

# Spatial voting decisions with inconsistent policy preferences

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## A matter of representation

Citizens' policy preferences do not always coincide with models of spatial voting.

But what are the consequences for voting behavior and representation?

## Contribution

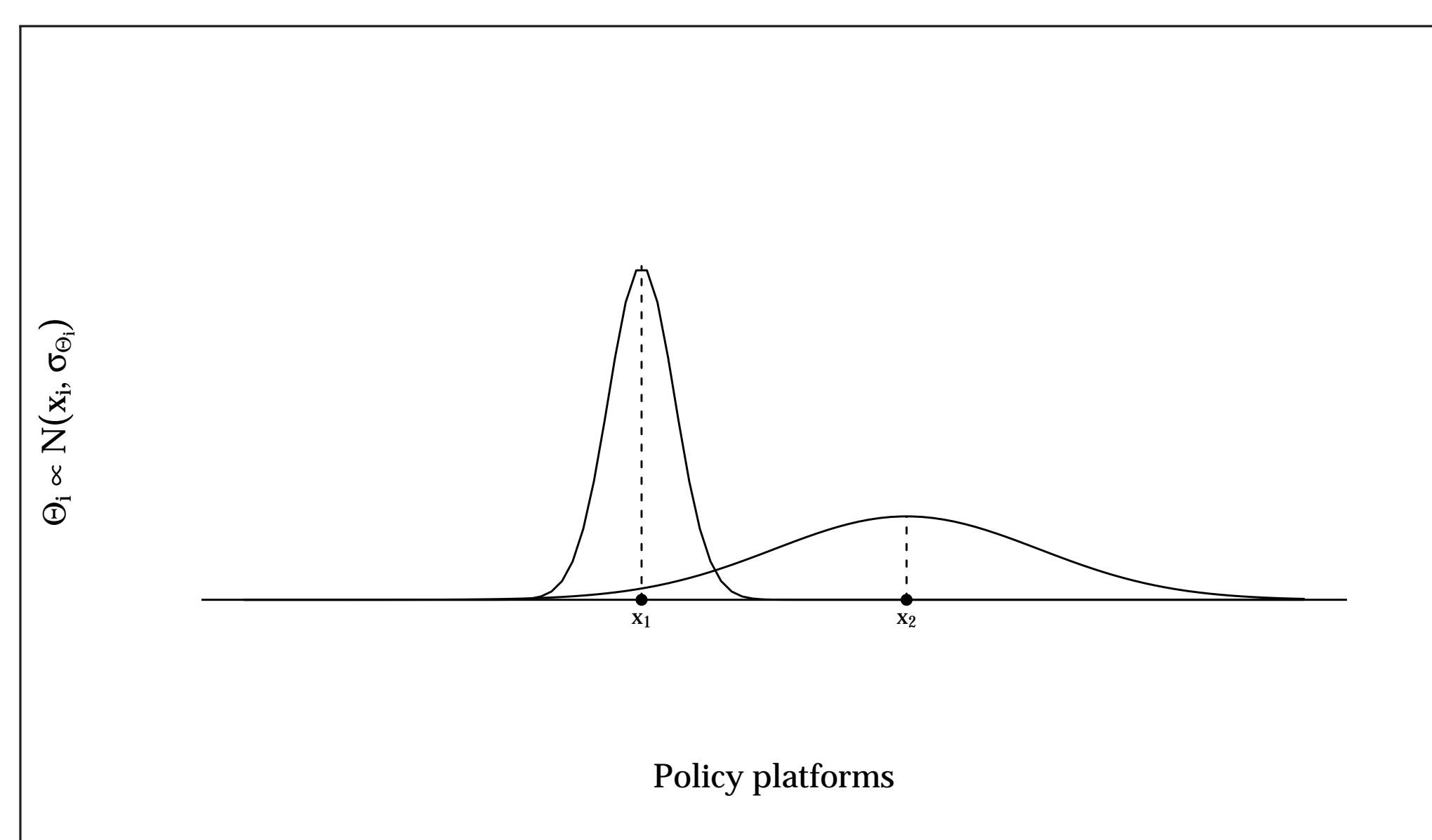
1. Extension to spatial voting models that allows for a wider definition of policy preferences
2. Analyze how inconsistency moderates spatial voting decisions
3. Policy distance is less important for voters with inconsistent preferences
4. Implications about the expected representational closeness

## Contrasting perspectives

- Spatial voting models
  - Ideological platforms organize parties' programs and also perfectly approximate voters' policy preferences
  - Assumption that two voters with the same ideal policy platform possess the same policy preferences
- Mass belief systems
  - Converse's definition of ideological constraint implies that citizens differ in the degree of consistency
  - For some citizens policy platforms are a reliable abstraction of their opinions, but for others they are not

## A spatial representation of citizens' policy beliefs

- Adaptive utility theory: Policy beliefs about ideal policy platform that differ in direction, but also in precision
- Voter's state of mind  $\Theta_i \sim N(x_i, \sigma_{\Theta_i}^2)$ , where  $x_i$  is mean belief and  $\sigma_{\Theta_i}^2$  belief variance



- Belief variance loosens the systematic relationship between ideological platforms and policy preferences
- Policy beliefs can be a strong source of additional randomness regarding policy proposals
- Wide belief variance is directly connected to inconsistency in policy preferences

## The influence of policy beliefs on voting decisions

- Probabilistic voting model between two candidates  $V_{ik} = \mathbb{E}[U_{ij}] + \epsilon_{ik}$
- Expected utility model
  - Uncertainty that originates from policy beliefs concerns both candidates to an equal share and as a result cancels out

H0 The effect of policy distance is not moderated by inconsistency

- Learning model
  - For voters with wider policy belief variance, information contained in platform signals is less informative, compared to voters with consistent policy beliefs.
  - Expected utility is less strongly affected by policy distance for voters with wide policy beliefs

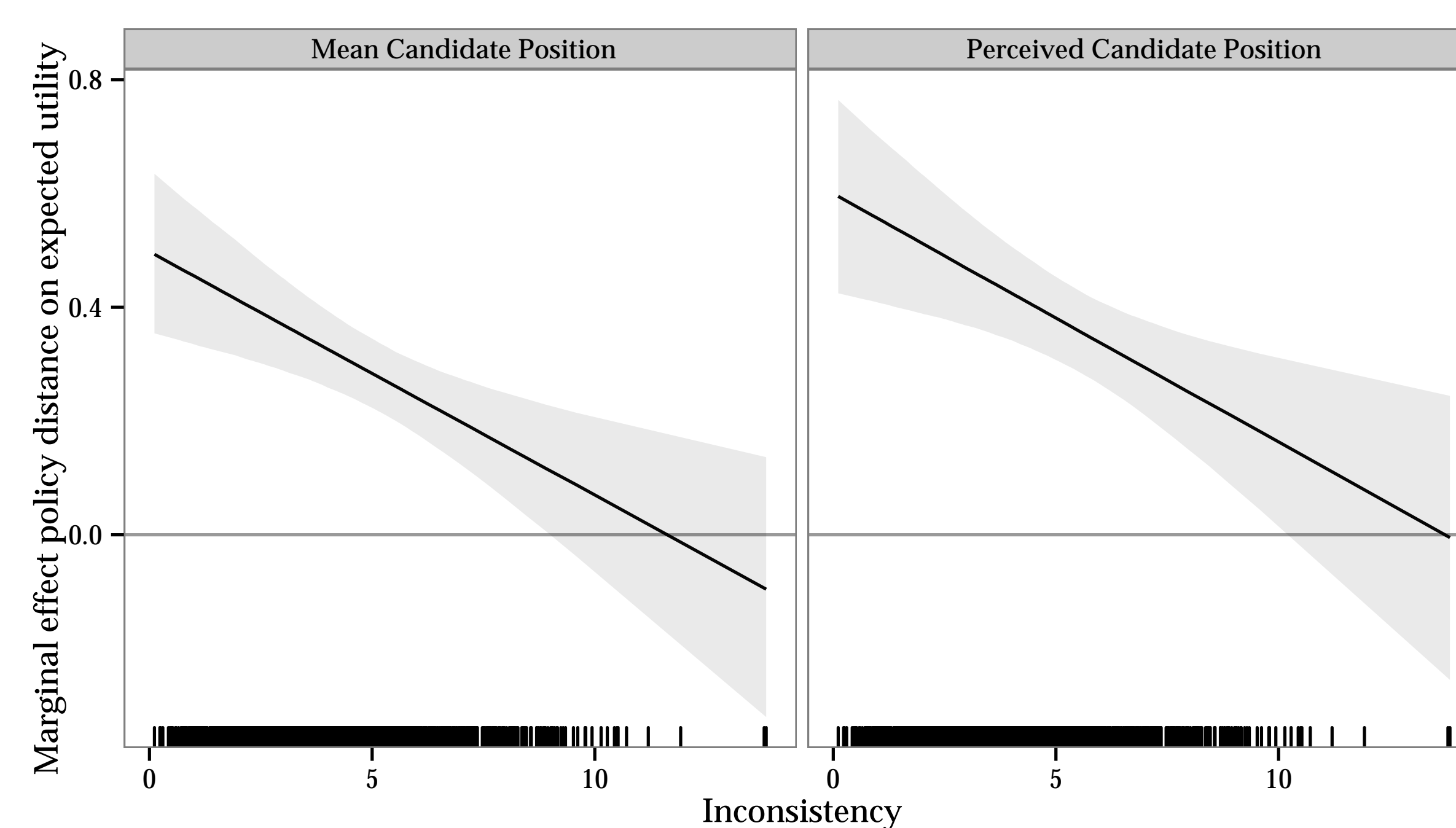
H1 Policy distance is moderated by inconsistency, as voters with a wider belief variance put less weight on policy distance

## Empirical specification

- Data from American National Election Study 2008-2009
- Probit models with interaction effect of policy distance and inconsistency; additional controls
- Measurement of mean beliefs: Factor scores, perceived distance and average candidate platforms
- Measurement of inconsistency: Derived based on relationship between ideological platform and policy preferences, as the average deviation from the ideologically expected answering pattern

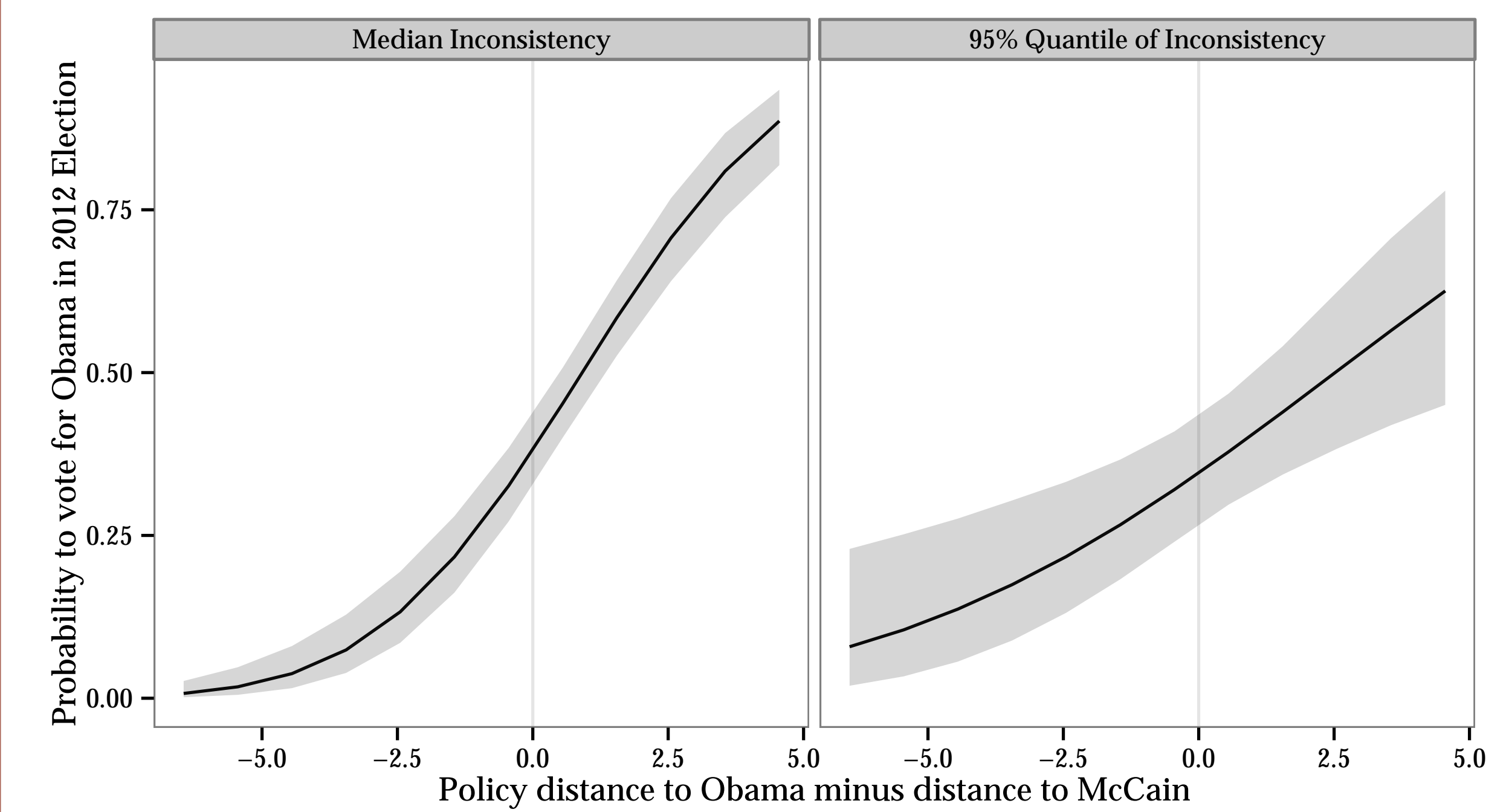
## Results

- The effect of policy distance is negatively moderated by inconsistency

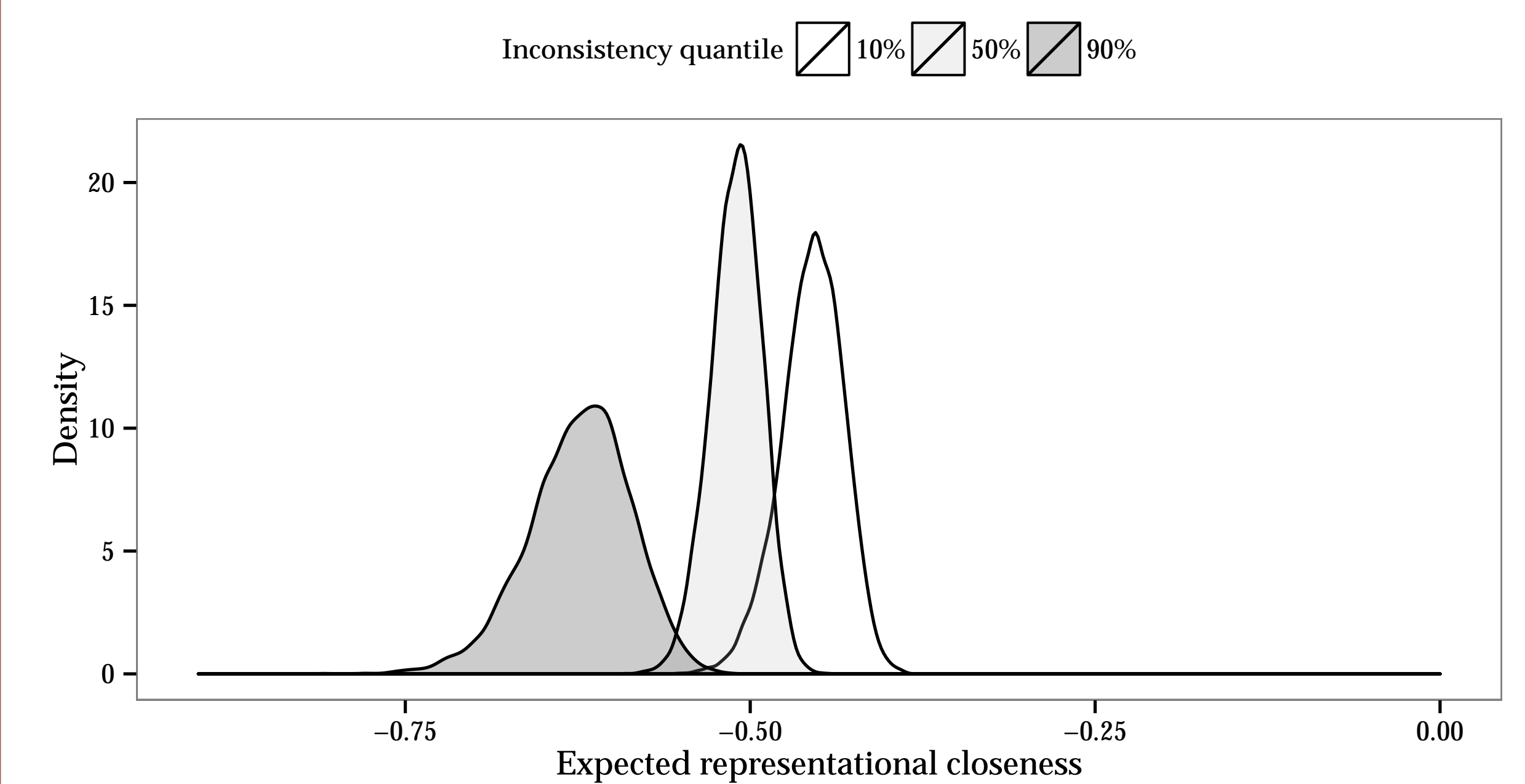


## Implications

- For voters with inconsistent preferences policy distance is less important



- Citizens who's preferences align closely with ideological dimensions are expected to be closer represented by their candidates



- Results are robust when using different measurements for inconsistency and policy platforms; considering estimation uncertainty of inconsistency; different types of inconsistencies, weak vs. strong attitudes; Results also hold in presidential election of 2012 with a different set of issues

## Discussion

- Citizens with views on different issues that are not organized in liberal vs conservative terms, rely less on distance when deciding which candidate to vote for, compared to citizens with well-defined policy preferences
- Speaks to current debates:
  - Political sophistication hypothesis about heterogeneity in spatial voting decisions
  - Directional theories of spatial voting
- Potential extensions:
  - Two dimensions of politics
  - Learning model for candidate ambiguity and polarization