"Do Something" Politics and Double-Peaked Policy Preferences

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Abstract

When a public problem is perceived to be poorly addressed by the status quo policy, alternatives are often considered to the status quo's left and right. Specially designed national surveys in which respondents rank order their policy preferences on a series of issues show that when faced with choices like these, many voters' preferences are not single-peaked on a standard left-right dimension. Rather, a substantial share of the electorate simply wants the government to "do something" about the problem and therefore prefers *both* liberal and conservative policies to the moderate status quo. This produces preferences that are *double-peaked* with respect to the left-right dimension, and can in turn yield collective preferences that are double-peaked as well. Double-peakedness is significantly less prevalent on issues where no consensus exists regarding policy goals, and it increases when exogenous events increase the public's concern about the seriousness of a policy problem.

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"While we disagree at times, let us at least agree that doing nothing is not an option."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV)

"Nobody is arguing about doing nothing. Republicans have presented some very good ideas to do something, to do a lot of somethings. Our ideas have been rejected. Let's don't get into false debate about doing something or nothing."

Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl (R-AZ)[1]

With this exchange on November 30, 2009, the United States Senate commenced debate on the Democratic health care reform bill that would become the Affordable Care Act. The debate illustrates a particular kind of politics that can accompany the rise of a policy problem on the public agenda. When a consensus builds that such a problem has failed to be addressed by the status quo, it is often the case that alternative policies are considered to the status quo's left and right. As health care costs increase, should government become more—or less—involved in regulating prices? As the level of undocumented immigrants rises, should the federal government increase deportation of these immigrants, or instead should a path to citizenship be established to help them gain legal status? Would our nation's reliance on foreign oil be better addressed by raising taxes on U.S. oil companies to fund development of renewable energy sources—or cutting their taxes to spur more domestic energy exploration?

Debates like these arise commonly in politics, and a key assumption underlying our understanding of them is that voters' preferences are *single-peaked*. That is, the electorate is thought to agree upon how these choices are ordered on a common left-right dimension, and each voter's rankings over the alternatives are assumed to decline as the choices get more distant from the voter's ideal point in either direction on this dimension. For example, a voter whose most preferred policy is to the left of the status quo (L) is assumed to in turn prefer the status quo (Q) to a policy to the status quo's right (R). Collective

[1] 155 Cong. Rec. (2009), at S11,980 (Reid) and S11,983 (Kyl) .

preferences are often assumed to be characterized by a similar property: an electorate in which a majority of voters prefers L to Q is assumed to therefore prefer Q to R.

But these assumptions, which are so important to formal and empirical analyses of policy preferences, ignore an important feature of this class of policy debates: no one is defending the status quo. Although the Democrats would eventually enact the most sweeping expansion of the welfare state in a generation, in 2009 Republicans and conservatives were loath to be portrayed as simply resisting change—that is, "doing nothing" about health care quality, accessibility, or costs. Rather, they were eager to be seen as "doing something" about these problems, too—offering a range of market-driven proposals to reduce the role of the federal government in the health care system (e.g. Antos 2009, Boehner 2009, Jindal 2009).

I call circumstances like these "do something" politics, and here I hypothesize and demonstrate that when such debates arise single-peakedness with respect to the left-right dimension can fail to hold among many voters. I identify three conditions that tend to accompany "do something" politics. First, a broad consensus exists on the ultimate goals associated with a particular issue (for example, that high-quality, affordable health care is generally good, and undocumented immigration or relying too much on foreign sources of energy is generally bad). Second, as was the case with health care in 2009, a substantial share of the polity perceives that problems are serious in the issue domain and thus concludes that the status quo policy is failing to achieve the goal. Third, credible policy instruments located to the status quo's left and right are promoted by liberal and conservative elites. To the extent that these conditions hold, considerable numbers of voters can simply want change—and thus can prefer *both* liberal and conservative policies to the status quo. Their preferences over policies with respect to the standard left-right dimension will not be single-peaked, but rather *double-peaked*. In some cases, the share of voters with double-peaked policy preferences is substantial enough that collective preferences follow suit: majorities prefer that government "do something" (regardless of whether change is to the left or right) instead of "doing nothing" by maintaining the poorly performing status quo.

The extent to which preferences are double-peaked cannot be known from standard opinion surveys, which typically ask respondents merely to specify their most preferred policy rather than allowing them to rank all of the alternatives. Evidence is presented here with data derived from specially designed representative sample surveys of Americans in which respondents were presented with national policy problems on issues like health care, foreign economic competition, and the national debt. They were offered mutually exclusive policy solutions to these problems proposed by liberal and conservative leaders, and then provided the opportunity to rank-order their policy preferences on these issues. Respondents specified their preferences over three policy choices: the liberal and conservative alternatives to the status quo's left and right, and the status quo itself.

On eight different issues meeting the criteria for "do something politics," substantial shares of Americans ranked the moderate status quo last. Consistent with a long line of scholarship showing that the left-right dimension plays a smaller role in the organization of political attitudes among the less sophisticated, double-peaked preferences were more prevalent among the less educated and those with lower levels of political knowledge. But they were not uncommon at higher levels of political sophistication. On many of the issues, collective preferences were themselves double-peaked, with majorities of Americans prefering both left- and right-wing alternatives to the moderate status quo.

Additional analyses provide evidence substantiating the connection between "do something" politics and double-peaked policy preferences. First, voters' rankings of their policy preferences on two issues where no national consensus exists on ultimate goals—abortion rights and gun rights—confirm that "do something" politics are unlikely to arise on such issues. Double-peaked preferences are significantly less common among voters on these issues. Rather than being double-peaked, collective preferences instead favor maintaining the status quo. Second, observational and experimental data confirm that as perceptions increase that a moderate status quo policy is failing, more voters' policy preferences become double-peaked. In an experimental condition manipulating the extent to which respondents viewed a particular issue as a serious problem, treated respondents were significantly more likely than controls to hold double-peaked preferences on the is-

sue. This result suggests that when policy in an issue domain is subjected to an exogenous negative shock, "do something" politics are more likely to arise as the proportion of voters favoring both left- and right-wing alternatives to the status quo increases significantly.

In addition to serving as a first-ever investigation of the extent to which the Americans' policy preferences on specific issues satisfy the criterion of single-peakedness, this study has three sets of implications. First, it suggests that less politically sophisticated Americans are not only "innocent of ideology" across issues (Converse [1964] 2006: 47) but that the reach of this innocence extends within issues as well. Learning the correct ordering of policy choices along the left-right dimension may play an unsung role in generating the high levels of ideological "constraint" exhibited by the politically sophisticated. Second, these findings provide fresh insight on the distinctions political scientists have drawn between two sets of issues: those having to do with debates over the best "means" of acheiving "ends" around which there exists a consensus, and issues on which no consensus exists regarding the ends themselves (Alt 1979, Fiorina 1981, Stokes 1963, Tavits 2007). On the latter set of issues, a collective preference for stability can be the norm, as majorities of Americans prefer the status quo to change in either a liberal or conservative direction. By contrast, on the first set of issues Americans can be open to multiple ways of addressing problems and thus favor change—in either ideological direction—on these problems. This in turn leads to a final implication, which is that a distinct advantage may be conferred in times of "do something" politics on parties that "own" issues because of their reputations for addressing problems in these issue domains (Budge and Farlie 1983, Petrocik 1996). Under these circumstances, it is possible that a candidate whose platform is on the losing end of a left-right policy debate can nevertheless win by convincing voters that she is more likely than her opponent to change the status quo.

Single-Peaked Policy Preferences and the Study of Politics

Political scientists often explicitly or implicitly make the assumption that when voters consider policy alternatives on an issue, their preferences over these alternatives reflect an

ordering of the choices that all voters hold in common. An electorate's preferences are called *single-peaked* with respect to this ordering if each voter's preferences over the choices decline in their distance in either direction from the voter's most preferred policy (or "ideal point") on the issue.

Formally, consider an ordering Ω of a set of policy alternatives and (x, y, z) as any triple of alternatives within the set ordered by Ω. For an individual i's preferences to be single-peaked with respect to Ω, if y is located between x and z on Ω, i cannot both prefer x to y and prefer z to y (i.e., there is no "cave" between x and z at y). Although this definition is specified in terms of individual preferences, single-peakedness is better understood as a property of collective preferences. This is because absent ties in preference rankings, it is always possible to construct an ordering Ω with respect to which any lone individual's preferences are trivially single-peaked. Thus single-peakedness is also defined collectively, on a set (or profile) of individual preferences. A preference profile is said to be single-peaked if there exists an ordering Ω with respect to which *every* individual's preferences in the profile are single-peaked.[2]

Single-peakedness is a basic assumption of many formal models of electoral competition and social choice. An electorate with preferences satisfying single-peakedness is sufficient to guarantee the existence of a Condorcet winner, defined as a policy that beats all alternatives in pairwise competition. Single-peakedness is often considered a desirable property of collective preferences, as profiles that are not single-peaked can be vulnerable to cycling, instability, and agenda manipulation under majority rule. The assumption of single-peakedness is important for empirical researchers as well. Participants in public opinion surveys are rarely given the chance to rank policy alternatives on an issue, as standard survey questions essentially permit respondents only to specify their ideal points. When empirical researchers include these ideal points as predictors in, say, vote-choice models, they too are relying on the single-peakedness assumption.

This paper focuses on the extent to which voters' policy preferences on individual is-

[2]This is a relatively non-technical definition; in-depth treatments in political science include Austen-Smith and Banks 1999; Brams, Jones and Kilgour 2002; List et al 2013; and Penn, Patty and Gailmard 2011.

sues are single-peaked with respect to a particular ordering of policy alternatives: that corresponding with the liberal-conservative ideological dimension that is the primary axis of conflict in American politics. Single-peakedness does not require that an ordering Ω be the left-right dimension, and indeed there are many policy debates where a liberal-conservative ordering of alternatives does not easily suggest itself. But in in the highly polarized atmosphere that characterizes contemporary U.S. politics, elite political debates about most national issues are structured around this dimension and the expressed preferences of politicians appear to be single-peaked with respect to this dimension. Here I investigate the extent to which voters' preferences over policy alternatives exhibit the same high degree of structure as elites. Successive generations of scholars have replicated Philip Converse's discovery in the 1960s that only a small slice of Americans' attitudes *across* issues are constrained by ideology (Judd and Krosnick 1989; Zaller 1992) and that even today such constraint remains largely confined to strong partisans and the politically sophisticated (Baldassarri and Gelman 2007, Federico 2007; Federico and Schneider 2007; Layman and Carsey 2002). This paper examines the complementary but heretofore unexplored question of the extent to which Americans' policy preferences *within* issues conform to a liberal-conservative ordering. The research of Converse and his intellectual descendants suggests that political sophistication may play a similarly strong role in distinguishing those who hold single-peaked preferences from those who do not.

Studies documenting the extent of single-peakededness in actual electorates are few in number, and no study has ever examined the prevalence of single-peaked policy preferences with a nationally representative sample of Americans. The lack of data with rank-ordered preferences on issues in sample surveys has forced scholars to instead examine preferences over candidates by reconstructing ranked preferences from standard survey measures. This is the approach taken by a series of studies which have relied on "feeling thermometer" scores (as well as in some cases head-to-head comparisons) to impute voters' relative rankings of the candidates. In this work, scholars have found that the preferences of substantial shares of Americans appear to satisfy the single-peakedness property when the choice set is small. As more candidates are added to the mix, the prevalence

of single-peakedness declines (Feld and Grofman 1988; Niemi and Wright 1987; Radcliff 1993). Additional empirical insights on single-peakedness come from a series of "deliberative polling" exercises in which samples of individuals are convened, provided information about a certain issue, and given opportunities to deliberate among themselves and query experts (see generally Fishkin 2009). In baseline surveys administered before deliberation takes place, researchers have found that the proportion of Americans with single-peaked preferences on local issues can vary substantially (Farrar et al 2010; List et al 2013).

Generally, these empirical studies provide evidence allaying concerns about the effects of non-single-peakedness on aggregate choice. For example, in each of the 13 issues examined in published deliberative polling exercises, a Condorcet winner existed even in the face of low levels of single-peaked preferences. The extent to which voters' preferences are structured in a single-peaked fashion rises with an issue's salience, and deliberation about an issue tends to increase "proximity to single-peakedness," a measure defined as the largest possible proportion of voters whose preferences are single-peaked with respect to some common ordering (List et al 2013; Niemi 1969). Similarly optimistic conclusions have been reached by studies using presidential candidate rankings. Even in circumstances where single-peakedness fails to hold among a large share of the electorate, aggregate preferences can conform to an ordering expected to arise if all voters' preferences were single-peaked—a phenomenon called "collective ideological consistency" (Feld and Grofman 1988; see also Feld and Grofman 1986; Niemi and Wright 1987; Niemi 1969). For this condition to hold, an electorate that prefers, say, a left-wing candidate L to a moderate candidate M in pairwise competition cannot also prefer a right-wing candidate R to M. Analyses of presidential candidate data have found that aggregate preferences can be ideologically consistent despite the fact that many individuals rank candidates in ways that violate single-peakedness (Feld and Grofman 1988).

"Do Something" Politics

For many issues, the assumptions that single-peakedness is widely prevalent and collective preferences are ideologically consistent are likely warranted. But previous research suggests that single-peakedness could be vulnerable to disruption under the not uncommon circumstances that arise when (1) a policy debate occurs on an issue on which there is a broad consensus about an ultimate goal; (2) there is the perception that problems are serious with regard to the goal and thus dissatisfaction with the status quo policy's perceived ability to acheive the goal; and (3) credible policy alternatives exist to the status quo's left and right. I call these circumstances "do something" politics: in these conditions we have reason to expect that many voters prefer the government to "do something" to change policy in either ideological direction than stick with the clearly inadequate status quo.

The first condition making "do something" politics more likely is that a consensus exist in the electorate on goals (or end states) regarding the issue. Conservatives and liberals alike want to live in a nation safe from its enemies, with clean air and water, a well-educated populace, and a low crime rate. Americans may disagree on how to achieve these goals and their relative prioritization, but broad consensuses do exist regarding the worthiness of the goals themselves. By contrast, on many other issues—particularly those falling into the category of "social issues"—Americans fundamentally disagree about goals. On issues such as access to abortion, the availability of guns, or the place of religion in public schools, no consensus on end states exists. This distinction between "consensus" and "non-consensus" issues is a close cousin to scholars' categorizations of issues into "valence" and "position" (Stokes 1963), "hard" and "easy" (Carmines and Stimson 1980), or "consensual" and "conflict" (Miller and Shanks 1996). There are important differences among all of these classifications, but they are similar in that debates regarding the first of each pair of issues tend to be be about the proper "means" of reaching agreed-upon "ends," while debates regarding the latter of each pair are often about the "ends" themselves (Alt 1979, Fiorina 1981). Perhaps of greatest relevance to the notion of "do something" politics is a similar categorization of issues by Margit Tavits as either "pragmatic" (having to

do with welfare-maximizing concerns of voters) or "principled" (related to long-standing conflicts over values). Voters reward parties for policy shifts on pragmatic issues because these shifts are viewed as active responses to changing conditions. On the other hand, voters punish parties for shifts on principled issues because these changes are perceived as inconsistent and lacking credibility (Tavits 2007). In a similar vein, I hypothesize that because policies are the means to achieve ends on consensus issues, substantial numbers of voters —particularly those whose preferences are less constrained by ideology — can be open to changing policy in either ideological direction in their desire to achieve consensus goals. By contrast, there is very little distinction between policies and goals on non-consensus issues. For example, the major debates over abortion policies—such as parental and spousal notification laws, allowing or banning Medicaid coverage of abortion procedures, and regulation of abortion providers—all have to do with the fundamentally opposed goals of expanding or restricting abortion access. For these reasons, I hypothesize that relatively few voters should have reason to prefer both liberal and conservative alternatives to the status quo on a non-consensus issue like abortion.

Two additional conditions help give rise to "do something" politics on consensus issues: the perception that current policy is failing to achieve a consensus goal, and the existence of credible policy alternatives to the left and the right of the status quo. These conditions help overcome the considerable psychological biases shown to work in favor of the status quo. Experiments demonstrate that otherwise identical choices become more favored when they are presented as the status quo (Samuelson and Zeckhauser 1988), in part because individuals weigh the disadvantages of potential losses more heavily than the advantages of potential gains (Tversky and Kahnemann 1991). Overcoming status quo bias in favor of alternatives to both the left and right is more likely to happen when voters perceive that problems are serious in a particular issue domain. Conditions like these may not be so unusual in American politics, as the considerable barriers to policy change put in place by U.S. political institutions create "friction" leading to bottlenecks in government responses to policy problems (Baumgartner et al 2009; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003) and "gridlock" that keeps policy from moving from

an unpopular status quo (Krehbiel 1998). Thus we should not be surprised to discover many instances in which status quo policies are perceived to be inadequately addressing national goals—and where many voters in turn favor change in either ideological direction over inaction.

Double-Peaked Policy Preferences

"Do something" politics produce double-peaked policy preferences when a voter's dissatisfaction with the moderate status quo Q on an issue creates two peaks in her ranking of policy alternatives located to the status quo's left (L) and right (R). See Figure 1. I define double-peaked preferences explicitly with respect to a policy space consisting of the choice set $\{L, Q, R\}$ and the left-right ordering LQR (or equivalently, its mirror image RQL). For the purposes of this definition, the ordering LQR specifies more than just an apolitical, geometric arrangment of the choices. Rather, it is an ordering corresponding with the liberal-conservative ideological dimension that is the primary axis of conflict in national politics. L is a policy ideologically more liberal than the status quo Q (in that it is promoted by liberal elites as an alterantive to Q) and similarly R is a policy ideologically more conservative than Q and promoted by conservative elites. Thus this ordering is explicitly a "semantic" issue dimension (List et al 2013: 82). Absent ties, there are six possible ways for an individual to rank the choices. Four rankings are single-peaked with respect to the left-right dimension: two ideological rankings (LQR and RQL) and two moderate rankings where Q is the most preferred alternative (QLR and QRL).[3] The remaining two preference orderings in which Q is ranked last (LRQ and RLQ) violate single-peakedness with respect to the left-right dimension, and here are defined as double-peaked.[4] In a choice set consisting of three options, double-peaked preferences are indistinguishable from preferences that theorists have called "single-caved" (Inada 1964), "single-trowed" (Feld and Grofman 1986; Vickrey 1960), or "single-dipped" (Klaus, Peters and Storcken 1997). Here

[3]The notation here is a shorthand for the strict preference relation (commonly written as P). For example, writing individual i's ranking of the alternatives as LQR is equivalent to LP_iQP_iR.

[4]Here we see the necessity of defining double-peakedness in respect to a left-right ordering of alternatives. As noted earlier, it is always possible to construct an ordering with respect to which a single individual's preferences—including those meeting the criteria for double-peakedness—are trivially single-peaked.

I employ the term "double-peaked" to avoid implying that preferences rise monotonically as policy choices move farther away in either direction from Q. Double-peakedness reflects the presumption that if more alternatives were to be introduced to L's left or R's right, the preferences of voters over these extreme choices would decline, creating two peaks in their rankings along the left-right dimension.

Of particular interest are the circumstances under which the prevalence of double-peaked preferences among individuals translates into collective preferences where majorities prefer both left and right policy alternatives to the status quo. These outcomes thus violate the "collective ideological consistency" condition found to hold in the American electorate in previous work (Feld and Grofman 1988; see also Feld and Grofman 1986; Niemi and Wright 1987; Niemi 1969). Here I define such a profile of preference orderings where both L and R beat Q in pairwise majority voting as "collective double-peaked."

Hypotheses

At the individual level, I expect to see substantial shares of voters holding double-peaked preferences, with these preferences more prevalent among those who are less politically sophisticated. Double-peaked preferences should be much more common on consensus issues than non-consensus issues, and their prevalence should rise among individuals as they become persuaded that a serious problem exists in an issue domain. Collective double-peakedness should follow suit: in some cases, majorities will prefer both L and R to Q on consensus issues—but these circumstances should not arise on non-consensus issues.

Data

Specially designed survey questions were fielded on modules included on the 2010, 2011, and 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) surveys. Conducted via the Internet by the YouGov polling firm, the CCES employed a nonprobability sample-matching method designed to yield a sample of the adult population whose representa-

tiveness is comparable to that obtained via a random-digit dial sampling process.[5] In 2010, respondents were first interviewed between mid-September and Election Day. They were empaneled and interviewed again after Election Day, typically two to four weeks after the initial interview. The data presented here from 2011 and 2012 come from interviews taking place in a wave prior to Election Day (in 2011) or immediately afterward (2012).

Participants completed surveys on YouGov's interactive website. Attitudes on each issue were assessed with a pair of questions worded in identical format. Participants were first asked the question "Now we'd like your opinion. How serious a problem do you think [issue X] is for the country right now?" Respondents clicked a box on the screen indicating whether they believed the problem was "very serious," "somewhat serious," "not too serious," or "not at all serious." Respondents were then asked, "Here are three ways the federal government might respond to the problem of [issue X]. Please rank these responses by dragging your choices onto the numbered boxes on the right side of your screen." Respondents' preferences were measured using an interface known as a "ranking widget," an image of which can be found in Appendix Figure A1. Each of the three choices was presented (in random order) in a moveable box. Respondents ranked the three choices by dragging the boxes across the screen to a ladder labeled RANKINGS that was numbered 1, 2 and 3.[6]

Two of the three choices (L and R) reflected positions advanced respectively by liberal

[5] YouGov constructed the survey sample by first drawing a target sample designed to be representative of the American adult population. This sample was drawn with a sampling frame of U.S. citizens from the American Community Survey, which was matched with additional data from the Current Population Survey Supplement and the Pew Religious Landscape Survey. The target sample was thus representative of the population on demographic characteristics (gender, age, race, marital status, education, income, region and urbanicity of residence), political covariates (party identification, ideology, voter registration status, and interest in politics), and religion (affiliation and attendance of religious services). For each member of the target sample, proximity matching techniques were then used to identify survey respondents who were as similar as possible to target sample members. Finally, weights were calculated so that the final sample would be similar to the adult population on these characteristics. For more details on this process, see Vavreck and Rivers 2008. When compared with actual election results, estimates from CCES 2010 state-level samples were found to exhibit error rates similar to that expected from random sampling (Ansolabehere 2012). Since the launch of the CCES in 2005, data from the study have been used in more than 50 studies published in peer-reviewed journals (CCES 2013).

[6] Consistent with previous empirical research on ranking policy alternatives, ties in rankings were not permitted. A "don't know" option was not explicitly offered, but respondents could skip the ranking question entirely by simply proceeding to the next screen of the survey. Completion rates were high: across issues, only two to four percent of respondents failed to fully rank all three alternatives.

and conservative elites in the "two-sided information flow" that typically characterizes U.S. policy debates (Zaller 1992). The third choice was always the status quo Q. For the wording of these choices, see Table 1. The designations L, Q and R are displayed in the table along with the question wordings; these labels were not shown to survey respondents. The alternatives were specified in a way to reduce the possibility that any observed double-peakedness was the artifact of extraneous factors. On each issue, the implementation of L and R would move policy in unambiguously different directions on the standard left-right dimension, placing Q in between L and R on this dimension. The number of alternatives offered was limited to three, in keeping with previous work finding that violations of single-peakedness rise with the number of elements in a choice set. Finally, all three choices—the two alternate policies and the status quo—were worded in such a way as to be mutually exclusive: the enactment of any one of the policies ruled out the other two by construction. This ensured that respondents were not ranking complementary solutions to the problem that could be enacted in conjunction with one another, which might artificially depress support for the status quo.

Results

I first present combined findings from the 2011 and 2012 surveys, which followed the basic design described above. These data illustrate the prevalence of double-peaked policy preferences at the individual level and allow for tests of the hypotheses that double-peakedness should be less prevalent on non-consensus issues and more prevalent among the less politically sophisticated. I then turn to the findings from the 2010 survey, which featured an experiment to test the hypothesis that an increase in perceived problem seriousness causes the prevalence of double-peaked policy preferences to rise. Finally, I revisit all of the survey data to explore the extent to which collective preferences are double-peaked on consensus issues.

Policy Preferences on Consensus Issues

Four questions regarding highly salient policy debates on consensus issues were fielded in 2011 and 2012. The questions dealt with the goals of lowering health care costs and reducing unemployment (in 2011), and responding to foreign economic competition and reducing the national debt (in 2012).[7] The top panel of Table 2 reports the proportion of Americans choosing each of the six possible rankings on the four issues. Results were calculated using the survey weights supplied with the CCES. Substantial shares of respondents ranked Q last—and thus held double-peaked preferences—on three of these issues. To respond to the problem of foreign economic competition, 49 percent of Americans preferred both increasing and reducing free trade to doing nothing at all. To bring down health care costs, 24 percent of Americans preferred both increasing and decreasing the federal government's role in the health care system to the status quo. A final problem on which double-peakedness was substantial was the national debt. The policy alternatives offered on this issue echoed the broad outlines of the solutions proposed by the Democrats (cutting military spending and raising taxes, L) and the Republicans (cutting spending on services such as health and education, R) during the 2012 presidential campaign. To reduce the national debt, 24 percent of Americans preferred both of these plans to making no changes to current levels of taxes and spending.

The high prevalence of double-peaked preferences on health care and the national debt are of particular note. The health care item was fielded in 2011, as the Affordable Care Act continued to dominate the headlines. The national debt item was fielded in the midst of the 2012 presidential campaign in which the issue featured prominently. Both issues were thus characterized by the kind of highly salient, ideologically charged policy debates at the elite level shown to polarize the public on the basis of party and ideology (Bullock

[7] As an illustration of the national consensuses regarding these four goals, consider data from surveys on Americans' policy priorities conducted by the Pew Research Center just months after the CCES studies (Pew Research Center 2013). Pew asked, "I'd like to ask you about priorities for President Obama and Congress this year. As I read from a list, tell me if you think each should be a top priority, important but lower priority, not too important or should it not be done." In January 2012, reducing unemployment was named as a "top" or "important" priority by 96% of Americans; only 2% rejected the goal and said "it should not be done." Similar numbers were found for the other three consensus goals of reducing health care costs (90%, 5%), and (in January 2013) reducing the budget deficit (92%, 2%) and dealing with global trade (78%, 2%).

2011, Cohen 2003, Lenz 2009, Rahn 1993, Zaller 1992). Nevertheless, when presented with liberal and conservative positions on these issues, substantial numbers of Americans still preferred both of these policies to the moderate status quo.

Policy Preferences on Non-Consensus Issues

To allow for tests of the hypothesis that double-peakedness should be less prevalent on non-consensus issues, the 2011 survey also included ranked-choice questions regarding abortion rights and gun rights. The structure of these items was identical to the questions asked on consensus issues. Respondents were first asked about the extent to which they thought these issues were serious problems and then used the ranking widget to indicate their preferences over policies L (expanding abortion access, restricting gun rights), R (restricting abortion access, expanding gun rights), and Q (making no changes to abortion laws, gun laws). The wording for these options is displayed along with the other issues in Table 1. As expected, the prevalence of double-peaked preferences on these issues was low. The bottom panel of Table 2 shows that only 11 percent of Americans hold double-peaked preferences on guns and 8 percent hold double-peaked preferences on abortion—prevalences lower than for any of the consensus issues. On the whole, survey responses confirmed the hypothesis that double-peakedness should be more prevalent on consensus issues than on non-consensus issues. On average, 25 percent of respondents held double-peaked preferences on the four consensus issues compared to just 9 percent on the two non-consensus issues ($p < .001$).

Political Sophistication and Double-Peaked Preferences

To test the hypothesis that double-peaked policy preferences are more prevalent among the less politically sophisticated, data on the four consensus issues were pooled in descriptive probit regression models estimating the probability of an individual's holding double-peaked preferences on a particular issue (see Table 3). The models confirm that low levels of political knowledge[8] and educational attainment are significantly associated

[8] An index of political knowledge was constructed from respondents' answers to four political information questions: correct identification of the party controlling (1) the House of Representatives; (2) the Senate; (3)

with holding double-peaked preferences, both when considered alone (in Models I and II) and in a model that includes party identification, ideology and demographic characteristics as additional predictors (Model III).[9] Estimates derived from Model III are shown in the first two panels of Figure 2, which plot the estimated probabilities of holding double-peaked preferences on these four issues by Americans' levels of political knowledge and educational attainment, holding all other covariates fixed at their actual values. Americans least informed about politics are estimated to have a 31 percent chance of holding double-peaked preferences on the issues, a 16-percentage-point difference compared to those most informed. Among the least educated, one in four (28 percent) hold double-peaked preferences on these issues, a difference of 9 points from those at the highest levels of educational attainment. Model III also finds that important differences in the prevalence of double-peaked preferences exist along racial and ethnic lines. Predictions from this model show that blacks and Hispanics are 8 and 12 percentage points more likely, respectively, to hold double-peaked preferences than the rest of the population controlling for all other variables in the model. Interestingly, across a variety of specifications (including those shown here), no significant differences in the prevalence of double-peakedness are found with regard to party identification or ideology. (The remaining estimates in Table 3 and Figure 2 regarding perceived problem seriousness are discussed further below.)

Although the prevalence of double-peaked preferences is highest among those who are less politically sophisticated, the data show that double-peakedness is a noteworthy aspect of how a wide range of Americans think about political issues—even sophisticates. On any of these four issues, one out of every seven Americans at the highest level of the political knowledge index holds double-peaked preferences. The same is true for one in five Americans with a post-graduate education. Two additional analyses (shown in the Ap-

the respondent's state senate and (4) the lower house of the respondent's state legislature. Cronbach's alpha for this index equalled .81 among respondents in 2011 and .80 in 2012.

[9]Educational attainment is included in these models as both a control variable and as a predictor of interest in its own right. A strong relationship exists between political awareness and educational attainment (Bennett 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hamill, Lodge, and Blake 1985; Highton 2009; Jennings 1996). Education is also correlated with cognitive ability (Dreary et al 2007; Lynn and Mikk 2007), which helps individuals comprehend abstract concepts such as the liberal-conservative dimension. Thus the significance of both predictors found in Model III assures us that education does not confound the relationship between awareness and double-peaked preferences. It also suggests that cognitive ability may directly affect the extent to which Americans use the liberal-conservative dimension in forming their policy preferences.

pendix) confirm how our understanding of policy preferences is enriched by the concept of double-peakedness. First, double-peaked preferences on the national debt and foreign economic competition were significant predictors of the vote for president in 2012. As noted earlier, standard vote-choice models are typically limited to including respondents' preferences between policies L and R on any given issue. But as shown in Appendix Table A1, when indicators of double-peaked preferences were added to the standard model, they were jointly significant predictors ($p < .02$) of the vote. Of particular significance for vote choice in 2012 was holding double-peaked preferences LRQ on the issue of reducing the national debt. Predictions from the model indicate that those preferring L to R on this issue favored Democratic President Barack Obama over his Republican challenger Mitt Romney, 62 percent to 38 percent (holding all other variables constant). But among these voters, those who also preferred R to Q (and thus held double-peaked preferences on this issue) slightly favored Romney by 53 to 47 percent—a statistically significant swing of 15 percentage points. Second, double-peakedness can lurk behind responses to standard survey questions about policy preferences to a substantial degree. On two issues—health care in the 2011 survey and the national debt in 2012—questions of this standard type appeared elsewhere on the CCES. Respondents were asked whether they approved of Congressional bills corresponding closely with policies L (on health care) and R (on the national debt) offered in the ranked-choice items.[10] Appendix Table A2 shows that 32 percent of the supporters of the Democrats' health reform bill held double-peaked preferences and thus preferred the drastically different, conservative approach of decreasing the government's role in the health care system (R) to making no change whatsoever (Q). Similarly, of the small minority of Americans supporting the budget bill crafted by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and passed by the Republican House, 40 percent held double-peaked preferences on this issue, indicating that they preferred a liberal response (L) to reducing the national debt over no response at all (Q).

[10]On health care, survey respondents were asked if they supported the health reform bill passed by the Democrats in 2010. Its provisions were described as "Requires all Americans to obtain health insurance. Allows people to keep current provider. Sets up health insurance option for those without coverage. Increases taxes on those making more than $280,000 a year." On the national debt, respondents were asked if they supported the budget passed by the House Republicans in 2011. Its provisions were described as "The Budget plan would cut Medicare and Medicaid by 42%. Would reduce debt by 16% by 2020."

Problem Seriousness and Double-Peaked Preferences

Observational and experimental data from the surveys permit exploration of the hypothesis that double-peaked preferences should rise as perceptions of the seriousness of policy problems increase. Preliminary confirmation of the hypothesis is provided by respondents' reported perceptions of the seriousness of each of the four consensus issues as a problem in the 2011 and 2012 surveys. There is a strong relationship between perceived problem seriousness and double-peakedness (as shown in Table 3, Model IV). The relationship persists after controlling for party identification, ideology, educational attainment, political awareness, and demographic characteristics—all covariates that presumably precede problem perceptions in the causal chain (Table 3, Model V). These *ceteris paribus* estimates are plotted in the right-hand panel of Figure 2. Holding other variables constant, 28 percent of those who perceived a particular issue as a "very serious" problem are estimated to prefer both liberal and conservative policies to the status quo; this share declines to only 13 percent among those thinking the issue is "not at all" a problem.

As hypothesized, a strong association exists between perceived problem seriousness and double-peaked policy preferences. Testing whether the former causes the latter motivated the experiment forming the basis of the 2010 survey, which featured questions regarding a different set of four consensus issues. The experiment was designed to exogenously manipulate respondents' perceptions of issues as problems —in effect simulating a "shock" of bad news in the issue domain. The expectation was that policy preferences would change as a result. Survey questions in the pre-election wave dealt with the consensus goals of improving the nation's education system and resolving the ambiguous status of the U.S. prison for suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay. In the post-election wave, respondents were asked questions about decreasing America's reliance on foreign oil, and

reducing undocumented immigration to the U.S.[11] In order to account for any question-order effects, the order in which the issues was presented was randomized within wave.

On each of these issues, respondents answered problem seriousness and ranked-choice questions following the exact same format as in the other surveys. But before being asked these questions, an experimental manipulation took place. Half of respondents were randomly assigned to a treatment group, which read a short passage of approximately 75 words in length presenting evidence that there was currently a national problem in the particular issue domain. The passage was accompanied by an image chosen to illustrate the issue. (For text of these passages and the accompanying images, see Appendix Table A3.) Each of these passages presented the problem, provided factual evidence of problem status that would appeal to both liberals and conservatives, and closed by saying that "experts disagree" about how to solve the problem, but that "most agree that current policies aren't working." Thus, the passages echoed the sort of reporting about policy concerns one might encounter on an evening news program or in the newspaper, which have been shown to act in an agenda-setting fashion to increase the proportion of those exposed identifying the issue as a national problem (e.g., Iyengar and Kinder 1987). The other half of respondents were assigned to a control condition with a generic reading passage that did not mention the issue at all. Instead it discussed how the country faced many challenges and difficult decisions, and closed by saying that it was time for America's leaders "to turn their full attention to addressing the country's problems with feasible solutions that actually work." This text was accompanied by an image of the U.S. Capitol building.

The experiment was thus designed to differentiate between the effects of raising generic versus issue-specific concerns about the status quo. Stories about the general need to solve problems in Washington are regular staples of news coverage in every election season, and they could conceivably prime concern about every policy problem. By contrast,

[11] Here again, Pew survey data provide evidence of the national consensuses that exist around these goals (Pew Research Center 2013). In January 2011, dealing with illegal immigration was named as a "top" or "important" priority by 84% of Americans; only 3% rejected this goal outright and said "it should not be done." Similar numbers were found for the consensus goals of improving education (92%, 2%) and dealing with the nation's energy problems (89%, 2%). Unfortunately, Pew did not ask a similar question about the Guantanamo Bay prison.

stories about the need to solve problems regarding a certain issue appear as the issue rises on the public agenda and should prime concern only about that particular issue. Thus comparison of treatment and control cases make for a particularly hard test of the hypothesis that an increase in the problem salience of a particular issue causes the prevalence of double-peaked policy preferences to rise on that issue.

Results from a manipulation check (shown in the left-hand panel at the top of Table 4) indicate that all the treatments increased treated subjects' assessments of problem seriousness relative to those in the control group.[12] The total effect of the treatment on double-peaked preferences (shown in the right-hand panel at the top of Table 4) varied across issues, with significant effects found for those regarding education and (especially) immigration, where the effect was a particularly strong eight percentage points.[13] As shown in the bottom panel of Table 4, analyses with data pooled across issues found a statistically significant total effect of the experimental treatment of approximately three percentage points across a variety of specifications.[14] Because it is hypothesized that an increase in the perception of problem seriousness causes an increase in the prevalence of double-peaked preferences, a final important quantity of interest in this experiment is the average causal mediation effect. This is an estimate of the indirect effect of the treatment through the mediating variable of increased perception of problem seriousness. Estimates of the average causal mediation effect are displayed in the bottom panel of Table 4. These highly statistically significant estimates provide strong support for the hypothesis, and

[12]No significant differences were found in problem seriousness among those receiving the different reading passages on the two issues covered in the post-election survey (illegal immigration and foreign oil). But significant effects were caused by another randomized factor: the order in which the two issues were presented to respondents. Respondents who received the immigration question first (regardless of which passage they read) viewed the immigration problem as more serious than those who received this question second; the opposite was true for the foreign oil question. Respondents likely anchored their responses to the second question based upon responses to the first question. The fact that question order was randomized and thus exogenous to policy preferences means that internally valid inferences can still be drawn about the effect of raising respondents' assessments of the seriousness of a problem on policy preferences. These analyses thus consider the treatment group for the immigration and foreign oil issues to be those subjects to whom the issue was presented first.

[13]As is standard in analyses of experiments, survey weights are not used in these calculations of treatment and mediation effects. Running the same analyses using survey weights yields results that even more strongly support the hypotheses than the unweighted data.

[14]These estimates are derived from linear structural equation methods as generalized to non-linear models by Imai, Keele, and Tingley (2010) and implemented in the *mediation* package in R (Tingley, Yamamoto, Keele and Imai 2013).

they show that a large proportion (between 52 and 72 percent) of the treatment's effect on increasing double-peaked policy preferences can be attributed to the fact that it raised the perception of problem seriousness.[15]

All told, these results provide strong support for the proposition that "do something" politics are more likely to arise when a public policy problem is perceived as serious. Observational data show a strong association between problem seriousness and double-peaked preferences. Experimental data suggest that when an exogenous event raises Americans' perceptions of problem seriousness, it causes a significant increase in the share of the electorate with double-peaked preferences.

Collective Double-Peakedness

The implications of individual double-peaked preferences for collective choice can be seen by using individuals' ranked preferences on each issue to determine how each of the three policy alternatives would fare in pairwise contests against one another. As shown in the top panel of Table 5, the collective preferences of the U.S. electorate were double-peaked on two out of the four consensus issues included in the 2011 and 2012 surveys. Americans as a whole preferred that policies regarding foreign economic competition and (by a slimmer margin) health care be changed in either a liberal or conservative direction over sticking with the status quo. Double-peaked collective preferences can arise even when the public favors either L or R in a head-to-head vote by a comfortable margin. For example, on foreign economic competition Americans preferred L to R by more than 20 percentage points. Nevertheless, both L and R soundly beat Q, rendering collective preferences double-peaked. A similar pattern was found with regard to reducing health care costs, where by a 10-point margin Americans preferred R to L while still preferring both options to Q. Substantively, the fact that double-peaked collective preferences exist on these two

[15] As can be the case in experimental studies with mediated effects, a caveat is these estimates are sensitive to the untestable concern that they are confounded by unobserved covariates correlated with both the outcome (double-peakedness) and the mediator (perceived problem seriousness). Estimated sensitivity parameters from the fully saturated model with no interactions in Table 4 were $\rho = -.18$ for both the treatment group and control group, putting the sensitivity of these estimates on par with those found in other prominent mediation analyses (e.g. Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010: 316).

issues is quite remarkable. As Americans considered the proper governmental response to problems of national significance, majorities rejected the status quo in favor of two policies reflecting dramatically different views from opposite sides of the political spectrum.

The middle panel of Table 5 displays collective preferences on the consensus issues included in the experiment fielded in 2010. Because both the treatment and control passages primed respondents to be open to change, collective preferences derived from the experimental results are not directly comparable with those found in the non-experimental surveys. Rather, these experimental data illustrate how status-quo bias might be overcome and thus collective double-peakedness can arise in environments where voters are receiving messages about the need to solve policy problems. In this context, collective preferences were double-peaked on three of the four issues: immigration, and (by quite slim margins) reliance on foreign oil and education.[16] On immigration, collective double-peakedness arose despite the fact that a strong majority preferred policy L to R on this issue.

Contrast the findings on these eight consensus issues with those shown for the non-consensus issues of abortion and guns in the bottom panel of Table 5. On both of these issues, single-peakedness at the individual level translated into collective preferences favoring the status quo. This was particularly the case on the issue of abortion, where roughly six in ten Americans favored keeping abortion laws the same over either increasing or reducing access to legal abortion.

The right-hand columns of the three panels in Table 5 display the "proximity to single-peakedness" statistic for each issue, a measure used in previous research. It is constructed by first identifying the ordering Ω with respect to which the largest share of the electorate holds single-peaked preferences on the issue. This ordering is called the "largest structuring dimension," and the proportion of the electorate whose preferences are single-peaked with respect to this ordering is defined as proximity to single-peakedness (List et al 2013,

[16]These data are limited to respondents in the control condition, which raised perceptions of these issues as serious problems less than the treatment condition. Collective double-peakedness was found to be even stronger among those in the treatment condition.

Niemi 1969). Proximity to single-peakedness and the largest structuring dimension are shown for all ten issues in these studies. On six of the eight consensus issues—and both of the non-consensus issues—the largest structuring dimension was the left-right ordering and thus proximity to single-peakedness equaled one minus the proportion holding double-peaked preferences. The two exceptions were the problems of foreign economic competition and undocumented immigration, where the ordering RLQ (or its mirror equivalent, QLR) was the largest structuring dimension. This could be evidence that many respondents understood the two issues in terms of these alternative orderings, with respect to which their preferences are single-peaked. If so, this represents a remarkable departure in mass opinion from the way policy debates on these issues have been structured by elites.[17]

Taken together, these data suggest that double-peaked preferences have important substantive implications for collective choice on consensus issues and that typical survey questions can provide an incomplete picture of collective preferences. On consensus issues, the aggregate results derived from standard survey items can mask the majority's desire for change in either a liberal or conservative direction. On non-consensus issues, they may occlude a collective preference for the status quo.

Conclusion

This paper provides fresh insights on the organization of voters' preferences in an important class of policy debates: those arising when there is broad agreement that the status quo policy is failing to achieve a shared national goal. On the four consensus issues examined in the non-experimental studies, one out of every four Americans holds

[17]One reason for this may be the relatively less polarized signals sent by liberal and conservative elites on trade and immigration policy. Democratic lawmakers are much more likely to support protectionist policies (policy L) than Republicans (Karol 2009). But ideological lines are blurred by the fact that Democrats Bill Clinton and Barack Obama spearheaded major free trade agreements (policy R) in their presidencies which were supported by substantial contingents of Democratic legislators. An analagous story can be told regarding immigration and the Republicans, who are typically stronger supporters of punitive measures (policy R) than Democrats. However, Republican leaders—including Presidents Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and presidential candidate John McCain—have all been vocal supporters of reforms establishing a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants living in the U.S (policy L).

double-peaked policy preferences on average. Although these preferences are concentrated among the less politically sophisticated, at no stratum of the population are they uncommon. Observational and experimental data show that double-peaked preferences are associated with—and caused in part by—perceived problem seriousness. Individual double-peakedness can have substantial impacts on aggregregate preferences, where "do something" politics is possible even on issues over which liberal and conservative elites are engaged in salient, highly polarized debates. This section revisits the conditions that accompany "do something" politics and addresses their implications for how different types of issues create different politics and how issue ownership affects electoral competition. It concludes with a discussion how these findings deepen our understanding of the relationship between political sophistication and ideological sophistication.

The first condition associated with "do something politics"—illustrated by the survey data on consensus and non-consensus issues discussed here—is that an issue features a broad agreement regarding a public goal. This sheds light on the distinction that political scientists draw between two types of issues: those about the proper "means" of reaching agreed-upon "ends," and those that are simply about the "ends" themselves. Here, they are called "consensus" and "non-consensus" issues, but the insights extend to the closely related typologies discussed above (e.g., Alt 1979, Fiorina 1981, Stokes 1963, Tavits 2007). The survey responses examined here suggest that the structure of opinion on these two types of issues is different, and thus so may be the politics that arise around these issues. On consensus issues, many Americans are open to solutions to public policy problems that come from different sides of the political spectrum. The result can be that the collective prefers change on a consensus issue in either direction to maintaining the status quo. By contrast, American opinion on non-consensus issues appears to comport more closely with standard empirical and formal models in which preferences reflect a common ordering—in part because policy on these issues is an end in itself rather than the means to a universally desired outcome. The findings here suggest, however, that an important aspect of the politics on non-consensus issues has been largely overlooked: a collective national preference for keeping policy unchanged on these issues. This insight deepens our

understanding of why the parties tend to target their messages about issues like these to voters who already support their positions (Hillygus and Shields 2009). Rather than doing something on non-consensus issues, the electorate may often prefer that the government in fact do nothing.

Observational and experimental evidence are presented here for the second condition for "do something" politics: the public's perception that problems are serious regarding a consensus issue and thus that the status quo is failing to achieve a consensus goal. This suggests that the prevalence of double-peaked preferences can rise with the prominence of an issue on the national agenda. Unfortunately, it is difficult to predict when such agenda-setting might occur: issues can gain salience for many reasons, including changing indicators of national conditions, focusing events and crises, interest-group campaigns, and policy entrepreneurship by public officials (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1994). A provocative implication of the findings presented here is that in times like these, politicians may be less constrained by public opinion than in other contexts. By definition, a Condorcet winner (either L or R) always exists when an electorate's preferences are collectively double-peaked. But because the second-choice alternative alternative is preferred to Q, politicians may champion it as at least "doing something" about a serious policy problem. In times of "do something" politics, it is conceivable that many voters will evaluate candidates not only on their policy proposals but on the likelihood that they will actually be able to enact those proposals. In turn, this may allow the candidate whose proposal is not the Condorcet winner to nevertheless gain votes to the extent that she is perceived as more committed to undertaking the costly political work necessary to achieve policy change. In the 2012 presidential campaign, President Obama engaged in a vigorous defense of the Affordable Care Act despite its flagging fortunes with voters. Obama's challenger Mitt Romney did more than simply endorse the Republicans' unpopular deficit-reduction plan; he named its author, Wisconsin Representative Paul Ryan, as his running mate.

We might expect strategies like these to be aligned with political parties' enduring "issue ownership" reputations for addressing specific policy problems due to their coalitions

of activists who care deeply about certain issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). When debates over policy are tied together with debates about which party or candidate is more likely to take the initiative in attacking a difficult problem, an advantage may therefore accrue to the party which "owns" that particular issue. Obama and Romney appeared to be making these calculations in 2012. Surveys conducted before the campaign consistently found Americans naming the Democrats as better able to handle the issue of health care and the Republicans as doing a better job on reducing the federal deficit (NBC News/Wall Street Journal 2012; Pew Research Center 2012). In a related vein, the experimental results here suggest that a candidate from an issue-owning party has the incentive to raise the proportion of voters with double-peaked preferences by transmitting messages about how serious problems are on her party's "owned" issue—even if the candidate's policy proposal is not the Condorcet winner.

The third condition associated with "do something" politics is the one least explored here: elites promoting credible policies to the status quo's left and right. Like the rise of an issue on the agenda itself, the emergence of two credible solutions to a problem—one liberal and one conservative—is difficult to predict. But by no means should we expect this circumstance to be uncommon. First, liberal and conservative elites are skilled at responding to problems with policies that are aligned with their ideological values. A liberal response to a rise in crime, such as President Bill Clinton's crime bill passed by a Democratic Congress in 1994, can include increasing funds for social programs. A conservative solution to rising health care costs—President George W. Bush's 2003 prescription drug plan for seniors—took the first step to allowing private insurance plans to compete with Medicare. Furthermore, even the obvious failure of an ideologically charged status quo policy does not preclude further movement in the same direction, as illustrated by George W. Bush's decision in 2007 to change policy on the gravely unsuccessful Iraq War by increasing—rather than reducing— the number of U.S. troops committed to the conflict. Finally, the media's balancing norm—in which reporters identify two sides of an issue and portray them as equally plausible in news stories—can lend simultaneous credence to liberal and conservative responses to policy problems.

A final set of implications can be drawn from these findings about Americans' well-documented "ideological innocence." This paper is the first to investigate whether preferences *within* issues are ordered ideologically, and it reaches some similar conclusions as research documenting the low level of ideological constraint *across* issues. The less educated and less informed are most likely to express policy preferences that do not conform to the standard left-right dimension. This deepens our understanding of the processes that take place as voters integrate policy information and the cues of partisan elites when determining their views on public issues (e.g., Arceneux 2008, Bullock 2011, Cohen 2003, Lenz 2009, Rahn 1993, Tomz and Van Houweling 2009, Zaller 1992). Engagement in politics appears to do more than help voters learn—as Converse put it—"what goes with what." These activities also help voters learn the "correct" ordering of policy choices in the first place. To be clear, the fact that double-peaked policy preferences on consensus issues are more prevalent among the less sophisticated does not imply that these preferences are irrational or undesirable. Favoring mutually exclusive alternatives to the status quo's left and right can be rational on complex policies like the consensus issues discussed here, even when it is the case that policies map in a relatively predictable fashion to outcomes on the left-right dimension. If this mapping is modeled realistically as a stochastic process, then under some circumstances it can be rational to hold preferences that are not single-peaked (Callander 2011: 649-650). In this sense, those with double-peaked preferences call to mind the low-information "floating voters" who tend to be less ideologically tied to the policies of the two parties than the highly informed. Their votes in U.S. presidential elections are thus more responsive—in an entirely sensible way—to election-specific forces such as the state of the economy, success or failure in foreign affairs, and the relative ideological extremity of candidates (Zaller 2004). This sort of openness to supporting divergent policies and candidates illustrates how lack of ideological constraint among the less informed is not necessarily deleterious in a democracy—and in some circumstances may even be beneficial (Marcus 1988). Further work on these questions—and the others raised by the findings presented here—will require careful attention to the measurement of policy preferences and a rigorous examination of the assumptions we make about how these preferences are ordered and structured.

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Table 1. Question Wording for Policy Choices

Labels indicate the status quo (*Q*) and alternatives to its left (*L*) and right (*R*). These labels were not shown to survey respondents.

Consensus Issues (2011 and 2012)

Health care (2011)

- **Make no changes** to the level of the federal government's involvement in the health care system. (*Q*)
- **Increase the federal government's role** in the health care system so that it can negotiate lower prices. (*L*)
- **Decrease the federal government's role** in the health care system so that free markets can drive down costs. (*R*)

Unemployment (2011)

- **Make no changes** to the nation's unemployment benefits system. (*Q*)
- **Increase unemployment benefits** so that the jobless have enough to support themselves and their families in these tough times. (*L*)
- **Reduce unemployment benefits** to give the jobless more of an incentive to actually find work. (*R*)

Foreign Economic Competition (2012)

- **Make no changes** to trade agreements between the U.S. and other countries. (*Q*)
- **Reduce free trade with other countries** to protect American workers' jobs. (*L*)
- **Increase free trade with other countries** so that American products can compete fairly**.** (*R*)

The National Debt (2012)

- **Keep taxes and spending the same** as they are now. (*Q*)
- **Raise taxes and cut military spending.** Do not cut spending on services like health and education. (*L*)
- **Cut spending on services like health and education.** Do not raise taxes or cut military spending. (*R*)

Non-Consensus Issues (2011)

Abortion

- **Keep abortion laws the same** as they are now. (*Q*)
- **Make it less difficult for women to obtain an abortion** so that they can make personal decisions without government interference. (*L*)
- **Make it more difficult for women to obtain an abortion** in order to protect the lives of unborn children. (*R*)

Guns

- **Keep gun laws the same** as they are now. (*Q*)
- **Make gun laws more strict** in order to keep weapons out of the hands of criminals. (*L*)
- **Make gun laws less strict** so that Americans can fully exercise the right to bear arms. (*R*)

Table 1. Question Wording for Policy Choices (continued)

Problem Seriousness Experiment (2010)

Education

- **Make no changes** to the level of the federal government's involvement in the nation's education system. (*Q*)
- **Increase the federal government's involvement** in the education system to set standards and ensure quality nationwide. (*L*)
- **Get the federal government out** of the education system, reducing its burdensome regulations and rules. (*R*)

Guantanamo Prison

- **Make no changes** to our policy on Guantanamo. (*Q*)
- **Close Guantanamo permanently** and transfer suspected terrorists to a maximum-security prison in the U.S. (*L*)
- **Firmly commit to keeping Guantanamo open** in order to keep suspected terrorists off of U.S. soil. (*R*)

Immigration

- **Make no changes** to our treatment of illegal immigrants. (*Q*)
- **Give illegal immigrants already in the U.S. the right to live here legally** if they pay a fine and meet other requirements. (*L*)
- **Deport all illegal immigrants** using increased law-enforcement efforts. (*R*)

Reliance on foreign oil

- **Keep taxes on U.S. oil companies at current levels.** (*Q*)
- **Raise taxes on U.S. oil companies,** with the money used for research into renewable domestic sources like solar and wind energy. (*L*)
- **Provide tax breaks to U.S. oil companies** to promote more drilling for domestic oil. (*R*)

Table 2. Ranked Preferences over Status Quo, Left and Right Policy Alternatives

a. Consensus Issues

Issue	Single-peaked preferences				Double-peaked preferences		
	LQR	*RQL*	*QRL*	*QLR*	*LRQ*	*RLQ*	**% with double-peaked preferences (se)**
Foreign Economic Competition (*N* = 734)	24.1	18.5	3.4	5.0	31.8	17.2	**49.0 (2.7)**
Health Care (*N* = 1,221)	28.7	37.9	6.2	3.2	13.0	10.9	**24.0 (1.9)**
National Debt (*N* = 724)	36.7	19.8	6.9	13.1	13.6	9.9	**23.5 (2.2)**
Unemployment (*N* = 1,228)	34.8	25.2	13.3	13.8	8.2	4.7	**12.9 (1.5)**

b. Non-Consensus Issues

Issue	Single-peaked preferences				Double-peaked preferences		
	LQR	*RQL*	*QRL*	*QLR*	*LRQ*	*RLQ*	**% with double-peaked preferences (se)**
Guns (*N* = 1,223)	37.5	21.1	17.4	13.2	8.0	2.8	**10.8 (1.4)**
Abortion (*N* = 1,222)	33.2	30.2	9.4	19.3	2.0	6.0	**8.0 (1.1)**

Table 3. Predictors of Double-Peaked Policy Preferences

Predictors	I	II	III	IV	V
Political Knowledge (baseline: lowest, 17th percentile)					
Low (39th percentile)	-.093		-.037		-.040
	(.122)		(.131)		(.134)
Medium (53rd percentile)	-.281**		-.171		-.179
	(.104)		(.113)		(.113)
High (66th percentile)	-.174		-.057		-.046
	(.117)		(.126)		(.125)
Highest (86th percentile)	-.721***		-.527***		-.518***
	(.085)		(.101)		(.103)
Education (baseline: H.S. graduate or less)					
Some college		-.081	-.013		-.025
		(.098)	(.098)		(.099)
Associates degree		-.305*	-.235+		-.242+
		(.129)	(.128)		(.130)
Bachelor's degree		-.349***	-.166+		-.171+
		(.096)	(.101)		(.099)
Post-graduate degree		-.511***	-.266+		-.263+
		(.131)	(.136)		(.136)
Perceived problem seriousness (baseline: "very serious")					
"Somewhat serious"				-.067	-.135+
				(.081)	(.081)
"Not too serious"				-.359*	-.491**
				(.163)	(.170)
"Not at all serious"				-.341	-.546+
				(.346)	(.325)
Ideology (baseline: "not sure")					
Liberal			-.010		-.044
			(.147)		(.146)
Conservative			-.093		-.094
			(.148)		(.148)
Moderate			-.054		-.078
			(.123)		(.124)
Party Identification (baseline: "not sure")					
Democrat			-.055		-.045
			(.216)		(.214)
Republican			-.026		-.044
			(.220)		(.218)
Independent			.071		.084
			(.218)		(.216)
Demographics					
Female			.093		.097
			(.075)		(.076)
Black/African-American			.283*		.274*
			(.121)		(.121)
Hispanic/Latino			.393**		.410**
			(.126)		(.127)
Age (years)			-.001		-.003
			(.002)		(.002)
Issue fixed effects	X	X	X	X	X
expected percent correctly predicted	68.5	67.5	69.2	66.7	69.4
expected proportional reduction in error	10.2	7.3	12.2	5.1	12.9

Notes: Probit with sampling weights. DV: holds double-peaked preferences on issue (0-1). Unit of analysis is (issue x survey respondent). N = 3,883 for all models. Coefficients significantly different from zero at $^{+}p<.10$; $^{*}p<.05$; $^{**}p<.01$; $^{***}p<.001$ (two-tailed tests, standard errors clustered on survey respondent shown in parentheses). Goodness of fit statistics (expected percent correctly predicted and expected proportional reduction in error) are calculated as proposed by Herron (1999) and implemented by the *epcp* routine in Stata (Lawrence 2009).

Table 4. Problem Seriousness Experiment Results

Issue-specific manipulation checks and treatment effect estimates

Issue	problem seriousness (mean rating, 0 – 1 scale)			prevalence of double-peaked preferences (percent)		
	Treated	Control	Difference	Treated	Control	Treatment Effect
Education (*N* = 944)	.89	.79	.10***	17.5	14.2	3.3+
Guantanamo (*N* = 955)	.60	.47	.13***	14.5	14.4	-0.1
Immigration (*N* = 778)	.83	.76	.07***	42.4	33.6	8.7**
Foreign Oil (*N* = 788)	.85	.82	.03*	18.4	19.5	-1.1

Pooled treatment and mediation effect estimates

Regression estimates (*N* = 3,465 for all analyses)	Total effect	Average causal mediation effect	Share of total effect that is mediated
No interactions			
Baseline	2.5*	1.9**	.72
+ issue fixed effects	2.8*	1.7**	.58
+ all controls in Table 3, Model V	2.9*	1.8**	.60
With interactions (treatment x mediator x issue)			
Baseline	3.1**	1.7**	.54
+ all controls in Table 3, Model V	3.2**	1.7**	.52

Notes: Education and Guantanamo: treatment = received issue-specific reading passage.
Immigration and foreign oil: treatment = issue was presented to respondent first (before other issue).
+$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p <. 01$, ***$p < .001$ (manipulation checks: two-tailed tests; experimental effects: one-tailed tests reflecting directional hypotheses; standard errors clustered on respondent).

Table 5. Collective Preferences Derived from Individual Ranked Preferences

a. Consensus Issues

Issue	***L vs R***		***L vs Q***		***R vs Q***		**Proximity to Single-Peakedness** [largest structuring dimension]
	% L	*% R*	*% L*	*% Q*	*% R*	*% Q*	
Foreign Economic Competition*	**60.9**	**39.1**	**73.1**	**26.9**	**67.5**	**32.5**	**.78** [*RLQ*]
Health Care*	44.9	**55.1**	**52.7**	47.3	**61.9**	38.1	**.77** [*LQR*]
National Debt	**63.4**	36.6	**60.2**	39.8	43.3	**56.7**	**.77** [*LQR*]
Unemployment	**56.8**	43.2	47.7	**52.3**	38.1	**61.9**	**.87** [*LQR*]

b. Consensus Issues: Experimental Data (control condition only)

Issue	***L vs R***		***L vs Q***		***R vs Q***		**Proximity to Single-Peakedness** [largest structuring dimension]
	% L	*% R*	*% L*	*% Q*	*% R*	*% Q*	
Immigration*	**58.7**	41.3	**73.4**	26.6	**55.5**	44.5	**.85** [*RLQ*]
Foreign Oil*	48.1	**51.9**	**51.0**	49.0	**56.0**	44.0	**.85** [*LQR*]
Guantanamo	38.7	**61.3**	43.6	**56.4**	**62.8**	37.2	**.81** [*LQR*]
Education*	**52.6**	47.4	**50.9**	49.1	**51.6**	48.4	**.85** [*LQR*]

c. Non-Consensus Issues

Issue	***L vs R***		***L vs Q***		***R vs Q***		**Proximity to Single-Peakedness** [largest structuring dimension]
	% L	*% R*	*% L*	*% Q*	*% R*	*% Q*	
Guns	**58.7**	41.3	48.3	**51.7**	31.8	**68.2**	**.90** [*LQR*]
Abortion	**54.5**	45.5	41.2	**58.8**	38.1	**61.9**	**.93** [*LQR*]

Notes: Winners of pairwise contests shown in **bold.** *Indicates collective preferences are double-peaked.

Figure 1. Single-Peaked and Double-Peaked Policy Preferences

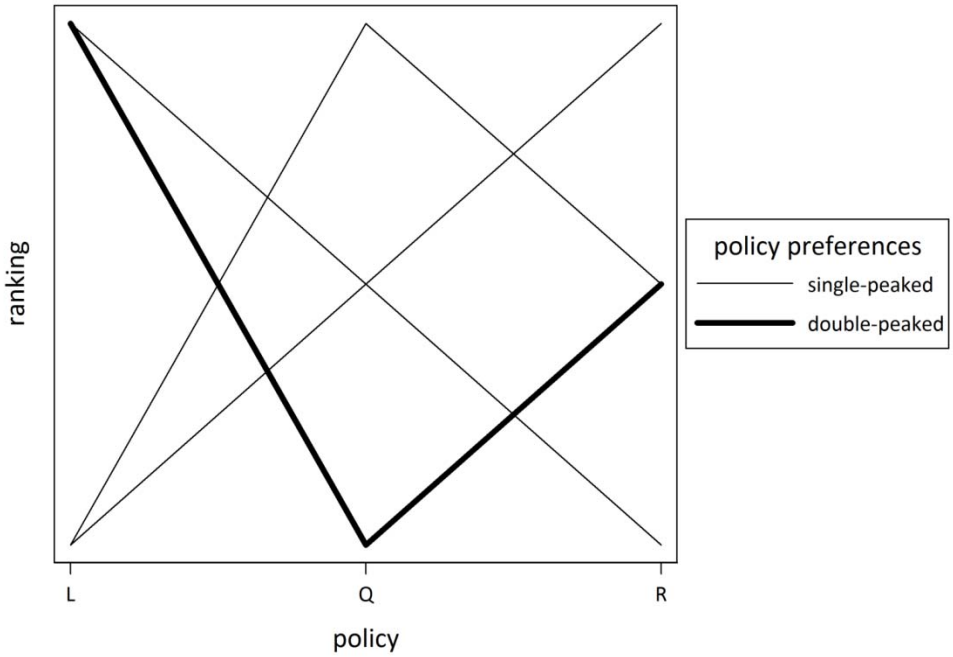
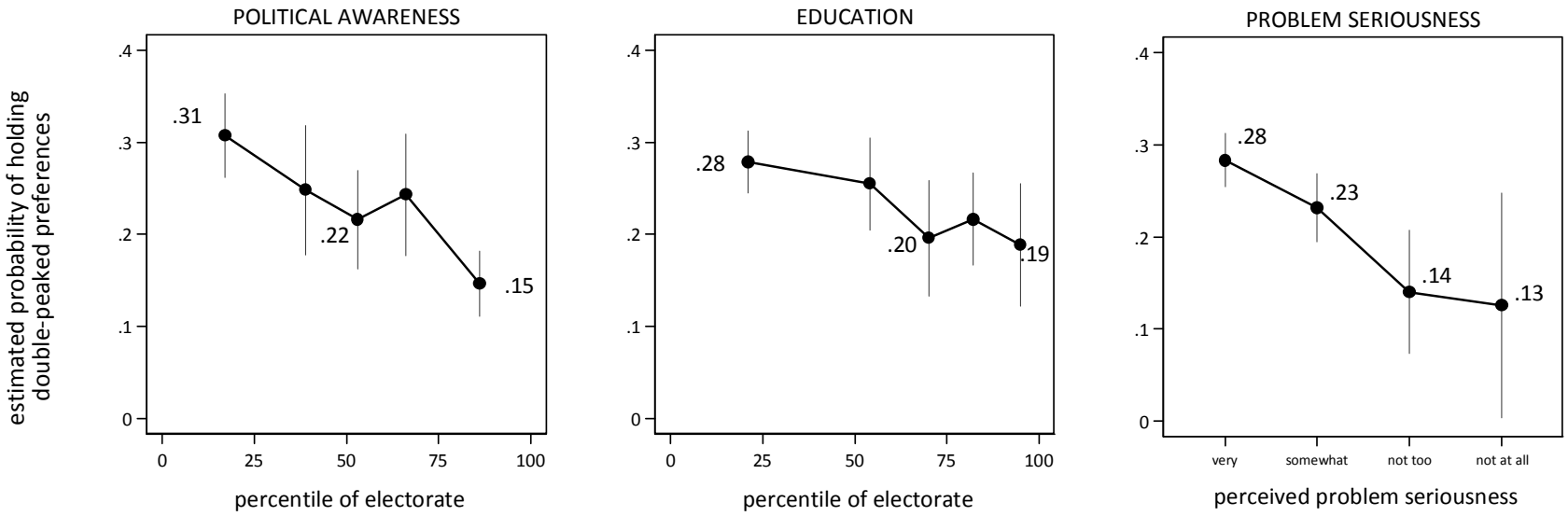


Figure 2. Estimated Prevalence of Double-Peaked Policy Preferences by Levels of Political Knowledge, Education and Problem Seriousness



Notes: Source: Predictions generated by Table 3, Model III (political awareness and education) and Model V (problem seriousness); for details see text. Vertical lines about the estimates are 95% confidence intervals.

Appendix

Table A1. Predicting the Vote for President, 2012

	I		II	
	coef	se	coef	se
Pairwise preferences, prefers *L* to *R*:				
National debt	1.252***	(.241)	1.533***	(.270)
Foreign economic competition	-.203	(.256)	-.498	(.319)
Double-peaked preferences:				
National debt:				
LRQ			-1.059**	(.390)
RLQ			.017	(.524)
Foreign economic competition:				
LRQ			.431	(.356)
RLQ			-.111	(.365)
Race: Black	1.132*	(.554)	.952+	(.573)
Ethnicity: Spanish, Hispanic or Latino origin	1.029**	(.370)	1.217*	(.485)
Age	-.019	(.050)	-.007	(.049)
Age squared	.000	(.000)	.000	(.000)
Female	.031	(.281)	.037	(.259)
Attendance of religious services (0-5)	-.114	(.071)	-.144*	(.070)
Education level (0-1)	.502	(.417)	.647	(.439)
Party ID: Democrat	1.408**	(.529)	1.558**	(.511)
Party ID: Republican	-1.439**	(.503)	-1.408**	(.502)
Party ID: Independent	.107	(.495)	.098	(.493)
Ideology: liberal	.637	(.547)	.579	(.534)
Ideology: moderate	.510	(.399)	.455	(.401)
Ideology: conservative	.147	(.417)	.141	(.417)
Intercept	-.667	(1.251)	-.935	(1.236)
expected percent correctly predicted	90.8		91.0	
expected proportional reduction in error	81.6		82.0	

Wald test of H_0: double-peaked preferences coefficients equal to zero in Model II:
F (4, 603): 3.10 p-value: .015

Notes: Probit with sampling weights. N = 607. DV: Vote for Obama=1, Romney=0. Coefficients significantly different from zero at $^{+}p<.10$; $^{*}p<.05$; $^{**}p<.01$; $^{***}p<.001$ (two-tailed tests; robust standard errors). Goodness of fit statistics (expected percent correctly predicted and expected proportional reduction in error) are calculated as proposed by Herron (1999) and implemented by the *epcp* routine in Stata (Lawrence 2009).

Table A2. Comparison of Standard Survey Items with Ranked Policy Preferences

a. Health care (2011)

Rank-ordered preferences on health care policy	Health care reform bill: support (53.0%)	Health care reform bill: oppose (47.0%)	Total
LRQ	19.1	6.1	13.0
RLQ	12.6	9.1	11.0
Subtotal: Double-peaked preferences	**31.7**	**15.2**	**24.0**
RQL	13.5	65.6	38.0
LQR	47.7	7.1	28.6
QRL	3.7	9.0	6.2
QLR	3.3	3.1	3.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

N = 1,217. Pearson's *F* (design-based): 37.1 (*p* <.001).

b. National Debt (2012)

Rank-ordered preferences on national debt policy	Ryan (R-WI) Budget Bill: support (18.7%)	Ryan (R-WI) Budget Bill: oppose (81.3%)	Total
LRQ	17.1	12.9	13.7
RLQ	22.5	7.2	10.1
Subtotal: Double-peaked preferences	**39.6**	**20.1**	**23.8**
RQL	43.1	14.2	19.6
LQR	11.7	43.2	37.3
QRL	2.3	8.1	7.0
QLR	3.3	14.4	12.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

N = 707. Pearson's *F* (design-based): 11.5 (*p* <.001)

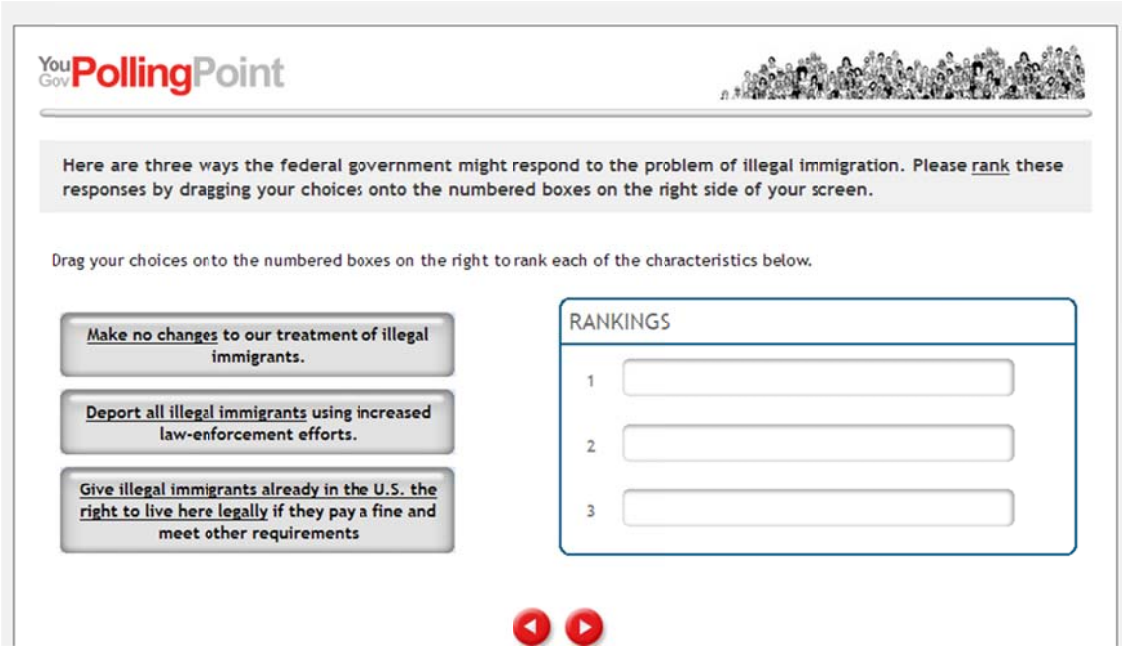
Notes: Data are weighted. For question wording, see text.

Table A3. Reading Passages and Accompanying Images

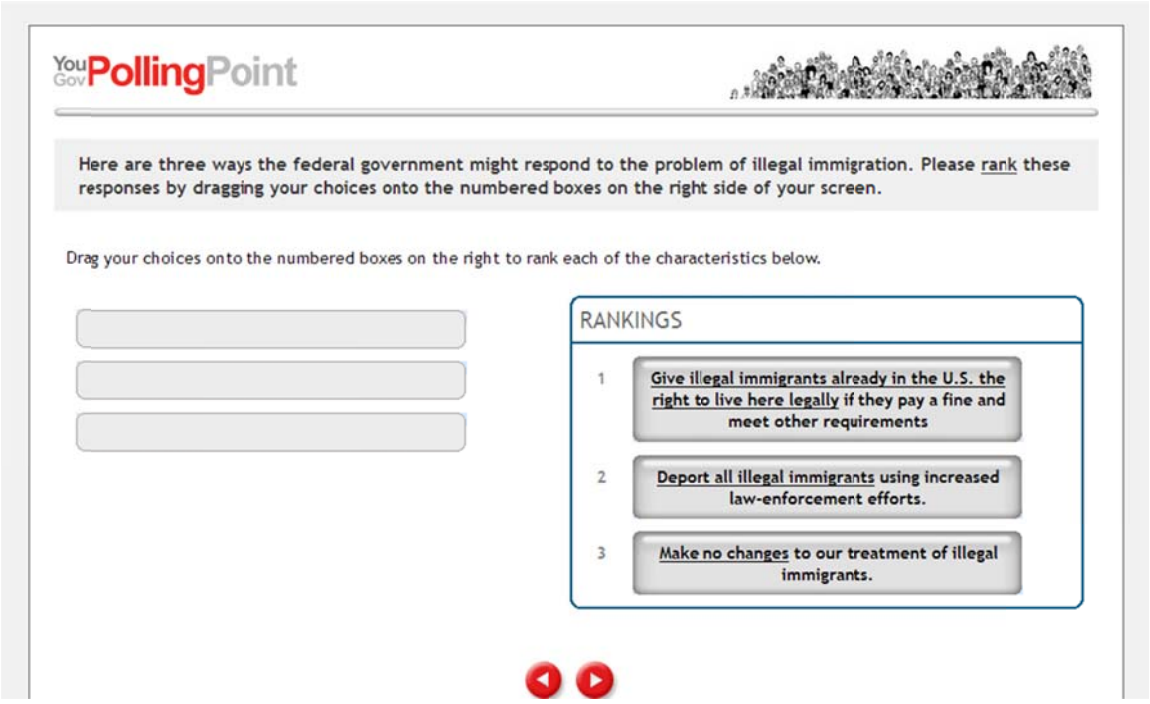
Text	Accompanying Image
Control	
The United States currently faces a long list of challenges. Difficult decisions must be made about our nation's future. [*Once the elections are over/Now that the elections are over*], America's leaders—whether they be Republicans, Democrats or Independents—[*will*] need to turn their full attention to addressing the country's problems with feasible solutions that actually work.	
Education treatment	
The United States ranks far behind many other countries in how well our students perform at math, reading and science, making it difficult for us to complete in the global economy. Nearly 30 percent of our nation's high school students aren't even graduating. Furthermore, there are huge differences in the quality of education received by students from poor families and wealthy families. Experts disagree about how to solve this problem, but most agree that current education policies aren't working.	
Guantanamo Bay treatment	
The U.S. is sending mixed signals about its plans for the nearly 200 suspected terrorists it is holding in a prison located in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In 2008, the U.S. announced it would close the prison. But nearly two years later, it has yet to do so. Many military commanders say Guantanamo should be closed. But some of the prisoners are considered to be very dangerous, and opposition has arisen to transferring them to prisons in the U.S. Experts disagree on what to do about Guantanamo, but they agree that we need a clearer policy.	

Text	Accompanying Image
Undocumented immigration treatment The number of illegal immigrants in the United States is estimated to be 12 million people, a number higher than at any time in the last fifty years. The government spends billions of dollars each year providing illegal immigrants with services like health care and education. Furthermore, millions of illegal immigrants are parents, and their children are being raised in poverty. Experts disagree about how to solve this problem, but most agree that current immigration policies aren't working.	
Foreign oil treatment The United States currently relies on imports for more than half of its oil supply, making us vulnerable to price shocks caused by countries that export oil, including Iran and Russia. According to some projections, our reliance on foreign oil will rise to even greater levels over the next 25 years. Furthermore, these fuels are major causes of air pollution. Experts disagree about how to solve this problem, but most agree that current policies aren't working.	

Figure A1. The Ranking Widget



a. Before ranking



b. After ranking