sociological science

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

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

Keywords: discussion networks; deliberation; salience; opinion formation.

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

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

To address this gap, we present findings from a National Survey of American adults designed to gauge the frequency with which people discuss issues commonly tapped in surveys, specifically issues captured in the *General Social Survey*'s (GSS) "core" questionnaire. These issues include questions of national politics, confidence in different institutions, beliefs about gender and family roles, generalized trust, socioeconomic identification, views on morality, and religious beliefs and

identifications. Although these issues do not encompass all potential political issues, especially transient "hot-button" or "takeoff" issues that often dominate news and discussion for short periods of time before getting resolved, findings about these specific questions underlie diverse theories of social behavior and change (DellaPosta 2020; DellaPosta et al. 2015; Kiley and Vaisey 2020; Vaisey and Lizardo 2016). Other common surveys underlying important theories of political behavior, including the *American National Election Study* and the *Cooperative Election Study*, also frequently ask about these issues (Zaller 1992).

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

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

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

Issue Salience

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

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

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

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

Broadly speaking, then, while researchers have a good sense of what members of the general public understand to be "important" issues in general elections, and while researchers have established a good sense of what topics dominate news and

social media, it is still unclear how often these issues become topics of discussion in everyday life.

What Do People Talk about in Everyday Life?

Social science research suggests that issues become topics of conversation for many reasons. People raise topics in conversation to express and reinforce their identity (Goffman 1959; Tajfel and Turner 1979), to make instrumental and affective connections with other people (Dunbar 2002; Lizardo 2006; McLean 1998), and to solve both minor and major problems in their everyday lives (Daminger 2019; Small 2017). Although some of this conversation is strategic (Cowan and Baldassarri 2018), much of it is reactive, with people often raising topics with discussion partners with little or no forethought to the purpose of discussion or the discussion partner (Small and Sukhu 2016). Given this range of motivations for discussion and the variance in individual experience, the number of issues that could become topics of conversation is essentially unlimited. Because of this, any specific issue—including those tapped in social science studies—is likely to be an infrequent topic of conversation.

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

Importance and Discussion Frequency

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

has an individual preference to discuss an issue, he or she might lack a partner to discuss that issue with (Cowan and Baldassarri 2018; Small et al. 2024). It could be the case that many people wish to discuss something but a widespread belief that other people do not means the issue fails to become a common topic of discussion.

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

Issue Differences

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

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

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

Second, political leaders and news media shape the public agenda, which influences the topics that become salient (Zaller 1992). For example, national elections focus public and media attention, increase the frequency with which people discuss some issues, and change people with whom these issues are discussed (Lee and

Bearman 2020). Because of these focusing effects, members of the general public potentially end up talking about similar issues (at least similar social and political issues), even while they live very different lives (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007). This suggests discussion frequency across topics—especially among the kinds of political issues that dominate opinion surveys—should be unevenly distributed, with a few issues receiving significant attention while most receive little.

Interpersonal Differences

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

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

Empirical Strategy

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

We recruited 2,183 participants through the Lucid Marketplace between June 6 and June 9, 2024. The sample was largely representative of the U.S. adult population across several demographic categories—age, sex, race, Hispanic status, and region—and we used poststratification weights to adjust our sample composition to approximate U.S. Census representation.[2] As documented in the online supplement, we applied a variety of quality checks to ensure a sample of good quality,

including attention measures, geo-location, and bot detection, reducing the final analytic sample to 2,117. We provide more details about sampling, quality control, and post-stratification in the online supplement, while Table S5 provides basic descriptive statistics of our sample across several key demographics.

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

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

Findings

Discussion Frequency

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

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

Figure 2 shows that the estimated average number of days each issue is discussed, categorized by basic topical areas. On the higher end, general religious issues—beliefs about God, perceptions about being a religious person, or one's spirituality—are more frequent topics of discussion than other issues, followed

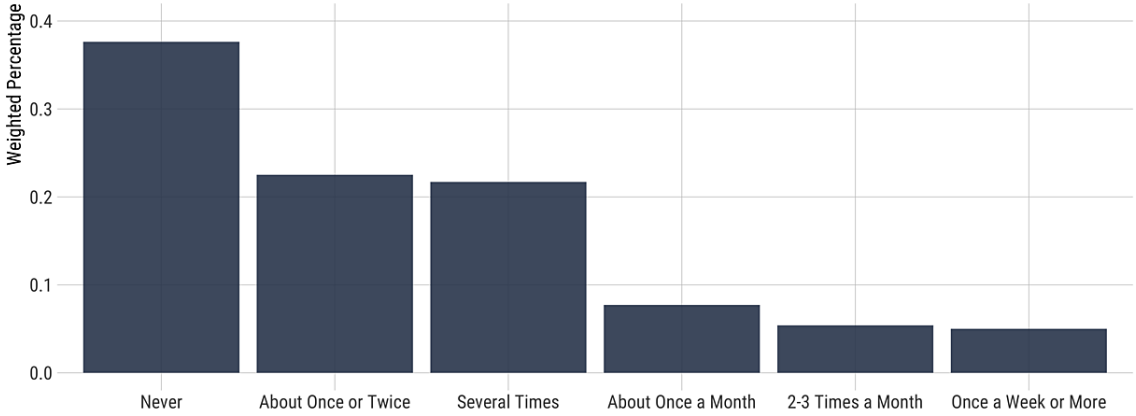

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of discussion frequency.
Notes: The figure shows weighted percentage distribution of discussion frequency across all individuals and issues.

by public confidence in major political institutions and leaders, such as Congress and the executive branch, as well as issues such as immigration and marijuana legalization. On the lower end, we see issues pertaining to civil rights—whether racists or atheists can have books in the library or teach at college—and morality items such as premarital sex or euthanasia.

We are hesitant to make strong claims about the frequency of discussion across these major topic domains as the "issues" tapped in different topics vary significantly in their generality. For example, ideological identification—a common label that is likely to be invoked across diverse topics—is a common point of discussion, even while specific spending federal priorities are not. Conversely, there is no general question about "civil liberties," only a set of very specific scenarios that rarely come up in discussion. Similarly, it is not clear how independent the discussion of different topics is. All seven abortion questions are discussed an average of about eight times a year, but it is unclear whether this reflects eight conversations that touch on multiple facets of abortion or 56 discussions that range in topics. We suspect it is closer to the former than the latter.

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

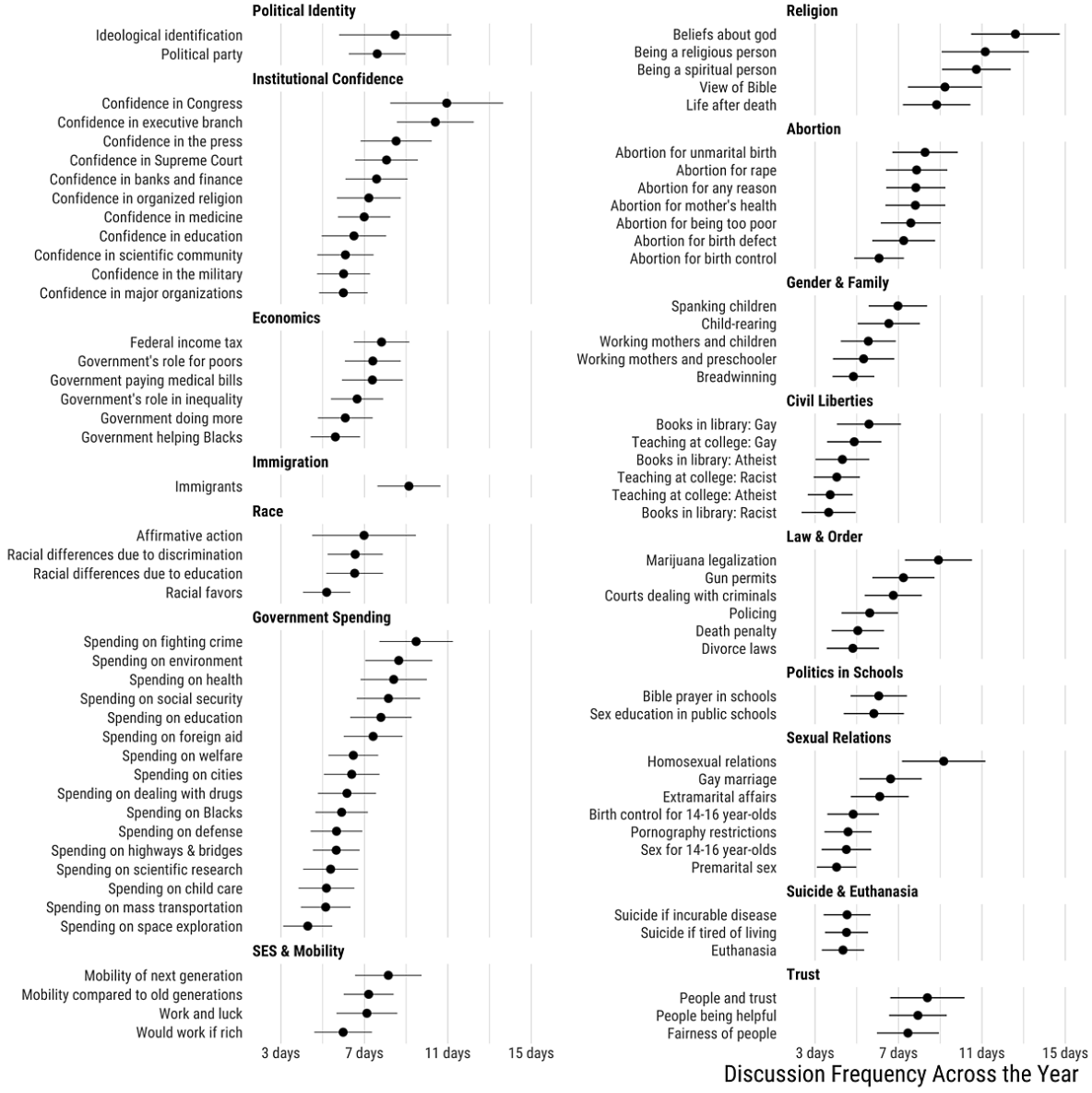

Figure 2: Average discussion frequency across issues.
Notes: The figure shows weighted average discussion frequencies across issues. To increase interpretability, the qualitative survey responses—ranging from "never" to "once a week or more"—are recoded to quantitative scores that range from 0 to 52. The error bars represent 95 percent standard errors of the weighted mean scores.

The Covariance of Discussions across Issues

Figures 3 and 4 provide information about how these issues *go together* in our sample. In Figure 3, we present the estimated correlations between the discussion frequency of all the issues examined in the article. In Figure 4, we present a hierarchical clustering of these co-occurrences. The first takeaway from the figures is that issues,

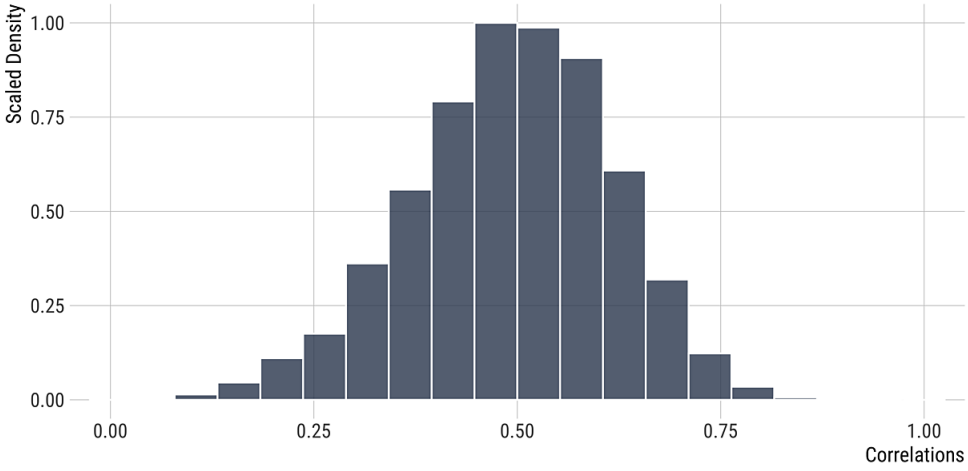

Figure 3: Estimated level of correlations across issues.
Notes: The figure shows the distribution of Spearman correlations across all issue pairs ($N = 3,828$), while the right panel shows a hierarchical clustering of these correlations from Euclidean distance scores.

in general, are quite strongly correlated (mean $\rho = .49$, with a standard deviation of 0.12). Only a single issue pair has a negative correlation (`librac` and `letin1`), which is very close to 0. In other words, Figure 3 suggests the people who say they talk more about any given issue tend to say they talk more about all other issues as well.

At the same time, within this general trend, there are some issue clusters with higher-than-average inter-item correlations. A set of "social" or "moral" issues including gay marriage, the morality of homosexual and extramarital relationships, several cases of abortion, and laws around divorce correlate strongly with each other (cluster 7, highlighted in the figure). A set of issues related to religion, including identification as a spiritual and religious person, interpretation of the Bible, God, the existence of an afterlife, and, perhaps surprisingly, whether it is OK to spank children also correlate strongly with each other in the top left corner (cluster 1). And a broad set of issues around racial inequality, such as whether racial differences are due to differences in access to education, whether black Americans deserve additional assistance, and the acceptability of Affirmative Action policies, and general politics, including spending on welfare, whether the government should spend more on helping people cover medical costs, gun regulations, and confidence in science, hang together in cluster 3. However, it is important to reiterate that these stronger correlations are slight deviations from a pattern of overall positive correlations across all items and are not reflective of notably distinct "issue publics" that discuss very different issues.

Although these clusters have some relation to the issue clusters we used to structure Figure 2—all of the religion questions in Figure 2 cluster in Figure 4—they are not completely aligned. For example, one of the abortion questions—abortion if the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children—appears in cluster 6, showing higher correlations with issues such as partisan identification than the other abortion questions, which appear in cluster 7.

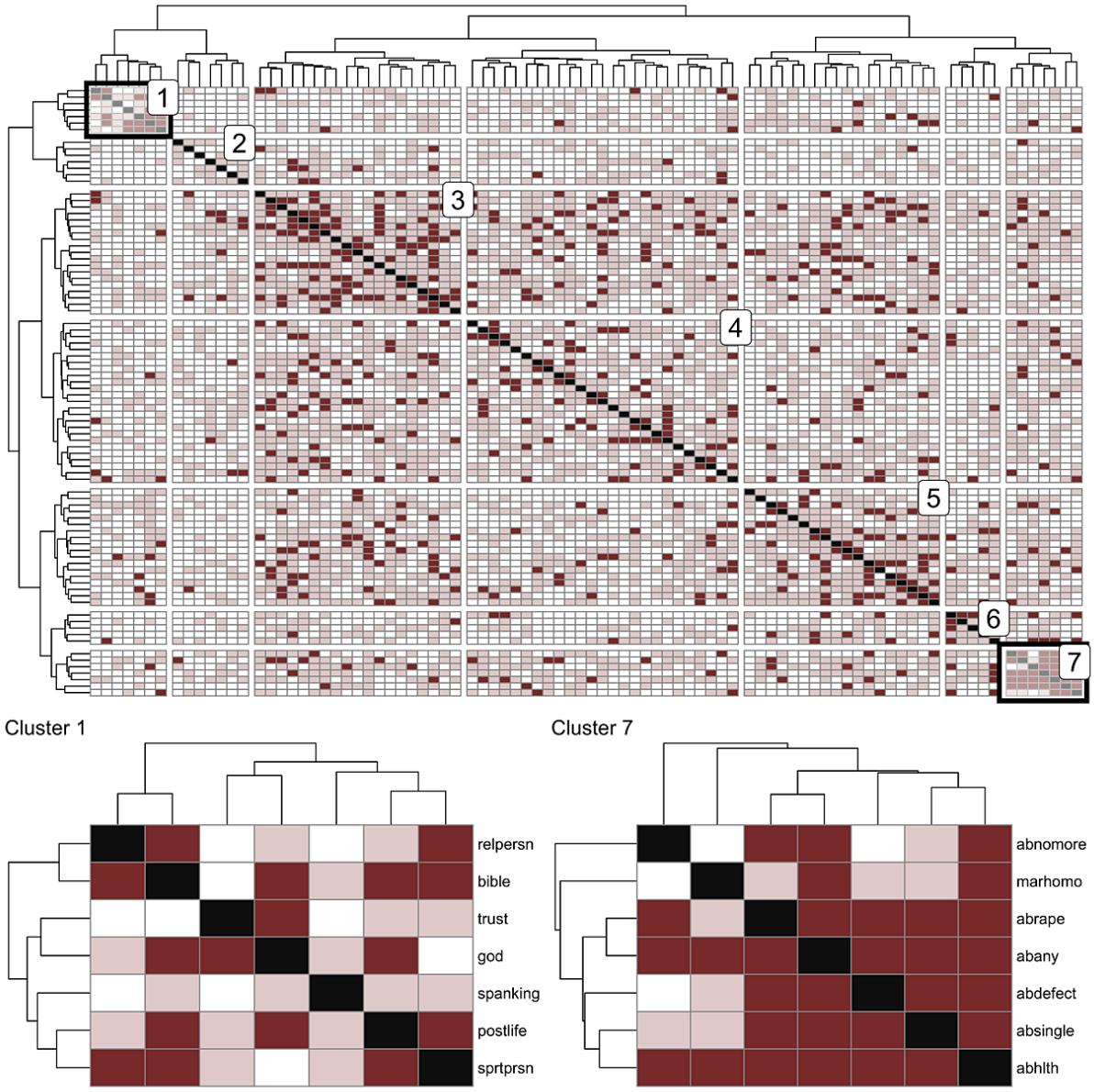

Figure 4: Hierarchical clustering of issues.
Notes: The figure shows a hierarchical clustering of correlations from Euclidean distance scores.

Individual Differences in Discussion Frequency

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

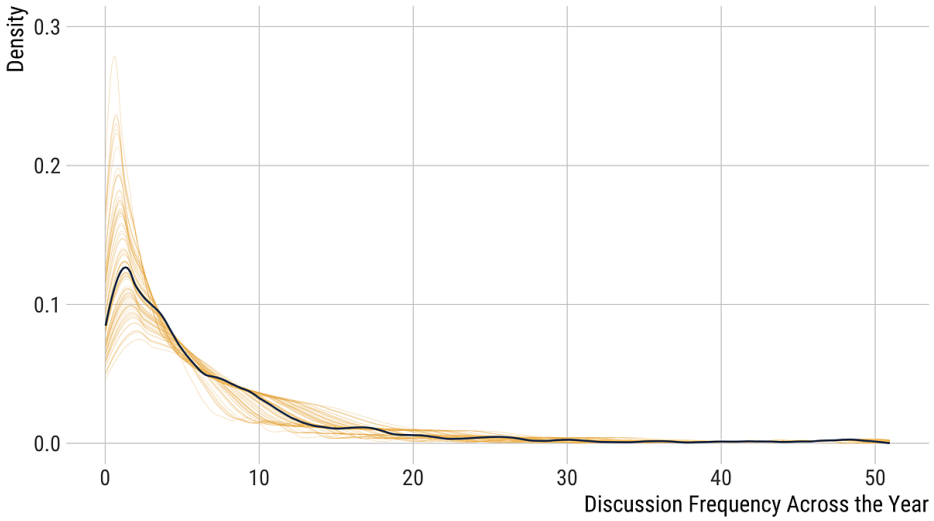

Figure 5: Distribution of discussion frequencies across individuals.
Notes: The figure presents the distribution of discussion frequencies across individuals, using model predicted responses at the individual and item level. The density plots with yellow lines represent the distribution of individual frequencies at each issue, whereas the density plot with a dark blue line presents the average frequency across issues.

estimated distribution of discussion frequency on average and across issues in Figure 5.

Any summary measure for discussion frequency is potentially misleading for two reasons. First, because we separately asked respondents about how many conversations they had on each issue, we ignore the fact that many issues explored here have the potential to co-occur in conversations. As a result, summing up the number of conversations is likely to inflate the total number of conversations people have. A single discussion about abortion might touch on both the permissibly of abortion in the case of birth defects and abortion in the case of rape, as well as partisan and ideological identification, so summing those responses as if they were independent conversations will make it appear that people have many more discussions on these topics than they do. Second, people are likely to over-report their discussion frequency of individual issues for various reasons. Although this is likely not a significant problem when comparing issues in isolation, as all issues are likely affected by this problem, aggregating multiple over-reports across many issues has the potential to dramatically misrepresent respondents' propensity to discuss issues.

The distribution in Figure 5 is highly right-skewed, with a peak of about one to two discussions a year for all issues and a small number of respondents saying that these issues come up quite frequently. All issues follow the same distribution. In other words, a small number of "political hobbyists" discuss issues frequently, driving up the average number of discussions respondents have on each issue. In Figure 6, we present the effects of political attention on discussion frequency, which show a steep linear trend across individuals. The more attention people say they pay to politics, the more conversations they report having about each issue.

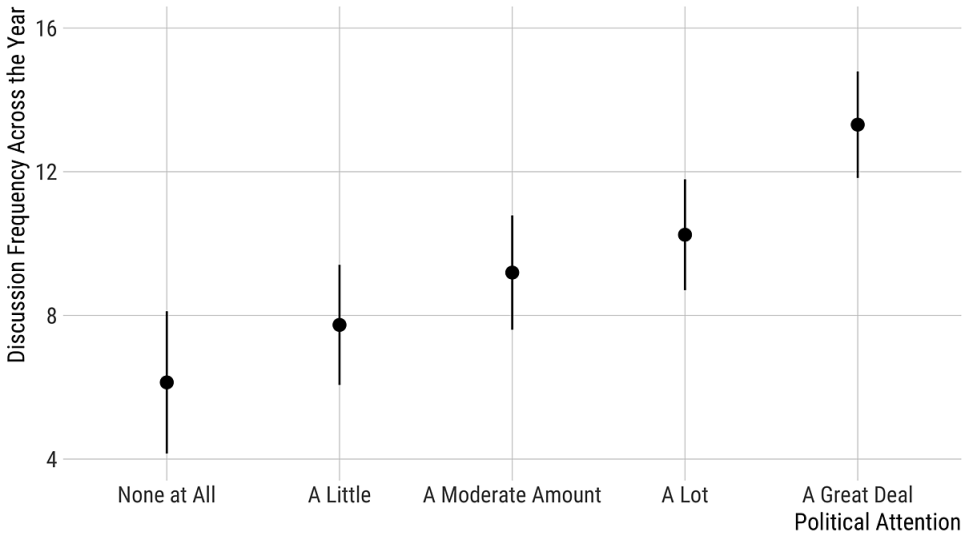

Figure 6: Conditional effect of political attention on discussion frequency.
Notes: The figure presents average predictions of discussion frequency by political attention, estimated from a regression model that adjusts for age, gender, race, college attendance, region, ideology, and partisanship, with random intercepts at the individual and item level. The error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

Group Differences in Discussion Issues

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

Looking at partisan differences, we see that the leading issue on the aggregate, the belief about God, is concentrated among Republicans, with a difference of 7 days—10.3 days a year for Democrats compared to 17.4 days a year for the Republicans. On the other side, issues related to race, government spending, and sexual relationships are more commonly discussed among Democrats compared to Republicans, though, in general, the difference margins are somewhat smaller. Note also that there are additional issues with seemingly strong difference-in-means without statistical significance, mainly because the group variation is high, for example, there is nearly a 7-day difference on average between groups on affirmative action, though the standard error for Democrats is 1 day compared to Republicans' 3.5 days, indicating higher variability among the latter.

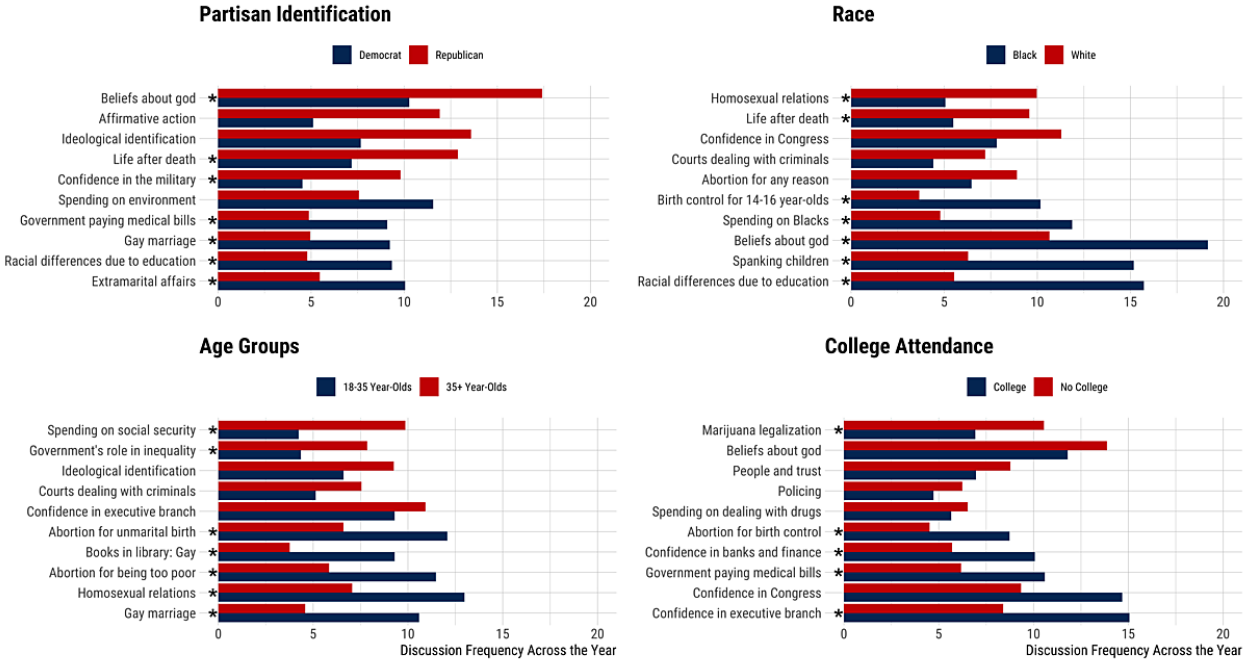

Figure 7: Group differences in average discussion frequency.
Notes: The figure depicts the differences in average discussion frequency scores across groups. The differences that are statistically significant at the 95 percent level are marked with an asterisk.

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

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

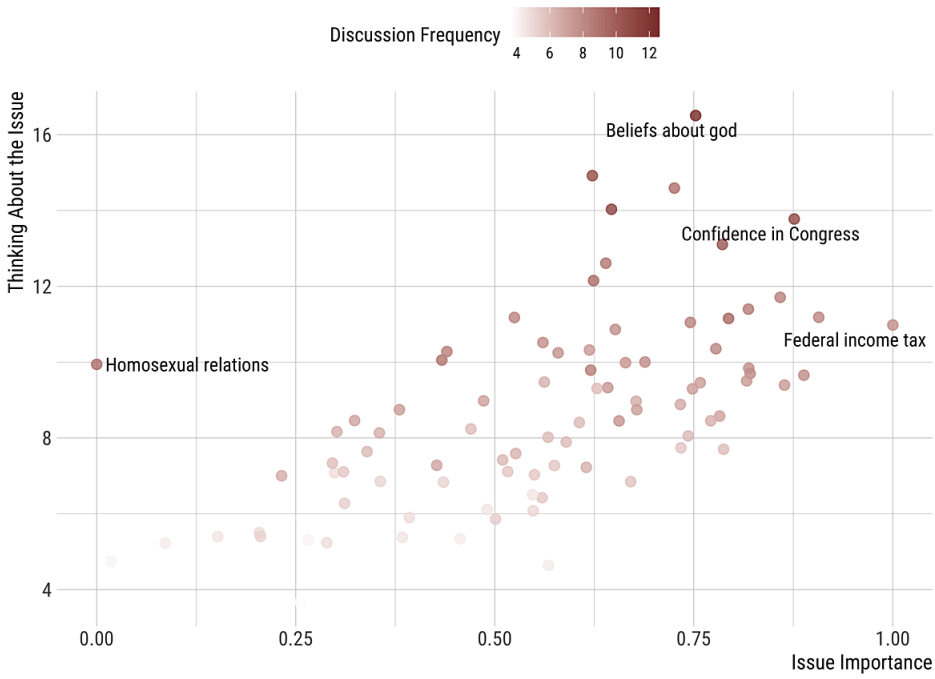

Figure 8: Issue importance, thinking frequency, and discussion frequency.
Notes: The figure depicts the weighted averages on issue importance, thinking frequency, and discussion frequency. We normalized issue importance between 0 and 1 for interpretability.

Covariates of Discussion

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

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

As noted, it is also plausible that people might avoid sensitive issues. In Figure 9, we show that this is indeed the case: there is a strong negative relationship between an issue's average sensitivity and discussion frequency (Pearson's $r = -0.44$). Once we look at the items, people think issues related to morality—such as sex among 14-16-year-olds, suicide, and birth control—and issues about racial justice are the most sensitive issues, and they avoid discussing them in public. Issue sensitivity also

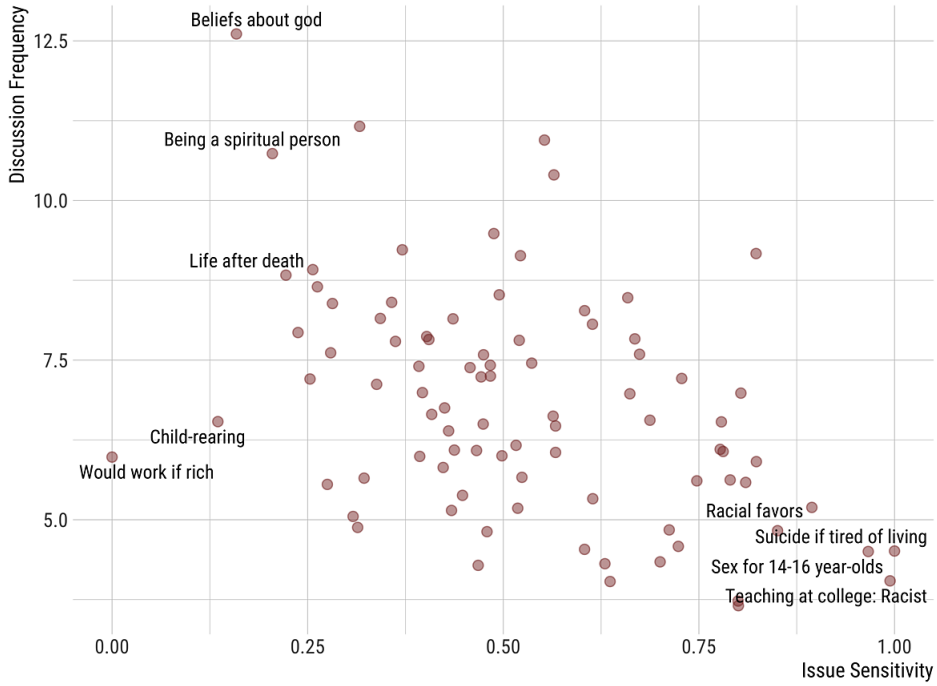

Figure 9: Issue sensitivity and discussion frequency.
Notes: The figure depicts the relationship between issue sensitivity, operationalized as the perceived level of comfort one would feel when talking about the issue at hand with an acquaintance, and discussion frequency. We normalized issue sensitivity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

covaries negatively with issue importance (Pearson's $r = -0.52$), indicating that people do not find highly sensitive issues important or worthwhile for discussions.

General Overview of the Findings

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

Second, we found a high correlation in discussion frequency across items, and between-question variance in reported discussion frequency is small compared to between-person variance in reported discussion frequency. The average discussion

frequency is significantly inflated by a small proportion of respondents engaging in much higher rates of discussion than the rest of the sample.

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

Discussion and Conclusions

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

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

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

Third, as noted previously, self-reported discussion frequency is likely a poor proxy for actual discussion frequency. We expect that, in general, people over-report the frequency of discussing issues captured here, a value that is likely further inflated by our decision to recode responses to the midpoint of the category. Although we have no reason to expect this bias to complicate inter-item or inter-person comparisons, as it applies to all items, we expect that our specific quantification of

how frequently issues are discussed and how many conversations people have to be erroneous. We encourage researchers to evaluate alternative approaches for quantifying discussion frequency.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

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

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

0.96. We settled on weighted sample means given their simplicity and high robustness to alternative specifications.

6 Figure S1 in the online supplement presents 5,000 issue bootstraps, showing that these results are robust to the inclusion or exclusion of particular items in the GSS.

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

8 Of course, because our study is cross-sectional, we cannot differentiate whether these differences result from age effects such that priorities change once a person gets older, or cohort effects (Ryder 1965).

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