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We are grateful to John Wiley & Sons for permission to reproduce elements of our article 'A Choice-Based Measure of Issue Importance in the Electorate', which was previously published in the *American Journal of Political Science* (Hanretty et al., 2020). Elements of Chapter 7 and 8 draw on that article, particularly those passages focusing on the measurement of issue importance (Chapter 7), the headline issue importance estimates (Chapter 7), and issue importance by ideological dimension (Chapter 8).

Any academics studying British public opinion and electoral politics owe a debt to the British Election Study (BES) team (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). The BES produce rich, publicly available survey data and analysis that forms the basis of informed discussion of British electoral politics. We are especially grateful because, as we detail in Chapter 4, we drew our survey sample from among YouGov panelists who had participated in the BES, so that our data could be linked to the BES data (Fieldhouse et al., 2017) to allow for additional analysis.

In developing this book we have relied on a technical toolchain which various people have been involved in creating. We thank in particular the developers of R (R Core Team, 2020), RStudio (RStudio Team, 2020), RStan (Stan Development Team, 2024), and Bookdown (Xie, 2016).

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Contents

1
Introduction

This book is about the nature of mass opinion on public policies and the role of these opinions in the political choices voters make in a democracy.[1] Why do we care about public opinion on questions of public policy? The core thing that governments do is enact and implement policies. During election campaigns parties publish manifestos setting out various policies, and while these manifestos are not always delivered in full, they are usually good indicators of the policies parties will enact and implement while in government (Thomson et al., 2017). As such, by casting a ballot for one of these parties each voter 'claims [their] share, however infinitesimal, in the determination of the policies that will eventually emerge from the representation system' (Converse and Pierce, 1986, 13).

Does this mean that elections serve as a mechanism making public policy responsive to citizens' preferences? We might hope so given that government responsiveness to citizens' wishes is often considered a defining characteristic of a democracy (e.g., Pitkin, 1967; Dahl, 1971, 1989; Powell, 2004). A widely held and influential 'folk theory' of democracy (Achen and Bartels, 2016, 1) says that elections do indeed serve this purpose.[2] The folk theory envisions a world where 'ordinary people have preferences about what their government should do' (Achen and Bartels, 2016, 1) and, when making their voting choices, weigh up how parties' policy stances accord with their own policy preferences. This provides politicians with an incentive to promise and deliver more popular policies in order to secure (re)election, thus steering the policy direction of government in the directions that citizens collectively prefer. There may be many hands on the wheel of state, but the folk theory says

[1] We focus on mass opinion concerning policy on *position* issues, i.e., those issues characterized by disagreement over different potential policy alternatives (Butler and Stokes, 1969, 189). These are distinct from *valence* issues, where most voters agree on what the government should seek to do, and the key question is who can better deliver the desired outcome.

[2] Achen and Bartels describe this as a 'folk theory' because they think people who come across politics as part of their everyday life think about politics in this way; there is no pejorative intent. That doesn't mean that the folk theory is only held by such people, and never held by people for whom politics *is* their everyday life. Political scientists sometimes use a version of the folk theory. Converse and Pierce (1986, 285), for example, label this the 'utilitarian component of democratic theory'.

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that when more citizens are pushing one way than the other, the ship will tend towards the direction that the majority wants it to go.

Yet there are long-standing arguments among political scientists regarding whether and how mass policy preferences can serve as a starting point for policy-responsive democracy. For mass opinion to play this role, members of the public must possess, and make political choices based upon, meaningful policy preferences. Many political scientists believe that few members of the public have truly meaningful policy preferences on typical policy issues, and tend to perceive the public as lacking the capacity to make political choices based on policy considerations. Of course, whether or not voters pay attention to public policy issues when they vote, they will influence the policy outputs of their governments through their choices. Some have suggested that, due to voters' lack of real policy preferences and the many distractions from policy questions that are presented by real world politics, there is little meaningful sense in which citizens steer the policy direction of their governments. If you have a choice between a ship's captain who proposes one heading and another who proposes a different one, but select which to empower based on other considerations—who shares an identity with you, who gives more stirring speeches, or who wears the most stylish hat—you have influenced the direction of travel but have not made a meaningful choice about where to steer the ship. The ship of state may tend in one way or another as a result of elections, but its direction is not a result of citizens' purposeful choices about where they want the ship to go.

Which of these stylized accounts best reflects the realities of democratic governance depends substantially on how (or if) citizens engage with questions of public policy, how (or if) those views relate to one another, and how (or if) citizens translate those views into vote choices. It is the various perspectives on these questions that are the focus of this book.

Political science research on these questions has, in recent decades, been largely dominated by two opposing perspectives. On one side is what we refer to as the *ideological voter* account. According to this perspective, which has been advanced or adopted in a variety of studies across different countries (e.g., Nie et al., 1976; Heath et al., 1985, 1991, 2001; Kriesi et al., 2008; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Jessee, 2012; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Evans and Tilley, 2017, ch.3; Dalton, 2018; Caughey et al., 2019; Fowler et al., 2023; Simas, 2023), voters tend to develop opinions which are ideologically organized.[3] On any given issue, different voters prefer a variety of different policy

[3] These studies all view voters' issue opinions as ideologically structured and view ideological considerations as a key factor in voter decision-making. However, they vary in the relative emphasis they place on

alternatives. But various logical, psychological, and social mechanisms lead to *ideological correlations* in voters' opinions across issues: support for a particular policy alternative on one issue tends to be associated with support for a particular policy alternative on another issue, and more generally with support for particular alternatives on each of a large number of other issues. This means that voters' disagreements on various issues can be summarized as different positions on an underlying ideological dimension. Each position on that ideological dimension corresponds to a different bundle of opinions across issues.

The more tightly bound together voters' issue opinions are, the more we can use language like 'left' and 'right' or 'liberal' and 'conservative' to meaningfully describe the collections of policy opinions different voters develop across a broad range of issues. Not only this, but democratic policy responsiveness is better facilitated via ideological electoral competition (Downs, 1957). Provided parties or candidates offer policy packages structured according to similar ideological patterns, voters can choose between parties or candidates based on which one is closer to them on a small number of ideological dimensions (e.g., Jessee, 2012; Dalton, 2018; Simas, 2023)—e.g., in the simplest case, which is closer to them on a single left-right ideological dimension. By doing so, the voter will tend to choose a party closer to them in terms of their underlying issue-specific policy preferences. This means that parties and candidates have good electoral reasons to respond to voters' ideological positions (and thus their policy preferences) when they in turn adopt their own positions.

On the opposing side to the ideological voter account lies a second perspective which we refer to as the *innocent voter* account. The *classic* version of this account has its roots in works like Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969), which argue that voters simply lack the kind of structured policy views which seem to be required by the ideological voter model. These studies showed through surveys that citizens' reported opinions about major political issues of the day were not very highly correlated with one another, suggesting much of the public are 'innocent of ideology' (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, 3). Neither were those reported opinions very stable over time, suggesting that, on many issues, many citizens are innocent of well-formed, enduring opinions at all. Subsequent research has developed a *voter-as-follower* variant of the innocent voter account (e.g., Lenz, 2012; Achen and Bartels, 2016; Barber and Pope, 2019; Freeder et al., 2019). This says that citizens may

the different mechanisms inducing ideological structure, and the extent to which non-ideological factors (such as partisan identities or valence considerations) also explain voting behaviour.

sometimes, when surveyed, report stable and ideologically organized policy opinions, but that these often do not reflect meaningfully held and well-formed policy preferences. Instead, they often reflect citizens mimicking the ideologically structured policies espoused by the parties they already support. If those parties happen to change their policy positions, their supporters will follow suit and report different policy opinions. In other words, party policy positions are not so much responsive to citizen policy preferences, but instead serve as a force shaping those preferences.

The classic and voter-as-follower variants of the innocent voter account thus expect somewhat different patterns in the issue opinions measured by surveys. But both share a pessimism towards the idea that much of the public have well-formed preferences—ideologically structured or not—on any given policy issue. In an influential book, Achen and Bartels (2016) synthesize the various strands of the innocent voter account and argue that there just is not enough substance or structure to most citizens' policy opinions for them to play a major role in how citizens make political decisions such as choosing which candidates and parties to vote for. Instead, they suggest that those political choices are better understood as expressions of citizens' feelings towards and identifications with different social groups. In particular, Achen and Bartels stress the long-standing argument that political parties serve as particularly prominent social groups and that citizens often develop a lasting sense of identification with a particular party (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1969). They argue that it is these party identifications, not policy preferences, which serve as a fundamental driver of citizens' political choices. At election time, voters will often support whoever they think of as 'their' party rather than considering which party they agree with more on policy issues like 'affirmative action' or 'redistributive taxation', or with which party they are more generally ideologically aligned.

This book advocates for a different perspective on this enduring and fundamental debate in political science. While the ideological and innocent voter accounts both capture important features of mass opinion on public policy, we argue for the relevance of a third, *idiosyncratic voter* account. This account says that citizens do develop meaningful and stable policy opinions on varying subsets of issues, but that the combinations of policy opinions they form on these issues often lack ideological consistency, and in this sense are idiosyncratic.[4] Because they are meaningfully held and stable, these idiosyncratic policy opinions are also distinct from those expected by the classic

[4] As we explain in next chapter, we use the term 'idiosyncratic' in a non-pejorative sense to stress the distinctiveness of the collection of issue opinions a citizen holds, rather than to indicate that those opinions are somehow 'strange' or 'odd'.

version of the innocent voter account. Because they additionally lack ideological consistency, these idiosyncratic policy opinions are distinct from those expected by either the ideological voter account or the voter-as-follower version of the innocent voter account. Idiosyncratic policy opinions have the capacity to influence voters' political choices and therefore serve alongside genuinely held ideologically organized policy opinions as an additional starting point for democratic policy responsiveness. Yet whereas ideologically organized issue opinion simplifies politics, the prevalence of idiosyncratic issue opinions makes politics highly multidimensional, complex, and thus prone to volatility.

Although existing literature on mass policy attitudes has tended to overlook idiosyncratic opinion, sporadic studies have posited some theoretical arguments (e.g., Kinder, 1983; Hillygus and Shields, 2009) or provided indicative evidence (Hillygus and Shields, 2009; Broockman, 2016) for its prevalence. We contribute theoretically by building on these studies and drawing together various other elements of existing literature to develop an expanded account of why idiosyncratic policy opinion is likely to be widespread and consequential for political choices.

Our argument is based on a number of key points. First, although there are different logical, psychological, and social mechanisms which create ideological correlations across issues, these mechanisms can cut against one another, strengthening connections between some issues whilst weakening connections between others (Hillygus and Shields, 2009). Second, each psychological and social mechanism taken in isolation is likely to operate in diverse ways across individuals and issues. Voters with similar underlying values or principles and similar social group memberships may nonetheless develop different, idiosyncratic combinations of opinions across policy issues. This is because there are multiple values or principles (Marcus et al., 1974; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015), as well as multiple (Ford and Jennings, 2020; Dassonneville, 2022) and increasingly fluid (Dalton et al., 1984) social group memberships which could be brought to bear when considering any given issue. Voters are likely to differ as to which of those values, principles, and social group memberships are most relevant for each issue. Third, logical, psychological, and social mechanisms are likely to have weak effects because voters may not devote the cognitive resources necessary to link issues consistently to underlying principles (Lane, 1962; Kinder, 1983).

As well as setting out why citizens may often hold collections of issue opinions which lack ideological consistency, we explain why it is plausible that these collections of opinions are meaningfully held despite empirical

evidence—stressed by advocates of the classic innocent voter account—that most citizens seem to lack stable opinions on most issues. To do so we build on long-standing research concerning 'issue publics' (e.g., Krosnick, 1986, 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023). This issue publics literature can also be traced back to ideas suggested by Converse (1964). It says that most members of the public may not develop considered opinions on a wide range of policy issues, but are nonetheless likely to become interested in, and therefore form meaningful and stable opinions upon, varying subsets of issues.

Empirically, this book contributes by more systematically and comprehensively documenting the extent of idiosyncratic policy opinion among the public and the importance of this type of opinion for political choice. First, we provide a new empirical assessment of the nature of policy opinion among a large, representative sample of Britons. Unlike previous studies, our analysis directly quantifies the relative prevalence of ideological, idiosyncratic, and unstable policy opinion variation among voters. It thereby allows us to assess the relative ability of the ideological voter account, the idiosyncratic voter account, and both the classic and voter-as-follower variants of innocent voter account, to explain patterns in mass policy opinion. Second, we provide new experimental and observational evidence concerning the role of idiosyncratic, ideological, and unstable policy opinions in the political choices that individuals make.

Our analysis shows that both the ideological voter and innocent voter accounts explain important aspects of mass policy opinion and the degree of impact it has on voters' political choices. Nonetheless, idiosyncratic policy opinion is widespread on many issues and significantly shapes the political choices that voters make. We thus argue that these 'ideal type' models, taken together, enable us to better understand the different types of opinion variation on public policy questions and how they interact with the rest of the political system, particularly through elections.

As we shall explain, our findings have implications for debates about democratic policy responsiveness, party competition, and polarisation. The fact that a large share of non-ideological policy opinion is real and meaningful rather than simply ephemeral—and can therefore serve alongside real ideological opinions as a basis for policy-based political choices—enhances the prospects for policy responsive democracy. However, widespread idiosyncratic policy opinion also complicates electoral politics. It means there are a large number of potential dimensions of political conflict. This expands the opportunity for entrepreneurial parties to build new electoral coalitions by emphasising distinctive positions on neglected policy issues (Hillygus and

Shields, 2009; De Sio and Weber, 2014; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020) and enhances the potential for electoral shocks to disrupt politics by bringing new issues—and new electoral divides—to the fore (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). Yet it also limits political polarization by ensuring that voters who disagree on one policy issue are still reasonably likely to agree on some other policy issues (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008).

1.1 Overview of the book

In Chapter 2, we summarize the ideological and innocent voter accounts that have dominated political science debates about the nature and role of mass policy opinion. We then develop a theoretical argument for the relevance of idiosyncratic policy opinion. In Chapter 3, we trace the development of previous empirical scholarship on the nature and role of mass policy opinion. We show that although idiosyncratic policy opinion is not entirely absent from this empirical research, it has often been overlooked in the debate between the ideological voter and innocent voter perspectives.

Our empirical evidence comes primarily from a new panel survey recording British voters' opinions on 34 policy issues and their choices between candidates proposing different policy bundles. As argued in Chapter 3, we view Britain as an informative case study for understanding how mass opinion about public policy is organized and influences political choices.

In Chapter 4, we use our survey data to show that there is some ideological structure to our respondents' issue opinions. Those opinions are partially organized along the economic left-right and social liberal-conservative ideological dimensions highlighted in existing research. We discuss how these findings lend support to both the ideological voter account and the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account. However, other aspects of our findings highlight the limits of these accounts. In particular, the economic left-right and a social liberal-conservative dimensions of ideology together only explain around 20% of the variation in respondents' reported opinions on the 34 public policy issues. This leaves around four-fifths of variation unaccounted for.

In Chapter 5, we show that a greater share of this variation (37%) is attributable to idiosyncratic issue opinion. This type of issue opinion is stable over time for a given individual—reflecting a real attitude—but not ideologically organized along either of the familiar economic left-right or social liberal-conservative ideological dimensions. We provide evidence that this

idiosyncratic opinion occurs on politicized and non-politicized issues, and is widespread across different types of respondent. We show also that the patterns we find in our British data are similar to those found applying the same analysis to data on American voters.

In Chapter 6, we explore the remaining unexplained 43% of variation in how people respond to questions of public policy. We show that this variation in responses is unstable upon re-surveying the same individuals, and is therefore evidence of the type of opinion instability emphasized by the classic innocent voter account as indicative of nonattitudes—fleeting, cursory responses to survey prompts. Yet we also show that, although many respondents lack well-formed, stable opinions on many policy issues, most respondents do develop well-formed stable opinions on at least some policy issues. This finding is consistent with the issue publics logic upon which the idiosyncratic voter account builds.

Having established that there is real, stable variation in people's views on public policy questions, only a limited fraction of which is ideologically structured, the natural question to ask is whether these policy views matter? In Chapter 7 we analyse a series of survey experiments to show that, despite the fact that nonattitudes can explain a sizeable proportion of variation in policy opinions, individuals are nonetheless reasonably capable of making coherent, meaningful political choices based on policy considerations. This is because not only do most individuals have well-formed policy opinions on at least some issues, they also focus more on these issues in their political decision-making. As a result, people make political choices that make sense in terms of their issue opinions and are reasonably stable and predictable over time.

Chapter 8 then provides evidence that idiosyncratic issue opinion is, alongside ideologically organized issue opinion, consequential for people's political choices. We show that in our survey experiments it is stable policy opinions that are important for the political choices that respondents make, whether or not those issue opinions are ideologically predictable or idiosyncratic. We also analyse voting at the 2019 general election. This analysis shows that ideologically structured issue opinion helps us explain voting patterns in 2019. Nonetheless, when we additionally account for ideologically unpredictable opinion on a specific policy issue—Brexit—this substantially improves our ability to explain voting patterns.

Following these empirical chapters, Chapter 9 concludes by reviewing our findings and reflecting upon their implications for democratic politics and for political science research.

1.2 Scope

As an in-depth study of the structure and role of citizens' policy views, this book is very much concerned with the 'demand' side of democratic politics rather than the 'supply' side, the mass public rather than political elites. As such, we will not examine the behaviour of political elites directly. We stress, however, that this does not mean that we think elite behaviour is unimportant for democratic politics. Far from it. In our discussions of innocent voter-as-follower perspectives, for example, we will talk about how the policy opinions of citizens may come to be shaped by elites. Furthermore, as we will argue in Chapters 2 and 9, while widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion among the public is in some ways indicative of the limits of voter-as-follower perspectives, it is also likely to expand the scope for strategic political elites to shape electoral outcomes in other ways, by taking different combinations of positions on different issues and through placing different levels of emphasis on different issues. In this sense, this book presents theory and evidence that help map the contours of the public opinion landscape within which political elites in an established democracy operate.

We emphasize that, in doing so, this book does not make a strong case *against* either the ideological voter or innocent voter perspectives. Indeed, we view each as a partial account of how citizens engage with the policies that their governments enact and implement. Rather, our goal is to highlight what we take to be an additional important—and often unarticulated—component of the mass public's engagement with the work of government, which we characterize in the idiosyncratic voter perspective. These are not mutually exclusive perspectives. All are 'ideal type' accounts describing aspects of the reality of public opinion, and as such are caricatures in their strongest forms. Indeed the analysis of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 is oriented around attempting to characterize variation in expressed public attitudes as having ideological, idiosyncratic, and classically innocent (unstable) components.

It is also important to emphasize that this book does not argue that considerations relating to policy positions shape voting to the exclusion of considerations relating to policy competence, or to the exclusion of non-policy considerations. If a political party or candidate is feckless, or rash, or incompetent, or has failed to solve problems in the past, those are all good reasons not to vote for them no matter what policies they propose. Similarly, if a political party is implicitly or explicitly oriented away from one or more of the social groups that a voter identifies with, that may also be a good reason not to vote for them, even if the voter agrees with many of their policy

positions. Instead, our aim is to build a more coherent account of how policy opinion is likely to feed into voting choices, given how such opinion is structured. In our concluding chapter (Chapter 9) we situate policy position considerations in voting relative to other considerations that have received major discussion in the literature, particularly those around group identities and evaluations of government performance.

Thus while our focus in this book is on more clearly articulating and demonstrating the fact of and role of idiosyncratic issue opinion than past work has done, this is not because we think that it is more important or more fundamental than the other two types of policy opinion we describe—or indeed that it is necessarily more important than the other non-policy considerations that might shape how people vote. We think all of these are important to understanding the data we collect about public opinion and how political disagreement and conflict operate in established democracies. This book focuses on idiosyncratic opinion because it has been neglected in past research, and because understanding its role is a necessary part of any complete understanding of public opinion, political behaviour, and democratic politics.

2
Competing Accounts of Mass Policy Opinion

There are long-standing debates among political scientists about the nature of mass opinion on public policy issues and about the role of such opinion in electoral politics. In this chapter we set out the three general accounts of mass policy opinion examined in this book. We begin by discussing the two most prominent perspectives put forward in the literature. The first of these characterizes voters' opinions on issues as ideologically organized, and voters' electoral choices as being a function of their ideological closeness to different political parties. We call this the *ideological voter* account. The second general perspective is sceptical as to whether most voters possess ideologically organized issue opinions, or indeed, much of the time, meaningful issue opinions at all. Instead, voters' electoral choices—and, according to some, even the issue opinions they report in surveys—arise from non-policy considerations, such as partisan identities. We call this the *innocent voter* account.

Having set out these two dominant accounts of mass policy opinion and its role in electoral politics, we argue for the relevance of a third, alternative account. According to this *idiosyncratic voter* account, most voters do develop meaningful opinions on at least some policy issues, and these opinions do matter for their political choices. However, these policy opinions lack ideological organization. Instead, voters develop idiosyncratic—ideologically unpredictable—combinations of opinions across subsets of issues and weight different issues in idiosyncratic ways when they evaluate which parties and candidates to support. We argue that, although often overlooked in the existing literature, idiosyncratic policy opinion is likely to be widespread in the electorate, and therefore important for understanding democratic politics.

2.1 The Ideological Voter Account

When commentators discuss electoral politics, they often use terms like 'left-wing', 'centrist', and 'right-wing'—or in the US, 'liberal', 'moderate', and

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'conservative'. This type of language is not new: for example, in their study of British electoral politics in the 1960s, David Butler and Donald Stokes (1969, 200) observed that 'the words "left" and "right" are constantly used in everyday political comment and reporting'. A key reason that terms like these have been used so frequently for so long is that they provide an efficient shorthand to describe people who tend to hold certain collections of views. More 'left-wing' people are, for example, generally assumed to prefer more progressive tax, *and* more generous welfare support, *and* greater spending on public services, *and* less involvement of private companies in the running of those public services. More 'right-wing' people are generally assumed to prefer lower taxes, *and* less generous welfare support, *and* lower spending on public services, *and* greater involvement of private companies in public service provision. 'Centrist' people are assumed to take intermediate stances on all of these issues.

When they use these types of terms to talk about members of the electorate, the implicit assumption commentators are making is that voters' issue opinions are organized along common ideological lines. On any given issue, different voters can—and often do—have different views on the policies government should pursue. But these voters nevertheless share an understanding that support for certain policies on that one issue tends to go hand-in-hand with support for certain policies on other issues. In other words they share some understanding of which opinions on one issue are ideologically consistent with which opinions on other issues. To the extent that each voter develops a bundle of opinions across different issues that conforms to this shared understanding, only certain ideologically consistent combinations of opinions across issues will occur in the electorate. Continuing the left–right example above, voters will develop combinations of opinions that are consistent in how left- or right-wing they are across issues, but will not develop combinations of opinions that are left-wing on some issues and right-wing on other issues. It then becomes possible to *summarize* voters' opinions across many issues in terms of their positions on a single ideological *dimension*—here, a left–right dimension—and to think about politics much more simply in terms of disagreements along this dimension.

Following this logic, in this book we will define voters as having *ideological* issue opinions to the extent that their opinions on different issues reflect a common pattern of which opinions tend to go together across issues. We call this the degree of *ideological correlation* in voters' issue opinions. Our definition of ideological issue opinion in the electorate follows that used by Philip Converse (1964) in his classic 1964 essay *The Nature of Belief Systems*

in Mass Publics, except that he refers to the degree of ideological correlations in issue opinion as the degree of 'constraint' in those issue opinions.[1]

2.1.1 Sources of Ideological Issue Opinion

One important thing to stress about the definition of ideological issue opinion we have just set out is that it is a rather minimalist definition: it leaves open the mechanism by which voters' issue opinions come to combine in certain ways more frequently than others. Indeed, Converse (1964) and later authors (e.g., Jessee, 2012; Noel, 2014) argue that there are numerous plausible mechanisms which could generate common ideological correlations in issue opinions in an electorate. Because this diversity of mechanisms will matter for aspects of the argument we make later in this chapter, we lay out the main mechanisms identified by Converse here.

First, Converse (1964, 209) points out that it may be that certain stances on one policy issue tend to imply certain stances on another policy issue for strict *logical* reasons, and that voters pay heed to these reasons. For example, if voters were to recognize that a government cannot increase spending while simultaneously lowering the budget deficit and lowering tax revenues, their attitudes on spending, budget deficit, and tax would be connected as illustrated in Figure 2.1. As such, a preference for higher spending on public services would come to be associated with some combination of a preference for an increased budget deficit or increased tax revenue (Converse, 1964). Of course, voters might not actually follow the 'adding up' constraints

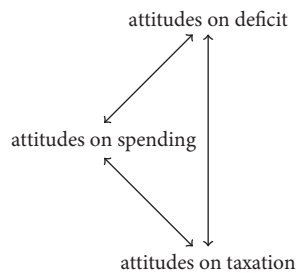

Figure 2.1 Logical constraints may causally connect views on spending, taxation, and budget deficit, such that views on these issues are correlated across voters and opinion change on one issue would lead to opinion change on the other issues.

[1] We will explain why we prefer the term 'ideological correlation' to 'constraint' shortly.

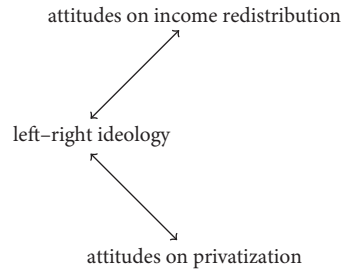

Figure 2.2 Psychological processes like ideological reasoning may induce correlations in views on different issues that lack direct logical relationships. Change in the underlying ideology would change views on multiple issues. Changing views on one issue may induce changes in views on other issues to the extent that it leads to changes in underlying ideology.

of government budgeting, and there is a large literature in political science assessing whether and when they in fact do so (Barnes et al., 2022, 207–209). More generally, ideological correlation in issue opinions will only come about due to this type of reasoning when voters have sufficiently deep understanding of logical connections between different policy issues.

Second, Converse (1964, 210–211) highlights how what he calls '*psychological*' mechanisms can induce ideological correlations in voters' issue opinions. One way this would occur is if voters derive their opinions on specific policy issues from an over-arching world-view, or philosophy, which sets out a set of desirable social outcomes and which prescribes certain policies across a broad range of issues to attain these outcomes. For example, Figure 2.2 illustrates how a voters' left–right ideological world-view might lead them to take particular positions when it comes to two different policy issues—privatization of public services and income redistribution—which lack direct logical relationships of the types discussed above. Voters who develop issue opinions through this type of process would be engaging in more fully fleshed ideological reasoning of the type sometimes invoked in ideological theories of politics (e.g., Hinich and Munger, 1997, 191).

Even if voters' issue opinions are not derived from a single over-arching world-view, other psychological mechanisms may still lead them to develop ideologically correlated issue opinions. Some past researchers emphasize how voters' opinions on broad collections of issues in a given domain may be derived from core values which they hold to be important and which are commonly understood to pertain to that domain (e.g., Rokeach, 1973). For example, voters' opinions on economic policy issues have been explained as a function of how much they value equality (e.g., Feldman, 1988; Heath et al.,

1994), while their opinions on social or moral issues have been explained as a function of how much they value freedom (Evans et al., 1996). Others emphasize deeper psychological needs and dispositions that may underpin ideological correlations in issue opinions. Jost and colleagues (Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2006), for example, argue that voters with a greater need to avoid uncertainty and threat are more likely to develop conservative convictions which constrain their economic and cultural issue opinions.

Third, Converse (1964, 211–213) stresses that ideological correlations in individuals' issue opinions may arise due to what he calls '*social*' mechanisms. Some of these mechanisms are rooted in a view of the mass electorate as made up of competing social groups, each defining a set of individuals who have common policy interests reflecting their common position in the social structure. If this is the case, and if individuals from the same group develop similar policy opinions across a range of issues based on their shared interests, this leads to ideological correlation in issue opinion. Social class groupings provide a classic example of this type of mechanism. Scholars of British and European politics have long argued that social class groupings are important for shaping ideological correlation in mass opinion on economic policy issues (e.g., Heath et al., 1985; Beramendi et al., 2015; Evans and Tilley, 2017). Working-class individuals are, for example, argued to share a common material interest in more redistribution, government economic intervention, and greater trade union powers. More middle-class individuals are argued to have a shared interest in limiting redistribution, less government intervention, and weaker trade union powers. The result is that working-class individuals tend to hold a collection of 'left'-leaning opinions, and middle-class individuals a collection of 'right'-leaning opinions, across various economic policy issues.

Moreover, individuals sharing a similar social position may develop similar issue opinions across a range of issues not just due to shared self-interest, but also due to the common socializing influences to which they are exposed. Political socialization involves individuals learning particular sets of political attitudes and behaviours from those they interact with and receive communications from, especially during their impressionable teenage and early adult years (see Neundorf and Smets, 2017). Parents can play a particularly important role in transmitting political attitudes to their children (e.g., Jennings et al., 2009), alongside the peer networks and media sources to which individuals are exposed during their impressionable years (Neundorf and Smets, 2017). If individuals growing up in similar social circumstances are exposed to parents and other socializing agents with similar sets of political attitudes, they will be exposed to similar socializing influences. As a result, those individuals might be expected to develop similar sets

of issue opinions themselves. Political scientists have, for example, argued that common socializing influences lead individuals from the same social class (Langsaether et al., 2022), economic (O'Grady, 2019), or educational background (Stubager, 2008; Evans and Tilley, 2017) to develop common combinations of political attitudes. To the extent that these types of socializing processes operate, they can help to create ideological structure in mass issue opinion.

In addition to the potential role of common social positions and socializing influences, individuals may develop similar combinations of issue opinions due to a shared sense of subjective belonging to a social group. Influential accounts of human behaviour like social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) say that people's opinions and actions are often driven by an innate tendency to divide their world into groups to which they see themselves as belonging (in-groups) and not belonging (out-groups). According to these types of theory, people hold more positive feelings towards in-groups and their members than towards out-groups and their members, as well as internalizing the fortunes of an in-group such that they experience positive psychological and emotional impacts when the standing of an in-group improves relative to out-groups (and negative psychological and emotional impacts when the standing of an in-group worsens). If people think about the world in this way, they might evaluate policies in terms of which prominent social groups advocate for—or benefit from—those policies and how much they themselves identify with—or feel positively towards—those particular groups (Converse, 1964; Elder and O'Brian, 2022). And if different social groups come to be associated in people's minds with distinct combinations of policy positions across a range of issues, issue opinions grounded in group sentiment can become ideologically correlated. Returning once more to the example of social class, people may come to support left-leaning policies across a range of issues because they perceive these as 'working-class' policies and perceive themselves as belonging to the working class as a group. Some have even argued that individuals come to identify themselves as members of social groups defined around particular ideologies (Ellis and Stimson, 2012; Devine, 2015) and are motivated to support the combinations of policies for which their ideological group are perceived to stand (Malka and Lelkes, 2010; Groenendyk et al., 2022).

A further *social* mechanism that Converse (1964, 211–213) highlights as a potential source of ideological correlation in mass issue opinion is the social 'diffusion' of ideas. A relatively small number of political intellectuals and pundits engage in 'creative synthesis' to develop detailed ideological

rationales for why certain 'packages' (Converse, 1964, 211) of positions go together across a range of policy issues (see also Noel, 2014). To the extent that their ideas are diffused outwards into the mass electorate via mass media, political messaging, and via social and personal interactions between people, the average individual will tend to encounter a particular policy position only as part of an ideological package alongside other particular policy positions. Converse stresses that, realistically, social diffusion of ideologically correlated issue opinion is likely to involve individuals adopting combinations of issue positions without thinking deeply about the rationale for why those positions go together. In other words, they take on board basic information about 'what goes with what' rather than more complex information about 'why' (Converse, 1964, 212).

Social mechanisms can therefore be expected to produce ideological correlations in voters' issue opinions in a variety of ways. They can be expected to do so to the extent that (a) society is made up of a small number of encompassing, politically relevant social groups whose membership may be objectively or subjectively defined, but who are associated with distinctive combinations of issue positions; and that (b) individuals develop issue opinions either based on the objective or subjective interests they share with fellow group members, through socializing influences common to members of their group, or based on how much they like or dislike the social groups known to advocate particular issue positions. Additionally, social mechanisms can produce ideological correlations in mass issue opinion to the extent that ideological packages of issue positions are successfully diffused from political intellectuals across society. Figure 2.3 illustrates how these various social processes can induce ideological correlations in opinions across issues.

In sum, as Converse recognized, ideological correlations in voters' issue opinions can arise from a mixture of any of the above mechanisms: logical interrelationships between issues, common psychological underpinnings of opinions on different issues, or common social influences upon opinions on different issues.

We think Converse's choice of the word 'constraint' as a catch-all term to describe the correlations generated by these different mechanisms was unfortunate. The everyday meaning of the word 'constraint', and the idea of issue positions being 'constrained', implies certain kinds of *causal* relationships between issue positions in the minds of voters. But only the logical and psychological mechanisms described above involve an individual's views on issues actually being causally constrained by their other views in the sense that they can only hold certain combinations of opinions. In contrast, social mechanisms have to do with the different bundles of signals that voters

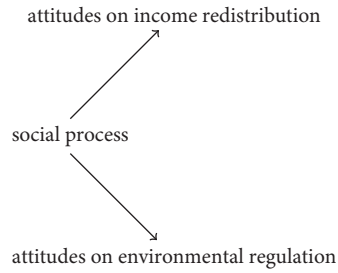

Figure 2.3 Social processes, including patterns in social group interests and sentiment, socialization, and social diffusion of ideological packages of ideas, may induce ideological correlations in views on different issues that lack direct logical relationships. Changing social context might change views on multiple issues, but changing views on one issue do not affect views on other issues.

get about politics from the world in which they live. If one's social context changes—e.g., due to a move from a more working-class to a more middle-class occupation, or due to a shift in the messaging from a preferred media outlet—this might lead (over time) to a systematic shift in one's views across many different issues. But if changing social context causes an individual to change their views on a single issue they will not necessarily feel compelled to change their opinion on other issues because they do not cognitively relate the two issue opinions to one another directly.

Thus, while 'constraint' is the term widely used in the literature, we will generally refer to 'ideological correlation' in issue positions. We do so in recognition of the fact that those correlations may or may not result from causal constraints between issue opinions. We think this choice of terminology is particularly important given that we cannot easily assess the relative contributions of each of the above types of mechanism to any ideological correlations that we do observe in an electorate.

2.1.2 Ideological Opinion and Democratic Politics

Whatever combination of logical, psychological, or social mechanisms cause ideological correlations between issue opinions among the public, strong and pervasive ideological correlations are theoretically appealing for understanding the structure of political competition (Converse, 1964, 214–215). This is because such correlations mean that it is more realistic to think about electoral politics according to a simple 'spatial' logic (Jessee, 2012). When voters' opinions on different issues exhibit strong ideological correlations, and such

correlations are pervasive across a broad range of issues, then voters' various issue-specific opinions can be summarized as positions on a smaller number of ideological dimensions. Voters can then make choices between parties offering collections of policies that are also well-summarized by positions on this small number of dimensions. This means they can easily decide which parties are 'closer' to them on these dimensions—and are therefore closer to them on policy questions generally—and then vote accordingly.

In the simplest case where ideological correlations collapse variation in issue opinion onto a single left–right dimension, a party that strays a long way to the left or the right in terms of the platform that it offers to the electorate may risk moving too 'far' from—and thereby losing the support of—the majority of voters. The pull to the centre ground can be very powerful. Under certain simplifying assumptions, if only two parties compete for votes and if we place all voters in an electorate along a line representing their left–right ideological position, we would expect whichever party has the platform closest to the middle voter—the so-called 'median voter'—to win the majority of votes. We would also expect that any party with a platform located exactly at the position of the median voter cannot be defeated by a single party adopting any other platform (Downs, 1957).

Electoral developments in established democracies have often been understood in terms of this general left–right ideological logic. For example, the British Labour Party suffered one of its worst electoral defeats in recent history at the 1983 general election after campaigning on what was generally considered an avowedly and remarkably left-wing manifesto (e.g., Budge, 1999) dubbed by one of its own MPs 'the longest suicide note in history'.[2] In contrast, following almost two decades in the electoral wilderness, Labour under Tony Blair is often described as shifting to capture the ideological 'centre ground' in the run-up to its landslide victory at the 1997 general election (e.g., Budge, 1999; Sanders, 1999; Hindmoor, 2004). The Conservative Party is understood to have moved towards the centre under Cameron in advance of the 2010 election, and at the time of writing the same is being said of the Labour Party under Keir Starmer following their electoral victory in 2024. In the US, landslide presidential election losses by Goldwater (1964), McGovern (1972), and Mondale (1984) are all often attributed to the candidates being too conservative (Goldwater) or too liberal (McGovern and Mondale) relative to the views of the electorate.

Other versions of the ideological account argue that voters' opinions across a broad range of policy issues can only be adequately summarized in terms

[2] Gerald Kaufman MP, as quoted in Healey (1983).

of their positions along *two* distinct ideological dimensions, rather than just one dimension. Variants of this two-dimensional ideological account have been used repeatedly to understand mass opinion and electoral politics in Britain (e.g., Heath et al., 1985, 1991; Heath and McDonald, 1988; Evans et al., 1996; Surridge, 2012; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022), as well as in the United States (Schofield et al., 2003; Treier and Hillygus, 2009) and in multi-country studies of Western European democracies (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006; Beramendi et al., 2015; Dalton, 2018), established Western democracies (e.g., Inglehart, 1990), and beyond (Malka et al., 2019).

In many of these two-dimensional ideological accounts, the first ideological dimension is usually found to encompass what we call *economic left–right* issues which concern things like taxation and government spending, private versus public production of goods and services, and redistribution. The second dimension is usually—though not always—found to encompass what we call *social liberal–conservative* issues which concern things like law and order, minority rights, immigration, and the degree to which political authority is ceded from the national level to supranational bodies. If we take two issues belonging to the same dimension, people's opinions on both of these issues are argued to be shaped by common logical, psychological, or social factors. For example, an individual's opinion on two economic issues might be connected because they perceive hard logical connections between the two issues (e.g., the tax-spend-deficit example above). Or they might connect both issues to an underlying philosophical world-view about the efficacy of the market. Or they might think about both issues in terms of the experiences or interests of their occupational group. Or opinions on two economic issues might be connected by some combination of all three of these things. The key thing is that, because opinions on both these issues are shaped by common forces, they are ideologically correlated. If we know that an individual takes a more right-leaning position on one of these issues, we would reasonably predict that they will take a more right-leaning position on the other issue, and indeed on other economic left–right issues.

In contrast, if we take two issues from different dimensions, advocates of a two-dimensional model would expect that people's opinions on these two issues are largely unrelated because they are shaped by different logical, psychological, or social forces. For example, when thinking about a social liberal–conservative issue, an individual might reasonably perceive no strict logical connection between that issue and an economic left–right issue. Or they might connect that issue to their underlying philosophical world-view

regarding social conformity versus diversity rather than to their world-view regarding the market. Or they might think about it in terms of the experiences of ethnic groups rather than occupational groups. As a result, we might find it hard to predict how liberal or conservative an individual will be on a social issue armed only with knowledge of how left- or right-wing they are on economic issues. An individual could still turn out to be both economically left and socially liberal or economically right and socially conservative, but a two-dimensional model implies that there are many individuals who are either economically left and socially conservative or economically right and socially liberal.

If mass issue opinions are ideologically structured in terms of two distinct dimensions rather than a single dimension, electoral politics related to policy positions gets more complicated. Even under quite restrictive assumptions (including that there are only two parties competing for election), as long as the electorate's ideological positions are arrayed in a two-dimensional space, there will not usually be a single 'median voter' whom parties must attract to win. In fact, the McKelvey–Schofield 'chaos theorem' tells us that, in any ideological space with more than one dimension, there is no party platform location in that space which cannot be defeated by some other platform (McKelvey, 1976; Schofield, 1978): every possible platform location can be defeated by some other platform location, which in turn can be defeated by some other platform location.

Nevertheless, theorists point out that parties still have electoral incentives to adopt policy packages located in a fairly central region of a two-dimensional ideological space (e.g., Miller, 2016; Adams, 2019). And the broader point is that, whether structured in terms of one or two ideological dimensions, as long as voters' issue opinions have ideological structure, parties are incentivized to be responsive to the ideological positions of most voters, which in turn means their policies are responsive to the issue opinions of those voters. In other words, we have a simple process which is normatively appealing in the sense that it 'ties together citizen preferences on specific policies, voting decisions, candidate behavior, and, ultimately, the policy outputs of government' (Jessee, 2012, 29). Hence Kinder's (1983, 391) observation that if the public's issue opinions were to display high levels of ideological correlation, 'the prospects for democratic control would be enhanced'.

In sum, the ideological voter account expects that the public develops *issue opinions that are correlated across issues*, and that the *patterns of correlation in these issue opinions can be captured by a small number of 'ideological' dimensions*. In turn, *individuals' political choices are substantially influenced*

by their 'ideological' issue opinions (those showing patterns of correlation with other issues), or by the underlying ideological positions that those issue opinions represent.

2.2 The Innocent Voter Account

A different strand of political science research is highly sceptical as to whether the public in general have ideologically organized policy opinions, and even whether many members of the public tend to possess meaningful policy opinions on most issues.

Among the key sources for this scepticism are the findings from two canonical early survey studies of political attitudes among samples of American and British voters. First, in the same essay in which he set out the characteristics and potential causes of ideological thinking in the mass public, Converse (1964, 218) reported evidence on such thinking from a panel study of Americans, where the same individuals were surveyed repeatedly in 1956, 1958, and 1960. He found that, when asked open-ended questions about politics, very few (just over 11%) of these respondents explained their views expressly in terms of the liberal–conservative ideological dimension commonly assumed to structure American politics at the time.

This left open the possibility that, whilst most Americans do not articulate their political views in terms of ideology, they may still possess issue opinions that are ideologically structured. However, when Converse (1964, 228) examined the correlations between respondents' opinions on pairs of reasonably salient policy issues, he found these correlations to be unimpressive, reaching just above 0.2 on average. By contrast, when congressional candidates were asked similar issue questions in 1958, correlations between pairs of issue opinions typically reached above 0.5. Converse thus concluded that while elite issue opinions could be said to be organized by a common ideological schema, the same could not be said for issue opinion among the mass public in America.

A few years later, Butler and Stokes (1969) published a book drawing similarly sceptical conclusions about the role of ideology in the British electorate. Their evidence came from the first iteration of the British Election Study (hereafter BES).[3] This took the form of a panel survey that repeatedly surveyed the same individuals across three waves in 1963, 1964, and 1966.[4] Like

[3] The British Election Study is a series of nationally representative surveys of Britons which, since 1963, have been conducted at general elections, and often also in between elections.

[4] A later edition of the Butler–Stokes book (Butler and Stokes, 1974) included evidence from subsequent additional waves close to the 1970 general election.

Converse before them, Butler and Stokes found that awareness of ideology was limited. More than 60% of British respondents had no recognition of the left–right ideological dimension often assumed to organize British politics. And, again like Converse, they report low correlations across respondents' issue opinions: even focusing on those more engaged respondents with well-developed views on issues, the correlation between opinion on pairs of issues was typically below 0.3.

Perhaps even more concerning for the prospects of policy-responsive democracy, both Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974) provided evidence that many respondents do not even possess real and meaningful opinions on prominent policy issues of the day.

First, one indicator that individuals hold real and meaningful opinions on a policy issue would be that their political choices depend at least to a reasonable extent upon their opinion on that issue—i.e., that they are more likely to support a political party if the party advocates a policy 'closer' to their own preferred position on that issue. Yet Converse found that there was little correlation between respondents' stated issue opinions and which party they supported.

Second, an even more direct indicator of whether an individual holds a real and meaningful opinion on a policy issue is the *stability* of that opinion over time. For Converse, Butler and Stokes, and for many political scientists thereafter, a respondent is considered more likely to have a well-formed opinion on an issue to the extent that their stated opinion on that issue remains consistent when they are asked for that opinion repeatedly across different waves of a panel survey. A reported opinion that is temporally stable is likely to be an opinion that has settled, or 'crystallized' (Converse, 1964, 242), in the individual's mind. In contrast, when a respondent's reported opinion on an issue fluctuates across survey waves, this is indicative that they do not have a well-formed view on that issue. Instead, they are recording a 'lightly held and transitory opinion' on the issue at the moment they are prompted to do so by a survey question (Butler and Stokes, 1969, 182).

What both Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974) found in their analysis of issue opinion stability was that the latter situation seemed much more common. Converse summarized the stability of opinions on an issue by computing the correlation between individuals' reported opinions on that issue in the 1958 survey wave and the same individuals' reported opinions on the same issue in the 1960 survey wave. The higher this wave-on-wave correlation, the stronger the association between individual opinion on the issue across the two time points, and the more stable is individual opinion on the issue. Looking across eight different issues, Converse reported mostly

unimpressive correlations, below 0.5 for all issues, and below 0.4 for most.[5] Butler and Stokes (1969) reported a similarly modest wave-on-wave correlation of 0.4 in British voters' stated opinions on nationalization of industry, one of the most prominent issues in politics at the time.

The conclusion that Converse and Butler and Stokes drew from these results was that, when asked about a policy issue in a survey, individuals often respond not by reporting real, crystallized opinions, but by reporting ephemeral opinions lacking meaningful content—sometimes referred to as '*nonattitudes*' (Converse, 1970). By implication, 'large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time' (Converse, 1964, 245).

In other words, these studies suggested that members of the public are typically *innocent*: 'innocent of ideology' (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, 3) in the sense of lacking ideologically structured views across a broad range of issues; and, on many individual policy issues, innocent of real, meaningful opinions.

For both Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969), this voter innocence had much to do with political information, or rather lack of it. In their view, the pressures of daily life mean that most individuals in the electorate are severely limited in the amount of time and effort they can devote to following political and policy developments. This in turn inhibits the development of political sophistication—the degree of cognitive resource upon which they can draw to make sense of and put into context the politically relevant communications they do receive—particularly in the absence of higher levels of education which might help develop such resources by training abstract conceptual thinking more generally. Where individuals receive limited political information and lack the 'contextual grasp' (Converse, 1964, 33) to connect specific pieces of information to a broader debate about a policy issue, or to considerations regarding self-interest, broader values or worldviews, or to social group sentiment, they are less likely to develop well-formed issue opinions that exhibit ideological structure.

One implication of this information-related explanation is that more politically attentive and sophisticated individuals should be more likely to develop well-formed issue opinions, and to develop opinions that are ideologically

[5] Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974) focused on correlation as measured by Kendall's tau. This is a measure of rank-correlation, which can be roughly understood as the tendency of pairwise comparisons of observations to show a matching *sign* (positive or negative) in differences on two different variables—in this application, a survey measure of the same question in two different survey waves. We discuss and reanalyse these data in Chapter 4.

correlated across a broad range of issues. Consistent with this, Butler and Stokes (1969, 211–214) found that Britons with greater capacity to articulate the left–right ideological dimension—and therefore presumably better ability to connect policy information together across issues—exhibited greater ideological correlation in their issue opinions. Later work also demonstrates that issue opinion is substantially more stable and ideologically correlated among highly politically informed Americans than among those with lower levels of political information (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017, 34–40).

Yet even if real, meaningful and ideologically correlated opinion on policy issues are more likely among the minority of the electorate that are unusually politically attentive and sophisticated, this does not change the key finding from Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974). Namely, that among the mass public in general, such issue opinions are typically lacking. As a result, these classic studies suggest that issue opinion and ideology provide an unpromising starting point for understanding citizens' political behaviour.

Instead, both Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974) argued that mass political behaviour is better understood directly in terms of voters' feelings towards, and identification with, political parties as prominent social groups. Their emphasis on party identification—as opposed to ideology or issue opinion—was in line with a general theory of voter behaviour set out in the book *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), another major study from the same period and one on which both Converse and Stokes were co-authors. According to this, voters with different social group memberships—in terms of class, religion, or ethnicity—are socialized into affective attachments to political parties. These party identifications are more than mere transactional decisions to vote for one party or another at a particular point in time based on political context. Rather, they reflect a deeper sense of belonging to a particular party as a social group. Different individuals think of themselves as Republican or Democrat, Labour or Conservative. As such, these partisan attachments tend to endure for individuals and to be the main determinants of those individuals' political choices (Campbell et al., 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1969). Subsequent work (e.g., Huddy et al., 2015; Mason, 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019) has extended the theoretical argument for the primacy of party identification by embedding the concept within the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) framework described above. From this perspective, party identification is a particularly salient social identity for individuals when they think about politics. It is thus theorized to motivate individuals to protect and advance the status of 'their' party by supporting its actions and voting for it in elections (Huddy et al., 2015; Mason, 2018).

In line with the claim that party identification is a more fundamental element of people's political thinking—and therefore more likely to shape political behaviour—than either ideology or issue opinions, Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969) provided evidence attesting to the superior stability of American and British respondents' party identifications. For example, Butler and Stokes (1969, 42, 178) showed that while only 39% of British respondents stuck to the same opinion on the issue of nationalization across just two survey waves a year apart (1963 and 1964), fully 83% reported the same party identification—i.e., whether they think of themselves as Labour or Conservative—across all three survey waves over a three-year period (1963, 1964, and 1966). Similarly, Converse (1964, 240) showed that the wave-on-wave correlation in American respondents' reported party identification—i.e., whether they think of themselves as Democrat or Republican—was notably higher (above 0.7) than even the highest wave-on-wave correlations in individuals' issue opinions (below 0.5). According to Converse, these relative stabilities showed that '[t]he party and the affect toward it are more central within the political belief systems of the mass public than are the policy ends that the parties are designed to pursue' (Converse, 1964, 241).

In sum, out of early survey studies emerged what we call the *classic innocent voter* account of mass opinion and political choice. This account allows for more stable and ideological opinion among the most politically attentive and sophisticated individuals in the mass public. However, it characterizes mass issue opinion in general as *typically unstable at the individual level* and *typically lacking ideological correlation*.

2.2.1 The Voter-as-Follower Variant

Another version of the innocent voter account takes a slightly different tack. In contrast to the *classic* version of the innocent voter account described above, a *voter-as-follower* variant accepts that the issue opinions reported by voters in surveys may sometimes exhibit temporal stability and ideological correlation, but views this more as an artefact of voters' pre-existing political and partisan attachments rather than a reflection of real, meaningful policy preferences.

The voter-as-follower logic draws on a large literature in public opinion studies on elite persuasion (e.g., Zaller, 1992; Layman and Carsey, 2002; Levendusky, 2009; Druckman, 2012; Lenz, 2012; Barber and Pope, 2019; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). The central assertion of much of this elite

persuasion research (sometimes also called elite cues research) is that voters often adopt the issue-specific and broader ideological positions of those political elites and parties who they already support. Some of the more optimistic elite persuasion arguments suggest that this could be because voters are rationally using the observed position of their preferred parties or politicians to make a reasonable guess about what they would really prefer on an issue if they were willing to pay the costs of becoming more fully informed (e.g., Lupia, 2016, 45–46, 89–90; see also Fowler, 2020). This is in line with research suggesting that voters are more likely to receive and accept cues on policy from elite actors with whom they have reason to believe they share some deeper political predispositions (Zaller, 1992).

However, much research on elite persuasion frames the processes by which citizens adopt the positions of favoured elites less optimistically. Such research suggests that, when exposed to information about the policy positions of politicians or parties, individuals often automatically and unconditionally adopt the positions of those politicians or parties they already support (Lenz, 2012; Achen and Bartels, 2016; Barber and Pope, 2019; Slothuus and Bisgaard, 2021). Some of this work builds on psychological theories of motivated reasoning to stress that, when confronted with political information, individuals may not be motivated by the 'accuracy' goal of using information carefully and fairly to try to come to a 'correct' view (Taber and Lodge, 2006). Instead, they may be motivated by the 'directional' (Leeper and Slothuus, 2014) goal of defending the political attitudes they already hold, either by favouring arguments consistent with those attitudes, or by more effortful countering of arguments inconsistent with those attitudes (e.g., Taber and Lodge, 2006).

The concept of party identification as a deep-rooted and enduring attachment to a political party (Campbell et al., 1960) again becomes relevant here. To the extent that an individual identifies with a party in this way, it is likely that this identification serves as a salient pre-existing attitude that the individual is motivated to defend when encountering new information about policy issues. If so, rather than evaluating the different arguments for different issue positions evenhandedly, the individual may defend their partisan in-group by favouring those policy arguments and issue positions which their party advocates, and which are therefore consistent with their pre-existing party identification. In other words, they *follow* the policy positions of their party. This echoes Campbell and co-authors' earlier claim that party identification acts as a 'perceptual screen' (Campbell et al., 1960, 133) through which an individual views the political world, filtering out information unfavourable to the party with which they identify.

The voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account thus tends to argue that, whether due to a psychological need to maintain consistency between their partisan identity (which is more central in their belief system) and policy opinion (which is less central), or just because of a tendency to ensure that their issue opinions are consistent with their chosen party or candidate, many individuals are prone to more or less 'blindly' (Lenz, 2012, 235) ape the political positions of those political elites they support. The degree of following, it is argued, renders 'many people's expressed issue positions … malleable to the point of issue innocence' (Barber and Pope, 2019, 39).

In this sense, the voter-as-follower and classic variants of the innocent voter account share a scepticism towards the idea that much of the electorate have issue opinions which can serve as an *input* into the democratic process. For the classic innocent voter account, this scepticism stems from the public lacking many issue opinions to serve as such inputs. For the voter-as-follower variant, it stems from the claim that most issue opinions which members of the public do appear to form are really a by-product of their political affiliations, dependent on the pronouncements of the elites they happen to follow. Such opinions are then *outputs* of rather than inputs to the processes by which citizens make voting decisions.

However, compared to the classic innocent voter account, the voter-as-follower variant has different implications for the patterns we should observe in mass issue opinion. As we saw above, the classic innocent voter account stresses that individuals' issue opinions will typically exhibit low stability and low ideological correlation. In contrast, the voter-as-follower variant implies that issue opinion stability and ideological correlation depend on the positional cues that individuals receive from the political parties that they follow.

There are good reasons to expect that, where voters in established democracies receive these partisan cues, those cues will tend to be relatively stable and ideologically structured. Evidence from numerous countries over many decades, including the US, Australia, Britain, and France, shows that politicians tend to report issue opinions which exhibit substantial stability and ideological correlation (Converse, 1964; Converse and Pierce, 1986; Kam, 2009; Broockman, 2016). Furthermore, the ideological structure in politicians' issue opinions tends to map to their party affiliation, so that politicians from different parties tend to take reasonably distinctive ideological positions (Converse, 1964; Broockman, 2016; Hanretty et al., 2017). Finally, parties themselves tend to make issue pronouncements exhibiting substantial ideological structure (Gabel and Huber, 2000; Däubler and Benoit, 2022) and are quite stable over time in their ideological positioning (Budge, 1994).

Given the relatively stable and ideologically patterned policy cues that parties provide to their supporters, we would expect that where individuals do adopt issue opinions by following their party, those issue opinions are likely to be relatively stable (Freeder et al., 2019) and ideologically correlated (Levendusky, 2010). Other times, individuals may be unable to follow a party on an issue. This might be because an individual is not attached to a particular party and therefore does not have a party to follow on any issue, or because they pay too little attention to politics to receive a cue from a party they do support (Layman and Carsey, 2002). Or it might be because an issue is not politicized, such that parties do not talk about that issue, or that different parties do not take contrasting positions on that issue, meaning that voters receive only a weak signal about which stance on the issue is associated with 'their' party (Levendusky, 2010). Either way, where individuals are not able to follow a party on an issue, the *voter-as-follower* logic tends to imply that reported issue opinions will behave like those envisioned by the *classic innocent voter* account: lacking a clear party steer, issue opinions will exhibit a lack of ideological correlation (Layman and Carsey, 2002) and a lack of stability (Freeder et al., 2019).

In sum, the *voter-as-follower* account allows for varying stability and ideological structure across individual citizens and across issues, depending on the strength of party cues. However, it does imply that *those citizen opinions which are stable should also be subject to substantial ideological correlation*.

2.2.2 Innocent Voters and Democratic Politics

In a major book, *Democracy for Realists*, Achen and Bartels (2016) weave together the classic and voter-as-follower variants of the innocent voter account to provide what is to date perhaps the most comprehensive and forceful statement of the account—as well as its implications for democratic politics. Achen and Bartels argue that the weight of evidence accumulated by political scientists over the past several decades overwhelmingly favours an innocent voter account. For them, findings of a lack of ideologically structured or even stable issue opinion are strongly indicative of an electorate lacking ideological thinking about politics and, more fundamentally, typically lacking real, meaningful policy preferences. What is more, even where citizens report issue opinions that are stable and ideologically structured, Achen and Bartels argue this is less likely a result of those citizens possessing real policy views upon which basis they might choose between parties, and

more likely an artefact of following: citizens adopting the issue positions of the party they already support.

The conclusion that Achen and Bartels (2016) draw is that we should deem as untenable traditional notions of responsive democracy rooted in the policy preferences of the electorate. If citizens tend to lack meaningful policy views—ideological or otherwise—or purely ape the views of the party they have chosen to support for non-policy reasons, we can no longer think of them as choosing between parties based on their policy platforms and thereby incentivizing those parties to adopt more popular policy platforms.

According to Achen and Bartels, when an electorate votes in a new government, they are not seeking to bring about 'deliberate policy change. The parties have policy views and they carry them out when in office, but most voters are not listening, or are simply thinking what their party tells them they should be thinking. This is what an honest view of electoral democracy looks like. It is a blunder to expect elections to deliver more' (Achen and Bartels, 2016, 310). Put differently, to the extent that either variant of the innocent voter account is true, 'democratic theory loses its starting point—public opinion on policy' (Achen, 1975, 1220).

In sum, when it comes to citizens' political choices, both the classic and voter-as-follower variants of the innocent voter account say that *issue opinions do not substantially influence individuals' political choices*. Instead, *citizens' political choices are better understood as influenced directly by their social group identifications, and particularly their partisan identifications*. The voter-as-follower logic further allows that individuals' political choices may appear to be consistent with their stated issue opinions, but this is usually because individuals bring their issue positions into line with those of the party they support: in other words, *partisanship influences both political choice and issue opinions*.

2.3 The Idiosyncratic Voter Account

The ideological voter and innocent voter accounts offer what have become the two dominant, contrasting visions of the nature of policy opinions among the mass public and the role of these opinions in electoral politics. One sees voters as possessing ideologically organized opinions across a range of policy issues and making political choices that are based to an important degree on ideological proximity to parties. The other sees voters' policy opinions as generally poorly formed and unstable—or as simply mimicking the ideologically

organized opinions of the political parties whom they already support—with group identities, rather than ideology or policy opinions, the key driver of political choice.

Yet there is also a third possibility, one which has received only limited attention in recent literature but which we argue is nevertheless significant for understanding mass policy opinion and its role in electoral politics. This is that voters develop *idiosyncratic* bundles of policy opinions on subsets of issues. By idiosyncratic, we mean bundles of opinions which *are* real, meaningful and therefore stable for an individual, but which *are not* organized in terms of a low-dimensional ideological structure that is shared across voters or that maps consistently onto the contrasting positions of political parties.

Take, for example, a person who, on the issue of how healthcare should be provided, has a well-formed and stable preference for private, non-state provision, but when it comes to employment regulation, has a well-formed and stable preference for strict state-imposed restrictions on the use of casualized employment contracts. This is an idiosyncratic collection of issue opinions in the sense that both opinions are meaningfully held but their combination is surprising from an ideological perspective. Standard ideological accounts of mass opinion would suggest that both of these issues belong to the left–right economic ideological dimension, and that a preference for privatized provision of health services is a right-leaning position which would tend to go with a preference for *weak* regulation of employment contracts, the right-leaning position on that issue.

As another example, consider a person with a well-formed and stable preferences for both unfettered immigration and the use of the death penalty to punish serious criminal offences. This would be an idiosyncratic combination of issue opinions in the sense that standard ideological accounts of mass opinion often treat both the immigration and death penalty issues as belonging to the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension *and* tend to expect the 'liberal' position of favouring unrestricted immigration to 'go with' the 'liberal' position of opposing the death penalty—not the 'conservative' position of supporting the death penalty.

More generally, one can think about an individual's opinion on an issue as idiosyncratic to the extent that it exhibits two characteristics: first, it is well predicted by the same individual's reported opinion on the same issue at a previous time point (opinion stability); second, it is poorly predicted based on the same individual's stated opinion on other issues and the observed pattern of opinions across issues among the public more generally (ideological

unpredictability).[6] Because idiosyncratic issue opinions are meaningful and stable, they are not the nonattitudes we should typically expect according to the classic innocent voter account. Because idiosyncratic issue opinions lack ideological correlation, they are not the type of attitude we should typically expect according to the ideological voter account, nor the type of stable attitude we should typically expect according to the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account.

We stress that we do not intend the term 'idiosyncratic' to have pejorative connotations. Our use of it is rooted in dictionary definitions of 'idiosyncrasy' as denoting the 'distinctiveness' or 'individuality' of something.[7] 'Idiosyncrasy' in this book thus refers to the distinctiveness of the collection of issue opinions a person holds, in the sense that this collection of issue opinions does not conform to broader ideological norms in society regarding which opinions go together across issues. While the term 'idiosyncrasy' is sometimes used by people to imply something 'odd' or 'strange', our use of it here does not imply any negative judgement regarding the opinions someone holds. Indeed, as we shall argue below, there are a number of reasons why people may develop distinctive collections of issue opinions.

We also stress that the notion of idiosyncratic issue opinion we set out here is not an entirely new one. Indeed, a variety of existing studies have suggested or provided evidence that members of the public may organize their opinions in a variety of different ways rather than according to one or two common ideological dimensions (e.g., Marcus et al., 1974; Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983; Fleischman, 1986; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Broockman, 2016; Groenendyk et al., 2022), with some offering particular explanations for this relating to particular mechanisms. To date, the most extensive discussions of the reasons why voters may develop issue opinions lacking in ideological structure are provided by Kinder (1983) and Hillygus and Shields (2009), who cover several mechanisms in some detail. In the discussion that follows, we build on these various works and draw together various other elements of existing literature to set out an argument for why many members of the public are likely to hold ideologically unpredictable collections of issue opinions on subsets of policy issues. We then explain

[6] It is important to clarify that idiosyncrasy in issue opinion need not imply that issue opinions are *completely* uncorrelated. There may still be some underlying weak and multidimensional correlational structure to a collection of idiosyncratic issue opinions, in the sense that opinion on certain issues is somewhat predictive of opinion on other issues. It is just that this structure would not be well described by a small number of dimensions that we could accurately term *ideological* even in the most minimal correlational sense discussed earlier in this chapter.

[7] For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines 'idiosyncrasy' as 'the individuality of a person's outlook, temperament, or behaviour; the distinctive nature of something' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024).

why it is plausible that these ideologically unpredictable collections of issue opinions are meaningfully held—despite evidence of widespread instability in mass issue opinion—by drawing on 'issue publics' theory, which contends that members of the public are likely to care about, and form meaningful opinions upon, varying subsets of issues (e.g., Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023).

2.3.1 Sources of Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion

As Kinder (1983) and Hillygus and Shields (2009) argue, one major reason why we would expect voters to develop ideologically unpredictable collections of issue opinions has to do with the sheer number of possible mechanisms highlighted by Converse (1964) and later authors as potential sources of ideological correlations. If the 'source[s] of policy attitudes are diverse and far-reaching' (Hillygus and Shields, 2009), it seems plausible that different sources may pull voters in different directions on different issues.

However, beyond this there is another major reason that we would expect voters to develop ideologically unpredictable issue opinions. This is that, even when we take many of the ideological correlation-inducing mechanisms in isolation, there are good reasons to expect each particular mechanism to operate in different ways for the same issue across different voters, and in different ways for the same voter across different issues. In what follows, we explain why such diverse operation is plausible, first with regard to psychological mechanisms, then social mechanisms.

Diverse operation of psychological mechanisms. First, consider the *psychological* mechanisms highlighted as potential sources of ideological correlation. In particular, take the argument that individuals' opinions across issues belonging to the same domain (e.g., the economic policy domain) become ideologically correlated because they are rooted in individuals' core values or principles pertaining to that domain. It doesn't seem a stretch to suppose that when thinking about a particular issue, individuals may disagree as to which values or principles are most relevant for that issue. Alvarez and Brehm (2002), for example, stress that members of the public have a variety of values which may be brought to bear when they consider an issue, and that 'identifying which value is relevant may not be obvious' for any given individual (Alvarez and Brehm, 2002, 9). One implication of these ambiguities, upon which Alvarez and Brehm focus, is that individuals may change their stated opinion on an issue over time because they change their mind about which value is relevant for that issue (an explanation they propose for

response instability in panel surveys). However, an alternative implication, upon which we focus, is that two individuals with the same collection of values may consistently disagree about which value is most relevant for an issue. This would lead individuals with the same underpinning values to hold stable but different opinions on the issue.

To the extent that members of the public more generally vary in terms of which values or principles they consider relevant for which issues, this introduces heterogeneity into the patterns of issue opinions induced by values and principles. Marcus et al. (1974) illustrate this point with a simple example of two hypothetical American voters, one called Able, the other called Baker:

> Able may not support federal aid to education on the rationale that aid involves the federal government in an area which he feels ought to be the exclusive domain of the local government. Yet he might logically support federal aid for building roads, reasoning that it improves the economy and does not conflict with the issue of the location of political authority. Therefore Able, and others who think like him, would find their responses to these two specific issues negatively correlated. For Baker, both issues might evoke as the important criterion the principle of greater government concern for the social welfare of the citizenry, and he would therefore support federal funding in both areas. In this situation the pattern of responses to the two specific political attitudes would be positively correlated. (Marcus et al., 1974, 407)

Moreover, Häusermann and Kriesi (2015) highlight how changing social contexts mean that some policy issues can be viewed by different individuals according to different principles. For example, take the issue of the degree to which labour market policy should advantage people with jobs in certain industries (labour market 'insiders') versus people seeking jobs in those industries ('outsiders'). This issue is viewed by some as a question of workers' rights, therefore invoking considerations about economic principles. However, in a context of globalization and mass migration, it is viewed by others as a question of whether immigrants should be able to undercut wages of native workers, therefore requiring them to consider their principles concerning the entitlements of nationals versus non-nationals in a society.

Thus, even if the public does develop meaningful issue opinions rooted in their deeper values or principles, this will not necessarily lead to low-dimensional patterns of correlation in issue opinions. People vary in which values and principles they consider relevant for a given issue, meaning that individuals with the same sets of values and principles may develop different combinations of policy opinions.

Diverse operation of social mechanisms. A similar type of heterogeneity is likely to pertain when it comes to the *social* processes Converse identifies as potentially leading to ideological correlation in issue opinions. We have seen how ideological correlation could emerge because people form opinions on policy issues based on the interests of the social groups to which they belong, or by considering the issue positions they associate with groups that they like or dislike. If a single politically dominant social cleavage defines the reference groups most voters use to form opinions on most issues, this will induce common patterns in opinions across issues. For example, if the class cleavage dominates, working-class voters would tend to develop a certain shared constellation of opinions across issues, and middle-class voters a distinctive shared constellation of opinions.

But individuals are usually members of multiple social groups (Klar, 2013; Dassonneville, 2022), each of which may have different interests or be associated with a different position on a given policy issue (Hillygus and Shields, 2009). And the same issue could potentially evoke considerations about any of several of these social groups. Hartley (1950) illustrates this point in his 1950 essay on the social psychology of opinion formation:

> On some issues, all (or almost all) of the reference groups of an individual may standardize essentially the same opinion. On some issues, however, there may be variations in attitude as a function of which reference group is evoked … as a professional with a limited income, I want taxes cut; as a father of a family group, I want more money spent on schools; as a property owner I want taxes cut, as a motorist I want highways improved. Such variation does not mean that I must be undecided as issues involving taxing and spending arise. Far from it. I have opinions, many opinions and I take my stand on the issue as a function of the particular context in which the issue arises, for in each context some one or another frame of reference becomes operative to structure the situation for me and establish my orientation (Hartley, 1950, 672).

The key point here is that, even among individuals who all belong to the same set of social groups, these individuals may differ as to which of those groups is most relevant when it comes to a particular policy issue. The bundle of issue opinions an individual might form based on group-related considerations is less a coherent and consistent bundle associated with the outlook of one particular group, and more a cross-cutting and complex combination of the positions of different groups. Furthermore, there are reasons to think that the effects of social group membership upon issue opinions may have become increasingly cross-cutting and complex. Some research argues that

social groupings have become more fluid for citizens of affluent democracies over the past half-century (Dalton et al., 1984; Dalton, 2018). And even if social group memberships are still strongly held by individuals, today there are a large number of politically relevant social group cleavages. For example, Ford and Jennings (2020) argue that, beyond long-standing cleavages rooted in class and religious differences, Western European societies have in recent decades seen the emergence of four additional types of politically relevant socio-demographic cleavages.

Particularly relevant here is a recent study by Dassonneville (2022). Dassonneville illustrates how, as the number of politically relevant social group cleavages increases, so too does the chance that an individual will be politically cross-pressured by their different social group memberships. Dassonneville focuses on how such social group cross-pressures weaken individuals' attachments to particular political parties, and how this in turn weakens the capacity for partisan attachments to constrain patterns in individuals' 'short-term' political views like issue opinions. We stress, however, that to the extent that social group membership directly shapes individuals' issue opinions, the social group cross-pressures Dassonneville identifies would lead to complex patterns in issue opinions, as different voters with the same social group memberships prioritize different group memberships for different issues. In this sense, as Hillygus and Shields (2009) observe, non-ideological patterns of issue opinions 'may well be rooted in group identities', and in particular, the ways in which multiple group identities can cross-cut each other when it comes to their influence on issue opinions.

Finally, while processes of socialization might be considered to lead to ideologically correlated issue opinions, most people will form political views in the context of a complex and changing social environment. A person's opinion on one particular issue might be formed in a social context that is unusual compared to those in which that same person has formed opinions on many other issues. Dinas (2014) gives the example of people forming an array of opinions and attachments in the home environment during adolescence, but then being exposed to a different social environment and consequent information streams when they leave home to begin university or a job. As they update or form new opinions on issues that happen to become salient once they are in this new social context, those opinions may be less predictable based on their pre-existing views on other issues. Consistent with this, Klofstad et al. (2013) show that exposure to social networks containing divergent political views can lead people to self-report more weakly held ideology, which would plausibly lead to more ideologically unpredictable opinions on individual issues.

Thus, one key reason we might expect substantial idiosyncrasy in mass issue opinion is that each of several of the mechanisms that Converse and others highlight as potentially inducing ideologically correlated opinions are likely to operate in diverse ways across individuals and issues. This creates diverse combinations of issue opinions in the electorate.

So too does the sheer diversity of individuals' specific lived experiences. Variation in these specific lived experiences means that the context in which issue-specific opinions are formed is likely to vary across individuals, and over time for the same individual, resulting in idiosyncratic opinions. For example, someone who is otherwise reasonably lukewarm about state intervention might become supportive of the nationalization of train provision after the cancellation of a particular train service by a private provider causes them to miss a crucial family event. An otherwise similar person who experienced the same delay but happened to be travelling for a more routine reason might not revise their opinions on how the railways are run.[8] As another example, a person with a socially conservative upbringing and outlook may develop a particularly liberal position on the specific issue of cannabis legalization after their partner begins to rely on it for relief of chronic pain stemming from a long-term medical condition. An otherwise similar person whose partner did not develop that medical condition might retain a conservative stance opposed to cannabis legalization.

It is often difficult to document the effects on political attitudes of these idiosyncratic life experiences, precisely because they are so varied and difficult to empirically disentangle from other features of individuals that shape which experiences they are likely to have. One well-studied example of diverse lived experience potentially shaping views on subsets of political issues arises from the fact that people who have children end up with children of different gender on a largely random basis, enabling relatively sound inferences about whether having a daughter versus having a son changes the political attitudes of parents or siblings (e.g. Conley and Rauscher, 2013; Healy and Malhotra, 2013a). When Wesley and Garand (2021) find that 'having a son decreases support for feminist and egalitarian gender attitudes in both men and women to varying degrees across a variety of dimensions', they are documenting one particular instance of the kind of phenomenon we are contemplating here, and which may also be occurring through many kinds of life experiences—e.g., marriage/divorce, having or not having children, employment/unemployment, health/disease—that are less amenable to well-identified causal inferences.

[8] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting an example along these lines.

Weak operation of mechanisms. Still another reason to expect widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion is that many ideological correlation-inducing mechanisms are plausibly quite weak in practice. This has to do once more with the reality that many members of the public do not pay a great deal of attention to political matters and do not develop particularly high levels of political sophistication. A lack of political attention and sophistication makes it difficult for an individual to contextualize a particular policy issue and thereby weakens the operation of those processes that might induce ideological correlations. It makes it difficult for them to connect an issue to other political issues, to deeper abstract values that they may hold, or to their attitudes towards social groups. As discussed earlier in this chapter, elements of the innocent voter account stress that in such a situation an individual probably fails to develop a well-formed opinion on the issue at hand. However, it may also be that in such a situation an individual develops some reasonably well-formed opinion on the issue based on some considerations, but that these considerations have limited connection to those which form the basis for opinions on other issues.

Early evidence of this comes from Lane (1962). He investigated the degree to which voters thought about politics in ideological terms by conducting a series of in-depth interviews with working-class American men in the 1950s. As Kinder (1983) notes, one of Lane's most striking observations from these interviews was how his subjects 'morselize' political issues and events, rather than 'contextualizing' them in a more general scheme of thinking (Lane, 1962, 350). Lane describes how,

> treatment of an instance in isolation happens time and again and on matters close to home [for the subjects]: a union demand is a single incident, not part of a more general labor-management conflict; a purchase on the installment plan is a specific debt, not part of a budgetary pattern–either one's own or society's. The items and fragments of life remain itemized and fragmented—at least at the conscious level. (Lane, 1962, 353)

Lane goes on to argue that this 'morselizing tendency' prevents his interviewees from 'ideologizing' (353–354): a frequent failure to 'place issues or events in the context of a pattern of history or policy' inhibits broader ideological reasoning, and even a more basic sense of 'what goes with what' in terms of opinions across issues. Instead, his interviewees rely on 'smaller and vaguer theories, the segments of ideologies' (356). To the extent that these

'segments' are disjoint across different issues or domains, but nevertheless underpin the development of real issue opinions on the part of the individual, there is the potential for idiosyncratic issue opinions. Indeed, Lane suggests the possibility of combinations of attitudes that are surprising from a standard ideological perspective when he describes his subjects as each individually 'pluralistic, with both liberal and conservative roots to which new ideas can attach themselves and grow' (363).

More recent research by Lupton et al. (2015) provides quantitative evidence consistent with the notion that limitations in political attention and sophistication reduce the public's ability to make ideological connections between issues. They show that Americans with lower levels of self-reported political interest, political engagement and factual political knowledge tend to exhibit issue attitudes that are less substantially structured in terms of a single liberal–conservative ideological dimension. Lupton and co-authors are unable to definitively rule out the possibility that these non-ideological issue opinions are simply nonattitudes, but speculate that they at least partly reflect real, idiosyncratic issue opinions.

In sum, limited political attention and sophistication are likely to weaken the operation of the main mechanisms thought to induce low-dimensional correlations in mass issue opinion. Furthermore, to the extent that they do operate, these mechanisms are likely to do so in diverse ways across voters. Picture an electorate where issue opinion results from the aggregation of various relatively weak mechanisms which each vary in their effects across voters and which may cross-cut each other. The end result is not going to be a highly ideological electorate where issue opinions are aligned across policy issues for most people. A scatter of correlations induced by a variety of different mechanisms each inducing heterogeneous effects will not generate one or two dominant dimensions that explain most opinion variation among the public. Rather, the aggregation of these processes is likely to lead to a substantial amount of idiosyncratic opinion in the electorate, whereby voters hold diverse bundles of opinion across issues.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion do not necessarily arise from different processes. Rather, both emerge from a complicated set of processes that generate some correlations between issue opinions across voters, but not terribly strong correlations. We might call the strongest of these *ideological correlations*. But those correlations may not describe very much of the variation in opinions or reflect much ideologically structured reasoning by individuals.

2.3.2 Idiosyncratic Issue Publics

One potential objection to the notion of widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion goes back to the evidence of attitude instability reported by both Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969, 1974). How is it plausible that much of the public hold meaningful issue opinions—whether idiosyncratically or ideologically organized—when those issue opinions are on average not particularly stable?

In his 1964 essay Converse quite reasonably concluded that modest average issue opinion stability ruled out a scenario where most members of the public have idiosyncratic belief systems which tie together well-formed opinions across a *broad range of issues*. If they did, then issue opinions should on average be quite stable. Yet Converse was also careful to note that patterns of modest average issue opinion stability need not rule out a scenario where most members of the public develop well-formed issue opinions on *limited subsets of issues*. Suppose most people have meaningful views on a fairly narrow collection of issues, but the precise collection of issues which elicit such views varies from one person to the next. On any given issue, only some people would then have a well-formed, stable view, so that—just as Converse (1964) found—average stability among the public on that issue is unimpressive. At the same time, a broad section of the public would nevertheless possess at least some well-formed issue opinions which could then form the basis of their political choices.

Such a scenario involves what Converse (1964, 245) termed *issue publics*. An issue public is that subset of the population who care deeply about a particular issue and therefore form real, stable opinions on what government policy on this issue should be. If there are many different issue publics, and membership of these publics is diffuse across members of society, this holds out the possibility that many citizens are members of at least one such issue public and therefore are not entirely lacking in well-formed issue opinions. In his 1964 essay Converse (245) briefly mentions evidence that this might be the case, reporting that when he assigned individual respondents to issue publics based on the stability of their stated opinions on different topics, the resulting patterns suggested a 'fragmentation of the mass public into a plethora of narrower issue publics'.

Subsequent research has pursued Converse's concept of issue publics and substantiates the image that he outlined of a fragmented electorate. For example, assigning respondents to issue publics based on which issues they subjectively rate as particularly important, Krosnick (1990) finds: that the

American public seems to be made up of many small issue publics; that 'the majority of Americans probably fall into at least one' issue public and at most a small number of issue publics; and that where people are members of a particular issue public they tend to have more stable opinions on that issue. Later research by Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) finds that many Americans see themselves as belonging to at least one issue public, and that overall in the electorate there appear to be many issue publics covering a range of different topics.

What would cause voters to attach importance to, and develop settled views upon, particular issues—i.e., to become members of particular issue publics? One reason this can occur is due to material interest associated with occupation, location, or demographic characteristics. For example, some research suggests that farmers, or those residing in heavily agricultural localities, attach particular importance to agricultural policy issues concerning subsidies and tariffs (e.g., Chyzh and Urbatsch, 2021; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023). There is also evidence that senior citizens in America are particularly likely to pay attention to and attach importance to social security and Medicare policies, which have a direct and immediate material impact upon this group of citizens (Campbell, 2003; Henderson, 2014).

Another reason that people become members of particular issue publics relates to geo-temporally located shocks. Existing research suggests that living in an area affected at a certain time by an extreme weather event leads people in that area to attach greater importance to climate change as an issue (Hoffmann et al., 2022). Additionally, living in an area proximate to a terrorist attack can lead people in that area to attach more importance to terrorism as an issue (Stevens and Banducci, 2022; Efthyvoulou et al., 2024).

It may also be that individuals with particular religious or ethnic identities might be more likely to attach importance to particular issues. There is, for example, circumstantial evidence from the 2024 UK general election that British Muslim voters put particular weight on the issue of how Britain should respond to the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Labour Party support dropped notably at this election in constituencies with large Muslim populations, with the party losing a number of such constituencies to independent pro-Gaza candidates. In the wake of the election, both senior Labour figures (Stacey, 2024) and election analysts (Curtice, 2024; Ford, 2024) agreed that a key reason for this was that 'Labour's initial refusal to call for a ceasefire in the conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas had occasioned considerable disquiet among many Muslims' (Curtice, 2024, 13). This assessment is backed up by pre-election polling showing that, while only 3% of all British

voters were estimated to view the Israel–Palestine conflict as their single most important issue, 21% of British Muslim voters were estimated to do so (Javed, 2024).

As this list of examples suggests, there are many potential reasons why individuals come to attach importance to particular issues. In other words, just as we argued earlier that there are a diversity of mechanisms which can lead people to the particular position they take on a given issue, there are also a diversity of mechanisms which lead them to attach importance to (and therefore form a settled position upon) that particular issue (rather than other issues) in the first place. Furthermore these various mechanisms tend each to have quite weak aggregate effects, in the sense that they often only impact the importance that a fraction of the electorate attach to a particular issue. Together, the diversity and individual weakness of these mechanisms can be expected to create diffuse patterns of issue importance across individuals.

Consistent with this, Krosnick (1986) finds that the self-reported importance an individual attaches to one issue is generally a poor predictor of the importance they attach to another issue. This sort of evidence leads him to conclude in later work that 'people are unlikely to focus their passions on the same small set of policy debates', but rather come to care about varying sets of issues on the basis of 'their own unique personal experiences and … their own self-interests, social identifications, and values' (Krosnick, 1990, 74). In this sense, people often develop interest in—and form meaningful, stable opinions upon—idiosyncratic subsets of policy issues.

Overall, then, issue publics research suggests that unimpressive average issue opinion stability among the mass public need not imply that most members of the public lack any well-formed policy preferences. Rather, it suggests that, as Kinder (1983, 401) put it, a typical person may have 'nonattitudes, casually expressed' on many issues, but is nonetheless in possession of some 'authentic opinions, tenaciously held' on at least a subset of issues—those to which they attach importance and as such are a member of the corresponding issue publics. The key reason why this manifests in the aggregate as unimpressive average opinion stability on most issues is that the varying sets of individuals who form each issue public—and therefore develop stable views on the corresponding issue—typically represent a fraction of the overall electorate. Moreover, we have seen that, due to the diverse mechanisms which encourage issue public membership, the particular combinations of issues which individuals come to care about are often unpredictable. As such, issue publics research also suggests that individuals are likely to develop stable opinions on varying and idiosyncratic subsets of policy issues. The idiosyncratic voter account that we advance in this book builds on this by stressing

that, on those idiosyncratic subsets of policy issues, the combinations of positions that individuals settle upon are often likely to be ideologically unpredictable.

Of course, just as individuals will vary in the issues on which they come to form stable opinions, it is also likely that policy issues will to some extent vary in their capacity to elicit real, stable opinions across the general public. For example, Converse (1964) suggests that policy issues whose consequences can be more readily connected to particular prominent social groups—such as policies relating to racial equality in the US—are more likely to elicit enduring opinions from a typical individual because people have enduring feelings towards those social groups. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) suggest that policy issues which can be more readily understood in moral terms—such as abortion—elicit more enduring opinions. Finally, Hobolt et al. (2021) highlight how, particularly when the subject of high-profile focal events such as referenda, some issues may begin to elicit such strong feelings that in effect their corresponding issue publics grow to encompass much of the electorate. They show that this can on occasion—as with the Brexit issue following the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union—happen to such an extent that people's stances on an issue come to approach partisan identities in terms of their impact on both political and social behaviour.

2.3.3 Idiosyncrasy and Democratic Politics

To summarize, the idiosyncratic voter account contends that *different people care about, and hold stable opinions on, different sets of issues*, and that *those stable opinions are ideologically unpredictable: only weakly correlated across issues*. In terms of individuals' political choices, the idiosyncratic voter account suggests that issue opinion *can* influence these choices. In particular, *those issue opinions which are meaningfully held, and therefore stable, have capacity to influence political choices*.

By arguing for the relevance of idiosyncratic issue opinion, we do not deny a role for ideology in politics and mass issue opinion. Nor do we deny a lack of meaningful policy attitudes for many people on many issues, or that stated policy attitudes will sometimes simply reflect the policy position taken by a voter's preferred party. What we do stress is that many members of the public are likely to develop opinions on at least some subsets of issues which are well formed but lacking in low-dimensional ideological structure, and which therefore do not simply mimic the more ideologically structured policies of their preferred parties.

To the extent that many people develop bundles of idiosyncratic issue opinions and make political choices based upon them, then the prospects for policy responsive representative democracy are enhanced compared to a context where people are largely innocent of issue opinions or simply ape parties' positions. Parties once more have incentives to offer policies on issues which appeal to those members of the public who have come to care about those issues.

At the same time, widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion means that policy responsiveness in a representative democracy is no longer as simple as envisaged by the ideological voter account. Disagreements among the public across various issues can no longer be boiled down to one, or even two or three, easily understood ideological dimensions. Rather, idiosyncratic opinion implies that people's opinions on each policy issue are poorly predicted based on their opinions on other policy issues, so that policy disagreements in a society are decidedly *multidimensional*.

In this sense, if idiosyncratic issue opinion is widespread among the public, this lends weight to those theories of party competition and political campaigning that stress the multidimensionality of the issue space in which parties operate. A number of such theories have emerged in the academic literature over the past two decades (e.g., Hillygus and Shields, 2009; De Sio and Weber, 2014; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Although varying in the expectations they ultimately develop, all highlight that, faced with a multidimensional issue space, *issue emphasis* becomes a key strategic tool for parties. In doing so, these theories build on the insights of earlier authors like Riker (1986) and Schattschneider (1960), who observed that multidimensionality presents politicians with opportunities to strategically reframe the political debate along new dimensions and thereby disrupt prevailing political coalitions.

For example, Hillygus and Shields (2009, 36) argue that candidates can gain an electoral advantage by identifying and emphasising what they call 'wedge issues'. These are issues on which the supporters of the candidate's opponent are divided, such that some of those supporters can be peeled away if the candidate adopts and emphasizes distinctive positions on these issues. Relatedly, De Vries and Hobolt (2020, 116–118) argue that challenger parties engage in 'issue entrepreneurship', seeking to raise the profile of 'ignored' issues. These are issues which established political parties are reluctant to talk about and take a position upon because their prevailing electoral coalitions are each divided on these issues. On these 'ignored' issues, challenger parties have the opportunity to stake out popular and distinctive policy positions which can attract voters away from the established parties. These sorts of

strategies of course present risks to the politicians who employ them because the position they take on 'wedge' issues or 'ignored' issues may alienate some of their own existing electoral coalition. Hillygus and Shields (2009) argue that these risks can be mitigated through micro-targeting of different issue appeals to different subsets of voters. Meanwhile, De Vries and Hobolt (2020) argue that these risks are more likely to be acceptable for challenger parties, who have smaller existing electoral coalitions but can make potentially large gains by taking voters from mainstream parties.

The more widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion is among the mass public, the more opportunities there are likely to be for politicians to successfully emphasize 'wedge' or 'ignored' issues. For one thing, there are likely to be voters who have real and meaningful opinions on such issues and may change their vote choice based on appeals relating to such issues. For another thing, compared to a situation where mass issue opinion is highly ideological, more idiosyncratic patterns of issue opinion mean more potential 'wedge' issues or 'ignored' issues are likely to exist. The more issues there are upon which many voters' opinions tend to be weakly related to their opinions on other issues, including those issues on which the main political parties have built their coalitions of support, the more issues there are which divide those coalitions.

Elsewhere in the party competition literature, De Sio and Weber (2014) develop a general theory of issue emphasis which contends that parties gain electoral advantages by emphasizing issues with a higher 'yield': issues where the party's position is relatively popular in the electorate generally (providing potential electoral gains) and where the party's position does not alienate too many of its current supporters (limiting the risk of electoral losses). The nature of mass issue opinion is again relevant here. If voters' opinions and parties' positions across issues are very highly structured by one or two ideological dimensions, this will tend to limit the variability in yield across issues and therefore the scope for parties to profitably deploy switches in issue emphasis. For each potential alternative issue a party might consider, voters' and parties' positions on this issue would be well-predicted based on their positions on other issues related to that ideological dimension. The popularity of the party's position on this issue both within the overall electorate and within its current electoral coalition would therefore likely be similar to that on other issues related to the same ideological dimension. In contrast, the more voters' issue opinions are idiosyncratic, the more unpredictable their opinions are from one issue to the next. This will increase the variation across issues in the popularity of a party's issue positions within the overall electorate and within its current electoral coalition. As a result, it becomes more

likely that a party can find and emphasize high yield issues characterized by a promising distribution of voter opinion.

All of this is to say that arguments and evidence for widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion in the mass public provide micro-level (i.e., voter-level) foundations for macro-level (i.e., elite-level) accounts of multidimensional party competition. By a similar logic, idiosyncratic issue opinion enhances the potential impact of 'electoral shocks' that suddenly and substantially increase the importance of a particular issue for the electorate (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). Widespread idiosyncrasy means there is more chance that current supporters of each of the main parties are divided on the newly important issue, and therefore that these coalitions may split as they come to vote more based on that new issue. This in turn can help to explain the high levels of volatility in party support in many Western democracies documented in studies like Fieldhouse et al. (2020) and Dassonneville (2022).

Finally, widespread idiosyncrasy in mass issue opinion does not just complicate democratic policy responsiveness because it makes public opinion distinctly multidimensional. It also does so because it means that different voters care more about (and form meaningful opinions upon) different sets of policy issues. In a recent book, Hill (2022) argues that when voters vary in the 'intensity' of their preferences on a particular policy issue, democratic electoral processes can yield outcomes that 'frustrate' majority opinion on that issue. Hill highlights the possibility that a majority of voters have a weakly held preference for one policy outcome on an issue but a minority of voters have a strongly held preference for an alternative policy outcome. Faced with this situation, vote-seeking politicians may be incentivized to side with the minority position: by doing so they may expect to win more votes from among the minority of voters who care intensely about the issue than they lose among the majority of voters who care less intensely about the issue. What is more, Hill argues that this type of outcome should not necessarily be seen as a failure of democracy. In a world where different voters care about different issues, 'policy set with intense minorities over less-intense majorities on some issues can, in some cases, be best for the full electorate' (Hill, 2022, 7) when considered from the standpoint of aggregate social welfare.

For all of the reasons we have just discussed, widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion creates opportunities for policy responsiveness in a democracy, but it also complicates such responsiveness. This is because it implies that electoral politics involves multiple dimensions of disagreement and that different voters develop intensely held preferences on different dimensions.

2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has set out a number of contrasting accounts of mass policy opinion. Table 2.1 summarizes these different accounts in terms of their key expectations regarding the nature of mass policy opinion and the role of policy opinion in citizens' political choices. Its first three rows focus on the accounts which tend to dominate current understanding. The ideological voter account (first row, Table 2.1) says that people have ideologically correlated issue opinions, and that these opinions—or the ideologies underpinning them—substantially influence their political choices. The innocent

Table 2.1 Summary of implications for each of the main accounts discussed in this chapter

	Implications for issue opinion	**Implications for political choice**
Ideological voter account	Issue opinions are stable; opinions on different issues are correlated; the patterns of correlation can be captured by a small number of dimensions	Political choices are substantially influenced by individuals' 'ideological' issue opinions (those correlated with opinion on other issues) or by the underlying ideological positions that those issue opinions represent
Innocent voter account: classic	Unstable issue opinion in general; opinions on different issues exhibit little correlation	Issue opinions do not substantially influence individuals' political choices; partisanship is the major influence on individuals' political choices
Innocent voter account: voter-as-follower	Stability of opinion varies across issues and individuals. Among those issue opinions that are stable: opinions on different issues are correlated; the patterns of correlation can be captured by a small number of dimensions	Issue opinions do not substantially influence individuals' political choices; partisanship is the major influence on both individuals' political choices *and* their issue opinions
Idiosyncratic voter account	Different people care about, and hold stable opinions on, different sets of issues; those stable opinions are only weakly correlated across issues	Issue opinion influences political choices; this influence is greater for issues where individuals have stable opinions

voter account challenges this, arguing that most people are not just innocent of ideologically organized opinions, but are also altogether innocent of meaningful opinions on most issues. The classic version of the innocent voter account (second row, Table 2.1) stresses the instability of voters' reported issue opinions and their lack of ideological correlation. A voter-as-follower variant (third row, Table 2.1) contends that we may sometimes observe citizens reporting stable and ideologically organized issue opinions, but this is often a result of them simply mimicking the policy statements of the parties they have already decided to support for other reasons. Either way, individuals' political choices are better explained by their partisan identities than by ideology or issue opinions.

The third part of this chapter has advanced an alternative possibility, which we call the idiosyncratic voter account (fourth row, Table 2.1). In advancing this account we do not deny a role for ideology in politics. Nor do we deny a lack of meaningful policy attitudes for many people on many issues, or that people's issue opinions will sometimes mimic those of their preferred parties. However, we do stress that existing research may have underestimated the extent to which members of the public hold idiosyncratic—real and meaningful yet ideologically unpredictable—bundles of opinions on varying subsets of issues, and make political choices based on these idiosyncratic issue opinions.

In the chapters that follow, we will evaluate the degree of empirical evidence for these different accounts and their expectations as summarized in Table 2.1. We will do so first, in the next chapter, by reviewing existing empirical political science research. We will then turn to do so based on the new data we have collected and analysed.

3
The Limits of Existing Evidence

In the previous chapter we laid out three accounts of the nature of mass opinion on policy issues and its role in electoral politics. The *ideological voter* account expects views on different issues to be correlated across voters, such that certain positions on one issue tend to 'go with' certain positions on other issues. As a result, voters' disagreements on a broad range of issues can be reduced to disagreements along a small number of ideological dimensions, and elections involve voters choosing between parties staking out different positions on these dimensions. *Innocent voter* accounts, in contrast, view most voters as lacking ideologically organized issue opinions. Indeed, on many issues, voters may lack opinions that are even meaningful. Sometimes we might observe voters reporting issue opinions which appear to be meaningful and to exhibit ideological correlations, but this is often just because voters have learnt to *follow* the policy stances of the party they have already decided to support. According to innocent voter accounts, electoral choices lack policy content and are driven more by other factors like party identification. Finally, we advanced an *idiosyncratic voter* account. This posits that many voters may have meaningful issue opinions on at least some issues, but that there are good reasons to expect these opinions to lack ideological organization. Electoral choices can still reflect policy concerns. Yet, because voters' disagreements on a broad range of issues cannot be reduced to disagreements along a small number of ideological dimensions, electoral politics becomes more multidimensional, complex, and prone to volatility.

What does existing political science research tell us about the degree of empirical evidence for these three different accounts? We saw in the last chapter how some of the first major academic studies of mass political attitudes yielded evidence pointing squarely towards the classic innocent voter account. Philip Converse's (1964) analysis of American voters between 1956 and 1960, and David Butler and Donald Stokes' (1969) analysis of British voters between 1963 and 1966, found that voters' stated issue opinions lacked ideological structure, were weak predictors of party support, and were unstable over repeated measurement. They concluded that most voters not

Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion and Political Choice. Nick Vivyan, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, and Chris Hanretty, Oxford University Press.
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only lacked ideological opinion but also lacked well-formed views on most policy issues. Given the prominence of these findings, and their troubling implications for democratic policy responsiveness, it is perhaps unsurprising that they came to be challenged on a number of fronts in subsequent empirical research.

In this chapter we trace how those empirical challenges have evolved in the decades since Converse, Butler, and Stokes published their evidence. We first outline the challenge mounted by 'issue voting' studies in the 1970s and 1980s, which argued that voters' issue opinions had by then become more well formed and—whether ideologically organized or non-ideological—more relevant for political choices. We then discuss how, in the wake of renewed evidence of mass issue opinion instability, the most prominent challenges to the innocent voter account have focused less on issue voting or indeed on analysis of issue-specific opinions. Instead, partly to allay concerns about the instability of voters' issue-specific opinions, they have come to rely more on aggregating voters' reported opinions across multiple issues to measure voters' more general ideological dispositions. Based on analysis of the resulting multi-item ideology scales, they argue that contrary to the innocent voter account, voter ideology plays a key role in mass political behaviour.

We argue that while these multi-item ideology scales have undoubtedly enhanced understanding of public opinion and political behaviour, they end up discarding well-formed but non-ideological issue opinion as measurement noise. As a result, they ignore the potential role of idiosyncratic issue opinion by design. We outline how the empirical approach we take in this book addresses this shortcoming, allowing us to simultaneously capture and adjudicate between all three accounts of mass issue opinion—ideological, innocent, and idiosyncratic. We also discuss the comparative relevance of the British case to which we apply this approach.

3.1 The Rise and Decline of Issue-Based Analyses of Electoral Politics

Some of the most prominent initial challenges to the innocent voter account argued that the lack of well-formed issue opinions evidenced by Converse and by Butler and Stokes was not a fundamental, standing feature of mass politics. Rather, it was a product of the particular historical, social, and political contexts in which their survey data happened to have been collected. The studies which mounted this type of challenge tended to draw on survey

data from alternative time periods to the ones studied by Converse and by Butler and Stokes. These studies provided analysis suggesting that, during these alternative time periods, voters' issue opinions played a more central role in their political decision-making. These studies also tended to focus on so-called 'issue voting' analysis: measuring the observed strength of association between voters' stated opinion on an issue and their party support. Stronger associations were taken as evidence of more widespread issue-based political choice and therefore, ultimately, of the more widespread existence of meaningful, issue-specific opinions among the electorate.

Some of these studies focused on American voters. For example, Key (1966) used polling data collected before Converse to show how American voters' opinions on key issues were predictive of switches in party support in the 1930s and 1940s. Pomper (1972) examined survey data collected after Converse to show how, during the 1960s, voters' opinions on each of a number of domestic and foreign policy issues became more predictive of their Republican or Democrat party identification. Nie et al. (1976) provided evidence that, again during the 1960s, voters' average opinion across a range of issues became more predictive of party support in elections. These authors argued that the association between Americans' issue opinions and party support was—by historical standards—weak during the 1956–60 period examined by Converse. This, they argued, was because the issues dominating American political discourse in the late-1950s happened to be particularly uncontroversial, rooted as they were in older New Deal debates which for many Americans lacked immediate personal relevance (resulting in weaker opinions). It was also because American political parties were less sharply divided on policy issues (restricting the scope for issue opinions to shape vote choices). In contrast, the issues dominating politics in the 1930s and 40s—around the introduction of the New Deal and the role of government in the economy (Key, 1966), as well as in the 1960s when civil rights and the Vietnam War rose to prominence (Nie et al., 1976)—were of more immediate relevance for voters and led them to develop more intensely held issue opinions.[1]

Prominent issue voting studies were by no means confined to the US. In Britain, Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) and Franklin (1985) analysed surveys collected between 1970 and 1983. They showed that during the 1970s there had been a weakening in the class-rooted party identifications which Butler and Stokes (1969; 1974) had found to dominate British politics in the

[1] Presidential candidates in these periods are also argued to have presented voters with more clearly differentiated policies on issues of the day than did presidential candidates during the period studied by Converse.

1960s. This, they theorized, opened the way for British voters to engage in issue-based voting, making electoral choices based on which party is on average 'closer' to their own preferred position on policy issues, with proximity on an issue of greater personal importance to the voter receiving more weight in their calculus (e.g., Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983, 248). In support of this theory, both Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) and Franklin (1985) showed that during the 1970s and early 1980s, Britons' individual issue opinions—and their perceived proximity to parties on issues—were quite predictive of which party they reported voting for in general elections. What is more, issue positions and proximities were found to be even more predictive of party support when a voter rated the issue as of high personal importance. This argument was also applied more generally beyond Britain. Summarizing a collection of studies of fourteen Western democracies (Franklin et al., 1992), Franklin (1992, 399) concluded that in every one of those countries, just as voting along the lines of traditional social cleavages such as class and religion had declined between the 1960s and 1980s, so issue-based voting had increased.

The commonality across all of these studies is that they challenge the classic innocent voter account by arguing that, outside of the historically specific contexts examined by Converse, Butler, and Stokes, voters often have issue opinions which are real enough to form the basis of electoral choices. Some went further and argued that, in the modern electorate, not only were well-formed issue opinions more widespread than suggested by Converse and by Butler and Stokes, so were ideologically organized issue opinions. Nie et al. (1976), for example, showed that during the 1970s, the average ideological correlation in American voters' issue opinions increased to reach the levels that Converse (1964) found for political elites in 1958.[2] But while this evidence tended to support the ideological voter account, others provided findings more consistent with an idiosyncratic voter account. Sarlvik and Crewe (1983), for example, did not claim that British voters had necessarily become more ideological in terms of their views on policy issues. Indeed, they found little evidence (180) that correlations in British voters' issue opinions had strengthened significantly since it was first assessed by Butler and Stokes in the 1960s (Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983, 180), and uncovered 'many combinations of issue opinions' among voters (Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983, 288).

[2] Sullivan et al. (1978) argue that the increase in the ideological correlation of Americans' issue opinions which Nie et al. (1976) observed in the 1960s was more an artefact of changes in survey question wording during the same period than a reflection of real increases in ideological issue opinion.

3.1.1 Critiques of Issue Voting Analyses

Regardless of where these issue voting studies stood on the degree to which issue opinions are ideologically organized, other political scientists expressed scepticism that they had convincingly refuted the innocent voter charge that voters lack sufficiently well-formed issue opinions to make issue-based political decisions.

One reason for scepticism concerned the types of self-reported issue importance ratings used in some issue voting studies like Sarlvik and Crewe's. Psychologists and political scientists have highlighted how survey respondents find it difficult to introspectively evaluate the personal importance they place on specific factors in their decision-making (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002; Bartle and Laycock, 2012). A survey question asking about the importance they place on a particular issue when deciding who to vote for is likely to present precisely these type of difficulties. This can lead respondents to answer issue importance rating questions (or indeed the 'most important problem' questions common in surveys today) based less on the role those issues play in their own decision-making and more on the amount of attention they remember an issue having received in recent party political or media debates (Johns, 2010), a limitation which Sarlvik and Crewe acknowledged (Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983, 224). Respondents' self-reported issue importance ratings are also prone to error because respondents can be reluctant to be seen to explicitly label some issues 'unimportant' for fear of appearing ignorant or parochial, especially if those issues have been subject to recent public debate (Converse and Pierce, 1986; Johns, 2010).

Beyond these concerns about issue importance measures, even more fundamental concerns were raised about how much issue voting studies really revealed when they demonstrated an empirical association between voter–party proximity on a given issue and voter support for a party. Brody and Page (1972) pointed out that such an association could be due to a number of different mechanisms. One such mechanism is what they called 'policy-oriented evaluation' (Brody and Page, 1972, 457), where a voter's choice of which party to support is influenced by well-formed, causally prior, issue considerations. If this mechanism is at work, this would indeed represent evidence against the innocent voter account, and in favour of the ideological or idiosyncratic voter accounts.

However, the observed association between voter–party issue proximity and voter party support could also be due to what Brody and Page (1972, 457) called 'projection effects' or 'persuasion effects'. Projection effects occur to the extent that psychological biases lead voters to perceive a party they support

to be closer to their own opinions on the issues they care about. Persuasion effects are what we would expect according to the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account: they occur to the extent that voters simply bring their own reported issue positions into line with those of the party they support. Crucially, with either projection or persuasion effects, the direction of causality between voter–party issue proximity and party support is reversed: a voter's party support causes them to move closer to that party in terms of observed issue proximity. The result is that an association between voter–party issue proximity and party support is observed without issue proximity actually causing party support. In fact, in the case of persuasion effects, such an association may be observed without voters really possessing well-formed issue opinions independent of whatever issue-related cues they receive from their preferred party.

Disentangling these mechanisms is difficult with the type of data used by many of the issue voting studies conducted in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. First, this data tended to be *cross-sectional*, consisting of respondents' own reported issue opinions, their reported perceptions of party issue positions (where these were recorded) and their reported party support all measured more or less simultaneously in the same survey. Second, it was also *observational*, measuring the reported choices respondents make at a given point in time between distinct and long-lived party entities, each of which tend to take on relatively distinct and long-lived policy platforms. If the same party has been associated with a broadly similar bundle of issue positions for a long period of time, and we have only recent, simultaneously recorded measurements of a respondent's self-reported issue opinions, party issue placements, and party support, it is difficult to tell whether a respondent developed their reported issue opinions prior to deciding which party they support (policy-oriented evaluation), or decided which party they support and learnt to copy the issue positions of that party (persuasion).

Where later studies have better dealt with these difficulties they have found mixed evidence regarding the mechanisms at work. For example, some have exploited empirical cases where a candidate announces contradictory positions on an issue, one of which represent a drastic shift from the traditional policy platform of their party and is therefore unlikely to be an issue position favoured by voters who have previously begun to support that party on policy grounds. Experimentally varying which of those stated issue positions is highlighted to different survey respondents, Barber and Pope (2019) find evidence of persuasion: respondents who already support the party of the candidate are likely to report that their own issue opinion is whichever candidate issue position has been highlighted to them, regardless of whether

that position fits with the traditional policy platform of the party. However, in a later study the same authors also show that these types of persuasion effects are substantially weakened when a respondent has previously rated the issue in question to be one that is personally important to them (Barber and Pope, 2024). This suggests that the relative strength of persuasion and policy-oriented effects may vary depending on issue importance.

Others have exploited empirical cases where a candidate or party shifts their issue position *and* where there happens to be panel survey data which provides measures of individuals' opinions on the relevant issue and their candidate or party support taken both before and after the shift occurred. Both Lenz (2012) and Slothuus and Bisgaard (2021) study cases of this type across different countries. Consistent with the persuasion mechanisms emphasized by the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account, they find that voters often shift their issue opinions to align with their prior preferred candidate or party rather than shifting their candidate or party support in line with their prior issue opinion. Schonfeld and Winter-Levy (2021), on the other hand, find evidence more consistent with policy-oriented evaluation (and therefore with either the ideological or idiosyncratic voter accounts). Studying how British voters react when the Conservative Party shifted to a more Eurosceptic position in the wake of the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, they show that voters tended to adjust their party support to align with their prior opinions on the EU issue more than they adjusted their opinions on the EU issue to align with their prior party support.

Notwithstanding this later evidence, the lack of panel studies of issue voting in the 1970s and 1980s limited the ability of issue voting advocates to persuasively disentangle the different mechanisms which might underpin an observed association between issue opinions and vote choices. It also left them unable to assess the stability of issue opinions. Without a way of measuring respondents' issue opinions across multiple survey waves, it was not possible to address a key charge made by the classic innocent voter account: that, on any given issue, most voters were innocent of meaningful, stable, issue-specific opinions in the first place.

When subsequent research did re-examine issue opinion stability, it suggested this charge still stuck. Converse and Markus (1979) and Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) analyse later panel survey data collected between 1972 and 1976 to show that Americans' reported opinions on many issues remained as unstable as Converse had found them to be in the late 1950s, with wave-on-wave correlations in individual opinions of between 0.25 and 0.5 for those issues originally examined in Converse (1964). Although opinions in some

new issues did appear to exhibit stronger stability (wave-on-wave correlations of between 0.45 and 0.7) they were still much less stable than Americans' reported party identifications. In one of the only analyses of the stability of British voters' opinions on a range of policy issues since Butler and Stokes' 1960s evidence, Heath and McDonald (1988) analysed panel survey data collected between 1983 and 1987. They found modest wave-on-wave correlations of typically between 0.3 and 0.4 in individuals' stated opinions on twelve policy issues. And, once again, they found substantially higher wave-on-wave correlations for individuals' reported party identification. Panel studies in other countries, including Switzerland (Hill and Kriesi, 2001), Sweden (Niemi and Westholm, 1984) and France (Converse and Pierce, 1986) found that, although issue opinion stability was higher on some issues than others, and sometimes higher on average than Converse found in 1950s America, it was still modest for the most part.

In sum, although the issue voting studies which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s often claimed that the innocent voter findings of Converse, Butler, and Stokes were time-bound, and that voters had come to develop more well-formed policy issue opinions upon which they increasingly based their political decisions, the evidence these studies provided was challenged on various fronts. Sceptics pointed out that the key evidence on issue voting presented in these studies tended to rely on problematic measures, and was still arguably consistent with variants of the innocent voter account. Moreover, a new wave of evidence that many voters continued to lack well-formed, stable opinions on many policy issues cast further doubt on issue voting claims, and provided renewed support for the innocent voter account.

3.2 From Issue-Specific to Ideological Measures

Methodological objections to issue voting studies and fresh evidence of mass issue opinion instability may have led to a renewed scepticism among many political scientists regarding the prevalence of 'real' issue-specific opinions in the electorate. Yet by no means did it lead to a consensus in favour of innocent voter accounts. Rather, another strand of literature mounted a different challenge to these accounts. It argued that the issue opinion instability that had been taken as evidence of nonattitudes was in fact largely an artefact of 'measurement error' in voters' responses to issue-specific survey questions. We now turn to outline this measurement error argument, and particularly how consequential it was for the development of empirical research on mass issue opinion. As we shall see, the argument encouraged political scientists to

focus attention away from voters' issue-specific opinions and towards voters' general ideological dispositions, which can be measured via the aggregation of responses to multiple issue-specific questions in a way that reduces measurement error and attendant concerns about instability.

3.2.1 Measurement Error and Response Instability

The measurement error critique of the nonattitudes thesis was first set out by Christopher Achen in a 1975 paper entitled 'Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response' (Achen, 1975).[3] Achen's paper argued that Converse and others were wrong to conclude that high levels of wave-on-wave change in voters' responses to the same issue-specific question necessarily indicates a lack of well-formed opinion on that issue. Why? Because survey questions are inevitably imperfect instruments for the measurement of an individual's true attitude on a subject. There is always a degree of 'vagueness' (1222) in the wording of a question and of the response options associated with it. This vagueness introduces an element of noise—or 'measurement error'—into the process by which an individual's true attitude on an issue gets translated into an observed response each time the individual is asked a question on that issue. Their interpretation of the question, or of the meaning of the different response options, can change from one instance to the next in what Achen considered to be essentially random ways. As a result, even when an individual maintains a perfectly stable true attitude on a topic, question vagueness and consequent measurement error may lead them to give different responses to the same question on that topic at two different points in time. In other words, instability in an individual voter's observed issue opinions could be due to measurement error rather than a lack of well-formed issue opinions on the part of the voter.

Achen's paper went on to apply a statistical procedure which exploits the three-wave panel structure of Converse's (1964) data to gauge the amount of measurement error present in each of the issue opinion measures Converse originally studied.[4] Armed with this information, it took the raw

[3] As we have already discussed in Chapter 2, Achen's more recent work is more closely associated with the innocent voter account (e.g., Achen and Bartels, 2016).

[4] This procedure identified variation in responses due to measurement error based on the relative degree to which an individual's opinion in waves 1 and 2 are informative about their opinion in wave 3. To the extent that their true opinion is poorly formed and shifting over time, Achen argued that opinion at wave 3 should be better predicted by more up-to-date information from wave 2. To the extent that true opinion is stable and measurement error is causing random time-specific fluctuation in reported opinion, Achen argued that their opinion at wave 3 should be equally well predicted by wave 1 opinion as by wave 2 opinion. Others, such as Butler and Stokes (1969, 181), had argued that this pattern only indicated a

wave-on-wave correlations in individuals' responses to those issue opinion items and 'corrected' them for measurement error. These corrected wave-on-wave correlations were substantially higher than the raw ones reported by Converse, almost always rising above 0.7. For some issues, they even approached the wave-on-wave correlations observed for party identification. Based on these results, Achen's paper concluded that much of the mass issue opinion instability observed by Converse and others was the result of measurement error arising from the vagueness of survey instruments. Once one accounted for this error, mass issue opinions appeared much more stable, and therefore well-formed.

3.2.2 The Rise of Multi-Item Ideology Scales

The approach to correcting for measurement error that Achen outlined in his 1975 paper relied on certain assumptions about the ways in which individuals' true attitudes changed over time. It also crucially required the researcher to have access to panel survey data offering at least three waves of repeated observations on the same sample of respondents. This latter requirement in particular limited the applicability of Achen's approach in subsequent political science research, which often relied on single-wave surveys. However, the broader conceptual points developed in Achen's paper—about the problem of measurement error in survey-based measures of issue opinion and the appreciable difference it can make to the results one gets when analysing such measures—gained considerable traction in the political science literature.

And as it did so, scholars of mass political opinion began to adopt an alternative and more readily applicable approach to address the measurement error problem. This approach relies on aggregating respondents' answers across multiple survey items to generate summary attitude *scales*. The logic for doing so is premised on the notion that respondents have a general underlying attitude—represented as a position on a continuous scale—which underpins their responses to a set of survey items. This general attitude may be conceptualized as a broad-ranging ideological disposition (in which case the set of survey items used covers a broad range of issues) or as pertaining to a particular issue domain or collection of domains (in which case the relevant set of survey items is narrower). A respondent's answer to each individual item is their 'score' on that item. Each item is viewed as containing some

lack of meaningful, persistent change over time, and thus constituted evidence of weakly formed issue opinions rather than substantial measurement error.

useful 'signal' regarding their general underlying attitude, *plus* a degree of 'noise' due to random measurement error caused, as Achen (1975) suggests, by vagueness in the question and response option wording. Sometimes that random measurement error will push the respondent's score on the survey item higher. Sometimes it will pull the score lower. Therefore, if we aggregate a respondent's scores across a number of items into a summary scale—e.g., by taking the mean of those scores—the measurement errors contained in each individual answer will, on average, cancel out. The resulting summary scale should be a less noisy, and more stable, measure of the respondent's general underlying attitude.[5]

Several articles have provided empirical evidence for this aggregation logic. For example, after using panel survey data to demonstrate that Britons' reported issue-specific opinions continued to exhibit only modest wave-on-wave stability in the 1980s, Heath and McDonald (1988) go on to construct a summary scale designed to measure respondents' general economic left–right ideology (which they called an 'index of left-right values'). To do so they sum respondents' answers to eleven questions on economic issues. They find that the wave-on-wave correlation in individuals' scores on this scale are much higher (0.73) than the wave-on-wave correlation in individuals' responses to each issue-specific question used to construct the scale (all below 0.4). Heath and McDonald took this as evidence that, even if voters' responses to issue-specific questions are noisy and hence unstable, voters do seem to have real and stable 'general normative principle[s]' which underpin those issue-specific question responses, and that these can be measured through the 'methodological device of calculating an index' (1988, 100). Consistent with this, later research by Evans et al. (1996) shows that British respondents' scores on two separate summary left–right economic and liberal–authoritarian 'values' scales are notably more stable than are their responses to the specific questions used to construct those respective scales. Writing just over a decade after that, Ansolabehere et al. (2008) show that moving from single-item issue questions to multi-item scales substantially reduces wave-on-wave instability in Americans' measured attitudes, and does so in ways consistent with the measurement error explanation of issue-specific response instability. They conclude that, 'once measurement

[5] In some applications summary attitude scales are created by simply summing or averaging each respondent's response scores across survey items. In other applications, scales are constructed using slightly more involved methods such as factor analysis, principal components analysis or item-response modelling. All of these allow for different survey items to be accorded different weights in the aggregation process depending on how strongly they appear to correlate with one another, and thus (it is hoped) the general underlying attitude being measured. Either way, the logic that aggregation reduces measurement error remains the same.

error is reduced, we can firmly reject the notion that the American voter holds no coherent or stable attitudes' (216).

Partly as a result of this aggregation logic, prominent studies of mass politics have in recent decades focused less upon voters' opinions on specific policy issues. Instead, they have tended to identify sets of issue questions for which voters' responses exhibit reasonable ideological correlation and to aggregate responses from these issue questions into multi-item ideology scales. These scales are more stable over repeated measurement and therefore less vulnerable to the objection that they capture nonattitudes. Some of these studies aggregate responses from large numbers of questions spanning a wide range of issues into a summary measure of voters' positions on a *single* underlying ideological dimension, sometimes called a 'left–right' dimension, sometimes called a 'liberal–conservative' dimension. Such a focus on a single broad-ranging ideological scale is common among analyses of the American electorate (Jessee, 2009; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Jessee, 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013; Caughey and Warshaw, 2015; Simas, 2023), although some analyses of electorates in other countries have also taken this one-dimensional approach (Bartle et al., 2019).

Other studies, sometimes of American (Treier and Hillygus, 2009) but more often European electorates (Heath et al., 1994; Evans et al., 1996; Surridge, 2012; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Dalton, 2018; Gidron, 2022), argue that it is more appropriate to measure voter positions on *two* distinct multi-item ideology scales. In these analyses, each of the two scales—sometimes referred to as 'values' scales (e.g., Evans et al., 1996)—aggregates information from different survey items on different sets of topics. Usually, one scale draws on survey items relating to economic questions, while the other scale draws on survey items relating to social and cultural questions.

Still others identify three or more distinct sets of survey items relating to different issue domains and proceed to aggregate responses to each set of items separately (Heath et al., 1999; Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Highton and Kam, 2011; Knutsen, 2018; Caughey et al., 2019; Perrett, 2021). The result, in these analyses, is that voter positions are measured on three or more multi-item ideology scales, each capturing different dimensions. Some of these studies talk about the scales generated as measuring 'issue preferences' (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 2008). However, they tend to measure not so much preferences on specific policy issues as quite broad-ranging underlying attitudes concerning, for example, questions surrounding 'moral' issues (Ansolabehere et al., 2008), social security and 'welfare' (Perrett, 2021), or 'nationalism' (e.g., Heath et al., 1999). We hence refer to them as multi-item ideology scales.

Whether focused on capturing positions on a single overarching ideological dimension or on multiple dimensions, the multi-item ideology scales

developed in these various studies have been used to make several valuable substantive contributions. This includes: showing that voters' measured ideological positions are strongly predictive of party support (Heath et al., 1994; Evans et al., 1996) and vote choice (Jessee, 2009, 2012); showing how social class influences electoral politics by shaping voters' ideological values (Evans and Tilley, 2017); mapping the evolution of electoral competition in European democracies (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015) and Western democracies more generally (Dalton, 2018); and evaluating the extent to which elected representatives are responsive to voters' ideological positions (e.g., Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013; Caughey and Warshaw, 2015; Hanretty et al., 2017; Bartle et al., 2019).

Others exploit panel surveys containing repeated measures of multi-item ideology scales and of respondent partisanship to discriminate between the ideological voter and innocent voter accounts. If respondent ideological position is responsive to prior changes in the ideological position of the party with which the respondent identifies, this is evidence for the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account. If, on the other hand, respondent partisanship adjusts to prior changes in the ideological position of the respondent or the ideological positions of the parties, this suggests that party support depends on voter ideology and as such is evidence for the ideological voter account. Some scholars find evidence that, under certain conditions, voters' ideological positions follow those of their preferred party (Cavaillé and Neundorf, 2022) or report mixed evidence depending on historical political context (Highton and Kam, 2011). Others, however, find that, consistent with the ideological voter account, past voter ideological position predicts future partisanship better than than past partisanship predicts future ideological position (Milazzo et al., 2012; Evans and Neundorf, 2020).

These analyses differ in their methodological details, focus on varying substantive questions and come to varying conclusions. All, however, share a common focus on analysing voters' general underlying ideology as measured by multi-item scales, rather than analysing voters' opinions on specific policy issues. Indeed, as the focus on measuring general underlying ideology via multi-item scales has increased, it is not just the *analysis* of individual policy-specific opinions that has decreased, but also the *usage* of policy-specific issue items in the construction of those multi-item ideology scales.

Consider, for example, the evolution of research on British public opinion. Here, early ideology scales were constructed based on aggregation of information from more concrete policy questions available in extant survey data (e.g., Heath and McDonald, 1988). Once the potential advantages of such scales became apparent, it made sense to develop standard batteries of items which could be deployed repeatedly in different surveys over long periods of

time, and in each case aggregated to create comparable multi-item measures of voter ideology. In the 1990s, Heath et al. (1994) and Evans et al. (1996) took up this challenge, creating and validating standard survey item batteries for the measurement of left-right economic and liberal-authoritarian ideological values. These batteries are influential, having become the default way of measuring British voters' ideological values—with one or the other regularly included in annual British Social Attitudes surveys, in the British Household Panel Survey from 1991 to 2007, and the British Election Study from 2014 onwards.[6]

Because the items in these batteries were primarily intended for aggregation, and for repeated deployment over a long time period, there were good reasons to avoid questions about 'topical policy issues' (Heath et al., 1994, 118). These could be relevant at the time of survey design but nevertheless become obsolete as social, economic and technological contexts change over the years. Instead, the batteries consisted of more 'abstract' (Evans et al., 1996, 97) questions about the desirability of different outcomes in a particular issue domain, or about respondents' beliefs concerning certain social or economic processes. Not only did these more abstract questions have the advantage of being less time-bound, they were also arguably more efficient: because existing research at the time provided rich information about the policy content of each of the main dimensions of ideological disagreement among British voters in the early 1990s, a relatively small number of well-chosen abstract questions on relevant principles or beliefs could plausibly capture variation in voters' positions on each dimension as effectively as a larger number of narrower policy questions.

To illustrate, take one of the batteries developed by Evans et al. (1996). This measures a respondent's left–right economic ideological values based on the degree to which they agree or disagree with each of the following statements on a five-point scale:

- 'Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off.'
- 'Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers.'
- 'Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth.'

[6] The main alternative measures of ideology employed in British political surveys this century are also ones which do not ask about specific policy issues. Instead, these ideological self-placement questions ask respondents to place themselves directly on a generic eleven-point 'left–right' scale, or to place themselves on relatively abstract domain-level scales measuring, for example, preferences for higher taxes and social spending versus lower taxes and social spending (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004), or preferences for redistribution where higher scores indicate government should be less concerned about ensuring equal incomes (e.g., Fieldhouse et al., 2020).

- 'There is one law for the rich and one for the poor.'
- 'Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.'

These questions all elicit information which plausibly relates to a respondents' left–right economic ideological thinking. But only the first one could be said to measure respondents' opinions on what the government should *do* in terms of policy, and even that item is phrased in broad directional terms rather than focusing on a specific public policy proposal regarding the level of redistribution.

As we have discussed, there were good reasons for this focus on more abstract questions. Nevertheless, as empirical research on British voters has come to rely more on multi-item ideology scales like this one, there has been less analysis of voters' opinions across more concrete policy issues. The consequence is that it is now almost a quarter of a century since the last systematic assessment of the British public's opinions on a broad range of concrete policy issues, the degree to which these opinions are ideologically correlated, and the pattern of such correlations (Heath et al., 2001).

It is not just studies of British voters which have moved away from multi-item ideology scales grounded in voters' opinions on specific policy issues. Research on American voters does still focus frequently on ideology as measured exclusively based on aggregation of information from more concrete policy questions (e.g., Jessee, 2012). However, ideology scales which aggregate information from more abstract issue questions either instead of—or as well as—more concrete policy questions are commonly used in research on European voters (e.g., Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Dalton, 2018; Caughey et al., 2019) and also in some research on US voters (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 2008).[7]

3.3 The Case for Renewed Study of Policy Issue Opinion

So far this chapter has traced how political scientists have developed different types of ripostes to the normatively troubling claims made by the innocent voter account: that voters often lack real and meaningful views on what public policies they want their government to implement, or that they

[7] In many European countries, voting advice applications (VAAs) do collect and analyse large amounts of information on people's policy-specific opinions in order to advise them which party offers the closest policy match (Wagner and Ruusuvirta, 2012). However, ideological scales constructed from these types of data are not widely used in academic research, partly because VAA users tend not to be representative of the general population (Germann et al., 2023).

blindly support the policies advocated by the parties they have already come to support for non-policy reasons. Despite an initial challenge from studies claiming to have found evidence of issue voting, methodological concerns about these studies, and continuing evidence that voters' reported issue-specific opinions are often unstable, have led political scientists to move away from analyses of voters' opinions on specific policy issues. Instead, an alternative empirical challenge to the innocent voter account has emerged. This argues that observed instability in voters' responses to issue-specific survey items is driven less by a lack of meaningful opinions and more by measurement error. It also argues that this measurement error can be corrected by aggregating issue-specific items into summary scales measuring voters' more general ideological attitudes.

The latter challenge has helped to foster a prominent strand of literature focused on analysis of multi-item voter ideology scales, rather than issue-specific opinion. We have seen that this literature has yielded important insights. Multi-item ideology scales have been used to provide new evidence suggesting that voters' ideologies are predictive of their political choices, and are not simply noise or artefacts of voters' partisan loyalties, as the innocent voter account would suggest.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons to think that too heavy a reliance on these ideology scales risks obscuring key features of mass opinion on public policy which can be consequential for democratic politics.

First, it may lead to overconfidence regarding voters' capacity to develop well-formed views on policy issues. This is because there are good reasons to doubt that observed issue opinion instability is mainly attributable to random measurement error. If it were, the level of stability in measured opinion on a given issue would mainly be a function of the vagueness of the survey instrument used to elicit opinion on that issue, and should not vary systematically across voters. Yet several studies show that issue opinion stability does vary across voters: those with lower levels of general and issue-specific political knowledge tend to give less stable responses to a given survey question on that issue (e.g., Feldman, 1989; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; Freeder et al., 2019). Moreover, it is precisely these types of voter whom we would reasonably expect to be less likely to develop well-formed opinions on policy issues (Converse, 1964). This type of evidence thus suggests that findings of low to moderate average stability in voters' measured issue-specific opinions are, after all, at least partly attributable to many voters having weakly formed views on many issues, such that their responses on those issues vary randomly over time. As a result, it is unclear to what extent multi-item ideology scales exhibit greater temporal stability than individual issue opinion

items because they average out 'randomness in the measurement of policy opinions, or randomness in the opinions themselves' (Freeder et al., 2019, 274).

Second, we have seen how, as researchers become more focused on constructing multi-item scales to measure voters' general underlying ideology, there is often less onus on using broad sets of concrete policy questions to construct these scales. There is a powerful logic to this: smaller sets of abstract attitudinal questions may more efficiently capture key elements of disagreement along known ideological dimensions, and should become obsolete less rapidly. Yet the ideology scales created from sets of more abstract questions may not necessarily reflect the key dimensions of disagreement underlying voters' views on more concrete policy issues. Even where batteries of more abstract questions are first selected for aggregation into ideology scales because they successfully capture the main observed dimensions of ideological correlation in voters' concrete policy opinions at that point in time, the ideological correlations in policy opinions may change over time. New ideological dimensions of disagreement on policy issues may emerge, or existing dimensions may expand (or contract) to encompass more (or fewer) policy issues. To the extent that this happens, the multi-item ideology scales will wane in their relevance for understanding voters' outlook on policies and the consequences of this for electoral politics.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, to the extent that multi-item ideology scales alleviate concerns about the instability of voters' issue-specific opinions—and attendant scepticism about whether such opinions are real and meaningful—they do so by isolating that component of issue-specific opinion which has ideological structure and focusing on this (and only this) as meaningful opinion. The scales effectively assume that 'citizens do not have distinct views on distinct policies separate from what their ideologies dictate' (Broockman, 2016, 185). The result is that these scales discard well-formed and stable but nonetheless ideologically unpredictable issue-specific opinions—in other words, idiosyncratic issue opinions—as measurement noise.

The more prevalent idiosyncratic issue opinions are among voters, and the more consequential they are for their political choices, the more we should be concerned about over-reliance on analytical techniques which ignore this type of opinion. At present, however, it is hard to gauge how concerned we should be because we lack clear evidence as to how widespread truly idiosyncratic issue opinion is and the role of such opinion in voters' political choices.

This is not to say that existing research provides no evidence of such idiosyncrasy—far from it. For one thing, we discussed in Chapter 2 how our account of idiosyncratic issue opinion builds on issue publics research (e.g., Krosnick, 1986, 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023), which provides evidence that voters attach importance to, and develop meaningful views upon, varying subsets of issues. This issue publics literature, however, leaves open the question of whether the real opinions that voters do form on these subsets of issues are ideologically correlated or idiosyncratically patterned.

Other research does provide indicative evidence that voters' issue opinions may lack low-dimensional ideological structure. Some, for example, take the reasonably high rates at which partisan American voters are found to disagree with their party on policy issues as indicative that voters' policy opinions cannot be very strongly structured by a single ideological dimension (Hillygus and Shields, 2009). Others provide evidence that voters' issue opinions cannot be adequately understood in terms of a small number of ideological dimensions (e.g., Dolezal et al., 2013; Broockman, 2016), or that mass issue opinion exhibits more complex, multidimensional structures (e.g., Marcus et al., 1974; Jackson and Marcus, 1975; Fleischman, 1986; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Lupton et al., 2015). Yet these studies do not directly gauge the prevalence of idiosyncratic issue opinion as distinct from both stable ideological issue opinion and unstable nonattitudes.

Suggestive evidence of idiosyncratic issue opinion also emerges from recent literature seeking to understand animosity between supporters of different parties, a phenomena known as 'affective polarization' (Iyengar et al., 2019). Dias and Lelkes (2022) carry out a series of experiments where Americans are asked to report their feelings towards hypothetical fellow citizens who vary randomly in their partisanship and their stance on policy issues. They find that, just as disagreement over partisanship has a substantial negative impact on affect towards a fellow citizen, so too does disagreement on policies on which parties are not perceived to take clear and contrasting positions. This suggests that voters can develop policy opinions which are not organizsed by prevailing party ideologies but are nonetheless meaningfully held—at least inasmuch as they help shape feelings towards others. Later work by Orr, Fowler, and Huber (2023) highlights evidence that Democrat and Republican identifiers rarely agree with their party on all policy issues, and therefore seem to hold some opinions which do not fit with prevailing party-organized ideologies. They also present evidence suggesting that these contra-party issue opinions are meaningfully held as measured against the yardstick of partisan loyalty: analysing the same experimental data as Dias and Lelkes (2022), they show that citizens express warmer feelings towards

a co-partisan who shares their contra-party issue position than towards a co-partisan who takes the party-loyal issue position.

In addition to these studies of affective polarization, recent research on how group norms induce ideological structure in issue opinions also suggests the possibility of widespread idiosyncratic issue opinion. Studying American survey respondents' opinions on sixteen issues, Groenendyk et al. (2022) show that self-identified ideological 'liberals' and 'conservatives' reasonably frequently report a preference on an issue that is at odds with the preference norm on that issue among their self-identified ideological group, and which is in this sense ideologically inconsistent. As evidence that many of these ideologically inconsistent preferences are not nonattitudes attributable simply to innocence or to misperceptions of 'what goes with what' according to prevailing ideological divides, they show that just under two-thirds of self-identified ideological 'liberals', and just over two-thirds of self-identified ideological 'conservatives', have preferences on at least one issue that are *knowingly* ideologically inconsistent: the individual correctly perceives the 'normal' preference on the issue for their ideological group, yet their own personal preference still deviates from that norm.

These recent studies of affective polariation and norm-induced ideological attitudes clearly suggest that voters quite often hold issue opinions which do not fit with the norm for their self-identified partisan or ideological groups, and which may therefore be idiosyncratic as we define it. They also provide some evidence that these issue opinions are meaningful for voters. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly given that idiosyncratic issue opinion is not their main focus, there are limits as to what they can tell us about the prevalence of idiosyncratic issue opinion and its role in citizens' political choices. For one thing, when people in these studies report issue opinions that run contrary to what is the norm in the partisan or ideological group with which they identify, this only tells us that these opinions are unpredictable based on the patterns of opinion which happen to be associated with membership of these particular partisan or ideological groups. For example, it could be that, rather than being ideologically unpredictable per se, these opinions are rooted in a second ideological dimension that cross-cuts the main dimension along which those party or ideological groupings are defined. This is particularly likely when—as is the case in these studies—individuals are measured as members of one of just two partisan groupings (Republican or Democrat) or ideological groupings (liberal or conservative).[8] Beyond this limitation,

[8] All of these studies also focus on those respondents who either express a partisan leaning (Dias and Lelkes, 2022; Orr et al., 2023) or self-identify with an ideological group (Groenendyk et al., 2022). As

because these studies rely on issue opinions recorded in a single survey wave, they are unable to investigate the stability of group-defiant issue opinions as an indicator of how well formed these opinions really are.

Finally, some recent research by Fowler et al. (2023) does try to investigate more directly the extent to which voters tend to hold ideologically or non-ideologically organized issue opinions. Fowler et al. (2023) examine data on American respondents' issue opinions and develop a method which aims to quantify the relative frequency of 'Downsian' ideological voters (whose issue opinions can be well summarized by a single liberal–conservative ideological dimension) versus other types of non-ideological voters. They find that most voters in the American electorate are ideological, as defined under their model.

However, the empirical model they use characterizes a voter as non-ideological only where their opinions are *strictly uncorrelated across issues*: i.e., where the chances of the voter holding a particular opinion on one issue do not depend at all on their views on any other issue, so that knowing their opinion on any one issue is of zero value in helping us predict their opinion on any other issue. This restrictive definition of what it means to hold *non-ideological* opinions directly leads to Fowler et al. (2023) finding that most voters appear to hold ideological patterns of opinions (Broockman and Lauderdale, nd). It also contrasts with the theory of idiosyncratic issue opinion which we propose. This theory does not suggest that large numbers of people have opinions that exhibit strictly zero correlation across all issues. Rather, it suggests that many people will have real, stable issue opinions that are at best *weakly* correlated across issues, such that a small number of ideological dimensions can only explain a limited portion of the real (temporally stable) variation in mass issue opinion.[9]

3.3.1 Our New Evidence

In this book we go beyond this existing research by more directly and effectively quantifying the prevalence of idiosyncratic issue opinion among voters. Specifically, we analyse rich new survey data from Britain to gauge

such, they do not tell us about patterns of issue opinion among those who do not self-identify with one of these groups, who for example sometimes constitute more than a quarter of the sample (Groenendyk et al., 2022).

[9] Fowler et al. (2023) also rely on issue opinions recorded in a single survey wave. As such, they too are unable to use observed response (in)stability to distinguish ideologically unpredictable opinions that are really unstable nonattitudes from ideologically unpredictable opinions that are well formed and stable over repeated measurement.

what fraction of variation in voters' issue-specific opinions is attributable to idiosyncratic issue opinion. The data we use records voters' opinions upon each of a broad range of policy questions on ordinal, concrete policy option scales. In contrast to some existing research which relies on dichotomous issue-specific opinion measures—which come from survey questions asking whether a respondent supports or opposes a given policy proposal—the ordinal nature of our issue opinion measures means that they offer much more information to discern idiosyncratic from ideological patterns of opinion.

Furthermore, our data records opinions on the same issues among the same sample of voters repeatedly at six-month intervals. This panel structure provides us with the necessary empirical information to gauge the extent to which those issue opinions which lack shared ideological structure are either: unstable opinions which individual voters fail to maintain consistently over time, and as such are indicative of nonattitudes and voter innocence; or are stable for individual voters over repeated measurements, and as such are indicative of meaningful, idiosyncratic issue opinion.

As well as allowing us to better gauge the prevalence of idiosyncratic issue opinion, our new issue opinion data also allows us to contribute new evidence concerning the ideological and innocent voter accounts. First, it allows us to estimate what fraction of variation in voters' issue opinions is attributable to ideologically correlated issue opinion—and as such is indicative of the ideological voter or innocent voter-as-follower accounts—and what fraction is attributable to unstable opinion—and as such is indicative of the classic innocent voter account.

Second, with regard to the ideological voter account, our data allows us to provide new evidence concerning the dimensionality of voters' opinions on a broad range of concrete policy questions in a Western European electorate. This helps us assess the extent to which the types of multi-item scales commonly used to measure voter ideology in Western European countries continue to capture the ideological structure which characterizes voters' more concrete policy opinions.

Third, with regard to the innocent voter account, our panel data enables us to assess the degree of instability in voters' policy opinions. Rather than resorting to arguments about measurement error which turn on untestable assumptions about the source and meaning of instability, we take such instability as informative about the limits of real, meaningful policy opinion in mass publics. However, we also explore the limitations of the classic innocent voter account by investigating how issue opinion (in)stability is distributed across voters and issues. In particular we investigate whether this distribution is consistent with the type of issue publics logic discussed in the previous

chapter, where most voters have at least some real, stable opinions on some policy issues, and are thus able to make issue-based political decisions.

This book also goes beyond existing research by providing new evidence concerning the role of issue opinion in general, and of idiosyncratic issue opinion specifically, in the *political choices* that voters make. We do so by examining data from a series of choice experiments embedded in our panel survey. Compared to the existing issue voting studies outlined above, the resulting data allows us to better address the scepticism of the innocent voter account regarding voters' ability to make coherent political choices based on policy preferences. This is partly because the panel nature of the choice experiments allows us to use a novel metric to empirically evaluate the coherence of voters' political choices. Just as Converse and others use the observed temporal stability of voters' issue opinions to gauge the extent to which those opinions are well formed, we use the observed temporal stability of voters' choices when deciding repeatedly between the same pairs of policy bundles to gauge the extent to which those voters can engage in well-formed, consistent issue-based reasoning. The design of our choice experiments also allows us to isolate issue-based political choice and reduce concerns about persuasion and projection effects—which, as we have seen, are difficult to rule out in many existing studies of issue voting. As well as this, our choice experiments yield improved measures of the importance respondents attach to issues, thus overcoming several of the aforementioned disadvantages of self-reported issue importance ratings often used in existing research.

Finally, our data allows us to provide a new assessment of the degree to which idiosyncratic issue opinion and ideological issue opinion each matter for voters' political choices. In this sense, it puts us in a better position not just to adjudicate between the innocent voter account versus all other accounts which stress issue-based politics, but also to adjudicate between different issue-based accounts which emphasize ideological issue opinion on the one hand, and non-ideological, idiosyncratic issue opinion on the other.

3.3.2 Learning From The British Case

The empirical analysis we present in this book draws mainly upon a new panel survey recording the policy opinions and political choices of a sample of voters from Great Britain.[10] In a strict sense, this data allows us to make

[10] In keeping with most public opinion surveys in Britain, our sample data includes only respondents from Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales) and does not include respondents from Northern Ireland. It is therefore a sample from the population of Great Britain rather than from the population of the United Kingdom. We provide further details on the survey sample in Chapter 4.

inferences about the British electorate specifically. Indeed, the particular details of our results—such as which issues tend to elicit more ideological or idiosyncratic opinion, or which issues tend to be more important to voters—may well be unique to the British case.

However, we argue that our broader findings, regarding the overall structure of mass opinion on public policy issues and the role of such opinion in voters' political choices, should generalize reasonably well to other high-income established democracies. For example, we think that our findings regarding the overall prevalence of ideological, idiosyncratic, or unstable issue opinion variation in the British electorate give us a reasonable indication of the likely prevalence of these different types of issue opinion variation in other Western European democracies, or in North American or Australasian democracies.

One reason we make this claim has to do with the general applicability of the theoretical argument laid out in Chapter 2 for the relevance of idiosyncratic issue opinion. The basis for that theoretical argument is that the logical, psychological, and social mechanisms commonly invoked as inducing voters to develop ideologically correlated issue opinions are often weak due to voters' limited levels of political attention and sophistication. Moreover, to the extent that the psychological and social mechanisms do operate, they do so in diverse and cross-cutting ways, because voters are often subject to multiple social identities and contexts, and often disagree as to which considerations, principles, or values are relevant on which issues. We see no strong reason to think that these types of conditions, which collectively generate idiosyncratic issue opinion, apply particularly to Britain as compared to other established democracies.

There are of course relevant differences between Britain and other established democracies. For example, Britain has often been characterized as a 'uniquely class-divided society' (Evans and Tilley, 2012, 963). In contrast to some other countries, such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the US, the British historical experience has produced weaker social cleavages relating to religion or race which can cross-cut divisions relating to social class (Evans and De Graaf, 2013). If British public opinion is unusual in having been shaped by a single dominating social cleavage then, to the extent that social processes and socially induced world-views encourage voters to develop ideologically correlated opinions across a broad range of issues, Britain may be a case where we would expect comparatively high levels of ideologically organized issue opinion, and comparatively low levels of idiosyncratic and unstable issue opinion.

Yet these differences between Britain and other established democracies seem relatively small when set against the similarities they share. Over the

past several decades Britain has experienced the major socio-demographic changes common to democracies in Western Europe and highlighted by political scientists as underpinning key emerging social cleavages (Ford and Jennings, 2020). These include a dramatic expansion in higher levels of education, increases in mass migration and ethnic diversity, as well as emerging divides between older and younger generations and between those living in large cities versus other geographic areas. Britain has also experienced all of the other major economic and societal changes common to high income established democracies, such as a move towards service sector rather than manufacturing jobs, increased exposure to the globalized economy, the growth of information technology and online communication and greater gender equality (Dalton et al., 1984; Kitschelt, 1994; Hellwig, 2014; Beramendi et al., 2015; Dalton, 2018). And just like voters in other established democracies, British voters have been subject to the 'atomizing influences' (Dalton et al., 1984, 474) which weaken the broad-ranging social and psychological forces most likely to induce broad-ranging ideologically structured issue opinions. These include increased occupational instability and geographic mobility (Dalton et al., 1984) and the increased importance of diverse 'consumptive experiences' (relative to more homogeneous occupational productive experiences) as disposable income and time has increased (Kitschelt, 1994, 19).

As well as sharing common economic and social contexts with other high income established democracies, Britain has often been analysed alongside these other democracies in cross-national studies of mass opinion. Notwithstanding the limitations of ideological analyses discussed earlier in this chapter, several cross-national comparative studies suggest that the two ideological dimensions which best explain variation in mass opinion in Britain—one structuring opinions economic left–right issues, the other structuring opinions on more cultural and social issues—are similar to those that do so in other established democracies (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Dalton, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Cross-national studies also tend to find that the sociostructural correlates of voters' positions on these ideological dimensions are similar in Britain to other Western and Northern European countries (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015). Finally, cross-national studies also find that affective partisan divides among British voters are comparable in magnitude to those found in several other established democracies, including the US, France, Australia, and New Zealand (Gidron et al., 2020).

Overall, then, we propose Britain as an informative case for understanding the structure and political role of mass issue opinion in established

democracies more generally. In addition to the general arguments we have just made to support this point, in the chapters that follow we will sometimes provide particular evidence concerning the generalizability of particular findings beyond the British case, either through direct analysis of data from other countries, or through reference to relevant published empirical studies from other countries.

We note that our approach of using a single-country case study to draw more general conclusions is not new. Indeed, some of the past work upon which our book builds—including Converse (1964) itself—has used data from the US to make broader claims about the opinions and behaviour of democratic citizens more generally. We are writing in that tradition and in dialogue with that research, except drawing on the British rather than the American case.

3.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter and the last have set out the motivation for the empirical study we go on to carry out in this book. Whereas the previous chapter concentrated on the different theoretical explanations of mass issue opinion and political choice offered by the ideological voter, innocent voter, and idiosyncratic voter accounts, the present chapter has focused on establishing the need for new empirical evidence to adjudicate between these different accounts. It has reviewed key developments in the empirical political science literature since Converse, Butler, and Stokes first presented evidence of voter ideological innocence and widespread nonattitudes.

In doing so, we have highlighted how that recent empirical research which challenges the innocent voter account tends to do so by moving away from analysis of policy-specific opinions and towards multi-item measures of voters' ideological dispositions which are more stable over repeated measurement, and therefore less susceptible to concerns about nonattitudes. The unfortunate consequence of this approach is that we end up discarding real, stable but non-ideological—i.e., idiosyncratic—policy opinion as noise. In other words, the empirical political science literature has evolved in such a way that it primarily focuses on the relative explanatory power of the innocent voter and the ideological voter accounts, largely ignoring the idiosyncratic voter account.

We outlined how the data and empirical strategy we use in the following chapters improves upon this state of affairs, enabling us to simultaneously

assess the ability of all three accounts to explain variation in voters' opinions on concrete policy issues and voters' political choices. We also presented an argument for why the British case that we study is of general relevance from a comparative perspective. Having motivated our analysis, we turn to describing issue opinion in Britain, and some of the findings that emerge from its study.

PART I

THE NATURE OF MASS ISSUE OPINION

4

Ideological Patterns of Issue Opinion

To what extent does mass opinion on policy issues exhibit *ideological* structure, such that particular views on one issue tend to go with particular views on other issues? To what extent is mass opinion on policy issues *idiosyncratic*, such that peoples' views across issues lack ideological structure, but are nonetheless well-formed? And to what extent is the mass public *innocent* of well-formed opinions on policy issues?

Over the course of this chapter and the two that follow, we address these questions using new survey data on the reported issue opinions of a large, representative sample of Britons. We begin, in this chapter, by using this data to evaluate the degree and nature of ideological correlation in mass issue opinion. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, prominent theories of democracy and analyses of electoral politics characterize the public as having ideologically structured opinions. The *ideological voter* account views this structure as resulting from the logical links that members of the public perceive' between different issues, or from the common psychological or social processes that underpin the development of peoples' views across broad sets of issues. The *voter-as-follower* variant of the *innocent voter* account, on the other hand, views this structure as emerging to the extent that members of the public mimic the ideologically organized issue positions of the parties they support.

Motivated primarily by the ideological voter account, political scientists in countries like Britain have developed routine survey measures of voter ideology, usually along one or two ideological dimensions. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, we may wonder whether these ideological measures adequately describe contemporary voters' opinions across a broad range of concrete policy issues. In the British case, for example, it is now almost a quarter of a century since the last systematic assessment of the ideological structure of public opinion across a broad range of concrete policy issues (Heath et al., 2001).

This chapter provides such an assessment. We set out our survey data measuring Britons' opinions on policy issues and explain some of the key choices we made when designing our survey. We then ask whether the issue opinions measured in our data exhibit ideological correlation, and whether

Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion and Political Choice. Nick Vivyan, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, and Chris Hanretty, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780198955245.003.0004

the patterns of such correlation can be described in terms of the two ideological dimensions which underpin much recent research on politics in Britain and many other established democracies. Our answer to each of these questions is a qualified 'yes': issue opinions do exhibit ideological correlation, the patterns of which can be captured reasonably well in terms of two dimensions; furthermore, consistent with recent research, one of these dimensions relates mainly to opinions on issues concerning economic left–right disagreements, the other mainly to opinions on issues concerning social or cultural matters. However, we also show that ideology only explains a limited portion of the observed variation in British voters' issue opinions. This leaves open questions about how much of the remaining variation reflects the types of weakly held opinions which we might expect according to the classic and voter-as-follower variants of the innocent voter account, or the type of non-ideological but nonetheless well-formed issue opinion predicted by the idiosyncratic voter account.

To be clear, the analysis in this chapter concerns the minimalist conception of ideological issue opinion that we use in this book. As explained in Chapter 2, this defines issue opinion as ideological to the extent that there are common patterns of what opinions tend to go together across issues. As such, the analysis in this chapter is agnostic as to whether common patterns in opinion across issues emerge due to any particular mechanism posited by the ideological voter account, be that logical entailment, common psychological underpinning, or common social processes. It is also agnostic as to whether they emerge due simply to the type of partisan cue-taking emphasized by the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account. Put differently, this chapter is focused on identifying the nature and extent of ideological structure in mass issue opinions, rather than the origins of that structure.

4.1 The Survey Data

Our data comes from an original panel survey of British residents fielded online by YouGov.[1] In this chapter we focus on data from the first of three survey waves. This survey wave records the opinions of a sample of 6,112 YouGov panellists. This sample was drawn from the set of 31,136 YouGov

[1] All respondents consented to the use of their anonymous response data at the time when they joined YouGov's UK panel. Because it asked only non-sensitive questions about public policy, to anonymized respondents who had already consented to answer questions, this survey was deemed exempt from full ethics review at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2017. YouGov UK panelists are compensated based on a points system, convertible to cash once milestone levels are reached, with the reward amount determined by YouGov's estimate of the average time required to complete the survey.

panellists who had taken part in the 13th wave of the 2014–2019 British Election Study (BES, Fieldhouse et al., 2017). Our sample was designed to be representative of the British population in terms of various demographic and political attributes, including age, gender, education, political attention, 2016 EU referendum vote choice, and 2017 General Election vote choice.[2] We use population weights in all of our analysis, and so the estimates we present here should apply to the general British population.[3]

We surveyed YouGov panellists who had participated in the BES because by doing so we gain access to a great deal of additional information about our respondents. Although respondents to long-running panel surveys like the BES can become unrepresentative over time, the BES team's own analysis suggests that analysis conducted on their panel data yields similar results to results obtained from a fresh sample of YouGov panellists (Mellon, 2019).

The fieldwork for this first survey wave began in the third week of January 2018 and ran until the first week of February 2018. Two weeks earlier, then-Prime Minister Theresa May had conducted a minor cabinet reshuffle, and opted to keep prominent Brexiteers such as Boris Johnson and David Davis in key roles (foreign secretary and Brexit secretary respectively). The prime minister had been damaged by her failure to secure a parliamentary majority in the election of June 2017, but had as yet only been defeated on one significant vote in the Commons (an amendment to the EU Withdrawal Bill which gave Parliament a 'meaningful vote' on the final deal). During this period, both the Conservative and Labour parties were polling in the low 40s.

This chapter, and the two that follow, focus in particular on the data our survey recorded on the issue opinions of our survey respondents. These recorded issue opinions come from a series of 'issue questions' we included in our survey, each of which elicited a respondent's position on a concrete policy issue. Our survey was designed so that each individual respondent received seven issue questions sampled randomly from a 'bank' of 34 such questions, all covering different issues. This ensured that our data provides coverage across a broad range of issues while at the same time avoiding exposing individual respondents to unduly long lists of policy questions.

[2] Respondents were selected via YouGov's sample matching algorithm from the set of panellists who participated in wave 13 of the BES.

[3] YouGov provided UK population weights for the survey sample. Our analysis of patterns of issue opinion incorporates these weights, using a quasi-likelihood approach (Miratrix et al., 2018) to do so for the scaling models estimated below. However, an unweighted analysis yields results that differ negligibly from what we present. Both the sampling and the population weights targeted Great Britain: the United Kingdom excluding Northern Ireland.

4.1.1 The Policy Issues

How did we select policy issues for inclusion in our survey? One reason why investigating public opinion on political issues is difficult is because the boundaries between issues are not fixed. Issues can become linked over time; issue linkages can also be broken. There is no 'canonical' list of issues in British political life, and nor could there be. Over time, some issues disappear and others emerge, and individuals who place new issues on the national political agenda perform an important role in structuring political competition (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020).

Even identifying relevant issues at a particular point in time is difficult, and there are problems with some obvious shortcuts. We could identify issues which had been raised in Parliament over a certain period of time, but the parliamentary agenda in the UK is strongly controlled by the government (Cox, 1987). We could identify issues which parties mention in their manifestos, but this would lead us to ignore issues which were the subject of elite consensus but where there is no corresponding popular consensus. (We will see in Chapter 8 that the issue of the death penalty is an example of this.) We could look at issues which have been previously asked about in election studies and publicly available polling. But election studies do not necessarily include questions on concrete policy issues across a broad range of topics, and it's not clear how polling companies or their clients choose the issues they ask about.

Therefore, to ensure breadth of issue coverage, we based our initial list of issues on the twenty top-level headings used by the UK Policy Agendas Project (John et al., 2013). For each heading, we identified between one and three issue areas for which we could provide ordered policy positions. We drafted 42 issues and associated policy positions, before reducing the set to 34 issues which could be presented most clearly to survey respondents. This bank of 34 issues was therefore wide-ranging, including issues that are salient in elite political contestation in the UK and issues that UK elites do not generally talk about. The full text of all 34 issue questions is provided in Appendix A.

4.1.2 The Design of Issue Questions

We offered respondents five response options for each issue question. An example of the kinds of options we offered is shown in Figure 4.1, which shows response options on Britain's relationship with the European Union.

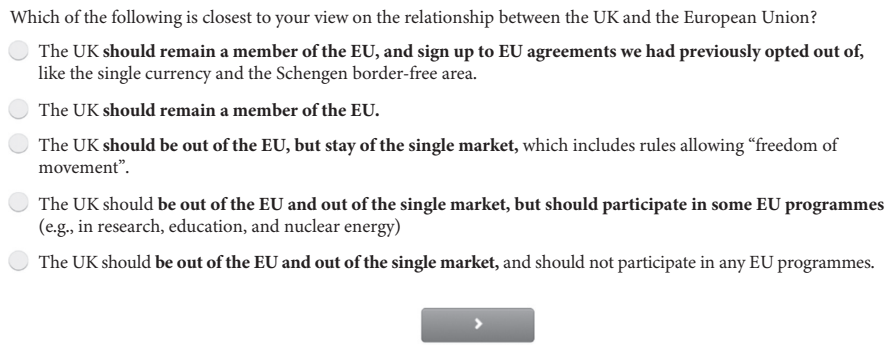

Figure 4.1 Example issue question on the UK's relationship with the European Union.

The response options for every issue question had two key features in common. First, we designed these response options so that—as much as possible—each one resembles a concrete policy alternative which a government could implement or a party could propose. Our response options are therefore different to response options which give respondents a policy and ask whether they (strongly) support or oppose the policy, and to response options which signal policy direction (e.g., 'Do you think the number of immigrants to Britain today should be *increased*, *remain the same*, or be *reduced*?').

We gave respondents multiple concrete policy alternatives, rather than statements for which respondents could express their support or opposition, because support/oppose questions can flatten and distort our understanding of public opinion on issues. This is particularly true when such questions are posed as dichotomous choices, including only a single 'support' response option and a single 'oppose' response option, without allowing respondents to indicate the strength of their support, or to indicate neutrality. Broockman (2016) has shown that aggregating responses to dichotomous support/oppose issue questions can generate misleading conclusions about respondent ideology. He finds that many respondents opt for the more 'left-wing' response option on some issues (by expressing support for a left-leaning policy or opposition to a right-leaning one) and the more 'right-wing' response option on other issues (by expressing opposition to a left-leaning policy or support for a right-leaning one). Are these respondents ideological centrists who sometimes support moderate left-wing policies and sometimes support moderate right-wing policies? Or does their mixture of responses indicate that they are ideologically inconsistent, taking extreme left-wing positions on some issues and extreme right-wing positions on

other issues? To give another example, do respondents who always offer the left-leaning response option do so because they are just left-wing enough to do so given the policies asked about, or because they are extremely left-wing and would support more radical left-wing policies than those asked about?

It is difficult to resolve these questions when we only observe whether each individual respondent either supports or opposes single proposals on various policy issues, but do not observe how moderate or extreme each respondent's position is on each policy issue. Although response options which allow respondents to indicate the strength of their support for a policy proposal are better, they still face problems. To return to our EU example, a respondent who says that they strongly support membership of the EU may mean that they would support EU membership and further European integration, or that their support for EU membership is held strongly, perhaps because it is a core part of their political identity. Only by listing further policy alternatives can we disentangle the two. We reduced the risk of this type of problem (sometimes referred to as 'differential scale use' among respondents) by ensuring each response option articulated a relatively concrete policy alternative (Krosnick and Berent, 1993; Jessee, 2012, 49).

Response options which elicit opinion about policy direction relative to the status quo ('more, less or about the same') create different problems. These problems are particularly severe for any research design which looks at the stability of responses across multiple waves. Consider a respondent who expresses a preference for 'more' in some policy area, and six months later expresses a preference for 'less' in that same area. It is difficult to tell whether this respondent changed their mind regarding what level of policy they ultimately want in that area, or whether the government policy changed to deliver 'more' and the respondent reacted in a 'thermostatic' manner (Wlezien and Soroka, 2012) by updating their preferences for any further change.

A second feature of the response options in our issue questions is that they are all ordered. Some response options are ordered numerically. For example, when we asked about the proper tax rate for incomes over £150,000, we gave respondents a series of options ranging from 40% to 80%. Options for our questions on chief executive pay, the burden of the cost of long-term social care, and the amount of foreign aid were also ordered numerically. For some issue questions, response options were ordered logically: the protected categories in our question about hate speech are proper subsets of one another, so that a definition of hate speech which protects different races, religions, or sexual orientations is more expansive than a definition of hate speech which

just protects different races or religions. Response options which are ordered like this make it easier for respondents to decide between options.[4]

Thus, the advantages of giving respondents ordered and concrete policy alternatives are that this allows us to better gauge ideological positions (understood as patterns of association across respondents), and—in later chapters—to distinguish non-ideological from ideological opinion, and distinguish change in reported policy preference from change in prevailing policy context. The principal disadvantage of this response format is that it takes time: time for researchers to identify myriad policy alternatives, time for respondents to read and consider those alternatives, and time for us as authors to describe patterns of public opinion elicited in this way. We believe these costs are worth paying in order to get a richer view of public opinion. Furthermore, our decision to ask each respondent only a sample of seven issue questions reduces the time and cognitive burden on each individual respondent.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting that many of the policy alternatives included in our issue questions are not tied to actual policies put forward by particular parties. No UK party competing in the 2017 or 2019 election proposed that the UK should join the Schengen Agreement on border controls or adopt the euro. Many of our other policy alternatives—the nationalization of the banking sector, or open borders—are also unsupported by any party. We also asked questions both about issues where British political parties explicitly offered very different policies to British voters—for example, on university education funding and fracking (see Chapter 5)—and issues on which the parties did not compete prominently—for example, on the charging of road tolls.

4.2 The Opinions Respondents Expressed

For each of the 34 policy issues included in our survey, Figure 4.2 displays estimated support in the 2018 British population for each of the five available policy options. There is variation across issues in the distribution of opinion.

[4] To help deal with the possibility that respondents' choice of response option might be influenced by whether that option appears early or later in the list provided, we randomly reversed the order of the alternatives for every issue for every respondent. For example, half of respondents saw a question about EU membership where the first option involved remaining in the EU and participating in additional programmes, and the other half saw a question where the first option involved no UK participation in any EU programme. For the purposes of analysis, however, all responses were coded based on the ordering of alternatives presented in Appendix A.

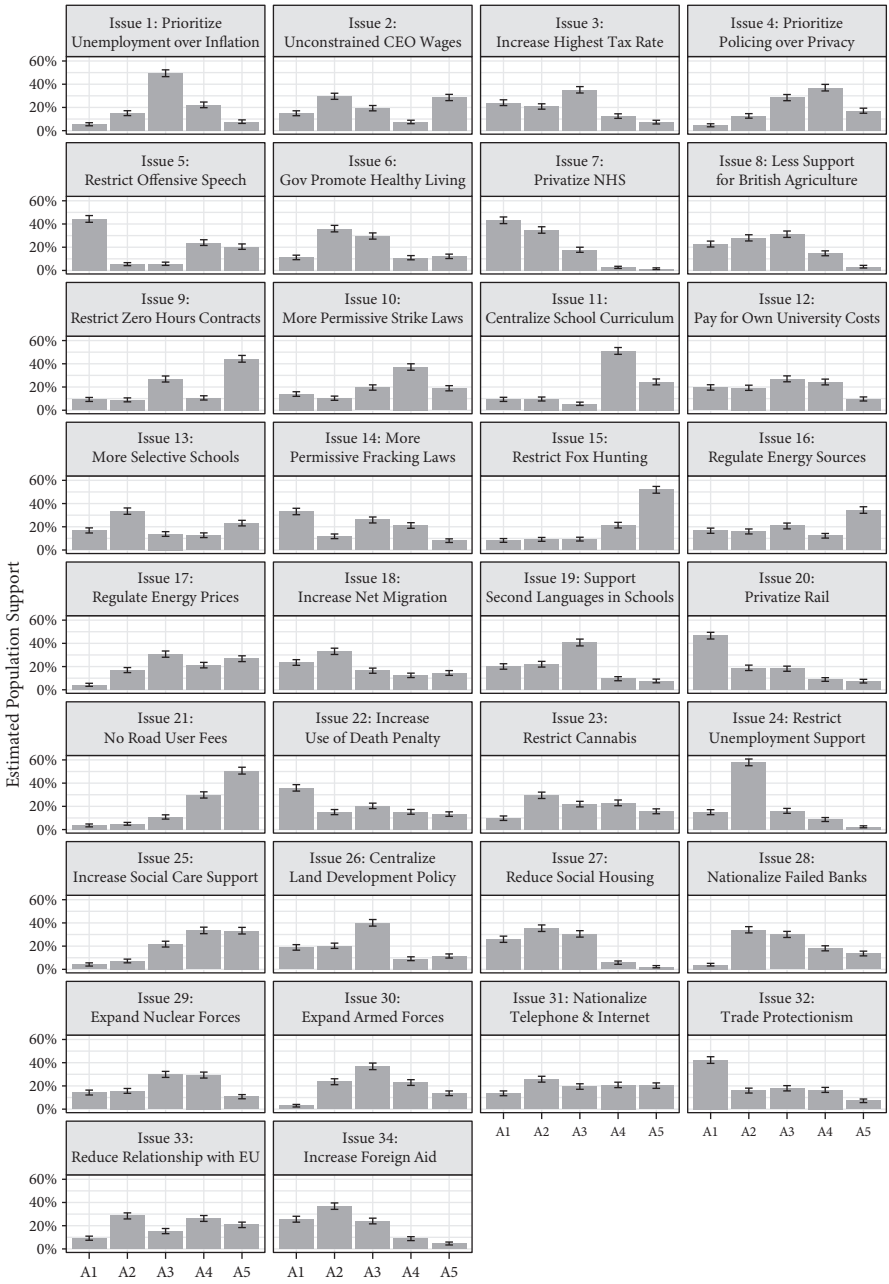

Figure 4.2 Estimated population support for each of the five policy alternatives (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5) on each issue, based on self-reported response questions.

For example, on the question of the degree of involvement of private companies in the NHS (issue 7), opinion is lopsided, with most voters preferring no or minimal private involvement, and very few preferring high levels of private involvement or full-scale privatization. In contrast, opinion is less lopsided on issues like how constrained CEO wages should be (issue 2) or Britain's relationship with the European Union (issue 33). On these latter issues, there is more variation in the views of British voters as to which policy option is preferable.

Because we ask about a large number of issues, it is impossible to give a reasoned overview of opinion across all issues. In this section, we describe opinion on three issues—cannabis decriminalization, the death penalty, and unemployment benefit—which we think are interesting, and which show the advantages of asking about concrete policy alternatives.

4.2.1 Cannabis Decriminalization

It is illegal to possess cannabis in the UK. There are some limited exceptions for the medical use of cannabis, and for cannabidiol (CBD). However, attitudes towards cannabis possession have changed over time. Between 2004 and 2009, cannabis changed from a Class B drug (the second most serious category) to a Class C drug (the least serious category). This in turn meant that people could not be arrested for the possession of small amounts of cannabis for personal use. This reclassification followed on from local experiments with decriminalization, initiated by the police in order to focus on 'harder' drugs and non-drug related crime. Even after reclassification in 2009, individuals caught with small amounts of cannabis may still be given a 'cannabis warning' rather than a fine.

Policy on cannabis therefore involves distinctions between what is illegal and legal, between what is subject to criminal sanction and what is not, and between what is for personal use rather than part of a broader drugs economy. The concrete policy alternatives we gave respondents—listed in full in the appendix—reflected these distinctions. Our most permissive alternative involved no regulation of cannabis ('Cannabis should be legal. Anyone should be free to possess or sell cannabis'). The next alternative, which restricted the sale of cannabis to licensed sellers, reflects Liberal Democrat policy at the time of the survey. Our middle alternative involved decriminalization of cannabis use, with police unable to charge individuals for

possessing cannabis for personal use, a policy which has been experimented with at local level. Our fourth alternative ('people possessing cannabis for personal use should be fined') reflects both the status quo and the policy of the Conservative and Labour parties. Our final alternative involved jail terms for individuals possessing cannabis for personal use.

We found that a majority of respondents (61%) favoured a more permissive policy than the status quo; and that the single most popular alternative was a regulated market in cannabis, supported by 30% of respondents. Only a small minority (16%) supported a more restrictive policy than the status quo. On this issue, the British public are more permissive than public policy.

It is possible that these proportions depend, in some way, on the alternatives listed. The middle option in our list of alternatives was more permissive than the status quo. That means that there were three ways to be more permissive than the status quo, and only one way to be more restrictive than the status quo. We think our selection of alternatives is reasonable: we struggled to find more restrictive options than sending people to jail for possession of cannabis, and the second most extreme options (starting from either end of the scale) are policies put forward by major parties. Still, the imbalance in our alternatives means that if respondents were selecting alternatives at random, we would still find a majority in favour of a more permissive policy than the status quo.

We note the possibility that these proportions depend on the alternatives listed without being convinced by it. Other polls suggested that if anything British public opinion is more permissive than we suggest. A 2022 poll by Redfield and Wilton suggests that 38% of respondents support 'the legalization of cannabis for personal use'. This single option matches our top two categories, which were chosen by 39% of respondents in our survey. A 2023 YouGov poll suggests than a clear majority of respondents (60%) support 'the legalization of cannabis in the UK'.[5] The fact that two polls asking about the same proposal gave such different results is perhaps an indication that respondents have different things in mind when they answer these questions, and that our method of listing concrete policy alternatives is for that reason preferable.

[5] 'British public narrowly split on legalization of cannabis for recreational use', Redfield and Wilton, 27 January 2022, available online at https://redfieldandwiltonstrategies.com/british-public-narrowly-split-on-legalisation-of-cannabis-for-recreational-use/; 'Generally speaking, to what extent would you support or oppose the legalisation of cannabis in the UK?', YouGov, 20 April 2023, available online at [https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/survey-results/daily/2023/04/20/8d0a4/1]. Both sets of figures have been rebased to exclude 'don't know' responses.

4.2.2 The Death Penalty

If our previous issue suggested that the British public is generally more liberal on social issues, our next issue suggests just the reverse. The death penalty was abolished for murder in Britain in 1969, and the UK's decision to ratify Protocol 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights means that the re-introduction of the death penalty would require changes not just on the domestic but also on the international level. Despite the fact that the abolition of the death penalty has been thoroughly entrenched in law, it is not so entrenched in public opinion. The British Social Attitudes Survey has, since 1986, asked respondents whether they agree with the statement that 'for some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence'. Whilst levels of agreement have declined over time, the 2023 survey found that 39% of respondents agreed with this view.

Whilst the phrasing used by the British Social Attitudes survey has been consistent over time, respondents may not understand 'some crimes' in the same way. We therefore made explicit what was implicit. In our list of policy alternatives, our most permissive option was the status quo: that the death penalty 'should not be used'. We then allowed the death penalty for a successively greater set of murders: from the death penalty being available only for multiple murders, available as the punishment for *any* murder, the usual punishment for any murder, or *mandatory* for any murder.

When asked in this way, we found that the single most popular policy alternative was the status quo, and that this was supported by 36% of respondents. This of course implies that most respondents supported the death penalty under at least some circumstances. The median respondent supports the death penalty for individuals who have committed multiple murders, but a surprisingly large proportion (13%) support the death penalty as the mandatory punishment for all murders. This proportion is only slightly less than the share of the vote won by Reform UK in the 2024 general election; although parliamentarians from the party have expressed support for the death penalty in general, none have suggested that it should be used for all murders.

4.2.3 Unemployment Benefit

The issues of cannabis regulation and the death penalty are both about criminal justice. However, political competition on these issues of criminal justice has been muted. There has been greater political competition on issues of distributive justice, and how much intervention in the economy is required

to secure some modicum of distributive justice. The third issue we look at is unemployment benefit, a very common intervention in the labour market.

Although there has historically been more political competition on economic issues, this does not always mean that the alternatives put forward by parties are clearly distinct from one another, or that all economic issues are subject to competition. On the issue of unemployment benefits, the differences between the policy alternatives we asked about are exaggerated compared to the differences between different parties' preferred policy. Our first alternative is to provide unemployment benefit to all for so long as they are out of work, without requiring individuals to demonstrate that they are actively seeking a job. The second alternative, which comes closest to the policies of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties at the time of the survey, is to provide unemployment benefit to individuals who can show that they are actively seeking a job. Our third alternative restricts benefits to the first few months of unemployment only; our fourth alternative restricts benefits to individuals who are unemployed because of specific reasons due to disability or injury, and our final alternative provides no state benefits, but mentions charitable alternatives. Our alternatives therefore mirror in part the historical development of the welfare state from a system of alms-giving, to a system of workers' compensation, to a more general system with greater or lesser degrees of conditionality.

This issue was one of four issues where there was majority support for a specific policy alternative, and one of only two issues where there was majority support for the status quo: 58% of respondents supported unemployment support for so long as individuals can demonstrate that they are actively seeking work; 15% of respondents supported a more generous system; 27% a less generous system.

For cannabis and the death penalty we were able to contrast our findings with the findings of other surveys, albeit surveys which gave respondents less detailed alternatives. Unfortunately, questions about unemployment benefit are generally asked relative to the status quo. For example: the British Social Attitudes Survey asks whether 'benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship', or whether instead 'benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs'. Not only do nominal and real levels of unemployment benefit change over time, but so too do labour market conditions. This means that changes over time can either signal changes in opinion or changes in the policy. We can tell whether temperature on this issue is getting 'warmer' or 'colder', but we have no yardstick or thermometer from which to read off the absolute level of temperature. This can only really be done by prompting respondents with specific alternatives.

4.3 Exploring Correlations Among Issue Opinions

In the previous section we discussed the levels of support for different policy alternatives. Of greater interest for our purposes, however, is what our data tell us about the *correlation* in voters' opinions across issues. The stronger the correlations in opinions across issues, the more potential for there to be low-dimensional ideological structure in issue opinions. To get an initial sense of the degree and structure of issue opinion in the British electorate, Figure 4.3 reports the polychoric correlation between each of the

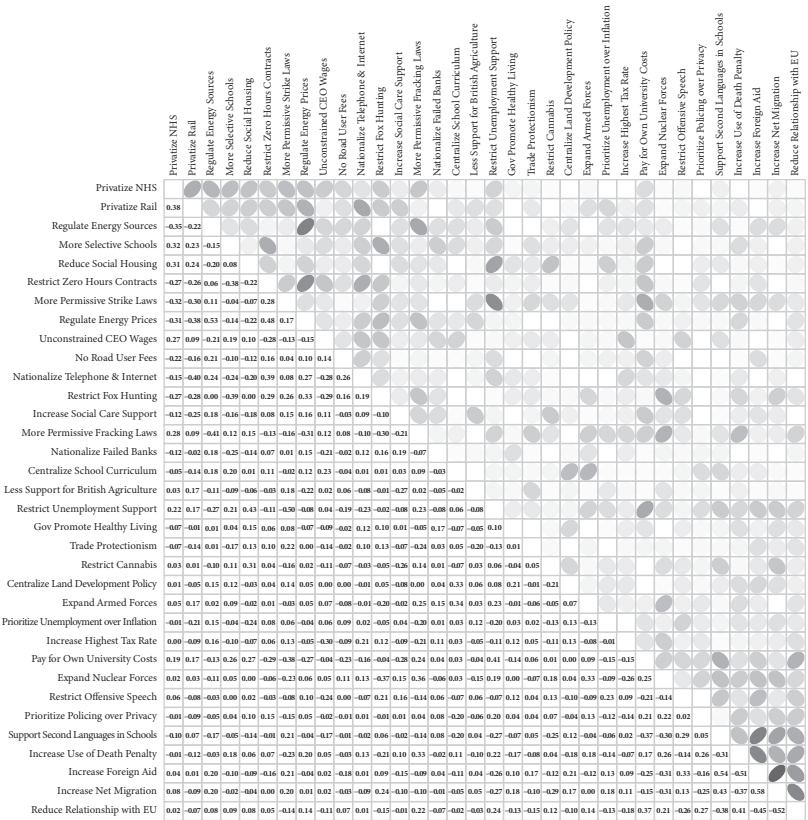

Figure 4.3 Pairwise polychoric correlations between issue items in wave 1. Ellipse shade and eccentricity indicate strength of correlation. Left- and right-leaning ellipses indicate negative and positive correlations, respectively. Correlations are population weighted. Issues are sorted according to the relative strength of their associations with the NHS and EU relationship issues.

($\frac{34\times(34-1)}{2}$ =) 561 unique pairs of issues.[6] If individuals who select higher-numbered policy alternatives on one issue (according to the numeric labels given in Appendix A) tend also to select higher-numbered policy alternatives on another issue, those two issues will have a positive correlation. The size of this correlation approaches 1 as the strength of the association increases. If individuals who select higher-numbered policy alternatives on one issue tend also to select *lower*-numbered policy alternatives on the other issue (or vice versa), those two issues will have a negative correlation. The size of this correlation approaches -1 as the strength of the association increases. If individuals who select higher-numbered policy alternatives on one issue are no more or less likely to select higher- or lower-numbered policy alternative on another issue, the correlation for these issues will tend towards zero. Because we are interested in the strength of the association rather than its direction, we focus on the absolute value of these correlations, ignoring whether they are positive or negative.

It is immediately apparent from Figure 4.3 that there is a lot of variation in the correlation of opinion across pairs of issues in our data. The maximum absolute correlation is 0.58 (for the issue questions concerning increases to net migration and increases to foreign aid), while the minimum absolute correlation is almost exactly 0 (for the issue questions concerning fox hunting restrictions, and regulation of energy sources).

While the mean absolute correlation across all pairs of issues is low (0.13), Figure 4.3 also reveals two clusters of issues where opinion seems to be more clearly correlated. First, in the north-west region of the plot, we find relatively pronounced correlations between pairs of issues which concern things like government involvement in the economy and labour rights. These issues relate to what is often characterized in the British and comparative politics literature as the 'left–right' (Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 2001) or 'economic' (Kriesi et al., 2006; Dalton, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2020) dimension, and what we call the 'economic left–right' dimension (Denver and Johns, 2022).

To see this, take the issue of rail privatization, second from top along the vertical axis. Looking along the row we can see that support for this is moderately positively correlated (0.38) with support for more NHS privatization, moderately negatively correlated with support for more permissive strike laws (-0.3) and with opinion on nationalizing telephone and internet

[6] Because these are ordinal categorical variables we report polychoric correlations. The polychoric correlation (Olsson, 1979) between two ordinal variables is the Pearson correlation coefficient that would need to exist between two normally distributed latent variables in order to generate two observed ordinal variables, assuming a cutpoint model to translate those continuous latent variables into the observed ordinal values.

services (-0.4). However, opinion on rail privatization is weakly correlated with opinion on issues less obviously related to the economic left–right dimension, such as whether the government should promote healthy living (-0.01) or reduce Britain's relationship with the EU (-0.07).

Second, in the south-east region of the plot, we have evidence of relatively pronounced correlations between pairs of issues which seem to relate more to what the British and comparative politics literature has called the 'cultural' (Dalton, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2020) or 'libertarian-authoritarian' (Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 2001) dimension, and what we call the 'social liberal–conservative' dimension (Denver and Johns, 2022). For example, support for more foreign aid (third from bottom) is moderately positively correlated (0.58) with support for more net migration and with support for second language provision in schools (0.54), and moderately negatively correlated with support for increased use of the death penalty (-0.51) and for reductions in Britain's relationship with the EU (-0.45). In contrast, support for foreign aid is weakly correlated with opinion on issues like NHS privatization and CEO wages.

In sum, the pattern of correlations in voter opinion across pairs of policy issues suggests we might think of these opinions as structured at least to some extent by two ideological dimensions: an economic left–right dimension, and a social liberal–conservative dimension.

To further investigate whether this two-dimensional interpretation makes sense, we perform principal components analysis (PCA) on the 34 x 34 matrix of pairwise polychoric correlation coefficients. The aim with PCA is to re-describe the observed variation in opinion across our 34 issue opinion measures with a smaller number of 'principal components'. Here, a 'principal component' is really just a mathematical function which takes each individual's observed responses across the issue items and maps these to a single number representing a position on a single line, or dimension. This function will map two different individuals with different sets of responses to two different positions on the same dimension. So a principal component expresses individuals' observed responses across multiple issue items as a collection of positions, one for each individual, along a single dimension. Neither the dimension nor the implied positions individuals take upon it are actually observed; rather, they serve as an abstract summary of the observed data. What PCA does is to find, given the data and subject to some technical constraints, a 'first' principal component on which the variation in individuals' implied positions is as large as possible; in other words, a principal component which expresses as much as possible of the total observed variation in individuals opinions across the 34 issue items. It then finds a 'second'

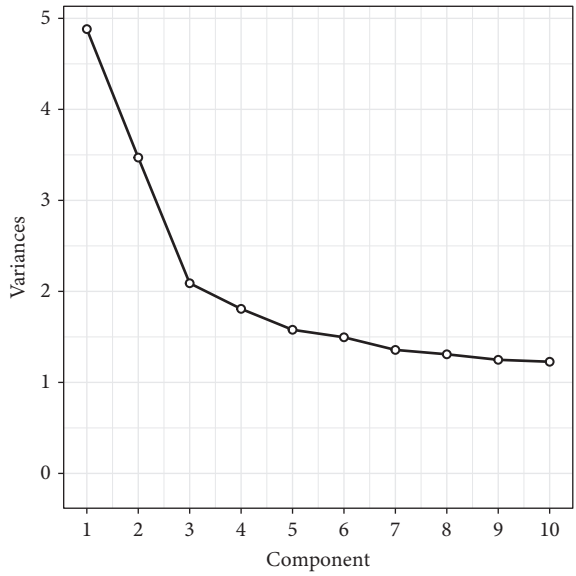

Figure 4.4 A scree plot based on principal components analysis (PCA) of the 34 x 34 pairwise polychoric correlations between issue items (wave 1 of survey).

principal component which expresses as much as possible of the remainder of the total observed variation in individuals' opinions across the 34 issue items, then a 'third' principal component which expresses as much as possible of the remaining observed variation, and so on.

Figure 4.4 is a 'scree plot' which summarizes the results of this exercise. Each dot in the plot corresponds to a principal component—or dimension—recovered from the PCA. These components are ordered along the horizontal axis. The height of the dot tells us how much issue opinion variation that component explains. We will, in this book, conduct many analyses that examine this kind of 'variance explained' measure, which appears in PCA as well as in familiar model fit statistics like R^2 and related quantities. Our interest in these quantities reflects the fact that this is a book about the large scale structure in opinion data: which patterns are strong and which are weak, which kinds of variation across issues or across time are large and which are small.

Scree plots are used as a diagnostic tool for researchers who want to summarize their data using a smaller number of dimensions than there are issues. Typical scree plots feature a small number of components which explain a large proportion of variation, followed by a large number of components littered to the right of the graph, which resemble scree on mountain slopes, and which explain a smaller proportion of variation. Researchers are often

advised to pick a number of dimensions before the 'elbow' in the graph where the slope of the line starts to lessen. This advice is not binding: in reducing dimensionality, we are always trading off fit to the data against interpretability, and researchers can reasonably disagree on how to approach this trade-off. Nevertheless, our interpretation of Figure 4.4 is that the first two principal components clearly explain substantially more issue opinion variation than the remaining components, which all explain similarly smaller amounts of variation. In other words, the first two components are upwards outliers in terms of the amount of issue opinion variation they explain. This is borne out by a non-graphical test of the slope of the scree plot (the 'acceleration factor' found in Raîche et al. 2013).

Thus, we have evidence that, to the extent there is structure underpinning the variation of opinion across our 34 issues, this seems to be reasonably well captured by two ideological dimensions.

4.4 Modelling the Ideological Structure of Issue Opinion

Given that our exploratory analysis suggests a two-dimensional ideological structure to the opinion of British voters across our 34 issues, we turn to fit a scaling model that allows us to better understand this ideological structure.

The intuition of this model is that it describes respondents in terms of their positions—often called *ideal points*—on each of two ideological dimensions. A respondent's observed opinion on each policy issue is associated with their position on each ideological dimension, with respondent positions on each dimension, as well as the strength and nature of the connection between each ideological dimension and each issue, estimated from the data. This modelling approach is a useful way to summarize the observed associations between different issue opinions in the data, although it does not tell us about the logical, psychological, or social processes which underpin these associations. In Appendix B.1 we describe the mathematical details of the model, but to understand some of our later findings it is necessary to describe what it does in non-technical terms here.

4.4.1 Observed and Latent Issue Opinion

As a first step in this model, we assume that when respondents in our survey choose between the five ordered categorical response options for a given issue question, this *observed* categorical choice reflects their *latent* response on an

underlying continuous scale. We do not directly observe their opinion on this continuous scale, hence it being labelled a *latent*, unobserved, opinion. One way to think about the connection between latent response and observed categorical response is that the latent response scale for each issue is divided into five regions, with each region corresponding to one of the five observed response categories for that issue. When a respondent is observed to give a particular categorical response on that issue, this tells us that their latent response is located in the corresponding region on the latent response scale.

For example, take the issue of net migration. When asked what the level of net migration should be, we observe respondents choosing a categorical response like 'there should be no net migration', or 'no more than 65,000 per year', or 'no more than 130,000 per year'. Our model assumes that when a respondent chooses the '65,000 per year' option, they do not necessarily prefer exactly that figure, but that their latent preferred level of net migration is closer to this than to zero or 130,000 per year, the two adjacent available response options.

This is a common strategy when social scientists model categorical survey response data, mainly because for various reasons it is more convenient to model latent opinion on a continuous scale than it is to model categorical opinion measures directly. (The approach we adopt is generally known as a form of ordinal probit response model.)

4.4.2 Modelling Latent Issue Opinion

Having specified how observed categorical responses to issue questions link to latent continuous responses, our model focuses on those latent responses. At the core of this model is the idea that respondents' latent responses on individual issues are associated with their positions (ideal points) on two latent, continuous *ideological dimensions*.

Responses to some issues will tend to be more strongly related to one ideological dimension or the other, and responses on some issues might have no relationship at all to these ideological dimensions. To capture this, our model estimates a *loading* parameter for each of our 34 issues on each of the two ideological dimensions. When the loading parameter for a particular issue on a particular ideological dimension is estimated to be large in magnitude in absolute terms (i.e., far from zero), this tells us that a person's latent opinion on the issue is strongly related to their position on that ideological dimension. When it is estimated to be close to zero, this tells us that a person's latent opinion on the issue is weakly related to their position on that

ideological dimension. When the loading parameter for a particular issue on a particular ideological dimension is estimated to be positive, this tells us that people with larger-valued ideal points on the ideological dimension tend to give higher latent responses on the issue. When it is estimated to be negative, this tells us that people with larger-valued ideal points on the ideological dimension tend to give lower latent responses on the issue.

The model also assumes that, as well as depending on respondent ideology, each individuals' latent response on each issue question also depends on a residual 'error'. Here we assume that this residual error varies randomly across individuals and issue questions. This term captures all non-ideological sources of variation in opinion on an issue. It could thus reflect genuinely held non-ideological (idiosyncratic) opinion on the part of respondents, or variation in responses due, for example, to sheer survey response error (Achen, 1975) or to respondents' sampling randomly from top-of-the-head considerations when generating their response (Zaller and Feldman, 1992).

As explained further in Appendix B.1, based on initial analysis of the data—including the analysis of pairwise correlations presented above—we set up our model in such a way that the two ideological dimensions are more easily interpretable as the left–right economic dimension and social liberal–conservative dimension often invoked in accounts of electoral politics in Britain (e.g., Heath et al., 1985, 1991, 2001; Heath and McDonald, 1988; Evans et al., 1996; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022) and in established democracies more generally (e.g., Inglehart, 1990; Kriesi et al., 2006; Dalton, 2018). This is achieved by constraining the model in two ways. First, we stipulate that the NHS privatization issue question must load positively on the first (left–right economic) dimension—meaning that those favouring more private NHS provision tend to have larger-valued ideal points on this dimension—and has zero loading on the second (social liberal–conservative) dimension. Second, we stipulate that the EU relationship issue question must have zero loading on the first (economic left–right) dimension and positive loading on the second dimension—meaning that those favouring the weaker ties to the EU will tend to have larger-valued ideal points on this (social liberal–conservative) dimension.

We stress that these stipulations do not determine the estimated strength of the positive loading of the NHS question on the first dimension or of the EU relationship question on the second dimension. Perhaps more importantly, nor do they determine the direction or strength of the loading of any other issues on either ideological dimension. These all depend on the patterns of observed responses to issue questions in the data. More specifically, subject to these constraints, our model estimates how each of the 34 issues we study

loads on each of the two ideological dimensions, as well as each individual respondent's ideal point on each dimension, based on which set of estimated loadings and ideal points best predict observed responses to issue questions in our survey.

We additionally stress that the ideological dimensions that this model estimates are in effect just the best available simple summaries of responses to the survey questions: they mathematically capture the ways in which people who tend to give certain responses on one issue also tend to give particular responses on other issues. Thus, when an individual has an ideal point 'on the right' of the first dimension, for example, all this really tells us is that the individual tends to give economically right-leaning responses across different questions of the survey. This could be because the individual has an overarching right-leaning ideological worldview which is actually causing them to give economically right-leaning responses to specific issues. However, it could also be because social mechanisms happen to induce the individual to give ostensibly right-leaning responses on both issues, or even because the individual mimics the positions of a right-leaning political party that they happen to support.

4.4.3 An Illustration of the Model

To illustrate the kinds of relationships that we learn about the data from this kind of model, we offer some detailed interpretation of the model results relating to a particular example issue: railway ownership. A 'higher' response alternative on this issue question corresponds to favouring a greater degree of rail privatization. The left panel of Figure 4.5 plots the estimated association between a person's position on the first ideological dimension in the model (on the horizontal axis) and their latent opinion on rail privatization (the vertical axis). The rail privatization issue has a reasonably strong, positive estimated loading on this dimension (specifically, the estimated loading for this issue on this dimension is 0.54). As a result, average latent opinion on the issue is estimated to become substantially more favourable to privatization when respondents are positioned further to the right on this ideological dimension. This makes sense if we think of this first ideological dimension as an economic left–right dimension. In contrast, the rail privatization issue has a very weak negative loading (-0.08) on the second ideological dimension included in the model (which we will characterize as the social liberal–conservative dimension). This is why in the right panel of

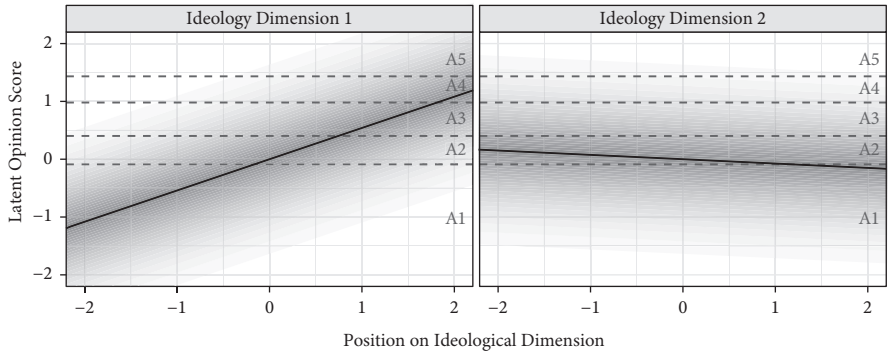

Figure 4.5 Estimated association between ideology and issue opinion on the railway ownership issue, where response alternatives A1 to A5 are ordered in terms of increasing levels of railway privatization. Panels show how average latent opinion on railway ownership changes as ideology on each dimension changes (black line). Shading shows estimated density of realized opinions around this average line. Dashed lines show estimated thresholds which translate latent issue opinion into observed categorical responses A1 to A5.

Figure 4.5, average latent opinion on railway privatization, changes very little as respondent position on this second ideological dimension varies.

Figure 4.5 also illustrates the mapping from ideology to latent issue opinion to observed ordinal survey response in our model.[7] For example, respondents with an ideal point on the left of the first dimension, at around -1, will on average have a latent response score that manifests as ordered response option A1, a preference for the lowest level of privatization among the available response alternatives. Yet the shading shows how, due to the error term in the model, some respondents at this ideological position may have more positive latent scores that yield response option A2, or even occasionally A3 or above. Respondents with a right-leaning ideal point of around 1 will on average have a latent response score that manifests as ordered response option A3, a preference for the third-highest level of privatization among the available response alternatives. However, again due to the error term, such respondents may quite often have latent scores that are sufficiently more negative to give response options A2, or sufficiently more positive to give response option A4.

[7] On this issue, alternative A1 corresponds to publicly owned railways and affordable fares; A2 to public ownership but at-cost fares; A3 to mixed ownership but regulations ensuring at-cost fares; A4 to private ownership but regulated, at-cost fares; A5 to private ownership and company-set fares.

4.5 Estimated Ideological Structure of Issue Opinion

Having discussed how to interpret the ideological scaling model of issue opinion with reference to an example issue, we turn to assess the model results more fully.

Figure 4.6 displays the estimated loadings of each of the 34 policy issues on each of the two ideological dimensions included in the model. The pattern of issue loadings it reveals is broadly consistent with those existing two-dimensional ideological accounts which characterize politics in Britain (e.g., Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 2001; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022) and established democracies more generally (e.g., Inglehart, 1990; Kriesi et al., 2006; Dalton, 2018) as structured along an economic left–right dimension and a social liberal–conservative dimension.

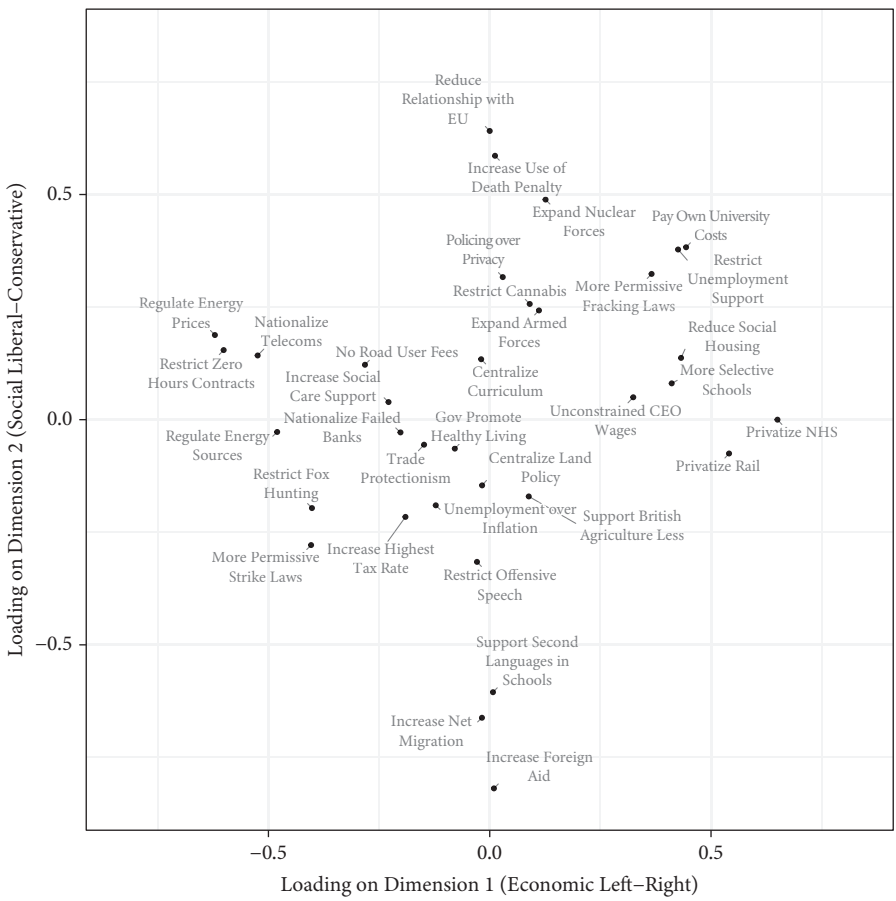

Figure 4.6 Estimated issue loadings on each ideological dimension.

Take the issues which load strongly on Dimension 1 in Figure 4.6—i.e., the issues with more extreme locations (in either direction) along the horizontal axis. These are all issues which the above-mentioned two-dimensional ideological accounts would ascribe to the economic left–right dimension, concerning as they do:

- the degree of state provision of goods and services (NHS privatization, rail privatization, nationalization of telephone and internet services),
- state regulation of goods and services (regulation of energy prices and sources),
- welfare provision (unemployment support),
- workers' rights (zero hours contracts, strike laws), and
- wage disparities (CEO wages)

The direction of the issue loadings on this dimension also make sense in economic left–right terms, given the ordering of the policy alternatives for each issue question (see Appendix A). For example, the positive loadings for issues like NHS privatization, rail privatization, and CEO wages on this dimension indicate that individuals placed further to the right on this dimension tend to choose higher-numbered alternatives on these issue questions, which correspond to higher levels of privatization and fewer government constraints on earnings. The negative loadings for things like the telephone and internet service nationalization and zero hours contract issues indicate that individuals placed further to the right on this ideological dimension tend to choose *lower*-numbered alternatives on these issue questions, which correspond to lower levels of nationalization and less protection of workers.

Turning to Dimension 2, the issues which load strongly on this in Figure 4.6 (the vertical axis) are mainly ones which most of the above two-dimensional ideological accounts would ascribe to the social liberal–conservative dimension. Furthermore, the direction of loadings for most of these issues tends to make sense if we think of this second dimension as a social liberal–conservative one. Thus, according to the loadings, individuals who are placed higher on this ideological dimension—i.e., in a more 'conservative' position—are more likely to:

- be tougher on law and order (in terms of increased use of the death penalty and the prioritization of policing over privacy),
- be more hawkish on national security (in terms of expansion of Britain's nuclear forces),

- be less favourable to immigrants and minority rights and (against increased immigration, support for second languages in schools, and restrictions on offensive speech),
- prefer lower levels of foreign aid, and
- prefer lower levels of integration with the European Union.[8]

A small number of the estimated issue loadings displayed in Figure 4.6 are less straightforwardly reconciled with the characterization of the two dimensions as economic left–right and social liberal–conservative, respectively. The unemployment support and university education funding issues load strongly on the first dimension, as would be expected given that both might ostensibly be considered as economic in nature. However, both of these issues also load strongly on the second dimension: individuals who are placed in a more socially conservative location on this second ideological dimension tend to favour more restrictive unemployment support and less state funding of university education.

The pattern of loadings for these issues is not entirely surprising, however. For one thing, with respect to the unemployment support question, previous research has shown that Britons' attitudes towards redistribution and welfare state provision have in recent decades become increasingly associated with positions on the non-economic ideological dimension (Surridge, 2012; Perrett, 2021). For another thing, both of the issue items ask about the appropriate level of state support for particular groups (the unemployed and university students, respectively), and comparative research has argued that citizens may consider these types of questions not just in economic left–right terms, but also in terms of the perceived deservingness of the recipients of such support (e.g., Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Attewell, 2022). This may in turn connect people's attitudes on these items to their attitudes on other social liberal–conservative issues. For example, more socially conservative respondents may be inclined to think of each question in terms of the perceived outgroups who might 'take advantage of undeserved benefits' from the state (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015, 207); for the unemployment support question, the perceived outgroup might be immigrants; for the university education funding question, the perceived outgroup might be university

[8] The finding that the EU relationship and nuclear forces items both load strongly on this second dimension, and that attitudes to both are therefore somewhat correlated, is consistent with research stressing that attitudes to both of these issues may be rooted at least partly in individuals' sense of nationalism (e.g., Heath et al., 1999).

educated people (particularly since, as we shall see, university graduates are on average less socially conservative).[9]

Notwithstanding these exceptions, we think it is reasonable given the general pattern of issue loadings in Figure 4.6 to characterize the two estimated ideological dimensions as economic left–right, and social liberal–conservative, respectively. Overall then, to the extent that there is ideological structure in Britons' opinions on policy issues, these opinions are structured by two dimensions. More right-leaning opinions on one economic left–right issue tend to go with more right-leaning opinions on many other economic issues. More conservative opinions on one non-economic, social issue tend to go with more conservative opinions on other social issues.

Although the substantive content of the two ideological dimensions we recover matches mainstream two-dimensional accounts of politics in Britain and Western European democracies more generally, our findings nonetheless advance these accounts. This is because, as discussed in Chapter 3, the evidence given for these existing two-dimensional accounts has in recent decades tended to rely on analysis of citizens' responses to mixtures of concrete policy questions and more abstract attitudinal questions. This has left open an empirical question as to whether voters in Western European democracies have opinions across a broad range of *concrete policy issues* which are structured along economic left–right dimension and social liberal–conservative dimension lines. Our analysis of concrete policy opinions suggests that, at least in Britain, they do.

Another way we might think about these findings is in comparison to those from studies of American voters' concrete policy opinions, which have been more frequent in recent years. From this perspective, our evidence of two-dimensional ideological structure in British voters' policy opinions is more similar to those studies that recover a two-dimensional ideological structure in Americans' policy opinions (Treier and Hillygus, 2009) than those finding evidence that a single ideological dimension organizes Americans' policy opinions (Jessee, 2009; Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Jessee, 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013).

[9] A fuller assessment of this potential explanation would likely require multiple items on each of these topics (unemployment support and university education funding), some of which emphasize the support provided to beneficiaries, and some of which emphasize the costs of support and who bears these costs. We might expect answers to the former to be more associated with location on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension, with answers to the latter more associated with location on the economic left–right ideological dimension. Attewell (2022), for example, differentiates these types of questions when studying the relationship between education and attitudes to welfare state support.

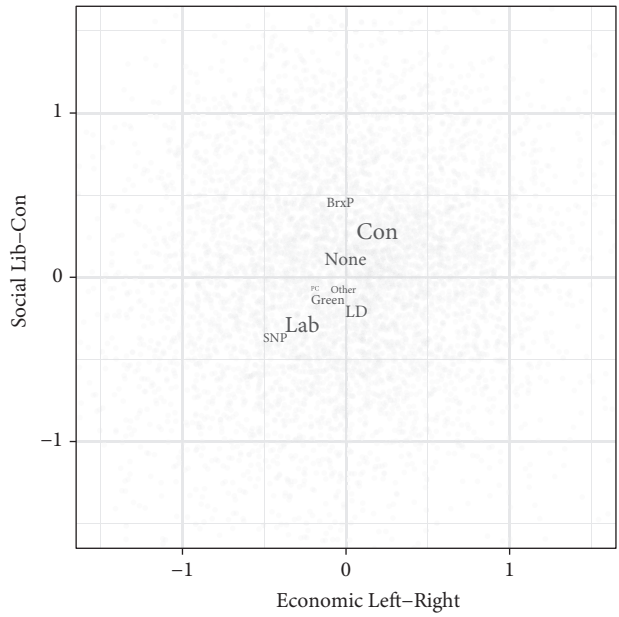

Figure 4.7 Average ideological position by 2017 general election vote choice. Text size indicates group size.

4.5.1 Patterns in Estimated Ideological Positions

Our scaling model also provides estimates of each respondent's ideological position on each of the economic left–right and social liberal–conservative ideological dimensions. Figure 4.7 visualizes these ideological positions. It shows individual ideal points as well as average ideal points by self-reported vote choice at the 2017 general election.[10] Consistent with traditional ideological accounts of British politics, we see that the average Conservative voter was further to the right on the economic left–right dimension then the average Labour or SNP voter, with the average Liberal Democrat voter positioned in between. However, consistent with accounts emphasizing the importance of the social liberal–conservative dimension in recent elections (Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022; Ford et al., 2021), we see that the average Conservative voter is also notably more conservative on this dimension than the average Labour, SNP, or Liberal Democrat voter. In other words, in 2017, voters for the main parties in British politics were divided on both left–right and social liberal–conservative ideology.

[10] Figure 4.7 displays all but the most ideologically extreme respondents: 305 of the total 6,112 have ideal points that fall outside the boundaries of the plots on at least one dimension.

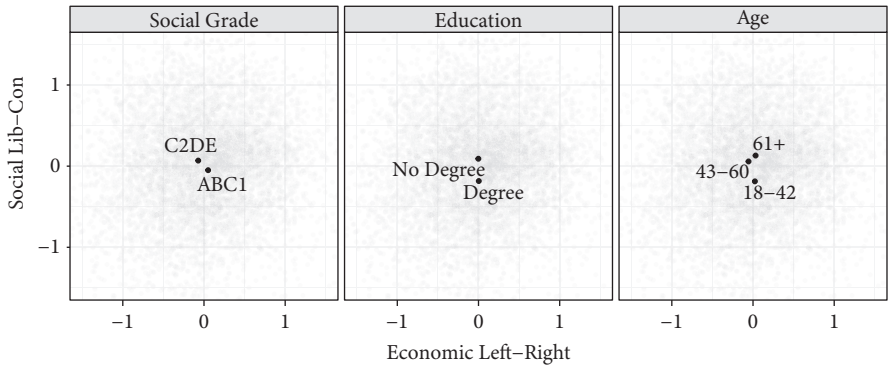

Figure 4.8 Average ideological position by voter characteristic.

We can also use our estimates to examine how ideology relates to social characteristics. Many ideological accounts of politics argue that an individual's ideology is at least partly rooted in their social circumstances (Heath et al., 1985; Stubager, 2008; Beramendi et al., 2015; Evans and Tilley, 2017; O'Grady, 2019; Abou-Chadi and Hix, 2021; Langsaether et al., 2022). Accordingly, Figure 4.8 shows how average estimated ideology varies according to three different social characteristics: social class (proxied by social grade),[11] level of education, and age group. Social grade is split into two categories: ABC1 (managerial, administrative and professional occupations) and C2DE (manual occupations, unemployed); age is split into three equally sized groups.

Figure 4.8 shows that there are differences in average ideology by all three characteristics, although the differences by education and age are larger in magnitude. Perhaps most striking from this plot is that differences in average ideology between social groups are more pronounced along the social liberal–conservative dimension than along the traditional economic left–right dimension. This is clearly the case for age and education: younger and university degree-possessing voters are on average notably more liberal than their older and non-university educated counterparts, but little different in terms of average left–right position. Such a pattern accords with theories which stress that educational expansion over recent decades has socialized voters in Western democracies into a more liberal and cosmopolitan outlook

[11] Social grade is a widely used UK demographic classification scheme based on the occupation of the head of household. Following past academic work, we focus on the divide between the levels of this variable that are generally considered working class—C2DE, which include skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled manual workers—and those which are generally considered middle class—ABC1, which include managerial, administrative, and professional workers.

(Stubager, 2008; Evans and Tilley, 2017), and that this has a had a more far-reaching effect within each successive generation (e.g., Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

When it comes to social class, Figure 4.8 shows that more working-class (C2DE) voters tend to be slightly more economically left-wing than their more middle class (ABC1) counterparts. This is consistent with the different material interests of these groups (Heath et al., 1985; Evans and Tilley, 2017). Working class voters also tend to be slightly more socially conservative, which existing accounts generally predict given that more middle class occupations tend to be associated with higher levels of education (Evans and Tilley, 2017).

4.5.2 Comparing New and Old Measures of Ideology

How do our estimates of policy-based ideology relate to existing multi-item measures of ideology used in the literature? To answer this question, Figure 4.9 plots our estimates of respondents' policy-based ideological positions on each dimension against alternative measures of respondent ideology recorded in wave 13 of the BES. These alternative measures are the five-item additive left–right ideological values scale (Evans et al., 1996) described in Chapter 3, a five-item additive liberal–authoritarian scale (Evans et al., 1996), and an eleven-point single-item left–right self-placement scale.

Looking at the top two panels, respondent left–right ideology as estimated by our model is clearly more strongly related to respondents' scores on the five-item additive left–right ideological values scale (Evans et al., 1996) than it is to respondents' scores on the corresponding additive liberal–authoritarian values scale. The middle two panels reveal that the reverse is true for our estimates of respondent social liberal–conservative ideology. We would therefore not expect analyses of political behaviour to generate wildly different inferences were we to substitute our policy-rooted ideology estimates for the commonly used ideology scales. Nevertheless, it seems reassuring to observe that long-used ideological indices based on more general attitudinal survey questions still capture somewhat similar ideological dispositions to measures like ours, which are based on more concrete policy considerations. Furthermore, there is a notable bunching of respondents at the bottom of the additive left–right values scale and at the top of the liberal–authoritarian scale, which makes it hard to discriminate between these respondents in terms of their ideological positions. Our ideology estimates do not exhibit this issue.

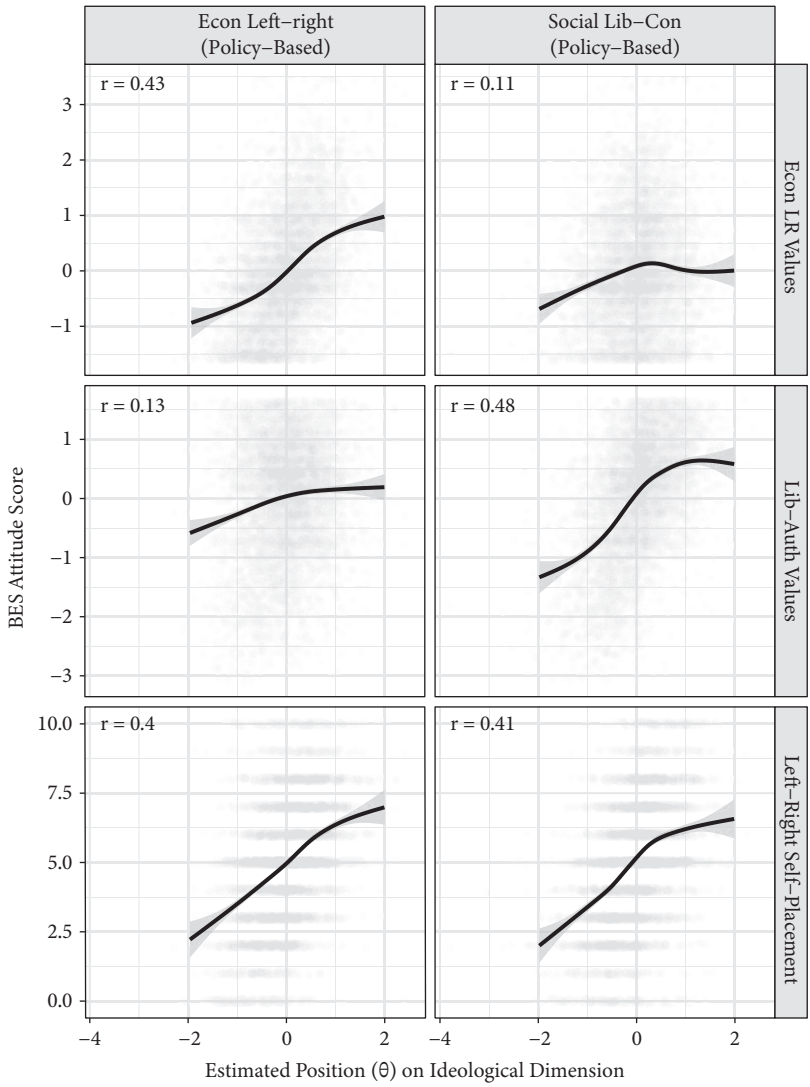

Figure 4.9 Relationship between respondent ideology estimates and BES measures of respondent political attitudes.

The bottom panels of Figure 4.9 highlight potential drawbacks with the other commonly used ideology measure in the literature; the left–right self-placement scale. Respondents' left–right self-placements correlate moderately with *both* estimated left–right economic and social liberal–conservative ideology. In other words, left–right self-placements seem to conflate ideology on two dimensions, and we have seen that these two dimensions do seem

to differ meaningfully in terms of types of issue they relate to. That said, if one is looking for a unidimensional summary that will be predictive across domains, the left–right self-placement fulfils that role reasonably.

4.6 The Limits of Ideology

So far, our results suggest that, to the extent that issue opinion among British voters is ideologically organized, this structure appears to be two-dimensional in character, featuring an economic left–right dimension and a social liberal–conservative dimension. But to what extent can we really say that ideology structures mass opinion on concrete policy issues?

Figure 4.10 provides an answer to this question. For each issue, it shows the proportion of the total latent opinion variation on this issue which is explained by two-dimensional ideological positions, according to our model.

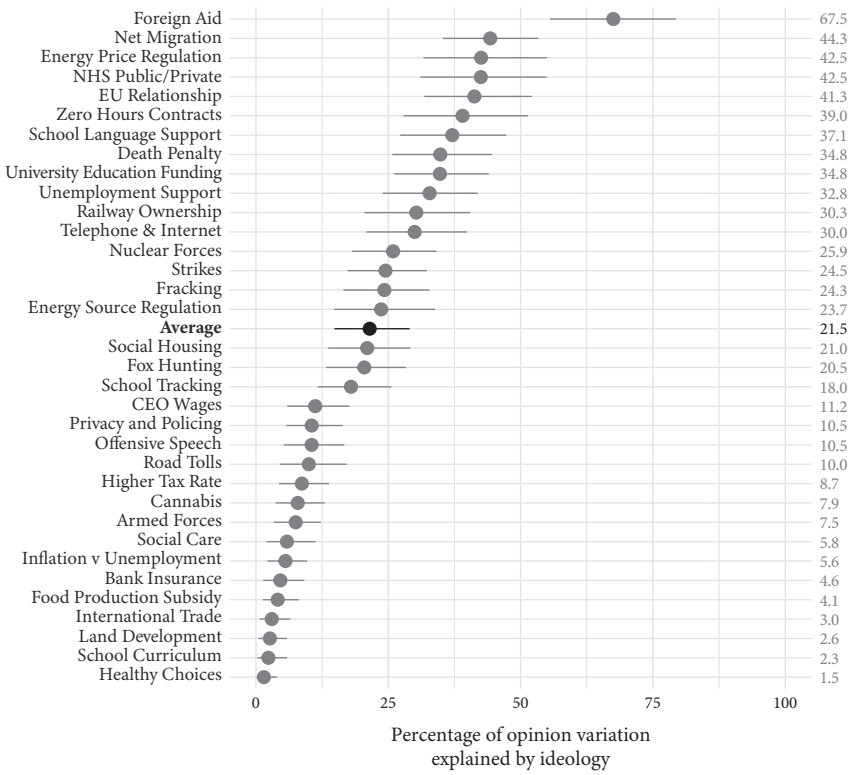

Figure 4.10 Percentage of opinion variation explained by respondents' ideological positions.

Details of how the proportion of explained variation is calculated can be found in the Appendix B.1.

Averaging across our 34 issues, individuals' left–right and social liberal–conservative ideological positions together explain 21% of variation in individuals' issue opinions. Being able to explain about one-fifth of variation in opinion is not to be sniffed at, and this result should assure us that British voters' issue opinions seem to be ideologically structured to a notable extent. Yet it also implies that, averaging across issues, around four-fifths of variation in British voters' expressed issue opinions is explained by something *other* than the two dimensions of ideology captured here.

Issues vary markedly around this average. For example, on one issue—foreign aid—we can explain an impressive two-thirds (68%) of variation in opinion based on ideology. However, this issue is unusual. Even for those other issues where opinion appears to be more ideologically structured than average—such as net migration, NHS privatization, energy price regulation, Britain's EU relationship, and zero hours contracts—we estimate that ideology explains around two-fifths of the total variation in opinion in these issues, leaving almost three-fifths—the majority of variation—still unexplained.

Figure 4.11 illustrates more concretely the amount of opinion variation explained by ideology and how this varies across four example issues. It is generated by performing the following simulation exercise using our estimated model. For any given issue, we take the respondents who were assigned a question on that issue in our survey. For each of these respondents, we compute their predicted latent opinion on the issue given the respondent's estimated position on each ideological dimension and the estimated loading of that issue on each dimension. We call this the respondents' 'expected' latent opinion based on ideology alone. For each respondent, we then simulate a 'realized' latent opinion on the same issue by adding a random error to their expected latent opinion. The variation of this random error depends on the magnitude of non-ideological variation in respondents' opinions on that issue, as estimated by the model.[12]

The four panels of Figure 4.11 plot 'realized' versus 'expected' opinions for four different issues. If ideology explains all the variation in opinion on an issue, realized opinion would exactly equal expected opinion, and all the points would fall along the black line. The greater the vertical spread of points around the black line for an issue, the more respondents' realized latent opinion tend to deviate from the ones we would expect given their ideology, and

[12] In the terms of the model notation laid out in Appendix B.1, the random error is normally distributed with mean zero and with an issue-specific standard deviation as estimated by the model.

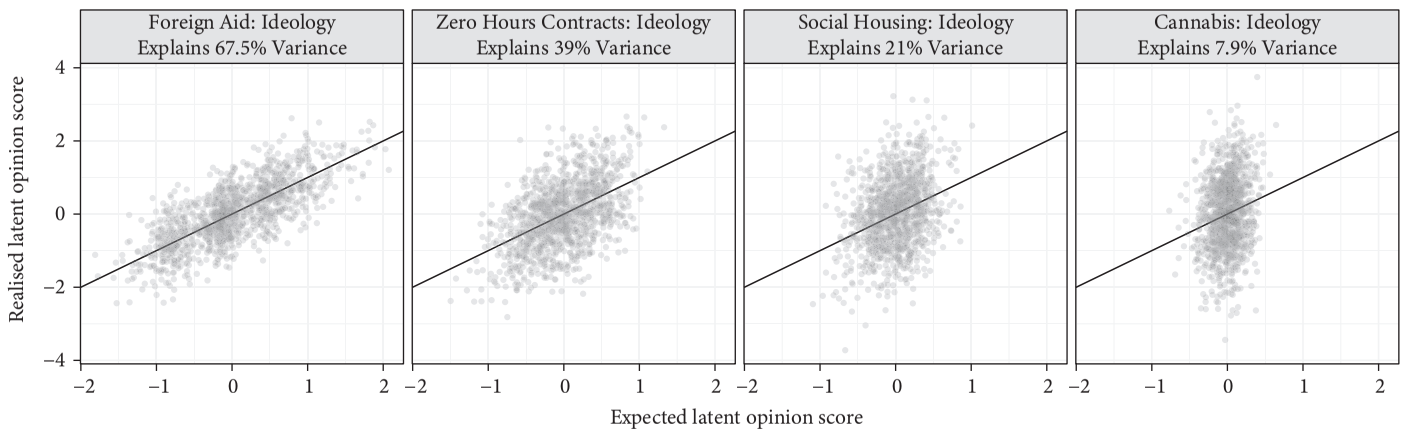

Figure 4.11 Visualizing how much latent opinion variation is explained by ideology for four example issues.

the greater the variation in latent opinion which is left unexplained by our two-dimensional model of ideology.

The leftmost panel of Figure 4.11 focuses on foreign aid, the issue on which ideology explains by far the most opinion variation (67.5%). For this issue, the vertical spread of points indicates that realized latent opinion is generally reasonably close to what we would expect given a respondent's estimated ideological position. The second panel focuses on zero hours contracts, which is among a pack of the most ideological issues once foreign aid is discounted (39% variance explained). On this issue, we see that there is still a clearly visible relationship between realized latent opinion and expected opinion given respondent ideology. However, realized opinion deviates from expected opinion more than for foreign aid. The third panel looks at social housing, where the amount of opinion variation explained by ideology (21%) is very close to the cross-issue average in our data. In comparison to zero hours contracts, the relationship between expected and realized opinion on social housing is noticeably less pronounced, and realized opinion deviates from expected opinion noticeably more. The fourth panel looks at the issue of cannabis policy, which is among the least ideological issues in our data (7.9% variance explained). Here, realized opinion varies around the black line so much that the relationship between expected and realized opinion is barely visible.

These plots illustrate the amount of variation in *latent* issue opinion explained by ideology. This latent opinion, however, is something that only exists in our model. Readers may therefore wish to know how well we can explain *observed* responses on each issue based on ideology? As discussed above, the translation of latent opinion response to observed categorical response on an issue will depend in part on the particular values of the threshold parameters for that issue, since these determine which regions of the latent scale map to which observed categorical responses. Therefore, to gauge how the amount of variance in latent opinion explained by ideology impacts our ability to explain observed categorical issue opinions, we ideally want to look at two issues which differ in the amount of latent opinion variance explained by ideology but which have similar threshold parameters.

Two such issues are foreign aid and social housing. Both issues have similar estimated threshold parameters, but one (foreign aid) has by far the most latent opinion variation explained by ideology of any issue we look at, while the other (social housing) is about average. For these two issues, the first and third panels of Figure 4.12 again plot realized latent opinion versus latent opinion expected based on ideology. This time, we add dashed horizontal lines to depict the estimated thresholds for translating latent opinion

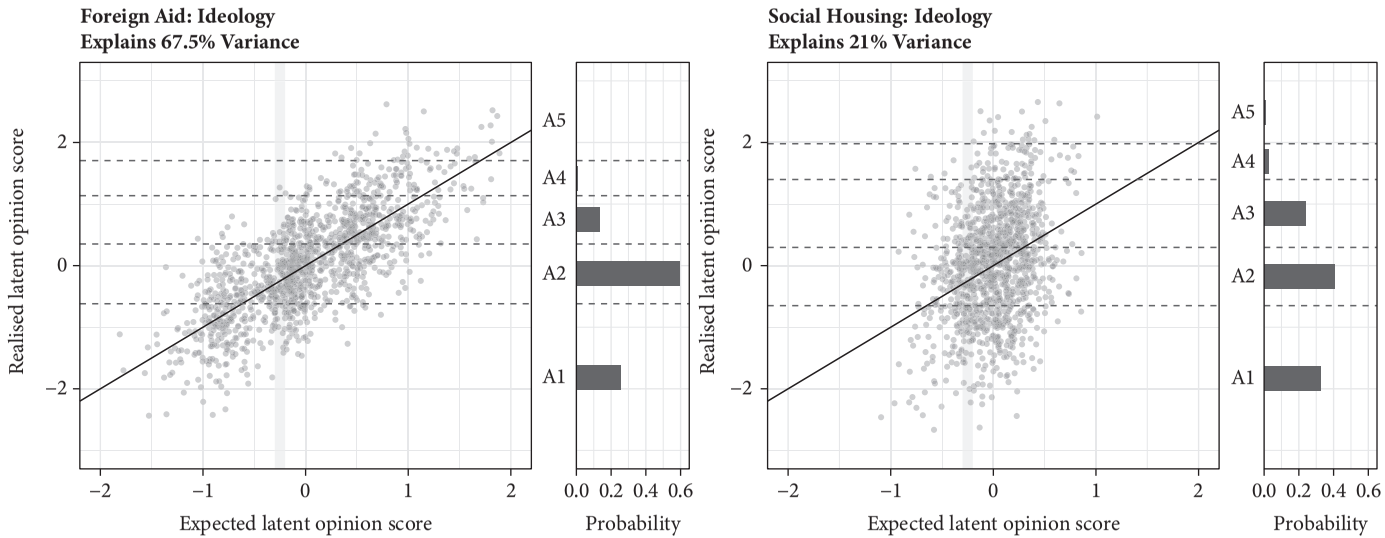

Figure 4.12 Visualizing how changing variance explained by ideology impacts uncertainty regarding observed categorical responses.

to observed response categories. These thresholds divide the vertical axis into five regions, each corresponding to a response category. The categorical response of an individual is determined by the region into which their latent response falls. Comparing the social housing plot to the foreign aid plot, the greater vertical spread of realized latent opinion around the black line for a given expected latent opinion score clearly translates into greater variation in realized latent opinion across the regions on the vertical axis, and therefore into greater variation in categorical opinion responses.

The second and fourth panels of Figure 4.12 illustrate this point more explicitly. For each issue, they take individuals whose expected latent opinion on the issue given their ideology is -0.25 and show the predicted probabilities of each ordinal response category among those individuals. Focusing first on respondents who have this expected latent opinion score for foreign aid, the first panel shows how these respondents (highlighted with the vertical light grey bar) have realized latent opinions that mostly cluster around the 45-degree line and translate into ordered response option A2. The second panel confirms this: respondents whose expected latent opinion is at -0.25 for foreign aid are expected to give the A2 ordered response about 60% of the time. Contrast this with the social housing issue. Respondents whose ideology leads us to expect a latent opinion of -0.25 on this issue (again highlighted with the vertical light grey bar) have realized latent opinions that are much more spread around the 45-degree line in the third panel, translating often into ordered response options A1, A2, A3, and sometimes even A4. The fourth panel confirms this: for respondents whose expected latent opinion on social housing is at -0.25, the probability distribution over ordered responses is much more diffuse than it was for foreign aid; the probabilities of responses A1, A2, and A3 all range between 0.2 and 0.4.

In other words, on an issue which is fairly typical in terms of what proportion of variation in opinion is explained by ideology, based on ideology alone we are quite uncertain about what a respondent's stated opinion on this issue will be.

4.7 Chapter Summary

Using new data, this chapter has presented a systematic analysis of ideological structure in British voters' opinions across 34 concrete policy issues. We found that there are ideological correlations in the policy opinions of British voters. Moreover, this ideological structure takes a two-dimensional form consistent with prevailing conceptions of ideological conflict in Britain and

many other established democracies: a left–right economic dimension and a social liberal–conservative dimension.

From a normative standpoint, one may view our findings as encouraging to the extent that they accord with the ideological voter account's claim that ideology can provide a simplifying link between the public's preferences on specific policies and the choices they make between parties competing for office, thereby incentivizing parties to stand on platforms ultimately responsive to mass policy preferences. However, it should be borne in mind that the ideological correlations in issue opinion that we have documented could be driven to a greater or lesser extent by respondents simply copying the ideologically organized issue positions of the parties they support. In this sense, our findings in this chapter are also consistent with the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account, and ideologically organized mass issue opinion does not serve as an input into electoral politics, but rather emerges as a by-product of it.

Perhaps just as important, we have also found that a large proportion of issue opinion variation—on average around four-fifths, and more than half for almost all the issues we consider—remains unexplained by either of these ideological dimensions. Does this unexplained variation simply represent poorly formed issue opinions on the part of voters? Or is it attributable to idiosyncratic opinion—i.e., real, meaningful, issue opinions which just do not fit with standard ideological patterning? In the next chapter we introduce panel data to answer this question.

5
Idiosyncratic Patterns of Issue Opinion

In the last chapter, we drew on new survey data measuring the views of a large, representative sample of Britons across 34 policy issues to provide clear evidence of ideological structure in mass issue opinion. Our analysis revealed patterns of correlation between opinions on different issues across individuals. These patterns could be reasonably summarized in terms of two ideological dimensions—economic left–right, and social liberal–conservative—such that particular views on an issue belonging to one of these dimensions were associated with particular views on other issues belonging to the same dimension. In terms of the accounts of mass issue opinion set out in Chapter 2, these findings so far are consistent with the *ideological voter* account and the *voter-as-follower* variant of the *innocent voter* account: both expect the public's issue opinions to exhibit at least a degree of ideological correlation, whether because voters develop genuinely held and ideologically organized opinions (the ideological voter logic), or because voters mimic the ideologically organized issue positions of the parties they support (the voter-as-follower logic).

However, we also found in the last chapter that two-dimensional ideological structure only accounted for a limited portion—just over one-fifth—of the total variation in our respondents' expressed issue opinions. Most variation—just under four-fifths—is still to be accounted for.

What should we make of this substantial unexplained variation in issue opinion? Both the *classic* and *voter-as-follower* variants of the *innocent voter* account would suggest that it is mainly reflective of individuals lacking well-formed opinions on policy issues (and, according to the voter-as-follower variant, lacking clear partisan cues on what issue opinions to adopt). Partly in reaction to such arguments, studies in the ideological voter tradition have typically come to discard this non-ideological opinion variation as measurement noise (see Chapter 3). Those studies focus instead on explaining political behaviour in terms of that component of issue opinion which is ideologically structured and as such more readily characterized as real and meaningfully held.

Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion and Political Choice. Nick Vivyan, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, and Chris Hanretty, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780198955245.003.0005

In contrast, the *idiosyncratic voter* account that we set out in Chapter 2 would argue that a substantial amount of the non-ideological component of voters' issue opinions is in fact idiosyncratic: real and meaningfully held on the part of individuals, but not organized according to a common ideological pattern. This account says that the various processes often highlighted as generating ideologically correlated issue opinions among the public will typically operate weakly and in diverse ways across voters and issues, cutting across each other. Sometimes this can result in weakly held, ephemeral issue opinions (in line with the innocent voter account). But other times it can result in an individual developing well-formed opinions on an issue that are not well predicted given the views they happen to have on other issues and the more general patterns of ideological correlation across issues in the electorate.

In this chapter, we ask how much of the non-ideological component of mass issue opinion in Britain can be described as idiosyncratic. To do so we must distinguish issue opinion which is ideologically unpredictable but well formed—and therefore idiosyncratic—from issue opinion which is ideologically unpredictable and poorly formed—and therefore characteristic of voter innocence. Because of this, our analysis relies on repeated measures of survey respondents' issue opinions. These repeated measures allow us to distinguish well-formed, stable issue opinions from poorly formed, unstable issue opinions. We describe this repeated measures data and how we model this data in the next section. We then proceed to present the findings of our analysis, which reveal that a substantial portion of variation in Britons' issue opinions appears to be idiosyncratic in nature.

5.1 Distinguishing Idiosyncrasy from Ideology and Nonattitude

So far, our analysis has sought to explain variation in British voters' issue opinions as a function of the two main ideological dimensions that structure those opinions. All the remaining variation in issue opinion not explained by ideology has been lumped into a single black box. Our task now is to try to unpack that black box. We want to determine how much of this residual non-ideological variation in voters' issue opinion is due to individual voters holding idiosyncratic issue opinions which are real and meaningful but which are also not subject to the most common patterns of cross-issue ideological correlations in the population. The challenge we face is that, according

to the innocent voter account, the non-ideological variation in issue opinion which we have identified is also likely to reflect a substantial degree of nonattitudes: survey respondents reporting issue opinions which lack ideological structure because they are not real and meaningful issue opinions, but rather more fleeting, cursory responses to survey prompts.

How then can we distinguish that component of non-ideological variation in issue opinions which is due to idiosyncrasy from that which is due to nonattitudes? We rely on panel survey data that repeatedly measures respondents' opinions on the same issues across more than one survey wave. The following example helps explain our approach. Imagine a voter expresses their opinion on several issues at an initial point in time, t_1. The combination of opinions the voter expresses lacks ideological structure: their positions on any one issue are not well predicted based on their positions on other issues and the prevailing associations in opinions across issues among voters more generally. We therefore conclude that these opinions are not explained by ideology. Now, imagine that we go back to the voter some months later, at time t_2, and ask them for the issue opinions again. If the voter's expressed opinion on each issue at t_2 differs from their expressed opinion on the issue at t_1, we might be more inclined to conclude that the voter was simply reporting nonattitudes: their stated opinions fluctuate over time because they do not reflect beliefs that are meaningfully held. On the other hand, if the voter's expressed opinions on each issue remain fixed from one time point to the next, this would give us confidence that those expressed opinions reflect genuine idiosyncrasy. The voter may hold a combination of opinions that is surprising from an ideological perspective, but the persistence of these opinions suggests that they are nevertheless real and meaningful for the voter.

The use of panel data to distinguish 'real' issue opinions from nonattitudes is not new. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 2, it dates back at least to the pioneering studies by Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969). What is different with our approach here is that we simultaneously distinguish stable, meaningful idiosyncratic opinion from unstable, weakly formed opinion *and* from stable, meaningful ideological issue opinion.

5.1.1 The Panel Data

The data we use here is an extension of the data we used in Chapter 4. There, we analysed the reported issue opinions of a sample of 6,112 YouGov respondents, selected via YouGov's sample matching algorithm to be representative of the population of Great Britain in terms of 2017 general election

vote choice, EU referendum vote choice, self-reported political attention, and standard demographic variables. Those issue opinions were recorded in one survey wave, from late January to early February 2018. We refer to this as wave 1 of our survey.

We now incorporate additional data from two further survey waves. Wave 2 was fielded six months after wave 1, in July 2018. It recorded the issue opinions of 3,044 of the individuals who had previously responded to wave 1. Wave 3 was fielded a further six months after wave 2, in January 2019. It recorded the issue opinions of 1,650 of the individuals who had previously responded to wave 1 and wave 2. Wave 2 was fielded in the same month that high-profile supporters of Brexit (David Davis, Boris Johnson) resigned from the Cabinet in protest at Prime Minister Theresa May's proposed agreement on withdrawal from the European Union; wave 3 was fielded in the month the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement was rejected by the House of Commons, leaving the government in office but without a majority on the most important political issue of the decade. Despite this, both the Conservative and Labour parties continued to poll at around 40%, just as they had during wave 1.

Chapter 4 discussed the steps taken to enhance the quality and representativeness of our wave 1 sample of respondents. However, no matter how high quality and representative the sample is for its first wave, any panel survey faces the challenge that respondents will drop out of the survey from one wave to the next. This can cause the sample of respondents who are observed across multiple panel waves to become unrepresentative. If, for example, the less politically attentive respondents in the original sample are less likely to respond to requests to undertake a follow-up survey, this can lead to more politically attentive people being over-represented in the sample of multiple-wave respondents. We addressed this problem by planning for more attrition than would occur if recontact were attempted with all respondents. We asked YouGov to use their standard sampling strategy *within* the set of respondents to the previous wave, with declining sample size targets of 3,000 (wave 2) and 1,500 (wave 3), respectively. Because of this design, when we inspect the (unweighted) distributions of demographic and political characteristics—including political attention—among the sample of respondents for each survey wave, these distributions are very similar across survey waves. They are also very close to the corresponding distributions of such characteristics in the British population.[1]

[1] YouGov supplied demographic and political population weights for each wave. We use these in all analyses reported below unless otherwise stated.

As in wave 1, in both wave 2 and wave 3 each survey respondent was asked seven issue questions (again, one issue question per page). As in wave 1, each of these issue questions asked a respondent to give their preferred policy on an issue from a set of five ordered policy alternatives. Recall that the seven issues about which each respondent was asked in wave 1 were drawn randomly without replacement from a bank of 34 issue questions. In subsequent waves, each respondent was asked *exactly the same issue questions* in *exactly the same order* as in previous waves.

Our panel survey therefore repeatedly records each individual respondent's reported opinions on the same issues at six-month intervals. These six-month intervals are shorter than the roughly two-year and fourteen- to twenty-month intervals separating the repeated issue opinions studied by Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969), respectively. Nevertheless, we think they are of sufficient length to guard against the risk that respondents report artificially stable issue opinions because of a psychological motivation to answer survey questions in a manner consistent with their answers to previous questions. In order for responses to wave 2 or wave 3 issue questions to be driven by such consistency motivations, respondents would have to remember that these questions are similar to a set of questions they had previously answered, and remember the answers that they gave. This is plausible when the previous questions were posed earlier on in the same survey wave, but would be difficult if they were posed two weeks before, and very difficult if they were posed six months before, as was the case in our survey.

5.1.2 The Model

To distinguish idiosyncratic variation in issue opinion from variation due to either ideology or nonattitudes, we estimate a *panel model* of issue opinion variation.[2]

This panel model, which we describe here in non-technical terms, is really an augmented version of the ideological scaling model used in the previous chapter (Chapter 4).[3] As such it shares three key basic characteristics with that model. First, as before, it tries to explain the responses individuals give to questions about policy issues. The key difference is that now our data includes multiple waves, and we observe many individual respondents answering the

[2] This panel model draws on the one described in Lauderdale et al. (2018), which was developed for US survey data. It is also similar to that in Sturgis (2001), but is designed for categorical (rather than continuous) opinion measures and is applied to a wide range of questions about concrete policies rather than questions about values.

[3] We provide the full details of the model in Appendix B.2.

same issue questions across waves 1, 2, and 3. The data therefore contains repeated observations of a particular respondent's answer to a particular issue question, each recorded in a different survey wave.

Second, and just as before, each individual responds to an issue question by choosing one of five ordered categories. These ordered categories represent different policy alternatives. Although the responses are discrete ordered categories, the model assumes that the observed categorical responses reflect a *latent* response on an underlying continuous scale. In other words, each issue is assumed to have a continuous latent response scale divided into five regions; respondents' choices of policy alternatives depends on the region in which their latent response is located.

Third, the panel model continues to include an *ideological component*. It includes parameters which connect an individual's latent response on a given issue to their position on two latent dimensions of ideology. As before, the ideological component of the model allows each issue to 'load' more or less strongly upon each of these dimensions. An issue with a strong loading is an issue where individuals' responses on that particular issue are strongly related to their position on the ideological dimension. An issue with a weak or zero loading is an issue where individuals' responses on that particular issue tell us almost nothing about their position on the ideological dimension. And as before, it turns out that economic left–right issues tend to load more strongly on the first ideological dimension, and social liberal–conservative issues tend to load more strongly on the second dimension. Importantly, the panel model makes the added assumption that the ideological locations of respondents on each of these two dimensions, and the loadings of issues on each of these two dimensions, are all *stable* over time and thus across the three survey waves.

The key difference between the ideological scaling model used in Chapter 4 and the panel model we use here relates to the non-ideological aspects of each model. Recall that the scaling model in Chapter 4 assumed that an individual's response to an issue question had only two components: the *ideological component* just discussed, plus a non-ideological *residual error term* whose value varied across respondents and issues. Whenever that model observed a discrepancy between the response an individual gives to an issue question and the response it would expect them to give based on ideology alone it attributed all of this discrepancy to the residual error term. The residual error term thus captured all non-ideological determinants of issue opinion.

The panel model we estimate in this chapter uses the longitudinal nature of our data to split this non-ideological residual into two distinct terms. The first of these terms captures idiosyncratic opinion, and takes the form of an additive *respondent-by-issue effect* on issue opinion outcomes. This effect is

allowed to take on a different value for each respondent on each issue, but remains stable over time for a given respondent on a given issue. When the respondent-by-issue effect is large and positive for a given respondent on a given issue, it indicates that the respondent gives a much higher latent response on that issue than we would expect based on their ideology alone, and does so consistently over survey waves. When the respondent-by-issue effect is large and negative, it indicates that the respondent gives a much lower latent response on that issue than we would expect based on their ideology alone, and does so consistently over survey waves. In both of these cases, the respondent can be said to display idiosyncratic opinion: their opinion is unpredictable based on ideology but is nonetheless consistent over time. In contrast, when the respondent-by-issue effect is near zero for a given respondent on a given issue, this indicates that the respondent on average answers the issue in the way we would expect based on their ideology alone. In this case, the respondent displays little idiosyncrasy in their opinion on the issue.

The second non-ideological term is a random *respondent-by-issue-by-wave error* which takes on a new value every time a respondent answers any issue question in any wave. This is different from the ideological and idiosyncratic terms in the model, which remain stable over time for a given individual or for a given individual on a given issue. Our respondent-by-issue-by-wave error term therefore captures instability over time in individuals' issue opinions. The bigger the random error (whether negative or positive) associated with a particular individual on a particular issue in a particular wave, the more their opinion in that wave deviates from the opinion we would expect them to give on that issue based on the stable ideological and idiosyncratic factors. The average size of the error for each issue tells us how much individuals' opinions on that issue vary from wave to wave.

The panel model we use in this chapter thus separates out the idiosyncratic component of voters' observed issue opinions from both the ideological component and the unstable component of those opinions. In fact, the model allows us to go further and summarize *how much* idiosyncratic variation there is in voters' observed opinions on a particular issue. For a given issue, the raw amount of idiosyncratic opinion variation on this issue is indicated by the amount of variation in the idiosyncratic respondent-by-issue effects discussed above. The more these idiosyncratic respondent-by-issue effects vary across respondents, the more respondents' observed opinions will end up varying.

To more easily assess whether the amount of idiosyncratic variation in opinion on an issue is small or large, we express this quantity as a fraction of the *total* variation in observed opinion on the issue. We can do this because

the model parameters also tell us how much variation in opinion on an issue is due to ideology and instability, respectively, and because the total amount of variation in opinion on an issue can be found by summing the amount of idiosyncratic variation, ideological variation, and unstable variation on that issue.[4]

Our panel model allows some issues to elicit opinion that is more idiosyncratic than others. An issue where we estimate a high proportion of idiosyncrasy is one where opinions on that issue are stable over time (across survey waves) but are not very predictable for a given individual given their general ideological positions as captured by their opinions on other issues in the survey. An issue where we estimate a low proportion of idiosyncrasy is one where opinions on that issue are *either* unstable over time (across survey waves), *or* are stable and predictable for a particular individual given their general ideological positions.

5.2 Main Results

We can now show the results of our panel model of issue opinion. Figure 5.1 displays, for each of our 34 issues, the estimated proportion of total opinion variation which can be explained by idiosyncratic opinion. That is, it shows how much issue opinion is non-ideological but stable for an individual over repeated measurements. It is clear from the figure that some issues are much more idiosyncratic than others. For energy price regulation, the issue on which respondents are estimated to have the least idiosyncratic opinions, only 11.8% of opinion variation is estimated to be attributable to idiosyncrasy. In contrast, for cannabis regulation, the issue on which respondents are estimated to have the most idiosyncratic opinions, 58.7% of opinion variation is estimated to be attributable to idiosyncrasy. The difference in opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy for these two issues is substantial, at 47 points.

These differences between issues are important, but the second key finding shown in Figure 5.1 is that the *average* issue shows a lot of idiosyncrasy. Averaging across all 34 issues, idiosyncrasy explains 37.1%—around three-eighths—of variation in opinion. This average is not driven by one or two outlier issues, either: for all but two of our 34 issues, we estimate that idiosyncrasy explains more than one-fifth of opinion variation; and for 15 of our 34 issues, we estimate that idiosyncrasy explains more than two-fifths of opinion

[4] Further details of this decomposition can be found in Appendix B.2.

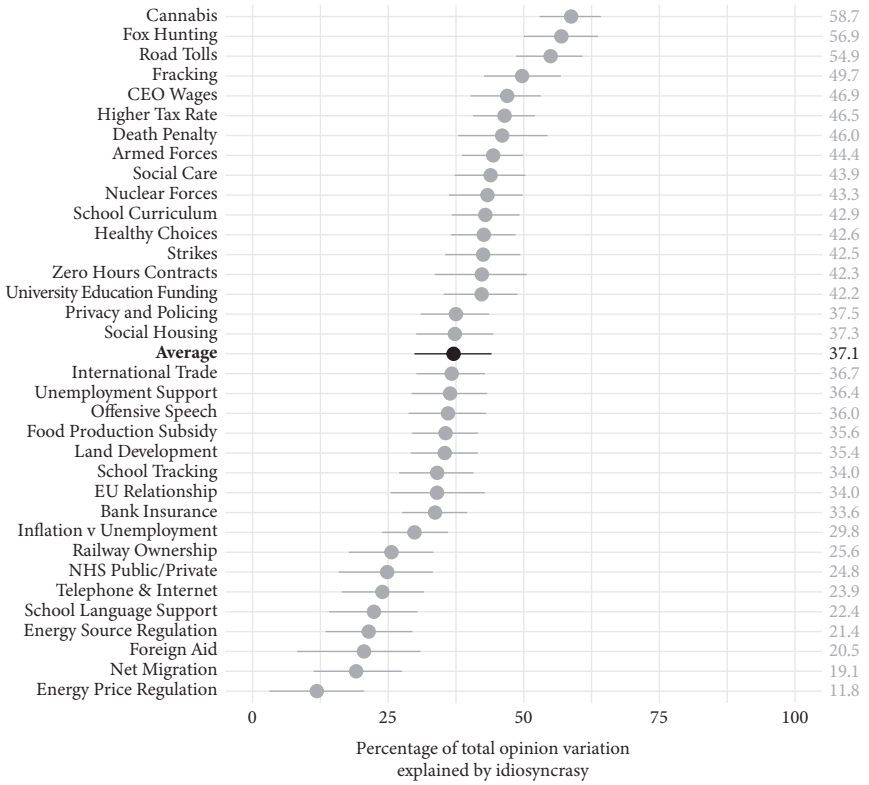

Figure 5.1 Plot showing what percentage of all variation in opinion on each issue is attributable to idiosyncratic (i.e., ideologically unpredictable but stable) opinion.

variation. In other words idiosyncratic opinion explains a notable proportion of variation in British voters' opinions on many of the 34 policy issues we study here.

One way to put this proportion into perspective is to compare it to the proportion of variation explained by ideological opinion. Recall from Chapter 4 that, when we focused on cross-sectional data from wave 1 of our survey only, individuals' positions on economic and cultural ideological dimensions explained on average about one-fifth of variation in their issue opinions. Based on the model for repeated opinion measures introduced in this chapter we again estimate that, averaging across issues, two-dimensional ideology still explains about one-fifth, or more specifically 20.4%, of opinion variation. Allowing for idiosyncrasy doesn't therefore change our conclusions about how much ideology explains survey responses. By comparison, the estimated average proportion of opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy is decidedly greater, at 37.1%. Put differently, idiosyncrasy is estimated

to explain 16.7 percentage points more variation in issue opinion than ideology. The estimated 95% confidence interval for this difference ranges from 4.3 points to 28.3 points, meaning we can be confident that idiosyncrasy explains more issue opinion variation than ideology.

As we did in Chapter 4 for ideology, it is useful to provide a visual illustration of the amount of latent opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy. We do this for the same four example issues we looked at in Chapter 4. For each issue, we analyse just those respondents who were asked about a question about that issue. For each of these respondents we simulate four quantities of interest based on the model. The first quantity of interest is the respondent's expected *latent* response on the issue *given ideology only*. This is calculated based on the respondent's estimated ideal points on the economic and social ideological dimensions, and the estimated loadings of the issue on these dimensions. The second quantity of interest is the expected latent opinion of the respondent on the issue *given idiosyncrasy only*. This is calculated by randomly drawing a value for the idiosyncratic respondent-by-issue effect from the model-estimated distribution of these effects for the issue in question.[5] The third quantity of interest is the respondent's simulated expected latent opinion on the issue *given ideology and idiosyncrasy*. This is just the sum of their expected opinion given ideology only and the expected opinion given idiosyncrasy only. These three quantities do not take into account the fact that responses—even latent responses—are noisy and vary from wave to wave. Our fourth quantity of interest is the respondent's simulated '*realized*' latent opinion on the same issue when surveyed in a particular wave. This is generated by taking the respondent's simulated expected latent opinion on the issue given ideology and idiosyncrasy, then adding a random respondent-by-issue-by-wave error, which is reflective of the estimated degree of unstable wave-to-wave variation on the issue. This final quantity can be thought of as the simulated latent opinion 'outcome' for a respondent. With these quantities in hand, we can assess how well information about ideology and idiosyncrasy, respectively, help us to accurately predict these realized outcomes.

Based on this simulation exercize, for each of the four example issues (columns), Figure 5.2 plots 'realized' latent opinion (on the vertical axis) against expected latent opinion (on the horizontal axis). The expected latent opinion can be the expected latent opinion given ideology only (top row),

[5] In the terms of the model parameters laid out in Appendix B.2, the value of the respondent-by-issue effect (ν_{ij}) is drawn for each respondent i and issue j from a normal distribution with mean zero and issue-specific standard deviation set to the model estimate of ω_j. The respondent-by-issue-by-wave error is drawn from a normal distribution with mean zero and standard deviation equal to the model estimate of σ_j.

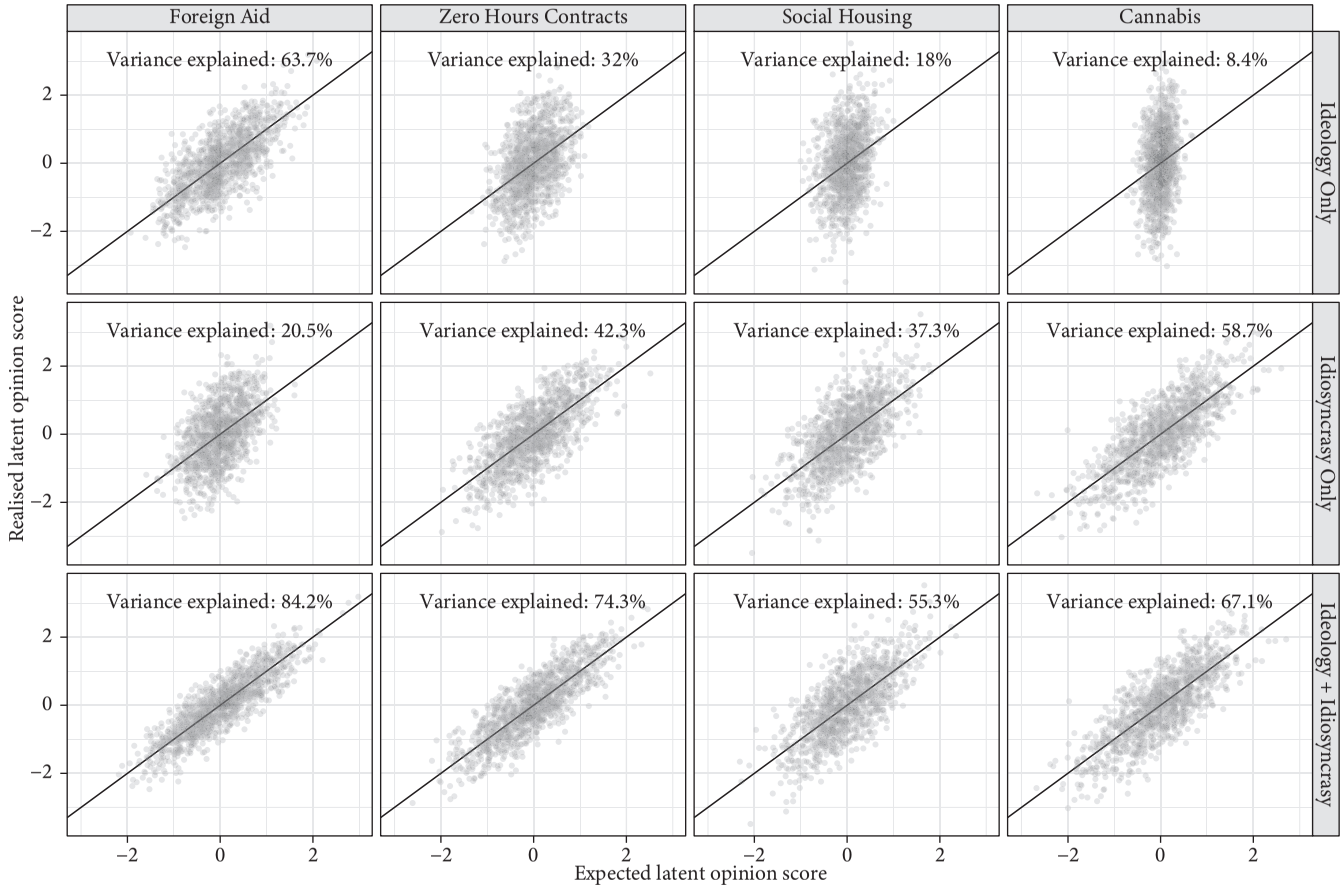

Figure 5.2 Visualizing how much additional latent opinion variation is explained by idiosyncrasy for four example issues.

given idiosyncrasy alone (middle row), or given ideology and idiosyncrasy combined (bottom row). Each dot in each panel represents a particular respondent in a particular wave. If all dots fall on the solid black line, this indicates that expected latent opinion perfectly predicts realized latent opinion. The more the dots are spread out around the black line, the less we are able to explain opinion variation using ideology and idiosyncrasy, either separately or jointly.

The leftmost column looks at the issue of foreign aid, which—as we saw in the last chapter—scores higher than average in terms of the proportion of opinion variation explained by ideology (63.7%). It is therefore unsurprising that, in the top panel, where we focus on expected opinion given ideology alone, the dots are clustered quite tightly around the black line. In contrast, in the middle panel of the same column, we see much more notable spread of dots around the black line, since idiosyncrasy explains much less (20.5%) variation in opinion on foreign aid than does ideology. The bottom panel of the column illustrates how adding information on idiosyncrasy to that on respondent ideology improves our ability to explain realized opinion compared to focusing on ideology alone: the dots in the plot are generally even more tightly clustered around the black line here than in the top row, and visually there is a very strong relationship between expected and realized opinion.

If all issues were similarly ideological in nature, we would see a similar pattern for the remaining columns in Figure 5.2. But we do not. Instead, for the three remaining example issues, points are clustered more tightly around the black line—and the visual association between expected and realized opinion is much stronger—when we focus on expected opinion given idiosyncrasy alone (middle row) compared to expected opinion given ideology alone (top row). This pattern is particularly striking for the rightmost column, which focuses on cannabis regulation, the issue estimated to have the greatest degree of idiosyncratic opinion variation according to our model. But the pattern also holds even for the second and third columns, which focus on issues—zero hours contract and social housing—that, relative to the other issues we study, are fairly typical in terms of the amount of opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy.

5.2.1 The Idiosyncratic Part of Stable Opinion

Another way to put the role of idiosyncratic issue opinion into context is to assess the extent to which it explains variation in *stable* opinion. Expressing

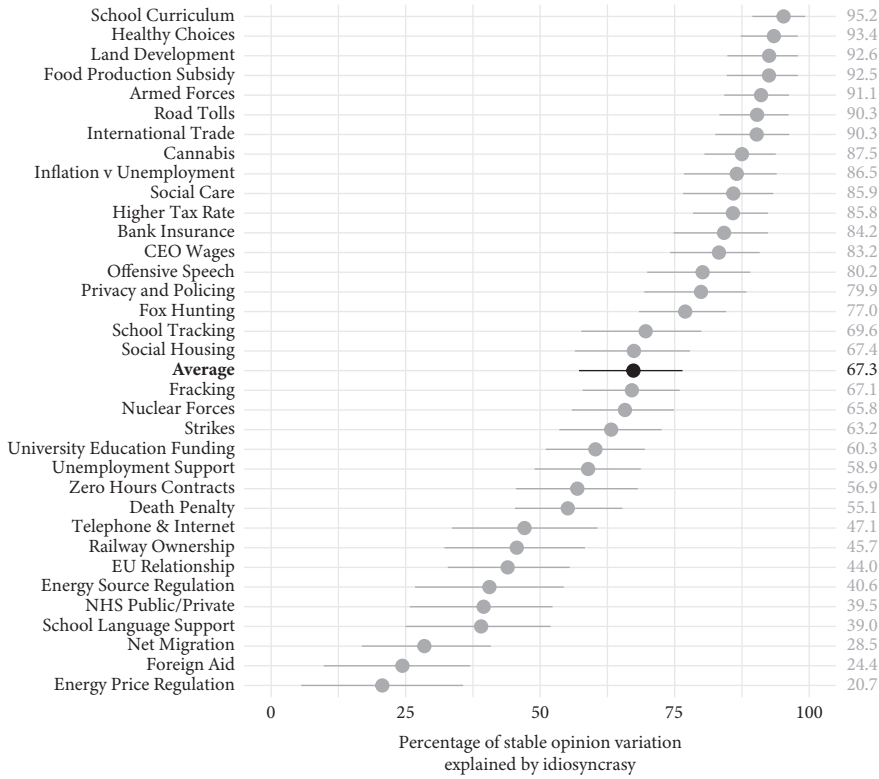

Figure 5.3 Plot showing what percentage of stable variation in opinion on each issue is attributable to idiosyncratic (i.e., ideologically unpredictable but stable) opinion.

idiosyncratic opinion in this way matters because political scientists have typically held stable opinion to reflect attitudes that are more real and more meaningful for voters. Figure 5.3 plots our model estimate of the proportion of *stable* opinion variation attributable to idiosyncratic opinion for each issue. Since idiosyncratic opinions are, by definition, stable opinions that are not ideological, this quantity is simply the estimated proportion of total opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy, divided by the sum of the estimated proportions of total opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy and ideology together.

Figure 5.3 shows how, for some issues, like foreign aid or energy price regulation, idiosyncrasy plays a relatively small role in explaining variation in stable issue opinion. However, it also makes clear that, for the majority of issues we consider—25 out of 34—more than half of the variation in stable opinion is due to individuals' idiosyncratic policy views. Indeed, for 16 of the 34 issues, idiosyncratic views explain more than 75% of variation in

stable respondent opinion. Averaging across all issues, just over two-thirds (67.3) of variation in stable issue opinion is attributable to idiosyncrasy. In other words, focusing on those issue opinions which we would generally regard as real and meaningful due to their individual-level stability, a substantial portion of variation across individuals in these opinions seems to be idiosyncratic rather than ideological in nature.

5.2.2 Examples of Idiosyncrasy

Perhaps the most concrete way to illustrate idiosyncratic issue opinion is to look at individual instances of this in our data. Take, for example, respondent number 309, whom we will call Carol. Carol is a 65-year-old who hails from the east of England and has a degree-level education. Carol responded to wave 1, wave 2, and wave 3 of our panel survey and in every wave was asked, among other things, for her position on the death penalty, net migration and Britain's relationship with the EU. As we have seen, these are three issues which load particularly strongly on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension of British politics, and which barely load on the economic left–right dimension. As such, from an ideological perspective we would expect someone who favours more restrictions on net migration to prefer Britain to have fewer ties to the European Union and to be more favourable toward the death penalty in at least some circumstances. We expect this based on patterns of association between issue opinions alone; we are not making any assumptions about Carol's political reasoning or psychology.

Carol's stated opinions on these three issues remained perfectly stable across all three waves, each six months apart, and thus are plausibly real and meaningful as judged by the usual political science standards. But those stable opinions are not a combination we would expect if Carol's opinions are organized according to prevailing patterns of ideological correlations. On the issue of migration, Carol is quite conservative, consistently favouring the imposition of a limit on net migration of 'No more than 65,000 per year (0.1% of UK population)'. This would represent one-fifth of the actual 2015 net migration levels to the UK quoted in the issue question preamble, and was the second-most restrictive policy option available for respondents. But then on the issue of Britain's relationship with the EU, Carol consistently prefers that 'The UK should remain a member of the EU' across all waves. And on the death penalty, Carol consistently prefers that 'The death penalty should not be used' in any circumstance. Carol's opinions on a set of issues which tend to load strongly on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension are stable, but do not obey common patterns of ideological correlation.

As another example, take respondent number 662, a 35 year-old man from the south west of England who does not have a degree-level education. We will call this respondent Daniel. Like Carol above, Daniel responded to wave 1, wave 2, and wave 3 of our panel survey. In each of these waves, Daniel was asked about two policy issues which we earlier found to load strongly on the economic left–right dimension but not on the social liberal–conservative dimension: railway ownership and the regulation of zero hours contracts. And on each of these two issues, Daniel maintained consistent, stable preferred policy options across all three survey waves at each six-month interval. On railway ownership, he consistently preferred what would generally be considered the most 'right-wing' option available to respondents: 'The rail network and the rail operating companies should be privately owned. Rail operating companies should set fares.' If Daniel's stable issue opinions are subject to prevailing patterns of left–right ideological correlation, we would thus expect Daniel to be against government intervention to restrict the use of zero-hour contracts. However, Daniel was in fact consistently supportive of the most interventionist available policy in this area, which states that 'Zero hours contracts should be illegal.'

Carol and Daniel of course represent just two examples of individuals holding idiosyncratic combinations of issue opinions. They also represent relatively extreme examples: their opinions on the issues highlighted were extreme in terms of positions and perfectly stable across waves, which accentuated how ideologically surprising these opinions were in combination. We have seen from our estimated model that idiosyncratic combinations of issue opinion are widespread in the British electorate. However, we should also bear in mind that a substantial portion of that idiosyncratic opinion variation will be driven by more moderate discrepancies between individuals' observed (stable) opinion on issues and the opinion we would expect, given what we know about their other issue opinions and prevailing patterns of ideological correlation.

5.3 Alternative Explanations for Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion

Might the large estimated amount of idiosyncratic issue opinion in our data be an artefact of some aspect of our study design or analysis? To argue convincingly that British voters often form idiosyncratic issue opinions, as we suggested in Chapter 2, we need to be able to reject alternative explanations for our observed results. These alternative explanations might claim

that idiosyncratic issue opinion only exists under limited conditions which are overrepresented in our analysis. We now turn to examine a series of such alternative explanations, and to provide evidence against each one.

5.3.1 Idiosyncrasy on Politicized Issues

Does the set of policy issues we included in our survey lead to an exaggerated amount of idiosyncratic issue opinion in our data? Perhaps, for example, we have failed to ask our respondents about enough politicized issues: i.e., issues on which British political parties provide clear, contrasting cues as to the appropriate position their supporters should adopt. The voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account implies that such cues make it easier for respondents to identify which issue positions their party endorses and mimic those party positions, which themselves tend to be stable and ideologically structured. As a result, respondents should be more likely to report stable and ideologically organized opinions on more politicized issues. According to this logic, if we asked about policy issues that were atypically low in their level of politicization, we might understate the degree of ideological issue opinion variation. This would correspondingly leave room for a greater degree of the remaining two types of issue opinion variation in our data: unstable variation and idiosyncratic variation. The voter-as-follower logic would tend to expect unstable opinion variation to grow in the absence of clear partisan cues, but perhaps respondents are also more likely to happen upon idiosyncratic combinations of opinions in the absence of such cues, meaning that idiosyncratic variation also becomes overstated.

One problem with this objection is that, as we shall shortly demonstrate, the 34 issues we asked about in our survey included a number on which the two main British political parties took clearly contrasting stances in the 2017 general election, which occurred around six months before wave 1 of the survey. In other words, our survey did indeed include questions on a number of politicized issues. A bigger problem for this objection is that, even on these politicized issues, where the voter-as-follower account would expect relatively high levels of ideological variation in respondent issue opinion—and less room for idiosyncratic opinion variation—we in fact find that idiosyncrasy explains a substantial share of variation in opinion and a similar or greater share of variation in stable opinion than does ideology.

Take, for example, the issue of university education funding. The incumbent Conservative government had maintained a system where university students in England paid annual tuition fees of up to £9,250 to cover the

cost of their higher education, but were offered government-backed loans to enable them to do so. This system closely matched our response alternative 4, which states that the government 'should not pay for the cost of university education, but should provide loans to ensure that all students are able to take up a position at university regardless of family resources'. It involved greater state intervention than response alternative 5, which required students to pay their fees from their own resources or private loans, but less state intervention than response alternative 3, which would have capped fees at £3,000.

In contrast, the Labour Party campaigned prominently at the 2017 general election on a manifesto promise to 'reintroduce maintenance grants for university students, and… abolish university tuition fees' (Labour Party, 2017, 43). This policy corresponds to alternative 1 on our university education funding question, which states that the government 'should pay for university education for UK students who enter university', and does not require students to pay any direct fees.

Thus, this is an issue on which the two main British political parties took clearly contrasting positions at the 2017 general election—corresponding to alternatives 1 and 4 on our five-category response scale. Furthermore, the direction of the difference between the parties on this issue—with Labour taking the more state interventionist position—were consistent with the more general ideological differences between the two parties on the left–right economic dimension.

Yet despite this our respondents exhibited a substantial degree of idiosyncratic opinion variation when asked about the university education funding issue seven and thirteen months after the 2017 election. Specifically, we estimate that idiosyncrasy accounted for over two-fifths (42.2%) of all variation in opinion on university education funding (see Figure 5.1), and more than half (60.3%) of all variation in stable opinion on university education funding.

Another example is the issue of fracking. The Labour 2017 manifesto promised to 'ban fracking' (Labour Party, 2017, 21), corresponding to response alternative 1 on our issue question ('Fracking should be illegal in the UK'). Meanwhile, the Conservatives stood on a manifesto which promised to 'develop the shale industry in Britain', although did not promise to alter existing requirements that fracking developments receive landowner and local authority approval (Conservative Party, 2017, 23). This corresponds to response alternative 4 on our fracking issue question ('Fracking should be allowed where landowners and local councils both permit it'). Regardless of these clear and contrasting party cues, which once more are consistent

with more general differences between the parties on questions of the proper degree of state regulation and intervention, we find that half (49.7%) of all opinion variation and two-thirds (67.1%) of stable opinion variation on the fracking issue is idiosyncratic in nature.

One of the most prominent areas of Conservative and Labour policy disagreement around the 2017 general election centred on the ownership of Britain's railways, a classic economic left–right issue. While the Conservative's 2017 transport policy involved no change to the *status quo*, whereby the rail network and operating companies were privately owned and fares were regulated by the government, Labour's 2017 manifesto pledged to '[bring] our railways back into public ownership' and 'cap fares' (Labour Party, 2017, 90), a position once more in line with its more generally economically left-wing manifesto. Thinking about our railway ownership issue question, these two contrasting party policies correspond most closely to alternatives 4 ('The rail network and the rail operating companies should be privately owned. Fares should be set by the government to cover operating and maintenance costs') and 2 ('The rail network and the rail operating companies should be publicly owned. Fares should be set by the government to cover operating and maintenance costs'), respectively. Given these clear, contrasting, and ideologically consistent party cues, it is perhaps unsurprising—according to a voter-as-follower logic—that the railway ownership issue is at the lower end of all the issues we consider in terms of the amount of idiosyncratic opinion variation it elicits. Yet, even on this issue, the proportion of total opinion variation attributable to idiosyncrasy is still notable, at roughly a quarter (25.6%), while the proportion of stable opinion variation attributable to idiosyncrasy remains substantial at just under a half (45.7%).

On other issues where the Conservatives and Labour also provided prominent—albeit less extreme—contrasts in policy positions we still see substantial idiosyncratic issue opinion, contrary to the voter-as-follower account. One such issue concerns higher rates of tax. Coming into the 2017 general election, the incumbent Conservative government had overseen a tax system where residents paid a tax rate of 45% on earnings over £150,000. This corresponds to response alternative 2 on our higher tax rate question ('Income over £150,000 should be taxed at 45%'). In contrast, Labour campaigned prominently on a manifesto pledge which involved increasing the tax rate for earnings above £150,000 to 50% (Adam et al., 2017). This corresponds to alternative 3 on the higher tax rate question ('income over £150,000 should be taxed at 50%). Despite these differences in party cues—cues which are again consistent with the parties' broader differences in economic left–right ideology—we find that almost half (46.5%) of all opinion

variation and more than four-fifths (85.8%) of stable opinion variation is idiosyncratic in nature.

Likewise, on the issue of CEO wages, Labour campaigned in 2017 on a left-leaning manifesto pledge to 'roll out maximum pay ratios of 20:1 in the public sector and in companies bidding for public contracts' (Labour Party, 2017, 47), whereas the Conservative manifesto made a contrasting and more right-leaning promise only to 'make executive pay packages subject to strict annual votes by shareholders' and to make listed companies publish information about pay ratios (Conservative Party, 2017, 18). In terms of response options on our CEO wages question, these positions correspond to response alternative 4 (CEOs should be paid no more than twenty times a typical factory worker salary of £25,000) and 5 (CEOs should be paid 'whatever salary company owners [shareholders] think is appropriate'), respectively. Even given these contrasting and ideologically consistent partisan cues, we once more find that almost half (46.9%) of all opinion variation and more than four-fifths (83.2%) of stable opinion variation is idiosyncratic in nature.

In sum, even when we look at issues where the two main British political parties—which between them received 82% of all votes at the 2017 general election—took contrasting and ideologically consistent policy positions in the election shortly preceding our survey, we still find that a substantial portion of stable opinion variation is idiosyncratic rather than ideological. This is unexpected from the voter-as-follower perspective, which suggests that stable opinion on these issues will tend to be ideologically organized. Furthermore, the fact that idiosyncrasy appears to account for a substantial portion of all opinion variation on these politicized issues speaks to its general relevance when thinking about public opinion on policy matters.

5.3.2 Is Widespread Idiosyncrasy an Artefact of National Fragmentation in UK Electoral Politics?

Of course, there are other political parties in Britain beyond the Conservatives and Labour. Indeed, one of the most striking developments in British politics during the 2010s was the rise of the Scottish National Party. From 2015, the SNP came to dominate at general elections in Scotland, receiving 37% of the vote in Scottish constituencies in 2017 and 45% in 2019. Fieldhouse et al. (2020) show how the rise of the SNP was tied to the shock of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, which raised the importance of independence-related issues and therefore led many voters who had previously voted Labour in general elections to switch support to the SNP.

From the perspective of the voter-as-follower account, perhaps the realignment of party support in Scotland can explain some of the widespread idiosyncrasy we observe in our data. If many Scottish voters began to take issue opinion cues from the SNP, perhaps the SNP cued those voters to take on distinct combinations of opinions on issues unrelated to independence. These distinct combinations would be less likely among those who take their cue from the Labour or Conservative parties. More generally, perhaps we are estimating high overall levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation because we are estimating our model on a mixture of English, Welsh, and Scottish respondents who have begun to develop nation-specific patterns of issue opinion due to different nation-specific patterns of elite cues.

To examine this possibility, we re-estimated our panel model of issue opinion variation using responses from respondents in England only. If fragmentation of party systems across UK nations—and associated diversity in patterns of party cues—was driving idiosyncratic opinion variation in our main analysis above, then we should see a substantial drop in idiosyncratic opinion variation when we study only English respondents.

Figure 5.4 presents the results of this England-only model alongside the results from our main model estimated on the whole sample. It shows that, on every issue and overall on average across issues, the estimated share of opinion variation attributable to idiosyncrasy is very similar whether we focus on English respondents only or on British respondents more generally. Our finding of widespread idiosyncrasy in issue opinion is not an artefact of the fragmentation of the British party system into nation-specific systems.

5.3.3 Is Widespread Idiosyncrasy an Artefact of Brexit Disruption?

The fragmentation of the British party system is not the only recent major development in British party politics. The 2016 EU membership referendum was hugely disruptive. In the aftermath of that referendum, the issue of Brexit came to the fore in British politics and many voters switched political allegiance to a party better aligned with their own position on Brexit (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). If those voters then behaved consistent with a voter-as-follower logic, they may have subsequently begun to adjust their other issue opinions to fit with those of their newly chosen party. That adjustment is likely to lead people to exhibit combinations of issue opinions that *look* idiosyncratic, but which reflect new patterns of followership, patterns which may only establish themselves over a number of years, and which may still be in the process

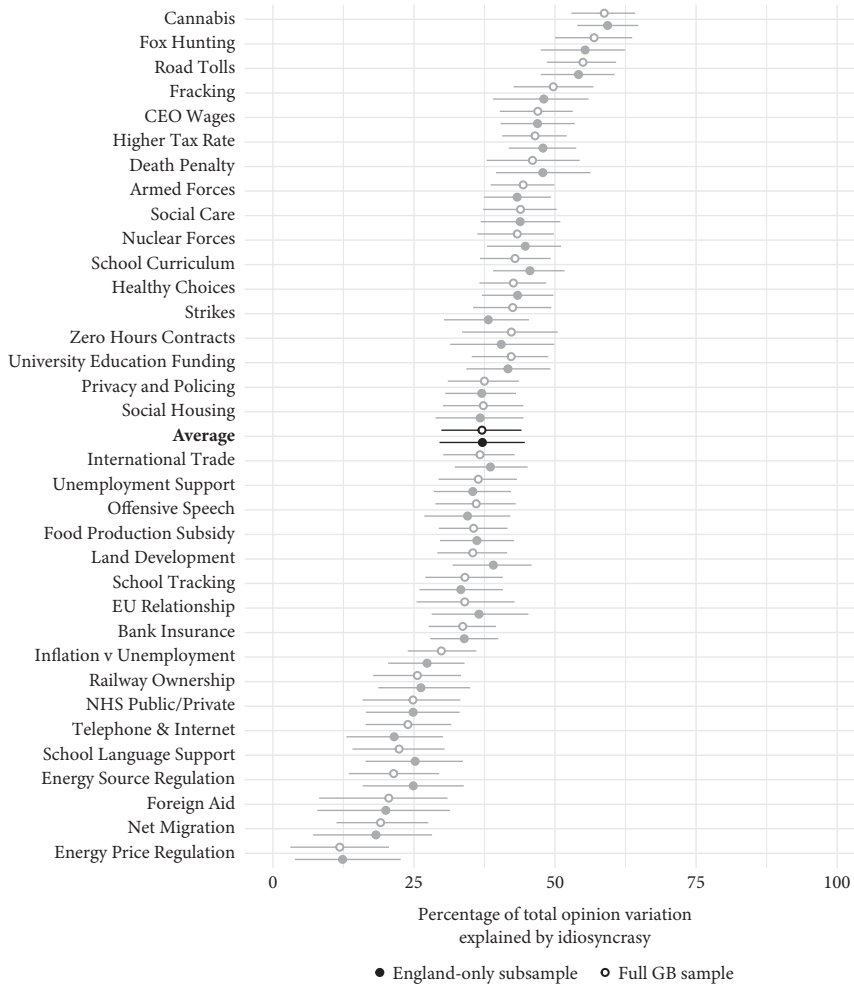

Figure 5.4 Plot showing what percentage of all variation in opinion on each issue is attributable to idiosyncratic (i.e., ideologically unpredictable but stable) opinion in the full GB sample and in the England-only subsample.

of establishing themselves when we fielded our survey in 2018–19. As such, might the large amount of idiosyncratic opinion variation we observe in our main results be a quirk of contemporary British political disruption, rather than a more generalizable phenomenon?

To address this question, we turn to survey data from a different political system which, at the time the data was collected, was not subject to a major electoral disruption such as Brexit. Specifically, we analyse panel data recording the opinions of American citizens on several policy issues. This

data was collected by Broockman (2016). 1,137 respondents were surveyed in early January 2014, and 513 of these respondents were re-surveyed in late February of the same year. Importantly, both survey waves were fielded well before the major disruption to American electoral alignments precipitated by the ultimately successful presidential campaign of Donald Trump, which was not launched until June of the following year.

Like our British panel survey, the Broockman (2016) panel survey of Americans asked respondents a series of thirteen ordinal policy issue questions. The topics of these issue questions covered a range of policy areas, from immigration, to Medicare, to abortion and gun control.[6] Like our survey, each issue question provided respondents with a series of ordered concrete policy alternatives, although there were seven of these rather than the five in our data. Compared to our British survey there were fewer respondents in the survey and fewer issues covered in the Broockman data.

We use this data to estimate the same panel model of issue opinion as we did for British voters earlier in this chapter. As before, this model allows for two dimensions of political ideology to potentially structure issue opinion.[7] Although some argue that Americans' political attitudes are adequately explained by a single ideological dimension (e.g., Jessee, 2012), others contend that a second dimension is also relevant (Treier and Hillygus, 2009). Allowing for two ideological dimensions also makes the US model more comparable with our British one.

Before turning to discuss the levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation estimated by this model, it is worth noting that those respondents who participate in the second wave are more politically knowledgeable on average than the full sample of first-wave respondents. To the extent that more politically knowledgeable people are more likely to make ideological connections between issues, this should create a bias toward ideological opinion variation and against idiosyncratic opinion variation.

For each issue in the US data, Figure 5.5 plots the estimated proportion of total opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy (top panel), and the estimated proportion of stable opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy (bottom panel). Averaging across the thirteen issues, the estimated fraction of total opinion variation explained by idiosyncratic opinion is 30.8%. This is lower than the corresponding quantity estimated based on the British data

[6] See Broockman (2016) for full details of the survey fieldwork and questions.

[7] Lauderdale et al. (2018) report results from a similar model with only one ideological dimension. When only one dimension of ideology is permitted this increases the average proportion of opinion variation explained by idiosyncrasy by around 11 points, while decreasing the average proportion explained by ideology by the same amount, compared to below. The only difference in the US model from the UK model, other than the number of respondents and issues, is that there are more threshold parameters for each issue, because there are seven instead of five response categories for each issue.

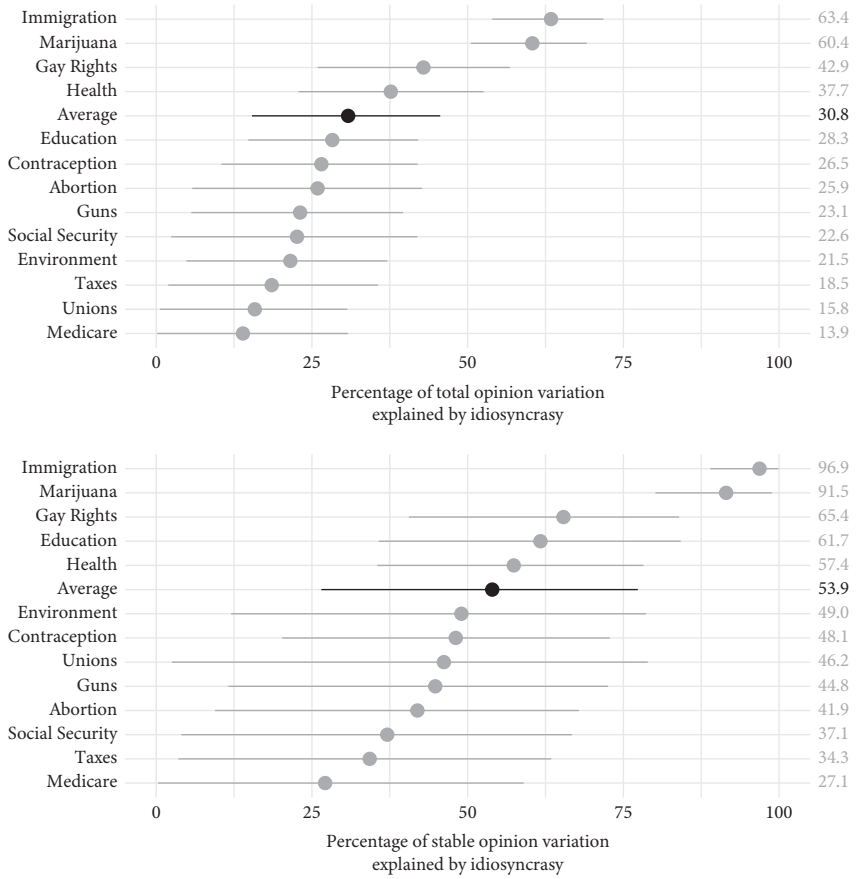

Figure 5.5 For a sample of Americans, the plot shows what percentage of variation in opinion on each of twelve issues is attributable to idiosyncratic opinion.

(37.1%). It is still sizeable though, and higher than the estimated fraction of opinion variation in the American sample explained by ideology (24.5%), just as is the case in the British sample, where the fraction explained by ideology is 20.4%. Idiosyncrasy is estimated to explain 53.9% of all stable opinion variation in the American sample. This is somewhat lower than the two-thirds that we estimate in the British sample (67.3%), but still represents a majority of stable opinion variation.

It is important to recognize that the US and British results are based on different sets of issues. The US issue set are almost all high profile issues whereas the UK issue set are more mixed. Nonetheless, even with the differences in the implementations, the comparison is useful. Even when we look at the issue opinions of citizens of a different country at a different time, on a collection of almost entirely high profile issues, we find that idiosyncratic opinion is still

widespread. This suggests that our main findings regarding British voters are not an artefact of the particular disruptions occurring in British politics in the years preceding our survey.

5.4 Does Idiosyncrasy Decline Among More Politically Sophisticated Individuals?

We argued in Chapter 2 that one reason why people develop idiosyncratic issue opinions is because they lack the demanding levels of political attention and sophistication necessary to readily 'contextualize' issues and consistently connect them to other political issues, to deeper abstract values that they may hold, or to their attitudes toward social groups. Therefore, if our account of idiosyncrasy in mass issue opinion is correct, we should observe higher levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation, and lower levels of ideological opinion variation, among those individuals with lower levels of political attention. Furthermore, to the extent that higher levels of education trains abstract conceptual thinking in general (Converse, 1964)—and therefore equips individuals to contextualize issues within broader-ranging belief systems—we should observe higher levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation, and lower levels of ideological opinion variation, among those individuals with lower levels of education.

To examine the first of these expectations we use measures of respondents' self-reported attention to politics on a 0-10 scale. Based on this, we divide respondents into two groups: a low-attention group who have below-median levels of attention, and a high-attention group who have above-median levels of attention. To examine the second expectation, we measure respondent education in terms of their highest level of qualification as recorded by YouGov. Based on this, we again divide the sample into two groups: those with and without an undergraduate degree-level qualification.

How do we incorporate these grouping variables into our analysis of issue opinion? So far our panel models of issue opinion have averaged over all types of respondents. Now we estimate an adjusted version of our panel model which allows the degree of ideological, idiosyncratic, and unstable opinion variation on a given issue to differ according to attention group or educational group. This adjusted model has the same basic structure as the model introduced earlier in this chapter: latent issue opinion is a function of a respondent's ideology on two dimensions, a respondent-by-issue idiosyncratic effect, and a random respondent-by-issue-by-wave error. The adjusted model also assumes that the relationship between ideological

position and expected latent opinion on each issue is the same across all groups.[8] Details of this model are provided in Appendix B.2.1.

We estimate this adjusted model twice, first grouping individuals by political attention, second grouping individuals by education. In each instance, our focus is on comparing the estimated magnitude of ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variation across different groups. When making these comparisons, we no longer focus solely on the percentage of total opinion variation in a group which is explained by ideology, or by idiosyncrasy. This metric on its own may mislead, because the *total* amount of opinion variation on a given issue can be greater within one group than it is within another group: if this is the case, idiosyncratic opinion, for example, might be observed to explain a greater percentage of total opinion variation in the second group even though the magnitude of idiosyncratic opinion variation is the same across both groups. To provide a fuller comparison across groups, we therefore now also present, for each voter group, the raw estimated ideological variance in issue opinion, and the raw estimated idiosyncratic variance in issue opinion.

Figure 5.6 summarizes results when we allow issue opinion variation to differ by voter political attention. To simplify matters, we focus on results averaging across all 34 issues in our study. The top-left panel plots estimates of the raw average ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variance for each of the high and low attention groups. The bottom-left panel plots estimates of the corresponding differences between the high and low attention groups in terms of their ideological variance and idiosyncratic variance. In line with expectations, the top-left panel shows how the estimated average ideological variance in issue opinion is higher among high attention respondents than among low attention ones, while the estimated average idiosyncratic variance is lower among high attention voters. The bottom-left panel shows how, based on the data, the model is highly confident about the direction of these differences between high and low attention groups: the 95% confidence interval for the difference in ideological variance between high and low attention respondents runs from a positive number (0.25) to a positive number (0.55); and the 95% confidence interval for the difference in idiosyncratic variance between high and low attention respondents runs from a negative number (−1.12) to a negative number (−0.71).

The panels in the right column of Figure 5.6 focus on the percentage of total opinion variance in each attention group which is attributable to

[8] The adjusted model also assumes that the 'threshold parameters'—which divide up the latent response scale for a given issue into the five regions corresponding to each policy alternative offered in the issue question—are the same across all respondent groups for a given issue.

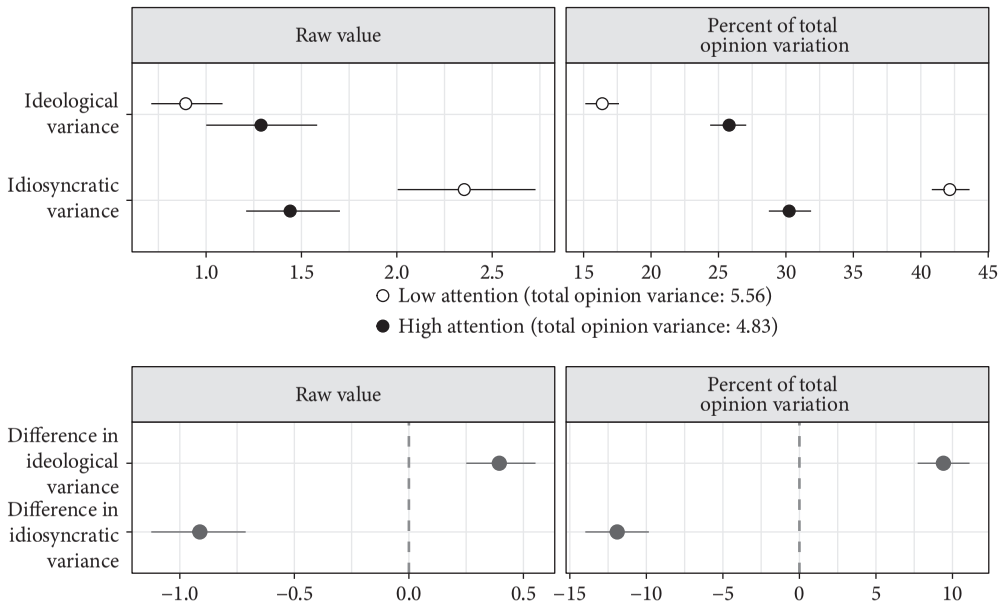

Figure 5.6 Top row shows estimated average ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variance for voters with below- and above-median self-reported attention to politics. Left panel shows raw variance. Right panel shows variance as per cent of total within-group latent opinion variance. Bottom row shows estimated between-group differences (high attention group minus low attention group) in ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variance. All estimates average across all 34 issues.

ideology and idiosyncrasy, respectively. Consistent with the raw variance estimates, the top-right panel shows how the percentage of opinion variation attributable to ideology is greater among high attention respondents than among low attention voters, and the percentage of opinion variation attributable to idiosyncrasy is lower among high attention voters. And once again, the bottom-right panel suggests we can be confident regarding the direction of these differences: comparing high and low attention voters, the 95% confidence interval for the difference in percent of total group opinion variation explained by ideology runs from 7.7 to 11.1 percentage points, while the 95% confidence interval for the difference in percent of total variation explained by idiosyncrasy runs from −14 to −9.8 percentage points. It is worth noting that, comparing high to low attention respondents, the difference in ideological variance as a percentage of total variance is more pronounced than it was when looking at differences in raw variance. This is because total opinion variation is slightly lower for high-attention respondents than for low-attention voters (see legend for top plots), meaning that an increase in the raw amount of ideological variance translates into an even bigger increase in the proportion of total variance it constitutes.

Figure 5.7 presents results in the same format when we estimate a model which allows opinion variance to differ by voter education (degree versus no degree). The left column shows the raw levels of estimated ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variance in each group (top-left panel) and estimated differences in these types of variance across groups (bottom-left panel). In line with expectations, respondents with higher levels of education (degree-level education) tend to exhibit more ideological variance and less idiosyncratic variance in their issue opinions than do respondents with lower levels of education (no degree-level education). Although these differences are more muted in size than they were when we compared high and low attention groups, the model is again confident that the differences are non-zero and in the expected direction.

Turning to the right-hand column of Figure 5.7, the picture is a bit less clear. In line with expectations, the percentage of total opinion variation attributable to ideology is clearly greater for degree holders than for those without a degree (95% confidence interval for difference: 4.8 to 8.7 percentage points). However, the percentage of total opinion variation among degree holders attributable to idiosyncrasy is not clearly lower than that among those without a degree (95% confidence interval for difference: −0.9 to 3.5 percentage points). This is because the total amount of opinion variation is lower among degree holders compared to those without a degree (see legend). This difference in total opinion variation comparing degree-holders

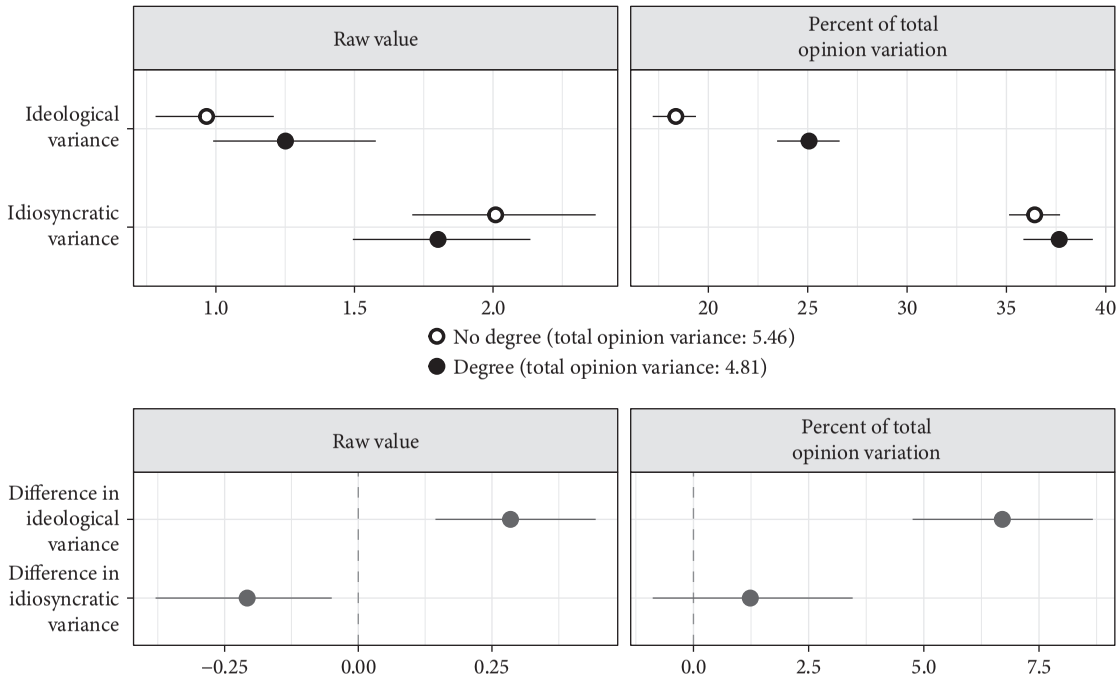

Figure 5.7 Top row shows estimated average ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variance for voters with and without a degree-level education. Left panel shows raw variance. Right panel shows variance as percent of total within-group latent opinion variance. Bottom row shows estimated between-group differences (degree group minus no degree group) in ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion variance. All estimates average across all 34 issues.

and those without a degree is large enough that idiosyncratic variance ends up constituting a similar proportion of total opinion variation in both groups, even though—as the bottom left panel of Figure 5.7 shows—the raw level of idiosyncratic issue opinion variance *is* lower among degree holders.

Overall we find support for the expectations that ideological issue opinion variation should be more pronounced among respondents with more political attention and higher levels of education. We find that idiosyncratic issue opinion variation is less pronounced among high-attention respondents, and is less pronounced by at least some measures when comparing respondents with degrees to respondents without.

Does this mean that it is really only the less politically engaged and educated respondents who are driving the substantial average level of idiosyncratic opinion variation that we have found in our main analysis? Further inspection of the top-right panels of Figures 5.6 and 5.7 makes clear that the answer is no. The percentage of total opinion variation attributable to idiosyncrasy may be lower among high attention and degree educated respondents compared to their low attention and non-degree educated counterparts. But, at 30.2% and 37.7%, respectively, it is still substantial, and is greater than the percentage of total opinion variation in each group attributable to ideology (25.8% and 25.1%, respectively).

This finding is consistent with our argument in Chapter 2 that it is not solely limitations in political attention and sophistication that generate idiosyncratic issue opinion, but also the diverse and potentially cross-cutting operation of a variety of processes that are traditionally thought to induce ideological correlations in issue opinions. It also underlines the potential for idiosyncratic issue opinion to be electorally consequential: this type of opinion is widespread among the more politically attentive and educated section of the electorate who are more likely to notice party policy positions and react to these when making vote choices.

5.5 Chapter Summary

Our goal in this chapter has been to assess the extent to which people's opinions on policy issues are idiosyncratic—real and stable, but lacking shared ideological structure. We laid out an empirical strategy for doing this which exploited repeated measures of our survey respondents' issue opinions to distinguish stable idiosyncratic opinion from unstable, poorly formed opinions. Using this approach, we showed that a substantial portion of issue opinion variation in the British public is attributable to idiosyncratic opinion. Across the 34 policy issues we study, idiosyncratic issue opinion accounts for more

than a third of all variation in overall issue opinion. Furthermore, of the variation in opinion that is stable, and therefore more likely to reflect real and meaningful voter attitudes, idiosyncrasy explains notably more of this variation than does two-dimensional ideology.

To demonstrate that idiosyncratic opinion is genuinely widespread rather than an artefact of particular features of our study, we showed that the substantial level of idiosyncratic issue opinion that we uncover does not appear to be an artefact of a lack of elite politicized issues in our survey. We also used alternative US data to show that idiosyncratic issue opinion was widespread among Americans before the political disruption induced by the presidential campaign and eventual election of Donald Trump. This suggested that widespread idiosyncratic opinion is unlikely to be an artefact of the particular contextual features of British politics at the time of our study, such as the disruption caused by the rise of the SNP or Brexit. Finally, we provided evidence that—as the idiosyncratic voter account would expect—although idiosyncratic opinion is more prevalent among individuals who are less politically attentive and have lower levels of education, it is by no means confined to these types of individual.

As discussed in Chapter 3, previous studies have provided suggestive or indirect evidence of non-trivial amounts of idiosyncratic issue opinion, mainly in the American electorate (Marcus et al., 1974; Jackson and Marcus, 1975; Fleischman, 1986; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002, Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Broockman, 2016; Groenendyk et al., 2022). In this chapter we have provided more direct and comprehensive evidence for widespread idiosyncrasy in issue opinion, exploiting repeated measures of opinion on a broad range of policy issues to simultaneously distinguish idiosyncratic opinion variation from both ideological and unstable opinion variation. The findings from this analysis demonstrate the relevance of the idiosyncratic voter account for understanding mass issue opinion in Britain, and also in America. Furthermore, given the arguments for the cross-national generalizability of our evidence that we laid out earlier (see Section 3.3.2), we also think that these findings strongly suggest that idiosyncratic issue opinion is relevant in established democracies more generally.

Finally, the findings from this chapter highlight the limits of the ideological and innocent voter accounts. Regarding the former, our findings suggest that the ideologically focused accounts of mass politics in Britain and other established democracies discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 ignore a substantial component of public opinion which appears to be real but is not ideologically organized. Regarding the classic innocent voter account, our findings limit the explanatory scope of this account because they demonstrate the

prevalence of real, meaningful policy views beyond those that are ideologically organized. Regarding the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account, our findings demonstrate that stable opinion need not be ideologically structured, as one would expect if voters were simply aping the ideologically structured issue positions of their preferred parties.

6
Stability of Issue Opinions

For over half a century, political scientists have taken the stability of a person's opinion on a particular issue as a primary indicator of whether that opinion is real, or meaningful. Panel studies, which survey the same individuals repeatedly, have often found average levels of individual issue opinion stability that are at best described as 'modest', even on the most prominent issues of the day. This finding sustains a key charge made by stronger versions of the *classic innocent voter* account of political behaviour. The logic of this charge is as follows. Modest average individual opinion stability on an issue indicates that only a minority of the electorate have meaningful views on that issue. What is more, this minority usually consists of many of the same politically attentive and sophisticated citizens who also happen to develop meaningful and stable views on other issues. No one can meaningfully base their choice of party or candidate on issue opinions which are not meaningful. Therefore, it is unrealistic to think of all but the most politically attentive and sophisticated voters as casting their vote 'based on the issues'.

Yet in our discussion of *idiosyncratic* issue opinion in Chapter 2, we drew on *issue publics* theories (Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023) which offer a contrasting interpretation of findings of modest average individual issue opinion stability. They stress that, even if people's opinions on any given issue are on average only modestly stable, this doesn't preclude high stability for most people on some issues. Suppose most voters have real and meaningful views on a small number of issues which matter to them, and have unstable opinions on all other issues. Suppose also that voters vary as to which particular subsets of issues they develop real and meaningful views upon. At the aggregate level, this may manifest as modest average issue opinion stability on any given issue. But most voters would still be capable of making political choices based on at least some meaningful issue considerations.

One can think of this as a debate about the degree to which stable issue opinion is *concentrated* versus *diffuse*. A strong version of the innocent voter account would suggest that stable opinions are concentrated among the most sophisticated voters. These voters have meaningful, stable issue opinions

Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion and Political Choice. Nick Vivyan, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, and Chris Hanretty, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780198955245.003.0006

across a wide range of issues. The remainder of the electorate lack stable opinions on all (or nearly all) issues. In contrast, the idiosyncratic voter account builds on a theory of issue publics which suggests that stable opinion is instead diffuse. Although very few people will have stable issue opinions across a wide range of issues, most voters form real, stable views on at least some issues.

Whilst there is some evidence that many voters see themselves as belonging to at least one issue public (e.g., Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023), there is less direct evidence on whether stable issue opinion is concentrated or diffuse in the sense just described. So what does our panel survey data reveal about patterns of issue opinion stability—and, by extension, meaningful issue opinion—in the modern British electorate?

In the previous two chapters we focused on distinguishing two types of stable issue opinion: ideological versus idiosyncratic. In this chapter, we turn to focus on the distinction between stable issue opinion of any type versus unstable issue opinion. We first assess average levels of opinion instability on different issues, examining how this compares to past evidence from Britain and beyond. Our main finding is that, for the average voter and the average issue, the stability of opinion is modest. This finding is consistent with past research. However, we also explore differences between issues and between voters. We find large differences in levels of stability between issues. We also analyse the stability of individual issue opinions more directly in order to understand whether stability is concentrated or diffuse. Our analysis suggests a reasonable degree of diffusion, in line with an issue publics logic. We argue, therefore, that most voters do form real, meaningful views on at least some subsets of issues and are thus likely to be capable of issue-based political choices.

6.1 Aggregate (In)Stability in Issue Opinion

We begin by using the panel data described in the previous chapter to analyse opinion stability across different policy issues. This analysis is summarized in Figure 6.1. The left panel of the figure is based on the panel model of issue opinion described in the previous chapter. That model decomposed opinion variation into three components: ideology, idiosyncrasy, and instability. The left panel plots the proportion of total variation accounted for by the last of these components: instability. The lower the proportion for each issue, the more individuals tend to hold stable views on that issue. Issues are arranged by instability, so that issues where people tend to hold more stable views are

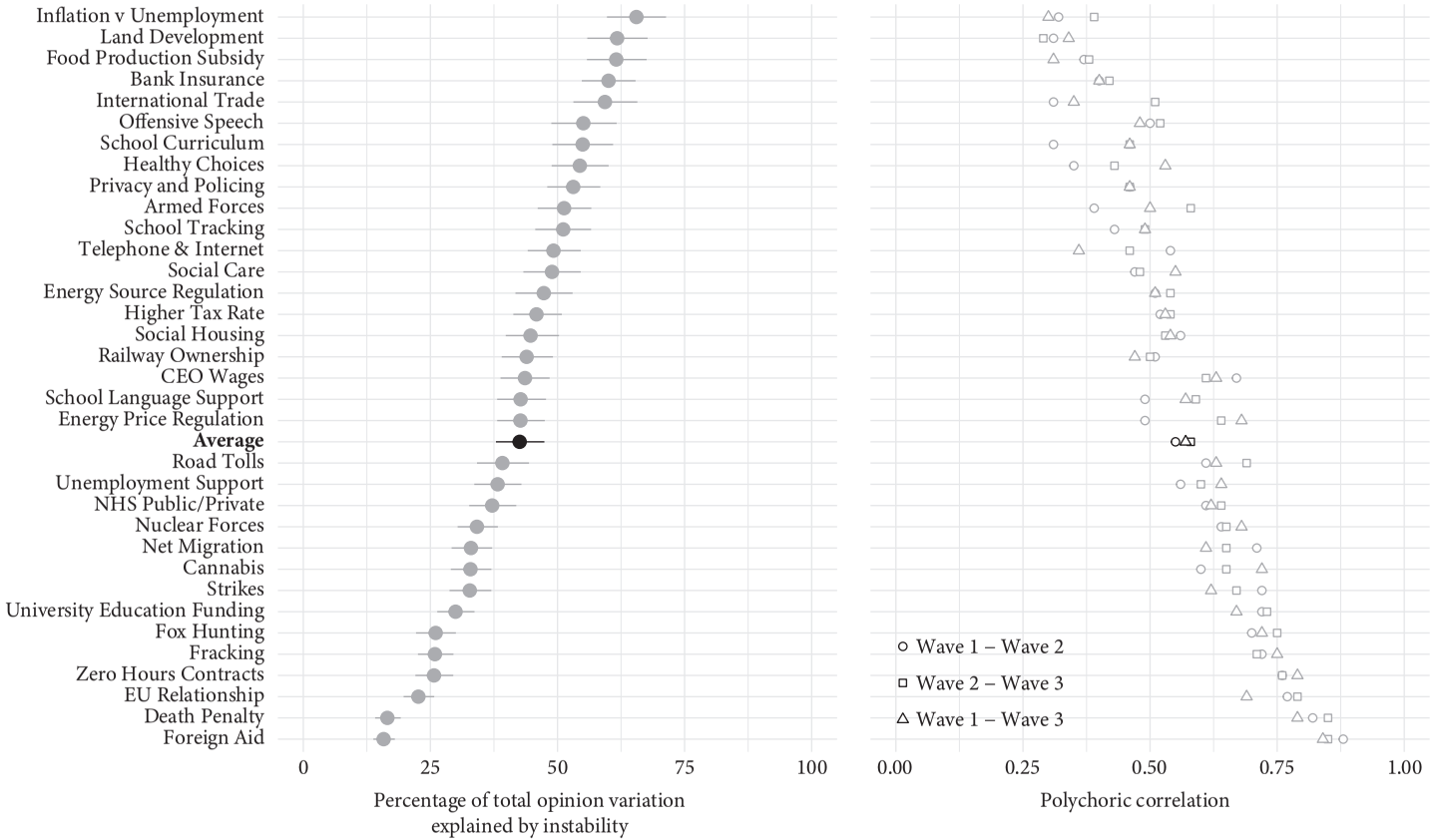

Figure 6.1 Left panel shows percentage of all variation in opinion on each issue which is attributable to instability. Right panel shows polychoric correlations in self-reported issue positions between pairs of waves.

at the bottom of the plot. We plot proportions for all of the 34 issues included in our panel survey, and the average proportion across all issues.

The right panel of Figure 6.1 reports a different measure of issue opinion stability. This is the polychoric correlation between each individual's issue opinion in one wave and their issue opinion in a later survey wave. Polychoric correlations are a traditional measure of opinion stability, and rely on fewer modelling assumptions. With three waves, there are three between-wave comparisons (wave 1 to 2, wave 2 to 3, and wave 1 to 3), and so three numbers are plotted for each issue. In this panel, the larger the number plotted, the more stable are individuals' opinions on that issue.

Figure 6.1 tells us four things about public opinion. First, it tells us that different measures of stability agree with one another. Issues which score *lower* on the left panel (meaning a lower estimated fraction of unstable opinion variation according to our panel model of issue opinion) also tend to score *higher* in the right panel (meaning a higher stability as measured by interwave correlation). Thus, whether we focus on the estimated unstable fraction of total opinion variation on an issue, or the interwave correlation between opinions on an issue, both measures tend to agree on which issues elicit more stable opinions. This gives us confidence that these measures capture the same thing.

Second, Figure 6.1 tells us that when we average across issues, opinion stability is moderate at best. This is true whichever metric we use. The left panel shows that, averaging across all issues, unstable opinion variation (left panel) is estimated to explain 42.6% of all issue opinion variation. The right panel shows that the mean interwave correlation in issue opinion, averaging across issues, is 0.55 for wave 1 to wave 2, 0.58 for wave 2 to wave 3 and 0.57 for wave 1 to wave 3. How does this compare to previous studies? When we convert the interwave correlations examined by Converse (1964) from Kendall's tau to comparable polychoric correlations, we find that the mean interwave correlation in Converse's American study (0.39) is somewhat lower than the mean interwave correlations in our study.[1] We can't really perform the same type of comparison for the Butler and Stokes (1969) study of British voters, as they only explicitly examine interwave correlations

[1] Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969) report slightly different types of correlation (Kendall's tau) to the polychoric ones upon which we focus. We therefore used the raw data for each study (the 1958–1960 American National Elections Study data and the 1963–1970 Political Change in Britain survey) to calculate polychoric correlations for those issues whose stability is explicitly examined in either study. We were unable to exactly replicate the values of Kendall's tau reported in each of the original studies, but our estimates were broadly similar. For example, our closest estimates (those based on complete cases) were correlated with Converse's values at 0.98 but had slightly lower numerical values.

for two issues: nuclear weapons and nationalization of industry. However, when we use the Butler–Stokes data to estimate interwave polychoric correlations for these two issues, the resulting estimates are closer to—albeit usually still slightly lower than—the mean interwave correlations in our data: for nuclear weapons, the estimated interwave correlations are 0.44, 0.53, and 0.43 for 1963–64, 1964–66, and 1963–66, respectively; for nationalization, the estimated interwave correlations are 0.63, 0.53, and 0.51. Average issue opinion stability in our data is therefore slightly higher than that in two classic studies—but is by no means high in absolute terms.

The third lesson we draw from Figure 6.1 is that, whichever metric we use, stability of opinion varies notably across issues. The minimum estimated percentage of unstable opinion in our data is 15.8%, for foreign aid, which is far lower than the maximum estimated percentage, 65.5%, for inflation v unemployment. The maximum estimated wave 1–2 correlation is 0.88 (again for foreign aid), which is far greater than the minimum estimated interwave correlation of 0.31 (for land development). These gaps in stability across issues are around twice the size of those which Converse observed. The polychoric correlation for the most stable issue analysed by Converse (isolationism in foreign policy) is 0.53; the value for the least stable issue (stationing troops in foreign countries) was 0.25.

Moreover, the variation in opinion stability across issues means that levels of stability on some issues are actually quite impressive. For example, while Converse noted that party identification was far more stable than issue positions, the interwave polychoric correlation for party identification in Converse's data (0.86) is comparable to the interwave polychoric correlation for our most stable issues, foreign aid and the death penalty. Thus, by traditional standards, at least some of the policy issues we examine elicit high levels of stable opinion.

The final lesson from Figure 6.1 relates to one question the reader may have had in mind for a while now: might observed instability in issue opinion reflect genuine change in real, meaningful opinion rather than a lack of meaningful opinions? To answer this question, we use the same strategy used by Converse (1964, 242–244) and also by Butler and Stokes (1969, 180–181). The logic of this strategy is as follows. Suppose instability in issue opinion is caused by genuine shifts in opinion. In this case, our ability to predict individuals' opinions on an issue based on their past opinions on the same issue should degrade the longer ago we measured those past opinions. This is because the longer ago those past opinions were measured, the more opportunity there will have been for individuals to change their real opinions in the intervening period. In our data, this would imply a pattern

whereby individuals' stated opinions on an issue in wave 3 should be better predicted by their stated opinions on the same issue in wave 2 than by their stated opinions in wave 1.

When both Converse and Butler and Stokes used this strategy, they found that the correlation between issue opinions recorded in the first and third waves of their survey was generally not much smaller than the correlation between issue opinions recorded in the second and third wave. Figure 6.1 reveals a similar pattern for our data. We find that interwave correlations are not systematically lower when estimated based on wave 1 and 3 issue opinions than when based on wave 2 and 3 issue opinions, or wave 1 and 2 issue opinions. From this we conclude that instability does not result in any substantial part due to changes in real meaningful opinions over time. Instead, it results more from individuals lacking 'real' opinions, from individuals not expressing perfectly consistent stated opinions (sometimes understood to be measurement error), or from individuals only being able to narrow their opinion down to a subset of the response options from which they choose as if at random.

Throughout this discussion, we have compared our issue stability estimates to those from Converse (1964) and Butler and Stokes (1969). There are many differences between our data and their data. Their data was collected through single purpose face-to-face interviews; our data was collected through an online panel previously used to study political attitudes. They asked about different issues to the issues we asked about, and they gave their respondents different ways to respond. Our data come from the UK; Converse (1964) studied the US. Most obviously, our data was collected more than half a century after these two pioneering studies. Differences in the stability of issue opinion could be the result of any of these factors.

Some of these factors reflect genuine differences in the object of study rather than differences which are the result of methodological choices. The United Kingdom in the first third of the twenty-first century is a very different place to the United Kingdom in the middle of the twentieth century. The proportion of individuals who have some tertiary education has increased substantially since then. As we show later, people with degrees have more stable issue opinions than people without degrees. Higher levels of stability may therefore result from changes in average education levels.

Most of these factors are, however, the result of methodological choices. Some of these choices might reasonably be expected to create lower stability. One such choice is the choice of issues. Because we asked about a broad

range of issues, we included many issues which are not the subject of party political debate, or involve some complex or technical considerations. International trade is not, in general, an easy topic. Our average levels of stability average across some hard issues like international trade and some issues, like the death penalty, that are more likely to provoke 'gut responses' (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). When we compare stability on the 'same' issues, we find higher levels of stability: the interwave polychoric correlations for our questions on nuclear weapons are higher than the interwave correlations in Butler and Stokes' questions on nuclear weapons.

The other methodological factors point in the direction of greater stability. Although we ask about a broader range of issues, we also give respondents concrete response options. One simple possible source of difference, for example, is that the response scales of policy items used in Converse (1964) often have labelled endpoints but unlabelled intermediate response options. In contrast, our use of fully labelled response scales may lead to higher average issue opinion stability in our data because it reduces the chance that respondents interpret response scales differently at different time points (Krosnick and Berent, 1993).

It is much easier to give respondents labelled policy alternatives when surveying online, yet there may be survey mode effects which affect levels of stability. Our respondents are members of the YouGov panel who have previously answered questions about politics. 'Previously having answered questions about politics' might cause greater levels of stability, as respondents reflect on 'top of the head' responses and turn them into reasoned opinions. We note, however, that the YouGov weights we use are designed to weight for levels of political attention, and that (as noted earlier in Chapter 4) the opinions and behaviours of 'fresh' panellists are not different to the opinions and behaviours of repeated respondents to the British Election Study.

Because all of the factors just outlined changed at the same time, we cannot break down the differences between our findings and earlier findings into methodological and non-methodological components. Although there are methodological factors which might have led to greater measured issue opinion stability, not all methodological factors promote stability, and we have reason to believe that the effects of some methodological factors (the use of YouGov panellists) have small effects. The differences in issue opinion stability that we find are likely real, but it remains difficult to assess how much of the increase in levels of stability across fifty years and two countries is a result of changes in the way we study public opinion.

6.2 Average Opinion Stability by Political Sophistication

Is the moderate amount of observed issue opinion stability in the British electorate mainly concentrated among a certain subset of voters, as the classic innocent voter account would predict? If it were, then we might reasonably expect the concentration to occur among those voters who are politically attentive and sophisticated, since these voters have the cognitive resources to follow policy debates and therefore to form meaningful views on policy issues.

To examine evidence for this, we return to those models estimated in the last chapter which allowed the structure of issue opinion variation to vary by levels of political attention and education. There, we focused on what those models told us about how the amount of idiosyncratic issue opinion variance differed depending on whether an individual had an above- or below-median level of self-reported political attention, or whether an individual had at least a degree-level of education. However, those models also allowed the amount of unstable variance in opinion on each issue to differ by attention or education. Our focus now is on what the estimated models tell us about these differences in unstable issue opinion variation.

Figure 6.2 summarizes results from the model that allows unstable issue opinion variation to differ by the political attention of the respondent. This figure is split into four panels. The two panels in the top of the figure plot the variance in issue opinion that is unstable. The top-left panel plots the variance as a number; the top right panel expresses this number as a proportion of the total variance. In both of these top two panels we plot two quantities. One quantity is the average figure, across all 34 issues, for high attention respondents (plotted using a solid plot point). The other quantity is the average for low attention respondents (plotted using an open plot point). The two bottom panels take these two quantities and subtract the value for low attention respondents from the value for high attention respondents. Put differently, the top two panels show group levels, whilst the bottom two panels show between-group differences.

The top-left panel and bottom-left panel together show that the variance in issue opinion that is unstable is lower among high attention individuals than among low attention individuals. This is in line with the argument that issue opinion stability is more prevalent among more politically attentive individuals. The 95% confidence interval for this difference contains only negative numbers (−0.35 to −0.08), so we can be quite confident that this difference is in the expected direction. However, all of the values in this confidence interval are also small compared to the total estimated opinion

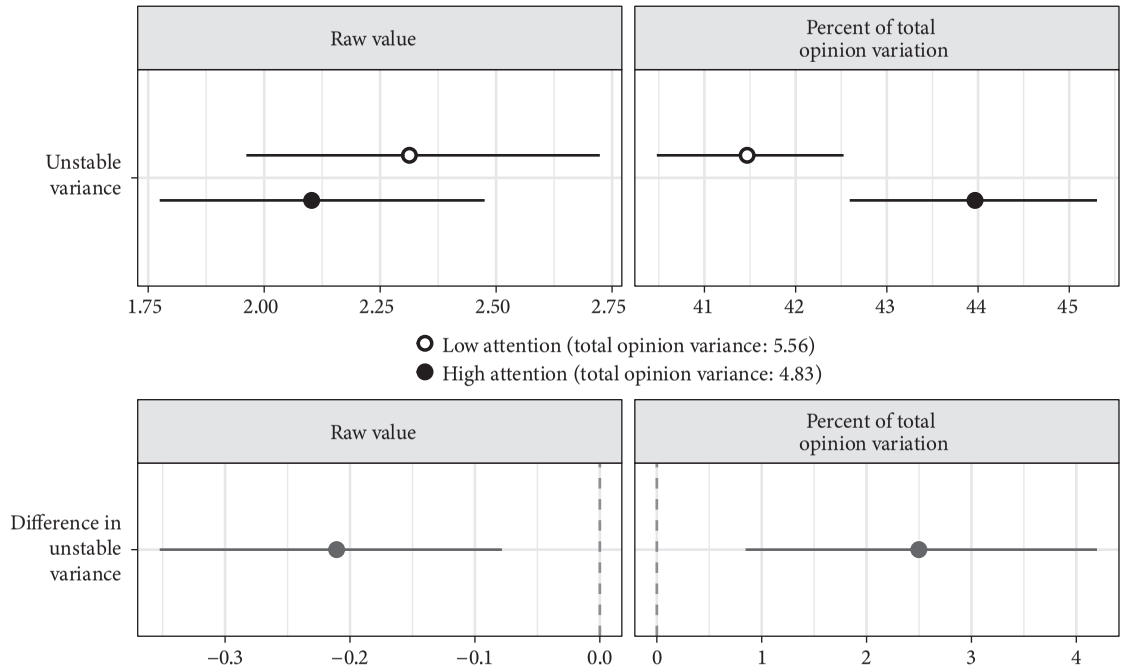

Figure 6.2 Top row shows estimated average unstable issue opinion variance for voters with below- and above-median self-reported attention to politics. Left panel shows raw variance. Right panel shows variance as percent of total within-group latent opinion variance. Bottom row shows estimated differences in unstable opinion variance (high attention minus low attention). All estimates average across all 34 issues.

variance among either the high attention individuals (4.83) or low attention individuals (5.56). In other words, we can also be quite confident that the difference is relatively modest in magnitude.

The right-hand panels of Figure 6.2 underline the weak relationship between political attention and opinion stability. The top-right panel shows that the estimated percentage of total opinion variation attributable to instability is quite similar whether one looks at below-median attention voters (41.5%) or above-median attention voters (44%). In fact, unstable opinion variation actually makes up a greater share of total opinion variation in the higher attention group than the lower attention group. This counter-intuitive result stems from the fact that, compared to below-median attention individuals, *total* estimated opinion variation is *lower* among above-median attention individuals. In short, high attention voters are less likely to take on the extreme positions on the issues we ask about than low attention voters. A lower absolute amount of unstable variance can thus make up a bigger share of this smaller amount of total variation, although the differences are not large in magnitude in either case.

Just as we can split respondents up by levels of attention, we can also split respondents up by other characteristics. Figure 6.3 summarizes results from the model that allows unstable issue opinion variation to differ by voter education. As would be expected if stable opinion is concentrated among more educated individuals, raw unstable opinion variance is estimated to be lower among degree-holders than non-degree holders. We can be confident that the difference runs in this direction because the confidence interval for it contains only negative numbers (−0.91 to −0.57). The percentage of total opinion variation attributable to instability is also estimated to be lower among degree-holders than non-degree holders. But though these differences run in the expected directions, the results do not suggest that stable opinion is primarily concentrated among the degree holders and largely absent among the non-degree holders. For example, even among the non-degree holding group, unstable opinion variation hardly makes up an overwhelming share of all opinion variation. In fact, the estimated 45.2% share of unstable variation implies that around half or more of issue opinion variation among non-degree holders is in fact stable in nature, and therefore plausibly reflects variation in real opinion.

The key lesson we take from these results is that differences in unstable opinion variance across groups are not as large as we would expect to see if meaningful issue opinions were highly concentrated among high attention or education voters, and were largely absent among low attention or education respondents.

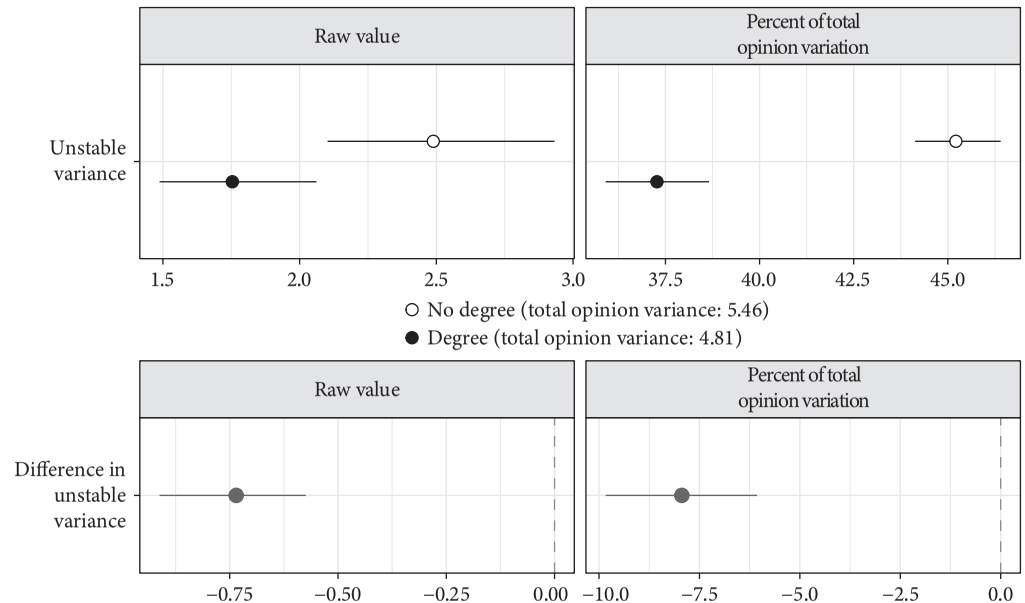

Figure 6.3 Top row shows estimated average unstable issue opinion variance for voters with and without a degree-level education. Left panel shows raw variance. Right panel shows variance as percent of total within-group latent opinion variance. Bottom row shows estimated differences in unstable opinion variance (degree group minus no-degree group). All estimates average across all 34 issues.

We have focused on attention and education because these are the two individual characteristics which we believe are most directly connected to stability. We can, however, split up respondents by other characteristics such as age, gender, or class. When we do this, we can investigate either how much variance is accounted for by instability (the 'raw value' in our plots), or the percent of total opinion variation that is accounted for by instability. For age, we find the same counter-intuitive result that we found for political attention. Respondents over 60 have more stable opinions (total opinion variation is lower) than respondents under 60, but instability makes up a greater proportion of the variation that we see. We see these same findings for class, where individuals in approximated social grades ABC1 have lower total opinion variation, but where instability makes up a greater proportion of that variation. Because we split respondents up by a single characteristic at a time, these findings might exist because older individuals and individuals belonging to particular classes pay more attention to politics. Only for gender are the effects univocal: compared to men, women have issue opinions that show greater variation, and instability makes up a greater component of this variation for women than for men.

6.3 Modelling the Stability of Individual Issue Opinions

To further investigate the degree to which stable issue opinion is concentrated or diffuse, we turn to model the observed stability of individual issue opinions more directly. For this analysis, we take each issue opinion response of each individual in wave 2 of our survey and code an indicator for whether or not this response was exactly the same as the response given six months previously. This indicator has a value of one if the responses were the same, and zero if the responses differed.

Using this indicator, we then fit an item-response model described in detail in Appendix B.3. An item-response model is a model which tries to explain repeated measurements from an individual as a function of 'how much' of a latent or unobserved trait the individual has. Item-response models are commonly used in educational testing, where 'answers to questions' are the repeated measurements, and where the latent trait might, for example, be 'mathematical ability'. Mathematical ability is never observed directly, but 'getting more maths questions right' is strongly associated with it. Item-response modelling is generally preferred to calculating the number of correct responses when test-takers see different questions, some of which might be harder than others. In our case, we are not interested in

respondents' mathematical ability, but in their underlying propensity to give stable responses. The model *estimates* this latent quantity based on the observed patterns of stability in each individual's responses, taking into account the issues the individual was asked about and the broader patterns of stability on those issues.

As well as estimating individuals' propensity to stability, the model simultaneously estimates the relationship between the propensity to stability and the probability of an individual reporting a stable opinion *on a given issue*. This relationship is allowed to vary across each of our 34 issues. Thus, it is possible that stability of opinion on some issues is more strongly predicted by individuals' general stability propensity than is stability of opinion on other issues.

Although this is the first time we have used the terminology of item-response modelling, the model we use here is similar in spirit to the model we used to estimate ideology in Chapter 4 (and extended in Chapter 5). Both model latent individual and issue attributes based on observed patterns of variation in the data. There, we estimated individuals' positions on latent general ideological dimensions and the loading of each issue on each ideological dimension, all based on variation in reported issue positions across respondents and issues. Here, we estimate individuals' scores on a latent dimension capturing their propensity toward stable opinions and the loading of each issue on this latent dimension, all based on variation in the stability of reported issue positions across respondents and issues.

The resulting estimates allow us to make inferences about the degree of concentration or diffusion in issue opinion stability. If individuals' propensity to stability is strongly associated with stable opinion across all issues, then issue opinion stability is concentrated among those individuals who are high in the general stability trait. Those who are low in this trait will generally lack stable issue opinions. In contrast, if individuals' propensity to stability is only weakly associated with opinion stability on many issues, then this means issue opinion stability is more diffuse: those individuals who are low in the general stability trait may nevertheless be reasonably likely to form stable opinions on at least some issues.

6.3.1 Results

Based on the fitted model of opinion stability, Figure 6.4 plots estimated 'item response curves'. Each curve corresponds to one of our 34 policy issues, and shows how the predicted probability of a stable opinion on that issue

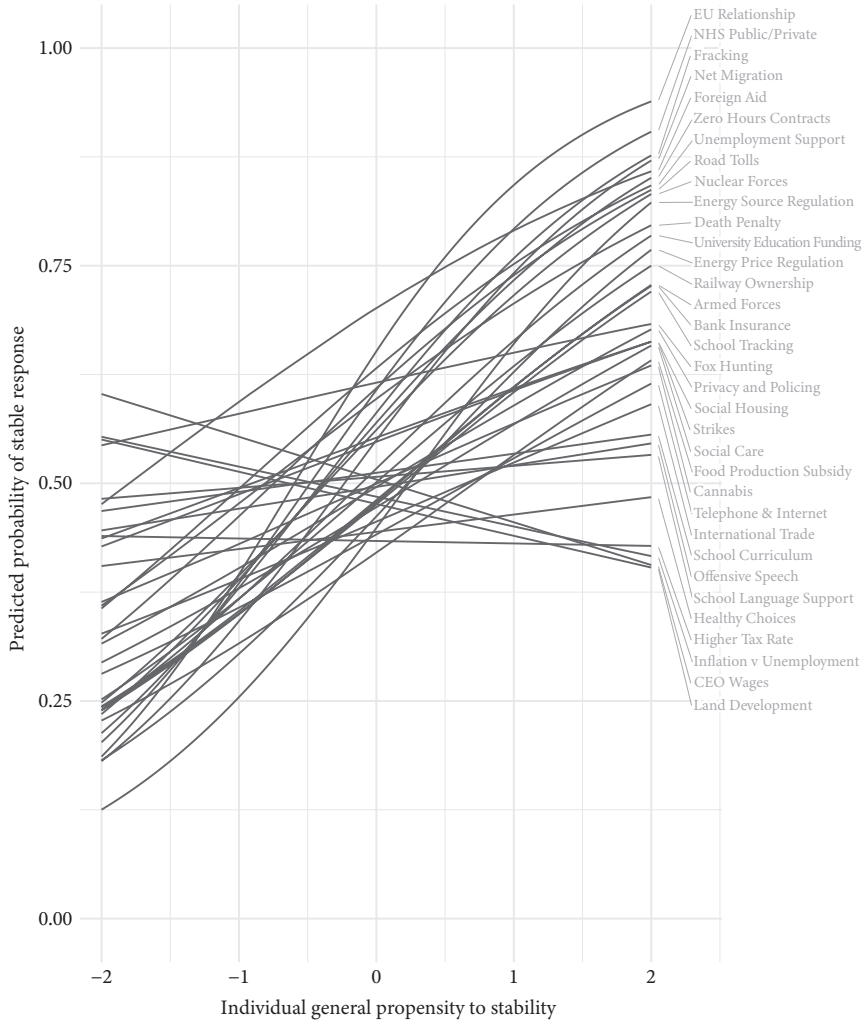

Figure 6.4 Item response curves from a model of opinion stability. Each line represents an issue.

(on the vertical axis) varies depending on an individual's estimated propensity to stability (on the horizontal axis). Several things stand out from this figure. First, for any particular point on the horizontal axis, there is considerable spread in the height of the curves at that point. This suggests that, for a given propensity to stability, the probability of a stable *issue-specific opinion* varies notably across issues. This is consistent with the substantial variation in average stability of opinion across issues we found earlier on in this chapter.

Second, most of the curves in Figure 6.4 slope upwards. The model thus estimates that, for most of our 34 issues, the probability of an individual possessing a stable opinion on an issue increases when the individual has greater propensity to stability. Put differently, the model *does* suggest that some people have a greater tendency to develop stable opinions across a broad range of issues than do some other people.

This does not, however, mean that stable opinion is highly concentrated among the same subset of individuals. There are notable differences in the steepness of slope for different issues. The model estimates that stability of opinion on some issues—such as foreign aid, which has a more modest slope—is more weakly related to an individual's general propensity to stability than is stability of opinion on other issues—such as Britain's EU relationship, which has a steeper slope.

For most issues, the association between an individual's propensity to stability and their probability of stable issue-specific opinion is only moderately strong. To illustrate this, think about two example individuals, Alice and Bob. Alice has a propensity to stability of −1, a score which is in the bottom 20% across all individuals. Bob has a propensity to stability of +1, a score which is in the top 20% across all individuals. Based on the item response model, we can compute the predicted probability that Alice and Bob report stable opinions on each issue, and compute how much greater this probability is for Bob than for Alice on every issue. When we do this, it turns out that, across issues, the median difference in the predicted probability of Alice and Bob having stable issue-specific opinions is 0.21, while the mean difference is 0.19. Differences of this magnitude—around twenty percentage points—are certainly notable. At the same time, we would expect notable differences given that we are comparing individuals who are in the bottom and top fifth of people ordered by their propensity to stability. Only if this difference was much larger would we be confident saying that opinion stability was only concentrated in the top fifth.

6.3.2 Who Develops Real, Stable Issue Opinions?

What does the item response model tell us about the likelihood of stable opinion among individuals who have a low propensity to stability? This is a particularly important question since the probability of such individuals having stable opinions on each issue should be very small if real, stable opinions on issues are highly concentrated among individuals with a high propensity to stability. In contrast, if stable opinion is reasonably diffuse across voters,

then even 'low stability' individuals should be reasonably likely to have stable opinions on some issues.

One way of answering this question would simply be to look at the heights of the item response curves toward the left end of the horizontal axis in Figure 6.4: these tell us the model-estimated probability of stable opinion on each issue among individuals with a low propensity to stability. However, that approach is likely to give an overly optimistic impression of such individuals' capacity to form real, stable opinions. Imagine an individual who holds no real opinions and randomly chooses a response option every time they are asked about an issue. Even this individual will sometimes, just by chance, choose the same response option in two consecutive waves and therefore appear stable.

What we really want to assess, then, is the degree to which—among individuals who have a low propensity to stability—the probability of stable issue opinions, as estimated by our model, *exceeds* the probability of observing stable issue opinions if individuals answered issue questions randomly. The greater this difference, the more evidence there is that even low stability individuals still develop stable issue opinions above what might be explained by chance alone, and that some of these opinions are therefore real, meaningful ones.

To get at this, for each of our 34 issues we compute *null probabilities* of stable opinion under the assumption that individuals answer questions randomly. If all five policy options were equally popular on every issue, the null probability would be 0.2, since this is the chance of selecting the same option out of five twice in succession.[2] However, our policy options are not equally popular, and so the calculation of our null probabilities is slightly more involved.[3] Our interest, of course, is not in the null probabilities themselves, but the difference between these probabilities and the probabilities that come from our model.

[2] Start by working out the probability of choosing the first alternative two times in a row. The probability of choosing the first alternative in the first wave is one in five. The probability of choosing the first alternative in the second wave is also one in five. Because these probabilities are independent, the probability of both of them happening is equal to the product of the two probabilities. The probability of choosing the first alternative in both waves is therefore $0.2 \times 0.2 = 0.04$. We can now repeat this exercise for the probabilities of choosing the other alternatives twice in succession. These other probabilities will also be the same. The probability of choosing the same alternative twice in succession is equal to the probability of choosing the first alternative twice in succession, plus the probability of choosing the second alternative twice in succession, and so on. The total probability is therefore 0.2.

[3] The null probabilities are computed by assuming that each response on an issue question is an independent random draw from a multinomial distribution. This distribution is defined over five categories corresponding to each of the response categories for the issue question, and the probability assigned to each category is given by the observed proportion of responses in this category across wave 1 and wave 2 survey responses in our data. Following the logic laid out in the previous note, the square of any one of these probabilities gives us the probability of an individual choosing a particular response category both times when asked the issue question twice. And by summing the squares of all five probabilities we obtain the overall probability of a stable opinion on the issue, under the null model. The null probability of a stable opinion varies across our 34 issues, with a range of 0.21 to 0.4 and a mean of 0.27.

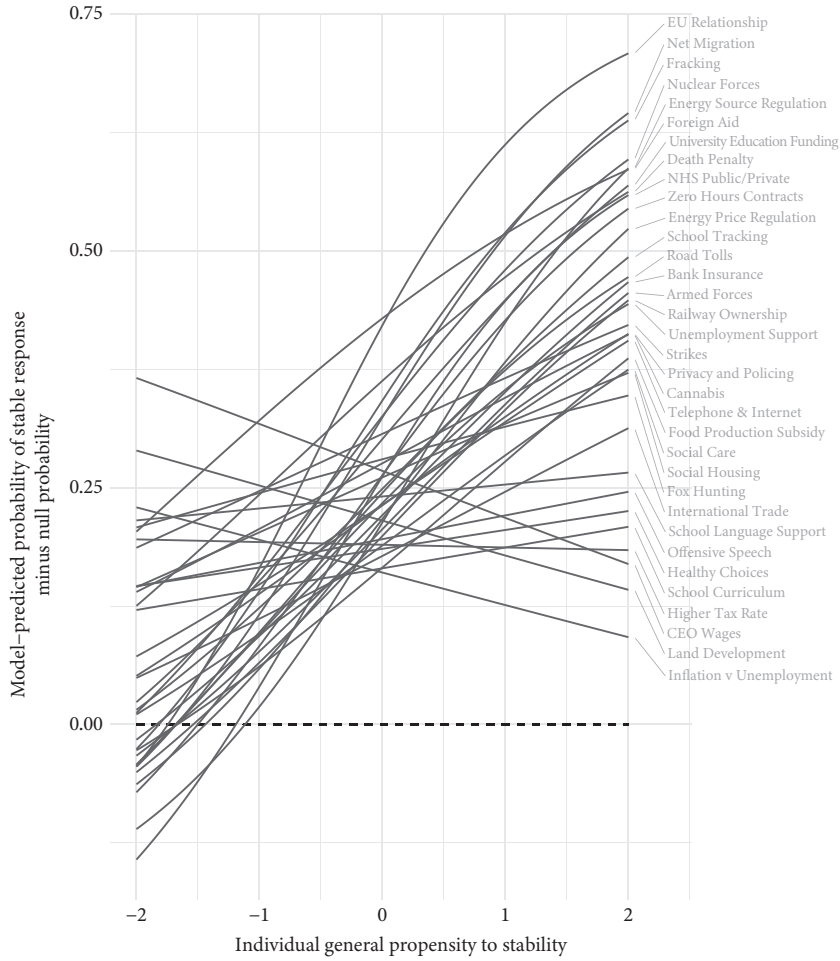

Figure 6.5 For each level of individual general stability, the figure shows the difference between the model-estimated probability of a stable opinion on an issue and the null probability of stable opinion on the same issue when individuals answer randomly.

Figure 6.5 plots the difference in these probabilities across a wide range of propensities to stability for each of our 34 issues. The curves in the plot are thus the estimated item response curves from Figure 6.4, but shifted downwards. The size of shift for an issue is determined by the magnitude of the null probability of a stable response for that issue: the higher the chance that an individual answering the issue question randomly would give the same response across two waves, the more the curve is shifted downward.

We are particularly interested in what this figure tells us about individuals who have a low propensity to stability. These are individuals whose issue opinions might be so unstable as to be neither real nor meaningful. We

therefore focus on the heights of the curves toward the left side of the plot. For a low propensity to stability of around –1, all 34 curves lie above zero on the y-axis. In other words, for an individual with this propensity to stability—which is in the bottom 20% of all voters—the model-estimated probability of a stable opinion exceeds the null probability for every issue that we study. However, if we move to the left and examine individuals with an extremely low propensity to stability of –2—which is two standard deviations below the voter average and in the bottom 3% of all voters—the model-estimated probability of a stable opinion fails to exceed the null probability for thirteen out of 34 issues. Furthermore, whether focusing on individuals with propensities to stability of –2 or –1, the difference between the model-estimated probability and null probability of a stable issue opinion is modest for most issues: this difference is below 20 percentage points for all but six issues when the propensity to stability is –2, and for all but six issues when the propensity to stability is –1.5.

Thus, among those in the electorate with the lowest propensity to stability, rates of opinion stability on each issue are not vastly greater than what we would expect to see with random survey responses. This suggests that, among these voters, there are at best modest rates of real opinion on any one issue.

Nevertheless, as long as the rates of real opinion on each individual issue are not too low, the rate at which these voters hold a real opinion on *at least some of many* issues could still be quite high. Put differently, our results hold out the possibility that a large proportion of even low general stability propensity voters do have some real, stable issue opinions, a key prerequisite for being able to engage in issue-based political choice.

To see whether this is the case, we would ideally measure the stability of opinions on a broad range of issues for every individual survey respondent, and examine the count of stable opinions per individual. However, while we cover a broad range of 34 policy issues across respondents in our survey, the survey design means that we observe stability of opinion on only seven issues per respondent. This means we cannot rely directly on our raw data to make inferences about how many of the 34 issues individuals tend to hold stable opinions on. Instead, we proceed by extrapolating from our item response model of issue-specific opinion stability, using it to simulate the counts of stable opinions we would expect to observe if an individual were asked about all 34 issues.[4]

[4] This simulation exercise thus makes an important assumption: that individuals' response behaviour on issue questions would be unchanged when they are answering 34 rather than seven such questions in each wave.

To simulate counts of stable opinion based on the item response model, we begin with a hypothetical voter with a particular general stability propensity score. Then, for each simulation we do the following.

In step one, we sample a set of values for all of the parameters in the model which govern how individuals' propensity to stability relates to the probability of a stable opinion on each given issue. We sample the values for these parameters from the posterior distribution of the item response model. This distribution characterizes our beliefs about the values of the model parameters given the patterns in the data. By sampling from the posterior distribution—rather than just using the point estimate for each parameter—our simulations incorporate uncertainty about these parameters.

In step two, given the sampled set of values for the issue parameters, we simulate one realization of the count of stable opinions the voter holds across all 34 issues. This is achieved as follows. For a particular issue, we take the sampled values of the item response parameters for this issue and use them to compute the predicted probability that the voter holds a stable opinion on the issue of interest. We then simulate a realized opinion stability outcome for the voter on this issue by taking a single random draw from a probability distribution which is defined over two outcomes—stable or non-stable opinion—and where the probability of the stable outcome is the predicted probability we just computed. We repeat the same process for all remaining issues, resulting in 34 simulated opinion stability outcomes for the voter. We then sum the number of these outcomes which turn out to be stable to obtain a simulated count of stable opinions for that voter across the 34 issues.

We repeat steps one and two 1,000 times, storing the value of the simulated count each time. These 1,000 model-simulated counts approximate the distribution of stable opinion counts that the fitted item response model would predict among voters with a given propensity to stability, if those voters were asked about all 34 issues.

To again account for the fact that individuals might give stable opinion responses just by chance, we then compare our model-simulated counts of stable opinions to counts of stable opinions simulated under the null assumption that voters simply answer all 34 issue questions randomly. To generate these null-simulated counts, we do the following. In a given simulation, we draw a realized opinion stability outcome for each of our 34 issues from issue-specific distributions where the probability of a stable opinion is equal to the issue-specific null probabilities computed earlier in this chapter. We then count the number of realized stable opinion outcomes and store this. Repeating this process 1,000 times results in 1,000 null-simulated counts.

These approximate the distribution of stable opinion counts we would predict if individuals gave random responses on all 34 issue questions.

The left panel of Figure 6.6 plots the distributions of model-simulated stable opinion counts for individuals with five different propensities to stability which vary from extremely low (−2.0) to average (0). It also shows the distribution of null-simulated stable opinion counts assuming an individual gives random issue opinions. The right-hand panel of Figure 6.6 further summarizes the differences between each of the model-simulated distributions and the null-simulated distribution in a single quantity. For each propensity to stability, it shows the probability that the model-simulated count of stable opinions exceeds the null-simulated count (i.e., the proportion of simulations in which this occurs). The higher this probability, the more evidence that individuals with a particular level of general stability propensity tend to have at least one real, stable opinion across the 34 issues.

For any of the distributions depicted in the left panel of Figure 6.6, there is quite a lot of variation in simulated stable opinion counts. Yet despite this variation, there are still some discernible differences between the model-simulated distributions and the null-simulated distribution. Taking first individuals with a moderate propensity to stability of zero, the distribution of model-simulated stable opinion counts for this type of individual is clearly concentrated further to the right than the null-simulated distribution. This is further emphasized in the right-hand panel of Figure 6.6, which records a 0.98 predicted probability that an individual with a general stability propensity of zero exhibits a stable opinion count which exceeds that of someone giving random issue opinions. In other words, our model of opinion stability strongly suggests that individuals who have an average propensity to stability will tend to have some real opinions across the 34 issues.

What do the figures tell us about individuals with lower propensities to stability? As we consider individuals with decreasing propensities to stability, Figure 6.6 shows how the distributions of model-simulated stable opinion counts shift progressively closer to the null-simulated distribution. The right panel shows how the probability of the stable opinion count exceeding the count from a null-simulated distribution also diminishes. Yet, even among individuals with the lowest propensities to stability, the distribution of model-simulated counts is still concentrated to the right of the null distribution. And the predicted probability of a stable opinion count which exceeds that of someone giving random opinions remains reasonably high in absolute terms. For individuals with a low propensity to stability of −1.0 (bottom 20% of all individuals) this probability is 0.9, implying a roughly 9/10 chance that stable opinion count exceeds null count. Even for individuals with extremely

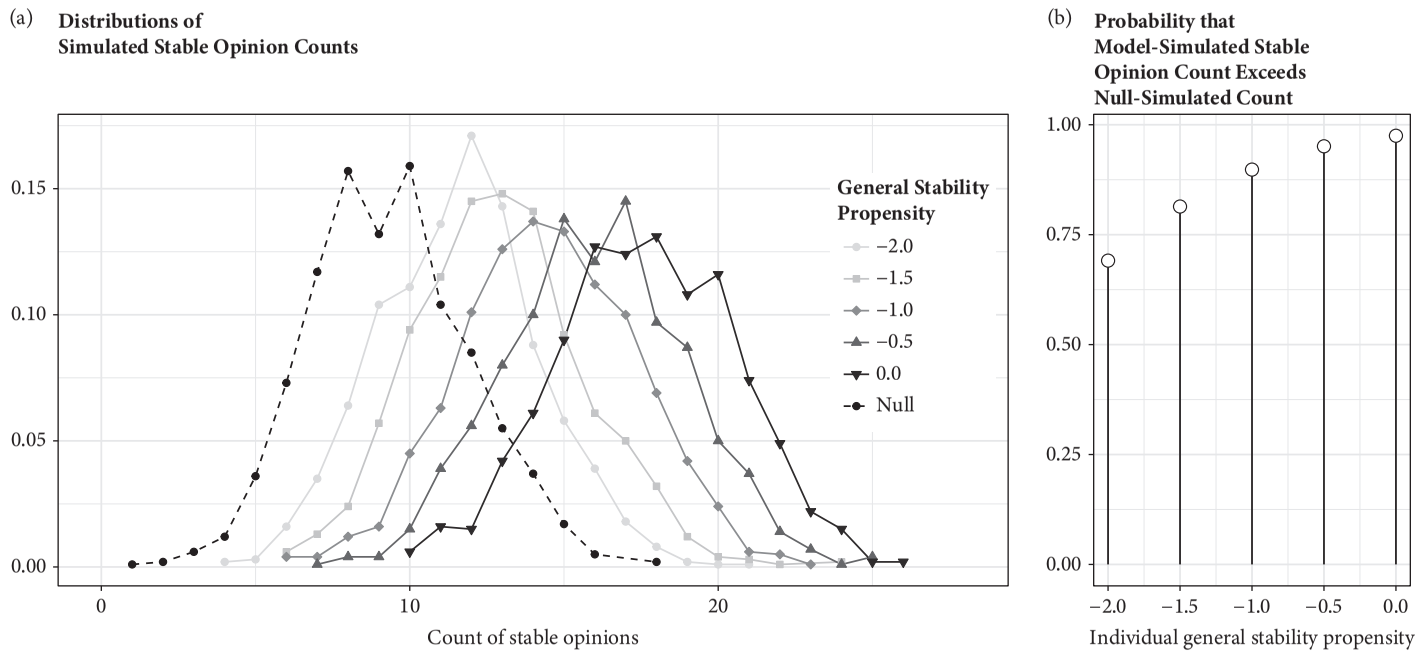

Figure 6.6 Model-simulated stable opinion counts across all 34 issues for individuals with different levels of general stability propensity, benchmarked against null stable opinion counts simulated assuming random issue opinion responses.

low propensities to stability of −2.0 (bottom 3% of all individuals) this probability is 0.69, implying a roughly 2/3 chance that stable opinion count exceeds null count.

In sum, these simulations—which are rooted in our data and the item response model of opinion stability we have fitted using it—are consistent with a reasonable amount of diffusion in stable issue opinion across voters. There are clearly some voters who do tend to form stable opinions across more issues, and some who form stable opinions on fewer issues. But, as far as we can tell, even the latter are quite likely to form at least some stable opinions—and more likely than not to form stable opinions on more issues than we would expect if they were just answering randomly. In our view, this evidence is at odds with a view of the electorate where only a small set of sophisticated voters develop real, stable issue opinions. Instead it suggests an electorate where most voters form real, stable opinions on at least some policy issues.[5]

6.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have sought to understand the prevalence of real, meaningful issue opinion. We have done so by studying an indicator of real opinion traditionally employed by political scientists: stability of reported opinion across repeated measurements. We have shown that, averaging across the 34 policy issues in our survey, opinion stability in the contemporary British electorate is moderate at best. At first blush, this is broadly consistent with traditional innocent voter accounts, which stress that most voters lack real views on most policy issues.

However, several of our remaining findings cast doubt on strong versions of the innocent voter account, which suggest that this moderate overall amount of stable issue opinion will be concentrated among a small set of sophisticated voters. First, we found that issue opinion stability varies greatly across issues, and that for some issues it is impressively high, reaching levels comparable to the stability of party identity in classic studies. On these issues, it appears that many voters form stable—and therefore plausibly meaningful—opinions.

[5] The US data we analysed in the previous chapter can be analysed in similar ways to the UK data we have focused on in this chapter, however, with one important caveat. That US data set has seven policy position response categories, which makes strict stability of response between waves a higher bar than it is for our five policy response category UK data. In the US data, stability on some issues is more negatively predictive of stability on other issues than we see in the UK data. We see more evidence of voters being differentiated into some who are more stable on certain issues, and others who are more stable on a different set of issues.

Second, we showed that instability is lower among the types of politically attentive and educated voters who the innocent voter account might suggest are more likely to form real opinions. Although this difference between voters is real, the difference is not so high as to rule out a substantial amount of real issue opinion among voters who are less politically attentive and less educated.

Third, we modelled the stability of individual issue opinions as a function of a person's general propensity to stability across issues. This showed, on the one hand, that there are indeed some voters who tend to develop stable views across a greater range of issues than do other voters. Yet, on the other hand, it also showed that low general stability propensity voters are likely to hold at least some stable opinions across issues, and more than we would expect if they were giving random issue responses. Hence, there is evidence that even voters with a relatively low general propensity to develop meaningful issue opinions will still develop such opinions on a small number of issues.

We argue that these findings support the 'issue publics' logic on which the idiosyncratic voter account builds. This logic says that most voters form real, meaningful opinions on at least some (varying sets of) policy issues. This in turn holds out the prospect that most voters will be able to make meaningful political choices based on issue considerations. It is that prospect that we seek to test more directly in Chapters 7 and 8.

PART II

ISSUE OPINION AND POLITICAL CHOICE

7

Meaningful Issue-Based Political Choice

In Chapters 4 to 6 we examined the nature of British voters' opinions on 34 policy issues. We focused on the extent to which such opinions are stable and ideological, stable and idiosyncratic, or unstable. Taking the stability of individuals' issue opinions as a key indicator of real, meaningfully held issue opinion, our findings suggested a moderate amount of such opinion in the electorate: averaging across issues, about 4/7 (57%) of the total variation in voters' issue opinions is stable across repeated measurement. Considering just the variation in opinion that is stable across repeated measurements, around one-third of this variation is ideological in nature. By 'ideological', we mean that the variation is predictable based on common patterns of correlation in opinion across issues. A much larger share—around two-thirds of the variation that is stable—can be understood as idiosyncratic. By 'idiosyncratic', we mean variation in opinion that *is not* predictable based on common patterns of correlation in opinion across issues.

We studied the nature of issue opinion because it is interesting in its own right and because it has consequences for the potential role issue opinion plays in the political choices that people make. In this chapter and the next, we turn to look more directly at the role that issue opinion plays when voters make these choices. If issue opinion plays a significant role then, at least from the perspective of classic conceptions of democracy, this is good news for representation: political elites have incentives to be responsive to public opinion on the issues because this matters for their (re-)election.

One thing we will do in this part of the book is look at the relative roles played by both ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion in political choice. However, before we do this we need to establish that voters are capable of making meaningful issue-based political choices *at all*. We need to do this because a strong version of the *classic innocent voter* account might interpret moderate average levels of issue opinion stability as rendering the notion of widespread issue-based political choice empirically untenable. This argument would say that, if most voters lack stable opinions on most policy issues, they cannot realistically make political choices by evaluating parties based on how well party positions match their opinions. Making evaluations

Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion and Political Choice. Nick Vivyan, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, and Chris Hanretty, Oxford University Press.
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with reference to unstable issue opinions is like trying to anchor a boat to driftwood. Instead, political choice is more plausibly shaped by other factors like group identities, which tend to be stable (and therefore presumably meaningful) for most people.

However, as we discussed in Chapter 2, other perspectives would consider this an overly ceptical take. In particular, the *idiosyncratic voter* account builds on *issue publics* theory (Converse, 1964; Krosnick, 1990; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023) to argue that most voters are capable of meaningful issue-based political choices even if they lack meaningful opinions on most issues. This argument has two steps. First, that most voters do possess real, stable views on at least *some* issues that matter particularly to them. Second, that when they come to make political choices, voters focus more upon those subsets of issues on which they possess real, stable views.

In the last chapter, we found evidence consistent with the first step in this argument ('real views on some issues'). Our analysis suggested issue opinion stability is reasonably diffuse across voters, rather than highly concentrated among a particularly politically sophisticated stratum: even those voters among the least prone to exhibit real, stable issue opinions were still quite likely to exhibit such opinions on at least some issues. In this chapter, we turn to evaluate evidence for the second step in the argument. More specifically, we examine whether voters' decision-making processes tend to place more weight on those issues upon which they possess real, stable opinions, and whether they are therefore generally capable of making coherent issue-based political choices.

In doing so, we will call the weight attached to an issue in a voter's decision-making the *choice importance* of the issue for the voter. We describe it as 'choice importance' because we infer it from the choices that people make, rather than basing it on what people say is important to them, and because sometimes what people say is important to them doesn't matter much for their choices. 'Choice importance' plays a key role in our argument. Suppose that the optimists are right, and that voters do make meaningful issue-based political choices, despite the modest levels of real, stable issue opinion. In this case, we would expect a positive association between the stability of opinion on an issue and the choice importance attached to that issue. Rather than speaking repeatedly of 'the positive association between the stability of opinion on an issue and the choice importance attached to that issue', we'll label this expectation the *stability ↔ choice-importance association* expectation. The arrow in this phrase points in both directions, because it's possible for the causal link between stability and importance to run either way: maybe people develop stable opinions on issues because those issues are important to them,

or maybe it's only stable opinions that allow people to attach importance to something.[1]

In this chapter, we test this *stability ↔ choice-importance association* expectation based on evidence from a series of experiments embedded in our panel survey. In these experiments our survey respondents are asked to choose between hypothetical political candidates. These candidates take varying combinations of positions on varying subsets of the issues on which we measure respondents' own positions and the stability of those positions. This experimental evidence allows a more direct test of the *stability ↔ choice-importance association* expectation than the academic literature has so far provided.

Not only this. As we shall explain later in the chapter, because respondents in our panel survey take our experiment repeatedly across survey waves, this allows us to go further and analyse the over-time stability and predictability of the *political choices* our respondents make based on issue considerations. We will argue that such analysis provides new insights regarding the degree to which voters are capable of making issue-based political choices which are coherently connected to their issue opinions.

7.1 Existing Evidence and Our Approach

We know of no existing direct empirical evidence that voters—British or otherwise—attach more choice importance to issues upon which they have more stable opinions. Instead, existing evidence is *indirect*. This indirect evidence shows two things. First, it shows that respondents have more stable opinions on issues that they report to be of greater *subjective importance*—i.e., issues that they assign higher ratings to when given a scale that runs from 'low' to 'high' importance, or issues they mention when asked what they think are the 'most important problems' of the day. Second, it shows that the proximity between a survey respondent and a party (or candidate) on an issue is a better predictor of the respondent's chances of voting for that party when the issue in question is assigned higher subjective importance by the respondent. In other words, the fact that a respondent agrees perfectly with (say) the Labour party on (say) the issue of cannabis does not tell us much if the respondent says that they don't care about policy on cannabis. Evidence for the link between issue opinion stability and subjective importance comes

[1] Elements of this chapter and the next draw on our previously published article, Hanretty et al. (2020), particularly those passages focusing on the measurement of importance (this chapter), the headline issue importance estimates (this chapter) and issue importance by ideological dimension (next chapter).

mainly from studies of US survey respondents (e.g., Krosnick, 1990; Gershkoff, 2006; Leeper, 2014; Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023). Evidence for the link between subjective issue importance and vote choice importance comes from some of the same studies (e.g., Krosnick, 1990; Gershkoff, 2006), but also from studies of British voters, perhaps most prominently the one reported in Sarlvik and Crewe (1983).

As discussed in Chapter 3, doubts have been raised about this indirect evidence. To recap our earlier discussion, some have expressed cepticism as to whether self-reports of subjective issue importance are a good measure of importance in political decisions. This is because of the difficulties people generally encounter when trying to introspectively evaluate how much weight they attach to different considerations in their decision-making, and their reluctance to label certain factors 'unimportant' (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2002; Bartle and Laycock, 2012; Leeper and Robison, 2020). Meanwhile, others argue that the apparent link between observed respondent-party issue proximity and respondent vote choice in elections may be driven not by issue-based voting on the part of the respondent, but by so-called 'projection' and 'persuasion' effects. Such effects may lead to a situation where respondent-party issue proximity and respondent vote choice become associated simply because respondent partisanship exerts a common influence upon both (e.g., Achen and Bartels, 2016).

All of this means that there are reasonable grounds to question existing evidence of an indirect link from issue opinion stability to issue choice-importance *via* subjective issue importance. To resolve these questions we require clearer evidence concerning how citizens weight more and less stable issue opinions in their political decision-making, and what this means for their political choices.

In this chapter we provide some such evidence. We draw on a series of candidate choice experiments embedded in our panel survey, and which followed on from the questions about issue opinions analysed in previous chapters. In these experiments, respondents are presented with two hypothetical candidates with randomized positions on three issues, randomly chosen from the seven policy issues on which we had previously asked the respondent to give their own position. Some of these hypothetical candidates will have issue positions which are very far from the respondent on some issues, but are very close on other issues. We assess the importance of more and less stable issue opinions as revealed by the choices survey respondents make when they have to trade off being close to candidates on certain issues and further away from them on other issues. We consider an issue to be important to an individual to the extent that they accord causal weight to that

issue in their decision-making: put differently, an individual attaches more choice importance to an issue the more their support for a party or candidate declines when that party or candidate departs from her preferred position on that issue.

Rather than trying to gauge the choice importance attached to an issue based on *observational* data capturing individuals' vote choices given the issue positions and more general electoral offers made by parties at a given election, our approach focuses on the choices individuals make in an *experimental* setting. Relying on data from experiments has the downside that such experimental stimuli cannot fully recreate the real-world circumstances of political choice. Experimental approaches do, however, offer significant advantages. We can ensure rich variation in the combinations of issue positions that candidates adopt in the choice experiments we administer to respondents. Some of our hypothetical candidates endorse the death penalty but want to decriminalize cannabis. Others want to nationalize the banking system but leave everyone to pay the full costs of their university tuition. Compared to the hypothetical candidates in our experiments, the observed variation in the real-world policy platforms adopted by the small number of parties running at a given general election is very limited. Worse, those real-world party platforms are bound up with other features of the parties and their recent electoral and governmental history. These factors make it difficult to disentangle which issue positions are more important for people's vote choices, and indeed whether these issue positions have much role at all, based on observational data.[2]

The experimental approach we take allows us to better identify the choice importance of an issue net of the projection and persuasion effects which, as discussed in Chapter 3, have caused problems for many past studies of issue voting. First, consider projection effects. These involve people taking their preferred position on an issue and 'projecting' this position onto a party or candidate to whom they are already predisposed. This can make it look like people are voting for parties or candidates based on who they perceive to be closer to them on an issue when in fact their predispositions towards parties or candidates are causing them to vote for those parties or candidates *and* to perceive those same parties or candidates as close to them on the issue. Our experimental approach reduces the room for projection

[2] Other recent studies, Leeper and Robison (2020), Mummolo et al. (2021), Sides et al. (2022), and Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) also measure issue choice importance experimentally using a similar logic to us. However, none use panel data to directly test whether issue opinion stability is associated with issue choice importance. Leeper and Robison (2020) and Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) study whether choice importance is predicted by subjective issue importance—as measured by subjective importance scales or an open-ended question, respectively—rather than issue opinion stability.

effects because respondents receive explicit information about each candidate's issue positions and we can directly measure this information. Because we also separately measure respondents' own positions on each of the same issues, we can effectively gauge how much a respondent (dis)agrees with a candidate on an issue rather than relying on measures of respondents' self-perceived issue proximity to a candidate, as some observational studies have to.

Second, consider persuasion effects. These are the type of mechanism stressed by the *voter-as-follower* variant of the innocent voter account. They involve people bringing their own reported issue opinions into line with those of the party or candidate they already support. This makes it difficult to interpret observational evidence from a real-world election showing that people tend to vote for a party (or a candidate from a party) that is close to them on a particular issue. It could be that the issue is genuinely important to people, such that they vote for a party because that party is close to them on the issue. Or it could be persuasion: people's predisposition towards a particular party causes them to vote for that party *and* to closely align their own issue position with the party's position. Our experimental approach reduces the scope for these types of persuasion. For one thing, respondents' predispositions towards political parties cannot directly cause choices in our experiment because the hypothetical candidates they are asked to choose between are defined only in terms of their stated policy positions, and do not have party labels. For another, respondents' self-reported issue opinions are measured before the experiment, so cannot be influenced by the stated policy positions of hypothetical candidates in the experiment.

That said, our experimental design cannot entirely rule out a very indirect form of persuasion mechanism. Specifically, it could be that respondents self-report issue positions which mimic the stance of their preferred real-world party, then in our experiment vote for the hypothetical candidate who seems most likely to be from that party based on their stated policy positions. This sort of indirect persuasion mechanism would still involve citizens holding quite detailed issue-based understandings of parties. Nevertheless, it would induce an association between respondent-candidate issue proximity and candidate choice because respondents' partisan predispositions influence both of these things, rather than because respondents' issue opinions influence their candidate choices.

Although we cannot rule out this sort of indirect persuasion mechanism—and indeed it is very difficult to design an experiment which does (Orr et al., 2023)—we do argue that it is unlikely to strongly influence respondent choices in our experiment. The independent randomization of candidate

issue positions in our experiment means that respondents will often encounter candidates offering policy combinations quite distinct from any real UK party. This means guessing candidate parties will often be difficult. Our experimental results also reveal that, in their choices between candidates, respondents put a great deal of weight on issues which fit poorly with this type of persuasion account. For example, as discussed later in this chapter, respondents place great weight on the death penalty issue. This issue was subject to little partisan debate at the time of the experiment in 2018–19. As such, the issue is likely to lack the clear 'party branding' (Dias and Lelkes, 2022) that would allow respondents to confidently infer someone's partisanship based on their stance upon it.[3]

We will also see that respondents put a lot of weight on the UK's relationship with the European Union, an issue which has been shown to be subject to only weak partisan persuasion effects (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021).

In sum, together the information we collect on respondent issue opinions and their candidate choices in our experiments allows us to estimate the weight respondents attach to different issues in their political choices. Combining these measures of choice importance with the measures of issue opinion stability described in the previous chapter allows us to conduct the first direct, experimental test of the *stability ↔ choice-importance association*. This association would have to pertain if voters are to make meaningful issue-based political choices despite modest levels of real, stable opinion.

7.2 Candidate Choice Experiments

Before explaining in detail how we incorporate the candidate choice experiments into our analysis, in this section we flesh out key aspects of the design of these experiments.

Our candidate choice experiments have the structure of a *conjoint choice experiment*. A conjoint choice experiment requires respondents to choose between two or more alternatives, where these alternatives are bundles of randomly chosen values on a number of different attributes. A key advantage of conjoint choice experiments is that they allow us to learn about the weight these different attributes are accorded in people's decision-making. For example, a conjoint choice experiment concerning electronic vehicles

[3] Dias and Lelkes (2022) provide a promising systematic approach for identifying party 'branded' and 'unbranded' issues relying on a separate pre-survey of a different sample of respondents. They then experimentally vary whether respondents in a subsequent study receive information about branded or unbranded issue stances in order to disentangle the effects of issue disagreement and partisanship on affective polarization.

might show respondents (fictitious) vehicles which differ in terms of three attributes: their affordability, their maximum range, and their top speed. All of these characteristics are good characteristics: a car which can go further, faster, for less money is a better car, and if we had the choice we would always pick the cheap, fast, long-lasting car over the expensive, slow, flaky car. Since no actually existing car has all these desirable attributes, conjoint choice experiments show respondents random configurations to test, for example, whether cars that are *cheap but slow* are generally preferred to cars that are *expensive but fast*. The notion of trade-offs is central to conjoint choice experiments.

Conjoint choice experiments have been used extensively in political science over the last decade to study voters' preferences on a variety of topics, including the attributes of politicians (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Campbell et al., 2019), of immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015), and of potential Eurozone bailout agreements (Bechtel et al., 2014). For example, Bechtel and Scheve (2013) used conjoint choice experiments to study how different attributes of potential international climate agreements affected mass support for such an agreement in Germany, France, the UK, and United States. This allows them to study how voters in each of these countries trade off the financial cost of such an agreement against institutional features which are likely to make such an agreement more credible and effective. Bechtel and Scheve find that voters tend to prioritize cost—support is most sensitive to variants in this attribute—but they are nonetheless willing to tolerate slightly higher costs when agreements have features that enhance credibility and effectiveness (moderate sanctions and independent monitoring).

We could get this information in a different way, for example by asking voters a question such as, 'thinking about potential international climate agreements, which matters more, the cost of the agreement to an average household or the extent to which the agreement can be effectively enforced?' However the advantage of conjoint choice experiments is that they allow us to elicit such information for multiple attributes at the same time, and to do so while relying less on voter introspection: voters do not have to think about or consciously reflect upon the importance they attach to different factors; *they need only choose*, and leave any inferences about importance to the analyst.

We included a candidate conjoint choice experiment in our panel survey which asks respondents to choose between two fictitious candidates for parliament (labeled 'A' and 'B') who are described as running on different policy platforms. These platforms are defined on three issues, which are drawn randomly from the set of seven issues on which a respondent has been

asked to give their own positions already. Each candidate's stated *position* on each issue is drawn randomly and independently from the set of five policy alternatives which served as response options when the respondent was asked about that issue.

Respondents were asked to review the candidates' positions and then to say whether they would vote for A, B, or whether they were 'not sure'. In this way, we ask respondents to trade off policies against one another, and thereby draw out implicit information about the importance weight respondents attach to departures from their stated preferred policy on different issues.

In a single wave of the survey, each respondent received three candidate choice questions.[4] Where a respondent participated in subsequent waves of the survey after wave 1, they received *exactly* the same candidate choice questions, involving candidates taking the same positions on the same issues, as they did in wave 1. This design means that we have a large amount of information about the stability of candidate choices involving varying sets of issues, a feature we exploit later in this chapter.

Figure 7.1 shows an example candidate choice question a respondent might have received as their first such question in the first wave of the survey. In this example, the three issues upon which hypothetical candidates take positions are: relative levels of CEO wages; degree of state encouragement of healthy choices; and regulation of strikes. The hypothetical candidates happen to adopt identical positions on the second issue but candidate B wants tighter limits on CEO earnings and favours more permissive rules on strikes.

The respondent would have already reported their own position on each of these issues (plus four other issues) before viewing these candidates. If the respondent participated in the next wave of the survey, they would be asked to make a choice between the exact same pair of candidates in that wave (as well as between the two other pairs of candidates they saw in subsequent candidate choice questions in the first wave).

Because they ask respondents to consider a number of pieces of information about hypothetical candidates and then choose between them, our candidate choice questions are not necessarily easy for respondents to answer. We therefore limited the number of issues shown in the candidate choice questions to three so that the questions were not so difficult as to create significant survey non-response.

[4] In the first survey wave, the second and third candidate choice questions a respondent received involved hypothetical candidates taking policy positions on the same three issues as were selected in the first candidate choice question the respondent received, but candidate positions on each issue were randomly drawn afresh each time.

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

Issue	Candidate A	Candidate B
Full-time factory workers in the UK have average earnings of about £25,000 per year (£500 per week befors tax). How much should the chief executive of a large British company listed on the stock exchange typically be paid in comparison to this figure?	No more than **twenty times** this figure (£500,000 per year)	No more than **ten times** this figure (£250,000 per year)
How much should the government try to encourage individuals to make healthy choices in their lives through taxes and other incentives?	The government **should tax products that are harmful when consumed in any quantities**, such as cigarettes and tobacco products.	The government **should tax products that are harmful when consumed in any quantities**, such as cigarettes and tobacco products.
What is your view on strikes?	Strikes **should be banned in the emergency services** (fire, police, and ambulance), but should be allowed in other sectors.	Strikes **should be allowed, whatever the reason**.

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

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

Figure 7.1 Example of a candidate choice question.

Given their difficulty, it might seem odd to rely on candidate choice questions to gauge the weight respondents attach to different issues when one of the key critiques of the subjective issue importance questions previously used in the literature is the difficulty respondents have answering such questions. Our response to this is to stress that the two types of question are difficult in different ways. The difficulty presented by the candidate choice questions is fundamental to our measurement objective and to the act of voting: it is the multidimensional nature of considering trade-offs between different issues that makes our candidate choice questions difficult for respondents. But the same difficulty arises when voters make choices between candidates in the real world. The implicit weights that they attach to different factors when making such choices are what we are interested in measuring, whether respondents are aware of those weights or not. In contrast, the difficulty involved in self-reporting issue importance is not a common part of political life: citizens are not typically required to engage in introspection about how they came to their political choices. Citizens choose between candidates with a variety of potentially relevant differences whenever they vote, but there is no 'why did you vote for that candidate?' question below those choices on the ballot paper.

7.3 Modelling Candidate Choices

To recap, for each candidate choice question a respondent answers in any of the three waves of our survey, we observe several pieces of information in our data: the policy platforms of the two hypothetical candidates, each consisting of proposed policy alternatives on each of the three issues included in the question prompt (with issues and proposed policy alternatives randomly selected); the respondent's own self-reported preferred policy alternative on each of those three issues; and the choice the respondent makes between the two candidates ('candidate A', 'not sure', and 'candidate B'). We estimate a statistical model which takes these pieces of information as inputs and, based on them, infers the importance respondents attach to different policy issues.[5]

This model assumes that the choice a respondent is observed to make between a given pair of candidates depends at least in part on which one offers a more attractive policy platform from the respondent's perspective. The model treats the overall attractiveness of a policy platform for a respondent as an unobserved quantity, which we refer to as the respondent's *issue-based utility* from the policy platform.

The issue-based utility a respondent derives from a candidate's policy platform is in turn assumed to be a function of the *distance* between the respondent and the candidate on each of the three individual issues covered in the policy platform. This means we think of respondents as behaving as if they apply a *spatial* logic to each issue.

According to this logic, the five available ordered policy alternatives on a given issue can be thought of as locations on a continuous scale, so that it becomes meaningful to talk about distances between policy alternatives—i.e., to say that policy alternatives on an issue are located 'further away' from, or 'closer' to, each other. We don't fix these distances in advance: rather, we let the model infer the distances based on the choices made by respondents. We're able to do this because we assume that the greater distance between the respondent's preferred alternative and the candidate's position, the less utility the respondent gets. The greatest possible utility for any given issue happens when the respondent and the candidate have the same preferred policy alternative; as the candidate's position gets further away from the respondent's preferred alternative, their utility decreases.

Thus, for each of the three issues on which a candidate advocates a policy alternative, the utility loss a respondent associates with that policy alternative

[5] The full specification of this statistical model, which is based on the model we developed in Hanretty et al. (2020), is given in Appendix B.4.

is the distance between the location of that policy alternative and their own preferred policy alternative on the same issue. The overall issue-based utility a respondent associates with the candidate's policy platform is simply the sum of these utility losses across the three individual issues.

How do these issue-based utilities translate into a respondent's observed choice between a pair of candidates, A and B? Our statistical model assumes that what matters here is the difference in the issue-based utilities the respondent associates with the policy platforms: i.e., the issue-based utility from candidate A's platform minus the issue-based utility from candidate B's platform. The absolute values of these issue-based utilities don't matter: it is possible for both candidates to propose platforms that are pretty awful from a given respondent's perspective, and for both candidates to propose platforms that are pretty great from a given respondent's perspective. If the difference in utilities is positive (i.e., candidate A's positions give more utility than candidate B's positions) the respondent prefers candidate A's policy platform over candidate B's, and the larger this difference the more likely the respondent is to vote for candidate A. If the difference in utilities is negative the respondent prefers candidate B's policy platform over candidate A's, and the larger this difference the more likely the respondent is to vote for candidate B.

The use of the term 'likely' is deliberate here because the model treats the relationship between issue-based utility differences and respondents' candidate choices as *probabilistic* rather than deterministic. There are two important sources of variation that we cannot capture deterministically. The first of these is that we do not have enough responses from any single respondent to estimate their own personal weights on the different issues or perceptions of how far apart the different policy alternatives are. We can estimate the average values of these, and these will be predictive of how respondents are likely to respond, but some will weight things differently in ways that make them respond to a given item differently. Such variation would be per respondent, and lead to a given person repeatedly answering in an unexpected way across survey waves when asked to make the same comparison. The second source of variation is that, even if we were to observe that same respondent choose between the same two candidates many times, and if the respondent's preferred policy alternatives on all of the relevant issues remained stable for all those choices, we might expect them to change their response sometimes, perhaps because the way respondents' evaluate the issues is not completely stable and they end up weighing up the choice differently (particularly if it is a close call for them or a difficult trade-off between different issues).

Our model treats all of these other factors which may influence respondents' candidate choices as essentially random. More specifically, we capture these factors as a *random utility shock* which is generated every time a respondent answers a candidate choice question. This random shock can be positive or negative, and the respondent's ultimate choice between the two candidates A and B is a function of their issue-based utility difference between the two candidates (utility from A minus utility from B) *plus* the random utility shock. When the resulting quantity is positive and sufficiently large, the respondent is assumed to vote for candidate A.[6] When it is negative and sufficiently large, the respondent is assumed to vote for candidate B. And when it is neither sufficiently large in either positive or negative direction, the respondent is assumed to choose the 'not sure' option.

To recap, we model respondents' observed answers to the candidate choice questions as a probabilistic function of the policy alternatives the candidates propose on each issue and the policy alternatives the respondent is observed to prefer on the same issues. We assume that respondents choose between candidates based partly on the issue-based utility they derive from their respective policy platforms, and that these issue-based utilities depend on a spatial logic—how 'far away' the candidate's proposed policy alternative is located from respondents' own preferred policy alternative on each issue. Based on the pattern of observed choices and how these are observed to relate to candidate policy platforms and respondent's preferred policy alternatives, our model *estimates* the utility distances respondents on average perceive between the different policy alternatives on each issue.

It is these estimated utility distances between policy alternatives that are crucial to our measure of issue importance. An issue with *more widely spaced* policy alternatives is one on which respondents experience bigger utility losses from alternatives that depart from their own preferred policy. The stances candidates take on that issue will therefore have a larger impact upon the overall issue-based utility respondents' derive from candidate policy platforms, and ultimately upon respondents' choices between candidates. For example, imagine two issues where all five policy alternatives on the first issue are equally spaced at relatively wide two-unit intervals, and all five policy alternatives on the second issue are equally spaced at narrower one-unit intervals. This would tell us that, on the first issue, respondents associate a move from one policy alternative to the neighbouring policy alternative with a change in utility of two units. Meanwhile, on the second issue, respondents associate a move from one policy alternative to the neighbouring policy

[6] By 'sufficiently large' we mean beyond a certain threshold value which is estimated based on the data.

alternative with a much smaller change in utility of just one unit. As a result, the overall issue-based utility respondents derive from a candidate policy platform—and therefore their likelihood of choosing that candidate—will tend to be more sensitive to changes in candidate stance on the first issue compared to changes in stance on the second issue. In this sense, the first issue can be said to be more important to their choices.

One potential complication here is that the spacing between the locations of the five observed policy alternatives on an issue is partly shaped by our choices of which policy alternatives to present for that issue in our survey. Large distances between policy alternatives on an issue might not necessarily mean that respondents care a lot about differences between policy alternatives on that issue, but might instead indicate that we happened to offer particularly extreme policy alternatives on that issue. We want a measure of issue importance that reflects not the extremity of the alternatives we happened to provide on an issue, but the relative importance of that issue given realistic policy alternatives.

We therefore use a measure of the choice importance of an issue which is based on the model-estimated spacing between policy alternatives, but which also accounts for the estimated distribution of support for each policy alternative on an issue. If a tiny number of respondents prefer the most extreme positions our survey offers on an issue, the fact that respondents would heavily punish candidates who adopt those positions does not indicate that an issue is important in anything more than a trivial sense. If, however, we see respondents heavily punishing hypothetical candidates who take positions that are popular with many other respondents, that indicates that differences between realistic, politically relevant policy alternatives on the issue are important to respondents.

More precisely, our measure of the importance of an issue is the weighted average of the estimated utility distances between each pair of policy alternatives on that issue, with each distance weighted by the estimated chance that two people picked at random from the population would prefer that pair of policy alternatives. One can think about this choice importance score as the population average disutility voters feel towards the opinions held by their fellow voters on an issue. The choice importance score will be large when voters vary a lot in which policy alternatives they prefer on an issue and are more sensitive to departures from their preferred policy alternative on that issue in their political choices. The choice importance score will be small either if there is little disagreement in the public on an issue or if voters' political choices are insensitive to departures from their preferred policy alternative on that issue.

As noted already, we do not have enough data for each respondent to estimate individual-level importance scores for each issue. Rather, the approach we use generates population-level and subpopulation-level estimates of choice importance for each issue.

7.3.1 Evidence That Voters Apply A Spatial Logic

We have just described the statistical model that we apply to the data from our candidate choice experiment in order to estimate issue importance. This model *assumes* that respondents apply a spatial logic when thinking about candidates' policy platforms. We think this is a reasonable assumption to make: after all, the five policy alternatives we designed for each issue were intended to be ordered in a meaningful way—e.g., from less to more rail privatization, or from less to more net immigration. But what if voters don't apply a spatial logic? A sceptic of issue voting might argue that if many voters lack real opinions on many policy issues, it is not realistic to assume that such voters tend to think about issues according to a shared understanding of which policy alternatives go in which order, let alone which alternatives are further apart or closer together. In fact, if respondents' answers to questions eliciting their positions on the policy issues lack meaning, then we might not expect respondents to reward even those candidates in the conjoint experiment who adopt exactly their stated preferred position on an issue.

We therefore also investigate an alternative, 'flexible' model of the candidate choices. This model is identical to the model we have just described, except that it does not assume that policy alternatives follow any particular order in respondents' decision-making processes.[7] We can estimate this model because our data still allows us to see patterns in the data that suggest distances. In our data, for a given policy alternative on a given issue, we observe multiple instances of respondents who self-report this as their preferred policy alternative deciding whether to choose a candidate, with the policy alternative proposed by the candidate on the issue in question varying randomly across instances. For example, we observe 1,236 instances where respondents who self-report a preference for policy alternative 2 on the foreign aid issue ('The UK should give a small amount of foreign aid (between 0.3 and 0.4% of national income)') decide whether or not to support a candidate who takes a position on the foreign aid issue. In 266 of these instances, the candidate happens to share the view that policy alternative 2

[7] See Appendix B.4.4 for full details of this more flexible model specification.

is the best option on foreign aid. But there are a roughly similar number of these instances where the candidate takes each of the other remaining four positions on foreign aid.

By comparing the rate at which these respondents choose candidates taking each of the different foreign aid positions, we can estimate the utility loss they experience from each policy alternative, and check whether this obeys a spatial logic—i.e., whether utility losses are larger from those candidates who take foreign aid positions further from position 2 (according to the substantive ordering of the policy alternatives we provided). The flexible model we use here generalizes this intuition across issues and policy alternatives.

Figure 7.2 summarizes results when we estimate the model with this flexible specification for issue-related utilities. It plots the estimated utility losses for all issues, for all policy alternatives, organized by a respondent's own most preferred policy alternative (with alternatives labelled 1 through 5 based on their ordering in the survey question). Each issue is represented by a line, and if respondents follow a spatial logic we expect that line to reach its highest point at the respondent's own most preferred policy alternative.

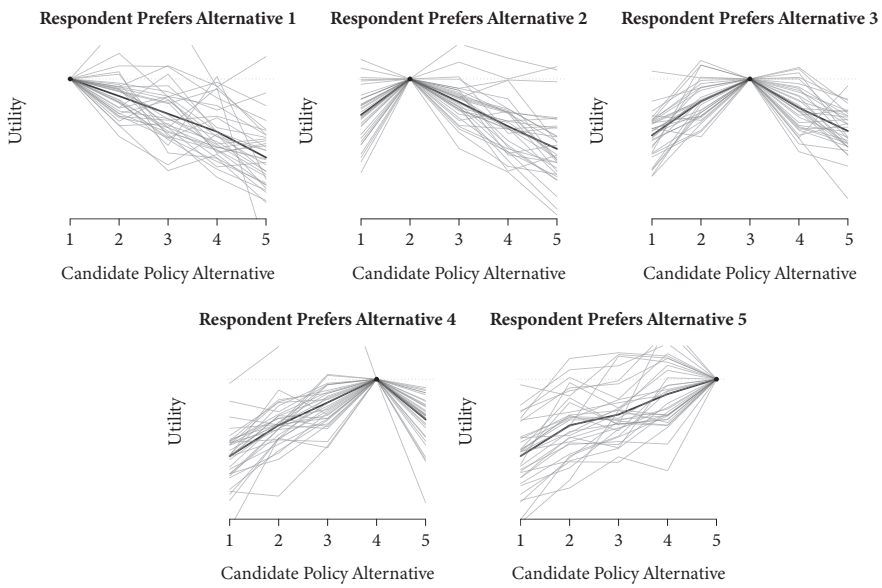

Figure 7.2 Each panel shows the estimated utility loss functions for candidates taking each of the five possible policy alternatives on each issue, among respondents who prefer a particular policy alternative. Each thin line is one of the 34 issues, the thick lines are the average of these. The dashed horizontal line corresponds to a utility penalty of zero.

For respondents who choose an extreme alternative, we expect the line to slope down as we move away from the respondent's preferred policy alternative. For respondents who choose a middling alternative (options 2, 3, or 4), we expect to see a pattern that resembles an upside-down V or an upside-down U.

The overwhelming tendency is for respondents to evaluate the hypothetical candidates in a way that is consistent with a spatial, proximity-based utility function. Not all lines reach their highest point at the respondent's own position, and some lines do not follow a clear pattern. This variation across issues exists because for some issues the five alternatives are closer together, and because we don't always have a large number of responses we can use to estimate the quantities that make up these lines. Yet on average, and for most individual issues and policy alternatives on those issues, respondents are estimated to associate maximal utility with a candidate proposing their preferred policy alternative on an issue, and to associate progressively greater utility losses with candidate proposals for policy alternatives that are further (in either direction) from their own preferred one in terms of the original substantive ordering of the alternatives in the survey.

We interpret these results as evidence that British voters do tend to think about the types of issues we include in our survey in a way that follows spatial logic, whether consciously or unconsciously. We also interpret the results as evidence that it is reasonable to proceed with our statistical model that assumes this spatial logic.

7.3.2 Which Issues Are More Important to Voters?

A key aim of this chapter is to test whether voters attach more importance to those issues on which they have a more stable opinion. Before we can do that, we must first present and reflect briefly upon our estimates of the choice importance of the issues we asked about in our survey.

The right panel of Figure 7.3 shows the estimated choice importance score for each of the 34 policy issues in our study based on our wave 1 survey data (fieldwork January–February 2018). It also shows an accompanying 95% interval as a solid line underneath each number. Issues are ordered vertically according to their importance score, which ranges between zero and one; larger numbers indicate greater choice importance.

The left panel of Figure 7.3 plots the estimated utility distances between each of the five policy alternatives for each issue. Each number represents the location of a policy alternative. Because all that matters is the distance

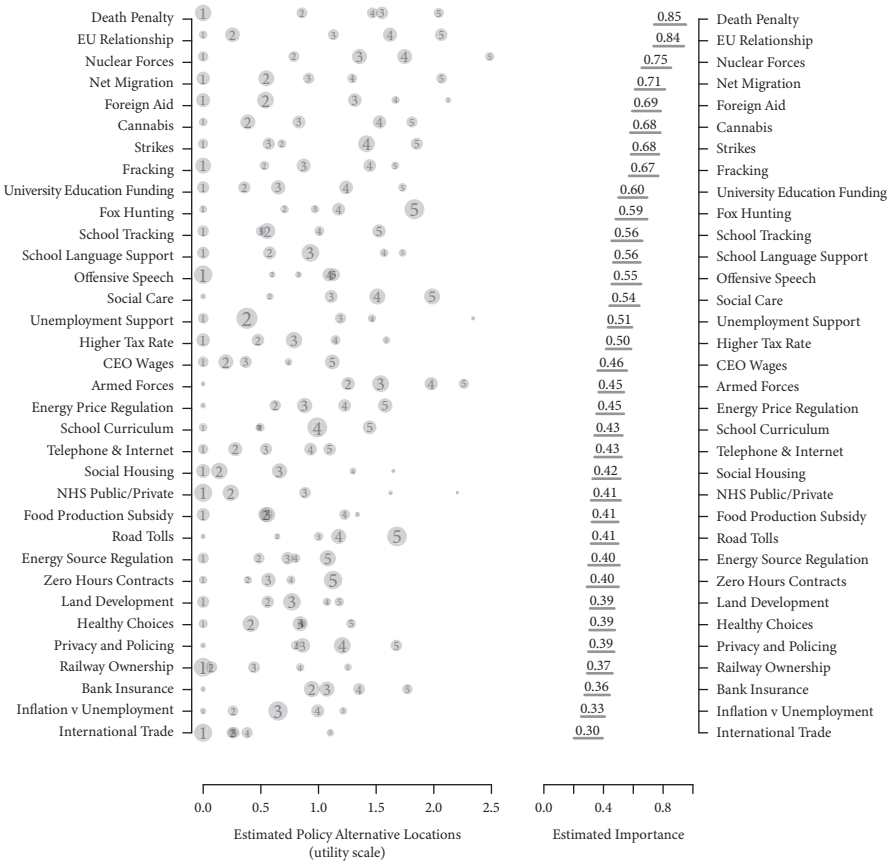

Figure 7.3 Left: estimated locations of policy alternatives for each issue, sorted from most to least importance. The number on each point is the designed ordering of the positions. Right: estimated importance score for each issue with 95% confidence intervals shown below the numerical value.

between policy alternatives relative to each other, for every issue, the estimated location of alternative 1 is set to zero in the model by assumption. Alternatives 2 to 5 can be closer to this first alternative or further away. Behind each number is a circle; the size of this circle is proportional to the number of survey respondents who choose that alternative in the issue questions. More popular alternatives are therefore represented by bigger circles. The greater the distance between the five policy alternatives on an issue, the greater the difference in utility that voters associate with those alternatives. The greater the difference in utility, the more respondents penalize candidates who depart from their own preferred alternative. Our measure of importance is a weighted summary of these distances, with more weight

given to distances between alternatives which are popular, and less weight given to distances between alternatives that are unpopular.

Looking across the issues in the right panel of Figure 7.3, we see that Britain's relationship with the European Union was one of the two most important issues to British voters at the time of the survey in early 2018 (its estimated importance score is 0.84). The left panel shows why. First, this is a policy issue where people heavily penalize disagreement with their preferred policy alternative, such that alternatives are estimated to be located far apart on the issue scale. Second, the distribution of people's preferences on this issue are also dispersed, such that alternatives far apart on the issue scale are preferred by substantial numbers of individuals.

Contrast this with the NHS public/private issue. According to Figure 7.3, this issue is ranked only 23 of 34 in terms of importance (importance score: 0.41). Looking at the left panel, this is initially surprising, since the estimated locations of the five positions for this issue are among the most widely spaced of all issues considered here: i.e., respondents very heavily penalized large deviations from their preferred positions on this issue when choosing between candidates. The reason the NHS public/private issue scores only moderately on importance despite this spacing is that the distribution of respondent positions on this issue is extremely lopsided. Almost 80% of respondents endorsed alternatives 1 or 2 (which favour no or very limited private involvement in the NHS), while less than 5% endorsed alternatives 4 or 5 (which favour partial or full privatization of the NHS, and which are barely visible in the Figure). Thus although respondents heavily penalized privatized NHS provision in the conjoint experiment, very few endorse private provision.

It is unsurprising that Britain's relationship with the EU is estimated to be one of the most important issues to British voters in early 2018. The negotiations following the UK's decision to leave the EU were at the forefront of national political debates—both in the media and among political elites—at that time. However, Figure 7.3 also shows that issues can be important to the public without being the subject of prominent political debate. The death penalty question has an estimated importance score (0.85) that is indistinguishable from the importance score for the EU issue. The finding that British voters vary in their opinions on the death penalty is not a new one (e.g., Heath et al., 1985, 1991). What is striking is the *weight* Britons attach to deviations from their preferred position on this issue, despite the fact that the death penalty (for murder) was abolished in the UK in 1969. Although the UKIP leader Paul Nuttall backed its partial reintroduction during the 2017 general election campaign, no other significant British political party

discussed this issue in their campaigns. Our results suggest that, were parties to take up opposing positions on this issue, it would have a potential to move votes on a scale comparable to the EU issue.[8]

Is it reasonable to have a measure of issue importance which says that the use of the death penalty is more important to the public than the public/private organization of the NHS? One might view this as evidence that our measure is problematic, given that the death penalty is more or less ignored in contemporary British politics while the NHS holds an almost totemic place in British life. Our response to this concern is twofold. First, it is possible that a differently phrased NHS question, perhaps about funding levels rather than public/private organization, would have ranked higher because it would have induced more varied positions among respondents. We may simply have asked about a less contentious aspect of the NHS: its primarily public organization.

Second, because we are trying to measure importance as distinct from prominence in elite contestation, we should not expect to see a perfect association between our importance measure and the issues currently being contested. Our goal is to measure issues that are potentially important to the public in the sense that, if offered contrasting but politically realistic policy alternatives on an issue, people would be willing to change their vote choice to secure their preferred alternative on that issue, even if that means losing out on some other issues. These are issues that *could* become major issues of political contestation. But they will not do so unless parties and candidates choose to adopt varying positions and to emphasize those positions (Butler and Stokes, 1969). Parties in a given election only campaign and differentiate themselves on a limited set of issues. Researchers measuring issue importance based on models of electoral choice are confined to studying only this subset of issues. In our experiments we observed respondents choosing between candidates who, between them, take varying positions on all 34 of our policy issues of interest. We can therefore gauge how much importance respondents attach to all of these issues, whether or not they are the subject of current elite contestation in Britain.

To see why this is advantageous, consider that one of the major lines of argument about Brexit is that it was the result of multiple decades of elites in the major UK political parties failing to take up varying positions along an

[8] As a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, and having ratified Protocol 13 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the UK is treaty-bound to maintain the abolition of the death penalty. Some Conservative MPs have advocated withdrawal from the ECHR, including the former home secretary Suella Braverman, but largely without linking this to the question of the death penalty.

increasingly severe fault line in British public opinion, leading to a political earthquake when that fault line found an outlet through UKIP and then the referendum on EU membership (Evans and Menon, 2017). Our strategy for measuring issue importance is one that can help to identify such fault lines before the earthquake strikes, rather than only after.

7.4 Stability ↔ Choice-Importance Association

Having inspected the choice importance scores we have estimated for each issue based on the candidate choice data, we can now use these scores to test whether, when making political choices, voters attach more importance to those issues on which they have more stable opinions.

We first test for this stability ↔ choice-importance association at the *aggregate* level by examining whether the estimated stability of opinion on an issue (as measured by polychoric wave-to-wave correlations introduced in the previous chapter) is associated with the choice importance score of that issue as estimated based on the wave 1 candidate choice experiment data. Figure 7.4 shows that, across the issues we examine, the estimated choice importance of an issue is highly correlated with the over-time stability of respondents' self-reported positions on an issue. This is true whether one examines wave 1–2, wave 1–3, or wave 2–3 issue position stability, as a function of wave 1 estimated issue importance. There are correlations of around 0.7 in each case.

We next test for a stability ↔ choice-importance association at the *individual* level. We do this by augmenting our candidate choice model, and estimating the model using data from wave 2 of our survey. In the augmented version of the model (described in Appendix B.4.5), we allow the weight that respondents attach to departures from their preferred policy alternative on an issue to vary as a function not just of the estimated distances between policy alternatives on that issue, but also as a function of whether or not the respondent maintained the same preferred policy alternative on that issue in waves 1 and 2. The degree to which this additional weight varies is estimated based on the data.

When we fit a model with this specification for issue-related utility, we find clear evidence that respondents who maintain a stable position on an issue tend to put more weight on that issue, compared to respondents who do not maintain a stable position on that same issue. More specifically we estimate that in their candidate choices people put an average of 11% (95% CI: 3%, 18%) more weight on issues on which they have stable responses, comparing within issue to those who do not have exactly stable positions.

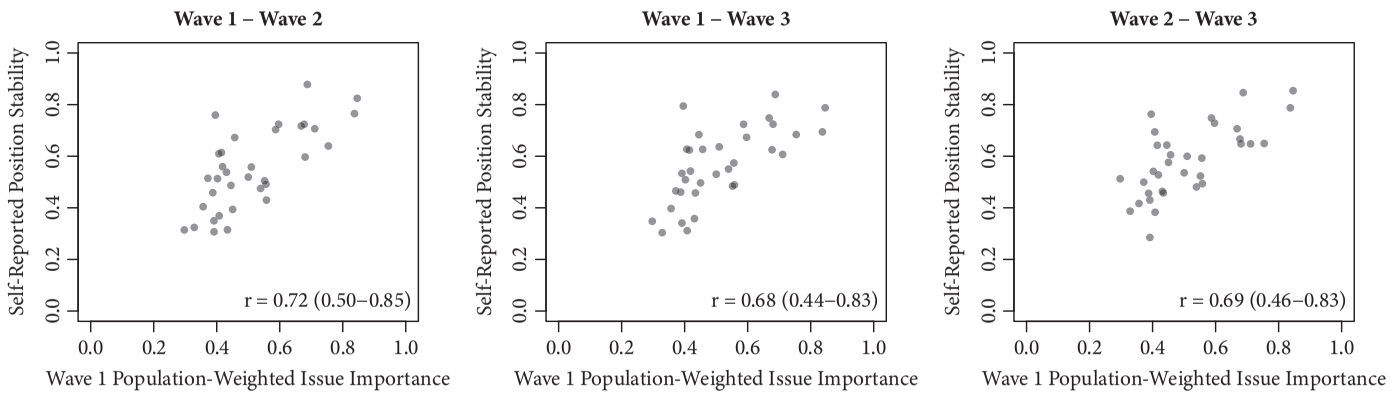

Figure 7.4 Wave-on-wave stability (polychoric correlation) of self-reported positions on an issue as a function of estimated issue choice importance in wave 1. Correlations reported with confidence intervals in parentheses.

In order to augment our model, we turned individual level stability into a dichotomy: either the respondent had exactly the same position in both waves 1 and 2, or they did not. This is a very simple measure of stability: a more refined measure of stability might distinguish between respondents who chose exactly the same alternative, respondents who chose adjacent alternatives, and respondents who chose alternatives that were very far apart. Given that our measure is so simple, we think that if anything we are underestimating the stability ↔ choice importance association at the individual level.

In sum, the issues on which respondents more heavily penalize hypothetical candidates who diverge from their preferred position tend to be the same issues where respondents give more stable self-reported positions at six-month intervals. This is true on average at the level of issues, but also looking at individual-level variation in stability within issues. In other words, we find aggregate and individual-level evidence for the type of *stability ↔ choice-importance association* which would need to hold for voters to be capable of meaningful issue-based political choices despite moderate levels of issue opinion stability.

7.5 The Stability of Political Choices

As well as directly testing the stability ↔ choice-importance association, our candidate choice experiment enables us to provide a new type of empirical evidence concerning the extent to which citizens make issue-based political choices which can be considered meaningful. A key feature of our experimental design is that we asked each respondent to make choices between the *same* pairs of hypothetical candidates in each of our three survey waves, with each pair of hypothetical candidates taking unchanged positions on an unchanged set of issues across the three survey waves. This yields a repeated measure of candidate choice at six-month intervals. This novel design allows us to assess the stability of the *political choices* that citizens make—and the stability of the processes that underpin those choices—in a controlled environment when restricted to issue-related stimuli that remain stable over time.

Studying *choice stability* in this way is informative for the same reason that Converse (1964) argued that studying the stability of self-reported issue opinions is informative: the stability of political choices made repeatedly between the same alternatives can tell us something about the extent to which these choices reflect real and enduring political opinions and decision-making processes, rather than being ephemeral responses to a survey prompt. Past

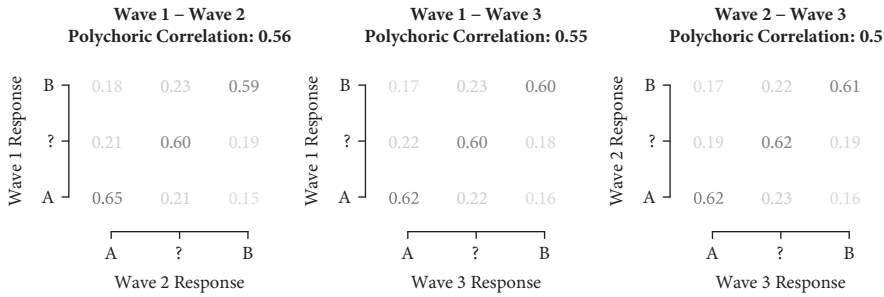

Figure 7.5 The proportion of conjoint candidate choices in later waves for respondents giving each choice option in earlier waves, comparing waves 1 and 2 (left), waves 1 and 3 (centre), and waves 2 and 3 (right). The three response options are preferring candidate A (A), being unsure (?), and preferring candidate B (B).

research assessed whether voters had meaningful opinions by studying how those opinions change over time. We assess whether voters make meaningful issue-based choices by studying how these choices change over time.

We start by looking at the wave-on-wave stability of respondents' candidate choices. Figure 7.5 shows the response transition table for respondent's candidate choices, averaging across all of the candidate choices our respondents made. For example, the first panel reports the distribution of choices in wave 2 conditional on the choice the respondent made when presented with the same pair of candidates in wave 1. It shows that respondents' wave 1 and wave 2 choices remain stable in just over 60% of cases, regardless of which response an individual gave in wave 1. The rate at which choices remain stable is similar comparing waves 2 and 3 and waves 1 and 3. Meanwhile, 15–18% of respondents switched fully from supporting candidate A to B or vice versa between survey waves. To further summarize the patterns of wave-on-wave choice stability in these tables, we can compute the polychoric correlation between respondents' candidate choices in one wave and their candidate choices in another wave.[9] When we do so, we recover a Wave 1–2 correlation of 0.56, a wave 2–3 correlation of 0.57, and a wave 1–3 correlation of 0.55.

The transition table and wave-on-wave correlations indicate moderate levels of choice stability. However, it is important to remember that they average over all randomly generated candidate choices presented to respondents in our experiment. As we shall elaborate shortly, by chance some of

[9] Polychoric correlations make sense because we treat candidate choice as a three-category ordered variable, with candidate A, 'not sure', and candidate B, as the three categories in that order.

these choices will involve candidates taking issue positions that make it very hard, even for respondents who make very carefully considered issue-based choices, to select the same candidate wave after wave. Thus, it makes sense to examine how the stability of candidate choice depends on the nature of the candidate choices presented to respondents. In other words, to examine *conditional choice stability*.

7.5.1 Choice Stability and the Issues Under Consideration

Our experiment gives respondents varying sets of issues to consider in their choices between candidates. One key way in which these sets of issues vary is in the extent to which respondents have well-formed, stable views upon them. Sometimes, by chance, the three issues on which hypothetical candidates happen to take positions will be ones on which a respondent has stable, meaningful opinions. In these cases, it is more likely that the respondent is able to make a meaningful issue-based choice between the candidates, and therefore that this choice is stable from one survey wave to the next. Other times, however, the three issues on which candidates happen to take positions will all be relatively obscure ones on which a respondent lacks stable, meaningful opinions. In these cases, it is less likely that the respondent is able to make a meaningful issue-based choice between the candidates, and their choice is therefore more likely to end up a fleeting, cursory response that fluctuates from one survey wave to the next.

In other words, respondents are more likely to make meaningful, consistent and stable issue-based political choices when they are asked to make those choices based on issues that elicit more meaningful, stable opinions. This logic implies the first type of *conditional choice stability* expectation that we examine in our data: this says that, given stable candidate positions in our experiment, *respondents' candidate choices should be more stable when candidates take positions on issues where respondents have more stable opinions*.

To examine this expectation we estimate how the wave-on-wave correlation between individuals' candidate choices depends on the average issue opinion stability between waves 1 and 2, for the three issues included in the candidate choice question. We expect that as average wave 1–2 opinion stability on the three issues included in the candidate choice question increases, individuals' candidate choices become more stable. To perform this analysis we need to estimate a model that allows the wave-on-wave polychoric correlation between individuals' candidate choices to vary as a function of another variable. The details of that model are described in Appendix B.4.6.

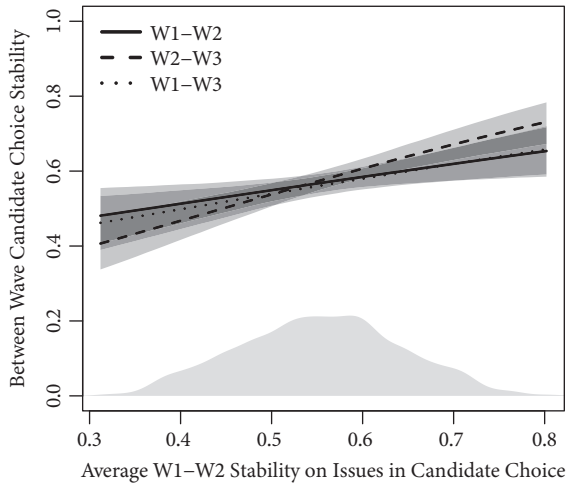

Figure 7.6 The stability (wave-to-wave correlation) of respondents' candidate choices across waves as a function of the wave 1–2 average stability of issue positions for the three issues presented for candidate choice. The density of average wave 1–2 issue opinion stability for the three issues presented to respondents in the experiment is provided in grey.

Figure 7.6 plots the estimated relationship between average wave 1–2 stability of issues included in a respondent's candidate choice questions and the wave-on-wave stability of the choices respondents make between candidates. The stability of candidate choices increases when the three issues selected for the candidate comparisons elicit higher opinion stability from respondents. This is true whether we focus on stability of candidate choices between waves 1 and 2, between waves 2 and 3, or between waves 1 and 3. Focusing just on the correlations between candidate choices in waves 1 and 2, we see the lowest polychoric correlation (i.e., the least stability) for those candidate comparisons that involve the issues with the lowest average issue opinion stability. In numerical terms, when average issue opinion stability is around 0.31 we expect a wave-to-wave correlation between candidate choices of around 0.48. When we instead focus on the highest levels of issue opinion stability, we see much greater candidate choice stability. When average issue opinion stability is around 0.81, candidate choice stability is around 0.65.

We think that the strength of the estimated relationship between average issue opinion stability and candidate choice stability—which implies a 17 point change in choice stability across the range of issue opinion stability treatments in our experiment—is substantial. This is especially the case given the fact that it is purely based on information about aggregate issue opinion stability rather than any respondent-specific information. The measure

of issue opinion stability used in this analysis is *not* based on how stable an individual respondent's issue opinions were on the particular issues involved in the candidate choices with which they were confronted. Rather it captures aggregate opinion stability on those issues across respondents, and more specifically the polychoric correlations between wave 1 and 2 issue opinions reported in Chapter 6. These aggregate-level measures of issue opinion stability will be a noisy reflection of the stability of the individual respondent's own opinions on the three issues included in the candidate choice question.

7.5.2 Choice Stability and Choice Contrast

Another relevant way in which the candidate choices posed in our experiment vary is in the extent to which they present respondents with a clear *issue-based contrast*. By 'issue-based contrast', we mean the extent to which the issue positions of the two hypothetical candidates are such that the respondent has a strong issue-based preference for one candidate over the other. Linking back to the model of candidate choice discussed above, we can think about contrast as the magnitude of the difference in the issue-based utilities the respondent derives from the two candidates. *High contrast* choice tasks are ones where this difference in issue-based utilities from the two candidates is large. These are choice tasks where one candidate proposes policy alternatives much closer to the respondent on issues which are of high importance to the respondent. In cases like this, the large difference in the issue-based utilities the respondent derives from the two candidates in wave 1 of the survey means that subsequent variation in either random utility shocks or a respondent's own issue opinions is less likely to be sufficient to change the respondents' candidate choice from that timepoint to the next.

By comparison, *low contrast* choice tasks are ones where the difference in the issue-based utilities a respondent derives from the two candidates is small. These are choice tasks where both candidates offer similar policy alternatives on all issues, or offer contrasting policy alternatives only on low-importance issues, or where one candidate is closer to the respondent on some issues while the other candidate is closer on others. In cases like these, the balance of issue considerations is marginal, and even respondents who engage in careful issue-based reasoning are reasonably likely to change which candidate they ultimately plump for from one survey wave to the next.

This reasoning leads to our second conditional choice stability expectation: that, given stable candidate positions, *candidate choices will be more stable when candidates present a greater issue-based contrast for the respondent.*

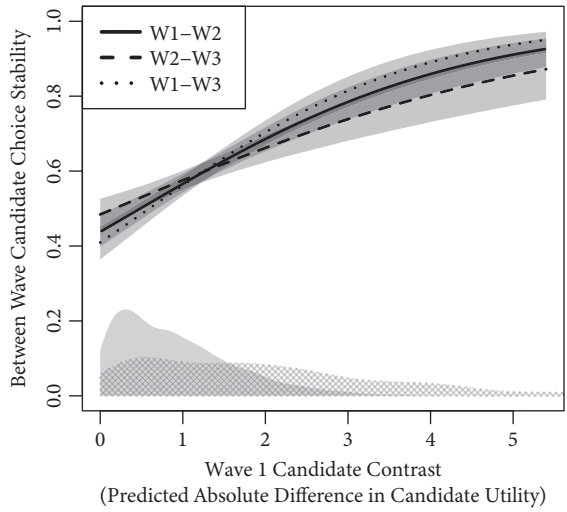

Figure 7.7 The stability of candidate choice across waves as a function of the wave 1 candidate contrast (i.e., predicted absolute difference in candidate utility). The density of all contrasts in the experiment is provided in solid grey at the bottom of the plot. The density of contrasts assuming real British political party positions is shown in cross-hatch.

We measure the degree of 'contrast' for each observed respondent and candidate choice pair in our data as the absolute difference in the respondent's issue-based utility between candidates, as estimated by fitting the candidate choice model introduced earlier in this chapter to our wave 1 data. A larger estimated utility difference indicates a higher contrast candidate question for a respondent. We test the second conditional choice stability expectation by including this measure of candidate contrast as the sole predictor of the wave-on-wave polychoric correlation of a respondent's candidate choice responses.

Figure 7.7 plots the estimated relationship between wave 1 contrast and the stability of candidate choices across different wave pairs. The stability of individuals' candidate choices across waves is powerfully predicted by the degree of contrast a candidate comparison presents for a respondent in wave 1. For the candidate comparisons that present the lowest contrast for respondents—i.e., where the predicted utility difference is close to zero and the respondent is likely to be close to indifferent between candidates—the estimated wave-to-wave polychoric correlations are just over 0.4. However, the estimated polychoric correlation rises to 0.8 and above for the highest contrast comparisons in our data—i.e., where the candidate utility difference is 3 or above. Although comparison of polychoric correlations

across different question types is not straightforward, we note that when Converse (1964) studied Americans' responses to party identification questions, the polychoric correlations were around 0.86. Our highest polychoric correlation is never this high, but it approaches it for very high contrast comparisons.

The distribution of candidate contrasts that respondents experience is partly a function of the randomization structure of the experiment, according to which candidates were equally likely to adopt all possible combinations of issue positions. It is therefore not directly representative of the distribution of issue-based utility differences that voters are likely to experience when comparing real parties and candidates in the UK, since those candidates and parties tend to take certain combinations of issue positions. What levels of choice stability do our results imply if respondents were faced with candidate choices representative of the real policy disagreements of real parties on the 34 issues considered here?

To assess this, we coded the positions of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties on all 34 issues based on their public policy pronouncements (see Appendix A for coded positions). We then combined these party positions with our wave 1 measures of respondent issue positions and wave 1 fitted candidate choice model to simulate issue-based contrasts for a sample of hypothetical pairwise choices between real party platforms defined over three issues at a time. Specifically, for each of 1,000 simulated issue-based contrasts, we: (1) sampled a wave 1 respondent; (2) sampled a pair of parties from among Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat, with sampling in proportion to the first and second-place constituency finishes achieved by these parties at the 2017 election; (3) randomly sampled three issues; (4) computed the absolute issue-based utility difference for the respondent given their self-reported positions and the party positions on the three issues, and given the parameters from the fitted wave 1 candidate choice model.

The resulting distribution of simulated contrasts induced by actual party issue positions is shown in cross-hatch in Figure 7.7. Comparison of this and the solid distribution makes clear that the real UK political parties offer *greater* issue-based contrasts for voters than do the experimentally generated candidates in our experiments: the average simulated absolute utility difference between parties was 1.93, compared to an average absolute utility difference of 0.92 for respondent-candidate choices in our experiment. Based on the fitted regression lines presented in Figure 7.7, the average absolute issue-based utility difference between *parties* would generate a predicted choice stability (polychoric correlation) of between 0.65–0.70, notably higher

than the unconditional average choice stability of 0.55–0.57 observed in our experiment.

Even these hypothetical party pairwise choices represent an understatement of voters' experienced contrasts as induced by the parties in real elections. People get to choose which issues to pay attention to in real elections, rather than being limited to a randomly selected three which may not include the issues they care about most.

In sum, we would expect real issue-based choice stability to be higher than the average choice stability in our experiment. The comparisons generated by the randomization tended to be lower contrast than those generated by real party's issue positions, and real world comparisons between real candidates and parties are not constrained to a random subset of three issues.

7.5.3 Choice Predictability

We can extend the reasoning behind the conditional choice stability expectations to generate one final expectation. We call this the *choice predictability* expectation. It says that, *given only information about respondents' reported issue positions and the pattern of candidate choices that they make conditional on those positions at time* t_1, *we can predict candidate choices between the same alternatives about as well at time* t_2 *as at* t_1. Although respondents may have unstable opinions on many issues, the issues on which they have more stable positions receive more weight in their choice calculus at both points in time. The issues on which people would ultimately be unstable were already playing little role in their t_1 candidate choices. Thus, whatever lack of predictability there is in the relationship between t_1 issue positions and t_2 candidate choices, it was already present in the relationship between t_1 issue positions and t_1 candidate choices. So long as there is temporal stability in the functional relationship between issue positions and choices—a key hallmark of enduring, meaningful, issue-based political choice—this renders choices at t_2 just as predictable based on observed t_1 issue positions and their functional relationship to choices at t_1.

To test out this choice predictability expectation, we take our original fitted model of wave 1 candidate choices (modelled as a function of respondents' wave 1 issue positions) and compute predicted probabilities of each candidate choice for each respondent-choice question combination. In Figure 7.8 we examine how well these predicted choice probabilities—based on wave 1 information alone—predict observed wave 1, wave 2, and wave 3 choice frequencies. Since these are fitted on wave 1 data, they fit wave 1 choices as well

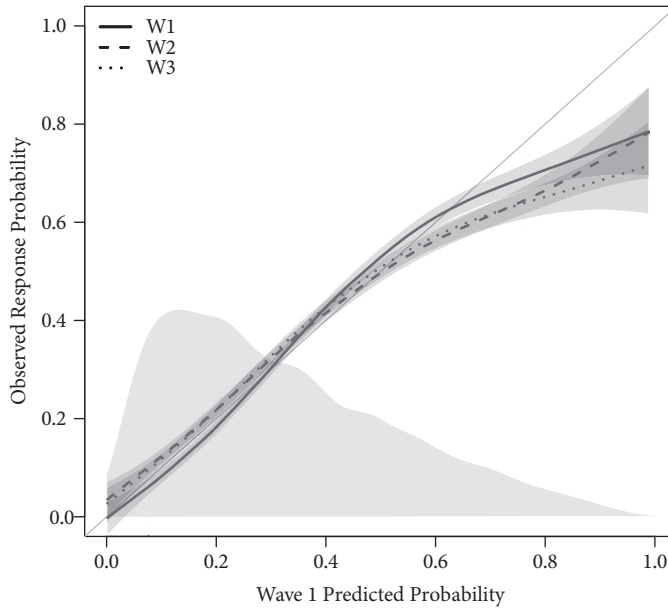

Figure 7.8 Observed probability of selecting a candidate in waves 1, 2, and 3 as a function of predicted probability based on wave 1 estimates of candidate choice model and self-reported issue position measured in wave 1.

as possible. But there is remarkably little decline in the predictive power of the model across waves. This is even though we are ignoring any changes in respondents' wave 2 and wave 3 self-reported positions on the issues included in the candidate choice questions, and even though respondents' candidate choices are only moderately stable *on average*.[10]

These results suggest that, when making issue-based choices between candidates, British voters appear to use an enduring decision-making process which ignores their more volatile issue opinions.

7.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has drawn on a *panel* candidate choice experiment, recording respondents' repeated choices between the *same* randomly generated pairs of candidates and their associated policy platforms at lengthy (six month) intervals. Analysing the data from that experiment, we have demonstrated five key

[10] The model is somewhat overconfident where it very strongly predicts that a candidate will be preferred. This suggests that respondents are not quite as decisive in selecting candidates where there is a very large estimated utility difference as the model's functional form implies.

findings. First, when making choices between candidates in our experiment the voters we surveyed appeared to choose based on a *spatial logic*. Even when we estimated a model which imposed no spatial restrictions on how individuals evaluated candidates proposing different policy alternatives on different issues, we found that they penalized candidates more heavily when those candidates adopted positions substantively further from their own preferred policy alternative on an issue.

Second, in line with our expectation of a *stability* ↔ *choice-importance association*, when making choices in the candidate experiments, the voters we surveyed tended to attach more importance to issues on which they tend to give more stable responses. This was true both comparing across issues in the aggregate and comparing individual voters with different levels of observed stability on the same issue.

Third, individuals' candidate choices were more stable when the issues on which candidates took positions were those that tend to elicit more stable issue opinions (*conditional choice stability I*). Fourth, individuals' candidate choices were far more stable when candidates presented clearer issue-based contrasts for respondents (*conditional choice stability II*). Indeed, we found that choices exhibited reasonably high absolute stability when issue-based contrasts were as high as they are likely to be in real elections. Finally, individuals' candidate choices made at a distance of six months and twelve months had very nearly as strong relationships to their self-reported issue opinions as do the candidate choices made in the same survey wave as those self-reported issue positions were recorded (*choice predictability*).

As is often the case with experimental research, how we interpret these findings depends on how far we are willing to extrapolate from these experimental findings to the broader political world. Our interpretation is that they illustrate some of the limits of the classic innocent voter account in terms of its scepticism regarding citizens' capacity to make meaningful issue-based political choices. Even when many individuals lack stable issue positions on many issues, meaningful, enduring political choices—particularly choices over parties or candidates—can still emerge from issue-based considerations.

The key thing that makes this possible is that, in line with an issue publics logic, most individuals do have *some* issues where they have real, stable views (whether ideological or idiosyncratic), and that they have enduring issue-related decision-making processes that put most weight on these issues. Individuals tend to ignore candidate positions on the issues that they do not care about and fail to form stable opinions upon. As a result, when we give individuals hypothetical candidate choices involving clear contrasts on issues upon which individuals form stable opinions, we find reasonably high

candidate choices stability even for purely hypothetical candidate choices involving just three issues, no partisan or other cues, and a twelve-month interval between our first and last wave. We suspect that the real political system gives even relatively inattentive voters more information about party positions than this, as real political parties generally take positions on more than three issues and those positions tend to be quite stable over time. As such, voters in real elections arguably have greater opportunity to choose between parties based on the issues about which they care and on which they have more stable opinions.

What we have shown is a possibility result: even given the varying and limited engagement of citizens with most political issues, citizens can nevertheless make stable political choices over candidates even when those candidates are defined solely in terms of issue positions. The well-established body of evidence of aggregate instability in citizen issue opinions does not preclude citizens making meaningful vote choices based on issue positions alone.

8

The Importance of Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion

The last chapter showed that, although they often lack well-formed, stable opinions on many policy issues, British voters are nevertheless reasonably capable of making coherent and meaningful political choices based on policy considerations. This is because voters often have at least some well-formed, stable opinions on certain policy issues, and they focus on those particular policy issues when making political choices. We previously showed, in Chapters 4 and 5, that the well-formed, stable policy opinions which voters do develop are sometimes *ideologically* structured, but are also quite frequently *idiosyncratic* (i.e., ideologically unpredictable).

We have not, however, shown *how much* stable and idiosyncratic issue opinion matters for political choices compared to stable and ideological issue opinion. Some might suspect that idiosyncratic issue opinions are less genuinely held, and less prominent in voters' minds when they make political decisions. Ideological issue opinions, by contrast, might be more genuine, and matter more for decision-making. Some of our evidence so far could be taken as supporting this view of ideological opinions. Ideological issue opinions are not just stable, but they 'make sense' given the other issue opinions an individual holds and given shared patterns of ideological correlations in the electorate. And we might suspect they 'make sense' on a deeper level, to the extent that shared patterns of ideological correlations in the electorate are generated by common logical, psychological, or social processes that bind certain issue opinions together.

In contrast, for idiosyncratic issue opinions we have so far relied on *one* characteristic—stability across repeated measurement—as evidence that these opinions are genuinely held. Since idiosyncratic issue opinions, by definition, do not follow a commonly held understanding of 'what goes with what', we might worry that the stability we see is an artefact of how respondents answer survey questions. Maybe respondents aren't really thinking about each issue question and recording a 'real' view which persists across time. Maybe respondents are just using some idiosyncratic rule to pick a

Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion and Political Choice. Nick Vivyan, Benjamin E. Lauderdale, and Chris Hanretty, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780198955245.003.0008

response from those on offer, and happen to use that same rule in each survey wave.[1] The recorded issue opinions that result from this sort of behaviour would be stable over time, but would provide limited information about the individual's real views on the issue.

Even if this is not the case, and idiosyncratic issue opinions are just as genuinely held as ideological ones, we might wonder whether—when it comes to political decision-making—voters neglect such opinions for pragmatic reasons. If political parties' policies are strongly differentiated by ideology, and differentiated along the same dimensions present in the electorate, then a voter can ensure that they vote for a party aligned with them on a broad range of issues by picking a party close to them on just one or two issues where the voter's opinions are structured by ideology. This reduces the number of issues on which the voter has to learn about party positions, and gives voters a simple decision-making rule: vote for the party you are closest to on a small number of *ideological* issues.

These two concerns about genuineness and relevance deserve to be taken seriously. Both raise the question of how much idiosyncratic issue opinions matter. To use the term introduced in the previous chapter, they ask how much *choice importance* voters attach to issues where they hold idiosyncratic opinions compared to issues where they hold ideological opinions.

In this chapter, we address this question in two main ways. First, we again draw on the measure of issue *choice importance* introduced in the previous chapter. This measure is based on the weight our survey respondents attach to different issues in experiments where they are asked to choose between candidates whose policy platforms vary randomly. We show that voters attach substantial importance to more idiosyncratic issues and do not merely focus on ideological issues in their political decision-making. We also use the measure to briefly examine the relative importance voters attach to the two main ideological dimensions of British politics.

Second, to supplement our experimental analysis of issue importance, we also look at real-world political choices at the 2019 general election. We show how idiosyncratic opinions concerning Britain's relationship with the European Union help us explain vote choice in that election, beyond what can be explained by ideology alone. Our experimental and observational findings suggest that voters do care about—and act upon—idiosyncratic issue opinions.

[1] This would be an example of 'satisficing' survey response behaviour (Krosnick, 1991). Survey satisficing occurs when respondents answer survey questions via short-cuts rather than performing all cognitive steps necessary to provide a fully considered response to the question. An example of satisficing response behaviour might be where a respondent simply picks the middle option on a question no matter which response options are provided.

8.1 Ideology, Idiosyncrasy, and Importance

In the last chapter, we presented an experimental method for measuring the choice importance of different policy issues to voters. We used the resulting importance scores to show that issues which attract more stable opinions tend to be more important. We do something similar here, except now we examine how importance varies depending on how much stable and ideological opinion an issue attracts, and depending on how much stable and idiosyncratic opinion an issue attracts.

Figure 8.1 displays our key findings regarding idiosyncrasy and importance. The left panel plots the estimated choice importance of each of our 34 policy issues on the vertical axis against the estimated fraction of *ideological* opinion variation on those issues on the horizontal axis. The right panel plots estimated importance against estimated fraction of *idiosyncratic* opinion variation on those issues.

We begin by discussing the link between the degree of ideological opinion variation and issue importance. Here there is a moderately strong positive association. Issues which have a low fraction of ideological opinion variation—such as international trade and inflation versus unemployment—also have low importance scores. Issues which have a high fraction of ideological opinion variation—such as net migration and foreign aid—tend to have among the highest estimated importance scores. Across the 34 issues, the Pearson correlation between the fraction of ideological opinion variation on an issue and the issue's importance score is 0.51.

We now turn to the link between the degree of idiosyncratic opinion variation and issue importance. Here there is a weaker positive association, and the points are more scattered around the line of best fit. For example: the issue of whether government policy should incentivize healthy choices is just as idiosyncratic as the issue of government policy on strikes, but government policy on strikes is much more important by our measure. Because the points show more scatter, the Pearson correlation between the fraction of idiosyncratic opinion variation on an issue and the issue's importance score is lower, at 0.18.

On the one hand, this contrast in associations is evidence that voters care more about issues on which they form more ideologically organized opinions. Those issues which elicit more ideological opinion do on average receive greater priority when voters come to make political choices.

On the other hand, the results presented in Figure 8.1 do not imply that idiosyncratic opinion is noise, or that it is ignored by voters when they make decisions. Some issues with high levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation

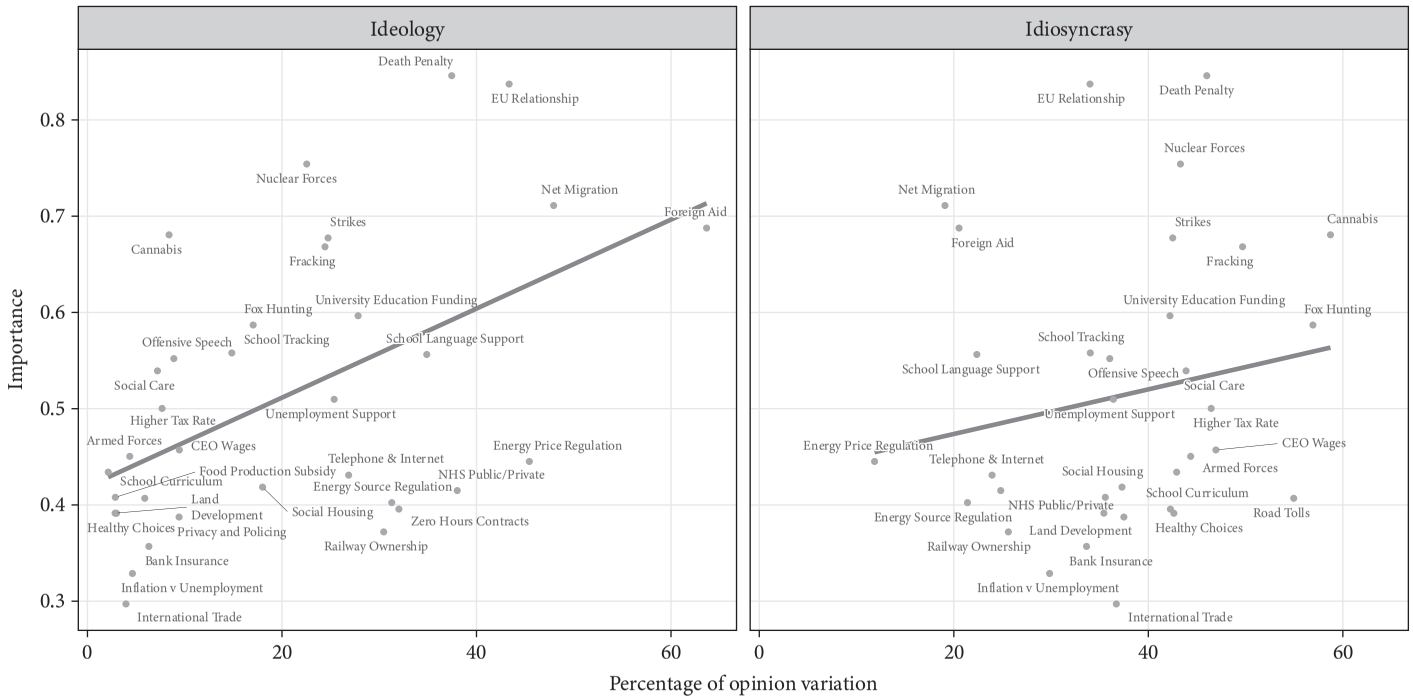

Figure 8.1 Issue importance as a function of fractions of ideological and idiosyncratic opinion variation. Lines of best fit shown in grey.

receive low importance scores (e.g., CEO wages, road tolls), but others have importance scores in the top quartile (e.g., the death penalty, cannabis, fracking).

To see this another way, let's take the eight issues with the highest population importance scores according to our estimates: Britain's relationship with the EU, the death penalty, nuclear forces, net migration, foreign aid, cannabis, strikes, and fracking. These issues all have importance scores above 0.65, and form a reasonably distinct vertical strata in Figure 8.1. If we restrict ourselves to these generally 'most important' issues, we find that the average fraction of ideological opinion variation is 34%. This is notably higher than that among our 34 issues generally (20%), consistent with the notion that important issues tend to be more ideological than less important issues. However, there is also a significant amount of idiosyncratic opinion on these 'most important' issues. In fact, at 39%, the mean fraction of idiosyncratic opinion variation on these most important issues is slightly higher than the mean fraction of idiosyncratic opinion variation averaging across all 34 issues (37%) and is also higher than the mean fraction of ideological variation on the most important issues.

Moreover, when we look at individual issues among those in the 'most important' group, it does not appear that membership in this group is solely due to high ideological opinion variation. Of the eight issues, three are characterized by at best modest fractions of ideological opinion variation combined with much higher fractions of idiosyncratic opinion—strikes (25% vs 43%), fracking (24% vs 50%), and nuclear forces (23% vs 43%)—while one, cannabis, combines very low levels of ideological opinion variation with high levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation (8% vs 59%).

Another way we can analyse this data is to estimate a regression which models the importance of an issue as a function of the proportion of ideological opinion variation *and* the proportion of idiosyncratic opinion variation on that issue. Table 8.1 presents the resulting model estimates when we do this. Consistent with the above findings, the estimated coefficient on ideological opinion variation in this module is positive and statistically significant. This is what we would expect given the pattern in the left panel of Figure 8.1. What matters more for our argument is the coefficient on idiosyncratic opinion variation. The right panel of Figure 8.1 might lead us to expect a small or statistically insignificant relationship. However, Table 8.1 shows that, once we control for the proportion of ideological opinion variation on an issue, the conditional relationship between idiosyncrasy and issue importance is positive and significant. In interpreting the coefficient on idiosyncrasy in this model, we must remember that, when the proportion of ideological issue

Table 8.1 OLS regression model of issue importance as a function of the proportions of ideological and idiosyncratic opinion variation on an issue (95% confidence intervals for coefficients are reported in square brackets).

	Model 1
(Intercept)	0.01
	[–0.16; 0.19]
Ideology	0.82
	[0.56; 1.07]
Idiosyncrasy	0.90
	[0.53; 1.26]
R^2	0.58
Adj. R^2	0.55
Num. obs.	34

opinion variation on an issue is held fixed, then increases in idiosyncratic issue opinion must imply decreases in the third, remaining component of issue opinion variation: unstable issue opinion. With this in mind, the estimated coefficient on idiosyncrasy is telling us that exchanging unstable issue opinion variation for idiosyncratic issue opinion variation is associated with greater issue importance.[2]

What is even more notable is that the coefficient on the idiosyncratic opinion variation is *nearly identical* to the coefficient on ideological opinion variation. It appears that increases in either ideological opinion variation or idiosyncratic opinion variation both have a similar partial association with the importance voters put on a given issue. There is no evidence here that issues on which opinion is more ideological, as opposed to idiosyncratic, get a greater importance weight in candidate choice. Rather, more of *either* form of stable opinion is associated with greater importance weight.

In sum, we find evidence that British voters attach increased importance to issues upon which they develop ideologically organized views. However, they also attach substantial importance to issues which elicit high levels of idiosyncratic opinion. What is more, for a given level of ideological opinion variation on an issue, increases in idiosyncratic opinion variation are associated with increases in issue importance. Collectively, these results are consistent with the notion that idiosyncratic issue opinion *does* matter for political choice.

[2] The estimated intercept corresponds to an issue on which there is no stable opinion variation. Unsurprisingly, it shows that such an issue is predicted to have an importance score close to zero.

We see this as further evidence that the idiosyncratic opinion we document reflects genuinely held views which voters do care about.

8.2 The Importance of Different Ideological Dimensions

We saw in Chapter 4 that, to the extent that Britons' issue opinions are ideologically organized, they are organized by two ideological dimensions: an economic left–right dimension and a social liberal–conservative dimension. Several prominent recent studies have argued that British electoral politics has witnessed an ideological reorientation in the latter half of the 2010s (Curtice and Simpson, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021; Denver and Johns, 2022). According to this argument, the social liberal–conservative dimension has become increasingly consequential for vote choices as compared to the economic left–right dimension which traditionally structured political competition.

In Figure 8.2 we use our issue importance measures to examine the relative weight Britons in 2018 accorded to the two main ideological dimensions. The figure plots the estimated importance of each of our 34 policy issues on the vertical axis as a function of the proportion of ideological opinion variation explained by the economic left–right dimension on the horizontal axis. The further to the right an issue is, the more the ideological component of voters' opinions on those issues can be understood in terms of the economic left–right dimension rather than the social liberal–conservative dimension. The further to the left an issue is, the more the ideological component of voters' opinions on that issue are attributable to social liberal–conservative ideology rather than economic ideology.

The pattern in Figure 8.2 is broadly consistent with the notion that non-economic ideology had come to play an important role in British politics by 2018. Issues to the left of the plot, where economic ideology explains a low proportion of ideological opinion variation, tend to be accorded somewhat more importance in voters' decision-making compared to issues where economic ideology explains a high proportion of ideological opinion variation. If we fit a linear regression line to these points, the resulting slope coefficient is negative and statistically significant (p-value: 0.02).

This pattern is by no means deterministic. For example, some issues which are almost exclusively social liberal–conservative in terms of ideological opinion variation—such as privacy and policing or the extent to which government should promote healthy choices—score quite low in importance. This pattern also depends on the issues we chose to ask people about. Although we tried to give good reasons for our choice of issues in Chapter 4,

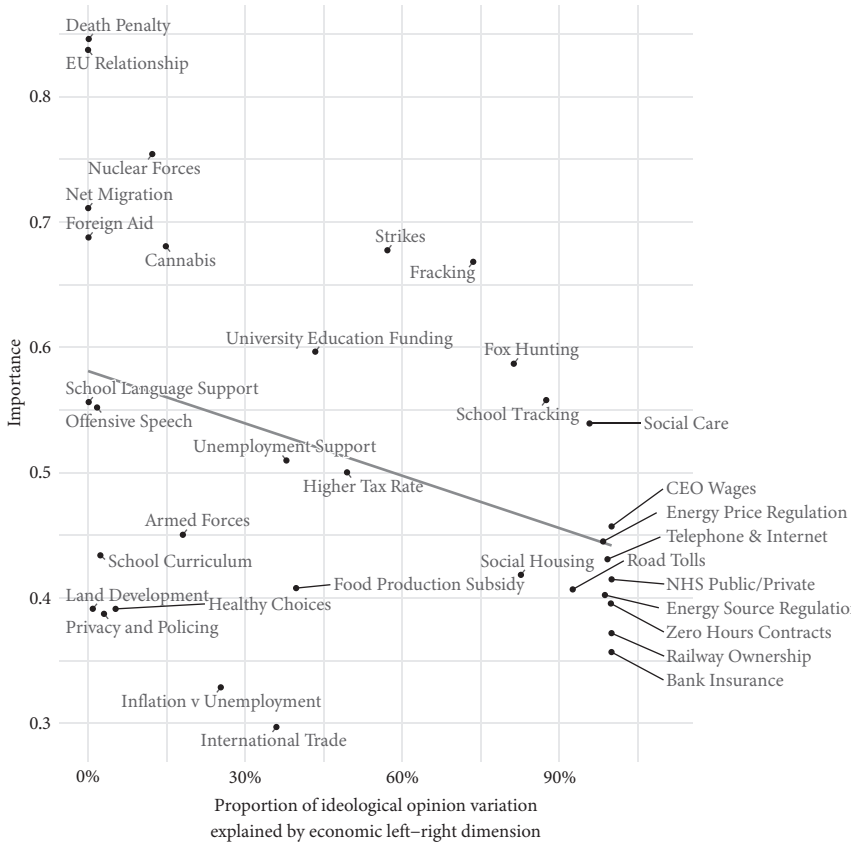

Figure 8.2 Issue importance as a function of relative loading of issue on economic left–right versus social liberal–conservative ideological dimension. Line of best fit shown in grey.

it is possible that we inadvertently selected less important economic issues than we did social issues. Nevertheless, the general finding here is that, when it comes to ideological issue opinion, the issues we examined which loaded more onto the non-economic dimension of politics seemed to be more important to British voters in 2018 than the issues which loaded onto the economic dimension.

8.3 Electoral Consequences of Idiosyncratic Issue Opinion

So far our evidence for the importance of different types of issue opinion for political choices has come exclusively from survey experiments. As we discussed in the last chapter, this experimental approach allows us to identify

the causal effect of a variety of individual issues in voters' political decision-making. Still, we might wonder whether idiosyncratic opinion matters for vote choices in real elections rather than hypothetical ones.

In this section we provide descriptive evidence suggesting that idiosyncratic issue opinion played a significant role in voting behaviour in the UK general election of 12 December 2019. We focus on the issue of Britain's relationship with the European Union. We argue that, for several reasons, this is an advantageous real-world case for disentangling the effects of ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion.

First, the issue of Britain's relationship with the EU met all the conditions to be consequential. As Butler and Stokes (1969, 184–187) pointed out, a policy issue will only impact an elector's vote choice when *(a)* they form real opinions on that issue, *(b)* they care strongly about it, and *(c)* different parties take prominent, contrasting positions on the issue, meaning that voters have a clear choice. Conditions *a* and *b* are satisfied, since we have seen already in our analysis of issue opinion stability (Chapter 6) and importance (Chapter 7) that many British voters hold real opinions on the EU issue and care a lot about the issue.

We argue that condition *c* is also satisfied, since the EU issue was highly prominent in terms of elite contestation at the 2019 general election (Ford et al., 2021; Denver and Johns, 2022). Indeed, the primary reason that the election was called in the first place was to break the parliamentary deadlock over the implementation of Brexit following the Leave victory in the 2016 referendum and the hung parliament that resulted from the 2017 general election (Cowley, 2021). Moreover, the issue was front and centre of the ensuing election campaign, with the main British parties taking contrasting positions upon it. The Conservatives—led by Boris Johnson, who had become party leader just a few months before, and who had been perhaps the most well-known advocate for the Leave campaign during the 2016 referendum—concentrated ruthlessly on their central campaign promise to 'get Brexit done' (Ford et al., 2021). The Brexit they promised was a relatively 'hard' one: the withdrawal agreement with the EU that Johnson sought to enact into law entailed Britain leaving the single market and customs union. The Labour Party, in contrast, pledged to renegotiate a softer Brexit option including customs union membership and to hold a new referendum on this deal with 'remain' an option on the ballot. Although less keen to talk about Brexit because of the electoral risks it posed for them, Labour failed to shift the campaign focus onto other issues (Ford et al., 2021). Meanwhile, several other smaller parties such as the Scottish Nationalist Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, and the Green Party all fervently opposed

Brexit, with the latter three forming an electoral pact under the label 'Unite to Remain'. In sum, 'Brexit was the defining issue of the campaign' (Ford et al., 2021, 496) in 2019, with parties taking contrasting positions on this issue.

The second reason that studying the EU issue at the 2019 general election is advantageous for disentangling the role of ideological and idiosyncratic issue opinion is that opinion on the EU is both ideological and idiosyncratically structured. Based on the analysis in Chapters 4 and 5, 43% of Britons' opinion variation on the EU issue is ideologically structured, among the highest such fractions across all 34 policy issues we study. All of this variation is in fact explained by voters' underlying positions on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension. At the same time, a large proportion—just over a third (34%)—of opinion variation on the EU issue is stable but unpredictable based on ideology, and therefore idiosyncratic in nature.

This means that there is ample scope for either ideological or idiosyncratic opinion on the issue of Britain's relationship with the EU to impact vote choices at the 2019 election. Existing research has demonstrated that people's opinions on the EU issue were indeed predictive of their vote choice at the 2019 general election, with those favouring leave more likely to vote for the Conservative Party (e.g., Curtice, 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022). What we are interested in is the extent to which this reflected those opinions on the issue which were ideologically consistent or also those opinions on the issue which were ideologically inconsistent, and therefore idiosyncratic.

We are well placed to disentangle these factors. We have a measure of respondents' issue-specific opinion on the EU issue, measures of respondents' broader ideological position based on a range of issues including the EU issue, and post-election measures of respondents' self-reported 2019 vote choice. Our strategy is relatively simple. First, we estimate an OLS regression model where the dependent variable is an indicator for whether a respondent votes Conservative in the election versus voting for any other party or abstaining.[3] The two predictors in this model are our measures of respondent ideology on both the economic left–right and social liberal–conservative dimension. We call this the 'ideology' model of vote choice. Second, we re-estimate this regression model adding as a predictor respondents' issue-specific opinion on the EU as stated in wave 1. This new predictor is entered into the model via a series of four dummy variables, one for each possible

[3] We focus on Conservative voting versus any other outcome because the Conservatives represented the main viable option for those supporting Brexit. The Brexit Party was marginalized by the Conservative's Brexit focus during the campaign, and its decision to stand down candidates in Conservative-held seats was seen to severely undermine its electoral credibility with Brexit-supporting voters (Ford et al., 2021, 204–206).

policy alternative offered to respondents in the EU issue question apart from the most Europhile alternative of remaining in the EU and signing up to further agreements, which is treated as the baseline category. We call this second model the 'ideology + issue' model. To ensure that any differences between the models do not reflect differences in the samples on which they are estimated, we estimate both of these models on the subset of wave 1 respondents to our survey who were randomly assigned to receive the EU issue question.

If the electoral impact of the EU issue in 2019 is driven *exclusively* by ideological opinion on this issue, we should find two things. First, a voter's location on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension should be a strong predictor of voting for the Conservative Party. Second, respondens' issue-specific opinion on the EU should *not* be a strong predictor of Conservative voting, when controlling for ideology. If genuinely held opinions on the issue flow entirely from the voter's position on the social liberal–conservative dimension, then that ideological position contains the vote-relevant information regarding the voter's opinions on the issue, and knowing the actual reported opinion of the voter on this issue adds little.

If instead the impact of the EU issue in 2019 is driven partly by idiosyncratic opinion, we should find that, even when controlling for voter ideology, individuals' issue-specific opinions on the EU issue are predictive of vote choice. This is because there will be individuals who have opinions on the EU issue which are genuine, and which influence their voter choice in important ways, but which are nonetheless not well predicted by their ideological position.

Table 8.2 shows the results when we fit these models. Inspecting the 'ideology' model (model 1) first, the estimated coefficients reveal associations between ideology and voting that are in line with expectations. Voters with a more right-wing position on the economic ideological dimension were more likely to vote Conservative, as were voters with a more socially conservative position on the social ideological dimension. Both of these associations are statistically significant, although, consistent with accounts which stress the rise of the non-economic ideological dimension in British politics (Curtice and Simpson, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022), the association between social ideological position and vote choice is the stronger one. Whereas a one-standard deviation (i.e., one-unit) shift to the right on the economic dimension is associated with a 12 point increase in the probability of voting Conservative (95% confidence interval: 7 to 16), an equivalent sized shift in the conservative direction on the social ideological dimension is associated with a 31 point increase in the probability of voting Conservative (95% confidence interval: 27 to 35).

Table 8.2 OLS regression models of voting Conservative in 2019 (versus any other vote or abstention). Model 1 includes voter estimated ideology only. Model 2 adds issue-specific positions on the EU relationship as a series of dummy variables, with 'Remain, more integration' as the baseline. Both models are estimated based on the random subset of wave 1 respondents who receive the EU relationship issue item and issue positions are measured from wave 1 responses. Results are substantively similar when modelling voting Conservative or Brexit Party versus any other vote or abstention (95 percent confidence intervals for coefficients are reported in square brackets).

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Intercept	0.45*	0.33*
	[0.42; 0.48]	[0.20; 0.46]
Ideology: econ left–right	0.12*	0.13*
	[0.07; 0.17]	[0.08; 0.17]
Ideology: social lib–con	0.31*	0.15*
	[0.27; 0.35]	[0.08; 0.22]
EU issue: Remain in EU		–0.11*
		[–0.22; –0.00]
EU issue: Leave EU, stay in single market		0.12
		[–0.04; 0.27]
EU issue: Leave EU, leave single market		0.27*
		[0.12; 0.43]
EU issue: Leave all EU programmes		0.27*
		[0.08; 0.45]
R^2	0.25	0.30
Adj. R^2	0.24	0.29
Num. obs.	761	761

*Null hypothesis value outside the confidence interval.

However, when we inspect the estimated 'ideology + issue' model (model 2), we see that the addition of information on respondents' issue-specific EU opinions notably improves our ability to predict vote choice at the 2019 election. The R^2 statistic, which measures the proportion of variation in the dependent variable explained by a regression model, improves from 25 percent for the 'ideology' model to 30 percent for the 'ideology + issue' model. The adjusted-R^2, which amends the R^2 statistic to penalize regression models which include more predictors, improves by a similar margin, from 24 percent for the 'ideology' model to 29 percent for the 'ideology + issue' model. In other words, we can explain 5 percentage points more variation in 2019 Conservative voting when we take account of individual's issue-specific opinions on the EU beyond simply their two-dimensional ideology.

What is more, the estimated coefficients show that, even controlling for individuals' general social liberal–conservative ideology, the association between EU-specific opinion and Conservative voting is statistically significant and sizeable in magnitude. To illustrate this, imagine two 2019 voters who had the same ideological positions, but where one voter wanted to leave the EU and the single market (alternative 4 on the EU issue question) and where the other voter wanted to stay in the EU (alternative 2 on the EU question). The estimated model implies that the first of these voters would be 39 percentage points more likely to vote Conservative than the second of these voters (95% confidence interval: 28 to 49 percentage points). Crucially, this large difference in predicted probabilities of voting Conservative stems from the two voters holding different issue-specific opinions on the EU issue, and despite both sharing identical social liberal–conservative and economic left–right ideological positions. We view this as evidence that non-ideological opinion on the EU issue was consequential for vote choices at the 2019 general election.

Our evidence here comes from observational data. Although we can show that EU-specific issue positions were associated with voting behaviour, we can't prove that EU-specific issue positions caused respondents to vote in particular ways. We can, however, perform some additional analysis to corroborate our claim that idiosyncratic EU-specific issue opinion played an important role in the 2019 general election.

First, we can perform a similar type of analysis for each of the other 33 policy issues included in our survey study. One crucial reason that we expected large issue-specific effects of EU issue opinion on vote choice at the 2019 general election is that the Brexit divide between parties dominated the 2019 election campaign. In contrast to the 2017 election, where the main parties' stances on Brexit were less clearly differentiated (Curtice, 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022, 100), non-Brexit party policy divides were far less prominent in the 2019 campaign. For example, while Labour tried to emphasize its ambitious spending pledges, the Conservatives also neutralized this issue by promising to end austerity and spend more on public services (Ford et al., 2021, 209). On immigration, while Labour promised to move away from a fixed immigration target, so too did the Conservatives by pledging a new points-based system (Morris, 2019). On foreign aid, both parties promised to stick to spending 0.7% of gross national income on foreign aid. Therefore, if our interpretation is correct, it would be surprising if, for other issues, we were to find issue-specific opinion effects on voting of a similar magnitude to those found for the EU issue. Doing so might suggest that the EU-specific issue opinion effects estimated in the above models perhaps do not really

reflect the impact of idiosyncratic EU specific-opinion on voting, but rather capture the effect of something else about voters who hold non-ideological opinions.

To check this, Figure 8.3 summarizes results when we estimate separate 'ideology' and 'ideology + issue' models of Conservative voting at the

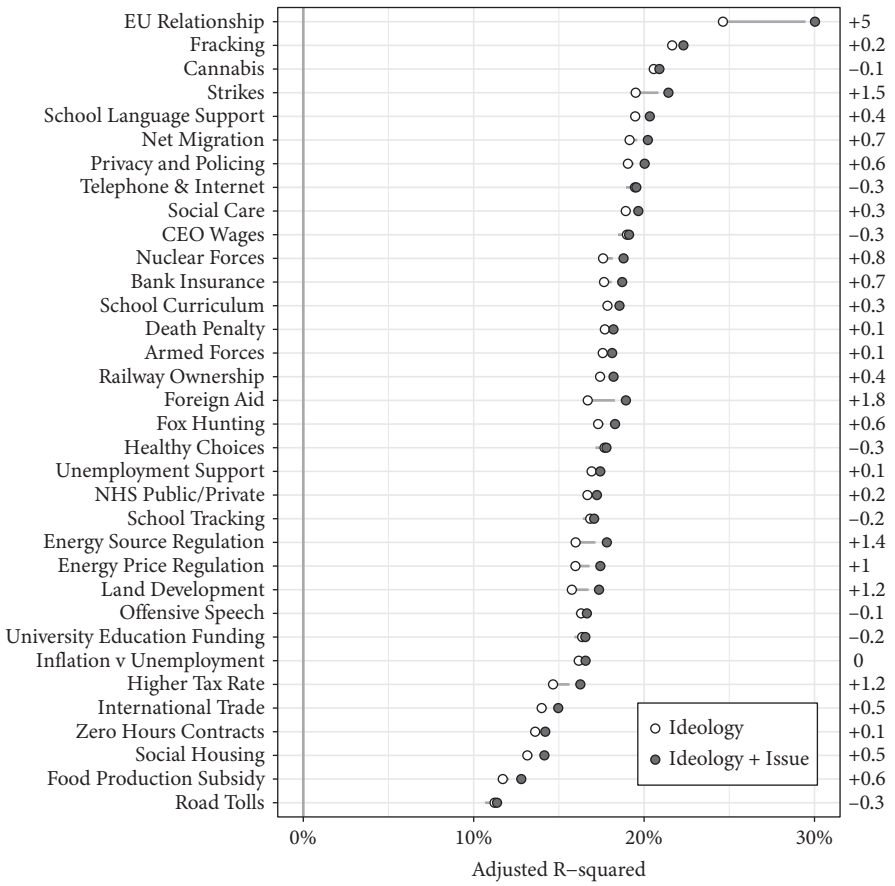

Figure 8.3 How much do positions on each issue explain 2019 vote choice beyond 2D ideological positions? For each issue, the plot shows the adjusted R squared of two regression models of Conservative voting in 2019 (versus any other vote or abstention): an 'ideology' model which contains as predictors only a respondent's estimated positions on the economic left–right and social liberal–conservative dimensions; and an 'ideology + issue' model that adds as a predictor a respondent's position on the issue. For each issue, both the 'ideology' and 'ideology + issue' models are OLS models based on the random subset of wave 1 respondents who receive the issue item and where issue positions are taken from wave 1 responses.

2019 election for each of our 34 policy issues. As before, for each issue, the 'ideology' model includes as predictors only individuals' positions on the economic and social ideological dimensions, while the 'ideology + issue' model includes individuals' reported positions on the issue of interest as an additional categorical predictor. For each issue, both models are estimated based on the random subsample of respondents who received a question on that issue in wave 1 of our survey. The plot focuses on the adjusted R^2 of each model for each issue, since this gives us a summary measure of explanatory power (while accounting for the number of predictors in each model).

Figure 8.3 shows, first, that the 'ideology' model of 2019 vote has more explanatory power among the random subset of respondents who received the EU question than it does when estimated for other subsets of respondents who received other issue questions. This is because, of all issues, a person's position on the EU issue is among the most predictive of their position on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension. As a result, we estimate these respondents' position on the social liberal–conservative dimension with less measurement error, and this lower measurement error means that measured social ideology is better able to explain vote choices.

However, despite the fact that the 'ideology' model has higher explanatory power among respondents who received the EU issue question, the jump in explanatory power from the 'ideology' to the 'ideology + issue' model is much greater for the EU issue than for any other issue. The additional 5% of variation in Conservative voting we are able to explain by adding information on EU-specific issue opinion is always more than two times the increase in explained variation when we add information on any other issue-specific opinions, and is more than three times the increase in explained variation for all but one other issue-specific opinion.[4]

This test showed that the EU issue was different to all other issues at the 2019 general election. A second type of corroborative evidence comes from examining further features of individuals' opinions on the EU. Recall that idiosyncratic issue opinions are opinions which are not ideologically organized but which are stable over repeated measurement. We can test whether stable positions on the EU mattered more for vote choice than unstable opinions on the EU. To do this, we re-estimate our 'ideology + issue' model of 2019 vote choice, adding an interaction between EU issue opinion and an indicator for whether that issue opinion is stable across repeated measurement for

[4] For some issues, the 'ideology + issue' model has a lower adjusted R^2 than the 'ideology' model. For these issues, the extra variation in Conservative voting explained by the addition of issue-specific opinion as a predictor is insufficient to offset the penalty that the adjusted R^2 statistic imposes for the addition of this predictor.

the voter. This interaction allows us to separate out the effects of *stable* EU issue opinions from the effects of *unstable* EU issue opinions. If it is primarily idiosyncratic EU issue opinion which, in addition to ideology, explains 2019 vote choice, we should find that the effects on vote choice of stable EU issue opinions are much greater than those of unstable EU issue opinions.

To perform this test, we need to measure the stability of an individual respondent's EU issue position over time. We therefore switch to our wave 2 respondents, and particularly those respondents who were asked the EU issue question. For each of these respondents we construct an indicator of whether their EU issue opinion was perfectly stable between wave 1 and wave 2 of the survey, or not. Of the wave 2 respondents who received the EU issue question and who were included in a later BES survey wave which recorded their 2019 vote choice, 275 recorded a stable opinion on the EU issue in waves 1 and 2, while 156 did not. For this sample of respondents, we then estimate an OLS regression model of 2019 Conservative voting as a function of respondent ideology, respondent wave 2 EU issue opinion, the wave 1–2 EU issue opinion stability indicator, and the interaction between those final two predictors.

Because the interpretation of coefficients from interaction models can be complex, Figure 8.4 summarizes the key results from this regression model in terms of predicted probabilities. These predicted probabilities are calculated from the model assuming that a voter is an ideological moderate (i.e., is positioned at zero on both the economic and social ideological dimensions). The left panel shows how the predicted probability of this person voting Conservative varies as a function of wave 2 EU issue opinion when that opinion was *unstable* between wave 1 and wave 2. The right panel shows the predicted probability of voting Conservative as a function of wave 2 EU issue opinion when that opinion was *stable* between wave 1 and wave 2. When issue opinion is unstable (left panel), there is some indication that probability of voting Conservative increases when a voter's wave 2 opinion on the EU issue moves away from a strong Remain one. However, when EU issue opinion is stable (right panel), the probability of voting Conservative varies much more dramatically as a function of Wave 2 EU issue opinion.

In sum, we have shown that, even controlling for a voter's policy ideology, issue-specific opinion on Britain's relationship with the EU is strongly predictive of that voter's choice at the 2019 general election. It is not a novel claim to suggest that the EU issue played an important role in vote choice at the 2019 general election, but we have provided evidence that it did so above and beyond the extent to which views on that issue reflected a more general ideological orientation: opinions on the EU issue seem to have mattered in their own right, and not just as expressions of a more general social orientation.

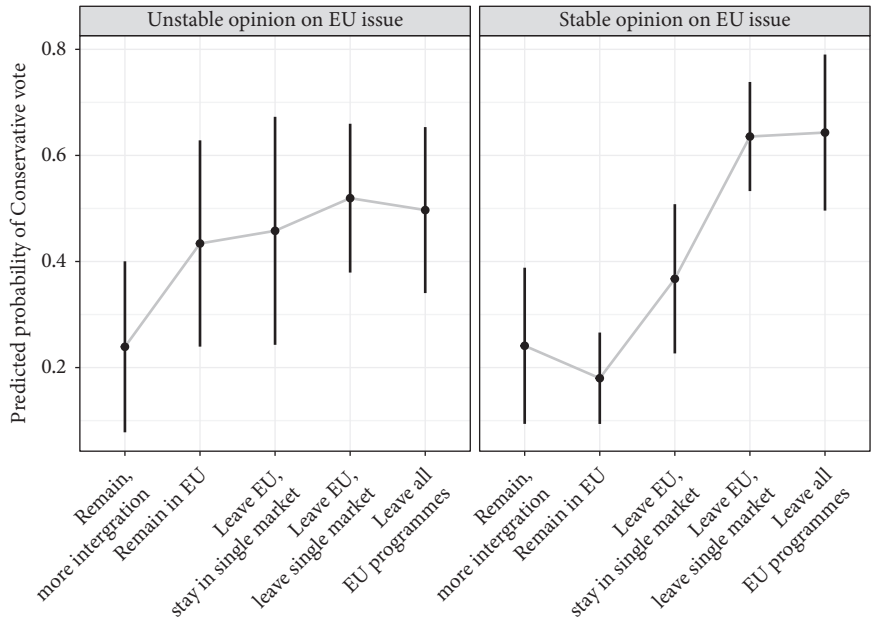

Figure 8.4 Predicted probabilities of voting Conservative in 2019 for an ideological moderate as a function of opinion on EU issue and stability of that opinion. Estimates based on OLS model of 2019 Conservative voting as a function of wave 2 EU issue opinion interacted with wave 1–2 stability of EU issue opinion.

We have also shown that this is particularly true when issue-specific opinion on the EU is stable, and that specific opinion on other issues does not exhibit notable associations with 2019 vote choice in the presence of ideology controls. Together, we think this evidence underlines the potential for idiosyncratic issue opinion to matter in elections. Even when voters form ideologically unpredictable opinions on a policy issue, those opinions can plausibly impact vote choices provided voters care about the issue enough and provided parties take prominent, contrasting positions on the issue at an election.

These findings also speak to the debate between research which argues that British electoral politics in recent years has seen an reorientation toward non-economic ideology (Curtice and Simpson, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2020; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020; Denver and Johns, 2022), and research which cautions that recent developments might be more reflective of conflict over the particular issue of Brexit (Curtice, 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2020). While we do find that non-economic ideology is strongly predictive of Conservative voting at the 2019 general election, our findings also suggest that EU-specific

opinion is an important factor too. As such, our results leave a question mark over the durability of the new cleavage in British electoral politics: if this cleavage is mainly about the specific issue of Brexit, rather than social ideology more generally, then there is more chance of its electoral impact subsiding as issues other than Brexit come to the fore. Quite how many of these future issues will have the same capacity as Brexit to shape electoral choice must, of course, remain a matter for speculation.

8.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter we looked at the impact of different types of issue opinion—ideological, idiosyncratic, and unstable issue opinion—on voters' political choices. A key motivation for doing this was the lingering concern that idiosyncratic issue opinion, though it makes up a substantial portion of overall issue opinion, might still somehow be less genuine or less consequential than ideologically organized issue opinion.

We provided two types of evidence to address these concerns. The first type of evidence relied on the experimental, choice-based measures of issue importance generated in the previous chapter. Our analysis of these measures showed that issues where opinion is structured more by ideology are more important. However, our analysis also suggested that issues where opinion is structured by idiosyncrasy are more important than issues where opinion is largely unstable. Furthermore, several issues which elicit a substantial amount of idiosyncratic opinion—a number of which also elicit modest or low amounts of ideological opinion—were among the most important issues in respondents' political decision-making.

Second, we provided real-world evidence from the 2019 general election. Consistent with the ideological account of public opinion and politics, we found that a persons' policy ideology predicted how they voted in the 2019 general election. However, consistent with the idea that idiosyncratic issue opinion can also matter for voting, we also found that ideologically unpredictable opinions on the specific issue of the UK's relationship with the EU were also consequential. Controlling for ideology, issue-specific opinion on EU issue was strongly associated with Conservative support in this 'Brexit election'. And this was particularly the case when those issue-specific opinions were stably held by respondents.

Our experimental and observational findings suggest that idiosyncratic issue opinion can and does matter in voters' political decision-making. This in turn allays concerns that what we measured as idiosyncratic issue opinion

in previous chapters might, despite its stability across repeated measurement, somehow lack the genuineness or importance typically ascribed to ideologically organized opinions.

While our findings come from analyses of British voters, we see little reason to believe that Britons are unique in placing sometimes substantial weight on idiosyncratic issue opinions when making political choices. Ahler and Broockman (2018) show, in a series of experimental and observational analyses, that individual issue-specific opinions (and the extent to which candidates agree with those specific opinions) better explain *American* voters' choices between candidates than do ideological considerations (i.e., voter-candidate ideological proximity). Although they do not directly measure the degree of idiosyncratic opinion on different issues, the findings they report are consistent with non-ideological, idiosyncratic issue opinion being important in the decision-making of American voters.

There are of course caveats here. Even if idiosyncratic opinion on an issue is real and important to a voter, it will only matter for electoral choices to the extent that parties take prominent contrasting stands on that issue. Our survey experiments allowed us to identify several issues which elicited substantial idiosyncratic opinion variation and which mattered for survey respondents' choices between fictitious candidates. In a general election like the 2019 general election, which revolved around a single issue, those other policy issues did not appear to have a large issue-specific impact on vote choices. This is in line with the reasoning laid out by Butler and Stokes (1969), which states that the impact of issue-specific opinion on voters' electoral choices is conditional on the degree to which elites stress differentiated policy alternatives on that specific issue.

9
Conclusion

Many definitions of democracy emphasize government responsiveness to the wishes of citizens (e.g., Pitkin, 1967; Dahl, 1971, 1989). Accordingly, democratic elections are often viewed as a means to 'bring citizens' preferences to bear on public policies' (Powell, 2000, 160). This book has focused upon the starting point for these widely held and influential notions of democratic policy responsiveness: citizens' preferences concerning public policies. More specifically, we have addressed two questions about these preferences. What is the nature of mass opinion on public policies? And what role can and do voters' opinions on public policies play in their political choices? Depending on the answers to these questions democratic policy responsiveness can become more or less feasible, and more or less complex.

A prominent strand of political science research, which we have called the *ideological voter* account, argues that mass opinion on public policies is, at least in its most important and consequential part, ideologically organized. Voters who have particular views on one policy issue tend also to have particular views on other policy issues, such that we tend to observe certain combinations of opinions across issues. As a result, voters' opinions across a broad range of public policies can be summarized as positions on a small number of (usually one or two) underlying ideological dimensions. This simplifies democratic policy responsiveness because voters can choose between political parties based on the ideological positions they adopt, thereby incentivizing parties to ensure that their ideological position—and the set of policies it implies—does not stray too far from the position of a typical voter—and the set of policies they prefer.

This contrasts with a second prominent strand of political science research, which we have called the *innocent voter* account. The classic version of this account argues that most voters not only lack ideologically organized opinions; on most issues of public policy, many voters lack real, meaningful opinions at all. A more recent *voter as follower* variant accepts that, when surveyed, voters may exhibit some stable and ideologically organized collections of reported opinions, but only because they mimic the ideologically organized policy positions of the political elites they already support for other

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reasons. Both versions of the innocent voter account are therefore sceptical about democratic policy responsiveness. Election outcomes cannot be understood as a function of mass policy preferences because those preferences do not really exist or, to the extent that they do, are more a product of voters' party support than a force shaping their party support.

This book has argued that, while these ideological and innocent voter accounts do explain aspects of mass opinion on public policy, a proper understanding requires a third, equally crucial yet often neglected, *idiosyncratic voter* account. According to this account, many voters *do* develop real, meaningful opinions on policy issues. Yet, consistent with an *issue publics* logic, they tend to do so only on varying, idiosyncratic subsets of issues. What is more, the combinations of policies voters come to prefer across these subsets of issues tend to be idiosyncratic combinations rather than ideologically consistent ones. Because it posits that most voters do have at least some real opinions on policy issues, this idiosyncratic voter account is less pessimistic than the innocent voter account about the possibilities for policy responsive democracy. Yet because it posits that disagreement about public policy in the electorate is highly multidimensional, the idiosyncratic voter account also implies that democratic policy responsiveness is much less straightforward than the ideological voter account would suggest.

The preceding chapters have developed our argument in detail. In Chapter 2 we set out the theoretical case for the idiosyncratic voter account. To do so, we summarized the key elements of the ideological and innocent voter accounts, the two frameworks which currently dominate thinking about mass policy opinion. We argued that, viewed from a different perspective, key pillars underpinning each of these existing accounts actually point towards the idiosyncratic voter account. First, the various psychological and social mechanisms thought to induce ideological correlation in opinions are likely to operate weakly and in diverse ways across voters and issues. This means that idiosyncratically organized policy opinion is likely to be widespread and potentially electorally consequential. Second, the longstanding evidence of unimpressive average levels of stability in voters' policy opinions, traditionally cited by innocent voter advocates as evidence that most voters lack genuine policy opinions, is equally consistent with a situation where most voters form at least some genuine, stable policy opinions, but do so only upon idiosyncratically varying subsets of issues. Put differently, low average issue opinion stability is compatible with most voters becoming members of one or more 'issue public'—a group of voters who care particularly about and develop meaningful opinions upon a particular policy issue.

In Chapter 3 we showed how empirical research on mass political opinion has evolved in such a way that it focuses on adjudicating between the ideological and innocent voter accounts, neglecting the extent and role of idiosyncratic policy opinion. Early issue voting studies which challenged the innocent voter account did do so by providing evidence that both ideologically and idiosyncratically organized policy opinion helps explain voters' electoral choices. But their conclusions were cast into doubt, partly because of methodological concerns and partly because of renewed evidence that most voters lack stable—and therefore meaningful—opinions on most policies. Instead, an alternative empirical challenge to the innocent voter account has emerged. This attributes observed instability in voters' opinions on specific issues to measurement error, and focuses on aggregating multiple opinions into ideology scales which are argued to reduce measurement error. The use of such multi-item ideology scales has yielded some important substantive insights about the existence of at least some ideological opinion and its role in voter decision-making. At the same time, these scales discard observed idiosyncratic opinion as measurement noise. In this sense, political scientists have increasingly ignored idiosyncratic opinion by design.

In Chapters 4–6 we redressed this neglect by providing a new, comprehensive empirical assessment of the nature of mass policy opinion which takes into account all three theoretical perspectives—ideological, innocent, *and* idiosyncratic. To do so we drew on a new panel survey which recorded the opinions of a representative sample of British voters on 34 policy issues repeatedly across three survey waves separated by six-month intervals. Our survey provided unusually fine-grained information on voters' concrete policy opinions across an unusually broad range of policy issues, making it well-suited for identifying ideological patterns in policy opinion and distinguishing non-ideological opinion. Furthermore, the panel element of the survey allowed us to distinguish non-ideological policy opinions which individual voters fail to maintain over time—which are indicative of voter innocence—from non-ideological policy opinions which individual voters do maintain over time—which are indicative of idiosyncrasy. Our data thus allowed us to simultaneously quantify and compare three types of variation in mass policy opinion: the type of stable ideological variation expected by both the ideological voter account and voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account; the type of unstable variation expected by the classic innocent voter account; and the type of stable idiosyncratic variation expected by the idiosyncratic voter account. Although our analysis focused mainly on the British context, we argued that findings regarding the structure

and role of mass policy opinion should generalize reasonably well to other high-income established democracies.

In Chapter 4 we began our analysis of this data by focusing on the ideologically structured component of policy opinion. Exploratory analysis of correlations between voter opinions on different policies suggested these opinions are organized along two distinct ideological dimensions. Results from a two-dimensional ideological scaling model showed that British voters' positions on a range of economic policy issues—often regarding state intervention in the economy and state provision of public services—can be usefully summarized in terms of positions on an underlying economic left–right ideological dimension. Meanwhile, voters' positions on a range of social or cultural issues—relating to things like the death penalty, immigration, and Britain's relationship with the European Union—can be usefully summarized in terms of positions on an underlying social liberal–conservative ideological dimension. Further analysis of British voters' estimated 'ideal points' on each of these ideological dimensions showed that average ideological differences by age group, education, social class, and party support were, at the time of our survey in 2018–2019, as or more pronounced on the social liberal–conservative dimension as on the economic left–right one. These patterns were generally in line with recent research on the structure of ideological contestation in many Western democracies. However, we were able to show that those structures apply not just to the more abstract attitudes and beliefs often analysed in recent studies of voters beyond the United States, but also to voters' concrete policy attitudes.

Together, these findings provided some support for both the ideological voter account and the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account, since both expect that voters have ideologically correlated issue opinions. At the same time, our analysis highlighted the limits of these accounts of mass policy opinion. Averaging across policy issues, only one-fifth (20.4%) of observed variation in British voters' stated policy opinions was explained by the ideological model we estimated.

In Chapter 5 we established that a much larger portion of variation in Britons' policy opinions is idiosyncratic in nature. To do so, we extended the ideological scaling model from Chapter 4 to exploit the panel element of our data and distinguish real but idiosyncratic opinions from unstable nonattitudes. Averaging across our 34 issues, more than a third (37%) of variation in British voters' reported policy opinions was found to be idiosyncratic in nature. Focusing only on reported policy opinions which individual voters hold consistently over time—traditionally seen as more genuinely held opinions—just over two-thirds of the observed variation in these stable

opinions was idiosyncratic in nature, while only around a third was ideological. Although the fraction of variation in stable opinion attributable to idiosyncrasy differed quite markedly by issue, it was estimated at above one-fifth for every one of our 34 issues, and above one-third for 31 of the 34 issues. Furthermore, although the fraction of opinion variation attributable to idiosyncrasy was, as predicted by our theoretical account of the mechanisms underpinning idiosyncratic opinion, generally higher among voters who are less politically sophisticated (as proxied by education and political attention), it still reached substantial levels (around a third) even among the more politically sophisticated.

The voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account might suggest that the idiosyncratic opinion variation we identify is an artefact of unclear partisan cues on particular issues, or of a more general disruption to partisan cues caused by realignments around Scottish independence or Brexit, realignments which were potentially ongoing at the time of our survey. However, we provided evidence that is not the case. High levels of idiosyncratic opinion variation persisted on issues where there were clear partisan divides, did not appear to be notably lower when we dropped respondents from outside England, and were found to be present when we analysed similar data from the US collected before the political realignments there emerging from the Trump candidacy and presidency.

Having demonstrated the substantial amount of idiosyncratic variation in Britons' policy opinions, in Chapter 6 we focused attention on patterns of stability in individual voters' reported policy opinions over repeated measurement. Evidence of widespread instability in reported policy opinions has traditionally been highlighted by advocates of the classic innocent voter account as showing that voters typically lack well-formed policy opinion. Consistent with such evidence, we showed that, averaging across issues, the fraction of variation in Britons' policy opinions accounted for by instability in individuals' reported opinions—just over two-fifths (43%)—is higher than the fraction accounted for by idiosyncratic or ideological variation, taken separately. Similarly, averaging across issues, wave-on-wave correlations in individuals' stated policy opinions was moderate at best. However, we also showed that once one considers the distribution of (un)stable policy opinion across issues and voters, the evidence regarding voter innocence becomes less clear cut. Strong versions of the innocent voter account suggest that those stable policy opinions which exist are concentrated among politically sophisticated voters. In contrast, we showed that they appear to be diffuse and that on a small number of policy issues a large number of voters reported stable opinions. Furthermore, while unstable variation in policy opinion is notably

greater among certain types of voter, even those voters who seem to be least predisposed to form stable opinions still appear likely to develop stable policy opinions on at least some issues, and more than we would expect them to if they were answering policy questions randomly. We interpreted this as evidence that unimpressive average levels of policy opinion stability are still consistent with most voters having at least some real, meaningful views on varying subsets of issues, in line with the issue publics logic on which the idiosyncratic voter account builds.

In Chapters 7 and 8 we turned to examine the role of policy opinion in the political choices that voters make. The innocent voter account is sceptical that voters are capable of making political choices based on coherent policy considerations because they tend to lack real, meaningful policy opinions. In Chapter 7 we provided evidence that this scepticism is misplaced because not only do most voters tend to hold some meaningful opinions on some policy issues, but they also attach more importance to realizing their preferred policy on these particular issues when they come to make political choices.

Our evidence came from a candidate choice experiment included in our survey, where respondents were asked to choose between hypothetical candidates taking randomly selected policy positions on randomly selected subsets of our 34 policy issues, and then asked to choose between the same hypothetical candidates in subsequent survey waves. This experiment allowed us to examine the connection between policy considerations and political choices while mitigating concerns about projection effects and the types of persuasion effects emphasized by the innocent voter-as-follower account. More generally, it allowed us to more effectively identify the causal importance voters attached to different policy issues in their decision-making. We found that not only did respondents place more importance weight on policy issues upon which they personally held more stable policy opinions, but their candidate choices appeared to be connected to policy considerations according to a (issue-level) spatial logic which was stable and predictable over time. Indeed, when presented with 'high-contrast' pairs of candidates who took differing positions on high-importance policy issues, respondents' candidate choices exhibited impressive wave-on-wave stability. We interpreted these various findings as evidence that, despite high average levels of instability in policy opinions, voters seem to be capable of making stable, meaningful political choices that are coherently connected to the stable, meaningful policy opinions which they do tend to hold on at least some issues.

Even if voters are capable of making meaningful political choices based on policy considerations, this does not imply that idiosyncratic policy opinions matter for those choices. Despite being stable over repeated measurement,

some might wonder whether the lack of ideological structure of idiosyncratic policy opinions indicates that those opinions are somehow less deeply held, and therefore less consequential for political choices. In Chapter 8 we showed that, contrary to this concern, idiosyncratic policy opinion can and does matter in voters' political choices. The first way we showed this was by examining the relationship between the average importance voters attach to a policy issue in their political choices—as estimated based on our candidate choice experiment—and the amounts of ideological, idiosyncratic, and unstable opinion variation on that issue. Issues which elicit more ideological variation in opinion did tend to be more important to voters. However, several issues which attract high levels of idiosyncratic opinion were accorded substantial importance weight by voters in their political decisions. Furthermore, among issues which attract similar levels of ideological opinion variation, those that attract more idiosyncratic opinion variation (as opposed to unstable opinion variation) tended to be more important to voters.

The second way we demonstrated the relevance of idiosyncratic opinion for political decisions is by studying voting at the 2019 general election. In this 'Brexit election', the central issue of Britain's relationship with the European Union attracted substantial ideological and idiosyncratic opinion. If only ideologically structured opinion on the issue matters for vote choice we should find that policy opinions on this specific issue add little to our ability to predict vote choices if we already know voters' more general estimated ideological positions on the left–right economic and social liberal–conservative dimensions. To the contrary, individuals' opinions on the specific EU issue were found to be highly predictive of their vote choice, even controlling for their ideological positions. Moreover, consistent with our approach of treating stable policy opinion as more meaningful, stable opinion on the specific EU issue was found to be much more predictive of voter choice than unstable opinion on the same issue. In other words, ideologically unpredictable but stable opinions—i.e., idiosyncratic opinions—on the EU issue seem to have been consequential in the 2019 general election.

9.1 Policy Opinion and Democratic Politics

Together, our findings lend new weight to the argument that a proper account of the role of policy opinion in democratic politics requires us to move beyond what in recent decades has often been a dichotomous debate between perspectives that emphasize ideological policy opinion on the one hand, and those that emphasize voter innocence of real policy opinion on the other

(Kinder, 1983; Hillygus and Shields, 2009). Rather, in addition to these perspectives, we must pay due attention to the neglected role of idiosyncratic policy opinion in democratic politics. Doing so can help us better understand key features of mass opinion which cannot be explained by either the ideological voter account or the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account (which both expect stable policy opinions to be ideologically organized), nor by the classic version of the innocent voter account (which stresses instability in issue opinion and expects stable opinion to be concentrated among sophisticated voters).

This is by no means the same as saying that ideological and innocent voter accounts are irrelevant for understanding the role of policy opinion in democratic politics. On the contrary, our findings demonstrate that both very much continue to be relevant alongside each other, and alongside the idiosyncratic voter account. With respect to the ideological voter account, while ideologically organized policy opinion may account for a relatively small fraction of variation in mass policy opinion compared to idiosyncratic policy opinion or unstable policy opinion, it still explains a non-trivial fraction (in our data, around one-fifth) of such variation. What is more, policy issues which elicit more ideologically organized opinion tend to be those that voters attach more importance to in their political decision-making. Ideological opinion variation on these types of issue is likely to play a key role in democratic politics because it aligns with long-standing distinctions between mainstream political parties and other elements of elite politics, which may themselves then reinforce that ideological opinion variation through their messages to citizens. As such it has a disproportionate opportunity to influence perceptions of politicians and parties, and to be strongly associated with vote choice. With respect to the classic innocent voter account, the fact that a large fraction of mass policy opinion variation is attributable to unstable opinions highlights the fundamental limitations of public engagement with the policy questions that are at the heart of governance. Understanding how the degree of innocence varies across issues is central to understanding the varying scope of democratic influence across different domains of public policy.

So ideologically organized policy opinion and voter innocence regarding policy both have important roles to play in democratic politics. Yet so too does idiosyncratic policy opinion. For a start, compared to a situation where non-ideological policy opinion is generally composed of nonattitudes, the large volume of real but idiosyncratic policy opinion in the electorate enhances the scope for citizens' policy views to influence the outcomes of the democratic process. The existence of idiosyncratic policy opinion incentivizes political

parties to cater to these policy views on specific issues, not merely as a proxy for appearing moderate in general, but in order to attract votes from people who care about those specific issues.

At the same time, the large volume of idiosyncratic policy opinion means that it is just less straightforward for political parties to strategize about the relative popularity of different packages of policies. If correlations in issue opinions mean there are a small number of ideological dimensions that can easily be assigned substantive labels, that make it easier for elites to position themselves for many issues at once. If voters' opinions on lots of different issues are not very correlated with one another, this means the positioning problem that parties face—as they balance attracting and alienating different subsets of voters—is more complex.

For similar reasons, we argue that idiosyncratic policy opinion is likely to influence politics differently from ideological policy opinion. Much of the time, the weak ideological correlations in citizens' real policy views makes it difficult to identify the effects of such views on voting and other political behaviours. The fact that an individual votes in a particular way because they have idiosyncratic views about some issue tends to disappear in the noise of public opinion data. There are many issues in politics. Even though—as we demonstrate—specific issue considerations are capable of moving individual voters' decision-making, the weak correlations in citizens' views across these issues, combined with the tendency of parties to take stable positions on most issues across elections, means that the aggregate electoral effects of any one issue will often appear limited given the current configuration of a political system.

At the same time, idiosyncratic issue opinion is particularly well situated to shape the dynamics of a political system. It is precisely the complexity generated by widespread idiosyncratic opinion that expands the set of strategic opportunities available to entrepreneurial political elites. The more that voters' policy opinions on issues about which they care most tend to be summarized by positions on one or two ideological dimensions, the more this constrains the bundles of policy positions that elites can offer and hope to be successful. Established political parties are then more able to develop ideologically consistent and relatively stable policy bundles which are distinctive enough to maintain support from reasonably durable coalitions of ideologically consistent voters located in particular regions of the ideological space. Ideological opinion thus tends to define the general standing structure of policy conflict between opposing politicians and parties.

In contrast, as we argued in Chapter 2, the more that mass policy opinion is idiosyncratic and therefore highly multidimensional, the more scope

there is for politicians who are electorally disadvantaged by prevailing structures of policy conflict to identify and campaign upon new or neglected issues which reduce that disadvantage. There are likely to exist more 'wedge' issues (Hillygus and Shields, 2009) which divide the electoral coalitions of their adversaries. By engaging in 'issue entrepreneurship' (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020) and emphasizing distinctive positions on these wedge issues, disadvantaged politicians can potentially attract supporters from their adversaries. More generally, the richer variety in the distribution of voters' opinions across issues means there are likely to exist more high 'yield' (De Sio and Weber, 2014) issues, on which disadvantaged parties have positions that are relatively popular in the electorate and that cause minimal division among their current electoral coalition. Some theories of electoral competition argue that disadvantaged parties can fruitfully emphasize these types of issues in order to try to increase their vote share (De Sio and Weber, 2014). Other perspectives would suggest that, inasmuch as widespread idiosyncrasy implies that different voters care about different issues with different levels of intensity, parties seeking to improve their vote share may not necessarily have to seek out issues on which their position is popular among the electorate *in general*. They may instead gain electorally by staking out issue positions that are somewhat unpopular among the majority of voters who happen to have weakly held preferences on those issues, but are popular among the minority of voters who have strongly held preferences on those issues (Hill, 2022).

Idiosyncrasy in mass issue opinion not only provides strategic politicians with more opportunities when constructing electoral coalitions. It also has the capacity to amplify the disruptive impact of any type of 'electoral shock' (Fieldhouse et al., 2020) which alters the profile of different issues in public debates. This is the case whether that shock is caused by domestic politician behaviour or by more general domestic or global economic or geopolitical events. This is because idiosyncrasy makes it more likely that the prevailing electoral coalitions that have been built by parties are internally divided on the issue newly highlighted by the shock. If voters then start to choose between parties based more on their positions on this newly prominent issue, they are more likely to switch their support to different parties who are better aligned with them on this new issue.

A number of recent political science studies have documented pronounced volatility in the voting behaviour of citizens in Western democracies. In Britain, Fieldhouse et al. (2020) and Denver and Johns (2022) show that in every general election from the mid-1990s through to 2019 at least a quarter of voters appear to have voted for a different party than the one they

voted for at the previous election. Dassonneville (2022) looks at this type of party switching across eight Western democracies and shows that, in all bar the United States (where the rate of party switching has declined to below 20% since 2004), the rate of party switching has mainly exceeded 20% since the mid-1990s, sometimes quite considerably. We think that the idiosyncratic issue opinion that we have theorized and documented in this book can help explain this volatility because it gives more scope for strategic politicians and external shocks to change the dimensions of political conflict in ways that disrupt prevailing electoral coalitions.

Even taking just recent British political history, it is not hard to think of examples where challenger parties seem to have exploited idiosyncratic issue-specific opinion to expand their electoral coalitions, or where the impact of electoral shocks have been accentuated by idiosyncratic opinion on newly important issues. Although it also attracted voters through other issue-based and anti-establishment rhetorical appeals (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Evans and Mellon, 2019), one key way in which the UK Independence Party successfully expanded its electoral coalition in the early 2010s was by attracting voters through its Eurosceptic stance on Britain's relationship with the European Union (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, 193). This issue of Britain's relationship with the EU divided what were then the prevailing electoral coalitions of both the Conservative and Labour Parties because those coalitions had been built mainly along economic left–right ideological lines. In contrast, as we have seen, ideological variation in voter opinions on the EU issue tends to relate to positions on the social liberal–conservative ideological dimension, while a third of this variation is idiosyncratic and therefore unpredictable based on either of the two principal ideological dimensions structuring British politics.

To give another example, in the run-up to the 2005 general election, the Liberal Democrats expanded their electoral coalition by specifically emphasizing their opposition to university tuition fees in contrast to the Labour and Conservative parties (Russell, 2005; Cutts et al., 2010). One reason this may have helped them attract voters from Labour is that Labour's tuition fee policy was perceived by more ideological voters as too far to the right economically. However, as we have seen, while the funding of university education is an issue which elicits a degree of ideologically consistent opinion, idiosyncratic opinion explains a greater share of variation on this issue. This suggests the tuition fees issue split the prevailing electoral coalitions of the main parties not just for ideological reasons, but also because members of those coalitions often had idiosyncratic opinions on the tuition fees issue.

Consider also the electoral impacts of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union on Scottish and British politics, respectively. Both of these referenda have been characterized as electoral shocks by Fieldhouse and co-authors (2020, 40–41) because each generated a sharp rise in the salience of particular issues—respectively, Scottish independence and Britain's relationship with the EU—in political discourse, and in the importance accorded to these issues in voters' electoral decision-making. We stress that one factor crucial to the impact of both of these shocks was the fact that a substantial amount of voter opinion on the newly important issues was not well predicted by positions on either of the two main ideological dimensions. We have seen how this is the case with British voters' opinions on the EU issue. This meant that the prevailing electoral coalitions built by both Labour and Conservative parties along ideological lines were internally split on this newly important issue, accentuating the disruptive electoral effects of the EU referendum. Similarly, evidence from Scholes and Curtice (2020) shows that at the time of the 2014 independence referendum and subsequent 2015 general election, Scottish voters' opinions on independence from the UK could only be predicted moderately well based on their economic left–right ideology, and even less well based on their liberal–authoritarian ideology. This helped to create a situation where the prevailing electoral coalition of the Labour Party, previously dominant in Scottish politics, was divided on independence. As a result, a large number of prior Labour supporters who supported independence were prone to switch to the independence-supporting Scottish National Party once the issue came to dominate Scottish politics in 2014, contributing to the electoral 'collapse' of Labour in Scotland in the 2015 general election (Fieldhouse et al., 2020, 161).

Looking across advanced democracies, the dynamics of how political systems respond to idiosyncratic opinion are conditioned by electoral systems and the variable incentives they create for within-party versus across-party realignments (Stoll, 2011; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). The UK first-past-the-post system has engendered a party system with two traditionally dominant parties but with significant regional and other minor parties. This means that we see the dynamics of idiosyncratic opinion play out both through realignments of the major parties with respect to specific issues and also through the rise of specific minor parties associated with particular issues that become salient. In countries with systems that create very low barriers to party entry (for example, the Netherlands or Israel) the dynamics of idiosyncratic opinion are similarly likely to play out through a combination of mainstream party realignments and minor party growth and shrinkage,

albeit with a comparatively greater role being played by the latter. In contrast, entry costs for parties in a country like the US are so high as to push nearly all of these dynamics into the intra-party politics of the two major parties. Thus the emergence of particular issues (for example, abortion from the 1970s, or immigration from the 1990s) tends to occur via a process where new issues that are unaligned with the parties initially become more aligned over time and eventually come to form part of the ideological base structure of two-party competition.

Turning to the future, how might idiosyncratic policy opinion cause electoral disruption in advanced democracies in the coming years? In the medium term, we see opinions relating to climate change policy as being potentially idiosyncratic and potentially disruptive in many advanced democracies. One reason we do so is that the real, tangible consequences of climate change are likely to become increasingly apparent to voters generally (IPCC, 2018), but that different voters will experience severe impacts of climate change to varying degrees. At the same time, the real, tangible consequences of the types of policies necessary to realize countries' emission reduction commitments—such as bans on petrol and diesel cars, or gas heating, or limits on fossil fuel extraction—are also likely to become increasingly apparent to voters, and also to have disparate impacts. As such, an increasing number of voters are likely to form real opinions on these policy issues and to attach importance to those opinions in their political decision-making. Furthermore, existing research shows that voters' opinions on climate change are in many countries at best moderately well predicted based on left–right (Hornsey et al., 2018; Caldwell et al., 2024) or liberal–conservative ideology (Hornsey et al., 2018). Potentially high levels of idiosyncrasy in beliefs about climate change suggests that existing electoral coalitions constructed along more ideological lines may be split if climate-related policies become more salient and important. This in turn may present opportunities for entrepreneurial politicians and political parties. Indeed there is evidence that right-wing populist parties in various counties are attempting to mobilize opposition to climate reforms (Lockwood, 2018; Dickson and Hobolt, 2024).

We close this discussion by reflecting on the implications of our findings for debates about political polarization. High levels of ideological organization in public opinion on policy issues tends to go hand in hand with certain forms of political polarization (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Munzert and Bauer, 2013). As the degree of ideological correlation in opinion on different issues intensifies, voters who disagree on one issue become more likely to disagree on other issues as well. In this sense, as Baldassarri and Gelman (2008, 409) put it, ideological correlation in issue opinions 'induces

alignment along multiple lines of potential conflict', such that members of a society are more likely to become divided into distinct 'factions' who oppose each other across a wide range of matters and are harder to reconcile. Some studies have provided evidence that this form of political polarization—often referred to as 'ideological polarization'—has increased among the US public in recent decades (Webster and Abramowitz, 2017; Bougher, 2017) and among the British public since the 2008 financial crisis (Cohen and Cohen, 2021; Perrett, 2021).

Viewed in terms of its implications for ideological polarization, our finding that there is a substantial amount of idiosyncratic issue opinion among the British public could be seen as promising for the health of democracy. This is because widespread idiosyncrasy in issue opinions limits the degree of ideological polarization in society. The weakness of the correlation in people's opinions across different issues means that voters who disagree on one issue are still reasonably likely to agree on some other issues. In this sense, our findings are consistent with other research stressing the limits of ideological polarization in mass publics (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Munzert and Bauer, 2013). They are also consistent with more pluralist notions of democracy, in the sense that they imply 'multiple and nonoverlapping lines of disagreement' among the public, which in turn can render issue-related political conflict in society more 'sustainable' by discouraging the formation of highly distinctive political factions who oppose each other across most issues (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008, 409).

Another form for political polarization that has received increasing attention from political scientists in recent years is 'affective polarization', whereby supporters of different parties display increasingly intense feelings of dislike toward each other (Iyengar et al., 2019). Some argue that affective polarization is at least partly rooted in policy disagreements (Orr and Huber, 2020; Orr et al., 2023), so that increases in ideological polarization contribute towards growing levels of affective polarization (Bougher, 2017; Webster and Abramowitz, 2017). To the extent that this is the case, the widespread idiosyncrasy that we document is likely to limit the growth of affective polarization because it limits ideological polarization.

However, there are important caveats here. First, there is an ongoing debate among political scientists as to whether affective polarization is really a product of policy disagreements, or is instead mainly a product of partisan and other reinforcing social identities (e.g., Lelkes, 2018; Mason, 2018; Dias and Lelkes, 2022). Second, even if ideological polarization does contribute to affective polarization and even if society is characterized by high levels of idiosyncratic issue opinion—and low levels of ideological polarization—it

may be that specific issues become so prominent and divisive that voters affectively polarize on those particular issues. Indeed, this is what Hobolt et al. (2021) argue occurred on the issue of Brexit in the wake of the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, with those taking opposing sides on this issue developing particularly negative feelings toward each other. Taking these points together, there are reasons to think that substantial levels of idiosyncratic issue opinion and affective polarization may plausibly co-exist in a society.

9.2 Competing Explanations for Voting Behaviour

This has been a book focused on the nature of the public's beliefs regarding public policy questions and how those influence voting behaviour. However we would not claim that these are the only, or the only important, influences on voting behaviour. There are three major kinds of considerations that have been widely examined as influences on voting behaviour. The first of these are those related to *social identities* felt by citizens and associated with candidates as individuals and with parties. The second of these are those related to *government performance* experienced by citizens and attributable to candidates and parties in power, as well as related competence perceptions of oppositions. This book has focused on a third type of considerations, those related to *policy positions* held by citizens and endorsed by candidates and parties.

Each of these three perspectives reflects an intuitive process that a citizen might use in deciding how to vote. Citizens might ask which political actors are members of the same social group as them (looking to social identity); citizens might ask which political actors have done a good job in the past, and are therefore likely to do so in the future (looking to government performance); and citizens might ask which political actors are proposing public policies that they want to see (looking to policy positions). Or they might do some combination of all three of these, to varying degrees across persons and across political contexts.

Many major works on political behaviour have located the core of voter behaviour in identity concerns. This view is strongly associated with the 'Michigan school' of public opinion research and *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), and with scepticism about views of political behaviour that place a great deal of emphasis on issues, policy, and ideology (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Achen and Bartels, 2016). One of the key arguments made in several key texts in this

tradition (Converse, 1964; Achen and Bartels, 2016) is that this perspective is more realistic regarding the information that typical citizens have about politics and policy. Such works often emphasize that while a few citizens might be engaged on issues and policy, and might have ideologically structured views, this is far from typical even in countries with high levels of educational attainment (Converse, 1964; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Converse and Pierce, 1986; Achen and Bartels, 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017).

Work that locates voting behaviour in past or anticipated *government performance* constitutes a similarly major literature in political science (see, e.g., Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981; Kiewiet and Rivers, 1984; Clarke et al., 2004; Healy and Malhotra, 2013b; Green and Jennings, 2017). A central element of the argument for performance evaluations or competence perceptions being important in voting behaviour is their accessibility. Voters need only to make an assessment of whether 'things are going well' and to (think they) know who to attribute the answer of that question to, in order to vote based on performance considerations. They can potentially combine retrospective performance information with a variety of other simple shortcuts to form prospective competence assessments (Clarke et al., 2004). Just as identity considerations might lead a voter to make a poor choice regarding who will act in their interests, retrospective performance considerations might incorrectly attribute successes or failures to incumbents in some instances. But in the context of a relatively ideologically innocent electorate there is a strong theoretical argument for looking to these influences on voter behaviour.

These different kinds of considerations are often difficult to disentangle empirically. For example, regular changes in power (Norpoth, 2014) can be attributed to a tendency to develop dissatisfaction with the performance of incumbents or to a 'thermostatic' tendency in issue opinion to swing away from the observed policies of incumbent governments (Erikson et al., 2002). Absent major shifts in the political salience of different identities, different ideological dimensions or different issues, both stable identity concerns and stable ideological or issue-level commitments predict the general observation that voting behaviour tends towards stability at the individual level. This book is about issue opinion, but our view is not that policy voting is a sufficient explanation for how citizens vote. We would very much like to be able to better characterize the relative roles of identity considerations, performance considerations, and issue considerations in voting behaviour. Based on existing research we have every reason to expect that these vary across political contexts, and also vary across individuals within political contexts. We encourage future research to explore how to decompose variation in

voting along these lines, perhaps in something like the way we have decomposed issue opinion variation into its ideological, idiosyncratic, and unstable components.

9.3 Implications for Political Science

This brings us more generally to the implications of our findings for future political science research. As Chapter 3 made clear, problems of measurement are a central reason for the relative neglect of voters' policy-specific opinions in public opinion research over recent decades. The average instability of voters' reported policy-specific opinions led many political scientists to turn away from analysis of policy-specific opinion measures, either because they believed those measures mainly captured nonattitudes, or because they focused instead on multi-item measures of more general ideological attitudes in an effort to correct instability due to measurement error. Our novel analysis of panel data recording voters' concrete policy opinions on a broad range of issues, as well as the decisions they make in repeated candidate choice experiments, yields findings that should, we think, lead to a reassessment of the value of measuring and studying policy-specific opinions. We have shown that while most voters do lack meaningful, stable opinions on most policy issues, they do nonetheless seem to develop meaningful, stable opinions on at least some issues, and are capable of making consistent policy-based political choices based on those opinions. At the same time, the meaningful policy-specific opinions that voters do develop are often idiosyncratic rather than ideologically structured. Thus, measures of policy-specific opinion should not be dismissed as wholly ephemeral, and nor do summary measures of voters' more general ideological attitudes serve as an adequate substitute for them.

As such, one key implication of our findings for political science research is that it should allocate more attention than it currently does to the measurement and analysis of policy-specific opinions and their role in democratic politics. In many countries, this could involve academic survey studies that include questions on a broad range of specific policy issues alongside the types of more abstract attitudinal questions commonly included for the construction of ideology or values scales. In countries where the inclusion of such questions in academic surveys is more common—such as the US—it involves more analysis of those policy-specific opinions on their own terms in addition to using them to construct ideological scales. Including repeated questions on policy-specific opinions in *panel* surveys would be particularly valuable because, as we have seen, this allows us to disentangle idiosyncratic

opinion from unstable nonattitudes. Armed with such measures, political scientists will be better equipped to investigate the voter-level, contextual, and issue-related factors which make voters more likely to form ideologically structured opinions, to form idiosyncratic opinions, or to fail to form stable opinions at all.

Still, even assuming access to a richer and more frequent measurement of citizens' policy opinions, studying the effects of policy opinions upon voting raises important challenges. Put simply, widespread idiosyncratic policy opinion makes political science hard. If different people care about different sets of issues and organize their opinions on these issues in different ways, this leads to deep problems of measurement and inference. One reason is that, even if we ask more policy-specific questions in surveys, it is very difficult to measure people's opinions on all of the many possible issues about which they might care. This is a problem that Hill (2022, 120–21) highlights and calls 'enumeration error'. It is also a problem that is compounded by the fact that the lack of correlation in opinions across issues means we cannot reliably infer respondents' opinions on issues that we have not asked about.

Another reason is that if we take any one particular issue and examine the association between measured opinion on this issue and vote choice averaging across all voters, the estimated association will often be small because only a subset of the population are members of the relevant issue public such that they accord substantial weight to this issue in their political choices. This may be despite the fact that opinion on this issue impacts substantially on the votes of that issue public. To fully assess the impact of policy specific opinions on electoral choice, we need to be able to measure and condition upon which voters are members of which issue publics. This is not easy, and it has long been recognized to not be easy. Converse's (1964) discussion of issue publics is speculative in part because standard survey questions struggle to elicit reliable individual-level information from citizens about which issues they really care about. We discussed in Chapter 3, for example, how simply asking survey respondents about the importance to them of different issues is problematic because of the general difficulties people face when introspectively evaluating the importance they place on specific factors in their decision-making. The measure of issue importance we developed in Chapter 7 overcomes this drawback because it is based on the weight respondents attach to different policy issues in a series of candidate choice experiments. However, it only captures the average importance attached to an issue across voters, rather than telling us which specific individual voters attach importance to which issues.

We therefore encourage political scientists to exploit the increasing feasibility of population-based survey experiments (Mutz, 2011) to explore opportunities for new issue importance measures. One strategy is to use

experiments that yield individual-level measures of issue importance, but this remains difficult without asking an individual many questions with varying prompts. A more feasible strategy is the one which our analysis in Chapter 7 is an example of: designing experiments that yield information about which individuals are *likely* to care more/less about an issue. Even if that information is only a weak measurement at the individual level, it can nonetheless enhance analyses of other choice experiments on the same survey: for example, we used wave-on-wave issue stability as a predictor of choice importance for that issue at the individual level.

9.4 Summary

This book has argued for the significance of voters' *idiosyncratic* policy opinions in democratic politics. The dominant *ideological* voter and *innocent* voter accounts stress, respectively, the ideological structure of mass policy opinion or the lack of real policy opinion for many voters on many issues. While both of these accounts can explain some aspects of mass policy opinion and the degree of impact it has on voters' political choices, they neglect the volume and impact of idiosyncratic policy opinion. In contrast to the expectations of the classic innocent voter account, this type of opinion is real and meaningful, and therefore endures at the individual level. Yet, in contrast to both the ideological voter account—and the voter-as-follower variant of the innocent voter account, which argues that voters mimic the ideologically structured policy opinions of the parties they support—idiosyncratic opinion also lacks ideological structure.

Idiosyncratic factors lead voters to develop real opinions on varying subsets of policy issues. And the combinations of opinions they form on these subsets of issues tend to be idiosyncratic because the mechanisms which might induce ideological structure are weak and operate in diverse and cross-cutting ways across voters and issues. As a result, a substantial amount of the variation in voters' reported policy opinions reflects idiosyncratic opinion. When making political choices between candidates and parties, voters take into account both idiosyncratic policy opinions and ideological policy opinions according to a reasonable and consistent spatial logic where a voter tends to prefer candidates who are 'closer' to their preferred policy positions on issues they consider to be important. The importance attached to different policy opinions varies by voter and issue, yet idiosyncratic policy opinions can and do play a consequential role in the political choices that voters make. Voters' idiosyncratic policy opinions therefore serve alongside ideological policy opinion as a significant starting point for democratic policy responsiveness.

APPENDIX A

Prompts, Policy Alternatives, and Party Positions

The full prompts and policy alternatives for each item, together with our estimates of the party positions on these issues, are provided below. Our estimates of party positions are based on party manifestos and other public statements. Statements in the 2017 manifestos were treated as authoritative, followed by statements in the 2015 and 2010 manifestos and other public statements in that order. For some issues we were unable to estimate party positions. For example: we were unable to locate Labour or the Liberal Democrats' position on social care, a politically sensitive issue where the Conservative party's unusually clear manifesto commitment to cost-sharing arguably cost them votes in the 2017 election. Notwithstanding this we were able to identify positions for 33 of 34 issues for the Labour party, 32 of 34 issues for the Conservative party, and 31 of 34 issues for the Liberal Democrats. Where we report statistics which average over issue positions we impute the position which minimizes the differences between the parties.

Issue 1: Inflation v Unemployment
Prompt: If there is a trade-off between maintaining low inflation (stable prices) and low unemployment, what is the best balance?
Alternative 1: **Low inflation should take priority** over low unemployment.
Alternative 2: **Low inflation should usually take priority**, except where there is a risk of exceptional levels of unemployment. *[Con]*
Alternative 3: Inflation and unemployment should be given **equal priority**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 4: **Low unemployment should usually take priority**, except where there is a risk of exceptional levels of inflation. *[Lab]*
Alternative 5: **Low unemployment should take priority** over low inflation.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Domestic Macroeconomic Issues

Issue 2: CEO Wages
Prompt: Full-time factory workers in the UK have average earnings of about £25,000 per year (£500 per week before tax). How much should the chief executive of a large British company listed on the stock exchange typically be paid in comparison to this figure?
Alternative 1: No more than **two times** this figure (£50,000 per year).
Alternative 2: No more than **five times** this figure (£125,000 per year).
Alternative 3: No more than **ten times** this figure (£250,000 per year).
Alternative 4: No more than **twenty times** this figure (£500,000 per year). *[Lab]*
Alternative 5: **Whatever salary** company owners (shareholders) think is appropriate. *[Con] [LibDem]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Domestic Macroeconomic Issues

Issue 3: Higher Tax Rate
Prompt: Given that UK residents pay income tax at a rate of 40% on income from £43,000 to £150,000, which of the following comes closest to your view on the proper tax rate for incomes over £150,000?
Alternative 1: Income over £150,000 should be taxed at **40%.**
Alternative 2: Income over £150,000 should be taxed at **45%.** *[Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 3: Income over £150,000 should be taxed at **50%.** *[Lab]*
Alternative 4: Income over £150,000 should be taxed at **60%.**
Alternative 5: Income over £50,000 should be taxed at **80%.**
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Domestic Macroeconomic Issues

Issue 4: Privacy and Policing
Prompt: What is your view on how the UK should balance privacy with policing and anti-terrorism activities?
Alternative 1: The police and the security services **should not be able to intercept or read any communications**.
Alternative 2: The police and the security services should be able to intercept and read a communication **if they can convince a judge that it would lead to serious crime being prevented**.
Alternative 3: The police and the security services should be able to intercept and read a communication **if they can convince a judge that it would lead to serious crime being prevented or criminals being arrested**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 4: The police and the security services should be able to intercept and read a communication **if they believe that it would lead to serious crime being prevented or criminals being arrested**. *[Lab] [Con]*
Alternative 5: The police and the security services **should be able to intercept and read any communications.**
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties

Issue 5: Offensive Speech
Prompt: What is your view on offensive/hate speech?
Alternative 1: Government **should not stop people from saying offensive things**, no matter who is affected.
Alternative 2: Government should stop people from saying things that offend people of different **races**.
Alternative 3: Government should stop people from saying things that offend people of different **races or religions**.
Alternative 4: Government should stop people from saying things that offend people of different **races, religions, or sexual orientations**. *[Lab]*
Alternative 5: Government should stop people from saying things that offend people of different **races, religions, sexual orientations, or political beliefs**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties

Issue 6: Healthy Choices
Prompt: How much should the government try to encourage individuals to make healthy choices in their lives through taxes and other incentives?
Alternative 1: The government **should not try to influence individuals to make healthy choices in their lives**.

Alternative 2: The government **should encourage people to make healthy choices in their lives through information campaigns only**. *[Con]*
Alternative 3: The government **should tax products that are harmful when consumed in any quantities**, such as cigarettes and tobacco products.
Alternative 4: The government **should also tax products that are harmful when consumed in excess**, such as soft drinks. *[Lab] [LibDem]*
Alternative 5: The government **should ban products that are harmful in all quantities and tax those that are harmful in excess**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Health

Issue 7: NHS Public/Private
Prompt: How should the NHS be organized?
Alternative 1: There should be **no involvement of private organizations in the NHS**, and existing private healthcare providers should be nationalized.
Alternative 2: There should be **no new involvement of private organizations in the NHS**. Existing private healthcare providers should continue to operate as before. *[Lab]*
Alternative 3: **The NHS should be partially privatized**, and public and private providers should compete on the basis of quality. The government should decide how much medical providers can charge. *[Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 4: The NHS should be **fully privatized, but the government should decide how much medical providers can charge**.
Alternative 5: The NHS should be **fully privatized, and medical providers should be allowed to charge their own fees**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Health

Issue 8: Food Production Subsidy
Prompt: How should the government be involved in subsidizing (financially supporting) UK food production?
Alternative 1: Food from other countries should be **taxed to discourage consumption** and government should **subsidize the production of food in this country**.
Alternative 2: Food from other countries should not face any special taxes, but the government should **subsidize the production of food in this country**.
Alternative 3: Food from other countries should not face any special taxes, but the government should **subsidize the production of essential foods in this country** (flour, eggs, butter, milk, etc). *[Con]*
Alternative 4: Food from other countries should not face any special taxes and the **government should not subsidize the production of food in this country**. *[Lab] [LibDem]*
Alternative 5: **The UK should rely more on food from other countries** and government should support current farmers switching into other work.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Agriculture

Issue 9: Zero Hours Contracts
Prompt: What is your view on zero hours contracts (contracts with no guarantee of hours or income)?
Alternative 1: Zero hours contracts **should be permitted** under whatever terms employers and employees agree to.
Alternative 2: Zero hours contracts **should be permitted, but employers should commit to employment hours at least one day in advance**, and pay wages when they cancel with less notice. *[LibDem]*

Alternative 3: Zero hours contracts **should be permitted, but employers should commit to employment hours at least one week in advance**, and pay wages when they cancel with less notice.
Alternative 4: **Workers on zero hours contracts should be subject to a higher minimum wage than normal contracts.** *[Con]*
Alternative 5: **Zero hours contracts should be illegal**. *[Lab]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Labour and Employment

Issue 10: Strikes
Prompt: What is your view on strikes?
Alternative 1: Strikes **should be banned**.
Alternative 2: Strikes **should be banned in the emergency services** (fire, police, and ambulance), but should be allowed in other sectors.
Alternative 3: Strikes **should be banned in the emergency services and other critical sectors** (health, transport, communications, energy), but should be allowed in other sectors.
Alternative 4: Strikes **should be allowed in all sectors, but only to improve pay and working conditions**. *[Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 5: Strikes **should be allowed, whatever the reason**. *[Lab]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Labour and Employment

Issue 11: School Curriculum
Prompt: Who should decide what is taught in schools ('the curriculum')?
Alternative 1: **Individual schools** should decide what is taught.
Alternative 2: **Local governments should set a core curriculum**, but individual schools should decide the rest.
Alternative 3: **Local government should set the curriculum for all subjects**
Alternative 4: **The UK government should set a core curriculum**, but individual schools should decide the rest. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 5: **The UK government should set the curriculum for all subjects**. *[Lab] [Con]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Education

Issue 12: University Education Funding
Prompt: Who should determine the cost of, and pay for, university education?
Alternative 1: The **UK government should pay for university education** for UK students who enter university. *[Lab]*
Alternative 2: The **UK government should pay for most of the cost of university education** for UK students, aside from a fee of less than £1,000 per year to be paid by the student.
Alternative 3: The **UK government should pay for some of the cost of university education** for UK students, aside from a fee of less than £3,000 per year to be paid by the student.
Alternative 4: The **UK government should not pay for the cost of university education, but should provide loans** to ensure that all students are able to take up a position at university regardless of family resources. *[Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 5: The **UK government should not pay for the cost of university education**, and students should pay for their university education through family resources and private student loans.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Education

Issue 13: School Tracking
Prompt: How should schools deal with students with different levels of ability?
Alternative 1: **Schools should not select students on the basis of ability**, and should treat all students the same way.
Alternative 2: Schools should not select students on the basis of ability, but **pupils with different levels of ability in different subjects should be put into different classes for those subjects** ('setting'). *[Lab] [LibDem]*
Alternative 3: Schools should not select students on the basis of ability, but **pupils with different levels of general ability should be put into different year groups ('streaming').**
Alternative 4: Most schools should not select students on the basis of ability, but **selective schools should be available for a small number of talented students**. *[Con]*
Alternative 5: **Schools should select students on the basis of ability.** Selective schools or 'grammar schools' should be available across the country.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Education

Issue 14: Fracking
Prompt: "Fracking" is a process of injecting a high pressure water mixture into rock to enable the extraction of natural gas and petroleum from underground or under the seabed.
Alternative 1: Fracking should be **illegal** in the UK. *[Lab] [LibDem]*
Alternative 2: Fracking should be **limited to offshore drilling**.
Alternative 3: Fracking should be **limited to offshore and unpopulated areas**.
Alternative 4: Fracking should be **allowed where landowners and local councils both permit it**. *[Con]*
Alternative 5: Fracking should be **allowed where local landowners permit it**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Environment

Issue 15: Fox Hunting
Prompt: Which of these comes closest to your view on fox hunting?
Alternative 1: Fox hunting with hounds for pest control or sport **should be allowed without restriction.** *[Con]*
Alternative 2: Fox hunting with hounds for **pest control should be allowed, but fox hunting for sport should be banned**.
Alternative 3: Fox hunting with hounds for **pest control should be allowed, but foxes must be shot with guns rather than killed by the hound**. Fox hunting for sport should be banned. *[Lab]*
Alternative 4: Fox hunting with **guns for pest control should be allowed, but fox hunting with hounds should be banned**.
Alternative 5: **Fox hunting should be illegal** without exception.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Environment

Issue 16: Energy Source Regulation
Prompt: Electricity can be generated in different ways (including coal, nuclear and wind). How involved should the government be in deciding how we produce electricity?
Alternative 1: The government should **leave electricity generation to the market**. *[Con]*
Alternative 2: The government should **not subsidize any types of electricity generation, but should set targets for different types**. *[Lab]*
Alternative 3: The government should **subsidize certain types of electricity generation over others**. *[LibDem]*

Alternative 4: The government government **should ban certain types of electricity generation, and should subsidize other types of electricity generation**.
Alternative 5: The government should **nationalize electricity generation and determine the types of electricity generation in use**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Energy

Issue 17: Energy Price Regulation
Prompt: Who should set energy prices?
Alternative 1: Energy companies **should be able to set whatever tariffs they like**.
Alternative 2: Energy companies **should be able to set their own tariffs, but they should be required to let customers know if a better deal is available elsewhere**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 3: Energy companies **should be able to set tariffs, but the government should be able to cap certain rates**. *[Lab] [Con]*
Alternative 4: The government **should set tariffs for the energy companies**. Energy companies should have to compete on the quality of service.
Alternative 5: The government **should nationalize energy companies and set its own tariffs**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Energy

Issue 18: Net Migration
Prompt: Net migration is the number of immigrants who come to the UK minus the number of emigrants who leave the UK to live elsewhere. The current UK population is about 65 million and in 2015 the level of net migration was 333,000. Which of the following figures is closest to the appropriate level of net migration into the UK per year?
Alternative 1: There should be **no net migration.**
Alternative 2: **No more than 65,000 per year** (0.1% of UK population). *[Con]*
Alternative 3: **No more than 130,000 per year** (0.2% of UK population).
Alternative 4: **No more than 325,000 per year** (0.5% of UK population).
Alternative 5: There should be **unlimited UK net migration.** *[LibDem]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Immigration and Refugee Issues

Issue 19: School Language Support
Prompt: Many schools teach students whose first language is not English. Should such students be given support in school?
Alternative 1: **Schools should not provide support for such students, and should only teach in English**.
Alternative 2: **Schools should not be required to provide support for such students, but should be allowed to do so. Schools should only teach in English.**
Alternative 3: **Schools should provide support for all students whose first language is not English**, but should only teach in English. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 4: Schools should provide support for all students whose first language is not English, and should offer **bilingual teaching in some classes**.
Alternative 5: **Bilingual schools should be set up** wherever there are large communities whose first language is not English.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Immigration and Refugee Issues

Issue 20: Railway Ownership
Prompt: How should railways in the UK be owned and operated?

Alternative 1: The rail network and the rail operating companies should be **publicly owned. Fares should be set by the government so that they are affordable for most people.**
Alternative 2: The rail network and the rail operating companies should be **publicly owned. Fares should be set by the government to cover operating and maintenance costs.** *[Lab]*
Alternative 3: The rail network and the rail operating companies should be **in part publicly owned, and in part privately owned. Fares should be set by the government to cover operating and maintenance costs.** *[LibDem]*
Alternative 4: The rail network and the rail operating companies should be **privately owned. Fares should be set by the government to cover operating and maintenance costs.**
Alternative 5: The rail network and the rail operating companies should be **privately owned. Rail operating companies should set fares.** *[Con]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Transportation

Issue 21: Road Tolls
Prompt: Which of these comes closest to your view on how we should pay for the road network? Currently the cost of the road network is paid for by general taxation rather than by charging a toll, or fee, for use of the roads.
Alternative 1: **All roads should be toll roads**.
Alternative 2: **Motorways should be toll roads**, but other roads should be free to use.
Alternative 3: **New developments (new bridges, tunnels, motorways) should be toll roads**, but all other roads should be free to use.
Alternative 4: **Only the most expensive new developments (bridges, tunnels, motorways) should be toll roads**.
Alternative 5: **No roads should be toll roads**. *[Lab] [Con] [LibDem]*
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Transportation

Issue 22: Death Penalty
Prompt: The death penalty was abolished as a punishment for murder in the UK in the 1960s. What are your views on the death penalty?
Alternative 1: The death penalty **should not be used**. *[Lab] [Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 2: The death penalty **should be available only for multiple murders**.
Alternative 3: The death penalty **should be available as punishment for any murder**.
Alternative 4: The death penalty **should be the usual punishment for murder**, but should not be mandatory.
Alternative 5: The death penalty **should be mandatory for murder**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Law, Crime, and Family Issues

Issue 23: Cannabis
Prompt: How should cannabis be regulated?
Alternative 1: **Cannabis should be legal.** Anyone should be free to possess or sell cannabis.
Alternative 2: **Cannabis should be legal. The sale of cannabis should be restricted to licensed sellers**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 3: **Cannabis use should be decriminalized.** Police should not charge individuals for possessing cannabis for personal use. Producing or selling cannabis should continue to be a criminal offence.
Alternative 4: **Cannabis should be illegal.** People possessing cannabis for personal use should be fined. People producing or selling cannabis should be sent to jail. *[Lab] [Con]*

Alternative 5: **Cannabis should be illegal. Both people possessing cannabis for personal use, and people producing or selling cannabis, should be sent to jail.**
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Law, Crime, and Family Issues

Issue 24: Unemployment Support
Prompt: What level of support should the government provide for UK citizens of working age who are not employed?
Alternative 1: **People should be paid unemployment benefit whilst they are out of work.** This unemployment benefit should last as long as the person is unemployed.
Alternative 2: **People should be paid unemployment benefit whilst they are out of work.** This unemployment benefit should last as long as the person is unemployed, and **as long as they can show that they are actively seeking a job.** *[Lab] [Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 3: **People should be paid unemployment benefit in their first few months out of work** only.
Alternative 4: **People should not generally be paid unemployment benefit, except where they are unable to work because of a disability or injury they got whilst working**.
Alternative 5: **There should be no unemployment benefit.** Individuals unable or unwilling to find work should be supported by family, friends, or charities.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Social Welfare

Issue 25: Social Care
Prompt: Many older people require personal care and special accommodation to help them carry out everyday activities. How should we pay for this personal care?
Alternative 1: **Individuals should pay all of the cost**.
Alternative 2: **Individuals should pay if they have more than £20,000 in savings**, or a home worth more than £20,000.
Alternative 3: **Individuals should pay if they have more than £120,000 in savings**, or a home worth more than £120,000. *[Con]*
Alternative 4: **Individuals should pay if they have more than £240,000 in savings**, or a home worth more than £240,000.
Alternative 5: The **government should pay all the cost**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Social Welfare

Issue 26: Land Development
Prompt: Which level of government should decide how land is to be developed?
Alternative 1: None—**those who own the land** should be free to decide how it is developed.
Alternative 2: The **immediate community** (e.g., a parish council or a neighbourhood forum). *[LibDem]*
Alternative 3: The **local authority** (e.g., a county council, a borough council or a city council). *[Lab] [Con]*
Alternative 4: A **regional body** (e.g., the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly).
Alternative 5: The **national government** should set land development policy.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Community Development and Housing Issues

Issue 27: Social Housing
Prompt: Currently local councils and housing associations provide affordable social housing. How much social housing should there be in the UK?

Alternative 1: There should be **social housing for any UK citizen who wants it**, and the government should provide funding to construct as much social housing as necessary.
Alternative 2: Social housing **should be expanded** through additional government funding to provide housing for a larger fraction of the population. *[Lab] [LibDem]*
Alternative 3: Social housing **should be maintained at its current level**, with replacement housing built when residents purchase their units through right-to-buy. *[Con]*
Alternative 4: Existing social housing should be privatized when residents are able to purchase it through right-to-buy, and **there should be no new social housing built.**
Alternative 5: **All existing social housing should be privatized** by selling it off to residents or property management companies.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Community Development and Housing Issues

Issue 28: Bank Insurance
Prompt: Which of the following is closest to your view on how banks and bank deposits should be insured against failure?
Alternative 1: **Banks should be allowed to fail**, even if it means that depositors lose money.
Alternative 2: **Bank deposits should be fully insured by the government, but if banks fail they should be closed**.
Alternative 3: **Banks requiring government assistance in a crisis should be nationalized and then sold back into the private sector** once the crisis is over. *[Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 4: **Banks requiring government assistance in a crisis should be nationalized and then kept under government control**. *[Lab]*
Alternative 5: **Banks should be nationalized** and kept under government control.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce

Issue 29: Nuclear Forces
Prompt: Which of the following is closest to your view on how the UK nuclear forces should be structured?
Alternative 1: The UK should **unilaterally decommission all nuclear weapons**, and no longer maintain a nuclear deterrent.
Alternative 2: The UK should **seek multilateral decommissioning of all nuclear weapons** around the world. Until that agreement is achieved, **should reduce its own stock of nuclear weapons**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 3: The UK should **seek multilateral decommissioning of all nuclear weapons** around the world. Until that agreement is achieved, **should maintain its current stock of nuclear weapons**. *[Lab]*
Alternative 4: The UK should just **maintain its current stock of nuclear weapons**. *[Con]*
Alternative 5: The UK should **expand its nuclear deterrent forces**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Defence

Issue 30: Armed Forces
Prompt: Which of the following is closest to your view on how the UK armed forces should be structured?
Alternative 1: The UK should **abolish its armed forces**.
Alternative 2: The UK should maintain **armed forces able to defend the country** if it is invaded.
Alternative 3: The UK should maintain **armed forces able to defend the country and launch small-scale operations abroad** for peace-keeping or conflict prevention. *[Lab] [Con] [LibDem]*

Alternative 4: The government should maintain **armed forces able to defend the country and fight a large scale war** in another part of the world.
Alternative 5: The government should maintain **armed forces able to fight multiple large scale wars** in different parts of the world.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Defence

Issue 31: Telephone and Internet
Prompt: Which of the following is closest to your view on how telephone and internet services should be provided?
Alternative 1: Telephone/internet services should be **provided by the private sector.**
Alternative 2: Telephone/internet services should be **provided by the private sector**, but **private sectors should be made to supply rural areas if no one else will.** *[Lab] [Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 3: Telephone/internet services should be **provided by a mix of private and publicly owned companies**.
Alternative 4: Telephone/internet services **should be nationalized** and **the government should set prices to cover costs**.
Alternative 5: Telephone/internet services should be **nationalized** and **provided for free**.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Space, Science, Technology, and Communications

Issue 32: International Trade
Prompt: Which of the following is closest to your view on international trade?
Alternative 1: The UK should seek **free trade with all countries in the world**. *[Con]*
Alternative 2: The UK should seek **free trade only with democratic countries**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 3: The UK should seek **free trade only with countries that have similar labour rights to the UK**. *[Lab]*
Alternative 4: The UK should seek **free trade agreements only with countries that have similar labour rights and wage levels to the UK**.
Alternative 5: The UK should **not seek free trade agreements**, and should protect its own industries against foreign competition.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General Foreign Trade

Issue 33: EU Relationship
Prompt: Which of the following is closest to your view on the relationship between the UK and the European Union?
Alternative 1: The UK **should remain a member of the EU, and sign up to EU agreements we had previously opted out of**, like the single currency and the Schengen border-free area.
Alternative 2: The UK **should remain a member of the EU**. *[LibDem]*
Alternative 3: The UK **should be out of the EU, but stay part of the single market**, which includes rules allowing 'freedom of movement'.
Alternative 4: The UK should **be out of the EU and out of the single market**, **but should participate in some EU programmes** (e.g., in research, education, and nuclear energy). *[Lab] [Con]*
Alternative 5: The UK should **be out of the EU and out of the single market**, and should not participate in any EU programmes.
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General International Affairs and Foreign Aid

Issue 34: Foreign Aid
Prompt: The UK currently gives around 0.7% of its national income to other countries in the form of aid. Many countries regard this figure as a target. Which of the following is closest to your view on foreign aid?
Alternative 1: The UK should give **no foreign aid**.
Alternative 2: The UK should give **a small amount of foreign aid** (between 0.3 and 0.4% of national income).
Alternative 3: The UK should give **the current amount of foreign aid** (0.7% of national income). *[Lab] [Con] [LibDem]*
Alternative 4: The UK should give **a larger amount of foreign aid** (1% of national income).
Alternative 5: The UK should give **a substantial amount of foreign aid** (around 1.4% of national income).
Comparative Policy Agenda Category: General International Affairs and Foreign Aid

APPENDIX B

Technical Details

B.1 Chapter 4

Here we lay out the full specification of the ideological scaling model used in Chapter 4.

Let i stand for any one of the 6,112 individual respondents in our sample, and j stand for any of the 34 issues we asked about. When individual i is asked about issue j, they form a latent response on a continuous scale. We write this response Y^*_{ij}. This latent response maps to an observed categorical response for individual i on issue j, which we write as Y_{ij}. Y_{ij} can take on one of five possible ordered values, reflecting the five response options for the issue question. The mapping from latent response Y^*_{ij} to a particular observed response category Y_{ij} depends on a series of four threshold parameters. These four threshold parameters can take on different values for different issues, but always divide the latent continuous response scale into five regions. Each of these regions corresponds to one of the observed response categories for an issue. And the observed categorical response of individual i on issue j is determined by the region in which their latent response on issue j falls.

For example, if individual i is observed to choose the first response category on issue j (i.e., $Y_{ij} = 1$), this indicates that their latent response, Y^*_{ij}, happens to be located in the first region of the latent opinion scale for issue j. If i is observed to choose the second response category on issue j (i.e., $Y_{ij} = 2$), this indicates that their latent response Y^*_{ij}, happens to be located in the second region of the latent opinion scale for issue j. And so on for all five regions and corresponding response categories.

Formally, we write the threshold parameters as α_{jk}, where $k \in \{1, ..., 4\}$ indexes the four thresholds. $Y^*_{ij} \leq \alpha_{j1}$ implies observed response $Y_{ij} = 1$; $\alpha_{j,k-1} < Y^*_{ij} \leq \alpha_{j,k}$ implies observed response $Y_{ij} = k$; and $\alpha_{j,4} < Y^*_{ij}$ implies observed response $Y_{ij} = 5$. Our threshold parameters are drawn from a uniform prior subject to an ordering constraint.

Having specified how observed categorical opinion responses link to latent continuous opinion responses, we can then model the latent response Y^*_{ij}. In Chapter 4, our model for Y^*_{ij} takes the following form:

$$Y^*_{ij} = \beta_{j1}\theta_{i1} + \beta_{j2}\theta_{i2} + \epsilon_{ij.}$$

The first two terms in the model ($\beta_{j1}\theta_{i1}$ and $\beta_{j2}\theta_{i2}$) allow for a two-dimensional *ideological* structure to issue opinion; θ_{i1} and θ_{i2} describe the location of respondent i's ideal point on the first and second ideological dimension, respectively; β_{j1} and β_{j2} describe how a respondent's ideal point on the first and second dimension, respectively, predicts her (latent) response on issue j. A larger absolute value of β_{j1} means that opinion on issue j is more strongly related to respondents' ideal points on the first ideological dimension—put in the language of factor analysis, a larger absolute value of β_{j1} means that issue j *loads* more strongly on the *first* ideological dimension. A positive value for β_{j1} tells us that larger-valued ideal points on the first dimension are associated with higher latent responses on issue j. In contrast, a negative value for β_{j1} tells us that larger-valued ideal points on the first dimension are associated with lower latent responses on issue j. Similarly, a larger absolute value of β_{j2} means that opinion on issue

j is more strongly related to respondents' positions on the *second* ideological dimension, and the direction of this relationship depends on whether β_{j2} is positive or negative.

The third term in the model is a residual error term ϵ_{ij}, which we assume is drawn from a normal distribution with mean zero and variance σ_j^2 (i.e., $\epsilon_{ij} \sim N(0, \sigma_j^2)$). This error term captures all *non-ideological* variation in opinion on issue j.

As is standard for this type of two-dimensional scaling model, we must supply some further information to the model to make the estimated ideological space more easily interpretable. The intuition for why need to do this is as follows. Imagine our respondent ideological positions as a cloud of points in a two-dimensional space. Our ideological dimensions θ_1 and θ_2 can be thought of as a horizontal and vertical axes overlaid on this cloud. Our model wants to estimate values for loading parameters (the β parameters above) which best fit the observed data. If we rotate the cloud of points underneath the axes while keeping those axes fixed, we do not change the positions of the points relative to each other. All we do is change their values—or coordinates—on the two axes, and we can make these new values fit our observed issue opinion data equally well with appropriate changes to the values of the β parameters. This is called *rotation* invariance: the fit of the model is invariant to the rotation of the underlying ideological space. Also, if we flip—or reflect—the cloud horizontally (or vertically), we can simply reverse the sign of the *beta* values for the horizontal (vertical) ideological dimension and fit the observed data equally well. This is called *reflection* invariance.

As a result of *rotation* and *reflection* invariance, without further information our model does not know which way to orient the cloud of ideal points, as there are many possible sets of θ and β estimates that fit the data equally well. In order to fix this problem, we need to give the model a small number of constraints as to how opinion on certain issues load onto each ideological dimension (Rivers, 2003).[1] To fix rotation invariance, we set the $\beta_{j1} = 0$ for the EU relationship issue, forcing this issue to have zero loading on—i.e., to be unrelated to—the first dimension. We also set $\beta_{j2} = 0$ for the NHS privatization question, forcing this issue to have zero loading on the second dimension.[2] To fix reflection invariance, for the first dimension we specify that the NHS privatization questions loads positively on this dimension ($\beta_{j1} > 0$): i.e., higher scores on this opinion are associated with a larger-valued ideal point on this dimension. For the second dimension we specify that the future EU relationship question loads positively on this dimension ($\beta_{j2} > 0$). Together, these constraints orient the first dimension to capture traditional economic left–right disagreements, and the second dimension to capture disagreements that are typically thought of as social liberal–conservative.

We stress that these constraints do not determine the relationships between different issues. Rather, they merely serve to orient the estimated ideological space so that it is more easily interpretable. In fact, we arrived at these constraints by fitting an unconstrained model, examining the loadings and implied ideological space, and identifying a set of constraints that would yield the rotation of that space onto the two conventionally understood dimensions of left-right and social liberal-conservative. We then refitted the model with constraints and confirmed that it was a rotation rather than a distortion of the original one. In that original unconstrained model the NHS privatization and EU relationship issues are almost exactly orthogonal, as implied by our constraints.

[1] The variance of the latent scale is identified by the following prior assumptions: $\theta_{i1} \sim N(0, 1)$; $\beta_{j1} \sim N(0, \frac{1}{2})$; $\beta_{j2} \sim N(0, \frac{1}{2})$; $\sigma_j \sim N_{1/2}(0, 2)$. Together, the priors over the β and σ parameters correspond to a weak prior expectation for 1/3 of the total variance in opinion variation to be explained by ideology. Any deviation from this in our results reflects evidence from the data. We choose these priors to maximize comparability with the model described in Chapter 5.

[2] As such, the model is slightly over-identified. Setting a second issue to have zero loading on one of the dimensions is not strictly required.

We estimate this model via Bayesian posterior simulation, implemented in Stan (Carpenter et al., 2016).

In the chapter we describe the proportion of variance explained by ideology for each issue. The total variance for each issue is a function of three components: $\beta_{j1}\theta_{i1}$, $\beta_{j1}\theta_{i1}$, and ϵ_j. The variance of the first (economic left–right) ideological term is equal to the square of β_{j1}. This follows from the identity $\text{Var}(cx) = c^2\text{Var}(x)$, and from the fact that the variance of θ_{i1} is set to one as part of our identification conditions. A similar argument holds for the variance of the second (liberal–conservative) dimension. The proportion of variance explained by ideology is therefore equal to $\frac{\beta_{j1}^2+\beta_{j2}^2}{\beta_{j1}^2+\beta_{j2}^2+\sigma_j^2}$.

B.2 Chapter 5

Here we lay out the full specification of the panel model discussed in Chapter 5.

As with the model in Chapter 4, the outcome variable in our model is issue opinion measured on an ordered five-category response scale. We write each observation on this outcome variable as Y_{ijt}. As before, Y can take on any value from 1 to 5, since there were five ordered response options for every issue question. As before, i stands for the individual respondent who reported the opinion, where i can take on any value from 1 to 6,112 (the total number of respondents in our data). And as before, j stands for the particular issue on which the opinion was reported, where j can take on any value from 1 to 34 (the total number of issues covered in our data). But now, because we are working with panel survey data, we have the additional index t, which stands for the survey wave in which the opinion is reported and which can take on any value from 1 to 3 (the total number of survey waves in our data).

As with the model used in in Chapter 4, we assume an ordinal probit model which links *observed* ordered categorical issue opinion responses to unobserved, *latent* continuous responses. When respondent i is asked about issue j in survey wave t, this generates a latent response Y^*_{ijt} on a continuous scale. A series of threshold parameters (α_{j1} to α_{j4}) divide up this continuous scale into five regions, each corresponding to one of the five ordered response categories for issue j. The value of the observed ordered response Y_{ijt} for respondent i on issue j in wave t is determined by the region in which Y^*_{ijt} is located.

Our augmented model for the latent response Y^*_{ijt} takes the following form:

$$Y^*_{ijt} = \beta_{j1}\theta_{i1} + \beta_{j2}\theta_{i2} + \nu_{ij} + \epsilon_{ijt.}$$

The first two terms on the right hand side ($\beta_{j1}\theta_{i1}$ and $\beta_{j2}\theta_{i2}$) are the same as in the model used in Chapter 4, and allow for a two-dimensional *ideological* structure to issue opinion; θ_{i1} (θ_{i2}) describes the location of respondent i's ideal point on the first (second) ideological dimension, respectively; β_{j1} (β_{j2}) describes the direction and magnitude of the association between a respondent's ideal point on the first (second) dimension and their latent response on issue j. Note that none of these ideological parameters are indexed by survey wave t: this means that we assume that both respondent ideology and the association between ideology and opinion on each issue are stable over time.

The third term on the right-hand side of the model, ν_{ij}, is new compared to the model in Chapter 4, and is key for capturing *idiosyncratic* issue opinion. Being indexed only by i and j—and not t—it captures any stable respondent-by-issue effect on latent opinion which remains *after accounting for respondent ideology*. If ν_{ij} is large and positive, it indicates that respondent i gives a much higher latent response on issue j than we would expect based on their ideology alone (as captured by estimated θ's for respondent i and the estimated β's for issue j), and that this discrepancy is consistent over survey waves. If ν_{ij} is large and negative, it indicates

that respondent i consistently gives a much lower latent response on issue j than we would expect based on their ideology alone. In both of these cases, respondent i can be said to display idiosyncratic opinion on j: their opinion is unpredictable based on ideology but is consistent over time. In contrast, if ν_{ij} is zero, this indicates that respondent i on average gives the latent response on issue j which we would expect based on their ideology alone. In this case, the respondent displays little idiosyncrasy in their opinion on issue j.

In our model we assume that, for a given issue j, individuals' values of ν_{ij} are distributed normally with mean zero and variance ω_j^2. The larger the value of ω_j^2, the more values of ν_{ij} vary across individuals, and the more idiosyncratic variation there is in opinion on issue j.

As in Chapter 4, the final term in the model is the residual error term ϵ_{ijt}. In this augmented model, this error term takes on a slightly different interpretation. In Chapter 4, it captured *any* non-ideological variation in issue opinion. But now we have the addition of the respondent-by-issue effect (ν_{ij}) to the model, which captures that non-ideological variation in opinion across individuals which is stable over repeated measurement. Hence, ϵ_{ijt} now captures only the residual variation in issue opinion which is *unstable* across repeated measurements. In other words, ϵ_{ijt} captures the essentially random variation in reported issue opinion which we would expect when respondents lack real attitudes. We assume that, for each observation, ϵ_{ijt} is drawn from a normal distribution. The mean of this distribution is always zero. The variance of this distribution depends on the issue in question, and as before is labelled σ_j^2. The larger the value of σ_j^2, the larger the absolute values of ϵ_{ijt} tend to be for issue j, and the more respondents tend to have unstable opinions on that issue.

How can we use the parameters from this estimated model to summarize the proportion of total opinion variation on each issue that is attributable to idiosyncrasy? We already have a model parameter which measures the variance in opinion due to idiosyncrasy: this is ω_j^2, which, as discussed above, governs how much respondent-by-issue idiosyncratic effects vary for issue j. To express this as a proportion of the *total variation* in opinion on a given issue, we need to express total opinion variance on that issue in terms of the model parameters. To do this, note first that unstable variance in opinion on issue j is given by σ_j^2. Second, note that the ideological variance in opinion on issue j is given by $\beta_{j1}^2 + \beta_{j2}^2$.[3] To get the total variation in opinion on issue j we can sum the idiosyncratic variance term, ω_j^2, the unstable variance term, σ_j^2, and the ideological variance term $\beta_{j1}^2 + \beta_{j2}^2$, because these reflect sources of variation that are independent by assumption.

The proportion of the total opinion variation on issue j attributable to idiosyncrasy can therefore be computed as $\omega_j^2/(\beta_{j1}^2 + \beta_{j2}^2 + \omega_j^2 + \sigma_j^2)$. In addition, the proportion of *stable opinion* variation that is idiosyncratic can be expressed in terms of the estimated model parameters as $\omega_j^2/(\beta_{j1}^2 + \beta_{j2}^2 + \omega_j^2)$.

In the previous appendix, we discussed the issues surrounding the identification of the two-dimensional ideological space in a model like this. To deal with those issues we apply the same set of prior constraints on β values as described in that appendix.

We also choose priors for the β, ω, and σ parameters which together imply a weak prior expectation that 1/3 of the variation of opinion on each issue is attributable to idiosyncrasy, 1/3 to ideology, and 1/3 to instability. As such, if our results indicate a deviation from this equal split, this is due to information in the data. Specifically, we assign priors $\omega_j \sim N_{1/2}(0, 1)$,

[3] To see why the opinion variance due to ideology is $\beta_{j1}^2+\beta_{j2}^2$, note first that, assuming independence of all β and θ parameters, then $Var(\beta_{j1}^2\theta_{i1}+\beta_{j2}^2\theta_{i2}) = Var(\beta_{j1}^2\theta_{i1})+Var(\beta_{j2}^2\theta_{i2})$. Second, because the variance of the product of a constant c and a random variable x is $Var(cx) = c^2Var(x)$, then $Var(\beta_{j1}^2\theta_{i1}) = \beta_{j1}^2 Var(\theta_{i1})$. And since we assume that $\theta_{i1} \sim N(0, 1)$, this implies that $\beta_{j1}^2 Var(\theta_{i1}) = \beta_{j1}^2$. The same logic holds for $Var(\beta_{j2}^2\theta_{i2})$.

$\sigma_j \sim N_{1/2}(0, 1)$, $\beta_{j1} \sim N(0, \frac{1}{2})$, and $\beta_{j2} \sim N(0, \frac{1}{2})$. These priors imply the same expected value of one for ω_j^2, for σ_j^2, and for $\beta_{j1}^2 + \beta_{j1}^2$.

B.2.1 Adjusted Model Using Groups

Compared to the model just described, the adjusted model used in Chapters 5 and 6 to decompose issue opinion for different voter groups involves three key changes. These are as follows.

First, whereas before we assumed that all voter ideal points were drawn from a common standard normal distribution, we now allow the variance in ideal points to differ for each group. Specifically, letting $g[i]$ denote the group to which voter i belongs, we assume that $\theta_{i1} \sim N(0, \phi^2_{g[i]1})$ and $\theta_{i2} \sim N(0, \phi^2_{g[i]2})$. The greater the value of ϕ_{g1} and ϕ_{g2}, the more variance there is in ideological positions within group g, leading to more ideological variation in issue opinions in group g. The total ideological variance in opinion on issue j across voters in group g will be $\beta_{j1}^2\phi_{g1}^2 + \beta_{j2}^2\phi_{g2}^2$. We fix $\phi_{g1} = \phi_{g2} = 1$ for a baseline group, for identification.

Second, whereas in the main model we assume that voter-by-issue idiosyncratic effects are drawn from a common distribution across all voters for a given issue, we now assume this distribution differs for each voter group. Specifically, we assume that $\nu_{ij} \sim N(0, \omega^2_{jg[i]})$. This implies that, for any group, the average voter-by-issue idiosyncratic effect is zero, but that the variance in voter-by-issue idiosyncratic effects can differ across groups: the larger the value of ω^2_{jg}, the more idiosyncratic opinion variation there is on issue j among voters in group g.

The final adjustment to the model involves the residual term, ϵ_{ijt}. Previously, the model assumed that this error, which captured wave-to-wave instability in an individual's opinions on a given issue, was drawn from a common distribution across voters. Now we assume different distributions for each voter group, each centred at zero but with a group-specific variance: $\epsilon_{ijt} \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{jg[i]})$. The greater the value of σ^2_{jg}, the more unstable opinion variation there is on issue j among voters in group g.

B.3 Chapter 6

Here we lay out the full specification of the item-response model of issue opinion stability used in Chapter 6.

Let Z_{ij} denote our opinion stability indicator, where $Z_{ij} = 1$ if individual i gives the same observed opinion response on issue j in both wave 1 and wave 2 of the survey, and $Z_{ij} = 0$ if they do not. Recall that our survey design was such that each wave 1 respondent was asked seven issue questions drawn randomly from the full bank of 34 issue questions, and was asked the same sample of issue questions in each subsequent survey wave in which they participated. We therefore have seven observations on Z_{ij} for each of our 3,044 wave 2 respondents, with Z_{ij} measured on different combinations of issues for different respondents. And we have between 589 and 675 observations on Z_{ij} for each of our 34 issues, with different issues observed on different combinations of respondents.

Using the observed data on Z_{ij}, we estimate the following item response model:

$$\Pr[Z_{ij} = 1] = \text{logit}^{-1}(\alpha_j + \beta_j\lambda_i)$$

The term $\Pr[Z_{ij} = 1]$ on the left hand side of the equation says that we are modelling the probability of individual i giving a stable response on issue j. The 'logit^{-1}' on the right hand side is a common ingredient when modelling a probability: it says that we apply an 'inverse-logit'

transformation to the value of the linear expression inside the parentheses. This can be useful because a probability must lie between zero and one, and whereas the expression inside the parentheses can take on any value, an inverse-logit transformation 'squashes' these values to lie between zero and one.

The linear expression contained within the parentheses, $\alpha_j + \beta_j\lambda_i$, is of more substantive interest. The parameter λ_i represents the general stability propensity of individual *i*. The model assumes that the distribution of λ across individuals has a normal shape with mean zero and standard deviation one. The 'slope' parameter β_j here determines the association between individual general stability propensity and the probability of a stable opinion specifically on issue *j*. If β_j is positive, this means that individuals with higher general stability propensity are more likely to have stable opinions on the specific issue *j*, and the larger the magnitude of β_j, the stronger this association. If β_j is negative, this means that individuals with higher general stability propensity are for some reason less likely to have stable opinions on the specific issue *j*. Finally, the 'intercept' parameter α_j here determines the probability of a stable response on issue *j* among individuals who have an average level of general stability propensity, and who therefore score zero on λ_i.[4]

B.4 Chapter 7

Here we lay out the details of the various statistical models used in Chapter 7.

B.4.1 Candidate Choice Model: Choice Component

We observe the choice respondent *i* makes between candidates A and B in survey wave *t*. We assume that respondent *i*'s choice between A and B in wave *t* depends on the difference in the issue-based utilities associated with the two candidates, plus a random utility shock. We express this utility difference as:

$$\Delta_{it} = (u_{iAt} - u_{iBt}) + \epsilon_{it},$$

where u_{iAt} (u_{iBt}) denotes the issue-related utility that the respondent associates with candidate A (B) given A's (B's) stated policy alternatives across issues and the respondent's own preferred policy alternatives on those same issues at the time of survey wave *t*, and where ϵ_{it} denotes a random utility shock which is drawn from a standard logistic distribution each time the respondent answers the candidate choice question in any given wave *t*.

Because the error term has a logistic distribution, we use an ordered logistic response model to connect latent candidate utility differences to observed conjoint choices. The realized utility difference between two candidates can take any value on a continuous scale. The model includes two threshold parameters, γ_1 and γ_2, which divide this continuous scale into three regions. We observe the choice outcome 'I would vote for B' if the realized value of the utility difference happens to fall in the region below γ_1, choice outcome 'not sure' if the realized utility difference happens to fall in the region between γ_1 and γ_2, and choice outcome 'I would vote for A' if the realized utility difference happens to fall above γ_2. The threshold parameters γ_1 and γ_2 are estimated based on the data. The larger their absolute

[4] We again estimate this model via Bayesian posterior simulation, implemented in Stan (Carpenter et al., 2016).

values, the more likely we are to observe 'I am not sure' responses to the candidate choice questions.[5]

B.4.2 Candidate Choice Model: Utility Component

Having specified how individual respondents are assumed to translate the utilities they associate with candidates into conjoint choices, we turn to specify how those utilities depend on the issue positions of respondents and candidates. Specifically, we focus on how respondent and candidate issue positions combine to generate the issue-related utility a respondent associates with a candidate.

Our main analysis of the candidate choice experiment data assumes a spatial structure for the issue-related utilities respondents associate with candidates. Specifically, it assumes a 'linear-loss' spatial model, where the issue-related utility a respondent receives from a candidate's position on an issue declines linearly as that position moves further from the respondent's own preferred position. More formally, the model assumes that for each issue j, the five policy alternatives on this issue, $k = 1$ to 5, can be arrayed along a continuous issue-specific scale, with five parameters ψ_{j1} to ψ_{j5} representing the *locations* of each policy alternative on that scale. We then assume that the issue-related utility respondent i associates with candidate A and B in survey wave t takes the following form:

$$u_{iAt} = -\sum_{j \in S_i} \left| \psi_{jA} - \psi_{jit} \right| \qquad u_{iBt} = -\sum_{j \in S_i} \left| \psi_{jB} - \psi_{jit} \right|.$$

These equations say that the issue-based utility from a candidate for a respondent is found by taking the negative of the sum of the absolute differences between the locations of the respondent's preferred positions (ψ_{jit}) and the candidate's stated positions (ψ_{jA}, ψ_{jB}) on the three issues included in the conjoint experiment ($j \in S_i$). By taking the negative of the sum, we ensure that issue-related utility *declines* as candidate issue positions move further away from respondent issue positions.

The key parameters here are the locations of the policy positions ψ_{jk}. The location of the first policy alternative on each issue (ψ_{j1}) is fixed to zero. The locations of the remaining policy alternatives are *not* subject to an ordering constraint: the recovered locations are those that best fit the observed conjoint choices.

Because in this framework all of the issue-specific scales are defined in units of utility, the spacing of the locations ψ_{jk} of policy alternative on an issue indicates how much respondents penalize disagreement with their own position on that issue. An issue where individuals associate large utility differences between different policy alternatives will be one where the locations ψ_{jk} are widely spaced. An inconsequential issue would have locations ψ_{jk} that are essentially indistinguishable (i.e., $\psi_{j1} \approx \psi_{j2} \approx \ldots \approx \psi_{j5}$).

[5] If $|\gamma_1| = |\gamma_2|$, respondents treat candidates A and B symmetrically. If $\gamma_1 \neq -\gamma_2$, respondents systematically prefer either A or B due to order effects. We could estimate a single pair of parameters γ_1 and γ_2 for all comparisons, but for diagnostic purposes we estimate separate parameters according to the number of issues on which candidate A and B take differing positions. We thus allow for respondents to apply different thresholds depending on the complexity of the comparison. In particular, in cases where all three issue positions are identical, we would expect larger differences between γ_1 and γ_2 as the intermediate response is most sensible when faced with two identical candidates. Indeed, in cases where Wave 1 respondents were faced with identical candidates in the experiment, 75% of raw responses were for the intermediate 'not sure' option. The remaining 25% are presumably either not paying attention, or are giving a silly answer to what appears to be a silly question. Because we model separate thresholds by difference count, these responses have no consequence for any substantive parameter estimates.

We use Bayesian posterior simulation, implemented in Stan (Carpenter et al., 2016) to estimate a conjoint response model which assumes this spatial structure for issue-based utilities. We use uniform priors on all parameters and report posterior means and 95% central intervals. The likelihood of the model is well-identified, and similar estimates could be obtained by maximum likelihood estimation.

B.4.3 Measuring Issue Importance

How exactly do we measure importance based on the spatial model of candidate choices just described? If the spacing of the estimated locations ψ_{jk} of policy alternatives for an issue tell us how much respondents penalize departures from their own position on that issue, we could just use the range of estimated locations ψ_{jk} for an issue to gauge the importance of that issue. However, the spacing between the ψ_{jk} locations on any issue is partly shaped by our choices of which policy alternatives to present for issue j in our survey.

We therefore focus on a measure of the choice importance of each issue which is based on the candidate choice model, but which also accounts for the distribution of support for each policy alternative on an issue. Specifically, our main choice importance measure is the following function of the estimated locations of each position ψ_{jk} on the common utility scale and the proportion of respondents who report preferring that position π_{jk}:

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

This says that the choice importance score χ for issue j weights the distances between the ψ values for each pair of different positions on j by our population estimates π_{jk} of the proportion of respondents who prefer the kth position on that issue. As explained in the main text, one can think about this choice importance score as the population average disutility voters feel towards the opinions held by their fellow voters.

B.4.4 A Flexible (Non-Spatial) Model of Candidate Choices

In Chapter 7 we also use the data from our candidate choice experiments to test the assumption that voters tend to think about the types of issues we examine according to a spatial logic. We do so by assuming a flexible specification for the issue-related utility respondent i associates with candidates A and B in survey wave t:

$$u_{iAt} = \sum_{j \in S_i} \eta_{jkk'} \qquad u_{iBt} = \sum_{j \in S_i} \eta_{jkk'}.$$

Here, the term $\eta_{jkk'}$ represents the utility increment associated with a particular combination of respondent and candidate positions on issue j, where k indexes the respondent's position on issue j, and k' indexes the candidate's position on issue j. The equations say that a respondent's total issue-related utility from a candidate is found by summing the three relevant utility increments $\eta_{jkk'}$: the utility increment associated with the observed respondent-candidate position combination on the first issue included in the candidate choice experiment for respondent i; the utility increment associated with the observed respondent-candidate position combination on the second issue included in the candidate choice experiment; and the utility increment

associated with the observed respondent-candidate position combination on the third issue included in the candidate choice experiment.[6]

In cases where respondent and candidate take the same position on issue j (i.e., $k = k'$), we restrict the value of $\eta_{jkk'}$ to zero. For all remaining combinations where candidate and respondent take non-identical issue positions (i.e., $k \neq k'$), we estimate values of $\eta_{jkk'}$ based on the data, making no assumptions about the relative size of these parameters. These estimated values can be interpreted as the average *utility loss* associated with a particular combination of respondent and candidate positions on issue j, compared to when the respondent and candidate share the same position on the issue. The larger the value of η_{jkk}, the larger the utility loss respondents at position k on issue j associate with a candidate taking position k' on issue j. This model requires us to estimate a very large number of parameters: with a different utility loss for every possible non-identical respondent-candidate issue position combination, there are twenty $\eta_{jkk'}$ parameters to estimate for each of our 34 issues. Furthermore, we have relatively few observations with which to estimate some $\eta_{jkk'}$ parameters because they pertain to a respondent issue position which is particularly unpopular with respondents. Hence we cannot estimate each individual utility loss precisely. But we can nonetheless look at the general pattern in estimated utility losses to see if, even when we place few restrictions on the form that pattern can take, it broadly follows what we would expect if voters think about the issues spatially.

B.4.5 Allowing Individual Issue Importance to Vary by Issue Position Stability

To allow individual issue importance to vary by stability of individual opinion on that issue, we re-fit the main candidate choice model described at the start of this appendix to our wave 2 survey data. This time, we augment the issue-based utility component of the model to allow the weight attached to the distance between respondent i's position and the candidate position on issue j to vary as a function of whether respondent i has maintained a stable position on issue j between wave 1 and 2 ($X = 1$) or has changed that position in any way ($X = 0$). Specifically, the augmented model for issue-based utility is as follows:

$$u_{iA2} = -\sum_{j \in S_i} e^{\beta X_{ji}} \left| \psi_{jA} - \psi_{ji2} \right| \qquad u_{iB2} = -\sum_{j \in S_i} e^{\beta X_{ji}} \left| \psi_{jB} - \psi_{ji2} \right|.$$

Here, β captures the average degree to which a respondent with a perfectly stable wave 1–2 position on issue j attaches greater utility weight to candidate deviations from their wave 2 position on j than does a respondent whose position on j has changed from wave 1 to 2. We use the natural exponent of βX_{ji} to constrain the weight to be positive. β is estimated from the data under an improper uniform prior.

B.4.6 Modelling Conditional Choice Stability

To test each conditional choice stability expectation, we estimate a statistical model that allows the polychoric correlation of individual candidate choice responses across a given pair of survey waves to vary as a function of covariates. This model starts with Y_{i1} and Y_{i2}, the observed choices of a respondent i presented with a given pair of candidates in each of two periods

[6] In the equations, S_i denotes the set of three issues randomly selected for respondent i's conjoint questions. So if S_i contains 3, 6, and 25 this means that respondent i happened to be presented with candidates taking positions on issues 3, 6, and 25.

$t = 1$ and $t = 2$. These observed responses fall into one of the ordered categories *A* (a choice for candidate A), *NS* (not sure), and *B* (a choice for candidate B). The model assumes that these observed categorical choices depend on the continuous latent variables Y^*_{i1} and Y^*_{i2}, one for each period *t*. As usual, the mapping from latent continuous Y^*_{it} value to observed categorical Y_{it} response depends on threshold parameters that divide up the latent scale into three regions, one for each response category.

Our chief interest is in modelling the correlation between the two latent variables Y^*_{i1} and Y^*_{i2}, since this tells us about the correlation between the respondent's candidate choices at two time points, when faced with the same candidates across both time points. To do this, we first define these two latent variables as made up of a stable, respondent specific component ν_i and a respondent-period-specific component ϵ_{it}, i.e., $Y^*_{it} = \nu_i + \epsilon_{it}$. We then assume that the stable, respondent-specific component ν_i is normally distributed across respondents with mean zero and variance equal to ρ_i (i.e., $\nu_i \sim N(0, \rho_i)$), where the parameter ρ_i can take on any value between zero and one. We further assume that the respondent-period-specific component ϵ_{it} is normally distributed with mean zero and variance equal to $1-\rho_i$, i.e., $\epsilon_{it} \sim N(0, 1-\rho_i)$. With the components defined in this way ρ_i captures the correlation between the respondent *i*'s latent responses across the two time periods: the greater the value of ρ_i, the greater the share of all variance in the latent variables Y^*_{i1} and Y^*_{i2} that is attributable to the stable respondent-specific component, and the smaller the variance in the respondent-period-specific component (since this is $1 - \rho_i$), which results in smaller differences, on average, between realized values of Y^*_{i1} and Y^*_{i2}.

If we model ρ_i as a constant across all individuals, then we are estimating a single polychoric correlation for all respondents. Instead, here we allow ρ_i to vary across respondents as a function of covariate X_i, which measures either the characteristics of the respondent *i* or of the choice they are engaged in. Specifically, we assume that $\rho_i = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta X_i)$. In this specification, β captures the effect of the covariate X_i on the wave-to-wave correlation in the respondent's conjoint choices. As in the previous chapter, we use an inverse logit transformation here to ensure that ρ_i always takes on values between zero and one.[7]

We again estimate this model by Bayesian posterior simulation, implemented in Stan (Carpenter et al., 2016), imposing uniform priors on all parameters.

[7] While in general correlations can be negative, in this application of modelling stability we do not expect any negative correlations and so the logistic form above is a sensible parameterization.

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