Everything is important so nothing is extreme:

Individual differences in extreme political attitude formation*

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Abstract

The social psychological interpretations of extreme social and political attitude formation are mainly linked to attitude importance. Bluntly put, if something is personally relevant for the individual it is very probable that she will have a non-neutral attitude, shifting towards extremity. This extremitization process is mostly driven by additional thought and discussion about the issue. We argue in this paper that the magnitude of this extremitization process generated by personal relevance is conditional. Individuals who need small amounts of environmental stimuli to get concerned about any event (disquieted) or, similarly, those individuals who consider almost everything "important and relevant" will exhibit lower extremitization. Conversely, for those who have a selective or ordered importance allocation system, there will be a stronger relationship between importance and extremity. These expectations are tested by modeling interaction terms between issue specific importance and individual propensity to rate events as being important. Disentangling this individual rating mechanism helps in better understanding how much weight should we put on importance of an issue in spatial theories of voting.

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People see, process, understand, and evaluate identical political events in a very different manner. Among others, individual differences in reacting to political events or problems stem from personality traits (Gerber et al., 2010; Mondak et al., 2010), partisanship bias (Bartels, 2002), or different levels of political sophistication (Lachat, 2007; Pierce, 1993; Rahn et al., 1994). In essence, given various individual characteristics, individuals react to the same environmental stimuli in very different ways. Research on individual electoral behavior or political psychology considers understanding these differences as a central goal. These individual differences also shape how political attitudes are formed. Extending this argument, how strongly an individual holds a given political attitude should vary between individuals. Indeed, social psychological research focusing on various dimensions of attitude strength suggests that personal importance of an issue will determine how much an individual will deviate from the neutral political attitude or policy preference[1](Krosnick et al., 1993; Raden, 1985; Tesser, 1978). These individual differences are especially relevant if we accept the classical spatial model of voting, according to which people prefer candidates that share their issue and policy preferences (Enelow and Hinich, 1981, 1984; Downs, 1957).

The underlying process tagged as attitude extremitization can be summarized as follows: individuals perceive an issue relevant for their life, and they consider it an important issue. This realization triggers more information gathering about the issue in case, it will appear more frequently as a topic discussed with peers, and essentially the individual will *think* more about the issue at hand. This process will result in clearer issue stances that are more distant from the neutral position (Tesser, 1978; Petty and Krosnick, 1995). However, the positive relationship between attitude importance and extremity varies across issues and it is also varies across individuals (Krosnick et al., 1993; Raden, 1985). In the present paper we hypothesize that this is due to an individual level dispositional trait to see any context related external event as being relevant for one's life.

This trait should be thought of as *disquietude*, a mixture between low emotional stability and low scores on internal locus of control. Aspects linked to emotional stability cover the feeling of insecurity and concern (Eysenck, 1953; Hallam and Hinchcliffe, 1991;

[1]When issue content is not considered, personal importance is the strongest predictor of attitude extremity (Liu and Latané, 1998).

Judge and Bono, 2001), whereas the low scores on internal locus of control translate into a feeling of exposure to external factors (Ajzen, 2002; Sandler and Lakey, 1982). Disquietude has substantive implications for how people decide whether an issue is relevant for them or not: scoring high on this dispositional trait would suggest that no matter how small the personal relevance is, the subjective importance rating for any given issue will be artificially high. Simply put, for some people, everything will be important. This suggests that they do not necessarily rank the issues when it comes to importance, reporting several aspects of the political life as being equally and highly important. The same amount and quality of information may influence them differently in regarding the issue as personally relevant or not. The mechanism is analogous to the one detected in the fear literature:

> For example, people dispositionally prone to fear report experiencing more fear at a variety of points in time and across situations (Gross et al., 1998), they report higher levels of state fear in response to negative affect inductions (Gross et al., 1998), and they display more fear in the face (Keltner, 1996).
>
> Lerner and Keltner (2000), 477.

Following Boninger et al. (1995), we build a theory on how the same amount of external stimuli can influence differently the three sources of importance formation, conditional on disquietude. Understanding importance formation is — *per se* — an interesting endeavour, but the substantive implications for political policy preferences and political attitudes are much more valuable. We argue that the almost automatic relationship between attitude extremity and importance (Liu and Latané, 1998) should be nuanced. Even if an individual considers a political issue personally important, the magnitude of attitude extremititzation will differ. Thus, the strength of this attitude will also vary, and this has serious effects on how we assess individuals' political preference formation and its impact on behavior. Generally, stronger political attitudes — and implicitly, more important ones — are stronger predictors of preferences and behavior (Krosnick, 1988). Most spatial voting theories take this into account and assign bigger weights to personally more important issues in electoral behavior formation (Krosnick, 1988; Westholm, 1997b). But if the effect of personal importance varies between individuals who are different on such dispositional traits as disquietude, we might overemphasize the role of

the issues regarded as important. The present paper analyzes this hypothesis, suggesting the incorporation of additional individual level heterogeneity in models of preference and behavior formation. Furthermore, it contributes to evaluation of the extremitization process and possible between-individual differences. We test our theoretical model on the 2008 American National Election Study, focusing on the environmental issue. This US representative sample has the advantage that it includes a vast array of issue and issue importance items, making it possible to derive a good measure of disquietude.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we describe the psychological mechanisms and attitude strength related dimensions relevant for the understanding political issue preferences. Next, we formulate our hypothesis, and we then empirically model the expected conditional effect. We present the results and discuss the implications of our findings.

1 Political attitude strength: extremity and importance

Political elites are meant to govern in accordance with the voters' preferences and shape public policy by representing the views expressed by these voters. Nevertheless, not all political attitudes carry the same weight in judgement or preference formation (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Miller and Peterson, 2004). The ones that matter most are the strong attitudes. Attitude strength has thus substantive implications for political science research, because strong attitudes manifest two important qualities: `durability` and `impactfulness`. Petty and Krosnick (1995) consider `durability` as persistence throughout time and resistance to external stimuli. It has been shown that attitude stability is higher during middle adulthood than in early or late adulthood, and this curvilinear relationship might be determined by the fact that attitude importance, certainty and quantity of attitude-relevant knowledge is greater in middle adulthood (Visser and Krosnick, 1998). `Impactfulness` is also a two-faceted attribute, entailing an effect on information processing and judgment on one hand, and behavior on the other hand. Generally speaking, "attitudes influence behavior because they shape our perception of the world around us" (Petty and Krosnick, 1995). This effect on behavior or the guiding role of attitudes for judgements is bigger and more direct in the case of strong attitudes.

As previously recognized, attitude strength is a multi-dimensional construct (Boninger

et al., 1995; Miller and Peterson, 2004; Raden, 1985). Overall, ten strength related dimensions were identified and researched: extremity, affective intensity, importance, certainty, interest in relevant information, knowledge, accessibility, direct behavioral experience, latitudes of rejection and non-commitment, and affective-cognitive consistency (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985). A relatively straight forward categorization[2] groups these ten dimensions into 4 broader sets: (1) aspects of the attitude (such as extremity), (2) aspects of the cognitive structure in memory (such as accessibility), (3) subjective belief about the attitude or attitude object (such as importance), and (4) cognitive processes by which an attitude is formed (such as elaboration) (Petty and Krosnick, 1995, 5). This broader categorization acknowledges that attitude importance is an inherent *subjective* belief about the attitude object, in our case various political issues. This subjective nature of the attitude strength dimension will play an important role in our further discussion. Briefly, we might already think about a simple example in which the *objective* reality would indicate a 4% inflation rate that is **known** by the individual. Even people with similar income, knowledge about the functioning of economy and ideological leanings are expected to perceive this rate[3] differently. For some, this number is a reason for concern, for some other the 4% is between the accepted bounds. Consequently, some will tag it as an extremely important issue, but others will not grant this issue any special importance. Later in this paper we will argue that this is a consequence of what emotional reactions are triggered and what coping mechanisms are perceived to be available.

Returning to attitude strength, we see that these dimensions are interrelated and extensive work has been done to identify whether they reflect a single latent construct of attitude strength. This hypothesis was rejected as different effects on behavior, judgment

[2]Considering the measurement of attitude strength Bassili (1996) develops two categories of measures: `meta-attitudinal` and `operative`. The former is the reflection of subjective assessment of one's own attitudes (Bassili, 1996), whereas the latter focuses on how the "individual uses the attitude" (Miller and Peterson, 2004, 849). Meta-attitudinal measures were found to have slightly smaller predictive power for behavior, but also different effects than operative measures (Bassili, 1996; Miller and Peterson, 2004). Nevertheless, this measurement issue should not influence the present paper because in electoral and political surveys almost always — also in the present data — meta-attitudinal measures are employed.

[3]It has to be emphasized that it is not the case that one individual does not possess accurate information about the level of inflation or about its impact on wealth. This clarification is basically nothing else than the classic "everything else held constant" phrase from regression-type multivariate analysis

and information processing were identified (Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Raden, 1985). An interesting case would be certainty and importance, discussed by Visser et al. (2003). Even if previously these two were used interchangeably for describing attitude strength,Visser et al. (2003) find that different effects of these dimensions: importance is a good predictor of turnout and additional information gathering, whereas certainty is related to the tendency to find more than one candidate acceptable[4]. Also, the reviews offered by Raden (1985) and Petty and Krosnick (1995) highlight very different correlation patterns between attitude strength dimension, suggesting complicated relationships among these dimensions.

In the present paper we focus on two of the dimensions, namely extremity and importance. The choice is somewhat obvious, because these two dimensions are the most common in political and electoral surveys. Respondents are asked to express their opinions or attitudes towards various issues and policy options, usually on an evaluation continuum that has a stipulated mid-point. Also, they are asked to mark the personal importance of the issues. These issue related considerations are then used to explain political preferences or political behavior, such as vote choice or candidate evaluation.

There are three additional reasons for choosing these two dimensions. First, even in social psychology, the importance and extremity relationship enjoyed far less attention compared to how importance is related to other attitude strength dimensions[5]. Second, there is an available running hypothesis on the direction of the relationship between these two strength dimensions[6]. The possible mechanism that links these two is starts with recognizing personal relevance and attaching importance to an attitude object and this triggers more thought processes, information gathering and discussion, and throughout this process the attitude becomes more extreme (Berent and Krosnick, 1995; Petty and Krosnick, 1995; Tesser, 1978). This is clearly not a sign that attitude strength can be reduced to one dimension – importance – and every other dimension is caused by it (Fazio, 1989; Petty and Krosnick, 1995), but it suggests a mechanism that can guide the analysis of the relationship between attitude importance and extremity.

Finally, grasping the nature of this relationship is much needed for evaluation of spatial voting theories. More specifically, the proposition of a directional voter theory by Ra-

[4]Alongside these effects, there are several effects that are linked to both of these dimensions.

[5]For a full summary of other relationships see Krosnick et al. (1993).

[6]Discussed more in detail in the next section.

binowitz and Macdonald (1989) argued that issue position extremity shows how intense individuals and candidates feel about an issue. Moreover, this renders the additional importance question redundant (Westholm, 1997a). Thus, the underlying assumption of the directional theory is that extremity overlaps with intensity and importance, an assumption that was supported by empirical results reported by Niemi and Bartels (1985)[7]. In order to evaluate the directional theory of voting, a detailed account of the relationship between attitude strength is called for.

Throughout this paper, extremity is defined as "the extent to which an individual's attitude deviates from the midpoint of favorable-unfavorable dimension and it is typically operationalized by folding over attitude self-report rating scales" (Krosnick et al., 1993, 1132), whereas importance[8] is "the extent to which an individual cares deeply about and is personally invested in an attitude and is ordinarily operationalized by self-reports of importance, concern, or caring about the attitude object" (Krosnick et al., 1993, 1132). In line with the definition, issue importance is treated as an individual level variable, reflecting the associated importance to the person, not how important is the issue for the country. This conceptual distinction is needed because of the differences in ego-involvement (Sherif and Cantril, 1947). Personal relevance of an issue assures more involvement and implicitly higher importance associated with that given issue (Lavine et al., 1996; Petty and Krosnick, 1995), but this is not necessarily true for the perceived macro level importance of an issue (Lavine et al., 1996; Miller and Peterson, 2004). Thus, perceptions about what is an important issue or problem for the country are much more unstable compared to individual importance, and they are also weaker predictors of political activity (Lavine et al., 1996; Miller and Peterson, 2004). Moreover, interconnections between personal importance and extremity are expected to be stronger and cognitively different from what perceptions about macro importance could tell us about the relationships between strength dimension. Consequently, personal attitude importance is the sole interest of the present paper.

First and foremost, according the Boninger et al. (1995), three factors determine whether an attitude becomes important or not: self-interest, social identification, and individual values. From these three, thinking of the attitude object as being instrumental for one's

[7]However, these results were reanalyzed by Krosnick (1988), showing that a more correct modeling strategy suggests that importance has increases the effect of issue positions on candidate evaluations.

[8]Importance is sometimes dubbed as salience in the political science literature.

rights, privileges or lifestyle (self-interest) is the strongest determinant (Boninger et al., 1995). Also, personal and behavioral experience with the issue in question amplifies the attitudes effect on behavior (Fazio and Zanna, 1981). Furthermore, strong identification with a social or reference group may induce importance if the issue is considered to endanger the privileges of the given group, or if the reference group considers the issue (or attitude object) to be very important (Boninger et al., 1995). Third, if the issue is relevant for the individual's value system, it will occupy an important role (Boninger et al., 1995).

We continue below discussing how individual differences may create situations in which people similar on many characteristics consider the same environmental context as more or less important, and how this is related to their proneness of generally rating issues as being important, without any topic specific differentiation.

2 Everything is important: disquietude

Tagging something as personally relevant and important is the result of an individual processing of environmental stimuli. Realizing whether the current state of a policy or the possible changes will influence one's life is based on *(1)* what that policy is about in reality, *(2)* how that policy is perceived, and *(3)* how much threat or potential benefit is associated with its impact. All these aspects depend on how much information one has about the policy, what are the sources of this information, and how they are interpreted through the perceived position of the individual in the society. Intended changes in the educational system will be more relevant to people still studying, or people who have family members in the educational system (both on the supply and demand side), or to people for whom the changes would not fit into their general value-system. For these people, the educational issue will be more important. However, how these threats and benefits are internalized does not depend only on these perceptions. Even if the perceived implications of a policy change — all other biases in perception taken into account — are understood, we might still see variation in how it will be regarded on an importance scale. For example, we know from the literature on fear that the same exact external stimuli will determine more situational fear among those who are dispositionally prone to fear (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). Similarly, researchers posit that evaluation of terrorist attacks or threats are also differentiated based on the underlying levels of fear or anger

that were previously triggered (Lerner et al., 2003; Small et al., 2006). Of course, it is not sufficient to consider the valence of the emotion (positive or negative), but the type of emotion also matters. Nevertheless, this stream of research suggests that situational and dispositional manifestations of an emotion or traits should be differentiated, and also that dispositional traits may affect the situational reactions. Even more importantly, if the source of the situational reactions is not purely driven by the perception of the external event, the implications of these situational reactions might be different. We expect that this differentiation is meaningful and useful also when political issues or social problems are considered.

Why and how would this work when the importance of an issue is under investigation? Firstly, individuals are very different when anxiety or concern is considered, these being important components of the self-evaluation traits (Judge and Bono, 2001). Those scoring high on these traits are generally less satisfied and also regard environmental stimuli differently. Because of higher anxiety and lower emotional stability, any external event raises more concern in the individual. In other words, it indicates a lower individual threshold to consider something a threat. Consequently, the manifestation of these dispositional traits would be that all the political issues or problems will be important to these individuals.. The current state of the policy or the expected changes will raise more concern. Also, if it is paired with low scores on internal locus of control (sense of defencelessness in a way), the expressed issue importance might have very different effects. This is conceptually different from perceived self-efficacy (Ajzen, 2002): it is not about the individual's potential to change or control the external environment, but it is her inability to cope with the environment's impact or changes on her personal situation. Previous research indicates that, for example, managers with more internal locus of control are more innovative and drive, rather than follow, competition (Miller et al., 1982). Taking these decisions reflect not only a sense of control over the environment, but also a view in which the actor is not that exposed to external forces. The joint presence of anxiety, neuroticism and external locus of control will be dubbed as **disquietude** and treated as a dispositional trait[9]. Without limiting this to negative appreciations of the environment, we can see that even slightly beneficial policy changes will be considered more important,

[9]As presented in the sections below, we will operationalize this concept focusing on its manifestation: proneness of rating each and every issue as important.

because it is expected to induce major, positive changes in one's life.

The last aspect to consider is why more proneness of ranking any issue important (on average) should weaken the extremitization process. The logic of positive relationship between personal importance and extreme attitudes is predicated on the type and extent of cognitive processes involved after realizing that an issue is personally relevant. However, if everything is considered relevant easily, these processes might not result in the extreme position. First, when everything becomes important the possibility to gain in depth knowledge about **each and every** issue will be limited both by costs and attention. As the quantity and quality of information matters for the extremitization process (Federico, 2004), disquietude's effect will be to weaken this process. Secondly, if the political reality as a whole is important, one specific issue will not dominate the political discussions in which the individual participates. Normally, the more important topics dominate the political discussions, and this leads to more extreme positions[10]. However, if the specificity of the issue is not reflected in the political discussions we can expect that the polarizing effect will be weaker or absent. These would indicate that individuals will think less about one specific important issue if there is a vast array of important issues — or in other words, they score high on disquietude.

These expected theoretical mechanisms guide our hypothesis about the conditional effect of importance on extremity. Consequently, we expect that for disquieted individuals the issue specific importance will generate **less** extremitization, decreasing the probability of observing an extreme opinion determined by personal relevance. In the next section we describe our statistical model that will be employed to assess the validity of our claim.

3 Model

For the present analysis, we define I as the issue space with k issues, where each respondent i ($i = 1, ..., n$) rates each issue j ($j = 1, ..., k$) with a level of importance, π_{ij}. The inherent difficulty in transposing our theoretical model into a statistical one stems from the possibly strong correlation between π_j and the measure of disquietude. Disquieted

[10]The extremitization is present matter whether the discussions are with people who share the individual's opinions (motivated reasoning) or with peers who have a different stance on the issue (Binder et al., 2009).

people are expected to indicate high levels of importance, disregarding the content of the issue. Thus, in our operationalization we must consider this peculiar relationship, because otherwise the moderating effect of disquietude might not be identified[11]. In order to minimize this possible source of bias, when we analyze issue j, we define disquietude only as a function of the importance scores given to all other issues. Formally, for each issue j we extract the first factor from I^{1-k}, where $I \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times k-1}$. If there is some sort of underlying importance or disquietude that is independent of the issue content, we shall find that the first factor satisfies the following conditions: *(1)* accounts for a reasonable proportion of the covariance in I^{1-k}, and *(2)* π_j has a substantive positive loading on this factor. From now on, we denote this measure as λ_{ij}, reflecting the disquietude score for individual i when the issue space from which the factor was extracted is I^{1-j}.

Also, for each issue j the respondent expresses her own issue position on a policy continuum with two specified endpoints and a middle (or neutral) position. The extremity of individual i on issue j (ω_{ij}) will be our quantity of interest. We define this quantity as a dichotomous variable, taking the value 1 if the issue position expressed is on either end of the policy continuum, and taking the value 0 in all other cases. In this sense, we will estimate the probability that somebody will position herself on either end of the issue continuum. Finally, we will employ z number of individual level covariates as controls. We refer to these[12] as X, where $X \in \mathbb{R}^{n \times z+1}$.

In the present analysis we only focus on one issue, thus each individual will only have a single score of disquietude (λ_i), so we can think of it as an $n \times 1$ matrix (or an n dimensional vector)[13]. Also, for our dependent variable and the importance measure we only take the values for the jth issue, ending up with ω_i and π_i, simple $n \times 1$ matrices. Consequently, our statistical model is specified as follows:

$$g(\omega_i) \quad \sim \quad \theta_1 \pi_i + \theta_2 \lambda_i + \theta_3 \pi_i \lambda_i + \Theta X_i + \epsilon_i, \text{for } i = 1, ..., n \tag{1}$$

where θ_1, θ_2, and θ_3 are the parameters of interest; Θ is the $z+1$ dimensional vector of all the parameters associated with our control variables, and the constant term,

[11] Identified in the substantive, not in a statistical sense.

[12] The additional column in this matrix is the column of 1's added for the constant term.

[13] This already points into the temporary nature of this operationalization. If we would want to analyze all issues, one individual would have k scores on disquietude. Theoretically, this is not something that would be in line with our definition of disquietude. Nevertheless, at this stage, we continue with this operationalization.

whereas ϵ is the n dimensional vector of individual level error, assumed to be distributed normally (with $\mu = 0,$ and $\sigma = 1$). According to our theoretical model, θ_1 should be positive, whereas if our hypothesis is confirmed, θ_3 should be negative. We did not formulate explicit expectations related to θ_2. The dichotomous nature of ω_i asks for a link function, and we use for this the classic $logit$ function, where $g(z) = \frac{1}{1+e^{-z}}$.

4 Data

We use the 2008 round of the American National Election Study (ANES from here on) to test our hypothesis. We choose this data source for several reasons. First, most of the public opinion, public opinion polarization, and American issue voting literature relies on it. Secondly, and more importantly, it offers a vast array of political issue questions for which not only issue positions, but also personal importance was asked.

Overall, 15 issues were covered, but a wording experiment was also employed and thus we will keep only those issues that were asked using the same wording. This leaves us with 10 issues, namely: abortion, aid to blacks, gun ownership, defense spending, women's role, government spending, medical insurance, government guaranteed jobs, number of troops in Iraq, and environment vs. standard of living[14]. At this stage, we will implement our model focusing on the attitude extremity related to this last issue[15]. On one end, a strong preference towards environmental protection is expressed (even if it costs jobs or lower standard of life), whereas on the other end of the scale jobs and the standard of life is considered to be more important than environment. The exact wording is presented in Appendix A. We coded extremity 1 if the respondent indicated either end of the scale, and 0 otherwise. In our sample, 18.78% of the respondents opted for an extreme position. This distribution still allows us to specify the logistic regression, without estimating an additional overdispersion parameter or a zero-inflated model.

Our crucial independent variable is issue specific importance. This was coded on a 5-point scale ranging from "not at all important" to "extremely important". Exact wording and answer categories are presented in Appendix B. In order to have a meaningful

[14]These constitute I, the issue space.

[15]Although this analysis should be extended to all the issues in an iterative framework, the environmental issue is also suitable for substantive reasons. Both ends of the scale relate to a judgement about the "quality of life", potentially able to raise strong feelings of anxiety and concern.

0 value for our regression analysis, we recoded this scale to range from 0 to 4. The personal importance for all 10 issues was inquired right after the issue question, keeping the wording unchanged. Because our example analysis is run on the environmental issue, we present the distribution of this importance measure in Figure 1 . Our moderator variable, disquietude, is extracted from all **other** personal importance scores. The factor scores were obtained using a *varimax rotation*. We report the distribution of the scores in Figure 2.

[Figure 1 around here]

[Figure 2 around here]

This factor accounts for 33% of the covariance among the 9 importance items, the lowest loading being for abortion (0.32) and the highest for government guaranteed jobs (0.68). We also want to make sure that this measure does not capture some underlying importance rating proneness that is linked to some other covariates, such as ideology or level of information. If that would be the case, we might be picking up on individual differences generated by these factors, not a our trait of interest. Disquietude does not correlate with ideology ($r = -0.008$), political information ($r = 0.06$), or party identification ($r = -0.11$). However, as expected it correlates strongly with the specific issue importance ($r = 0.4$). On one hand, this might obviously cause multicollinearity problems in our model estimation. On the other hand, this strong positive relationship is theoretically bound. If there is a relevant disquietude trait, it should influence the importance rating on the environmental issue as well. However, our main interest lies in assessing how the relationship between importance and extremity changes, conditional on the level of disquietude.

This factor structure satisfies our conditions set in the previous section, and thus we proceed with recoding the factor scores into three categories: low disquietude (-1), average disquietude (0), and high disquietude (1). The red lines on Figure 2 display the separation bounds. This way we solve the problem of skewness and can focus on the effect of sizeable changes in disquietude. Furthermore, we artificially decrease the correlation between importance and disquietude to $r = 0.31$, making the assumption that smaller changes in disquietude (within categories) do not have a substantively different effect on our variables of interest.

Finally, we have to include a set of individual control variables. This is especially important because we built our theory on stating that the individual differences in the magnitude of extremitization process are present even if two individuals have the same political orientation, level of political information, or view politics in similar terms. Consequently, we must control for as many relevant individual level characteristics as possible. The downside of this modeling approach is that our sample size decreases (final sample size, $n = 274$) because of missing values[16]. In our statistical model we include the following control variables: frequency of political discussion in a week (ranging from 0 to 7, $\mu = 3.6, \sigma = 2.35$), education (ranging from 0 to 7, $\mu = 4.47, \sigma = 1.52$), race (coded 1 for non-white respondent and 0 for white, $\mu = 0.28, \sigma = 0.45$), gender (coded 1 for women and 0 for men, $\mu = 0.49, \sigma = 0.5$), 7-point party identification (ranging from 0 = Strong democrat, to 6 = Strong republican, $\mu = 2.65, \sigma = 2.17$), level of political information (interviewer rating ranging from 0 = very low to 4 = very high, $\mu = 2.97, \sigma = 0.95$), 7-point liberal-conservative ideological scale (ranging from 0 = Very liberal, to 6 = Very conservative, $\mu = 3.15, \sigma = 1.6$), situation compared of previous year (ranging from 0 = Much worse, to 4 = Much better, $\mu = 1.73, \sigma = 1.3$), life satisfaction (ranging from 0 = Not at all satisfied, to 4 = Extremely satisfied, $\mu = 2.42, \sigma = 0.98$), number of opinions compared to others (ranging from 0 = A lot fewer, to 4 = A lot more, $\mu = 2.43, \sigma = 0.9$), optimistic about personal future (ranging from 0 = Very pessimistic, to 6 = Very optimistic, $\mu = 4.64, \sigma = 1.58$), optimistic about US (ranging from 0 = Very pessimistic, to 6 = Very optimistic, $\mu = 4.08, \sigma = 1.96$), trust media to report news fairly (ranging from 0 = None of the time , to 4 = Just about always, $\mu = 1.79, \sigma = 0.84$), and likelihood of earthly catastrophe in the next 100 years (ranging from 0 = Not at all likely , to 4 = Extremely likely, $\mu = 1.15, \sigma = 1.23$). We report our results in the next section.

5 Results

After specifying the model from Equation 1 on the 2008 ANES, we report our results in Table 1. Without dedicating too much space to our control variables, we can conclude that only two of these covariates are significant predictors of extremity on the environmental

[16]Clearly, the next step in this analysis will be to use multiple imputation. One other alternative would be to use non-parametric matching in order to assure the similarities between the individuals with varying levels of disquietude. However, this procedure is also known to be costly for sample size.

issue. In line with previous research (Liu and Latané, 1998), we see that our understanding of individual extreme attitude formation is "exposed" to the role of personal importance. With a sizeable magnitude and statistically significant in multiple model specifications, personal importance appears to be the sole relevant predictor of extreme attitudes. This suggests that our knowledge about this relationship is even more valuable, but it also has to be sensitive to possible individual heterogeneity. And indeed, our results indicate that this claim should be taken up seriously.

[Table 1 around here]

First off, we see that when the issue is not important and there is a mid-level disquietude — and all other controls are fixed at 0, the baseline probability to have hold an extreme opinion on the environmental issue is very small (roughly 5%). This changes dramatically as the issue grows in personal importance. Everything else held constant: when the issue is at least "somewhat important" the probability of extreme response is around 53%, whereas when it reaches its maximum, extremity becomes the much more probable position (approximately 95%). This is a very strong positive relationship, indicating that those people who consider an issue highly important will most probably have a very clear, crystallized, and extreme issue position or policy preference.

But is this effect uniform across individuals who score differently on disquietude? In our view, yes. Although we had no expectation regarding parameter θ_2, we find a substantive and significant positive effect. When importance is low, the changing levels of disquietude suggest major changes in the probability of extreme policy preference: for below average values 0.6% , for mid level 5%, and for high level 31%. We can acknowledge that issue specific importance is still a much stronger predictor of extremity on the given issue, but general concern, dependency on the environment, and higher average importance ratings also push people away from the middle of the scale. Nevertheless, even for the most disquieted individuals, if the issue in case is not important, a more moderate position is the most probable (69%). But our interest lies far away from this sort of main effect. We theorized that disquietude should moderate the positive effect of importance on extremity. For this, we need to see whether the effect of importance varies across scores on disquietude. Our expectation was that extremitization should be of a weaker if disquietude is high. This is based on the idea the subjective importance rating for any given issue will be artificially high, and we would see our hypothesis confirmed if θ_3 is

negative and its magnitude induces significant changes in the importance's coefficient. As presented in Table 1, although only marginally significant ($p = 0.061$), θ_3 is indeed negative. To evaluate whether this changes a lot the extremitization process, we display the marginal effect of importance on extremity (conditional on disquietude) in Figure 3.

[Figure 3 around here]

When disquietude scores category changes from low to high we see that the effect of importance on extremity drops with approximately 60%. This indicates that our hypothesis is supported by the data, and indeed, when everything is important the extremitization process associated with high issue specific importance levels is much weaker. Does this also mean that the extremity disappears? The short answers is that *only slightly*; the longer answer is that the sources of extremity are different.

The underlying reason is the strong positive main effect (θ_2) of disquietude. For people scoring low on disquietude a change from considering the environmental issue "somewhat important" to rating it "extremely important" alters the predicted probability of extreme position from 36% to 98%. For those who score high on this trait, the same change in importance alters the predicted probability of extreme position from 67% to 90%. The changes are 62% in the first case, but only 23% in the second scenario. Thus, scoring high on disquietude implicitly induces higher probability of extreme position taking, but it moderates the extremitization process associated with the topic specific importance. This significantly weaker extremitization for disquieted individuals confirms our expectations suggesting that the level of extremity associated with high importance of the issue might stay relatively constant, but its sources vary considerably. We discuss the implications of this finding in the next section.

6 Discussion

In the present paper we contended that the extremitization process associated with personal importance should be revisited. We argued that this approach should stem from a careful consideration of individual differences in how one allocates importance to various political and social issues. Previous research showed that as personal importance of an issue grows, the issue position or policy preference on that issue will tend to deviate further away from the neutral and moderate opinions. Overall, this extremitization

process has its roots in the different cognitive process that are involved in reflecting on important issues — compared to not important ones (Tesser, 1978). Generally, important issues will be associated with more extreme opinions because people think more about them, gather more issue relevant information, and discuss it more often with peers. All these aspects add up to an extremitization process.

The question we asked was whether the magnitude of extremitization depends on individual dispositional traits. More specifically, we argued that some people are more prone to rate *all* issues as being personally important, independent of the issue. This is due to a multitude of determinants. Individuals who are more anxious and generally more concerned about the external environment will regard each and every aspect of the social reality as being important. Furthermore, this will be reflected in the survey items about issue importance when they are also inclined to have an external locus of control. Based on this, we hypothesized that for disquieted people the reported issue specific importance will be artificially higher, and thus it will not necessarily result in extreme opinions. Put it differently, the extremitization process will be weaker for those who consider that each and every issue is relevant for them. This hypothesis is formulated in a framework in which we see that the external context is identical, and we try to control for possible variables that should alter the subjective evaluation of the external stimuli.

We argued that it is reasonable to expect that an economic or social situation will be evaluated differently even if we control for ideology, partisanship, political information, and other individual covariates. We know that individuals know about the given issue to a similar extent and the biases in perceiving it should also be similar. However, we posited that they will rate the issue important to a different extent because they have different thresholds of concern, coupled with different scores on internal locus of control. This logic functions for all three determinants of attitude importance: self-interest, threat to reference group, or value-system fit. Accordingly, controlling for other individual differences, disquieted individuals will rate something more important even if it *should not* be that much of a threat to their own goals, values, or to their reference groups. Even weaker stimuli will translate into higher importance, because their threshold of concern is lower. Also, those individuals who feel that the environment has much higher impact on their individual decisions and lives will be more concerned because they do not see themselves as being able to control the situation. However, this artificial nature of importance rat-

ing is neither condemnable nor to be applauded. But when present, we cannot expect that the consequences of issue importance will be the same as in cases where there is no disquietude acting as a major source of importance appraisal.

We tested this hypothesis on the 2008 American National Election Study, deriving our disquietude measure from 9 issues, and analyzing the extremitization process in the case of the environmental issue. We were interested in the interaction between disquietude and importance when predicting issue position extremity. Our findings suggest that there is an interplay between these two factors, and its direction is in the expected direction. We reported that for disquieted individuals the issue specific extremitzation process is substantively and significantly weaker. The positive effect of importance drops by around 60% for disquieted people, compared to those scoring low on this trait. Overall, the extremity will not change much, but the sources are different.

The implications of this finding are twofold. Considerations about important issues counting more for political decisions and electoral preferences should take into consideration whether the individuals are prone to rate everything important or not. We cannot simply employ the issue importance as weights in spatial voting models, because they do not necessarily reflect the *true* importance for the possible electoral choice. Overall, these issue weights might have less impact because they will all be high, but this could bias our understanding of issue voting, by simply picking up on the effects of unmodeled individual characteristics. Secondly, if the extreme opinion is not necessarily due to the specific issue importance extremitization process, we need to develop new theories for understanding why some people prefer more extreme policy positions in the same environmental context. The study of extreme attitude formation is mostly relying on this link to importance, and other characteristics do not help much in explaining extreme attitude formation. But if the sources of this process lie in dispositional traits, even our comforting view of importance as a major predictor should be reconsidered.

As in any other case, we do have to consider the limitations of this study. The major limitation is the measurement. We do not have specifically designed items that would capture the two main underlying psychological traits. In data sources in which we find extensive measurement of the internal locus of control and general anxiety or concern, do not contain a political issue questions **and** personal importance items. Thus, the measurement is only a proxy for our underlying concept. From a statistical point of view, the

correlation between the two independent variables might raise some concerns. Thus, overall, a better measurement of disquietude will be necessary to further develop this research agenda.

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Tables

Table 1: Model results for the environmental issue

	Logit coefficients
(Intercept)	-2.89^{*}
	(1.34)
Importance	1.48^{***}
	(0.33)
Disquietude	2.09^{*}
	(0.85)
Discussion	0.01
	(0.07)
Education	$-0.21^{\dagger}$
	(0.13)
Race	0.01
	(0.44)
Gender	0.46
	(0.36)
Party Identification	-0.17
	(0.11)
Political Information	0.02
	(0.19)
Previous Year	-0.04
	(0.13)
Ideology	0.10
	(0.12)
Life Satisfaction	-0.01
	(0.18)
Number of Opinions	-0.05
	(0.22)
Optimistic	0.04
	(0.12)
Optimistic about US	$-0.21^{\dagger}$
	(0.11)
Trust in Media	0.24
	(0.22)
Likelihood of a Catastrophe	-0.19
	(0.15)
Importance X Disquietude	$-0.72^{\dagger}$
	(0.38)
N	274
AIC	256.29
BIC	516.43
$\log L$	-56.14

Standard errors in parentheses
† significant at $p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$

Figures

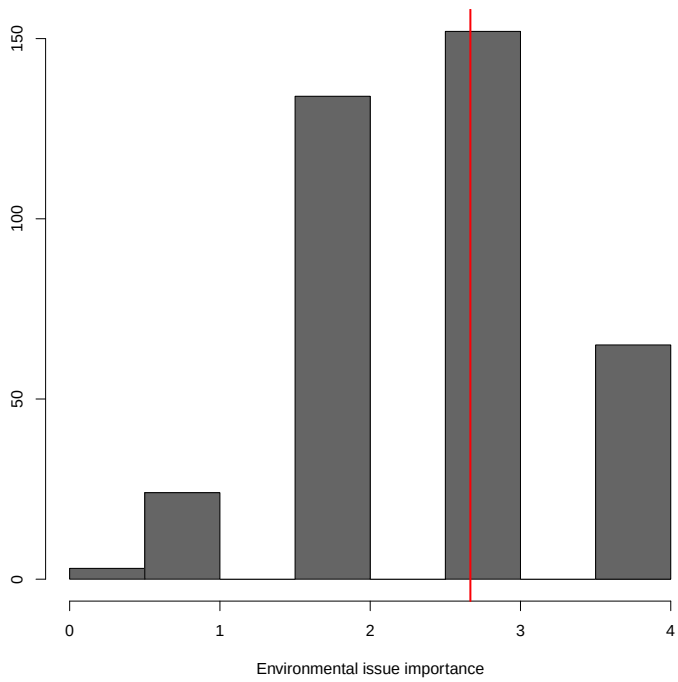

Figure 1: Distribution of the environmental issue importance, ANES 2008.

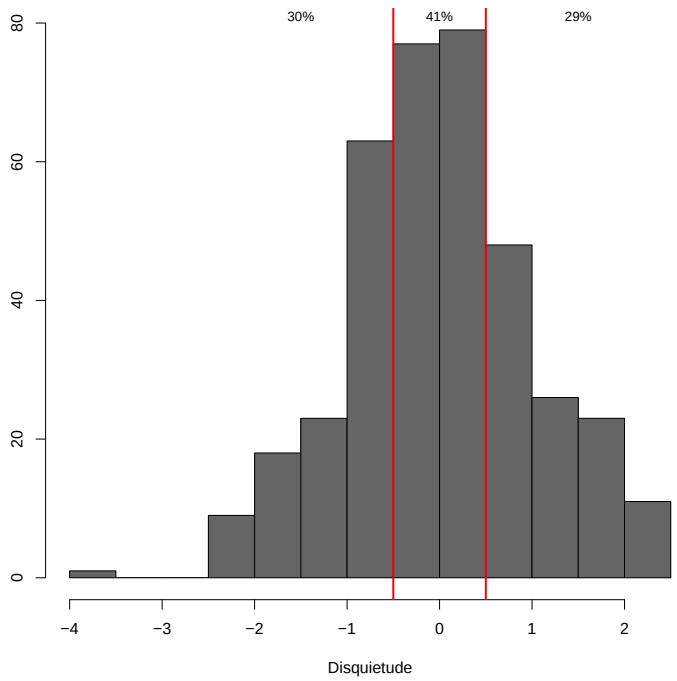

Figure 2: Distribution of first factor scores extracted from I^{1-j}, ANES 2008.

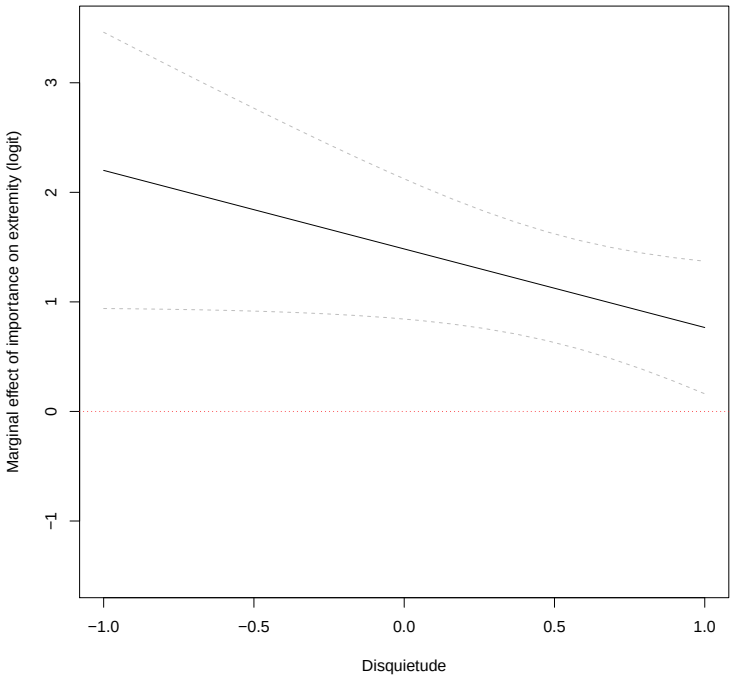

Figure 3: Marginal effect of importance on extreme issue position. Dashed lines: 95% confidence intervals.

Appendices

A Issue question wording

Some people think it is important to protect the environment even if it costs some jobs or otherwise reduces our standard of living. (Suppose these people are at one end of the scale, at point number 1). Other people think that protecting the environment is not as important as maintaining jobs and our standard of living. (Suppose these people are at the other end of the scale, at point number 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6). Where would you place **Yourself** on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

1. Protect environment, even if it costs jobs & standard of living.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7. Jobs and standard of living more important than environment.

† Refused, don't know, and haven't thought about it much were coded as missing.

B Importance question wording

How important is this issue to you personally? Not important at all, not too important, somewhat important, very important, or extremely important?

1. Not important at all
2. Not too important
3. Somewhat important
4. Very important
5. Extremely important

† Refused and don't know were coded as missing.