

Partisan Voters in Party Systems with Ephemeral Parties: Evidence from South Korea

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Abstract

In this article, we examine how voters make decisions about electoral candidates in an under-institutionalized party system. In such a context, parties are expected to be less rooted in society, with fewer programmatic linkages to particular groups. Thus, voters are considered less likely to vote for candidates based on their policy positions and are expected to have less consistent policy preferences. Instead, it is assumed that individual candidate characteristics are more important. Using a conjoint survey experiment conducted in South Korea, a crucial case of a weak party system in a relatively new but consolidated democracy, we examine how voters are motivated by individual candidate characters and domestic policy and foreign policy positions. Our results show that individual characteristics matter, but we also find strong evidence of consistent policy preferences, especially in the foreign policy domain. We demonstrate high levels of programmatic partisanship - voters who are partisans informed about and motivated by policy positions, primarily.

Keywords: political behavior, elections, party systems, institutionalization, South Korea

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Introduction

How do voters choose representatives in under-institutionalized party systems? Much of the existing research on party institutionalization focuses on the definition and extent of party institutional power and the characteristics of party systems. This literature is both voluminous and informative. It provides a conceptual basis for measuring relative levels of institutionalization and determining whether a country's party system is under-institutionalized. It also suggests that voters in under-institutionalized party systems either decide upon candidates for pecuniary reasons (clientelism) or else due to candidates' personal characteristics (Müller 2007).

Institutionalization is the degree to which a party system is stable, and the major parties associated with it have durable organizations. A source of such stability is the degree to which parties are embedded and enmeshed within society through linkages between the party's ideological or programmatic positions and voters. Parties also have an identity and organizational power distinct from individual party leaders (Mainwaring and Torcal 2005; Mainwaring 2016). In countries with unstable parties and party systems, personalities and networks based on regions or other sectional ties may dominate without durable party institutions and clear ideological linkages between politicians and their voters. Sometimes, parties can also be highly personalistic, serving primarily as vehicles for powerful individuals rather than having a strong separate identity as an institution (Reed 1994; Moser and Scheiner 2004; 2005; Kostadinova and Levitt 2014; Kefford and McDonnell 2018). Hence, voters are liable to choose candidates who provide financial benefits or are otherwise personally charming.

In this paper, we draw upon the literature on party institutionalization to test theoretical expectations about voter behavior in a weakly institutionalized party system setting. We use the South Korean case, a relatively new democracy with under-institutionalized parties (Hellmann 2014) and a weakly institutionalized party system (Wong 2014). South Korean political parties, despite their weak organizations, are no longer plagued by clientelism (Nam

1995; Hellmann 2014; JeongHun Han 2021). But the weakness of party organizations implies that programmatic linkages between party and voter are weak or absent. At the same time, political elites are increasingly polarized (S.-J. Lee 2005; S. Han 2022; Cheong and Haggard 2023), which has given rise to some negative affective polarization among partisan voters (J. M. Lee 2015; Jo 2022).

However, as newer literature on party institutionalization has shown, party institutional strength and the strength of party systems overall do not have to be directly linked to the stability of policy and ideological programs. Borbáth (2020) demonstrates that while party organizations may lack stability, the electoral strategies and policy programs they pursue, often aligned with specific ideologies, can remain consistent over time. Such a party system is thus characterized by "ephemeral parties". In many regards, with its unstable parties but highly ideologically polarized elites, South Korea is a textbook case of an ephemeral party system. Hence, we suggest that elite polarization may, even in the absence of strong party institutions, still give rise to consistent preferences among voters generally that track those of their chosen party or ideological camp (Levendusky 2010; Gonthier and Guerra 2023). However, there is a lack of work examining whether elite partisanship amidst weak parties can give rise to consistent preferences among voters.

We employed a choice-based conjoint experiment conducted in the lead-up to the 2024 Korean General Election to consider the relative importance of individual candidate characteristics relative to domestic and foreign policy positions. We seek to establish whether voters prefer candidates with domestic and foreign policy preferences consistent with their partisan identities or whether they are primarily motivated by the personal characteristics of candidates like their region of origin, their prior professional experience, allegations of impropriety, or having politically controversial family backgrounds. We do not include party labels in order to test whether people who identify as conservative or liberal pick candidates on the basis of their programmatic positions.

Our findings indicate that voter preferences in South Korea's weakly institutionalized

party system are shaped both by policy stances and the personal characteristics of candidates. Voters demonstrate strong tendencies to support candidates whose policy positions align with their own partisan identities, especially regarding foreign policy and specific areas of domestic policy. This suggests a significant level of policy congruence between voters and their preferred candidates, even in a context where parties lack strong institutional foundations and are characterized by high levels of elite polarization. Notably, our results highlight that voter-level programmatic partisanship—driven by ideological alignment rather than clientelism or candidate personality alone—can manifest in environments with weak party institutions. This finding challenges the assumption that voter behavior in such contexts is primarily non-programmatic and instead underscores the potential for stable voter-policy linkages even amid institutional instability. By focusing on South Korea as a case study, this research contributes to bridging the gap between studies on party institutionalization and electoral behavior, demonstrating that elite partisanship can foster coherent voter preferences in under-institutionalized settings.

Literature Review and Case Selection

The literature on party system institutionalization has developed since the pioneering work of Sartori (1976) and others, notably Huntington (1968). To paraphrase Mainwaring and Torcal (2005), the generally accepted definition of party institutionalization is the degree to which parties are stable, have deep roots in society with voters from particular social groups having strong attachments to them via policy and ideological linkages, parties generally have a high degree of legitimacy among political actors, and the personal power of leaders over parties is limited.¹

In this paper, we are primarily interested in two aspects of institutionalization and how they are exhibited in voter behavior. These are the impact of party instability on voter

¹As newer literature has noted and sought to resolve, there is often confusion between individual party institutionalization and party system-level institutionalization (Bértoa et al. 2021; Bértoa, Enyedi, and Mölder 2024).

preferences, the relative power of individual candidate characteristics, and the personality and image of the candidate in voter decision-making relative to policy positions. We examine whether programmatic strength with unstable parties can still give rise to consistent programmatic partisanship among voters.

Stronger parties usually sustain strong links with voters. Parties act as channels for social cleavages, but drawing on their organizational capacities and social legitimacy, parties can also shape and change the preferences of voters (Torcal and Mainwaring 2003, 57–59). Linkages are often discussed regarding policy preferences, with the degree to which politicians' positions are congruent with voters taken as an indicator of policy linkages between the two, and unstable party systems leading to weak policy linkages between voters and elites (Boas and Smith 2019; c.f., Carroll and Meireles 2024). This is expected to give rise to inconsistent and unstable policy preferences among voters.

Without strong party institutions, an alternative form of linkage between politicians and voters is the so-called 'personal vote', which means voting for politicians on the basis of their ascriptive characteristics or personal conduct (Renwick et al. 2016; Zittel 2017). A subset of such linkages that are of great interest in under-institutionalized political systems is clientelist linkages in which politicians provide personal favors to voters in return for continued support (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). Some have argued that declining clientelism, greater economic development, and growing party institutionalization are correlated or that there may even be a causal link between them (though recent literature points to a more complex relationship, see: Kitschelt and Kselman 2013).

Generally, clear partisan divides give rise to strong party brands and strong parties in many contexts (Mainwaring 2016). However, the relationship between parties' organizational stability and programmatic linkages is more complex than some have previously assumed. As newer literature has shown, in spite of parties being unstable, party programs and political competition based upon them can become and remain stable. In other words, systems can be characterized by both unstable parties and stable programs, otherwise termed an "ephemeral

party” system (Borbáth 2020).

Korea and Ephemeral Parties

We choose to focus on South Korea’s voters here because the country is a clear example of a consolidated democracy with weak parties. The party system is unstable, but clientelism has disappeared (Nam 1995; Hellmann 2014; JeongHun Han 2021). Instead, South Korea’s parties are dominated by society. ‘Weak parties, strong society’ is how this is often summarized (Croissant and Völkel 2012; Cho, Kim, and Kim 2019; Y. Lee 2022).² The progressive camp is characterized by strong societal movements and civic organizations that significantly influence elite partisanship and social linkages, the political right demonstrates different patterns of engagement and mobilization (Kim 2021). The political right is less dependent on grassroots social movements for policy formulation and electoral mobilization. Instead, right-wing parties emphasize institutional continuity, economic progress, and national security concerns, appealing to constituencies through governance achievements and ideological narratives centered around anti-communism, market liberalization, and national defense.

Moreover, the conservative parties in South Korea have been more likely to use institutional mechanisms and formal political channels to connect with voters, as opposed to the civil society connection that defines the left (Lee 2021). This is not to say that the right lacks a societal base or that civic organizations aligned with conservative values do not exist (Lee 2024). However, how these parties interact with society and the degree to which social movements influence party dynamics differ significantly from the left. Much of this difference is a consequence of the legacies of authoritarian rule and the fact that the conservative parties trace their institutional lineages back to the authoritarian era when the ruling party was primarily a mechanism for voter mobilization (Möbrand 2019).

Generally, research shows that elite polarization produces voters with more consistent and partisan preferences and clearer identification with specific parties (Hetherington 2001;

²At the mass level, involvements in such movements also foster political participation more generally as well (No, Han, and Wang 2021).

Levendusky 2010; Zingher and Flynn 2018; Moral and Best 2023). Partisanship and polarization are features of the South Korean political system, as they are elsewhere in the democratic world.³ This means that there is a modicum of programmatic stability on both the left and right has developed in spite of the instability of the party system. This is evident from the analysis of party programs since the country democratized in 1987 with the emergence and persistence of programmatic differences between major conservative and progressive party groupings (Lee 2020; Han 2021).

Further, a significant portion of the Korean electorate possesses the necessary skills to parse political news with relative ease, and a subset of the electorate has been categorized as ‘cognitive partisans’, voters who have a high degree of knowledge of politics, do not rely on cues from party leaders/organizations, and have clear partisan leanings (Dalton 2007; Choi, Kim, and Roh 2017).⁴ However, it is unclear whether partisanship and elite polarization ensure that popular policy positions of partisans are coherent and aligned with the parties in the absence of strong party-voter linkages.

Indeed, what the literature on institutionalization and partisan polarization point to are two potential drivers of voter choice in elections in countries with weak institutions but absent clientelism. First, voters may primarily be motivated by their personal attraction to particular candidates’ characteristics (e.g., Ono and Yamada 2020). In South Korea, this phenomenon is evident with the personal vote associated with political outsiders like Ahn Cheol-soo, particularly in the 2017 Presidential Election, and the widespread use and apparent effectiveness of negative campaigning in the 2022 Presidential Election (Lee and Park 2023). The more recent case of Cho Kuk, a former Minister of Justice whose nomination and subsequent resignation in 2019 sparked significant public and political controversy, fur-

³At the popular level, social media may act as a conduit and has been found to push users toward political participation, make them partisan, and tend to polarize their views (C. Lee, Shin, and Hong 2018; Min and Yun 2018; Cheong and Haggard 2023). Conventional partisan media exposure also polarizes the public, pushing partisans toward stronger or more extreme viewpoints (Jiyoung Han 2018).

⁴Recent evidence from South Korea indicates that the public overall is not particularly polarized or partisan, with many claiming to be independents and centrists, but a subsection of voters who are strong partisans with increasingly polarizing opinions (Cheong and Haggard 2023).

ther highlights the polarization and personalistic nature of South Korean politics.⁵ Second, even without strong party organizations, partisan polarization among elites and mass partisanship may create consistent policy preferences among partisan voters and policy-based candidate preferences. In other words, even without strong parties, Korean voters may be “programmatically partisan” whose ideological views are reflected in particular programmatic preferences (Sniderman and Stiglitz 2012, 77).

Data and Methodology

We use a choice-based conjoint design to measure the relative importance of policy positions and personal candidate characteristics in voter decision-making. Conjoint experiments are a commonly utilized survey technique in the social sciences (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Bansak et al. 2021). Conjoint experiments use multidimensional designs that allow researchers to simultaneously examine how different attributes affect preferences. This method facilitates a detailed analysis of how voters make decisions, specifically showing how policy positions and personal characteristics of candidates influence voting choices.

In this study, we are interested in the extent to which candidate personal attributes influence voter decision-making relative to policy positions and, secondly, to the extent that they matter, which policy positions are supported and by whom. In the run-up to South Korea’s General Election, the survey was run with a (semi-)nationally representative online panel run with the survey company Qualtrics (n=2,006). Appendix A in the Supplementary Information (SI) provides more information on the sample. Half of the sample was asked to choose General Election candidates, while the other half was asked to choose Presidential

⁵Initially hailed as a progressive academic and a key advisor to President Moon Jae-in, Cho Kuk’s nomination and brief tenure as Minister of Justice were overshadowed by allegations of unethical conduct involving his family’s affairs, particularly concerning his daughter’s university admissions. These controversies ignited widespread public outcry and protests, highlighting how personal scandals can dominate public discourse and influence voter attitudes more than party affiliations. Cho’s subsequent return to politics, not aligned with any established party but as the leader of his own, further illustrates this dynamic. His campaign focuses on reforming the Public Prosecutor’s Office, but his party lacks a substantive programmatic foundation and is likely to endure only as long as his personal influence remains.

candidates. Because major parties had yet to set out their General Election manifestos at the time of design, the presidential positions of the two major party candidates from 2022 were used. However, policy positions set out in March of 2024 correspond to 2022 positions quite closely, and older positions also function as a test of programmatic partisanship, as they measure partisans' memories and programmatic consistency. Table 1 provides the attributes and their corresponding levels used to define the hypothetical candidates respondents evaluate.

Attribute	No.	Attribute Levels	Motivation
Age	3	40, 55, 70	Primarily for profile realism but also to explore the importance of age. Notably Article 67 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea stipulates that citizens aged 40 or older are eligible to be elected president (Republic of Korea 1987).
Gender	2	Man, Woman	Primarily for profile realism but also to explore the importance of gender.
Origin	3	Seoul, Busan, Gwangju	Seoul and the capital region together contain half the population of the country. Busan and Gwangju are parts of two regions, Yeongnam and Honam, historically subject to regionalist sectarianism (Kwon 2004).
Controversies	3	None, Bribery allegations, Candidate grandparents engaged in Japanese collaboration, Candidate's son allegedly received illegal exemptions from military service	Existing literature points to personal scandals as a potential negative personal trait that affects voter behavior, with the attribute levels drawn from that literature (H. Kim and Roh 2019).
Candidate experience	4	Businessperson, Civic Activist, Prosecutor, Diplomat	Existing literature points to candidate experience as important in attracting votes when party labels are absent (Kirkland and Coppock 2018).
Labor Policy	4	Promote harmony between workers and business, More flexible working hours, Gradually implement a four and a half working day week, Work guarantee	Economic policy issue with implications for all members of the population in employment. Policies taken from three largest parties by vote share 2022 Presidential Election as registered at the National Election Commission.
Housing Priority	4	Reform housing policy, Increased access to public housing, Lower real estate taxes, Strengthening of real estate taxes	Economic policy issue with implications for homeowners (lower/higher taxes) and renters. Policies taken from the three largest parties by vote share 2022 Presidential Election as registered at the National Election Commission.

Continued on next page

Table 1 – *Continued from previous page*

Attribute	No.	Attribute Levels	Motivation
Social Policy	4	Priority to social harmony, Prioritize social consensus before pursuing anti-discrimination law, Opposition to comprehensive anti-discrimination law, Pass an anti-discrimination law as quickly as possible	Social policy issue related to minorities including sexual and ethnic minorities facing discrimination. Sourced from government think tank analysis of different party candidate positions in 2022 Presidential election.
Foreign Policy	4	South Korea’s national interests need to be promoted, Foreign policy that utilizes US-China competition as an opportunity, Emphasize US-ROK Alliance, Restarting inter-Korean cooperation projects	Policies taken from three largest parties by vote share 2022 Presidential Election as registered at the National Election Commission.
Position on Nuclear Weapons	4	The national interest must be reflected, No deployment of nuclear weapons to South Korea, Redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, South Korea pursuing its own nuclear deterrent	Major foreign policy issue. Presidential candidates on the right have advocated for nuclear sharing and redeployment of nuclear tactical weapons under certain circumstances, while those on the left have said that no deployments should be made.

Table 1: Attributes Summary

As the table summarizes, the conjoint design comprises ten attributes, of which five are personal candidate characteristics, while the other five are policy-related. Each set of levels was benchmarked against existing literature (personal attributes), related laws (personal attributes), or else the policy positions of the two largest parties as sourced from the National Electoral Commission, major news sources, or policy analysis. Based on our research and understanding of the political and policy environment in South Korea, Table 2 outlines the policy positions associated with one of the two major parties: the conservative People’s Power Party or the progressive Minjoo Party.

Policy Area	Conservative Position	Progressive Position
Labor Policy	Flexibility in working hours	Phased implementation of a 4.5-day workweek
Housing Policy	Easing real estate tax burden	Increasing real estate taxes, Large-scale expansion of public housing
Social Policy	Prioritize social consensus before pursuing anti-discrimination law	<i>Same as Conservative</i>
Foreign Policy	Emphasis on the US-South Korea alliance, Deployment of tactical nuclear weapons	Balanced diplomacy between the US and China
Nuclear Policy	and nuclear sharing with the US, Pursuit of independent nuclear armament	No deployment of nuclear weapons in South Korea

Table 2: Comparison of Policy Positions by Political Orientation

In the survey experiment introduction, respondents are told they will evaluate hypothetical candidates for a general or presidential election. Then, they are provided with two profiles and asked to choose which among them they support the most. They evaluate ten profiles in total, which yields a total effective sample size of 40,120 (2,000 respondents * 2 profiles per task * 10 tasks in total). Figure 1 shows an example of the experimental design. For ease of navigating profiles, all personalist attributes (age, gender⁶, origin, occupation), besides the

⁶In this study, the term ‘gender’ is employed in a binary framework, conceptualized according to sex as determined at birth. This approach aligns with the methodologies commonly utilized in Korean demographic surveys and the construction of population estimates. The decision to adhere to this binary conception of

suspicion of scandal, are presented together. The order within the personal characteristics and all other attributes and values are randomly assigned without constraints.

대선 후보 1/10

다음의 질문들은 두 명의 후보에 대한 정보를 기반으로 합니다. 실제 선거 상황을 가정하여, 자신의 완벽한 선호와 일치하지 않더라도 두 후보 중 더 선호하는 쪽을 선택해 주시기 바랍니다. 프로필은 후보자들이 누구인지와 그들의 정책 입장을 알려줍니다.

귀하는 지금 선거권을 행사하신다고 가정하시어 다음 질문들을 천천히 읽어가며 선택하시길 바랍니다.

	후보 A	후보 B
노동정책	노사관계에서 조화 증진	노사관계에서 조화 증진
부동산 정책	부동산 세부담 완화	공공주택 대대적 확대
사회정책	포괄적 차별금지법 반대	차별금지법 신속 제정 추진
의혹	증조부모 친일반민족행위자 의혹 제기	뇌물 수수 의혹 제기
외교정책	미중 균형 외교 전개	조기에 북한 정부와의 경협사업 재 추진
핵무기관련 정책	핵무기와 관련한 정책에 국익 반영	필요 시 미국에 전술핵 배치와 핵 공유
연령	70세	40세
성별	여성	남성
출신지역	부산광역시	부산광역시
경력	검사	외교관
어느 후보를 선호하십니까?	후보 A	후보 B

Figure 1: The Experimental Design

gender is driven by several factors, chief among them the desire to maintain consistency with existing data collection and analysis practices within South Korea. This alignment ensures that our research is directly comparable to a wide array of governmental and academic studies within the country, facilitating a more seamless integration of our findings into the broader discourse on electoral behaviors and demographic trends. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this approach, particularly its inability to capture the full spectrum of gender identities.

Our analysis calculates marginal means to examine the outcome data from the forced-choice responses. This method determines the average effect of each attribute level on the outcome variable (i.e., choosing the candidate), averaging across the other levels. Given our research interest, we want to assess subgroup preferences overall and the difference in marginal means for each level by partisan subgroups (progressives, conservatives). This way, we can empirically determine what each subgroup prefers and whether they have partisan differences consistent with our expectations for party-voter linkages.⁷

In addition to the main tasks in the conjoint design, we also include two manipulation checks. After the first task, respondents are prompted, on a separate page, to indicate to which party the candidate they chose belongs (the conservative People’s Power Party, progressive Minjoo Party, or “another party”). This question is meant as a hard test of whether the preferred candidates’ policy positions motivate support.⁸

Then, after the second task, respondents are prompted with an open-text question asking them to explain their previous candidate choice. This data provides qualitative insight into their candidate preferences and serves as an additional attention check. We implement Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), a machine-learning technique that identifies underlying themes or topics within text data. By applying LDA to the open-text answers, we can uncover patterns in respondent preferences and perceptions that are not directly observable through the numeric data.

Our subgroups are likely voters of progressive and conservative partisans. We identify these groups using a combination of self-reported political ideology and party support. We

⁷We adopt marginal means over conditional AMCEs due to the latter’s requirement of a reference category, which can obscure the interpretation of overall preference patterns. Free from such constraints, marginal means offer an analytically simple approach suitable for identifying and comparing preferences between subgroups.

⁸Minor parties have received relatively small shares in recent presidential and general elections, so they were omitted as choices. Practically speaking, the research could not include minor parties due to the very small sample sizes of party supporters that we can capture in surveys. The programmatic positions of the Justice Party, a left-wing progressive party, were included as alternative attribute levels. Their policy positions, which are often the most programmatic among parties, come close to but are distinct from the more moderate Minjoo Party’s positions. For example, the Justice Party has advocated for an anti-discrimination law on the basis of progressive principles. At the time of writing, the Justice Party is no longer represented in the National Assembly, but they have previously scored in the high single digits in various national elections.

take self-identifying progressives and conservatives as partisans. Where respondents identified as centrist (i.e., neither left nor right), we looked to their party support. Those supporting the People’s Power Party were assigned to the conservative subgroup, and those supporting the Minjoo Party were assigned to the progressive subgroup. This measurement, then, accounts for partisan leaners. Based on the data, we determine that we have a valid measure of partisanship. The final analysis uses voting respondents.⁹

Findings

First, we do not find significant enough differences between general and presidential election scenarios to warrant reporting them separately (see Appendix C for more information). Taking candidate preferences for both voting scenarios, Figures 2 and 3 show our main findings. For clarity, we divide the figures into personalist and policy attributes. Conditional marginal means are presented as percentages, as any given marginal mean of an attribute level represents the probability that the profile was chosen. With two profiles, any mean above .5 (or 50 percent) indicates attribute level favorability; the profile is more likely than not to be chosen. Then, we present the marginal means between the subgroups expressed as percentage point (pp) differences.

Overall, we see that both the hypothetical candidates’ personal and policy positions matter for progressive and conservative partisans, but generally in different ways. Regarding personalist characteristics (Figure 2), the candidate’s age does not matter much unless they are considerably older; then, there is a notable penalty. Only 45 percent of profiles with an older candidate were preferred. This holds consistent for progressives and conservatives. Other personalist attributes matter, too, and with notable partisan divides.

First, we see that the candidate’s occupational background matters. Progressives strongly prefer a candidate with a career in civil rights activism. Overall, 55 percent of all profiles with such a candidate were chosen, whereas for conservatives, such an attribute level disin-

⁹127 of 2,006 respondents were excluded. Their inclusion or exclusion makes no difference on the results.

centivized support. The sum difference is nine percentage points (pp). Civil rights activist backgrounds are commonly associated with progressive bulwarks (e.g., the previous president, Moon Jae-in, a progressive), so this is not a surprising finding. Conservatives, on the other hand, slightly prefer a prosecutor or diplomat, although the subgroup difference is only notable for the prosecutor career background. This finding is more likely evidence of personalism rather than a merit-based evaluation of a candidate's career background, given that it is the career background of current South Korean president Yoon Suk-yeol, a conservative.

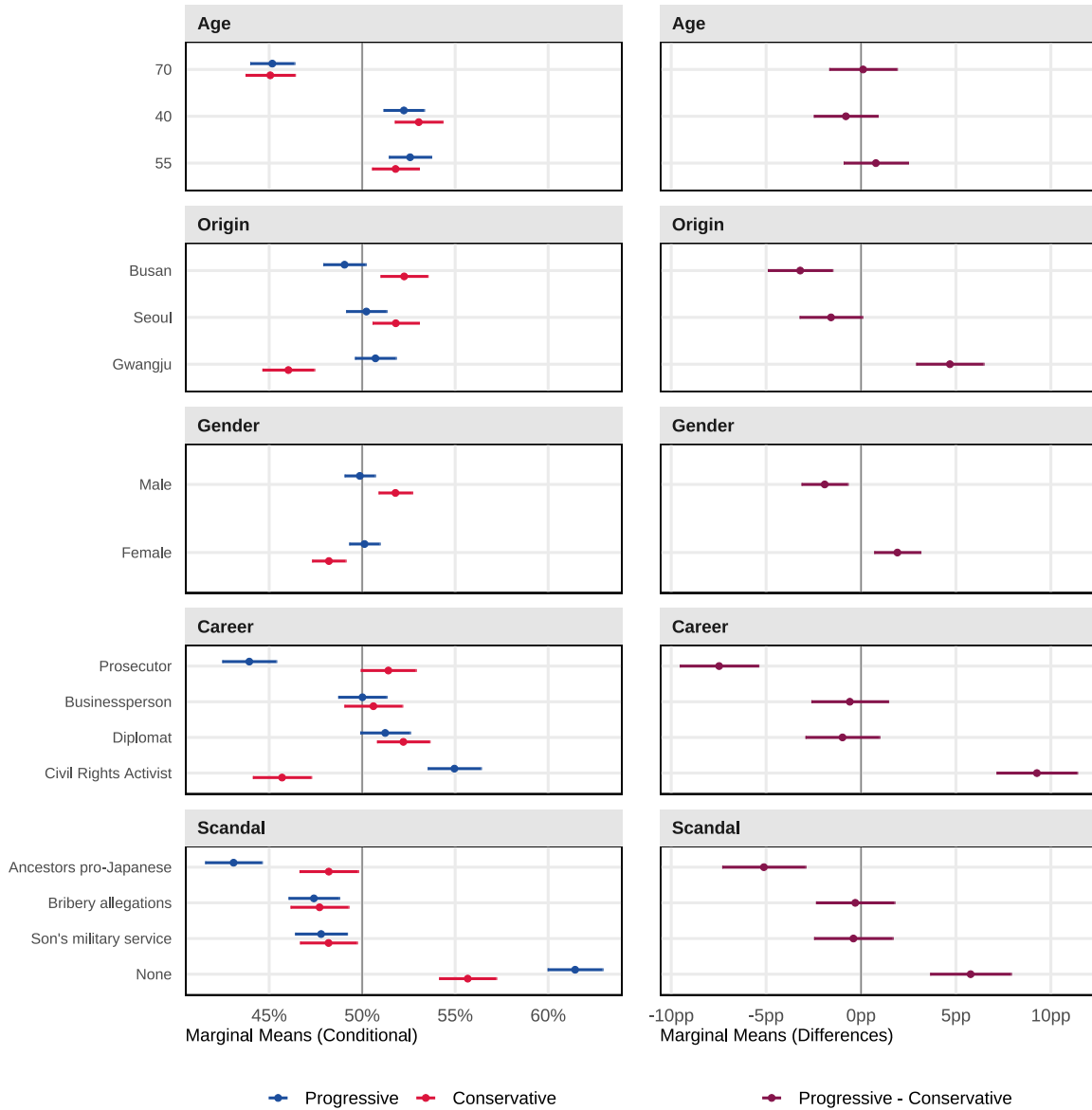


Figure 2: Marginal means of the policy attributes for subgroups (left) and subgroup differences (right) for personal characteristics

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

We observe additional subgroup differences for gender, with conservatives preferring male over female candidates (notably, a female candidate disincentivizes conservative candidate choice). Conservatives also favor candidates from Busan and are against those from Gwangju, whereas origin matters less for progressives. This finding aligns with the deep-seated regionalism within South Korea, where historical, economic, and political divisions have fostered strong regional identities and voting patterns. Busan’s conservative leanings contrast sharply with Gwangju’s history as a progressive stronghold, making a candidate’s origin a potent signal of their political and ideological affiliations in the eyes of voters.

Scandal suspicion yields subgroup differences, as well. While both progressives and conservatives prefer scandal-free candidates, this matters more to progressives, as evidenced by the 6pp difference in marginal means. Furthermore, if a candidate’s ancestors are accused of Japanese collaboration during the colonial era, it results in a considerable penalty among progressive voters (43 percent of profiles chosen), whereas, for conservatives, it is less penalized (48 percent). Progressive voters’ stronger aversion to historical collaboration with Japan reflects this demographic’s deep historical consciousness and particular ethical expectations, underscoring the impact of historical events and national identity on voting behavior. However, bribery matters seemingly equally to partisans from both sides (c.f., Kim-Leffingwell 2023).

Turning to policy positions (Figure 3), we find evidence of consistent partisan preferences regarding domestic and foreign policies, but especially regarding the latter. Housing policy reveals some partisan differences consistent with the stated positions of party representatives. Progressives prefer a 4.5-day workweek (the Minjoo Party position), and conservatives favor flexibility in working hours (the PPP’s position), although neither position shows particularly strong effects on candidate preference.

The key differences regarding housing policy concern taxes, which is what one would expect under some form of conventional left-right cleavages. Conservatives favor easing the real estate tax burden and oppose increasing real estate taxes (the conservative PPP’s

position). Progressives oppose easing the real estate tax burden, and while they are not motivated to support a position of increasing real estate taxes, there is a 5pp subgroup difference; progressives do not really either support or strongly oppose the measure. Notably, both sides show some support for large-scale public housing, a position advocated by the progressive Minjoo Party.

Socially, we see that candidates declaring their support for an expedited enactment of an anti-discrimination law motivate opposition from conservatives (47 percent marginal mean) and some support among progressives (52 percent). If candidates outright oppose the passage of such a bill, this triggers opposition from progressives, but it does not affect conservatives' preferences much – in favor, if anything. These positions are ideologically consistent with progressive and conservative party positions. Although the Minjoo Party has not prioritized the passage of the bill, it is understood they are more partial to its eventual implementation. Strictly speaking, the position of both parties is to seek 'social consensus' first, which is a roundabout way of avoiding the issue altogether.¹⁰

The most notable partisan differences and the policy positions that strongly motivate support or opposition belong to the foreign policy realm. Here we see that both sides of the political aisle are moved to seek policies 'centered on the national interests' (55 percent marginal mean for both). Relative to this vague position, we see evidence of what this might mean in more substantive terms. For progressives, it is more balanced diplomacy between Washington and Beijing (52 percent marginal mean) and opposition to emphasis on the ROK-US bilateral alliance (43 percent).

¹⁰Strictly speaking, the position of both parties is to seek 'social consensus' first, which is a roundabout way of avoiding the issue altogether.

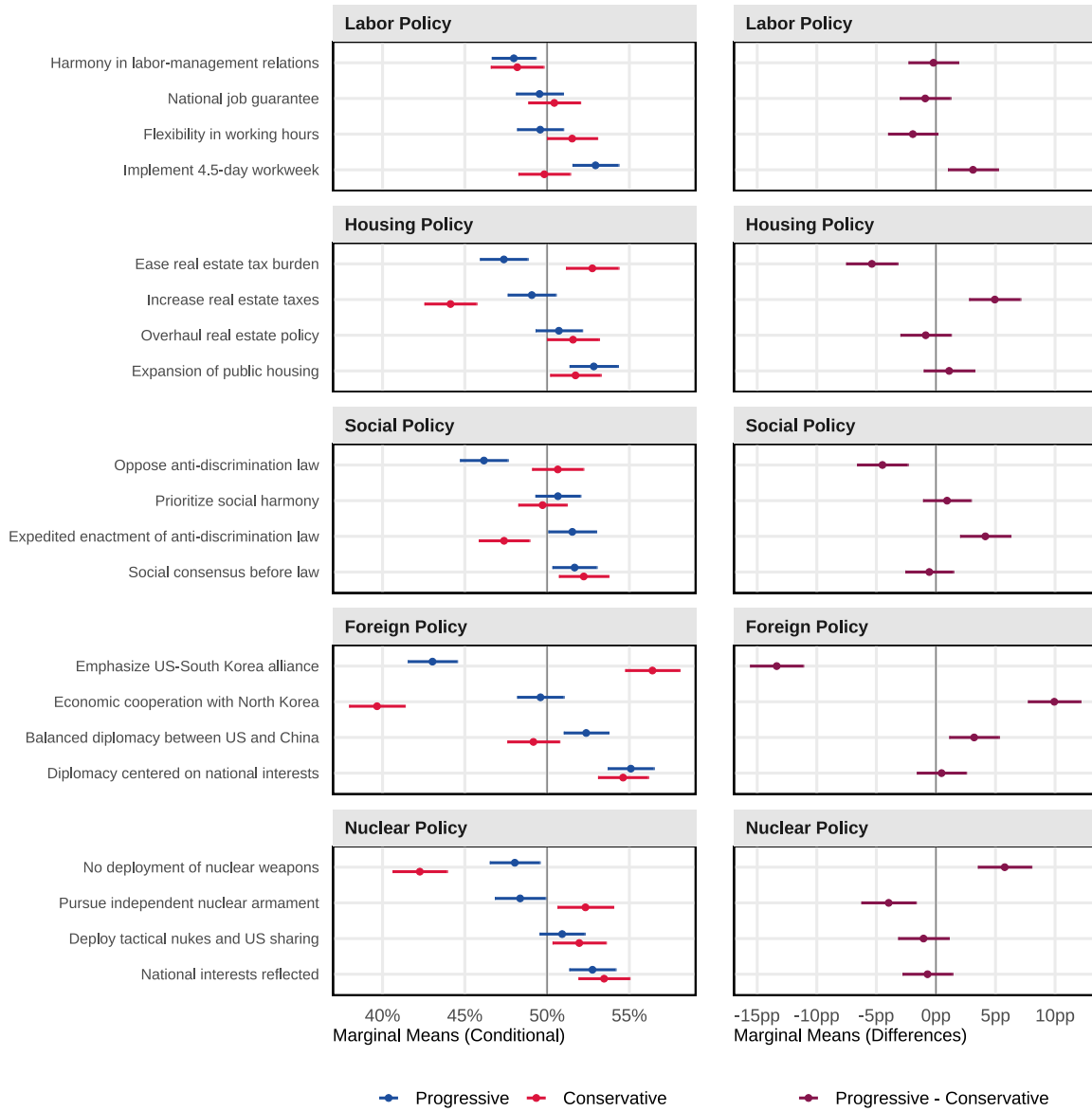


Figure 3: Marginal means of the policy attributes for subgroups (left) and subgroup differences (right) for policy positions

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Conservatives, on the other hand, are strongly supportive of a foreign policy revolving around the country’s relationship with the United States (56 percent) and, consistent with this position, are strongly opposed to candidates who favor economic engagement with North Korea (40 percent). We observe opposing views on these two attribute values, as evidenced by the marginal mean differences. Contrary to the notion that “politics stops at the water’s shores,” as has often been said about partisan differences in the United States, we can say with confidence that politics most likely begins, or at least intensifies, at the water’s shores in South Korea – or the North-South Demilitarized Zone. We discuss the deeper meaning and implications of this finding in the conclusion.

Lastly, but of no less significance, we observe some partisan differences regarding nuclear weapons policy, which is also a matter of foreign policy. The two most noted conservative party positions are the pursuit of an independent arsenal or the sharing of redeployed tactical weapons on South Korean soil. While both issues have ostensibly been resolved following a bilateral meeting between South Korean and US officials,¹¹ we see that conservative voters remain relatively inclined to support the pursuit of an independent option. They are significantly moved to oppose candidates who outright disavow nuclear weapons deployment in South Korea, the issue around which we see a notable marginal means difference (6pp). While progressives are not of a completely different view, they somewhat oppose an indigenous program option and are less opposed to the no-deployment option. These differences in opinion likely reflect the positions of voters who all favor having ‘national interests reflected in nuclear weapons policy.’

To present the findings more substantively and intuitively, Figures 4 and 5 show the estimated probabilities of hypothetical candidates being preferred at the minimum and max-

¹¹The Washington Declaration, agreed upon by President Joseph Biden of the United States and President Yoon Suk-yeol of the Republic of Korea on April 26, 2023, marked a significant development in nuclear policy between the two nations. This declaration aimed to reinforce South Korea’s confidence in the US extended deterrence commitment. It also outlined commitments to cooperative decision-making on nuclear deterrence, including enhanced dialogue, information sharing, and establishing a Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to address nuclear threats and strategies. In theory, it was meant to resolve the question of whether South Korea would seek its own nuclear deterrent or possibly insist on the United States redeploying tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean soil.

imum points of the distributions. In other words, they show the least and most likely candidate profiles to be preferred by progressive and conservative partisans. Reading what each side strongly prefers and opposes is telling.

The least supported candidate among progressives is a 70-year-old prosecutor whose ancestors are accused of collaborating with the Japanese during the occupation of Korea. This candidate wishes to ease the real estate tax burden, is opposed to passing an anti-discrimination law, prioritizes the US-South Korean alliance as a matter of foreign policy, and supports the pursuit of independent nuclear armament. The most supported candidate is only 40 years old, has a civil rights activist background, supports the large-scale expansion of public housing, and wishes to prioritize social consensus before pursuing an anti-discrimination law. Their foreign policy and nuclear policy preferences are vague, but they are scandal-free politicians. The most and least supported candidates being of identical gender (male) from the same origin (Gwangju) indicates that these values are not deciding factors for progressives.

The most and least supported candidates significantly differ for conservatives. A middle-aged man from Busan with no scandals who opposes the passage of an anti-discrimination law, wants to cut real estate taxes, and thinks foreign policy should focus on the country's alliance with the United States is strongly preferred. Policy related to nuclear weapons would reflect the national interest. Whereas an elderly female from Gwangju with a civil rights activism background who desires to engage North Korea economically, is committed to not deploying nuclear weapons, seeks to expedite the passage of an anti-discrimination law, and raise taxes is highly unlikely to be chosen by a conservative. That her son is accused of possibly evading his mandatory military service does not help.

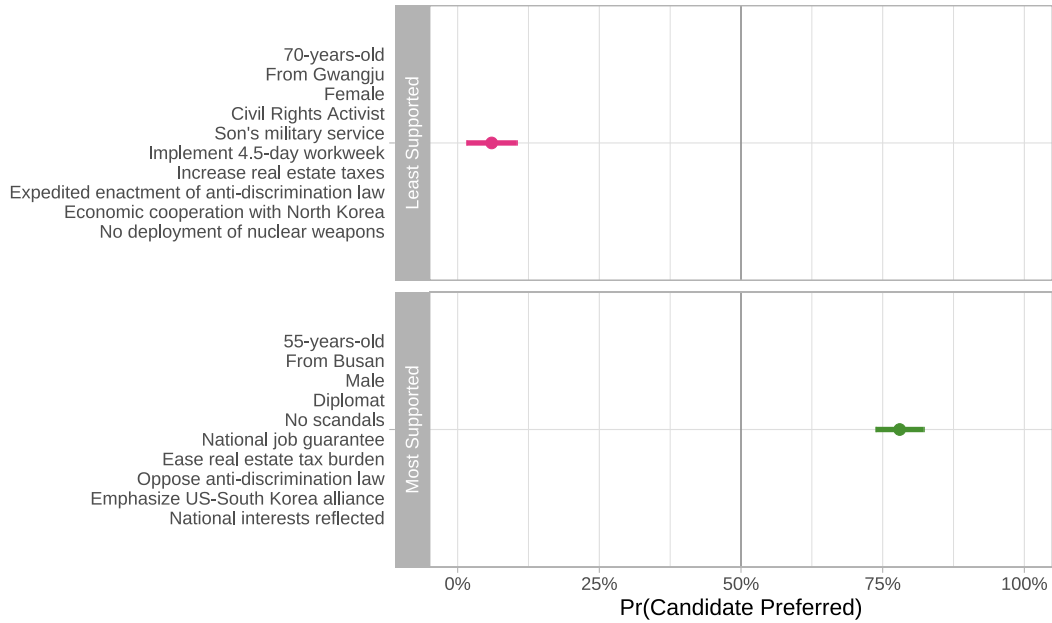


Figure 4: Least and most preferred candidate for *conservatives*

Note: Estimates are shown for the minimum (least likely) and maximum (most likely) percentiles of the distribution. The estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors. The error bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

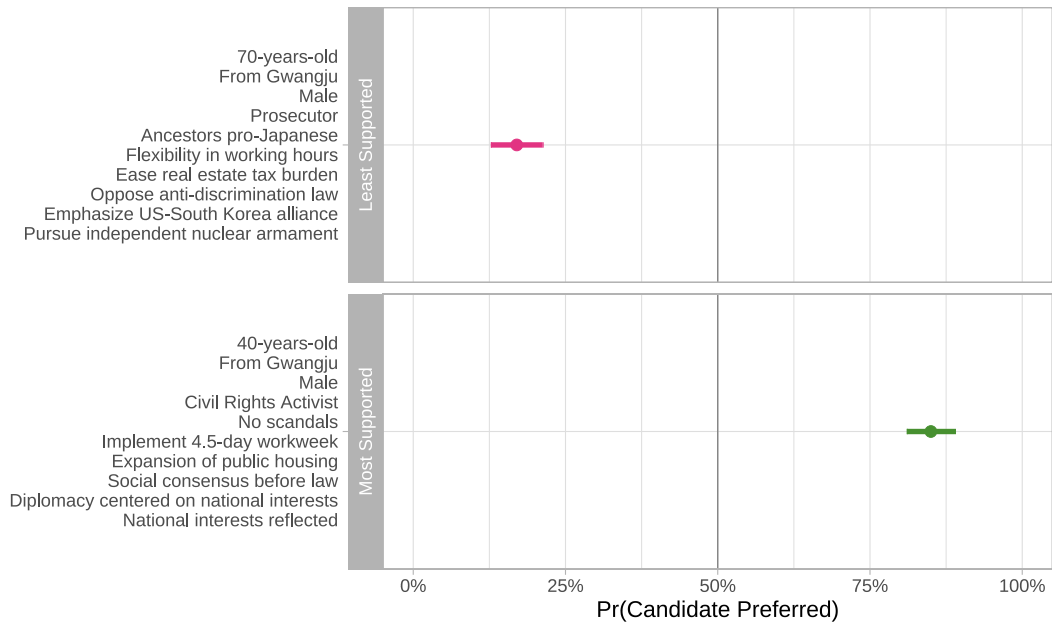


Figure 5: Least and most preferred candidate for *progressives*

Note: Estimates are shown for the minimum (least likely) and maximum (most likely) percentiles of the distribution. The estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors. The error bars show 95 percent confidence intervals.

Appendix C of the SI reviews several robustness checks and provides additional information on our findings. We can reproduce our main findings (partisan divides) using observational measures of our policy outcome variables. The open-text analysis using an LDA approach also corroborates and supplements our findings. Furthermore, we show the findings are robust to alternative subgroup measurement.¹²

Conclusion and Discussion

In this article, we examined how voters in under-institutionalized party systems choose candidates for office. Conventionally, politicians in weak parties are expected to rely on their personal appeals to voters and clientelist networks. South Korea is a country with weak parties but has successfully overcome clientelism (Nam 1995; Hellmann 2014; Han 2021). Regionalist networks and personalist candidates have been an important feature of politics in the country long before democratization (Möbrand 2019). Further, as can be seen in the most recent presidential election, major parties are vulnerable to being captured by individuals from outside politics with personal appeal (charisma, talent) like now-President Yoon Seok-yul (Heo 2013; Kim 2021). Yet, as our findings show, the weakness of party organizations and their shallow roots in society has not prevented the emergence of policy awareness and partisan consistency among voters.

Using a choice-based conjoint to disaggregate the relative importance of hypothetical candidates' personal characteristics and policy positions across a range of salient policy topics, the evidence suggests that despite the absence of strong, stable party-voter linkages, South Korean voters are not merely swayed by the personal charisma or background of

¹²Not reported in an appendix, we note that our check of the 'hard test' of partisanship explored using the first manipulation check yields additional support for our main finding that there exists consistent partisan policy preferences despite weak party system institutionalization. We subset hypothetical candidate profiles chosen for those whose policy positions align completely with the right/conservative or left/progressive and then looked at the percentage of conservatives who correctly identified the supported candidate as a member of the People's Power Party (n=101 profiles) and progressives who rightly chose the Minjoo Party (n=98). 90 percent of conservatives correctly identified the person as a conservative party representative, and 89 percent of progressives did the same for a progressive party representative.

political candidates alone. Instead, they exhibit discernible policy preferences that reflect the ideological underpinnings and policy proposals of the political parties they support. This points to an engaged and informed electorate, possibly facilitated by the polarized nature of political elites, the influence of partisan media, and other modern channels of political communication. We also leveraged the timing of the General Election in South Korea to conduct our survey at a time when voters would likely be especially engaged and interested in candidate positions.

A striking degree of partisan consistency in foreign policy and some areas of domestic policy points to what Sniderman and Stiglitz (2012, 77) call "programmatic partisanship" despite weak linkages between party and voter. Foreign policy appears to function as a particularly significant source of partisan conflict not just among elites but also among the voting public. Domestic policy preferences, such as those relating to real estate taxes and labor policy, show that voters are not passive recipients of political rhetoric but actively endorse policies that align with their partisan identities consistent with conventional left-right cleavages.

In other words, even in systems with weak parties, consistent policy preferences among partisans can emerge in areas where elite political opinion and policy views are polarized, as polarization has been shown to do in other countries (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2010; Zingher and Flynn 2018; Moral and Best 2023). This can occur even when polarization has not led to the formation of strong parties (cf. Mainwaring 2016). South Korea exemplifies an ephemeral party system, where parties are unstable, but elite polarization and programmatic differences remain relatively stable (Borbáth 2020; Lee 2020; Han 2021). The South Korean case illustrates that stable and clear voter preferences can develop in such systems, despite weak linkages between politicians and voters.

The distinction in voter preferences is especially notable in the foreign policy realm, where we find significant partisan divides. Conservatives demonstrate a strong preference for the US-South Korea alliance, while progressives advocate for a balanced approach to diplomacy,

particularly in relation to US-China relations. This delineation in preferences underscores the importance of international relations in South Korean domestic politics, reflecting an electorate that places significant weight on the geopolitical positioning of their country with regard to inter-Korean relations, China, and ROK-US relations. Preferences regarding nuclear weapons underscore the securitized nature of policy preferences among South Korean voters, with conservatives in favor of the candidates pursuing an independent nuclear armament, consistent with their party's position on the matter. And while progressives do not support a candidate advocating for no deployment of nuclear weapons at all, there is a notable difference in the level of opposition, with conservatives much more strongly against it.

The domestic and foreign policy preferences of voters in South Korea substantiate the idea of a programmatic partisan electorate capable of overcoming the limitations of weak party institutions to make informed and ideologically coherent policy choices. Why might this be? While this paper was not intended to answer this question, it looms large. The lack of strong party-voter linkages appears to have been substituted for by elite polarization, partisan media, and possibly other forms of communication with voters that ensure they are well informed about the ideological and policy positions of their political camp, even as parties regularly rebrand and reconstitute themselves. Future research should direct its attention to these possible explanations.

The findings presented here should not be read as suggesting that partisans are not motivated by candidate personalities or other non-programmatic factors. The experience and background of hypothetical candidates still matter, and, unsurprisingly, corruption is not popular. Particularly in South Korea, issues regarding transitional justice and the colonial past also make voters less likely to support candidates – the degree to which the latter matters is also a partisan issue in its own right, as noted elsewhere (Shaw 2022). Similarly, progressive disapproval of prosecutors and conservative dislike for civic activists are a product of the partisan identification of these two fields within the conservative and progressive camps,

respectively. Some degree of regionalism has also survived, especially among conservative partisans, and age and gender matter to some extent, as well.

Going forward, it would be beneficial to further disaggregate the impact of policy positions on the preferences of partisan voters in weak party systems. Experimental designs should also consider including positions that, while not necessarily partisan-coded, could still influence voter preferences, such as support for local "pork barrel" spending. Additionally, future research could explore the effects of direct partisan cues by varying whether survey respondents are shown candidates' party affiliations. Finally, conducting transnational comparisons among countries with varying strengths of party systems—such as those with and without clientelism and those with strong or weak programmatic coherence—would provide further insight into voter behavior in weak party systems.

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Supplementary Information for “Partisan Voters in
Party Systems with Ephemeral Parties: Evidence from
South Korea”

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Appendix A Additional survey information

In January and February 2024, responses from 2,006 South Koreans were recorded. The recruitment process used Qualtrics' online panel. To ensure (semi-)national representativeness, quotas were established in alignment with recent demographic parameters. Multiple quality assurance steps were included, incorporating Qualtrics' inbuilt quality control systems, manual attention checks, and specific questions designed to detect inattentiveness and validate manipulation and survey completion. Responses that failed our quality criteria were replaced, following a thorough review and in consultation with the Qualtrics project manager. We are confident that the final dataset comprises legitimate and valid survey responses. Table A.1 reviews the basic demographics of the panel.

Variable	Count	Proportion
Age		
≤25	240	12%
26-35	336	17%
36-45	402	20%
46-55	433	22%
>55	595	30%
Gender		
Male	1015	51%
Female	991	49%
Highest Level of Education		
No University	382	19%
University (including technical colleges)	1624	81%
Location		
Seoul	203	20%
Busan	71	7%
Daegu	49	5%
Incheon	57	6%
Gwangju	28	3%
Daejeon	29	3%
Ulsan	22	2%
Sejong	8	1%
Gyeonggi Province	238	24%
Gangwon Province	31	3%
North Chungcheong Province	31	3%
South Chungcheong Province	35	4%
North Jeolla Province	37	4%
South Jeolla Province	38	4%
North Gyeongsang Province	54	5%
South Gyeongsang Province	65	7%
Jeju	12	1%

Table A.1: Summary Counts and Proportions

Appendix B Survey questions

In this section, we provide the text used to introduce the experiment and the questions for direct questions used, including background and alternative outcome measures. Before respondents took the conjoint experiment questions, they were asked to evaluate general election or presidential candidates. For each pair of hypothetical candidates evaluated by respondents, they were reminded whether they were assessing general election or presidential candidates. The introductory text read as follows:

The subsequent questions are designed to determine the criteria you, as a citizen of the Republic of Korea with the right to vote, use to select candidates in [*randomized*: **general/presidential elections**]. (emphasis in original)

The survey questions used for background and subgroup analysis, which were asked before the experiment, are provided below. For the direct questions, we used as alternative (observational) measures of policy preferences. Respondents were asked, "For each policy, please select the one option with which you most agree."

Alternative measures of policy preferences:

- Real estate policy
 - Reform housing policy
 - Increased access to public housing
 - Lower real estate taxes
 - Strengthening of real estate taxes
- Foreign Policy
 - South Korea's national interests need to be promoted
 - Foreign policy that utilizes US-China competition as an opportunity to realize the national interest
 - Emphasize US-ROK Alliance
 - Restarting inter-Korean cooperation projects at the earliest opportunity
- Position on nuclear weapons
 - The national interest must be reflected in policies surrounding nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula

- No deployment of nuclear weapons to South Korea
- Redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons
- South Korea pursuing its own nuclear deterrent
- Labor policy
 - Promote harmony between workers and business
 - More flexible working hours
 - Gradually implement a four and a half working day week
 - Work guarantee
- Social Policy
 - Priority to social harmony
 - Prioritize social consensus before pursuing anti-discrimination law
 - Opposition to comprehensive anti-discrimination law
 - Expedited enactment of anti-discrimination law

Background questions:

- What was your assigned sex at birth?
 - Male
 - Female
- Where do you currently reside?
 - Seoul
 - Busan
 - Daegu
 - Incheon
 - Gwangju
 - Daejeon
 - Ulsan
 - Sejong
 - Gyeonggi
 - Kangwon
 - Chungbuk
 - Chungnam
 - Cheonbuk

- Cheonnam
 - Gyeongbuk
 - Gyeongnam
 - Jeju
- Please specify your age.
 - (validated input line)
- What is the highest level of education you have achieved?
 - No Formal Education
 - Elementary school or lower
 - Middle school
 - High school
 - Some college (including technical school)
 - University
 - Graduate school and above
 - Other (e.g., Seodang)
- When distinguishing between progressives and conservatives in our society, where do you belong? (10-point sliding scale)
 - Very progressive (coded 1-2)
 - Somewhat progressive (coded 3-4)
 - Centrist (coded 5-6)
 - Somewhat conservative (coded 7-8)
 - Very conservative (coded 9-10)
- Which party would you vote for if there was a national election tomorrow?
 - People’s Power Party
 - Minjoo Party
 - Green-Justice Party
 - Other Party
 - I don’t know

Appendix C Additional Analysis

We provide additional analysis here to supplement the findings presented in the manuscript. First, we examine the findings from our observational design. Using direct questions, respondents were asked to choose which policy position they most supported (Table C1). We regress partisanship (progressive and conservative with independents as the reference group) against a dichotomous outcome variable representing the conservative and progressive policy positions described in Table 2 of the manuscript. For ease of interpretation and simplicity, we use a linear probability model with controls included for age, gender, region, and education. The coefficients are then read as the percentage point difference in the probability of choosing the policy position relative to the reference category (whose value is represented in the constant). The observational data analysis corroborates findings derived from the conjoint experiment. Although levels of support are sometimes low, this is certainly explained by the number of choices available and is another reason why, for multifaceted policy positions, a conjoint serves us well. We note, in particular, that conservatives are strongly moved on the matter of conservative foreign policy and that progressives strongly support a progressive real estate tax (i.e., an increase). Furthermore, the category "neither" for social policy regards the "expedited enactment of an anti-discrimination law." Although neither major party has endorsed this position, we find a left-right cleavage on the matter.

Next, we look at the conditional marginal means by election type, as framed in the survey experiment's introduction. We find no substantive differences in the marginal means between progressives and conservatives (Figure C1), although there are some notable differences in the effect size of the election type on some partisan preferences, even if the direction of the effects is the same. Notably, partisan effects are stronger for presidential candidate preferences. Specifically, we find small but stronger effects of regionalism, as evidenced by a stronger negative effect for conservatives for candidates from Gwangju and a similar small but positive effect for those from Busan. In the policy realm, we see that presidential candidate endorsements for real estate tax increases or cuts produce a stronger partisan response than

for general election candidates. The same can be said for social policy, especially regarding a potential anti-discrimination law enactment. Lastly, we note that partisan divides in foreign policy are stronger for all the specific positions tested.

Then, we plot the main effects model with respondents we deem "independents" (Figure C2). This group is measured as those who self-identify as "centrist" on the political identification scale and do not support either of the two main political parties. The findings show that their preferences do, in fact, register as somewhere in between progressives and conservatives. In other words, true centrists.

We also examine whether a stricter definition of what constitutes a partisan changes the findings (Figure C3). Rather than using political identification and party support, we simply used the latter. This results in a smaller sample size of partisans (n=584 for People's Power Party conservative supporters compared to n=670 with the more expansion definition applied and n=711 for Minjoo Party progressive voters (strict) compared to n=815 (expansive)). We also consider previous presidential candidate vote choice (Figure C4). The findings do not differ in any substantive or meaningful way across alternative measures.

Finally, we model the open-text response data using Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). Based on a four-cluster implementation of the LDA,¹ we find corroboration of the analysis based on the conjoint data. Figures C4 and C5 show the output for the top 10 terms per topic for progressives and conservatives. Topics 2 and 3 emerge as telling for progressives; they indicate concern for "north" and "south" (read: North-South, inter-Korean relations) "diplomacy" as a determining factor in their vote choice. The second topic indicates concern for candidates with ancestors accused of collaborating with the Japanese (see "Japanese", "pro", and "anti"). For conservatives, topic 1 indicates that concern for the ROK-US alliance looms large ("alliance", "rok alliance") and opposition to an anti-discrimination law ("anti discrimination"). Topic 3 indicates a concern for South Korea's engagement with North

¹The optimal number of topics were based on a statistical measure of semantic similarity and interoperability. All responses were translated from Korean to English and cleaned for analysis before running the topic model.

Korea but in a way that is likely very different from that of progressives (i.e., opposition to engagement).

Table C.1: Policy and Party Association Regression Results

	Real Estate		Foreign Policy		Nukes		Labor		Social	
	Con. Position (1)	Prog. Position (2)	Con. (3)	Prog. (4)	Con. (5)	Prog. (6)	Con. (7)	Prog. (8)	Shared (9)	Neither (10)
Conservative	0.097*** (0.027)	-0.037 (0.030)	0.215*** (0.024)	-0.075*** (0.024)	0.112*** (0.030)	-0.030 (0.021)	0.072*** (0.026)	-0.024 (0.029)	0.011 (0.028)	-0.064*** (0.027)
Progressive	-0.095*** (0.026)	0.195*** (0.029)	-0.019 (0.023)	0.025 (0.023)	-0.081*** (0.029)	0.080*** (0.020)	-0.048* (0.025)	0.111*** (0.027)	-0.048* (0.027)	0.087*** (0.026)
Constant	0.189*** (0.050)	0.240*** (0.057)	0.141*** (0.029)	0.169*** (0.029)	0.560*** (0.057)	0.120*** (0.040)	0.233*** (0.050)	0.585*** (0.054)	0.090* (0.053)	0.315*** (0.050)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1879	1879	1879	1879	1879	1879	1879	1879	1879	1879
Adjusted R2	0.040	0.050	0.073	0.015	0.044	0.023	0.013	0.058	0.022	0.024

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Note: The “Neither” social policy position is “Rapid enactment of an anti-discrimination law. The variables are based on direct questions. Columns represent party positions on key policies (see Table 2 in the manuscript for positions and survey questions in Appendix B for wording), and rows represent groups defined by political identification. The outcome variables are dichotomous, defined by whether the respondent supports the party position or not, and regressed in a linear probability model. Controls include age, sex, education, and region.

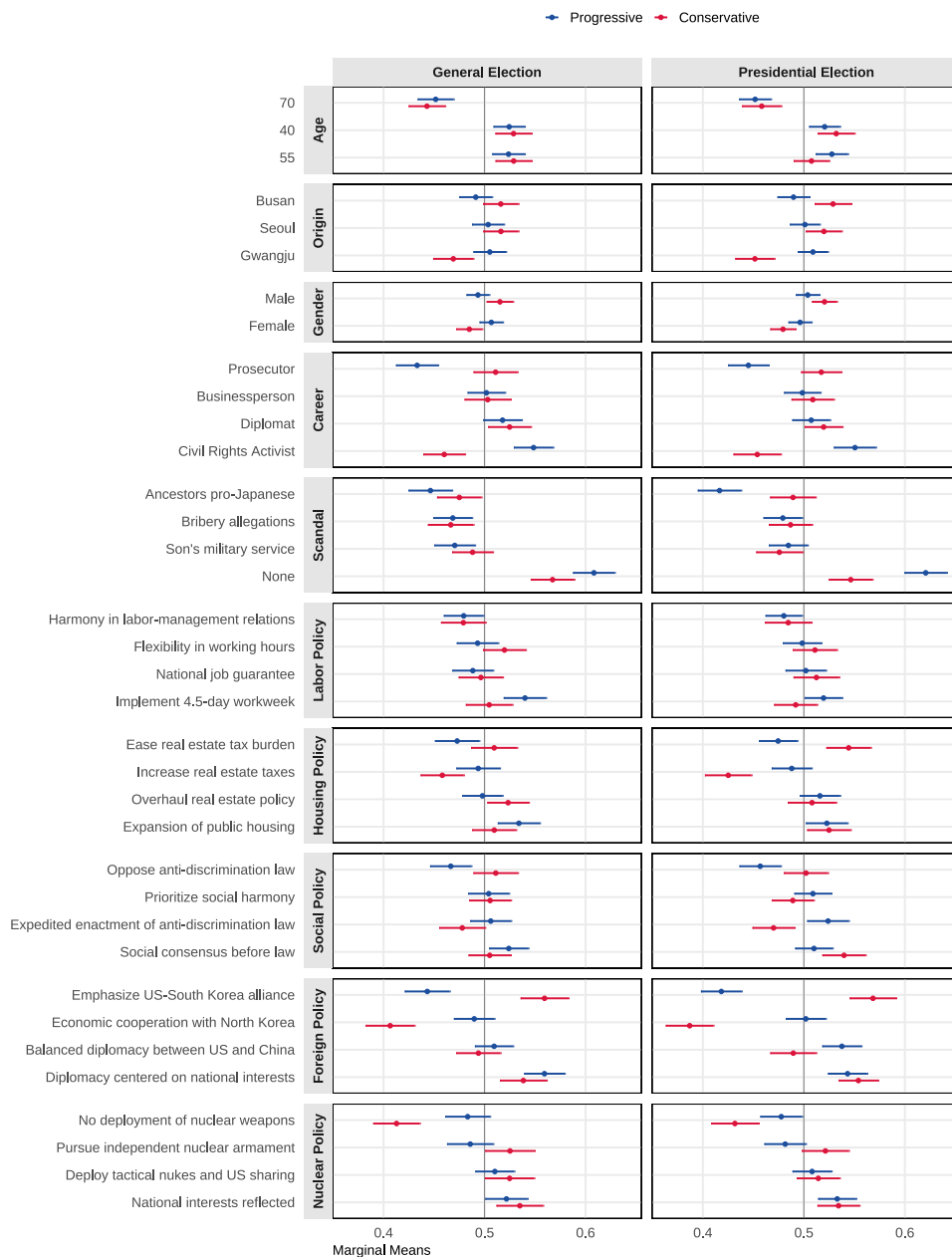


Figure C.1: Marginal means of candidate attribute levels by subgroup, general and presidential election framing

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

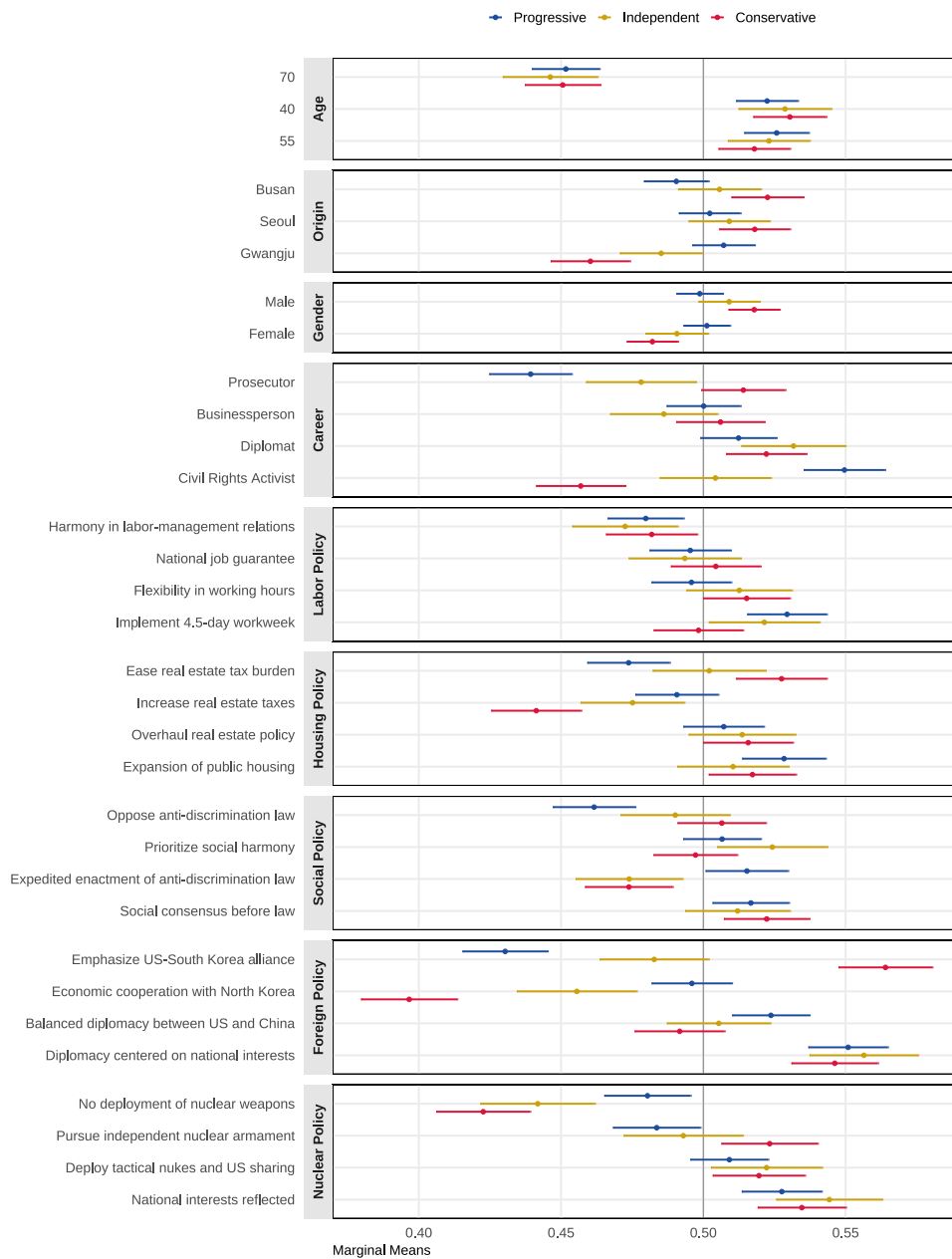


Figure C.2: Marginal means of candidate attribute levels by subgroup, partisans (with leaners) including independents/centrists

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

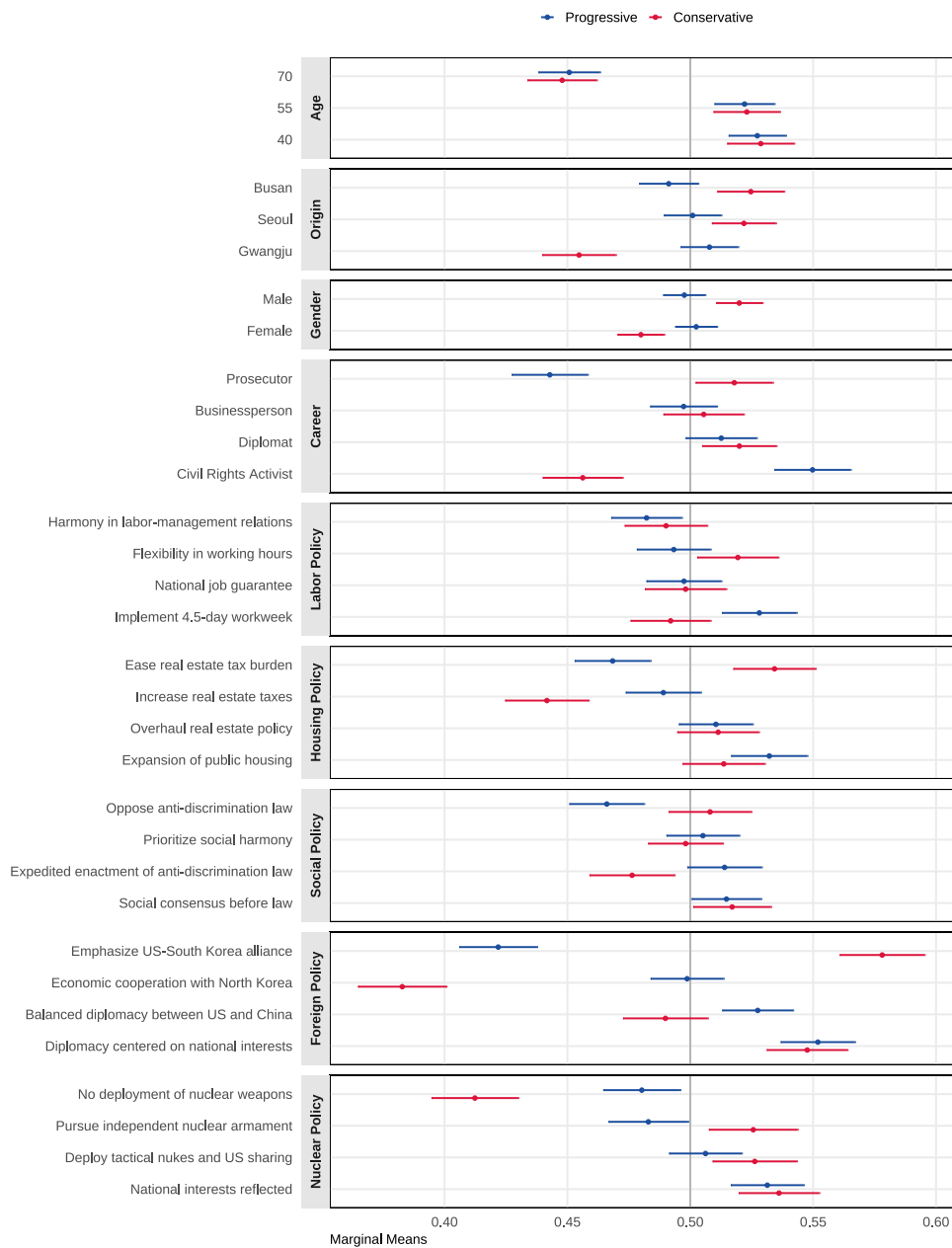


Figure C.3: Marginal means of candidate attribute levels by subgroup, based on strict measure of partisanship (party support only)

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

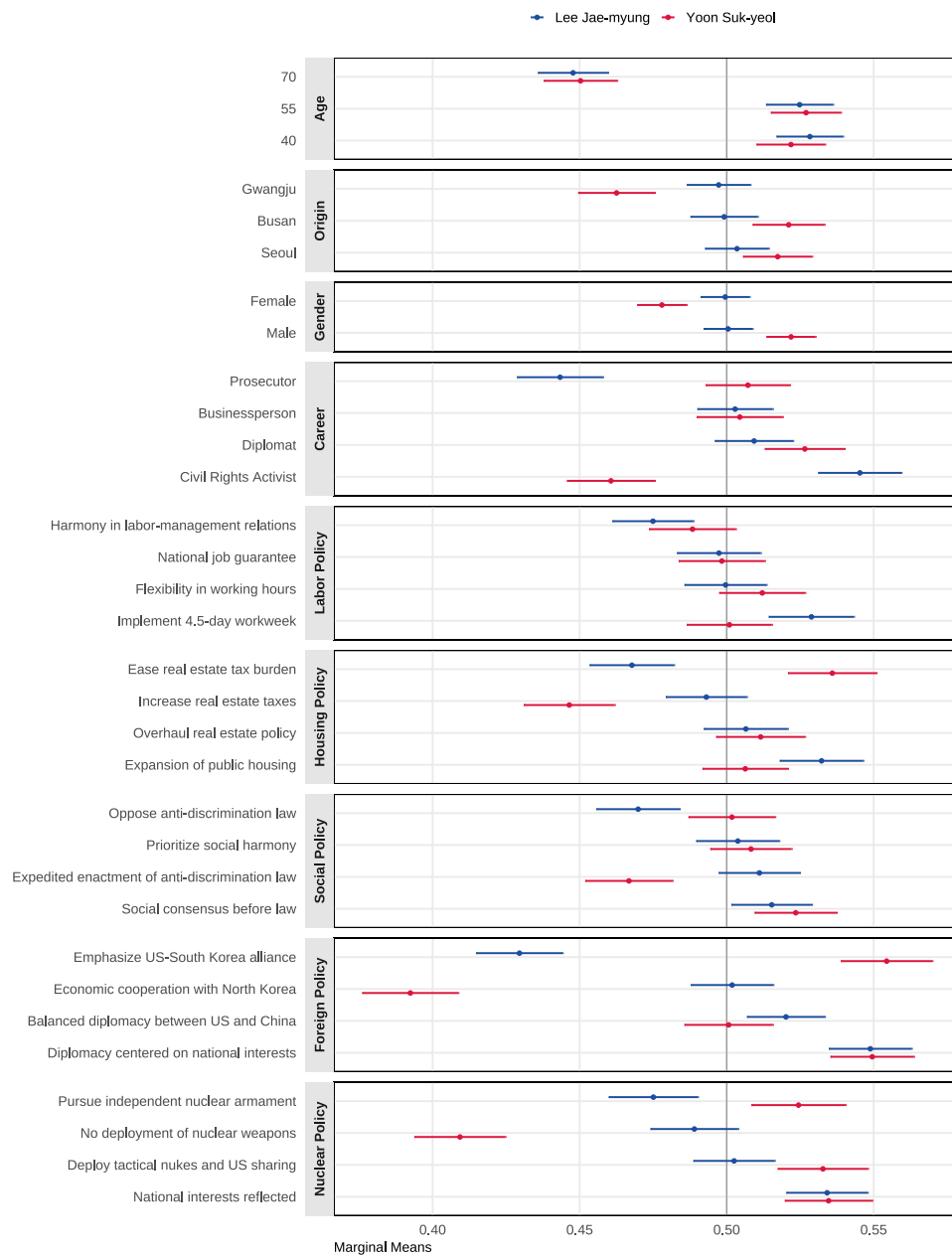


Figure C.4: Marginal means of candidate attribute levels by subgroup, based on prior presidential election votes

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

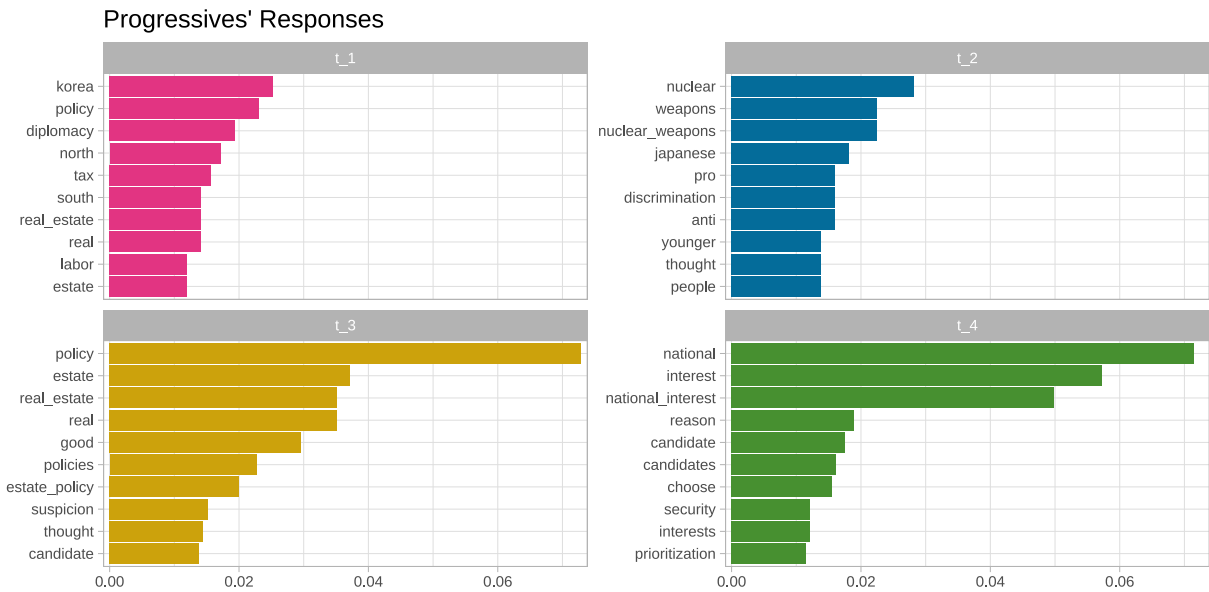


Figure C.5: Topics from the implementation of Latent Dirichlet Allocation

Note: The values on the x-axis show the probability of the term given the topic.

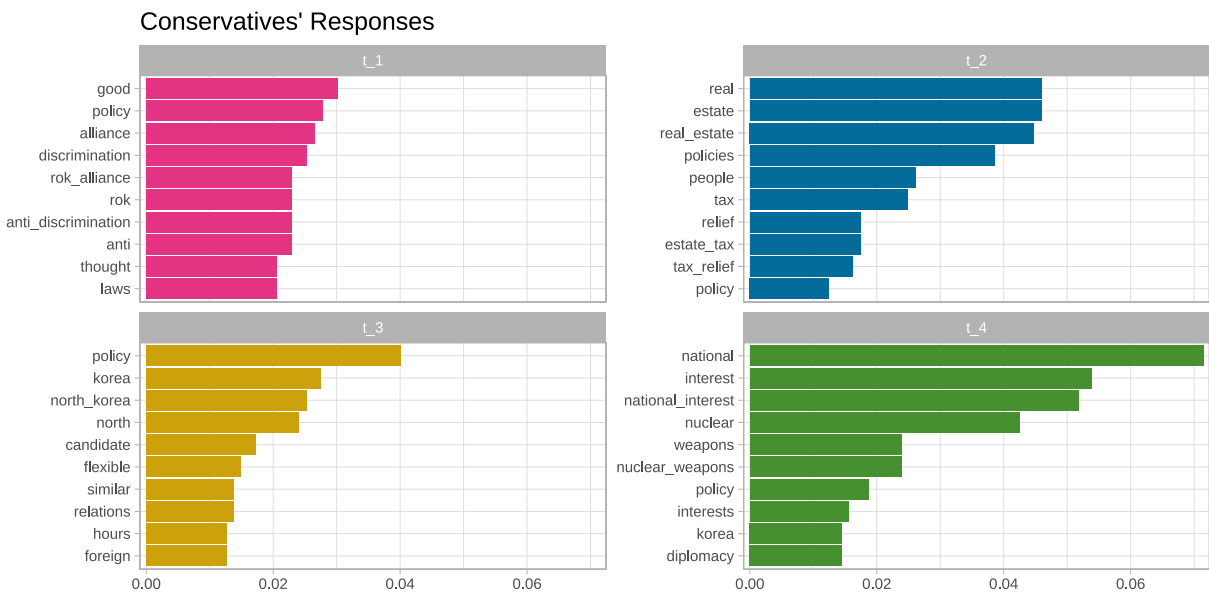


Figure C.6: Topics from the implementation of Latent Dirichlet Allocation

Note: The values on the x-axis show the probability of the term given the topic.