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Issue Publics: How Electoral Constituencies Hide in Plain Sight

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Abstract: An often-forgotten passage of Philip Converse's classic essay on mass belief systems introduced the concept of an issue public – a segment of voters that has crystallized attitudes about a particular topic. Some people deeply care about particular topics, and they might be equipped to reach judgments on these topics. This simple idea could provide an important corrective to work that casts citizens' political competence in a negative light. But, previous attempts to evaluate the issue publics hypothesis have been unsatisfying. This Element proposes and tests a new measurement approach for identifying issue publics. The evidence gathered leads to the conclusion that issue publics exist, but are smaller and more particularistic than existing scholarship presumes them to be. As such, researchers underappreciate the significance of issue opinions in electoral politics.

Keywords: issue publics, public opinion, political psychology, interest groups, issue voting

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Contents

"[t]here isn't one voter in 20,000 who knows my voting record . . . except on the one thing that affects him."

–Anonymous congressman interviewed by Richard Fenno (1978, 142).

1 Eldon Gould's Particular Problem

In several respects, Eldon Gould is the caricature of a Republican voter. He is seventy-six years old, white, and lives in rural Illinois. He is a farmer – just like his father, grandfather, and son. He owns 500 acres of land, which he uses to grow corn and soybeans, and to raise hogs. The area where he lives is sparsely populated. In 2016, there were 898 registered voters spread over the thirty square miles his voting precinct encompasses – just about thirty people per square mile. In 2016, 73 percent of these individuals voted, and they supported Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton by a more than two-to-one ratio.[1] For his part, Gould says he was "a little surprised" when Donald Trump won the Republican presidential nomination in 2016. But in the same breath, he acknowledges, "I don't think there was any doubt in my mind that I would vote for him" (Barbaro 2018). And he did (Kitroeff 2019).

Gould does remember harboring some concerns about what Donald Trump had to say about trade during his presidential campaign. In a stark departure from Republican Party orthodoxy of the time, Trump was loudly critical of free trade arrangements. He called the North American Free Trade Agreement the "worst trade deal . . . in the history of this country" (Barbaro 2018). He promised to discard the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a landmark trade deal between the United States and eleven other nations tentatively negotiated by the Obama administration. And he repeatedly bemoaned the trade deficit between the United States and its trading partners – especially China – suggesting that the United States' purchasing more goods from China than vice versa was a sign of an exploitive relationship.

It is easy to see why all this would make Gould uneasy. Gould estimates that 90 percent of the soy he grows is exported – substantially to China.[2] If the United States were to impose new taxes on Chinese imports, as Trump threatened to do, China would likely respond by taxing the goods it imports from the United States. The effects on Gould's bottom line could be drastic. And once a trade war began, it could be difficult to deescalate. If it were to go on long enough, it might even create an opening for South American countries – Brazil and Argentina are major soy producers – to displace the Sino-American trade relationship permanently.

[1] Election results retrieved from the Kane County Clerk's website at www.kanecountyclerk.org/Elections/Pages/Election-Results-Archive.aspx.

[2] Approximately half of US soybean exports go to China (Davey & Cohen 2018).

Gould's concerns proved well-founded. In March of 2018, President Trump announced new tariffs on imported steel and aluminum. The ostensible rationale was national security: the administration argued that reliance on foreign metal imports degraded the American manufacturing base. However, given Trump's campaign promises and concurrent griping about "decades of unfair trade" (quoted in Swanson 2018), it was hard to take this rationale as anything other than a legal pretext. From there, things unfolded as Gould feared. In April, China retaliated with tariffs on 128 American exports – soybeans chief among them. Further tariffs were unrolled throughout 2018 in tit-for-tat fashion.

Trump's trade bouts received ample media coverage in outlets like the *New York Times*, but it is hard to know how much the typical American voter's opinions were really affected by them. There were a lot of other things going on. Major political headline-grabbers included Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into 2016 election interference; the Trump administration's effort to obstruct that inquiry; a declared national emergency instated to redirect federal funds toward funding a border wall; a scandal involving the Trump administration's family separation policy for children of recent undocumented immigrants; the decision to withdraw from a nuclear arms pact with Iran; Supreme Court nomination hearings in which Christine Blasey Ford accused Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault; and more. Stories about tariffs probably would not crack most individuals' top ten list of significant political events of 2018.

For farmers like Gould, however, the ups and downs of trade policy were impossible to ignore. In the months after China's soy tariffs took effect, the price of soybeans dropped to the lowest level in a decade (Hirtzer 2019), leading farmers to sell at a loss, or place their crops in storage in the hopes that prices would rebound. Meanwhile, China shifted most of its soy purchasing to Brazil. During negotiations in December 2018, China and the United States agreed to a ninety-day moratorium on fresh tariffs, sparking some hope of a thaw. But these negotiations failed, and in May 2019, Trump escalated the dispute with fresh tariffs on $200 billion of Chinese imports.

Few Americans followed all of these turns, but each was exhaustively covered in what Gould refers to as the "Ag Media." The Ag Media includes periodicals such as *AgriNews*, *Farm and Dairy*, and *Farm Journal*, and also syndicated daily shows on television (*AgDay*) and radio (*My Farm Radio, AgriTalk*). At agweb.com, an interested party can sign up for several dozen regular newsletters, such as *Drovers Daily* – "the latest cattle industry news and features delivered daily to keep you informed of industry issues." The produce-oriented newsletter, *The Packer,* has both AM and PM editions, as well as separate specialized editions focused on produce technology, organic produce,

and produce retail trends. Professional organizations generate a stream of relevant press releases and other updates. The Iowa Soybean Association, for instance, has a regular podcast (*The State of Soy*). In addition, farmers can easily track prices and news on their smartphones with specialized apps such as "Farm Futures Mobile" and "Agrarian Mobile Information Center." Farmers have ample opportunities to follow relevant political events that others might miss.

Did the Trump administration's moves on trade policy influence Trump's support within the farm community? There are signs that it did. A *Farm Journal* poll found that, whereas more than 70 percent of farmers supported Trump in 2016, only 54 percent said they intended to vote for him as of August 2018.[3] More conclusively, statistical analysis of county-level voting patterns during the trade war found that soy production of 10,000 bushels in a county was associated with an 11 percentage point swing against the Republican Party between the 2016 and 2018 federal elections (above and beyond national trends during this time) (Chyzh & Urbatsch 2021). Perhaps to curb the political fallout, the Trump administration unrolled substantial bailout packages to offset farmer's losses – $12 billion in direct payments in 2018, and $14.5 billion in 2019 (Daniels & Wilkie 2019).

By 2020, the trade war had cooled and soybean prices had rebounded somewhat. Still, Joe Biden improved on Hillary Clinton's vote total in Gould's precinct by nearly 9 percentage points (38.49 percent for Biden compared to 29.89 percent for Clinton).[4]

Issue Publics

Walter Lippman, the early-twentieth-century journalist and political commentator, was no fan of direct democracy. His writings reflect an abiding skepticism that citizens could acquire – much less comprehend – the information that they needed to play more than a side role in politics. He opens *The Phantom Public*, one of his classic indictments of populism, as follows:

> The private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row, who ought to keep his mind on the mystery off there, but cannot quite manage to keep awake. He knows he is somehow affected by what is going on. Rules and regulations continually, taxes annually, and wars occasionally remind him he is being swept along by great drifts of circumstances.

[3] The *Farm Journal* poll – the Farm Journal Pulse – is based on an opt-in panel of approximately 5,000 farmers who receive two poll questions via text message each month. Its reporting practices are not up to scientific standards – methodological details are elusive – but the fact that it is a long-running panel provides some assurance that over-time trends are not purely driven by selection effects.

[4] Election results retrieved from the Kane County Clerk's website at www.kanecountyclerk.org/Elections/Pages/Election-Results-Archive.aspx.

> Yet these public affairs are in no convincing way his affairs. They are for the most part invisible. They are managed, if they are managed at all, at distant centers, from behind the scenes, by unnamed powers. As a private person he does not know for certain what is going on, or who is doing it, or where he is being carried. No newspaper reports his environment so that he can grasp it; no school has taught him how to imagine it; his ideals, often, do not fit with it; listening to speeches, uttering opinions and voting do not, he finds, enable him to govern it. He lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand, and is unable to direct. (Lippman 1925, 3–4)[5]

Indeed, politics often feels as though it exists only off in some distant place. A person might have a general sense of the major goings on – the things that garnered top headlines or which were fodder for commentary on social media. But their knowledge of the particulars is shallow, and understanding of their significance dim. As we discuss in Section 2, this is the consensus picture of citizen political engagement that has developed over several decades of public opinion research.

But sometimes, you cannot escape politics; it walks up and conks you on the head. Contrast Lippman's description above with the experience of Shane Goplin, a soybean farmer in central Wisconsin. Interviewed as the Trump administration was involved in trade negotiations with China, Goplin recounts that when Trump announced (via Twitter) that he intended to impose additional tariffs on Chinese goods, the price of soy promptly fell by ten cents per bushel – a shift with enormous ramifications for Goplin's crop revenue. "It was a $40,000 tweet," he remarked to the *New York Times* (quoted in Cohen 2019). Such an obvious cause-and-effect relationship stands in stark contrast to Lippman's image of politics. No behind-the-scenes dealing. No ambiguity about who acted and with what consequence. Just the matter of deciding the consequences.

Our aim in the pages that follow is to improve understanding of how political behavior is influenced by situations when politics takes on heightened personal significance – wherein a person or constituency has particular motivation to attend to developments in a particular area. We focus on these instances for two reasons.

First, these are instances that are likely to matter. As we elaborate in Section 2, political judgments, such as about candidates, are difficult to move. People have little factual knowledge about politics, pay sporadic attention to the news, have standing group loyalties, and as Lippman notes, have limited faculties with which to comprehend public policy developments, even if they knew what these were. Perhaps because they lack a psychological framework

[5] We wish we were well versed in the political commentary of the 1920s, but we discovered the quoted passage via Kinder & Kalmoe (2017, 2).

from which to arrive at reasoned judgments, they tend to follow cues from elites about what they should think when it comes various issues and events. Scenarios wherein people really care about a particular topic might represent an important departure from this default – the rare but critical instance in which people think for themselves, and political actors have a genuine opportunity to ply people away from their political habits and predispositions.

Second, the social scientific understanding of the politics of personal significance is underdeveloped. Political science does not have a consensus about such important questions as: How many political topics does a typical person care about? How many distinct topics are cared about in the electorate as a whole? What factors induce a person to care about a particular political topic? When a person cares about a topic, what are the consequences for attitude stability, persuadability, and judgments about candidates? As we elaborate in Section 2, while some of these questions have been addressed to some extent by previous work, they are rarely if ever considered as an interrelated whole.

The theoretical framework we use to unify these questions is that of *issue publics*. This phrase was coined by Phillip Converse in a classic study of citizen political sophistication to capture the notion that, while political unsophistication might be a sort of default condition, any particular political topic might have its own constituency that is more psychologically invested. Converse provided a convenient label, but several other early public opinion researchers independently arrived at an assessment that the basic idea was indispensable. Surprisingly, as we discuss in Section 2, the concept of issue publics never took hold – at least not to the extent it might have. We ask why not, and examine whether issues publics – considered anew – might shed new light on issue politics in the United States.

Our primary contributions focus on measurement. We demonstrate just how difficult it is to use survey-based tools to assess how many issue publics exist and to classify people as belonging to an issue public. As we elaborate in Section 3, the difficulty is that survey researchers, faced with a recurrent pressure to keep survey instruments short, tend to limit their examination of issue publics to a fairly small number of issues – commonly those that are in the public eye at a given moment. This tendency is understandable, but it is at odds with the theoretical conception of an issue public – particularly the notion that issue public members would attend to their personally important issue even when it is *not* in the public eye. In Section 3, we show that the standing approaches to identifying issue public members are likely afflicted with substantial measurement error, the aggregate effect of which is to lead scholars to underestimate the significance of issue voting.

In Section 4, we ask what a survey-based issue public measure would look like, if it were designed from the ground up. After all, many of the standing measures reviewed in Section 3 were written with some other purpose in mind, or were designed with constraints that do not apply to modern survey research. We propose a measurement approach that focuses on how respondents answer an open-ended question. The main advantage of this approach is that, rather than limiting the focus to a manageable number of issues, it allows issue publics to emerge organically from the associations our question prompt activates in respondents' minds. We test our measurement approach in two panel studies: one conducted on a convenience sample, and one on a large national sample. The approach is not perfect, but we find evidence that it reveals a face of issue public membership that other approaches do not: citizens attend to a much wider array of issues than past work suggests, and for many people, these issue-based connections endure over time.

In Section 5, we submit our measure to a more difficult test by assessing its ability to predict a quintessential political judgment: deciding for whom to vote. We develop a new experimental tool – what we refer to as a "bespoke" conjoint experiment – that examines how candidate stances on political issues influence citizens' votes. We surmount a long-standing challenge in issue public research: designing a procedure that allows respondents to belong to a vast array of different issue publics. When we do, we find that issue public voting is important. Our study participants' votes were influenced by candidate stances on issue public issues even more than by stances on the most salient issues on the national stage.

Thus, where public opinion research has, for decades, downplayed the significance of issue-based voting, we suggest that it exists to an underappreciated degree – masked by the considerable impediments to determining what issues citizens care about. We close the Element by discussing the implications of this result for survey practices, as well as the theoretical understanding of issue-based voting in the United States.

2 A Hostile Landscape for Issue Voting

Americans are routinely consulted about their opinions on political issues of the day. With some time spent on the website of the Gallup organization, for instance, one can find a wealth of high-quality polling data assessing Americans' policy views concerning abortion, crime, the environment, gun control, health care, immigration, gay rights, marijuana policy, taxes, and many other topics. The results of polls like these are popular fodder for discussion by journalists and pundits. What do Americans want their government to

do? How are they reacting to the latest current events? How has American culture evolved over time?

Politicians are part of the polling ecosystem, too. Journalists commonly seek politicians' reaction to polling results that cut against their policy positions, such as when, in the days after a horrific school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, *Fox News Sunday* host Shannon Bream asked Republican Senator Mike Lee to react to polling data showing that upward of 75 percent of Americans favored several new restrictions of guns (Shapero 2022). And of course many candidates for office hire polling firms to collect proprietary data that will inform campaign activities.

However, the relationship between a particular poll result and the proper response by a public figure is anything but straightforward. The reason is that a summary poll result characterizing a constituency's position on a particular political topic might elide a lot of important context. For instance, suppose that a candidate for Congress is considering coming out in favor of marijuana decriminalization, but learns that 60 percent of her constituencies oppose this policy. Although that result might give the representative pause, there is a lot more she would want to think about. How many constituents *care* about marijuana policy? How does it stack up against other things that they might consider when casting a vote? What proportion of voters care enough about marijuana that they would donate money or attend a rally to advocate for their view? What proportion would change their mind if the policy were enacted and drug use did not seem to increase? How likely is a future political opponent to make marijuana policy a campaign issue? Our hypothetical candidate is struggling with an old question in political science: How much do political leaders need to attend and respond to citizens' issue opinions?

A more general statement of this point is that there is a gap – potentially a large one – between *views registered on surveys* and *public opinion*, which in V. O. Key's memorable definition is "opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" (1961, 14). Surveys summarize the views of a cross section of individuals at one moment in time, in dimensions specified by the person conducting the survey. Public opinion, in contrast, is embedded in a complex political system in which the openings for citizen involvement are multifarious – elections, but also activism, donations, discourse, and persuasion – and some opinions have greater potential to animate than others.

When the canonical approaches to survey research – probability sampling and a standardized questionnaire – were invented in the mid-twentieth century, social scientists promptly criticized them for treating all opinions as equally important and efficacious. In a biting critique presented to the *American Sociological Society*, Herbert Blumer argued that the then young enterprise of

public opinion polling was premised on a *nonsequitur*: polls could predict elections well enough, but elections are an aberration from typical channels for political influence. Most political influence occurs via pressure points – individuals or groups influencing key figures (committees, boards, legislators, administrators, bureaucrats, and so forth), and "these key individuals take into account what they judge to be worthy of being taken into account" (Blumer 1948, 544). These people were probably only passingly interested in an amalgamation of atomized opinions lumped together into proportions or averages – what public opinion polls deliver. Much more, they would care about individuals' or groups' capacity to sustain attention, to elicit messaging from the opposition party, to mobilize, to secure meetings, and to persuade. Blumer exhorted social scientists to embed their examination of opinions in the public in a more explicit theory of which opinions matter and why (Blumer 1948).[6]

Consider also V. O. Key's classic discussion of the role of public opinion within democracy, which we allude to above. Which opinions would politicians find it "prudent to heed?" For Key, the answer depended, yes, on how many people held each opinion – but also on the intensity with which they were held. Key writes:

> Obviously the incidence of opinion intensity within the electorate about an issue or problem is of basic importance for politics. An issue that arouses only opinion of low intensity may receive only the slightest attention, while one that stirs opinions of high intensity among even relatively small numbers of people may be placed high on the governmental agenda. (14)

In his analysis, Key elucidates that the distribution of attitude intensity would have major implications for how many citizens became aware of a political controversy, and who would be more likely to effectively wield influence. "Under proper circumstances extremely small numbers of persons can generate sufficient uproar to make life miserable for those in power. They may make themselves distinctly heard as they seek to obtain or, perhaps more commonly, to obstruct action" (Key 1961, 92).

Philip Converse, a key figure in the earliest survey-based work on public opinion, also recognized the importance of understanding citizens' psychological investment in particular political issues. His most famous essay, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," is most commonly remembered for elucidating Americans' political naiveté: their attitudes about particular issues did not hang together in an ideologically coherent way; their political views shifted erratically over time; and for most, their comprehension of words like "liberal" and "conservative" was flimsy at best. But in a less-cited passage near the end of the essay, Converse carves out an important caveat: even if

[6] See Converse (1987) for a thoughtful retrospective on Blumer's critique.

Americans' political sophistication is *generally* low, they might pay attention to topics of particular personal significance.

> The simple conclusion seems to be that different controversies excite different people to the point of real opinion formation. One man takes an interest in policies bearing on the Negro and is relatively indifferent to or ignorant about controversies in other areas. His neighbor may have few crystallized opinions on the race issue, but he may find the subject of foreign aid very important. Such sharp divisions of interest are part of what the term "issue public" is intended to convey. (Converse 1964, 246)

Converse closes by alluding to some results that roughly support this notion, though he clearly thought the data available to him in 1964 were mostly insufficient to the task.

In the early days of survey-based public opinion research, then, there was substantial recognition that understanding the causes and consequences of citizens becoming psychologically invested in particular political issues was essential for contextualizing survey results, and understanding what role political attitudes play in a dynamic political system.

Two Trajectories of Research on Issue Publics

How have political scientists come to understand the role of issues publics since these initial discussions? The answer is: unevenly. In our reading, there is a substantial rift between literatures on public policy and political institutions, where issue publics are a focal concept, and public opinion, where the concept is surprisingly elusive.

First, consider the research that focuses on public policy and political institutions. Here, issue publics, also known as interest groups, are a canonical topic – the focus of a chapter in almost every introductory textbook on American politics. Well-regarded books document how issues influence candidates on the campaign trail (Fenno 1978 [see our epigraph]; Sulkin 2005). There is also evidence that they exert substantial influence on policy outcomes. Interest groups form to advocate for a wide spectrum of causes: workers' rights, environmental issues, changes to social policy, senior citizens' interests, interests of particular industry sectors, and more. They use many tactics to advance their goals, several of which rely on participation from large numbers of regular citizens: letter-writing campaigns, social media campaigns, organized protests, get-out-the-vote campaigns, posting flyers and lawn signs, making campaign contributions, and so forth (Kollman 1998). These efforts appear to influence policy makers, either via persuasion (Austen-Smith 1996) or by improving the return that policy makers receive for exerting effort in a particular policy area (Hall & Deardorff 2006).

Perhaps the most commonly invoked example of the influence that interest groups can wield concerns gun control. Since at least the early 1990s, the American public as a whole has reliably supported stricter gun laws. In a Gallup survey as of March 2018, for instance, 67 percent of Americans wanted stricter gun control laws, compared to 4 percent who wanted less-strict laws and 28 percent who favored the laws being "kept as they are" (Jones 2018). Of course, you wouldn't know it by looking at public policy. In the past several years, a series of mass shootings in the United States induced repeated calls for new federal restrictions: tighter background checks for gun purchases, a ban on assault-style weapons, a ban on large-capacity magazines, and so forth. Over and over again, these initiatives failed.[7] To be sure, part of the reason for the failure is the insider influence of the gun lobby. But at least as important is the NRA's success in forming a collection of regular citizens who pay attention to gun policy, write letters to representatives, donate money to political groups, and vote – particularly in primary elections – on the basis of gun issues, thereby constraining the behavior of political actors (Lacombe 2019).

Given the centrality of interest groups as a political science concept, as well as the initial interest in incorporating issue publics into the study of mass political behavior, one might expect public opinion researchers to have proceeded in parallel. For instance, public opinion researchers might have developed a common understanding of how to determine citizens' issue public memberships. They might have documented how many issue publics exist, the extent to which they overlap, how many issue publics a typical person belongs to, and many other things. In fact, these efforts have occurred on a small scale, or not at all. On the contrary, the trend in public opinion research has been very much to downplay the significance of citizens' preferences on specific issues. Consider the arc of four separate areas of research in public opinion:

1. *Abundant Ignorance*. A popular segment of the former late-night institution *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* featured the show's host approaching Los Angeles pedestrians at random and giving them an impromptu quiz. The laughs came when the hapless interviewees made wild misses concerning basic facts about politics, history, and pop culture. Who was Abraham Lincoln? The first president of the United States, of course. What two countries border the United

[7] As we finish this manuscript, gun control proponents have finally made a breakthrough. On June 25, 2022, a few weeks after a racist mass killing of ten people in Buffalo, NY followed by a separate killing of nineteen children and two adults at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX, President Biden signed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. This law provides support for individuals experiencing mental health issues and strengthens "red flag laws." It does not enact many other restrictions favored by larger majorities of Americans – restrictions on assault weapons and limits on magazine capacity, for two examples.

States? Australia and Hawaii. What French emperor has a pastry named after him? Crème Brûlée. And so forth.

To be sure, the *Jaywalking* segments reflected soaring heights of citizen ignorance. But the central tendency is not very impressive either. One comprehensive review documented that Americans have passable knowledge of political institutions and processes (e.g. whether the Supreme Court has the power of judicial review). But their knowledge of specific people and events was mediocre at best (Delli-Carpini & Keeter 1997). The same goes for specifics about particular policies (Galston 2001; Gilens 2001), especially when the policies are affected by recent events (Barabas et al. 2014). These reliable results are an inauspicious beginning for issue public voting. If most Americans cannot say how long a Senate term is, or describe in broad strokes even the most prominent legislative proposals of the day, how could they possibly have meaningful opinions about specific, narrow policy areas?[8]

2. *Over-time Instability*. Not only are Americans short on facts, their views on particular issues change, sometimes drastically, over time. Converse documented in his famous (1964) essay that only 65 percent of survey respondents – only a bit more than chance – placed themselves on the same side of a given policy issue over a four-year span. The same basic result has been replicated several times since (Markus & Converse 1979; Kinder 1998, 793–797).[9] For instance, the 1984 iteration of the American National Election Study (ANES) asked Americans whether or not the government should guarantee people a job and a good standard of living. A few weeks later, it contacted the same people and asked the same question again. Forty-six percent of respondents gave a different answer the second time the question was asked (Page & Shapiro 1992, 6). How likely is it that citizens engage in issue-based voting if they cannot even keep track of what their issue opinions are?

3. *Framing Effects*. It gets worse still. Citizens' issue stances change sharply over just a few weeks, but they also change in response to small (sometimes trivial) changes in wording or emphasis – what researchers commonly call "framing effects" (Chong & Druckman 2007). Framing effects can often be demonstrated with simple question wording experiments. For instance, people are much more likely to support federal spending that is labeled "assistance to the poor" than "welfare" (Rasinski 1989). They are less tolerant of inflation when it is presented as raising employment than reducing unemployment

[8] Iyengar (1990) points to an important caveat. He examines issue-specific knowledge and finds knowledge in one area to be poorly predictive of knowledge in other areas, hinting at the possibility that general knowledge measures could miss substantial domain-specific knowledge. See Pérez (2015) for a similar point applied to ethnic politics.

[9] See Feldman (1989) for a thorough discussion of different ways to interpret these patterns.

(Druckman 2004). They are much more likely to say that the United States should "not allow" public speeches against democracy than that it should "forbid" public speeches against democracy. Results like these – and the examples abound – throw cold water on the notion of issue voting because they imply that many issue preferences that people report in surveys are illusory – the product of how a question was asked or what considerations happened to be salient, more than anything real in a person's head.

4. *Partisanship*. Finally, the prospects for issue-based voting face a substantial challenge from what political scientists have discovered about the nature of partisanship. Early survey researchers noted that learning whether a person thinks of themselves as a Republican or Democrat will often tell you a lot about how they feel about issues of the day (Campbell et al. 1960, ch. 6). It will also tell you – at least with high confidence – how they voted in recent presidential and congressional elections (Bartels 2000). These associations do not *inherently* challenge the notion that issue opinions influence political judgments. Perhaps people develop issue preferences first, and then decide which party they will identify with on that basis (Page & Brody 1972; Carsey & Layman 2006; Johnston 2006, for discussions). But partisanship appears to be a powerful political identity, often deeply connected to a person's self-concept (Greene 1990; Green et al. 2002; Huddy et al. 2015; Mason 2018). As such, it, more than issue positions, is likely to be the "unmoved mover" that represents the core determinant of political judgments.

Determining the causal precedence of partisanship vis-à-vis issue positions represents a tricky inferential problem (Fowler 2020, for a recent discussion), but several studies have accumulated compelling evidence that partisan considerations determine citizens' issue positions – at least under many circumstances. For instance, Cohen (2003) conducted a series of experiments in which participants read vignettes that described specific policies (e.g. a welfare reform that was either generous or stringent, as determined by a random assignment) and which party advocated for the policy (Republicans or Democrats) and found that party cues influenced participants' support much more than policy substance. Lenz (2012) examines a number of instances in which panel surveys repeated measures of party identification and issue positions at several points in time. He finds that exogenous events, such as an issue becoming a focal campaign topic, cause citizens to bring their issue preference into alignment with their party identification – rather than vice versa. Thus, we regard the evidence that people *commonly* determine their issue positions via partisan cues to be strong.[10]

[10] See also Druckman (2001), Kam (2005), and Brader et al. (2013). Bullock (2011) extends Cohen's experiments, and finds that policy information matters a lot more when there are more policy details available. But more recent work showing that partisan loyalty of trumps

Each of the four topics we review here represents a major area of public opinion research, and they lead to some of the field's hallmark findings. Jointly, they have led researchers to dour conclusions about the prospects of issue-based voting. For instance, one landmark review (Kinder 1998) calls citizens "unsophisticated in the extreme" (793) and argues that political judgments flow from affinity and animosity toward various groups, much more than anything resembling ideology or policy desires. More recently, Achen and Bartels' much-discussed book, *Democracy for Realists* (2016), argues that citizens are not suited to hold politicians accountable. It contains an entire section titled "The Illusion of 'Issue Voting'" (41), suggesting that voters tend to have issue preferences in sync with the politicians they support because the voter is taking a cue from a politician they like – not because they chose to support that politician on the basis of policy views. In conclusion, a major upshot of several decades of research in public opinion – quite distinct from the interest group literature above – is that issue preferences are mostly epiphenomenal. They are arbitrary statements made up on the fly, or byproducts of more fundamental group-based conflicts.

Unfulfilled Promise

The literatures reviewed above provide plenty of reason to doubt that "issues," understood as a category, influence the average citizen's political judgments very much. But the issue public hypothesis is narrower than that. It is that discrete issues each have their own constituencies for whom issue opinions influence *related* judgments. Considered one at a time, these constituencies might be quite small. But as the number of distinct political issues is large, so might the aggregate number of people who are – in one form or another – issue voters also be large. Can this more specific claim stand up to the mountain of evidence we allude to above? We think it plausibly can.

This possibility has cropped up here and there in survey research. Jon Krosnick and various collaborators have published several papers discussing how a social psychology literature on attitude intensity (Petty & Krosnick 1995) can help illuminate how policy preferences affect citizens' thoughts and behavior – an agenda explicitly linked to Converse's notion of issue publics (e.g. Krosnick 1990). Hutchings (2003) argues that issue publics (operationalized in a different way, as we discuss in Section 3) function as sleeping giants, in the sense that they can be activated by campaigns that focus on personally important issues.

commitment to democratic principles (e.g. Claassen & Ensley 2015; Graham & Svolik 2020; Simonovitz et al. 2022) leaves little doubt that people turn to partisan cues to resolve impulses that lead to conflicting judgments. See Lodge & Taber (2013) for a thorough treatment of the psychological bases of motivated reasoning in politics.

Hillygus and Shields (2008) show that campaigns can peel voters away from their partisan leanings by highlighting personally important issues on which the voter departs from the party line. These are all important contributions, and the implications for understanding the political system as a whole are potentially profound. Given this, it is surprising that issue publics are not a more focal area of research in public opinion than they are. For one sign of the modest extent to which the topic has taken hold, consider that a recent, nearly 400-page edited volume seeking to provide an overview of the state of public opinion research allocates only five paragraphs to the topic (Berinsky 2016).[11]

We suggest that a key reason that public opinion research has diverged from research about how groups influence public policy is the insufficient tools that public opinion researchers have used to identify and examine issue publics. In our next section, we turn to the difficult issue of measuring issue publics.

3 Issues of Measurement

We argue that one reason research on issue publics has proceeded inconsistently is that public opinion researchers have never had a fully satisfying approach for identifying membership in issue publics. Here, we present an abstract definition of an issue public to serve as standard against which to evaluate existing measurement approaches. We propose that an issue public is a group of citizens whose political judgments are influenced by a long-standing and emotionally charged psychological investment in a specific political topic. Then, we review four different approaches that have been employed in the past. For each, we highlight significant limitations, each of which would lead researchers to underappreciate the importance of issue publics.

What Is an Issue Public?

A starting point for evaluating a social scientific measure is to describe, in the abstract, what it is that we wish to measure. In our case, what *is* an issue public? A challenge in answering this question is that Converse's original treatment never defined the term precisely. The closest he comes is to remark (referring to Black Americans with a dated term) that:

[11] When the topic of issues publics does come up, several researchers have remarked on the potential significance of the idea. Martin Gilens closes the above-referenced five paragraphs by noting that the public's capacity to fulfill its "assigned role in democratic governance" hinges in no small part on the nature of issue publics (Gilens 2019, 47). Gabriele Lenz notes that issue publics might represent a major departure from his conclusions about whether citizens lead or follow, but laments the absence of a measurement approach adequate for assessing this possibility – what he calls "an embarrassment for the field of survey research" (Lenz 2012, 120).

> different controversies excite different people to the point of real opinion formation. One man takes an interest in policies bearing on the Negro and is relatively indifferent to or ignorant about controversies in other areas. His neighbor may have few crystallized opinions on the race issue, but he may find the subject of foreign aid very important. Such sharp divisions of interest are part of what the term 'issue public' is intended to convey. (Converse 1964, 246)

There are several components here: an emotional component ("excite"),[12] a hint that issue public members will attend to goings on related to their topic of interest, and the idea that their opinions are "real" and "crystalized." In a nearby passage, it becomes clear that over-time stability is another part of what Converse is getting at.[13]

Reading how Converse used the term and how it has been invoked since, we came up with three specific criteria to define an issue public. Most important, being an issue public member is primarily an affective orientation based on caring about an issue. More than that, it implies that a person cares about a particular issue *relative to others*: if a person cares about issue X because they are attentive to politics and care about basically all issues, we have not identified an issue public member.

Second, the term "issue public" refers to people whose interest is *long-standing* – things that a person pays attention to across contexts, and including when the issue is not in the national spotlight. A person might care immensely about health care on Monday as Congress considers reform legislation, and about immigration on Tuesday, as the president tweets about it. This might be *genuine* caring, but it would also be event-driven caring, and not the sort of thing that the term "issue public" conveys.

Third, and stepping away from Converse, issue publics are groups of people whose political judgments are significantly influenced by their issue public attitudes. If we identify people who care about an issue, attend to it day in and day out, but who are not influenced by it when they comment on public affairs, decide for whom to vote, or engage in other politically significant acts, we have not yet found an issue public.

At first blush, the last criterion might seem to introduce a tautology: we cannot test the hypothesis that issue public attitudes influence judgments, since influencing judgments is part of what it means to be an issue public. We prefer to think of the criterion as a way to set a high standard for an issue public measure:

[12] A component that nicely parallels Markus Prior's (2019) conception of political interest. Specifically, he writes about how "dispositional" interest in politics is maintained over time in part because it is emotionally arousing.

[13] See footnote 43 in Converse (1964).

we are asking it to identify groups that are *politically significant* within the context of the broader political system – not mere attitudinal curiosities.[14]

Existing Approaches and Their Problems

Over the years, researchers have used a variety of methods to identify personally important issues. For the most part, however, they have relied on measures included on a survey with some other primary purpose in mind. We think this reality has restricted the scholarly understanding of issue publics in important and underappreciated ways. Our exposition in this section was influenced, we wish to stress, by an outstanding – but never published – dissertation on the topic (Gershkoff 2006). When we stumbled across and began to peruse Gershkoff's work, we realized that she beat us by several years in identifying and articulating several of our nascent concerns about survey research related to issue publics – plus some other ones that had not occurred to us. What follows is partly a summary and update of Gershkoff's critique.

1. *Interest Imputation*. One approach to identifying issue public members is to identify politically relevant groups, and assume that members of a particular group have certain consequent political interests. For instance, Hutchings (2003) supposes that union members represent an issue public for labor issues. More recently, Guntermann and Lenz (2022) consider whether individuals who contracted Covid-19, or who know someone who did, represent an issue public for pandemic issues.[15] The main appeal of the interest imputation approach is its feasibility. Researchers can often make a colorable argument that items included on a survey capture issue interests – even if the items were included for some different reason.

Unfortunately, the issue imputation approach is likely to generate a large number of false positives and false negatives. For instance, a person might deeply care about labor issues not because she is a union member herself, but because her friend or relative is a union member, or because she is sympathetic to workers. By the same token, a person can be a union member and *not* care very much about labor issues.[16] We fear that the noise inherent in this

[14] This approach aligns us to some extent with Hanretty et al. (2020). These authors identify personally important issues by examining their ability to influence votes for hypothetical candidates for the UK Parliament. They examine thirty-four issues and find that several issues that are not currently focal in political discourse have the potential to influence votes.

[15] See also Bolsen and Leeper (2013) for a study that uses interest imputation to predict attention to group-relevant news stories. Henderson (2013) finds that seniors paid more attention to Social Security news in the 2000 Presidential Campaign than non-seniors.

[16] As a graduate student, one of the authors of this element was required to join and pay dues to a union as a condition of becoming a course instructor. But he has no particular interest in labor policy. Similarly, one of the authors' fathers worked at a grocery store in his twenties where all of