Issue Salience and Political Decisions

Philip Moniz, Department of Government, University of Texas, Austin and Christopher Wlezien, Department of Government, University of Texas, Austin

https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1361
Published online: 28 September 2020

Summary

Salience refers to the extent to which people cognitively and behaviorally engage with a political issue (or other object), although it has meant different things to different scholars studying different phenomena. The word originally was used in the social sciences to refer to the importance of political issues to individuals' vote choice. It also has been used to designate attention being paid to issues by policy makers and the news media, yet it can pertain to voters as well. Thus, salience sometimes refers to importance and other times to attention—two related but distinct concepts—and is applied to different actors. The large and growing body of research on the subject has produced real knowledge about policies and policy, but the understanding is limited in several ways. First, the conceptualization of salience is not always clear, which is of obvious relevance to theorizing and limits assessment of how (even whether) research builds on and extends existing literature. Second, the match between conceptualization and measurement is not always clear, which is of consequence for analysis and impacts the contribution research makes. Third, partly by implication, but also because the connections between research in different areas—the public, the media, and policy—are not always clear, the consequences of salience for representative democracy remain unsettled.

Keywords: political issues, attitudes, problems, most important problems, public opinion, voting behavior, survey measurement, political decision making

Subjects: Political Psychology

Introduction: The Importance of Salience

Salience is an indispensable concept to political scientists because it captures a simple but powerful idea about political issues: some matter more than others. Stated simply, "If we wish to know how issues affect behavior, we must first find out which issues are salient to individual voters" (RePass, 1971, p. 391). While it is often not clear what researchers mean when they use the term *salience*, most will agree that an issue is salient if it carries a lot of weight in voters' political judgments. Understood this way, salience has much in common with attitude "importance." Since it first began to be used in political science, salience has captured what people attend to and care about. Other researchers, most working in fields outside of voting behavior, have used the term to characterize attention at more macro levels, such as within the media or the government.

The concepts of salience, importance, and attention are useful if they are used to designate different, but related, things. The *personal* salience of an issue is the degree to which an individual engages cognitively and behaviorally with that issue. In other words, an issue is salient to a

person if she thinks about it deeply, seeks and retains information about it, and uses it as a basis for political judgments and behaviors (Miller, Krosnick, & Fabrigar, 2017). This is issue salience at the individual level, which is distinct from the prominence or visibility of issues at more macro levels due to the attention of media outlets or other political actors. The latter are better referred to as *media* or *political* salience. This article focuses on personal salience, but in doing so it touches on its relation to media (and political) salience. Conceptually the two terms are similar, as they both denote a form of engagement with an issue, but they differ with respect to the agent who is giving the attention: In the case of personal issue salience, it is the individual; in the case of media salience, it is the news media or the government.

At the level of individual decision making, personal salience begins with the notion that some issues are more central than others. People do not care about all issues equally, and they may not care about any issues at all. Policy issues, such as the environment, health care, or taxes, when they do factor into people's political judgments, for example, about whether to re-elect an official, vary in their impact. Salience often is conceived of as a weight attached to an issue in a model of vote choice or candidate evaluation; conceived in this way, it is an *attribute* of a voter's issue preferences (and other attitudes). But, when something is salient to vote choice, it is not the same as being important, as salience identifies the degree to which an issue actually matters.[1]

Because salience depends in part on importance, research from psychology on attitude importance can deepen our understanding of the causes and consequences of political science's concept of personal issue salience. Attitude importance, as used in the social psychology literature, is the subjective importance one attaches to an attitude (Boninger, Berent, & Krosnick, 1995), concerning, for instance, an issue.[2] Although issue importance and personal salience are not identical, they do share a great deal of overlap, as the former appears to be necessary for the latter. Importance is not sufficient, however, as the personal salience of issues depends more on circumstances and so can fluctuate as conditions change and as events occur, including political debates and other interactions among political elites (Dennison, 2019; Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007). Attitude importance, by contrast, tends to develop out of connections between the issue (the attitude object) and concepts close to a person, such as their group identification, values, and self-interest (Boninger et al., 1995). As such, importance tends to be less variable. Put differently, and reflecting much of the literature on the subject, personal salience depends not only on the importance of an issue but also on the degree to which it currently is a problem. While different, there is a strong theoretical and empirical connection between importance and salience. Indeed, some scholars use the latter to refer to the former (e.g., Alvarez, 1997; Brody, 1991; Hill & Hurley, 1999).

Political scientists also refer to issue salience as the prominence of the topic in the media or in government (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Minozzi, & Reveley, 2011; Epstein, 2000; Lax & Phillips, 2009), but this is a separate concept. As discussed previously, this may best be referred to as media or political salience. While the two types of salience are related—an important political issue is more likely to be prominent in voters' minds and in news coverage, and an important issue is more likely to be accessible in voters' memories and become prominent in the media—they are not the same. One reason is that a political issue's prominence may have little to do with citizens'

concerns. Although research shows that mass media actors and politicians tend to respond to public concerns, their behavior also reflects other things (e.g., Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Lee, 2009; Soroka, Stecula, & Wlezien, 2015).

Still another use of the term *issue salience* refers to the issue that the public at large says is the most important problem, or MIP. Political behavior and public policy scholars alike use measures that ask about the MIP facing the country today as an indicator of what issues are of the highest priority to the public (e.g., MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Jones, 1994; Jones & Baumgartner, 2004). Even at the individual level, this measure captures the national salience, rather than the personal salience, of an issue (Johns, 2010). Although this article will focus on personal issue salience, national issue salience is a valuable concept, and the two serve as informative counterpoints to each other. The relationship between the two is important for research on government responsiveness and voting behavior, as well as (many) other areas, and the way forward lies in clarifying our concepts to establish clear empirical patterns and build theories to explain them and their implications.

This article develops a concept of personal issue salience, traces how it has been operationalized, and identifies how it matters to political behavior and political representation. The "family" of salience concepts that have emerged in various literatures is discussed and an attempt is made to clarify them, their interrelationships, and their causes and consequences.

Conceptualization

Most of the time most people do not pay much attention to politics. Even the most interested citizens can focus on only a small corner of it at any time. News media face a similar situation and must direct scarce journalistic resources with care. Political actors, including parties and governments themselves, do so as well. The concept of issue salience helps capture this variation in attention to political matters.

Issue Importance and Problem Status

What people cognitively and behaviorally engage with is going to be a function of how subjectively important the policy domain is and how much it is perceived to be a problem. Consider an example. It is almost a truism that what is most important to people is their health, although if they are in good health, their health is unlikely to be their number one concern at that time. As an issue domain for the individual, health is nearly always important, so when it is a problem, it will demand attention at the expense of other domains that also are problems. The same is true for the nation or state or other polity. Some issue domains are more salient because when they are a problem, they demand the government's attention. These issue domains are akin to the health of the polity: the economy and national security. When the economy is in trouble or there is a war on, the security of the nation is under threat. The natural reaction is concern and a call for action. When there is national and economic security, these matters do not become any less important, but they are less of a problem. This illustration leads us to an equation of political salience:

$$S_{ij} = \alpha_{ij} + \beta_1 I_{ij} + \beta_2 P_{ij} + \beta_3 I_{ij} P_{ij} + e_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where S is the salience of issue j for individual i, I is the importance the individual attaches to issue j, P is the perceived problem status of that issue, α is the intercept, and e is the disturbance term. The "issue" under consideration can be a policy domain, such as defense or environment, but also other considerations that influence political judgments of, say, an elected official, such as candidate character or qualification.

Salience is modeled here as a function of these two variables, I and P, because of the theoretical and empirical roles they play in determining salience and also for parsimony, not because they exhaust all the possible variables that could enter the equation. When the media send signals to the public about an issue, these communications can raise the salience of the issue, which is expected to at least in part be mediated by citizens' perceptions of problem status or the personal importance of that issue. It is possible, however, that the media have a direct effect on salience.[3]

The point of Equation 1 is to highlight how issue importance and problem status influence salience. It brings out the insight, for instance, that when the problem status of an issue is zero, the importance the individual attaches to it is all that bears on the judgment, as $\beta_2 P_i$ and $\beta_3 I_{ij} P_{ij}$ both would equal zero. Likewise, when an issue is of no importance to a person, only the degree to which it is perceived to be a problem matters. The degree to which either importance or problem status impacts salience under these conditions depends on the coefficients β_1 and β_2, and there is reason to suppose that the former is larger than the latter, at least assuming the same metrics. That is, while importance is expected to impact salience even when an issue is not at all a problem, problem status should not matter much when an issue is irrelevant to a person. To the extent an individual is entirely egocentric, the latter may not have any impact on personal issue salience. All of this said, though I and P can be small, they may always be nonzero for all issues, as each seemingly is important or a problem to someone.

The IP term is critical, as it captures the joint effect of importance and problem status. Although I and P may impact salience independently, their interaction is expected to be most consequential. Here, the influence of I depends on P, where a really important issue is salient to the degree it is a problem. The interaction effect thus is greatest when both I and P are large. Where I or P is very small, by contrast, the effect tends toward 0, and their effects are mostly independent, as discussed. The critical role of IP in salience is reflected in measurement, which often has relied on questions asking about the most important problem. Though related, IP and MIP are not the same, and the difference often is substantial and meaningful (see Wlezien, 2005).

Because an issue is salient does not mean that it is reflected in all political judgments. For instance, it is common to conceive of salience as impacting vote choice (Belanger & Meguid, 2008; Fournier, Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2003; Wolf & Holian, 2006), but its impact on voters' electoral decisions depends on the extent to which the candidates or parties offer alternatives on the issue. Simply put, if they do not offer a choice, the issue cannot matter; that is, importance is a necessary condition for finding such effects, not a sufficient one (Wlezien, 2005).

And the greater the choice, the more heavily the issue will appear to be weighted in the vote choice issues (Ansolabehere & Socorro Puy, 2018). This weight, however, is due in part to the distinctiveness of the parties on those issues, not solely to their importance. Scholars thus should be wary of the danger of conflating issue importance with the distinctiveness of the parties based on regression analyses of vote choice. Estimating equations for individual candidates/parties, rather than the choice between them, is a better way to reveal the weight of issues.

Operationalization and Measurement

Any discussion of the measurement of issue salience must consider the MIP or most important issue (MII). Asked regularly by Gallup since 1935 in the United States (1959 in the United Kingdom), and by the American National Election Survey since 1960, this oft-deployed indicator of issue salience asks: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" As the question asks about the country, it is a measure of national salience. Sometimes the word "issue" is used instead of "problem," but this does not appear to make much of a difference empirically (Jennings & Wlezien, 2011). While survey researchers ask the questions, respondents get to answer them, and people evidently do not distinguish between the two types in the way scholars might like, that is, when surveys ask about "issues," respondents think about "problems." This insight is of relevance to future attempts to measure the importance of issues (and problems), as are others from research on MIP. Building upon these insights, the section concludes with suggestions on how to improve the measurement of personal issue salience.

MIP is an open-ended question, the response to which is coded by the survey organization into one of a multitude of categories. It is worth noting that about 10–15% of national samples at any given time do not mention a single problem or issue. The most popular categories over the 70 or so years for which U.S. data exist are typically economic matters like inflation, unemployment, and taxes; foreign affairs such as wars; and dissatisfaction with government generally. In December 2019, government/poor leadership was the category with the most responses (33%), which reflected the fact that the economy, according to standard measures, was doing well and that American military involvement abroad was not a major concern (i.e., it is not resulting in many dead or wounded soldiers or civilians).

This last point about the current prominence of the government/poor leadership as the most important problem is noteworthy because it underlines a key drawback with using MIP, namely, that requiring a "most" important problem forces a single response.[4] Respondents must select one issue to the exclusion of all other important problems. It thus is not only limited as a measure of what is personally important, because it taps both importance and problem status, it is limited as a measure of important problem (*IP* from Equation 1) itself. That is, people are asked to pick a single important problem regardless of whether the issue is very important or a big problem. The MIP choice thus depends on the degree to which an issue is both important and a problem and the degree to which other issues are important problems (Wlezien, 2005). If there is prosperity, people look elsewhere for their MIP. If there also is peace, people look further still. This is of real relevance as researchers observe—and interpret—changes in the distribution of responses, for example, the growing diversity of MIP responses during the 1990s in the United States and the

convergence on national security (and then the economy) after 9/11. Most of the variation in the mentions of the "other" issues seemingly had a lot to do with the problem status of those two domains.

Though limited, MIP responses tell us something about both importance and problem status, as they are a function of both. Consider that, at a particular point in time, it is revealing if different individuals offer different MIP responses. Such variation indicates that the importance or perceived problem status of the issues varies, especially across partisan lines (e.g., McCarthy, 2018). Though it may be tempting in some cases to attribute the variation to importance (e.g., the economy or national security), it may be that the problem status of the issues varies across individuals. Likewise, aggregate-level differences in responses across countries or within countries and across states or cities are revealing about differences in importance or problem status. Research shows that this matters to policy makers. Changes at both the individual and aggregate levels are informative (and consequential) as well. Although they clearly do not tell us everything researchers want to know, MIP responses do tell us something about the problems people are concerned about.

Interestingly, the top-of-the-head nature of the MIP response does not seem to seriously bias it toward issues that for one reason or another are "easier" to name. On the hunch that the threat of nuclear war, though not typically at the front of everyone's minds, was still considered an all-important problem in the early 1980s, Schuman, Ludwig, and Krosnick (1986) ran an experiment in which they added nuclear war to a closed-ended version of the MIP question. They found no reliable increase in its being mentioned, except in 1983, when the issue was covered heavily in the national press. Broadly, MIP responses seem to react to changes in the problem status of objective conditions (Wlezien, 2005), and Jennings and John (2009) show further that such reactions can come in pronounced spurts rather than gradual change. This kind of responsiveness may be characterized by cognitive "friction" because MIP responses resist change until a threshold is met and then change dramatically.

Other work has further shown that MIP and MIP-like questions do not simply reflect the information that is most recent in a respondent's mind. Geer (1991) tests whether open-ended responses to list likes and dislikes about a candidate are sensitive to newly presented information and thus an artifact of recent news exposure. He found that providing (student) subjects with policy information about issues they considered unimportant did not cause an increase in the frequency with which they were mentioned as reasons for liking or disliking the candidate at hand. When given information on important issues, subjects did, however, mention these a great deal more. Only economic issues were mentioned with the same frequency by both groups, suggesting that economic matters are a go-to for citizens in any information environment.

Geer's (1991) analysis asks about the "general" importance of a series of issues, not the personal importance that researchers in the political psychology literature focus on, so it is unclear whether his results pertain to issues of personal or national importance, though it would seem to lean toward the latter due to its more sociotropic wording. This distinction between personal and national importance is crucial because each relates differently to decision making. On matters of national importance, as opposed to personal importance, citizens are less knowledgeable, their

opinions are less stable, and their preferences are less impactful on their vote choice (Johns, 2010). Responses to MIP or MII are not based only on people's perceptions of what is nationally important at that time. Some responses invoke less visible concerns and are mentioned because they are personally important (Johns, 2010), but most MIP responses hew toward the national (Bevan, Jennings, & Wlezien, 2016; Lavine, Sullivan, Borgida, & Thomsen, 1996).

As indicators predominantly of national importance, MIP and its cousin MII also do not necessarily capture issues that are focal in citizens' political behaviors, such as protesting, campaign donation, and group-meeting attendance; nor is national importance significant for candidate preferences after controlling for personal importance (Miller et al., 2017). The two types of importance are conceptually and empirically distinct, but there is overlap. Miller et al. (2017) estimate that on average 37% of the variance between personal and national importance is shared. Using aggregate closed-ended-response data from Europe, Bevan et al. (2016) also find that the correlation between mentions of personally and nationally important issues is quite strong, but this mostly is driven by the tendency to select the economy as the most important issue. More generally, the authors find that the strength of the relationship between personal issue importance and levels of government weakens as the level of governments rises, specifically, from the country to the European Union. Further research might explore whether this applies to local and state government, and why.

Although they may function to indicate the personal and public salience of an issue, at least as conceived as important problems and, even then, with limitations, MIP responses are poor indicators of policy preferences. First, as MIP is an open-ended question, responses are coded into a discrete set of preconceived categories and may conceal heterogeneity of problems, especially those where people see very different aspects. For example, although MIP responses that there were "too many immigrants" and "immigrants are treated unfairly" would both be placed under "immigration," they clearly differ as to what the problem is. Using the percentage of MIP responses mentioning immigration would therefore combine anti- and pro-immigrant preferences into the same measure. Second, even if responses are telling about the nature of a problem, they do not reveal what people want done about it.

Some empirical work bears out these differences. The percentages of the public citing particular issues as the most important problem are weakly correlated with percentages in favor of increasing spending in the areas (Jennings & Wlezien, 2015). That research also shows that those MIP responses are much less predictive of policy changes. Although results vary some across policy domains, based on this research MIP responses are not good indicators of what policies the public wants.

Establishing what traditional measures such as MIP and MII actually measure is important, but future research should avoid the pitfalls of earlier instruments. A measure of what is important to citizens should ask what is important to them. A measure of what issues citizens perceive to be a problem should explicitly ask about their perception of problem severity. Importance and problem status are distinct concepts and measurement should reflect this, at least to the extent this is possible.[5]

Moreover, as a latent construct, personal attitude importance is best measured using multiple indicators. Research by attitude-importance researchers typically employs three items, using different wordings—"important," "care," and "concern"—and scales—three, five, and seven points (see, e.g., Miller et al., 2017). Items should be unambiguous as to their referent, either the person herself or the nation or otherwise (Johns, 2010). If there is only space on the questionnaire for one importance-related item, it should be one that mentions "importance" directly.

For national importance, research suggests that open-ended items do not turn up different findings than do closed-ended ones (Geer, 1991; Schuman et al., 1986). Personally salient issues could also be discovered through an open-ended prompt, but researchers often want to know how important a predetermined set of issues is because it allows for issues that vary in importance. Since it would be questionable to expect respondents to recall unimportant issues, a prescribed set may be necessary to identify issues of low importance.

Measuring Personal Issue Salience

Though rating issue importance using Likert scales is prevalent in the literature on salience, they present some respondents with the difficult task of responding to several highly important issues, thus encouraging them to rate them all equally high in importance (Krosnick & Alwin, 1988). When presented with this problem, it is wise to ask respondents to break ties between highly important issues by rank-ordering them. With regard to measuring value profiles, ranking tends to produce a more reliable measure than Likert scales (Reynolds & Jolly, 1980). However, the theoretical argument in favor of ranking items—that they are inherently in competition with each other and must be traded off for one another—does not clearly extend to the case of political issues. Imposing a strictly rank-based measure of salience, then, may force respondents to think about the importance of issues in a way that is unnatural to them, although it does deal with the problem of respondents not differentiating among the issues (Alwin & Krosnick, 1985). If a combination of rating and ranking is used, research suggests first rating and then ranking because the former is the more vulnerable to fatigue-induced satisficing (Krosnick, 1999).

Work exploring the reciprocal relationship between political salience and personal issue salience shows that asking about what issues voters are "concerned" about (3-point scale) is also a viable measure of personal issue salience (Neundorf & Adams, 2018; see also Abramowitz, 1995; Boninger et al., 1995). Using a personal issue salience measure with "concern" wording, Neundorf and Adams (2018) find a party's emphasis on particular issues can raise their concern to voters, but primarily among those who already support the party. A more reliable measure of personal issue salience might be to combine two or three items, each of which asks how important the issue is and how much the respondent cares, has thought about, or is concerned about the issue, though most studies rely on only one.

Some of the earliest evidence for the role of personal issue salience in voter decision making comes from RePass (1971), who leveraged open-ended questions from the 1964 American National Election Studies that asked: "What would you personally feel are the most important problems the government should try to take care of when the new President and Congress take office in January?" (Up to three responses were coded.) Open-ended prompts are valuable

because they permit the respondent to determine the area of concern. Moreover, respondents must have some long-term cognition of the issue in order to draw it from memory. Even still, RePass (1971, fn. 19) did not find strong connections between the issues the respondents mentioned and their attitudes or vote choice unless the issues were also ones that the respondents said they were "extremely worried" about or the problem was on their mind a lot. This finding suggests two things, one substantive and one methodological. First, what is personally a MIP may concern something that citizens do not care much about. Second, asking what a person is worried about, cares about, thinks a lot about, and so on may be a more direct way to measure personal issue salience than asking what they think is an important problem. Thus, while asking people what issues are personally important seemingly provides a better measure of issue salience than open-ended MIP, it is incomplete because people do not engage—cognitively and behaviorally—with all issues that they consider important.

Behavioral Indicators of Issue Salience

With a growing interest in and wider accessibility to online behavioral data, the number of measures researchers can use to capture personal issue salience has grown. Behavioral measures are valuable because they do not suffer from some of the pitfalls of survey-based measures, such as the tendency for respondents to overstate how many issues are highly important to them (though ranking can help deal with this problem). Many of these measures, however, apply to aggregates rather than individuals. Google search data, for example, are promising indicators of what issues citizens are engaging with (Mellon, 2014; Oehl, Schaffer, & Bernauer, 2017). Cataloging users' comments on Twitter and other platforms is also a viable means to aggregate that population's issue salience (Barberá et al., 2019). There are likely still other internet-based behaviors that can inform what issues are on the minds of citizens. Measuring these behaviors may open up new avenues for the study of representation and mass politics, but researchers should not forget that salience is a multiply caused phenomenon. On a survey, it is a mixture of importance and problem status. With behavior, such as a Twitter post, it is likely even more complex, as the online world introduces social and other dynamics (Jetten & Haslam, 2018). Real-world behavioral measures contain more than just attitude importance and perceived problem status; they also reflect participants' socioeconomic resources and social networks.

Accessibility measures can be useful for measuring personal issue salience (Marquis, 2014), especially for issues about which people may make ambivalent reports (Meyer & Schoen, 2014), but the results based on the method can be highly sensitive to decisions about outliers. Thus, sensitivity tests should be conducted and reported (see Johnson, 2004; Mulligan, Grant, Mockabee, & Monson, 2003).

Findings

Causes of Attitude Importance

Why are some attitudes important to people while others are not? The origins of attitude importance are consequential for understanding citizen and also elite decision making. Candidates for public office typically avoid trying to persuade voters from the other party to switch their policy preferences to those of the candidate; instead, office-seekers try to alter the issues that voters have in mind when deciding which candidate to support (Druckman, 2004; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Zaller, 1992). Much election campaigning can be understood as an attempt to *prime* voters to evaluate a candidate on issues of the candidate's choosing, which may be because the candidate's party has a reputation for handling those issues well (Petrocik, 1996; Wagner & Meyer, 2014) or because some voters in other parties are cross-pressured: they have strong attitudes about issues on which they disagree with their party's position (Hillygus & Shields, 2008). Priming is a means that candidates use to induce voters to support them over their opponents, so really is a means to the end of (electoral) persuasion (Erikson & Wlezien, 2012). This does not mean that priming is easy to accomplish, as there are constraints owing to people's own priors and there also are competitors for their attention. The origins and dynamics of attitude importance thus can inform our understanding of election campaigns and their effects. Identifying the sources of attitude importance can also improve our understanding of citizens' political judgments, such as the prevalence of and potential for issue voting.

When asked to explain why their political attitudes are important to them, people tend to respond with reasons that fall within one of three broad categories: self-interest, social identification, and value congruence (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995). The force of these antecedents on perceptions of issues as important comes from their functional relationship within a person's conception of the self. Research finds that political issues become important to people because people perceive those issues to touch on some part of their identity, such as their self-interest or the social groups to which they belong (Eaton & Visser, 2008).[6] Though people face high information costs in determining what policies impact their material self-interest (Mettler, 2011), perceiving such an impact is one of the main reasons for thinking that an issue or policy is important. In a study by Boninger et al. (1995), in which subjects were asked to reflect on why five issues were important to them, 63% of the explanatory statements invoked self-interest.[7] A correlational study by the same authors found that perceived self-interest was a strong predictor of attitude importance, on a level similar to that of social identification, the second-largest category in the introspection study.

The groups in society with which a person identifies connect that person to the group's interests, values, and circumstances. Indeed, politics is often conceived of as a competition among groups for resources and authority (Schattschneider, 1960). In some research on issue salience, in fact, group identification itself was used as a measure of issue salience (Hutchings, 2001; Paolino, 1995; Philpot, 2007). In some of this work, identification as an African American is treated as an indicator for the belief that public policies impacting black Americans are personally important to

the individual. Research in political psychology emphasizes that one of the primary causes of an issue being considered important to the individual is the perception that the issue relates in a central way to the reference group (Visser & Holbrook, 2012). Though strong identification with a group may mean that attitude importance comes from a sense of group interest, which is not unrelated to self-interest, it is also possible that individuals adopt beliefs of the group for reasons other than tangible benefit. For instance, members of the Catholic Church are likely to care deeply about their attitudes toward abortion because the Church has taken public stands on the issue for many years (Boninger et al., 1995). Identifying with a group will, of course, not necessarily determine that members adopt its views. For instance, not all Catholics will adopt the Church's position on abortion, and it presumably depends on how much they identify with the Church, and the positions the Church takes can reinforce or undermine that identification, among other things.

A person may come to regard her attitudes toward an object, such as a person or a policy, as personally important if the attitudes linked to that object are relevant to her social or political values (Boninger et al., 1995; Feldman, 1988). Values are context-independent beliefs about desirable end states of the world and the acceptable means by which to accomplish them (Rokeach, 1973). This antecedent to personal issue importance is called value congruence. Value congruence therefore requires making abstract connections between values and attitude objects, which may be facilitated by group-held values, as in the case of Catholics, or may be generated by deep consideration of the relevance between the consequences of a public policy and one's values (Blankenship, Wegener, & Murray, 2015; Pollock, Lilie, & Vittes, 1993). Some amount of political information, then, is necessary for values to instigate attitude importance and behavior consistent with that attitude (Zaller, 1992). The theoretical value of the concept of attitude importance is in its causal relation to attitude-expressive and attitude-congruent behavior, of which knowledge acquisition comprises a key part.

Consequences of Attitude Importance for Decision Making

Political scientists, much like politicians, care about what people think—or what they say they think—because it indicates something about what they might do. If opinions and attitudes bore no relation to politically relevant behaviors, such as voting, volunteering, donating, and protesting, then they would not be the focus of so much study. Foundational work in political science tried to determine whether political attitudes in fact mattered for behavior, and the results were bleak (Converse, 1964). Given that citizens do not have the time or inclination to think carefully and research deeply into all matters of public policy that researchers or pollsters might ask them about, this finding is not all that surprising. Citizens might have crystallized and behaviorally consequential attitudes precisely on those issues that are of great personal importance and concern to them. The literature on attitude importance consistently finds that, on political issues of high importance to them, people are more knowledgeable, process new information more efficiently, are more stable in their attitudes and more extreme in their attitudes, and exhibit a higher degree of consistency between their attitudes and their behavior. At least with regard to personally important attitudes, citizens come much closer to the informed, reasoning, and active participant in the democratic ideal (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Prefiguring a great deal of later research on personal issue salience, RePass (1971) discovered, using a unique set of data that asked citizens to name as many problems facing government as they could, a number of invaluable insights on the subject.[8] The findings from this analysis are still important because they derive from a data set in which citizens were allowed to define their own issue space and not simply react to a series of single-issue prompts. Though 14% of the respondents in 1964 did not mention a single problem, 23% listed four or more issues, and the average number was 2.5. Surprisingly, there were no differences across levels of education, and Independents were just as capable as partisans. Among Americans who were personally concerned about several issues, there was a strong tendency to perceive that one party was better able to handle those problems. Collected as they were during the course of the presidential campaign, it appears that people remembered issues that aligned with the strengths of one party; but for those voters whose issue preferences conflicted with their party loyalties, there were large numbers of defections toward the other party. RePass (1971) also found that salient issues had nearly the same (standardized) regression coefficient on vote choice as did party identification.

Personally important attitudes are reported with more over-time consistency than are unimportant attitudes, and this is not because people are simply better able to understand questions and interpret their own internal attitude cues about issues important to them but, crucially, because these attitudes share strong links to other attitudes, beliefs, and values stored in long-term memory (Krosnick, 1988a). People also possess comparatively deeper knowledge about personally important issues. Attitude importance leads to the accumulation of knowledge by motivating individuals to selectively expose themselves to attitude-relevant information and to elaborate more carefully upon this information once it has been received (Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, Visser, & Boninger, 2005). Possessing larger quantities of knowledge about an issue makes it more likely that the considerations that come to mind when pressed to express an opinion will be unambiguous and less susceptible to change (Zaller, 1992).[9] Recent research also finds that voters maintain their perceptions of parties' issue ownership over the course of an election campaign only for issues that are personally important, which may be a sign of well-informed opinion (Tresch & Feddersen, 2019); however, it may be that voters simply project ownership of personally important issues onto their preferred party (Walgrave & Soontjens, 2019). More knowledge, or more personal importance, thus may not always be good, and other research suggests that it sometimes is used to deflect attitude-inconsistent information (Lodge & Taber, 2013). Nevertheless, attitude importance would serve as a key motivator in the acquisition and retention of knowledge on political issues.

One of the most notable political consequences of attitude importance is that citizens are better able to perceive differences between candidates' policy positions on issues of high importance (RePass, 1971, pp. 393–394). Since perceiving a difference between political options is a logical prerequisite for issue-based voting, attitude importance can play an outsized role in public decision making (Downs, 1957). Using 3 years of nationally representative observational data, Krosnick (1988b, p. 202) found statistically significant, substantively meaningful coefficients on the interactions between policy preference and importance (across issues) on the choice between the presidential candidates up for election at the time. The raw percentages reporting a difference in the candidates' issue positions are also significantly higher among the individuals who

considered the issues to be very important, with differences between the low- and high-importance groups ranging from about 5 to 30 percentage points and an average of 21 percentage points across the set of issues studied.

Voting

The issues and evaluations that voters regard as most important play a crucial role in their vote decision. Without accounting for the attitudes that are most important to voters, models of individual vote choice will lack a valuable component of explanatory power. Although there was some debate over the role of important attitudes in voting (see, e.g., Kuklinski & McCrone, 1980; Niemi & Bartels, 1985), research tends to find a significant moderating role for attitude importance. Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby (1982) studied candidate evaluation during the 1968 presidential election using a 7-point scale assessing agreement with the statement regarding whether so-and-so would make an excellent president. They regressed this presidential evaluation variable on perceived issue proximity multiplied by responses to a 4-point "important to you" scale. Their results point toward an effect for the most important issue that is at least one third that of partisanship. In a study focusing on foreign policy and employing candidate issue positions derived from content analysis, Anand and Krosnick (2003) also find significant effects for interactions between policy evaluation and personal importance on candidate evaluations. That said, there is reason to suppose that perceived issue proximity may be endogenous to candidate preferences and possibly even issue importance itself (Wlezien, 2002).

Taking data from the Canadian context, Belanger and Meguid (2008) inquire into the role that attitude importance plays in voting models that allow issues to be "owned" by certain parties. They find that the impact of issues on vote choice is moderated by the importance attached to those issues by the voter. A hypothetical voter for whom the most important issue is owned by a party other than his own, for instance, will be 10 percentage points more likely (53 to 43%) to vote for that party when that issue is rated at "very important," the highest level. In general, the authors find that party ownership of an issue is only statistically significant in predicting vote choice when the issue is personally important to the voter. The Canadian context is valuable here for theory building as well because, by contrast with the United States, it presents us with a case involving multiple parties. The effects on the vote for each party differ, meaning that some parties were more likely than others to get a person's vote when that person thought the party owned a personally important issue. This result indicates that not all personally important issues are equally weighted in people's vote decisions: A ranking measurement strategy thus may have been of use here. Moreover, owning an issue can be deleterious to the party owning it: Voters who considered the party-owned issue to be personally important were more likely to punish the party at the polls. Belanger and Meguid (2008) suggest that this was because those voters were receptive to arguments made during the election campaign on which the parties failed to deliver. This reveals again that voters motivated by personally important issues can become highly informed and act accordingly.

Once more drawing on Canadian data, Fournier et al. (2003) use both an open-ended personally MII item and a series of closed-ended importance items to assess how well issue importance moderates decision making, but now with an emphasis on performance voting. Given previous research, one might expect that "individuals who feel an issue is more important are more likely to evaluate the government on that issue" (Fournier et al., 2003, p. 57). People are less likely to give a "don't know" answer when asked to evaluate the government on a certain issue when it is important to them, and, crucially, they are also more likely to connect their evaluation to their vote choice. In fact, when taking personal importance and performance evaluations together, the direct effect of performance evaluations on the vote decision nearly evaporates entirely. In addition to a sizable increase in model fit, the importance-evaluation interactive terms demonstrate that attitude importance can help us account for the effects of performance evaluations in elections. Interestingly, the improvement in model fit comes largely from including the open-ended personal importance question. In another study using a similar measure, Giger and Lefkofridi (2014) show that voters in Switzerland are closer to the party they vote for on issues that are personally important to them, and this is especially true for niche parties.

Personal issue importance can make a meaningful difference to whether or not voters change their vote based on their evaluation of the government's performance (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). The median difference in the estimated probability of voting for the Liberal Party for an individual rating the government's performance somewhat negatively versus somewhat positively is 10 percentage points for those who consider the issue is very important but only 1 percentage point for those who do not think it important (Giger & Lefkofridi, pp. 298–299). It is thus worth asking: To what extent is a voter who attaches a great deal of importance to social welfare, for example, unbiased in her evaluation of the government's performance on that issue? Does issue importance facilitate accuracy-motivated reasoning? Simultaneously valuing social welfare policy and processing information about it in a biased way does not seem logically inconsistent, but it does call into question the normative value that attitude importance has in politics.

One useful response to this question was put forward by Dejaeghere and van Erkel (2017), who, among other things, asked whether knowledge of the parties' policy positions in a complex multiparty system (Belgium) was greater for individuals who held personally important views about the issues on the agenda. Surprisingly, they find no significant results for issue importance and that few people are good at placing the parties on issues. The only success voters do exhibit in this task is placing parties on the specific "owned" issues with which they are associated in the public's mind. The null results for personal issue salience are questionable for two reasons, however. First, the authors operationalize personal issue salience as a global characteristic of a person, something like "how salient is the overall political agenda to this individual," rather than as the relationship between a person and a specific issue, as it is typically—and seemingly appropriately—conceived. Specifically, they construct a single variable that is an additive index of responses to twelve different issue statements. For example, the highest value on this variable would mean that the respondent said every issue was extremely important. Ideally, research might investigate whether voters are better at placing the parties on those specific issues to

which the voters attach importance. Second, the item tapping issue importance does not appear to invoke the voter's personal attachment to the issue, but rather a general sense of importance. This is a crucial matter in the measurement of attitude importance, especially as it relates to the use of issue attitudes in political reasoning.

Miller et al. (2017) bring a considerable amount of evidence to bear on the question of whether people engage differently with issues they regard as personally important as opposed to nationally important, as, for example, measured with the MIP question. Their main finding is that personal importance matters a great deal in determining how much a person thinks she knows about an issue, how often she thinks about it, and how certain her attitudes are, but that national importance has no relationship to these, albeit subjective, indicators of knowledge and cognitive engagement. Matters of national importance, it would seem, do not figure prominently in people's election-time thought processes, unless they also happen to be personally important to them (Johns, 2010).

Some research addresses "approval" instead of vote choice, which has the benefit of not being restricted to periods of electoral contest. Research here shows that media coverage of the economy and foreign affairs moderates their impact on evaluation (Edwards, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995; see also Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). As news coverage is a key antecedent of what voters consider important to the nation, findings concerning presidential approval, particularly when removed from an election campaign, may be theoretically distinct from those discovered during election times. (It also may be that issue importance—and preferences—are an antecedent of media coverage; see, e.g., Soroka et al., 2015.) One reason for this is that the role of issue-based reasoning in political judgments is probably weaker outside of the information-rich environment of election campaigns (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004). Another reason is that presidential approval is a mediator of issue-based concerns, and some of these issues may be more personally important at election time (Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007; Slothuus, 2008).

Determining whether voters' personally important issues come first or whether they follow the influence of political elites is a difficult task with observational data, but some work tries to disentangle the endogeneity between personal importance and other strong political forces. Neundorf and Adams (2018) examine the reciprocal relationship between personal importance and party support in Germany across a 15-year, 26-wave panel. Lagged personal importance of four policy domains predicts current party support; reciprocally, lagged party support predicts current issue importance.[10] The relative size of the coefficients suggests that people more often update what is important to them than they update what party they vote for. The results hold for the British case as well, which may mean that the same dynamic applies in two-party systems like that of the United States. The conditions under which parties and candidates can alter the importance citizens attach to issues, and the conditions under which parties respond to citizens' issue importance, seemingly should be part of the research agenda on issue salience going forward. Such research will help develop theory of the origins of attitude importance and its dynamics over the course of election campaigns. Some results from the laboratory suggest that moving evaluations with information is harder for issues of high national importance (Wolf & Holian, 2006).

Consequences for Elite Behavior

What issues the public is passionately concerned about and personally invested in also has implications for the behavior of parties and candidates. Insofar as parties act as though citizens will weight personally important issues more heavily in their vote decision, elites are incentivized to adjust their behavior accordingly. And as the number of individuals who care about the same issues grows, the more office-seekers have to gain by appealing to them. Thus, the responsiveness of representatives to their constituents should be conditioned by how much their constituents care about the issues at hand (Kuklinski & McCrone, 1980). Studies of personal issue salience should therefore be able to provide us with examples of tighter constituent–representative linkage on policy, with the reason for that linkage being that the key segments of the electorate care.

The theory of subconstituency representation is predicated on this kind of dynamic between representatives and voters, and its empirical foundation provides examples of responsiveness under conditions of high personal importance. Its suitability here can be seen clearly: Subconstituency politics holds that legislative responsiveness is strongly impacted by subconstituent minorities with intensely held, or personally important, preferences (Bishin, 2000). Hayes and Bishin (2012) perform an analysis that leverages both a change in media salience (the visibility of an issue) and differences in the size of the relevant strongly opinionated subconstituencies. They find that, once an obscure issue burst into the news, legislators from districts with larger issue publics were much more likely to change their vote in line with these passionate citizens, forsaking the general liberalism of the district as well as smaller subconstituencies. The rise in visibility seems to have spurred legislators with sizable subconstituencies to better consider the opinions of their most concerned citizens and not those of the wider electorate. Barberá et al. (2019) make a contribution here using the behavioral measure of personal issue salience noted earlier. Relying on Twitter messages sent by members of Congress and constituents over a 2-year period, they find that the issues members tweet about follow what their supporters are talking about. As the work on subconstituencies has also shown, what matters is not only what issues are salient to the public, but to whom in the public they are salient, keeping in mind that different groups move in parallel over time (Page & Shapiro, 1992).

Other work claims that national issue salience plays a crucial role in the voting behavior of legislators (e.g., Kingdon, 1977). This line of research argues that when an issue is high in public concern, typically as operationalized by the percentage of people naming it the MIP, legislators take heed and vote as their district would have them. For this to be the case, voters would need to hold their representatives accountable at the polls. Canes-Wrone et al. (2011) bring some good data to bear on this question. When crime was relatively high in national salience (15% or higher in MIP), they show that citizens rewarded their representatives for voting for tough-on-crime measures. When crime was not so salient, voters did not seem to reward their representatives. Their analysis demonstrates that the MIP can indicate a policy domain for which politicians can expect greater scrutiny. Interestingly, however, this accountability did not come from voters with long-term personally important attitudes about crime policy, but from voters for whom crime was a newly salient issue.

Public issue salience also matters for responsiveness at the state level. Consider recent research by Bromley-Trujillo and Poe (2018). They conduct an analysis of the impact of (U.S.) state-level public opinion on the number of climate-change policies states adopted over a 7-year period. Importantly, the authors explicitly model public issue salience as both perceived problem status and issue importance, arguing that Google Search trends capture the latter while also containing a component of attention giving (Bromley-Trujillo & Poe, 2018, p. 4). Each component of salience had a substantive positive effect on the number of proclimate policies adopted, with the Google Trends variable having a larger effect than the percentage of state residents saying climate was a "very serious problem." While this is a valuable early step in testing the separate effects of problem and importance, it is not obvious what Google Trends data actually capture here. Since they register attention, these data may better indicate problem status itself, and possibly its interaction with importance. Without distinct measures of *I* and *P*, however, conclusions about the relative import of salience's components are difficult to reveal.

The responsiveness of the government's policy agenda is another area of research in which issue salience, particularly MIP, has played a prominent role (e.g., Jones, 1994). The idea here is that the government's focus on issues is a function of the public's preferences regarding that issue conditional on how much of a priority that issue is (measured by MIP). Although the relationship between the policy agenda and public opinion may interact this way theoretically, MIP is not ideally suited to the task of testing the theory (Wlezien, 2005). This limitation comes from the fact that (1) MIP does not only tap importance (I) but also includes problem status (*P*); and (2) it forces a single "most" (*M*) response, leaving other important problems completely out of the signal. As noted previously, the other important issues may receive attention from government actors, while MIP makes it appear as though those issues are not being prioritized by the public. Averaging MIP responses over sufficiently lengthy stretches of time might offer more useful information, as this would dampen the variation owing to problem status (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Comparing responses across geographic units, such as U.S. states, at particular points in time might also be informative, as would the responses of different individuals.

MIP's limitations owing to a single forced response still remain. Given this, a better measure would ask respondents to name as many important problems as they wish and to rank-order them. An even better measure might ask people what problems they think the government ought to be focusing on, because MIP does not explicitly refer to problems that the government ought to do something about. It may turn out that the political agenda's responsiveness to the public occurs mainly on the issue of top importance, but this is something research has yet to document.

Conclusion

The literature seems to be pointing toward a world in which people use issue preferences that are personally important to them, if they have them, to vote for candidates or at least affectively respond to those that are closest to them in policy space. The number of people who fit this characterization is of central importance to the functioning of representative democracy. It must not be much larger than roughly 20% if scholars are to take seriously the percentage of people indicating the highest level of importance (on a 4-point scale) for any single issue as an

indication (e.g., 21.6% said abortion in 1980; 20.5% said government services in 1984; Krosnick, 1990, p. 61). Still, it is not a settled matter whether this is the best way to identify members of issue publics; as the issues are preselected by researchers, there may be issues that people are passionate about but that researchers never ask, and some individuals at the high end of the importance spectrum, especially when measured using a one-item battery, may not truly belong there. Whether membership in an issue public is durable over the life course or whether it comes and goes with the degree to which the issue is a problem is an open empirical question. The individual longitudinal patterns of attitude importance have yet to be fully described and explained.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the advice of David Redlawsk and comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

References

Abramowitz, A. I. (1995). It's abortion, stupid: Policy voting in the 1992 presidential election. *Journal of Politics*, *57*(1), 176–186.

Alvarez, R. M. (1997). *Information and elections*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Alwin, D. F., & Krosnick, J. A. (1985). The measurement of values in surveys: A comparison of ratings and rankings. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *49*(4), 535–552.

Anand, S., & Krosnick, J. A. (2003). The impact of attitudes toward foreign policy goals on public preferences among presidential candidates: A study of issue publics and the attentive public in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *33*(1), 31–71.

Ansolabehere, S., & Socorro Puy, M. (2018). Measuring issue-salience in voters' preferences. *Electoral Studies*, *51*, 103–114.

Barberá, P., Casas, A., Nagler, J., Egan, P. J., Bonneau, R., Jost, J. T., & Tucker, J. A. (2019). Who leads? Who follows? Measuring issue attention and agenda setting by legislators and the mass public using social media data. *American Political Science Review*, *113*(4), 883–901.

Bassili, J. N. (2011). Attitude strength. In W. D. Crano & R. Prislin (Eds.), *Attitudes and attitude change* (pp. 237–260). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Behr, R. L., & Iyengar, S. (1985). Television news, real-world cues, and changes in the public agenda. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *49*(1), 38–57.

Belanger, E., & Meguid, B. M. (2008). Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice. *Electoral Studies*, *27*(3), 477–491.

Bevan, S., Jennings, W., & Wlezien, C. (2016). An analysis of the public's personal, national and EU issue priorities. *Journal of European Public Policy*, *23*(6), 871–887.

Bishin, B. G. (2000). Constituency influence in Congress: Does subconstituency matter? *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *25*(3), 389–415.

Blankenship, K. L., Wegener, D. T., & Murray, R. A. (2015). Values, inter-attitudinal structure, and attitude change: Value accessibility can increase a related attitude's resistance to change. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *41*(12), 1739–1750.

Boninger, D. S., Berent, M. K., & Krosnick, J. A. (1995). Origins of attitude importance: Self-interest, social identification, and value relevance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *68*(1), 61–80.

Boninger, D. S., Krosnick, J. A., Berent, M. K., & Fabrigar, L. R. (1995). The causes and consequences of attitude importance. In R. E. Petty & J. A. Krosnick (Eds.), *Attitude strength: Antecedents and consequences* (pp. 159–189). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Brody, R. A. (1991). *Assessing the president: The media, elite opinion, and public support*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bromley-Trujillo, R., & Poe, J. (2018). The importance of salience: Public opinion and state policy action on climate change. *Journal of Public Policy* (October), 1–25.

Canes-Wrone, B., Minozzi, W., & Reveley, J. B. (2011). Issue accountability and the mass public. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *36*(1), 5–35.

Converse, P. E. (1964). The nature of belief systems in mass publics. In D. E. Apter (Ed.), *Ideology and discontent* (pp. 206–261). New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe.

Dejaeghere, Y., & van Erkel, P. (2017). The importance of issue-ownership and salience for voters' knowledge of parties' issue positions. *Electoral Studies*, *46*, 15–25.

Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans know about politics and why it matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dennison, J. (2019). A review of public issue salience: Concepts, determinants and effects on voting. *Political Studies Review*, *17*(4), 436–446.

Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Druckman, J. N. (2004). Priming the vote: Campaign effects in a U.S. Senate election. *Political Psychology*, *25*(4), 577–594.

Duncan, L. E. (2005). Personal political salience as a self-schema: Consequences for political information processing. *Political Psychology*, *26*(6), 965–976.

Eaton, A. A., & Visser, P. S. (2008). Attitude importance: Understanding the causes and consequences of passionately held views. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *2*(4), 1719–1736.

Edwards, G. C., Mitchell, W., & Welch, R. (1995). Explaining presidential approval: The significance of issue salience. *American Journal of Political Science*, *39*(1), 108–134.

Epstein, L. (2000). Measuring issue salience. *American Journal of Political Science*, *44*(1), 66–83.

Erikson, R. S., & Wlezien, C. (2012). *The timeline of presidential elections*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Feldman, S. (1988). Structure and consistency in public opinion: The role of core beliefs and values. *American Journal of Political Science*, *32*(2), 416–440.

Fournier, P., Blais, A., Nadeau, R., Gidengil, E., & Nevitte, N. (2003). Issue importance and performance voting. *Political Behavior*, *25*(1), 51–67.

Geer, J. G. (1991). Do open-ended questions measure "salient" issues? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *55*(3), 360–370.

Giger, N., & Lefkofridi, Z. (2014). Salience-based congruence between parties and their voters: The Swiss case. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *20*(2), 287–304.

Hayes, T. J., & Bishin, B. G. (2012). Issue salience, subconstituency politics, and legislative representation. *Congress and the Presidency*, *39*(2), 133–159.

Hill, K. Q., & Hurley, P. A. (1999). Dyadic representation reappraised. *American Journal of Political Science*, *43*(1), 109–137

Hillygus, D. S., & Shields, T. G. (2008). *The persuadable voter: Wedge issues in presidential campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Holbrook, A. L., Berent, M. K., Krosnick, J. A., Visser, P. S., & Boninger, D. S. (2005). Attitude importance and the accumulation of attitude-relevant knowledge in memory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *88*(5), 749–769.

Hutchings, V. L. (2001). Political context, issue salience, and selective attentiveness: Constituent knowledge of the Clarence Thomas confirmation vote. *Journal of Politics*, *63*(3), 846–868.

Jennings, W., & John, P. (2009). The dynamics of political attention: Public opinion and the Queen's speech in the United Kingdom. *American Journal of Political Science*, *53*(4), 838–854.

Jennings, W., & Wlezien, C. (2011). Distinguishing between most important problems and issues? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *75*(3), 545–555.

Jennings, W., & Wlezien, C. (2015). Preferences, problems and representation. *Political Science Research and Methods*, *3*(3), 659–681.

Jetten, J., & Haslam, S. A. (2018). Not by behaviour alone: In defence of self-reports and "finger movements." *Social Psychological Bulletin*, *13*(2), e26196.

Johns, R. (2010). Measuring issue salience in British elections: Competing interpretations of "most important issue." *Political Research Quarterly*, *63*(1), 143–158.

Johnson, M. (2004). Timepieces: Components of survey question response latencies. *Political Psychology*, *25*(5), 679–702.

Jones, B. D. (1994). *Reconceiving decision-making in Democratic politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jones, B. D., & Baumgartner, F. R. (2004). Representation and agenda setting. *Policy Studies Journal*, *32*(1), 1–24.

Jones, B. D., & Baumgartner, F. R. (2005). *The politics of attention: How government prioritizes problems*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Kingdon, J. W. (1977). Models of legislative voting. *Journal of Politics*, *39*(3), 563–595.

Kiousis, S., & McCombs, M. (2004). Agenda-setting effects and attitude strength: Political figures during the 1996 presidential election. *Communication Research*, *31*(1), 36–57.

Krosnick, J. A. (1988a). Attitude importance and attitude change. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *24*(3), 240–255.

Krosnick, J. A. (1988b). The role of attitude importance in social evaluation: A study of policy preferences, presidential candidate evaluations, and voting behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *55*(2), 196–210.

Krosnick, J. A. (1990). Government policy and citizen passion: A study of issue publics in contemporary America. *Political Behavior*, *12*(1), 59–92.

Krosnick, J. A. (1999). Survey research. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *50*, 537–567.

Krosnick, J. A., & Alwin, D. F. (1988). A test of the form-resistant correlation hypothesis: Ratings, rankings, and the measurement of values. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *52*(4), 526–538.

Krosnick, J. A., & Brannon, L. A. (1993). The impact of the Gulf War on the ingredients of presidential evaluations: Multidimensional effects of political involvement. *American Political Science Review*, *87*(4), 963–975.

Krosnick, J. A., Holbrook, A. L., Lowe, L., & Visser, P. S. (2006). The origins and consequences of Democratic citizens' policy agendas: A study of popular concern about global warming. *Climatic Change*, *77*(1–2), 7–43.

Krosnick, J. A., & Kinder, D. R. (1990). Altering the foundations of support for the president through priming. *American Political Science Review*, *84*(2), 497–512.

Kuklinski, J. H., & McCrone, D. J. (1980). Policy salience and the causal structure of representation. *American Politics Quarterly*, *8*(2), 139–164.

Lavine, H., Sullivan, J. L., Borgida, E., & Thomsen, C. J. (1996). The relationship of national and personal issue salience to attitude accessibility on foreign and domestic policy issues. *Political Psychology*, *17*(2), 293–316.

Lax, J. R., & Phillips, J. H. (2009). Gay rights in the states: Public opinion and policy responsiveness. *American Political Science Review*, *103*(3), 367–386.

Lee, F. (2009). *Beyond ideology: Politics, principles, and partisanship in the U.S. Senate*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lodge, M., & Taber, C. S. (2013). *The rationalizing voter*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

MacKuen, M. B., & Coombs, S. L. (1981). *More than news: Media power in public affairs*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.

Malhotra, N., & Krosnick, J. A. (2007). Retrospective and prospective performance assessments during the 2004 election campaign: Tests of mediation and news media priming. *Political Behavior*, *29*(2), 249–278.

Marquis, L. (2014). The psychology of quick and slow answers: Issue importance in the 2011 Swiss Parliamentary elections. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *20*(4), 697–726.

McCarthy, J. (2018, November 20). Immigration up sharply as most important U.S. problem. *Gallup*.

McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *36*(2), 176–187.

Mellon, J. (2014). Internet search data and issue salience: The properties of Google trends as a measure of issue salience. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties*, *24*(1), 45–72.

Mettler, S. (2011). *The submerged state: How invisible government policies undermine American democracy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Meyer, M., & Schoen, H. (2014). Response latencies and attitude-behavior consistency in a direct democratic setting: Evidence from a subnational referendum in Germany. *Political Psychology*, *35*(3), 431–440.

Miller, J. M., & Krosnick, J. A. (2000). News media impact on the ingredients of presidential evaluations: Politically knowledgeable citizens are guided by a trusted source. *American Journal of Political Science*, *44*(2), 301–315.

Miller, J. M., Krosnick, J. A., & Fabrigar, L. R. (2017). The origins of policy issue salience: Personal and national importance impact on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional issue engagement. In J. A. Krosnick, I.-C. A. Chiang, & T. H. Stark (Eds.), *Political psychology: New explorations* (pp. 125–172). New York, NY: Routledge.

Mulligan, K., Grant, J. T., Mockabee, S. T., & Monson, J. Q. (2003). Response latency methodology for survey research: Measurement and modeling strategies. *Political Analysis*, *11*(3), 289–301.

Neundorf, A., & Adams, J. (2018). The micro-foundations of party competition and issue ownership: The reciprocal effects of citizens' issue salience and party attachments. *British Journal of Political Science*, *48*(2), 385–406.

Niemi, R. G., & Bartels, L. M. (1985). New measures of issue salience: An evaluation. *Journal of Politics*, *47*(4), 1212–1220.

Oehl, B., Schaffer, L. M., & Bernauer, T. (2017). How to measure public demand for policies when there is no appropriate survey data? *Journal of Public Policy*, *37*(2), 173–204.

Page, B. I., & Shapiro, R. Y. (1992). *The rational public: Fifty years of trends in Americans' policy preferences*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Paolino, P. (1995). Group-salient issues and group representation: Support for women candidates in the 1992 Senate elections. *American Journal of Political Science*, *39*(2), 294–313.

Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science*, *40*(3), 825–850.

Philpot, T. S. (2007). *Race, Republicans and the return of the party of Lincoln: The politics of race and ethnicity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Pollock, P. H., Lilie, S. A., & Vittes, M. E. (1993). Hard issues, core values and vertical constraint: The case of nuclear power. *British Journal of Political Science*, *23*(1), 29–50.

Rabinowitz, G., Prothro, J. W., & Jacoby, W. (1982). Salience as a factor in the impact of issues on candidate evaluation. *Journal of Politics*, *44*(1), 41–63.

Randles, D., Heine, S. J., Poulin, M., & Cohen Silver, R. (2017). Experienced adversity in life is associated with polarized and affirmed political attitudes. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *8*(6), 652–659.

RePass, D. E. (1971). Issue salience and party choice. *American Political Science Review*, *65*(2), 389–400.

Reynolds, T. J., & Jolly, J. P. (1980). Measuring personal values: An evaluation of alternative methods. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *17*(4), 531–536.

Rokeach, M. (1973). *The nature of human values*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Schattschneider, E. E. (1960). *The semisovereign people: A realist's view of democracy in America*. New York, NY: Wadsworth.

Schuman, H., Ludwig, J., & Krosnick, J. A. (1986). The perceived threat of nuclear war, salience, and open questions. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *50*(4), 519–536.

Slothuus, R. (2008). More than weighting cognitive importance: A dual-process model of issue framing effects. *Political Psychology*, *29*(1), 1–28.

Soroka, S., & Wlezien, C. (2010). *Degrees of democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Soroka, S. N., Stecula, D. A., & Wlezien, C. (2015). It's (change in) the (future) economy, stupid: Economic indicators, the media, and public opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *59*(2), 457–474.

Tresch, A., & Feddersen, A. (2019). The (in)stability of voters' perceptions of competence and associative issue ownership: The role of media campaign coverage. *Political Communication*, *36*(3), 394–411.

Visser, P. S., & Holbrook, A. L. (2012). Metacognitive determinants of attitude strength. In P. Briñol & K. G. DeMarree (Eds.), *Social metacognition*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Wagner, M., & Meyer, T. M. (2014). Which issues do parties emphasise? Salience strategies and party organisation in multiparty systems. *West European Politics*, *37*(5), 1019–1045.

Walgrave, S., & Soontjens, K. (2019). How voters form associative issue ownership perceptions: An analysis of specific issues. *Electoral Studies*, *59* (June), 136–144.

Wlezien, C. (2002). *A note on the endogeneity of ideological placements of government institutions*. American National Election Studies (ANES) Technical Report 010750.

Wlezien, C. (2005). On the salience of political issues: The problem with "most important problem." *Electoral Studies*, *24*(4), 555–579.

Wlezien, C., Soroka, S., & Stecula, D. (2017). A cross-national analysis of the causes and consequences of economic news. *Social Science Quarterly*, *98*(3), 1010–1025.

Wolf, M. R., & Holian, D. B. (2006). Polls, elite opinion, and the president: How information and issue saliency affect approval. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *36*(4), 584–605.

Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

1. This also is affected by other characteristics of the issue, such as the degree to which it is a problem and the difference between the policy alternatives on offer. Also see below for more discussion.

2. This means that a person's report of attitude importance closely approximates the true importance of that attitude, though there is some debate over people's ability to introspect in this regard (Bassili, 2011).

3. Of course, it is also possible that individuals' issue salience, at least in the aggregate, itself influences media coverage (e.g., Wlezien et al., 2017).

4. Harris now asks for the top two MIP, which may avert the problem, at least to some degree, keeping in mind that it still may constrain respondents.

5. There is little, if any, research on over-time personal issue importance, though research of this kind would go a long way toward ascertaining the extent to which importance, like MIP, is reflective of perceived problem status.

6. The degree to which an issue bears upon the self is a matter of (self-)perception and therefore may be changed by persuasion, priming, and life circumstances (Randles, Heine, Poulin, & Cohen, 2017), among other factors.

7. The issues asked about were racial integration, defense spending, marijuana, pollution, and abortion.

8. RePass (1971) operationalized personally salient issues as those which respondents were highly concerned about and had been on their mind a lot. Respondents themselves identified the issues in response to an open-ended prompt asking, "What would you personally feel are the most important problems the government should try to take care of when the new President and Congress take office in January?" Another question asked for up to three problems the government "should stay out of." Thus, a total of up to six problems could be mentioned.

9. In related work, scholars have conceived of a general type of political attitude importance, termed "personal political salience," which is computed by averaging over the responses to a number of personal importance questions about political events and issue domains (e.g., Duncan, 2005). People high in this sort of politics-wide attitude importance perform more quickly in tasks of associating political positions like "pro-choice" with ideological identifiers like "liberal."

10. Their measure uses the word "concern," but the concept is sufficiently similar. In multi-item indicators of attitude importance, one item typically asks about concern (e.g., Krosnick, Holbrook, Lowe, & Visser, 2006).

Related Articles

Voter Information Processing and Political Decision Making

The Influence of Psychological Security Maintenance on Political Decision Making

Strategic Voting Versus Sincere Voting