



The Limits of Partisan Loyalty

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Abstract

While partisan cues tend to dominate political choice, prior work shows that competing information can rival the effects of partisanship if it relates to salient political issues. But what are the limits of partisan loyalty? How much electoral leeway do co-partisan candidates have to deviate from the party line on important issues? We answer this question using conjoint survey experiments that characterize the role of partisanship relative to issues. We demonstrate a pattern of conditional party loyalty. Partisanship dominates electoral choice when elections center on low-salience issues. But while partisan loyalty is strong, it is finite: the average voter is more likely than not to vote for the co-partisan candidate until that candidate takes dissonant stances on four or more salient issues. These findings illuminate when and why partisanship fails to dominate political choice. They also suggest that, on many issues, public opinion minimally constrains politicians.

Keywords Party cues · Public opinion · Voting

Replication data are on the Political Behavior Dataverse: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/J9IJGM>

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09576-3>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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Partisanship serves as the preeminent cue voters use to navigate politics—it offers a powerful heuristic that shapes candidate choice, policy opinion and even perceptions of social conditions in the mass public. For decades, scholars of American Politics have debated both the empirical strength and normative implications of partisan attachments, asking whether—in an increasingly polarized context—party identification plays a near-deterministic role in how voters make decisions (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2000; Cohen 2003).

Despite agreement that partisanship serves as the central cue voters use to navigate politics (Bartels 2000; Campbell et al. 1960; Cohen 2003; Rahn 1993; Zaller 1992), competing considerations can rival, and even exceed, the effect of party labels on political decisions (Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011; Arceneaux 2008). For example, close to 10% of partisan voters in recent American National Election Studies (ANES) opposed their co-partisan presidential candidate—defections that are linked to issue-based disagreement with their party’s nominee (Gooch and Huber 2018; Jessee 2012). In particular, partisan defections are thought to be driven by cross-pressures imposed by salient political information: voters’ support wanes if co-partisan candidates take the “wrong” position on issues they deem relevant and important (see especially, Arceneaux 2008; Ciuk and Yost 2016).

While these studies document the mitigating effects of political information, the limits of partisan loyalty remain unknown. Is partisan loyalty effectively inexhaustible? How many dissonant issue positions can a candidate take before the average co-partisan voter abandons them? Given increased concern about “blind” partisan loyalty, and the recent success of national candidates who took deviant stances on issues long thought to be cornerstones of partisan ideologies, characterizing the limits of partisan loyalty is imperative.

Here we assess these limits through paired-choice candidate conjoint experiments (Hainmueller et al. 2014) that pit partisan cues against candidate positions that cross-pressure voters. Our experiments feature several new elements. First, we require individuals to choose between two candidates from opposing parties. The absence of partisan competition in earlier work may inflate the role of issues because opposing a co-partisan does not necessarily require supporting an out-partisan, a potentially insurmountable hurdle given contemporary out-party hostility (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2015; Huddy et al. 2015). Second, to avoid drawing conclusions based on the idiosyncratic effects of a limited set of issues, we examine several issues in each study. Third, while prior studies categorize issues as high or low-salience by assertion (e.g. Arceneaux 2008; Ciuk and Yost 2016), we use both self-reported and behavioral measures of issue importance to make these classifications.

Our results explain when and why partisans are willing to defect from the party line. While partisan loyalty is not inexhaustible, we find it is strong enough to give candidates wide latitude to take issue stances which conflict with their supporters. On low salience issues that voters deem unimportant, candidates enjoy a virtually unconstrained ability to take deviant issue stances. On salient issues, the average voter is less forgiving, but is more likely than not to remain loyal to their co-partisan candidate up until the point that the candidate disagrees with them on four or more high-salience issues.

These findings shed light on mechanisms that allow candidates to stake out positions that are at odds with the electorate. The responsiveness to a candidate's positions on high-salience issues observed in these studies shows that voters are not "blind partisans." However, on a range of low-salience issues, such as trade policy, education standards, and access to birth control, the average voter places few constraints on co-partisan candidates. Moreover, the sizable benefits of a shared party label lead many in these studies to support co-partisan politicians despite disagreeing with them on multiple high-profile issues. In combination, these patterns show both the limits to voters' partisan loyalty and constraints on the ability of elections to promote accountability among policymakers.

The Role of Partisanship in Political Decisions

A candidate's partisanship offers a wide-ranging heuristic for simplifying complex decisions (e.g., Downs 1957). While party labels convey useful information, the public's heavy dependence on them also raises concerns. If politicians can support any causes they please and still receive support from co-partisans, these cues arguably pose a significant obstacle for representative governance (Achen and Bartels 2016; Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992). In contrast, if divergence from public preferences results in substantial losses in electoral support, partisan cues may not threaten democratic accountability to the extent some have theorized (Gerber and Green 1999; Lavine et al. 2012; Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017).

This tension underlies two lines of research that offer different characterizations of what partisanship means for democratic accountability. One argues that partisanship—in the form of a candidate's party label or a partisan endorsement that accompanies a policy proposal—dominates public opinion (Campbell et al. 1960; Zaller 1992). In the presence of partisan cues, the politically sophisticated engage in "partisan motivated reasoning" and interpret information so as to bolster their partisan attachments (Lodge and Taber 2013; Bolsen et al. 2014). Their less sophisticated counterparts use partisanship as a heuristic to avoid processing political information, leading them to support co-partisan politicians and conform to their policy views (Riggle 1992; Rahn 1993; Kam 2005; Barber and Pope 2019).

The combination of these processes can produce substantial partisan influence over public opinion. Experimental studies find that party labels reduce the importance of other criteria for political choice (Rahn 1993; Lavine et al. 2012; Kirkland and Coppock 2018) and that partisanship receives a greater weight than other considerations when voters make decisions (Cohen 2003). In observational studies, partisanship is more predictive of candidate support than an individual's ideology (Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2000; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). This dominance of partisanship over other considerations is enhanced by the heightened elite polarization in contemporary American politics (Levendusky 2010; Druckman et al. 2013; Kim and LeVeck 2013).

While the preceding work gives partisanship a privileged role in information processing, an alternative perspective is that partisan cues are simply one more, albeit influential, piece of information individuals incorporate into their political

judgments even as they remain responsive to other considerations (Green et al. 2002; Downs 1957). When partisanship conflicts with an individual's other preferences (e.g., their policy views), these other criteria can still compel them to oppose candidates and policy proposals that share their party label, although elite-level candidate selection and the anticipatory actions of politicians may limit opportunities for this to occur during campaigns (e.g., Fowler n.d.; Zaller 2012; Lenz 2012).

A number of recent studies show that, while party labels exert a strong influence on political decisions, they do not blind individuals to other attributes. In several experiments individuals incorporate other considerations (e.g., policy content, expert evaluations) into their choices to the same extent whether or not partisan cues are available (Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Tomz and Houweling 2009; Nicholson 2011, 2012; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014). The effects of these other choice attributes rival, and at times exceed, the role of partisanship in political decisions (Riggle et al. 1992; Bullock 2011; Mummolo 2016; Mummolo and Nall 2017; Messing and Westwood 2014; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2018; Peterson 2019; Boudreau et al. n.d.). As more relevant information about a candidate beyond their party label becomes available, the effects of partisanship on political decision-making diminish (Peterson 2017). Observational studies also reveal instances in which moderate electorates penalize ideologically extreme politicians (Canes-Wrone et al. 2002) and voters fail to support co-partisan candidates who diverge from their issue preferences (Ansola-behere et al. 2006; Jessee 2012).

Issue Salience and the Limits of Partisan Loyalty

A growing body of work demonstrates that policy considerations can compete with the effect of partisan cues. A core insight to emerge from this research is that there is substantial heterogeneity in the contribution that issues make to the public's assessments of candidates. At one end of the spectrum are political issues that broad segments of the public understand, consider important and bring to bear on their political judgments. These considerations receive several labels in prior scholarship—"latent" opinions in Key (1961), "crystallized" attitudes in Sears (1975), "easy" issues in Carmines and Stimson (1980)—but for our present purpose they reference the same underlying concept, a set of political issues that are relevant for political decision-making. We deem such issues "salient" to signify their central role in vote choice, which can develop in several ways. For example, certain issues may become salient to voters because they are emphasized by elites (Lenz 2012; Nicholson and Hansford 2014), or because they personally affect groups of voters, sometimes called "issue publics," in obvious ways (Iyengar et al. 2008). Here we take no stand on the specific mechanisms by which some issues become salient and others do not, but posit that in a given electoral setting, there may be a subset of issues that voters deem important enough to produce a tension between their partisanship and their policy views.

The stakes of position-taking on these salient issues are so powerful that public officials tread carefully and take anticipatory actions so as to offset their later importance for political decisions (e.g., Zaller 2012, p. 588; Fowler n.d.). For

example, Lenz (2012, Ch. 6) identifies several instances in which political parties switched positions on major issues where they were out of step with public opinion (e.g., nuclear power during the Dutch 1986 elections), limiting the public's opportunity to vote on these issues.

This typology also points to other issues with limited importance for preference formation among the public. Whether due to their novelty, technical nature, or limited visibility in political discourse, these "hard" issues (Carmines and Stimson 1980) are relevant to only a small segment of the electorate and are unlikely to factor into the political decision-making of most of the public, particularly if voters lack confidence in their own opinions on these issues (see also, Gilens 2001; Gerber et al. 2011).

Prior work uses this distinction to offer insight into variation in the role of issues for political choice. For example, Arceneaux (2008) shows that individuals impose greater penalties on candidates who take counter-stereotypical positions on the high-salience issue of abortion than they do when the position concerns the low-salience issue of federalism. Similarly, Tesler (2015) finds individuals "follow" their preferred candidates' view on low-salience issues, but fail to do so for high-salience social issues. Carsey and Layman (2006) observe a similar dynamic based on self-reported issue importance. Ciuk and Yost (2016) find that information treatments exert stronger effects on opinion toward the salient issue of fracking than on the low-salience issue of storm water management. The study also finds that partisan cues have a smaller effect on issue opinions when the issue in question is salient. However, Ciuk and Yost (2016) do not directly contrast the effects of issues and party labels on vote choice.

Several studies provide evidence consistent with the moderating role of issue salience. For example, some findings of partisan dominance occur on political issues with novel or technical aspects (i.e., low-salience issues, as defined above). Lenz (2012) observes that a surge in the prominence of social security privatization in the 2000 presidential election led individuals to adopt the viewpoint of their preferred candidate, rather than move their support toward a candidate that better aligned with their position on this issue. Cohen (2003) examines support for a state health care policy and shows that partisan cues overpower brief statements regarding the policy's content in determining the support it received. In contrast, evidence demonstrating greater constraints on the influence of partisanship tends to incorporate salient, "easy" political issues, such as abortion or government spending (Tomz and Houweling 2009).

While these prior studies demonstrate that salient issues exhibit the greatest ability to erode partisan allegiances, we still have little sense of the limits of partisan loyalty. The reason is that prior studies evaluate the effect of deviation on one or two issues at most, leaving open the questions of (1) whether these observed issue effects are idiosyncratic, and (2) the number of issue disagreements that can cause partisan defections. Prior studies also code issues as salient or not by assertion (Arceneaux 2008; Ciuk and Yost 2016) or based on self reports (e.g. Carsey and Layman 2006) from survey participants that may not accurately reflect which issues are influential in electoral settings. To address these concerns, the

next section discusses several features needed to consider the relative influence of party labels and issue positions on candidate preferences.

The Need for New Evidence

Focusing on the types of considerations counter-posed against partisanship offers a chance to reconcile opposing perspectives on partisan loyalty. While generally loyal, members of the public may defect when co-partisan politicians diverge from their preferred viewpoints on a set of key, high-salience issue positions. In this section we identify three necessary elements to characterize the limits of partisan loyalty in the face of issue-based cross-pressures.

Before proceeding, we note that our study design focuses on the effects of party labels and issue agreement on candidate choice. This is an important context for understanding the role of partisanship in political decision-making, but is distinct from other settings that consider different outcomes, such as policy positions. In both cases, partisan labels may be relevant (e.g., Bullock 2011; Nicholson 2011; Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014), but our study features other elements that are less applicable in these other settings, such as competition between candidates of opposing parties.

The Relative Influence of Party and Policy

A first requirement is the ability to jointly estimate the effects of party labels and issue positions on candidate choice to assess their relative influence. Observational studies can only examine the correspondence between party, candidate positions and candidate choice for the types of politicians available for voters to assess in each political party. If counter-stereotypical politicians are screened out prior to general elections or voters lack information on the characteristics of individual candidates, observational evidence offers limited insight into how voters would respond when they know a co-partisan candidate deviates from their preferred stances (Lenz 2012, p. 212; see also Fowler n.d.).

For this reason we use an experimental research design that—after measuring a respondent's own partisanship and issue positions—uses randomization to break familiar links between a candidate's party label and their issue positions to assess the contribution each element makes to candidate choice. Prior experimental studies that examine the effects of partisanship and other considerations often purposely select relatively low-salience political issues. This choice can be useful when attempting to understand the process of public opinion formation. But the degree of partisan influence over decision-making in such settings may not generalize to scenarios in which higher-salience political issues are at stake.

Competitive Decision Settings

To characterize the limits of partisan loyalty, we assess the effects of these attributes in the context of competitive political choice over two alternatives. This enables an examination of not only the *effects* of these candidate attributes, but also the *levels* (i.e.,

candidate choice probability) that result from different election scenarios. This facet distinguishes the present study from most recent work demonstrating that other information can rival the effect of party labels. In those studies individuals evaluate a single policy proposal or candidate without the presentation of a clear, out-party alternative (e.g. Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014; Bullock 2011; Arceneaux 2008). It is one thing to oppose co-partisan policies or candidates relative to an unclear alternative or the status-quo. It is another when, as for many important political choices, doing so may also require individuals to support a candidate from the other party. In an era of out-party hostility (Mason 2015; Huddy et al. 2015), such a requirement may undercut the role of issues in political choice in a way that prior research cannot capture. The competitive setting used here creates a very different context for understanding the relative influence of partisanship and issues on political decisions.

Variation in Issue Salience

A final requirement is variation in the choice-specific salience of the considerations placed against party labels. This aspect of the study design poses several difficulties. First, “meta-attitudinal” approaches in which individuals self-report the relevance of an issue (e.g., Petty and Krosnick 1995) are subject to social desirability concerns (i.e., nearly all issues are rated as at least “somewhat” important) and require substantial introspection from respondents. This limits the utility of self-report measures for the choice-specific voting context we focus on (Leeper and Robison n.d.). Second, assessing issue salience based on media coverage may fail to capture variation in an issue’s salience for voters (e.g., Ciuk and Yost 2016; Arceneaux 2008) and ignores high-salience issues that elites strategically work to keep off of the policy agenda out of anticipatory concerns about their electoral costs (e.g. Key 1961; Zaller 2012). Finally, a post-hoc approach that labels issues as high or low salience based on the results of the main experiments introduces concern about researcher degrees of freedom and leaves unclear if the set of issues incorporated into the experiments will strike an appropriate balance of low and high salience issue-based considerations for candidate choice.

To avoid these problems, our second experiment includes issues chosen via an experimental pre-test in which participants engaged in paired-choice candidate conjoint tasks featuring a large array of issue positions, but no party labels. We code issue salience based on the treatment effects these issues produced, rather than accepting self-reports as accurate. However, to ensure our findings are not entirely due to this departure from previous studies, we also feature a design (Study 1) in which issue salience is determined based on nationally representative polls asking voters to rank issues in terms of importance.

A Research Design to Study Conditional Party Loyalty

These requirements motivate a unique research design that brings together the three features discussed above for the first time.¹ While there are some differences across the two studies we conduct, here we focus on several features common to both experiments. We examine the relative influence of partisanship and issue agreement on candidate choice using a conjoint experimental framework in which respondents evaluated two politicians and indicated which they preferred (Hainmueller et al. 2014). Because we are interested in testing whether issue disagreement can prompt partisan defections, the two candidates in the data we analyze always came from opposing political parties. In addition to partisanship, respondents learned about the candidates' positions on five (Study 1) or eight (Study 2) issues and some demographic information (i.e., gender and race/ethnicity). These candidate attributes were randomly assigned.

A key requirement is variation in the political salience of the other candidate attributes counter-posed against a candidate's party label. We accomplish this in Study 2 by including information about the candidates' positions on multiple issues that vary with respect to their political salience (i.e., either high or low-salience issues). This classification is based on a pre-test experiment, discussed in more detail later, and compares the effects of partisanship to issue agreement with a candidate on both low and high-salience political issues.

Embedding variation in political salience within a single design allows a clear assessment of our conjectures that partisanship may fail to dominate decisions on core political issues while also revealing the breadth of outcomes for which such dominance is feasible, and, most importantly, the *amount* of issue disagreement after which the average partisan will vote for an out-party candidate. The conjoint experimental framework we use has other advantages as well. First, this approach has demonstrated increased external validity compared with other forms of survey experiments (Hainmueller et al. 2015). Second, conjoint designs are one of several approaches that exhibit little evidence of experimenter demand effects even when research participants are directly informed of experimenter intentions (Mummolo and Peterson 2019).

We use two studies to probe the limits of partisan loyalty. Study 1 examines the relative weight of party labels and candidate positions on a set of high-salience issues to understand if position-taking can offset party labels. Study 2 elaborates on this by also incorporating issues with low political salience, offering the opportunity to examine variation in partisan dominance across different types of issues.

¹ Gerber et al. (2011) is the closest comparison in prior work to our current study, but focuses on a different research question. Specifically, the study documents individual differences in the extent to which citizens are confident in their ability to assess policy proposals and, accordingly, reward or punish representatives for adopting positions on them.

Study 1: Partisanship Versus High-Salience Political Issues

In Study 1, conducted in July 2016 ($N = 3074$ respondents from Research Now/SSI collected via Qualtrics Panels), respondents evaluated opposing political candidates in a series of seven conjoint tasks. The two candidates in each task took positions on five different political issues. These consisted of one economic issue (i.e., raising or lowering the corporate income tax), two aspects of health care coverage (i.e., repealing Obamacare, requiring health insurance providers to cover birth control), and two aspects of immigration policy (i.e., a path to citizenship/deportation for undocumented immigrants, banning immigration by Muslims). Prior to evaluating these candidates, respondents offered their own positions on the issues.²

While we later turn to a behavioral measure of issue salience/polarization in Study 2, the issues included in Study 1 were chosen because contemporary polling indicated they were the most important issues for voters during the 2016 presidential election.³ In our survey, respondents placed these issues at 2.8 on a 4-pt issue salience scale (ranging between 1 and 4)—close to the value of “very important” which corresponded to the scale’s third point. This experiment examines the interplay between partisan cues and position-taking on a set of highly salient issues.

Respondents also learned about the candidate’s partisanship and race/ethnicity.⁴ A candidate’s partisanship and issue positions were independently randomized within profiles. This meant candidates could take issue positions consistent with their party’s reputation on these issues or depart from the party line. This offers an opportunity to distinguish the relative effects of partisanship and issue disagreement on high-salience issues, as well as gauge the degree to which partisans tolerate dissonant stances from candidates.

Study 1 Results

We begin by following prior work that examines the role of partisanship in political decisions by assessing the relative weight that partisanship receives compared to other criteria for political choice among the roughly 10,728 conjoint tasks where respondents evaluated candidates from opposing political parties, simulating a general election match-up.⁵ This analysis does not include any “pure” independents as there are ambiguous expectations about the effects of party labels among this group.

The outcome is an indicator variable for whether the respondent preferred a candidate out of the pair they evaluated. We regress this outcome on two sets of independent variables. The first captures partisan considerations using an indicator

² Online Appendix B provides an example of how these profiles looked to respondents.

³ <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2016/images/05/04/rel6b.-.2016.general.pdf>.

⁴ The race/ethnicity of the candidate profiles was weighted to resemble the distribution of members of Congress at the time the survey was run.

⁵ Because of our focus on choice in settings with opposing party candidates we exclude 10,778 profile pairs in which the candidates had the same party label and individuals were unable to choose between them on this factor.

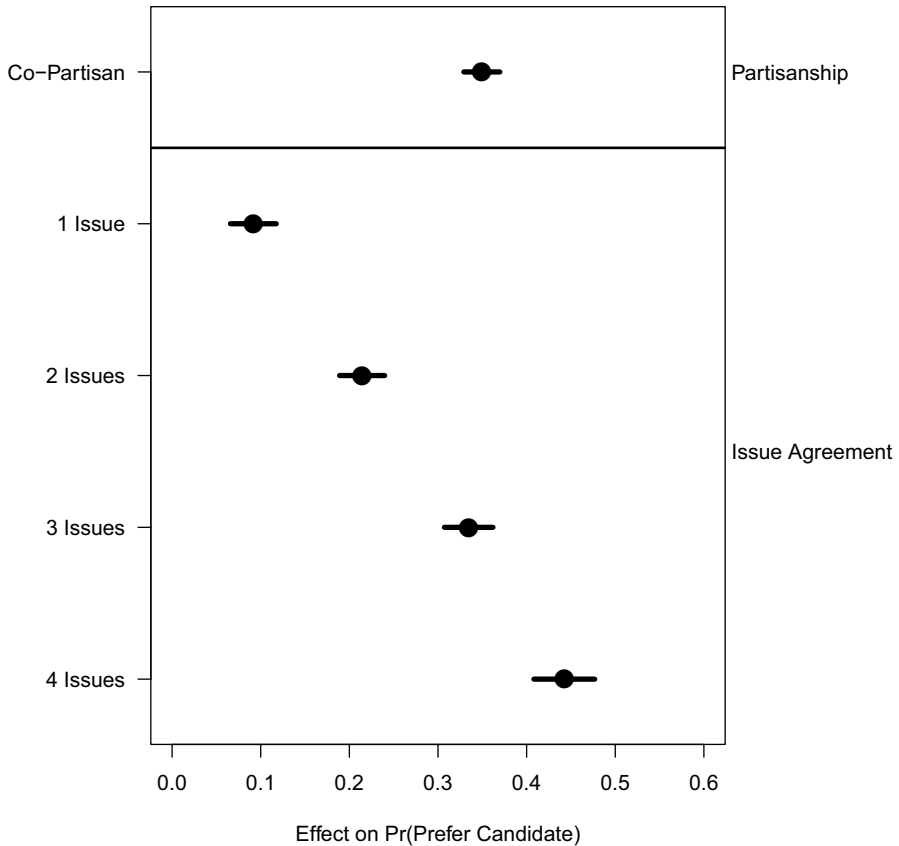


Fig. 1 Partisanship, issue agreement and candidate choice in Study 1. The effect of co-partisanship is relative to the support an out-party candidate receives. The effects of issue agreement are relative to no issue agreement with the candidate

variable for whether the candidate shared a respondent's partisanship. The second operationalizes issue considerations with separate indicator variables for the number of issue positions on which the candidate and respondent agreed. This ranges from zero, when an individual disagreed with every position a candidate took, to four, when a respondent agreed with each of the candidate's issue positions.⁶ These sets of variables were randomly assigned through the conjoint experiment.

Figure 1 displays the coefficients obtained from regressing candidate choice on these variables. We follow previous work and cluster standard errors for this analysis at the respondent level to account for the multiple observations available for each respondent (Hainmueller et al. 2014). The 95% confidence intervals that indicate

⁶ For this analysis we are only able to examine up to 4 issue agreements because one candidate position item (immigration policy) could not be mapped back to the individual policy position question.

this uncertainty are displayed along with the coefficients in Fig. 1.⁷ Tabular results with the regressions used to produce these figures are included in Online Appendix D.

The top row of Fig. 1 shows the effect of sharing a party label with a candidate. Relative to candidates from the opposing party, a shared party label increased the probability a candidate was preferred by 35% points.

The bottom four rows of Fig. 1 display changes in candidate preferences due to issue-based considerations, in this instance increasing levels of issue agreement with a candidate. Relative to a candidate with whom they did not agree on any issues, agreeing on one issue produced a 9% point increase in the probability a candidate was selected. Agreeing on three issue positions produced a 33% point increase in the probability a candidate was selected, an effect of roughly the same magnitude as sharing a party label (35% points). Further levels of issue agreement beyond this point had an even larger influence. The effect of agreeing with a candidate on four issue positions, relative to not agreeing with them on any, increased the probability they were preferred by 45% points.⁸

Figure 1 also makes clear that candidates pay a penalty for diverging from the positions of voters on high-salience issues. After diverging on three or more issues, the advantage gained by a shared party label is eclipsed. But what implications does this responsiveness have for political decision-making? That is, can issue disagreement make a voter more likely than not to defect to the out-partisan candidate? To examine this, Fig. 2 shows the predicted probability of voting for a co-partisan or out-partisan candidate by the degree of issue disagreement. For reference, the solid black line in the figure indicates the choice probability of 0.5—the point at which individuals are equally likely to select a co-partisan or out-party candidate. The dashed black line represents the probability of selecting a co-partisan congressional candidate in the 2016 American National Election Study (0.88) while the dashed gray line displays the probability of selecting a congressional candidate from another party (0.12).

Figure 2 reveals that the average partisan is, in general, extremely loyal to their co-partisan candidates.⁹ Even after a co-partisan candidate takes dissonant positions on three high-salience issues, the average voter is still more likely than not to select this candidate. Defection only becomes more likely than selecting a co-partisan when a respondent disagrees with their party's candidate on four or more major issues. Conversely, the average voter only becomes more inclined to vote for the out-partisan candidate than their co-partisan option if that candidate aligns with their views on all major issues—an unlikely scenario in general elections in contemporary U.S. politics given substantial elite polarization and partisan sorting on

⁷ We note here that there is minimal heterogeneity in these results by party, see Online Appendix D.

⁸ The analysis in Fig. 1 does not differentiate between different types of issues. When we consider their influence separately in Online Appendix A, agreement on Obamacare is more influential than the other three issues, although all exert a substantial influence on candidate choice.

⁹ These results characterize the response of the average partisan in our experiment. For brevity, we may refer to “voters,” “respondents” or “individuals” in the aggregate throughout.

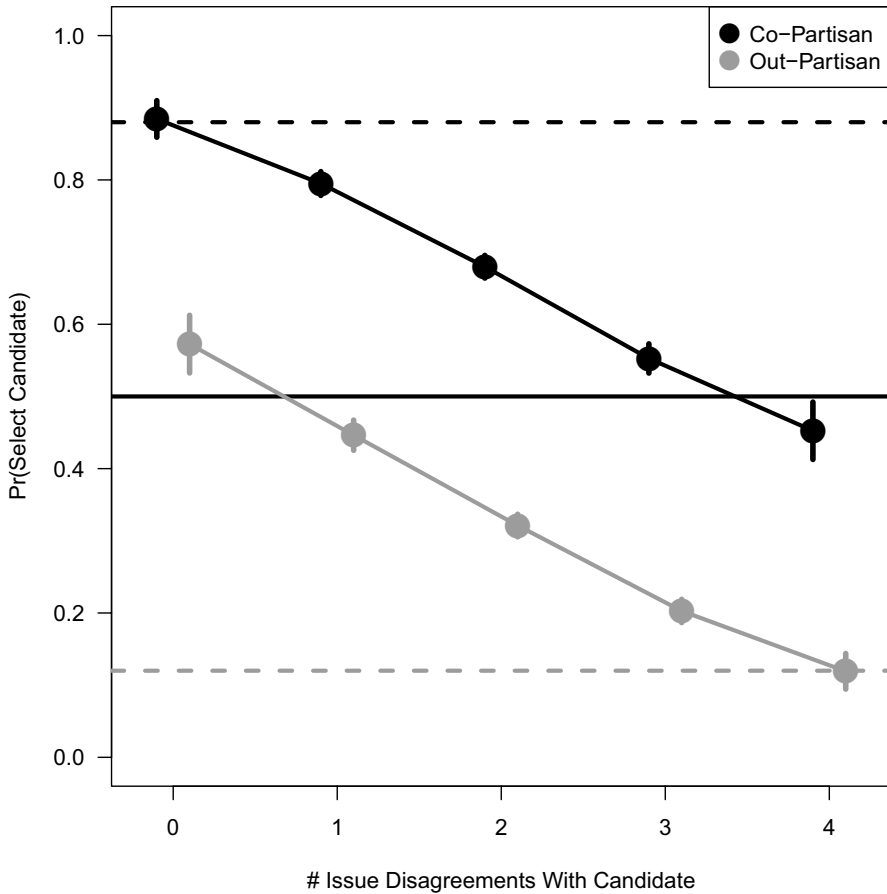


Fig. 2 Tolerance for issue disagreement by partisan status in Study 1. The figure displays the probability of selecting candidates conditional on their level of agreement with survey respondents on the issues presented. For comparison, the top dashed line shows the rate of co-partisan voting in the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES). The bottom dashed line shows the rate of out-party voting in the 2016 ANES

issues among the public. With respect to the observational benchmarks, an individual's predicted probability of supporting their co-partisan nominee when they agree on every issue (0.88) is the same as the levels of co-partisan voting observed among 2016 ANES respondents. There is a similar correspondence between the experimental scenario where respondents disagreed with the out-party candidate on each of the issues and levels of out-party voting in the 2016 ANES.

This first study shows that important insights can be gained by breaking the link between party and candidate issue positions to understand public responsiveness to both dimensions. In a number of prior studies, partisan dominance is determined by the relative weight that partisanship receives compared to other considerations in political decisions (e.g., Cohen 2003; Bullock 2011). Assessed relative to agreement

on individual issues, party labels have a larger effect on candidate choice, but the combined weight of agreement across multiple issues outstrips the role of partisanship. The availability of partisanship does not eliminate responsiveness to a candidate's issue positions.

However, the ability to directly examine resulting levels of political choice in this study also offers an important insight into some of the limits of this responsiveness for political decision-making. In the event the candidate diverges from voters on four or more key issues, the voter is more likely than not to defect to the out-party. And even in this extreme scenario where they disagree with their co-partisan nominee on every issue, the average respondent is still predicted to select that candidate 45% of the time, indicating a substantial baseline affinity for co-partisan nominees that persists even when they are in opposition on a number of important policy issues. Partisan loyalty affords candidates substantial electoral leeway.

Study 1 offers an important demonstration of responsiveness to candidate characteristics on these high-salience issues and evidence that should such large-scale deviations on policy occur, voters would not ignore them when assessing co-partisan candidates. However, this experiment does not allow us to adjudicate several possibilities which would sharpen our understanding of the limits of partisan loyalty. For one, the study does not include variation in issue salience. This means we cannot directly test prior assertions that high-salience issues are the primary driver of issue-based partisan defections in this competitive choice setting (Arceneaux 2008; Ciuk and Yost 2016). Second, we rely on self-reported polling data to identify these important issues. The design of the following study addresses both issues.

Study 2: Partisanship and Divisive (Salient) Issues

Study 2 replicates the results of Study 1 using an alternative measure of issue importance. Whereas Study 1 looked at the most prominent issues of the 2016 election, in Study 2 we introduce variation in the importance of the issues provided in the conjoint task. Importantly, we operationalize importance as the extent to which issues are divisive (polarizing) among the electorate (for a similar approach see; Nicholson and Hansford 2014).

Pre-testing to Categorize Issues

The issues in this experiment were chosen through a pre-test on Amazon's Mechanical Turk that featured candidate choice conjoint experiments which omitted all candidates' party labels, but randomly assigned their positions on 21 issues. 453 respondents evaluated a series of candidates taking positions on these issues in 10 conjoint tasks. This pre-test was aimed at identifying a set of issues with high and low degrees of salience, as measured by the degree to which they divided Democratic and Republican voters. Our logic in analyzing divisive issues as a means of studying the effects of issue salience is as follows. We conceptualize salient issues as those that are (1) relevant and (2) important to voters. It would be very difficult

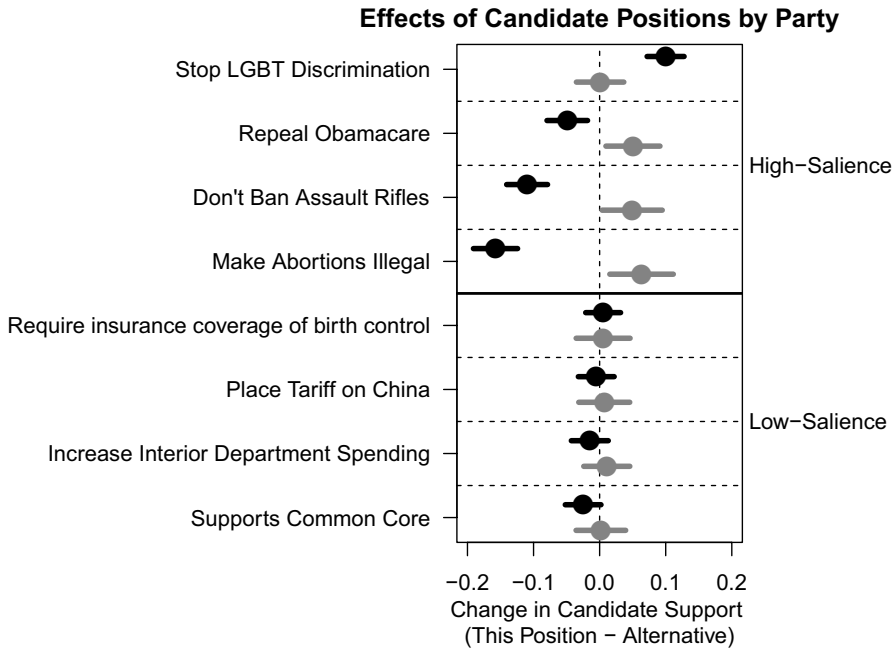


Fig. 3 Pre-test results for issue divisiveness (Salience). The figure displays effects of candidate positions by party from an experimental pre-test. Democrats in black; republicans in gray

for an issue to be relevant in a given electoral setting if the two parties agree on how to tackle it because in such a case it would make little sense for either candidates or the media to grant the issue attention during a campaign (Downs 1957).¹⁰ In other words, though we might imagine issues that both parties think of as important but on which both parties largely agree, campaigns are unlikely to center on such issues, and there inclusion in our experiment would arguably diminish external validity. In addition, we think that if issues are important to voters, they should exert large effects on vote choice. Our measurement strategy in Study 2 captures key indicators of issue salience by ensuring a focus on issues that both divide partisans in the electorate and exert large effects on candidate selection.

Our pre-test approach has additional advantages. First, it served as a robustness check for Study 1 by allowing for an alternative method of coding issue importance other than self reports. Second, our pre-test measures issue salience in an environment in which party cues are absent. If the issues we identify as salient continue to hold sway in the final analysis even after the introduction of party cues, it provides compelling evidence that policy considerations can serve as a counterweight to party labels. To clarify how our behavioral measure differs from the survey measure used in Study 1 we label it “divisiveness,” which we argue is a special case of salience.

¹⁰ In keeping with this assertion, Chong and Mullinix (n.d.) find that policy information has the greatest impact on policy support if it contains information on the ideological direction of the proposal.

Table 1 Issues by level of divisiveness in Study 2

Issue	Specific focus	Type
Abortion	Make abortion illegal	Highly divisive
Gun control	Ban assault rifles	Highly divisive
Health care	Repeal obamacare	Highly divisive
LGBT discrimination	Pass anti-discrimination law	Highly divisive
Birth control	Require insurance to cover	Minimally divisive
Dept. of Interior	Increase department spending	Minimally divisive
Education	Support common core	Minimally divisive
Trade	Tariff on Chinese imports	Minimally divisive

We classified issues that caused the largest divergence between Democrats and Republicans, in terms of the effects position-taking on that issue had on a candidate's probability of being preferred across, as highly divisive. In contrast, we labeled the four issues that caused the smallest divergence between the members of different parties as minimally divisive (see Fig. 3). By using heterogeneity in the treatment effects of candidate position-taking on an issue to classify issue divisiveness, we focus on how these issues affect candidate choice. This approach guards against social desirability bias and other forms of insincere response that limit the usefulness of self-reported measures of salience in this context (e.g., Leeper and Robison n.d.). Table 1 displays the eight issues selected through this process.¹¹

This approach to classifying issues produces a division that is validated when considering other operationalizations of issue salience measures.¹² In Study 2 the effect of issue agreement on candidate choice for one of the highly divisive issues ranged between 9 and 14% points (mean = 12). In contrast, on the minimally divisive issues, issue agreement produced between a 3 and 7% point increase in candidate support (mean = 4.5). On average, the effect of issue agreement on candidate support for one of the highly divisive issues was roughly three times the effect of agreement with the candidate on one of the minimally divisive issues. Alternatively, if we assess this typology using items that measure an issue's self-reported importance for candidate choice measured in Study 2, the issues categorized as highly divisive in our pre-tests were rated 2.7 on a 4-pt importance scale by respondents, substantially higher than the 2.2 point rating that the minimally divisive issues received.

¹¹ While self-reports placed the Birth Control issue as high-salience for Study 1, our approach in Study 2 categorizes it as minimally divisive.

¹² See Online Appendix B for additional information on the pre-testing procedure and validation of this issue typology.

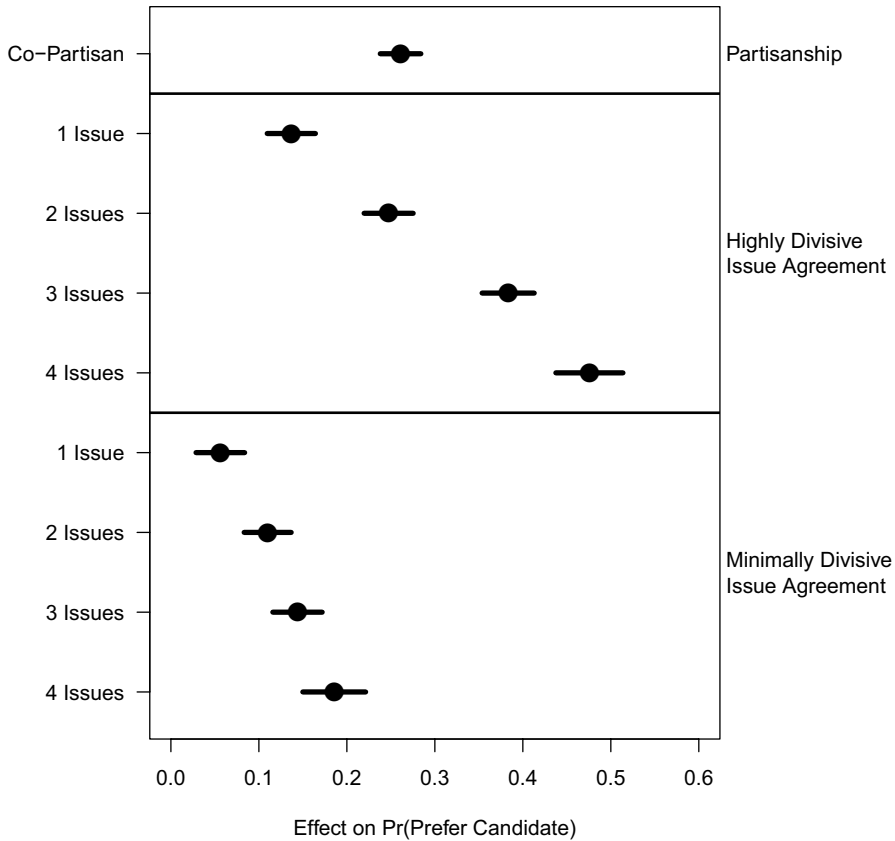


Fig. 4 Partisanship, issue agreement and candidate choice in Study 2. The effect of co-partisanship is relative to the support an out-party candidate receives. The effects of highly divisive issue agreement are relative to no issue agreement on highly divisive issues with the candidate. The effects of minimally divisive issue agreement are relative to no issue agreement on minimally divisive issues with the candidate

Study 2 Results

Study 2 was conducted in March 2018 ($N = 1439$ respondents from Research Now/SSI collected via Qualtrics Panels). The design was similar to Study 1 in that respondents evaluated candidates from opposing parties in seven conjoint tasks. However, in this case the candidates took positions on the eight issues identified in the aforementioned pre-test.

The top row of Fig. 4 displays the effect of co-partisanship on candidate choice. Sharing a candidate's party label produced a 26% point increase in the probability they are preferred by a respondent. While still influential, the effect of a shared party label is 9% points smaller than in Study 1. We view this as partially due to the design differences between these two studies. Individuals received more issue

information about the two candidates across all conditions in Study 2, potentially attenuating the effects of a shared party label (see e.g., Peterson 2017).

The next four rows of Fig. 4 display changes in the probability a candidate is preferred based on agreement on the set of high-salience issues considered in this study. Agreement on one of these issues increased candidate support by 14% points. Relative to the same baseline, the effect of agreement on two of these high-salience issues was 25% points—roughly the same magnitude as the effect of shared partisanship, as in Study 1. Further increases in issue agreement continued to improve candidate support, with agreement on four issue positions producing a 48% point increase in the probability a candidate was preferred.

So far these results resemble Study 1. A key distinction in Study 2, however, is the introduction of minimally divisive issues into the candidate profiles. When examining these issues, a very different portrait of the capacity of these issues to offset the role of candidate partisanship on support emerges. While the effect of agreement on one highly divisive issue was 14% points, the effect of agreement on one of the minimally divisive issues was a mere 6% point increase in candidate support. Further agreement on the minimally divisive issues only modestly increased the probability of selecting a candidate, and the effect of agreeing on all four minimally divisive issues, 19% points, failed to match the effect of sharing a candidate's party label. These results are more in line with prior studies emphasizing the dominance of partisanship over other political considerations. At least collectively, disagreement on a set of highly divisive issues has the power to overwhelm a party label. The same pattern fails to occur for the minimally divisive issues, although candidates do face a small penalty for deviating on them.

We now turn to assessing the implications of these patterns of responsiveness for candidate choice. Figure 5 shows the predicted probability of supporting a co-partisan candidate by the degree of disagreement on highly and minimally divisive issues.¹³ Replicating the findings of Study 1, we see in Fig. 5 that, on average, individuals remain more supportive of their co-partisan candidate (the probability of selection remains above 0.5) than the out-party candidate up until the point that the candidate diverges on four highly divisive issues. However, contrary to the defections that occur at high levels of disagreement on highly divisive issues (the baseline condition here), co-partisan candidates retain high levels of electoral support regardless of the number of minimally divisive issues on which they diverge from the positions of voters. Even in the event that a voter disagrees with a candidate on four low-salience issues, if they share a party label with that candidate and agree with them on the highly divisive issues, they support that candidate, on average, 74% of the time.

These results demonstrate the strong but conditional nature of party loyalty. Voters generally support their co-partisan candidates, but divergence on several highly divisive issues *is* capable of inducing defections to the out-party. However, when it

¹³ These dynamics are similar when examining support for out-party candidates, but there is a substantially lower baseline level of support across conditions. These results are presented in Online Appendix D

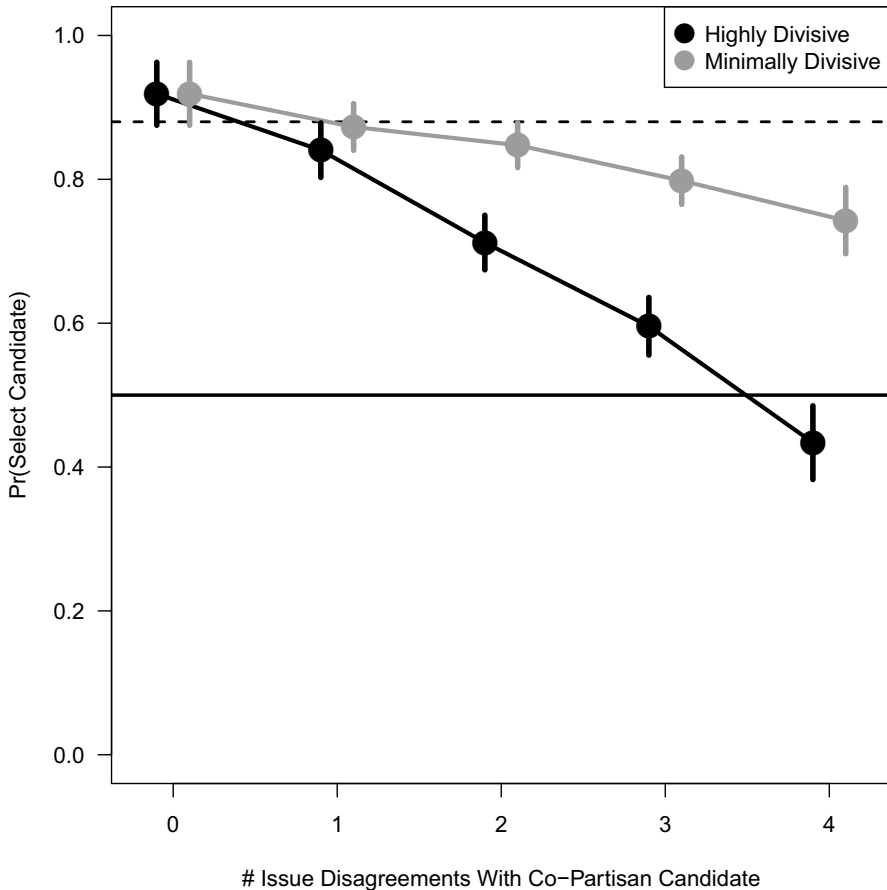


Fig. 5 Tolerance for issue disagreement on issues in Study 2. The figure displays the probability of selecting the co-partisan candidate conditional on a respondents' level of agreement with them on the issues presented. In each case the predicted probabilities assume agreement on all issues in the other category of issue salience. For comparison, the top dashed line shows the rate of co-partisan voting in the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES)

comes to minimally divisive issues, politicians enjoy far more latitude to take different issue positions while still maintaining high levels of co-partisan electoral support.

It is important to note that these minimally divisive issues, while less consequential than their counterparts for candidate choice, are still extremely important from a policy standpoint. They include central tasks of government such as defining regulation of trade, education standards and access to birth control. Our results indicate that so long as candidates toe the line on a key set of issues, they receive a relatively limited penalty from their co-partisans for the positions they take on other crucial matters.

External Validity

There are reasons to question whether our experiments are adequately approximating real-world behavior. A crucial feature of Studies 1 and 2 is that they break familiar links between candidate positioning and party reputations. As previously discussed, this is essential for understanding the extent to which individuals tolerate issue-based disagreements with co-partisan candidates. However, this approach does require individuals to respond to very different types of profiles than they typically encounter in real-world candidate decision-making. Given this unusual choice environment, are respondents behaving as they would if they encountered such choices in the real world?

We believe our experiments recover externally valid estimates for several reasons. For one, results from the type of conjoint experiments we use here have been shown to closely mirror real-world decision-making in other contexts (Hainmueller et al. 2015). In this particular context, the candidate profiles provide survey respondents similar information to what they may encounter through widely-available information sources such as voter guides (Mummolo and Peterson 2017; Boudreau et al. n.d.).

One way of assessing external validity is to compare rates of candidate selection in scenarios which *do* reflect real world choices to the rates we have observed in recent elections. If participants select typical partisan candidates in our studies at rates comparable to the real world, we can be more confident that their decisions regarding unusual candidates shed light on how they would behave in a real election should such candidates emerge.

Consistent with this reasoning, the rates of selecting a co-partisan candidate that agrees with the survey respondent on the issues in play closely mirrors the rates of co-partisan voting observed in recent elections, as measured in the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES). When the respondent agreed with the co-partisan candidate on all available issues, they preferred their party's candidate 88% of the time in Study 1 and 92% of the time in Study 2. This is highly similar to the rate of co-partisan voting in congressional elections in the 2016 ANES, where 88% of those voting in these races preferred their co-partisan candidate. Given this close correspondence in the base rates of voting for a like-minded co-partisan, we believe the candidate selection exercise, while obviously artificial, offers reasonably valid estimates. In addition, we find highly similar results with respect to the effects of partisan cues, low-salience issues and high-salience issues after re-weighting the samples in Studies 1 and 2 to conform to the demographic traits of the 2016 National Election Study (see Online Appendix D).

As a final check for whether our candidate selection exercise was externally valid, we conducted a third study in which 1,001 respondents from the same sample as Studies 1 and 2 were asked to indicate which of two candidates for office they preferred.¹⁴ The candidates came from opposing political parties and, as in Study 2,

¹⁴ This sample only included 'Strong' or 'Not very strong' partisans, excluding partisan leaners and independents.

Table 2 Support for co-partisan candidates: 2016 elections and survey benchmark

Study	Prefer co-partisan candidate (%)
ANES presidential (2016)	93
ANES congressional (2016)	88
CCES presidential (2016)	89
CCES congressional (2016)	89
Survey 1 (no issue disagreement)	88
Survey 2 (no issue disagreement)	92
Survey 3 (reputation-consistent)	78

took positions on eight different issues. Respondents first completed a set of tasks identical to Study 2. As a final task, however, they assessed a profile pair that did not contain any randomized components. Instead, the candidate positions were entirely reputation-consistent (i.e., the Republican candidate always took conservative issue positions and the Democrat always took liberal positions). This reputation-consistent task offers an alternative approximation for candidate alignment in general election competition in the United States, especially given the high levels of elite polarization present in contemporary politics.¹⁵ Using this alternative conception of “real-world” co-partisan candidates—ones who take the party’s position rather than the survey respondents’—we observe slightly lower base rates of co-partisan voting. When faced with a reputation-consistent Republican against a reputation-consistent Democrat, 78% of partisan respondents preferred their co-partisan candidate (see Table 2).¹⁶

We believe the close correspondence between rates of co-partisan voting in Studies 1 and 2 and the ANES offer the most compelling evidence of external validity. However, if we embrace this final test using reputation-consistent candidates, it means our findings regarding the ability of issues to offset party labels in candidate choice may be slightly inflated. In other words, if the base rate of voting for a co-partisan is understated in our studies, then it may take disagreement on even more than four salient issues to substantially erode the average voter’s party loyalty, evidence of extreme party loyalty.¹⁷

Voters strongly prefer co-partisan candidates, but their loyalty has limits. Disagreement on salient issues can erode the influence of a shared party label, and if

¹⁵ For instance, comparing the ideology of general election candidates for Congress using measures of ideology based on a candidate’s campaign finance receipts, shows that no races in 2014 (the most recent year available) involved a Democratic candidate that was more conservative than their Republican opponent (Bonica 2014).

¹⁶ As in other work, we include partisan “leaners” with the party they are closest with and exclude “pure” independents.

¹⁷ We note that this divergence in base rates would not affect the marginal effects we display above, (since the baseline divergence would difference out in those estimates), but may impact our analysis of the likelihood of partisan defection (Figs. 2 and 4) which relies on predicted probabilities.

enough disagreement is present, voters will defect to the out-party. However, this rarely occurs because of the high level of elite polarization in U.S. politics today. That is, voters are rarely faced with co-partisan candidates who take reputationally inconsistent positions that would cross-pressure them in this way.

Discussion and Conclusion

Extensive inquiry into the role of partisanship in political decision-making has produced a large literature with mixed results. In some settings partisanship appears to be the sole characteristic members of the public use to make political decisions. But while political information has previously been shown to mute partisan loyalty, its limits have remained unclear. In this paper, we gauged these limits using survey experiments that devote careful attention to the types of issues that are placed in tension with partisanship in a given setting based on both self reports and new behavioral measures of choice-specific issue salience. We show that, when considered relative to low-salience political considerations, partisanship appears dominant in political decision-making. In contrast, when compared to central, high-salience issues, it appears much less influential as these other considerations also exert considerable influence on candidate choice. In extreme cases—disagreement with a co-partisan on four or more high-salience issues—the average voter is more likely to support out-party politicians than their co-partisan. This attribute-focused explanation confirms issue salience as a key moderator in vote choice demonstrated in prior work, (e.g., Arceneaux and Vander Wielen 2017; Lavine et al. 2012; Bullock 2011), and further shows that sufficient deviation on high salience issues can cause partisan defections.

These findings make two important amendments to prior studies on how partisanship affects public opinion. First, these studies fail to support perspectives emphasizing that the introduction of partisanship to a choice setting eliminates the assessment of other considerations (e.g., Rahn 1993; Druckman et al. 2013). Although the penalty they face is small, politicians do suffer a cost for discrepant position taking even on low-salience political issues, indicating some responsiveness to these considerations. Second, these results offer new insights into the implications of responsive public opinion for decision-making about political candidates. In particular, despite the responsiveness of public opinion to high salience political issues, substantial disagreement is still required to compel mass partisans to diverge from the party line. Significant majorities still prefer co-partisan candidates even when they take a dissonant position on high-salience issues like immigration. These same candidates suffer an even smaller penalty to their support for abandoning their constituents' preferences on low-salience issues like trade or birth control.

There are several possible mechanisms underlying the observed partisan defections. One possibility is that voters perceive co-partisans who take deviant positions on important issues as inauthentic (e.g. the pejorative label of “Republicans in Name Only”). Another possibility is that interested citizens stand to instrumentally benefit from these policies, making a deviation from their issue preferences

too costly, even if it would be in the service of supporting a co-partisan (Iyengar et al. 2008). Or perhaps, in a highly polarized environment, in which party labels arguably serve as better heuristics for policy than in previous periods (Kim and LeVeck 2013), voters harbor doubts as to whether a candidate with the “wrong” set of views on important issues is likely to succeed electorally, and defect in the hopes of picking a winner. Future research that seeks to parse these mechanisms could further our understanding of the cognitive processes underlying vote choice.

Finally, our findings have important implications for normative discussions regarding the role of partisanship in political decision-making. Our results demonstrate the conditional nature of assessments regarding partisan loyalty among the public. On the one hand, our results give reason for optimism regarding democratic competence, showing that partisanship fails to dominate political choice when enough key issues are at the core of decision-making. At the same time, we show that patterns of partisan dominance over public opinion can occur when political choices center around issues that, despite having important policy implications and often serving as mainstays of political news, are not utilized by voters when making political decisions. In many electoral scenarios, the average voter can be expected to offer little resistance to the actions of their elite co-partisans, a finding which casts the partisan heuristic in a new, perhaps dimmer light.

Acknowledgements The authors thank Jeremy Ferwerda, Martin Gilens, Justin Grimmer, Greg Huber, Lilliana Mason, Lilla Orr, Markus Prior and Lauren Wright for helpful comments.

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