Analysis of BES panel data

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I use panel data from the British Election Study to test some of John Zaller's assertions about political interest, political knowledge, and attitude stability.

The first thing I found interesting is how how little political interest fluctuates within-respondent over time. Among respondents who took part in 5+ waves[1], the mean within-respondent standard deviation in political interest is 0.996.[2] The figure below shows the mean self-reported interest across the 30 waves; each panel groups respondents by their wave 1 answer. Though this doesn't get at within-respondent variation, the degree of aggregate stability is remarkable.

Now let's look at the predictive power of interest and knowledge. I measure interest as the self-reported interest in wave 1, measured on a 0-10 scale. Knowledge is measured as the number of correct answers to a question asking to match 5 prominent political figures in the United Kingdom with their official position. Attitude (in)stability is measured as the within-respondent standard deviation in stated attitude toward immigration.[3] For this analysis, I restrict the sample to respondents who participated in 5+ waves. Each point shows one respondent; lower values on the y-axis indicate *more* stability in attitudes.

The relationship appears somewhat stronger when using political knowledge as the independent variable:

[1] There are 30 waves in total.

[2] Of course, the people who attrite are perhaps precisely those with unstable interest, but wave 1 interest is surprisingly weakly predictive of attrition.

[3] Attitude toward immigration is measured by asking respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale whether they think immigration is good or bad for the British economy.

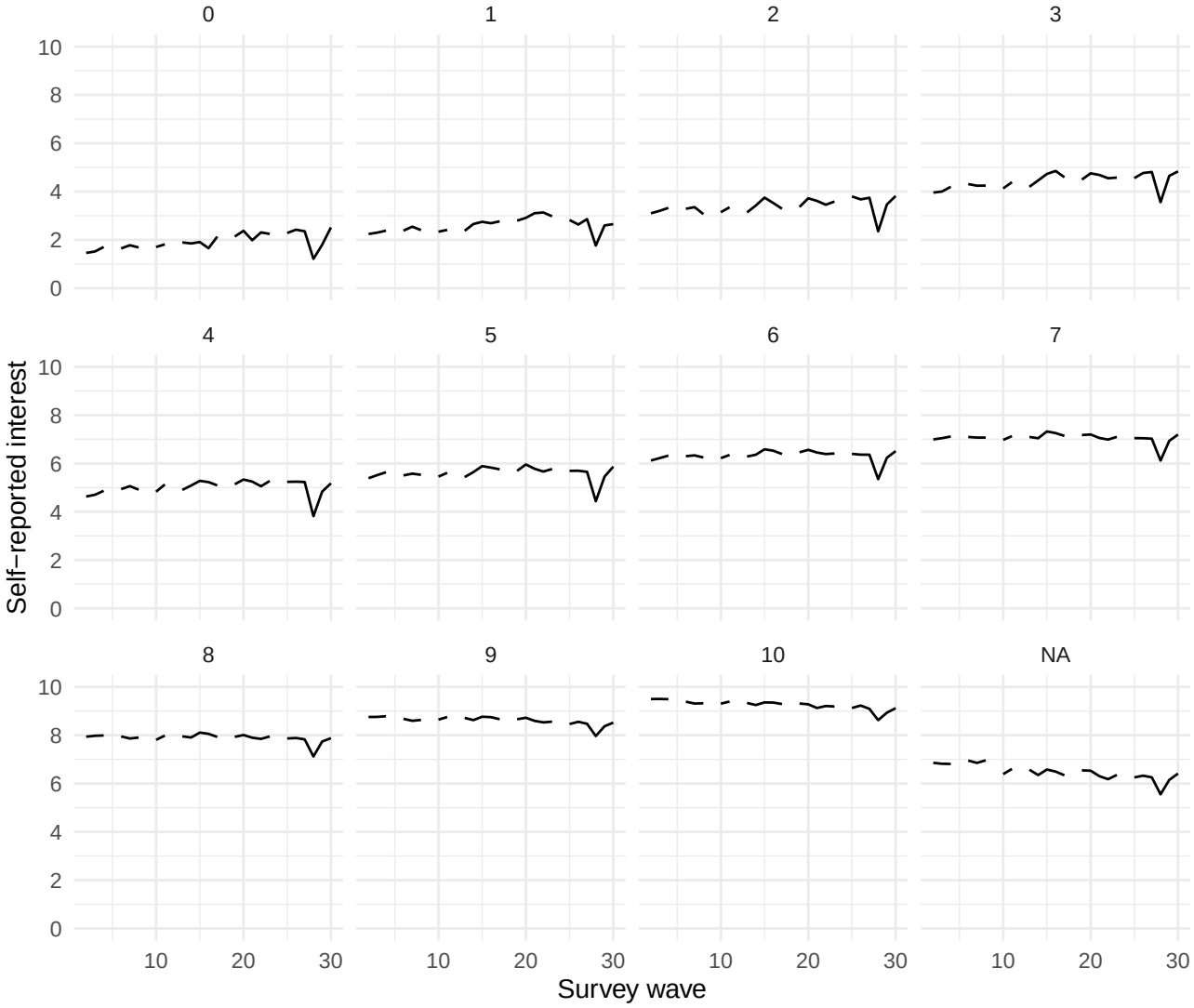
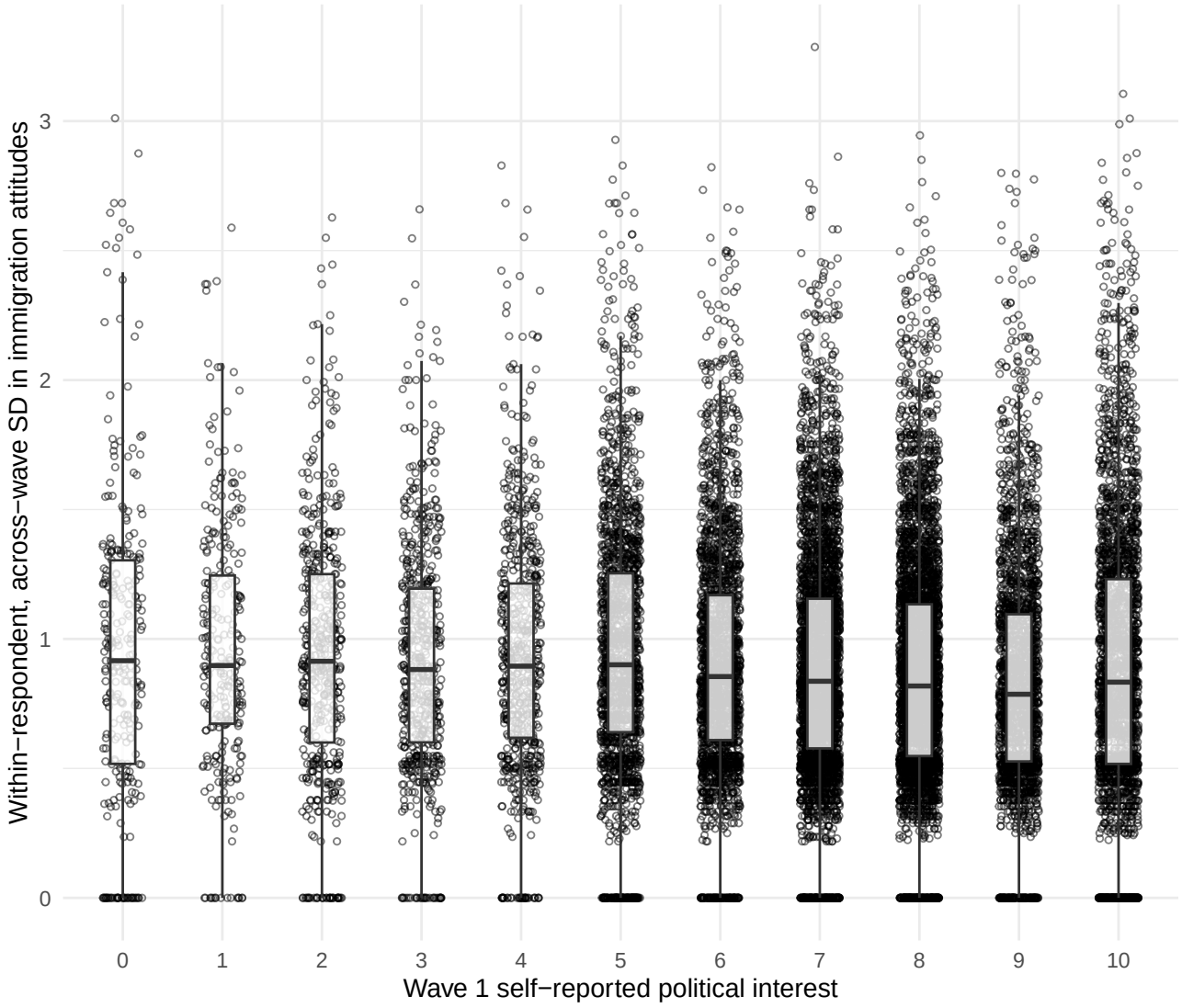


Figure 1: Mean political interest by survey wave and wave 1 interest


Within−respondent, across−wave SD in immigration attitudes
0
1
2
3
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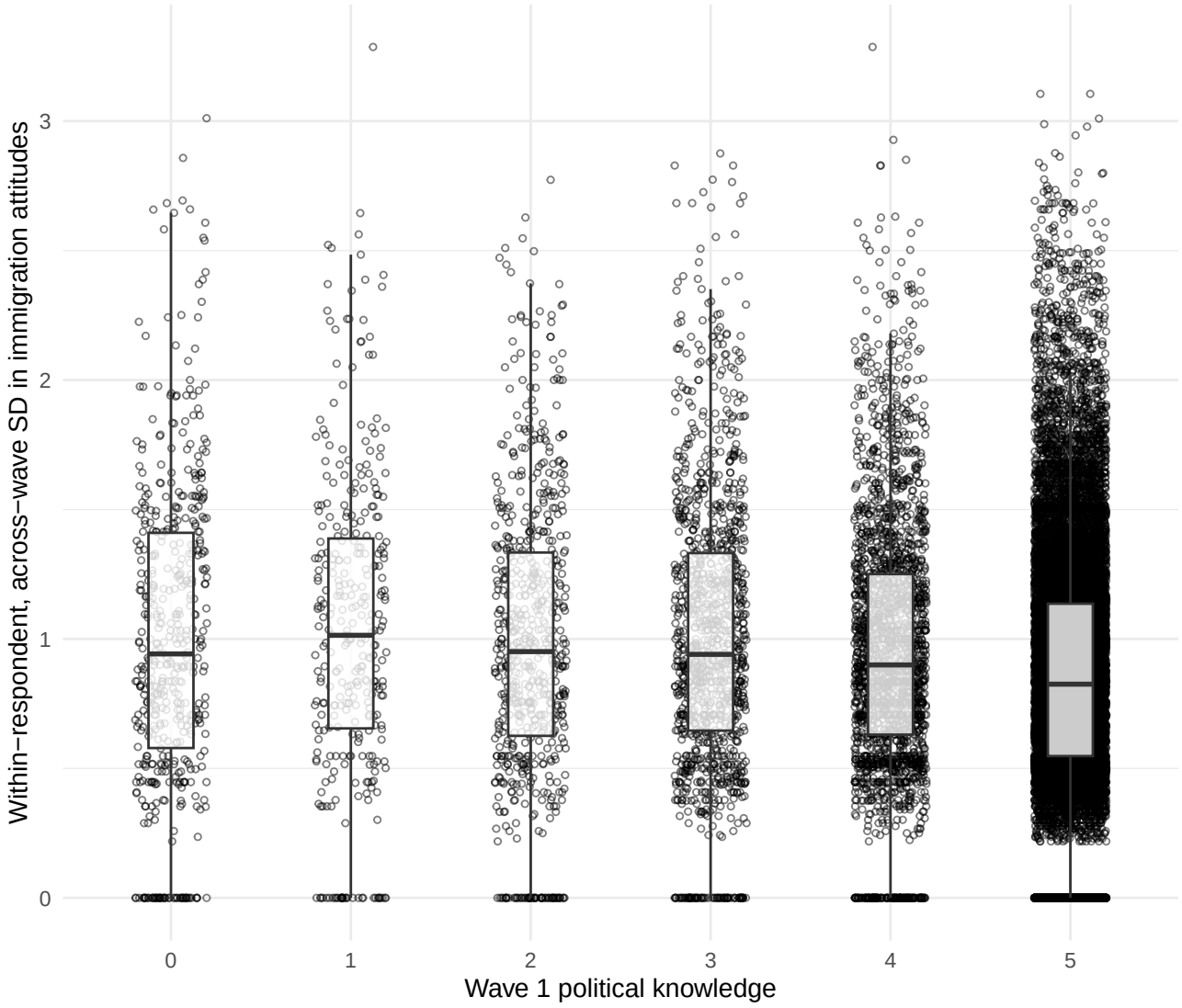
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
Wave 1 self−reported political interest


Within−respondent, across−wave SD in immigration attitudes
0
1
2
3
0
1
2
3
4
5
Wave 1 political knowledge