

Why are citizens satisfied with public policies (or not?)

Evaluation of democracy research group

Project team:

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Emiliano is Professor at Sciences Po. His research concentrates on agenda-setting and political institutions.

In addition to the LIEPP project, he is currently working on two major research projects. The first concerns conditional responsiveness in France and Germany. The other focuses on the influence of media salience on policy-making processes.

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Mirjam is Researcher at Humboldt University and at Sciences Po. Her research focuses on citizens and politics.

In addition to the LIEPP project, she is working on two major projects. The first explores causes and consequences of failing representation in Europe and changing patterns of representation in the wake of the crisis. The second investigates the interrelation of human values, inequality, alienation and resulting cross-pressures for Western democracy.

How citizens view public policies is a central issue for any government, let alone if it is a democratic government. At a time when, in France as well as in many other countries, governments are suffering from record-low popularity and confidence, the issue of voter perception of government action seems important. And yet, historically, the link between public policy and voting decision seems weak, although many theoretical models of representative democracy presupposes the existence of such a link. Beyond the issue of representation, we believe that understanding the determinants of citizens' opinions on public policy is consubstantial to the faithful and, thus, successful implementation of policymaking.

Goals of the project

The goals of this project differ from most of the existing literature on evaluation. We ask what determines the perception and judgment of citizens on the adopted and implemented policies. This relationship implies, however, several separate links and relies on fairly demanding assumptions about citizens. This project seeks to identify patterns and determinants of policy appreciation. We account for three aspects that influence policy preferences in detail.

1) Social identity, partisanship and policy appreciation

First, we refer to partisanship and show that party identification systematically and strongly determines policy preferences. For instance, voters who identify with parties on the right have similar preferences for government spending, preferring an increase in spending for security, order and the economy but a decrease in spending for social policies. Voters who feel close to leftist parties, to the contrary, prefer an increase in expenditure in most of the policy fields.

2) Self-interest, perceived issue importance and policy appreciation

Second, we account for issue publics. Our analysis shows that indeed, citizens who are directly affected by a policy (e.g. pensioners and policies that concern retirement payments) prefer a stronger increase in government spending or government activity in this particular policy field. Moreover, these groups attribute more importance to the policy in question than other parts of the electorate.

3) Media attention and policy appreciation

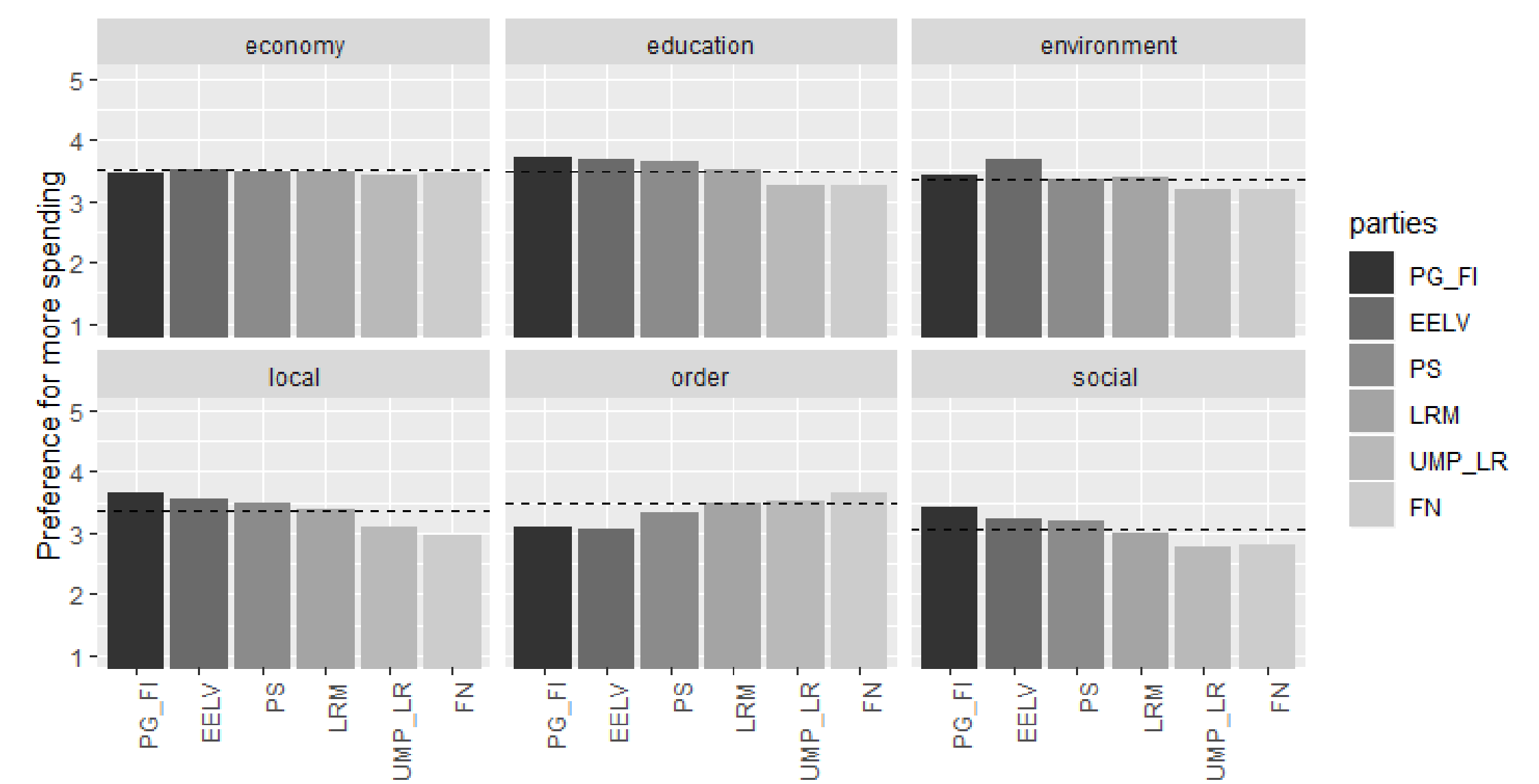
Third, our analysis addresses how citizens' issue salience and media attention moderate the impact of partisanship on policy appreciation. Our results indicate that party identity is a stronger predictor for policy preferences than citizens' issue salience. We demonstrate furthermore that media attention matters, but to diverging degrees: it influences policy preferences and, to a lesser extent, the importance that voters attribute to a policy. We conclude by discussing the implications of our study, highlighting the relevance of our findings beyond the French case and showing how our analysis might stimulate future research.

4) Data

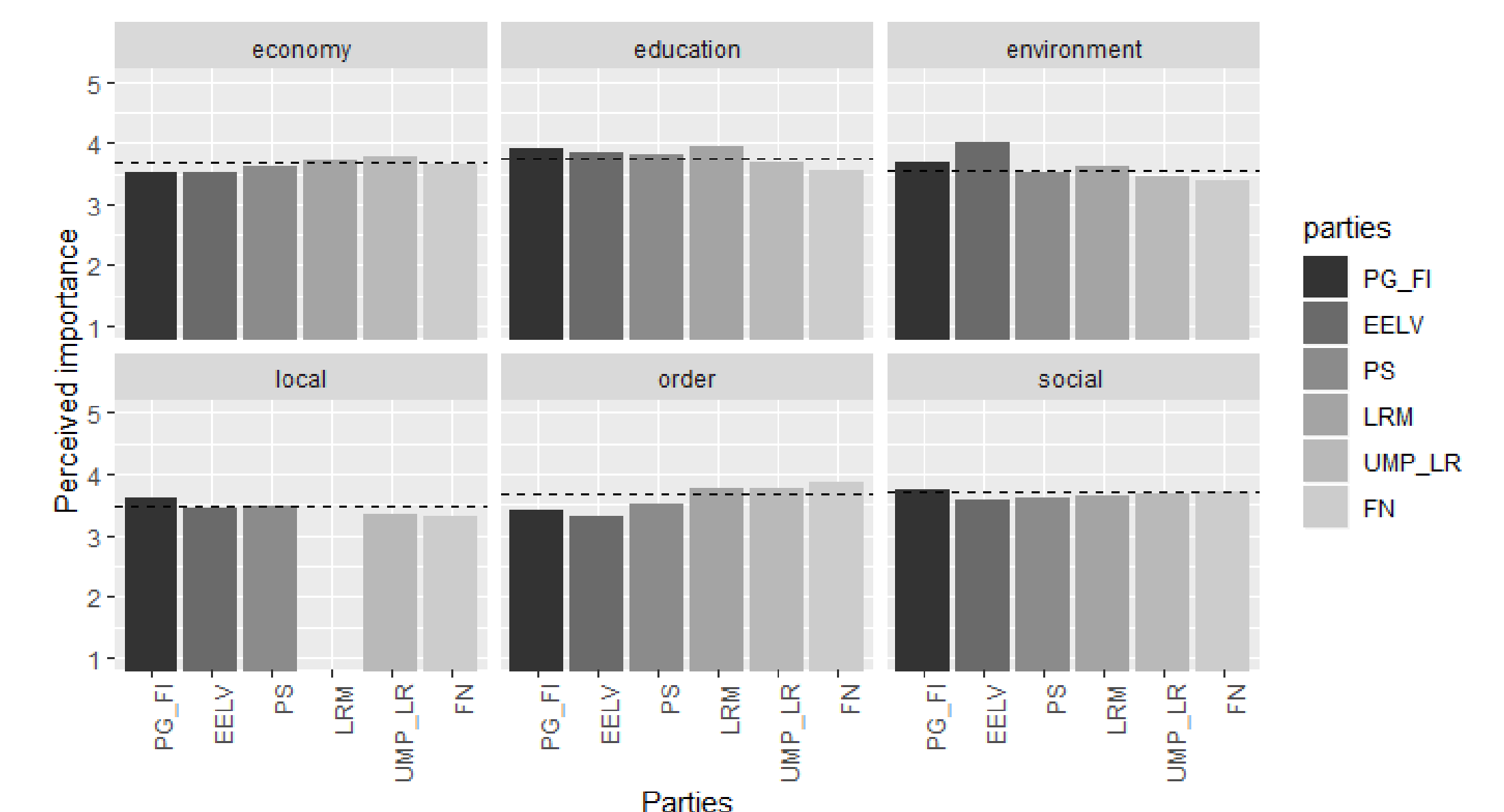
For our empirical analysis we combined nine waves of the Policy Priorities Survey (2014 – 2017). Hence, we were able to identify dynamics of policy preferences in the context of the French presidential and parliamentary elections in 2017. Our data on citizens' attitudes encompassed 13.570 respondents. In addition, we have collected data on monthly media attention in France for each of the policy issues considered in the survey. Our analysis covers media attention of the three leading national newspapers.

First results

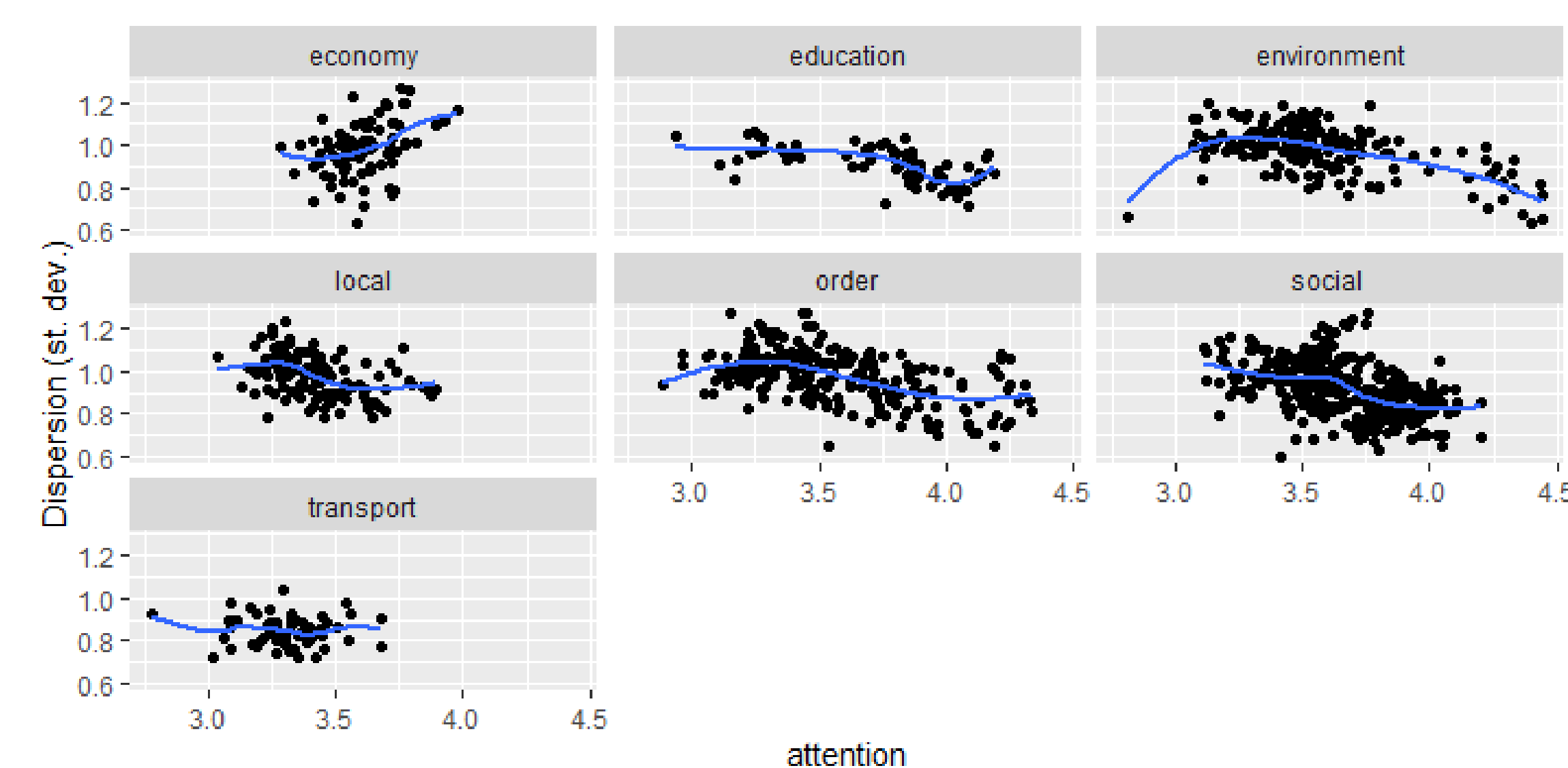
Partisanship and preferences for an increase in spending



Partisanship and perceived issue importance



Partisan agreement, citizens' issue salience and policy preferences



Media effects on policy preferences and perceived importance, by partisanship (marginal effect plots)

