

A Leader Who Sees the World as I Do: Voters Prefer Candidates Whose Statements Reveal Matching Social-Psychological Attitudes

Denise Baron 

London School of Economics and Political Science

Benjamin Lauderdale

University College London

Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington

London School of Economics and Political Science

Politicians are increasingly able to communicate their values, attitudes, and concerns directly to voters. Yet little is known about which of these signals resonate with voters and why. We employ a discrete choice experiment to investigate whether and which social-psychological attitudes predict how adult British voters respond to corresponding attitudinal signals communicated by candidates in hypothetical social media posts. For all attitudes studied, covering social feelings (trust, collective nostalgia), social perceptions (nationalism, populist sentiment), and social commitments (national identification, authoritarianism, egalitarianism), we find that participants are much more likely to vote for candidates who signal proximity to their own attitudinal position and less likely for candidates who signal opposing views. The strongest effects were observed for national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism, indicating the importance of commitment to a shared group and to particular principles for distributing power and resources within and between groups. We further demonstrate that social-psychological attitudes are not acting as mere proxies for participants' past votes or left-right ideology. Our results extend adaptive followership theory to incorporate preferences concerning intragroup coordination and intergroup hierarchy, while highlighting the social-psychological dynamics of political communication that may transcend the concerns of particular election cycles.

KEY WORDS: vote choice, intergroup relations, discrete choice experiment, adaptive followership, authoritarianism, egalitarianism

Social media has arguably given voters unprecedented access to the life and character of politicians beyond their political party platforms. Whereas a decade ago, voters learned about candidate qualifications and policy views from their campaign literature, speeches, and online

publications, they can now use platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to gain direct access to their personal values and concerns. Which of these sway voters' appraisal of a political candidate, and how might attitudinal signals resonate with some voters more than others?

Political psychologists have commonly studied the perception of politicians with survey data, highlighting either the preference for candidates who share personality characteristics with voters (e.g., Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004) or the preference for candidates with specific traits desired for specific circumstances (e.g., Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Such cross-sectional, or at best longitudinal designs, are limited in their ability to establish causality. Another approach is the use of conjoint experiments, which have demonstrated the causal impact of candidate traits as portrayed in profile vignettes, sometimes showing differential impacts depending on voter demographics, ideology, and issue positions (e.g., Hanretty et al., 2020). Yet the patterns of homophily along the lines of policy positions and demographic characteristics thus observed are not explained, leaving open the question of why voters seem to prefer candidates who are similar to them.

We attempt to bridge these fields by examining the causal impact of candidate signals of core social attitudes, conditional on voter positioning with reference to these same attitudes. We assess the impact of a range of attitudes, covering social feelings (trust, collective nostalgia), social perceptions (nationalism, populist sentiment), and social commitments (national identification, authoritarianism, egalitarianism). Building on accounts of politics as the adaptive management of group living (e.g., Petersen, 2015), we predict a strong role for social commitments as they index allegiance toward a group and toward principles for within- and between-group coordination. The use of a discrete choice experiment in a large, nationally representative sample for whom preexisting attitudinal positions are known permits the assessment of the relative importance of these versus other attitudes in shaping voting decisions at later time points. In an era of ubiquitous social media, this enables us to ask: Which attitudinal signals might cut through the noise to affect political decision-making, and for whom?

The Influence of Candidate Characteristics on Vote Choice

Attempts to identify which candidate characteristics attract versus repulse voters have tended to focus on the job-relevant traits of the candidate, their policy platform, or their demographic background. Early research on candidate characteristics as determinants of vote choice suggested the influence of perceived traits such as warmth, competence, dominance, and leadership skills, as rated subjectively by respondents, using noncausal designs (for reviews, see Laustsen & Bor, 2017; Olivola & Todorov, 2010). This is supplemented by a small literature on the influence of job-relevant personality traits such as conscientiousness and emotional stability (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Roets & van Hiel, 2009; see also Scott & Medeiros, 2020).

More recently, the use of conjoint experiments, involving the randomized presentation of candidates or party profiles that vary along multiple attributes, have yielded insights on which candidate characteristics cause respondents to select one candidate over another (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Some of these studies have demonstrated the effect of candidates taking different policy positions (Hanretty et al., 2020; Horiuchi et al., 2018), while others have revealed the relative impact of gender, race, class, occupation, and education levels on candidate preference and vote choice (e.g., Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018; Marx & Schumacher, 2018; Schwarz & Coppock, 2020; Wüest & Pontusson, 2018).

Designs involving the randomized presentation of candidate characteristics make it possible to consider the effects of such characteristics conditional on the characteristics of respondents

and to search for any differential effects among particular voter groups. Using this approach, partisanship and left–right ideology emerge as moderators of the effects of candidate characteristics (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Gift & Lastra-Anadón, 2018; Schwarz & Coppock, 2020), and a general pattern of homophily emerges, in which voters prefer candidates who match them on key demographic characteristics (Schwarz & Coppock, 2020; Wüest & Pontusson, 2018) as well as on political-issue positions (Hanretty et al., 2020).

Preceding the use of conjoint studies, homophily in voter preferences had been observed along the lines of sociodemographic (Campbell et al., 1960; Cutler, 2002), personality (e.g., Caprara et al., 2007), and even appearance-related (Bailenson et al., 2008) traits. One influential explanation is that voters are drawn to politicians with similar personality traits because such traits act as heuristics for underlying personal values (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; see Caprara et al., 2007). This raises the possibility of using the advantages of the conjoint design to examine homophily beyond surface-level (e.g., gender, ethnicity) or task-related (e.g., policy positions, leadership traits) characteristics. We apply this method with a focus on the personal values, attitudes, and concerns of both voters and politicians (see also Wager et al., 2022), addressing the critical question of whether voters are drawn toward politicians who seem similar to them in terms of these deeper social-psychological attitudes, potentially getting us closer to the core concerns that drive political behavior in the first place.

Underlying Mechanisms of Voter Homophily

If voters prefer political candidates who are similar to them as a way of finding leaders who share their underlying concerns (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; see Caprara et al., 2017), we might ask which underlying concerns are most salient to the situation of voting. A psychological lens has recently been brought to the study of voting, examining it in terms of the enactment of agency, identity, and emotion (see e.g., Bruter & Harrison, 2020; Huddy et al., 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). We thus start by reviewing published research to identify the emotions, perceptions, and other psychological commitments found to predict voting, with the expectation that these same factors are what matter to voters as they evaluate candidates.

Emotions are rarely assessed in nationally representative surveys except through their application to political circumstances or governance. One widely studied affective factor is the feeling of trust toward political actors and institutions, with distrust historically linked to lower voter turnout, but more recently to turning out to support nonmainstream political parties (for a review, see Bélanger, 2017). Another individual factor with emotional content is the feeling of nostalgia for a romanticized national past, which has been found to predict conservative political preferences in the United States (Lammers & Baldwin, 2018). We thus consider political trust and national nostalgia as two affective concerns that may be relevant as voters evaluate candidates.

Importantly, such affective motivations mobilize concerns that are not individual, but social, pertaining to relationships with others or to collective experiences. Indeed, a substantial literature has attested to the role of social groups in motivating voter behavior, with partisanship being the most striking example (see Fowler & Kam, 2007; Greene, 1999; Mason, 2018; West & Iyengar, 2022). One key group represented in voter concerns is that of the nation, as demonstrated by the findings that perceiving one's nation is superior to others (i.e., nationalism) consistently predicts support for far-right parties in a meta-analysis of far-right-wing voting (Stockemer et al., 2018). Group concerns take on a particular psychological potency when they are wrapped up in narratives claiming

that a corrupt or illegitimate “elite” are withholding power and resources from a pure “people,” as is common in populist platforms with wider voter appeal (Mudde, 2004; Obradovic et al., 2020; Stanley, 2008). Nationalism and populist sentiment and nationalism are thus two social perceptions worth considering as we investigate what is salient to voters at the point of candidate evaluation.

Digging deeper, social identities have been argued to play an important role in voting because voting triggers social cognitive mechanisms that evolved in early humans to cope with the selection pressures of cooperation within and competition between social groups (e.g., DeScioli & Bokemper, 2019; Petersen, 2015; Pietraszewski et al., 2015; Sidanius & Kurzban, 2013). Specifically, adaptive followership theory positions the evaluation of political candidates in terms of the selection of leaders with the most appropriate characteristics to address perceived group challenges, with some traits (e.g., dominance) more desirable at some times (e.g., during a conflict) than others (see Laustsen, 2021; van Vugt, 2006). Extending this literature, we argue that to the extent that voter preferences reflect attempts to navigate coalitional challenges, they should be attuned not only to candidate traits, but specifically to candidate commitments concerning salient coalitions and the distribution of power and resources within and between them.

The foremost commitment is to the social group most salient to voters as they evaluate potential leaders: the nation. In line with the flexibility predicted by coalitional psychology theorists (see Pietraszewski et al., 2015; see also Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1989), voters should be attuned to signals of candidate commitment toward the nation versus competing sub- or supranational groups, especially where national identities are nested (e.g., English, within British, within European). Indeed, one might expect that which identity adopts particular resonance in any one election depends on how political discourse has carved up the coalitional space historically in a particular context, as tuned upward or downward in the period preceding the election. Strength of national identification would thus have a minimal influence on voter behavior in contexts where it is uncontroversial (e.g., New Zealand: Duckitt & Sibley, 2016), but it would play a more important role in contexts where tensions over allegiance to and sovereignty of the nation have historical and current political resonance, such as the United Kingdom in the context of Brexit (Ford & Sobolewska, 2018; Zmigrod et al., 2018). Yet the importance of strength of national identification as signaled by political candidates in shaping electoral decisions has surprisingly not been studied, making it an important candidate trait for the current investigation.

Identification with the national group is not the only form of commitment to which a voter employing coalitional psychology should be attuned. We argue that they should also be concerned with the principles that a leader applies in resolving dilemmas arising from the distribution of power and resources within and between groups, and the role of hierarchy therein. In political psychology, these principles have been studied in terms of the two social-psychological orientations theorized to underlie voter variation in ideology: authoritarianism and egalitarianism (e.g., Duckitt, 2001; see also Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Jost et al., 2009).

Authoritarianism denotes preferences for how authority and hierarchy-related principles should be applied within a group, focusing on the need for submission to strong leaders and the punishment of those who deviate from their orders and from established ways of doing things (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981). Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1981) predicts the endorsement of strict prison sentences and the deportation of undocumented immigrants (Duckitt et al., 2010), in addition to support for right-wing and far-right-wing parties and candidates (Van Assche et al., 2019).

Egalitarianism is most commonly measured in the form of social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994; Ho et al., 2015), an individual’s preference for maintaining hierarchy *between* groups, with those high (vs. low) in SDO endorsing a world in which some groups have

more power and resources than others in society. Relatively high SDO predicts opposition to the extension of rights and resources to low-power groups (varying from gay people to immigrants; for a review, see Sidanius et al., 2016) and support for right-wing and far-right parties and leaders in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe (e.g., Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015; Womick et al., 2019; see Van Assche et al., 2019).

RWA and SDO are not only consistently predictive of voter preferences in a range of democratic contexts but they also predict personal values found to be influential in candidate evaluation. One recent conjoint study (Weinberg, 2020) found that British voters strongly prefer candidates who signal valuing universalism and benevolence, both of which are inversely correlated with SDO (Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002). The next most influential values were self-direction, security, and conformity, all of which tap into dimensions of RWA (Duriez & Van Hiel, 2002). As these basic human values had more influence on candidate choice than any demographic attributes included in this experiment, including gender, age, ethnicity, education, occupation, marital status, regional accent, and religion (Weinberg, 2020), the core social commitments they arguably tap might be a powerful source of homophily in voter preferences.

Supportive of this possibility, RWA and SDO were recently found to statistically mediate the positive association between self-rated personality traits and the personality traits of one's "ideal politician" (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020), suggestive of the possibility that the concerns they index underlie observations of voter homophily on personal traits (see Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Caprara et al., 2017). Yet personality similarity is a rather imperfect heuristic for deciding whether a politician will enact a policy agenda in line with one's core social-hierarchy preferences, and recent evidence suggests that SDO and RWA have a genetically grounded association with policy preferences that is independent of personality traits (Kleppesto et al., 2023). A key question is thus whether candidates *directly* signaling their positioning on these two core social-psychological dimensions exerts a causal effect on vote intention, conditional on voter self-ratings on those same dimensions.

In summary, our attempt to explore voter homophily in terms of underlying mechanisms takes a broad view of the core values and concerns for which voters may be scanning when evaluating political candidates. Drawing on evidence for key social-psychological predictors of voter behavior, we examine the role of two social emotions (political trust and national nostalgia) and two social perceptions (populist sentiment and nationalism) found to be salient in voter decision-making. Looking deeper toward evolutionary models of politics as a challenge of group coordination, we focus in particular on three core social commitments: national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism.

The Present Study

We employ a discrete choice design to assess the causal impact of candidate signals indexing social emotions, perceptions, and commitments (collectively referred to as "social-psychological attitudes" or "attitudinal traits") on decisions of voters who themselves vary on those traits, thus providing a methodological advance called for in the literature (McGraw, 2003) by considering both the signal from the candidate and the traits of the voter in the same study. As it is impossible to randomly assign attitudinal traits to respondents, the causal role of social-psychological attitudes is difficult to study while still being crucial to investigate and establish if they are to be treated as more than predictive summaries of related attitudes. Although survey experiments are constrained in generalizability due to their

inability to precisely replicate actual election settings, this design has the methodological benefits of enabling us to examine causal links between candidate traits and voting, which, when examined interacting with respondent traits, constitutes a powerful test of potential underlying mechanisms of patterns of voter homophily.

Our experiment takes the statements used in the assessment of such social-psychological attitudes and presents them as having been expressed by hypothetical candidates on social media in the past. By randomly presenting the resultant candidate profiles to respondents drawn from the British Election Study panel for which we have prior attitudinal data, we are able to assess whether or not attitudinal traits of respondents measured as far back as 5 years previously predict how candidates expressing these or opposing traits are evaluated.

This method also enables us to uncover whether some traits play a more or less important role when put in tension with others, again addressing a call from the literature to use causal designs to compare the relative contribution of different social-psychological attitudes to political vote choice (Dennison et al., 2020). Thus, in addition to the general examination of the role of social-psychological attitudes in voter homophily, our more specific aim is to examine whether traits indexing commitment to salient groups and principles coordinating the distribution of power and resources within and between groups have a stronger influence on voter preferences than traits unrelated to such commitments. Based on the adaptive followership model of candidate evaluations (see Laustsen, 2021) and accounts of ideology grounded in evolved concerns for navigating social hierarchy (see Sheehy-Skeffington & Thomsen, 2020; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), we expect the strongest effect of candidate and voter trait homophily to emerge for national identification (assessed at nation, state, and supranational levels, with no prediction for which level would matter more), authoritarianism, and egalitarianism.

Methods

Design

This study employs a discrete choice experiment which, similarly to a conjoint experiment, simultaneously varies multiple candidate signals and includes a head-to-head vote choice. Participants are presented with a hypothetical ballot between two candidates with a list of three statements from each candidate (see Figure 1). The appearance of statements is randomized and selected without replacement from a list of statements, each of which corresponds to the construct measurement of a social-psychological attitude. Two or three versions of statements indexing high and low positioning on each attitudinal trait were included in the full list to allow for the same construct and variation to be tested in ballot pairings. The randomization accounts for any potential order effects of the statements.

In the main analysis, we pooled the different versions of the high/low treatments for each construct and estimated an average effect for the high and low treatments of each attitudinal trait. Those treatment terms were then interacted with the participants' score for the corresponding attitudinal trait. Each respondent had completed the relevant measurement battery as part of the British Election Study (BES) between 5 months and 5.5 years prior to this survey experiment (see Fieldhouse et al., 2019). Including more than one version of the high/low treatments enabled us to confirm similar effects of different statements/treatments and also to compare interactions with past measurement of the attitudinal trait on the one hand, and with past measurement of the specific statement, on the other.

YouGov

Imagine at the next general election, the traditional parties do not have candidates standing in your local constituency. Instead, the race is between two independent candidates.

The table below shows statements that the candidates have made in writing or on social media before standing for elected office.

Candidate A	Candidate B
Name: David Jones	Name: Michael Smith
Compromising is not selling out. It's a key part of politics.	I don't identify only with other English people.
Britain's best days are ahead of us.	Schools should not focus on teaching children to obey authority.
I have absolutely no trust in either our democracy or the members of Parliament.	People in Britain are too ready to criticise their country.

If you knew nothing else about either candidate, which candidate would you vote for?

- Candidate A
 Candidate B
 Not Sure



Figure 1. Sample ballot from the discrete choice experiment.

Procedure

The survey experiment was administered online via YouGov, under their standard incentive scheme. Participants, all based in Great Britain, were presented with five ballots, viewed consecutively. Each began with the following prompt: “Imagine at the next general election, the traditional parties do not have candidates standing in your local constituency. Instead, the race is between these two independent candidates. The table below shows statements that the candidates have made in writing or on social media before standing for elected office.” Political party was omitted to enable observation of the full effect of each candidate signal in the absence of a partisan or ideological heuristic. Participants then read the list of candidate statements and were asked to indicate for which candidate they would vote (see [Figure 1](#)).

Materials

Candidates A and B were presented with names, which were randomly generated from the most common U.K. first names and surnames for men and women born between 1950 and 1980.

Nine attitudinal traits were selected from those available in the BES:

- Political trust (in politicians and democratic institutions)
- National nostalgia
- Nationalism
- Populist sentiment

- Strength of identification with three different national identities: English, British, and European
- Authoritarianism
- Egalitarianism

Every ballot featured three statements for each candidate, with the language for the statements based on BES items and survey instruments designed to measure the relevant social-psychological attitude.

Political trust was indexed with four statements, adjusted from an item used in the BES, for example, “I have a lot of trust in our democracy and the members of our Parliament.”

National nostalgia was indexed with two statements using the same language as the BES and two statements adopted in line with recent measures of national nostalgia (Smeeke, 2015), for example, “In general, British society is not as good as it used to be.”

Nationalism was indexed using the same language as six items used in the BES survey (and relating to an established measure of ethnocentrism in the context of nationality: Bizumic et al., 2009), for example, “I would rather be a citizen of Britain than of any other country in the world.”

Populist sentiment was indexed with six statements taken from Akkerman et al.’s (2014) measurement of populist sentiment, as used in the BES, for example, “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.”

Strength of national identification was indexed by four statements corresponding to the centrality of the identities of English, British, and European, based on the national identity measures in the BES, adapted in line with Leach et al. (2008). Example items are “I strongly identify as European” and “I don’t often think of myself as European” (reverse-coded).

Authoritarianism was indexed with four statements adapted from the BES, in turn based on Evans et al.’s (1996) measure of the libertarian-authoritarian scale and resembling similar measures of right-wing authoritarianism (Bizumic & Duckitt, 2018; Evans et al., 1996), for example, “People who break the law should get stiffer sentences.”

Egalitarianism was indexed for candidates with four statements from the short version of the SDO₇ scale (Ho et al., 2015), for example, “It is unjust to try to make all groups in society equal.” Egalitarianism was measured for participants with five statements from the BES capturing attitudes toward equality and hierarchy, for example, “Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people’s income more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people’s incomes are. Where would you place yourself and the political parties on this scale?” with a 10-point scale (see Appendix S6 in the online supporting information).

To arrive at the three statements presented for each candidate, we first selected six of the seven possible statement categories for the pair of candidates without replacement and distributed these across the two candidates. Thus, each candidate will have expressed statements associated with different social-psychological attitudes than their opponent. Each statement for each category is randomly selected to be associated with the “high” or the “low” value of that attitude and among the possible variations of the statement expressing that level, with equal probability.

Vote choice was measured by asking participants to select one of the two hypothetical candidates (Candidate A or B) for each ballot, or a “not sure” option, which was treated as a midway point between Candidates A and B. This vote choice is the dependent variable for all analyses.

Sample

Participants were drawn from a sample of past respondents to the British Election Study (BES) panel. The earliest BES responses used are from Wave 1 collected in February 2014, and the most recent responses are from Wave 15 collected in March 2019, 5 months before the survey experiment was conducted in August 2019. Where multiple measurements are available for a given respondent, we used the most recent measurement of the participant's attitudinal trait.

We administered a survey involving the presentation of five ballots to 1,656 British adults living in Great Britain (54.7% female, 8.7% in Scotland, 5.2% in Wales, and mean age of 52.1) resulting in 8,280 ballot decisions or vote choices. Of the full sample, 1,065 respondents had completed all relevant items in previous waves of the BES, with the remaining 591 respondents having completed an average of 7.3 of 9 relevant attitudinal-trait measurements.¹ Missing items were imputed using Stata's MI package (StataCorp, 2017).

Analysis

Our analysis focuses on the conditional effects of the treatment variables and involved the following steps. We first created separate treatment variables for candidate statements corresponding to high and low levels of each attitudinal trait, coded -1 if a relevant statement appeared for Candidate B, 0 if a statement did not appear, and 1 if the statement appeared for Candidate A. Next, each treatment variable was interacted with the standardized measurement of the participant's score for the corresponding attitudinal trait, the interaction thus describing the extent to which the effect of the treatment on vote choice is conditioned by the participant's attitudinal trait. The dependent variable of vote choice was coded as an ordered outcome with Candidate A as high ($Y = 3$), Candidate B as low ($Y = 1$), and "not sure" as in between ($Y = 2$).²

The value of the interaction term thus indicates the direction and strength of any potential homophily effects along the lines of our attitudinal traits. As an example, if a "high authoritarianism" statement appeared with Candidate A, the value of the treatment variable for "high authoritarianism" would be 1 . Finding a positive and relatively large magnitude of the interaction between the "high authoritarianism" treatment variable and participants' attitudinal trait would indicate a strong homophily effect of authoritarianism, reflecting the greater probability of a participant who is relatively high in authoritarianism (e.g., a value of 2 on a standardized scale) selecting Candidate A (vs. Candidate B and "Not sure"), and another participant relatively low in authoritarianism (e.g., a value of -2 on a standardized scale) having a greater probability of selecting Candidate B (vs. Candidate A and "Not sure"). The interactions, therefore, describe how the treatment effect for each candidate statement is influenced by the participants' corresponding attitudinal trait.

To conduct this analysis, we fit an ordered logistic regression model including the treatment variables, the participants' attitudinal variables, and the interactions between treatment terms and participants' corresponding attitudinal traits. We use an ordered logistic regression model rather than a multinomial logistic for three reasons: It is easier to interpret; we have good theoretical reasons to expect it to fit the data well given the way our regression models are specified; and when we test the proportional odds assumption, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that the

¹Analysis of missingness is reported in Appendix S5 in the online supporting information.

²In 66% of these decisions, participants selected either Candidate A or B; 34% selected "not sure."

ordered model fits the data. The ordered logistic regression, applied to this problem, makes the assumption that the explanatory variables act symmetrically in pushing responses toward selection of Candidate A versus toward Candidate B. This allows a model with a single coefficient for each explanatory variable (some of which are treatments, some of which are respondent characteristics, some of which are interactions thereof), which aids in interpretation. In contrast, a multinomial model allows for the possibility that there is asymmetry between selection of Candidate A and Candidate B. Theoretically, we have little reason to expect such asymmetry because both Candidate A and Candidate B are generated randomly from the same distribution of characteristics, differing only in the letter label and the order in which they appear in the presentation. To confirm that these differences do not yield any asymmetry, we conducted a formal (Brant) test of the proportional odds assumption. We indeed fail to reject the null ($\chi^2 = 32.78$, $df = 46$, $p = .622$), which means that the data appear to conform to the assumptions of the ordered model. Further, in the online supporting information, we plot the multinomial logistic coefficients for Candidate A versus those for Candidate B for every variable in our model to show that they closely follow the relationship that each equals -1 times the value of the other. That is, empirically we can see that variation in explanatory variables that increases the odds of the Candidate A response proportionately decreases the odds of the Candidate B response, as is assumed by the ordered logistic model.

Results

Our analysis focuses on the comparison of the coefficients for the interacted treatment terms (see [Table 1](#) as well as [Figure 2](#)) and the models from which the coefficients presented below also included variables used to produce those interactions, namely the treatment terms and participant construct measurements. The appendices include further details and alternative modeling approaches that illustrate the robustness of the core pattern of results we discuss immediately below ([Table S2.1](#) in Appendix [S2](#) in the online supporting information contains the full set of coefficient estimates from the ordered logistic regression model; [Table S8.1](#) in Appendix [S8](#) contains the full set of coefficient estimates from the multinomial logistic regression model; [Table S4.1](#) in Appendix [S4](#) contains the full set of coefficient estimates from a linear regression version of this analysis).

Our analysis demonstrates strong and consistent differential treatment effects. Different participants' reactions to candidates making the same statement vary in ways that reflect the participants' relative scores for the relevant attitudinal trait as previously measured. Specifically, voters systematically prefer to select candidates who match them and avoid selecting candidates who are opposite to them on these social-psychological attitudes.

As is clear from [Table 1](#), some attitudinal traits were more influential than others. Signals of high European identification had the greatest differential effect on vote choice, such that respondents with high European identification were especially more likely to vote for candidates who expressed high European identification, and participants with low European identification were especially repelled by candidates making those same statements.

In addition to European identification, the two attitudinal traits indexing concerns for group-related hierarchy—authoritarianism and egalitarianism, when expressed in both high and low terms—had considerable differential effects on vote choice. English identification exerted a moderate differential influence on vote choice, especially high English-identification statements. Trust in politicians and democratic institutions, nationalism, national nostalgia, and populist sentiment all influenced vote choice in the expected direction, albeit to a lesser degree

Table 1. Estimated Effect of Interactions Between Candidate Statement Treatment Terms and Participants' Corresponding Attitudinal-Trait Measurement From the Ordered Logistic Regression Model

Interacted Treatment Terms (Treatment Term Interacted with Measurement of Participant Attitudinal Trait)	Statement Variation	Coefficient Estimate	Lower CI	Upper CI	Standard Error
European identification	High	0.72***	0.60	0.83	0.06
	Low	-0.30***	-0.41	-0.19	0.06
Authoritarianism	High	0.39***	0.32	0.45	0.03
	Low	-0.38***	-0.44	-0.31	0.03
Egalitarianism	High	0.23***	0.17	0.30	0.03
	Low	-0.36***	-0.42	-0.29	0.03
English identification	High	0.35***	0.24	0.46	0.06
	Low	-0.19***	-0.30	-0.08	0.05
Trust in politicians	High	0.16***	0.10	0.22	0.03
	Low	-0.24***	-0.30	-0.17	0.03
Nationalism	High	0.21***	0.15	0.28	0.03
	Low	-0.18***	-0.24	-0.12	0.03
National nostalgia	High	0.22***	0.16	0.29	0.03
	Low	-0.08**	-0.15	-0.02	0.03
Populist sentiment	High	0.14***	0.07	0.20	0.03
	Low	-0.17***	-0.24	-0.11	0.03
British identification	High	0.10	-0.01	0.20	0.05
	Low	-0.19**	-0.31	-0.08	0.06
Gender/female		-0.01	-0.08	0.05	0.03
Intercept (B vs. NS and A)		-1.04	-1.18	-0.90	0.07
Intercept (B and NS vs. A)		0.68	0.54	0.82	0.07
Pseudo R^2		0.07			

*** $p < .001$;** $p < .01$;

than European identification, authoritarianism, egalitarianism, and English identification. The robustness of these results was checked by fitting multiple models, which confirmed the significance and magnitude of these results in all but a limited number of cases (for more details, see Appendices S2, S4, and S8 in the online supporting information).

The graphs in Figure 2 illustrate the probability of choosing Candidate A as a function of respondents' level of the corresponding attitudinal trait, illustrating the differential effects of candidate statement treatments. The vertical dimension of the graphs corresponds to the cumulative probability (adding to 1) of the three possible choices a respondent might make. The labels on the graphs correspond to the areas between the lines, with the area below the lowest line corresponding to the probability of selecting the candidate expressing a trait, the middle area corresponding to neutral responses, and the area above the top line corresponding to selecting the opposing candidate to the one expressing that trait. Each graph shows that as a given attitudinal trait increases, the probability of selecting candidates who make statements positively signaling that trait increases and the probability of selecting the opposing candidate decreases (solid blue lines). For candidates who negatively signal that trait, the probability of being selected declines as the corresponding attitudinal trait increases for the participant (red dashed lines). These effects are substantively large, with the probability of selecting candidates providing a given signal varying by 10–30 percentage points across the range of participants previously measured attitudinal traits.

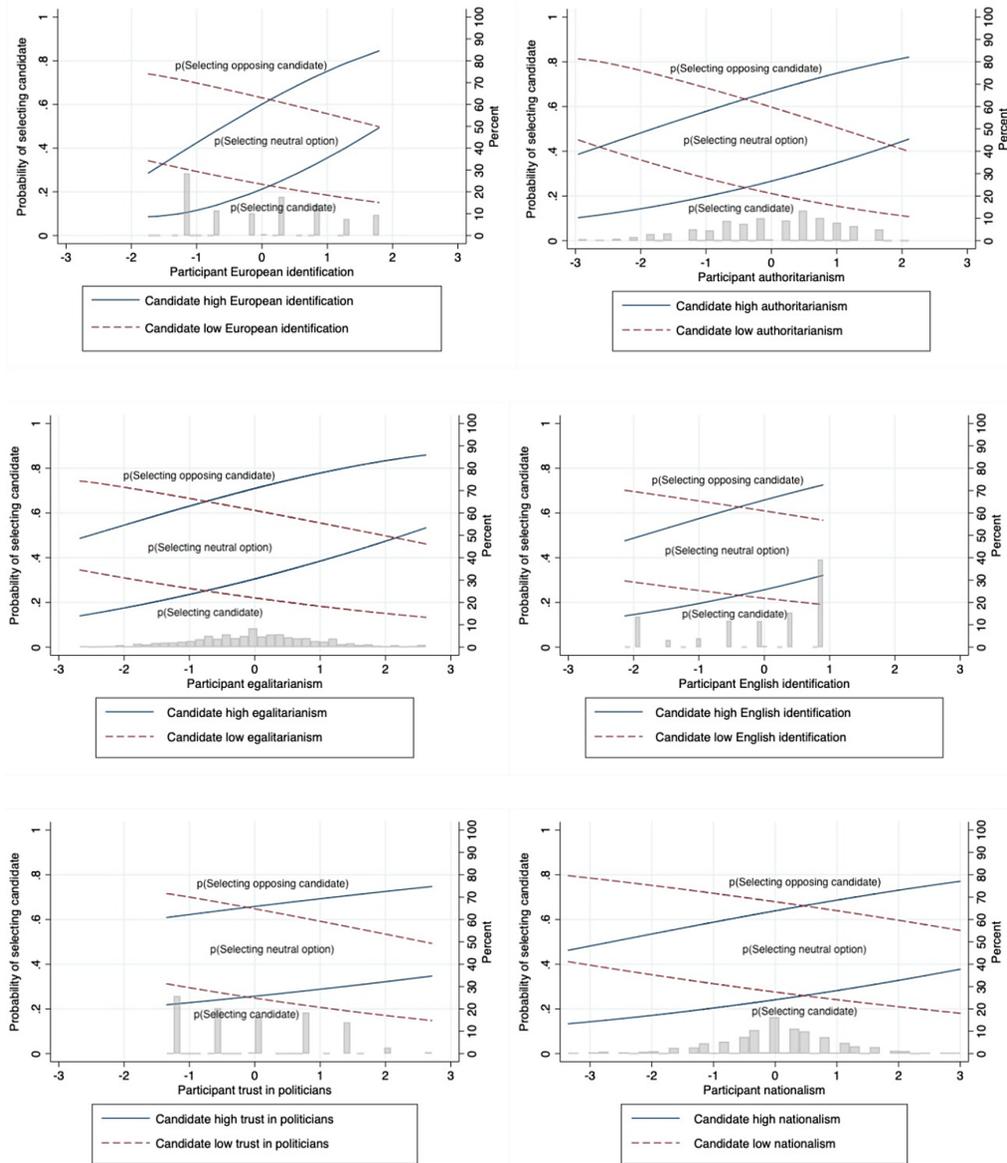


Figure 2. Differential effects of candidate statement treatments by participant attitudinal-trait measurements. The left-hand y-axis shows the cumulative probability of the three outcome levels (selecting the candidate expressing a trait, giving a neutral response, and selecting the opposing candidate), while the x-axis denotes respondent positioning on each trait.

The only exception to the finding that attitudinal traits strongly condition how the treatment statements affect vote choice pertained to high British identification, which has a small effect in the expected direction that falls short of being statistically significant. Statements of low British identification, on the other hand, elicit clear differential reactions, which resemble the effects of the other attitudinal-trait statements. In contrast, gender, as presented via candidate names,

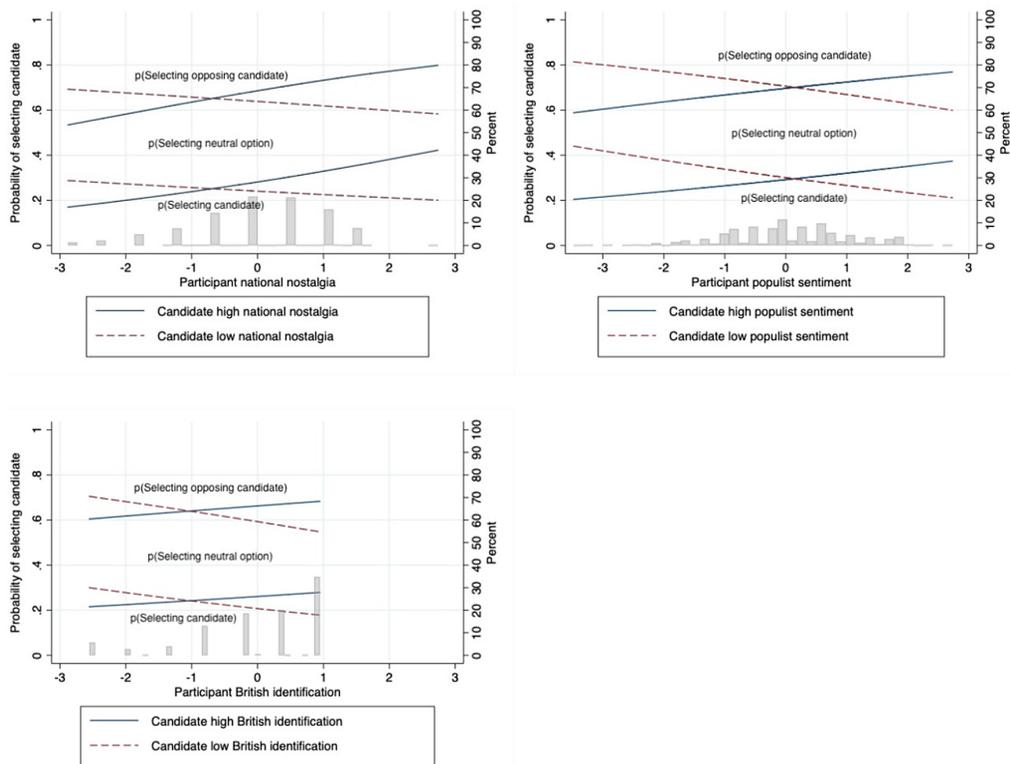


Figure 2 (Continued)

did not have an impact, indicating the absence of a homophily effect for the one demographic characteristic included in this study.

One important question concerns whether these results are a sign that these social-psychological attitudes are measuring distinct aspects of individuals that condition how they respond to candidate states, or whether attitude signals simply act as a proxy for candidate ideology or partisanship. We extend the regression model to investigate if this is the case by generating additional interactions of the treatment (candidate statement) indicators with both left–right self-placement and previous vote choice and add them to the ordered logistic regression model.³ We find that interactions with participants’ left–right ideology and past partisan vote in this model do not reveal the same differential effects (see Figure 3 and Appendix S3 in the online supporting information), and their addition does not substantially change the coefficients on the interactions of the treatments with the corresponding attitudinal traits from our previous analysis. Interactions of both left–right self-identification and partisan vote choice in the most recent national election preceding this experiment (the 2017 U.K. General Election) with the treatment terms are small and almost always nonsignificant (see Figure 3; table presented in Appendix S3). The graphs presented in Figure 3 illustrate the coefficients from the ordered logistic regression model which includes all represented variables in one model.

Another concern is that these social-psychological traits are overlapping and thus nonspecific in their influence, as might be the case if they were acting as a proxy for general ideological leaning

³High British-identification treatment terms omitted because of collinearity.

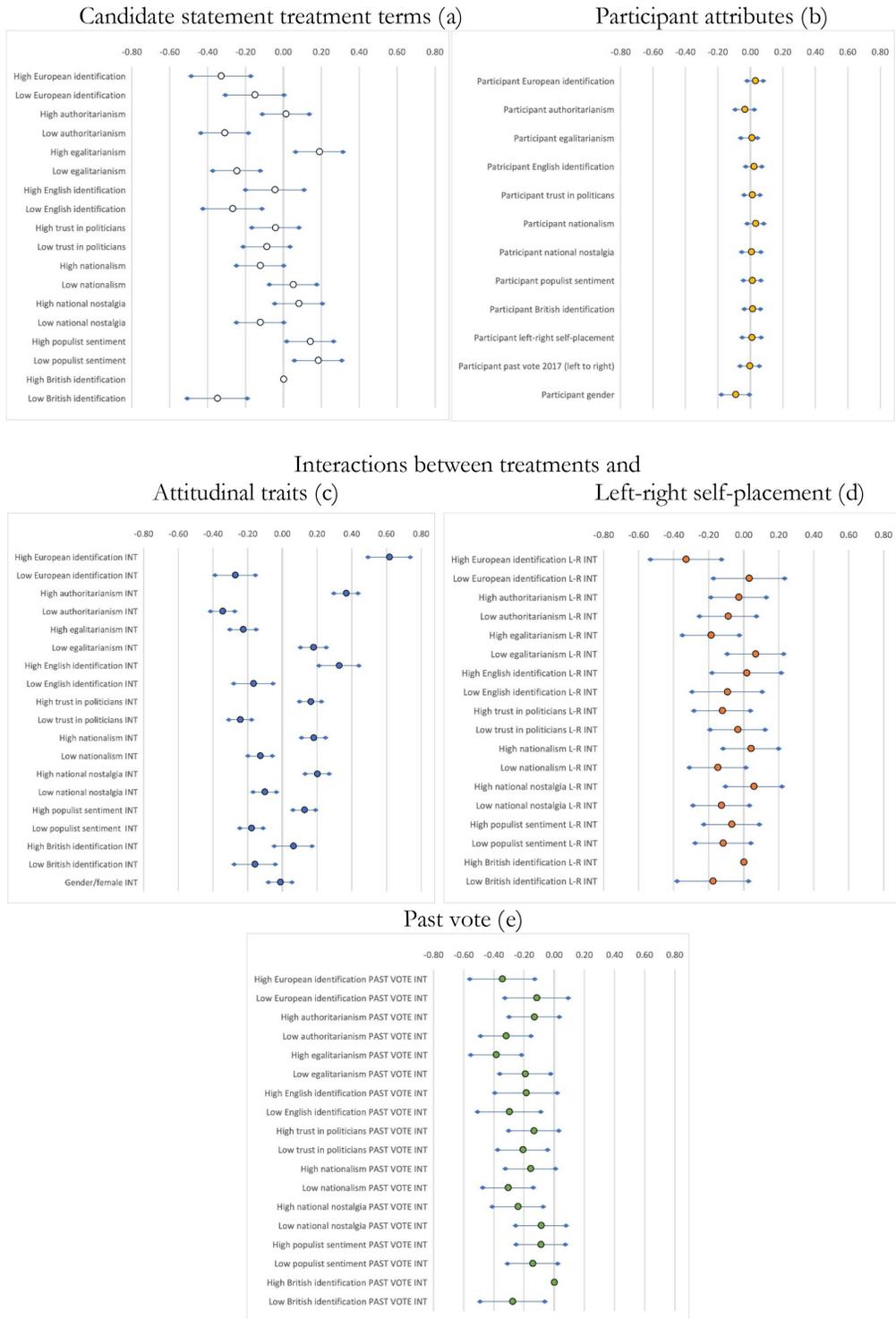


Figure 3. Estimated effects of candidate statement treatment terms (a), participants' attitudinal-trait measurement (b), and interactions between treatments and attitudinal traits (c), left-right self-placement (d), and past vote (e) from the ordered logistic regression model.

Table 2. Comparison of Model Fit

Model Fit with	AIC	Pseudo R^2
Interactions with corresponding attitudinal traits	16,979.26	0.07
Interactions with authoritarianism	17,373.65	0.05
Interactions with European identification	17,431.51	0.04
Interactions with left–right self-placement	17,514.69	0.04
Interactions with past vote	17,521.79	0.04
Interactions with national nostalgia	17,532.10	0.04
Interactions with egalitarianism	17,542.61	0.04
Interactions with nationalism	17,606.80	0.03
Interactions with populist sentiment	17,635.68	0.03
Interactions with English identification	17,643.22	0.03
Interactions with British identification	17,735.87	0.03
Interactions with trust in politicians	17,774.22	0.03

in a way that might be poorly captured by left–right self-positioning. To confirm that the variation in candidate selection is best explained by the interactions of attitudinal traits and candidate signals that correspond to them in a specific way, we compared the fit of a series of models. We used a single attitudinal trait to generate interactions with all treatment terms, creating a model that assumed that trait acted as a potential “general ideology” that explained all the interactions for all traits, and then fit an ordered logistic regression model with those interactions and the lower-level terms. We repeated this process for each attitudinal-trait measure as well as using participants’ left–right self-placement and past vote. The AIC and Pseudo R^2 statistics for each model are reported in Table 2, which illustrates that the main model of our analysis (with interactions of corresponding attitudinal traits and signals) is the best fit by a substantial margin. These results indicate the attitudinal traits are measuring multiple distinct features of individuals and that each specifically predicts how participants respond to candidate signals related to that trait.

Discussion

This study employs a novel experimental design to examine the role of core social-psychological attitudes in driving homophily in voter evaluations of candidates. We provide causal evidence that social emotions, perceptions, and commitments shape how voters react to statements that clearly signal the related attitudes of candidates. Participants reacted differently to the same statements made by hypothetical political candidates on social media, and that difference was strongly predicted by participants’ previously measured standing in terms of the attitudes those statements are designed to index. Specifically, participants were drawn toward candidates who appeared to match them on the attitudinal traits we measured and repelled by candidates who appeared to lie at the opposite end as them on the same traits. Underlying our research design is the recognition that we cannot randomize social-psychological attitudes to participants, but only the attitudinal signals presented. Our analysis of differential effects thus does leave open the possibility that there are other underlying motivations which are themselves drivers of both these attitudinal traits and voting decisions. Nonetheless, by demonstrating that voters have differential reactions that are specifically predicted by relevant social-psychological attitudes and not by left–right ideology or past partisan vote, we reveal how these widely applied social-psychological concepts index politically important multidimensional variation in how voters make decisions.

Indeed, this is the first evidence that voters exhibit homophily in core social-psychological attitudes when choosing political candidates. Although voter homophily has been classically discussed in terms of detecting underlying values of politicians (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004), it had only previously been demonstrated experimentally vis-à-vis demographics (Schwarz & Coppock, 2020; Wüest & Pontusson, 2018), issue positions (Hanretty et al., 2020), and on a correlational basis in the case of personality (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Caprara et al., 2017). We did not observe demographic homophily here in terms of gender, but we did observe strong, consistent patterns of homophily on traits that capture social emotions (trust, collective nostalgia), social perceptions (populist sentiment, nationalism), and particularly social commitments (national identification, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation). That such attitudinal traits were measured at least 5 months and in some cases as long as 5 years prior to this experiment speaks to their stability and over-time predictive power vis-à-vis political behavior. Such social attitudes are particularly potent to the extent that social media platforms enable political candidates to directly convey their personal values and concerns in a way that matters to voters (see Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Hellweg, 2011) and even to (wittingly or unwittingly) reveal them through statements made on such platforms before their decision to run for office. Future work could consider whether voters' media usage, political knowledge, and interest further condition their response to such signals. Overall, we have clear, robust evidence that the ability of politicians to communicate directly with candidates in a personalized way can have a strong impact on attracting and repelling voters with particular social-psychological profiles.

In addition to the overall importance of social-psychological matching for voter choice, we also address a gap in the literature (see Dennison et al., 2020) by identifying which attitudes matter the most. Although almost all attitudinal traits studied conditioned how participants responded to treatments, the interaction effects were considerable for European identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism and to a lesser degree, English identification. We interpret these findings as evidence that voters prefer leaders who share their commitments to social groups and to principles for distributing power and resources within and between such groups.

First, in choosing political candidates, individuals are drawn toward those who share their level of identification with national and supranational groups, suggestive that affiliation to such social identities, although symbolic and without apparent material consequence, is in fact meaningful to voters. This is consistent with mounting evidence for the influence of social identities on political behavior (e.g., Fowler & Kam, 2007; Huddy, 2001; West & Iyengar, 2022) and also with arguments that such influence is underpinned by the operation of an evolved “coalitional psychology” in the political domain (see Pietraszewski et al., 2015). Both evolutionary and social identity perspectives (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979) predict that the potency of particular social identity markers should vary with political and historical context, which may shed light on why high European identification has such a strong effect in this study, taking place as it did among British voters at the height of conflict between “Leaver” and “Remainer” voter identities (see Hobolt et al., 2021) as the United Kingdom was months away from leaving the European Union. The subnational identities within the United Kingdom, and their contemporary association with nativist attitudes (Ford & Sobolewska, 2018), provide a unique context for English identification to carry particular meaning for voters, while signals of high British identification did not activate salient coalitional identity for British voters at the time of the study. Drawing on theorizing of voting as adaptive followership, future studies could more systematically examine the extent to which shifting political and historical circumstances, and perceptions thereof,

moderate the importance of national versus other identities over time and across contexts (see Laustsen, 2021).

One important identity omitted from the present study is partisan identity or affiliation. This prevented us from testing whether the homophily effects we see in this study were due to attitudinal statements acting as indicators of partisanship, such that the affinities we observe would not hold were partisanship to be included, the latter acting as a more direct signal of what voters care most about. With this possibility in mind, a recent set of survey experiments with quasi-representative U.S. and U.K. samples used candidate profiles featuring demographic characteristics (via a photo), social commitment statements, and party affiliation, enabling assessment of the relative influence of each (Baron, 2023). Among both the British and American participants, it was found that shared partisanship has comparable influence on vote intention as shared national identification and shared egalitarianism and may even have less influence than shared authoritarianism. In addition to vote intention, participants also rated each candidate for perceived similarity (to the participant), and, in this case, all shared social commitments were as or more influential in shaping perceived similarity than shared partisan affiliation. Shared demographic characteristics (such as ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation) did not significantly shape perceptions of similarity, echoing our finding in the present study that gender homophily is not present when candidates' social commitments are signaled. These results indicate that candidates' signals of social commitments override voters' demographic stereotypes and are cognitively given priority in shaping which candidates we feel similar to (Baron, 2023). Taken together, the results of these experiments and the present study suggest that candidates who signal social commitments are communicating paramount information with regards to homophily and voting, mobilizing concerns that are as central to the core of political psychology as is partisanship.

Commitments concerning social groups are not only a matter of affiliation; they also involve endorsement of particular principles for distributing power and resources within and between groups. The substantial effects of both authoritarianism and egalitarianism in our study provide the strongest evidence yet of the influence of such principles in the selection of political leaders. In line with the predictive power of authoritarian attitudes for voter decisions as assessed in a range of eras and contexts (e.g., Cizmar et al., 2014; Van Assche et al., 2019), our observation of a strong influence of (high and low) authoritarianism implies that voters seek out candidates who might enact their preferred approach to leadership and adherence to traditional norms at the cost of severe punishment, that is, to navigating intragroup hierarchy in the face of challenges of group coordination.

Looking beyond one's own social group, another key dilemma concerns how different groups in society should relate to each other. Consistent with evidence for the strong predictive power of social dominance orientation (SDO) for voting behavior (e.g., Van Assche et al., 2019; see also Sidanius et al., 2016), and theorizing of SDO as a core adaptive strategy mobilized in political decision-making (see Sheehy-Skeffington & Thomsen, 2020; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), we found that individual preferences for equality versus inequality between groups strongly determined how voters reacted to statements from candidates signaling such preferences.⁴

⁴We note that although we consider SDO and egalitarianism as equivalent, the BES items used in measurement of participant egalitarianism were significantly different to the items from the SDO scale used to signal candidate egalitarianism. To conduct a more precise test of the role of SDO specifically, we reanalyzed the data from a subset of our sample who completed Wave 15 of the BES ($n = 238$), which included items taken from the SDO scale. This broadly replicated our results, yielding an overall interaction between participant and candidate SDO, plus a specific interaction involving candidate profiles signaling low SDO (for analysis details, see Appendix S6 in the online supporting information).

These findings raise questions for influential theoretical approaches that could be explored in future research. The overall salience of social-psychological attitudes underlines the importance of looking at candidate social values in an era of political communication that may be more personalized than ever before (Weinberg, 2020). Yet personal beliefs and traits are not devoid of political content, such that voting for a candidate with matching traits may indicate more than similarity as a route toward liking (see Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020). Indeed, it may be that the reason voters are drawn toward political candidates who seem similar to them on personality traits is that such candidates are assumed also to share their core social values (see Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Weinberg, 2020). This implies that the distinction between “expressive” and instrumental voting (see Huddy et al., 2015) is somewhat blurred, as voting becomes an arena for the instrumental enactment of core social commitments that are seemingly expressive in nature (see Obradovic et al., 2020; Sheehy-Skeffington & Thomsen, 2020; Weinberg, 2020). Given how it plays out most strongly for ingroup identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism, we think it likely that a core part of voter homophily is driven by the motivation to select leaders who share a similar level of commitment to one’s national group and ways of coordinating group-based resource dilemmas pertaining to it. Such a pattern had previously been suggested by correlational evidence that RWA and SDO mediate the link between self-rated personality and personality ratings of one’s ideal politician (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020) but is demonstrated here in a causal manner for the first time.

These findings are in line with accounts of the underpinnings of ideology centered on RWA and SDO (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010) and demonstrate that once one assesses such preferences directly (as opposed to indirectly, through personality or values: see Weinberg, 2020), their influence is striking. Future research should assess whether SDO and RWA are best understood as ideological manifestations of personality traits (Duckitt, 2001) or may exhibit an influence on politics that goes beyond them (Kleppesto et al., 2023). Related accounts of ideology (e.g., see Jost et al., 2009) also raise the question of whether the statements associated with the candidates in our study influenced vote choice only by acting as heuristics for left–right ideology or partisanship. Challenging this possibility, we did not find differential effects when we interacted our candidate-statement treatment terms with left–right self-placement and, separately, with past vote. This suggests that voters are not appraising candidates’ social attitudes merely as a way of detecting their partisanship. Indeed, subsequent studies suggest that even when a candidate’s partisan affiliation is explicit, its influence in shaping perceptions of that candidate is not stronger than that of national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism (Baron, 2023). Nevertheless, given the uncertain external validity of discrete choice experiments, future research would do well to explore the relative influence of candidate attitudes when signaled amidst the noisy reality of real-world elections, involving signals of other candidate attributes such as party and appearance.

Finally, future work might address how the hierarchy-relevant group commitments we highlight here relate to and interact with traits measured by accounts of voter behavior based on the notion of an evolved coalitional psychology (see Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Applications of adaptive followership theory to candidate evaluations suggest that RWA and SDO matter primarily through increasing perceptions of intergroup conflict, which in turn should be associated with preference for more dominant leaders (see Laustsen, 2021; Laustsen & Petersen, 2017). Future research could test whether the influence of voter-assessed RWA and SDO on candidate evaluations is accounted for by ratings of candidate dominance or voter preferences for dominance (and other leadership traits) in candidates, even taking into account signals of a candidate’s levels of RWA and SDO (for an initial investigation of this, see Baron, 2023). Indeed, to the extent that physical cues of candidates matter because of lack of direct

familiarity with the personalities of politicians in large-scale societies (Laustsen & Petersen, 2017), in cases where social media enables such direct familiarity, the influence of such surface-level traits may give way to the influence of core commitments concerning intra- and intergroup hierarchy (see Sheehy-Skeffington & Thomsen, 2020). Relatedly, the idea of politics as a site of enactment of one's preferred means of solving problems of group coordination implies that homophily based on group commitments may play out just as strongly for the signaling of the values of party platforms as for the signaling of the values of political candidates, a possibility future research could test.

Although they had a smaller impact than the core-group commitments of national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism, other social attitudes that we measured also influenced the selection of candidates in our study, possibly due to their links to group commitments and related notions of hierarchy. The role of nationalism is consistent with the importance of strength of ingroup feeling, although nationalism adds to it a sense of the superiority of one's own group and the inferiority of others (see Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012). The influence of populist sentiment suggests the potency of one particular intergroup distinction, between "the people" and "the elites" or establishment, which is centered on the perception of an unjust hierarchy between them (see Mudde, 2004; Obradovic et al., 2020). Recent manifestations of populism in the United Kingdom and the United States have been intertwined with national nostalgia, which often involves a perceived loss of social cohesion within groups and social status between groups (see Obradovic & Baron, 2023; Smeekes, 2015). As self-reported levels of trust are hard to interpret (Newton et al., 2018), future research would do well to probe the meaning of political trust to voters and whether it might in fact contain echoes of intergroup dynamics such as hostility toward the establishment or toward perceived outgroup members (see Delhey et al., 2011).

Overall, our findings provide the first evidence of voter homophily along the lines of social emotions, social perceptions, and social commitments, all constructs that vary widely within the population and are stable over time. By sidestepping particular policy positions and the issues that predominate a single election cycle, voters can use candidate attitudinal signaling to understand the social-psychological mindset of their potential leaders, in an apparent search for one that resonates with their own. Signals of group commitments, in particular, reveal the kind of society a candidate wishes to bring about and their allegiance to it, thus striking at the core set of concerns that arguably mobilize political participation in the first place.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Denise Baron, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE, UK. E-mail: d.e.baron@lse.ac.uk

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare none.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1 Attributes Varied in Survey Experiment

Table S1.1. Attributes Varied in Survey Experiment

Appendix S2. Table and Figure of Ordered Logistic Regression Model with Attitudinal Trait Interactions and Un-interacted Treatment Terms

Table S2.1. Ordered Logistic Regression Model with Attitudinal Trait Interactions and Un-interacted Treatment Terms

Appendix S3. Table and Figure of Ordered Logistic Regression Model with all Interactions and Lower Order Terms, Including Left-Right Ideology Interactions and Partisan Interactions

Table S3.1. Ordered Logistic Regression Model with All Interactions and Lower Order Terms, Including Left-Right Ideology Interactions and Partisan Interactions, Corresponding to Figure 3

Appendix S4. Table and Figure of Linear Regression Model with all Interactions and Lower Order Terms, Including Left-Right Ideology Interactions and Partisan Interactions

Table S4.1. Linear Regression Model with All Interactions and Lower Order Terms, Including Left-Right Ideology Interactions and Partisan Interactions

Figure S4.1. Linear regression model with all interactions and lower order terms, including left-right ideology interactions and partisan interactions.

Appendix S5. Missingness of Measurements for Attitudinal Traits

Table S5.1. Missingness of Measurements for Attitudinal Traits

Figure S5.1. Histograms of attitudinal trait measurements.

Appendix S6. Measure of Egalitarianism and Analysis of Wave 15 Sub-Sample Substituting Social Dominance Orientation

Table S6.1. Survey Items Used to Index Egalitarianism

Table S6.2. Ordered Logistic Regression Coefficients for Wave 15 SDO Sub-Sample

Appendix S7. Multi-Collinearity Statistics

Table S7.1. Collinearity Statistics for Variables Measuring Participants' Attitudinal Traits

Appendix S8. Multinomial Logistic Regression Tables

Table S8.1. Results of Multinomial Logistic Regression Model with All Interactions of Attitudinal Traits and Lower Order Terms with "Not Sure" as the Base

Figure S8.1. Multinomial logit coefficients for Candidate A (x -axis) and Candidate B (y -axis).

Table S8.2. Results of a Multinomial Logistic Regression Model with All Interactions and Lower Order Terms, Including Left-Right Ideology Interactions and Partisan Interactions with "Not Sure" as the Base

Appendix S9. Bivariate Ordered Logistic Regression Models

Table S9.1. Coefficient and Model Statistics for Bivariate Ordered Logistic Regression Models for Vote Choice; Each Grouping (i.e., High European Identification) Includes the Coefficients from One Bivariate Model.