

ISSUE IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE VOTING

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Issue importance mediates the impact of public policy issues on electoral decisions. Individuals who consider that an issue is important are more likely to rely on their attitudes toward that issue when evaluating candidates and deciding for whom to vote. The logic behind the link between issue importance and issue voting should translate to a link between issue importance and performance voting. Incumbent performance evaluations regarding an issue should have a stronger impact on the vote choice of individuals who find that issue important. The analysis demonstrates that there is a significant interaction between performance evaluations and issue importance. People concerned about an issue assign more weight to their evaluations of the government's performance on that issue when making up their mind.

Key words: issue importance; government performance; vote choice; heterogeneity.

Issue importance is a significant mediator of issue voting (Krosnick, 1988, 1990). The impact of various policy attitudes on candidate appraisal and vote choice is stronger among those individuals who feel that the issue in question is important. Although this interaction has large implications for our estimates of issue voting and our understanding of voting behavior, it has received little attention since the publication of Krosnick's studies. Issue importance is rarely integrated into models of political decision.

This article seeks to expand the work of Krosnick on the mediating role of issue importance. It determines whether the impact of incumbent performance evaluations on vote choice is mediated by issue importance. The analysis draws on the 1997 Canadian Election Study, which contains detailed mea-

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asures of perceptions of the government's performance on various issues and of assessments of the importance of these issues in the election. The analysis tests whether there is a significant interaction between performance evaluations and issue importance, whether people who consider an issue important are more likely to base their vote choice on their evaluation of the government's performance on that issue.

In some fashion, our interest is connected to the agenda-setting and priming literatures. In each case, the starting point is the observation that "people do not pay attention to everything" (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 64). Due to human cognitive limitations, "when people make decisions, they rarely take into consideration the entire array of available relevant evidence," they tend to concentrate on the pieces of information "that come to mind quickly and automatically for an individual—those that are most accessible" (Miller and Krosnick, 1996, pp. 80–81).¹ Agenda setting concerns the influence of factors—most notably, but not exclusively, media coverage—on the issues that individuals consider important and unimportant (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder, 1982; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Priming focuses on factors—again, most prominently, media coverage—that change the "standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged" by calling attention to some issues while ignoring others (Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, and Krosnick, 1984; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 63; Miller and Krosnick, 1996).

The link between agenda setting and priming is that issues that are deemed important should have more impact on individuals' decisions. Tying issue importance and decision weights is precisely our preoccupation. We show how individuals' own priorities make them weigh some issues more heavily than others when deciding how to vote. For example, those who believe that crime is a very important issue should pay greater attention to the government's performance on crime than those who think crime is not very important. We are thus concerned with interpersonal differences, rather than over-time changes in issue importance and decision weights.

THE CONTEXT

Political scientists have developed a growing awareness of the sources of interpersonal heterogeneity in political decision-making (Duch, 2001; Fournier, 2000; Johnston, Blais, Gidengil and Nevitte, 1996; Rivers, 1988; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock, 1991).² An important contribution to this question is Krosnick's work on the mediating role of issue importance in political behavior (1988, 1990).³

Krosnick defines policy attitude importance as "the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude"

(1990, p. 60). “Subjectively determined and inherently personal” (Berent and Krosnick, 1995, p. 92), policy importance, though partly driven by short-term factors, tends to be enduring. According to Krosnick (pp. 85–86): “Once bounds are established between aspects of the self and some attitudes, they are likely to remain as long as the attitude object is at least moderately salient to one’s environment.” As a result,

When prominent events or problems do not focus national attention, people are unlikely to focus their passions on the same set of policy debates. Rather, individuals probably come through their own unique personal experiences and on the basis of their own self-interests, social identification, and values to care deeply about idiosyncratic sets of public policy options. (Krosnick, 1990, p. 74)⁴

Social psychology theories lead Krosnick to believe that “The impact of a policy attitude on a citizen’s candidate preference should depend on the personal importance of the policy attitude to the voter. Important attitudes ought to have powerful impact, whereas unimportant attitudes ought to have little impact” (Krosnick, 1990, p. 62). First, important attitudes are more cognitively accessible, and they are “therefore more likely to come to mind as a criterion with which to evaluate political candidates” (Krosnick, p. 62). Second, citizens who find an attitude important are more likely to differentiate between candidates on that issue, since they give greater attention to statements about the issue, perceive differences between stands more easily, infer differences between the candidates based on cues more effectively, and exaggerate the “apparent magnitude of the difference between the candidates’ attitudes” (Krosnick, 1988, p. 197). Third, important attitudes, anchored by values, beliefs, relevant knowledge, social support, and psychological mechanisms, are “likely to be potent determinants of candidate evaluations . . . because important attitudes are likely to be highly resistant to change” (Krosnick, 1990, p. 62).

In fact, Krosnick found

Policy attitudes that citizens consider important are highly accessible in memory, are highly resistant to change, are highly stable over time, are extensively linked to and consistent with individuals’ basic values, instigate polarized perceptions of competing presidential candidates’ policy attitudes, and are powerful determinants of candidate preferences. (Krosnick, 1990, p. 70)

More importantly, Krosnick demonstrates that issue importance affects the impact of public policy issues on electoral decisions; individuals who feel that an issue is important are more likely to rely on their attitudes toward that issue when evaluating candidates and deciding for whom to vote.

Krosnick suggests that the logic that binds issue importance to issue voting

should extend to concepts other than issue voting, notably government performance evaluations (1990, p. 86). Surveys often ask respondents to rate the performance of political actors currently in office. Performance ratings are sometimes used as dependent variables capturing approval of a political actor's job handling (Brody, 1991; Edwards, 1990; Mueller, 1973; Neustadt, 1960). They are also included in models of candidate appraisal and vote choice as measures of retrospective judgment on the incumbent's accomplishments (Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, 1999; Butler and Stokes, 1969; Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1981; Flanigan and Zingale, 1994; Rose and McAllister, 1990). The latter situation is where issue importance could play a mediating role.

The reasoning behind the link between issue voting and issue importance should translate to a link between performance voting and issue importance. Individuals who are concerned about an issue should:

- be more able to rate the performance of the government on that issue,
- have more polarized evaluations of the government's performance on that issue,
- and link their evaluations of the government on that issue more closely to their vote choice.

This article tests these hypotheses.

THE STUDY

We draw on data from the 1997 Canadian Election Study (CES).⁵ In the campaign wave of the CES survey, respondents were asked to rate the performance of the incumbent Liberal government on five specific policy issues: preserving national unity, reducing the deficit, creating jobs, fighting crime, and protecting social programs. Responses to these questions range from not good at all (-1) to very good job (+1).⁶ Table 1 presents the mean score of these performance evaluations. The results show that the incumbent government was not judged uniformly across all issues. People were able to evaluate distinctly each aspect of the government's performance. Canadians perceived that the Liberals had done a relatively good job with regard to reducing the deficit, but a relatively bad job concerning job creation.

Are performance evaluations simply projections of prior partisan identification? Table 2 reports the average performance score among each party identification group. It indicates that some projection is at play. Performance scores are typically positive among Liberal identifiers. Conversely, partisans of the other parties generally give the Liberals negative scores. However, the results do not solely reflect projection. For one of the five issues (jobs), the average

TABLE 1. Government Performance Evaluations and Assessments of Issue Importance

Issue	Average Government Performance Evaluation	Percent Said Very Important in Closed Question	Percent Mentioned as Most Important in Open Question
National unity	.04	55.5	9.1
Deficit	.15	59.8	7.2
Jobs	-.25	83.9	28.8
Crime	-.04	68.8	1.8
Social programs	-.04	59.8	15.7

performance evaluation among Liberal identifiers drops below the neutral point into negative appraisals. Furthermore, supporters of opposition parties often attribute neutral and even positive marks to the government. For instance, despite the fact that they identify with another party, Conservative, New Democratic Party, and Bloc Québécois partisans responded that the Liberals had done a good job of reducing the deficit. Sometimes, the evaluations of opposition party identifiers are even more positive than those of nonpartisans. All in all, the evidence shows that government performance evaluations are related to partisan attachment but that they are not simply the product of projection.

Table 3 indicates how the propensity to vote Liberal was linked to government performance evaluations. As expected, there is a positive correlation between government performance evaluations and incumbent vote choice: the proportion of Liberal voters increases as performance assessments become more positive. We later ascertain whether this relationship holds when appropriate controls are introduced and, most importantly, whether this link is mediated by issue importance.

To operationalize issue importance, Krosnick (1988) used closed-ended questions that inquire about the importance that individuals attach to several

TABLE 2. Average Government Performance Evaluations by Party Identification

Issue	Liberal	Conservative	NDP	Reform	Bloc Québécois	Non-partisans
National unity	.27	-.05	.03	-.22	-.08	-.01
Deficit	.36	.16	.14	-.23	.09	.12
Jobs	-.02	-.30	-.42	-.41	-.46	-.29
Crime	.14	-.07	-.10	-.37	-.13	-.07
Social programs	.15	-.03	-.26	-.02	-.24	-.10

TABLE 3. Percentage Reporting to Have Voted for the Liberal Party by Government Performance Evaluations

Issue	Not Good at All	Not Very Good	Don't Know	Pretty Good	Very Good
National unity	13.7	28.6	30.9	49.7	54.1
Deficit	14.8	25.9	40.7	41.0	58.1
Jobs	16.4	33.7	38.2	56.9	74.5
Crime	21.0	30.0	37.9	46.6	66.7
Social programs	14.5	33.5	34.0	59.7	76.1

specific issues.⁷ In this study, we have access to both closed- and open-ended importance questions. First, respondents were asked an open-ended question about the most important issue of the election for them personally. Second, respondents were also asked to rate the importance they attach to each of the performance issues specifically in closed-ended questions.⁸

Existing evidence suggests that responses to closed- and open-ended importance questions differ only in minor and predictable ways. Using split sample experiments, Schuman, Ludwig, and Krosnick (1986) found that the relative importance of issues was not affected by question format. The most notable differences uncovered were that all issues proposed in the closed-ended format were more often rated as important than in the open-ended form, and that minor issues experienced the greatest increases. Although that study deals with questions about the importance of problems facing the country, its conclusions should extend to questions about the importance of issues in an election.

The distributions of the two indicators presented in Table 1, however, reveal significant differences in the rankings of issues obtained through the closed- and open-ended importance questions.⁹ Jobs is rated as the most important issue under both formats. The majority of other issues, however, are not ranked similarly by the two questions. Most notably, crime is cited as the second most important issue when all issues are specifically offered, yet it comes in last when people are asked to spontaneously mention the most important issue.

This raises the question of which format best measures the importance individuals attach to different issues. This question is not addressed here. Rather, we show that whichever measure of issue importance is used, there is empirical support for the three hypotheses formulated previously.

ISSUE IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, it examines whether issue importance increases the likelihood of evaluating the performance of the government and of giving the government extreme performance ratings. Then, it

uses interactive terms between importance and performance to determine whether issue importance mediates the effect of performance ratings on incumbent vote choice.¹⁰

The upper portion of Table 4 presents the results of difference-of-means tests on the proportion of don't know responses to the performance questions among different issue importance levels.¹¹ The results confirm that issue importance influences the capacity to rate the government's performance: individuals who feel that an issue is important are more likely to evaluate the government on that issue. The proportion of don't know is often substantially smaller among voters who deem the issue important than among those who feel it is not important. This pattern is consistent across both closed- and open-ended questions, since four of the five differences between the two groups are significantly negative in each question format.

The lower portion of Table 4 deals with the impact of issue importance on the propensity to give very positive or very negative evaluations of the government's performance. It reports the results of difference-of-means tests on the proportion of people who answer very good job or not good at all

TABLE 4. Issue Importance and Government Performance Evaluations: Nonresponse and Extremism

Issue	Closed-Ended Issue Importance			Open-Ended Issue Importance		
	Important	Not Important	Difference (Sign.)	Important	Not Important	Difference (Sign.)
<i>Percentage of Don't Knows to Government Performance Evaluations</i>						
National unity	6.4	6.8	-0.4	1.5	8.2	-6.7***
Deficit	6.9	9.4	-2.5**	1.0	9.1	-8.1***
Jobs	5.4	8.1	-2.7*	3.3	7.2	-3.9***
Crime	10.4	16.8	-6.4***	6.9	12.6	-5.7*
Social programs	5.5	7.2	-1.7*	6.7	6.4	0.3
<i>Percentage of Extreme Government Performance Evaluations</i>						
National unity	19.3	16.9	2.4*	24.2	17.6	6.6**
Deficit	23.8	16.9	6.9***	31.7	20.1	11.6***
Jobs	17.3	13.0	4.3**	18.6	15.7	2.9*
Crime	19.6	11.9	7.7***	43.5	16.8	26.7***
Social programs	16.5	10.8	5.7***	12.2	14.7	-2.5

Note: Extreme evaluations are very good job or not good at all.
Statistical significance (one-tail): ***< .001; **< .01; *< .05.

among the two importance groups. The results show that individuals who feel that an issue is important are also more likely to have extreme ratings of the government's performance on that issue than those who consider it unimportant. Again, the pattern holds across question formats: for 9 of the 10 tests, the difference between the two groups is positive and statistically significant.

The bottom section of Table 4 does not distinguish between the two directions (positive/negative) associated with the high importance group's tendency to give the government extreme performance scores. It is reasonable, however, to expect the greater polarization of performance evaluations among citizens who believe an issue is important to be skewed. If people consider that an issue is highly important to them, they should tend to be particularly vigilant and critical of the government's action (or inaction) concerning this issue. Someone who is very concerned about an issue is unlikely to be complaisant and easily satisfied by the government's performance on that issue. Thus, we anticipate that the high importance group's performance evaluations should be more negative. This anticipation is consistent with evidence that negative information is "more salient, more easily noticed, and therefore more readily processed" (Lau, 1985, p. 121).

To test this intuition, Table 5 presents findings of difference-of means tests for very negative (not good at all) and very positive (very good job) performance ratings separately. It shows that the greater polarization among the high importance group does not only occur at one end of the performance scale. In the upper portion of the table, we see that citizens who feel an issue is important are more likely to express very negative performance evaluations than those who feel it is not. But this relationship also exists, though to a lesser extent, among very positive evaluations (lower portion of the table): individuals who say an issue is important are generally more likely to give the government a very positive rating than those who deem it unimportant. With the closed-ended questions, we encounter four positive differences, which are on average smaller than those of extremely negative ratings but still statistically significant. With the open-ended questions, the results are ambiguous: there is only one significantly positive difference, and there are two instances where the high importance group is significantly less likely than the low importance group to evaluate the government's performance very positively. Overall, the notion that issue importance leads to systematically negative performance evaluations is not clearly supported.

In short, the results confirm expectations that issue importance tends to facilitate the development of opinions about the performance of the government and, more specifically, of polarized opinions. Next, we turn to the more crucial test: the effect of issue importance on the link between performance evaluations and vote choice.

Does issue importance mediate the impact of government performance

TABLE 5. Issue Importance and Government Performance Evaluations: Positivism and Negativism

Issue	Closed-Ended Issue Importance			Open-Ended Issue Importance		
	Important	Not Important	Difference (Sign.)	Important	Not Important	Difference (Sign.)
<i>Percentage of Extremely Negative Government Performance Evaluations</i>						
National						
unity	9.5	10.0	-0.5	17.7	8.9	8.8***
Deficit	7.8	5.2	2.6***	9.8	6.6	3.2*
Jobs	14.5	11.9	2.6*	16.5	13.1	3.4**
Crime	13.4	7.5	5.9***	43.1	11.1	32.0***
Social						
programs	11.7	5.1	6.6***	8.5	9.1	-0.6
<i>Percentage of Extremely Positive Government Performance Evaluations</i>						
National						
unity	9.8	6.9	2.9***	6.5	8.7	-2.2
Deficit	16.0	11.6	4.4***	21.9	13.5	8.4***
Jobs	2.7	1.1	1.6***	2.0	2.6	-0.6
Crime	6.2	4.3	1.9**	0.4	5.8	-5.4***
Social						
programs	4.7	5.7	-1.0	3.6	5.5	-1.9*

Note: Extremely negative evaluations are not good at all, and extremely positive evaluations very good job.

Statistical significance (one-tail): ***< .001; **< .01; *< .05.

evaluations on vote choice? Table 6 reports the estimates of four logistic regressions of the vote for the incumbent government party in 1997, the Liberal Party of Canada. Controls for a multitude of vote choice determinants are included, notably party identification, political values (moral traditionalism, free enterprise, regional alienation, political cynicism, and attitudes toward racial minorities), issue positions (government spending, tax cuts, public/private job creation, young offenders, capital punishment, and gun control), economic perceptions (national and personal, retrospective and prospective), strategic considerations, and various sociodemographic variables (region, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, education, and income).

Model A shows the effects of government performance evaluations on vote choice when issue importance is not taken into account. Above and beyond the presence of a myriad of controls, four of the five performance evaluations have a positive and statistically significant impact on support for the incumbent: favorable evaluations lead to greater Liberal support.¹² Only social programs' negative nonsignificant coefficient does not coincide with expectations.

TABLE 6. Government Performance Evaluations, Issue Importance, and the Liberal Vote (Logistic Regress.: B, S.E.)

	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
<i>Government performance evaluations (-1-1)</i>				
National unity	.24 (.12)*	.13 (.18)	.22 (.13)	.04 (.18)
Deficit	.41 (.13)**	.19 (.20)	.41 (.14)**	.12 (.19)
Jobs	.34 (.14)*	-.16 (.32)	.25 (.17)	.07 (.27)
Crime	.34 (.13)**	.10 (.23)	.36 (.13)**	.09 (.22)
Social programs	-.07 (.13)	-.20 (.20)	-.27 (.14)	-.55 (.20)**
<i>Issue importance (closed) (0-1)</i>				
National unity	—	.18 (.14)	—	—
Deficit	—	-.03 (.16)	—	—
Jobs	—	-.12 (.20)	—	—
Crime	—	.36 (.16)*	—	—
Social programs	—	.06 (.15)	—	—
<i>Issue importance (open) (0-1)</i>				
National unity	—	—	.19 (.25)	—
Deficit	—	—	-.07 (.34)	—
Jobs	—	—	-.25 (.34)	—
Crime	—	—	-.29 (.19)	—
Social programs	—	—	-.01 (.83)	—
<i>Issue importance (combined) (0-1)</i>				
National unity	—	—	—	.32 (.23)
Deficit	—	—	—	-.07 (.26)
Jobs	—	—	—	-.34 (.24)
Crime	—	—	—	.69 (.30)*
Social programs	—	—	—	.04 (.24)
<i>Interactives: Performance * Importance (-1-1)</i>				
National unity	—	.20 (.23)	.62 (.35)*	.65 (.36)*
Deficit	—	.38 (.25)	.93 (.46)*	.93 (.40)**
Jobs	—	.58 (.34)*	.14 (.28)	.38 (.39)
Crime	—	.40 (.26)	.22 (.99)	.85 (.48)*
Social programs	—	.18 (.25)	1.30 (.34)***	1.20 (.39)***
<i>Controls</i>				
19 attitudes (not reported)	—	—	—	—
Socio-demographics (not reported)	—	—	—	—
Constant	-2.12 (.59)	-2.29 (.64)	-1.86 (.61)	-2.01 (.65)
-2 log-likelihood	1453.6	1433.1	1423.8	1417.9
Chi-square	852.8	873.3	882.6	888.5
Percentage correctly predicted	81.2	81.8	81.9	82.0
Number of cases	1715	1715	1715	1715

Statistical significance for Liberal performance and interactive variables (one-tail): ***< .001; **< .01; *< .05.

Statistical significance for issue importance variables (two-tail): ***< .001; ** < .01; * < .05.

In Model B, closed-ended issue importance and interactive terms between importance and performance evaluations are added to the estimation. Due to the dichotomous nature of the issue importance measures, the main coefficients of the performance evaluations indicate the impact of performance among individuals who think that the issue is not very important, while the performance/importance interactions indicate the difference between the impact of performance among the high importance group and the low importance group. The results show that incumbent performance is less correlated to the vote choice of the low importance group than to the vote choice of the entire electorate: the performance coefficients in Model B are much smaller than those of Model A, only three are positive, and none is statistically different from zero. As for the interactive terms, they are all positive, as expected, but only one is large enough to attain statistical significance.

The specification of Model C resembles that of Model B in all aspects, except for the use of open-ended issue importance rather than its closed-ended counterpart. In comparison to Model A, the performance coefficients are not substantially affected by the addition of importance and its interactions: two of the four coefficients that were positive and significant retain their statistical significance. Still, the interactive terms between performance and importance exhibit sizable positive coefficients across all issues, and three of them are significant. Thus, the results of this setup suggest that most people base their vote choice on government performance evaluations, and those who consider the issue the most important—typically, a rather small proportion of the population—tend to do so to a greater extent.

The evidence presented up to this point indicates that performance evaluations of individuals who say that an issue is very important (closed-ended item) or the most important (open-ended item) are more strongly correlated to their vote choice. It may be worth combining the two indicators of issue importance to see whether people who are construed as feeling an issue is important on one or both measures are different from those who seem indifferent. We test this idea with combined issue importance indexes.¹³ Once the combined issue importance indexes and interactive terms are taken into account (see Model D), the positive direct effects of performance evaluations shrink even further (they almost dissipate completely), and none of them reaches positive statistical significance. In contrast, four of the five interactive terms exhibit a large, positive, and statistically significant impact on vote choice. This suggests that responses to closed- and open-ended issue importance questions capture complimentary attitudes that, when combined together, better distinguish those who do and who do not attach great importance to a given issue.

One may wonder whether the interactive terms between performance ratings and issue importance really advance our understanding of voting behavior. We can demonstrate that they do. First, the interactions significantly im-

prove the fit of the model. Likelihood-ratio tests (Greene, 1997; King, 1989) comparing Models B, C, and D to specifications without the five interactives reveal that the gain in model fit is statistically significant for two of the three models. The fit improvement marginally fails to reach the .05 level in Model B: with 5 degrees of freedom, a chi-square of 11.1 is required, but only 9.7 is attained. For models C and D, however, the improvement reaches the .001 level with chi-squares of 23.1 and 22.9, respectively.

Second, the contribution of the interactive terms can be highlighted through simulations (Table 7). Simulations based on Model D's estimates indicate that the median difference in the probability of voting Liberal between an individual who rates the government's performance somewhat positively (+.5) and one who rates it somewhat negatively (-.5) on a single issue is 10 percentage points among those who feel the issue is important (1), but only 1 percentage point among those who consider the issue unimportant (0). Across all issues except one, the size of the differences is small among the low importance groups and large among the high importance groups.¹⁴ The contrast is even more profound when comparing extreme performance evaluations. Moving from very negative (-1) to very positive (+1) performance evaluations increases the likelihood of voting for the incumbent by a median score of 19 percentage points among the high importance group (1) and only by a median score of 2 percentage points among the low importance group (0).

The results confirm the hypothesis that issue importance mediates the im-

**TABLE 7. Simulations Based on Model D of Table 6
(Combined Issue Importance)**

Issue	Difference in the Probability of a Liberal Vote Between a Somewhat Positive Performance Eval. (.5) and a Somewhat Negative Eval. (-.5) [%]			Difference in the Probability of a Liberal Vote Between a Very Positive Performance Evaluation (1) and a Very Negative Evaluation (-1) [%]		
	Low Importance (0)	Medium Importance (.5)	High Importance (1)	Low Importance (0)	Medium Importance (.5)	High Importance (1)
National unity	0.5	4.9	9.5	1.0	9.8	18.8
Deficit	1.6	7.7	13.8	3.2	15.4	27.3
Jobs	0.9	3.5	5.9	1.8	7.0	11.8
Crime	1.2	7.1	13.2	2.4	14.1	26.2
Social programs	-7.2	0.7	8.6	-14.3	1.4	17.2
Median	0.9	4.9	9.5	1.8	9.8	18.8

Note: Simulation scores are derived from aggregate mean predicted values based on manipulations of the performance and importance values while the other variables remained at their initial levels.

pact of government performance evaluations on vote choice. Individuals who feel an issue is important are more likely to rely on their evaluations of the government's performance on that issue when making up their mind about for whom to vote. In fact, those who feel an issue is unimportant essentially do not weigh government performance on that issue when deciding whether or not to vote for the incumbent.

Unfortunately, the results do not allow us to resolve the debate concerning the measurement of issue importance. Evidence based on both open- and closed-ended issue importance supports our hypotheses. But, neither of the two indicators clearly outperforms the other in this regard. Our findings do suggest, however, that combining both indicators may provide a superior measure of importance. Clearly, further work is needed to sort out the advantages and drawbacks of open- and closed-ended measures of issue importance.

CONCLUSIONS

Issue importance has a mediating effect on the link between government performance evaluations and vote choice. Individuals who feel that an issue is important assign more weight to their evaluations of the government on that issue when making up their mind. As a result, the performance of the government on issues that are perceived to be important affects incumbent support more strongly than its performance on issues that are perceived to be unimportant. Thus, negative performance evaluations on important issues hurt the incumbent more than negative performance evaluations on unimportant ones, and positive performance evaluations on important issues bring in more votes than positive performance evaluations on unimportant ones.

Furthermore, questions about issue importance and government performance appear to elicit meaningful responses from voters. The performance of the incumbent is judged differently for each issue. These evaluations of government performance are at least partly independent of party identification; they are not solely the product of projection. They contribute to the explanation of voting behavior even when controlling for partisan identification, political values, issue positions, and economic assessments. And the issues that voters feel are more important really have more weight on their decision.

Acknowledgments. The authors gratefully acknowledge financial assistance from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Fonds FCAR.

APPENDIX: DESCRIPTION OF VARIABLES

Government performance evaluation, five issues (-1-1) [cpsf10a, cpsf10b, cpsf10c, cpsf10f, cpsf10g]:

"How good a job do you think the Liberal government has done in . . . ?

-1 = not good at all, -.5 = not very good, 0 = don't know, .5 = fairly good, 1 = very good job.

Closed issue importance, five issues (0/1) [cpsa2a, cpsa2b, cpsa2c, cpsa2f, cpsa2g]:
 "How important are the following issues to you personally in this election?"
 0 = not very or somewhat important, 1 = very important.

Open issue importance, five issues (0/1) [cpsa1]:
 "What is the most important issue to you personally in this election?"
 0 = issue not mentioned, 1 = issue mentioned as personally most important in election.

Combined issue importance, five issues (0-1):
 (closed issue importance + open issue importance)/2

*Interactives, performance * importance (-1-1)*:
 government performance evaluation * issue importance (either closed, open, or combined).

Liberal vote choice (0/1) [pesa4]:
 "Which party did you vote for?"
 0 = voted for a party other than the Liberal Party, 1 = voted for the Liberal Party.

NOTES

1. For a dissenting view on the mediating role of accessibility, see Miller and Krosnick, 2000.
2. Heterogeneity refers to the notion that individuals do not reason the same way about political choices: they rely on different considerations, or they give different weight to similar considerations. Models which fail to take this variation into account may provide incomplete and even erroneous explanations of political decisions.
3. Krosnick's work represents the culmination of a strand of studies (Hinckley, Hofstetter, and Kessel, 1974; Markus and Converse, 1979; Niemi and Bartels, 1985; Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby, 1982; Repass, 1971; Shapiro, 1969).
4. Our data basically confirm this characterization. When used as dependent variable, issue importance is weakly related to media attentiveness and strongly linked to measures of values and self-interest. The moment during the campaign when the respondent was interviewed also has very little impact on issue importance. These results are available from the authors.
5. André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau, and Neil Nevitte were the co-investigators of the 1997 CES. The 1997 CES was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The surveys contain a rolling cross-sectional component and a panel component. A representative sample of 80-120 respondents (110, on average) was interviewed each day of the 36-day campaign to track the dynamics of vote intentions. Respondents from the campaign wave were reinterviewed twice after the election, once by telephone and once by mailback questionnaire. A total of 3,949 eligible voters were surveyed during the campaign, 3,170 during the postelection telephone interview, and 1,851 with the mailback questionnaire. The response rate for the campaign survey was 59 percent, and the average daily sampling error is about 11 percentage points. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University. Copies of the questionnaires, technical documentation

and data can be obtained at www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/ces-eeec and through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; see Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil, and Nadeau, 2000.

6. For details on the construction of these and other variables, see the appendix.
7. For instance, Krosnick used the following question from the 1984 NES: 'How important is it to you that the federal government do what you think is best on this issue of X? Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, or not important at all?'
8. The order in which the survey questions were asked might predetermine the pattern of relationships between performance, importance, and vote choice. However, we are confident about the data used here. Issue importance and government performance evaluations were asked in the campaign wave, and more than 80 questions separated the two batteries. Vote choice was asked in the postelection wave.
9. This table also shows that the distribution of issue importance disadvantaged the incumbent in the 1997 election: the Liberals were hurt by the fact that the issues on which they had a negative record were deemed important (e.g., jobs) while those on which they fared positively were considered less important (e.g., deficit).
10. Rose and McAllister (1990) also use interactions between issue importance and performance ratings in their models of vote choice in Britain, but they do not show the contribution of issue importance to the explanation.
11. Closed- and open-ended issue importance variables were recoded to take on values of 0 and 1 only. The open-ended responses are dichotomous by nature. The three categories of the closed-ended responses (very important, somewhat important, and not very important) were collapsed into two (very important/not). Analyses not reported here showed that individuals with moderate levels of closed-ended importance did not significantly differ from those with low levels.
12. Simulations reveal that the probability of voting Liberal increases by 9 percentage points, on average, as performance evaluations move from very negative (-1) to very positive (.1). The size of positive change in probability ranges from 6 (national unity) to 11 (deficit) percentage points.
13. We simply summed, for each issue, the open-ended (0: not mentioned as most important election issue/1: mentioned) and the closed-ended items (0: not very important/1: very important) to form a variable standardized to a range of 1 (0, .5, 1). The means of the indexes run from .32 (national unity) to .56 (jobs).
14. Social programs performs contrary to expectations among the less concerned due to the negative coefficient of performance's direct effect.

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