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Issue Salience and Ownership in the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Federal Elections

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Issue Saliience and Ownership in the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Federal Elections

Maxime St-Jean, McGill University

2023-06-06

This report was prepared for the Consortium for Electoral Democracy (C-Dem) using the 2019 (Stephenson, Harell, Rubenson and Loewen, 2020) and 2021 Canadian Election Study (Stephenson, Harell, Rubenson and Loewen, 2022). The views expressed in this report are solely those of the author.

About the data

This report is based on the data collected by the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Election Study survey (Stephenson, Laura B., Allison Harell, Daniel Rubenson and Peter John Loewen). The data can be found at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/C-Dem>. All analyses present weighted results to be reflective of the population on age, gender, region, and language.

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Overview

This report uses the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Election Study (CES) to explore how political issues and social cleavages are perceived by the electorate in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections. We focus more specifically on three dimensions: first, what issues were most important in electors’ minds (which we refer to as issue salience); second, which parties were seen as best able to handle various issues (which we refer to as issue ownership by parties); and finally, the social bases of party perceptions.

Issue Salience

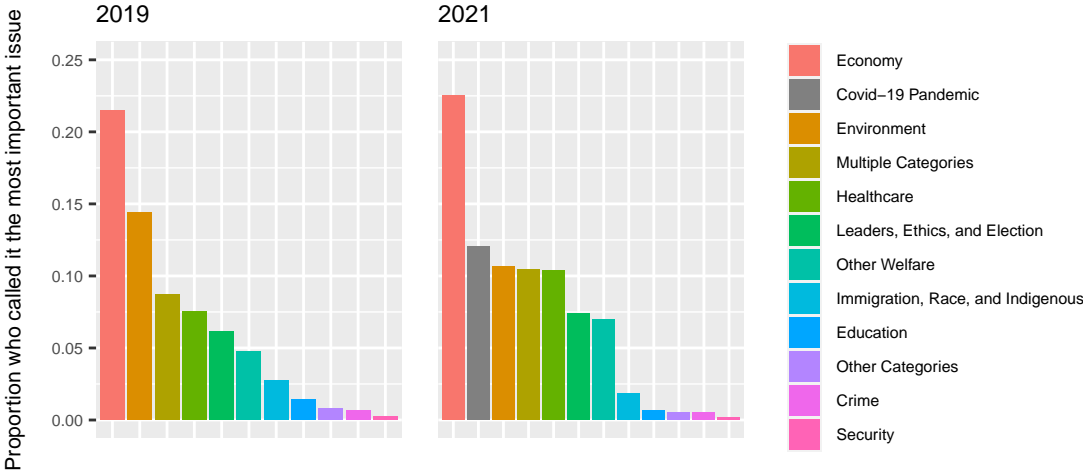
Issue salience has to do with how important different political issues are to people. Issue salience is important for understanding elections because while people may have opinions about a lot of political topics, we expect issues that are seen as particularly important to shape voters’ preferences more than preferences more generally.

In the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Election Study, respondents were asked to write in what the most important issue to them personally was in the upcoming federal election. Written responses were then categorized with a dictionary-based approach.

In 2019, the economy was the issue most frequently cited as important by respondents (about 1 in 5), followed by the environment (about 1 in 7). Many issues that are often seen in media as important were not that frequently mentioned: less than 3% of respondents mentioned immigration, education, or crime as the most important issue in the election.

In 2021, the economy remained the most salient issue, but handling of the Covid-19 pandemic became the second most frequently mentioned issue. Additionally, the topic of healthcare in general increased in salience, likely to do with how intertwined healthcare was with the pandemic. Issues surrounding leaders, ethics, and other welfare were also more important to voters in 2021 than in 2019, while the environment lost ground in the minds of electors. These changes can also likely be attributed to the pandemic, as Canadians became more focused on politicians’ responses to Covid-19, which may have felt more pressing than issues surrounding the environment.

Most Common Important Issues



We can also explore issue salience among supporters¹ of different political parties. The plots on the next page show party support (right) for those who stated different issues as the most important this election (left).

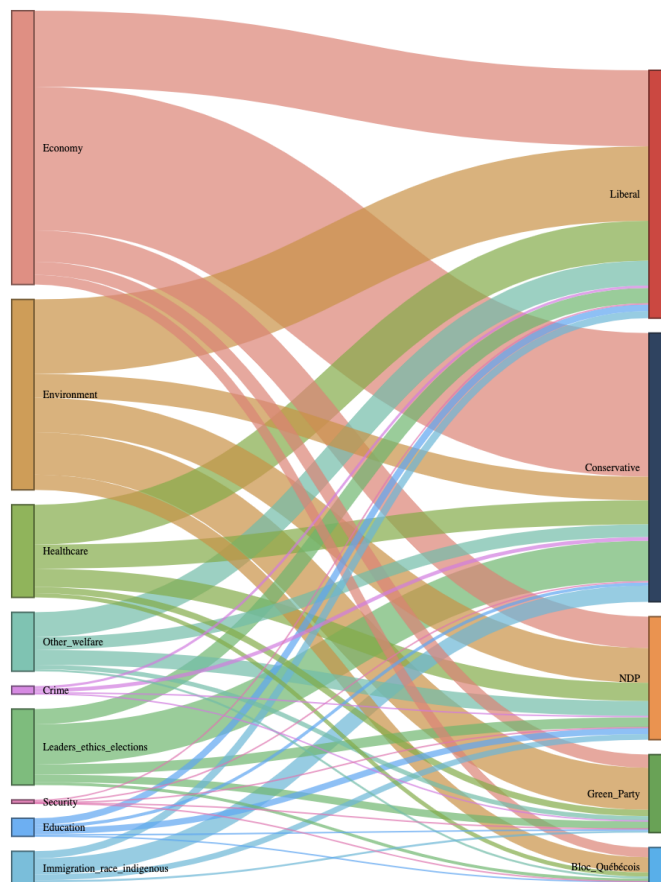
In 2019, we find that about half of Conservative Party supporters view the economy as the most salient issue, with leaders, ethics, and elections being the second most important. There isn't too much focus on other categories, such as healthcare or the environment.

Liberal Party supporters, by contrast, have more diverse views of which issues are the most salient. The economy is still seen as important, but roughly an equal number of supporters cited the environment as most important to them. There is also a substantial share of Liberal supporters for whom healthcare or other welfare issues were the most salient.

The NDP has a very similar distribution of issues to the Liberal Party, spreading importance across the economy, the environment, healthcare, and the other welfare issues.

Green Party supporters clearly view the environment as the most salient issue. Bloc Québécois supporters are also most likely to cite the environment as most important, as well as the economy.

2019



¹To determine party “supporters,” responses were used from questions asking which party advanced voters had voted for, which party respondents were likely to vote for, and which party undecided respondents were leaning towards, across citizens and permanent residents (who were asked if they could vote, which party).

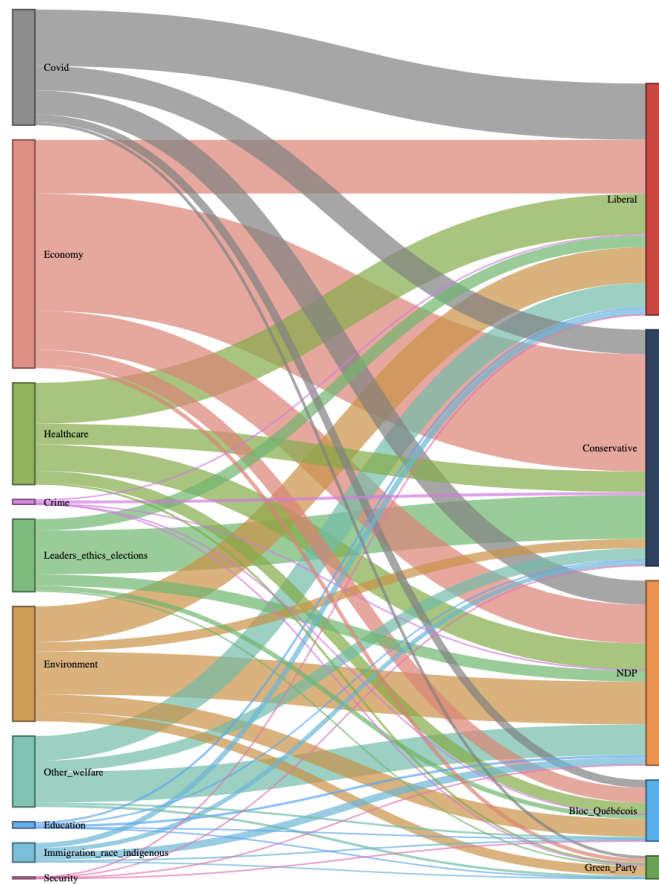
In 2021, we find that about half of Conservative Party supporters still viewed the economy as the most salient issue, again followed by leaders, ethics, and elections. Handling the Covid-19 pandemic was not often viewed as salient by Conservative supporters, although concerns with leaders and ethics may have been linked to how different politicians addressed the pandemic. We see even less of a concern over the environment in 2021 compared to 2019 among Conservative supporters as well.

For Liberal Party supporters, handling the Covid-19 pandemic was cited as most salient about as often as the economy, followed by the environment and healthcare. We see the same diversity of views on which issues were the most salient as was seen in 2019 among Liberal supporters.

NDP supporters again look similar to the Liberal distribution, but with less of a focus on Covid related issues, and higher salience attributed to the environment, the economy, and other welfare issues.

Bloc Québécois supporters placed the largest emphasis on the environment again, followed by the economy and healthcare. Green Party supporters were again predominantly concerned with the environment.

2021



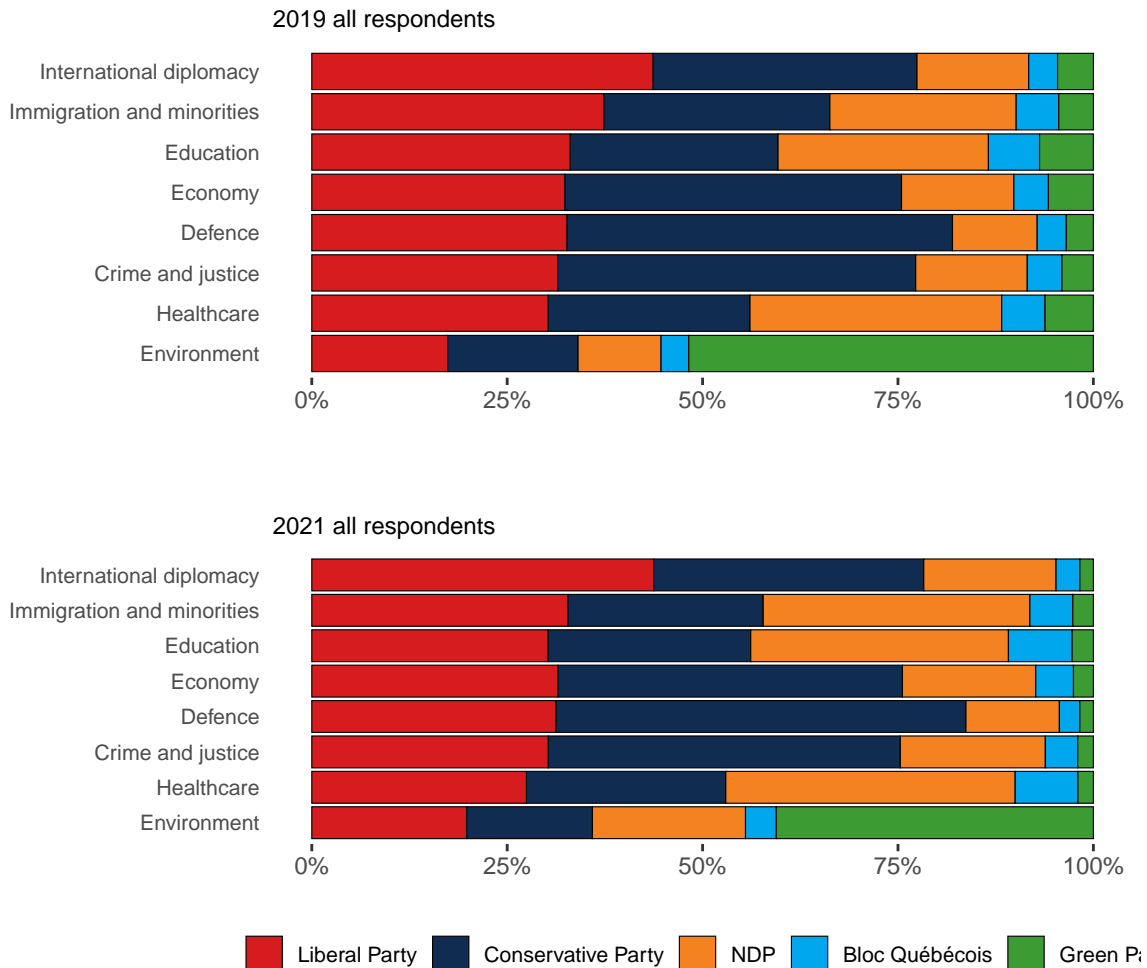
Issue Ownership

Historically, some parties have been seen as better stewards of particular issues than others. The concept of issue ownership captures this idea. When a party “owns” an issue, they are seen to be the best at handling it. Campaigns dominated by certain issues may benefit the party that owns them. Comparatively, parties on the political left tend to “own” social issues while parties on the right do better on the economy, foreign affairs and crime and justice.

To examine issue ownership in Canada, the 2019 and 2021 CES asked Canadians which party they think would do the best job at handling each of the following issues. Between 2019 and 2021 there was little change in public perception of parties’ ability to handle the issues measured, other than the green party’s decline across the board in 2021.

The Conservative Party follows expectations for a party of the right, seen as better placed to handle the economy, crime and justice, and national defence. On the left, issues are more divided, with the NDP performing especially well on healthcare and education, and the Liberal Party is seen as best in international diplomacy, as well as on social issues such as immigration and competing with the NDP on education. The Green Party is viewed as “owning” the environment.

Which party would do the best job at handling the following issue



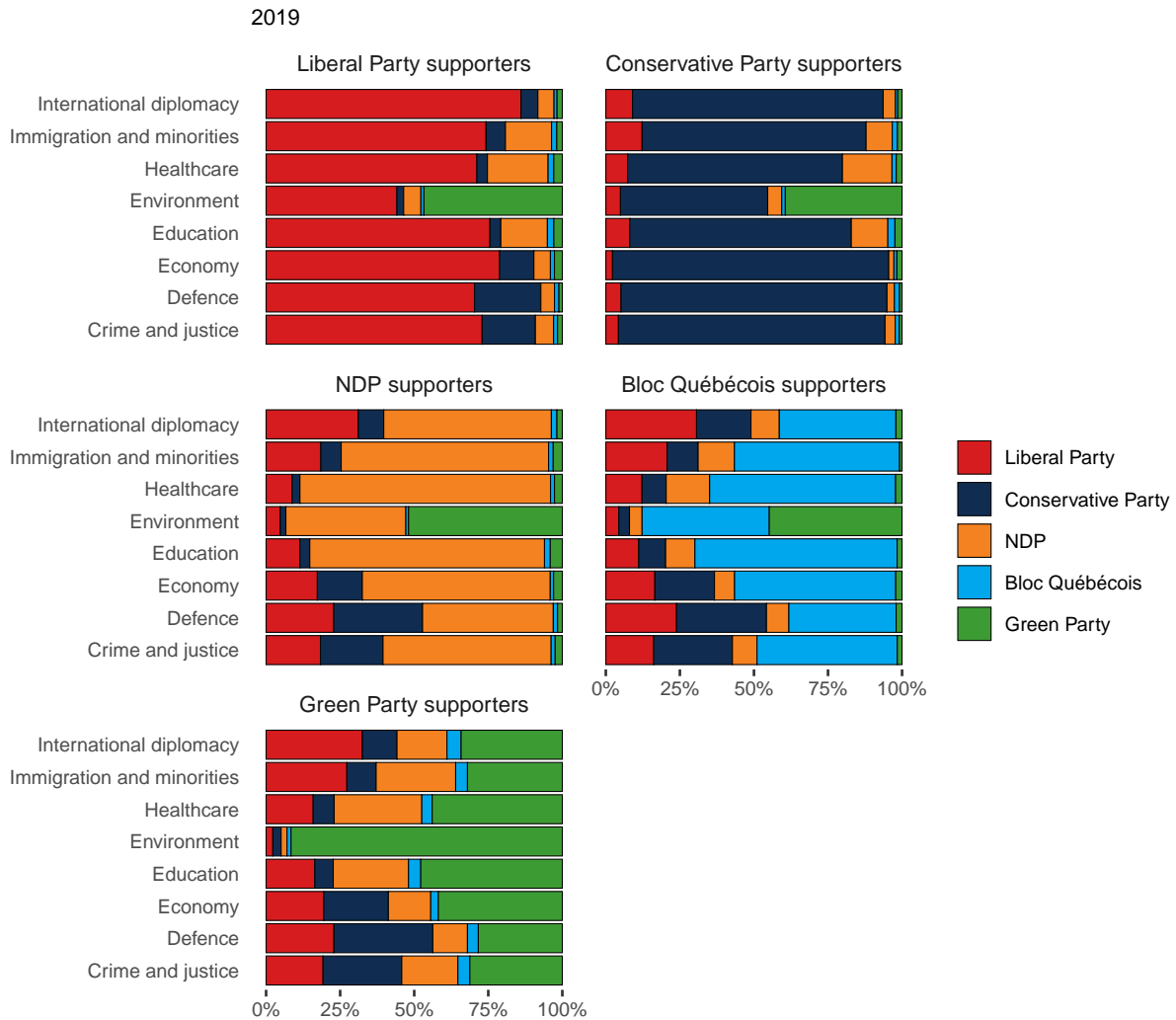
Issue ownership by supporters

While in theory, issues can be owned by any party regardless of voters' positions on those issues, we can see that party supporters tend to be biased in their beliefs about who is best at handling most issues. People tend to think that whichever political party they themselves support is the best at handling most issues, with the possible exception of the environment and the green party. The same split was done with self-identified partisans rather than supporters, to very similar results. The partisan graphs can be found in Appendix A.

As we can see in 2019, the two largest parties' supporters in general say their party is best, on average, on handling every issue. The pattern is similar for the NDP and Bloc Québécois. The one exception is the environment. Here, among most parties' supporters, there is a substantial group that believe the Green Party is best at handling environmental issues.

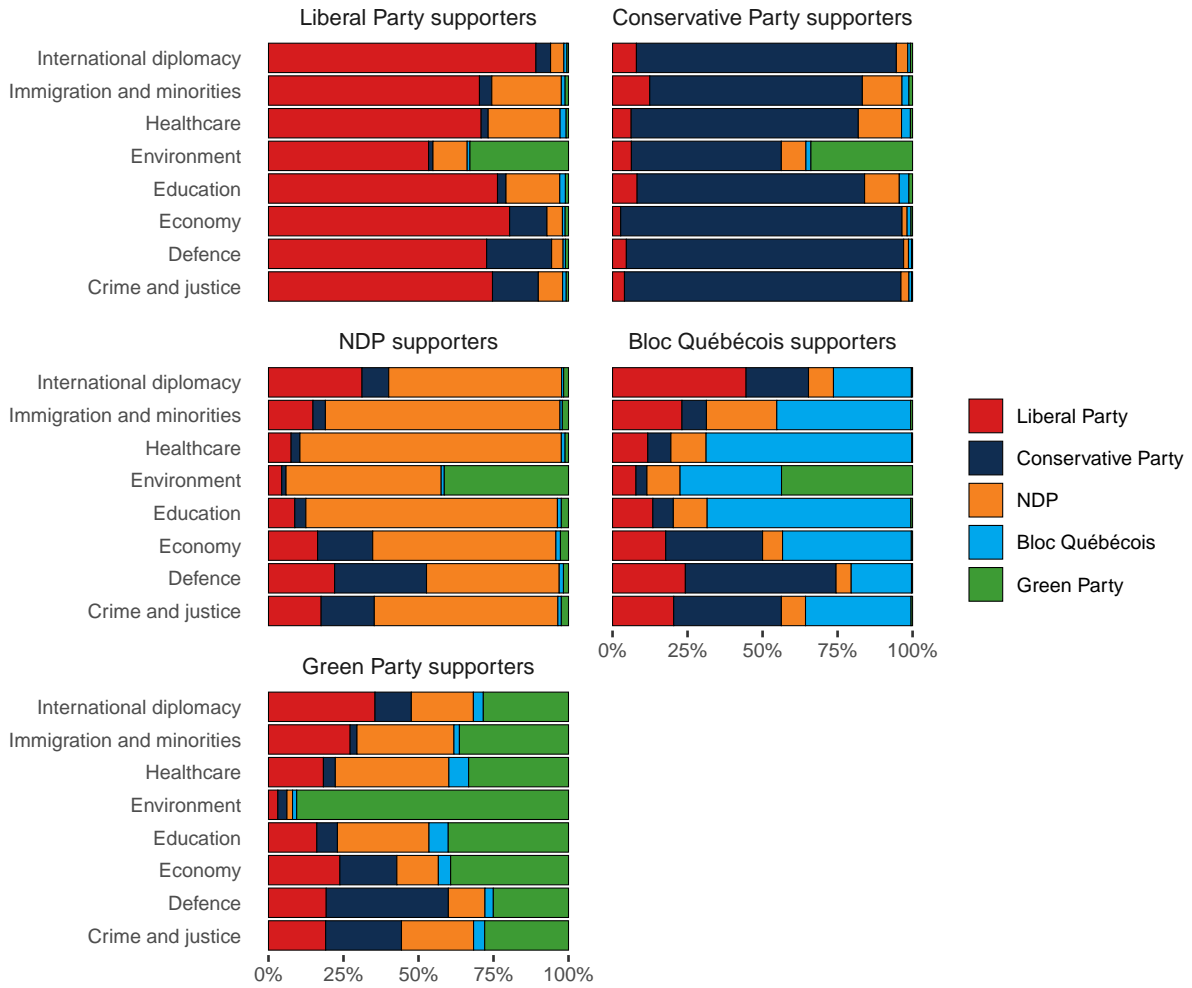
We can see that this bias did not change between 2019 and 2021, as the supporter split looks nearly identical.

Which party would do the best job at handling the following issues?



Which party would do the best job at handling the following issues?

2021



Party Associations

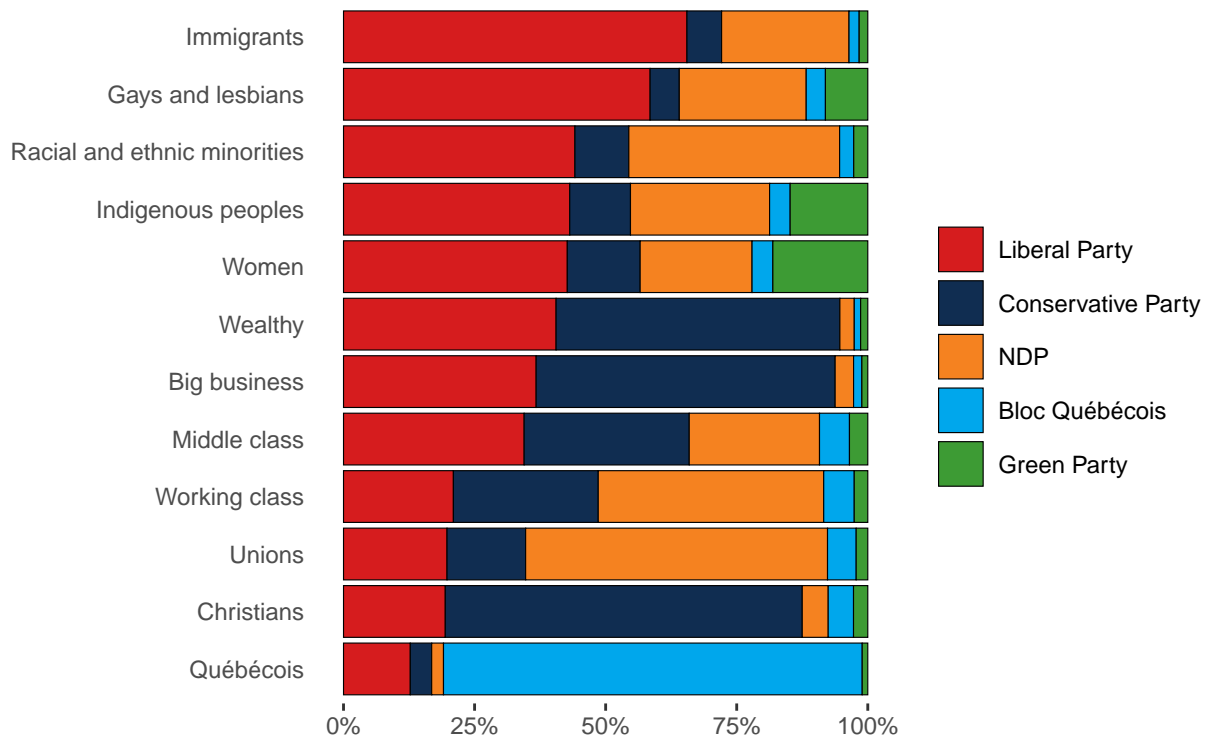
Parties have long found their support among specific demographic groups in the society. In this section, we explore if people think of the parties as associated with their traditional bases of support in the population. In the 2019 CES, respondents were asked which party they most closely associated with different groups. This question was only asked in 2019, so responses from 2021 are not available.

Historically, the Liberal Party has been thought of as the classic party of immigrants. The working class have been associated with the NDP at times, or, increasingly, the Conservative Party. Women are also thought of as a traditional base of support for the NDP, and to a lesser degree LGBTQ and indigenous voters as well. Men as a group tend to vote and identify more with the Conservative party. The Bloc Québécois is thought of as the party of the Québécois.

In the 2019 CES, we find that the Liberal Party is most closely associated with immigrants, the LGBTQ, minorities and women by respondents, and also had a substantial amount of respondents associate the party with the wealthy. The Conservative Party is seen as associated strongly with the wealthy, big business, and Christians. The NDP is thought of as the party of the working class and unions, which is consistent with expectations, and to a lesser degree racial and ethnic minorities. Unsurprisingly, the Bloc Québécois is linked to Québécois, and there aren't strong perceived associations between social groups and the Green Party.

One interesting group is the middle class, which has a nearly even split in respondents associating it with the Liberals, Conservatives, and NDP.

Which party is most closely associated with the following groups?



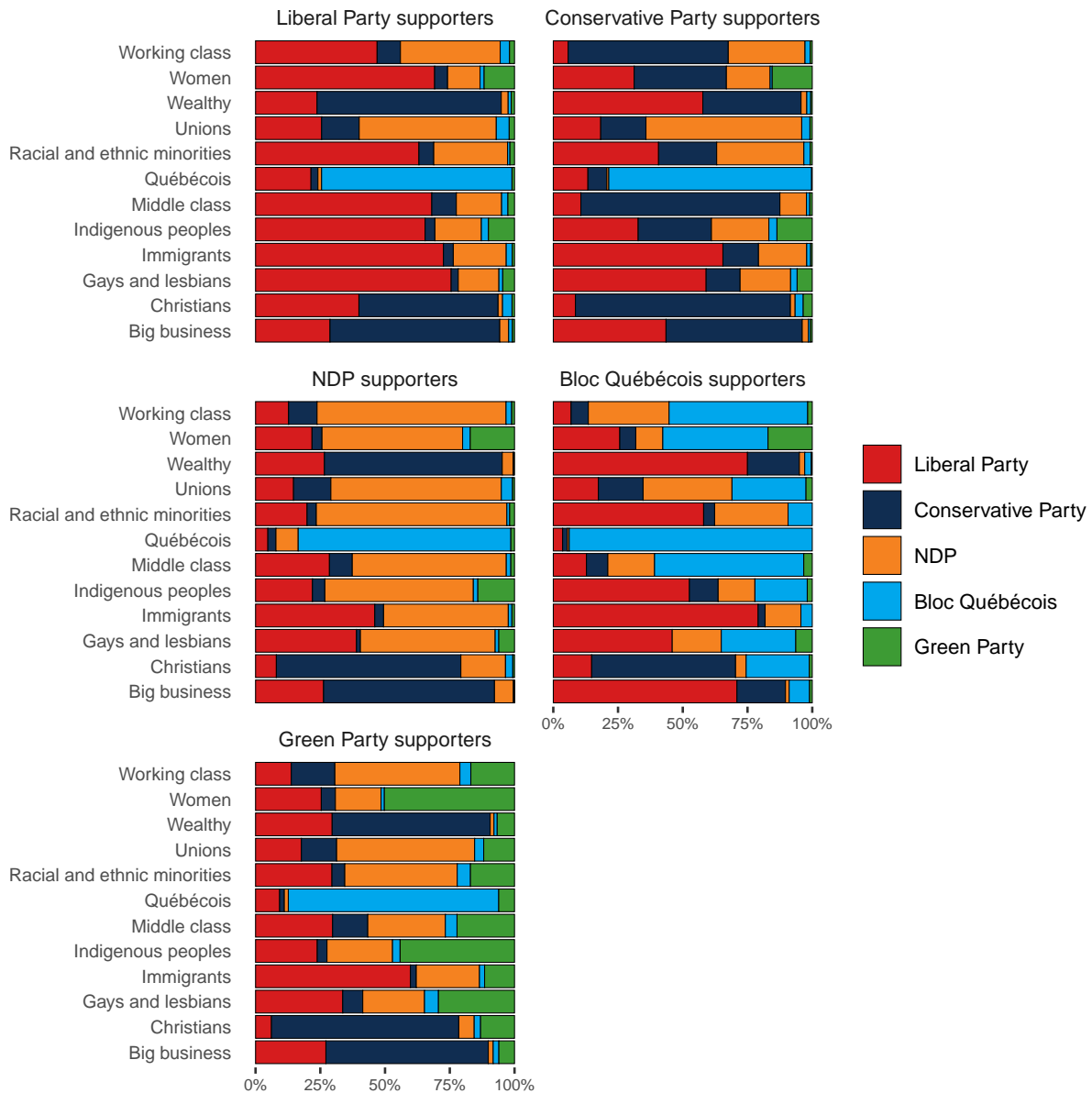
As with issue ownership, we can examine how supporters of each party view the associations of groups differently from the population at large. Interestingly, and in contrast to the bias seen in issue ownership, party supporters don't claim every social group for their own party.

For certain groups, such as the middle class and the working class especially, and women to a lesser degree, party supporters are eager to view their party as most closely associated with the group. In contrast,

supporters won't claim that their party is closely associated with the wealthy.

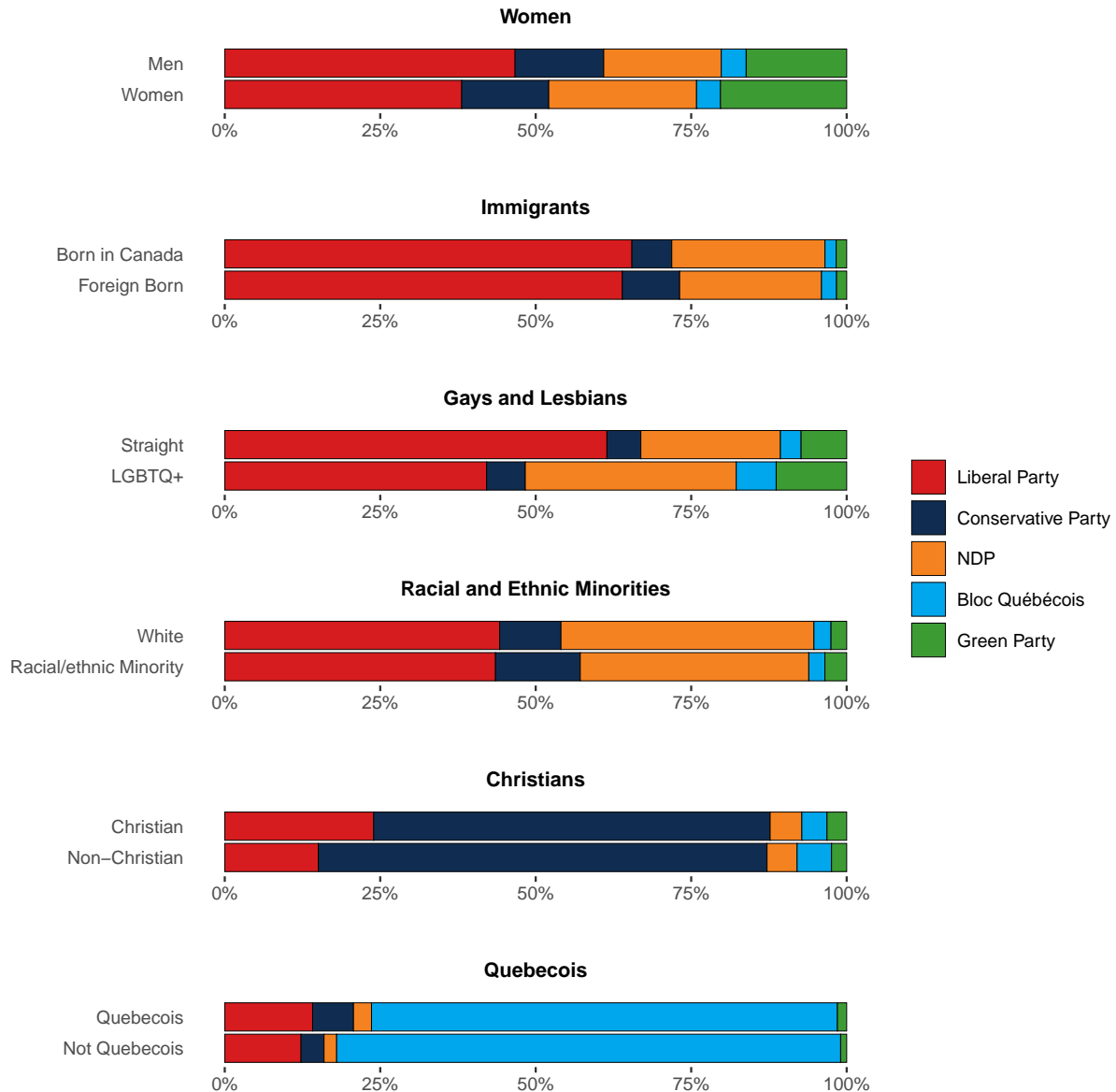
Some social groups are recognized across the board as being most closely associated with a singular party. Most clearly, Québécois with the Bloc, Christians with the Conservative party, and unions with the NDP. Immigrants and members of the LGBTQ community are consistently associated with the liberal party, except perhaps by NDP supporters who associate them with the NDP. Big business is viewed as most closely associated with the conservatives by all supporters except Bloc supporters, who associate big business with the Liberals. We also see this bias at play with the wealthy, whom are thought of as associated with the Conservatives, except by Conservative or Bloc Québécois supporters, who view them as more closely associated with the Liberal Party.

Which party is most closely associated with the following groups?

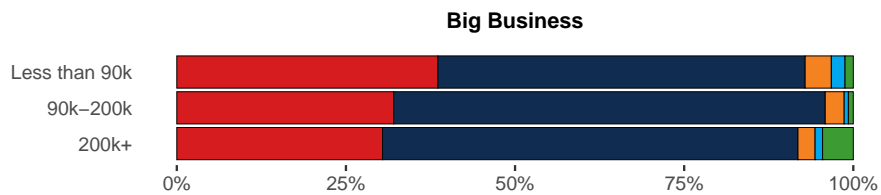
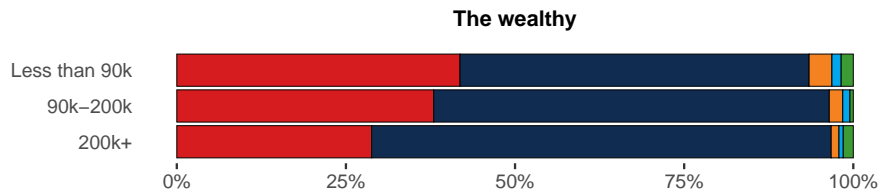
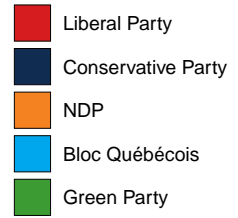
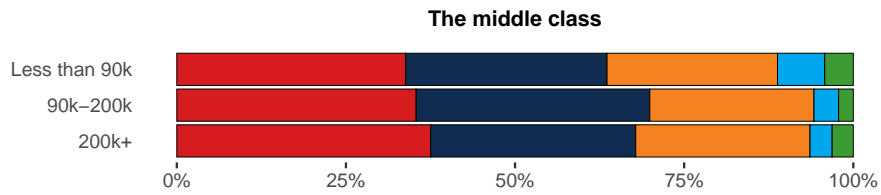
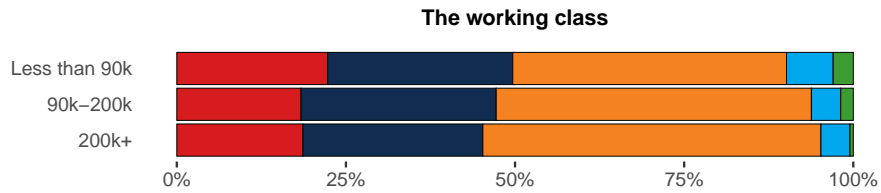
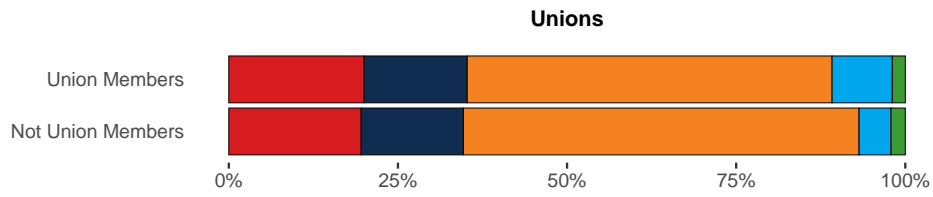


We also consider social group associations from an in-group/out-group perspective². In general, the perceptions of in-group and out-group respondents are similar, although those who do not belong to the social group in question tend to view more homogeneity within the group. Notably, LGBTQ respondents viewed gays and lesbians as less associated with the Liberal Party and more associated with the NDP than their straight counterparts, and respondents with higher incomes were more likely to associate the wealthy and big business with the Conservative party.

Which party do you most closely associate with...



²Due to low amount of Indigenous respondents, a closer split of that question is not available. Due to the low amount of non-binary respondents, the association of parties with women is only split into men and women respondents.



Conclusion

This report examines which issues were most important for voters, which parties were seen as best at handling those issues, and the social bases of support for those parties in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections.

We find that in both 2019 and 2021, the economy was the most salient issue for voters, followed by the environment in 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021. From 2019 to 2021, the environment fell in importance in the minds of voters, and healthcare increased in salience, which was most likely associated with the Covid pandemic emerging in 2020. Conservative Party supporters were the most concerned with the economy, for whom half found it the most important issue in both 2019 and 2021. Conservative supporters did not focus on Covid in 2021, and concerns over leaders, ethics, and elections increased. On the left, Liberal and NDP voters had a greater diversity of opinion on which issues were the most salient in both years, with Covid having a significant share in 2021.

Public perception of which issues were owned by which parties hardly changed between 2019 and 2021. The Conservative Party was seen as best at handling the economy, crime and justice, and national defence, whereas perception of ownership of social issues was divided between the Liberal Party and the NDP. We find that party supporters tend to be biased towards the party they themselves support, with a large majority believing that their party is best at handling every issue, with the exception of the environment and the Green Party.

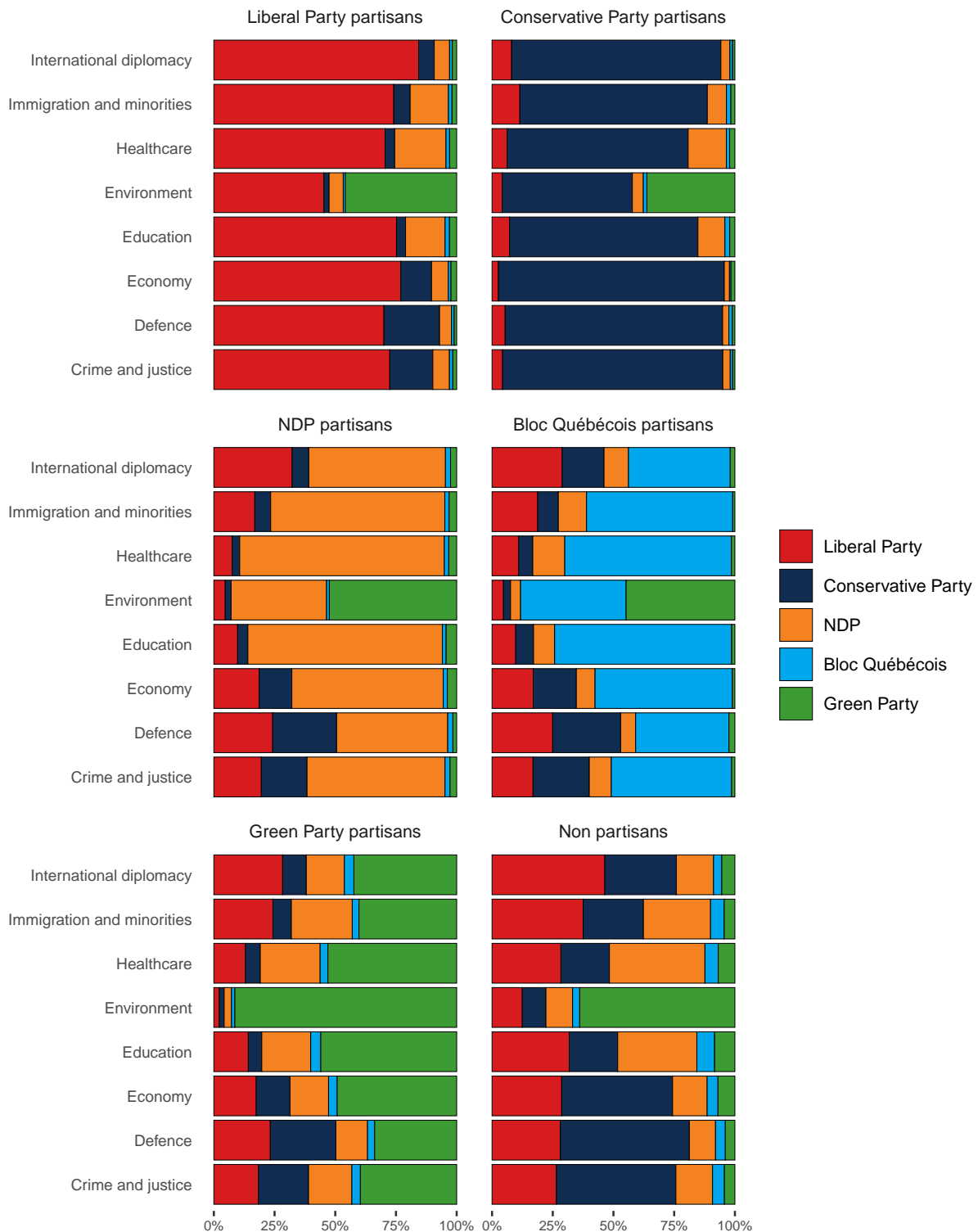
Finally, public perception of social bases of support for parties tends to meet historical expectations. Voters associate immigrants, gays and lesbians, and women mainly with the Liberal Party, the wealthy, big business, and Christians with the Conservative party, and the working class and unions with the NDP. Racial minorities are viewed as associated with both the Liberal Party and the NDP, and opinion on the middle class is split close to evenly between the three main parties. Supporter bias shows up in a different way when thinking about group associations rather than issues, with some groups claimed by each parties' supporters – the middle and working class, and women – whereas supporters are not willing to claim that their party is most closely associated with the wealthy. When we compare in-group respondents to out-group respondents, we see that out-group respondents view social groups as more homogenous than members of the group view themselves.

Appendix A

Issue ownership by party identification

Which party would do the best job at handling the following issues?

2019



Which party would do the best job at handling the following issues?

2021

