Gabriel S. Lenz

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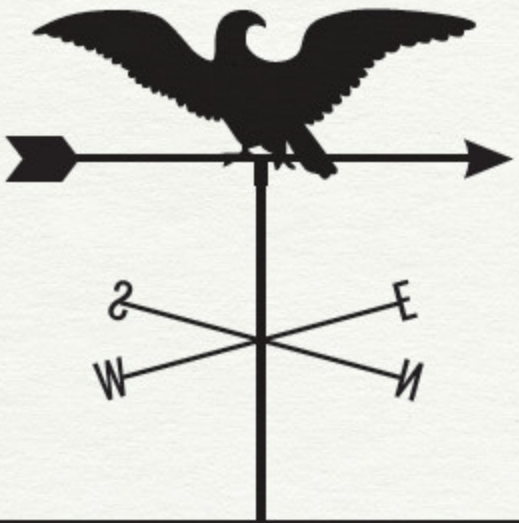

Follow the Leader?

How Voters Respond to Politicians' Policies and Performance

GABRIEL S. LENZ

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CHAPTER ONE

Rum Punch or Issue Voting?

In his long career as a public figure, James Madison lost only one election—his 1777 bid for a seat in the new Virginia House of Delegates. At the time, candidates for public office were expected to ply voters with liquor on Election Day; the favorite drink was rum punch. George Washington had supplied 160 gallons of alcohol to 391 voters for his successful 1758 election bid in Frederick County, Virginia (Labunski 2006). Madison, however, found this campaign tactic repulsive, "inconsistent with the purity of moral and Republican principles" (Labunski 2006, 32). Determined to introduce a "chaster" model of conducting elections, he refused to provide alcohol to voters in the 1777 election. His opponent, lacking such scruples, beat him.

Such apparently superficial judgments on the part of voters have always been one of the chief concerns with democracy. And even though most consider the worldwide spread of democracy since Madison's day a stupendous achievement, concerns about voters' judgments persist. Do voters still judge politicians on such irrelevant or superficial characteristics or do they vote on substantive matters?

In one view of democracy, elections are about substance; they are fundamentally about voters expressing their preferences on public policy (Dahl 1956; Pennock 1979). Voters judge, compare, and vote on candidates' policy platforms. (Political scientists call this *issue voting.*) The voter thinks: "This politician supports the policies I think are right and so I will vote for him or her." If this view is correct, politicians may generally reflect the will of the public. Citizens lead, politicians follow.

Other scholars consider the policy voting view unachievable. They see elections as periodic referenda on the incumbents or as a way of selecting candidates with the best character traits (Riker 1982; Schum-

peter 1942). In this version of democracy, voters may focus on what I call performance-related characteristics, such as previous success in office and trustworthiness. The voter thinks: "This politician has the personal traits I think a politician should have. This politician has done a good job in previous political positions." In this view, citizens don't directly lead politicians on policy, but they do lead on performance, throwing out incompetent or corrupt incumbents.

We can also imagine a worst-case view of democracy, in which voters lack well-developed preferences about public policy and about politicians' performance and, instead, blindly follow the views of their preferred party or politicians. They judge, compare, and vote for candidates according to other matters—anything from rum punch and good looks to overblown gaffes and an ill-fitting tank helmet. In this view, politicians make policy with surprisingly little constraint. They must still win elections, but they win or lose on what Alexander Hamilton called the "little arts of popularity."[1] Voters, having decided they like a particular politician for reasons having little or nothing to do with policy, may simply adopt that politician's policy views. In this view, democracy is a farce. Politicians lead, citizens follow.

The main question I set out to answer is, which view of democracy best reflects modern reality? Do citizens lead politicians on policy? Do they judge them on performance-related characteristics? Or do they merely follow politicians?

To answer this question I administer a series of tests—some easy and some difficult—to assess citizens' judgments of politicians. To do so I analyze how citizens respond to major and minor political upheavals induced by wars, disasters, economic booms and busts, and the ups and downs of political campaigns. I focus on citizens' judgments of politicians who are holding or seeking the highest offices—president and prime minister—since if voters are going to pay attention to any political figures, it will likely be these.

I begin with what I argue is an easy test: do voters take into account factors that are relevant to a politician's future performance, such as his or her past performance (on say the economy) or character traits that are relevant to future performance (such as honesty or competence)? I then move on to harder tests, focusing especially on whether voters take into account a politician's policy views. Do voters decide which policies are best and then vote for politicians who support those policies?

The results paint a mixed picture of democracy. Voters do pass the

relatively easy tests of judging politicians on performance. When people think a politician has performed well—perhaps by boosting economic growth or winning a war—they become or remain supportive of that politician. Likewise, when people perceive a politician as having desirable character traits relevant to performance, such as honesty, they become or remain likely to vote for that politician.

But voters fail the policy tests. In particular, I find surprisingly little evidence that voters judge politicians on their policy stances. They rarely shift their votes to politicians who agree with them—even when a policy issue has just become highly prominent, even when politicians take clear and distinct stances on the issue, and even when voters know these stances. Instead, I usually find the reverse: voters first decide they like a politician for other reasons, then adopt his or her policy views.

My results confirm the views of scholars who see democracy primarily as a means for voters to pass judgment on how well incumbent politicians have been performing rather than as a means for voters to express their own policy preferences. Although perhaps not everyone's ideal, democracy should therefore at a minimum select competent leaders over incompetent ones. Voters may even be exercising an indirect influence on politicians' policies by voting out leaders whose policies, in the voters' eyes, have not turned out well.

My results are likely to disappoint scholars who see democracy as a means for voters to express their policy preferences. In fact, my findings suggest that this idea of democracy has been inverted. Voters don't choose between politicians based on policy stances; rather, voters appear to adopt the policies that their favorite politicians prefer. Moreover, voters seem to follow rather blindly, adopting a particular politician's specific policies even when they know little or nothing of that politician's overall ideology. Politicians, these findings imply, have considerable freedom in the policies they enact without fear of electoral repercussions.

1.1 The Problem: Observational Equivalence

After decades of research into electoral politics, how can such important behavior on the part of voters still be in question? Determining whether citizens lead their politicians or follow them turns out to be a lot harder than it sounds. In fact, to the student of democracy, the policy-voting view and worst-case view can look identical. To understand how that can

Excerpt from address by President Harry S Truman
Charleston, West Virginia, October 1, 1948

The Republicans ... led the country to depression, poverty, and despair. ... The working men and women in this country could not do much to help themselves, because the strength of their unions had been broken by the reactionary labor policies of the Republican administration. ...

-- There was no minimum wage to cushion the blow.
-- There was no unemployment compensation to carry the working man's family along.
-- There was no work relief program to help people through the crisis.
-- But the party of privilege was ready to carry big business through the crisis. It created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for that purpose. The banks, the railways, the insurance companies -- they got relief, but not the American people.
-- For the unemployed, it was Hoovervilles and soup kitchens. Veterans were encouraged to go into business for themselves -- selling apples.

That is the Republican record. Most of us well remember it. The Democratic part of the record begins in 1933, when the Democratic Party began to build prosperity for business, labor, and agriculture.

-- We wrote into law the right of the working men and women to organize in unions of their own choice, and to bargain collectively.
-- We put a floor under wages.
-- We outlawed child labor. ...

FIGURE 1.1. Excerpt from address by President Harry S. Truman. Charleston, West Virginia, October 1, 1948.

be so, consider an example from a US presidential election in which it appears, at least at first, that citizens led their politicians on policy.

President Harry S. Truman's victory in 1948 was one of the great election upsets in American history. Long before the campaign started, journalists, pollsters, and pundits saw Truman's defeat as a foregone conclusion.[2] Nonetheless, Truman campaigned vigorously. He traveled the country by train to deliver his stump speech, excerpted in figure 1.1, in which he appealed to voters on public policy grounds. The Democratic Party, Truman told voters, had built prosperity for business, labor, and agriculture by enacting legislation that helped ordinary working men and women. Voters should vote for the Democratic Party because it supported the minimum wage, Social Security, and the right to organize unions and bargain collectively. "We put a floor under wages," Truman declared. "We outlawed child labor." On Election Day, Truman

defeated Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate, by a respectable margin, with 49.6 percent of the vote to 45.1 percent (303 electoral votes to 189).

If the policy-voting view does accurately depict democracy—that the public leads on policy—then Truman's victory is likely attributable to the public's reasoned judgment of his policy stances. He won because his campaign brought his policies to the attention of voters, allowing them to choose based on their own policy views.

In a classic study of Truman's come-from-behind victory, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues reach precisely this conclusion: "An impending defeat for the Democratic Party was staved off by refocusing attention on the socioeconomic concerns which had originally played such a large role in building that party's majority in the 1930s" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 270). Are Lazarsfeld and his colleagues right? The evidence supporting their view primarily concerns one issue on which the candidates had clear and distinct positions: government policy toward labor unions. Before the election, the Republican-led Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, considerably restricting labor union organizing. Truman opposed the legislation, while Dewey supported it. If this issue did sway voters, we should find that union supporters tended to vote for Truman while opponents tended to vote for Dewey. And indeed, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues conducted a preelection survey in October 1948 that found that among those who said unions "are doing a fine job," about 60 percent intended to vote for Truman, but that among those who said the country would be "better off without any labor unions at all," less than 30 percent intended to do so.[3] Figure 1.2 shows this relationship, apparently confirming that voters—at least on this issue—did lead politicians, voting for the one who shared their policy views.

Unfortunately for democracy, there is also a less flattering interpretation of Lazarsfeld's survey results. Imagine a world in which voters in the 1948 election utterly lacked views about unions. Many voters, however, liked Truman for other reasons, especially the nation's robust economic growth, and intended to vote for him on those grounds.[4] In such a world, voters who had already intended to vote for him may have adopted his prounion policy view.[5] Likewise, voters who had already intended to vote for Dewey may have adopted his antiunion policy view. In such a world, Lazarsfeld's survey would have produced the same results and the election would have gone the same way. We are left with a dilemma. From the evidence presented so far—both Lazarsfeld's survey

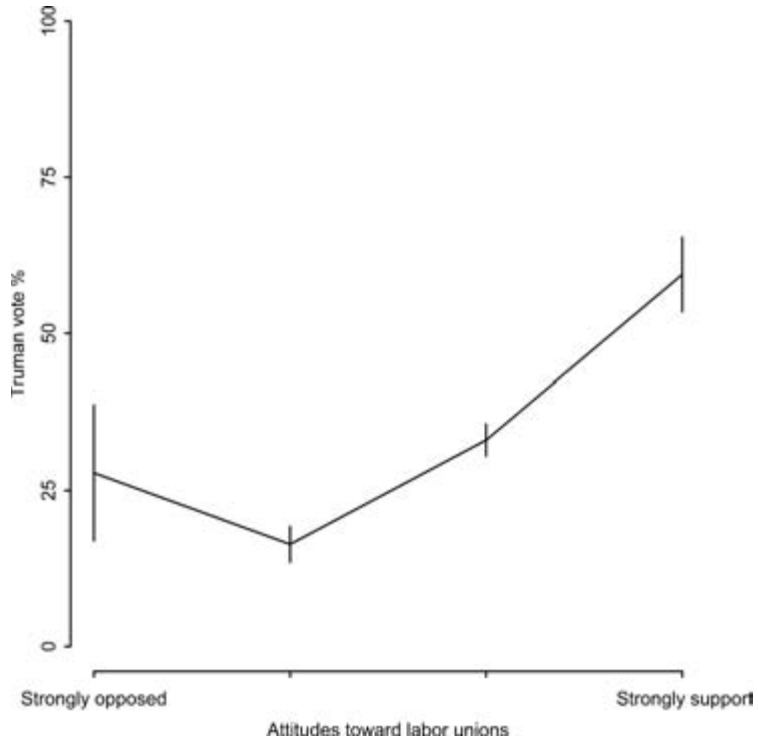

FIGURE 1.2. Leading or following on policy? Support for unions is positively associated with support for Truman (among those voting for Truman or Dewey) in the October interviews of a 1948 study—a pattern that could result either because union supporters voted for Truman because he shared their views (leading) or because Truman voters adopted his views on this issue (following). Error bars give 68 percent confidence intervals (one standard error). I show 68 percent confidence intervals whenever readers will want to compare means (checking whether these error bars touch provides a conservative differences-in-means test). Source: 1948 Elmira study (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954).

and the actual election—we cannot tell which came first, the voters' attitudes about unions or their choice of candidate, a problem researchers call *reverse causation*.

More generally, we cannot tell from such data—the correlation of policy views and vote choice—whether we are observing the policy-voting view of democracy, in which the people lead their politicians on policy, or a worst-case view, in which the people follow their politicians on policy. Like a bright star that is far away and a dim star that is near, these

two conditions are very different, but we can't tell them apart without additional information. They are *observationally equivalent*.

1.2 The Literature: Lack of Consensus

Researchers don't give up easily. They have tried to overcome the observational equivalence problem with such social science tools as randomized experiments and structural equation modeling. These methods, however, have failed to settle the debate.[6] The result is that scholars have been unable to reach a consensus about whether citizens lead or follow, and several opposing schools of thought continue to flourish.

On one hand, some researchers believe democracy resembles the policy-voting ideal. According to this view, voters lead their politicians by selecting them on policy grounds, just as Lazarsfeld and his colleagues contend that voters chose Truman over Dewey because a majority agreed with Truman's policy views and disagreed with Dewey's.[7] (Although we know that voters are often surprisingly ignorant about politicians' policy views, they may rely on reasonable substitutes for direct knowledge—which researchers call heuristics—such as party identification [Popkin 1991]. That is, I may not know a particular Republican candidate's position on offshore drilling, but I know the Republican Party's position and I agree with that.) Since this line of scholars sees policy and performance judgments as the basis of a voter's choice, they would describe the reality of democracies as being close to the policy-voting view.

But another line of scholarship paints a much darker view. They see voters as being influenced by superficial or random factors, ranging from candidates' faces (Todorov et al. 2005) to the happenstance of natural disasters (Achen and Bartels 2004a) to the fortunes of a local sports team (Healy, Malhotra, and Mo 2010). This research could describe the reality of democracies as being closer to the worst-case view.

Of course, most schools of thought place democracies somewhere between the policy-voting view and worst-case view. A prominent school, exemplified by Angus Campbell and colleagues' *The American Voter* (1960), views party identification as the core of voters' political behavior. According to this view, people identify with political parties early in life and rarely, if ever, change. This identification typically develops from socialization through one's parents, though policy views and party performance may also play a role. Once identified with a party, voters pick that

party's candidates and adopt that party's policy positions.[8] In this scenario, citizens primarily follow rather than lead their politicians, and democracy succeeds to the extent that the party elites act wisely.

Another group of scholars contends that voters vote primarily on performance rather than policy. Morris Fiorina (1981) exemplifies this view, claiming that many voters find direct judgments on public policy too complicated but are quite able to judge a politician's performance in office. For example, voters may be overwhelmed by the complexity of a health care policy debate, yet feel that they know whether or not the policy in place is working. In this view, citizens do lead, but only after the fact, throwing out incumbents who pursue failed policies.

Each of these views has been supported with evidence. The result is that we still do not know which view of democracy is correct.[9]

1.3 A Solution to Observational Equivalence

> The cause must be prior to the effect. (Hume 1888, 173)

To overcome observational equivalence—to sort out cause from effect—this book brings together data with two crucial qualities. First, it uses surveys that reinterview the same person multiple times, which researchers call panel surveys. These help us sort out what is causing what because we can measure people's views *before* they experience the campaign or other political event that we think might have affected those views. We can then test whether they later bring their support for politicians in line with their earlier stated views; that is, whether they lead. We can also test for the reverse process: whether voters bend their performance assessments or policy views to match their party identification or candidate preferences; that is, whether they follow.

On its own, however, measuring the cause before the effect—measuring policy or performance views before measuring changes in vote or candidate evaluation—does not enable us to test whether these views really matter. We also need variation in the cause so that we can look for evidence of an effect. We need to observe, for example, voters becoming more liberal, because we can then test whether they also become more supportive of liberal candidates. Or we need to observe candidates gaining a performance advantage in the eyes of voters, because we can then observe whether such an advantage attracts votes. With shifts like these,

we can use panels to help determine whether the public is indeed rewarding politicians for reasons of policy or performance.

The approach I adopt, then, is to use panels that span such shifts in voters' attitudes. Since political campaigns, wars, and disasters induce these kinds of shifts, the panels I analyze include such upheavals—some major, some minor. As I explain in the following sections, these upheavals induce three kinds of shifts in voters' thinking that have observable consequences for their voting decisions. The upheavals can (a) increase the salience of policy or performance issues (media priming), (b) change voters' own views about these issues (persuasion), or (c) increase voters' knowledge about politicians' policy positions (learning). By observing the consequences of these shifts—media priming, persuasion, and learning—I can test straightforward predictions about policy and performance voting.

Although panel surveys are still rare, their number is increasing. Analysis of individual surveys has yielded insights but has failed to generate a consensus about how much citizens lead and how much they follow.[10] This book contributes to the debate by bringing together, for the first time, many of these surveys, focusing on those spanning political upheavals. The cases come primarily from the United States, but also from Canada, Britain, and the Netherlands. In a few cases, previous research has already investigated similar questions with these data. I am indebted to these earlier works—especially Johnston et al. (1992); Johnston, Hagen, and Jamieson (2004); and Krosnick and Brannon (1993)—and build on their findings.[11]

Before moving on, it is worth briefly noting that, in drawing conclusions about democracy, my approach has limits.

If I find that these three shifts in voters' thinking—media priming, persuasion, or learning—lead to the predicted changes in votes or candidate/party evaluations, I can conclude that voters do judge politicians on policy or performance. This would be a reassuring conclusion, as it would indicate that voters are evaluating politicians on substantive grounds. But however reassuring, this conclusion would be limited in its scope. I can assess whether people do or do not so judge candidates, but I cannot ascertain whether they do so wisely. For example, voters may judge politicians on policy, but they may base their policy views on mistaken beliefs. Alternatively, the importance voters place on various policy issues could be manipulated by, for example, media priming. To the degree that these problems are real, any policy voting I observe may be

far from ideal. I nevertheless focus on policy and performance voting because they are fundamental. If voters rarely vote on policy issues, then politicians cannot manipulate voters' choices through such issues anyway. I therefore test for the judgments themselves and leave questions about their soundness to other research.

1.4 Overview

Exploiting Priming on the Economy: An Easy Test

> Surely the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys in all countries is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low. (Converse 1975, 79)

I start my search for substantive judgments with an easy test. Given the exceedingly low probability that a person's vote will ever be decisive, voters often lack incentives to learn about politics (Downs 1957). Most feel they have better things to do. They must earn a living, rear children, look after their parents, and enjoy life. The result, as Walter Lippmann put it, is that the political world often seems like a "swarming confusion of problems" (1927, 24). Since knowledge about politics is scarce (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Zaller 1992), voters should find judging politicians on issues harder when those issues require more knowledge.

Lack of knowledge should make policy issues, such as labor or abortion law, more difficult for voters than performance issues. Consider public knowledge about the Democratic and Republican stances on abortion law. Even though this issue has divided the parties for at least thirty years, only slightly more than half of citizens appear to be aware of the parties' stances. For example, in the 2008 American National Election Study, only about 50 percent knew that the Democratic Party was more supportive of abortion rights than was the Republican Party. The percentage knowing the relative positions held by Barack Obama and John McCain was also about 50 percent.[12] Without knowing the candidates' positions, citizens could not determine which candidate they agreed with most. Even if a citizen held a strong opinion about abortion, he or she could not judge the candidates on this long-standing issue without knowing where they stood. For as many as half of the public, then, this lack of knowledge about policy stances renders policy voting impossible, even on the most prominent issues.[13]

Voters face less of a knowledge hurdle, however, with performance issues than they do with policy issues. On performance issues, voters need not know politicians' positions, since everyone generally agrees that economic growth and personal competence and honesty are desirable.

Performance issues may be less cognitively demanding than policy issues for a second reason. To judge politicians on any issue, voters must develop their own opinions about it. They must decide whether they support or oppose the right to unionize. They must determine whether the economy has grown or shrunk. Doing so may generally be harder on policy issues than on performance issues. With performance, individuals do not necessarily need to know anything about the particulars of public policy. Instead, they need only determine, for instance, whether their incomes are rising or falling. Performance judgments may also be cognitively easier because they are so familiar. In their everyday lives, people constantly judge family members, friends, and coworkers on criteria—such as job performance, competence, and trustworthiness—that are also relevant to success in public office. Since voters may more readily develop strong performance assessments than strong policy views, they may be more likely to judge politicians on performance issues than on policy issues.[14]

Given that performance issues seem easier for several reasons, I start my search for substantive judgments on the part of voters by examining these issues. In chapter 2, I ask whether voters judge politicians on a key aspect of a politician's performance: the economy. For example, if voters perceive the national economy as faring well under a president, are they more likely to vote for him or her?

For many readers, this may seem like a settled question: of course, people judge the president on the economy, as numerous studies document (Erikson 1989; Fiorina 1981; Hibbs 1987; Kiewiet 1983; Kramer 1971; Markus 1988). But in fact, as I explain in the next chapter, we lack unambiguous evidence. We know that the economy affects elections and we know that people's economic perceptions correlate with their votes, but neither of these findings necessarily implies that citizens are judging incumbents on their own perceptions of the economy, and studies continue to raise doubts about such an explanation of election outcomes (e.g., Evans and Pickup 2010).

To test whether people use their assessments of the economy to judge incumbents, chapter 2 exploits the first of the three shifts in people's thinking that I mentioned—a shift that political scientists call media priming (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar et al. 1984). Media priming

involves two steps. First, a campaign or the news media focus attention on an issue, which raises the salience of that issue for voters. Second, once the issue is "top of the head," voters place greater weight on it when they make their voting decisions, causing some voters to shift their support to politicians who are advantaged on the issue.[15] I therefore examine cases where campaigns and the news media dramatically raise the salience of the economy in US presidential elections. If voters do indeed use their perceptions of the economy to judge presidents, I should find them increasingly relying on these perceptions as the issue of the economy becomes more salient. If voters see the economy as strong, they should become more supportive of the president. If they see it as weak, they should become less supportive. To rule out the possibility of voters following rather than leading, I measure their assessments of the economy before the shift.

To conduct these tests I examine three cases in which the state of the US economy becomes a particularly prominent issue during presidential campaigns: the 1980, 1992, and 1996 elections. In all three cases, panel studies interview voters before and after the issue of the economy becomes prominent. I can therefore examine whether people's presidential approval subsequently changes to reflect their prior economic perceptions.

According to the results in chapter 2, voters do evaluate politicians on performance. As the economy becomes prominent in the news and campaigns, voters bring their support for the president in line with their prior economic perceptions. At least on this performance issue—a relatively easy one—they do lead.

Of course, the same media priming that brings important issues to the public's attention could also leave voters vulnerable to manipulation by causing them to give too much weight to one particular issue relative to other issues. Consequently, this finding is not unambiguously positive for democracy. It does, however, answer a more fundamental question about voters' behavior: whether they use their own performance assessments to evaluate politicians. I leave to other research the difficult question of manipulation.

Exploiting Priming on Policy Issues: A Harder Test

Chapters 3 through 5 continue the examination process with harder tests, assessing whether voters use their views about policy (in addition

to their views about performance) to judge politicians. As I explained earlier, policy judgments are arguably more difficult for voters than performance judgments. To judge politicians on policy, voters must know politicians' positions and must form their own views about the policy. If voters pass this more challenging test, then democracy resembles the ideal policy-voting view some scholars espouse.

Chapter 3 applies the same media-priming test to ten policy-issue cases, one of which is an experiment rather than a historical event. In all ten, the news media, the campaigns, or an experimental treatment raises the prominence of a policy issue. In all ten, panel surveys span a political upheaval, asking people about their views on these issues both before and after. In all but two, the parties or candidates take clear and distinct positions (I discuss the two exceptions shortly), allowing me to make clear predictions about how voters should change their votes—if they really are engaged in policy voting, that is. For example, I reopen the case of priming labor union views in Truman's dramatic 1948 election victory. With panel data from the Lazarsfeld study, I examine whether people really did shift their votes to Truman because of his views on this policy.

The ten policy cases analyzed in chapter 3 (and in subsequent chapters) span a wide range of issues—both new and long-standing—including redistribution of wealth, national defense, and national identity. One case explores what researchers call "activating fundamentals" by testing for the priming of overall ideology rather than a particular issue in the 1992 presidential election. Another case is an experimental study on the issue of health insurance for children in the United States, conducted as part of a national survey that interviewed the same people twice. As in the economic cases, measuring policy views beforehand allows me to exclude the possibility that people are following rather than leading their politicians.

As these issues become prominent, do voters increasingly judge politicians on policy grounds? Do they pass this harder test? In contrast with much research, I find little evidence that they do. When I measure voters' views on a particular policy before that issue becomes prominent, I do not subsequently—once the issue becomes prominent—find those voters shifting their support to politicians who share their views, nor away from politicians who oppose them. This finding holds whether voters are asked for whom they intend to vote, how favorable they are toward a particular candidate, or how favorable they are toward a particular party. Although I find that voters' economic assessments influence

their support for politicians in all three economic-performance cases, I find their policy views having an influence in only one of the ten policy cases (defense spending).

These findings seem to be inconsistent with numerous other studies that not only find policy voting, but that also find media priming in particular. But these other studies—whether observational or experimental—generally measure policy views after the issues become prominent (posttreatment), so they could be getting the story backward. That is, they could be fooled by observational equivalence.[16] According to my results, which are not vulnerable to this alternative explanation, voters do not appear to be leading politicians on policy.

Exploiting Persuasion: Performance versus Policy

According to the results in chapters 2 and 3, voters appear to be rewarding or punishing politicians on performance issues, but not on policy issues. To examine whether these findings hold more broadly, chapter 4 exploits another shift in people's thinking: persuasion. By persuasion, I mean a change in a citizen's policy views or performance assessments between survey interviews. If voters do judge politicians on issues, then persuasion—a change in their own views—should lead them, all else being equal, to alter their votes accordingly. In these tests, instead of examining whether a voter's prior views become more important to his or her later support for a particular politician, as I did in the previous two chapters, I examine whether, when a voter *changes* his or her view on a particular policy or performance issue, that voter later *changes* his or her support for particular politicians who agree or disagree with his or her new policy view or performance assessment. Specifically, I examine whether policy or performance shifts between respondents' first and second interviews lead to vote shifts between the second and third. For example, when voters are persuaded that a candidate is dishonest (a performance issue), as many were with Al Gore in September during the 2000 US election, do they later become less supportive of that candidate?

With this persuasion test I can examine not only the three economic cases from chapter 2, but also three additional performance cases: Gore's honesty in the 2000 election, approval of George H. W. Bush's handling of the Gulf War in 1991, and Sarah Palin's fitness to be a vice presidential candidate in the 2008 election. I am also able to apply this test in six policy-issue cases.

Do the results of the persuasion test mirror the media-priming results, showing that voters pass the performance tests but fail the policy tests? That is exactly what we see. The results are surprisingly consistent. Voters pass all six performance tests and fail all six policy tests. When news stories persuade people to see Gore as dishonest (a performance issue), for example, they later shift to vote against him. In contrast, when the 1948 campaign persuades people to support unions (a policy issue), they do not later become more supportive of Truman, the candidate who supports unions. As before, these results hold whether we use vote choice or evaluations of candidate or party as the outcome variables.

Again, even the performance findings—where voters do seem to be judging politicians according to their own assessments—are not unambiguously positive for democracy. Voters were influenced by news stories claiming that Gore was dishonest, indicating that they evaluated Gore on this performance issue, but those news stories may have been misleading. Nevertheless, these analyses answer the more fundamental question: do voters use their own performance assessments and policy views to judge politicians?

Exploiting Learning on Policy: A Moderately Difficult Test

Chapters 2 through 4 suggest that, while democracy does not resemble the worst-case view, it does not resemble the policy voting view either. Chapter 5 refines this tentative finding. It administers a policy-voting test that is arguably easier for voters than the previous policy-voting tests, but harder than the performance tests. It investigates whether learning about candidates' positions on a policy leads voters to change their votes or their evaluations of presidents accordingly.

As noted above, the public is awash in ignorance about parties' and candidates' policy positions. Because of this ignorance, voters frequently support candidates with whom they disagree on policy issues—even the most prominent issues—without realizing it. When campaigns or political upheavals raise the prominence of an issue, however, voters often learn the politicians' positions (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Lang and Lang 1966; Trenaman and McQuail 1961). In the cases I examine, literally millions of voters do. When campaigns and the news media educate voters on candidates' policy positions, it should be easier for voters to vote on policy. But does it work out that way? With that knowledge barrier eliminated, do voters

shift their support to politicians with whom they now know they are in agreement?

For example, during each US presidential campaign, millions of voters learn something they didn't know—that the Democratic Party is to the ideological left of the Republican Party.[17] In a seminal article, Andrew Gelman and Gary King (1993) argue that, by informing voters about these basic party orientations, campaigns and the news media fulfill their most important role in a democracy. Analyzing survey responses from the 1988 presidential election, Gelman and King find that this enlightening matters: voters align their votes with their self-reported ideology over the course of the campaign. Their results indicate that, when voters learn the parties' positions, they act on this information, shifting their votes accordingly. Put differently, Gelman and King find that voters pass this somewhat easier test. Given the requisite knowledge, citizens therefore appear to lead politicians on policy.

But Gelman and King's (1993) finding, like those of many policy-voting studies, can be interpreted in a less flattering way. They may have the story backward: instead of leading, citizens may just be following. When Democratic voters, for instance, learn that their party is ideologically liberal relative to the Republican Party, they may just become more ideologically liberal themselves. Instead of knowledge making it easier for them to lead, it may make it easier for them to follow.

To see if knowledge really does facilitate policy voting or whether it just looks that way, I reexamine the ideology case and six other policy cases in which panel surveys allow us to determine which voters learn politicians' policy positions and also to measure those voters' policy views beforehand. I then test whether this learning leads these voters to alter their support for the politicians whose views they now know.

Do voters pass this easier test? They do not. Even when they have just learned candidates' positions on the most prominent issues of the elections, they do not change their votes (or candidate evaluations) accordingly. When ideological liberals who approve of President Bush, for example, learn during the 1992 presidential campaign that Bush's party does not share their own ideology, they fail to shift against him; they don't decide to become Democrats despite having learned that the Democratic Party is more aligned with their own views. The six other cases reveal the same pattern. Many people learn, but they do not appear to act on this knowledge.

These findings—startling enough in their own right—also affect the

way we view campaigns and the news media. Although campaigns and media provide information that could help voters pick the candidates who would further the voters' own policy goals the voters generally disregard this information. This puts democracy further away from the policy-voting view. At least according to these tests, voters do vote in accordance with their own views on performance issues but rarely do so on policy issues.

Voting on Easy Issues? Two Case Studies

Chapters 6 and 7 further refine our view of democracy and, to a degree, show it in a better light. Policy issues can be complicated and their implications remote. At times, however, they are straightforward and immediate in a way that captures the public's attention. In such cases, policy voting should be easier for voters (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Of the cases I examine, two arguably fall into this admittedly nebulous category: the issue of nuclear power in the 1986 Dutch election, right after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the issue of defense spending in the 1980 US election, right after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and in the midst of the Iranian hostage crisis. In both cases, policy issues seize the public's attention to an unusual degree.

These two elections are part of the analysis in chapters 3–5, which found that voters did not judge the candidates on these issues. For a better understanding, I present in-depth case studies. Chapter 6 looks at the issue of nuclear power in the 1986 Dutch campaign and chapter 7 looks at President Jimmy Carter's attempt during the 1980 election to fend off charges that he was weak on national defense. These chapters reveal considerable evidence that voters did care about these issues yet end up confirming that in the end the issues did not influence vote choice or candidate and party evaluations.

Instead, these two cases suggest an important wrinkle. The two incumbents, facing widespread public concern over issues that put them at a disadvantage, responded strategically, adopting policy stances that mollified the public and thus ensured that voters did not actually cast their ballots on those issues. As in all the other cases in this book, we initially find opposing politicians maintaining opposing views on the policy in question. In these two cases, however, the incumbents change their positions, converging on their challengers' more popular views. In the Netherlands, the incumbent parties shift from supporting nuclear

power to opposing it within a week of the Chernobyl disaster and just two weeks before Election Day. In the United States, President Carter, despite some back-and-forth, ultimately shifts from being a defense dove to being a defense hawk. In both cases I find that the public appears to learn about and accept these dramatic shifts. It appears—although any conclusions must be tentative—that voters fail to vote on either policy issue, not because of lack of interest or knowledge, but because the incumbents adopt more popular policy views, which neutralizes the issue because the candidates now hold the same position.

These case studies add further nuance to our view of democracy. It may be that most of the time voters fail to judge politicians on policy. At times, however, public policy does interest the masses. In these unusual cases, politicians do appear to follow voters.

Following, Not Leading, on Policy

If citizens are generally not leading on policy in these cases, are they instead following? In chapter 8 I examine this possibility, and in case after case I find that they are. Instead of selecting candidates on the basis of policy, many voters apparently select them for other reasons, such as performance advantages, party, or superficial traits such as appearance. Once decided on a candidate, voters often adopt that candidate's policy views. This tendency to follow is particularly evident among voters who learn politicians' positions between panel interviews; this pattern emerges in every case of learning that I examine. When supporters of George W. Bush, for example, learn that he opposes expanding a children's health care program (SCHIP), they too become opposed to the expansion. The tendency even emerges for overall ideology. When supporters of a Republican president learn, for instance, that the Republican Party is on the ideological right, they shift their own reported ideology to the right. Instead of leading on policy, in case after case, citizens follow.

This finding looks worrisome for democracy, but there are benign interpretations. People may follow a party or candidate on a specific policy because they see that party or candidate as sharing their own broader policy outlook—their ideology. Thus voters may not be following blindly so much as relying on cues from informative sources.

To investigate which interpretation is correct, chapter 8 submits voters to several more tests. Unfortunately for democracy, the results are

not reassuring. People who are ignorant about the parties' or candidates' general ideologies and therefore do not know which politicians share their broader policy outlook will nevertheless adopt the policy views of their preferred politicians. For example, supporters of George W. Bush adopt his view on investing Social Security funds even when they do not know that he is generally more conservative than Al Gore. Moreover, these less knowledgeable voters follow at similar or even higher rates than people who do know the politicians' ideologies. Several other findings suggest similar conclusions: not only do people fail to lead politicians on policy, but they appear to follow, maybe even blindly.

Implications for Democracy

Chapter 9 concludes the book by discussing the mixed picture of democracy that emerges from these results. Voters appear to rarely judge politicians on policy positions. Priming, persuasion, and learning on policy hardly ever change voters' votes or their evaluations of candidates. Instead of leading on policy—that is, choosing to support those politicians whose policy views agree with their own—voters follow rather blindly—forming attachments to politicians for various reasons and then adopting those politicians' policy views. At least on policy issues, democracy appears to be inverted: instead of politicians following the will of the people, the people seem to be following the will of politicians.

Not all the findings are unflattering however. I do find that voters reward politicians for performance advantages such as a strong economy. And as the case studies in chapters 6 and 7 illustrate, a lack of policy voting is not always a failure of democracy. When issues capture voters' attention to an unusual degree, politicians change their positions on the issue in accordance with the public's views. Thus, while we do not observe voters changing their vote, they do not need to—they have already successfully led the politicians on policy. Most often, however, voters do not appear to be voting on the basis of their own policy judgments, even when candidates maintain clear and distinct positions on the most prominent issues of the day.

Because my analyses overcome the problem of observational equivalence by taking advantage of panel surveys that span shifts in people's thinking—priming, persuasion, and learning—they arguably provide clearer tests of policy and performance voting than other analyses have done. They nevertheless have their limitations. In particular, although

analyzing the consequences of these shifts allows me to overcome the observational equivalence problem, the resulting findings may not be fully generalizable, applying only to the kinds of individuals who experience these shifts. Other important limitations include the paucity of data on performance cases, the relatively short time between survey interviews, that most of the shifts occur during election campaigns, and the absence of policy issues relating to race (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005; Lee 2002; Mendelberg 2001) or social issues (Hillygus and Shields 2008). Chapter 9 elaborates on these and other limitations. Even so, the book's results make clear that, when research is designed to sort out what is causing what, evidence that voters' policy views influence their votes is sparse.