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DISSERTATION

Titel der Dissertation

Papers on political attitude importance
and opinion formation

Verfasser

Zoltán Fazekas, MA

angestrebter akademischer Grad

Doktor der Philosophie (Dr.phil)

Wien, 2012

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 784300

Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt:

Politikwissenschaft UG2002

Betreuerin

Univ. -Prof. Mag. Dr. Sylvia Kritzinger

Papers on political attitude importance and opinion formation

Zoltán Fazekas

July 22, 2012

*To my parents who taught me
to focus on important things.*

Acknowledgments

I am not particularly sure whether working and writing in vacuum is desirable or possible. Most certainly this thesis did not emerge in vacuum and I should probably have sections and subsections for the acknowledgments. In early 2010 I was advised to apply for and take this position because my previous supervisor had known my prospective supervisor and me as well. I was told that "you will work well with Sylvia" or something along these lines. From my perspective, this could not have been more accurate of a recommendation.

I believe that it is hard to find a good combination of flexibility, supervision, and motivation. I am grateful to Sylvia Kritzinger for coming up with a perfect combination. I owe her thanks for the openness, guidance, motivation, and the enormous flexibility shown throughout these close to three years. Simply put, for everything surrounding my work related to the thesis and all the other projects. I needed help in various instances on various levels and it was always given to me. This supervision made it not only easier to finish, but to get things done as they should be.

I am also indebted to Martin Hansen. He was the much needed filter of my brain, killing unwanted ideas in a second and helping to develop those that were worth it. Along the academic parts, he really helped with navigating in the shady business of academia, setting some priorities, and focusing when focus was needed. My life in Vienna would have been very different if I hadn't rely on his recommendations. For all the rest, I invoke the pub rules.

Levi Littvay was my MA supervisor and he gave me that spot on advice on what to do. Since then, I consider him both my mentor and friend. All the work we did together — hopefully — made me a better researcher. In all fairness, his voting behavior class is at

fault that you have to read this thesis. I am grateful for all the things that changed since then, but more importantly for those that did not. Actually, convincing him to get a pair of pink shorts was close in satisfaction to finishing this thesis.

Sebi Popa and Paul Weith were always there to rinse the arguments and go through whatever my brain decided to put on paper. As a matter of fact, comments from Paul pop-up in my Gtalk window as I am writing these lines. Sebi did his commenting two days ago. I am happy to have them as friends and co-authors. We mock each other, disagree on mechanisms and statistics. This is the closest you can get to a healthy research environment. Similarly, research and academics were always constant in our discussions with Daniela Sirinic. She was smart enough to get a life early on, but still stay connected. Working together was always a pleasure and not only because finally somebody was also concerned about how we do visual display.

I was part of the ELECDDEM project and met extraordinary people. I will pick though. We shared an office with Steven van Hauwaert and it took some time to learn how to spell his name. We went through a lot together, from research to social life. It helped a lot to put things into perspective, discuss, and always evaluate what is going on. Again, my life in Vienna would have been very different without his friendship. With Federico "polarization" Vegetti we have spent some lovely Essex times together and shared a flat during my stay in Mannheim, we talked a lot about what the hell are we doing in academia, how to plot 3-way interactions, and how to gain skills to always keep your lighter. He keeps failing at the latter. Ideas and arguments in some of these papers were filtered in these discussions; they have gotten clearer because he had to suffer through the complicated versions. On a more serious note, we bounced so many ideas that we will eventually end up working together. I am pretty sure I will enjoy it, because we have a very similar view on *abstraction*. All these people reinforced me that thought and research never stays *just* in the office from nine to five.

As hinted at previously, I was part of the ELECDDEM project. More precisely, the Marie Curie Initial Training Network in Electoral Democracy offered generous funding to carry out my research, disseminate it, and get further training. When I say "generous funding" I mean it: no other graduate student has the possibilities I (we) had. I am thankful to Susan Banducci and Fiona Raffael for making this happen and implementing a monster of a project flawlessly. I spent most of my time at the Department of Methods in the Social Sciences at the University of Vienna. It offered everything that you can ask for when it comes to work environment. I also had the possibility to spend time at Kieskompas Netherlands — thanks to Andre Krouwel and the lovely team he manages there, Oxford University — with thanks to Geoffrey Evans and Sarah Binzer Hobolt, and at the University of Mannheim — with special thanks to Hermann Schmitt. All these research visits were very productive, engaging, and I was treated exceptionally in all of these locations.

On a less academic note, Attila Pásztor always helped when help was needed. He also pushed me to take breaks, unwind, and get something like a life. I went through some rough patches during my stay in Vienna and I could always count on him. I am very much indebted for this.

Finally, a very different level. I will be very pleased with myself if I can give half as much as I have gotten from my family. I was trained to be careful with general and overarching claims. In this case I am perfectly fine with this sort of a claim. My family was **always** there for me with unconditional support, concern, and love. I managed to get this far because I had an education outside the school. I like statistics because I was counting and adding up house numbers on our way home from the kindergarten. And there are countless other examples. In a way it is funny that our knowledge is so scarce about familial socialization mechanisms, but it is so easy to pinpoint these feelings of gratitude.

Graduate lifestyle has its particularities. It is always easier to share and also to share it

with somebody who gets it. I was very lucky to have Petra Gyöngyi's patient understanding and support throughout the whole process and before various decisions that needed to be taken. Retrospectively, if someone asks me how was the PhD, probably she is the reason that the answer will be: *easy*.

There are probably many other people whom I should thank here, but this list is not intended to be exhaustive. As in statistics, there is no true model. Omitting predictors and relationships is in the game. However, I owe thanks to anybody who facilitated the process of writing this thesis, from educators to administrative personnel. Each paper has a first footnote with specific thanks. Reviewing these couple of pages, I am sure the manuscript does not live up to the expectations generated by seeing so much help. All these people tried to make my work better. If that did not happen, it is most certainly my fault.

Preface

This thesis is a collection of three papers that revolve around the determinants and effects of political attitude importance — or salience. It is motivated by the premise that things we consider important are special. Or at least different from unimportant aspects of life. This is the same when it comes to politics. However, I argue in this thesis that we need to go much more into detail to figure out how individuals sort political attitudes and issues on the continuum between completely unimportant and extremely important. Focusing first on individual differences aids our understanding of how uniform are the salience effects. But along individual variation, there are issue related sources of variation. It does matter how the issue is characterized in general when it comes to the effects of salience on political preferences.

The manuscript is the product of work carried out somewhere between late 2010 and mid 2012. I present a general introduction followed by the three papers and a set of broader conclusions that integrate the three papers. The three papers can be read independently and they are written in the format of submittable academic articles. But reading the three of them as a whole contributes to solving the bigger puzzle of the thesis: how do different individuals allocate salience to multiple political issues and what are its effects on political preferences?

Vienna,

July 22, 2012

Zoltán Fazekas

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1 | Introduction

Before the 2008 American presidential elections, people were asked about their opinion (and the strength of it) on illegal immigrants being offered the possibility to become U.S. citizens. Around 53 percent were inclined to favor this policy option, around 31 percent were against this policy, and roughly 16 percent had no preference, declaring themselves neutral. Twenty-three percent of the respondents favored this policy a great deal, but also 21 percent opposed to it a great deal. Thus, even if the balance inclines towards favoring this policy option with more diffusion in its extent, the extreme responses — either end of the opinion spectrum — were almost equal. Since this was only one of the many issues researched, people were asked to express how important the question of citizenship for immigrants is. For fewer than 10 percent of people this issue was of no importance, but for over 15 percent it was extremely important. Moderate and high importance was declared by over 50 percent of the respondents, whereas for one fifth of them, immigrant citizenship was only slightly important.

Another political issue was government spending: should the government provide fewer services (such as health care or education) in order to reduce spending, or more services even if this means an increased level of spending? For this particular economic issue, roughly 18 percent considered that fewer services are the goal, 20 percent were in the middle, and 62 percent expressed their preference towards more services even if these would mean more spending. Twenty-six percent of those favoring spending reduction took the most extreme policy position, whereas this share was even larger on the side preferring more services: 34 percent. Yet again, as multiple issues are investigated, we also have information on the personal salience of this issue: 8% of the respondents

marked this issue as not at all or not important, 30% as somewhat important, and 62% as either very or extremely important. And the detailed examples could go on. All these issue and policy preferences are linked to political preferences with different strength and along very different spatial logics (Adams et al., 2005; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989).

There are multiple research questions that we can analyze with this sort of opinion data. First, let's assume we would like to predict based on these opinions who would have voted with Barack Obama and who would have voted with John McCain in the 2008 presidential elections. On one hand, if we listen to Niemi and Bartels (1985) — as the proponents of the directional theory so keenly did (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989) — we would not bother with the salience of the issue, and just concentrate on the issue position, since the extremity (or intensity) of it already gives us the necessary information about the importance. The farther we go from the neutral point, the more importance is inherent. Intuitively, we would have to find then that those who take definitive sides on a policy or issue also grant very high or extreme importance to it. However, Krosnick (1988) rectifies previous findings re-establishing the role of importance for policy positions. The general argument based on the social psychological traditions is that attitudes towards issues that are considered personally important are stronger attitudes and these have a stronger impact on judgment and behavior (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995). But again, how exactly do we conceptualize the salience effect is not clear at this point.

The salience effect suggests that for an individual who considers the illegal immigrants' citizenship as an unimportant issue and the government spending issue as very important, the latter should matter more for the expressed political preferences. This would be a within-individual approach and considers importance as a weighting system (Glasgow, 1998). On the other hand, we might extend this approach to between-individual

analysis. For those who consider the government spending issue as important, it will matter for the final political decisions. For those however who consider this issue unimportant, positions and policy preferences on government spending will be less influential — if at all — for their candidate selection for example.

Together with the very different empirical results (see RePass, 1971; Krosnick, 1988; Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Glasgow, 1998) and the different conceptualizations, there is still a striking lacuna in understanding and evaluating questions related to the effect of issue salience. The list of unaddressed questions is very long. Is there a real salience effect? Does this matter for issue positions or also for broader political attitudes? Is this effect — if any — uniform across individuals and across issues, or we will find systematic differences on how informative issue salience is? The present thesis addresses these questions motivated by the following reasoning: knowing more about individual and issue specific mechanisms related to the formation and expression of salience effects ultimately helps in building better spatial voting theories and understanding the formation and evolution of public opinion.

Overarching research question

The overarching research question of this thesis reads as follows:

What individual differences shape how people assign salience to political issues and what are the consequences of salience for broader political attitudes?

As it is, this research question is general and covers multiple subquestions. I briefly introduce here each of these subquestions, but the more specific theory and hypotheses are detailed in the subsequent papers.

I analyze importance or salience allocation in the context of multiple issues. The added value of this analysis lies in the conceptualization of importance in a setting where

many political issues are investigated. Hence, each individual rates the importance of many issues that are part of different issue domains or issue publics. When focusing on individual differences, the argument here is that **independent** of the issue, there are some general patterns in importance allocation that are heavily embedded in the individual level. Some people will find many issues important, whereas others only a few. Also, some people may single out one or two issues as very important and use them as anchors when they assign salience to others. If these salience allocation patterns can be explained systematically by dispositional traits or by other politics related individual characteristics, we will have difficulty in using them as independent weights in spatial voting theories.

Extant research in social psychology analyzed the determinants of attitude importance (for an excellent review see Boninger et al., 1995). This research stream looks at the possible impact an issue can have on the individual. Based on these considerations, the individual will assign some importance level to that particular issue. If that issue bears with consequences for one's goals, is related to some social reference groups of the individual, or fits into the broader value-system of the individual, the issue will be important to some extent. In other words, the issue or policy is instrumental for the individual. This classical approach analyzes the role of salience from an *issue* $\times$ *individual* perspective.

However, this raises a fundamental question: **is the conversion of personal instrumentality of an issue into salience ratings uniform for all individuals?** More specifically, in the first paper I propose a framework in which I argue that even if an issue is *similarly (or even equally) instrumental* for individual *A* and *B* we should expect differences in how much importance they assign to that issue. As presented in the subsequent papers, this is not a survey measurement problem, but has roots in core dispositional difference between individuals. Information processing and the recognition whether and how an issue might be relevant for one's life depends a lot on how this individual perceives herself,

the environment, and the interaction of these two. Ultimately, it is a function of how one reacts to a given environment. Individual differences are expected to drive these mechanisms resulting in very different outcomes when it comes to the salience allocation. These dispositional traits are expected to have an influence on importance allocation patterns. These are defined through all the importance ratings one gives for the multitude of issues investigated in a political survey. In the first paper I evaluate the role of personality traits for salience allocation using information from all importance ratings.

Next, in the second paper I turn to a broader approach and ask the following question: **does the salience effect vary depending on the individual level importance allocation patterns?** This paper adds a further step to the overall analysis: first, I look at different patterns among individuals, and then I check whether these differences affect the salience effect. The real question boils down to whether considering everything important or rating all issues in a particular way nuances our findings related to the salience effect. If everything is important, do we expect that indeed salient issues will matter that much more for broader political attitudes? I review this argument and analyze the relationship between issue positions and ideological self-placement by taking into account salience **and** the individual patterns of salience allocation. On one hand, this paper brings further explanations why previous research found very mixed empirical results when analyzing the salience effect. On the other hand, it stipulates valuable conclusions about heterogeneity that can change how strong the salience effect is and how big is the difference between important and unimportant issues.

Finally, the third paper brings contextual factors into consideration. One consistent finding of previous research is that individuals usually take clearer and implicitly more extreme positions on issues that are important (compared to those that are unimportant). Furthermore, there is a prominent causal interpretation (see Tesser, 1978) for this focusing on the idea that important issues have a "preferential" status among all issues. This

preferential status is given by the fact that they are personally relevant. Accordingly, salient issues are more frequently discussed with peers, they trigger more thought, and implicitly more motivation to gather issue relevant information. All in all, this process pushes individuals away from the no-opinion on these political issues. However, this relationship varies a lot depending on what issues are taken into consideration (see for a review Raden, 1985).

I offer a systematic explanation for this across-issue variation in the third paper. I propose a framework guided by the distinction between easy and hard issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). I ask whether **the process linking importance to issue positions is stronger for hard issues than for easy issues**. One of the main findings related in the last paper is that categorical stances on symbolic "easy" issues — such as moral issues for example — arise even if the issue is important for the individuals. This finding suggests that categorical and extreme issue positions or policy preferences on some issues are not driven by deep issue specific knowledge and relevance for the individual. Along the normative implications this (and other) finding in the last paper speaks to the broader literature of public opinion polarization. Some of these issues are divisive and changing salience is not the real answer to this phenomenon.

All these questions are detailed in the papers that follow. Before that I discuss the case selection in the next section.

Why the United States?

All the papers that build this thesis use data from the United States. This is not necessarily intuitive given the context of this thesis, but I will go through several reasons why this is the case.

First and foremost, I was trained to focus on the research question and then either find or collect suitable data to test the expectations derived from the theory. Of course,

this process is not that simple. What particular research focus one decides to pursue is an inherent result of the previously read literature. But more importantly, what would *suitable data* mean? This introduction is definitely not the place to offer a comprehensive essay on this topic. Nevertheless, I consider it relevant to at least sketch a few ideas, because it underlies the selection of the US as country from where the data stems.

As in most cases, I start with what is not referred to as suitable data. Suitable data is not data that has variables with the previously envisioned distributional properties. It is not the data in which one finds the relationships that are sought out for explanation. Consequently, suitable data is not some sort of a hotbed of Type-2 error. For this thesis, suitable data has one important property: it minimizes the need to use unclear proxies as suitable operationalizations of various theoretical concepts. Simply put, good measures of theoretical concepts are necessary test to the hypothesized relationships.

Unfortunately — or fortunately, each of these papers needs very particular variables. The argument presented in the first paper needs individual level issue importance questions (as many as possible) and personality traits. The second paper needs many issue importance questions measured at the same time-point for each individual. Finally, the third paper not only needs many importance questions, but these should be related to issues that come from different issue publics and domains. As it happens, the American National Election Study offers the most number of issue questions **accompanied** by personal importance questions. Furthermore, it assures a wide variety of issues from moral to economic domains. Although personality research for political attitudes became *en vogue* again, finding both personality questions and issue salience questions in one survey is very unlikely. This is the main reason why I also use US data to test expectations related to dispositional traits and salience.

Without taking an offensive tone, political science theories are weak theories compared to what we see in natural sciences. This is neither a problem nor a fixed state.

However, consistent replication and validation is less of a standard in this literature. Because most of the previous work carried out on salience focuses on the US — and more importantly the opinion polarization literature, research results from this context are the strongest source of well embedded theoretical expectations. On one hand it is possible to formulate well grounded hypotheses, and on the other hand the results can be benchmarked to many previous findings. Undoubtedly, this also makes it harder to offer an original contribution.

How would this translate for the European — mostly multi-party — elections is a very complicated question. Do these findings apply to a European context? My intuition would be that they partially do. Individual differences are context dependent, but they should be lurking around constantly. The issue content specific findings are a tougher call. In this case, the many and very heterogeneous political arenas in European countries should produce very different expectations related to which issues are always present in the electoral campaign or which issues get very technical (such as EU related questions). However, a hidden goal of this thesis is also to build a strong enough case that we should reconsider using salience questions in comparative European surveys. The overall results here suggest that salience plays an important role in preference formation, but not necessarily in the simple manner of making important issues more influential. In the next section I present the outline and structure of the thesis.

Structure

The present thesis comprises three papers. The first two papers tackle the questions introduced on the individual level, whereas the last paper integrates macro- and micro-level analysis of opinion formation. Accordingly, in the first paper I look at overall importance ratings across four political issues in the US for the year 2006. In this paper, modeling importance rating profiles is the main goal. Hence, importance related quan-

tities are on the left side of the regression equation. I show in the first paper that dispositional traits — or personality traits operationalized following the Five-Factor model — have an influence on how people report importance when they are asked about several political issues.

In the second paper I keep the individual level approach. In the first stage, I employ latent class analysis to ground the claim that there are different groups or subsamples that systematically exhibit different importance allocation. As an example, when analyzing ten issues from the 2008 US setting, I find that roughly 40% of the sample rates as very important or extremely important each an every issue. These differences beg the question whether the salience effect is universal for all these different classes. I relate issue positions to the ideological self-placement and focus on between-individual differences while accounting for the differences reported in the preceding analysis.

As the second paper also reveals interesting across-issue variation in the salience effect, in the third — and final — paper I reconsider earlier theories about the links between importance and issue positions. This is framed from the perspective of growing literature on public opinion polarization. A long running argument states that personally relevant issues get more attention by the individual, in various forms: thought, discussion, and information gathering (Tesser, 1978). All these processes suggest that for important issues clearer and implicitly more extreme issue positions will arise. However, I argue that this depends on issue related factors as well.

These three papers are independent contributions presenting different aspects of salience problems from determinants to diversified effects. The first two papers are a plea for considering and incorporating more individual heterogeneity into our theoretical and empirical models of voting behavior. The third paper also argues for considering heterogeneity, but on the contextual level. Similar to classic regression approaches, these papers should be thought of in an additive manner. They do not necessarily build on each

other, but they fill in parts of the puzzle outlined previously. How clear is the final picture remains for the readers to decide. Though, in order to persuade readers that these findings integrate to a "whole" I present a general final conclusions chapter.

2 | Important? Of course: An individual level approach for political issue importance ratings

The present paper analyzes how personality traits reflecting fundamental differences between individuals affect the personal importance of political issues. According to spatial theories (Adams et al., 2005), agreement between individual and a particular candidate is expected to increase that candidate's rating and ultimately the probability to get the individual's vote. But overlap with a candidate on an important issue has a greater effect on the preferences towards that candidate than agreement on an irrelevant issue (Krosnick, 1988). Generally, researchers focus on multiple issue positions and importance ratings of individuals and they use these in relative terms to establish stronger relationships between issue or policy preferences and electoral preferences or outcomes. Consequently, in this paper I focus on importance rating profiles that use information from all issues asked in a survey for one individual.

Why do some people rate more issues as important than others is the underlying question of this paper. The answer developed in this paper relies on personality theory. Two traits of the five-factor personality model (McCrae and Costa, 1987) are used to explain variation in the summed importance ratings for four issues in a nationally representative US sample in 2006. Individuals scoring high in openness to experience see more clearly why a political issue might influence their lives. Even if they do not care much about politics, when faced with concrete issues these individuals will easily apprehend how these

I would like to thank Alan Gerber and Daniel Doherty for sharing the Yale component of the CCES 2006 data. I am grateful for previous comments from Bert Bakker, Martin Hansen, Ken Horvath, Sylvia Kritzing, Sebastian Popa, and Paul Weith. A previous version of this paper was presented at the Departmental Conference of the Department of Methods in the Social Sciences, University of Vienna, June 2012. I am grateful for suggestions by the participants. All errors remain mine.

might affect their life. On the other hand, those scoring high in agreeableness assign high importance ratings to many issues for a very different reason: specific issues are framed as they are already of interest for many people. These individuals will not necessarily link the issues them to their own lives, but they will acknowledge the issue's importance because it is implied by the question.

2.1 Introduction

The present paper investigates the links between personality traits and attitude importance towards various political issues. Recently, the analysis of personality traits' effects on political attitudes and behavior has been again of central interest in political science (for a review see Carney et al., 2008; Gerber et al., 2010; Mondak and Halperin, 2008; Verhulst et al., 2012). One's personality — understood as a complex, multifaceted, but enduring internal psychological structure (Mondak et al., 2010, 86) — shapes how people process and react to environmental stimuli. Accordingly, I argue in the present paper that ways in which individuals differ in core dispositional traits has an influence on how they attribute importance to a set of political issues.

Attitude importance is a measure of how deeply the individual cares about an issue and whether she is personally invested in the issue (Krosnick et al., 1993, 1132). Importance is a characteristic of a strongly held attitude. Understanding what drives importance is especially relevant because political attitudes and opinions that matter most are those held strongly by the individuals, hence not all issues carry the same weight in the electoral decisions (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Miller and Peterson, 2004). Simply put, knowing how important an issue is matters because it indicates how much a particular issue is expected to "count" in the individual's electoral decision (Glasgow, 1998; Krosnick, 1988; Niemi and Bartels, 1985).

And indeed, this is the prevailing approach in the spatial voting literature. Political

competition between parties and candidates often focuses on different stances on political issues (Adams et al., 2005). Although not exclusively, these positions can guide voters in choosing among the multiple alternatives offered by the political supply. Regularly, individuals are asked to express their issue positions or policy preferences. These are mapped together with what candidates and parties stand for in a campaign. In this policy space, agreement between individual and a particular candidate is expected to increase that candidate's rating and ultimately the probability to get the individual's vote. But as seen, overlap with a candidate on an important issue has a greater effect on the preferences towards that candidate than agreement on an irrelevant issue.

But political competition develops on many issues, thus both issue positions and importance are gathered for multiple issues. I tag one individual's multiple issue importance scores as **importance rating profiles** in this paper. In spatial models, importance ratings of multiple issues are used in **relative** terms: each issue's importance tells us how much that particular issue will weigh in the political preference formation compared to other issues asked. Consequently, it is worthwhile to think of these importance ratings in relative terms when we try to understand them, not only when we use them as explanatory variables. When specific issue importance is analyzed, previous research lists three major determinants of personal importance: self-interest, relevance for social-groups the individual identifies with, and fit in the individual value-system (Boninger et al., 1995). This suggests that an individual links a political issue to her life, acknowledging whether this issue has any consequences. Extending this to importance rating profiles, a profile that marks many political issues as being important or even very important presupposes that a vast array of essentially political elements may have an influence on one's life.

But what happens if the importance rating profiles are systematically related to individual traits not only to situational factors? In that case, we need to rethink how informative are the issue importance questions treated at their face value and consider the incor-

poration of additional individual heterogeneity. Personality traits tap into these fundamental dispositional differences. The particular focus of this paper lies in two personality traits openness to experience — reflecting originality, creativity, and also a predisposition to accept more stimuli from the environment — and agreeableness — describing prosocial behavior, altruism, and trust (John and Srivastava, 1999).

These two traits depict two very different mechanisms of understanding why many political issues are important for one individual, even though politics in general might not be salient at all or individuals might not have extensive knowledge.¹ Individuals scoring high in openness to experience are expected to see it more clearly why a political issue might influence their lives. Hence, even if not caring about politics, when faced with concrete issues these individuals will easily apprehend how these might affect their life. Conversely, those scoring high in agreeableness are expected to assign high importance ratings to many issues for a very different reason. When asked in specific terms about political issues framed as something that is already of interest for many people, these individuals will not necessarily link them to their own lives, but they will acknowledge the issue's importance because it is implied by the question. Moreover, if they are not interested in politics, providing an "in-line or desired" answer will posit no cognitive dissonance. If agreeableness is paired up with lower levels of political knowledge there is essentially no reason to mark something as unimportant, if that is not the prevailing opinion.

The present paper has three major contributions. First, we see that voters do not care too much about politics and they do not possess extensive knowledge about the political competition (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992). But if politics does not play an im-

¹ Although voters should have some policy preferences and they are also expected to have some knowledge about politics and the available alternatives, previous research shows that this assumption does not necessarily hold true as people are not informed about politics (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992). However, they do partially compensate for this lack of knowledge by employing some heuristics (Lupia, 1994; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1991; Zaller, 1992).

portant role in one's life, we would expect that individuals will recognize the personal relevance of only very few political issues. Or, political engagement, interest and knowledge should markedly separate those who report many specific issues as important and those who do not. When looking at survey data we see that people consider many specific issues as very important or important even if they admittedly do not think about politics. Focusing on individual heterogeneity helps us in disentangling this puzzle, clarifying some determinants of importance rating profiles.

Second, this paper raises points related to how we can incorporate issue importance in spatial voting models. The effects of both traits discussed here have implications of how much we should rely on the importance ratings stemming from survey data. The effect of openness to experience is driven by a mechanism that is substantive in nature, whereas the effect of agreeableness is strongly related to the survey situation. However, both of these traits suggest that the reported importance scores are not necessarily a reflection of heightened personal relevance or instrumentality. If that is the case, the preferences on these issues (or overlap with candidate positions) will not necessarily be that influential for the behavior. Finally, this paper furthers the range of political variables for which personality plays an important role. I present further empirical support for the claim that understanding politics benefits from looking at traits that essentially reflect who we are and shape our reactions to any environmental stimuli, in this case stimulus from the political agenda.

In the next section I review the determinants and implications of personal importance. Then I discuss importance rating profiles and propose a theoretical model that incorporates individual differences. For the empirical analysis I use the 2006 Comparative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere, 2007) — CCES 2006 from now on. In addition to its common content, this online survey gathered 37 specific questionnaires from partner institutions, and each special content had its own representative sample.

In this paper I use the special content collected for Yale University (Gerber, 2007) that included a personality question battery. Other advantages of this data are also described in the Data section. Next, I test the hypotheses and conclude the paper with the discussion of results and the broader implications for political research.

2.2 What is personally important and to whom?

As previously introduced, political attitudes that are held strongly do have a more substantial impact on decisions and behavior (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Attitude strength is a multi-dimensional construct though (Boninger et al., 1995; Miller and Peterson, 2004; Raden, 1985). Overall, ten strength related dimensions were identified and analyzed², but these can be categorized into 4 broader sets: (1) aspects of the attitude (such as extremity), (2) aspects of the cognitive structure in memory (such as accessibility), (3) subjective belief about the attitude or attitude object (such as importance), and (4) cognitive processes by which an attitude is formed (such as elaboration) (Petty and Krosnick, 1995, 5).

The attitude strength dimensions are interrelated, thus extensive work was done to identify whether they reflect a single latent construct of attitude strength. This single latent construct hypothesis was rejected as different effects on behavior, judgment and information processing were identified (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985). Also, the reviews offered by Raden (1985) and Petty and Krosnick (1995) highlight very different correlation patterns between attitude strength dimension, suggesting complicated relationships among these dimensions.

From this broader set of strength dimensions, I focus on importance defined as “the extent to which an individual cares deeply about and is personally invested in an attitude and is ordinarily operationalized by self-reports of importance, concern, or caring about

²Extremity, affective intensity, importance, certainty, interest in relevant information, knowledge, accessibility, direct behavioral experience, latitudes of rejection and non-commitment, and affective-cognitive consistency (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985).

the attitude object” (Krosnick et al., 1993, 1132). In line with the definition, issue importance is treated as an individual level variable, reflecting the associated importance to the person, not how important is the issue for the country.

Considering the ego-involvement theory (Sherif and Cantril, 1947), personal relevance of an issue assures more involvement and implicitly higher importance³ associated with that given issue (Lavine and Snyder, 1996; Petty and Krosnick, 1995), but this is not necessarily true for the perceived macro level importance of an issue (Lavine and Snyder, 1996; Miller and Peterson, 2004).

Although initially contested (Niemi and Bartels, 1985), personally important political issues matter more for political preferences (Krosnick, 1988). This is the core reason why understanding personal importance aids our models of voting behavior. The political issues tagged as important will be more guiding in which candidate or party the individual prefers. Also, important attitudes are associated with a clearer position taking regarding the attitude object (attitude extremity). Recognizing personal relevance and attaching importance to an attitude object and this triggers more thought processes, information gathering and discussion, and throughout this process the attitude can become more extreme (Berent and Krosnick, 1995; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Tesser, 1978). But why are some attitudes or attitude objects — such as policies or political issues — more important than others?

Boninger et al. (1995) offer three major explanations of how and why importance arises: self-interest, social identification, and individual values. From these three, thinking of the attitude object as being instrumental for one’s rights, privileges or lifestyle (self-interest) is the strongest determinant (Boninger et al., 1995). Also, personal and behavioral experience with the issue in question amplifies the attitudes effect on behavior (Fazio and Zanna, 1981). Furthermore, strong identification with a social or reference

³There is a conceptual distinction between the importance associated with the attitude and the attitude object, but the correlations are close to 1, so it has no impact on the empirical results (Eaton et al., 2008).

group may induce importance if the issue is considered to endanger the privileges of the given group, or if the reference group considers the issue (or attitude object) to be very important (Boninger et al., 1995). Third, if the issue fits in the individual's value system, it will occupy an important role (Boninger et al., 1995).

As we have seen so far, individuals judge the relevance of a given political issue for their life — broadly defined also through ties with social groups, and report this in terms of importance ratings. However, individuals differ in their levels of commitment or engagement with politics. Some people are interested in politics, but most of them do not necessarily care about politics (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992). Understanding these differences garnered substantial attention among scholars of voting behavior, and it mostly focused on what motivates people to gather information and engage in politics (Luskin, 1990; Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Political interest or interest in politics gauges this motivation. Although survey items are far from perfect in separating the behavioral consequences of motivation and the motivation itself (Shani, 2011), political interest and political knowledge play an important role for participation and civic engagement (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Lassen, 2005; Luskin, 1990).⁴

Debates on the relationship between interest and political knowledge still curtail a unified approach to the causal links between motivation and information (Denny and Doyle, 2008; Luskin, 1990; Tilley et al., 2004). Nevertheless, from the perspective of this paper, no clear verdict is needed. Both interest and knowledge are informative for the analysis of multiple importance ratings through their effects on how much and how one regards politics in general. Importance rating profiles appear when individuals are asked to rate multiple political issues. They reflect information about multiple issues, not a single issue's perceived impact on the individual. When incorporating issue importance into models of voting behavior as weights for example (Niemi and Bartels, 1985), importance ratings are treated in relative terms. What helps us in understanding which issue mat-

⁴For different claims see Levendusky (2011).

ters more for political decisions is a product of comparison across issues. Consequently, ascertaining how these importance ratings are related to each other also improves our models of voting behavior.

First, I focus solely on why political interest and knowledge should be linked to importance rating profiles. Those who are more interested in politics express willingness to invest resources in following politics — time, money, etc. Undoubtedly, interested individuals perceive the role of politics differently than the uninterested. Motivation and information gathering mirrors a view in which politics might play a role in their own lives. Politics, as such, no matter how distant it is, has some sort of implications for the individual or for people who she cares about.

Two alternative effects can be hypothesized when considering the role of political interest and knowledge. Primarily, interested individuals accept some sort of role of politics, and thus they can be more prone to rate many different political issues as important. Furthermore, more knowledge about politics also suggests that for these individuals it is more probable to know something about the issues included in political surveys.⁵ Overall, this would indicate that those who are interested in and knowledgeable about politics will link more issues to politics on one hand, and they will also approach more issues as being relevant.

However, a competing hypothesis can also be formulated. Exactly because of the interest, but more importantly because of extensive knowledge about politics and functioning of politics, these individuals can be more selective in terms of importance rating. They not only know about those issues, but they clearly map why some issues are not relevant for them. Or, they already evaluate the possible impact of issues in a comparative

⁵This claim operates under the assumption that there is a limited item space in political surveys. Accordingly, only few issues will be investigated in detail, and the selection of these issues is not random. Researchers might want to pursue longitudinal or cross-sectional comparisons, so some issues will reappear in surveys. But more importantly, they seek to audit public opinion on issues that play some role at the social and political levels.

manner, because they have a clearer view on which exact aspects of politics might have an influence on their lives. This hypothesis would indicate that, on average, less issues are considered important.

Clarifying the role of interest and knowledge is instrumental for the analysis of importance rating profiles. Nevertheless, we can find differences in importance rating profiles even for those individuals whose interest and knowledge levels are identical. These differences are a result of how one reacts to the environment, even if they perceive a very similar environment. In order to assess this individual heterogeneity, I introduce and discuss in the next section the expected role of dispositional traits.

2.3 Importance rating profiles and personality

The relationship between personality traits' and political attitudes or behavior has become again a salient part of political science research (Carney et al., 2008; Verhulst et al., 2012). A myriad of political variables were linked to personality traits⁶, such as: participation (Mondak and Halperin, 2008), ideology or vote choice (Caprara et al., 1999, 2006; Gerber et al., 2010), civic engagement (Mondak et al., 2010), party identification and its strength (Gerber et al., 2011), or political discussion (Hibbing et al., 2011). Important part of these relationships were also analyzed outside the United States — Canada (Blais and St-Vincent, 2011), Germany (Schoen and Schumann, 2007), Italy (Caprara et al., 2006), Spain (Gallego and Oberski, 2012), Denmark (Bakker and Verhulst, 2012) — conferring cross-country validity to the findings linking personality traits to political attitudes and behavior.

Although there is no universally accepted parsimonious definition of personality, it is usually understood as a complex, multifaceted, but enduring internal psychological structure (Mondak et al., 2010, 86) that guides behavior and is the culmination of life

⁶For an extensive review see Carney et al. (2008) and Mondak and Halperin (2008).

events, personal adaptations, and biological mechanisms (Verhulst et al., 2012).

Most of this research employs the Five-Factor Model (McCrae and Costa, 1987), a model that suggests five super-traits that encompass the bulk of the variation in personality.⁷ These traits are: openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and emotional stability.⁸ Integrating personality with politics is definitely not a new endeavor (Eysenck, 1954; Fromm, 1947), but the availability of relatively short, parsimonious and valid measures for the Five-Factor Model (Gosling et al., 2003) aided the resurrection of personality research in political science. Of course, the use of the fewer items to tap into the traits does present some limitations regarding precision (Crede et al., 2012) and the possibility of directly analyzing sub-facets of the five personality traits (Bakker and Verhulst, 2012).

In the present paper I focus on two personality traits: **openness to experience** and **agreeableness**. I will argue below that these two traits are expected to influence the importance rating profiles, even when we control for the effects of the previously reviewed political variables. Openness to experience can be summarized as follows:

[...] has facet scales for Openness to Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values. Highly open people are thus seen as imaginative, sensitive to art and beauty, emotionally differentiated, behaviorally flexible, intellectually curious, and liberal in values. Closed people are down-to-earth, uninterested in art, shallow in affect, set in their ways, lacking curiosity, and traditional in values.

McCrae and Sutin (2009, 267)

Along with other characteristics, those scoring high on openness to experience appear to be more creative and curious (John and Srivastava, 1999). Accordingly, controlling

⁷For extensive review see also Digman (1990).

⁸For detailed description see John and Srivastava (1999).

for interest and knowledge, people high in openness connect specific issues to their own lives easier. Even if that specific political issue would not be voluntarily mentioned by the individual as important in an open-ended answer, when faced with the importance rating question, she will be able to link it to her own goals. Along the same lines, people scoring high in openness understand how the policy in question might endanger or foster the rights of groups with which the individual identifies. In terms of survey response theory, those scoring high in openness are expected to "find" the relevance of the political issue for their lives in the deliberation phase (Krosnick et al., 2005). En sum, I hypothesize that *everything else held constant and controlling for interest and knowledge, those scoring high in openness will mark more issues as important.*

Turning our attention to agreeableness, we can broadly describe this trait as "[...] an abstract, higher level summary term for a set of relations among connected lower level characteristics. It describes individual difference in being likeable, pleasant and harmonious in relationships with others" (Graziano and Tobin, 2009, 46). Also, "agreeableness contrasts prosocial and communal orientation toward others with antagonism and includes traits such as altruism, tender-mindedness, trust, and modesty" (John and Srivastava, 1999, 121). More formally, in the McCrae and Costa (1987) framework agreeableness is a super-trait that has six sub-facets: trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, tender-mindedness.⁹

For the present research, agreeableness is also expected to be associated with more issues marked as important, but for an entirely different reason. Here, the argument is more linked to the survey situation and the characteristics of the issue questions prior to the importance items. All the issue questions stipulate that there is discussion about that issue, or some people have one particular opinion, while others have different opinions on that issue. The goal of this formulation is to reduce possible social desirability effects by presenting it acceptable to have any opinion on an issue. Yeager and Krosnick

⁹Two sub-facets of agreeableness are of special interest: trust and compliance (McCrae and John, 1992).

(2011) offer an extensive review on the possible effects of the "some/other" wording in questionnaires for adolescents, suggesting that the expected benefits of this wording are missing.

More generally, even mentioning that there is a proposal about a given policy on the societal level — along the previously mentioned discussion and other people's opinions references — primes the individual about the salience of the political issue. Introducing the policy options or issue questions in this manner makes the given issue into something that is definitely not trivial. Hence, there is a possible spillover effect on the importance rating. However, I expect that this varies depending on the level of agreeableness of the respondent.

More agreeable people are expected to trust the judgment of others regarding the salience of a political issue. If people are talking about an issue, form different opinions, initiate proposals that issue most certainly must be important. Furthermore, if the individual realizes this and scores high in agreeableness, it is more probable that she will comply with assessment of issue importance. Graziano and Tobin (2009, 47) refer to previous work by Habashi and Wegener (2008) and posit:

[...] persons low in agreeableness were less influenced by persuasive communications than their peers high in agreeableness, regardless of the quality of argument. For persons high in agreeableness, however, strong arguments led to greater attitude change than weak arguments. Taken together, these data suggest that agreeableness is related to being responsive to others, including their communications. Responsiveness may be a prerequisite for social influence, but it is certainly not the same construct as compliance".

Graziano and Tobin (2009, 47)

Consequently, even if the issue is personally not important, agreeable individuals will mark it important for the reasons above. Given that all issue questions analyzed here are

introduced in this manner, I hypothesize that *everything else held constant and controlling for interest and knowledge, those scoring high in agreeableness will mark more issues as important.*

Both personality traits are expected to have a positive effect, but this positive effect is the outcome of two very different mechanisms. In the next section I present the data and the variables included in the statistical model.

2.4 Data, measures and method

The analysis is carried out on the 2006 Comparative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere, 2007). In addition to its common content, this online survey gathered 37 specific questionnaires from partner institutions, and each special content had its own representative sample¹⁰. In this paper I use the special content collected for Yale University (Gerber, 2007) which alongside of four issue importance questions also contains the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling et al., 2003).

The present survey included four issue questions — abortion, environment, social security, and affirmative action — with the associated personal importance item. The exact wording of these issue and importance questions (with descriptives) are listed in Appendix A and B. There are two important aspects related to these issue questions. First, before asking these issue question, the respondents were told that they will be asked about some "issues". Although it does not mention that these are political issues, it clearly separates them from previous questions.

Second, three out of four issue questions make direct reference to the fact that "some people" think something about that issue or that "there has been" some discussion about the issue. The Social Security issue invokes that a proposal was made, suggesting that there is some general preoccupation with that policy. This wording is helpful for the response quality on the issue questions, because it reduces social desirability effects and

¹⁰For sampling and implementation details see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).

avoids the unbalanced framing of the political issues. However, it also implies that, generally, these issues are thought about or discussed by the general public. All these pointers in the issue question wording are important for the argument made for the role of agreeableness.

The dependent variable of the present analysis is the individual level sum of importance scores over the four issues. Each importance question was recoded to range from 0 (Not important) to 3 (Very important). Hence, the dependent variable ranges from 0 to 12, where greater numbers appear for individuals who consider everything important, whereas smaller numbers are for those who consider most of the issues not that important.¹¹ Figure 2.1 displays the distribution of the dependent variable with descriptive statistics.

The shape of the dependent variable's distribution makes OLS a suitable estimator for the statistical model. We can see that the right tail is a bit heavier, as there are no people who consider all issues equally non-important.¹²

Four predictors are of interest in this paper. First and foremost, the two personality traits. Both openness to experience and agreeableness are measured by two items following exactly Gosling et al. (2003). Wording, coding and correlations between the two items per traits are reported in Appendix D. As discussed in the previous section, more extensive personality batteries would be preferred. However, the Ten-Item Personality Index was found to be a valid, reliable and parsimonious measure of personality traits (Gosling et al., 2003).

Although not necessarily the best practice, quite some research on the link between politics and personality uses explanations that simply highlight sub-facets of various traits

¹¹Only those individuals are kept in the final analysis who responded to all 4 importance questions. I explored the possibility that some specific importance combinations drive the distribution of the dependent variable. The data revealed no such pattern. In Appendix C I display the distribution of the importance profiles.

¹²There is a clear theoretical left (at 0) and right (at 12) censoring. I specified a generalized Tobit model (with Maximum Likelihood Estimator) with censoring on both sides and the results were identical.

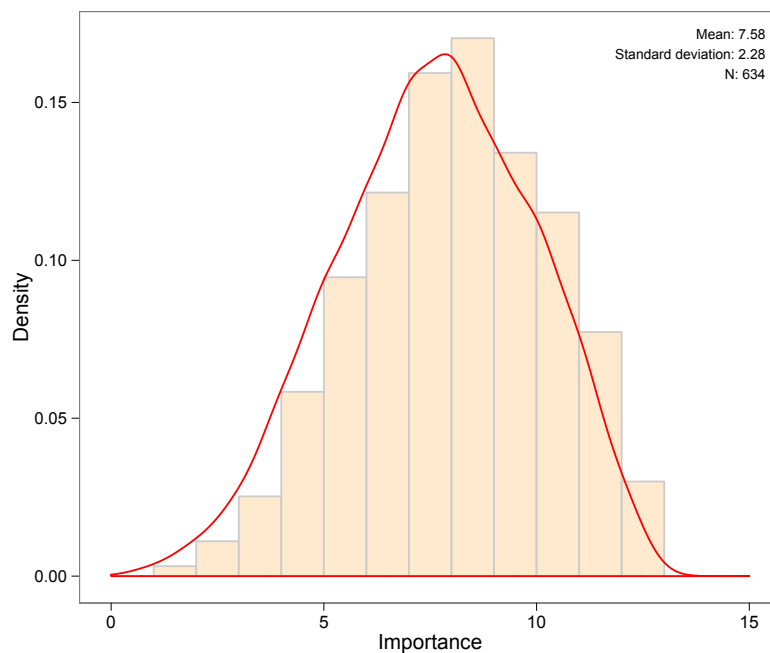


Figure 2.1: Distribution of the dependent variable defined as the sum of importance scores across four issues. Theoretical range: $[0,12]$.

(Bakker and Verhulst, 2012). In this case, the role of openness was described to be related to making connections with one's life and specific issues easier. In this sense, we do have adjectives such as "complex" and "uncreative" (reversed) in the personality questions. Hence, at least we have adjectives that tap into the sub-facet of openness that is theoretically expected to drive the results. The same can be said for agreeableness. Adjectives such as "quarrelsome", "critical" (reversed) and sympathetic can be linked to a propensity of not contesting or accepting the prevailing opinion, or to the idea of marking an issue personally important because it might benefit others. After the necessary reversal of the items that presented the individuals with adjectives contrary to the trait, a simple average of the two trait items was calculated for both openness to experience and agreeableness.

Figure 2.2 displays the distribution of the summed importance score for different

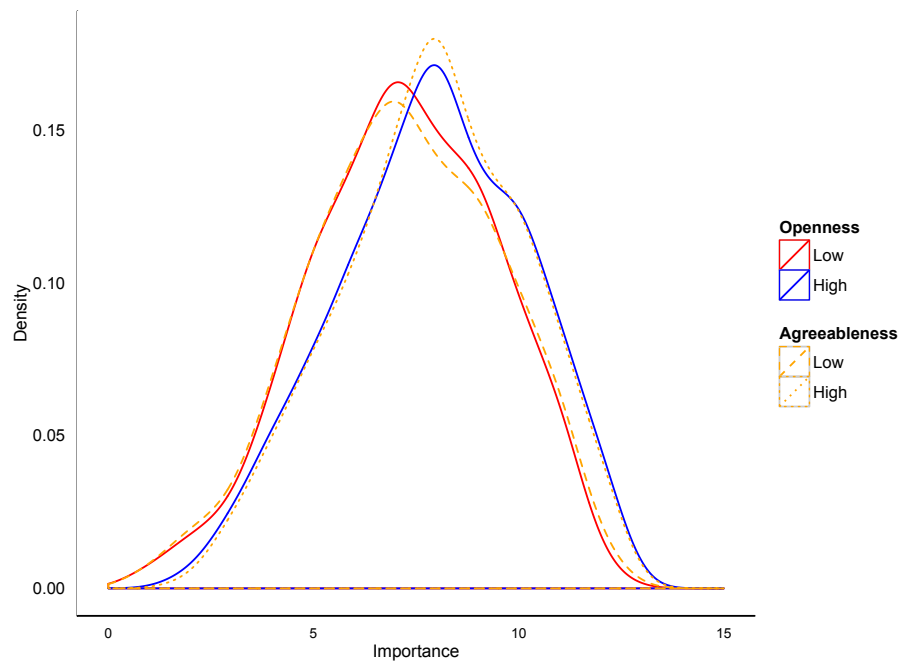


Figure 2.2: Distribution of the dependent variable for different levels of personality traits.

trait levels. This plot suggests that there are indeed differences between those scoring low or high on these two traits. More importantly, the shape and position of the distributions are very similar for high values of openness and agreeableness (consequently also for low levels). The correlation between agreeableness and openness to experience is 0.21 ($p < 0.001$), so simultaneously including these two variables in the model will also show whether the covariance between these two traits drives the similar patterns in importance, or the hypothesis of distinct mechanisms has empirical backup.

However, these simple bivariate representations disregard the role of interest and political knowledge. Accordingly, in the model I also employ a measure of political interest. This is a direct question that asks how interested the respondent is in politics and current affairs with the following answer categories: 1. Very much, 2. Somewhat, 3. Not much, 4. Not sure. The last category was treated as missing, and the scale was rescaled (0 to 2) and reversed so higher values (2) are associated with more interest.

The last predictor of importance is political knowledge. For the present analysis I use two measures for individual level political knowledge. The first is a combined measure of whether the respondent heard of the two district level candidates running for Congress. Hence, this measure takes the value 0 if the respondent heard about **none** of the candidates, 1 if she heard about **one** (and only one) candidate, and 2 if she heard of **both** candidates. This is a very basic political knowledge measure and it does not tap into knowledge about institutional structure or rules. The practical nature of this measure is an advantage, as issue importance is framed in terms of instrumentality for one's life. However, these are of course self-reports. Thus, I include another knowledge measure in the model. This measure also taps into a more practical aspect of politics: knowing the political supply in ideological terms. Individuals are asked to position both parties on a 0 (Liberal) to 100 (Conservative), with 50 as neutral point specified. Based on these two expressed party perceptions I code 0 those who positioned the Republican Party to the left of the Democratic Party. In general terms, this reflects low levels of knowledge about the supply and the ideological dimension of politics. If the positions were correct — Republican Party right of Democratic Party — the respondent's second political knowledge attribute is coded 1. Both these knowledge variables will be included simultaneously in the statistical model.

Finally, the model contains a set of control variables. These are gender (female coded as 1), race (non-white coded as 1), age, age squared, church attendance (0 for almost never or never, 1 for less than once a month, 2 for a few times a month, 3 once a week or more), education (from 0 - no high school, to 5 - postgraduate), 3-category party identification, 3-category ideology, strength of ideology (0 for Middle of the road, 1 for Liberal or Conservative, and 2 for Extremely Liberal or Extremely Conservative), and strength of partisanship (0 for Independent, 1 for Leaning Democrat/Republican, 2 for Weak Democrat/Republican, 3 for Strong Democrat/Republican). I run a simple linear regression

with all these explanatory variables (standardized) included in the model.

2.5 Results

The model results for the sum of importance scores are reported in Table 2.1. We can see that the trait variables are strong explanatory variables even when we control for interest and political knowledge. Before discussing those findings, the effects associated with the other political controls warrant a few words.¹³

When both partisanship and ideology are included in the same model, partisanship (and its strength) turn out to be significantly related to importance ratings. Unsurprisingly, as the strength of identification increases, higher importance ratings are expected. Strong partisanship can be thought of as engagement in politics, and thus the finding that more political issues are important is intuitive. There is no difference between the importance ratings of Democrats and Independents, but Republicans view fewer political issues as important or very important than Democrats (reference group). As the dependent variable ranges from 0 to 12 in theory, Republicans — on average — have a roughly 6% lower summed importance ratings. No *a priori* expectations were formulated regarding partisanship, but one possible explanation might be linked to an interplay between issue ownership (Petrocik, 1996) and the included issues. The clearest ownership effect can be found for handling environmental issues (Democrats), whereas social security, racial issue, or abortion are more balanced. If there is a more "Democrat" issue, those who identify with this party might consider them more important. Indeed, when looking at the separate importance scores, significant mean differences for importance appear only for the environmental issue — mean importance for Democrats 2.21, whereas for Republicans 1.59.

¹³Along these political variables, some controls are significant explanatory variables. Both church attendance and gender are positively associated with the summed importance scores, and age displays a curvilinear effect. However, these are control variables and no further interpretation will be discussed.

Table 2.1: Model results

	Importance rating profile
Intercept	6.77*** (0.50)
Openness to experience	0.25* (0.10)
Agreeableness	0.22* (0.10)
Conscientiousness	−0.07 (0.10)
Extraversion	0.10 (0.10)
Emotional stability	0.10 (0.10)
Political interest	0.27** (0.09)
Heard of candidate(s)	0.07 (0.09)
Party placement	−0.26 (0.28)
Strength of partisanship	0.28* (0.11)
Strength of ideology	0.13 (0.19)
PID: Independent	0.05 (0.38)
PID: Republican	−0.74** (0.28)
Ideology: Independent	0.11 (0.43)
Ideology: Conservative	0.17 (0.35)
Church attendance	0.22* (0.09)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.36† (0.19)
Age	1.24* (0.50)
Age squared	−1.21* (0.50)
Education	−0.08 (0.09)
Race (Non-white = 1)	−0.03 (0.24)
<i>N</i>	634
AIC	2803.53
BIC	3177.50
log <i>L</i>	−1317.77

Standard errors in parentheses

† significant at $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

None of the political knowledge variables are statistically significant and this is not different when only one of these variables is included in the model. These results suggest that knowing more about who is running for office or correctly placing political parties does not have an influence on the importance ratings. One competing hypothesis would be that these individuals would think of multiple importance in terms of ranking. Accordingly, knowing that they will be asked about more issues, they will have more variation in the importance scores across issues. I tested this competing interpretation by specifying a model in which the dependent variable was the variance of the four scores for each individual. The knowledge items have no influence on the variance of the importance ratings.¹⁴

Conversely, interest in politics and current affairs is a substantively strong and statistically significant explanatory variable. These results suggest that considering more political issues important is not a function of how much one knows about politics, but how interested she is in politics. A change from being not much interested in politics to being very interested is associated with a roughly 9% increase in the summed importance scores. As expected, being interested, motivated and reactive about politics means that politics plays a role in one's life — even if at a spectator level. Accepting politics as something that deserves attention is also positively associated with the importance ratings across issues. More political issues present personal relevance, because politics is thought of as an environmental factor that can influence one's goals or the potential to reach those.

More importantly, the analysis suggests that focusing only on political or social variables misses crucial explanations of the importance rating profiles. Core individual differences do influence the importance rating profiles. Both personality traits analyzed are significant explanatory variables and their magnitude is comparable to the one found for political interest. Everything else held constant, a change from minimum to maxi-

¹⁴The model is not reported here, but it is available on request.

num in openness is associated with a 13% change in the dependent variable, whereas the same change in agreeableness is responsible for a 11% change in the summed importance scores (1.56 and 1.32 change in the sum of importance ratings). The results from this model are in line with the expectations. Those who score high in openness to experience have an easier task to link the issues they are faced with to their personal life. Those who score high in agreeableness regard many things important, because the issue questions are primed in such a manner. Although these two traits are slightly correlated ($r = 0.21$) they explain different portions of the variation in the importance rating profiles, supplementing our understanding of importance rating profiles. The other personality traits — conscientiousness, extraversion, and emotional stability — have no significant effect on the importance rating profiles.¹⁵

2.5.1 Alternative analysis 1: Count of important issues

One possible argument could be that summing up the importance ratings might miss some patterns in the data. A score of 4 could reflect the four "somewhat important" ratings, or two "important" ratings and two "not important" ratings. Although the full list of importance rating profiles presented in Appendix C do not suggest that these combinations could drive the results, I specify two additional models in order to bring further empirical evidence for the relationships reported previously.

For the remaining two models the dependent variables will be counts of a specific response category. The first dependent variable is a count of the response category "very important" for each individual. The second variable is a count of the response category "very important" or "important". Given that we have four issues, both variables are

¹⁵Previous research reported a relationship between neuroticism and the variability of the answers given by respondents (Mondak, 2010; Robinson and Tamir, 2005). This possibility was tested in a model where the individual level variance of the importance ratings was the dependent variable — not reported here. No significant relationship was found for this sample. I am especially grateful to Bert Bakker for pointing at this possible relationship.

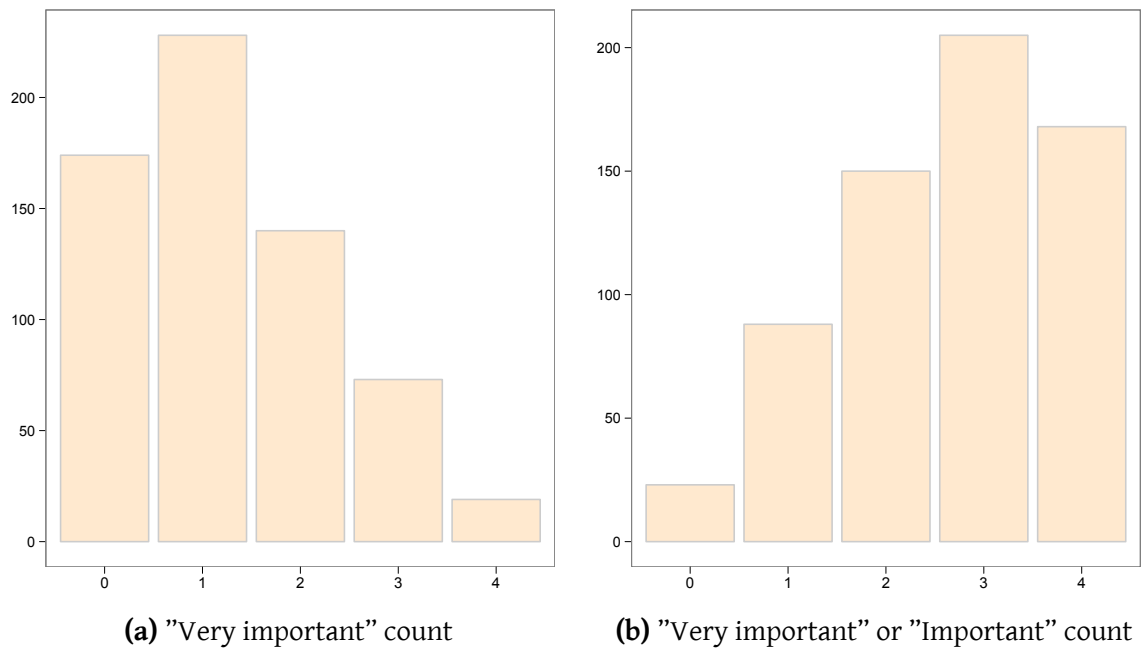


Figure 2.3: Distributions

counts between 0 and 4. These two variables are additional reflections of the importance rating profiles. Those people who rate everything very important or important will have higher counts on these responses. Distributions for the counts are displayed in Figure 2.3. As these are counts, I employ two Poisson models with the same predictors as in the previous model.¹⁶ According to the theoretical argument, for both models I expect positive coefficients associated with the personality traits. Results are presented in Table 2.2.

The results from these two models further suggest that both openness to experience and agreeableness is associated with importance profiles that more often employ "very important" and/or "important" ratings. All results are in line with those reported for the summed importance ratings. Accordingly, openness to experience has a positive effect comparable in magnitude with the one found for political interest. Furthermore, agreeableness's positive effect remains statistically significant and comparable in magnitude

¹⁶I specified two quasi-Poisson models to check the over-dispersion parameters. Both are below 1 — 0.88, respectively 0.46 — and thus the simple Poisson model is a suitable choice.

Table 2.2: Count model results, untransformed coefficients (log)

	Model 1	Model 2
Intercept	−0.27 (0.20)	0.90*** (0.09)
Openness to experience	0.10** (0.04)	0.05* (0.02)
Agreeableness	0.07† (0.04)	0.05** (0.02)
Political interest	0.10** (0.04)	0.04* (0.02)
Heard of candidate(s)	0.04 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.02)
Party placement	−0.05 (0.10)	−0.06 (0.05)
Strength of partisanship	0.06 (0.04)	0.06** (0.02)
Strength of ideology	0.13† (0.07)	0.00 (0.04)
PID: Independent	−0.02 (0.15)	0.03 (0.07)
PID: Republican	−0.20† (0.11)	−0.14** (0.05)
Ideology: Independent	0.21 (0.16)	−0.01 (0.08)
Ideology: Conservative	0.01 (0.13)	0.05 (0.07)
Church attendance	0.09** (0.04)	0.02 (0.02)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.16* (0.07)	0.04 (0.04)
Age	0.21 (0.20)	0.24* (0.10)
Age squared	−0.21 (0.19)	−0.23* (0.10)
Education	−0.03 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)
Race (Nonwhite = 1)	−0.13 (0.10)	0.02 (0.05)
<i>N</i>	634	634
log <i>L</i>	−872.2	−1037.1

Standard errors in parentheses

† significant at $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

with the effect of political interest in the second model. In this model the two highest importance ratings were counted. Thus, this suggests that although acquiescence might play a role in inflated importance ratings, there is clearly more behind this finding.

2.5.2 Alternative analysis 2: Partisanship

Another possible criticism is related to the documented relationship between openness to experience and liberal ideology or left-leaning political preferences (Gerber et al., 2010; Caprara et al., 1999; Mondak et al., 2010; Verhulst et al., 2012). This rightfully raises the question whether the results previously reported are driven by the relationship between openness to experience and the preference for liberal policies. Furthermore, one sub-facet of openness to experience is openness to values (Bakker and Verhulst, 2012; McCrae and Costa, 1987), which by definition, guarantees a positive relationship between openness to experience and a liberal world view.

In order to tackle this problem, I specify the same models for Democrat, Republican, and Independent subsamples. I choose to use the party identification based subsamples instead of the ideology based ones for practical reasons: 262 out of 634 respondents said that they are middle of the road on ideology, but only 66 out of 634 reported that they are independent in terms of party identification. This assures that there is still sufficient sample size for the identifier groups to specify the model for the sum of the importance ratings. The distribution of the dependent variable for all three party identification categories (including independents) is displayed in Figure 2.4. Overall, I expect that the results hold for each subsample, but given the loss in power coefficients might not reach statistical significance. Results are presented in Table 2.3.

The results from these three models further suggest that both openness to experience and agreeableness is associated with importance profiles, however further nuances should be considered. For the subsample of independents none of these variables reach statistical significance, though the sample size is only 66 in this case. Openness to expe-

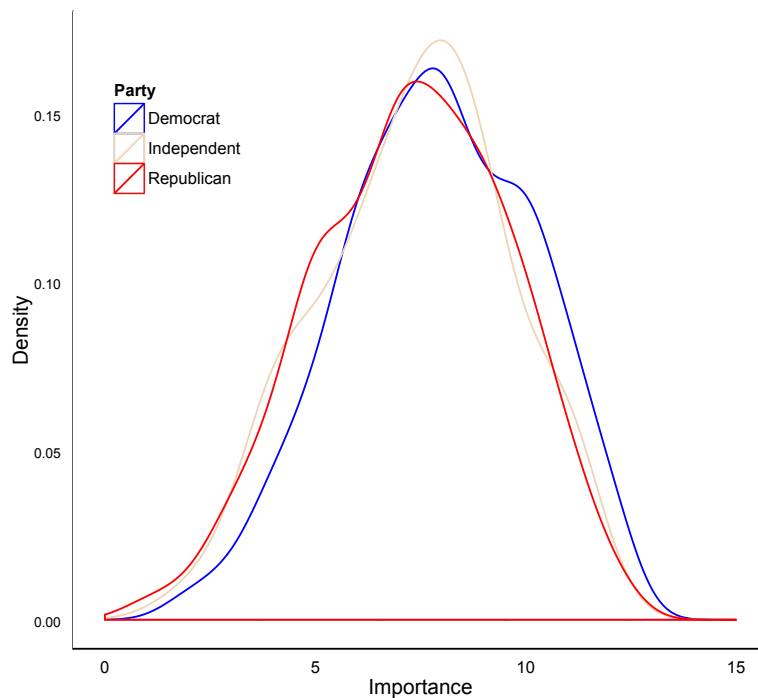


Figure 2.4: Distribution of the dependent variable for Democrats, Republicans and Independents.

rience is marginally significant for both Democrats and Republicans. The magnitude of the effects is comparable and they are in the expected direction, in line with findings of the pooled model reported in Table 2.1. More interestingly, the effect of agreeableness is only present for Democrats, and this is substantively stronger than the effect detected in the pooled sample. Hence, based on the results it appears that only Democrats who score high in agreeableness are susceptible to report more importance (on average). Again, this would suggest that Republicans do not manifest a conformation with implied importance in the actual issues questions. In terms of a sub-facet interpretation, one could argue that compliance appears only for a particular subsample, namely those who identify as Democrats.

Finally, although not related to importance rating profiles in the pooled sample, extraversion is positively related to the summed importance ratings for the Democrat sub-

Table 2.3: Model results for split samples of party identification

	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Intercept	6.40*** (0.65)	5.16** (1.78)	7.37*** (1.60)
Openness to experience	0.26 [†] (0.14)	0.30 [†] (0.17)	0.19 (0.34)
Agreeableness	0.43** (0.14)	0.01 (0.16)	0.42 (0.29)
Conscientiousness	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.14 (0.17)	0.04 (0.30)
Extraversion	0.29* (0.13)	-0.14 (0.16)	0.07 (0.30)
Emotional stability	0.02 (0.13)	0.07 (0.16)	0.22 (0.33)
Political interest	0.21 (0.14)	0.55*** (0.15)	-0.21 (0.31)
Heard of candidate(s)	0.10 (0.12)	0.03 (0.14)	0.06 (0.29)
Party placement	-0.00 (0.36)	-0.66 (0.62)	-0.85 (0.63)
Strength of ideology	0.47 [†] (0.27)	-0.11 (0.30)	0.56 (0.70)
Ideology: Independent	0.51 (0.57)	0.49 (1.66)	1.42 (1.74)
Ideology: Conservative	-0.03 (0.71)	0.95 (1.61)	0.71 (1.08)
Church attendance	-0.02 (0.14)	0.48*** (0.14)	0.47 (0.29)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.38 (0.27)	0.14 (0.31)	0.80 (0.60)
Age	1.53* (0.65)	0.17 (0.89)	2.87 [†] (1.54)
Age squared	-1.12 [†] (0.65)	-0.59 (0.89)	-2.76 [†] (1.52)
Education	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.26 [†] (0.15)	-0.21 (0.32)
Race (Non-white = 1)	0.54 [†] (0.31)	-0.17 (0.52)	-0.24 (0.67)
<i>N</i>	304	264	66
AIC	1329.26	1187.37	297.12
BIC	1596.89	1444.84	454.78
log <i>L</i>	-592.63	-521.69	-76.56

Standard errors in parentheses

[†] significant at $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

sample. Without any hypothesized association, one tentative explanation would be that the effect is similar to the positive relationship between various more participatory activities — turnout or volunteering — and extraversion (Mondak and Halperin, 2008). In this sense, rating many political issues as important can be seen as an act of acknowledging the role of politics. Furthermore, the effect of political interest is weaker for Democrats than Republicans, and this is not statistically significant. However, these results should not be overinterpreted as there is no strong theoretical expectation about the link between importance rating profiles and extraversion. Overall, we see that the direction and magnitude of openness to experience and agreeableness is comparable across subsamples (except agreeableness for Republicans), lending further credence to the results in the pooled model. The broader implications of these results are discussed in the next sections.

2.6 Limitations

Undoubtedly, this analysis presents some limitations, but opens further research avenues. First of all, the political knowledge measures are only rough proxies of general knowledge. They do not reflect possible issue specific knowledge, and this might be a reason for not finding an effect on importance rating profiles. Secondly, I only analyzed four importance ratings, and this should definitely be extended.

Third, and more generally linked to the research on the role of personality traits on political behavior, I fully subscribe to the idea that if an interpretation is driven by only a few (or one) sub-facets of a super-trait, the relationship between the sub-facet and the political variable should be modeled directly (Bakker and Verhulst, 2012). However, the present data set contains only the Ten-Item Personality Inventory which makes it impossible to carry out these empirical tests. Taking into account these possible limitations, I turn to the conclusions in the final section below.

2.7 Conclusion

Politicians, decision makers, political scientists are interested in what is important for the public. Knowing which aspects of the political and social life are salient for the people helps focusing the political discourse and competition on issues that are relevant. Similarly, we strive to study and understand how people differ in what they consider important and how this influences their preferences.

Usually, we gather this information from individuals through political surveys, asking about the personal importance of a political issue. Also, this happens in a political context where competition among actors takes place on multiple issues or policy dimensions. Hence, multiple issues are deemed of interest by researchers. These issue importance questions are asked together with the issue questions. The use of these items in combination serve researchers who want to link issue positions to party or candidate preferences (Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Krosnick, 1988). According to social psychological theories, political attitudes that are personally important are more influential for judgment and behavior (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Consequently, political opinions on issues that are personally important will be a better predictor of political preferences. Although Niemi and Bartels (1985) report that accounting for issue importance does not increase the explanatory power of spatial voting models, Krosnick (1988) suggests that with appropriate modeling, important political attitudes are more influential for political judgments.

This suggests that understanding which are the important issues — and why — is crucial for accurately explaining political preferences and behaviors. Agreement with a candidate on one particular issue might drive the positive evaluations up or even be enough to vote for that candidate if that issue is very important for the individual. Research suggests that those issues are considered important which are instrumental for one's goals,

relevant for the social groups the individual identifies with, or which fit into the individual's value system (Boninger et al., 1995). When it comes to political issues or policies that might influence one's life, individuals are expected to be able to actually understand and link the outcomes of policies to their life. However, people are not too informed about politics (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992), but they still find many political issues important.

I argued in this paper that there are individual differences between importance rating profiles. These profiles reflect information about all issue importance ratings an individual gives in a survey situation. But these questions are always preceded by issue questions. When faced with importance questions, some individuals make connections easier regarding why and how this issue might influence their lives. These differences persist even if we control for the individuals interest in politics or the knowledge she possess.

Individuals scoring high on openness to experience appear to be more creative and curious, and this helps them in seeing the relevance of specific political issues, even if they are not necessarily interested in politics. Those who are more agreeable also tend to consider more issues as important or even very important. However, in this case the theoretical argument was very different. The framing of the issue questions suggests that the given policy or issue enjoys some concern among other citizens. For those who are more agreeable — even if the three determinants of importance would not be applicable — will rate more issues as important. The findings appear to be consistent for the 2006 Congressional Elections for both the summed importance rankings and the count of specific importance rating scores.

Yet again, although the effects are in the same direction, the mechanism is very different. For openness, some issues might be relevant for the individual, but because there is no interest or information, these would not normally pop-up as answers to an open-ended question. But when directly confronted with the existence of that issue, people

scoring high in openness realize faster the possible relevance for their life. Conversely, those scoring high in agreeableness might not even think that those issues are influential for their lives, but they agree with the general frame in the issue question. The simplified logic would be that if others consider it important enough to talk about it or formulate proposals, it must be important.

On one hand, this paper brings further insight on how personality traits and individual differences affect crucial political variables. On the other hand, this extension has substantive implications for analyzing political opinions and preference formation. Results suggest that some importance rating profiles might be misleading. If some issues are reported to be important but they are not perceived as influential for one's life, they will not matter more for the decision making process. Incorporating the effects of dispositional traits gives an answer to why for some individuals weighting according to reported importance is informative for understanding their preferences, but why for others this brings no help for accurately predicting their political preferences. Krosnick (1988)'s argument when reestablishing the role of importance came from a measurement and modeling perspective. The present paper adds to those findings pointing out substantive differences depending on dispositional traits. If models of preference formation disregard these effects (such as (Niemi and Bartels, 1985)) the guiding role of importance can cancel out for the full sample of individuals. Of course, for some people importance is not that informative when it comes to preference formation, but this is not random. In this paper I suggest that there is a systematic relationship between dispositional traits and importance rating profiles. Accordingly, this paper brought further examples of how beneficial the inclusion of personality traits in voting behavior models could be.

The intuitive way forward from here involves survey wording experiments for multiple issues and importance questions to clearly isolate acquiescence effects. Furthermore, these wording experiments should consider the spill-over effect on directly linked

questions, such as importance rating profiles. Finally, political or candidate preference models should be investigated with specific control on how sensitive the issue position weighting is to the individual differences analyzed in the present paper.

3 | Do important issues matter more for politics: what if everything is important?

The present paper asks whether and how much salience matters for issue voting theories. I analyze the between individual salience effect associated with considering an issue as important vs somewhat or not important. However, the argument put forward in this paper focuses on individual differences in how issue importance ratings are given in a survey that has multiple issues. I hypothesize that there is individual variation in how informative the importance ratings are, and hence the salience effect will not be uniform for all individuals in the sample. I test these expectations using data from 2008 American National Election Study and focus on ten issue position and importance pairs. First, I show that, indeed, an overwhelming part of the sample rates everything as very or extremely important (40%). Next, I link the issue positions to ideology and investigate how the salience effect differs across individuals who use very different importance ratings. With this analysis I contribute to the understanding of salience effects for issue voting theories.

3.1 Introduction

Caring about what the public cares about — in political terms — is intuitive: we want to understand around which issues the individual decision making is centered and salient¹ matters have a stronger input for decision making (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). In our

I would like to thank Zsolt Enyedi, Martin Hansen, Sylvia Kritzinger, Tom Scotto, Joost van Spanje, Gabor Toka, and Paul Weith for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

¹Salience is the preferred term in the political science literature, whereas the social psychological tradition uses the term "importance". Throughout this paper I use these two terms interchangeably.

research we ask people how salient a political issue is for them and think of these as a good reflection of how much weight that issue will carry in one's decision. However, there are always discrepancies between the reported weight and the "true" weight for decision making (for a review see Glasgow, 1998).

Also, we assume that decision makers (at least partially) consider what people find crucial and they will transpose these issues in policy. What people care about drives what politicians talk about during heated debates or electoral campaigns. Furthermore, as the public opinion is not something unified or "one" as entity, there is always variation in what is on the agenda of voters and how much this agenda will matter. Going further, resources (even if it is just because of vote-maximization) get allocated in a particular way to solve particular problems, mostly problems that matter and the ones that bring electoral rewards for those who offered a solution. In this respect, understanding what individuals consider important is not only interesting for research purposes, but also for policy implications. There is no clear causal direction here, as people tend to consider important those issues that are discussed heavily in the political campaigns (RePass, 1971). En sum, research striving to understand salience considerations contributes to a better understanding of both individual decisions and political competition.

In the midst of the issue voting research tradition, Repass (1971, 395) wrote that "some [voters] focus on one problem, others on quite another problem" and also "salient issues had almost as much weight as party identification in predicting voting choice" (RePass, 1971, 400). The empirical support for this statement is at least mixed throughout the subsequent literature (see Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Glasgow, 1998; Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Rabinowitz et al., 1982), because they used different salience measures and statistical tests (Glasgow, 1998; Krosnick, 1988; Wlezien, 2005). The present paper contributes to this literature by asking whether (1) salience indeed matters for political preferences and (2) for whom exactly. I advance here another possible explanation of the divergent empir-

ical findings of past research: salience matters for some individuals, but it does not aid issue voting models for others. Consequently, I extend previous research by focusing on the heterogeneity of salience effects on the individual level. In order to accomplish this I first analyze how individuals rate the importance of multiple issues. After observing very different patterns in salience allocation, I incorporate this in models relating issue positions to ideology. Throughout the whole paper, no causal direction from issues to ideology is assumed, and I will analyze the magnitude of a correlational link.

Salience can be measured in various ways — from open-ended questions to ranks — and in this paper I focus on scale measures of importance. People are asked directly about how important is a particular issue. Also, they are asked to give importance scores for multiple issues. Hence, if we want to use the individual issue positions as predictors of political preferences and behaviors we will employ these importance scores as weights. However, according to Glasgow (1998) there is already a possible source of bias present in the measurement of reported salience because very few issues will be not important. This will decrease the salience effect, because all these scores will be grouped around the "very" or "extremely" important points on the scale. This claim raises more questions: what exactly is this bias and is it present for all the individuals or only for some?

So how does this bias manifest itself? Each issue's salience distribution will be left-skewed. This is expected to be the case for all issues. But this is an aggregate product of the bias. This does not tell us much about whether this bias is stronger for some people and weaker for other people. Overall, the salience distribution for one issue will be very similar if a (sizable) subsample "suffers" strongly from this bias across all issues or whether there is varying bias depending on the content of the issues. Furthermore, bias in importance ratings might be present, but there is no previous empirical test of how much this would matter when it comes to relationships between issues and other political variables. However, leaving this question unanswered has severe consequences for

the analysis of the salience effect in issue voting.

If there are groups of individuals for whom this bias is more pronounced, the salience effect is expected to be weaker (Glasgow, 1998). For those where this bias is weaker, we should expect that salient issues will indeed matter more than the not salient ones in the formation of political preferences. But these are claims derived from analysis of employing weights. The performance of weights is a within-individual benchmark of salience effect: we compare the relative role of issues for one individual. However, we do this by models that are suitable for explaining between individual variation. If these different patterns exist and we do not distinguish between possible subgroups, our general conclusions will be driven by the subgroup with more members.

In order to answer the questions introduced here, I proceed as follows. Next, I lay out the puzzle and define the salience effect analyzed in this paper. I review competing explanations and expectations about the salience effect. I then present the research strategy and the data used. For the present paper I use ten issues from the 2008 wave of the American National Election Study, issues that have associated importance questions. In the analysis section, I first assess the claim about the heterogeneity of the salience allocation with Latent Class Analysis and then assess the effects of this heterogeneity on the issue salience effects. I discuss the findings and draw broader conclusions in the last section.

3.2 The salience effect

Focus on important issue positions is guided by the principles related to attitudes in general: attitudes held strongly have a stronger impact on preferences (Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985; Eaton et al., 2008). One indicator of strong attitudes is importance. Attitudes towards various attitude objects that are considered to be personally important will have more weight in final decisions (Boninger et al., 1995; Glasgow, 1998). Personal

importance means that a given attitude is either instrumental for one's goals and can be driven by self-interest, impact on reference groups, or fit in value and belief systems (Boninger et al., 1995). The relevance for spatial models is simple: proximity between individual and candidate on important issues should weigh more in the final electoral decision compared to proximity on unimportant issues (Glasgow, 1998).

However, researchers reported divergent results. Niemi and Bartels (1985) found no added effect of salience, whereas Krosnick (1988) re-evaluated these findings suggesting that there is a salience effect. All these studies focus on the personal importance of a given issue that is asked in the survey, not the most important problem as seen in Wlezien (2005) or Jennings and Wlezien (2011). Different operationalizations of importance do have an influence on how much they matter (Glasgow, 1998), but I argue in this paper that there are more substantive explanations of the puzzling empirical results.

For this, let us consider what is salience effect, because there are multiple uses of this term. It can refer to the relative impact of different issue positions for one individual's preferences. In this framing, the salience effect refers to the differences in overlap between issue positions and preferences as a function of the issue salience scores. However, the customary regression analysis does not necessarily helps us in evaluating the salience effect understood as such. Although it is conceived as a within-individual effect, the regression analysis estimates parameters related to between-individual variation. Again, comparing the model fit (such as in Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Glasgow, 1998) will evaluate models that are set up to explain between-individual variation.

Throughout this paper, salience effect is understood as the differential in the magnitude of the relationship between an issue and political preferences conditional on the level of salience. How much more does an issue matter for those individuals who consider it very important compared to those who consider it unimportant? The quantitative answer to this question will be the salience effect. Although previous researchers

try to theorize salience effects guided by a within-individual logic, they mostly do not evaluate empirically these particular claims. I do not dismiss the regression framework — moreover, I will use it in the analysis section, but clarification is needed in order to relate our results to concrete theoretical claims. Discussing the salience effect in relative terms for one individual is very informative in multi-issue surveys and it can aid our understanding related to how preferences are formed and how survey data can be used for this. However, the salience effect discussed and tested here will stay — inherently — a between-individual effect.

One significant assumption in previous research is that the salience effect is constant in the following sense: the added value of an important issue versus an unimportant issue is uniform for the full sample and the full set of issues. I will argue in this paper that depending on how individuals allocate importance to multiple issues we will find differences in the magnitude of the salience effect. Hence, within-individual patterns or responses strategies will guide our hypotheses on between individual variation. In order to accomplish this I will outline two possible mechanisms in the subsequent sections.

3.3 Disquietude

Tagging something as personally relevant and important is the result of an individual processing of environmental stimuli. Realizing whether the current state of a policy or the possible changes will influence one's life is based on (1) what that policy is about in reality, (2) how that policy is perceived, and (3) how much threat or potential benefit is associated with its impact. All these aspects depend on how much information one has about the policy, what are the sources of this information, and how they are interpreted through the perceived position of the individual in the society. Intended changes in the educational system will be more relevant to people still studying, or people who have family members in the educational system (both on the supply and demand side), or to

people for whom the changes would not fit into their general value-system. For these people, the educational issue will be more important (Boninger et al., 1995).

However, how these threats and benefits are internalized does not depend only on these perceptions. Even if the perceived implications of a policy change — all other biases in perception taken into account — are understood, we might still see variation in how it will be regarded on an importance scale. For example, we know from the literature on fear that the same exact external stimuli will determine more situational fear among those who are dispositionally prone to fear (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). Similarly, researchers posit that evaluation of terrorist attacks or threats are also differentiated based on the underlying levels of fear or anger that were previously triggered (Lerner et al., 2003; Small et al., 2006).² Nevertheless, this stream of research suggests that situational and dispositional manifestations should be differentiated, and also that dispositional traits may affect the situational reactions. Even more importantly, if the source of the situational reactions is not purely driven by the perception of the external event, the implications of these situational reactions might be different. I expect that this differentiation is meaningful and useful also when political issues or social problems are considered.

Why and how would this work when the importance of an issue is under investigation? Firstly, individuals are very different when anxiety or concern is considered, these being important components of the self-evaluation traits (Judge and Bono, 2001). Those scoring high on these traits are generally less satisfied and also regard environmental stimuli differently. Because of higher anxiety and lower emotional stability, any external event raises more concern in the individual. In other words, it indicates a lower individual threshold to consider something a threat or impactful. Consequently, the manifestation of these dispositional traits would be that all the political issues or problems will be im-

²Of course, it is not sufficient to consider the valence of the emotion (positive or negative), but the type of emotion also matters.

portant to these individuals. The current state of the policy or the expected changes will raise more concern. Also, if it is paired with low scores on internal locus of control (sense of defenselessness in a way), the expressed issue importance might have very different effects. This is conceptually different from perceived self-efficacy (Ajzen, 2002): it is not about the individual's potential to change or control the external environment, but it is her inability to cope with the environment's impact or changes on her personal situation.

Previous research indicates that, for example, managers with more internal locus of control are more innovative and drive, rather than follow, competition (Miller et al., 1982). Taking these decisions reflect not only a sense of control over the environment, but also a view in which the actor is not that exposed to external forces. The joint presence of anxiety, neuroticism and external locus of control can be dubbed as **disquietude** and treated as a dispositional trait. Without limiting this to negative appreciations of the environment, we can see that even slightly beneficial policy changes will be considered more important, because it is expected to induce major, positive changes in one's life.

For expectations about response patterns this possible mechanism is less informative. On one hand, we would clearly see that those rating everything important would be more distressed. However, we do not have explicit and reliable measures of this disquietude in the American National Election Study. Respondents were asked whether some political figures or social groups make them anxious. These items are not suitable to derive a disquietude measure as they are very specific in terms of naming what is the trigger of anxiety. If Barack Obama makes somebody anxious that tells us basically nothing about how distressed the individual is. Hence, in this paper I will employ a very weak test of this explanation and focus on how likely people consider a catastrophe in the future years. More specifically, I expect that *if rating everything important is triggered by some sort of disquietude, those who assign above average likelihood to a catastrophe will be more likely to rate everything overwhelming important.*

3.4 Issue inclusion effect

There is yet a third alternative explanation for seeing that many "very" or "extremely" important answers across issues. For this, consider the following simple question: what issues get to be asked in a nationally representative political survey? Assume that there are a very large number of possible issue questions. Though they are related to broader issue domains, many questions can focus on very specific sub-aspects of these broader issues such as the economy. I is the possible issue space composed by K issues. Is $\frac{1}{K}$ probability of an issue — i_k , where $k = 1, \dots, K$ — to be part of the survey? I argue that the answer is no.

Researchers have only limited space in a survey. Also, the main aim is to collect data that will help understanding how and why people vote, explain election results, or disentangle competing theories present for a long time in the political science literature. Accordingly, researchers will try to include issues that *might* be important for the particular election. In the full blown economic crisis in 2008 the economy "must have" mattered. But which aspects of the economy? Following this logic, some economic issues should be included. Next, researchers want to evaluate whether some theories hold as time passes by or their explanatory power changes depending on developments in the broader political context. Imagine studying partisan realignment without repeated questions of partisanship. It is very hard or even impossible. Hence, there will be issues that appear in each wave of the electoral studies, such as abortion. And we could go on, however these examples suggest that the probability of a random political issue to be included in a major survey will definitely not be $\frac{1}{K}$ for each issue i_k .

How does this aid our understanding of importance scores? This argument posits that we should expect that issues will be rated overwhelmingly as important, because of this *issue inclusion effect*. The term *issue inclusion effect* does not refer to a phenomenon that

is either good or bad. It is simply the effect of that we — as researchers — want to study relevant things and we do have an idea what could be relevant before we go out collecting data. We want to collect data on attitudes that matter, issues that can explain why somebody voted Democrat or Republican, or why she eventually abstained from voting. With a 5-category importance question, the baseline theoretical probability of each response category is $\frac{1}{5}$. But if already important or relevant issues get to be asked, this baseline probability will not be equal across categories facilitating the report of overwhelmingly high salience scores for most issues.

However, this effect should be stronger for those who actually follow politics and know about politics. Those informed about the current affairs and the topics of the political campaign will realize the *de facto* importance of these issues. *Issue inclusion effects* would be less substantial for those who do not know anything about politics. By default, for non-informed individuals these are just issues and there is no realization that the positions or performance of the candidates on these issues will be vital in deciding who gets elected to office. But because they are important issues in general, there is a higher probability that they have heard at least about some of them, no matter how remotely. This would indicate that those non-informed would rate at least some issues more important, but stay overwhelmingly on the non-important ratings. Had the issues been completely random, chances are that they would have not even remotely heard about any of them. But as an issue inclusion effect is at play, they are expected to rate at least some issues at least somewhat important. Overall, this could be translated in more equal probabilities of not important, somewhat important, and very important ratings for the issues present in the survey. Also, if this alternative explanation is at play, we should observe *higher levels of political knowledge for those who rate everything important, whereas lower levels of political knowledge for those with mixed importance evaluations.*

3.5 Heterogeneous salience effects?

In this section I review what is the expected impact of these divergent explanations of the salience effect. Just to reiterate, the salience effect stipulates that issues considered important will matter more for preferences and decisions than those that are not important. This is already a statement that implies a comparison: issue salience is weighting, each issue's role should be conditional on this weight. If everything is important, the weights are identical, and same goes for situations where nothing is important. Issues should matter equally. In the first case, their relationship with preferences should be universally — for every issue — strong. In the second case however, this relationship should be universally weak.

For a subgroup where an overwhelming part of the issues is considered highly salient the salience effects is biased downwards. On one hand there will be small variation in the importance measure across individuals, artificially biasing down the R^2 — as the measure of explained variation — of the model, because that measure also depends on the variance of the independent variable (in this case importance). This is also the reason why I will refrain from using the R^2 as a criterion to evaluate the salience effect. For a subgroup with more mixed importance ratings we can detect a salience effect. From this point on, the real question is whether there are distinct groups along these lines, and what are the proportions associated with these groups.

In the present research strategy I draw categorization information from **all** expressed issue importance ratings. Consequently, this allows to extend the expectations, because it incorporates background information on how people allocate importance. For a subgroup where the rule is to mark most issues as important, saying about a particular issue that it bears with no or moderate importance is a clear statement. It markedly differentiates that particular issue from the others. Thus, I expect that for the subgroup who marks

most issues important, the salience effect should be more pronounced. Marking an issue as unimportant is unlikely, but when that happens this will have a simple consequence: that issue will not matter in the formation of political preferences.

This reads as a slightly conflicting expectation when we reconsider that salience effect should be biased downwards because all the ratings for an issue will be clustered in the high value range. However, this is a between-individual hypothesis for the full sample. Already accounting for some individual heterogeneity, the hypothesis of stronger salience effect refers only to a subsample. Again, for this group no importance is unlikely, but if one or more issues get tagged as such, it should be a clearer statement against that particular issue's impact. What would be the expected outcome? For example, we can observe that — for this class — an issue will be related to the ideological self-positions only if it is important. Also, we might find that the issue is related to ideology for no importance or medium importance (somewhat), but the strength of relationship will be weaker than the one found for very important issues.

There is one more crucial question before turning to the data. How does this subgroup match up in salience effect with other subgroups that do not exhibit this particular response pattern? If the guiding mechanism is related to the *issue inclusion* argument or genuine salience because of higher interest and political engagement, we should find that the salience effect works better for this group. Accordingly, important issues should have a markedly strong effect on ideological self-placement. However, if the guiding mechanism is more related to disquietude, important issues for this group will not have greater impact on political preferences.

But who are the "other groups"? If the *issue inclusion* hypothesis has some validity, we should not expect groups that constantly mark everything unimportant. Also, as disquietude is an individual level characteristic by employing some controls, it is highly unlikely to find a substantive proportion of the sample to consider nothing important. Finally, the

expectation about the salience effect for these other subgroups is considered. Previous research is not informative in this case for a very simple reason: the salience effect is assumed to be uniform across individuals. If the issue is instrumental for an individual, it should matter more. In this sense, the expectations here are not too clear. If the group membership is negatively related to levels of political information, we might see the following effect: importance ratings are not that informative, so we will not see differences in the explanatory power of the issues across different levels of salience. This invariance can take two forms: for all levels of importance the issue will have a substantive (but invariant) effect, or no effect at all. Both of these scenarios suggest the same: weak salience effect. However, if the subgroups of the sample are not sorted along levels of political information, no clear expectation can be derived.

En sum, I will first evaluate whether there are classes that clearly manifest different important ratings for the ten issues under investigation. The first implication will be that we can see whether the ratings are more guided by the issue domains or content, or by some individual tendencies in importance allocation. Then, I will look at how these classes differ and the salience effect through the lenses of the relationship between ideology and a given issue position.

3.6 Data

In order to test the expectations presented above, I will use the 2008 wave of the American National Election Studies (ANES). I focus on one year because this guarantees that there is one clear political context and the individual level disquietude is expressed towards this particular reality. Without an extensive panel study with the same items it is more adequate to analyze the research question in a single country - single time point framework. Furthermore, this survey has an impressive selection of issue positions that are also accompanied by importance ratings.

Generally, issue questions can be found in most of the surveys, but personal importance questions are much more sporadic. In order to carefully look at importance rating tendencies among individuals we need many importance questions. Analyzing an underlying class structure with two or three observed variables is impossible and uninformative. Overall, I use ten issue questions with ten importance ratings from the 2008 ANES. I list the issue questions below.

Spending Some people think the government should provide fewer services even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6.

Defense spending Some people believe that we should spend much less money for defense. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that defense spending should be greatly increased. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6.

Medical insurance There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan, which would cover all medical and hospital expenses for everyone. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or other company paid plans. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Jobs Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Affirmative action Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because

they should help themselves. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Environment Some people feel the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on their own. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Guns Do you think the federal government should make it more difficult for people to buy a gun than it is now, make it easier for people to buy a gun, or keep these rules about the same as they are now?

Women Recently there has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry, and government. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others feel that a woman's place is in the home. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6.

Troops Compared to the number of U.S. troops in Iraq now, should the number of troops in Iraq three months from now be more, less or about the same? Followed by: How much more troops in Iraq in 3 months? or How much fewer troops in Iraq in 3 months?

Abortion There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view? You can just tell me the number of the opinion you choose. Options: 1. By law, abortion should never be permitted. 2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger. 3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established. 4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice.

There are issues from multiple issue domains: economy, foreign policy, civil rights, and moral domain. This is a great advantage, because we can analyze whether there are people who constantly consider important issues from one specific domain, or the importance patterns go beyond issue domains. Eight out of ten issues have a 7-point response scale. The abortion issue uses a classical wording in US studies, with no neutral point,

but informative response categories. The gun control issue has only three response categories, but these are also ordered. All issues are treated as continuous variables when they are employed as predictors.³

The data contain ten importance questions. All these questions were asked right after each issue question. Exact wording is presented in Appendix E. Originally, these have five categories: Not at all important, Not important, Somewhat important, Very important, Extremely important. In order to facilitate the analysis in terms of linkages to substantive expectations, I recode the importance questions and treat them as 3-category variables. Hence, the two lowest categories will be marked as Not important, the middle category will stay unchanged as Somewhat, whereas the two highest categories are collapsed into a Very important category. Furthermore, this reduces the risk of acquiescence or extreme response bias driving the results.

Finally, individuals were asked about their ideological self-placement on the liberal-conservative scale. This will be the outcome of interest in the multivariate analysis. The question wording is:

Liberal - conservative We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives.

Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

Responses options were: 1. Extremely liberal 2. Liberal 3. Slightly liberal 4. Moderate; middle of the road 5. Slightly conservative 6. Conservative 7. Extremely conservative. For the analysis I recode this variable into 3-categories: Liberal (1 to 3), Moderate (4), and Conservative (5 to 7). There are several reasons for this decision. When evaluating the effects of issue positions I use a change from one end of the spectrum to the other end. This

³The models from the subsequent analysis for gun control were specified also with the issue position being categorical. There were no differences.

is a radical change and its effects should be major as well. Hence, I am not interested to analyze these effects on small probability changes for slightly liberal and liberal categories for example. If issues matter, radical change should be a predictor of substantive changes in ideology. Second, reducing the number of categories in the dependent variable assures sufficient observations for each category in one given model. This is especially important because the will contain interaction effects between categorical variables. Finally, working with these three categories also eases the interpretation of the effects: in this case, a negative effect on a liberal self-placement's probability should be accompanied by an increase in the conservative identification.⁴

The present analysis unfolds in two steps. First, using latent class analysis, I analyze whether there are different groups in the sample regarding the importance rating of the ten political issues. After analyzing these groups, I assess what are the effects of these separate groups on the relationship between a given issue position and the liberal-conservative position of the individual. For the first step of the analysis the final sample size is 719, whereas for the second stage it varies a little bit depending on the amount of missing values on the particular issue questions, though it never goes below 700.

3.7 Latent class analysis: importance ratings

For the first step of the analysis, I use Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to assess whether there are distinct groups in the sample that follow a particular importance rating tendency. In the statistical analysis I use those individuals who expressed valid answers for all ten importance items. I introduce a simple latent class model with categorical observed (or manifest) variables. It is well beyond the scope of this paper to give an in-depth review and presentation of latent class analysis (for that see Hagenaars and McCutcheon, 2002),

⁴At one section of the analysis additional individual predictors will be employed. They are discussed in detail after the model specification. All descriptive statistics are available upon request from the author.

however a short description is necessary. Latent class analysis posits that each observation in the data (individuals in our case) belongs to an unobserved (latent) class of a latent variable (X) based on her responses to a multitude of items. There are two additional assumptions: (1) one individual can belong to only one latent class, and (2) there is local independence – “conditional on the on latent class membership, the manifest variables are mutually independent of each other” (Magidson and Vermunt, 2004, 175).

For a simple description, assume that there are J manifest variables, N individuals, and the discrete latent variable (X) has C classes. Following Vermunt (2010) an individual’s score on X is denoted by v_i . The general goal is to model y_i that is a particular response vector. In our case, one of these could be marking as important all economic issues, marking only somewhat important moral issues, and not important civil rights and foreign policy issues. Again, this is one possible response vector y_i that can be observed. With the assumption “that the density $f(y_i)$ is a weighted average of the C class-specific densities $f(y_i|v_i = c)$ ” (Vermunt, 2010, 238), the model is:

$$f(y_i) = \sum_{c=1}^C P(v_i = c)f(y_i|v_i = c) \quad (3.1)$$

Accordingly, our focus is on one hand to estimate from the observed responses the probability of an individual belonging to class c – $P(v_i = c)$ – and the probability of observing a given response pattern given the class the individual belongs to – $f(y_i|v_i = c)$. Given that our manifest variables are categorical, the assumption is that joint probability distribution of categories from item j is drawn from a multinomial distribution. For details on the expression of assumptions and description of the probabilities for each answer category on each manifest item please refer to Vermunt (2010, 239).

What does this mean in terms of possible outcomes and information about importance ratings? First off, we should focus on the difference between classes in terms of response vectors. The response vectors associated with one particular class can reflect across issue

variation. This would mean that in one class individuals mostly rank as important only some particular issues (based on issue domains), and rank as unimportant others. For example, we can detect a class that is focused on the economy. All the economic issues will have higher probabilities for marking them as very important, and low probabilities for the not important category. This would suggest that some individuals rate everything belonging to one issue domain as important, adhering to the idea of broader topics being salient, not subparts of it with specific emphasis on one issue.

However, a different possible outcome could be that one particular class rates all the issues mostly important, whereas other class(es) are generally inclined towards somewhat important ratings independent of the issue, or even mostly not important ratings. The distinction between the two possible patterns is essential. If we find that the classes discriminate between the usage of one particular importance rating for all issues, there is empirical evidence that some individuals rate issues predominantly as important, disregarding the issue domain or the exact content of the issue. This sort of clustering would indicate that some people consistently rate all issues similarly important. However, if this was the case, incorporation of importance measures in issue voting models becomes more challenging. As discussed previously, if some individuals rate everything as important, it would have two major implications: all the issues are expected to matter the same in the preference formation and all these issues should matter a lot. In this case, we should assign high, but equal weights to all issues. Conversely, if some individuals consider everything as not important none of the issues should matter a lot for the preference or choice, and they should be *equally* irrelevant.

Systematic invariance on importance ratings makes relative salience comparisons between issues very hard. If this type of clustering is present, we have to revisit how we weight important vs. not important issues in analyzing broad ideological position or the electoral preferences. But first, let us assess what is the latent class structure of the multi-

ple importance items. Is there any reason for concern? Figure 3.1 suggests that yes, there is reason for concern. In this figure I present the results of the LC model from Equation 3.1 fitted to the ten importance questions in the 2008 American National Elections Studies

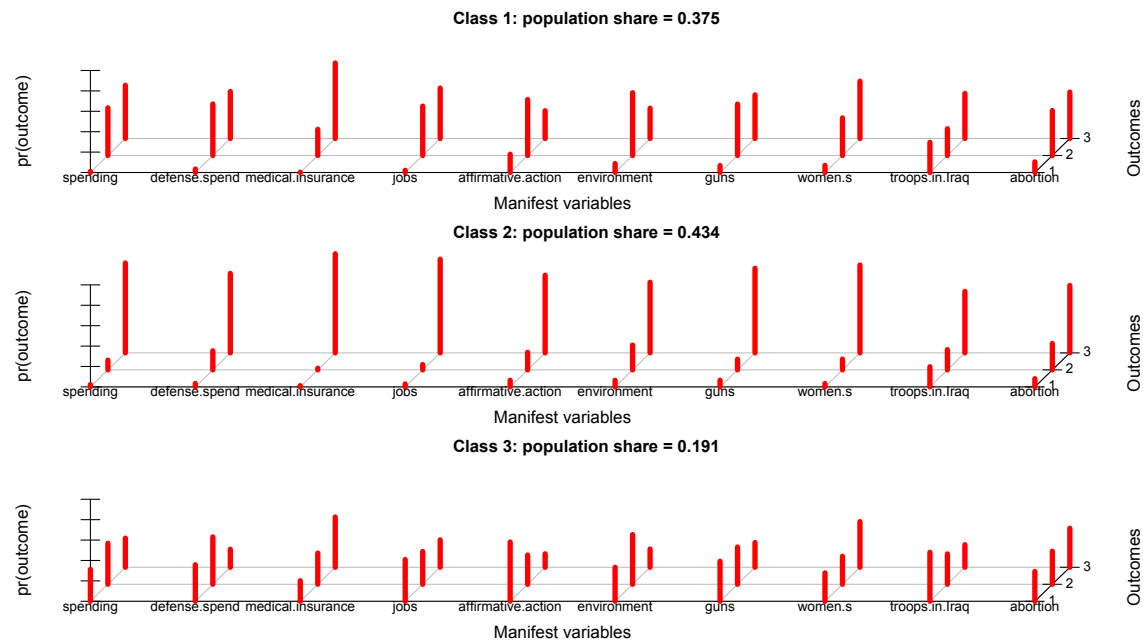


Figure 3.1: LCA results and issue importance probabilities

Before interpreting the results, some model fit considerations are needed. As seen, the final model is a 3-class model. Generally, the choice of number of classes is guided both theoretically and empirically. One possible line of thought is that if each class clearly discriminates between response categories (on manifest variables), we would expect 3 classes. However, this is not a theoretically guided expectation, mostly because there is no previous research on multiple importance ratings in relative terms. Hence, I follow the general logic of specifying a baseline model with one class (all people follow the same rating structure) — in which we only estimate two threshold values (3-category variable) for each manifest variable — and increase the number of classes by 1 for each new model. Model fit statistics are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: LCA model fit comparison

Number of classes	BIC	Log-likelihood	Parameters
1	18339	-9100.251	20
2	17474	-8595.364	41
3	17368	-8469.665	62
4	17420	-8423.471	83
5	17514	-8397.659	104

For all intents and purposes I use the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) to compare model fit, because it is a joint measure of model fit and parsimony. We can see that the three class model fits the data best.⁵ Looking at Figure 3.1 we can see an interesting grouping. Roughly 38% of the sample (Class 1) rates issues either very important or somewhat important. The medical insurance and the women's role issue presents some edge for the predicted probabilities of the very important response, but overall this class is mixed between somewhat and very important ratings. For Class 1, it is unlikely to observe non importance.

More importantly, the real source of worry is Class 2. Here, we clearly see that for **all** issues, the very important response is the most likely, with very high predicted probabilities. Minor differences appear for the troops in Iraq and the abortion issue, but even here the highest probabilities are for the very important rating (twice as high as the second category). Overall, Class 2 is made up of individuals for whom everything is important, making it problematic to relatively weigh their issue positions. One could argue that this should not be a problem, because these are exceptions. The results from this model suggest exactly the opposite: Class 2 is around 43% of the sample, being not only substantively sizable, but also the biggest class out of the three.

The third class that makes up roughly 19% of the sample has almost equal probab-

⁵However, when a likelihood ratio test is used, the four class model fits significantly better than the three class model. Nevertheless, there are two main reasons to stick with the three class model: (1) the reduction of unexplained variance is roughly 0.5% compared to the model with three classes, and (2) the four class model has a class that covers 8% of the total sample which would make it extremely hard to carry out further separate analysis on that class.

ities for all three importance ratings across issues. There is slightly higher probability to marking very important the medical insurance issue and not important the affirmative action issue. However, on average, in this class all response categories have very similar (and roughly equal) probabilities. This tells us that for Class 3 there is no prior expectation to observe systematic importance rating scores across issues. Importance on one issue can go one way, and importance on another issue can go in the other way. This would suggest that for this class importance ratings are more directly linked to the specific issue.⁶

So far, I have avoided naming the classes. The major reason for this is that we do not know *who* are the people in one given class, or what individual characteristics they share. On one hand, those rating everything important could be those with extensive political knowledge and involvement in politics. However, if it is an importance rating system that is triggered by some sort of disquietude, we observe the systematic high importance ratings because any sort of weak environmental stimulus already generates concern.

In order to disentangle the meaning of these classes, I specify the same 3-class LC model with individual level predictors. In total, the model has five predictors: two controls — gender (coded 1 for women) and race (coded 1 for non-white) — and three important predictors. I focus on political information, political discussion, and a rough concern proxy. Political information ranges from 1 to 5 (recoded 0 to 4 for the model) and reflects the interviewer rating of the political knowledge level. This measure was shown to be a good and reliable measure of general political knowledge (Bartels, 1996). The political discussion variable ranges from 0 to 7 and it is the self-reported number of days during a week in which the respondent discussed about politics. The last variable of interest is the likelihood of catastrophe. Respondents were asked "How likely do you think it is that a majority of all people on Earth will die all at once sometime during the next 100 years because of a single event?", with responses ranging from Not at all likely to Extremely

⁶There are insufficient issue domains to use the issue type as predictor.

likely. The variable was recoded by extracting the mean of this variable from all observations. Hence, the final score reflects how much more or less likely one considers such an event compared to the sample mean. Table 3.2 reports the results from this model with the classes kept as they were in the initial analysis.

Table 3.2: Logit coefficients

	Class 2 / Class 1	Class 3 / Class 1
Intercept	−0.659 (0.463)	0.698 (0.501)
Discussion	0.159* (0.051)	0.003 (0.067)
Race (Non-white = 1)	0.836* (0.243)	−0.271 (0.353)
Gender (Female = 1)	−0.001 (0.247)	−0.277 (0.322)
Disquietude/concern	0.156† (0.093)	−0.081 (0.122)
Political information	−0.129 (0.123)	−0.432* (0.146)
<i>N</i>	719	
BIC	12257.1	

Standard errors in parentheses

† significant at $p < .1$ and * at $p < .1$.

We can see that frequent political discussion increases the probability of belonging to the class rating everything important (against the mixed Class one) and so does more concern (marginally significant).⁷ More importantly, political information is not associated with the probability of ending up marking everything important. First off, it fails to reach statistical significance, but also the coefficient has a negative sign. Overall, these results would suggest that those who mark everything important are not necessarily the politically more informed, but those who are a bit more concerned and discuss politics⁸.

⁷I employ race as a control variable, hence the effects will not be discussed here.

⁸One possible criticism here could be linked to collinearity problems. The amount of political discussion and political information should be positively correlated. This is indeed the case in the present data as well, however the correlation is only 0.2, $p < 0.001$. This suggests that there is major multicollinearity concern. Moreover, I specified a model excluding political discussion and there was no change in the overall findings

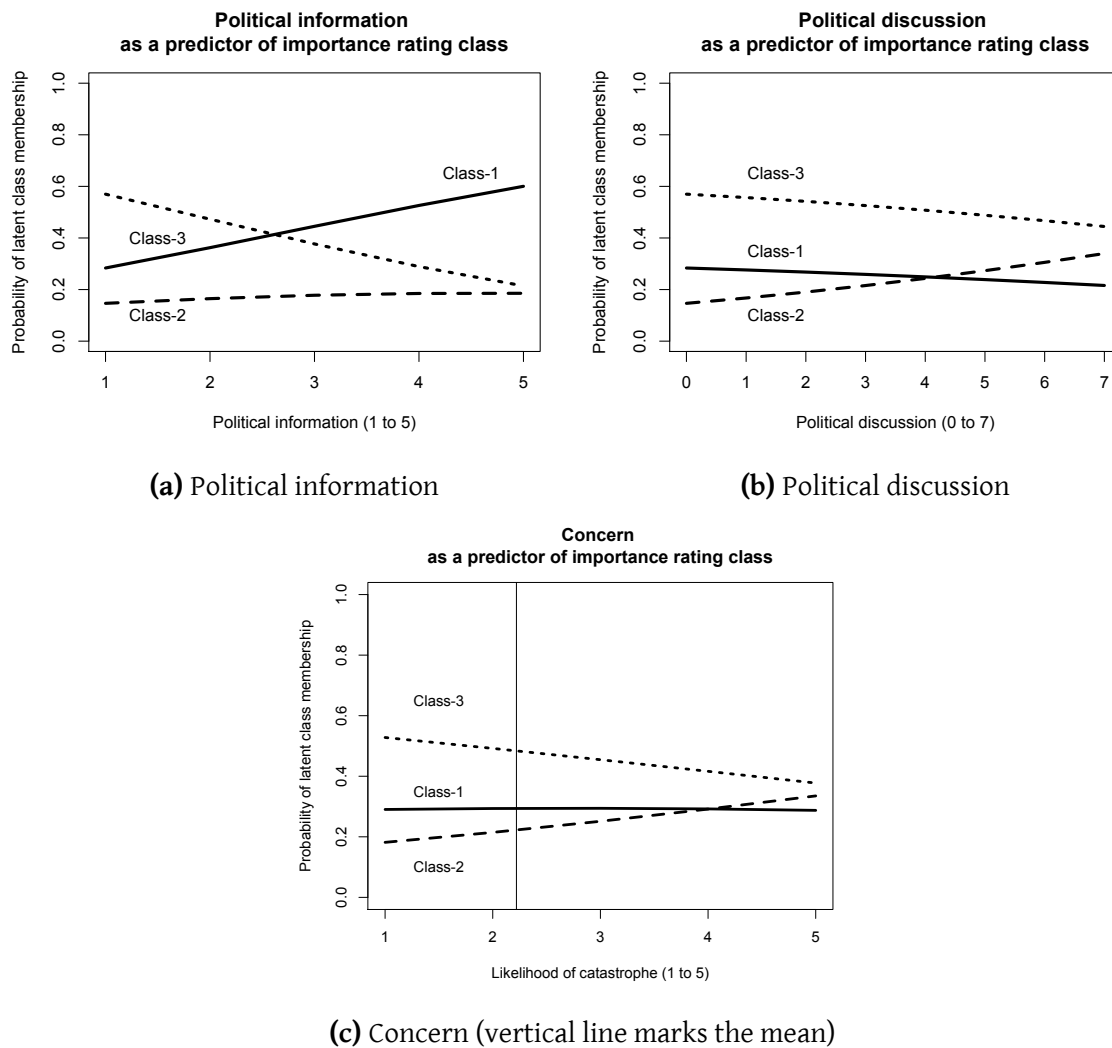


Figure 3.2: Changes in class membership probabilities depending on individual level predictors

Political information does have a significant effect on the probability of being in Class 3 against Class 2. The negative effect suggests that the politically more informed people are mostly grouped in the second class, hence they do consider the issues somewhat or very important alternatively⁹. As logit coefficients are not necessarily intuitive to grasp the magnitude of the effects, all these relationships are displayed in Figure 3.2.

related to political information.

⁹When the baseline group is changed, we can see that those who rate everything important are more informed on average than those in Class 3. Overall, most informed are those with torn between somewhat and very important ratings.

What do these results tell us about the classes? First and foremost, those who mark everything important are not the ones who are politically informed. There is slightly more support towards the explanation guided by disquietude. Overall, I will tag Class 2 as "overraters": they do consider everything important, disregarding the issue in question. The first class is the most informed and bounces back and forth between overall somewhat and very important ratings. They will be tagged as "carefuls". Individuals from this class tend to be split between somewhat important and very important, however they are mostly on this more positive side of the importance rating. They do realize that some issues are very important, and those that do not qualify for this categorization will be marked at least somewhat important. Still, there are no unimportant issues, but some level of differentiation is given in the upper region of the importance rating. Finally, in the third class we don't find any realistic differentiation between the three possible importance categories. Also, we find a slightly lower level of political information in this group. The importance ratings can go either way and there is no systematic invariance across issues. Thus, this category will be tagged as the "raters".

In the following step of the analysis, I turn now to describe the possible effects of not incorporating these differences in the analysis of issue positions and their impact on the ideological self-positioning. The next section reveals whether our conclusions on important issues matter most are biased in the light of individual differences.

3.8 Effects for the relevance of issue positions

In this section, I assess how informative are the classes for our inferences about how much important issues weigh in the ideological self-positioning. Simply put, the expectation is that issue positions on important issues matter more for the ideological self-placement. Does this hold throughout all the identified classes? If yes, simply weighting issue positions based on importance is a suitable way to incorporate salience effects. However, if

this is not the case, the additional individual level heterogeneity complicates our analyses. By focusing on possible differences across classes we will also have a better evaluation of the rather contradictory findings reported by Niemi and Bartels (1985) and Krosnick (1988). Does importance matter the same for all individuals? The suggested answer based on the analyses below is *no*.

The statistical approach here is simple. We are interested to see how each issue is related to the general liberal-conservative self-placement. I model the liberal-conservative self-placement as a function of the issue position interacted with the importance rating. Hence, I will specify ten separate models for each issue, with the same specification. Also, each of these models is ran separately for each class that I have discussed above: *carefuls*, *overraters*, *raters*. The liberal-conservative self-positioning is a 3-category variable covering liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Accordingly, I will use an ordered logit specification for the models. For these models, we are interested in estimating the probabilities of each category given values of the covariates¹⁰.

Interpreting ordered logit coefficients is not intuitive, hence I will focus on the first differences associated with a change from one end of the issue scale to the other end. This is a radical change in the issue position. The first differences reflect how much change in probability is associated with this change in the predictor variable. For example, an average first difference of -0.4 for the liberal category tells us that a radical change in the issue position will reduce the probability of observing a liberal self-positioning by 0.4. As the model includes an interaction term, we will have first differences associated with the change in issue positions for three levels of importance: not important, somewhat important, very important. These conditional effects are modeled directly, and the first differences will be evaluated for all three importance levels separately. En sum, for each

¹⁰To be more precise, it is assumed that there is an unobserved continuous variable with a standard logistic distribution that determines which category will we observe. As it is an ordered variable, we estimate the thresholds (always one less than the number of categories) that determine which category will be observed.

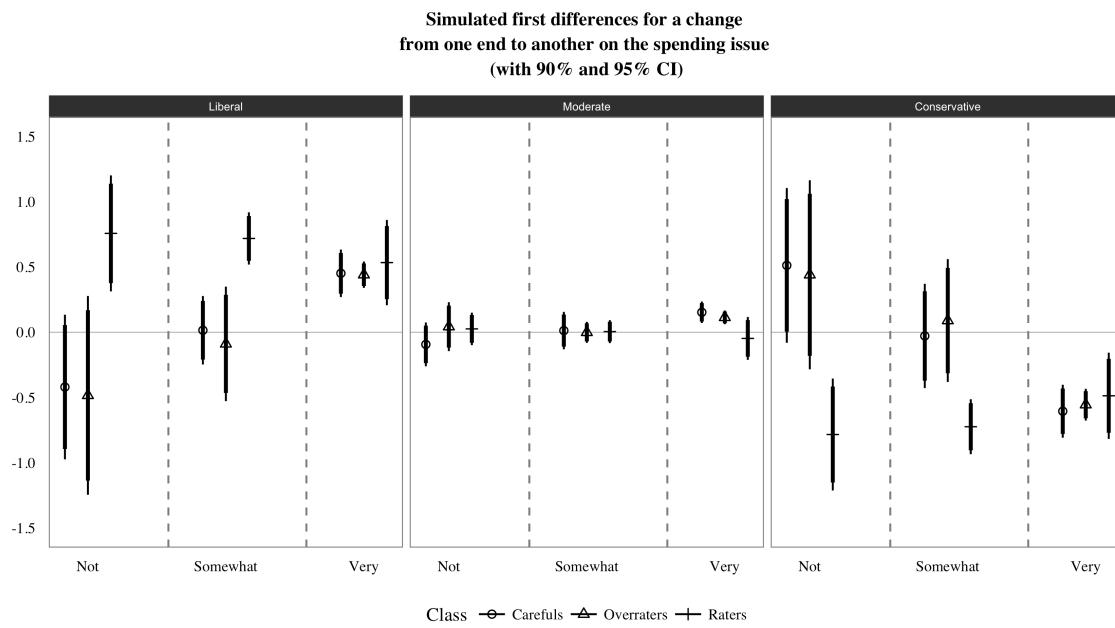
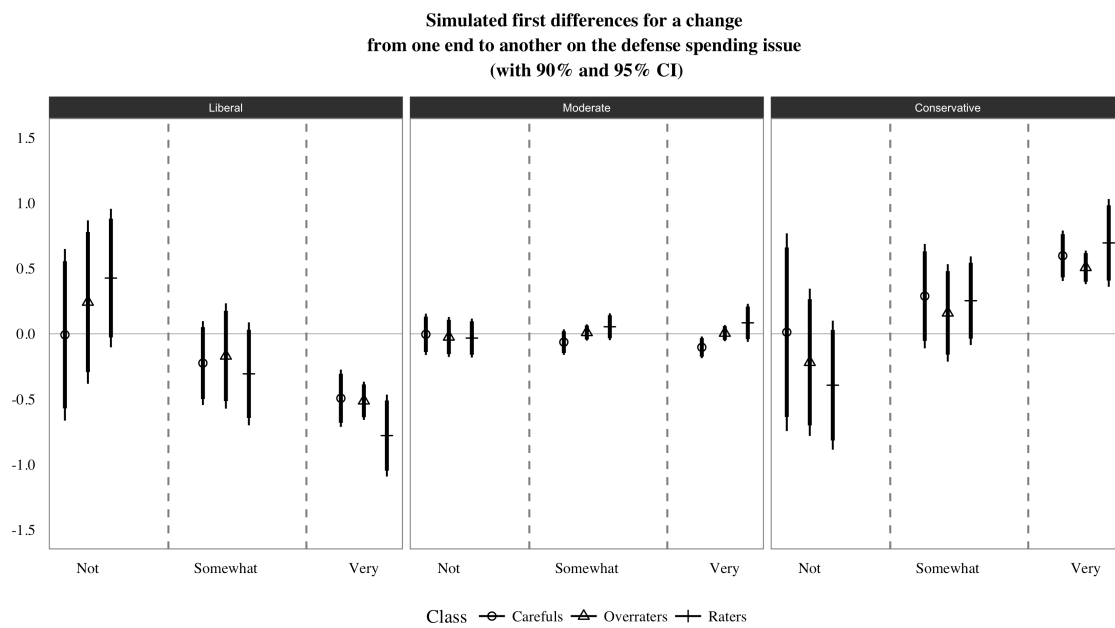
model I will use the predicted first differences as a measure of impact of the issue on the liberal-conservative self-placement. For each value in question, I simulate 1000 predicted first differences in order to get an uncertainty measure on these. I display the results in a series of figures from Figure 3.3 to 3.12.

The overall interpretation of the results becomes straight forward. We are looking for differences in effects of a given issue for the liberal-conservative position. Also, we are focusing on differences in "significance" of the first differences — confidence interval overlapping 0.¹¹ The distance from the 0 line of each predicted first difference reflects the magnitude, and the sign of the average predicted first differences tells us whether a change from the one end to another end on the issue position will decrease or increase the probability of a given category. The issues were not recoded to reflect a general liberal-conservative direction, as I am mainly focused on the magnitude of the effects.

To assess the impact of different classes, I will look at each issue in order. For the first issue, I will present a detailed explanation on the figure interpretation as well. The government spending issue reveals interesting patterns. If the issue is personally important, it will have a strong impact on the ideological self-positioning for all three classes. For both liberal and conservative category in each section of Figure 3.3 labeled as "very" on the *x-axis* all predicted first differences are different from 0, independent of the color. A change from one end to another end on the spending issue will increase the probability of liberal identification with roughly 0.5, and it will decrease the probability of conservative identification to the same extent, **if** the issue is marked as very important.¹² However, when the issue is not or only somewhat important, we would conclude that it would matter less for the ideological self-positioning. Almost all first differences overlap the 0 line.

¹¹One cautionary note is needed here: there is more uncertainty when the sample size is smaller, thus it is expected that the *raters* will have wider confidence intervals. Nevertheless, the three classes are comparable.

¹²Of course, this also indicates that the lower end of the spending issue is the more conservative policy option.

**Figure 3.3: Spending****Figure 3.4: Defense spending**

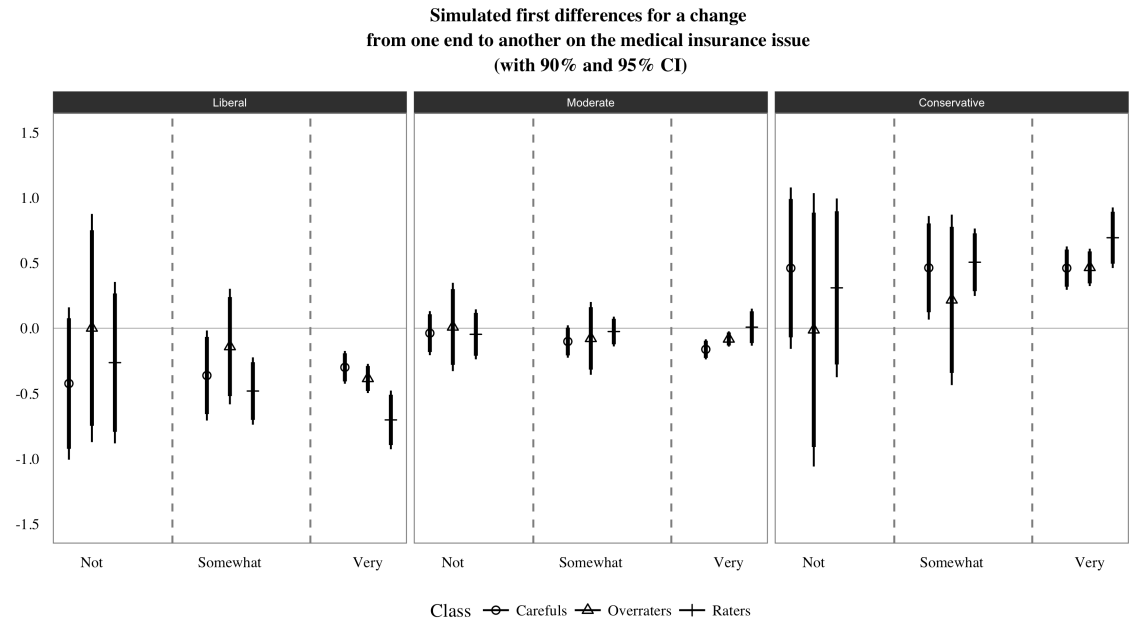


Figure 3.5: Medical insurance

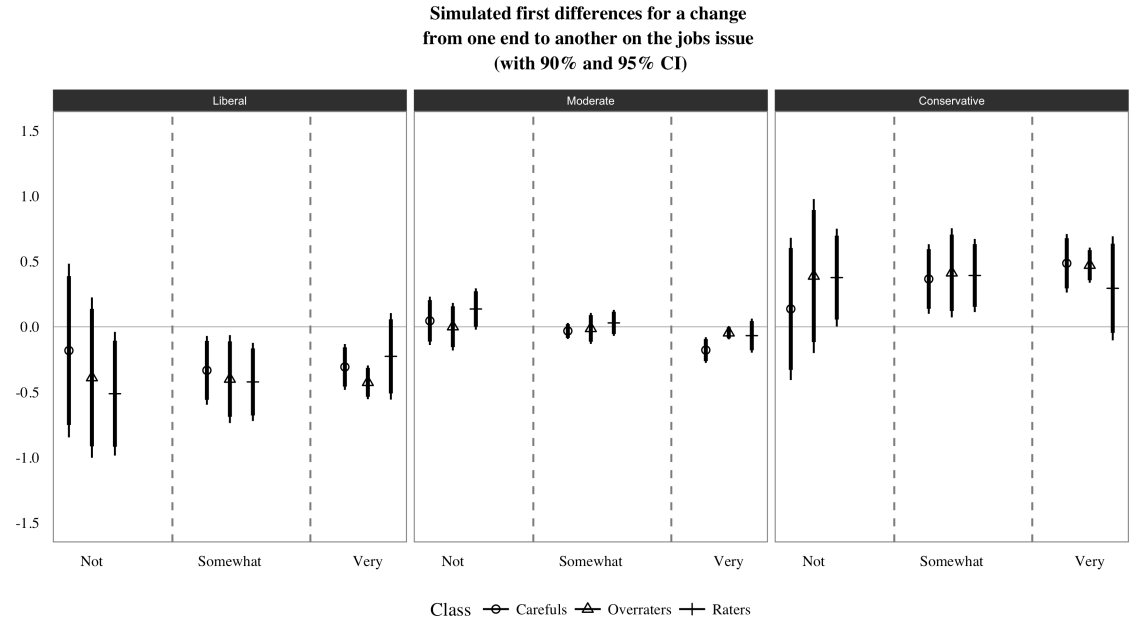


Figure 3.6: Jobs

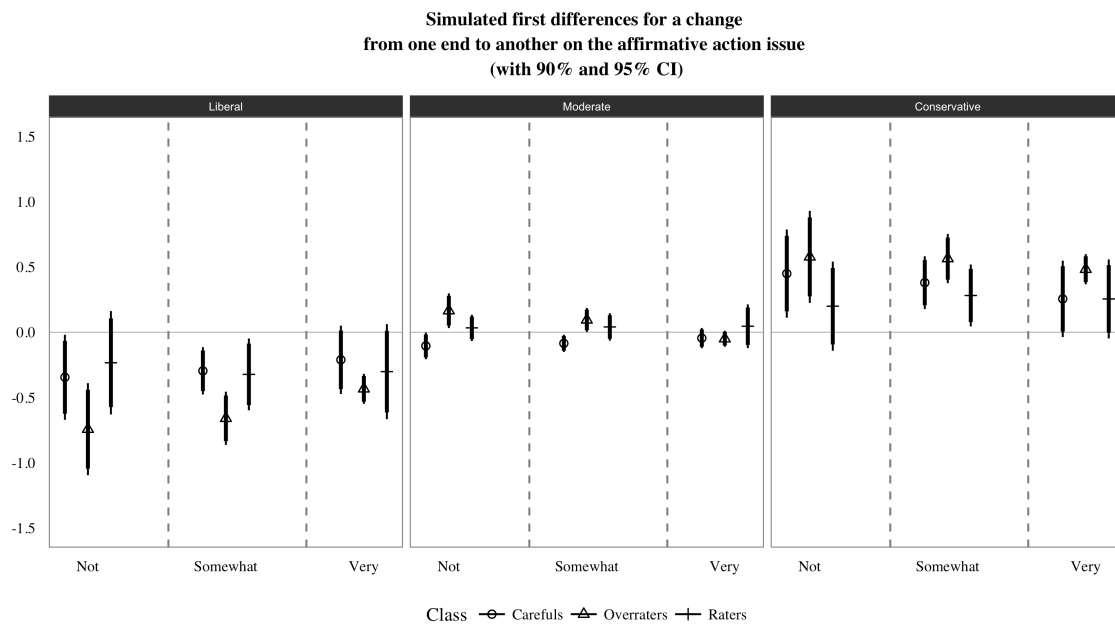


Figure 3.7: Affirmative action

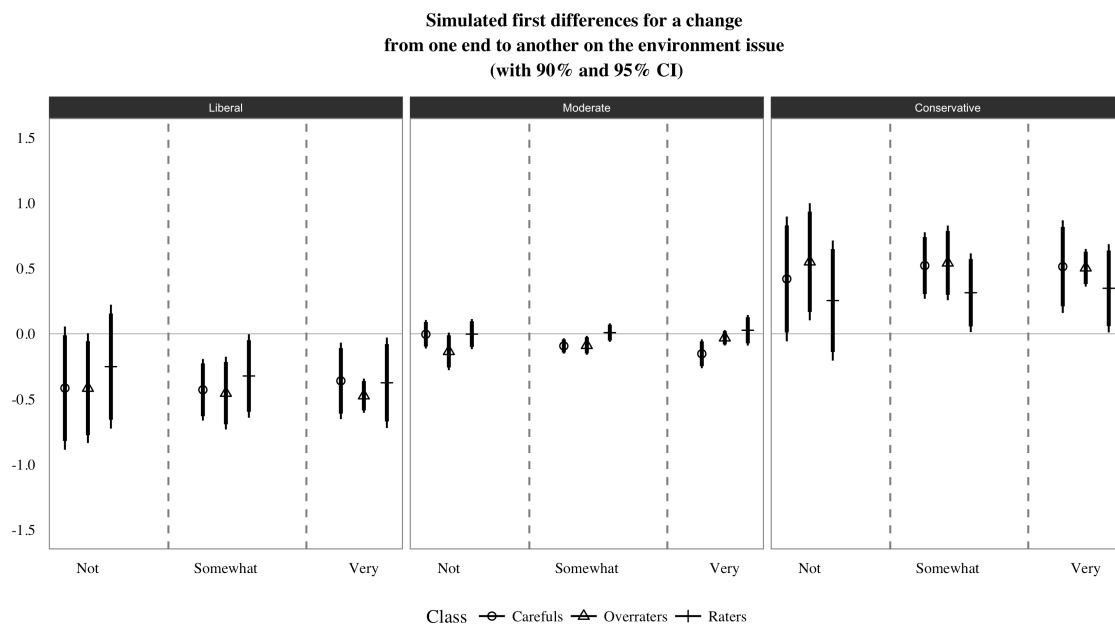


Figure 3.8: Environment

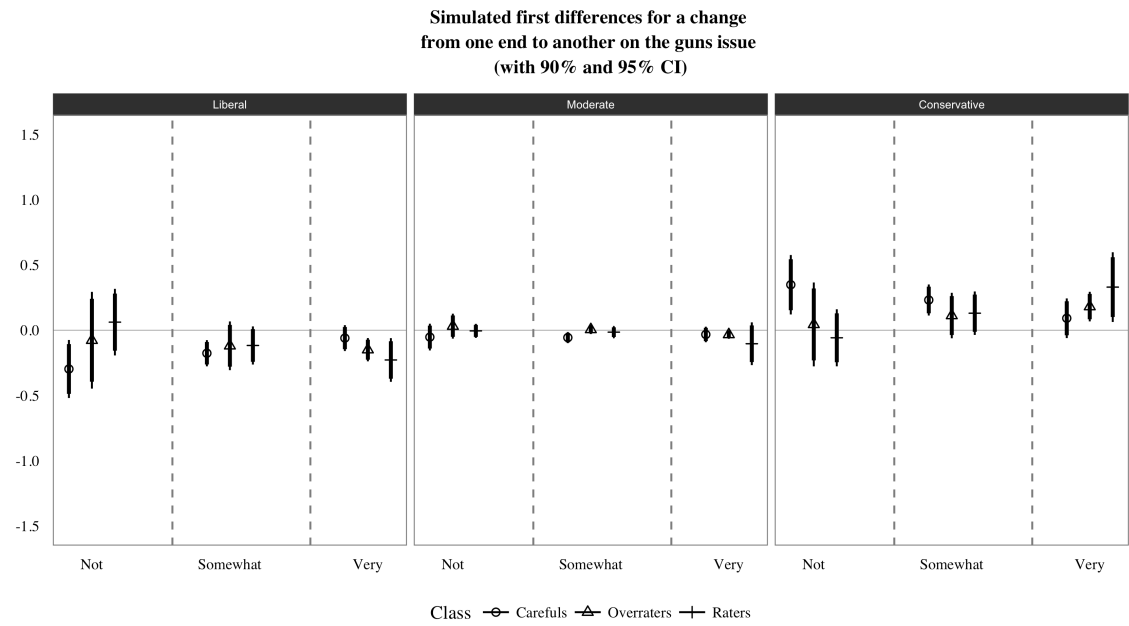


Figure 3.9: Guns

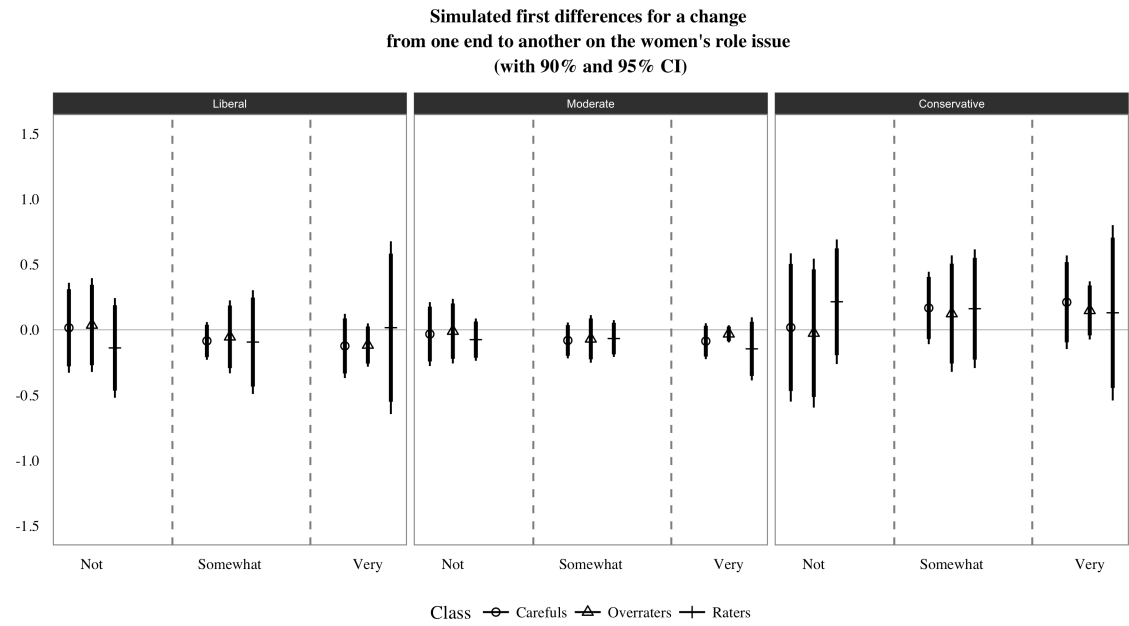


Figure 3.10: Women's role

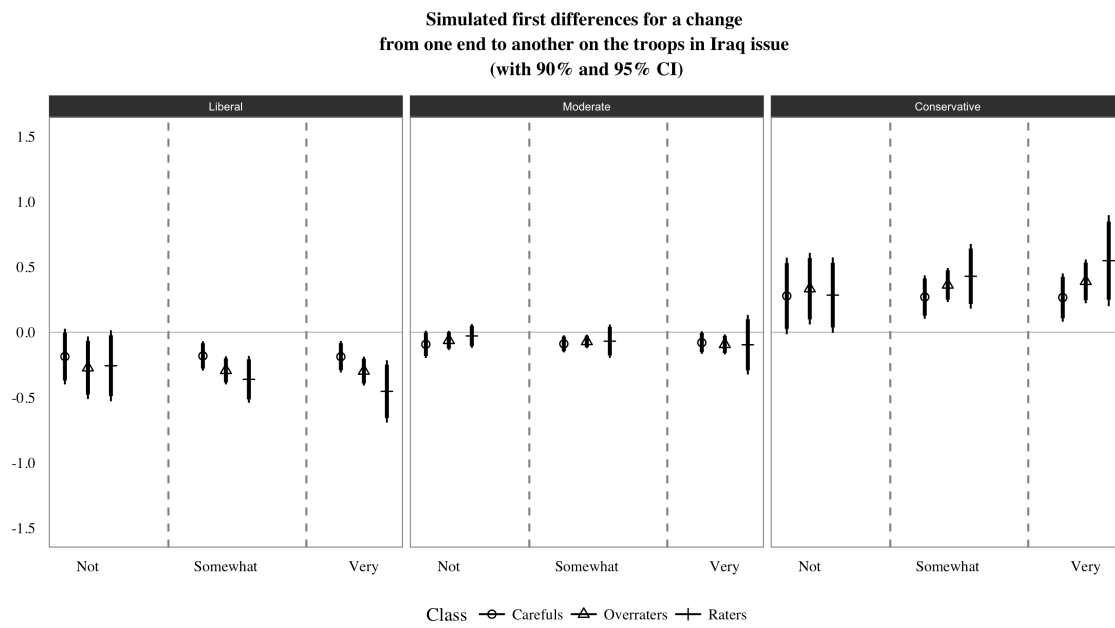


Figure 3.11: Troops in Iraq

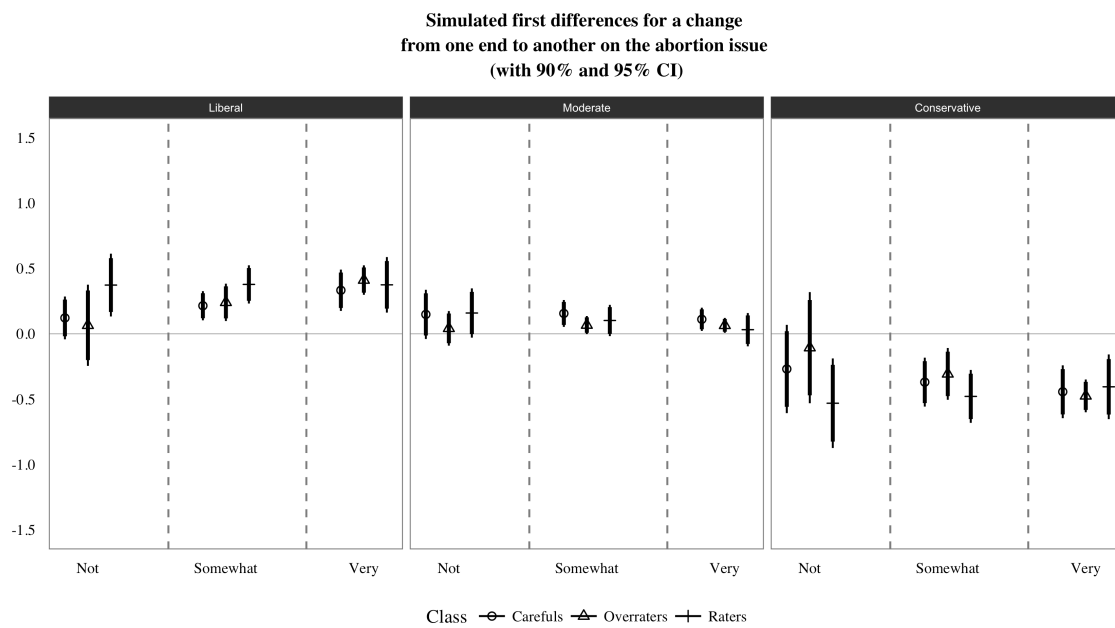


Figure 3.12: Abortion

However, there is a clear exception: the *raters*, marked with a cross on Figure 3.3.

For this class the issue position on the governmental spending will matter a lot even if it is not an important issue, as the confidence bands for the cross-marked class do not include 0 for the liberal and the conservative category. Furthermore, these effects are significantly different from the effects found for the other two categories. Generally, this issue matters most for the ideological position of those who do not commit to a specific importance rating pattern.

I find no differences for the defense spending issue, but the medical insurance issue displays some interesting discrepancies when the issue is only somewhat important for the individual. Accordingly, for the *overraters* a radical change in issue position has no effect if medical insurance is only somewhat important; whereas both for the *raters* and *carefuls* it has a similar effect on the liberal-conservative positioning.

For the jobs issue the only differences arise again for the *raters*, but in this case the issue will not matter even if it is very important. However, as the *raters* are the smallest group the wider confidence intervals could be also due to sample size issues. More importantly, if the issue is not important, this is the sole class for which the issue will still matter. The affirmative action issue presents very few differences, but in general we can see that the *overraters* are the ones for which this issue matters always, no matter how important it is.

The model reveals no differences for the environmental issue, and for the gun ownership issue I find that except for the *carefuls*, this issue only matters if it is very important. Somewhat surprisingly, for the *carefuls* a change in the gun ownership issue has an effect on the liberal-conservative self-positioning only if it is not important or somewhat important. Turning to the question about women's role I find no differences across classes, and for the troops in Iraq issue it seems that no matter how important this issue is, it will have an effect on the ideological self-placement. However, this effect is not necessarily

present for the *raters* when the issue is not important.

Finally, the issue of abortion needs to be considered. Here, the results are very intriguing. Again, we see that if abortion is considered at least somewhat important, it will have a substantive effect on the ideological self-placement. However, for the *raters* it will have an impact also if this issue is not regarded as personally important. We see here the same pattern as for the government spending and jobs issue. I reviewed here the results for multiple issues, but what is the overall picture after this set of analyses? There are several implications hidden along the model results and I will discuss them in detail in the next section.

3.9 Discussion

First, there is across issue variation in how much importance increases the relevance of a given issue. This raises a very basic problem with the incorporation of the importance effects into spatial models. Set up generally, the assumption of these models is that the importance effect is equal across all issues. For example, if the importance increases by one point for an economic issues, we expect that this issue will matter β times more for the preferences; however, if a moral issue's importance increases by one point we will also expect that the impact of this issue will matter β times more. However, we see here that this simple weighting is too simple and misses important heterogeneity. Issue position on the women's role issue will have no major effect on the ideological self-positioning, no matter if it is considered unimportant or very important. Defense spending will matter only if it is very important, but positions on the jobs issue will already have an impact if it is considered at least somewhat important.¹³

Without considering these issue level differences and taking a general approach, we

¹³The other extreme is the affirmative action issue which will have an effect for all three importance levels — except for one specific class, *raters*.

would weight up the women's role issue for those who consider it important. However, it will not help us better understand or predict preferences or ideological self-placement. Continuing in the general framework, we would give a slightly higher weight to the position on defense spending if the individual considers it somewhat important. Again, this will not help in predicting accurately preferences. On one hand, this suggests a non-linear relationship, but more importantly it suggests that we should take into consideration the differences across issues. Without acknowledging these differences one would erroneously conclude that importance does not help predicting better the individual preferences.

Turning now our attention to the separate classes, we do find some marked differences here as well, but the overall pattern is mixed. For defense spending, environment, or women's role issues I find no major differences across classes. However, for governmental spending, jobs, medical insurance, and abortion issues the class of *raters* appears to be very different from the other classes. Overall, for *raters* these issues are more strongly related to the ideological self-placement **even if the issue is not important**. Therefore, concluding that if the issue is not important should not matter much for broader political preferences is incorrect for this class.

Let us assume that we do not account for the importance response profiles. For everybody who marks the government spending issue as not important we weight down the impact of this issue on preferences. Again, we do this because it should not matter a lot, as it is not important. However, for roughly 20% of the sample this is not true: the model with importance weights will have a worse explanatory power for this subsample, biasing down the overall explanatory power of the model. On average, using importance as a source of information about how much one issue would matter for preferences will be found as less informative, because the heterogeneity in the sample. Given these discrepancies between groups that have different response patterns on all importance questions

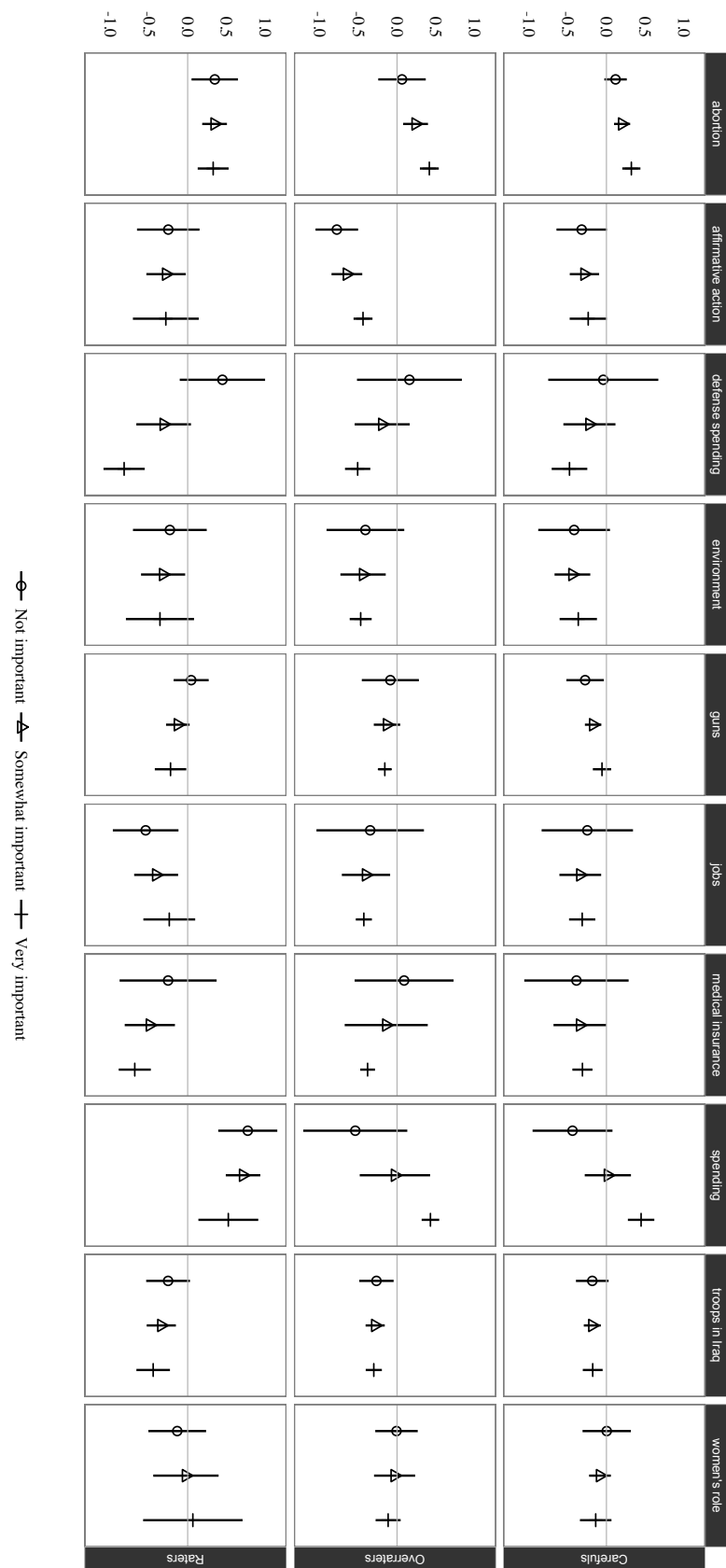


Figure 3.13: Salience effect across issues and classes

it is not surprising that some conclude that knowing how important an issue is does not aid our understanding of issue voting (Niemi and Bartels, 1985).

Looking back at the covariates of the class membership, we should recall that the probability of being in the *rater* class was negatively related to the level of political information. The differences were substantial: a probability of 0.6 for those being the least informed, and 0.2 for those who were the most informed. This relationship presents a possible interpretation: personal importance assigned for an issue is less informative for those who are less informed politically. This interpretation is intuitive because we might expect that those who are politically less informed have more problems in relating to the specific issues or understanding them.¹⁴

This paper set out the goal to find whether there are systematic response patterns in importance scores. One concern was that those who rate everything important are different from other individuals, and the role of issue specific importance will be different for them. However, the empirical findings suggest that these are not the group we should be most concerned of, because the expectations outlined were mostly confirmed. For this class, the issue should be important (or at least somewhat important in some cases) for the issue to be strongly related to ideology. There are minor differences in the strength of the relationship between somewhat important and very important ratings, overall pointing again into the direction that there is a non-linear salience effect, but also suggesting that there is a stronger salience effect.¹⁵

The overall results are displayed in Figure 3.13. Without recoding each and every issue to follow a liberal-conservative direction, we would expect steadily increasing or decreas-

¹⁴I tested the effect of education in a separate model but there was no significant relationship between the completed level of education and the probability of being a *rater*.

¹⁵Nevertheless, there is one striking exception: the affirmative action issue. In this case, if the issue is not important it has a stronger relationship with ideology than when it is more important. Two tentative explanations arise. On one hand, I did not control in the issue - ideology models for race, but class membership was related to race, which is an important variable for this issue. On the other hand, this issue involves high levels of social desirability, tainting the measurement of issue position — being extensively against affirmative action is undesirable to report.

ing first differences from left to right, following increasing importance. In this figure I report the first differences for the liberal self-placement, because the conservative would just simply be roughly the opposite of this pattern¹⁶. We can see, again, that the salience effect is not particularly strong and if uncertainty is incorporated, many differences are statistically insignificant. Still, the between-issue and between-classes differences are the more striking. Generally, the salience effect is present and stronger for the *overraters*. But again, the spending issue elicits a very interesting pattern. I find the salience effect associated with increased importance for the *carefuls* and the *overraters*, but not for the *raters*. However, the change in the liberal-conservative self-placement associated with a major change on the spending issues is the most substantive for this subgroup. All these findings point to major issue and individual level differences in the salience effect. Unless these are considered and modeled accordingly, predictions of spatial models will suffer in accuracy rendering the tests of issue voting theories a biased endeavor.

3.10 Conclusion

Do personally important issues matter more for broader political attitudes and behavior? This paper set out to answer this question with a focus on disentangling whether this (or any) salience effect is uniform across individuals. The main motivation to do this was to closely investigate a feature of issue voting theories and how salience can help or harm how we link issue positions to other political attitudes. More specifically, I focused on the relationship between issue positions and ideological self-placement.

Before the analysis of the salience effect, I argued that we should incorporate more individual level heterogeneity in our models of issue voting. Salient issue might matter more for political decisions, but not for everybody. Why? Because multiple issues are asked in a survey and people take varying decision in how to rate these issues in a com-

¹⁶Positive first differences for negative ones here, and negative first difference for the positives here.

parative or complementary matter. The theoretical setup focused on disquietude — for some people the threshold of considering something relevant is lower in a dispositional sense — but also on the issue inclusion effect rooted in the goals of the researchers who design a particular political survey. Using ten issues and importance ratings from the 2008 American National Election Studies I first employed latent class analysis and found that over 40% of the sample mostly rates everything important. These are individuals who are somewhat knowledgeable, but also more disquieted.

Turning to the salience effect I found interesting patterns. First off, there is major across-issue variation. Even for the same individual, the salience effect is very different for most of the issues. Whereas for some issues salience means a stronger relationship between that particular issue and ideology, for other issues this does not hold. Hence, using salience as simple weights might not be the most rigorous approach to account for the role of importance because of the non-constant impact across issues. Not only do issues have different levels of reported salience, but even with the same level of salience the magnitude of the relationships with other political attitudes will vary.

Furthermore, I found major differences in how strong is the salience effect for groups that have very different overall issue salience allocation patterns. As we saw, for the *raters* issues can have a strong relationship with ideology even if these are not important. Hence, the salience is less informative and we would strongly bias down the impact of salience on spatial models with no account for this heterogeneity (roughly 20% of the sample). Also, in general the salience effects are relatively weak, and they follow the theoretically expected pattern only in the more informed subsample.

As for any study, there are limitations associated with the approach and analysis presented in this paper as well. The ideal research design would have questions about issues that are completely irrelevant for political decisions. Using those would give us more leverage to pick up on importance allocation mechanisms and various biases. However,

given the limited space in political surveys and the focus of researchers on relevant issues this data is very hard to come across. Furthermore, there can be a general bias in salience reports generated by the survey situation: just by asking people about a particular issue the respondent infers the importance. Nevertheless, the present paper contributes to the understanding of nuances of the salience effect. On one hand, it offers a possible explanation to divergent findings in the previous empirical research on the salience effect. On the other hand, it opens up new research avenues that should be incorporated in both substantive issue voting research and the survey tools that we use in order to gather data on personal importance of politics and issues.

4 | Importance and Issue Position Extremity: Different Relationships for Easy and Hard Issues

In this paper I analyze the varying role of personal importance on political attitude extremization. The hypothesis put forward states that the relationship between importance and extremity depends on how demanding is the issue under consideration. This is framed from the perspective of easy and hard issues, because the link between importance and extremity considers more attitude relevant information gathering and thought. Using the 2008 American National Election Study, I find that positions on easy issues are more extreme even if these issues are not at all important for the individuals. Conversely, a stronger extremization process can be identified for hard issues, but only after these issues are considered at least somewhat important. These results add to our understanding of micro level dynamics of opinion polarization by stipulating important differences between types of political issues.

4.1 Introduction

Opinion polarization is important for the study of political preferences and public opinion formation, due to the role of polarization for social integration. Identifying large amounts of clear and extreme stances on both sides of a given issue reflects higher public opinion polarization. Moderate or middle-of-the-road policy options looking for consensus

I am grateful for comments from Julian Aichholzer, Martin Ejnar Hansen, Sylvia Kritzinger, Juraj Medzihorsky, Sebastian Popa, David Redlawsk, Markus Wagner, and Paul Weith. All errors remain solely mine. Replication materials are available upon request from the author.

are not desired or rewarded by the electorate. Assuming the split of extreme positions¹ along ideological lines persists across all policy preferences — implying issue constraint on the individual level (Converse, 1964) — we observe polarization that divides the public (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008).

Previous work suggests that polarization of the general American public does not happen uniformly for each and every political issue (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). Empirical findings point out that the general public is clearly divided only on a few issues — abortion, gay rights, or war on terrorism — but on a vast majority of issues the public became less polarized throughout the last decades (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). Fluctuations in public opinion polarization can be partly due to how much attention the issue gets in a given campaign and how it is handled by the candidates, elite opinion polarization influencing the public opinion polarization (Layman et al., 2006). Indeed, polarization in Congress grew substantively during the last couple of decades (for extensive review see McCarty et al., 2006). When looking at partisans, the trend in polarization is different from what we have seen for the general public. Partisan polarization or sorting in the public — the difference in ideological positions between Republican and Democrat identifiers — increased during the last decades, although with debatable speed (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Levendusky, 2009). However, except for a few issues previously mentioned, policy preferences expressed by the general public moved towards the more consensus friendly center area of the political spectrum (Evans, 2003).

In this paper I argue that understanding the individual level sources of political attitude extremitization can help in disentangling the puzzle of why on given issues the public is more polarized than on others. The argument put forward in this paper considers the level of personal importance of the issue as one of the key determinants of

¹Throughout this paper I will use the terminology from social psychology — extremity. Given the issue questions in the political survey, these extreme opinions are not necessarily radical or far-right/far-left positions, but they are a categorical stances supporting one end of the opinion spectrum.

extreme issue position. The individual level theoretical framework relies extensively on social psychological research on attitude strength dimensions and information seeking (for an overview, see Krosnick et al. (1993); Eaton et al. (2008)). Personally important attitudes are associated with the expression of more extreme attitudes (Liu and Latané, 1998; Tesser, 1978). For the present paper, an extreme attitude means that the individual will **strongly agree** or **strongly disagree** with a presented policy or issue statement. Alternatively, when individuals are asked *"Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help blacks because they should help themselves. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6."*, they will prefer one end of the spectrum (1 or 7).

When the individual realizes the importance of an issue, she will think more about that issue, discuss it more often, and gather more issue relevant information. For strong attitudes, the process of issue relevant information gathering involves selective exposure (Lavine et al., 2000; Lodge and Taber, 2005): individuals tend to limit the cognitive dissonance and seek information re-affirming their prior beliefs (Festinger, 1964). Also, selective cognitive processing will alter how one integrates negative or positive information about the attitude object (Pomerantz et al., 1995). This motivated reasoning has a powerful influence on the individual political decisions (Redlawsk, 2002), but also on aggregate electoral phenomena (Lebo and Cassino, 2007). Overall, possession of extensive knowledge about an issue could lead to greater thought-induced attitude polarization. But, as argued here, the necessary amount of issue relevant information (Gilens, 2001) to form a well-defined and extreme political opinion is not only a function of individual characteristics.

Throughout this paper I hypothesize that the relationship between importance and

extremity depends on the type of issue under consideration. For this, I use Carmines and Stimson (1980) categorization of easy and hard issues. According to this classification, for the easy issues that are more symbolic than technical, dealing with policy ends rather than means (Carmines and Stimson, 1980, 80) even unsophisticated voters can link their policy or issue preferences to a preferred candidate. Rational candidate choice based on issue preferences for hard political issues requires higher level of political sophistication from the voters (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). However, this is grounded in properties of the issue. Hence, I expect that these properties also have an influence on how hard or easy is for an individual to take an issue position. Considering the heightened information seeking for personally important issues we can link the individual and the macro level of issues. Hence, extreme positions appear only if they are of personal importance in the case of hard issues, because importance motivates the necessary additional information seeking and thought. On the other hand, extreme opinions on easy issues can arise even if that issue is personally unimportant. In this sense, on the aggregate level, change in personal importance can be responsible for increased public opinion polarization, but only for some issues. This conditional effect is responsible for the variation we identify in the frequency of extreme political opinions, and thus for some parts of the mixed levels of public opinion polarization. The varying interplay of importance and extremity helps better grasping why some issues truly divide a contemporary society, while others still harbor the potential of consensus and compromise. The empirical analysis relies on the American National Election Studies (ANES from now on), focusing on the 2008 Presidential elections. All political attitude questions that have associated personal importance questions are pooled together, and the issue domain effect is modeled simultaneously.

Overall, this paper's contribution is twofold. On the individual level, this paper helps in better understanding the conditional effect of importance on extremity. To this point, researchers pointed out the across-issue variation in the association between importance

and extremity (Raden, 1985, see), but no systematic account of this variation was offered. The present paper aims to fill in this gap. On the macro level, the present research also advances our understanding of why some issues create more divisions than others. Given their content and nature, some types of issues nurture polarization and division, whereas some have this effect only if that issue is personally important for individuals. Analyzing these differences benefits the study of political competition by enhancing our view on how — and why — the public chooses to react to social and political issues.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section introduces considerations related to political attitude polarization, followed by a detailed section on importance and extremity as attitude strength dimensions. Next, I develop the hypotheses for easy and hard issues; I describe the data, and the modeling approach. The last two sections present the results and the implications for the broader theoretical perspective.

4.2 Public opinion polarization

Opinion polarization can be regarded both as a state and process, and in the present paper, I draw on the characteristics of opinion polarization as a state (DiMaggio et al., 1996).² DiMaggio et al. (1996) offer a comprehensive definition of public opinion polarization, focusing on four dimensions of it: dispersion, bimodality, constraint, and consolidation. From these four the first two are of direct interest for the present research.³

Opinion polarization manifests itself as dispersion of opinions on the whole opinion spectrum, mostly clustered into two separate blocks on different sides of the issue. One

² “[p]olarization as a state refers to the extent to which opinions on an issue are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum. Polarization as a process refers to the increase in such opposition over time.” (DiMaggio et al., 1996, 693).

³ The last two dimensions of attitude or opinion polarization — constraint and consolidation — do not reflect within issue characteristics as variance or other distributional properties. Constraint refers to consistency of positions (on the same side of the opinion spectrum) across issues, and if these are extreme they line up into overarching ideological polarization (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Converse, 1964; Snow and Benford, 1992). Consolidation measures the association between opinion and structural categories, such as age, gender, occupation, etc (DiMaggio et al., 1996, 698).

of the possible outcomes of opinion polarization is social conflict, but for this to happen it is also important whether there is a “bridge” in the middle between the two groups clustered on different sides of the issue (DiMaggio et al., 1996). If there is no such sizable group in the middle of the policy or opinion spectrum, the distribution of the opinions is bimodal, and the potential for social conflict is much higher (DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). It has been argued that American public opinion became more polarized — social and political divisions becoming well-articulated — ultimately discouraging consensus and championing adversarial politics (Hunter, 1994; Wyszomirski, 1995). This observation is only partially supported by empirical research (Fiorina et al., 2005).

First and foremost, one must stress the conceptual distinction between elite opinion polarization and public opinion polarization. There is scholarly agreement about increasing elite polarization throughout time⁴ (Fiorina et al., 2005; McCarty et al., 2006) and also about increasing issue alignment⁵ among the political elite (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007). Elite polarization spills over only for those who are partisan identifiers and are aware of the party polarization (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Hetherington, 2001; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Layman et al., 2006; Zaller, 1992).

Secondly, increasing public opinion polarization throughout time happens for a subset of issues: abortion, sexuality, and recently the war in Iraq (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). Baldassarri and Bearman (2007) tag these issues as “takeoff issues”, and posit that these are very rare, politically polarized, and usually feature single-issue discussions. The remaining social and political issues face either relatively stable levels of public opinion polarization, or even depolarization (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003).

Third, as mentioned before, evidence suggests that the general public opinion polar-

⁴For a set of positive effects of elite polarization on consistency of voter preferences (see Levendusky, 2010).

⁵Issue alignment is used interchangeable with constraint (Converse, 1964), reflecting the consistency of opinions across political issues.

ization did not increase. Only partisan polarization increased⁶, and the extent of this increase is still debated (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Levendusky, 2009). Opposed to general public opinion polarization, Republicans and Democrats become increasingly divided on issue opinions, and this distancing happens along the liberal-conservative ideological continuum (Fiorina et al., 2005; Layman and Carsey, 2002; McCarty et al., 2006).

When analyzing public opinion polarization, the frequency of extreme positions becomes a pivotal element. Extreme issue position is understood as an issue stance that is on either end of the opinion continuum. Again, this can be strongly agreeing or disagreeing with a policy statement, or can be one of the two most extreme policy ends stipulated in the survey. From these defining features of polarization, we can observe the role of extreme opinions in creating social and political divisions. On bipolar positional issues, the more extreme opinions we find the more probable is that we observe a polarized public opinion⁷ As (Hetherington, 2009, 429) argues, attitude polarization draws on the intensity of deeply held attitudes. Extreme positions reflect a clear preference, but they also suggest that individuals are not willing to accept or follow the alternative or the consensual policy options.

From the macro perspective on public opinion polarization we see that political knowledge and party identification play a distinctive role in political opinion formation and polarization. The next section discusses the individual level determinants of attitude extremity, focusing on the role of personal importance of a given issue.

⁶The increase of partisan polarization also varies across issues (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003).

⁷Yet again, to induce social conflict this pattern should be observed across all issues, with issue alignment along some ideological or partisan continuum (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Also, high frequency of extremity does not induce polarization in the case of valence issues (Stokes, 1963). In this case, overwhelmingly extreme positions are associated with one end of the spectrum, as there are no sides on the issue. For this reason, the present paper considers only positional issues that are presented to have alternative solutions, individuals using the full opinion spectrum.

4.3 Individual level: importance and extremity

The main argument in this paper is that the relationship between political issue importance and the extremity of the issue position taken on a particular issue is not uniform across issue. How much importance is linked to the issue position is conditional on issue specific characteristics. Before developing these hypotheses, I will introduce the two key concepts: importance and extremity. I discuss here previous research on linking these two aspects together, and how this process might depend on the issue characteristics. At this stage, we cannot proceed without having clear notions about what importance is and what it can imply for issue positions.

One individual can have opinions about a vast set of issues, but these opinions do not necessarily weigh the same in a final political judgment or choice. The ones that matter most are the strong attitudes (Eaton et al., 2008; Krosnick et al., 1993; Miller and Peterson, 2004). This characteristic of strong attitudes is usually dubbed as impactfulness (Petty and Krosnick, 1995), and refers to an effect on information processing and judgment on one hand, but also behavior on the other hand⁸. When focusing on attitude strength, social psychologists identified ten underlying dimensions; two of these are attitude importance and extremity (Boninger et al., 1995; Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985).

Importance⁹ is understood as "the extent to which an individual cares deeply about and is personally invested in an attitude and is ordinarily operationalized by self-reports of importance, concern, or caring about the attitude object" (Krosnick et al., 1993, 1132). Importance here solely refers to the associated importance for the person, not how im-

⁸Also, personal and behavioral experience with the issue in question amplifies the attitude's effect on behavior (Fazio and Zanna, 1981).

⁹Importance is sometimes referred to as salience in political science. In social psychology salience refers to a different dimension of attitude strength (Miller and Peterson, 2004; Petty and Krosnick, 1995). In this paper I use the term importance.

portant is – or it is believed to be – the issue for the country.¹⁰ Attitudes are regarded as important for various reasons (for extensive analysis see Boninger et al., 1995), but the effects of importance will be of special interest for the present research.

Extremity is defined as “the extent to which an individual’s attitude deviates from the midpoint of favorable-unfavorable dimension and it is typically operationalized by folding over attitude self-report rating scales” (Krosnick et al., 1993, 1132). If one is not ambivalent about an attitude object — in this case a political issue or policy — more attitude-relevant information and knowledge about various features of the political issue should induce more extremity¹¹ (Federico, 2004; Lavine et al., 2000; Liu and Latané, 1998). Furthermore, Binder et al. (2009) show that, on average, political discussions also have a direct and positive impact on attitude extremity and attitude polarization.

Similarly, Baldassarri and Bearman (2007) find that political discussions, independent of the issue itself, always induce more segregated opinions. The nature of issues handled in political surveys are fairly general, and it is thus expected that more informed and interested citizens will have more issue specific knowledge also, and they can integrate it more in their general political views and values (Federico, 2004). These two characteristics of extremity are also in line with the assertion that political elites – who supposedly possess more information and are also more interested – tend to be more polarized than the public, on average (Fiorina et al., 2005; McCarty et al., 2006). However, this link between general and issue specific political information is not that straightforward (Gilens, 2001). One important implication of attitude importance is that it will trigger attitude specific information seeking and thought, not a general process that would increase the overall political sophistication, as measured in surveys. This leads to the consideration

¹⁰For differences between personal importance and importance for the country please refer back to the first paper of this thesis.

¹¹It has to be noted that more attitude-relevant information does not always translate directly into extremization, individual traits like need to evaluate (Jarvis and Petty, 1996) manifesting a moderation effect (Federico, 2004). Furthermore, for a different perspective in cognitive psychology about “contemplation” Kuhn and Lao (see 1998).

of attitude extremitization as an issue specific process.

Discussing the individual level process of extremitization of an attitude, the role of personal importance was frequently offered as an explanation (Liu and Latané, 1998; Tesser, 1978). One possible pathway that links importance to extremity can be summarized as follows: individuals identify personal relevance; consider the attitude important, further thought and discussion process is triggered, yielding a well-defined and more extreme attitude (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). Important attitudes generate more cognitive processes and thought about the issue, motivate people to gather more issue relevant information, and to engage in discussions about the given issue. All these processes host the extremitization of attitude or opinion (Tesser and Conlee, 1975; Tesser, 1978). Further studies find that the process of issue relevant information gathering involves selective exposure (Lavine et al., 2000; Lodge and Taber, 2005), because individuals generally tend to limit the cognitive dissonance and seek information re-affirming their prior beliefs (Festinger, 1964).

Other results are more nuanced. One consequence of high importance is heightened attitude relevant information seeking. Pomerantz et al. (1995) looked at embeddedness, a concept composed by importance and ego-involvement, and found that it is associated with search for new attitude relevant information. Although Embeddedness was found to increase selective memory retrieval (less retrieval of attitude incongruent information), but it did not induce more selective cognitive elaboration (Pomerantz et al., 1995). Although this points into a more open-minded and less biased information seeking in case of important attitudes, Pomerantz et al. (1995) find that selective cognitive processing will alter how one integrates negative or positive information about the attitude, being less exposed to persuasion.

Even with slightly diverging empirical results, the underlying theoretical link between importance and extremity or attitude polarization (as a process), positions impor-

tance prior in the causal path (see for example Lavine et al., 2000). However, the reviews offered by Raden (1985) and Petty and Krosnick (1995) highlight that the correlation between extremity and importance varies significantly across issues. Why this might be the case will be discussed in the next section.

4.4 The role of issues

The argument put forward here is simple. The different levels of polarization or frequency of extreme opinions across issues are due to how much extremitization happens as issues gain personal importance. Changes in public opinion polarization on an issue are not determined merely by changes in importance, but they also depend on the power of extremitization that is conditional on the content of the issue. Ultimately, varying extremitization of important attitudes can be explained by interaction between the cognitive processes and information gathering about important issues and the type of issue.

At a specific time point or under the circumstances of a given electoral campaign, some issues are more disputed than others. They receive more attention and coverage, candidates using these issues to differentiate themselves from other running candidates on these issues. This communication and campaign process can influence the variance of polarization on issues across elections, and it can also change personal importance associated with that issue. As seen, the general expectation is that if an issue is personally important it will also trigger more extreme opinion formation. Essentially, that issue will appear to be more dividing and higher public opinion polarization will be identified.

There is one major caveat of this simple hypothesis. First, from the social psychological perspective, there is across-issue variation in the magnitude of association between importance and extremity. Thus, we cannot assume a uniform effect of importance on extremity across issues (Raden, 1985). This suggests that some issues may well be divisive even if they are less important, but also, some issues will be less divisive even if they

are highly important for the individuals. Even if campaigns focus on making some issues more important, this does not necessarily mean that individuals will have clearer and more extreme opinions on these issues. Moreover, we have to further look into whether personal importance is uniformly driving the position taking and distancing from the neutral point¹². One possible way to systematically analyze this puzzle is to assess the relationship between importance and extremity for different issue types.

As seen previously, additional thought, information gathering, or discussion about a particular issue generates extremitization. Accepting this framework means that the issue categorization should be guided by principles that differentiate between issues in terms of necessary information to understand them. Accordingly, throughout the paper I discuss two issue types following up on the work of Carmines and Stimson (1980): easy and hard issues. In its original formulation, this issue categorization was used to better understand issue voting, or the necessary conditions of issue voting. Even if uninformed, voters can link candidates to their issue preferences on easy issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). However, political sophistication is necessary to map the same linkages in the case of hard issues. In the present paper, I do not focus on finding the matching candidate, but take one step back in the attitude formation.

The differences between these two issue types are summarized as follows: “1. The easy issues are symbolic, rather than technical. 2. It would more likely deal with policy ends than means. 3. It would be an issue long on the political agenda.” (Carmines and Stimson, 1980, 80). These properties of the issue types have an effect on how well defined and ultimately how extreme is an individual’s position as well. On average, an uninterested and uninformed voter will start out with a neutral or moderate position on a given issue. However, this voter is already exposed to easy issues, because they have been on the political agenda. Furthermore, there is no need for too much information in order

¹²Issue questions usually contain a neutral point. This is the middle of the issue continuum. It implies that the individual does not lean on any side of the issue. This can suggest that the individual either has no opinion or positions herself in a true middle position.

to understand the positions on these easy issues, because they are usually simple (concerned about policy ends) and symbolic. This would suggest that having a non-neutral attitude on easy issues is cognitively and informationally less demanding. On the contrary, for a non-neutral attitude on hard issues, issue relevant information and cognitive thought is needed. This is because they are more technical, discuss implementation alternatives, and sometimes they are relatively novel (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). Here, we have to stress that issue relevant information drives the extremization process, not (only) general political sophistication.¹³.

Position taking on symbolic, goal oriented and relatively familiar issues should be easier. As these positions get farther away from the neutral point, we see more extremization of the opinion. Thus, even with low amount of attitude relevant information individuals are expected to form non-neutral opinions easier. In terms of expectations, I hypothesize that extremity should be higher for easy issues compared to hard issues. In essence, this should hold for all the different personal importance levels. More specifically, as argued in the social psychological literature, importance is considered as a trigger of more cognitive thought and information seeking about that given issue (Pomerantz et al., 1995; Tesser, 1978). However, even if this process is not started – an issue is considered to be not at all important for example – I expect that extremity will still be higher for easy issues compared to hard issues. In case of hard issues, in order to reach a similar distance from the neutral positions – extremity, by its definition – is expected to happen only if there is information gathering and thought process about that given issue. Given selective exposure and selective information processing related to motivated reasoning, I expect that hard issues will gain in extremity if and only if they do present themselves as individually important. The technical nature of these issues discussing competing means of policy implementation require information and thought in order for one to take a po-

¹³For differences in effects of general political knowledge and policy specific knowledge on political judgments see Gilens (see 2001).

sition. These expectations would manifest themselves in the following way: the slope of importance when predicting extremity in case of easy issues should be constantly over the importance slope for hard issues, but the slope in case of hard issues should be steeper.

The empirical analysis employs several individual level control variables. As previous research suggests, more educated and politically more aware individuals tend to see politics in a more polarized manner (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Thus, it is expected that political sophistication has a direct and positive influence on opinion extremity (Binder et al., 2009; Federico, 2004). Furthermore, as discussed above, those who are ideologically more extreme are expected to have more extreme attitudes towards issues. Even if there is no full issue constraint (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007), “constraint” in strength of attitudes might appear. People having well defined and clear ideological and partisan preferences are also expected to be more decisive on separate issue, exhibiting also higher need to evaluate the social and political issues (Jarvis and Petty, 1996). Based on previous research these variables can have an effect on the extremity of the issue positions expressed. In order to have a clearer consideration of the conditional importance effects, I control for these variables in the models employed below. The next section describes the data sources and the issues covered by the present analysis, followed by the modeling strategy.

4.5 Data and variables

The data analyzed in this paper comes from the 2008 American National Election Studies (ANES). The previously overviewed polarization literature focuses on American public opinion, and ANES provides positions and personal importance measures for a wide array of issues.

The dependent variable in the analysis is individual issue position extremity. This is calculated for each issue by using a folded scale. Issue questions in the ANES all range

from 1 to 7, where these two extremes reflect the two most opposing policy solutions that could be preferred by the individual. Some of the questions use a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agreeing with a political or policy statement to strongly disagreeing with it. Thus, using the folded scales, a neutral or undecided position will constitute the minimum of the scale (0), whereas the most extreme positions (1,7) will be the maximum (3). Two other positions — (2,6) and (3,5) — are coded in between marked by 1 and 2. Another subset of the issue questions stipulates two alternative and opposed views on the two ends of the scale (1,7), and asks the individual to position herself on that scale. This will not change the use of folded scales. Hence, the fold over scale ranges from 0 to 3, and disregards the "direction" of the attitude or opinion (for or against the policy option)¹⁴. One issue constitutes an exception from this rule. Attitudes about abortion were constantly measured using a different question format. When asking about opinions on abortion (in all recent waves of the ANES), respondents have only four options. One extreme position is that abortion should never be allowed and the other extreme is that it is always a fully free and personal decision. These were treated as the most extreme opinions (3), reflecting their "radical" nature. The two other options stipulating conditions¹⁵ in which it should be allowed were coded as 0.

The ANES contains political issues from multiple issue domains. One important set is composed by economic issues that cover government spending on services, government guaranteed jobs, protection of the environment vs. economic costs of it, emission standards, universal health care, insurance plans, drug prescription system for seniors. Additional issues are related to: aid to blacks, gun control, work permits for illegal immigrants, citizenship for illegal immigrants, abortion, equal rights for women, defense

¹⁴Given the nature of the quantity of interest and the relationship between the values, this variable is treated as a continuous dependent variable.

¹⁵The two conditions were: "The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger" and "The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established".

spending and troops in Iraq¹⁶. The issue and wording format combinations are treated separately¹⁷. For the purposes of the present analysis, these issues should be grouped according to the easy-hard issue typology of Carmines and Stimson (1980). Economic issues are generally considered as hard issues, because they are framed more in terms of competing means that differ sometimes on technical matters related to implementation. Other issues that can be categorized hard issues are the foreign policy issues: defense spending and troops in Iraq. Again, in the original typology the issue of Vietnam War was considered as the example of a hard issue. Additionally, both defense spending is an issue involving discussion about means, whereas troop numbers or deadlines in Iraq represent clear technical details of how the withdrawal of troops is envisaged. These issues do not focus on general claims about the role of the United States in world politics or conflicts and they also avoid posing clear dichotomies such as pro- or against intervention.

Moral issues, such as abortion, on the other hand are symbolic in nature. Also, as described previously, easy issues are almost omnipresent on the political agenda for a long time period. In this sense, the abortion issue fits the description perfectly, being highly politicized from early stages of political competition, with increasing party cleavage after 1984 (Carmines and Woods, 2002). As in the case of the racial desegregation issue — motivator of the initial theory by Carmines and Stimson (1980) — parties had clear (and opposing) stances on this issues after 1984, Democrats being more pro-choice, whereas Republicans taking a pro-life position (Adams, 1997). Furthermore, abortion followed a similar issue evolution model throughout time as racial segregation (Adams, 1997; Carmines and

¹⁶ One of the issues related to troops in Iraq is about how the number of troops should change compared to the status quo in the following 3 months, and the other issue is about setting an explicit deadline for the withdrawal of the troops. From here on, they are referred to as troops in Iraq.

¹⁷ Four issues were asked with two different response alternatives, ranging on the same scale. Preliminary tests were carried out to assess whether there is a wording effect that could influence levels of extremity. No such effect was found, thus they are treated as separate issues. Furthermore, the same issues with different wording are always in the same issue category. This approach lends additional power on the second level of the analysis, without introducing any systematic bias. Also, the models were ran with issues having two different wordings treated as one group, and the results were identical to the level of the second decimal of the coefficients and standard errors.

Stimson, 1986). The focus on racial desegregation as an archetypical easy issue also suggests that the aid to blacks issue should be categorized as an easy issue. Similarly, the equal rights for women issue, gun ownership and granting citizenship to immigrants are not technical and they concern clear policy ends, not details related to implementation.

The last issue under consideration is related to work permits for illegal immigrants. It can be seen as a civil rights issue because it extends or reduces rights of a minority group, rights that are essential to their goal of emigrating to the US. Also, both immigration questions discuss possibilities offered to illegal immigrants. However, legislation regarding the work permit for illegal immigrants has effects on economic issues as well¹⁸, whereas the citizenship issue triggers more cultural connotations. Moreover, the proposition also contains technical details, such as granting 3 years of working permit, but forcing illegal immigrants to leave the US afterwards. More importantly, although the immigration issue was on the public agenda for quite a while (Tichenor, 2002), the general public discourse focused on the fact that economic costs outweigh the benefits created. Finally, there are major across state variations in elite discourse (Monogan, 2009), but also variation in how political parties treat the immigration issue on the national level (Brader et al., 2007; Monogan, 2012). This suggests that this issue should be categorized as a hard issue.

The crucial individual level predictor of extremity is personal importance. Personal importance questions are asked right after the respondent's opinion about the issue and they explicitly specify that personal importance is investigated. These are 5-point scale items ranging from not at all important (0) to extremely important (4)¹⁹. The set of individual predictors of extremity include controls for gender (1 for female, 0 for men),

¹⁸For a discussion on the economic impact of illegal immigrants see Clark et al. (1994).

¹⁹After a uniform recoding. Except on wording experiment for the aid to blacks issue, all importance questions had the following answer categories: Not important at all, Not too important, Somewhat important, Very important, Extremely important. For that one single issue the following categories were used: Not important at all, Slightly important, Moderately important, Very important, Extremely important. For the general scope of the paper I treated these answer categories identical.

and race (1 for non-white, 0 for white). The set of individual predictors of extremity include controls for gender, age, and race. Alongside these socio-demographic controls, the strength of ideology, the strength of partisanship, and the level of political information were included. Because the dependent variable – extremity – disregards the “direction” of the opinion, both for ideology and for partisanship I employ the folded scale. The original versions are 7-point scales, ranging from very liberal to very conservative on one hand, and from strong democrat to strong republican on the other hand. Similar to extremity, after the fold-over, independent and not ideological individuals received the minimum scores, whereas the maximums were associated with the above mentioned categories. The previous findings suggesting more extremity and polarization for individuals who are politically more knowledgeable, made it necessary to include a political information score. The ANES contains a 5-point political information scale that is completed by the interviewer after the interview. The use of this measure is adequate, because it is highly correlated with other possible measures of political information (Bartels, 1996), constituting a reliable measure of political knowledge. The original coding was reversed so that low scores reflect low political knowledge.²⁰

Both extremity and importance are calculated for each issue asked from each individual. In this sense, the unit of analysis will be the item, which is nested in individuals and in issues. Each individual responded to ten issue and importance questions, and the number of respondents for each issue in part varies between 1043 and 1167. A given individual has extremity and importance scores on multiple issues, and each issue has multiple extremity and importance ratings. In order to accurately model this data structure, I employ a cross-classified specification described in the next section.²¹

²⁰In order to make the interpretation uniform, all continuous variables were linearly rescaled to range between 0 and 1, and thus the coefficients reflect the change associated in extremity when the predictor goes from minimum to maximum.

²¹Descriptive statistics and exact issue wording available from the author.

4.6 Statistical model

To empirically test the hypotheses from the previous section, I employ a cross-classified hierarchical model. As discussed, there are multiple extremity and importance scores for each individual. More formally, our sample is composed of N individuals who express issue positions and importance about K issues. Thus, each extremity and importance score will be indexed to reflect which individual rated which issue. In more general terms, $y_{i(j,k)}$ will be the extremity of individual j ($j = 1, \dots, N$) on issue k ($k = 1, \dots, K$), and $z_{(j,k)}$ is the same individual's (j) importance rating on the same issue (k). All other controls (C) representing attributes of individuals are represented by the $N \times C$ matrix denoted X_j . The only issue level predictor is the dichotomous variable of issue type (Easy = 1) denoted as w_k . The full model specification with cross-level interaction is presented in Equation 4.1 below:

$$\begin{aligned}
 y_i &= \alpha_{k[i]} + \theta_{(j,k)[i]} z_i + X_j \beta + \epsilon_i \\
 \alpha_{k[i]} &= \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01} w_k + \eta_{0k} \\
 \theta_{(j,k)[i]} &= \gamma_{10}^{(1)} + \gamma_{10}^{(2)} + \gamma_{11}^{(2)} w_k + \eta_{1j} + \eta_{1k}
 \end{aligned} \tag{4.1}$$

This model assumes that the error components – $\epsilon_i, \eta_j, \eta_k$ – for each level are normally distributed with $\mu = 0$ and $\sigma^2 = 1$. Issue specific average extremity, $\alpha_{k[i]}$, is modeled to assess our hypothesis about "baseline" extremity for the two issue-types. The slope of importance is allowed to vary across issues and additionally across individuals ($\theta_{(j,k)[i]}$) to also correct for possible individual heterogeneity in how importance ratings are given²². I specify two reduced versions of the model from Equation 4.1. In the first model importance varies randomly across issues. In the second model I add the issue level variable as predictor of the intercept, and finally, in the last specification I model the cross-level

²²In the case of the average extremity I use the individual specific controls.

interaction between importance and issue type. I use this sequence of models to assess comparative model fit. Roughly 10% of the variation in extremity is across-issue variation. With all missing values dropped, the total level one sample size is 12438, and items are nested in 20 issues.

4.7 Results

Table 4.1 displays the results of the analysis²³. The fit statistics indicate that the statistical model including issue type as predictor of extremity fits the data significantly better than the empty cross-classified model (Model 1). Overall, Model 3 is the best fitting specification. In this case, even if we estimate an additional parameter by modeling the slope of importance as a function of issue type, we have a significantly better fitting model (χ^2 difference test significant at $p < 0.01$ level).

In this cross-classified model, by adding issue type as a predictor of the average extremity ($\alpha_{k[i]}$) the standard deviation of random effects for the intercept decreases from 0.13 to 0.11. Thus, including this predictor explains some of the across-issue variation in average extremity scores. Furthermore, modeling the slope of importance ($\theta_{(j,k)[i]}$) as a function of issue type (Model 3) decreases the unexplained across-issue variation in the effect of importance by roughly 45% (decrease in the standard deviation of the random effect from 0.12 to 0.09). There is still unexplained across-issue variation both in the levels of average extremity and the slope of importance, however these significantly decrease if we account for the specific issue type. Hence, from a simple inspection of model fit and the variance of the random effects we see that including information about whether we are looking at easy or hard issues matters for modeling attitude extremity and its rela-

²³All variables were rescaled to 0-1, the coefficients reflecting the induced changes from the minimum to the maximum value of the explanatory variable. Model 1 was tested against a model in which the items were nested only in individuals. Incorporating random intercept and slope for importance across issues significantly enhanced the model fit (χ^2 difference 1665.2, difference in DF 3, $p < 0.001$). Models were estimated with maximum likelihood.

Table 4.1: Model results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Fixed effects			
Intercept	0.244* (0.003)	0.198* (0.035)	0.193* (0.036)
Importance	0.484* (0.029)	0.482* (0.028)	0.532* (0.031)
Discussion	0.030* (0.012)	0.030* (0.012)	0.030* (0.012)
Strength of ideology	0.045* (0.012)	0.048* (0.011)	0.048* (0.012)
Strength of partisanship	0.024* (0.012)	0.024* (0.012)	0.024* (0.012)
Political information	-0.011 (0.015)	-0.011 (0.015)	-0.011 (0.015)
Race (Non-white = 1)	0.014 (0.008)	0.014 (0.008)	-0.014 (0.008)
Gender (Female = 1)	0.006 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)	0.006 (0.007)
Easy issues	—	0.134* (0.055)	0.147* (0.056)
Importance × Easy issues	—	—	-0.138* (0.052)
Random effects SD			
Individual			
Importance	0.11	0.11	0.11
Issue			
Intercept	0.13	0.11	0.11
Importance	0.12	0.12	0.09
Residual SD	0.33	0.33	0.33
Log-likelihood	-4325.2	-4323.2	-4320.2
<i>AIC</i>	8678.5	8676.5	8672.3
<i>Level1</i>	12438	12438	12438
<i>K</i>	20	20	20
χ^2 difference	—	4.00	6.16
Difference in DF	—	1	1
<i>p</i> - value	—	0.04	0.01

Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .05$

tionship with attitude importance.

Looking at the individual level predictors, we do not find empirical evidence for growing extremitization with higher levels of political knowledge. Furthermore, as previously suggested by the public opinion polarization literature (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; DiMaggio et al., 1996), age has no influence on individual political opinion extremity. Ev-

everything else held constant, people who are more ideological tend to be also more extreme on their issue positions. This confirms the expectation about some sort of issue constraint (Converse, 1964; DiMaggio et al., 1996), suggesting that the ideological extremism goes hand in hand with extremism on separate political issues. Strength of partisanship also has a positive effect, and it is roughly half of the magnitude associated with ideological extremism. Though women tend to be a bit more extreme than men, and white Americans are found to have less extreme political opinions, compared to other racial groups, these variables do not reach statistical significance.

Turning our attention to personal importance, we see that it is indeed a very strong predictor of extremity. Generally, our models suggest that, compared to a personally unimportant issue, extremity rises from 0.25 to 0.73 — on a $[0, 1]$ scale — when the issue becomes extremely important (for uninformed, non-ideological, non-partisan young white men). Models 2 and 3 focus on the question whether we have different average extremity for unimportant issues when they are easy vs. hard, and ultimately, whether the strength of the extremitization process is uniform across issue types. I hypothesized that easy issues will be associated with more extremity — compared to hard issues — even if these are not at all important. According to this hypothesis, a positive coefficient for issue type (coded 1 for easy issues) is expected. Our results show empirical support for this hypothesis. Focusing on the final model specification, the average extremity on the cognitively more demanding hard issues is 0.19 for issues that are not important at all. Conversely, this average is significantly higher for easy issues: 0.34. This result suggests that individuals have a clearer issue stance or policy preference on easy issues, even if these are personally unimportant.

When it comes to harder economic issues, if these are personally unimportant, individuals will take more moderate or indecisive positions on that issue. As importance is associated with gathering more issue specific knowledge and triggering more thought

about that particular issue, we can see that for easy issues such as moral or civil rights issues, this is not a necessary condition of a more extreme opinion. However, we have to look at the cross-level interaction between issue type and importance to assess whether this difference in extremity can be linked to issue specific information seeking, cognition, or discussion. Figure 4.1 displays the slope of importance for easy and hard issues.

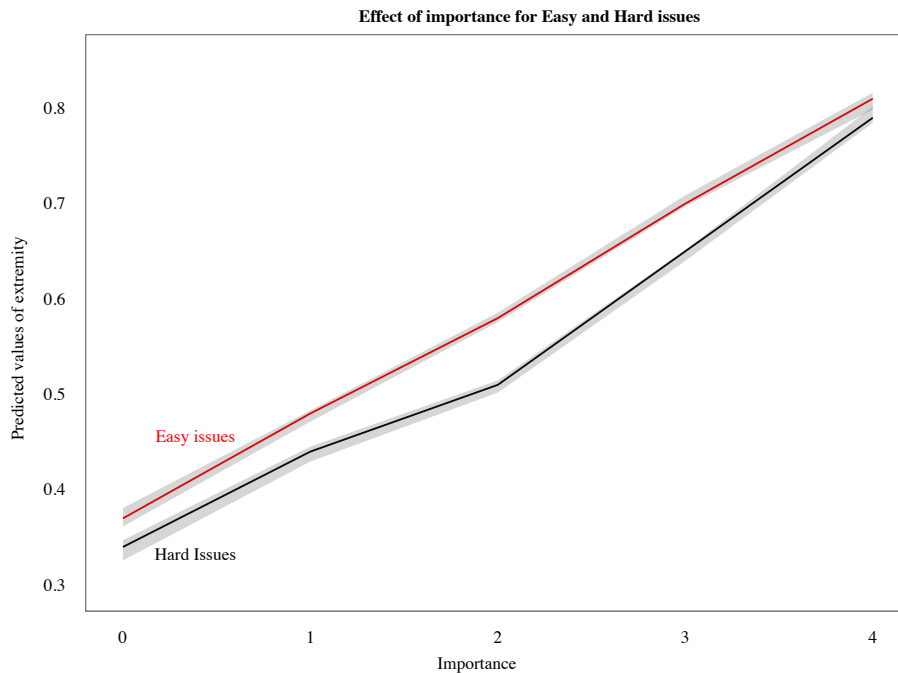


Figure 4.1: Effect of importance on extremity for the two issue types (with 95% confidence intervals).

As shown in Figure 4.1, if an issue is not at all important, there will be higher attitude extremity for easy issues. Easy issues will trigger more extreme positions throughout almost the whole importance scale. However, as an issue becomes extremely important, the significant difference between the slopes disappears. The predicted extremity will be high (around 0.75) for extremely important issues and more importantly this will be independent of the issue type. As we can see, one needs to consider a hard issue important, gather issue specific knowledge, and think of it more in order to have a more extreme

issue position.

On average, the extremitization process is stronger: if a hard issue is not important, individuals will be less decided on it, but as they gather more information and think more about these issues, they will eventually end up having a well defined and extreme position. Easy issues are associated with more extremity, but this is not strictly the product of the extremitization process linked to thought or information. Of course, as importance of an easy issue increases there is a linear increase in extremity as well. For hard issues the trajectory is different. Up until the moment that they are considered somewhat important, the extremitization process is comparable to that found in case of easy issues. From that point on, the slope of importance is steeper and this is why extremely important hard issues will be similarly extreme. This brings further evidence that hard issues will be associated with more extreme position only after a certain degree of personal importance. To reiterate, it was hypothesized that in order to have clearer, more decisive, and implicitly more extreme issue positions, there is need for more information and more thought processes when it comes to hard issues compared to easy issues. The multivariate analysis suggests different reasons or mechanisms that are at play when it comes to extreme attitude formation. The broader implications are discussed in the next section.

4.8 Limitations

Before discussing the overall conclusions of the analysis, I list here some limitations of the present analysis. In the cross-classified model I specified no link function and treated extremity as a continuous variable. For most issues, there are only four values extremity can take, and this might suggest that an ordered probit or logit specification would be better. However, this would also imply that more issues should be analyzed, as these models are more sensitive to the second level (issues) sample size.

Secondly, hard issues are indeed more technical, but they might be presented as easy issues during a campaign²⁴. This would simply mean that parties and candidates will try to present more technical economic issues in easier terms and explicate their positions on these consequently throughout the campaign. This aspect would suggest that even if an issue is hard by definition, placing the candidates on these issues should not be that much harder than on easy issues. This argument has strong consequences on the original implications of the easy and hard issue distinction. As in this paper the goal is not to assess whether people identify and understand candidate positions and then link these to their preferences, the possible limitations are less of a problem. However, as they are related to the amount of information necessary to understand some issue (through cues offered by candidates as well) it might blur the distinction between the two issue categories. One possibility to overcome this problem is to incorporate qualitative knowledge on the 2008 election campaign. Alternatively, campaign opinion polls can be used to assess whether the discourse of the two major candidates has an effect on the level of difficulty of each issue.

Finally, this paper analyzes a single election. Accordingly, it cannot necessarily speak to the debates revolving the evolution of opinion polarization. In order to do that, longitudinal analysis would be required. I omitted this aspect because each election study has different number of importance questions. If we want to incorporate into these models throughout time change that implies yet another level in the model specification. But given the inconsistency in the number of importance questions — and not necessarily the issue question, there are no other years where we would have sufficient sample size (and power) to employ these models. Again, if we want to link issue characteristics to individual level opinion formation we also need multiple issues in each of these categories and they should be accompanied by importance ratings as well. Albeit these limitations, the present papers suggests that changing levels of (aggregate) issue importance are not

²⁴I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

a sufficient explanation for changing levels of opinion polarization and the persistence of take-off issues. I turn to the concluding remarks in the final section below.

4.9 Conclusion

The present paper set out the goal to explain variation in extremity and public opinion polarization by looking at the role of personal importance in attitude formation. Public opinion research recognized that the American public opinion varies depending on what are the issues considered, and only “takeoff issues” increasingly divide the American public (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007; Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Evans, 2003). One possible explanation was related to changing levels of importance (Baldassarri and Bearman, 2007). The argument in this paper went further, suggesting that this is not necessarily due to varying importance, but the varying effect across issue types of importance on opinion extremity.

To discuss this effect, the paper relied on a social psychological perspective. Personally important political issues tend to generate more extreme opinions, because people think more about these issues, gather more attitude relevant information and discuss them more often. Throughout this process, extremitization of the opinion happens (Liu and Latané, 1998; Tesser, 1978). Depending on the role of additional thought processes, the extremitization can be different in magnitude, creating striking differences between easy and hard issues.

This set of hypotheses was tested on data from the 2008 American National Election Study, covering two major issue types: easy and hard issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). More cognitive thought and information gathering explain the link between importance and extremity. However, expressing clear stances or finding matching candidates on easy issues requires less issue relevant information and engagement from the individuals. Conversely, forming opinions on hard issues requires knowledge and effort from

the voter. Indeed, the results suggest that importance matters, but it matters differently for these two types of issues.

Issue stances on easy issues are generally more extreme when contrasted with the ones on hard issues. However, if one considers a hard issue at least somewhat important, the extremization process is much stronger for hard issues. Intuitively, some importance seems to be the threshold for hard issues that makes the individual motivated enough to start seeking out information and think more about that given issue. When this threshold is reached, the extremity of issue stances will grow stronger with each additional step of personal importance.

These findings extend our understanding of public opinion polarization. We see that increased personal relevance or concern with a given political issue can be the culprit for more extreme stances that might polarize society. However, different levels of personal importance are a more important determinant for changes in extremity on hard issues. Even if easy issues are not an important part of individuals' political preferences, these issue positions will be more polarizing. Moreover, we see that the reasons for the divided opinions on easy issues are not necessarily based on how much information one has about that issue. Clearly, this raises concerns about the nature of more extreme opinions on easy issues, even when these are uninformed opinions that did not go through an extremization process guided by thought. Further work is needed to identify the different mechanisms that drive individuals to take more extreme positions without issue relevant information and without any sort of personal importance involved. In case of hard issues – such as economic issues, if there is sufficient amount of increase in personal importance, the extremization process will be stronger. This suggests that previously less polarizing issues might well become at least that dividing as traditional take off issues if they will be a major concern for the electorate.

5 | Summary and conclusions

The main motivation of this thesis was to better understand what influences political issue importance ratings and how do these in turn affect issue stances and their links with broader political attitudes. The set of papers presented in this thesis aimed at filling in the lacuna in both the issue voting literature and also in the social psychological approaches towards attitude formation.

Hence, the papers focused on slightly different outcomes. The first two papers presented analysis of the importance ratings as dependent variables. The second paper already introduced the role of importance as explanatory variable for linking issue positions with ideological self-placement. In the third paper I focused on the extremity of issue positions as a function of importance. Consequently, in the last paper political issue importance was solely used as an explanatory variable. This approach is in line with the goal to present the parts of the analysis by starting from determinants of importance and steering the argument in the direction of possible consequences. Furthermore, the papers analyzing the determinants of salience were framed in a setting when individuals are asked to rate multiple political issues. This assured that we can gain knowledge about importance rating profiles and focus on individual differences.

The ultimate question is what do we learn about salience? Reviewing the findings of the papers, multiple patterns become clearer. First and foremost, there is substantial amount of individual level variation in how people allocate salience. And these are not only related to why some issues may be important to them. Importance rating profiles or patterns suggest that there is still a discrepancy between instrumentality or personal relevance and the importance ratings we accumulate in surveys.

Analyzing why these different patterns might arise and how are they distributed in the population is essential for understanding how they might impact the issue voting theories of electoral behavior. When confronted with issue or policy questions, some individuals recognize easier the personal relevance of the issues. Given some individual traits, such as scoring high in openness to experience, individuals realize and connect the possible implications of policies to their own life. Accordingly, we will see that these individuals, on average, rate more issues as important. For very different reasons, those scoring high in agreeableness follow a similar pattern. In this case, the expected mechanism is related to the presentation or introduction of the issue questions. Implying that other people are concerned with the political issues mentioned and there is social discussion about which way to go on some policies is associated with marking these issues as more important. However, this happens only for those who score high in agreeableness.

These explanations are not necessarily related to some general interest or engagement in politics. These are fundamental individual differences that guide how individuals react to the political (and survey) environment. These findings also suggest that we should be careful in taking importance ratings at their face value and we should consider additional sources of variation on the individual level. These dispositional traits were found to be related to importance rating profiles, not to single salience judgments. However, when analyzing salience effects on issue voting, we do use all salience ratings. Finding substantive individual differences raises though concern about how general is the salience effect that we expect, as importance ratings are not independent.

The second part of this thesis suggests that the problem of different individual importance allocation patterns is not trivial. A sizable subsample tends to rate each and ever issue very or extremely important. These findings suggest that for these individuals it is misleading to employ issue salience in terms of weighting for within-individual analysis. The subsequent analysis linking issue positions to ideological self-placement revealed a

very mixed picture. For between-individual analysis, salience effects are relatively weak and more importantly, inconsistent across different subsamples and issues. These findings further question how the salience measures should be used in order to enhance the predictive power of issue voting theories. The general conclusion here is not that issue voting only applies for some people or for some issue. Instead, what the results show is that salience matters differently depending on individual characteristics and importance allocation patterns. Again, without differentiating between these groups, we might conclude that issue voting theories augmented with salience measures do not perform well. However, they perform well for some people and worse for other people — because the salience ratings are not that informative.

To summarize, so far the implications of the work presented in the paper are guided towards a systematic inclusion of further individual differences into models of issue voting or theories that base their expectations on the salience effect. In the final part of this thesis, I introduced the contextual factor by focusing on issue characteristics. Some issues require more effort and information from the individuals in order to be understood. Other issues are long present on the political agenda, parties have clear positions on them, and they are symbolic in nature. Should we assume that having a clear and extreme policy preference or issue position on the latter type of issues requires the same amount of information and thought than on the former ones? I argued that this is not the case. The results suggest that, indeed, more issue specific knowledge and more cognitive effort is required for having more extreme positions on "hard issues". In other words, building on the social psychological tradition, "hard" issues need to be at least somewhat important for the individual in order to express issue stances that are markedly different from a neutral position.

These findings also speak to the public opinion polarization literature. Why are some issues more divisive and more polarizing? One possible explanation is that they do not

necessarily have to be important in order for the issue positions to be relatively extreme. In these cases, people do not have more extreme stances because they know more about that particular issue, or they discussed it more frequently, or simply they thought more about it. That is not a necessary condition to have relatively extreme stances on these issues. This individual mechanism helps in better explaining macro level polarization results.

Overall, the present thesis is the product of interest in differences so far missed in the analysis of opinion formation and salience allocation. One overarching idea present in all these papers is related to mechanisms and outcomes. We can observe identical final outcomes, but if they are driven by very different mechanisms these final outcomes might not relate to other quantities of interest in the way that we would expect them. For example, one expectation would be that people taking definitive stances on issues do this because they know a lot about that issue and they have clear-cut preferences. But if these definitive stances are not a product of such cognitive and informational effort, the consequences of these clear-cut preferences might be very different.

If we know who are the individuals that are more probable to follow one mechanism not the other one, we can control for those characteristics in our analysis. As seen throughout this paper, these characteristics are both individual and contextual ones. By accounting for these different mechanisms we will find that some of the theories still work. But their explanatory power will be very different depending on many factors that were previously not considered. Failing to find general support for a theory is never an aim or a wanted outcome. However, explaining why a theory *only* works in a given context for some of the individuals helps in better understanding the political processes and decisions. The thesis was written with this simple goal. Not to dismiss some theories, but to draw attention to their conditional nature that goes beyond outcomes and concentrates on mechanisms.

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Appendices

A | Issue questions

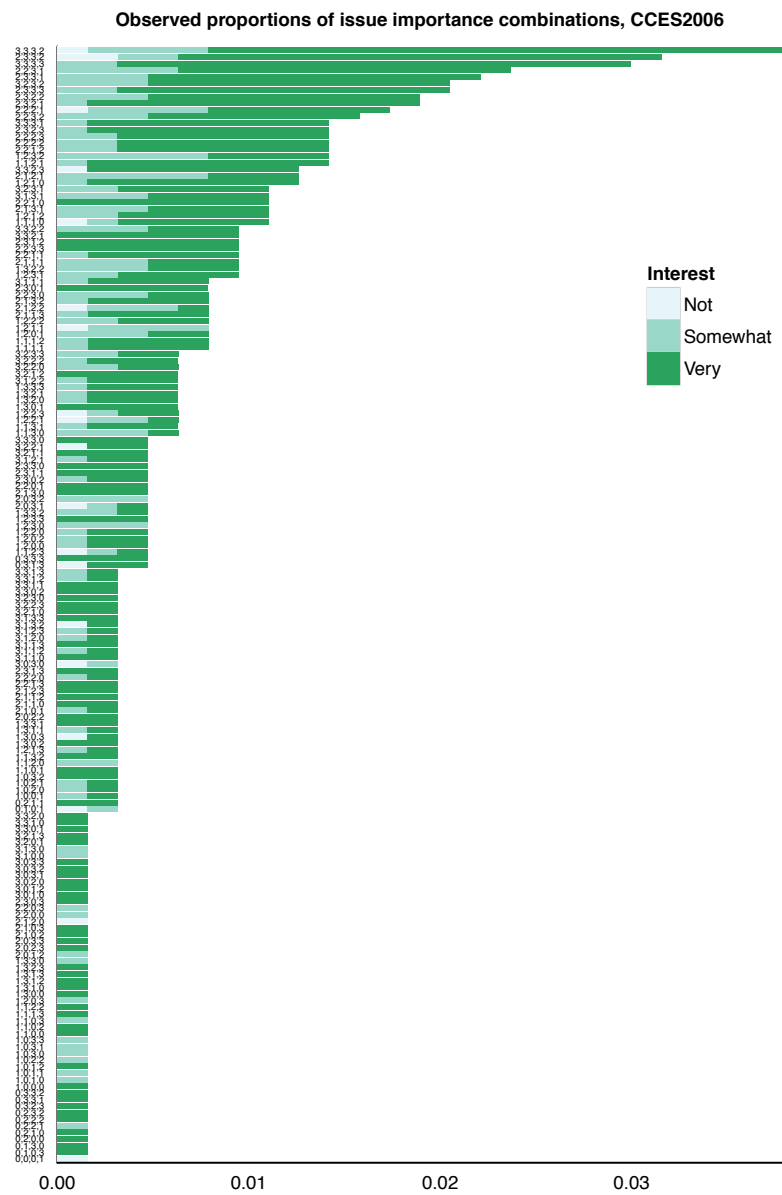
Item	Responses
1. There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view on this issue?	1. By law, abortion should never be permitted 2. The law should permit abortion only in case of rape, incest or when the woman's life is in danger 3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established 4. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice 5. Other (please specify): [...]
2. Some people think it is important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living. Other people think that protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living. Which is closer to the way you feel, or haven't you thought much about this?	1. Much more important to protect environment even if lose jobs and lower standard of living 2. Environment somewhat more important 3. About the same 4. Economy somewhat more important 5. Much more important to protect jobs, even if environment worse
3. Now, we'd like to ask you about Social Security. A proposal has been made that would allow people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Do you favor or oppose this idea?	1. Strongly favor 2. Somewhat favor 3. Neither favor nor oppose it 4. Somewhat oppose 5. Strongly oppose
4. Some people think that if a company has a history of discriminating against blacks when making hiring decisions, then they should be required to have an affirmative action program that gives blacks preference in hiring. What do you think? Should companies that have discriminated against blacks have to have an affirmative action program?	1. Strongly support affirmative action [...] 7. Strongly oppose affirmative action
Answers to the open ended category for the abortion issue and missing values were dropped. Original data source: 2006 Comparative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere, 2007).	

B | Importance question descriptive statistics

Issue	Mean	SD	Range
1. Abortion	2.02	0.99	[0,3]
2. Environment	1.94	0.83	[0,3]
3. Social security	2.04	0.90	[0,3]
4. Affirmative action	1.58	0.97	[0,3]

Each importance question was asked directly after the specific issue question. The original coding was: 1. Very important, 2. Important, 3. Somewhat important, 4. Not important. This coding was reversed in the data analysis and recoded to range between 0 and 3.

C | Importance profiles



Distribution of the importance rating profiles. Colors mark different levels of political interest.

D | Personality traits

Trait	Question	Coding	<i>r</i>
<i>Openness to experience</i>	Open to new experiences, complex. Conventional, uncreative.	Reverse	−0.31***
<i>Agreeableness</i>	Sympathetic, warm. Critical, quarrelsome.	Reverse	−0.20***

The personality items were collected using the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling et al., 2003). All questions ask the respondent to describe herself, by stating agreement or disagreement on a 7-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. *r* is the Pearson's correlation coefficient for the two items that are used to construct the traits.

E | Importance question wording

How important is this issue to you personally? Not important at all, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important?

1. Not important at all
2. Not too important
3. Somewhat important
4. Very important
5. Extremely important

† Refused and don't know were coded as missing.

Zoltán Fazekas

University of Vienna
Department of Methods in the Social Sciences
Rooseveltplatz 2/4, 414
AU-1090, Vienna

Phone: +43-1-4277-49913
Fax: +43-1-4277-9499
Email: zoltan.fazekas@univie.ac.at
Homepage: <http://methods.univie.ac.at/>

Current position

Early Stage Researcher in the Marie Curie Initial Training Network in Electoral Democracy (ELECDem) and PhD Candidate at the University of Vienna, Department of Methods in the Social Sciences

Education

PhD Candidate at University of Vienna, Department of Methods in the Social Sciences, Vienna, Austria. Expected: 2012.
MA in Political Science, Central European University, Budapest. Special Certificate in Electoral Politics. GPA: 4.0/4.0. 2009.
MA in European Affairs and Programme Management, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. GPA: 9.90/10. 2008.
BA in Economics, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Specialization in Management of European Institutions. GPA: 9.39/10. 2006

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