Power and Accountability: Unilateral Action and Vote Choice in Presidential Elections [*]

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Abstract

The theory of presidential representation makes assumptions about presidents' fitness to represent the views of the nation and the capacity of voters to hold them to account. I study the latter part of this theory and examine whether constituents hold presidents electorally accountable for the policies they create through executive power. Using data for more than 50,000 Americans in the 2020 Cooperative Election Study, I show that individuals who supported larger shares of the president's executive actions were more likely to support and report voting for President Trump. These patterns were especially strong among political Independents and individuals who made voting decisions earlier in the campaign. Additional evidence suggests that the president's unilateral directives informed individuals' beliefs about their ideological congruence with the president. These findings provide support for theories of issue-based representation and suggest that the American public holds presidents accountable for the policies they create through unilateral power.

The powers of the contemporary presidency owe much to the theory of presidential representation. According to this idea, because presidents are the only officials selected by the entire nation, they are best positioned to represent national public opinion and pursue the national interest.[1] Another layer of this idea draws from the notion of the electoral connection, elaborated by Mayhew (1974) in the context of congressional representatives, and posits that presidents face electoral consequences for taking actions that the public opposes. This accountability mechanism enables individual voters to evaluate about the incumbent president and provides incentives for presidents to be judicious in how they use their institutional prerogatives. Thus, the theory of presidential representation characterizes the presidency as a key contributor to the quality of representative democracy in the United States.

In this paper, I evaluate whether constituents evaluate presidential behavior in the way assumed by the theory of presidential representation. I focus particularly on whether constituents hold presidents electorally accountable for the policies they create through executive power. Presidential accountability is an important component of scholarship on the acquisition and use of executive power. Recent theoretical models that evaluate when presidents issue unilateral directives posit that presidents consider the potential electoral consequences of their actions and avoid issuing directives that would threaten their popular standing (Judd 2017; Kang 2020; Noble Forthcoming). This work relies on maintained hypotheses about how voters evaluate and respond to presidential unilateralism. Some empirical research documents public disapproval of unilateral power and presidents who use it (Reeves and Rogowski 2022), which may explain why presidents appear to strategically time the issuance of unilateral directives so as to avoid public scrutiny (Djourelova and Durante Forthcoming). Yet it is less clear whether the public holds presidents accountable at the ballot box for the policies they create through unilateral power. This omission is especially surprising given the extensive literature on presidential accountabil-

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[1]For an detailed treatment of the origins and consequences of the concept of presidential representation, see Dearborn (2021).

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ity for policy outcomes that are less directly under their control, such as economic conditions and wartime casualties (see, e.g., Ang et al. 2022; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020; Karol and Miguel 2007).

Existing perspectives provide competing expectations about how constituents may respond to presidential unilateralism. Some research indicates that individuals evaluate presidential candidates (Jessee 2012) and specific unilateral directives (Christenson and Kriner 2017) on the basis of ideological or issue congruence, and other scholarship finds a link between evaluations of unilateral directives and presidential approval ratings (Ansolabehere and Rogowski 2020). This research suggests the potential for electoral accountability in the context of unilateral action. Recent experimental research, however, finds little evidence that the public responds to, or is capable of holding presidents accountable for, unilateral action (Goehring and Lowande 2022). These findings are consistent with claims about the imperial presidency, which expresses a pessimistic view about the potential for presidents to be sanctioned for their behavior (Schlesinger 1973). Curtailing the potential for abuses of executive power is a perennial concern in presidential systems (Carlin and Singh 2015; Schedler, Diamond, and Plattner 1999; Waldner and Lust 2018), and distinguishing between these perspectives has important implications for understanding the potential constraints imposed by the mass public on elected executives.

I examine accountability for unilateral action in the context of the 2020 presidential election. Using data for more than 50,000 Americans in the Cooperative Election Study, I study how respondents evaluated executive actions issued by the Trump administration and used those evaluations in deciding whether to support Trump's re-election bid. Overall, I report evidence that the public evaluates presidents in ways assumed by theories of representation and accountability. The public has preferences over the substantive policies created through unilateral action and uses their evaluations of these actions in their voting decisions. Individuals who supported larger shares of the president's executive actions were more likely to support and report voting for President Trump. These findings are especially strong among political Independents and individuals

who made voting decisions earlier in the campaign. Additional analyses suggest that these relationships operate through shaping individuals' perceptions of their ideological congruence with the president. These findings provide support for classic theories of issue-based representation and suggest that the American public holds presidents accountable for the policies they create through unilateral power.

Accountability and the Presidency

Theories of electoral accountability turn on the capacity of voters to sanction and reward officeholders on the basis of their behavior (see, e.g., Ashworth 2012; Fearon 1999). As agents of voters, incumbents seek to remain in office and have incentives to behave in ways that achieve that goal. As principals, voters choose whether to re-elect the incumbent or support the challenger on the basis of which candidate they would prefer to make and implement policy on their behalf. In representative democracy, this agency relationship between voters and officeholders provides citizens with a mechanism for influencing government outcomes.

Concerns about accountability motivated the design of the institution of the presidency and its development. In *Federalist* #68, Hamilton writes that the President "should be independent for his continuance in office on all but the people themselves" (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2008, 335). Hamilton further justified the unitary executive on the basis that "the plurality of the Executive tends to deprive the people of...the restraints of public opinion" (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2008, 348). In the twentieth century, Congress routinely justified the creation and expansion of the institutional presidency because "the president appears directly accountable to the entire citizenry, the unique steward of the national interest" (Dearborn 2021, 2).

An extensive literature in the US and other presidential systems investigates presidential accountability for policy outcomes. Much of this work focuses on economic performance and the electoral performance of the incumbent president (Carlin and Singh 2015; de Benedictis-Kessner

and Warshaw 2020; Erikson 1989; Hellwig and Samuels 2008; Markus 1988; Samuels 2004) and reports a positive correlation. Other work shows that presidents are held accountable for wartime performance, as mounting casualties are associated with electoral penalties (Hill, Herron, and Lewis 2010; Karol and Miguel 2007). Presidents are also held accountable for the distribution of federal resources, including federal assistance following natural disasters (Gasper and Reeves 2011; Velez and Martin 2013).

Does the public hold presidents electorally accountable for the policies they create through unilateral action? Few studies investigate constituent responses to specific presidential policies or unilateral directives (though see Ansolabehere and Rogowski 2020; Christenson and Kriner 2017). This is especially surprising given the clear attribution of unilateral directives to the presidents who issued them, which would seem to provide the conditions under which electoral accountability is most likely to operate.

Constituent Evaluations of Unilateral Action

In the context of unilateral action, the idealized model posits that two conditions must be satisfied for the accountability relationship to exist. First, individuals must have preferences over the president's policy decisions. Second, individuals must apply these evaluations when deciding whether to support the incumbent president or to vote for their challenger. Evidence in support of these two conditions satisfies the requirements of presidential accountability.

Do voters meet these requirements? Recent theoretical models of executive power adopt the framework of electoral accountability and assume an affirmative answer. For example, Noble (Forthcoming) analyzes a scenario in which unilateral directives inform voters about whether the president shares their policy views, with voters preferring presidents who implement policies that are congruent with public opinion. This model suggests that unilateral power can improve democratic performance by providing incentives for presidents to enact policies that the public

favors that otherwise would not be implemented due to legislative gridlock. Similarly, Kang (2020) studies unilateral action as a tool of voter mobilization, where presidents are more likely to issue a directive when it will mobilize more supporters on their behalf than it will mobilize their opponents against them. The idea that the public holds presidents accountable for their use of unilateral power plays an important role in these models and the insights they produce.[2]

Yet previous scholarship offers conflicting perspectives about whether the public is likely to behave in ways assumed by these models. One perspective emphasizes limits on voter knowledge, attention, and political cognition. On this view, the public generally lacks sufficient policy knowledge to evaluate specific actions taken by the president (Converse 1964; Miller and Stokes 1963).[3] Instead, presidential evaluations and voting decisions may reflect cues that are more accessible, such as party identification (e.g., Broockman and Butler 2017; Donovan et al. 2020; Jessee 2012). This perspective is also found in scholarly critiques of unilateral power. As Mayer (2001, 9) characterizes this view, a unilateral directive is "unaccountable power and a way of evading both public opinion and constitutional constraints." This perspective expresses a dim view about about the capacity of voters to evaluate presidents on the basis of their executive actions and their ability to induce policy-based representation from a president's unilateral directives.

But other scholarship reaches more sanguine conclusions about voters' ability to sanction presidents on the basis of their unilateral directives. Studies of congressional accountability show that individual constituents provide greater support for legislators who share their policy views (e.g., Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022; Kaslovsky and Rogowski 2022). To the extent that a president's directives are at least as visible to voters as the actions of their congressional represen-

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[2]Two other related models merit comment. Judd (2017) analyzes a president's choice to use unilateral power based on electoral considerations, but through its effects on voters' beliefs about the president's competence rather than policy congruence. Howell and Wolton (2018) study a president's acquisition of authority, which voters evaluate based on their expectations about how the executive will use power to produce future policy actions. These models are related to those discussed above in the sense that they posit a relationship between public opinion and a president's exercise of unilateral power, albeit through somewhat different mechanisms.

[3]Consistent with this perspective, Goehring and Lowande (2022) show that the vast majority of unilateral directives receive no media coverage, and thus most voters are unlikely to be aware of them.

tatives, the findings from this research may apply similarly to public evaluations of unilateral action. In the context of the presidency, previous work has found that voters tend to support presidential candidates with whom they agree on more of the issues (Jessee 2012), that individuals are more supportive of unilateral actions that align with their policy preferences (Christenson and Kriner 2017; Lowande and Rogowski 2021), and that voters' assessments of unilateral directives are associated with their approval of the president (Ansolabehere and Rogowski 2020).[4] Collectively, this body of scholarship suggests that voters have the capacity to relate a president's actions to their own issue preferences and evaluate presidents accordingly. Moreover, research on presidents' behavior suggest that presidents themselves perceive incentives to respond to public opinion (Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2004).[5]

I distinguish these competing accounts by examining whether voters hold presidents electorally accountable for their unilateral actions. Specifically, I test the hypothesis that individuals' substantive agreement with the policies created by the president through executive action is associated with their voting decisions in a presidential election. The results of this analysis have key implications for positive theories of the presidency and normative theories of representative democracy. Evidence of electoral accountability in this context would suggest that presidents have incentives to anticipate the public response to a unilateral directive and may refrain from issuing directives that would harm their future electoral prospects. It would also be consistent with the conclusions from Noble (Forthcoming), in which unilateral action improves democratic performance by enabling executives to be responsive to public opinion when legislatures are not. The absence of electoral accountability, on the other hand, would indicate that presidents have little incentive to hew to public opinion when issuing unilateral directives and may suggest that the mass public is unlikely to be be a meaningful constraint on executive power.

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[4]Some research also indicates that the public evaluates presidents based on how policy outcomes are achieved (Reeves and Rogowski 2018).

[5]Presidents may be more responsive to some constituencies than others (Kriner and Reeves 2015; Wood 2009); however, this fact can still be consistent with the presidential accountability framework so long as voters use their evaluations of presidential performance to inform their voting decisions.

Data and Measures

I evaluate presidential accountability in the context of unilateral action using data from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) (Schaffner, Ansolabehere, and Luks 2021).[6] The CES was conducted in two waves. The pre-election wave was administered from September 29 to November 2 and the post-election wave administered from November 8 to December 14. The survey was conducted over the internet by YouGov and included nearly 61,000 completed interviews. The sample was constructed in a way that was designed to be representative of the national population.[7]

The design is similar to research on constituent evaluations of congressional representatives (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022; Kaslovsky and Rogowski 2022). In each wave of the CES, respondents evaluated five actions taken by the Trump administration. Most of these items were issued as executive orders or some other directive. These actions included the most prominent actions taken by the Trump administration in 2019 and 2020 and implicated a range of issue areas, including welfare, environmental policy, immigration, trade, and foreign affairs.[8] The full text of the questions is shown in Appendix A.1.[9]

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[6]Study website is available at https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/.

[7]As I discuss below, the analyses are conducted with two similar but distinct samples of the population. In the first analysis, I study pre-election candidate preference among respondents who expressed a preference for either Trump or Biden. These analyses are weighted to characteristics of the US adult population using the commonweight variable in the 2020 CES. In the second analysis, I study vote choice and focus on individuals with a validated record of turnout. These analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the vvweight_post variable. Unless noted otherwise, all analyses that are based exclusively on pre-election data are weighted using commonweight, and all others are weighted using vvweight_post.

[8]While these items represent the highest profile actions taken by the Trump administration, they do not exhaust the full set of directives. However, if presidents are not held accountable for their most prominent actions, then it seems unlikely that such a relationship would exist for less prominent actions.

[9]In the survey, respondents were informed that the Trump administration had taken these actions and asked whether they approved of each. Thus, all respondents were aware of the administration's actions and could attribute the relevant policy outcomes to the President's behavior (though it is possible that some respondents may not have not known about the administration's actions prior to completing the survey).

Evaluations of Presidential Actions

Figure 1 shows evaluations of the ten presidential actions. The left plot shows aggregate support for each action in percentage points, sorted in order of support. The plot shows substantial variation in support for these executive actions. The Trump administration's December 2019 rule to increase work requirements for food stamp eligibility among able-bodied adults without dependents (which was subsequently enjoined and never went into effect) was the most popular of the executive actions included on the survey, with support from about 65 percent of respondents. In contrast, the administration's ban on military service by transgender people, which went into effect in April 2019 before being reversed by President Biden upon taking office, was the least popular action on the survey with 36 percent support.

The right plot shows variation in support by respondents' partisanship.[10] Predictably, Republicans approved of each action at higher rates than Independents and Democrats. Yet there is also substantial variation within party. Republicans were most supportive of withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal (88 percent support) and least supportive of repealing the Clean Power Plant rules (62 percent). Among Democrats, support ranged from 7 percentage points for constructing the border wall with Mexico to 47 percentage points for instituting work requirements for certain food stamp recipients. Partisans also disagreed about the ten items at varying levels. The largest partisan difference was for the border wall (difference of 73 percentage points), which was about twice as large as the smallest difference for repealing the Clean Power Plant rules (37 percentage points). Finally, support among Independents closely tracked the aggregate level of support, as Independents were most supportive of the food stamp requirements (67 percent) and least supportive of the ban on military service for transgender people (36 percent).

The data shown in Figure 1 provide support for two conclusions. First, the American public does not provide carte blanche support for (or opposition to) a president's executive actions.

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[10]Partisanship is based upon the three-point party identification measure in which leaners are classified as Independents.

Figure 1: Approval of Trump Executive Actions
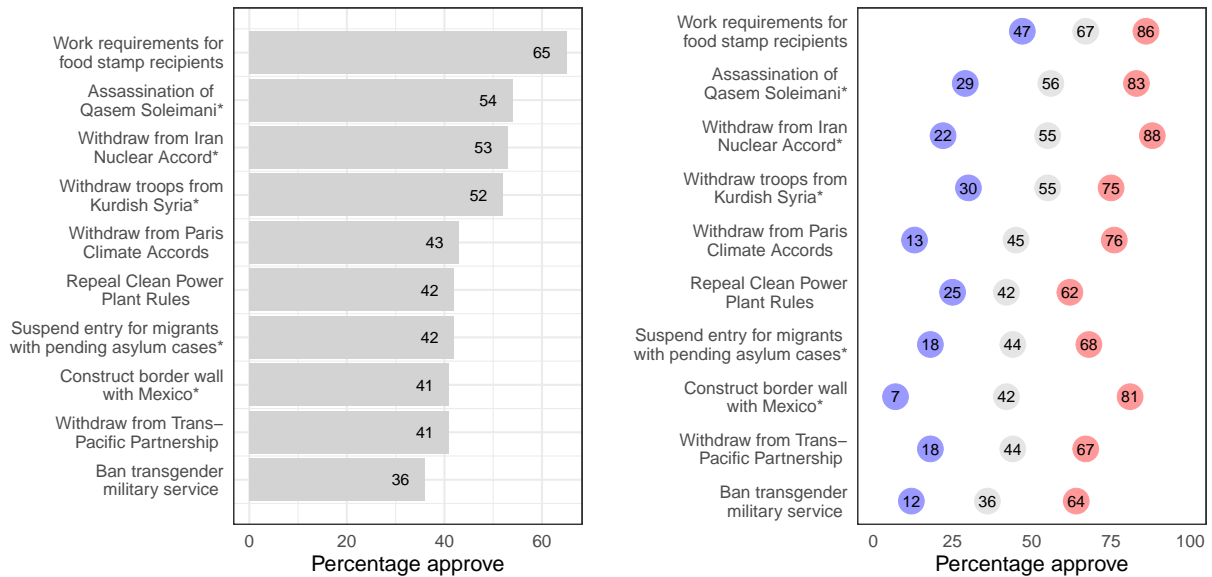
Note: The bars in the left plot shows aggregate levels of support for each executive action taken by the Trump administration. The dots in the right plot show support for each action by political party, where blue dots indicate Democratic respondents, red dots indicate Republican respondents, and gray dots indicate Independents. Data are from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. * indicates question appeared on the post-election wave; other questions appeared on the pre-election wave. The pre-election wave is weighted to the characteristics of the adult population and the post-election wave is weighted to the characteristics of the voting population.

Directives issued by the same president within a relatively short period of time receive varying levels of support based on the public's agreement with the policies contained in them. Second, while partisans provide different evaluations of a given directive, there is substantial variation within parties in evaluations of the directives issued by the same president. Overall, partisans do not appear to set aside their policy views when evaluating the actions taken by a sitting president, suggesting the capacity of the American public to hold presidents accountable for the policies they create via executive action.

Independent Variables

Using the items in Figure 1, I construct aggregate measures of respondents' support for President Trump's executive actions. My approach is similar to other scholarship that investigates accountability between legislators and constituents using similar data (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010; Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022; Kaslovsky and Rogowski 2022). I study the public's response to executive action by measuring each respondents' level of agreement with the policies created by the Trump administration. This variable, *Policy agreement* takes two forms. The first is constructed on the basis of the five executive actions on which respondents were queried in the pre-election wave. The second is constructed using all ten executive actions that appear in the pre- and post-election waves. For each measure, I calculated the share of executive actions that a respondent supported, so both measures range from zero (disapprove of all) to one (approve of all). As I describe below, I use the two measures in conjunction with distinct dependent variables; however, as I also discuss, none of the measurement choices affect the substantive inferences.

The distribution of values for both versions of *Policy agreement* are shown in Figure 2. The left plot shows the distribution of agreement among respondents on the pre-election wave, who were asked about five Trump executive actions. Though respondents tended to oppose more measures than they supported, the distribution of individual-level support for these policies is relatively uniform. About 21 percent opposed all five and another 21 percent supported one of the five. About 16 percent supported all five, while between 12 and 15 percent of respondents supported either two, three, or four actions. The mean value of *Policy agreement* is 0.46.

The right plot shows the distribution of agreement among voters who were in both waves and were asked about ten Trump executive actions in total. Here, the distribution is somewhat more polarized. About 28 percent of respondents supported either zero or one presidential action, and about 22 percent supported either nine or all ten actions. Thus, about half of the sample provided consistently strong support for or opposition to President Trump's accomplishments via executive action. The other half supported a more moderate share of executive actions, with

17 percent supporting either four, five, or six of the ten actions. Using evaluations of all ten actions, the mean value of *Policy agreement* is 0.47.

Figure 2: Distribution of Individual-Level Support for Trump Executive Actions
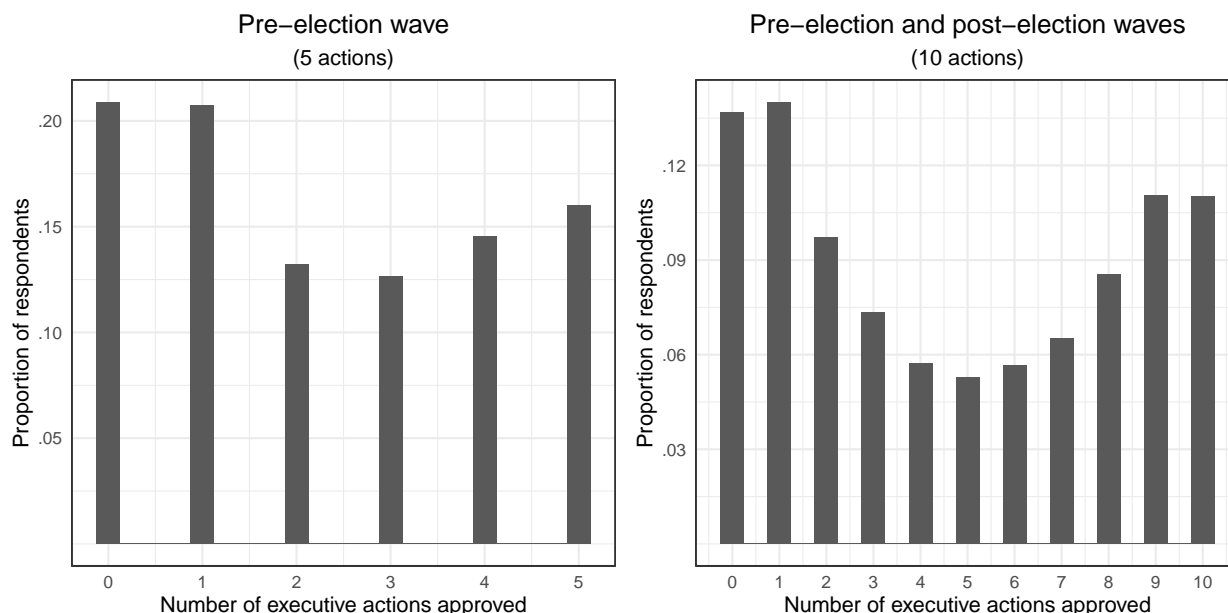
Note: Bars show the proportions of respondents who agreed with the number of Trump executive actions shown along the *x*-axis. The plot on the left shows the distribution of agreement among respondents on the pre-election wave, who were asked about five Trump executive actions. The plot on the right shows the distribution of agreement among voters who were in both the pre- and post-election waves and were asked about ten Trump executive actions in total.

Dependent Variables

I conduct two complementary analyses of presidential accountability using CES data. The first analysis investigates the relationship between evaluations of executive action and candidate preference and is based on responses to the pre-election wave of the CES. The dependent variable is a binary indicator for whether a respondent reported a pre-election preference for President Trump rather than his challenger, Joe Biden.[11] Altogether, 48 percent of respondents reported a

[11]The question wording was: "Which candidate for President of the United States do you prefer?" (CC20_364b). Respondents were omitted if they reported that they preferred some other candidate, were not going to vote, or were

preference for Trump on the pre-election wave according to this measure. I use this indicator of candidate choice to study its relationship with the five-item measure of *Policy agreement.*

The second analysis examines candidate choice and focuses on CES respondents with a validated turnout record in the 2020 election. While it is not possible to confirm for whom individual respondents voted, I can study the presence of electoral accountability with particular precision by studying reported candidate choice among validated voters. The dependent variable in this analysis was measured in the post-election wave. Respondents were included if they participated in both CES waves and had a validated record of voting in 2020.[12] About 48 percent of validated voters reported voting for Trump. I study the relationship between vote choice and the ten-item measure of *Policy agreement.*[13]

Model Specification

Given the binary nature of the dependent variables, I use logistic regression to regress the measures of candidate preference and vote choice on *Policy agreement.*[14] I also estimate models that account for a number of other factors that could also affect evaluations of the president. I account for a range of demographic factors, including racial group, Hispanic ethnicity, family

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not sure. At the time of taking the survey, some respondents reported that they had already voted and were asked for whom they voted rather than whom they preferred. Responses to the vote choice indicator (CC20_364a) thus are used for this group of respondents.

[12]Validated turnout was characterized using the $\mathtt{CL\_2020gvm}$ variable.

[13]The use of the five-item measure of *Policy agreement* to predict candidate preference and the ten-item measure to predict vote choice does not affect the substantive inferences. I estimated the models shown in Table 1 but used the ten-item measure of *Policy agreement* to predict candidate preference; I also used the five-item measure of *Policy agreement* to predict vote choice. These results, shown in Appendix A.2, continue to show that *Policy agreement* is significantly associated with candidate preference and vote choice.

[14]This model specification assumes that the probability of supporting Trump is linearly increasing in the values of *Policy agreement.* I estimated models to relax this assumption about functional form and included *Policy agreement* as a factor variable with six (for candidate preference) and eleven (for vote choice) distinct values. Figure A.2 shows the predicted probability of Trump support for each of these values of *Policy agreement*, and the results are very similar to those reported in the main text. Additionally, Table A.2 shows results when estimating the association between Trump support and evaluations of each individual executive action. Though the coefficients vary in magnitude, they are all positive and statistically significant, indicating that individuals who agreed with Trump's specific executive actions were more likely to support him in the 2020 presidential election.

income, gender, educational attainment, and age.[15] I also include controls for *Partisanship* and *Ideology*. *Partisanship* measures respondents' partisanship along a seven-point scale, ranging from "Strong Democrat" (1) to "Strong Republican" (7), and I include separate indicators for each category. *Ideology* is based on respondents' self-placements on an ideological scale that ranges from "Very liberal" (1) to "Very conservative" (5), and I include separate indicators for each response option.

I weight analyses to characteristics of the relevant target populations. Analyses using the candidate preference dependent variable are weighted to the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable in the 2020 CES. This allows me to study how evaluations of presidential actions are associated with preferences over the 2020 presidential candidates among the national population. When using the vote choice dependent variable, I weight the analyses to the characteristics of the voting population using the `vvweight_post` variable in the CES. This allows me to examine how evaluations of executive actions are associated with candidate choice among the national population of voters.

Results

Table 1 shows the results.[16] Columns 1-3 show the relationship between *Policy agreement* and candidate preference while columns 4-6 show the relationship between *Policy agreement* and vote choice. For each dependent variable, the first model is a bivariate regression. The second model adds controls for the demographic characteristics described above. The third model adds

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[15]Racial group is measured using responses to the variable `race`, which takes one of eight values (white, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Middle Eastern, two or more races, and other). Hispanic ethnicity is measured with the `hispanic` variable, which is a binary indicator for whether respondents reported Hispanic origin. (I also note that some respondents who did not choose "Hispanic" as their racial group identity did indicate being of Hispanic origin.) Income is measured using `faminc_new` and has seventeen categories. Gender is measured with a binary indicator for respondents' gender identity. Education is based on `educ` and has six categories. All of these variables are included as factor variables with separate indicators for each response option, which avoids making assumptions about functional form. Finally, age is included as a continuous variable.

[16]Tables in the main text omit estimates for controls. See Appendix A.3 for coefficient estimates for all covariates.

controls for respondent partisanship and ideological self-placement.

The results are consistent across dependent variables and model specifications. In each, *Issue agreement* is positive and statistically significant, indicating that respondents who provided more positive evaluations of the President's executive actions were more likely to report supporting President Trump's re-election bid. Even when accounting for respondents' partisanship and ideology, which are likely to affect both respondents' views of Trump's executive actions and their voting decisions, the results show that the public's evaluations of presidential actions are strongly associated with electoral decision making.

Table 1: Evaluations of Presidential Actions and Candidate Choice in the 2020 Election

	Dependent variable:					
	Pre-election preference (all respondents)			Vote choice (validated voters)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Policy agreement	5.663*	6.142*	3.876*	9.622*	10.221*	7.603*
	(0.045)	(0.053)	(0.072)	(0.100)	(0.115)	(0.149)
Demographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Partisanship			✓			✓
Ideology			✓			✓
Observations	51,667	51,667	51,667	33,687	33,687	33,687

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had voted for Trump rather than Biden. Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income) and self-reported partisanship (seven-point) and ideology (five-point) are included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

Figure 3 displays the relationships documented in Table 1. Based on the full model specifications for each dependent variable (columns 3 and 6), the figure shows the predicted probability that an individual reported a pre-election preference for Trump (left plot) or reported voting for

him (right plot) across the range of values of *Policy agreement.* The predicted probabilities were estimated while holding constant the values of the other independent varibles.[17] The jittered dots at zero and one along the *y*-axis show the number of respondents with each value of *Policy agreement* opposed and supported, respectively, Trump according to each dependent variable.

The left plot shows that respondents were more likely to report preferring Trump over Biden as they agreed with a larger share of his executive actions. For example, holding constant all the other covariates in the model, the predicted probability of preferring Trump increases from .64 to .80 a respondent agreed with three of his executive actions rather than two (corresponding to a values of 0.6 and 0.4,respectively, along the *x*-axis, or about two-thirds of a standard deviation of *Policy agreement*).

Similarly, the right plot in Figure 3 shows that the probability of voting for Trump increases steeply as respondents agreed with larger shares of his executive action.[18] The curve is consistent with what Jessee (2012, 85) characterized as unbiased spatial voting. That is, the difference in the probability of voting for Trump increased from nearly zero to nearly one (.03 to .98) on the basis of opposing versus supporting all ten of Trump's actions. Moreover, a respondent who supported exactly half (five) of Trump's executive actions is predicted to have been nearly indifferent between voting for Trump or Biden (predicted probability of .53). To draw a clearer comparison with the left plot, the predicted probability of voting for Trump increases from .35 to .71 as a respondent supported six rather than four of his ten actions (here, also approximately two-thirds of a standard deviation in *Policy agreement*).

The results shown in Table 1 and Figure 3 provide evidence of presidential accountability. In the context of the 2020 election, Americans connected their evaluations of President Trump's executive actions to their voting preferences. Individuals who supported a larger share of the president's important actions were more likely to report supporting the incumbent president.

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[17]I used the median values of age, partisanship, and ideology, and the modal values for all other variables.

[18]The smoother curve is likely a result of the increased precision in the measure of *Policy agreement*, which here is calculated with ten items rather than with five items as in the left plot.

Figure 3: Policy Agreement and Trump Electoral Support
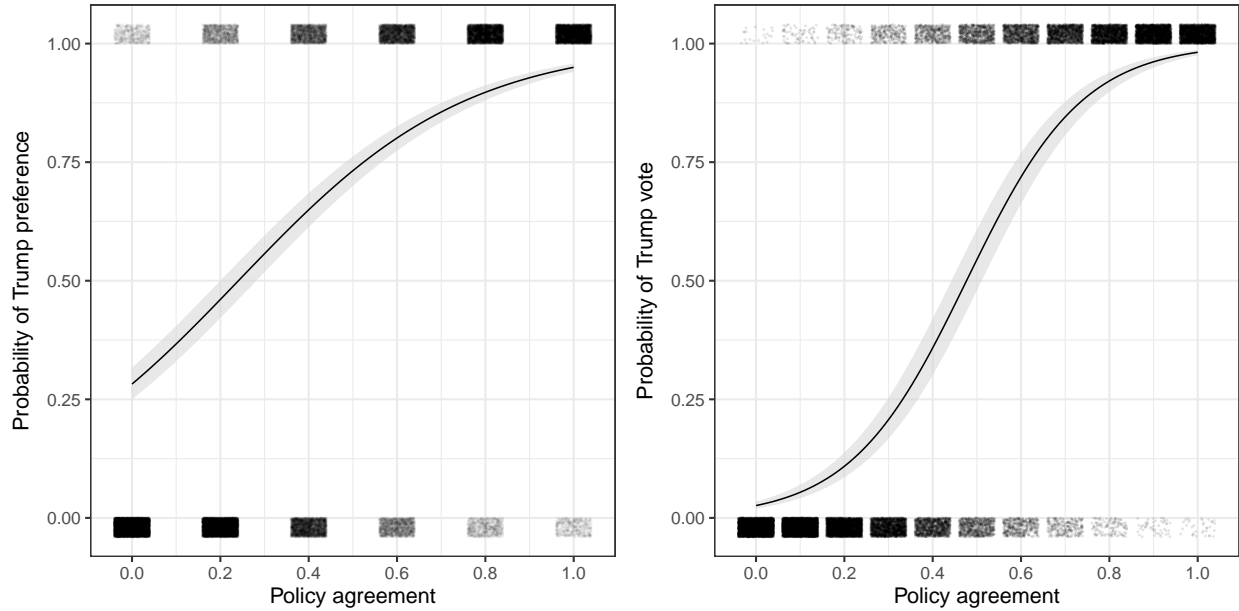
Note: Plots show the predicted probability of reporting a pre-election preference for Trump (left plot) and reporting casting a vote for Trump (right plot) across the range of values of *Policy agreement*. Predicted probabilities are based on the models shown in columns 3 and 6 of Table 1 while holding all other covariates constant at their median or modal values. Solid black lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded gray regions are the 95 percent confidence intervals. Jittered dots show the distribution of respondents with each value of *Policy agreement* who supported (*y*=1) or opposed (*y*=0) Trump.

Are these results causal? That is, did CES respondents cast votes for or against President Trump on the basis of their agreement with the policies he pursued via executive action? There are two ways to consider this question. We could ask whether individuals' candidate preferences and vote choices would have differed if Trump had not issued the ten actions included in the CES, or if their choices would have been different if they agreed with a larger (or smaller) share of his actions. While the cross-sectional results do indicate that individuals made different voting decisions on the basis of *Policy agreement* while holding constant the covariates in the regression models, the cross-sectional design has less leverage for studying these potential counterfactuals at the level of individuals.

As an alternative, I use the approach proposed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) to examine

whether omitted variable bias could alter the relationship between *Policy agreement* and the dependent variables. The intuition behind this approach is to identify how strong a potential confounder would need to be such that the effect of *Policy agreement* would attentuate to zero.[19] The results of these analyses are in Appendix A.4 and suggest that any potential confounders would have to be at least 1.5 times as strong as partisanship to explain away the results of *Policy agreement* in the fully-specified regressions from Table 1. It is difficult to think of such a covariate given the theoretical and empirical power of partisanship. Thus, the results of the sensitivity analysis are consistent with a causal interpretation of the relationship between respondents' evaluations of Trump's executive actions and their voting decisions in the 2020 presidential election.

Accountability, Partisanship, and Presidential Approval

I now examine how issue accountability operates in the context of respondents' partisan affiliations. The results shown above characterize the average relationship between respondents' evaluations of Trump's executive actions and their voting decisions in the 2020 election. However, it is not clear whether issue accountability operates similarly across partisan groups.

I evaluated potential variation in issue accountability based on respondents' partisan identities using the model specifications from columns 3 and 6 in Table 1. For each dependent variable, I estimated separate models for respondents who identified as Republicans, Democrats, and Independents.[20] Using these models, I generated the predicted probability of a preference or a vote for President Trump across the range of values of *Policy agreement* while holding the other covariates constant at their mean or median values for each partisan group.[21]

Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities. The top row shows the probability of reporting a pre-election preference for Trump. The figures show substantial variation by partisanship in the

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[19]Note that this does not require that there is *no* potential confounding from omitted variables, only that the confounding is sufficient to shrink the relevant coefficient to zero.

[20]Leaners are classified as Independents.

[21]Regression results are shown in Table A.7.

relationship between *Policy agreement* and candidate preference. As one would expect, Republicans were more likely to report a preference for Trump compared to Democrats and Independents. The figure also shows that the relationship between *Policy agreement* and candidate preference is positive for each group. However, Republicans and Democrats both were less responsive to *Policy agreement* than Independents. Among Republicans, an increase in *Policy agreement* from 0.40 to 0.60 (in other words, the difference between supporting two and three of the five executive actions) increased the probability of preferring Trump by two percentage points, from .96 to .98. Among Democrats, the same change in *Policy agreement* increased the probability of preferring Trump from .03 to .07. Among Independents, however, the difference between supporting two and three of the five actions increased the probability of preferring Trump by a substantially larger amount, from .37 to .66.

The bottom row shows the probability of reporting a vote for Trump and displays a similar pattern. While *Policy agreement* is significantly associated with vote choice for each partisan group, Independents are considerably more responsive than partisans to variation in its value. Among Republicans, an increase in *Policy agreement* from 0.40 to 0.60 (from four to six of the ten items) is associated with an increase from .92 to .99 in the probability of voting for Trump. The same increase in *Policy agreement* changes the probability of a Trump vote from .02 to .07 among Democrats. Among Independents, however, the probability of voting for Trump increased from .25 to .71 as *Policy agreement* changed from 0.40 to 0.60.

Figure 4: Policy Agreement and Trump Electoral Support
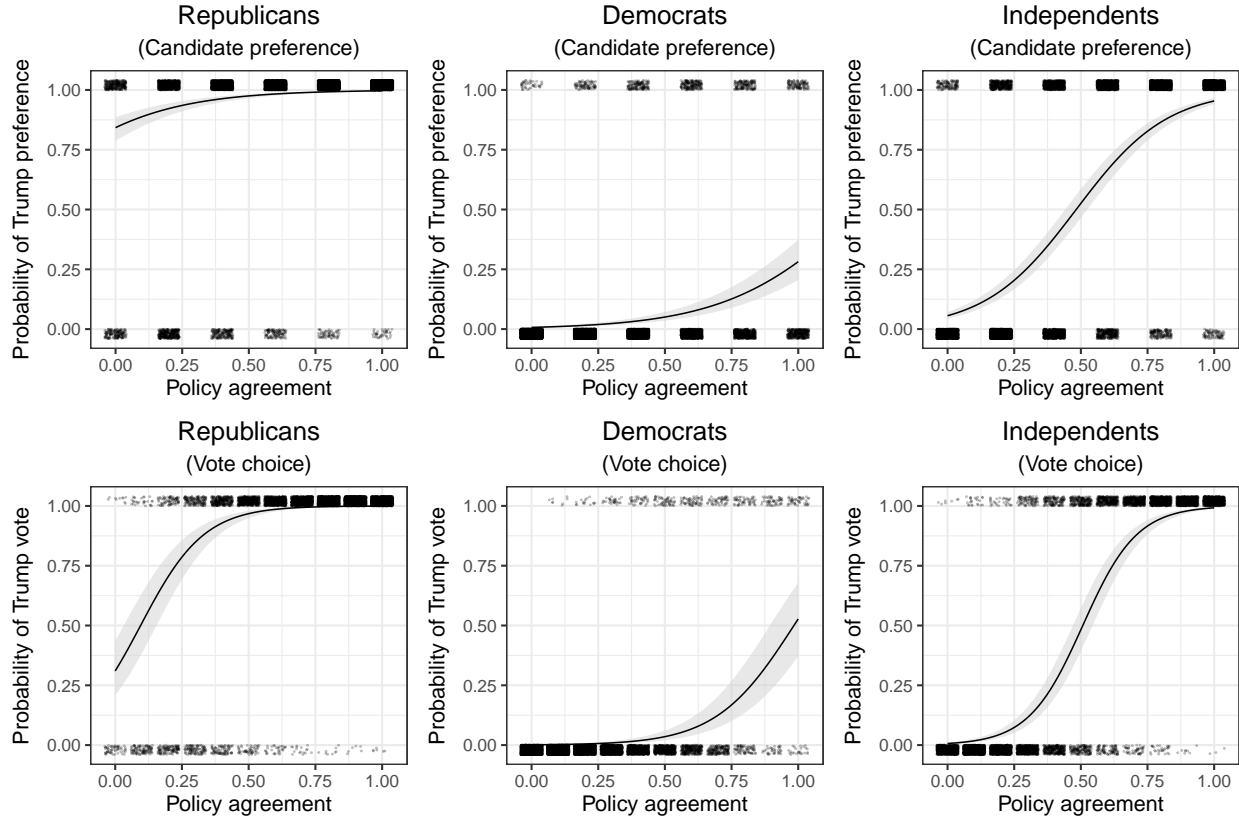
Note: Plots show the predicted probability of reporting a pre-election preference (top row) or voting (bottom row) for Trump across values of *Policy agreement*. Predicted probabilities are based on the models shown in columns 3 and 6 of Table 1, estimated separately for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. All other covariates are held constant at their median or modal values among the partisan group. Solid black lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded gray regions are the 95 percent confidence intervals. Jittered dots show the distribution of respondents with each value of *Policy agreement* who supported (*y*=1) or opposed (*y*=0) Trump.

I conducted a similar analysis to study whether respondents' approval ratings of President Trump's job performance were associated with variation in issue accountability. To do so, I constructed a trichotomous measure of presidential approval from the pre-election survey, which had a value of -1 for respondents who disapproved of Trump's performance, +1 for respondents who approved, and 0 for respondents who were "not sure." I then estimated the models from columns 3 and 6 of Table 1 while including this measure of presidential approval and its interaction with *Policy agreement*.

Table A.4 shows the results. The measure of presidential approval is centered at zero; thus, the coefficient for the interaction term indicates how the coefficient for *Policy agreement* is modified with a one-unit increase (for respondents who approve of the president's job performance) or decrease (respondents who disapprove) in presidential approval. The results indicate that, first, *Policy agreement* is a significant predictor of support for Trump among all respondents: neither respondents who approved of Trump's job performance nor those who disapproved set aside their policy (dis)agreements with him when forming preferences over candidates or making their voting decisions. The table also shows that the relationship between *Policy agreement* and Trump support is smaller in magnitude for respondents who approved of Trump's performance, while those who disapproved of Trump's job performance were especially responsive to values of *Policy agreement.* I do not want to overinterpret these results given the high correlations between partisanship, presidential approval, evaluations of Trump's executive actions, and vote choice. Even so, the findings suggest that individuals' evaluations of specific presidential actions are associated with their voting decisions, albeit at varying levels depending on their overall job approval of President Trump.

The findings provide new evidence about the importance of, and limits on, presidential accountability. Even in an era of "expressive" (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015) and "negative" (Webster and Abramowitz 2017) partisanship, evaluations of the substance of the president's executive actions remains an important predictor of vote choice in a presidential election. However, the magnitude of this association varies with an individual's partisan identity and approval of the president's job performance. Yet neither partisanship nor presidential approval fully overrides evaluations of the president's policies when the public decides for whom to cast a ballot.

Presidential Accountability and Uncertain Voters

Given the panel nature of the CES, I use the measure of *Policy agreement* to study electoral accountability among a critical subset of the sample: late deciders. Previous research shows that in-

Table 2: Variation in Issue Accountability by Presidential Approval

	Dependent variable:	
	Pre-election preference (all respondents)	Vote choice (validated voters)
Policy agreement	1.601*	4.617*
	(0.107)	(0.191)
Presidential approval	3.149*	2.641*
	(0.068)	(0.109)
Policy agreement × Presidential approval	-1.035*	-1.049*
	(0.113)	(0.193)
Demographic controls	✓	✓
Partisanship	✓	✓
Ideology	✓	✓
Observations	51,650	33,668

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had voted for Trump rather than Biden. *Presidential approval* has a value of -1 for respondents who disapproved of Trump's performance, +1 for respondents who approved, and 0 for respondents who were "not sure." Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income), self-reported partisanship (seven-point), and ideology (five-point) are included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

dividuals who make their voting decisions late in a presidential campaign tend to be less attentive and less politically active than voters who decide earlier in the contest (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2015; Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous 1994). Their eventual vote choices also tend to be less predictable (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2015). Upon finding that late-deciders exhibit unusually high rates of partisan defection in their voting decisions, Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous (1994, 62) were "forced to the conclusion that the behavior of late deciders is nearly random." *Are* late-deciding voters making decisions that appear to be "nearly random"? Or is this group of voters making decisions that reflect their evaluations of the president's executive actions? Late-deciding voters have the potential to swing elections if their decisions differ from early-deciding

voters, particularly in close electoral contexts. Thus, understanding whether this group of voters makes decisions on the basis of similar considerations as early-deciding voters is important for characterizing the prospects for electoral accountability.

I examine this question with the subset of respondents who participated in both waves of the CES and had a validated voting record. Among this subset of respondents, I distinguished voters who reported a candidate preference in the pre-election wave from those who reported "I'm not sure [for whom I will vote]." I estimated the model specification from column 6 of Table 1, which models vote choice as a function of the ten-item measure of *Policy agreement* and demographic, partisan, and ideological controls, separately for early deciders and late deciders.[22] One note of caution is in order, as fewer than four percent of validated voters had not decided for whom to vote when they participated in the pre-election wave, and thus the sample size of late-deciding voters is relatively small.[23]

Figure 5 shows the predicted probability of reporting a vote for Trump across values of *Policy agreement*. The left plot shows the curve for respondents who had chosen a candidate by the pre-election wave, and the right plot shows the curve for respondents who were uncertain of their preference in the pre-election wave. Two main findings emerge. First, regardless of the timing of the voting decision, both groups made voting decisions that reflected their evaluations of President Trump's unilateral directives, as both probability curves are positively signed (and the regression estimates are statistically distinguishable from zero). Second, early deciders make decisions that are more consistent with electoral accountability than late deciders, as the former group's voting decisions are more responsive to *Policy agreement* than the latter group's. For example, an increase in *Policy agreement* from 0.4 to 0.6 increases the probability of voting for Trump from .37 to .75 among early deciders. Among late deciders, who were more supportive of

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[22]The regression estimates are shown in Table A.8.

[23]A large share of respondents who were unsure of their candidate preference in the pre-election wave appeared not to have cast votes based on the validated voting records. This is consistent with previous work that finds that these individuals are less politically engaged than individuals who choose a candidate earlier in the process.

Trump compared to early deciders overall (56 percent support and 46 percent support, respectively), the same change in *Policy agreement* was associated with an increase in the probability of voting for Trump from .70 to .85. Thus, the magnitude of the difference was less than half as large, and a larger proportion of late deciders than early deciders cast votes for Trump despite disagreeing with a sizable proportion of his executive actions.

Figure 5: Policy Agreement, Trump Electoral Support, and Timing of the Vote Decision
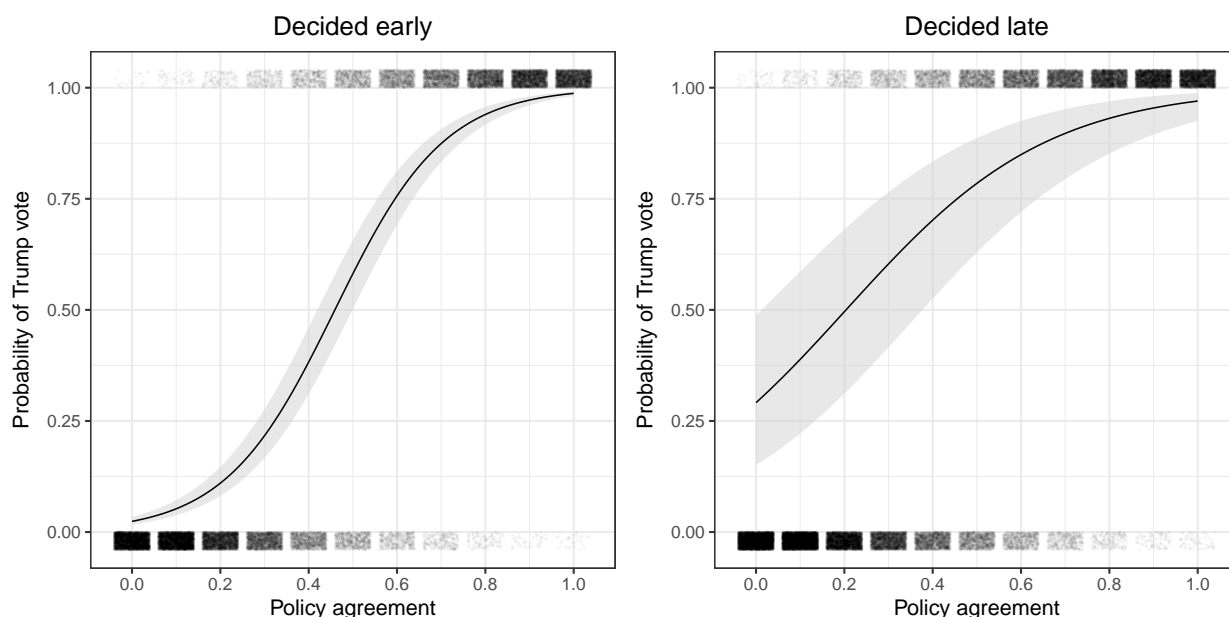
Note: Plots show the predicted probability of reporting a voting for Trump across values of *Policy agreement*. Predicted probabilities are based on the models shown in column 6 of Table 1, estimated separately for respondents who initially reported a candidate preference in the pre-election wave and respondents who initially reported that they were unsure for whom they would vote. (The regression coefficients are shown in Table A.8.) All other covariates are held constant at their median or modal values among the group. Solid black lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded gray regions are the 95 percent confidence intervals. Jittered dots show the distribution of respondents with each value of *Policy agreement* who supported (*y*=1) or opposed (*y*=0) Trump.

While the timing of an individual's vote decision likely reflects a mix of individual and campaign-specific factors, the results above indicate that even individuals who make up their minds in the final weeks of an election do so in ways that reflect their evaluations of a president's unilateral behavior. Far from making random decisions on Election Day (Gopoian and Hadjiharalambous 1994), the decisions of late-deciding voters are structured substantially by accountability consid-

erations. At the same time, voters who decide in the closing days of the campaign report voting decisions that are less responsive to their policy evaluations of the president's unilateral actions. While it would be a mistake to attribute these findings to the timing of the decision rather than the many other factors that distinguish early- and late-deciders, this finding raises interesting questions about how the final weeks of the presidential campaign might shape the importance of accountability considerations for voters who remain undecided.

Executive Action and Perceptions of Presidential Ideology

The results above indicate that respondents evaluate executive action on the basis of their agreement with the relevant policy and that these evaluations are associated with their subsequent voting decisions. In a final set of analyses, I consider a possible mechanism through which a president's executive actions informs the public's voting decisions. In particular, I study whether respondents' substantive evaluations of presidential action are associated with their perceptions of their ideological congruence with the president.

To do so, I construct a measure of *Perceived ideological distance* between each respondent and the president. CES respondents were asked to place themselves on a seven-point ideological scale that ranged from "very liberal" (1) to "very conservative" (7).[24] Respondents were also asked to place President Trump along a seven-point ideological scale. I used the absolute difference between these quantities to characterize *perceived ideological distance*, where larger values indicate respondents who perceived greater ideological disagreement between themselves and Trump. I used this as the dependent variable and estimate its association with *Policy agreement.* If respondents use their agreement with the president's actions to make inferences about their ideological congruence with the president, then I expect a negative association between these variables, indicating that increased support for individual executive actions leads voters to infer that they

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[24]This was in addition to being asked to place themselves along a five-point ideology scale, which is the covariate used as a control variable in the regression models.

increasingly share the policy views of the president.

Table 3 shows the results. The left columns show results using the five-item measure of *Policy agreement* from the pre-election wave of the survey and the right columns use the ten-item measure based on both the pre- and post-election waves. Both columns show similar results. The coefficient for *Policy agreement* is negative and statistically significant in all four columns, indicating that individuals who agreed with a larger share of executive actions perceived less ideological distance between themselves and the president. Note that the magnitudes of the coefficients attenuate between the models estimated for each measure of *Policy agreement.* The fully-specified models, however, represent a difficult test for the association between *Policy agreement* and *Perceived ideological distance,* as these models include a set of indicators for each value of the seven-point partisanship scale and the five-point measure of ideological self-placement. This indicates that for a given value of partisanship or ideology, individuals who approve of larger shares of executive actions perceive the president as more closely ideologically proximate to themselves. Even among respondents who share the same level and strength of partisanship or who place themselves at the same ideological location, *Policy agreement* continues to have a strong and statistically significant association with perceptions of the president's ideological congruence.

The results suggest that individuals' substantive agreement with the president's executive actions informs their assessments of the president's ideological views more generally. These findings help complete the loop of presidential accountability: voters evaluate executive actions on the basis of their agreement with the substantive policies, the level of agreement informs voters' assessments of the degree to which they are ideologically aligned with the president, and these beliefs are associated with their decision to re-elect the incumbent or to vote for their competitor.

Table 3: Executive Action and Perceptions of Presidential Ideology

	Dependent variable:			
	Perceived ideological distance			
	(five items)		(ten items)	
Policy agreement	−3.313∗	−0.876∗	−3.956∗	−0.969∗
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.028)
Demographic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Partisanship		✓		✓
Ideology		✓		✓
Observations	42,704	42,704	29,366	29,366

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is respondents' perceived ideological distance from President Trump, measured on a seven-point scale where larger values indicate greater perceived ideological disagree. The left columns use the five-item pre-election measure of *Policy agreement* and the right columns use the ten-item pre- and post-election measure of *Policy agreement*. Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income), self-reported partisanship (seven-point), and ideology (five-point) were also included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

Conclusion

This paper provides evidence that the American public can and does hold presidents accountable for wielding unilateral power. Consistent with theories of presidential representation and electoral accountability, the data show that individuals have preferences over the policies presidents create through unilateral action and that they apply those preferences when deciding for whom to vote. These results support the assumptions found in recent positive political theory regarding the sources of constraint on unilateral decision making by contemporary presidents (e.g., Noble Forthcoming). In a more general way, the findings also are consistent with research programs that emphasize the ongoing relationship between elected executives and their public audiences as a mechanism through which the quality of representative governance is sustained (e.g., Howell and Wolton 2018; Judd 2017; Kang 2020; Reeves and Rogowski 2022). While a con-

siderable body of research on presidential unilateralism focuses on law and the separation of powers as a vehicle for understanding how presidents make decisions in this realm (e.g., Howell 2003; Shane 2009), this paper suggests the theoretical promise of considering presidents as *elected electives* rather than as *Chief Executive*.

Several features of the political context have implications for interpreting the results. First, the data are limited to one president and election cycle. Donald Trump and his actions received greater media attention than any other president in history. Thus, respondents were likely better informed about these actions than they may have been in earlier presidential administrations. Second, the survey was conducted during an extremely polarized era, and President Trump was an especially polarizing president. It is not clear how these features affect the estimates reported in this paper. On the one hand, the heightened media attention during the Trump administration might have enhanced the prospects for accountability, as more voters were likely aware of Trump's actions and their policy consequences. On the other hand, it would not be surprising if partisans' views about Trump's actions had hardened given the polarized context, thus reducing the opportunity to find a relationship between evaluations of unilateral action and vote choice even among individuals who share the same partisan identity or ideological position. Thus, the evidence for electoral accountability is apparent even in a context in which it was particularly difficult to find them.

More speculatively, the results in this paper suggest that previous scholarship has overstated the different incentive structures confronted by actors serving in different branches of government. Some scholarship has emphasized the institutional differences between presidents and other officeholders, particularly legislators (e.g., Howell and Moe 2016; Moe and Wilson 1994). This argument, it is worth noting, has important similarities with the theory of presidential representation (see Dearborn 2021). It is clear that legislators and presidents serve in distinct institutional settings. Yet presidents, like legislators (Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki 2022; Mayhew 1974), face electoral costs for stepping out of line with the policy preferences of their constituents. In

fact, the estimates presented here are similar in magnitude to what Ansolabehere and Kuriwaki (2022) report are the consequences of policy incongruence for legislators. It may be productive to consider how electoral pressures create incentives for officeholder behavior in ways that transcend particular institutional contexts.

Finally, the results have several limitations and raise questions for future scholarship. First, they are correlational. It is not possible to randomly assign unilateral actions to different voters, or to explicitly consider the counterfactual case in which a president did not issue the actions they actually did. While the robustness checks support a causal interpretation of the findings, this is an unavoidable design limitation. Second, as noted above, the findings come from a single election cycle. Additional evidence from other contexts about how voter agreement with executive action is associated with their voting decisions would be useful. Third, and finally, while the results support assumptions in theoretical models of unilateral action, the findings do not bear on the core insights from those models. Additional research is necessary to better understand how electoral accountability structures empirical patterns of presidential behavior.

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ONLINE APPENDIX

Robustness Checks and Supplementary Analyses for
"Power and Accountability: Unilateral Action and Vote Choice in Presidential Elections"

Contents

A.1 Executive action question wording

The first five questions appeared on the pre-election wave of the CES and the last five questions appeared on the post-election wave. Questions were prefaced with: "For each of the following tell us whether you support or oppose these decisions."

CC20_355a Withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement.

CC20_355b Withdraw the United States from the TransPacific Partnership trade agreement, a free trade agreement that included the U.S., Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Chile, others.

CC20_355c Repeal the Clean Power Plant Rules (the Clean Power Plant rules would require power plants to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 32 percent by 2030).

CC20_355d Ban Transgender People in the Military.

CC20_355e Require able-bodied adults 18 to 49 years of age who do not have dependents to have a job in order to receive food stamps.

CC20_442a Assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani.

CC20_442b Withdraw the United States from the Iran Nuclear Accord and reimpose sanctions on Iran.

CC20_442c Declare a national emergency to permit construction of border wall with Mexico.

CC20_442d Suspend a program that allows migrants to remain in the US while their asylum cases were being decided.

CC20_442e Withdraw troops from Kurdish-controlled region of northern Syria on the border with Turkey.

A.2 Alterative measurement of *Policy agreement*

Table A.1: Evaluations of Presidential Actions and Candidate Choice in the 2020 Election

	Dependent variable:					
	Pre-election preference (all respondents)			Vote choice (validated voters)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Policy agreement	8.112*	8.541*	6.220*	6.839*	7.425*	4.952*
	(0.071)	(0.080)	(0.107)	(0.065)	(0.077)	(0.105)
Demographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Partisanship			✓			✓
Ideology			✓			✓
Observations	44,914	44,914	44,914	35,042	35,042	35,042

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had cast a vote for Trump rather than Biden. Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income) and self-reported partisanship (seven-point) and ideology (five-point) are included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonpostweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

Figure A.1: Policy Agreement and Trump Electoral Support
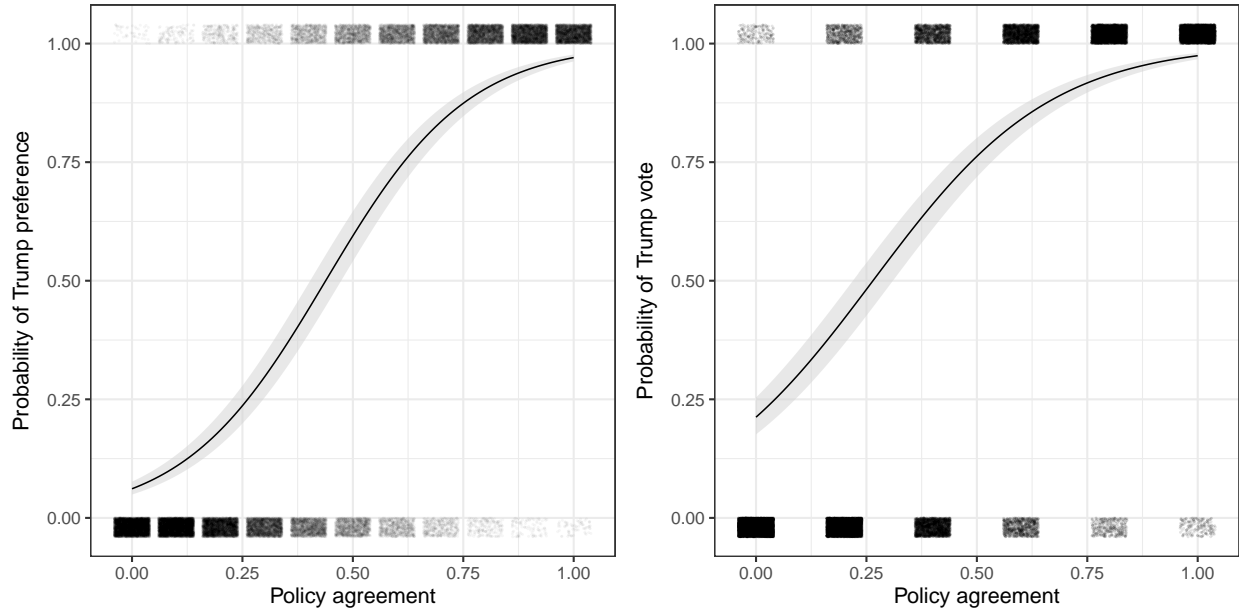
Note: Plots show the predicted probability of reporting a pre-election preference for Trump (left plot) and reporting casting a vote for Trump (right plot) across the range of values of *Policy agreement.* Predicted probabilities are based on the models shown in columns 3 and 6 of Table 1 while holding all other covariates constant at their median or modal values. Solid black lines show the predicted probabilities and the shaded gray regions are the 95 percent confidence intervals. Jittered dots show the distribution of respondents with each value of *Policy agreement* who supported (*y*=1) or opposed (*y*=0) Trump.

Figure A.2: Policy Agreement and Trump Electoral Support (Treating *Policy agreement* as a categorical variable)
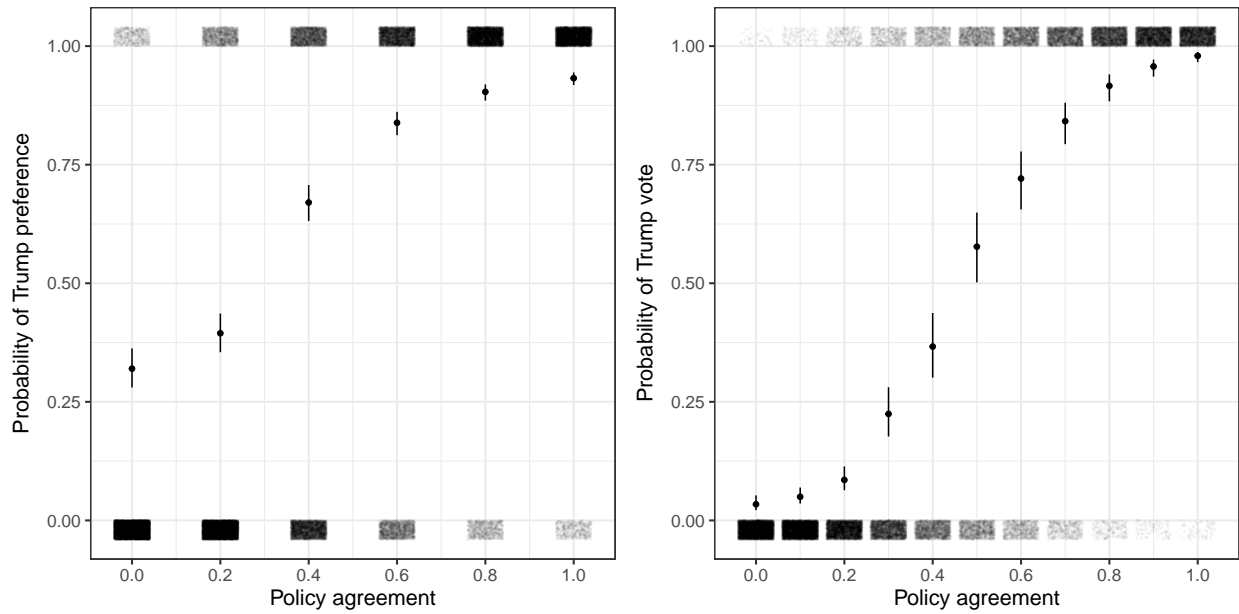
Note: Plots show the predicted probability of reporting a pre-election preference for Trump (left plot) and reporting casting a vote for Trump (right plot) across values of *Policy agreement*. Predicted probabilities are based on the models shown in columns 3 and 6 of Table 1 while holding all other covariates constant at their median or modal values and while treating *Policy agreement* as a factor variable with six and eleven discrete values in the left and right plots, respectively. Solid black lines show the predicted probabilities and the vertical lines are the 95 percent confidence intervals. Jittered dots show the distribution of respondents with each value of *Policy agreement* who supported (*y*=1) or opposed (*y*=0) Trump.

Table A.2: Evaluations of Individual Presidential Actions and Candidate Choice in the 2020 Election

|	*Dependent variable:*	
	Trump preference	Trump vote
	(1)	(2)
Paris withdrawal	1.540*	1.339*
	(0.050)	(0.085)
TPP withdrawal	0.602*	0.422*
	(0.048)	(0.080)
Clean Power Plant repeal	0.331*	0.319*
	(0.045)	(0.076)
Transgender military ban	0.973*	0.661*
	(0.047)	(0.077)
Food stamp work requirements	0.243*	0.230*
	(0.045)	(0.076)
Solemani assassination		0.338*
		(0.070)
Iran deal withdrawal		1.177*
		(0.075)
Mexico border wall		2.069*
		(0.083)
Migrant entry		0.410*
		(0.072)
Syria withdrawal		0.207*
		(0.072)
Demographic controls	✓	✓
Partisanship	✓	✓
Ideology	✓	✓
Observations	51,677	33,687

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left column is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right column is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had cast a vote for Trump rather than Biden. Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income) and self-reported partisanship (seven-point) and ideology (five-point) are included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *$p<0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

A.3 Results with all Controls

Table A.3: Evaluations of Presidential Actions and Candidate Choice in the 2020 Election

	Dependent variable:					
	Pre-election preference (all respondents)			Vote choice (validated voters)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Policy agreement	5.663*	6.142*	3.876*	9.622*	10.221*	7.603*
	(0.045)	(0.053)	(0.072)	(0.100)	(0.115)	(0.149)
Age (years)		-0.007*	-0.007*		-0.011*	-0.012*
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.002)
Woman		-0.021	0.019		0.064	-0.005
		(0.027)	(0.040)		(0.047)	(0.064)
HS graduate		-0.032	0.017		-0.276*	-0.093
		(0.054)	(0.073)		(0.113)	(0.158)
Some college		-0.269*	-0.129		-0.411*	-0.318
		(0.057)	(0.079)		(0.118)	(0.165)
Two-year degree		-0.244*	-0.175		-0.116	-0.087
		(0.065)	(0.091)		(0.127)	(0.178)
Four-year degree		-0.605*	-0.469*		-0.504*	-0.560*
		(0.060)	(0.084)		(0.118)	(0.165)
Post-graduate		-0.867*	-0.661*		-0.454*	-0.510*
		(0.068)	(0.098)		(0.128)	(0.177)
Black		-3.230*	-1.887*		-3.331*	-1.601*
		(0.054)	(0.069)		(0.091)	(0.114)
Hispanic		-1.000*	-0.570*		-0.794*	-0.284
		(0.094)	(0.124)		(0.162)	(0.212)
Asian		-0.976*	-0.804*		-1.146*	-0.906*
		(0.068)	(0.088)		(0.115)	(0.148)
Native American		-0.370*	-0.281		-0.101	0.005
		(0.158)	(0.204)		(0.317)	(0.380)
Middle Eastern		-0.959*	-0.587*		-0.636*	0.109
		(0.107)	(0.140)		(0.188)	(0.246)
Two or more races		-0.328*	0.033		-0.425	-0.012
		(0.135)	(0.184)		(0.242)	(0.320)
Other race		-1.973*	-1.732*		-0.235	0.740
		(0.432)	(0.530)		(0.763)	(1.135)
Not Hispanic origin		0.776*	0.542*		0.572*	0.309
		(0.084)	(0.111)		(0.146)	(0.192)
$10-20k		-0.206*	-0.100		-0.014	-0.064
		(0.070)	(0.093)		(0.132)	(0.177)
$20-30k		0.039	0.010		0.251*	0.147
		(0.068)	(0.090)		(0.126)	(0.168)
$30-40k		-0.029	0.062		0.292*	0.131
		(0.068)	(0.092)		(0.128)	(0.171)
$40-50k		0.022	-0.110		0.329*	-0.044
		(0.071)	(0.097)		(0.131)	(0.178)
$50-60k		-0.017	-0.117		0.385*	-0.013
		(0.073)	(0.100)		(0.132)	(0.178)
$60-70k		-0.023	-0.150		0.398*	0.139
		(0.078)	(0.111)		(0.140)	(0.194)
$70-80k		0.025	-0.179		0.402*	-0.037
		(0.076)	(0.107)		(0.136)	(0.183)
$80-100k		-0.069	-0.228*		0.280*	-0.167
		(0.074)	(0.104)		(0.130)	(0.175)
$100-120k		0.023	-0.038		0.304*	-0.081
		(0.080)	(0.114)		(0.142)	(0.193)
$120-150k		-0.112	-0.351*		0.355*	-0.274
		(0.082)	(0.117)		(0.144)	(0.191)
$150-200k		-0.011	-0.368*		0.431*	-0.174
		(0.092)	(0.133)		(0.155)	(0.210)
$200-250k		-0.288*	-0.508*		-0.264	-0.833*
		(0.128)	(0.194)		(0.229)	(0.302)
$250-350k		-0.303	-0.339		0.027	-0.215
		(0.175)	(0.246)		(0.319)	(0.395)
$350-500k		-0.361	-0.862*		0.261	-1.011*
		(0.221)	(0.307)		(0.417)	(0.499)
$500k+		0.335	0.482		0.859*	0.326
		(0.205)	(0.311)		(0.345)	(0.519)
Prefer not to say income		0.106	-0.152		0.507*	0.234
		(0.069)	(0.091)		(0.128)	(0.169)
Not strong Dem			1.113*			1.982*
			(0.084)			(0.142)
Lean Dem			0.846*			1.606*
			(0.100)			(0.172)
Independent			3.064*			3.806*
			(0.077)			(0.140)
Lean Rep			4.949*			5.257*
			(0.096)			(0.164)
Not strong Rep			4.400*			4.872*
			(0.085)			(0.151)
Strong Rep			5.701*			6.153*
			(0.098)			(0.173)
Not sure PID			2.929*			3.359*
			(0.107)			(0.221)
Liberal			0.405*			0.028
			(0.119)			(0.194)
Moderate			1.135*			0.593*
			(0.106)			(0.172)
Conservative			1.912*			1.425*
			(0.113)			(0.185)
Very conservative			2.053*			1.627*
			(0.127)			(0.217)
Not sure ideology			1.431*			0.499*
			(0.119)			(0.211)
Constant	-2.674*	-2.338*	-5.440*	-4.625*	-4.336*	-6.890*
	(0.024)	(0.111)	(0.182)	(0.051)	(0.213)	(0.340)
Observations	51,677	51,677	51,677	33,687	33,687	33,687

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had cast a vote for Trump rather than Biden. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

Table A.4: Variation in Issue Accountability by Presidential Approval

	Dependent variable:	
	Pre-election preference (all respondents)	Vote choice (validated voters)
Policy agreement	1.601*	4.617*
	(0.107)	(0.191)
Presidential approval	3.149*	2.641*
	(0.068)	(0.109)
Policy agreement × Presidential approval	-1.035*	-1.049*
	(0.113)	(0.193)
Age	0.008*	-0.006*
	(0.002)	(0.003)
Female	-0.033	-0.070
	(0.063)	(0.084)
High school graduate	0.095	-0.146
	(0.111)	(0.216)
Some college	0.119	-0.273
	(0.123)	(0.224)
Two-year degree	0.160	-0.140
	(0.142)	(0.242)
Four-year degree	-0.086	-0.475*
	(0.130)	(0.223)
Post-grad	-0.211	-0.415
	(0.150)	(0.238)
Black	-1.223*	-1.203*
	(0.098)	(0.143)
Hispanic	-0.275	-0.638*
	(0.187)	(0.282)
Asian	-0.563*	-0.153
	(0.136)	(0.173)
Native American	-0.202	-0.607
	(0.347)	(0.554)
Middle Eastern	-0.863*	-0.127
	(0.213)	(0.333)
Two or more races	-0.277	-0.455
	(0.312)	(0.456)
Other race	-4.437*	1.243
	(0.466)	(1.316)
Not Hispanic	0.509*	-0.245
	(0.167)	(0.253)
10k–20k	-0.143	-0.185
	(0.144)	(0.243)
20k–30k	0.407*	0.147
	(0.136)	(0.229)
30k–40k	0.362*	-0.020
	(0.142)	(0.229)
40k–50k	0.130	-0.028
	(0.148)	(0.244)
50k–60k	0.322*	-0.026
	(0.149)	(0.241)
60k–70k	0.238	0.295
	(0.170)	(0.258)
70k–80k	0.150	0.052
	(0.162)	(0.245)
80k–100k	-0.017	-0.031
	(0.156)	(0.240)
100k–120k	0.366*	0.055
	(0.175)	(0.267)
120k–150k	0.059	0.070
	(0.175)	(0.256)
150k–200k	0.236	0.228
	(0.200)	(0.286)
200k–250k	-0.126	-1.037*
	(0.311)	(0.429)
250k–350k	0.371	0.397
	(0.361)	(0.484)
350k–500k	-0.390	-0.373
	(0.361)	(0.660)
500k+	0.852*	1.212*
	(0.479)	(0.569)
Prefer not to say	0.284	0.367
	(0.141)	(0.229)
Not strong Democrat	0.779*	1.359*
	(0.120)	(0.177)
Lean Democrat	1.003*	1.376*
	(0.142)	(0.212)
Independent	2.617*	3.157*
	(0.112)	(0.173)
Lean Republican	4.295*	4.250*
	(0.140)	(0.204)
Not strong Republican	3.804*	3.919*
	(0.124)	(0.187)
Strong Republican	4.217*	4.269*
	(0.135)	(0.214)
Not sure PID	1.906*	2.614*
	(0.164)	(0.275)
Liberal	0.331*	-0.331
	(0.165)	(0.242)
Moderate	0.796*	0.234
	(0.148)	(0.213)
Conservative	1.305*	0.788*
	(0.160)	(0.232)
Very conservative	1.372*	1.003*
	(0.178)	(0.269)
Not sure ideology	1.348*	0.044
	(0.178)	(0.274)
Intercept	-4.601*	-3.728*
	(0.261)	(0.434)
Observations	51,650	33,668

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had voted for Trump rather than Biden. *Presidential approval* has a value of -1 for respondents who disapproved of Trump's performance, +1 for respondents who approved, and 0 for respondents who were "not sure." Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

Table A.5: Policy Agreement and Ideological Inferences

	Dependent variable:			
	Perceived ideological distance			
	(five items)		(ten items)	
Policy agreement	-3.313*	-0.876*	-3.956*	-0.969*
	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.028)
Age (years)	-0.004*	-0.001*	-0.005*	-0.001*
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Woman	0.006	0.006	-0.052*	0.003
	(0.015)	(0.011)	(0.016)	(0.012)
HS graduate	-0.001	0.005	0.092*	-0.047
	(0.031)	(0.023)	(0.046)	(0.033)
Some college	0.135*	0.019	0.166*	-0.052
	(0.032)	(0.024)	(0.047)	(0.034)
Two-year degree	0.108*	0.032	0.106*	-0.058
	(0.036)	(0.026)	(0.051)	(0.036)
Four-year degree	0.274*	0.056*	0.234*	-0.014
	(0.033)	(0.024)	(0.047)	(0.034)
Post-graduate	0.438*	0.090*	0.266*	-0.039
	(0.036)	(0.026)	(0.049)	(0.035)
Black	0.800*	0.145*	0.471*	0.080*
	(0.024)	(0.019)	(0.028)	(0.021)
Hispanic	0.306*	0.118*	0.162*	-0.028
	(0.052)	(0.038)	(0.061)	(0.044)
Asian	0.006	-0.056*	0.110*	0.071*
	(0.036)	(0.026)	(0.044)	(0.031)
Native American	-0.025	-0.008	-0.036	-0.025
	(0.091)	(0.066)	(0.115)	(0.082)
Middle Eastern	0.426*	0.165*	0.341*	0.021
	(0.060)	(0.043)	(0.066)	(0.047)
Two or more races	0.140*	0.013	0.136	-0.043
	(0.070)	(0.050)	(0.077)	(0.055)
Other race	-0.177	-0.191	-0.076	-0.308
	(0.199)	(0.144)	(0.261)	(0.185)
Not Hispanic origin	-0.157*	0.017	-0.120*	-0.098*
	(0.046)	(0.033)	(0.054)	(0.039)
$10-20k	-0.010	-0.052	-0.142*	-0.046
	(0.042)	(0.030)	(0.053)	(0.038)
$20-30k	-0.084*	-0.059*	-0.202*	-0.041
	(0.040)	(0.029)	(0.051)	(0.036)
$30-40k	-0.094*	-0.103*	-0.242*	-0.059
	(0.040)	(0.029)	(0.051)	(0.036)
$40-50k	-0.151*	-0.108*	-0.265*	-0.054
	(0.041)	(0.030)	(0.051)	(0.037)
$50-60k	-0.145*	-0.121*	-0.264*	-0.057
	(0.041)	(0.030)	(0.052)	(0.037)
$60-70k	-0.156*	-0.121*	-0.281*	-0.064
	(0.044)	(0.032)	(0.054)	(0.038)
$70-80k	-0.162*	-0.112*	-0.294*	-0.035
	(0.043)	(0.031)	(0.052)	(0.037)
$80-100k	-0.157*	-0.127*	-0.286*	-0.059
	(0.042)	(0.030)	(0.051)	(0.036)
$100-120k	-0.167*	-0.151*	-0.286*	-0.071
	(0.044)	(0.032)	(0.054)	(0.038)
$120-150k	-0.143*	-0.108*	-0.313*	-0.057
	(0.045)	(0.033)	(0.054)	(0.039)
$150-200k	-0.207*	-0.134*	-0.385*	-0.064
	(0.050)	(0.036)	(0.058)	(0.041)
$200-250k	-0.110	-0.096*	-0.265*	-0.068
	(0.065)	(0.047)	(0.073)	(0.052)
$250-350k	-0.043	-0.051	-0.171	0.025
	(0.085)	(0.061)	(0.091)	(0.065)
$350-500k	-0.199	-0.134	-0.447*	-0.073
	(0.115)	(0.083)	(0.130)	(0.092)
$500k+	-0.169	-0.156*	-0.256*	-0.117
	(0.108)	(0.078)	(0.118)	(0.084)
Prefer not to say income	-0.177*	-0.079*	-0.286*	-0.039
	(0.040)	(0.029)	(0.051)	(0.036)
Not strong Dem		-0.374*		-0.444*
		(0.020)		(0.023)
Lean Dem		-0.270*		-0.249*
		(0.021)		(0.023)
Independent		-1.052*		-0.979*
		(0.023)		(0.027)
Lean Rep		-1.548*		-1.471*
		(0.024)		(0.029)
Not strong Rep		-1.519*		-1.442*
		(0.024)		(0.029)
Strong Rep		-1.860*		-1.757*
		(0.023)		(0.028)
Not sure PID		-0.849*		-1.091*
		(0.059)		(0.090)
Liberal		-1.126*		-1.189*
		(0.020)		(0.021)
Moderate		-2.224*		-2.398*
		(0.020)		(0.023)
Conservative		-2.445*		-2.635*
		(0.025)		(0.028)
Very conservative		-2.182*		-2.310*
		(0.027)		(0.031)
Observations	42,704	42,704	29,366	29,366

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the perceived ideological distance between a respondent and President Trump, where both were measured on seven-point scales. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

A.4   Sensitivity

Sensitivity to omitted variables was evaluated using the procedure advocated by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020). This exercise necessitated two important differences relative to the models shown in Table tab1. First, the procedure for conducting sensitivity analysis is limited to the context of linear regression. Thus, I re-estimate the models from columns 3 and 6 in Table 1 using a linear probability model rather than logistic regression.

Second, the sensitivity analysis results indicate how strongly an omitted variable would have to be associated with the dependent variable in order to reduce the estimated coefficient for *Policy agreement* to zero. I chose partisanship as the point of comparison, so that the sensitivity analysis indicates how much a confounder would have to be associated with candidate preference and vote choice relative to party identification. To do so, I include party ID as a seven-point interval level variable, rather than as a series of binary indicators, and omit respondents who chose an option other than one of the seven points.

While neither of these adjustments is trivial, they also do not materially affect the substantive results. Table A.6 shows the results of these models. *Policy agreement* continues to be positive and statistically significant, while *Partisanship* is also positive and statistically significant.

Figure A.3 shows the results of the sensitivity analysis. The left plot shows results for the candidate preference regression and the right plot shows results for the vote choice regression. The dashed red lines show the points at which the proportion of residual variance in policy agreement it explains (x-axis) and the proportion of residual variance in candidate preference/vote choice it explains (y-axis) would reduce the estimated coefficient for *Policy agreement* to zero.

The left plot shows that the coefficient for *Policy agreement* would reduce by about two-thirds (from 0.39 to 0.14) if there were an omitted confounder equally as strong as partisanship in the candidate preference model. The effect of *Policy agreement* would only be explained away if an omitted confounder had an effect at least 1.5 times as large as partisanship. The right plot shows that the vote choice model is even more robust to omitted variable basis, in which the coefficient
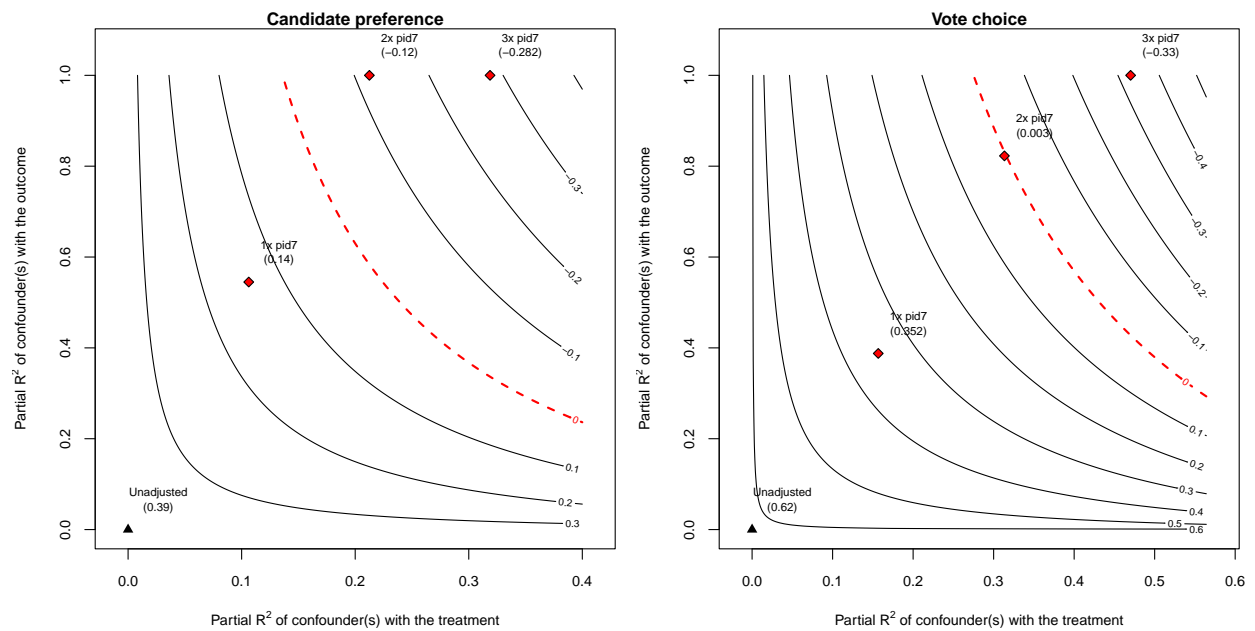
10

Table A.6: Evaluations of Individual Presidential Actions and Candidate Choice in the 2020 Election

	Dependent variable:	
	Trump preference	Trump vote
	(1)	(2)
Policy agreement	0.390*	0.623*
	(0.004)	(0.006)
Partisanship (seven-point)	0.114*	0.885*
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Demographic controls	✓	✓
Partisanship	✓	✓
Ideology	✓	✓
Observations	50,903	33,437

Note: Entries are linear regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left column is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. Rather than treat partisanship as an set of indicators, partisanship is an interval-level variable that ranges from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). Respondents who indicated "other" partisanship were omitted. The dependent variable in the right column is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had cast a vote for Trump rather than Biden. Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income) and self-reported partisanship (seven-point) and ideology (five-point) are included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).

for *Policy agreement* would be explained away only if an omitted variable were twice as strong as partisanship. Given the theoretical and substantive importance of partisanship for explaining voting decisions in American elections, it is difficult to think of a confounder that is at large or even larger than partisanship such that it could explain away the results shown in Table A.6. Thus, these results provide support for interpreting the relationship between *Policy agreement* and candidate preference/vote choice in a causal way.

Figure A.3: Sensitivity to Unobserved/Omitted Confounders

Candidate preference

- Partial R^2 of confounder(s) with the outcome
- Partial R^2 of confounder(s) with the treatment
- 2x pid7 (−0.12)
- 3x pid7 (−0.282)
- 1x pid7 (0.14)
- Unadjusted (0.39)

Vote choice

- Partial R^2 of confounder(s) with the outcome
- Partial R^2 of confounder(s) with the treatment
- 3x pid7 (−0.33)
- 2x pid7 (0.003)
- 1x pid7 (0.352)
- Unadjusted (0.62)

Note: Contour plots from sensitivity analysis based on Cinelli and Hazlett (2020).

A.5 Variation by Partisanship

Table A.7: Variation in Issue Accountability by Partisanship

	Pre-election preference (all respondents)			Vote choice (validated voters)		
	Republicans	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	Democrats	Independents
Policy agreement	3.983*	4.003*	5.857*	8.404*	6.838*	9.843*
	(0.153)	(0.141)	(0.117)	(0.315)	(0.258)	(0.250)
Demographic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ideology	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	14,075	21,416	13,254	9,229	14,169	8,702

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable in the left three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported a pre-election preference for Trump rather than Biden. The dependent variable in the right three columns is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had voted for Trump rather than Biden. Controls for demographics (race, ethnicity, age, gender, education, and income) and ideology (five-point) are included where indicated. Pre-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonweight` variable and post-election analyses are weighted to characteristics of voters using the `vvweight_post` variable, both from the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *$p<0.05$ (two-tailed tests).

A.6 Variation by Timing of the Voting Decision

Table A.8: Policy Agreement and the Timing of the Vote Decision

	Dependent variable:	
	Vote choice	
	Early deciders	Late deciders
Policy agreement	8.061*	4.366*
	(0.187)	(0.486)
Demographic controls	✓	✓
Partisanship	✓	✓
Ideology	✓	✓
Observations	24,502	830

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is an indicator for whether respondents reported that they had cast a vote for Trump rather than Biden. Controls for demographics and self-reported partisanship and ideology are included where indicated. The column labeled "Early deciders" includes respondents who reported a candidate preference in the pre-election wave. "Late deciders' includes respondents who reported they were "not sure" on their candidate preference in the pre-election wave. All analyses are weighted using to characteristics of the national adult population using the `commonpostweight` variable in the 2020 Cooperative Election Study. *p<0.05 (two-tailed tests).