

Public Support for Cross-Issue Compromises in the U.S. *

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Abstract

In theory, cross-issue compromises could facilitate policy reforms, as multiple groups can win on an issue they prioritize. But under what conditions do Americans support them? Prior research identifies several hypotheses about support for such compromises and its underlying mechanisms, from ideological extremity and partisan asymmetry to the presence of moral issues. To test them, we employ five surveys with 6,424 respondents fielded by Civiqs, NORC, and YouGov between 2020 and 2023. Overall, some cross-issue compromises can win substantial public support. Partisan asymmetries when respondents are asked about compromise abstractly disappear when they face concrete trade-offs. However, we detect meaningful loss aversion. Also, political donors show less support for compromises, as do those who would lose on an issue they deem important. While many respondents back compromises, there remain demand-side barriers to compromise among an influential segment of citizens.

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Introduction

For a Madisonian political system of divided powers, cross-party compromise can be critical in facilitating policy reforms (Pierson and Schickler, 2020). Yet in recent decades, the inability to forge cross-party compromises has been on stark display in the U.S. Congress. From the 2010 Affordable Care Act to the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, several of the most sweeping federal laws have been passed without bipartisan support (although most bills that did pass continue to do so with bipartisan support; Curry and Lee 2020). Strikingly, 2023 marked the year with the fewest bills passed in a Congress’s first year since the Great Depression (LoCascio, Siegel and Pereira, 2024).

In response to this gridlock, there is a fast-growing literature on polarization across American legislatures (Shor and McCarty, 2011; Lee, 2016; McCarty, 2019), including research on the factors underpinning legislative compromise (Mansbridge and Martin, 2015). While some barriers to compromise lie at the elite level (Binder, 1999; Fiorina, Abrams and Pope, 2005; Lee, 2016), one key question is the extent to which voters’ preferences reduce the prospects for political compromise among elected officials Abramowitz and Saunders (2008); Harbridge and Malhotra (2011); see also Levendusky (2009); Mason (2018); Iyengar et al. (2019); Hill (2022); Westwood (2022); Levendusky (2023). Put differently, are there insights into the demand side of politics that may help explain today’s supply-side legislative gridlock?

As illustrated by Table 1, prior research on compromises has made progress while focusing either on support for compromises in the abstract (Noel, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Green-Pedersen and Hjermitsev, 2024; Wolak, 2022) or support for concrete compromises on a single dimension (Maoz and McCauley, 2005; Ryan, 2017; Bauer, Yong and Krupnikov, 2017; Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong, 2020; Brutger, 2021). In one pioneering study, Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020) finds that while party elites often reject single-dimension compromises because they fear being penalized by primary voters, many voters support such compromises.

We extend prior research by investigating Americans’ support for *concrete, cross-issue compromises*, or what are sometimes termed “logrolls” in legislative contexts (McGann, 2019). We define a cross-issue compromise as one in which two or more groups reach an agreement across multiple issues in which the resulting policy represents a move away from each group’s preferred position on at least one issue. All of the policies we analyze reflect shifts away from the status quo. In theory, the introduction of a second dimension has the potential to increase the set of possible compromises (McKelvey, 1976; Hinich and Munger, 1997; Roemer, 2009). Even if two groups have divergent preferences on two discrete issues, they may be able to reach an agreement if the groups prioritize those issues differently. In practice, Democrats and Republicans typically do emphasize different issues (Egan, 2013). This further motivates probing opportunities for cross-issue compromise at the mass level.

However, prior research suggests potential barriers to voter support for cross-issue compromise, generating several hypotheses. One is about loss aversion, a potential mechanism: voters may avoid compromises because they are more attentive to policy losses than corresponding policy gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Arceneaux, 2012). A second hypothesis is that support for compromise might be especially limited on issues that are seen in binary, moralistic terms (Ryan, 2017). Other hypotheses indicate groups of voters who may be less supportive. For instance, while voters in general may not be averse to compromise,

citizens who are more ideologically extreme may object to compromises given that some elements are likely to be especially far from their preferences. A fourth hypothesis emerges from Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) and Noel (2016): perhaps major-party supporters are asymmetric, with contemporary Democrats more committed to policymaking and so more interested in or comfortable with compromise. A final, related possibility is that politically engaged citizens or members of issue publics may be more averse to compromise (see esp. Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong, 2020), dampening politicians' incentives to pursue them.

We test these hypotheses using five surveys (n=6,242 unique respondents), including a 2023 population-based survey administered by NORC whose respondents were recruited via address-based sampling and surveyed online and by phone. The other four surveys analyze online, opt-in samples conducted via Civiqs or YouGov. Our novel survey questions ask respondents about concrete trade-offs on five specific issues: abortion, immigration, health care, energy/environment, and voting access. While this is only a fraction of the issues that might be reflected in cross-issue compromises, it enables us to consider compromises across various high-salience issues, and so should present a hard case. In each survey, respondents assessed hypothetical compromises involving a liberal position on one issue and a conservative position on the other.

Overall, we find meaningful support for compromise among Americans, with small reductions in support among the ideologically extreme. We observe evidence of loss aversion: respondents support compromises in which they favor one but not both policies at rates meaningfully lower than 50%. We also find that respondents who prioritize a given issue are less supportive of compromises that include losses on that issue, which is consistent with loss aversion among issue publics. Similarly, we find that political donors are less supportive of cross-issue compromises. Overall, although significant fractions of Americans back cross-issue compromise, they prove more sensitive to losses than to commensurate gains, and influential sub-groups are particularly reluctant to compromise. Therefore, the barriers to compromise are not entirely at the elite level.

These results also provide methodological insights for future research. At times, the cross-issue measure we employ produces different conclusions than measures of support for abstract compromises; while Republicans and Trump supporters are less favorable towards compromise in the abstract, they are *not* less favorable to concrete compromises. Thus, asking about support for abstract compromise may not be a useful guide to citizens' support when faced with specific proposals. Second, our online, opt-in surveys sometimes uncover less support for concrete compromises than does our population-based sample, which reinforces the possibility that some groups of highly engaged citizens are especially cool toward compromises. As with political donors, some of the citizens who are disproportionately visible to politicians are also disproportionately opposed to compromises.

Theorizing Citizens' Support for Compromise

Congressional policymaking takes place in the shadow of future elections (Mayhew, 1974). Therefore, understanding both voters' views of compromise and politicians' perceptions of those views is critical (Harbridge and Malhotra, 2011). Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-

Yong (2020) provides a central contribution, showing that legislators fear primary voters’ punishment for supporting compromises. While such fears are grounded in public opinion to some extent, legislators overstate them—it is only voters who oppose the particular details of the compromise who would punish them.

However, there are multiple ways one might define compromises when studying mass-level attitudes. One approach asks respondents about their support for compromises (or politicians advocating them) in general (Noel, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Green-Pedersen and Hjermitsev, 2024; Wolak, 2022). Such questions are not issue-specific, a potential advantage. Still, one concern with this measure is that it may partly detect partisan differences in how the parties talk about “compromise” rather than actual support for concrete compromises (Zaller, 1992; McLaughlin et al., 2017). Noel (2016) reports that Democratic activists are far more likely to prefer politicians who “compromise to get things done” while Republican activists prefer politicians who “stick to their principles, no matter what” (pg. 176), differences that could partly reflect messaging by the two parties.

An alternative approach is to study compromises on specific issues. For example, Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020) focuses on compromises on a single dimension, termed “half-loaf compromises,” that move policy on one issue closer to both sides’ ideal points. One key example from Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020) is the gas tax. If one individual’s preferred gas tax is 1% and another’s is 2%, this approach asks whether they would accept a compromise that slightly decreases the gas tax rate (from the status quo of 10%) in the direction of both of their ideal points.

Prior research has formalized such unidimensional policy compromises via extensive research on ideal points (Krehbiel, 1998). Assuming that respondents’ utility is strictly decreasing as a policy proposal is further from their ideal point, someone whose ideal point is a 1% gas tax should not oppose a move from 10% to 8% on policy grounds. However, some distributions of unidimensional ideal points which can give rise to gridlock, especially when changing the status quo is costly. Such approaches also typically consider one issue at a time, raising questions about generalizability.

Theoretically, the introduction of a second dimension can allow for a wider set of possible compromises (McKelvey, 1976; Hinich and Munger, 1997; Roemer, 2009). If the parties to the negotiation prioritize different issues, they can reach agreements that move policy in the direction of their preferences on the issues they prioritize. Such compromises are sometimes called “logrolls” (McGann, 2019). For example, if the Democrats’ top priority is expanding health care access while the Republicans seek to limit immigration, there may be a cross-issue policy compromise which advances both parties’ goals on the policy they deem more important. Yet as Table 1 demonstrates, key work has mostly studied compromise in the abstract or else one-dimensional policy compromises, but not compromises on seemingly separate issues, even as real-world compromises often involve multiple issues. We thus draw on prior work to generate hypotheses about support for such compromises.

Hypotheses

There are several reasons to think that citizens might not support such multi-dimensional compromises. Prior research identifies multiple potential barriers to compromise (Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong, 2020; Goya-Tocchetto et al., 2022). One is the prospect that

	Abstract Compromise	Single-Issue Compromise
Maoz and McCauley (2005)		x
Noel (2016)	x	
Bauer, Harbridge, and Krupnikov (2017)		x
McLaughlin et al. (2017)	x	x
Ryan (2017)		x
Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong (2020)	x	x
Brutger (2021)		x
Wolak (2022)	x	
Green-Pederssen and Hjerimitslev (2024)	x	

Table 1: Classification of recent scholarship exploring public support for compromise.

partisans do not trust that the deal would be fairly implemented. Here, though, we emphasize testable hypotheses that are unique to the setting of multi-dimensional compromises, in which respondents may be evaluating gains on one dimension relative to losses on another. After all, it is these cross-pressured respondents (see also Hillygus and Shields, 2008) whose response to a would-be compromise isn’t clear from their positions on the individual issues alone.

Loss Aversion. On the single-issue compromises studied by Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020), parties do not face the prospect of policy moving away from their preferred position on some issues. However, multi-dimensional compromises typically involve losses as well as gains. That raises the specter of loss aversion (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), which holds that individuals experience losses as more negative than commensurate gains are positive. Extensive political science research shows that threats to existing policies can be especially mobilizing (Arceneaux, 2012; Mettler, Jacobs and Zhu, 2023). If loss aversion is operative, we should expect that citizens will view compromises negatively when they involve roughly equivalent gains and losses. On average, support for a given compromise should be subadditive, meaning that support for the compromise as a whole should be lower than support for the specific elements that make up that compromise.

Moral Issues. Another hypothesis expects differences based on the issues under discussion. Delton, DeScioli and Ryan (2020) finds that moral conviction undermines compromise. When individuals’ positions on a policy issue are rooted in their fundamental views of right and wrong, they are more likely to adopt aggressive bargaining strategies that hinder compromise. Examining Social Security, Ryan (2017) finds that moral conviction predicts opposition to politicians’ willingness to compromise. The resulting hypothesis is that compromises which involve moral issues will garner less support from those who stand to lose.

Ideological Extremity. Scholarship has long considered how legislators or voters respond to policy proposals that are not exactly aligned with their preference on a given dimension (Downs, 1957; Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Carroll et al., 2009). One common assertion is that voters have quadratic loss functions, meaning that as the proposed policy gets more distant from their ideal point, they evaluate that policy disproportionately more negatively. For example, someone who prefers a 20% top marginal tax rate will view a move from 25%

to 30% less negatively than a move from 35% to 40%. If so, when facing a compromise, a voter who is more ideologically extreme will be less likely to support the compromise because one of its elements will involve a more significant loss (but see Broockman, 2016). In a key study, Wolak (2022) finds a significant positive relationship between ideological extremity and rejecting compromise. This hypothesis is related to loss aversion, but indicates which respondents are most likely to experience loss aversion: those whose extreme preferences mean that one part of the compromise is far from their ideal point.¹

Asymmetric Polarization. While classical models of two-party systems assume that the two parties' voters have symmetric preferences, recent work challenges this claim (see also Azari, 2016; Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016; Noel, 2016; Schlozman and Rosenfeld, 2024). Instead, Grossmann and Hopkins (2016) contends that the nature of the two parties' coalitions is different, with the Democratic Party being a coalition of diverse, policy-demanding interest groups while the Republican coalition is more homogeneous and oriented towards symbolic position-taking. If so, it is possible that Republicans—or at least a faction of them (Noel, 2016)—may be less supportive of policy compromises as the tangible policy outcomes are less valuable to them.²

Issue Publics and Political Engagement. Even if loss aversion doesn't operate widely through the public, it may explain attitudes among the smaller subset of people who are highly knowledgeable and engaged on a specific issue. Commonly termed “issue publics” (Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023), these groups have significant knowledge on a given issue—and may also have preferences that depart from those of the public generally (Anzia, 2022; Hill, 2022).³ Those with pre-existing conditions who rely on the Affordable Care Act for health insurance may be especially averse to its repeal, for example. Here, the hypothesis holds that those who stand to lose on an issue they deem important will be disproportionately likely to reject compromise.

A related possibility is that those who are more engaged with politics may have different preferences about compromise, especially if their political engagement is more expressive than instrumental in motivation (Hersh, 2020). For example, Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020) shows that while primary voters as a whole do not punish legislators for compromising, primary voters who oppose particular compromises are less likely to sup-

¹A related but distinct hypothesis holds that strong partisans will be less supportive of compromises. In line with research on affective polarization, Goya-Tocchetto et al. (2022) finds that partisanship is strongly correlated with attributions of intentionality in policy trade-offs: strong Democrats view the inevitable yet unintended consequences of Republican-led policy trade-offs as intentional, and vice versa. In turn, perceptions of intentionality are related to the likelihood of supporting the trade-off. However, analyzing proclivity for political compromise in the abstract, Wolak (2022) finds no relationship with partisanship's strength.

²Alternately, if one party's adherents prove more ideologically constrained than the other's, that heightened constraint may reduce the fraction of cross-pressured voters who are supportive of a given compromise (Lelkes and Sniderman (2016); but see Lupton, Myers and Thornton (2017)).

³These ideas are closely related to the typology of Wilson (1973) focusing on whether costs/benefits to a given policy are concentrated or diffuse.

port politicians who compromise on those issues. If this hypothesis holds, there is a related question about the forms of political behavior that predict the propensity to reject compromises. Kujala (2020) finds that major-party nominees to the U.S. House of Representatives are more responsive to donors than to either primary or general-election voters. If the highly engaged are more opposed to compromise, donors might represent a channel through which politicians learn that. By contrast, people who engage in direct voter persuasion efforts may become less polarized and more supportive of compromise (Kalla and Broockman, 2022).

Research Design

Table 2: Breakdown of Surveys

Survey	Dates	Sample Method	Target Pop.	N	Explanatory variables
NORC (2023)	June 28, 2023 to July 14, 2023	Stratified sampling from AmeriSpeak Panel (probability-based panel recruited through address-based sampling)	Nat'l	1,540	Issue position measures Open-ended responses
YouGov (2023)	November 17, 2023 to November 27, 2023	Compensated opt-in online panel	Nat'l	1,500	Political engagement Ideology measures
YouGov (2021)	April 23rd to April 29th, 2021	Compensated opt-in online panel	Nat'l, Activists	1,110	Most important issues
Civiqs (2020)	October 17th to October 21st, 2021	Uncompensated opt-in online panel	PA	1,557	
Civiqs (2021)	December 9th to December 14th	Uncompensated opt-in online panel	PA	1,623	

As detailed in the Materials and Methods section below, we assess support for cross-issue compromises by asking respondents to five separate surveys (2020-2023) to evaluate compromises which involve one liberal policy and one conservative policy, with the policies randomly drawn from two lists but constrained to be from different domains. The NORC survey employed a population-based sample drawn via address-based sampling and administered online and by phone, while the YouGov 2023 survey drew online panelists to match English-speaking U.S. adults on core demographics. The YouGov 2021 survey explicitly sampled political activists while the 2020 and 2021 Civiqs surveys of online Pennsylvania adults had many highly engaged respondents as well (Hopkins and Gorton, 2023).

Due to survey space limitations, we were not able to include every question of interest on each survey instrument, so combining data from five separate surveys allows us to test various hypotheses. Table 2 describes the samples for each survey alongside the dates of administration and question batteries unique to that survey. Meanwhile, Table 3 lists the issues employed by survey. To reduce the threat that status quo biases might confound our results, all the proposed policies reflect shifts away from the current status quo.

Table 3: Support for Compromises across All Studies

Policy Area	Study	Conservative Policy	Support for Conservative Policy	Liberal Policy	Support for Liberal Policy
Healthcare	YouGov Avitivist '21	Repeal Obamacare	40.95	Medicare for all	51.77
	Civiqs PA 2020		18.92		24.62
	Civiqs PA 2021		16.35		43.75
	NORC '23	43.22	54.29		
	YouGov '23	42.21	62.70		
Abortion	YouGov Avitivist '21	Make abortion illegal	43.12	Access to abortion nationwide	46.61
	Civiqs PA 2020		18.07		22.81
	Civiqs PA 2021		17.94		33.23
	NORC '23		24.63		51.63
	YouGov '23		32.03		53.74
Immigration	YouGov Avitivist '21	Deport immigrants without authorization	50.11	Immigrants without authorization legalized	43.60
	Civiqs PA 2020		29.59		18.54
	Civiqs PA 2021		40.90		21.54
	NORC '23		49.23		41.94
	YouGov '23		51.82		41.62
Environment	YouGov Avitivist '21	Eliminate regulations on power plant emissions and cars' gas mileage standards	33.02	Carbon tax that would increase electricity and gas prices	45.60
	Civiqs PA 2020		15.83		16.44
	Civiqs PA 2021	Complete new pipeline projects such as Keystone and Line 3 and reduced restrictions on fracking	41.86	Increase taxes on fossil fuels	18.54
	NORC '23	Increase drilling and mining for fossil fuels	46.67		35.79
	YouGov '23		52.69		43.27
Voting	YouGov Avitivist '21	Valid photo ID requirement for state and federal elections	65.74	Eligible citizens registered to vote	45.38
	NORC '23		64.59		44.70
	YouGov '23		68.37		45.78

Note: “Support for Conservative Policy” gives the average percent of support for proposals containing a conservative position for a given policy area. “Support for Liberal Policy” gives the average percent of support for proposals containing a liberal position for a given policy area.

Results

Table 3 reports the overall results by survey and compromise element. The lowest levels of support are commonly observed among the online Pennsylvania panelists, where median levels of support are between 18.5% and 22.2% depending on whether they are grouped by the conservative side or the liberal one. However, the compromises tend to fare much better among the population-based NORC sample, where median support for compromises’ conservative side is 46.7% while for the liberal side it is 44.7%. The 2023 YouGov survey returns similar results, with median levels of support for compromises of 51.8% (conservative side) or 45.8% (liberal side). Overall, in the surveys with broader sampling frames, support for compromises proves reasonably high, with a variety of compromises winning majority support.

Loss Aversion

To assess whether these results are unexpectedly high or low, we need to compare how policies do as part of a bundle relative to the levels of support for their constituent elements. Table 4 illustrates levels of support for a compromise for NORC respondents who separately reported their support or opposition to the compromise’s components. (For the same results grouped by the liberal policies, see Supplemental Information (SI) Table S4.) Overall, respondents who support both constituent elements of a compromise support the resulting compromise between 75% to 87% of the time, depending on the issue. Meanwhile, those who support

one of the two policies support the compromise only 18% to 44% of the time, and those who support neither policy support the compromise between 7% and 23% of the time.

	Support Both Policies	Support One Policy	Support Neither Policy
Healthcare, Cons.	0.75	0.28	0.21
Abortion, Cons.	0.75	0.18	0.08
Immigration, Cons.	0.79	0.36	0.13
Climate, Cons.	0.85	0.34	0.07
Voting, Cons.	0.87	0.44	0.23

Table 4: Support for Compromise by Support for Its Elements. (NORC, n=1664)

If respondents are loss averse, we expect them to reject cross-issue compromises more often than they accept them when their issue-specific attitudes indicate that they should be indifferent. That is exactly what Table 4 reports: across all issues, respondents who support only one side of the compromise are more likely to reject such compromises than accept them. Consistent with loss aversion, individuals are more likely to reject a compromise when they oppose both of its constituent elements than they are to accept a compromise when they support both of its constituent elements, an asymmetry Figure 1 illustrates. In Figure 1, we see precisely the non-linearity that we would expect given loss aversion.⁴

Moral Issues

Among the issues we study, abortion stands out as a moralized issue—prior research finds that abortion primes moral considerations (Pew Research Institute, 2013). Tables 3 and 4 report low levels of support for compromises involving conservative abortion policies, raising a question: is it due to unwillingness to compromise on a moral issue or just the low levels of support for these specific abortion policies? To answer that question, Figures S1 and S2 in the SI present the results by levels of support for a specific policy (x-axes) and compromises involving that policy (y-axis) separately for in-party and out-party compromises. In Figure S1 in the SI, we see that Democrats’ support for compromises involving unrestricted abortion is almost exactly on the 45-degree line, indicating that it is neither higher nor lower than we would expect given that Democrats’ average level of support for the underlying policy is 3.39. The same is true with respect to Republicans and banning abortion: support for the underlying policy is 2.59 and for compromises that involve it is 2.54. Meanwhile, Figure S2 in the SI illustrates that while support for compromises involving an abortion ban is quite low among Democrats, that’s because support for the underlying policy itself is very low (1.39). Thus, there is little evidence that compromises involving abortion are unique in the strength of the opposition once we account for the opposition to the underlying policies.

⁴We confirm this formally via linear regression, which indicates that the coefficient for an indicator variable of supporting one policy is 0.19 (SE=0.02) while coefficient for supporting two is 0.68 (SE=0.03). That is meaningfully different from a linear relationship, in which case the second coefficient should be approximately 0.38.

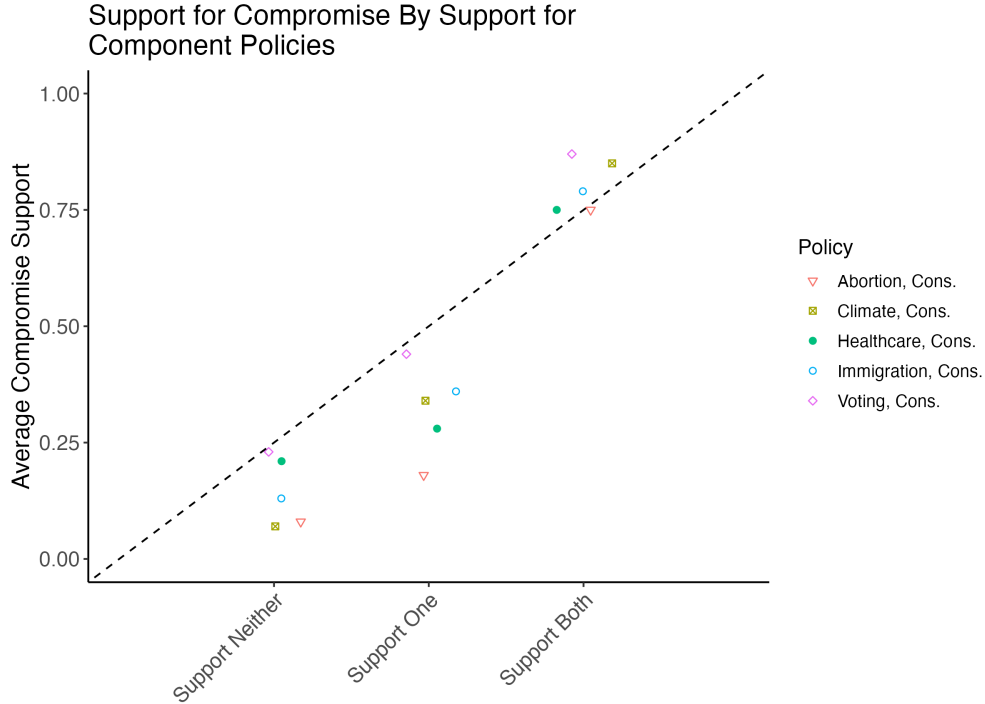


Figure 1: Support for compromise by support for constituent elements. Figure S7 plots the corresponding results for liberal positions.

Ideological Extremity

One possibility is that those on the ideological extremes may be less likely to support compromises, perhaps because the “losses” in our experimental set-up often involve moving one policy far from their preferred position. Figure 2 illustrates support for compromises in the 2023 YouGov survey by respondents’ self-reported ideology. Those who term themselves “moderate” are slightly more supportive of compromise (mean=2.44) compared to both those who are very liberal (mean=2.37) and those who are very conservative (mean=2.28). While the moderate-very conservative difference is statistically significant ($p=0.04$), the moderate-very liberal difference is not ($p=0.38$).⁵ There is some evidence moderates are more supportive of compromises, but its substantive magnitude is limited.

Asymmetric Polarization

Another prospect to consider is asymmetries in the parties, wherein Republicans (or perhaps pro-Trump Republicans; Noel (2016)) may be especially averse to compromise (Grossmann and Hopkins, 2016; McCarty, 2019). Figure 2 hints in that direction, with very conservative respondents being somewhat less supportive of compromise than those in other groups. In Figure 3, we illustrate levels of support for compromise separately for respondents who identify as pure independents, Republicans (including leaners), and Democrats (including

⁵P-values from two-sided t-tests.

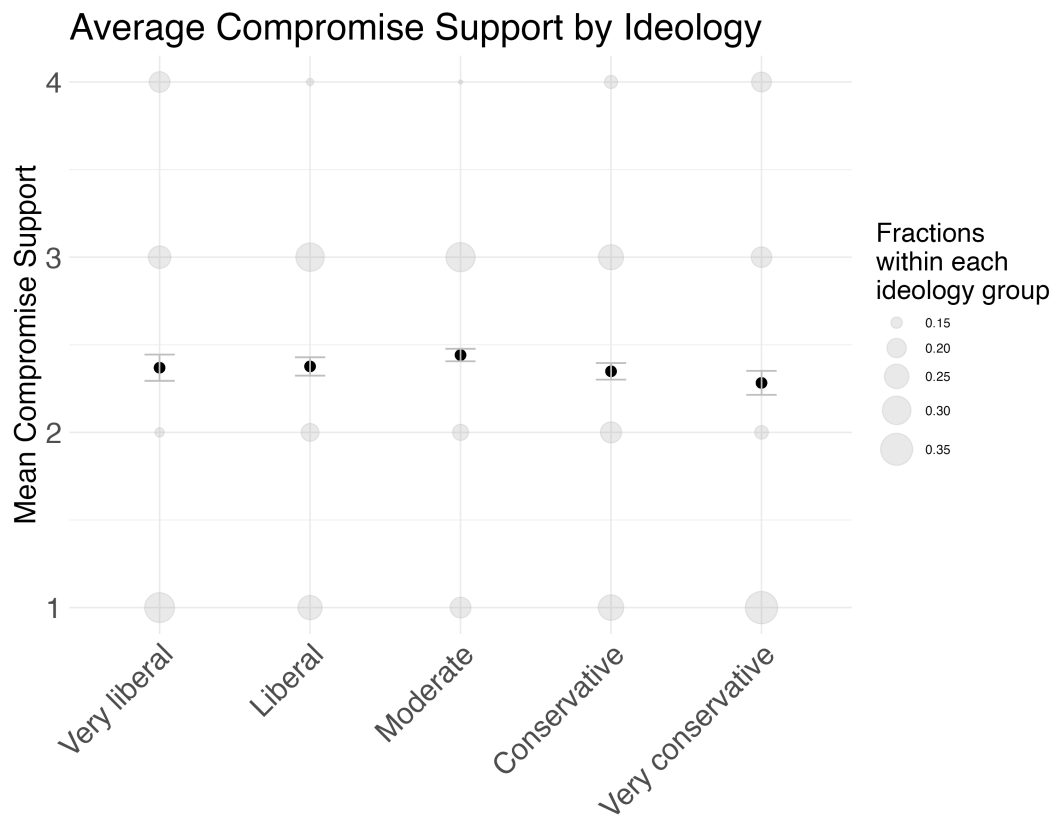


Figure 2: Average Compromise Support by Ideology. YouGov, 2023. (n=2682)

Support for Compromise By Partisanship

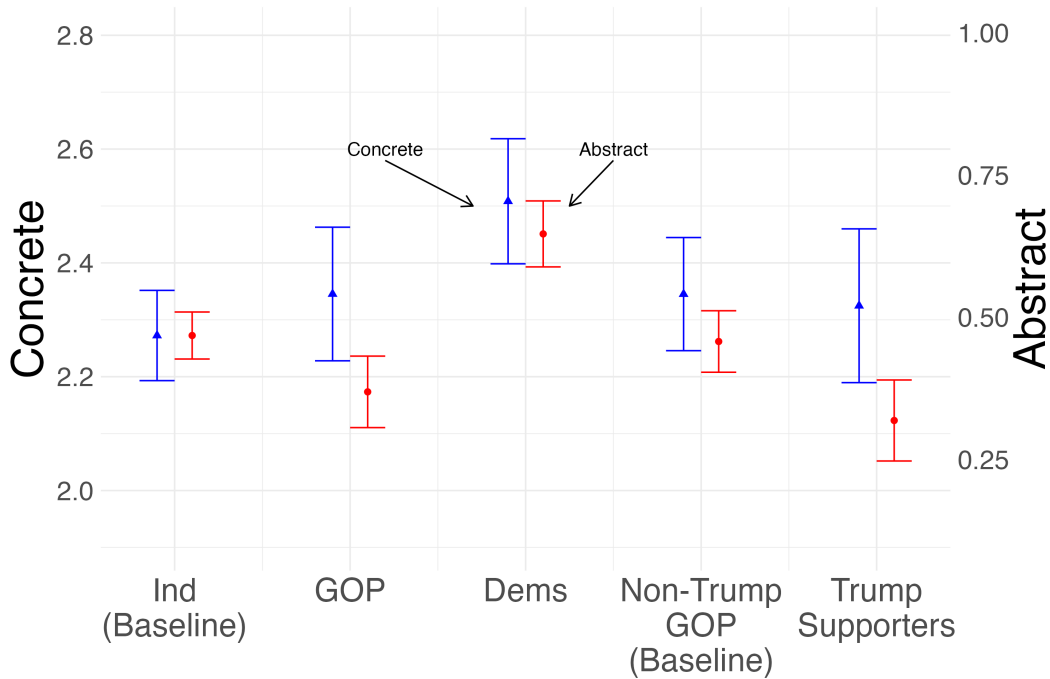


Figure 3: Support for compromise by partisanship. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level. Abstract all: $n=2994$, GOP subset $n=1438$. Concrete all: $n=2472$, GOP subset $n=1203$.

leaners), as well as for pro-Trump and other Republicans.

The red circles indicate support for abstract compromise, as measured via a question asking about respondents' preference for politicians who seek compromise versus sticking to their principles (Noel, 2016). Here, there are meaningful partisan differences, with Democrats 0.18 higher on the binary measure on average (95% CI 0.12 – 0.24). Pro-Trump Republicans score lower than other Republicans by -0.14 (95% CI -0.21 – -0.07).

But if we only assess support for abstract compromise, we risk mischaracterizing respondents' preferences. As Figure 3's blue triangles illustrate, the cross-party differences in support for concrete compromises are quite muted and statistically indistinguishable. For example, Democrats score only 0.24 higher than independents on a 1-4 Likert scale (95% CI 0.13 – 0.35), roughly half the effect observed in the abstract support for compromise when rescaling. Likewise, there is no discernible difference between Republicans and independents as far as concrete compromises are concerned. Nor is there a difference between pro-Trump Republicans and other Republicans.

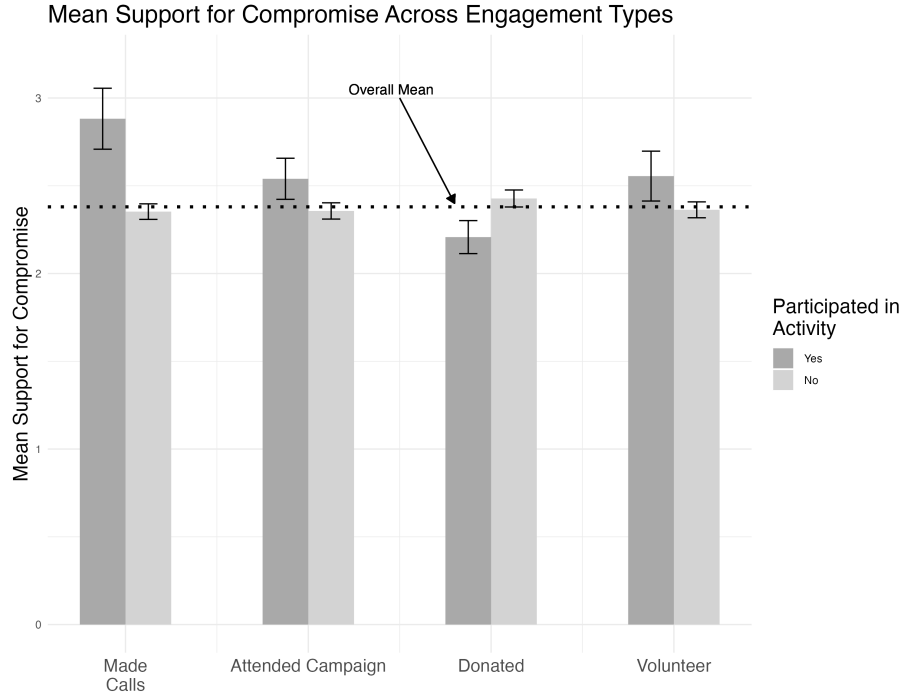


Figure 4: YouGov, 2023. (Called, n=146. Attended campaign, n=338. Donated, n=572. Volunteered, n=234.)

Issue Publics and Political Engagement

On a given issue, it’s possible that the subset of Americans who are informed on that issue might prove especially loss-averse (see also Ryan and Ehlinger, 2023). We test this possibility in SI Table S6 by using the YouGov 2021 data to examine whether respondents who feel strongly about an issue are less likely to support a compromise on that issue.⁶ The results indicate that they do: respondents’ support for compromise on a 1-4 scale drops by between 0.37 (modeled with demographics; 95% CI from -0.52 to -0.22) and 0.46 (modeled without demographics; 95% CI from -0.65 to -0.29) when it involves an element which is opposed by their party on the issue they separately rated as most important. The results are slightly smaller but substantively similar when looking at issues that respondents rank as among their four most important. Loss aversion may be especially pronounced for the subset of people who stand to lose on an issue they consider a top priority (see also Hill, 2022).

A related possibility is that contemporary Americans who are heavily politically engaged may differ from others in various respects—they may be less instrumental and more expressive in their political engagement (Hersh, 2020). To test that prospect, Figure 4 presents the average support for concrete compromises among YouGov 2023 respondents who reported making campaign calls, attending a campaign rally, donating to a campaign, or volunteering for a campaign. There is considerable heterogeneity in support for compromise by type of political engagement. In particular, those who donate are less supportive of compromise

⁶In research published after we fielded our surveys, Ryan and Ehlinger (2023) argues for an alternative measure of issue publics.

(mean=2.21) relative to those who do not (mean=2.43)—the difference is 0.22 (95% CI from 0.18 to 0.24). By contrast, those who make calls are more supportive of compromises than others by a difference of -0.53 (95% CI from -0.56 to -0.51), and the same is true of those who volunteered (difference of -0.20; 95% CI from -0.24 to -0.18). Forms of engagement that involve interacting with voters seem to be positively associated with compromise while donations are not.⁷ As SI Figure S3 demonstrates, the patterns are quite different when respondents are asked about support for politicians who support compromise abstractly, reinforcing that that measure is quite distinctive.

Conclusion

In November 2023, Congressional Republicans announced that they would only support additional U.S. aid to Ukraine if it was coupled with measures to improve border security and reduce immigration. However, negotiations on a joint package broke down in February 2024, and the U.S. House of Representatives passed Ukraine aid without any movement on immigration in April 2024. The attempted cross-issue compromise had failed.

What role does public opinion play in the failure of such cross-issue compromises? This paper uses five surveys, including a population-based NORC survey, to investigate Americans' support for concrete, cross-issue compromises. It finds substantial public backing for such compromises while also uncovering evidence that loss aversion limits their support. Consistent with Anderson, Butler and Harbridge-Yong (2020), it finds that there is heightened opposition to compromise among some groups of highly engaged respondents. In this case, donors prove especially opposed to compromise, as do those who would lose on an issue they rank as very important.

These results have methodological implications. Levels of support for cross-dimensional compromises were much lower in the uncompensated Civiqs surveys, which indicates that sampling frames can matter—and that the respondents who are most eager to provide their opinions hold views which may not be representative of others. Also, these results uncover important differences between support for concrete compromises and for politicians who tend to back compromise in the abstract. It is possible that the abstract question taps intra-party divisions or symbolic orientations that aren't closely related to support for tangible compromises (see esp. Noel, 2016).

In an era when the connections between voters and politicians are often tenuous (Azari, 2016; Schlozman and Rosenfeld, 2024), these results help explain the role of public opinion in contemporary America's levels of legislative gridlock. Loss aversion is at work. Even while some compromises win majority support, opposition is concentrated among donors and issue publics, two of the groups that are especially likely to be visible to politicians.

⁷These findings persist in regression models which control for respondents' ideology, indicating that they are not driven by the association identified earlier between ideological extremity and reduced support for compromise.

Materials and Methods

We administered five surveys to assess respondents’ views on hypothetical cross-issue compromises. These surveys differ in their sampling frames and timing as well as the inclusion of other survey items. In each survey, we presented two proposed cross-issue compromises. Each proposal included a pair of policies, one liberal and one conservative, drawn without replacement from five issue areas (health care, immigration, abortion, voting access, and the environment/energy).⁸ SI Table S1 details the question wording. Our quantities of interest are sample estimates, so we do not employ survey weights. Our surveys did not include attention checks.

The 2023 NORC survey was drawn from AmeriSpeak, a panel of U.S. adults composed of individuals recruited through “randomly selected households... sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Frame and address-based sample, and then contacted by U.S. mail and by NORC telephone and field interviewers” (*Panel Design*, N.d.). The total sample was 1,540, and the survey was administered between June 28th and July 14th. This survey asked respondents about their support for the specific items included in each compromise separately as well as the compromises themselves.

The 2023 YouGov survey was administered between November 17th and 27th to a sample of 1,579 Americans drawn to be representative of the adult population on key demographics. This survey assessed various forms of political engagement alongside support for the hypothetical compromises.

The 2021 YouGov survey was administered between April 23rd and April 29th to a sample of 1,110 party activists (see also Hopkins and Noel, 2022).⁹

Between October 17th and 21st, 2021, we conducted an online, opt-in survey with 1,577 Pennsylvania residents recruited by Civiqs to take brief polls for free (Hopkins and Gorton, 2023). We then administered another survey via Civiqs between December 9th and 14th, 2021. It included a total of 1,623 Pennsylvania residents, 1,005 of whom had participated in the previous Civiqs survey.

⁸The 2021 YouGov activist survey did not include voting access.

⁹To qualify, respondents had to meet one of two thresholds. The first was to report having done two political activities in the preceding four years: having donated to a candidate; attended a campaign event; volunteered for a political campaign; or made phone calls for a campaign. The second was to report having ever: been a paid staffer for a campaign or elected official; been a candidate for office; or held a position in a political party.

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Supplemental Information

Table S1: Compromise experiment prompt wording across the surveys. In NORC 2023, the order of the conservative and liberal policies was randomized.

Survey	Phrasing
YouGov (2023)	Republicans and Democrats in Washington, DC disagree on many issues, but there are also some compromises they might agree to. Please tell us if you support or oppose the proposal described assuming it would be fully enacted. What if the proposed compromise meant that CONSERVATIVE POLICY and also that LIBERAL POLICY?
NORC (2023)	Republicans and Democrats in Washington, DC disagree on many issues, but there are also some compromises they might agree to. Please tell us if you support or oppose the proposal described assuming it would be fully enacted. What if the proposed compromise meant that CONSERVATIVE/LIBERAL POLICY and also that CONSERVATIVE/LIBERAL POLICY?
PA Panel (2021)	Republicans and Democrats in Washington, DC disagree on many issues, but there are also some compromises they might agree to. Please tell us if you support or oppose the proposal described assuming it would be fully enacted. What if the proposed compromise meant that CONSERVATIVE POLICY and also that LIBERAL POLICY?
PA Panel (2020)	Republicans and Democrats in Washington, DC disagree on many issues, but there are also some compromises they might agree to. Please tell us if you support or oppose the proposal described assuming it would be fully enacted. What if the proposed compromise meant that CONSERVATIVE POLICY and also that LIBERAL POLICY?
YouGov Activists (2021)	Republicans and Democrats in Washington, DC disagree on many issues, but there are also some compromises they might agree to. Below, we are going to provide you with a few potential compromises. For each, please tell us if you support or oppose the proposal described assuming it would be fully enacted. What if the proposed compromise meant that CONSERVATIVE POLICY and also that LIBERAL POLICY?

Table S2: Exact Wordings for All Studies

Policy Area	Study	Conservative Policy	Support for Conservative Policy	Liberal Policy	Support for Liberal Policy
Healthcare	YG/Activists	the 2010 health reform law known as “Obamacare” was repealed in full	40.95	the Medicare health insurance program was expanded to allow all Americans to participate	51.77
	PA Panel 2020		18.92		24.62
	PA Panel 2021		16.35		43.75
	NORC	43.22	54.29		
	YouGov	42.21	62.70		
Abortion	YG/Activists	abortion became illegal nationwide	43.12	access to abortion without restrictions became legal nationwide	46.61
	PA Panel 2020		18.07		22.81
	PA Panel 2021		17.94		33.23
	NORC		24.63		51.63
	YouGov		32.03		53.74
Immigration	YG/Activists	Immigrants in the U.S. without authorization were deported to their countries of origin	50.11	immigrants in the U.S. without authorization were able to become legal residents and later citizens	43.60
	PA Panel 2020		29.59		18.54
	PA Panel 2021		40.90		21.54
	NORC		49.23		41.94
	YouGov		51.82		41.62
Environment	YG/Activists	the U.S. eliminated all regulations on power plant emissions and cars’ gas mileage standards	33.02	the U.S. imposed a tax on carbon which would increase electricity and gas prices to reduce emissions that cause climate change	45.60
	PA Panel 2020		15.83		16.44
	PA Panel 2021	the U.S. completed new pipeline projects such as Keystone and Line 3 and reduced restrictions on fracking to reduce energy prices	41.86	the U.S. increased taxes on all fossil fuels, gasoline, coal, and natural gas to encourage conservation and the use of alternative energy sources	18.54
	NORC	the U.S. increased drilling and mining for fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas on public lands	46.67		35.79
	YouGov		52.69		43.27
Voting	YG/Activists	All voters were required to show a valid photo identification in all state and federal elections	65.74	all eligible American citizens were automatically registered to vote	45.38
	NORC		64.59		44.70
	YouGov		68.37		45.78

Table S3: Question wordings for the issue positions. All respondents were presented with each of the questions, and were asked to respond on a Likert scale with the options: “Strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” and “strongly disagree.”

Issue	Conservative	Liberal
Healthcare	Do you support or oppose work requirements for all adults receiving health insurance through the Medicaid program?	Do you support or oppose expanding the Medicare health insurance program to allow all Americans to participate?
Abortion	Do you support or oppose making abortion illegal nationwide?	Do you support or oppose making access to abortion without restrictions legal nationwide?
Immigration	Do you support or oppose deporting all immigrants in the U.S. without authorization to their countries of origin?	Do you support or oppose allowing all immigrants in the U.S. without authorization to become legal residents and later citizens?
Environment	Do you support or oppose the U.S. increasing drilling and mining for fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas on public lands?	Do you support or oppose the U.S. increasing taxes on all fossil fuels, gasoline, coal, and natural gas to encourage conservation and the use of alternative energy sources?
Voting	Do you support or oppose requiring all voters to show a valid photo identification in all state and federal elections?	Do you support or oppose automatic voter registration for all eligible American citizens?

	Support Both Policies	Support One Policy	Support Neither Policy
Healthcare, Liberal	0.88	0.35	0.16
Abortion, Liberal	0.81	0.36	0.15
Immigration, Liberal	0.77	0.34	0.10
Climate, Liberal	0.71	0.30	0.12
Voting, Liberal	0.82	0.26	0.13

Table S4: Compromise Support by Underlying Policy Views (NORC, n=1,664).

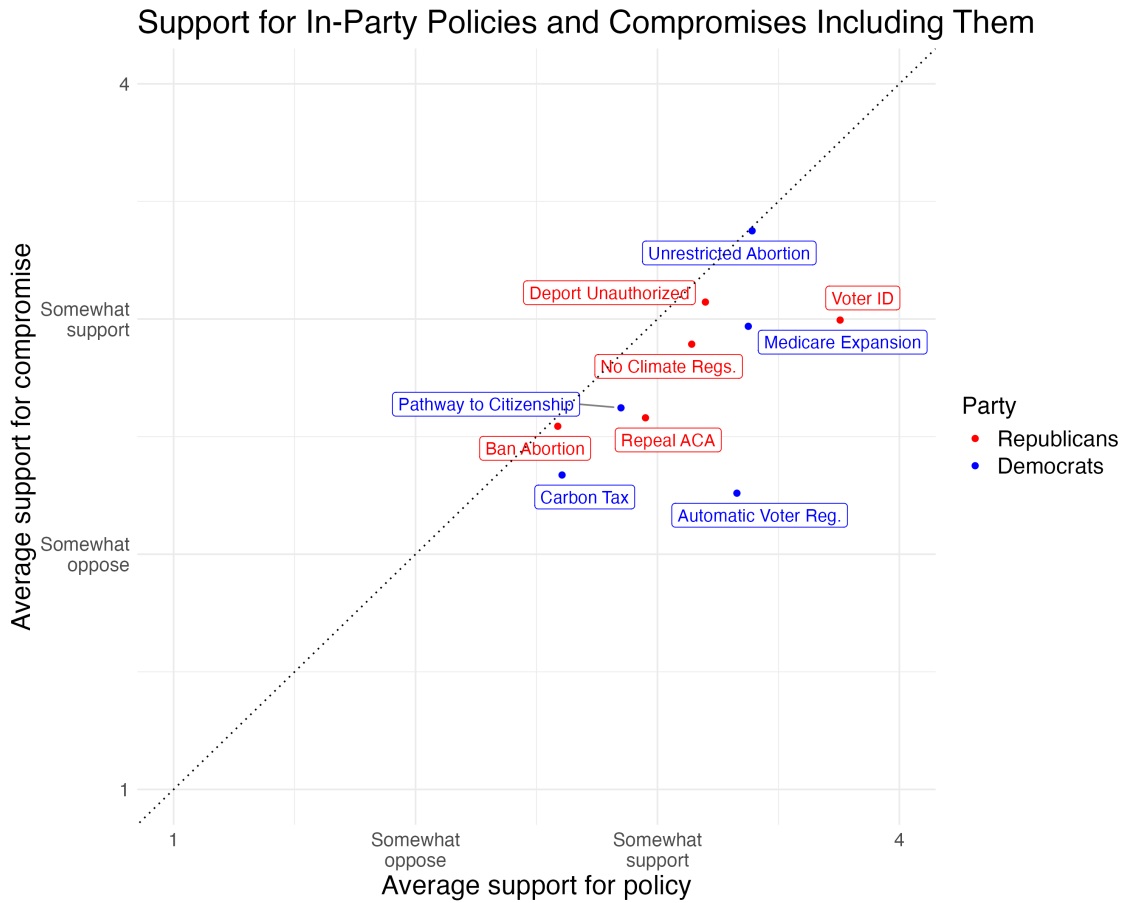
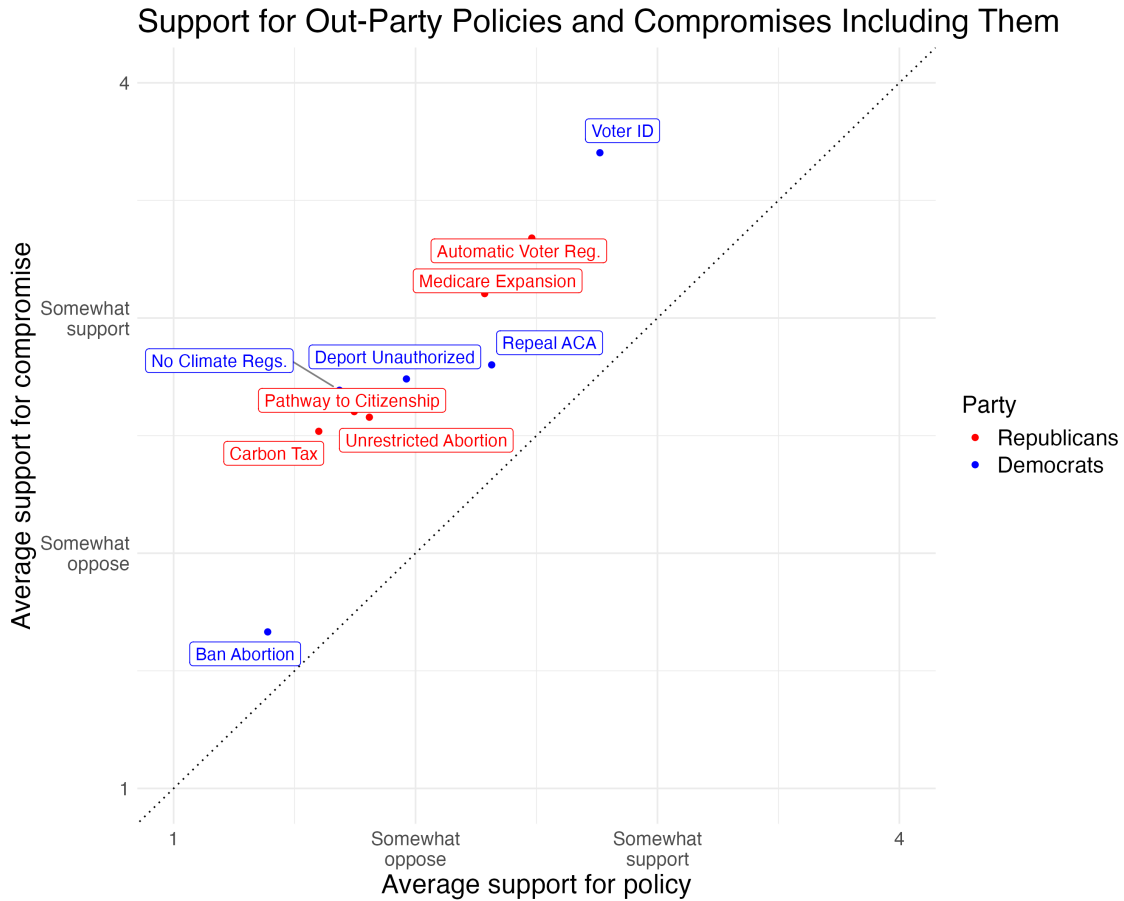


Figure S1: NORC, 2023. (n=2730).

	Model 1	Model 2
Donated	-0.21* [-0.34; -0.08]	-0.26* [-0.42; -0.10]
Republicans	-0.05 [-0.16; 0.06]	
Donated × Republicans	-0.06 [-0.35; 0.22]	
Democrats		0.22* [0.11; 0.33]
Donated × Democrats		0.03 [-0.20; 0.26]
(Intercept)	2.44* [2.38; 2.51]	2.35* [2.29; 2.42]
R ²	0.01	0.02
Clustered standard errors	✓	✓
N Clusters	1316	1316
N	2472	2472

* Null hypothesis value outside the confidence interval.

Table S5: OLS model predicting support for compromise with Republican (Model 1) and Democratic (Model 2) interaction effects. YouGov, 2023.



25
Figure S2: NORC, 2023. (n=2730).

Political Engagement and Support for Compromise

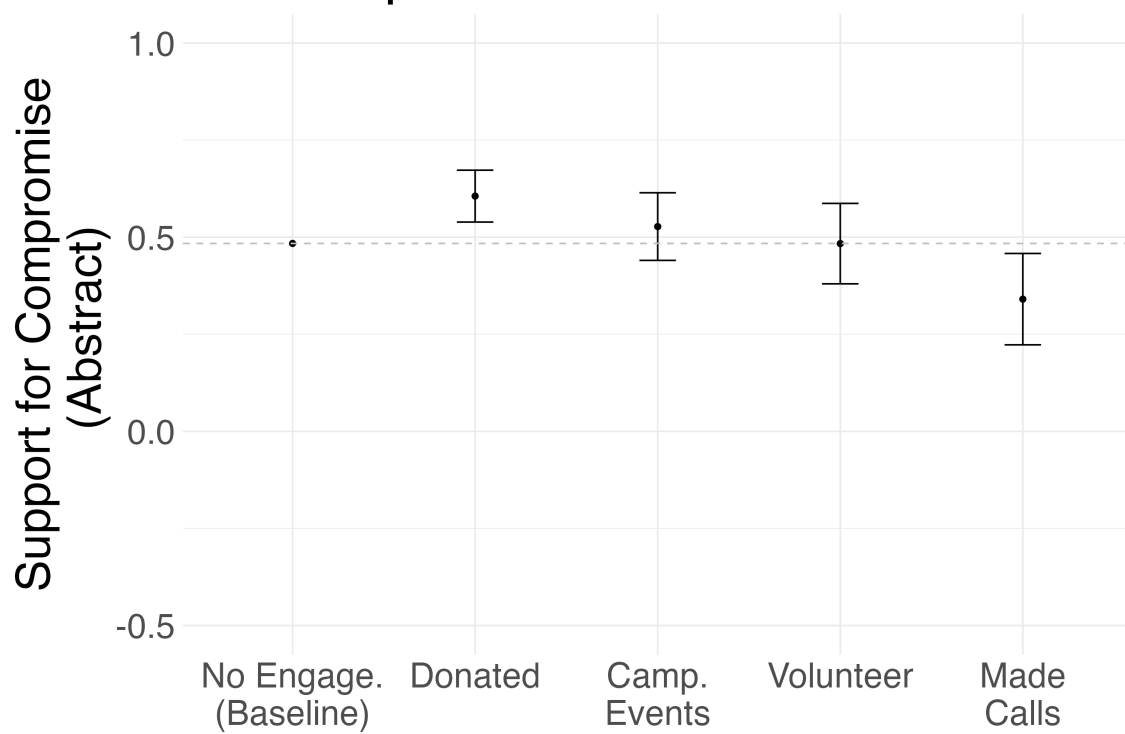


Figure S3: Abstract support for compromise by political engagement. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level. YouGov, 2023. (n=2994).

Political Engagement and Support for Compromise

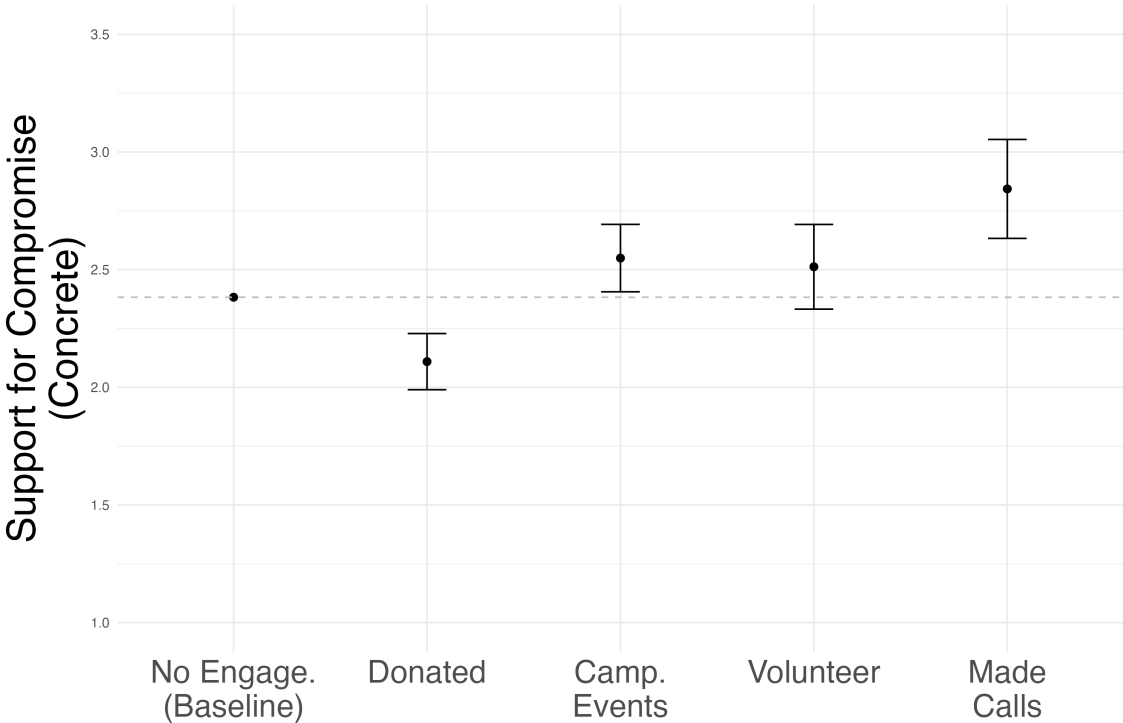


Figure S4: Mean support for compromise by political engagement, excluding "not sure" as middle category. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level. YouGov, 2023. (n=2472).

Political Engagement and Support for Compromise

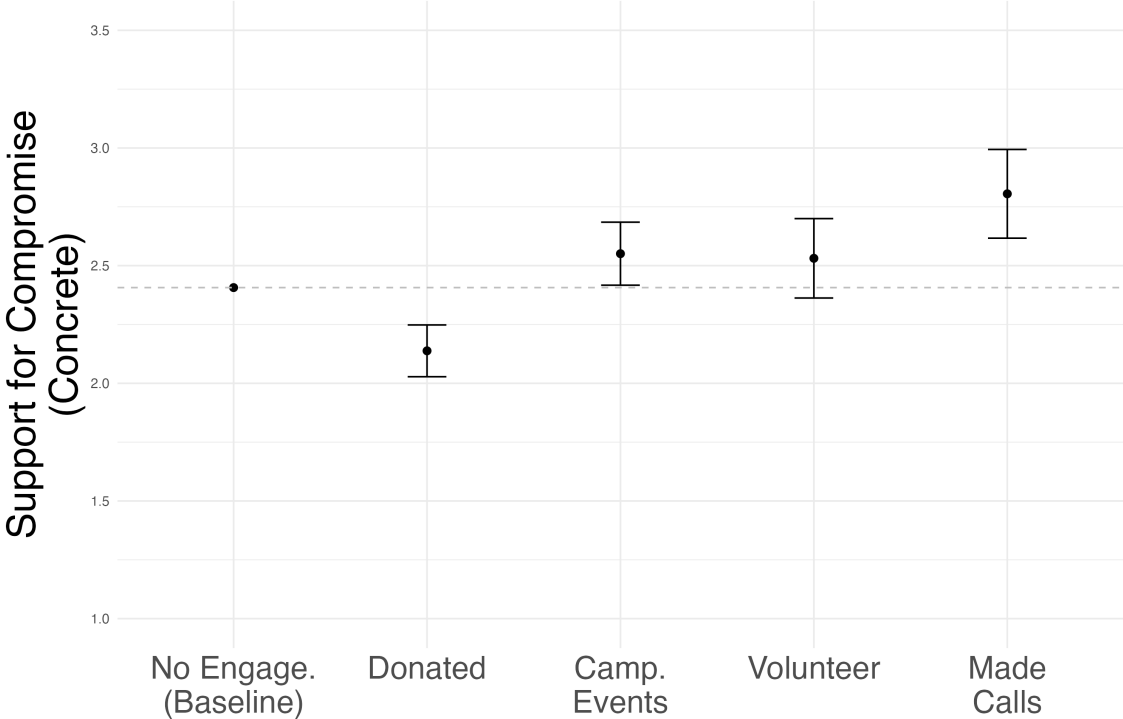


Figure S5: Mean support for compromise by political engagement, including "not sure" as middle category. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level. YouGov, 2023. (n=2989).

Political Engagement and Support for Compromise

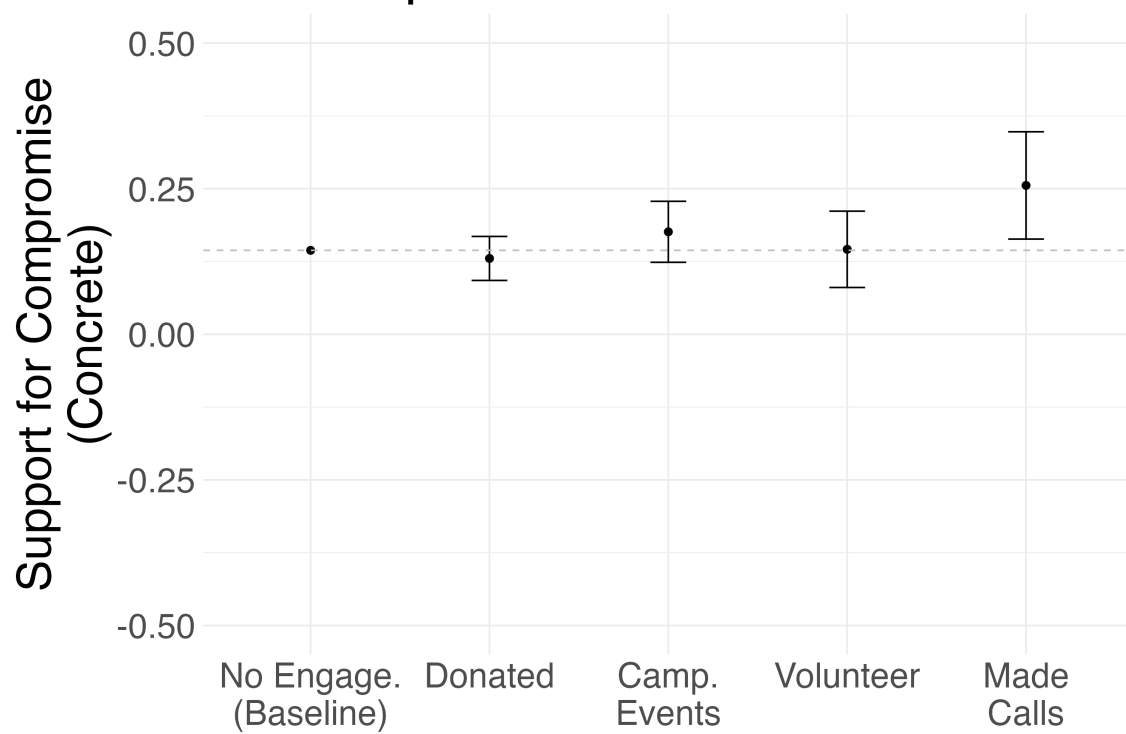


Figure S6: Mean support for compromise by political engagement, using a binary indicator for support. Clustered standard errors at the respondent level. YouGov, 2023. (n=2989).

	Top 1 Issue			Top 4 Issue		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Supportive, Top 1 Issue	-0.052 [-0.235; 0.131]	-0.032 [-0.115; 0.051]	0.166 [-0.010; 0.342]			
Opposed, Top 1 Issue	-0.464* [-0.639; -0.289]	-0.163* [-0.236; -0.090]	-0.368* [-0.519; -0.217]			
Supportive, Top 4 Issue				-0.061 [-0.189; 0.066]	-0.012 [-0.070; 0.046]	0.114 [-0.006; 0.233]
Opposed, Top 4 Issue				-0.420* [-0.546; -0.294]	-0.162* [-0.218; -0.107]	-0.329* [-0.440; -0.219]
Supportive and Opposed, Top 4 Issue				-0.078 [-0.602; 0.446]	-0.116 [-0.345; 0.112]	0.310 [-0.238; 0.858]
Female			-0.153* [-0.254; -0.053]			-0.142* [-0.243; -0.042]
Education			-0.103* [-0.138; -0.068]			-0.103* [-0.138; -0.068]
Age			-0.022* [-0.025; -0.019]			-0.022* [-0.025; -0.019]
White			0.150 [-0.081; 0.381]			0.151 [-0.081; 0.382]
Black			0.477* [0.220; 0.733]			0.466* [0.208; 0.723]
Hispanic			0.137 [-0.155; 0.428]			0.139 [-0.150; 0.428]
(Intercept)	2.216* [2.064; 2.368]	0.426* [0.359; 0.493]	3.799* [3.483; 4.115]	2.240* [2.087; 2.393]	0.433* [0.365; 0.501]	3.804* [3.487; 4.120]
Two-Way Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Demographics			✓			✓
Binary		✓			✓	
R ²	0.067	0.061	0.250	0.076	0.070	0.257
N	2097	2097	2097	2097	2097	2097
N Clusters	1085	1085	1085	1085	1085	1085

* Null hypothesis value outside the confidence interval.

Table S6: OLS regression predicting support for compromise. In the columns 1, 3, 4 and 6 the outcome variable is a 1-4 support scale for compromise. In columns 2 and 4 the outcome variable is a binary support variable for compromise. Models 1, 2 and 3 look exclusively at respondents' most important issue. Models 4, 5 and 6 look at the four most important issues. All models are clustered standard errors at the respondent level. Baseline level did not see their most important issue (for Models 1, 2, 3) or their four most important issues (for Models 3, 4, 5). YG/Activists.

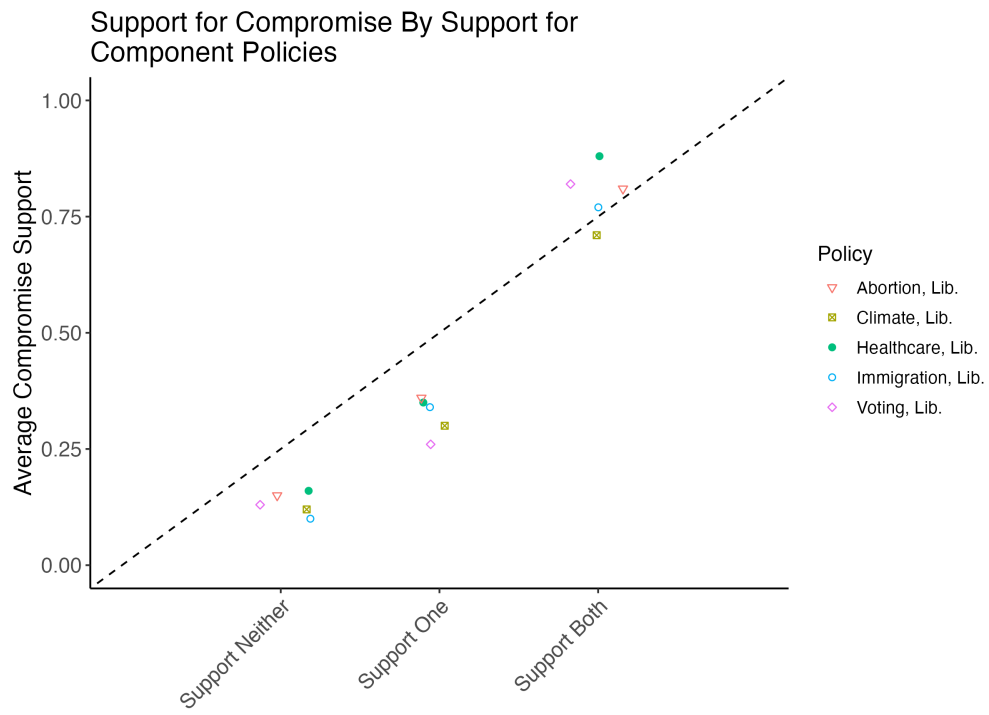


Figure S7: Support for compromise by support for constituent elements.