

# Who Cares? Measuring Attitude Strength in a Polarized Environment

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# Behavioral Assumptions in the Study of Electoral Politics

## Political Economy

(Meltzer and Richard 1981,  
Acemoglu and Robinson 2006)

- ▶ Voters are equipped with policy preferences
- ▶ Voters' preferences are ideologically coherent, i.e. they partly mirror existing beliefs systems
- ▶ Policy preferences relate in a systematic fashion to voters' prior and current material conditions.
- ▶ Voters' preferences are politically relevant, i.e. they influence politically relevant decisions such as turnout and whom to vote for)

## American Politics

(Converse 1964, Zaller 1994, Lenz 2013, Achen and Bartels 2017)

- ▶ Preferences very often only exist "in the moment"
- ▶ Few citizens hold meaningful policy opinions
- ▶ No need to look at income: it explains nothing and when it does it is all about race (McCarty et al. 2008 vs 2016)
- ▶ Citizens first pick a politician for reasons that have little to do with policy preferences and then adopt that politician's policy views

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# The Krosnick “Olive Branch”: Strong versus Weak Attitudes

“Strong attitudes have the characteristics that” political economists “assume are possessed by all attitudes” (Howe and Krosnick 2017: 328).



Strong attitudes are the attitudes that:

- ▶ ... matter the most for an individual's thoughts, intentions and behavior
- ▶ ... are more stable over time
- ▶ ... concern policies that individuals perceive “to be related to her or his self-interest”, i.e. to “directly affect his or her rights, privileges, or lifestyle in some concrete manner” (p 332)
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## Zaller Reflecting on *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*

Zaller (2012):

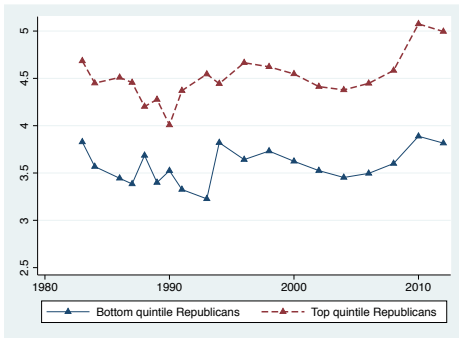
*“Well-informed voters (may) support candidates of their party who are distant from them on one issue for the sake of the party’s reputation for being closer to them on another they care about more. But we should not expect narrowly motivated partisans to maintain disagreement with their chosen party on the bulk of its agenda. Once they identify with a party, the RAS model expects that they will accept cues favoring the party’s broad agenda” on issues they care about less.*

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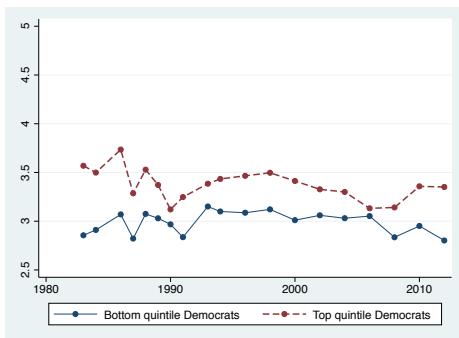
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# Support for Redistribution: Income Matters But Only for Republicans



Republicans

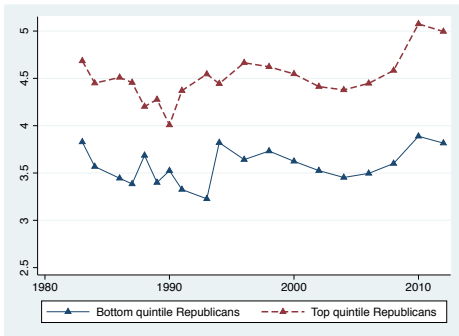


Democrats

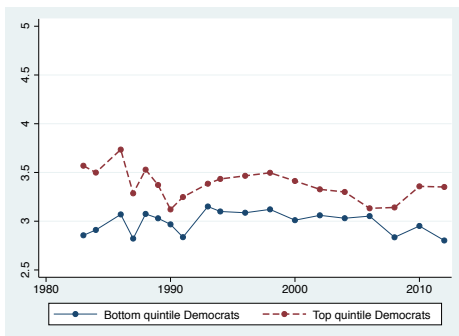
Hypothesis: Only a few rich Democrats really care, the others are paying lip service to the party norm in a **polarized** 2 party system



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Hypothesis: Only a few rich Democrats really care, the others are paying lip service to the party norm in a **polarized** 2 party system

## Research Goal/Methodological Challenge

How to distinguish between **strong** and **weak** attitudes ... when in practice these might be **indistinguishable**?

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# This Paper

We propose a survey method that, theoretically, discriminates between strong and weak preferences (or, at a minimum, does it better than the Likert scale). We test this method empirically based on the following criteria:

Strong attitudes are [relative to weak attitudes]:

1. More predictive of behavior
2. More stable over time
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A note on vocabulary: **strong (important) attitudes are different from extreme ones.**

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# Outline

- ▶ Theory
- ▶ Design
- ▶ Results
- ▶ Discussion and next steps

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# How People Answer Surveys

We assume that, on each issue  $k = 1, \dots, K$ , respondent  $i$  is characterized by:

- ▶ Her attitude on the issue, denoted by  $x_{ik} \in [-1, +1]$
- ▶ The strength of this issue, denoted by  $\beta_{ik} \geq 0$ .

We denote by  $\hat{x}_{ik}$  her observed survey answer on issue  $k$ .



## How People Answer Surveys

We assume that the utility  $V$  a respondent derives from answering the survey depends on  $x_i = (x_{i1}, \dots, x_{iK})$ ,  $\beta_i = (\beta_{i1}, \dots, \beta_{iK})$  and  $\hat{x}_i = (\hat{x}_{i1}, \dots, \hat{x}_{iK})$  in the following way:

$$V(\hat{x}_i; x_i) = - \sum_{k=1}^{k=K} \beta_{ik} C(\hat{x}_{ik}; x_{ik}), \quad (1)$$

where the function  $C$  describes the cost of deviating from one's attitude on each issue. The cost of deviating from one's attitude is increasing and convex in the distance between the attitude ( $x_{ik}$ ) and the reported attitude ( $\hat{x}_{ik}$ ).

- ▶ An individual's utility is maximized when she is as close to her attitude as possible, on all issues.
- ▶ The psychological cost of not reporting one's attitude depends positively on issue strength.

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# Preference Strength is Hard to Recover in Likert's World of Abundance

## Responses under Likert:

On each issue, the respondent can choose any  $\hat{x}_{ik} \in [-1, +1]$ . In that case, on each single issue, the respondent will simply report her attitude  $x_{ik}$ .

$$\hat{x}_{ik}^L = x_{ik}.$$

# Introducing Scarcity (1): Trading “Votes” Across Issues

**US POLITICAL ISSUES**10 Proposals

You have 82 credits left.

1 of 10

Immediate deportation of any person who is found to be living in the United States illegally.

3

AGREE

Costs 9 Credits

2 of 10

Elimination of the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (aka 'Obamacare').

1

DISAGREE

Costs 1 Credits

3 of 10

Nationwide ban on abortion in nearly all circumstances.

2

AGREE

Costs 4 Credits

## Introducing Scarcity (2): Quadratic Pricing

Total and Marginal Cost of Voting Under QV

Votes	Total cost	Marginal cost
1	1	1
2	4	3
3	9	5
4	16	7
5	25	9
6	36	11
7	49	13
8	64	15
...	...	...

# Preference Strength in QV's World of Scarcity (1)

## Responses under QV:

Under Quadratic Voting, the respondent faces a “budget constraint”, such that:

$$\sum_{k=1}^{k=K} \hat{x}_{ik}^2 \leq B.$$

The individual solves the following optimization program:

$$\max_{\hat{x}_i} \mathcal{L} = V(\hat{x}_i; x_i) + \lambda_i \left[ B - \sum_{k=1}^{k=K} \hat{x}_{ik}^2 \right],$$

where the function  $V$  has been defined previously and  $\lambda_i > 0$  is the Lagrange multiplier.

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## Preference Strength in QV's World of Scarcity (2)

Remember: the psychological cost to the voter of not reporting her attitude depends positively on issue strength.

$$\begin{aligned}\hat{x}_{ik}^{QV} &= x_{ik} \quad \text{if} \quad \sum_k x_{ik}^2 \leq B, \\ &= \frac{\beta_{ik}}{\beta_{ik} + \lambda_i} x_{ik} \quad \text{if} \quad \sum_k x_{ik}^2 \geq B.\end{aligned}$$



## Example

---

---

Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose ...:

---

... Giving blacks preference in hiring and promotion to address past discrimination?

---

... Requiring employers to pay women and men the same amount for the same work?

---

... Laws to protect gays and lesbians against job discrimination?

---

... Making it more difficult for people to buy a gun?

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... Increasing income taxes on people making over one million dollars per year?

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... Allowing Syrian refugees to come to the United States

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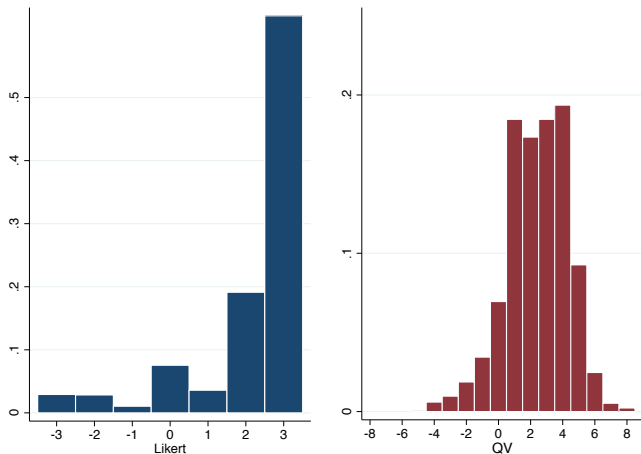
... Building a wall on the US Border with Mexico?

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... Requiring employers to offer paid leave to the parents of new children?

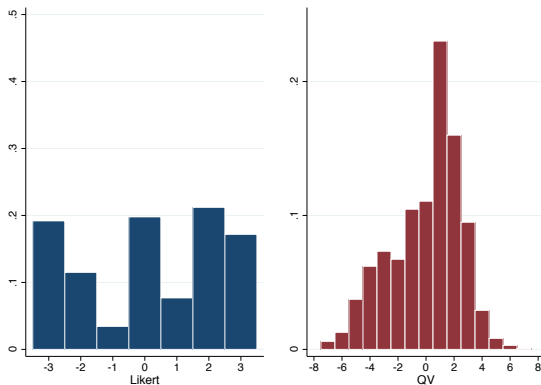
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## QV vs. Likert: Equal Pay



Do you favor or oppose requiring employers to pay women and men the same amount for the same work?

## QV vs. Likert: Letting Refugees In



Do you favor or oppose allowing Syrian refugees to come to the United States?

## Hypothesis: QV Provides a Better Measure of Preference Strength than Likert

QV:

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Likert:

$$\hat{x}_{ik}^L = x_{ik}.$$

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# Hypothesis: QV Provides a Better Measure of Preference Strength than Likert

QV          versus          Likert

- ▶ *Prediction 1:* Attitudes measured using QV are, relative to Likert, better correlated with relevant proxies of self-interested support for (or opposition to) a given policy
- ▶ *Prediction 2:* Attitudes measured using QV are, relative to Likert, less amenable to contextual cues such as party cues. The priming of partisan identity should therefore affect answers in Likert more than in QV.

## Are We Being Fair to Likert?

**QV:**

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QV      versus      Likert + *How Important is this issue to you?*

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**QV**      versus      **Likert + How Important is this issue to you?**

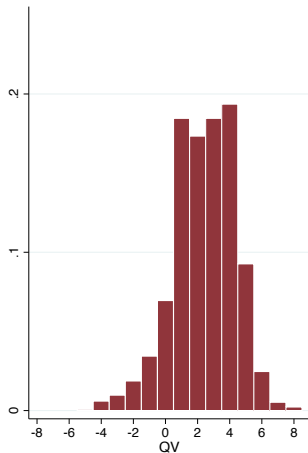
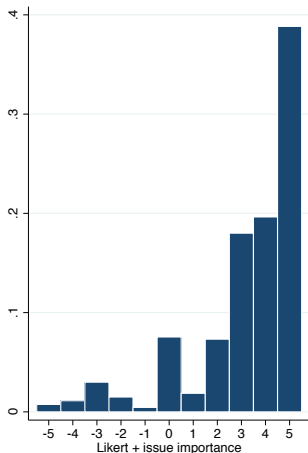
QV Might or Might Not Provide a Better Measure  
of Preference Strength than Likert ++

## Likert ++

*“How important”* → 1 to 5 scale

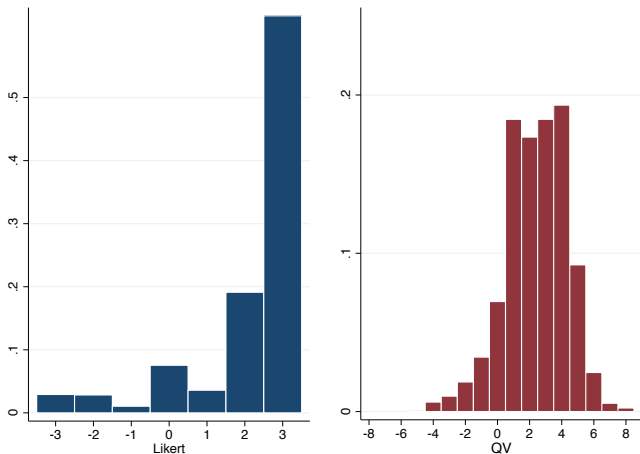
$$\text{Likert ++} \left\{ \begin{array}{ll} 1 * \text{Issue Importance} & \text{if } \mathbf{favor}, \\ -1 * \text{Issue Importance} & \text{if } \mathbf{oppose}, \\ 0 & \text{if } \mathbf{neither}. \end{array} \right.$$

## QV vs. Likert ++: Equal Pay



Do you favor or oppose requiring employers to pay women and men the same amount for the same work?

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Likert ++	Likert ++	QV	QV
QV	QV	Party ID	Party ID
Manip Check	Manip Check	Manip Check	Manip Check
SES (subj inc, race)	SES (subj inc, race)	SES (subj inc, race)	SES (subj inc, race)

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## Prediction 1: Self-interest

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Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose ...:

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**Race** → **Giving blacks preference in hiring and promotion**

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**Gender** → **Requiring employers to pay women and men the same amount**

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... Laws to protect gays and lesbians against job discrimination

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**Gun owner** → **Making it more difficult for people to buy a gun**

---

**Subj inc** → **Increasing income taxes on people making over one million dollars**

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... Allowing Syrian refugees to come to the United States

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... Building a wall on the US Border with Mexico

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**Proba young child** → **Requiring employers to offer paid leave**

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$$QV_{Zscore} - Likert_{Zscore} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Self-Interest Proxy + \epsilon$$

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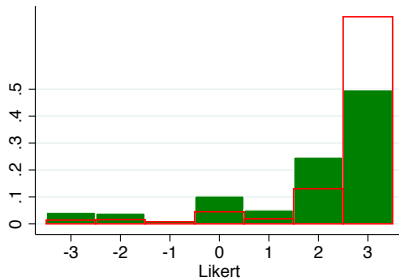
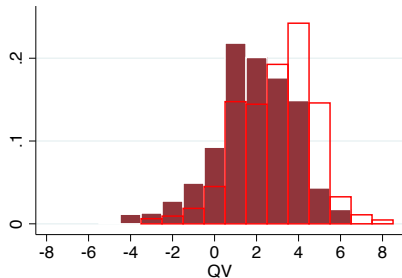
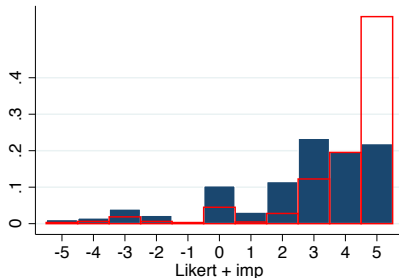
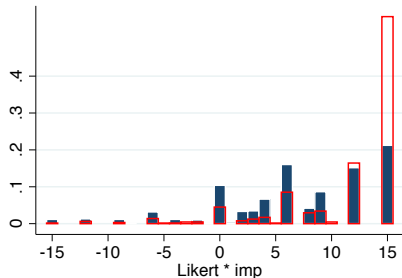
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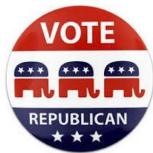
	b/se
diffgender	
gender_self	0.15** (0.05)
_cons	0.07 (0.04)
diffgun	
gun_self	0.09* (0.04)
_cons	0.03 (0.02)
diffpaidL	
paidL_self	0.10* (0.04)
_cons	0.04 (0.03)
N	1338.00
ll	-11548.46

Nothing for race and taxation of millionaires

# Support for Equal Pay by Gender: QV vs. Likert ++



## Prediction 2: Effects of Contextual Cues (Partisan Prime 1)



---

These days, Democrats and Republicans differ greatly in their political ideals and their preferred policies. First, we would like to ask you about the the party you feel the closest to - that is, the **Republican Party**.

Please take some time to think about why you prefer the Republican Party, as opposed to the Democratic Party. What is it that you especially like about the Republican Party?

**In the space below, please write 3 or 4 things you especially LIKE about the Republican Party:**

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## Prediction 2: Effects of Contextual Cues (Partisan Prime 2)



According to recent polls, American voters are extremely dissatisfied with the way things are done in Washington. Many Americans are fed up with partisan bickering and are frustrated with both political parties – including their own. They think that most members of Congress prefer to advance their own interest instead of working for the benefit of the country as a whole.

Regardless of whether you tend to prefer the Democrats or the Republicans, what frustrates you the most about the way politicians behave today?

**In the space below, please write 3 or 4 of your biggest criticisms or complaints about the way politicians behave today.**

# Data: M-Turk

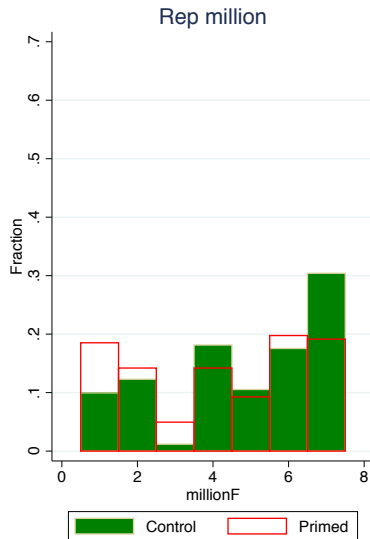
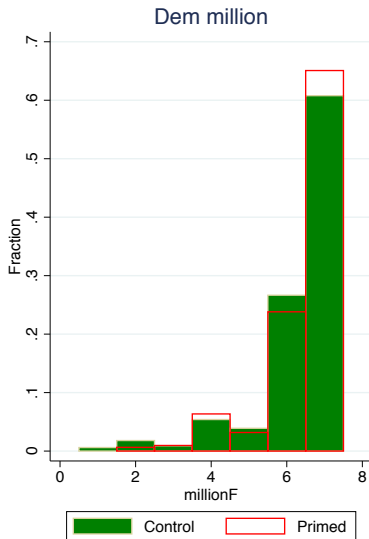
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## The Partisan Primes Increased Partisan Identification

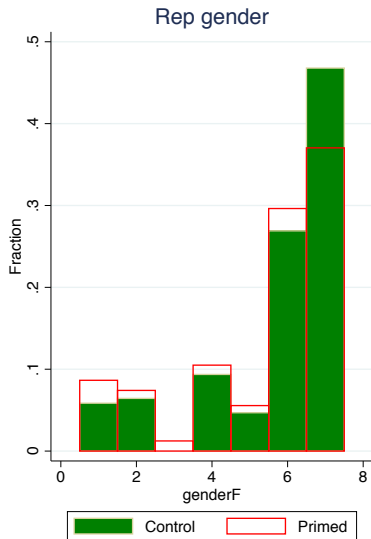
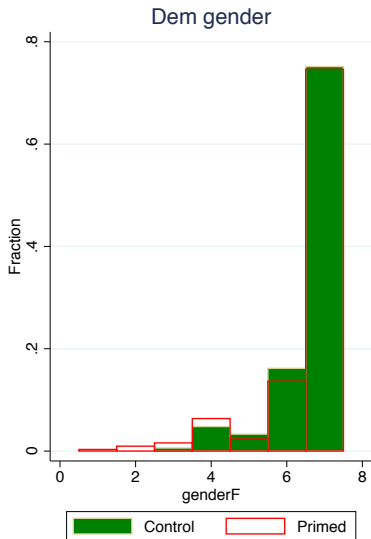
- ▶ How important is being a Democrat/Republican to you?
- ▶ How well does the term Democrat/Republican describe you?
- ▶ To what extent do you think of yourself as a Democrat/Republican?
- ▶ How often do you use “we” instead of “they” when talking about Democrats/Republicans?

Using all four items to construct a partisan identity scale, we find that the average difference between the primed group and the control group is 0.13 standard deviation. **Partisan polarization between Republican and Democrats increased by 0.26 SD.**

# Tax on Millionaires



# Equal Pay for Women



## Prediction 2: Effects of Contextual Cues

$$QV_{Zscore} - Likert_{Zscore} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * PartyID + \beta_2 * Prime + \beta_3 * PartyID * Prime + \epsilon$$

- ▶ Party ID = 1 if respondent identifies as a Democrat, 0 if Republican
- ▶ Prime = 1 if respondent was exposed to one of the two primes

$$QV_{Zscore} - Likert_{Zscore} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * PartyID + \beta_2 * Prime + \beta_3 * PartyID * Prime + \epsilon$$

b/se			
Equal pay		Gay rights	
Primed	-0.14 (0.10)	Primed	-0.02 (0.08)
Dem	-0.10 (0.05)	Dem	-0.13 (0.07)
Primed * Dem	0.19 (0.12)	Primed * Dem	-0.03 (0.09)
_cons	0.08	_cons	0.10
Paid leave		Border wall	
Primed	0.07 (0.08)	Primed	0.19** (0.06)
Dem	-0.20** (0.07)	Dem	-0.16** (0.06)
Primed * Dem	-0.08 (0.10)	Primed * Dem	<b>-0.22**</b> (0.08)
_cons	0.11 (0.06)	_cons	0.10* (0.05)
Gun regulation		More refugees	
Primed	-0.04 (0.07)	Primed	0.06 (0.06 )
Dem	-0.23*** (0.06)	Dem	-0.05 (0.05 )
Primed * Dem	0.06 (0.08)	Primed * Dem	-0.07 (0.08)
_cons	0.14** (0.05)	_cons	0.01 (0.04)

Affirmative action	
Primed	0.05 (0.07)
Dem	-0.05 (0.06)
Primed * Dem	0.04 (0.08)
_cons	0.01 (0.05)
Tax millionnaires	
Primed	0.10 (0.08)
Dem	-0.08 (0.07)
Primed * Dem	<b>-0.17*</b> (0.10)
_cons	0.06 (0.06)
N	1129.00
ll	-9657.42
Wald test	F( 8, 9000) = 2.11 Prob > F = 0.031

Comparing QV and Likert ++,  
QV does better on Wall  
item only.

$$QV_{Zscore} - Likert_{Zscore} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * PartyID + \beta_2 * Prime + \beta_3 * PartyID * Prime + \epsilon$$

b/se			
Equal pay		Gay rights	
Primed	-0.14 (0.10)	Primed	-0.02 (0.08)
Dem	-0.10 (0.05)	Dem	-0.13 (0.07)
Primed * Dem	0.19 (0.12)	Primed * Dem	-0.03 (0.09)
_cons	0.08	_cons	0.10
Paid leave		Border wall	
Primed	0.07 (0.08)	Primed	0.19** (0.06)
Dem	-0.20** (0.07)	Dem	-0.16** (0.06)
Primed * Dem	-0.08 (0.10)	Primed * Dem	<b>-0.22**</b> (0.08)
_cons	0.11 (0.06)	_cons	0.10* (0.05)
Gun regulation		More refugees	
Primed	-0.04 (0.07)	Primed	0.06 (0.06 )
Dem	-0.23*** (0.06)	Dem	-0.05 (0.05 )
Primed * Dem	0.06 (0.08)	Primed * Dem	-0.07 (0.08)
_cons	0.14** (0.05)	_cons	0.01 (0.04)

Affirmative action	
Primed	0.05 (0.07)
Dem	-0.05 (0.06)
Primed * Dem	0.04 (0.08)
_cons	0.01 (0.05)
Tax millionnaires	
Primed	0.10 (0.08)
Dem	-0.08 (0.07)
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_cons	0.06 (0.06)
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ll	-9657.42
Wald test	F( 8, 9000) = 2.11 Prob > F = 0.031

**Comparing QV and Likert ++,  
QV does better on Wall  
item only.**



# Outline

- ▶ Theory
- ▶ Design
- ▶ Results
- ▶ **Discussion and next steps**

# To sum up

- ▶ We propose a simple model to compare and contrast different survey methods
- ▶ Likert only measures  $x_{ik}$  while QV measures a mix of  $x_{ik}$  and  $\beta_{ik}$
- ▶ According to criterion 3 (self-interest) QV “performs better”
- ▶ According to criterion 4 (contextual cues) QV “performs somewhat better”, but hard to change answers (1) on politicized issues, (2) using an M-Turk sample
- ▶ Criterion 1 (predictive power) and criterion 2 (stability) still need to be tested

# Implications

- ▶ In political economy: when trying to “manipulate” self-interest, might be worth switching to QV
- ▶ in American Politics: when testing the effects of contextual cues, might be worth switching to QV
  - ▶ Likert is more likely to pick up attitudinal change that has limited political consequences because it is mainly lip service to the party
- ▶ Listen to Krosnick and measure strength: how different would public opinion look like?
- ▶ QV or Likert ++?

## Next Steps

- ▶ About to launch a big survey on a large representative sample: good time for ideas and feedback
  - ▶ Partisan prime or not? other suggestions?
  - ▶ Stability
  - ▶ Behavioral items (letter to senator, donation to cause, dictator game, field survey in Massachusetts)
- ▶ ANES data (untapped pool of “issue importance” items), existing QV data to re-analyze

