Support for Political Topics Across the Ideological Spectrum

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The arena of political ideas is difficult to visualize without losing context and nuance. Here we elucidate how acceptance of various political ideas systematically varies as a function of observers' self-reported political ideology, while preserving as much relevant information as possible. We conducted an online survey on a representative sample of the U.S. population exploring individuals' perceptions of where they and various statements fall on the political spectrum, alongside their agreement with those statements.on a high-resolution sliding scale. This methodology allows for detailed portrayals of approval trends for individual political concepts as seen by individuals from across the spectrum, informing which topics are palatable to which portions of the population. These data provide a portrait of the ideological ecosystem and could prove useful for advocacy groups, researchers of attitudes across the political spectrum, or other interested parties.

I. INTRODUCTION

The arena of politics contains a slowly-shifting myriad of issues according to the concerns of the day. While the major political parties may take stances and define their platforms based on some of these issues, the actual feelings of the general population are generally harder to read. With data from a summer-2024 survey of an age/sex/political-party reflective sample from the Prolific platform, we map the acceptance of various political policies and attitudes as a function of ideological identity.

We thus set out to gather data exploiting this one-dimensional framing of political alignment, allowing each respondent to do their own "projection" of political ideas onto a liberal/conservative axis. In this paper, we share a multitude of preliminary findings concerning the subjective rating and acceptance of politicized statements.

II. RESULTS

Throughout this paper, we compare individuals' self-reported overall ideology (a concept whose robustness is examined in [1]) with their positions on major issues, and their agreement on a wide variety of political opinion statements.

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A. Major-Issue Ideological Self-Placement

First, we examine patterns of ideological self-identification on 13 major politicized issues. In Fig. 1 we can see that for the most part, individuals' sense of ideology on each issue hews closely to their overall sense of "general" ideology (dashed 45° diagonal), though on most issues (race, homosexuality, abortion, wealth inequality, religion in government, and environmental regulation) most of the population lies below the diagonal (i.e., people feel more liberal on those issues than they do overall). One comparison of particular note, however, is between "issues concerning homosexuality" and "changing one's gender/transgender issues" (see Section II C 1, "Transgender Issues," below.

B. Major-Issue Agreement

In Fig. 2, we visualize support across the ideological spectrum for ten major policy positions/attitudes. We provide a moving median and 25/75th percentiles, as well as the appropriate "ideology-consistent" diagonal where, e.g., a very liberal respondent strongly disagreeing with a conservative statement would lie on this line. We see that some statements hew very close to this line (military spending, LGBTQ issues, more taxes for more government benefits, demographic alarm), while others have systematic fall-off on one side (government assistance for the poor, wealth inequality, government religiosity, corporate regulation, abortion), or no ideological trend at all (globalized trade).
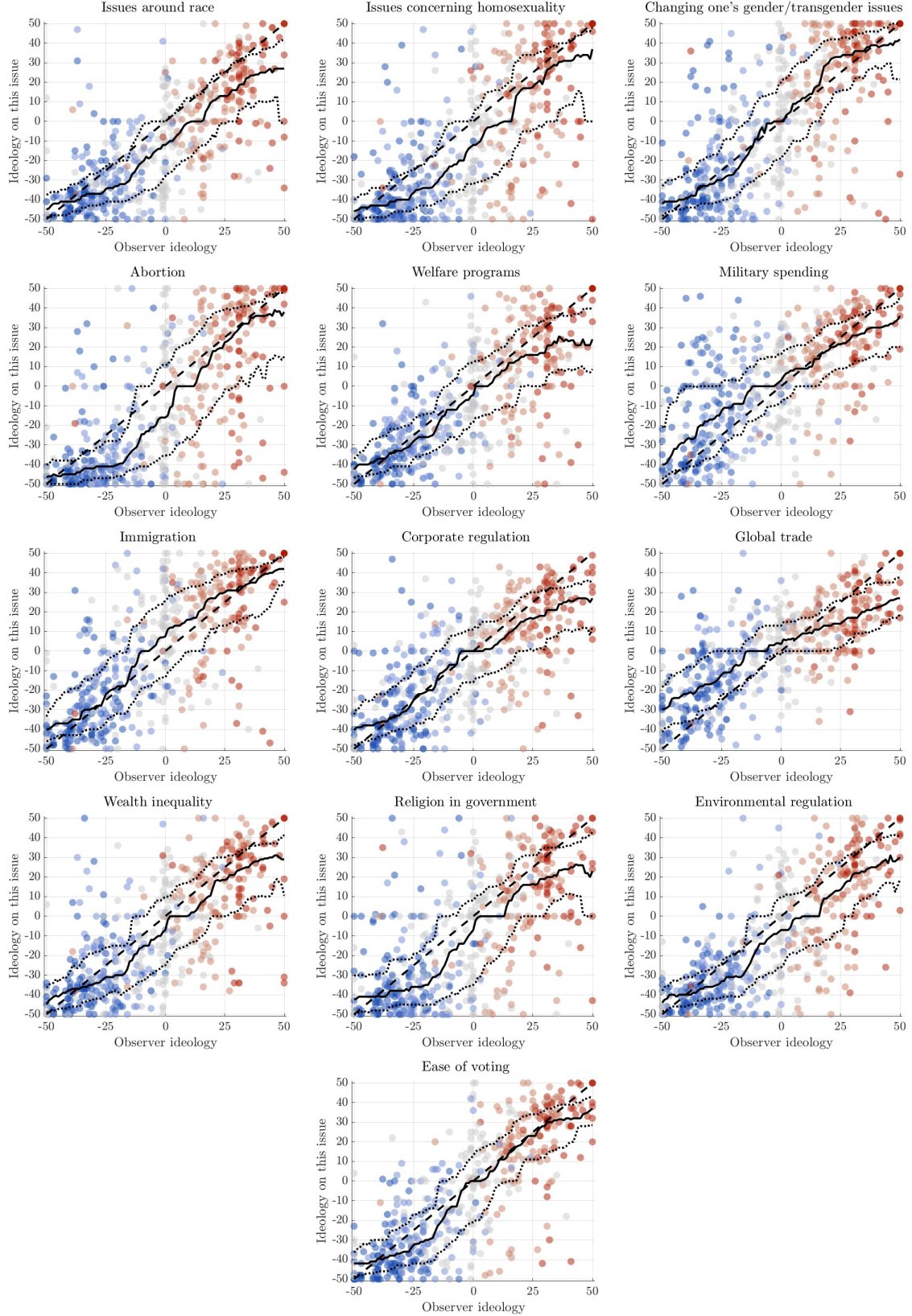
FIG. 1: Issue-by-issue ideological self-placement, with moving median (solid) and 25/75th percentiles (dotted) . Black curves are a Gaussian-weighted moving average with standard deviation 7. Most issues show a similar pattern with individual variation but consonance on average with the 45° line, though military spending and global trade show a notably flatter slope.
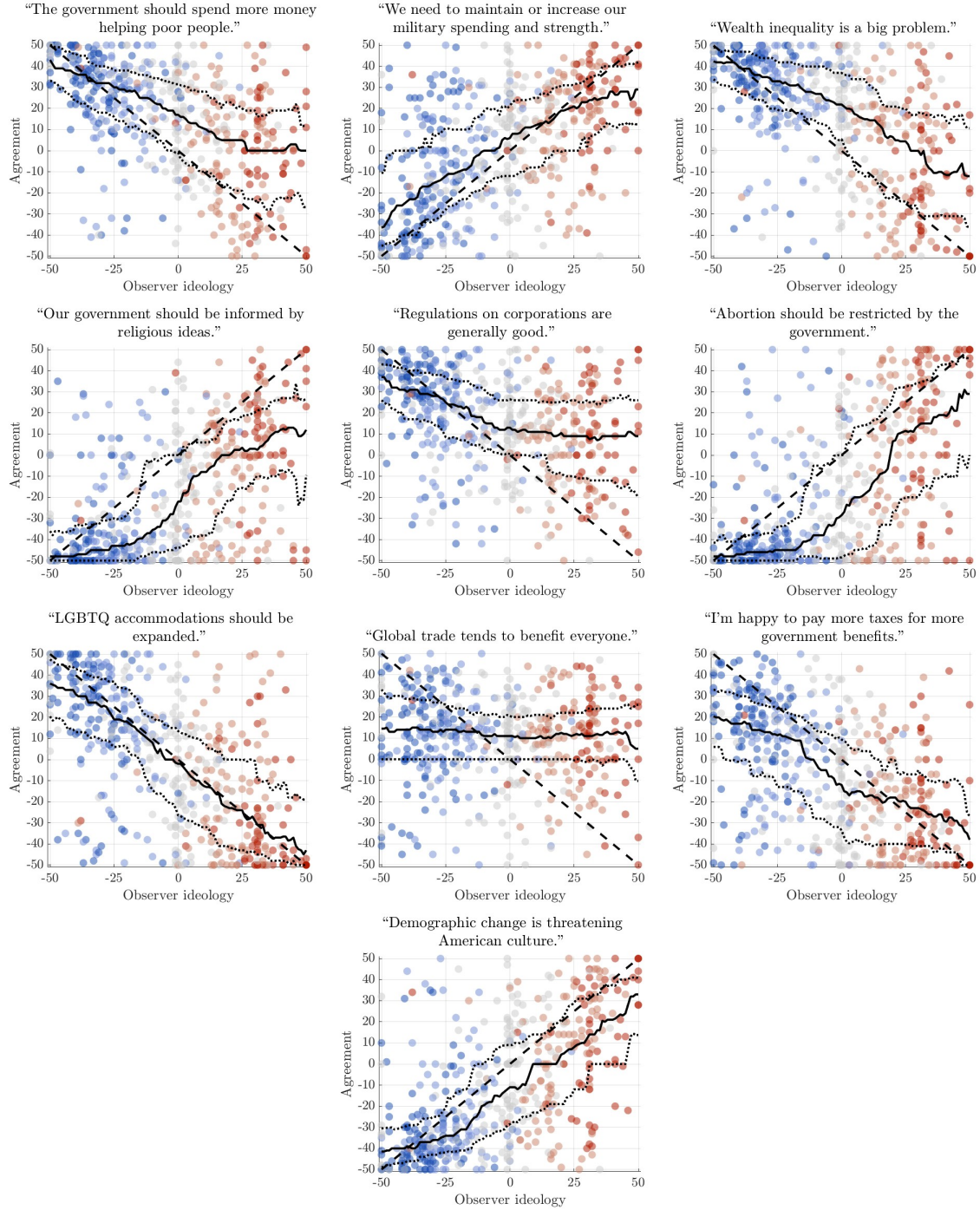
FIG. 2: Major-issue agreement with moving-median (solid) and 25/75th percentiles (dotted)—with window width = 7—along with the "ideologically consistent" diagonal (dashed) according to assumed ideological alignment of each statement. We see that the assumption of ideological correlation for pro-global-trade being a "liberal" position is quite inaccurate, and in fact that individuals believe their slight-agreement positions to be basically in line with their overall ideology (see "Global trade" panel of Fig. 1. We also that unlike Fig. 1, several issues (assistance for the poor, wealth inequality, religiosity in government, and corporate regulation) show a pattern of "half-indifference" wherein liberals are in strong agreement but conservatives are quite widely split, and on the other hand, military spending and increased taxes show a somewhat opposite pattern with liberals being more centrist and widely spread.

C. Support For Politicized Topics, By Ideology

In Figs. 3 through 12 we summarize the shape of support for each statement across the political spectrum. The black trend lines are, as elsewhere, a moving median (solid) and 25/75th percentiles, with window width 7. Each question saw an average of 224 respondents.

1. Transgender issues

Our data show clear signs of transgender policy being a "wedge issue," much moreso than homosexuality. In the 13-issue self-ideology report section, we separated "issues concerning homosexuality" from "changing one's gender/transgender issues"—the mean positions broken down by political affiliation are presented in Table I below. For additional statements gauging acceptance for specific policies and attitudes concerning transgender issues, see Fig. 3.

2. Topics of Bipartisan Agreement

Several topics showed strong agreement on one side of the aisle, and either net agreement or indifference on the other. Political advocacy movements might wish to search for these as a way of sorting through political topics for those where progress could be made.

III. METHODS

In order to support relatively smooth quantitative trend-seeking, all answers except for party identification responses were entered by a 100-point slider, rather than commonly used discrete 5- or 7-option agreement scales.

Several efforts were made to discourage respondents from over-using the extremes of the response scale, in order to resolve a wider range of reactions by reserving truly extreme positions and emotions. To this end, first, the following disclaimer preceded the survey:

"For this survey, please try **not** to use the extreme values very often—they should represent what you believe to be truly extreme views (e.g. inclined to drastic action or violence), or highly emotional/zealous mental states."

Second, the reference labels provided along with each slider included non-standard and more emotionally salient language on the ends:

- For ideological placement (e.g., "Rate where you think this statement falls on a Liberal/Conservative axis"), the markers were "Extremely Liberal,", "Very Liberal," "Somewhat Liberal," "Unsure/Centrist," "Somewhat Conservative," "Very Conservative," and "Extremely Conservative."

- For agreement (e.g., "How much do you agree with this statement?"), the markers were "Vehemently Disagree," "Strongly Disagree," "Somewhat Disagree," "Unsure/Indifferent," "Somewhat Agree," "Strongly Agree," and "Emphatically Agree."

These seven labels appeared at roughly values $0, \pm16, \pm32, \pm48$. However, there was no indication of what exact position corresponded to each label, so individuals were encouraged to position sliders smoothly anywhere in between.

The survey started with an assessment portion, aimed at measuring respondents' ideological position in three different ways for comparison: self-placement overall, self-placement on thirteen salient political issues, and agreement with a slate of ten broad statements on a similar slate of issues. These measures were compared to assess the accuracy and consistency of self-report with researcher-assigned ideological positions (see [1]).

Participants were also asked their party affiliation: "Which option best describes your political party affiliation/voting tendency?":

- Strongly Democrat

- Lean Democrat

- Independent/Undecided/Other

- Lean Republican

- Strongly Republican

This partisan identity informed the color of the scatter-dots in all figures.

This was followed by the main portion of the survey, where a random sample of thirty out of sixty-eight statements were shown to each participant. Respondents were secretly and randomly assigned to a control condition, where the statements were displayed on their own, or a treatment condition, where statements were framed as coming from a speaker of a particular political affiliation (e.g., "A Democrat says,'...' ").

This pool of statements was created to represent positions encountered across the political spectrum, emulating how a politically opinionated person might express their position online or in person.

Affiliation	Strong Democrat	Lean Democrat	Independent/Other	Lean Republican	Strong Republican
Sample Size	104	104	140	101	59
Homosexuality	-36.0	-29.1	-15.2	8.2	22.9
Trans Issues	-28.1	-21.1	-4.2	21.7	29.3
Difference	+7.9	+8.0	+11.0	+13.5	+6.4

TABLE I: Mean ideological self-placement on gay and trans issues by political affiliation (negative = liberal-aligned, positive = conservative-aligned). This demonstrates a clear gap in support for different parts of the LGBTQ acronym, particularly among swing voters (Independents and Leaners). This clearly demonstrates the status of transgender policy as a "wedge issue" in modern political discourse. Methodologically, it suggests that lumping LGBTQ issues together when collecting ideological data may engage with two or more significantly different meanings for different individuals.
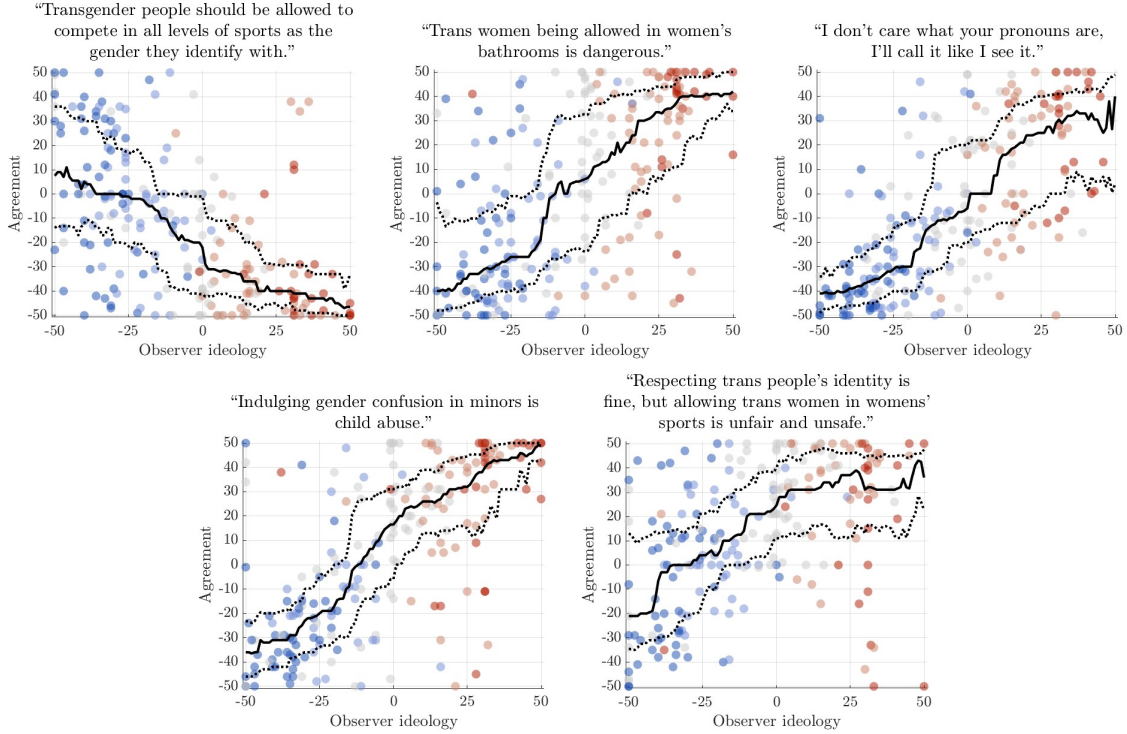
FIG. 3: Responses to statements having to do with transgender issues.

These statements were *not* intended to be a representative sample of the relative prevalence of political opinions of each ideological extremity in the general population, but rather to cover the spectrum as evenly as possible.

The statement pool included thirty "liberal" statements, thirty "conservative" statements, and eight "independent" statements. However, the actual ideological rating of the statements was left to the respondents, with the philosophy that individuals' internal, subjective experience of the statements is what matters for their reaction to them. While those ratings aren't visible in these scatter plots, we examine their patterns and surprising universality in [1].

An interactive website (david-sm.com) has been created to allow the independent exploration and comparison of these and hundreds of other possible figures from the data. All data and Matlab code for analysis and figure generation are available upon request.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Limitations

This survey had several limitations and areas for improvement for similar data-gathering efforts in the future.
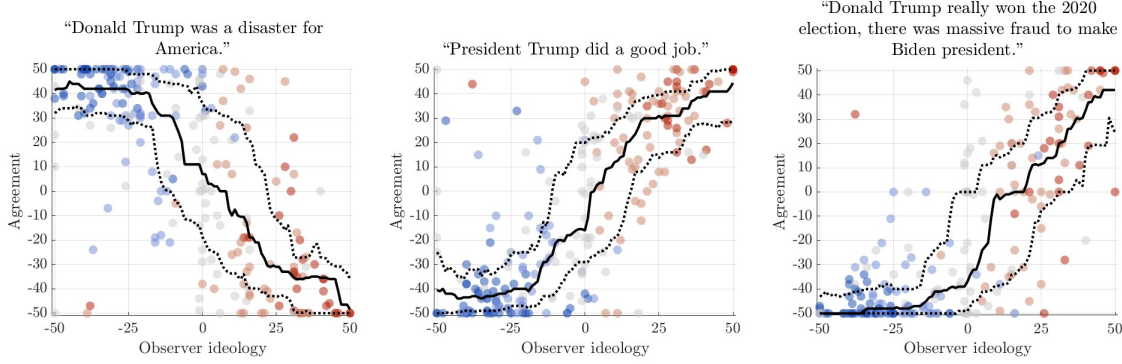
FIG. 4: Responses to statements having to do with Donald Trump.

First, the language "liberal" and "conservative" may be more accurately described as "left-wing" and "right-wing" for concordance with international (as opposed to just American) political-spectrum terminology—"liberalism" indeed has a broader definition outside of the United States, which could leave some more global-politics-minded respondents confused or conflicted. However, the ubiquitious nature of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in common U.S. political parlance might serve to counteract that concern by offering increased clarity to the audience.

Second, the statement pool could potentially be made more symmetric. A statement or two concerning trust in liberal media should be included to interrogate symmetric effects in media—perhaps MSNBC to parallel Fox News, and something like The Young Turks to parallel Fox opinion shows. Additionally, providing a left-wing conspiracy might help balance the several right-wing conspiracies as far as interrogating relative levels of support, and support/denigration of Joe Biden (or Kamala Harris) to parallel statements about Donald Trump. This would allow the examination of potential symmetry or asymmetry on these issues on the other side of the aisle, which our survey cannot speak to.

Finally, future efforts may be able to relax the one-dimensional assumptive framing, and ask participants (for example) their ideological position on social issues and their ideological position on centralization of power. However, this could become burdensome for every statement, so direct comparison of statements to individuals' positions may require careful consideration to balance ease/intuitiveness of response and accuracy of results.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Visualizing patterns of support against self-reported ideology gives a unique and high-resolution perspective on the attitudes of the general public. We can see that some statements enjoy strong support on one side and only neutral sentiment on the other; these may be indicators of a topic of bipartisan progress, in contrast to more polarizing issues which have steeper slopes, or statements which do not enjoy support from either side. Visualizing the window of acceptance in this manner may also be of use for diagnosing the extent of belief in conspiracies, or support for certain policies when information is targeted towards certain ideological subsets of the population. We hope the capacity for quantitative nuance visible from this diagnostic work, and in related, diagnostic and predictive analyses [1] serves as an enticement towards this paradigm of data-gathering and visualization.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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[1] D. Sabin-Miller, M. McGrath, and M. C. Eisenberg, A political spectrograph: High-resolution examinations of the united states' ideological landscape (2025), arXiv:2501.08433 [physics.soc-ph].
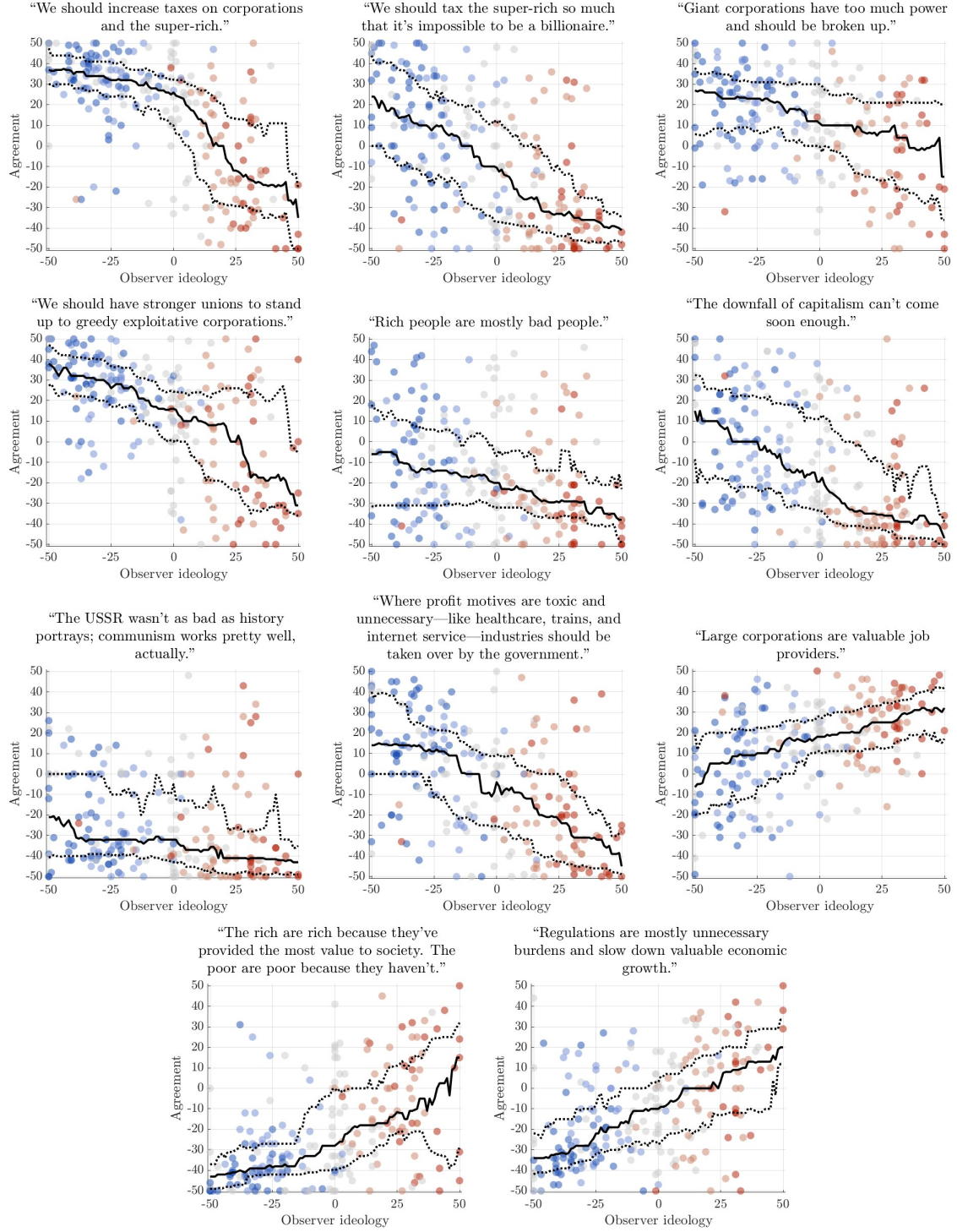
FIG. 5: Responses to statements having to do with economic issues.
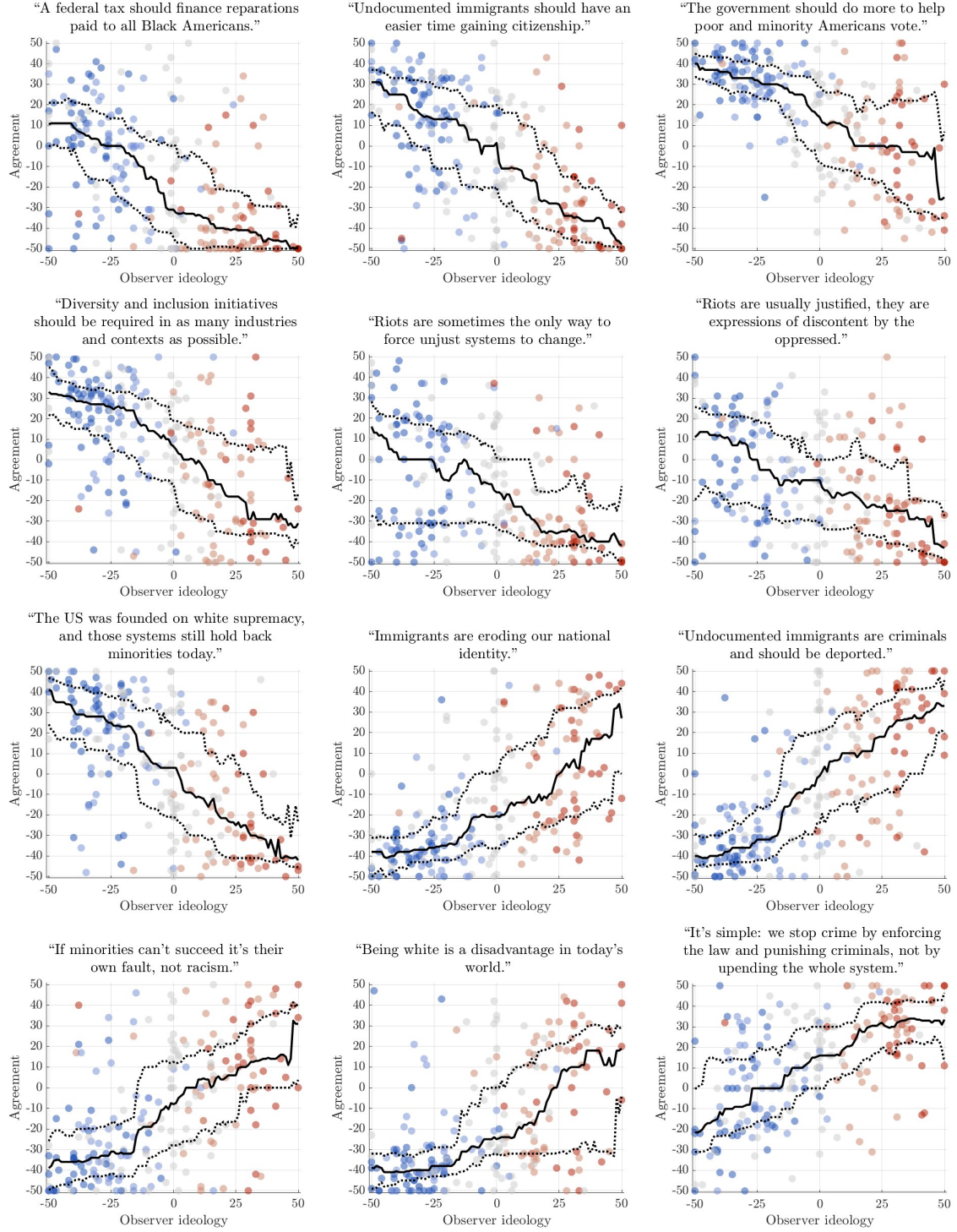
FIG. 6: Responses to statements having to do with racial issues.
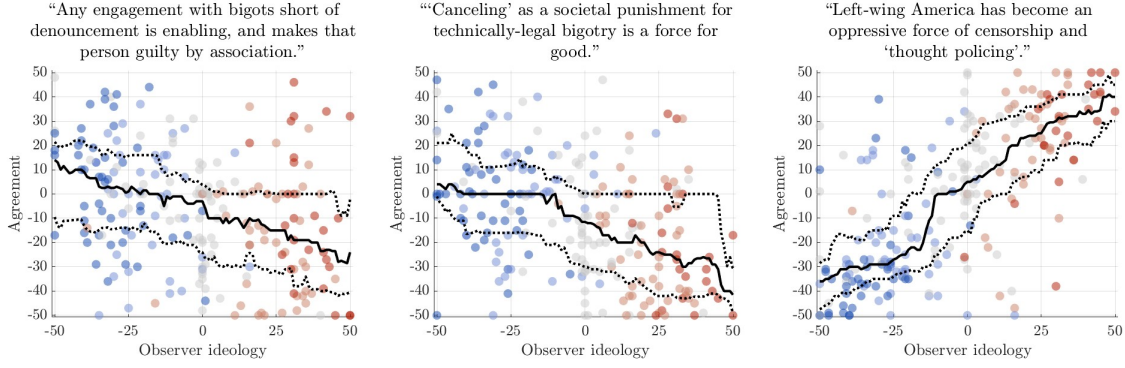
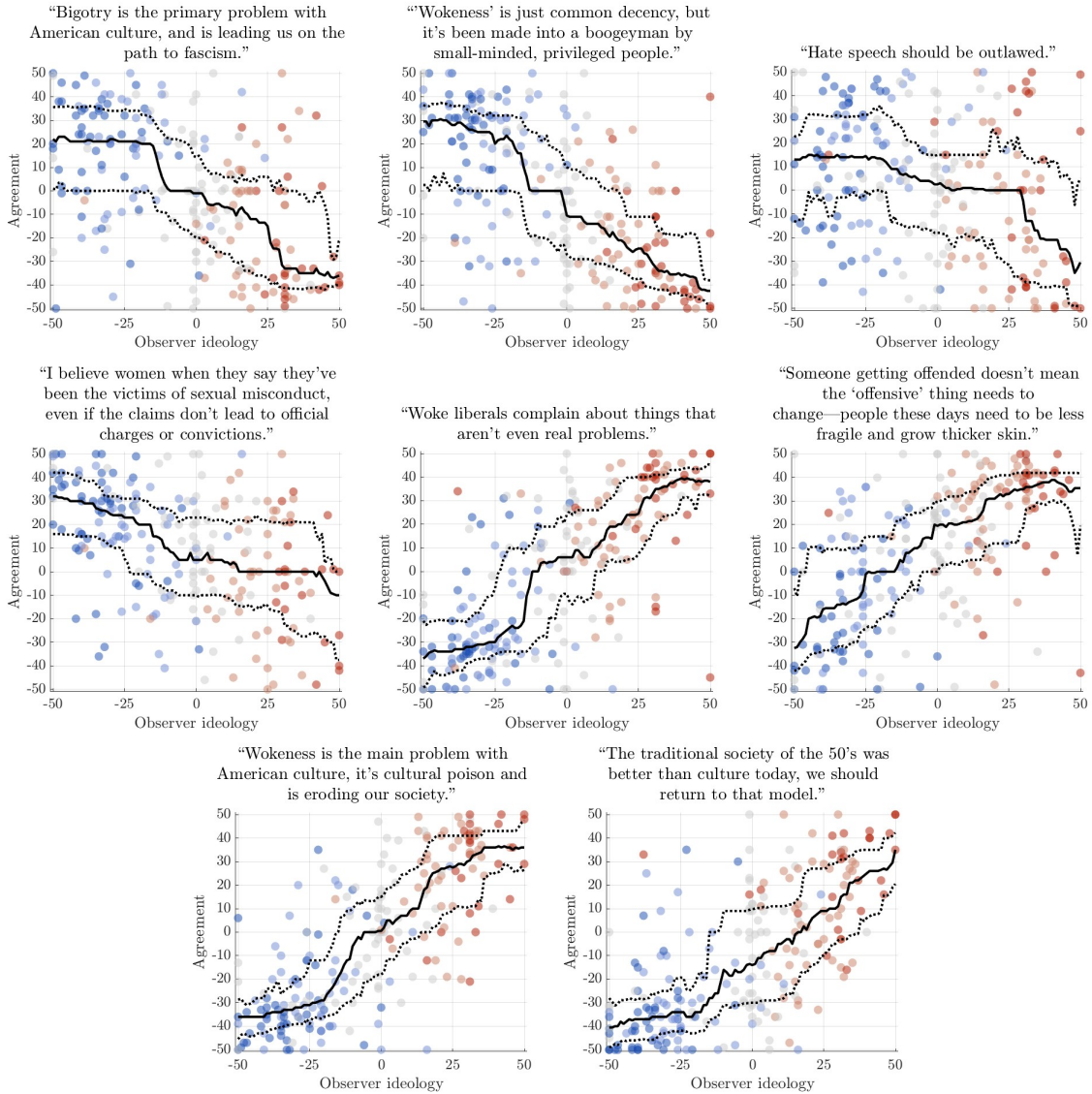FIG. 7: Responses to statements having to do with "canceling".

FIG. 8: Responses to statements having to do with the "wokeness" and the general "culture war".
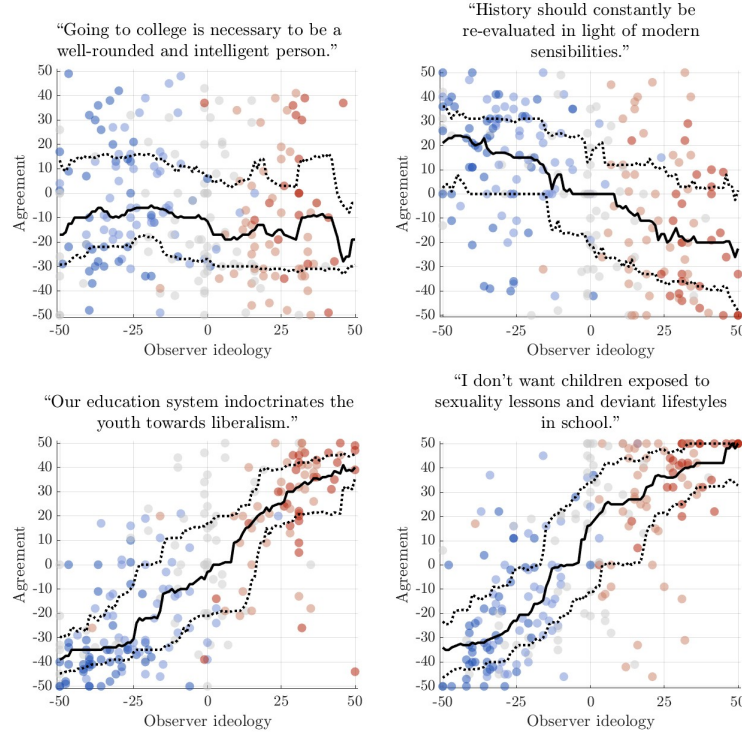
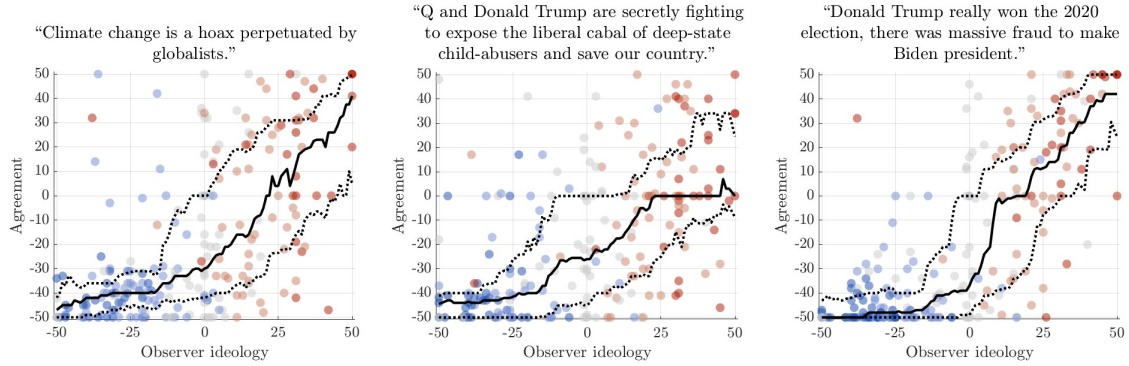FIG. 9: Responses to statements having to do with education.

FIG. 10: Responses to statements having to do with three conspiracy theories.
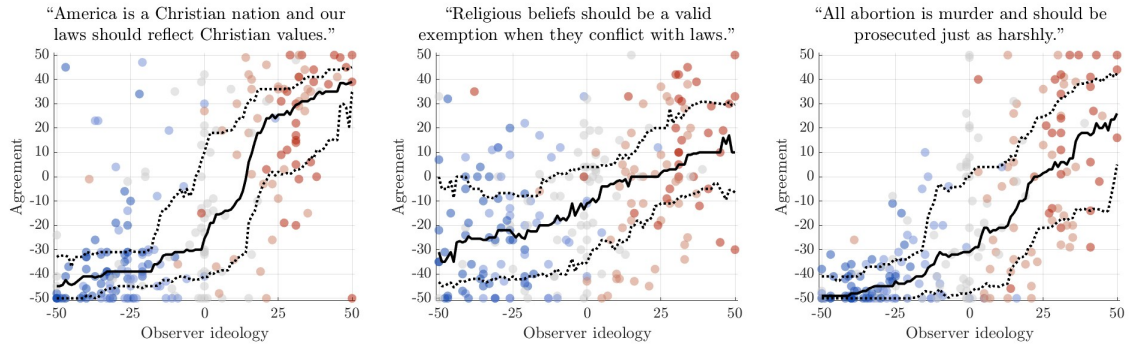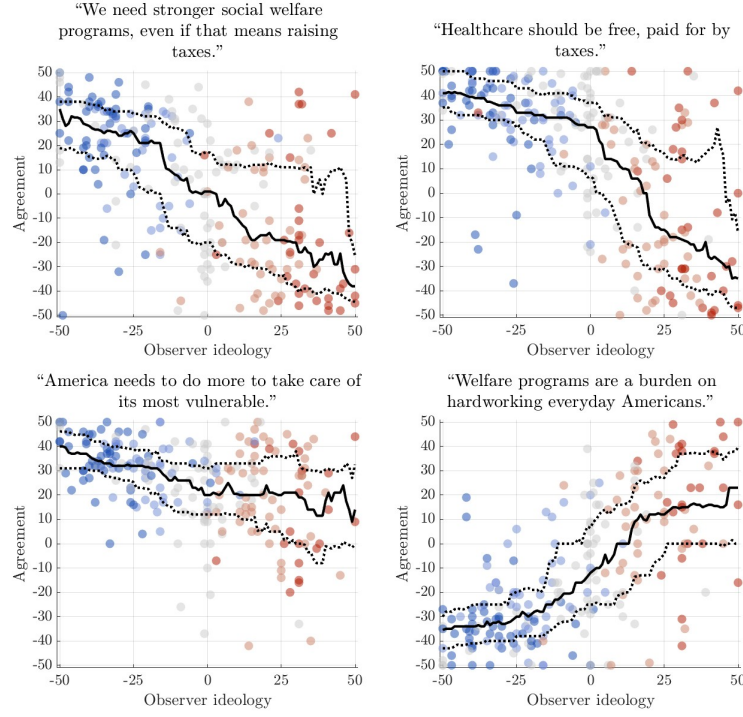

FIG. 11: Responses to statements having to do with religion.

FIG. 12: Responses to statements having to do with social services.
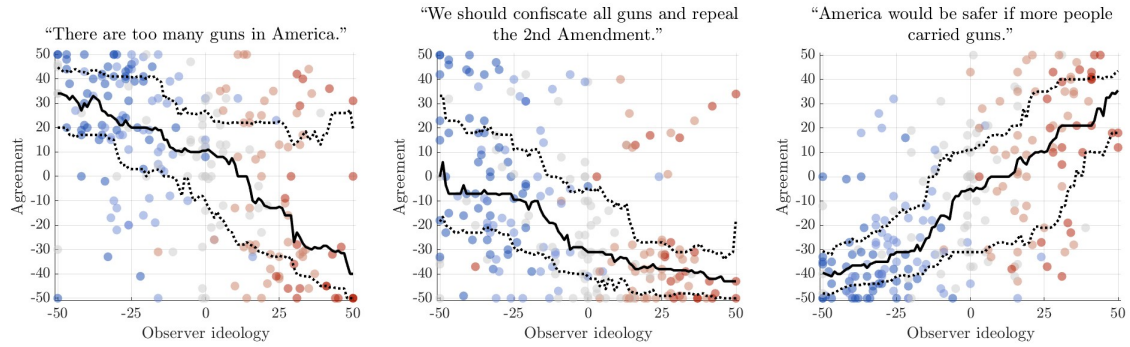
FIG. 13: Responses to statements having to do with gun ownership.
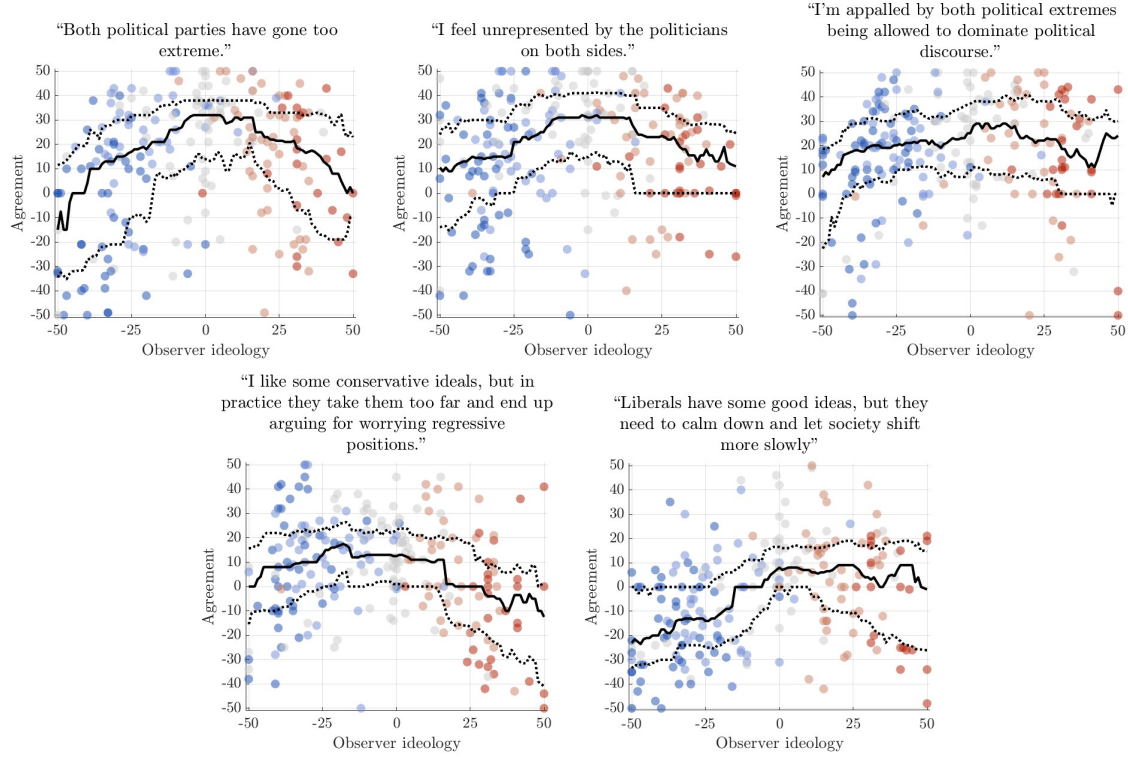
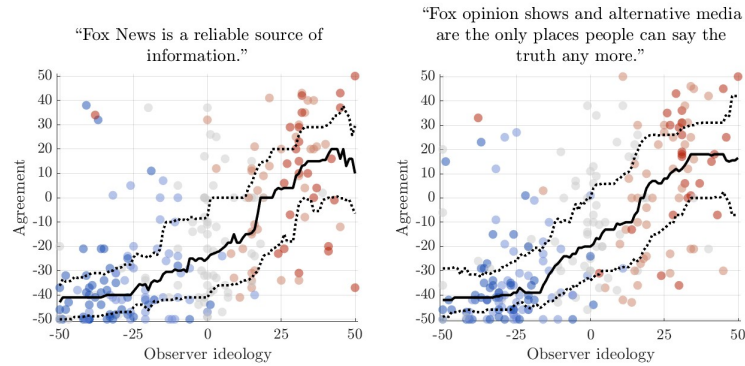FIG. 14: Responses to statements having to do with centrist dissatisfaction.

FIG. 15: Responses to statements on Fox News (regrettably not mirrored).
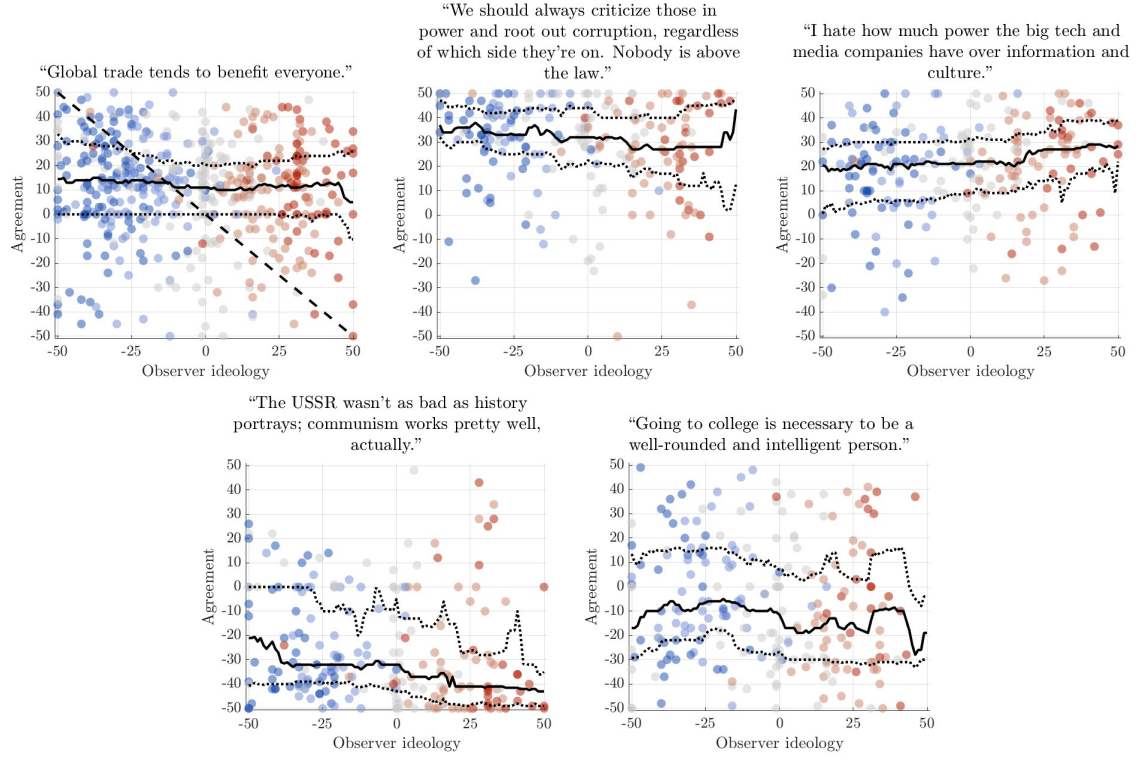
FIG. 16: Statements which showed broad concurrence, i.e. little to no partisan or ideological difference. (Some questions repeated from other sections above)
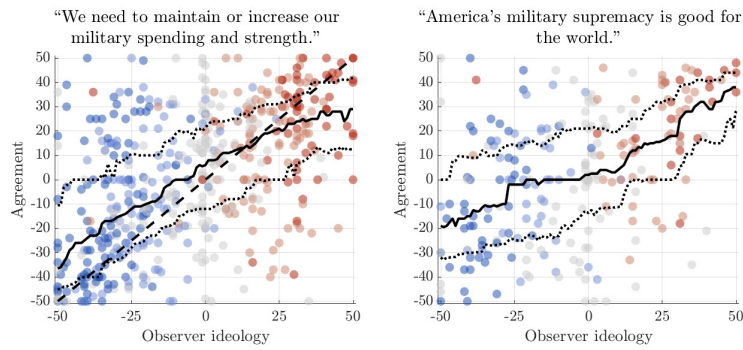

FIG. 17: Responses to statements on the military.