

JUDGMENTS OF POLITICAL EXTREMISM IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

Ethan C. Busby
Brigham Young University
ethan.busby@byu.edu
ethanbusby.com

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ABSTRACT: Democracies around the world face extreme threats like the erosion of democratic norms, repression of dissent, and outbursts of political violence. The ability of democracies to defend themselves from these problems depends on how much citizens and political actors recognize such threats as extreme and penalize these kinds of extremism. What, then, do Americans citizens and elected officials recognize as extreme? What political penalties are associated with extremism? In this paper, I explore the defenses that both ordinary American citizens and elected officials provide against extremism in its various forms. Using data from two conjoint experiments, I find that the public can provide some protection from extremism, especially responding to political violence and incivility. Elected officials are even more adept at recognizing extremism and show more potential for protecting democracy from problematic types of extremists. Encouragingly, there appears to be a shared understanding of problematic forms of extremism and corresponding penalty; these results do not depend on individuals' partisanship, similarity with the extremist, or political interest. However, many kinds of extremism go unacknowledged and even the most challenging forms of extremism are far from unanimously rejected.

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Introduction:

Democracies around the world face extreme challenges. These include the erosion of democratic norms (Foa and Mounk 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018), polarization (Westwood et al. 2018; Iyengar et al. 2019), negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Bankert 2020), political intolerance (Mondak and Sanders 2003; Gibson 2013), and political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2018; Institute for Economics and Peace 2020). Extremist movements, individuals, and politicians that perpetuate these problems force democratic societies to juggle a commitment to the ideas that underlie democracy – like representation, tolerance, and civil liberties – with the need to combat perspectives that threaten democracy itself.

To further compound these issues, the manifestations of these kinds of political extremism are legion. Extremism can be attached to the left, right, and center of the ideological spectrum (Lipset 1960). It can be found among political leaders and among everyday citizens (Salmon 2002). Not everything labelled as extremism is democratically damaging, a point made separately by both Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Barry Goldwater (King Jr. 1963; Goldwater 1964). Given this complexity, to what extent do citizens and political actors recognize types of extremism that challenge democracy? How much can the public and political elites be relied upon to guard against dangerous forms of extremism?

Given the importance of perceptions and judgments in political and social life (e.g., Mutz 1989; Ahler 2014; Ahler and Sood 2018), these questions are not just academic. The civil liberties Americans afford to others can depend on their judgments of those groups (e.g., Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997), and electability and democratic accountability have long been connected to perceptions of candidates' extremity (e.g., Downs 1957; Hall 2015; c.f. Utych 2020a). Further, what elected officials consider to be extreme likely influences the policies they advocate for and implement.

In the sections that follow, I describe two large-scale surveys exploring judgments of extremism in the United States.¹ One involves a sample of the American public (N=2,531) and the other a sample of elected officials at the state, county, and local level (N=1,919). Both use conjoint experiments to document how citizens and elites judge different versions of political extremism. With these data, I find that the public provides some protection from extremism, especially responding to political violence and incivility. Elected officials are even more adept at recognizing extremism. Encouragingly, there appears to be a shared understanding of problematic forms of extremism and a corresponding political penalty; these results do not depend on individuals' partisanship, similarity with the extremist, or political interest. However, many kinds of extremism go unacknowledged and even the most challenging forms of extremism are far from unanimously rejected.

Theories of Extremism:

Extremism is itself a contested term, with bitter debates about what is and is not extreme (Hogg, Kruglanski, and van den Bos 2013; Berger 2018). The ability of the public to defend against different forms of extremism depends, at least in part, upon their ability to recognize problematic kinds of extremism as such and penalize these viewpoints politically. Otherwise, members of the public do not hold elected officials and political movements accountable for extreme views and can encourage their representatives to adopt extremist positions. Political actors, on the other hand, will not design institutions and policies that limit the consequences and spread of extremism if they do not recognize it when they see it and do not perceive political costs for espousing extremist views.

In the sections that follow, I describe different theories of problematic forms of

¹ These surveys and expectations were pre-registered prior to any data analysis. The pre-analysis plan contains several additional items and analyses not included here. See <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UIXDAI>

extremism. I discuss four perspectives drawn from research on political extremism: extremism based on norms, intensity, dispositions, and violence. Each has been linked to various kinds of attacks on democracy, including political intolerance, a refusal to compromise, polarization, and attacks on political opponents. As such, each poses challenges for democracy but may not be recognized as such by elected officials and the public.

Norm-based extremism:

One version of political extremism emphasizes attitudes that go against some social standard (Klein and Kruglanski 2013; Kruglanski et al. 2014). Extremists, then, are those who hold beliefs that people ought not to hold, or those who go against injunctive social norms (Higgins 1987; Schultz et al. 2007). While any definition of extremism must be relative in some sense (Fleming 2014), this kind of extremism is the most linked with judgments about what people should believe. Depending on the context, this version of extremism would include concepts like racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Many forms of norm-based extremism pose problems for democracy because they involve social exclusion, prejudice, and a disrespect for the rights of others (e.g., Glick et al. 1997; Butler and Broockman 2011).

A prominent example of norm-based extremism involves incivility, or a disregard for social conventions like interpersonal politeness, deliberation, and reciprocity (Jamieson et al. 2017; Muddiman 2017; Sydnor 2019). Incivility is often linked to concerns about political extremism (e.g., Giroux 2018; McDonald 2018; Sydnor 2018; Boot 2018) and can undermine democratic principles like deliberation and mutual respect (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996; Muddiman 2017; Boatright et al. 2019).

Another type of norm-based extremism involves violating *democratic* norms. These principles include political tolerance, respect for the rule of law, support for free and fair

elections, the ability to compromise, and more. Recent studies find that while Americans are supportive of democracy in the abstract and recognize the value of democratic norms, they often overlook violations of democratic norms in the pursuit of their preferred political outcomes. This tendency increases with respondents' levels of polarization (Graham and Svobik 2020). The willingness to trade democratic norms for more short-term political preferences can manifest itself in the attitudes of both voters and of campaign donors, suggesting limitations on the ability of the American public and elites to enforce democratic norms (Carey et al. 2020).

Intensity-based extremism:

Others discuss extremism in terms of intensity rather than norms (Klein and Kruglanski 2013). Instead of focusing on the substance of individuals' attitudes, this type of extremism centers on people with especially intense, committed, or passionate views. This conceptualization of extremism avoids normative judgments involved in norm-based extremism and relies on measures of attitude intensity. Spatial position, where one's attitudes fall on a range of possible views, is the most commonly used form of intensity extremism and has frequently been employed by social scientists (e.g., Fernbach et al. 2013; Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015; Fleming 2014; Boleslavsky and Cotton 2015). Other examples include the emotional charge of one's views (George and Wilcox 1996; Hardin 2002) and how certain people are of their beliefs (Toner et al. 2013; Brandt, Evans, and Crawford 2015).

Another form of intensity-based extremism comes from studies of partisan polarization in the United States. This research distinguishes between individuals who are highly interested and engaged in politics and those who are not and finds that current levels of partisan polarization and extremism are produced by those who are deeply committed and intensely connected to politics. The rest of the public, in contrast, often disengages entirely from politics (Klar and

Krupnikov 2016; Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018). In this sense, the hyper-engaged can be considered extreme as they focus intensely and exclusively on politics.

Intensity, in various forms, can challenge democracy in multiple ways. Spatial extremity, for example, promotes overconfidence in one's own ideas (Ferbach et al. 2013), closed-mindedness, and intolerance (van Prooijen and Krouwel 2017). A strong sense of certainty, on the other hand, discourages compromise and flexibility (Ryan 2017). It also encourages a sense of superiority and rejection of the ideas of others (Toner et al. 2013; Brandt, Evans, and Crawford 2015). An obsession with politics also seems connected to affective polarization and a dislike of one's opponents (Klar, Krupnikov, and Ryan 2018).

Disposition-based extremism:

A different approach describes extremism as an underlying disposition rather than a specific attitude (Lipset 1960; Greenberg and Jonas 2003). This suggests that extremism is something deeper than intensity about a particular topic or violating a specific norm; instead, it is a stable, enduring way of interacting with the world. Locating extremism in general dispositions has a long tradition in the social sciences: for example, many have explored the authoritarian disposition (Altemeyer 1996; Feldman 2003; Conway et al. 2018); dogmatism (Rokeach 1954; Kossowska, Czernatowicz-Kukuczka, and Sekerdej 2017); social dominance orientation (Pratto et al. 1994; Ekehammar et al. 2004); and populism (Aslanidis 2016; Donovan and Redlawsk 2018). This view of extremism pays particular attention to dispositions that prefer rigidly structured societies and a way of thinking that divides the world into stark, black-and-white options (Hogg, Meehan, and Farquharson 2010).

Extremist dispositions have long been linked to challenges for democracy. Authoritarians often curtail the rights of those they consider to be deviants or find threatening (Stenner 2005;

Hetherington and Suhay 2011). Dogmatism has been connected to racial prejudice (Bronstein, Dovidio, and Cannon 2017). Social dominance orientation, similarly, has been linked to ingroup bias, political intolerance, zero-sum thinking, and aggression towards outgroups (e.g., Sidanius, Pratto, and Mitchell 1994; Ho et al. 2012; Crawford and Pilanski 2014).

Violence-based extremism:

A final group of researchers emphasizes violence in characterizing political extremism (e.g., Midlarsky 2011; Berger 2018). From this point of view, extremists are willing to use whatever means are necessary to achieve their goals and are undeterred by the consequences of those actions. Along these lines, some distinguish extremism from radicalism by noting that radicals operate within established legal and moral rules and extremists resort to illegal and violent behavior (Midlarsky 2011; Böttcher 2017). This focus on violence also links to discussions about terrorism (Hewitt 2003; Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; Bartlett and Miller 2012); many elected officials and people in the American public may recognize violence as political extremism given its connection to terrorism.

Expectations:

Given these different kinds of extremism, what will elected officials and members of the public recognize as such? Previous research suggests a special place for violence among theories of extremism. As noted, some point to violence as the defining difference between extremism and other radical viewpoints (Midlarsky 2011). Violence threatens individuals' lives and bodily safety, violates the state's monopoly on the use of force, and contradicts social norms about appropriate ways to engage in political disagreement and conflict (see, for example, Kalmoe 2014; Kalmoe and Mason 2018). For these reasons, political violence should be especially unpalatable and diagnostic of extremism. Along these lines, I predict the following:

H1: Support for political violence will more strongly influence perceptions of extremism than other versions of extremism.

On the other end of the extremist spectrum, people should be less prone to label those who are like themselves as extreme. Individuals often use their own perspective as an anchor for judging or comparing others and possess more available information about their own views than those of others; both factors prompt more positive judgments of those like oneself than more dissimilar others (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Similarity between individuals (including similarity of attitudes) can also have a powerful influence on attraction and interpersonal judgments (Heider 1958; Sachs 1975; Liviatan, Trope, and Liberman 2008; Heiphetz, Spelke, and Banaji 2014). Additionally, evaluations of more similar others have implications for one's own self-image, activating self-affirmation and self-enhancement motivations (Sherman and Cohen 2006; Sedikides and Gregg 2008). As a result of these processes and the assumption that it is generally negative to be thought of as an extremist, I expect that people should be less likely to view others as extreme when they share characteristics with the person they are considering.

H2: People should be less likely to consider someone to be extreme when they share characteristics with that individual.

How do people evaluate individuals who display multiple forms of extremism at once? For example, is someone who is ideologically extreme and espouses political violence considered more extreme than a more moderate counterpart? I generally expect that as the amount of extremism someone expresses increases, people should more readily recognize someone as extreme; this is because the person under question sends multiple, reinforcing signals about their extremism that become increasingly difficult to overlook. This expectation is

summarized by H3:²

H3: All else equal, individuals who display more forms of extremism will be recognized as more extreme.

Extant research presents conflicting expectations about how elected officials and the public should compare in their judgments of extremism. On one hand, a collection of studies finds that elected officials, political elites, and the more political sophisticated are more tolerant than the public at large (e.g., McClosky and Brill 1983; Gibson and Duch 1991; Sullivan et al. 1993). This may make elected officials less prone to label others as extreme, given elites' increased commitment to the norm of tolerance. Others, however, conclude that political elites behave in ways that are comparable to the public, especially under conditions of stress or threat (e.g., Shamir 1991; Sniderman et al. 1991). Further, elected officials are also more politically polarized and divided than the public (e.g., Hetherington 2001; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Hare and Poole 2014), which may encourage higher perceptions of extremism in others. As a result, I compare the public to elected officials without strong priors, as summarized in *RQ1*.

RQ1: Do elected officials have similar extremism perceptions as members of the public?

Finally, how different kinds of extremism influence favorability and electoral support?

The penalties candidates and politicians face for extremism serve as one important check on extremism in democracy; however, members of the public may not penalize candidates for these kinds of beliefs. In existing studies of extremism, conventional wisdom and much research indicate that extremists should be less popular and electable than moderates (Downs 1957; Hall 2015; Stone 2017; Johns and Kölln 2019). Newer studies, though, indicate that extremist and moderate candidates are now equally likely to win elections (Utych 2020a), citizens are not very

² This hypothesis and associated statistical test were not included in the pre-analysis plan as they came out in suggestions and comments on the framing and analysis.

responsive to extremism in candidates (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018; Utych 2020b), and penalties for violations of democratic norms depend on other explicitly political considerations (Graham and Svulik 2020). Further, this work almost exclusively evaluates ideological extremism and democratic norms; little is known about the political costs of other types of extremism. As such, I explore a more open-ended research question to consider if potential candidates suffer political costs for the forms of extremism discussed earlier.

RQ2: Are candidates that holding extremist views less electable than more moderate candidates?

Design:

To answer these research questions and hypotheses, I administered a survey experiment on a sample of the American public and elected officials. The public sample was obtained through the research firm Lucid, which acts as an aggregator of online panels of respondents.³ While not probability-based, the sample was designed to mirror the demographics of the larger the American population. The survey was administered to a sample of 2,500 respondents between November 12th and 13th, 2019.

I also constructed a sample of elected officials to consider perception of extremism in elites and public officials. The sampling frame was obtained from Google's Civic Information API, which provides contact information for elected officials across the United States. Querying this API for all available information on elected officials at the state, county, and local level created a sampling frame of 28,688 elected officials with email addresses.⁴ All respondents were emailed invitations to participate in the survey, and these email contacts were made between January 30th and February 13th, 2020. This time period was selected to be as close as possible to

³ For a discussion of Lucid as a source of subjects, see Coppock and McClellan (2019).

⁴ This excludes federally elected officials as no emails were listed for these individuals.

the sample of the public while contacting elected officials when their offices would be open; at the state legislative level, for example, 44 of the 50 state legislatures were in session by early February.⁵ 1,919 individuals completed the survey.⁶

Table 1 presents the demographic composition of both samples. The public sample matches the American population closely on these observed characteristics. For elected officials, participants were more likely to be White and county-level officials than the sampling frame. Otherwise, respondents mirrored the characteristics of the elected officials from Google’s API.

Table 1: Demographic composition

| | American population | Public sample | Elected official sampling frame | Elected official sample |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Percent male | 49% | 49.1% | 65.2% ^a | 64.6% |
| Percent non-Hispanic White | 60.1% | 69.1% | 58.6% ^b | 89.2% |
| Percent liberal | 30.8% | 31.3% | NA | 21.1% |
| Percent moderate | 36.8% | 36.7% | NA | 19.5% |
| Percent conservative | 32.4% | 32.0% | NA | 59.4% |
| Median age (years) | 38.3 | 44 | NA | 58 |
| Percent in Northeast | 17.1% | 15.2% | 11.0% | 8.1% |
| Percent in South | 38.3% | 39.9% | 31.3% | 34.9% |
| Percent in Midwest | 20.8% | 20.4% | 37.8% | 37.2% |
| Percent in West | 23.9% | 24.5% | 19.9% | 19.8% |
| Percent state level | NA | NA | 25% | 12.9% |
| Percent county level | NA | NA | 66% | 79% |
| Percent city level | NA | NA | 9% | 6.6% |
| N | | 2,531 | | 1,919 |

Note: Population level data come from the US Census Bureau for gender, race, age, and region and the 2018 CCES for ideology.

^a *This proportion was obtained by estimating the gender of the first names of the elected officials in the sampling frame with the “gender” R package and a database of names from the Social Security Administration.*

^b *This percentage was obtained by estimating the race of the people in the sampling frame based on their last names. This was done with the “wru” R package.*

⁵ Legislatures in Arkansas and Louisiana do not convene until after March; Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, and Texas did not have regular sessions in 2020.

⁶ The response rate was 7.2%. This is comparable to recent surveys of American elected officials (such as Kalla, Rosenbluth, and Teele 2017; Butler and Dynes 2016; Broockman and Skovron 2018; Dynes, Hassell, and Miles 2019; Broockman et al. 2019).

The study design was the same for the samples of the public and the elected officials, save that the elected official survey was shortened slightly to encourage a higher response rate. After viewing a consent page, all respondents completed a series of demographic items, the full list of which can be found in the Online Appendix. These included several batteries about respondents' dispositions and views, such as the four-item, child-rearing measure of authoritarianism (Stenner 2005; Hetherington and Klingler 2009; Wronski et al. 2018), political ideology, and two items about interest in and conversations about politics. These items allow me to consider how extremism judgments relate to similarity on these variables.

Respondents in both samples first completed an open-ended item about extremism which is not analyzed here. Next, subjects next completed a conjoint experiment. This survey technique was developed in marketing research and has been used extensively in political science (see Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Shafranek 2019; Johns and Kölln 2019); it asks respondents to evaluate two different individuals or profiles with different attributes. The attributes are randomly assigned to each profile, and respondents compare multiple pairs of profiles in a sequence. The resulting evaluations provide a large amount of statistical power with several observations per respondent and can determine how respondents weigh attributes in comparison to one another. In this particular application, the conjoint method fits my theoretical goals – it allows me to consider what people recognize as extreme and to directly compare different attributes to one another. Further, the conjoint allows me to evaluate different kinds of extremism holding other forms constant, allowing for inferences that are not confounded by the way different varieties of extremism co-occur in the real world.

In both surveys, respondents were introduced to the conjoint task and shown an example before the task began (see Online Appendix). After reading these instructions, respondents made

a series of comparisons, judging which profile they felt was more extreme. In the public survey, respondents completed six conjoint tasks; in the elected official survey, respondents completed four. In both cases, the profiles included 9 attributes which were presented in a random order to avoid ordering effects.⁷ The number of attributes and profiles was based on methodological research (Bansak et al. 2017; 2018) and focus groups on difficulty of this specific conjoint task.

Rather than demographic traits, the specific attributes used in this conjoint come from the definitions of extremism discussed earlier. The attributes include four items on different norm violations, three tapping into forms of intensity, one on dispositional extremism, and one about violence. It is crucial to include all these versions of extremism in each profile rather than a random subset for each respondent as conjoints allow for justifiable inferences about different attributes *only in relationship to other attributes included in each profile*. Otherwise, reactions to specific attributes may be about other, unmeasured elements that correlate highly with the included attributes. This is often called masking; including all of the attributes in each profile prevents this error in inferences (see Bansak et al. 2017). Table 2 presents the different attributes and the possible values for each. For each profile, respondents indicated the profile they felt was more extreme and rated each in extremity (seven-point scale from “Definitely do NOT think they are extreme” to Definitely do think they are extreme).⁸ After completing their final conjoint task, subjects’ participation was complete.

⁷ For each respondent the order of the attributes was randomly assigned for the first pair of profiles and then fixed in that same order from that point onward. This is in keeping with other studies of conjoint experiments (e.g., Shafranek 2019; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019).

⁸ Both kinds of items are common in conjoint tasks (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015).

Table 2: Profile Attributes

| Attribute (label shown to respondents) | Possible values (one value shown per profile) | Type of extremism |
|---|---|--------------------------|
| Response to disagreement | Disrespectful, hostile / Polite, friendly | Norm |
| Has been called | Anti-American / Sexist / Racist / Anti-Christian / Pro-Democracy | Norm |
| Views on tolerance | Always tolerant / Balances tolerance, safety / Discourages dangerous ideas | Norm |
| Compromise is | Necessary / Selling out | Norm |
| Certainty they are right | Completely certain / Mostly sure / Not sure | Intensity |
| Ideology | Far-left liberal / Liberal / Moderate / Conservative / Far-right conservative | Intensity |
| How often discuss politics | Always / Sometimes / Never | Intensity |
| Reaction to political violence | Condemns / Depends / Supports | Violence |
| Personality | Conventional, rigid / Flexible, open | Dispositional |

To answer *RQ2*, concerning comparisons between evaluations of extremism and vote choice, a further element of the public survey was randomized. In the conjoint task, half of the sample was asked to provide ratings and evaluations based on extremism; the other half indicated which profile they would be more willing to vote for. The elected official sample was not randomized in this way as theories and studies about voting behavior typically focus at the mass level, and the sample size of the public official sample was unknown prior to data collection.

Analysis:

To address *H1*, *H2*, *H3*, *RQ1*, and *RQ2*, I analyze the results of the conjoint experiment included in these surveys. As these analyses are oriented around respondent-profiles (rather than respondents), the conjoint experiments have approximately 30,010 observations for the public sample and 11,400 observations for the elected official sample. This is either comparable to or larger than prominent conjoint experiments used in political science (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018; Bansak et al. 2018; Peterson and Simonovits 2018;

Shafranek 2019), suggesting that this design should have statistical power comparable to or better than those studies.

In the analyses that follow, I emphasize the discrete choice response. From a theoretical standpoint, the goal of the experiment is to determine how different versions of extreme compare to one another and how people decide what does and does not count as extremism. As such, the structure of the choice response – where individuals determine which of two profiles is more extreme – more closely matches the concept of interest. By and large, the results using the ordinal rating outcomes lead to the same conclusions as the binary measure; the Online Appendix contains the versions of the analyses with the ordinal ratings.

The analyses with these data primarily focus on marginal means (MM) for profiles with different attributes quantities – these quantities represent the probability of selecting a profile with a given attribute averaged over all other features.⁹ MMs have a direct interpretation as a probability and can incorporate clustering by respondent to account for the fact that each respondent generates multiple datapoints. MMs also have a direct relationship with a more common estimate from conjoint experiments – the average marginal component effect (AMCE). AMCEs are, by construction, the difference in marginal means between two levels of an attribute. However, conditional ACMEs are unreliable estimates of subgroup differences; MMs, on the other hand, provide a way to describe how different respondents react to different attributes without these issues (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2019). This is especially important given the comparisons between elected officials and the public as implied by *RQI*.

As a first step in these analyses, I evaluate *RQI* by considering how much members of the public and elected official sample respond to different kinds of extremism. Figure 1 presents

⁹ MM analyses were conducted through the *cregg* package in R.

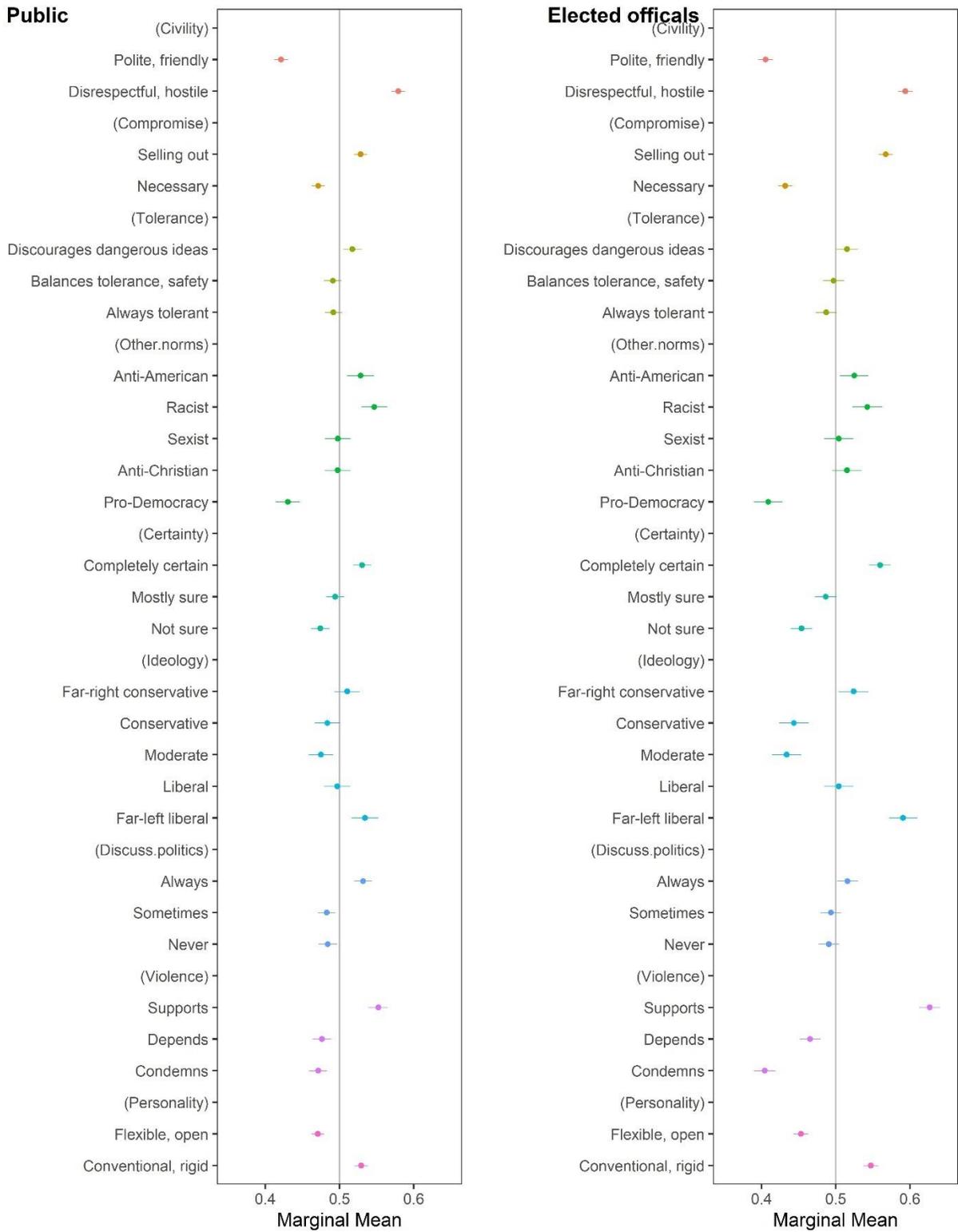
the probability that a respondent chose a profile with the corresponding attribute as extreme. This figure displays these estimates for the public sample and the elected official sample. The middle line, at 0.50, is for comparison purposes; as respondents chose between two profiles, a probability of 0.50 represents indifference between the profiles.

These results indicate that many individuals recognize the kinds of extremism discussed earlier as such. For both the elected official and public samples, individuals judge norm, intensity, disposition, violent forms of extremism to be more extreme than their more moderate counterparts. For example, being uncivil, labelled as anti-American, called racist, supportive of political violence, and always talking about politics encourages respondents to judge the individual as extreme.

There are notable exceptions to these patterns. Being accused of sexism or anti-Christian views does not encourage perceptions of extremism. Far-right conservatives are not as likely to be considered extreme as far-left liberals. All of this suggests that there are some specific kinds of norm and intensity versions of extremism that Americans do not regard as extreme.

I next consider *HI*, which suggests that support for violence should more strongly determine what is judged to be extreme more than other types of extremism. In support of *HI*, support for violence encourages perceptions of extremism; respondents chose an individual endorsing political violence as extreme 55 percent of the time. This is higher than nearly all the other forms of extremism presented to subjects. Interestingly, people react to accusations of racism similarly as they do support for political violence (p-value on the differences is 0.20) and respond more strongly to individuals who are disrespectful and hostile (57 percent, $p < 0.0001$). This suggests that although support for political violence is a powerful driver on judgments of extremism, racism and incivility generate similar responses.

Figure 1. Public and elected official judgments of extremism



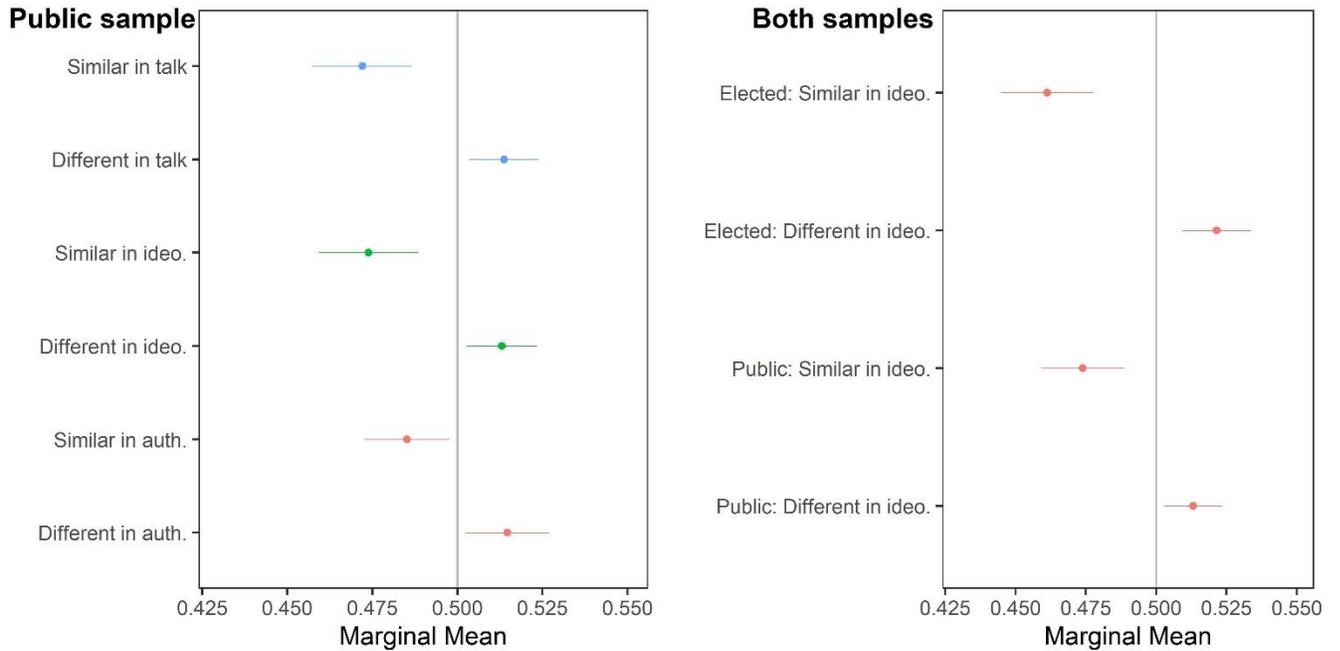
Considering the sample of elected officials, I find even stronger support for *H1*. Elected

officials are far more likely to label the profile supporting political violence as extreme than any other form of extremism – the probability of choosing an individual supporting violence is 0.63, which is reliably higher than all of the other kinds of extremism. This suggests that elected officials are more likely to label political violence as extremism than the public.

H2 suggests that individuals should be less likely to consider someone to be extreme if that person is more like the respondent. These analyses involve recoding the attributes on three areas (authoritarianism, ideology, and frequency of political discussion) to consider how the marginal means change when the respondent is presented with an attribute that indicates similarity to themselves. The other attributes in the conjoint experiment, for which there were not measures of respondents' views, remained unchanged from the preceding results. This coding is described in the Online Appendix.

Figure 2 shows the results of the similarity-focused analyses, presenting the estimates for only the similarity variables. Results for the other attributes, which remain unchanged from the prior figures, can be found in the Online Appendix. I find strong support for *H2* with both the public and elected official samples. In the sample of the public, for authoritarianism, ideology, and discussion of politics, individuals are less likely to identify a profile as extreme if it is similar to themselves. For the elected official sample, where the only similarity measure focused on ideology, elected officials were less likely to consider a profile extreme if it shared their general ideological viewpoint. Reactions to ideological similarity in both samples seem to be similar and are not statistically different.

Figure 2. Similarity analyses



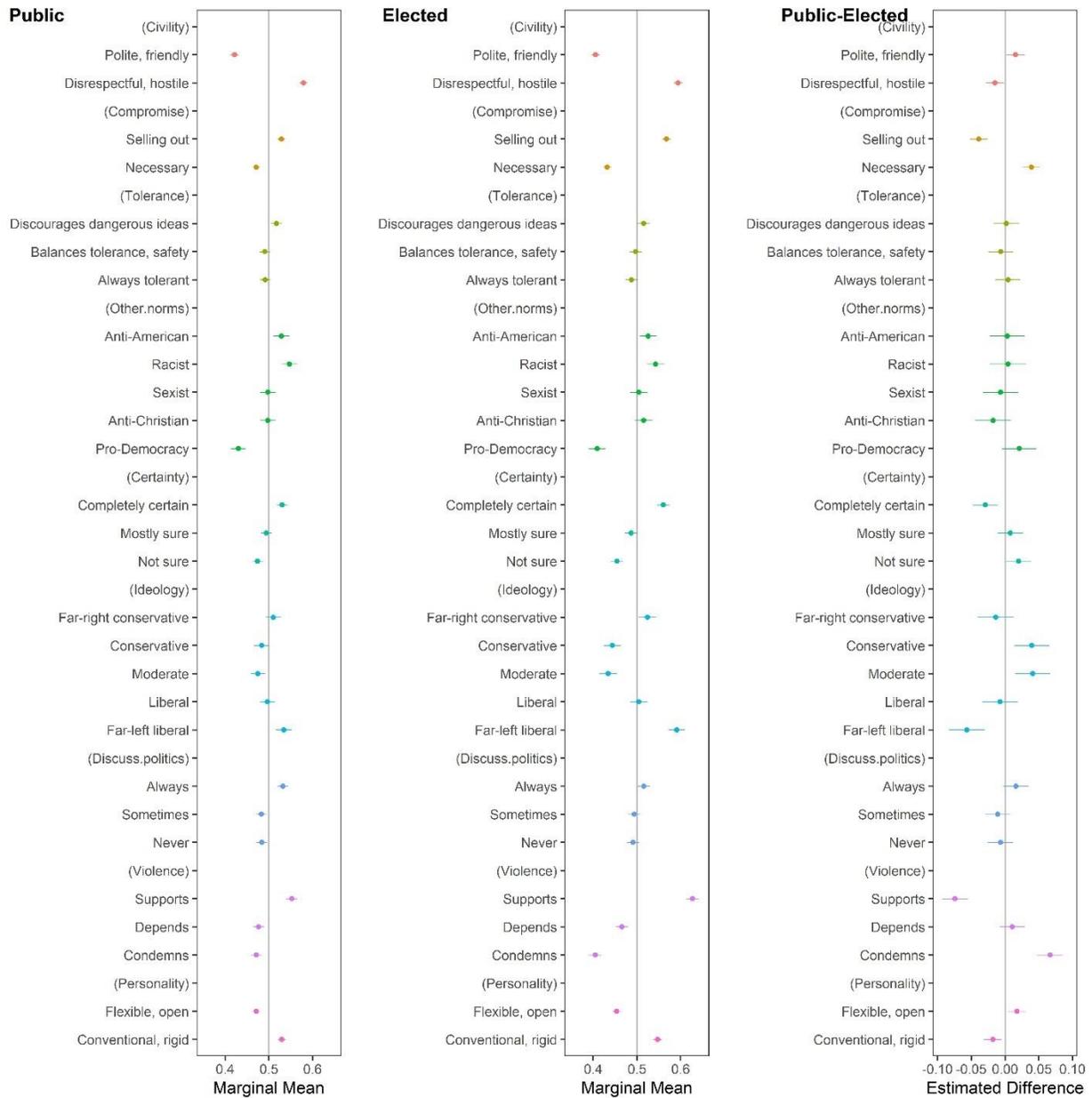
To more fully consider *RQI*, I compare reactions to the different attributes in the conjoint for both samples. Figure 3 again shows the binary judgments of extremism by the public and elected officials. The third pane of this figure shows the differences between these judgments and confidence intervals around those differences. Negative values indicate that the public was less likely than the elected official sample to mark profiles with this attribute as extreme. These estimates indicate that there are several differences between the way elected officials and the public at large respond to these kinds of extremism. A nested model comparison supports the idea that sample type moderates reactions to these profile attributes ($p \approx 0.000$).

Considering the first two panes of the figures illustrates that these differences are usually more pronounced reactions by elected officials. As an example, both members of the public and elected officials think a profile is more extreme when the individual is completely certain of their beliefs; however, elected officials react more strongly to this attribute than the public. This same pattern is evidence in reactions to being disrespectful and hostile; feeling that compromise is

selling out; having a conventional, rigid personality; being a conservative, moderate, or far-left liberal; and supporting political violence. In contrast, there do not seem to be differences in how elected official and mass-level respondents react to other norm violations (being accused of racism, sexism, anti-Americanism, etc.) and how much the individual discusses politics. I observe the same pattern of results if I consider the ordinal form of extremism judgments.¹⁰

¹⁰ P-value on the nested comparison for the ordinal item is $p \approx 0.000$

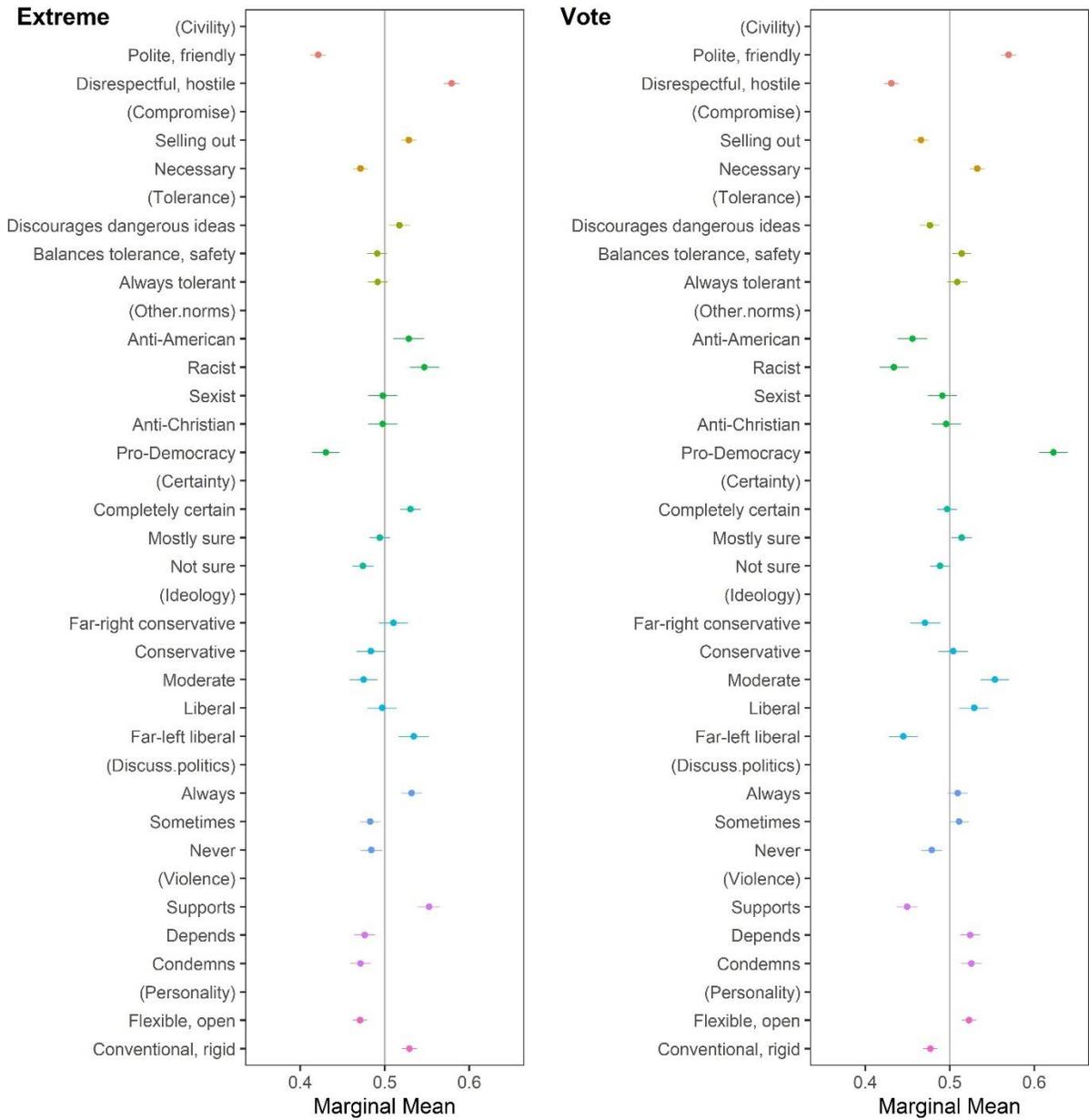
Figure 3. Binary extremism judgments in both samples



RQ2 asks how extremism judgments and vote choice compare. To answer this question, I re-ran the conjoint analyses for those assigned to make extremity and voting judgments in the public sample. The results, presented in Figure 4, indicate that factors that promote perceptions of extremism are the same items that discourage electoral support. There are two exceptions to this pattern – in certainty and discussion of politics. In these areas, people judge individuals to be

more extreme when they are more certain or discuss politics more often; however, these kinds of individuals do not pay a corresponding price in electoral support.

Figure 4. Extremism and voting judgments, Public sample:



The preceding analyses have treated each type of extremism as a separate concept and compared those concepts to one another. However, these data also allow for a different examination of various kinds of extremism in combination. I consider this in two ways – first by

looking for different interactions between the kinds of extremism and second by evaluating the overall amount of extremism presented in a profile. This latter method is a direct test of *H3*.

I first introduced interaction terms between different attributes into the conjoint analyses, which allows me to determine if specific combinations of extremism are more readily recognized as extremism by the public and elites. In these analyses, I emphasized combinations of violence and other types of extremism, given the empirical and theoretical importance of violence. Ultimately, these analyses did not suggest significant interactions between these attributes. Reactions to supporting political violence does not appear to be magnified if it is combined with ideological extremism, a refusal to compromise, incivility, or other varieties of extremism.

I also consider the total, overall level of extremism in each profile and directly test *H3*. The randomization of the attribute levels means that each profile has different amounts of extremism, ranging from extreme across all nine attributes to extreme in none of them. To evaluate how different overall levels of extremism influence perceptions of extremism and electoral support, I assigned each profile a score based on how many extreme attribute levels were presented in that profile. Table 3 presents two examples of how different profiles were scored.

Table 3. Example profile scoring

| Profile 1 | Profile 2 |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Polite, friendly | <i>Disrespectful, hostile</i> |
| <i>Sexist</i> | <i>Racist</i> |
| Balances tolerance, safety | Balances tolerance, safety |
| Necessary | <i>Selling out</i> |
| <i>Completely certain</i> | <i>Completely certain</i> |
| Conservative | <i>Far-left liberal</i> |
| Never | <i>Always</i> |
| Depends | Depends |
| <i>Conventional, rigid</i> | <i>Conventional, rigid</i> |
| Score of 3 | Score of 7 |

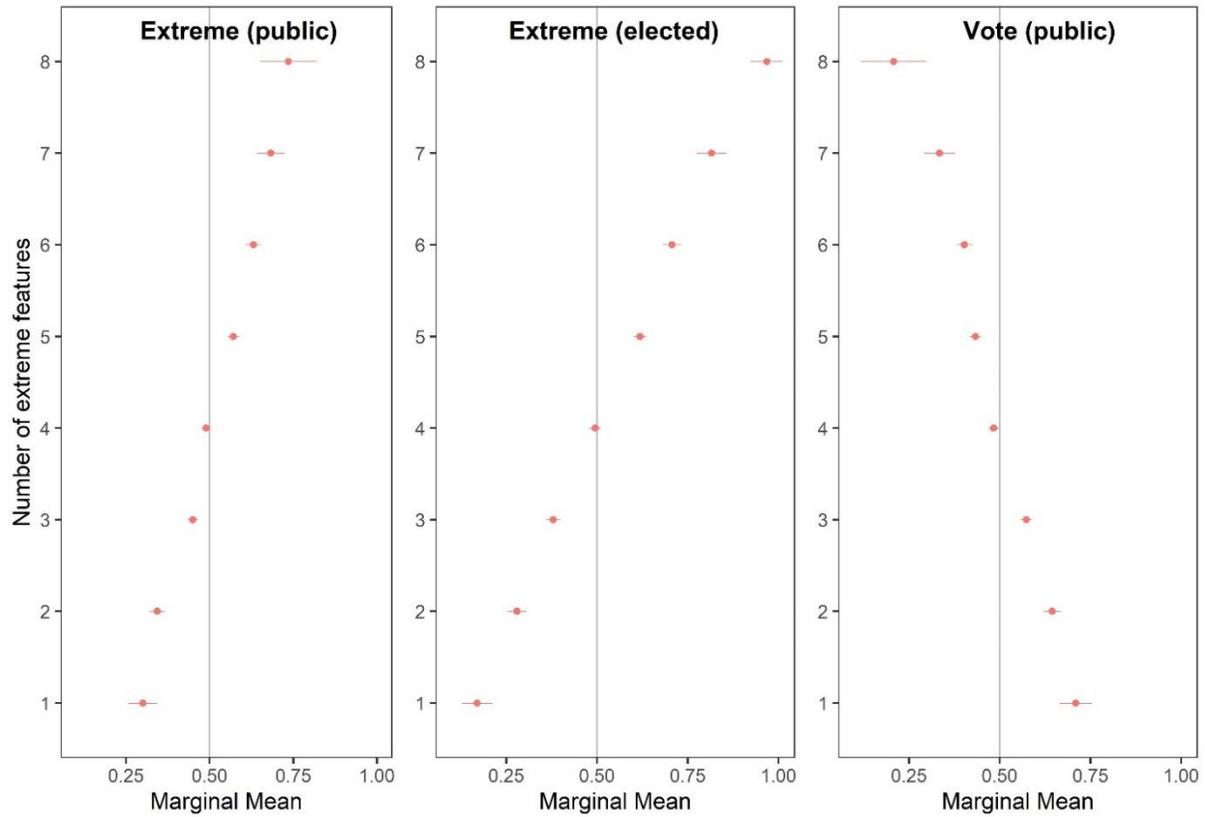
With this measure of overall extremism, I reanalyzed the conjoint data using the level of extremism as the independent variable of interest. As these attribute levels are randomly assigned, this analysis can lead to the same causal conclusions as the analyses presented earlier. The difference is in the interpretation of what the independent variable represents – in this case, the overall level, instead of specific varieties, of extremism. A small number of profiles contained no amounts or every kind of extremism; I combine the 0 and 1 levels and the 8 and 9 levels for the purposes of statistical power. Given that the relationship between the amount of extremism and individuals' judgments may be nonlinear, I treat the amount of extremism as a categorical variable so that the estimates are generated separately for each extremism score.

Figure 5 presents these results. All three panes of this figure show a clear pattern – as the number of extreme features increases, so does the likelihood a profile is labeled as extreme. Similarly, increasing the amount of extremism decreases electoral support for a profile in a nearly linear way.¹¹ These results also indicate that members of the public and elected officials have a relatively high tolerance for extremism – it is not until a profile has more than about six extreme attributes that an overwhelming percentage of the samples consider that person to be extreme. Phrased another way, profiles can have five or six kinds of extremism and still maintain about 40 percent of the support of members of the public. While 40 percent may not be enough to win a direct runoff between two candidates, it represents a large amount of support for a candidate. Americans seem to reserve the label extreme for the most fanatic cases in politics and do not abandon candidates until they are undeniably extreme. Elected officials are more sensitive to extremism (e.g., the shift from low to high amounts of extremism is sharper) but still hesitate

¹¹ Estimating these relationships with a continuous version with OLS regression leads to the same conclusions; the coefficient on the count variable is 0.07 for extremity ratings in the public, 0.11 for extremity ratings in elected officials, and -0.06 for vote preferences in the public. All three are statistically significant ($p \approx 0.000$) with standard errors clustered at the level of the respondent.

to label individuals as extreme until they have more than four types of extremism.

Figure 5. Number of extreme features



Robustness checks

I consider the robustness and homogeneity of the patterns in the analyses and figures above in various ways. First, re-estimating the analyses with partisanship as a moderator suggests that while Democrats and Republicans have different views of ideological groups and specific kinds of norm violations, they react similarly to other forms of extremism (see the Online Appendix).¹² Republicans were more likely than Democrats to view those accused of being anti-American, liberals, and far-left liberals as extreme; Democrats were more likely to consider those facing claims of racism, accusations of sexism, conservatives, and far-right

¹² Subjects were divided into three categories: Democrats, Independents, and Republicans.

conservatives as extreme. This was also true for both the elected official and public results, an important point given the partisan differences in the two samples.

Similarly, I find remarkably consistent reactions for other subgroups of the samples. Those who are more interested in politics do not react different to these kinds of extremism than the less interested. Respondents who are themselves ideologically extreme or partisan extremists do not react to extremism in ways that differ from their more centrist counterparts. This is true of both the sample of the public and state and local elected officials.

Other robustness checks support the results shown here. Using the rating measure of extremism leads to the same conclusions shown here. Analyses of the order of the profiles also indicate that respondents did not show a preference for either the profile on the left or on the right. As noted, interactions between profile attributes also do not change these conclusions.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, I drew on a novel survey of members of the public and a sample of elected officials to explore judgments of extremism in the United States. From these results, several key conclusions emerge. With respect to *H1*, elected officials and the public seem to acknowledge support for political violence as extreme. Members of the public also respond to violence with lower levels of political support. This generally supports behind *H1*. People also seem less likely to consider someone extreme when they are like that person, supporting *H2*. Admittedly, these data can only evaluate this point in a limited way – I can only consider similarity with respect to ideology, authoritarianism, and the discussion of politics. However, even with only these three measures, the results strongly provide support to *H2* and indicate that similarity dampens extremism judgments both in the public and elected officials. In support of *H3*, I find that elected officials and the public increasing label an individual as extreme when the amount of extremism

expressed by that person increases. The inverse is true for vote support. Intriguingly, large amounts of extremism are required to garner an overwhelming consensus about extremism in the public and among political elites.

The same factors that promote impressions of extremism erode electoral support. When considering who they would vote for, members of the public penalize candidates for the same attributes that are judged as extreme. There are some exceptions to this but by and large, more extreme individuals face a penalty in a voting context.

This last conclusion is somewhat at odds with recent research in political science, which finds that extremist and moderate candidates perform at similar levels (Utych 2020a). However, that research considers ideological extremity, and in my results, only far-left and far-right ideologues lose votes; conservatives, liberals, and moderates all garner statistically similar amounts of support. It may therefore be the case that while ideological extremity does not create large penalties at the ballot box, other kinds of extremism like violence or incivility do.

These results have some key limitations. First, these surveys examined only perceptions and attitudes. As a result, more work needs to be done to consider what motivates people to join extremist movements or politically participate in ways that help or hurt extremist causes. Second, the structure of the conjoint task also cannot incorporate many factors that can be important to perceptions of extremism – like charismatic leadership, the experience of uncertainty, and existential threat. Those factors and their interactions with these perceptions are outside the scope of this study and require additional theoretical and empirical exploration.

The results of these two experiments lead both to optimism and concern for those interested in strengthening democracy. On the optimistic side, members of the public seem to see extremism in the right places and give an electoral penalty for these kinds of views. Elected

officials at the state and local level do this even more consistently and may therefore be an even more reliable bulwark against extremism.

From another view, however, even the most concerning kind of extremism – support for political violence – are far from universally condemned. Among members of the public, respondents have a 55 percent probability of considering support for violence as extreme. This falls well short of overwhelming condemnation. Along the same lines, about 45 percent of respondents in the public indicate that they are willing to vote for a candidate who explicitly supports political violence. The picture for elites is somewhat better – 63 percent probability of considering violence to be extreme – but similarly underwhelming. Other kinds of extremism like political intolerance, racism, sexism, and a refusal to compromise fail to meet even these modest levels of recognition and rejection. And it is not until an individual possess remarkably high amounts of extremism that they are labelled as such by most members of the public and lose electoral support. Some might consider this latter point a form of political tolerance for various kinds of unpopular views; however, this conjoint experiment asked only for people to indicate which profile was more extreme rather than make specific tolerance judgments. In addition, this does not diminish the negative democratic consequences of the forms of extremism present in these individuals. All of this points to serious limitations of the public and elected officials as serious barriers to extremism and the problems that it can create for democratic society.

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