

- **DISSERTATION TITLE:**

Dividing the American Voter: What Conjoint Analysis Tells Us About Behavioral Voting and American's Preference Utilities on Contentious Policy Issues

- **SHORT SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL IN 100 WORDS: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO, WHY AND HOW?**

This dissertation explores the contours and impetus of polarization in contemporary American politics, drawing upon both primary research and a broad literature review. It is an attempt to unpack the subconscious and conscious motivations directing voter behavior, and how this 'psychology of voting' translates individual behavior to group behavior in the form of policy choices. Primary research is built upon a novel conjoint analysis, through a nationally representative sample of 1,500 registered US voters (including demographic data). Literature will be reviewed and surveyed from both political science and social psychology in order to ascertain the cognitive processes and motivations that could influence behavior in voting.

- **RESEARCH TOPIC, QUESTION AND METHODS**

- a. Research question: What is the main question that the dissertation seeks to answer?*

The main question that the dissertation will attempt to answer can be broken down in two parts:

(1) Does priming shape voter behavior on the issue of climate change in the United States? What can social psychology tell us about why voters have become increasingly polarized – and on this issue specifically?

(2) What are the confounding effects driving behavioral voting and how can conjoint analysis help us better understand how and why voters make choices on polarizing policy issues like climate change?

- b. Justification for analysis: Why is it important to answer this question?*

The typology of the American electorate is increasingly polarized: defined by identity, social psychological motivations, moral tenets and the dynamics of 'tribal' behavior. What is driving this issue-based polarization? A recent report by the research and advocacy group, More in Common, finds that just a sliver of the American electorate – 14 percent – is driving the national narratives that, in turn, influence the behaviors of voters, elected officials and even institutions themselves. 8 percent are defined as Progressive Activists. A further 6 percent are labeled Devoted Conservatives. These two groups have just four things in common: they are rich, Caucasian, university educated and highly politically engaged. In

short, these extreme ‘tails’ of the left-right spectrum are elites. What can the social psychology and political behavior of these elites tell us about why the national electorate decides to vote against their long-term interests? The dissertation will focus particularly on climate change as a polarizing issue. This social issue nicely captures the current divide in American politics, with progressives and conservatives on opposing sides and the idea between what is ‘fake’ and what is ‘real’ at center stage.

The dissertation will answer important questions using a conjoint analysis through primary data. My analysis will test whether negative or positive primes (Treatment 1 + 2) or no primes at all (control) impact the relative importance voters place on environmental issues. I expect that a negative prime will have more impact than a positive prime, but that the latter will still show an impact in importance attached to environmental policy relative to the baseline. Additionally, this dissertation will assess how voters prioritize policy areas – in the absence of parties or candidates – by asking respondents to evaluate a randomized set of policy bundles. This analysis will shed light on how voters prioritize environmental policy compared to other issues when voting, yielding insights into the psychology of voting (Treatment 3).

This research will advance the literature towards a more comprehensive understanding of polarization on issue voting – and from where it stems. Additionally, conjoint analysis is growing within political science and has been shown to be better at satisfying internal validity concerns compared to secondary research. In this regard, employing primary research offers a unique opportunity to extend empirical evidence and be part of a new approach to understanding the cause of things. This type of issue-based, non-candidate driven analysis has, to my knowledge, never been conducted in the US context (only in the EU). Given the current political climate, this issue area is not only relevant, but it is indeed paramount to assess if we are to emerge from this era of partisanship and lackluster policy accomplishment, especially on something as fundamental as the health of our planet.

c. Literature review: What theoretical and empirical literature are you planning to use to situate the question and frame the research?

The following articles will guide my research question and provide a model to the methodology undertaken. The two bolded articles are my conceptual framework (one for social psychology, one for political science), which will translate my question into a specified and measurable output:

- Hainmueller et. al, “Causal Inference in Conjoint Analysis: Understanding Multidimensional Choices via Stated Preference Experiments,” (2013). *Political Analysis* 22:1–30.
- Eidelman, S. (2009). “A Psychological Advantage for the Status Quo.” Oxford: Oxford University Press.

d. Explanation of sources: What data and information are you going to use for answering the research question?

- e. Methods: What research methods do you propose to use? E.g., primary research or secondary analysis; data or literature-based; quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method?*
- f. What methods for data analysis are you intending to use? E.g. statistical methods; qualitative data analysis; use of software, etc.*

This dissertation will employ primary research and an extensive literature review. To assess primary data, it will use a ‘backend’ conjoint analysis as specified in subsections III-G + IV-B: The conjoint analysis data will be analyzed through the rank-ordered logistic regression model in Stata (*rologit*), which fits the model by maximum likelihood (Beggs, et. al. 1981).

The work will also use qualitative analysis garnered from the extensive literature review, which seeks to marry research in social psychology with political science.

- g. Feasibility: How accessible is data and information you require? Have you established contact with relevant persons or organizations to access them?*

The US national conjoint analysis will be funded by Professor Simon Hix and will likely be fielded by YouGov. It will include a nationally representative sample of 1500 registered voters. It is unlikely that the field time and data packaging for the survey will take longer than two weeks, with an additional week needed for data analysis. Therefore, contact with YouGov will be initiated upon approval of proposal.

- **STRUCTURE AND CONTENT**

- a. Structure: What is the provisional structure of the dissertation?*

- I. Title
- II. Acknowledgement
- III. Table of Contents
- IV. List of Tables + Figures
- V. List of Acronyms + Abbreviations
- VI. Abstract
- VII. Introduction
- VIII. Literature Review + Theoretical Underpinnings
 - a. Background + Context
 - b. Conceptual Framework
- IX. Conjoint Analysis + Methodology
- X. Discussion of Results
- XI. Conclusions + Policy Impact
- XII. References
- XIII. TBC: Appendices

- b. Analytical framework: How are you going to answer the research question? E.g. what are the main variables and how are you going to examine the relationship between these variables to answer the research question?*

In conjoint analysis, respondents score a set of alternatives, where each has randomly varied attributes. This approach estimates the effects of multiple treatment components in terms of a

single behavioral outcome and, therefore, allows me to evaluate the relative explanatory power of how voters make issue-based decisions. By testing multiple hypotheses simultaneously, I will be able to identify the correct explanation of why divergence exists on contentious policy issues. The dependent variable will be the preferences of respondents, while the independent variables will be policy issue attributes, plus additional variables for interaction terms of the individuals (e.g., education level or geographic region).

The respondents will be asked to complete several questions, with surveys lasting no more than 10 minutes. It uses a model analogous to Hainmueller et. al 2013. The first question in the survey will ask respondents to identify their preferred policy bundles, which will be randomly allocated as treatments. Climate change will always be given as a policy issue, and will be compared to the following issues: healthcare, immigration and taxes. Because conjoint analysis is a summation of partial utility preferences, the total utility is found by adding all partial utilities together, yielding the importance/priority respondents give to climate / environmental policy relative to other contentious policy issues. The study will go one step further however, in assessing social psychology by building on Eidelman, S. (2009). A second treatment, "Priming," will be randomly allocated to respondents to see if there is a shift in relative importance of environmental policy after respondents treated with both negative and positive primes. There are two outcomes I expect through priming: 1) relative to the baseline of the airplane plots, positive primes should raise the level of importance given by respondents to environmental policy; 2) negative primes will be more powerful than positive. In this way, the analytical framework is linking my literature review in social psychology and political science to revealed preference voting behavior. It is comparing the literature from these fields to the data observed through primary research.