Title: Abortion Policy Preferences are Structured, Stable, and Consequential[*]

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Short Title: Meaningful Policy Preferences

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Abstract: Do Americans have structured, stable and consequential policy preferences that shape political outcomes? We explore this question through the case of abortion, using a large-scale panel dataset (n = 130,000) and applying three key diagnostics. First, we demonstrate that abortion policy preferences exhibit logical coherence, both within and across reasons for seeking an abortion. Second, we show that these preferences are highly stable over time--more so than personality traits--suggesting that abortion attitudes are deeply engrained rather than fleeting opinions. Lastly, we find that abortion policy preferences, measured before the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade*, predict shifts in intended voting behavior between 2020 and 2024. This overall pattern helps rule out key theoretical alternatives, such as non-opinions, attitudes following vote choice, and elite cues. Additionally, these findings highlight the significant and independent role of abortion attitudes in shaping American political behavior.

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In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade*, eliminating the constitutional right to abortion and granting elected officials' broad authority to regulate it.[1] In addition to making abortion a central issue of legislative and ballot initiatives, the *Dobbs* ruling presents a unique opportunity to assess whether Americans hold meaningful policy preferences on abortion.

Political scientists have long debated whether voters hold meaningful policy preferences. While many electoral choice models assume voters make decisions that maximize their expected policy benefits, critics argue that most individuals lack meaningful policy positions (Converse, 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017; Zaller, 1992). Three main critiques underpin this "non-opinion" perspective: a lack of ideological constraint across issues, instability of opinions over time, and the role of elite cues in shaping preferences. Although some scholars argue that abortion constitutes a distinct policy domain in which Americans hold meaningful preferences along these three dimensions (Luker 1984; Converse and Markus 1979; Carsey and Layman 2006), others contend that abortion attitudes are underdeveloped, shaped by elite cues, and only weakly linked to vote choice (Munson 2018; Bartels 2006; Freeder et al. 2018).

Given these competing perspectives, the post-*Dobbs* policy environment provides a unique setting to examine whether abortion attitudes influence voter behavior when policymakers have broad discretion to legislate. This study investigates the extent to which

[1] *Dobbs* overruled *Roe* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* (1992).

abortion opinions are meaningful, which we define as opinions that are coherent, stable, and electorally consequential in this new political landscape.[2] Our analyses use abortion policy preference measures we fielded in a large panel study (max. n~=130,000).

We evaluate meaningful preferences through three tests. First, we assess logical coherence by examining (1) if respondents have single-peaked timing restriction preferences for a specific abortion reason and (2) whether their timing preferences across reasons reflect are ordered in a consistent manner. Second, we test stability by examining whether respondents' abortion attitudes remain stable over two intervals: an 8-week period and a 4-year span. Finally, we examine whether abortion attitudes affect vote choice by assessing whether respondents changed their presidential vote choice between the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections to align with their abortion preferences, using both pre-*Dobbs* and post-*Dobbs* measures of abortion policy preferences.

Across these tests, we find consistent evidence that Americans hold meaningful abortion policy preferences. First, respondents exhibit logically coherent preferences. We find that 90% of respondents have single-peaked timing preferences for a particular abortion reason. For the across reasons test, between 68 and 79% of respondents consistently order

[2] Logical coherence measures whether policy opinions within a specific domain are meaningfully structured. This contrasts with Converse's (1964) concept of constraint which measures preferred policies across domains (e.g., gun control and abortion). In this paper, we argue that coherence is a better measure than constraint, which relies heavily on elite driven ideologies and disregards alternative ideological frameworks (see Ottone et al. 2024).

their preferred timing restrictions in a logically coherent manner, preferring abortion to be legal later in pregnancy for reasons like the mother's life being at risk compared to reasons like sex-selective abortion. Second, preferences are highly stable, with correlations in preferred policies of around .80 both across an 8-week period using our newer abortion policy measure and over a four-year period using a standard abortion survey question. Finally, abortion policy preferences predict changes in vote choice between the 2020 and 2024 presidential elections. Conservative (liberal) abortion attitudes are associated with an increased likelihood of switching to the Republican (Democratic) candidate by between 1 and 3 points, depending on model specifications. This is a modest effect that might be substantively important given presidential elections are often decided by narrow margins.

Taken as a whole, our analyses reveal that respondents hold meaningful abortion policy preferences. Their answers are logically coherent, stable, and, following the increased salience of abortion after the *Dobbs* decision, predict changes in presidential voting. This suggests that, at least for the issue of abortion, voters exhibit meaningful preferences that shape their political behavior – supporting models of democratic representation that assume that voters weigh policy commitments when selecting leaders.

Is Public Opinion Meaningful?

The question of whether individuals hold meaningful policy preferences has been a central topic in political science for over six decades. Many models of elections assume that voters weigh the policy positions taken by competing parties or candidates and vote for the candidate whose position maximizes the voters' expected utility (e.g., Downs 1957). Voters

choosing elected officials based on their policy commitments and elected officials anticipating such choices by voters creates the key representational linkage necessary for democratic governance. A key assumption of these models, though, is that voters have well-formed policy preferences that they use to assess competing options. However, this assumption has faced extensive empirical criticism, with scholars like Converse (1964), Kinder and Kalmoe (2017), and Zaller (1992) arguing that many individuals lack meaningful, stable policy positions.

Three main critiques underpin this "non-opinion" perspective: the lack of ideological constraint across issues, the instability of opinions over time, and the influence of elite cues in shaping preferences. Beginning with constraint, Converse (1964) and Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) find that voters often lack ideologically constrained preferences, meaning that their preferred policies across policy domains (e.g., gun control and abortion) do not align consistently along conservative, liberal, or moderate lines. However, this standard has been criticized for relying too heavily on elite-driven ideologies while disregarding alternative ideological frameworks (see Ottone et al. 2024). For example, under this framework, an individual who supports state intervention to regulate guns but opposes it for abortion (or vice versa) would be considered ideologically constrained, as these these positions align with elite partisan cues from Democrats and Republicans. Yet, this perspective dismisses groups such as libertarians, who generally oppose government regulation across issues, or conservative Catholics, who support regulation of both guns and abortion, despite the fact that these groups may hold beliefs that are deeply rooted in strong value commitments.

The apparent *instability* of issue positions has also been used to argue that policy attitudes are not deeply held. Converse (1964) analyzes ANES survey data and finds that

respondents' issue preferences over a two-year period have a correlation between 0.3 and 0.4. He interprets this instability as an indication that individuals lack meaningful preferences: if policy positions fluctuate over time, they cannot be deeply rooted. This concern is echoed by Zaller (1992), Zaller and Feldman (1992), and Freeder et al. (2018), who similarly argue that the instability of policy attitudes suggests these attitudes may not be deeply rooted.

However, the evidence supporting the instability conclusion is dated and the survey items used to assess stability are often vague. When questions are vague, respondents may interpret them differently over time, introducing measurement error (e.g., Achen 1975; Zaller 1992). Consistent with this concern, when scholars instead average policy preferences in related domains (such as social policy), issue stability increases (Ansolabehere et al. 2008). Additionally, deviations from one preferred policy to a close alternative may indicate indifference between similar options rather than a lack of genuine preferences (Ottone et al. 2024).

At the same time, stability itself may be driven by external commitments, such as partisanship and deference to elite cues, meaning that stability alone may not be a sufficient indicator of meaningful preferences. As a result, scholars have also argued that *elite cues*, rather than meaningful preferences, may explain the apparent structure and stability of policy opinions (e.g., Lenz 2012; Levendusky 2009). In this account, observed correlations between preferred policies (i.e., high levels of constraint), as well as the correlation between vote choice (partisanship) and preferred policies, may stem from voters following elite cues rather than indicating that they have independently formed beliefs. Since partisanship and vote choice are generally stable, policy opinions may also appear stable and constrained, but these markers do

not necessarily reflect meaningful attitudes. Instead, voters may simply learn "what goes with what," leading to seemingly consistent policy positions (Freeder et al 2018). A key challenge in distinguishing the *consequential policy preferences perspective* from the *elite cue perspective* is that, in a stable political environment, both predict a strong correlation between issue positions and vote choice. Absent a shock to party positions (see Lenz 2012) or voter preferences, it is generally difficult to distinguish the two perspectives empirically.

This broader debate over whether Americans hold meaningful policy preferences extends to abortion. Some scholars identify abortion as an area of uniquely meaningful public opinion (e.g., Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). In her seminal book, Luker (1984), based on interviews with abortion activists, argues that abortion opinions reflect deeply held values and worldviews. Consistent with this, research suggests that Americans' views on abortion are more crystallized and stable compared to other policy issues and that aggregate abortion attitudes are highly stable over time (Converse and Markus 1979; Carsey and Layman 2006). Furthermore, scholars find that abortion attitudes are highly correlated with core value commitments (e.g., Tamney et al, 1992), secularization (Campbell et al 2018), and broader ideological orientations such as authoritarianism (Bakker et al. 2021).

Scholars also find that abortion predict political choices, such as partisan shifts (Carsey and Layman 2006, Killian and Wilcox, 2008) and support for Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the Supreme Court (VanSickle-War and Wallsten 2019). Consistent with this view, Goren and Chapp (2017) argue that culture war issues like abortion and gay rights rival partisanship and religion in their stability and influence. They suggest these preferences are deeply rooted, resistant to change, and shape both political behavior and information processing. Similarly,

Adams (1997) characterizes abortion as an "issue evolution," where clear partisan divisions on abortion have reshaped the electorate, pulling pro-life voters toward the Republican Party and pro-choice voters toward the Democratic Party.

However, not all scholars agree that abortion attitudes are meaningful and well-structured. Munson (2018), based on interviews with Americans about their abortion attitudes, concludes that "[p]ublic opinion about abortion is surprisingly un-thought-out" (69). Similarly, Bartels (2006) finds that abortion attitudes weakly predict electoral support, and to a much smaller degree than economic concerns (p. 212). Additionally, perhaps because abortion policymaking was restricted by *Roe* and subsequent precedents, some research finds that voters have chosen candidates on the basis of other policy concerns (Daynes and Tatalovitch 1992). Freeder et al. (2018) further argue that abortion attitudes are stable only for those who are highly knowledgeable about elite ideological commitments, implying that this stability is more an artifact of following elite cues than deeply held beliefs.

Thus, across issues generally and abortion specifically scholars disagree on whether Americans hold meaningful policy preferences. Viewed through this lens, the post-*Dobbs* era in which the Supreme Court overturned *Roe* offers a crucial opportunity to examine whether abortion attitudes influence voting behavior. Previous research suggests that abortion attitudes sometimes predict vote switching, with effects potentially larger in elections where abortion is a salient issue (e.g., Abramowitz 1995; Killian and Wilcox 2008; Wattier, Daynes, and Tatalovitch 1997). Post-*Dobbs*, abortion policymaking became highly salient, creating an opportunity to understand if pre-existing abortion attitudes explain shifts in voting.

Identifying Meaningful Public Opinion

In light of the above, we test whether Americans' hold meaningful preferences on abortion using three criteria: coherence, stability, and predictive power in vote choice. First, following Ottone et al. (2024), we argue that a strong test of whether preferences are meaningful is whether an individual's policy views within a single-issue area are logically coherent, that is, whether they follow a consistent internal logic. We use this test rather than relying on Converse's (1964) concept of ideological constraint across multiple issues.

We conduct two tests of coherence. First, for a given reason for abortion, we ask respondents to rate five different time limits for when abortion should be allowed. This allows us to examine whether their preferences are *single-peaked*—meaning respondents have most preferred time limit and their support never increases for options that are further from that most preferred policy (i.e. scores are weakly monotonically decreasing on both sides of the peak).[3] Assessing coherence in this way requires measuring not only a respondent's most preferred policy but also how they evaluate alternative policies (i.e., different abortion timing restrictions). Our second test evaluates coherence across different reasons for abortion.

[3] As discussed in Ottone et al. (2024), one might have preferences that are not single peaked but nonetheless meaningful. For example, one might prefer abortion be allowed always or never, believing all intermediate timing options are infeasible. For this reason, our test is a conservative because some preference profiles we code as incoherent may nonetheless be meaningful.

Specifically, we assess whether respondents support later abortion time limits for reasons they perceive as more justified.[4]

For stability, we measure whether respondents' most preferred policies remain stable over time. Specifically, we assess stability across two-time frames: 8 weeks and 4 years. Our measure of stability penalizes larger differences in preferences over time more than small deviations to minimize the effect of indifference and measurement error in our estimates.

For our final test, we examine whether abortion attitudes have a causal influence on vote choice. Using panel data from 2020 to 2024, we analyze whether individuals changed their presidential vote between the two elections to align with their abortion views. This analysis uses both pre-*Dobbs* measures of abortion policy preferences and post-*Dobbs* measures. We discuss the necessary assumptions for this to be a causal estimate and examine how the *Dobbs* decision – by making abortion preferences more consequential for policy outcomes – likely heightened the salience of abortion in voting, below.

If Americans' abortion attitudes meet all of these criteria, we argue this shows that abortion policy preferences are meaningful. If they fall short, we present tests that can distinguish between two key alternative theoretical accounts: non-opinion and elite cueing. Table 1 summarizes the predictions generated by each of the theoretical perspectives discussed above. Finding a combination of coherence, stability, and prediction would be compatible only with the meaningful preferences perspective.

Table 1. Summary of empirical predictions derived from models of public opinion

[4] Below we discuss how we arrive at our ordering of reasons.

Theoretical perspective	Coherent preferences?		Stable preferences?	Preferences predict vote choice?	
	Within-reason	**Across-reason**		**Past opinion predicts vote switching**	**Current opinion predicts vote switching**
Meaningful preferences	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
People lack meaningful preferences	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal	No	Unclear (possible if both opinions and vote choice reflect idiosyncratic factors)
Elite cueing	Unclear (depends on elite/party cues)	Unclear(depends on elite/party cues)	Yes (and aligned with stable partisanship and candidate choice)	No (because issue positions should reflect candidate choice)	Yes (because people align issue positions with current vote choice)

Methods

Our data come from the 2024 Stanford-Arizona-Yale election panel survey, conducted by YouGov. The survey includes a baseline sample of approximately 130,000 U.S. residents recruited from YouGov's opt-in online panel, where participants earn points redeemable for rewards. To ensure representativeness, YouGov provides weights for both the initial sample and subsequent subsamples. All results reported here are weighted accordingly, with Table A1.1 in the appendix summarizing the demographic characteristics of both weighted and unweighted samples (p. A-2). Respondents provided informed consent before participating, and the survey was deemed exempt by the IRB at Yale University.

This panel provides a valuable opportunity to study abortion opinion for three main reasons: its large sample size, frequent re-contacts, and extensive archive of pre-*Dobbs* survey questions. We first collected baseline data from the 130,000-person sample in December 2023 and early January 2024, followed by a full-sample follow-up in May 2024. Additionally, about 7,500 of these respondents participated in a separate panel study with additional survey waves in February and May 2024. For clarity, we refer to the December 2023 survey as the baseline survey.

The YouGov panel is an opt-in sample, so we use weights provided by YouGov to approximate a nationally representative sample. Nonetheless, even the weighted sample may be more politically interested and engaged than the general population. Where practical, we address this concern by showing our results hold for less engaged subgroups. Additionally, as with all survey data, we rely on respondents accurately reporting their behaviors and attitudes. We note that our panel analysis relies on reports of past behavior collected close to those events (e.g., 2020 voting), reducing concerns that retrospective reports are affected by systematic measurement error.

Table 2. Summary of questions asked, when asked, number of respondents asked, and analyses that use each question.

Question	Date(s) asked	Approximate sample asked	Analysis used for
Up to what point in a pregnancy do you think abortion should be legal for each of the following reasons? *Six timing options and six reasons*	Dec. 2023	130,000	Coherence across reasons, Stability, Vote choice
	Feb. 2024	7,000	Stability
How much would you support a law that makes it illegal to have an abortion past each of the following points in pregnancy if [reason]? Please indicate your support on the 0-10 scale, where 0 means completely oppose and 10 means completely support. *Five timing options and four reasons*	May 2024	6,000	Coherence within reasons
Which comes closest to your position on abortion? *Four response options*	2018-2021 (almost all in 2020)	51,000	Vote choice
Which comes closest to your view on abortion? *Four response options*	2018-2021 (almost all in 2020)	41,000	Stability
	May 2024	81,000	Stability
How important is abortion to you? *Four response options*	2011-2014 (almost all in 2014)	18,000	Coherence across reasons, Stability, Vote choice
How important are each of the following issues to you? *Five response options*	Dec. 2023	130,000	Coherence across reasons, Stability, Vote choice
How confident are you that you have the knowledge and expertise to evaluate policy in each of the following areas? *Five response options*	Dec. 2023	130,000	Coherence, Stability, Vote choice

Finally, because the sample was recruited from YouGov's online panel, for various non-random subsamples of the baseline sample we have access to opinions measured prior to the *Dobbs* decision. These pre-*Dobbs* opinions include 2020 vote choice (N~=50,000), partisanship (N~=50,000), and various abortion-related preferences. The abortion-related items include abortion policy preferences (N~=40,000) and the importance of abortion (N=18,000). Table A1.1 in the appendix summarizes the demographic characteristics of the full sample and the monthly subsample (p. A-2). In Table 2 we summarize when each question was asked and the number of respondents who answered each question. The full text of each question and all response options appear in Appendix B (pp. A-3).

Our primary measure of contemporary abortion attitudes is derived from Hernandez's (2025) *Reason by Weeks* (RbW) abortion policy measure (the first row of Table 2). This measure allows respondents to indicate their preferred timing restrictions for abortion for six distinct reasons: risk to the woman's life, the pregnancy resulting from rape or incest, serious fetal abnormalities, financial hardship, interference with education or career opportunities, and sex of the fetus (see Appendix B for the full text, p. A3). This battery is designed to match the post-*Dobbs* policy space, in which states can enact timing restrictions across the term of a pregnancy that vary by the reasons for the abortion. Because the questions are more detailed than a simple support question (as is the norm in the discipline), this question allows respondents to

express their abortion preferences in the relevant policy space. For a single abortion reason, we also ask respondents to rate each of five potential timing restrictions.[5]

As argued in Hernandez (2025), this question design improves upon past methods commonly used by political scientists, which typically follow the approaches of the American National Election Survey (ANES) or the General Social Survey (GSS) (e.g., Adams, 1997; Osborne et al., 2022; Jozkowski, Crawford, and Hunt 2018; Cassese, Ondercin, and Randall, 2025). The standard four-point ANES measure asks respondents about their abortion policy preferences without specifying when or why they might support abortion. Hernandez (2025) demonstrates that Democrats and Republicans interpret ANES response categories differently, meaning that Democrats and Republicans who select the same ANES response hold systematically different policy preferences. The GSS, by contrast, asks respondents whether nor not they support abortion in specific cases, but these categories have not been updated since the 1970s (Cowan, Hout, and Perrett 2022). Additionally, the binary nature of these questions fails to capture the complexity of the current policy landscape, where gestational limits may vary depending on the

[5] We note that these items are much more detailed than pre-*Dobbs* elite discourse and candidate positions (e.g., candidates generally state they are "pro-life" or "pro-choice," rather than discussing these detailed timing rules), helping to rule out the possibility that stated opinions are merely adopting the "party line." Additionally, when we ask respondents to evaluate all timing options for a specific reason, there are no party cues to follow because candidates and parties do not provide comparative assessments of different timing options.

reason for seeking an abortion.[6] Given these limitations, we argue that the Reason by Week (RbW) measure introduced in Hernandez (2025) provides a more relevant measure of abortion policy preferences. Additionally, this approach presents a more rigorous test of whether individuals hold meaningful preferences because the increased specificity and complexity of these questions makes them more challenging for respondents who lack well-formed views to answer in a coherent or stable way.

We asked these questions on both the baseline and the February 2024 waves of the survey. The aggregate distribution of preferred timings in the baseline wave is presented in Appendix Figure A3.1 (p. A-5). Additionally, to measure whether respondents have coherent abortion preferences for a single abortion reason, in the May 2024 survey wave we asked each respondent to rate on a scale from 0 (least preferred) to 10 (most preferred) how much they support the following five time restrictions on abortion[7]: (1) never legal, (2) legal until 6 weeks

[6] As we discuss below, as a robustness test of our measure, we apply our coherence across reasons test to the binary GSS items and find high levels of coherence. See Appendix Table A3.2 (p. A-8).

[7] Specifying the reasons for an abortion and asking about preferred timing options in our questions allows us to rule out the possibility that measurement error induced by differences in how respondents understand the questions might bias upward or downward estimates of coherence and stability (Fowler n.d., Tausanovitch 2024). Additionally, by varying only a single dimension of choice (timing for a given reason) we ensure that apparent incoherence does not reflect interdependent preferences in a multidimensional policy space (Ottone et al. 2024). One

[into pregnancy], (3) legal until 15 weeks, (4) legal until 24 weeks and (5) legal until birth. Each respondent was randomly selected to receive this item for a single abortion reason chosen from these four reasons: (1) fetus' serious physical or mental disability, (2) pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, (3) mother cannot afford the child, and (4) pregnancy interferes with mother's career or educational aspirations.

Our historical measures of abortion attitudes and importance are from YouGov's common survey wordings. YouGov has in the past asked about general abortion policy preferences offering a scale ranging from "illegal at all times" to "legal at all times" for respondents. This item is similar to the abortion policy question asked by the ANES. This question was asked relatively close to the period before the *Dobbs* decision was released: most responses came in 2020. Importantly, these responses were recorded even before the Supreme Court took up the case.

Additionally, we have both a historical measure of the importance of abortion to respondents as well as a current measure. The historical measure, from 2014, predates our

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concern is that respondents might be able to use numeric cues to increase the apparent coherence of their attitudes within reason (i.e. it might be easier for respondents to order their timings rankings because they are already ordered). We believe this specificity is desirable as it elicits comparative rankings of well-specified alternatives. Additionally, the between reason analysis mitigates this concern because it does not use rating of multiple timing restrictions for a single reason for an abortion but instead tests the ordering of preferred timing restrictions across different questions where these contextual cues do not present a natural order.

current analysis by almost a full decade. The historical measure asked about the importance of abortion to the respondent. The current measure, asked in the baseline wave, asks about the importance of abortion in a battery also asking about the importance of many other issues.

Finally, following the approach of Gerber et al. (2011), we measure how confident respondents are in their ability to make policy choices surrounding abortion (row 7 of Table 2). This measure is only available for the contemporary period and was fielded in the baseline wave in a battery that also asked about confidence in many other issue areas.

Results

Coherence within reason

We find strong evidence of coherence using data from our May 2024 survey on respondents' ratings of abortion timing options for a single reason. We classify responses as coherent (single-peaked) if a respondent's scores decline (or remain constant) as they move away from their most-preferred option.[8] For example, if a respondent assigns their highest rating (e.g., an 8) to "legal until 15 weeks," their preferences are considered single-peaked if: (1) their ratings for "legal until 6 weeks" and "legal until 24 weeks" are no higher than 8, (2) their rating for "never legal" does not exceed their rating for "legal until 6 weeks," and (3) their

[8] We exclude individuals who did not score all timing options because it is easier to appear coherent if a respondent scores fewer options. This is therefore a conservative choice. Across all reasons, 4.7% of respondents (unweighted, 4.2% weighted) who completed this wave did not score all five timing options. If we conservatively assume these individuals have incoherent preferences it reduces apparent coherence by at most 5 percentage points.

rating for "legal until birth" does not exceed their rating for "legal until 24 weeks." Notably, respondents can still exhibit coherence if they assign equal ratings to some or all time points.

We report results for this measure of coherence in Table 3. We find between 89% and 91% of respondents hold single-peaked preferences across each of these four reasons.[9] When we exclude respondents who gave the same score to all timing options, we still find that between 87% and 90% of respondents hold single-peaked preferences. Overall, this pattern strongly suggests that many respondents have coherent preferences over timing restrictions for a given abortion reason.

Table 3: Logical coherence rates by abortion reason

Reason	All respondents	Excluding those who select same timing for all reasons
Coherent: Serious physical or mental disability	0.90 (N=1545)	0.88 (N=1383)
Coherent: Rape or incest	0.91 (N=1549)	0.90 (N=1439)
Coherent: Mother can't afford	0.89 (N=1580)	0.87 (N=1429)
Coherent: Mother's aspirations	0.90 (N=1543)	0.88 (N=1359)

Notes: Weighted Analysis. Unweighted N's reported in parentheses. Table entries are the proportion of respondents with single-peaked preferences for a given reason.

[9] By comparison, random responding (e.g., individuals randomly picking numbers 0-10 for each survey item) would yield coherence by chance only 18.4% of the time. We use the comparison benchmark of random responding throughout because this provides a better null than 0 for measured coherence and stability. This follows Zaller's (1992) approach in his study of stability (p. 30). No empirical work we are aware of finds instability or lack of constraint as low as the random responding benchmark.

Coherence across reasons

Next, we find strong evidence of logical coherence in how respondents order their preferences for preferred abortion timing restrictions for different reasons using data from our December 2023 baseline survey. At the aggregate level, respondents generally support later abortion access for medically necessary reasons (e.g., to protect the mother's life or in cases of fetal abnormality) and traumatic reasons (e.g., rape) compared to non-medical reasons (e.g., concerns about a child interfering with career or educational opportunities or not wanting a child of a specific sex) (see Figure A3.1 in the appendix, p. A-5).

At the individual level, we assess whether respondents' preferred abortion timing restrictions align with the aggregate ordering observed in our data.[10] Table 4 presents these results, with rows ordered from the most to least widely supported reasons for later abortion access. A respondent is considered *coherent* if they do not assign a later abortion cutoff to a lower-ranked reason than to a higher-ranked one in the table.

Table 4 summarizes responses from 104,069 participants who provided different abortion timing preferences. Each cell shows the percentage of respondents who supported an equal or later abortion cutoff for the reason in the column compared to the reason in the row. For example, in the second row's first column, 0.89 means that 89% of respondents believe abortion should be allowed at least as long for life-threatening medical conditions as for cases

[10] As with our coding of coherence within reason, this is a conservative choice because individuals with different value commitments may arrive at different orderings that are nonetheless deeply held.

of rape or incest. As we move down the first column, the percentages for other reasons exceed 90%, showing strong agreement that abortions for life-threatening medical conditions should be permitted at least as late in pregnancy as for any other reason.

Table 4. Logical coherence rates across abortion reasons

	Mother's life	Rape or incest	Fetal disability	Not enough money	Opportunity cost	Sex selective
Mother's life	1.00	0.54	0.48	0.22	0.16	0.10
Rape or incest	0.89	1.00	0.68	0.40	0.31	0.21
Fetal disability	0.93	0.81	1.00	0.52	0.44	0.34
Not enough money	0.94	0.95	0.90	1.00	0.78	0.61
Opportunity cost	0.95	0.96	0.93	0.95	1.00	0.73
Sex selective	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96	1.00

Notes: Weighted Analysis. Table entries are the proportion of respondents providing an equally or less restrictive timing option for the reason listed in the column than for the reason listed in the row.

We find very high levels of agreement on the ordering of reasons. For 13 of the 15 cells below the diagonals, over 90% of respondents provide an equally or less restrictive timing option. There are two exceptions: (1) life threatening medical condition and rape or incest: 89% of respondents believe that abortion should be allowed at least as long for life-threatening pregnancies as for cases of rape or incest, and (2) rape or incest and fetal disability: 81% of respondents agree that rape or incest should be allowed at least as long for rape or incest as for a fetal disability. We consider these alternative rankings below in our construction of different measures of preference coherence because we do not believe these different value tradeoffs ex ante indicate incoherent preferences.

To measure overall coherence in abortion policy preferences across all reasons we transition from pairwise comparisons to four summary measures of respondents' preferred

timing restrictions. Our strictest measure classifies respondents as *coherent* if their ranking follows the order in Table 4, ensuring that no reason below a reason in Table 4 has a preferred later timing restriction. Our preferred measure relaxes this by allowing flexibility in the ordering of *rape* and *fetal disability*—the most common deviation—while maintaining strict order for other reasons. The third measure instead permits flexibility in the *mother's life* and *rape* comparison. Finally, our broadest measure allows either of these deviations while still coding respondents as coherent.

To assess the impact of omitting a pairwise comparison at random, we conduct a placebo analysis, allowing *disability* and *financial reasons* (two other adjacent reasons in the table) to be ordered freely. This has a minimal effect on measured coherence, unlike the specific comparisons we relax in our primary measures. Finally, we also conduct simulations in which we randomly select preferred timing options with equal probability to simulate random responding and estimate the sensitivity of our preferred measure of coherence. Table 5 presents these results, restricted to respondents for whom we have basic demographic information (i.e. partisanship), first considering any incomplete preferences as incoherent, then restricting the data to those who answered all abortion attitude questions, and then those who answered them with at least two different timing options.

Table 5. Proportion of respondents with coherent preferences

	Those missing any abortion item coded as incoherent	Answered all abortion items	Did not pick same timing for all options
Coherent timing preferences (strict)	.6463 [.4781]	.6871 [.4637]	.6157 [.4864]
Coherent timing preferences (rape/fetal disability removed)	.7439 [.4365]	.7909 [.4067]	.7432 [.4369]
Coherent timing preferences (mom's life/rape removed)	.6770 [.4676]	.7198 [.4491]	.6558 [.4751]
Coherent timing preferences (both removed)	.7747 [.4178]	.8236 [.3812]	.7833 [.412]
Coherent timing preferences (placebo, disability/money removed)	.6616 [.4732]	.7033 [.4568]	.6357 [.4812]
Coherent given random responding (rape/fetal disability removed)	.0128 [.1123]	.0136 [.1157]	.0139 [.1171]
Observations	130601	124192	102393

Standard deviations in brackets

Note: Weighted analysis. Restricted to those providing PID. Table entries are the proportion of respondents coded as coherent based on their across-reason preferred timing options, using four different definitions of coherence (rows). Standard errors of estimates in brackets.

For our preferred measure, random responding would yield an estimated 1.3% of respondents coded as coherent. In contrast, we find that, for our most restrictive definition of coherence, shown in the first row of the table, 64% of respondents are coherent. This figure rises to 74% when we allow *rape* and *fetal disability* to be ordered either way and to 67% when we relax the ordering between *mother's life* and *rape*. Given reasonable differences in the values underlying these ordering variations, we adopt the second definition of coherence —

allowing *rape* and *fetal disability* to be ordered either way — as our preferred measure in the analysis that follows.[11] The numbers are even higher if we exclude those who are missing some responses instead of classifying them as incoherent.

Overall, we show that most individuals appear to have coherent abortion policy preferences both within and across abortion reasons. In addition, in the Appendix we show that there are differences in coherence across subgroups that imply coherence is a marker of well-formed preferences (See Appendix Table A3.1, p. A-6). We show that correlates of holding meaningful policy preferences used in prior work (education, political interest, confidence, and importance) also predict coherence (although coherence is only 6 points lower among the least educated or least politically interested compared to those at the maximum for both measures). Additionally, we find that (1) attitudes can be reliably scaled to a single dimension (see appendix section "*Coherence*", p A-5) and (2) if we apply our across-reason approach to the binary GSS items we also find high levels of coherence (see appendix Table A3.2, p. A-8). Next, we turn to our second test of whether abortion policy attitudes are meaningful: stability.

Stability

We document high levels of stability in abortion policy preferences using both short- and long-term panel data. We measure stability in two ways. First, we examine whether respondents provide the exact same survey response when asked either about preferred timing

[11] We note that measurement error in survey response (or different value orderings) would cause us to code individuals as incoherent for a single mistake, which means observed rates of coherence are likely underestimates.

restrictions for different abortion reasons 8 weeks apart or using a more traditional ANES-style item asked 4-years apart. Second, we also report correlation coefficients for these measures, allowing us to assess whether deviations in stated preferences tend to be to more proximate options. For the timing restriction items, we also calculate a linear scale score of preferred timing restrictions across the 6 abortion reasons to reduce measurement error.[12]

Table 6 displays the proportion of respondents who provide the same survey response in both waves as well as the Polychoric correlation for each individual item and the correlation for the overall abortion policy scale.[13] If respondents were answering at random, we would expect 17% of respondents to give identical answers across the eight-week test (1 divided by the six potential preferred timings) and 25% of respondents to give identical answers for the four-year test (1 divided by the four preferred timings). We would also find no correlation across the two waves.

[12] To construct a consistent scale across waves, we use the Baseline responses of all respondents to generate factor scores and then apply those same scores to the February responses. The linear scale has a reliability coefficient of 0.92. The average change across panel waves in this measure is -.000009.

[13] We present polcychoric correlations because they are appropriate for categorical data. For the scale, polcychoric and regular correlation coefficients are equal. For all items, the difference between the baseline and February responses is centered near 0.

Table 6. Proportion of respondents with stable abortion attitudes

	Mom's life (8 weeks)	Rape/incest (8 weeks)	Fetal disability (8 weeks)	Money (8 weeks)	Mother's opportunities (8 weeks)	Sex selective (8 weeks)	Scale score (8 weeks)	Four-point ANES-style item (4 years)
Proportion giving identical response in both waves	0.554	0.527	0.531	0.589	0.624	0.656	N/A	0.688
Polychoric correlation across waves	0.756	0.756	0.769	0.800	0.811	0.773	0.812	0.781
N	5701	5701	5701	5701	5701	5701	5701	31743

Notes: Weighted Analysis. Table entries are the proportion of respondents with identical responses and polychoric correlations in responses across survey waves. The first 6 columns are preferred timing restrictions for specific abortion reasons, the 7th column is a scaled score for all 6 reasons, and the 8th column is for a 4-point ANES-style item.

Instead, we find high levels of stability: respondents give identical answers across waves between 53% and 69% of the time. These figures are much higher than if respondents were merely answering at random given the six potential response options. This standard likely understates stability because it treats any changes across waves as indicating unstructured preferences, when in fact deviations to adjacent options may reflect measurement error or indifference.

For this reason, we report in the second row of the table the polychoric correlations between responses (which punish larger deviations more). The correlations for individual items range between .76 to .81. These are large numbers, matching or exceeding the correlations in stable personality traits. In prior work, Big Five personality traits exhibited polychoric

correlations near 0.7, while traits such as right-wing authoritarianism and need for cognition have higher estimates, closer to 0.8 (Gerber et al 2011). Of 15 traits analyzed in prior work, only approval for Obama and Congress are more stable than abortion attitudes over a similar 8-week period (Gerber et al. 2011). Consistent with the role of random measurement error in reducing apparent instability, the overall correlation for the policy scale calculated from responses to the six timing questions is .81, exceeding the average of the individual items.[14] We note that the correlation coefficient is also very high over a much longer four-year period, .78, even for the less specific ANES-style item.

As with coherence, we also find that there are theoretically expected differences across subgroups that imply stability is a marker of well-formed preferences.[15] Stability in opinions over time is correlated with ideological coherence in the baseline measure of attitudes—a marker of well-formed opinions—as well as policy confidence and importance. Political interest, an important factor in psychological models of opinion, predicts stability, as does extremity (at least among those on the right). Moreover, we document that when individuals are unstable, there appears to be a systematic structure to their instability—deviations in most preferred timings are generally most common to an adjacent timing option, consistent with the notion of

[14] These high correlations are not simply an artifact of individuals who provide the same timing response for all items. Restricting our analysis to those who provide at least two different timing answers, the overall scale correlation is 0.79.

[15] See Appendix Figure A3.4 for full report of these results.

"coherence over time" proposed in Ottone et al. (2024). Thus, even instability appears to be structured in a meaningful way.

Overall, whether respondents are asked to provide detailed policy opinions about specific times at which they believe abortion should be legal for different reasons or in response to a more general item, respondents display high levels of stability in stated opinions. Next, we turn to our third and final test of whether abortion policy attitudes are meaningful: vote choice.

Vote Choice

We find that abortion attitudes appear to have a causal effect on vote choice by using panel data to demonstrate abortion attitudes predict intended vote switching between 2020 and 2024. If abortion attitudes predict vote switching, this implies voters use policy preferences to inform political behavior rather than simply following elite cues or using intended vote choice to inform policy preferences. This analysis uses both pre-*Dobbs* abortion attitudes and contemporary measures of these preferences. The former is exogenous (prior) to current vote choice, while the latter maps more directly into the post-*Dobbs* abortion policy space. Finally, this analysis also shows that, inconsistent with a strong elite-cuing prediction, pre-*Dobbs* abortion attitudes were not fully aligned with partisanship and vote choice.

We begin by using our historical data on pre-*Dobbs* partisanship (measured at various dates prior to the *Dobbs* decision) and reported 2020 vote choice (measured at the time of the 2020 election) to assess whether individuals held abortion policy preferences that were already aligned with their pre-existing partisan and candidate preferences. Among those who identified as Democrats prior to *Dobbs*, 7.6% held scaled abortion policy opinions that were in the 25%

most conservative part of the distribution of overall attitudes, while 7.6% of Republicans had opinions that were in the 25% most liberal part of the distribution (see Appendix Table A3.4 for complete distributions, p. A-11.) Similarly, 2.9% of Democrats expressed the most conservative abortion policy preference measured using the ANES-style item, while 6.1% of Republicans expressed the most liberal abortion policy preference. The distributions are similar for 2020 vote choice. This demonstrates that in 2020 there were sizeable minorities in each party who held abortion policy preferences that were at odds with their party's stance on abortion.

Next, we assess whether abortion attitudes predict changes in intended vote choice between 2020 and 2024. Our measure of reported 2020 vote choice was collected prior to the *Dobbs* decision. We begin with a simple tabular analysis, using our scaled score measure derived from preferred timings for the six reasons we asked about in December 2023 because it provides us with the largest analysis sample (See Appendix Table A3.5, p. A-12). Of the 25% most liberal abortion voters who report voting for Donald Trump in 2020, 77% reported intending to do so again in 2024. Among Joe Biden voters in 2020 with the most liberal attitudes, 93% intended to vote for him again. Among those with the most conservative abortion attitudes, Donald Trump retained 93% of his 2020 support while Joe Biden retained only 71% of his 2020 support.

To formally test whether abortion attitudes caused vote switching in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision (between 2020 and 2024), we turn to regression analysis. Our approach is to predict changes in voting using abortion attitudes while controlling for various other factors that might also explain changes in vote, including (pre-*Dobbs*) party identification, 2020 vote choice (to allow for average differences by prior candidate preference), demographic

characteristics[16], and 2020 policy positions on gun control, immigration, and healthcare[17]. Almost all control variables are included as sets of binary indicators, allowing for more flexible estimation. For abortion attitudes, we use both the four-point abortion policy measure from 2020 (pre-*Dobbs*) and our scaled measure from December 2023. The former was collected pre-treatment, while the latter was measured after *Roe* was overturned. Although the 2023 measure better reflects current policy debates, it was collected post-treatment which may raise concerns that changes in vote choice influenced reported attitudes rather than the other way around. Formally, the equation we estimate (omitting individual respondent subscripts) is:

$$\Delta VoteChoice_{(2020-2024)} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{2020 Vote Choice}) + \beta_2(\text{Demographics}) + \beta_3(\text{OtherPolicies}) + \beta_4(\text{AbortionAttitudes}) + \epsilon.$$

Vote choice for each election was coded categorically. A respondent received a score of 1 if they voted (or intended to vote) for Biden, a score of 2 for not voting or voting for a third-party candidate, and a score of 3 if they voted for Trump. The change in vote choice measure is the difference in this measure and ranges from -2 (voted for Trump in 2020 and intended to vote for Biden in 2024) to 2 (voted for Biden in 2020 and intended to vote for Trump in 2024).

[16] We control for: age (in decades), gender, education, race, marital status, income, employment, religiosity, religion, immigration status, political interest, and region. See appendix for specific coding details and complete specification (Appendix Table A3.6, p. A-13).

[17] We chose these policy items because they both are predictive of vote choice and were asked to sufficiently large numbers of people who were also asked the abortion policy item pre-*Dobbs*.

This model specification amounts to a heterogeneous effects event study model: all respondents are "treated" by the *Dobbs* decision, but the treatment effect varies according to their abortion attitudes (measured either before or after treatment). This specification will provide an unbiased estimate of the effect of abortion policy preferences on changes in vote choice if there are no omitted factors correlated with change in vote choice that are also correlated with underlying abortion attitudes. Additionally, it requires that any measurement error in reported vote choice not change from 2020 to 2024 in a way that is correlated with abortion attitudes. We note, however, that this estimate is unbiased even if prior vote choice also explains changes in abortion attitudes for some respondents (which we can model in the same way, see appendix Table A3.8, p. A-20).

Table 7 displays model estimates for a variety of different specifications. In columns (1)-(3) we use the pre-*Dobbs* abortion policy preference and in columns (4)-(6) we use the post-*Dobbs* abortion policy preference scale. The first three rows of the table indicate which factors we are controlling for in the model. In columns (1) and (4) we include only indicators for past vote choice and pre-*Dobbs* partisanship. In columns (2) and (5) we add the full vector of demographic covariates. Finally, in columns (3) and (6) we also include measures for the three other policy opinions, also measured prior to *Dobbs*. Full results for all models, including estimates for control variables, are presented in the appendix (p. A-13).

Table 7. Regressions predicting changes in vote choice from 2020 to 2024 using abortion attitudes

	Pre-*Dobbs* abortion policy preferences			Post-*Dobbs* abortion policy preferences scale		
Pre-*Dobbs* abortion policy prefs. (4 pt; +=consv.)	0.039 [0.003]**	0.035 [0.003]**	0.020 [0.004]**			
Abortion policy preferences scale (+=conservative, m=0, sd=.96)				0.058 [0.003]**	0.056 [0.003]**	0.035 [0.004]**
Constant	0.011 [0.005]*	0.029 [0.082]	0.012 [0.048]	0.114 [0.005]**	0.132 [0.084]	0.083 [0.048] †
Controls for 2020 vote choice (as indicators) and pre-*Dobbs* partisanship (as indicators)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls for demographics and other items (as indicators)		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Controls for 3 other pre-*Dobbs* issue positions, as indicators			Yes			Yes
Observations	50619	49327	21117	53678	52811	21157
R-squared	0.144	0.149	0.163	0.147	0.154	0.164

Robust standard errors in brackets. Weighted analysis.
†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01
Note: Outcome is change in vote choice, 2024 minus 2020 (+=toward Trump, -=toward Biden). For each vote choice measure, third party votes and abstentions are treated as a middle category. See text for details.

Across all models, conservative (liberal) abortion attitudes are associated with an increased probability of switching one's vote to the Republican (Democratic) candidate. To understand the coefficients in terms of changes in moving from one candidate to the other (rather than to or from not voting or supporting a third-party candidate), divide the regression coefficient by 2 (which represents the scaled distance it takes to move from supporting one party's candidate to the other).

Using the historical abortion preferences item, a one scale unit shift in the conservative direction increases the probability of switching one's vote away from Biden and towards Trump

by about 2 points (.04/2) in the column (1) specification and by 1 point (.02/2) in the most conservative (column 3) specification. The effects are slightly larger when we use the scale created from our preferred questions, which likely has lower measurement error, but is post-*Dobbs*. A one standard deviation increase in the scaled abortion conservatism score increases the probability of changing one's vote to Trump by between 2.8 (column 4, .96*.058/2) and 1.7 points (column 6, .96*.035/2). These effects are substantively important given that presidential elections are often decided by narrow margins, especially because the models predict *changes* in vote choice and incorporate a broad range of controls.

To better understand how (and for whom) abortion attitudes affect vote choice, we also interact abortion attitudes with measures of how important respondents see abortion and how confident they are about the abortion policy area (see Appendix Table 3.4). If abortion attitudes do meaningfully shape electoral decisions, this should be especially true of respondents who are confident about their ability to form opinions in the abortion policy space and view abortion as an important policy issue. Consistent with this, we find that the effect of abortion attitudes is larger for those who are more confident in their opinions and reported importance increases the association between abortion policy attitudes and changes in vote choice. Encouragingly, this helps reduce concerns about omitted variables bias in our core specification, because for these heterogenous effects to manifest, it would have to be that confidence (and importance) and abortion attitudes are both correlated with an omitted factor that also explains the direction of changes in vote choice. The effect of importance is less robust, however, when we use a pre-*Dobbs* measure of importance from 2014. It does not appear to alter the magnitude

of the relationship between abortion preferences and vote switching in the current context.[18] Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests abortion attitudes shape vote choice in the post-*Dobbs* political environment.

Conclusion

In this paper we examine Americans' abortion policy preferences to answer a broader question in the literature: do Americans hold meaningful policy preferences? Using novel large-scale panel data, we provide evidence that, in the case of abortion, Americans' policy preferences exhibit high levels of coherence and stability over time. Additionally, we show that post-*Dobbs*, which made it possible for elected officials to enact restrictions on abortion that had previously been legally enjoined, abortion attitudes predict changes in presidential vote choice between 2020 and 2024.

Contrary to prior work that has relied on smaller samples sizes, vague survey items, and analysis of attitudes across policy domains (i.e., testing for ideological constraint), we find that large proportions of Americans have meaningful policy preferences, even in a policy domain characterized by difficult and enduring value tradeoffs and where the current policy space (potentially different timing restrictions for different abortion reasons) is novel. Importantly, our analysis relies on relatively straightforward descriptive analysis of simple survey data, showing that intractable debates about whether public opinion is sufficiently well-formed to

[18] This could be because the group who finds abortion salient now is different than the group who found abortion salient in 2014, when *Roe* guaranteed a national floor.

support democratic governance may not be a problem of technical method of data analysis, but instead of informative data collection and simple analysis.

It is notable that to conduct some of these tests, we require different data collection strategies and survey instrumentation than is used in most prior work. For one, we rely on panel data to assess stability over time and to understand whether pre-existing policy preferences explain vote choice. While panel data are not uncommon, it is rare to have panel that brackets a pivotal event—in this case, a Supreme Court decision—that makes pre-existing policy preferences newly salient for electoral vote choice. These sorts of shocks are necessary for creating circumstances in which existing preferences shaping vote choice can be plausibly distinguished from partisanship and other commitments in explaining policy views.

Additionally, our survey data is unusual for two reasons. First, we have access to an unusually large sample size with a large number of covariates. This allows us to precisely estimate even small treatment effects (that might be of interest in the context of vote choice) and rule out certain alternative theoretical accounts for the patterns we discover. We also have detailed and specific abortion policy questions. Importantly, instead of asking about abortion in general terms (i.e., do you think abortion should always, sometimes or never be allowed) we ask respondents about specific abortion policy scenarios that correspond with the post-*Roe* policy space and also ask respondents to provide comparative assessments of different policy options. This dataset enables us to assess whether abortion policy preferences are logically coherent.

We note that our paper focuses only on a single policy domain—abortion. On the one hand, abortion may represent a policy area in which Americans' opinions are particularly well-

developed, given its longstanding prominence on the political agenda and the clearly articulated, if abstract, positions of the two leading political parties (e.g., “pro-choice” or “pro-life.”). On the other hand, in the post-*Dobbs* legal environment, the complexity of the policy space has become far more apparent. Policymakers and voters must now navigate distinct timing restrictions conditional upon specific reasons for abortions, yet parties and candidates have provided limited clarity regarding these intricate policy details. Additionally, because abortion policy involves important value conflicts, many individuals may struggle in choosing their preferred timing restrictions when negotiating the value conflict between women’s bodily autonomy and the potential life of a fetus (Norrander and Wilcox, 2023). These tensions could contribute to both instability and potential incoherence in expressed policy preferences.

In our survey, respondents exhibit unusually high confidence in their abortion attitudes, although they do not rank it as unusually important. If this heightened confidence reflects the meaningfulness of attitudes, the most comparable issues appear to be health care and racial justice. Prior research (e.g., Campbell et al. 2018) suggests LGBTQ+ rights would likely follow a similar pattern, though our data do not allow us to directly assess this inference.

To examine the generalizability of our findings, future research should extend our approach to additional policy domains. Doing so requires developing survey items explicitly designed to evaluate the logical coherence of attitudes within each domain— a challenge given that traditional survey items are not always interpretable as policy preferences and do not always provide direct comparisons between policy options (Ottone et al. 2024). Such detailed measures are essential for evaluating the meaningfulness of preferences within a specific policy domain (rather than drawing comparisons across different issues). Furthermore, external

events that sharply elevate the electoral relevance of pre-existing policy opinions are rare, making such moments uniquely valuable for distinguishing among competing theoretical perspectives.

These caveats aside, by deeply investigating public opinion in a specific policy domain, we provide newfound evidence that helps resolve longstanding debates about the nature of mass opinion. Our findings demonstrate that Americans hold meaningful policy preferences and actively use them to inform their political behavior. We hope these findings and our approach will guide and inform subsequent research.

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