Received: 3 June 2023 | Revised: 5 February 2024 | Accepted: 20 February 2024

DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.13360

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Look over there. Where? A compositional approach to the modeling of public opinion on the most important problem

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to test whether the American public is polarized and/or parallel in its assessments of the most important problem.

Methods: We use compositional time series models and new data on public opinion to test for differences between subgroups.

Results: We find inconsistent evidence of polarization for some issue areas but not others and remarkably robust evidence of parallel reactions across subgroups to economic and international shocks.

Conclusion: The U.S. public is remarkably consistent in terms of its assessments of the most important problem and in how subgroups shift their perceptions of issue importance in reaction to changing circumstances.

The polarization of the American mass public has become a topic for discussion and research not just for political scientists but also for the media and politicians. While much of the attention has been on the divisions within Congress, during elections, and between voters, we know less about how these political dynamics affect the public's views about national problems and concerns. In addition, extending this beyond partisanship, questions remain about how political or economic groups within the public perceive the nation's problems. Are these subgroups polarized over the important issues, or do they hold similar opinions in terms of how they define national problems? Thinking about how shocks may shift the groups' priorities, do economic and political changes push groups' concerns apart, or do they react in parallel?

Research on polarization in U.S. politics has focused on a range of levels and outcomes, from members of Congress to voters and from roll call votes to vote choice (Barber and McCarty 2015; Bishop and Cushing 2009; Hetherington 2009; Theriault 2008; Waugh et al. 2009). Much of the attention on partisan polarization has focused on Democrats and Republicans at both the elite and mass levels becoming less

similar on ideological scales, leading to gridlock and more ideologically driven rhetoric. However, an alternative (or additional) theoretical option suggests that subgroups within the public may hold similar, parallel views. Research on these "parallel publics" highlights how various groups' opinions can move together over time, showing a propensity for different groups to change their attitudes in similar ways (Eichenberg and Stoll 2012; Page and Shapiro 1992). These two theoretical frames approach public opinion from different angles: polarization by focusing on the different issues and policy stances between groups and parallel publics by emphasizing groups' similar responses to salient events. Therefore, it would be possible to have a polarized public that is also parallel: significant differences between groups with shifts in opinion that move in tandem over time.

Deciphering how the public prioritizes problems is a particularly important aspect of public opinion. Uncovering the public's views about what policy areas are most problematic offers insights into what issues are salient to the public and to voters. Research on policy salience contends that while saliency includes specific policy areas, it emphasizes the varying importance among those areas (Bevan and Jennings 2014; Krosnick 1990; Wlezien 1995). Therefore, rather than focusing on policy spending, responsibility, or other specific policy changes or solutions, policy salience involves uncovering what issues concern the American public with an eye on understanding what types of issues drive the public discourse. While previous research on salience has acknowledged the reality that issues compete with each other for the public's attention (Jennings and Wlezien 2015; Singer 2011; Zaller 1992), few researchers have treated salience both theoretically and methodologically as a competition (see Junqueira, Kagalwala, and Lipsmeyer 2023, for an exception).[1]

In this article, we are interested in investigating how polarized and/or parallel the American public is when choosing the country's most salient issues. Is there common ground when discussing the country's most important problems? And we argue for looking at subgroups that go beyond partisanship in order to understand the possible differences when it comes to policy salience. Therefore, focusing on partisanship, gender, and income, we argue that the divisions within these subgroups may be polarized over the most important problem, leading to different viewpoints. However, in response to economic and international changes, those partisan, gender, and income groups may shift their opinions on policy salience in similar, parallel ways.

Using a data set of the most important problem facing the country from 1967 to 2015 in the United States, we investigate our argument about polarized and parallel publics. However, simply examining the issue's importance in one policy area is not sufficient to understand the dynamics of collective public opinion, because respondents, like the mass public, have options when making their choices. Our methodological strategy of using an explicitly compositional model allows for competition across the issue areas, so our results indicate the tradeoffs between salient issues. Overall, the degree of polarization across groups depends on the issue area and the subgroup: Republicans are more likely to select cultural issues but less likely to select social welfare; men are more likely to select economic issues but less likely to select social welfare; and poorer respondents are more likely to select economic issues but less likely to select crime. We therefore find evidence that the American electorate is inconsistently polarized in terms of issue importance. Moreover, our results indicate that the various groups move in parallel ways in the face of rising unemployment and increased international crises. In our conclusion, we consider the implications of this for public opinion, public policy modifications, and representative government more broadly.

ISSUE SALIENCE AND THE PUBLIC

Given the representative nature of American democracy, exploring what the mass public thinks about issues or policies continues to be a key aspect of American governance, and understanding what alters public opinion over time remains an important part of this representative link. As previous research has argued, policy salience can be an underlying driver of political behavior with attachments to vote choice

[1] For a discussion of the zero-sum nature of issues on agenda setting, see McCombs and Zhu (1995) and Edy and Meirick (2018).

and political parties (Belanger and Meguid 2008; Downs 1957; Fournier et al. 2003).[2] However, while issue salience signals importance, it cannot provide an indication of the direction (e.g., pro or con) or degree (e.g., more or less) of the opinion for the issue. Instead, issue salience can show the relevance of issues to the mass public.

Understanding opinions on issue salience can indicate the public's views on what should be on the policy agenda—what is important to the country. How the public views issues and policies drive much of American politics, and scholars have explained the "push and pull" involved in mass public opinion. Singer (2011) explains this as "the degree to which an issue is important is at least partially dependent on other elements not crowding it out" (p. 287).

Scholars have discussed how this competition between issue areas can affect the salience of issues. Much research has focused on explaining variations in the public's attitudes on issues and policies, but ultimately there may be limited room when the public considers various topics and issues. For example, Simon (1996) argues that individuals have limited attention spans, especially in the short term, which restricts their ability to make strategic and efficient decisions. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) explain this "bottleneck of attention" as leading to selective decision making, since focusing on one issue moves attention away from others. Therefore, when considering the issues and policies most important to the public, we should expect to see that the rising saliency of some issues will come at the expense of others, resulting in a competition between issue areas.[3]

POLARIZED AND/OR PARALLEL PUBLICS AND PUBLIC OPINION

When explaining mass public opinion, researchers have focused on how various subgroups think about issues and policies. Within the mass public, there is a range of subgroups brought together by various characteristics—for example, partisanship, income, gender, race, ethnicity, and so forth—and how these groups perceive the importance of issues remains of interest. Public opinion research has considered two possibilities for how groups relate to salience: *polarized* publics where subgroups differ on which issues are most important and *parallel* publics where subgroups respond to circumstances by changing their preferences in tandem.

The polarization of public opinion has largely been a partisan consideration with a focus on the great distance between Democrats and Republicans on political issues and policies. Discussions about polarization started with research about elites, parties, and congressional roll call behavior. With a focus on congressional voting and party elite messages, scholars and political pundits alike have discussed and emphasized that government representatives and party elites are driven by and extol party-centric messages and behavior (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2016).[4] Although research on elite polarization was the early driver for studying political polarization, and the uncovered high levels of polarization have headlined the topic of polarization, the shift to studying polarization at the mass public level has not resulted in such clear-cut definitions (Hetherington 2009) or conclusions (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Evidence for differences between subgroups—as defined by education, income, partisanship—on preferences and opinions on policies and issues suggests a broad polarization of the mass public (Castle and Stepp 2021; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

Scholars investigating mass public opinion have also identified patterns where groups within the public move their opinions in sync. Expanding the focus beyond partisanship to other groups and emphasizing changes over time, scholars have shown the parallel structure of opinion, whereby opinion at the subgroup level can move in tandem. While these parallel publics differ in their intensity for which issues are important, shifts of opinion appear to move together over time (Page and Shapiro 1992). Although this

[2] Gruszczynski (2019) also finds a link with agenda fragmentation.

[3] The most common way of assessing issue importance is with the "most important problem" question in surveys. Asking for the "most" important problem means that an issue of rising importance displaces the importance of other issues. See Wlezien (2005) for a formalization of this idea.

[4] Fiorina and Abrams (2008) also discuss the pros and cons of the various measures of elite polarization.

research acknowledges the differences across various groups in which issues and policies are important and salient, the focus remains on the common movement in public opinion across these groups rather than the disparity.

We consider whether the underlying divisions in the public may relate to the issues people find important and ask whether political and economic groups split on the issues they deem important. Are these subgroups polarized on how they view the country's problems? In addition, we argue that the economic and political contexts may influence which issues are deemed important, so we ask how do groups respond to economic and political shocks? Is there a common reaction, or do group-level differences affect these opinions on policy salience? Our argument is that the competitive environment shapes issue importance, and key identifiers—that is, gender, income, and partisanship—motivate groups to view different issues as important (*polarized* publics). However, the groups will respond in similar ways to shifting economic and political conditions (*parallel* publics).

GROUPS AND ISSUE SALIENCE

Extending the idea of a polarized, but parallel public, to the competitive arena of issue importance, we begin by identifying three characteristics that structure group-level opinion dynamics. These features play an important role in determining the issues considered most important by voters. Previous research has noted that a significant group-level determinant is the extent to which being in that group increases the personal connection to that issue (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977). For example, being in a high-income group may increase the importance of progressive tax policy, because it directly affects one's income. While personal connections can increase a group's accessibility of information about issues, "the accessibility of issue concerns is driven by the strategic choices of politicians attempting to set the agenda and by the frequency and tone of media coverage" (Singer 2011, p. 286).[5] Therefore, members of different subgroups may view policy issues, and their importance, in varying ways.

Given this variation in personal preferences and tendencies to mobilize, it is reasonable to expect that there are large differences in how the groups' priorities shift in response to changing conditions. However, we suggest that though these features may produce polarized issue agendas, the groups' responses to issues may be similar to one another. The idea that American mass public opinion was coherent, sensible, and stable with parallel groups trending together over time goes back to Page and Shapiro's argument in *The Rational Public* (1992). While scholars had previously focused on how individual public opinion showed widely changing and disparate attitudes on policies and issues, aggregate public opinion appeared stable. More importantly, for this article, it highlighted how opinions across subgroups (e.g., age, income, and partisanship) changed in similar ways. Subgroups may not view issues with the same level of importance, but their opinions on the issues can move in tandem in response to environmental shocks.

These patterns of polarized but parallel publics are evident in studies of preferences for spending in the United States (and across countries). For example, Soroka and Wlezien (2010) explore differences in preferences for spending on various policy areas across education, income, and partisan groups, showing how those preferences respond to changes in policy. They find that there are larger cross-group differences in welfare than defense or health/education spending preferences but "considerable parallelism" for all policy areas and groups (Soroka and Wlezien 2010, p. 157). While this study is useful for strengthening the notion of polarized but parallel groups, its focus on spending preferences limits its relevance to a discussion about policy salience, and while they tackle multiple policy areas, they stop short of acknowledging the competitive nature of issue areas.

Our approach, then, builds on these previous studies. Research on spending preferences has studied these differences and changes for individual issue areas rather than understanding opinion across the issue or policy agenda (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). However, some scholars have acknowledged that attention on some issues diminishes the saliency of other areas, and the comparison has tended to be between economic

[5] See also Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1996) and Iyengar and Kinder (1987).

policy and other possible issue areas at the individual level (Singer 2011, 2013). Other work discusses the competitive nature of issue importance, as well as how the responses vary across subgroups but stops short of empirically investigating those relationships. In the remainder of this section, we discuss three characteristics that structure subgroup issue importance—partisanship, gender, and income. We select these issues because these identities play an outsized role in research on mass public opinion, and more practically, polling companies have consistently collected this information in surveys in the post-World War II era.

Partisanship

The public's attachment to political parties has been a key factor when discussing differences in vote choice and policy preferences. This focus on partisanship grounds the research on polarization. While the original interest was in the polarization of Democrats and Republicans within Congress and at the elite level (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Theriault 2008; Waugh et al. 2009), other debates centered on questions of the polarization of the mass public. Some argued that the American public is polarized on some if not all issues (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008; Castle and Stepp 2021), while others concluded that the American public's ideological and partisan differences remained slight with polarization largely at the elite level (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2006). Much of this work explores attitudes on various policies or issues as individual components, rather than considering the issues as parts of a larger issue agenda, where the public shifts its preferences between issues.

There is considerable research with regard to how partisanship affects issue attitudes and opinions (Campbell et al. 1960), as well as how the public chooses candidates closest to their ideal positions (Belanger and Meguid 2008; Downs 1957; Fournier et al. 2003). Party elites affect the issue attitudes of co-partisans through messaging and policy positions (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). For example, Slothuus and Bisgaard (2021) show that citizen policy opinions shift substantially in accordance with the position of the party to which they are attached. In addition, researchers have argued that partisan-motivated reasoning may also be at play. The idea here is that individuals conform real-world contexts and factors to their partisan beliefs, interpreting conditions through a partisan lens (Bisgaard 2015; Dickerson and Ondercin 2017; Jerit and Barabas 2012). Importantly, this cognitive dissonance moves beyond simple changes in attitudes within issue areas and extends to what issues are viewed as important. For example, the existence of an in(out-) party president affects partisan views concerning whether budgetary issues are (un)important (Kane and Anson 2022). Elite party cues and partisan-motivated reasoning provide potential explanations for why citizens may view some issues as more important than others—such as owned party issues (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013; Junqueira, Kagalwala and Lipsmeyer 2023; Petrocik 1996)—and therefore we expect there to be a partisan gap in what issues are salient.

Scholars present competing views of whether partisan differences move asymmetrically (Branham 2018; Castle and Stepp 2021; Enns and Kellstedt 2008) or in parallel (Page and Shapiro 1992) across time. How parties attempt to influence their supporters may affect this, as well. While candidates should try to emphasize the issues their party owns to maximize their chance of victory (Budge and Farlie 1983; Green and Hobolt 2008; Petrocik 1996), research also points to a significant amount of issue convergence between candidates in competitive U.S. elections (Banda 2015; Kaplan, Park and Ridout 2006; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Simon 2002; Spiliotes and Vavreck 2002). Convergence by candidates to discuss "the issue of the day" may suggest that partisans think similar issues are important, increasing their salience; therefore, Democrats and Republicans alike must campaign on these issues (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994). Given these possibilities for how parties and partisanship affect voters and the public, Democrats and Republicans may view the most important problems facing the country in similar ways, or depending on the partisan message, they may see different issue areas as most salient.

Gender

Although partisanship often times takes center stage when discussing public opinion, researchers also have turned to other group categories to investigate polarization and parallel publics.[6] Here, we are interested in how gender differences may affect the public's perceptions of policy salience. Do men and women view the same or different issues as nationally problematic? With a grounding in work on representation, scholars have focused on how men and women legislators focus on varying policy areas and have gender-based preferences (Lawless 2015; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003). Recently, researchers have turned to the question of whether gender affects how individuals perceive the importance of issues (Yildirim 2022).

Existing research on public opinion has highlighted various differences between women and men that relate to policies and attitudes.[7] For example, women are more likely than men to hold liberal opinions, and they tend to support issues that relate to equality and empathy (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986). Research has found that these differences appear across a range of policy areas. From obviously gendered issues, such as equal pay, to more general policy areas such as gun control and education spending, men and women find some issue areas more important than others (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Lawless 2015). In the specific areas of war and social welfare, previous research has consistently shown a gender gap in preferences (Huddy, Cassese and Lizotte 2008). These gendered differences within and between issues can have important implications for elections, where attitudes and the salience of issues affect vote choice (Chaney, Alvarez and Nagler 1998; Harteveld et al. 2019; Kaufmann and Petrocik 1999).

Questions remain about whether or not women and men are polarized or parallel when it comes to issue salience. Some scholars argue that men and women shift their opinions in the same direction and by the same magnitude (Eichenberg and Stoll 2012; Page and Shapiro 1992), while others claim men and women shift their opinions in the same direction but by a different magnitude (Kellstedt, Peterson and Ramirez 2010). These scholars argue that differences in historical economic experiences, vulnerabilities, and outlooks lead to different perceptions of the economy and public policy and ultimately different attitudes between men and women. However, they focus on policy attitudes in a specific issue domain and ignore variations in issue importance across the broader issue agenda. The agenda-setting properties of the media may help to build consensus between subgroups on the most important issues. For example, men and women who consumed more news, whether from television, radio, or newspapers, were more likely to agree on which issues were most important (McCombs 1997; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Shaw and Martin 1993).[8]

Income

Our third subgroup emphasizes the socio-economic differences in the American mass public—distinctions based on income. There is much research tying income groups to a range of political behaviors, from vote choice and elections to policy preferences and attitudes, with questions remaining about the depth of these relationships. For example, while income has been shown to influence electoral outcomes (Bartels 2010; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008), these differences seem to be contextual, varying by time and region (Gelman 2008).

How income affects the public's views on issue salience may be related to how their income levels relate to public policies. Much of the research on income and political attitudes touches on self-interest with an emphasis on where groups fall in the redistributive calculation. For example, those in the lower income

[6] For example, Castle and Stepp (2021) investigate both partisanship and religious groups.

[7] Note that the gender gap in policy attitudes does not appear to be simply a function of partisan sorting (Bishop and Cushing 2009), with recent evidence suggesting inter- and intra-party gendered opinion differences. For example, on the scope of government, women prefer a more activist government than men of the same party, Republican or Democrat (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Lizotte 2017).

[8] Even without the influence of the media, men and women had moderate agreement on the most important issues (Shaw and Martin 1993).

groups are expected to favor redistributive policies, because the benefits they receive outweigh the cost of taxes. But the rich and middle class should oppose these policies due to an increased tax burden without the benefits (Meltzer and Richard 1981). Similarly, Page, Bartels and Seawright (2013) find that those in the top income group hold significantly more conservative attitudes on some policy areas than the general population. However, some scholars argue that increased polarization has resulted in the rise in the salience of cultural and social cleavages over traditional income differences (Frank 2004; Roemer 1998) with others contending that the traditional cleavage is still as strong as ever (Van Der Waal, Achterberg and Houtman 2007).

The economic voting literature may provide insights into what issues income groups hold important. For instance, research shows that in response to the same economic conditions, income groups had different evaluations of which party was the best manager of the economy in the United Kingdom (Palmer and Whitten 2011; Palmer, Whitten and Williams 2013). In particular, low-income voters assessed the Labour Party based on unemployment, while high-income voters assessed the Labour Party based on inflation. This is reasonable, because economically vulnerable individuals prefer more spending on unemployment regardless of collective economic conditions unless policies are well suited to buffer against these vulnerabilities (Compton and Lipsmeyer 2019). Therefore, what is the most important problem may vary by income group, even under the same economic or social conditions, if they view the context from different, polarized perspectives. But the possibility of parallel income groups also exists since the public may view national issues or problems from a more sociotropic viewpoint rather than through their own self-interest (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).

Besides simple cross-sectional differences in issue opinions, we must examine how views on issue importance shift across time. There are two potential factors that influence the perceived importance of issues: the media and economic indicators. The media influence these perceptions using agenda-setting, priming, and framing (Blood and Phillips 1995, 1997; Boomgaarden et al. 2011; De Boef and Kellstedt 2004; Nadeau et al. 1999; Soroka et al. 2014; see Moy, Tewksbury, and Rinke 2016, for a review of the literature). For example, when news coverage of economic issues, such as unemployment or inflation, comes to the forefront of the public's attention, they will place more importance on these issues. Importantly, people do not need to be "bankers" (see MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992) to update their economic evaluations (Enns and Kellstedt 2008). They only need to understand how the economy has changed (Soroka, Stecula and Wlezien 2014), and this information can be gathered from the media and personal interactions (Books and Prysby 1999; Goidel et al. 2010; Mutz and Mondak 1997; Reeves and Gimpel 2012). We expect issue opinions to move in parallel across time because of the prevalence of media attention on national economic conditions and local conditions and interactions.

Voters choose to focus on a limited number of issues at a time, and we expect that voters' attention to those issues will shift as conditions change. For example, a weak economy not only changes voters' issue attention toward economic solutions but also moves it away from other issue areas, such as foreign affairs and social policy (Singer 2011, 2013). These sorts of tradeoffs can appear in other salient issue areas, such as foreign policy. As Heffington, Park and Williams (2019) show, publics respond in rational and predictable ways to salient international crises by emphasizing foreign policy problems and deemphasizing other issues. Considering our argument about polarized and parallel publics, we contend that the various subgroups will be concerned with different sets of issue areas, but we expect that they will respond to economic and political shocks in similar and consistent ways across subgroups.

Our theoretical argument of polarized, but parallel, publics offers two hypotheses about issue importance:

***Polarized publics* hypothesis**. Subgroups are concerned with different sets of issue areas.
***Parallel publics* hypothesis**. Subgroups respond to shifting conditions in similar and consistent ways.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Our theoretical argument offers two hypotheses regarding how subgroups in the public view the importance of issues and how external shocks affect those views. While our expectations are based on aggregate and group-level changes in public opinion, conventional aggregate-level toplines from survey houses or data repositories (such as Roper) are not ideal. Those responses dealing with issue importance do not often provide fine-grained responses that are consistent across time, and they very rarely break out these responses across the necessary groups.

Testing these hypotheses, therefore, requires a unique data collection that allows the aggregation of individual-level responses regarding issue importance. Fortunately, the "Most Important Problem" Data Set (MIPD) is a massive data set of individual responses to the "most important problem" (MIP) question from 1939 to 2015 (Yildirim and Williams, Forthcoming). Scholars have used MIP data to tap into a variety of aspects of public opinion including issue salience, issue importance, problem status, public concerns, preferences, and so forth (see Jennings and Wlezien 2015, for a review). Though widely used, its limitations are also well-known. MIP responses are generally poor at representing issue opinions (Soroka 2003) and public spending preferences (Jennings and Wlezien 2015), and they cannot tell us the direction of opinion (Junqueira, Kagalwala and Lipsmeyer 2023; Wlezien 2005). Moreover, confusion can arise over the extent to which issues are both "important" and a "problem." For instance, an issue (i.e., the economy) might be the most important issue, but it may not be a problem in a specific period, such as in an economic boom (Wlezien 2005, p. 556).[9] At its most basic, the MIP response is an individual's plurality winner of important problems, and when aggregated to the group or national level, it represents the public's set of priorities or issue agenda.

The MIPD is particularly useful for this project since it codes responses with the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) coding scheme (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). We then can calculate monthly percentages of the public identifying various categories as the "most important problem" facing the country. This is crucial to examining any questions related to how issues compete and tradeoff with each other in the aggregate. We collapse the 20 categories from the CAP into six broad categories: Economic Issues (including Macroeconomy, Employment, Inflation, Taxes and Fiscal Policy), Social Welfare, Crime, International Affairs (including National Security), Culture (including Immigration), and Other (including Civil Rights, Environment and Energy, Government Operations, and all remaining categories).[10] These categories are consistently the most important problems over time and are therefore more likely to be the target of media attention and elite messaging strategies.

Since the MIPD uses polling data from a number of survey houses, there are slight variations in the wording of the MIP questions, as well as the response sets. For example, while the most prominent MIP question is the typical "most important problem facing the country today," there are other wordings used quite often (e.g., "most important issue," "most important problem for Congress to solve," etc.). The vast majority of surveys offer open-ended responses (that are then coded into 30–45 categories by the polling house), but a small percentage (almost 2 percent) forces the respondent to choose between around 10 categories. In the interest of generating as complete of a data set as possible for our time period, we use the most inclusive criteria for deciding which surveys to use. We then calculate the weighted[11] percentage identifying each category as the MIP out of all those who identified a problem.[12] The MIPD offers the exact dates of fieldwork, so we create monthly percentages. Percentages for the months without available

[9] Having said that, the fact that "most important issue" (MII) responses are "strikingly similar" to MIP responses (Jennings and Wlezien 2011, p. 545) helps to mitigate concerns that the variation in MIP responses over time is completely driven by variation in problem status.

[10] The "Other" category includes responses that do not fit into the remaining categories.

[11] Population weights are generally available for this time period (90 percent), but where they are unavailable, we assume that all respondents are weighted equally. We calculate these percentages by survey, so variations in the weighting scheme used do not influence the survey aggregation at each time period.

[12] The alternative is to include those respondents who said "do not know" or were "missing" into the denominator to calculate the percentages. We choose to exclude these from the calculation, because we want a measure of issue importance for those who consider there to be problems present with the country.

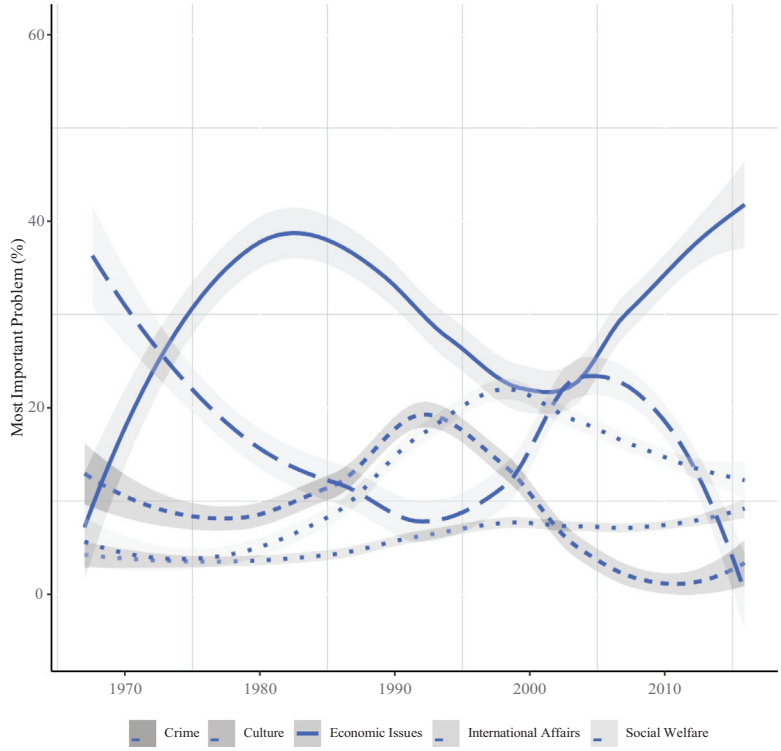

FIGURE 1 Issue importance over time (1967–2015).

surveys are interpolated linearly. Due to missing data in our MIP indicator, we limit our temporal domain to 1967–2015.

In Figure 1, we display the smoothed estimates of the monthly percentages of five issue categories (we omit Other). A first observation is that one of two issue categories—Economic Issues or International Affairs—typically is considered the "most important problem" by the public. A second, related, observation is that there appears to be evidence consistent with competition for public attention. There are clear instances when the importance of economic issues (possibly due to recession or a shock) rises to eclipse previously salient international affairs (possibly due to an international crisis), and there are other noteworthy tradeoffs that may be less publicized. As crime and social welfare issues grow in importance in the late 1980s and 1990s, international affairs becomes much less important. We also note that there is a great deal of "stickiness" in the series, meaning that issues that are important in one month tend to remain important until a major shock shifts the public's relative issue importance.

As an illustration of issue importance in the aggregate, consider Figure 2 that shows the percentages selecting Economic Issues as the most important problem broken down by partisanship (Democrats and Republicans).[13] Overall, we see common patterns of highs and lows for both partisan groups, suggesting shared perceptions of the country's problems. To better illustrate this movement, we include a snapshot from 2008 to 2009 in Figure 3 that suggests a parallel, possibly polarized, structure to the public's perceptions of salient policies. While the shifts in the choice of Economic Issues as the most important problem move in tandem for Democrats and Republicans, the vertical distance between the partisan groups suggests polarization.

[13] Though periods of domestic crises or international disputes periodically elevate other issues on the agenda (Mueller 1973; Ostrom and Job 1986), issues related to the macroeconomy are typically the most important problems.

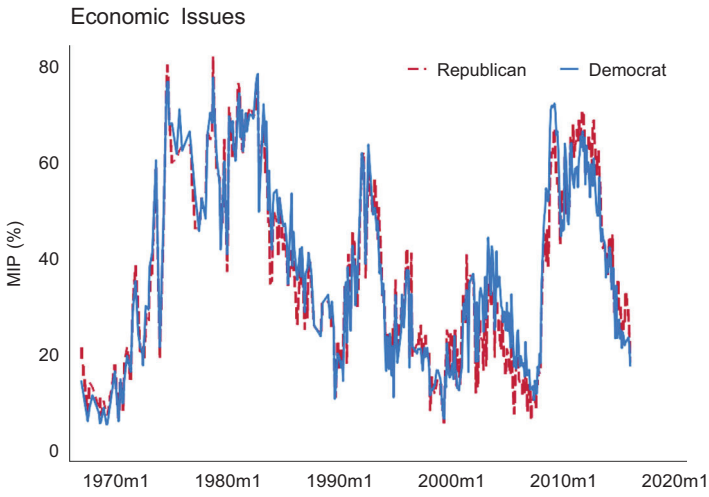

FIGURE 2 Economic Issues "most important problem" (MIP) percentage over time (1967–2015) and across party identification.

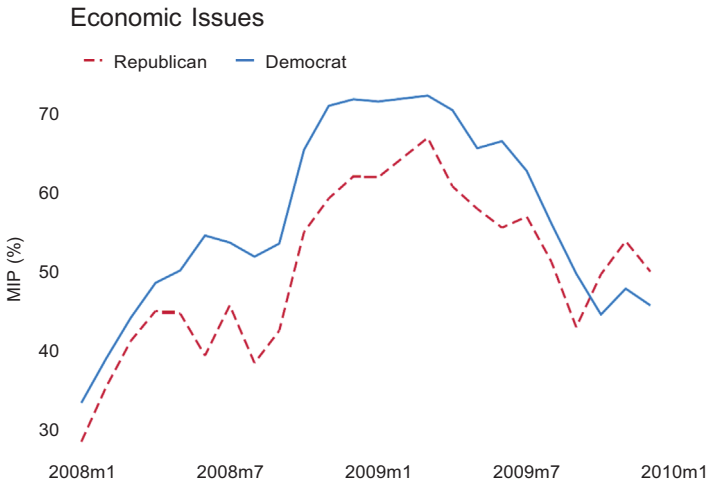

FIGURE 3 Economic Issues MIP percentage snapshot (2008–2009) and across party identification.

These exploratory figures suggest that, although subgroups may differ as to the most important problem, they respond to shifting circumstances in similar ways. This is consistent with our theory that the public responds to changing conditions by reprioritizing salient issues on their agenda, and this produces patterns of issue tradeoffs at the aggregate level. Therefore, our priority in terms of model specification is to adequately capture the changing economic, political, and international landscapes, so we can fully understand which circumstances induce tradeoffs and to what extent. We model the relative tradeoffs between six prominent issue categories (explained above). The compositional nature of our dependent variable—that is, the categories are bound by 0 and 100, sum to 100 percent, and we expect correlated errors across categories—means that traditional ordinary least squares regression (OLS) is inappropriate (Zellner 1962). As per Philips, Rutherford, and Whitten (2016), we use seemingly unrelated regression to model how exogenous shocks influence the public's relative tradeoffs across issue categories. The categories are autoregressive, so we also control for the percentages of each issue category in the previous month.

Our independent variables fall into three broad categories that capture the ongoing media, economic, and international situations. First, the media plays a clear role in setting the agenda and identifying the particular issues that ought to be salient on the public's agenda (Moy, Tewksbury and Rinke 2016; Soroka 2003). Moreover, the media is the primary source of information for voters, so it is unlikely that issues

will become important to the public without being covered extensively by the media. We measure the percentage of *New York Times* articles devoted to three issues: macroeconomy, law and crime, and international affairs (Baumgartner and Jones 2002).

The second category includes variables that measure objective economic conditions that are of utmost concern to the public. They are: quarterly *GDP growth* (from the Bureau of Economic Analysis), monthly *inflation* and *unemployment* (both from the Bureau of Labor Statistics), and *growth in oil prices* (percentage change per gallon from the previous month, from the Energy Information Administration). We expect these to be closely related to the percentage of the public viewing macroeconomic issues as salient.

Our final category of independent variables tests for the tendency for salient international crises to shift the public's attention away from domestic issues and toward international or security-based issues (Mueller 1973). We measure international conflict with the *total number of crises* that counts the number of crises occurring in that month (the International Crisis Behavior Data; Brecher and Wilkenfeld 2000; Brecher et al. n.d.). This variable has a high threshold for crisis, so we expect these events to break through the noise and attract a great deal of public attention. We expect that the public responds to all three issues with a short delay, and model fit statistics indicate that all variables should be lagged by 1 month ($t-1$).

RESULTS

The sheer number of coefficients in our models, combined with their nonlinear nature, limits the ability to assess the substantive impact of variables solely from their coefficients. As with other nonlinear models (such as logit or probit), quantities of interest ease the burden required for interpretation (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). Other scholars have offered graphical techniques of exploring these quantities of interest in the presence of temporal dynamics (similar to this model), either in the simple case of OLS (Williams and Whitten 2012) or in compositional models (Lipsmeyer, Philips and Whitten 2023; Philips, Rutherford, and Whitten 2016). Those graphical methods are already quite complex, so scholars reduce their complexity by simplifying the scenarios used in the simulations. The nonlinear nature of compositional models means that each configuration of independent variables in the data potentially produces a different substantive effect for the variable of interest. Our approach is to examine the change in the relative issue importance across the six categories given a change in the independent variable, and then average those changes across all N observations (Hanmer and Kalkan 2013; Williams 2018).[14]

To assess whether or not groups are polarized, we estimated separate compositional models for each subgroup in order to control for a range of variables and to more rigorously generate predicted proportions of all six categories across partisanship, gender, and income groups. The results from these analyses are shown in Figures 4–6. [15] If the confidence intervals for subgroups do not overlap each other, then we conclude that the proportions of the various subgroups (e.g., men and women) choosing an issue as the most important problem are significantly different from each other. Across these figures, we see evidence for polarization inconsistently across issue categories.[16]

In Figure 4, the proportion of Republicans likely to choose Culture as the country's biggest problem is significantly higher than that of Democrats. And the proportion of Democrats likely to choose Social

[14] The conventional approach is to generate quantities of interest at "average" values; unfortunately, this "average-case approach" has a number of prominent weaknesses that limit its usefulness in dynamic compositional models. First, Hanmer and Kalkan 2013, p. 266) demonstrate mathematically that calculating the marginal effect for a scenario with all values at their means is not the same as taking the mean of the marginal effects calculated for all observations. Second, scholars are only rarely interested in inferring the substantive effect for a specific observation, and in those rare cases, scholars are hardly ever interested in an observation with "average" values of everything. Instead, more effective evaluations of theories focus on the average substantive effect across conditions observed in the data. This is the "observed-value approach," and it has some appealing connections to notions of "average treatment effects" in experimental settings. Finally, Williams (2018) shows that scenarios based on the "average-case approach" have a high risk of being extrapolated and quite far from the bulk of the observations. The "observed-value" approach removes the risk of misleading inferences about treatment effects due to unrepresentative simulation scenarios.

[15] For simplicity, Figure 4 focuses on those who identify as either Democrat or Republicans. Although they are included in the model, we omit Leaners and Independents from the figure.

[16] We also provide additional information and empirical analyses in our Supporting Information (Appendix).

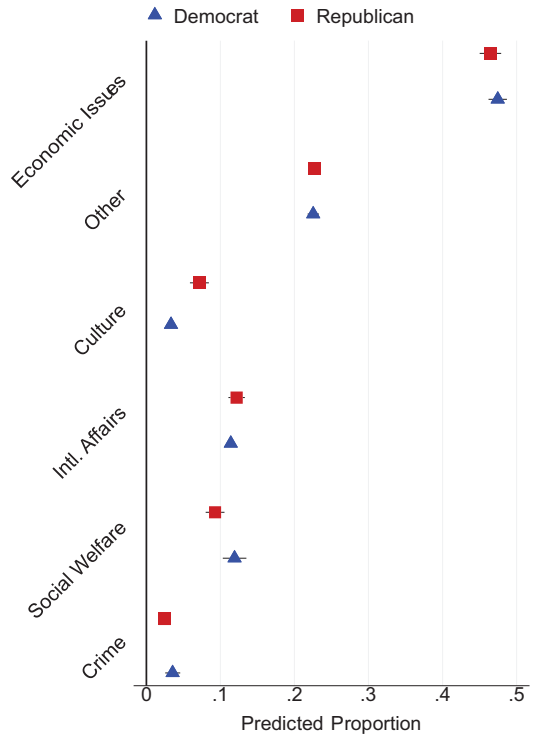

FIGURE 4 Partisan differences across issue importance categories.

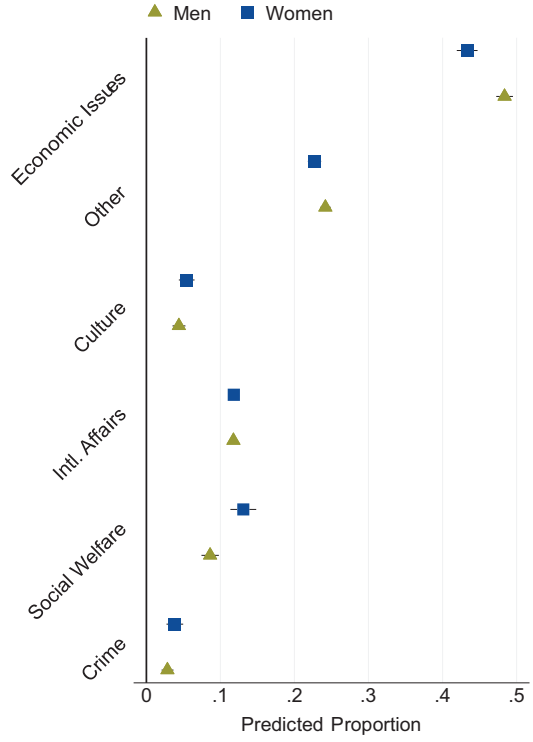

FIGURE 5 Gender differences across issue importance categories.

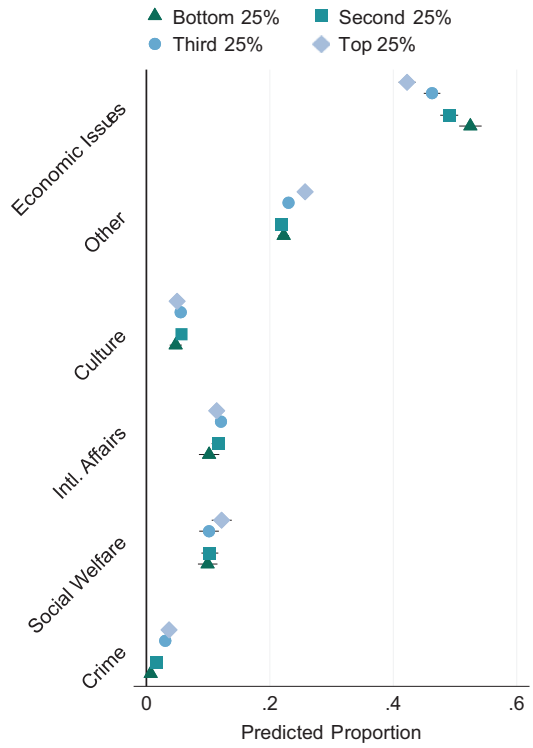

FIGURE 6 Income differences across issue importance categories.

Welfare as the country's biggest problem is significantly higher than that of Republicans. For all other issue areas, the partisan proportions overlap each other. For gender differences in Figure 5, we see polarized groups for Economic Issues (men with a higher proportion) and Social Welfare (women with a higher proportion). Figure 6 illustrates a slight degree of income polarization. For three issue areas (Economic Issues, Other, and Crime), we see significant differences across various income quartiles but similar proportions for the other issue categories (Culture, International Affairs, and Social Welfare).

While we expected subgroup responses to vary based on media coverage, international crises, and economic issues, we found no statistical impact of media coverage on issue importance. We therefore focus our attention in the remainder of this section on interpreting subgroup responses to the two most highly influential exogenous shock variables: *total number of crises* and *unemployment*. These figures assess whether groups have parallel reactions to shocks. In Figures 7 and 8, we show the predicted long-run changes[17] from the baseline proportions in all six issue categories across Democrats and Republicans in response to one-standard deviation increases in *total number of crises* and *unemployment*, respectively. Looking first to the results after an increased shock in unemployment, we find responses that illustrate our *parallel publics* argument. As the unemployment situation becomes more dire, both Democrats and Republicans increase their attention to Economic Issues at the expense of nearly every other issue (Figure 7). In addition, the results illustrate that those issue areas significantly likely to decrease (i.e., Culture, Social Welfare, and Crime) are similar across partisan groups, as well.

The results in Figure 8 also indicate that Democrats and Republics respond to interstate crises in similar ways by increasing their attention to International Affairs issues. The results suggest limited tradeoffs in the areas of Economic Issues (for Democrats) and Culture (for Republicans). In nearly every case—the

[17] Although multiple quantities of interest would make sense to explore, we narrow our focus to presenting the long-term effects (which result from the dynamic and highly autoregressive nature of the issue importance series).

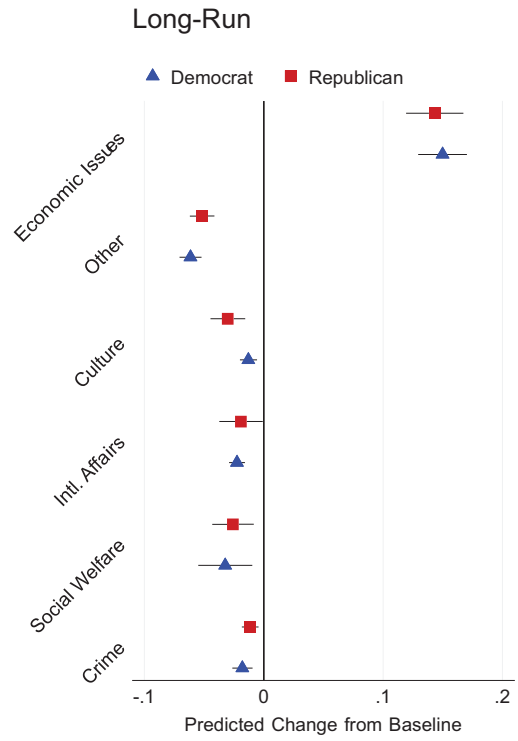

FIGURE 7 Long-run change from baseline proportions across partisanship in response to unemployment.

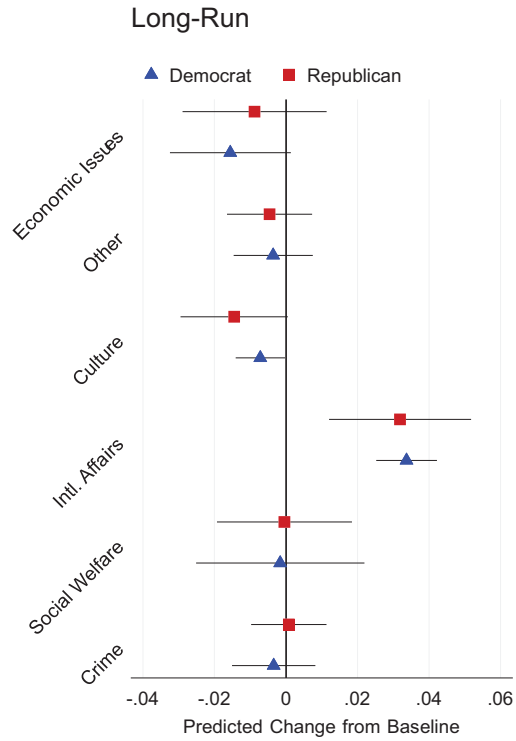

FIGURE 8 Long-run change from baseline proportions across partisanship in response to interstate crises.

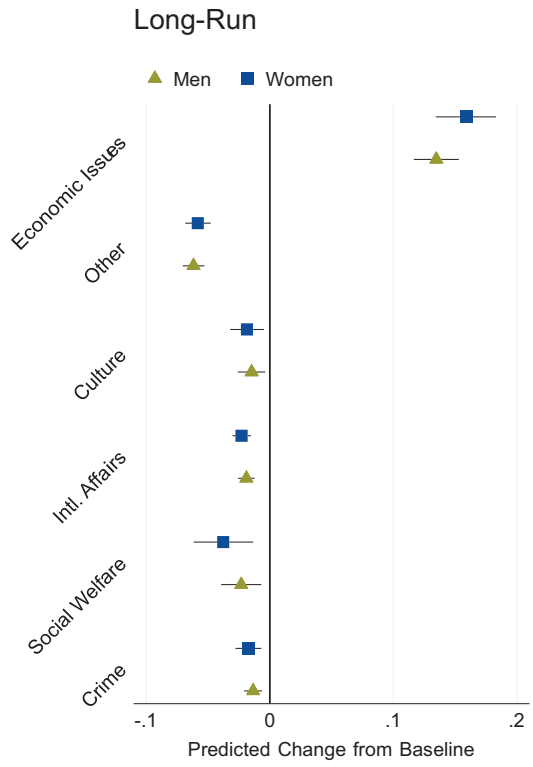

FIGURE 9 Long-run change from baseline proportions across gender in response to unemployment.

one exception is how partisans respond to unemployment shocks with respect to Culture—there is no statistical difference in how Republicans and Democrats respond to shifting conditions in terms of issue importance. This lends support to the *parallel publics* hypothesis.

Our results for how external shocks affect gender groups point to similar parallel patterns found in the partisanship figures. Issue competition across men and women in response to unemployment (Figure 9) and interstate crises (Figure 10) suggest groups with similar reactions to these shocks. In Figure 9, an increase in unemployment results in the same pattern: Economic Issues become significantly much more important to both men and women at the expense of every other category. For interstate crises, the results in Figure 10 indicate a parallel pattern with the proportions of those choosing International Affairs increasing significantly for both men and women, while neither gender offsets that increase by significantly decreasing other policy areas.

Issue competition across income quartiles also displays evidence of parallel publics. In Figure 11, an increased shock to unemployment significantly increases the importance of Economic Issues for all income groups, although there are no significant differences between these groups. The relative decreases in other areas (i.e., Other, Culture, Social Welfare, and Crime) also do not significantly differ across income categories.[18] Turning to how interstate crisis can affect public policy salience across income groups, and the results in Figure 12 show that all income quartiles increase their concern for International Affairs in response to an increase in international crisis, but these increases are not statistically different across all four groups. Similarly, the decreasing tradeoffs to Culture for the second- and third-income categories are not significantly different from the other groups. Taken together, these results also suggest *parallel* behavior in issue importance across income groups.

[18] The one slight exception is for Crime, where shifting attention to Economic Issues produces a smaller decline in the proportion of the poorest individuals selecting Crime.

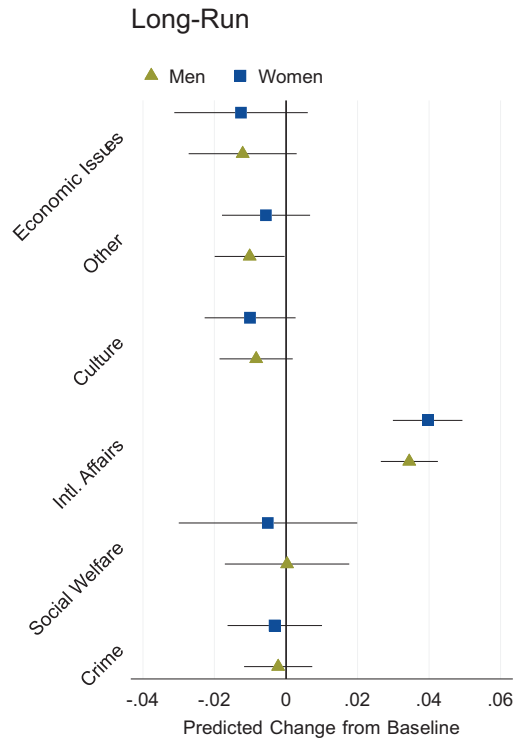

FIGURE 10 Long-run change from baseline proportions across gender in response to interstate crises.

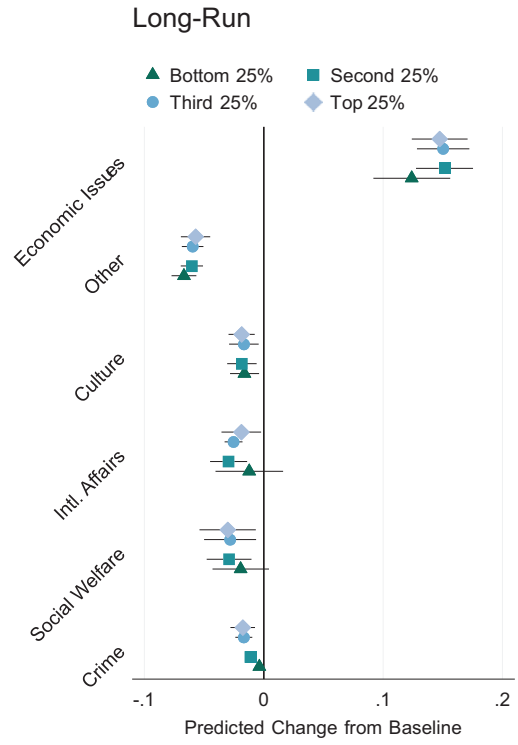

FIGURE 11 Long-run change from baseline proportions across income quartiles in response to unemployment.

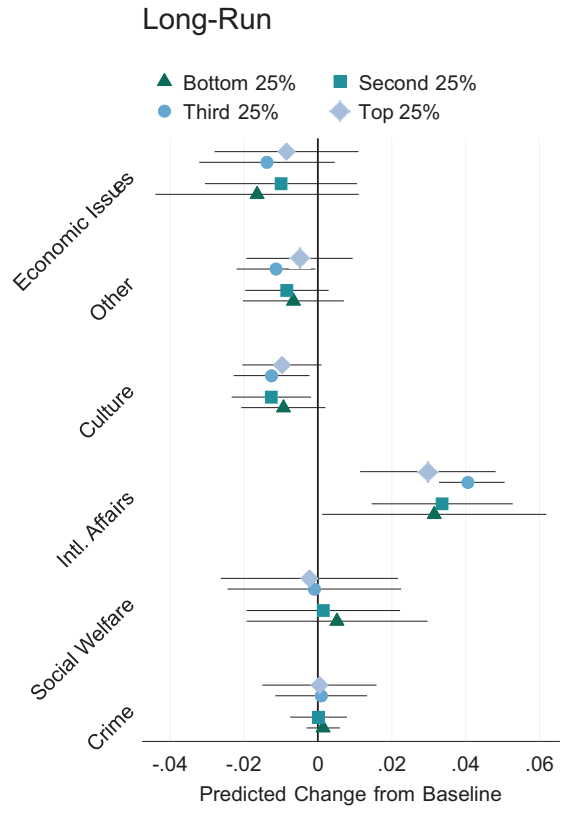

FIGURE 12 Long-run change from baseline proportions across income quartiles in response to interstate crises.

CONCLUSION

Research and news coverage about polarization and divisiveness present a country split by partisan and ideological differences. The difficulties of passing legislation in a divided Congress, combined with the heated discussions about policy differences across party lines can lead to a pessimistic view of the American political situation. In this article, we take a step back from the legislation and policy debates to investigate how the American public views the problems in the nation. While partisanship may divide the mass public when it comes to policy prescriptions, might the public actually agree on what is wrong?

Before debating policy solutions, the public first considers what needs to be fixed. Therefore, we have been interested in what national problems are most salient across groups in society—by partisanship, gender, and income. In our analysis of the most important problem, we found that polarization across groups differs by issue area. The importance of Economic Issues varies across gender (men more than women) and income (poor more than rich), although not partisanship. Social Welfare is more important for Democrats and women, although it does not matter for income groups. Republicans are also more concerned about Crime than Democrats, and the importance of Crime increases with income. International Affairs, on the other hand, does not vary across partisanship, gender, or income. Our model-based simulations of reactions to rising unemployment and international conflict revealed generally common reactions across groups. For example, the proportions of both men and women who chose International Affairs significantly increased in parallel in response to interstate crises. We found similar results when we turned to income groups with the range from high- to low-income groups reacting in tandem to both rising unemployment and international crises shocks. What about partisan differences? Given the attention to partisan polarization, how do these external shocks affect partisans' views of issue salience? When it

comes to national problems, Democrats and Republicans reacted similarly to economic and international shocks, increasing the proportions that choose Economic Issues and International Affairs.

How do we reconcile our results about issue salience and national concerns that suggest "parallel" publics with the vast literature on policy spending, legislation, policy preferences, and voting that highlight differences across partisanship, gender, and income? Research on topics that question the role of individuals and government in politics and society touches on the cornerstone of partisanship, as well as aspects that create differences across other subgroups in society. For instance, studying preferences for government spending on redistributive policies can tap into numerous underlying economic, political, and social attitudes. It is not surprising that research on preferences, attitudes, voting, and legislation would uncover some level of polarization.

The results in this article suggest that at a basic level, the mass public (and various subgroups) is generally cohesive in its views of the most important issues in the nation. Although there is some evidence of polarization, these groups hold similar views of what plagues the country, and their reactions to economic and international crises move in parallel. Therefore, the mass public agrees on the importance of issues. However, we note that within these groups, people may not agree on how to fix the problem or even who bears the responsibility for the problem, but that would shift the discussion into the partisan realm. If the mass public agreed on all of the policy prescriptions to fix the nation's problems, then there would be no differences between Democrats and Republicans. Appendix.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Jokinsky, S., C. S. Lipsmeyer, A. Q. Philips, L. K. Williams, and G. D. Whitten. 2024. "Look over there. Where? A compositional approach to the modeling of public opinion on the most important problem." *Social Science Quarterly* 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13360