What Are You Talking About? Discussion Frequency of Issues Captured in Common Survey Questions

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March 2025

Abstract

Social science surveys regularly ask respondents to generate opinions or positions on issues deemed to be of political and social importance, such as confidence in government officials or federal spending priorities. Many theories assume interpersonal deliberation is a primary mechanism through which people develop positions on such issues, but it is unclear how often the issues captured by such questions become a topic of conversation. Using an original survey of 2,117 American adults, we quantify how often people report discussing the issues tapped by 88 questions in the General Social Survey's core questionnaire, as well as how often respondents say they individually reflect on these issues, how important they believe them to be, and how sensitive they believe it would be to discuss those issues. We find the majority of respondents report discussing the majority of issues fewer than once or twice a year, with the modal response that respondents have never discussed an issue in the past year. At the same time, some topics—including religious beliefs and generic appraisals of political leaders—come up quite frequently, and a small number of respondents report frequently discussing most items. We consider the implications of these findings for theories of belief formation.

Reproducibility Package: The data and code to reproduce the full set of analyses are provided at https://osf.io/u8b7v.

Introduction

The salience of social and political issues to the general public is of central importance for diverse social science perspectives, including questions of public opinion (Converse 1964; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992), democratic voter behavior (Campbell et al. 1960), partisan polarization (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; DellaPosta 2020), and identity formation and social influence (DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2015). Many of these perspectives, as well as the broader "neo-Tocquevellian" (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014) perspective on civic life, assume that issues of collective concern, especially issues of politics, are sorted out through deliberation at the local level (Putnam 2001). But whether people actually deliberate the issues that frequently become the topic of social science inquiry—and which provide the empirical underpinnings for many theories of opinion formation—is poorly understood.

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To address this gap, we present findings from a national survey of American adults designed to gauge the frequency with which people discuss issues commonly tapped in surveys, specifically issues captured in the *General Social Survey*'s (GSS) "core" questionnaire. These issues include questions of national politics, confidence in different institutions, beliefs about gender and family roles, generalized trust, socioeconomic identification, views on morality, and religious beliefs and identifications. While these issues do not encompass all potential political issues, especially transient "hot-button" or "takeoff" issues that often dominate news and discussion for short periods of time before getting resolved, findings about these specific questions underlie diverse theories of social behavior and change (DellaPosta 2020; DellaPosta et al. 2015; Kiley and Vaisey 2020; Vaisey and Lizardo 2016). Other common surveys underlying important theories of political behavior, including the *American National Election Study* and the *Cooperative Election Study*, also frequently ask about these issues (Zaller 1992).

Our central finding is that the majority of respondents report the majority of issues explored in our study came up in conversation either "never" or "only once or twice" in the past year. Whether this is "a little bit" or "a lot" of discussion largely depends on expectations and how often topics co-occur in conversation, which we cannot quantify. What we can confidently say is that most people report discussing most specific issues a couple times a year or less. This finding, however, obscures heterogeneity at the issue and person level. For some issues, including belief in God, general confidence in government officials, and desired immigration levels, more than 40 percent of respondents reported that the topic came up about "once a month" or more often. For other issues, including specific issues related to civil liberties and different forms of sexual morality, the majority of respondents report never talking about them at all. The frequency of discussing all issues is positively correlated, often quite strongly, and we find much more variance across individuals in the frequency of discussion than we see across issues.

Perhaps surprising given common findings about people's hesitancy to raise issues and disclose positions with discussion partners in one's life (Lee and Bearman 2017, 2020; Small 2017; Small, Brant, and Fekete 2024), we find high correlations between how important people deem issues, their willingness to talk about these issues with strangers and friends, the frequency with which people report thinking about issues, and the frequency with which people report actually having talked about issues. Again, informative exceptions exist, but we interpret these correlations as suggesting that, among the issues explored here, people face few barriers in discussing topics they deem important with people in their lives or, alternatively, that assessment of issue importance is in part a function of how frequently people talk about an issue.

Our results are useful in two ways. On a substantive level, our results provide a rough quantification of how frequently Americans say they *think* about and *talk* about a broad range of issues frequently explored by researchers, as well as how important Americans deem these topics to be. These quantifications can help inform future research and interpretation of survey responses and reinforces the idea that many Americans (though by no means all) "avoid politics," especially compared to other topics (Eliasoph 1998). While many theories of opinion formation assume discussions in social networks that exist independent of context, our results—although we cannot measure it directly—are consistent with the idea that structured environments, like congregations, workplaces, and other organizations, shape opportunities and topics of discussion. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our results speak to the plausibility of different models of attitude formation and political polarization.

Issue Salience

Social science researchers use a variety of approaches to capture the salience of political and social issues for the general public. In perhaps the most common approach, frequently used in the American National Election Studies, survey administrators ask respondents to rate the "most important issue" or "problem" in their lives (Jones 1995; McCombs and Shaw 1972). While these survey-based approaches capture what a representative sample of respondents claim to be important issues, the framing of "most important problem," often in the context of an election, does not necessarily reflect what issues people discuss with their family, friends, coworkers, and other close confidants on a regular basis (Wlezien 2005). Respondents might simply be repeating what political leaders' emphasize in an election, rather than reflecting on the salience of issues in their everyday lives (Zaller 1992). These approaches also neglect the salience of these issues relative to other topics that might not be labeled "problems" or "issues."

Other attempts at measuring the salience of topics quantify the prevalence of issues, organizations, and events in news media (Andrews and Caren 2010). These approaches rely on assumptions about the media's "agenda-setting" role in shaping public opinion, positing that coverage of issues increases or reflects the salience of these issues in people's lives, without assessment of consumption of this information. While research shows that consumption of news media produces shifts in beliefs about the importance of different issues (Zaller 1992), the influence of a media environment is contingent on people's engagement with it, and people most likely to consume news media might be the ones most susceptible to its influence.

More recently, researchers have focused on measuring salience using the prevalence of issues on social media (Bail 2014; Golder and Macy 2014). While these approaches capture a more diverse set of voices than those reflected in the news media, they similarly suffer from potential selection problems. Americans who engage in online political discussions—those who produce the content measured in these approaches—differ in systematic ways from those who do not, most notably in their concern for those issues. People who take time to discuss specific matters in public likely care more about them than people who do not. Similarly, if people perceive these online forums to be spaces for talking about certain issues rather than others, what is discussed in these spaces might differ in systematic ways from other components of the civil sphere.

Finally, research on discussion of social and political issues focuses either on the frequency of discussing specific issues or the frequency of discussing issues with specific alters without the ability to compare across topic domains or make general claims about the salience of issues for the general public across contexts and relationships (Bobkowski and Pearce 2011; Hargittai et al. 2024). This can make it difficult to disentangle whether the mechanisms driving discussion among the members of the public are topic-, relation-, or site-specific.

Broadly speaking, then, while researchers have a good sense of what members of the general public understand to be "important" issues in general elections, and while researchers have established a good sense of what topics dominate news and social media, it is still unclear how often these issues become topics of discussion in everyday life.

What Do People Talk About in Everyday Life?

Social science research suggests that issues become topics of conversation for many reasons. People raise topics in conversation to express and reinforce their identity (Goffman 1959; Tajfel and Turner 1979), to make instrumental and affective connections with other people (Dunbar 2002; Lizardo

2006; McLean 1998), and to solve both minor and major problems in their everyday lives (Daminger 2019; Small 2017). While some of this conversation is strategic (Cowan and Baldassarri 2018), much of it is reactive, with people often raising topics with discussion partners with little or no forethought to the purpose of discussion or the discussion partner (Small and Sukhu 2016). Given this range of motivations for discussion and the variance in individual experience, the number of issues that could become topics of conversation is essentially unlimited. Because of this, any specific issue—including those tapped in social science studies—is likely to be an infrequent topic of conversation.

Prior research on conversation topics broadly reinforces the idea that conversation is diverse and specific to individual experience. When people are asked to reflect on the "important matters" they have discussed with other people,[1] they tend to report topics related to personal financial challenges, work-related challenges, romantic and familial relationships, and mental and physical health (Bailey and Marsden 1999; Bearman and Parigi 2004; Brashears 2014; Small et al. 2024). In these studies, respondents rarely report that these "important matters" include national politics, confidence in institutions, or other issues commonly tapped in general social science surveys. Attempts to capture the frequency of different discussion topics also find that national news, politics, or social issues, which are common topics for social science surveys, are not common topics of discussion (Sehulster 2006). Relatedly, people appear to talk to far fewer people in their lives about political matters than they do about other "important matters" outlined above (Lee and Bearman 2017, 2020), again suggesting that these are infrequent topics of discussion.

Importance and Discussion Frequency

While these findings suggest social and political issues are not perceived to be "important matters" and therefore not a common topic of conversation, what people deem to be "important" in these contexts is not a direct measure of what people spend their time discussing. It could be the case that people frequently discuss political and social issues but do not consider them "important" in the context of these questions. Similarly, it could be that people think issues are important and reflect on them often but do not discuss them. Some issues might be perceived to be normatively "off limits" for discussion, either by society as a whole or by specific groups, making them infrequent topics of conversation (Eliasoph 1998; Mutz 2006). The common invocation that people refrain from talking about religion and politics in polite company reflects this kind of normative influence, and other work suggests that discussions of sexual morality and abortion are generally discouraged in many settings (Cowan and Baldassarri 2018; Gelman and Margalit 2021). Even if a person has an individual preference to discuss an issue, he or she might lack a partner to discuss that issue with (Cowan and Baldassarri 2018; Small et al. 2024). It could be the case that many people wish to discuss something but a widespread belief that other people do not means the issue fails to become a common topic of discussion.

For all these reasons, it is an empirical question whether there is a relationship between what people think is important, what they spend their time thinking about, and what they discuss with other people.

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[1]This focus on "important matters" grows out of the fact that much of this research is focused on trying to understand how people interpret a common network-generator question used in surveys rather than trying to understand everyday conversations.

Issue Differences

Our baseline expectation is that discussion of any specific issue covered in social science surveys is uncommon because a variety of topics exists and because people tend to discuss issues directly relevant to their personal lives. At the same time, there are reasons to expect variation across issues in discussion frequency as social forces make some issues more likely to come up in discussion. We suggest two primary institutional influences on how frequently people discuss issues: the contexts in which they spend their time and the focusing and coordinating role of major social institutions.

First, institutional mechanisms bring people together and focus attention on particular topics (Feld 1981). Because time and attention are finite, where people spend time and who they spend it with are likely to affect what they talk about. Adults spend much of their time in workplaces discussing a range of work-related topics, but these topics are rarely tapped in national opinion surveys. Conversely, few people spend significant amounts of time in social spaces that explicitly focus attention on the kinds of political and social issues that dominate social science surveys (Putnam 2001), meaning they likely have few structured opportunities for conversations around these topics. While it is plausible that informal social settings—bars, recreational facilities, and other "third spaces"—provide opportunities to discuss the topics that come up in social science surveys, existing work suggests that discussion of politics tends to be infrequent and actively discouraged in many of these settings (Eliasoph 1998).

One type of setting that does provide structured opportunities to discuss a subset of issues tapped in social science surveys with other people is religious congregations (Smith 1998). While religious service attendance has declined in recent decades (Voas and Chaves 2016), about a third of Americans say they attend religious services at least once a month (Smith et al. 2025). These organizations often encourage people to reflect on several issues commonly tapped in surveys—religious and spiritual identity, the nature of God, and the existence of an afterlife—and provide people with whom to discuss these issues. Perhaps because of this structuring effect, we find (as we will show below) that issues of religious faith and identification are more frequent topics of discussion than many other issues tapped in social science surveys.

Second, political leaders and news media shape the public agenda, which influences the topics that become salient (Zaller 1992). For example, national elections focus public and media attention, increase the frequency with which people discuss some issues, and change who people discuss these issues with (Lee and Bearman 2020). Because of these focusing effects, members of the general public potentially end up talking about similar issues (at least similar social and political issues), even while they live very different lives (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). This suggests discussion frequency across topics—especially among the kinds of political issues that dominate opinion surveys—should be unevenly distributed, with a few issues receiving significant attention while most receive little.

Interpersonal Differences

To this point, we have focused on which issues become topics of discussion. However, we also expect people to vary in how likely they are to have such discussions in the first place. Existing work suggests most members of the public spend little time engaging with the national political and social issues that dominate social science surveys (Converse 1964; Putnam 2001), in part because they spend little time in settings that facilitate this discussion. Instead, people primarily discuss issues that are "close to home," which tend not to show up in national surveys. At the same time, a subset of the public engages in what Hersch (2020) calls "political hobbyism"—the consumption

and discussion of political and social issues as a form of recreation. These individuals spend significant amounts of leisure time consuming information about politics and discussing a broad set of these issues.

Because of this, we expect (1) high correlations among the frequency of discussing diverse social and political issues; (2) a highly skewed distribution of individual propensities to discuss issues in general, with a small proportion of the population engaging in very high rates of discussion; and (3) that the propensity to discuss any given social or political issue will be strongly correlated with attention to news about national politics.

Empirical Strategy

Since our main substantive interest is to assess the discussion prevalence of the kinds of social issues that are frequently explored by social science researchers, our starting place is the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey started in 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. We selected 88 survey questions from the core questionnaire of the GSS—questions generally asked in each wave of the survey—that tap into Americans' subjective views about politics, religion, morality, and social life. These questions provide a large coverage of various issues, ranging from the legality of abortion to beliefs about God, views about gay marriage, and views on affirmative action. Table S1 in the supplemental materials provides the list of these items. While certainly not representative of all issues, the GSS provide us with a set of validated questions for measuring public opinion.

We recruited 2,183 participants through the Lucid Marketplace between June 6 and June 9, 2024. The sample was largely representative of the U.S. adult population across several demographic categories—age, sex, race, Hispanic status, and region—and we used poststratification weights to adjust our sample composition to approximate U.S. Census representation.[2] As documented in supplemental materials, we applied a variety of quality checks to ensure a sample of good quality, including attention measures, geo-location, and bot detection, reducing the final analytic sample to 2,117. We provide more details about sampling, quality control, and post-stratification in the supplemental materials, while Table S5 provides basic descriptive statistics of our sample across several key demographics.

We assigned each participant to 15 randomly selected GSS items. For each item, participants were instructed to carefully read the question, think about the issue addressed, and respond to a set of questions regarding this issue. These questions asked whether the participants (1) discussed this issue with anyone else in the past year, (2) thought about the issue in the past year, (3) found the issue personally important, and (4) found the issue comfortable to talk about with an acquaintance.[3] In the end, each question received between 340 and 380 responses—see Table S3 for the full counts— giving us broad measures on discussion frequency, thinking frequency, importance, and sensitivity associated with each issue.[4] Supplemental Materials provides details about our survey instrument.

Using these measures, we generated average scores for each issue using weighted sample estimates

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[2]Table S2 in the online supplemental material shows the distribution of predefined quota goals in the Lucid Marketplace and the final number of respondents across these categories.

[3]Following DiPrete et al. (2011), we defined an "acquaintance" as someone the participant "know[s] [by] name and would stop and talk at least for a moment if [they] ran into the person on the street or in a shopping mall." In an alternative specification, we changed the "acquaintance" to "a random American you do not know." The substantive ordering of the results remained similar, with average scores between two specifications having a correlation of 0.88.

[4]In analyses shown in Table S4, we show that these sampling differences have no influence on average scores.

of survey responses. While estimating averages, we recoded the survey responses for discussion and thinking frequency to provide interpretable scores: we recoded *never* as 0 days, *about once or twice* as 1.5 days, *several times* as 6 days, *about once a month* as 12 days, *2-3 times a month* as 30 days, and *once a week or more* as 52 days over the year. For issue importance and discussion sensitivity, we estimated simple averages and normalized the scores such that they are between 0 and 1.[5]

Findings

Discussion Frequency

We begin by examining the self-reported discussion frequencies. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage distribution of discussion frequency in the aggregate, as measured by our survey questionnaire, while Figure 2 shows the estimated number of days an issue is discussed across major topical areas, as measured by our approximation to average days in a year. There are several notable findings.

Figure 1 suggests that the modal response to the discussion of issues is *never*, with a steep decline after, and a majority of responses (60 percent) fall into either the "Never" or "About Once or Twice" categories in the past year.[6] Across all issues, the average percentage discussing any given GSS issue about once a month or more is less than 20%. To rephrase these results, we find that, on average, the issues we ask about come up in discussion approximately 6.8 days a year, with a range from 3 days to nearly 13 days. Considering that our coding has an upper bound of 52 days, it is notable that the highest end is roughly 1/4th of a weekly schedule, suggesting that individual issues tapped in national opinion surveys are at best moderately relevant to everyday discussions.

Figure 2 shows the estimated average number of days each issue is discussed, categorized by basic topical areas. On the higher end, general religious issues—beliefs about God, perceptions about being a religious person, or one's spirituality—are more frequent topics of discussion than other issues, followed by public confidence in major political institutions and leaders, such as Congress and the executive branch, as well as issues like immigration and marijuana legalization. On the lower end, we see issues pertaining to civil rights—whether racists or atheists can have books in the library or teach at college—and morality items such as premarital sex, or euthanasia.

We are hesitant to make strong claims about the frequency of discussion across these major topic domains as the "issues" tapped in different topics vary significantly in their generality. For example, ideological identification—a common label that is likely to be invoked across diverse topics—is a common point of discussion, even while specific spending federal priorities are not. Conversely, there is no general question about "civil liberties," only a set of very specific scenarios that rarely come up in discussion. Similarly, it is not clear how independent discussion of different topics is. All seven abortion questions are discussed an average of about eight times a year, but it is unclear

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[5]We conducted four ancillary analyses to see whether these estimates were sensitive to alternative specifications. First, we calculated unweighted averages, and estimated Spearman rank correlations for each construct. These values ranged from 0.95 to 0.97. Second, we estimated multilevel mixed-effects models with varying intercepts at the participant and GSS item level to estimate partially-pooled averages (Gelman and Hill 2007). These scores, once again, correlated highly with sample averages (0.95–0.98). For discussion frequency and thinking frequency, we checked whether simple averages using the 1–7 Likert scale produce similar results with our interpretable scores, and we found, once again, very high correlations (0.97–0.98). Finally, we estimated ordinal cumulative link models and predicted a latent score for each GSS item for discussion frequency. We then checked the Spearman correlation of these scores with our metric, finding a ρ of 0.96. We settled on weighted sample means given their simplicity and high robustness to alternative specifications.

[6]Figure S1 in the supplemental materials present 5,000 issue bootstraps, showing that these results are robust to the inclusion or exclusion of particular items in the GSS.
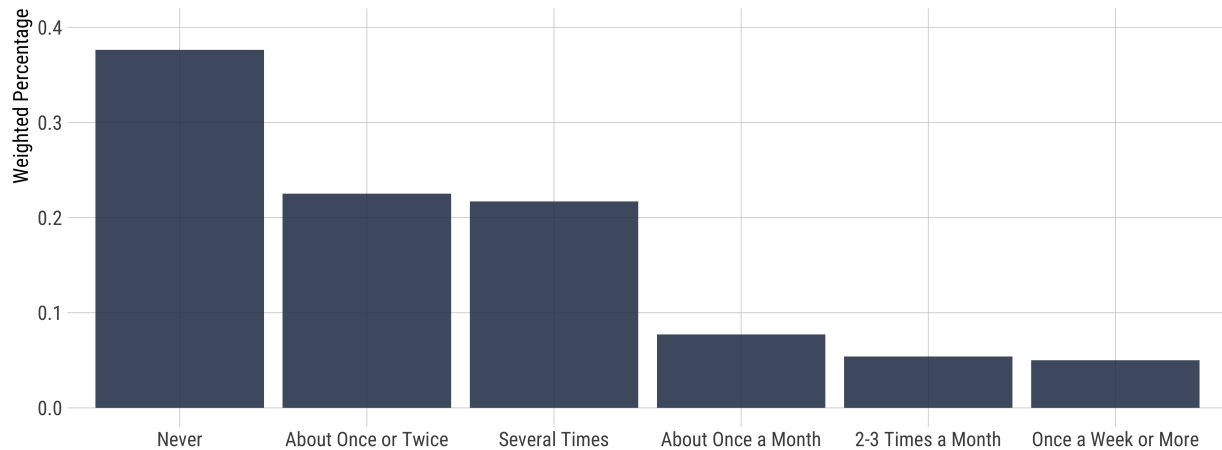
Figure 1: The Percentage Distribution of Discussion Frequency
Notes: The figure shows weighted percentage distribution of discussion frequency across all individuals and issues.

whether this reflects eight conversations that touch on multiple facets of abortion or 56 discussions that range in topics. We suspect it is closer to the former than the latter.

The variation within the topical domains is striking, however. Take, for instance, questions about institutional confidence. We see that participants discuss confidence in major political institutions on a consistent basis: Congress comes up an average of 10.9 days a year, the executive branch an average of 10.4 days, and the press an average of 8.5 days. In contrast, the military emerges as a topic of discussion 6 days a year, the scientific community 6.1 days, and educational institutions 6.5 days. The set of items regarding federal spending on different topics also shows strong variation: while spending items involving fighting crime, the environment, and health come up more frequently as discussion topics—with 9.5, 8.6, and 8.4 days a year, respectively—spending on issues like space exploration (4.3 days) or mass transportation (5.1 days) receive little attention.

The Covariance of Discussions Across Issues

Figures 3 and 4 provide information about how these issues *go together* in our sample. In Figure 3, we present the estimated correlations between the discussion frequency of all the issues examined in the article. In Figure 4, we present a hierarchical clustering of these co-occurrences. The first takeaway from the figures is that issues, in general, are quite strongly correlated (mean $\rho = .49$, with a standard deviation of 0.12). Only a single issue pair has a negative correlation (`librac` and `letin1`), which is very close to 0. In other words, Figure 3 suggests the people who say they talk more about any given issue tend to say they talk more about all other issues as well.

At the same time, within this general trend, there are some issue clusters with higher-than-average inter-item correlations. A set of "social" or "moral" issues including gay marriage, the morality of homosexual and extramarital relationships, several cases of abortion, and laws around divorce correlate strongly with each other (Cluster 7, highlighted in the figure). A set of issues related to religion, including identification as a spiritual and religious person, interpretation of the Bible, God, the existence of an afterlife, and, perhaps surprisingly, whether it is OK to spank children also correlate strongly with each other in the top left corner (Cluster 1). And a broad set of issues around racial inequality, such as whether racial differences are due to differences in access to education,
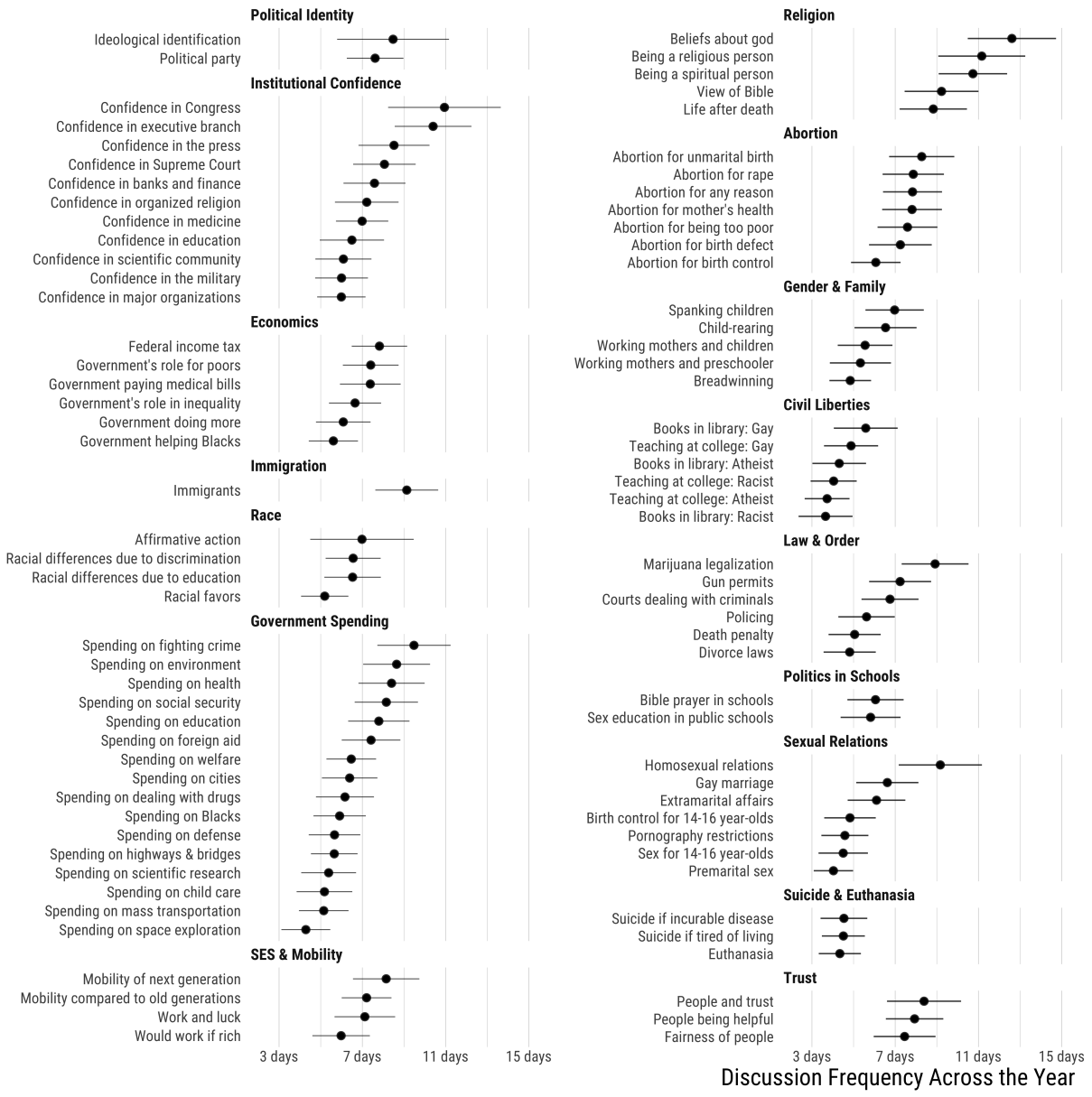
Figure 2

Political Identity
- Ideological identification
- Political party

Institutional Confidence
- Confidence in Congress
- Confidence in executive branch
- Confidence in the press
- Confidence in Supreme Court
- Confidence in banks and finance
- Confidence in organized religion
- Confidence in medicine
- Confidence in education
- Confidence in scientific community
- Confidence in the military
- Confidence in major organizations

Economics
- Federal income tax
- Government's role for poors
- Government paying medical bills
- Government's role in inequality
- Government doing more
- Government helping Blacks

Immigration
- Immigrants

Race
- Affirmative action
- Racial differences due to discrimination
- Racial differences due to education
- Racial favors

Government Spending
- Spending on fighting crime
- Spending on environment
- Spending on health
- Spending on social security
- Spending on education
- Spending on foreign aid
- Spending on welfare
- Spending on cities
- Spending on dealing with drugs
- Spending on Blacks
- Spending on defense
- Spending on highways & bridges
- Spending on scientific research
- Spending on child care
- Spending on mass transportation
- Spending on space exploration

SES & Mobility
- Mobility of next generation
- Mobility compared to old generations
- Work and luck
- Would work if rich

3 days   7 days   11 days   15 days

Religion
- Beliefs about god
- Being a religious person
- Being a spiritual person
- View of Bible
- Life after death

Abortion
- Abortion for unmarital birth
- Abortion for rape
- Abortion for any reason
- Abortion for mother's health
- Abortion for being too poor
- Abortion for birth defect
- Abortion for birth control

Gender & Family
- Spanking children
- Child-rearing
- Working mothers and children
- Working mothers and preschooler
- Breadwinning

Civil Liberties
- Books in library: Gay
- Teaching at college: Gay
- Books in library: Atheist
- Teaching at college: Racist
- Teaching at college: Atheist
- Books in library: Racist

Law & Order
- Marijuana legalization
- Gun permits
- Courts dealing with criminals
- Policing
- Death penalty
- Divorce laws

Politics in Schools
- Bible prayer in schools
- Sex education in public schools

Sexual Relations
- Homosexual relations
- Gay marriage
- Extramarital affairs
- Birth control for 14-16 year-olds
- Pornography restrictions
- Sex for 14-16 year-olds
- Premarital sex

Suicide & Euthanasia
- Suicide if incurable disease
- Suicide if tired of living
- Euthanasia

Trust
- People and trust
- People being helpful
- Fairness of people

3 days   7 days   11 days   15 days

Discussion Frequency Across the Year

Figure 2: The Average Discussion Frequency Across Issues

Notes: The figure shows weighted average discussion frequencies across issues. To increase interpretability, the qualitative survey responses—ranging from "never" to "once a week or more"—are recoded to quantitative scores that range from 0 to 52. The error bars represent 95% standard errors of the weighted mean scores.

whether Black Americans deserve additional assistance, and the acceptability of Affirmative Action policies, and general politics, including spending on welfare, whether the government should spend more on helping people cover medical costs, gun regulations, and confidence in science, hang together in Cluster 3. However, it is important to reiterate that these stronger correlations are slight deviations from a pattern of overall positive correlations across all items and are not reflective of notably distinct "issue publics" that discuss very different issues.

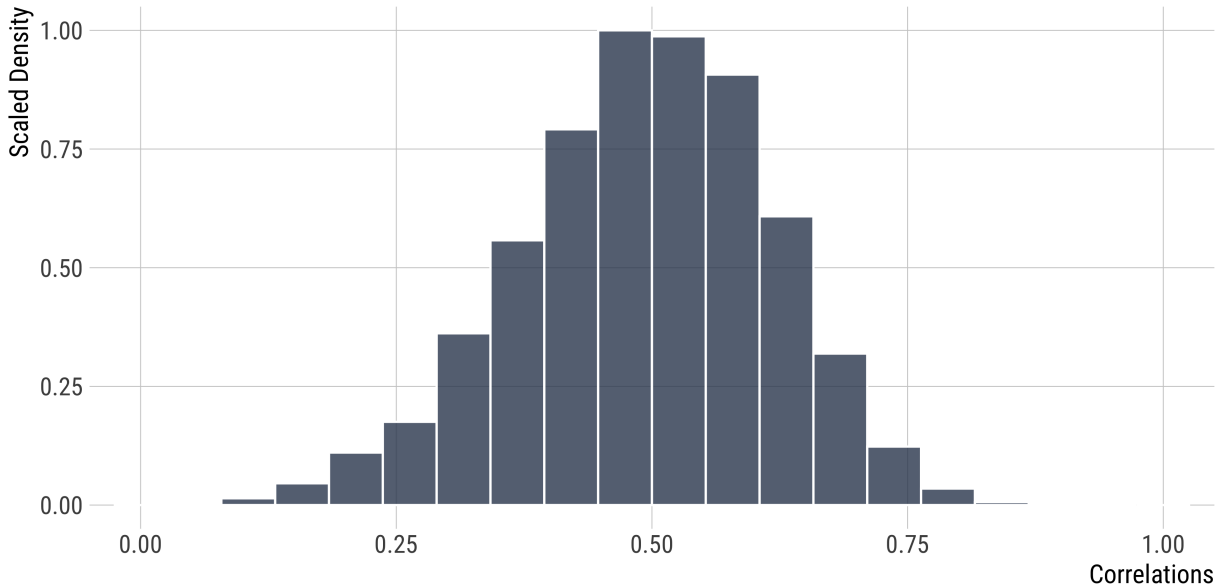While these clusters have some relation to the issue clusters we used to structure Figure 2—all of

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Figure 3: The Estimated Level of Correlations Across Issues
Notes: The figure shows the distribution of Spearman correlations across all issue pairs (N = 3,828). while the right panel shows a hierarchical clustering of these correlations from Euclidean distance scores.

the religion questions in Figure 2 cluster in Figure 4—they are not completely aligned. For example, one of the abortion questions—abortion if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children—appears in Cluster 6, showing higher correlations with issues such as partisan identification than the other abortion questions, which appear in Cluster 7.

Individual Differences in Discussion Frequency

What about individual differences in discussion frequency? Because people responded to random subsets of 15 of the full 88 questions, and because issues differ in their baseline propensity to be discussed, unadjusted individual means present a misleading picture of how likely people are to discuss issues in general. To ensure that our measure of individual variation accounts for these differences, we imputed responses to unasked items using the correlations in Figure 3.[7] We present the estimated distribution of discussion frequency on average and across issues in Figure 5.

Any summary measure for discussion frequency is potentially misleading for two reasons. First, because we separately asked respondents about how many conversations they had on each issue, we ignore the fact that many issues explored here have the potential to co-occur in conversations. As a result, summing up the number of conversations is likely to inflate the total number of conversations people have. A single discussion about abortion might touch on both the permissibly of abortion in the case of birth defects and abortion in the case of rape, as well as partisan and

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[7]We fit a Bayesian multilevel model with varying intercepts at the item and individual level, while also including several additional parameters: age, gender, race, college attendance, region, ideology, partisanship, attention to politics, and attention to news. We incorporated the covariance structure of items estimated from the sample to account for the fact that items are not independent, and we specified Student's t-distribution as a prior distribution for the random effects to capture heavy tails. We used this model to predict all empty items in the dataset, and transformed the ordinal predictions to quantitative estimates using our coding scheme. In the final step, we calculated the average value of discussion frequency at the individual and item level from 1,000 posterior draws across 2,117 individuals and 88 items.
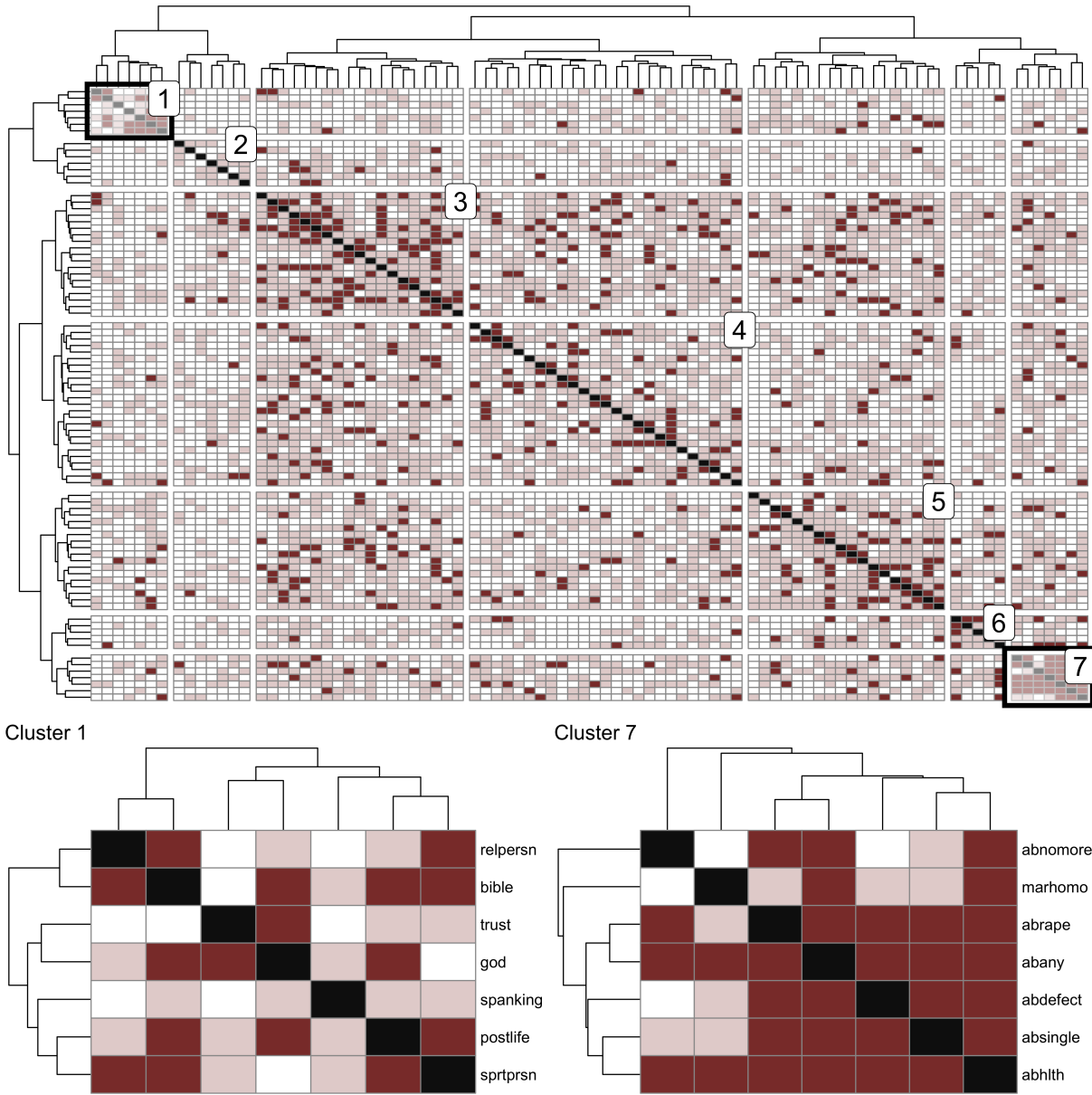
Cluster 1

Cluster 7

Figure 4: The Hierarchical Clustering of Issues
Notes: The figure shows a hierarchical clustering of correlations from Euclidean distance scores.

ideological identification, so summing those responses as if they were independent conversations will make it appear that people have many more discussions on these topics than they do. Second, people are likely to over-report their discussion frequency of individual issues for various reasons. While this is likely not a significant problem when comparing issues in isolation, as all issues are likely affected by this problem, aggregating multiple over-reports across many issues has the potential to dramatically misrepresent respondents' propensity to discuss issues.

The distribution in Figure 5 is highly right-skewed, with a peak of about one to two discussions a year for all issues and a small number of respondents saying that these issues come up quite frequently. All issues follow the same distribution. In other words, a small number of "political
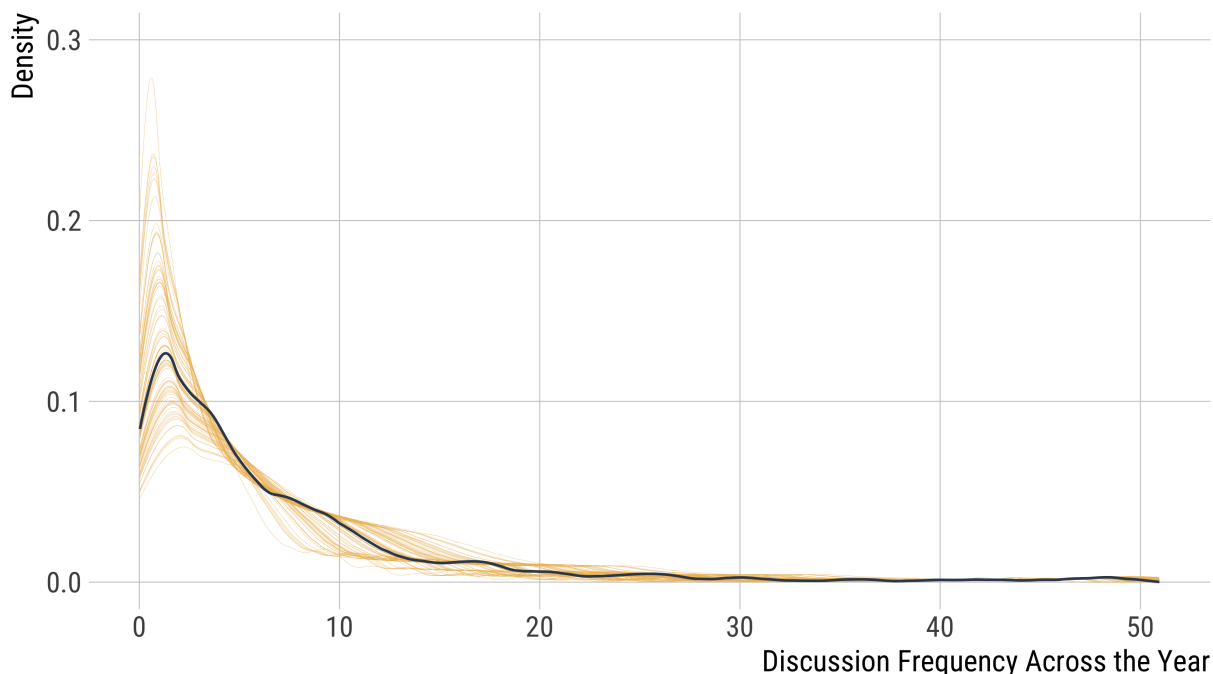
Figure 5: The Distribution of Discussion Frequencies Across Individuals
Notes: The figure presents the distribution of discussion frequencies across individuals, using model predicted responses at the individual and item level. The density plots with yellow lines represent the distribution of individual frequencies at each issue, while the density plot with a dark blue line presents the average frequency across issues.

hobbyists" discuss issues frequently, driving up the average number of discussions respondents have on each issue. In Figure 6, we present the effects of political attention on discussion frequency, which shows a steep linear trend across individuals. The more attention people say they pay to politics, the more conversations they report having about each issue.

Group Differences in Discussion Issues

While average discussion frequency provides a general picture of the U.S. population, it is plausible that it might hide salient differences across groups. To capture whether there are indeed such heterogeneities, we calculated weighted scores once more, this time by separately looking across partisan identification (Democrats, *N*=716 versus Republicans, *N*=672), racial identification (Whites, *N*=1,537 versus Blacks, *N*=266), age (those between the ages of 18 and 35, *N*=636 and those aged 36 or more, *N*=1,481), and, for those aged 25 and more, college attendance (college, *N*=661 and no college, *N*=1,221). For each group comparison, we estimated the difference in discussion frequency between groups, and selected five issues from each direction—five where Group 1 discusses the issue more frequently than Group 2, and five where Group 2 discusses the issue more frequently than Group 1, ordered by the estimated difference. Figure 7 documents these differences.

Looking at partisan differences, we see that the leading issue on the aggregate, the belief about God, is concentrated among Republicans, with a difference of 7 days—10.3 days a year for Democrats compared to 17.4 days a year for the Republicans. On the other side, issues related to race, government spending, and sexual relationships are more commonly discussed among Democrats compared to Republicans, though, in general, the difference margins are somewhat smaller. Note
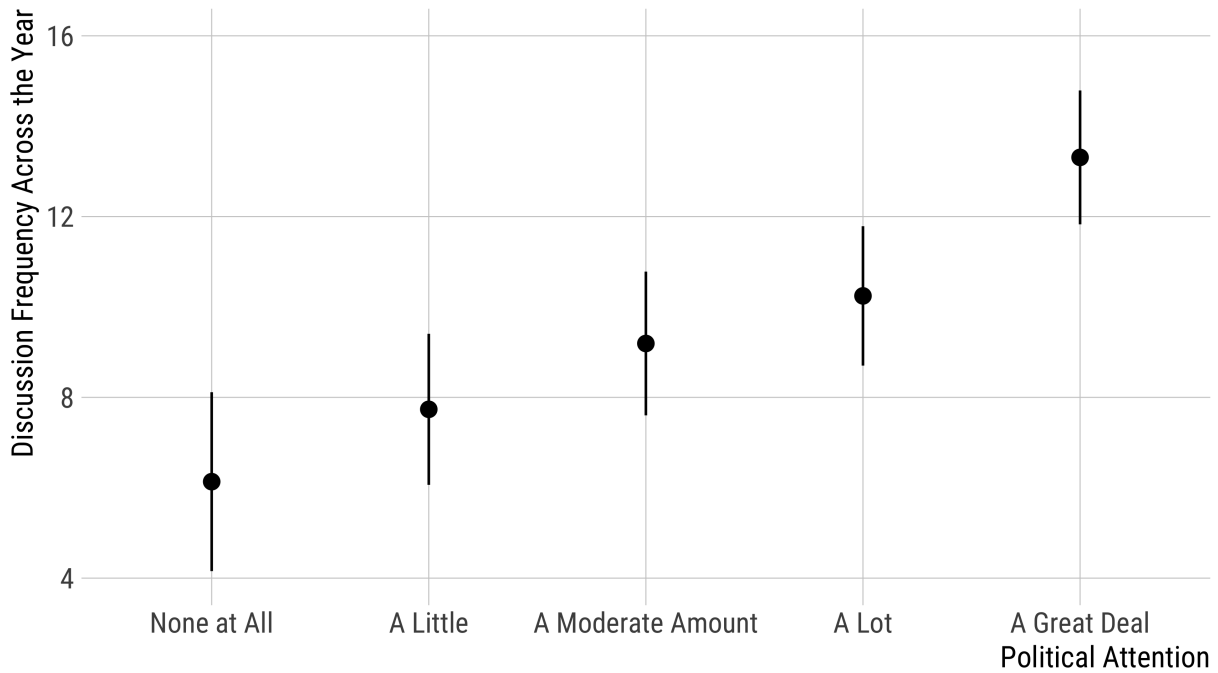
Figure 6: The Conditional Effect of Political Attention on Discussion Frequency

Notes: The figure presents average predictions of discussion frequency by political attention, estimated from a regression model that adjusts for age, gender, race, college attendance, region, ideology, and partisanship, with random intercepts at the individual and item level. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.
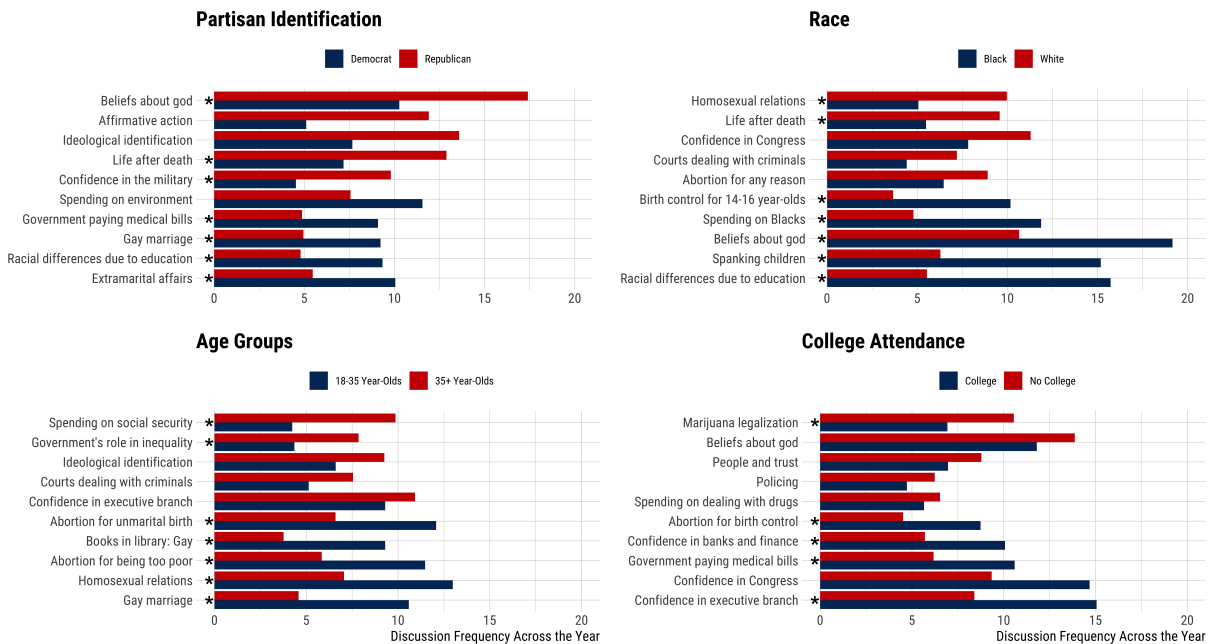

Figure 7: Group Differences in Average Discussion Frequency

Notes: The figure depicts the differences in average discussion frequency scores across groups. The differences that are statistically significant at the 95% level are marked with an asterisk.

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also that there are additional issues with seemingly strong difference-in-means without statistical significance, mainly because the group variation is high: for example, there is nearly a 7-day difference on average between groups on affirmative action, though the standard error for Democrats is 1 day compared to Republicans' 3.5 days, indicating higher variability among the latter.

When it comes to average differences across racial identification groups, we see a striking concentration among self-identified Blacks about issues related to race and minors. Discussion of racial differences resulting from education (15.7 days), spanking children (15.2 days), government spending on Blacks (11.9 days), or birth control for 14-16-year-olds (10.2 days) are discussed significantly more among self-identified Blacks than self-identified whites, along with issues pertaining to religion—e.g., belief about God takes a high of 19 days, compared to whites' 11 days. In contrast, self-identified whites are not much more likely to have more discussions than self-identified Blacks, except for questions about the morality of homosexual relations, with a difference of 4.9 days.

A similar pattern emerges for differences across age and college attendance, with younger people and those with a college degree having several distinctive discussion topics, while older participants and those without a college degree seem to have one or two distinctive issues. Looking at age[8], we see that older participants are more likely to talk about social security and the government's role in inequality, while younger participants are focused on gay marriage, homosexual relations, and abortion. Similarly, college attendees have a higher interest on confidence in major institutions—the executive branch and banks and finance—and issues pertaining to medical bills and abortion.

Covariates of Discussion

There are at least two open questions about these patterns. First, while people may *discuss* certain issues frequently, they might *think about* or personally prioritize different issues. Second, it is possible that some issues are more *sensitive* than others (Restrepo Ochoa and Vaisey 2024), leading people to avoid discussions on these topics despite ascribing high importance to them.

To address the first possibility, we asked our participants to report how often in the last year they thought about an issue—coded with the same frequency rating as the discussion frequency—and how important the issue at hand seem to them, personally. Unsurprisingly, people's reports of thinking frequency, on a general issue, were usually higher than their discussion frequency, with an average of 1.8 days. That said, Figure 8 shows that, except a few outliers, people often discuss issues they think about and personally find important. Put differently, individuals both talk and think about the things that are important to them, and there does not seem to be a lot of distinction between these things.

As noted, it is also plausible that people might avoid sensitive issues. In Figure 9, we show that this is indeed the case: there is a strong negative relationship between an issue's average sensitivity and discussion frequency (Pearson's $r = -0.44$). Once we look at the items, people think issues related to morality—such as sex among 14-16-year-olds, suicide, and birth control—and issues about racial justice are the most sensitive issues, and they avoid discussing them in public. Issue sensitivity also covaries negatively with issue importance (Pearson's $r = -0.52$), indicating that people do not find highly sensitive issues important or worthwhile for discussions.

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[8]Of course, since our study is cross-sectional, we cannot differentiate whether these differences result from age effects such that priorities change once a person gets older, or cohort effects (Ryder 1965).
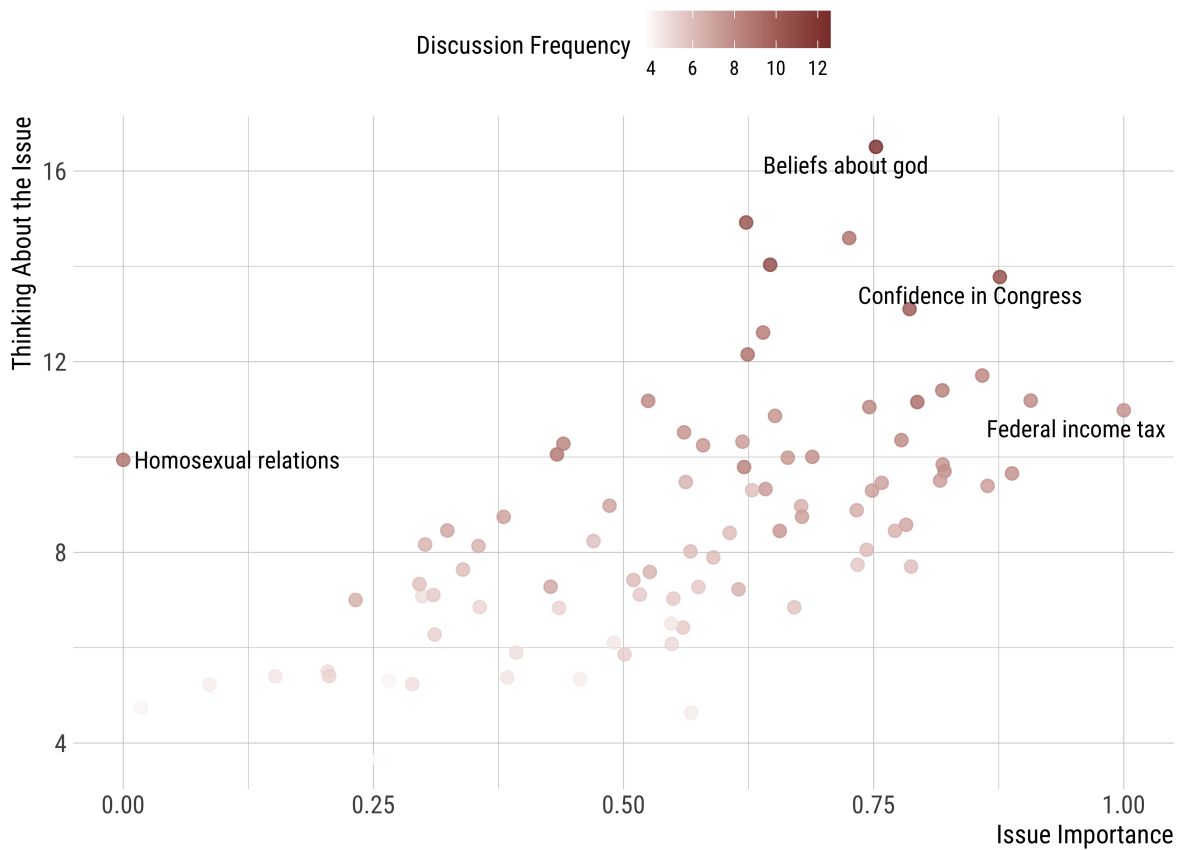
Figure 8: Issue Importance, Thinking Frequency, and Discussion Frequency
Notes: The figure depicts the weighted averages on issue importance, thinking frequency, and discussion frequency. We normalized issue importance between 0 and 1 for interpretability.

General Overview of the Findings

In summary, our findings provide several important results about the "social infrastructure" of discussion patterns in the United States. First, we show that people report discussing the issues covered in national social science surveys occasionally, with the majority of responses (about 60 percent) across issues being either "Never" or "Only Once or Twice" in the past year. We found notable variation across issues. People most commonly reported discussing issues touching on religion, general sentiment toward political officials, and immigration. "Hot-button issues" on sexual morality and sensitive issues like euthanasia, suicide, and racial issues are rarely reported to be the topic of personal discussions. Major issues in the 2024 presidential campaign—crime, immigration, and spending in health—are more frequently reported as discussion topics.

Second, we found high correlation in discussion frequency across items, and between-question variance in reported discussion frequency is small compared to between-person variance in reported discussion frequency. The average discussion frequency is significantly inflated by a small proportion of respondents engaging in much higher rates of discussion than the rest of the sample.

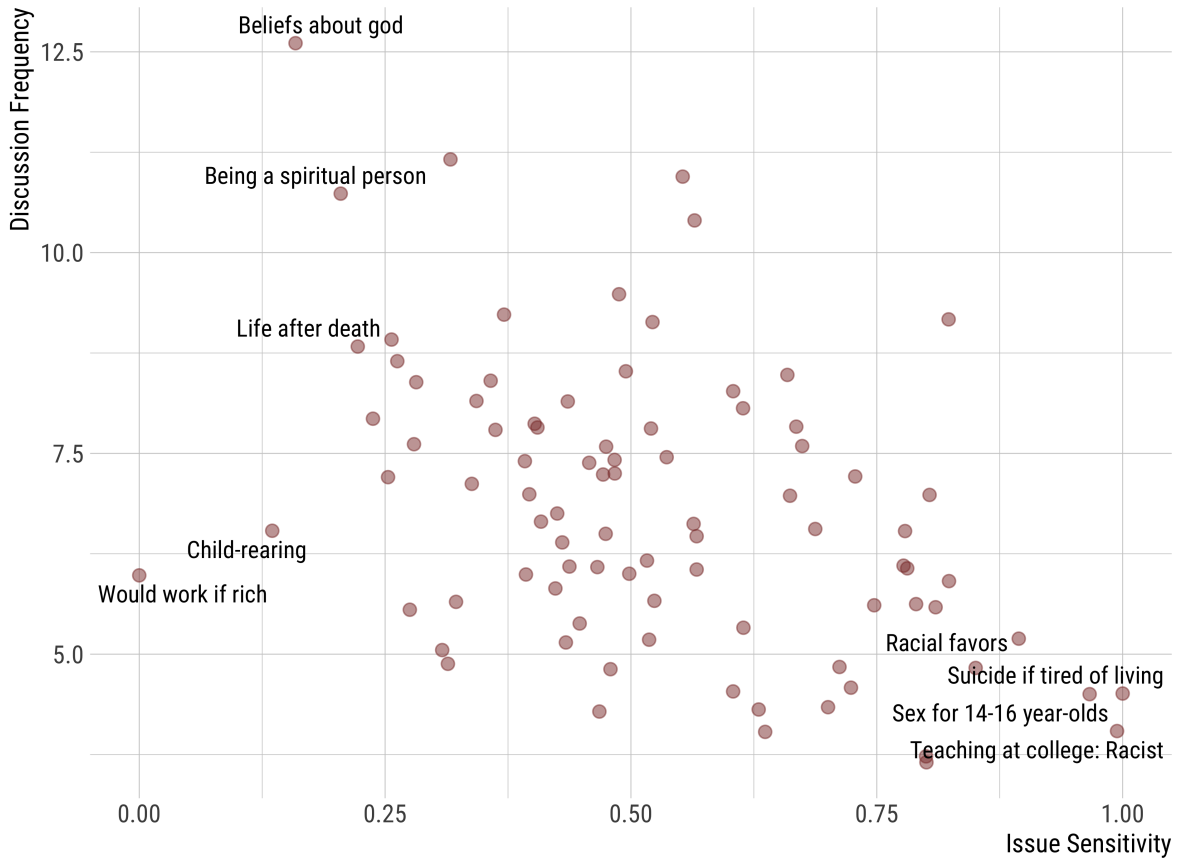Third, we found small but salient group differences in how frequently people discussed various

Figure 9: Issue Sensitivity and Discussion Frequency
Notes: The figure depicts the relationship between issue sensitivity, operationalized as the perceived level of comfort one would feel when talking about the issue at hand with an acquaintance, and discussion frequency. We normalized issue sensitivity between 0 and 1 for interpretability. Qualitatively similar results hold if issue sensitivity is measured as the perceived level of comfort one would feel when talking about the issue with a random American.

issues across partisan identification, race, age/cohort, and college degree status. Finally, we found very strong correlations between how frequently people report discussing issues, how frequently they report thinking about issues, how important they rated issues, and how acceptable people found discussing issues. We found very little evidence that people struggle to discuss issues they find important or want to discuss, at least among the issues explored here.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are distinct limitations to the results presented above. First, while we used Census quotas on key demographics and weighted the results using post-stratification weights, our sample ultimately comes from an opt-in panel. We tried keeping the sample as high quality as possible given well-known issues with online research, though it is also true that absent a proper probability sampling design, we cannot assess the extent to which unobserved sample characteristics bias our estimates.

Second, our design focused only on the frequency of discussion for commonly asked questions,

and was not designed to understand the distribution of topics discussed in the general population. While we have a high degree of confidence that the issues we asked about are discussed relatively infrequently, we cannot say much about how that compares to other topics. Existing work suggests that when people talk about "important matters," this tends to focus on personal finances, family, health and medical issues, and work (Brashears 2014; Small et al. 2024), none of which is captured well by the GSS questions and, therefore, our design. At the same time, it is not clear how often "important matters" are even the topic of most discussion, or whether "trivial" or "unimportant" topics, such as sports, popular culture, the weather, or just small talk, dominate most conversation (as Bail, Brown, and Wimmer 2019 find). We leave that question for future research.

Relatedly, it could be the case that people frequently discuss hot-button issues that did not make it into the core of the GSS, and as a result we are under-estimating how often people discuss politics. This is certainly plausible. We would note, however, that many of the major topics of the 2024 presidential election, including immigration levels, spending on crime, abortion rights, and the general state of the economy, are included in GSS core and therefore were covered by our survey. These items, while reportedly discussed more frequently than other topics, were still unaddressed or only discussed a few times in the past year by a proportion number of respondents.

Third, as noted previously, self-reported discussion frequency is likely a poor proxy for actual discussion frequency. We expect that, in general, people over-report the frequency of discussing issues captured here, a value that is likely further inflated by our decision to recode responses to the midpoint of the category. While we have no reason to expect this bias to complicate inter-item or inter-person comparisons, as it applies to all items, we expect that our specific quantification of how frequently issues are discussed and how many conversations people have to be erroneous. We encourage researchers to evaluate alternative approaches to quantifying discussion frequency.

Those limitations aside, our findings provide some important takeaways. First, in general, most specific items that social scientists ask about in general surveys do not appear to be frequent topics of discussion for the general public. When a researcher asks a respondent to report a position on whether the government should spend more or less on science or highways and bridges, or whether premarital sex or euthanasia is morally wrong, they are asking them to reflect on an issue they likely have not thought about or discussed with another people in months or maybe even years. Because of this, it is not surprising that these issues are plagued with low reliability (Hout and Hastings 2016; Kiley and Vaisey 2020) and show only minimal association with important life-course changes (Lersch 2023).

This does not mean that, in general, people never talk about social and political matters. If people discuss each of the 88 issues about 1.5 times a year on average, and these discussions were independent, then they would discussing multiple items every single week, and political issues as a whole would be a common topic of conversation. While this is likely an over-estimate, as issues are likely to co-occur within conversations and are not independent, we are hesitant to make an overall judgment about whether people discuss "social and political issues," in general, infrequently. At the same time, high correlations among issues means that each average is inflated by political hobbyists, and we are confident in claiming that many people report many of these issues never coming up in the past year. Similarly, we focus only on whether people themselves discuss issues, not whether they consume information about topics without discussing them or overhear conversations had by others about the topic. As such, we cannot speak to how prevalent these issues are in people's lives.

To be clear, we cannot quantify whether the items covered here are *uniquely* infrequent topics of

discussion, as we did not quantify issues that other studies suggest are common topics of discussion for comparison. Many issues exist, and because of that, any individual issue from politics to the weather to professional sports is likely to be infrequently discussed. But we can say that, excluding a small proportion of "political hobbyists" who discuss all these items frequently, and excluding general views toward government figures and a few "takeoff" issues like immigration, people say they discuss most political and social issues much less frequently than they discuss belief in God and religious identity.

Second, we believe this quantification of discussion frequency constrains the set of plausible models of opinion formation and position-taking. For example, theories of political polarization rooted in person-to-person influence (DellaPosta et al. 2015; Goldberg and Stein 2018) need to reconcile with the empirical fact that these topics appear to be infrequently discussed. Because people rarely get clear signals about what their close associates believe about different issues, it is not clear how they can use these as the basis of their opinions. We do not suggest that these models are wrong or implausible, only that researchers should think clearly about how they can operate in a world of limited discussion.

Third, our results support existing theories of opinion formation that emphasize organizational and institutional mechanisms that facilitate discussion of social and political issues. It is not surprising that a significant proportion of the American population reports discussing their religious beliefs weekly or more, as about a third of Americans report weekly church attendance. Religious congregations create spaces for people to connect and discuss these specific issues. Similarly, people are much more likely to report discussing institutions in general—the executive branch of the federal government or congress—than they are to talk about specific issues. We believe this has implications for how we should understand electoral preference formation and suggests a stronger role for organizations in coordinating and facilitating opinion-holding.

Finally, our results suggest that some common patterns identified in previous work—that highly educated people tend to be more stable opinion holders and that black Americans are less stable opinion holders—do not appear to be driven by these groups discussing these issues more or less frequently than the rest of the population. While there are small differences in discussion frequency across groups, these do not appear to be sufficient to explain divergences in reliability. This suggests that the stability of specific opinions seems to be unrelated to the frequency with which people discuss them, though this question requires a more rigorous testing.

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Supplemental Materials for

What Are You Talking About? Discussion Frequency of Issues Captured in Common Survey Questions

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March 2025

Contents

In this document, we provide supplemental materials for the paper, *What Are You Talking About? Discussion Frequency of Issues Captured in Common Survey Questions*.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Duke University, with the protocol code 2024-0373: *Understanding Question-Level Variation in National Opinion Surveys*.

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1 Data Collection

We collected our data through the *Lucid Marketplace* using a Qualtrics survey. In this section, we document the information regarding the General Social Survey (GSS) items we used, the survey document, sampling strategy, participant recruitment, and quality controls.

1.1 Item Selection

Since our substantive interest was to understand "public opinion" that pertain to "personal culture" (Lizardo 2017), we used the GSS, a nationally-representative survey started in 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (Smith et al. 2022). The GSS contains a wide variety of items that tap into Americans' opinions regarding politics, religion, morality, and social life, with a rich battery of validated survey items across all these domains.

We used the GSS's *Replicating Core* question component to select survey items for our study. We tried to cover various topics, while including most questions asked recurrently in the GSS 2006-2014 panels and time-series data. This resulted in 88 unique GSS items, each described in Table S1.

Before using these items in our survey instrument, we processed the question text to ensure that the questions were sufficiently decontextualized from the larger survey. This involved deleting certain phrases, shortening some statements, and changing some words. We tried to keep the question wording as close to the original as possible. Readers can search for each question in the General Social Survey Data Explorer by using Table S1's Item column.

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used

Label	Item	Question Text
Abortion for any reason	abany	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason?
Abortion for being too poor	abpoor	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
Abortion for birth control	abnomore	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she is married and does not want any more children?
Abortion for birth defect	abdefect	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
Abortion for mother's health	abhlth	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
Abortion for rape	abrape	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she became pregnant as a result of rape?
Abortion for unmarital birth	absingle	Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she is not married and does not want to marry the man?

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used *(continued)*

Label	Item	Question Text
Affirmative action	affrmact	Some people say that because of past discrimination, blacks should be given preference in hiring and promotion. Others say that such preference in hiring and promotion of blacks is wrong because it discriminates against whites. What about your opinion – are you for or against preferential hiring and promotion of blacks?
Being a religious person	relpersn	To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?
Being a spiritual person	sprtprsn	To what extent do you consider yourself a spiritual person?
Beliefs about god	god	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it."
Bible prayer in schools	prayer	The United States Supreme Court has ruled that no state or local government may require the reading of the Lord's Prayer or Bible verses in public schools. What are your views on this–do you approve or disapprove of the court ruling?
Birth control for 14-16 year-olds	pillok	Methods of birth control should be available to teenagers between the ages of 14 and 16 if their parents do not approve. Do you agree or disagree?
Books in library: Atheist	libath	If some people in your community suggested that a book somebody wrote against churches and religion should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
Books in library: Gay	libhomo	If some people in your community suggested that a book in favor of homoSexual Relations written by someone who admits he is a homosexual should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
Books in library: Racist	librac	If some people in your community suggested that a book which said Blacks are genetically inferior should be taken out of your public library, would you favor removing this book, or not?
Breadwinning	fefam	It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family. Do you agree or disagree?
Child-rearing	obey	If you had to choose, is it more important for a child to learn to obey rules or to think for themselves?
Confidence in banks and finance	confinan	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running banks and financial institutions?

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used *(continued)*

Label	Item	Question Text
Confidence in Congress	conlegis	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the congress?
Confidence in education	coneduc	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the education?
Confidence in executive branch	confed	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the executive branch of the federal government?
Confidence in major organizations	conbus	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running major companies?
Confidence in medicine	conmedic	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the medicine?
Confidence in organized religion	conclerg	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running organized religion?
Confidence in scientific community	consci	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the scientific community?
Confidence in Supreme Court	conjudge	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the U.S. Supreme Court?
Confidence in the military	conarmy	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the military?
Confidence in the press	conpress	Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence in people running the press?
Courts dealing with criminals	courts	In general, do you think the courts in this area deal too harshly or not harshly enough with criminals?
Death penalty	cappun	Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?
Divorce laws	divlaw	Should divorce in this country be easier or more difficult to obtain than it is now?
Euthanasia	letdie1	When a person has a disease that cannot be cured, do you think doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient's life by some painless means if the patient and his family request it?

4

Label	Item	Question Text
Extramarital affairs	xmarsex	What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner–is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?
Fairness of people	fair	Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?
Federal income tax	tax	Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low?
Gay marriage	marhomo	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Homosexual couples should have the right to marry one another.
Government doing more	helpnot	Some people think that the government in Washington is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses. Others disagree and think that the government should do even more to solve our country's problems. Where would you place yourself on this issue?
Government helping Blacks	helpblk	Some people think that Blacks have been discriminated against for so long that the government has a special obligation to help improve their living standards. Others believe that the government should not be giving special treatment to Blacks. Where would you place yourself on this issue?
Government paying medical bills	helpsick	In general, some people think that it is the responsibility of the government in Washington to see to it that people have help in paying for doctors and hospital bills. Others think that these matters are not the responsibility of the federal government and that people should take care of these things themselves. Where would you place yourself on this issue?
Government's role for poors	helppoor	Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans. Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself. Where would you place yourself on this issue?

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used *(continued)*

Label	Item	Question Text
Government's role in inequality	eqwlth	Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor. What position comes closest to the way you feel?
Gun permits	gunlaw	Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?
Homosexual relations	homosex	Do you think sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?
Ideological identification	polviews	We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. The political views that people might hold might be arranged from extremely liberal–point 1–to extremely conservative–point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?
Immigrants	letin1	Do you think the number of immigrants to America nowadays should be increased, remain the same, or be decreased?
Life after death	postlife	Do you believe there is a life after death?
Marijuana legalization	grass	Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal or not?
Mobility compared to old generations	parsol	Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is better, about the same, or worse than theirs was?
Mobility of next generation	kidssol	When your children are at the age you are now, do you think their standard of living will be much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than yours is now?
People and trust	trust	Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?
People being helpful	helpful	Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?
Policing	polhitok	Are there any situations you can imagine in which you would approve of a policeman striking an adult male citizen?

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used *(continued)*

Label	Item	Question Text
Political party	partyid	Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or something else?
Pornography restrictions	pornlaw	Which of these three statements comes closest to your feelings about pornography laws? 1. There should be laws against the distribution pornography whatever the age 2. There should be laws against the distribution of pornography to persons under 18 3. There should be no laws forbidding the distribution of pornography
Premarital sex	premarsx	There's been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and woman have sexual relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?
Racial differences due to discrimination	racdif1	On the average Blacks have worse jobs, income, and houses than white people. Do you think these differences are mainly due to discrimination?
Racial differences due to education	racdif3	On the average Blacks have worse jobs, income, and houses than white people. Do you think these differences are because most Blacks don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty?
Racial favors	wrkwayup	Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors.
Sex education in public schools	sexeduc	Are you for or against sex education in the public schools?
Sex for 14-16 year-olds	teensex	There's been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and woman in their early teens, say 14 to 16 years old, have sexual relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?
Spanking children	spanking	Do you agree or disagree that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking?
Spending on Blacks	natrace	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving the conditions of Blacks?
Spending on child care	natchld	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on assistance for childcare?

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used *(continued)*

Label	Item	Question Text
Spending on cities	natcity	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on solving the problems of the big cities?
Spending on dealing with drugs	natdrug	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on dealing with drug addiction?
Spending on defense	natarms	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on the military, armaments and defense?
Spending on education	nateduc	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving the nation's education system?
Spending on environment	natenvir	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving and protecting the environment?
Spending on fighting crime	natcrime	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on halting the rising crime rate?
Spending on foreign aid	nataid	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on foreign aid?
Spending on health	natheal	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving and protecting the nation's health?
Spending on highways & bridges	natroad	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on highways and bridges?
Spending on mass transportation	natmass	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on mass transportation?
Spending on social security	natsoc	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on social security?
Spending on space exploration	natspac	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on space exploration program?
Spending on welfare	natfare	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on welfare?
Spending on scientific research	natsci	Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on supporting scientific research?
Suicide if incurable disease	suicide1	Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person has an incurable disease?
Suicide if tired of living	suicide4	Do you think a person has the right to end his or her own life if this person is tired of living and ready to die?
Teaching at college: Atheist	colath	Should somebody who is against all churches and religion be allowed to teach in a college or university?
Teaching at college: Gay	colhomo	Should somebody who admits that he is a homosexual be allowed to teach in a college or university?

Table S1: The List of Survey Items Used *(continued)*

Label	Item	Question Text
Teaching at college: Racist	colrac	Should somebody who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior be allowed to teach in a college or university?
View of Bible	bible	Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word. The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally. The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men.
Work and luck	getahead	Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work; others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?
Working mothers and children	fechld	A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work. Do you agree or disagree?
Working mothers and preschooler	fepresch	A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works. Do you agree or disagree?
Would work if rich	richwork	If you were to get enough money to live as comfortably as you would like for the rest of your life, would you continue to work or would you stop working?

1.2 Survey Procedure

Our survey document was organized into four distinct blocks:

(1) An introductory section, where participants underwent several security and qualification checks—detailed in Section 1.4—and consented to the study,

(2) A warm-up section, where participants answered questions regarding their age and date of birth, party identity, ideological identification, and attention to politics,

(3) An item block section, where participants answered a variety of questions from a randomly selected 15 items from our 88-item list,

(4) A closing section with questions regarding participant gender, race, and education.

Before the main item-block section, participants were shown the following message:

In this survey, we'll give you some questions like the following:

"On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to reduce income differences between the rich and poor?"

We will then ask you a series of questions about the issues addressed in these questions.

You will go through 15 such statements.

Participants were then directed to their first item block, containing two pages. On the first page, they were shown the precise text of the randomized item—documented in Table S1—with the prompt, "please read the question, and think about the issues addressed." Before moving forward, participants had to wait for at least 2 seconds on this page. On the second page associated with the item, participants were shown 7 questions:

(1) Question 1 asked, "How comfortable would you be talking about this issue with an acquaintance, meaning that you know their name and would stop and talk at least for a moment if you ran into the person on the street or in a shopping mall?", with a slider ranging from *1 = not comfortable at all* to *7 = very comfortable*.

(2) Question 2 asked, "How comfortable would you be talking about this issue with a random American you don't know?", with a slider ranging from *1 = not comfortable at all* to *7 = very comfortable*.

(3) Question 3 asked, "How important does this issue seem to you, personally?", with a slider ranging from *1 = not at all important* to *7 = very important*.

(4) Question 4 asked, "In the past year, about how often have you discussed this issue with anyone else, either in-person or online?", with choice options, *never*, *about once or twice*, *several times*, *about once a month*, *2-3 times a month*, and *once a week or more*.

(5) Question 5 asked, "Regardless of whether you have discussed this issue with anyone else, about how often in the last year have you thought about this issue?", with choice options, *never*, *about once or twice*, *several times*, *about once a month*, *2-3 times a month*, and *once a week or more*.

(6) Question 6 asked, "What percentage of the Democrats in the United States do you think agree with [ITEM]. Please give us your best guess." with a 0 to 100 % slider.

(7) Question 7 asked, "What percentage of the Republicans in the United States do you think agree with [ITEM]. Please give us your best guess." with a 0 to 100 % slider.

In all these questions, the sliders were shown in the middle, but participants had to click on the slider for the answer to be counted, even if their true answer was the "middle" response. We also replicated the item wording in each question with a smaller font to remind participants of the exact wording. Once their responses were recorded, participants repeated this procedure 14 more times.

The Qualtrics Survey File (QSF) associated with the survey instrument, which allows the survey to be reconstructed in Qualtrics, is presented in the replication package.

1.3 Sampling

The survey participants were recruited from the *Lucid Marketplace*—a Cint Group Company. Lucid connects researchers to "suppliers," a set of panel companies that provides research participants for academic or commercial surveys. 2,183 participants from 35 unique suppliers completed the instrument between June 6 and June 9, 2024. We set several US census representation quotas that restricted participant access to the survey based on five population characteristics: age, gender, race, Hispanic status, and region. Our initial aim was to recruit 2,000 respondents. That said, due to over-completes and quota requirements, our final participant number ended up being 2,183 (with the final analytical N = 2,117—see `Quality Checks` below for details). Table S2 documents the quota categories, the sample goal, and the realized sample sizes across specific groups.

As seen in Table S2, the greatest discrepancy between our goals for the sample and the final counts occurred across gender lines, with more female respondents participating in the survey. We detail our weighting procedure that adjusts for these differences (see `Poststratification Weighting`).

Table S2: Sampling Aims and Realized Distributions

Category	Quota	Goal	Realized
Age	18 to 24 years old	260	253
Age	25 to 34 years old	389	371
Age	35 to 44 years old	359	369
Age	45 to 54 years old	349	374
Age	55 to 64 years old	364	301
Age	Over 65	462	515
Gender	Male	1075	999
Gender	Female	1108	1184
Hispanic Status	Not Hispanic	1826	1862
Hispanic Status	Hispanic	357	321
Race	White	1646	1662
Race	Black	285	276
Race	Other ethnicity	252	245
Region	Northeast	372	393
Region	Midwest	455	403
Region	South	836	882
Region	West	521	514

Respondents received incentives to participate in the study, though Lucid did not provide specific details regarding these incentives due to supplier proprietary reasons. These incentives can range from cash to gift cards and donations. Since there were no technical requirements in the survey, we allowed both mobile and non-mobile access. The median response time was 14.9 minutes, and older participants and participants who are Hispanic took longer to finish the study.

1.4   Quality Checks

There were several security and qualification checks before, during, and after the survey.

Checks Before the Survey. Lucid provided the first barrier, assessing participants for invalid traffic, duplicate IPs, low quality scores, and other qualification failures. Once the participants passed these tests, they had to go through three quality checks directly in our Qualtrics instrument. First, we embedded Lucid age data to ensure that those who are less than 18 years old could not take part in the survey. Second, we collected participant IPs and fed them to IPHub Proxy and VPN detectors: participants with IPs detected as proxies or those using VPNs were not allowed to participate, and we instructed them to turn off their VPNs if they wished to proceed. Finally, we used the country parameters from IPHub to ensure that respondents were indeed participating from the US.

Checks During the Survey. During the survey, we conducted a basic attention check. In the warm-up section among other questions, we asked respondents, "For our research, careful attention is critical! We thank you for your care. To show that you are paying attention, please select 'I have a question.'" Those who answered this question incorrectly were not allowed to take part in the main study, and were directed to Lucid as a quality termination. 19.7% of the participants—including completes and attention failures—came from these terminations, and they were not included in the final sample.

Checks After the Survey. We processed the final data using three additional quality checks, which led us to drop 66 participants from the sample, reducing the analytical sample size to 2,117. First, we used the built-in Qualtrics assessment to flag whether a participant was a duplicate or a bot. We

filtered out participants who failed these checks ($N = 15$). Next, we inspected the Lucid-supplied zip codes to verify whether participants were registered in the US. 3 participants failed these checks and were excluded from the study. Lastly, we used our built-in instrument to evaluate a second—implicit—attention check. At two different points in the instrument, we asked respondents their age and the year they were born. In $N = 32$ of cases, participants' answers to these questions differed by more than 2 years. For example, a participant who claimed to be 29 years of age wrote down 1999 as their birth year. We dropped these participants from the study sample.

2 Poststratification Weighting

Lucid is a non-probability sample with opt-in participation, but we tried to ensure that, at least across main demographic features like age, gender, race, and region, our sample approximates US census distributions. As noted in Table S2, there were several discrepancies between our sample goal and the realized sample. Additionally, these quotas were set to be absolute. This means they are not necessarily representative of cross-tabulated cells—e.g., we aim for representativeness for age group 18-24 year olds and Hispanics, but not necessarily for 18-24 year-old Hispanics. In order to adjust for these discrepancies, we present all our analyses using poststratification weights.

To develop these weights, we used the 2023 Census data from `tidycensus`, by cross-classifying all categories across age, gender, racial group, and region using Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program 2023 vintage year. We followed a raking procedure to construct post-stratification weights that match the survey margins to the Census population margins. In 10% of the cross-classifications mostly from hard-to-reach groups, we did not have any participants. Instead of extrapolation, we removed these groups from our target, given that they only constitute 3.1% of the U.S. population. Only 4 out of 2,117 weights had weights larger than 5, so we did not perform arbitrary trimming.

3 Descriptive Information

3.1 Item Counts

We randomly allocated our participants to 15 items, ensuring that each question receiving between 340 and 380 ratings. Table S3 documents the distribution of individuals across all 88 GSS items.

Table S3: The Distribution of Individuals Across Items

Label	N
Abortion for any reason	361
Abortion for birth defect	368
Abortion for mother's health	358
Abortion for birth control	353
Abortion for being too poor	368
Abortion for rape	360
Abortion for unmarital birth	353
Affirmative action	354
View of Bible	359
Death penalty	365
Teaching at college: Atheist	360
Teaching at college: Gay	353

Table S3: The Distribution of Individuals Across Items *(continued)*

Label	N
Teaching at college: Racist	340
Confidence in the military	349
Confidence in major organizations	366
Confidence in organized religion	367
Confidence in education	351
Confidence in executive branch	366
Confidence in banks and finance	358
Confidence in Supreme Court	364
Confidence in Congress	351
Confidence in medicine	348
Confidence in the press	361
Confidence in scientific community	368
Courts dealing with criminals	365
Divorce laws	355
Government's role in inequality	371
Fairness of people	353
Working mothers and children	354
Breadwinning	360
Working mothers and preschooler	358
Work and luck	380
Beliefs about god	377
Marijuana legalization	365
Gun permits	347
Government helping Blacks	351
People being helpful	365
Government doing more	368
Government's role for poors	363
Government paying medical bills	352
Homosexual relations	356
Mobility of next generation	371
Euthanasia	364
Immigrants	369
Books in library: Atheist	368
Books in library: Gay	367
Books in library: Racist	363
Gay marriage	357
Spending on foreign aid	369
Spending on defense	352
Spending on child care	371
Spending on cities	354
Spending on fighting crime	361
Spending on dealing with drugs	354
Spending on education	347
Spending on environment	355
Spending on welfare	362
Spending on health	360

Table S3: The Distribution of Individuals Across Items *(continued)*

Label	N
Spending on mass transportation	368
Spending on Blacks	366
Spending on highways & bridges	366
Spending on scientific research	361
Spending on social security	350
Spending on space exploration	369
Child-rearing	358
Mobility compared to old generations	352
Political party	365
Birth control for 14-16 year-olds	368
Policing	372
Ideological identification	361
Pornography restrictions	367
Life after death	354
Bible prayer in schools	358
Premarital sex	373
Racial differences due to discrimination	360
Racial differences due to education	359
Being a religious person	368
Would work if rich	350
Sex education in public schools	358
Spanking children	358
Being a spiritual person	368
Suicide if incurable disease	367
Suicide if tired of living	374
Federal income tax	357
Sex for 14-16 year-olds	373
People and trust	345
Racial favors	368
Extramarital affairs	357

Table S4: Key Measures and Respondent Counts

	Discussion	Thinking	Importance	Sensitivity
(Intercept)	6.975	8.704	5.049	2.974
	(0.549)	(0.774)	(0.093)	(0.082)
N	−0.338	−0.141	−0.309	0.146
	(0.985)	(1.389)	(0.167)	(0.148)
R^2	0.001	0.000	0.038	0.011

Note: N shows the change from the lowest number (N = 340) to the highest (N = 380).

We also analyzed whether this slight variation has implications on our key measures.

We do this simply by regressing our outcomes—discussion, importance, thinking, and sensitivity

measures—on the number of participants responding to each item. As documented in Table S4, there is no systematic relationship between the number of people and our key measures.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

We document the weighted sample characteristics in Table S5.

One thing to note is that some key characteristics that we did not aim for in our quota and weighting ended up moderately replicating US population characteristics:

- Our sample has 33.4% college degree-holders among participants aged 25 and older, compared to an estimate of 37% in the US census.
- Partisan differences largely replicated 2022 GSS—37.6% Democrats compared to our 36%, 35.2% Republicans compared to our 30.7%, and 22% Independents compared to our 26%.[1]
- Our ideology measure moderately replicated 2022 GSS—29% Liberals compared to our 31.9%, 34% Conservatives compared to our 30.4%, and 35% Moderates compared to our 37.7%.[2]

Table S5: Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Individual Participants

Characteristic	N = 2,117
Age	47.5
Gender	
Male	49.1%
Female	50.9%
Race	
White	63.2%
Black	12.1%
Hispanic	16.4%
Other	8.3%
Region	
Midwest	20.4%
Northeast	16.9%
South	39.5%
West	23.2%
College	33.4%
Party	
Democrat	36.0%
Independent	33.3%
Republican	30.7%
Ideology	
Extremely liberal	8.3%
Liberal	14.8%
Slightly liberal	8.8%
Moderate, middle of the road	37.7%
Slightly conservative	7.1%

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[1]The estimates came from the 2022 General Social Survey datafile, with poststratification weights applied to the response proportions retrieved from the item `partyid`.

[2]Similar to party identification, these estimates come from 2022 GSS, using the item `polviews`.

Table S5: Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Individual Participants *(continued)*

Characteristic	N = 2,117
Conservative	15.0%
Extremely conservative	8.3%
Attention	
None at all	8.3%
A little	17.7%
A moderate amount	26.9%
A lot	22.5%
A great deal	24.6%
[1] Mean; %	

4 Bootstrap Analyses

In this section, we assess the robustness of Figure 1 from the main manuscript, which presents the distribution of discussion frequency across all issues. One potential issue with our approach is that this distribution may be sensitive to the specific composition of the 88 GSS items we use. This composition may influence the overall distribution of discussion frequency.

To evaluate this possibility, we estimated the distribution of discussion frequency by randomly dropping half of the items—keeping 44 out of the total 88—5,000 times and calculating the weighted distribution of discussion frequency in each bootstrap run. Figure S1 presents the results, demonstrating that the main estimates are highly robust and that variation across issues is minimal.
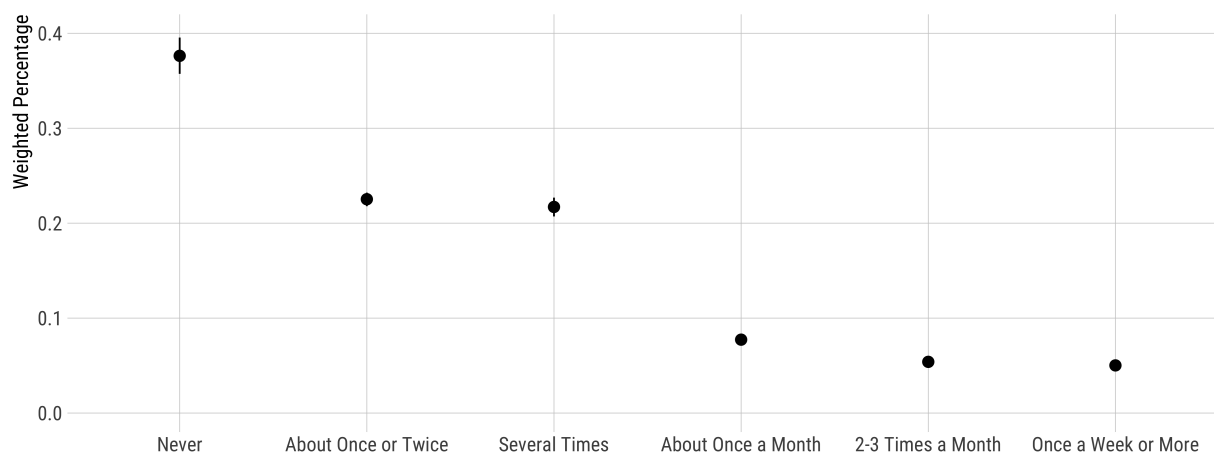

Figure S1: The Bootstraps for the Percentage Distribution of Discussion Frequency
Notes: The figure shows weighted percentage distribution of discussion frequency across 5,000 bootsrap runs, where we keep 44 GSS items out of the original list of 88.

References

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