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CLIMATE CHANGE IS A KEY WEDGE ISSUE FOR WINNING OVER PERSUADABLE TRUMP VOTERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

▶ According to the 2019 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, approximately 10% of people who voted for Donald Trump in 2016 are now at least considering voting Democratic in 2020. These voters are overwhelmingly younger; nearly one half (49%) are under 45 (compared to just just 23% under 45 among the Trump base). We find similar estimates from the VOTER survey, which we also analyze here.

▶ Using a machine learning approach, we find that climate issues are the best predictor of whether a Trump voter is considering voting for the Democratic nominee in 2020. Trump voters who care more about climate issues and take more progressive positions on climate policies are significantly more likely to be considering voting for the Democratic nominee in 2020.

▶ Trump voters who think climate change is an important issue are much more likely to be persuadable in 2020. Across 23 issues, none predicted persuadability among Trump voters better than climate change.

▶ 11% of those who voted for Trump in 2016 take a liberal position on at least four out of five climate-related issues that they were asked about. Over half of that group is considering voting Democratic in 2020.

▶ Persuadable Trump voters are much closer to the Democratic base than the Trump base on the climate issues we asked about. This was not necessarily the case on other issues.

▶ Trump voters who are persuadable in 2020 and who rate climate change as an important issue rate Biden more favorably, on average, than Trump. These voters are clearly winnable in 2020 and climate change appears is a major reason they are considering abandoning Trump.

In 2016, Donald Trump won a narrow victory at least partly by persuading millions of voters who supported Barack Obama in 2012 to vote for him in 2016. Given the narrowness of the outcome, these swing voters were more than sufficient to win Trump the election. In 2020, however, it is Trump who must worry about losing some of his base of support. Our analysis of the 2019 Cooperative Congressional Election Study survey indicates that as many as one-in-ten of those who voted for Trump in 2016 are now considering abandoning him in 2020 -- about one-third of this group already plans to vote for the Democratic nominee with the remainder saying they are unsure of how they will vote.
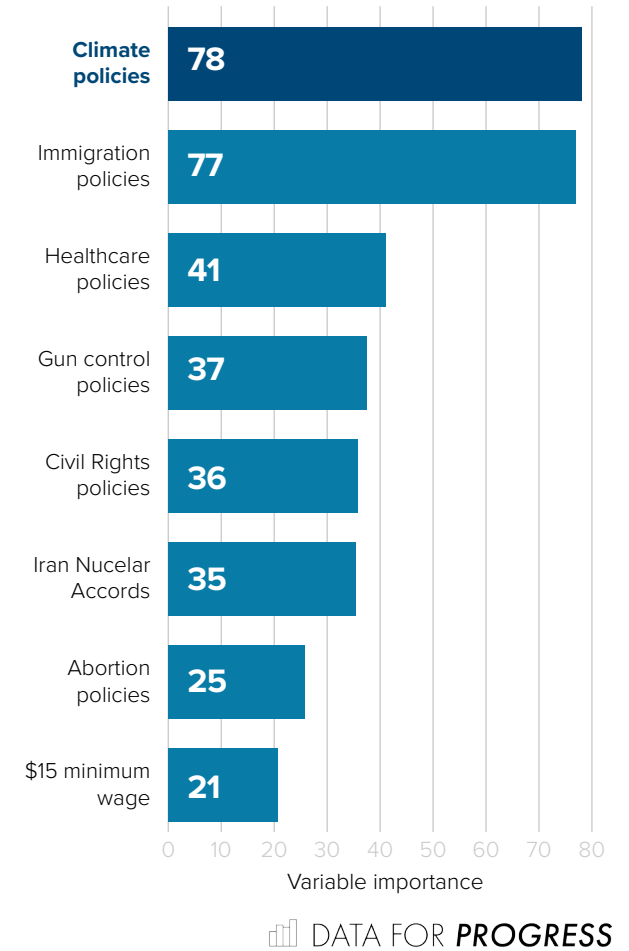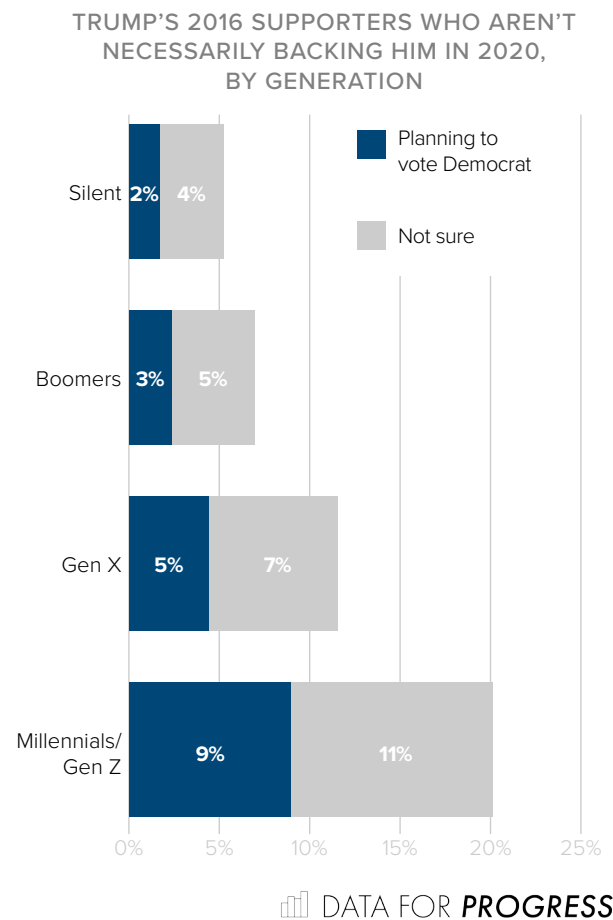
The 2019 CCES provides a good data source for examining the question of persuadable Trump voters for several reasons. First, the survey has a very large N, with a national sample of 19,000 American adults who were interviewed in November 2019. This provides us with a sufficiently large sample of persuadable Trump voters (N = 587). Second, the CCES asks a large number of questions about policy issues; thus, in this analysis we account for each respondent's position on 24 different policy prominent proposals. Third, each respondent's 2016 vote choice was measured shortly after the 2016

presidential election, which means we do not have to worry about the ability of respondents to successfully recall who they voted for nearly four years ago.

In terms of demographics, the thing that most sets the persuadable Trump voters apart from the loyal Trump voters is age. Nearly half (49%) of the persuadable Trump voters are under the age of 45, whereas less than one-fourth (24%) of loyal Trump supporters are under 45. In fact, nearly 9% of the millennials or Gen Z voters who backed Trump have already decided to vote Democratic in 2020 and another 11% are undecided about their vote in November. A significant share of Gen X Trump supporters are also considering voting Democratic in 2020.

A key question is which issues are pushing these Trump voters to potentially vote Democratic in

November? To answer this question, we started with 24 questions about policy proposals across a variety of domains including climate change (5 policies), immigration (4 policies), health care (4 policies), gun control (4 policies), abortion rights (2 policies), civil rights (3 policies) and two other issue items (the $15 minimum wage and the Iran Nuclear Accords). We then tallied the number of liberal positions that respondents took on these items in each issue area. Finally, we used these issue items in a random forest classification model to determine which issue items did the best job of predicting whether a Trump voter now identifies as persuadable. The graph below shows the importance of each variable in predicting whether a 2016 Trump voter identified as persuadable in the CCES survey. The larger the bar, the more predictive the issues were in determining who is considering leaving Trump in 2020.

TRUMP'S 2016 SUPPORTERS WHO AREN'T NECESSARILY BACKING HIM IN 2020, BY GENERATION

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It's clear that two issue areas stand above the rest in predicting whether a Trump voter is now persuadable -- climate change and immigration. As we will show, however, these voters are much more likely to be attracted to the Democratic side on climate issues than on immigration. Indeed, a significant share of Trump voters are dramatically out of step with Trump on climate issues. Respondents were asked whether they support the following:

▶ The Paris Climate Agreement (which Trump removed the U.S. from)

▶ The Clean Power Plant Rules enacted during the Obama administration (which Trump eliminated)

▶ Giving the EPA the power to regulate Carbon Dioxide emissions

▶ Requiring that each state use a minimum amount of renewable fuels in the generation of electricity even if electricity prices increase a little

▶ Strengthening the EPA's enforcement of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act even if it costs U.S. jobs

Notably, 11% of 2016 Trump voters indicated that they supported at least four of these policies on the CCES. More than half of that group is at least considering abandoning their support for Trump in November. Notably, out of the 24 issues tested in our analysis, the single issue that predicts whether a Trump voter is persuadable in 2020 is her position on the Paris Climate Agreement. That issue is about three-times more predictive than any other. Also worth noting, however, is the fact that climate policies make up half of the 8 most predictive issues in determining whether Trump voters are persuadable.

The fact that climate issues are more predictive than other issues of which Trump voters are

persuadable is significant. What this tells us is that those issues, more than others, are particularly powerful in distinguishing which Trump voters can be won over and which will stay loyal to the president in 2020. But attempting to win over persuadable voters on any set of issues must be weighed against how the Democratic Party's base feels about those positions. Ideally, the Democratic nominee would be able to appeal to persuadable Trump voters without alienating the base. The next graph shows that climate is an area where this is quite feasible.
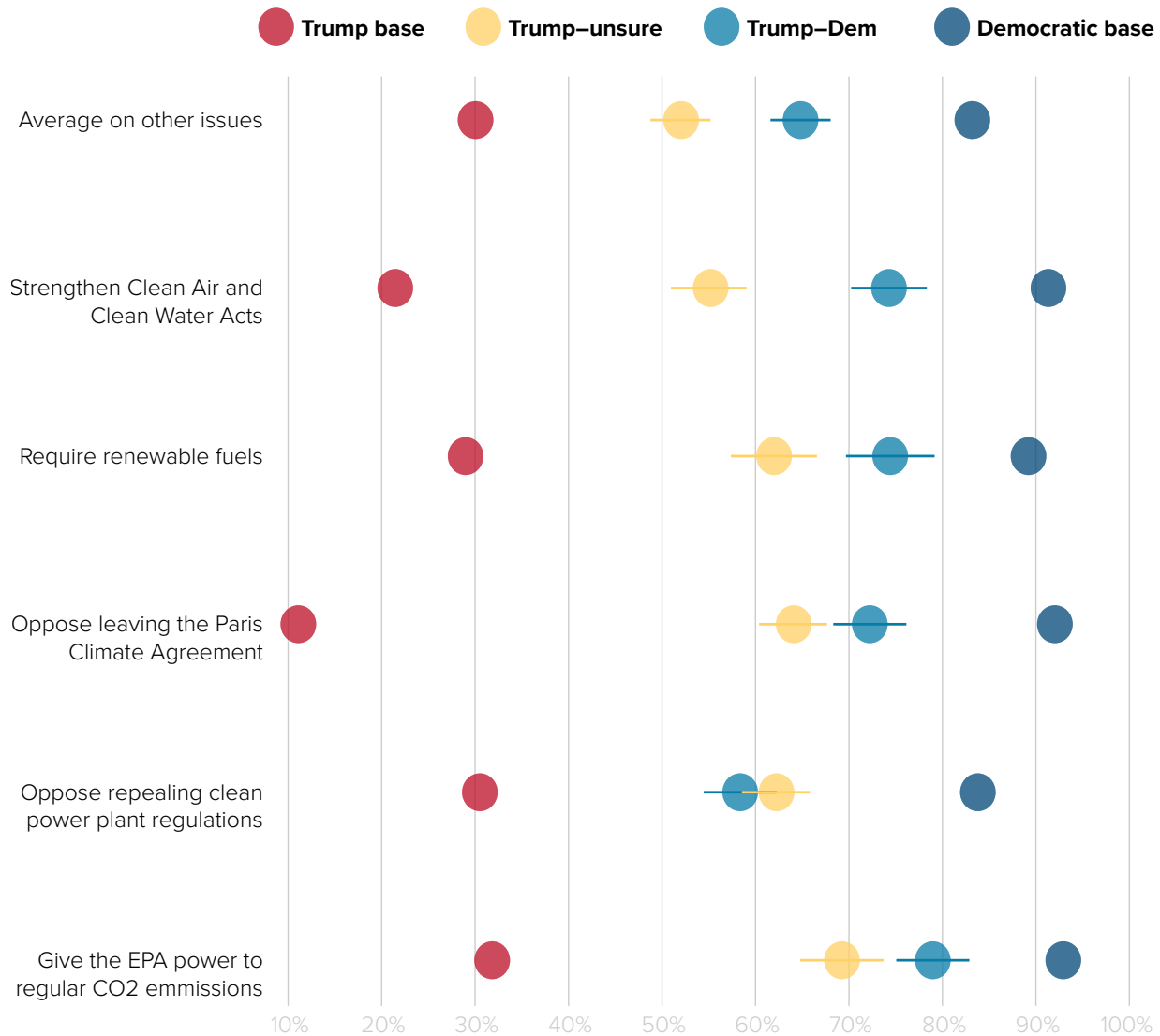
This graph shows the amount of support for each of the climate policies among four distinct groups -- the Trump base (those that voted for him in 2016 and plan to vote for him again in 2020), the Democratic base (Clinton voters who plan to vote Democratic in 2020), Trump voters who are unsure of how they will vote in 2020, and Trump voters who have already said that they plan to vote for the Democrat in November.

A clear pattern that emerges from this graph is the fact that on almost every climate policy, persuadable Trump voters are much closer to the Democratic Party's base than they are to the Trump base. 69% of Trump voters who are unsure of how they'll vote in 2020 support giving the EPA power to regulate CO_2 emissions. This compares favorably with the Democratic base, where support is 93%. Opposition to Trump's decision to leave the Paris climate agreement shows a similar pattern with 62% of Trump voters who are unsure about 2020 in opposition compared to 84% of the Democratic base. Only 30% of Trump's base opposes the decision to leave the Paris climate agreements. 64% of the Trump voters who are now unsure oppose repealing the clean power plant rules and 92% of the Democratic base believes the same. 61% of former Trump voters who are now unsure support requiring renewable fuels compared to 89% of the Democratic base. The only climate issue we tested where the group

of Trump voters who are now unsure falls closer to the Trump base than the Democratic base is on strengthening EPA enforcement of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act even if it costs the U.S. jobs. On this issue, these voters are slightly closer to the Trump base, with 21% of the Trump base, 55% of the Trump voters who are now unsure, and 92% of the Democratic base supporting strengthening enforcement. But still, a majority of persuadable Trump voters do support this policy.

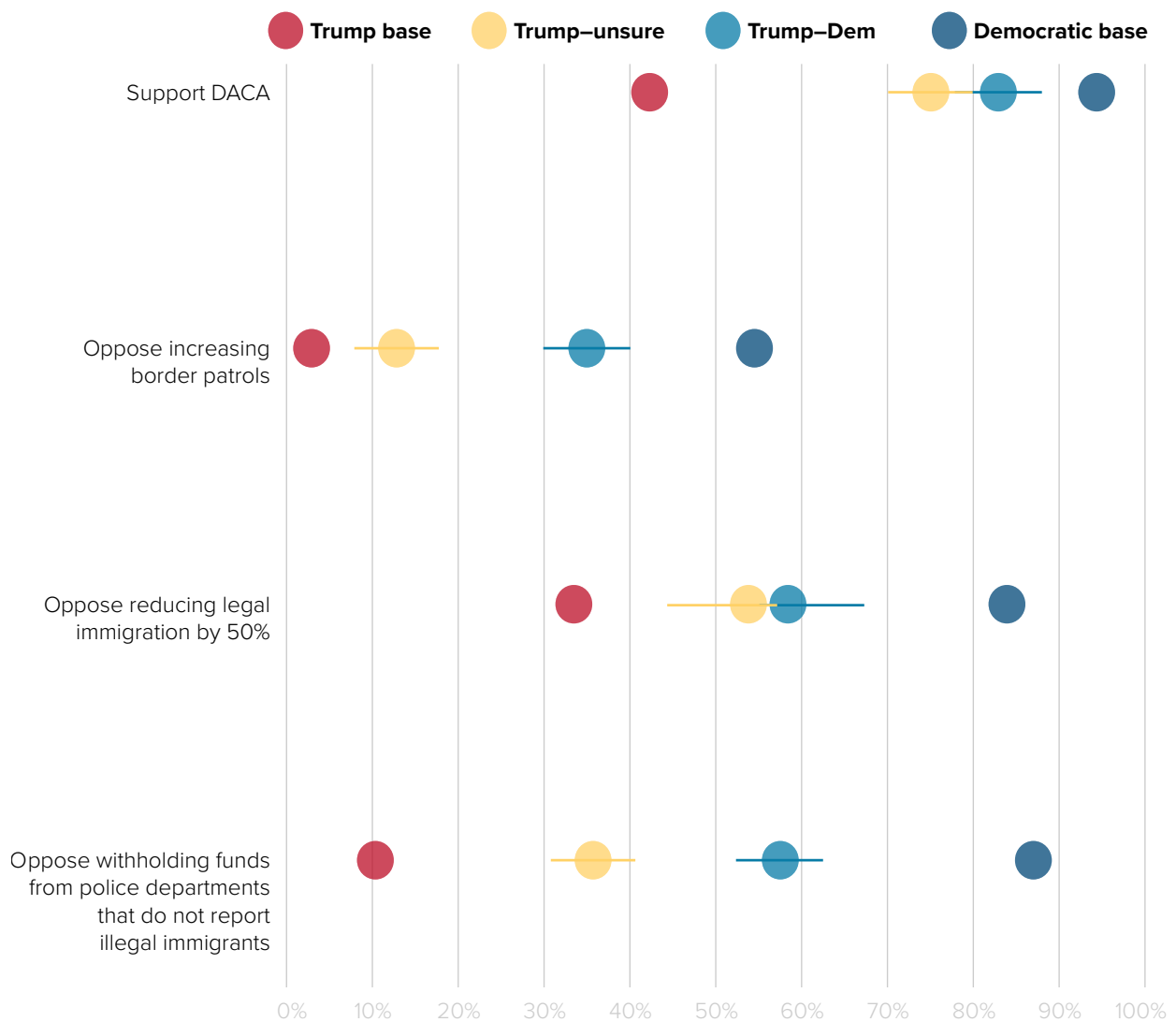The bottom line of the graph shows where each of the groups stands on the average support for the liberal policy position on the other 19 policies that we examined. On these other issues, note that 2016 Trump voters who are now unsure of who they will support in 2020 look somewhat more like the Trump base than the Democratic base. The Trump/Unsure group registers just above 50% support for the liberal position on the other 19 policy issues, whereas the support for the liberal position is 83% among the Democratic base. By comparison, the Trump base supports the liberal position on these policies, on average, 30% of the time.

Trump base   Trump–unsure   Trump–Dem   Democratic base

- Average on other issues
- Strengthen Clean Air and Clean Water Acts
- Require renewable fuels
- Oppose leaving the Paris Climate Agreement
- Oppose repealing clean power plant regulations
- Give the EPA power to regular CO2 emmissions

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

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Recall that the other issue area that was similarly predictive of being a persuadable Trump voter was on immigration. However, on immigration issues, persuadable Trump voters take some positions that align with the Democratic base, but others that do not. For example, like the Democratic base, most persuadable Trump voters support DACA. However, unlike Democratic voters, persuadable Trump voters are more open to reducing legal immigration, withholding funds from local police departments that do not report illegal immigrants, and increasing security along the U.S. - Mexico border. Thus, while persuadable Trump voters are turned off by some of Trump's policies on immigration, winning them over might necessitate taking more anti-immigration positions than the Democratic base would be comfortable with. This is in contrast to climate change, where persuadable Trump voters are closer to the Democratic base on almost every policy respondents were asked about.
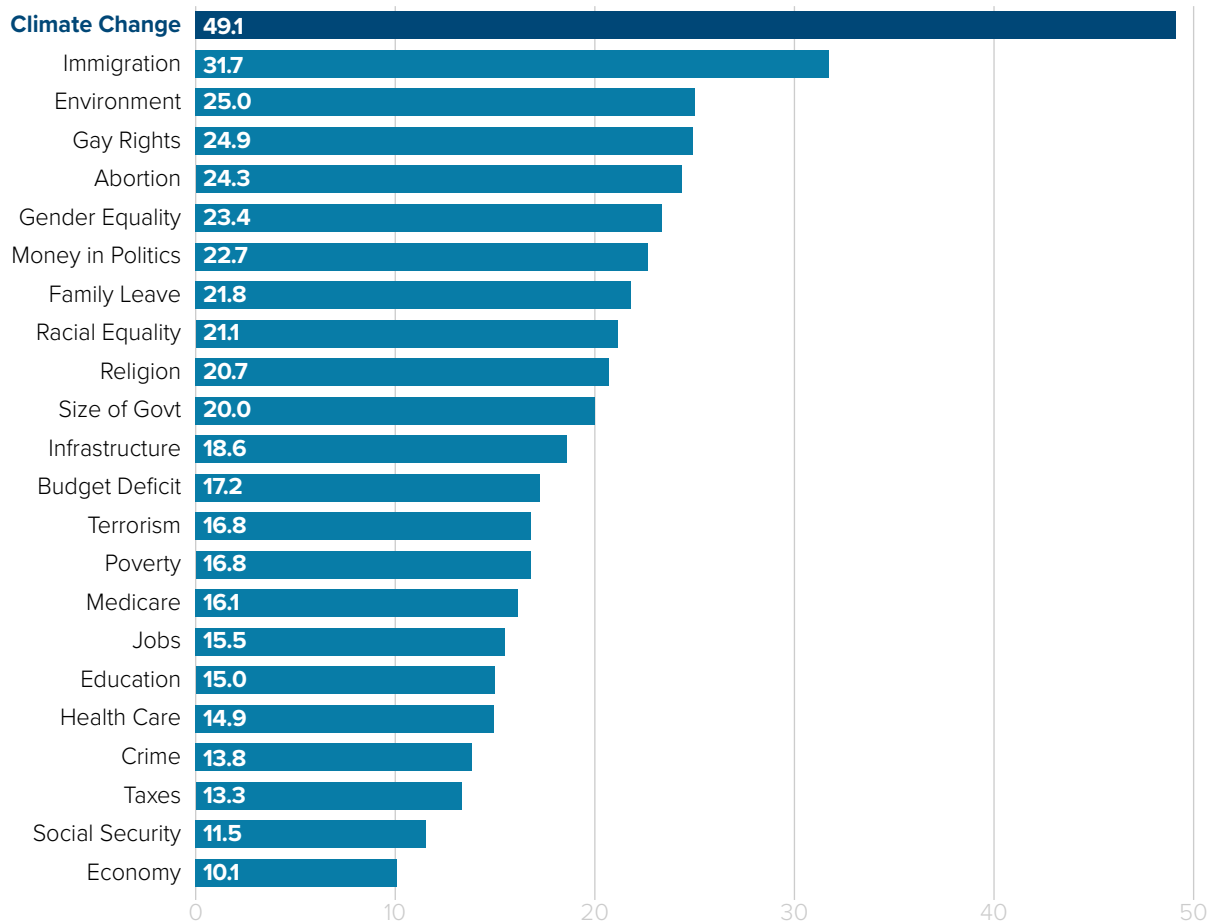
ISSUE IMPORTANCE

So far, our analysis shows that positions on climate issues are highly predictive of whether a Trump voter is at least considering voting Democratic in 2020. Here, we draw on a different survey, the Voter Study Group's VOTER survey, to test whether we see similar patterns when we look at issue importance rather than issue positions. The VOTER survey conducted interviews with 6,779 American adults from November 2018 through January 2019. Like the CCES, the VOTER survey has a measure of who respondents voted for in 2016, which was recorded shortly after the election. Then, in 2019, these same respondents were asked how they planned on voting in 2020. In addition, these respondents were asked to rate how important 23 different issues are to them on a four-point scale ranging from "very important" to "unimportant."
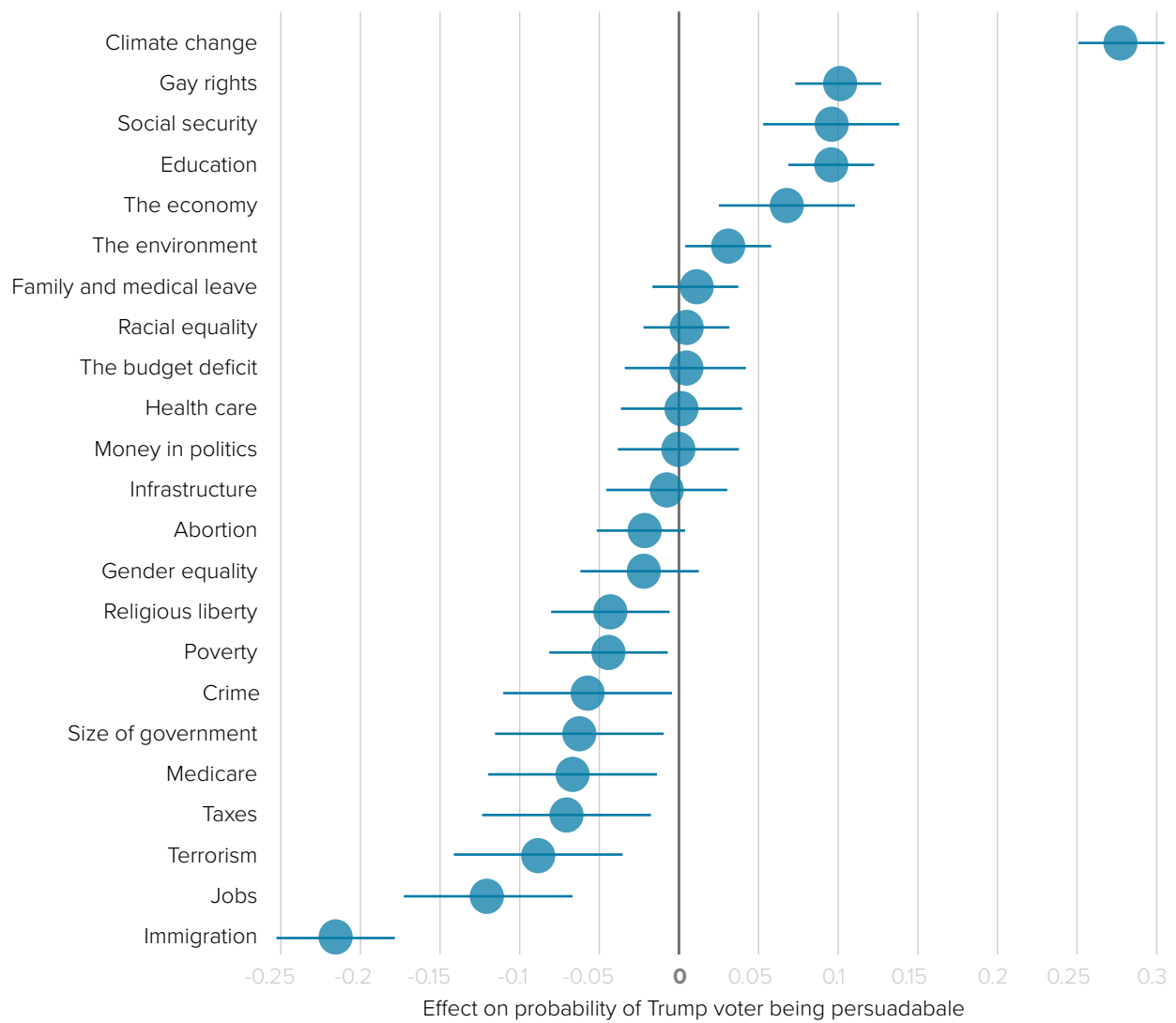
We followed a similar analysis as that described above, using a random forest model to test the predictive value of each of these issue importance questions on identifying which 2016 Trump voters are persuadable in 2020. The plot below shows the results. By a fairly significant margin, how a 2016 Trump voter rated the importance of climate change was the best predictor of whether that voter was undecided or planning to vote Democratic in 2020.

Issue	Value
Climate Change	49.1
Immigration	31.7
Environment	25.0
Gay Rights	24.9
Abortion	24.3
Gender Equality	23.4
Money in Politics	22.7
Family Leave	21.8
Racial Equality	21.1
Religion	20.7
Size of Govt	20.0
Infrastructure	18.6
Budget Deficit	17.2
Terrorism	16.8
Poverty	16.8
Medicare	16.1
Jobs	15.5
Education	15.0
Health Care	14.9
Crime	13.8
Taxes	13.3
Social Security	11.5
Economy	10.1

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Also consistent with our first analysis, immigration was the second most important predictor followed by the environment. However, mirroring the analysis above, the direction of the relationship is significant here. Specifically, Trump voters who rate immigration as a more important issue are significantly <u>less likely</u> to be persuadable in 2020. It is actually Trump voters who care less about immigration that Democrats are more likely to win over.

It is important to be clear about what this means. As we will show below, it is not the case that persuadable Trump voters rate climate change as their most important issue. After all, most Americans tend to rate other issues like the economy, health care, and jobs as much more important. However, climate change is an issue that strongly differentiates Trump's base from the Trump persuadable voters. 71% of persuadable Trump voters rated climate change as a very or somewhat important issue whereas just 27% of Trump's base did the same.

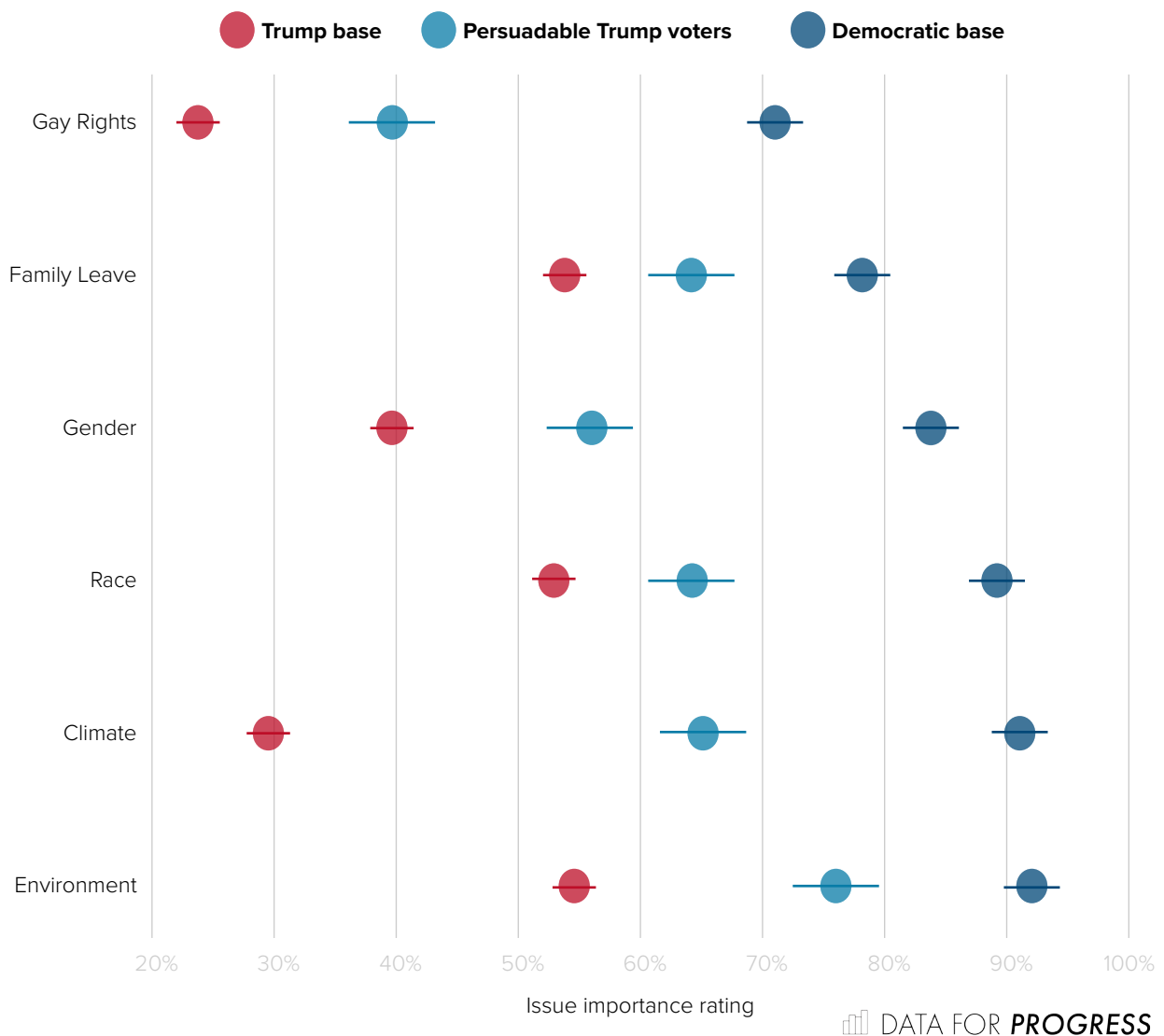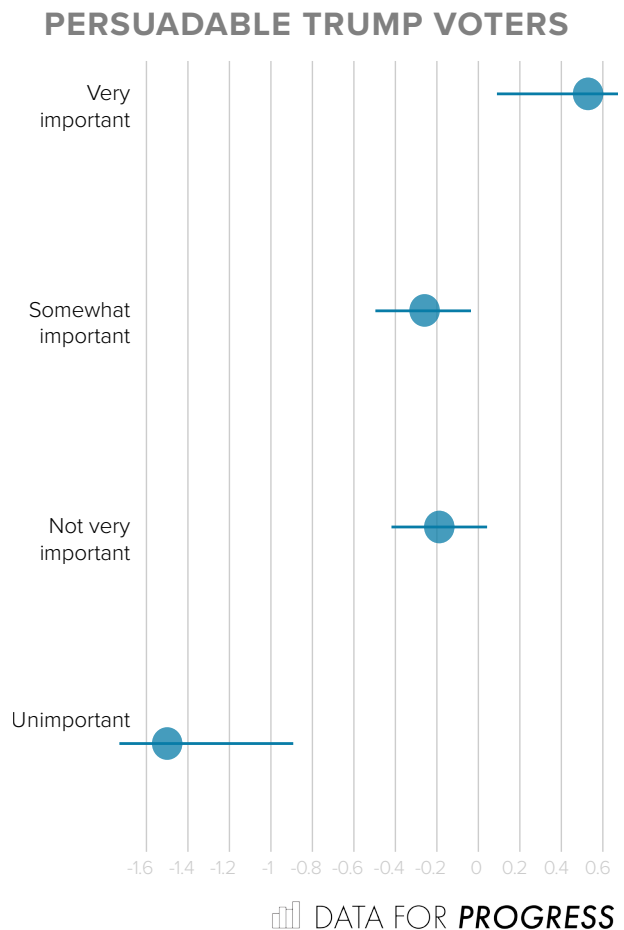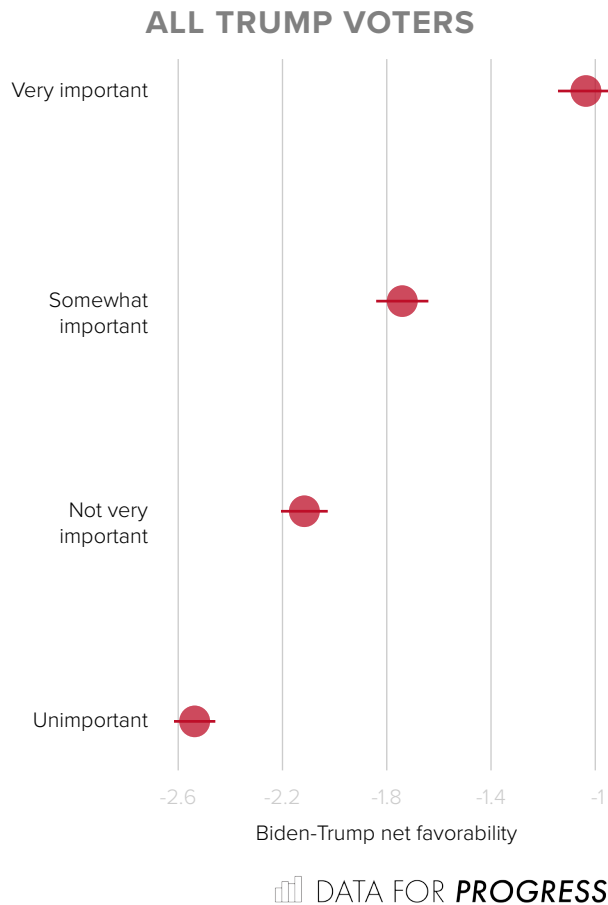Effect on probability of Trump voter being persuadabale

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Out of the 23 issues that respondents were asked to rate in terms of importance, there were six that the Democratic base rated as at least 20 points more important than the Trump base. The graph below shows those issues as well as the average issue importance rating for the Trump base, the Democratic base, and persuadable Trump voters. On only two of these six issues did the persuadable Trump voters look more like the Democratic base than the Republican base -- the Environment and Climate Change. On those two issues, the issue importance rating among persuadable Trump voters was closer to Democrats than Republicans. On the other four issues, the issue importance rating for those persuadable Trump voters looked much more like it did among the Trump base.

Finally, the VOTER survey included questions asking respondents to rate the favorability of both Joe Biden and Donald Trump. We used each of the 23 issue importance items above to predict Biden's net favorability ratings (relative to Trump) and found that a Trump voter's rating of climate change had the strongest positive relationship with net favorability. The graphs below show the average net favorability for Biden over Trump

ALL TRUMP VOTERS

Biden-Trump net favorability

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PERSUADABLE TRUMP VOTERS

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based on how Trump voters rated the importance of climate change. There is a strong positive relationship among all Trump voters, but the most striking pattern is found among persuadable Trump voters. Persuadable Trump voters who rate climate change as a very important issue actually have more favorable views of Biden relative to Trump. And even those rating climate change as not very important or somewhat important, the average rating of Biden relative to Trump is roughly even.

CONCLUSION

Climate change appears to be a clear wedge issue that could allow Democrats to win over a significant share of those who voted for Trump in 2016. Trump voters are clearly cross-pressured on climate issues -- they support many climate policies that Trump has actively worked to undermine (like the Paris Climate Agreement and the Clean Power Plant rules) and they rate climate issues as much more important than other Trump voters. Of particular significance is the fact that persuadable Trump voters are overwhelmingly young, meaning that winning their support in 2020 could pay off for the party for many years to come.

METHODOLOGY

The 2019 Cooperative Congressional Election Study survey was conducted online by YouGov. The survey includes interviews with a nationally representative sample of 19,000 American adults. The survey was fielded November 6th - December 5th, 2019.

The 2019 wave of the VOTER survey was also conducted online by YouGov. The survey includes interviews with a nationally representative sample of 6,779 American adults. The survey was fielded November 17, 2018 and January 7, 2019.

For the random forest models, we use the mean decrease in gini coefficient metric as our measure of variable importance.

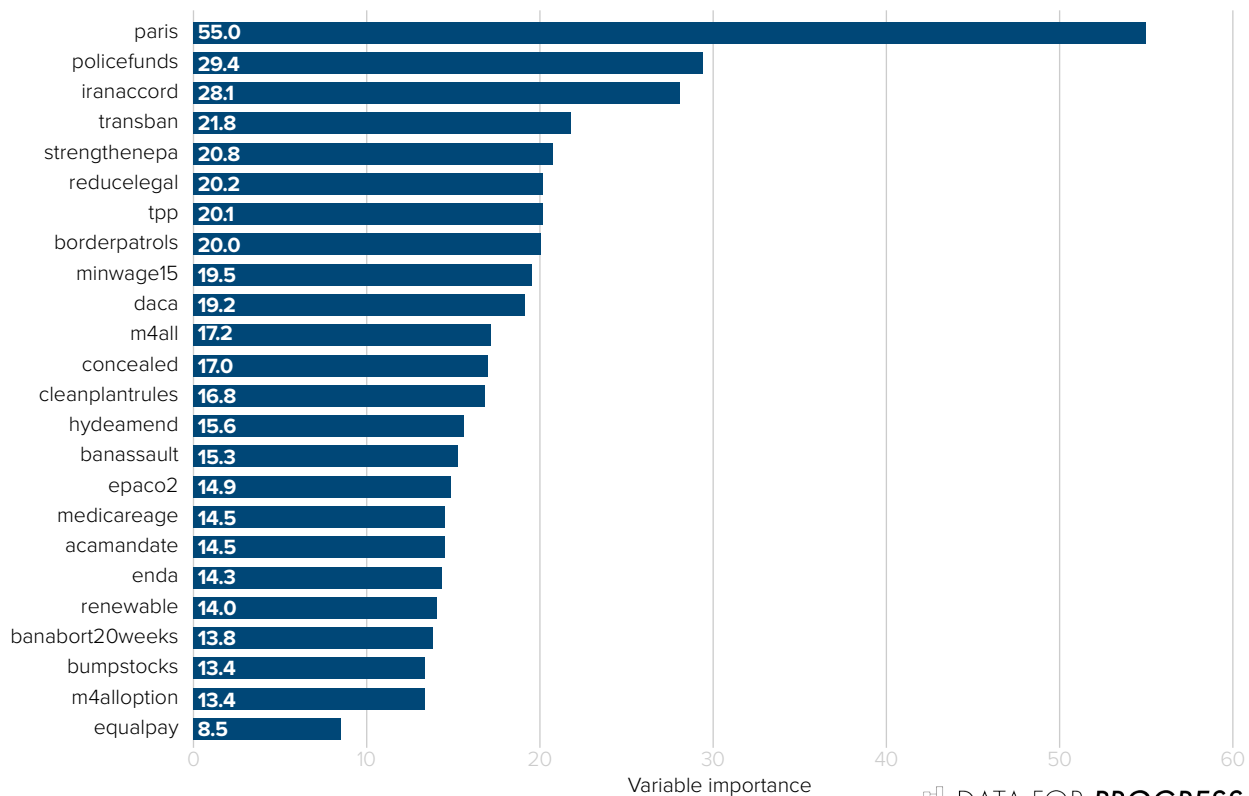All error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

We used the sampling weights in our analyses to ensure our results are representative.

Issue items used in the analysis of CCES data

ISSUE AREA	WORDING (LIBERAL POSITION IN PARENTHESES)
Gun control	(Support) Background checks for all gun sales, including at gun shows and over the Internet
	(Support) Ban bump stocks (a device attached to a semi-automatic weapon that allows bullets to be fired more rapidly)
	(Support) Ban assault rifles
	(Oppose) Make it easier for people to obtain concealed-carry permit
Abortion	(Oppose) Ban abortions after the 20th week of pregnancy
	(Oppose) Prohibit the expenditure of funds authorized or appropriated by federal law for any abortion except to save the life of the woman, or if the pregnancy arises from incest or rape
Immigration	(Oppose) Withhold federal funds from any local police department that does not report to the federal government anyone they identify as an illegal immigrant.
	(Oppose) Reduce legal immigration by 50 percent.
	(Oppose) Increase the number of border patrols on the U.S.-Mexican border.
	(Support) Provide permanent resident status to children of immigrants who were brought to the United States by their parents (also known as Dreamers). Provide these immigrants a pathway to citizenship if they meet the citizenship requirements and commit no crimes.
Health care	(Support) Expand Medicare to a single comprehensive public health care coverage program that would cover all Americans.
	(Support) Make Medicare available as an option to anyone, but allow people to keep private insurance if they prefer.
	(Support) Lower the eligibility age for Medicare from 65 to 50.
	(Support) Restore the Affordable Care Act's mandate that all individuals be required to purchase health insurance.

ISSUE AREA	WORDING (LIBERAL POSITION IN PARENTHESES)
Climate change	(Oppose) Withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement.
	(Oppose) Repeal the Clean Power Plant Rules (the Clean Power Plant rules would require power plants to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 32 percent by 2030).
	(Support) Require that each state use a minimum amount of renewable fuels (wind, solar, and hydroelectric) in the generation of electricity even if electricity prices increase a little
	(Support) Strengthen the Environmental Protection Agency enforcement of the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act even if it costs U.S. jobs
	(Support) Give the Environmental Protection Agency power to regulate Carbon Dioxide emissions.
Civil rights	(Support) Amend federal laws to prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation.
	(Support) Require equal pay for women and men who are doing similar jobs and have similar qualifications.
	(Oppose) Ban Transgender People in the Military
Other issues	(Support) Raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour.
	(Oppose) Withdraw the United States from the Iran Nuclear Accord and reimpose sanctions on Iran

Variable Importance Plot With Individual Issue Items

COVER PHOTO
Markus Spiske/Unsplash