

# A Choice-Based Measure of Issue Importance in the Electorate



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**Abstract:** *Measuring how much citizens care about different policy issues is critical for political scientists, yet existing measurement approaches have significant limitations. We provide a new survey-experimental, choice-based approach for measuring the importance voters attach to different positional issues, including issues not currently contested by political elites. We combine information from (a) direct questions eliciting respondents' positions on different issues with (b) a conjoint experiment asking respondents to trade off departures from their preferred positions on those issues. Applying this method to study the relative importance of 34 issues in the United Kingdom, we show that British voters attach significant importance to issues like the death penalty that are not presently the subject of political debate and attach more importance to those issues associated with social liberal-conservative rather than economic left-right divisions.*

**Replication Materials:** The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/0EIQXL>.

How much do citizens care about different policy issues? This question is crucial for political scientists. Answering it can help us better understand electoral competition, since differences in party or candidate issue positions only matter for election outcomes insofar as voters attach importance to the issue and sanction those with positions far from their own preferred position (Butler and Stokes 1974). Learning about the importance the public attaches to different issues also enables us to better assess the quality of substantive representation in democracies and identify representational deficits. A rich literature empirically evaluates representation as the degree to which the policy positions of political representatives match the positions of those they represent (Converse and Pierce 1986; Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2017; Kastellec, Lax, and Phillips 2010; Krimmel, Lax, and Phillips 2016; Lax and Phillips 2012; Miller and Stokes 1963), but to

evaluate representation synoptically, we need to know whether such congruence happens for issues that voters care about most (Jones and Baumgartner 2004, 2). This is particularly important for accounts of recent political upheavals, such as Brexit, which have been argued to result from a failure to provide voters with meaningful choices on issues they care about (Evans and Menon 2017).

Despite the centrality of issue importance to political science—and in contrast to the increasingly sophisticated approaches developed to measure issue attention among political elites<sup>1</sup>—there have been few recent advances in measuring the relative importance of different issues to voters. This is not because this is a solved problem. As we discuss in more detail below, methods currently in use suffer from severe limitations in terms of both what they measure and what they demand of survey respondents.

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<sup>1</sup>See analyses of press releases (Grimmer 2013) or legislative agendas (John et al. 2013).

In this article, we provide a new choice-based, survey-experimental approach for measuring the importance voters attach to different positional issues. We show how issue importance can be measured by combining questions about respondents' preferred policy positions with a conjoint experiment involving hypothetical candidate platforms. By asking about respondents' preferred positions, we measure what respondents would ideally want on several different issues. By asking respondents to choose between candidate platforms adopting a random combination of positions on these issues (in the conjoint experiment), and by conditioning our analysis of the resulting choices on candidate–respondent disagreement, we can infer how respondents trade off positional disagreement across different issues. We learn about the relative importance of an issue from how much, on average, positional disagreement on that issue (as compared to positional disagreement on other issues) reduces voters' support for a candidate. We then calculate a population-level issue importance statistic that averages these causal effects of disagreement over the distribution of actual disagreements on each issue within the electorate, summarizing how much potential there is for each issue to affect voting decisions.

We apply this method to a new national survey of British voters to estimate the relative importance of 34 policy issues. Consistent with the suggestions of studies focusing on the determinants of vote choice in the 2017 general election (Curtice 2017; Mellon et al. 2018) we find that the most important issues for the United Kingdom public are those dividing opinion along social liberal–conservative lines rather than along economic left–right lines. We also show that this phenomenon includes not only currently salient issues like the UK's relationship with the European Union (EU) and migration, but also issues like the death penalty that are not currently the subject of elite political debate. Existing research has noted that UK public opinion on these issues is more divided than elite opinion (e.g., Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 1985; Heath et al. 1991). A novel contribution enabled by our method is that we can demonstrate that voters disagree with one another and also care a lot about departures from their preferred position on these currently uncontested issues, and that the issues would therefore be highly contentious if they became the subject of national political debate. Finally, we also show how the method can be extended to produce estimates of issue importance that vary as a function of citizen characteristics. We use this to show how voters' priorities vary by age, attention to politics, gender, and education.

## Approaches to Measuring Issue Importance

In this section, we discuss existing measures of issue importance, problems with these measures, and how our proposed approach addresses those problems. Our discussion is premised on a *causal* conception of issue importance at the individual level: We define an issue as important to a citizen to the extent that she accords weight to agreement or disagreement on that issue in her decision calculus, such that her support for candidates or policy platforms are reduced by their departures from her preferred position on that issue. This causal conception of issue importance matches that used in some existing studies (e.g., Bartle and Laycock 2012; Johns 2010; Wlezien 2005). It relates to the broader notion of “attitude strength,” or the extent to which an attitude held by an individual “manifest[s] the qualities of durability and impactfulness” (Krosnick and Petty 1995, 3). Issue importance as we consider it pertains to the latter quality of “impactfulness” as manifest in the political domain, since it concerns the extent to which attitudes held toward an issue causally impact an individual's judgments and behavior (Krosnick and Petty 1995, 3).

Our discussion is also premised on a conceptual distinction between an issue's *importance* to voters' decisions and an issue's *salience* to current elite political conflict. The term *salience* is “vague” (Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2016, 125). It is sometimes used to refer to the prominence of an issue in voters' thoughts (Butler and Stokes 1974), and at other times as an alternative label for the causal conception of issue importance to citizens that we define above (e.g., Hellwig 2014; Niemi and Bartels 1985). We follow Bartle and Laycock (2012, 681) in defining an issue to be salient to the extent that there are perceptible differences between the positions of competing parties (or candidates) on that issue. Salience is thus used here to refer to the extent of *elite* political contestation on an issue.

Given these definitions, an issue can be important without being salient: This can happen when there is elite consensus on an issue, but voters' choices between elites would be affected were perceptible differences between elites to emerge on that issue. We argue that empirically distinguishing importance from salience is vital not just for reasons of good conceptual hygiene, but because it is otherwise impossible to investigate important substantive questions. For example, if measurements of issue importance are only available for salient issues, we cannot evaluate whether parties present voters with meaningful choices on all the issues that voters care about and

disagree about. To conduct that evaluation, we need to be able to measure the importance voters attach to issues whether or not those issues are salient at the elite level.

### Problems with Self-Reported Measures

Most of the measures of issue importance in the existing literature treat importance as something that is *self-reported*. They record an issue as important for some voter to the extent that the voter herself *judges* it to be so. One such measure is based on “direct” survey questions that ask respondents to assign subjective importance scores to a set of specific issues chosen by the researcher (e.g., Boninger et al. 1995; Converse and Pierce 1986; Krosnick 1988). Another common measure is based on survey respondents’ answers to open-ended questions about what they consider to be the “most important issue” (MII) facing the country (e.g., Clarke et al. 2004).

These self-reported importance measures share two undeniable virtues: they are individual-level measures and they are straightforward to implement in surveys. However, they also suffer from significant shortcomings. Direct measures of importance often lack discrimination due to respondents’ reluctance to explicitly label issues (which are often in the survey because they have received national media or political attention) as “unimportant” even if they care little about them personally (Converse and Pierce 1986; Johns 2010). A limitation of MII measures is that the proportion of respondents for whom a given issue was most important is not a reliable indicator of the average importance of an issue.

A more fundamental concern with self-reported measures of importance is that asking respondents to introspectively consider the relative importance of different issues is asking them to report “more than they can know” (Bartle and Laycock 2012). Because the cognitive processes that lead to evaluations and choices are often unconscious processes, individuals are often poor guides as to these processes (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Wilson 2002). When it comes to issue importance, then, voters may simply “not [be] very good at judging the relative weight they attach to criteria in making decisions” (Niemi and Bartels 1985, 1219).

The difficulty respondents have when making such introspective judgments may explain why issue importance measures generated from both direct and MII questions have proved to be of limited value in predicting voting behavior (e.g., Bartle and Laycock 2012; Leeper and Robison 2018; Niemi and Bartels 1985, 1219). It may also explain why respondents, when answering direct or MII questions, tend to rely upon, or use as a heuristic,

“how much attention a particular issue attracted during the campaign, or how heated the debate . . . has been” (Sarlvik and Crewe 1983, 224; see also Bartle and Laycock 2012; Johns 2010). If respondents do approach MII or direct questions in this way, the resulting measures would conflate an issue’s importance to citizens and its salience in elite political contestation.

### Choice-Based Measures of Issue Importance

Instead of relying on respondent introspection, others have taken a *choice-based* approach to measuring issue importance. According to this approach, the importance of an issue to a voter will influence the decisions she makes when faced with objects of choice (i.e., candidates, parties, and policy packages) with differing issue positions or competencies. If many voters, choices are particularly sensitive to candidates’ positions or competency on one issue, then the issue is revealed to be important (at the population level), regardless of whether the voters are aware of or could report this fact. The case for a choice-based approach for measuring issue importance is supported by marketing studies showing that measures of attribute importance inferred from choice-based conjoint experiments are better predictors of real product/candidate choice than the direct importance scores that respondents self-report (Harte and Koele 1995; Neslin 1981).

Existing choice-based measures of issue importance have been generated by modeling the vote choices respondents make between parties in real elections (e.g., Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler 2000; Hellwig 2014). For example, Alvarez, Nagler, and Bowler (2000) model voters’ party choice in the 1987 UK general election as a function of voters’ policy distance to each of the three main parties on seven different issues. The coefficients on these issues can be interpreted as relative measures of importance.

Unfortunately, measures of issue importance based on models of electoral choice are limited by their reliance on variation in the actual policy platforms adopted by parties. First, even in multiparty systems, the absolute number of observed party platforms that voters choose between in any given election is quite small, and parties’ positions are likely to be correlated across issues. Second, this approach also relies on respondents’ perceptions of the issue positions of parties being accurate, which they may not be due to strategic ambiguity on certain issues on the part of parties (Bräuninger and Giger 2016) or projection effects (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010). Third, respondents’ vote choice in elections will be influenced by other considerations, such as party attachment and competence judgments, that are distinct from the policy

issues we aim to study here. Fourth, and perhaps most crucially, if we infer issue importance based solely on voters' choices between observed party platforms, it is not possible to estimate the importance voters attach to the issues that parties either do not talk about, or on which major parties adopt the same position. Thus, researchers measuring issue importance based on models of electoral choice are confined to studying *only those issues salient in elite political competition*.

### An Experimental Approach

In an experimental setting, we can measure choice-based issue importance for issues that are not salient for elite political competition. This is because an experimental setting permits researchers to construct hypothetical policy platforms composed of positions on both salient and nonsalient issues and to ask respondents to choose between these platforms. One survey experimental method that lends itself well to this kind of task, and which has become increasingly popular in political science, is conjoint analysis (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).

Conjoint analysis has not been used to explicitly measure issue importance, although some recent studies have come close. Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto (2018) ask Japanese respondents to make choices between hypothetical policy bundles composed of (random) positions on nine issues. Compared to modeling respondents' choices between observed party platforms in an election, this conjoint approach allows the researcher to observe respondent choices across a much more varied set of policy bundles and to control the information respondents receive about these bundles. The authors are thus able to more precisely and accurately identify the average effects—specifically, average marginal component effects (AMCEs)—of different issue positions.

However, the AMCEs estimated in that article do not measure the *importance* of issues, but rather the net effect of alternative issue positions on support for a candidate/party. This becomes clear if we imagine a dichotomous issue where 50% of respondents take position A and 50% take position B. If respondents' choices between policy bundles in the experiment were exclusively affected by the position offered on this issue, making it not just the most important issue but the only important issue, the estimated AMCE would still be zero because the reactions of the two groups of respondents cancel out. Small AMCEs do not imply a lack of issue importance. More generally, the AMCEs of a particular issue will be a function of both the importance individual respondents attach to the issue (in the sense defined above) *and* the distribution of respondent preferences on that issue.

This example makes clear that we can only recover the average importance respondents attach to an issue from a conjoint experiment if we condition statistical analysis on a measure of respondents' own positions on each issue. For measuring issue importance, what matters is the sensitivity of respondents' choices to divergences between their own views and candidate positions, and to measure these divergences, one needs to know respondents' own views on that issue. Leeper and Robison (2018) take the next step of conditioning analysis of a conjoint candidate experiment on respondents' own issue positions. They estimate the average marginal effect of respondent–candidate issue distance for several issues to show that self-reported issue importance does not predict choices in a conjoint experiment, but they do not generate a measure of issue importance.

Here, we develop a choice-based approach for measuring issue importance that combines questions about respondent issue positions with conjoint analysis. Unlike existing self-reported issue importance measures, our approach avoids reliance on respondent introspection. Unlike existing self-reported and choice-based measures of issue importance, our approach can measure the importance of issues that are not salient in elite political contestation.

Our proposed approach is not without limitations. First, although the use of an experimental design tightly links the measurement strategy to the causal conception of issue importance, the usual external validity trade-offs regarding potential artificiality of the experimental environment apply. In particular, our approach measures issue importance based on hypothetical choices in a survey experiment rather than observed behavioral choices between real candidates in elections. Second, it places extra burdens on researchers, who must select a set of issues and specify plausible alternatives on those issues. Third, although it requires only a moderate number of survey items, it does require a reasonably large sample size. We address these issues further in describing our survey instrument and data analysis strategy.

## Survey Instrument

### Issue Questions

The first component of our instrument consisted of seven issue questions, which asked respondents to give their position on seven issues (one issue per screen). The seven issues about which each respondent was asked were drawn randomly without replacement from a bank of 34 issue questions (described in more detail below).

## FIGURE 1 Example Issue Question on UK Relationship with the European Union

YouGov

Which of the following is closest to your view on the relationship between the UK and the European Union?

- The UK **should remain a member of the EU, and sign up to EU agreements we had previously opted out of**, like the single currency and the Schengen border-free area.
- The UK **should remain a member of the EU.**
- The UK **should be out of the EU, but stay part of the single market**, which includes rules allowing “freedom of movement”.
- The UK should **be out of the EU and out of the single market, but should participate in some EU programmes** (e.g., in research, education, and nuclear energy)
- The UK should **be out of the EU and out of the single market**, and should not participate in any EU programmes.



Each issue question began with a short prompt introducing the issue, followed by a list of five different policy options with a logical ordering (e.g., varying from less to more state intervention).<sup>2</sup> Respondents were asked to choose the option that came closest to their own view on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 gives an example issue question concerning the UK's relationship with the European Union. The ordered options in this example run from a closer relationship than the current status quo to withdrawal from the single market and all EU programs.

Whereas many researchers have measured voters' positions on issues using dichotomous response scales (whether they “favor” or “oppose” a certain policy; e.g., Jessee 2012 or ordered sentiment scales (e.g., “strongly oppose” to “strongly support”; e.g., Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 1985, we follow Broockman (2016) by using an ordered polytomous response scale defined in terms of concrete policy alternatives. These response options require more cognitive effort from respondents and more preparation from researchers, but they reduce the risk that variation in observed survey responses results from differences in the way respondents use response scales rather than differences in respondents' positions (Broockman 2016; Jessee 2012).

Why do we measure respondents' issue *positions* using direct self-reports given the problems with direct

self-reports of issue *importance* highlighted in the previous section? From the standpoint of psychological research, self-reported importance ratings are problematic because individuals are poor at explaining the unconscious processes that determine their judgments or attitudes (Nisbett and Wilson 1977; Bsem Wilson 2002, 62–63). In contrast, with direct questions about issue positions, we are asking respondents to report not on processes but on attitudes, which tend to be consciously accessible (Wilson 2002, 79). Consistent with this, when Converse and Pierce (1986) asked both position questions and direct issue importance questions in their study of French voters, they find that the latter “clearly suffer[ed] more measurement ‘noise,’ and [were] generally less effective measures” (222–23).

There is an important debate among political scientists concerning the extent to which respondents' answers to issue position questions reflect meaningful attitudes versus fleeting context-specific considerations (e.g., Converse 1964; Zaller and Feldman 1992). However, recent studies confirm that a substantial portion of variation in reported issue positions is attributable to “real”—that is, temporally stable—attitudes, even though these attitudes are often “idiosyncratic” rather than structured by a common low-dimensional ideological structure (Broockman 2016; Lauderdale, Hanretty, and Vivyan 2018).

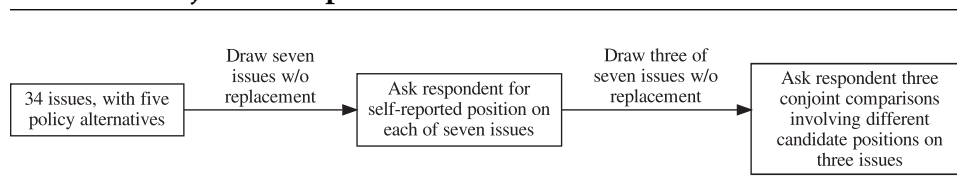
### Conjoint Questions

The second component of our survey instrument involved respondents answering three conjoint questions (one per

<sup>2</sup>The polarity of the order (1–5 or 5–1) was randomized with probability 0.5.

<sup>3</sup>No “don't know” response was permitted. Given our modeling strategy, random responses have the same consequence as respondent, putting no weight on their position on that issue.

**FIGURE 2 Relationship between Question Bank, Issue Questions, and Conjoint Comparisons**



screen). Each conjoint question gave respondents a choice between two hypothetical political candidates (labeled “A” and “B”) characterized entirely in terms of their positions on three issues. These three issues were drawn randomly without replacement from the seven issues on which a respondent had already given his or her own position in the first part of the survey (see Figure 2). These were randomized once for each respondent, so that each respondent saw three conjoint questions with the same three issues in the same order.

For each conjoint question, the positions of each candidate on each issue were drawn randomly (with equal probability) from the five response options offered for that issue in the issue questions. Candidate positions were also drawn independently, so that occasionally a respondent could be faced with candidates advocating the same policy position on one or more issues. Respondents were asked to review the candidates’ positions and then to say whether they would vote for A or B, or whether they were “not sure.”

Figure 3 gives a screenshot of an example conjoint question. Here, the hypothetical candidates are characterized in terms of their positions on three issues: the degree of state intervention in food production, the future of the UK–EU relationship, and the magnitude of UK foreign aid provision. The example respondent would have already been asked for his or her own position on all three of these issues (plus four others) in the first part of the survey. In this example, the hypothetical candidates happen to adopt identical positions on the first issue, but candidate B wants a closer relationship with the EU and more foreign aid provision than candidate A. In addition to this question, our example respondent would have been presented with two further candidate comparisons, each covering the same three issues presented in the same order but with candidates’ positions on those issues varying randomly.

We limited the number of issues shown in the conjoints to three so that the questions were not so difficult as to create significant survey nonresponse. However, because they ask respondents to consider a number of pieces of information about hypothetical candidates and then choose between them, these questions are clearly not easy

for respondents to answer. Why, then, do we argue for their use over questions that ask respondents to self-report issue importance, given that a key problem identified with the latter type of questions was the difficulty people have answering them? Crucially, the two types of questions are difficult in different ways. The difficulty presented by the conjoint questions is fundamental to our measurement objective: It is the multidimensional nature of considering trade-offs between preferences on different issues that makes conjoint experiments difficult for respondents. But the same difficulty arises when voters make choices between candidates in the real world. The implicit weights that they attach to different factors when making such choices are what we are interested in measuring, whether respondents are aware of those weights or not. In contrast, the difficulty involved in self-reported issue importance is not a common part of political life: Citizens are not typically required to engage in introspection about how they came to their choices. Citizens choose between candidates with a variety of potentially relevant differences whenever they vote, but there is no “why did you vote for that candidate?” question below those choices on the ballot paper.<sup>4</sup>

### Selecting Issues and Positions

The bank of 34 issues from which we sampled for the issue and conjoint questions was developed to be wide-ranging, including issues that are salient in elite political contestation in the UK and issues that UK elites generally ignore. Researchers who are only interested in issues salient in elite political contestation can identify such issues by examining party manifestos and other forms of communication. It is harder to identify issues that are not salient but have the potential to be important to voters.

<sup>4</sup>The rate at which respondents with no educational qualifications answer “not sure” to the conjoint questions is 13% higher than for respondents with at least a university degree-level qualification. This education gap in responses is the same as that found when we examine the rate at which the same groups of respondents answer “don’t know” or leave blank a question asking them for their “most important issue.” Thus, by this metric, the difficulty of the conjoints is similar to that of a most important issue question.

**FIGURE 3 Example of a Conjoint Question**



Now imagine that two candidates for Parliament, A and B, were asked about some of the same public policies that we just asked you about. Please look at their answers below and tell us who you would vote if this was all the information you had to go on.

Issue	Candidate A	Candidate B
How should the government be involved in subsidising (financially supporting) UK food production?	<b>The UK should rely more on food from other countries</b> and government should support current farmers switching into other work.	<b>The UK should rely more on food from other countries</b> and government should support current farmers switching into other work.
Which of the following is closest to your view on the relationship between the UK and the European Union?	The UK <b>should remain a member of the EU.</b>	The UK should <b>be out of the EU and out of the single market, but should participate in some EU programmes</b> (e.g., in research, education, and nuclear energy)
The UK currently gives around 0.7% of its national income to other countries in the form of aid. Many countries regard this figure as a target. Which of the following is closest to your view on foreign aid?	The UK should give <b>the current amount of foreign aid</b> (0.7% of national income).	The UK should give <b>a substantial amount of foreign aid</b> (around 1.4% of national income).

Given only the information shown above, who would you vote for?

- I would vote for A
- I am not sure
- I would vote for B



To ensure breadth of issue coverage, we based our initial list of issues on the 20 top-level headings used by the Comparative Agendas Project ([www.comparativeagendas.net](http://www.comparativeagendas.net)). For each heading, we identified between one and three issue areas for which we could provide ordered policy positions. We drafted 42 issues and associated policy positions before reducing the set to 34 issues that we could present clearly to survey respondents.

For each issue, we wrote five ordered policy positions. Fewer policy alternatives per issue are easier to specify for the researcher and to answer for the respondent, but these could potentially mask meaningful disagreements that would become apparent with greater numbers of alternatives. In writing these policy positions, we tried to make sure that the policy status quo, any positions of the main parties, and any logical end points, were all represented as options. The full wording of each issue question is reported in the supporting information (p. 1).

### Cost Considerations and Fieldwork

The overall design of the survey instrument was chosen to balance survey cost, sample size, and breadth of issue coverage. The cost of the survey was primarily dictated by the product of the number of items per respondent (7 issue questions + 3 conjoint questions = 10) and number of respondents. Given that each respondent only saw three issues in his or her conjoint questions, a cost-minimizing module would have only asked issue questions about those three issues; however, this survey experiment was designed to also facilitate other studies not reported in this article, for which a greater number of ordinal items was advantageous. There is a further discussion of sample size and data sparsity in the supporting information (p. 8).

The survey was fielded by YouGov UK January 22–31, 2018. The 6,070 respondents to our survey were selected

via YouGov's sample-matching algorithm from the set of 31,196 respondents who took part in the thirteenth wave of the British Election Study (BES), conducted online after the June 2017 election. We are therefore able to link our respondents to all variables present in the BES survey. YouGov provided UK population weights for the survey sample. Our analysis in the main text is based on a quasi-likelihood approach using these weights; however, an unweighted analysis yields results that differ negligibly from what we present (Miratrix et al. 2018).

## Model

Our survey instrument records the choices respondents make between hypothetical candidates who vary in terms of how much they disagree with the respondents' own preferred positions on several issues. We now introduce a model for these data that assumes a respondent chooses between candidates based on the latent utility she derives from each candidate, and that the utility derived from a candidate depends on the proximity of that candidate to the respondent's own preferred position across issues.

For the choice component of the model, we define an ordered logistic response model for the probabilities of "I would vote for A" ( $A$ ), "I am not sure" ( $NS$ ), and "I would vote for B" ( $B$ ). Given utilities for each respondent  $i$  for Candidate A and B of  $u_{iA}$  and  $u_{iB}$ , respectively, and threshold parameters  $\gamma_1, \gamma_2$ :

$$\log\left(\frac{p(NS) + p(B)}{p(A)}\right) = u_{iB} - u_{iA} - \gamma_1;$$

$$\log\left(\frac{p(B)}{p(A) + p(NS)}\right) = u_{iB} - u_{iA} - \gamma_2.$$

The larger the absolute values of  $\gamma_1, \gamma_2$ , the more likely the respondent is to be indifferent between the two platforms. If  $|\gamma_1| = |\gamma_2|$ , voters treat A and B symmetrically. If  $\gamma_1 \neq -\gamma_2$ , respondents systematically prefer either A or B due to order effects.

We could estimate a single pair of parameters  $\gamma_1$  and  $\gamma_2$  for all comparisons, but for diagnostic purposes, we estimate separate parameters according to the number of disagreements between A and B. In our data, we have 130, 1,811, 7,055, and 9,214 conjoint responses involving comparisons where zero, one, two, and three issue positions differ between the two candidates, respectively. We

thus allow for respondents to apply different thresholds depending on the complexity of the comparison.<sup>5</sup>

For the utility component, we adopt a linear-loss "spatial" model of preferences, where  $\psi_{jk}$  are the locations of the five policy positions  $k$  for issue  $j$  on an issue-specific policy dimension. We assume that the utility of each platform for a respondent is equal to the sum of the absolute differences between the locations of their preferred position ( $\psi_{ji}$ ) and the candidate platform positions ( $\psi_{jA}, \psi_{jB}$ ) on the three presented issues ( $j = 1, 2, 3$ ):

$$u_{iA} = - \sum_{j \in 1,2,3} |\psi_{jA} - \psi_{ji}|$$

$$u_{iB} = - \sum_{j \in 1,2,3} |\psi_{jB} - \psi_{ji}|$$

The location of the first position ( $\psi_{j1}$ ) is fixed to zero. The locations of the remaining positions are *not* subject to an ordering constraint; the recovered locations are those that best fit the observed conjoint choices. Because the utility scale is common across issues, an issue where individuals put a lot of weight on differences between the positions will be one where the locations are widely spaced. An inconsequential issue would have  $\psi_{j1} \approx \psi_{j2} \approx \dots \approx \psi_{j5}$ .

The parameters from the model are thus the locations of the policy positions  $\psi_{jk}$  and the thresholds  $\gamma$ . Because the former are all on the same utility scale, the spacing of the policy alternatives  $\psi_{jk}$  on different issues indicates how much respondents penalize disagreement with their own position on that issue. However, the spacing between the alternatives is directly shaped by our choices of which alternatives to provide. Simply comparing the range of the alternatives is not a good measure of the degree to which disagreement on that issue carries significant weight with the public. A large range might just indicate that we offered more extreme alternatives on one issue than another. We want a measure of importance that reflects the relative importance of policy disagreements that actually exist in the electorate, not the extremity of the alternatives we provided.

To give a simple statistic that measures the importance of each issue among the public, we take into account the distribution of opinion on each issue (supporting information, p. 9). If few respondents adopt the most extreme positions on offer, the fact that respondents would

<sup>5</sup>In particular, in cases where all three issue positions are identical, we would expect larger differences between  $\gamma_1$  and  $\gamma_2$ , as the intermediate response is most sensible when faced with two identical candidates. Indeed, when respondents were faced with identical candidates in the experiment, 75% of raw responses were for the intermediate "not sure" option. The remaining 25% are presumably either not paying attention or are giving a silly answer to what appears to be a silly question. These responses have no consequence for any substantive parameter estimates.



punish candidates who adopt those positions does not indicate an issue is important in anything more than a trivial sense. If, however, we see respondents heavily punishing hypothetical candidates who take positions that are popular with many other members of the public, that indicates the issue is important. The importance statistic we use is therefore the following function of the estimated locations of each position  $\psi_{jk}$  on the common utility scale and the proportion of respondents who report preferring that position  $\pi_{jk}$ :

$$\chi_j = \sum_{k=1}^5 \sum_{k'=1}^5 \pi_{jk} \pi_{jk'} |\psi_{jk} - \psi_{jk'}|.$$

This importance statistic is the population average disutility citizens feel toward the opinions held by their fellow citizens. Issue importance will be large when citizens hold widely varying positions on an issue and also place great weight on those disagreements in the candidate comparisons. Importance will be small if there is little disagreement in the public on an issue or if citizens put little weight on the positions that the hypothetical candidates take on that issue (or both). We further discuss the implications of adopting this sort of measure below once we have examples to consider.

We estimate the conjoint response model by Bayesian posterior simulation, implemented in Stan (Carpenter et al. 2016), using uniform priors on all parameters and reporting posterior means and 95% central intervals.

## Results

We begin by performing checks on the reasonableness of our modeling approach, before focusing more directly on our estimates of issue importance. First, we examine the parameters specifically related to the response model, which are primarily diagnostic. The parameters  $\gamma$  indicate the baseline propensity of respondents to give each of the three possible responses to the conjoint experiment. Recall that we estimate different values of  $\gamma$  for comparisons involving zero, one, two, and three policy disagreements. Our  $\gamma_1$  estimates are  $-1.64$ ,  $-0.86$ ,  $-0.93$ , and  $-0.92$  for each of these, respectively. Our  $\gamma_2$  estimates are  $2.50$ ,  $0.95$ ,  $0.97$ , and  $0.97$ , respectively. As expected, the thresholds are very widely spread for comparisons involving no policy differences because most respondents give the intermediate response when there is no way to distinguish between two identical candidates. Overall, the values of  $\gamma_1$  are somewhat smaller in magnitude than the

values of  $\gamma_2$ , indicating a mild ballot/response order effect in favor of candidate A. However, there is little difference in the parameters across comparisons involving one, two, and three policy disagreements. This is an indication that respondents are weighing up varying numbers of disagreements in a way that is consistent with our random utility model. If respondents became less responsive to candidate disagreements as the number of disagreements (and therefore complexity of the comparison) increased, we would see the threshold parameters become more extreme around zero.

Next, we examine the estimated relative locations of the five policy positions on each issue (supporting information, p. 10). In our model, we do not enforce the ordering that we intended when we designed each set of positions, so this provides an additional check on whether respondents perceive the alternatives as we expected. We estimate all five positions to be in the intended ordering for 30 of 34 issues. For the remaining four, we find a single pair of adjacent alternatives where the point estimates are in the reverse order of what we expected (supporting information, p. 11). None of these position reversals are substantively large, and none are statistically significant at conventional levels. This is not due to a lack of estimation precision: The posterior probability of being in the intended order is greater than 0.975 for 110 of the 136 total pairwise comparisons. In sum, respondents made choices in the conjoint as though they perceived the alternatives in the logical order we intended.

As a further check, we estimated an unrestricted preference model in which we do not assume a spatial structure to the utility function of respondents over alternative candidate positions (supporting information, p. 13). The overwhelming tendency is for respondents to evaluate the hypothetical candidates in the conjoint in a way that is consistent with a spatial proximity-based utility function. Even without assuming spatial ordering, on average, and for most individual issues and positions on those issues, respondents are most inclined to choose candidates with the position that the respondents reported as their own and to penalize candidates deviating from that position more as the candidates move to positions further from the respondents' own positions, in both directions. Not only is this evidence of the validity of the spatial model that we impose on the data to generate our main results, but it also speaks to the validity of respondent self-reported issue positions: By punishing candidates who take the more distant positions from their stated position, people are generally responding to the conjoint in ways that reflect their stated issue preferences.

## Estimated Issue Importance

Figure 4 shows our core results. It plots the estimated locations for the five positions for all 34 issues (i.e., the  $\psi_{jk}$  parameters). We label the five positions according to the designed ordering. The area of each point is proportional to the proportion of respondents choosing that alternative as their most preferred in the issue questions (supporting information, p. 9). Issues are sorted from most to least important, with the estimated importance statistic and its 95% posterior interval reported on the right-hand side (see also supporting information, p. 12).

Recall that the importance statistic for an issue represents the average utility weight that respondents attach in candidate choices to other respondents' deviations from their own preferred position on that issue. To illustrate the implications of this approach, consider the example of the National Health Service (NHS) public/private issue. As Figure 4 shows, this issue is ranked only 23 of 34 in terms of importance ( $\chi = 0.41$ ). The figure also shows that the estimated locations of the five positions for this issue are among the most widely spaced of all issues considered here; that is, respondents very heavily penalized large deviations from their preferred positions on this issue when choosing between policy bundles in the conjoint task. The reason the NHS public/private issue scores only moderately on importance despite this spacing is that the distribution of voter positions on this issue is extremely lopsided. Almost 80% of respondents endorsed alternatives 1 or 2 (which favor no or very limited private involvement in the NHS), whereas less than 5% endorsed alternatives 4 or 5 (which favor partial or full privatization of the NHS). Thus, although voters heavily penalized privatized NHS provision in the conjoint experiment, very few voters endorse private provision.

In contrast to the NHS issue, one of the two most important issues concerns Britain's relationship with the European Union ( $\chi = 0.84$ ). This is a policy issue where voters heavily penalize disagreement with their preferred policy position (such that positions are estimated to be far apart on the issue scale) and where the distribution of voters' preferences on the issue is dispersed (such that positions far apart on the issue scale are preferred by substantial numbers of voters). It is unsurprising that Britain's relationship with the EU is currently one of the most important issues to British voters. The negotiations following the UK's decision to leave the EU were at the forefront of national political debates—both in the media and among political elites—at the time our survey was fielded. The same is true for the closely related issue of

net migration, which is the fourth-most important issue according to our estimates ( $\chi = 0.71$ ).

However, Figure 4 also shows that issues can be important to the public without being the subject of prominent political debate. The death penalty question has an estimated importance score ( $\chi = 0.85$ ) that is indistinguishable from that estimated for the EU issue. The finding that British voters vary in their opinions on the death penalty is not a new one (e.g., Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 1985; Heath et al. 1991). What is striking is the *importance* voters attach to deviations from their preferred position on this issue, despite the fact that the death penalty (for murder) was abolished in the UK in 1969. Although the UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Paul Nuttall backed its partial reintroduction during the 2017 general election campaign, no other significant British political party made mention of this issue in their campaigns. Our results suggest that, were parties to take up opposing positions on this issue, there would be the potential to move votes on a scale comparable to the EU issue.

Is it reasonable to have a measure of issue importance that says the use of the death penalty is more important to the public than the public/private organization of NHS? One might view this as evidence that our conception of importance is problematic, given that the death penalty is more or less ignored in contemporary British politics, whereas the NHS holds an almost totemic place in British life. We have several responses to this line of criticism. First, because we are trying to measure importance as distinct from salience, we should not expect to see a perfect association between our importance measure and the issues currently being contested. Second, it is possible that a differently phrased NHS question, perhaps about funding levels rather than public/private organization, would have ranked higher because it would have induced more varied positions among respondents. We may simply have asked about a less contentious aspect of the NHS: its primarily public organization. Third, we have defined a measure that focuses our attention on issues that are politically important to voters in the sense that there are disagreements among citizens on which basis citizens would be willing to change their vote choices. These are issues that *could* become major issues of political contestation, but they will not do so unless parties and candidates choose to adopt varying positions and to emphasize those positions (perhaps because they are losers on the primary issue dimension; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). Indeed, one of the major lines of argument about Brexit is that it was the result of multiple decades of elites in the major UK political parties failing to take up varying positions along an increasingly severe fault line in British public opinion, leading to a political earthquake when

**FIGURE 4 Estimated Policy Alternative Locations and Estimated Issue Importance**



that fault line found an outlet through UKIP and then the referendum on EU membership (Evans and Menon 2017). Our conception of issue importance and the resulting measurement strategy is one that can identify such fault lines before the earthquake strikes, rather than only after—a road map for both issue entrepreneurs and those who study them.

In contrast, if we look at the open-ended, most-important-issue measures from the same respondents, measured 6 months earlier, we only see the issues on the most immediate political agenda. The distribution of responses is, by the nature of a “most important” prompt, very lopsided and covers few issues. Fully 31% of (population-weighted) respondents name “Europe” as the most important issue. Smaller groups give responses related to terrorism (13%), immigration (7%), health (6%), or the economy in general (4%). There is clear indication of sensitivity to recent events: It is unlikely that terrorism would have been the second largest share had there not been three terror attacks on the UK in the 4 months before the survey. Thirteen percent of respondents leave the item blank. Maybe these respondents do not care about any issues, but more likely they just have difficulty answering an open-ended question. Although the responses to this question clearly tell us something about which issues people think are most important, they give a relatively superficial picture that is limited to a few of the highest-profile issues.

### Issue Importance and Ideological Structure

To relate our importance scores to the major dimensions of conflict in UK politics, we conduct a separate two-dimensional scaling of respondents’ answers to the self-reported issue position questions. This uses a standard item response theory scaling model for ordered responses to measure how issue positions tend to go together. The details of the model specification and identification restrictions are in the supporting information (p. 16).

The top two panels of Figure 5 summarize the results of the 2-D ideological scaling model. The top left panel shows the loading of each of our 34 issue positions on the economic left–right (*x*-axis) and social liberal–conservative (*y*-axis) dimensions, respectively. Along with the EU, issues such as the death penalty, foreign aid, net migration, and support for school pupils whose first language is not English are strongly associated with an underlying social liberal–conservative dimension. Issues that load strongly on the economic left–right dimension principally concern the extent to which government should intervene in the provision of goods and services (e.g.,

rail privatization, regulation of energy prices, nationalization of telephone and internet services). Issues relating to taxes, and social support load less heavily on this dimension. The top right panel shows the average estimated position of respondents by reported 2017 UK general election vote. Conservative voters are on average more economically right-wing and more socially conservative than Labour voters. Liberal Democrat and UKIP voters are on average moderate on economic left–right issues, but they differ strongly on the social liberal–conservative dimension, with UKIP supporters being highly conservative.

The bottom panel of Figure 5 is our focus here. It shows a clear negative association between how important each issue is and the relative degree to which each issue loads on the economic left–right ideological dimension rather than the social liberal–conservative dimension.<sup>6</sup> Issues in our survey that related more to economic left–right considerations were generally *less* important to voters; the issues that related more to social liberal–conservative considerations were conversely more important.

Although this association is statistically significant in a simple regression analysis (the *p*-value on the slope of the regression line in Figure 5 is 0.02), the issues we included in our survey are not an independent random sample from any meaningfully defined population of issues. This is therefore not conclusive evidence that the issues that divide social liberals and conservatives in the UK are more important than those that divide economic left and right. It is possible that the left–right issues we asked about were not sufficiently explicit regarding benefits and overall redistribution, tending instead to focus on public versus private ownership, taxes, and workers rights. Perhaps there are other left–right-oriented policy questions that would have much more powerfully shaped respondents’ choices, and we simply failed to ask about them. Nonetheless, of the issues we asked about, we see a clear pattern that is consistent with arguments made by other scholars of recent UK voting behavior (Curtice 2017; Mellon et al. 2018).

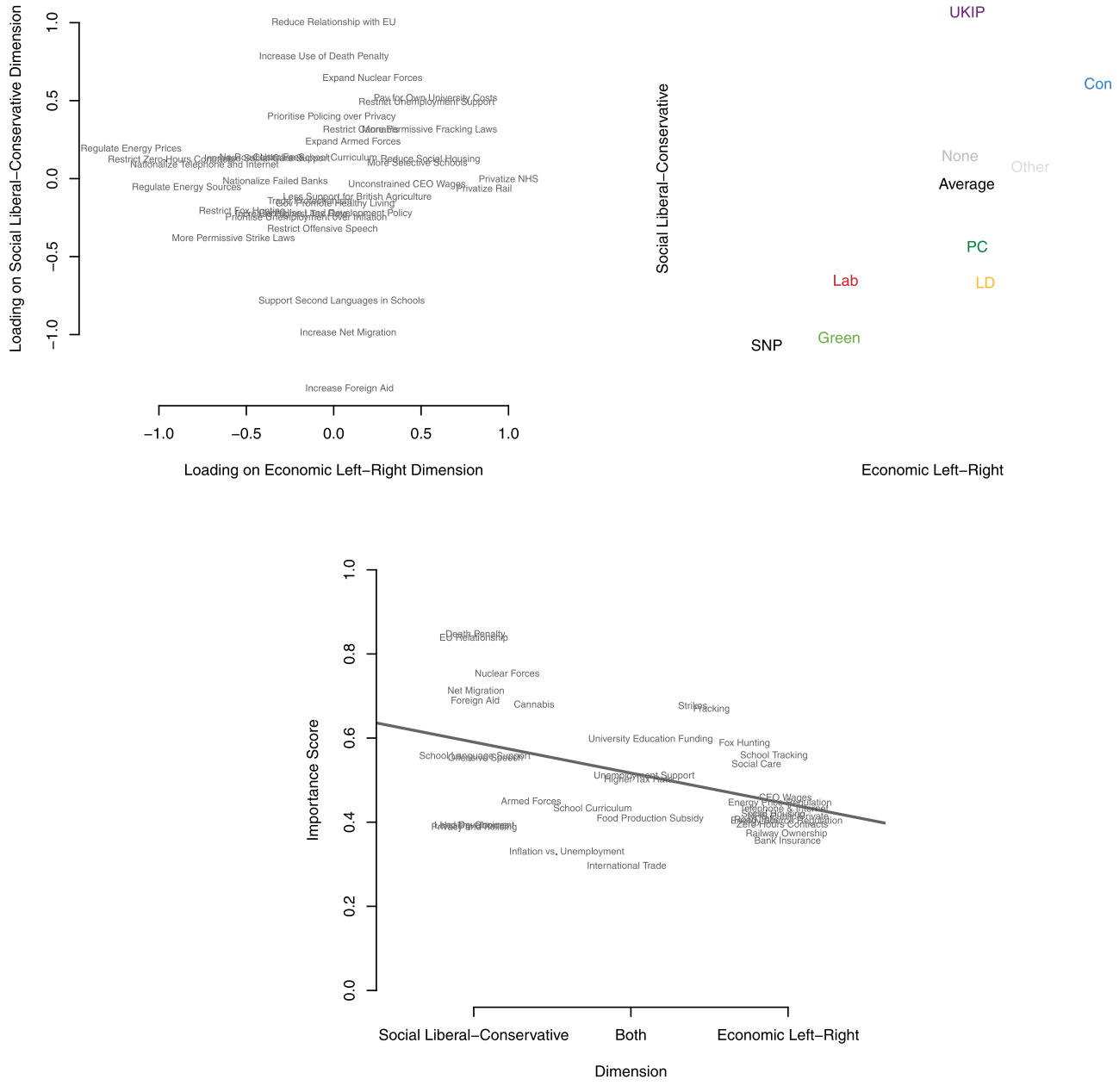
### Issue Importance and Complexity

One might worry that some of the issues we study may be measured as less important because the wording we use to operationalize those policy issues was more difficult for

<sup>6</sup>Where  $\beta_{ij}$  is the discrimination parameter for dimension *i* and issue *j*, we plot

$$\frac{\beta_{1j}^2}{\beta_{1j}^2 + \beta_{2j}^2}$$

**FIGURE 5** Estimates from 2D Scaling Model of Issue Positions (Top Left and Right) and Their Relationship to Importance Scores (Bottom)



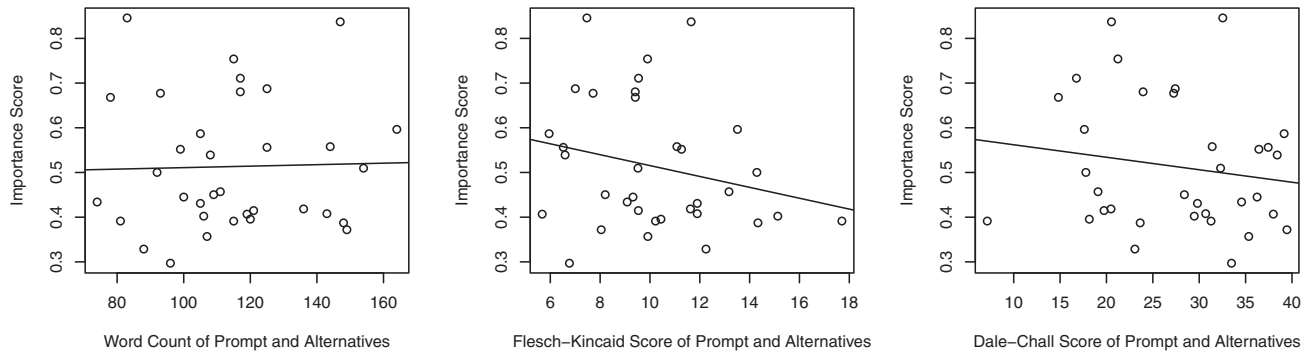
nonexperts respondents to understand. In Figure 6, we plot our measure of issue importance against three possible measures of the linguistic complexity of the prompt and response alternatives that we provide for an issue: simple word count; Flesch-Kincaid score, which measures the readability in terms of words per sentence and number of syllables per word; and Dale-Chall score, which is similar to Flesch-Kincaid but accounts for the proportion of difficult words instead of syllables per word. Figure 6 shows weak and nonsignificant associations be-

tween these measures of prompt/alternative complexity and our measure of issue importance. Linguistic complexity is unlikely to drive very much of the differences in issue importance we measure.

### What is Important to Whom?

We can extend our model to allow issue importance to vary between population subgroups. We do this by allowing the weight on the distance between the respondent's

**FIGURE 6** Estimated Importance Scores for Each Issue as a Function of Three Measures of Prompt and Alternative Complexity: Word Count, Flesch-Kincaid Score, and Dale-Chall Score



position and candidate positions to vary as a function of observed covariates  $X$ :

$$u_{iA} = - \sum_{j \in 1,2,3} |e^{\beta_j X_i} (\psi_{jA} - \psi_{ji})|$$

$$u_{iB} = - \sum_{j \in 1,2,3} |e^{\beta_j X_i} (\psi_{jB} - \psi_{ji})|$$

The overall weights are constrained to be positive by using an exponential function,  $e^{\beta_j X_i}$ . The coefficients  $\beta$  are estimated from the data under an improper uniform prior.

Table 1 shows the results of a simple application of this approach with four predictor variables: self-reported political attention (0–10 scale, mean 5.8), whether a respondent is female, age (in 5-year increments), and whether a respondent holds a university degree (Level 4+ qualifications). All of these variables were measured for the BES at least 7 months prior to our survey. In the table, we highlight issues that have significantly more positive or negative associations with each demographic variable, compared to the average issue. Comparison to the average issue is necessary because some variables are generally associated with higher or lower weight placed on the average issue. This is particularly true for attention, which is associated with higher weight put on all issues and manifests in the data as lower probabilities of choosing the “I am not sure” option in the conjoint questions. It is likely that high-attention respondents consider candidate profiles more carefully in relation to their own policy preferences and have firmer policy preferences (Bartle 2000; Lauderdale, Hanretty, and Vivyan 2018).

Holding the other variables constant, *older voters* care relatively more about nuclear forces, fracking, fox hunting, social care, and food production subsidies. Social care directly affects older voters, and fracking affects areas where older voters disproportionately live and own

land. Fox hunting, UK nuclear forces, and the extent to which the UK is reliant on food imports are literally “old” issues in British politics in the sense that they were more prominently debated decades ago. Younger voters care relatively more about the future relationship with the EU, the extent of unemployment support, road tolls, government intervention to encourage healthy eating, and the terms of international trade. Several of these are issues that primarily affect people of working age, and the EU relationship is explicitly about the future.

Holding other variables constant, voters who are *more attentive* to politics care relatively more about the future relationship with the EU and energy source regulation, two relatively complex issues. In contrast, voters who are less attentive to politics care more about the death penalty, nuclear forces, school language support, and social care provision. With the possible exception of social care, these are relatively nontechnical issues that connect more straightforwardly to political values.

The associations for the two remaining variables are weaker. Other things equal, university graduates care more about food production subsidies and international trade issues, and they care less about fox hunting, land development, and the government’s intervention to encourage healthy eating. Women put higher weight on zero-hours contracts and less weight on the EU relationship, top tax rates, and the inflation/unemployment trade-off.

In the supporting information (p. 19), we provide plots showing the predicted levels of importance of different issues as a function of each variable considered singly. These figures sometimes show clearer relationships than the multivariate analysis here because variables like political attention and holding a university degree are correlated, making it difficult to distinguish their associations with importance.

**TABLE 1 Coefficient Estimates for Variation in Importance as a Function of Four Demographic Variables**

	Age		Attention		Degree		Female	
Death Penalty	0.017	(+)	0.019	(-)	-0.026		-0.027	
EU Relationship	-0.052	(-)	0.124	(+)	0.093		-0.381	(-)
Nuclear Forces	0.060	(+)	0.023	(-)	0.057		-0.091	
Net Migration	-0.001		0.038		-0.078		-0.260	
Foreign Aid	-0.006		0.086		0.200		-0.011	
Cannabis	0.007		0.044		0.035		-0.096	
Strikes	-0.032		0.091		0.141		0.066	
Fracking	0.027	(+)	0.118		-0.107		0.034	
University Education Funding	0.021		0.112		0.219		-0.221	
Fox Hunting	0.035	(+)	0.048		-0.340	(-)	-0.211	
School Tracking	-0.041		0.119		-0.089		-0.115	
School Language Support	-0.016		0.027		-0.096		-0.120	
Offensive Speech	-0.038		0.087		0.131		0.053	
Social Care	0.039	(+)	0.004	(-)	0.214		-0.047	
Unemployment Support	-0.054	(-)	0.055		-0.102		-0.103	
Higher Tax Rate	-0.026		0.109		0.009		-0.406	(-)
CEO Wages	0.017		0.064		0.041		-0.359	
Armed Forces	0.020		0.100		0.134		-0.039	
Energy Price Regulation	0.023		0.120		-0.111		0.074	
School Curriculum	-0.022		0.028		-0.116		0.056	
Telephone and Internet	-0.006		0.024		0.161		-0.046	
Social Housing	-0.006		0.109		0.097		-0.299	
NHS Public/Private	-0.040		0.083		-0.012		-0.246	
Food Production Subsidy	0.095	(+)	0.095		0.379	(+)	-0.174	
Road Tolls	-0.116	(-)	0.031		0.217		-0.192	
Energy Source Regulation	-0.035		0.178	(+)	0.152		0.020	
Zero-Hours Contracts	-0.036		0.079		-0.002		0.294	(+)
Land Development	-0.032		0.046		-0.382		0.217	
Healthy Choices	-0.090	(-)	0.050		-0.582	(-)	-0.274	
Privacy and Policing	-0.017		0.077		0.106		0.049	
Railway Ownership	-0.031		0.118		0.124		-0.073	
Bank Insurance	0.012		0.026		0.143		-0.098	
Inflation vs. Unemployment	-0.010		0.026		-0.105		-0.493	(-)
International Trade	-0.114	(-)	0.123		0.419	(+)	-0.247	
Average	-0.013		0.073		0.027		-0.111	

Note: Coefficients significantly higher than or lower than the average coefficient for that demographic variable across all issues are marked with (+) or (-), respectively.

## Discussion

In this article, we have offered a new choice-based approach for measuring issue importance in the public. Our approach combines standard survey questions asking respondents to choose concrete policy positions on a number of issues with a conjoint analysis presenting respondents with hypothetical candidates who take positions on a subset of those same issues.

There are limitations to our approach in general and in the specific implementation presented here. Concerning our specific implementation, although we chose a set of issues that were representative of the policy areas defined by the Comparative Agendas Project, we have still only studied one particular set of policy issues using a particular wording for each issue. Future work might explore additional policy issues and sensitivity to the set of and wording of alternatives. Future work could also

use our measurement approach to further investigate the factors that determine issue importance. Although our results suggest that measured importance is not driven by linguistic complexity of issue wording and that issues can be important to voters even when they are not salient in elite political contestation, there is much work to be done to understand the antecedents of issue importance. For example, past research finds that the temporal stability of issue positions is higher when those positions have clear implications for well-defined societal groups or for objects that are concrete and significant for respondents themselves (Converse 1964). This might suggest that issues are more likely to be important for citizens' political decision making to the extent that they are framed in terms of such implications.

The limitations to our general measurement approach are mostly variants of the external validity concerns that come with any survey experiment. We infer importance based on respondents' choices between hypothetical candidates rather than based on voters' behavioral choices between real candidates in real elections. Because respondents know nothing else about the candidates, know they are not real, and have information about only three issues, they may put some weight on issues that they would completely ignore when making real political decisions. Future research could, for example, embed the candidate policy positions in a richer conjoint design where respondents also receive information about candidates' background characteristics. This would allow researchers to gauge the importance that voters attach to policy issues against other potentially relevant attributes of candidates. Even then, there is still a risk that voters choose differently when considering the hypothetical issue stances of hypothetical candidates compared to when considering real issue positions of real politicians.

However, just as external validity concerns are not a good general argument against doing survey experiments, none of these limitations are good arguments for rejecting our approach to measuring issue importance, especially given the severe limitations of the alternatives. When we say an issue is important in politics, we should mean that changing something related to that issue is capable of causing people to act differently. Once we recognize that importance can be considered a causal attribute, all the arguments for using experiments to study it have their usual force. A further advantage of the experimental approach is that it allows us to identify issues that, despite being important to the public, are not the subject of current political debate. We care about variation in issue positions that are not currently being presented to the public by political parties and candidates, but may be in the future. Armed with a method that identifies such issues in

a systematic fashion, we can better understand current electoral competition and its likely future trajectory, and can better judge whether citizens are getting the policies they say they want on the issues they care most about.

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## Supporting Information

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

- Prompts and Policy Alternatives
- Data Sparsity
- Alternative Support Estimates
- Alternative Position Estimates
- Policy Alternative Reversal Examples
- Importance Estimates
- Unrestricted Model Estimates
- Comparison to Standard Conjoint Analysis
- Ordinal Scaling Model for Respondent Ideology
- Importance by Covariates

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