

# Issue Salience, Ownership, and Cross-Pressures in the American Electorate: Proposal for the 2016 American National Election Study

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# 1 Measuring Issue Salience and Party Ownership

There has been a surge of interest in the estimation of voter positions in ideological space in recent years. Some of this work uses the familiar liberal-conservative dimension to model voter ideal points (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Jessee, 2009; Hare, 2015), while other work expands the ideological space to encompass multiple policy dimensions (Treier and Hillygus, 2009; Carmines, Ensley and Wagner, 2012; Lupton, Myers and Thornton, 2015). At the same time, there has also been a resurgence of work on the role of policy cross-pressures in the American electorate (Hillygus and Shields, 2008). As the parties move farther apart on the liberal-conservative spectrum, cross-pressured voters—those who pair left-wing economic positions with right-wing social attitudes and vice versa—face a starker choice between the two primary issue dimensions in American politics.

The American Nation Election Studies (ANES) have been a popular source of data for both literatures not only because it provides a representative sample of the American public, but also because of it offers a diverse set of survey items by which to estimate voters' ideological positions: issue questions, feeling thermometers (e.g., Jacoby, 2009; Enders and Smallpage, 2015), and perceptual data (e.g., Hare et al., 2015).

However, studies of policy preferences and values in American mass political behavior—particularly research in the cross-pressures sub-field—have been hampered by the sparseness of salience measures in public opinion surveys. The 2012 ANES, for instance, asks only about the personal importance of gun control and religion.<sup>1</sup> In other years, such as 2008, the ANES has included more issue salience questions, but all are in a single format that asks: “How important is this issue to you personally?,” with five choices ranging between “not important at all” and “extremely important.”

While certainly useful in providing a measure of issue salience, this question format has some

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<sup>1</sup>The 2012 ANES also included a battery of open-ended questions about the most important problems facing the country and which party would do a better job of solving them based on David RePass's Online Commons proposal, “Correcting the Most Important Problems Question.” We have found this data to be extremely valuable and used responses to develop issue choices for a closed-ended version of this question, which would provide more accessible data to researchers about issue salience and ownership.

problems. The first is a problem discussed by Jacoby (2006) in the context of core values: when respondents are allowed to provide separate ratings of the importance of a series of values or issues, there is a tendency to rate all items as highly important and ignore trade-offs that can arise between mutually desirable end-states. A voter may care about both health insurance and abortion, for example, but she must choose between the two if she disagrees with both parties on one of the issues. In the 2008 ANES, only about a fifth of respondents (239 out of 1040) who answered both the (old versions) of the abortion and health insurance salience items provided at least a two-unit difference (on the five-point scale) between the two issues.

Worse still, this question format appears to encounter the problem of interpersonal incomparability (Brady, 1985). Simply put, some respondents seem more likely to report higher values on the salience scale across separate issues than others. Combining the eleven (old versions) issue salience questions in the 2008 ANES yields a high  $\alpha$  reliability coefficient of 0.78, even though the items are intended to measure the relative salience of separate policy dimensions. When interpreting the response values from these items cardinally, we are likely mistreating variance that is due to interpersonal incomparability as meaningful differences in issue salience between respondents.

Finally, there are several important issues that have not been included in recent ANES time series studies: taxes, gay rights, climate change, the national debt, and national security. We think that the ANES and scholars of American mass political behavior would benefit greatly from an item measuring salience on these issues and in a format that deals with the problems associated with the existing salience ratings.

Our proposal is to add a measure that asks respondents to rank the four most personally important issues from a list of 14-16 issues. From these choices, respondents would rank the most important issue, the second most important issue, etc. This proposed format would accomplish two things in a single item. First, it would provide respondents' most important issue. Rabinowitz, Prothro and Jacoby (1982), in particular, discuss the utility of the most important issue question as a moderating variable in the relationship between issue attitudes and vote choice. Such an



In sum, we think that a single survey item, one that asks respondents to rank the first, second, third, and fourth most personally important issues, can capture two important aspects of issue salience: the most important issue as well as the ranking of secondary issues. Following Rabinowitz, Prothro and Jacoby (1982), we think that the validity of issue importance rankings declines quickly once we get past a handful of issues (i.e., respondents do an increasingly worse job at ranking issues once we begin asking about the fifth, sixth, seventh, etc. most important issues). Hence, although a full rank order of issue importance would be ideal, we think such an item would be unreliable and costly. We should also note that we prefer the use of the term “issue” instead of “problem” in the question based on Jennings and Wlezien (2011), who find that “issue” and “problem” are closely related but give a slight edge to “issue” as an indicator of salience.

An important component of the role of issue salience in voting behavior concerns perceived party ownership (Petrocik, 1996; Hayes, 2005) of issues. Bélanger and Meguid (2008) have demonstrated the conditioning effects of issue salience on the relationship between issue ownership (perceived party competence on issues) and vote choice in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections. Particularly for cross-pressured voters, perceived party competence is a key measure of whether voters are *aware* that they hold positions that are out of step with their party (Hillygus and Shields, 2008; Carsey and Layman, 2006). Hence, we propose a question that asks respondents to move the sixteen issues listed in the salience items into the “Democratic” or “Republican” columns based on which party they perceive to be more competent at handling the issue (using the same question wording as Bélanger and Meguid, 2008).

## 2 Proposed Issue Salience and Ownership Questions

1. Usually there is no candidate who shares all of our positions on the important issues facing the country. All of the issues listed below are important, but which of the following are the **most** important to you in terms of choosing which candidate you will support?

Please rank which four of these issues are **most** important to you.

- Abortion
- National debt
- Environment and climate change
- Gay rights
- Gun control
- Health care
- Immigration
- Poverty
- Income inequality
- Unemployment
- Economic growth
- Military strength
- Morality and the role of religion in society
- Racism
- Spending on social programs like Social Security and food stamps
- Taxes

2. In your view, which party would be best at handling the following issues?

Democrats		Republicans
	Abortion	
	National debt	
	Environment and climate change	
	Gay rights	
	Gun control	
	Health care	
	Immigration	
	Poverty	
	Income inequality	
	Unemployment	
	Economic growth	
	Military strength	
	Morality and the role of religion in society	
	Racism	
	Spending on social programs like Social Security and food stamps	
	Taxes	

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