Priority Voting:
Reconsidering the Role of Issue Salience in American Voting Behavior

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Issue salience in the mass public

- Puzzle: How is issue importance important?

- We have good theoretical reasons to think it is; for instance, the literatures on:
  - Issue publics
  - Priming, hereshtetic, and other work on agenda-setting effects
  - Issue ownership

- However, the standard approach—testing for $\beta (issue_{salience} \times issue_{position})$—has produced mixed results.

Issue salience in the mass public

- Some considerations:

  1. **Methodological**: There exists (possibly considerable) measurement error in one or both component terms.

     - ⋆ In particular, the use of importance *ratings* (e.g., asking "How important is issue X to you?") to measure issue salience is problematic because it fails to force tradeoffs.

  2. **Substantive**: This approach focuses on the *conditional* effects of issue salience.

- Might some combination of these be responsible for negative findings?

Our strategy

1. We use both *ratings* and *rankings*-based formats of issue importance.
   - **Teaser**: It turns out that a pre-processing step (enumerate all pairwise issue comparisons and populate it as a binary vote matrix) yields similar results.

2. For each format, we scale the pairwise comparisons (using Optimal Classification) and consider the properties of the recovered dimension. Namely,
   - How well do policy priorities cohere to a unidimensional structure?
   - How is this dimension related to choice behavior above and beyond the traditional (position-based) conception of ideology?

Why would we expect an independent priorities dimension?

1. Directional/discounting models of issue voting.
2. Valence or "hard" issues (i.e., those concerned more with policy means than ends).
3. Other situations where positional preferences are ill-defined.
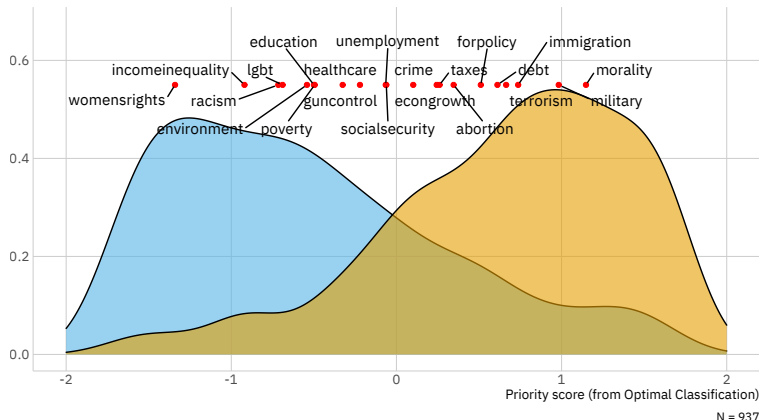
Partisan differences in policy priorities

2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

Proportion Including Issue in Top Four Ranking
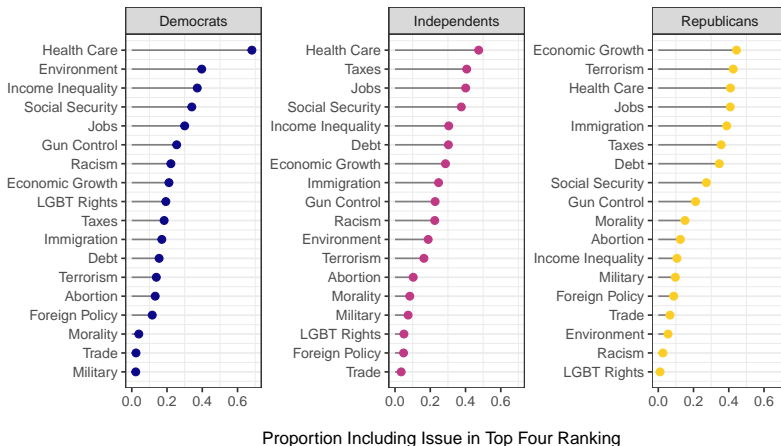
A dimension of issue priorities (using rankings)

2016 American National Election Pilot Study

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents

Priority score (from Optimal Classification)

N = 937

A dimension of issue priorities (using rankings)

2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Single Module: Rankings)

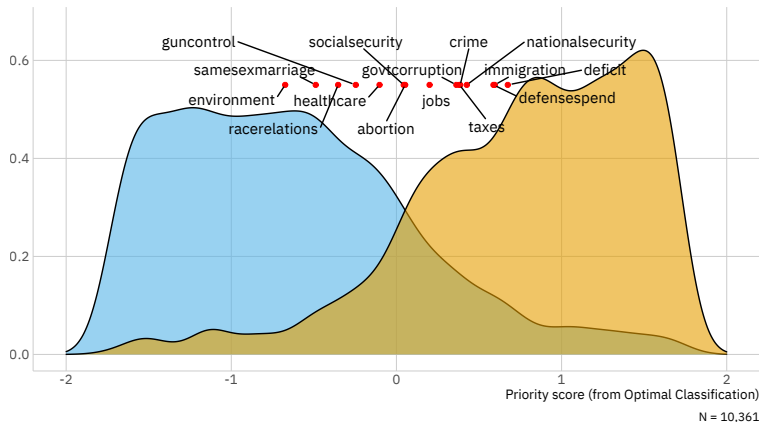Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents

Priority score (from Optimal Classification)

N = 800
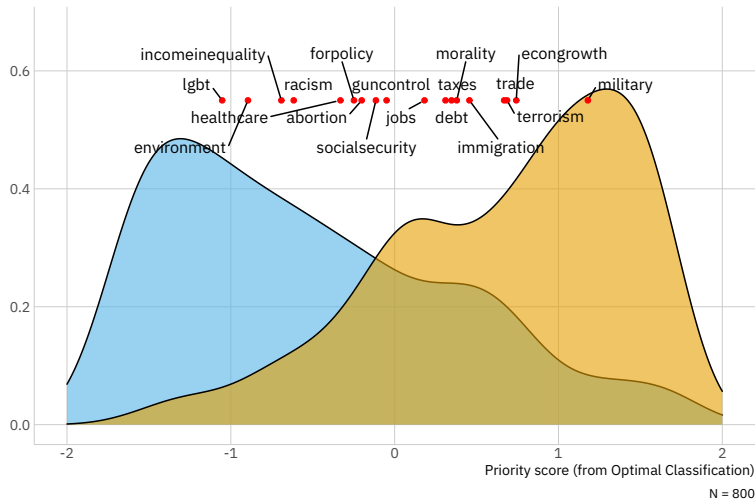
A dimension of issue priorities (using ratings)

2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Common Content)

Democratic (blue) and Republican (yellow) respondents

Labels: guncontrol, socialsecurity, crime, nationalsecurity, samesexmarriage, govtcorruption, immigration, deficit, environment, healthcare, jobs, defensespend, racerelations, abortion, taxes

Priority score (from Optimal Classification)

N = 10,361

A dimension of issue priorities (using ratings)

2012 American National Election Study

Democratic and Republican respondents (N = 4,198)
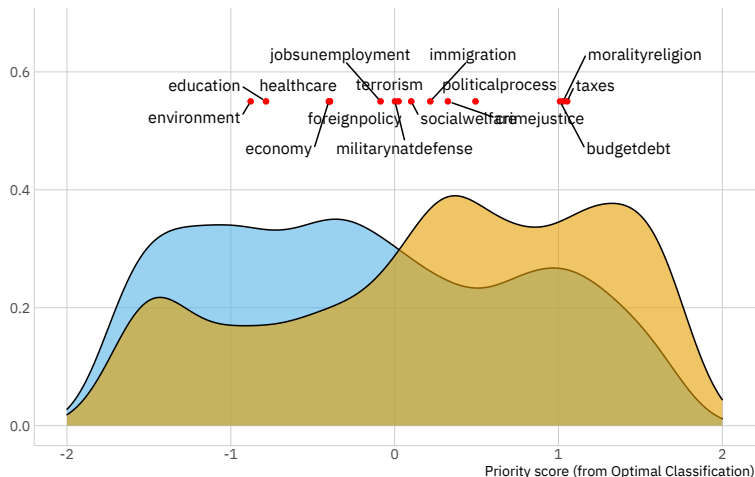
Scores estimated from traditional issue salience ratings.

Priority score (from Optimal Classification)

What is this dimension of mass policy priorities?

1. Appears to be related to (but is nonetheless distinct from) the standard ideological dimension of **left-right policy positions**.
   - Seems to most closely correspond with an **ownership** dimension.
2. Locations on the dimension are reasonably **stable** across time.
3. Moreover, they appear to exert **independent effects** on political behavior.

The combined policy/priority space
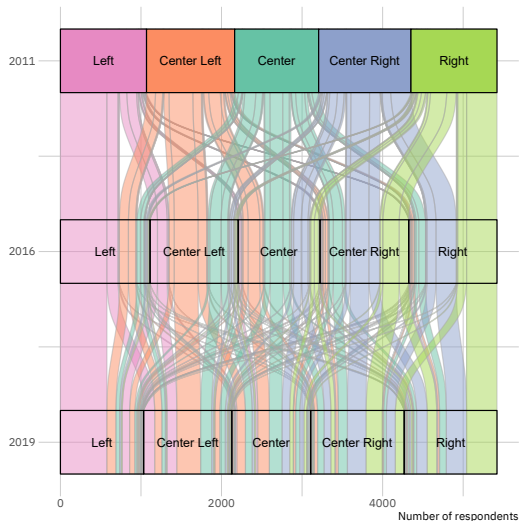

2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study

Respondent Positions on Policy and Priority Dimensions

r = 0.59 (overall), r = 0.43 (Democrats), r = 0.50 (Independents), r = 0.28 (Republicans).
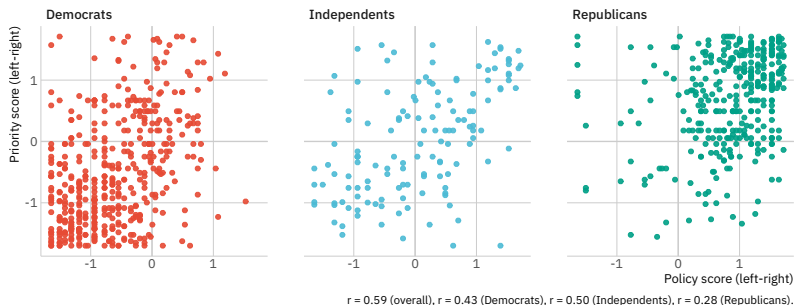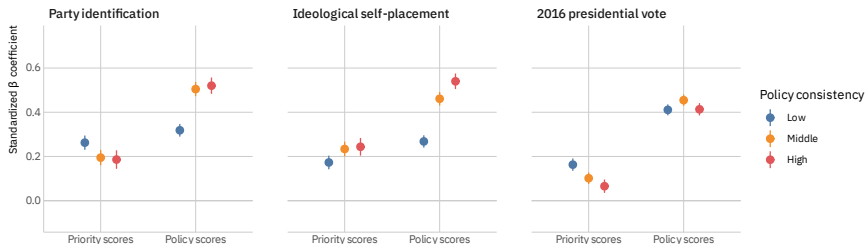
Stability of issue priority scores

2011-2019 VOTER Panel Survey
Respondents binned by priority scores.

Effects of policy positions and priorities (ratings)
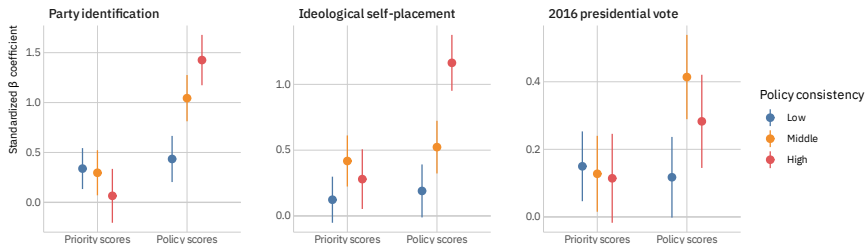

2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Common Content)

Models estimated via OLS and include controls for gender, race, religiosity, age, education, and income.
Vote choice model also controls for party identification and ideological self-placement.

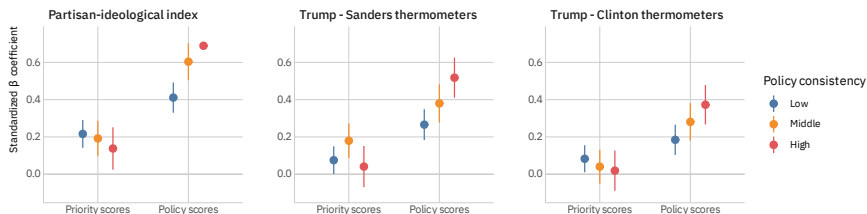# Effects of policy positions and priorities (rankings)

2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Single Module: Rankings)

Models estimated via OLS and include controls for gender, race, religiosity, age, education, and income.
Vote choice model also controls for party identification and ideological self-placement.

# Effects of policy positions and priorities (rankings)

2016 American National Election Pilot Study

Models estimated via OLS and include controls for gender, race, religiosity, age, education, and income.
Feeling thermometer models also control for party identification and ideological self-placement.

Effects of policy positions and priorities (ratings; panel data)

2011-2019 VOTER Panel Survey
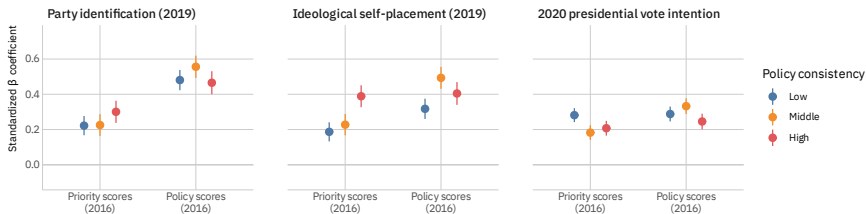
Models estimated via OLS and include controls for gender, race, religiosity, age, education, and income.
Vote choice model also controls for party identification and ideological self-placement.

The importance of issue importance?

- What are issue priorities?
- One way to think about them: the identification of societal threats or problems.
- This could well be an easier cognitive task—it is certainly an important component of human communication with an evolutionary history.
  - ▶ A basic need to identify or call attention to an urgent concern.
  - ▶ We also harshly sanction its misuse.
- Might not be a stretch to say that the identification of societal threats via symbols (e.g., culture war imagery) is an easier task for citizens.
- Might also simply be a reframing of left-right policy divisions in a way that serves as a gateway to ideology for those with mixed (positional) policy preferences.

The importance of issue importance?

- Implications for polarization: can we not even agree on what to disagree about? Also, emotional residue from encountering the opposing side's denial of clear threats *and* their promotion of false threats ("crying wolf").

- In many cases, spatial proximity fails to capture the full extent of voters' policy considerations.

Next steps: using voters' own words $\rightarrowtail$ priorities map

MDS of inter−token cosine similarities in ANES 2020 MIP open−ended responses
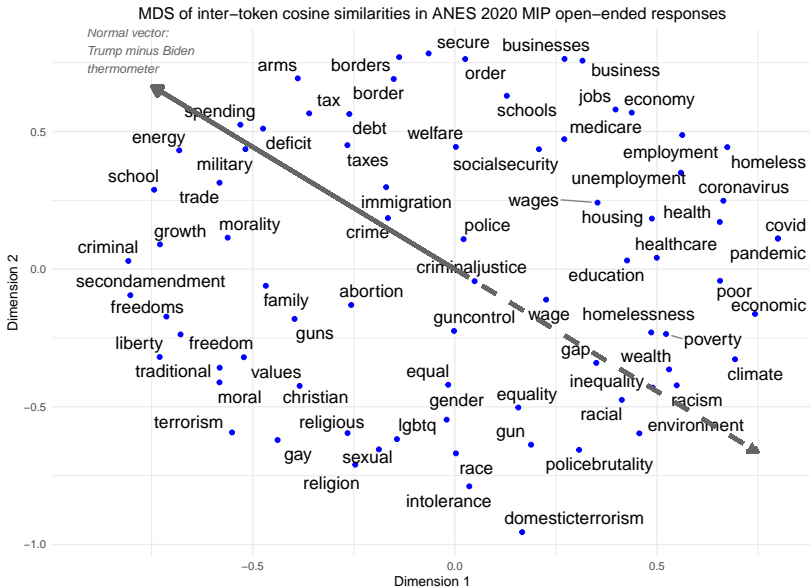
Next steps: using voters' own words ⟻ priorities map

MDS of ANES 2020 MIP open-ended responses by party ID