

Differing Voter Criteria and Primary Polarization

Barry C. Burden
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of Political Science
Elections Research Center
bcburden@wisc.edu

Matthew J. Kim
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of Political Science
mkim733@wisc.edu

We thank the Elections Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for financial support, Colin Case and Emily Matthews for comments, and the National Science Foundation for its support of both the American National Election Studies and Cooperative Election Study. A prior version of this paper was presented at the UW-Madison American Politics Workshop and the 2025 meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

Abstract

It is tempting to blame partisan polarization on people who vote in primary elections, yet scholars find little evidence that primary voters are extremists. We resolve these contradictions by hypothesizing that primary voters weigh issues more heavily than do non-primary voters. This makes polarization a result of differing voter criteria rather than their positions alone. We test this hypothesis with data from the American National Election Studies and Cooperative Election Study both of which identify primary and non-primary voters and measures their preferences on a set of policies. In general elections and when evaluating presidential performance, primary voters tend to attach greater weight to issues such as abortion, government policies towards Blacks, and health insurance than do non-primary voters. This heavier weight that primary voters put on issues appears to grow over time and more so for Republicans, in line with trends in party polarization.

It is widely accepted folk wisdom that primary election voters are to “blame” for party polarization in the U.S. The argument goes like this. In many states and districts, dedicated partisans choose the winner of the party primary, and the Democratic and Republican candidates who win those nominations almost always espouse positions substantially to the left or to the right of the preferences of the average general election voter, effectively “leapfrogging” back and forth over the median voter (Bafumi and Herron 2010). Because politically lopsided districts cause most general election contests to be uncompetitive, extreme primary voters have leverage to demand that the candidates they support are ideological purists.

The media have echoed this theory in recent years. Journalists and other casual observers of contemporary U.S. politics frequently point to primary elections as a fundamental force behind policy polarization between the parties. A widespread assumption behind these claims is that primary voters are comparatively extreme in their policy views. By this account, primary voters either pressure candidates to adopt more extreme positions or support challengers who are farther from the middle of the ideological spectrum.

Yet there are problems in trying to pin the polarization of candidates on the ideological extremism of primary voters. Academic researchers do not find much evidence that people who vote in primaries are more polarized than the larger party following that only votes in presidential elections. We propose a resolution to this apparent contradiction that shifts the focus from the unique positions of primary voters to the heavier emphasis they place on issues and ideology. Our analyses of national political surveys show that – compared to co-partisans who vote only in general elections – primary voters give greater weight to issue positions when they make political judgements such as evaluating the president and when voting for candidates in general elections. Primary voters may have positions that are not distinguishable from other

voters and yet still foster candidate polarization by translating those positions more directly into political judgements.

Primary Voters and Polarization

Conventional wisdom puts primaries near the top of the list of culprits for the growing ideological divide between Democratic and Republican politics. General elections, which in theory should moderate politicians' positions, are not competitive in most districts or states any more due to a combination of geographic sorting of the electorate and gerrymandering. As a result, the main political competition often occurs in a primary where voters are generally affiliated with the same party and favor candidates who represent that party's interests. Winning the votes of primary voters requires candidates to tack to the left in a Democratic primary and to the right in a Republican primary (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006).

The problem for this folk wisdom is that academic research does not support it, at least not in its simplest form. In a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic, Thomsen (2020, 134) concludes that researchers have "struggled to find direct linkages between primaries and polarization." Hirano et al. (2010, 188-9) largely agree, providing evidence that "casts doubt on the conventional wisdom that the primary system in the United States fuels the growing ideological schism between the parties . . . widely taken as a truism in public discourse and among political scientists."

The phenomenon of getting "primaried" by a more extreme opponent is not particularly common and does not seem to motivate representatives to adopt more polarized positions (Boatright 2013). In most cases there is no systematic difference in the extremity of the positions taken by candidates who win congressional primaries versus those who lose them (Cowburn 2024; Hirano and Snyder 2019). And states that use "closed" primaries, in which only

(presumably more ideological) registered partisans may vote, do not produce more polarized politicians than in states where “open” primaries allow all voters, independent of party affiliation, to take part (Hill 2015; Masket 2019). Evidence indicates that party elites actively work to favor more moderate nominees in congressional primaries over extremists that appear to only a segment of the party (Hassell 2017; cf. Broockman et al. 2021). Candidates do frequently adopt extreme positions, but it happens for a variety of reasons beyond the pressure of primary voters, such as acting on their own policy commitments (Hall 2019), attracting money from donors (Kujala 2020), and mobilizing activists to work on their campaigns (Aldrich 1983).

In a damning empirical critique, Sides et al. (2020) demonstrate that the views of primary voters are not unrepresentative of the broader party followings. In their analysis, primary voters in elections from 2008 to 2014 do not appear to be more polarized than their co-partisans who skip primaries, even on salient issues such as health care, taxation, the minimum wage, and abortion. Although party primary voters might be polarized than independents, the Sides et al. analysis says that partisans who vote in primaries are no more extreme than fellow partisans who only vote in general elections.

The necessary condition for primary voters to be a cause of polarization – ideological extremism – thus appears to be missing. Although earlier studies also cast doubt on the idea that primary voters are more extreme (Geer 1988; Norrander 1989), those studies are dated and focused on the unique circumstances of presidential primaries. The Sides et al. analysis, in contrast, provides contemporary evidence drawn from state and congressional primaries, the exact settings where the conventional wisdom should apply.¹

¹ A contrary conclusion comes from Hill (2015), who finds that congressional primary voters are more ideologically extreme than those who only vote in congressional general elections. Sides et al. hint that Hill’s methodological approach might explain his divergent results, but the reason for the disagreement remain unresolved.

These null results are difficult to square with other evidence, such as the finding that candidates whose ideological positions stray in a moderate direction from the preferences of primary voters in their districts suffer electorally, drawing more opponents and earning smaller shares of the primary vote (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007). In addition, primary candidates appear to adopt more extreme positions when they face more serious competition in the primary election (Burden 2004). It is not yet clear how these patterns can exist if primary voters are unexceptional. In the following section we propose a solution to reconcile the apparent conflict between the conventional wisdom and evidence. Although primary voters might not have unrepresentative policy positions, we argue that they prioritize those positions when voting in primaries and that incentivizes candidates to be more faithful to their views.

Theory and Expectations

Although lacking evidence of extremism, the Sides et al. study does show primary voters to be more interested and knowledgeable than other members of the electorate. In our account this is a key to understanding how primary voters contribute to polarization. Greater sophistication leads to more attentiveness to issues and ideology. Studies show that voters who are more informed rely more on ideology when selecting candidates (Adams et al. 2017; Basinger and Lavine 2005). We theorize that primary voters contribute to polarization not necessarily because their ideological and issue positions are more extreme but because they give more weight to those positions when voting. This in line with Burden's (2004, 214) speculation that, "[t]he ideological positions of candidates are simply more important to primary voters than to general election voters." Even if primary voters are not distinguishable by their issue positions, we believe they are distinctive in giving those positions more emphasis when they make political choices.

There is ample theoretical support for the idea that different types of voters weigh criteria differently. Prominent theories of democratic representation are built on the assumption that some voters care more intensely about issues than do others and hold politicians more accountable for their positions on those issues (e.g., Hill 2022). As one study of heterogeneity in voting decisions explains, “[i]f issues have different levels of salience to voters, then identical policy preferences do not necessarily imply identical (or even similar) voting patterns for voters” (Rivers 1988, 737). An analogy is the finding that, although men and women have similar positions on the issue of abortion, women give the issue more weight when engaging in political activity (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001).

Allowing voters to use differing decision criteria in this way explains into how primaries can be polarizing even if the positions of primary and non-primary voters are similar. Primary voters, it seems, are sticklers for candidates to adopt positions consistent with party orthodoxy (Henderson et al. 2022). It helps that primary voters are somewhat more “unified” in their views than are general election voters (Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong 2023), making it easier for candidates to discern what the preferred stance on each issue would be for this more attentive group of voters. Our key expectation is compared to other voters, people who vote in primaries will base their vote choices and evaluations of political actors more on their issue positions.

We also have two secondary expectations about heavier issue weights among primary voters. First, in line with the growing polarization of voters over time, we hypothesize that the importance of issues will generally rise across the years, particularly since the escalation of partisanship in the electorate in the early 1990s (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008). Whether the mechanisms are “conflict extension” (Carsey and Layman 2006), “sorting” (Levendusky 2009), or some other process, there is general recognition among scholars that voters’ party loyalties,

issue stances, and vote choices have come into closer alignment over time, especially among the kinds of attentive citizens who are likely to participate in primaries (Abramowitz 2010).

Second, even amidst differences in weighting between primary and non-primary voters, we expect Republican primary voters to give even heavier weight to issue positions than do Democratic primary voters. Numerous scholars have observed that contemporary party polarization is asymmetric, in that the GOP has moved to the ideological right more dramatically than Democrats have moved to the left (Hacker and Pierson 2008; Lelkes and Sniderman 2016; cf. Lasala-Blanco, Shapiro, and Wilke 2021) and that there is a higher proportion of ideologues among Republicans compared to Democrats (Hill 2015; Norrander 1989). The rise of the Tea Party and eventual MAGA movement behind Donald Trump were two visible signs of ideological factions pulling the party to the right. Grossman and Hopkins (2016) argue that Republicans are in general, a more ideological party and, more specifically, that GOP congressional candidates are more likely than Democratic ones to be endorsed by ideological and single-issue interest groups (versus demographic or identity groups). Without taking a firm position on the degree to which asymmetric polarization has generally occurred at the elite level or among rank-and-file partisans, we believe it is reasonable to expect Republican primary voters to show more reliance on issue positions and Democrats less, more so in recent years than earlier decades.

Data and Methodology

To test these hypotheses, we analyze the criteria voters use to choose candidates and evaluate presidential performance. To do this, we estimate multivariate models of vote choice and presidential approval separately for general election voters who reported voting in their state primaries versus those who did not. These methods mimic the approach of Sides et al. (2020) and

avoids making an inappropriate comparison to non-voters. Including issues in regression models of vote choice and presidential approval, we interpret the coefficients on these variables as the weight that voters give to them in determining the candidates they support and evaluating politicians in elected office.

To examine how primary and non-primary voters weigh issues differently, we analyze data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) and the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Both studies conveniently ask the needed questions: presidential vote choice, presidential approval, positions on policies, primary election turnout, and important control variables such as party identification. Because these items were asked over multiple years, we can examine change over time. Yet these surveys also have limitations. Some issue questions come and go, making it impossible to estimate a unified model for all election years. The issues in our models were chosen for two main reasons. First, they have been asked consistently across multiple election periods with few variations in question wording or measurement. Second, these issues are salient for voters and for parties. Questions about primary voting unfortunately only appear in some years.

To balance comparability over time and richness of the models, we settled on the effects of distinct policy issues across several election periods. In the ANES, questions about primary voting appear in the 1988, 1992, 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020 surveys, allowing us to do some longitudinal analysis to compare the periods before and after polarization took hold. In the CES, primary participation was measured in 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2020, and 2022 which allows us to examine partisan polarization during presidential and midterm elections.

In the ANES analysis, we analyze four policy opinion scales: abortion, government aid to Blacks, government spending, and health insurance. The abortion measure asks respondents to

rate their abortion policy preference on four-point scale ranging from “never permitted” to “always” available. The aid to Blacks question asks respondents to place themselves on seven-point scale ranging from whether government “should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of Blacks” or “should not make any special effort to help minorities.” The health insurance question is a seven-point scale ranging from preferences for a unified government insurance plan to private insurance paid by individuals. Finally, the seven-point government spending scale asks respondents whether the government should reduce or increase spending for social services such as health and education. To make the weights of the issues comparable, we recoded all of them as zero-one scales and reversed their direction as necessary so that higher values represent more liberal positions.

In the CES, policy scales were more variable across election cycles. For example, in 2008 we are able to analyze four issues: abortion, protecting the environment or safeguarding jobs, privatizing Social Security, and affirmative action.² The abortion question mirrors its ANES counterpart. Respondents are asked to rate their support for abortion on a four-point scale from “never be permitted” to “always permitted.” Whether the government should prioritize protecting the environment over safeguarding jobs is a five-point scale from “more important to protect the environment even we lose jobs and have a lower standard of living” to “much more important to protect jobs even if the environment becomes worse.” Attitudes towards affirmative action and Social Security privatization are four-point issue scales from “strongly support” to “strongly oppose.” From 2010 and 2014, the Social Security question is absent and the question about jobs versus the environment was slightly altered to focus on the Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air Act. From 2016 to 2022, issue scales become dichotomized and new policies

² The CES includes numerous questions about specific bills in Congress, but we view those as less relevant than broad policy dimensions that tend to persist across election cycles.

were provided to respondents. In 2016, the CES asked respondents whether the government should increase or decrease the number of border agents at the Mexican border, and on gender equality, respondents were asked whether they opposed or supported same-sex marriage. In 2020 and 2022, respondents were also asked whether the “strongly” supported or opposed a ban on assault rifles.

The lesser consistency in questions in the CES surveys is a real limitation compared to the longer ANES time series. However, the CES is a helpful complement in several ways. It has larger sample sizes that provide more statistical power, it covers more recent years where the ANES provides less consistent coverage, and it includes vote validation based on official state election records to avoid biases due to self-reporting of turnout.

The main dependent variable– vote choice – is a dichotomy indicating whether the voter selected the Democratic or Republican presidential candidate. The second dependent variable – presidential approval – is also a dichotomous variable where respondents either approve or disapprove of the president’s performance. The approval variable has been reversed when the president is a Republican to be consistent in direction with other variables. To account for the powerful influence of partisanship in voting, our models include the standard seven-point party identification variable, also rescaled to the zero-one range. This can be viewed as an especially strong control variable because it reflects so many predispositions that affect political decisions. Its coefficient also reveals if primary voters give party attachments greater importance than do non-primary voters.

In subsequent analyses we make use of other ANES items to determine if primary voters give more weight to issues and ideology. As we describe later, we examine several measures of political sophistication such as educational attainment to assess the mechanisms that that might

primary voters to weigh issue more heavily and as separate tests of the basic hypothesis about differential weighting. In particular, the “levels of conceptualization” from the open-ended “likes” and “dislikes” questions about the political parties and the candidates are another way to reveal if primary voters are more likely to think about elections in terms of ideology and issues. We use the master codes provided in the ANES to recreate the “levels of conceptualization” first introduced in *The American Voter* for primary and non-primary voters.

For the main we estimate simple logistic regression models of general election vote choice and presidential approval that include the four issue scales and party ID, applying the appropriate ANES sampling weight variable. To account for election-specific variation we include fixed effects for individual election years to account for shifting partisan tides. After showing the pooled results for all years, the model is run separately for differing time periods to assess change occurring alongside polarization. We then run the model separately for the two parties to evaluate differences in weighting between Democrats and Republicans. The full regression results may be found in the appendix. For ease of interpretability, we rely on graphs that plot the coefficients (weights) of the variables separately for partisans who voted and did not vote in that election year’s primaries. Dots indicate the coefficients and vertical lines show 84% confidence intervals around those estimates, a common standard when testing for a difference between two estimates rather than testing that each estimate is different than zero.³

Issue Weighting by Primary and Non-Primary Voters

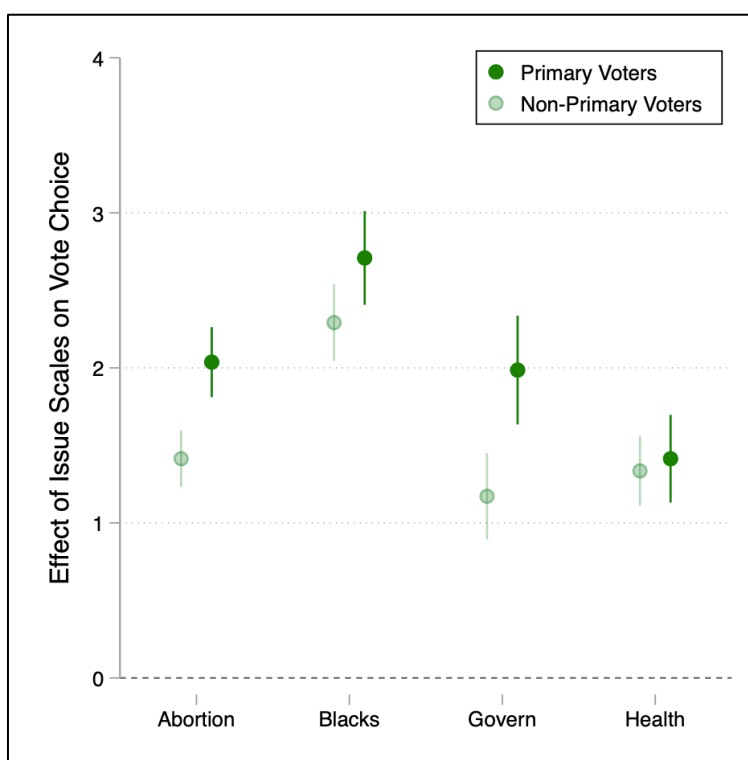
Figure 1 represents our main finding using the ANES: primary voters, controlling for party affiliation, do attach greater weight to some issues compare to non-primary voters. (Party

³ Armstrong and Poirier (2025) find that the 84% intervals produce the same results as a more exact method in 99.8% of their simulations.

identification effects are not displayed, but full regression results are provided in the appendix.)

Although there is understandably some variation across issues, the coefficients all run in the expected direction. Because confidence intervals around separate point estimates make it difficult to discern which differences are significant, we conduct formal tests of statistical significance. These tests indicate that primary voters attach significantly greater weight to two of the four issues: abortion ($p = .01$), and government spending ($p = .05$) compared to non-primary voters.⁴ The differences for health insurance funding, government support for Blacks, and party affiliation are not significant but run in the expected direction.

Figure 1: Effects of Issues on Presidential Vote Choice (ANES)



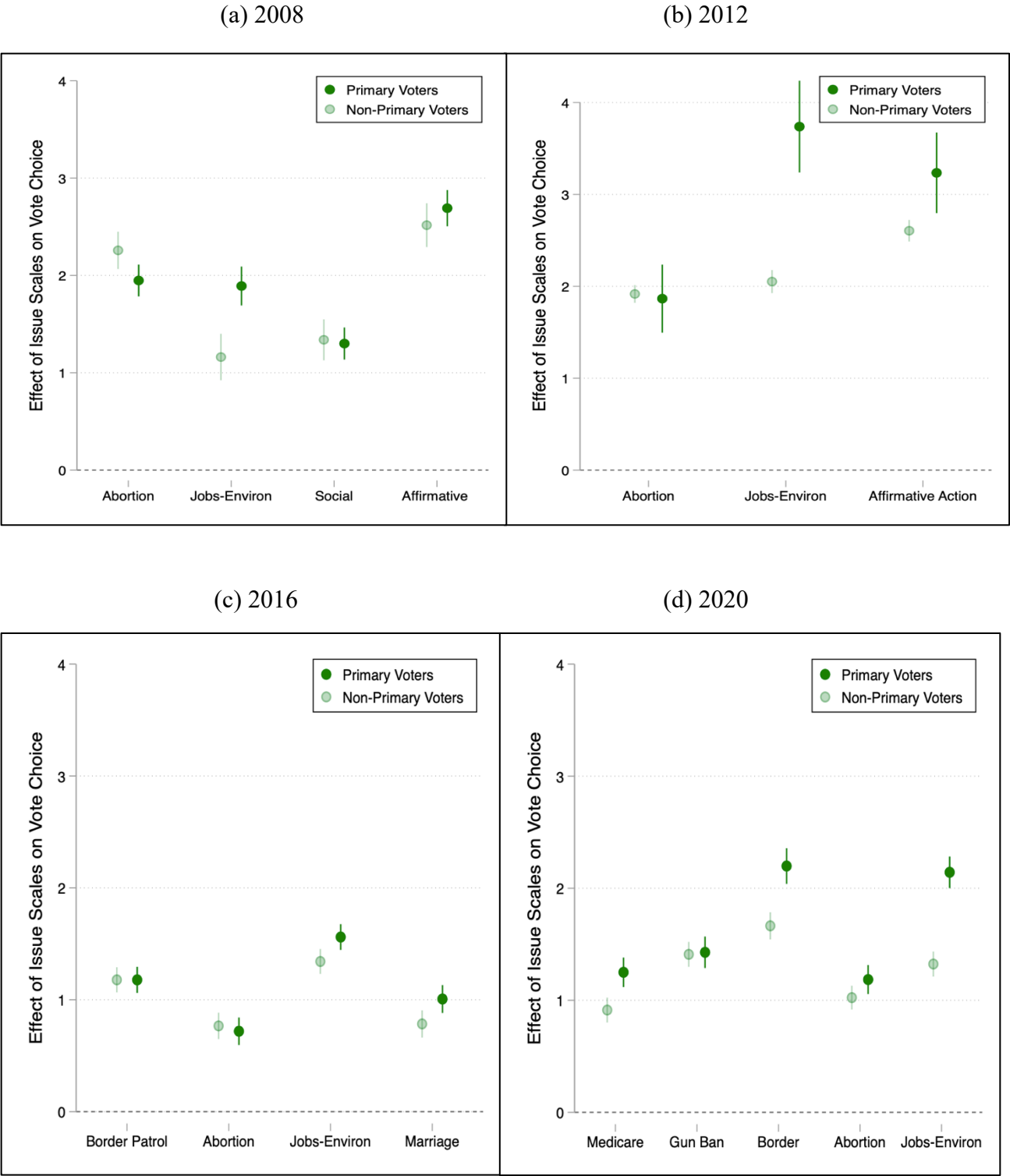
Full regression results also show that primary and non-primary voters appear to give equal weight to party identification. While it is not surprising that party is the dominant factor

⁴ Because our hypotheses are directional, these are one-sided p values derived from Wald tests for equality of coefficients across regression equations.

behind vote choice, the heavier influence of issue positions among primary voters is not the result of down weighting their party affiliation: they care about both.

Figure 2 displays our findings using the CES. Because the questions change from one survey to the next, the models are not identical across years, so we present each year's coefficients separately. There is again good evidence that primary voters weigh most issues more heavily than non-primary voters, although anomalies such as the similar emphasis given to abortion by both groups complicate the picture. The majority of the coefficient patterns run in the expected direction and the differences are statistically significant in about half of the cases: environmental concerns in 2008, 2012 and 2020 ($p < .01$), abortion ($p < .03$) and same-sex marriage in 2016 ($p < .04$), and protecting Medicare access ($p < .04$) and increasing border security in 2020 ($p < .04$).

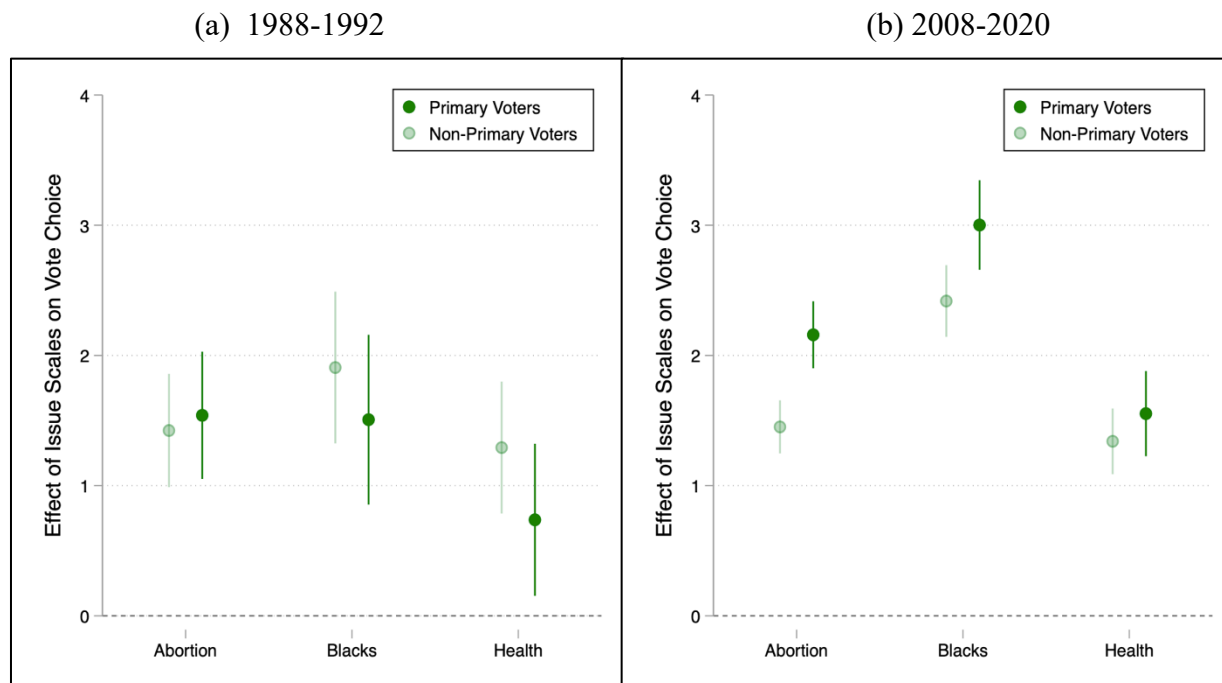
Figure 2: Effects of Issues on Presidential Vote Choice by Election Year (CES)



Turning to the first of our secondary hypotheses, the panels in Figure 3 display trends over time by comparing two time periods. The first period comprises two early presidential election years (1988 and 1992) while the second period contains four later election years (2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020). Grouping the elections in this way allows comparison of primary and non-primary voters before and after high levels of party polarization took hold. Splitting the data unfortunately widens the confidence intervals around the estimates, making it less likely that statistically significant differences will emerge. As a result, we reach more tentative conclusions about the patterns of effects.

During the earlier period prior to the rise in polarization (Figure 3(a)), the differences in effects mostly run contrary to expectations, and none of the differences between primary and non-primary voters is statistically significant by any reasonable standard. In contrast, the expected pattern emerges in the second time period after polarization has set in (Figure 3(b)). Moreover, in the latter period three of the four differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$). The weights of issues are also generally greater in the second period than the first. Among non-primary voters, the coefficients do not shift in a consistent direction between the two time periods and none of the differences are statistically significant. In contrast, among primary voters, all the point estimates increase as expected. It seems that people who vote in primaries grew more dissimilar from other voters in the importance they place on policy issues in their evaluations of candidates.

Figure 3: Effects on Issues on Vote Choice Before and After Polarization (ANES)



To test our expectations regarding asymmetries between the two parties, Figure 4 displays the results from separate regressions for Democrats and Republicans between 1988 and 2020 using the ANES. Figure 5 displays the results from separate regressions for 2012 and 2016 using the CES. We define partisans as strong partisan, weak partisans, and “leaners.” Starting first with comparisons within each party, seven of the eight comparisons run in the expected direction with larger effects for primary voters than non-primary voters. Among Democrats, primary voters appear to weigh government support for Blacks, support for abortion access, and greater government spending more heavily between 1988 and 2020 and policies such as affirmative action, same sex marriage, border security, and the environment more heavily than non-primary voters in 2016, but none of these differences is statistically significant. In contrast, among Republicans the differences are larger and often significant. In the ANES, aside from the question about government support for Blacks, Republican issue weights are significantly greater

than their non-primary counterparts (abortion $p = .002$, health insurance $p = .011$ and government spending $p = .053$).

Comparing *between* the parties, non-primary voters in Democratic and Republican presidential elections show no significant differences in the weights, but among primary voters all but the aid to Blacks item get heavier weight among Republicans ($p < .09$ in all three cases). With its larger sample sizes, the CES also shows more party asymmetries. In 2012 and 2016, no differences were significant among Democrats while for Republicans, affirmative action, abortion, and same-sex marriage were significant for primary and non-primary voters.

Figure 4: Effects of Issues on Presidential Vote Choice by Party (ANES)

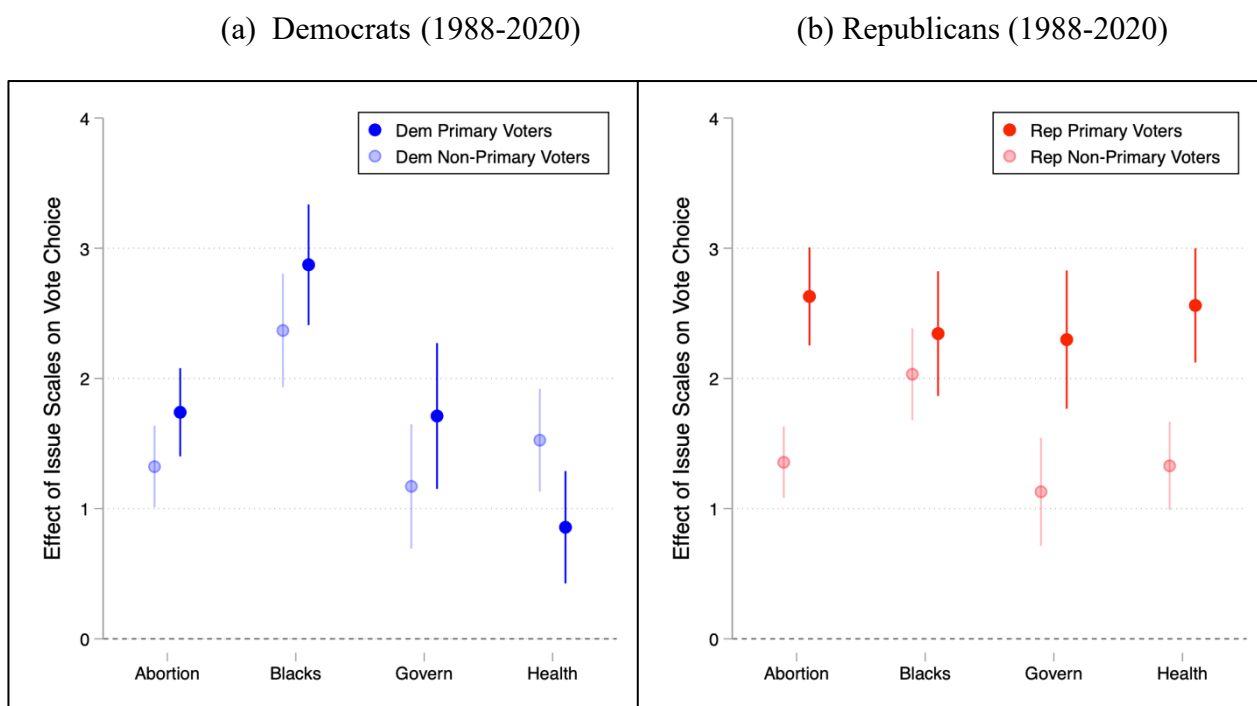
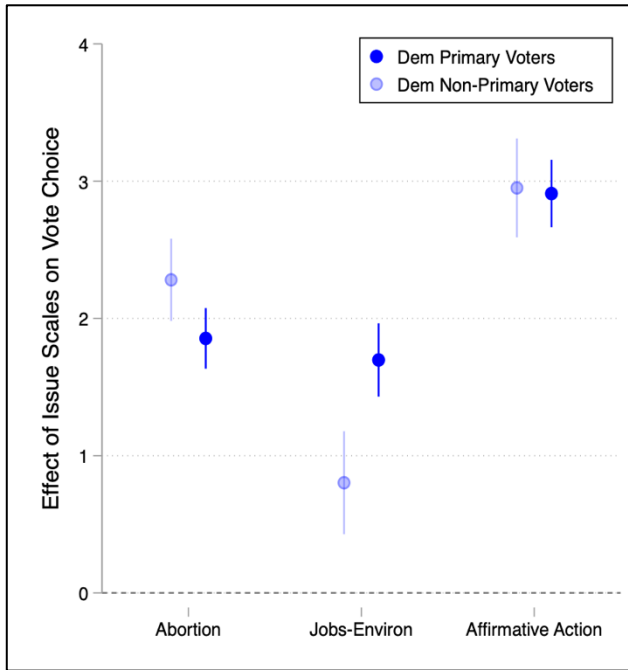
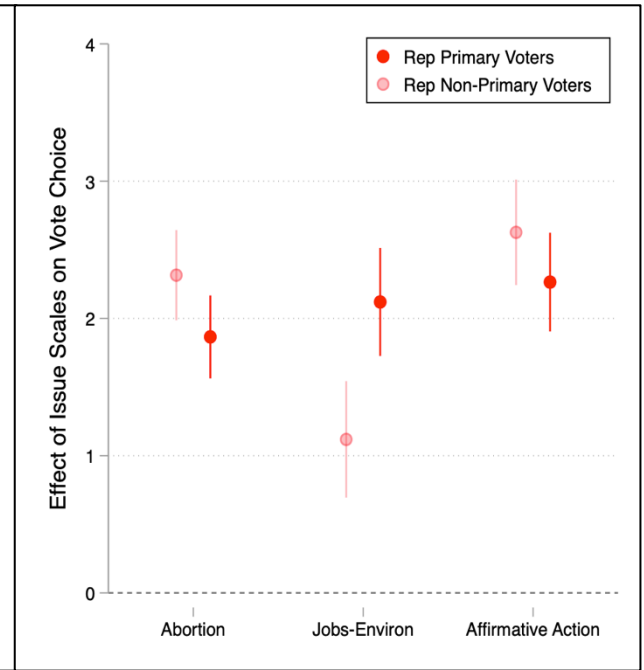


Figure 5: Effects of Issues on Presidential Vote Choice by Party (CES)

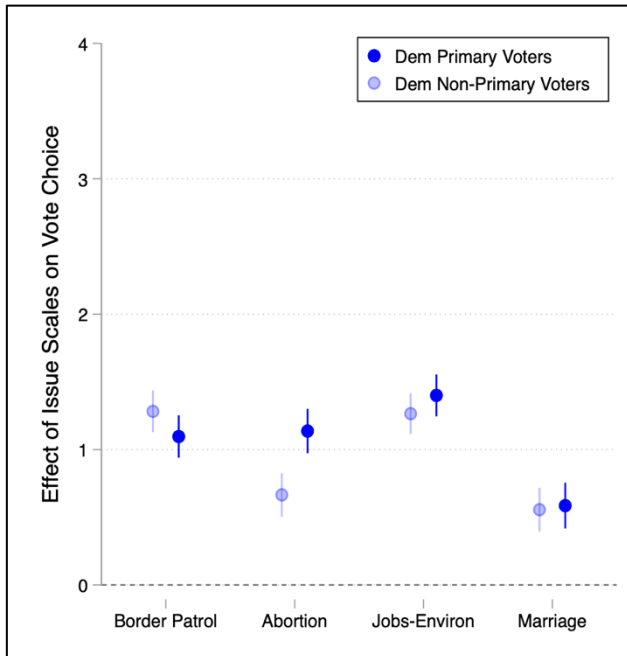
(a) Democrats (2012)



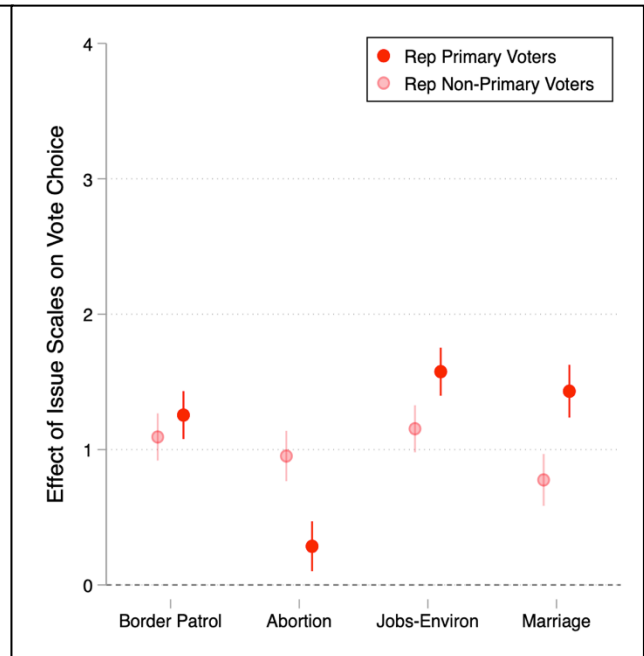
(b) Republicans (2012)



(a) Democrats (2016)

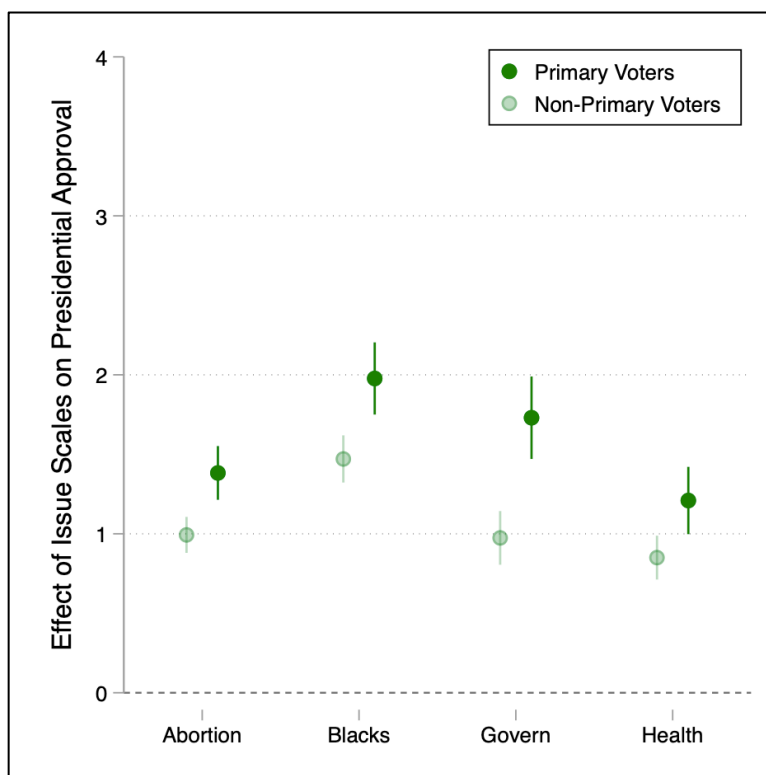


(b) Republicans (2016)



Finally, we also hypothesized that issue weighting would be visible in other political decisions and opinions. To complement our analysis of vote choice, we also estimate models of presidential approval. We analyze the standard question about presidential job performance in the ANES and CES asking whether respondents approve of the president when he is a Democrat and disapprove when he is a Republican, to be consistent with the pro-Democratic direction of the independent variables.⁵ Figure 6 shows the basic results using the ANES. In line with the vote choice models, the effects again run as predicted in every case, with primary voters valuing issues more than do non-primary voters, in three cases significant at $p < .05$ and the other one (health care) marginally so at $p = .10$.

Figure 6: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval (ANES)



⁵ “Don’t know” responses comprise only 3.6% of the overall ANES sample and are treated as missing data.

Figure 7 shows the results on presidential approval using the CES for 2018 and 2022. The results are also consistent with the ANES, with primary voters weighing most issues more heavily than their non-primary counterparts. However, the only significant differences emerge for Medicare opinion in 2018 ($p = .02$). and gun control ($p = .04$) in 2018. It seems likely that the generally small effects of issue positions on presidential approval in the midterm surveys makes differences between any groups in the survey difficult to discern.

Figure 7: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval (CES)

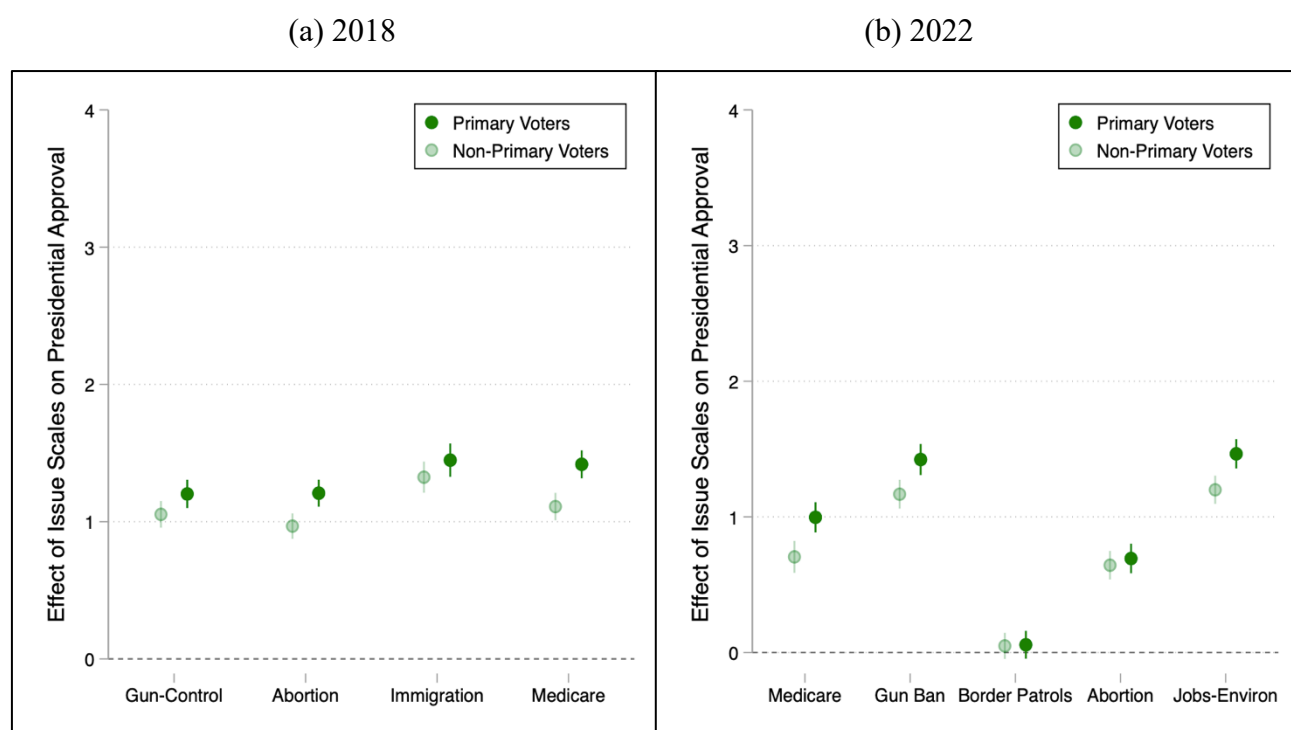
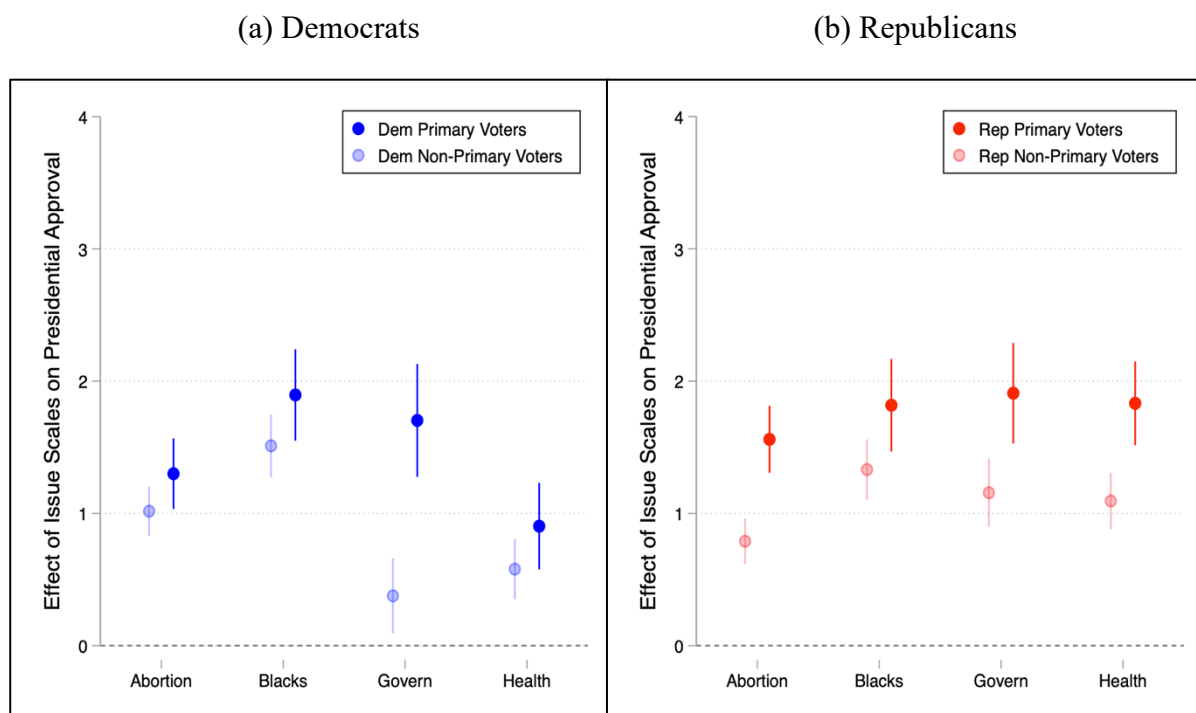


Figure 8 present the ANES presidential approval results separately by party. It shows that for both Democrats and Republicans, the patterns of coefficients conform to expectations, with primary voters always giving more weight to issues. These differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$ for two issues among Democrats (government spending and abortion) and for three issues among Republicans (government spending, abortion, and health insurance). For Democrats, only government spending is statistically different *between* parties ($p < .01$), while

for Republicans, abortion ($p < .01$), government spending ($p = .06$) and health insurance ($p = .03$) are statistically bigger coefficients for primary voters compared to non-primary voters.

Figure 8: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval by Party (ANES)



Political Sophistication

The next stage of our analysis examines why primary and non-primary voters differ in the importance they place on issues. To isolate the causal mechanism that prompts primary voters to weight issues more heavily than non-primary voters, we consider whether these differences are the by-product of greater political sophistication among primary voters. To the degree that greater sophistication is the mechanism, estimating models separately for high and low sophisticates should show heavier weights for the former, even among primary voters.

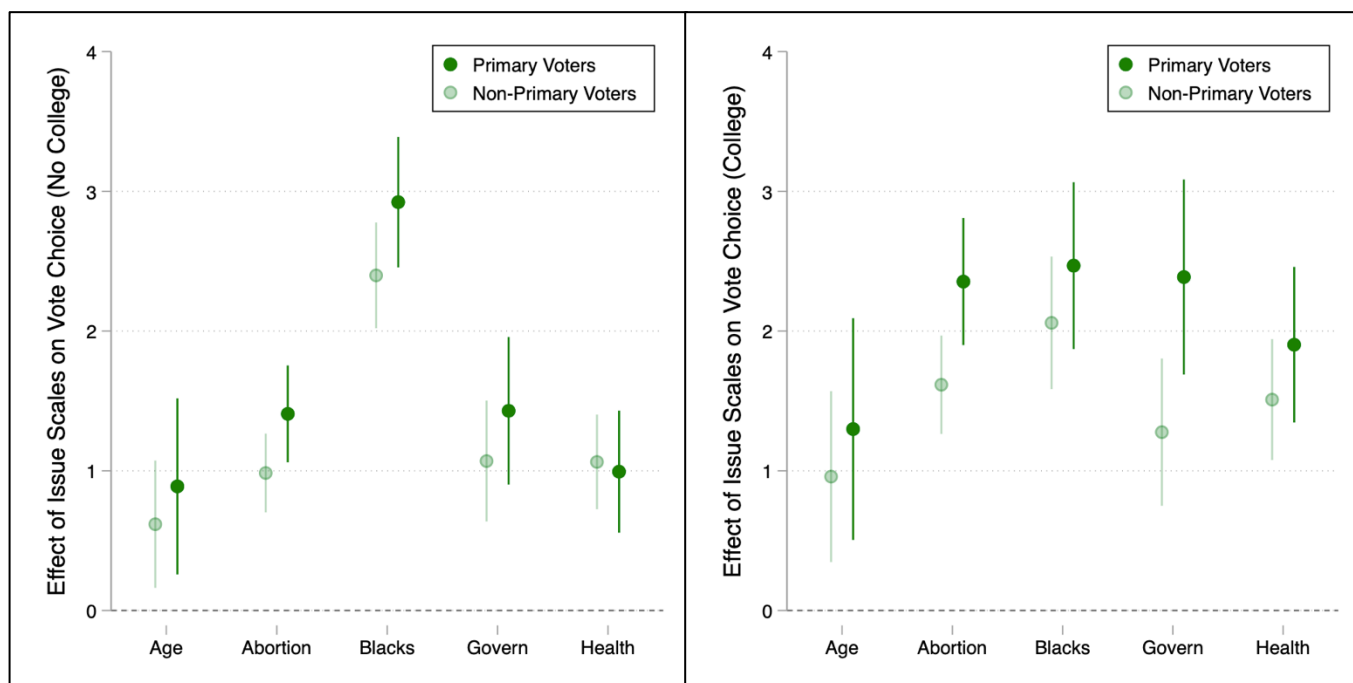
As noted in our review of existing research, scholars are generally in agreement that primary voters exhibit higher levels of engagement, awareness, and interest in politics than do non-primary voters. Even if the relationship is not a causal one, education can act as a suitable

proxy for sophistication because of the strong relationship between the variables (Highton 2009). As one's educational attainment increases, individuals are more likely to be engaged in politics and gain a greater understanding of the party's policies. We divided respondents were based on whether they had completed at least a college education. To conduct these tests, we return to our baseline model of vote choice. Figure 9 show the results of that model for respondents with high and low levels of educational attainment. The results are mixed. Among college-educated and non-college educated voters, primary voters give do give greater weight to more issues than non-primary voters, but only abortion ($p = .02$) and government spending ($p = .02$) are statistically different. Although the weight of issues is greatest among college educate primary voters, it appears that sophistication, at least when proxied by education, is not what makes primary voters more attentive to issues.

Figure 9: Effects of Issues on Presidential Vote Choice by Education

(a) Non-College Educated Voters

(b) College Educated Voters

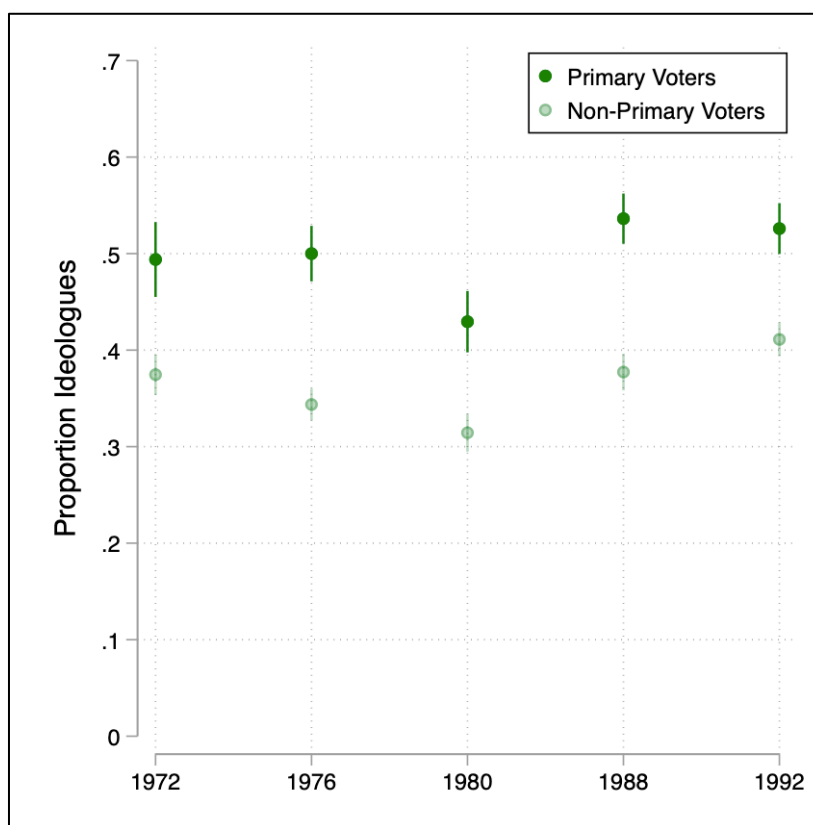


In our final analysis we turn to different kind of evidence to by analyzing the “levels of conceptualization” (LOC) used by voters to describe parties and candidates. In Campbell et al.’s *The American Voter*’s (1960) introduction of the concept, a person’s “level” of thinking about politics can be classified into one of four strata: ideologues, group benefits, nature of the times, and no issue content.⁶ For years between 1972 and 1992 the ANES provides a collapsed measure for measuring political sophistication in the publicly available version of the cumulative data file. For up to five mentions, respondents can choose what they like/dislike about the Democratic or Republican parties based on several characteristics, which can then be re-grouped into four LOC categories. Respondents whose positions on the party or candidate are based on “Government activity/philosophy” are categorized as “ideologues” since this is an abstract method of qualifying the two parties/candidates. Respondents who view parties as transactional institutions, are classified under “group benefits.” Respondents who view the parties or candidates based on short term perceptions or policies, such as “party characteristics, domestic policies, and foreign policies” or who view parties based on their governance (“Government Management”) fall under the “nature of the times” category.” Finally, respondents who like or dislike the party based on the people who are in it, candidate qualities, characteristics, and party connections, or who provided no reason for their decision were placed into the “no issue content” category. Across these 20 possible codes, we follow standard practice by recording the highest level represented by the respondent. To identify voters who are mostly likely to think about political choices in ideological ways, we focus on the highest and presumably most sophisticated category of “ideologue,” which comprises about one third of all ANES respondents.

⁶ See Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) for an update of that analysis.

Figures 10 and 11 show differences between primary and non-primary voters and differences between the parties.⁷ As Figure 10 illustrates, the share of ideologues is consistently greater among primary voters compared to general election voters who do not participate in primaries (all differences significant at $p < .05$). A more substantial difference is visible *between* the parties with a higher share of ideologues among Republicans, in line with previous studies on partisans and primaries (Norranders 1989). In addition, comparing between primary and non-primary voters shows slightly more ideological and issue-based thinking among primary voters, a statistically significant relationship (chi-squared $p < .05$) in which primary voters are about six percentage points more likely to be coded as ideologues and non-primary voters are about four points more likely to be coded as showing no issue content.

Figure 10: Proportion of Ideologues among Primary and Non-Primary Voters Over Time

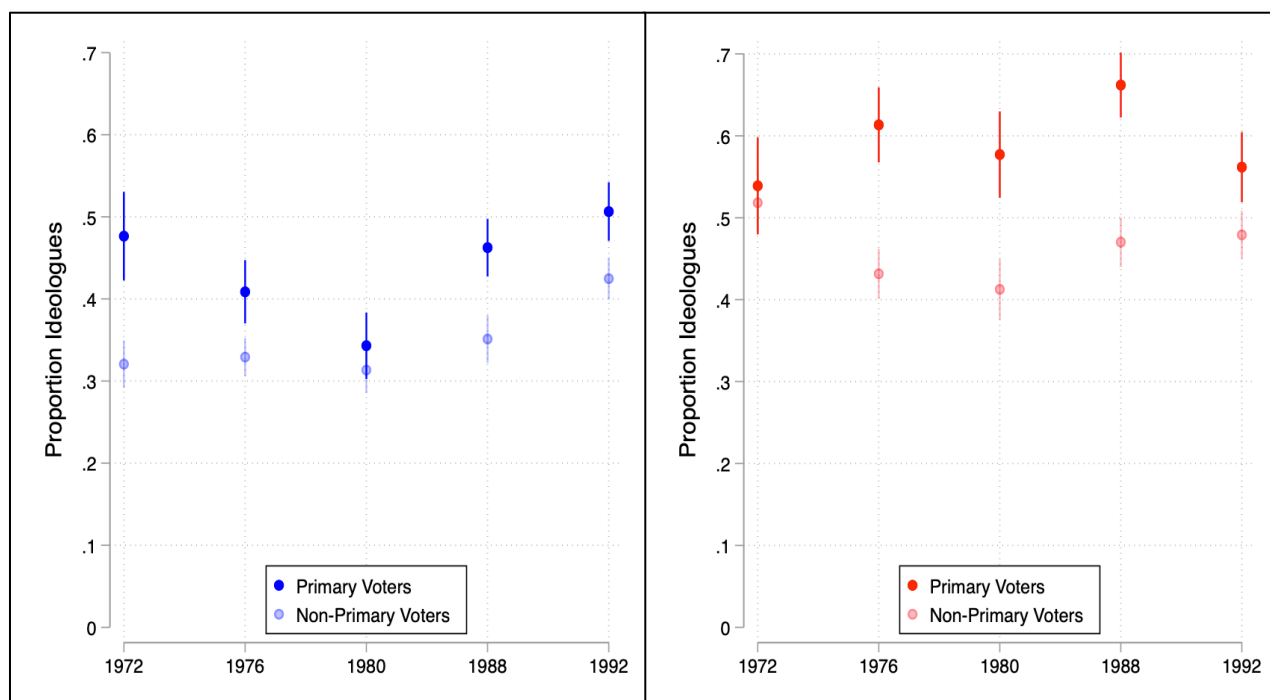


⁷ This figure and the following figure again display 84% confidence intervals, although without weights applied.

Figure 11: Proportion of Ideologies by Political Party

(a) Democrats

(b) Republicans



Discussion and Conclusion

We have provided what is at least a partial solution to the puzzle in which party polarization is believed to result from primaries but without evidence of primary voters being more extreme. Particularly in more recent election cycles when polarization has been more pronounced, across most issues, primary voters, whether Democratic and Republican, have weighted issues more heavily when making their presidential election choices and when evaluating the performance of presidents. This pattern is apparent despite the natural variation in campaigns and political eras that revolve around different sets of issues and where policy differences between candidate stances are sometimes greater and sometimes smaller, as well as what issues happen to be asked about in surveys. Yet we generally find that primary voters put more emphasis on issues. Even if their positions are not meaningfully different from those of

non-primary voters, primary voters are apparently contributing to polarization by being more rigid in selecting candidates and evaluating office holders based on issues.

As party polarization grows, a growing chorus of journalists and political pundits have targeted primary voters as the source of the nation's increasingly partisan candidates. Because primary voters take positions that are more extreme than the median voter, candidates should be less likely to moderate their positions during the primary and general elections. However, recent studies have challenged the validity of linking primary voters with greater polarization because they seem not to be more ideological extreme than their non-primary counterparts. Our analysis provides a reconciliation of these conflicting arguments that puts part of the "blame" for polarization at the feet of primary voters – the reason is not necessary where they stand on issues but how much they care about them. Using existing theories in which some voters have more intense views or weigh decision criteria differentially, our findings point to how primary participation can explain some presidential voting patterns within the electorate and provides greater empirical evidence for the folk theory of primaries and polarization. Because primary voters in both parties weigh issues more heavily, their decisions likely have implications for candidate position taking and the direction of public policies. Candidates might not feel pressure to fully moderate their positions in the general election because those voters care less about issues and presumably weigh other factors such as candidate characteristics, group attachments, and performance in office more heavily. In this way, winning candidates can have it both ways, adopting positions that satisfy primary voters and drawing attention to non-policy considerations to win over other general election voters.

References

- Abramowitz, Alan. 2008. "Don't Blame Primary Voters for Polarization." *The Forum* 5.
- Abramowitz, Alan I. 2010. *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. Yale University Press.
- Abramowitz, Alan I., and Kyle L. Saunders. 2008. "Is Polarization a Myth?" *Journal of Politics* 70: 542-555.
- Adams, James, Erik Engstrom, Danielle Joeston, and Walt Stone. 2017 "Do Moderate Voters Weigh Candidates' Ideologies? Voters' Decision Rules in the 2010 Congressional Elections." *Political Behavior* 39:205–227.
- Aldrich, John H. 1983. "A Downsian Spatial Model with Party Activism." *American Political Science Review* 77:974-990.
- Anderson, Sarah, Daniel Butler, and Laurel Harbridge-Yong. 2023. "The Electoral Challenge of Balancing Primary and General Electorates." Unpublished manuscript.
- Ansolahehere, Stephen, James M. Snyder, Jr., and Charles Stewart III. 2001. "Candidate Positioning in U.S. House Elections." *American Journal of Political Science* 45:136-159.
- Armstrong, David A., and William Poirier. 2025. "Decoupling Visualization and Testing When Presenting Confidence Intervals." *Political Analysis* 33:252-257.
- Bafumi, Joseph, and Michael C. Herron. 2010. "Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 104:519-542.
- Basinger, Scott J. and Howard Lavine. 2005 "Ambivalence, Information, and Electoral Choice." *American Political Science Review* 99:169-18.

- Boatright, Robert G. 2013. *Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges*. University of Michigan Press.
- Brady, David W., Hahrie Han, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2007. "Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step the Primary Electorate?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32:79-105.
- Broockman, David E., Nicholas Carnes, Melody Crowder-Meyer, and Christopher Skovron. 2021. "Why Local Party Leaders Don't Support Nominating Centrists." *British Journal of Political Science* 51:724-749.
- Burden, Barry C. 2004. "Candidate Positioning in U.S. Congressional Elections." *British Journal of Political Science* 34:211-227.
- Burns, Nancy, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba. 2001. *Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation*. Harvard University Press.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Cowburn, Mike. 2024. *Party Transformation in Congressional Primaries: Faction and Ideology in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fiorina, Morris P., and Matthew S. Levendusky. 2006. "Disconnected: The Political Class vs. the People." In *Red and Blue Nation: Characteristics and Causes of America's Polarized Politics*, ed. Pietro S. Nivola and David W. Brady. Brookings Institution Press.
- Geer, John G. 1988. "Assessing the Representativeness of Electorates in Presidential Primaries." *American Journal of Political Science* 32:929-945.
- Grossman, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. 2016. *Asymmetric Politics: Ideological Republicans and Group Interest Democrats*. Oxford University Press.

- Hacker, Jacob S., and Paul Pierson. 2008. *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*. Yale University Press.
- Hall, Andrew B. 2019. *Who Wants to Run? How the Devaluing of Political Office Drives Polarization*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hassell, Hans J. G. 2017. *The Party's Primary: Control of Congressional Nominations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Henderson, John A., Geoffrey Sheagley, Stephen N. Goggin, Logan Dancey, and Alexander G. Theodoridis. 2022. "Primary Divisions: How Voters Evaluate Policy and Group Differences in Intraparty Contests." *Journal of Politics* 84:1760-1776.
- Hersh, Eitan. 2012. "Primary Voters Versus Caucus Goers and the Peripheral Motivations of Political Participation." *Political Behavior* 34: 689-718.
- Highton, Benjamin. 2009. "Revisiting the Relationship between Educational Attainment and Political Sophistication." *Journal of Politics* 71:1564-1576.
- Hill, Seth J. 2015. "Institution of Nomination and the Policy Ideology of Primary Electorates." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 10: 461-487.
- Hill, Seth J. 2022. *Frustrated Majorities: How Issue Intensity Enables Smaller Groups of Voters to Get What They Want*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hirano, Shigeo, and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2019. *Primary Elections in the United States*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hirano, Shigeo, James M. Snyder Jr., Stephen Daniel Ansolabehere, and John Mark Hansen. 2010. "Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 5:169-191.

- Kujala, Jordan. 2020. "Donors, Primary Elections, and Polarization in the United States." *American Journal of Political Science* 64:587-602.
- Lasala-Blanco, Maria Narayani, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Joy Wilke. 2021. "The Nature of Partisan Conflict in Public Opinion: Asymmetric or Symmetric?" *American Politics Research* 49:46-58.
- Layman, Geoffrey C., and Thomas M. Carsey. 2002. "Party Polarization and 'Conflict Extension' in the American Electorate." *American Journal of Political Science* 46:786-802
- Lelkes, Yphtach, and Paul M. Sniderman. 2016. "The Ideological Asymmetry of the American Party System." *British Journal of Political Science* 46:825-844.
- Levendusky, Matthew. 2009. *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., Helmut Norpoth, William G. Jacoby, and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2008. *The American Voter Revisited*. University of Michigan Press.
- Masket, Seth. 2019. "What Is, and Isn't, Causing Polarization in Modern State Legislatures." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 52:430-435.
- Norrander, Barbara. 1989. "Ideological Representativeness of Presidential Primary Voters." *American Journal of Political Science* 33:570-587.
- Rivers, Douglas. 1988. "Heterogeneity in Models of Electoral Choice." *American Journal of Political Science* 8:737-757.
- Sides, John, Chris Tausanovitch, Lynn Vavreck, and Christopher Warshaw. 2020. "On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates." *British Journal of Political Science* 50:677-685.

Thomsen, Danielle M. 2020. "Parties and Polarization in Congress." In *New Directions in Congressional Politics*, 2nd ed., ed. Jamie L. Carson and Michael S. Lynch. Routledge.

Appendix

Table A1: Effects of Issues on General Election Vote Choice (ANES)

	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Party ID	5.52** (0.17)	5.67** (0.18)
Health	1.34** (0.16)	1.41** (0.20)
Blacks	2.29** (0.18)	2.71** (0.22)
Abortion	1.41** (0.13)	2.04** (0.16)
Government	1.17** (0.20)	1.99** (0.25)
Constant	-6.18** (0.22)	-7.16** (0.26)
N	5,714	6,676

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A2: Effects of Issues on General Election Vote Choice Before and After Polarization (ANES)

	1988-1992 Non-Primary Voters	1988-1992 Primary Voters	2008-2020 Non-Primary Voters	2008-2020 Primary Voters
Party ID	6.25** (0.41)	5.73** (0.40)	5.30** (0.19)	5.60** (0.21)
Health	1.29** (0.36)	0.74 (0.42)	1.34** (0.18)	1.55** (0.23)
Blacks	1.91** (0.41)	1.51** (0.46)	2.42** (0.20)	3.00** (0.24)
Abortion	1.42** (0.31)	1.54** (0.35)	1.45** (0.14)	2.16** (0.18)
Government	0.87 (0.46)	2.19** (0.54)	1.27** (0.22)	1.96** (0.28)
Constant	-6.21** (0.46)	-6.19** (0.50)	-6.02** (0.26)	-7.32** (0.33)
N	923	842	4,791	5,834

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A3: Effects of Issues on General Election Vote Choice by Party (ANES)

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Health	1.53** (0.28)	0.86** (0.31)	1.33** (0.24)	2.56** (0.31)
Blacks	2.37** (0.31)	2.87** (0.33)	2.03** (0.25)	2.34** (0.34)
Abortion	1.32** (0.22)	1.74** (0.24)	1.36** (0.20)	2.63** (0.27)
Government	1.17** (0.34)	1.71** (0.40)	1.13** (0.30)	2.30** (0.38)
Constant	-1.53** (0.34)	-1.74** (0.33)	-5.18** (0.33)	-7.07** (0.44)
N	2,713	3,669	2,491	2,704

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

**Table A4: Effects of Issues on General Election Vote Choice by Year (Non-Primary Voters)
(CES)**

	2008	2012	2016	2020
Party ID	5.69** (0.17)	-6.92** (0.09)	5.82** (0.12)	4.89** (0.11)
Abortion	2.26** (0.14)	1.92** (0.07)	0.77** (0.08)	1.02** (0.08)
Environment	1.16** (0.17)	2.60** (0.08)	1.34** (0.08)	1.32** (0.08)
Social Security	1.34** (0.15)	-	-	-
Affirmative Action	2.52** (0.16)	2.60** (0.08)	-	-
Border Security	-	-	1.18** (0.08)	1.67** (0.09)
Marriage	-	-	0.78** (0.09)	-
Medicare	-	-	-	0.91** (0.08)
Gun Control	-	-	-	1.41** (0.08)
Constant	-6.43** (0.19)	-6.54** (0.09)	-5.22	-5.33** (0.10)
N	6,090	28,125	9,633	13,573

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A5: Effects of Issues on General Election Vote Choice (2012)
(CES)

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Abortion	1.26** (0.07)	1.77** (0.35)	1.23** (0.10)	-1.90** (0.44)
Environment	0.93** (0.09)	2.45** (0.48)	2.02** (0.13)	3.16** (0.54)
Affirmative Action	2.24** (0.08)	2.97** (0.41)	2.43** (0.12)	3.97** (0.53)
Constant	-0.23** (0.07)	-1.69** (0.38)	-4.67** (0.10)	-7.36** (0.50)
N	19,583	1,111	14,089	3,152

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A6: Effects of Issues on General Election Vote Choice (2016) (CES)

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Abortion	0.29* (0.10)	0.96** (0.10)	0.60** (0.12)	0.39** (0.12)
Environment	0.94** (0.10)	1.19** (0.09)	1.58** (0.11)	1.81** (0.12)
Same-Sex Marriage	0.89** (0.10)	0.66** (0.10)	0.83** (0.12)	1.37** (0.13)
Border Security	1.05** (0.09)	0.98** (0.09)	1.11** (0.11)	1.18** (0.12)
Constant	0.05 (0.11)	-0.19 (0.10)	-4.16** (0.13)	-4.82** (0.13)
N	5,893	9,335	4,464	7,114

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A7: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval Ratings (ANES)

	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Party ID	4.00** (0.11)	4.35** (0.14)
Health	0.85** (0.10)	1.21** (0.15)
Blacks	1.47** (0.11)	1.98** (0.16)
Abortion	1.00** (0.08)	1.38** (0.12)
Government	0.97** (0.12)	1.73** (0.18)
Constant	-4.88** (0.14)	-6.16** (0.19)
N	9,177	7,852

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A8: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval Ratings (CES)

	2018		2022	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Party ID	5.61** (0.12)	5.81** (0.12)	4.14** (0.10)	4.09** (0.10)
Abortion	0.97** (0.07)	1.21** (0.07)	0.64** (0.07)	0.69** (0.08)
Gun Control	1.05** (0.09)	1.20** (0.07)	1.17** (0.08)	1.42** (0.08)
Immigration	1.32** (0.08)	1.45** (0.09)	0.05 (0.07)	0.06 (0.07)
Medicare	1.11** (0.07)	1.42** (0.07)	0.71** (0.08)	1.00** (0.08)
Environment	-	-	1.19** (0.09)	1.46** (0.08)
Constant	-5.55** (0.11)	-6.04** (0.11)	-4.95** (0.10)	-5.18** (1.00)
N	12,327	18,516	12,247	19,016

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A9: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval Ratings by Party (ANES)

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Health	0.58** (0.16)	0.90** (0.23)	1.09** (0.15)	1.83** (0.23)
Blacks	1.51** (0.17)	1.90** (0.25)	1.33** (0.16)	1.82** (0.25)
Abortion	1.02** (0.13)	1.30** (0.19)	0.79** (0.12)	1.56** (0.18)
Government	0.38 (0.20)	1.70** (0.30)	1.16** (0.18)	1.91** (0.27)
Constant	-1.28** (0.20)	-2.28** (0.26)	-3.94** (0.21)	-5.26** (0.30)
N	4,171	4,168	3,770	3,212

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

**Table A10: Effects of Issues on Presidential Approval Ratings by Party
(2022 CES)**

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Medicare	0.32* (0.13)	1.00** (0.11)	1.11** (0.19)	1.04** (0.17)
Gun Control	1.17** (0.10)	1.28** (0.11)	0.89** (0.18)	1.57** (0.20)
Immigration	-0.10 (0.08)	-0.16* (0.08)	1.09** (0.21)	1.66** (0.22)
Abortion	0.61** (0.10)	0.56** (0.11)	0.62** (0.17)	0.74** (0.16)
Environment	0.80** (1.00)	1.00** (0.10)	1.53** (0.19)	2.29** (0.20)
Constant	-0.75** (0.16)	-1.00** (0.15)	-5.50** (0.20)	-6.29** (0.21)
N	6,179	10,342	4,408	7,121

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$

Table A11: Effects of Issues on Vote Choice by Education (ANES)

	College		No College	
	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters	Non-Primary Voters	Primary Voters
Age	0.96** (0.31)	1.30** (0.40)	0.62 (0.32)	0.89* (0.45)
Party ID	5.57** (0.24)	5.83** (0.26)	5.42** (0.26)	5.67** (0.29)
Health	1.51** (0.22)	1.90** (0.28)	0.99** (0.31)	0.99** (0.31)
Blacks	2.06** (0.24)	2.47** (0.30)	2.92** (0.33)	2.92** (0.33)
Abortion	1.62** (0.18)	2.35** (0.23)	1.41** (0.25)	1.41** (0.25)
Government	1.28 (0.27)	2.39** (0.36)	1.07** (0.31)	1.43** (0.38)
Constant	-7.39** (0.38)	-8.41** (0.45)	-5.80** (0.39)	-7.06** (0.48)
N	3,841	4,794	1,698	1,690

Linear regression models with fixed effects for years (not reported)

$p^* < .05, p^{**} < .01$