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Who cares about the culture war? Evidence from a vote choice conjoint experiment☆

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ABSTRACT

Despite their recent prominence, it is unclear how electorally important new culture war topics (such as statues, LGBT+ representation in popular culture, diversity training, transgender athletes, curriculum diversity and university free speech) are for voters, particularly cross-pressured ones. To address this, this study conducts an original vote choice conjoint experiment in the United Kingdom to test the extent to which people base their vote on these new culture war issues when they are included in a policy platform alongside long-standing economic and non-economic issues. I find that culture war issues are consistently important for those with more conservative cultural beliefs, whilst those with right-traditionalist and, to a lesser extent, left-traditionalist values prioritize them when cross-pressured. These results highlight the political dynamics of contemporary culture wars and vote choice in multi-dimensional elections, as well as the value of studying political beliefs relative to each other.

1. Introduction

In the decades following WWII, Western elections tended to focus on economic issues (Clark et al., 1993) with the expectation that voters would prioritize their economic preferences (Downs, 1957; Lipset et al., 1954; Meltzer and Richard, 1981). However, elections now involve multiple dimensions, with parties advocating both economic and non-economic policies (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Kitschelt, 1994). This has led to a debate over the relative importance of each dimension for vote choice (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Bartels, 2006; Gidron, 2022; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Noury and Roland, 2020; Treier and Sunshine Hillygus, 2009). This matters particularly if voters are cross-pressured, where they agree with Party A's economic platform but Party B's non-economic platform (Dassonneville, 2022; Endres and Panagopoulos, 2019; Roemer, 1998).

More recently, distinctive non-economic issues related to identity, morality and societal norms, dubbed the 'culture war' (Hunter, 1991), have risen in prominence (Duffy et al., 2021a; Rodgers, 2011; Shogan, 2002). However, given their newness, we know very little about whether the specific issues that make up the contemporary culture war (such as statues of people who made money from the slave trade, LGBT+ representation in popular culture, diversity training, transgender athletes, curriculum diversity, and university free speech) affect voters' electoral decisions. New issues in general have the potential to reshape traditional political cleavages, as they can cut across established divides, potentially creating novel voting coalitions (De Vries and

Hobolt, 2020). Whilst the culture war has caused consternation in elite circles and has increased in awareness within the general public (Duffy et al., 2021a, Duffy et al., 2021b), we do not know how important these new issues are relative to long-standing issues. Even if beliefs are polarized, this does not necessarily mean they matter for vote choice. This is important because the study of the relative importance of political opinions for election outcomes and competition has been lacking (Hanretty et al., 2020, p. 519). If issue saliency is 'the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude' (Krosnick, 1990, p. 60), do culture war issues meet this benchmark?

There are theoretically justifiable reasons as to why culture war opinions would now override economic or traditional non-economic concerns, such as the rise of 'postmaterialist' voters (Inglehart, 1981), how symbolic cultural issues can be more emotionally arousing than drier economic issues (Cobb and Elder, 1973; Edelman, 1985; Pitkin, 1972; Theiler, 2005), and how culture war controversies may be easier for voters to understand (Brader, 2005; Dittmar, 2020; Garrett, 2019; Weber, 2013). On the other hand, the public may be more moderate and willing to compromise on cultural issues than perceived (Fiorina et al., 2005; Thomson, 2010) with few people holding strong beliefs (Duffy et al., 2021a). The culture war may also have asymmetric effects, with different theories suggesting they hold greater sway for left-wing elites (Hersh, 2020; Swift, 2019), right-wing voters (Prothero,

2016), or the ethnic majority working-class (Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2018).

This study implements an original vote choice conjoint experiment in the United Kingdom, where candidates advocate for a mixture of economic, long-standing non-economic and new culture war policies. Whilst the main aim of this paper is not British opinion specifically, the UK context serves to illustrate the wider relevance of the culture war, given their prominence here (Curtice and Ratti, 2022; Duffy et al., 2021a, Duffy et al., 2021b).

The findings show that culture war issues are neither all-encompassing nor irrelevant to voters. Whilst not overriding long-standing issues, they are an additional issue group voters cared about. The importance placed on culture war issues is asymmetric, consistently influencing respondents with more conservative ('orthodox') cultural views but holding less sway for those with more liberal ('progressive') cultural views. Those who have right-wing economic and socially conservative ('right-traditionalist') and, to a lesser extent, left-wing economic and socially conservative ('left-traditionalist') values prioritize the culture war when cross-pressured. This suggests that the culture war is another of the 'many ways to be right' where it is enough to be conservative on one dimension to turn to the political right (Gidron, 2022).

These results do not fully clarify why this is and it is important that future research examines the causal mechanisms that lead some to place greater or lesser importance on the culture war. In my discussion, I consider why these voters cared more about the culture war, the implications for multi-dimensional elections, and the importance of studying political beliefs relative to each other.

2. What is a culture war issue?

Despite its limitations, I use the term 'culture war' throughout, as it is most common in academia and general discourse. However, 'culture war' has been used very inconsistently, potentially leading each reader to have a different preconceived idea of what a culture war issue is. 'Culture war' is often used pejoratively by those calling it a 'distraction' from more 'important' issues or that it is cynically and opportunistically used by political elites (Examples include: Aaronovitch, 2023; Bouie, 2023; Goldberg, 2021). When I describe issues as 'culture war' it is not intended to trivialize or disparage them but is used neutrally to denote issues which are qualitatively different from economic or longer-standing non-economic issues in politics.

'Culture war' is a translation of 'Kulturkampf' which described the 19th-century division between the Prussian government and the Catholic Church about religion's influence over the state (Weichlein, 2011). Modern political culture wars gained prominence in the early 1990s in the US (Davis, 2019). Most importantly for academia, James Davison Hunter released *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991). Hunter defined the culture war as 'political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding' (p. 42) which aims to shape society's 'public culture' through 'the symbols and meanings that order the life of the community or region or nation as a whole' (pp. 53–54). Attitudes are divided between two poles. First, the 'orthodox' prioritize traditional moral – often religious – values, perceive a positive national history, and are cautious to change collective norms and order. In opposition, 'progressives' challenge orthodox values, emphasize individual social freedom, and define justice as equity between societal groups (pp. 43–46).

Subsequent research has focused heavily on the US and emphasized: religiosity versus secularism (Wuthnow, 1990, chap. 4 and 5; Layman, 2001; Wuthnow, 1996); racial divisions (Giles and Hertz, 1994; Olson, 2008; Stanton, 2021); family structures (Self, 2012); and education (Zimmerman, 2022). In the UK, emphasis has been placed on: ethnocentrism and national identity (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020); censorship, moral standards, misinformation, and identity (Duffy et al.,

2021b); and the position of minority groups and interpretations of British history (Curtice and Ratti, 2022).

For the purposes of this study, I divide non-economic issues between long-standing ones that have been debated in politics for many decades and new culture war issues that have risen in the last 5–10 years. Long-standing non-economic issues in politics include immigration, the environment, crime and – in Europe – EU integration (Kitschelt, 1994) and are generally areas in which elected politicians have the power to control what policies are implemented. For example, immigration rules were passed by politicians and will remain until politicians change them. They may evoke strong emotions, different moralities and polarized attitudes, but responsibility for creating, implementing and changing traditional non-economic policy is clear. Although these issues inevitably have economic elements to them, they have previously been used as key tests of second-dimension preferences (Evans et al., 1996; Heath et al., 1994; Kitschelt, 1994; Treier and Sunshine Hillygus, 2009).

In contrast, new culture war issues are debates such as the status of historical statues, diversity in popular culture, 'cancel culture', and transgender participation in sports, amongst others (Duffy et al., 2021a, Duffy et al., 2021b; Fanning, 2023). These qualitatively differ from long-standing non-economic issues in that the responsibility for the start, escalation and conclusion of cultural conflicts is either unclear, occurs within unelected institutions, or is a change to wider societal norms. Generally, these are symbolic changes and do not usually require large legislative changes. Divisions over these types of symbols have played out in the US (Billings, 2019; Chapman and Ciment, 2015; Hartman, 2019; Sinclair-Chapman, 2018) and the UK (Curtice and Ratti, 2022; Duffy et al., 2021c, Duffy et al., 2022).

As well as differing content, there are also theoretical reasons to separate culture war issues and traditional non-economic ones. The newness of culture war issues mean that they may not have integrated into existing ideological divides, potentially leading to a disconnect between these beliefs and beliefs on traditional issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1986). This should be particularly the case in the UK where culture war issues have split political elites within the same party (Balls, 2023; Seddon and Catt, 2023; Tapsfield, 2021) and where party leaders have attempted to avoid taking a strong stance on certain issues (Le Conte, 2024; Francis, 2024). If political parties have not yet taken strong stances on these new issues, voters may not view them as critical decision-making factors in elections (Zaller, 1992). This newness can lead to 'non-attitudes' among the electorate, where individuals may not have yet formed views on these issues (Converse, 1964). This contrasts with the long-standing non-economic issues where party competition and ideological sorting is far clearer (Butler and Stokes, 1974, chap. 14 and 15; Bale and Partos, 2014; Kitschelt, 1994).

Furthermore, given the qualitative differences between culture war and traditional non-economic issues, they may trigger different underlying values and thus have different effects. For instance, using moral foundations theory (Haidt and Graham, 2007), Koleva et al. (2012) show that purity values best predict beliefs on various culture war issues. In contrast, beliefs on the traditional issue of immigration were best predicted by harm and fairness values for liberals, but authority (and purity again) for conservatives.

On the empirical side, in Appendix 3.10., I conduct a factor analysis using BESIP Wave 26 respondents' agreement with culture war statements and their answers to the economic, authoritarianism, populism and efficacy survey scales also included in that wave. I find that respondents' beliefs on the culture war are a distinct factor compared to the other scales. This shows that the culture war forms an internally consistent belief system, as well as that these beliefs are not the same as other dimensions of politics.

3. Theory and prior evidence

3.1. Culture war issues are important for voters

Culture war opinions could now override economic or traditional non-economic concerns. As societies become richer, economic security becomes less of a priority to 'postmaterialist' voters (Inglehart, 1981). Symbolic cultural politics has long been appreciated for its importance to voters because of the meanings and emotions people attach to symbols (Edelman, 1985; Pitkin, 1972), how they can signal what types of people belong in the collective (Cobb and Elder, 1973; Theiler, 2005) and how divisive the different interpretations of them can be (Aberbach and Walker, 1970; Sears, 1993; Sinclair-Chapman, 2018).

The emotive nature of culture war debates may increase their saliency and polarization (Brader, 2005; Dittmar, 2020; Garrett, 2019; Weber, 2013). Economic issues which trigger 'System II' slow, deliberative thinking can be overwhelmed by emotive culture war issues which trigger automatic and emotional 'System I' thinking (Kahneman and Sunstein, 2007). This makes it more psychologically comfortable to compromise over, say, tax rates, but far harder to compromise over culture war issues (Hunter, 1991, p. 46).

Culture war debates may be more entertaining for the media to cover, further raising saliency (Fiorina et al., 2005; Hunter, 1991, chap. 6; Hunter, 1994, pp. 154–67). References to 'culture wars', 'woke' and related terms increased substantially in the UK after 2015, which was followed by an increased public awareness of these issues (Duffy et al., 2022). Polarization is likely intensified in societies with partisan news media (Levendusky, 2013; Mutz, 2006) or high social media use (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2018).

Sobolewska and Ford (2020) show a new divide in UK politics between 'conviction liberals' (supporting individual social freedoms and cosmopolitanism, whilst rejecting traditional values) and 'identity conservatives' (more communitarian and continuing to value traditional social attitudes), with demographic shifts between them leading to cultural conflicts. As well as this, culture war attitudes in Britain have been shown to increasingly be tied up in people's partisan identities (Duffy et al., 2021a).

3.2. Culture war issues are not important for voters

However, the importance of culture war issues may be exaggerated. In the UK, few people selected either 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree' in culture war issue surveys (Duffy et al., 2021a) and many voters had often not even heard of the issues under consideration (Duffy et al., 2022). In the US, previous studies have provided evidence that, while still mostly polarized, the public are more moderate and willing to compromise on cultural issues than is generally thought (Fiorina et al., 2005; Thomson, 2010). 20th-century cultural issues may no longer be politically divisive, because cohort replacement means a critical mass of the electorate is now progressive of the issues that divided society in the 1960s (Dombrink, 2015; Hartman, 2015).

Preference falsification (Kuran, 1987, Kuran, 1997) in public expressions of culture war beliefs would create a misleading impression of their significance. Social desirability bias may mean that apathetic individuals falsify their beliefs during interactions with fervent believers (Schlenker and Weigold, 1992; Tamir and Hughes, 2018). People might publicly adopt certain cultural beliefs if this viewpoint is seen as high status, despite private indifference or disagreement (Kunstman et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2020). Alternatively, a career incentive may lead to falsified preferences if one's employer expresses support for a particular cultural cause (Fairfax, 2022; Newkirk, 2020).

3.3. Culture war issues are important for some voters

Finally, culture war issues may have asymmetrical effects. They may be more motivating for progressives, given issues are most often progressive activists calling for change to the dominant culture and morality (Hunter, 1991). In particular, wealthy, educated progressives are said to prioritize culture war issues over the material conditions of the poor (Guilluy, 2019; Hersh, 2020; Swift, 2019).

The culture war might instead be a stronger driver for those on the right. Conservative politicians and media were increasing their emphasis on these issues during the survey period (Cammaerts, 2022; Davies and MacRae, 2023), which could affect the voting priorities of their voters (Zaller, 1992). Prothero (2016) argues culture wars throughout US history have been instigated by conservatives after a new cultural change has disrupted the way things used to be. As losses are felt more acutely than gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), this could be a reason why conservatives would prioritize these issues more.

For cross-pressured voters with left-wing economic and socially conservative beliefs, non-economic – including culture war – beliefs may take precedence over economic issues. This would correspond with Gidron (2022) who shows that support for left-wing parties tend to occur amongst people with left-wing economic and socially liberal beliefs, but support for right-wing parties can come from people with either right-wing economic or socially conservative beliefs. Therefore, the culture war could become another route into voting for the right. This situation is said to have taken place after 2016, where populists' electoral success was attributed to the ethnic majority working-class' 'cultural backlash' (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) to progressive social change, despite these voters often holding left-wing economic beliefs (Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2018). Given declining social status can motivate political behaviour (Craig and Richeson, 2014; Gidron and Hall, 2017), prioritizing the culture war may be seen as a way to restore previous high social status for these voters.

Effects can also be asymmetric based on the specific issue. People are likely to prioritize a progressive issue if it affects the group a person belongs to (Dawson, 1995). However, this does not mean they will also hold progressive views on other issues. For instance, ethnic minorities may be 'necessity liberals' who vote for left-wing parties despite disagreeing with their social liberalism but do so because they are most likely to support their own rights (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

3.4. Overcoming previous limitations

Given culture war research has been limited, much of the literature cited was for socially liberal-conservative attitudes on traditional non-economic issues, but they are not necessarily the same as new culture war issues. Furthermore, individual beliefs are not all weighted equally in people's minds (Dennison, 2019; Krosnick and Petty, 1995). Therefore, measuring culture war beliefs using Likert-scale survey responses is insufficient to understand whether they affect vote choice. As outlined, voters may be cross-pressured, so it is necessary to see whether different groups are asymmetrically motivated by particular issues.

A design to overcome this is a conjoint experiment, where aspects of a question are randomly varied for each respondent to see which significantly motivate respondents' choices (Hainmueller et al., 2014; Leeper et al., 2020). This is similar to an actual election where voters choose between multiple candidates who vary in their beliefs. Conjoint experiments are best placed to see whether new topics matter to voters, because they can be placed alongside existing issues to see which has the largest effect.

Related experiments (Hanretty et al., 2020; Sides et al., 2023) lacked a culture war issue in every platform and had unspecified party affiliations, which could overshadow policy concerns (Dias and Lelkes,

YouGov

How much do you agree or disagree with the following policies?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
Cannabis should be illegal to use, buy and sell.	○	○	○	○	○	○
The UK should seek free trade deals with all countries in the world.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Increase government spending on the NHS.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Reduce regulations for people to start their own business.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Students should not be allowed to prevent invited speakers who argue that there are innate differences between racial groups from speaking on university campuses	○	○	○	○	○	○
Transgender women (someone who was biologically male at birth, but now identifies as a woman) should be allowed to compete in female-sex sport	○	○	○	○	○	○
Zero hours contracts should be banned.	○	○	○	○	○	○
Increase the minimum prison sentence for violent crimes.	○	○	○	○	○	○

Fig. 1. Policy agreement example.

2022). Conjoint experiments have been run in non-majoritarian electoral systems (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Horiuchi et al., 2018; Kirkizh et al., 2022) but majoritarian systems constrain voters' opportunities to choose the party they agree with most. Therefore, although my results find policies that respondents would rather their preferred party did not support, this does not necessarily mean advocating these policies will cause voters to abandon them in a majoritarian election.

4. Data

The conjoint experiment was run in May 2023's wave of the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) to respondents in England, Scotland and Wales via YouGov (Fieldhouse et al., 2023). A benefit of using the BESIP is the large number of respondents that took the experiment (7,675), the inclusion of a wide variety of demographic and political preference variables, its highly representative nature, as well as providing population weights. I use the cregg R package (Leeper, 2020) to specify the respondent identifier and use it for clustering standard errors.[1]

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[1] Due to time constraints and the late decision to field the experiment within the BESIP, pre-registration was not feasible for this study. While pre-registration is best practice, the robust nature of the BESIP and the transparent reporting of methods in this paper aim to mitigate potential concerns about the lack of pre-registration.

4.1. Questions

For estimates to be externally valid, the policies included need to represent attributes on which individuals base their vote choice in the real world. All issues included in the experiment were deliberately chosen so that, even if they were non-standard positions for a party, they would still be plausible positions for at least either a Labour or Conservative leadership candidate trying to move to the 'center' to take. To prove this, in Appendix 1.2. I give an example from the last decade of both a Labour and Conservative elite advocating in favour of all of the traditional economic and non-economic policies included in the experiment.

For the culture war issues, I initially piloted different issues and wording variations, which are outlined in Appendix 1.1. Those selected are not an exhaustive list of all culture war issues in the UK but should cover the major topics. In Appendix 1.2., I provide justification for each issue's inclusion as representing salient debates that have occurred in UK politics recently.

First, respondents were asked their agreement with the eight policies that their conjoint candidates would later advocate for. A hypothetical example is shown in Fig. 1. This allowed me to capture respondents' baseline policy preferences across the key issue domains. This is particularly important because the randomization of policy platforms meant that there was a high likelihood that both candidates would advocate a mixture of issues that the respondent agreed and disagreed with.

So that each later policy platform is balanced, four of the policies are economic issues, two are traditional non-economic issues, and two

Table 1
Policies included in conjoint experiment.

Economic Policies (List 1)
1. Increase the state pension in line with inflation, average wages or 2.5% (whichever is highest).
2. Increase government spending on the NHS.
3. Increase taxes on people who earn more than £80,000 per year.
4. Reduce taxes on people's wealth (inheritance, housing, investments).
5. Reduce the amount of money that people on benefits receive.
6. The UK should seek free trade deals with all countries in the world.
Economic Policies (List 2)
1. Zero hours contracts should be banned.
2. Increase the minimum wage to £15 per hour.
3. UK trains and buses should be owned and run by the government.
4. Reduce planning regulations in order to build more suburban houses.
5. Make it more difficult for trade unions to go on strike.
6. Reduce regulations for people to start their own business.
Long-Standing Non-Economic Policies
1. Increase immigration to the UK.
2. All UK energy should come from renewable sources by 2040.
3. The UK should have a closer legal relationship with the European Union.
4. Cannabis should be illegal to use, buy and sell.
5. Increase the minimum prison sentence for violent crimes.
6. Reduce the number of asylum seekers allowed to the UK.
Culture War Policies
1. Statues of prominent historical figures should not be taken down, even if they profited from the slave trade.
2. Workplaces should end mandatory diversity training.
3. School and university curriculums should include fewer white male authors and more female and non-white authors.
4. Transgender women (someone who was biologically male at birth, but now identifies as a woman) should be allowed to compete in female-sex sport.
5. BBC children's TV shows should portray more families with same-sex parents.
6. Students should not be allowed to prevent invited speakers who argue that there are innate differences between racial groups from speaking on university campuses.

are culture war issues. I separate economic issues into two lists, with the first being more about taxation and spending, and the second on economic regulations. Table 1 shows the different issues that were tested in this experiment. This means that each hypothetical candidate later advocates for two economic policies (one tax and spending, and one regulation) and two non-economic policies (one long-standing and one culture war).

The conjoint experiment was worded as a hypothetical leadership contest of a UK political party. To determine which party the question would be worded as for the respondent, I first asked each respondent what their preferred political party is. If this was 'none' or 'don't know', I then asked who they would be most likely to vote for in a general election. Their conjoint contest would then be worded as a leadership election in their preferred party.

If the respondent said that their preferred party was 'none' or 'don't know' in both questions, they were randomly assigned to a leadership contest of either the Labour or Conservative Party. Although this may not have been their favoured party, it meant that all respondents saw a candidate. Furthermore, given the lack of partisanship from these respondents, they would likely have wanted whichever party they saw to move towards their policy priorities.

I presented two candidates' policy platforms and asked which the respondent would prefer to be leader. The assignment of policy positions to candidates was fully randomized, meaning that respondents could encounter candidates from their preferred party holding any policy stance, including those that might be considered atypical. An example is shown in Fig. 2 in a Reform UK leadership contest.

Unlike in other previous vote choice conjoint experiments (Bansak et al., 2021; Hainmueller et al., 2014), this design does not involve candidates taking different positions on the same issue, but instead allows one policy stance per issue topic. This is because the goal of this experiment is not to disentangle voter preferences on precise policy alternatives on the same issue (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015). Instead, the goal is to evaluate how overall issue ownership and emphasis strategies of candidates affect voter perceptions. In particular, it tests whether the presence of a culture war stance that the respondent agrees/disagrees with overrides the candidate's stances on economic or traditional non-economic issues that they also agree/disagree with when deciding who to vote for.

This approach better reflects the reality of political campaigns, where candidates strategically emphasize the issues that they believe will be most favourable to their candidacy (Dellis, 2009; Iyengar and Simon, 2000; Wagner and Meyer, 2014). By allowing each candidate to address different issue topics, the design captures how politicians can selectively prime and make salient certain topics to their advantage (Druckman, 2004; Druckman et al., 2004), rather than all having to take a stance on the same issues.

However, providing the party affiliation introduces uncertainty in what respondents will assume about the candidates. For example, respondents might take particular positions for granted from certain political parties (Popkin, 1991), such as spending on the NHS for Labour or Euroscepticism for the Conservatives (Vaccari et al., 2021). This could potentially lead to an overestimation of the importance of culture war issues where party competition and ideological sorting are much less clear given how new they are.

Nevertheless, omitting this information would also have drawbacks. Respondents could infer party membership based on policy positions (Squire and Smith, 1988). For instance, without providing party labels, respondents could assume a candidate proposing, say, that Britain has a more distant relationship from the EU is a Conservative and consequently refuse to select them due to anti-Conservative partisanship, rather than because of the policy itself. This would create uncontrolled for and unknown variation in how participants interpret the candidates.

There is no fully satisfactory resolution to the dilemma of party labels in conjoint experiments. I choose to include them because party labels are crucial for external validity. In the UK, voters rarely if ever make decisions about candidates without knowledge of their party affiliation. Furthermore, this experiment replicates a leadership election in a respondent's preferred party, which is relevant given recent culture war-focused Conservative (Stewart and Allegretti, 2022) and SNP (Green, 2023) contests.

4.2. Quantity of interest: Marginal means

I follow Leeper et al. (2020) in reporting marginal means rather than Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs). In conjoint experiments that vary, say, candidates' age or education, AMCEs would be suitable as the lowest age and education groups are natural reference groups

YouGov

Imagine a situation where Reform UK did not have a party leader. Now imagine that two politicians who wanted to be the new leader were asked about what policies they supported.

Please look at their answers below and say which you would prefer to be Reform UK leader, if this was the only information you had.

Candidate A	Candidate B
Increase government spending on the NHS.	The UK should seek free trade deals with all countries in the world.
Zero hours contracts should be banned.	Reduce regulations for people to start their own business.
Cannabis should be illegal to use, buy and sell.	Increase the minimum prison sentence for violent crimes.
Students should not be allowed to prevent invited speakers who argue that there are innate differences between racial groups from speaking on university campuses	Transgender women (someone who was biologically male at birth, but now identifies as a woman) should be allowed to compete in female-sex sport

Who would you prefer to be the leader of Reform UK?

○ Candidate A

○ Candidate B

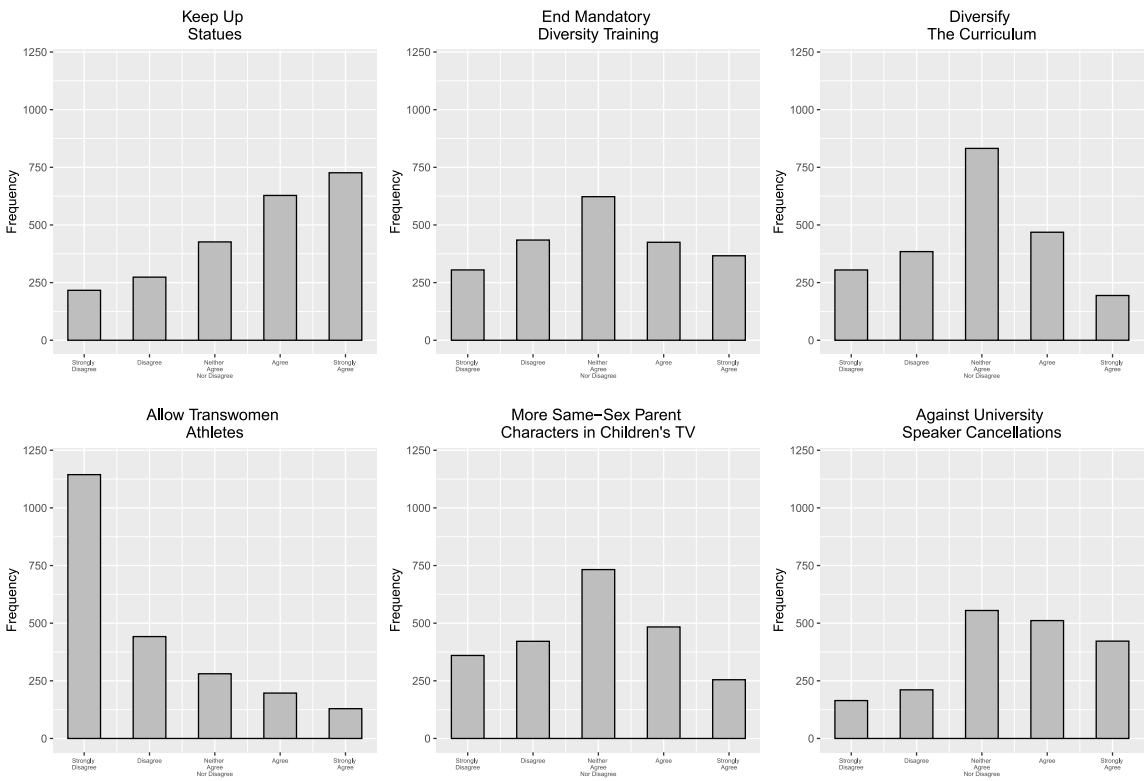**Fig. 2.** Conjoint experiment example.

Fig. 3. Distributions of level of support for the culture war issues. Population weight used.

(Bansak et al., 2022). However, the policies I use lack these, meaning any selection would be arbitrary. I am interested in the effect of each individual policy relative to all other policies, not just those within the same category, so I use marginal means to show the likelihood of voting for a candidate advocating a particular policy, marginalizing across all other features.

In visualizing the marginal means, I use confidence intervals of 95% in each. I use a null hypothesis of 0.5, because it would suggest the policy was not important in deciding how respondents voted. My main analysis is reported in Section 5 where I mainly present figures of results, but full results tables are available in Appendix 2.

5. Analysis

5.1. Agreement level

For context, Fig. 3 presents the weighted distributions of responses to the culture war issues. The distribution of all responses is available in Appendix 3.6.

This shows variation in support for each policy. Ending mandatory diversity training, diversifying the curriculum and more same-sex parents in children's TV are fairly normally distributed with a relatively even mixture of support and opposition. Being against the cancellation of controversial orthodox university speakers is skewed towards support. Keeping up statues is much more skewed towards agreement. Allowing transwomen athletes is very unpopular, with strongly disagree the majority of responses.

To assess the relative importance of culture war issues, I first model how agreement with a candidate's position on the different policy groups influences selection overall. I present results in Fig. 4 showing predicted selection probabilities across agreement levels for each policy group. If a policy group matters, there should be a very low predicted probability of selection with strong disagreement, and a very high probability with strong agreement.

Respondents tended to select candidates supporting their policy preferences and against those supporting policies they disagree with. This demonstrates the validity of respondent's self-reported issue positions and that a spatial model of voting behaviour is internally valid for this experiment (Hanretty et al., 2020).

All issue groups had similar selection probabilities across agreement levels, suggesting each contributed to vote choice. The economic policies showed the lowest probability for disagree and neither agree nor disagree, and the highest for strongly agree, but differences between groups were minor. These initial results indicate culture war issues influence vote choice similarly to economic and traditional non-economic issues, with comparable effect sizes and slopes across dimensions.

In Fig. 5, I present the marginal means for each individual policy conditional on the respondent's agreement with the corresponding issue, which allows me to examine whether policies asymmetrically motivate voters. Given the low number of respondents in some of the 'strongly' categories, I combine 'strongly agree' and 'agree' into one agreement category and combine 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' into one disagreement category.

The culture war consistently motivates the orthodox (those agreeing with orthodox and disagreeing with progressive positions) but has inconsistent effects on progressives (those agreeing with progressive and disagreeing with orthodox positions). Orthodox respondents significantly voted against all progressive policies and significantly voted for all orthodox policies. In contrast, this was inconsistent for progressives. Agreeing on transwomen athletes, disagreeing on slave-trade statues, and disagreeing on controversial speakers had insignificant effects, whilst the other progressive policies were significant.

This clarifies which issues are truly divisive on both agreement and importance. Policies with the expected pattern of agreement/ disagreement significantly predicting vote choice are same-sex parents in children's TV, diversifying curriculums, and ending mandatory

diversity training.

Given this study's focus is on the culture war's importance relative to other issues, Tables 2 and 3 present the policies with the highest and lowest marginal means conditional on agreement level. There is little trend in which issue group most motivates voters. Of the top five highest, two are economic policies, two are culture war policies, and one is a traditional non-economic policy. This again suggests all groups influence vote choice. Economic and traditional policies still effectively move votes, but voters also incorporate culture war beliefs. This is not to say the culture war is the most important issue group, but they clearly play a key role for some voters. However, as a note of caution, of the five policies with the lowest marginal means, none are culture war issues.

This also shows that the effects of disagreeing tend to be larger than those of agreeing with issues, being further from 0.5. This is probably due to acquiescence bias in Likert-scales where respondents tend to agree with statements more than they disagree regardless of their content (Krosnick, 1999). This means those that said they agree with a policy were potentially overstating their support in the agree/disagree responses, while their revealed preferences in the vote choice experiment demonstrate their actual more tepid support.

As outlined in Sections 2 and 3, there are theoretical reasons to believe that cross-pressured voters may prioritize the culture war over their economic beliefs. This is particularly relevant for voters with left-wing economic and socially conservative beliefs who are said to have been behind the success of orthodox-supporting populists since 2016. This also tests the previous finding that support for the right can come from people with either right-wing economic or socially conservative beliefs (Gidron, 2022).

To assess this, I use the premise that political competition is two-dimensional, where one dimension is economic and the other is cultural (Dalton, 2018; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Hillen and Steiner, 2020; Kitschelt, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2008). I take each respondent's answers to the left–right redistribution and libertarian–authoritarian[2] social values scales, which have been shown to be good estimations of preferences on the economic and non-economic dimensions in the UK (Heath et al., 1994). These are a series of five questions for each dimension – presented in Appendix 1.3. – and I only use respondents who gave a valid answer to every question.

5.2. Cross-pressured voters

I use Item Response Theory (IRT) to model the relationship between each individual's latent traits and their responses to the set of questions asked. IRT was developed with the recognition there is a certain random element to responses to questions like these and, consequently, there is a need for a probabilistic model to explain answers' distribution (Linden, 2013). I use a Graded Response Model to obtain the latent traits for each individual (Samejima, 2013). I use the mirt R package (Philip, 2012) to first fit a unidimensional maximum likelihood factor analysis model using responses to the five economic values questions. I then compute the expected a-posteriori factor score for each individual. To create balanced groups, I use a threshold of the median factor score to create a 'right-wing' and a 'left-wing' group. I then repeat this process for the five authoritarian scale questions to create 'libertarian' and 'traditionalist' value groups. This creates four groups: Left-Traditionalists (1,506 respondents), Left-Libertarians

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[2] In the BESIP, the non-economic value scale is referred to as 'libertarian-ism' versus 'authoritarianism'. Although 'libertarianism' has a different popular meaning in other countries' politics, it is used here in the sense of whether someone supports individual social freedom, freedom of association, and tolerates unconventional lifestyles. 'Authoritarianism' is not used in the same way as the psychological construct but as the opposite of this non-economic social libertarianism (Heath et al., 1994).
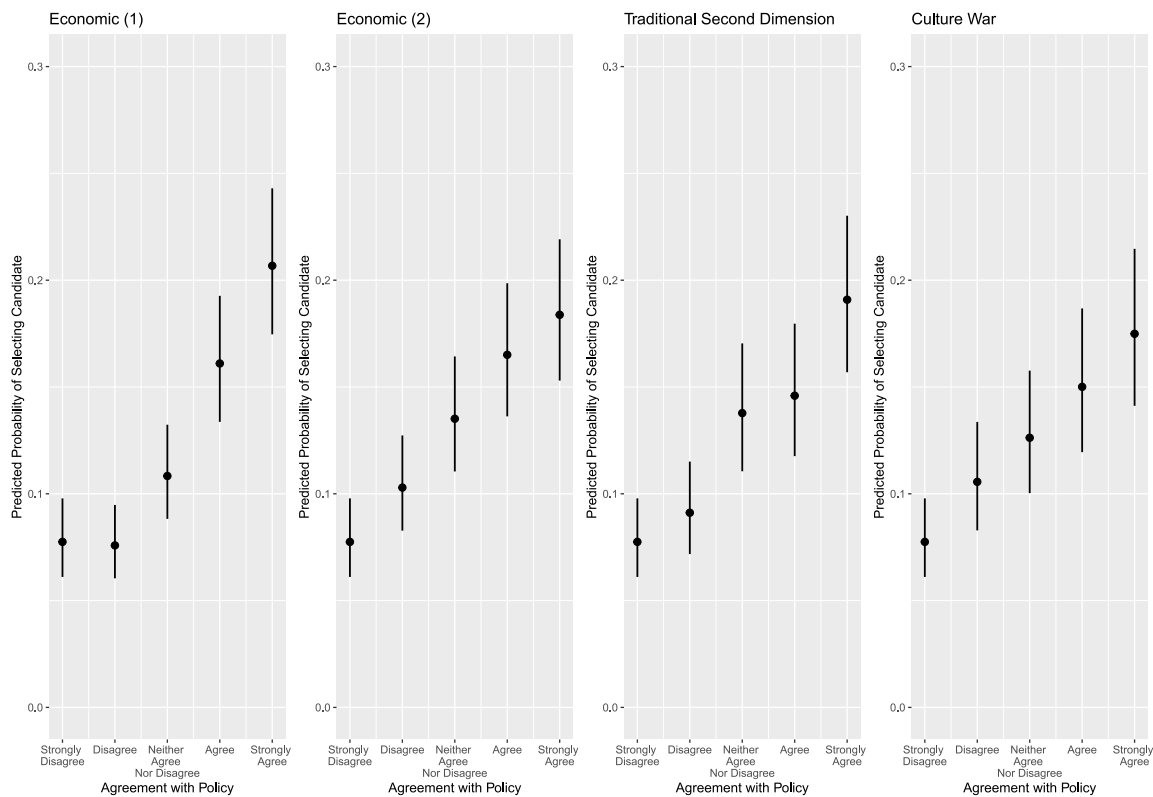
Fig. 4. Predicted probability of candidate vote share as a function of respondents' support for candidate's policy in each group. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent significance level. Population weight used.
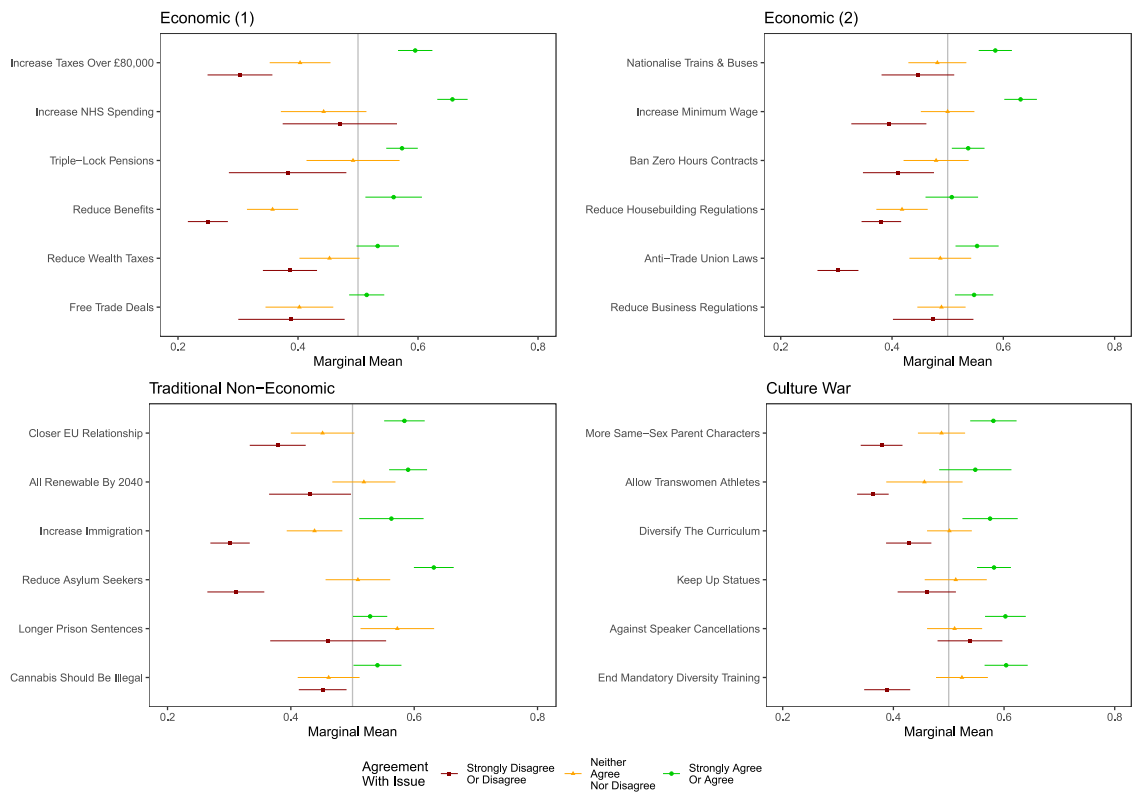

Fig. 5. Marginal means of all respondents conditional on the level of agreement with the corresponding specific individual policy. 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' responses merged into one 'Agreement' category. 'Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree' responses merged into one disagreement category. Population weights used. Confidence interval: 95 percent. Null hypothesis: 0.5.

Table 2

Highest marginal means (MM) conditional on agreement level with the specific individual policy. All issues are significant to at least the 95 percent level.

	Agreement	Group	Policy	MM
1	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Economic (1)	Increase NHS Spending	0.66
2	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Traditional Second-Dimension	Reduce Asylum Seekers	0.63
3	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Economic (2)	Increase Minimum Wage	0.63
4	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Culture War	End Mandatory Diversity Training	0.60
5	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Culture War	Against Speaker Cancellations	0.60
6	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Economic (1)	Increase Taxes Over £80,000	0.60
7	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Traditional Second-Dimension	All Renewable By 2040	0.59
8	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Economic (2)	Nationalise Trains & Buses	0.59
9	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Traditional Second-Dimension	Closer EU Relationship	0.58
10	Strongly Agree Or Agree	Culture War	Keep Up Statues	0.58

Table 3

Lowest marginal means (MM) conditional on agreement level with the specific individual policy. All issues are significant to at least the 95 percent level.

	Agreement	Group	Policy	MM
1	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Economic (1)	Reduce Benefits	0.25
2	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Traditional Second-Dimension	Increase Immigration	0.30
3	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Economic (2)	Anti-Trade Union Laws	0.30
4	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Economic (1)	Increase Taxes Over £80,000	0.30
5	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Traditional Second-Dimension	Reduce Asylum Seekers	0.31
6	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Economic (1)	Reduce Benefits	0.36
7	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Culture War	Allow Transwomen Athletes	0.36
8	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Culture War	More Same-Sex Parent Characters	0.38
9	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Traditional Second-Dimension	Closer EU Relationship	0.38
10	Strongly Disagree Or Disagree	Economic (2)	Reduce Housebuilding Regulations	0.38

(1,600), Right-Traditionalists (1,506) and Right-Libertarians (1,596). Using these groups, Fig. 6 presents the marginal means of selecting a candidate.

It is important to note the drawbacks of using and analysing discrete groups. Many people hover around the cut-off point, so a large number of those classed as 'traditionalists' and 'libertarians' or 'left' and 'right' will have similar factor scores for their respective values. I use them here because it is easier to interpret and is a useful shorthand for what types of policies different people prioritize when cross-pressured, whilst keeping in mind that it is a simplification of reality.

The groups generally vote for candidates who adopt their political values, suggesting the values questions tap into people's underlying traits. To assess the culture war's relative electoral importance, Table 5 shows the ten individual policies furthest from 0.5 for each value group. This acts as a proxy for their priorities and summarizes how important the culture war is relative to other issues. This means it is possible to see whether a group's economic or non-economic beliefs move their vote more, which is particularly important to see for cross-pressured voters (see Table 4).

For left-libertarians, there are no culture war issues in this list. Instead, they prioritize economic (six out of the top ten) and traditional non-economic (four out of the top ten) issues. This contrasts with right-traditionalists who clearly prioritize the culture war, as well as traditional non-economic issues. Four culture war issues make up their top ten issues, and two of these (keeping up statues and allowing transwomen athletes) are in their top three. This corresponds with the results of Section 5.1 where the orthodox were much more motivated by the culture war than progressives.

The main focus of this analysis is the cross-pressured left-traditionalist group who show similarities in their preferences to both left-libertarians and right-traditionalists. The culture war does motivate left-traditionalists, albeit to a lesser extent than right-traditionalists. Three of the six culture war issues included are in the left-traditionalists top ten, but only at sixth, eighth and ninth. Therefore, the culture war is not their main concern and implies that these issues are not the main reason why some of them have been attracted to the right.

Instead, the issues that most motivate left-traditionalists are the long-standing non-economic policies of opposing increased immigration and supporting reduced asylum seekers. This is like right-

traditionalists who also had opposing increased immigration as their top issue. These results give further evidence that those who are anti-immigration care more about the issue than those who are pro-immigration (Kustov, 2023). This is particularly the case given that support for increased immigration is insignificant for left-libertarians and right-libertarians, whilst opposition to reduced asylum seekers is only seventh for left-libertarians and is insignificant for right-libertarians.

Left-traditionalists have similarities with left-libertarians, as both prioritize the economic issues of supporting increased NHS spending, an increased minimum wage, and opposing reduced benefits. However, in the hierarchy of priorities, left-traditionalists cared more that a candidate had socially conservative policies on immigration and asylum. This suggests that it is these long-established issues that are driving some left-traditionalists to vote for the right, rather than the culture war, and that left-wing economic appeals have a lesser potential to keep them voting for the left.

For right-libertarians, interpretation is limited by only eight issues having a significant effect. Despite this, two culture war issues are in this list but they are in the orthodox direction (opposing transwomen athletes and supporting efforts to stop speaker cancellations). Supporting the rights of controversial orthodox speakers may be an aspect of libertarian values (as in, all should be allowed to speak regardless of their views), which shows orthodox cultural issues are not always negatively correlated with libertarian social values.

Although right-libertarians prioritize social liberalism as expected, all but one significant economic policy are left-wing. This suggests either the original values questions do not properly capture right-wing economic beliefs, the policies did not tap into their latent values, or some left-wing policies were universally popular across values.

5.3. Robustness checks

In Appendix 3, I conduct robustness checks and additional analyses. I examine how different party identifiers respond to culture war issues and find Conservatives are more motivated by the culture war than Labour identifiers. Using 2016 EU referendum identification, I similarly find Leave identifiers tend to be more motivated by the culture war than Remain identifiers. Both the party and EU identification findings back up my main findings that the orthodox and those with traditional
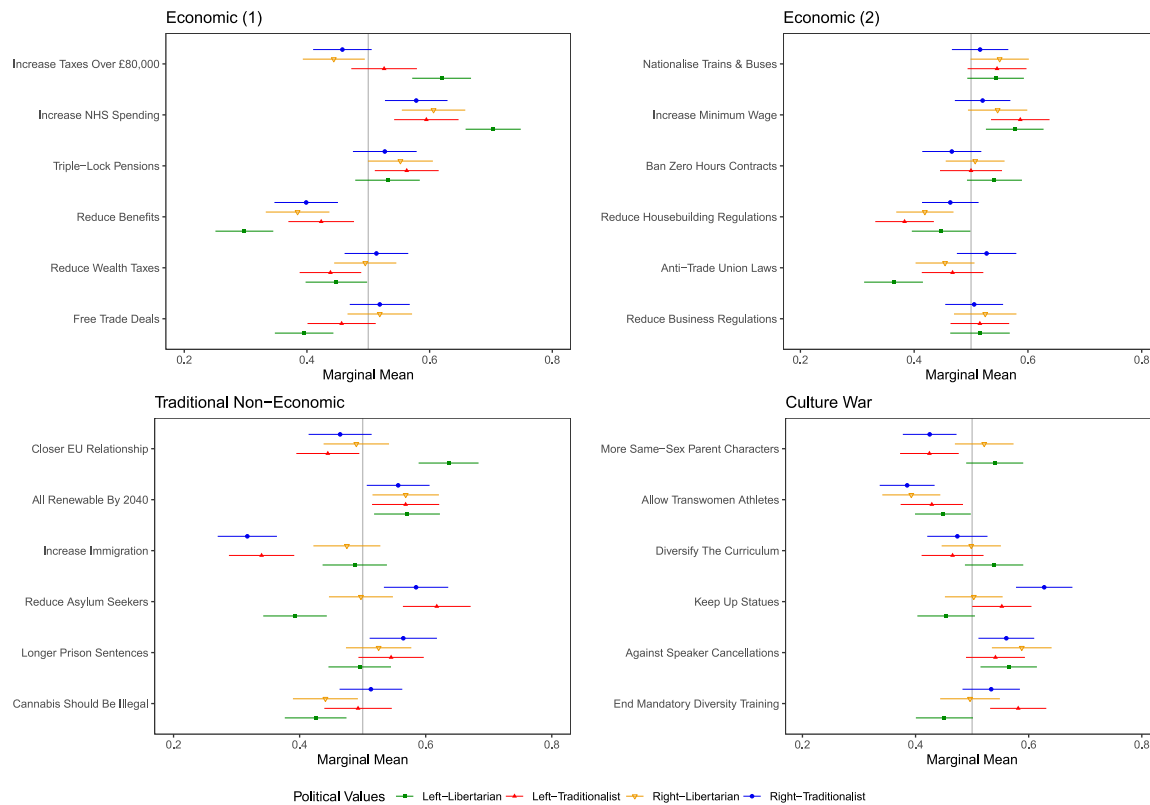
Fig. 6. Marginal means of all policies for all respondents conditional on political values. Population weights used. Confidence interval: 95%. Null hypothesis: 0.5.

Table 4

Top ten issues with marginal means furthest from 0.5 for each political value group. *Policies in italics are traditional second-dimension*, **policies in bold are culture war** and polices in standard font are economic (1) and (2). Only policies significant at 95% level are displayed. Population weight used.

	Left-traditionalist	Right-traditionalist
1	*Against: Increase Immigration*	*Against: Increase Immigration*
2	*Supports: Reduce Asylum Seekers*	**Supports: Keep Up Statues**
3	Against: Reduce Housebuilding Regulations	**Against: Allow Transwomen Athletes**
4	Supports: Increase NHS Spending	Against: Reduce Benefits
5	Supports: Increase Minimum Wage	*Supports: Reduce Asylum Seekers*
6	**Supports: End Mandatory Diversity Training**	Supports: Increase NHS Spending
7	Against: Reduce Benefits	**Against: More Same-Sex Parent Characters**
8	**Against: More Same-Sex Parent Characters**	*Supports: Longer Prison Sentences*
9	**Against: Allow Transwomen Athletes**	**Supports: Against Speaker Cancellations**
10	*Supports: All Renewable By 2040*	*Supports: All Renewable By 2040*

	Left-libertarian	Right-libertarian
1	Against: Reduce Benefits	Against: Reduce Benefits
2	Supports: Increase NHS Spending	**Against: Allow Transwomen Athletes**
3	Against: Anti-Trade Union Laws	Supports: Increase NHS Spending
4	*Supports: Closer EU Relationship*	**Supports: Against Speaker Cancellations**
5	Supports: Increase Taxes Over £80,000	Against: Reduce Housebuilding Regulations
6	Against: Free Trade Deals	*Supports: All Renewable By 2040*
7	*Against: Reduce Asylum Seekers*	*Against: Cannabis Should Be Illegal*
8	Supports: Increase Minimum Wage	Against: Increase Taxes Over £80,000
9	*Against: Cannabis Should Be Illegal*	
10	*Supports: All Renewable By 2040*	

values are more motivated by the culture war.

Other than political beliefs, it is important to test other dimensions on which the impacts could vary. I find asymmetric effects among different age groups, with the oldest groups more inclined to vote for orthodox and against progressive candidates. In contrast, the youngest age group (18–30) showed insignificant effects for all culture war issues. For education and social class, the non-university educated and working-class respondents tended to support orthodox candidates.

Conversely, culture war issues had a weaker impact on the university educated and middle-class respondents.

I test demographics directly affected by culture war issues (gender, ethnicity and sexuality). Women exhibit some cross-identity solidarity, with most culture war issues not significantly influencing them. However, both men and women voted against allowing transwomen athletes, with women's marginal means being lower. For ethnicity and sexuality, results are hindered by a lack of respondent numbers. For

ethnicity, non-white respondents are insignificant for all policies, but marginal means were similar to white respondents, although non-white respondents were more progressive for mandatory diversity training and diversifying the curriculum. Among lesbian, gay and bisexual[3] respondents, marginal means were mostly in the progressive direction but, due to the small sample size, all were insignificant.

I also rerun the analysis of Section 5.2. but this time following Hillen and Steiner (Hillen and Steiner, 2020) by now creating a centrist group who have moderate views on at least one dimension, as well as four quadrants which are now more ideological in their make-up. This should better avoid classifying individuals with very similar attitudes in different groups. While the ideological quadrants show similar results to before, the new centrist group show an intriguing mixture of priorities. Their top two priorities are left-wing economic policies and third is conservative traditional non-economic. However, four of their top ten are culture war issues and all are in the orthodox direction. This suggests that while the culture war is not the most important issue for these respondents, it can be a lower-level irritation that can help push people towards the right.

Finally, I test the robustness of my culture war issues. All culture war policies are correlated with one another in the expected direction, although the strength of that correlation varies. Using linear regression models, I find that the individual-level variables of age, education and sexuality are the best predictors of culture war attitudes, with the young, university educated and sexual minorities consistently significantly progressive. Ethnic minorities tend to be progressive for issues that affect themselves but not for other issues, in line with previous findings that they tend to be 'necessity liberals' (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

6. Discussion

Culture wars are neither all-encompassing nor irrelevant to voters. Whilst not overriding long-standing issues, they were an additional issue group voters cared about. Nevertheless, the importance placed on culture war issues was asymmetric. Orthodox voters prioritized these issues over progressives, whilst right-traditionalists and, to a lesser extent, left-traditionalists prioritized them when cross-pressured.

The results highlight how those who are socially conservative more broadly tend to place greater emphasis on non-economic issues – both culture war and traditional – than people with socially liberal values. This suggests that the culture war is another of the 'many ways to be right' that Gidron (2022) outlines where it is enough to be conservative on one dimension to turn to the political right. The results of Section 5.2 highlight the potential that non-economic issues hold in helping to produce a majority electoral coalition for the right, even if their voters have dissimilar economic beliefs, as cross-pressured left-traditionalists voted for reduced immigration and asylum seekers more than they voted for policies such as increased NHS spending or taxes on the rich. For the left, this is further experimental evidence of the difficulty of forming winning voter coalitions around economic issues when non-economic policies are prominent (Gidron, 2022; Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015; Ignazi, 1992; Daniel and Rennwald, 2018).

However, Gidron notes that his results do not clarify the underlying mechanism that nudges cross-pressured voters to the right (158). Similarly, my results do not fully explain why the orthodox placed greater emphasis on the culture war compared to progressives. In this discussion section, I outline how future research could better examine the causal mechanisms that lead different types of voters to place greater or lesser importance on the culture war.

As outlined in the review of previous literature, this may be because orthodox voters were following the lead of their preferred media who raised these issues' saliency (Zaller, 1992). For example, orthodox

British media commentators at the time of the survey were lamenting how Britain has experienced progressive cultural change under a Conservative government, who they argue were insufficiently counteracting this (Examples include: Cummings, 2022; Heath, 2021; Timothy, 2023). This means it is important to study how a person's media and social media diet affects their priority of the culture war, particularly how this compares with those who consume less media overall or consume less partisan media.

For instance, there has been criticism of politicians who have run on culture war issues and lost elections for being too 'online' where they prioritized the cultural concerns that animate social media at the expense of 'bread-and-butter' issues (Ahmari, 2024; Bensinger and Nehamas, 2023). Therefore, it would be good to test whether the priorities of active social media users are different to others. This was not possible in this study because the last time that the BESIP asked about a person's social media use was in wave 18 in November 2019.

Given that the Conservative Party was the incumbent during my conjoint experiment survey period, future research should also look at whether dynamics are now different under Labour. With a Conservative government, orthodox voters may already have felt control over economic and traditional second-dimension issues which elected politicians tend to have more power over. Therefore, their priorities may return to the economy and traditional second-dimension issues under the Labour government if they begin to implement policies on these dimensions that they disagree with.

The change of government also provides an opportunity to study how progressive voters react to this changed context where they have a government who they agree with more. I have found that progressives did not consistently vote for progressive cultural changes and instead prioritized the economy and traditional non-economic issues. As a reverse of the orthodox, this may be because the Conservative Party were the incumbent, so these voters felt they did not have control over these issues. Centre-left control of the government may give them greater freedom to prioritize the culture war if asked again.

More broadly, the most important avenue for future research is to test the priority of the culture war in different countries. This study used the UK context to test the relevance of the culture war, given their prominence here (Curtice and Ratti, 2022; Duffy et al., 2021a, Duffy et al., 2021b). However, the culture war has clearly risen in prominence throughout the developed world in the last decade (Duffy and Skinner, 2021; Hartman, 2019; Hesová et al., 2021; Williams, 2023). If the importance of the culture war to voters differs between countries, it would suggest that the specific context plays a key role in their saliency. If the importance of the culture war is similar between countries, it would instead imply that there are aspects of the issues themselves that lead progressive and orthodox voters to make certain decisions.

However, it is important to note that comparative culture war studies will be constrained because certain issues have more relevance or saliency in certain contexts. In particular, I have not included classic US issues such as abortion or guns (Hartman, 2019; Hunter, 1991). This is because these issues are not prominent political divides in the UK (Dickson, 2024; Howard, 2017), so would have made less sense to include as I was interested in new issues that have caused divisions in the UK, as set out in Appendix 1.2. This highlights the crucial point that culture wars can vary significantly and can evolve over time. Nevertheless, it would be good for future research to include US-specific culture war issues to see whether they have the potential to cause similar divisions in other countries if politicians were to take polarizing positions on these.

This also raises that point that the choice of culture war policies included in this study's conjoint experiment may have driven the findings with an omitted policy potentially having a big effect. There may have been an additional area that I did not even include in the pilot that would have changed results, particularly for progressives who I found were less motivated by the culture war.

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[3] The BESIP does not ask whether someone is transgender.

One context-specific dynamic that should be at the forefront of future research is how parties themselves react to the culture war, particularly for the left where there has been uncertainty as to how to respond (Abou-Chadi et al., 2021; Neiman, 2023; Ozkirimli, 2023). There are different ways for centre-left parties to respond to this and the effects of different strategies should be given closer examination. Left-wing politicians may profit electorally by ensuring the culture war does not become salient, as policy ambiguity has previously maintained diverse electoral coalitions (Kamphorst, 2024). Alternatively, currently unpopular culture war policies may become less damaging if politicians strongly support them, making them partisan issues where voters follow their party (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016; Egan, 2013; Lenz, 2013). A comparison of these two approaches should be studied when parties try them in different contexts.

Despite my results, limitations exist. Policy determinism is a mistake, as many uncontrolled for factors influence election outcomes, such as economic conditions (Key, 1966), valence (Clarke et al., 2011; Green, 2007), and candidates' demographics (Dolan, 2010; Fisher et al., 2015; Martin, 2016). Even for policy, it is unlikely voters have memorized each candidates' position on different issues (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Carpini and Keeter, 1996), which were shown in the experiment. Furthermore, this study should not be treated as the final say in the culture war's importance for voters, as new issues will continually emerge in the ever-evolving landscape of cultural battles (Prothero, 2016). In particular, these new issues could motivate orthodox and progressive voters in different ways from what I found for the included policies.

Away from the culture war specifically, my results highlight the importance of studying political beliefs relative to each other, given the multidimensional nature of electoral conflict. Hanretty et al. (2020) argue advances in the study of the relative importance of political opinions have been insufficient, despite their clear importance in analysing the dynamics of election outcomes and competition. With regards to the debate over whether economic or cultural issues motivate voters, this study has shown that some types of voters tend to be motivated by economic issues and other types more motivated by non-economic ones. However, no voter group was motivated only by economic or only by non-economic beliefs, even if one was weighted more heavily than the other. This study aimed to partially fill the gap of issues' relative importance by looking specifically at the culture war, but future analysis should continue to test how important new issues are in comparison to other pre-existing ones.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102895.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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