

Policy Voting and the Representation of Policy Preferences

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Abstract

Recent studies have suggested that policy preferences have little if any impact on citizens' vote choices. Thus, governments should feel little or no incentive to enact the policies citizens want and not enact those they do not want. However, these studies contrast with other findings suggesting that governments generally do what citizens actually want. Using an original dataset on policy implementation and Swedish National Election Studies data going back to 1956, we consider the extent to which citizens adjust their vote choice during election campaigns to reflect their policy preferences. We then consider whether their preferences are more likely to be implemented the more they vote on the basis of policy. We find that issue voting increases the likelihood that governments implement citizens' policy preferences. We also find that issue voting may explain the greater extent to which governments enact the preferences of the rich compared to those of the poor.

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Work by Lenz (2009, 2012) has cast doubt on the notion that citizens vote on the basis of policy preferences that are exogenous to their party preferences. In a number of examples in several democracies, he shows that citizens rarely adjust their candidate or party preferences to reflect their policy opinions but instead adjust their opinions to make them consistent with their candidate or party preferences. He suggests the non-existence of issue voting means that parties have no incentive to represent citizens' preferences.

Other studies have stressed the influence that considerations that have no obvious political importance have on citizens' vote choice. Achen and Bartels (2016) have argued that shark attacks and floods influence election results Healy, Malhotra and Mo (2010) showed that the results of sports games influences election outcomes. Todorov et al. (2005) have shown that candidates' appearances influence the support they get from citizens.

At the same time, a considerable body of scholarship emphasizes that citizens' policy views are endogenous to the positions adopted by political parties. Increasing numbers of studies find evidence that citizens tend to adopt the positions of parties they support and reject those of parties they dislike (e.g. Bullock, 2011; Cohen, 2003; Guntermann, 2017) especially when parties are polarized (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013). Leeper and Slothuus (2014) have argued that citizens engage in partisan motivated reasoning, that is they adopt their party's position as a way to show their support for it.

The image created by all these studies on political behaviour is that citizens are simply influenced by parties and never evaluate them on the basis of policy considerations. However, work on representation actually shows that governments tend to do what citizens want them to do (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, 2002). If citizens never judge politicians on the basis of their policy preferences, why do governments ever have any incentive to do what people want them to do?

Other research has found some evidence that citizens do react to policy considerations. Soroka and Wlezien (2010) show that citizens respond thermostatically to government spending: when governments spend more, they want less, and, when governments spend

less, they want more. Other studies have questioned Lenz' conclusions about the near absence of policy voting. Tesler (2015) has shown that people do revise their candidate and party preferences to reflect policy attitudes that are crystallized. Non-crystallized attitudes tend to be more strongly influenced by party attitudes. Moreover, Matthews (2016) provides evidence that, in some of the cases analyzed by Lenz, citizens' prior attitudes do get primed when parties and/or the media emphasize them. There thus is evidence that party preferences do at least sometimes reflect pre-existing policy views. Consequently, it may be that governments are more responsive to citizens' preferences when policy considerations influence vote choice. Soroka and Wlezien (2010) show that governments are strongly representative of popular spending preferences when those preferences are responsive to actual government spending.

To our knowledge, no one has assessed the relationship between issue voting and the enactment of citizens' preferences. This limitation is probably due to the large amount of data necessary to conduct such an investigation. Distinguishing the influence of policy preferences on vote choice from the influence of party preference on opinions requires at least two waves of panel data. Determining whether a policy position was implemented requires a massive dataset of the kind created by Gilens (2012) for his work on the representation of rich and poor Americans. Fortunately, Mikael Gilljam and Mikael Persson, after considerable work, have put together such a large dataset. Moreover, it can be merged with data from the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES), which, since 1956, has been asking survey respondents their opinions and vote intentions prior to each election and their vote choice after the election.

In this paper, we first consider the types of issue voting that should be conducive to representation and the types that should not lead to representation. We then assess how much issue voting actually occurs and determine whether issue voting makes governments more or less likely to implement citizens' preferences. We find that the more citizens adjust their vote choice to make it consistent with support for a policy change, the more likely it

is that governments implement their preferences. Conversely, the more people adjust their vote choice to line it up with their opposition to a policy change, the less likely it is that governments implement their preferences.

1 Theory and Hypotheses

Governments may represent citizens' preferences either indirectly or directly (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Indirect representation occurs when a government with one set of policy positions is replaced by another with different positions. Direct representation occurs when governments follow public opinion between elections and do what citizens want. While, in the first type of representation, governments do what people want if they share their preferences, in the second, they do what people want because they feel electoral pressure to do so. If the most extreme version of the view of democracy articulated by authors like Lenz (2012) and Achen and Bartels (2016) holds, governments should never have any incentive to directly represent people's preferences. On the other hand, if policy preferences do sometimes influence vote choice, governments should have an incentive to implement those preferences.

Direct representation of citizens' preferences requires that politicians feel a threat that citizens will vote against them if they fail to implement them. However, it is not clear how elites can feel a threat that is merely latent, meaning a threat that will occur only if they veer away from what people want. Politicians should thus look for the best available evidence of what people seem to care enough about to change their party choice.

Issue voting can occur among supporters of a policy change, among its opponents or among both. Supporters of a policy might adjust their vote choice to reflect their opinion on the issue, those who are against it might move their vote choice to line it up with their opinion or both categories may adjust their votes to make them more consistent with their preferences on the policy.

The time when citizens are most likely to learn about parties' positions and use these

positions to judge parties is during election campaigns. We thus focus on evidence that policy views influence vote choice during campaigns. Given that issue voting signals to governing parties the issues citizens care about, we expect that:

Hypothesis 1 *When citizens who favour a policy proposal adjust their vote choice to reflect their policy preference, governments are more likely to implement that policy.*

Hypothesis 2 *When citizens who oppose a policy proposal adjust their vote choice to reflect their policy preference, governments are less likely to implement that policy.*

Governing parties should be most responsive to shifts in support for them. If they gain or lose support in an election because of a policy position, they should feel compelled to implement that position out of fear that they might lose the support they gained or out of a desire to win back the support they lost. However, when the government is a coalition of multiple parties, the different parties may have different incentives to represent policy preferences, particularly if different issue opinions lead to shifts in support among the parties that make up a coalition. Thus, changes in support for governing parties (compared to opposition parties) should only influence the enactment of policies when changes in support among governing parties associated with the opposite opinion are small. We thus expect:

Hypothesis 3 *The more issue voting for governing parties occurs among supporters of a policy position, the more likely it is that the government will enact a policy.*

Hypothesis 4 *The more issue voting for governing parties occurs among opponents of a policy position, the more likely it is that the government will enact a policy.*

Hypothesis 5 *Under coalition governments, issue voting for the prime minister's party among supporters of a policy change increases the likelihood that a policy will be implemented when issue voting for other governing parties among opponents of the policy change is low.*

Hypothesis 6 *Under coalition governments, issue voting for the prime minister's party among opponents of a policy change decreases the likelihood that a policy will be implemented when issue voting for other governing parties among supporters of the policy change is low.*

2 Data and Methods

Citizens vote on the basis of their policy preferences when they adjust their party preferences to reflect prior policy attitudes. What this means is that voters who have one particular attitude should become more or less supportive of a party, while those who do not share that attitude should either not change their vote preferences or move in the opposite direction. Thus, here, we assess issue voting on the basis of how much people with a particular attitude towards a policy proposal (either support or opposition) change their vote choice compared to those who do not have that position. We thus compare the change in support for a party among people who support a policy to that among those who either oppose it or who neither support nor oppose it. We also compare changes in support for parties among those who oppose a position to those among people who either support the policy or neither support nor oppose it. We assess these changes during election campaigns held between 1956 and 2010 in Sweden.

We measure changes in the proportions of votes for each party between the pre- and post-election studies among supporters and opponents of each policy compared to respondents who do not share these positions. We consider the sum of these across all parties total issue voting, the sum across government parties government issue voting, and relative changes for the prime minister's party PM party issue voting. Finally, we sum changes among non-PM governing parties.

Data are from them Swedish National Election Studies (SNES) and the policy implementation dataset created by Mikael Gilljam and Mikael Persson at the University of Gothenburg.

Note a major limitation of this approach to assessing policy voting. Given that we consider changes in support for multiple parties on a large number of issues, we have no way of knowing whether voters are actually adjusting their party support to make it consistent with parties' positions themselves. We also do not know whether a particular opinion per se is driving vote choice and not some other attitude that is correlated with it. Nonetheless, what

we do observe are changes in support for parties among citizens with particular opinions.

3 Results

3.1 Evidence for Issue Voting

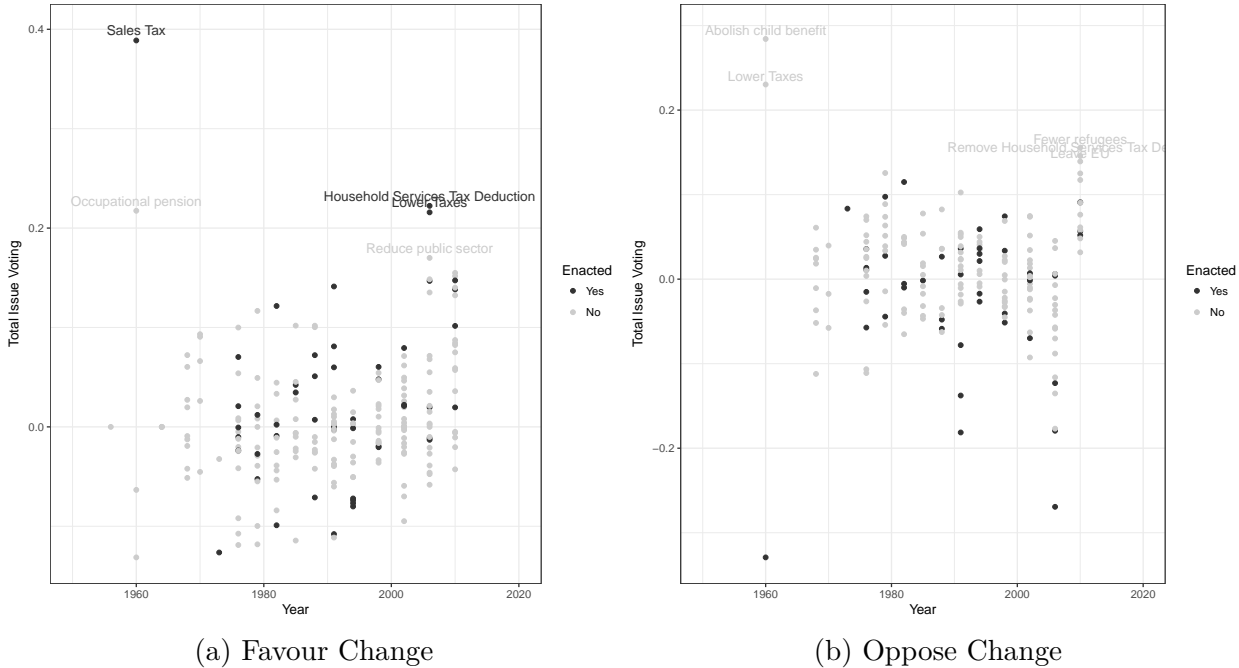
Do Swedish voters adjust their vote choice to reflect their issue positions? Overall issue voting is low. Of the 227 issues for which we have data, only an average of 1.1 percentage points of votes were changed during election campaigns among people who favoured policy changes. A mere 0.01 percentage points shifted among those who opposed policy changes. However, policy voting varies considerably across issues. Issue voting among supporters of a policy position varied from -13.1 percentage points to 38.9 percentage points. Opponents' issue voting varied from -32.9 percentage points to 28.4 percentage points. Note that negative numbers mean that people who did not share that position shifted their votes more than those who had that opinion. In other words, no issue voting occurred among voters with a given opinion. On 10.1 % of issues, issue voting among supporters of the policy change was at least ten percentage points. On 4.4 % of issues, issue voting among opponents of the policy was ten percentage points or greater. If issue voting is essential for governments to be responsive to citizens' preferences, most of the time governments have little incentive to do what people want. Nevertheless, on some cases, they do have an incentive to enact public preferences. In the next section, we consider whether that is the case.

Figure 1 shows the total issue voting that has occurred on all issues since 1956. The left panel shows total issue voting among supporters of a policy change, while the right panel shows total policy voting among those who oppose a policy. Both figures identify the five issues on which issue voting was greatest among supporters and opponents of a policy proposal, respectively. We can see in the left panel, that the issue on which there was the most issue voting among supporters of a policy was implementing a sales tax in 1960. Nearly forty percentage points (38.9%) more votes shifted among supporters of the sales tax than

among people who opposed it or who neither supported nor opposed it. Although only 32.9% of voters supported it, many of these voters shifted their votes and the policy was enacted. Three of the five issue proposals on which issue voting was greatest among supporters of the proposal were enacted.

The right panel shows that the policy proposal that shifted the most votes among opponents was abolishing the child benefit for parents’ first child, also in 1960. Among opponents of that proposal, 28.4 more percentage points in vote intentions changed parties than among supporters or people who neither supported nor opposed the proposal. All of the five policy proposals on which issue voting among opponents was greatest were enacted.

Figure 1: Total Issue Voting in Elections from 1956 to 2010



Comparing the two panels of Figure 1, we can see a key limitation of our approach. We see that issue voting was high among people who supported a sales tax, among those who opposed abolishing the child benefit, and among those who were against lowering taxes. Our analyses do not allow us to see exactly which of these issues really influenced vote choice. Opinions were highly correlated. 79.5% of respondents who favoured the sales tax opposed

lowering taxes, while 77.2% of those who were in favour of the sales tax did not want the child benefit for a couple's first child to be abolished. Nevertheless, people who did not want taxes to be lowered or the child benefit to be abolished tended to shift their votes in 1960.

3.2 Issue Voting and Policy Enactment

We saw above that issue voting is rare but does exist on many issues. Does it make a difference when it comes to representation. In Figure 1, there appeared to be a relationship between the magnitude of issue voting and whether an issue position was enacted. Here, we formally test whether there is a relationship between issue voting and policy enactment.

Table 1: Models of Policy Enactment with Controls

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	-1.36*** (0.17)	-1.20*** (0.18)	-1.24*** (0.17)	-1.24*** (0.17)	-1.23*** (0.27)	-1.11*** (0.24)
Total (Support)	4.87* (2.29)					
Total (Oppose)		-6.38* (2.51)				
Government (Support)			2.10 (2.18)			
Government (Oppose)				-0.42 (1.60)		
PM Party (Support)					6.02 (4.59)	
Non-PM (Oppose)					2.98 (4.67)	
PM (Supp.)*Non-PM (Opp.)					-11.99 (59.18)	
PM (Oppose)						-4.56 (3.78)
Non-PM (Support)						-5.67 (5.76)
PM (Opp.)*Non-PM (Supp.)						83.38 (78.66)
N	216	184	211	208	99	99
AIC	225.76	197.18	226.87	226.22	115.82	115.05
BIC	252.76	222.89	253.68	252.92	157.34	156.57
$\log L$	-104.88	-90.59	-105.43	-105.11	-41.91	-41.52

Standard errors in parentheses

† significant at $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Models 1 to 6 in Table 1 test hypotheses 1 to 6. Model 1 assesses the influence of total issue voting among supporters of a proposal and the probability that the proposal is enacted. We can see that there is a significant positive relationship between the amount of issue voting among supporters and the probability that an issue position is implemented. Model 2 is similar but shows how overall issue voting among opponents of an issue proposal influences the enactment of a policy. We can see that, as expected, the relationship is negative. Models 3 and 4 are analogous but show issue voting only for government parties. We can see that

the coefficients are in the right direction but are not significant.

Models 5 and 6, limited to coalition governments, allow us to see whether issue voting depends on how consistent the incentives are for the various opposition parties. In Model 5, the coefficient on PM Party (Support) shows the relationship between issue voting for the prime minister's party among supporters of a policy proposal when issue voting among opponents of the policy for non-prime ministerial parties is 0. We can see that the relationship is positive but not significant. The coefficient on Non-PM (Oppose) shows the relationship between issue voting among those who are against the policy for the governing parties other than that of the PM. We can see that it, unexpectedly is positive but not significant. The coefficient on PM (Opp.)*Non-PM (Supp.) shows how the relationship between issue voting among supporters of the policy for the prime minister's party changes as issue voting among opponents of the policy for non-PM governing parties increases. As expected, it is negative. However, it is not significant either. Coefficients in Model 6 are similar but in the opposite direction. The coefficient on PM (Oppose) shows the relationship between issue voting among opponents of a policy for the party of the PM and policy implementation when issue voting among supporters of the policy for the other governing parties is 0. We can see it is negative, but not significant. The coefficient on Non-PM (Support) shows the relationship between issue voting among those who favour the policy for the other governing parties and policy implementation when issue voting for the PM party is 0. We can see that it is negative but also not significant. The coefficient on PM (Opp.)*Non-PM (Supp.) shows how issue voting for the PM party among opponents of a policy varies as issue voting among supporters for the other governing parties increases. We can see that it is positive. However, it is not significant.

In sum, results in Table 1 are consistent with Hypotheses 1 and 2 that issue voting among supporters and opponents of a policy makes governing parties more and less likely, respectively to implement a policy. However, while results for Hypotheses 3 to 6 are all in the right directions, none of the relevant coefficients are significant. Overall issue voting seems

to be the most important determinant of whether a policy is enacted by the government. In the rest of this paper, we will focus on overall issue voting.

Table 2 shows two more models, including the independent variables from Models 1 and 2 along with controls. PM Party Support is the proportion of supporters of the prime minister's party who support the proposal. Overall support is the proportion of survey respondents in general who support it. PM Party Oppose is the proportion of PM party supporters who oppose the policy. Overall Oppose is the proportion of all respondents who oppose it. These controls all include don't know responses in the denominator. We further control for the proportion of don't know's on each issue. If governments seek to represent public opinion in general or their own supporters, we would expect support or opposition among PM party supporters, on the one hand, or support or opposition overall, on the other hand, to be positively related to policy enactment. We would also expect the signal from citizens to be weaker when there are more don't knows. Thus, that variable should be negatively related to policy enactment. In fact, we find that, while Overall Support is positively related to policy adoption, PM Party Support is negatively related to enactment. Analogously, PM Party Oppose is positively related to policy enactment, while Overall Oppose is negatively related to enactment. Surprisingly, the proportion of don't knows is positively related to implementation. None of these variables are significant, however. What is most important is that the issue voting variables are still significantly related to policy enactment in the expected directions even after the introduction of controls.

Table 2: Models of Policy Enactment with Controls

	Model 7	Model 8
Intercept	-2.00** (0.71)	-1.09 (0.72)
Total (Support)	4.64* (2.33)	
PM Party Support	-1.24 (1.53)	
Overall Support	2.30 (1.79)	
Total (Oppose)		-6.18* (2.55)
PM Party Oppose		0.83 (1.47)
Overall Oppose		-1.61 (1.84)
Don't Knows	0.79 (1.92)	0.29 (1.97)
N	226	226
AIC	239.75	238.26
BIC	308.16	306.67
$\log L$	-99.87	-99.13

Standard errors in parentheses

† significant at $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

3.3 Issue Voting and the Relative Representation of High and Low Income Citizens

We saw above that issue voting among supporters of a policy increases the likelihood that that policy will be implemented, while policy voting among those who are opposed to a policy reduces its probability of enactment. Does issue voting account for the inequalities in representation that have been identified elsewhere?

First, we must determine whether inequalities in the representation of policy preferences actually exist in Sweden. As in the US, the potential for unequal representation is limited in Sweden because most of the time, the rich and the poor agree on policy issues. On 84.6% of issues, majorities of both the richest and poorest groups were on the same side of them. On 4.1% of issues, however, the rich supported a change that the poor opposed. On a further 11.3%, the poor were in favour of a policy that the rich opposed.

Is there evidence of greater representation of the rich's preferences? The answer is yes. Policies the rich supported but the poor opposed were implemented 33.3% of the time, while those the poor supported but the rich opposed were implemented a mere 6.7% of the time.

Is this gap accounted for by issue voting? It may be. While issue voting among supporters of a policy does not seem to matter, the influence opposing attitudes has on voting seems to make a difference to the relative representation of rich and poor citizens. When total policy voting among supporters of a policy is greater among the richest than the poorest citizens, policies are implemented in 31.3% of cases when the rich support a policy the poor do not and in 9.5% of cases when the poor favour a policy change that the rich oppose. When issue voting is greater among the poor, the rich still get their favoured policies 40% of the time, while the poor never get theirs.

However, when the poor who are opposed to a policy vote more on the basis of that position than the rich do, while the rich get their favoured policies 37.5% of the time, the poor get theirs 22.2% of the time. When rich opponents of a policy engage in more issue voting than poor opponents, the rich get the policies they support 33.3% of the time, while

the poor get none of their preferred policies. Consequently, issue voting by rich and poor citizens who oppose a policy change seems to influence whether the poor get the policies they want that rich citizens oppose.

4 Conclusion

The findings in this paper support the conclusions of work by Achen and Bartels (2016) and Lenz (2012) that issue voting is weak overall. However, on a minority of policy issues, issue voting is substantial. We have also shown that issue voting determines how likely it is that a policy will be implemented. The more issue voting there is among supporters of a policy, the more likely the government is to enact it. Conversely, the more issue voting there is among people who oppose a policy, the lower the likelihood of policy implementation. These variables have more influence than the proportion of all respondents or of supporters of the party of the prime minister on policy enactment.

We have seen that issue voting also may help account for the tendency for governments to be more representative of the preferences of better-off Swedes than of the less-well-off in the minority of cases where these groups disagree. While the rich win when opponents among them who oppose a policy engage in more issue voting than opponents among the poor, the gap narrows when the poor vote more on the basis of their policy preferences than the rich. In Sum, issue voting matters for representation.

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