

Evaluations of candidates' non-policy characteristics from issue positions: Evidence of valence spillover

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ABSTRACT

Why do most winning candidates adhere to partisan orthodox positions? While some prior work has examined how issue positions signal candidate ideology, this paper instead focuses on how candidate issue positions affect evaluations of valence. In light of important inferential limitations in using the correlation between observed candidate positions and electoral performance to assess voter responses, we present a large-scale candidate vignette experiment that reveals issue positions affect perceptions of non-ideological characteristics. Candidates with only one of three positions that stray from the “typical” position for their party – being too extreme, bipartisan, or ideologically unusual – are perceived as less effective legislators. This suggests party-consistency may be reinforced by the electorate through changes in perceived valence, and that the observed correlation between candidate performance and issue positions might arise for reasons apart from ideology.

A key question in research about mass elections is whether voters are able to play one of the basic roles assigned to them in a democratic government: hold politicians accountable for the positions they take on political issues. And, if they do, what is the mechanism by which issue positions shape evaluations of candidates (and what incentives does this give candidates for office)? We argue that candidates are held accountable for their issue positions through a different mechanism than just ideology – non-policy valence perceptions. And that this pathway – from issues to valence and not the other way around – has been largely overlooked by the otherwise vast literature on democratic accountability. Part of our contribution includes causally identifying specific types of valence perceptions, which is typically difficult using observational data. By non-policy valence, we mean attributes that all candidates try to possess regardless of their party or ideology (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963). Some research has broadened the definition of valence to include voters' perceptions of the candidate including charisma, integrity, competency, intelligent, and trustworthiness (Stone and Simas 2010). Valence attributes can also include legislative skills, inspirational leadership skills, personal integrity, competence in office, and a dedication to public service and constituencies.

Candidates who hold extreme issue positions tend to be lower valence on average. Using classical research approaches, a negative correlation between ideological extremity and vote share could arise

even if voters do not care about ideology. For example, otherwise “weak” candidates with low valence (e.g., those who are undisciplined, are poor leaders, or have little experience) might be more likely to express extreme or unusual positions for (1) strategic reasons or (2) because they are bad at doing their jobs (e.g., Stone and Simas 2010). In other words, a candidate's valence determines the issue positions. By contrast, higher quality candidates who have a valence advantage take the opposite approach and adopt issue positions that are consistent with their party's norms. In either case, the correlation between a candidate's valence and their issue positions makes it difficult to determine if, and by how much, voters respond to candidates' issue positions when assessing their valence characteristics.

From an inferential standpoint, if there are *any* factors that are relevant for voter evaluations that are not properly accounted for in a statistical model relating observed election outcomes to candidate positions (that is, if these factors are not included, are included with incorrect functional forms, or are measured with error), then the estimates of voter punishment produced by the classical approach will be biased. For example, there may also be countervailing effects of extremity if it also allows candidates to raise money that finances campaign activity (i.e., advertising) that improves their standing with voters and therefore compensates for their ideological extremity. Of general note, while one might hope to control for these sorts of

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correlated factors in a regression context, imperfect measurement or incorrect model specification will still leave the estimated effect of candidate issue positions vulnerable to bias. Moreover, even a correctly specified model is uninformative about the mechanism linking divergence to electoral performance. Do issue positions matter for policy reasons alone, or do the issue positions that candidates adopt also communicate information about a candidate's other valence characteristics that voters also value? It may be that voters infer something about candidates' non-policy characteristics from the issue positions they adopt. Such inferences could arise either due to the strategic complexities outlined in prior models, or simply because voters infer that candidates who, for instance, diverge from party norms are naïve and/or insincere.

In light of these potential challenges to accurate inferences about voter punishment, we designed an experiment that produces, by design, variation in issue positions that is unrelated to the described attributes and valence of politicians and their political constituency. In essence, we are evaluating how voters assess valence when candidates deviate from standard party norms. To ensure that our results are not dependent on idiosyncratic preferences for certain policies, our positions encompass six major issue areas in American politics (war, taxes, Social Security, Welfare, abortion, and gun control). We randomly assigned positions to candidates that are both within and outside the typical range of party positions on a left-right dimension observed during elections and asked a series of questions tapping into different dimensions of valence. Our vignette includes candidate background experience, their party identification, and three issue positions (only one of which may be party inconsistent). We show that valence evaluations are negatively affected when candidates hold even a single position out of three that is (1) more extreme than normally observed, (2) an element of the other's party's agenda, or (3) wholly unusual given standard left-right ideological divisions. To our knowledge, no previous study attempts to analyze valence using a full range of (typically) observed and unobserved issue positions. Our analysis of these data provides clear evidence that citizens do change their valence evaluations based on the issue positions held by candidates. Candidates who stray from the usual range of possible positions are perceived as less competent overall and less effective legislators compared to mainstream party candidates. However, extreme candidates are punished the least in terms of perceived leadership ability – an extremist candidate is just as likely to be viewed as a bold and inventive leader as a mainstream party candidate.

In the next section, we review the literature on the connection between valence and issue positions. From there, we describe a survey vignette experiments designed to assess the responsiveness of voters to a fuller range of issue positions. We then explore whether changes in perceived valence are driving changes in candidate evaluations in the results section. Finally, we summarize the results and discuss implications for the study of representation and voting behavior more generally.

1. The connection between candidate valence and candidate issue positions

The basic two-candidate competitive framework originally posited by Downs (1957) has been extended to include a second, non-policy valence (or quality) dimension that voters separately value. Some of these models lead to the prediction that the higher valence candidate will take a more moderate position because, by virtue of being higher quality, they are almost certain to win if both the high and low quality candidates adopt centrist positions. On the other hand, lower quality candidates can only win if they distinguish themselves ideologically (e. g., Groseclose 2001). Stone and Simas (2010) report empirical support for this prediction. They show that candidates with higher valence tend to be more moderate, which means extreme candidate positions are systematically correlated with lower valence. These observational findings are not confined to just the United States. Across 26 surveys in

22 countries, ideological distance from the parties is associated with reduced perceptions of valence (Zakharova and Warwick, 2014).

We are focusing on perceptions of valence because we are interested in how voters view candidates with different issue position profiles. Much of the existing research on the role of valence uses objective differences between candidates as a way of distinguishing their quality – for example, incumbency, previous officeholder experience, fundraising advantages, and better name recognition (Groseclose, 2001; Burden, 2004; Stone and Simas 2010). Analysts recognize that objective measures like incumbency are only imprecisely related to valence. Because of the imperfections that researchers recognize, it seems prudent to not limit ourselves to only the conceptions used by previous studies. We ask valence directly in surveys instead of using proxies like incumbency. When developing our valence questions, we considered the valence definition from Stone and Simas (2010, 373): “integrity, competence, and dedication to public service are examples of qualities that define the character and abilities of candidates. Voters value these qualities in their leaders and in government, and they may facilitate voters’ trust in leaders’ ability to advocate constituency interests.” This definition highlights that valence is about how voters perceive candidates from objective differences like incumbency. We expand this definition to include leadership and legislative ability, which are difficult to measure objectively for candidates.

Although these important studies show valence and issue positions are correlated, this work presumes that voters evaluate each factor in isolation. That is, it assumes the only way candidate positions affect voter evaluations is via perceptions of candidate ideology. It may be, however, that voters infer something about a candidates' non-policy characteristics from the issue positions they adopt. For example, in recent articles, Hall (2015) and Hall and Thompson (2018) shows that an “extremist” candidate who barely wins a primary election does about nine points worse in the general election than a more moderate candidate with otherwise similar characteristics. Hall (2015) also shows that previous officeholder experience – a typical proxy for valence – does not differ between extremist and mainstream party candidates. But because directly measuring valence is difficult during an actual election (i.e., prior office holding is an imperfect proxy), extreme and typical candidates may differ on other unmeasured characteristics that signal low quality, which may contribute to poorer electoral performances. While the regression discontinuity design ensures the cases with a bare primary winner extremists and bare primary winner non-extremist are otherwise similar, it does not show why extremists do worse—it could be that voters dislike extremists on ideological grounds, that the extremists are also lower valence, that extremists violate party norms, or that voters infer something about valence from extremism. More succinctly, an extremist winning a primary is a bundled treatment, so this research design cannot isolate the effect of ideological extremity or the mechanism by which it affects election outcomes.

The problem of strategic candidate behavior – and the ensuing correlation between candidate ideology and valence characteristics – is a key source of difficulty in testing models of candidate accountability, but there are also several other challenges that are worth highlighting when considering prior work. First, most work does not examine how new candidates for office perform, but instead compares the performance of incumbent office holders (Hall 2015 being an exception).¹ Studying incumbents has important advantages, for example all are high-quality enough to have won office and have taken known public stands through roll call votes and other actions. But to make informative assessments of whether “extreme” incumbents are punished requires the analyst to make strong assumptions about how to measure voter preferences and map them into the legislative action space (e.g., Canes-Wrone et al. 2002).

¹ Notably, this work cannot account for what types of challengers enter the race and what positions they adopt.

The second research challenge is that observed candidates, particularly those who are successful in having won office, rarely display much variation in the issue positions they adopt. For example, bills that receive a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives are almost always supported by nearly all members of the majority party (Cox and McCubbins 2005), even if those bills are considered “extreme” by some outside observers. In contrast to this observed behavior is the unobserved counter-factual statements (or actions) that a candidate might have made but chose not to for fear of electoral repercussions or other strategic reasons (Arnold 1990). That is to say, Democratic (Republican) candidates rarely hold positions that are (1) too liberal (or too conservative) for their party’s median representative, (2) a combination of both liberal and conservative positions thereby resulting in moderate ideal points, or (3) unaligned with the left-right continuum of American politics. Using strategically determined positions to assess representation may therefore lead the analyst to systematically underestimate the responsiveness of the public to issue positions. In the experiment to follow, we randomly assign these three candidate profiles that are rarely observed.

Finally, the third research design challenge is that merely observing a correlation between candidate issue positions and voter evaluations is not theoretically informative of why and how candidate positions shape voter evaluations. Is it the ideology signaled in the issue positions that voters are responding to? Is it the valence signaled in the issue positions? Or something else entirely? In this respect, recent work by Ahler and Broockman (2018) is particular promising. In an experimental framework, they randomly manipulate a set of policy positions taken by a pair of candidates. Supporting their core argument that scaling issue positions of candidates and voters into a single ideological dimension is inappropriate for testing representation, they find that citizens prefer candidates whose issue positions on specific issues align with their own over candidates whose “average” ideology is closer to their own. But this study does not test the mechanism linking issue positions to candidate evaluations (e.g., assessments of ideological affinity or valence) and manipulates issue positions without the candidate’s party or background experience.

A related line of political psychology research involves the connection among candidate traits, like morality or empathy, issue ownership, and party identification (Hayes 2005, 2010). These studies do not investigate the causal link between issue positioning and valence, but they show that certain traits can be inferred from issues that are “owned” by a given party (Hayes, 2005). For example, Republicans (Democrats) should be viewed as stronger (more compassionate) than their opposition because of the issues they traditionally support (Hayes, 2005). See also Rapoport et al. (1989) for an investigation of which traits and valence attributes (competence, leadership, integrity, and compassion) are associated with four standard party-aligned issues including a fair standard of living, a constitutional amendment banning abortion, fighting Marxists abroad, and giving the president more power in foreign policy. However, similar problems arise when interpreting the observed correlations between traits and issue ownership. In theories of issue ownership, Republicans and Democrats are strategically selecting issue positions to match their own party’s unique character traits (i.e., Republicans are strong and support war, and Democrats are compassionate and support fair employment practices). By contrast, our analysis involves tests of whether changes in issue positions within issue areas (being too liberal or too conservative) are a predictor of the same valence characteristics (competency, legislative ability, and leadership ability) regardless of party.

In sum, this vast area of representation research makes clear predictions about how voters *should* respond to candidates’ issue positions. But whether previous research finds this expectation to be true or not, almost every study up to this point neglects to evaluate the full range of possible issue positions and instead only focuses on *observable* issue positions that are strategically determined by candidates and parties. Furthermore, no previous observational study disentangles the

correlation between issue positions and valence – instead, assumptions are made about the causal direction of valence to issue positions. As a result, we cannot answer several important questions about how candidates are evaluated based on the issue positions they adopt. For this reason, we argue that a research design is needed in which we consider a full range of positions (both normally observed and unobserved) and include outcome measures that tap into a variety of valence attributes.

2. Experimental design

We designed and fielded a detailed candidate vignette experiment that randomizes issue positions and other candidate features. Our vignette experiment builds on a pilot experiment that evaluates issue positions in isolation, and those results can be found in the [appendix](#) (the pilot results are also consistent with those reported here). Our vignette provided multiple pieces of information about a hypothetical candidate, and respondents were asked to evaluate the candidate in terms of valence this is the same vignette design as Gooch and Huber (2020). By having a detailed vignette, we more closely approximate the range of information citizens have when evaluating typical candidates during elections. This section describes the experiment, sample, and estimation strategy.

2.1. Issue areas and issue positions

We first identified six different issue areas (federal taxes, Social Security, abortion, welfare, concealed handguns, and the conflict with ISIS), which cover social, economic, and foreign affairs. These are salient issue areas for which many contemporary candidates for federal office take positions. We then created six issue positions for each issue area. Where possible, we designed these six positions to approximate a continuous scale, allowing us to vary their ideological position from left to right while otherwise minimizing all other differences across conditions. In addition to the six issue positions in each policy area that are “aligned” with the Democrats or Republicans, we also created a seventh issue position that was ideologically “unusual”, in that it did not fit on the standard left-right continuum (moreover, it has aspects that appeal to both liberal and conservative values). It is important to emphasize, however, that these are not simply moderate or bipartisan positions; instead, they represent an unusual combination of far-right and far-left considerations. For brevity purposes, all seven issue positions for all

Table 1

Example of an issue and all positions (concealed handgun laws).

<p>[Introduction seen on first page] Concealed carry handgun laws regulate whether and when private citizens can carry a firearm under their clothing. Those laws currently vary by state. Most states have some requirements before carrying a concealed handgun, but some states have no restrictions while others have banned them completely.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Extremely Liberal] I support amending the U.S. Constitution to allow confiscating privately owned handguns and to prevent any state from permitting people to carry a concealed handgun. • [Aligned Position: Liberal] I support “no-issue” concealed carry gun laws. These laws prohibit any private citizens from carrying a concealed handgun. • [Aligned Position: Somewhat Liberal] I support “may-issue” concealed carry gun laws. These laws require approval by local authorities, like the police department, to carry a concealed handgun. • [Aligned Position: Somewhat Conservative] I support “shall-issue” concealed carry gun laws. These laws require minimal criteria, like residency and age verification, to carry a concealed handgun. • [Aligned Position: Conservative] I support “unrestricted” concealed carry gun laws. These laws do not require a permit to carry a concealed handgun. • [Extremely Conservative] I support a law that requires all teachers and university professors to carry concealed handguns for public safety. • [Unusual] I support banning concealed handguns. Instead I support setting up concealed handgun stations in public building and private businesses, much like fire extinguishers, so that ordinary citizens can use a handgun in cases of an emergency.
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Note: **Bolded, bracketed** text did not appear in treatments. See [supplemental material](#) for all six policy areas.

Table 2
Four randomized candidate vignettes based on three issue positions.

Aligned Candidate	Extreme Candidate	Bipartisan Candidate	Unusual Candidate
<i>Aligned position with own party</i>	<i>Extreme position for the own party</i>	<i>Aligned position with other party</i>	<i>Inconsistent position for either parties</i>
Aligned position with own party	Aligned position with own party	Aligned position with own party	Aligned position with own party
Aligned position with own party	Aligned position with own party	Aligned position with own party	Aligned position with own party

Note: The ordering of issue positions, from first to third, was randomized. The position that distinguishes each group is at the top of this table for display purposes only (in the actual experiment, this position could have appeared first, second, or third).

six issue areas can be found in the [appendix](#). As an example, [Table 1](#) below is the concealed carry handgun issue positions, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative and an unusual position that does not align with contemporary American politics. Currently, concealed carry handgun laws vary by state, and the liberal to conservative positions below are actual policies in place at the state-level. These mainstream positions are bookended by an extremely conservative and an extremely liberal position. These extreme and unusual positions are purposely designed to be more extreme than those normally observed among most successful candidates. However, roughly two years after fielding our experiments, variants of the extreme positions for gun control have been advocated by some officeholders, including President Trump.

We also designed a series of vignettes describing hypothetical candidates for the House of Representatives with three main features. First, respondents were asked their own party identification pre-treatment, and then the candidate in the vignette was assigned the respondent's party (including Independent leaners as partisans). We designed our experiment in this way because respondents evaluating a candidate of their own party is the strictest test of policy accountability – will a respondent punish a member of their own party for deviating on issues? Pure Independents were randomly assigned a Democratic or Republican candidate. Second, the candidate's prior experience was randomly assigned. Candidates were described as having been a manager of a company with 10, 100, or 1000 employees (with the number of employees assigned at random with equal probability). Additionally, candidates were randomly assigned with equal probability to have no additional political experience, have been “a member of the city council,” or “a member of the state legislature”. Third, our core area of focus is how citizens respond to the issue positions the candidates took. Each candidate was assigned issue positions for three separate issue areas, selected at random from the six possible issue areas. Issue positions for two of these three issue areas were always selected to be “aligned” with the candidate's party. For aligned issue positions, Democratic candidates were assigned at random to take either a liberal or somewhat liberal position, while Republicans took either a conservative or somewhat conservative position. (i.e., two of the three issue are held by typical candidates who most often win office in the contemporary American system).

For the third issue area, however, we assigned a broader range of potential issue positions (this third issue was placed in a random order in the three issues presented in the vignette). On this third issue, candidates were assigned with equal probability to take (1) another aligned position (i.e., fully representing a typical candidate on issues), (2) an extreme position, (3) a bipartisan position, or an (4) unusual position. The bookended positions found in [Table 1](#) are our extreme positions. The extreme liberal position was assigned to the Democratic candidate and the extreme conservative position was assigned to Republican candidates (extreme positions were never assigned to the opposite party). A “bipartisan” position was defined as a position that is mainstream and

aligned for the other party. For example, when the Affordable Care Act (ACA) repeal bill passed in the House but failed in the Senate in 2017, most Republican legislators supported the Republican-sponsored bill.² On the other hand, a much smaller group of Republican legislators (i.e., Charlie Dent and John McCain) voted against the repeal in defiance of their party coalition. Our bipartisan candidate profile seeks to simulate these types of legislators who defect from their party but only on one issue. On the Democratic side, an example of bipartisan candidates can be observed with the issue of gun rights. Senator Jon Tester of Montana has an A-score from the National Rifle Association (NRA), and Joe Manchin III (WV), Joe Donnelly (ID), and Heidi Heitkamp (ND) are also in the A range, compared to almost every other Democrat with an F rating. These senators had high NRA scores because they consistently adopted positions that are espoused by Republicans on gun rights. Our hypothetical “bipartisan” candidate – who held one position of the other party and the rest of their own party – simulates this tradeoff. Finally, the “unusual” candidate adopts a position that is completely outside the standard ideological groupings in contemporary American political conflict. A summary of the four candidate types are displayed in [Table 2](#), and [Fig. 1](#) displays a screenshot of our candidate vignette (an “Aligned” Democrat).

We hypothesize that candidates supporting party-aligned positions will be evaluated most favorably in terms of valence. Based on past observational research, we expect candidates with extreme positions to be viewed as lower valence than aligned candidates. For unusual and bipartisan candidates, we have no apriori prediction about how they will affect valence. Bipartisan candidates could be viewed as pragmatic and willing to compromise because they mix liberal and conservative positions. On the other hand, because our issue positions are randomized, bipartisan candidates are not adopting strategically selected issue positions that matches their districts' preferences (i.e., John Tester or Charlie Dent). Therefore, it is unclear if the bipartisan candidate will be seen as high or low on valence. For the unusual candidate, we have similar ambiguous predictions. The unusual positions are wholly unorthodox in terms of the left-right dimension and contain specious elements, but to some respondents, the unusual positions might convey that they are the type of candidate who “thinks outside the box”, “is a strong leader”, or “is willing to buck conventional wisdom”.

2.2. Outcome measures

We asked overall competency as a candidate for the House of Representatives and a seven-item battery designed to measure perceptions of valence characteristics along two more fine-grained dimensions: legislative skills and leadership ability. The legislative ability valence items are: craft and advance legislation in-line with the candidate's policy goals, bring benefits to the home district, and work well with others in Congress. The leadership ability items are: listen to ordinary citizens and not special interests, come up with new and important ideas, say what ordinary citizens are really thinking even if some might

² The ACA was Barack Obama's signature health reform legislation, and it originally passed Congress in 2010 without any Republicans voting in favor of it.

As a reminder, this is the candidate's information:
 A **Democratic candidate** for the U.S. House of Representatives with experience as a **manager of a company with 1000 employees and was a member of the city council**. During the campaign, the candidate has focused on these three issues:

- 1. Welfare Laws**
Candidate policy stance: I support raising the lifetime cap from 5 years to 7 years.
- 2. Social Security**
Candidate policy stance: To keep Social Security solvent, I support raising the income cap over the next few years from \$118,500 to \$175,000 so that more money is raised in taxes.
- 3. Concealed Carry Handgun Laws**
Candidate policy stance: I support “may-issue” concealed carry gun laws. These laws require approval by local authorities, like the police department, to carry a concealed handgun.

If this candidate is elected to the House of Representatives, what is your best guess about **how likely** this candidate would...

... come up with important new ideas?

Very unlikely
 Somewhat unlikely
 Neither unlikely nor likely
 Somewhat likely
 Very likely

Fig. 1. Screenshot of Candidate Vignette. *Note:* This is a screenshot of an aligned Democratic candidate. The candidate's party and randomized past experience appeared above the issue positions. The ordering of the issue positions were also randomized.

be offended, and be a strong and decisive leader. These questions are consistent with broad perceptions of “integrity, competence, and dedication to public service” (Stone and Simas 2010), and they are consistent with recent operationalizations of valence in the comparative arena (i.e., Zakharova and Warwick, 2014).

We are interested in outcome measures about valence because we view it as a mechanism by which voters use issues to adjust their evaluations of candidates. Candidate favorability and perceived ideology were asked before the valence items, and therefore, respondents were already given a chance to voice support for or disapproval of the candidate in general and ideological terms. These results can be found in the appendix, and they show that (1) the aligned candidate is most favorable, and (2) our candidate vignettes were interpreted in terms of the ideology their issue positions communicated (i.e., compared to the aligned candidate, the extreme candidate is perceived as more extreme and the bipartisan candidate is more moderate). However, we are not interested in simply showing that favorability changes when candidates are party-inconsistent – instead, we are interested in show *why* evaluations changes. As a result, the outcome measures evaluated in the body of this article are only related to valence.

2.3. Data gathering

Our data comes from a survey experiment administered using a sample provided by Survey Sampling International (SSI) in April 2016 to 2059 general population respondents. SSI recruits respondents from the U.S. with sample benchmarks similar to general population marginal distributions by age, gender, income, race, and education. Even with these precautions respondents in our sample are somewhat younger and more liberal than in the population as a whole. Because we estimate treatment effects after assigning people to their preferred

party, however, we are less concerned about this ideological imbalance, because it also does not bias our estimates of sample treatment effects. It might raise concerns about generalizability. In these settings, Miratrix et al. (2018) argue that unweighted analysis is preferred because it fully leverage random assignment and avoids the risks of a dramatic loss of statistical power associated with post-stratification weights. Nonetheless, as a robustness check, we weighted our sample using post-stratification weights for ideology and find that estimated effects are similar in magnitude and direction as those reported in the main text. Also see appendix for sample demographics, where we also present balance randomization tests showing our assignment procedure appears to have been successful.

2.4. Estimation strategy

We estimate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions among partisans and pure Independents separately of the following form, although we present the results graphically:

$$Valence_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Extreme_i + \beta_2 Bipartisan_i + \beta_3 Unusual_i + \delta Controls + e_i.$$

We use three dependent variables including overall competency, a legislative ability additive index (craft and advance legislation in-line with the candidate's policy goals, bring benefits to the home district, and work well with others in Congress), and a leadership ability additive index (listen to ordinary citizens and not special interests, come up with new and important ideas, say what ordinary citizens are really thinking even if some might be offended, and be a strong and decisive leader). All dependent variables are scaled from zero to one, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations. An exploratory factor analysis of the index confirms that the relevant items load onto two distinct factors, and the reliability (alpha) are .82 and .86, respectively, for the

legislative and leadership indexes. Our [appendix](#) also reports analysis with each individual item as the outcome.

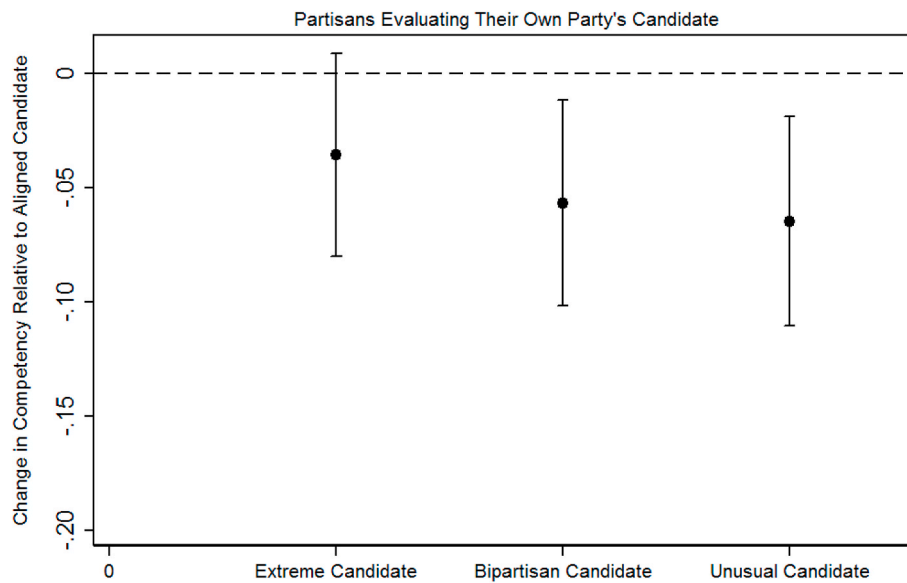
All independent variables, including controls, are indicator variables (1 = yes, 0 = no). The excluded candidate position profile is the *Aligned* candidate, such that β_1 , β_2 , and β_3 are all differences from the aligned group. As a reminder, the *Aligned* candidate has three issue positions that are all within the range normally observed for that party, and so β_1 , β_2 , and β_3 are the effect of deviating from the mainstream on one of three issue. We present these results graphically to show differences from the aligned candidate. The vector *Controls* includes a number of variables meant to account for expected differences in candidate evaluations from the candidate vignette. We use controls even though the data comes from random assignment in order to reduce variance that arises from sampling variability (Gerber and Green 2012). Full regression results appear in the [appendix](#).

3. Results

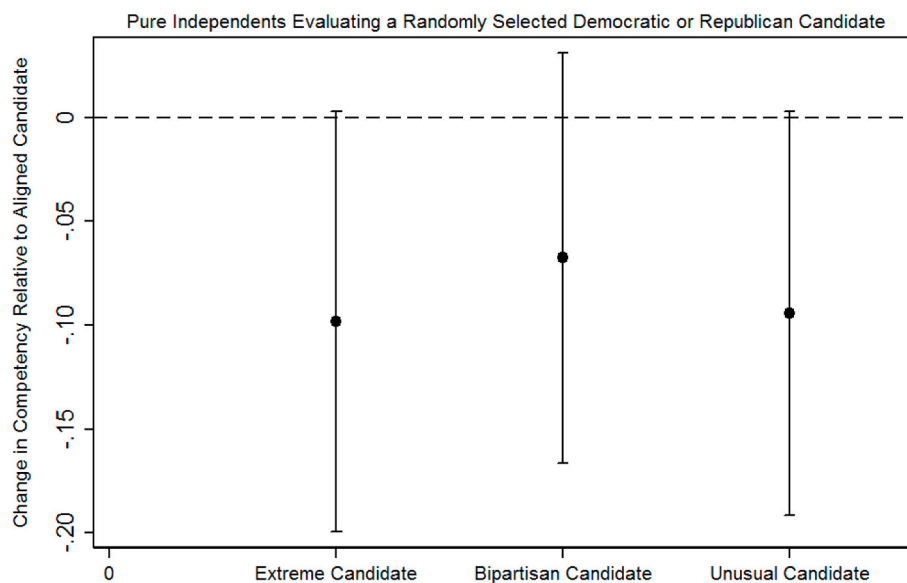
3.1. Evaluating a candidate vignette with three issue positions

The dotted lines in each plot represent evaluations for the aligned candidate, and each point is the difference from the aligned candidate with 95 percent confidence intervals. Confidence intervals that cross the dotted line, therefore, indicate no difference compared to the aligned candidates. The top panel of each plot are partisans and the bottom panel are pure Independents.

Beginning with overall competency in [Fig. 2](#), we find a 3.5 percentage point (5.8%) drop ($p < .10$) in competency for the extreme candidate. In addition, we find larger and statistically significant drops in competency for the bipartisan ($p < .05$) and unusual ($p < .01$) candidates with 5.7 and 6.5 percentage point reduction in competency

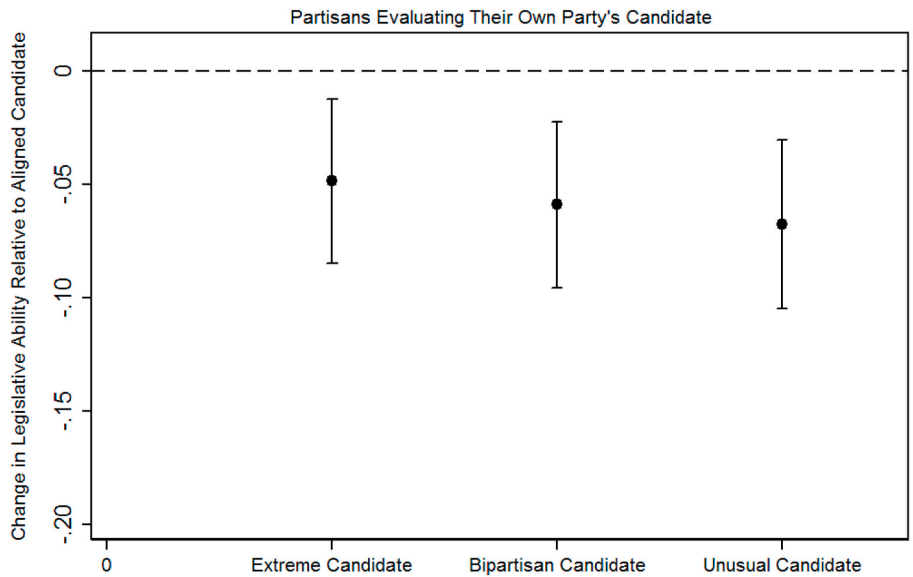


n=1,742. Plotted quantities are change in competency relative to the aligned candidate with 95% CI. Lincom estimates from regression with controls. See Appendix for full results.

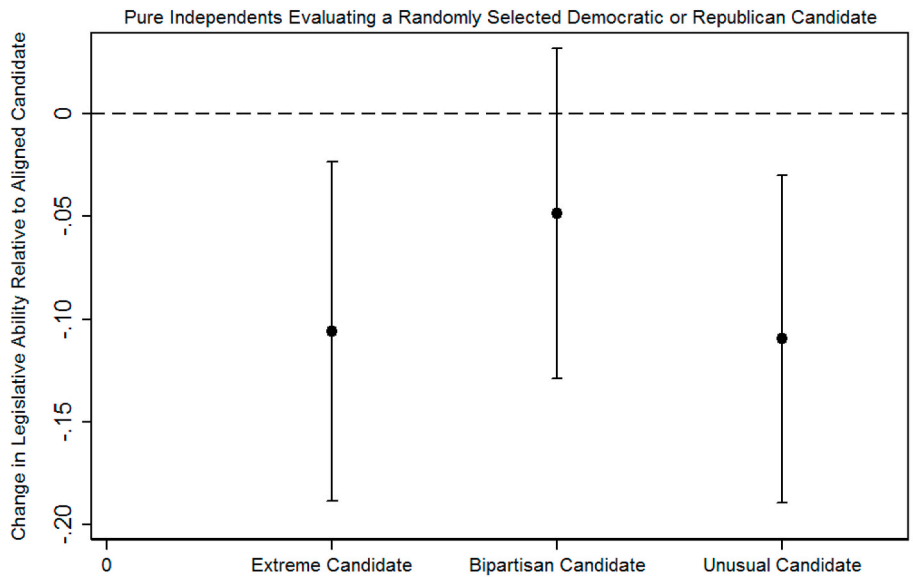


n=317. Plotted quantities are change in competency relative to the aligned candidate with 95% CI. Lincom estimates from regression with controls. See Appendix for full results.

Fig. 2. Effect of candidate issue positions on overall competency.



n=1,737. Plotted quantities are change in valence evaluations relative to the aligned candidate with 95% CI. Lincom estimates from regression with controls. See Appendix for full results.



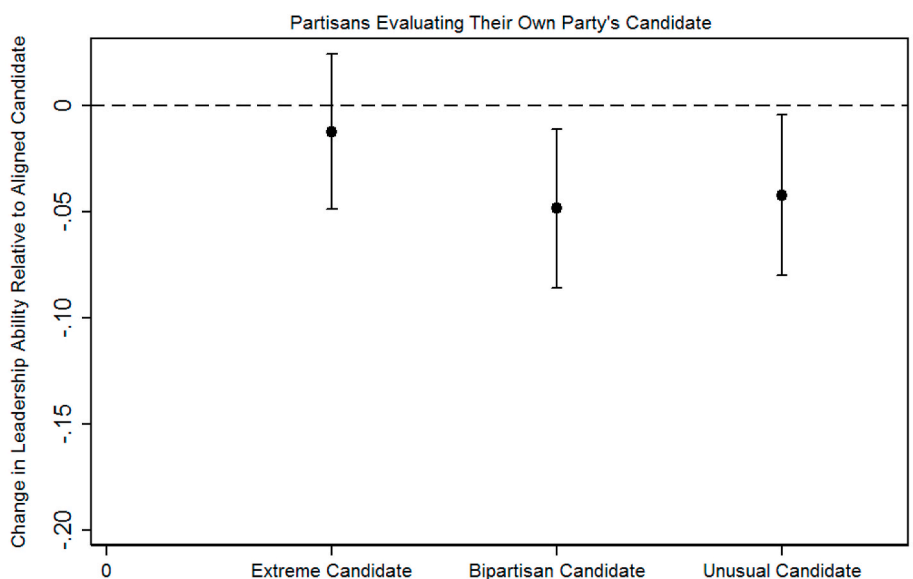
n=315. Plotted quantities are change in valence evaluations relative to the aligned candidate with 95% CI. Lincom estimates from regression with controls. See Appendix for full results.

Fig. 3. Effect of candidate issue positions on valence index: Legislative ability.

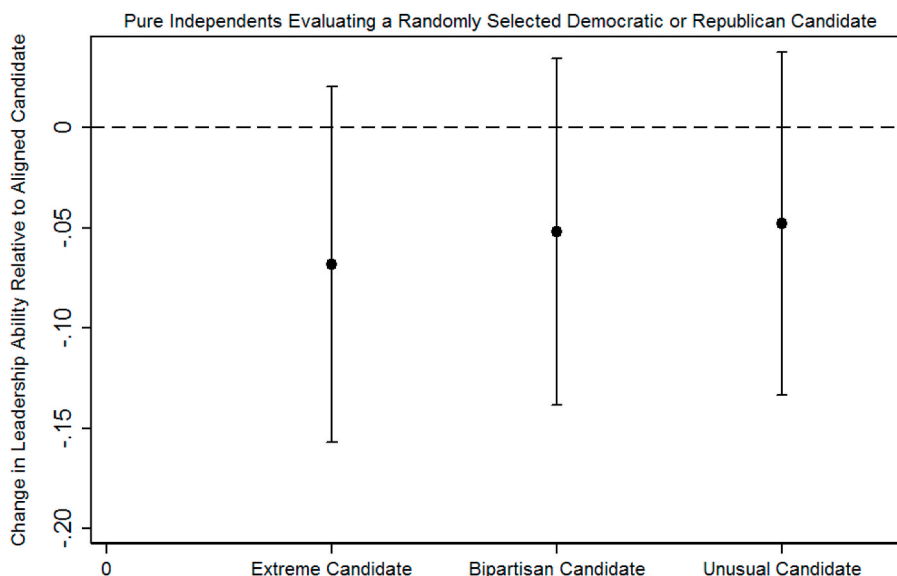
respectively (representing 9.3 and 10.7 percent effect). Among Independents, we find a reduction in competency for the extreme and unusual candidates compared to the aligned candidate that approaches significance at the 95 percent level. Non-aligned candidates are viewed by Independents as relatively similar. Independents are slightly less likely to view bipartisan candidates as negatively as extreme or unusual candidates, but these estimates are measured imprecisely. It is of note, however, that Independents still consistently rate the aligned candidate as the most competent candidate on average. We also note results in the appendix by ideology. We show that those who are liberal or conservative (not “very” or “lean”) are most likely to punish candidates for holding an unaligned position, consistent with their being differences in this valence effect by ideological distance between the voter and the candidate. We recommend caution because of the limited sample size

when breaking results down by voter ideology.

Next we examine our legislative ability index. Even though we do not find statistically significant differences between aligned and extreme candidates in terms of competency as a candidate, we do find that extreme candidates are expected to be less effective as actual lawmakers (i.e., the extreme candidate confidence interval does not overlap with the dotted line). Fig. 3 shows that, compared to aligned candidates represented by the dotted line, all three other candidate profiles are viewed as having less legislative ability. These coefficients have similar magnitudes from 5.2 to 6.6 percentage points and represent shifts of about 10% of the valence scale. All are significant at $p < .01$ compared to the aligned candidate but are indistinguishable from one another (i.e., all unaligned candidates are punished similarly). Thus, holding just one of three issue positions that is extreme, bipartisan, or unusual reduces



n=1,735. Plotted quantities are change in valence evaluations relative to the aligned candidate with 95% CI. Lincom estimates from regression with controls. See Appendix for full results.



n=317. Plotted quantities are change in valence evaluations relative to the aligned candidate with 95% CI. Lincom estimates from regression with controls. See Appendix for full results.

Fig. 4. Effect of candidate issue positions on valence index: Leadership ability.

the perceived ability of the candidate to operate in the legislature. If voters value the ability to advance legislation and provide constituent service, this pattern therefore reveals a direct penalty for non-aligned candidates. Independent respondents, however, do not show a significant difference in expected legislative productivity between the aligned candidate and the bipartisan candidate even though a reduction in valence occurs. Like our competency measure, we find the biggest effect among those who are liberal or conservative (see appendix for full results).

Even more interesting, however, is what we find for the leadership valence index among partisans. A priori, it is unclear whether any unaligned candidates will be perceived as stronger or weaker leaders due to their willingness to depart from partisan orthodoxy. On the one hand, such boldness may signal strength and independence. On the other hand, voters may interpret these stances as revealing naivety or a lack of

professionalism. The leadership results appear in Fig. 4. Among partisans, the extreme candidate is viewed as only slightly less capable as a leader compared to the aligned candidate, and the difference (a drop of 1.4 percentage points) is statistically indistinguishable. However, the bipartisan and unusual candidate profiles are viewed as less effective leaders among partisans by a magnitude of 5.2 and 4.5 percentage points respectively (9 and 7 percentage point drops). Moreover, we find a significant difference in leadership ability between the extreme candidate and the bipartisan or unusual candidate. Thus, despite the theoretical possibility that unusual and bipartisan candidates would be rewarded for their willingness to abandon partisan norms, we find that these issue profiles, in net, reduce the leadership evaluations of candidates adopting these types of positions. However, the largest variance occurred with the unusual candidate profiles (see appendix for full results), suggesting that respondents see a larger spread of valence

possibilities with an unusual candidate. Being extreme for one's own party, however, is minimally punished in terms of leadership ability.

This preference for an extreme candidate over a bipartisan candidate should be put into context with positions from our vignette. For example, Democratic respondents viewed Democratic candidates more favorably in terms of leadership ability when they supported a tax increase on high income earners from 40% to 90% (extreme) compared to a Democratic candidate who supported a tax decrease from 40% to 37% (bipartisan). Likewise, Republican respondents viewed Republican candidates as better leaders when they supported a tax decrease on high income earners of 10% (extreme) compared to Republican candidates who supports a slight tax increase from 40% to 43% (bipartisan). In other words, candidates are viewed as better leaders for being extreme on one of three issues compared to candidates who compromise with the other party on one of three issues. These results suggest that candidates have valence incentives to uniformly support their party's issue positions, but if they deviate from the standard party position (perhaps to distinguish their leadership ability in a primary election), the preferred position is more extreme than their party.

It is also of note that our bipartisan candidate – who holds one position from the other party's bundle – is perceived as roughly equivalent in terms of valence as our unusual candidate. This is a surprising finding because our usual candidate holds a position that is so bizarre that almost any reasonable candidate would avoid it. However, during actual campaigns, holding an usual position like the ones in our experiment typically come with substantial public backlash that can exacerbate negative valence evaluations that are not captured in our experiment (i. e., Todd Akin's failed Senate campaign in 2012).

Lastly, we note the ideological uncertainty about each candidate profile. Respondents were asked how certain they were of the candidate's ideology, and we find that respondents are less certain of bipartisan and unusual candidates compared to extreme and aligned candidates. This is noteworthy because extreme candidates were evaluated similarly to aligned candidates in terms of overall competency and leadership ability (i. e., differences were weaker and statistically non-significant). Whereas, bipartisan and unusual candidates were consistently viewed as lower valence. These results suggest that candidates who cannot be easily summarized as liberal or conservative may risk lowering their valence. (See the appendix for a full analysis of ideological uncertainty.) Taken together, our results demonstrate that issue positioning can causally influence valence.

3.2. Conclusion and implications

These results are, to our knowledge, the first to show that citizens alter their views of candidates' non-policy characteristics in response to their policy positions. Compared to aligned candidates, all three types of candidates who rarely win office (extreme, bipartisan, and unusual) are viewed as less able lawmakers, while bipartisan and unusual candidates are also viewed as less competent and inferior leaders. Even when we find no significant difference between the aligned candidate and the extreme candidate, the direction of the difference is consistently a reduction in valence for the extreme candidate. These data therefore reveal a heretofore undocumented potential mechanism driving the reduction in support for candidates who adopt positions rarely taken by winning candidates. Not supporting the party's positions signals to voters that a candidate is less likely to succeed at their job in a variety of ways. More bluntly, voters seem to understand that an ability to follow a party's script reveals something more than just a candidate's stand on the issues.

These results have important implications for interpreting the issue positions staked out by actual political elites. First, our results demonstrate that candidates for office have strong incentives to not deviate from their party's strategically determined positions (see appendix for an analysis of candidate favorability). This finding confirms prior observational work that shows candidates cannot be out of step with

their general election constituents (e.g., Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Hall 2015; Hall and Thompson 2018), but our results does so in a way that distinguishes the effect of bad positions from bad candidates taking undesirable positions. Second, while some work suggests that building a "party brand" or advancing a party's efficacy is meant for organizing votes in Congress (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005), our data suggests ordinary citizens have embraced party orthodoxy, implying elite polarization is not entirely divorced from mass preferences.

Our study does have limitations. First, because we use hypothetical candidates in a survey experimental setting, a question about externally validity arises. It is true that not all voters are well-informed on candidates' issue positions (i. e., Zaller, 1992), but our experimental results largely corroborate observational correlations between valence and issue positioning (i. e., Stone and Simas 2010). Our study adds to observational work by showing that the causal relationship between issue positions and valence can go both ways. It is not the case that low valence candidates always stake out extreme positions for strategic reason because our results show that extreme issue positions also cause low valence evaluations.³

Second, although we find that party-consistent, aligned candidates receive the highest valence evaluations, respondents' views of what is and is not a high-quality candidate might be conditioned by a general equilibrium where high quality candidates stake out aligned positions in the real world. Therefore, how respondents evaluate our hypothetical candidates might be a result of this regularly occurring equilibrium between candidate quality and issue positions. Breaking this equilibrium, however, is impossible without reassigning positions in the real world similarly to how we reassigned positions in these experiments. From our perspective, instead of interpreting our results as an argument about the observed equilibrium, our results more closely approximate how a candidate might choose to stake out a new position on an issue while holding every other candidate constant. Moreover, we argue that most successful candidates stake out aligned positions because positions signal quality in addition to ideology. Thus, candidates might take an extreme position on an issue not to signal that they are really extreme on that issue, but rather to convey that they are the type of candidates who "think outside the box", "are strong leaders", or "willing to buck conventional wisdom". Alternatively, taking an extreme position might convey that a candidate will not be a successful team player in the legislature or that the candidate is prone to misperceive what is acceptable to say and what is not acceptable. From this perspective, issue positioning might not be about the issue at hand – or the dimension on which the issue sits; something that many voters are not really capable of understanding – but is instead about what the issue position conveys about some valence dimension. This function (from policy position into valence) is determined by how the voter links the issue to the valence characteristic, which is something constructed by political debate and social understandings.

Data availability

Data is available on the author's website.

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³ Also see our pilot study in the appendix where single-issue positions without party identification were randomized instead of a full candidate vignette. Our pilot results are consistent with results reported here.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102246>.

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