Policy Versus Party: The Importance of Personal Issue Importance (Draft)

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Abstract: To what extent do voters rely on policy information when making electoral decisions? While there is evidence that the public is policy-driven to an extent, much of recent research suggests the prevalence of ‘blind partisans’ – a public that ignores policy information in favor of simple party cues. I argue that both perspectives have merit. A voter is policy-driven when the issues at stake are of high personal importance but favors partisan cues on issues of low personal importance. Across two studies – one using fictitious candidates and one using Senate incumbents running for reelection in 2018 – I find that the effect of issue agreement on candidate evaluation increases when the issues at stake are of high personal importance, while the effect of party cues decrease. Both studies also reveal an interesting caveat when effects are separated by in versus out-party evaluations. When evaluating candidates from the opposite party of the respondent, personal issue importance moderates the extent to which policy information is utilized as expected. However, evaluations of in-party members are policy-driven regardless of the personal importance of the issue. Together, these studies imply that the American public is far from blind partisanship. Political issues matter for the voter calculus, with personally important issues being most influential.
Classic models of voting assume that electoral decision-making is driven by preferences on political issues (Dahl 1971; Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984). More recently, this claim has been challenged by work arguing that voters are largely ‘blind partisans’ who ignore policy information altogether and vote to express their political identity (Achen and Bartels 2017; Mason 2015). Despite these strong claims, there is substantial empirical evidence that issue positions are associated with vote choice, for at least some voters, some of the time (Arceneaux 2008; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Fowler wp; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). However, skeptics argue that this association is driven by the effect of partisan preferences on issue positions (Achen and Bartels 2017; Broockman and Butler 2017; Lenz 2012). Are voters primarily blind partisans that ignore issues in favor of partisan loyalties, or do issues matter for political decision-making? The former implies a public unable to hold politicians accountable for their policy actions, while the latter implies that, even if imperfect, citizens can make political decisions that are informed by candidate issue positions.

In this paper, I seek to reconcile these conflicting perspectives. I argue that voters do rely on issue information to inform their decision-making, but only for issues that are personally important to them. The majority of issues do not meet this criterion for the electorate and the subset of issues that matter varies across citizens. When the political issues at stake are of little personal importance, voters rely on non-issue information, such as partisan cues. These unimportant issues are endogenous to party and candidate preferences and do not have a causal impact on vote choice. Therefore, we are left with a pattern of influence that varies systematically based on personal issue importance (Carsey and Layman 2006).
Past work on personal issue importance has been skeptical that it has any effect on how voters rely on issue information for political decision-making (Leeper and Robison 2018; Niemi and Bartels 1985). I argue that the importance of personal issue importance has been missed by past research studying voter decision-making for two reasons. First, researchers often focus on the political salience of issues rather than the personal importance one places on that issue. Political salience is distinct from personal issue importance – as it is defined at an aggregate level. While the two can be positively correlated, citizens vary in what issues they care about at any given time (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990). Furthermore, there is evidence that political salience does not make evaluation of candidates more policy-driven (Lenz 2012).¹ Second, standard measurement of personal issue importance suffers from measurement error problems, like acquiescence bias, that makes it difficult to discriminate between important and unimportant issues. In this project, I focus on personal issue importance but use an alternative measurement strategy to isolate issues that are prioritized by individual respondents.

In two experimental studies, I test the importance of issue information and party cues for candidate evaluations while varying the specific policies presented. Respondents are asked to evaluate candidates taking positions on issues that are either the most or least personally important to them. Results consistently show that the impact of policy positions on candidate evaluation increases for issues of high personal importance, whereas the effect of partisanship decreases. When the results are broken down by in-party versus out-party evaluations, both studies show respondents are more likely to be guided by policy information on issues of high personal importance for out-partisan evaluations. When evaluating in-party candidates, by

¹ Though see Arceneaux 2008.
contrast, respondents used policy information in their evaluation regardless of the personal importance of the issue. These results are consistent with the idea of negative partisanship — affective polarization is driven more by dislike of the out-party than positive feelings toward the in-party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Thus, partisan animosity towards out-party candidates cannot be overridden by agreement on issues of little importance. These effects are found for both fictitious candidates and U.S. Senators running for reelection in 2018 during the campaign. Together, these studies imply that citizens do rely on policy information to guide their political decision-making, even in the presence of partisan cues.

**Background**

Research on voter decision-making has led political scientists to infer various levels of democratic accountability on display by the public (Achen and Bartels 2017). Ideally, voters make decisions based on how well the issue positions of candidates match their own preferences on the issues. A policy-driven public elect’s candidates that best represent their beliefs on how to be governed. Classic models of voting assume that citizens care primarily about issues, with voters choosing the candidate whose policy profile maximizes some function of relative spatial location across issue dimensions (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Merrill and Grofman 1999).

An alternative perspective instead emphasizes the importance of social and political group memberships for political decision-making. While these can include groups like gender, race, or religion, the most influential group for political decision-making is partisanship (Bartels 2000; Campbell et al. 1960). Some argue that partisanship is simply a proxy for a citizen’s issue preferences (Fiorina 1981; Lau and Redlawsk 2006), however recent research suggests that
partisan voting is expressively-motivated. By this perspective, citizens prefer candidates of similar partisanship because of a psychological attachment to the group rather than overall policy agreement (Achen and Bartels 2017; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004; Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe 2015). Such ‘blind partisans’ vote for members of their own party regardless of issue agreement because they derive utility from “winning” at the expense of other groups. For citizens that take issue positions perfectly in-line with party labels, this reliance on psychological group attachment is inconsequential to voting accuracy. However, most citizens hold positions that vary substantially across issues and do not collapse to a single left-right dimension (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Treier and Hillygus 2009). This suggests that many partisans are prioritizing identity over policy (Achen and Bartels 2017; Cohen 2003; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Mason 2015, 2018).

Yet a variety of research documents that issues matter for voter decision-making, at least to an extent. Evidence of policy-driven behavior has been found when there is conflict between the voters’ political beliefs and their party preference (Endres and Panagopoulos 2019; Hillygus and Shields 2008; Lavine et al. 2012. Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Research has also found those who are informed about a policy are more likely to rely on it, even after accounting for partisanship (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Jessee 2010). There has also been evidence of policy information having a significant impact on vote choice when party cues are present alongside multiple candidate issue positions (Fowler wp; Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). Taken together, these two lines of research suggest that a hybrid approach to vote choice may be closer to the truth—one where both partisanship and issues matter. I argue for one such theory: that personal issue importance
serves as a key moderator of voter reliance on issue information versus party cues for political decision-making.

In theory, an issue that is personally important to a citizen should hold a greater weight for their decision calculus. Important issues may behave similarly to important attitudes, which exhibit higher levels of stability over time (Howe and Krosnick 2017; Krosnick and Petty 1995). Additionally, people show a greater interest in seeking out information for issues they deem of high personal importance (Henderson 2014). While it is theoretically possible that all issues are considered important by voters, this is unlikely the case. Citizens are limited in both resources and motivation when it comes to political engagement, and many scholars suggest that voters typically care about only a few issues (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990). In this view, personal issue importance is essential to understanding the nature of voting behavior.

If voters only use a few, personally important issues, to inform their decision-making, then any given issue will likely be unimportant for many voters. Previous work comparing the impact of issue information versus partisan cues on voter decision-making has often failed to consider this. While party labels are constant across these studies, with either a Democratic or Republican alternative, the policy information differs. Studies have looked at a variety of issues including healthcare, abortion, immigration, and oil drilling. Often, the policy is chosen because of its political salience at the time of the experiment (e.g. Arceneaux 2008; Endres and Panagopoulos 2019). When looking at political salience, the argument is that citizens should be more policy-driven when issues of high salience are present. However, while politically salient issues are positively correlated with issues that are personally important to individual voters, salience and personal importance are not the same thing (Lavine et al. 1996). Thus, studies that
present voters with a choice between a fixed, politically salient policy issue and a non-issue cue like partisanship are attenuating the impact that policy information can have by not accounting for personal issue importance.

To be sure, previous research has demonstrated that issue importance moderates political behavior, but this work has not focused explicitly on how the concept moderates the effect issue information has on voting. For example, Carsey and Layman (2006) find that issue-based changes in party identification are most common among those who are aware of elite partisan differences on issues of high personal importance. In another study, Fournier et al. (2003) find that personal issue importance affects how much weight voters place on government performance evaluations in that issue area, which in turn affects vote choice. Most similarly, Hillygus and Shields (2008) use personal issue importance to determine meaningful issue disagreements (or cross-pressures) between voters and their party’s presidential candidate; finding that partisan defection in the 2004 presidential election was more likely as the number of these cross-pressures increased. However, their measure of issue importance is a scale, which ignores the moderating effect of importance for any given issue. Additionally, their analysis was more focused on the moderating role of campaigns. Together, this work suggests that personal issue importance affects political behavior, but we have yet to understand how personal issue importance moderates voter use of issue information to form evaluations, and vote for, a candidate.

Moreover, there has been substantial skepticism about the importance of personal issue importance in voting. Several scholars have pointed to the dearth of evidence for the moderating role of personal importance (Hinckley, Hofstetter, and Kessel 1974; Niemi and
Bartels 1985). Further, recent experimental work suggests that issue importance has no effect on vote choice (Leeper and Robison 2018).

I argue that lack of evidence for the role of personal importance may be due to the way importance is commonly conceptualized and measured. The current accepted measure asks how personally important a given issue is to the respondent (Petty and Krosnick 1995). This question wording was constructed to make the concept of issue importance distinct from how accessible or extreme the issue position is to the individual, as well as distinct from issue salience (Howe and Krosnick 2017; Miller and Peterson 2004). However, the personal issue importance question has its own drawbacks. Most pertinent, respondents tend to exaggerate how much they care about each topic, making it difficult to discriminate between important and unimportant issues.² For example, in both studies that follow I find over half of respondents indicate multiple political issues are ‘Extremely Important’ to them, which is the highest value of importance on the scale. When this occurs, the measure is unable to determine an ordering of importance, which can consequentially attenuate the relationship personal importance has with political behavior.

In this paper I measure personal issue importance in a manner that allows us to determine which political issue is the most and least personally important for each respondent. This measurement strategy differs from the traditional measure of issue importance by forcing respondents to determine which political issue they prioritize above all others. By focusing on personal issue importance, rather than issue salience, and relying on a measure that can better

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² The reason for this bias is likely a combination of social desirability against calling a political issue unimportant and measurement issues associated with introspective evaluation (Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2019).
differentiate between important and unimportant issues, we can better understand if voters are blind partisans or if issues do matter for political decision-making – just not all issues.

**Expectations**

Voters are likely relying on both policy information and partisanship to an extent when making electoral decisions. However, not all issues matter for all voters. We should expect voters to be more policy-driven in their decision-making when the policies at stake are of high personal importance to them. This leads to a set of expectations. First, all else equal, voters should prefer candidates that take similar issue positions to them and candidates of similar partisanship to them. In both cases, it is clear that agreement should be more favorable than disagreement.

**Hypothesis 1:** Voters will evaluate candidates more favorably when their position on a given issue agrees with the voter versus when their position disagrees with the voter.

**Hypothesis 2:** Voters will evaluate candidates more favorably when they are in-partisans versus out-partisans.

However, we should expect the relative effect of policy information to be moderated by how personally important the issue at stake is to the voter, such that policy information is more impactful for candidate evaluation on issues of high personal importance. Consequentially, this weakens the effect that partisanship will have on evaluations.

**Hypothesis 3:** Policy information will be more impactful on voter decision-making when the issue at stake is of high personal importance to the voter compared to low personal importance, whereas partisanship will be less impactful.

In order to test these expectations, I conducted two experimental surveys that pit party cues and policy information against one another, while taking into account personal issue
importance. According to expectations, respondents should prefer candidates with likeminded partisanship and issue stances. However, the effect of issue agreement on candidate evaluation should be much stronger—and the role of partisanship much weaker—when the issue is of personal importance to the respondent.

**Study 1**

Study 1 was administered through the pre-election 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES is a national sample of over 50,000 adults in the U.S. that is stratified by election districts and weighted to reflect the U.S. population on a series of political and demographic characteristics.\(^3\) CCES respondents first answer a ‘Common Content’ omnibus questionnaire and then are filtered into different, specified ‘Team Content’ that consists of more unique questions and/or experiments. I rely on a specified Team Module of the CCES consisting of 1664 respondents.\(^4\) Data was collected in October of 2018.

The Common Content portion of the CCES asked respondents about their stance on a variety of political issues through binary issue position questions. For example, respondents were asked if they were ‘For’ or ‘Against’ background checks for all sales of firearms. These questions covered multiple issue areas; including abortion, gun control, healthcare, immigration, international trade, and taxes.\(^5\) Within the Team Content, respondents were asked to rate how personally important each of these issue areas were to them using the

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\(^3\) See the Appendix for additional information about the sample.

\(^4\) Team content consists of 1000 ‘matched’ cases from the overall sample of the CCES that are weighted to produce a sample demographically similar to the U.S. population. I rely on the larger, ‘unmatched’ cases of the team module (n = 1664) to increase sample size. The unmatched cases serve as the basis for randomization (Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013). Results hold using the matched dataset.

\(^5\) See the Appendix for full question wording on these binary issue position questions.
A traditional five-point scale ranging from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Extremely’ important. Respondents were then asked to indicate which issue area was the most important to them and which was the least important. Following this, respondents were randomly assigned to read a vignette about a candidate, then indicate their overall approval of the candidate and their likelihood of voting for the candidate.

To distinguish between personally important and unimportant issues for the purposes of testing the issue importance moderation effect, I focus on respondents’ most and least personally important issues. This approach provides the clearest distinction between important and unimportant issues within the bounds of the survey for every respondent. In addition, defining only the most important political issue avoids past problems of acquiescence bias by forcing respondents to pick only a single issue. By operationalizing issue importance in this manner, I am able to create better discrimination between important and unimportant issues for the survey manipulation.

The content within the vignette adhered to a 2x2x2 design. Respondents were randomly assigned to see the candidate, Michael Adams, as a Democrat or Republican, as well as see him support or oppose a policy proposal. In addition, the issue content was randomly assigned to either cover the issue area that the respondent thought to be most or least important. For

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6 They also rated how important to them the issue of defense spending was. There were no issue position questions on the Common Content related to defense spending.
7 Both measures were on five-point scales as per previous research (Arceneaux 2008).
8 Respondents who were shown Michael Adams take a position on defense spending (and therefore indicated defense spending was the most or least important issue to them) were excluded from the analysis because there are no issue position questions on the Common Content to determine which position they take on this issue (n = 126).
example, Figure 1 below is a potential vignette for any respondent who indicated that abortion is either the most or least important issue to them personally.

**Figure 1: CCES Vignette Example**

Michael Adams, a [Democratic] candidate running for Congress in what looks to be one of 2018's closest open seat races, recently told a group of supporters during a rally that he [supports] [making it harder for a woman to get an abortion].

This comment came just days before Mr. Adams' Republican opponent took the opposite position on the issue.

While most partisans support their party's candidate in this race, political analysts have noted that the race is still too close to call. Both candidates have increased their campaign activities in response to this close race, with multiple rallies scheduled the week before the election.

We should expect respondents to evaluate Michael Adams more favorably, and be more likely to vote for him, when his partisanship and issue stance are in agreement with the respondent, on average. However, policy stance agreement should have a larger effect—and partisan agreement a weaker effect—in the ‘most important’ condition compared to the ‘least important’ condition. Partisan congruence is determined based on how respondents answered the standard seven-point partisan identification question.\(^9\) Issue agreement is determined based on how respondents answered the binary issue position questions earlier in the survey.

For each issue area, a single binary issue position question that best matched the specific policy stance taken by Adams was used to determine congruence.\(^10\)

\(^9\) Only partisans and partisan leaners are considered for this analysis, all non-partisans and self-described independents (four on the standard seven-point party identification scale) are dropped.

\(^10\) As a robustness check, I also created issue scales for each issue area by averaging all the responses a respondent gave to every binary issue position question within a given issue area. Using this scale in place of the binary categorization does not impact the results.
Table 1, below, shows regression results for overall candidate approval by treatment condition, when averaging over the issue importance conditions. Candidate approval was rescaled from 0 to 1, so a value greater than 0.5 corresponds with ratings of Michael Adams as more favorable than unfavorable. Results suggest strong evidence for both H1 and H2.\textsuperscript{11} Respondents viewing an out-party candidate who disagrees with them on a given issue (Party Disagrees (PD), Issue Disagrees (ID)) evaluate the candidate negatively – 0.38 points on the 0-1 scale. Seeing an out-party candidate who takes a similar issue position to the respondent (PD, Issue Agrees (IA)) boosts overall favorability ratings by 10 points (p-value = 0.00). Respondents viewing a candidate that disagrees with their issue position but is a member of their own party (Party Agrees (PA), ID) evaluate the candidate 8 points higher compared to the PD, ID condition (p-value = 0.00). Unsurprisingly, evaluations of the candidate are most favorable when both their issue position and partisanship agree with the respondent (PA, IA) – around 56 points on a 100-point scale. It is worth noting that the insignificant interaction term (p-value = 0.84) suggests an additive relationship between party and issue agreement. Overall, these results suggest strong evidence for H1 and H2, as respondents most prefer in-party candidates who agree with them on political issues, regardless of issue importance.

\textsuperscript{11} These results hold when adding a series of demographic and political controls. The results of both the controlled and uncontrolled analysis can be found in the Appendix.
Table 1: Candidate Approval Averaging Over Issue Importance (CCES)

|                        | Estimate | Std. Error | z value | Pr(>|z|) |
|------------------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|
| Constant               | 0.38     | 0.01       | 30.49   | 0.00     |
| Party Match            | 0.08     | 0.02       | 4.59    | 0.00     |
| Issue Match            | 0.10     | 0.02       | 5.91    | 0.00     |
| Interaction            | 0.00     | 0.02       | -0.20   | 0.84     |
| n                      | 1253     |            |         |          |
| Adj. R²                | 0.08     |            |         |          |

Table 1 is based on results from an OLS regression on candidate favorability. The dependent variable was recoded to range from 0 to 1. Each coefficient represents a treatment condition, with the omitted condition (Constant term) representing a candidate that had a different partisanship and issue position from that of the respondent.

The next set of analysis adds interaction terms of party and issue match with personal issue importance. Figure 2 shows the effect of issue and party match on candidate evaluation when the issue being viewed by the respondent is the least versus most important issue to them personally. As expected, the effect of issue agreement on candidate evaluation is stronger when the issue at stake is the most important compared to least important, with respondents evaluating Adams 1 point higher when the issue at stake is the most important (p-value = 0.02). Similarly, we see the effect of party match on candidate evaluation attenuated when comparing respondents viewing their most, compared to least, important issue. The effect of party match on evaluation is expected to decrease by 5 points when we move from the least to most important issue (p-value = 0.85).\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{12}\)This insignificant p-value is for the interaction coefficient between party match and the most important issue condition. The constituent term for being in the most important issue condition is negative and significant (p-value = 0.03). Full regression tables for Figure 2, both with and without controls, can be found in the Appendix.
on their most important issue results in the effect of issue match surpassing the effect of party match, though the difference between these two coefficients is not itself significant. Overall, this evidence supports H3 – issue match is more impactful for evaluation of Adams when the issue at stake is of high personal importance, whereas the effect of partisanship on evaluation is dampened.

Figure 2: Effect of Issue and Party Match by Personal Importance (CCES)

Point estimates represent the effect of issue and party match (i.e. the respondent’s issue position/partisanship agrees with the candidate’s) on candidate evaluation, which is coded from 0 to 1. In the Most Important condition, these effects are obtained by adding the interaction term of the match with the most important condition, along with the constituent terms. 95% confidence bounds were calculated by simulating 10,000 sets of coefficients from a multivariate normal distribution based around coefficients and the variance-covariance matrix of the original OLS model.
As an additional piece of analysis, I look at the predicted evaluation of the candidate across each of the eight conditions from the 2x2x2 design. Below, Figure 3 shows predicted values in-line with the expectations for evaluations of out-party members. Out-party candidates who takes an agreeable issue stance (PD, IA) are rated five percentage points more favorably when the issue is most important compared to least important (95% Conf. Interval = -0.01, 0.09). Similarly, out-party candidates who takes a dissimilar issue stance (PD, ID) are rated eight percentage points less favorably when the conflicting issue is most important relative to least important (95% Conf. Interval = -0.13, -0.03). Looking at issue agreement across issue importance, out-party candidate evaluations are expected to be 14 points higher comparing issue agreement to disagreement on the respondent’s most important issue, but only 4 points higher when the least important issue is shown.

While there is evidence for H3 with respect to out-party evaluations, this does not appear to hold for in-party evaluations. There is no discernable difference on in-party evaluations based on issue agreement or disagreement when comparing the most to least personally important issue. Additionally, we do see that respondents evaluate in-party candidates as more favorable when their issue position agrees with the candidate (PA, IA) compared to when the issue position disagrees (PA, ID), but this decrease in approval is essentially the same regardless of whether the issue is of the most or least importance to the respondent.

13 These results hold with a host of political and demographic controls, an ordered logit model, an ordered logit model with controls, for only the matched case observations of the CCES, replacing a binary measure of issue agreement with a scale, and when using vote likelihood as the dependent variable instead of candidate favorability.
Figure 3: Candidate Approval by Treatment Condition (CCES)

Point estimates represent average approval rating of Michael Adams by treatment condition. They were obtained by adding each relevant coefficient from an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model. IA = issue agrees, and ID = issue disagrees. Candidate approval was coded from 0 to 1, with values above 0.5 representing more favorable than unfavorable opinions. Segments represent 95% confidence bounds that were calculated by simulating 10,000 sets of coefficients from a multivariate normal distribution based around coefficients and the variance-covariance matrix of the original OLS model.

The results of this study support the expectations of personal issue importance moderating the propensity for citizens to be policy-driven versus partisan-driven when making electoral decisions about candidates, with policy mattering more when the issues at stake are of high personal importance. When we break these results down by evaluation of in-party versus out-party members, however, it appears that the public engages in policy-driven behavior for in-party candidates regardless of the personal importance of the issue – a finding far from blind partisanship. These results are surprising and require replication, as the theory behind personal issue importance as a moderator was not expected to vary by party. It is also
unclear how much the results of this study may be due to the use of fictitious candidates, which abstracts from the real electoral decisions voters are asked to make. A second study was conducted that allows for attempted replication of these results applied to evaluations of real candidates.

**Study 2**

Study 2 was also a survey experiment conducted prior to the 2018 midterm elections. Data collection for the survey occurred from October 22nd to November 5th on Lucid, a survey marketplace that recruits respondents from over 250 different sample suppliers. The sample was drawn to match demographic benchmarks from the Census’ Current Population Study.\(^\text{14}\) Eligible respondents had to be adult citizens with zip codes pertaining to one of nineteen different Congressional Districts in California, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, or West Virginia.\(^\text{15}\) A total of 1997 respondents participated in the survey.\(^\text{16}\)

Prior to the manipulation, respondents were asked how strongly they supported or opposed (on a seven-point scale) issues related to abortion, defense spending, healthcare, immigration, and taxes.\(^\text{17}\) In addition, they indicated which of the five issues was the most and least important to them. They also answered a variety of questions about their political beliefs.

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\(^\text{14}\) See the Appendix for additional information about the sample.

\(^\text{15}\) Geographical eligibility requirements were put in place for another study that was conducted on this survey.

\(^\text{16}\) The sample was narrowed down to 1806, after removing respondents who failed a bot check (n = 75) or an attention check (n = 116). The bot check asked respondents to identify two out of six images that contained a stop sign and the attention check asked respondents who the President of the United States was.

\(^\text{17}\) See the Appendix for full question wording on these issue position questions.
and demographic questions. Following this, respondents were exposed to a vignette about the incumbent Senator in their state, then were asked about their favorability of the Senator and vote choice for the upcoming election. An example of a vignette is shown below. Similar to Study 1, respondents were randomly assigned to see issue content that was either related to the issue they indicated was most or least important to them personally. Rather than see a fictitious candidate, respondents in this study viewed how their Senator actually voted on a real Senate bill. This study also included an additional manipulation of political polarization, where respondents were told that representatives across the partisan isle disagreed to different extents (see Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). However, varying levels of elite polarization on a given issue had no impact on the results and is averaged over for the following analyses.

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18 Prior to the manipulation, respondents participated in another experiment that explored the effects of campaign messages on in-partisans’ participation and candidate evaluations. Respondents were randomly assigned to either view or not view real emails collected from House candidates in their district. They were then asked to answer a series of dependent measures related to candidate evaluation and vote intention of the House members as well as a self-report of campaign activities and feeling thermometers of the parties. They were given the opportunity to view these candidate’s web pages. This prior manipulation is not thought to affect the results of the current study, as it dealt with members of the House rather than Senate.

19 Respondents from Kansas (n = 135) and Oklahoma (n = 104) were removed from the analysis because they did not have a Senate election in 2018. Respondents from Maine (n = 127) were also removed because of the nature of their election – a three-party race where the incumbent, and eventual winner, ran as an independent. This results in a sample size of 1440 across eleven states. The party distribution of the eleven incumbent Senators was two Republicans and nine Democrats.

20 Full vignette information about the bills, as well as Senator votes is available in the Appendix.
As you know, the 2018 Midterm elections are coming up this November. Thirty-five seats in the Senate will be up for election on November 6th. Over the past six years, Senators that occupied these seats have voted on a variety of legislation. One piece of legislation that these Senators voted on was [S 1519].

[S 1519 increased the U.S. defense budget by $7.7 billion to a total of $626.4 billion, including a budget of $65.7 billion for overseas operations and a $4.4 billion increase for missile defense programs.]

Your Senator, [Amy Klobuchar] a [Democrat], who is up for reelection this year voted [For] the bill.

Similar to Study 1, we should expect to see that respondents evaluate their incumbent Senator as more favorable, and are more likely to vote for them, when their partisanship and issue stances are in agreement with the respondent. Issue agreement’s effect on these evaluations should be heightened when respondents are exposed to their Senator’s vote on an issue that is personally important to them. Similar to Study 1, partisan agreement was determined based on how respondents answered the standard seven-point partisan identification question.\(^{21}\) Respondents were coded as agreeing on the issue whenever they took one of three stances (strongly support/oppose, support/oppose, slightly support/oppose) that was in agreement with the incumbent Senator’s vote.\(^{22}\)

One may think that this test may be harder to find evidence for, as many respondents likely already have pre-existing opinions about their Senator outside of the information provided in the vignette. However, the results are consistent with Study 1. Table 2 shows the

\(^{21}\) All non-partisans and self-described independents were dropped from the analysis.

\(^{22}\) Respondents who took a middle position (Neither support nor oppose) were treated as taking an incongruent position (ID) to the incumbent Senator, as their issue stance does not agree. Alternatively dropping respondents who viewed a vignette where they took the middling positions on the issue that is most important to them (n = 63) or least important to them (n = 150) does not significantly change the results.
average favorability of the incumbent Senators by treatment condition among the respondents when averaging over the issue importance treatment. We again find evidence for H1 and H2, with respondents evaluating their Senator 40 points more favorably on a 100-point scale when the Senator is from the same party as them (p-value = 0.00) and 15 points more favorably when the Senator votes on an issue in agreement with the respondents belief about that issue (p-value = 0.00). Again, this interaction effect appears to be additive (p-value = 0.40).

**Table 2: Candidate Approval Averaging Over Issue Importance (Lucid)**

|                      | Estimate | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|----------------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|
| Constant             | 0.23     | 0.02       | 12.74   | 0.00     |
| Party Match          | 0.40     | 0.03       | 15.50   | 0.00     |
| Issue Match          | 0.15     | 0.03       | 5.64    | 0.00     |
| Interaction          | -0.03    | 0.04       | -0.85   | 0.40     |

| n                    | 1150     |
| Adj. R²              | 0.33     |

Table 2 is based on results from an OLS regression on candidate favorability. The dependent variable was recoded to range from 0 to 1. Each coefficient represents a treatment condition, with the omitted condition (Constant term) representing a candidate that had a different partisanship and issue position from that of the respondent.

Figure 5 displays the effect of issue and party match on candidate evaluation for the most and least important issue conditions. For issues of low personal importance, a candidate from the same party as the respondent is evaluated 41 points higher on a 100-point scale, whereas a candidate voting in agreement with the respondent’s issue preferences on issues of low importance issue is only evaluated 10 points higher. When looking at issues of high
personal importance, the effect of issue match on candidate evaluation increases by 6 points (p-value = 0.04) while the effect of party match decreases by 7 points (p-value = 0.08). Similar to Study 1, these results suggest that issues of high personal importance enhance policy-driven behavior by the public at the expense of partisan-driven behavior.

Figure 5: Effect of Issue and Party Match by Personal Importance (Lucid)

Point estimates represent the effect of issue and party match (i.e. the respondent’s issue position/partisanship agrees with the candidate’s) on candidate evaluation, which is coded from 0 to 1. In the Most Important condition, these effects are obtained by adding the interaction term of the match with the most important condition, along with the constituent terms. 95% confidence bounds were calculated by simulating 10,000 sets of coefficients from a multivariate normal distribution based around coefficients and the variance-covariance matrix of the original OLS model.
Figure 6 shows the predicted evaluations of candidate favorability across the eight different conditions. Similar to Study 1, the results are consistent with the theory of personal issue importance moderating the effect of issue importance for out-party Senators. Specifically, out-party candidates who take agreeable issue positions are rated 13 percentage points more favorably on the most important issue compared to the least important issue (95% Conf. Interval = 0.05, 0.20). Meanwhile, when the out-partisan’s vote disagrees with the respondent’s issue belief (PD, ID), they are rated about 7% less favorably when the issue pertains to the respondent’s most versus least important issue (95% Conf. Interval = -0.13, 0.01). In addition, the marginal effect of issue agreement compared to disagreement is stronger for the most important issue compared to the least. Candidate evaluations are 24 points higher when the out-party candidate’s issue stance agrees with the respondent on their most important issue, whereas issue agreement is only 5 points higher than issue disagreement for candidate evaluation when the least important issue is shown.

For in-party evaluations, however, the candidate is evaluated around 10 percentage points lower when they vote in a direction that disagrees with the respondent’s position on the issue, regardless of the personal importance that issue has for the respondent. Meanwhile, there is again no difference in evaluation based on issue agreement or disagreement when comparing issues of the most and least personal importance. Together, these results replicate the findings of Study 1, suggesting that in-party candidate evaluations are policy-driven regardless of the personal importance of the issues at stake.

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22 Similar to Study 1, these results are robust to a variety of alternative models including a model with multiple political and demographic controls (p=0.00), an ordered logit specification (p=0.00), and a binary logit of vote choice (p=0.02).
Figure 6: Candidate Approval by Treatment Condition (Lucid)

Point estimates represent average approval rating of the respondent’s incumbent Senator by treatment condition. They were obtained by adding each relevant coefficient from an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model. IA = issue agrees, and ID = issue disagrees. Candidate approval was coded from 0 to 1, with values above 0.5 representing more favorable than unfavorable opinions. Segments represent 95% confidence bounds that were calculated by simulating 10,000 sets of coefficients from a multivariate normal distribution based around coefficients and the variance-covariance matrix of the original OLS model. Note the differences in the y-axis between the two figures.

Across both studies, the results are largely consistent. Personal issue importance does moderate the extent to which voters rely on policy versus party when making electoral decisions. However, this moderating effect is only prevalent for out-party evaluations, as the policy positions of in-party candidates appears to matter for voters regardless of the personal importance of the issue. Study 2 was able to replicate these findings in a much more realistic context, as respondents were shown roll call votes of Senators in their state and the study was conducted just prior to the reelection bids for these Senators.
Discussion

Are citizens relying on issues when making electoral decisions or are they blind partisans who avoid policy information altogether? Recent skepticism notwithstanding, I find in two separate studies that citizens do care about issue information. Originally, I expected that uncertainty surrounding this question in past research was due to not accounting for the moderating effect of personal issue importance. If we consider that the vast majority of Americans can be categorized as only caring about a few, at most, issues (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990), then we should not expect policy-driven behavior on most issues. Accounting for personal issue importance would allow us to see that citizens are policy-driven when the issues at stake are important to them. This turned out to be part of the story.

When looking just at the effect of issue and party match on candidate evaluation, both studies found respondents to be more policy-driven and less partisan-driven when the issue at stake was of high personal importance. However, when these results are broken up by in and out-party evaluations, the moderating effect of issue importance is only apparent for out-party candidates. Out-party candidates in the experiments were evaluated much more positively/negatively when they agreed/disagreed with the respondent’s most important issue compared to their least important issue. This was not the case for in-party evaluations, where issue agreement mattered equally for the respondent’s most and least important issues – around a ten-percentage point difference in both cases. This finding is in-line with past work that finds evidence for a policy-driven public without considering the moderating effect of personal issue importance (e.g. Arceneaux 2008; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014) and provides
compelling evidence against the blind partisanship perspective when dealing with in-party candidates.

This unexpected finding is also consistent with the theory of negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), which posits affective polarization between the two parties that is driven more by dislike of the out-party than positive feelings of the in-party. When in the domain of similar partisanship, respondents were policy driven – evaluating politicians on their issue positions regardless of how personally important the issue was. For out-partisan evaluation, however, personal issue importance had a significant effect on candidate evaluation. Out-party candidates that disagreed with respondents on issues of low personal importance were evaluated about the same regardless of if they agreed or disagreed with the respondent on the issue. In stark contrast, for issues of high personal importance to the voter, an out-party member faced much more backlash for taking a position opposite of the respondent. Disagreement with the out-party candidate on a personally unimportant issue is not enough to alter the voter’s already negative opinion of the candidate that is due to partisanship. However, for issues of high personal importance, policy positions of candidates can still impact how they are evaluated by voters of the opposite party.

The results of the studies are encouraging from the perspective of democratic accountability. When evaluating in-party members, citizens appear to care about issue positions regardless of how personally important they are. This should incentivize politicians to represent constituents in their party substantively, otherwise risk backlash from their political base. For out-party evaluations, the implication of policy-driven behavior only for issues of high personal importance is still positive for democratic accountability. Considering the variance in
personal issue importance, out-party members can still be monitored by various ‘issue publics’ able to hold politicians accountable for a given issue. This is not to say that partisanship plays no role in political decision-making, but voters are not blind partisans who avoid policy information altogether for electoral decision-making.

These results also have implications for the understanding and measurement of personal issue importance. Due to known measurement problems with the standard issue importance question, such as poor discrimination between important and unimportant issues (Hanretty, Lauderdale, and Vivyan 2019), I isolate respondents’ most and least personally important issues for comparison. This resulted in evidence stressing the importance of personal issue importance for political behaviors – particularly out-party evaluations. Past work on personal issue importance that finds no effect on its ability to moderate political behaviors (e.g. Leeper and Robison 2018) may be due to measurement error, rather than actual null effects.

This method of isolating only the most and least important issues is not without its own limitations. Most importantly, we lose a sense of how issues compare in importance relative to one another. For instance, some individuals may have importance distributions that are bimodal while others are better represented by a normal distribution. Thus, the present method is well-suited to demonstrate that issue importance matters, but it is limited in how much it can say about how it matters across the full range of importance. Future research needs to focus on improving upon standard measures of personal issue importance in order to better understand this important moderator’s impact on political behavior.
References


