

# Policies Not Personas: How Ideology Trumps Moral Failings in Electoral Decision-Making

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## Abstract

Under what conditions do voters support presidential candidates with moral failings, such as corruption or ties to authoritarian regimes? This article examines vote choice in European presidential elections, focusing on how voters trade off between candidates' moral integrity, policy positions, and socio-demographic traits. Using a conjoint experiment across Czechia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and France, we analyze over 336,000 candidate evaluations from more than 12,000 respondents. We find that candidate partisanship and moral standing matter most overall, followed by policy positions and socio-demographics. However, these effects vary by voter ideology and party proximity. In many cases, policy alignment can outweigh ethical concerns, with voters preferring corrupt candidates who share their views over upright but ideologically distant opponents. The findings help explain the corruption voting paradox and highlight the importance of voter–candidate congruence. They demonstrate that survey experiments can reveal support for unethical candidates when interpreted with sufficient nuance.

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# 1 Introduction

How do voters select candidates in direct presidential elections? How do they trade off between policy positions, moral stature, and socio-demographic characteristics of candidates? And how do their own characteristics interact with the attributes of presidential candidates? These are important questions as presidents are directly elected by voters in two-thirds of the thirty-six European republics (Bértoa and Weber 2024) and “semi-presidentialism is now the most prevalent system of government in Europe” (Neto and Strøm 2006, 632). Furthermore, although most directly elected presidents play a significant role in their respective political systems, voting behavior in European presidential elections remains surprisingly understudied (Schmitt and Teperoglou 2017, 64; Lago 2022, 277).

This article studies the operating mechanisms of vote choice in presidential elections in European democracies. It investigates three closely related questions: which candidate attributes matter most; how these attributes’ effects are moderated by respondents’ ideology and party proximity; and under what conditions voters prefer morally corrupt candidates over more upright alternatives.

We test several sets of theory-driven, preregistered hypotheses. The first postulates that there is a hierarchy of attributes in vote choice, ranging from the candidate’s party affiliation and moral integrity, through their policy positions, to their socio-demographic characteristics. The second set of hypotheses contends that respondents’ ideology and party proximity strongly moderate the effect of candidates’ attributes. Finally, we hypothesize that particular mixes of policy positions may fully compensate for candidates’ moral failings.<sup>1</sup>

The empirical analyses employ an online conjoint experiment and focus on Central and Eastern Europe, where most countries hold direct presidential elections, using France as a comparative case in Western Europe. They draw on more than 336,000 candidate evaluations by over 12,000 respondents. We assess them through a variety of estimands, including marginal means, average marginal component effects, and individual marginal component effects. The candidate attributes include rarely studied factors such as a problematic past under the communist regime, as well as a relatively broad set of policy proposals, enhancing the realism of the experimental condition.

The results strongly support most of our hypotheses. In the aggregate, candidates’ partisanship and moral standing matter the most to voters, followed by candidates’ policies, and socio-demographics. However, allowing for heterogeneous effects reveals that voter characteristics importantly interact with candidate attributes to determine vote choice. Whether a voter is an economic left- or right-winger, a cultural conservative or a

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1. While not explicitly preregistered, this last hypothesis follows naturally from the reasoning of the second set of hypotheses.

liberal, or how she views past political regimes, is central in determining which candidate characteristics matter in her vote choice and how. For example, for cultural liberals, opposition to immigration matters more than corruption, whereas for anti-communists, it is the candidate's position towards Russia. More generally, voters are willing to overlook a candidate's moral failings if they share the same views on policy issues. We show that alignment on multiple policy issues can lead voters to prefer a corrupt candidate with a communist background over an upright candidate with whom they share no policy agreement. Policies matter to voters more than personas.

Our findings hold important implications for our understanding of voting behavior in European presidential elections and the so-called corruption voting paradox (Bågenholm 2021). They demonstrate that the importance of candidate attributes varies across voters and that, when the survey results are analyzed and interpreted correctly, voters do vote for corrupt candidates even in survey experiments. The discrepancy between outcomes observed in the real world and in field experiments on the one hand, and survey experiments on the other, does not come from an inadequacy of survey experiments, but from their results' insufficiently nuanced interpretation.

The article first reviews some of the key literature on political competition and electoral decision-making before setting out its theoretical expectations about individual vote choice calculations. The methodological section then reviews the conjoint analysis design, and considers the divergent empirical quantities that this design provides. The section also sets out the specific design of our conjoint experiment. The following section presents our empirical findings and assess the tests of our hypotheses. The final section serves as a conclusion.

## 2 What determines vote choice?

Political scientists have so far devoted little attention to the role of candidate characteristics in European presidential elections, studying instead the constitutional powers and activities of elected presidents (e.g. Roper 2002; Köker 2017), or the effect of direct presidential elections on party competition, and citizen participation (Tavits 2009; Kostelka et al. 2023; Bértoa and Weber 2024).

Most of the existing studies of presidential elections draw on survey evidence and examine patterns in vote choice. Geographically, they usually focus on France, where the president is the most visible and powerful (at least outside the periods of co-habitation), and Portugal. They show that even when candidates run as independents, voters' party identification and ideology matter heavily in decision-making (Magalhães 2007; Lewis-Beck and Costa Lobo 2011; Bélanger and Turgeon 2019). In Central and Eastern Europe, the important role of party proximity and ideology in voters' behaviour was confirmed in Slovenian presidential elections (Fink-Hafner et al. 2014). Conversely, voters' perceptions

of government performance play a much more modest role in presidential elections than in legislative elections in Portugal (Magalhães 2007) and in France under cohabitation (Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Bélanger 2012, 167). Presidential vote choice in France is informed by voters' policy preferences (Guntermann and Lachat 2023) but also their images of candidates (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2014).

The existing, mostly experimental, literature studied the role of candidate characteristics in legislative elections (e.g., Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto 2020), subnational elections (Klašnja and Tucker 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2016), supranational elections (Christensen, Rosa, and Grönlund 2020), or U.S. presidential primaries (Bansak et al. 2021). Many of these studies suggest that substantive candidate attributes (e.g., ideology, policy positions) matter more than descriptive attributes (e.g., age), leaders psychological traits, or even valence attributes (Franchino and Zucchini 2015; Costa and Silva 2015; Breitenstein 2019; Christensen, Rosa, and Grönlund 2020; Bansak et al. 2021). Voters do not directly discriminate against women or working class candidates (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), although women may be penalized when they do not conform to the traditional gender roles and voters may consider them as less electable (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018; Ono and Yamada 2020; Hassell and Visalvanich 2024). When voters receive more informative cues such as party labels or policy issues, this reduces the importance of candidates' descriptive characteristics (Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Arnesen, Duell, and Johannesson 2019). This said, voters may prefer non-partisan candidates (Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto 2020).

An extensive literature investigates the electoral consequences of corruption and candidate integrity, often converging on what is referred to as the corruption voting paradox (Bågenholm 2021). While voters severely punish politicians for corruption and other failings in survey experiments, they do so much less in real life and field experiments (Golden 2010; De Vries and Solaz 2017; Incerti 2020; Bågenholm 2021). Voters' weak response to scandals can, in real politics, arise anywhere along the causal chain between the triggering event and the ballot box (De Vries and Solaz 2017). Voters may not receive or correctly process the information about the given scandal, they may misattribute the blame for it, and they may vote for the implicated politicians anyway because of their other performance, competence, policy positions, targeted benefits, or because there is no viable alternative (Golden 2010; De Vries and Solaz 2017; Incerti 2020; Bågenholm 2021; Jankowski, Juen, and Lewandowsky 2023). The differing results in survey experiments do not seem to be driven by social desirability bias (Breitenstein, Anduiza, and Muñoz 2022). Instead, it seems that they may come from the largely simplified causal chain,<sup>2</sup> which questions survey experiments' external validity (Bågenholm 2021, 217).

Altogether, the literature offers many valuable insights, but it does not address a

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2. Unlike in real politics, respondents are usually directly told who is to blame and for what just before the voting act.

number of important points.

First, it does not directly study the role of candidate characteristics in European presidential elections. We thus do not know which candidate attributes matter the most and whether the requirements of the presidential office, which usually plays an important symbolic role in its political system (Marrani 2011), do not differ from those of mayoral or legislative offices. Relatedly, in recent democracies such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, it remains unclear to what extent candidates' problematic past under the previous dictatorship still matters to voters.

Second, existing studies have paid limited attention to the interactions between candidate attributes and voter characteristics. When analyzing differences in voters' behavior, they usually rely on broad ideological categories (e.g., left vs right) without considering more refined ideological dimensions, which may condition voters' perception of candidates' attributes. As a result, we know relatively little about which attributes matter most to which types of voters.

Finally, the discrepancy between real-world outcomes and the results of survey experiments regarding politicians' integrity suggests that hypothetical voting may significantly differ from real-world voting. Survey experiments may thus be perceived as suboptimal for making inferences about real-world behavior. But is it really the case, or do we simply need more adapted tools to better interpret the results of survey experiments?

In what follows, we aim to address these questions and limitations, and systematically investigate vote choice in European presidential elections via a cross-national conjoint experiment.

### 3 Presidential voting in Central and Eastern Europe

Literature on political competition in recent democracies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) suggests that party labels, and reputation are typically only weakly established (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015; Ost 1993; Mair 1997), valence issues, such as corruption are more salient (Polk et al. 2017), external and transnational institutions may exert strong political clout (Vachudova 2005), and political forces' authoritarian past may be an important cue for voters (Grzymala-Busse 2002). More recently, works on the rise of populism highlight the role of the cultural dimension, cleaving divergent visions of society and role of the state, and reshaping political competition as such (Jenne 2018; Vachudova 2020, 2021). In line with this research, we expect ideology to significantly moderate citizens' political outlooks and electoral calculus. Altogether, we formulated

three sets of hypotheses.<sup>3</sup> Before we present them, we discuss the different dimensions of vote choice that we consider in our study and our expectations regarding their role in CEE.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.1 Dimensions of Vote Choice

We focus on multiple dimensions of vote choice whose importance was highlighted by previous research. First, we consider the socio-demographic characteristics of candidates, such as gender and occupation. In line with the existing literature (Campbell and Cowley 2014; Carnes and Lupu 2016; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), we do not have strong expectations of the effect of gender and occupation, but expect that voters prefer professional politicians (members of parliament) less than candidates with other occupations.

Second, we focus on the influence of authoritarian past of candidates. There is reason to believe that the relevance of authoritarian past fades soon after democratic transitions (Bermeo 1987; Grzymala-Busse 2002), and that voters do not consistently sanction politicians for their authoritarian pasts (Loxton and Power 2021; LeBas and Gray 2021). Ex-authoritarian organizations able to replace the most compromised politicians and change their label, are in a significantly better position than individual ex-authoritarian candidates running in presidential contests. At the same time, especially in countries in which the authoritarian regime was repressive, such as in Czechoslovakia (Kitschelt et al. 1999), association with the authoritarian regime and its crimes should still bear a stigma that is salient to some voters. Additionally, some political forces in Central and Eastern Europe have sought to increase the salience of the communist past, in their search to discredit political opponents. In the context of France, whose authoritarian Vichy regime is too distant to have living politicians involved in it, we consider individual association with extreme and violent left-wing organizations in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> We thus expect that association with a former authoritarian regime (or political violence) has a negative effect on vote choice.

The third dimension that we explore is the legal status of the candidate, specifically, whether or not they are investigated or convicted of corruption. There is significant experimental evidence that corruption charges are detrimental to politicians' election prospects (Incerti 2020), and many real-life examples of suspicion or conviction of political candidates. We thus expect that corruption charges negatively effect vote choice.

The fourth dimension under consideration are the foreign views of candidates, namely

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3. The first two sets were preregistered before we accessed the data. The third set, which builds on the second, was not preregistered.

4. The expectations presented in the following section were originally preregistered as a third set of hypotheses, most of which are empirically supported by our results. To streamline our analyses, we list these hypotheses only in the The Appendix.

5. Such organizations existed in France at the time, for example, two members the radical left-wing organization Action Directe were convicted of political assassinations carried out in the 1980s.

whether geopolitical orientation towards western international structures (NATO), versus eastern orientation towards Russia, or preferences for strict geopolitical neutrality, matter in vote choice. We hypothesize that, in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, pro-Russian positions penalize candidates.

Fifth and sixth dimensions consider economic and migration programmatic positions of the candidate. Earlier studies show that voting behavior in new democracies reflects retrospective economic voting (Tucker 2002), policy positions (Tavits and Letki 2014), social cleavages (Rovny 2015), valence issues (Hanley and Sikk 2016) and, in less developed contexts, clientelism (Kitschelt and Altamirano 2015). However, the explanatory power of the different factors was rarely explicitly compared. In those political systems where the president lacks significant legislative, executive or budgetary powers, as is the case in Slovakia or Poland, policy issues and economic performance presumably matter less than in party competition. However, globally (un)popular policy stances that resonate with public opinion are likely to have a significant effect on candidates’ electoral prospects. In this sense, we hypothesize that particularly salient socio-cultural issues, such as migration, to play an important role. We expect that favoring the acceptance of refugees from Africa and the Middle East exerts a negative effect on vote choice.

The seventh dimension concerns democratic views and studies the candidate’s attitude towards the democratic functioning of the state, probed by their stances on the independence of the judiciary. We expect that the candidate’s support of the judiciary’s independence, as opposed to its submission to the government or the people, are favored by respondents.

Finally, we investigate the effect of candidates’ membership in political parties, focusing on the main government and main opposition parties. We expect that non-partisan candidates are globally preferred by respondents, although there are certainly differences based on respondents’ party proximity and ideology, which we discuss more extensively below.

### 3.2 Relative Importance of Attributes

An important question concerns the relative importance of the different candidate attributes. As it is common in the interpretation of factorial experiments, we first consider candidate attributes as individual, stand-alone influences and not part of broader packages of candidate characteristics, which may however be more realistic and which we discuss in the next subsections below.

We expect that presidential elections focus attention on the personality of each candidate, and consequently, we expect the centrality of attributes relating to their individual moral standing and trustworthiness. Consequently, we thus hypothesize that candidates’ legal status and authoritarian past exert the most significant influence on vote choice, as

they offer voters a relatively simple, morally-based criterion on which they can judge candidates. Further, and in line with the literature (Kirkland and Coppock 2018; Arnesen, Duell, and Johannesson 2019), we expect the role of partisanship to play an important role. Party membership is an emotionally-charged shortcut for a vast range of political positions, and acts as a central cue for vote choice.

**Hypothesis 1.1:** *The most powerful predictors of vote choice are party membership, authoritarian past, and legal status.*

The second group of factors determining vote choice are candidates' economic, cultural, foreign policy, and constitutional positions. We hypothesize they are of lesser importance to respondents than more encompassing or moral criteria, but that they matter more than candidate's socio-demographic characteristics. In Central and Eastern Europe, positions favorable to Russia and migration are likely to be particularly penalizing.

**Hypothesis 1.2:** *Programmatic views are secondary, but still significant predictors of vote choice.*

### 3.3 Respondents' Ideology

The core argument of this paper is that the effect of the candidate attributes is moderated by respondents' ideology and party proximity. We expect respondents to vote for candidates based on their party membership. Respondent's proximity to a party is likely to be reflected in their vote choice. Furthermore, following the logic of partisan bias, respondents are likely to be benevolent to their co-partisans' penalizing attributes such as authoritarian past and legal status.

**Hypothesis 2:** *Respondent ideology and partisanship moderate vote choice in favor of co-partisans.*

We argue that it is important to distinguish three dimensions of ideology: economic, cultural and symbolic. The economic dimension relates to the role of the state in markets, and spans from economic left to economic right. The cultural dimension considers the role of government intervention in personal life choices, and views of cultural out-groups, such as ethnic or sexual minorities or migrants. We can consider this dimension to span from cultural conservatism to cultural liberalism (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008; Rovny and Polk 2019). The last, symbolic, dimension reflects broad ideological positioning, and engages respondents' interpretation of the past. In the context of Central and Eastern Europe the symbolic dimension reflects individuals' views of the past communist regime – whether they view it as an authoritarian regime that circumscribed individual rights and liberties, or whether they view it as a regime that provided important social benefits and securities to economically weaker segments of the population. While past

literature generally expected this symbolic view of the communist past to be strongly associated with economic and cultural policy outlooks (see Kitschelt 1992; Kitschelt 1995, we contend that the symbolic dimension is an important independent source of individual positioning.<sup>6</sup> We can consequently think of voters as economic left- or right-wingers, as cultural liberals or conservatives, and as symbolic supporters of the communist regimes or as symbolic anti-communists. We expect that individual voter placement on these three dimensions will importantly interact with candidate attributes to determine vote choice.

We hypothesize that the symbolic dimension has an important sorting impact on issues related to communism. Consequently, we expect this dimension to importantly interact with candidate attributes related to their involvement with the past communist authoritarian regime, and candidate attributes related to current foreign policy outlooks influenced by the threat of Russian revanchism in the context of Russia's full scale war in Ukraine.

We expect that a candidate with a communist past is more strongly condemned by symbolic anti-communists who are particularly concerned about the candidate's personal association with the past regime. We expect that respondents' approach to the past, and thus their evaluation of candidates with communist history, is primarily determined by the symbolic dimension, rather than the cultural or the economic.

**Hypothesis 2.1:** *Communist past exerts a stronger negative effect among symbolically anti-communist respondents.*

Concerning foreign policy, we also expect that it is symbolic identification that distinguishes respondents' views on candidate foreign policy positions. While the views of communist past always framed outlooks on international affairs, Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine heightens the salience international affairs and of geopolitical orientations. In this context, symbolic opponents of communism vocally reject Russia – the historical leader of the communist block – as a viable international partner, rather preferring a western orientation of presidential candidates.

**Hypothesis 2.2:** *Support of Russia exerts a stronger negative effect on vote choice among symbolic anti-communist voters.*

Turning to specific policy issues, we expect voter economic and cultural orientations to determine their evaluation of candidate policy attributes. Concerning economic issues, we naturally expect that respondent economic preferences moderate the effect of candidate views.

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6. Indeed, a correlation of the three dimensions shows that the symbolic dimension is correlated with the economic and cultural dimensions at only  $r = 0.09$  and  $r = 0.26$  respectively.

**Hypothesis 2.3:** *Support high taxes exerts a positive effect on vote choice among economically left-wing respondents, and a negative effect among economically right-leaning respondents.*

Regarding migration views, we expect respondent cultural views to moderate candidate the effect of candidate positions.

**Hypothesis 2.4:** *Support for accepting refugees from Africa and the Middle East exerts a stronger negative effect on vote choice among culturally conservative voters.*

Regarding democratic values, we expect that cultural outlooks of respondents determine their views of candidate democratic views. We expect that cultural liberals are much more likely to be concerned with the maintenance of democratic institutions and practices, while cultural conservatives are more likely to turn a blind eye to democratic regression, regardless of their economic or symbolic positioning. This is because cultural liberals are more concerned with the preservation of rights and liberties, central to a liberal democratic order. Importantly, while symbolic anti-communists are naturally opposed to communist authoritarianism, their democratic values are not certain, as they may prefer various forms of democratic erosion, provided that it keeps communist supporters out of power. Indeed, various illiberals, such as Viktor Orbán, or Jarosław Kaczyński, have utilized anti-communist rhetoric to discredit their opponents and rally support for their nationalist illiberalism. It is thus cultural liberals who are most likely to prefer liberal democratic orientations of presidential candidates.

**Hypothesis 2.5:** *Believing that governments should have the right to recall judges exerts a stronger negative effect on vote choice among culturally liberal respondents.*

### 3.4 Trade-Offs Between Ideology and Moral Failings

One of the enduring puzzles in the voting behavior literature is the contrast between citizens' clear rejection of candidates with moral failings in survey experiments and their frequent support for such candidates in real-world elections. As reviewed above, existing research explains this discrepancy by pointing to factors such as limited access to information, misattribution of responsibility, competing motivations, or the absence of viable alternatives—conditions that are often absent or less pronounced in experimental settings.

However, if ideology is a strong moderator of the vote, as we assume, a particular mix of the candidates' policy positions, compatible with the respondent's ideological orientations, may suffice to compensate for their moral failings. While voters may hesitate to support a corrupt candidate who aligns with them on just one policy, they may be more inclined to overlook the candidate's past if they agree on a large number of policy

positions. Previous research—typically focused on a limited number of policy positions or valence attributes—has found that policy congruence and strong political performance can mitigate the negative effects of candidates’ prior moral failings (xxx, xxx). However, in real-world settings, voters are exposed to a broader array of candidate positions. We hypothesize that the cumulative weight of these considerations may lead voters to prefer candidates with questionable moral standing over more morally upright alternatives.

**Hypothesis 3:** *Candidate-voters policy congruence on multiple issues may compensate for the candidate’s past moral failings.*

## 4 Data and Methods

To test the above hypotheses, we have conducted a conjoint experiment embedded in a larger public opinion survey. Our case selection includes five countries with directly elected presidencies. Four of them (Czechia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia) are located in Central and Eastern Europe and had a communist past. The fifth country is France, which serves as a comparison case in Western Europe. The survey was fielded via computer assisted online interviews by the survey company Cint, programmed in the survey software Qualtrics, in November 2023. The samples are based on quotas on sex, age, region, size of municipality, and education. The sample size is between 2400 and 2500 respondents by country<sup>7</sup>. Respondents received a small financial compensation roughly equivalent to 2 euros for completing the survey.

Prior to the experiment, respondents are asked about a set of personal characteristics, political attitudes, and political behaviors:

- Basic socio-demographics (gender, age, education, ethnicity, languages spoken at home)
- Basic political positioning and attitudes (left-right self-placement, political interest, voting as a right or duty)
- More specific attitudes (views about strong leaders, pacifism, conspiracy beliefs, views of communist past)
- Political issue preferences (redistribution, economic regulation, homosexuality, immigration, environment, European integration)
- Views on the war in Ukraine and the acceptance of different types of migrants
- Political behavior (vote choice, propensity to vote for parties, non-electoral participation)

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7. Czech Republic N=2408, France N=2449, Poland N=2454, Romania N=2506, Slovakia N=2404.

- Additional demographics, asked after the conjoint experiment (income, social class, economic hardship, religious affiliation, frequency of religious attendance)

The conjoint design follows the works of Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014); Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto (2015); and Johns and Kölln (2020). All respondents are asked to evaluate 14 pairs of hypothetical candidates in a presidential election. The candidates contain 9 attributes, with 3 levels each (except for gender). Table 1 summarizes the attributes, their levels, and the probability with which they appeared in the conjoint analysis.

For each pair, the respondent was asked three questions. First, the respondent designated which of the two (candidate A or candidate B) she prefers. Further, each respondent evaluated the likelihood with which they would vote for candidate A and candidate B. The response options range from 0 ‘not likely at all’ to 10 ‘extremely likely’.

The literature surrounding conjoint analysis debates the most suitable measure for assessing the impact of attribute levels on vote choice. One widely used metric, proposed by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014), is the average marginal components effect (AMCE). This measure assesses the average impact of an attribute on the likelihood of a respondent selecting a specific candidate, over the distribution of the other attributes across repeated samples. Formally, for treatments  $t$ , candidate profiles  $j$ , choice task  $k$ , and attributes  $a$ :

$$\begin{aligned} \pi_a(t_1, t_0, p(\mathbf{t})) = & \\ & \sum_{(t, \mathbf{t}) \in T} E[Y_i(t_1, t, \mathbf{t}) - Y_i(t_0, t, \mathbf{t}) | (T_{ijk[-a]}, \mathbf{T}_{i[-j]k}) \in T] \\ & \times p(T_{ijk[-a]} = t, \mathbf{T}_{i[-j]k} = \mathbf{t} | (T_{ijk[-a]}, \mathbf{T}_{i[-j]k}) \in T) \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

This value captures the increase in the probability of selecting a candidate profile if its  $a$ th attribute were changed from  $t_0$  to  $t_1$ . Consequently, the AMCE offers a meaningful insight into attribute influence across options with diverse characteristics.

Despite its prevalence, concerns persist regarding the interpretation of AMCEs in conjoint analyses. One such issue is the AMCEs reliance on a baseline, which can distort interpretations due to baseline selection or discrepancies across subgroups. Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020) suggest unadjusted Marginal Means (MM) as an alternative, which gauge favorability towards specific attribute levels without relying on baselines. MMs simply specify the probability with which a respondent  $i$  selects a profile  $j$  with a given attribute  $a$ :

$$\pi(Y_{ij} = 1 | A = a) \quad (2)$$

MMs thus avoid the problems of baseline selection and divergence.

A further concern with measurement in conjoint analyses is the presence of effect het-

erogeneity, as divergent effects across sample subgroups can hide significant effects. To address this problem, Zhirkov (2022) proposes Individual Marginal Component Effects (IMCE). IMCEs quantify the impact of attribute levels for each respondent, facilitating individual-level analyses. We depart from Zhirkov (2022), and estimate respondent-specific regressions for attributes  $a$  and individuals  $i$ , in the form:

$$\mathbf{y}_i = \alpha_{ia} + \beta_{ia} \mathbf{X}_{ia} + \epsilon_{ia} \quad (3)$$

Here  $\alpha_{ia}$  and  $\beta_{ia}$  are respondent-specific regression parameters with respect to each candidate attribute, and  $\mathbf{X}$  is a vector of attributes  $a$  each respondent  $i$  saw in a particular conjoint evaluation. Estimating IMCEs requires modifying the conjoint design and necessitates a numerical outcome variable, which we have included in our conjoint design. To be able to assess IMCEs on our sample, we presented 14 conjoint evaluations to every respondent.

Finally, for the purposes of assessing the interaction effects between individual characteristics and candidate attributes, we simplify the conjoint attributes to a binary measure. Table 1 includes an asterisk by the attribute level that was coded as 1 in the IMCE analysis, the other attribute levels are combined as the baseline. We then predict the IMCEs for each candidate attribute as a function of respondent ideology, while controlling for respondent socio-demographics, such as gender, age, education, urbanity of residence, subjective income, religiosity, and interest in politics. Given that the predicted IMCEs are estimates (from equation 3), we implement the approach suggested by Lewis and Linzer (2005). We depart the following model:

$$\mathbf{y}_i^* = \alpha_i + \sum_{j=2}^k \beta_j \mathbf{x}_{ij} + \mathbf{u}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (4)$$

Here  $y_i^*$  is an estimated dependent variable with sampling error  $\mathbf{u}_i$  with variance  $\omega_i^2$ . Since this sampling error variance differs across cases, then  $\mathbf{u}_i + \epsilon_i$  are heteroscedastic, violating OLS assumptions. Lewis and Lizer (2005) thus propose weighting the regression with the weight  $w_i$ , defined as:

$$w_i = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\omega_i^2 + \hat{\sigma}^2}} \quad (5)$$

Here  $\omega_i^2$  is the variance of the dependent variable sampling error estimated through equation (3), and  $\hat{\sigma}^2$  is the estimated variance of  $\epsilon_i$  from equation (4)

Our regression models thus weight the regression model in (4) with  $w_i$ , consequently estimating:

$$w_i \mathbf{y}_i^* = \alpha_i w_i + \sum_{j=2}^k \beta_j \mathbf{x}_{ij} w_i + \mathbf{u}_i w_i + \epsilon_i w_i \quad (6)$$

To assess party proximity (Hypothesis 2), we use respondents' reported vote in the

Table 1: Attributes and levels

Attribute	Level	Probability
Gender	man	50%
	woman*	50%
Occupation	member of parliament*	33.33%
	medical doctor	33.33%
	business executive	33.33%
<b>Eastern Europe</b> In the 1980s	was not a member of the Communist party*	33.33%
	was a member of the Communist party	33.33%
	was a communist secret police informant	33.33%
<b>France</b> In the 1980s	was not a member of any extremist group	33.33%
	was a member of an extremist Marxist group	33.33%
	participated in an extremist Marxist group	
	planning an attack against civilians in France	33.33%
Legal status	no legal problems	33.33%
	is investigated for corruption	33.33%
	was convicted of corruption*	33.33%
Foreign affairs views	favors strengthening relations within EU and NATO	33.33%
	favors strengthening relations with Russia*	33.33%
	favors neutrality in line with Switzerland	33.33%
Economic views	favors high progressive taxes and generous public welfare*	33.33%
	favors moderate flat tax and limited public welfare	33.33%
	favors low flat taxes and minimal public welfare	33.33%
Migration views	is opposed to accepting any refugees*	33.33%
	is in favor of accepting Ukrainian refugees	33.33%
	is in favor of accepting refugees from Africa and the Middle East	33.33%
Democratic views	believes government should have the right to recall judges	33.33%
	believes that the people need to have the right to recall judges	33.33%
	believes that the courts need to be independent*	33.33%
Partisanship	no party*	60%
	PM's party	20%
	main opposition party	20%

Note: An asterisk by the attribute level denotes that the level is coded as 1 in the IMCE analysis, the other attribute levels are combined as the baseline.

most recent past national legislative election. To operationalize the symbolical right and left (Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2), we constructed a scale combining two questions on communist past.<sup>8</sup> We measure respondents' economic preferences (Hypothesis 2.3) through support for two statements on state regulation of the economy and public spending.<sup>9</sup> Finally, cultural liberalism and conservatism (Hypotheses 2.4 and 2.5) are measured via a scale drawing on questions on homosexuality and immigration.<sup>10</sup>

8. Their wording was as follows: Q1 "What do you think about the fall of the pre-1989 regime? On the scale below, 0 means that 'The fall of the pre-1989 regime was a very bad thing' and 10 means 'The fall of the pre-1989 regime was a very good thing'." Q2 "For ordinary people, was life better before 1989, or is it better now? On the scale below, 0 means that 'Life was much better before 1989 than now' and 10 means 'Life is much better now than before 1989'."

9. Statement 1: "State regulation and control of the economy. On the scale below, 0 means that 'I am fully in favor of state regulation and control of the economy' and 10 means 'I fully oppose state regulation and control of the economy'." Statement 2: "Public spending. On the scale below, 0 means that 'I am fully in favour of raising taxes to increase public services' and 10 means 'I am fully in favour cutting public services to cut taxes'."

10. Question 1: "To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish." (0-10 scale, 0 = Disagree strongly, 10 = Agree strongly) Question 2: "Should immigration from low-income non-European countries be restricted or liberalized? On the scale below, 0 means 'immigration from low-income non-European countries should be totally restricted', 10 means 'immigration from low-income non-European countries should be totally liberalized'."

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Overall effects

In the first step, we turn to assess the marginal means (MMs) of our different attribute levels across all countries and all respondents. This analysis, reported in Figure 1, provides an initial overview of the effect of candidate attributes on vote choice.

Figure 1 demonstrates a number of significant effects that support most of our pre-registered expectations from Section 3.1 (see also Appendix A). First, a communist past, particularly being a communist secret police informant greatly reduces the probability of selection, while not having a communist past significantly improves it. Second, legal integrity is an important attribute for electoral choice, as being convicted of corruption greatly reduces the probability of selection, while not having legal problems is the single most powerful characteristic inducing vote. Third, favoring stronger relations with Russia is a very strong vote deterrent. Fourth, favoring the arrival of refugees from African and the Middle East reduces electoral support, while opposition to any refugees, or the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees, elicits moderate levels of support. Fifth, respondents electorally reward candidates supporting court independence. Finally, party membership also matters for vote choice, as respondents prefer non-partisan candidates. Partisan candidates are sanctioned, with governing party members least likely to be selected.

In the next section we consider the relative strength of the different candidate attributes in voter decision-making.

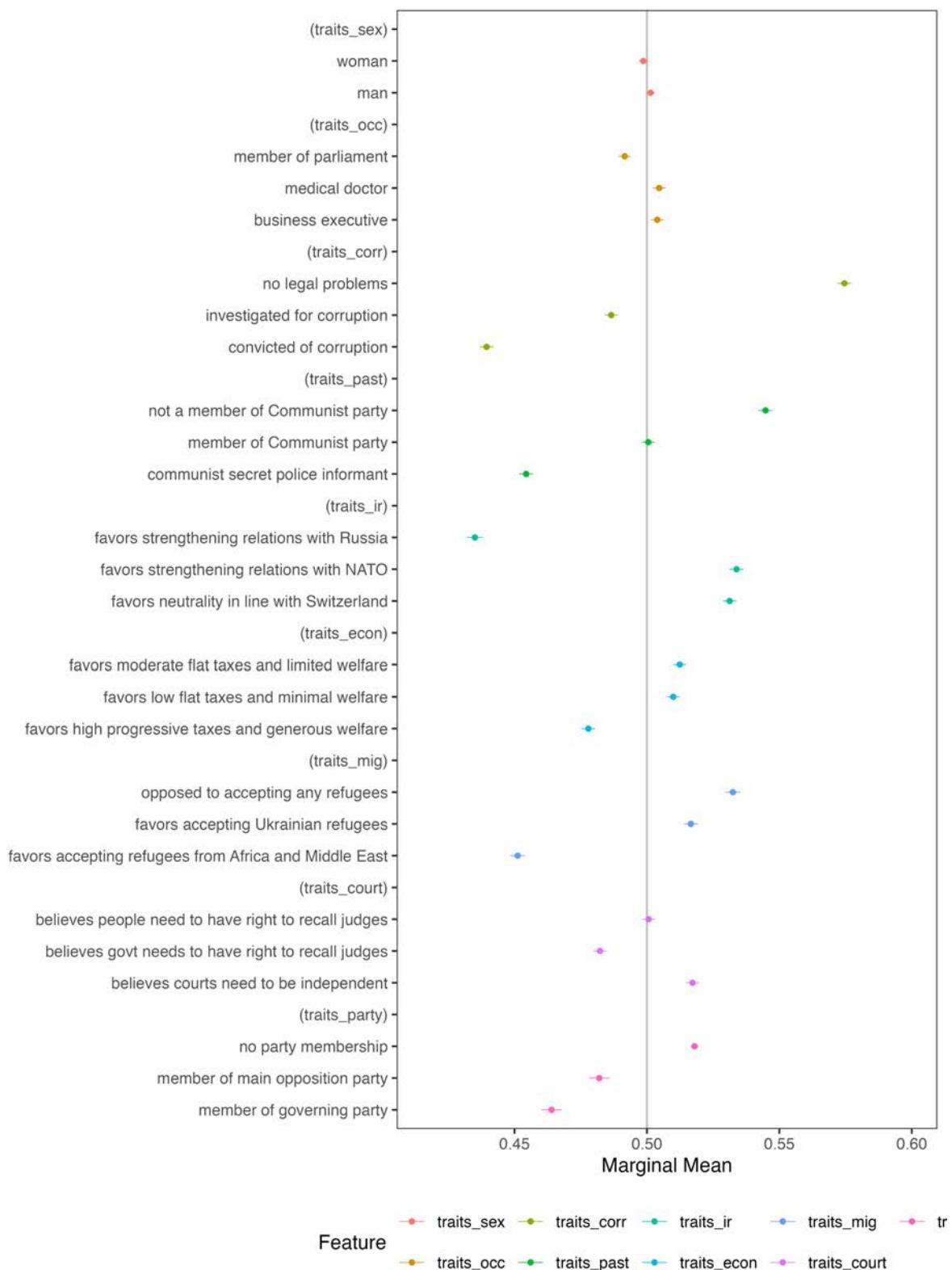
### 5.2 Relative Importance of Attributes

Our hypotheses argue that attributes associated with the moral standing of individual candidates and their party affiliations will be most important predictors of vote choice, followed by policy positions. To make this assessment, we carry out individual marginal component analyses (IMCE), predicting the propensity to support a candidate, given each of her attributes. We then take the mean absolute values of these attribute IMCEs. This gives us a measure of the average strength of each attribute and each of its levels.

Figure 2 demonstrates the overall importance of each attribute. Each point on the plot shows the absolute effect of each attribute level, which the bars take the mean of these effects, giving us a sense of the overall mean absolute effect – or importance – of each attribute on individual vote choice.

The figure largely supports our hypotheses. First, in line with hypothesis 1.1, it shows that partisanship and judicial status with respect to corruption are the two most important attributes. Communist past is fourth, trumped only by candidates' position on migration. In sum, three out of the four most important attributes are those advanced

Figure 1: Conditional marginal means



Note: all respondents.

by Hypothesis 1.1. The figure also supports Hypothesis 1.2 concerning the secondary importance of policies in vote choice. All four candidates' policy positions matter more than their occupation and gender, and only migration matters more than the candidate's communist past.

In the next section we turn address the results relating to the theoretical core of our paper, namely how individual level characteristics interact with candidate attributes to influence vote choice.

### 5.3 Effects by individual political behavior

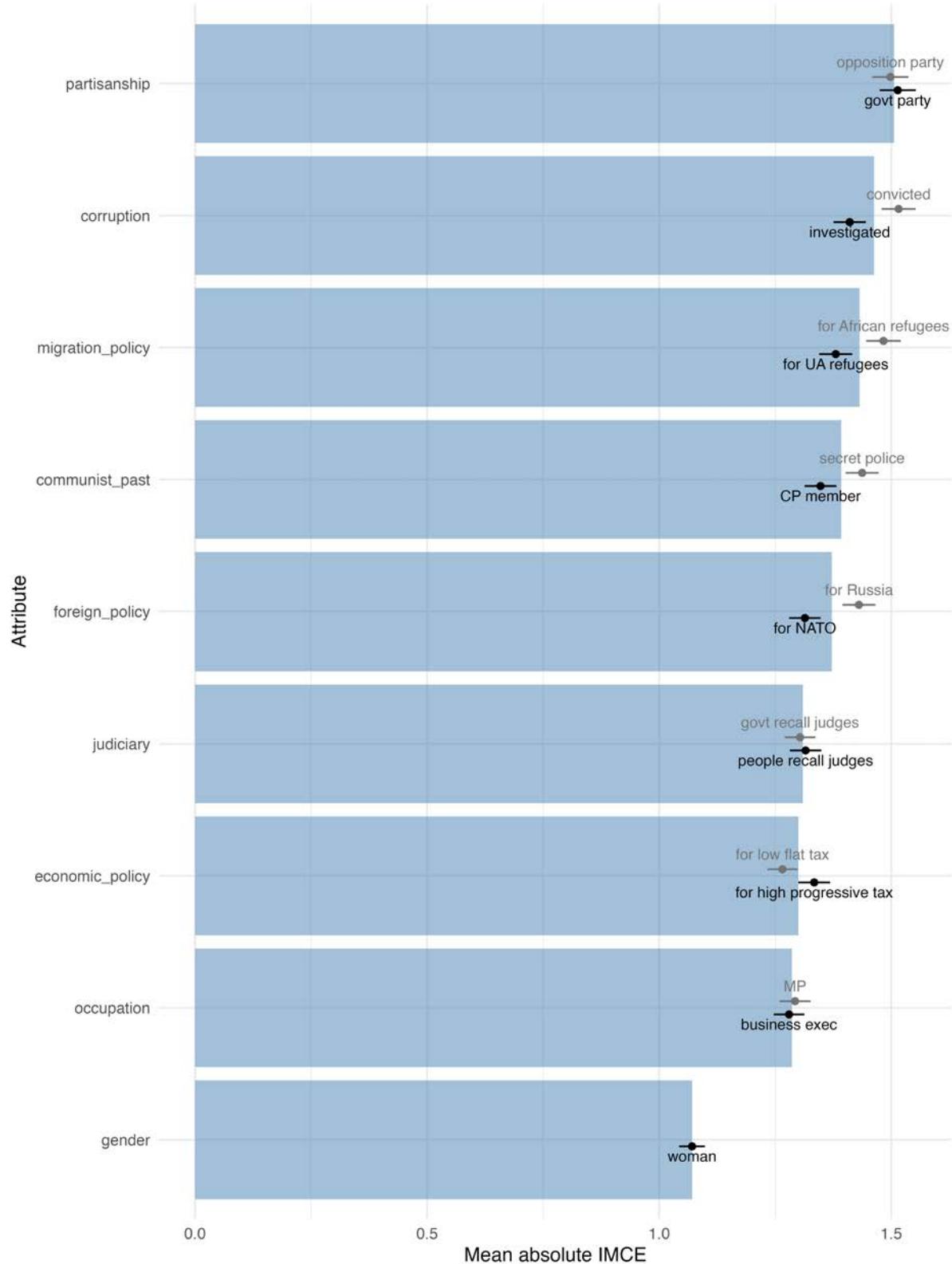
We now consider the individual political proclivities of our respondents, and assess whether ideologically distinct individuals evaluate presidential candidates and their attributes differently. To test Hypothesis 2, we examine whether individuals are more likely to prefer candidates who issue from political parties they reported voting for. We thus estimate the continuous likelihood that a respondent select a given candidate as a function of the candidate's partisan attributes (representative of the governing party, main opposition party, or non-partisan) in interaction with how the respondent reported voting in the previous parliamentary elections, a question we asked prior to the conjoint experiment, while controlling for all other candidate attributes.

Figure 3 presents the results of predicting the support for a candidate (y-axis) as a function of respondent vote (x-axis) and candidate partisanship. All other attributes are controlled for. Supporting hypothesis 2, it shows that respondents are significantly more likely to prefer candidates that issue from parties they themselves supported in previous parliamentary elections. Interestingly, respondents who did not vote for either the governing or main opposition parties tend to prefer non-partisan candidates.

In the next step, we estimate Individual Marginal Component Effects (IMCEs) for each individual and each candidate attribute. This means that we predict the propensity of an individual to select a candidate as a function of the candidate's attributes. We then use these IMCEs as dependent variables, and predict which individual-level ideological characteristics determine the importance of each candidate attribute in electoral decision-making, while controlling for a number of individual socio-demographics: year of birth, education, rural v. urban residence, subjective income, secularism, and interest in politics. Given that the dependent variable is an estimate, we weight the estimation with the uncertainty of the estimate in line with Lewis and Linzer (2005). The results are summarized in Figure 4. Figures A3 and A4 in Appendix C provide robustness checks of these estimations using Marginal Means and Average Marginal Component Effects. These alternative analyses lead to substantively comparable conclusions.

Figure 4 presents the results predicting IMCEs of each candidate attribute as a function of individual voter political positioning – symbolic anti-communism, cultural conser-

Figure 2: Importance of attributes



Note: All respondents. Each point shows the mean absolute IMCE for the given attribute level. Bars take the mean of these levels, measuring the general absolute effect of the attribute.

Figure 3: Candidate partisanship and support

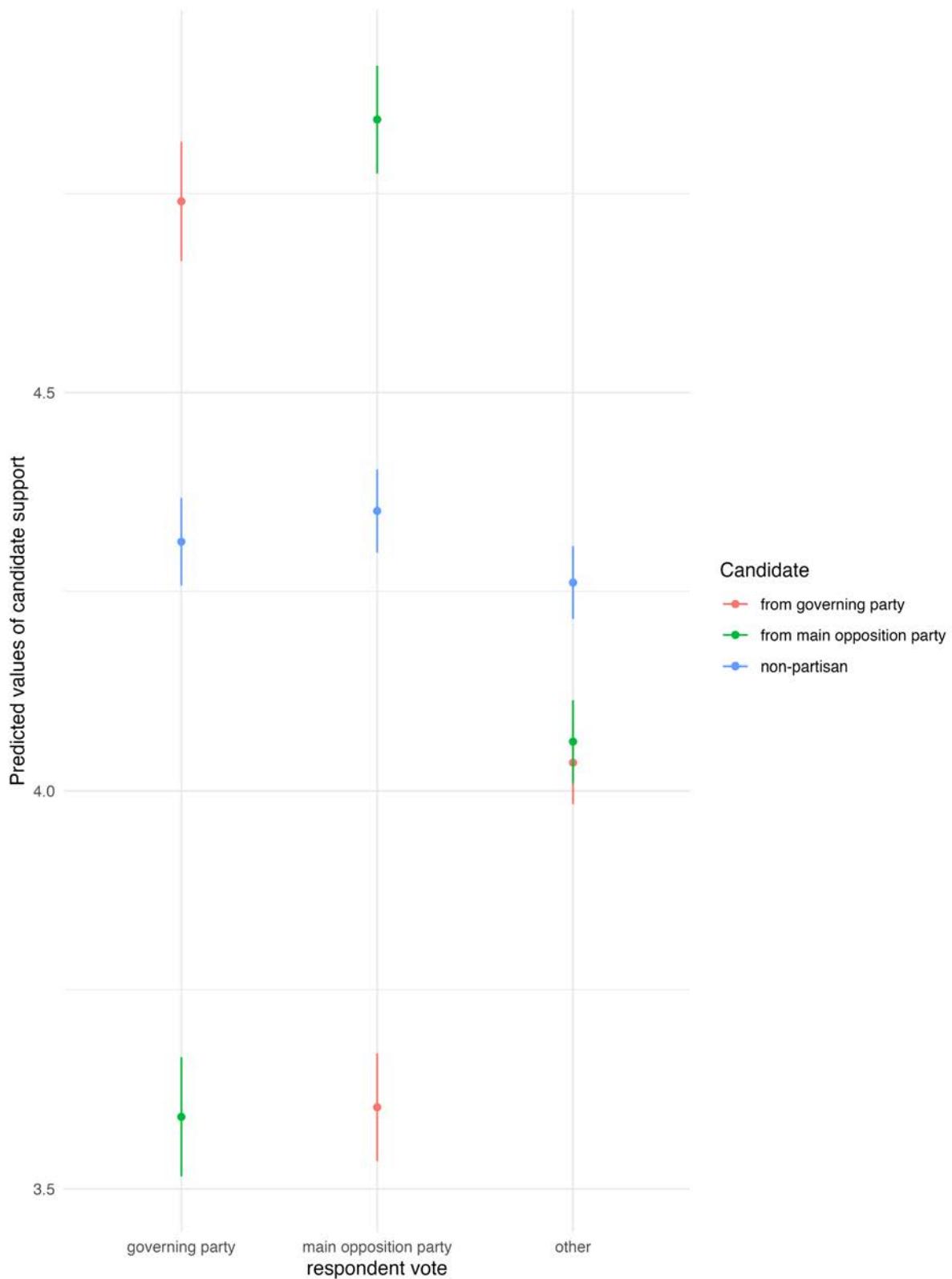
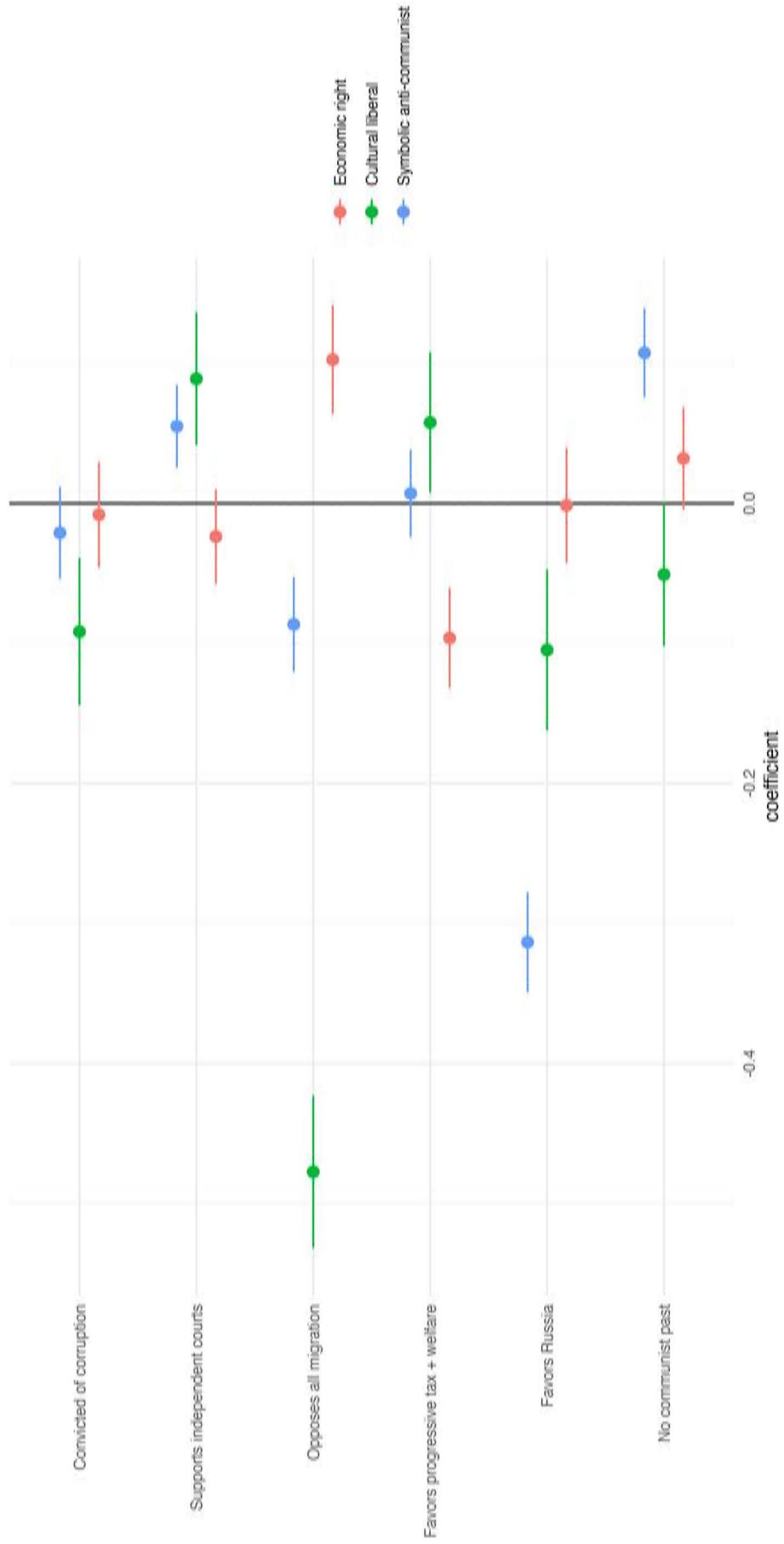


Figure 4: Individual Marginal Component Effects



Note: all respondents. All models control for individual: year of birth, education, rural v. urban residence, subjective income, secularism, and interest in politics.

vatism versus liberalism, and economic left-right preferences. Let us consider the results in turn.

First, concerning communist past, symbolic anti-communist voters are much more likely to support candidates without a communist past than individuals who do not oppose communism, in line with our hypothesis 2.1. Second, candidates favoring stronger ties with Russia are particularly strongly repulsive for anti-communist individuals in line with Hypothesis 2.2, and to a lesser extent to cultural liberals. There is no effect for economic right-wingers. Third, and in line with our hypothesis 2.3, candidates favoring progressive taxes and welfare are significantly less supported by economic right-wingers than left-wingers. Interestingly, they are slightly but significantly more likely to be supported by cultural liberals. Four, and in line with our expectations in hypothesis 2.4, cultural liberals are very strongly more likely to reject candidates that oppose all migration than cultural conservatives. Finally, supporting our hypothesis 2.5, cultural liberals as well as symbolic anti-communists are significantly more likely to support candidates that favor independent courts, as opposed to supporters of communism and cultural conservatives.

Interestingly, these analyses considering the interaction between candidate attributes and voter characteristics highlight the importance of non-economic issues. Economic left-right placement only predicts how individuals engage with candidate positions on taxation and welfare, and migration. In both cases, the predictions for economic preferences are substantively modest. In comparison, cultural and symbolic anti-communist preferences are in almost all cases statistically significant, and often substantively strong predictors of candidate support. This finding highlights the importance of non-economic preferences in the electoral considerations of voters in presidential elections.

In the final step we turn to consider the importance of different electoral trade-offs that voters may face in light of their own preferences. The next subsection brings our interpretation of conjoint voting behavior closer to real-world conditions by analyzing the combined influence of multiple candidate attributes.

## 5.4 Policy congruence and electoral trade offs

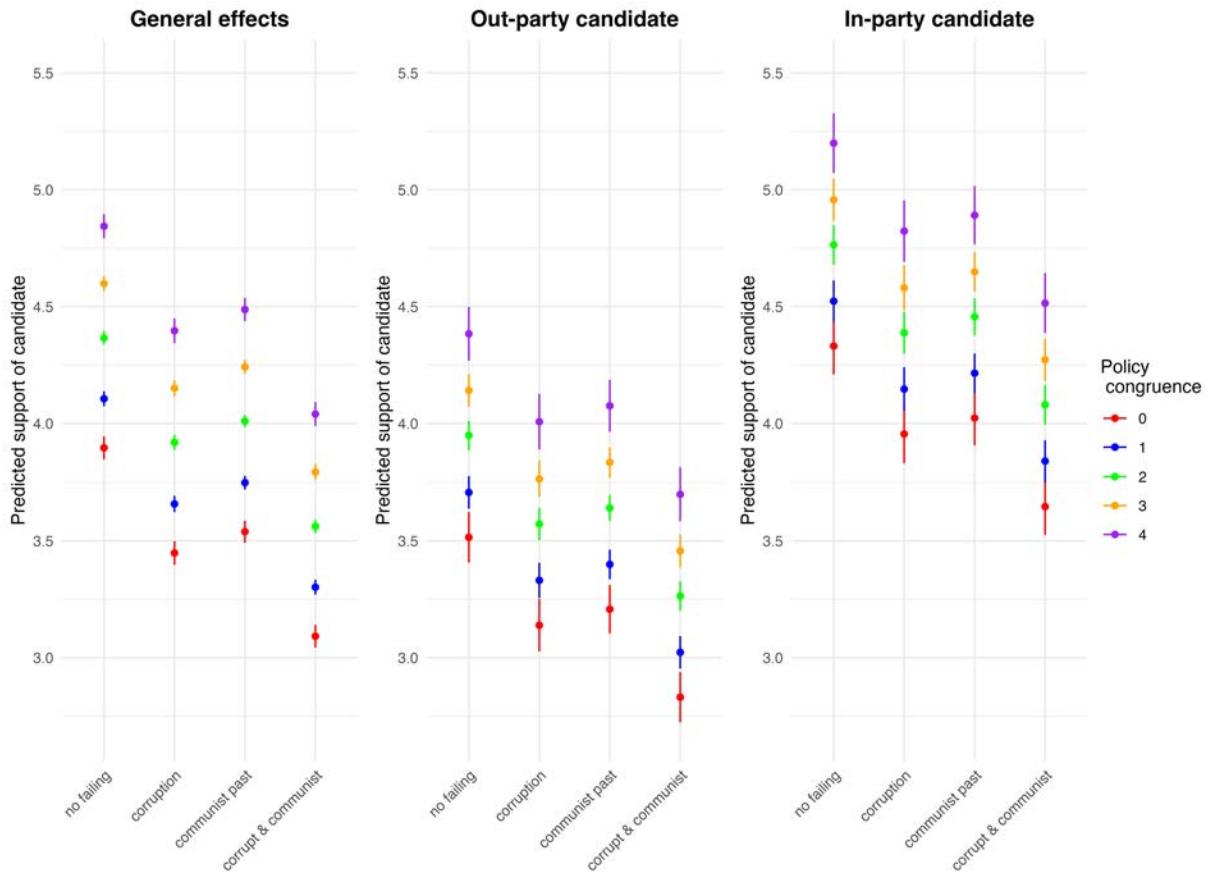
How do voters select candidates who combine desirable and undesirable characteristics? In our final analyses we address whether and when voter agreement with candidates' policy stances can trump undesirable moral characteristics of candidates.

Specifically, we consider candidate-voter congruence on four policy issues we measured in our conjoint analysis; economic preferences over taxation and welfare; immigration preferences; foreign policy preferences; and democratic preferences concerning the independence of the judiciary. A voter can be programmatically congruent with a given candidate on none, some, or all four policies. In addition, we also vary whether the can-

dicate issues from a party that the voter supports (in-party candidate) or from another party (out-party candidate).

We then consider how voter-candidate congruence influences the propensity to support a candidate, given that this candidate has no moral failings (was not convicted of corruption, and was not a member of the communist party); if she has was convicted of corruption; if she was a communist party member; or if she was both – a party member and convicted of corruption.

Figure 5: Candidate Selection Tradeoffs by Candidate Type



Note: Based on AMCE calculations. All respondents. All other attributes as controls.

Figure 5 presents the predicted support of a different types of candidate. The left panel presents the general effects, regardless of partisanship, while the middle and right panel report the results for out-party candidates and in-party candidates respectively. The color scheme varies the number of policies a voter agrees with the candidate on – ranging from zero to all four.

The figure demonstrates an important set of findings. First, candidates that have no moral failings are generally preferred to candidates with a communist past or convicted of corruption. Second, and importantly, policy congruence can trump moral failings. That is, candidates that are convicted of corruption, but that agree with a voter on three or

four policy goals are preferred to candidates without moral failing that do not agree with the voter on any policy. Third, the effect of policy congruence is powerful enough that it can trump serious moral failure. Voters prefer a candidate who is both convicted of corruption and has a communist past over a candidate without moral failings, as long as the candidate agrees with the voter on all four policies. Finally, if we consider the combination of policy congruence and partisanship, the figure demonstrates that in-party candidates who are corrupt and have a communist past, but who are congruent on as little as one policy area (blue point on the extreme right of the right panel in figure 5) are preferred over out-party candidates with no moral failings who do not share any policy congruence (red point on the extreme left of the middle panel of figure 5).

These results underscore the interactive nature of candidate attributes and voter preferences. They emphasize the fact that candidate moral failure can be trumped by congruence on policy issues, particularly if this is reinforced by voter candidate co-partisanship. They suggest that when candidates are represented by a more comprehensive set of attributes, rather than a single or limited few, and citizens' ideology is taken into account, conjoint responses can closely approximate actual voting behavior in which candidates' moral standing usually matters much less than expected.

## 6 Conclusion

This article addressed the electoral calculus in presidential elections in Europe. Presidential office, frequently seeking to represent the nation while seemingly above daily political fray, is endowed with important symbolic connotations. Evaluation of presidential candidates – necessarily individual persons – is thus steeped in questions of individual character.

Using experimental methods and an original dataset spanning over 12,000 respondents, this article shows that, when taken individually, there is a relatively clear hierarchy of candidate attributes in vote choice. On average, party affiliation and moral integrity carry more weight than policy positions, which in turn outweigh socio-demographic characteristics.

However, in practice, candidate attributes interact with individual voter characteristics to determine electoral outcomes. When we incorporate respondents' ideology, the importance of candidates' policy positions, especially geopolitical orientations, and views on migration, comes to the fore. The article highlights three key dimensions of individual voters – economic left-right placement, cultural liberal-conservative placement, and symbolic support of or opposition to communism. The results underscore that presidential candidate attributes matter differently across these diverse voter types. While candidate authoritarian past and geopolitical orientation matters most for symbolic anti-communists; migration and constitutional stances are most determinant for cultural lib-

erals. This ultimately outlines the crucial role played by non-economic concerns in presidential electoral choice.

Furthermore, the article demonstrates the power of policy agreement between voters and candidates in presidential vote choice, revealing that policy congruence can trump moral failings. We show that although the ethical character of candidates matters, voters are willing to support candidates convicted of corruption or with a communist past over candidates without such breeches of integrity, if they agree with them on a set of policy positions. This effect is further reinforced by partisanship. This importantly highlights the powerful role of policy interests in presidential campaigns, even in cases where presidents do not directly decide on policy matters. Descriptive traits such as gender or occupation exert only negligible effects.

Importantly, our findings offer a straightforward explanation for the corruption voting paradox. They show that the apparent discrepancy between voting behavior in survey experiments and real-world outcomes is not inevitable. When conjoint experiment results are interpreted appropriately—accounting for respondents’ characteristics and presenting candidates as realistically complex combinations of attributes—they reveal that voters may prefer candidates with moral failings over more upright alternatives, just as they do in real-world elections.

From a geographic perspective, studying the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia in comparison with France, this article demonstrates the comparability of Eastern European political systems with direct presidential elections to the quintessential Western European semi-presidential system. The results across these five cases provide strikingly similar results.

Of course, the present findings carry limitations in that they come from an experimental setting and do not incorporate factors such as election campaigns or candidates’ charisma. However, prior research showed that conjoint experiments can achieve a high degree of external validity (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015). There is no reason to believe that the present findings do not reflect real-world behavior when the omitted factors are controlled for. Future studies should test this assumption and replicate our analyses using observational data from presidential elections.

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These are the Appendices to the paper “Policies Not Personas: How Ideology Trumps Moral Failings in Electoral Decision-Making”

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## Appendix A: Pre-registered Hypotheses from Section 3.1

The following hypotheses and their justification were preregistered, and they were empirically corroborated by our results (see Section 5.1). However, to streamline our analyses, we present them as simple expectations in Analysis 3.1:

We focus on multiple dimensions of vote choice. First, we consider the socio-demographic characteristics of candidates, such as gender and occupation. We do not have strong expectations of the effect of gender and occupation.

Second, we focus on the influence of authoritarian past of candidates. There is reason to believe that the relevance of authoritarian past fades soon after democratic transitions (Bermeo 1987; Grzymala-Busse 2002), and that voters do not consistently sanction politicians for their authoritarian pasts (Loxton and Power 2021; LeBas and Gray 2021). Ex-authoritarian organizations able to replace the most compromised politicians and change their label, are in a significantly better position than individual ex-authoritarian candidates running in presidential contests. At the same time, especially in countries in which the authoritarian regime was repressive, such as in Czechoslovakia (Kitschelt et al. 1999), association with the authoritarian regime and its crimes should still bear a stigma that is salient to some voters.

**Hypothesis 4 (H1.1):** *Communist past exerts a negative effect on vote choice*

The third dimension that we explore is the legal status of the candidate, specifically, whether or not they are suspected or convicted of corruption. There is significant experimental evidence that corruption charges are detrimental to politicians' election prospects (Incerti, 2020), and many real-life examples of suspicion or conviction of political candidates.

**Hypothesis 5 (H1.2):** *Corruption charges have a negative effect on vote choice*

The fourth dimension under consideration are the foreign views of candidates, namely whether geo-political orientation towards western international structures (NATO), versus eastern orientation towards Russia, or preferences for strict geo-political neutrality, matter in vote choice. We hypothesize that, in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, pro-Russian positions will be penalizing to candidates.

**Hypothesis 6 (H1.3):** *Orientation towards Russia exerts a negative effect on vote choice*

Fifth and sixth dimensions consider economic and migration programmatic positions of the candidate. Earlier studies show that voting behavior in new democracies reflects retrospective economic voting (Tucker 2002), policy positions (Tavits and Letki 2014), social cleavages (Rovny 2015), valence issues (Hanley and Sikk 2016) and, in less developed contexts, clientelism (Kitschelt and Altamirano 2015). However, the explanatory power of the different factors was rarely explicitly compared. In those political systems where the president lacks significant legislative, executive or budgetary powers, as is the case in Slovakia or Poland, policy issues and economic performance presumably matter less than in party competition. However, globally (un)popular policy stances that resonate with public opinion are likely to have a significant effect on candidates' electoral prospects. In this sense, we hypothesize that particularly salient socio-cultural issues, such as migration, to play an important role.

**Hypothesis 7 (H1.4):** *Favoring the acceptance of refugees from Africa and the Middle East exerts a negative effect on vote choice.*

The seventh dimension concerns democratic views and studies the candidate's attitude towards the democratic functioning of the state, probed by his or her stances on the independence of the judiciary. We expect that the candidate's support of the judiciary's independence (as opposed to its submission to the government or the people) will be favored by respondents.

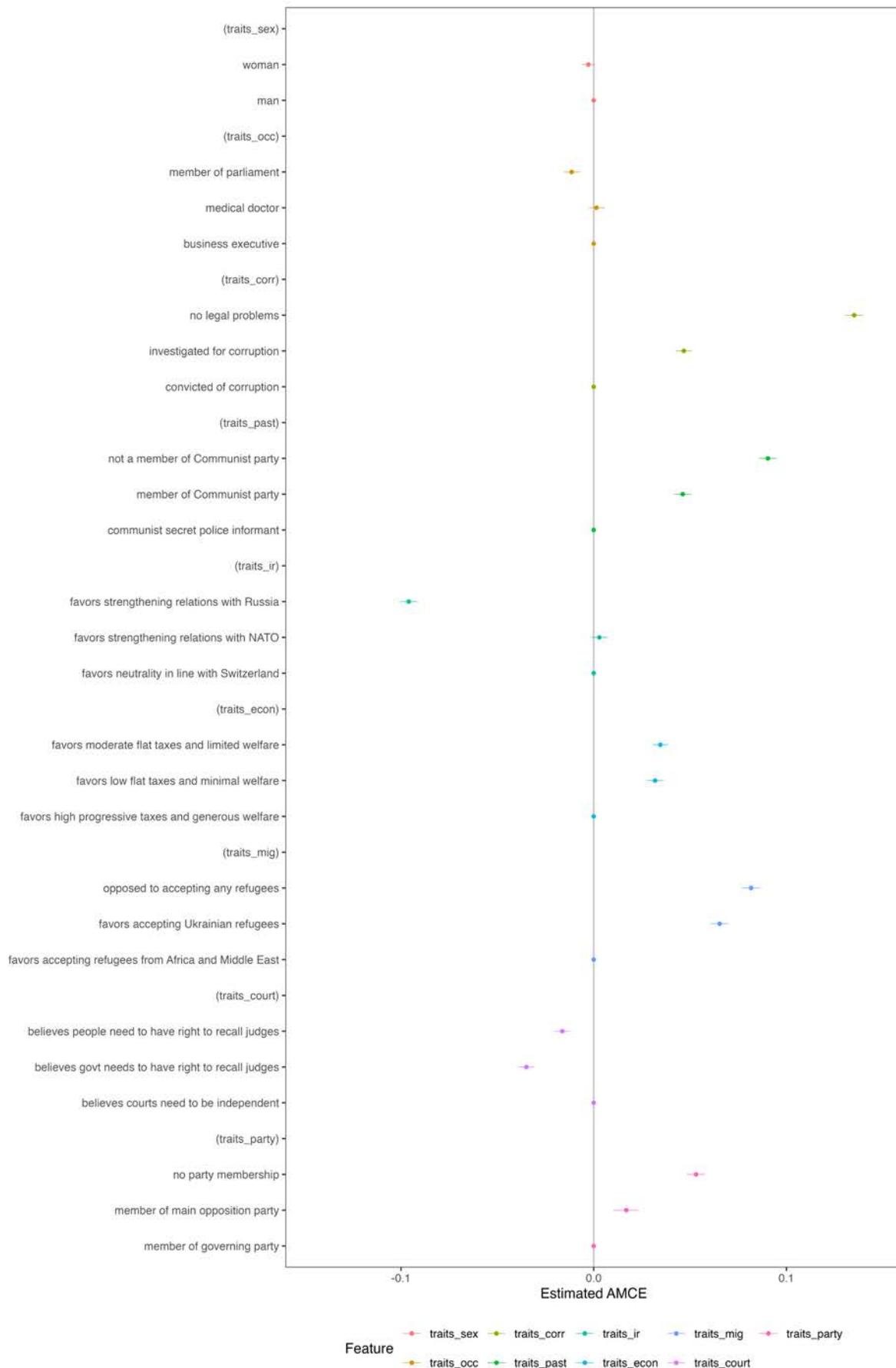
**Hypothesis 8 (H1.5):** *Believing that governments should have the right to recall judges exerts a negative effect on vote choice.*

Finally, we investigate the effect of candidates' membership in political parties, focusing on the main government and main opposition parties. We expect that non-partisan candidates will be globally preferred by respondents, although there are certainly differences based on respondents' party proximity and ideology (see below).

## **Appendix B: Robustness Checks for Section 5.1**

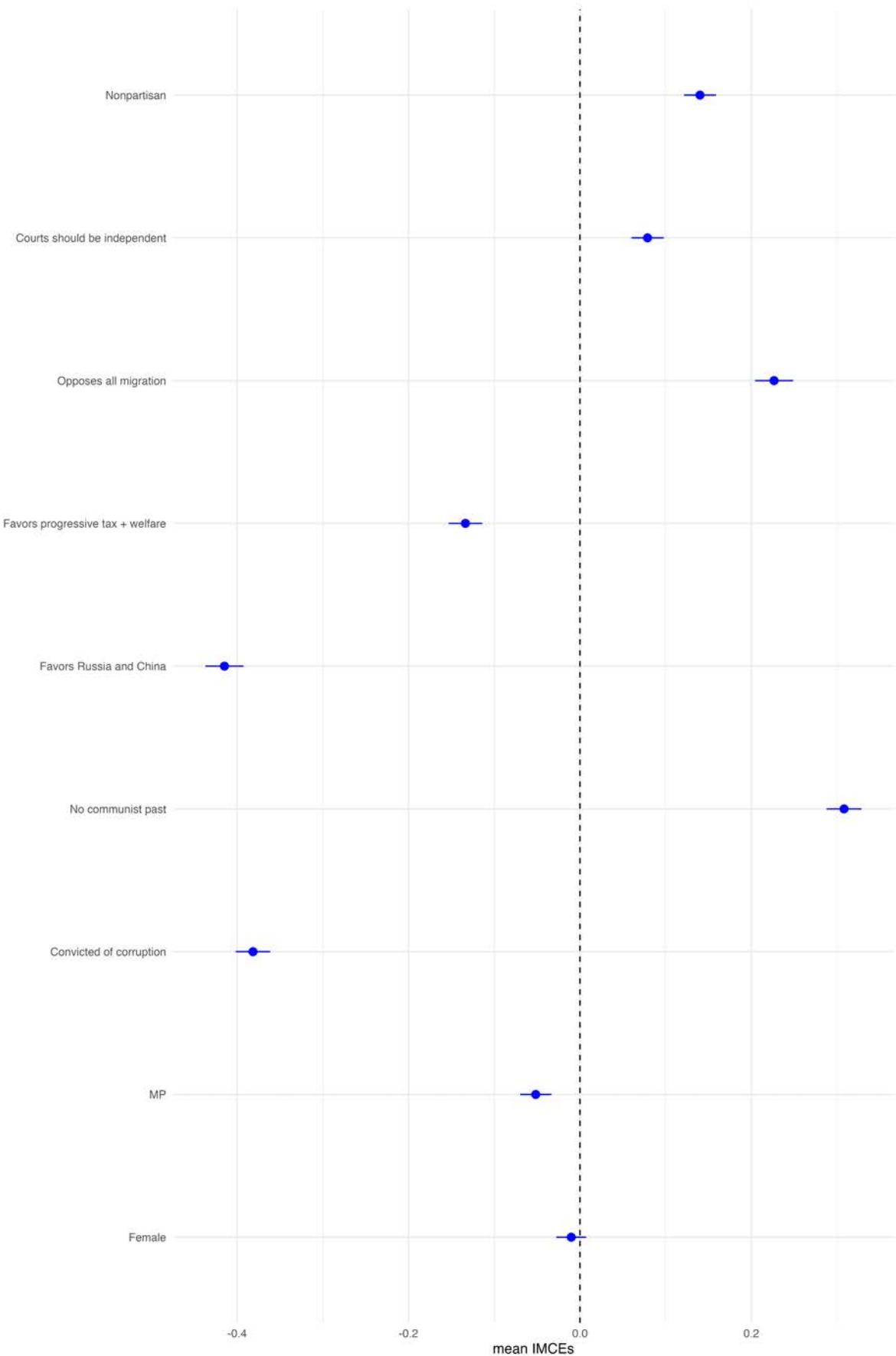
Figures A1 and A2 provide a robustness check for the analyses reported in section 5.1. The results lead to the same substantive conclusions as those reported in the text.

Figure A1: Average Marginal Component Effects



Note: all respondents.

Figure A2: Individual Marginal Component Effects

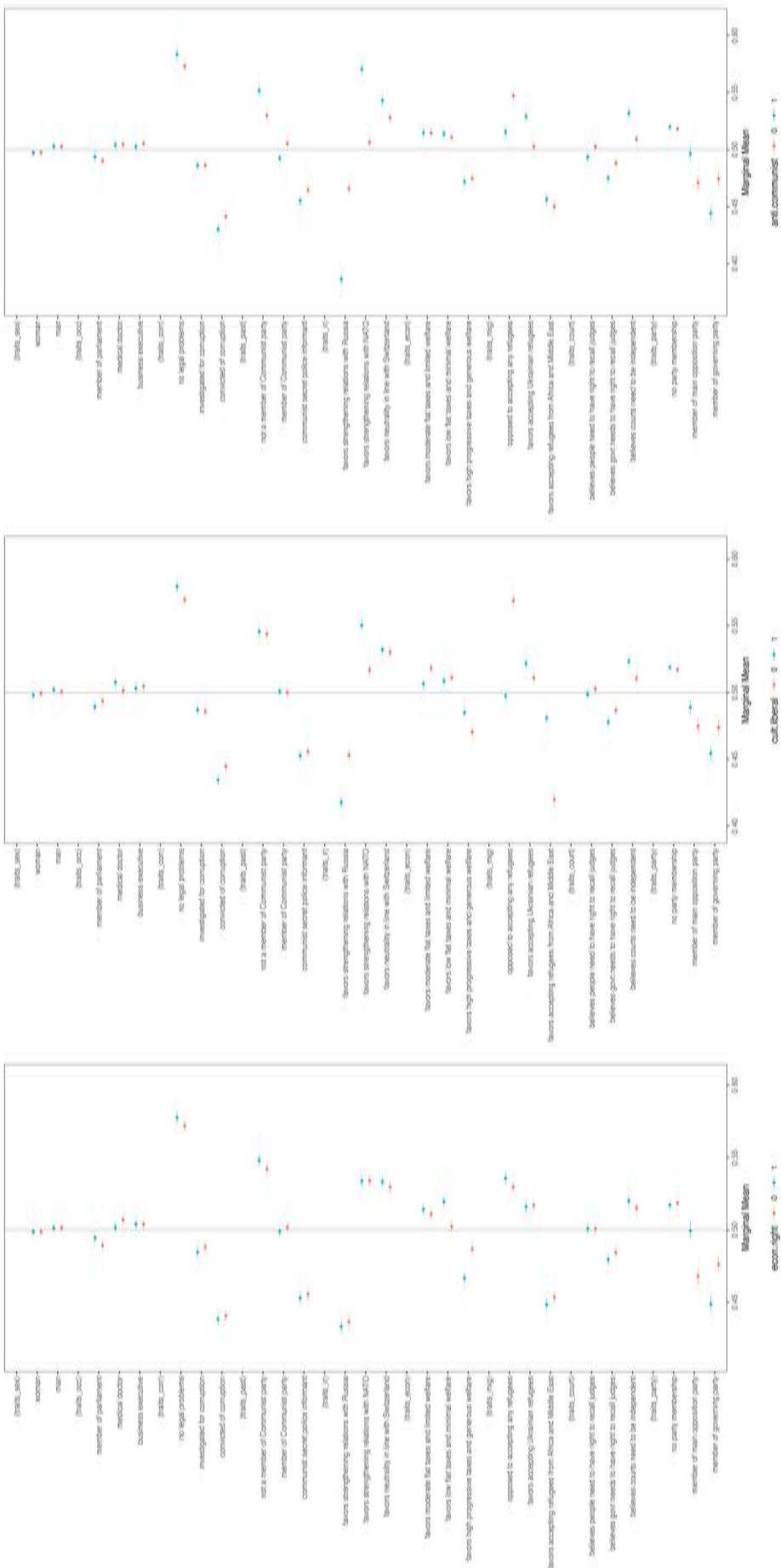


Note: Central and Eastern Europe, all respondents.

## **Appendix C: Robustness Checks for Section 5.3**

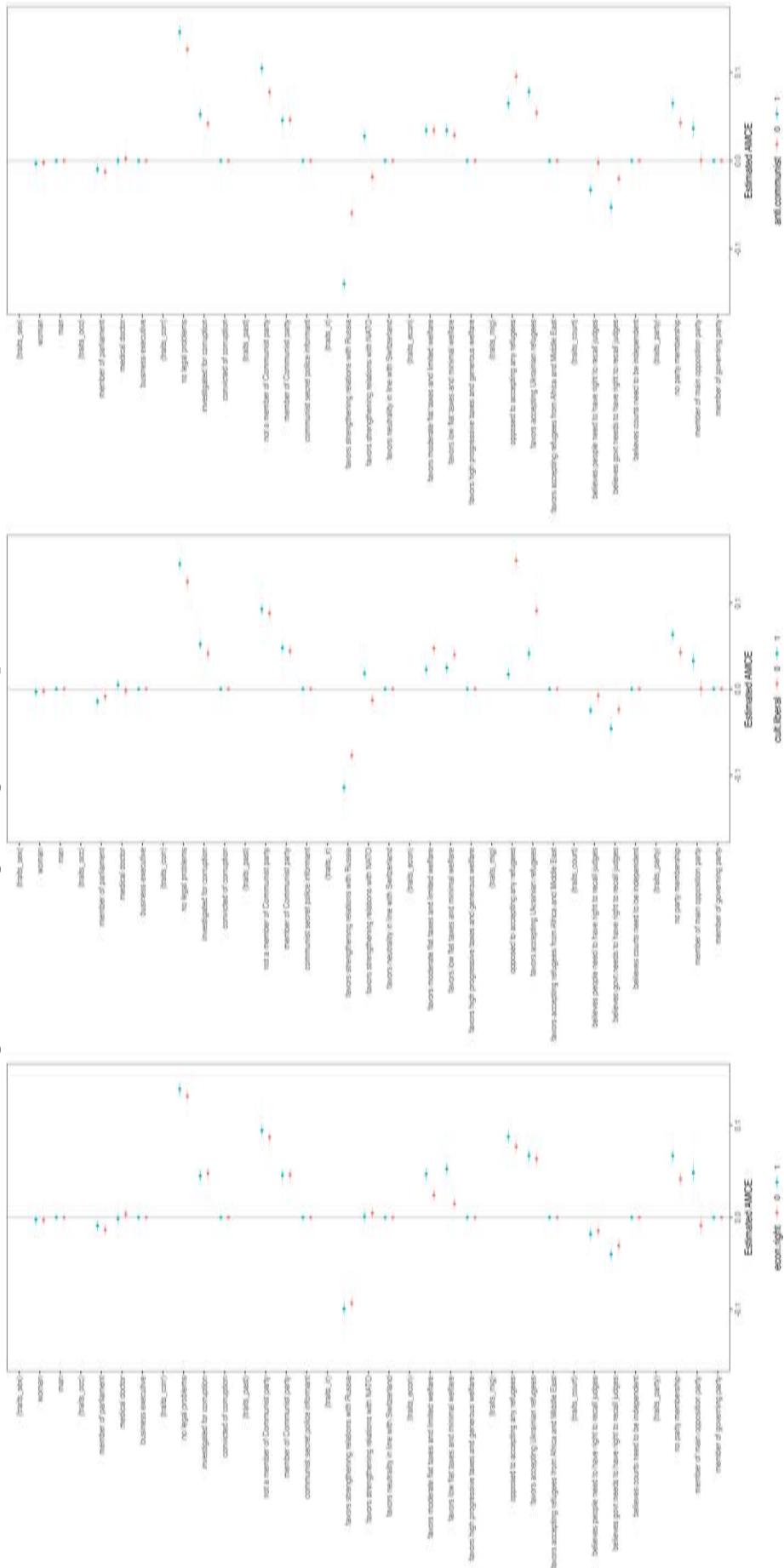
Figures A3 and A4 provide a robustness check for the analyses reported in section 5.3. The results lead to the same substantive conclusions as those reported in the text.

Figure A3: Conditional Marginal Means



Note: respondents by ideology.

Figure A4: Average Marginal Component Effects

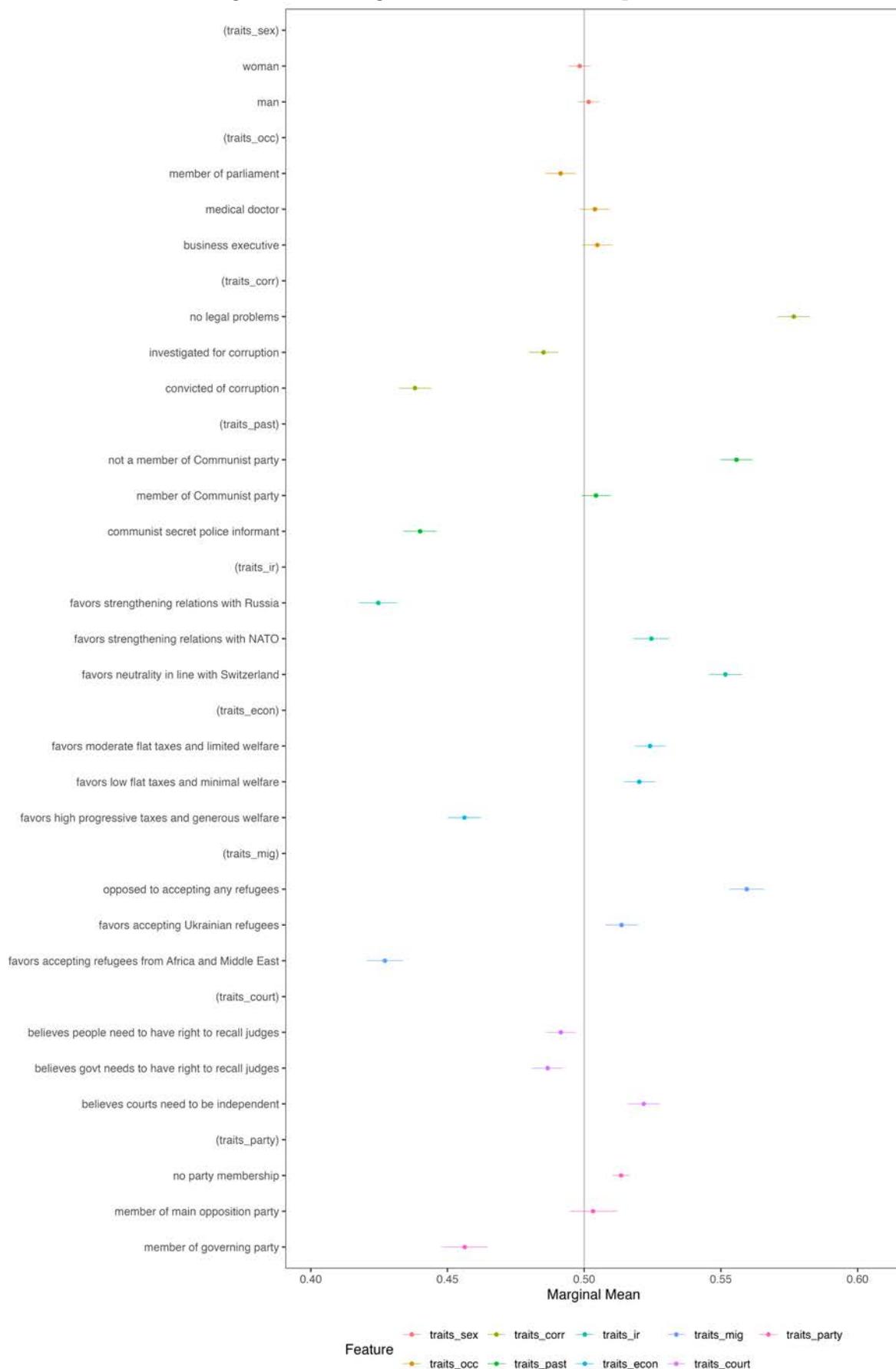


Note: respondents by ideology.

## **Appendix D: Marginal Means by Country**

Figures A5 to A9 provide marginal means analyses by country. They demonstrate the general robustness of the results across our five countries.

Figure A5: Marginal Means - Czech Republic



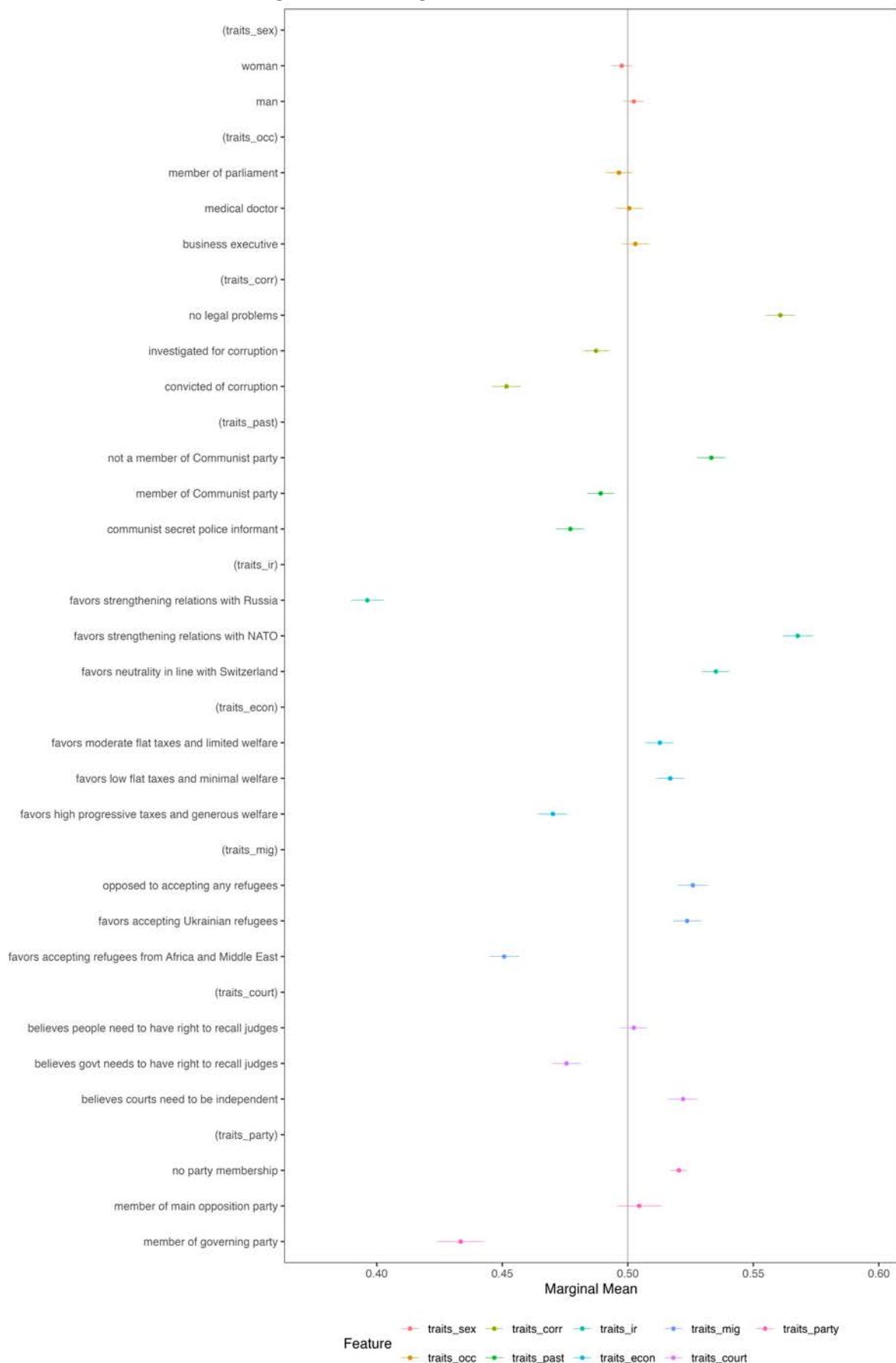
Note: all respondents.

Figure A6: Marginal Means - France



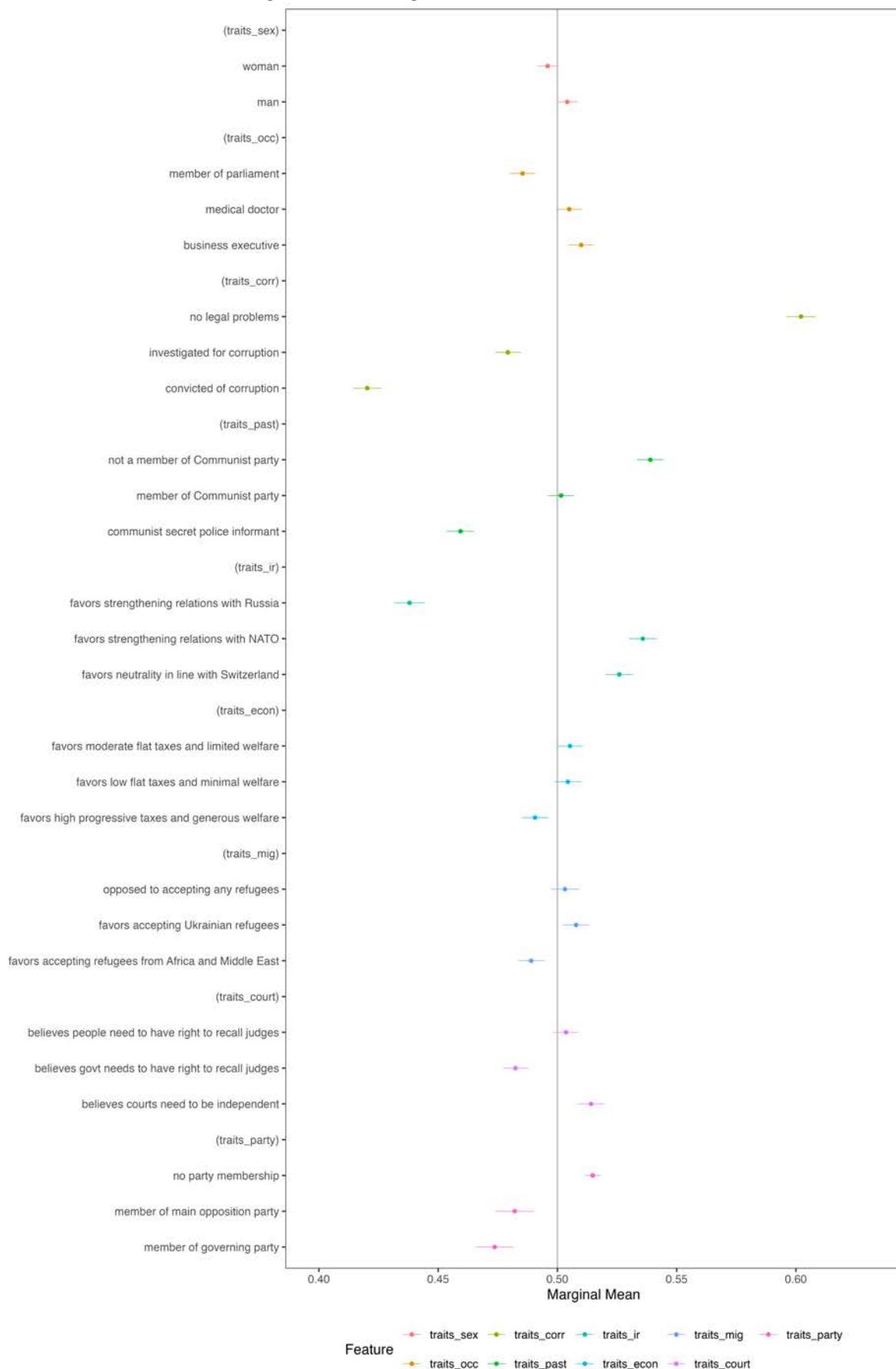
Note: all respondents.

Figure A7: Marginal Means - Poland



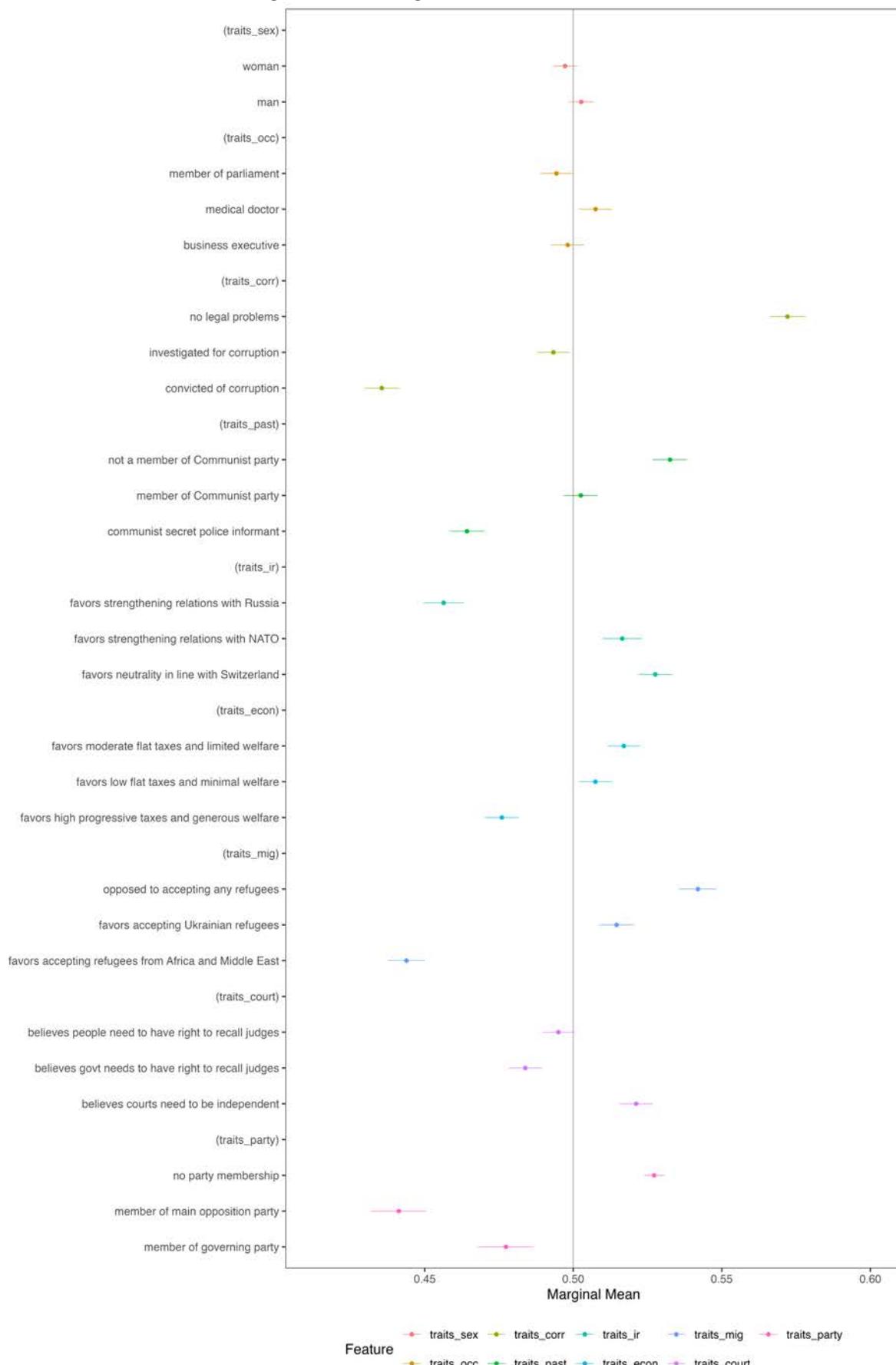
Note: all respondents.

Figure A8: Marginal Means - Romania



Note: all respondents.

Figure A9: Marginal Means - Slovakia



Note: all respondents.