

Character, Policy, Or Partisanship?

Valence Dimensions in American Presidential Elections

A. David Jackson

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Abstract: This paper argues that affective valence dimensions play an important role in determining the vote choice of individuals. It hypothesizes that individuals will vote for a candidate who they consider to better exemplify affective valence characteristics. To find evidence for this claim, ANES data from the 2016, 2020, and 2024 election cycles are used with certain datum transformed into spatial dimension. Evidence is found for honesty in all three cycles. Evidence for the other three valence dimensions used here (knowledge, leadership, and if a candidate really cares) is found in some years but not others. Valence dimensions are more significantly related to vote choice than any of the policy dimensions. Party ID is still by far the strongest predictor of vote choice, and ideology is generally a strong predictor as well.

Introduction: Valence Dimensions in American Elections

In recent presidential elections, attacks on the character of political candidates have been extremely prevalent. Following the Downsian tradition (Downs 1957), spatial theory suggests that the policy position of both voters and candidates is the primary driving force of vote choice. Those who follow the Michigan school (Campbell et al. 1960) argue that partisanship is the primary driving force. Some spatial theorists (see Adams 2001a, 2001b) have tried to reconcile these two views, however, much of the work done has ignored attacks on the character of candidates. Character traits are neither partisan nor policy. If partisanship and/or policy were the only causes of voter behavior, why would a candidate for office spend so much time discussing character traits of their opponents. While this paper does not seek to answer the question of why candidates choose certain tactics over another, it does seek to demonstrate that character traits are important issues to voters.

In this paper, it is argued that there are non-policy spatial dimensions, besides partisanship or ideology, that are important to voters. These dimensions are candidate characteristics. To substantiate this argument, the paper is structured as follows: First, the paper discusses what previous scholars have examined regarding spatial models of voting. Here, the discussion first turns to the Downsian tradition, where policy preference is either the deterministic cause or the primary cause of voter behavior. The literature regarding valence issues in spatial models of voting is then reviewed. The paper then examines how ANES data from the three most recent presidential election cycles (2016, 2020, and 2024) are used to create spatial variables for the analysis. The findings are then presented, showing solid evidence supporting the theory. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings, both in terms of advancing the literature on spatial models and valence dimensions

within spatial models, as well as voting behavior more generally. The normative implications of these findings are also discussed.

Throughout this paper, the terms valence issues and valence dimensions as well as policy issues and dimensions are used interchangeably. This approach is taken because valence and policy issues exist in the real world, while the dimensions exist only in the spatial models under discussion. In other words, dimensions are merely the transference of valence and policy issues into a formal spatial model. Valence dimensions will also be referred to as either character issues or partisanship, rather than simply as valence dimensions. Formal and spatial models and theory are also used interchangeably, as is quite typical.

Spatial Models and the Policy Dimension(s)

In Downs' (1957) seminal work, he argues that rational actors vote for political candidates whom they perceive to have similar policy stances to them. He conceptualizes a spatial market of policy preference points, where a voter chooses a candidate based on the distance to said candidate, similar to how a shopper will go to a store that is in closer proximity to them than another (see Smithies 1941). This formulation of political behavior was the foundation of the spatial theory of voting. Spatial theorists thus argue that the primary motivation for voters choosing one candidate or party over another is policy preference.

The theoretical work done by formal theorists seems to contradict empirical findings by Campbell et al. (1960. See also Lewis-Beck et al. 2008) which suggest that partisanship seems to be the primary determinant of voter's political behavior. Campbell et al. argue that individuals develop certain political attitudes through socialization during their youth. The primary attitude they develop is what party they identify with. For this reason, the party of an individual's parents

is the primary driving force of what party an individual identify with, and by extent, who they will generally vote for. While there has been empirical work by spatial modelers and formal theorists more generally, most of the work that initially followed Downs was more theoretical in nature. For these reasons and others these two schools of thought, the rational choice school, and the Michigan school—have generally been at odds with each other since.

Not long after Campbell et al. (1960), however, Stokes (1963) argued that the spatial theory of voting was not incorrect, but that there were multiple dimensions that voters took into account when deciding who they would vote for. These dimensions included policy and non-policy or *valence* dimensions (pp. 372-374). According to Stokes, the number of policy dimensions is not exactly limited to one, two, or three policies, and the ordering of these dimensions is not identical across all voters (pp. 370, 372). While Stokes provides some high level theorizing about policy dimensions, formal theorists following them formalize his ideas by developing theoretical models that consider multiple dimensions as well as the weighting and separability of policy dimensions. Enelow and Hinich (1984) develop an advanced formal model that allows theorists to consider how much weight voters place on one dimension over another and if policy packages can be separated into two dimensions. However, their work can easily be applied to more dimensions in practice, in fact they talk about how they used two dimensions merely for simplicity (pp. 53-61). Hinich and Munger (1997) also look at multi-dimensional weighted spatial models of voting and discuss the roll of uncertainty in voting behavior.

Other theorists use spatial models with different assumptions than Downs does. Grofman (1985) proposes a discounting model, which is still a proximity model (a model where voters choose a candidate who has a closer policy position), where voters discount certain politicians proposed policy points. This means that a voter may vote for a candidate who is not in close

proximity to their preference point if the probability that candidate can affect that change, instead voting for a candidate who may be further but more likely to do what they say they will.

Reynolds (1974), Matthews (1979), Rabinowitz (1973, 1978), and Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989; see also Rabinowitz, Macdonald, and Listhaug 1991) argue for *directional* rather than proximity models. These types of models suggest that voters would vote for candidates who are more likely to drag the status quo towards their ideal policy—suggesting that voters would mostly vote for more extreme candidates. Merrill III and Grofman (1999) proposed a unified model that utilizes both proximity and directional variables. When testing their theory empirically, they find support for a unified model in two-party and multi-party systems.

Valence Dimension(s)

The idea of valence dimensions is quite broad but can be summarized as non-policy issues that affect a voter's choice of candidate in an election. In this paper, valence dimensions are divided into three different types that are generally supported by literature. The first type is partisanship, the second relates to objective non-policy circumstances, while the final, which are the focus of this this paper, is affective valence issues. The second and third types may appear to be related as objective non-policy circumstances may include descriptive characteristics or traits of candidate, but Endersby (1994) separates descriptive traits (which are included in the second type) and affective traits. Affective measures of valence issues refer to a type of personal characteristics or traits as perceived by individual voters. The idea of partisanship is quite clearly a non-policy issue and is related to the political behavior of voters as discussed above (Campbell et al. 1960), so this paper does not cover it in greater detail here. The second type refers to any number of things that are not related to policy directly, not directly related to partisan attachment, but are also objective circumstances or traits of the political situation, or of the candidate. Some

examples of this broad type of valence issues include the state of the economy, if a country is at war, if a politician is an incumbent, or if a politician is good at raising money. These types of valence issues do not change based on individual perception (though individual reaction to them might). The final type of valence issue, and the focus of this paper, is affective valence issues. These types of valence issues are evaluations by individual voters and are generally characteristics or traits of candidates by voters. The level of morality, competence, honesty, or leadership ability is not an objective circumstance but an individual level evaluation of candidates' behavior and actions. This paper will discuss these three types of valence dimensions and how they fit into the literature below.

James Adams discusses partisanship as perhaps the most important valence dimension in determining vote choice (2001a, 2001b). His work begins by questioning the apparent discrepancy between spatial models of voting and empirical studies by both Campbell et al. (1960) and the Manifesto Research Group. In particular, he sought to understand why parties offer stable policy platforms and what factors lead to vote choice by individual voters. He first argues that voters are "biased" (2001b, p. 123). Based on findings from Campbell et al (1960), Adams suggests that voters develop attachments to parties that are not founded in policy positions of them or of the parties. Because voters are biased, parties have to act responsibly by offering stable policy platforms for fear of alienating voters who are biased towards them while being unable to win over voters who are biased towards another party (Adams 2001a, pp. 33-48). Adams finds out, quite unsurprisingly, that including the biases of voters into a spatial model of voting works extremely well when trying to predict vote choice in multiparty systems (Adams 2001b, pp. 96-97). The model does not work as well at describing the policy stability in the

United States because of the nature of the party system; however, the general idea does seem to translate when considering abstention due to alienation (pp. 164-165)

Stokes (1963) argues that there are connections that individuals may have to parties because of religious or racial reasons or because of the current state of the economy (not the economic policy) or if the country was at war or not (not either party's policy regarding war) as a few types of valence issues (p. 370). Enelow and Hinich (1984) argue that valence dimensions include the religion, ethnic background, or even skin color of a candidate are important valence issues that voters consider (p. 80). Importantly, they argue that these types of valence issues are static and do not change one way or another between voters (p. 80). A Catholic candidate is Catholic to supporters and non-supporters alike. Some voters may evaluate these valence issues differently; the valence issues themselves are static and objective. Endersby (1994) argues for a set of valence issues that are *descriptive* in nature (p. 251). These include the age, ethnicity, religion, or personal background of a candidate. Adams and Merrill III (2008) discuss campaigning skills as an important type of valence dimension and find support for argument both formally and empirically. Campaigning skills are a type of valence dimension that is not perceived by voters but is not a policy issue. Rather, it deals with the objective status of a candidate to do something. Adams et al. (2011) posits that incumbency is a type of valence dimension that is often weighed against affective valence dimensions. Incumbency falls under what Endersby calls a description of a candidate and is an objective characteristic of the existing circumstances.

The final type of valence dimensions, and the type that this paper focuses on, is affective valence. These valence dimensions related to how voters perceive the personal characteristics or traits of a candidate or party. It is important to note that this is separate from *descriptive*

characteristics of candidates because they are evaluations of candidate behavior by voters and thus change from individual to individual. This separation was not clearly defined, Enelow and Hinich (1984) group these two types together saying that valence dimensions are any non-policy dimensions and that all valence issues are viewed the same by the public (p. 80). Endersby (1994) originally separates these two types from each other because, although most people probably prefer a moral or honest candidate, they do not necessarily share the evaluations of a candidate's morality or honesty (p. 251). Adams and Merrill III (2009) discuss the tension between valence dimensions and policy positions of parties and find that parties tend to adjust their policy positioning *if* they feel they are not performing strongly on a valence dimension as a way to secure more votes. Similarly, Adams et al. (2011) find that challengers to incumbents who are perceived as displaying stronger valence characteristics have an incentive to moderate their policy positions. These papers taken together seem to suggest that there is an interplay between policy dimensions and affective valence dimensions. Zur (2021) argues that centrist parties in multiparty systems need to display appear to do better in valence issues than non-centrist parties or they will lose support. Much of the work done on valence issues focuses on how it affects the positioning and action of parties or candidates. This paper proposes to look at how affective valence dimensions impact the vote choice of individuals.

Theory

This paper argues that valence issues have a significant impact on a voter's calculus of who to vote for. Its addition to the literature is that personal characteristics of a candidate play a significant role in a voter's calculus. In line with the rational choice and spatial theory school, this paper argues that voters and politicians are rational actors. The author does not think that voters always choose what is the objectively best choice for them, rather they seek to obtain

information about which candidate or party they should vote for based on who they think can implement policy that is most likely to provide them with goods and services they think they need. This means that the steps which a voter must go through in order to decide who to vote for is as follows: 1) decide what they want 2) decide what policy is most likely to achieve what they want, and 3) decide which party is most likely to enact those policies. While this seems obvious, it sets up the high information costs on voters in order for them to participate in the election process. Most voters generally want things such as safety and a stable economy. However, the cost voters need to expend to find out what the best way to pass legislation relating to safety and a stable economy is very high. These high costs are a serious limit on the ability of a voter to choose which party or candidate to select.

The most common way voters circumvent the limitation of high information costs is by using heuristics to create mental shortcuts. The most notable way they do this is through identifying with a political party. This solves the information limitation for the second and third point above. While attachments to parties may not be founded in policy preferences, the attachment causes voters to believe the party will craft policies that are close to what they want.¹ This is why partisanship, in the United States at least, is almost always be the primary explanation for vote choice. However, a second way a voter may gather information is based on their evaluations of a candidate's actions. These evaluations are based on what the candidate says, how they act, and how they live their day-to-day lives. This type of shortcut does not provide much information on policy preferences. What this does is let voters decide if they trust a candidate to do what is best for the people, even without knowing themselves what is best. These evaluations are extremely low cost for voters, which simplifies their decision making

process by removing an entire step from their calculus, and providing information on one of the two remaining steps.

To sum up the theory driving this paper: evaluating the personal characteristics of a candidate requires a low cost and is easy to do. Because of the low cost and simplicity, it plays a significant role in deciding who a voter would cast their vote for. To try find evidence for this theory, this paper will test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: A voter who views a political candidate to display better personal characteristics will be more likely to vote for that candidate, even when controlling policy positions and ideology.

Some may argue that this is a theoretically simple argument. The author agrees, however, to my knowledge, no serious analysis has been done that analyzes valence issues in a spatial sense. This paper fits within the rational choice tradition, while following the pragmatic tradition that has evolved within spatial models that try to be more inclusive to empirical research that indicates that non-policy issues, especially partisanship and ideology, play a sizable role in determining the

Data and Methods

This project uses American National Election Survey data from 2016, 2020, and 2024. These years were chosen because they are the most recent presidential elections. Because Donald Trump has been a candidate in all three elections, and Joe Biden has run in two of the elections, these years also allow for some continuity. For this paper, each year is kept separate with unique models for each cycle. The dependent variable in these analyses for all three years is respondents stated vote choice as a binary variable (votes for third party candidates are removed). As such, I run a separate logit model for each of the three years.

This section discusses how the data was cleaned and used to create spatial variables, which are the foundation for the analysis performed here. It should be noted that, as cleaning and creation of the new spatial variables occurs, listwise deletion of missing data is performed. Perhaps a future paper may do something else with missing data such as having missing data, such as replacing the missing values in some columns with 0s because a respondent not answering a question may reflect alienation or indifference to the question. For now, however, this paper simply uses listwise deletion for any missing data.

Characteristic Valence Dimensions

The models contain four different groups of independent variables. First, the primary set of variables are those variables representing personal characteristic valence dimensions. Each of the three years analyzed ask respondents four questions about how they would rate the two presidential candidates in terms of their honesty, knowledge, leadership ability, and how much the “really care.” For each candidate, the respondent rates the candidate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means they think the valence issue strongly matches the candidate and 5 suggests the issue does not. Because this paper focuses on the spatial aspect of voters perception of valence issues, each of these pairs of questions are transformed into a spatial variable. This is done by by subtracting respondents ratings of the Republican presidential candidate from the rating of the Democratic candidate so that:

$$Val_{r_{spatial}} = Val_{r_{dem}} - Val_{r_{rep}}$$

It should be noted that the spatial variable here is simpler than for the other groups of spatial variables discussed below, this is because there is no self-placement of where the ideal point is for each respondent on the scale². Each scale is also in a reverse order, so the spatial variable

actually says how much more a respondent thinks the Republican candidate fits the valence issue. The new variable also has a scale from -5 to 5, where -5 suggests that a respondent thinks the Democratic candidate fits the issue significantly better than the Republican candidate.

One theoretical issue with this new variable as it stands is that it is very possible that this valence issue is just a respondent's partisan bias. As such, new variables are created, where residuals from the relationship between party ID and each valence issue are extracted. Party ID is used instead of ideology even though, theoretically it makes sense that partisan attachment biases. The final form of this variable is thus:

$$Val_{final} = \beta_2 Val_{r_{spatial}} - (\beta_0 + \beta_1 \times PID_I)$$

This paper also includes models in the appendix that use the sum of all four valence dimensions into a single variable. After the variables are transformed into spatial variables and residualized, the distributions are approximately normal for the 2016 Presidential election, with the slight exception of knowledgeable which makes sense given Hilary Clinton was a career politician and Donald Trump was just entering politics. Finally, histograms showing the distribution of this variable for the other two years are included in the appendix also (Figures A1 and A2).

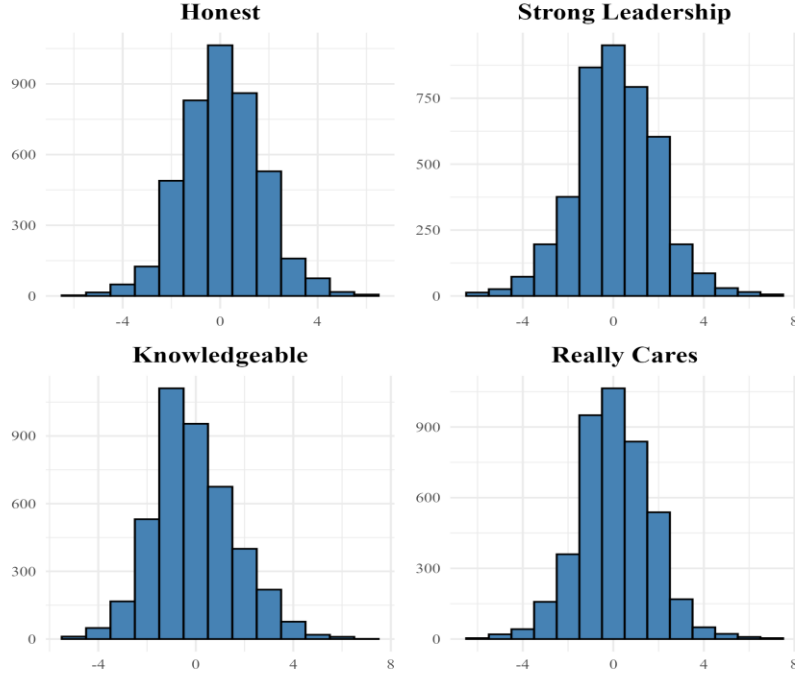


Figure 1: This table contains distributions for the four valence dimensions from the 2016 Presidential election, after turning them into spatial variables and residualizing them. Note that more negative scores mean that respondents think that the trait describes the Democrat candidates better, while positive scores mean they think the word describes the Republican candidate better. Figures for the 2020 and 2024 elections are in the appendix. (Data from the 2016 ANES).

Ideology Valence Dimension

There are three different questions about ideology in ANES. One question asks respondents to place themselves on a seven-point scale where 1 means that they identify as a strong liberal while 7 means they identify strongly as a conservative. The other two questions ask respondents to place the Republican and Democrat presidential candidate on the same scale. Like the characteristic valence dimensions, the three questions are transformed into a single spatial variable. This is done as follows:

$$ideology_{spatial} = \sqrt{(ideology_{rD} - ideology_r)^2 - (ideology_{rR} - ideology_r)^2}$$

Where $ideology_{rD}$ is the where the respondent places the Democrat candidate on the seven-point scale, $ideology_{rR}$ is where they place the Republican candidate, and $ideology_r$ is where they place themselves. One issue with this model mathematically is that all values of the new variable are positive. To fix this, the author multiplies $ideology_{spatial}$ by the sign of $(ideology_{rD} - ideology_r)^2 - (ideology_{rR} - ideology_r)^2$ so that the signs are in the right direction. This does not effect the value of the data, as the formula above is just for the Euclidean distance from the position of the respondent to each candidate, not the distance *and* direction.

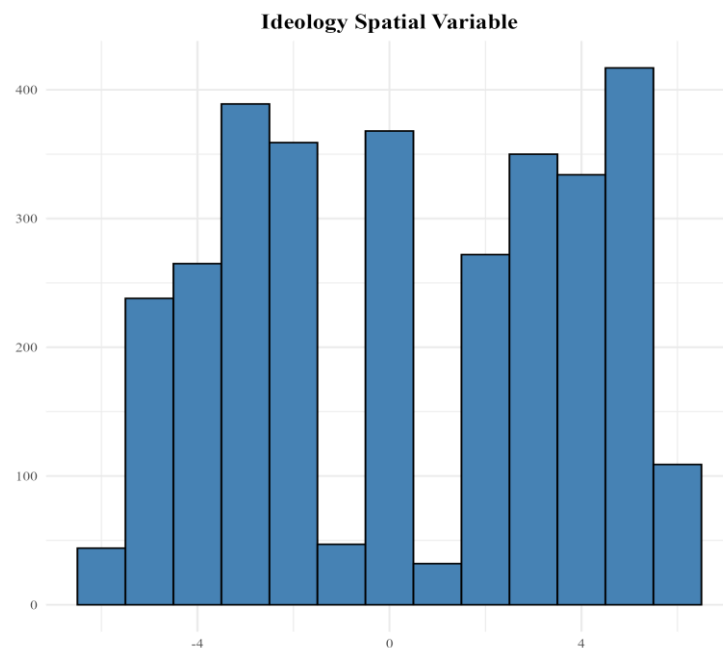


Figure 2: This histogram shows the distribution of the ideology spatial variable for the 2016 Presidential election, which creation I describe above. Negative scores indicate that voters feel that the Democratic candidate is in closer ideological proximity, while positive scores indicate the opposite. Other histograms are provided in the appendix. (Data from the 2016 ANES).

As figure two demonstrates, there is a bimodal distribution in this variable, suggesting that voters generally perceive one candidate or the other to be more ideologically similar to themselves. There is a large single spike at 0. This single spike suggests that voters perceive that both candidates are the same proximity to them. This itself is interesting as it leads to the

question of how these respondents act and could touch on alienation or other similar topics. This is out of the scope of this paper, so it will not focus on this spike anymore.

Partisanship

Also included in the model is a variable for party identification. It includes both party ID and ideology because they are theoretically distinct things that happen to have a lot of overlap in the United States because of the two-party system. Party ID is important to include because the creation of the valence dimension variable uses party ID and not ideology. This variable is created using the seven-point scale from ANES where a 1 is strongly Democrat and 7 is strongly Republican. A spatial variable using party ID is out of this question because there is no question asking to rate how Republican or Democratic a presidential candidate is, and why would there be? The author could have recoded the variable into 3 categories. However, the variance provides interesting nuances. Figure 3 below shows the distribution for this variable for the 2016 presidential election. The histogram demonstrates that the distribution of respondents is bimodal at both ends, though the spike at where someone who identifies with no party is slightly raised.

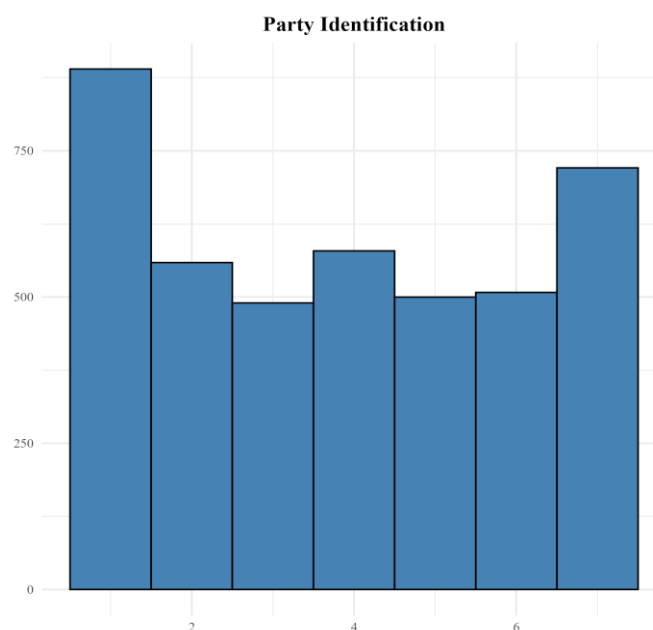


Figure 3. This histogram shows the distribution for party ID for the 2016 presidential election. Lower scores indicate that a respondent more strongly identifies as a Democrat.

Policy Dimensions

The final set of spatial variables included in these models are on a handful of policy issues that are included in the ANES datasets. This paper is only secondarily interested in policy dimensions. However, the author makes sure to include these variables because spatial theory argues that proximity on policy issues is the primary cause of voter behavior. If the theory driving this paper is right, then the policy dimensions would need to be included within the statistical model to see the variables of interest do have the power to provide evidence to support this paper's claims. If the claims are correct, then even including a series of policy dimensions should not effect the significance of the characteristic valence dimensions.

These questions ask a respondent to rate themselves, the Democrat candidate, and Republican candidate on a scale of 1 to 7. The issues examined are government spending, defense spending, healthcare, environment, and government assistance to African Americans. Government and defense spending are scaled so that 1 means that the respondent thinks that the person whom the question is about prefers more spending, while 7 means that they think that the person in question prefers less spending. For healthcare, 1 indicates that a respondent thinks the person of interest desires increased healthcare, and 7 desires decreased healthcare. For the environment, a score of 1 indicates that the respondent thinks that the person whom the question is about thinks that the government should create regulations to protect the environment even if it meant limiting the creation of jobs, while 7 indicates the opposite. A 1 for the assistance to African Americans questions indicates that a respondent thinks that the person whom a question is about supports an increase of assistance to African Americans, while a 7 indicates a decrease

in assistance. These policy questions are in all 3 of the years I use for this analysis. This paper does not include questions that only appear in a single year.

In order to transform these questions into spatial variables follow the same method done for the ideology variables above:

$$policy_{spatial} = \sqrt{(policy_{rD} - policy_r)^2 - (policy_{rR} - policy_r)^2}$$

Here the notation follows the notation used above for the ideology spatial variable where rD subscript represents the respondent's perception of the Democratic candidate's position, rR is their perception of the Republican candidate's position and r is their self-placement. In this equation *policy* is switched out for any of the five issue areas above. Summary statistics for these variables are not included because this paper is not as interested in them as in valence dimensions.

Why Spatial Variables?

A reader may fairly ask why the author decides to use spatial variables in this analysis instead of the variables as they are included in ANES. This paper is an extension of the spatial modeling literature, and as such the distance between candidates and between candidates and between candidates and voters is important. It is not enough to simply know how honest a voter views one candidate and how that affects their vote choice because perhaps they think that the opposing candidate is just as honest or dishonest. Similarly, if the spatial model of voting can be applied, the distance between candidates ideologically on policy is what matters more than merely the individual ideological position.

Demographic Variables

Each of the models include a number of standard demographic control variables including age, education, income, and race. Age is measured as a discrete variable, income and education are measured as ordinal variables, though the model they are treated as discrete variables, and race is a nominal variable that is one-hot-encoded so that white is the baseline variable. These variables are generally the norm to include as control variable when doing research in voting behavior.

The Model

To test my hypothesis, this paper uses a logit model with the binary vote choice variable mentioned above. In each of the models a 0 is coded for the Democratic candidate, while a 1 is coded for the Republican candidate. The model with all the variables looks like the following:

$$\log_e(y_{vote\ choice}) = \beta_1 x_{honest} + \beta_2 x_{knowledge} + \beta_3 x_{leadership} + \beta_4 x_{cares} + \\ \beta_5 x_{party\ ID} + \beta_6 x_{ideology} + \beta_p \mathbf{X}_{policy} + \beta_d \mathbf{X}_{demographics} + \epsilon$$

Here, the primary variables of interest are each of the four valence dimensions, party ID, and ideology. The vector \mathbf{X}_{policy} contains each of the five policy issues discussed above. $\mathbf{X}_{demographics}$ is a vector that contains each of the demographic variables: age, income, education, and race. These are included in the model above as vectors and not each variable individually simply because that would make the equation here unnecessarily long and they are not the primary interest of this paper.

Results

Here are the results from the models for each of the three election cycles discussed. Odds ratio graphs as well as predicted probabilities plots as well as explanations are included. For full regression output from each of the models, see appendix B.

2016 Presidential Election Cycle

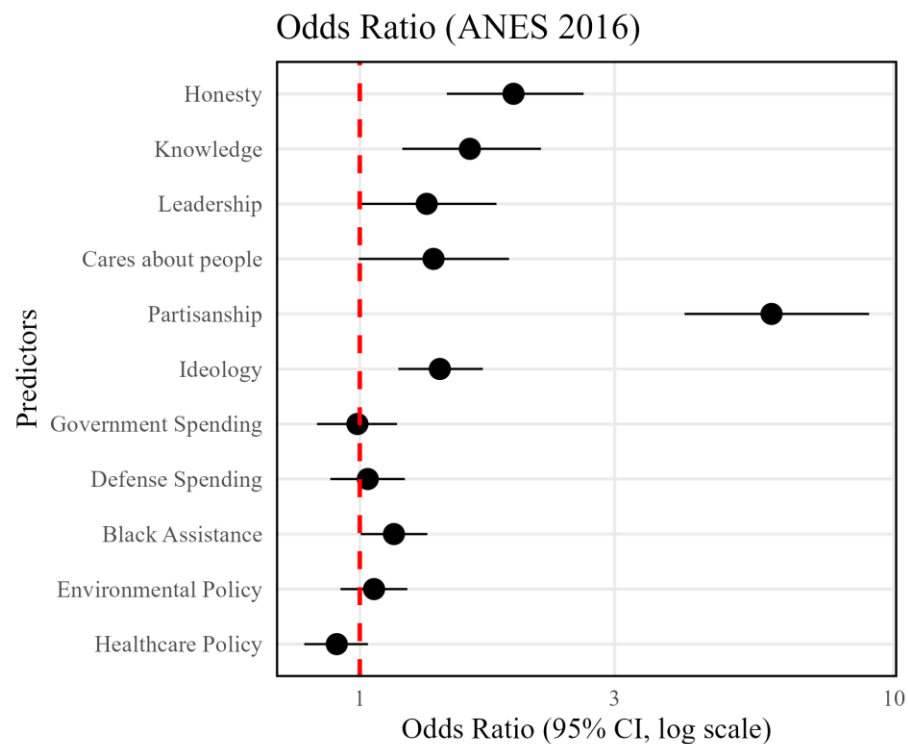


Figure 4. This figure shows the odds ratios for 2016 model. I omitted the demographic variables here because none of the variables are significant and also because the low sample size distorts my predicted probabilities graph here. However, they can be found in the regression table in the appendix (see Table B1).

Using ANES data from the 2016 presidential election cycle, there appears to be quite strong support for the stated hypothesis as shown in the predicted probabilities plot in figure 4. Likely to no one's surprise, party ID is the strongest and most statistically significant variable in

explaining the vote choice of individuals during the 2016 presidential election cycle. However, Honesty, leadership, ideology, and assistance to African Americans also all have statistically significant relationships at the 0.05 level. The leadership and really cares variables are both barely outside of the 0.05 cutoff, though they are significant at the 0.1 level. No other variables are significantly related to vote choice.

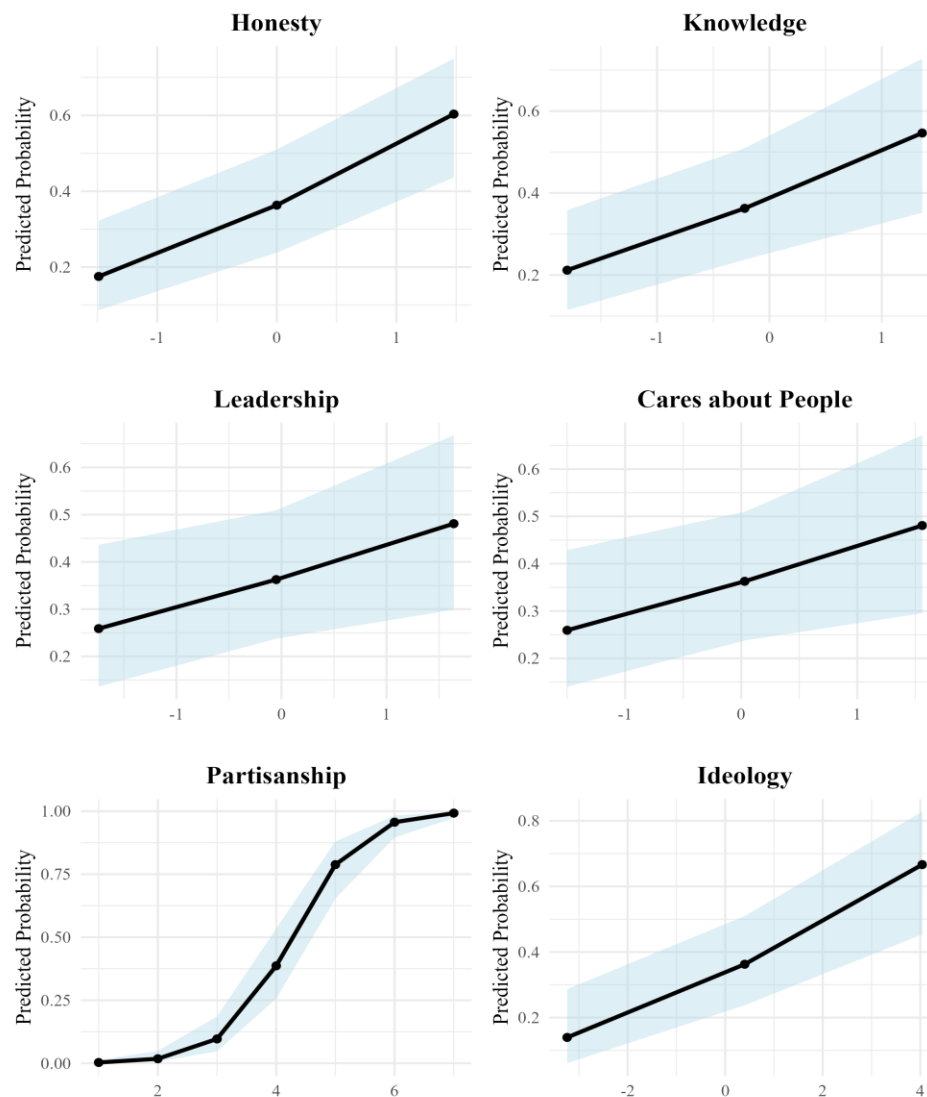


Figure 5. This figure shows the predicted probabilities for the primary variables of interest in this analysis for the 2016 presidential election cycle. Note that Figure B1 in appendix B contains a predicted probabilities graph for the sum of all of the valence dimensions.

Figure 5 shows the predicted probabilities plots for the first six variables in the odds ratio graph in figure 4. Figure 5 shows that someone who identifies as a strong Democrat had a near 0% predicted likelihood to vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, a moderate had a 39% chance to do so, and a strong Republican had a 99% chance, even when controlling for all the variables my model. Ideology was similar, with someone who viewed themselves as closer to Hilary Clinton ideologically having an 14% chance to vote for Donald Trump, individuals who viewed themselves as being nearly the same distance from either candidate having a 36% chance to vote for him, and those who viewed Donald Trump as being closer ideologically having a 67% chance to vote for him. This shows these two variables are by far the strongest predictor of vote choice

While party ID and ideological distance are the two variables with the strongest effect on vote choice in this election, the valence dimensions still play a significant role. While the odds ratio chart above demonstrates the statistical significance of the relationship between honesty and knowledge on vote choice, Figure 5 shows that if a respondent thinks that Clinton was more honest than Trump, they was only a 18% predicted probability they would vote for Trump, if they viewed them as the same, there was a 36% chance to do so, and if they viewed him as significantly more honest, they had a 60% probability to do so. This suggests that the more honest a respondent views a candidate compared to the other, the higher likelihood they vote for that candidate over the other, even when controlling all the other variables in my model. While it is less impactful on vote choice than honesty, the leadership variable still plays a strong role in determining vote choice as someone who views Clinton as being a stronger leader is 34 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump than someone who thinks Trump is a stronger leader. This does not discuss the other two valence dimensions here because I they were not

statistically significant at the 0.05 level, however, they are included in figure 5 because they have similar effects on vote choice, just to a less significant and substantively impactful way.

These findings seem to at least partially confirm the stated hypothesis during the 2016 presidential election cycle case. Affective valence issues seem to have a more notable impact on vote choice than policy positioning. Some valence issues, notably honesty and strong leadership ability, appear to have had a stronger impact on vote choice during the 2016 presidential election cycle than leadership ability or how much a candidate cares about people. However, the primary variables that explain vote choice in the 2016 presidential election cycle are party ID and then ideological distance. This may suggest that affective valence issues may be more likely to impact those who have weaker party attachments or are less ideologically aligned with certain parties or candidates.

2020 Presidential Election Cycle

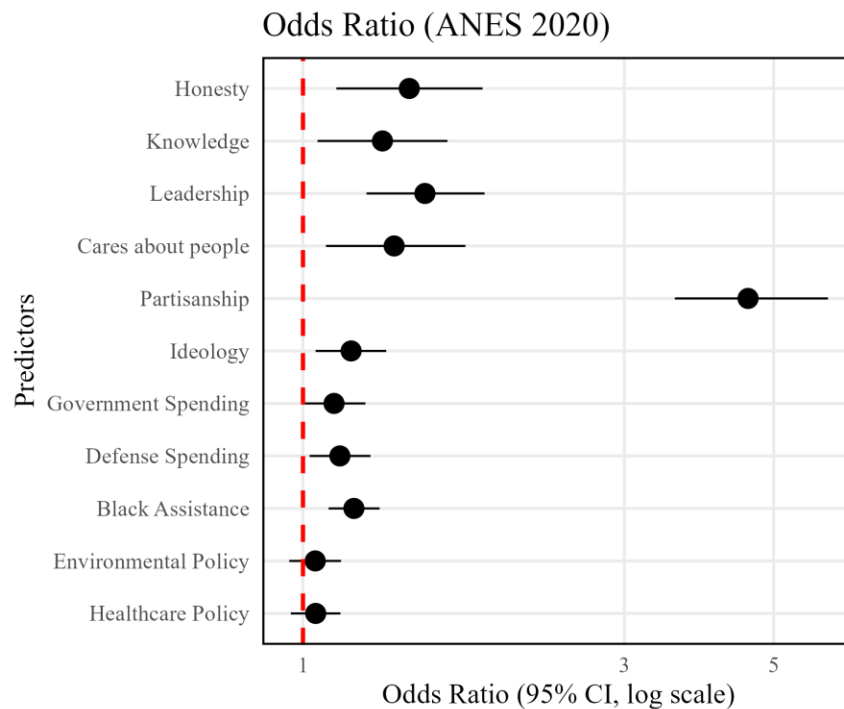


Figure 6. This Figure shows the odds ratio for the 2020 model. The author omitted the demographic variables because none of the variables except for age are significant, because the low sample size for some of the racial groups distorts my predicted probabilities graph, and for consistency with the 2016 predicted probabilities figure above. The results for each of the demographic variables can still be found in the regression table in the appendix (see Table B3).

The 2020 model finds even more support for the stated theory than in 2016. As shown in figure 6, beside party ID and ideology which are obviously significantly related to vote choice, honesty, knowledge, leadership, and really cares about people are all significantly related to vote choice at the 0.05 level. These suggest that the stated theory appears to be correct that valence issues are an important explanation in vote choice. In this model, defense spending and assistance to African American are both significant at the 0.05 level, while government spending is just outside of this threshold, being significant at the 0.1 level. Note that figure 6 does not show the demographic variables, but the age variable is significant at the 0.05 level (see table B3 in appendix B). Figure 7 below shows the substantive effects these variables have.

As expected, partisanship has the most notable impact on vote choice, with strong Democrats being 94 percentage points less likely to vote for Trump than strong Republicans. Interestingly though, moderate Republicans seem to have a lower probability of voting for Trump than in 2016, while moderate Democrats appear to behave similarly in both 2016 and 2020. This seems to suggest that partisan matters less for moderate Republicans in 2020 than in 2016, while it is still a strong explanation in for strong Republicans and most Democrats. Ideology also appears to have a significant relationship, though unlike 2016, a change in ideological distance from strongly liberal to strongly conservative does not appear to have the same magnitude of impact on vote choice. This trend seems to apply to the affective valence dimension variables. In the 2016 model, the change in predicted probability for the statistically significant variables changed over 20 percentage points as the units increased (respondents

thought the trait better described Trump). In this model, the change in predicted probability is around 10 percentage points. The confidence intervals also appear to be quite large in this model for all the valence variables.

Despite these interesting complications, the models do seem to provide evidence that supports the stated hypothesis for this case. This means that in 2020, affective valence issues played a notable role in impacting the vote choice of individuals. It is important that party ID still explains most of the variation in vote choice, and ideology is still a strong second explanatory variable. However, almost all of the valence issues appear to have more statistically significant relationships with vote choice than any of the policy issues. This suggests that in 2020, party ID was the most important factor in vote choice, then ideology, then affective valence issues, and then certain policies.

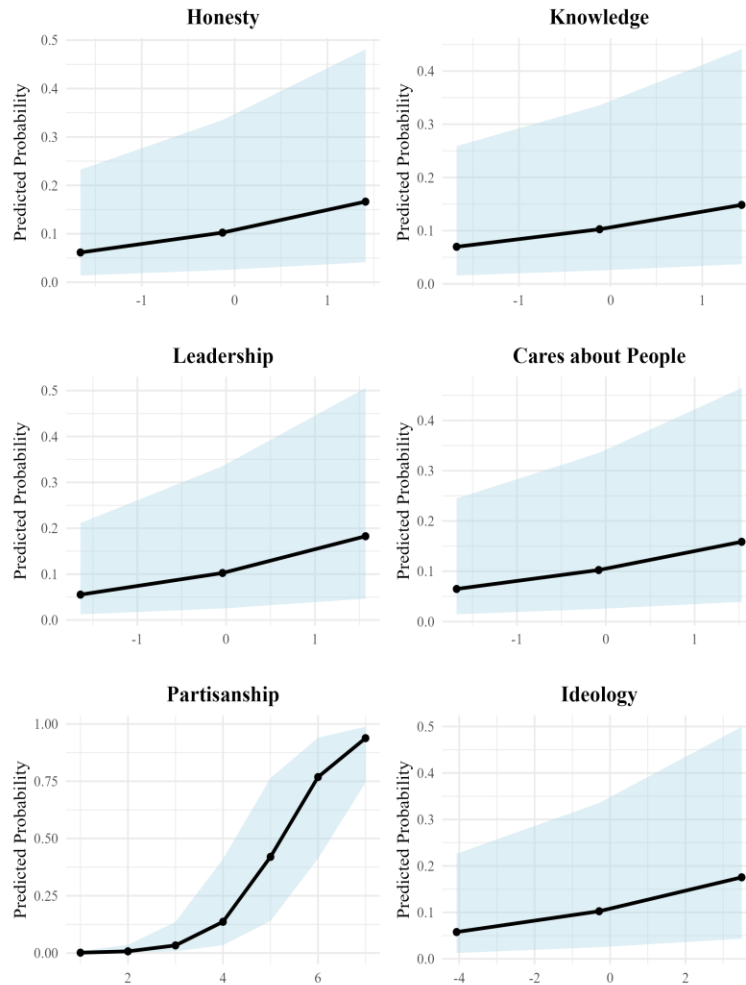


Figure 7. This figure shows the predicted probabilities for the primary variables of interest in this analysis for the 2020 presidential election cycle. Note that Figure B2 in appendix B contains a predicted probabilities graph for the sum of all of the valence dimensions.

2024 Presidential Election Cycle

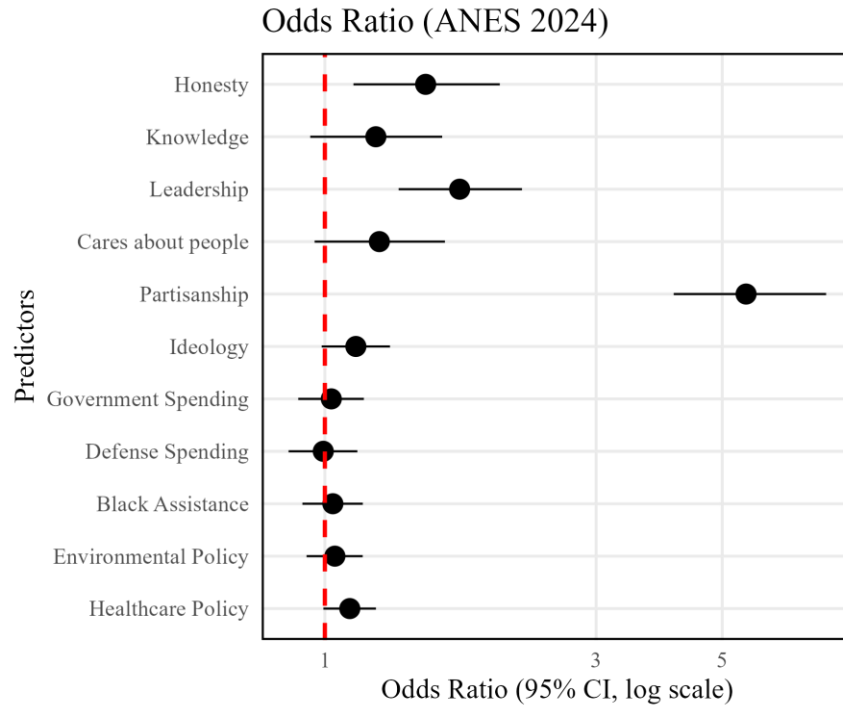


Figure 8.

Similar to both 2016 and 2024, party ID is the primary explanation for vote choice as it is strongly statistically significant as shown in figure 8 and is substantially a much stronger explanation for vote choice as shown in Figure 9. In fact, strong Democrats only have a 1% chance to vote for Trump while strong Republicans have an over 99% chance to vote for him. Figure 9 does suggest that party ID is a stronger predictor for moderate Republicans than moderate Democrats, sort of opposite to 2020. All this being, party ID is still the strongest predictor of vote choice in 2024. However, ideological distance is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level (though it is at the 0.1 level). This suggests that in 2024 ideological distance is not a strong predictor of vote choice.

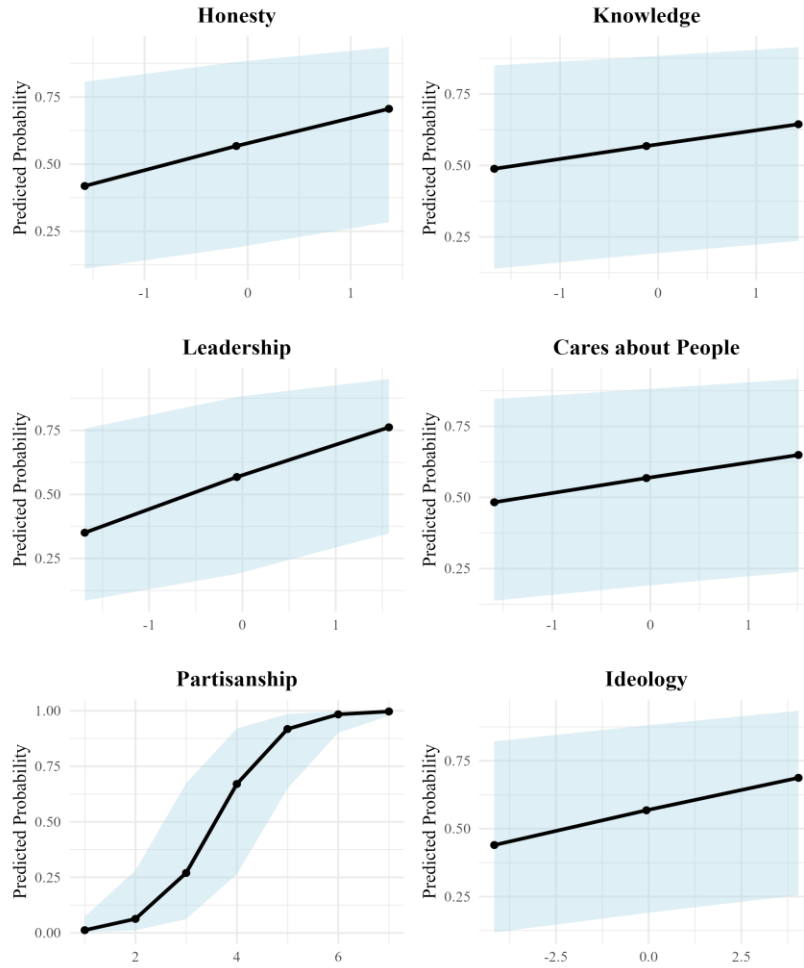


Figure 9.

Unlike 2016 and 2020, no policy dimensions are statistically significant at the threshold and neither are any demographic variables. A few variables are significant at the 0.1 level, however, this paper follows standard political science practice and using the 0.05 threshold. To see the variables that are significant at the 0.1 level see table B5.

For the primary variables of interest, the affective valence dimensions, both honesty and strong leadership are significant at the threshold, while knowledgeable and really cares about people are not significant even at the 0.1 level. Substantively, honesty and strong leadership have a moderately strong impact on vote choice during the 2024 election cycle. Someone who views

Harris as much more honest than Trump have a 42% chance to vote for him while those who view Trump as much more honest have a 71% chance to vote for him. If they viewed both candidates as about equally honest, they had a 57% chance to vote for the Trump. Someone who thinks that Harris is a much stronger leader has a 35% chance to vote for Trump while someone who thinks that Trump is a much stronger leader have a 76% chance to vote for him. The sum of the affective valence dimensions is also strongly statistically significant (see Table B6; for the substantive effects of the sum of the valence dimensions see Figure B3). These findings taken together suggest that affective valence dimensions do play a statistically significant role in effecting the vote choice of individuals in 2024, albeit secondarily to partisanship.

What Does This Mean?

Throughout all three election cycles, this paper finds some support for the state theory. The stated hypothesis is partially confirmed all for years. During 2016, the hypothesis is confirmed for the honest and knowledgeable affective valence dimensions, but not for leadership or if a leader really cares. During 2020, the hypothesis is confirmed for all four valence dimensions, though honesty and leadership are more statistically significantly related to vote choice than the other two. For 2024, the hypothesis is confirmed for the honesty and leadership dimensions, but not the other two. As a whole, this paper finds evidence to support the hypothesis across all three election cycles for honesty, though the other dimensions it finds only limited support. It should be noted that, taken as a whole, the sum of all four dimensions into a single dimension does seem to provide support for my hypothesis across all four years (see Tables B2, B4, B6).

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper attempted to argue that affective valence issues have a significant impact on vote choice. It finds some solid evidence that supports the presented theory. To do so, the author uses ANES data from the 2016, 2020, and 2024 presidential election cycles and approaching my analysis from a spatial modeling approach. To do this, a few variables relating to valence issues, ideology, and policies are transformed into spatial variables. This paper finds that the affective valence dimensions can play an important secondary role in determining the vote choice of individuals in all three election cycles. Partisanship and ideological distance pull most of the weight in determining how an individual votes. However, some affective valence issues still have a more significant relationship with vote choice than most policy issues across all three years. Honesty, in particular, seems to have a strong impact on vote choice across all three years. Knowledge and strong leadership have a significant impact across two of the three election cycles, but fall just outside of the significance threshold for one of the cycles.

These findings are an important extension of the spatial modeling literature, as it establishes that policy issues may not be as important to rational voters as some rational choice theorists may argue. Instead, rational voters have a limited capability to gain and absorb information, and while partisanship and ideology might provide the most information in a relatively easy to digest package, the way a candidate might behave themselves provide relatively easy to access information about said candidate. This does not disprove spatial models of voting but rather emphasizes the importance of information for voters or decision makers generally within a spatial framework.

Substantively, this finding has both positive and negative implications. Perhaps the most important positive implication is that having perceived positive character traits are important to some degree for a candidate to find success. This would imply that it is important for candidates to be honest, strong leaders, knowledgeable, or really care. A negative implication is that it is actually more important that they appear more honest, like a strong leader, knowledgeable, or that they really care, when compared to the opposing candidate—not that they exemplify these qualities themselves. While this paper does not look at anything related to the strategy of politicians in response to public opinion, theoretically, a rational candidate would have an incentive to both lie or grandstand their own valence characteristics, and/or go after their opponents' valence characteristics. It might even make sense for a political candidate to limit their discussion of policies in general and instead focus on valence issues. While pointing out the valence flaws of an individual or playing up your own might not be a bad decision in itself, democracy tends to become more difficult when it is simply a series of personal attacks on political opponents and no discussion of things that matter.

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Appendix A

In this appendix, I include descriptive statistics that reflect the statistics I use in the main body of this paper, but with ANES data from 2020 and 2024. Figures A1 and A2 contain distributions from the valence dimensions for the two years respectively. Figures A3 and A4 are the distributions of the ideological difference which is the spatial variables I discuss above. Figures A5 and A6 are distributions of the party identification of respondents. Note that the distributions are generally similar to those of the 2016 election cycle. If the distributions were notably different, I would include them in my main analysis and not here.

Figure A1: Distributions for the four valence dimensions using 2020 ANES data

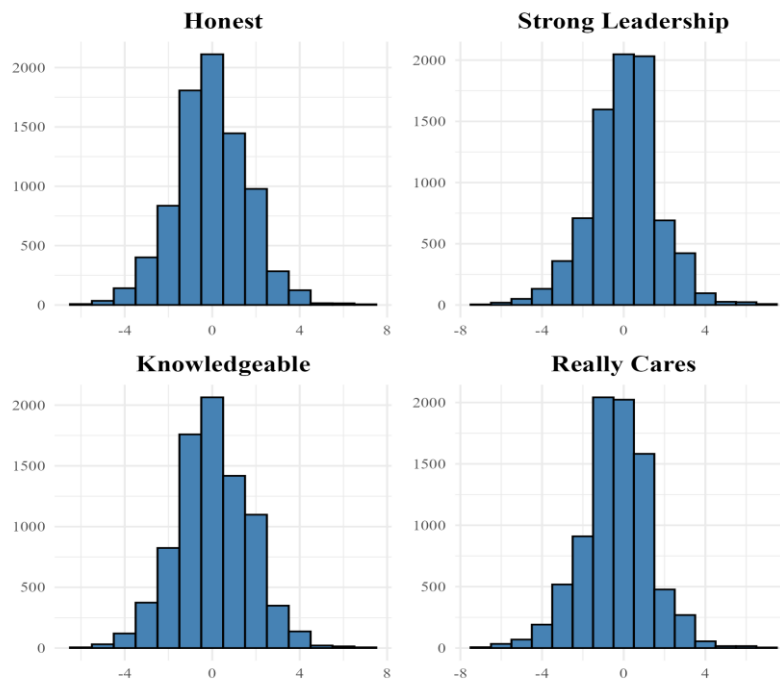


Figure A2. Distributions for the four valence dimensions using 2024 ANES data

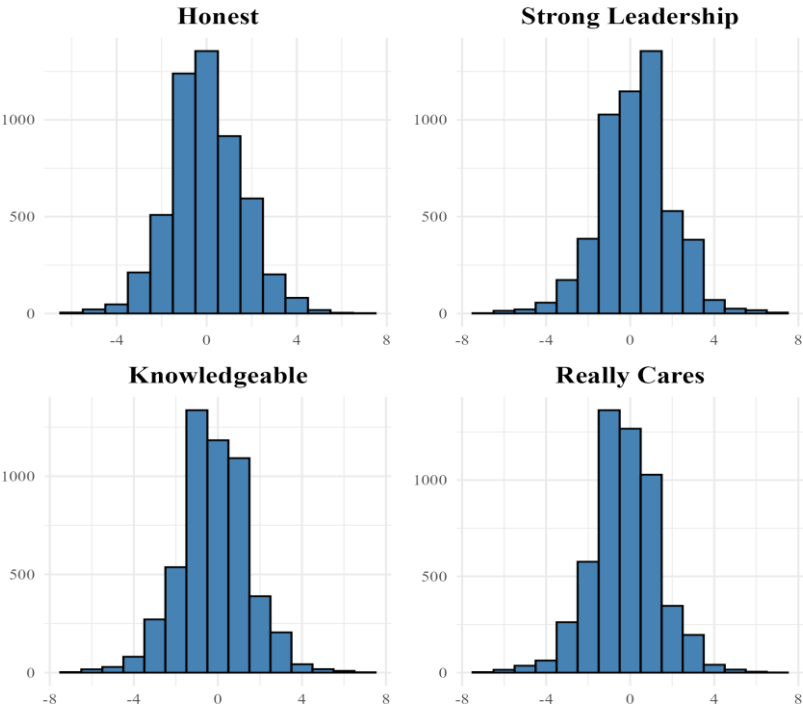


Figure A3: Distribution for ideological distance with 2020 ANES data

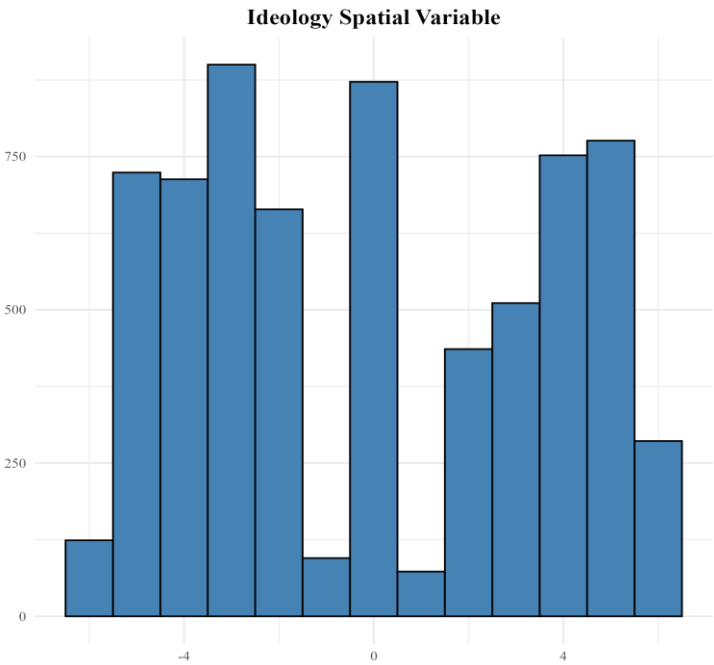
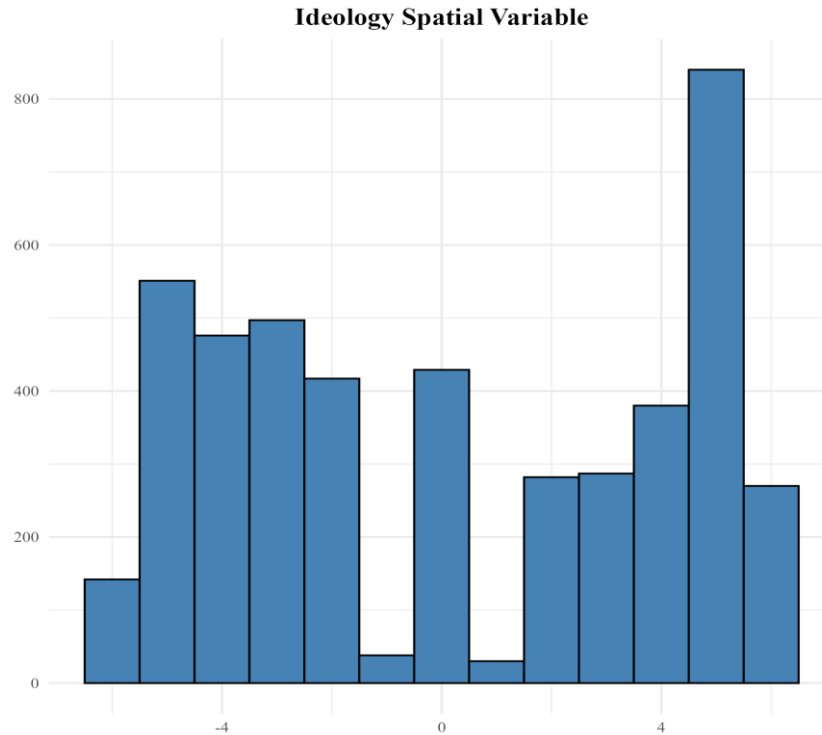


Figure A4. Distribution for the ideological distance using 2024 ANES data



In figures A3 and A4, we see that the distributions are similar to what we see in figure 2 in the main text except for the fact that there is a large spike of individuals who view themselves as ideologically closer to Trump than Harris during the 2024 election. However, both models are mostly bimodal distributions with two curves around the -4, and 4 points and a third spike at the center (the 0 point). These distributions make sense because voters likely perceive themselves as closer ideologically to one candidate or another to some level or another. However, the spike in the center seems to suggest that a large number of respondents are either alienated, or indifferent in their evaluation between candidates and view them both as being equidistant from them ideologically.

Figure A5: Distribution for party ID with 2020 ANES data

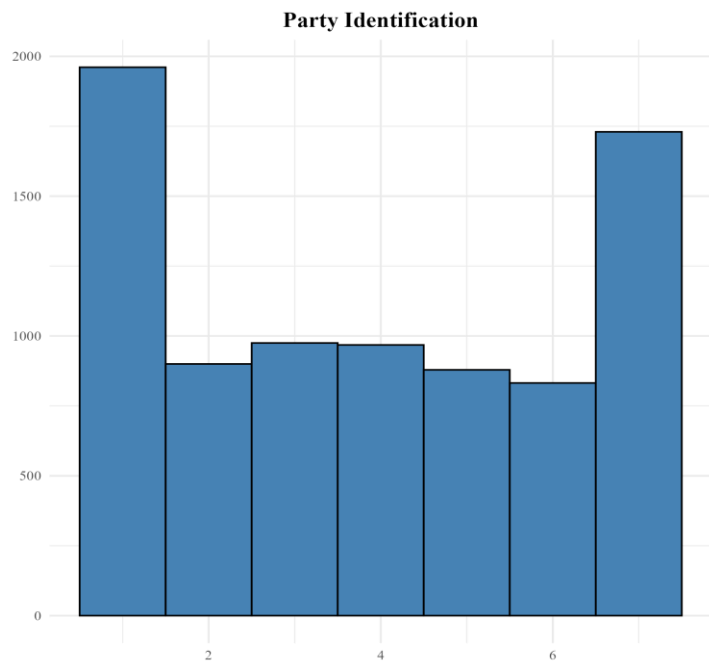
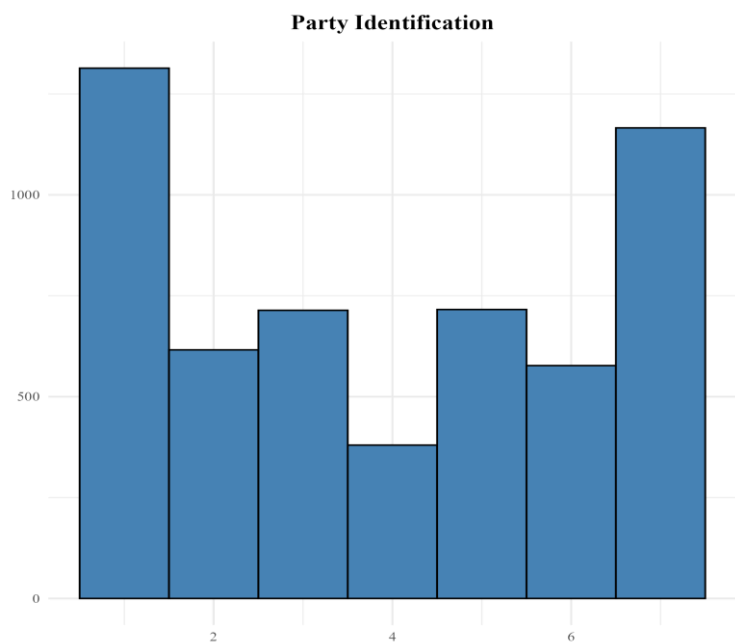


Figure A6. Distribution for Party ID with 2024 ANES data



In Figures A5 and A6 the distributions appear rather similar to the 2016 distribution. Perhaps the most notable difference is that there are relatively less middle of the road independents in 2024 than in other years and relatively more partisans and partisan leaning independents.

Appendix B: Regression Tables

Below I have the regression tables from my analyses. In my paper proper, I discuss the findings using predicted probability graphs which correspond to Tables B1, B3, and B5 respectively. Tables B2, B4, and B6 are tables that are almost identical to the main models I analyze, except the four valence dimensions are summed up into a single variable. I do not discuss these in the body of my paper too much, but during a previous discussion about this paper, it was suggested that I also see if using a sum of the dimensions might be useful. Unlike the graphs above, I do not discuss each of these tables in detail, instead providing brief comments about the model. I should mention that I include statistical significance at the 0.1 level in my tables, however, per standard practice in political science, I use 0.05 as the critical threshold to try and demonstrate my claim. I also include predicted probabilities for the valence sum dimensions in figures B1, B2, and B3.

Table B1: Full logit model using 2016 ANES data

	Vote Choice
Intercept	-7.324*** (1.357)
Honesty	0.663*** (0.150)
Knowledge	0.475** (0.152)
Leadership	0.289+ (0.153)
Cares about people	0.318+ (0.164)
Partisanship	1.775*** (0.202)
Ideology	0.345*** (0.093)
Government Spending	-0.010 (0.088)
Defense Spending	0.034 (0.082)
Black Assistance	0.147* (0.073)
Environmental Policy	0.062 (0.073)
Healthcare Policy	-0.099 (0.070)
HS Diploma	0.255 (1.038)
Some College/Associate's Degree	0.346 (0.952)
Bachelor's or Higher Degree	-0.037 (0.970)
Respondent Income	-0.063 (0.102)
Respondent Age	0.001 (0.011)
Black	0.643 (0.695)
AAPI	-1.334 (0.929)
Hispanic	-18.196 (962.066)
Other/Multiple	-0.031 (0.647)

	Vote Choice
Num.Obs.	1423
AIC	300.1
BIC	415.8
Log.Lik.	-128.033
RMSE	0.16
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, **	
p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

Table B1 contains the full logit model output for the 2016 model using ANES data. This corresponded with Figure 4 in the main text. Note that the omitted variables for education and race are less education than a HS diploma and white respectively.

Table B2: Full logit model with the of the four valence dimensions using 2016 ANES data

	Vote Choice
Intercept	-7.328*** (1.332)
Sum of Valence Dimensions	0.429*** (0.050)
Partisanship	1.797*** (0.200)
Ideology	0.335*** (0.090)
Government Spending	-0.032 (0.085)
Defense Spending	0.033 (0.080)
Black Assistance	0.150* (0.072)
Environmental Policy	0.052 (0.072)
Healthcare Policy	-0.095 (0.067)
HS Diploma	0.183 (1.002)
Some College/Associate's Degree	0.213 (0.915)
Bachelor's or Higher Degree	-0.131 (0.929)
Respondent Income	-0.052 (0.100)
Respondent Age	0.002 (0.011)
Black	0.671 (0.674)
AAPI	-1.301 (0.929)
Hispanic	-18.188 (957.700)
Other/Multiple	-0.066 (0.641)
Num.Obs.	1423
AIC	297.4
BIC	397.4
Log.Lik.	-129.711

	Vote Choice
RMSE	0.16
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, **	
p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

Table B2 contains a logit model using 2016 ANES data similar to table A1 but uses the sum of all four valence dimensions instead of keeping them separate. Note that the omitted variables for education and race are less education than a HS diploma and white respectively. Despite the honesty and knowledge being the only valence dimension variables significant above the 0.05 cutoff, the sum of all the all four dimensions is still strongly statistically significant.

Figure B1: Predicted probabilities for the sum of the valence dimensions (2016)

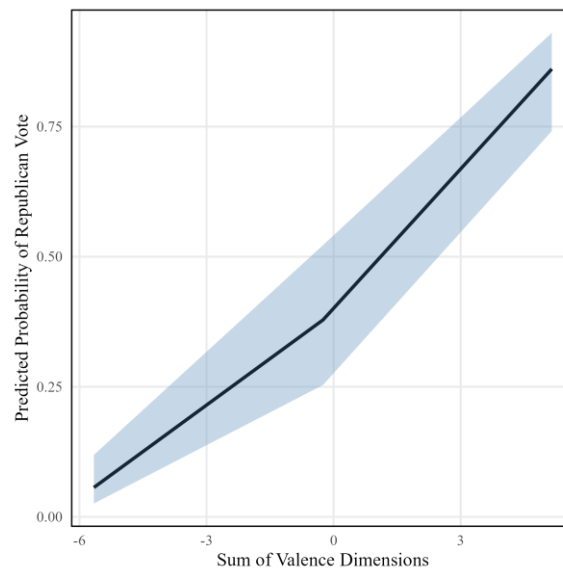


Figure B1 shows the predicted probabilities for the sum of the four valence dimensions and corresponds with table B2.

Table B3: Full logit model using 2020 ANES data

	Vote Choice
Intercept	-8.650*** (1.107)
Honesty	0.363** (0.127)
Knowledge	0.272* (0.113)
Leadership	0.417*** (0.103)
Cares about people	0.312* (0.121)
Partisanship	1.522*** (0.133)
Ideology	0.165** (0.061)
Government Spending	0.106+ (0.055)
Defense Spending	0.126* (0.053)
Black Assistance	0.174*** (0.044)
Environmental Policy	0.042 (0.045)
Healthcare Policy	0.044 (0.043)
HS Diploma	1.031 (0.801)
Some College/Associate's Degree	0.978 (0.783)
Bachelor's or Higher Degree	1.101 (0.783)
Respondent Income	0.005 (0.063)
Respondent Age	0.023** (0.008)
Black	0.026 (0.580)
AAPI	0.792 (0.554)
Hispanic	-0.518 (0.514)
Other/Multiple	1.325 (0.845)
Num.Obs.	3406
AIC	538.9
BIC	673.8
Log.Lik.	-247.434
RMSE	0.14

Vote Choice
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B3 is the full logit model for the 2020 model using ANES data. This corresponded with Figure 6 in the main text. Note that the omitted variables for education and race are less education than a HS diploma and white respectively.

Table B4: Full logit model with the of the four valence dimensions using 2020 ANES data

	Vote Choice
Intercept	-8.747*** (1.100)
Sum of Valence Dimensions	0.344*** (0.029)
Partisanship	1.535*** (0.133)
Ideology	0.164** (0.061)
Government Spending	0.107* (0.054)
Defense Spending	0.127* (0.053)
Black Assistance	0.176*** (0.044)
Environmental Policy	0.040 (0.045)
Healthcare Policy	0.044 (0.043)
HS Diploma	1.047 (0.796)
Some College/Associate's Degree	0.993 (0.779)
Bachelor's or Higher Degree	1.135 (0.777)
Respondent Age	0.023** (0.008)
Black	0.039 (0.577)
AAPI	0.833 (0.547)
Hispanic	-0.493 (0.506)
Other/Multiple	1.340 (0.847)
Num.Obs.	3406
AIC	533.6
BIC	650.2
Log.Lik.	-247.817
RMSE	0.14

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, **

p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B4: This table contains a logit model using 2020 ANES data similar to table A3 but uses the sum of all four valence dimensions instead of keeping them separate. Note that the omitted variables for education and race are less education than a HS diploma and white respectively.

Figure B2: Predicted probabilities for the sum of valence dimensions (ANES 2020)

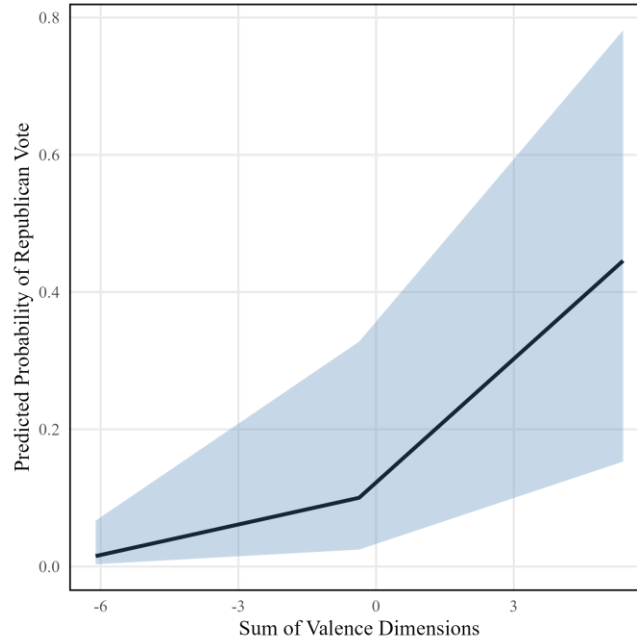


Table B5: Full logit model using 2024 ANES data

	Vote Choice
Intercept	-5.246*** (1.195)
Honesty	0.408** (0.151)
Knowledge	0.207 (0.136)
Leadership	0.546*** (0.127)
Cares about people	0.221 (0.134)
Partisanship	1.706*** (0.157)
Ideology	0.126+ (0.070)
Government Spending	0.026 (0.068)
Defense Spending	-0.006 (0.071)
Black Assistance	0.032 (0.062)
Environmental Policy	0.041 (0.058)
Healthcare Policy	0.101+ (0.054)
HS Diploma	-1.090 (0.940)
Some College/Associate's Degree	-1.585+ (0.894)
Bachelor's or Higher Degree	-1.500+ (0.911)
Respondent Income	-0.121 (0.078)
Respondent Age	-0.000 (0.010)
Black	0.349 (0.621)
AAPI	-0.965 (0.706)
Hispanic	0.965+ (0.508)
Other/Multiple	0.264

	Vote Choice
	(0.775)
Num.Obs.	2240
AIC	398.3
BIC	518.3
Log.Lik.	-178.147
RMSE	0.14
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, **	
p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

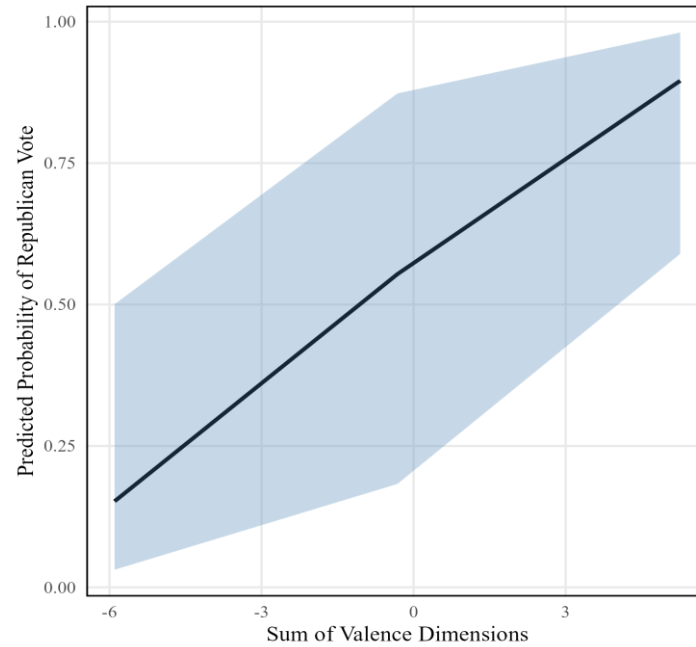
Table B6: Full logit model with the of the four valence dimensions using 2024 ANES data

	Vote Choice
Intercept	-5.201*** (1.186)
Sum of Valence Dimensions	0.347*** (0.034)
Partisanship	1.700*** (0.155)
Ideology	0.132+ (0.070)
Government Spending	0.037 (0.067)
Defense Spending	-0.009 (0.070)
Black Assistance	0.037 (0.061)
Environmental Policy	0.031 (0.056)
Healthcare Policy	0.091+ (0.052)
HS Diploma	-1.023 (0.935)
Some College/Associate's Degree	-1.520+ (0.889)
Bachelor's or Higher Degree	-1.387 (0.903)
Respondent Income	-0.124 (0.077)
Respondent Age	-0.002 (0.010)
Black	0.390 (0.610)
AAPI	-0.919 (0.688)
Hispanic	1.002* (0.501)
Other/Multiple	0.302 (0.767)
Num.Obs.	2240
AIC	395.6
BIC	498.4
Log.Lik.	-179.776

	Vote Choice
RMSE	0.14

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, **
p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Figure B3: Predicted probabilities for the sum of valence dimensions (ANES 2024)



¹ James Adams (2001a) argues that because voters have this assumption, parties generally have to provide policy platforms that their voters prefer, so there is some evidence to support this assumption by voters I make here.

² One may notice that the distance variables for valence characteristic variables is significantly different than the spatial variables for ideology and each of the policy issues. This is the case because the respondent does not place themselves on any scale of what their preference may be. Some may argue that the ideal point for each of these positions for respondents would be that they highly value these characteristics as they all seem very positive (for example Enelow and Hinich argue this (1984, p. 174)), but I cannot know for sure. While this variable is not perfect, it does a good enough job capturing how a respondent evaluates two candidates as compared to each other.