This article examines the influence of policy salience on election outcomes using aggregate U.S. presidential election data and the American National Election Studies poll data from 1972 to 2000. It finds that salience influences election outcomes consistent with the Schattschneider-Lowi thesis that policy determines politics. While salience levels are typically low, relatively higher salience yields more popular votes for Republicans than Democrats. Consequently, Republicans typically win by higher margins and lose by smaller margins compared to Democrats. Moreover, an incumbent is likely to be reelected if his party's salience levels remain higher than the challenger's. Finally, the policy salience thesis provides useful clues in the quest for a unified voting theory. It suggests that voters rely on rationality and self-interest to obtain answers to two pertinent questions, whose answers determine how they vote: (1) what is the most important problem; and (2) who can address it? These questions also undergird other voting theories.

Keywords: Policy Salience, Voting Behavior, Election Outcomes, Presidential Elections, United States, American National Election Studies, Reelection, Theories of Voting Behavior, Electoral Studies, Political Parties.

Related Articles:
Este artículo examina la influencia de legislaciones relevantes sobre los resultados de las elecciones utilizando datos agregados de las elecciones presidenciales de Estados Unidos y los datos de la encuesta de los Estudios Electorales de los Estados Unidos de 1972-2000. Se encuentra que la relevancia influye en los resultados de las elecciones de acuerdo con la tesis de Schattschneider-Lowi de que la legislación determina la política. Mientras que los niveles de relevancia son típicamente bajos, una relevancia relativamente más alta produce votos más populares para los republicanos que los demócratas. En consecuencia, los republicanos suelen ganar por mayores márgenes y perder por menores márgenes en comparación con los demócratas. Además, es probable que un titular sea reelegido si los niveles de relevancia de su partido permanecen más altos que los del retador. Finalmente, la tesis de la relevancia de una legislación proporciona pistas útiles en la búsqueda de una teoría unificada de la votación. Se sugiere que los votantes confían en la racionalidad y el interés propio para obtener respuestas a dos preguntas pertinentes, cuyas respuestas determinan cómo votan: (1) cuál es el problema más importante, y (2) quién puede abordarlo? Estas preguntas también subyacen a otras teorías de votación.

Palabras Clave: Prominencia Política, Comportamiento Electoral, Resultado Electoral, Elecciones Presidenciales, Estados Unidos, ANES, Resultados Electorales, Partidos Políticos.

借助1972-2000年间美国总统选举数据总和以及美国国家选举研究投票数据，本文检查了政策显著性对选举结果的影响。数据结果发现：显著性对选举结果的影响与Schattschneider和Lowi提出的"政策决定政治"理论保持一致。尽管显著性通常都比较低，但相对来说，显著性越高，投给共和党的票数就越比民主党更多。这样一来，共和党通常获胜时票数比民主党更多，失败时票数较少。不仅如此，如果就职者所在党派的显著性保持比对立党派高的话，其就很有可能再次当选。最后，政策显著性理论为寻求一个统一的投票理论提供了有用线索。它暗示：选民依靠理性和自我兴趣获得两个相关问题的答案，而答案决定了选民如何进行投票。这两个问题分别是：(1)最重要的问题是什么？(2)谁能处理该问题？同时，这些问题还为其他投票理论提供了支持。

关键词：政策显著性，投票行为，选举结果，总统选举，美国，美国全国选举研究，竞选连任，选举研究，政党.
The literature on voting behavior is not only vast and varied but also characterized by controversies and unwinding effervescent debates. In fact, “voting behavior is one of the most carefully studied political activities” (Polsby et al. 2012, 3). A key issue around which this debate revolves is the question of motivations for voting. This is hardly surprising, since voting towers above most of the known mechanisms for aggregating individual choices to collective decisions (Campbell et al. 1980). Generally, “some voters vote on the basis of sound moral values [and] they pursue ends that are worth pursuing, [while] others vote for morally despicable reasons” (Brennian 2011, 10). The debate on why people vote the way they do has yielded copious theoretical perspectives, each generating empirically testable hypotheses and hence, “why people vote is, after years of investigation, still a bit of a mystery” (Polsby et al. 2012, 9).

Surprisingly, electoral behavior studies have been slapdash and unguided by any grand theory (Barness 1997), despite the fact that “why people vote as they do and whether people vote at all have been fundamental questions that have motivated electoral inquiry for more than a half century” (Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009, 23). Hence, developments in electoral research have tended to mirror the theoretical novelty in the broader political science field. It is not mere happenstance that the rise in electoral behavior studies coincided with the emergence of behavioralism which places more premium on individuals and how they interact within groups. In its formative stages in the 1930s, electoral behavior was largely studied using survey research. Comparative studies of mass politics only sprouted courtesy of advances in research methodology and the existence of comparative data for theory building. Indeed, several regional and global political developments in the 1930s may have drawn the attention of scholars to mass politics. There were several mass political events that needed rationalization during this period such as the Turkistan mass protests against Russia; the Mexican youth and workers’ liberation struggles; the Japanese Rice riots; and the different variants of the Gandhian mass politics in India (Barness 1997).

The recent past has witnessed heightened scholarly attention to the effect of public policy on different aspects of political behavior. From Schattschneider to Theodore Lowi, the social constructionists, and the policy feedback scholars, the consensus so far is that policy influences politics. Nonetheless, the causal mechanism linking certain aspects of public policy and political behavior remain unexplored. Consequently, this study examines the influence of policy salience on election outcomes, taking the case of American presidential elections from 1972 to 2000. It is premised on the supposition that the candidate of a party with higher policy salience is likely to get a higher percentage of votes, and win elections. In essence, this article contributes to the policy-politics nexus debate by building on past studies on the influence of salience on voter behavior.

One such study is Asingo (2008), which examined the influence of policy salience on voter behavior, and found that higher aggregate policy salience
raises voter turnout. The study noted that individual voters may have different opinions concerning what they regard as most important, but when a significant proportion of voters believe that at least one of the political parties can address what they regard as important, they turn up and vote. While Asingo (2008) focused on the effect of policy salience on voter turnout, this article builds on that study by focusing on the effect of salience on election outcomes in a way that responds to the claim that, “no evidence has been presented to show that the issues people identify as important to them have any more impact on their decisions than issues not so designated” (Rabinowitz, Prothro, and Jacoby 1982, 42).

Theoretical and Empirical Literature on the Policy-Politics Nexus

The Schattschneider-Lowi Revolution

In his seminal publication, Eric Schattschneider asserted that “new policies create a new politics” (Schattschneider 1935, 288). Through this assertion, he planted the seeds that later germinated into a kind of “Copernican revolution in political theorizing.” For a long time, research on the policy-politics nexus was obstinately fixed to the idea that it is politics that determines policies, thus leading to the conclusion that, “the proposition that politics determines public policy is a fundamental tenet of political science” (Gormley 1983, 152). It was in 1964 that Theodore Lowi added fresh impetus to Schattschneider’s line of thinking by affirming that, “policy determines politics.” This radical shift in the causal loop of the politics-policy nexus has been christened as “Lowi’s iconoclastic turnaround of political science wisdom of the 1960s” (Hoppe 2011, 64).

Lowi began from the premise that people’s expectations define the nature of relationships that exist among them. What people expect from a government are outputs such as public policy. Relationships among people are essentially political, and hence at the macrolevel, it is policies that determine politics. Lowi’s thesis sprung from his criticism of David Easton’s input-output systems theory. It is noteworthy that from the mid-twentieth century, a number of political scientists embarked on a mission to demonstrate that political science was indeed a science. The strategy adopted by most of these scholars was to use natural science principles and theories to explain human relations and behavior. In this regard, Easton’s theory applied biological principles in the analysis of political systems, assuming that the two systems operate in much the same way. He separated political life, which he calls political systems, from the rest of the society, which he calls the environment. Political systems are open systems that incessantly interact with their environment from where they get inputs in terms of support and demands and process them into outputs like policies. Political analysis should focus on the whole system rather than its parts, recognize environmental influences on the system, and detect whether a system is in equilibrium.
Theodore Lowi’s primary concern was how to open the black box in David Easton’s input-output systems theory. He felt that Easton did not passably explain what happens in the political system, merely presenting it as some sort of a machine or black box which receives all sorts of inputs from the environment and instantaneously processes them into outputs. Yet, because policy making occurs in a political system, and involves questions concerning who gets what, when, and how, it is essentially a political process. Therefore, he sought to explain what determines politics in the context of the policy-making process. Specifically, he wanted to determine whether differences in the outputs of the political system are products of different politics that go on within the political system, and whether these differences in politics are themselves products of differences in the type of policy processed. This led him to create three typologies of policies—redistributive, distributive, and regulatory—each creating different types of politics (Lowi 1972).

Lowi observed U.S. federal policies and concluded that public policy determines the course of politics so that the type of policy that is dominant at any given time determines which political actors are dominant. In the nineteenth century, for instance, Congress tended to be dominant since most polices espoused tended to be distributive. Moreover, the U.S. history is replete with cases where exceptional shifts in politics are preceded by some underlying exceptional shifts in policy. Lowi’s thesis has been extended beyond his original three policy types to other policy areas, and beyond the politics of policy making to politics more generally. It has been shown that the politics generated by regulatory policies vary across policy domains, depending on policy salience levels and degrees of technical complexity. Different salience-complexity permutations create different incentives for actors to participate in the political process (Gormley 1986).

The essence of the Schattschneider-Lowi thesis is that different types of public policies influence different aspects of political behavior differently. Evidently, their focus is on the type of policy that is more salient and hence the most important problem (MIP), while ignoring the voter’s perceptions of who is capable of addressing it. Yet issue-salience is politically sterile in the absence of someone who can address the issue. The issue-ownership theory propounded by Budge and Farlie (1983), as well as Petrocik (1996), has partially addressed this defect. It suggests that the American political parties have come to be associated with certain policy issues over the years, so that whenever an issue is viewed as the MIP, the party associated with it often reaps electoral dividends. For instance, “the Democratic Party has a reputation for being best able to effectively handle issues of education, civil rights, and welfare, while the Republican Party has a reputation for being more competent in dealing with foreign affairs, national defense and crime” (Asingo 2008, 54). However, not all issues have clear-cut owners. Moreover, majority opinion may converge on the same MIP, even when the same opinion is divided over which party can address that MIP best. In the circumstances, they will vote for the different parties they
individually believe can address the MIP. Thus, voting decisions depend less on a specific issue viewed as the MIP and more on who can fix it.

The Social Construction Framework

This framework was developed by Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram and is rooted in Thomas Kuhn’s idea that there is no single view of reality and Lowi’s thesis that policy distributes benefits and burdens in ways that make it determine politics (Ingram, Schneider, and DeLeon 2007). It views problems as interpretations of subjectively defined issues and stresses the social construction of reality. Positive construction portrays target groups as “deserving,” while negative construction depicts them as “undeserving,” where target group refers to “those groups chosen to receive benefits and burdens through the various elements of the policy design” (Ingram, Schneider, and DeLeon 2007, 95).

Social construction of the target group refers to a formal recognition of the unique characteristics of the target group which distinguishes it from the rest, and the attachment of values, stereotypes, and images, to the group’s unique characteristics. It is “[the] cultural characterizations or popular images of persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy” (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334). There are two dimensions of target group construction—the target group’s political power measured in terms of its resources, size, unity, ability to mobilize, and voting strength, and political value measured in terms of whether they are positively or negatively constructed. Allocation of benefits to targets depends on the two dimensions (Ingram, Schneider, and DeLeon 2007). The framework explains why policies confer benefits and sanctions to different groups. Social construction is largely a framework about the political consequences of policies both at the formulation and the implementation stages. Unlike this study, social construction neither focuses on which policy is more salient nor the public opinion on who is more likely to tackle it.

The Policy Feedback Framework

Recent scholarship has fused the Schattschneider-Lowi thesis with social construction into a cogent framework known as the policy feedback framework (PFF). The framework reaffirms the reversed causal direction in the policy-politics nexus from policy to politics, hypothesizing that it is policies that shape politics, and not the other way round. PFF also links mass political behavior with an institutional approach to policy studies (McDonnell 2009; Pierson 1993). According to the PFF, “policies create incentives for targets to organize to preserve and expand their benefits or to minimize their costs” (McDonnell 2009, 66). Targets typically organize within a framework of institutionalized rules and structures created by the policy. The nature of the feedback generated by a policy is a function of the incentive structures it creates, the type of access to governmental system it provides, and “the signals it sends about the political
standing of its targets” (McDonnell 2009, 66). In this regard, policies are essentially the “rules of the game,” which significantly influence the allocation of various forms of scarce resources, whether economic or political. Consequently, past policies determine current political struggles, and hence today’s policies need to be carefully designed since they will define tomorrow’s politics (Pierson 1993).

In terms of empirical studies, Soss (1999) undertook a comparative study of the recipients of two welfare programs—Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Social Security Disability Insurance. The study sought to explicate why beneficiaries of welfare policy programs tend to be more attentive to governmental activities, and whether the two programs have similar effects on participants’ orientation to politics. The study found that beliefs acquired while participating in these programs influenced the participants’ orientation to politics. In essence, “direct experiences with policy design provide citizens with ‘scripts’ that indicate how they can expect government to act” (Soss 1999, 376). Participants who felt satisfied with the way they were treated became more active in politics. Thus the policy design served as a microcosm of the larger political arena, and guided participants in deciding whether or not to engage in politics.

Relatedly, Mettler (2002) used the PFF to examine how the G.I. Bill education policy influenced the decision by veterans to join civic organizations and engage in political activities. The study found that participation in policy programs influenced perceptions of target groups, thereby enhancing their participation in politics. Likewise, Abernathy (2005) examined the impact of school choice policy on political participation. His assumption was that parents who participate in school choice programs would replicate the spirit of participation in the wider political arena. However, he found that school choice only enhances participation of the parents within the chosen school, but not in the entire community. A similar study of New Jersey school budget referenda found that charter school districts tend to register higher voter turnouts and lower budget approval rates than non-charter districts (Abernathy 2005; McDonnell 2009).

Hacker, Mettler, and Pinderhughes (2005) used the case of the 1965 Voting Rights Act to demonstrate how new policies create new politics. The Act sought to remedy discrimination against disenfranchised groups especially in the South. A key policy feedback effect of the Act was the inspiration it gave to minority groups, especially non-English speakers, who began to demand new accommodative policies. This gave impetus to the bilingual movement that began to agitate for policy change. The agitation sparked political contests culminating in the adoption of the Bilingual Education Policy as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968. The new policy empowered blacks in the South, thereby raising their electoral value and strengthening their political voice. Fearing the influence of blacks on the electoral process, southern states like Mississippi adapted strategies aimed at neutralizing the influence of the blacks in elections. But since the blacks were already enfranchised,
attempts to prevent them from voting hardened their resolve more. The issue shifted from policy to pure politics, with the blacks seeking to take new roles as voters and candidates. This fueled tension between them and previously dominant groups, who fought back to block them. In the end, the electoral demographics of the state of Mississippi changed, as did the results of subsequent elections (Hacker, Mettler, and Pinderhughes 2005).

Alternative Theoretical Perspectives on Voting Behavior

The Rational Choice Theory
Rational choice theory (RCT) is widely viewed as the most dominant paradigm not just in political science but in the social sciences, raising the question: “is rational choice theory all of social science?” (Lichbach 2003, xiii). Those who back the primacy of RCT argue that, “the only theory in comparative politics today that is sufficiently powerful and general to be a serious contender for the unified theory is rational choice” (Wallerstein 2001, 1). Others are cagily optimistic that, “perhaps only rational choice [theory] is still a serious contender as a general theory” (Barness 1997, 134). They add that, “if rational choice provides one advantage over competing explanatory approaches, it is the ability to make clear predictions about the effects of increasing and decreasing the costs of voting” (Green and Shapiro 1994, 70).

RCT emerged in the late nineteenth century, partly in response to the classical political economy of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. It found its way into political science through the work of Anthony Downs, Mancur Olson, William Riker, and Kenneth Arrow. It all began when Downs introduced spatial models in the study of voting in 1957, thus accentuating the role of individual rationality in political choices in the same way they influence economic ones. Spatial models explain the positioning of parties on the political scale to be closer to the majority. Based on this, Olson (1965) added that when making voting choices, individuals are rational, self-interest driven utility maximizers, guided by cost-benefit calculations (Munck 2002). Hence, RCT is “a theory of decision-making that rests on the expected utility principle, which states that individuals make decisions that maximize the utility they expect to derive from making choices” (Munck 2002, 166).

Economic Voting Theories
It should be noted from the outset that, “in its ideal form, the theory of economic voting is a special case of the rational choice perspective on electoral behavior” (Dorussen and Palmer 2002, 2). Economic voting theories suggest that voter behavior is inextricably linked to material living conditions. That is, the economy is the major determinant of voting decisions. Economic voting refers to “any change in a voter’s support for parties that is caused by a change in economic perceptions” (Duch and Stevenson 2008, 41). The egotropic genre
of the theory holds that when voters feel dissatisfied with their personal economic conditions, they blame and vote against the incumbent (Kramer 1971). In contrast, the sociotropic version of the theory suggests that voting decisions are a function of perceptions concerning national macroeconomic indicators such as inflation and gross domestic product. Voting is thus a routine ritual where incumbents are punished or rewarded depending on the state of the national economy (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).

The problem is that voters lack pertinent information and the ability to grasp macroeconomic indicators and hence their evaluations merely reflect perceptions rather than the true state of the economy. As a result, “they may punish or reward ‘wrong’ politicians” (Dorussen and Palmer 2002, 2). Moreover, economic voting theories reduce elections to single-issue races, where the economy is always the MIP and the failure of the incumbent to fix the economy incontrovertibly implies that the challenger is best suited to handle it. In a sense, economic voting theories are narrower and more restricted versions of my policy salience thesis. When the economy is doing poorly, voters are cast in a negative role of “throwing rascals out” when in actual fact they still play the positive role of identifying the party that can best handle the economy, which is their MIP.

Institutional Voting Theories

Institutional voting theories focus either on how electoral institutions affect the composition of the electorate or on the impact of the electoral institutions on the aggregation of voter preferences. According to Shepsle (1997), electoral institutions determine how votes are translated into seats, so that different electoral systems translate votes into seats differently. As a result, similar electoral results can confer victory to different parties depending on whether proportional representation or a plurality system is used. Consequently, changes in electoral rules affect election outcomes. Moreover, different institutional arrangements direct voters to make different voting decisions, thus producing different election outcomes. That is, “if voters are concerned with policy, institutional mechanisms converting their votes to policy will find their way into voter decision rules and consequently into voter choices” (Kedar 2009, 24).

Generally, an institution has been defined as “a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances” (March and Olsen 2006, 3). Their prime role is to create regularity in human behavior and guarantee order and predictability. Hence, institutions by design are inimical to change, until some perturbations toss them off equilibrium (Peters 2005). Even then, they change slowly partly due to the high cost involved, elite consensus, lack of innovative options, closure of bargaining venues, or a sheer fear of losing power. For instance,
changing electoral laws is exigent since politicians advantaged by existing laws fear the uncertainty that changes portend. Elkins and Sides (2007) found that, on average, states change constitutions after 16 years. Given the slow pace of institutional change, it is less likely to account for election outcomes which change almost every election time.

**Measuring Policy Salience**

Voters do not always have ready-made opinions on various policy issues, but construct them only when the need arises (Zaller 1992). In the circumstances, voters reflect on major policy issues and mentally arrange them into a hierarchy. Voters circumspectly inspect and retrospect the political scene, interrogating the ideals and credentials of the various political parties, in search of who is competent enough to drive policy change in their preferred direction. In other words, “it is just as important for voters to know about the salience political actors attach to policy as it is to know the actors’ policy position” (Brunner 2013, 67). Policy salience is the convergence of voters’ policy preference and the party performance weight measured in terms of its past performance, factoring incidental constraints that may blight its capacity to execute policies. It is thus measured from the voter’s perspective in terms of how their key policy issue ranks in the agenda of various political parties as well as their perceptions about which party is committed to solving their policy issues. Therefore, the present study defines policy salience as “the degree of public interest and attention devoted to a particular policy issue” (Eisner, Worsham, and Ringquist 2000, 29) or “the eminence accorded to a policy issue by both the general public and the political leaders” (Aingo 2008, 59).

The present study measures policy salience in terms of the American National Election Studies (ANES) poll question concerning what respondents think is the “MIP,” and the subsequent question concerning which political party they think can best handle the problem. This is consistent with the strategies used to measure the concept by Aingo (2008) and Knecht (2010). In this regard, a party’s policy salience is measured by the proportion of respondents who feel that the party in question can best tackle the MIP. Policy salience is therefore divided into Democrats’ policy salience and Republicans’ policy salience, corresponding to the proportion of the respondents who feel that either of the two political parties can best address the MIP.

Several assumptions underlie this study. First, every individual who feels that a particular party is more likely to address the MIP is equally likely to vote for that party. The cumulative effect of this is that the party with the more favorable aggregate rating in terms of ability to address the MIP is also likely to receive more aggregate votes. Since election victory is a function of aggregate votes, it is possible to use the aggregate MIP rating of parties to predict victory. Second, American political parties stand for certain ideals and policies, and voting for one party as opposed to the other in most cases reflects a tacit support
for the policies espoused by that party. Finally, voters often regard different policy issues as the MIP, and therefore, what matters is not which specific issue is regarded as the MIP, but which party voters believe can address the issue regarded as the MIP.

Results and Discussion

Policy Salience and Presidential Election Outcomes

Table 1 shows the policy salience and election outcomes between 1972 and 2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrats Score (%)</th>
<th>Republican Score (%)</th>
<th>Policy Salience</th>
<th>Presidential Election Outcomes</th>
<th>Democrats</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Republicans</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>George McGovern</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>James Carter</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>Gerald Ford</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>James Carter</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>Fredrick Mondale</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>Michael Dukakis</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>Bob Dole</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>Al Gore</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Preliminary analysis of the data presented in Table 1 reveals that policy salience levels are generally low, ranging from 10 to 40 percent. The low salience levels are further exacerbated by a high standard deviation of 8.7 percent. Not only is the mean salience level for Democrats (25.5 percent) slightly
higher than that for Republicans (23.0 percent) but the latter is also more sparsely distributed with a standard deviation of 9.2 percent against the former’s 8.6 percent. It is equally evident that the Republicans tend to get relatively higher presidential votes than the Democrats. Compared to Democrats, whenever the Republicans win, they tend to do so with a relatively higher margin and they also tend to lose by a smaller margin. Thus the mean presidential vote for Republicans is 49.7 percent, while that for Democrats is 44.4 percent. However, the Republican presidential votes tend to oscillate more from one election to another (high standard deviation of 8.1 percent), while Democrats witness fewer fluctuations as evidenced by a relatively low standard deviation of 4.6 percent. In addition, there is a moderate direct correlation between policy salience and election outcomes ($\rho = .42$; $r = .35$), suggesting that, regardless of party, higher salience yields higher election outcomes.

The reason why policy salience scores are lower than presidential votes is because most American voters tend to distribute votes between the two major parties—the Democrats and the Republicans. Therefore, the presidential vote tally for the two parties is almost always very close to 100 percent. This is expected, given that “voters prefer parties which are large enough to have a good chance of putting their policies into effect” (van der Brug, van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007, 119). In contrast, the low policy salience scores reflect the reluctance of many Americans to endorse any party as capable of addressing the MIP. Consequently, the joint policy salience for the two key parties is always far from 100 percent, with the highest combined salience of 55 percent in 1984. Figure 1 shows an x-y plot of the correlations between salience and election outcomes for the Republicans and the Democrats.

An eye-ball view of the regression lines in the twin scatterplots depicted in Figure 1 reveals that policy salience is much more strongly correlated with election outcomes for Republicans ($r = .529$) than Democrats ($r = .322$). That is, policy salience accounts for 28.0 percent of variance in the Republican

![Figure 1. X-Y Plot for Parties, Salience, and Election Outcome](image-url)
presidential votes, compared to 10.4 percent of the Democratic votes. In essence, higher policy salience levels tend to attract more popular votes for Republicans than for Democrats. That is, at least for the elections reviewed, those who feel that Republicans can best address the MIP were more likely to vote for them than those with similar feelings for Democrats. This may account for the propensity of the Republican candidates to win by higher margins and lose by smaller margins compared to the Democrats. While the former at times win by margins as large as 23.2 percent for Richard Nixon in 1972 and 18.2 percent for Ronald Reagan in 1984, the biggest margin of victory for a Democratic candidate was a paltry 8.5 percent by Bill Clinton in 1996.

To move the analysis further, this study uses the Kruskal-Wallis H test to determine the correlation between policy salience and election outcomes in the U.S. presidential elections held from 1972 to 2000. Since the Kruskal-Wallis test uses ranked data, it is imperative to create a more uniform basis for correlating election outcomes with policy salience. As it is, the election outcome scores are generally higher than policy salience scores. Moreover, Figure 1 shows that election outcome scores tend to be higher for Republicans than Democrats. Therefore, assigning ranks to the four sets of raw data would affect the respective sum of ranks thereby resulting in an unbalanced distribution of ranks. It is clear, for instance, that if the raw data are used, then the first four ranks would all be allocated only to the Republican presidential votes. To circumvent this and balance the distribution of ranks, the salience scores for each party in a given year have been expressed as a percentage of the combined Democratic and Republican salience scores for that year. For example, the Democratic and Republican salience scores in 1972 were 24 and 25 percent, respectively, and hence the total policy salience is 49 percent. This translates into policy salience scores of 49.0 percent ($24/49 \times 100$) and 51.0 percent ($25/49 \times 100$) for Democrats and Republicans, respectively. This principle was applied to presidential votes, and the new scores rank-ordered as shown in Table 2.

The N1 to N4 in the bottom row of the table refers to the number of cases in each of the four sets of data, while R1 to R4 refer to the square of the sum of the ranks for each set of data. Since the 1996 Democratic presidential votes and the party’s 1992 policy salience levels were the same, the two scores are assigned a similar rank (11.5), which is the mean of the ranks they would have been assigned (eleven and twelve) if they were sequential. The Kruskal-Wallis test measures the extent to which the four sets of ranks are uniform, and assumes that the study populations are identical. It uses the right-tailed rejection region or p-value based on a chi-squared distribution with $(k - 1)df$. The chi-squared value of $H = \frac{12}{N(N+1)} \left( \frac{R_1}{N_1} + \frac{R_2}{N_2} + \frac{R_3}{N_3} + \frac{R_4}{N_4} \right) - 3(N+1)$, where: $N = N_1 + N_2 + N_3 + N_4$; and $k = 4$. Hence, the observed chi-squared value of $H = 2.579$, and $df = 3$.

The null hypothesis is that the four sets of rankings are the same, while the alternative hypothesis is that the ranks are different. For a right-tailed chi-squared test where $\alpha = .05$ and $df = 3$, the Null hypothesis would only be
rejected if the critical \( \chi^2 \) value for \( H \geq 7.81 \). Usually, the value of \( H \) gets larger as the difference between the means of the ranks assigned in each set of rankings increases. A greater \( H \) value indicates discord in the ranks. In this case, the observed value of \( H \) is 2.58, which is less than the expected value (7.81), and hence falls in the nonrejection region. It is notable that the Kruskal-Wallis test has also been implemented in the R Project for Statistical Computing, where the \texttt{kruskal.test} function yields the same results and a \( p \)-value of .462. In essence, the null hypothesis does not reach the rejection threshold and is thus retained. There is no significant difference between the way people endorse parties as capable of handling the MIP and the way they cast votes in presidential elections. Party endorsement patterns are evidently replicated in elections so that the party with the higher salience score tends to receive more popular presidential votes and win presidential elections. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that, with the exception of 1988, whenever a higher percentage of respondents felt that either Democrats or Republicans could best handle the MIP, their presidential candidate won that year’s popular vote. Fundamentally, voter’s perceptions of the MIP and whether some party can address it determines not only whether they would vote but also which party they would vote for.

In identifying the MIP, voters are usually aware of the fact that it is not the only policy issue, although it ranks highest in their mentally constructed hierarchy of issues. While the voters may compromise on other issues, they are least primed to support a party or candidate who is unlikely to address what they consider to be the MIP. In other words, they are rational. This rationality, however, only yields desired results if there is a convergence between what they consider as the greatest policy issue and what politicians indicate they intend to address once elected. It is not just what politicians promise to do that necessarily influences voting decisions, but also voters’ perceptions about which

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**Table 2. Standardized Scores and Ranks for Policy Salience and Election Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrats Score (%)</th>
<th>Democrats Rank</th>
<th>Republicans Score (%)</th>
<th>Republicans Rank</th>
<th>Democrats Votes (%)</th>
<th>Democrats Rank</th>
<th>Republicans Votes (%)</th>
<th>Republicans Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>73.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>53.9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>45.3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N3 = 8 \( R3 = \) N4 = 8 \( R4 = \) N1 = 8 \( R1 = \) N2 = 8 \( R2 = \)

24,492.25 11,556.25 13,110.25 22,350.25
politicians have what it takes to address the MIP. Thus, rationality is required less in identifying the MIP, and more in matching the selected MIP with those who can fix it, and this may involve comparative cost-benefit analysis of voting for one party and not the other.

Close analysis of the 1988 elections reveals that it was not different from others. In 1988, Michael Dukakis and George H. W. Bush were the Democratic and the Republican presidential candidates, respectively. The policy salience level for the Democrats in that year was higher than that for Republicans. Yet contrary to theoretical expectations that Dukakis would win the popular vote, he actually lost. Several studies have shed light on these apparently inconsistent results. For instance, the study by Sullivan, Fried, and Dietz (1992) suggests that this apparent incongruity is linked to conscientious efforts by Bush to raise the salience of patriotism and use it against Dukakis. Bush raised several issues calculated to discredit Dukakis’ patriotism. First, he depicted Dukakis as unpatriotic since he was a card-carrying member of American Civil Liberties Union. Second, he accused Dukakis of vetoing a bill compelling public school teachers to lead students in the pledge of allegiance. Third, Bush overly accentuated the involvement of Dukakis’ wife in flag burning during the Vietnam War, while trumpeting his patriotism credentials to the extent of reciting the pledge of allegiance in campaigns, and staging a strategic and well publicized visit to a flag factory. Furthermore, “the electoral salience of this issue was heightened because editorial writers, television commentators, political pundits, and writers of campaign literature all devoted considerable attention to Bush’s use of the pledge issue and to Dukakis’ delay and ineffective rebuttals” (Sullivan, Fried, and Dietz 1992, 201). Thus, “Bush managed to pick [policy] issues which struck a chord with the majority of voters” (Thomson and Faletta 1999, 162).

Clearly, it was still policy salience that defined the 1988 election outcomes and conferred victory to Bush. It is notable that “in order to make an issue decisive in the elections, parties try to make it ‘salient’ in voters’ decisions by giving it political salience. Parties confer political salience by campaigning on the issue” (Colomer and Llavador 2009, 148). Thus, by raising the salience of patriotism, Bush redefined the MIP in his own terms, and tactfully rallied opinion around patriotism as the MIP. As a result, he shifted the voters’ focus toward which candidate could be trusted to champion one of America’s most treasured values—patriotism. In the dialect of the issue ownership theory, Bush “owned” patriotism and crafted it into a critical electoral issue. The salience of patriotism in this election suggests that, contrary to the economic voting theories, if voters feel that a different issue, rather than the economy, is the MIP, they may disregard the economy and vote on the basis of who can best address that particular issue.

Policy Salience and Incumbent Performance

To underscore the influence of policy salience on election outcomes, it is equally imperative to focus on the performance of incumbents seeking
reelection. Between 1892 and 1992, 19 incumbent presidents were reelected, while ten lost (Shantz 1996). The apparently impressive performance of incumbents has led some to argue that “incumbents are winning because challengers are poor campaigners... good challengers appear too infrequently for too many important offices” (Brewer and Maisel 2012, 221). Others attribute regular reelection of incumbents to the fact that “the advantages of incumbency are many: presidents have the aura and experience of office; they command media coverage; they are able to influence events; and they are able to dispense government grants” (Shantz 1996, 41). Evidently, none of these arguments recognize the link between policy salience and election outcomes. To explore this link, this study introduces two concepts—policy salience gap and policy salience change. The former refers to the difference between salience levels for Republicans and Democrats, while the latter refers to changes in each party’s salience levels from one election to the other. Figure 2 shows the policy salience levels as well as the policy salience gap and policy salience change for the Republicans and Democrats.

The three high policy salience peaks marked peak 1, peak 2, and peak 3 are in 1976, 1980, and 1992. It is no coincidence that these are the three elections where incumbent presidents lost. In the run up to 1976 elections, the incumbent Republicans had negative salience change; Democrats had a positive salience change; while the incumbent had lower salience than the challenger. It is notable that President Richard Nixon who was elected in 1972 was neither the incumbent nor was he seeking reelection because in 1974, he had been “forced out of office as a result of scandals, lies, cover-ups and ethical lapses that became public as a result of the Watergate break-in” (Seifert 2012, 37). He was succeeded by Gerald Ford, who became the incumbent, facing off with Jimmy Carter. True to this study’s hypothesis, the incumbent Republican president, Ford, lost to the challenging Democratic Party candidate, Ronald Reagan, in 1976.
In 1980, the incumbent Democrat, James Carter, lost to his Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan. Carter lost at a time when the Democratic Party experienced the greatest decline in policy salience (24 percent), while Republicans had their biggest increase in salience (28 percent). The resultant salience gap of 30 percent was the largest in the entire review period. Moreover, Republicans had their highest policy salience score of 40 percent, while Democrats had their lowest salience score of 10 percent. It should be noted that, “as the 1980 election approached, the fact that issues customarily ‘owned’ by the Republican party were being designated as the most important not only by Republicans but also by huge numbers of Democrats and Independents did not bode well for Carter” (Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009, 217). Hence, voters, regardless of partisanship, settled on a common MIP, agreed that Republicans owned it, and pooled votes for Republicans. This weakens the role of partisanship in voting decisions, yet partisanship is a key pillar of the sociopsychological voting model. It also diminishes the sociological voting model’s axiom that, “voting behavior reflects social group memberships shaped by socioeconomic and demographic forces” (Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto 2009, 18).

Relatively, in 1992, the Republican incumbent, George H. W. Bush lost to the Democratic challenger, Bill Clinton. At the time, the Republicans had their second lowest salience score of 13 percent, while the Democrats had their highest salience of 39 percent. Relatedly, the Republicans had negative salience change, while the Democrats in contrast had a positive salience change. Once again, low salience for the incumbent coincided with high salience for the challenger, leading to the second highest salience gap (marked peak 3) in Figure 2. Bush’s loss is quite interesting not just because he was the first sitting vice-president to electorally succeed a president since 1836, but also because he had led the United States to victory in the Gulf war just a year before his loss. Moreover, his challenger, Bill Clinton, had integrity issues including claims that “he had dodged the Vietnam draft, smoked marijuana and committed adultery” (Thomson and Faletta 1999, 165). Hence, Bush’s loss only accentuates the centrality of salience as a determinant of election outcomes.

The tentative conclusion in light of the defeat of incumbent Presidents Ford, Carter, and Bush is that if (1) the incumbent has negative salience change; (2) the challenger has positive salience change; (3) the incumbent has a lower policy salience than the challenger; and (4) there is a huge salience gap; then the incumbent is unlikely to be reelected.

To test the veracity of the conclusions reached so far, it is important to also focus on those cases where incumbent presidents have been reelected. Two reelected presidents in the period under review are the Republican Ronald Reagan in 1984 and the Democrat Bill Clinton in 1996. In fact, Reagan and Clinton were reelected with more votes than when they first won elections. Although, incumbent parties in both cases had negative salience change while their challengers had positive salience change, the incumbents had higher salience than the challengers. Moreover, the salience gaps in both cases were very small.
Therefore, as long as the incumbent has a higher salience level than the challenger, then an incumbent is likely to win regardless of the magnitude or direction of their party’s policy salience change. Incumbents can be reelected even if their salience declines, as long as the salience gap is small and their salience levels remain higher than those of the challenger. This is because salience scores for incumbent parties almost always decline in the election year while those of the challengers tend to increase.

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that indeed there is a very strong link between policy salience and election outcomes and the direction of this link is from policy to politics as suggested by the Schattschneider-Lowi thesis. While the Kruskal-Wallis H test has only established the correlation between policy salience and election outcomes rather than the causation, it is apparent that the time order causal sequence is from policy salience to election outcomes. This is due to the fact that the question concerning which political party is perceived to be more likely to address the MIP is usually asked before the corresponding presidential elections. Consequently, it is policy salience that influences election outcomes and not vice versa. A voter’s perception of which political party can address the MIP influences whom they vote for and hence determines the election outcome.

The study also shows that policy salience determines an incumbent’s reelection. For instance, the defeats of Ford, Carter, and Bush yield a tentative conclusion that an incumbent president is unlikely to be reelected if (1) the policy salience gap is big; (2) his party has a lower policy salience score than the challenger party; and (3) it has a negative salience change, while the challenger party has a positive salience change. The reelection of both Reagan and Clinton suggests that an incumbent president is likely to be reelected regardless of policy salience change, as long as (1) the policy salience gap is small, and (2) his party has a higher policy salience score than the challenger. Given that this study relied on a small sample of elections, it is important to test these patterns with larger datasets.

In the final analysis, this study is important because it fills some gaps in the theoretical discourse on voter behavior. It shows that salience-driven voters are rational, self-interest-driven, utility maximizers, who make decisions on the basis of cost-benefit calculations in line with RCT. They are self-interest-driven because they conceptualize the MIP in their own terms. They are also rational to the extent that they are able to identify the MIP, match it with the party that is more likely to address it, and use this as a basis for making voting decisions. It is noteworthy that, “in the policy context, a rational voter should identify a policy issue that best corresponds to his self-interest and vote for the party or candidate who guarantees actualization of the relevant policy [while] an
irrational voter may support a specific policy but consciously support a party or candidate unlikely to implement the desired policy” (Aingo 2008, 55).

Moreover, the policy salience thesis advanced in this study provides a broader theoretical and conceptual perspective that integrates the causal mechanisms of several voting theories such as economic voting theory, issue-ownership, sociological, and sociopsychological theories. Syntax aside, all these theories implicitly or tacitly embrace the key axiom of the policy salience thesis that voters usually rely on rationality and self-interest to find answers to two pertinent and interrelated questions whose answers constitute their basis of voting: (1) what is the MIP; and (2) who is more likely to address it? According to economic voting theories, the answer to the first question is always fixed incontrovertibly and universally—the economy. If voters believe the economy is doing well, the incumbent becomes the answer to the second question. If it is doing badly, they will trust the opposition to be able to fix it, leading to regime change. However, by reducing elections to regular rituals decided purely on the basis of a single issue (the economy), economic voting theory offers a narrow and more restricted version of the policy salience thesis. Relatedly, issue-ownership theory posits that the MIP is the one that is expressed by the majority, and it is more likely to be addressed by the party that has built a reputation for addressing such issues over the years. In contrast, sociopsychological theory tacitly assumes that, regardless of which issue is perceived to be more important, voters tend to take refuge in their partisan ties and believe that the party they are attached to is always the best in addressing all problems. In a nutshell, the policy salience thesis provides important clue in terms of the direction that the quest for a unified theory of voting should follow.

About the Author


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