The Role of Attitude Importance in Social Evaluation: A Study of Policy Preferences, Presidential Candidate Evaluations, and Voting Behavior

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According to a number of social psychological theories, attitudes toward government policies that people consider important should have substantial impact on presidential candidate preferences, and unimportant attitudes should have relatively little impact. Surprisingly, the accumulated evidence evaluating this hypothesis offers little support for it. This article reexamines the hypothesis, applying more appropriate analysis methods to data collected during the 1968, 1980, and 1984 American presidential election campaigns. The impact of policy attitudes on candidate preferences was indeed found to depend on the importance of those attitudes, just as theory suggests. The analysis also documented two mechanisms of this increased impact: People for whom a policy attitude is important perceive larger differences between competing candidates' attitudes, and important attitudes appear to be more accessible in memory than unimportant ones.

According to political theorists, democratic governments maintain stability and legitimacy because citizens elect representatives who implement government policies that they favor (e.g., Dahl, 1956; Pennock, 1979). This is presumed to occur because voters' candidate preferences are determined in part by the match between their attitudes toward government policies (called *policy attitudes*) and their perceptions of candidates' attitudes toward those policies. This notion, referred to as *policy voting*, is consistent with the many social psychological theories that assert that social attraction is based in part on attitudinal similarity (Byrne, 1971; Festinger, 1954; Heider, 1958). It is also consistent with the results of many studies of voting behavior in recent American presidential elections. In addition to affiliations with political parties, assessments of candidates' personality traits, the emotions candidates evoke in voters, and evaluations of incumbent presidents' performance in office, candidate preferences are shaped by voters' policy attitudes and their perceptions of candidates' policy attitudes (see Kinder & Sears, 1985).

Social psychological theories of social evaluation (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Newcomb, 1956, 1961; Singer, 1968) and political

scientists' theories of voting (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Enelow & Hinich, 1984; Rosenstone, 1983) suggest a significant caveat to this proposition: The impact of a policy attitude on a citizen's candidate preference should depend on the importance of the policy attitude to the voter. Important attitudes are thought to have powerful impact, whereas unimportant attitudes are thought to have little impact. Surprisingly, the accumulated evidence evaluating this proposition in the context of recent U.S. presidential elections offers little support for it.

This article reevaluates the hypothesis that policy attitude importance regulates policy voting. It begins by offering a definition of attitude importance, a theoretical justification for the hypothesis that attitude importance regulates policy voting, and a review and critique of previous studies of this hypothesis. National survey data are then used to evaluate the relation of attitude importance to (a) the impact of policy attitudes on attitudes toward candidates, (b) the impact of policy attitudes on voting behavior, (c) voters' perceptions of candidates' attitudes toward policies, and (d) the accessibility of policy attitudes.

Attitude Importance and Social Evaluations

Definition

Since the early days of attitude research, scholars have distinguished between attitudes in terms of their importance (Festinger, 1954, 1957; Newcomb, 1956, 1961), centrality (Converse, 1970; Katz, 1960), ego-involvement (Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; M. Sherif & Cantril, 1947), and salience (Lemon, 1973; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). These properties are highly related conceptually, have often been used interchangeably (e.g., Scott, 1968, pp. 206–207; C. W. Sherif, 1980, pp. 2–4), and are usually defined in one of two ways. Some definitions propose that important, central, ego-involved, and salient attitudes are those that individuals are especially interested in and concerned about (e.g., Converse, 1970; Freedman, 1964; Smith et al., 1956). Other definitions assert that important, central,

ego-involved, and salient attitudes are those that are closely linked to individuals' basic values, needs, and goals (e.g., Converse, 1970; Katz, 1960; Lewin, 1951; Newcomb, Turner, & Converse, 1965; M. Sherif & Cantril, 1947). It seems most appropriate to define attitude importance as a person's interest in or concern about an attitude, and to view linkage between an attitude and values, needs, and goals as one possible cause of importance.

Why Might Important Attitudes Have More Impact on Candidate Evaluations?

For a citizen to choose between competing presidential candidates on the basis of a policy attitude, two conditions must be fulfilled. First, the attitude must be cognitively accessible when candidates are evaluated. Higgins and King (1981) suggested that the chronic accessibility of an attitude is determined by three factors: the frequency of activation, its distinctiveness, and the extent of links between it and other psychological elements. Because important attitudes are frequently subjects of conscious thought (Wood, 1982), are typically extreme (Brent & Granberg, 1982), and are probably extensively linked to other psychological elements (Judd & Krosnick, in press; Newcomb et al., 1965), these attitudes are likely to be highly accessible. Important attitudes are therefore likely to be more powerful guides of candidate preferences and voting than are unimportant ones.

No matter how accessible a policy attitude is, however, a citizen cannot use it to choose between competing candidates unless the citizen is aware of their stands on the issue and perceives them to differ from one another. Voters with important policy attitudes might therefore be expected to attend closely to candidates' public statements of their attitudes toward the policy so as to detect differences between them. If public statements do not reveal between-candidate differences, voters for whom a policy attitude is important may be especially likely to infer differences using cues such as party platforms, affiliations with individuals or groups known to have particular policy attitudes (e.g., endorsements by labor unions), and ideological labels with which candidates are described in the news media (e.g., Conover, 1981; Feldman & Conover, 1983). Thus, even when two candidates appear to take very similar stands toward a policy, voters whose attitudes toward it are important seem likely to infer between-candidate differences. As a result, they may find it especially easy to choose between the candidates on that basis.

According to social judgment theory (M. Sherif & Hovland, 1953, 1961; Sherif & Sherif, 1967; C. W. Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965), people assimilate communicators' attitudes that fall within their latitudes of acceptance toward their own attitudes, and contrast communicators' attitudes within their latitudes of rejection away from their own. Important attitudes are thought to be especially powerful perceptual anchors that cause individuals to see others as falling primarily into one of two groups: those with whom they agree (at one extreme of the attitude continuum) and those with whom they disagree sharply (at the opposite extreme of the continuum) (e.g., Crano, 1983; Judd & Johnson, 1981). Therefore, among voters whose attitudes toward a policy are important and who detect or infer that one candidate favors a policy and the other candidate opposes

it, assimilation and contrast processes are likely to enhance the apparent magnitude of the difference between the candidates' attitudes. This would further facilitate choosing between these candidates.

Previous Studies of Attitude Importance, Candidate Evaluation, Candidate Perception, and Attitude Accessibility

Despite this strong theoretical rationale for the expectations that more important policy attitudes (a) shape candidate preferences more powerfully, (b) facilitate perception of between-candidate differences, and (c) are more accessible in memory, previous research offers little support for them.

Studies of Candidate Evaluation

Using data from recent American presidential elections, a number of studies have tested the proposition that policy attitude importance regulates policy voting. Some of these studies concluded that important policy attitudes are no more powerfully associated with candidate preferences than unimportant policy attitudes (e.g., Aldrich, Niemi, Rabinowitz, & Rohde, 1979; Beardsley, 1973; Hinckley, Hofstetter, & Kessel, 1974; Jackson, 1979; Niemi & Bartels, 1985), although others found important attitudes to evidence slightly stronger associations (Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977; Granberg & Holmberg, 1986; Rabinowitz, Prothro, & Jacoby, 1982; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Shapiro, 1969). However, these conclusions may have resulted from problems with the statistical analysis methods used.

Omission of main effects in regressions. The hypothesis is most appropriately tested by examining the interaction between a policy attitude and its importance in the following regression equation,

$$CP = \alpha_1 V + \alpha_2 I + \alpha_3(V)(I), \tag{1}$$

where CP is candidate preference, V is the voter's policy attitude, and I is the importance of the policy attitude. Cohen (1978) has shown that the main effects for V and I must be included in the equation in order to accurately estimate α_3.

All five of the studies that found no effect of importance performed such regressions and reported that R^2 was larger when only policy attitudes were used to predict candidate preference than when attitudes were multiplicatively weighted by attitude importance. However, it appears that the main effects for policy attitudes and importance were not included in the regression equation along with the interaction term in these studies. Omitting the main effects confounds them with the interaction, so these tests of the importance hypothesis are inaccurate and may well have underestimated the magnitude of the interaction.

Use of proximity scores. The studies that found important policy attitudes to have more impact on candidate preferences than unimportant policy attitudes either performed regressions (Rabinowitz et al., 1982) or analyzed contingency tables (Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977; Niemi & Bartels, 1985; Schuman & Presser, 1981; Shapiro, 1969) in ways that did not confound the interaction with the main effects. The importance interactions estimated in these studies were generally small, but this may have resulted from another aspect of the statistical procedure

used. Most of these studies predicted candidate preferences using *proximity scores,* which indicate how much closer each voter's stand is to the candidates'. Proximity scores are defined as

$$P = |(V - C_1)| - |(V - C_2)|, \qquad (2)$$

where P is the proximity score, V is the voter's attitude, C_1 is the voter's perception of one candidate's attitude, and C_2 is the voter's perception of the other candidate's attitude. These analyses assessed whether proximity scores were associated more strongly with candidate preferences among voters for whom the policy attitude was important than among voters for whom it was not.

Unfortunately, the association between candidate evaluations and proximity scores does not only reflect the effect of policy attitudes on candidate evaluations (Brody & Page, 1972; Page & Brody, 1972; RePass, 1976). It also reflects persuasion and projection. Persuasion refers to the processes whereby people adopt a policy attitude espoused by a liked candidate or a policy attitude different from that of a disliked candidate. Projection refers to the processes whereby people infer that candidates they like hold policy attitudes similar to their own and that candidates they dislike hold policy attitudes different from their own. Persuasion and projection both occur after a candidate preference is formed, and both enhance the size of the association between proximity scores and candidate evaluations. Because previous studies using proximity scores compared this association across levels of importance, their results may be misleading if persuasion or projection vary according to importance.

They are indeed likely to do so. Persuasion probably occurs primarily among individuals for whom a policy attitude is unimportant, because these attitudes are more susceptible to change (e.g., Howard-Pitney, Borgida, & Omoto, 1986; Krosnick, 1988). Projection may also occur more often among these people because they are unlikely to have paid close attention to information revealing candidates' stands and may therefore have to infer candidates' stands using their own. Thus, persuasion and projection might have enhanced the statistical association between proximity scores and candidate evaluations more among these individuals than among those whose policy attitudes are important. This would mask the expected positive association between importance and policy voting in the tests of the importance hypothesis that used proximity scores.

Omission of candidate attitudes. Finally, some tests of the importance hypothesis avoided proximity scores by simply correlating policy attitudes with candidate preferences (Granberg & Holmberg, 1986; Rabinowitz et al., 1982; Schuman & Presser, 1981, p. 267). These studies also documented weak importance effects, but because this analysis method ignores candidates' attitudes, it also probably underestimates policy attitude impact. According to spatial modeling theories of voting (e.g., Enelow & Hinich, 1984), two voters whose attitudes on an issue are more liberal than the more liberal of two candidates ought both to prefer the liberal candidate equally strongly, even if the two voters' attitudes are not identical. Therefore, the relation between policy attitudes and candidate preferences is a complex function determined in part by the relative positions of the candidates' attitudes. A correlation between voters' policy attitudes and candidate preferences simply assesses the degree of linear association between these two variables. However,

the expected relation between the two is nonlinear when, as is typically the case (Page, 1978), neither candidate's attitude is at an extreme of the continuum. In sum, then, these and all the other previous studies of the importance hypothesis used methods that may have led to underestimation of the effect of policy attitude importance on policy voting.

Studies of Candidate Perception

Previous studies of voters' perceptions of candidates' stands on policy issues have not directly tested the hypothesis that people with important policy attitudes perceive large between-candidate differences more frequently. Rather, they tested the projection hypothesis by examining associations between voters' attitudes toward a policy and their perceptions of candidates' attitudes toward it (e.g., Granberg & Brent, 1974; Granberg & Seidel, 1976; Kinder, 1978; King, 1977-1978). Strong positive associations among people who like a candidate have been interpreted as evidence of assimilation, and somewhat weaker negative associations among people who dislike the candidate have been interpreted as evidence of contrast. Because the positive association between voters' attitudes and their perceptions of liked candidates' attitudes is typically larger among people who consider a policy attitude to be personally important, assimilation has been assumed to be stronger among these people (Brent & Granberg, 1982; Granberg & Brent, 1974; Granberg & Seidel, 1976). This might be viewed as evidence that these individuals perceive larger differences between competing candidates' attitudes toward the policy in question.

Recently, however, researchers have recognized that the association between voters' attitudes and their perceptions of a liked candidate's attitude is affected by many processes other than projection (Conover & Feldman, 1982; Granberg & Holmberg, 1986; Judd, Kenny, & Krosnick, 1983; Shaffer, 1981). Because this association is increased by policy voting; candidate-induced persuasion; perspective effects in the use of attitude scales, which cause correlated measurement error (Ostrom & Upshaw, 1968; Upshaw, 1976); and increases in the variance of either voters' attitudes or voters' candidate perceptions, the association could be larger among people who consider the attitude important as a result of any of these other processes. Consequently, there is no clear evidence that attitude importance leads to perceptions of larger differences between competing candidates' attitudes toward a policy.

Studies of Attitude Accessibility

The accessibility of psychological constructs has been the focus of a great deal of recent research. As measured by the latency of attitude reports, accessibility is greater for extreme attitudes (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), and for attitudes that are frequently expressed (Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982, Experiment 3). Because important attitudes tend to be extreme (Brent & Granberg, 1982) and expressed frequently (Yankelovich, Skelly, & White, 1981), this evidence suggests that important attitudes may be more accessible than unimportant ones. However, this hypothesis has not been tested directly.

The Present Study

The research reported in the following sections reevaluates the claim that more important policy attitudes have more impact on candidate evaluations and voting behavior. A new analysis method that combines the advantages of the proximity score and correlational methods while avoiding their disadvantages was used to analyze data from national surveys conducted before and after recent U.S. presidential elections. The first analyses explore whether more important policy attitudes are better predictors of candidate evaluations and voting behavior. Subsequent analyses evaluate a series of possible explanations for these results other than policy voting and examine whether people with more important policy attitudes perceive larger differences between competing candidates' attitudes toward the policy and whether more important policy attitudes are more accessible in memory.

Method

Respondents

The data analyzed in this study are from the 1968, 1980, and 1984 American National Election Studies (NES), the only presidential-election-year surveys in the NES series that asked respondents about the personal importance they attached to policy attitudes. For the 1968 NES, 1,673 Americans were interviewed in September, October, and early November 1968; 1,481 of these people were reinterviewed after the presidential election, between November 1968 and February 1969. The preelection sample included a representative national cross-section of 1,557 adults and a supplement of 116 Black respondents.

For the 1980 study, two independent samples were surveyed. One representative national cross-section of 818 people was interviewed in April 1980. A second cross-section of 2,172 people was interviewed in September 1980. Both of these samples were reinterviewed in November 1980. Data from the two samples were combined for analysis.

For the 1984 NES, a representative national cross-section of 1,990 adults was interviewed first in September, October, and early November 1984, and again in late November and December 1984 and early January 1985.

Measures

Policy Attitudes

During the 1968 NES postelection interview, respondents reported their attitudes regarding how the government ought to deal with urban rioting and U.S. policy in Vietnam. Included in the 1980 NES preelection interviews were policy attitude measures addressing provision of social welfare programs by the federal government, the trade-off between combating inflation and combating unemployment, the defense budget, strategy for relations with the Soviet Union, guaranteed full employment, government aid to minorities, and abortion. The policy attitude questions in the 1984 NES preelection interview addressed social services, guaranteed full employment, U.S. policy in Central America, and government aid to women.

All policy attitude reports were made on 7-point scales. After respondents reported their attitudes on the policy issues, they reported the personal importance of those attitudes and perceptions of the major party candidates' attitudes on those issues. The attitude importance measures were phrased as follows:

1968. How important was this problem of ___ to you in deciding how you would vote in the election for president—the most impor-

tant single thing, very important, somewhat important, or not very important?

1980. Here is a scale from 0 to 100 [Interviewer hands respondent blue card with 101-point scale printed on it]. One hundred on this scale means the greatest possible importance, while 0 means not at all important. The other numbers on the scale from 0 to 100 represent higher and higher amounts of importance. Now for the issue we just talked about, I see that your position on this issue (matches/ comes close to/does not match) what you feel the federal government is doing at the present time. You placed yourself at point ___ and what the federal government is doing at point ___. Using the blue card, tell me: How important is it to you that the government (continue what it is doing/change what it is doing) so that it (stays close/comes closer) to your own position on this issue?

1984. How important is it to you that the federal government do what you think is best on this issue of ___? Is it extremely important, very important, somewhat important, or not important at all to you?

Candidate Evaluations

During the 1980 preelection interview and the 1968 and 1984 postelection interviews, respondents reported their attitudes toward the major party presidential candidates on 101-point scales (ranging from 0 to 100). During the postelection interviews of all three surveys, respondents reported for whom they had voted. Respondents were also asked to list any factors that might have made them want to vote for or against each of the candidates.

Other Variables

A number of additional variables measured in these surveys were used in the analyses reported in this article. Interviewers recorded respondents' race and gender. Respondents reported their age; years of formal education; total family income for the previous year; whether they considered their political views to be liberal or conservative; whether they considered themselves to be a Republican, a Democrat, or neither; how well they felt things were going for the country in terms of economics and national security; and how interested they were in the year's political campaigns.[1]

Analysis

The traditional proximity score approach to assessing policy voting is problematic partly because it confounds policy voting with projection. Projection produces systematic variation across individuals in terms of perceptions of candidates' attitudes, which may mask the increased impact of important attitudes on candidate preferences. This problem can be solved by replacing the candidate perception variables in Equation 1 with constants, the candidates' true attitudes. If such proximity scores are computed using constant candidate attitude values, the association between these proximity scores and candidate preferences is not influenced by projection. Therefore, comparisons of policy voting across levels of attitude importance are unbiased by differences in projection across these levels.

This approach to estimating policy voting is problematic if candidates do not consistently express the same attitudes toward policies, but instead attempt to maximize their appeal by praising a policy in front of one audience and criticizing it before another. However, Page's (1978,

pp. 108–151) elaborate analysis of campaign rhetoric demonstrates that this rarely occurs. Almost always a candidate takes a stand on an issue and espouses it consistently throughout the campaign. Furthermore, national media coverage of campaign events makes it difficult for candidates to make statements to select audiences. Therefore, variability in candidates' attitude expressions is unlikely to cause problems for this analysis method.

Comparisons of amounts of policy voting across levels of attitude importance using this method may be biased by differences in persuasion, but the resulting bias is most likely to be against confirmation of the hypothesis being tested. Because persuasion is most likely to occur among people for whom a policy attitude is less important, it would probably enhance the policy attitude–candidate preference association among these people and would reduce the apparent difference between these people and those for whom the attitude is more important.[2]

Because candidates' true attitudes are difficult to measure, researchers have often used a national sample's average perception of a candidate's attitude as an approximation of his or her true attitude (e.g., Markus, 1982; Markus & Converse, 1979; Page, 1978). This method was used in the analyses reported in the next section.[3]

Results

Bivariate Analyses

Initially, two dependent variables, an attitude differential and vote choice, were regressed on modified proximity scores. The attitude differential was computed by subtracting the respondent's rating of the Republican candidate on the 101-point liking scale (recoded to range from 0 to 1) from his or her rating of the Democratic candidate on that scale (also recoded to range from 0 to 1). The attitude differential was regressed on each modified policy attitude proximity score (recoded to range from 0 to 1) separately for individuals at each of four levels of attitude importance. Table 1 displays unstandardized coefficients produced by ordinary least squares regressions.

Vote choice was a dichotomous variable representing vote for the Republican or Democratic candidate (coded 1 and 2, respectively). Logistic regressions were conducted predicting this variable using each modified proximity score; the left half of Table 2 displays the logit coefficients. The right half of Table 2 displays, for each logit coefficient, a value between 0 and 1 derived from the logit coefficient indicating the change in probability of voting for the Democratic candidate associated with moving from the conservative end of the policy attitude dimension to the liberal end. Larger probabilities indicate more impact of policy attitudes on vote choice.

In the 1968 data, the associations between policy attitudes and both dependent variables rise steadily as attitudes become more important to respondents. For urban unrest, the impact of the policy attitude on the attitude differential rises from 0.06 in the lowest importance group to 0.42 in the highest importance group, a sevenfold increase. The increase in the case of vote choice for urban unrest is from 0.43 to 3.21. For U.S. policy in Vietnam, the association increases by more than a factor of 3 in the case of the attitude differential, from 0.07 to 0.24; for vote choice, the increase is from 0.31 to 0.78.[4]

To test the statistical significance of the interactions between policy attitudes and importance, the following regression equation was estimated:

$$\text{AD or VC} = \alpha_1(\text{MP}) + \alpha_2(\text{I}) + \alpha_3(\text{MP})(\text{I}) + \epsilon, \qquad (3)$$

Table 1

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients Estimating the Association Between Modified Proximity Scores and Candidate Attitude Differential at Different Levels of Importance

| Issue | Importance | | | |
	1 (Low)	2	3	4 (High)
1968				
Urban unrest (N = 1,273)	.06	.18*	.32*	.42*
Vietnam (N = 1,248)	.07*	.10*	.13*	.24*
M	.07	.14	.23	.33
1980				
Unemployment (N = 1,743)	.00	.17*	.28*	.32*
Defense (N = 2,364)	.14*	.17*	.29*	.30*
Social welfare (N = 2,319)	.01	.21*	.35*	.39*
Russia (N = 2,226)	.01	.08*	.17*	.30*
Abortion (N = 2,422)	−.11	−.03	.01	.01
Job (N = 2,157)	.09	.08*	.35*	.36*
Minorities (N = 2,287)	.07	.22*	.32*	.46*
M	.03	.13	.25	.31
1984				
Social welfare (N = 1,614)	.30	.22*	.40*	.56*
Central America (N = 1,460)	.02	.14*	.28*	.48*
Women (N = 1,588)	.18*	.20*	.26*	.43*
Job (N = 1,631)	.14	.21*	.36*	.44*
M	.16	.19	.33	.48
M all years	.09	.15	.27	.37

Note. Importance categories: 1968—1 = *not very important*, 2 = *somewhat important*, 3 = *very important*, 4 = *most important*; 1980—1 = 0–59, 2 = 60–89, 3 = 90–99, 4 = 100; and 1984—1 = *not important*, 2 = *somewhat important*, 3 = *very important*, 4 = *extremely important*.
* p < .05.

where AD and VC represent the attitude differential and vote choice, respectively, MP is the modified proximity score, and I is the importance of the policy attitude. The values of α_3, which

[2] One drawback of modified proximity scores is that they contain measurement error resulting from perspective effects (Ostrom & Upshaw, 1968). Because the traditional proximity score approach subtracts respondents' placements of candidates on attitude scales from their self-placements, perspective effects do not produce between-respondent differences in proximity scores. It is difficult to be sure what effect perspective effects might have on the modified proximity score analysis reported here without knowledge of the relation between perspective effects and attitude importance.

[3] The sample average perceptions placed the candidates relatively close to one another on the 7-point policy attitude scales. The number of units differences between the competing candidates' attitudes on an issue ranged from 0.31 to 2.10 and averaged 1.27. As a result, the modified proximity scores could take on one of four possible values for four of the issues, one of three possible values for seven of the issues, and one of two possible values for two of the issues.

[4] Because the reliability of the importance measures is relatively low (Krosnick, 1986; see also Marsh, 1986; Schuman & Presser, 1981), the relation between importance and policy voting is probably substantially stronger than it appears to be here. Therefore, unreliability in these measures biases the reported analyses against finding the hypothesized effects of importance.

Table 2

Logit Coefficients and Corresponding Probability Differentials Estimating the Association Between Modified Proximity Scores and Vote Choice at Different Levels of Importance

	Logit coefficient				Probability differential			
Issue	1 (Low importance)	2	3	4 (High importance)	1 (Low importance)	2	3	4 (High importance)
1968								
Urban unrest (N = 911)	0.43*	0.96*	1.73*	3.21*	.10	.23	.41	.52
Vietnam (N = 892)	0.31	0.34	0.64*	0.78	.08	.09	.16	.19
M					.09	.16	.29	.36
1980								
Unemployment (N = 1,121)	0.07	0.92*	1.23*	1.78*	.02	.21	.40	.42
Defense (N = 1,542)	0.75	1.15*	1.52*	1.03*	.18	.27	.36	.26
Social welfare (N = 1,522)	0.08	1.27*	2.06*	2.84*	.02	.29	.46	.60
Russia (N = 1,513)	−0.18	0.68*	0.51*	1.17*	−.04	.16	.12	.28
Abortion (N = 1,508)	0.33	−0.69	−0.48	0.41	.07	−.17	−.12	.10
Job (N = 1,471)	0.32	1.42*	2.27*	2.16*	.08	.34	.51	.49
Minorities (N = 1,563)	0.56	1.07*	1.72	2.67*	.13	.25	.40	.57
M					.07	.19	.30	.39
1984								
Social welfare (N = 1,204)	0.48	1.36*	2.33*	3.31*	.11	.29	.51	.67
Central America (N = 1,090)	−0.43	1.13*	1.63*	1.92*	−.10	.24	.35	.44
Women (N = 1,188)	1.62*	1.12*	1.50*	2.12*	.37	.25	.35	.48
Job (N = 1,213)	2.91*	1.46*	1.86*	1.90*	.62	.35	.43	.44
M					.25	.28	.41	.51
M all years					.14	.21	.33	.42

Note. Importance categories: 1968—1 = *not very important*, 2 = *somewhat important*, 3 = *very important*, 4 = *most important;* 1980—1 = 0–59, 2 = 60–89, 3 = 90–99, 4 = 100; and 1984—1 = *not important*, 2 = *somewhat important*, 3 = *very important*, 4 = *extremely important.*
* $p < .05$.

estimate the effect of importance on the magnitude of policy attitude impact, are shown in the first columns of Tables 3 and 4. In the 1968 data, the interaction is significant for both dependent variables for urban unrest, although the effect for Vietnam is marginally significant in the case of the attitude differential, and nonsignificant in the case of vote choice.

The results for the 1980 data offer further support for the importance hypothesis. For all issues except abortion, the highest importance groups have substantially larger coefficients than the corresponding low importance groups, with monotonic increases in between. All of these attitudes are associated with statistically significant interaction terms in the regressions predicting the attitude differential and in vote choice, except for defense spending in the vote choice equation.[5] This issue shows the expected pattern, but a sizable relation between policy attitudes and vote choices appears in the lowest importance group. The coefficients for attitudes regarding abortion reveal a very different pattern; neither interaction is significant, and none of the coefficients in Table 1 or Table 2 is large or statistically significant.

The results for the 1984 data are consistent with those for the 1968 and 1980 data. All the regression coefficients for the attitude differential equation increase with rising importance, and all of these trends are statistically significant. For social welfare programs and Central America, the pattern of the logit coefficients is as expected, and the interactions are significant. For aid to women and guaranteed employment, the three highest importance groups show the expected pattern of logit coefficients, but the lowest importance groups show unexpectedly

strong associations. As a result, the linear interaction for aid to women is only marginally significant, and the interaction for guaranteed employment is nonsignificant.

Tables 1 and 2 also show the means of the regression coefficients and probability differentials for each year and for all years combined. The year means, which reveal the pattern shown earlier, were subjected to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in order to test a linear contrast representing the importance effect. It was large and statistically significant for both the attitude differential, $F(3, 8) = 33.87, p = .0004$, and vote choice, $F(3, 8) = 23.33, p = .0013$. Thus, combining across issues reveals highly reliable importance effects.

Understanding Past Failures to Find Importance Effects

These results offer consistent support for the hypothesis that important attitudes have more impact on candidate evaluations

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[5] Additional analysis of the 1980 data indicated that the relations of the 101-point importance scales to the regression and logit coefficients were not linear. Instead, they were gradually accelerating: A one-unit change in importance at the bottom of the importance scale produced a much smaller change in the measures of association than did a one-unit importance change at the high end of the importance scale. Therefore, Equation 3 was estimated with the importance terms squared for the 1980 data. Parameter estimates generated by this method matched the estimates in Table 1 nearly perfectly. Without the quadratic transformation, they did not; in fact, many regression coefficient estimates fell outside of the range from 0 to 1.

Table 3

Attitude × Importance Interaction Effect Estimates for Regressions Predicting Candidate Attitude Differential

	Model		
Issue	1[a]	2[b]	3[c]
1968			
Urban unrest (N = 1,273)	.39*	.25*	.20*
Vietnam (N = 1,248)	.14**	.06	−.04
1980			
Unemployment (N = 1,743)	.43*	.32*	.30*
Defense (N = 2,364)	.21*	.08	.10
Social welfare (N = 2,319)	.51*	.28*	.16*
Russia (N = 2,226)	.33*	.28*	.22*
Abortion (N = 2,422)	.13	.12**	.01
Job (N = 2,157)	.36*	.30*	.16**
Minorities (N = 2,287)	.46*	.40*	.28*
1984			
Social welfare (N = 1,614)	.48*	.28*	.12
Central America (N = 1,460)	.46*	.28*	.04
Women (N = 1,588)	.30*	.18**	.16*
Job (N = 1,631)	.38*	.32*	.10

[a] Baseline model.
[b] Baseline model plus demographics, political interest, education, and extremity.
[c] Baseline model plus demographics, political interest, education, extremity, party identification, liberal/conservative self-placement, and retrospective assessments.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .10$.

than unimportant ones. This finding is clearly at odds with the results of previous studies, which have found either weak effects of importance or no effects at all. It was argued earlier that these previous studies reached the conclusions they did because of the analytic methods used. To test this assertion, the 1968, 1980, and 1984 NES data were reanalyzed using the methods used in those studies. Equation 3 was reestimated, first by using traditional proximity scores and then by simply using the raw attitude scores as predictors.

The Attitude × Importance interactions in these analyses were substantially less than those illustrated in Tables 1 and 2. In the case of the attitude differential, the average interaction across the 13 issues is .35 when the modified proximity scores method is used. This is the average of the figures in Column 1 of Table 3. The comparable average when the traditional proximity score method is used is only .16, substantially smaller. Furthermore, whereas 12 of the 13 interactions in Column 1 of Table 3 are statistically significant, only 8 of them are significant when the traditional proximity score method is used. Similar findings are obtained when vote choice is the dependent variable. Similar findings are also obtained when raw attitude scores are used in place of modified proximity scores. This suggests that previous findings of little or no relation between policy attitude importance and policy voting are artifactual results of the statistical analysis methods used.

Alternative Explanations

The analyses reviewed thus far indicate that more important policy attitudes are more strongly associated with candidate

evaluations. The observed associations between important policy attitudes and candidate evaluations are unlikely to reflect the reverse causal effect, persuasion, because such attitudes are unlikely to change during presidential election campaigns (Krosnick, 1988). However, there are a number of other possible alternative explanations for these results, and tests of each are reported in the following sections.

Bias in Estimates of Candidates' True Attitudes

One possible alternative explanation focuses on the use of sample average candidate perceptions as estimates of candidates' true attitudes toward policies. Comparisons of policy voting across importance levels using this method may be biased if the sample's average perception of a candidate's stand is different from his or her true attitude. To examine how sensitive the earlier results are to the particular values chosen for candidates' true attitudes, the coefficients shown in Table 1 were reestimated using a variety of alternative values.

These values were derived from a content analysis of the candidates' major campaign speeches and debates (see Krosnick, 1986). These content analyses indicated on which side of each policy attitude scale midpoint each candidate fell. A distance of 0.6 scale units was chosen arbitrarily, and candidate true attitude scores were computed for each issue by placing each candidate 0.6 units from the scale midpoint on the appropriate side. Substitution of these alternative values for candidates' attitudes produced slight changes in the policy voting coefficients, but more important attitudes consistently appeared to have much more impact on candidate evaluations. When this process was

Table 4

Attitude × Importance Interaction Effect Estimates for Logits Predicting Vote Choice

	Model		
Issue	1[a]	2[b]	3[c]
1968			
Urban unrest (N = 911)	2.17*	1.69*	2.87*
Vietnam (N = 892)	0.56	0.01	1.00**
1980			
Unemployment (N = 1,211)	2.24*	1.34	1.50
Defense (N = 1,542)	0.17	0.73	0.46
Social welfare (N = 1,522)	3.39*	2.58*	1.84*
Russia (N = 1,522)	1.23*	0.81	0.55
Abortion (N = 1,508)	1.02	0.68*	0.54**
Job (N = 1,471)	2.41*	2.01*	1.66**
Minorities (N = 1,563)	2.37*	2.22*	0.80
1984			
Social welfare (N = 1,204)	2.75*	1.68*	1.01
Central America (N = 1,090)	1.46*	1.20	0.35
Women (N = 1,188)	1.03**	0.99	1.64**
Job (N = 1,213)	0.45	0.75	1.08

[a] Baseline model.
[b] Baseline model plus demographics, political interest, education, and extremity.
[c] Baseline model plus demographics, political interest, education, extremity, party identification, liberal/conservative self-placement, and retrospective assessments.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .10$.

repeated using a distance of 1.2 scale units, similar results were obtained. Finally, this process was repeated, using the averages of 50 blind raters' placements on the 7-point policy attitude scales of each candidate's statements of his positions on the issues examined in the 1980 study. Again, comparable results were obtained. This suggests that the results in Tables 1 and 2 are not highly dependent on the particular values used to estimate the candidates' true attitudes.

Reliability of the Modified Proximity Scores

Random measurement error in independent variables reduces the magnitude of unstandardized regression coefficients. Therefore, the differences shown in Tables 1 and 2 could have occurred simply because modified proximity scores are more reliable among individuals who consider an attitude important than among individuals who do not. To evaluate this possibility, data from the 1980 National Election Panel Study were examined, for which a representative national sample of 769 American adults was interviewed on three occasions during the presidential campaign (January–February, June, and September 1980). During each interview, respondents reported their attitudes on the unemployment/inflation trade-off, defense spending, social welfare programs, and relations with Russia, as well as the importance of those attitudes. Application of a three-wave, single-indicator structural equation model to these data permits estimation of the reliability of the modified proximity scores among groups of individuals differing in policy attitude importance (Wiley & Wiley, 1970).

This analysis showed that modified proximity scores for important attitudes were somewhat more reliable (average reliability = .58) than those for unimportant attitudes (average reliability = .39). To determine whether the results in Table 1 can be attributed to this difference in reliability, the regression coefficients shown were disattenuated. The reliability of modified proximity scores at each level of importance was estimated on the basis of the structural equation modeling results, and the regression coefficient in each cell of Table 1 was then divided by the corresponding reliability estimate. This disattenuation reduced the apparent effects of importance slightly, but the overall differences remained quite strong.

Role of Attitude Extremity

Because important attitudes are frequently subjects of conscious thought (Wood, 1982), and because conscious thought induces attitude polarization (Tesser, 1978), important attitudes would be expected to be more extreme than unimportant ones. Attitude extremity is positively related to the affective intensity of an attitude (Cantril, 1946; Suchman, 1950), so important attitudes are likely to be affectively charged as well. Because a citizen who feels strongly that a particular policy is absolutely right or wrong may be more likely to evaluate candidates on that basis than is a voter who is less sure about whether the policy is good or bad, more important policy attitudes may appear to have more impact on candidate evaluations simply because these attitudes are more extreme and affectively charged.

As expected, attitude importance is positively related to atti-

tude extremity in the NES data. The proportion of people who placed themselves at the extremes of the 7-point attitude scale increases monotonically across the importance categories (γ ranges from .17 to .46, $p < .05$ in all cases). To examine whether the association between importance and extremity is responsible for the apparent effects of importance in Tables 1 and 2, two terms were added to Equation 3 for each issue: the extremity of the attitude and the interaction between the modified proximity score and extremity. The interaction between modified proximity scores and extremity was statistically significant in 10 of the 13 equations estimated. As would be expected, extreme attitudes were more strongly associated with candidate preferences than moderate attitudes. However, the interactions between modified proximity scores and importance were only slightly reduced by the addition of the interaction between modified proximity scores and extremity to Equation 3. Therefore, the apparent increased impact of important policy attitudes on candidate evaluations is not due to the fact that important attitudes are typically extreme.

Adjustments of Attitude Importance

A fourth alternative explanation for the results reported earlier is that people adjust the importance they attach to policy attitudes on the basis of their candidate preferences. That is, voters may derive their candidate preferences from considerations other than policy attitudes, such as candidates' personalities, their party affiliations, and so on. Then in an effort to justify those preferences, voters may increase the importance they attach to policy attitudes on issues on which they agree with their preferred candidate and on issues on which they disagree with their nonpreferred candidate. People may also reduce the importance they attach to policy attitudes on issues on which they disagree with their preferred candidate and on issues on which they agree with their nonpreferred candidate. These processes would cause more important policy attitudes to be more strongly associated with candidate preferences than are unimportant ones.

The plausibility of this argument can be evaluated in part by examining the stability of policy attitude importance during presidential campaigns. If the importance people attach to policy attitudes is extremely stable, this alternative explanation would seem unlikely to be valid, whereas if policy attitude importance changes at least somewhat, those changes could reflect rationalization. The stability of policy attitude importance was assessed using data from the 1980 National Election Panel Study. The application of a three-wave, single-indicator structural equation model to these data permits estimation of the stability of attitude importance during the presidential campaign, corrected for attenuation as a result of random measurement error (Wiley & Wiley, 1970).

During the 9 months of the 1980 campaign, policy attitude importance was quite stable, although not perfectly so; standardized stability coefficients ranged from 0.55 to 1.07 and averaged 0.83. To examine whether changes in attitude importance can be predicted using measures of voter–candidate agreement and candidate preference, the parameters of the following regression equation were estimated for each of four policy attitudes:

$$I_t = \alpha_1(I)_{t-1} + \alpha_2(|V - C_1|)_{t-1} + \alpha_3(|V - C_2|)_{t-1} + \alpha_4 AD_{t-1}$$
$$+ \alpha_5(AD_{t-1})(|V - C_1|)_{t-1} + \alpha_6(AD_{t-1})(|V - C_2|)_{t-1} + \epsilon, \quad (4)$$

where I is the importance of the policy attitude, V is the voter's policy attitude, C_1 is the voter's perception of one candidate's attitude, C_2 is the voter's perception of the other candidate's attitude, and AD is the attitude differential. The variables α_5 and α_6 test the hypothesis that changes in attitude importance between time $t - 1$ and time t can be predicted using the interaction between voter-candidate proximity and candidate preference at time $t - 1$. Of the 16 interaction coefficients estimated (2 coefficients per equation × 4 issues × 2 lags [W1 − W2 and W2 − W3]), none was sizable or statistically significant. Thus, it seems that adjustments of policy attitude importance during the 1980 election campaign were not made to justify candidate preferences.

Attitude Importance or General Cognitive Style?

Another possible explanation for the results argues that they may not reflect the effect of attitude importance per se. Instead, the observed differences between people who consider a policy attitude important and those who do not may reflect differences in general cognitive style. Indeed, political scientists have offered a rationale for why this might be so (e.g., Neuman, 1986). According to what might be called the educational stratification hypothesis, formal education equips citizens with the ability to organize and manipulate abstract ideas, and it socializes individuals to value civic participation. Consequently, this perspective argues, people who are well-educated are best able to understand the complex world of national politics and are therefore likely to consider a wide array of policy attitudes highly important. In contrast, people with relatively little education are expected to consider few if any policy attitudes highly important. Better-educated individuals do indeed evidence greater impact of policy attitudes on candidate preferences (e.g., Pomper, 1975; Stimson, 1975), so the differences between high and low importance groups in Tables 1 and 2 may be due to differences between these individuals in terms of educational attainment or general political involvement and interest.

Interestingly, the political science literature suggests a contrasting hypothesis as well (e.g., Converse, 1964, 1970; O. A. Davis, Hinich, & Ordeshook, 1970). The issue public hypothesis is based on assumptions that national politics is a peripheral concern for the majority of Americans and that the information costs entailed in developing and maintaining an important policy attitude are quite substantial (e.g., Downs, 1957; Lippmann, 1922, 1925). Therefore, each individual citizen presumably has highly important attitudes on only a handful of policy issues at most. Which particular policy attitudes are important to any given citizen is presumably a function of that individual's basic values, self-interest, group identifications, and other such factors. Therefore, different citizens are likely to consider different policy attitudes to be highly important and are likely to fall into different issue publics. According to this perspective, the differences between the high and low importance groups in Tables 1 and 2 reflect the effect of attitude importance per se rather than differences between importance groups in terms of general personal dispositions instilled by formal education.

One way to test these competing hypotheses is to examine the correlations between the importance ratings of policy attitudes and respondents' education and general interest in politics. The educational stratification hypothesis suggests that strong positive correlations should be found, whereas the issue public hypothesis predicts correlations near zero. In fact, the 13 correlations between attitude importance and education computed with the 1968, 1980, and 1984 NES data range from −.10 to .01, 10 of them being negative. The 13 correlations between self-reported attention to political campaigns and policy attitude importance range from .04 to .23 and average .12. Thus, this evidence resembles the prediction of the issue public hypothesis more closely than it resembles that of the educational stratification hypothesis.

A second approach was also taken to test these hypotheses: Interactions between modified proximity scores and education and political interest were added to Equation 3. Almost all of the interactions involving political interest were sizable and statistically significant, although relatively few of those involving education were. The significant interactions indicated that policy attitudes were more strongly associated with candidate preferences among the well-educated and politically involved than among the less-educated and politically uninvolved. Most important, adding these interactions to the equations did not reduce the magnitudes of the interactions between modified proximity scores and importance; in fact, these interactions increased in 7 of the 13 equations. It is therefore unlikely that the apparent increased impact of important policy attitudes on candidate evaluations is due to the fact that people who consider a policy attitude to be important are highly educated and interested in politics.[6]

Spuriousness

A final alternative explanation for the apparent relation of policy attitude importance to policy voting shown in the previ-

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[6] A third test of these competing hypotheses was also conducted by examining correlations among the importances of different policy attitudes. The educational stratification hypothesis suggests that these correlations should be large and nearly equal across pairs of attitude objects. The issue public hypothesis suggests that these correlations should generally be near zero, but may be positive when two attitude objects are substantively related. Simply examining raw correlations between the importances of policy attitudes may be misleading with regard to these predictions, because correlations will be attenuated by random measurement error and inflated by shared method variance (e.g., Alwin, 1974). Therefore, corrected correlations among the importances of the seven policy attitudes in the 1980 and 1984 NES data were estimated using a multitrait–multimethod matrix approach to confirmatory factor analysis (e.g., Alwin, 1974; Kenny, 1979). The resulting correlations between importances range from .04 to .83 and average .25; 14 of the correlations are less than .25, and 7 are greater. Because they are generally small, except in cases where the attitude objects are closely related (such as fighting unemployment and a guaranteed job program), these correlations resemble the prediction derived from the issue public hypothesis more than that derived from the educational stratification hypothesis. More generally, these correlations discredit the claim that individuals who consider one policy attitude highly important are likely to consider most others to be highly important as well.

ous section is spuriousness. According to this perspective, more important policy attitudes may be more strongly associated with candidate preferences because the former are more powerfully determined by variables that are known to shape candidate choices. To evaluate this rival hypothesis, additional main effect and interaction terms were added to Equation 3. One class of control variables considered was those variables that may be causes of both policy attitudes and candidate preferences but are unlikely to be determined by policy attitudes: demographics (age, race, gender, and income). If these variables cause both policy attitudes and candidate evaluations, controlling for them would eliminate some or all of the observed association between policy attitudes and candidate evaluations. The α_3 in Equation 3 was therefore compared to α_3 in the following equation:

$$\text{AD or VC} = \alpha_1(\text{MP}) + \alpha_2(\text{I}) + \alpha_3(\text{MP})(\text{I}) + \alpha_4(\text{extremity})$$
$$+ \alpha_5(\text{age}) + \alpha_6(\text{race}) + \alpha_7(\text{gender}) + \alpha_8(\text{education})$$
$$+ \alpha_9(\text{income}) + \alpha_{10}(\text{political interest})$$
$$+ \alpha_{11}(\text{MP})(\text{age}) + \alpha_{12}(\text{MP})(\text{race})$$
$$+ \alpha_{13}(\text{MP})(\text{gender}) + \alpha_{14}(\text{MP})(\text{education})$$
$$+ \alpha_{15}(\text{MP})(\text{income}) + \alpha_{16}(\text{MP})(\text{political interest})$$
$$+ \alpha_{17}(\text{MP})(\text{extremity}) + \epsilon, \quad (5)$$

where AD is the attitude differential, VC is vote choice, MP is the modified proximity score, and I is the importance of the policy attitude. Age and education were coded in years, race was a dummy variable (White/non-White), gender was a dummy variable (male/female), income was coded in dollars, and political interest was measured on a 3-point scale.

The second column of Table 3 displays estimates of α_3 in Equation 5 when the attitude differential served as the dependent variable. The estimates for the baseline model are a bit larger than the comparable estimates for the model including the additional variables, but most of the coefficients in Column 2 remain large and statistically significant. Thus, the associations observed are apparently not spurious with regard to demographic variables.

A second class of control variables was also considered: variables that could be either causes of policy attitudes and candidate evaluations or mediators of the effect of policy attitudes on candidate evaluations. The variables in this category are group identifications (with the major political parties, liberals, and conservatives) and assessments of how things seem to be going in the country generally, whether various aspects of the national economy have gotten better or worse recently, whether the U.S. position in the world has gotten stronger or weaker recently, and what the chances of the United States going to war are. These variables were chosen because they were measured in all three surveys, and because they have been shown to be potent determinants of candidate preferences (see Kinder & Sears, 1985).

Main effect terms representing these variables were added to Equation 5. Party identification was represented by two dummy variables, one coded 1 for Republicans and 0 for others, the other coded 1 for Democrats and 0 for others. Liberal/con-

servative self-identification was similarly represented by two dummy variables.

The last column of Table 3 displays the estimates of α_3 derived from this final model. The importance interaction coefficient estimates are generally decreased by virtue of the addition of these new variables, but seven of the interactions remain sizable and statistically significant or nearly so. Only the effects for social welfare programs, Central America, and guaranteed employment are nearly eliminated in Column 3. It may be that these three attitudes are determined by group identifications and retrospective evaluations, which also cause candidate preferences. It may also be that these three attitudes cause group identifications and retrospective evaluations, which in turn shape candidate preferences. Group identifications and assessments of the nation's health have been shown to shape and to be shaped by policy preferences (e.g., Fiorina, 1981; Franklin, 1984, 1985; Franklin & Jackson, 1983; Jackson, 1975; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Markus, 1979; Page & Jones, 1979), but it is beyond the scope of the present investigation to evaluate these possibilities here.

Table 4 displays the results of the multivariate analyses when vote choice is the dependent variable. The pattern is generally similar to that in Table 3, although there are fewer significant interactions here. Attitudes in 1984 regarding Vietnam, defense spending, aid to women, and guaranteed employment evidence no significant interactions in the baseline models, and controlling for additional variables does not bring these coefficients to be statistically significant. In the cases of the remaining attitudes, the importance interactions are significant and generally withstand controls for additional variables in the same ways as is shown in Table 3. Thus, there is support for the importance hypothesis here as well, although it is weaker.

Mediating Role of Candidate Perceptions

People whose attitudes toward a policy are important may find it easier to vote on that basis because they perceive relatively large differences between competing candidates' attitudes toward the policy. To test this claim, the proportion of respondents who perceived a large difference between the candidates' stands on each issue was computed for respondents at various levels of attitude importance. These figures, displayed in Table 5, show that people who consider a policy attitude to be important are more likely to perceive a difference of two or more scale units between the candidates' attitudes than those who consider it unimportant. A one-way ANOVA of the year means revealed that the linear component of the importance effect is highly significant, $F(3, 8) = 23.24, p = .0013$.

Table 5 offers an interesting explanation for the lack of abortion attitude effects in Tables 1 and 2. In the 1980 data, only a small proportion of respondents in each importance group perceived a sizable difference between the candidates on that issue, which is probably why most people did not evaluate candidates on that basis. Among the other issues, the proportion of respondents who perceived sizable candidate differences is closely related to the extent of policy voting. Across the high importance groups, the correlation between the estimates in the fourth columns of Tables 1 and 5 is .73. The more people perceive a substantial candidate difference, the more likely they are

Table 5

Proportion of Respondents Perceiving a Difference of Two or More Units Between the Candidates' Attitudes

	Importance				
Issue	1 (Low)	2	3	4 (High)	γ
1968					
Urban unrest ($N = 1,304$)	41.2	51.3	58.6	70.2	.24*
Vietnam ($N = 1,313$)	29.5	35.7	44.3	53.6	.23*
M	35.4	43.5	51.5	61.9	
1980					
Unemployment ($N = 1,777$)	35.2	39.1	48.8	43.9	.13*
Defense ($N = 2,418$)	46.6	54.0	58.9	59.2	.12*
Social welfare ($N = 2,383$)	39.3	45.6	52.0	52.6	.14*
Russia ($N = 2,311$)	43.7	47.9	54.1	48.9	.07*
Abortion ($N = 1,849$)	11.4	13.5	16.4	18.8	.17*
Job ($N = 2,242$)	40.3	49.2	54.9	53.8	.14*
Minorities ($N = 2,408$)	36.0	45.9	53.3	57.4	.22*
M	36.0	42.2	48.3	47.8	
1984					
Social welfare ($N = 1,841$)	42.6	59.1	72.9	71.6	.22*
Central America ($N = 1,664$)	36.0	47.4	56.1	65.9	.26*
Women ($N = 1,832$)	38.9	45.4	54.1	60.4	.21*
Job ($N = 1,881$)	40.2	45.7	53.8	60.0	.19*
M	39.4	49.4	59.2	64.5	
M all years	36.9	45.0	53.0	58.1	

Note. Importance categories: 1968—1 = *not very important,* 2 = *somewhat important,* 3 = *very important,* 4 = *most important;* 1980—1 = 0–59, 2 = 60–89, 3 = 90–99, 4 = 100; and 1984—1 = *not important,* 2 = *somewhat important,* 3 = *very important,* 4 = *extremely important.*
* $p < .05$.

to vote on the basis of the issue. This is consistent with the assertion that candidate perceptions partially mediate the effect of attitude importance. That is, attitude importance may enhance policy voting by causing perception of larger between-candidate differences.

Mediating Role of Attitude Accessibility

People who consider a policy attitude to be important may also be more likely to derive candidate evaluations from that attitude because it is highly accessible in memory. The 1968, 1980, and 1984 National Election Study interviews included questions that may be viewed as relatively crude measures of attitude accessibility. At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked if there were any factors that might lead them to vote for or against each of the major party candidates. Answers to these questions were no doubt determined by a host of factors other than the accessibility of attitudes. Nonetheless, individuals who consider a policy attitude to be more important would be expected to mention that attitude as a reason for voting for or against one of the candidates more often than would individuals who consider the attitude unimportant (e.g., Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982).

As the figures in Table 6 show, this prediction is confirmed. There is a clear trend across the 13 issues, such that the probability of mentioning an issue rises as importance increases. This relation is statistically significant for all issues except guaran-

teed employment in 1980 and 1984 and aid to women in 1984. Attitudes regarding aid to women evidence the only striking exception to the pattern, being mentioned by almost no respondents in any importance group. A one-way ANOVA of the year means revealed that the linear component of the importance effect is again highly significant, $F(3, 8) = 9.82, p = .014$. Thus, these results offer some support for the claim that more important attitudes are more accessible and suggest that accessibility may mediate the enhanced impact of these attitudes on candidate preferences.

Discussion

Summary

The analyses reported here showed that important policy attitudes are more strongly associated with candidate preferences than are unimportant policy attitudes, ruled out a number of possible explanations for that result, and thereby suggested that more important policy attitudes are more potent determinants of candidate evaluations and voting behavior. This apparently occurs partly because important attitudes are more accessible in memory and because people whose attitudes toward a policy are important are more likely to perceive sizable differences between competing candidates' attitudes toward it.

Table 6

Proportion of Respondents Mentioning Each Issue as a Reason to Vote for or Against Either of the Two Candidates

	Importance				
Issue	1 (Low)	2	3	4 (High)	γ
1968					
Urban unrest ($N = 1,276$)	2.8	5.5	10.5	14.2	.39*
Vietnam ($N = 1,275$)	18.0	22.9	29.2	37.5	.22*
M	10.4	14.2	19.9	25.9	
1980					
Unemployment ($N = 772$)	16.0	17.6	22.5	24.1	.15*
Defense ($N = 1,127$)	12.0	15.9	16.3	25.4	.21*
Social welfare ($N = 1,131$)	4.8	12.8	14.5	17.7	.22*
Russia ($N = 988$)	1.5	3.6	8.9	2.3	.19*
Abortion ($N = 1,233$)	2.6	3.7	7.9	12.0	.46*
Job ($N = 955$)	9.1	12.2	16.2	14.0	.13**
Minorities ($N = 1,016$)	0.6	2.4	3.0	7.0	.46*
M	6.7	9.7	12.8	14.6	
1984					
Social welfare ($N = 1,842$)	19.1	23.2	31.6	31.4	.15*
Central America ($N = 1,664$)	17.1	21.6	26.9	32.8	.19*
Women ($N = 1,836$)	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.4	.05
Job ($N = 1,884$)	20.4	21.6	22.2	25.8	.07***
M	14.3	16.7	20.2	22.6	
M all years	10.5	13.5	17.6	21.0	

Note. The cell entries are based on all respondents who were asked all four vote for/against questions. Importance categories: 1968—1 = *not very important,* 2 = *somewhat important,* 3 = *very important,* 4 = *most important;* 1980—1 = 0–59, 2 = 60–89, 3 = 90–99, 4 = 100; and 1984—1 = *not important,* 2 = *somewhat important,* 3 = *very important,* 4 = *extremely important.*
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .10$.

The analyses yielded a number of additional useful findings. Extreme attitudes were found to have more impact on candidate preferences than moderate ones. Individuals who are especially interested in politics were found to base their candidate preferences more on policy considerations than those who are less interested in politics. Educational attainment did not have a direct effect on the magnitude of policy voting when interest in politics was controlled; given that education has been shown to be related to policy voting in previous studies (e.g., Stimson, 1975; Pomper, 1975), the present result suggests that the effect of education may be mediated by political interest.

It is important to acknowledge some limitations of these analyses reported. First, the measures of attitude importance used are only moderately reliable, so the effect of importance on policy voting is likely to have been underestimated. Second, the procedure used to assess policy voting confounded it with candidate-induced persuasion. This may also have reduced the apparent magnitude of the importance effect. Third, the measure of attitude accessibility was relatively crude and may be only loosely related to measures such as response latency in attitude reporting tasks. It would therefore be useful for future research to resolve these problems and to generate more accurate assessments of policy voting and its relation to attitude importance.

Implications

People as Cognitive Misers

The finding that importance regulates policy voting is consistent with social psychology's view of individuals as cognitive misers who base judgments on a few salient criteria instead of on complete arrays of relevant knowledge. It might be argued on normative grounds that voters should use all their policy attitudes to generate candidate evaluations by a summing or averaging method, but this would be a costly and demanding cognitive strategy. Voters seem to simplify this task by concentrating only on those policy attitudes that they consider important. This may occur either as the result of deliberate, conscious decisions to focus on these attitudes, or simply because these attitudes are especially accessible in memory and come to mind automatically as candidate evaluation standards. The present results do not suggest that people underutilize their attitudes on policy issues when deriving candidate evaluations in what might be called an irrational or counterproductive fashion. Rather, people seem to use a sensible strategy that minimizes the cognitive costs of deriving candidate evaluations while maximizing subjective expected utility.

Similarity/Attraction Literature

The present results complement past work on the relation of attitudinal similarity to interpersonal attraction. The notion that people develop positive attitudes toward others whose attitudes are similar to their own is a tenet of a number of social psychological theories (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Heider, 1958) and has been supported by a great deal of empirical research (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961). Most of this research has taken for granted that more important attitudes are more powerful determinants of interpersonal attraction (e.g., Newcomb,

1961), but the few empirical tests of this assumption suggest that importance may have effects only under limited conditions (Byrne, London, & Griffitt, 1968; Byrne & Nelson, 1964, 1965; Clore & Baldridge, 1968). Recently, D. Davis (1981) found that the importance effect found in previous studies disappears when one controls for beliefs regarding how much information an attitude conveys about how enjoyable it would be to interact with a stranger. This suggests that the effect of importance found in these studies may be mediated by these beliefs.

Critics have questioned the usefulness of these findings, arguing that the research design used, the phantom other technique, lacks external validity (Levinger, 1972; Murstein, 1971; Wright, 1971; Wright & Crawford, 1971; see also Byrne, Ervin, & Lamberth, 1970). Subjects in these studies were given information only about a stranger's attitudes, and that information was typically unambiguous and neatly packaged. The present results show that more important attitudes have more effect on interpersonal evaluations even when the subject of judgment is hardly a "phantom" and when a great deal of other information is available with which to make liking judgments. Furthermore, because most citizens are unlikely to interact directly with the president of the United States, the present results suggest that importance effects are not always mediated by the sorts of beliefs that D. Davis (1981) examined.

More generally, the present findings attest to the validity of evidence from previous studies of the effect of attitude importance on preference for cognitive balance (e.g., Cacioppo & Petty, 1981; Insko & Adewole, 1979). In these studies, subjects rated the pleasantness of P–O–X triads under conditions where the subjects imagined themselves as P. As would be expected, pleasantness ratings were found to be determined more powerfully by the degree to which the triads were balanced when subjects imagined that their attitudes toward x were personally important than when they imagined they were unimportant. The present results suggest that this importance effect generalizes to real (as opposed to imagined) P–O–X situations.

Information Integration Models of Attitude Formation

The present findings lend support to an infrequently tested proposition in Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) model of the relation between beliefs about an object and attitudes toward it. Fishbein and Ajzen have argued that attitudes are derived from beliefs about objects and that important beliefs have more impact on attitudes than do unimportant ones. Consistent with this claim, Budd (1986) recently showed that belief-by-evaluation products that people consider important are more strongly correlated with attitudes than belief-by-evaluation products rated as unimportant. However, this difference between correlations could have occurred because important belief-by-evaluation products are typically more extreme and therefore more variable than unimportant ones (Duncan, 1975). The present results, which are based on methods unbiased by variance differences, show that more important policy attitudes do indeed have more impact on candidate evaluations than unimportant ones do.

Validity of Importance Assessments

The present results speak to a long-standing interest of psychologists: the accuracy of people's reports of the importance

they attach to particular criteria in deriving summary judgments. Early studies found only weak correspondence between these reports and objectively derived criteria weights (Blood, 1971; Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971), but two more recent studies using better methods found strong correspondence between subjective importance ratings and objective criteria weights (Birnbaum & Stegner, 1979; Cook & Stewart, 1975; see also Anderson, 1982; Birnbaum & Stegner, 1981; Darlington, 1968). The present study further attests to the validity of people's reports of the importance of psychological criteria.

Political Implications

Previous studies of voting behavior have been concerned largely with documenting associations between candidate preferences and predictors such as policy attitudes, political party identifications, perceptions of candidates' personalities, and retrospective assessments of incumbent performance. Simply documenting these associations does little to further development of a general theory of voting. Instead, the interacting variables that regulate the impact any given criterion has on candidate preferences must be identified.

With regard to citizens' attitudes toward government policies, empirical research on regulators has focused primarily on the magnitude and clarity of differences between competing candidates in terms of the stands they take on issues (e.g., Miller, Miller, Raine, & Brown, 1976; Pomper, 1972). When competing candidates clearly take sharply different positions on an issue, that issue typically has more impact on citizens' vote choices than when candidates are indistinguishable from one another. Thus, the emphasis in this work has been on factors external to the voter. The present research adds to this literature by demonstrating that internal factors regulate policy attitude impact as well. Candidates may regulate the magnitude of policy voting to some degree through their behavior, but it will also be determined in part by the importance voters attach to particular policy attitudes.

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