affect you,” while those assigned to the High Importance condition read, “This is relevant to you since the treaty would substantially affect the prices of consumer goods.” This type of manipulation has previously been shown to influence reported issue importance (Leeper 2014). Respondents in the three conditions did not report significantly different issue attitudes, but those in the Low Importance condition did report significantly lower levels of issue importance than respondents in the Baseline or High Importance conditions (see Figure OA7). The presence of this manipulation provides us with further leverage to assess whether subjective importance moderates issue voting due to the exogenous decrease in apparent issue importance.

## **Sample**

The first survey was fielded from December 8-10 2016 and was completed by 1013 individuals. On this first survey respondents answered questions pertaining to their political and demographic characteristics and provided their attitudes, and attitude importance, on eight issues. Respondents to this first survey were then re-contacted the following week with 743 respondents completing the second survey (December 15-20), which contained the candidate choice experiment. Our analyses will focus on these 743 respondents.

Our sample was recruited from Survey Sampling International's (SSI) national panel of survey respondents. Tables OA1 and OA2 in the Online Appendix provide an overview of the sample's demographic and political characteristics along with population estimates where available. Our sample is broadly representative of the mass public although some notable deviations do emerge. In particular, the sample has more white and fewer Black and Hispanic respondents, is better educated, and also has more middle-aged (and fewer elderly) respondents than the mass public at large. Meanwhile, the sample is quite representative in terms of its political characteristics (e.g. partisanship, vote choice, and ideology). For instance, the partisan split of those participating in both surveys is 28.51% Republicans, 38.34% Democrats, and 33.15% Independents, which nearly mirrors the Gallup estimate most recent to the surveys (27/32/36). Importantly, there does not appear to be any substantive bias in determining attrition between the two surveys as these tables, and Figures OA1 and OA2, demonstrate.

## **Results**

While the concern with any experimental study of voter decision making is whether its artificial nature will generate incoherent and thus externally invalid insight into choices, the conjoint design's inclusion of numerous demographic and political features enables a "sanity check" on respondents' behavior. As such, we first note some important patterns from the conjoint. For brevity's sake we

present these results in the Online Appendix (Figures OA8 and OA9) and simply note four key results that give us confidence in the validity of the design. First, while the candidate's status as a Democrat or Republican did not matter by itself, the partisan match between candidate and respondent emerged as a substantial factor in accounting for candidate choice. A candidate was, on average, approximately 22% ( $b=0.215$  [0.17, 0.26]) more likely to be chosen by co-partisans than individuals from the other party. This estimate is line with Peterson's (n.d.; Figure 1) estimate of the effect of co-partisanship in a similarly information rich conjoint environment. Second, Muslim candidates were approximately 12% ( $b= -0.12$  [-0.16, -0.08]) less likely to be selected than non-Muslim candidates, which reflects the still quite negative attitudes towards Muslims among Americans (Pew Research Center 2017). Third, a small negative effect for age emerged, consistent with Hainmueller et al. (2014). A candidate at the maximum value for age (75 years old) was on average approximately 6% less likely to be chosen than one at the age minimum (35 years old). Finally, conservative candidates on the issue of taxing the wealthy were significantly less likely to be selected, consistent with the broadly progressive taxation preferences of Americans (Ballard-Rosa, Martin, and Scheve 2016). A candidate listed as strongly opposed to increasing taxes on the wealthy was, on average, approximately 8% less likely to be chosen than one listed as strongly in support of these tax increases. While these results are not the core focus of our study, they are nevertheless interesting both in their consistency with prior studies (e.g. the large effect of co-partisanship) and their potential novelty (e.g. the negative effect of age).

To test the Issue Public Hypothesis, we regressed candidate choice on relative candidate issue distance, issue importance, and their interaction. In Figure 4 we plot the marginal effect of issue distance by level of subjective importance for all five issues (see Table OA4 for full model results). Two lines are provided per subplot; one from an OLS model where proximity, importance, and their interaction are the only included predictors and one from a model wherein the other proximity

variables, candidate age, Muslim status, and co-partisanship are also controlled. The inclusion of these other factors (as well as other demographic characteristics) does not substantially influence the resulting estimates.

The core finding from Figure 4 is that subjective importance does not systematically moderate relative proximity in the expected positive direction. Three basic patterns can be observed in Figure 4. First, on three issues the interaction yields an essentially flat line: TPP, Immigration, and Cap & Trade.<sup>10</sup> That is, on these issues relative proximity has approximately the same average effect regardless of the subjective importance of the issue. Second, a positive interaction does emerge on Taxing the Rich albeit one that is not statistically significant; in the second model, the average marginal effect of issue distance changes from 0.09 [-0.12, 0.31] when importance is at its minimum to 0.25 [0.13, 0.37], a substantive but imprecise change.<sup>11</sup> Finally, a *negative* interaction emerges on the issue of deploying ground troops to combat ISIS although again neither interaction coefficient is statistically significant. Again, the change in behavior is substantive but imprecise, with the average effect of relative proximity declining from 0.28 [0.04, 0.52] at the minimum of importance to 0.05 [-0.09, 0.19] at its maximum.<sup>12</sup> In its totality, Figure 4 augurs against hypothesis that subjective importance positively moderates issue voting in a consistent manner.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A similar result emerges on the TPP issue when we use the manipulation treatment assignment instead of importance in the interaction with relative proximity. We also explored a three-way interaction between proximity/importance/and importance manipulation as well as a two-stage least squares equation where we use the exogenous importance treatment condition as an instrument for importance and its interaction with proximity. These analyses also show a failure for importance to positively moderate proximity. See Table OA5/Figure OA10 for these results.

<sup>11</sup> A Wald test for the equivalence of these two effects is not statistically significant [ $F(1, 655)=1.27, p = 0.26$ ], i.e. we cannot reject the null that the difference between the two equals 0.

<sup>12</sup> As with above, we cannot reject the null that the two are equivalent;  $F(1, 657) = 1.84; p = 0.18$ .

<sup>13</sup> In Online Appendix A we also investigate the relationship between importance, proximity and co-partisanship and find scant evidence that Independents were more likely to behave in accordance with the Issue Public hypothesis. We also compare results taken from just the first vignette versus those obtained from the full sample of vignettes to investigate potential learning effects. Notably, a *negative* interaction emerged for three of the five issues on the first vignette, which suggests that Figure 4 is not an artifact of respondent learning over the course of the experiment.

## Study 2 Discussion

Subjective importance did not play a substantive role in positively moderating the relationship between a respondent's issue preferences and their candidate choices. Our confidence in these patterns should be enhanced by our ability to randomly assign candidate characteristics through the conjoint approach and thereby avoid issues such as attitude projection.<sup>14</sup> However, while behavior in conjoint experiments appears to be a good predictor of behavior outside the laboratory (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015), choosing between Candidate A and Candidate B is clearly different from choosing between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Participants in Study 2 did not possess prior attitudes toward these candidates that could influence their resulting behavior. Likewise, the candidate choices occurred absent the prolonged campaign that characterizes Presidential elections. The information provided subjects was fairly extensive, but also somewhat limited, which may contribute to the particularly strong results for relative proximity seen in Study 2. Yet our first study suggested that under conditions where individuals are likely to have had prolonged campaign exposure, the influence of proximity does not appear to be heavily moderated by importance either.

## Conclusion

Issue importance is a critical concept in studies of voting because it is thought to motivate citizens to base their vote choices on the policy stances taken by candidates and thereby satisfy certain normative standards of democratic citizenship. If so, then 'issue publics', of which subjective importance is a key criterion for membership, would provide a potential salve to concerns raised by studies demonstrating a lack of general interest in, and knowledge about, politics among the mass

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, we are unable to completely rule out the possibility of some projection (that is, respondents viewing party and policy positions of profiles but ignoring or modifying them to some extent.) Researchers employing conjoint experiments on candidate evaluation and vote choice should consider how best to measure this possible projection dynamic.

public. Yet the present research – using two quite different research designs – points toward pessimism regarding the ability of issue importance to play this role. Across the two studies we found a positive, but largely inconsequential, interaction between subjective issue importance and issue voting. This leads to a conclusion wherein issue importance has a small, but highly variable, influence over voter decision making. These findings pose important normative and practical questions, which we turn to next.

The supposition that candidate positions matter more for vote choices among those who find the issue important is a deeply intuitive idea. One recurring difficulty in testing this claim, however, concerns measurement. We rely here on closed-choice items concerning a select few issues, as has been the standard practice in empirical tests in this area. However, the issue priorities of citizens are surely highly idiosyncratic such that many of the subjects in our studies may have felt other issues not asked about more important than the ones included in the survey batteries we used (Ahler and Broockman n.d.; Krosnick 1990). As such, one potential worry may be that the subjective importance items used on the ANES and other surveys are capturing what are, in essence, non-attitudes.<sup>15</sup> One potential remedy that future studies could explore is to use open-ended items to generate a respondent-specific set of subjective important issues followed by candidate placements and closed choice importance ratings for each issue (or some subset). Alternatively, the conjoint method itself could be useful as means for enabling respondents to reveal the issues they deem important by examining the weight given to proximity concerns when candidates disagree (Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2018). Regardless, an important topic for future work is to refine the methodology for assessing importance.

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<sup>15</sup> We thank an Anonymous Reviewer for making this point.

While we did not find much evidence in favor of a consistent role for issue importance, our studies do show a consistently positive, albeit small, influence of issue considerations in vote choices. For instance, in our ANES analyses (Study 1) moving from minimum to maximum in issue distance was associated with an approximate increase of voting for the Republican candidate of 5% (see Online Appendix OC for results). But this raises the question: how much issue voting is ‘enough’? Given that we find limited variation in issue voting across levels of attitude importance, we could interpret this finding as either a positive or negative conclusion for political well-being. If one conceptualizes democratic legitimacy as resting on the congruence between the policy preferences of the mass public and the policy outputs of the government, then a paltry degree of issue voting may threaten the very legitimacy of government. After all, it may be difficult to see how voters can hold governments accountable if they do not vote on policy matters.<sup>16</sup> In the current study we saw that there was a modest effect of issue distance, both in terms of the additional explained variance from its inclusion in models predicting vote choice and by an investigation of the average marginal effects of the proximity variables themselves. However, it is not immediately clear if the lack of a more sizable effect is truly worrying or simply a reflection of typically low-effort political reasoning. For instance, the low – and generally consistent – levels of issue voting may suggest that even those individuals who claim to be passionate about an issue may lack the motivation or opportunity to meaningfully connect their views to candidate alternatives, particularly in a setting of limited political choice such as the United States. By contrast, if citizens use partisanship as a low-cost heuristic for judging how to act (Lupia and

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<sup>16</sup> Even if voters choose based on the rational proxy of recent economic performance, as suggested by Fiorina (1981), we may still see such a breakdown occur on non-economic issues, especially when partisan biases in economic perceptions are considered (e.g. Bartels 2002). Of course, there are issues with this type of demand-input model, most importantly the endogeneity of voter preferences to elite rhetoric (Disch 2011; Druckman 2014). When the endogeneity of mass preferences are accounted for the normative implications of proximity voting, of any degree, becomes much more complicated to assess.

McCubbins 1998), and do so reasonably (Lau and Redlawsk 2006), then any additional gain from issue voting may make a positive situation even more positive. Thus, future normative work should pay further attention to addressing the sufficiency of issue voting as a criterion of democratic health.

Given our focus on Presidential elections, it is also worth asking whether, and how, the type of election might shape voting behavior. Presidential elections are potentially unique in terms of the degree of information available to citizens and in the higher salience of partisanship during said elections. On the one hand, then, we might expect to see a stronger role for subjective importance in lower profile elections where the informational advantage of subjective importance may be greater. On the other hand, the paucity of information in these very elections might give added power to partisanship as a low-cost heuristic for decision-making, further crowding out the role of proximity. Lacking data on other election types, this question remains unanswered here as does the normative question of whether issue distance and subjective importance should have differential effects across types of elections.

While our two studies point to a conclusion that this relationship will be quite small on average, they also suggest that in particular cases we might see a stronger relationship emerge. An important step for future work is to consider the potential causes of variation in the interaction between issue importance and candidate positioning. Recent work has shown that experiences of partisan ambivalence, for instance, may stimulate greater attentiveness to candidate positioning (Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). It may be the case that the expected interaction between issue importance and issue voting will be especially likely among those individuals, or in those contexts, wherein the relevance of partisanship is diminished. Alternatively, greater attention could be paid to the nature of the issues themselves, e.g. to party issue ownership (Belanger and Meguid 2008; Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003). Regardless, it strikes us as time to move beyond the expectation of a

straightforward interaction and instead look for much more nuanced conditions (either of issues, of voters, or of candidate campaigns) where subjective importance may play an important role in voting.

Finally, our results speak to the viability of “issue public” theories of democratic citizenship. While political scientists have long known that much of the public is inattentive to and not terribly well-informed about much of politics (Converse 1964), scholars over the past sixty years have repeatedly pointed to the idea that passionate subsets of the public are especially interested in small slices of policy debate. These issue publics have been repeatedly shown to care deeply about a particular issue – say abortion or gun control – and considerable evidence has shown a translation of that concern into selective media attention (Bolsen and Leeper 2013; Iyengar 1990; Krosnick 1990). Yet the evidence linking that personal importance to voting behavior is proving to be quite meager. Political scientists would therefore be right to wonder what precisely we should make of a public passionate about a given issue but no more likely to act on their attitude toward that issue than anyone else. Future work should consider the degree to which this pattern of results reflects the perennial disconnect between (even strong) attitudes and expressed behaviors, or the limitations of choice within the U.S. political context, or an interaction between the two. A concerned and attentive public is no doubt a good thing, but the limited variation in proximity voting across levels of importance highlights that the most typical political role for citizens of all levels of attitude importance is that of spectator.

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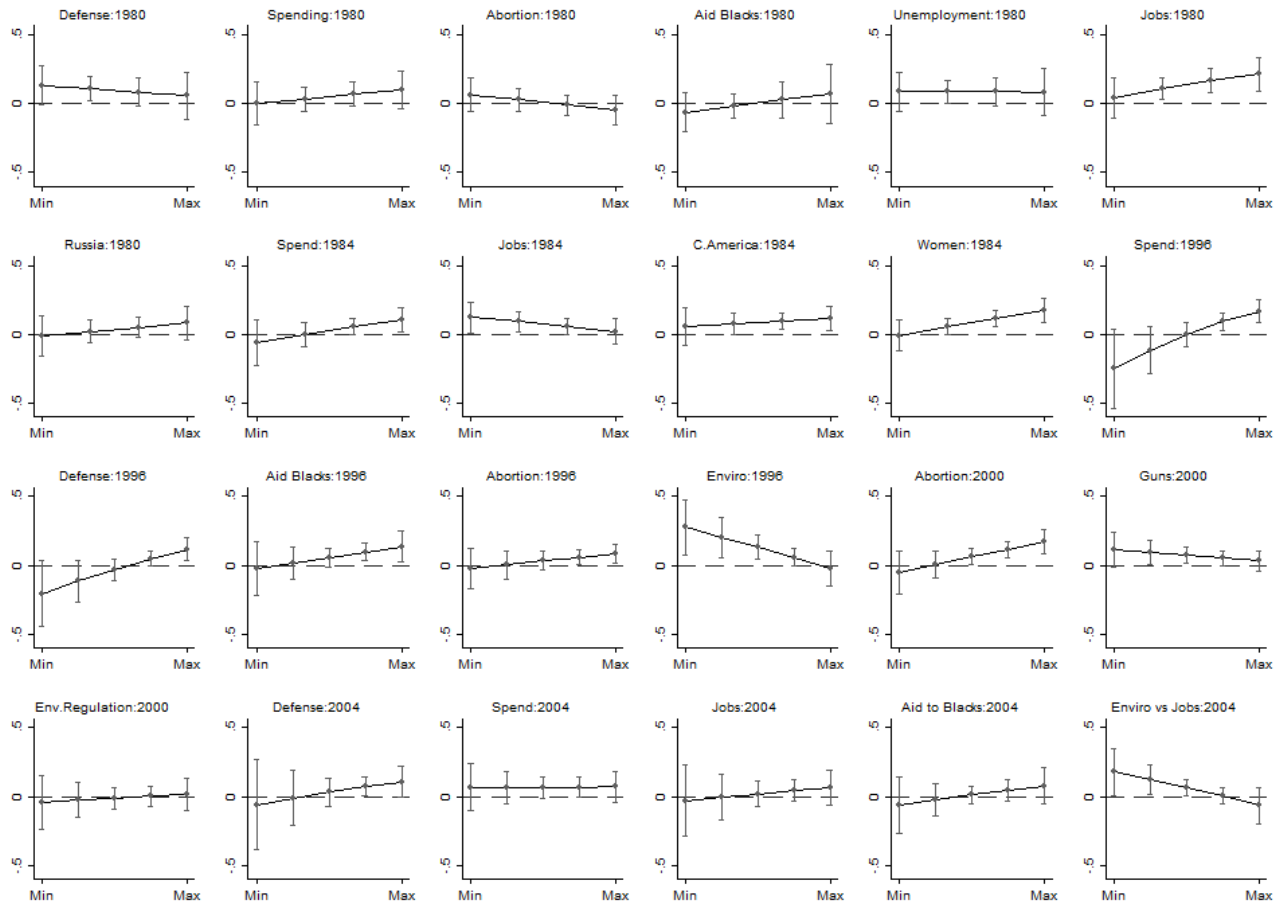
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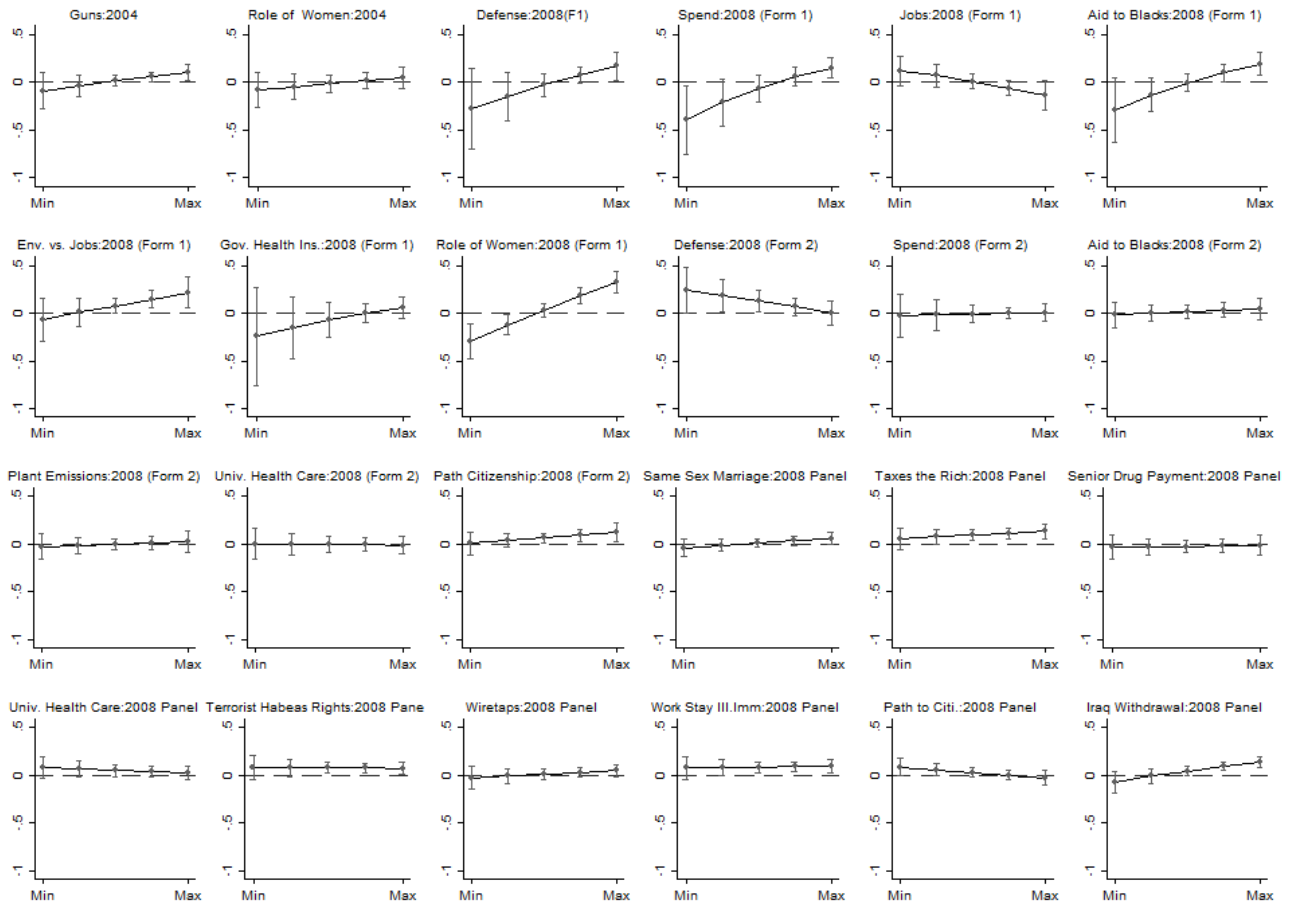
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**Figure 1: Subjective Importance and Issue Voting on the ANES, pt. 1**



**Notes:** Markers provide the average marginal effect of issue distance by level of subjective issue importance (x-axis), with 95% confidence intervals.

**Figure 2: Subjective Importance and Issue Voting on the ANES, pt. 2**



**Notes:** Markers provide the average marginal effect of issue distance by level of subjective issue importance (x-axis), with 95% confidence intervals.

**Table 1: Candidate Characteristic Levels**

Attribute	Possible Values
Age	35-75 years old (in 1 yr increments)
Sex	Male or Female
Race	White, African American, Hispanic, or Asian American
Religion	Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, or None
Occupation	State Governor, U.S. Senator, Member of Congress, or CEO
Party	Democrat or Republican
Military Service	Served or Did Not Serve
Education	Ivy League University, Small College, State University, or Community College
Issue: Trans-Pacific Partnership (“Ratification of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)”)	Strongly Oppose, Moderately Oppose, Slightly Oppose, Neither Support Nor Oppose, Slightly Support, Moderately Support, Strongly Support
Issue: ISIS (“Deploying ground troops to combat ISIS”)	Strongly Oppose, Moderately Oppose, Slightly Oppose, Neither Support Nor Oppose, Slightly Support, Moderately Support, Strongly Support
Issue: Cap & Trade (“A carbon tax (‘cap and trade’) system for greenhouse gases”)	Strongly Oppose, Moderately Oppose, Slightly Oppose, Neither Support Nor Oppose, Slightly Support, Moderately Support, Strongly Support
Issue: Taxing the Rich (“Increased taxes on those making over \$250,000”)	Strongly Oppose, Moderately Oppose, Slightly Oppose, Neither Support Nor Oppose, Slightly Support, Moderately Support, Strongly Support
Issue: Path to Citizenship (“Path to citizenship for illegal immigrants brought to US as children”)	Strongly Oppose, Moderately Oppose, Slightly Oppose, Neither Support Nor Oppose, Slightly Support, Moderately Support, Strongly Support

**Notes:** One candidate was always a Democrat and the other a Republican. Which candidate was a Democrat/Republican was randomly assigned.

Figure 3: Example of Conjoint Choice Setting

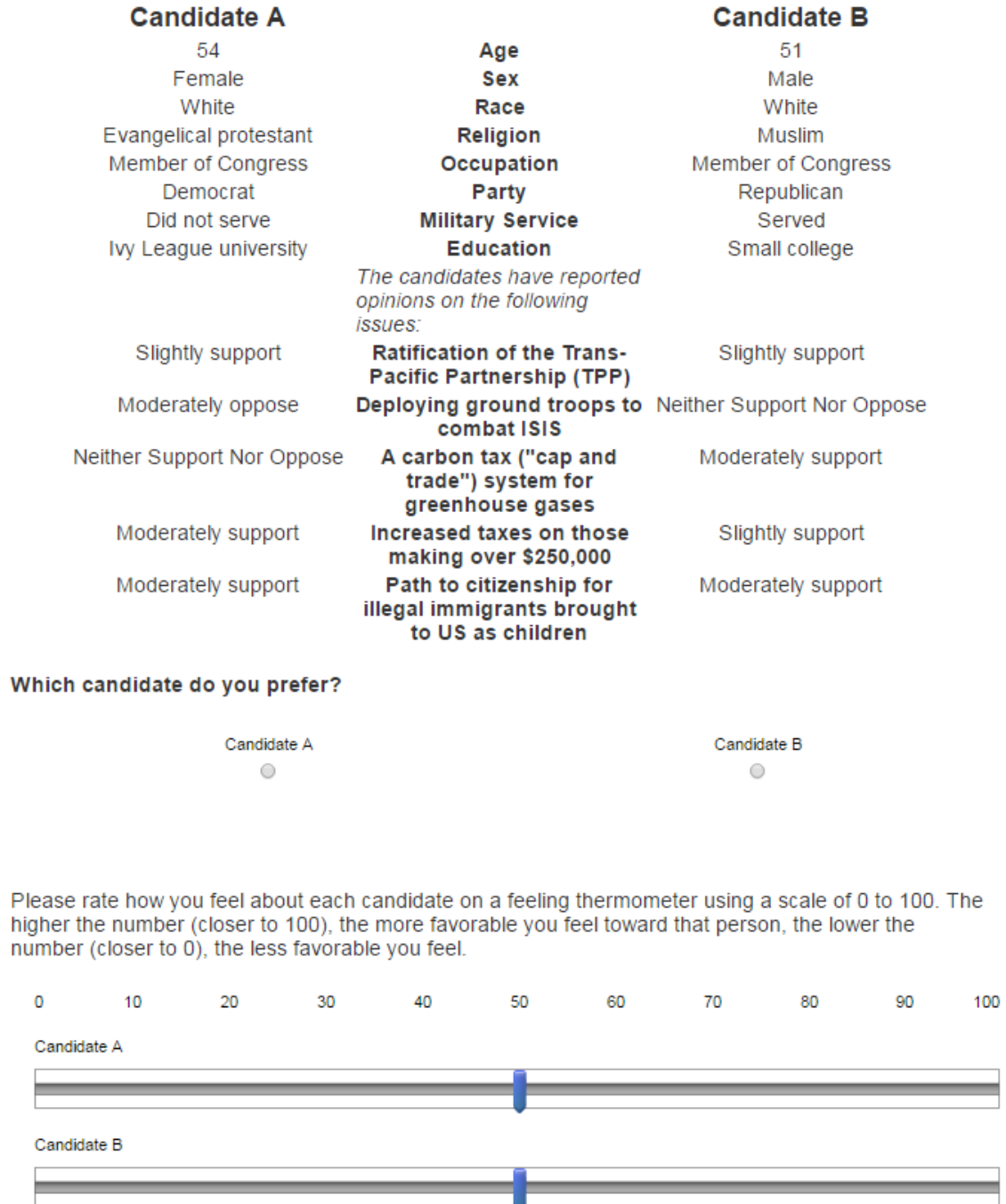
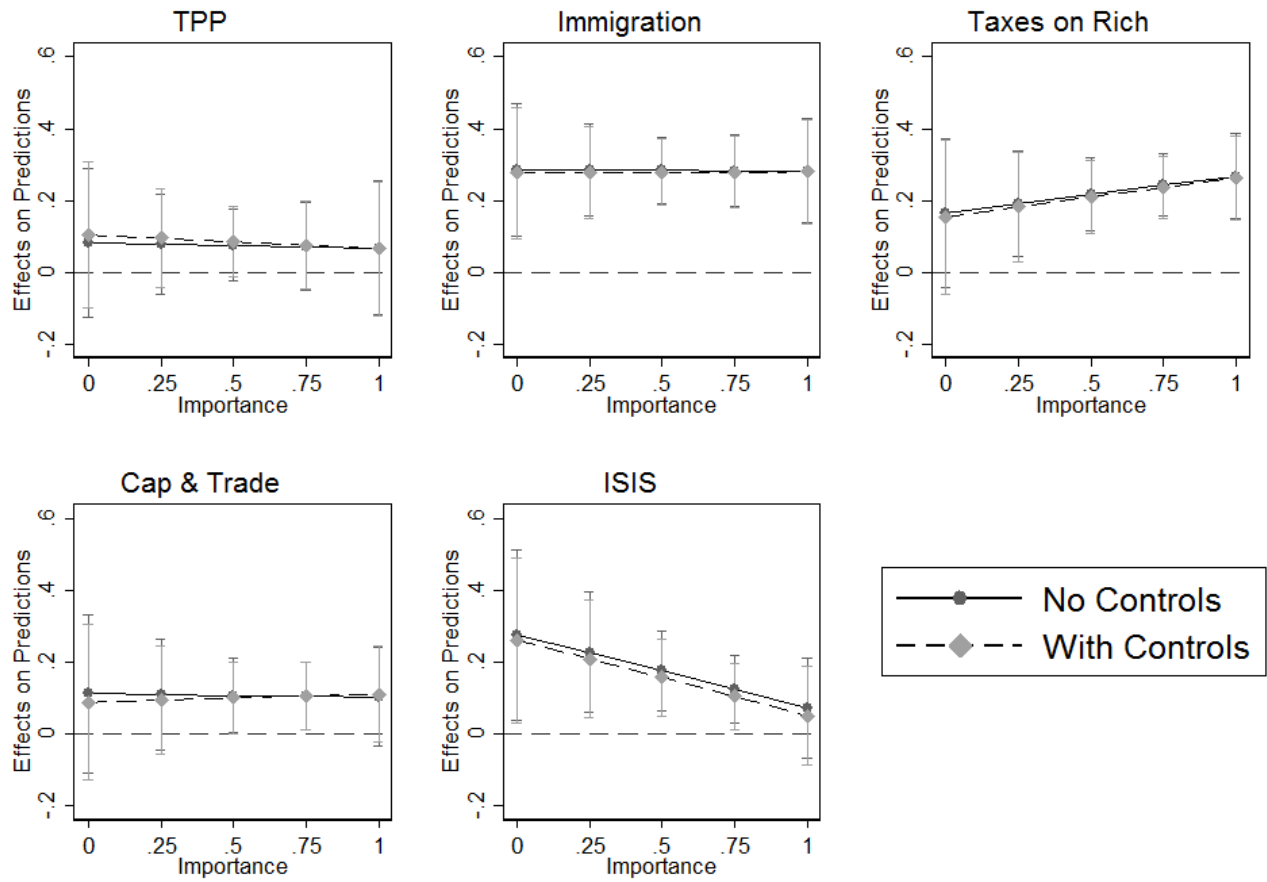


Figure 4: Importance as Moderator in Study 2



Notes: Markers provide the average marginal effect of issue distance, with 95% confidence intervals, by level of issue importance.