# Core Issue Priorities and Candidate Choice in Congressional Primaries*

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**Abstract**

Primary elections shape representation by determining who advances and the incentives candidates face. We examine whether voters with core issue priorities are consequential within congressional primary electorates and what they reward. Using three surveys of more than 2,000 validated primary voters, we find that 58% to 67% identify an issue they regard as more important than most others. These voters are more attentive and generally more participatory and operationally extreme. A conjoint experiment shows that discussing a voter's core issue rather than another issue increases candidate support by 24.1 percentage points. Observational Senate-primary vote intentions produce the same pattern, with a 4.8-point increase in vote probability. Although voters generally prefer extreme candidates, extremity does not significantly magnify the reward for issue emphasis. Primary voters therefore shape representation not only by rewarding where candidates stand, but also by rewarding which issues candidates prioritize.

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Elections play a crucial role in shaping political representation by determining who reaches office and the incentives candidates and elected officials face. Understanding this relationship requires identifying which voters are electorally consequential and what those voters reward. In contemporary congressional elections, primary elections play an increasingly important role in determining who is elected to Congress. In recent years, the vast majority of congressional districts are electorally safe for one party. This means primary elections often represent the only potential electoral constraint that candidates and members face. For candidates and members motivated by (re-)election, primary voters' preferences determine which priorities and positions candidates have incentives to communicate during campaigns and, potentially, pursue in office. Understanding how primary elections shape representation consequently requires identifying what issues and positions primary voters reward when choosing among candidates from the same party.

Along these lines, existing research has largely emphasized the role of ideology and issue alignment in primary elections (e.g., Hirano et al. 2015; Henderson et al. 2022; Colao et al. 2025; Anderson et al. 2026). The conventional account argues that primary voters prefer candidates who take more ideologically extreme positions, thereby encouraging candidates and elected officials to move away from the broader electorate (e.g., Burden 2004; Brady, Han and Pope 2007; Hill 2015; Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong 2026). Evidence for this account, however, remains mixed. Primary electorates are not uniformly more extreme than other co-partisans (Hirano et al. 2010; Sides et al. 2020), more extreme candidates do not consistently perform better across elections and measures of candidate positioning (e.g., Lockhart and Hill 2023; Meisels 2026), and voters often lack the information necessary to identify which candidate is closest to them (Ahler, Citrin and Lenz 2016; Colao et al. 2025). We argue that existing work evaluating the role of issues and positioning in congressional primary elections suffers from two limitations. First, studies generally compare alignment across researcher-selected issues or aggregate positions into broad ideological measures. This obscures the possibility that voters assign disproportionate weight to one issue or a small

subset of issues. Second, research often neglects that candidates selectively discuss issues during campaigns (Druckman, Kifer and Parkin 2009; Porter, Case and Treul 2025; Sachleben and Treul 2026). Existing work therefore overlooks the role issue emphasis may play in structuring primary vote choice and the electoral incentives candidates face.

Our approach addresses these limitations in two ways. First, we expand existing work on issue voting by considering the issues voters themselves identify as priorities. We define a core issue priority as a political issue, if any, that an individual regards as more important than most other political issues. Research on core issue priorities, issue publics, and personal issue importance finds that these priorities are often durable and politically consequential (Krosnick 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger 2023; Kustov 2023; Velez 2024; Velez and Liu 2025). Yet we do not know how prevalent these priorities are among congressional primary voters or whether their holders constitute an electorally consequential constituency. To evaluate these questions, we draw on three complementary surveys containing more than 2,000 validated congressional primary voters: the Primary Election Survey (PES; Anderson et al. 2026), Cooperative Election Study (CES), and an original Verasight survey. Across the three surveys, between 58% and 67% of primary voters identify a core issue priority. In the CES and PES, these priorities are 12 to 15 percentage points more prevalent among primary voters than among co-partisans who did not participate in a primary. Primary voters with core issue priorities report greater political attention and greater general political participation than primary voters without core issue priorities. Primary voters with a core issue priority also hold more ideologically extreme views than primary voters without a core issue priority. These findings demonstrate that voters with core issue priorities are not a small or politically peripheral group within primary electorates.

Second, we evaluate candidate choice along two dimensions on those issues: issue emphasis, or whether a candidate addresses the issue, and positional extremity, or whether the candidate takes a moderate or extreme position. We evaluate this relationship using a tailored conjoint experiment in the Verasight survey and an observational analysis connecting

PES respondents' Senate-primary vote intentions to the campaign communication of actual candidates. Together, these analyses distinguish the electoral reward for issue emphasis from the reward for positional extremity among primary voters with core issue priorities. In the experiment, discussing a respondent's core issue rather than another issue increases the probability of candidate support by 24.1 percentage points, with similar effects among Democratic and Republican primary voters. Although we find primary voters generally prefer extreme candidates, we find no evidence that extremity significantly magnifies the reward for addressing their core issue. Indeed, a moderate candidate who discusses the respondent's core issue is 14.2 percentage points more likely to be selected than an extreme candidate who discusses another issue. The PES produces the same pattern: addressing a respondent's core issue is associated with a 4.8 percentage-point increase in vote probability, while taking an extreme rather than moderate position provides no statistically distinguishable additional benefit. Across experimentally controlled candidate evaluations and actual Senate-primary vote intentions, whether candidates address voters' core issue priorities is more consequential than whether they take moderate or extreme positions on those issues.

Taken together, these findings provide a different account of how primary voters shape political representation. They do not imply that positional extremity is irrelevant: primary voters with core issue priorities tend to hold more extreme policy preferences, and voters generally prefer extreme candidates when the issue discussed is held constant. Rather, they show that, for the large share of primary voters with core issue priorities, the issues candidates choose to address can be more consequential for candidate choice than whether candidates adopt moderate or extreme positions on those issues. By identifying a large, attentive, and generally active constituency that rewards candidates for addressing prioritized issues, we identify an electoral incentive for agenda responsiveness in primary elections. Primary voters may therefore shape representation by determining which issues candidates have incentives to prioritize during campaigns and in office.

# Voter Decision Making in Congressional Primaries

Primary elections present voters with a distinctive decision because the available candidates share a party label. Even in non-partisan primaries, where candidates from multiple parties run against one another, voters frequently must choose among same-party candidates.[1] Party labels therefore provide little help in distinguishing between candidates. Existing research shows that voters respond to a variety of candidate characteristics and campaign cues in this environment. Prior elected experience and occupational background can provide information about a candidate's qualifications and ability to serve in office (e.g., McDermott 2005; Kirkland and Coppock 2018), while race and gender can shape voters' assumptions about candidates' qualifications, policy priorities, and ability to represent particular groups (e.g., McDermott 1998; Koch 2000; Henderson et al. 2022). Endorsements from political elites, interest groups, and party organizations can similarly provide information about candidates' relationships with politically important groups and campaign viability (e.g., Dominguez 2011; Blum, Cowburn and Masket 2024), while fundraising and media attention can provide additional signals of campaign viability and general-election electability (Simas 2017; Anderson et al. 2025).

Among these considerations, existing research has emphasized ideology and issue alignment as important to primary voters' decision-making. The conventional account argues that primary voters hold more extreme preferences than general-election voters, prefer candidates who take correspondingly extreme positions, and encourage candidates and elected officials to move away from the broader electorate in response (e.g., Burden 2004; Brady, Han and Pope 2007; Hill 2015; Nielson and Visalvanich 2017). Evidence for each part of this account, however, remains mixed. Primary electorates are not uniformly more extreme than other co-partisans, and conclusions about whether more extreme candidates perform better

[1] Of the 492 non-partisan primaries that took place from 2010 to 2024 for the U.S. House, 57.9% featured two or more Democrats and 51.2% featured two or more Republicans. For comparison, of the 2,988 partisan primaries that took place over the same period, 43.1% featured two or more Democrats and 52.4% featured two or more Republicans.

in primaries vary across elections and measures of candidate positioning (e.g., Hirano et al. 2010; Sides et al. 2020; Woon 2018; Lockhart and Hill 2023; Meisels 2026). At the voter level, policy agreement can strongly affect support when candidate positions are supplied or learned, but primary voters often lack the information necessary to identify which candidate from the same party is closest to them (Ahler, Citrin and Lenz 2016; Henderson et al. 2022; Colao et al. 2025). One limitation of existing research is that it generally evaluates these relationships using broad ideological measures or agreement across a common set of researcher-selected issues. Broad ideological measures aggregate voters' positions across policy domains, while measures of issue alignment generally do not incorporate the importance individual voters assign to each issue. Both approaches therefore obscure the possibility that voters place substantially greater weight on some issues than others.

A growing body of research finds that a substantial share of voters can identify an issue they find personally important (Ryan and Ehlinger 2023), which we refer to as core issue priorities throughout this paper. We define a core issue priority as a political issue, if any, that an individual regards as more important than most other political issues.[2] Research using these measures shows that core issue priorities are often durable and related to political behavior (Ryan and Ehlinger 2023), that the importance attached to an issue can vary systematically among voters holding different positions on it (Kustov 2023), and that agreement on a self-identified core issue can be especially consequential for candidate choice (Ryan and Ehlinger 2023; Velez 2024). We suggest that mixed evidence about ideological and issue voting in primary elections may partly reflect differences in the importance voters assign to the issues under consideration. Issue alignment and preferences for more extreme

[2]Existing research has used several terms to describe closely related concepts. Voters who attach particular importance to an issue have been characterized as members of an issue public (e.g., Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger 2023), the weight voters assign to an issue has been described as personal issue importance or individual-level issue salience (e.g., Kustov 2023), and the issues themselves have been described as core issues or deeply held issue positions (e.g., Velez 2024; Velez and Liu 2025). Although these terms differ somewhat in their measurement and emphasis, they share the same basic premise: voters may hold positions on many issues while assigning disproportionate weight to only a subset of them.

positions may matter, but their effects may be concentrated on the particular issues voters prioritize rather than expressed consistently across every issue included in broader measures.

A second limitation concerns how existing research characterizes the positions candidates take. Research on the role of issues in primary vote choice generally treats candidate communication as a source of positional information, focusing on whether voters agree with candidates' positions. Even studies that examine individual issues rarely consider whether candidates address the issue at all. This overlooks issue emphasis, or whether candidates choose to discuss an issue during the campaign. This omission matters because congressional primary candidates do not take positions on every issue (Porter, Case and Treul 2025), but instead selectively and strategically choose which issues to address (Sachleben and Treul 2026). By choosing to address an issue, candidates communicate not only where they stand, but also what they intend to prioritize (Sulkin 2009, 2011). Issue emphasis and issue alignment therefore provide distinct but complementary information: emphasis concerns which issues candidates place on the political agenda, while alignment concerns the positions they take on those issues. Existing research provides little evidence about whether primary voters reward both.

## Core Issue Priorities and Representational Incentives

Vote choice in primary elections matters beyond determining which candidate advances to the general election. For candidates and elected officials motivated by (re-)election, the preferences voters reward help define the incentives that structure campaign behavior and, subsequently, behavior in office. Candidates and elected officials, however, do not respond equally to every constituent. Instead, they have incentives to identify and cultivate constituencies that are attentive to their behavior, active in electoral politics, and able to reward or punish them at the ballot box (Fenno 1978). Primary voters may be especially consequential in shaping these incentives in congressional districts where limited general-election

competition makes securing and retaining office largely dependent on the primary election. Primary electorates are also generally more unified in their issue preferences than general-election electorates, and primary voters are more sensitive to whether legislators align with those preferences (Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong 2026). Together, this provides strong reason to expect issue-based voting to generate especially strong electoral incentives in primary elections on average. Their framework does not, however, establish which voters and which issues generate this heightened sensitivity. Whether core issue priorities produce representational consequences therefore depends on whether the voters who hold them constitute an electorally consequential primary constituency and translate those priorities into candidate evaluations.

The representational consequences of core issue priorities for candidates and members of Congress therefore depend first on how prevalent they are within primary electorates. A small group of voters could respond strongly to candidates who address their priorities without affecting enough votes to meaningfully alter candidates' incentives. By contrast, a sufficiently large group could constitute an important electoral constituency, particularly in low-turnout primary elections where relatively few voters determine which candidate advances (Gerber et al. 2017). Existing research demonstrates that core issue priorities exist among the broader public (Krosnick 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger 2023), but does not establish how common they are among validated congressional primary voters. These priorities are likely especially prevalent among primary participants. Primary participation is disproportionately concentrated among politically interested and engaged citizens (Sides et al. 2020), and voters who attach disproportionate importance to a particular issue may be especially motivated to participate in the election that determines their party's nominee. We therefore expect core issue priorities to be common among primary voters and more prevalent among primary voters than among co-partisans who do not participate in primary elections.

Prevalence alone, however, does not establish that voters with core issue priorities create meaningful incentives for candidates. A second condition is whether these voters are espe-

cially attentive to politics and active in the political process. Research on personal issue importance shows that individuals devote greater attention to information concerning the issues they prioritize, including news coverage and candidate communication (e.g., Krosnick 1990; Boninger, Krosnick and Berent 1995; Bolsen and Leeper 2013; Ryan and Ehlinger 2023). Attaching greater importance to an issue may also motivate more costly forms of political participation, including contacting elected officials, attending political events, contributing money, and engaging in other activities intended to influence political outcomes. Through these behaviors, voters make their preferences more visible to candidates and demonstrate their willingness to act on those preferences during primary elections. We therefore expect primary voters with a core issue priority to report greater political attention and participate in politics at higher rates than primary voters without one.

> **H1a:** Among primary voters, those with a core issue priority will report greater political attention than those without a core issue priority.

> **H1b:** Among primary voters, those with a core issue priority will participate in politics at higher rates than those without a core issue priority.

Whether these voters hold extreme preferences is not a condition for their electoral influence, but it helps determine the type of representational incentives they may create. Having a core issue priority does not, by definition, require a voter to hold an extreme position. Issue importance concerns the weight a voter assigns to an issue, while extremity concerns the position the voter holds. At the same time, attitudes concerning core issues tend to be stronger, more certain, and more durable than attitudes concerning more peripheral issues (e.g., Ryan and Ehlinger 2023; Velez and Liu 2025). Voters who assign disproportionate importance to an issue may therefore hold more crystallized and potentially more extreme policy preferences. This relationship may appear in broader measures of operational ideology, but it should be especially pronounced on the particular issue the voter prioritizes. If these voters hold especially extreme preferences, candidates may face incentives not only to address their prioritized issues but also to take more extreme positions on them. We there-

fore expect primary voters with a core issue priority to hold more extreme policy preferences than primary voters without one.

> **H2:** Among primary voters, those with a core issue priority will exhibit greater operational ideological extremity than those without a core issue priority.

The final condition is whether core issue priorities translate into candidate evaluations. Co-partisan candidates may take positions in the same ideological direction across issues, limiting the usefulness of proximity alone for distinguishing among them. Candidates can nevertheless separate themselves through the issues they choose to discuss. By addressing a voter's core issue priority, a candidate signals that they recognize the concern and intend to prioritize it during the campaign and, subsequently, in office. Because the issue is already central to the voter's political evaluation, this signal should receive greater weight than discussion of an issue the voter does not prioritize. Rewarding candidates for addressing core issue priorities therefore creates an electoral incentive to place those issues on campaign and governing agendas.

> **H3:** Primary voters with a core issue priority will be more likely to support a co-partisan candidate who discusses their core issue than an otherwise similar candidate who does not discuss their core issue.

Although this expectation isolates the electoral reward for issue emphasis, a candidate's communicated position may provide an additional basis for evaluation after the candidate addresses the issue. Issue emphasis establishes that the candidate intends to prioritize the issue, while the position taken allows voters to evaluate how closely the candidate's preferences correspond to their own. If voters with core issue priorities hold especially strong or extreme preferences, a relatively extreme position may provide greater alignment. Extremity may also independently signal that the candidate is especially committed to acting on the issue. We therefore expect the electoral reward for issue emphasis to be larger when the candidate communicates an extreme rather than moderate position.

**H4:** The positive effect of discussing a primary voter's core issue on candidate support will be larger when the candidate takes a relatively extreme position on that issue than when the candidate takes a moderate position.

Together, these expectations allow us to evaluate whether voters with core issue priorities constitute a politically consequential segment of the primary electorate and the type of representational incentives they create. Their prevalence, attention, and participation establish whether they form a constituency candidates have reason to recognize, while their policy extremity indicates whether that constituency brings distinct positional demands to primary elections. If these voters reward candidates for addressing their prioritized issues, they provide candidates with incentives to respond through issue emphasis. If they also hold more extreme policy preferences and that reward is magnified when candidates adopt more extreme positions, they may additionally create incentives for positional divergence. We evaluate these possibilities using three complementary surveys that allow us to identify and study primary voters.

## Measuring Primary Voters' Core Priorities

We study primary voters' core issue priorities using three complementary surveys. A central advantage of these data is that each source includes validated primary turnout for non-presidential elections. This allows us to identify primary voters using administrative records rather than relying exclusively on respondents' self-reported participation. Together, the surveys provide observational and experimental evidence about the prevalence and characteristics of primary voters with core issue priorities and whether those priorities shape candidate choice in congressional elections.

Our first survey, the Primary Election Survey (PES; Anderson et al. 2026), provides observational data from the 2024 U.S. Senate primary elections in California, Michigan, and Nevada. Across all three states, there is an oversample of primary voters, giving us sufficient sample size to examine voters' preferences for real candidates within actual campaign

Table 1: Survey Data Sources

| Survey | Sample | Survey Questions | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|
| PES | 866 validated Senate primary voters and 507 non-primary voters in Michigan, Nevada, and California | Core issue priority, campaign interest, campaign participation, and Senate primary vote intention | Evaluate candidate choice among real candidates within actual primary campaign environments |
| CES | 329 validated primary voters and 671 non-primary voters from a national sample | Core issue priority, political attention, campaign participation, and issue-attitude questions | Examine the prevalence and characteristics of primary voters with core issue priorities |
| Verasight | 1,000 voters with validated turnout in the 2024 primary elections | Core issue priority, political attention, political participation, issue-attitude questions, and candidate-choice experiment | Isolate the effects of discussing voters' core issue priorities and the positions candidates take on those issues |

*Note:* Primary election participation is identified using validated turnout records in each survey. The PES and CES include both primary and non-primary voters, while the Verasight survey is limited to validated primary voters. Non-primary voters are included only when comparing the prevalence of core issue priorities across primary and non-primary voters. Complete survey question wording and additional information about each sample are presented in Appendix A.

information environments. Our second survey comes from the 2024 Cooperative Election Study (CES) team content. This survey provides a larger national sample that we use to examine how common core-issue priorities are among primary voters and how voters with these priorities differ from other primary voters. Finally, we also field an original 2026 survey with Verasight that includes 1,000 validated primary voters from the 2024 primary election. The Verasight survey provides us with a large national sample of primary voters, enabling us to evaluate their political attitudes and behavior, as well as how they respond to the issues and positions candidates communicate. Combining these data allows us to evaluate core issue priorities using both observed candidate choices in actual elections and experimentally controlled candidate evaluations. Table 1 provides a summary of the surveys and Appendix A provides full descriptions of the sample characteristics and questions asked.

Across all three surveys, we measure core issue priorities using the same two-stage approach developed by Ryan and Ehlinger (2023). In this approach, respondents first indicate whether they care more about a political issue than most other issues. The question explains that they might think about the issue frequently, follow news about it closely, or consider it when evaluating political candidates. Respondents who answer yes are then asked in an open-ended question to describe the issue they have in mind. The open-ended follow-up then allows respondents to identify the specific issue they prioritize without restricting them to a researcher-defined list. This preserves priorities that fall within broad policy areas as well as narrower concerns that conventional closed-ended questions may not include. Prior applications of this approach similarly find that the issues respondents identify are personally important, stable, and consequential for their political evaluations (Ryan and Ehlinger 2023; Kustov 2023; Velez 2024; Velez and Liu 2025).

We classify respondents as having a core issue priority when they answer yes to the initial question and provide an open-ended response that identifies a substantive political or policy concern. We retain responses that identify an issue that could plausibly be affected by government action, public policy, or political decision-making. Respondents are not classified as having a core issue priority when they leave the open-ended question blank, provide an incoherent or irrelevant response, or give an answer that is too vague to identify a substantive concern. We also exclude responses that mention only a candidate, political party, or desired electoral outcome without identifying an underlying issue. We then hand-label each retained response according to the major policy-topic categories used in CampaignView (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). These categories distinguish among agriculture; civil rights, liberties, and minority issues; crime; defense; economics and commerce; education; energy and the environment; government operations; healthcare; immigration; international affairs; social welfare; and transportation and infrastructure. Substantive responses that do not fit one of these categories are classified as other. Using a common coding scheme across the three

surveys lets us compare core issue priorities across samples and later connect the issues voters prioritize with the issues candidates discuss during primary campaigns.

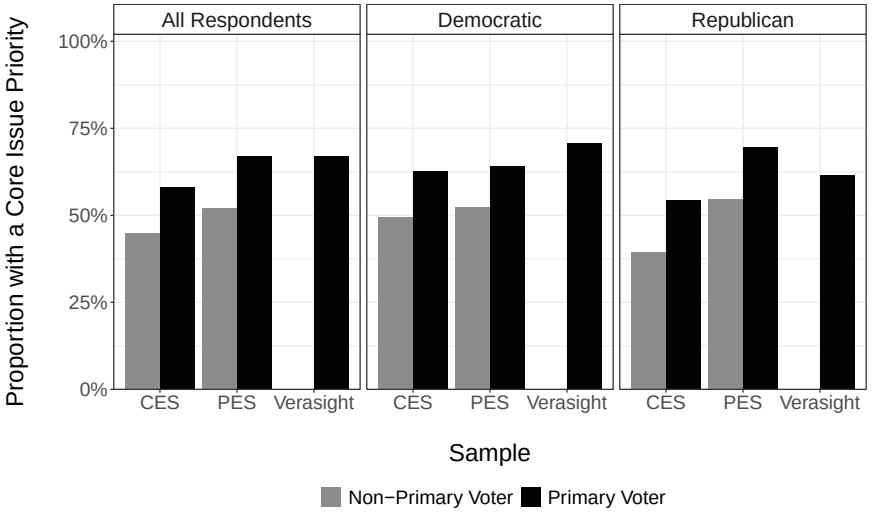
## The Prevalence and Content of Core Issue Priorities

We begin by examining the prevalence and content of core issue priorities across our three surveys. We start by documenting the prevalence of voters with core issue priorities in primary electorates. We present these comparisons for all primary voters and separately for Democratic and Republican primary voters. As a baseline comparison, we also include the proportion of non-primary voters who identify a core issue priority in the CES and PES samples. Because the Verasight sample consists exclusively of primary voters, comparisons between primary and non-primary voters are limited to the PES and CES samples.

Figure 1 presents the proportion of primary voters and non-primary voters who have a core issue priority among all respondents (left panel), Democratic respondents (middle panel), and Republican respondents (right panel). Across all three surveys, a majority of primary voters have a core issue priority. This proportion ranges from 58% among validated primary voters in the CES to 67% in the PES and Verasight samples. Importantly, this demonstrates that a majority of primary voters in congressional elections have a core issue they can articulate caring about.

Core issue priorities are also substantially more prevalent among primary voters than among rank-and-file partisans who do not participate in primary elections. In the CES, 58% of primary voters report a core issue priority compared to 45% of non-primary voters. We observe a similar difference in the PES, where 67% of primary voters report a core issue priority compared to 52% of non-primary voters. This pattern also holds within both parties. Across the four party-specific comparisons available in the CES and PES, the proportion of respondents with a core issue priority is 12 to 15 percentage points higher among primary voters. Taken together, these results demonstrate that core issue priorities

Figure 1: Prevalence of Core Issue Priorities Across Surveys



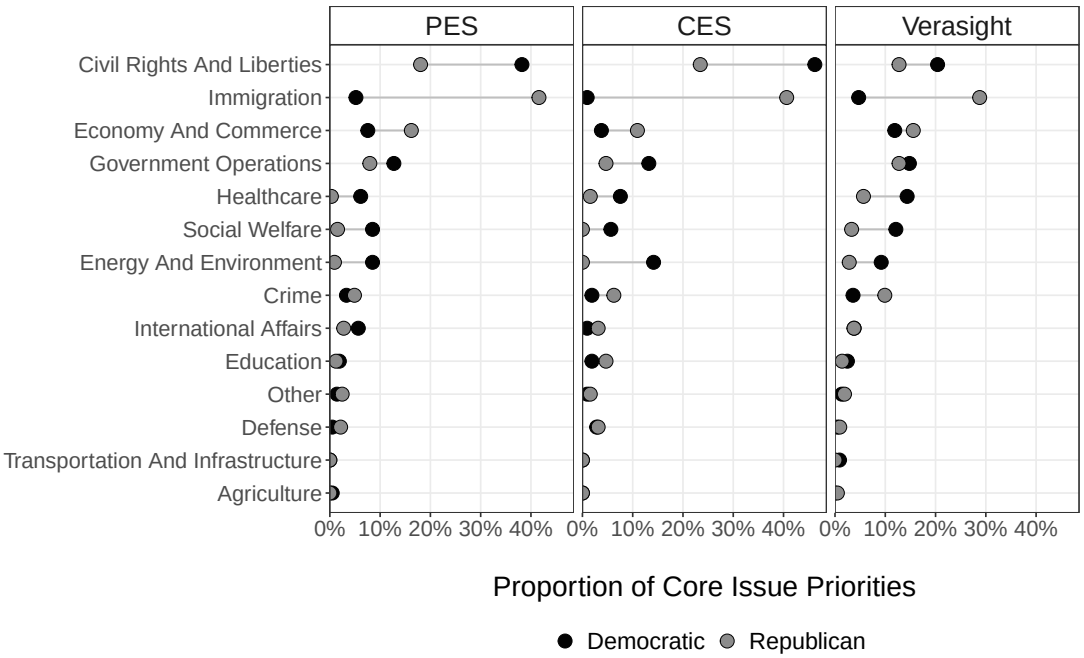

*Note:* Figure plots the proportion of respondents who report a core issue priority by primary voter status. Results are presented for all respondents and separately for Democratic and Republican voters. The Verasight sample includes only primary voters.

are common among American voters more broadly. But core issue priorities are especially prevalent among those who participate in primary elections, providing evidence of important differences between primary voters and rank-and-file partisans.

We next document which issues primary voters identify as core issue priorities. For this analysis, we restrict each sample to validated primary voters who articulate a core issue priority and would vote in one of the major parties' primaries. Figure 2 presents the proportions of the resulting samples that mention each major topic area, split by partisanship.

Across all three samples, civil rights and liberties and immigration make up the largest proportion of core issue priorities. These two issues show clear partisan differences. Among Democratic primary voters, civil rights and liberties is the most commonly mentioned core issue priority in each survey. The proportion ranges from 20% in the Verasight sample (2026) to 38% in the PES and 46% in the CES (2024). Democratic primary voters are approximately twice as likely as Republican primary voters to identify civil rights and liberties as their core issue priority in the CES and PES. Most Democratic responses in this category pertain to abortion and women's rights, although a sizable proportion also mention LGBTQ+ related topics. Across all three surveys, Democratic primary voters are also more likely than Repub-

Figure 2: Policy Areas Mentioned as Core Issue Priorities




*Note:* Figure plots the proportion of primary voters with a core issue priority who identify each policy area as their core issue priority. Proportions are calculated separately for Democratic and Republican primary voters within each survey.

lican primary voters to identify energy and the environment, healthcare, and social welfare as core issue priorities.

Among Republican primary voters, immigration is the most commonly mentioned issue in each survey. Approximately 29% of Republican primary voters in the Verasight sample (2026) identify immigration as their core issue priority, compared to 41% in the CES and 42% in the PES (2024). The largest partisan difference is also found on immigration. In the CES, only 1% of Democratic primary voters identify immigration as their core issue priority. This proportion is similarly low in the PES (5%) and Verasight sample (5%). Republican primary voters are also consistently more likely to identify the economy and commerce and crime as core issue priorities.

A final takeaway from Figure 2 is the relatively consistent patterns in the issues primary voters identify across surveys. The CES and PES data were collected in 2024, while the Verasight data were collected in 2026. Although the exact proportions vary across samples,

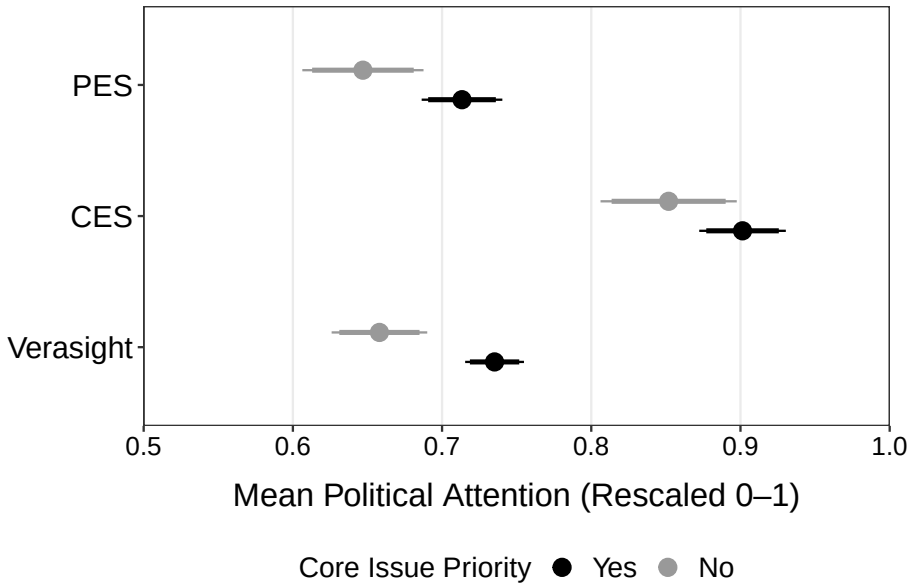
we do not observe a substantial reordering of the issues that Democratic and Republican primary voters prioritize. Civil rights and liberties remains the most common core issue priority among Democratic primary voters, while immigration remains the most common among Republican primary voters. We also observe the same broader partisan differences across the remaining issue areas. While these surveys do not follow the same respondents over time, this consistency across independent samples aligns with Ryan and Ehlinger's (2023) characterization of core issue priorities as relatively stable, long-standing political attitudes.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that a clear majority of primary voters have a core issue priority. Moreover, what primary voters mention as their core issue priority presents clear partisan patterns that are relatively consistent across surveys and across time. Having established the prevalence and content of core issue priorities, we next evaluate whether primary voters with a core issue priority differ from primary voters without one.

## How Primary Voters with Core Issue Priorities Differ

The preceding analyses establish that core issue priorities are common among primary voters and more prevalent among primary participants than among co-partisans who do not participate in primary elections. Prevalence alone, however, does not establish whether the voters who hold these priorities possess characteristics that increase their potential influence over the incentives candidates face or the type of representational demands they may create. We therefore compare primary voters with and without a core issue priority along three dimensions: political attention, political participation, and operational ideological extremity. Greater attention and participation would make these voters more likely to monitor candidates, make their preferences visible, and act on those preferences, while greater operational extremity would indicate that they bring distinct positional demands to primary elections. Consistent with our expectations, we anticipate that primary voters with a core

Figure 3: Political Attention




*Note:* Figure plots mean levels of political attention among primary voters with and without a core issue priority. Political attention is rescaled to range from zero to one within each survey, with higher values indicating greater political attention. Thick and thin lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Comparisons should not be made across surveys as question wording and number of scale items differ.

issue priority will report greater political attention, participate at higher rates, and hold more operationally extreme policy preferences than primary voters without one.

We begin by comparing their levels of political attention and political participation across the three surveys. Each survey includes a question measuring how closely respondents follow or pay attention to politics. In the PES, respondents were asked whether they were very interested, somewhat interested, or not interested in the U.S. Senate campaign in their state. In the CES, respondents were asked whether they follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all. In the Verasight survey, respondents were asked how closely they pay attention to information about what is going on in government and politics on a five-point scale ranging from not closely at all to extremely closely. Because the response scales differ across surveys, we rescale each measure to range from zero to one, with higher values indicating greater political attention.[3]

[3]Because question wording and number of scale items differ, comparisons should not be made across surveys.

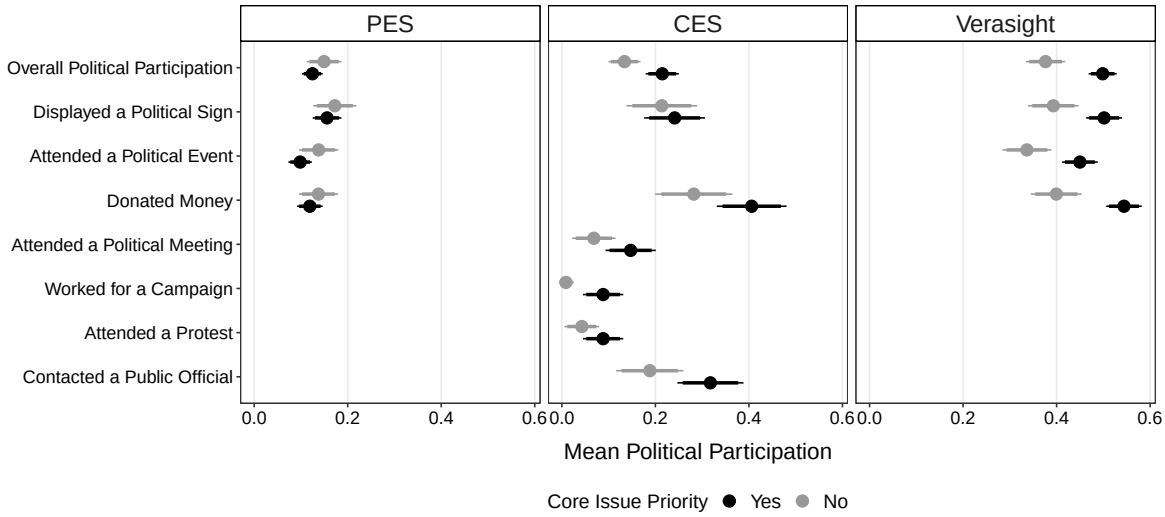
Figure 3 presents mean levels of political attention among primary voters with and without a core issue priority across each survey. We present the results using the rescaled measures described above and include 90% and 95% confidence intervals around each group mean. Across all three surveys, we find evidence that primary voters with a core issue priority report significantly higher levels of attention to politics than primary voters without one. In the PES, primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.71 on the rescaled political attention measure compared to 0.65 among primary voters without one (diff=0.07, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, CES primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.90 compared to 0.85 among primary voters without one (diff=0.05, $p < 0.10$). Finally, in the Verasight sample, primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.74 compared to 0.66 among primary voters without one (diff=0.08, $p < 0.01$).

We next turn to self-reported political participation. Each survey asks respondents to report whether they engaged in several political activities, including displaying a political sign, attending a political event, and donating money. Importantly, the PES asks specifically about self-reported participation in support of an individual candidate in the upcoming U.S. Senate primary, while the CES and Verasight surveys capture self-reported political participation more broadly. We examine each available activity separately and create an overall measure equal to the proportion of activities in which a respondent reported participating.[4]

Figure 4 presents levels of self-reported political participation among primary voters with and without a core issue priority across each survey. Across the CES and Verasight surveys, we find evidence that primary voters with a core issue priority report higher levels of political participation than primary voters without one. In the CES, primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.21 on the overall participation measure compared to 0.13 among primary

[4]The PES includes three binary items measuring whether respondents report displaying a campaign sign, attending a political event, or donating money in support of a candidate in the upcoming U.S. Senate primary. The Verasight survey asks how often respondents engaged in the same three activities during the past four years; we code respondents who report participating at least once as one. The CES asks whether respondents engaged in six activities during the past year: attending a local political meeting, displaying a political sign, working for a campaign, attending a protest, contacting a public official, and donating money. Because the reference periods, question wording, and number of items differ, comparisons should be made within surveys rather than across surveys.

Figure 4: Self-Reported Political Participation




*Note:* Figure plots the proportion of primary voters with and without a core issue priority who report engaging in each form of political participation. Overall self-reported political participation equals the proportion of available activities in which a respondent reports participating. Thick and thin lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Blank rows indicate that an activity was not included in a survey. Comparisons should be made within surveys rather than across surveys because question wording and available activities differ.

voters without one (diff=0.08, $p < 0.01$). Primary voters with a core issue priority also report significantly higher levels of participation for four of the six individual activities. Similarly, Verasight primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.50 on the overall measure compared to 0.38 among primary voters without one (diff=0.12, $p < 0.01$). This pattern holds across all three individual activities in the Verasight survey ($p < 0.01$ for each).

In contrast, we find no evidence that primary voters with a core issue priority report higher levels of participation in the PES. Primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.12 on the overall measure compared to 0.15 among primary voters without one (diff= $-0.02$, $p > 0.10$), and none of the individual differences are statistically significant. One potential explanation is that the PES questions ask specifically about participation in support of an individual candidate in the upcoming U.S. Senate primary. By contrast, the CES and Verasight surveys capture broader forms of political participation that are not tied to a particular candidate or primary election. Voters with a core issue priority may therefore be

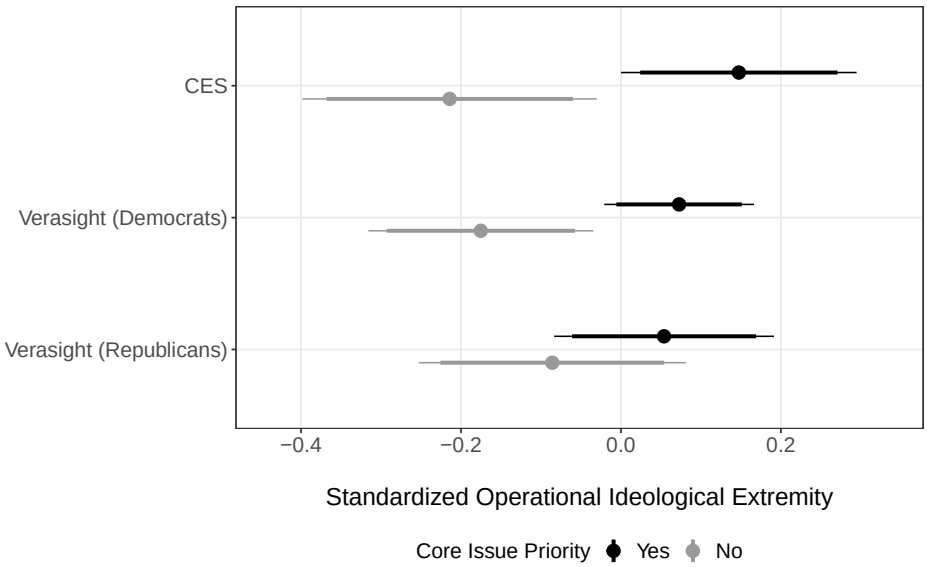
more politically active generally without necessarily participating on behalf of an individual primary candidate.

We finally examine whether primary voters with a core issue priority hold more ideologically extreme policy opinions than primary voters without one. The CES includes its standard battery of questions measuring respondents' positions across a range of policy issues. For the Verasight survey, we constructed separate policy batteries for Democratic and Republican primary voters. These batteries include questions across several policy domains that were selected to distinguish among voters within each party. We use responses to these questions to estimate respondents' operational ideology using item response theory (IRT) models. We estimate a single IRT model using the standard CES policy battery and separate IRT models for Democratic and Republican primary voters using the party-specific Verasight batteries. We then orient the resulting measures so that higher values indicate greater ideological extremity and standardize each measure within the sample in which it was estimated. Because the PES does not include a comparable set of policy questions, this analysis is limited to the CES and Verasight samples.[5] As noted above, we expect primary voters with a core issue priority to hold more operationally extreme policy positions than primary voters without one.

Figure 5 presents mean levels of operational ideological extremity among primary voters with and without a core issue priority. We present the results using the standardized measures described above and include 90% and 95% confidence intervals around each group mean. In the CES, primary voters with a core issue priority average 0.15 on the standardized operational ideological extremity measure compared to $-0.21$ among primary voters without one (diff=0.36, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, among Democratic primary voters in the Verasight sample, those with a core issue priority average 0.07 compared to $-0.18$ among those without one (diff=0.25, $p < 0.01$). Among Republican primary voters in the Verasight sample, those with a core issue priority also have higher levels of operational ideological extremity, averaging

[5]The full list of policy questions and additional details on the construction of the operational ideology measures are presented in Appendix B.

Figure 5: Operational Ideological Extremity




*Note:* Figure plots mean levels of operational ideological extremity among primary voters with and without a core issue priority. Operational ideological extremity is standardized within each survey, with higher values indicating more extreme policy positions. Thick and thin lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. The analysis is limited to the CES and Verasight samples. Comparisons should not be made across samples because the policy questions and resulting scales differ.

0.05 compared to −0.09 among those without one. However, this difference is smaller and is not statistically significant (diff=0.14, $p = 0.20$). Taken together, these results provide evidence in the CES and among Democratic primary voters in the Verasight sample that voters with a core issue priority hold more ideologically extreme policy positions than voters without one, although this pattern is not statistically significant among Republican primary voters in Verasight.

# Core Issue Priorities and Candidate Choice

Thus far, we have shown that voters with a core issue priority make up a clear majority of primary electorates. We also find that these voters are more politically attentive across surveys, report higher levels of political participation in two of our three surveys, and often hold more extreme policy positions than primary voters without core issue priorities. These results suggest that voters with a core issue priority may be an especially consequential part

of the primary electorate. However, for core issue priorities to shape the incentives candidates and members face, primary voters with these priorities must reward candidates for addressing the issues they prioritize. We therefore evaluate whether primary voters are more likely to support candidates who address their core issue priority and whether candidates receive an additional benefit from taking more extreme positions on that issue. We examine these questions using a survey experiment in the Verasight sample and observational evidence from the PES.

## Survey Experiment (Verasight)

To evaluate whether core issue priorities shape candidate choice, we conducted a repeated-measure, paired-profile conjoint experiment in the Verasight survey.[6] Because our aim is to evaluate how candidate rhetoric affects primary voters' preferences who have a core issue priority, we limit our analysis to primary voters who articulated a core issue priority with policy-relevant content. Each respondent evaluated four pairs of hypothetical co-partisan congressional candidates, producing four candidate-choice decisions and eight candidate-level evaluations. Respondents evaluated candidates from the party with which they identified or whose primary they typically reported voting in.

The experiment varied whether each candidate addressed the respondent's core issue priority and whether the candidate took a moderate or relatively extreme position. Each candidate independently had a 35% probability of addressing the respondent's core issue priority. Candidates not assigned to address the respondent's core issue priority discussed another randomly selected policy area, with the respondent's classified core issue priority removed from the set of possible alternatives. Position extremity was assigned separately, with each candidate having an equal probability of taking a moderate or relatively extreme position. This design produces candidates who address the respondent's core issue priority and take either a moderate or extreme position, as well as candidates who discuss another

[6]Pre-registration can be found here: `https://osf.io/wmfpq/overview?view_only=80afe844217d4ea0bb293ebb411f70b8`.

issue and take either a moderate or extreme position. We use this variation to evaluate whether primary voters reward candidates for addressing their core issue priority and whether this reward depends on the position the candidate takes.

One challenge of our research design is that the experimental manipulation depends on the core issue priority respondents mention in an open-ended survey question. We therefore cannot pre-program the issue respondents mention into candidate statements before fielding the survey. To overcome this challenge, we rely on recent advances that incorporate generative large language models into surveys to create tailored conjoint experiments (Velez and Liu 2025). Our survey pipeline proceeds as follows. Respondents first indicate whether they care more about a political issue than most other issues. Respondents who answer yes then provide a brief open-ended description of that issue. The survey sends this response to GPT-4o-mini through two API calls. The first determines whether the response contains policy-relevant issue content and classifies the response into a pre-defined set of broad policy areas. Responses that contain policy content but do not fit one of the predefined categories are classified as other, while blank, filler, candidate-only, party-only, and other responses without policy content are classified as containing no issue content. Only respondents whose responses contain policy-relevant issue content proceed to the candidate-choice experiment. The second API call produces a brief summary of the respondent's core issue priority in fewer than five words.

As respondents proceed to the conjoint experiment, we randomize whether each candidate addresses the respondent's core issue priority and whether the candidate takes a moderate or relatively extreme position. When a candidate is assigned to address the respondent's core issue priority, the brief summary generated from the open-ended response serves as the issue the candidate should address. When a candidate is assigned to address another issue, we randomly select a different policy area after removing the respondent's classified core issue priority from the set of possible alternatives. Through an API call, we then generate a candidate's issue statement using the following prompt:

> Create a campaign policy statement from a [moderate/extreme] [RESPONDENT PARTY] candidate running for Congress about [ASSIGNED POLICY AREA/CORE ISSUE SUMMARY]. In the statement, make sure you take the position a [moderate/extreme] [RESPONDENT PARTY] would take. Keep the statement about 25 words, write in the first person, do not explicitly state the candidate's ideology and do not mention whether the candidate is already in office.

Candidate statements are generated using GPT-4o-mini for all eight candidates independently. This procedure allows us to tailor the experimental manipulation to the specific issue each respondent prioritizes while preserving random assignment of whether candidates address that issue and the positions they take. Candidate profiles also randomly vary gender, race, age, occupation, and incumbency. In half of the candidate pairs, one randomly selected candidate was identified as an incumbent member of Congress; the remaining pairs included two non-incumbent candidates. Appendix C includes the full experimental manipulations.

After viewing each pair, respondents indicated whether they would be more likely to support Candidate A, Candidate B, or neither candidate in a co-partisan primary election. Respondents also rated each candidate separately on a seven-point scale ranging from very unfavorable to very favorable. We use the candidate-choice outcome to evaluate whether the respondent selected each candidate and the favorability outcome to measure the respondent's evaluation of each candidate independent of the alternative profile.

Table 2 presents the results evaluating whether primary voters reward candidates for addressing their core issue priority. Panel A presents logistic regression model results predicting candidate choice, and Panel B presents OLS regression model results predicting candidate favorability. We first focus on the preregistered aggregate models in the left-most columns. Across both candidate choice and favorability, primary voters are significantly more likely to support candidates who discuss their core issue priority. We also find similar positive and statistically significant effects in the secondary subgroup models by party, as discussed in the preregistration.

Figure 6 provides a more substantive interpretation of these results. In the aggregate, changing a candidate from discussing another issue to discussing the respondent's core issue

Table 2: Core Issue Priorities and Candidate Support

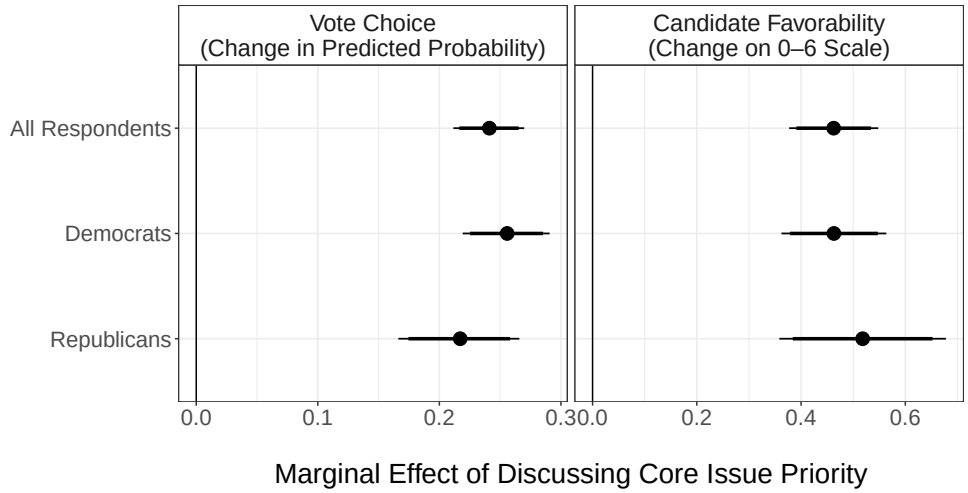
| *Panel A: Vote Choice* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority | 1.006*** | 1.074*** | 0.922*** |
| | (0.065) | (0.082) | (0.112) |
| Candidate Attribute Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |
| *Panel B: Candidate Favorability* | | | |
| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority | 0.463*** | 0.463*** | 0.518*** |
| | (0.044) | (0.051) | (0.082) |
| Candidate Attribute Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |

*Note:* Panel A reports logit estimates predicting candidate choice. Panel B reports OLS estimates predicting candidate favorability on the original zero-to-six scale. All models include controls for position extremity, occupation, gender, race or ethnicity, age, and candidate order. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. The pooled models in the left-most columns constitute the preregistered tests; the party-specific models are secondary subgroup analyses discussed in the preregistration. Full model results are presented in Appendix D. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

priority increases the predicted probability of selecting that candidate from 0.393 to 0.634. This represents a 24.1 percentage-point increase in candidate support. The estimated effects are similar across parties. Discussing the respondent's core issue priority increases the predicted probability of selecting the candidate by 25.6 percentage points among Democratic primary voters and 21.7 percentage points among Republican primary voters. We find a consistent pattern for candidate favorability. Candidates who discuss the respondent's core issue priority receive favorability ratings that are 0.463 points higher in the aggregate, 0.463 points higher among Democratic primary voters, and 0.518 points higher among Republican primary voters on the original zero-to-six scale. Taken together, these results clearly support H3 and show that addressing a primary voter's core issue priority produces a substantively meaningful increase in candidate support.

Having established that primary voters reward candidates for addressing their core issue priority, we next evaluate whether this reward depends on the candidate's position on that

Figure 6: Marginal Effects of Discussing a Core Issue Priority on Candidate Support




*Note:* Figure plots the marginal effect of discussing the respondent's core issue priority rather than another issue. Vote-choice estimates represent average changes in predicted probability calculated using an observed-values approach. Candidate favorability estimates represent changes on the original zero-to-six scale. Thin and thick lines represent 95% and 90% confidence intervals, respectively. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

issue. As discussed in our pre-registered hypothesis (H4), we expect candidates to receive an additional benefit when they both address the respondent's core issue priority and take a relatively extreme position on that issue. To evaluate this expectation, we interact whether the candidate discusses the respondent's core issue priority with whether the candidate takes an extreme rather than a moderate position. Because a moderate position serves as the reference category, a positive interaction indicates that the benefit of discussing the respondent's core issue priority is larger when the candidate takes an extreme position.

Table 3 presents the results. Panel A presents logistic regression models predicting candidate choice, while Panel B presents OLS models predicting candidate favorability. We first focus on the preregistered aggregate models in the left-most columns. The lower-order coefficients show two clear patterns. Among candidates who take moderate positions, discussing the respondent's core issue priority significantly increases both candidate choice and favorability. Among candidates who discuss another issue, taking an extreme rather than a moderate position significantly increases both outcomes. Primary voters therefore reward

Table 3: Core Issue Priorities, Position Extremity, and Candidate Support

| *Panel A: Vote Choice* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority | 0.956*** | 0.942*** | 1.059*** |
| | (0.091) | (0.113) | (0.155) |
| Extreme Position | 0.377*** | 0.177** | 0.820*** |
| | (0.073) | (0.086) | (0.143) |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority × | 0.103 | 0.271* | −0.275 |
| Extreme Position | (0.127) | (0.155) | (0.226) |
| Candidate Attribute Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |
| *Panel B: Candidate Favorability* | | | |
| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority | 0.449*** | 0.444*** | 0.538*** |
| | (0.060) | (0.067) | (0.119) |
| Extreme Position | 0.251*** | 0.153** | 0.470*** |
| | (0.054) | (0.059) | (0.108) |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority × | 0.027 | 0.038 | −0.039 |
| Extreme Position | (0.080) | (0.088) | (0.155) |
| Candidate Attribute Controls | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |

*Note:* Panel A reports logit estimates predicting candidate choice. Panel B reports OLS estimates predicting candidate favorability on the original zero-to-six scale. Discussing another issue and taking a moderate position constitute the reference categories. All models include controls for occupation, gender, race or ethnicity, age, and candidate order. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. The pooled models in the left-most columns constitute the preregistered tests; the party-specific models are secondary subgroup analyses discussed in the preregistration. Full model results are presented in Appendix D. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

candidates for addressing their core issue priority while also imposing a general penalty on candidates who take moderate positions.

However, we find little evidence of our hypothesis that there is an increased benefit for taking an extreme position on the respondent's core issue priority. The interaction estimates are positive in both aggregate models, but neither is statistically significant. The benefit of discussing a respondent's core issue priority does not become significantly larger when taking an extreme position on that issue. The party-specific models produce the same general conclusions. Discussing the respondent's core issue priority has a positive and statistically

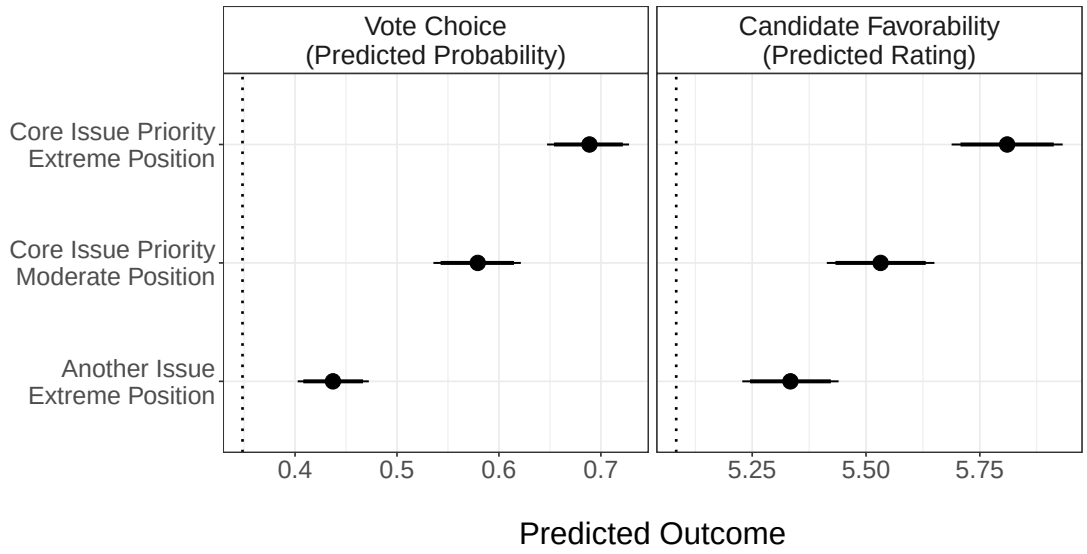
significant coefficient in every model, while taking an extreme position has a positive and statistically significant coefficient. The interaction is only statistically significant at the 0.10 level for candidate choice among Democratic primary voters and is statistically insignificant in the remaining party-specific models.

The substantive implications of these results for primary election outcomes and candidate incentives depend on the relative magnitude of the benefit from addressing the respondent's core issue priority and the benefit from taking an extreme position. We therefore turn to predicted outcomes from the aggregate models to show the ordering of the four candidate profiles and compare the relative magnitude of these effects. Figure 7 presents the predicted probability of selecting each candidate profile and the predicted favorability rating for that candidate. The dotted line represents the predicted outcome for a candidate who takes a moderate position on another issue, while the three point estimates present the remaining combinations of issue and position. Party-specific models are consistent with the results presented here.

These comparisons show that the benefit from addressing the respondent's core issue priority is substantially larger than the benefit from taking an extreme position. Among candidates taking moderate positions, addressing the respondent's core issue priority increases the predicted probability of support by 23.1 percentage points and favorability by 0.45 points. Among candidates taking extreme positions, addressing the respondent's core issue priority increases the predicted probability of support by 25.2 percentage points and favorability by 0.48 points. By comparison, moving from a moderate to an extreme position increases the predicted probability of support by between 8.9 and 11.0 percentage points and favorability by between 0.25 and 0.28 points.

As a result, a candidate who takes a moderate position but addresses the respondent's core issue priority receives considerably more support than a candidate who takes an extreme position on another issue. The moderate candidate who addresses the respondent's core issue priority is 14.2 percentage points more likely to be selected and receives a favorability rating

Figure 7: Core Issue Priorities, Position Extremity, and Predicted Candidate Support




*Note:* Figure presents average predicted outcomes from the aggregate models reported in Table 3. The left panel presents the predicted probability of selecting the candidate, while the right panel presents predicted candidate favorability on the original zero-to-six scale. The dotted vertical line represents the predicted outcome for a candidate who discusses another issue and takes a moderate position. Points represent the remaining three combinations of issue and position. Thick and thin lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively. Predictions are estimated by varying whether the candidate discusses the respondent's core issue priority and takes a moderate or extreme position, while holding the remaining candidate attributes at their observed values.

0.20 points higher than the extreme candidate who discusses another issue. Primary voters therefore prefer extreme candidates to moderate candidates when the candidates address the same issue. However, whether a candidate addresses the voter's core issue priority is more consequential than whether the candidate takes a moderate or extreme position.

## Observational Data (PES)

Although the survey experiment lets us isolate whether addressing a voter's core issue priority and the position taken on that issue affects candidate support, it also ensures respondents receive information about the issues candidates address and the positions they take. This differs from the information environment voters face during actual primary elections. Even as a highly attentive subset of the electorate (Sides et al. 2020), primary voters often possess limited knowledge about the candidates running and may not know where candidates stand

on the issues that separate them (Colao et al. 2025). Candidate communication can only shape vote choice if information about the candidate reaches voters and becomes part of their evaluations. We therefore complement the experiment with an observational analysis connecting PES respondents' vote intentions to the campaign communication of actual candidates. This allows us to evaluate whether the relationship identified in the experiment also appears in real primary elections, where exposure to candidate information is neither guaranteed nor experimentally controlled.

We collect campaign website content from 36 of 40 Democratic and Republican candidates who appeared on the ballot in the 2024 U.S. Senate elections in Michigan, Nevada, and California.[7] Campaign websites provide a record of the issue information candidates choose to make publicly available during a campaign (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). Importantly, we do not assume that many of our respondents, if any, visited these websites directly. However, candidate messages presented on campaign websites may also reach voters through news coverage, social media, campaign events, and other forms of political communication. The website content therefore measures the issues and positions candidates publicly emphasized rather than respondents' direct exposure to a particular communication source.

To collect candidates' campaign website content, we follow the same website collection process as CampaignView (Porter, Case and Treul 2025). We first identified each candidate's official campaign website through online databases such as Politics1 and Ballotpedia, as well as Google searches. We then collected issue-related content from dedicated policy and issue pages. For each platform point, we classified statements using the same major topic categories as CampaignView, which we also use for respondents' core issue priorities. This enables us to link survey respondents' core issues with candidate communication.

In addition, for each policy area, we determine whether candidates communicate relatively moderate or extreme positions on that issue. Congressional candidates often adopt a

[7]Eric Early (Republican), James Macauley (Republican), Raji Rab (Democrat) and John Rose (Democrat) in California did not have issue content on their websites, and therefore we exclude them from our analysis. In total, these candidates garnered 4.03% of the primary vote share in the California primary.

mix of moderate and extreme positions across policy areas (Case and Porter 2026). Classifying candidates as uniformly moderate or extreme would therefore obscure the issue-specific positions that voters encounter. While computational approaches to issue-specific scaling exist, these approaches have been developed for a limited set of policy areas and require sufficient text, issue-specific reference statements, and separate estimation and validation procedures for each issue. Given the number of candidates and policy statements in our analysis, constructing and validating separate computational measures for each policy area would add substantial measurement complexity without a clear advantage over directly hand-coding the positions candidates communicate. We therefore hand-code each candidate's position within each policy area as relatively moderate or extreme for the candidate's party. Two authors independently code every candidate–policy area. When the two authors disagree, a third author independently codes the candidate–policy area, providing a majority decision for the final measure.

The PES asks respondents which candidate they intend to support in the upcoming Senate primary. Unlike the candidate-choice experiment, respondents make this decision within the information environment of an actual primary campaign. For respondents who articulate a core issue priority, we link their issue to the content presented on each candidate's campaign website. This allows us to evaluate whether candidates who address the respondent's core issue priority are more likely to receive that respondent's support and whether candidates receive an additional benefit from taking a relatively extreme position on that issue. As in our experimental analysis, we include only primary voters with a core issue priority.

To evaluate our hypotheses, we structure the PES data at the respondent-candidate level. In this setup, each observation pairs a respondent who articulates a core issue priority with a candidate running in the respondent's intended party primary.[8] The dependent variable for each observation indicates whether the respondent intends to support the candidate or not in the election. Our first model evaluates whether candidates are more likely to receive

[8]For respondents in California, we pair them with candidates from the party of the primary they would have voted in if forced to choose a partisan primary.

a respondent's vote when their campaign website addresses the same major policy area as the respondent's core issue priority. We estimate a logistic regression model with candidate fixed effects and standard errors clustered by respondent. The candidate fixed effects allow us to control for all candidate-specific characteristics that would affect vote choice across respondents, including differences in candidate quality, campaign resources, incumbency, and overall electoral support. The coefficient is therefore identified by comparing support for the same candidate across voters whose core issue priorities the candidate does and does not address. Clustering the standard errors by respondent accounts for the fact that each respondent appears once for every candidate included in their choice set.

Our second model evaluates whether candidates receive an additional benefit from taking an extreme position on the respondent's core issue priority. We distinguish among candidates who address the respondent's core issue priority and take a moderate position (reference category), candidates who address the issue and take an extreme position, and candidates who do not address the issue. Table 4 presents the results. Column 1 evaluates whether candidates are more likely to receive a respondent's vote when their campaign website addresses the respondent's core issue. Consistent with our experimental results, we find a positive and statistically significant coefficient, indicating that candidates who address the respondent's core issue priority receive greater support than the same candidates receive among voters whose core issue they do not address.

The right-most column of Table 4 distinguishes between candidates who address the respondent's core issue priority and take moderate or extreme positions and candidates who do not address the issue. Our results show that candidates who take an extreme position on a respondent's core issue do not receive significantly more support than candidates who take a moderate position. By contrast, candidates who do not address the respondent's core issue priority receive significantly less support than candidates who address the issue and take a moderate position. These observational results therefore produce the same general pattern as the survey experiment: candidates benefit from addressing a voter's core issue priority,

Table 4: Core Issue Priorities and Vote Choice in the PES

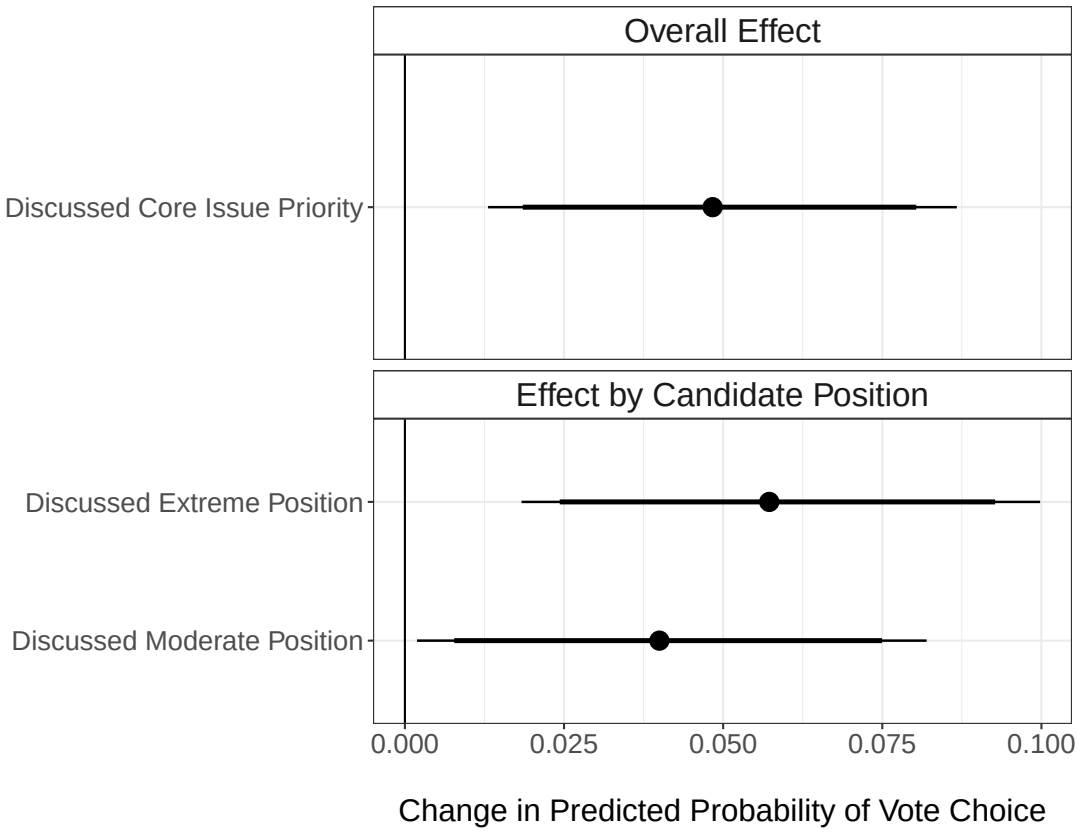
| | Vote Choice | |
|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) |
| Discusses Core Issue Priority | 0.482*** | |
| | (0.176) | |
| Extreme Position on Core Issue Priority | | 0.162 |
| ref: Moderate Position on Core Issue Priority | | (0.154) |
| Does Not Discuss Core Issue Priority | | −0.404** |
| ref: Moderate Position on Core Issue Priority | | (0.196) |
| Candidate Fixed Effects | ✓ | ✓ |
| Observations | 2,259 | 2,239 |

*Note:* Table reports logistic regression estimates predicting whether the respondent intends to support each candidate. Both models include candidate fixed effects. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. Candidates who receive no support from respondents in the sample are excluded from the analysis. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

but receive no statistically detectable additional benefit from taking a relatively extreme position on that issue.

To interpret our results substantively, we present the average marginal effect of discussing a respondent's core issue priority from both models above in Figure 8. Each marginal effect is relative to a candidate who does not discuss the respondent's core issue priority. The black point presents the overall relationship from the first model, while the gray points distinguish between candidates who take moderate and extreme positions on the respondent's core issue priority. Starting with the first model, Figure 8 shows that addressing a respondent's core issue priority is associated with a 4.8 percentage point increase in the predicted probability of receiving a respondent's vote. Although this substantive effect is smaller than the corresponding effect in the survey experiment, this should be unsurprising. In our survey experiment, respondents have a limited set of information about candidates presented right to them and evaluate them after short exposure. In real-world election environments that our observational results capture, respondents have a longer-running interaction with candidates. In this sense, an effect size of 4.8 percentage points is still substantively meaningful.

Figure 8: Candidate Communication and Vote Choice in the PES




*Note:* Figure presents average marginal changes in the predicted probability that a respondent intends to support a candidate. Candidates who do not discuss the respondent's core issue priority constitute the reference category. The black estimate presents the marginal effect of discussing the respondent's core issue priority from column 1 of Table 4. The gray estimates distinguish between candidates who take moderate and extreme positions on the respondent's core issue priority using the model in column 2. Thick and thin lines represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals, respectively.

The position-specific estimates produce the same general pattern. Relative to candidates who do not address the respondent's core issue priority, candidates who address the issue and take a moderate position are 4.0 percentage points more likely to receive the respondent's vote. Candidates who address the issue and take an extreme position are 5.7 percentage points more likely to receive the respondent's vote. Both marginal effects are positive and statistically significant. We should emphasize, as Table 4 shows, that the difference between discussing a respondent's core issue priority in a moderate versus an extreme way is not statistically different from one another. Moreover, the 1.7 percentage-point difference is substantively smaller than the marginal effect size we see for discussing a respondent's core

issue priority in general. The observational results therefore reinforce our central findings from the survey experiment. Namely, candidates receive a sizable benefit from addressing a primary voter's core issue priority, and that benefit exists both for candidates who take moderate positions on that issue and extreme positions on that issue.

# Conclusion

Primary elections shape political representation not only by determining which candidates advance to the general election, but also by defining the incentives candidates and elected officials face. This paper examines whether voters with core issue priorities constitute a politically consequential segment of congressional primary electorates and what these voters reward when evaluating candidates. Across three complementary surveys, we find that between 58% and 67% of primary voters identify a core issue priority and that these priorities are substantially more prevalent among primary voters than among co-partisans who do not participate in primary elections. Primary voters with core issue priorities also report greater political attention across all three surveys, generally participate in politics at higher rates, and tend to hold more operationally extreme policy preferences. These voters are therefore neither a small nor politically peripheral segment of primary electorates.

Most importantly, core issue priorities translate into meaningful electoral rewards. In the Verasight experiment, discussing a respondent's core issue priority rather than another issue increases the probability of candidate support by 24.1 percentage points. The PES produces the same general pattern in actual Senate primaries: candidates who address a respondent's core issue priority are 4.8 percentage points more likely to receive that respondent's vote. Although primary voters with a core issue priority generally prefer extreme candidates when the issue discussed remains the same, extremity does not significantly magnify the reward for addressing their core issue. Indeed, primary voters prefer a moderate candidate who addresses their core issue priority to an extreme candidate who discusses another issue.

Across experimentally controlled candidate evaluations and actual primary vote intentions, which issues candidates address is more consequential than whether they take moderate or extreme positions on those issues.

Taken together, these findings provide a different account of how primary voters shape political representation. They do not imply that positional extremity is irrelevant. Rather, they show that voters also create electoral incentives through the issues they reward candidates for placing on the political agenda. By addressing the priorities of attentive and generally active issue-specific constituencies, candidates can increase their electoral support without necessarily adopting more extreme positions. This paper identifies an incentive for agenda responsiveness; whether candidates alter their communication in response or subsequently prioritize these issues in office remains an important question for future research. Primary voters may therefore shape representation not only by rewarding where candidates stand, but also by determining which issues candidates have incentives to prioritize.

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# Core Issue Priorities and Candidate Choice in Congressional Primaries

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*Supporting Information*

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# A Survey Overview

## A.1 Sampling Overview

**Cooperative Election Study:** The 2024 Cooperative Election Study (CES) was administered online by YouGov using a matched national sample of U.S. adults. The survey was fielded in pre- and post-election waves and combined a set of common-content questions administered to all respondents with separate team-content modules designed by participating research teams. Our core issue priority questions were included in one of these modules, which was administered to 1,000 respondents and linked to common-content measures of political attitudes, demographic characteristics, and electoral participation. Following the election, respondents were matched to voter-file records containing validated turnout in the 2024 primary elections. Our resulting sample includes 329 validated primary voters and 671 respondents who did not participate in a primary election. We use the non-primary voters only when comparing the prevalence of core issue priorities across primary and non-primary voters.

**Primary Election Study:** The Primary Election Study (PES; Anderson et al. 2026) was fielded by Verasight during the 2024 U.S. Senate primary elections in California, Nevada, and Michigan. The study combined representative samples of the adult population in each state with large oversamples of likely primary voters in the party contests expected to be competitive. Respondents were recruited through registration-based sampling, dynamic online targeting, and the Verasight Community. The survey included a set of common-content questions administered to all respondents, followed by one of five randomly assigned team-content modules; our questions measuring core issue priorities were included in one of these modules. Following the elections, respondents' participation in the 2024 primary was validated using voter-file records. Our resulting sample includes 866 validated Senate-primary voters and 507 respondents who did not participate in a primary election. We use the non-primary voters only when comparing the prevalence of core issue priorities across primary and non-primary voters.

**Verasight Survey:** Verasight collected the primary-voter survey from July 29 to August 6, 2026. The sample consisted of 1,000 U.S. adults whose participation in a 2024 primary election was validated through matched L2 voter-file records using the "Other Primary Vote" validation. Respondents were recruited by email from the Verasight Community, whose members are initially recruited through random address-based sampling, random person-to-person text messaging, and dynamic online targeting. Verasight matched community members to the L2 voter file using demographic and personally identifiable information collected when members joined the panel, including date of birth and home address. Only respondents matched to a valid voter-registration record with validated 2024 primary participation were eligible for the survey. The final sample was further limited to respondents who provided active consent and passed Verasight's data-quality checks, including checks for duplicate or non-human responses, U.S. IP addresses, speeding, inattention, straight-lining, and nonsensical open-ended responses.

## A.2 Question Wording

- **(PES, CES, Verasight)** Some people have a political issue that they care about more than most other issues. They might think about the issue a lot, pay particular attention to news about that issue, focus on what political candidates say about that issue, or decide who to vote for on the basis of that issue. Is there an issue like that for you?
- **(PES, CES, Verasight)** In just a sentence or two, what issue is it that you care about?
- **(PES)** In which party's primary will you vote? Respondents who did not intend to vote were asked which party's primary they would vote in if they were to vote. California respondents were asked which party's primary they would select if the state used separate partisan primaries.
- **(CES, Verasight)** Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or what?
- **(Verasight)** In a typical election year, if you were to vote in a partisan primary election for the U.S. Congress, which party's primary would you vote in?
- **(PES)** Some people do not pay much attention to political campaigns, while others pay a lot of attention. Would you say that you have been very interested, somewhat interested, or not interested in the political campaigns for the U.S. Senate in your state so far this year?
- **(CES)** Would you say that you follow what is going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?
- **(Verasight)** How closely do you pay attention to information about what is going on in government and politics?
- **(PES)** Did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your house for an individual candidate in the upcoming primary election for the U.S. Senate?
- **(PES)** Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or similar events in support of an individual candidate in the upcoming primary election for the U.S. Senate?
- **(PES)** Did you give money to an individual candidate in the upcoming primary election for the U.S. Senate?
- **(CES)** During the past year, did you attend a local political meeting?
- **(CES)** During the past year, did you put up a political sign?
- **(CES)** During the past year, did you work for a candidate or political campaign?

- **(CES)** During the past year, did you attend a political protest, march, or demonstration?
- **(CES)** During the past year, did you contact a public official?
- **(CES)** During the past year, did you donate money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization?
- **(Verasight)** In the past four years, how often have you worn a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or placed a sign in your window or in front of your house?
- **(Verasight)** In the past four years, how often have you attended any political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners?
- **(Verasight)** In the past four years, how often have you given money to a political candidate, party, or organization?
- **(PES)** If you were voting today in the U.S. Senate primary in your state, which candidate would you vote for?
- **(Verasight)** If you were voting in a Democratic or Republican primary for the U.S. Congress, which candidate would you be more likely to vote for?
- **(Verasight)** How favorably would you rate each candidate, from very unfavorably to very favorably?

# B Operational Ideology

We construct measures of operational ideology using policy-attitude batteries included in the CES and Verasight surveys. Because the two surveys include different policy questions and were designed for different samples, we estimate the measures separately within each survey. The PES does not include a comparable battery of policy questions and is therefore excluded from these analyses.

## B.1 Cooperative Election Study

The CES includes a standard battery of binary questions asking respondents whether they support or oppose a range of policy proposals. We estimate a one-dimensional two-parameter logistic item response theory (IRT) model using the full CES Common Content sample. We code each item so that higher values represent more conservative responses. For proposals associated with liberal positions, opposition is coded as the conservative response. For proposals associated with conservative positions, support is coded as the conservative response. We then merge the resulting respondent scores with our CES team sample.

The resulting measure ranges from more liberal to more conservative operational ideology. To create a party-oriented measure of operational extremity, we reverse the measure for Democratic primary voters and retain its original orientation for Republican primary voters. Higher values therefore indicate policy preferences that are more extreme in the direction of the respondent's intended party primary. We standardize this measure within the CES analytical sample. The following CES Common Content variables are used to estimate the measure:

- *Liberal-support items:* `CC24_321a`, `CC24_321c`, `CC24_321e`, `CC24_321f`, `CC24_323a`, `CC24_323d`, `CC24_324a`, `CC24_324d`, `CC24_326a`, `CC24_326b`, `CC24_326c`, `CC24_326e`, `CC24_328b`, `CC24_328e`, `CC24_323f`, `CC24_340a`, `CC24_340b`, `CC24_340c`, `CC24_341b`, `CC24_341c`, and `CC24_341d`.

- *Conservative-support items:* `CC24_321b`, `CC24_321d`, `CC24_323b`, `CC24_323c`, `CC24_324b`, `CC24_324c`, `CC24_326d`, `CC24_326f`, `CC24_328c`, `CC24_328d`, `CC24_340d`, `CC24_340f`, `CC24_341a`, `CC24_444a`, `CC24_444b`, `CC24_444c`, `CC24_444d`, `CC24_444e`, and `CC24_444f`.

Complete question wording for these items is available in the 2024 CES Common Content codebook availible here: `https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X11EP6`.

## B.2 Verasight

The Verasight survey includes separate policy-attitude batteries for Democratic and Republican primary voters. These batteries were designed to distinguish among respondents within each party rather than across the electorate as a whole. Each battery contains six questions covering abortion, gun policy, energy, healthcare, immigration, and economic policy. Respondents indicate their level of support or opposition using a seven-point scale ranging from strongly oppose to strongly support.

We estimate separate one-dimensional graded-response IRT models for Democratic and Republican primary voters. The Democratic measure is oriented so that higher values indicate more liberal policy preferences. The Republican measure is oriented so that higher values indicate more conservative policy preferences. Support for federal investment in renewable energy and temporary increases in federal spending during economic downturns is reverse-coded in the Republican model because greater support represents a less conservative response. We combine the party-specific scores into a single measure in which higher values indicate greater operational extremity in the direction of the respondent's party. We standardize the Democratic and Republican measures within their respective estimation samples.

### B.2.1 Democratic Policy Questions

- Do you support or oppose eliminating all federal and state restrictions on abortion access, including limits based on stage of pregnancy?
- Do you support or oppose a mandatory federal gun buyback program that would require individuals to sell their firearms to the federal government?
- Do you support or oppose banning all new oil and gas drilling nationwide, including on private land?
- Do you support or oppose replacing private health insurance with a single, government-run health insurance program for all Americans, often referred to as "Medicare for All"?
- Do you support or oppose abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)?
- Do you support or oppose a federal jobs guarantee program that would ensure a government job for every American who wants one?

### B.2.2 Republican Policy Questions

- Do you support or oppose Congress passing a national law that bans abortions with no exceptions for rape, incest, or the life of the mother?
- Do you support or oppose repealing all federal gun laws regulating private firearm ownership?
- Do you support or oppose the federal government investing in the development of renewable energy sources like wind and solar power?
- Do you support or oppose repealing the Affordable Care Act without replacing it with another federal healthcare program?
- Do you support or oppose deporting all undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States, regardless of how long they have been in the country?
- Do you support or oppose allowing temporary increases in federal spending during economic downturns to stabilize the economy?

# C Survey Experiment Manipulations

The Verasight conjoint began by asking respondents to describe the political issue most important to them. GPT-4o-mini classified each response into one policy area: abortion, guns, crime, the economy, energy, the environment, government spending, democracy, healthcare, immigration, foreign affairs, social welfare, another policy area, or no issue content. Responses were considered policy relevant when they identified a concern that could plausibly be addressed through government action; blank, filler, candidate-only, and party-only responses were classified as containing no issue content. The model then converted each policy-relevant response into a short summary of the respondent's principal concern. This summary preserved the substance of the response while reducing it to fewer than five words. The resulting text served as the respondent's "core issue" in the conjoint.

Respondents completed four paired-choice tasks, producing evaluations of eight hypothetical candidates seeking their party's nomination for the U.S. House. Within each task, the two candidates belonged to the same party as the respondent's assigned primary. Candidate characteristics were independently randomized except for the constraints on incumbency described below. Assigned probabilities to profiles were based on realistic of probabilities of various profiles. We assigned candidate gender as man with probability 0.65 and woman with probability 0.35. Race or ethnicity was assigned as White (0.65), Black (0.15), Hispanic or Latino (0.13), or Asian American (0.07). Age was drawn from a truncated normal distribution with a mean of 57.9, a standard deviation of 10, and a range of 30 to 90 years. Nonincumbent occupations were lawyer (0.25), business owner (0.25), elected state or local government official (0.20), military veteran (0.10), teacher (0.07), doctor (0.07), farmer (0.03), or engineer (0.03). Each task had a 0.50 probability of including one incumbent member of Congress, with the incumbent assigned to Candidate A or Candidate B with equal probability; a task could not contain two incumbents.

Each candidate independently had a 0.35 probability of discussing the respondent's core issue. Otherwise, the candidate discussed an issue selected uniformly from abortion, guns, crime, the economy, energy, the environment, government spending, democracy, healthcare, or immigration. When the respondent's classified policy area appeared in this list, it was removed from the pool of alternative issues. Consequently, a task could contain two candidates discussing the respondent's core issue, one candidate doing so, or neither candidate doing so. Independently, each candidate was assigned either a moderate or relatively extreme position with equal probability.

GPT-4o-mini generated a first-person campaign statement of approximately 25 words for each candidate based on the candidate's assigned party, issue, and ideological position. The prompt was:

> Create a campaign policy statement from a [moderate/extreme] [party] candidate running for Congress about [assigned issue]. In the statement, make sure you take the position a [moderate/extreme] [party] candidate would take. Keep the statement about 25 words, write in the first person, do not explicitly state the candidate's ideology, and do not mention whether the candidate is already in office.

The generated statement was displayed alongside the candidate's age, gender, race or ethnicity, and occupation or incumbency status. After viewing each pair, respondents indicated whether they would be more likely to vote for Candidate A, Candidate B, or neither candidate in their party's congressional primary. They also rated each candidate separately on a seven-point scale ranging from very unfavorable to very favorable.

# D Survey Experiment Full Results

Table 5: Core Issue Priorities and Candidate Vote Choice: Full Results

| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discusses Core Issue | 1.006*** | 1.074*** | 0.922*** |
| | (0.065) | (0.082) | (0.112) |
| Extreme Position | 0.412*** | 0.264*** | 0.717*** |
| | (0.061) | (0.072) | (0.115) |
| Doctor | −0.079 | 0.186 | −0.548** |
| | (0.141) | (0.170) | (0.238) |
| State/Local Official | −0.004 | 0.082 | −0.209 |
| | (0.103) | (0.119) | (0.206) |
| Engineer | 0.303 | 0.354 | 0.188 |
| | (0.218) | (0.241) | (0.480) |
| Farmer | −0.048 | −0.125 | 0.012 |
| | (0.200) | (0.247) | (0.358) |
| Lawyer | −0.047 | 0.048 | −0.237 |
| | (0.091) | (0.108) | (0.165) |
| Incumbent | −0.053 | −0.029 | −0.096 |
| | (0.095) | (0.116) | (0.171) |
| Veteran | 0.105 | 0.124 | 0.040 |
| | (0.125) | (0.155) | (0.215) |
| Teacher | −0.061 | 0.114 | −0.500* |
| | (0.144) | (0.170) | (0.288) |
| Woman | 0.187*** | 0.322*** | −0.089 |
| | (0.062) | (0.075) | (0.109) |
| Black | 0.242* | 0.267* | 0.276 |
| | (0.132) | (0.154) | (0.244) |
| Hispanic/Latino | 0.147 | 0.147 | 0.228 |
| | (0.136) | (0.159) | (0.260) |
| White | 0.058 | −0.037 | 0.301 |
| | (0.119) | (0.137) | (0.226) |
| Age | −0.018*** | −0.020*** | −0.011** |
| | (0.003) | (0.004) | (0.005) |
| Candidate B | −0.038 | −0.097 | 0.068 |
| | (0.078) | (0.095) | (0.137) |
| Constant | 0.247 | 0.461* | −0.296 |
| | (0.218) | (0.264) | (0.394) |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |

*Note:* Table reports logit estimates predicting candidate choice. Discussing another issue, a moderate position, business owner, man, Asian American, and Candidate A constitute the reference categories. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. The pooled model in the left-most column constitutes the preregistered test; the party-specific models are secondary subgroup analyses discussed in the preregistration. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 6: Core Issue Priorities and Candidate Favorability: Full Results

| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discusses Core Issue | 0.463*** | 0.463*** | 0.518*** |
| | (0.044) | (0.051) | (0.082) |
| Extreme Position | 0.260*** | 0.166*** | 0.456*** |
| | (0.044) | (0.047) | (0.093) |
| Doctor | 0.028 | 0.202** | −0.278 |
| | (0.102) | (0.102) | (0.209) |
| State/Local Official | −0.052 | −0.019 | −0.188 |
| | (0.067) | (0.073) | (0.135) |
| Engineer | 0.121 | 0.182 | −0.132 |
| | (0.144) | (0.132) | (0.385) |
| Farmer | −0.038 | −0.076 | 0.009 |
| | (0.133) | (0.161) | (0.233) |
| Lawyer | 0.010 | 0.107 | −0.211* |
| | (0.063) | (0.071) | (0.117) |
| Incumbent | −0.016 | −0.041 | 0.016 |
| | (0.057) | (0.069) | (0.101) |
| Veteran | 0.153* | 0.180* | 0.075 |
| | (0.079) | (0.093) | (0.142) |
| Teacher | 0.015 | 0.111 | −0.343* |
| | (0.104) | (0.118) | (0.207) |
| Woman | 0.077** | 0.127*** | −0.025 |
| | (0.039) | (0.046) | (0.072) |
| Black | 0.065 | 0.137 | 0.016 |
| | (0.086) | (0.099) | (0.163) |
| Hispanic/Latino | −0.006 | 0.072 | −0.132 |
| | (0.083) | (0.089) | (0.181) |
| White | −0.050 | −0.036 | −0.017 |
| | (0.072) | (0.081) | (0.143) |
| Age | −0.009*** | −0.013*** | 0.000 |
| | (0.002) | (0.003) | (0.004) |
| Candidate B | −0.072* | −0.072* | −0.082 |
| | (0.037) | (0.041) | (0.077) |
| Constant | 5.611*** | 5.968*** | 4.797*** |
| | (0.155) | (0.180) | (0.284) |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |

*Note:* Table reports OLS estimates predicting candidate favorability on the original zero-to-six scale. Discussing another issue, a moderate position, business owner, man, Asian American, and Candidate A constitute the reference categories. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. The pooled model in the left-most column constitutes the preregistered test; the party-specific models are secondary subgroup analyses discussed in the preregistration. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 7: Core Issue Priorities, Position Extremity, and Candidate Vote Choice: Full Results

| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discusses Core Issue | 0.956*** | 0.942*** | 1.059*** |
| | (0.091) | (0.113) | (0.155) |
| Extreme Position | 0.377*** | 0.177** | 0.820*** |
| | (0.073) | (0.086) | (0.143) |
| Core Issue × Extreme | 0.103 | 0.271* | −0.275 |
| | (0.127) | (0.155) | (0.226) |
| Doctor | −0.076 | 0.189 | −0.564** |
| | (0.141) | (0.170) | (0.240) |
| State/Local Official | −0.004 | 0.083 | −0.208 |
| | (0.103) | (0.119) | (0.206) |
| Engineer | 0.305 | 0.359 | 0.190 |
| | (0.218) | (0.241) | (0.480) |
| Farmer | −0.046 | −0.120 | 0.007 |
| | (0.199) | (0.246) | (0.359) |
| Lawyer | −0.047 | 0.049 | −0.236 |
| | (0.091) | (0.108) | (0.165) |
| Incumbent | −0.052 | −0.027 | −0.099 |
| | (0.095) | (0.116) | (0.171) |
| Veteran | 0.105 | 0.121 | 0.033 |
| | (0.125) | (0.155) | (0.214) |
| Teacher | −0.064 | 0.111 | −0.481* |
| | (0.144) | (0.170) | (0.288) |
| Woman | 0.188*** | 0.326*** | −0.088 |
| | (0.062) | (0.075) | (0.109) |
| Black | 0.240* | 0.262* | 0.284 |
| | (0.132) | (0.154) | (0.243) |
| Hispanic/Latino | 0.145 | 0.144 | 0.235 |
| | (0.136) | (0.158) | (0.260) |
| White | 0.056 | −0.042 | 0.310 |
| | (0.119) | (0.137) | (0.226) |
| Age | −0.018*** | −0.020*** | −0.011** |
| | (0.003) | (0.004) | (0.005) |
| Candidate B | −0.037 | −0.096 | 0.064 |
| | (0.078) | (0.095) | (0.137) |
| Constant | 0.265 | 0.501* | −0.363 |
| | (0.220) | (0.265) | (0.397) |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |

*Note:* Table reports logit estimates predicting candidate choice. Discussing another issue, a moderate position, business owner, man, Asian American, and Candidate A constitute the reference categories. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. The pooled model in the left-most column constitutes the preregistered test; the party-specific models are secondary subgroup analyses discussed in the preregistration. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 8: Core Issue Priorities, Position Extremity, and Candidate Favorability: Full Results

| | All | Democrats | Republicans |
|---|---|---|---|
| Discusses Core Issue | 0.449*** | 0.444*** | 0.538*** |
| | (0.060) | (0.067) | (0.119) |
| Extreme Position | 0.251*** | 0.153** | 0.470*** |
| | (0.054) | (0.059) | (0.108) |
| Core Issue × Extreme | 0.027 | 0.038 | −0.039 |
| | (0.080) | (0.088) | (0.155) |
| Doctor | 0.029 | 0.202** | −0.280 |
| | (0.102) | (0.102) | (0.210) |
| State/Local Official | −0.052 | −0.019 | −0.188 |
| | (0.067) | (0.073) | (0.135) |
| Engineer | 0.121 | 0.183 | −0.132 |
| | (0.144) | (0.132) | (0.385) |
| Farmer | −0.038 | −0.076 | 0.008 |
| | (0.132) | (0.160) | (0.233) |
| Lawyer | 0.010 | 0.107 | −0.211* |
| | (0.063) | (0.071) | (0.117) |
| Incumbent | −0.016 | −0.041 | 0.016 |
| | (0.057) | (0.069) | (0.101) |
| Veteran | 0.153* | 0.179* | 0.074 |
| | (0.079) | (0.093) | (0.142) |
| Teacher | 0.014 | 0.111 | −0.341 |
| | (0.104) | (0.118) | (0.208) |
| Woman | 0.078** | 0.128*** | −0.024 |
| | (0.039) | (0.046) | (0.072) |
| Black | 0.064 | 0.137 | 0.017 |
| | (0.086) | (0.099) | (0.163) |
| Hispanic/Latino | −0.006 | 0.071 | −0.131 |
| | (0.083) | (0.089) | (0.181) |
| White | −0.051 | −0.037 | −0.016 |
| | (0.072) | (0.081) | (0.144) |
| Age | −0.009*** | −0.013*** | 0.000 |
| | (0.002) | (0.003) | (0.004) |
| Candidate B | −0.071* | −0.072* | −0.083 |
| | (0.037) | (0.041) | (0.077) |
| Constant | 5.615*** | 5.973*** | 4.788*** |
| | (0.156) | (0.182) | (0.288) |
| Observations | 5,318 | 3,616 | 1,702 |

*Note:* Table reports OLS estimates predicting candidate favorability on the original zero-to-six scale. Discussing another issue, a moderate position, business owner, man, Asian American, and Candidate A constitute the reference categories. Standard errors clustered by respondent are reported in parentheses. The pooled model in the left-most column constitutes the preregistered test; the party-specific models are secondary subgroup analyses discussed in the preregistration. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.