

Core Issues and Citizen Competence: Re-evaluating the Role of Single-Issue Knowledge and Voting in American Politics

By Andrew Cramer

Yale Institution for Social and Policy Studies Undergraduate Researcher

Both academics and media pundits seem to concur that Americans either do not know or do not care about candidates' policies when voting (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Delli Carpini 1999; Achen and Bartels 2017). The rising tide of partisan polarization—both in terms of policy dimensions and in the media environment—has likely diminished even further the role of issues in determining vote choice (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). However, at the same time, the 2020s has seen larger and more frequent protests than previous decades, suggesting that citizens hold meaningful policy beliefs they wish to express (Haig et al. 2020; Bui et al. 2020). This speaks to an increasingly popular notion in political science research: although voters may be ill-informed on the aggregate, they have strong beliefs about a single core issue, which alone drives their vote choice (e.g. Fowler 2020, Ehlinger and Ryan 2023, Velez 2023). My research looks at empirical data from the 2022 Texas gubernatorial race and a tailored conjoint experiment to argue that, even if voters are uninformed on policy overall, they are relatively well-informed about their core issue and a significant portion of Americans appear to vote based on those policies. In the empirical case study, core issues were roughly four times more predictive of vote choice than partisanship, and in the survey experiment, ten percent of respondents behaved consistently as single-issue voters.

2022 Texas Gubernatorial Election

The 2022 gubernatorial election had several features that increased the likelihood of issue salience. First, both incumbent Greg Abbott and challenger Beto O'Rourke were high-profile figures, so voters were likely more familiar with their views. Second, events from the preceding year such as the energy grid crisis, Uvalde shooting, greater numbers of border crossings, and the *Dobbs* decision brought the impacts of policy decision down to individuals in the state. Third, the importance of the seat and seemingly competitive nature of the race led to an influx of donations and spending, which in turn led to significant ad spending and high quality, publicly available polling.

At first glance, in the Texas Politics Project data (N = 2,400) that I used, there does not seem to be evidence of a clear electoral mandate. Of the eleven issue dimensions polled, citizens did not identify a consensus most important issue nor did support on any one dimension seem to closely match intended vote choice. However, respondents were also asked to indicate what their core issue was. A model predicting vote choice based only on core issues explained roughly 88% of the data, much better than the 58% of a partisanship model, and even better than the 82% of an "Issue Wins" model that aggregated preferences across all 11-issues polled (See Table 1). These results were robust even when accounting for demographic variables (See Figure 1). However, a large number of voters supported their preferred candidate on either all or none of the polled issues, suggesting that they perhaps simply picked a candidate for non-policy reasons and then expressed support on all issues (See Figure 2; Lenz 2009).

Issue Knowledge Survey and Tailored Conjoint Experiment

Because of concerns about the preference formation process, I utilized a tailored conjoint experiment that asked respondents about their policy attitudes and then forced them to choose

between hypothetical candidates. Although hypotheticals possess their own limitations, they can be useful insofar as revealing psychological processes (McDonald 2019; Hainmueller et al. 2014).

I first asked respondents to indicate which of seventeen issues was their most important and up to six more that they deemed very important for their vote. I then asked them to place the views of the average Republican and Democratic congressperson among three options to measure policy knowledge, in line with Freeder et al. (2019) and Converse's (1964) notion that one can measure citizen competence by asking if people "know what goes with what." As Table 2 shows, voters were significantly more knowledgeable about their core issues, especially those who behaved as single-issue voters, although political participants were not necessarily more knowledgeable.

In the candidate choice portion of the experiment, I utilized five conditions. The first was a control, in which one candidate matched respondent's party, demographics, and all of their policy preferences, and the other did not. The second explored the effect of policy versus partisanship and demographics. The third looked at single-issue voting. The fourth looked at single-issue voting in primaries. And the fifth used randomized variables across all of these categories. Full descriptions of the conditions can be found in Figure 3. In Condition 3, nearly a third of respondents behaved as single-issue voters (See Table 3), and across all four conditions, ten percent of respondents consistently voted only based on their core issue even when it ran against demographics, partisanship, or their other very important issues. In regressions based on the randomized condition, we see a similarly large effect for core issues (See Figure 4). Interestingly, even those who behaved as single-issue voters do not clearly self-identify as such.

In fact, people who behaved as single-issue voters often listed the same number of very important issues as non-single-issue voters (See Table 4).

Implications

These findings suggest that, by looking at overall political knowledge or aggregate data rather than core issue knowledge on the individual level, research and surveys typically underestimate the level of knowledge among American voters. These findings have significant implications across several different domains. In terms of normative claims about democratic health, they suggest that the portion of Americans who vote competently is larger than generally assumed. In terms of campaign strategy, as technology improves to allow for improved microtargeting, candidates can focus more on appealing to just one issue for a voter rather than highlighting a comprehensive bundle of policies. For issue polling, this suggests a need to ask not just for citizen preferences, but to combine that data with the importance of a given issue for each respondent. And this work calls into question both present and historical claims of electoral mandates, as we see that, when citizens vote based on policy dimensions, the policies they care about are diverse, with elections giving no clear consensus on support or opposition to any given policy, no matter how dominant it may be in the public discourse.

Figures and Tables

Table 1: Comparing different models of vote choice in Texas governor's race

Model	Core Issue Only	Issue Wins Only	Partisanship Only	Full Model
Intercept	0.018**	0.053***	0.474***	0.053**
Best Handler Coefficient	0.9355***	—	—	0.4552***
Issue Wins Coefficient	—	0.09294***	—	0.0441***
Democrat Coefficient	—	—	-0.4135***	-0.0685***
Republican Coefficient	—	—	0.0722*	0.0180
Other Party Coefficient	—	—	0.4898***	0.0468**
Adjusted R²	0.8756	0.8215	0.5838	0.9126

Figure 1: Effects of issues in Texas 2022 Governor's race

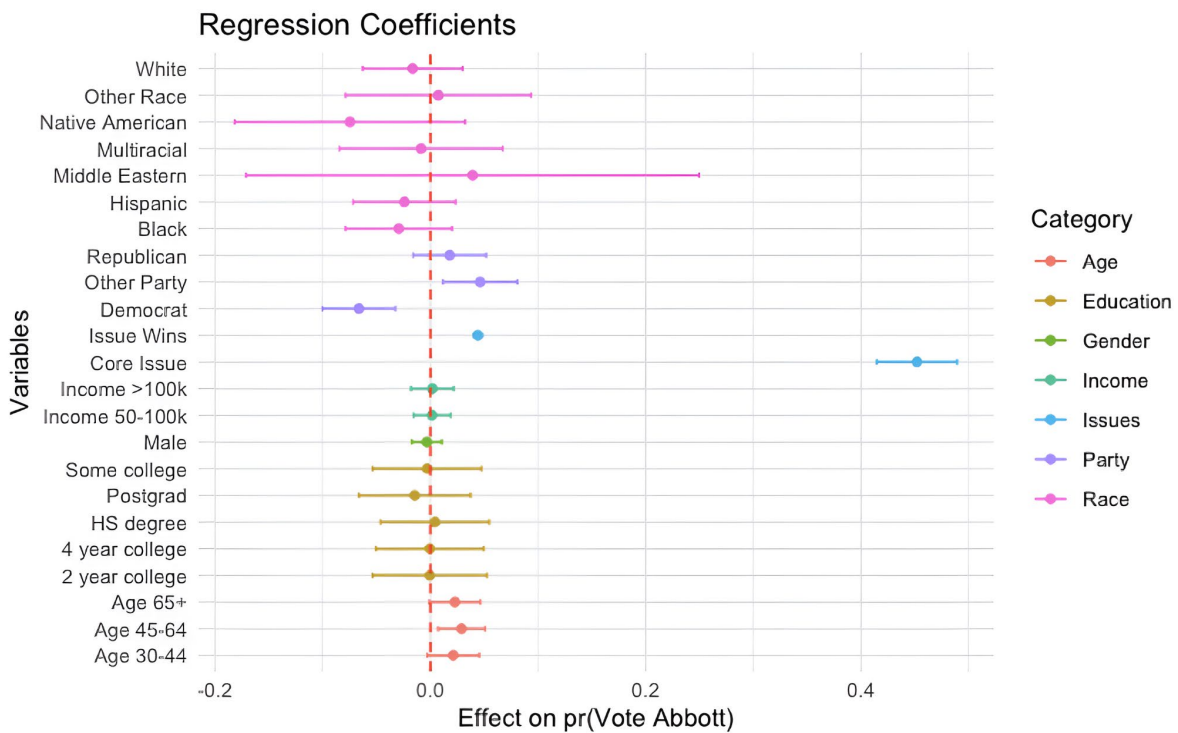


Figure 2: Support on the issues by voting behavior

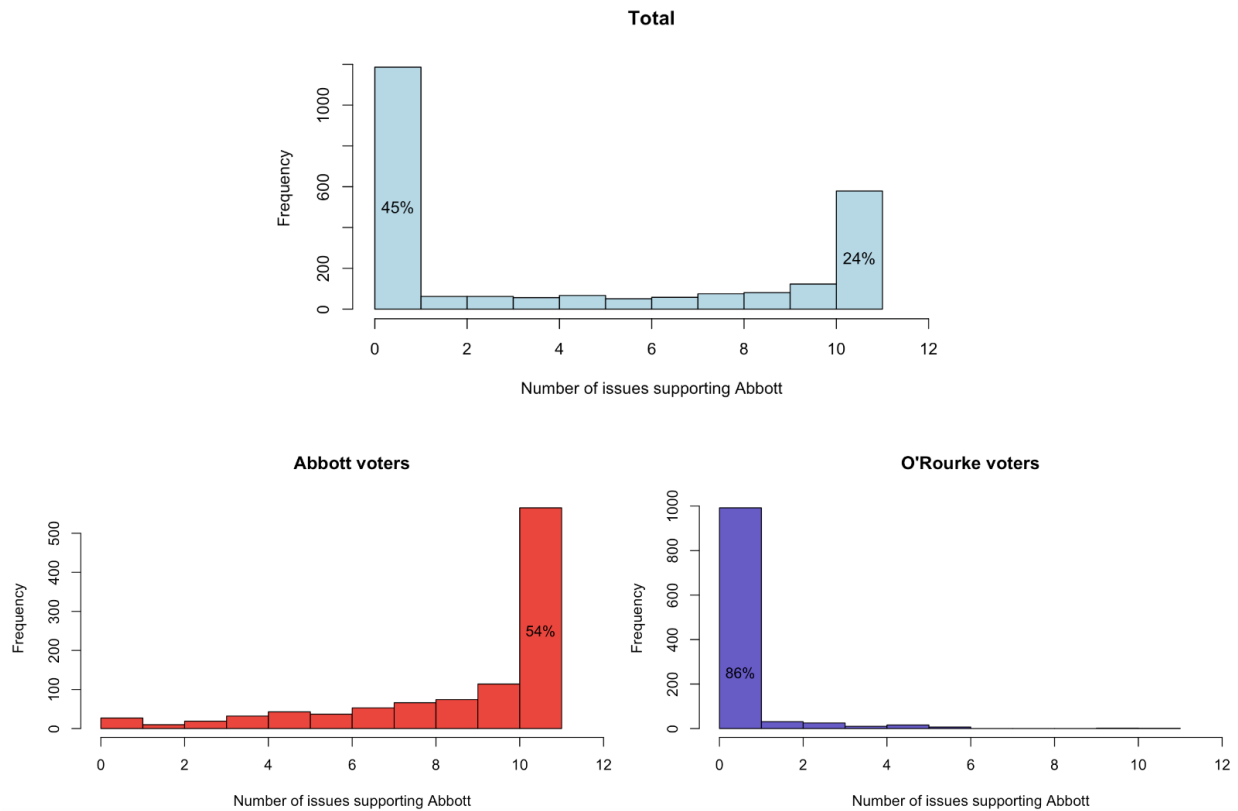


Table 2: Policy knowledge by issue type and voter type

	General Knowledge	Not Important Issues	Very Important Issues	Core Issues
Full Sample	48.09%	41.39%	47.25%	55.45%
Single-issue voters	47.25%	44.17%	53.34%	64.20%
Political participants	53.51%	48.97%	40.07%	52.44%
College graduates	56.45%	50.00%	56.15%	64.77%

Figure 3: Conjoint conditions

Condition 1: Control		
Trait	Candidate A	Candidate B
Age	Similar	Different
Gender	Same	Different
Race/ethnicity	Same	Different
Political Party	Same	Different
Core Issue Name	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Same	Different

Condition 2: Party vs. Policy and Demographics		
Trait	Candidate A	Candidate B
Age	Different	Similar
Gender	Different	Same
Race/ethnicity	Different	Same
Political Party	Different	Same
Core Issue Name	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Same	Different

Condition 3: Single-Issue Voting		
Trait	Candidate A	Candidate B
Age	Random	Random
Gender	Random	Random
Race/ethnicity	Random	Random
Political Party	Different	Same
Core Issue Name	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Different	Same
Very Important Issue	Different	Same
Very Important Issue	Different	Same

Condition 4: Single-Issue Primary		
Trait	Candidate A	Candidate B
Age	Random	Random
Gender	Random	Random
Race/ethnicity	Random	Random
Political Party	Same	Same
Core Issue Name	Same	Different
Very Important Issue	Different	Same
Very Important Issue	Different	Same
Very Important Issue	Different	Same

Table 3: Vote choice by conjoint condition

Condition	1: Control	2: Policy vs. Party	3: Single Issue vs. All Others	4: Single Issue Primary
Candidate A	All traits (89.8%)	All policies (70.4%)	Core issue policy (32.0%)	Party and core issue policy (47.3%)
Candidate B	No traits (7.3%)	Demographics and party (27.6%)	Party and all very important policies (61.6%)	Party and all very important policies (45.3%)
Indifferent/ No opinion	2.9%	2.0%	6.3%	7.5%

Note: The description in each cell indicates the traits a candidate shared with the respondent and the value in parentheses is their vote share.

Figure 4: Regression coefficients from randomized condition of conjoint experiment

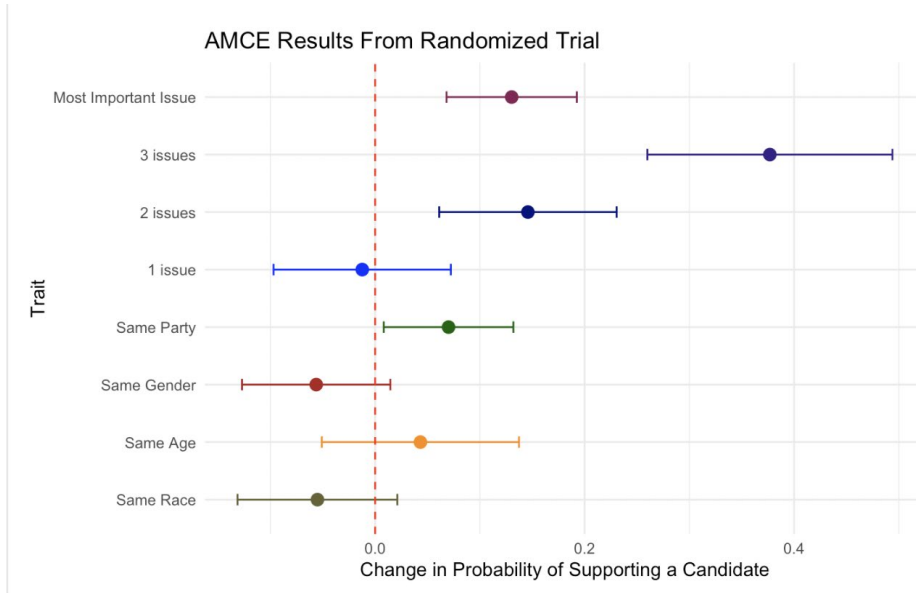


Table 4: How many issues do people say are very important to their vote

	1 issue	2	3	4	5	6+
Overall	2.89%	4.45	6.34	10.12	19.13	57.06
Single-issue voters	5.49%	3.30	10.99	10.99	13.19	56.04
Non-single-issue voters	2.60%	4.58	5.82	10.02	19.80	57.18

References

- Achen, Christopher, and Larry Bartels. "Democracy for realists: Why elections do not produce responsive government." *Princeton University Press* (2017).
- Bui, Quoc Trung, Larry Buchanan, and Jugal K. Patel. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *New York Times* (Jul. 3, 2020): <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. "The American Voter." *New York: John Wiley and Sons* (1960).
- Converse, Philip E. "The nature of belief systems in mass publics." *Critical Review* 18.1 (1964): 1-74.
- Delli Carpini, Michael. "In search of the informed citizen: What Americans know about politics and why it matters." *The Communication Review* 4.1 (2000): 129–164. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420009359466>.
- Fowler, Anthony. "Partisan Intoxication or Policy Voting?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* (2020).
- Freeder, Sean, Gabriel S. Lenz, and Shad Turney. "The Importance of Knowing "What Goes with What": Reinterpreting the Evidence on Policy Attitude Stability." *Journal of Politics* 81.1 (2019): 274-290. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/700005>.
- Haig, Christian Stirling, Katherine Schmidt, and Samuel Brannen. "The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend." *CSIS*. Mar. 2, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/age-mass-protests-understanding-escalating-global-trend>.
- Hainmueller, Jens, Daniel J. Hopkins, and Teppei Yamamoto. "Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments." *Political Analysis* 22.1 (2014): 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpt024>.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S., William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth, and Herbert F. Weisberg. "The American Voter Revisited." *Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press* (2008).
- McDonald, Jared. "Avoiding the Hypothetical: Why 'Mirror Experiments' are an Essential Part of Survey Research." *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 32.2 (2020):266–283. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edz027>.
- "October and August 2022 Polls." *The Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin*. <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/polling-data-archive>.
- Ryan, Timothy J., and J Andrew Ehlinger. "Issue Publics: How Electoral Constituencies Hide in Plain Sight." *Elements in Political Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2023): doi:10.1017/9781009242400.
- Velez, Yamil Ricardo. "Trade-offs in Latino Politics: Exploring the Role of Deeply-Held Issue Positions using a Dynamic Tailored Conjoint Method." (2023).