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Personal issue importance effects on voters' perceptual accuracy of party issue positions

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ABSTRACT



The accuracy of voters' party position perceptions is critical for the functioning of representative democracy, and recent comparative work has shown that voters generally have accurate perceptions of parties' left-right ideological positions. Yet, we know little about how the left-right results generalize to single issues and how personal issue importance evaluations shape accuracy. Building on existing work on the consequences of issue importance, we argue that voters seek more information and become more accurate in their perceptions of party issue positions on those issues they deem personally important. However, we also posit that this is likely a curvilinear relationship. For highly important issues, voters are more likely to have strong priors and engage in projection effects of assimilation and contrast, limiting their ability to accurately perceive party positions on highly important issues. Using original voter – and expert-level surveys from ten advanced democracies, we show support for our expectations.


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Introduction

The accuracy of voters' perceptions of party positions has attracted growing attention in the scholarly community, and for good reasons. For representative democracy to function well, it is crucial that voters choose parties that share their political opinions (Lau and Redlawsk 1997). In this way, it ensures that the elected parties take positions that align with public opinion (Mair 2008; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). A prerequisite for the functioning of this process of representative democracy is that voters know the parties' positions on issues.

But do voters have accurate perceptions of party positions, and how does accuracy vary across issues? A growing literature points to certain conditions

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under which accuracy is more likely. While Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu (2011) show that voters do not update their perceptions of parties' left-right ideological positions when parties change those positions in their election manifestos, Somer-Topcu, Tavits, and Baumann (2020) present evidence that when the focus is on the newspaper reporting of party positions during electoral campaigns, voters have pretty accurate perceptions of parties' left-right positions. Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu (2019) demonstrate that voters have more accurate perceptions of those parties that had a recent leadership change. Relatedly, Busch (2016) shows that citizens are better able to position parties on a left-right dimension when politics is more personalized – presumably because of increased attention to politics. Moving beyond the overarching left-right scale, Seeberg, Slothuss, and Stubbager (2017) reveal that accuracy is more likely when the policy shifts are larger, Dejaeghere and Van Erkel (2017) uncover that perceptual accuracy is generally not very high but parties' issue ownership helps voters in accurately perceiving those issue positions. Finally, and most importantly for our research, Plescia and Staniek (2017) present comparative evidence across four countries that when political parties change their issue positions, voters accurately perceive these changes but only on those issues that are salient.¹

Building on these latter works about the accuracy of party *issue position* perceptions and on the classic Zallerian argument that voters sample information on issues that are salient (Zaller 1992),² we argue that accuracy should improve as an issue becomes more important to them *personally*. The reasoning is that when an issue is more important for an individual, they are more interested in learning about parties' positions on it and also pay more attention to parties' rhetoric and media coverage of the issue (see, also, McGraw and Pinney 1990). While we expect perceptual accuracy to be higher for issues that are more important for an individual, we also argue that this association is curvilinear. Specifically, we expect voters to rely more on their preconceptions of party positions and engage in projection effects as issues become highly important personally. The projection effects refer to people's tendencies to pull the parties they identify with closer to their position (assimilation) and push the other parties' positions away from where they are (contrasting) (Calvo, Hellwig, and Chang 2012). We argue that these pull and push effects result in lower perceptual accuracy for most people, with the exception of those respondents who have issue

¹While both Plescia and Staniek (2017) and we investigate the effects of issue importance on perceptions, our focus is on the effects of *individual/personal* issue importance on the accuracy of *party positions*, while Plescia and Staniek (2017) examine the effects of issue salience for the *country*, as evaluated by the respondent, on the accuracy of *party policy shifts*.

²See also the more recent work by De Vries and Giger (2014) on how issue importance affects performance voting.

preferences very close to the issue positions of the party with which they identify.

We use original survey data from ten advanced democracies to test our expectations. In pairs of simultaneous surveys, we asked citizens and political experts in each country to locate political parties on six issue scales and also asked the respondents to evaluate the personal importance of each issue. Using the average expert perceptions as indicators of the “real” positions of a party, we investigate how issue importance shapes perceptual accuracy and check whether projection effects limit perceptual accuracy. Our results point to clear curvilinear effects of issue importance on accuracy and support our expectations about the role of partisan projection effects.

Our findings contribute to the growing literature on voters’ perceptual accuracy of party positions by highlighting the role of personal issue importance evaluations. Our original comparative dataset of party issue positions on six political issues across ten advanced democracies allows us to contribute to the existing perceptual accuracy literature. The curvilinear effects we uncover and the partisan projection effects we show have important implications for the functioning of representative democracy. Since people vote for parties that they perceive as close to their preferences on the issues they deem as personally important (Fournier et al. 2003; Moniz and Wlezien 2020), the declining perceptual accuracy for those highly important issues suggests that people may not vote correctly for the party that would best represent their interests. This suggests that an important condition of representative democracy, that voters vote for the party that represents them best (Lau and Redlawsk 1997), likely does not hold for the issues that voters find most important, with sobering implications for the voting behavior and representation literatures. In what follows, we first state our expectations for how personal issue importance should affect accuracy, detail how we think partisan projection effects result in a curvilinear association, and then present our research design, survey details, and the results.

Issue importance and accuracy

The existing work presents quite strong evidence that personal issue importance evaluations affect voting behavior (for a review of the literature, see Moniz and Wlezien 2020). Fournier et al. (2003), for example, show that attitudes toward the issue a respondent considers personally important are critical in their evaluations of candidates and vote choices. Flavin and Law (2022) present empirical evidence from the US that policy positions on issues that are personally very important to the voter have as strong effects on vote choice as partisan identification. But what explains this strong relationship between issue importance and voting behavior? According to these authors, the strong effect is due to citizens being “more likely to seek out

additional information about political issues they deem important” and “more likely to learn where candidates stand on those issues” (Flavin and Law 2022, 2). Moniz and Wlezien (2020) also argue that when an issue is more important for an individual, they acquire more knowledge about the issue and are ultimately better able to differentiate between the positions of political actors on the issue. In terms of the mechanisms that connect issue importance and knowledge, people’s feelings towards personally important issues likely activate their “emotion systems” (Miller, Krosnick, and Fabrigar 2016, 131), strengthening their interest in seeking information on those issues at the expense of less important issues. Individuals, in other words, are thought to be more likely to consume the media stories on those issues they find important (see, also, Zaller 1992), and this selective exposure to information can make them better at positioning parties and candidates on those issues that are personally important to them, improving their political knowledge (Robison 2021; Moniz and Wlezien 2020), congruence (Walgrave and Lefevere 2013), ability to keep parties accountable for their performance (De Vries and Giger 2014), and perceptual accuracy (McGraw and Pinney 1990).

We push this literature forward and argue that the relationship between issue importance and perceptual accuracy of party issue positions is curvilinear. We agree that for the issues that are of little importance personally, voters likely do not pay attention to or accurately locate political parties. We also agree that interest in, exposure to, and accuracy of party positions on issues should increase as issues become more important personally. However, we argue that for very important issues, accuracy is lower compared to mid-salience issues. This is because voters likely have strong priors and preconceptions about party positions on very important issues, and tend to be more resistant to party cues (Barber and Pope 2023), especially if they contradict their priors. Hence, our main hypothesis is as follows:

H1: Perceptual accuracy of party issue positions should increase as an issue becomes more important personally, but accuracy should decline for very important issues.

What explains this curvilinear trend? Our argument builds on the motivated reasoning and projection effect literatures. According to the motivated reasoning theory, people have a tendency to seek information that is consistent with their prior beliefs and reject information that contradicts their priors (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuss 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006). Hence, if a person believes that a party is located at a specific position on an issue they value highly, any party cues contradicting these preconceptions about the party’s issue positions will be rejected, reducing the likelihood of observing the party’s positions accurately. In contrast, party cues help voters update

their perceptions of party positions on issues for which citizens have weak prior attitudes (Druckman and Leeper 2012; Lecheler, De Vreese, and Slothuus 2009).

The motivated reasoning theory, on its own, however, does not suggest that perceptions should be inaccurate for very important issues when strong priors dominate people's perceptions. If the prior perception is accurate and the party gives accurate cues, then accuracy should still be high. To understand when accuracy should be lower or higher for very important issues, we draw on the projection effects theory. According to this theory, people perceive the party they identify with as closer to their own position (assimilation effect), while they project the other parties' positions as further away from them than where they are located in reality (contrast effect) (Calvo, Hellwig, and Chang 2012; Ward and Tavits 2019). As an example, a pro-life person who identifies with an anti-abortion, right-wing party and considers abortion as a highly important issue personally would perceive this party as very close to their pro-life position, regardless of how close the party really is to them (assimilation). Similarly, this person would create a contrast by considering a left-wing party as very pro-choice – even if this party is not strongly pro-choice in reality. What are the implications of these assimilation and contrast effects for perceptual accuracy?

We expect people to have more accurate perceptions of party positions as an issue becomes more important personally. People will pay more attention to and learn more about party positions as an issue gains importance to them. However, for highly important issues, we expect people to engage in assimilation and contrast behavior. Therefore, outpartisans, i.e., those people who identify with a different party, are more likely to push the party away from their preferred position, perceiving it as more extreme than where the party is, resulting in lower perceived accuracy of the party's issue positions on those issues they find important. Hence, we expect to see curvilinear accuracy distributions for outpartisans. They should perceive out parties' issue positions with much error when the issue is of no importance, given their lack of interest in the issue and the party cues. Accuracy should increase as an issue becomes more important. For highly important issues, however, the contrast behavior would mean that the other parties would be seen in more extreme positions than where they are located. Therefore, our expectation for the outpartisans is as follows:

H2a: Outpartisans perceive the party's issue positions more accurately as issue importance increases, but accuracy should decline for very important issues.

On the other hand, copartisans of a party, i.e. those respondents who identify with a party, are more likely to assimilate the party's position and perceive the party as closer to their own position. This assimilation behavior suggests potentially two different trends for the accuracy distributions across issue

importance. First, if a copartisan of a party has a personal issue position that is very close to where the party actually is, then as the issue importance increases, they should observe the party's position more accurately. For highly important issues, the presence of an assimilation effect would mean that they should continue to perceive the party as close to their own position, which is also the party's actual position, suggesting that the accuracy should stay high.

However, if a copartisan's position on an issue is not close to where their party is on the issue, the assimilation effect for a very important issue would mean that these copartisans would perceive the party as closer to their own position and away from where the party actually is, increasing perceptual inaccuracy. Therefore, while we expect accuracy to increase as issue importance increases, we expect the accuracy distribution to show a similar curvilinear trend, i.e., decreasing accuracy for highly important issues, as these copartisans would perceive the party as closer to their preferred position compared to where the party is really located. Our copartisan hypotheses then are as follows:

H2b: Copartisans whose issue positions are close to their party's positions should perceive the party's positions more accurately as issue importance increases and the accuracy should stay high at very high levels of issue importance.

H2c: Copartisans whose issue positions are not close to their party's positions should exhibit a curvilinear relationship between importance and accuracy as their perceptions of the party's positions become less accurate at very high levels of issue importance.

Research design

To test our hypotheses, we need data on the accuracy of voters' perceptions of party issue positions and their personal issue importance evaluations. As we stated above, while the literature exploring perceptual accuracy has been growing, the focus in this literature has mainly been on the *left-right* ideological perceptions of party positions due to the lack of comparative survey data asking respondents to locate political parties on a variety of political issues. To overcome this data limitation problem, we conducted a novel survey across ten advanced democracies, asking citizens (and political experts, as we explain below) to locate political parties on six issues in addition to the left-right scale.³ Table 1 lists the countries and the political parties included in the surveys.⁴ Our country cases include parliamentary,

³We used 5% polling performance in recent opinion polls as a cutoff to finalize the list of political parties in each country.

⁴The project is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Table 1. Countries and parties included in the surveys.

Country	Party	Country	Party
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	Germany	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)
	Social Democratic Party (SPÖ)		Christian Social Union (CSU) (in Bavaria)
	Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP)		Social Democratic Party (SPD)
	The Greens (Die Grünen)		Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
	The New Austria & Liberal Forum		Alliance for Germany (AfD)
Canada	Conservative Party of Canada	Great Britain	Free Democratic Party (FDP)
	Liberal Party of Canada		Left Party
	New Democratic Party		Conservative Party
	Bloc Québécois		Labor Party
	Green Party of Canada		Liberal Democrats
Denmark	People’s Party of Canada	Ireland	Greens
	Socialdemokratiet		Plaid Cymru (in Wales)
	Liberal Alliance		Reform UK
	Socialisk Folkeparti		Scottish National Party (in Scotland)
	Venstre		Fianna Fail
France	Danmarksdemokraterne	Italy	Fine Gael
	Enhedslisten Rød-Grønne		Sinn Fein
	Moderaterne		Green Party
	Det Konservative Folkeparti		Social Democrats & Labor
	Ensemble/Renaissance		Fratelli d’Italia
	La France Insoumise	Spain	Partito Democratico
	Les Écologistes – ÉELV		Movimento 5 Stelle
	Les Républicains – UDI		Lega
	Parti Communiste Français		Forza Italia
	Parti Socialiste		People’s Party (PP)
	Rassemblement National	United States	Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE)
	Reconquête		Sumar
			Vox
			Democratic Party
			Republican Party

presidential, and semi-presidential systems with a variety of party system sizes and structures of party competition, allowing us to generalize our findings to other advanced democracies.⁵

We partnered with the survey company Cint (previously Lucid) to survey about 2,000 respondents among each of these ten countries using nonprobability online samples.⁶ In each country, we used the most recent census data to set gender, age, and region/state statistics to ensure the representativeness of the sample. Our survey included several attention checks. We excluded respondents who failed an attention check and responses from accounts that we suspected to be bots. We also excluded a small number of respondents who rushed through the survey in under two minutes.

⁵The data collection periods were as follows: Canada between 26 January and 3 February 2023; Germany between 23 and 30 May 2023 and 28–29 August 2023 to replace suspected bot answers; the United States between 14 and 20 March 2023 and on September 21 2023 to replace suspected bot answers; Ireland between 26 June and 13 August 2023; the UK between 25 July and 13 August 2023; Austria between 17 and 29 October 2023, France between 17 and 26 October 2023, Italy between 11–15 April 2024, Denmark between 11–23 April 2024, and Spain between 24 April and 1 May 2024.

⁶Coppock and McClellan (2019) show that the Cint survey data provide estimates comparable to those of probability samples.

Table 2. Issue Scales.

Income gap	Some people think that [country] should do much less to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor (0). Others think that [country] should do much more to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor (10). Where would you place the political parties?
Govt. intervention	Some people think that the [country's] government should intervene much less in the economy (0). Others think the [country's] government should intervene much more in the economy (10). Where would you place the political parties?
Immigration	Some people think that [country] should allow much fewer immigrants to come to [country] (0). Others think that [country] should allow much more immigrants (10). Where would you place the political parties?
Climate change	Some people think that [country] should do much less to combat climate change (0). Others think that [country] should do much more to combat climate change (10). Where would you place the political parties?
LGBTQ rights	Some people think that [country] should do much less for gays and lesbians (0). Others think that [country] should do much more for gays and lesbians (10). Where would you place the political parties?
International trade	Some people think that [country] should strongly discourage international trade (0). Others think that [country] should strongly encourage international trade (10). Where would you place the political parties?

Each respondent in the survey was asked to locate the political parties on six issues: income inequality, government intervention in the economy, immigration, climate change, gay/lesbian rights, and international trade. Hence, the set of issues includes two economic issues, one cultural issue (immigration), one that captures traditional values (gay/lesbian rights), one that concerns climate change, and one that relates to the economic consequences of globalization (international trade). By means of these six issues, we sought to include issues related to the important debates on the economic left-right dimension as well as a second (GAL/TAN or libertarian/authoritarian) dimension, which define the politics in our country cases (Bakker and Hobolt 2013). Table 2 lists the six issues and the survey wording for each issue scale.

While gathering survey data from citizens across the ten countries, we also surveyed country experts about their perceptions of parties' issue positions on the same issue scales.⁷ We aggregate experts' responses to these questions and use these means to measure parties' "true" positions on the different issues to generate our dependent variable: *perceptual accuracy*.

The perceptual accuracy variable is measured at the respondent-party dyad level and calculated by taking the absolute distance between where the respondent locates a party on an issue and the mean expert perceived position of the party on that same issue. We then reversed these absolute distances such that the higher the value of perceptual accuracy, the closer the perceptions are and the more accurate the respondent is about the party's issue position. The maximum possible score of accuracy is 10 if the experts

⁷These experts are political scientist experts of each country. We aimed for ten experts to fill out the survey in each country, and the actual number varies by country depending on the response rate of experts. The expert data were collected at the same time as the citizen surveys in each country.

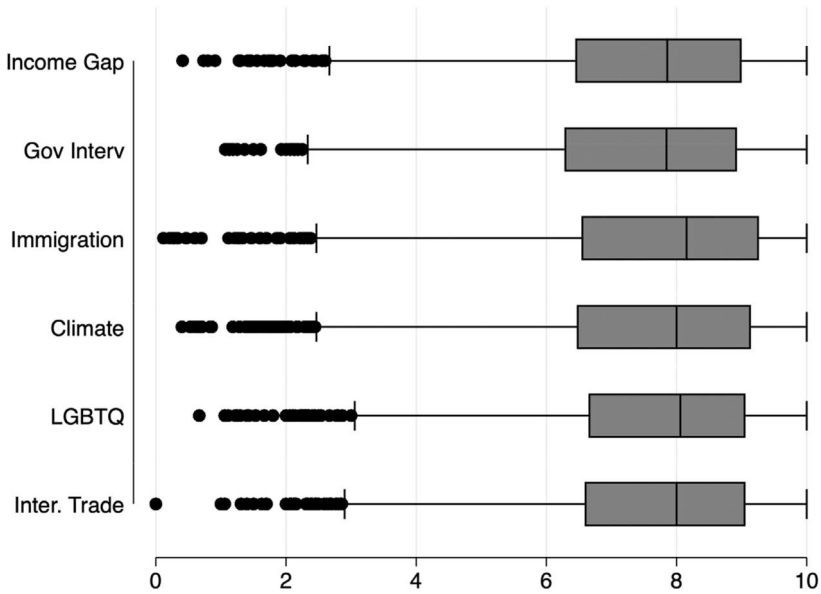


Figure 1. Accuracy across Issues.

Notes. The average accuracy scores are 7.42, 7.40, 7.60, 7.51, 7.60, and 7.60 for these issues, respectively.

and respondents located the party at the exact same position, and the minimum possible score is 0 if the experts located the party at 0 or 10 and the respondents located the party at the opposite end. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of accuracy scores across the issues, and [Appendix A](#) shows the distributions for each country separately. Overall, we see that the median accuracy value is around 8 and the mean is around 7.5 across all issues, which means that respondents, on average, locate the parties about 2.5 points away from where experts do. This is quite a large difference, especially in crowded party systems where this perceptual deviation from the party position may potentially mean that voters might be voting for a party whose position they misperceive. This level of inaccuracy is also higher than it is for the placements of parties on a general left-right dimension. Across the countries in our dataset, the average distance between where citizens and experts place a party on the left-right scale is 2.1. The issue-specific accuracy scores are also quite similar across our country cases, as can be seen in [Appendix A](#). The lowest scores are all in the US. However, this is expected given that respondents were asked to locate only two parties on the 0–10 issue scales, with large spaces available to locate each party.

Our main independent variable is personal issue importance. We build on the definition of [Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent \(1995, 65\)](#) to define issue

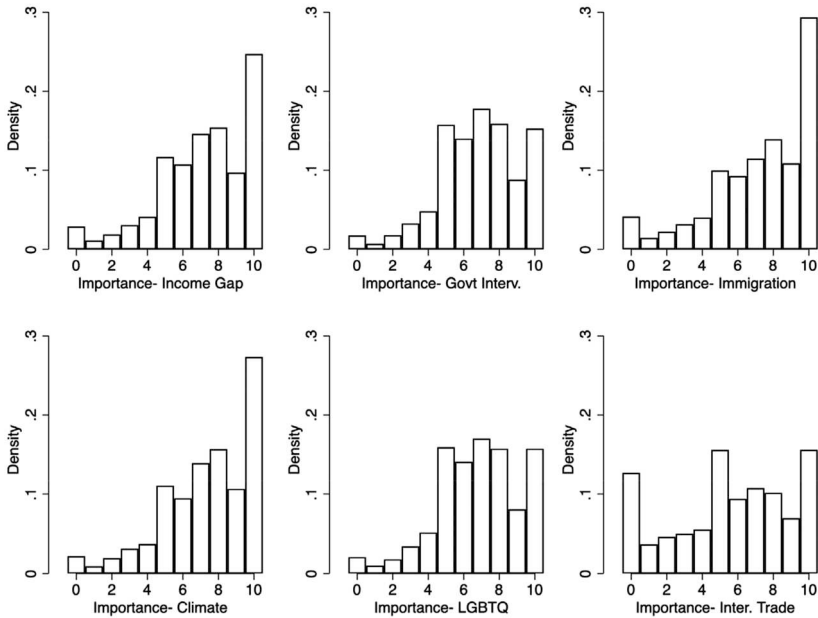


Figure 2. Issue Importance across Issues.

importance as “an individual’s subjective sense of the concern, caring, and significance he or she attaches to an [issue]”. The survey question asked the respondents how important each issue was to them personally on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means not important at all, and 10 means very important. Figure 2 shows the distribution of personal issue importance across the six issues, and Appendix B presents the figures separately for each country along with a summary statistics table. We see that immigration and climate change are ranked as the most important issues by respondents, with about 30% of the respondents rating both issues at 10, followed closely by the income inequality issue. While the proportion of the respondents that evaluated most of the issues as not important at all (at 0 on the 0-10) scale is very small (less than 5%), close to 15% of the respondents rated the international trade issue as not important at all and only 30% of the respondents gave the issue at eight or higher in personal importance. The country distributions in Appendix B do not show much difference across the country cases.

Our main hypothesis states that the effect of issue importance on accuracy should be curvilinear: as importance increases, accuracy should increase, only to decline again as preconceptions and partisan biases become more dominant for very important issues. Before we test this hypothesis, we first examine the linear effect of issue importance. We then test our hypothesis for the curvilinear effect by including both the issue importance and its

squared term in the models. We expect a positive impact for issue importance in the linear model, while we anticipate a positive coefficient for issue importance and a negative coefficient for the squared term in the second model.

To examine the partisan level mechanisms behind our curvilinear expectations, we estimate separate models for outpartisans, i.e. respondents who identify with a party that is not the focal party, and copartisans, i.e. respondents who identify with the focal party. Our survey asks the respondents whether they identify with any of the parties and, if they say yes, which party. If they said no to the partisan identification question, we followed up by asking if they feel closer to any of the parties and which party. The partisanship variable is coded 1 for the party the respondent identifies with or feels closer to and 0 for all other parties and nonpartisans.⁸

Our expectation is that the copartisan effects are conditioned by the absolute distance between a respondent's own position on the issue and the position of the party. To recap, we anticipate copartisans who are close to the party's position to have accurate perceptions of party positions for all issues and especially as issue importance increases. Copartisans who are not close to the party's actual position, on the other hand, will pull the party toward their position, which suggests that the effect of issue importance on accuracy should be curvilinear for these copartisans. To test these conditional expectations, we ran the copartisan model by interacting the issue importance variable and its squared term with a dummy variable for ideological closeness, which is coded 1 for those respondents who are close to the party's actual position (i.e. the expert perceived party position) and 0 for those who are not close. We used the mean absolute distance of copartisans as our threshold, coding those who are less than the mean distance away from the party as 1, and others as 0.⁹

We also include several control variables at the respondent and party levels that may affect our main variables of perceptual accuracy and personal issue importance. First, following the existing literature, we include gender, age, education, and political interest. While Dejaeghere and Van Erkel (2017) show that people with higher education levels are more politically knowledgeable, they do not find that women are more or less accurate in their perceptions of party positions. Nevertheless, we add the gender variable along with age, education, and political interest, to test whether there are any

⁸Below, when we run the models only for the outpartisans, we exclude nonpartisans from the estimation, thus limiting the sample to supporters of other parties.

⁹The mean distances are 2.7, 2.5, 2.4, 2.6, 2.4, and 2.3 for the income gap, government intervention, immigration, climate change, LGBTQ rights, and international trade issues, respectively. In Appendix J, we also replicated these results by using the cutoff as one point distance on the 0–10 scale for close and not close copartisans. We use dummy variables for issue closeness rather than the actual issue distance given that the models require a triple interaction between issue importance, its squared term, and the issue closeness, and using a dummy conditioning variable eases the interpretation of the results.

individual-level differences in how accurately people perceive party issue positions. Gender, education, and political interest are coded as dummy variables (1 for women, highly educated, and highly interested respondents, respectively), while the age variable is the reported age of the respondent. At the party level, we include a dummy variable for governing parties at the time of the survey, although we do not have clear expectations for how the variable should affect accuracy. While governing parties receive more media coverage that may increase perceptual accuracy about their positions, perceptions about governing parties' positions are more likely to be shaped by what the parties do in office rather than what they stand for, which is especially true for coalition and minority governments. In one of the few papers having studied the connection between government status and perceptual accuracy, Busch (2016) finds no significant association between government participation and the accuracy of citizens' left-right placements of parties.

Our dataset is structured in a respondent-party dyadic format, whereby each respondent enters the data as many times as there are parties in each country. To account for unmeasured factors at the country and party-respondent dyadic levels, we include country fixed effects, and allow for random intercepts at the respondent-party dyad level.¹⁰

Results

Table 3 shows the linear relationship between issue importance and perceptual accuracy for the six issues. Each model in Table 3 includes country-fixed effects and random intercepts for the respondent-party dyad. We focus on the results of our main specification here, and show the estimates without any control variables (but including the country fixed effects) and the results with party fixed effects in place of country fixed effects in Appendix C.

The first row in Table 3 reports the effects of subjective issue importance on accuracy. To recap, higher numbers for the dependent variable suggest higher accuracy in locating political parties on these issues. We see that the relationship works in a positive linear fashion only for the immigration issue. For each one-point change in issue importance (on the 0–10 scale), the distance between expert perceptions of the party position and the respondent perceptions on the issue of immigration decreases by 0.02 points on the 11-point issue scale. While statistically significant, this is a substantively small effect. For income gap, government intervention, climate change, LGBTQ, and international trade issues, the effect is also significant,

¹⁰In the appendix, we show the results of models that include party fixed effects in place of country fixed effects. We also note that we include country fixed effects (or party fixed effects in the appendices) and only the random intercepts for the respondents in the separate models for the copartisans and outpartisans.

Table 3. Linear Effect of Issue Importance on Perceptual Accuracy.

	(1) Income Gap	(2) Govt. Interv.	(3) Immigration	(4) Climate	(5) LGBTQ	(6) Intern. Trade
Importance	-0.051* (0.004)	-0.092* (0.005)	0.019* (0.004)	-0.045* (0.004)	-0.063* (0.005)	-0.007* (0.003)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	7.572* (0.060)	8.001* (0.061)	7.151* (0.059)	7.708* (0.057)	7.913* (0.060)	7.245* (0.049)
Random Effects:	0.816* (0.018)	0.715* (0.016)	0.876* (0.018)	0.676* (0.016)	0.791* (0.017)	0.496* (0.013)
Random Effects: Res.	2.938* (0.017)	2.883* (0.017)	2.861* (0.017)	3.208* (0.019)	2.596* (0.016)	2.645* (0.016)
N	70,151	67,019	70,644	70,678	66,451	65,197

Notes. Standard errors in parentheses. **p* < 0.05. Full results are presented in Appendix C.

but the direction of the association between issue importance and perceptual accuracy is opposite to our expectations. The negative coefficient for the government intervention model, for instance, suggests that a person who deems government intervention into the economy as a very important issue (10) compared to a person who does not think that the issue is important at all (0), perceives the party, on average, one point more distant than where the experts locate the party.

These results at first may seem surprising, given that, going back to McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh (1990) and Zaller (1992), we would expect accuracy to increase as the personal issue importance increases. However, as we have argued, we expect this relationship to be curvilinear: accuracy should increase as issue importance increases but then decrease for very important issues. We interpret the fact that the linear effects are negative on average to suggest that the negative effect for very important issues is particularly pronounced. However, this linear specification might mask the impact of moving from a low to a medium level of importance on accuracy.

We now test whether the association between issue importance and accuracy is curvilinear, as our main hypothesis posits. Doing so requires including the issue importance variable and its squared term in the models. To support our hypothesis, we should see accuracy increase as issue importance increases, but accuracy should start to decrease for very important issues. Table 4 shows the results for the main variables and Figure 3 visualizes the association between importance and accuracy, based on these estimations. Our hypothesis is supported for all issues, as seen from the positive and statistically significant coefficients for the issue importance variables and the negative and significant coefficients for the squared importance variables.¹¹

¹¹The full table of results can be found in Appendix D.

Table 4. Curvilinear Effect of Issue Importance on Perceptual Accuracy.

	(1) Income Gap	(2) Govt. Interv.	(3) Immigration	(4) Climate	(5) LGBTQ	(6) Intern. Trade
Importance	0.425* (0.017)	0.442* (0.019)	0.201* (0.015)	0.238* (0.017)	0.387* (0.018)	0.222* (0.010)
Importance ²	-0.039* (0.001)	-0.043* (0.001)	-0.015* (0.001)	-0.023* (0.001)	-0.037* (0.001)	-0.022* (0.001)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Country FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	6.323 * (0.071)	6.557* (0.077)	6.704* (0.069)	6.956* (0.071)	6.744* (0.074)	6.863* (0.050)
Random Effects:						
Dyad	0.728* (0.017)	0.638* (0.015)	0.858* (0.018)	0.645* (0.016)	0.721* (0.016)	0.449* (0.013)
Random Effects: Res.	2.937* (0.017)	2.881* (0.017)	2.862* (0.017)	3.208* (0.019)	2.598* (0.016)	2.654* (0.016)
N	70,151	67,019	70,644	70,678	66,451	65,197

Notes. Standard errors in parentheses. **p* < 0.05.

The curvilinear effects across all issues imply that perceptual accuracy is lowest when the issue is not personally important, improves as issue importance increases, but declines again for very important issues. The LGBTQ graph, for instance, shows that while respondents, on average, perceive parties about 3.1 points distant from where the experts locate the same parties if the issue is not important at all, the distance decreases to about

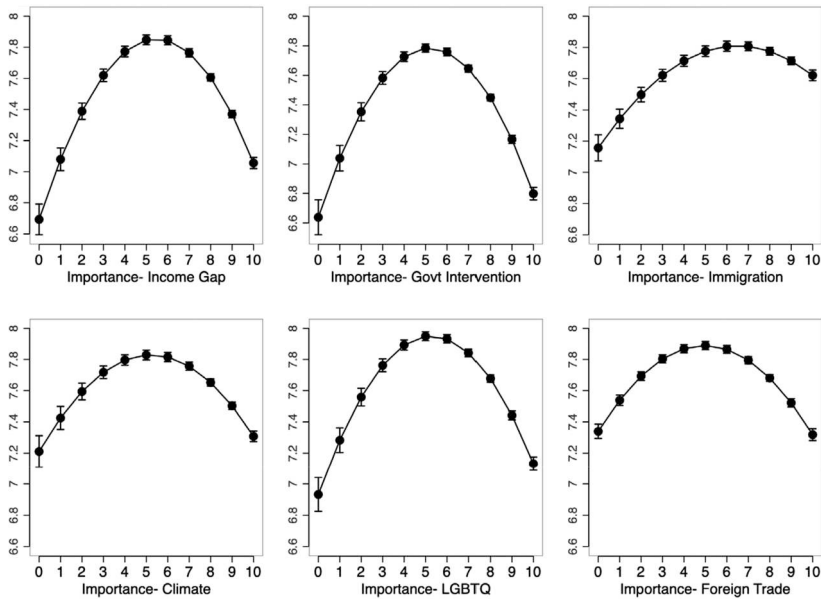


Figure 3. Relationship Between Issue Importance and Perceptual Accuracy.

Notes: Predictive margins and 95% confidence are shown. Full estimates can be found in Appendix D.

2.1 points when the issue has medium-level importance for the respondent. However, when the issue is very important for citizens, the accuracy is almost as low as when the issue was not important at all. Among these six issues, only the immigration issue does not present a perfectly curvilinear relationship, even though we see that accuracy peaks around the issue importance value of 6.5 and starts to decline afterward but not as much as it declines for other issues. It is possible that this result is due to the highly polarizing and very salient nature of the immigration issue in our countries during the time period when we conducted our surveys, but unpacking this different shape of the curve for the immigration issue requires further research.

In Appendix E, we replicate the results by excluding all the control variables except the country fixed effects (Table E1) and by replacing the country fixed effects with party fixed effects (E2). These models produce robust findings. Appendix F shows these curvilinear effects by country, whereby we see that the only deviations from the curvilinear trends across issues are found in Austria, Italy, and Spain for the immigration issue.¹²

Next, we test whether partisan projection effects explain these curvilinear trends. As we stated in Hypothesis H2a, we expect similar curvilinear effects of issue importance for outpartisans. Respondents who do not identify with a party likely do not know much about the party's positions on issues that are not important personally and become more accurate in their perceptions as issue importance increases. However, for very important issues, they likely project the other parties' positions as more extreme than where the parties actually are, decreasing accuracy. Figure 4 shows the results when we restrict the sample to only include outpartisans (see Appendix G for the full models). As expected, the curvilinear effects shown in Figure 3 are heavily driven by the responses of outpartisans. These results support our expectations and are robust in alternative specifications.¹³

Our final set of hypotheses (H2b and H2c) relate to copartisans of the parties. We expect the effects to be conditioned by the gap between the copartisans' issue positions and the positions of the party with which they identify. We anticipate copartisans that are close to their party's position to exhibit increasing accuracy as issue importance increases, which should stay high for the very important issues. For copartisans whose position is not very close to their own party's position, we predict to see similar

¹²In Austria and Spain, respondents' accuracy is the highest when issue importance is at 8 and stays high for issue importance scores of 9 and 10, although the trends in both countries suggest slight curvilinearity. In Italy, on the other hand, issue importance does not appear to affect accuracy. This is because about 65% of the respondents in Italy ranked immigration as highly important (with a score of 8, 9, or 10) and only 9% of the respondents ranked the issue with an importance score of less than 5. Given the lack of variation in issue importance scores for immigration, the lack of curvilinearity is not surprising.

¹³In Appendix H we test these outpartisan models by replacing the country fixed effects with party fixed effects.

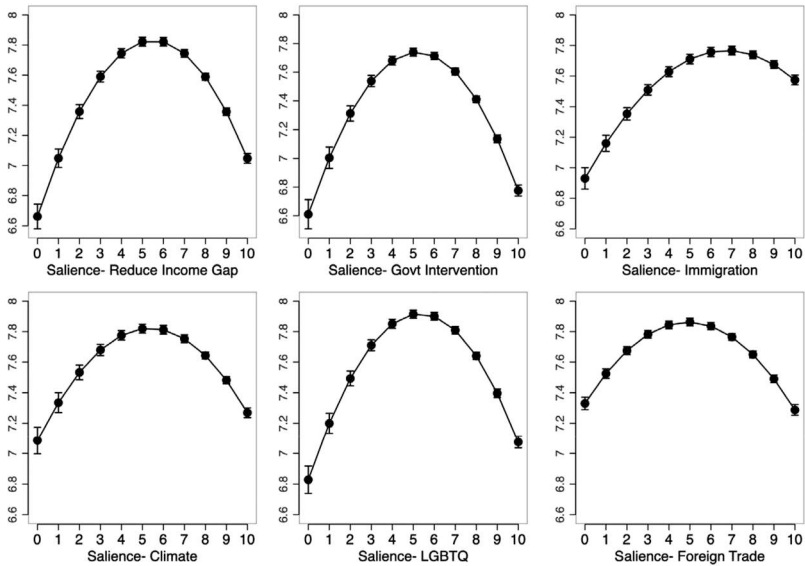


Figure 4. Relationship Between Issue Importance and Perceptual Accuracy Among Out-partisans.

Notes: Predictive margins and 95% confidence are shown. Full estimates can be found in Appendix G.

curvilinear trends as outpartisans – not because of contrast effects, but due to assimilation effects. The perceptual accuracy of these individuals should increase as issue importance increases, but assimilation for very important issues would lead to a decline in accuracy because they would perceive the party to be closer to their own position and away from where the party actually is. Figure 5 summarizes the results from models in which we included a triple interaction between issue importance, its squared term, and ideological closeness.¹⁴ As we described in the research design section, we used the mean distance between the copartisans and their parties to differentiate between ideologically close and not very close copartisans.¹⁵ The triangles at the top of each graph show the predicted level of accuracy for the ideologically close respondents, and the circles show the predictions for the not very proximate copartisans.

The graphs in Figure 5 show that the ideologically close copartisans have highly accurate perceptions regardless of issue importance. Accuracy is around 8 (8.7 for immigration) when issues are not considered important (issue importance = 0) and stays about the same for all issue importance values. This constant accuracy is what we expected for the medium to high

¹⁴The full results can be found in Appendix I.

¹⁵In Appendix J, we replicate these results by setting the cutoff value for closeness as one-point distance on the issue scales for each issue. The results are robust.

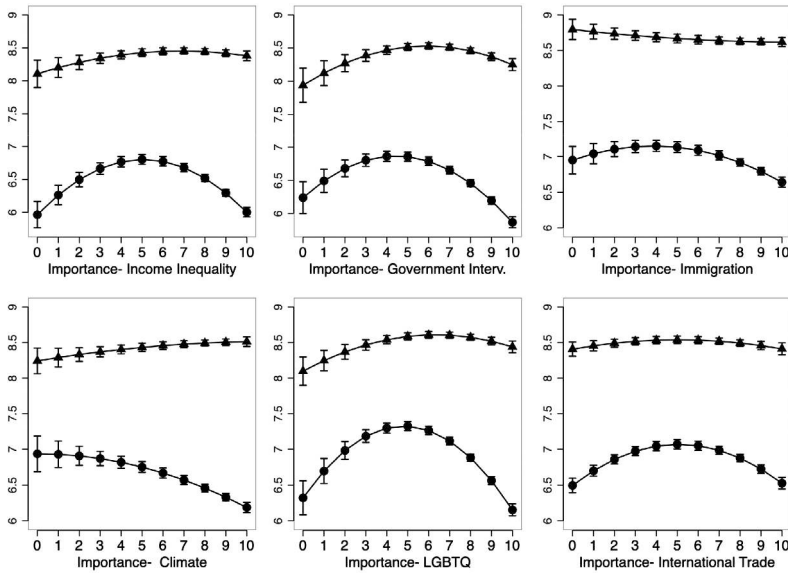


Figure 5. Relationship Between Issue Importance and Perceptual Accuracy Among Copartisans by Closeness.

Notes: Predictive margins and 95% confidence are shown. Full estimates can be found in Appendix I. Triangles show the results for the ideologically close copartisans, and the squares show the results for the not very close copartisans.

issue importance evaluations, but the results for low importance suggest that copartisans who are close to their party ideologically on an issue have quite stable accuracy levels in perceiving their party’s position.

The graphs also show that ideologically more distant copartisans tend to have accuracy distributions that are consistent with our expectations. Accuracy increases as issues become more important, only to decline again for very important issues. We argued that this is due to the assimilation effects whereby copartisans pull the party toward their own position (and away from where the party is) for very important issues. The curvilinear effect is consistent across all issues except for immigration and climate change, for which accuracy consistently drops as issue importance increases.

The control variables have the expected effects (see the Appendix for the coefficients and standard errors of the control variables). Women, on average, have less accurate assessments of party positions. The higher the education level, the more accurate perceptions are. Older respondents also exhibit higher accuracy. Political interest, although often positively associated with accuracy, is not consistently significant or positively signed across different issues. Finally, accuracy is often positively correlated with governing party status, except for the government intervention in the economy issue, for which government status does not affect accuracy.

Discussion and conclusion

A key condition for representative democracy to function well is that voters choose parties that are close to them ideologically and share their political views. To accomplish this, it is crucial that voters have information about the positions that parties take. However, given the large number of issues on which parties take positions – particularly in a context of multidimensional party competition (Koedam 2022) – it is unreasonable to expect voters to be informed about parties' positions on every single issue. For issues that voters deem important, though, the expectation is that voters are well informed about parties' positions. Theoretically, individuals likely seek more information about issues that are important to them. And normatively, it is even more important that voters are informed about party positions on important issues, because issues that are more important for individuals have greater weight in their vote choice (Fournier et al. 2003).

The few studies that have empirically investigated whether voters are better informed about parties' positions on important issues suggest higher accuracy as issue importance increases (Zaller 1992; De Vries and Giger 2014; Plescia and Staniek 2017) (but note that Dejaeghere and Van Erkel (2017) do not find that issue importance affects accuracy). Building on this limited literature and pushing it forward, we have argued that the association between issue importance and perceptual accuracy is, in fact, not linear. Specifically, we theorized that while importance should initially increase perceptual accuracy, accuracy should decline for issues that are highly important to an individual. In hypothesizing a curvilinear relationship, we anticipated that assimilation and contrast effects would be the mechanisms reducing accuracy for very important issues.

To test our expectations, we make use of a unique and original dataset, including both a voter and an expert survey component, that allows studying perceptual accuracy for six different issues and in ten established democracies. Our analyses of the connection between issue importance and the accuracy of citizens' perceptions of parties' issue positions offer strong support for our expectations. We find that the association between issue importance and perceptual accuracy is indeed curvilinear. That is, individuals who assign a medium-level personal issue importance score to an issue (on the 0–10 issue importance scale) hold the most accurate views of the positions that parties take on this issue (with the exception of the immigration issue). Perceptual accuracy is substantially lower among those who rate an issue as not important at all, but it is also lower among those for whom the issue is very important. By examining the conditioning effects of partisanship, we furthermore find that the diminishing accuracy in perceptions of party positions for highly important issues likely results from partisan projection effects. Specifically, we find that perceptual accuracy substantially weakens as importance increases among outpartisans, who project other parties on positions that are more extreme. Copartisans,

on the other hand, seem to assimilate parties' positions – leading especially partisans who are objectively further away from a party's true position to wrongly think the party shares their positions on important issues.

In showing that the association between issue importance and perceptual accuracy is curvilinear, this paper is the first study that suggests that caring much about an issue activates partisan reasoning. Such partisan reasoning likely introduces errors in citizens' perceptions of where parties are positioned on specific issues. While these results provide a first-cut at why the relationship between importance and accuracy is curvilinear, future work should unpack the exact mechanisms behind this curvilinear effect.

Our results can be interpreted as offering sobering insights into the state of democratic representation. While it is unrealistic to expect citizens to be very well informed about party positions on every possible issue, we would expect them to have a good understanding of the positions different parties take on issues that voters themselves find important and that strongly influence their voting behavior. While voters, on average, seem better informed about the positions of parties on issues that are somewhat important to them than they are on issues that they find not important at all, we also find that for the most important issues, partisan dynamics trump individuals' need to be well informed.

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